

Chapter 3: Radical Political

Rise of the Political Avant-garde

The political avant-garde reminds us that reality is in play and that play involves actual risk. This disturbs the usual frames with which we think and act—blending art, games, and politics. From the perspective of the political avant-garde, the radical formal avant-garde is myopic because of its reflexive, inwardly focused strategies. The political avant-garde refuses to ignore the fact that form and politics are inextricably linked. Wark (2007, 67) reflects this program when he states that the “question of the form of the game cannot be separated from the question of the form of the world.” Art for art’s sake is impossible because the world demands our attention and action, but that does not mean these artists stop making art and playing games. It means that they radicalize the way they make art and play games in order to open up as well as transform culture.



Figure 3.1 Through creative uses of street theater, the original Black Panthers used symbolic violence to reconfigure the cultural meaning of blacks in a society that is structurally racist. Image of Black Panthers on the steps of the legislative building, Olympia, 1969, taken by a state patrol photographer, courtesy of State Governors' Negative Collection, Washington State Archives.

The original Black Panther Party exemplifies the complicated entanglements that occur when the radical political avant-garde blends art and politics to transform popular culture. In 1968, the Panthers marched into the California State Capitol building armed with shotguns in a fusion of politics and theater. They understood how art could be used to obliterate deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and inequities. Eldridge Cleaver founded

the Black House, a community center and theater in San Francisco, before he became the Panthers' minister of information. Ed Bullins, a young playwright who served as the group's minister of culture, wished to move the ideas of black power "out into the community" as "street theater" (Reed 2005, 49).

According to T. V. Reed in *The Art of Protest*, the original Black Panthers are best understood as a radical political avant-garde. The Black Panthers' spectacular shock tactics were simultaneously their greatest strength and weakness.¹ The Panthers waged symbolic warfare, combating the litany of racist stigmas that blacks were lazy, stupid, undisciplined, and disorganized. More sinister stigmas were also attacked, including the idea that blacks were historical "victims" who needed the government or dominant (white) culture to give them justice and equality. Through *symbolic violence*, the Panthers asserted their own needs in the public arena. They were active, self-determining subjects who seized power and "made history," instead of passive objects to which history happened. The strategic purpose of COINTELPRO, an FBI counterintelligence program to infiltrate the group, was to lure the Panthers across the line from symbolic violence into literal violence and illegal activity. In some cases, it succeeded.

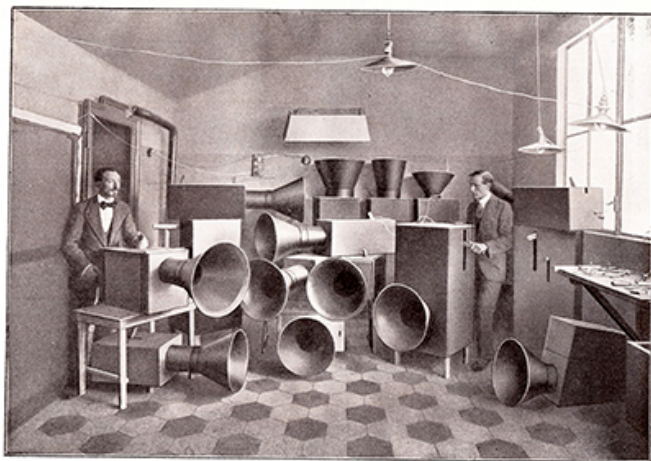
Note that the objective of the political avant-garde is neither to raise awareness nor spark discussion about specific political, economic, or social issues. Mainstream culture strives to reduce art to expression, criticism, or publicity, thus safely containing art within the categories of free speech and marketing. The radical political avant-garde knows that art is not speech, expression, or criticism. In fact, political art is political to the degree that it resists such easy categorization in popular culture. Jacques Rancière (2004, 63), author of the *Politics of Aesthetics*, explains that

political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an “awareness” of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.

Radical political art does not follow the rules of discourse to make reasoned arguments or suggestions, because rules are always rigged to favor those in power. It plays by rules that are difficult for mainstream culture to either process or dismiss. This is the reason why it is challenging to appreciate the significance of a political avant-garde as it emerges. It is not about making or communicating meaning; it is about reconfiguring how meaning is made or communicated. Political “avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments”; “it is traumatic—a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it” (Foster 1996, 29). The symbolic order is the structure of our social reality held together by the rules of language and culture. There are innumerable things that the logic of popular culture cannot accept, understand, or even see—such as its own structural racism and sexism. Since the avant-garde plays in this negative space, its actions can appear purely ominous because it attacks the cultural pillars of reality. To face these pillars is to face the very limits of language. When we experience politically avant-garde acts, we confront forces that shape our common sense of reality, although they are excluded and hidden from that reality. That the Panthers of the 1960s are still problematic to situate after so many

decades is emblematic of the structural challenges raised in popular culture by the radical political avant-garde.

Over time, the actions of the avant-garde can become intelligible and sensible. History begins to make sense of it. New cultural grammars, terms, and associations congeal around the events like scar tissue over old wounds. Yesterday's ruptures become today's defining marks and touchstones. For most, the Black Panthers are not a popular cultural touchstone today. If we look further back than the 1960s, we gain a better grasp of the political force of art. It has been a century since art and politics first began to spectacularly clash, mix, and merge inside the avant-garde magic circle.



Nel Laboratorio degli Intonarumori a Milano.



Figure 3.2 Futurist noise poetry imitates the machine in its twin forces of destruction and reconstruction.

In his 1909 *Futurist Manifesto*, Filippo Marinetti stated that art “can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice,” and thus launched futurism in Italy. A product of the era, futurism arose before World War I (1914–1918) and continued long afterward.

