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Introduction

I grew up playing games like *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Centipede* (1980) in the arcades, feeding quarters into the hungry game cabinets, desperately trying to improve my skills so I could play longer and longer. Despite my best efforts, I would quickly succumb to the ever-faster, ever-more-deadly descending aliens or twisting centipede. The games' quick ratcheting up of difficulty grew out of the economics of the arcade: when players lost their coveted and expensive lives, they spent more coins to keep playing. The introduction of home game systems like the Atari VCS and Intellivision from Mattel Electronics changed this dynamic. Owners of these systems could play games repeatedly in the comfort of their living rooms, without a handful of quarters dwindling in their pockets. Without the worry about money, how did these console games keep their players riveted? One answer is that they set up the conditions for players to experience what we call *flow*.

The conditions that generate flow are visible in one of my favorite games from this period, *Astrosmash* (1981), programmed by John Sohl for the Intellivision system (figure 0.1). *Astrosmash* is similar to *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids* (1979). Players shoot falling meteors, spinning bombs, and attacking UFOs to earn points. The goal is clear—stay alive and achieve a high score. Like arcade games in the early 1980s, *Astrosmash*'s challenges increase as the player's score goes up: at certain point thresholds, everything speeds up and the difficulty increases. But the game provides an extra life at every 1,000 points, and unlike most arcade games, *Astrosmash* adapts when the game's challenges outstrip the player's skill level: it decreases the score when the player dies or when falling rocks hit the ground, and if a player's score drops below a preprogrammed threshold, the game becomes slightly

Figure 0.1
Astrosmash, from Mattel Electronics

easier by slowing the enemies' speed. But when players are on their game, when their skills are honed, they can play for a long time, precisely matching the game's level of challenge. All this means that when players are off their game or new to *Astrosmash*, they can still play for extended periods of time because of the steady accumulation of extra lives and the subtle difficulty adjustments. *Astrosmash* remains satisfying despite the player's level of skill, allowing players to lose themselves within the groove of the game and become immersed in flow.

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,* a best-selling and influential book on the topic of flow published in 1990, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced "me-HIGH chick-sent-me-HIGH-ee") explains the adaptive play that creates flow by describing a simple game of "escape and pursuit" that he played with his hunting dog, Hussar.[1] When they were out for a walk, Hussar would pounce around, happily running circles around his companion, nipping at him and leaping away, enticing him to chase, to tag, to play. When Csikszentmihalyi was fatigued, uninterested,

or out of shape, Hussar would sense it, tightening his circles and making himself an easier target. On the other hand, when his master was energetic and eager, Hussar would expand his circling and speed up, making the game more challenging. Hussar continuously adjusted the difficulty of the game depending on his partner's physical and emotional state. The point of this subtle adjustment was to "make sure that the game would yield the maximum of enjoyment," allowing Csikszentmihalyi to balance his skills with challenges and enter an absorbing state that he called *flow* (1990, 53). In flow—most easily reached through play, whether playing a game with a dog or a solo video game like *Astrosmash*—one is in the zone and immersed in a completely absorbing activity.

Csikszentmihalyi developed his concept of flow in the course of his research on the foundations of creativity and enjoyment in the 1960s and 1970s. Flow was a "native category" experienced by many subjects interviewed by Csikszentmihalyi and his students (1975a, 36). Chess players, artists, dancers, surgeons, and basketball players used the word *flow* to describe an experience of getting into the zone, of being swept away in their chosen activity. Csikszentmihalyi wanted to understand this absorption and why people would ignore hunger, danger, and life's many problems to continue doing an activity that they loved. It is this sense of complete absorption that links flow with play; as philosopher Johan Huizinga wrote in his classic work on play, *Homo Ludens*, "in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play" ([1950] 1955, 2–3). The experience of flow captures the sense of deep absorption that often characterizes play and helps to explicate one of the key properties and features of play.[2] While play is an extremely broad subject—linked to childhood development, leisure and frivolous activity, mimicry and acting, creativity and imagination, and so on—flow is a subset of play that focuses on players' experience of intense involvement.

Csikszentmihalyi studied flow in an effort to better understand human enjoyment. For Csikszentmihalyi, the term *flow* describes a complex form of sustained enjoyment—one that is distinct from both pleasure and immediate gratification. The word itself evokes a sense of continuous absorption, with its connotations of fluid movement, smooth and steady continuity, and a stream unhampered by impediments or jagged interruptions. His early research described the general properties of flow. Typically, a flow-producing activity balances an individual's skills with the activity's

challenges, presents clear goals and feedback toward achieving these goals, and allows a feeling of control when awareness merges with action. In this state, self-consciousness disappears and one's awareness of time and its passing melts away. For Csikszentmihalyi, flow experiences allow humans to develop skills and grow more complex as individuals, an enjoyable process (like learning to play piano) that travels beyond mere pleasure. Playing piano or a video game might be difficult and unpleasant at points, but Csikszentmihalyi argued that in hindsight, we view these experiences as fun and enjoyable (1990, 46). Yet his work on flow extended beyond simply understanding enjoyment. He saw flow as a principle around which to redesign all of life's activities, even those seen as laborious, unpleasant, and devoid of fun. What was he hoping? Life itself could become more like Hussar's game.

In the half-century since Csikszentmihalyi first started studying flow, the theory has overflowed its academic origins and spilled into many areas of contemporary culture. As game scholar and philosopher Ian Bogost has said, "flow theory has also been applied to just about everything else, from workplace satisfaction to education to spirituality" (2016, 103). Flow theory has helped to establish the growing field of positive psychology.[3] It has become a talking point in the aspirational worlds of self-help, self-care, and wellness, and a staple in the psychological makeup of professional sports figures, trainers, and those seeking to understand and catalyze high levels of human potential and performance. It has blossomed into a powerful ideal for business managers who hope to tap flow in order to nourish the happiness, creativity, and productivity of their workers. It has addicted the self-optimization gurus who ride the tide of motivational talks and corporate workshops, flow accelerators, flow fests, and flow dojos pushing New Age enlightenment through self-optimization techniques and flow hacking.[4] It has inspired digital services that promise the creation of flow states to increase productivity and has even been used in an advertising campaign for Dropbox, a major digital media company.[5] Indeed, articles about flow and productivity, fitness, creativity, and innovation appear throughout the mainstream press.[6]

The field that has been most influenced by the quest for flow is the study and design of video games, which is the focus of this book. Some years ago, game scholar Torill Mortensen wrote that Csikszentmihalyi's prolific theories had already attained "a position of almost paradigmatic power in

game studies" (2004, 1).[7] Since then, the influence of flow has only grown, and it is now as important to the field of game studies as other concepts such as immersion, game mechanics, rules, and even the notion of play itself, from which flow derives. Flow theory significantly influences multiple areas of research in the field: game design, the analysis of player experiences, mainstream versus alternative game aesthetics, the study of play, and gamification. Flow is seen as an obvious and natural way to discuss the fun and enjoyment of games, their formal properties (goals, feedback, and balancing skills and challenges), and player experiences (feelings of control, immersion, intense concentration, enjoyment, and fun).

But many game scholars, designers, and players uncritically apply the idea of flow to games. Flow is "an almost unquestioned reference" in game studies, explains Riccardo Fassone (2017, 117), and it is in the guise of the natural and obvious that ideology travels. Until now, game scholars and designers have not investigated flow's historical, theoretical, and ideological contexts, which some game scholars have found shocking.[8] This book fills this gap. It complicates the application of flow theory to video games, urging scholars, designers, and players to become more critically aware of flow's political, economic, and cultural implications.

Although many assume that flow is an unqualified good, it is far from a neutral or benign concept. For example, Csikszentmihalyi was a Hungarian émigré who grew up in Italy during World War II and whose family was personally affected by the war and the postwar Soviet occupation of Hungary; his theory of flow should be understood in this context: it was a response to Marxism, an attempt to create a Western democratic solution to alienation (a feeling of estrangement from the products of one's labor, from other people, and from life itself, which is produced by the stratified conditions of capitalist production). Flow offered an alternative to Marxist modes of social change. Unlike Marx, who argued that alienation would be solved only by collective revolution that overturned capitalist structures and created radical political change, Csikszentmihalyi imagined that flow experiences could reimmerse people in their own lives without the need for revolution, removing alienation by allowing them to experience the absorbing effects of play.

However, flow is not an uncomplicated, straightforward solution to the problem of alienation. It is not simply a natural psychological state or experience; flow theory uses the concept as an *ideology*, one that privileges

individuality over social collectivities, growth and accumulation over equilibrium and sustainability, self-determination over the idea that external forces shape human consciousness, and action over critical examination. These qualities infuse many video games, which promote what I call *flowing subjects*. Flowing subjects are not simply game players experiencing the psychological state of flow; they are being positioned as media consumers in a way that promotes flow's ideologies. Game designer Eric Zimmerman said that the twenty-first century is the "ludic century"—the century of games and play (2014, 20). If this is so, then we need a deeper, critical assessment of play itself, and particularly of the theory and effects of flow, the subset of play. This assessment will help us understand how video games are influencing players and the mass culture that they permeate.

Complicating Flow and Play: The Dog, the Cat, the Mouse, and the Lizard

In the 1970s, when Csikszentmihalyi first wrote about flow, it seemed possible for flow and play to heal alienation and transform society in an altruistic fashion. Today, however, they are packaged and delivered through video games and have become dominant ways of interfacing with culture and capitalism. Originally conceived to transform and rejuvenate society, play and flow now fuel the problems that they originally aimed to overcome. This is what this book is about. Because play is a broad subject, with roots reaching into many disciplines and economic areas, I focus on the theory of flow as a kind of case study of play, examining how flow theory emerges from play, imbues it with ideology, and facilitates its channeling toward intensified consumption. But like play, flow under capitalism has become a broad subject, reaching far outside game studies. I specifically examine flow in relation to video games and play, but I hope that the critical approach to flow that I offer here can be applied to the culture beyond games, unlocking a critical discussion of play and its transformations in contemporary culture.

If we are to become more critical of play and flow in this ludic century, we need to begin by dispelling their allure and purity. Csikszentmihalyi's description of playing escape and pursuit with his dog, Hussar, is pastoral, disarming, and innocent. It offers us a glimpse into an idyllic moment of carefree play, an ode to enjoyment; it invokes an escape from a technological and alienating environment into nature, into the playfulness of

childhood. It conjures the reemergence of unbridled, animal pleasure; Hussar's bounding revives a biological instinct to tumble and play that lies dormant in the overcivilized body and mind of the human being.

There are less innocent games of escape and pursuit than Hussar's happy play. There is the sinister "game" played by cat and mouse, in which a cat bats a mouse about, letting it disappear under a thicket of brush or a sofa, only to pounce and pin it to the ground when it reemerges. While the cat could easily win this game, says the sociologist and play theorist Thomas S. Henricks, instead it "captures the mouse and then releases it, opens up avenues for escape and closes these off," even wounding the mouse to reduce its chance of escape (2006, 201). Henricks explains that this is because the cat wants neither a boring encounter with a paralyzed mouse nor an encounter that ends too soon, with a mouse that immediately escapes. It wants a *balanced* game. Like Hussar, the cat modulates the difficulty of the game to suit its own interests—to keep the mouse "playing" for as long as possible. If you forgive the anthropomorphism, the cat sets up the conditions for flow: the mouse has a clear goal (escape) and receives clear feedback toward achieving this goal (the cat's claws and jaws). The cat balances the game so that the mouse's skills match the challenges that it presents—even if that means literally handicapping the mouse.

Clearly, when the cat maims the mouse to make it a more interesting playfellow, the mouse is being coerced into the cat's game. The mouse is not really playing; rather, it is trying to survive. It plays *in order* to survive—a situation that seems increasingly applicable to life in the twenty-first century. "Play, create, innovate, flow, think outside the box, reinvent the rules," demand the pundits, managers, and educators. Unlike the game with Hussar, where the dog and human play together harmoniously, the cat plays *with* the mouse. From this perspective, inducing flow in the mouse only benefits the cat.

Not all forms of coercion to play are so obvious. For example, while cats coerce, dogs *coax*. This is what made Hussar's game so irresistible: the dog's invitations to play, his adjusting of the game's challenges to match Csikszentmihalyi's skills and moods, set up a pattern of action that tapped into deep, instinctual desires in his master and made it almost impossible for Csikszentmihalyi *not* to play. Particular conditions (which can be put in place intentionally) can trigger the instinctual desire to play that is present in most animals—a type of coercion much more subtle than a cat's claws.

For example, in his explanation of flow theory, positive psychologist Martin Seligman tells a story about his teacher's lizard. The teacher offered the lizard many types of food, but it had no interest in any of them, and it began to starve. One day, the teacher gave the lizard a ham sandwich (which it also refused), then absentmindedly dropped a newspaper on top of the sandwich. The lizard shredded the newspaper and devoured the sandwich. According to Seligman, the lizard required a particular kind of play, akin to the cat's play with the mouse, to "turn on" its hunting instincts and allow it to eat its "prey." In other words, a precise configuration of objects provoked the lizard's desire and enjoyment, triggering what Seligman calls its instinctual "repertoire of action" (2002, 120).

Like the lizard, says Seligman, humans require organizing structures to facilitate action and enjoyment, and flow activities work like the lizard's newspaper: they invite us to play. Seligman says that while we humans do not need to stalk and shred, we do need to indulge in something like play (and to be immersed in play, to flow) in order to overcome challenges and enjoy life. He warns that a society that is not structured to trigger the repertoires of action that produce complex enjoyment "leads not just to lizards that starve to death, but to legions of humanity who are depressed in the middle of great wealth and are starving to death spiritually" (2002, 120).[9] For Seligman, humans have brains that seek flow (a form of complex enjoyment), and he suggests that if we design activities to produce that flow, then industriousness will be wed to enjoyment, enabling us to live fulfilling and productive lives.

Yet humans are not lizards (or cats or mice or dogs, for that matter). We not only respond to repertoires of action shaped by nature and biology, but also to those shaped by capitalism and ideology. If we interpret the anecdote of the lizard figuratively rather than literally, it becomes a scene of energetic, mediated consumption. The newspaper, as the intermediary that launched the lizard's ravenous actions, metaphorically suggests that unique, formal arrangements of media content can provoke active consumption. Obviously, humans do not need newspapers to survive, but we devour them, often attracted by online clickbait headlines that we simply cannot resist. Clickbait is an obvious example, but we are equally enticed by the endless scroll of Instagram or enveloped by YouTube as we watch one video after another. Just as the teacher made multiple attempts to entice the lizard to eat, trying various foods, media companies adjust the

parameters of consumption—testing and refining them to find an irresistible configuration.

Video games are often such an irresistible configuration, in part because developers seek to integrate flow-producing conditions into game design and calibrate the experience to optimize playful consumption, a point that I discuss in chapter 3. Although the flow produced by these configurations appears innocent, simply a method of producing fun and enjoyment for players, it is in fact used to extend playtime—to ensure that players continue to consume the product. This attempt to produce flow is coupled with the use of addiction as a marketing tool as developers advertise their games in app stores using the language of flow, addiction, and loss of time. The intense absorption of play and flow is not simply a primordial experience, but a marketable ideology as well.

As the anecdotes of these various animals—dog, cat, mouse, lizard—suggest, flow is more than simply being in the zone or enjoying an intensely absorbing activity. Hussar's game frames flow and play as achingly innocent, implying that there is a similar innocence to Csikszentmihalyi's desire to transform everyday life into a game or an occasion to play. But today, Hussar's game and the conception of play that it encodes seem increasingly less relevant than the play of the cat and mouse, which serves as a metaphor for the mediated forms of "playful" capitalist consumption that dominate the video game industry, and that of the lizard, whose playful instincts are activated by media patterns that trigger extended bouts of immersive and profitable consumption. For humans, the repertoires of action that activate flow can be found by playing with a dog, but in our technological world, video games are perhaps our most loyal companions when it comes to finding flow.

Bringing Flow to the Masses

The concept of flow has become ubiquitous not only in game design and marketing, but also in contemporary discourse about video games. It is used in the mainstream press in discussions of the enjoyable and addictive qualities of games like *Flappy Bird*, *Candy Crush Saga*, and *Fortnite*. Articles in *The New Yorker*, *Variety*, *Scientific American*, and elsewhere invoke flow to discuss why we play games and why we become so deeply immersed in their challenges.[10] Writing for the influential website Gamasutra, one industry

veteran sums up how games make flow accessible to all players, even those without expertise, as follows: "If anything can explain the 'magic' of games, I'd say it's flow. While flow is not unique to games, games bring flow to the masses" (Ventrice 2012).

Flow experiences can arise in *any* activity (work, chores, conversations, learning, and so on) if designed correctly, and yet, as Csikszentmihalyi explains, "Games are obvious flow activities, and play is the flow experience par excellence" (1975a, 36–37). Play exceeds games; we play with toys, in playgrounds, on a theater stage. When we play, we explore the creative possibilities that an activity offers.[11] Flow is the experience of intense absorption that one often feels when occupied by a play activity or playing a game. Yet games are often more designed experiences than play situations, and many of the properties that produce flow are, in the excited words of game scholar Jesper Juul, "very gamelike!" (2004, 139).[12] This is why flow is a central concept within game studies. Like games, for example, flow-producing activities include clear goals and feedback: players must have a sense of what they are trying to achieve and feedback that indicates progress toward this achievement.

Perhaps the most important factor in producing flow is the balancing of skills with challenges—the line that my beloved *Astrosmash* walked so well. According to flow theory, balancing current game challenges with a player's current skill level helps produce flow by completely absorbing players in a task. This balance is crucial, for when challenges outstrip skills, players feel anxious and frustrated, and when skills outstrip challenges, players get bored (figure 0.2). These states can cause players to quit playing. If a game is designed according to flow theory, it allows players who might be feeling anxious to improve their skills to meet challenges and return to flow, or for those feeling bored to seek higher challenges to return to flow. This careful balancing act between skills and challenges is clear in Hussar's game of escape and pursuit, as the dog monitored Csikszentmihalyi's maneuvers and adjusted his lunges and nips to his master's current skills. Game designers play the role of Hussar (or the cat), creating situations where players encounter challenges that match their skills at every level of the game's progression. In games that offer standard difficulty ramps, challenges increase over time to match increases in player skills and thus privilege the idea of sustaining flow.

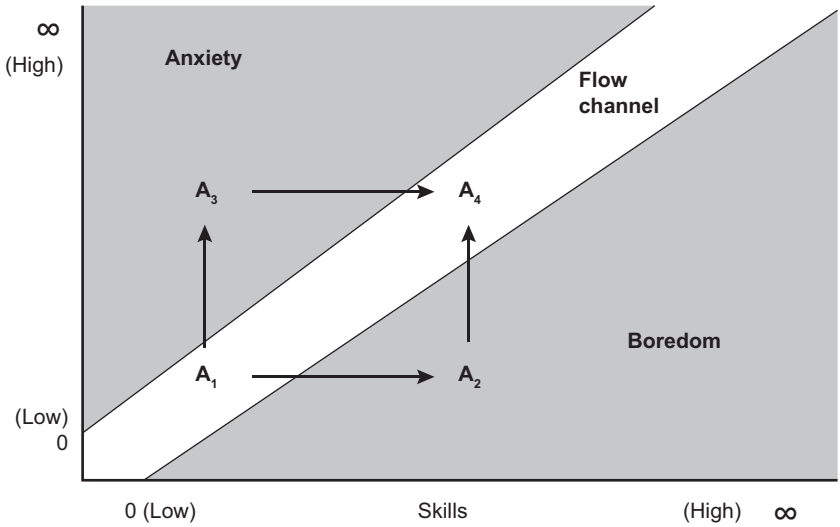

Figure 0.2
Standard graph of flow. The A elements mark moments in time. A_1 and A_4 indicate moments in flow, when skills match challenges. A_2 and A_3 indicate moments outside of the flow channel when skills and challenges are unbalanced. The arrows indicate how people seek a balance of skills and challenges to return to flow and that both challenges and skills grow over time. Graph of skills and challenges from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 74. © 1990 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Used by permission of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and HarperCollins Publishers.

According to flow theory, when skills are balanced with challenges, players enter the flow channel and become immersed within their activity. Immersion in a mediated experience is not limited to games—people can become deeply absorbed in a well-crafted narrative or world in any media form—but flow in video games offers a particular type of immersion, which game scholar Frans Mäyrä calls "challenge-based" (2008, 108). This challenge-based immersion involves focusing attention on tasks, overcoming difficulties, solving problems, and so on. While other features of games contribute to their immersive qualities (e.g., feeling present within an imaginary, narrative universe or feeling socially immersed based on interaction with others), flow's challenge-based immersion is central to a wide variety of games.[13] A game like *Skyrim* (2011) immerses players in its aesthetically stunning and massive world, but it also seeks to balance player

skills with challenges as the game progresses. The same is true for social and multiplayer games, where a level playing field and a balance between competitors' skills produces more immersive play experiences. As Mäyrä explains, flow "is something that good game designers regularly take into consideration" (2008, 108), and while it is not the *only* form of immersion, or even the most important one in some games, it is frequently used to create absorbing gameplay experiences.

It is sometimes thought that only experts experience flow. As Bogost puts it, "the application of flow in games is best left to those that allow mastery at the highest levels of skill and challenge" (2015, 15). This is an overstatement. Certainly, experts explain their immersion in their task in terms similar to flow, describing their mastery as effortless and fluid. Mastery can produce absorbing deep flow experiences, what Csikszentmihalyi called "macroflow," but he was also interested in microflow experiences created by less complex activities that produce order and involvement in our everyday lives (1975a, 54). Flow has been understood in relation to the masses from the beginning, and Csikszentmihalyi wrote *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* to make flow experiences more accessible. In the book, he aimed to explain to the broader public that flow could be found by anyone, within any activity. This is why he embraced the virtues of the dilettante and the amateur, and why he used Hussar's game (which clearly does not require expertise) as an example of flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi, one can experience flow within a life dedicated to chess, art, or sport, within one's work as an entrepreneur or toiling on an assembly line, or even within the more mundane moments of life, such as playing with a dog, conversing with a friend, doodling—and, as we have discovered, playing video games.

While flow is central to video games, Csikszentmihalyi rarely mentioned them in his early work on flow.[14] This seems odd, because by the 1990s, when he turned toward introducing his research to the larger public, video games were pervasive in culture: arcades and the home video game market had already brought flow to the masses. In a book coauthored with media scholar Robert Kubey, Csikszentmihalyi does assert that video game play "possesses all the key structural elements necessary to experiencing flow," and that flow can "explain much of the popularity of video games" (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 143–144). But the book in which this appeared, *Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience*,

presented a vehement critique of television; in fact, the authors positioned television viewing as the opposite of a deep, rewarding flow experience (a point that I examine further in chapter 3).

Perhaps these two authors did not wish to valorize another popular form of mass media while critiquing the stifling effects of television; like television itself, video games were often belittled in mass culture as adolescent forms of entertainment and pleasurable escape. Images of kids playing video games in their basements or bedrooms did not dovetail with Csikszentmihalyi's aim to completely transform everyday life and solve issues of social and personal alienation via flow. Or perhaps an emphasis on the exemplary production of flow conditions in video games would have obscured the fact that flow experiences extend beyond games into other areas of life: play, art, creativity, and even work. Or perhaps Csikszentmihalyi's early silence about video games betrays an anxiety about the commodification of flow experiences, an issue that he was well aware of (1999, 2004). The notion that flow would be brought to the masses through the consumption of video games did not align with his vision of the political and ideological future of flow.

Yet this is what happened. According to game researcher and author Jane McGonigal, "video games made it possible to experience flow almost immediately" (2011, 41), a property that has contributed to the massive popularity of games.[15] In fact, game scholar Brian Schrank explains that today, mainstream game design has a "monopoly of flow" (2014, 32). This provocative phrase suggests that the aesthetics of many video games are monopolized by their attempt to produce flow, and that flow has a monopoly on mainstream games. It also connects the concept of flow to the board game *Monopoly*, a cultural icon of gaming that (like flow) is both familiar and extremely common. There are other similarities between *Monopoly* and flow. Both obscure their historical and ideological roots: although modern *Monopoly* wears its capitalist ideology as a matter of pride, it is based on a progressive game, *The Landlord Game*, which was designed to expose the dangers of unchecked capitalism.[16]

The politics of flow have also receded and been hijacked. When designers, academics, players, and the popular press discuss flow and its enjoyable properties, they do not acknowledge its history, politics, or ideological agenda, which often is focused on individuality, self-determination, growth, and reduction of critical consciousness—issues that I discuss further in

chapter 1. Moreover, while Csikszentmihalyi envisioned flow as a politics of enjoyment that would challenge a rampant consumerist culture and teach people that a different, unalienated future was possible, flow is often used in the video game industry today to intensify playful consumption.

Some game researchers suggest that video games attempt to "force" players into flow, the "holy grail of game design" that the industry seeks.[17] But in keeping with the media studies tradition of seeing *both* the ideological effects of media *and* audiences' resistant or subversive readings of those dominant ideologies, I do not suggest that video games' production of flow and flowing subjects is inescapable. The actual experience of flow is precarious and difficult to verify (Sherry 2017). For some players it also can be short-lived or non-existent; the immersion that it offers is only one state in a panoply of cognitive, emotional, social, and kinesthetic experiences that arise during gameplay; and the political and social ideologies that ground the concept of flow do not always hit their mark.[18] But the fact that many games strive to produce the holy grail of flow (although they may succeed only unevenly) speaks to flow's power as an *ideology*—one that shapes game design, development, and player experience—rather than as a settled fact that games and the psychological state of flow are inherently linked.

