

## Ludic Alternatives

**Christian Ulrik Andersen** is associate professor at Aarhus University, Denmark, where he is also the chair of Digital Aesthetics Research Centre and part of Centre for Digital Urban Living where he researches within digital aesthetics, software cities and computer games. Together with Søren Pold he is the editor of a new book: "Interface Criticism – Aesthetics Beyond the Buttons".

**ABSTRACT:** At an abstract level Jacques Derrida has suggested play as an alternative to western metaphysics' rigid thinking in concepts and binary oppositions and at a concrete level playing video games are perceived as spoiling youth and are often met with official bans. So, even though playing games is widely accepted as a healthy activity (for both people and the creative industries), it is also an activity met with suspicion, as a non-viable alternative that must be controlled. Playing games therefore is a handy tactics for creating alternatives. What is this rhetoric of play employed in critical and political game plays?

The article will examine the activity of playing (and in particular playing games) as societal critique, presenting either alternatives or the possibility to act politically, as an alternative. Looking back in history at the first political games (*Monopoly/Landlord's Game*) the article will trace the basic characteristics of using game play as politics and elaborate how playing with software (*Spacewar!*) can be considered a biopolitical act using cybernetics against itself. To conclude, it will reflect upon the fate of playing with software.

Games, play and what can be labelled 'ludics' is a compound field of research, including mathematical logic, computer science, semantics, philosophy, pedagogy, sociology, and other fields of research. The basis of the following understanding of ludics lies in the activity of playing, and in particular playing games, as societal critique presenting either alternatives or the possibility to act politically, as an alternative. At an abstract level Jacques Derrida has suggested play as an alternative to western metaphysics' rigid thinking in concepts and binary oppositions (Derrida 278-94) and at a concrete level playing video games are perceived as spoiling youth and are often met with official bans So, even though playing games is widely accepted as a healthy activity (for both people and the creative industries), it is also an activity met with suspicion, a non-viable alternative that must be controlled. Playing games hence also present itself as a handy activity for creating expressions that are meant to be socio-critical and political alternatives. Contemporary examples of how play and games using software and computers are used this way are numerous: Inspired by the situationist international Ludic Society use play and games to reflect on the role and use of technology; on the Internet Paolo Pedercini's Molleindustria produce games as critique of for instance the Catholic Church (*Operation: Pedopriest*); The British Artist Collective The People Speak employ game shows in an

exploration of participatory culture and civic action, and so forth. The question is: What is this rhetoric of play employed in critical and political game plays?

This question has not been left untouched by video game theorists. Already Ted Friedman discussed the implied ideology of *Civilization* in 1998 (Friedman) and later Gonzalo Frasca has discussed *Video Games of the Oppressed* (Frasca), Alexander Galloway *Social Realism in Gaming* (Galloway) and Ian Bogost *Persuasive Games* (Bogost). No doubt, these works are inspiring but they refrain from explaining how playing with software in itself can be considered a political act an alternative. In the following I will therefore turn to history's first computer game *Spacewar!* to provide an understanding of how playing with software in itself can be considered a political act, or rather as parody and biopolitics. Concluding, I will like to reflect on the rhetoric of playing critically with software and its fate in a time where not only games and toys but also play itself is being increasingly commercialised.

### **The historical background of political games: *The Landlord's game***

Though becoming more common in particular on the Internet, using games politically and critically is not a new thing. In 1904 Elizabeth J. Magie, a Quaker woman from the United States, patented the board game *The Landlord's Game*. As explained by Burton H. Wolfe in *The Monopolization of Monopoly*, Magie supported the theory put forward by Henry George that private monopolies on land and the renting of land produced an increase in the value of land that profited a few landlords rather than the majority of tenants (Wolfe). George proposed a 'single tax' on land to discourage speculation and balance the relationship between owners and tenants. Magie's intention was, in short, to create a practical demonstration of the negative consequences of private monopolies on land. Though many similar games were played at the time, *Landlord's Game* is considered the inspiration for *Monopoly*, the world's best selling board game. This paradox says something basic about the nature of games and of using games as politics.

Playing has to do with the cultural reproduction of prevailing values. Playing a game is about the tactile exploration of and adaption to the codes of conduct in the game. In *Landlord's Game*, letting players explore the processes of monopolisation is used with the deliberate intention to educate them in Georgism.

When this persuasion fails, it has to do with the ambiguous nature of play. Play serves two seemingly opposing goals: Play reproduces prevailing values but it also diverts unacceptable impulses and drives into personally and socially acceptable activities. Play has a 'frivolous' nature as play-theorist Brian Sutton-Smith calls it (Sutton-Smith). Under the circumstances of play, you are allowed to assume other roles (a different gender for instance) and act out unacceptable behaviours (brutality for instance). This means that the demonstration of monopolisation does not necessarily need to be linked to reflection and education; it may also be linked to frivolity and the opportunity to, in a socially acceptable way, experience the thrill of being a greedy capitalist.

