

...the multiple avant-gardes he so skillfully articulates in this much-needed treatise, Schrank's *Avant-garde Videogames* radically challenges the status quo of how we view games, their place in art and culture, and provides a conceptual map of the many potential futures of this vibrant aesthetic form."

...Fullerton, Associate Professor and Chair, USC Interactive Media & Games

...*Avant-garde Videogames*, Schrank shows us how the cutting-edge of games and the cutting-edge of art can be fashioned together into shears that cut holes into our perceptions of reality. This far-ranging examination of the relationship between games, technology, culture, and art serves as an excellent guide to the past, present, and future of avant-garde games."

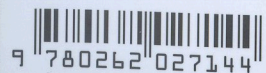
...Schell, CEO, Schell Games; Distinguished Professor of Entertainment Technology, Carnegie Mellon

MIT Press  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139  
www.mitpress.mit.edu  
617-495-3434

brian schrank

**avant-garde videogames**  
playing with technoculture

brian schrank  
foreword by jay david bolter



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This book was set in Stone Sans and Stone Serif by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schrank, Brian, 1976–  
Avant-garde videogames : playing with technoculture / by Brian Schrank; foreword by Jay David Bolter.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-262-02714-4 (hardcover: alk. paper)

1. Video games—Design. 2. New media art. 3. Video games—Social aspects. I.

Title.

QA76.76.C672S35 2014

794.8'1536—dc23

2013034775

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Foreword

Jay David Bolter

Among the growing number of books offering to explain the importance of videogames, Brian Schrank's *Avant-garde Videogames* stands out. It is perhaps the only one that engages the history of twentieth-century art in a serious way. The author's knowledge of videogames is broad and deep; he always finds the appropriate example to illustrate his points about the formal, political, or narrative structures of games. At the same time, his understanding of major figures and movements in the twentieth-century avant-garde allows him to argue for videogames as an avant-garde (or rather a set of avant-gardes) with a sense of history that is rare, if not unique, in the area of games studies.

This book belongs to games studies, and it will be read and debated largely in that community as well as by the larger world of digital media and design. I imagine that few students of traditional art and art history will pick up *Avant-garde Videogames*. That is unfortunate, because this book is evidence of an important change in the status of art in our media culture today—a change that the art world has still not addressed. From the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, art occupied a special place in the culture of Europe and North America: it was assigned the task of elevating both the individual and the culture as a whole. Various theorists called attention to this belief in the "autonomy" of art. In its extreme form—for example, in the writings of Matthew Arnold—art replaced religion. The historical avant-garde, such as the Futurists, Dadaists, and surrealists, who Schrank describes briefly and effectively in the chapters that follow, thought that they were challenging such "bourgeois" notions. They believed that their absurd performances as well as strange paintings and assemblages would help to destroy the institution of Art with a capital A, and replace it with practices that could integrate art into

Chapter 3

We can evaluate political avant-garde events according to how they force or enable us to play with technoculture. This is play in the Sutton-Smith sense of the word: play as variability in the face of rigid adaptations; play as openness to alterity. This conception of play deviates from the popular desire to safely play as we extend our mastery over the world through the instrumental use of technology. We do not need to evaluate the political avant-garde for its effectiveness, or lack thereof, in critiquing, negating, mocking, or healing what ails us socially or politically. The constituent parts of technoculture are pried apart by the avant-garde, giving us slack to appreciate not a better synthesis with technology or a Rousseauian decoupling from technology via an impossible "return to nature" but rather a more open way of being with technology and each other.

## 4 Complicit Formal

### Art Is Messy

The complicit formal avant-garde advances art for art's sake while taking into account the messy technocultural milieu in which its work is engaged. These artists do not promote specific mediums. On the contrary, they question whether videogames or painting, film, video, the Internet, and so on, are each unique mediums in the first place. Videogames are treated as a resource from popular culture that can be used to make fun and relevant contemporary art. Individual mediums may be illusory, but art as a cultural practice is not. Complicit formal artists are mischievously liberal in what they consider to be art, because they have learned from the failures and successes of the historical avant-garde. While committed to form, they are also dedicated to investigating (or demonstrating) the technocultural context that shapes the interpretation of form. They create art games in the loosest possible sense, making use of diverse strategies, such as putting games in traditional gallery spaces, constructing manic cyborgs, and *affordance mining* (searching for new ways to play with things) household materials for their hidden, play-enabling properties.

The term *complicit formalism* was coined by Drucker to distinguish contemporary practices in art from radical formal practice, which she refers to as "modernist practice" or "old-style formalism" because it dominated art in the first half of the twentieth century. Drucker (2005, 36–37) criticizes radical formal practice for a "conspicuous allegiance to a kind of formal essentialism or faith in the power of an object to communicate directly as a form." The complicit formal avant-garde is acutely aware of the social and historical contexts in which its work is engaged. The fact that a game is never played in a sensual, material, or cultural vacuum is an affordance

that this type of work exposes as well as exaggerates. Artists working in complicit formalism foreground the social act of meaning making by staging performances, installations, and mixed media events that purposely blur boundaries. By applying the histories, rituals, and cues of art to those of games, and vice versa, these artists create the most blended kinds of art game experiences.

The artifacts produced by those working in this genre are not the only elements that defy conventional boundaries. Even the label of artist is itself suspect for complicit formalists. For example, instead of identifying as an artist, Amerika prefers "artist-medium," "flux persona," "aimless drifter," or "digital thoughtographer." Amerika (2007, 290) is a contemporary digital artist and theorist who remixes historical concepts:

Our collective mission is to radically alter the Pop Culture's focus by channeling a more popularized kind of dark, sexy, surreal, and subtly ironic gesturing that grows out of the work of many twentieth-century artists like Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Lenny Bruce. . . . The emerging wave of Avant-Pop artists now arriving on the scene find themselves caught in this struggle to rapidly transform our sick, commodity-infested workaday culture into a more sensual, trippy, exotic, and networked Avant-Pop experience.

Sensual, trippy, exotic, and networked mixtures are the core feature of the complicit formal avant-garde. Players are given too much or too little control. More or less of the player's body is brought to bear than they would like. Players must keep adapting and remain open to the spectacle of play if they are to keep it alive.

### Fluxus and Flow

If contemporary practice in complicit formalism can be said to have an ancestry, it would be found in the Fluxus art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists such as Paik, Yoko Ono, and Dick Higgins whimsically blended mediums together while formally appropriating a smorgasbord of previous avant-gardes, from Dada to minimal abstraction. All of art history was fair game, as was popular culture. In 1964, Paik and Shuya Abe created *Robot K-456*, a twenty-channel remote-controlled robot. The precarious, handmade robot was guided down a New York City street, defecating beans while broadcasting John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. In 1982, Paik led the robot down the street again, this time into oncoming traffic



Figure 4.1

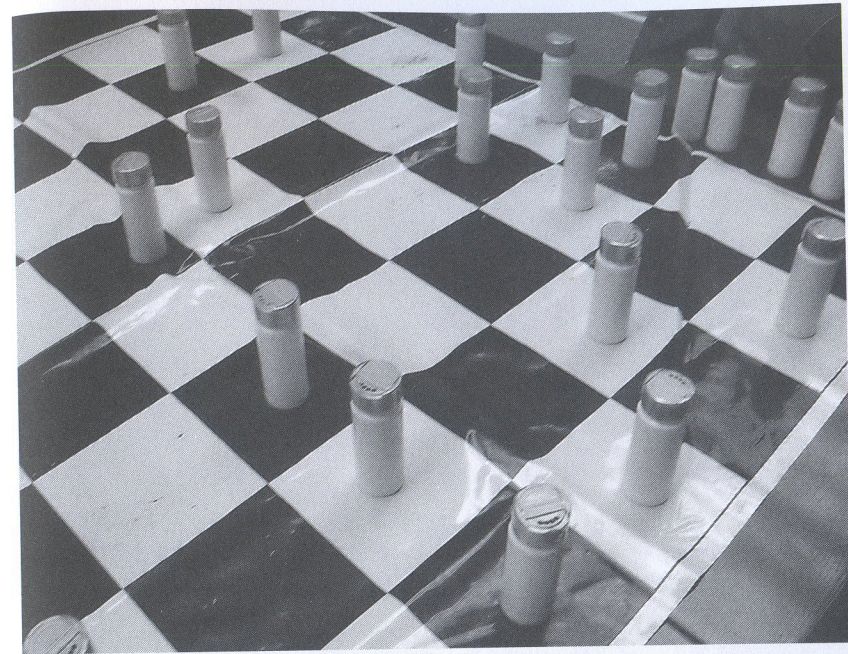
Nam June Paik's *Pre-Bell-Man* (1990) is a mixed assemblage of media electronics and traditional sculpture. Image courtesy of Dontworry.

in a performance piece called *The First Catastrophe of the 21st Century*. The work held up a kind of mirror to the anxieties of the era, as *Robot K-456* was always on the brink of collapsing into a pile of twitching parts. This fragility reflected the precarious *détente* that had prevented the Cold War from turning hot and pulverizing the planet with thousands of nuclear weapons. During this same period, as the computer revolution launched, popular media representations of technology oscillated between diabolical villain and messianic savior. *Robot K-456*, on the other hand, was neither heroic nor menacing, and demonstrated how technology itself was neither an innate threat nor a means of salvation but rather a confused network of materials and cultural conventions.

Fluxus had connections to performance art. Fluxus artists were inspired by “Happenings”—art events in which audience and performers merge, spontaneously improvising a constantly evolving, shared experience (Higgins 2002, 105–106). When people do not know what they are supposed to do, when they do not know what they are looking at, artwork and audience seem staged within a *mise-en-scène*. In that moment, life becomes art. Fluxus blurred the role of artists and participants through generative and awkward Fluxkits, Fluxfilms, and Fluxshops (Pearce 2006a). When an artist asks viewers to help them dump dirt in a gallery, the spectators become complicit in the act. Art becomes a curious dare.

Fluxus artists also used the conventions of games to achieve certain artistic effects, inciting lively behavior from participants while blurring the roles of creator and player. Celia Pearce (*ibid.*, 69–70) explains that “creating something that is framed as a game expresses a certain attitude, a particular posture toward not only the work itself but the ‘audience, and the practice of art-making in general.’” Put simply, games invite people to play with art. This connection to games can be uncovered even at a linguistic level. The term *Fluxus* was derived from the Latin word for flow. This is not Csikszentmihályi’s flow, in which the experience is designed so that the player loses self-consciousness as their skills grow to match rising challenges. Instead, this is the flux of flow, the axiom of Heraclites that you cannot step into the same river twice. Complicit formal art is about being open to change and dancing with the currents.

Famous examples from this genre include Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), in which she prompted audience members to cut the clothes off her as she sat motionless. The audience largely decided how the work would unfold and

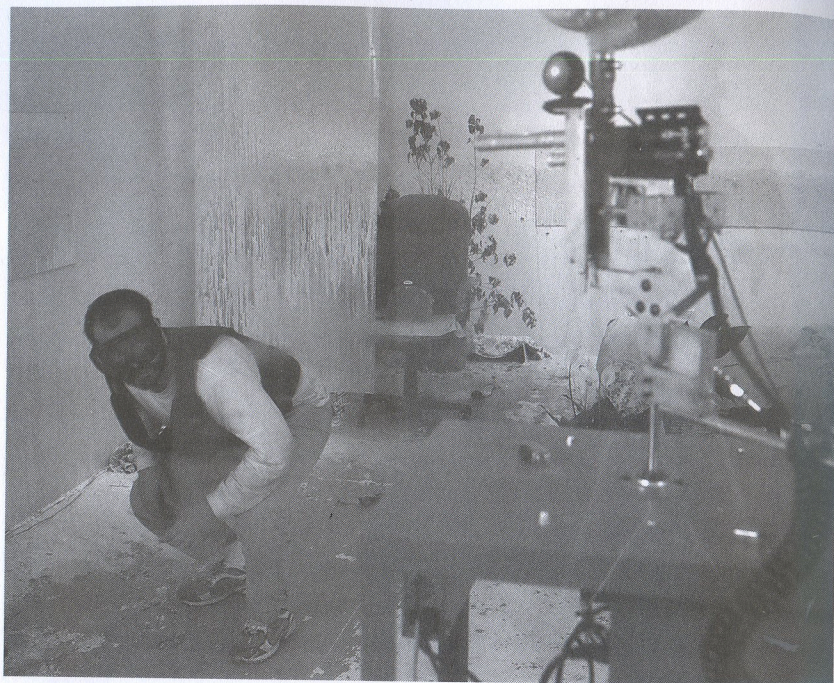


**Figure 4.2**

Not just a visual or conceptual work, Takako Saito’s *Smell Chess* (1965) encourages gallery-goers to playfully figure out ways to interact with it. Photograph taken at the Tate Modern in 2008. Image courtesy of R4vi.

what it meant. In *Deadman* (1972), Chris Burden placed his safety in the hands of people who were not even his audience when he wrapped himself in a tarp and laid down on busy street in Los Angeles. When police arrested and questioned him, he declared he was making a piece of sculpture.<sup>1</sup> In a 1971 piece called *Shoot*, Burden was shot in a gallery by a friend wielding a rifle. The bullet was supposed to just graze him, but it accidentally tore through his shoulder. Complicit formal artists trust art to play out as it will in other people’s hands, risking not only the stability of the piece but sometimes their own safety as well.

In Ono’s *Play It with Trust / White Chess Set* (1966), all the game pieces and chessboard squares are white. Ono was inspired by the Cold War climate of suspicion and paranoia. She said that you have to “play it with trust.” In reaction to polarizing political angst, *White Chess Set* encourages the audience to reject categorical thinking. The experience is antibinary by design. In most games, victory comes at the expense of another side’s



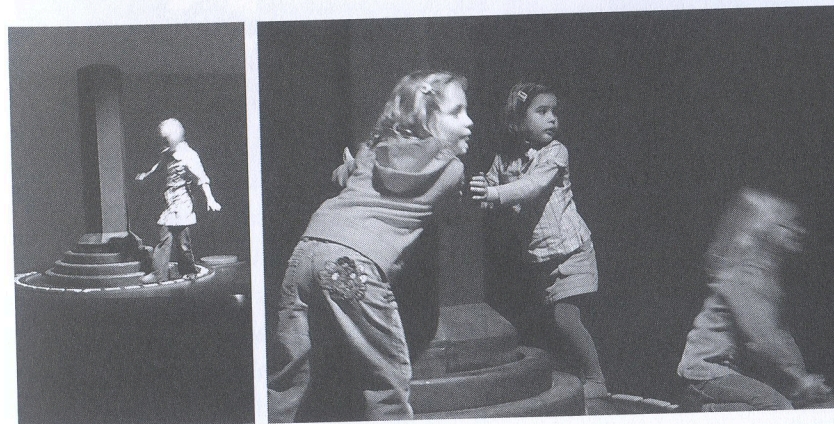
**Figure 4.3**  
Artist Wafaa Bilal ducks from a remote-controlled paintball gun controlled by online players during *Domestic Tension*. Image courtesy of Wafaa Bilal.

defeat according to zero-sum logic. In *White Chess Set*, the burden of play is consistently refocused from the “what to do” to the “how to play.” When audience members accept the challenge of *White Chess Set*, a series of questions arise: Is this my piece or yours? Am I playing with you or against you? How does collaborative play function in chess? Due to the challenge presented by the formal openness of *White Chess Set*, the experience forces players to cooperatively construct new rules of engagement as they struggle to enact a game and keep it alive.