There are, of course, limits to the usefulness of flow theory when discussing games. While flow theory has been (and is) central to the design, experience, and analysis of video games, it is not the only game in town (so to speak). Just as the current proliferation of analog board games has shaken up *Monopoly*'s dominance of the board game market, new expressive possibilities for video games have emerged that move beyond the monopoly of flow.[19] There are art games, trash games, Japanese *kusoge* ("shitty games"), unfinished and broken games, queer games, social games, sex games, cozy games that seek to comfort players, masocore games that treat players to masochistic levels of difficulty, and plenty of video games that eschew the absorption of flow and its challenge-based immersion to explore the variety of human affect and experience (for example, the kind of feelings that populate the placeholders of "anxiety" and "boredom" that exist beyond the flow channel). Moreover, video games may bring flow to the masses, but the masses are not docile subjects so easily forced into flow. The unruly, unpredictable, and often subversive agency of players can take a game that privileges flow and transgress it, mutate it, queer it, subvert it, unplay it, and trifle with it.[20]

While this book is attuned to the limits of flow, it does not catalog the diverse forms of expressive games and vibrant play communities that transgress these limits. Instead, it delves into flow theory so that we can better understand the concept and, by extension, its limits. While expressive experiments with games proliferate and bring new experiences and feelings to the masses, we still do not have a critical grasp on flow, even though games have been bringing flow to the masses for years. My hope is that the critical understanding of flow offered here will contribute to forms of design, player reception, and scholarship that trouble the monopoly of flow while also invigorating those who desire to experiment with flow, putting it to critical use or resisting it once its ideologies are more clearly understood.

Interpreting Flow

The critical perspective on flow offered in this book opens a humanities-based approach to understanding and interpreting flow in video games. This is a different approach to flow than normally encountered in the video game industry and in game studies that focus on how games produce flow, how flow accounts for the fun of games, or how flow relates to other emotional experiences such as arousal, anxiety, apathy, boredom, curiosity, learning, and so on.[21] This book does not provide a psychology or phenomenology of flow, but I do present a critical examination of flow's history, ideology, politics, aesthetics, and theoretical implications. I use this examination to interpret video games, their meanings, and their relationship to larger issues in contemporary culture such as ideology, consumption, and politics. No doubt the player's experience of flow is important for interpreting the meaning of video games, and throughout the book, I integrate this experiential dimension into my analysis of games.[22] Nevertheless, this book does not discuss flow's precise, phenomenological effects, but it does examine flow holistically, as a multidimensional experience where its theories, ideologies, implementations, representations, and experiences combine to influence my interpretations of video games and their meaningful aesthetics.

While many games seek to produce the conditions for flow, they increasingly do so in ways that are varied and aesthetically interesting. Video games experiment with the flow channel by moving outside it, abandoning it,

interrupting it, and zigzagging through it—valorizing it one moment and disrupting it the next.[23] These experiments multiply flow's expressive uses and potential meanings: game designers can leverage flow in distinct ways to produce significance within their games, while game scholars and critics can use flow theory and its ideologies as an analytic framework to interpret games. These approaches move beyond tired questions of whether or not a game produces flow—*the yes or no of flow*—toward an understanding of how games use flow and represent flow in meaningful ways. Focusing purely on the psychological aspects of flow can cause players and scholars to overlook how it is represented in games as a part of their narratives, images, and mechanics.

As I show throughout the book, analyzing the implementations and depictions of flow in video games enables close readings and close play that can deepen our understanding of a game's significance. Most important, approaching flow critically and with a deeper grasp of the cultural and political significance of flow theory enriches our ability to interpret and critique flow, its uses within games, and its ideological impacts.

I am not claiming that we must always use flow to interpret games. There are games that do not seek to produce it, players who subvert it, and theories that expose its limits. For example, there are forms of social and narrative immersion in games that are not challenge-based, as I mentioned previously. Alternatively, from the perspective of play studies, play's absorbing and engrossing properties are only "parts of the play equation," not the entire formula, as Henricks explains when discussing flow (2015, 33). Players might not be engrossed in a corporate softball game, but rather distracted, wondering if their performance will influence their prospects for promotion. That is, there are social, economic, and cultural dimensions to play that are important to how one interprets a game's meaning, and that have little to do with flow's absorbing properties.

But if we continue to think about flow uncritically, accepting common received ideas about it, we risk not only propagating troubling ideologies inherent in the concept but also overlooking the significance of a concept that has had a substantial influence on the history of gaming and contemporary game production. We risk losing an opportunity to think about games, their cultural impact, and their history from a more nuanced perspective concerning flow. We also risk an opportunity to expand our interpretative tool kit when it comes to games and to explore new avenues

of game design and production. For example, the game designer Greg Costikyan implores students and designers to jar players out of flow for "aesthetic purposes" (2013, 25). A more sophisticated, critical understanding of flow will illuminate and contextualize these aesthetic purposes. Instead of figuring out *how* to produce flow, designers can also ponder *why* they choose to facilitate it or avoid it.

Doubtless there are other approaches to the analysis and interpretation of flow that move beyond the study of games. For example, in this twenty-first-century moment, ideas of flow, flux, circulation, turbulence, and others have become key metaphors for cultural processes.[24] Although scholars have theorized modern culture writ large using metaphors of flow (and although various forms of mediated experience produce psychological flow), I focus in this book on how video games in particular seek to produce flow and the flowing subject. Occasionally, I branch out to discuss flow within the broader culture—for example, in relation to television in chapter 3—but focusing on video games allows a more detailed, specific analysis of flow within a particular context.

However, the discussion of video games in this book can be useful for understanding and interpreting what media scholar Jay Bolter calls "flow culture." This culture "flourishes in digital media such as games," but also moves beyond games because "digital media forms have extended the aesthetic experience of flow to new communities," including social media platforms (2019a, 105). Because video games are key media forms that have drawn extensively on flow theory to create their immersive effects, they offer a unique perspective for understanding how flow functions in contemporary culture and provide myriad examples through which one can analyze and interpret the ideologies of flow.

While this book does not examine flow in digital media culture writ large, the use of flow in games can be read as symptomatic of a broader culture that seeks to capture consumers in streams of profitable consumption, a point that I return to in the conclusion. Thus, the ideological and critical analysis of flow in games that I offer here can illuminate approaches that seek to understand how flow applies—and does not apply—to other media forms. Yet this book moves beyond a critical introduction to flow and interpreting its use in video games in one important respect: it performs its criticism of flow in order to advocate for a larger critique of play.

A Critical Approach to Flow and Play

Writing a book about flow without discussing play would be like writing a book about painting without talking about color; you can do it, and even do it well, but you would be lacking something crucial. While a significant portion of contemporary media culture might be understood productively as flow culture, on a more fundamental level, we live in a ludic culture where the absorbing properties of flow are part of a larger culture of play. This is why this book often discusses play alongside flow—because the former gave birth to the latter, because they are closely connected, and because criticizing flow opens doors to criticize play and thus temper the rise of discourse in popular culture and the academy that celebrates play.

In the beginning, flow was play. The model that would become flow—the balancing of skills and challenges and the sweet spot between anxiety and boredom (see figure 0.2 earlier in this introduction)—first appeared as a description of play (a point that I discuss further in chapter 1).[25] Yet play, like video games, is popularly perceived as a frivolous, childish form of leisure that has no part in the serious adult world. Play is often understood as the opposite of work, of productivity; it is definitionally useless, engaged in for pure pleasure rather than for gain. In the words of sociologist Roger Caillois, play is "an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money" ([1961] 2001, 5–6). Play resists demands for productivity. But flow is a psychological experience of enjoyable action that can accompany any activity whatsoever (even productive work). Csikszentmihalyi's focus on flow thus helped to bypass cultural stigmas attached to play in a society that values intense productivity. Flow theory spread the idea that play could be used to transform society without actually calling it play.

"Play is coming," Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett exclaimed in an article from 1971 that examined play's social and cultural importance (57). Perhaps their prediction has come to pass, and play has arrived. Academics and the public alike are again interested in play's positive potential.[26] Some scholars seek to reclaim play and playfulness as subversive activities that can disrupt a rationalized, commodified, and heteronormative world.[27] Others embrace play as an engrossing experience that can help us get outside our heads, engage more intimately with the world, and facilitate a more enjoyable, manageable, and productive life.[28] Still others suggest

that play can help us understand and rejuvenate the time-honored skills of interpretation, narrative comprehension, and analytic thinking.[29] While popular films such as *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Ready Player One* (2018) reveal anxieties about play and its corruption, they ultimately suggest that play will save the day.

Or perhaps the moment of play has already come and gone. We no longer live in a world where the innocence of Hussar's game of "escape and pursuit" seems palatable. In the twenty-first century, play has lost its innocence. Childhood is commodified. Play is packaged and sold. We are taught that play is a guilty pleasure stolen from a more serious life, but we rarely accuse play of being guilty of a crime. Yet, as media scholar Sean Cubitt (2009) explains, play has become a "manipulable tool" in an extensive con game; functioning as a vampire's glamour, play keeps us from noticing capitalism's teeth in our necks, draining our life's vital powers.

In the years since Csikszentmihalyi's groundbreaking research, the game industry has transformed flow into a tool to intensify consumption, businesses use games to spur consumer loyalty, and corporations cultivate creativity, fun, and playfulness to increase worker productivity and mask exploitative working conditions.[30] Ping-pong tables in the break room, soccer fields on corporate campuses, and all-you-can-drink coffee bars at the tech start-up—these perks give work the trappings of leisure and keep workers producing. Play can even distract workers from taking action that might actually improve working conditions; as a *Business Insider* article explains, using play in the workplace is great for managers, because workers are "playing instead of organizing and entering into collective bargaining" (Baer 2014).

We live in an era of playful capitalism: play does not subvert the dominant culture; rather, it *is* the dominant culture.[31] Increasingly, popular books about entrepreneurship argue that a playful approach to life is the key that unlocks happiness and capitalist success.[32] As I explain in chapter 5, playfulness, innovation, and the relentless search for the new combine to form a powerful cocktail of experimentation that feeds the search for new markets and commodifiable desires. Instead of play solving contemporary problems, play itself *is* a problem. In light of these developments, some voices have begun to question the cultural value placed on play. Cultural theorist McKenzie Wark (2014) wonders if we should adopt the slogan "Never Play," since play drives a key form of consumption in capitalist

societies, and game artist Anne-Marie Schleiner argues that political games might convince us *not* to play as a viable way to resist questionable actions within a game or in the real world.

It is not enough to liberate play from games.[33] Csikszentmihalyi once called for this, lamenting that games were "playfulness tamed" and forms of "controlled expression" (1981, 23). Neither is it enough to free play from flow, which Mortensen understood as a "measuring stick" that defines "play as function, aimed not at chaotic experience, but at productive goals" (2004, 8). Finally, it is not enough to release flow from video games, which often use it to intensify playful consumption. While freeing flow from commodification and channeling it toward political ends is important—an argument I support in chapter 5—this solution must also avoid the idea that flow is ideologically neutral, innately positive, and beneficial. We should be critical of games and of how they confine and channel the powers of play and flow, especially when it concerns commodification, but we should also criticize play and flow themselves—a project that I undertake in this book via my analysis of flow's ideologies and my critique of playfulness. A critical attitude aimed at these experiences offers a path toward further emancipation from their ideologies and problematic uses. Instead of a life of uncritical flow, or an unleashed ludic life that embraces a playful attitude, this book argues for renewing the importance of the critical attitude.

What does *criticality* mean in this context? From its inception, the academic field of game studies has sought to create a vocabulary with which to describe, study, clarify, refine, evaluate, and judge games.[34] These tasks meet the most common definition of criticism. But this definition ignores another function of the critical: to critique dominant systems, ideologies, and oppressive social and cultural norms. This second form of criticality—a criticality based in *critique*—aims not at refining, clarifying, and augmenting knowledge, but rather at freedom and emancipation.[35] The critical attitude uncovers hidden assumptions and rules that operate in society, striving to make visible the forces that shape our lives. Some game designers and scholars, such as Mary Flanagan and Lindsay Grace, embrace this form of criticality, arguing for new forms of critical play and game design that expose and critique dominant and oppressive norms while urging players to approach their play critically.[36] And there is a tradition of critical game studies in academia as well, which "tempers both knee-jerk condemnation of, and celebratory euphoria about, virtual games with a critical political

analysis of the medium" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009b, xxvi). My analysis of flow implicitly draws on this tradition of critical game studies, embracing a similar political and theoretical critique of its focal concepts—here, flow and play.[37]

This book is motivated by the desire to step back from flow and its sibling play, analyzing them from a critical distance and shifting how they are studied and interpreted. The critical attitude embraces doubt, suspicion, and skepticism toward the world, but the problem is that flow is the "quieting of doubt," as Steven Kotler tells us in a popular book about flow (2014b, 47). When we go with the flow, we do not pause to consider the reasons for our actions; we immerse ourselves in reality, releasing the blockages of indecision, evaluation, and worry. Henricks says that flow theory views "play as a deep, almost mystical involvement," and that people experiencing flow "abandon interest in what their actions may bring in times to come" (2015, 31). In contrast, the critical attitude steps back to ponder one's actions, a theme that I return to throughout the book. As play and its maddening powers intensify our consumption through flow, it is ever more difficult to gain distance from our actions. Taking a step back from play and flow—becoming more critical of their ideologies and the uses to which they are put—will revalorize critical distance in a world where games, play, and flow offer an enveloping appeal.

Against Flow: An Overview of the Book

This book is called *Against Flow* because the phrase rings with the negative—a bit of the critical voice to break through the quieting and positive powers of flow. Yet the title also alludes to the idiom "to go against the flow," which typically means that one moves against mainstream opinions and beliefs. Thus, this book aims to cause turbulence within the way that flow theory and the experience of flow have been understood, especially in relation to games.[38] Each chapter looks at flow from a different critical perspective, defamiliarizing the experience and urging scholars, students, game designers, and players to see it from a less obvious angle.

Instead of understanding flow as purely a psychological experience, chapter 1 examines it as a concept with a history, a political context, and an ideological agenda. Instead of seeing flow as an enjoyable state, chapter 2 examines it as a form of coping with the adverse effects of alienation.

Instead of using flow to define the fun and enjoyment of video games, chapter 3 sees flow as a way to produce playful consumers for the video game industry. Instead of understanding flow as an unreflective form of immersion and the absence of thought, chapter 4 examines how it channels reflection in ways that manage and diffuse critical distance. Instead of embracing flow as a way to cultivate playfulness, chapter 5 critiques playfulness itself as a dominant and problematic attitude within capitalism. Moreover, chapter 5 argues that we do not need to forgo flow, but rather channel it through a progressive political perspective. This last point suggests that the title of this book is too strong, since going against the flow is not the same as abandoning it. Rather, we must resist flow and, as I explain in the conclusion, we might imagine a critical form of flow, working against the current of uncritical thought that currently animates the experience.

While this book primarily examines flow within video games, chapter 1 analyzes the experience more broadly, introducing its history and ideologies while theorizing the idea of the flowing subject. Drawing on a wide variety of Csikszentmihalyi's early scholarship that is rarely discussed in game studies, chapter 1 argues that flow is not just a psychological state—the theory of flow promotes ideologies that privilege the individual over the social, intentional agents over fragmented subjects, growth over homeostasis, and action over critical evaluation. It critiques the universalizing and essentializing ideas behind flow that create a dominant and privileged form of flowing subjectivity. This chapter examines key ideas and intellectual currents that influenced the idea of flow, offering a critical introduction to flow and some of the political ramifications of the theory. It is likely to be of interest to readers who want a general, critical introduction to flow that can be useful for studying a variety of topics beyond the limited scope of video games.

Chapter 2 examines Csikszentmihalyi's idea of the politics of enjoyment, an early form of gamification that sought the redesign of all of life's activities according to the principles of flow and play. This chapter questions the idea that flow is purely about peak experiences and happiness and critically examines flow as a form of coping with alienation, distraction, and depression. Flow can operate as palliative medicine for treating the symptoms of alienation without curing its causes. Politically, flow individualizes coping and thus functions as an ideal ideology for a neoliberal world where people

are taught that they can only rely on themselves for solving life's problems. In this chapter, I closely read and play video games such as *Diner Dash*, *Psychonauts*, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, and *Celeste,* which relate flow and play to issues of mental health and coping. These games reveal the use of flow and play to distract us from the causes of alienation, thereby allowing it to persist.

Chapter 3 urges readers to see flow from the perspective of commodification, not only as a psychological experience that helps to explain why games are fun and enjoyable, but as a design strategy used to extend the duration of playful consumption. To do so, this chapter compares the concept of televisual flow, developed by cultural critic Raymond Williams in 1974, with Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow activities, developed in 1975. Both of these forms of flow aid processes of commodification—the former in relation to television and the latter in relation to video games. They plan media experiences and smooth over interruptions, thus aiding the continuation of media consumption. Using televisual flow as a point of comparison, this chapter describes how game developers incorporate psychological flow theory into video games, often using difficulty adjustment systems to balance game challenges with player skills to remove interruptions from play. Thus, this chapter discusses the centrality of flow theory to game design and how it is integrated into the commodification of games. This chapter is likely of interest to television and media scholars because it offers a sustained examination of televisual flow (a key concept in television theory) and its relationship to video games.

Chapter 4 examines the relationship between flow, play, critical distance, and reflection. Flow is often described as an experience of absolute involvement in an activity where one acts automatically, without thinking. Typically, self-reflexive media have sought to disrupt immersive experiences to produce reflection, allowing viewers and spectators to gain distance from their experiences. Yet video games incorporate reflection and critical distance directly into their structures, turning flow into a new form of reflective immersion. Analyzing the self-reflexive lineage of games including *Half-Life*, *Portal*, *The Stanley Parable*, and *The Beginner's Guide*, this chapter advocates for critical distance over and above the closeness of play and the immersive effects of flow. While these games involve us by breaking our immersion and offering moments for reflection and interpretation, they also use their distance from games to critique the idea of playfulness itself.

Chapter 5 builds on the previous chapters to extend a critical analysis of flow to a culture of playfulness. In the late 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi highlighted playfulness, not flow, as the most important attribute of a flourishing culture. He hoped that seeing the world playfully would undermine the dominant culture, leading to alternative futures and a more free and playful life. Yet this chapter argues that today, playfulness *is* the dominant reality, and what we need is a critique of playfulness, not its uncritical embrace. Through an analysis of the rise of independent games and their unbridled experimentation, it criticizes the playful mindset as a key attribute that drives and sustains ludic capitalism. This attitude helps to spur relentless innovation and a culture of total play, but these innovations do not oppose the dominant reality, but renovate it. This chapter argues that politics needs to shape and channel play and flow to offer an alternative world beyond the precarity of ludic capitalism.

Finally, in the conclusion, I step back from flow and play once again and assess the future possibilities for flow in games and beyond. I examine the wider reach of flow in contemporary digital culture and call for the continued critical examination of play in this ludic century. In addition, I offer a few thoughts on creating games and experiences that embrace a critical flow that does not merely immerse us and bracket everything beyond it, but that also reignites the possibilities for flow to function as a critique of alienation, capitalism, and modern life.

When Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett declared that "play is coming," they wanted to catalyze the study of play by identifying its positive potential to nourish humanity's desiccated soul. This optimistic view of play has been adopted by entrepreneurial and self-help cultures. But the shadow side of play—the side that I seek to surface in this book—was already in circulation at the time of Csikszentmihalyi's writing. Marxist philosopher György Lukács had also seen that play was coming, but he examined its coming critically rather than optimistically. In *The History of Class Consciousness*, Lukács warned that some would see play and art as a means by which modern life "may be salvaged from the deadening effects of the mechanism and reification" ([1923] 1971, 139), but people would busy themselves in individual play and playful contemplation without preparing to collectively solve political problems.[39] They would go about embracing play and art as compensations for an alienated life, not using this alienation to forge political affiliation between the exploited and oppressed.

Csikszentmihalyi's ideas of flow and his politics of enjoyment were rebuttals of the Marxist idea that collective social revolution would repair alienation and were intended as direct responses to Lukács's gloomy warnings (1967). As strange as it may sound, we could understand our unfolding ludic century as a battleground between Csikszentmihalyi and Lukács, two Hungarians with very different visions of how to transform reality. For the former, play and flow would nourish the soul and save humans from a life without enjoyment. For the latter, play would contain and manage the rise of class consciousness, compensating for alienation without curing its causes.

When Csikszentmihalyi was worrying about Marxism and developing his nascent theory of flow, the world likely seemed ready for the coming of a playful revolution. Indeed, flow was meant to be a critical theory.[40] He did not describe it simply as an experience of complete immersion in an activity. Instead, flow aimed to undermine the status quo, to show that life can be lived outside the cage of alienation. He called this critical theory the politics of enjoyment, and he presented flow as one alternative to the dehumanization and alienation of the modern world (1975a). Flow was an instrument with which to criticize reality, not only to immerse us within it. It is not clear if this critical edge and political use of flow can operate today. Game scholars Ken McAllister and Judd Ruggill express hope that it can; drawing on the work of the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, they associate flow with "the momentousness of play" and suggest that "flow can prove liberatory to the spirit" (2010, 55). Despite this hope, Lukacs's version of play as palliative medicine seems more applicable to our times. Flow extends enjoyable streams of consumption, compensates for an alienated life, and even involves us more fully in reality today and its intensified productivity, rather than causing us to step back and critique it. How would game designers, scholars, and players approach the experience of flow if they become more aware of its theoretical, historical, and political roots? What would flow within games look like after its ideologies have been identified and criticized? While this book does not offer a tidy how-to, these questions animate the hopes and desires that motivated this study of flow.

As video games bring flow to the masses and our lives are increasingly governed by playful approaches to reality, it is more important than ever to engage in a critical assessment of flow theory and how it has channeled

play to transform society. The pundits of play always remind us that play is "the stuff of life," "a condition of the universe," or "the very being of [the] human."[41] Yet, as this book argues, the essence of the human odyssey is not play, but rather critical self-consciousness—the ability to gain distance from oneself and rationally reflect on one's actions and circumstances. Understanding the ideological implications of flow and play will provide us with critical distance from these activities that increasingly shape our lives in the twenty-first century. With this critical distance, we can stop canonizing flow and play as solutions to our modern problems and see them instead as the site of one battle in the historical struggle to free ourselves from alienation and from the illusions and collusions that sustain it.

1 An Introduction to the Ideology of Flow

A white, gently throbbing title, *flOw,* appears on a dark blue screen, fading in and out as if breathing lightly. As the player tilts the PlayStation 3 (PS3) controller, a small, aquatic creature with a crescent moon for a mouth writhes over the title text. Pressing a button causes the minnowlike creature to burst forward, speeding through the blue expanse of the screen (figure 1.1). An ethereal soundtrack washes in and out, accompanying the creature through a submerged universe peppered with white dots that bob like plankton in a subtle throb of movement. The player's creature consumes these dots so it can grow larger. There is another organism with a red center nearby. When consumed, the player's creature quickly plunges downward, deeper into the oceanic depths. Other organisms float about, and when players eat them, the music chimes and the body of the avatar grows. More elaborate creatures appear further within the depths. They are swifter and more difficult to devour, and they often chase the player's avatar and try to attack it. If the creatures encountered are too challenging, then players can consume an organism with a blue dot in its center, which sends them up a level, closer to the surface and away from the attacking beasts. Then, with the difficulty slightly eased, players can find more food, grow larger, and return to the challenges lurking below.

The video game *flOw* was produced by thatgamecompany (TGC), founded by Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago in 2006. TGC has released other acclaimed games, such as *Cloud* (2005), *Flower* (2009), *Journey* (2012), and *Sky* (2019). The popular press categorizes their games as innovative and emotionally moving. Their logo, featuring a disembodied hand gesturing over an azure background, elegantly embodies the tranquil feel of all their games (figure 1.2). Caught in movement as it flows through the frame, the hand is like an appendage-shaped cloud that lingers in the sky. Or perhaps it signifies the

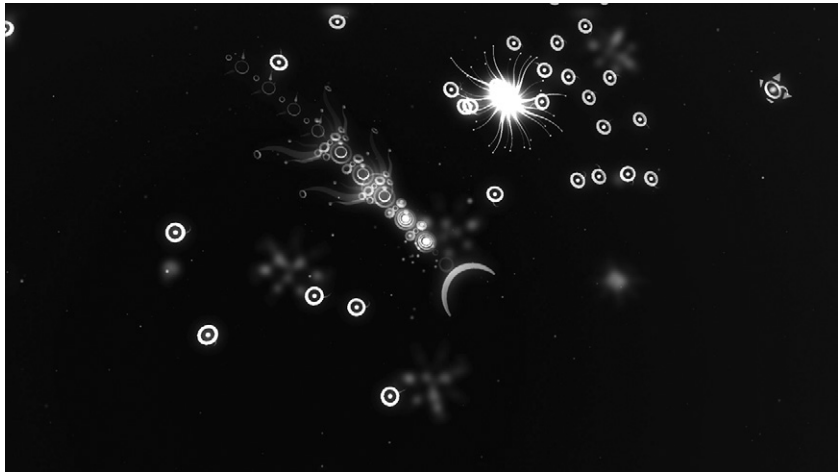

Figure 1.1
flOw, thatgamecompany, 2006. The player's avatar with the "C" shaped mouth swims through a group of consumable organisms represented as white dots.

Figure 1.2
TGC's logo

poised hand of a dancer or a conductor gesturing as she leads an orchestra. This is appropriate because players use a Sixaxis wireless controller (which senses rotational movement) to conduct the avatar's actions; players twist and turn the controller in the air as they consume creatures and produce sounds that melt within the eerie soundtrack. Part of the fun of *flOw* is simply swimming around, consuming, and creating peaceful, aquatic music. The logo's flowing hand, which extends from the lower-left side of the frame, also contrasts with the disembodied and often weaponized hand depicted in many complex, first-person shooter video games. While *flOw* uses the PS3 controller's motion detection to control the directional movement of the avatar, it requires pressing only one button to provide a burst of speed. The game employs an interface that allows unique forms of controlling movement, while also reducing the complexity of its interactions to make the game accessible to novices. Indeed, TGC positions its games against dominant, mainstream games like popular first-person shooters and seeks to create interactive experiences that will interest all gamers, whether hardcore or casual.

