



THE AESTHETICS OF PLAY

Sarah Brin

Situated between two seemingly disparate realms, *Game Room* takes on the challenge of contextualizing concepts from the field of game design and applying them to contemporary artworks. By doing so, the project moves the ongoing discourse surrounding art and games toward a discussion emphasizing the values of process, interpersonal dynamics, and participation.

EXPERIENCE DESIGN: *PIÑATAS: RECREATIONAL ITEMS FROM UNFORTUNATE EVENTS*

Of all the activities that are enacted in a museum, looking might be cited as the most important—or at least the most common. There is a tendency to regard artworks as static objects and to believe that the museumgoer's role is to visually examine them. After an item is viewed, some observers will arrive at an evaluative conclusion based on context as well as their personal preferences and associations. However, artists' games are one of many practices that attempt to shift the public's role from that of observer to that of participant, in hopes of facilitating a different kind of art experience that emphasizes relationships, action, and articulation.

Both artists and game designers are drawn to the medium of experience because of its potential to bridge the gap between creators and their publics, because of the opportunities that it provides to eschew traditional commercial models, and because of its capacity to engage broader audiences by creating livelier and more dialogical work, among many other reasons. And while the facilitation of participatory performances dates back to the Italian futurists and earlier, the progression of the twentieth century brought with it a more focused interest in engineering specific collaborative experiences with rules, limitations, and precise instructions.¹ While restrictions may appear to be in direct conflict with the creativity and freedom associated with artistic practices, controlled conditions allowed both artists and participants to use experiential artworks as laboratories to yield specific social, material, and emotional data.

Similarly, game designers rely on rules and iteration to engineer and alter experiences. For example, with *Piñatas: Recreational Items from Unfortunate Events* (2012), Sarah Bay Williams transforms the familiar ritual of breaking open a piñata, turning it into an artistic phenomenon. By recontextualizing the piñata, an object traditionally found in the intimate spaces of a home or a child's birthday party, and situating it within the gallery, the artist facilitates a lively hands-on interaction within the traditionally silent, hands-off space of the gallery. Aside from transforming the space immediately surrounding the piñata, Williams exhibits an ongoing dedication to evolving her experience design practice by modifying components of the piñatas in order to yield various sonic, aesthetic, and behavioral outcomes.

IMPACT GAMES: *SUBSIDIZED*

While games are often relegated to the realm of children's playthings, there is a genre of game design sometimes referred to as "games for change" or "impact games." These works—dedicated to the exploration of serious, real-life phenomena—pose a significant design challenge. Artists confront the task of creating systems that are entertaining enough to engage audiences while simultaneously communicating the gravity of complex subject matter.

Noa P. Kaplan's *Subsidized* (2011–12) embraces the complexity traditionally associated with impact games and harnesses it to demonstrate the often Byzantine process of food production and sourcing in the United States. Players make a series of rapid decisions in which they must choose between their own survival and the greater good. In this way, *Subsidized* continues a tradition of artists' games that educate players about real-world systems by sharing the antagonist's perspective.

One particularly relevant predecessor in the impact game genre is Paolo Pedercini's *McDonalds: The Videogame* (2006), in which players oversee every step in the production of a McDonald's hamburger, from pasture to Happy Meal. Pedercini's work, like Kaplan's, employs a vivid and lively aesthetic to engage players in a mastery of hierarchical order that benefits the few at the expense of the many. By effectively balancing competition, design, and content, both *McDonalds: The Videogame* and *Subsidized* encourage players to internalize a flawed system, thereby bringing transparency to a process that might otherwise be too complex to communicate.

ANTAGONISTIC PLAY: *MONEYMAKINGWORKSHOP*

In contrast to games that attempt to add levity or aesthetic appeal in order to engage audiences with serious subjects, Edo Stern's work deliberately elicits tedium, frustration, and sometimes physical pain. For example, his *Moneymakingworkshop* (2012) compels players to perform a variety of repetitive actions as part of the gameplay. This game is consistent with earlier works in Stern's oeuvre, in which the artist used a variety of strategies to blur the line between real-life and in-game phenomena.

One particularly relevant example is *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001), a gallery installation in which individuals playing the PlayStation game Tekken 3 (1998) were outfitted with custom hardware that delivered electrical shocks that corresponded to the damage sustained by players' avatars. Stern adds real-life consequences to in-game actions, thereby creating an environment that shifts the focus away from both designer and player and onto the tension that emerges when players become physically and mentally exhausted.

Stern continues the exploration of that tension with *Moneymakingworkshop*, the third installation in his series of games interrogating the relationships among work, repetition, and asymmetrical power structures. Despite the antagonistic nature of these games, individuals continue to play them, immersing themselves within an exceedingly difficult pursuit of the "win-state." As they engage, players invest in the integrity of games' systems and rules, despite their clear contrast with an individual's internal senses of fairness. What results is a fascinating meditation on the unspoken authority of systems, what it means to win, and the hoops through which players will jump in the pursuit of victory.