Although futurism had movements in Russia, England, and Eastern Europe, its best-

known group was in Italy. Similar in some respects to the Black Panthers, the futurists were a hypermasculine movement and embraced violent rhetoric. The Italian futurists were complicit with Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. They feared that Italy was mired in tradition, and would perish culturally unless it embraced modernity and technology. Marinetti urged his compatriots to vigorously "play with life." To free their country, the futurists attacked the structures that held social reality in place: "We want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong Futurists." They proposed that only perennial violence could sustain Italy, so, for example, to destroy the "cult of the past," museums would be burned down each generation and aging artists replaced by more virile provocateurs.

The futurists embraced the power of modern science and industry to a comical extent. Reality was reframed into a whimsical fantasy space through which humankind could playfully exert its violent desires—desires augmented by the machine. Italians would conquer inertia with vehicular speed, smash distance with the locomotive train, and defy gravity via the airplane and erection of steel skyscrapers. Futurist drawings were ripped apart and reassembled as if by mad robots. Futurist noise poetry emulating the blasts, clicks, and rumbling of airplanes, guns, and factories erupted in cafés. The futurists dreamed of metalizing the human body. Every aspect of life was assaulted. Nowhere was safe—not the sky, city, country, museum, body, bathroom, or kitchen. Futurism was everywhere. Tongue-in-cheek Marinetti blasted, "No more spaghetti" at the offensive flaccidity of piled noodles.



Figure 3.3 World War I photographs of a British Vickers machine gun crew wearing antigas helmets in 1916, a British Little Willie tank in 1915, and a German trench on Messines Ridge in 1917 with dead bodies.

A few years after futurism emerged, during World War I, a radical political avant-garde known as Dada arose. Dada spread out through Europe's cultural centers—Zurich, Berlin, Paris, and the Netherlands—and elsewhere, such as New York and Tokyo. Like the futurists, Dadaists also used political art to respond to the destructive capacity and productive potency of machines at the culmination of the Industrial Revolution. In contrast to the futurists, the Dadaists blended mechanical visions with the horrific reality

of World War I. This reality, captured and culturally transmitted by the new media of photography, radio, and film, included the brutal trenches, plumes of mustard gas, millions of burned and mutilated corpses, and moonlike landscapes of destruction.



Figure 3.4 *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919–1920) by Hannah Höch mimics the destruction of World War I in its cut up of traditional aesthetics and at the same time creates a new aesthetic as mechanized violence is channeled into the practice of cut-and-paste collage.

Faith in progress through science and technology had sustained the West for centuries, but this faith suffered a crippling blow in the aftermath of World War I. What had made the horrors of the war possible were in fact the fruits of the Enlightenment: advances in industrial engineering, manufacturing, medicine, mass media, communications, and transportation. For disillusioned intellectuals, not only were the engineers and politicians to blame but also the artists, philosophers, and poets. Beauty and aesthetics had failed. Art for art's sake had failed.

Hans Arp describes how this cultural moment informed Dadaist practice: “While the guns rumbled in the distance, we . . . were seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age.”² Dadaists collapsed categories, allowing feelings and logic, art and politics, to affect and define each other. Formal distinctions between mediums collapsed: “As the boundaries between the arts became indistinct, painters turned to poetry and poets to painting. The destruction of the boundaries was reflected everywhere. The safety valve was off.”³ It took a keen understanding of nineteenth-century notions of beauty and art to reconfigure their traditions effectively. A historical pressure cooker compressed cultural and technical ingredients—amalgamating them into new synthetic forms and hybrids that still resonate today.

The tactics of the early political avant-garde were absorbed by a variety of cultural actors, sometimes with disastrous results. Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl adopted avant-garde film techniques, for instance, to create stunningly provocative work that elevated Adolf Hitler's cult of personality. Historical avant-garde techniques also gave fodder to the “creative revolution” in 1960s' marketing. Lev Manovich (2002, 306–307) argues that a key Dadaist tactic is now integral to technoculture: “The avant-garde

strategy of collage reemerged as the ‘cut-and-paste’ command, the most basic operation one can perform on the digital data.” One of the most lasting “avant-garde move[s] was] to combine animation, printed texts, and live-action footage,” Manovich continues, in a procedure that finds an analog “in the convergence of animation, title generation, paint, compositing, and editing systems into all-in-one packages.” The recombinatory force with which we currently approach the creation and remixing of media is a legacy of the early political avant-garde. It is now conventional to embrace the transformative force of technology to create all kinds of flowing mediated experiences.

The futurists, Dadaists, and Black Panther Party all strived for divergent goals, using a variety of tactics. Their political motivations ranged from the cult of the machine, masculinity, and nationalism (Italian futurists), to cultural trauma (Dadaists), to social justice (Black Panthers). Their aesthetic interests ranged from inventing new practices of listening and looking to making new kinds of images and subjects visible. The common thread among the political avant-garde is the manner in which they earnestly play with our shared, mediated, public reality by blending art and politics. They take the position that neither play nor art are ever truly safe.

Monopoly of Safe Play

Play is often described as occurring in a safely protective magic circle. Johan Huizinga, a Dutch anthropologist, popularized the term in his 1938 book, *Homo Ludens*. For Huizinga (1970, 10), the magic circle depicts a social frame within which play can safely flow:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. . . . The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

Accepting the modern Enlightenment model of reality, Huizinga places two worlds in opposition: the everyday world and the world of play. The “spoilsport shatters the play-world itself. He reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world. He robs play of its *illusion*” (ibid., 11). For Huizinga, play is weak because it exists in our minds, while the ordinary world is formidable because it is grounded in the physical universe.