Unbeknownst to many players, *flOw* takes its name from the theory of flow developed by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi; *flOw* was designed to test Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow (Chen 2007, 16). The experience of flow describes an enjoyable state of complete absorption in an activity, where one's attention is focused, awareness merges with action, and a sense of one's self and even time itself melt away. In fact, TGC's logo clearly resembles the typical flow diagram (reproduced in the introduction), where the flow channel emerges between boredom and anxiety; the hand in the logo seems to embody the flow channel as it gestures toward the upper-right part of the frame, pointing like an arrow that signifies the growth of both skills and challenges that flow experiences encourage.

TGC designed *flOw* so players can easily move between the levels of gameplay to adjust the game's challenges to their skills. Delving deeper into the aquatic game space increases the challenges, while ascending toward the surface decreases them. In theory, players with different skill levels and styles of play should be able to locate a depth within the game where their skills match the present challenges, thus producing the experience of flow. Gamers familiar with the PS3 controller and with a high degree of gaming literacy can quickly submerge themselves within the deeper levels of the game to discover and explore more challenging environments, while less

experienced or more causal players can experience flow while remaining within the less challenging surface levels. TGC eschews the typical approach to difficulty, which allows players to choose between easy, medium, and hard settings. Instead, individual players naturally locate their own comfort levels and flow zones during play.[1]

While *flOw* wears its theoretical influence on its sleeve, players are not necessarily aware that the game is designed to facilitate a particular subjective state and that their skills, choices, and playstyles continuously adjust the game's difficulty. The game *flOw* is not merely enjoyable; it seeks to produce a feeling of flow, or at least offer this state as an ideal position through its design. In media studies, one would say that the game creates a particular, *subject position* for players to inhabit—that of flow. In media theory, occupying a subject position can inject, impart, or suggest ideas or ideologies unbeknownst to the players, thus transforming them from individuals into entities who are *subjected* to these ideologies. The game *flOw* addresses players ideologically as flowing subjects. The game scholar Helen Kennedy suggests that we would benefit from an ideological examination of video games that focuses on how they position subjects in ways that are beyond their intentional control. She explains that she "would even relate this to a reworking of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of flow to suggest that flow is not so much about a state of perfect control but more a perfect submission to the technologies" (quoted in Arthurs and Zacharias 2007, 100).[2] While *flOw* does not force one to experience flow, and unruly players might fight its flow, the game design encourages players to seek and achieve it.

What are some of the ideas and ideologies that *flOw* promotes? Because *flOw*'s gameplay allows players the opportunity to locate personalized flow zones and customize their experience, it privileges *individuality*. In fact, playing with multiple people—which the PS3 version allows—often interrupts the flow experience. Because players move through the levels together, the different skill levels of players can interfere with each other's enjoyment. A higher-skilled player might feel bored playing with a lower-skilled player who wants to stay near the easier surface levels, while a lower-skilled player might feel anxious if a higher-skilled player dives quickly into the more challenging depths. In addition to foregrounding individuality, *flOw* privileges an ideal *unity* over fragmentation because players focus on consuming food that fills in the abstract representation of their avatars, while

avoiding other creatures who might devour and fragment their bodies. The game also privileges *growth* and accumulation through the consumption of resources; indeed, the player's creature grows and evolves spectacularly as the game progresses. Finally, *flOw* privileges *action over reflection*, removing interruptions such as narrative cutscenes or disruptions between levels so players can act continuously, without needing to reflect deeply on their actions. Moreover, while *flOw* explicitly announces the theory that influences it within its title, the game does not invite players to think about the theory of flow and never mentions its influence. Instead, players focus on playing the game and perhaps feeling the experience of flow, not on critically evaluating the idea of flow.[3]

In this chapter, I think more deeply about flow than game designers, popular writers, and game scholars have until now. Flow has been referenced in the popular press as a key idea that explains why we play games and enjoy them. It has been used in game design literature to explain how one can design successful, engaging games. As I explained in the introduction, flow has influenced many areas of game studies and remains a central concept in the field. Chen claims that "video games deliberately include and leverage" flow, and that "descriptions of the Flow experience are identical to what players experience when immersed in games" (2007, 32). Yet while the theory of flow is omnipresent in popular and academic discourses surrounding games, it is rarely discussed in a critical fashion, remaining "an unquestioned tool for both authors of design manuals and game scholars," as Riccardo Fassone describes it (2017, 117). Scholars, designers, and popular writers apply the concept of flow to games, but they rarely examine its history, ideology, and political implications.

If many video games facilitate flow, we need to understand the ideologies that lurk within it. The experience of flow often seems natural, benign, and innocuous. It is like *flOw,* which offers itself as a serene, calming, and beautiful experience that seems obviously less ideological than the violent first-person shooter games that populate the ocean of mainstream video games. Yet ideology travels within the protective garb of the seemingly obvious, natural, and neutral. As delivery systems for flow, often video games are not innocuous forms of mass entertainment, but rather position players ideologically through the production of flow experiences.

This chapter analyzes the roots and intellectual history of flow while describing the idea of a flowing subject. After delving more deeply into

flow theory and exploring its origins, one realizes that flow experiences should not be understood simply as psychological states of enjoyment; rather, flow theory surrounds this experience with ideologies that aim to produce flowing subjects. In this chapter, I examine the ideologies that subtend the theory, similar to those found in the video game *flOw*. On closer inspection, flow theory privileges individuals over social collectives. It embraces unified, intentional agents over fragmented subjects. It privileges self-determination over the idea that human action and consciousness are shaped by external forces. It foregrounds growth and accumulation over stability. Finally, it embraces action over critical examination. By examining these issues and plumbing the depths of flow theory and its history, the common perception of flow—as an experience of intense involvement in an activity—begins to appear more nuanced, and even problematic.

Flow as an Individual Alternative to Collective Consciousness and Action

The concept of flow emerged from Csikszentmihalyi's research into the foundations of play, creativity, and enjoyment that he and his students pursued at Lake Forest College and the University of Chicago in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In interviews, mountain climbers, doctors, chess players, artists, basketball players, and others reported being absorbed completely in the "flow" of an activity that they found eminently enjoyable. They described their immersion as a feeling of being carried away by an activity that swept them up into a stream of action. Eventually, *flow* replaced the more academic-sounding term *autotelic experience,* which the psychologist and his students were using to describe this absorbing state (Csikszentmihalyi [1975] 2000, xviii). *Autotelic* activities (from the Greek *auto-,* meaning "self," and *telos,* meaning "end") contain their ends in themselves and are intrinsically motivating. People do not pursue these activities for external rewards or extrinsic reasons, but rather because the activity is rewarding and enjoyable in itself. The autotelic nature of flow aligns it closely with play, which is also commonly understood as autotelic.[4]

Studying play was an important influence on the development of flow theory. In fact, the basic ideas behind the flow model emerged during a senior seminar that Csikszentmihalyi taught on play at Lake Forest College in 1969.[5] He chose play as the topic because of its close ties to creativity, because he himself was an avid rock climber and chess player, because "the

scholarly study of this topic was strangely limited," and because both children and adults played (2014b, xix). Before developing the concept of flow in the mid-1970s, Csikszentmihalyi described the general model of flow in terms of play in an article that he coauthored in 1971 with the sociologist Stith Bennett (a student of Csikszentmihalyi's from Lake Forest College). Play was the prototype for flow. "We have the ability to flip back and forth from worry to play to boredom," they wrote, explaining play in terms closely aligned with the later use of flow (see figure 0.2 in the introduction) (1971, 56). In their article, the word *flow* appeared in relation to play. They described play as "an uninterrupted flow of action" and as "a unified experience flowing from one moment to the next" (1971, 45–46). This latter phrase is almost identical to the language used when Csikszentmihalyi introduced the concept of flow in 1975 in an article for the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (Csikszentmihalyi 1975b, 43).

Initially, flow theory gained traction in the realm of psychology and academic play studies. Yet while flow and play are related, they are not identical. Flow might emerge in play, and play might be a prime example of a flow-producing activity, but flow can also appear in a variety of other activities such as work and learning. Csikszentmihalyi explains that "I realized that it is not so much the form of play that is important [to flow], but it is the experience of playfulness that people have when they do it" (Csikszentmihalyi 2017b, 814). As I discuss further in chapter 5, flow is often linked with playfulness, an attitude that can apply to any activity, like flow. One can be playful in one's work even if it is not play, just as one can be absorbed in one's work and experience flow even though work is not a play activity. Thus, flow was born from the study of play, but as the world became more familiar with flow, this autotelic activity became associated with its own experience beyond play.[6]

Unlike play, which is multifaceted and often difficult to describe precisely, flow invoked a feeling and psychological state that seemed more tangible and definable when Csikszentmihalyi researched play and creativity in the 1960s and 1970s. Reflecting on the decision to choose the term *flow* in 2000, he explains that it "seemed to refer to something real," and thus it referenced a substantial psychological experience out there in the world waiting to be analyzed (xviii). The choice of *flow* helped to circumvent derogatory associations of play with childhood, frivolousness, and unproductive action, while also substituting a colloquial, everyday term for the

academic jargon *autotelic experience*. This gave the theory legs. The word *flow* made flow theory flow. Csikszentmihalyi explains that this "trivial change" in the mid-1970s had an "astonishing" effect on the theory's popular reach, and that the terminological switch "was hardly premeditated or discussed," thus providing flow with a natural and simple origin story (2000, xviii). Yet this account elides other intellectual currents and personal experiences that influenced the development of flow theory.

As with all concepts, flow is shaped by history. Csikszentmihalyi was born in Italy on September 29, 1934.[7] His father was a Hungarian diplomat who worked in Fiume, Italy (now a part of Croatia). The early years of his life were ravished by World War II, and in his own words, he describes his childhood as "senseless, brutal, and confusing" (2014b, xiii). After Fiume was bombed, he left Italy for Budapest in 1942, only to return to Italy after the advance of Russian forces, barely escaping the siege of Budapest in the winter of 1944–1945. He lost family members to the violence of war and its aftermath—an aunt who was killed while tending the wounded, a grandfather who starved during the siege, and two half-brothers, one who was killed by the Soviets when they took over Budapest and the other who vanished in a Russian gulag. After the war ended, he spent some time in a refugee prison camp in Italy with his family "until it could be determined that they were not fascists" (Flaste 1989). Here, he learned to play chess, a game that "allowed him [to] forget the tumult, to make the best of a bad situation," as Steven Kotler writes (2014b, 18). This would be a recurring idea in his work, where play and flow facilitate the forgetting of external conditions.

It was partially the horrific mark of these early years that drove Csikszentmihalyi to make sense of the world and study human experience. He sought the secrets of human enjoyment and virtue because, in his words, "WWII had been a warning sign of a systemic fault in the human condition, one that needed a radical remedy" (2014b, xiii). The search for this remedy led him to a life of scholarship. He emigrated to Chicago in 1956, where he worked a night job to put himself through college. Eventually he was accepted into the University of Chicago for graduate studies, where he worked with the psychologist Jacob W. Getzels, famed for his work on creativity and the arts. After a series of publications with Getzels on the topic of human creativity, Csikszentmihalyi began his own research on the foundations of happiness, the positive powers of play, and the absorbing

properties of flow.[8] If his early experiences of World War II revealed "a solid society fall to pieces, a permanent way of life collapse," flow theory eventually emerged as a way to put the pieces of the shattered human psyche back together again (2014b, xii).

Related to his experience of World War II, the emergence of flow theory needs to be understood against a backdrop of Csikszentmihalyi's personal and intellectual relationship to Marxism. One of his earliest publications from 1967 was a scathing attack on the false lure of Marxism. He certainly had personal reasons for rejecting Marxism, since his family was thrown into turmoil by the Soviet attack and occupation of Hungary at the end of World War II and beyond. After he emigrated to the United States, Csikszentmihalyi's intellectual journey was marked by the desire to find an alternative to Marxism. He framed this alternative in terms of the classical tension between the individual and society. He saw Marxism as an "over-socialized view of man" that aimed to dissolve the self and the individual into the social masses (1967, 275). In his article about Marxism, he quotes Marx's famed reversal in "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in which Marx claimed that society determined human consciousness, not the other way around. Csikszentmihalyi laments the loss of self-determination that Marx was expressing. He argues that humans would achieve fellowship and overcome alienation through the empowerment of individual consciousness, not its dissolution in the social tides of class consciousness and revolution.[9] He marvels at the motivating power of Marxism, where the promise that a social revolution would remove alienation functioned as a clear goal for many people. Yet he wonders, "Where do the Western democracies have an ideal even remotely comparable to it?" (1967, 279).

A few years later, he answered this question with play, and eventually with flow. In his article with Bennett, Csikszentmihalyi explains that play resolved the classic tension between society and the individual. While players submit to socially accepted rules while playing (e.g., a game of soccer), they are allowed individual freedom to act within these rules. Play offers both a social structure and personal freedom, but Bennett and Csikszentmihalyi argue that in play, the social self who negotiates issues with others diminishes. If the individual dissolves into the social mass of a Marxist revolution, they say, in play "the social self becomes superfluous, and the player can merge with the process in a state of monistic awareness" (1971,

56–57). While socially accepted rules are still present and the social self occasionally creeps into play (e.g., when players deal with a cheater or worries about their lives disrupt their play), the social self recedes and the individual is empowered. Play is not class consciousness, but individual consciousness that submits to the social rules of the game.

This explains why Csikszentmihalyi penned an article about hippies in 1968. The hippie movement intrigued him because of its individualistic and playful nature, which he hoped might coalesce into a social movement with clear goals. Csikszentmihalyi desired revolution and a solution to the problem of alienation, but he did not agree with the Marxist form of revolution. Instead of Marxism's social and political conformity—which is not intrinsic to Marxism, but rather a historically shaped interpretation of Marxism that responds to anxieties of totalitarianism or Stalinism—he desired a revolution of individual consciousness that promised individual play, spontaneity, and self-expression within a more fluid and open social movement.

For Csikszentmihalyi, alienation—that is, the feeling of separation from other people, from a meaningful sense of work, and from life itself—was a problem in modern society. Individual self-consciousness was alienated from itself, where moments of anxiety and boredom interrupted action and a sense of the individual's connection with their environment and surroundings. He argued that even attention was alienated and a form of false consciousness, either when workers had to focus attention on tasks they did not choose to do voluntarily or when distracted by the bells and whistles of capitalism and consumerist society.[10]

Yet the answer was not to replace capitalism, which causes this alienation by separating workers from the products and ownership of their labor, but to find an individual method to resist or mollify its effects. Thus, play (and then flow) became candidates for an ideal that would motivate individuals within Western democracies to solve the problem of alienation that Marxism failed to correct. If the essence of play concerns its absorbing properties, as the philosopher Johan Huizinga once argued, then play would allow individuals to feel connected to their environment and actions without distractions ([1950] 1955, 2–3). Thomas S. Henricks, a sociologist of play, suggests that alienation is "not so different from the theological idea of sin—when people experience themselves at a distance from the great compelling logic that stands at the center of their being" (2006, 38).

For some scholars, play defines the *being* of human beings, and thus when humans do not play, they are separated from their being.[11] In contrast to the idea that alienation is related to sin, we must wonder if privileging play as a solution to alienation invokes the theological idea of salvation, a redemptive return to innocence, childhood, nature, and the proximity of being—before separation, before sin.

Like play, flow is an intense experience where action merges with awareness and the self dissolves into the world. This loss of a sense of self is perhaps akin to that experienced in collective action, but it stems from one's involvement in an environment, activity, task, or play situation. Moreover, while Marxists might organize into social collectives to cast off the chains of exploitation because they feel the pain of dehumanization and separation from their labor and from others, flow offers a positive oneness and an individual connection with life. Whereas Marxists are supposedly motivated to act because they feel a negative experience of alienation and reification (i.e., the idea that human beings become things and commodities that sell their labor), flow mobilizes personal transformation by offering individuals a taste of intense, unalienated enjoyment and a positive connection with the world, supposedly even when working.[12] If play and flow are so enjoyable, Csikszentmihalyi thought, then individuals might begin to wonder why everyday life and work do not always feel this way. They might ask, "Can all of life feel more like play and the enjoyable experience of flow?" Individuals would be motivated to change society by turning all of life into play, not to escape negative feelings but to experience the positive feelings of play and flow more often.

For Csikszentmihalyi, the realization of this transformation had to begin with individuals. "The roots of the discontent are internal, and each person must untangle them personally, with his or her own power" (1990, 12). In this worldview, the problems that people experience in Western democracies are not due to external causes such as poverty, inequality, oppression, exploitation, war, and so on; instead, they are internal feelings of separation from everyday life and individual feelings of a loss of control, boredom, anxiety, and rampant self-criticism. When Csikszentmihalyi developed his idea of flow, he felt that consciousness was malfunctioning and mired in unproductive distractions. Too many worries and anxieties occupied people living in the modern world. Because he questioned the idea that society was the most influential force shaping consciousness, he sought individualized

solutions to mastering and controlling consciousness. Experiencing flow throughout life or engaging in play activities were individualistic methods that allowed people to merge with their environment and block out their troubles and worries. "As a pitcher steps up to the plate," Bennett and Csikszentmihalyi wrote in 1971, "it is useless to ask him for an opinion on the Vietnam war" (56). For that matter, it was also useless to ask them about their debt or bills or anything else.

Play and flow were perfect ideals for neoliberal, individualistic democracies and capitalist societies. At least theoretically, play and flow offered a way to salvage the power of individual consciousness when faced with oversocialization or the perceived threat of communism. They also helped to overcome the problem that consciousness was under attack, not by class consciousness, but by fragmented modern life. With the rise of the postindustrial world in the 1970s, individuals were increasingly required to solve their own problems, with diminishing assistance from the social sphere, and thus individual consciousness required unity, empowerment, and self-determined focus. Flow offered a solution to this problem as well.

Consciousness Regained: The Flowing Subject

Marxism was not the only threat to the power of individual consciousness that worried Csikszentmihalyi. He laments the "the fall of consciousness" brought about by behaviorism and psychoanalysis (1978, 335). These theories undermined the intentional power of human consciousness. Behaviorists viewed human action as mechanistic responses to biological stimuli, while psychoanalysts viewed human action as the result of unconscious, unfulfilled wishes and sexual desires. From both these perspectives, consciousness appeared to be a passenger rather than the driving, motivating force of history. Twentieth-century intellectual currents demoted human consciousness again and again, and flow theory sought its rehabilitation to reclaim the power of individual agency.

The theoretical implications of the desire to empower consciousness are important because flow theory moves against twentieth-century critical theories of the subject, like feminism, Marxism, behaviorism, and psychoanalysis. These theories identify the external forces shaping human consciousness in order to criticize the illusions and ideologies of individual agency. Instead, flow theory constructs a model of the self and a flowing

subject that promotes a powerful sense of agency, unity, individual growth, and mastery of consciousness through self-determination.

While we commonly understand flow as the experience of an intense state of involvement within an activity, it is more than this. "The most interesting aspect of flow," Csikszentmihalyi writes, "is its motivational power; it is like a source of personal and social energy" (1981, 25). This power was fascinating because it helped to explain why people such as artists endlessly worked on their art without the promise of material reward. As an autotelic experience, flow is known as a form of intrinsic motivation—something we do for its own sake and not for external rewards. This intrinsic motivation stems from within.

While Csikszentmihalyi drew on a large number of intellectual sources, the most well-known influence stems from self-actualization theory. The psychologist Abraham Maslow's studies of peak experiences, self-transcendence, and ecstatic religious experiences were important to the development of flow theory because they described positive states of subjective feeling that became important for psychologists who wanted to move beyond the study of pathological states of consciousness (1964). Self-actualization theory also influenced flow through its foregrounding of self-determination and the growth of the self that ascends from satisfying basic necessities toward attaining a meaningful life—Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs. While flow experiences can motivate action because they offer positive experiences that individuals want to experience again and again (like peak experiences or religious ecstasy), flow also operated as a source of internal energy and action. Flow was not simply an intense, spontaneous, ecstatic experience, but a way to channel energy toward productive action and complex states of consciousness.

Early in his career, Csikszentmihalyi sought to understand the forces that motivated humans to act and shape their world. For example, he attended a 1970 symposium where scientists and humanists discussed the relationship between science and human behavior. At the symposium, the biologist A. Katchalsky presented a paper entitled "Thermodynamics of Flow and Biological Organization" (1971) that examined how flow structures in biological systems produce complex properties when energy is continuously injected into a system. For example, heating some liquids at a constant temperature results in patterns on the liquid's surface—a process that occurs because of "dissipative structures" where the flow of energy from the

heating source reaches equilibrium with the cooling effects of evaporation at the surface. These patterns indicate the emergence of complex states that are related to constant, continuous energy input.

It is tempting to think that this idea might have influenced flow theory. On an abstract level, balancing heat entering a system and cooling at the surface that results in a complex state dovetails with flow experiences that occur when skills are balanced with an activity's challenges, creating what Csikszentmihalyi calls a "meaningful pattern" within consciousness (1990, 7). The absorbing experience of flow emerges as a complex state under the right conditions. Although distinct from the biological flow structures that Katchalsky observed, even play situations like a game of basketball or chess create systems of rules separate from everyday life, where the energy input by players produces meaningful patterns and allows for the emergence of complex interactions and behaviors.

But what is the energy that drives human actions and is associated with flow? In Csikszentmihalyi's contribution to the published conference proceedings, "From Thermodynamics to Values: A Transition Yet to Be Accomplished," he struggles with the idea that the natural sciences could assist the sociologist's understanding of human behavior (1971). Because thermal energy could not explain the complexity of human society, he instead mentions Marx's theory of productive labor and Freud's foregrounding of repressed sexuality as engines of social and cultural change. Yet, dissatisfied with Marxism and Freudian thought because they undermined individual agency, he speculates that there might be a "third form of energy" that drives human action (1971, 164). Play and flow became this third form of energy that he was seeking, or at least, they were examples of focused attention and consciousness that channeled and motivated human behavior.

The energy that flow channeled was a form of *psychic energy*, a concept that Csikszentmihalyi took from the psychologist Carl Jung, a figure whom he often mentions as being an influence on his thinking. In his essay "On Psychical Energy," Jung also sought to identify the energy that caused cultural change, writing, "The history of culture has sufficiently demonstrated that man possesses a relative superfluity of energy which is capable of application over and above the merely natural flow" ([1928] 1942, 53). While it is uncertain what this "natural flow" might be—Jung called it "libido," although he distanced his use of this term from Freud and from

sexuality—the key point for him was that psychic energy indicated a form of mental power.[13] Psychic energy is the mental force that directs action and the superfluity of energy toward cultural achievement. Jung frequently described it as a "flow" that humans can channel and make useful, just as a dam harnesses the power of the river ([1928] 1942, 42, 46, 53). In his essay, Jung often attributed this channeling of energy to ritual practices of "primitive" people; modern humans are not in need of such rituals, Jung explained, because they have a "will," whereas "primitives are much more unconscious, much nearer to being mere phenomena of nature than we are, and are therefore scarcely aware of what we call a 'will'" ([1928] 1942, 50). The intentional control of psychic energy, which is important to flow theory, is based on a racist logic of the primitive versus the civilized where the latter measures its prestige and power in terms of its idealized distance from the former. Csikszentmihalyi followed Jung's ideas, embracing the source of human action in consciousness and the individual's ability to master and control psychic energy.[14]

This all-too-brief examination of a few of the influences on the development of flow theory troubles the simple narrative that psychological flow was simply an emotional and cognitive state, identified by informants, out there in the world waiting to be studied. Like any theory, flow theory emerges within contexts that shape it and its persuasive power. The flow experience filled a void that troubled Csikszentmihalyi: finding an individual form of energy and motivation that could provide an alternative model to social, collective change. Psychic energy places the power of historical, social, and personal change within an idealized individual consciousness. The other forms of energy—thermal energy, labor power, sexual energy and its sublimation—challenged the power of human intentional agency because of their association with forces external to consciousness, such as the economy or unconscious desires. The focus on psychic energy, and one's control over it, attunes flow theory to the rise of a postindustrial society that privileges individuality, as well as knowledge work, creativity, and immaterial labor. The flowing subject becomes uniquely suited to postindustrial society, where individual consciousness becomes optimized and channeled toward higher levels of productive action.

Csikszentmihalyi describes two interrelated models of the subject: a general model of subjectivity and an optimal form of this model that I am calling the *flowing subject*. In his general model, consciousness is filled with

experienced phenomena and information—bits of data—that consciousness attends to and processes. This information can exist in a state of order or disorder. Csikszentmihalyi calls the latter state "psychic entropy" (1988, 22). In this state, consciousness is disrupted by noise and information that causes "attention to be diverted to undesirable objects" and thus impedes its optimal functioning (1990, 36). For example, noisy affects like boredom and anxiety are conscious states that are not organized according to a meaningful pattern because there is not enough information to order (boredom) or too much (anxiety). This general model of subjectivity maps onto the typical diagram of flow experiences (depicted in the introduction) where an individual fluctuates between the disordered poles of boredom and anxiety. "Entropy is the normal state of consciousness," explains Csikszentmihalyi, "a condition that is neither useful nor enjoyable" (1990, 119). In a world full of distractions, worry, and alienated attention, consciousness is fragmented and constantly interrupted by moments of uncertainty, self-criticism, and anxiety.

What I am calling the flowing subject is an optimal or ideal state for consciousness, which Csikszentmihalyi defines as "*intentionally ordered information*" (1990, 26; emphasis in original). *Intentionality* means that an active agent directs and controls consciousness. In flow theory, this agency or psychic energy appears as attention directed by an individual. An individual can choose what information to attend to and what to ignore, thus controlling and ordering consciousness.[15] While order, unity, and coherence are not givens because often there is too much or too little information to organize, for flow theory, this order in consciousness is an ideal state and attainable possibility. For the optimal form of consciousness, the important elements are not disorder and entropy (as in a Freudian model of the split subject, where unconscious drives constantly disrupt intentional control), but rather order, mastery of consciousness, and intentional agency. This mastery of consciousness is an ideal not only because it exists in relation to more common, disorganized states, but also because it is an ideal state in a society where productivity and efficiency are privileged. The flowing subject is seen as more useful and productive, overcoming psychological disorder and blockage to produce a more continuous and unified experience.