Other instances of complicit formal works can be structured such that one group of players works to bring the game to life while another group works to shut the game down. In *Domestic Tension*, Iraqi American Wafaa Bilal locked himself in a gallery for a month in 2007 to be bombarded with paintballs from a webcam-mounted gun operated by online players. Players did not need to negotiate anything as in *White Chess Set*; they only needed to click the mouse to fire. Other players tried to disrupt shots and

protect Bilal. The site got eighty million hits, and sixty thousand paintballs were fired. Bilal suffered welts, bruises, and occasional bleeding. For him, the worst part was not physical pain but rather the anxiety about not knowing when he would next get shot. Bilal had several emotional breakdowns, visibly sobbing as the Internet continued to pelt him, preferring his face and groin. He wore goggles to protect his eyes and set up a transparent shield to protect his head at night.

Bilal’s impetus to create *Domestic Tension* was a desire to give a face to the Iraq war. While Bilal himself has been in the United States since 1992 when he was granted asylum, his siblings and parents remain in Iraq. His twenty-one-year-old brother was killed in 2005 in Najaf by a missile fired from a US drone, and two months later his father died. Afterward, Bilal saw an ABC interview with a soldier remote controlling a drone over Iraq and launching missiles while sitting at a computer in Colorado. *Domestic Tension* offers a face, body, and tangible way to engage the controversial issues of modern war technologies. By inviting players to target him as if they were playing a game, Bilal incited aggression as well as empathy. Malevolent players authored Java scripts that caused the gun to aim at Bilal and fire automatically, while other players attempted to disrupt those shots. By month’s end, players protecting Bilal stayed online persistently to form a “virtual human shield.”



**Figure 4.4**  
*[giant]oystick* by Mary Flanagan invites people to spontaneously collaborate to play Atari games. Images courtesy of Mary Flanagan.

[*giantjoystick*] (2006) is a work that fosters spontaneous collaboration instead of strife with strangers. It is an installation piece, videogame, and performance. Mary Flanagan, its creator, describes it as a “system of collaboration.” As gallery visitors enter, they are confronted by a six-foot-tall joystick, which towers over the room. The joystick is wired to an Atari 2600 running classic games such as *Breakout* and *Asteroids*, which are projected on the gallery wall. A pattern of social play usually emerges. Curiosity spurs the crowd surrounding this strange monument to nostalgic play, and invariably someone is provoked into performative action. One visitor climbs the base and tries to push the monument-like stick. It merely wobbles. Now feeling “onstage,” the visitor struggles harder. Another gallery-goer joins the first to assist and successfully move the platform. But now the ball is stuck, and the fire button is out of foot reach. Someone else impulsively runs up to hit it. The artwork sets up a situation in flux. Figuring out how to collectively play the thing becomes the game, turning players into artistic performers.

Walter Langelaar presents a different take on the common game joystick in his 2007 installation work *nOtbOt*. Instead of waiting for players, the game prefers to play itself. The physical joystick erratically slams directions, mirroring the decisions of an artificial intelligence bot rampaging around *Quake III*. The player can grip it, but the joystick bucks and rears like a little mechanical bull. Julian Oliver (2007) notes, “My first impression of *nOtbOt* was of a haunting: an AI that would take no more, fighting back at the input device” to free “itself from a history of bondage.” Roles are reversed. The player can finally feel what it is like to be throttled into submission through the performance of an agonistic machine.

*Cockfight Arena* (2001) provides another compelling example of complicit formalism with games. Dueling players physically gesticulate in garish, plumaged costumes and beaked hats to battle virtual roosters on-screen behind them. For spectators and players alike, the ridiculous spectacle in front of the screen draws as much attention as the action of animated sprites. The encumbered arms and twisted faces of players layer an absurd theatricality on top of the gameplay. The motion triggers of the game are floating in the immediate space around each player, who awkwardly gesticulates in search of them. One of the game’s creators, Eddo Stern, observes, “The physicality of the game allowed for players to really perform beyond the confines of something predefined and preprogrammed” (quoted in

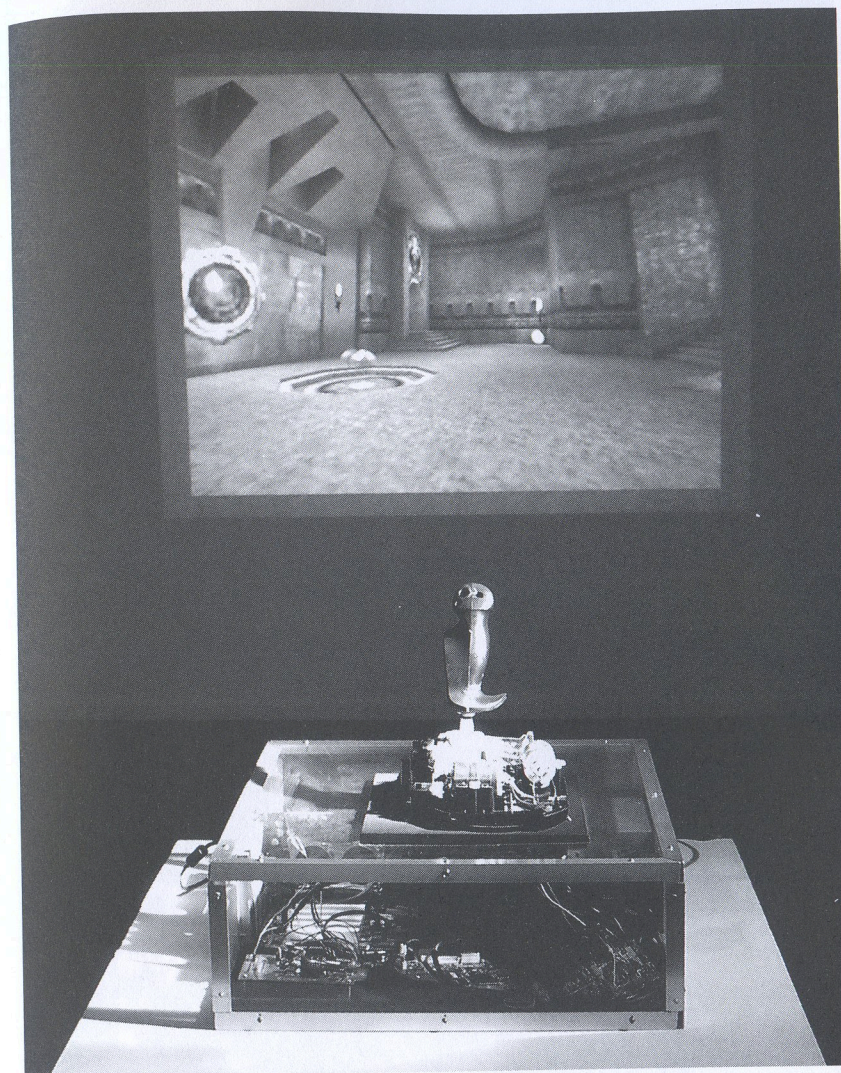


Figure 4.5

Players grip the *nOtbOt* joystick as it jerks around like a little mechanical bull. Image courtesy of Walter Langelaar.



Beard 2006). Meanwhile, the virtual roosters vie for attention. When one is hit, giant captions indicating damage, such as "DOH!" and "OOF!!" appear and then float away. Ambiguity is at the heart of C-Level, the temporary collective that created *Cockfight Arena*. Characteristic of the complicit formalists, the description of C-Level (2006) is multilayered and complex:

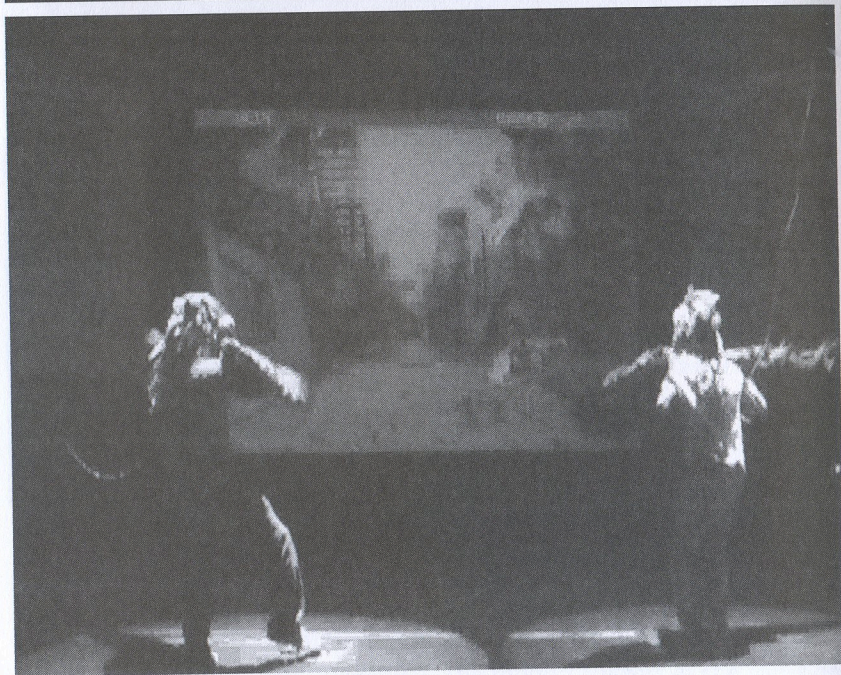
Cooperative public and private lab formed to share physical, social and technological resources. Its members are artists, programmers, writers, designers, agit-propers, filmmakers and reverse-engineers. Part studio, part club, part stage and part screen; C-Level . . . plays host to various media events such as screenings, performances, classes, lectures, debates, dances, readings and tournaments.

Such descriptive profusions and litanies of categories are typical in complicit formalism. Similar blending and blurring of categories is mirrored in [*giantJoystick*] and *Domestic Tension* as well. Each uses performativity and the body to blend games with theatrical art. A contemporary "art experience" freely mingles with a familiar "game experience." Where do the games end and the performance hacks or traditional gallery spaces begin?

Complicit formalism is distinct from radical formalism. Whereas radical formal works dig into the formal material, sensual, and cultural essences of a medium, complicit formal works blur all the medium's edges, challenging conventional modes of interaction and interpretation. Nonetheless, complicit formal artists do take certain cues from radical formalism. They subscribe to the same art for art's sake attitude, according to Hanna Higgins (2002, 102), a Fluxus historian. Complicit formal practice is committed to nonsemiotic and extralinguistic art. Like radical formal art, it is resistant to applied uses or serving as a rhetorical vehicle of persuasion that stands in for something else. Complicit formalism simply seeks to present reality itself in a new light.

### Manic Avant-garde Cyborgs

Other examples of complicit formal avant-garde works make use of the cyborg figure, which is prominent in mainstream culture. The cyborg appears in videogames as the avatar, in military training exercises and combat as the human soldier enmeshed in technology, and most basically, as the interdependent relationship created by the circuit of the player's hand with the controller, brain and CPU, and retina and screen. Engaging a mainstream game, the player can get the sense that if they could only play



**Figure 4.6**

*Cockfight Arena* (2001) is an exuberant, celebratory videogame performance by C-Level (comprised of Eddo Stern, Mark Allen, Jessica Z Hutchins, and Karen Lofgren at the time). Images courtesy of Eddo Stern.

well enough, they might emerge on the other side of gamespace as a perfect cybernetic being. Scott Bukatman (1993, 196) calls this condition “terminal identity,” where games “represent the most complete symbiosis generally available between human and computer—a fusion of spaces, goals, options, and perspectives.” In these mainstream game experiences, the cybernetic loop is not about opening up, thinking about, or playing with the loop; it is about closing the loop as tightly and seamlessly as possible. Complicit formal works making use of the cyborg and cybernetic loop seek to reverse this closure, open it up, or bring attention to its hermetic nature.

The complicit formal avant-garde foregrounds the cybernetic circuit by giving players either more or less agency over it than they can effectively handle. Artists exaggerate the cyborg with comically grotesque results. They strive for the most exquisite abominations rather than the most seamless couplings.

Stelarc is a new media artist who treats the cyborg as a sandbox in which to play. In *Ping Body/Proto-Parasite* (1995), an audience in Paris touched screen icons to trigger electrode-rigged muscles on the left side of Stelarc’s body (located in distant Luxembourg) to flex and release. Stelarc went further, and “made the body a video switcher and mixer,” a kind of human graphics card, and relayed the processed information back to Paris for projection. He plays on the “fear we have always been zombies” (Smith and Clarke 2005, 21). His agenda is to reveal how “information is the prosthesis that holds up the obsolete body” (*ibid.*, 7). He wishes to give information total control over the organic dimension of human life.

Like many avant-garde figures, Stelarc’s stated aspirations for his work are ironic because, his cybernetic spectacles emphasize his body’s resistance to technological integration and exploitation. His material “components” awkwardly jiggle, bleed, and sweat all over the technology. A reporter describes a Stelarc performance: “FLABBY, balding and naked, a middle-aged man convulses as 30 volts pulse through skin and bone, stimulating his nerve endings and producing an involuntary dance. It looks like torture” (Spencer 1996). Stelarc exaggerates his separation from technology versus his integration with it. He appears like a ghastly player from some dystopian future of games, attempting to couple with technology that rejects his agonizing advances, achieving an outcome more impressive than his stated goal for the work.