MODS AND SKINS: *PLAYING CARDS, MADE IN U.S.A.*

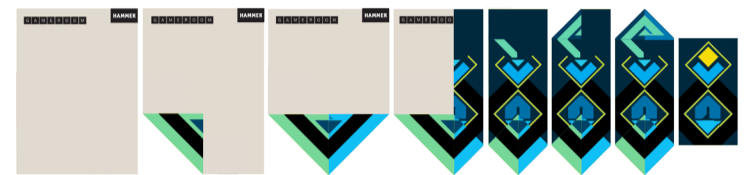
The size, portability, and versatility of playing cards have made them a popular format for experiential artwork. Contemporary examples that more closely resemble the conventional fifty-two-card deck include Tauba Auerbach's *One Deck of Playing Cards* (2009) and Tom Sachs's *Nugget Playing Cards* (2010), while earlier pieces like Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* (1975) and George Brecht's *Water Yam* (1963) depart from the four-suit model.

Borrowing elements from traditional card games and more experimental forms, Alexis Smith's *Playing Cards, Made in U.S.A.* (1981) is an extension of the long tradition of modifications (or "mods") in which artists have recycled, remixed, and reimagined preexisting systems to alter their meanings. Artists' mods have theoretical roots in a range of movements and philosophies, perhaps most significantly in the practice of *détournement*, originated in 1956 by the French artists Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, who attempted to use collage to disassemble and recombine capitalist imagery to create new, alternative meanings and narratives. This practice of recombination is present in contemporary video-gaming culture, as seen in Joan Leandre, Brody Condon, and Anne-Marie Schleiner's *Velvet Strike* (2002), an online intervention within the popular computer game *Counter-Strike*, in which players' guns were altered to shoot antiwar graffiti instead of bullets, thereby shifting players' focus from recreational warfare to contemporary political realities.

While Smith's playing cards are not an attempt to dismantle capitalist infrastructures or to incite civil disobedience, *Playing Cards, Made in U.S.A.* adapts the ubiquitous and standardized playing-card model and transforms it into a tool for personal exploration and meaning-making. By re-skinning the traditional monarchical images on card faces and replacing almost all of them with alternative illustrations, paired with snippets from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Smith loads the deck with a range of possible interpretations and associations.

In some ways, *Playing Cards, Made in U.S.A.* functions as a never-ending collage, allowing players to constantly reshuffle the deck to construct new, playful, and flexible associations among text, image, and rank.

Reverse: Rachel Morris's kaleidoscopic paper craft game may be reconfigured to create new patterns. Below is one example from the artist:



GAMES IN PUBLIC SPACES: *CHAIN REACTION*

The Situationist practice of the *dérive*, which is often translated into English as "drift," is a process in which individuals observe the varied social, psychological, and economic conditions of cities by embarking on pedestrian explorations without set end points. While *dérives* are not exactly games and Guy Debord's *Theory of the Dérive* (1958) did not explicitly delineate rules, the text includes loose guidelines, such as suggestions regarding the length of a *dérive* ("one day, considered as the time between two periods of sleep"), distances to travel, and methods for determining the direction of the walk.²

Samara Smith's *Chain Reaction (Westwood)* (2012) is a particularly relevant example of how games in public space, also known as "big urban games," are contemporary adaptations of the *dérive* model. *Chain Reaction's* players do not move to any set destination, and there is no clear win condition. Instead players navigate the city based on their observations of independent businesses or the lack thereof. While it can be easy to overlook these factors during an everyday commute, the game trains players to heighten personal awareness of their surroundings by challenging them to find particular socioeconomic clues. Participants document their observations, charting these indicators over time and collecting artifacts and images. Smith likens the process of developing player self-consciousness to performance, and she cites Boal's thesis that "theater—or theatricality—is the capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action," thereby adding theoretical or ideological meaning to physical observations.³

PROCEDURAL RHETORIC: *ORDNUNGSWISSENSCHAFT*

In the 2007 book *Persuasive Games*, the designer and philosopher Ian Bogost posits that video games possess a unique persuasive power. This power, which he refers to as "procedural rhetoric," is directly linked to computers' core functionalities, particularly their ability to run processes, execute calculations, and complete rule-based operations.⁴ Bogost argues that video games are especially effective vehicles for procedural rhetoric because of their ability to impart rule systems by encouraging players to "think" like a computer.

While some games encourage players to internalize procedural rhetoric as an incentive to win, Jakob Penca, Marek Plichta, and Till Wittwer's *Ordnungswissenschaft* (Science of Order; 2010) externalizes this phenomenon by remediating the command-based nature of computer language through human actions. Like many Fluxus scores, including La Monte Young's instruction from *Composition 1960 #10* (1960) to "draw a straight line and follow it," *Ordnungswissenschaft* is both played and performed by following simple instructions. The game itself is entirely analog, which means that players introduce elements of chaos and randomness simply by translating *Ordnungswissenschaft's* "programming" into physical movements. As players perform the game, it becomes clear that there is a distinct separation between human behavior and the clean, platonic ideals associated with computer logic. The deviations between the written instructions and their physical manifestation are not necessarily negative factors, but rather they demonstrate the increasing influence of human-computer relations and the fascinating tensions that emerge when organic and programmed elements are combined.

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Notes

1. See Boris Groys, "The Genealogy of Participatory Art," in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, by Rudolf Frieling et al. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 22–28.

2. Guy Debord, "Théorie de la dérive," *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 2 (December 1958); translation by Ken Knabb available at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/sj/theory.html>.

3. Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 1995), 12.

4. Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), ix.