It is common for designers to believe play is a fragile mental state. Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw programmed the first Multi-User Dungeon (a mashup of tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons and Dragons* and early online chat rooms). Bartle (2006, 33) is a prominent proponent of securing play, contending, “Virtual-world administrators have absolute control over their virtual world,” and if they are “denied absolute control, then the game conceit must be protected in some other way, otherwise, the virtual world would just be an extension of the real world.” Edward Castronova (2008, 168) notes that players “should abide by the rules or expect extreme sanctions.” Castronova’s (2006, 68) justification is that “virtual worlds represent a new technology that allows deeper and richer access to . . . fantasy, myth, saga, states that have immense intrinsic value to the human person,” and that “virtual worlds cannot provide these mental states if the *magic*

circle . . . is eroded.” This extremely protective attitude toward play, though, undermines the proposition that play is powerful. In this sense, Castronova has it backward. The purpose of play is to reshape reality.

Radical Play

Brian Sutton-Smith sees play in an impressive light, wherein it has the purpose of eroding and questioning our usual way of being in the world. For Sutton-Smith (1997, 231), play is the “facsimilization of the struggle for survival as this is broadly rendered by Darwin. Biologically, its function is to reinforce the organism’s variability in the face of rigidification of successful adaptation.” Play allows organisms to push past hard-won patterns that have become fixed to ensure their survival.⁴ This is why in his *Play of the World*, literary critic James S. Hans laments the modern anemia of play as a safe, manageable activity. Hans (1981, 182) challenges Huizinga as well as French sociologist Roger Caillois directly:

From the playful perspective, however, one does not simply place oneself at risk; he places everything at risk, and not in the naive sense that he must consider the consequences of his action on other people as well as himself. . . . One risks the world precisely by giving oneself up to it. . . . Yet we have done our best to eliminate the risk in play, to make it “safe” for society. We almost need to relearn from the beginning that play is always only play if something is really at stake, or if everything is at stake.

We reshape the world and our understanding of it through play. To willfully “hallucinate” with “an intermediate reality between phantasy and actuality is the purpose of play,”

according to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson.⁵ We play to open up new ways to live, be, and perform in the world.

The political avant-garde of games reminds us how to play. Works in this category recover something that we have collectively lost: radical play. Radical play destabilizes the entrenched patterns with which culture engages and plays with technology, allowing alterior patterns to emerge and unrepresented subjects to become visible. The motivation of the political avant-garde of games is to break up existing regimes of technocultural power. It challenges the popular desire to extend our mastery over the world through the instrumental use of technology in the guise of safe play. Similar to the futurists and Black Panther Party, the cult of masculine violence often shapes contemporary work in this genre, especially in the case of griefer.

The common definition of griever is a player of multiplayer games who intentionally harasses other players. For Bartle, grieving is a natural stage of personal development that all players go through. Bartle (2007) casts grieving as a normal phase in the process of assimilation into a shared virtual reality:

The classic, *main sequence* is to start as a *griever* (implicit socializer) who tries to find the limits of what is socially possible in the virtual world by attempting to do whatever they can to their fellow players. Having ascertained what is normatively allowed and what isn't, the player becomes a *scientist* (explicit explorer), performing experiments and learning from the results. They string together the primitive actions they have discovered so far and form meaningful sequences that enable them to perform complicated tasks. Armed with enough of these, they advance to become a *planner* (explicit achiever). This takes up the bulk of their time

and is where they actually play the game. Eventually, they proceed to become *friends* (implicit socializers), a state born from the camaraderie of people who have come to trust one another over time while under pressure.

In Bartle's view, players begin grieving the moment they enter a virtual world, as they move idiotically, perform incoherently, and ask inappropriate questions. Griefing is couched as a bump in the road to virtual adulthood; it is worth noting that Bartle's "main sequence" presented in the microcosm of a virtual world is similar to Jean Piaget's sequence of how a child matures and assimilates into the procedures of culture in the macrocosm. Are we really meant to believe that all challenges to the status quo are simply clumsy attempts to adapt to it? The hole in Bartle's theory is the apparent reality that many grievers are not as they are because they do not understand the social and technical rules but rather because they know the rules all too well. What makes them strange, and what makes the term griefing misleading, is the openness to accident, loss of control, and alterity that they celebrate.



Figure 3.5 In 2007, while mischievously wearing “Bush ‘08” buttons, the Patriotic Nigras defaced the John Edwards presidential campaign headquarters in *Second Life* with images of Communist propaganda, feces, genitals, and Edwards in blackface.

The Patriotic Nigras is a griefer community that grew from 7chan, an anonymous image board, in 2006. A user called “MudKips Acronym” posted a message on 7chan asking if *Second Life* was “raidable.” The idea of raiding comes from MMO gaming when players band together as a mob to defeat an enemy boss. Members of 7chan regularly raid websites, other image boards, and forums, applying the gaming practice within a broader social context. This involves inundating a site with inflammatory posts and occasionally crashing its server. 7chan raids spread to online games, such as *Habbo*

Hotel, and from there to *Second Life*, where they flood and break the world with iconoclastic imagery and Internet memes.

A bundle of ostensibly contradictory forces hold the Patriotic Nigras together. The Nigras value giving instruction to new members and clearly commenting on code, but they also demand anonymity so they can more effectively cause trouble and spread iconoclasm. The first page of their wiki espouses their open-source ethos: “This is a group effort by the Nigras. All of the scripts and tools here are Open Source. This means you can steal the code, contribute to the codewriting process, etc.” Within their extensible, anonymous community, they share griefing techniques via a nonexclusive pedagogy. The Patriotic Nigras developed a “Shooped Life” client, which anyone can use to circumvent Internet protocol (IP) and media access control address bans in *Second Life*. They distribute highly malleable scripts, such as “Self-Replication,” written in the native language of *Second Life*. It is worth examining an excerpt from the script:

```
integer WaitTime = 10;

//Time to wait between replications in seconds.

//Must be greater than 0. I recommend more than 10 to
avoid a grey goo fence.

float v = 8;

//Max random speed object will be punted when rezzed.

string Name = "";
```

```
//Don't supply a name unless the name of the object  
differs from the copy.
```

```
vector VelRand() {
```

```
float Angle = (integer)llFrاند(360);
```

```
Angle = Angle * DEG_TO_RAD;
```

```
vector Unit = <llCos(Angle), llSin(Angle), V>;
```

```
return (Unit * V); }
```

```
default
```

```
{
```

```
on_rez(integer start_param) {
```

```
if(Name == "") { Name = llGetObjectName(); }
```

```
llSetTimerEvent(WaitTime); }
```

```
timer() {
```

```
llRezObject(Name, llGetPos(), VelRand(),
```

```
ZERO_ROTATION, 1); }
```

```
object_rez(key child) {
```

```
llGiveInventory(child, Name); }
```

```
} (MachineCode 2008)
```