Csikszentmihalyi calls flow an optimal experience not only because it is enjoyable, but also because it is supposedly the most favorable and

productive state of the subject. The flow experience concerns the complete organization of consciousness, where all the information that enters consciousness becomes part of a harmonious pattern (1990, 7). In the flow experience, psychic order arises when each bit of experienced information is organized to obtain the same goal. Csikszentmihalyi offers the example of a rock climber who completes each movement in relation to the goal of a climb. Each concentrated moment of attention is focused on achieving this goal. The ordering of consciousness functions like a chain, where each bit of information that enters consciousness through the active direction of attention follows logically from the one before, and so on. Harmonious order emerges when these discrete actions merge, a process that Csikszentmihalyi likens to a projected film where the separate, static photographs on a celluloid filmstrip become fluid motion on the screen (1975a, 85–86). Consciousness becomes a stream of consciousness, and each discrete action dissolves into a river of continuous action.

For proponents of flow, activities like mountain climbing can assist in the achievement of an ordered state of consciousness in a world where disorder is the norm. *Flow activities*—or activities suited to the production of flow—assist in the merging of action and awareness through the "centering of attention on a limited stimulus field" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 40). For example, mountain climbers concentrate on their current and next movements, blocking out stimuli that might interfere with this focus. Flow activities also prevent disruptions in consciousness; they balance skills with challenges and provide an optimal level of difficulty for participants that helps to remove noisy states of anxiety or boredom when skills and challenges are mismatched.[16] Play is also an activity that often produces flow and combats psychic disorder because it directs and limits attention, akin to creating playgrounds of perception. Huizinga explained that play "creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection" ([1950] 1955, 10; emphasis in original). Like play, flow activities help the flowing subject to attain a feeling of perfection. They also help create order, and proponents of flow seek to understand the properties of typical flow activities like play and games in order to design all of life's activities so that they facilitate flow.

Flow activities vary widely at both high and low levels of complexity—from performing surgery to shooting hoops, from having an engaging

conversation to doodling. Typical examples of complex activities, called *macroflow* or *deep flow*, include those where the challenges of the activity and the participant's skills can increase to highly ordered states of complexity, such as chess, competitive sports, creative art production, or working in a rewarding job. Deep flow activities have a high ceiling of potential challenges that allows actors to develop complex skills to meet these challenges. Microflow activities, on the other hand, fill the interstices of everyday life, like doodling, or provide activities where challenges and skills might be balanced but remain at a low level of complexity. Typical examples of microflow include whistling, fidgeting, chewing gum, daydreaming, shopping, and, not surprisingly, watching television (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 141). For example, doing a crossword puzzle, Csikszentmihalyi says, can create "a mild state of flow" while sitting on a bus or waiting for a plane (1990, 129). While microflow activities do not optimize the principles of flow—some might not have clear goals and feedback; some might be performed in states of distraction; and others might not increase skills and challenges over time—they provide a basic structure for consciousness in everyday life. Csikszentmihalyi recognized the paramount importance of microflow to produce order as individuals went about their daily lives, but he typically focused on macroflow activities that promote flowing subjects who expand their sense of self while developing complex skills over time—even a lifetime.

The flowing subject signifies an ideal, optimal form of subjectivity that overcomes fragmentation and disorder while unifying and focusing consciousness. For Csikszentmihalyi, deep flow activities aid consciousness to right itself after falling from its seat of authority in the twentieth century. Flow theory aims to provide the basis for a strong form of agency that channels psychic energy to produce personal and social change. It promotes an ideology of powerful individualism to counter collective forms of social change. Today we can see the growth of this strong form of individualism within contemporary popular culture, such as in Steven Kotler's best-seller *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance* (2014b), which focuses on flow theory to demonstrate the unlimited potential of human achievement. We see it in the rise of self-optimization gurus and wellness organizations that tap into the discourse of flow to disseminate ideologies of optimized, flowing subjects. While these examples reveal

the spread and reach of flow in self-help culture, many video games also promote flow without advertising it with the megaphone of TED talks and best-selling books.

Thus far in this chapter, I have briefly described the history of flow and the idea of the flowing subject. I now turn to examine flow and the flowing subject from a more critical perspective. I explain how flow privileges the growth of the self, turning to video games to illustrate this connection, and then I critique the flow experience as a reduction of critical consciousness.

Growth as the Key to Flow

Macroflow experiences lead to an expansion of self—an accumulation of capacities and higher skills, a kind of active capital deposited in consciousness that can be invested further in self-expansion and self-perfection. One of the defining principles of the flow experience concerns the loss of self-consciousness when an activity such as mountain climbing completely absorbs the self and its attention. Yet after the experience ends, consciousness of self reappears. This returning self does not come back empty-handed from the void in which it was lost. Rather, it returns with gifts—a surplus value of higher-level skills and capabilities that supposedly augment and enlarge the self, bestowing on it a higher complexity (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 64). The flowing subject returns from flow ahead of itself, more capable of ordering consciousness than before the experience.

Flow theory privileges the idea of growth, and Csikszentmihalyi suggests, "In this growth of the self lies the key to flow activities" (1990, 74). This is why the typical flow graph, shown in the introduction, depicts arrows that assume that challenges and skills increase over time, evoking a gradual climb toward expansion. While microflow activities do not assume an increase of skills and challenges but instead suggest a low-level balance between them, macroflow activities assume that challenges and skills will both grow. Flow activities that produce absorbing deep flow experiences do not simply promote a unified and intentional consciousness; they also augment the complexity of consciousness.

Csikszentmihalyi saw flow as a form of *negentropy*—a term from information theory that means negative entropy or the reduction of disorder. Generally, negentropy highlights a state where information is ordered

meaningfully. It does not mark a state of equilibrium where the self attains balance or stability with its surrounding environment, but it signals growth and complexity that works against the flow of entropy and disorder. It is an ideal state for proponents of flow because it marks a form of ordered consciousness that struggles upstream against the dissipation of energy and toward states of organized information. While microflow activities might offer simple, pleasurable moments of psychological order or equilibrium, macroflow activities create *enjoyment*. Enjoyment, for Csikszentmihalyi, always signals novelty, "psychological growth," and complexity (1990, 46). Thus, macroflow activities channel the energy of flow upward.

But where does this preoccupation with growth and self-expansion come from? Csikszentmihalyi's answers are not entirely satisfying. For example, he suggests that "it is difficult to ignore challenges" when one encounters them, and that we fundamentally seek "to stretch our skills" because this leads to further enjoyment (1990, 75).[17] One sees this upward climb of flow in a diagram from Csikszentmihalyi's book *Good Business: Leadership, Flow, and the Making of Meaning,* where the desire to stay within flow drives the growth of skills (figure 1.3). A critical answer to the question of flow's connection to growth is that flow theory parallels capitalism's obsession with growth and its endless search to produce surplus value, expand its boundaries and markets, and accumulate capital that is reinvested in the growth of the system. Flow theory's model of the flowing subject parallels these conditions: expanding boundaries of the individual self, accumulation of new skills to reinvest in the growth and ordering of the self, further challenges to overcome that will profit the self, and so on. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi refers to flow and enjoyment as "the psychological equivalent of building capital" (2003, 76). Moreover, capitalism's drive to increase productivity through efficiency, optimization, and rationalization of production also parallels flow as an optimal experience where the functioning of consciousness is streamlined and made more productive.

It is telling that in a TED talk from 2004, Csikszentmihalyi began with a graph depicting soaring economic growth and income over previous decades while self-reported happiness levels remain static. The cliché response is that money does not buy happiness, but the subtext is that flow theory wants to align the growth of the self and its enjoyment with economic growth. While the talk suggests that the augmentation of human skills, *not* wealth or economic well-being, could lead to actual gains in

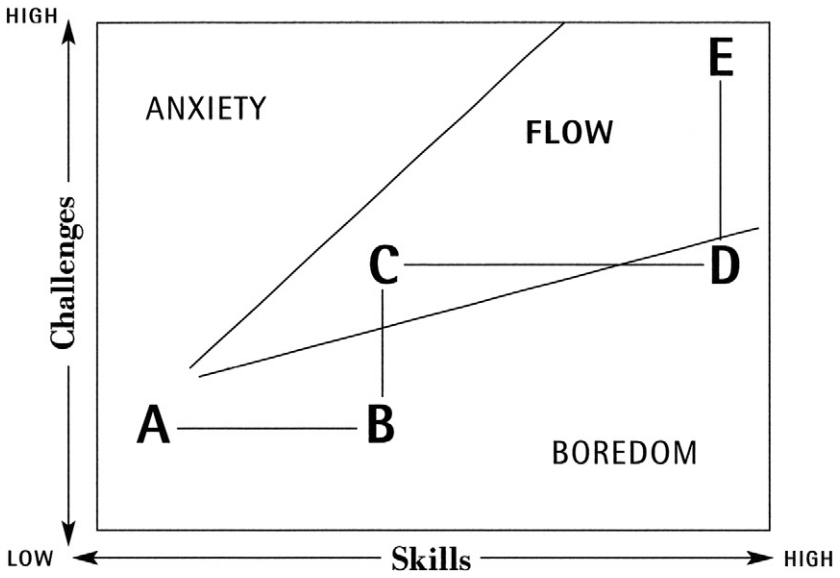

Figure 1.3
"Growth of Complexity through Flow." This graph shows how skills grow over time through a desire to return to flow. The activity begins at A. At B, the person is bored and increases challenges to achieve flow at C. Then, the person increases skills and becomes bored again at D, and then raises challenges again to return to flow at E. From Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Good Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 67. © 2003 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Used by permission of Viking Books, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

happiness, there is also the sense that flow theory mirrors and internalizes this economic growth, equating happiness and enjoyment with an ideology of growth specific to our historical situation.

From this perspective, advocating for growth of the self is problematic. In her book *Bright-Sided*: *How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*, sociologist Barbara Ehrenreich critiques positive thinking, positive psychology, and self-help ideologies, arguing that they are easily aligned with consumerism, "the individual's hunger for more," and the growth imperative of profit (2009, 33–34). When Kotler quotes the Harvard psychologist Ned Hallowell as saying, "Flow is the doorway to the 'more' most of us seek," one intuits that flow promises an abstract sense of accumulation—more energy; more happiness; more productivity (2014b, viii). With discussions

of sustainability and degrowth increasingly populating political agendas, a form of subjectivity that privileges growth, accumulation, and expansion is increasingly out of step with contemporary ideas concerning a sustainable ecology and world. Flow is about more, not less.

The growth of the self becomes even more problematic when it is linked to consumerism and the use of material resources to accommodate the enjoyment of this growing self. Yet the augmentation of productivity and the optimization of action through flow activities—even when not linked to consumerism—can buttress ideologies of growth. Flow becomes a form of what cultural critic Terry Eagleton calls "pathological productivity," which is deeply rooted within "cultural habits" where incessant action and productivity become obsessive (2010, 103). Seeking flow experiences and the growth of the self can support the idea of endless expansion through productive action in a historical moment when we need to think of alternatives to endless growth.

Eagleton wonders if it is possible to retain these productive energies while detaching them from the cultural habits of consumption that accompany them. This is a key problem for our age. Proponents of flow hope that this decoupling can occur, and Csikszentmihalyi certainly disdained the potential link between flow and materialism. He understood consumerism as a simple microflow activity that offers order to consciousness but does not build the kind of complexity of the self that appears in macroflow experiences (1999, 2004). In 1981, Csikszentmihalyi and the sociologist Eugene Rochberg-Halton argued that flow could help combat what they called a "terminal materialism," an out-of-control focus on consumerism and material goods that threatened humanity (1981, 230–235). They thought that society could become less dependent on material energy used to fuel economic growth and instead invest in the growth of psychic energy (1981, 229). Flow experiences produce skills, knowledge, complexity, and psychological capital that do not necessarily require vast material resources. If one can experience flow by writing poetry, dancing, or playing chess, then why buy video game consoles? If the growth of the flowing subject could be channeled toward nonconsumerist ends, it would become a strategy for confronting rampant productivity that results in material destruction.

One faces the dilemma of whether promoting flowing, growing selves can alleviate the problem of looming ecological collapse or if such an

expansion of self feeds into a cancerous mentality of productivity that seeks economic growth and leaks into rampant materialism. In *Good Business,* Csikszentmihalyi charts a socially conscious version of business in which managers strive to improve the world and put the well-being of workers before profit. Nevertheless, he offers flow as a tool that managers can use to increase creative productivity and innovation within the workplace while improving the happiness and morale of workers (2003, 25).[18]

In an article for *Fast Company*, financial journalist Ann Marsh (2005) notes Csikszentmihalyi's resistance to the commercial uses of flow, but then continues, "Yet plenty of others see the flow of dollar signs, either in their own company's performance or in bringing the concept to the corporate masses." In terms of consumerism, even Csikszentmihalyi indicated that replacing consumerist behavior with the pursuit of nonmaterialist flow activities "may be the hardest and least likely scenario" (2004, 104). He argues that a large set of cultural habits would need to change, which requires society to implement regulations and institutional supports to encourage this transformation. Moreover, he asks, "How would the World Bank, the Enrons and Savings-and-Loans and their political allies react if a new world-view based on voluntary simplicity really gained ground?" (2004, 104). Not kindly, of course; but this is why collective forms of action are more palpable and effective responses to capitalism and its ideology of growth than focusing on empowering individual consciousness and the growth of the self. The fact that flow theory emerges as an individualized alternative to social action and privileges powerful forms of individual agency over class consciousness can inhibit collective responses to dominant forms of power and pathological forms of productivity.

Video Games and the Growth of the Self

"The idea of perpetual growth underpins much of our society," writes game journalist Alister MacQuarrie (2018), "but games seem uniquely committed to it as a medium." Focusing on 4X strategy games like the *Civilization* series where players explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate, MacQuarrie argues that "The 4X model *is* perpetual growth. In order to escape the usual flow and stagnation in the design, these games would have to rethink their core mechanics completely" (2018; emphasis in original). When linking flow to pathological productivity in terms of games, the growth of the self

becomes invested in expansion, domination, and consumerism. Csikszentmihalyi admits that flow "is not 'good' in an absolute sense," and that particular flow experiences must be judged according to their personal, social, and material impacts (1990, 70). It is possible that this is why he rarely discusses video games, seeing them as consumerist flow activities and technological forms of play that depend on material resources and focus growth in the wrong direction. Video games that package and sell flow experiences work against the cultivation of flow activities that produce complex growth without depending on material resources.

It is no secret that video games often foreground growth and couple it to an expanding sense of a powerful self and player. I agree with digital media theorist Lev Manovich that the goal of many video games is to "build character" and strive for "self-improvement"—a goal that he likens to the North American mentality of the expanding frontier (2001, 272). Many mainstream video games privilege the continuous growth of player characters within the game. Players often accumulate new talents, skills, and equipment. They acquire virtual currencies that help them purchase this equipment or the training needed for new skills. As players master game mechanics and add new abilities to their available actions, a sense of growing possibilities for effective action occurs. It is commonplace to critique mainstream video games such as role-playing games and first-person shooters as violent power fantasies, as foregrounding narratives of powerful male heroes who overcome all challenges and obstacles. Yet linking these critiques to the ideologies contained in flow theory—such as the growth of the self and the privileging of powerful forms of individual agency and consciousness—adds depth to these critiques and explains why many games that leverage flow might veer toward these narratives.

Because player growth is central to many games, examples that foreground an aesthetic of depletion or loss are few and far between. Some games offer moments of loss—for example, a level where a player's gear is taken away or a character is weakened. Yet these scenarios are often brief interludes in a larger structure of accumulation. For example, in the role-playing game *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), players must fight a copy of their own character's party at one point, a challenging moment where players confront their own accumulated power. This difficult battle offers a self-reflective moment that turns the tables on the usual scenario, where the player's party easily dominates minor enemies. Here, players must contend

with their own massive accumulation of skills. Given the battle's difficulty, players might need to pursue strategies of subtraction such as removing their best armor before the character copies are made, fighting alone instead of with a full group (which reduces complexity because players battle only one copy of the main character), or manually switching the game to a lower difficulty setting. While this moment forces players to confront their own growth within the game and is ripe for self-reflection (the battle literally mirrors the player's party and occurs after the player receives an amulet called "reflection"), this pause is temporary. After the battle, players resume the dominant progression of character growth and development.

Some games extend this criticism of player growth and experience. In game designer Lindsay Grace's *Levity* (2011), the accumulation of items such as coins slows players, thus foregrounding the burden of growth and collection. In game developer Zoë Quinn's *Depression Quest* (2013), players are given fewer choices and decisions as the game progresses. While they still see textual choices offered at the end of each scene to continue the narrative, many of them are crossed out and inaccessible. This simulates depression, confining the self and subtracting the life skills necessary for action instead of expanding the self's boundaries and skills. Games like *Levity* and *Depression Quest* frustrate players intentionally to create an aesthetic experience that does not align gameplay with the growth of player strengths and abilities. In another example, the game *Undertale* (2015) criticizes assumptions contained within many role-playing games where the accumulation of skills and experience points are key features. Near the end of *Undertale*, players discover that the attribute EXP, which often denotes "experience points" in games, actually stands for "execution points," awarded for the annihilation of monsters or other characters in the game. In effect, *Undertale* undermines positive associations with the growth of experience during a game and forces players to feel that their gameplay has produced only an accumulation of loss and mass extinction. While emerging voices have begun to critique the idea of growth in games—and here I am thinking about the rise of queer game studies and the queer game movement—the ideology of powerful forms of human agency remains a dominant theme in games.[19]

Returning to *flOw*, a player's organism evolves purely through the act of continuous consumption. Bogost explains that "the only viable option save abstinence is engorgement. Like the strip miner, the *flOw* player

overwhelms everything in his path" (2007). The basic narrative and visual elements of *flOw* reinforce the subjective sense of an expanded and growing self that players encounter in a flow experience. As the player consumes, her or his or their creature grows, forming elaborate and intricate shapes that are rich in abstract complexity and vibrant color (figure 1.4). As the creature evolves, it produces a spectacular image that is often said to be a pleasurable feature of the game. This spectacular type of growth occurs in many games, such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), where the representation of one's character is understated and ascetic in the beginning of the game but becomes massive and glorified in later stages, when players have built their characters through accumulation of elaborate equipment like ridiculously sized shoulder guards, weapons with glowing enchantments, and massive helms. While players develop skills to meet increasing challenges in *flOw*, this growth is minimal, but the key point is that the game's spectacular representations reinforce and amplify the growth of self that a player experiences within a subjective state of flow. In a game designed to produce flow through its game mechanics, one cannot ignore its visual representation of flow, which significantly augments the spectacle of an ideology of growth.

Figure 1.4
A spectacular organism in *flOw*

After *flOw* was released, Supervillain Studios produced a small, downloadable expansion pack that added two features to the game—a playable creature and a consumable organism. The new creature is perhaps aimed at gamers desiring more violent and aggressive content in a game that originally sought to reject such ideas. It is composed of a circular set of quickly spinning blades that protect a mouth in the middle. The player can press a button to expand the blades outward, thus stunning an adversary, sucking its inert body within, and devouring the consumables that it releases. In this process, the "little death machine," as one reviewer called it, grows larger with each victory and expands its destructive influence (Clements 2007).

Meanwhile, the additional consumable is called "camera food" because, when eaten, the game briefly pauses and takes a screenshot of the player's evolved creature, saving it on the hard drive of the PS3 console. Here, the brief interruption of flow—perhaps needed to save the image—allows the production of a keepsake stored outside the bounds of the game, a memory that the player can share with other fans. This souvenir is a spectacular image of an ideology of growth expressed through the goals and representational depictions within *flOw*. The brief pause that occurs when players consume the camera food—a moment that some might see as a glitch—interrupts the psychic flow of the game. In a game that attempts to remove all forms of interruption to produce a state of continuous action, these moments of critical pause might act as brief reminders of the impossibility of total, intentional agency and highlight the influence of other forces that shape the game and player experience. The camera food appears as an unintended pause beyond the control of players. In the swirling action of the game, players might not even notice the camera food that they consume until the screen briefly stutters. Moreover, players do not have control over this feature. It cannot be turned off, and the images will be saved whether one wants them or not.

These saved images could be understood as unintended critiques of the growth of the self. They are ultimately sterile and empty representations of the growth that the player's creature is undergoing. Only when the game ends and the flow experience is over can players search for these hollow images. It is as if these images, accumulating deep in a folder within the file system of the PS3, are unconscious reminders of the spectacular growth that is emphasized in the game.

One might object that interpreting the camera food as an unintended pause and critique of growth is a stretch. The interrupting moment of consuming the camera food punctures the flow of gameplay and causes the game to jerk slightly, but this passing moment is quickly submerged. It is a blip in an otherwise seamless movement of the game. However, one can interpret this insignificance as representing that the game privileges continuous action and flow over critical pause and reflection. This leads us to another important point about flow: while flow privileges the idea of growth of self and an expansion of the powers and skills of the self, it also reduces the number of moments where critical evaluation and reflection can occur. In the next section, I explain how flow theory diminishes criticality by embracing flow as the erasure of external, outside perspectives that aid in the development of critical perspectives.

Flow and the Reduction of Critical Consciousness

If the key to flow is the growth of the self and the accumulation of skills to meet increasing challenges, flow theory devalues the development of skills such as performing critical evaluation and identifying forces of determination that shape human consciousness beyond the experience of flow. The philosopher Bernard Stiegler laments that capitalism, consumption, and digital media technologies such as video games and social media are producing "a colossal historic regression creating massive irresponsibility and adult infantilization" (2010, 42). He continues, "This regression is mistakenly called 'growth'; mistaken because 'growth' in this context means merely what becomes larger—whereas irresponsibility is the *reduction* of what *should* be larger: *esprit*—individual and collective mind/spirit, whose modern form is *critical consciousness*" (2010, 43; emphasis in original). Critical consciousness means becoming aware of the forces of exploitation, domination, and control that limit individuals and social groups from pursuing freedom and emancipation. If the growth of the self is a key component of flow theory, then the reduction of critical consciousness is its ideological flipside. Flow theory contributes to this reduction because it downplays understanding the influence of external forces on human behavior, and because the flow experience itself does not cultivate the skill of gaining an outside perspective on one's actions in order to evaluate them.

Arguably, the twentieth century saw a remarkable growth in critical consciousness, where theorists and philosophers adopted a critical stance toward capitalism, and also toward consciousness itself, revealing that human consciousness is shaped by external forces such as the economy, society, race, sexuality, and technology. The idea of a growing, flowing subject works against these developments and cultivates a powerful form of humanism that places human intentions as the determining force that shapes the course of history. This accounts for one reason why flow theory has largely been ignored within media studies and critical theory. Critical theorists in the last half of the twentieth century analyzed the death of the author, decentered and fragmented subjects, in order to raise awareness about the absence of full agency and intentionality. Meanwhile, flow theory advocated for a subject fully capable of agency and actionable intentions. While poststructuralists and media theorists in the 1970s and 1980s drew on Freudian ideas to argue that the subject was driven by sexual impulses stemming from unconscious wishes, Marxist ideas about the determining force of the economy, or linguistic theories in order to show that the structure of language itself prevented an experience of full subjectivity, flow theory posited that a subject could attain fullness, harmony, and unity.

While critical theorists in the twentieth century argued that centered, unified subjects were ideals and ideological constructions that potentially limited the goals of collective emancipation, the theory of flow posited the unified subject as the precondition for social liberation. While critical theorists explored *antihumanist* versions of the subject—meaning that individuals do not entirely control their actions and human intentions are not the most powerful cause of historical change—flow theory focused on the masterful possibilities of human consciousness and agency.

Critical consciousness and antihumanist approaches take a step back from humans and their actions, gaining critical distance from experience in order to think more deeply about dominant and oppressive forces that circumscribe consciousness. Yet in flow experiences, "the actor has no need to adopt an outside perspective from which to consciously intervene" writes Csikszentmihalyi (1975a, 85). Individuals are swept away within the flow of action, which creates a momentum that inhibits adopting an outside perspective from which to reflect on and consider the meanings of their actions. Csikszentmihalyi writes, "Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions, and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But

in flow there is no reason to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic" (1990, 54). If the growth of the self is the key to flow, and this growth concerns the accumulation of skills by an actor who overcomes an activity's challenges, then the flow experience itself does not cultivate growth of the skill of critical evaluation because this is precisely what is erased through the magic of flow, a point that I return to in chapter 4. Flow experiences privilege action over critical evaluation and attaining outside perspectives. Yet critically evaluating the reasons for human action is an essential hallmark of critical consciousness.

Proponents of positive psychology foreground this effect of the flow experience as its most important feature because flow quiets anxiety, worry, doubt, and depression. Instead of rampant self-criticism or stress caused by external issues, flow facilitates the loss of self-consciousness and focuses attention on an activity, not on one's worries. Flow theory teaches us, as Csikszentmihalyi writes, that "to stay healthy one need not change the external stressors—just one's mind" (1993, 47–48). This use of flow to block out external reality hides a deeper claim. Positive psychologists explain that part of their contribution lies in challenging the idea that external causes act on human consciousness. The psychologist Martin Seligman argues that positive psychology battles "imprisoning deterministic ideology" and helps individuals to overcome "the tyranny of determinism" (2002, 248, 120). For example, if fixating on past trauma causes present pain, positive psychologists want to release people from the idea that the past determines the present.