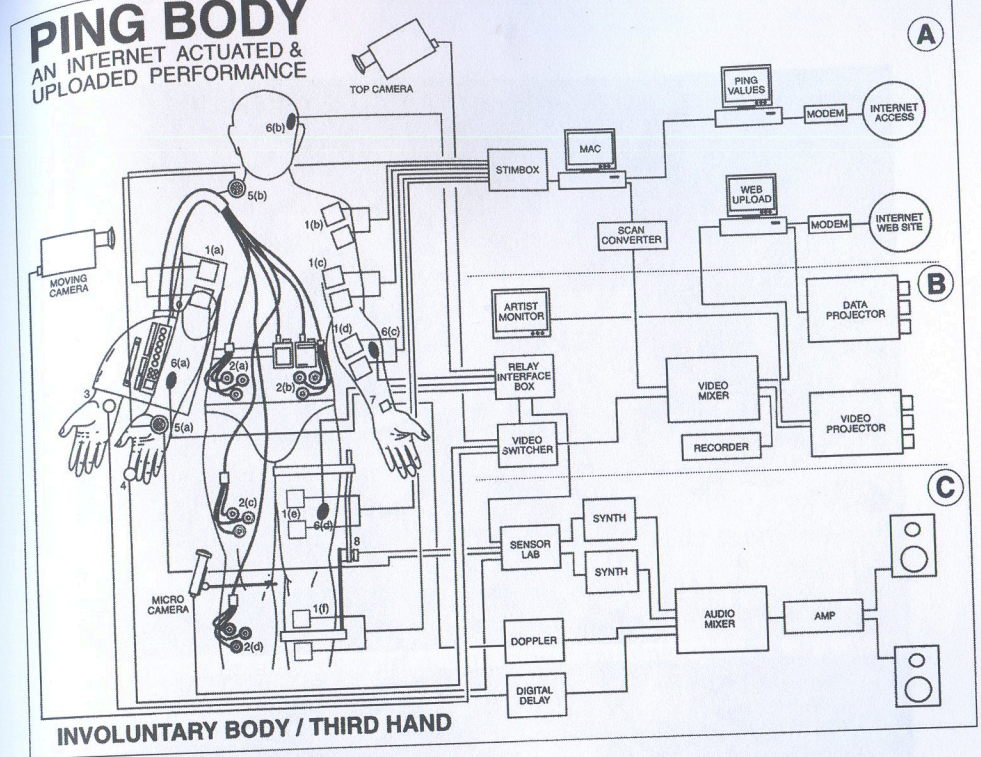
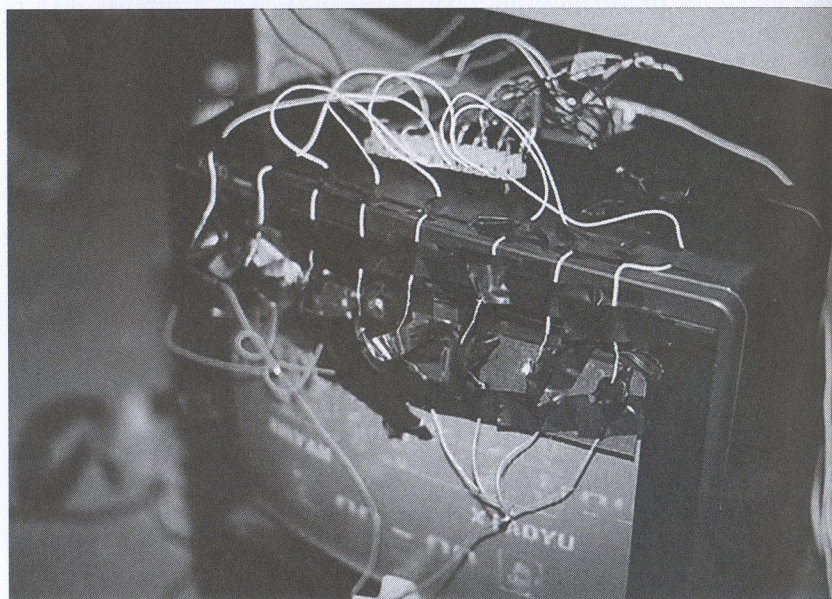
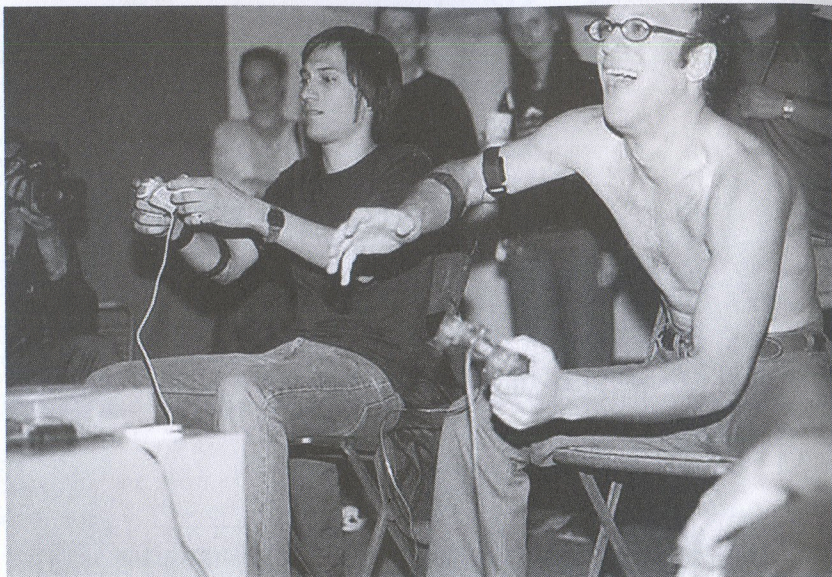


Figure 4.7

Stelarc, a cyborg artist, harnesses his body’s materiality as an extension of new media technology. The above image is a diagram of PING BODY, Stelarc 1996, courtesy of STELARC. The below image shows Stelarc performing *PARASITE* in 1997, courtesy of Dave Pape.



**Figure 4.8**

Avatar damage is transliterated into electric shocks in *Tekken Torture Tournament*. Images courtesy of Eddo Stern.

*Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001) by C-Level (comprised of Eddo Stern and Mark Allen at the time) provides another example of complicit formal work engaging with the cyborg. In this case, participants were wired to a modded (“modified”) PlayStation to play the fighting game, *Tekken 3*. When a player’s avatar was hit, they received an electric jolt via electrodes attached to their arm. In a positive feedback loop of failure, the closer to death a player was, the higher the charge of the electric current. Abruptly aware of their fleshy, vulnerable body, the player’s mind cannot avoid grappling with the concrete sensation of being wired to a machine.

Game artist and professor Robert Nideffer (2004) notes that *Tekken Torture Tournament* “takes the ‘shock controller’ metaphor marketed to sell console devices to a whole new level.” In this regard, the avant-garde has competition from the military-industrial complex. Efforts are well under way to assimilate physical pain into a militarized kind of flow. The *Threat-Fire Belt*, developed by VirTra, is an inward-facing taser strapped around an officer’s or soldier’s waist during virtual training exercises. If a player is shot, a 300-millisecond electric stun (adjustable to 2.5 seconds) is triggered. According to a sales rep, “The whole idea is to fight though the pain, and keep going, just the way you’ve been trained” (Halter 2006, 181). Like the *Threat-Fire Belt*, *Tekken Torture Tournament* incorporates pained human flesh, but in an open and humorous way. It resists the total electronic enclosure of all sensoriums by compelling players to perform, play, and laugh beyond the limits of a functional cyborg.

### Gentle Avant-garde Cyborgs

The complicit formal avant-garde also builds up and breaks down the cyborg using gentler tactics, tapping into lazier or more pleasurable couplings. In the following examples, the cyborg augments affection, uncovering dormant intimacies between technology and humans through cybernetic play. In these performances, technology skews and distorts how intimacy flows between people, or between a person and the presentation of oneself.

*Boomerang* (1974), created by Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, provides a provocative illustration of this type of work. In *Boomerang*, Holt wore a headset and spoke into a microphone. Her speech was delayed by a half second and fed back through her headphones. The audience heard both the live and delayed feeds, causing a nicely layered double echo. For ten



**Figure 4.9**

In *Boomerang* (1974), Nancy Holt speaks to herself through a recorded delay, providing herself with a disorienting way of realizing a skewed form of self-intimacy. Image courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

minutes, Holt described the experience and how it affected her cognition: "Sometimes, I find I can't quite say a word because I hear a first part come back and I forget the second part, or my head is stimulated in a new direction by the first half of the word." Holt got increasingly out of sync. She explained in real time how the disparity between her perception and speaking self "puts a distance between the words and their apprehension—their comprehension." It is a situation that is "like a mirror-reflection . . . so that I am surrounded by me and my mind surrounds me. . . . [T] here is no escape." Holt increasingly became estranged from herself: "I'm throwing things out in the world and they are boomeranging back . . . boomeranging . . . eranging . . . anging" (quoted in Krauss 1976). She was like a sensual psychonaut reporting back to ground control. The video performance allowed the cybernetic loop of human-audio-machine to slowly short-circuit before an audience vicariously riveted to the experience. In addition to audio and video feeds, complicit formal game artists fold the capacities of controllers, software, and virtual space in the experiential loop.



**Figure 4.10**

*Darkgame* conveys information through vibrations on a player's head, supplanting the visual dimension of gamespace with a tactile dimension. Images courtesy of Eddo Stern.

*Darkgame* (there have been several iterations from 2007 to 2013) by Eddo Stern provides another instance of this type of gentler subversion of the cybernetic loop. It allows two players to maneuver avatars in a virtual space. Avatar movements are projected on a gallery wall. Each player is given one of two channels of sensual feedback, either sight or touch, from which they must surmise what is happening. For example, if the player watching the screen gets shot, fuzzy spots grow, which obscure their vision as well the vision of all the gallerygoers. The second player receives information haptically through a force-feedback helmet—an orange octopus with tentacles wrapping around the cranium. Virtual space and in-game actions are felt as vibrations through concordant tentacles. "DZZZT" on the middle-left side, say, indicates that the player just took damage to that side. A milder "dzzzt" indicates that they just brushed a wall. Gameplay is sense "deprivation and sensory overload" simultaneously. While *Darkgame* has been lauded as accessible to the visually impaired, in a way the reverse is true too. The game also allows sighted players to sense a kind of blindness and play with a slow debilitation of sense. Navigating through the helmet, the player is aware of absence in the visual field. You can see and your eyes are open, but they are oddly useless. Sensations of "skin chatter" replace customary visual sensations. The primacy of sight is so profoundly

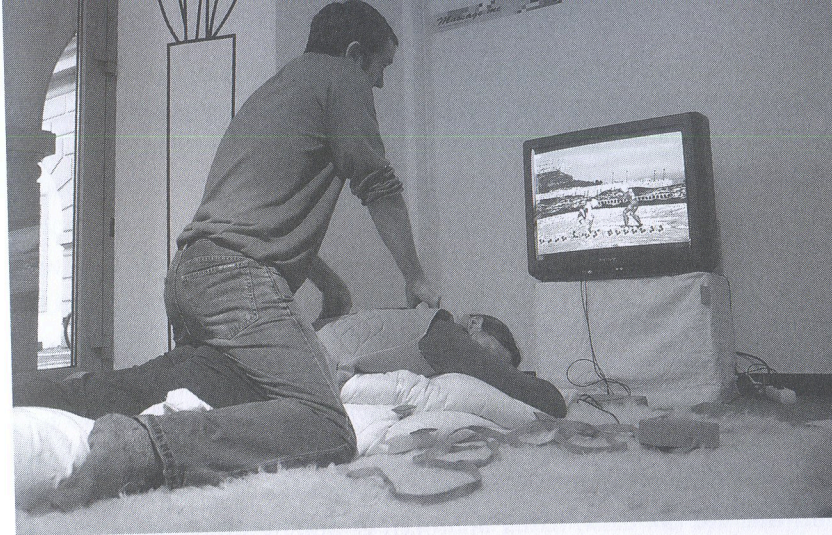
naturalized that by diverting the visual channel through tactile sensations applied elsewhere, we can feel our familiar sense ratios awkwardly adjusting to the new patterns.

*Darkgame* enables participatory openness and emergent couplings in its play. Similar to Ono's *White Chess Set*, players become better competitors if they cooperate. "DZZZZT" provokes a player to ask, "Did you just shoot me?" As the visual player becomes "blind," they may rely on the crowd and the buzzing sound of their opponent's helmet to know if they landed a shot. The example of *Darkgame* is emblematic of complicit formalist strategies, with the artist exploiting whichever connections might be socially, psychologically, or technologically available.

Gentle cyborgs elide virtual game competition in favor of physical pleasure. In her cyborg manifesto, Donna Haraway portrays cyborgs as inherently sexual because they open up alternate kinds of coupling between concepts, objects, and people. Cyborgs "signal disturbingly and pleasurable tight coupling" between "emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers" (Haraway 1991, 172, 173). Playing with cyborgs cross-wires bodies and technologies, enabling things that cannot usually touch to finally hook up.

*Massage Me* (2007) puts two people in an asymmetrical relationship: the single player operates the game by massaging someone wearing a vest that has embedded sensors on its back. The game's creators, the artists' group Kobakantinen (2007), claim that it "turns a video game player's excess energy into a back massage for an innocent bystander." The game pad becomes a pleasure center for contact, and the "addicted game player becomes an inexhaustible masseur." *Massage Me* yokes the agonistic energy of a fighting game into a massaging action. A performance that is usually abstracted to action on-screen is diverted to a friend prone on the floor. To enjoy the game is to give someone else pleasure, or at the very least, pressure.

*Kissing Controllers* (2011), by Hye Yeon Nam and Sam Mendenhall, goes further than *Massage Me* by penetrating the boundary of the players' bodies. A two-player game, it allows the control via kissing of virtual bowling balls and race cars. One player wears a headset with magnetic field sensors that detect the movement of a magnet affixed to their tongue with Fixodent. Players squish and wrestle tongues to negotiate control. It is tempting to assume that the mildly disturbing spectacle of *Kissing Controllers* coldly



**Figure 4.11**  
*Massage Me* reframes the human back as a conduit into gamespace, affording contingent exchanges of sensuality, activity, and passivity. Image courtesy of Mika Satomi and Hannah Perner-Wilson.



**Figure 4.12**  
*Kissing Controllers* by Hye Yeon Nam brings the videogame controller into two players' bodies. Models in photograph: Thomas Lodato (left) and Sarah Puerto (right). Photographer: Hye Yeon Nam. Image courtesy of Hye Yeon Nam.

instrumentalizes bodily intimacy. Nevertheless, because the spectacle is framed as a festive social event, it is more a celebration of cyborg sexuality.

### Affordance Mining

Complicit formal artists play with the materiality and “thingness” of everyday objects and equipment, prompting players to do the same. For example, George Maciunas experimented with alternate forms of ping-pong in *Flux Ping-Pong* (1976). He affordance mined the usual game equipment by sawing holes in rackets, then gluing Styrofoam, cans, tubes, and lead weights to them. This caused the ball to suddenly react and spin in ways that players did not expect. It was as if Maciunas was solving design problems that did not exist, fixing unbroken games. In a way, visitors to the gallery space were sweetly grieved, because the main challenges they faced as players (e.g., getting used to how ping-pong balls bounce off Styrofoam) seemed unrelated to the original games and thus they had to reacclimate themselves. The dormant properties of the materials and equipment were foregrounded through play.