To execute the Self-Replication script, a user declares an instance, location, name, and vector. The “RezObject” component creates a child object that has the entire Self-Replication script in its inventory. Parent objects keep spawning children, so numerical growth is exponential. The life of the script outside *Second Life* mimics its behavior in the virtual world. The script is in flux, constantly remixed and propagated. Rapid adaptations combat countermeasures that Linden Lab uses to try to contain it. In response, Patriotic Nigras run the script through code obfuscators, which leave functions unchanged, but rearrange lines while adding bogus functions and noise. In the excerpt above there is evidence of iteration history. The delay or “WaitTime” between duplications is ten seconds in order to avoid triggering a “grey goo fence,” a countermeasure by Linden to catch scripts that make calls too frequently. When the script was first introduced, such delays did not need to be as long.

Griefers not only play hard with servers, processors, and administrators but also with average players. Catherine Fitzpatrick is a small business owner who earns a modest income from virtual property in *Second Life*. Fitzpatrick bitterly complains about griefers such as the Patriotic Nigras, “Fuck, this is a denial-of-service attack. . . . it’s anti-civilization. . . . it’s wrong. . . . it cost me hundreds of US dollars.” She challenges any claim that griefers are artistic, philosophical, or even interesting: “Griefers aren’t reading Sartre, they’re antitechnological.”⁶ From within this litany of complaints, the claim that griefers are antitechnological clearly is not credible. Griefers celebrate computer and

network technologies to a comical, horrible fault, similar to the way in which the futurists celebrated machine and industrial technologies a century ago. Grieferers activate and revel in all the unseen materials that make virtual reality possible. Gamespace is constrained by popular cultural conventions such as scopophilia, the fetish of clearly seeing objects and controlling the space in front of us, as well as capitalistic notions of supply, demand, and resource scarcity. For grieferers, gamespace is not a hollow container to flow through or conduct ordered business within; rather, it is a socially situated hallucination managed by computer programs and legal systems. What most people fail to understand about the political avant-garde today is the same thing they failed to understand when it first emerged in the early twentieth century. Dada and the futurists did not destroy art, although that was how it appeared at the time. Retrospectively, they are credited with redefining art. Grieferers likewise do not destroy games but instead show us how to fully play with this new medium. The experience of time, space, and action in games is a mashup of processor clocks, refresh rates, cultural conventions, and human bodies clicking away at millions of terminals. The political avant-garde forcefully pulls all these things, the entire medium, into the magic circle.

In *The Exploit*, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker (2007, 98) explain that for those engaged in radical politics, the “goal is not to destroy technology in some neo-Luddite delusion but to push technology into a hypertrophic state,” so society may engage technology from a critical distance and gain a more comprehensive sensual grasp of it. “There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society,” they add: “to *retreat ahead of it*.” The “challenge is to play at play itself,” according to Wark

(2007, 19, 224), so we may go “further and further into gamespace.” The avant-garde challenges popular culture to dive more deeply into gamespace than most care to go.

Sweet Griefing

The Patriotic Nigras celebrate the power of videogames at the expense of the human subject sitting at their computer terminal, not unlike the way in which the futurists fetishized the machine at the expense of the human subject sitting in the theater. The community forum of the Patriotic Nigras suffered a DDoS attack in 2010 and is still down at the time of this writing; other infamous griefers, like Plastic Duck, have moved on as well. In their wake, even stranger kinds of griefers are gathering public attention. Procedures that were historically avant-garde, such as cut-and-paste and montage editing, have become commonplace today. An analogous goal of introducing new procedures to think with motivates a few sophisticated griefers, who are explicitly trying to bring spoofing, worms, grey goo, and so on, into the common vernacular. This new wave of griefing is more like Dada than the futurists. These griefers are ambivalent toward the machine and more self-critical, and vacillate between being technoevangelists and devilish Luddites. They are harder for us to dismiss, not because they read Jean-Paul Sartre but rather because they signal a potential future shift in game culture itself. They may reference videogame history, politics, and the avant-garde directly, but they are mainly identified by how they use such elements to open up how we play games and ease people into a more inclusive magic circle.



Figure 3.6 *Grey Goo Number Nine*, scripted by Gazira Babeli, calls down a rain of Super Marios, referencing the history of videogames within *Second Life*. Image courtesy of Gazira Babeli.

Gazira Babeli takes grieving to another level by preserving little islands of stability in the iconoclastic ocean. The text channel isn't deluged with noise, for example. Babeli uses it to live chat about why she's grieving you instead. As a disruptive torrent of Mario images overwhelm your monitor, Babeli will politely break down for you how the script works. As your frame rates slow down because your computer cannot render the flood of objects, she will keep you company while explaining the avant-garde purpose of

her political act. She will share a link to the script she is using, such as *Grey Goo Number Nine*, and then be on her way. The first few lines of code read:

```
// Grey Goo Number Nine

// (cc) 2006 Gazira Babeli-gazirababeli.com

// =====

// This work is licensed under a Creative Commons

// Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License

// http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/

// =====

// HOW TO: Drag/Copy/Add this script on a prim

list GG = ["abe4de67-77e8-2fe2-c20d-118e7549b7b8," //

super mario

"6a32f6a0-c5f0-a7f6-1911-ca43e804dda6," // warhol

banana (Babeli 2006)
```

Note the “mario” and “warhol” references at the bottom; the swarming elements in her work are not goatse holes, Obama or Bush banners, or racial caricatures but instead images from game and art histories. Babeli (2007) writes, “Griefing is a bourgeois

concept’—Leon Trotsky.” It is an invitation to play. Her introduction is forced, but the company is warm. Patriotic Nigras are nurturing, yet only to one another within their community. Babeli is nurturing everywhere, healing and wounding simultaneously, throwing around Mario imagery rather than virtual feces.