The tyranny of determinism has a theoretical meaning as well, and both Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi explain that positive psychology aims at overcoming deterministic ideas that appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Freud, Marx, and others. Instead of evolution, economics, sexuality, or society controlling consciousness and human action, positive psychologists embrace self-determination and individual agency.[20] Even the flow experience itself appears to be a way to sidestep the idea that external forces influence human actions. Jeanne Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi write that within a flow experience, "what happens at any moment is responsive to what happened immediately before within the interaction, rather than being dictated by a preexisting intentional structure located within either the person (e.g., a drive) or the environment (e.g., a tradition or script)" (2002, 91).

This means that on the level of the flow experience itself, the influences of culture, social tradition, instinct, and sexual drives are jettisoned, leaving only the influence of self-determination and the actions that occurred immediately before the present action. In flow theory, overcoming external causes on the macro level—such as pushing aside ideas of Marxism and psychoanalysis—is replicated on the micro level, where action follows only from what occurred directly before.

To be fair, flow theory does not dismiss outright the discoveries of antihumanist thought, critical consciousness, and the idea that consciousness is influenced by external forces.[21] It claims that flow offers a *solution* to the challenges that that these approaches raise. For example, in his book *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) acknowledges that biological and cultural forces determine human actions beyond individual consciousness and tend to remove control from the intentional agent. He then argues: "Knowledge of these forces that determine consciousness and action, however, can make it possible for us to become liberated from them: to become free to decide what to think, what to feel, and how to act. At this point in our history it should be possible for an individual to build a self that is not simply the outcome of biological drives and cultural habits, but a conscious, personal creation" (1993, 4).

Flow theory affirms the power of antihumanist thinking—that critical distance from human consciousness can provide insight into forces that influence human action—but it also asserts that human agency can overcome these influences through flow. In light of this, a more nuanced understanding of the humanism that subtends flow theory reveals that only now, at this historical juncture, can true humanism emerge, simply because we are aware of the limitations on human consciousness that individuals must overcome. From the perspective of flow theory, human society has progressed through waves of critical antihumanism, and only with the library of knowledge accumulated by such progress can we forge a strong, self-reflective humanism. In flow theory, antihumanist positions become a form of *ante*-humanism. They arrive *before* humanism and must be overcome on the way to the emergence of true humanism.

Flow theory is a high-level humanism. Flow activities are techniques that augment human actions, such as when the engineer Douglas Engelbart promoted the augmentation of intellect through technological means ([1962] 2003). Flow activities strive to overcome the defects and limitations

of consciousness, assisting humans by limiting their field of attention and channeling agency into productive streams of action. To use terminology from video games, flow activities *buff* and *gear* consciousness so that it has a greater chance of affecting human development and societal change. Just as a spell—a buff—applied to an avatar in an online role-playing game strengthens it, flow activities strengthen a human being's consciousness. Flow theory idealizes a high-level humanism, a form of humanism that has leveled-up over time through its encounters with various obstacles and challenges. From this perspective, various antihumanist positions that posit limits to intentional action raise challenging obstacles to agency that humans must overcome in order to strengthen intention and humanist possibilities. One might recognize the model of flow operating here, wherein humans increase skills to meet growing challenges. In this context, the theory of flow is less a theory of human enjoyment than an idealized version of historical change where human consciousness overcomes its own negations.

Yet flow theory does not counter the challenges of these antihumanist moments on their own terms; rather, it sidesteps them by proposing a new way to overlook the issues that they present. For example, while Marx identified the importance of the capitalist economy to shaping alienated consciousness (e.g., workers feeling separated from their labor), flow theory does not address economic solutions to this problem; it suggests that individual agents with a stronger consciousness can solve issues of alienation on their own. This is the idea that we do not need to remove (or solve) external causes of anxiety and worry, but simply change our minds and distract ourselves from these causes—an idea that I explore further in chapter 2. If capitalism alienates our attention, exploits workers, and causes stress through its pathological productivity, then we do not need to change and remove capitalism, flow theory suggests, but rather train ourselves to ignore or cope with its effects. This view explains the surprising and disquieting claims that Csikszentmihalyi often returns to in his work, where, for example, even prisoners in concentration camps can learn to block out their reality, seeming "sometimes even to enjoy their experience" (1975a, 193).[22] The potential implications of such a view—when applied to other instances of oppression such as economic exploitation, patriarchy, racism, discrimination, and so on—can lead to a dangerous denial of reality and the continuation of violence and injustice. In this situation, flow might

become more than a coping mechanism to distract people from the cruel conditions of reality; it might become a form of psychosis that disconnects people from reality.

Flow theory's acknowledgment and then dismissal of external forces on human consciousness are coupled with the absolute, determining powers of the flow experience itself. That is, flow is seen as shaping human consciousness, but flow is rarely seen as being shaped itself. Flow experiences are often posited as ahistorical, timeless, and universal. They are seen as determining the course of history, not being determined by it. For example, Csikszentmihalyi offers flow as an explanation for Confucianism, the Protestant ethic, the growth of capitalism *and* the rise of communism, and other "milestones of history" (1993, 258–266). Flow experiences are also described as universal and the same across different cultures, peoples, genders, and classes.[23] Some scholars suggest that positive psychology forwards the idea that humans are programmed with "a moral software of justice, wisdom, humanity, courage, temperance, and transcendence," an idea that veers toward essentialism where humans naturally contain dispositions toward goals and behaviors that positive psychologists seek to cultivate (Jørgensen and Nafstad 2004, 28).

Positing flow as timeless, ahistorical, essential, and universal places human agency and consciousness as the sole force driving human history, and we need to critique the naturalness of these ideas as ideological. The play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith takes this approach, criticizing the ahistorical and universal claims of flow and arguing that flow is an experience centered in twentieth-century Western cultures, where the individual's "secular pleasures" are foreground (1997, 185). Flow theory's insistence on reforming individual consciousness is shaped by the ongoing, neoliberal intensification of modern individuality, and Sutton-Smith identifies Csikszentmihalyi's work as presenting the most influential theory of play related to the twentieth century's focus on the self (1997, 185–186).

Moreover, critical race and feminist theorists who challenge the idea of a unified subject and powerful agent do so in order to reveal it as an ideal construct linked to dominant social norms. From this perspective, challenging the false unity of the self and individual aims at dismantling a privileged form of subjectivity that is white, male, straight, Western, colonial, and bourgeois. If flow theory claims universality and timelessness, then the flowing subject opens a door to these dominant conceptions of the subject.

This point is driven home by the fact that in our historical moment, flow theory is used to tout *The Rise of Superman*—as the title of Kotler's book (2014b) proclaims—and self-optimization gurus and influencers seem to address a white, privileged, and often masculine audience.[24] It also driven home by Csikszentmihalyi's framing of psychic capital and flow as being threatened by racialized others. For example, he worries that immigrant workers might form a "troublesome underclass" that saps the psychic capital of individuals and a nation (1993, 90). When Csikszentmihalyi turns to discuss psychic energy and flow within society writ large, it is not only boredom and anxiety that threaten the absorption and harmony of flowing subjects, but racialized others who steal the psychic resources of the powerful.[25]

With this in mind, we should also not forget that the theory of flow is a praxeology or theory of action that might be useful. For example, the idea of the flowing subject might help individuals sustain political action. This seems to be the subtext of Csikszentmihalyi's understanding of the relationship between the individual and social change. He is critical of a society "devoted to greed and blind exploitation" and explains that to change this system, individuals must eventually act in the social realm (1993, 281). Once humans have repaired consciousness through flow, as the idea goes, the flowing subject will have more power to change the world. While flow theory prioritizes individual change, it does not reject the social, but like play, it opens up thinking about their relationship. This can be important for political action, but in my estimation, a critical evaluation of the flowing subject—and its privileging of the individual, its ideology of growth, its universalizing and essentializing tendencies, its association with dominant and dominating forms of subjectivity—must come first. As the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser exclaimed, the ideologies of humanism are useful, even necessary, but they must be based on antihumanist theories that are critical of the individual and must be understood as *ideologies*, not as universal and timeless facts of life (2005, 231). A critical understanding of the flowing subject might provide room for its ideological use aimed at progressive, political ends, but only after its ideologies are understood and processed.

While the high-level humanism of flow theory incorporates previous forms of antihumanism as challenges to overcome, it does not cultivate the skills needed to continue the emancipatory project of identifying how external forces shape human consciousness. Instead, flow theory appears

beyond history, not only as high-level humanism (which suggests that there are yet higher levels to achieve as history progresses), but as the *highest level* of humanism—the peak of human experience. In its attempt to overcome the tyranny of determination, flow theory overdetermines everything but remains undetermined itself, existing outside history as timeless and universal. This idea can blind the theory to critical assessments of the flow experience itself, such as the idea that video games and interactive machines can use flow theory to produce situations where flow does not lead to an expansion and growth of human skills and potential, but instead to their reduction.[26] While flow theory acknowledges antihumanist thought and the challenges of critical forms of consciousness, it promotes an ideology that impedes the future development of this critical project. This leads to a reduction, not an increase, of critical consciousness.

Conclusion: Flow and Ideology

In this chapter, I have taken a step back from the flow experience to describe and critically analyze its ideologies and origins. As such, I embrace the continuing expansion of critical consciousness, not its reduction. Csikszentmihalyi began his career wondering if there was an alternative to Marxist, collective approaches to solving problems of alienation within society. He wondered if democracies could develop an ideal that could motivate individual human action toward this end without taking recourse in an oversocialized vision of collective revolution. This required the embrace of ideas that would strengthen and grow individual consciousness and powerful forms of human agency. In his early research, he studied people intensely involved in activities for long periods of time in order to understand what motivated them. This led him to play and eventually to flow.

The flow state became the ideal that individuals could strive toward. Yet flow theory promotes ideas that align with neoliberal ideologies of individuality and the pursuit of economic growth. Ideologically, flow theory privileges individuality over social collectives, self-determination over theories of external determination, growth over stability, and action over critical examination. Thus, flow theory resurrects an ideology of the powerful human agent striving toward high levels of humanist achievement that counters critical approaches from the twentieth century that challenged the hubris of human consciousness.

If many video games promote and disseminate flow, then we must entertain the idea that games can also function as vehicles for the ideological content of flow. When he began his research in the 1960s and 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi could not have imagined the rise of video games that would burgeon into a powerful media industry. He rarely mentions video games in his prolific scholarship, even though they exemplify flow activities and flow has been instrumental to game design. A game like TGC's *flOw* is often upheld as an expressive alternative to more overtly violent, aggressive, and ideological offerings in the video game industry, yet *flOw* reveals subtle ideologies within games that we tend to overlook. When we encounter a critique claiming that "video games are 'weaponized' texts, or disrupters of psychic stability" (Garite 2003, 8), it seems almost comical when mentioned next to a game like *flOw*, which intentionally deweaponizes its environment and seeks to create psychological harmony, focus, and flow (at least before the addition of the downloadable content mentioned previously). Yet this positive vision of games as producing flowing subjects is not innocuous because it establishes ideas of a stable, centered, universal, and growing subject that pushes aside the critical, antihumanist insights from the twentieth century and threatens the project of cultivating and raising critical consciousness.

This chapter has focused on the ideologies of flow and suggested that we should analyze video games as potential vehicles for these ideologies. I have said little about the limits of flow and ideological analysis itself. Game scholars Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska provide an overview of ideological approaches to video games, but they also remind us that a "strong measure of caution is always necessary when attributing to games the ability to contribute actively to the ideological shaping of the player" (2006, 207). They explain that while a video game might give a player a sense of mastery and control—like flow, which supports an ideology of the powerful nature of individual agency—perhaps another player will understand that this powerful sense of self and agency is impossible outside the game, thus believing that such agency is futile in the real world. Moreover, they point to the idea that play potentially subverts or ruptures the rigid functioning of ideology (2006, 206).

Indeed, at the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that one pleasurable way to play the game *flOw* is by conducting music because consuming organisms creates sounds that become integrated into the game's

soundtrack. This form of play potentially dislodges the impulse to consume and grow, to level up skills to meet challenges, and to find one's personal flow zone. Other players, unconcerned with progress, might simply enjoy the bodily movements of manipulating the Sixaxis motion controller. Still others might play to enjoy a meditative, peaceful experience without delving into the challenging depths of the game.[27] The ideological positioning of media users is never monolithic and absolute, as media studies has taught us over the years. Nevertheless, scholars and designers also can idealize playful subversion and subversive players, celebrating the freedom of players while eclipsing the ideological constraints within play and its sibling, flow. This chapter has focused on the latter, examining some of the historical, political, and ideological ideas that shape flow theory and potentially shape players who encounter games that attempt to facilitate flow.

The following chapters examine the ideological properties of flow presented here in more detail, especially in relation to video games. These chapters continue to embrace a critical attitude toward flow, taking a step back from its absorbing effects. If Henricks explains that people in flow are "deeply entranced" by their experience, then these chapters advocate for distance and detachment (2015, 31). Each chapter suggests new ways that scholars, game designers, and players can think about flow, which challenge the ways that flow theory has usually been understood in relation to games.

In the next chapter, I look more closely at the idea that play and flow can solve problems of alienation in society because they allow individuals to merge with their environment instead of feeling separate from it. I argue that flow can function not as a peak experience of enjoyment, but rather as a way to manage and cope with personal and social problems. I explain that flow can produce feelings of separation because it operates as an individualistic containment of alienation and a form of palliative medicine that treats the symptoms of alienation without addressing its causes.

2 Flow, Alienation, and the Politics of Enjoyment

The cult classic video game *Psychonauts* (2005), by Double Fine Productions, offers a whimsical reflection on the positive possibilities of play and suggests that it can repair psychological disorders wrought by adulthood. In this third-person perspective platformer, the player inhabits the role of a boy named Razputin ("Raz") as he strives to become a "psychonaut" (a special agent with psychic powers) at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp. Throughout the game, players leap into the unconscious minds of various characters to heal their disorders and emancipate them from stultifying psychological conditions. While inside their minds, players defeat enemies and solve challenges related to their illnesses; players also search for spiderwebs (to wipe away "mental cobwebs") and suitcases (to liberate "emotional baggage").

Raz was inspired to become a psychonaut upon reading Whispering Rock's promotional pamphlet. "You were born with a special gift. But the people around you treat it like a curse," it says, "Back home, your powers make you a loner, an outcast, a circus freak. But in this dojo, in this psychic dojo, they make you a hero." While ostensibly about the psychic powers of gifted children, these words invoke the idea of socially rejected gamers, the dated stereotype of shunned loners playing games in their parents' basement. In *Psychonauts*, gamers cast off their shame and use their gaming skills to solve the serious personal problems of adults. *Psychonauts* suggests that the psychic powers of play will heal depression, apathy, anxiety, and alienation, thus freeing humanity from its suffering. Play will save the day.

In one game sequence, players rehabilitate a descendent of Napoleon, Fred Bonaparte, who has lost his love of competition, victory, and life itself.

Fred was once an orderly at an insane asylum on an island offshore of Whispering Rock. He became a resident after a catatonic inmate defeated Fred twenty-seven times while playing a board game called Waterloo-O (which invokes the historic battle that ended Napoleon's reign). Fred experienced a psychotic break and began to dress and act like his ancestor Napoleon. To heal him, Raz (and hence the player) leaps into Fred's delusional mind and finds Fred playing Waterloo-O against Napoleon. Fred has lost all interest in the game. He slouches in his chair, completely unmotivated to engage in battle. Raz must play Waterloo-O instead of Fred and defeat Napoleon, thus restoring Fred's motivation, competitive instincts, and desire to play. Healing Fred requires Raz to interest him in playing games again by playing a game (Waterloo-O) within Fred's mind (figure 2.1).

When Raz jumps into the game and begins the battle, Napoleon addresses him with excitement, "Ha ha! I like your je ne sais quoi! Your JOIE DE VIVRE!" It is Raz's love of life, exemplified through play, that convinces Fred to return to the game and renew his passion for life. As players complete various tasks—recruiting peasants to fight and a carpenter to repair a bridge on the game board—victory creeps closer. Fred slowly becomes more interested in playing and escapes his lethargy as the game progresses, and eventually he takes control of the battle and is healed. In later parts of

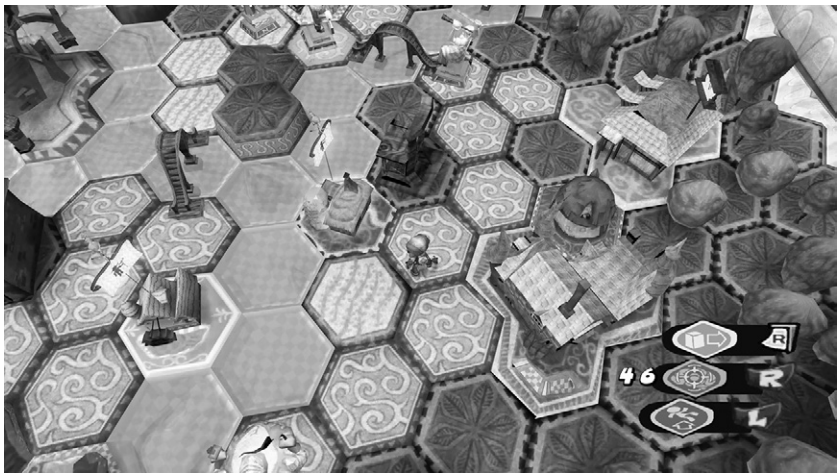

Figure 2.1
Raz playing the Waterloo-O board game in *Psychonauts* (4K GAMER 2016)

Psychonauts, after Fred's recovery, we see him playing Waterloo-O again, sitting alone before the game, deeply absorbed in developing new strategies. Play becomes an individualized strategy to cope with reality and get Fred out of his head.

"Games are the liberal arts for the 21st century," proclaimed the website of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where I used to teach. The incoming class of first-year college students read Jane McGonigal's book *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011). In this book, she champions the possibility of an epic win wherein gaming will fix the problems that plague reality, from personal depression to climate change, from social alienation to the revitalization of education. The message of McGonigal's book is uplifting: games and gamers can transform society for the better. Instead of being ridiculed as antisocial outcasts, gamers can cleave to a heroic narrative of achievement. If players have become flowing subjects, ready to act and overcome challenges, then the goal is simply to persuade them to leave their caves of entertainment and train their sights on the challenging problems that arise in the private spheres of their psyches and in the public sphere of meaningful, social action. In this scenario, the world becomes their psychic dojo, and they become the heroes that heal the world.

To accomplish this transformation of reality, advocates claim, the ins and outs of everyday life should be redesigned as games. This concept is known as *gamification*, which broadly means the redesign of nongame activities to function more like games. These activities vary widely—work, learning, business management, scientific inquiry, exercise, consumption, and so on—but the idea to use the motivational power of games and play to transform reality lies at the core of gamification's dream.[1] While gamification typically concerns the redesign of everyday activities to be more like games, a related area of interest focuses on the idea that people can treat everyday life as a potential opportunity for play by adopting what McGonigal calls a "gameful mindset" (2015a). Instead of designing an app to transform an aspect of everyday life into a playable game, people would learn to approach their everyday lives and activities as they do their games.

This idea draws inspiration from the fact that many people already play games that have taught them valuable skills such as problem-solving and the determination to overcome difficult obstacles. "You don't have to

change the games you play," McGonigal writes in an article for *Slate* magazine. "You just need to focus on the way the games are making you better. When you do, you become more likely to believe that the strengths you build while playing are strengths that you can bring to your everyday challenges" (2015a). From this perspective, people can use the skills that they develop while gaming to tackle real-life issues. The motivation to succeed at games can become the motivation to succeed at life.

The rise of gamification has renewed interest in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the key figures in the field of positive psychology and an early proponent of using play, games, and flow to transform everyday life.[2] Instead of focusing on negative pathologies such as mental illness, positive psychology studies an individual's well-being, self-care, and ability to thrive. In the 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi advocated for redesigning everyday activities to facilitate the experience of flow and combat debilitating psychological disorders. At the time, he called this project the *politics of enjoyment*. Like the idea of adopting a gameful mindset, the politics of enjoyment foregrounds the idea that there are "very real opportunities for each individual to experiment in his or her daily life, to see whether enjoyment can be increased" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 204). If people approached their everyday activities as potential occasions for producing flow, reimagining these activities to be more like games, then enjoyment would rise throughout society.

This chapter critically examines the politics of enjoyment, specifically the idea that individuals can use flow, games, and a gameful mindset to heal consciousness and psychological issues such as depression, worry, and rampant self-criticism. Csikszentmihalyi labeled his early version of gamification *politics*, which implies that it seeks to use play and games to transform and govern everyday life. He explicitly framed the politics of enjoyment in terms of overcoming alienation, writing "Alienation, as Marx pointed out long ago, occurs when a person feels that he has lost the ability to direct the part of his life that is invested in work," and that flow could "eliminate alienation, at least temporarily" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 195). Csikszentmihalyi went on to argue that all of life—leisure, work, education, social interactions, the functioning of institutions, and so on—must become like a game or a flow-producing activity. Once this occurred, the temporary solution would become permanent. While the goal to remove alienation is common to both flow theory and Marxism, the methods to achieve this

goal differ. Instead of urging collective action to catalyze change, the politics of enjoyment provides opportunities for individuals to assert control over their own lives.

Yet the politics of enjoyment is not an uncomplicated solution to social and personal problems. In chapter 1, I explained that flow theory prioritizes individuality over social collectives. In this chapter, I explore the implications of this idea and argue that flow can function as an individualistic form of containment that manages, but does not solve, issues of alienation and social malaise. For example, in *Psychonauts,* the player teaches Fred to manage his lethargy and alienation through play, but after his rehabilitation, he remains separate, absorbed in his board game, playing alone. When applied to everyday life, flow and play can act as palliative forms of medicine that treat the symptoms of alienation without curing its causes (an argument that György Lukács made in the early twentieth century and that I discussed briefly in the introduction to this book). Instead of solving collectively external issues that might contribute to feelings of alienation and depression, such as poverty, inequality, or injustice, flow and play can distract us from their effects and the examination of their root causes. In fact, this chapter argues that two causes of these negative effects are the persistence and privileging of individuality itself. By promoting the strengthening of the individual as a way to solve personal and social issues, flow might produce and sustain alienation instead of eradicating it.

One result of this perspective is that it transforms our common perceptions concerning flow that align it with positive feelings, peak experiences, and images of smooth, unhindered action. When we see flow as a method to treat issues of alienation and depression, it appears less as a psychological experience of intense enjoyment than a coping mechanism useful for shielding individuals from the harsh realities of modern existence. The anthropologist Victor Turner once said, "To flow is to be as happy as the human can be" (1982, 58). Yet as a form of coping, flow appears less ecstatic and more mundane and utilitarian. Thus, this chapter encourages readers to think beyond flow as just being intense enjoyment and fun—typical ways of thinking about flow when it comes to video games.

Increasingly, video games are offered as activities that can facilitate coping and assuage depression.[3] They put the politics of enjoyment into action. In this chapter, I closely read and play games that explore ideas of flow, mental health, and coping. This is a strategic decision, made in

order to stay close to how flow is implemented and represented within video games while critically examining the idea that the politics of enjoyment will heal personal and social malaise. Moreover, reading flow within games in terms of both their narratives and mechanics transforms our understanding of flow from a psychological state into an aesthetic property of games that can facilitate the interpretation of a game's significance. Games such as *Psychonauts*, *Diner Dash* (2004), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), and *Celeste* (2018) provide different representations and uses of flow while explicitly navigating issues related to the politics of enjoyment and mental health, issues that can be gendered. These self-reflexive games also provide an opportunity to examine how play, flow, and the politics of enjoyment privilege individual solutions to alienation instead of collective responses.

Get Over It! The Cause of Relentless Self-Criticism

At the heart of the politics of enjoyment is a desire to solve problems of social and personal alienation. If alienation describes a condition of feeling separated from work, the product of one's labor, other human beings, and life itself, then flow and play offer individuals opportunities to feel connected to themselves and the world, focused on their goals and absorbed in their actions. The politics of enjoyment suggests that the strengthening of individual consciousness must occur prior to the social change. "But no social change can come about until the consciousness of individuals is changed first," writes Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 191). In flow theory, this turn to individual consciousness is fueled by a fear of the oversocialization of collective action, as I discussed in chapter 1, but also by the melting away of traditional social structures like religion, unions, family, and civic life that typically offered individuals guidance concerning their life choices. "Flow was a therapy for the individual," writes media scholar Jay Bolter, "who found herself in a society without universally agreed values: each individual had to find her own path toward fulfillment" (2019a, 166). When traditional social foundations loosen, individuals cannot petition enduring systems that articulate meaningful reasons for personal action. In this situation, individuals must use their own skills and power to solve life problems, either personal or social. If social foundations do exist in the form of political parties, New Age religions, fads, and short-lived communities formed

through shared interests, Csikszentmihalyi argues that these provide forms of control that remove the need for self-mastery of the individual: "consciousness may obtain a welcome order," he writes, "but it will be an order imposed rather than achieved" (1990, 65). Instead, flow theory foregrounds individual achievement through self-mastery as a prerequisite for engaging the social sphere.

The video game *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017) foregrounds individual resolve as a prerequisite for social connection. The player must climb a mountain as a muscular, male avatar who sits in a black cauldron and uses a large hammer like an oar, lever, and pick to pull himself up and over various obstacles (figure 2.2). The mountain is not only made of rock, but also a motley of junk and cultural detritus. This implies that the player must overcome a culture of easily consumed, discarded objects in order to succeed. *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* is not an easily consumed video game, but an extremely difficult game to play. The player must control the mouse precisely to succeed. The mouse controls the avatar's hammer, and a slight error in hand movement can cause players to lose a significant amount of or *all* their progress, tumbling to the base of the mountain. After conquering the summit—a remarkable achievement, given the game's

Figure 2.2
A protagonist in a cauldron in *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*

punishing and unforgiving difficulty—players are granted access to a chat room where they can socialize with others who have reached the peak.