Maciunas was affordance mining household materials, trash, and the usual equipment with which we play ping-pong. An affordance is a property that seems to call out from a technology to the person near or handling it. A doorknob looks like it wants to be turned and pulled. A game

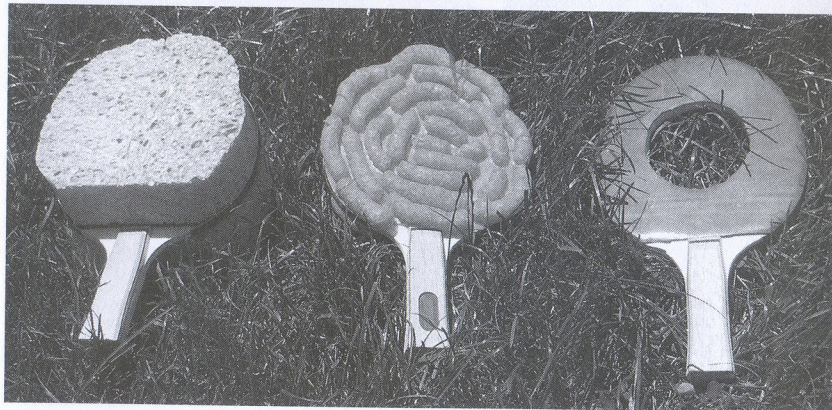


Figure 4.13

The author modified ping-pong equipment using household materials in the spirit of *Flux Ping-Pong* (1976) by George Maciunas.

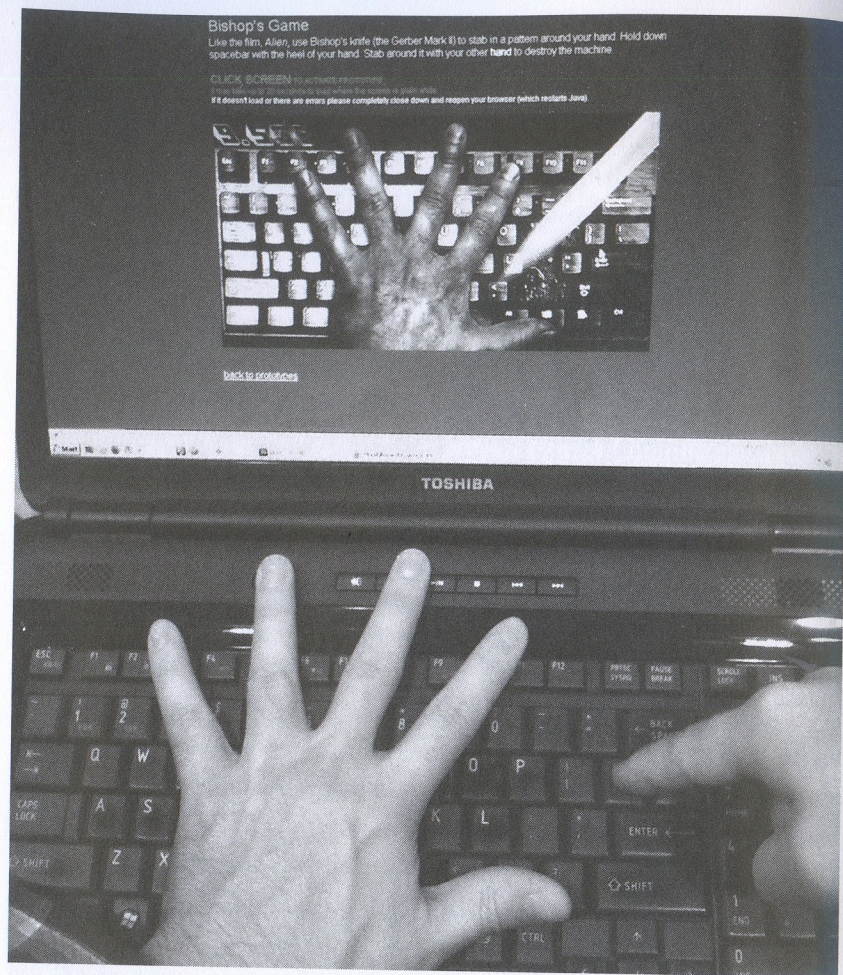
controller prompts us to handle it because of the way it perfectly fits our hands. In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Donald Norman popularized affordance in this sense. Norman's thesis is that technology should be designed to be transparent and intuitive for users by presenting strong, clear affordances. He appropriated the term affordance from perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson. For Gibson, affordances are inherent to nature; they do not have to be visible, known, or even desirable. Few of the potential affordances of everyday objects—from hot irons, phones, and pistols to toilet paper—are visible to us at any given moment (Norman 2008). Innumerable affordances have yet to be discovered between humans and the physical world, let alone between humans and technology.

Affordance mining helps players resist the usual ways we instrumentalize technology.<sup>2</sup> It sets our focus on an object's materiality and the total range of sensual experience it might offer. From this expanded embodiment, we can play beyond established conventions. To begin affordance mining, the artist must resist semiotic entrainment and forget what they know. They must feel the thing again as if for the first time, and this freshness carries over into gameplay.

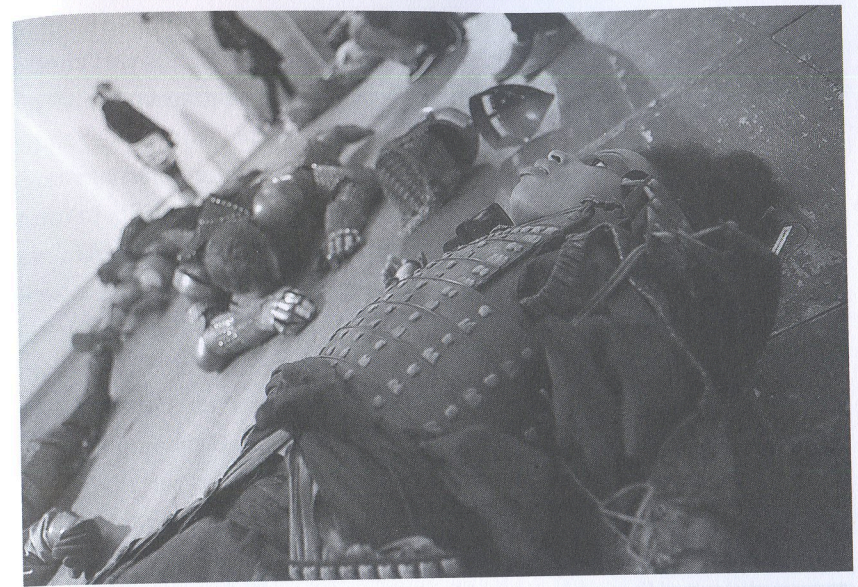
*Mashboard Games* is a series of games that I developed with Jeremy Rogers in which we affordance mine the common computer keyboard. The keyboard becomes a clunky touchpad and inept instrument. *Bishop's Game* is a piece in the series in which a player holds down the spacebar with the heel of their left hand and spreads their fingers apart over the keys. A filthy virtual hand appears on-screen, mimicking the player's finger formation. With their right hand, the player jabs the keyboard in a sequential pattern between the spread fingers of their left hand.<sup>3</sup> For every keyboard poke, a virtual knife breaks off a key. Stab fast enough and the virtual keyboard is decimated. If the player accidentally pokes their own hand, a screaming knife gouges their monstrous on-screen hand. *Mashboard Games* is awkwardly liberating to play, because players get to deprogram themselves and reinvigorate their relationship to the keyboard on more sensual, playful terms.

### Art of Erasure

Complicit artists also make use of an inversion of affordance mining: they erase and remove materials to see how artistic experience is affected. Robert



**Figure 4.14**  
 In *Bishop's Game*, the common computer keyboard is transformed into a clunky touchpad to poke and mash.



**Figure 4.15**  
*Death Animations* extract the moment of death from games and re-present it back to us in a theatrical form. Image courtesy of Brody Condon.

Rauschenberg asked Willem De Kooning if he could erase one of his drawings in order to make a new “collaborative” work from it. The result was *Erased De Kooning* (1953). Although Rauschenberg spent hours carefully rubbing out the pencil lines, palimpsest remained like a ghostly afterimage. Attempting to erase the act of drawing increased its visibility, as the eye strained to hunt for its evidence and take in its full form. Details were unevenly available, attenuating our attention, luring us to look intently.

*Death Animations* (2007–2008) are live-action performances of death animations extracted from videogames. The entire videogame apparatus is erased, leaving only slow-motion death. Over several hours, nine performers in medieval, science-fictional, and fantasy costumes fall and roll around slowly. Throbbing muscles hold up contorting heads and quivering appendages. Binaural electronic beats saturate the space, suspending thought and conversations that might otherwise arise. The creator of *Death Animations*, Brody Condon, was inspired by the works of “process artist” Bruce Nauman, such as his *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* (1973). Nauman instructed two actors to lie on a concrete floor and

imagine that they were sinking into it, or that it was rising and enveloping them. The video is disturbing to watch, because actors convulsively choke, contort, and sluggishly act out their viscera splattering across concrete. In *Death Animations*, the moment of death is extracted from games to be dilated and inspected at length. Focus wavers between memories of gameplay and the insufferably slow aliveness of theatrical spectatorship. In most games, death marks the instant that players are kicked out of the game in procedural failure. But death is also a spectacular reward for trying as well as a momentary reprieve. With the rag doll physics of the Havok engine in mainstream shooter games, the player is titillated to watch their avatar ricocheting off walls or contorting as it absorbs a dozen bullets. *Death Animations* embodies these ephemeral and fantastically exploding corpses, showing, by contrast, just how heavy and material the human body is in comparison.



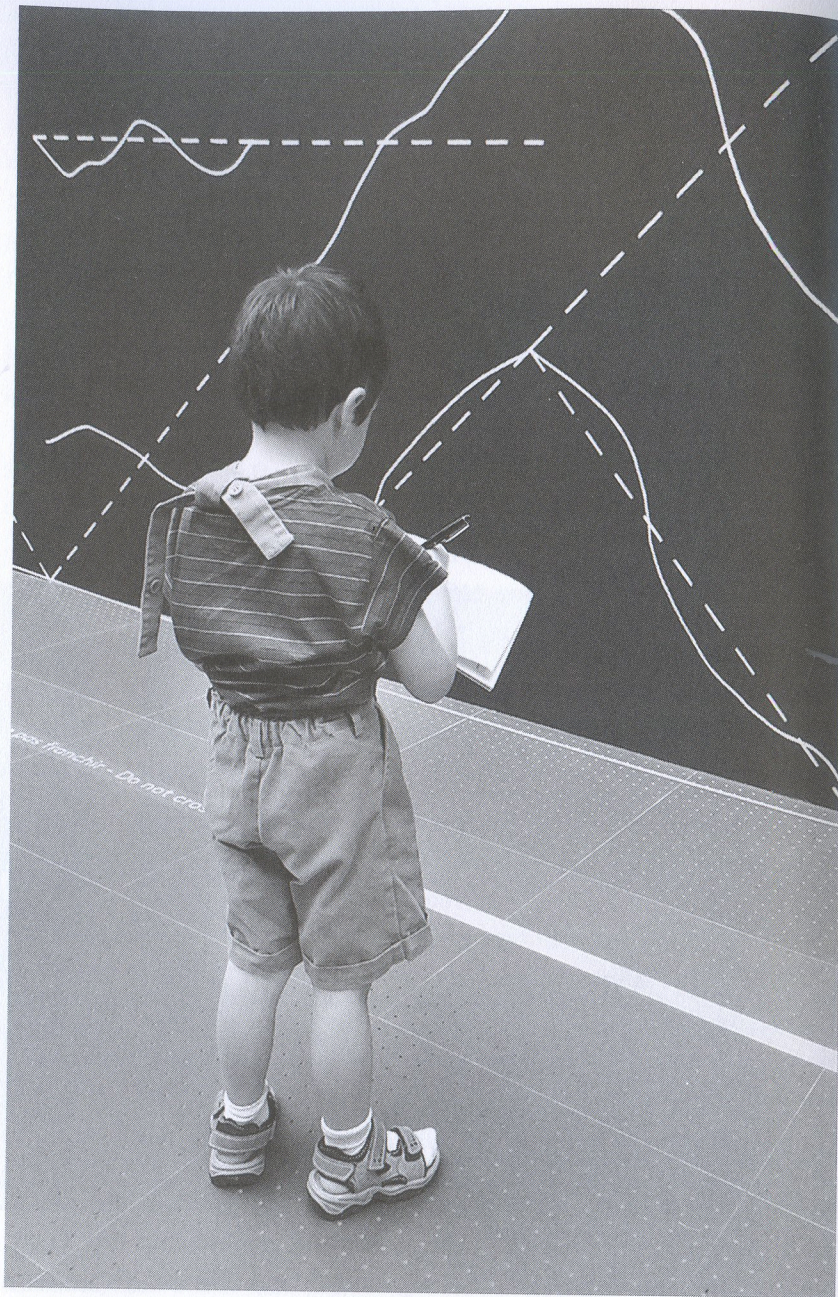
**Figure 4.16**  
Handmade, hacked *Super Mario Brothers* cartridge and Nintendo NES videogame system from Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (2002–). Installation view of the New York/Liverpool Project, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool, UK, 2004. Photo: Duncan Hamilton. Dimensions variable. © Cory Arcangel. Image courtesy of Cory Arcangel.

In another example of complicit formal erasure, Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (2002–), white clouds drift over a bright blue sky, lazily occupying the projector screen. Arcangel hacked a *Super Mario Bros.* NES cartridge so that Mario's graphic data and all other visual objects sit waiting for cues that will never come. Arcangel erases game designer Shigeru Miyamoto's work, leaving a palimpsest of blips and a drained sense of worldliness. The game experience is literally suspended in the air.

It is unfortunate that game enthusiasts have criticized Arcangel for betraying the medium of videogames with works like *Super Mario Clouds* that are allegedly unplayable as well as too much like video art, installation art, or film. Detractors see Arcangel as selling out or appropriating the medium of games for the enrichment of the art establishment rather than the reverse—using art to enrich games. *Super Mario Clouds*, however, is an imminently playable game. It is playable in the same sense that the paintings of conceptual artist Sol LeWitt are viewable paintings. LeWitt's 1970 work titled *Wall Drawing #46* is this line of text: "Vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly." Anyone can view the artwork if they accept the invitation to play and execute the instruction. *Super Mario Clouds* is not just a projection on a wall. The work is also the display of the process involved in the work's creation, the carved-up cartridge, the exhibition milieu, Arcangel's website with complete code examples, step-by-step instructions, and alluring photos of vivisectioned Nintendo cartridges. For Arcangel, "*Super Mario Clouds* [was] meant to be blind to both audiences, meaning that art people would see the work one way and like it while Internet people would see it another way and like it. I wanted these parallel rails on the same track" (quoted in Birnbaum and Arcangel 2009, 192). Players approaching the work from online culture see it as a do-it-yourself mod project as well as an invitation to play and tinker with what makes eight-bit games and game systems tick, and art audiences see the work as referencing art history with games.