We might call Babeli a *sweet griefer*. Contemporary cultural pirate Hakim Bey (2003, 40), who is also known as Peter Lambourn Wilson, examines how sweetness and ruthlessness, philanthropy and theft, can be fruitfully combined in radical politics:

A conspiracy of artists, anonymous as any mad bombers, but aimed toward an act of gratuitous generosity rather than violence—at the millennium rather than the apocalypse—or rather, aimed at a *present moment* of aesthetic shock [act] in the service of realization and liberation.
... Art tells gorgeous lies that come true.

Like the Patriotic Nigras, Babeli’s scripts are thoughtfully commentated with instructions and warnings. But unlike the Patriotic Nigras, Babeli further weakens the artificial boundaries between ordinary reality, play, and the chaotic real by being so oddly ambivalent—shocking and generous at the same time. Babeli (n.d.) calls herself a “code performer” who fosters “unauthorized installations.” The fact that her gestures are at once gentle and aggressive leaves many questions hanging over the experience. Her targets cannot easily dismiss her as a griefer, yet they cannot completely trust her either. Babeli combines two figures in Joseph Campbell’s universal mythology: the trickster and the guide or mentor. She brings the gift of knowledge while sabotaging it—similar to Mephistopheles, Faust’s trickster-guide, who tortured people’s souls while revealing the secrets of the universe.

The Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System (GLaDOS) in the *Portal* franchise is a trickster-guide, teaching and terrorizing the player. It is important to differentiate GLaDOS from Babeli. In *Portal*, spatial continuity, physical forces, and the narrative become twisted in exquisitely designed and witty mind-bending puzzles. Not only do we expect GLaDOS to play tricks, we also expect that the tricks can be solved. Babeli performs her tricks while explaining how they work. There is nothing to solve. Players can explore the quality of the experience as it unfolds, engaging the accidental nature of gamespace in the cracks between conventions. It is not about solving the tricks but instead about dissecting and toying with the tricks themselves as part of the medium.

Sweet grieving spreads computational literacy, exemplifying how grieving could settle into a more obvious and open practice in technoculture. As grieving becomes easier and more prevalent, its tools, techniques, and conventions will become increasingly integrated into “normal” gameplay experiences. Wark (2006) writes in *Hacker Manifesto* that avant-garde “politics does not seek to overthrow the existing society, or to reform its larger structures, or to preserve its structure so as to maintain an existing coalition of interests.” Avant-garde politics is *prefigurative*. It “seeks to permeate existing states with a new state of existence,” contends Wark, “spreading the seeds of an alternative practice of everyday life.” Babeli realizes, in the act of protest itself, the kind of virtual world she wants. For example, if street protesters throw bottles and rocks as police fire rubber bullets, the protesters inadvertently mirror and propagate the same administered violence that they protest. Yet if protesters throw teddy bears at police instead—a demonstration tactic that was actually used at the 2000 Economic Summit of the Americas in Quebec City—then they are enacting an alternate vision of the world within the act of protest

itself. The double negation turns it into a positive act, generative of an alternate way of being.

Single-Player Political Games



Figure 3.7 *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* lets the player grapple with the shocking events of Columbine through the aesthetic of retro RPGs. Image courtesy of Danny

Ledonne.

Single-player games, like the online multiplayer examples explored above, can also politically challenge the cultural conventions that define the medium. The game *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* released in 2005, allows the player to reenact the 1999 Columbine school shootings as the two killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. It is a 2D,

single-player RPG created with an eight-bit style in RPG Maker. *Columbine* has two realms: the real world and hell that is crawling with enemies appropriated from *Doom*, a game played by the killers. *Columbine* has a linear plot: to survive in hell you must level up beforehand by killing children and teachers. Its creator, Danny Ledonne, explained to *Wired* magazine: “It’s a little joke—you have to be really, really bad to survive in hell.”⁷

Super Columbine is politically avant-garde because its subject is inappropriate for games according to a mainstream perspective. *Columbine* mingles gameplay and spectacular tragedy in an incredibly ambivalent experience. The material it brings into the magic circle is disturbing. Ledonne researched the event to thoroughly dramatize it—incorporating video stills of the shooting, photos of the killers’ dead bodies, the cover of Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* (which was inspirational for the killers), and images of survivors as well as mourning families. If the game were merely shocking, it would not be that effective or interesting as avant-garde art. What makes *Columbine* fascinating is its fusion of two domains usually kept separate: serious (and tragic) reality and the safe, playful mood of mainstream games. *Super Columbine*’s most important feature as avant-garde art is allowing the player to grapple with that contradiction. Greg Costikyan (2007) adroitly critiques that “the game-ness of it helps to cloak the horror.” The game trivializes the massacre, adopting the sociopathic perspective of the killers, who planned it like a *Doom* game. To play the game is to experience the event through the flippant lens of the killers.



Figure 3.8 Jacques Servin sneaked code into *SimCopter*, causing “mimbos” to appear, which caused Maxis to recall the game. Image courtesy of Jacques Servin.