Social connection is a reward for significant individual achievement. The game polices this social interaction by asking players if they are streaming or recording their gameplay. If they answer "yes," then they are not admitted to the chat room; they can also answer "no" even if they are recording, and thus footage of the chat has been shared on the internet. Nevertheless, the chat room is intended as a club for elite, successful climbers. During the climb, players listen to the game's designer and artist, Bennett Foddy, discuss the consumption of games through "Let's Play" videos on the internet, suggesting that more people will watch his game being played than actually complete it. Yet the game downplays the sociality that might occur before or during play—for example, watching, sharing, and discussing the game online—and instead suggests that social fellowship arrives after individual achievement and mastery.

Most people play the game for reasons other than mastering it—because they saw one of the many reaction videos posted online, because they want to get a taste of how hard it is, or perhaps because they like strange and experimental games. Perhaps some play purely to feel the sublime pain that others have felt, or to laugh at the ridiculous idea of a man climbing a mountain inside a cauldron. The pleasures of the game are multidimensional, and clearly an immersive, absorbing experience is not its primary draw. For most, the play experience will be short-lived and frustrating. For those determined to succeed, they might experience a precarious sense of flow after improving their skills, focusing intently, and blocking out distractions like a real mountain climber (an example of a flow activity commonly used by Csikszentmihalyi). Yet whether played or not, the game embraces individual achievement because the only way to climb the mountain is to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps (or, in this case, your own sledgehammer).

For the majority of players, it is probably difficult to achieve mastery in *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, or even a feeling remotely akin to absorption or flow, because the game immediately demands a high level of skill. Players likely will feel frustrated and angry from the beginning, but this is the point. The game is not designed to facilitate flow. Foddy himself says that he is not interested in "good design," which he says is "a smooth experience where you're never confused, you're never stumped as to what to

do, you're never annoyed, you're never bored, you're on a perfect difficulty ramp that gets you just enough competency so that you're always exerting the same amount of effort and that you're always engaged at the exact same level" (2018). This sounds a lot like flow. The conceit of the game is to toss out standard difficulty ramping, where a game's challenges increase gradually and incrementally along with a player's skills. Instead, players must work hard from the beginning to improve their skills and succeed.

If flow experiences expel self-awareness that can interrupt consciousness, *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* constantly interrupts players with their own failures and weaknesses. Falling after achieving progress induces rage, which makes the game even more difficult to play as your body surges with adrenaline, disrupting the impeccable patience needed to succeed. When I played, the strain and fatigue in my hand crept into my mind, and I silenced my phone after it buzzed, breaking my concentration. Thoughts of my own inadequacy, anger at Foddy's distracting voice-over, and frustration at the sensitivity of the mouse constantly derailed my actions. Awareness of myself, my anxieties, my computer, and the real world spilled into my thoughts. From the perspective of flow theory, when personal skills are unbalanced with challenges, individuals adopt outside perspectives on their actions, worrying about the self and its failures and wondering *why* they are doing something instead of doing it.[4] As Turner explains, "'Flow' perceived from the 'outside' becomes non-'flow' or anti-'flow.' Pleasure gives way to problem, to worry, to anxiety" (1982, 56).

Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy intensifies these feelings of antiflow, revealing the considerable labor necessary to overcome these blockages. The game reminds us that life is difficult, and frustrating events and worries interrupt our lives. Indeed, one interpretation of the game is as an allegory for the hardships of modern existence, where psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression plague us with self-awareness. They prevent the streaming flow of action and allow moments of self-criticism to appear.

What causes pathological self-awareness and rampant self-criticism in contemporary culture? Positive psychology sees these afflictions as internal malfunctions, caused by a consciousness that has become too aware of its actions.[5] "Unlike so many other nations in the contemporary world," Csikszentmihalyi writes, "we can't blame our problems on a harsh environment, on widespread poverty, or on the oppression of a foreign occupying army. The roots of the discontent are internal, and each person must untangle

them personally, with his or her own power" (1990, 12). This worldview suggests that people feel an external turmoil that is not really there. Because Western societies have ostensibly overcome barriers to wealth (for some people more than others), it is the welfare of the individual consciousness that restricts progress, not warfare, not class, not class warfare, not the continued traditions of inequality, racism, bigotry, oppression, and so on.[6] Yet the roots of discontent are external and real, and this discontent is intensified by the overindividualized nature of society today. Individuals are pressed to resolve social problems or look away from them. An internal solution and dialogue with the self are offered for social, economic, and political issues of debt, isolation, overwork, and so on. This process *manages* the desire for changing these externally caused problems by suggesting that they can be resolved within the individual. Critic of capitalism Mark Fisher calls this "responsibilisation," where "each individual member of the subordinate class is encouraged into feeling that their poverty, lack of opportunities, or unemployment, is their fault and their fault alone. Individuals will blame themselves rather than social structures" (2014, 9).

In this situation, individuals must employ their own skills and power to solve life's problems. They are like the players in *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, struggling with a near-impossible task, dealing with negative emotions caused by the arduous climb, or even being dissuaded from social connections that could assist and ease their troubles. The only guidance that can be found for the self is the self itself. No wonder our age is characterized by paralyzing self-doubt and self-criticism, for the thing that we seek guidance *for* is simultaneously called on to provide the guidance. Individuals are told to be strong and control their lives, but external issues that cannot be solved individually break into consciousness and stymie action with worry, doubt, and anxiety. As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman tells us, this "poisonous effluvia" appears when individuals are constantly pressured to take control of their lives, but external forces such as poverty, patriarchy, and institutional racism are beyond their control (2000, 39).

Placing responsibility solely on the individual ignites what Bauman calls the "privatization of critique" (2000, 38). In modernity, criticism functioned to undermine the power and authority of institutions such as religion and monarchy from the locale of the public voice. Modernity is a process of perpetual criticism that questions external forces that control, shape, and dominate the individual. Marx once declared that if revolution and the

social planning of the future were not options, then he argued for the fearless and "*ruthless criticism* of all that exists" (1843; emphasis in original). This unabashed criticism defines modernity and intensifies during periods where collective, revolutionary solutions seem out of reach. Ironically, in the twentieth century, one of the targets of this ruthless criticism centered on the individual itself, with the goal of dismantling the idea of individual agency to pave the way for collective action.[7]

This idea is ironic because the criticism of the individual mutates into an instrument to sustain individuality and to manage and control the possibility of collective action, not facilitate it. Untethered from its criticism of external forces that shackle humanity, criticism acquires a new target like a homing missile that had lost its previous target. The public voice turns into a private, inner voice that unleashes criticism of oneself and its inability to solve personal and social problems once and for all.

Let Your Troubles Flow Away: Overcoming Self-Criticism

To shield the self from this relentless attack, the politics of enjoyment offers flow and play as ways to focus attention on an activity instead of on one's worries. It offers a solution to the relentless self-criticism that dogs the psyche in modern life and empowers individuals to take control of their lives and quiet their inner critic.

Psychonauts provides an example of flow and play healing psychological disorder while empowering the self. In one level, players enter the mind of the actress Gloria Von Gouton, who can no longer perform because of relentless self-criticism. Inside her mind, which takes place in a theater, Raz encounters a rehearsal of a play about Gloria's life. But the play is in disarray because Bonita Soleil, a representation of Gloria's inner self, will not act. To complete the level, Raz must defeat a manifestation of Gloria's inner critic, who appears as a harsh theater critic named Jasper Rolls. Jasper sits in his prestigious box above the stage and denounces the rehearsal, while Bonita hides in a backstage room, unable to perform under Jasper's stern gaze. Over the years, Jasper has grown into a massive presence in Gloria's mind, his critical voice becoming so loud that it overwhelms Bonita's ability to act. Yet the play must go on, and the player guides Raz through a series of steps to save the performance.

In the final boss battle, Jasper's critical voice becomes *literally* lethal. He leaps from his box and takes center stage, blasting the player with stabbing words from his pen—"stale," "strained," "vulgar," and so on (figure 2.3). During the battle, Jasper constantly criticizes the player's skills, attempting to get inside the player's head, psych them out, and undermine their performance. "A terrible fight, not up to the task at hand!" Jasper shouts at one point. Yet players hone their skills to rise to the challenge, becoming absorbed within flow while dodging Jasper's deadly words and *critical hits* (a gaming term meaning a particularly effective and damaging blow). If these words hit Raz, they damage him and threaten to interrupt the player's flow and concentration. Thus, players literally enact what Gloria must do in her "real life" to overcome her inner critic: evade and ignore her self-criticism.

The final battle against Jasper denounces self-criticism through an affirmation of play and flow. Players become actors, completely involved in both the play within Gloria's mind and their play during the battle. The battle even alludes to flow when players must use their levitation power (their "thought bubble") to leap into an animated stream of musical notes that carries them up into the rafters. Jasper's critical blasts are easier to

Figure 2.3
Jasper Rolls (on left) shoots the critical word "crude" from his pens and Raz (center) jumps on his "thought bubble" to avoid the attack in *Psychonauts*

dodge when players enter this stream; looking at him, players can focus on his attacks, using the analog sticks of the PS2 controller to sway back and forth in the notes and float beyond the reach of his stinging words. Here, *Psychonauts* foregrounds the soothing and protective effects of play and flow. The musical notes denote an auditory shield that drowns out Jasper's negative voice, and players can fill this interlude in the battle with strategizing while worrying a bit less about Jasper's threatening criticisms.

In this way, the gameplay and narrative situation reinforce each other. The player's use of skills and strategizing to defeat Jasper suggests a strategy for Gloria to overcome her rampant self-criticism. At the end of the battle, Jasper shrinks into a flea and disappears into an empty box of popcorn. Unable to see the stage that was once his lifeblood, Jasper squeaks, "Can you hear me?" The answer is "barely"—players have learned to ignore his harsh words and focus on the task at hand. Jasper's once-booming, critical voice is hushed, and Bonita can once again act. When Bonita returns from her backstage dressing room and rejoins the play, she shines like the golden sun implied by her last name. After the battle, Raz exits Gloria's mind and finds her healed, her worries dissolved. The player has strengthened Gloria's mind and sense of self, allowing her troubles to flow away while empowering her inner self to shine once again. Gloria returns to life's stage, and we see her tending to her garden. In a similar fashion as Fred—who we see playing Waterloo-O alone—Gloria now turns to an individualized activity to cope with her psychological ailments.

We also can see the empowerment of the individual and the use of flow to manage everyday life in the *Diner Dash* series of casual, time-management games. *Diner Dash* explicitly references flow theory with the name of the series protagonist, Flo, a woman who leaves a stressful office job to open a restaurant. She manages multiple restaurants over the course of the game, reinventing herself as a successful entrepreneur. In the game, players direct Flo to perform a series of tasks by clicking on different parts of the screen—seating customers, taking customers' orders, delivering food, bringing the check, and clearing the table. Because Flo can carry only two objects at a time (orders, food, dirty dishes, etc.), players send her dashing around the restaurant, clicking multiple steps ahead to provide her with an itinerary of tasks to follow. The customers have timers, represented by depleting hearts above them, and if players do not serve them quickly, they disappear in anger. Thus, the game creates an intense experience of multitasking, where

players' eyes dart around the screen, paying attention to the demands of the customers and multiple tasks that Flo must manage (figure 2.4).

Much has been written about *Diner Dash*, particularly about the gendering of casual games and its mixture of play and work.[8] Game scholar Shira Chess argues that time-management games like *Diner Dash* can be understood as helping women to cope with a *third shift*, a term scholars use to describe moments in women's everyday life where negotiations between the first shift at work and the second shift at home are mulled over (2012). This third shift can be an occasion of intense self-reflection, where one works through the anxieties produced during the first two shifts (Bolton 2000). Games like *Diner Dash* inhabit this third shift, substituting the pleasurable anxiety of multitasking play for psychological anxiety and thus helping to shield players from potential self-criticism and worry in their own lives.

Taking a cue from the truncation of Flo's name, we can interpret *Diner Dash* through the lens of microflow activities. As I discussed in the last chapter, microflow activities like daydreaming and doodling are less complex forms of flow experience that provide order in everyday life. According to Csikszentmihalyi, these activities produce flow "at a lower level of complexity," "fill the gaps in daily routine," and "make reality manageable" (1975a, 141, 159–160). When Flo waits for player input, she stares out from the screen and sometimes performs animations that approximate microflow—brushing something off her sleeve, swaying with her hands on her hips, and yawning (figure 2.4). The short, early levels of *Diner Dash* can also be read as microflow for players because players might use the game to fill a gap in their daily routine. Casual and mobile games like *Diner Dash*, *Angry Birds* (2009), *Candy Crush Saga* (2012), and *Bricks 'N Balls* (2018) allow short bursts of play and flow and can be used to manage reality and stress temporarily.

Microflow can also be gendered. Researchers Maria Allison and Margaret Duncan explain that women and men experience flow, but that women rely more on brief moments of "coping strategies," "cognitive restructuring," and microflow to deal with everyday life because they must perform "multiple role responsibilities encompassed in career, home maintenance, and child care" (1988, 136–137). *Diner Dash* mirrors these experiences: players hustle around the restaurant, take care of the customers, cope with the intensity of the growing tasks, and cognitively restructure the psyche;

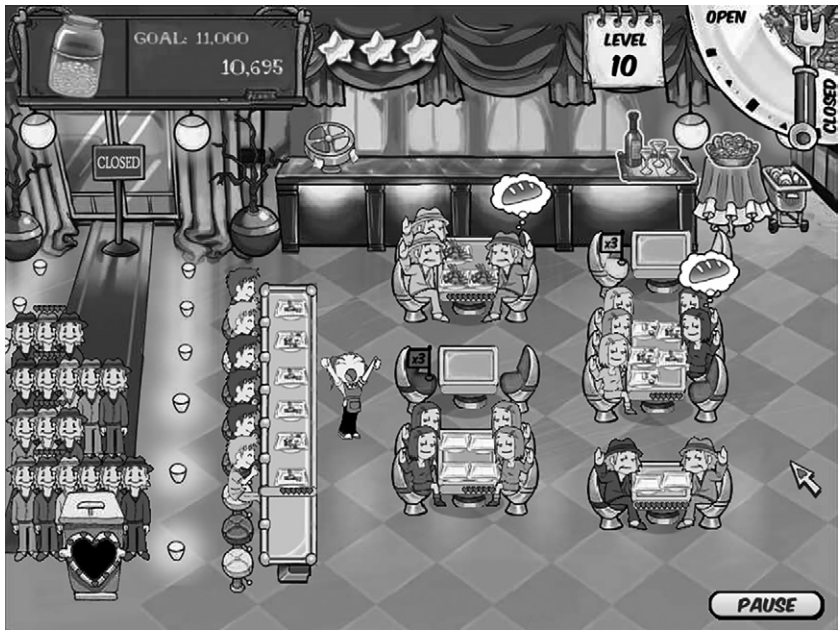

Figure 2.4
Flo (center) yawning as customers demand her attention in *Diner Dash*

they focus on quickly completing task after task, which helps to block out the anxieties of everyday life.

Diner Dash charts a movement from casual moments of play to longer spans of deep involvement akin to flow. As players progress, the temporal spans of the play increase. In the beginning, levels take a few minutes to complete, but the last levels require half an hour or more. This suggests that players move from microflow to macroflow, from "flo" to flow. Unlike *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, *Diner Dash* implements a standard form of difficulty ramping, where the challenges increase incrementally, introducing more customers with different needs, more types of tasks to complete, and so on. Indeed, *Diner Dash* can create intense states of absorption as players focus on clicking ahead of Flo to plan her route, always aware of tasks requiring attention and feeling competent enough to be in control.

After forty levels of play, *Diner Dash* rewards players with a comic-style cutscene where a goddess with six arms—holding a knife, spoon, fork, and menu—appears to Flo. The goddess challenges Flo to run her restaurant.

She then transforms Flo into an image of herself, giving Flo another pair of arms. Returning to the game, Flo now floats on a cloud with her legs crossed, her eyes closed and in a state of intense calm or nirvana (figure 2.5). Having more hands would seem to allow her to finish work more quickly than before, but it actually means having more things to balance simultaneously—an intensification of labor and multitasking. Flo's meditative state in these final levels of play suggests that now she can do her work with her eyes closed, and by this point in the game, players likely feel capable and prepared for the increase in difficulty. Flo is at peace with her harried multitasking. Flo is in *flow*, and perhaps the player is too.

In *Psychonauts* and *Diner Dash,* play and flow become methods of coping with psychological ailments, empowering the self, and shielding the individual from self-criticism. In the final battle against Jasper in *Psychonauts*, focusing attention on using skills to overcome challenges becomes a shield against external worries. *Diner Dash* also creates this shield, functioning to substitute a challenge-based play for anxieties that might erupt in the

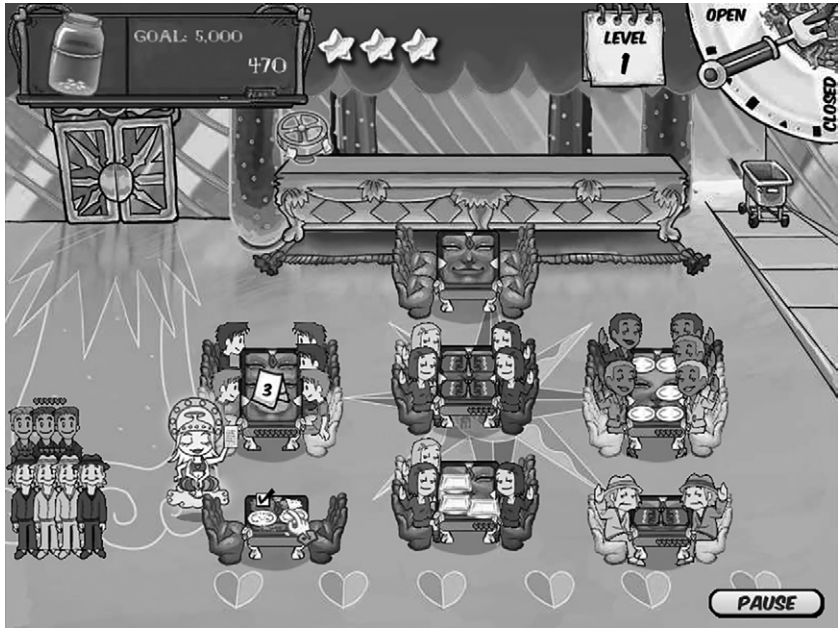

Figure 2.5
Flo (left) transformed into a goddess with four arms floating on a cloud in *Diner Dash*

gendered third shift of psychological labor. These games are self-reflexive and point toward the idea that video games can be used to block out worries, either with longer, more involved spans of play or shorter, casual bursts of play that help structure our everyday lives. Csikszentmihalyi framed the goal of the politics of enjoyment as providing individuals with a "way to cope with problems of personal and societal disintegration" by giving them more control over their actions (1975a, 195). The language of coping contrasts with positive associations that often accompany flow, and also foregrounds the individual use of flow to manage, rather than cure, alienation.

Celeste: "You've Got This!" or Flow as Coping

Flow is commonly understood as a positive feeling of effortless action and a peak experience. No doubt, when one is in the zone playing *Diner Dash*, one's play can feel effortless and fluid, and successfully managing the multiple demands of the customers is intensely satisfying. It feels good to cope with a difficult situation successfully. While often overlooked, the language of coping pervades descriptions of flow. When summarizing the flow experience in his best-selling book on the topic, Csikszentmihalyi leads with the idea that flow produces "a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges" (1990, 71). Alternatively, Turner writes when discussing flow theory that "in the ritualized limits of a game or the writing of a poem, a man or woman may *cope*, if they rise to the occasion with skill and tact. With control, worry and fear goes" (1982, 57; emphasis in original). To cope means to be capable when faced with difficulty. The etymological root of *cope* stems from a Latin word (*colaphus*) meaning to hit someone with a fist or to come to blows. To cope means to struggle, to battle. It suggests confrontation and endurance. Coping does not suggest victory *or* defeat, overcoming *or* succumbing, but rather the process of conflict. It sustains the status quo without transforming it. While we understand flow as an optimal experience, the language of coping can also reveal flow as strife and self-struggle. If "flow is to be as happy as the human can be," as Turner once said, then flow as a form of coping appears to be the best that individuals can feel, given life's struggles (1982, 58).

As a form of coping, flow helps to buttress and sustain the self. "You are stronger than you know," reads the title of a chapter from McGonigal's

book *Superbetter: The Power of Living Gamefully* (2015b). In this chapter, she describes flow theory as a method to empower individuals and encourage them to become aware of their unknown superpower: their ability to control attention. "Even when we're in pain," McGonigal writes, "even when we're suffering, we can control our attention spotlight and change our experience for the better" (2015b, 32). Healing consciousness becomes an individualized choice. She emphasizes that "*you* are in charge of your cognitive resources" and "*you* have this power" (32; emphasis in original). Here, inspirational and aspirational rhetoric replaces the harsher tone of individual responsibility that chides people to deal with their problems and "get over it." Yet this motivational tone still trades in the discourse of personal responsibility, even if this responsibility is delivered in the gentler terms of self-help and self-care.

"You can do this," players are told near the beginning of *Celeste* (2018), a video game that foregrounds processes of centering attention and flow as forms of coping. In the game, Madeline, a young woman who suffers from panic attacks, anxiety, and depression, comes to climb Mount Celeste to escape her troubles. In the tradition of *Super Meat Boy* (2010), *Celeste* is a two-dimensional platformer where players overcome difficult obstacles using mechanics such as precisely timed jumps, midair dashes, and clinging to walls to navigate levels brimming with dangerous obstacles. Because the game requires extreme precision and execution of movement, most players die frequently, often having to repeat a difficult action numerous times to complete a single screen. *Celeste* foregrounds the idea that players must try harder and harder, but unlike *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, it often minimizes setbacks without losing substantial progress. "We want people to come out of this game feeling capable and powerful," the developers explain, "so that means we have to teach them, challenge them, and support them through the failures along the way" (quoted in Klepek 2018). *Celeste* teaches players to cope with difficulty. To do this, the game begins with basic mechanics, like jumping, clinging to walls, and dashing in the air, and then subtly adjusts and extends these mechanics as the game progresses. Players build on their previous skills and grow them incrementally.

Throughout the game, Madeline must overcome herself as an obstacle to her success. Mount Celeste's magical powers cause Madeline's negative reflection to manifest, a version of Madeline that she calls a "part of me"

Figure 2.6
Cutscene with Madeline (left) and Badeline (right) in *Celeste*. Badeline explains to Madeline that she cannot be abandoned easily.

and whom online fans nicknamed Badeline (figure 2.6). Like Jasper in *Psychonauts*, this self-reflection embodies Madeline's self-criticism, constantly telling her that she will fail. Badeline's threats also appear in gameplay. In one sequence, Badeline mimics the player's movements after a delay of a few seconds. If players stop to think, Badeline will catch up with them and cause them to die. This creates a tense, temporal situation where the player ceaselessly tries to escape Madeline's negative self-reflection—a tension that can cause the player to fumble at the keypad and press the wrong controller button. "You can't outrun your own reflection," the game says at one point, punning on the gameplay and the idea that Madeline cannot escape her negative thoughts. When Madeline discusses her depression with Theo, another climber that she befriends, she explains, "I can't escape myself" and "I'm literally *fighting myself* the entire way" (emphasis in original).

Celeste foregrounds the self-struggle of coping. At one point, players must perform a deceptively simple minigame that teaches coping skills. Badeline halts a gondola that Madeline is riding with Theo, and Madeline suffers a panic attack. Theo teaches her a calming technique to close her eyes and imagine keeping a feather afloat with her breath.[9] The feather

appears within a white box superimposed on the lift, and the player simulates breathing by pressing and releasing a button on the controller, causing the feather to rise and fall (figure 2.7).

Yet players do not simply sustain the floating feather as a form of meditation. To overcome the panic attack, players must keep the feather within the white box as it slowly rises and falls onscreen. The box also shrinks over time, figuring a centering of one's "attention spotlight," as McGonigal calls it (2015b, 31–32). This increases the difficulty of the minigame and can increase anxiety as the task becomes more difficult and requires precise button presses. Coping is also a challenge, the minigame suggests. It requires skill and practice. Later, Madeline uses the feather technique when Badeline appears and stresses her out, but Badeline slices the feather in half and laughs at Madeline for trying to solve difficult problems with a simple solution.

The feather minigame approximates a flow activity through the centering of attention and the attempt to balance skills (i.e., controlling the feather) with increasing challenges (i.e., the moving, shrinking box). Here, flow's standard balancing act is represented as a struggle in a moment of stress, not as a positive affect. After the gondola scene, golden feather powerups begin to appear that temporarily transform Madeline into a fireball. She

Figure 2.7
The feather control minigame in *Celeste*

is literally "on fire," a burst of energy that players can completely control. For a brief amount of time, players can fly around the screen instead of jumping on platforms or clinging to walls. One can read the feather power-up as a representation of flow where Madeline is in the zone. Yet unlike common power-ups in games, such as the stars in *Super Mario Bros.* that offer a period of "on fire" invincibility, players can easily die if they touch obstacles. Moreover, the developers integrate this feather mechanic into the level design, creating new obstacles that augment the game's challenges (e.g., tight passages that players must fly through without touching the walls, covered with deadly plants). The feather is not a power-up that eases progress or represents enjoyable, effortless flowing; rather, it is another skill to master in order to cope with difficult obstacles. Figuratively, flow does not solve personal problems; it *sustains* coping.[10]

Reading representations of flow situations in *Celeste*—the minigame, the golden feather—reveals flow as a form of coping. McGonigal says that flow "emerges when we have a clear goal, a challenging task to perform, and sufficient skills to meet the challenge—or at least to come close enough that we are energized to try again and do better" (2015b, 44). *Celeste* creates these conditions for flow, and its core gameplay experience typifies the idea that we "come close enough" and feel like we have sufficient skills to succeed. On a single, difficult screen, we come close to succeeding again and again, knowing that we can overcome the challenge eventually. This engages players, focusing their attention and motivating continued attempts, but this engagement also feels jerky, frustrating, repetitive, and even disheartening at times.