But it may also fail for another reason: The rhetorical persuasive act is

arbitrary in nature. Modelling the process of monopolization of land does not seem to entail any conclusion; it is only a procedural logic. This, of course, is a very complex linguistic problem. In *logique du sens* Gilles Deleuze provides an understanding of the problem. He explains Diogenes' ability to argue using demonstrations, his ability to show and designate. Plato laughed at people who were satisfied with showing examples, as he did not ask *who* was just but *what* justice was, etc. (Deleuze 160). But Deleuze supports Diogenes and points to his ability to tear down Plato's idealism and essentialism by replacing ideas with examples. Designation, in other words, destroys meaning and signification. It is pointless to ask for the signification of the demonstration and its connection to universal concepts. The meaning of the game, capitalist or anti-capitalist, is completely arbitrary as it is merely a demonstration.

From this we may conclude that critical and political aspect is not intrinsic to the game but must lie somewhere else. The critical game is not just a demonstration but also a manifestation of an alternative. To consider *Landlord's Game* political, one must not merely pay attention to what is played and how it is played but also to who is playing the game. The critical players are not the consumers of *Monopoly* (enjoying the fun of playing greedy capitalists), but the Georgists and Quakers. Ultimately, getting the message depends on the players identifying with the project. One could even argue that there are no political and critical movement unless there are places where such performances can take place. This performative nature of manifestation seems to be a core characteristic of political and critical games, whose activity is otherwise ambiguous and meaning, arbitrary.

Certainly, using play as a critical manifestation is important in history's first computer game *Spacewar!*. The very conception of using computers for play depends on the manifestation of a critical attitude towards a prevailing system of meaning and control governing the employment of computers. Playing games deals with how cybernetics govern not only the user but also life itself.

### ***Spacewar!*: Game as parody and biopolitics**

The original version of *Spacewar!* is from 1962 and is intended for two players who each controlled a spaceship. The object of the game is to shoot the opponent with missiles while manoeuvring and avoiding the gravity well of the 'star' at the centre of the screen. Taking up the theme of a space war in the midst of a cold war, cannot be considered random. *Spacewar!* was in fact made at the same time as Yuri Gagarin's space travel. So, essentially the game is playing on cold war themes, a satire where the race for space is turned into popular culture and play. In particular it is a parody that turns the interaction of military defence systems into a cinematic model work of beams and explosions. The most celebrated of these cold war computer systems is SAGE (Semi Automated Ground Environment system), a cybernetic air defence system where humans, based on the information from control posts, would track aircrafts and feed a computer with input to predict flight tracks, possible targets and eventually automate the interception (Andersen 51-3). The whole game play of *Spacewar!* is essentially an imitation of the operation of SAGE: On a screen, the player's task

is to predict the tracks of missiles and spacecrafts in order to intercept enemy spacecrafts on a radar. The frivolous nature of play adds a hyperbolic quality and parody to the imitation: Rather than just spotting air crafts, the player can control them in battle, shoot enemies down and feel the thrill of explosions.

Unlike the *Landlord's Game*, *Spacewar!* does not model a complex process, or even a process that remotely pretends to say anything about reality. The game is science-fiction and no one imagines that the cold war leads to real space wars. Hence, the game is not political in the sense that it wants to make claims about the world. So, what does the game demonstrate and what kind of politics is at play?

What is particular about the demonstration is its humour. Again turning towards Deleuze, humour can be described an act of substitution (Deleuze 160-1). In *Spacewar!* the cold war is substituted with sci-fi. This is at once absurd and destroys meaning, but paradoxically the thrill of both shooting spacecrafts and laughing at the ridicule of the cold war makes sense as a manifestation of the player. Of course, there is also an internal logic in the game where shooting missiles at the opponent leads to victory, but first and foremost it makes sense for the player simply because it is thrilling and fun – as a bodily sensation. It is a manifestation of the body as sense making. The parody is a paradox of being at once absurd and making sense bodily. In this avoidance of a conceptualization the logic of sense becomes a logic of sensation. What is important is not just what is played but also the body of the player and the sensation of playing. In fact, one could argue that the bodily engagement, 'feeling' the gravity, the thrill of overcoming obstacles and even the shouting and excitement of playing is a central experience of all computer games. This is where the game becomes political, because this is exactly what is repressed in SAGE.