The radical political avant-garde also plays in rather slapstick ways. Jacques Servin (cofounder of the Yes Men and RTMark) was a programmer on *SimCopter* (1996), a helicopter flight sim game produced by Maxis (Wright’s studio acquired by Electronic Arts in 1997). Servin furtively placed code that would render “mimbos”—shirtless, Speedo-strapped muscle men—on certain days of the year. According to Servin, games only depict women as sexual objects, so he redressed the imbalance with a celebratory flourish. The mimbos’ nipples are rendered with the visual effect used for the game’s fog-piercing landing lights. The usual objectification of women in games was

comically augmented with the objectification of men. Servin's prank was discovered after fifty thousand copies of *SimCopter* sold, after which he was promptly fired. For a few weeks at least, the game's magic circle blended the private space of a single player experience with an artist's gesture that came swinging in for a private little party. The player's hallucinatory desire to control gamespace was sweetly grieved for a moment by an alien and boisterous, hypersexualized desire for male bodies.

The Playful Mob

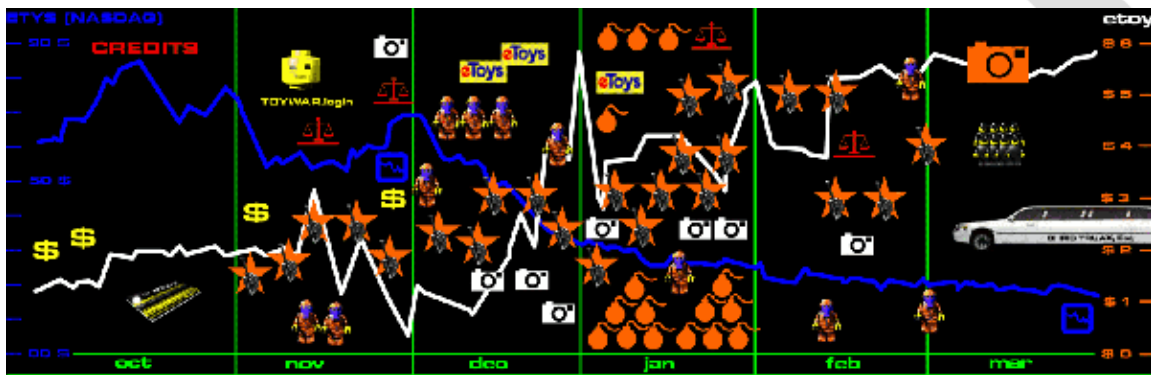


Figure 3.9 Players devalued the real stock price of eToys.com corporation in the game

Toywar. Image courtesy of etoy.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG! and *SimCopter* attempt to open up how people play and perceive videogames. They inject politics into entertainment, cracking the infrastructure that secures the status quo. The political avant-garde can also enact the reverse, calling forth political forces through the affordances of gameplay. *Toywar* (1999) is an example of this strategy. It existed in two worlds, both as a fictional game and a retaliatory attack on a corporation. *Toywar* had its origin in a legal dispute. The billion-

dollar toy retailer eToys.com threatened to sue the artist group etoy for trademark infringement. The retailer assumed that the etoy artists would either give in or respond to the legal claim via the courts. But etoy surprised eToys when it chose to fight back in an unconventional way: by launching *Toywar*.

Simply put, *Toywar* was an MMO game, but the objective was to drive down the actual price of eToys's stock on the NASDAQ market. Internal check systems allowed players to track the misinformation campaign they were contributing to and the escalating public relations nightmare that the corporation faced. The game featured a virtual world for players to log into and play as they would if it were only a fictional game. In the virtual world, players chatted via a virtual radio, posted messages, checked internal email, spent and spread in-game currency, and launched "media bombs"—bundled packages of images, legal statements, and damning customer complaints about eToys. The magic circle was wildly expanded; players filed real counterclaims against the company, callers overloaded the customer service department of eToys.com, and designers published dozens of websites to humiliate the company as well as confuse potential customers, partners, clients, and media outlets. Pretending to be bankrolled investors, players infiltrated newsgroups to spread disinformation. A flurry of wildly inaccurate articles appeared in global newspapers, from the *New York Times* to *Le Monde*.

Within weeks of launching *Toywar*, the price of the eToys stock dropped by half and remained in a free fall for weeks. This occurred in 1999, when the dot-com bubble was already in the process of bursting, so the impact of the videogame is difficult to determine. The eToys corporation eventually declared bankruptcy, which led etoy (1999) to claim that *Toywar* "was the most expensive performance in art history: \$4.5 billion

dollars.” The etoy artists insisted that the “achievement” was not theirs alone; it belonged to the players. The artists intentionally let the players define what the game was: “We have no idea what people do who meet here. They talk to each other. They can make deals. It’s a living system which generates an impact.”⁸ There were no official rules, only a persistent gameworld in which players could congregate and a meaty target with various soft spots to expose online.

Because *Toywar* was framed as a game, wild permutations of creativity were generated. But for the same reason, all that divergent energy focused on a singular goal through the funnel of groupthink: the humiliating defeat of eToys. The rhetoric of games is widely used in the corporate world, election campaigns, propaganda, and foreign policy to manipulate discourse as well as justify aggressive policies through abstractions of glorious victory at the expense of individuals, society, and the environment. *Toywar* appropriated the militarization of business as a spectacular game and manifested it literally. It subverted capitalism by the use of its own means. The abstraction of play absolved any guilt that might normally arise from attacking a random corporation with thousands of people’s livelihoods and life savings invested in it. The asymmetrical nature of the aggression prompted by the game reveals the symbolic (and literal) violence that the avant-garde is capable of when it appropriates the nature of digital capitalism, while armed with the rhetoric of contemporary warfare, and draws these into a globally expansive magic circle.