*Super Mario Clouds* is seductively illustrative of how the two chips inside a Nintendo cartridge work: one stores audiovisual information and the other holds gameplay information. Arcangel left the graphic chip intact, but returned the code chip to call on the clouds and nothing else. This erasure of information allows people to experience the work in new way. Arcangel explains why negotiation with technology at this level is appealing: "I like these systems not [be]cause of nostalgia, but because they are cheap and

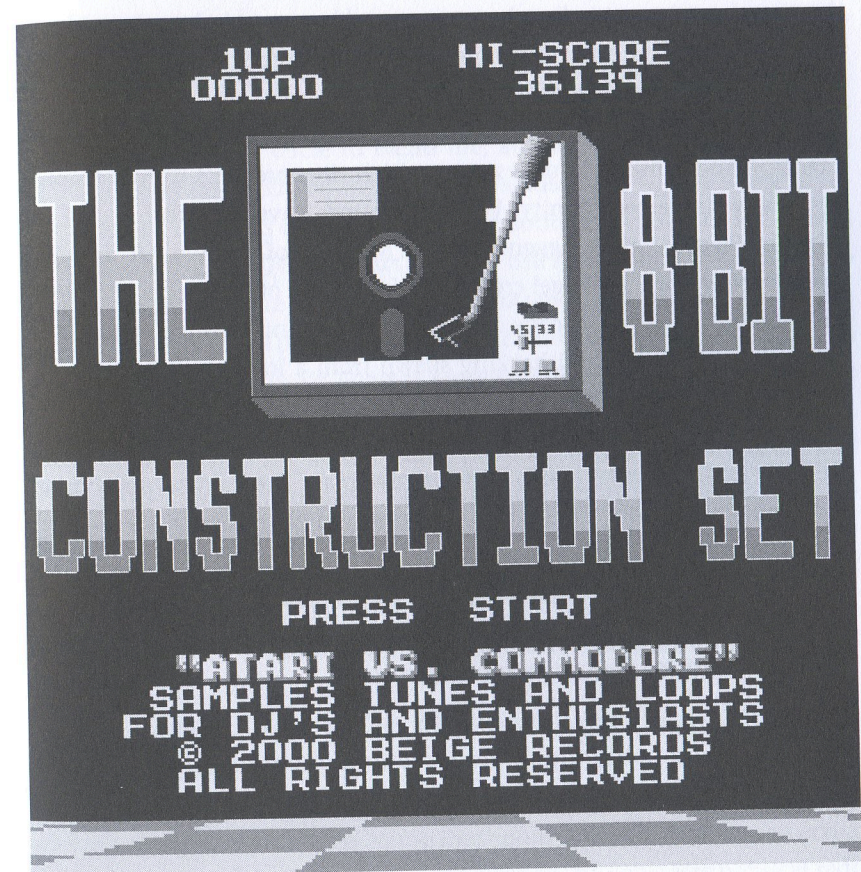




**Figure 4.17**  
A child appreciates a wall drawing by Sol LeWitt at the Centre Pompidou-Metz in 2012. Image courtesy of Jean-Pierre Dalbera.

easy to work. Also they are the perfect middle ground between analog and digital video" (quoted in Bittanti and Quaranta 2006, 50). Engaging these old game systems within an experimental art frame allows artist and players alike to grasp as well as manipulate the hybrid features of each.

Arcangel also created a series of Nintendo game cartridge hacks such as *F1 Racer Mod (Japanese Driving Game)* (2004), in which gallerygoers gaze at an endless highway scrolling by. His most lyrical piece is *I Shot Andy Warhol*, in which he reworked the NES game *Hogan's Alley*, replacing villains with Colonel Sanders, Flavor Flav, Pope John Paul II, and Andy Warhol.



**Figure 4.18**  
*The 8-Bit Construction Set* is a vinyl record whose audio, if recorded onto a cassette, is readable as computer code in an Atari or Commodore console. Image courtesy of Beige Records.

The project that led to this series of cartridge hacks was *The 8-Bit Construction Set* (1998–2000), a vinyl album of chiptune music that Arcangel produced with Paul B. Davis, Joe Beuckman, and Joseph Bonn. The set was inspired by the quirky affordances of eight-bit music and third-generation game systems. The inner track on each side of the record consisted of audio data (i.e., computer code in sonic form) that could be recorded onto a cassette, played back, and booted into an Atari or Commodore 64 console to play more music. The aim of *The 8-Bit Construction Set* was to “redefine the very limits of what one can put on a slab of wax,” since it was “half dj battle record/half concept album.” Albeit loosely and poetically framed, the record was in part tediously programmed in assembly language. Marrying technical skill, formal experimentation, and humor are key elements of Arcangel’s strategy (Halter 2008).

By fusing ostensibly oppositional perspectives, Arcangel’s work takes on a tension and sense of homelessness, which thus prevents it from belonging to any single community. While his games have been featured in the Whitney Biennial, the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art, and Eyebeam in New York, Arcangel credits the formation of his practice to difference sources: the hobby scene and online communities, such as AtariAge.com, where modding and hacking spawn from a love of games’ material technologies, sensual potential, and cultural conventions.

Complicit formal artists pursue games for games’ sake while mingling the body and technology with performative play. These artists appropriate and adapt the world of games for the institution of art, which makes some game enthusiasts uncomfortable. On close examination of this genre of work, however, it is clear that complicit formalist strategies cut both ways across games and art, and these complex pieces also appropriate and adapt the world of art for the institution of games.

## 5 Complicit Political

### Ad Hoc Utopias

Similar to the radical political avant-garde, the complicit political avant-garde uses the magic circle to blend life, art, and play. The difference is that the complicit political avant-garde blends these worlds using inviting, populist methods rather than the revolutionary tactics of the radical political avant-garde. These artists ask us to risk the stability of our world so that we might cocreate temporary ad hoc utopias and moments of collective, festive anarchy. The word utopia (which literally means “nowhere” in Greek) first appeared in Sir Thomas More’s 1516 novel *Utopia* as the name of a fantasy island society that had achieved a state of perfect governance. Avant-garde utopias are neither static nor ideal but instead dynamic and continually rewritten in play. The complicit political avant-garde treats utopia as an everyday idea to be explored versus a mythical state to which we should aspire. Nor does it matter if any particular attempt at achieving utopia fails; all that matters is that the attempt was made. For the complicit avant-garde, each attempt makes utopia more accessible, thinkable, and possible in the public sphere.

Fredric Jameson argues in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” that the culture industry provides fictional, cathartic glimpses of utopia in all its products—from films to pop music. He further asserts that each glimpse acts as a safety valve for the pressure that could otherwise build up to actual social upheaval. Although Jameson is a Marxist, he considers political radical approaches no longer viable, insisting instead that the contemporary political avant-garde be complicit with markets and institutions in order to be effective: “The new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold

to the truth of postmodernism, . . . the world space of multinational capital." Political art must achieve an "unimaginable new mode of representing" us "as individual and collective subjects," while allowing us to "regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion." Above all, Jameson (1991, 54) contends, it should provide "the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on the social as well as a spatial scale." While he questions whether such political art is possible, there are in fact thousands of complicit political artists already realizing it in practice.

ARGs are precisely about the invention and projection of global cognitive mapping on the social and spatial scales that Jameson calls for.<sup>1</sup> They do not merely offer cathartic glimpses of utopia. Rather, by facilitating the blending of life, art, and play, ARGs create opportunities for players the world over to work together to improvise utopias by solving puzzles, completing missions, and playing collective detective. ARGs frame the entire world as their media



**Figure 5.1**

Players of *Cruel 2 B Kind*, an ARG of "benevolent assassination." Image courtesy of Kiyash Monsef.

platform, from sky to street, from Internet to cellular tower, while fostering "scalable communities" of dozens to thousands of players.

Jordan Weisman helped develop two of the first major ARGs: *I Love Bees* and *The Beast*. His political vision exemplifies the complicit political avant-garde approach to transforming everyday life and art by blurring the boundaries between them through play. The "entire public" is invited to play games that live in every imaginable facet of world. Weisman elaborates, "If we could make your toaster print something we would. Anything with an electric current running through it. A single story, a single gaming experience, with no boundaries. A game that is life itself" (quoted in McGonigal 2005).

*The Beast* was an ARG conceived as a viral marketing promotion for Steven Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick's 2001 film *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* It took place in the twenty-second century, decades after the setting of the film, and provided players with ludic and creative opportunities to rethink



**Figure 5.2**

A website from the twenty-second century created for the 2001 ARG, *The Beast*, depicts Jeanine Salla in "Metropolitan Living Homes." Image of *The Beast* © courtesy of Microsoft Corporation.

the ways in which they used machines and technology. The developers placed “rabbit holes” for entering the game in various locations and contexts. So, for example, there was an unusual credit for “Jeanine Salla, sentient machine therapist” at the end of the film trailer. People who noticed this and Googled her discovered fake websites for companies selling lovebots and rogue android retrieval services. This served to extend both the film universe and magic circle. Physical media with hidden clues were planted in public bathrooms, and voice actors telephoned players to make the game seem even more real. Players were invited to join in the investigation of the death of a character named Evan Chan, whose website from the future began “I was born in Shanghai in 2066.”<sup>2</sup> In all, *The Beast* offered players the opportunity to solve three primary mysteries, weaving together a dozen subplots and nearly 150 fictional characters.

No single person could handle that much information alone, so players had to work together. Without leadership, the mob adapted to challenges like a swarm. Professionals shared specialized knowledge and performed specific tasks in continual round-robin fashion—hacking a website, deciphering a cryptic note, creating an Internet Relay Chat or wiki to exchange as well as collect information, and so on. Elan Lee, one of *The Beast*'s designers or “puppetmasters,” was awestruck by the powerful collective nature that the game engendered. He and other designers had created a host of puzzles they thought would take players six months to solve. Working collectively, participants solved every one of them in two hours on the first day (Lee 2008). These players were “scary good and scary fast,” and it was brutally challenging for the puppetmasters to keep the game going (Stewart 2008). The designers scrambled to stay ahead of the players from launch to resolution.

In hindsight this all makes sense—the designers were up against hundreds of player groups that had spontaneously formed. The Cloudmakers, founded by Cabel Sasser, a twenty-four-year-old computer programmer, was the most organized of the player groups and had the highest profile. By the time the game ended, seven thousand Cloudmakers had posted forty thousand messages and created thousands of artifacts, including images, videos, websites, and a 130-page walk-through of the game (McGonigal 2003).

By analyzing *The Beast* in this way, we can see how the complicit avant-garde has adapted the strategies of the “new games movement” of the

1960s to the twenty-first century. The new games movement originally grew out of the antiwar ethos of participation and cooperation. Its festive take on civics resonates with that of contemporary complicit political avant-garde art: if we play better together, we live better together. Bernie DeKoven (2013) coined the terms *coliberation* and *well-played game* to describe how individuals amplify one another when they gel in play. In well-played games, skill and confidence are contagious as each person's abilities both echo and enlarge the skills and abilities of others.

ARGs have brought the new games movement to new media and social media as well. As Jane McGonigal (2008b), a prominent proponent of ARGs, wagers with a wink, “By 2018 extreme-scale collaboration is the most important human ability.” Writer Clay Shirky agrees. In *Here Comes Everybody*, he explains how society is transitioning from a top-down to a bottom-up institution of power as individuals are increasingly enabled to connect spontaneously through scalable networks. Due to the rise of new media technologies, our existing social impulses are becoming amplified in their scope and degree of connections. Shirky claims that “we now have communications tools that are flexible enough to match our social capabilities, and we are witnessing the rise of new ways of coordinating action that takes advantage of that change.” As technoculture advances, Shirky (2008, 19, 20, 22) explains, barriers to group action will continue to collapse, “and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done.” The Arab Spring is a more extreme example, while Wikipedia and similar collective efforts are more complicit illustrations.

Contemporary culture does not comprehend how such increases in bottom-up social agency will upset established power dynamics. ARGs and the rhetoric that surrounds them allow us to bridge the gap between where we are and where we might be in a celebratory, wasteful, and hubristic way. As McGonigal (2011) argues, “Reality is broken. Game designers can fix it.” The world is united in play and is transformed into a temporary, anarchistic, utopian zone during an ARG. Typical of the complicit political avant-garde, ARGs do not directly attack capitalism or institutions in power but rather infiltrate, appropriate, and bend them to the collective will. They invoke the utopian mood, blending art and politics in a magic circle that is immanent and approachable en masse. ARGs demonstrate that players, in addition to game designers, can fix a broken reality.

Although *The Beast* had ended several months earlier, the Cloudmakers participants were still chatting on their message boards when the terror attacks occurred on September 11, 2001. Initially, their mood was one of shock and grief, as one would expect; within a few hours, however, the mood began to shift. Bold messages popped up: “We can solve the puzzle of who the terrorists are”; “we have the means, resources, and experience to put a picture together from a vast wealth of knowledge and personal intuition.” For days the Cloudmakers’ collective hubris grew. The forum moderators eventually intervened, arguing that unlike 9/11, *The Beast* “was scripted. There were clues hidden that were gauged for us. It was \*narrative\*. . . . *This is not a game*. Do not go getting delusions of grandeur. Cloudmakers solved a story. This is real life” (McGonigal 2003).

The point is not whether the Cloudmakers could really have “solved” 9/11. The point is that *The Beast* had materially changed the ways in which players were prepared to react to a national crisis. Participating in *The Beast* had naturalized a more fluid grasp of political power. Reality was indeed broken, and players were the ones who could fix it if they could play well enough together. This point is made even clearer when the Cloudmakers’ reaction to 9/11 is contrasted with that of the nation as a whole. Following 9/11, both the mainstream media and majority of US citizens were confused, angry, and shocked into passivity. As a result, the public relied on established governmental and military institutions of power to deal with the crisis, clearing the way for the Patriot Act and launching a never-ending war on terror.

Rather than permit those in power to process shock and fear for them, the complicit political avant-garde enables people to process these forces directly. The public learns to work—and play—together to sublimate those emotions into collective, affirmative actions. Avant-garde politics transform shock and terror into materials with which the masses play.

Clearly, the complicit political avant-garde is proactive—it creates the world in which it wants to live. For instance, Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon are attempting to “delete the border” by hacking national boundaries on a distributed scale. The game *BorderXing Guide* (2001–), sponsored by the Tate Gallery London, asks players to cross the borders of European countries illegally, surreptitiously, and without papers. An online database, accessible only in tactical geographic locations, outlines successful



**Figure 5.3**

Players of *BorderXing Guide* illegally sneak across European national borders. Image, courtesy of Heath Bunting, shows players rafting into Germany from France at Strasbourg.

procedures for crossing undetected by customs, police, and military. In a more local example, Bunting and Rachel Baker’s *SuperWeed* (1999–2009) empowered players to use herbicide-resistant seed bombs to enrich barren spaces in the urban landscape. *BorderXing* and *SuperWeed* actualize the complicit political avant-garde forces that had begun to emerge in the Cloudmakers’ response to 9/11, inviting people to play outside established channels of political power and discourse to create better—if not utopian—worlds.

Although they invite people to play outside the mainstream, complicit political avant-garde games do not fight or replace traditional political structures or discourse. Instead, they work within and beyond them. Rather than proposing referenda, participating in debates, or sharing petitions, complicit political artists approach the world orthogonally—impelling and daring people to live *otherwise* through play, even if only momentarily.