SAGE is a cybernetic control system, in which humans are reduced to elements fulfilling their task in the system, but potentially disturbing it and must be controlled. This kind of objectification of the human seems to be a general problem of cybernetics, also addressed by Norbert Wiener himself, who in his last book asks: "Can God play a significant game with his own creature? Can any creator, even a limited one, play a significant game with his own creature?" (Wiener). In this, he points to the technocratic and administrative nature of cybernetic systems: They are control systems (even seeking to control the future) putting God's creature, the human, in danger; or rather, cybernetics is marking the end of free will and the bourgeois subject. In these systems, humans are supposed to enter a symbiosis with the computer, as J.C.R. Licklider has expressed it (one of the key developers of SAGE and well-known theorist within cybernetics) (Licklider, 74), and in this they are too easily translated into the system. As media theorist Brian Holmes has noted, the human is an 'info mechanic being', whose "double constitution could be felt in the uncanny identity of the strange new creatures that fired the guns and piloted the planes: both seemed to waver between machinelike, implacable humans and intelligent, humanlike machines" (Holmes 4).

The symbiosis of human and computer is the reality of the post-war human subject, and not least the reality of the computer scientists who were not

only the makers but also the players of *Spacewar!*. The development of computer systems has always been linked to military strategic objectives as for instance ballistics or cryptography. In the United States, during the Vietnam War, it was even proposed that the support of computer research was depending on a strategic and military impact (Gere 130). In other words, at the time of *Spacewar!* computer research was also military research. Cybernetics proved itself to be applicable in all areas of life, even politics and military strategic research. The whole cold war is a cybernetic system where the production of weapons and defence systems, including computer systems, reduces humans and not least the human body to estimations of potential casualties in a war. As researchers they were themselves objects in the system with an uncanny identity between cruel machinelike humans and intelligent, humanlike machines.

The manifestation of *Spacewar!* is now more clear. Employing the computer as a creative tool, giving programmers as well as users agency and free will, making games with bodily response, playing and being frivolous (shooting, destroying, competing, expressing excitement, etc.) is a paradoxical rebellion against the human situation in a cybernetic age. Cybernetics used against itself. If *Spacewar!* reveals something about the system dynamics and procedural logic of the cold war, it is in particular the casualties of cybernetics, the humans, the cybernetic symbiosis of human and machines, and the impact of a political power on their bodies and life. It is 'biopolitics' and of special importance for computer programmers. Eventually this first game culture revolutionised computing. The 'hackers' playing *Spacewar!* (this was how they were labelled at the time) rebelled against a reductive perspective on humans as servants in the system, and developed new visions of how computers could serve people as creative tools and means for bodily sensation. Stewart Brand, in a feature article on *Spacewar!* in Rolling Stone magazine from 1972, depicts how these gamers (including a young Allan Kay) are the geek hippies at Xerox PARC (Brand). Perhaps not only games but also user driven interaction design depended on the vision and aspirations of these first gamers.

### **The fate of ludic alternatives**

The fate of these ludic alternatives with software is another story. Ironically, the US military probably learned more from *Spacewar!* than from SAGE. The military has a long tradition for using games to train, and computer games has provided new possibilities for not only train bodily enactments, but also for using games to brand the army; giving people a sense of 'the real deal' (as seen in the game *America's Army*). And vice versa, developing into an industry the makers of computer games have learned a great deal from surveillance systems like SAGE. With the capitalization of not only the games themselves but also the activity of play, the player is increasingly becoming objectified in the cybernetic system. In particular in online games player activity is seen as production of value in the form of social relations in or simply by the time they spend on the game platform, increasing the potential value of the platform for its advertisers. Making online games depends on rewarding players for performing this kind of value production – as 'info mechanic beings'.

Is the game lost? Can play still be an alternative?

In his book *Homo Ludens* from 1938 the Dutch play theorist Johan Huizinga states that “animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (Huizinga 1). Play is a natural thing: Cats play with mice, dogs pretend to bite while playing, dolphins are known to play in the current of boats, insects perform for-play before mating and so on. But the instinct for play, and the ‘having fun’ that defines its essence, is also a central element in human civilization. Play has been and always will be intrinsic to our nature and culture.

Huizinga explores how culture arises in the form of play in law, war, science, poetry, philosophy, and art. But from time to time, as manifestations, people also set up new games, challenging prevailing hierarchies of meaning and control. Play may have a similar role as aesthetics in the redistribution of the sensual experiences, as described by Jacques Rancière in his analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century revolt in France:

“I conceive it [the wild appropriation of high language by the common people in the 19th century] as the widespread availability of writing which meant *the very condition for making history: the possibility for anybody to appropriate for him- or herself another ethos than the ethos suited to their condition.*”

(Rancière 16)

Assuming another ‘ethos’ by publishing newspapers, writing poetry and having nocturnal literary societies, is far more revolutionary than complaining about the distribution of goods, and challenges a social hierarchy’s determination of life in a fundamental way. The worker, who in a platonic worldview ought to work at day and sleep at night, ‘redistributes the sensible’ by changing behaviour and challenging the norm – by doing what is not authorized. Playing as aesthetics is about assuming another ethos. In Michel de Certeau’s terms playing may have lost as a strategy but it persists as tactics.

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