S.W.A.R.M.
THE MINUTEMEN

SOUTH WEST ACTION TO RESIST THE MINUTEMEN

No One Is Illegal

LATEST UPDATE: Virtual Sit-In Against Anti-Immigrant Websites, July 20-22nd

Freedom of Movement and the Right to Stay are Human Rights

Over 3,500 people have died crossing the US/Mexico border since 1994

Over 1.5 Million Mexican Farmers have lost their farms as a result of NAFTA

Migrant workers pay more taxes but receive fewer social services than citizens

Only 25 out of 7500 migrant people stopped by the Border Patrol had criminal records

This action is over! Thank you to over 27,000 who participated in the sit-in! The success was huge with many of the targetted sites being unreachable throughout the 3 day period including:

- The Border Patrol Website
- The NAFTA Website
- Samuel Huntington's Website
- The California MinuteMen Site

Read the full announcement here:
[SD Indymedia](#)
[Indybay](#)
[LA Indymedia](#)
[Barcelona Indymedia](#)
[Italy Indymedia](#)

Whatever you do, **don't** call James Chase, the head of the California MinuteMen, on his cell phone at 760-644-0857 and tell him what you think of his little racist project, take up his

Figure 3.10 *S.W.A.R.M.*, which orchestrated DDoS and telephony attacks against the US border patrol and the Minutemen, controlled the narrative entirely, leaving participants with little room to improvise and diverge in their activity. Image courtesy of Ricardo Dominguez.

The celebratory play and exuberant waste of *Toywar* were enabled by the rubric of games. It will be illustrative to compare a similar event that was enabled not by the rubric of games but rather that of social justice. In 2005, a group called the Electronic Disturbance Theater wanted to enable anybody anywhere to support the Zapatista movement in Mexico. The strategy was to disturb the stability of the US-Mexico border

infrastructure. Brett Stalbaum, Carmin Karasic, Stefan Wray, and Ricardo Dominguez (a former member of the Critical Art Ensemble) created *S.W.A.R.M.* (South West Action to Resist the Minutemen) for that purpose. Using a distributable applet, they enabled thousands of people to flood the websites of California and Arizona Minutemen organizations, “Save Our State” initiatives, and political representatives who supported stricter immigration law enforcement. They used Electronic Disturbance Theater’s favorite tactic, a FloodNet application, to direct denial-of-service attacks against various websites:

The software we are using requests files from the servers of the targeted websites that are not found—files like Justice, Freedom, and the names of those who have died crossing the border. In effect you will see the error message—“files not found.” The sit-in will interfere with and slow down the servers of these various groups and individuals—much like a physical sit-in slows down the movement of people in buildings or on streets. In addition, the administrators of the servers will see logs of the action where the names of those who have died crossing, and the requested files like justice, appear repeated thousands upon thousands of times.⁹

S.W.A.R.M. and *Toywar* both engage in “electronic civil disturbance,” to use Electronic Disturbance Theater’s phrase. The nature of these two disturbances is markedly distinct, however. *Toywar* used the affordance of play so that the experience would oscillate between fictional worlds, corporate stock, and global media. In this sense, *Toywar* participation was open. Players diverged in their actions, spreading out into hundreds of nooks and crannies of technoculture—creating fake businesses and websites,

feeding news aggregators with misinformation, and so on; at the same time, many players just socialized in the MMO game with other players. Using FloodNet, *S.W.A.R.M.* never opened up the methods or narrative structure of the event. The orientation, interpretation, socialization, and actions it supplied were closed off from the beginning. People were only invited to do “real” things. The participants of *S.W.A.R.M.* were never given a chance to reinterpret reality and rewrite the rules of engagement. In contrast, by sporadically dislodging civil actions from reality and allowing players to reconnect them in whatever ways they could imagine, *Toywar* players proliferated into far more divergent patterns. This allowed *Toywar* to be more politically effective and leverage the affordance of contemporary culture in more comprehensive ways. *S.W.A.R.M.* made it all too easy, providing all the rules, means, and rhyme and reason to perform the event. Worlds did not blend. Worlds were not in play. The result was a less dynamic and open event. If artists enable people to play with the nature of their own logic—which is what framing the event as gameplay does—they are not only facilitating “electronic civil disturbance but also distributing their own authority, agency, and power among the participants.

Conservative Violence



Figure 3.11 In *State of Emergency 1* and *2*, the enemy is the Corporation, which the player battles by causing systemic chaos, cloaking consumption with the feeling of subversion. Image courtesy of Southpeak Games.

Mainstream games are designed for players to overcome the “other,” alterity, and difference. Vistas of alien landscapes lure us; scenarios of a postapocalyptic United States intrigue us. These features are misleading, though. Games are usually about eliminating enemies, dominating spaces, or ordering systems, which is to say that games usually afford a conservative or even fascistic kind of violence. Designers understand that the best way to get players to accept their role as privileged authority figures in games is

to cloak their status as its obverse. Players prefer to accept the underdog role: the rogue cop, cyborg mutant, psychotic killer, gang banger, anticorporate anarchist, and so on. By wearing the guise of a justified underdog, players can exert power with a clear conscience.

For example, *State of Emergency* simulates a world suppressed by an evil “Corporation,” which makes systemic disruption the gameplay goal. Transgression is encoded and afforded by design. Contrary to its rebellion rhetoric, *State of Emergency* casts the player in a conservative role. Galloway and Thacker (2007, 115) analyze the game: “The computer skills necessary for playing either scenario amount to network management tasks. Either you are infiltrating the city and destabilizing key nodes, or you are fortifying such nodes. The lesson of *State of Emergency* is not that it promotes an anarchic ideology, but that, in the guise of anarchic ideology, it promotes computer and network management skills.” The false sense of being other makes it easier to exert power and claim righteous authority. It gives license to use any means necessary to master the system rather than question the system’s underlying nature.



Figure 3.12 A 2008 “protest” that generated new virtual content such as placards and public relations drama for Linden Lab is more of an advertisement than a demonstration.

Image courtesy of Prokofy Neva.