Indeed, *Celeste* does not create a steady balance of skills and challenges that produce extended periods of fluid effortlessness or feeling "in the zone" (as in *Diner Dash*). Although *Celeste* absorbed me, it also caused my fingers to hurt, and I took breaks when my frustrations mounted. I became conscious of time passing when I remained on a single screen for long periods, and spikes of anxiety derailed any smooth, trancelike experience. This particular feeling of flow felt like coping, even though it engaged my attention and motivated me to continue.

The final boss battle with Badeline is a tortuous exercise in sustained coping. Players must use all their skills, navigating multiple, treacherous screens while Badeline floats in the distance, hurling beams of angry energy at players. The battle goes on and on, for screen after screen. In one arduous

sequence, players fall on a golden feather; fly through dangerous corridors of spiky plants; cling to a wall; jump on Badeline (who flees); fall down to the next screen; cling to a wall; jump on Badeline again, who launches the player across deadly plants to another wall; fall onto a moving platform that propels players toward Badeline again; and on and on and on. One poorly timed button press, and the entire sequence restarts—a devastating feeling. The battle builds enormous amounts of frustration, anxiety, and even boredom because it lasts forever. This is intentional. In the narrative, Badeline is the voice of self-criticism and failure, and *Celeste*'s designers cause players to feel her presence during the battle by triggering experiences of negative affect in the real world. For example, similar to when I played *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, my fingers cramped, rage interrupted my play, and the boredom of endless repetition gnawed away at my mind; a little voice said, "Enough already, quit—you can't do this." By provoking these thoughts and feelings, the intense anxiety, frustration, and repetitive boredom inhibited flow, creating an oscillation between moments of absorption and their disruption. These moments of disruption were also self-reflective, and by experiencing the interruptions of my own negative thoughts during this battle, the game suggested that I had to overcome my inner, critical voice to succeed.

After the battle, Madeline accepts Badeline instead of defeating her, which merges the two halves of the self. This provides players with a new power-up: they can now dash twice in the air instead of once (thus representing the two selves that reside together). During the inspiring final ascent of the mountain, Badeline occasionally separates from Madeline. In these moments, players must dash toward Badeline, using her as a platform to ascend. Instead of posing a threat, Badeline catches Madeline and boosts her far into the air, thus literalizing the idea of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. By forcing players to focus on Badeline as an uplifting platform instead of a dangerous impediment to avoid, near the end of the game *Celeste* suggests that players view their selves as the source of success, no matter the amount of previous failure. The game even keeps track of how many times players die, but it tells them, "Be proud of your death count! The more you die, the more you're learning. Keep going!" Learning to cope with difficulty encourages players to fail upward (as the entrepreneurs say), growing a stronger self from the ashes of defeat and buttressing the individual's powers to attain greater heights. This dovetails

with Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow as the growth of the self and escaping forward, "where one hones one's potential by confronting new challenges" (1993, 184).

Celeste blurs the boundaries between entertainment product and self-help tool, suggesting that games can teach players an attitude and skills through which they can improve everyday life. It embodies the ideas of the politics of enjoyment by seeking to empower individual agency through play and flow while countering psychological disorder. Yet *Celeste* is not about solving personal problems once and for all. Rather, it concerns *resolve*, the drive to keep struggling. In *Celeste*, players learn to control their attention and direct it away from what causes suffering in order to overcome its effects; in the gameplay, players flee Badeline in the beginning and also learn to ignore and overlook the endless dying and failing. We can understand the politics of enjoyment and flow theory in a similar light, as ideas that foreground forms of sustained coping that *manage and mollify the symptoms of alienation without addressing their causes*.[11] In this way, flow theory allows alienation to continue, even as it is treating its effects.

In *Celeste*, we never know what causes Madeline's depression. Players only see her malfunctioning self, not the cause of this malfunction. This cause is unimportant to the game. Only Madeline's recovery matters. Yet, as philosopher Sara Ahmed writes, "To recover can be to re-cover, to cover over the causes of pain and suffering" (2010, 216). *Celeste* foregrounds coping as self-struggle and the resolution of conflict in terms of strengthening and unifying the self. In my estimation, this distracts us from seeing the demand to manage oneself as a potential cause and containment of suffering. In *Celeste*, the malfunctioning self is the cause of Madeline's ailment, but the solution is to repair the glitch, unifying the self and strengthening it.

From a different political standpoint than the politics of enjoyment, one should not manage the self and its symptoms, but rather critique the self as causing alienation. From this perspective, capitalism sells solutions—self-help books, antidepressants, even video games—to depressed and inactive selves that turn forms of self-management into products and what Fisher (2009) calls captured discontent. From a more radical perspective, the goal would be to invest desire along lines that free us from these forms of containment.[12] "We are not depressed; we're on strike," write the political collective the Invisible Committee. They continue, "For those who refuse to

manage themselves, 'depression' is not a state but a passage, a bowing out, a sidestep toward *political* disaffiliation" (2009, 34; emphasis in original). Instead of responding to the malignancy of self-criticism by purchasing temporary solutions or empowering the individual (*Celeste*, *Diner Dash*, *Psychonauts*), radical agendas reimagine depression as resistance, as a step toward dissolving the demand to be a self or a normal individual. Depression becomes an opportunity for channeling struggle and anger toward overcoming or abandoning oppressive norms, not coping with its effects. The game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* offers an illustration of this idea.

Hellblade: Focusing on the Causes of Suffering and Alienation

The games that I have examined in this chapter integrate the process of looking away from the cause of suffering as part of their game mechanics. In *Psychonauts*, players must dodge and ignore Jasper's deadly criticisms. In the beginning of *Celeste*, players look away from and flee Badeline in order to survive. In *Diner Dash*, players look ahead of Flo as they click to plan her future itinerary and thus look away from the representations of her harried and exhausting labor (see figure 2.4 earlier in this chapter). Even when Flo achieves nirvana and "flow" at the end of the game, her eyes are closed, indicating peace and ease with her multitasking, but also that she has closed her eyes to the doubling of her labor, which generates more work to be done (figure 2.5). Not all games that investigate themes of relentless self-criticism, coping, and resolve ask players to look away from the external causes of these issues or end with the empowered self. For instance, in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), players confront suffering and its causes. It is not a game about enjoyment, successful coping, or healing alienation, but about pain, suffering, and cruel defeat. While *Celeste* empowers the self to overcome difficulty, *Hellblade* suggests that the self will fail and explicitly implicates oppressive forms of power as the cause of suffering and the continuous demand to cope.

Hellblade is a third-person perspective adventure game that tells the story of Senua, a Pict warrior living in the eighth century. Senua suffers from psychosis, hears voices, and lives in a state of relentless self-criticism. Carrying the severed head of her dead lover, Dillion, she embarks on a quest to bring him back to life by descending into hell. Throughout the game, players hear the voices of multiple people, sometimes encouraging Senua and the

player to quit, give up, or turn back, and sometimes providing motivation to keep going, rise after being knocked down, or muster strength in order to finish off weakened enemies. The designers recommend that players wear stereo headphones to strengthen the illusion of being inside Senua's head, immersed within the conflicting chaos of her negative thoughts and psychosis. Moreover, the game often breaks the "fourth wall," as Senua looks out of the screen, implicating the player as one of the controlling demons in her head.

Hellblade's combat requires players to develop a style that endures relentless attack. These battles allegorize intense moments of coping with external threats, managing the noise of distracting voices in the headphones, and evading attack, all with the hope of gaining power to dispatch enemies. The battles place Senua in tight, claustrophobic confines where multiple enemies threaten to flank her (figure 2.8). Players must constantly worry about being surrounded while attacking, parrying, and dodging attacks. Evading attacks can be difficult because of the confined battlefield, and dodging can disorient spatial awareness, thus allowing enemies to get behind Senua. Players must also cope with distracting voices (in their headphones if they are wearing them) that often make discouraging comments but also provide useful information. For example, the voices will warn of an attack from

Figure 2.8
Senua (in foreground, center-left) confronts multiple enemies in the final, unwinnable battle (Boss Fight Database 2017)

behind, a helpful mechanic that simultaneously provokes anxiety as one scrambles to dodge an unseen threat.

Landing successful attacks, parrying, and dodging also provide Senua with a special power called *focus*. When Senua gains enough of this power, players can use it to slow enemies, reduce threats, and augment Senua's attacks. Focus briefly eases the challenges of the battle and provides players with a burst of energy that can allow one to chain attacks more efficiently. The ability can be interpreted as a representation of flow, which also focuses attention on a task and augments our ability to act. One strategy during the battles is to evade enemy attacks, build up focus, and then use it to dispatch enemies. Thus, the battles create oscillations between evading, dodging, and looking away from threats and then focusing directly on these threats in order to overcome them.

Over the course of the game, players develop combat skills to cope with challenges and transform the battles into satisfying sequences of control, a satisfaction that *Hellblade* eventually undermines. At the end of the game, Senua fails in her quest, and the player's coping skills are revealed as an obstacle to her liberation, not her salvation. Waves of enemies attack the player as Senua approaches the center of the underworld (see figure 2.8). At this point, players can likely dispatch enemies quickly and ruthlessly with their practiced skills and a powerful sword that they have obtained. Yet the enemies keep coming. In fact, this battle cannot be won, no matter how long one struggles. Either players realize that they must die to progress—and the voices hint at this by whispering to the player to let go and give in—or they simply fight for as long as possible until they become exhausted.

Unlike in *Psychonauts*, *Diner Dash*, and *Celeste*, in *Hellblade* players cannot use skills to overcome this final challenge. "Flow experiences occur in activities where one can cope," Csikszentmihalyi writes, "with all the demands for action" (1975a, 45). In the final battle, the demands eventually overwhelm the player. In fact, the final battle tours the extremities of flow: from comfortable, almost boring control; to a feeling of capability and focus, where one copes with growing challenges; and finally, to anxiety and a feeling of being overwhelmed before inevitable failure. Flow staves off defeat and sustains coping, but it does not lead to liberation.

While the game empowers the player and the self, in the end this self is sacrificed and shown to be an effect of power. "My failings can also lead to

the dismantling of the hypothesis of the self," argue the Invisible Committee, "*The self is not some thing within us that is in a state of crisis; it is the form they mean to stamp upon us*" (2009, 33; emphasis in original). In *Hellblade*, power stamps Senua with her suffering self. Near the end of the game, a cutscene reveals that patriarchy and gendered violence caused Senua's suffering. Players learn that one voice in Senua's head was her father's. He created Senua's trauma by accusing her and her mother of being cursed, and he burned the mother at the stake, which Senua witnessed as a child. The father also isolated Senua as a threat and alienated her from her community. His vitriolic words and actions caused and intensified the internalization of voices in her head. "You created this darkness so you could hide behind it," Senua yells at him. She looks into the camera in this moment of accusation, and the camera aligns with her father's gaze. Breaking the fourth wall implicates the player as another spirit within her that *possesses* her, controls her, forces her to continue her quest, and causes her perpetual suffering. It implicates the player as occupying a similar space as the father.

While this self-reflexivity does not absolve *Hellblade* from the depictions of violence against women and Senua that the game endlessly recycles for players, it implicates their consumption of images as part of the "darkness" that Senua struggles against. In the end of the game, Senua dumps Dillion's severed head into the abyss. She sacrifices her burden, denies the self that has been stamped upon her, which is empowered to cope, and abandons her quest, which was catalyzed by internalized masculine violence and control. She then walks away and invites the player to come with her, to start a new story.

While *Hellblade* foregrounds the patriarchal causes of Senua's suffering, the politics of enjoyment teaches us to look away and redirect attention from suffering. To understand this suffering more clearly, Ahmed argues that "we have to work and struggle not so much to feel hurt but to notice what causes hurt, which means unlearning what we have learned not to notice" (2010, 216). Flow can teach us not to notice. It can create an individualized struggle against the constant threat of worry, anxiety, and fear that is generated by external forces such as patriarchy, inequality, and oppression. At least through the lens of the games that I have analyzed, the politics of enjoyment uses play and flow to create a psychic shield while teaching people to cope and strive harder and harder as individuals.

Unlearning this striving—which is what the player is tasked to do in the final battle of *Hellblade*—is a way that opens the possibility of noticing and criticizing the causes of alienation that flow and play can obscure.[13]

Psychonauts: The Healing Powers of Normalized Play

While *Celeste* promotes the idea that developing skills to overcome challenges in a game could parallel a mindset that would strengthen the individual and combat psychological disorder in life, Senua rejects a version of individuality stamped on her by power, as well as the kind of coping that this individuality requires. She abandons her quest because the skills that she has learned do not solve but rather perpetuate her suffering. She even implicates the player—who actually is coping with challenges in the game and perhaps experiencing flow—as one of the causes of her suffering and striving. This raises an important question: what if flow activities ease alienation for some, but produce or sustain it for others? Ahmed asks this question when she explicitly invokes Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow to describe how life can feel alienating and resistant to some while feeling fluid, open, and nonresistant to others. She writes, "We might need to rewrite happiness by considering how it feels to be stressed by the very forms of life that enable some bodies to flow into space" (2010, 11–12). From this perspective, flow can operate as a normative form that stresses some bodies while activating enjoyment for others. This becomes important for the politics of enjoyment (and also gamification, which seeks to redesign everyday life as a game). The question is about not only who would be *left out* of a world governed by the politics of enjoyment, but also who would be *stressed out* by this redesigned world. As I mentioned in chapter 1, flow experiences are often seen as ahistorical, universal, and timeless. Yet what if flow is not seen as a universal, but as a normalizing force?

For example, *Psychonauts* narrativizes the gameful mindset, before anyone called it that. It foregrounds the idea that play can save the day. But what kind of play brings this healing, and who performs it? *Psychonauts* foregrounds an innocent and normalized version of play as its solution to personal malaise. Adults who have lost their *joie de vivre* can rediscover it through play and the assistance of the boy hero, Raz. As discussed previously in this chapter, Fred recovers by watching and learning from Raz's

play and his absorption in the game, and Gloria recovers after Raz demonstrates the benefits of play and how it can help her evade her nasty inner critic. The cheerful boy hero and his innocent playfulness return the suffering others to normal. Yet Raz's normalized play is not as innocent as it seems; it can be read as a rehabilitation of abnormality and otherness. Moreover, the gameplay of *Psychonauts* can distract from a deeper investigation of the causes of suffering and can create a feeling of separation or alienation from the characters that one heals.

Psychonauts depicts the cause of adulthood depression, self-criticism, anxiety, paranoia, and psychosis as being the result of a corruption of childhood play by the serious concerns of adulthood. Gloria's rampant self-criticism stems from her mother leaving her in a boarding school with a harsh taskmaster who teaches her to act. Her childhood is ruptured by the optimization of play and performance. Coach Oleander (the main antagonist in the game) turns into a power-hungry military figure who wants to dominate the world because his father, a butcher, captured and killed young Oleander's beloved rabbit. Not only that, but the father literally forces Oleander to consume his playmate. In the virtual reality game *Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin* (2017), players glimpse the past of the sadistic antagonist, Dr. Loboto. Young Loboto exhibited playful and queer psychic abilities as a baby that his parents abhorred. They lobotomized him in order to delete his pathology permanently. Both *Psychonauts* games configure psychological disorders in adulthood as the result of the removal, disfiguration, and lobotomization of childhood play.

The psychological validity of this claim aside, the narrative of *Psychonauts* promotes the idea that recovering the innocence of childhood play can solve diverse personal problems. Csikszentmihalyi also invokes childhood as a model for the politics of enjoyment. "Left to themselves," he writes, "children seek out flow with the inevitability of natural law" (1975a, 199). Childhood becomes an innocent, natural source of flow. For the politics of enjoyment, the child's uncorrupted and unseparated connection to the world can be regained by adults. This idea can help explain why *Psychonauts* begins in the wonderland that is Whispering Rock summer camp. Here, Raz and the player run around, explore, climb trees, and practice their magical powers in a safe, natural playground. There are no enemies to encounter here. Players often return to this camp during the first part of the game—a place of freedom, childhood innocence, and exploratory play.

Yet play is not innocent in *Psychonauts*, even if the protagonist is a cheerful, joking kid from summer camp. While *Psychonauts* experiments with the three-dimensional platformer genre (e.g., with scale, interesting abilities, and so on), it embodies "good design," as Bennett Foddy describes it: it focuses on traditional genre elements like exploration, running and jumping, collecting items and powers, while also privileging smooth forms of engagement and normal difficulty ramps where players develop skills to overcome increasing challenges.

This basic form of game literacy would have been familiar to many players in 2005. Raz and the player are the ones who are not stressed out by this literacy. They are the ones who are asked to flow and bring their play (and playfulness) to the disaffected adults whom they seek to heal. Metaphorically, the hero Raz is a stereotypical boy-gamer, with strong psychic powers (i.e., gaming skills), who is on a gendered quest to save Lili, a girl camper and damsel in distress. His skills increase, and he gains more power as the game progresses. He overcomes failures and challenges without succumbing to depression or psychosis. While Raz has psychic powers (and the camp's promotional materials refer to campers as "circus freaks" and "outcasts"), he is the normal boy-gamer who rehabilitates abnormal characters whose play has been corrupted. From a critical perspective, Raz launches into the brains of others without their permission, conquering their psyches, stealing their emotional baggage, using them as vessels to increase his powers, and returning them to a so-called normal.

The gameplay in *Psychonauts* can also produce a looking away from the deeper causes of pain that characters experience in the game. For example, the level within Gloria's mind offers a complex array of details concerning the potential causes of her psychological ailments. Before the battle with Jasper Rolls described earlier in this chapter, players must collect multiple scripts and watch performances that relate information concerning Gloria's past—about her absent father, a mother who committed suicide, and so on. Players also discover that Gloria has a queer core. They first meet a representation of Gloria's inner voice and internal muse, Bonita Soleil, hiding away in her backstage dressing room. She is crying, but when players talk to her, she has a gruff, masculine voice that belies her fragile frame and long eyelashes. The feminine sobbing is just a recording that Bonita uses to practice her role as a sad, depressed, and dejected actress.

The simple idea that Gloria's self-criticism is caused by a corruption of childhood play is suddenly multivalent and rich. Yet this dense, narrative information is difficult to parse, especially when players direct their attention toward overcoming the level's challenges. For example, while players watch the rehearsals of plays that describe Gloria's past, they not only are focused on interpreting the scenes, but also must search for clues to help them progress in the game (e.g., a descending prop needed to access a new area of the theater). Even the battle against Jasper Rolls discussed above privileges action at the expense of digesting the vignettes that players have just witnessed. The more one flows, the less one knows about the causes of Gloria's suffering. One's attention is focused elsewhere, toward the challenges at hand. Privileging player action over a deeper interpretation of the complex causes of Gloria's pain can alienate players from Gloria and Bonita, even producing a feeling of separation from them.

Moreover, throughout *Psychonauts,* Raz and the player rehabilitate abnormality with their normalized play. For example, it is not entirely clear if Raz liberates Gloria's inner queerness or represses it. Do Raz and the player free Bonita from Jasper's toxic attacks and her backstage closet in order to allow her to perform her drag? Or do their actions rehabilitate Bonita, and she silently performs practiced happiness and radiant femininity in order to mask her inner queerness? In any event, through a gendered rescue narrative, the agency of the boy hero and player saves Gloria from herself, which indicates that Raz heals the turmoil caused by the gendered relations of her past and her inner queerness.

There are other moments that foreground an anxiety over otherness as well. The orderly Fred, whom I discussed previously, loses his grip on reality when he is defeated in the board game Waterloo-O by the demented patient Crispin Whytehead. Crispin is a withdrawn, disabled, and straitjacketed inmate who plays queerly, pushing around the game pieces with a tool that he holds in his mouth. While Crispin's straitjacket literally "handicaps" him—which in game terminology means that he has taken on a disadvantage in order to equalize the playing field for participants of different skill levels—he still defeats Fred twenty-seven times in a row. The orderly Fred becomes disordered when he encounters Crispin, and later players must heal Fred by interesting him in a normal, therapeutic form of play and turning him into a flowing subject.[14]

Even Raz is troubled by differences in the game, and at one point he must perform a queer and disabled otherness (by donning a straitjacket, a painting in the likeness of Dr. Loboto, and a hook for a hand) to trick the visually impaired Crispin and sneak past him. The straitjacket prevents Raz from climbing and grasping ledges, thus disabling the player's play and potentially disrupting the flow. Yet immediately after fooling Crispin, Raz removes the costume in a cutscene where he briefly ponders his own sanity, declaring snidely, "The things I do for Lili's brain."

Raz might don a version of otherness to pass before Crispin, but it is temporary. His performance of otherness is depicted as an undesirable threat to his sanity, powerful abilities, and heteronormative quest. While the straitjacket interrupts the normal functioning of game mechanics—queering the play and truncating the growth of the self and its skills that is key to the flow experience—Raz removes it to return his powers and enable progress. His core identity as the powerful and able boy hero remains the same. Indeed, after passing by Crispin, Raz and the player must climb Thorny Towers Home for the Disturbed, which requires grasping ledges, clambering up poles, and swinging from bars as essential components of the level's standard gameplay.

In *Psychonauts*, players reform the psychic deviance of institutionalized characters, ostensibly caused by a disruption of their childhood play, and return them to normal. Figuratively, *Psychonauts* suggests that individuals with diverse forms of psychological blockages can dissolve their troubles and rekindle their *joie de vivre* if they learn to play and flow like the boy hero, Raz. The player and Raz are the ones who are not stressed out by the "good design" of *Psychonauts*; they install their gameful mindset in the psyches of others, wiping away their mental cobwebs and emotional baggage while demonstrating that healing can occur by overcoming challenges using focused skills.

Yet we should not view this as an innocent process. From a critical perspective, *Psychonauts* does not simply display the healing of different characters through play; it can be read as representing flow and the politics of enjoyment as ideological straitjackets of sorts—forms of innocent, normal play that restrain, manage, and rehabilitate deviance, employing a dominant form of play to reproduce social norms instead of working to critique and dismantle these norms. Those who do not flow through life freely

because they resist its dominant forms (the bad subjects, the deviant, the depressed) are corrected by those who do.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the politics of enjoyment through a close, critical analysis of video games. Admittedly, my analysis revolves around particular video games, but I see these games as symptomatic of larger cultural issues surrounding the use of play and flow to solve personal and social problems of alienation.[15] The games in this chapter reveal that the politics of enjoyment privileges individual solutions to social and personal problems. Their gameplay and narratives combine to suggest that players focus attention on a task to create a shield against self-criticism. They urge players to look away from suffering and direct attention toward positive emotions to cover over the causes of alienation. Thus, flow appears as a coping mechanism, a form of self-struggle that unifies the self and seeks to empower individuals to solve their own, internal problems, despite their external causes.

One key idea from this chapter is that flow theory emphasizes looking away from the causes of alienation. Csikszentmihalyi says that the politics of enjoyment begins with "the recognition that there is such a thing as positive enjoyment," and one can focus on this positivity (1975a, 197). Yet turning attention toward enjoyment can also turn attention away from what causes suffering.[16] This can be indispensable for coping—and Csikszentmihalyi says that flow is useful even "on the battlefront, on a factory assembly line, or in a concentration camp" (1975a, 36)—but the dark side of the politics of enjoyment and its extension over all of life is that the structural problems that lead to war, alienation, inequality, poverty, racism, patriarchy, and other social ills are not corrected, but rather painted over. The politics of enjoyment becomes just a bandage. No doubt bandages are necessary and useful, but they do not heal the cause of the bleeding. This is why Ahmed argues in *The Promise of Happiness*, "To recognize suffering by recognizing the cause of suffering is thus a part of the revolutionary cause" (2010, 168). From this perspective, suffering motivates the quest to understand what causes the bleeding, which can also motivate social action to change these causes.

One of the causes is the stamp of individuality itself. Flow theory can function as individualistic forms of containing, not solving alienation. They place the burden of change on individuals, a Sisyphean solution to ills with social causes. The Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson once argued that the desire to transform the self is "allegorical of what is called revolution," and representations of self-improvement conceal an unconscious political desire to transform society (2002, 136). Only collective action, he explains, can achieve this transformation. What happens, then, is that individuals internalize this collective desire to transform society as an unfulfilled wish.[17]

This unfulfilled wish is then expressed in the products of popular culture. We see symptoms of such a wish in games like *Psychonauts*, *Diner Dash*, *Celeste*, and *Hellblade,* which depict the self as the transformative location for healing personal and social issues. The splitting, doubling, and multiplication of the self that appears in these games represent an unconscious wish for the complex social negotiations needed to accomplish radical cultural transformation. The personal psyches that Raz enters (dreamlands populated with intricate, imaginary worlds of social conflict), Flo's doubled hands and her self-reflection as a goddess, Madeline's split personality and personified self-reflection, the multiplicity of voices in Senua's head—all of these doublings, multiplications, and outgrowths represent an internalization of social conflict within the self and the turbulence that results when individuals become containers for this conflict.[18] The coping, self-struggle, and rampant self-criticism represented in these games signify the desire for social negotiations needed to transform society, which is then precariously managed and diffused by the player, who works to overcome the psychic disturbances and contain them within the individual.

Flow theory contends that individual consciousness must be repaired first, and only then can social transformation occur. The problem is that individual consciousness cannot truly repair itself. Flow might mollify the symptoms of alienation, but eventually worry and anxiety will break through the shield created by flow. In *Celeste*, Madeline must accept that a final solution to her problems does not exist, and she must resolve to cope with her anxiety forever, integrating Badeline into her being. In *Hellblade*, the last battle presents an endless stream of enemies until the player can no longer cope with the overwhelming, external challenges. *Diner Dash* ends with Flo *almost* reaching her destiny—the completion of her work, the

overcoming of distracting demands, and her attainment of leisure—only to have this destiny truncated by an alarm that represents her return to work and her harried life.[19] These games foreground the inevitable failure of the individual to solve the problems that emerge from outside the self.