In *The Last Whole Earth Catalogue* (1971), Stewart Brand summarizes this constructivist attitude: "We're not into utopian thinking around here, preferring a more fiasco-by-fiasco approach to perfection." The objective is to render the social infrastructure open, accessible, and reconfigurable by those who actually comprise it. It is not about marching collectively onward and upward toward a predetermined utopian destination that only exists in fantasies and manifestos. The aim of complicit political avant-garde art is to play with utopian ideas right now and then let those ideas go as soon as they fall apart.

### World Games

Buckminster Fuller designed an avant-garde game in 1961 that drew the entire planet—its cultures, materials, life-forms, and climate—inside its magic circle. It was called *The World Game: Integrative Resource Utilization Planning Tool*, and could theoretically incorporate all sciences and systems. Fuller studied the war games of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and other simulations at the US Navy War College. From these war games, Fuller created "peace games." Like war games, peace games draw on a matrix of disparate and diverse data in order to embed the theater of gamespace into all measured dimensions, and culminate in a rich, composite grasp and view of the world. The major difference is that peace games—unlike the simulations of global nuclear holocaust or mutually assured destruction that dominated the Cold War era—are played toward global utopia.

Learning from war games, Fuller reconfigured how global simulations could model the world and interpellate players. Rather than playing for one country's domination over the rest, the challenge was to create collective play that would "make the world work for 100% of humanity in the shortest possible time through spontaneous cooperation without ecological damage or disadvantage to anyone" (Gabel 2009). In order to help players visualize gamespace in ways that fostered multilateral thinking, Fuller designed the Dymaxion Map. This map minimized spatial distortion while displaying the continents contiguously as a singular blob, emphasizing geographic continuity and planetary community versus national borders.

War games have grown by several orders of magnitude in complexity since the time when Fuller was inspired by the original NORAD games. The

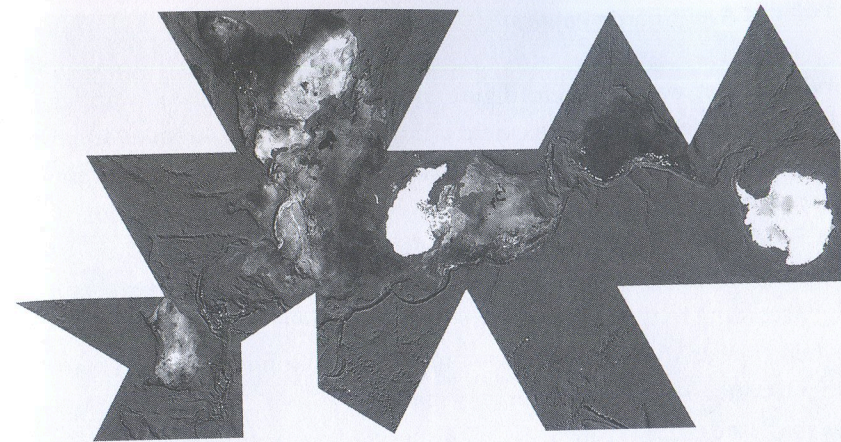


Figure 5.4

A Dymaxion Map, similar to the map used in Buckminster Fuller's *World Game* (1961), renders continental landmass contiguously, so that the geopolitical world is conceptually more integrated. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Synthetic Environment for Analysis and Simulations in use by Homeland Security and the US Department of Defense "is now capable of running real-time simulations for up to 62 nations, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and China." These systems integrate "breaking news, census data, economic . . . and climactic events in the real world . . . [along with] military intelligence" into a unitary whole (Baard 2007). The "Sentient World Simulation" will be a "continuously running, continually updated mirror model of the real world that can be used to predict and evaluate future events and courses of action" (Chaturvedi 2006).

Fuller's peace games have evolved as well, though. By the 1980s, *World Game* was played on basketball-court-sized maps tracking and visualizing an array of real-time data, including birthrates and death rates, famines, armed conflicts, supply and demand of foodstuffs, rate of deforestation, and so forth. Fuller's ultimate approach to governance and social problem solving was to call the planet "Spaceship Earth," a ship driven by the human collective. For Fuller, each of us is an Earth pilot; each of us should realize gameplay locally and in a personal way. World games must be "accessible to everyone, not just the elite few in the power structure who thought they were running the show" (Gabel 2009). Fuller's notions of accessibility and global agency are the most challenging aspects of world games to develop.

## Populist Avant-garde Politics

While Fuller was a peaceful figure in the complicit political avant-garde, there are others in the movement who are more closely wedded to provocateur tactics. While still complicit, they live a little further down toward the radical end of the political spectrum. They marry the intellectual gall of Fuller and fiery gusto of Italian futurist Marinetti, acting as instigators, breaking society's established patterns, and festively playing with reality.

According to the political avant-garde, all media are political, especially when they are framed as entertainment. The manner in which entertainment regulates social relationships makes it political. To put it in political avant-garde terms: a global consciousness cannot arise until society breaks free from the false consciousness sustained by popular media protected by institutions in power. These sentiments motivated Guy Debord and a small group of artists to forge the Situationist International in 1957, in order to target what Debord called "the spectacle." In his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1997, 17) writes that the "spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. . . . [The] spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. . . . It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity." The Situationists broke apart, remixed, and released social power bottled up in the spectacle.

In his 1973 film *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord read passages from his book over clips from soft porn, television commercials, and popular movies like those by Orson Welles and John Ford. Although the actors appear mildly tragic as their world is mocked, the film does not collapse into simple parody. Instead, the act of spectatorship is made discomfiting. Debord called this critical remixing *détournement*, a process he defined as "turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself" (quoted Holt 2010, 252). Thus, *détournement* infuses art with argumentation.

The Situationists wished to avoid the trap that had enmeshed Dada in the early twentieth century, when according to their critics, the Dadaists had sought to revolutionize life and had ended up only revolutionizing art. Moreover, the entertainment industry picked up the Dadaists' avant-garde strategies, assimilating them to some degree into popular culture. Rather

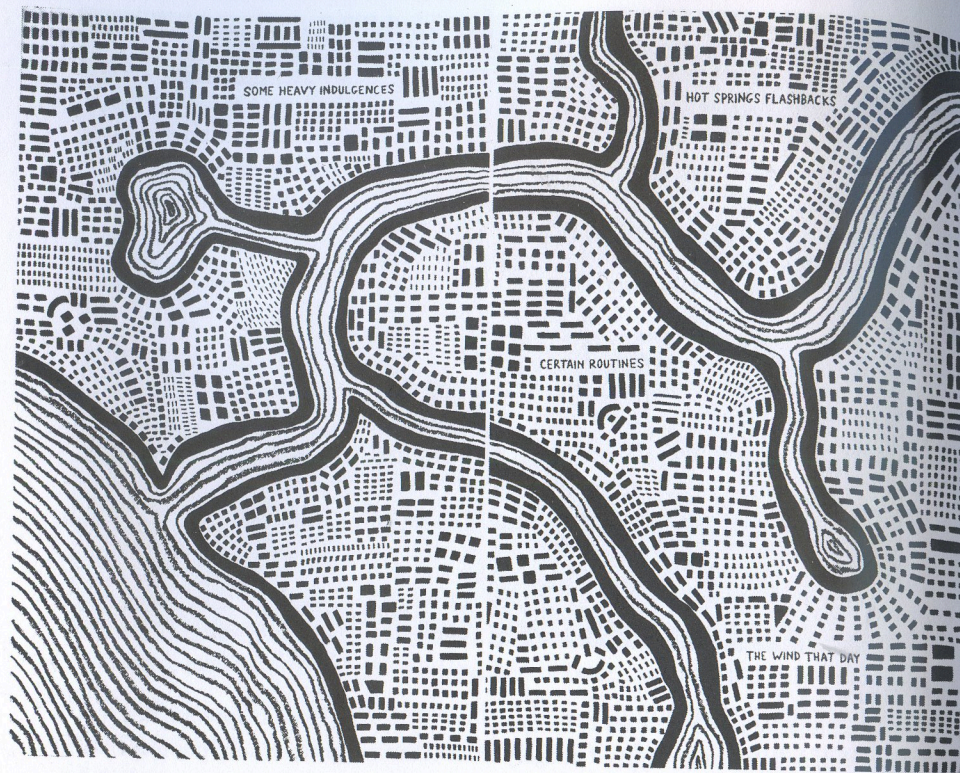


Figure 5.5

In his Situationist film, *Society of the Spectacle* (1973), Guy Debord appropriated, juxtaposed, and critically remixed imagery from commercial television, popular films, and historical events. UbuWeb.

than starting with art, then, the Situationists began by hacking entertainment, as with *Society of the Spectacle*. In doing so, the Situationists hoped to instigate movements similar to Dadaist work in intent that were characterized by greater sustainability. *Détournement* critiqued the very media that it spoke through and became a precursor to culture jamming. Instead of the culture industry appropriating the artistic work, the art appropriated the culture industry. The Situationists in this way reframed popular entertainment as a material to remix and play with. To augment this effect, they left artworks open to interpretation in order to create unstable social situations. An early screening of *Society of the Spectacle* closed with, "We live like lost children, our adventures incomplete," followed by twenty-four minutes of darkness. The audience was left to deal with the tenuous ending on its own.

The Situationists went beyond entertainment to remix urban space and reclaim the public sphere as a place for collective play with reality. They would "drift" through a city in a game they called the *dérive*. A *dérive* is a



**Figure 5.6**

In *Some Heavy Indulgences* (2009), Dahlia Elsayed advances political art techniques established by the Situationists in the 1960s. Elsayed describes her work as using “cartographic references that combine suggestions of hard data (streets, waterways, elevations, borders) to locate experiences of soft data such as emotional/sensory/psychological states.” Quote and image courtesy of Dahlia Elsayed.

spontaneous journey in which travelers allow the aesthetics of the architecture and geography to affect them emotionally as well as subconsciously, and direct them so that they might foster new relationships with the space. Debord (1956) describes the practice:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

To facilitate *dérives*, the Situationists cut up and reassembled maps to open novel vectors for experiencing urban space. They documented *dérives* as improvisational “psychogeographical” studies of the city—combining photographs, reworked maps, and meticulous notation of their sensations and reactions to all phenomena encountered.

The purpose of the *dérive* was to liberate people from established patterns of urban life while responding to the increasingly technical nature of that life with a technical literacy that was both generative and playful. For Debord, play was a political act. As he explained, the “Situationist game stands out from the standard conception of the game” and from its false “separation from the stream of life.” To play avant-garde games is a “moral choice,” ensuring “the future reign of freedom and play” (Debord (2006a, 97). The Situationists wished for a total revolution of the dominant order—of rational thought, human language, and sense itself—but also realized that they could only transform life through a thousand cuts to the status quo, not via the mythical, apocalyptic instant that revolutionaries had historically desired. It would undoubtedly take many thousands of situations and anarchist games before the complicit political avant-garde could open up the entire world to play.

### Détourning Shock

In the 2007 ARG *World Without Oil*, players collectively imagined what catastrophes and opportunities might arise in the event that oil demand surpassed supply. How would people in unprepared infrastructures cope? What new methods of sustainable living would become viable? The puppetmasters of *World Without Oil* incrementally raised the fictional price of gas over the course of several weeks. The global economy first went into a recession and then a depression. Another world war erupted. All events were determined spontaneously by the player collective, causing many to dispute what was actually happening. The puppetmasters wanted to give “people ‘permission’ to think seriously about a future they might otherwise avoid thinking about at all.” Players began “thinking about their neighbors and communities in new ways, and planting gardens, going to farmer’s markets, using bicycles and transit and otherwise questioning their dependence on cheap, plentiful oil” (Waite 2007). Beyond these positive yet



## WEEK 13: BLACKOUT: Oil Offline, Coal Faltering

UPDATES: Heat waves snap grid; storm brews in Gulf

TOP BLOG: "Building community mission" by **peakprophet**

TOP VIDEO: "Rolling Outages" by **kalwithoutoil**

TOP IMAGE: "Week Thirteen Comic" by **anda**

## WEEK 12: TRUCK STOP: Diesel Runs Dry

UPDATES: 'Shortages of food, goods will grow more acute'

TOP IMAGE: "Discovering a Sense of Place" by **fabulareine**

TOP BLOG: "Mais Ou Est Donc Pensee La France?" by **Méridith stapleton**

## WEEK 11: JOBS IN PERIL: 'I Can't Get To Work'

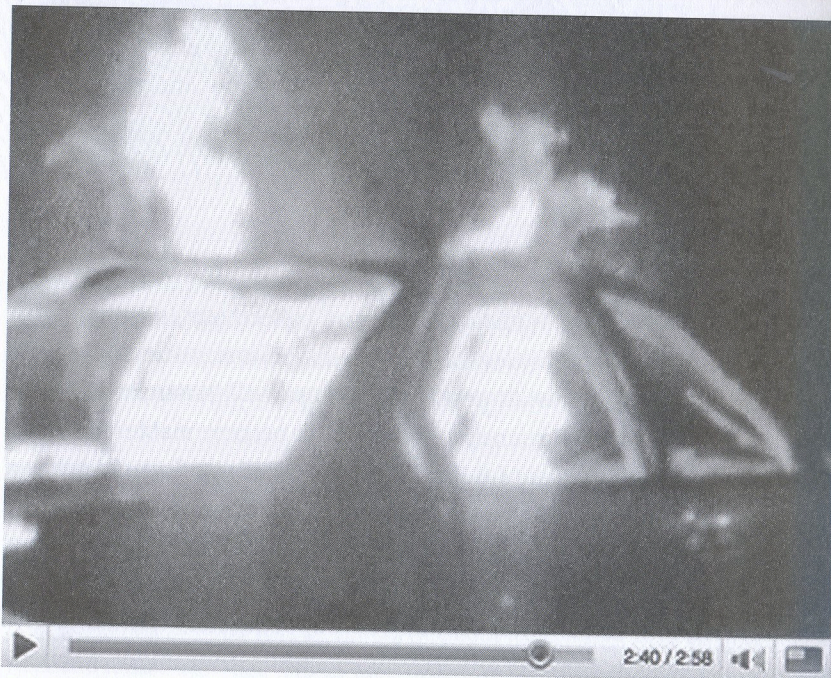


Figure 5.7

*World Without Oil* (April–June 2007) simulated the beginning of the end of a fossil-fueled economy, but was really an ARG about the collective deconstruction of shock. Images courtesy of Ken Eklund.

expected outcomes, people also dramatically deconstructed and reworked the mediation of crisis itself.

Players coped with challenges, producing in-game narratives across thousands of blogs. They posted apocalyptic videos along with pictures of gas stations ablaze and cars abandoned on US highways. Soldiers stationed in Iraq wrote as though they had been deployed to protect the US oil supply—while critics suggested that such blogging would actually be unlikely due to a probable media blackout. Although there was no official goal or prize, a player felt they had “won” when a critical mass of other players accepted their dramatized prediction of what news media, governments, and militaries would do. Not only did players constantly evaluate the possibility of each other’s projections, they also collectively critiqued the ways in which crises are usually mediated. The diverse collective simultaneously constructed and deconstructed its own spectacle, gaining a kind of kaleidoscopic perspective.