Administrators know that if players can express displeasure or violence through mechanisms made freely available in the game, these actually strengthen the status quo. Cory Ondrejka (2006), former chief technology officer of Linden Lab, welcomes player protests in *Second Life*, with specific recognition of their utility as fads: “Some have become entrepreneurs, opening stores, bars, and strip clubs. . . . Fads follow innovation and waves of new ideas have repeatedly swept through the population, from wings to protest marches.” Perpetuating the fad of protest, Linden Lab accedes to the occasional demand—for example, the virtual tax revolt of 2003. Public ire was inflamed over a

monetary charge for each primitive object players created, which was damned as a “tax on creativity.”

While Linden (and “Lindens,” as employees and volunteers are called) exists in many forms—a brick-and-mortar building, incorporated company, online business, and producer of a virtual world—protesters realized themselves in only one form: as avatars in the everyday virtual world. Protesters were essentially content creators for Linden, churning out viral hype and digital entertainment; designing and implementing little placards, bonfires, songs, smoke, and animating avatars to march. From the radical avant-garde perspective, this failure to play with the form itself results in mere expression as opposed to actual protest. By simply replicating the protest form virtually, the *Second Life* protesters expressed themselves, but not in a particularly meaningful or radically avant-garde way, and with little consequence for their cause.

Life, Art, Play, and Reality

The political avant-garde’s insistence on cultural or economic engagement with palpable consequences brings up complicated questions about the relationship between life, art, play, and reality. In his 1974 book, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Peter Bürger articulated the dichotomy of art versus life with regard to Dada. From Dada (and notably not futurism), Bürger extrapolated a universal theory of the political avant-garde, as Greenberg had done for the formal avant-garde in 1939 using modern painters. Greenberg advocated art for art’s sake, by which the formal avant-garde could theoretically advance culture for everyone; in actuality, it attended to a niche of educated elites with the training, time, and resources necessary to appreciate its output. Bürger’s

avant-garde, defined by its effect on the public, is the antielitist counterpart to Greenberg's avant-garde. According to Bürger, if only educated audiences or hardcore players can appreciate the art, then that art is a failure from a radical political perspective because it failed to challenge popular culture.

The problem with Bürger's (1984, 72) focus on defining the avant-garde by its effects on the public is that this viewpoint perpetuates a divide between art and life. This dichotomy is painfully familiar; it is also misguided. It is this same way of thinking that separates play from everyday life. Foster (1996, 15) has responded to this false dichotomy: "What is art and what is life here? Already the opposition tends to cede art the autonomy that is in question, and to position life at a point beyond reach. In this very formulation, then, the avant-garde project is predestined to failure, with the sole exception of movements set in the midst of revolutions." Using a simple, contemporary example, we can further illustrate Bürger's misconceptions about the political avant-garde. A political "purpose" for art can be discovered in real time because networked, anonymous culture affords a new kind of public theater. For instance, Belarus is ruled by an oppressive regime, and in May 2006 a peaceful flash mob gathered in a public park to eat and share ice cream (Shirky 2008). Police were instructed to arrest anyone holding ice cream in the park—a comically hysterical overreaction that belied weakness rather than strength. The spontaneity and bottom-up self-determination of the flash mob ostensibly threatened the central authority. Through the open theatricality of the event, which could not stand in any greater contrast to the brutal idiocy of the government, an alternate reality became palpable. Democratic revolution seemed imaginable, if only for a moment.

Philosophers from Plato to Friedrich Schiller have studied similar questions about the interdependence of art, play, and life. Herbert Spencer argued in the nineteenth century that play and art are alike in the way their purpose is always dependent and proximate to the situation in which they arise. Ellen Dissanayake (1992) studies the blended nature of art, ritual, and biology in *Homo Aestheticus*. Arnold Hauser (1999) advances the twin propositions that art has a political nature and politics has an artistic nature in his voluminous *Social History of Art*. Hans (1981, 2) resituates play within the real world, correcting Huizinga and Caillois for wrongly sequestering it:

Although both Huizinga and Caillois argue that play is important to human culture, they offer their arguments too late; once the cleavage between the “real” world and the world of play takes place, play will always have a subsidiary role, no matter what the rhetoric might suggest. . . . When one begins a book by stating that “play is superfluous” . . . one is only reinforcing its uselessness for a society that considers things in terms of utility. Huizinga’s study is valuable, but his initial premises undermine the play he so dearly wishes to reclaim.

Hans’s critique of Huizinga is analogous to Foster’s critique of Bürger. Foster contends that in setting up a rigid division between art and life, Bürger effectively guaranteed that the political avant-garde would fail to create a new kind of art-as-life praxis. Likewise, Huizinga and Caillois carve out a gulf between play and reality. Similar to Foster’s reclamation of art as an indivisible part of life, Hans reclaims play as a part of life; there is no gulf to bridge. This argument places the political avant-garde in the key cultural position of helping us remember something we have forgotten and forgetting

something that has constrained us for a long time: the deeply interdependent and integrated relationships of life, art, play, and reality.

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.

Notes

1. “Much of the public activity of the Black Panthers was built around highly dramatic, stylized confrontations, often involving guns and the police. These are among the main actions that earned them notoriety. This theatricality was in many ways the most important cultural contribution of the Panthers, but it was also their greatest political limitation” (Reed 2005, 41–42).
2. Quoted in Richter 1978, 25.

3. Ibid., 57.

4. According to animal behaviorist Gordon Burghardt (2006, 244), “Play may have been involved in the origin or elaboration of parental behavior.” Birds fiddle and fuss with their offspring, trying this or that with their beaks, talons, breasts, and wings. The behavior “isn’t energetically costly” but instead generates novel “adaptive repertoires,” such as new grooming tricks and communication techniques.

5. Erik H. Erikson and Robert Coles, *The Erik Erikson Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), 103–104.

6. Quoted in Dibbell 2008.

7. Quoted in Thompson 2007.

8. Quoted in Kettmann 2000.

9. Electronic Civil Disobedience 2008.