The Situationists demonstrated how détourned media drains power from spectacle and redistributes that power to the people who remixed it. *World Without Oil* was a détournement of a common contemporary spectacle: mediated crisis. Naomi Klein (2007) argues in the *Shock Doctrine* that governments, corporations, and militaries use shock as a psychological weapon to stupefy populations into accepting change, whether that change represents a new policy, unique product, or even war. Ostensibly, *World Without Oil* was about oil, but in practice it was about breaking the power of images and stories to stupefy. On the one hand, the game went exactly where the Cloudmakers had hoped to go with their call to fix 9/11, bringing terrible events into the magic circle so players could save or improve the world. On the other hand, *World Without Oil* allowed people to engage, reimagine, and control the terrible events themselves, dissipating the power to make passive that such events commonly have. As the complicit political avant-garde becomes more popular, it will inoculate populations against future shock, never-ending wars on terror, and the ongoing rise of the totalitarian state.

### Gonzo Gamers

The complicit political avant-garde redistributes power in society through games while at the same time redistributing power within games by

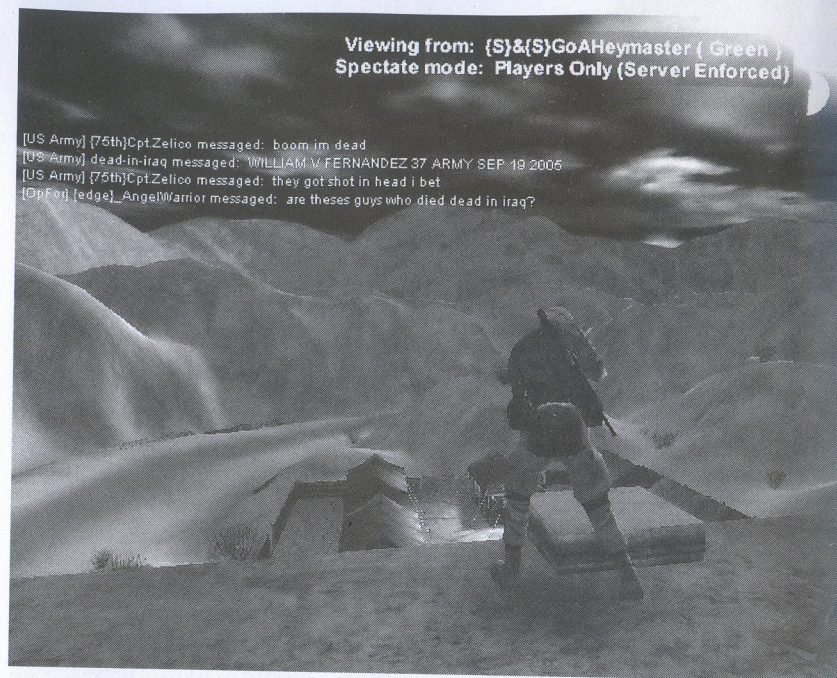


Figure 5.8

Joseph DeLappe performs *dead-in-iraq*, texting names of people who died in the Iraq War, from within the game *America's Army* (a recruiting tool of the US Army). Image is a detail of a screenshot courtesy of Joseph DeLappe.

opening up their spectacular nature to play. The avant-garde shows how to be truly active in games, making normal players seem passive in comparison because they accept games as framed by corporate, government, or military powers. It demonstrates how to really play games by opening up alternate ways of being and performing in them that are easy for most players to understand as well as reproduce.

In *dead-in-iraq* (2006–) Joseph DeLappe détourns the networked shooter game *America's Army* (developed by the US Army as a recruiting tool) by logging into the game, and then texting the names and ranks of every US soldier killed in Iraq. It has taken dozens of hours to type the name, age, service branch, and date of death of the thousands of US soldiers who were killed in Iraq. In the original *America's Army*, each team sees its opposition as terrorists and its own team as Americans, because the army did not want to produce a game in which international players could kill Americans.

According to DeLappe, *dead-in-iraq* is a “fleeting online memorial” and a counterrecruiting cautionary gesture. In it, he brings the specter of physical death into the realm of virtual death. As DeLappe explains, “Part of the reason we are so disconnected from what is going on in Iraq is that we consider the responsibility towards mourning to solely fall on the shoulders of the loved ones.” Through this piece of complicit political avant-garde art, DeLappe (2007) tries to “take personal responsibility towards mourning the deaths.” He is doing more than that, however. DeLappe’s act of détournement recalls the uncanny and problematic *other* in *America's Army*, which had been previously reduced to an easy-to-eliminate terrorist caricature. His actions disrupt the mood of gameplay by gently reasserting the obvious but easily forgotten fact that America’s actual army is not a team playing a game but rather real people who literally suffer, kill, and die in war.

Avant-garde performers involve players in their work in ways that are even more aggressive than those used in *dead-in-iraq*. *Velvet Strike* (2002)



Figure 5.9

Virtual graffiti in *Velvet Strike* interventions changes the nature of the networked multiplayer shooter game *Counter Strike*. Image courtesy of Anne-Marie Schleiner.

by Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre, and Brody Condon is a set of game “intervention recipes” that anyone can use and remix in the networked tactical shooter *Counter Strike*. Instead of gunning down terrorists, the artists chat about baking. Performers release hostages captured by their teammates and purposely betray team tactics to the enemy. They invite teammates into a vehicle and drive them far from battle, ultimately revealing the shared journey as a kidnapping. Captives must either commit group suicide to escape or slowly walk back once released. The *Velvet Strike* team employs mock-revolutionary rhetoric:

Our mission is to seek out those who would attempt to propagate the vile seeds of strife and division upon the burgeoning fields of online entertainment. Why are these gaming environments so savage and ruthless? We all exist within these virtual domains and as members we have a duty to each other to coexist in a Utopian world free of hate and struggle (King 2002),

The playful protests of *Velvet Strike* create an even more open game by using the dislodged raw materials of *Counter Strike*. For example, gay culture is celebrated in *Velvet Strike*. Another recipe calls for spraying graffiti all over the architecture in the game. Male cops or soldiers kissing are common images in the graffiti because they simultaneously supplant the dominant game tropes of heteronormativity and aggressive masculinity with acceptance and love. Graffiti has long been a tool of the complicit political avant-garde; the Situationists, for example, used it to great effect during the mass protests in 1968 France. Jean Baudrillard (2003, 287) spells out the art form’s unique political power: “Graffiti is transgressive, not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but simply because it responds, there, on the spot, and breaches the fundamental role of non-response enunciated by all the media.” *Velvet Strike* is not merely a negation of what exists in *Counter Strike*; it is also a positive assertion of what might exist. It infuses the political world into the game and the game into the political world, contesting gamespace right here and now in a playable way. *Counter Strike* becomes a game that is fundamentally in play for brief situations and moments in time.

*Gonzo Gamers* (2013), a student project in my art games class at DePaul University, was inspired by *Velvet Strike* and Hunter S. Thompson’s “gonzo” reporting. In it, the artists created even gentler recipes of disruption. One of Alex Dahm’s recipes was to become a sports commentator in the networked shooter *Team Fortress 2*. Instead of fighting, an artist would run through

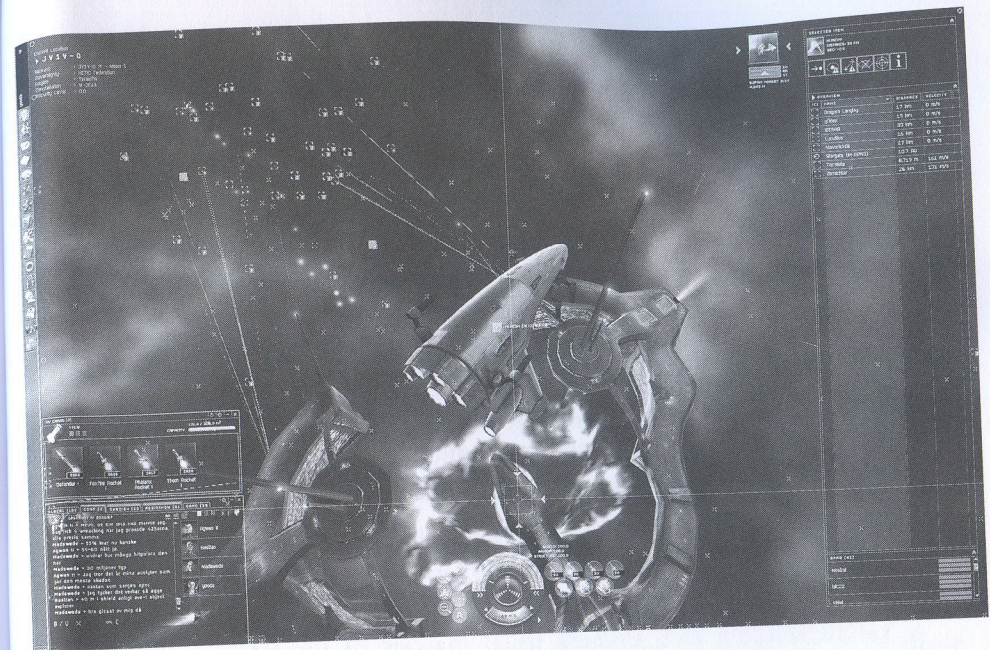


Figure 5.10

This screenshot captures a battle in *EVE Online* between a number of players and a station. Image courtesy of CCP Games and Perplexing.

battle with a baseball bat held up like a microphone. David Finseth (2013) describes his version of the performance: “After a few failures, I found a group of people who started to warm up to the idea of me following them around commentating on what they were doing. Players began interacting with me. We discussed current game meta mechanics and theory.”<sup>3</sup> If Babeli (discussed in chapter 3) is a sweet griever, *Gonzo Gamers* are even sweeter.

Some complicit avant-garde political acts have the power to make permanent transformations in a game, though, moving beyond fleeting moments of gonzo gaming. *EVE Online* is a brutal capitalist MMO with a science fiction theme that was permanently changed by the complicit political avant-garde. In *EVE Online*, warring player factions ruled a vast universe teeming with thousands of star systems including planets, moons, asteroids, and wormholes. Months of grind are required to build up a respectable, customized ship for a player to pilot. Beyond combat, players engage in mining, piracy, trade, and manufacturing. Large ships can be worth thousands of

real-world dollars when sold in online auctions. *EVE Online* is a persistent world; when a ship is defeated in battle, it is erased from the game, and its real-world value is also lost. Griefers calling themselves “goons” from the Something Awful forums comprised the GoonSwarm alliance, a collective that destroyed a ship belonging to the Band of Brothers alliance—the most highly valued ship in the game at the time.

GoonSwarm defeated the Band of Brothers ship through emergent gameplay tactics. Goons figured out that by creating and launching thousands of tiny frigates and T1 cruisers, they could overwhelm the Band of Brothers ship. That large ship would not be able to bring in reinforcements because the frame rate would decelerate for everybody in the area. Because they had a numerical advantage per frame rate, the goons had a net gain in maneuverability and firepower. As soon as a goon died, they picked up another disposable ship for a kamikaze attack. Using a guerrilla strategy with little investment of time or money, the goons annihilated the Titan ship by “choking the guns of our enemies with our corpses” (Dibbell 2008).

Goons rejected *EVE Online*'s usual markers of success and alliance strength by ignoring such factors as the kill-to-death ratio. Although the goons' tactics gave them a terrible score, the story of the GoonSwarm alliance winning against the odds spread, eventually making GoonSwarm the most popular player group in *EVE Online*. Because GoonSwarm rejected the (previously popular) values of virtual property, rank, and score, it attracted an influx of new, inexperienced players whose immediate goal was to go into battle. Playing by its own emergent set of rules, GoonSwarm changed the nature of the game. Ambivalence plagued GoonSwarm (2006) players as they struggled to invent new means of organizing swarm behavior, and bounced blindly between historic successes and defeats:

We are a terrible alliance playing a terrible game, we failed to kill our major enemy because we couldn't co-ordinate with allies so we just retreated and lost 2 regions to them. They are now wiping out our allies in another part of Eve while we hold our dicks, the RSF has fallen apart (What's left of the R is shooting the F) and everyone knows that if BoB [Band of Brothers] turn on us now, we are completely fucked. . . . [We risk] donation-drive inspiring levels of failure.

GoonSwarm shifted the concept of what was considered a “normal” player. Through avant-garde play, the game accommodated and empowered a more diverse influx of new players, who could immediately engage important in-game actions rather than drudging through the usual training

process. Power was distributed at the expense of stability—an instability that spread beyond control. The goons infiltrated the Band of Brothers alliance with a spy who ascended to director level, stole all the assets, and destroyed the alliance.<sup>4</sup> GoonSwarm itself eventually collapsed from within when its guild leader failed to keep up with critical logistical duties, promptly drained the account balance, and purposely disbanded the alliance (Drain 2010).

The complicit political avant-garde breaks apart power collected at the top, gently prying it from those who manage and rule infrastructure—whether that infrastructure is comprised of streets or servers—and redistributes it to swarms of people at the bottom. Artists of this movement expect their experiments of mass inclusion to fall apart eventually, understanding that an anarchist utopia is a tumultuous way of being and not a perfect, solid state. For this reason, the complicit political avant-garde cannot be evaluated by the success of any one event or game. Each complicit avant-garde work must instead be evaluated by the extent to which it contributes to the larger, long-term project of inciting those swarms of people at the bottom to participate—together and repeatedly—in thousands of such games and events, decade after decade, thus creating ad hoc utopias of festive anarchy.

## 8 Conclusion

### Call for Diversity

Brecht (1966) lamented, "Pity the nation that needs heroes." We should pity a game culture that needs an avant-garde. Galloway (2006, 126), a supporter of the videogame avant-garde, writes that the "movement should aspire to a similar goal [it had historically], redefining play itself and thereby realizing its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde." He ends his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* by stating that he awaits the end of the videogame avant-garde, echoing the 1965 claim of Jean-Luc Godard, who wrote, "I await the end of Cinema with optimism" (quoted in Milne 1972, 210). If the avant-garde succeeds, it becomes obsolete. When the average person has the knowledge, interest, tools, community, and skills to make any game we have examined, from *Untitled Game* to *Toywar*, the videogame avant-garde will be dead. Breaking and remixing game materials, sensations, and conventions will be as normal as they are in the liquid mediums of drawing, photography, or video. Art events and communities that promote the videogame avant-garde have been working toward that goal since the late 1990s. Anne-Marie Schleiner's curated exhibition in 1999, *Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art*, Walter Langelaar's *DADAMACHINIMA* series in the 2000s, and the *Babycastles* game and art collective currently active in New York are a few examples.

This book is not a complete summary of the game avant-garde. It is a map of some avant-garde approaches to games as well as a preview of what we may see more of in the future as avant-garde strategies are appropriated by mainstream game culture. Each chapter has represented a facet of

a composite view. The avant-garde leads or protests the current state of games, and it does so in many ways, just as it historically led or protested mainstream art and culture in many ways. Within the avant-garde spectrum, there are a variety of roles to play for artists, critics, activists, educators, and storytellers. Videogames are a global medium played by hundreds of millions of people, largely dominated by corporate and government forces, and comprised of software, hardware, and network technologies in continual flux. The videogame avant-garde must be exceptionally plastic, numerous, and productive if it is to be collectively effective. The strategy of the videogame avant-garde will take many decades to unfold and can only be advanced in an ad hoc way by many thousands of people—people who may agree or disagree with one another, or most likely, are unaware of each other's work. As argued in chapter 7, videogames are in the process of liquefying, due in part to the diverse range of avant-garde forces that are breaking apart and using the medium in a multitude of ways.

This dynamic range of forces will be instrumental in the success of the avant-garde videogame movement. For this reason, we need an open theory of the avant-garde that welcomes diversity. This is a view championed by many, as discussed in the introduction (i.e., Hale, Harding, Drucker, and Foster). The avant-garde is important because it advances and redefines art, and it is responsible for constantly rediscovering how videogames can be art. Contemporary theories of art games should not repeat the same mistakes historically made by art critics and popular culture alike, such as reducing art to one type or another (e.g., expressive, rhetorical, and aesthetic). Unless we accept fundamental differences and contradictions in how we frame the genre of games, we will only illuminate one particular kind of art game. Understanding the value of games as art is predicated on embracing artistic diversity and ontological breadth.

While games are a medium of expression, it is crucial to understand them in a larger sense. Videogames are one of the most highly versatile, contemporary, and relevant mediums for authors to express their creative voices. As art and a political force, however, videogames are also more than a medium of expression. Expression has been the paradigm that delineates our understanding of videogames as art in both mainstream culture (insofar as games are even accepted as art in mainstream culture) and academia. That paradigm needs to be challenged, not because it is baseless, but so that alternate paradigms can coexist alongside it. Certain videogame

avant-gardes fall from our view when we advance a singular unitary perspective on art. We can see examples of this in some theorists' work, which provides us with useful and productive frameworks that nevertheless fall short in terms of inclusivity.

Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* offers an illustration, which while groundbreaking theoretical work, is not adequately open to diversity. Flanagan begins by contending that "*Critical Play* is the first book to examine alternative games, and use such games as models to propose a theory of avant-garde game design." Even though she is focused on the avant-garde, Flanagan goes on to accept the idea that art is primarily concerned with expression: "*Critical Play* is built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics. Artists using games as a *medium of expression*." Flanagan (2009, 1) emphasizes "medium of expression," which positions ideas as primary and mediums as secondary.

In such a framework, an artwork is a vehicle for an artist's idea. This is just one among many useful ways to consider game art. It makes sense to engage *September 12th* as an elegant model of Frasca's take on the war on terror, for instance. Yet when we constrain art to expression alone, we are bound within a hierarchy that places materials, sensations, and conventions in the service of ideas. Art as expression adopts a binary understanding of the term medium as both divisible from and subservient to an already-created "idea" of the author that is simply awaiting material delivery. The hierarchy is so rooted in contemporary thought that it provides the foundation of US copyright law: "Copyright protection subsists, in accordance with this title, in original works of authorship fixed in any tangible medium of expression."<sup>1</sup> The problem with basing a theory of art games on mainstream rather than historical, subcultural, or diverse definitions of art is that the avant-garde challenges mainstream definitions.

Bogost's *Persuasive Games* offers another example of a key theoretical work that nevertheless is not as open to diversity as it might be. In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost asserts that videogames are art because they can model rhetorical arguments: "All kinds of videogames, from mass-market commercial products to obscure art objects, possess the power to mount equally meaningful expression." Bogost (2007, ix) goes on to maintain that the fundamental quality of videogames arises from the medium's procedural-ity: "This power lies in the very way videogames mount claims through

procedural rhetorics.” His explication of procedural rhetoric is worth reviewing:

Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively. Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words and images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation these rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming. (Ibid., 28–29)

Similar to Flanagan’s view of games as vehicles for expression, Bogost qualifies videogames as art due to games’ ability to express the rhetorical arguments of their authors through the games’ procedures. It can be productive to understand some games from the perspective of expression or procedural rhetoric. *Untitled Game* by Jodi, for one, can be read as a critical statement or artistic expression. The main point to underscore is that any game or artifact can be read that way, or in any way we like. Nevertheless, if our goal is to cultivate the richest experiences and most comprehensive understanding of videogame art, then we should illuminate the most prominent and divergent features of works and events, and neither seek to constrain all game art to a single vantage point nor fold all game art into the dominant paradigm of mainstream culture. If we allow works and events to speak for themselves, then we may arrive at a more varied, open, and diverse understanding of art games. Returning again to Jodi’s *Untitled Game* as an illustration, by taking a more diverse or open approach to understanding the game, we can see it as noteworthy in the way it renders tangible the underlying form of first-person shooter games, such as the genre’s rituals, rules, and player expectations. If anything, it strips away expression or rhetorical argument to foreground the genre and engine’s raw formal structure, thereby making that available to play.

Expression should be one foundational frame among many that we use to experience and think about videogame art. If we are talking about the broader purpose and potential of games as art, however, we must accept the fact that expression contradicts other key avant-garde frameworks. If this diversity is ignored, we repeat the same mistake art critics have made historically of collapsing the avant-garde into a single favored historical frame. Each of the formal chapters in this book (chapters 2, 4, and 6) has foregrounded alternate means of framing games as art, such as through the

medium’s aesthetics, cybernetics, narrative, or experiential uncanniness. Many formal examples, such as *Façade*, were successful avant-garde works in spite of the best efforts and expressed intent of the artists.

In suggesting this opening of the ways in which we examine art games, this book follows the path laid by many who have come before in the discipline of art history and theory. Defining art as expression has been resisted by a multitude of artists and critics over the past century. Susan Sontag (2001) famously argued “against interpretation,” rejecting the idea that art should be reduced to a vehicle of expression. Greenberg (1940) stated that painting should not become a “stooge of literature,” limited to semiotic readings and literary criticism. From a formal perspective, paintings and games generate a multitude of frameworks for enjoyment, sensation, edification, and evaluation; the interpretation of expressions is only one of them.

In addition to the view of games along the formal line of expression, another commonly held restrictive perspective placed on the avant-garde is to regard it only along political lines. This stance is often found in academia. For such critics, games are art because they can deliver critical political expressions. Half of this book is dedicated to illuminating the political paradigms of avant-garde games. While politics does define much of the videogame avant-garde, it does not define all of it. Furthermore, when the avant-garde engages in politics, it does not generally advance expression but bottom-up power, utopia, anarchy, or liquidity instead. In *Critical Play*, Flanagan (2009, 11–12) frames the avant-garde in a political dimension entirely: “With the exception of purely aesthetic movements (abstract expressionism comes to mind), most twentieth-century art movements fostered interventionist activities and strategies, particularly those identified as the avant-garde.” While Flanagan dismisses the aesthetic avant-garde as an exception, we must remember the aesthetic comprises one entire branch of the formal avant-garde. Works created in this mode are significant and numerous, and too important to be ignored. Furthermore, Flanagan’s description of the avant-garde itself as entirely “interventionist”—or in other words, political—is a mischaracterization because it does not acknowledge these other facets. Looking to art history and theory again, Greenberg’s (1939) seminal essay on the avant-garde, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” argues that the radical formal avant-garde is specifically not concerned with social issues but rather with aesthetics—art for its own sake. Videogames, too, can be played for their own sake. If every avant-garde

is evaluated for its political force, the abundance of formal and narrative avant-garde work is negated.

It should be noted as well that within the realm of politics, there is a tendency to restrict critical inquiry to work that falls within the progressive lens. This can lead critics to overlook radical political artists who adopt fascistic, militaristic, anarchistic, or wastefully celebratory worldviews—the futurists, Black Panther Party, Patriotic Nigras, Babeli, or GoonSwarm Alliance, to name a few. We must be uncomfortably inclusive and supportive of diversity when we discuss art games, especially in reference to the avant-garde. That is the only way to appreciate the stunning breadth of art games.

While Bogost and Flanagan frame videogame art as expressive, Galloway focuses on other formal properties. A considerate supporter of a radical formal avant-garde, Galloway nonetheless falters at a crucial point where games outstrip the established theories of art.<sup>2</sup> In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway writes that the kind of avant-garde games created by Jodi and Condon serve “to hinder gameplay, not advance it. It eclipses the game as a game and rewrites it as a sort of primitive animation lacking any of the virtues of game design.” Galloway (2006, 125) continues that we “need an avant-garde of video gaming not just in visual form but also in actional form. We need radical gameplay, not just radical graphics.” His admonishment of Jodi’s and Condon’s works as “just radical graphics” betrays a lack of deep understanding about them. Such games expand the medium into new territory, beyond the bounds of serious inquiry as seen by academics such as Galloway. Galloway’s shortsightedness on this point indicates the need for us to derive new theories that attend to the diversity of breakthroughs in art games.

Formal videogames by Jodi and Condon do advance gameplay, but they do so in fundamentally challenging, radical ways. The formal structures that facilitate flow have been exposed and defamiliarized. Works like *Untitled Game* are immanently playable as videogames, but the onerous challenge of these games is to rediscover how to play them as games. These games are difficult in ways similar to Manet and Pollock paintings, which challenged viewers to rediscover the medium of painting by figuring out how to view them as painting. The ways in which these paintings broke down space and liberally played with conventions were initially seen as evidence of poor craftsmanship. Viewers had to work through the unusual, difficult forms to reconceptualize the medium of painting.

## Not All That’s “Good” Is Avant-garde

The avant-garde does not have the final word on what to play, enjoy, support, or value in games. Just as we cannot reduce the avant-garde to a unified formal, political, or narrative framework, we cannot reduce all that is good or worthy of attention in games to a set of avant-garde frameworks. Citing historical feminism as an example, we can see that mainstream and avant-garde forces can be complementary. People who sometimes create avant-garde work are not therefore bound to create only avant-garde work. For instance, a radical political avant-garde artist might choose to take a break from radical politics to advocate for more venture capital and government grants for women and minority entrepreneurs. Or a person might support Jenkins’s defense of games in his testimony before Congress and at the same time find value in the work of the Patriotic Nigras. Similarly, enjoying a mainstream franchise like *BioShock* does not preclude players from appreciating avant-garde games such as *Proteus*, *Dear Esther*, or *Panoramical*. In fact, the more a player engages the former, the easier it is to value the latter. To equate all that is good in games with the avant-garde is absurd. The game *fIOW* by thatgamecompany is worthy of study and play, but it is not avant-garde because it facilitates flow in a straightforward way by design. Yet *fIOW* helped launch thatgamecompany’s popular success and set the benchmark for recent graduates wishing to form their own company. It is easy to be conflicted; *fIOW* is culturally enriching because it opens up the market to more independent games, but it is culturally restrictive because it perpetuates the hegemonic flow ideal in the guise of something new. The avant-garde does not need to be a call to rigidity. We can appreciate both the avant-garde’s multiplicity of strategies as well as the variety of work in mainstream games.

Cultivating a more diverse and accessible game culture requires strategies reaching far beyond the avant-garde. One clear strategy is to make games more representative of the diversity within game culture itself. In particular, there is an unbelievable amount of work to be done regarding women in game culture, and the avant-garde can only have so much impact. Normalizing women and acceptance of all genders in game culture—opening up more roles for women in both games and game companies—requires an active commitment from as many people as possible, in as many positions as possible. What game designers Brenda Laurel and Sheri Graner Ray have



been saying for years about women in games should surely be universally common sense by now, but it is not. The invisible hand of the market needs intervention and rehabilitation, according to Ray:

The game industry has long been looking for the "silver bullet" that one magic title that all women will play. They thought they had it with the "pink" Barbie games. Then they thought they had it with the Sims games. Currently they think they have it with the "casual" online games. Each of these categories of games has made money, but each time it results in the same thing, the entire market of "women" is re-categorized as one genre. . . . There is no, one monolithic audience called "Women" who all want exactly the same thing in games. It actually is one million markets . . . each one with its own tastes and wants in entertainment. The only thing these markets share in common is a particular chromosomal make-up! (quoted in Bateman 2009)

From a radical political perspective, Ray could be condemned for being too incremental and complicit: she is basically saying that we need more games for women, while implying that we do not need a complete reboot of the conventional and technical systems in which mainstream culture limits plus regulates games. Recalling Hale's proclamation that feminism requires radical diversity within its own movement to be fully effective, Ray is wise to advocate for change complicit with mainstream game culture. Widespread, moderate changes that raise the cultural status and agency of women in games are as laudable and historical as any avant-garde effort. Feminism, along with every other battle for equality in games, needs much more than the avant-garde.

Instead of seeing the entire videogame avant-garde as a singular force, we must split our perspective across a range of contradictory views that are formal, political, radical, complicit, and narrative. Collectively, the avant-garde liquefies games. It breaks apart and diversifies what games are as well as can do. That is the cultural contribution of the avant-garde as a whole. To see this effort as fundamentally political is as self-defeating as seeing it as fundamentally formal. Each artist and player is multifaceted, as is the medium of games at large. By accepting each avant-garde strategy as a viable approach to understanding and creating games as art, a richer set of game experiences and purposes are plausible. By accepting the fundamental diversity in games, we support the medium's development and appreciate its plasticity, and this subsequently enables us to become more plastic as players or programmers, and more present as human beings.

## Notes

### 1 Videogames as Avant-garde Art

1. The next few sentences are argued at greater length in Lister et al. 2009, 270.
2. PopCap, the developer of *Heavy Weapon*, is famous for its *Bejeweled* series, which sold more than twenty-five million copies from 2001 to 2008. See Ward 2008.
3. Gonzalo Frasca, *September 12th* (2003).
4. Flow, as a media concept, dates at least back to Raymond Williams's observation that television maintains a flow within and between programs.

### 2 Radical Formal

1. Critical theorist Fredric Jameson (1991, 67) describes an art medium similarly, "The word *medium* . . . now conjoins three relatively distinct signals: that of an artistic mode or specific form of aesthetic production, that of a specific technology, generally organized around a central apparatus or machine; and that, finally, of a social institution."
2. The loaded term *realism* is often used to describe this style of representation. The realism of the Renaissance is doubly relevant because the game industry has been following an analogous program for decades. The ghostly grid that merely guided the drawing of perspective is now the emblematic feature of computer graphics, applications like Maya, and game engines like Unreal.
3. Standing to the side warps the effect. In contrast, during the Middle Ages, a viewer could stand to the side of a painting and not have the same sense that their viewing position was wrong.
4. Noah Falstein (2005) first fleshed out the idea in game design terms that there must be an irregularity to the flow line.
5. In the 1980s, Jameson (1991, 16) noted that "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than