One could respond that social forms of play provide a solution and a less individualistic version of the politics of enjoyment (a point I return to in the conclusion of this book). For example, the play guru Bernie De Koven (1992) reimagines flow as a form of confluence (or flowing together) and "CoLiberation," where instead of the poles of skills versus challenges in the typical flow diagram, players oscillate between the poles of "ME" versus "WE." Too much emphasis on "ME" leads to isolation, whereas too much emphasis on "WE" produces conformity. The sweet spot of CoLiberation occurs in between. Games researcher Celia Pearce expands De Koven's ideas into a concept of "intersubjective flow," which "situates the flow state between people rather than within the individual. In this case, flow moves from the realm of the psychological to the realm of the social" (2009, 123). No doubt this is an important way to reimagine flow, and at times Csikszentmihalyi and others make similar claims, arguing that people must be both individualized *and* socialized, a point that conflicts with the idea that individual consciousness must be optimized before social change can occur.[20] It also suggests that flow can be useful to produce feelings of social togetherness, camaraderie, and fellowship by integrating a productive, motivated, and individualized flowing subject within social formations seeking collective change. Perhaps then we would discover a communist Csikszentmihalyi, a Marxist McGonigal, or a flowing insurrectionist.

This chapter has not focused on the possibilities of intersubjective flow. Rather, it has emphasized the *persistence* of solo play, particularly in games that address issues related to the politics of enjoyment, such as using flow to overcome psychological problems. The games that I have analyzed have been included, in part, because of the continuation of a cultural situation that seeks to manage and contain social transformation by privileging individualism, personal responsibility, and self-care. Moreover, this chapter has critiqued the idea from flow theory that individual consciousness must be repaired before social change can occur. Social and group flow charts a future path, but this path requires a sustained critique of the persistence of individualized forms of containment and management that continue to inhibit social change—the critical approach followed in this chapter.

Beyond the idea that the politics of enjoyment privileges the individual before the social, we must also be aware, as Ahmed suggests, that this solution to alienation favors some individuals over others. My reading of *Psychonauts* foregrounds the idea that a particular, ideological form of play brings salvation; it is the boy hero Raz, accustomed to the challenge-based form of flow, who brings healing to others. *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, for example, depicts deep flow's high challenge and high skill in terms of a hard-core masculinity, with the player's avatar being a muscleman sitting in a cauldron. Although the game alludes to the challenges of disability, the muscled male avatar suggests that attaining the high levels of performance required by flow is the domain of masculinity.[21]

Psychonauts, *Celeste*, *Hellblade*, and *Diner Dash* depict flow as a gendered form of coping. Raz saves Gloria from her relentless self-criticism. Madeline must learn to cope with anxiety and stress through her empowering quests (unlike her easygoing friend and climbing companion, Theo). Senua learns that her psychic ailments that require exhausting, endless coping were caused by the gendered violence of the father toward mother and daughter. *Diner Dash* embodies a form of microflow that allows Flo (and the player) to manage the demands of a gendered third shift of relentless self-criticism. These games suggest that women use flow to cope, while men use it to optimize their individual agency and become powerful, flowing subjects. Within games and beyond, we must be critical of the idea that flow, at least for some, might mean fluid action and intense, prolonged involvement, but for others, it becomes a way to cope in a world that distributes more anxiety onto some shoulders than others.

Indeed, standard forms of flow sought by many games might trigger other forms of stress. Where would stress from flow come from? Any of the ideologies of flow that I discuss in chapter 1, such as flow's privileging of individuality, self-growth, or action over critical evaluation, can provide the occasion for discontent. For example, players of *Hellblade* might learn to question self-growth, mastery, and individual agency as forces that perpetuate and sustain stressful coping without solving the issues that cause it. Alternatively, the game designer and author Anna Anthropy questions the idea that challenge and difficulty are central to games—forms of "good design" that can alienate players who are not interested in challenge-based forms of immersion or see them as ideologically problematic (2012a). If standard forms of flow might produce stress and alienation for some, we

need to turn a critical eye toward the politics of enjoyment to understand its potential exclusions.

While this chapter has focused on a subset of the politics of enjoyment as an early form of gamification—namely, that one can adopt a gameful mindset toward life in order to overcome life's challenges—it suggests that we must take a critical attitude toward gamification more generally. We need to critique gamification and the ideological uses of play and enjoyment that offer solutions to alienation, but only mollify its symptoms or perpetuate ideas that individuals can solve problems of alienation through personal resolve alone. Gamification scholars and designers must engage with work that critiques positive psychology, the normative social goals of enjoyment and happiness, and the experiences of flow and play itself. Works such as Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Bonnie Ruberg's (2019) discussion of queer game studies as degamification, or Sebastian Deterding's (2014b) argument for critical forms of gamification should be required reading for those who pursue the positive potential of play and games to transform society.[22]

Deterding offers a cyclical (and cynical) view of history in which gamification instrumentalizes play and uses it as a tool to heal alienation—a theme that runs throughout the history of the politics of play, as well as through games like *Diner Dash*, *Psychonauts*, and *Celeste,* where play becomes therapeutically useful. Yet Deterding argues that this instrumentalization eventually ends up "engendering alienation" (2014a, 51). When alienation suffocates, play provides relief, but then these forms of healing play become instrumentalized or commodified, creating alienation once again. When this happens, Deterding says, people will seek new playful methods to remove alienation. "The game's afoot," Shakespeare wrote, and we might reimagine his other valiant words spoken to our dear friend Play, "Once more unto the breach, dear Play, once more." Play and its subset flow can become an endless, innocent source for battling the final boss of alienation, which simply will not die. Yet this cyclical process opens a historical opportunity to politicize alienation and feelings of discontent, to turn self-struggle, rampant self-criticism, and depression toward modes of political affiliation and collective struggle instead of seeking to innovate new, playful techniques to distract us once again.

"The revolutionary is an affect alien in this specific sense," Ahmed writes, "You do not flow; you are stressed; you experience the world as a

form of resistance in coming to resist a world" (2010, 169). For Ahmed, alienation drives the revolutionary cause. Conversely, using play and flow as a way to cope with a resistant world and assuage the symptoms of alienation can manage the formation of revolutionary consciousness (which, as I mentioned in the introduction, was Lukács's point about play operating to compensate for an alienated life).

The games analyzed in this chapter represent the politics of enjoyment, flow, and play itself as palliative medications that assuage the causes of suffering. This opens an opportunity to turn our attention toward solving these causes—a task that requires a collective response instead of going it (and flowing it) alone. The next chapter continues an examination of how flow theory manages individuals through video games, but it turns toward the use of flow theory to commodify video games and turn players into consumers. Like flow's function as a coping mechanism, its use to extend consumption is obscured by the common idea that flow is simply about fun and enjoyment.

3 Streams of Consumption: Video Games and Televisual Flow

"Hey, kids! Do you like toys? Yeah! Know what's more fun than playing with toys? Hmm? Setting them on fire!" This begins the instructional video that introduces users to their new Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplace, a toy to end all toys. In the video game *Little Inferno* (2012), players sit before their entertainment fireplaces, buy stuff from a catalog, wait for the packages to arrive, and then set their contents ablaze. Burn children's blocks, stuffed animals, dolls, credit cards, photographs from your own hard drive, letters, cell phones, mininukes, the internet cloud, and, yes, even gaming devices. Burning stuff causes coins to drop, which players use to buy more things to burn. Sometimes players earn a combo—ignite a stuffed kitty and an old woman doll together and earn the "cat lady" prize. Achieving combos and buying every item in a catalog advances a narrative about a cold, dark world filling with smoke and snow while kids warm themselves before their spectacular play stations. Arguing that its players are distracted by rampant consumerism and alienated from others who exist within their own glowing hearths of media saturation, *Little Inferno* suggests that frivolous consumption will destroy the Earth, as ashes spew from the chimneys connected to each entertaining fireplace.

Little Inferno critiques the profit motive that underlies the monetization of video games, the industry's reliance on a planned obsolescence of game consoles, and the connections between addiction, casual game aesthetics, and consumption. Game designer Paolo Pedercini calls *Little Inferno* "a sign of maturity" for video games when "a cultural form starts to interrogate itself" (2012). As video games incubate within capitalism, they also express a maturing commodification that links them to a long history of mediated consumption. For example, when playing free mobile games such as

Galaxy Attack: Alien Shooter (2016) or *Bricks 'N Balls* (2018), players must wait through commercials between bursts of play (if they don't want to pay to skip them). This links gaming to a similar process of commercialization found on network television or YouTube, where advertisements interrupt the flow of consumption. *Little Inferno* plays with this aesthetic, often forcing players to wait for packages while they flip through a catalog of products to burn. The game does not require complex interactions—only a few button presses to buy things, drag them into the fireplace, and then collect the coins that fall—so players have time to sit and watch the fire or search through catalogs.

Indeed, television is the main point of reference for *Little Inferno*'s critique of gaming, and Pedercini explains that the game responds to "the social context of games: the fireplace, ancestral center of sociality, which has been replaced by radio, then by television, then by game consoles in an increasingly solitary, mediated and commercialized experience" (2012). In *Little Inferno*, family and friends do not gather around these entertainment fireplaces—it is only individual gamers, who communicate via electronic messages.

Little Inferno foregrounds its relationship to television. Players stare into a box that at times ignites with brilliant, representational content, and at other times remains empty and dull. Sugar Plumps, a girl whom players exchange messages with, often links the activity of play before the fireplace with watching television: "When I play with my Leetle Inferno Fireplace . . . I have sooOOO much fun! I stare into the fIRE for HOURS and DAYS . . . Where does all the time GO?" Playing *Little Inferno* can feel like watching television too: near the beginning of the game, packages arrive quickly and the player is excited by all there is to do, but later the arrival of the packages slows, players wait, and the immersive draw of the game begins to fade—perhaps similar to the feeling of watching television for long periods or near the end of a Netflix binge. The player can even purchase a television set to burn. When placed within the fireplace, the set turns on and replicates the player's screen, showing a live feed of what currently occupies the player's Little Inferno (figure 3.1). If the player moves objects around, they move on the TV. If the player burns the set, it shows itself burning until it breaks. This *mise en abîme* foregrounds capitalism's repetitive history of mediated commodification. It suggests that technological progress is not composed

Figure 3.1
A television set (left) within the Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplace

of radical breaks, differences, and advancements, but rather subtle adjustments, continuations, and remediations.[1]

While this new, playful, entertainment fireplace consumes the television and foregrounds its obsolescence—through the television set's dated look, with dials and antenna—*Little Inferno* simultaneously represents television and video games as isomorphic. Video games do not replace television; rather, they extend aspects of its historical function. For example, the decision to show players' gameplay on a television set (instead of something else) invites players to become aware of their own viewing and to draw associations between this viewing and their play. *Little Inferno* players replace television viewers, but the game foregrounds that these players occupy a similar position vis-à-vis their entertainment—watching, staring, and consuming for hours and days on end. The game challenges the easy separation between the lean-back, noninteractive, passive television viewer and the lean-forward, performative, interactive game player.

"You can change the dial, but there's only one thing on!" reads the catalog description of the television set that players can buy and burn. The joke is deceptively simple. Only one thing appears when you turn this set on in the game: the Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplace. The description

also satirizes the user's control of both television and video games. *Little Inferno* suggests that changing channels on an actual television produces little significant change, just as putting different products within the fireplace accomplishes nothing more than what it did before—creating a fire. The game implies that while we might interact with television and video games—change the channel, load another game—there is only one thing on: the commodity and its consumption. As game scholars Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter explain, "both television and video gaming are channels of commercialized culture, carrying a flow of commodified entertainment to youthful media audiences. Put simply, the new media are built on the foundations of the old" (2003, 18). From the perspective of *Little Inferno*, television and video games shed their differences when understood as channels of media consumption.

Identifying similarities between television and video games is an uncommon approach to studying games, most likely because the two forms of media seem radically disparate. Early home video game consoles in the 1970s and 1980s required the television for display, but to use these consoles, one had to flick a switch from TV to GAME on ultrahigh-frequency (UHF) boxes that hung behind the cathode-ray set. Users interrupted the television broadcast and replaced it with the game. Perhaps this historical divide is one reason why game scholarship rarely engages in comparative analyses between the two media. As media studies scholar Sheila Murphy points out, "television's role in new media history and culture is often minimized and overlooked" in favor of examining connections to more privileged media forms such as cinema (2011, 17).[2]

Even though an obvious historical connection exists between video games and television through the technology of the television set, scholars rarely theorize these media in the same breath.[3] Scholarship from television studies that analyzes video games remains underdeveloped, although some researchers discuss and compare these media within the contexts of convergence culture, fan studies, and transmedia storytelling, or in terms of adaptation, licensing, narrative, and audience.[4] While these are important points of contact, substantial room for comparative analysis remains.

This chapter develops a theoretical comparison between television and video games by examining the relationship between the cultural critic Raymond Williams's influential concept of televisual flow and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of psychological flow—two concepts that share the

same name.[5] These terminological twins appeared a year apart, in Williams's book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) and Csikszentmihalyi's *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games* (1975a). While these concepts appear distinct—one describing the cultural form of television and the other a psychological experience of immersion often related to play and gaming—this chapter demonstrates that their terminological equivalence is not where the similarities end, but rather where they begin. Indeed, the link between these two theories has not gone unnoticed. Television scholar Will Brooker observes that Williams's concept of flow describes the absorption of the viewer in a "dreamlike experience of watching American television" that parallels the immersive effects of flow that Csikszentmihalyi theorized (2005).[6] Similar to psychological flow and its absorbing properties, Williams was intrigued by an activity that attracted sustained attention: watching television.

This chapter argues that both televisual flow and video game flow calibrate flowing subjects to streams of consumption and extend the duration of this consumption. Relatedly, the idea that flow creates enjoyable and fun experiences in video games obscures its use to produce consumers for the game industry. Media historian Jonathan Crary explains that capitalist modernity concerns "the making of quantifiable and abstract flow into the object of attentive consumption," whether this is the flow of images in a film or on television, or even of stock quotes from a ticker tape machine (1999, 33).

Video game flow also produces this attentive consumption. For example, *Little Inferno* foregrounds the idea that players sit in front of their gaming consoles for days, wondering where the time went. This parallels Williams's interest in television viewers sitting for "hour after hour goggling at the box," a phenomenon that he said accounts for "much of the critical significance of television" (1974, 96). For Williams, prolonging media consumption and capturing viewer attention were crucial elements of broadcast television in the 1970s. This experience of televisual flow prefigures forms of commodification that we witness in contemporary video games.[7] In many ways, flipping the switch from TV to GAME on those old UHF boxes did not produce a radical shift between media, but rather exchanged one attentive flow of consumption for another.

The first half of the chapter examines the critical conversations around televisual media and flow. In the second half, I examine how game

developers and researchers leverage psychological flow theory to prolong the duration of media consumption by balancing game challenges with player skills to remove potential interruptions. If video games are "technically induced flow," as the sociologist and play theorist Thomas S. Henricks defines them, then it is no wonder that developers refine techniques for inducing flow in players (2015, 218). Indeed, flow theory occupies a central position in games research that seeks to model the subjective experience of players and produce personalized flow zones, even computationally and without a player's awareness.

The difficulty adjustment systems that often implement flow theory facilitate the commodification of games and player experiences. The irony is that psychological flow theory, ostensibly concerned with augmenting individual agency and control, ends up contributing to the commodification of games and strengthening more controlled forms of play. This challenges the idea that gamers are powerful, often subversive, interactive agents and tempers the stereotype that video games address active users or players, whereas legacy media such as film and television address passive viewers.

Like the other chapters in the book, this approach urges readers to view psychological flow from a different angle, to see it as being more than an enjoyable, peak experience. While chapter 2 focused on flow theory as an individualistic containment and management of alienation, this chapter foregrounds flow's relationship to commodification and consumption.

Television: The Opposite of Psychological Flow?

As I mentioned in the introduction of this book, one of the few times that video games appeared in Csikszentmihalyi's early prolific scholarship occurred in a book about television that he coauthored with media scholar Robert Kubey. In *Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience* (1990), the authors identified gaming as a positive alternative to the consumption of television, which they described as requiring few challenges and minimal skill and effort. In contrast, they described video games as offering goals, feedback, and challenges that increase over time. Thus, flow can "explain much of the popularity of video games," they said (1990, 144). Their comparison of television and video games inspired the idea for this chapter because it places flow theory directly in relation to

media, which is atypical of the theory.[8] The authors did not elaborate on the connection between video games and flow in their book, likely because they were hesitant to advocate for the positive benefits of another mass medium in the midst of attacking television as an apathetic form of consumption. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi distained television, and electronic media in general was not a common topic for flow theory.[9]

Williams's and Csikszentmihalyi's concepts of flow registered and reacted to cultural fragmentation and discontinuity wrought by the emergence of postmodernism and postindustrial society in the 1970s. For both authors, the word *flow* counteracted discontinuity with a sense or semblance of continuity. If postmodern culture appeared as a disordered mosaic or pastiche of perpetual change, then television presented this mosaic in mediated fashion, fusing together its elements within a flow of content. For example, Williams described television news programs in the 1970s as a reflection of this cultural fragmentation. They were a "flow of hurried items," he said, "tumbling over each other, from all sides" (1974, 119). In addition, Williams spent considerable effort analyzing how news programs and the television form itself tried to manage this fragmentation and provide some form of continuity between the diverse elements of content. He wanted to know why "many of us find television very difficult to switch off" and spend hours watching, especially considering the fragmented nature of TV and its constant commercial interruptions (1974, 94).

Csikszentmihalyi also wanted to know why artists, chess players, and dancers were able to sustain attention on an activity for hours and hours. The psychological concept of flow functions in a similar fashion to televisual flow, producing a feeling of order and continuous action, in contrast to a tumultuous world that threatens to overwhelm consciousness with external distractions. While these concepts of flow relate to different things—one to television, the other to psychology—they both react to the fragmentation of culture with its ruptures, interruptions, and distractions and theorize activities that sustain attention and provide a sense of order.

Williams's concept of flow is a "planned flow," as he calls it, meaning that the form of television that he analyzed in the 1970s was designed to smooth over interruptions and sustain viewer attention (1974, 91). For Williams, understanding the viewing experience required the critic to move beyond the interpretation of a single television program toward an analysis of the continuity that emerges between the discrete segments that appear

on television. The televisual content that he analyzed was composed of a heterogeneous stream of diverse elements—a turbulent flow of programs, commercials, network spots, trailers for upcoming shows, and others. For example, a film shown on network television is not a pure, uncontaminated experience; rather, it is riven with commercials and interruptions (Caldwell 1995). While it might seem that the diverse segments that appear on television are unconnected, Williams argued that the televisual text is planned and programmed to manage the diversity of content. For example, a network spot for an upcoming film prepares viewers for its arrival, while also stoking their interest so that they want to continue watching the selected channel. Or a spot for an evening news program highlights topics that parallel the program that it is interrupting; for example, an upcoming news story about a recent murder is run during the commercial breaks of a police procedural that also involves a murder. Or a commercial that breaks into a program contains thematic associations with the program segment that it is interrupting; for example, a show that has just depicted a cell phone conversation is interrupted by a commercial for a mobile service provider.

While some of these associations are doubtless coincidental, others are part of a preprogrammed flow designed to smooth interruptions between items. For viewers, planned flow provides the semblance of connection and order between discrete segments, removes potential interruptions, and captures and sustains attention to extend the duration of consumption.

As I have described in previous chapters, activities that facilitate psychological flow also are designed to direct and absorb attention. In fact, watching television *is* a flow activity. It provides order and structure that focuses and captures attention.[10] Yet Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi explain that psychological flow is "the opposite of the viewing experience" (1990, 141). For them, watching television is not a complex experience where a person's skills and an activity's challenges increase over time; rather, it produces apathy because the skills it requires and the challenges it offers remain low; television produces microflow experiences, not deep, macroflow ones (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 141). The authors explain that viewers do not have a sense of control while watching television, but rather the medium controls them: "A great deal of our thinking, reading, and learning involves efforts to attend, while the viewing of television and films is less likely to require effort. In one sense, attention is controlled from *inside* when the

person invests psychic energy to decode a complex message, or from *outside* by the moving film or television image as these media tend to relieve the person of effortful control" (1990, 140–141; emphasis in original).

From the perspective of flow theory, television might produce a flowing subject, but it is a flatlined subject, pleasurably wallowing in homeostatic equilibrium at low levels of skill and challenge without flowering into more complex forms of enjoyable interaction. The problem for Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is not that television fails to capture attention, but that it removes individual agency and effort. It is a planned flow that users consume, instead of a flow that they plan and create themselves.

Media scholars have critiqued this version of television spectatorship since the 1980s, challenging the idea that television is an idiot box and viewers are couch potatoes. From the perspective of media scholars, television viewing offers opportunities to produce high levels of user involvement. Brooker chastised Csikszentmihalyi for his "hostility towards television" and his rejection of the idea that audiences engage with television in a complex manner (2005). A few years before *Television and the Quality of Life* appeared, television scholar John Fiske even described the viewer's relationship to television as a form of play, where a ludic viewer "explores the relationship between rules and freedom" within the television text (1987, 234). In his book *Television Culture* (1987), Fiske argued that the planned flow of television is not totally planned, but rather offers room for viewers to play within its gaps and fissures. He lamented the idea that Williams's concept of flow brings to mind the image of a "languid river," and instead embraced the diversity of televisual flow, offering it as an exciting, tumultuous deluge of content that was ripe for interpretative adventure (1987, 104). For Fiske, television is not a seamless flow of controlled meanings, but rather an open and discontinuous text that allows possibilities for interpretation and eluding dominant ideologies through creative, resistive readings. Viewers do not succumb passively to a planned flow, watching mindlessly, but rather constantly perform the effortful thinking, interpretation, and decoding that Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) championed in terms of flow.

Despite Csikszentmihalyi's disdain for television, his theories could describe many of the complex efforts and pleasures of television viewing. Psychological flow theory can even explain the emergence of Williams's concept of planned flow. Williams famously described his first encounter

with planned flow, when he spent an anxious night watching television in a hotel room in Miami in the 1970s. While watching a televised film, he mistook events happening within commercials and a film trailer as occurring in the actual film that he was watching. The planned flow that smoothed interruptions between discrete segments confused him because he was used to the British context of television with fewer commercials and more clearly demarcated interruptions between different televisual sequences. Blaming his confusion on fatigue from his travels, Williams said that he had "difficulty in adjusting" to the hypercommercialized version of television, and that the bewildering flow was "a very difficult experience to interpret" (1974, 92). His experience fits the model of psychological flow theory, where anxiety appears when an activity's challenges overwhelm an actor's skills. The challenges that Williams encountered outstripped his media literacy skills. He played the game of television in the US context without understanding its formal rules, and he had to exert effort to learn skills that would match the challenges of planned flow.

The idea that television offers opportunities for growing media literacy skills remains a powerful narrative describing television's historical development. The model of psychological flow can explain the enjoyment that emerges in practices where viewers leverage their media literacy to interpret increasingly complex television shows, or even move beyond television proper and become interactive agents that explore and create cross-platform media content. Active audience scholarship has spawned popular theories of media convergence and participatory culture in which consumers acquire a more active role in shaping their media experiences and responding to media culture (Jenkins 2006a).

Fans and viewers use sophisticated media literacy skills to interpret complex narratives, programs, and franchises.[11] Viewers also control the consumption of content when television shows and franchises spill over the boundaries of television proper, an idea that Brooker calls "overflow" (2001, 458). In these moments, a viewer's experience of a particular television program extends to a variety of activities, such as exploring and contributing to a program's website, listening to its soundtrack, consuming goods related to the show, and producing fan materials in different media formats. Viewers become interactive agents constructing their own experience of a loved program. This idea eventually led Brooker (2005) to psychological flow theory because this theory can explain why individuals become

participants in media franchises in moments of overflow and enjoy a sense of control over their media-related activities.

This sense of viewer participation, engagement, and control also appears through the use of technological interfaces such as the remote control. At the end of their book, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi advocated for children to use the television interface to create opportunities for complex play, such as turning the sound down and trying to construct a dialogue for fleeting, silent images (1990, 215). For these authors, the interactive feature of sound control provides an occasion for gamifying the content of television, thus replacing a consumable planned flow with more challenging, interactive content. Fiske went so far as to claim that viewers could use the television remote as a paintbrush, creating their own video collages of actively constructed meanings and associations. Instead of being carried along by the planned flow of networks, Fiske explained that an unruly viewer-turned-artist could "construct his or her own flow by switching between channels" (1987, 100). Although the idea that viewers become playful artists creating postmodern collages of televisual images is hyperbolic, the simple form of remixing created by the remote control became a palpable reality with devices such as the videocassette recorder (VCR), digital video recorder (DVR), and downloadable content from the internet; through these devices, televisual flow became more accessible for user-generated content.

The ideas that challenging television narratives offer opportunities for a complex use of media literacy skills, that fan communities actively explore programs and franchises across media platforms, and that television interfaces allow increased user control and creativity all suggest that Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) assessment of television was one-dimensional and inaccurate. The viewing experience is not the opposite of psychological flow; television offers myriad instances that challenge and engage audiences. For flow theory, television often appears to be a strawman. It operates as an example of a less complex form of flow that allows flow theory to separate deep flow experiences from technological forms of sustained attention that Csikszentmihalyi often disparaged.[12] The rejection of television also allowed flow theory to distance itself from commercialization and consumption.

Yet the potential of television to produce complex psychological flow experiences does not necessarily mean that active viewers are liberated from consumption; in fact, it can involve them more deeply within it. It

might appear that the existence of active viewers having increased control over their television experiences displaces Williams's concept of planned flow—that is, instead of mindlessly consuming a flow planned for them, viewers actively construct their own forms of complex media consumption. Yet planned flow does not disappear within a milieu of increased viewer participation; it mutates. For example, some media scholars have applied planned flow to situations where television overflows its boundaries and corporations struggle to organize official content spread across media forms to capture audiences.[13] Other scholars have used planned flow to discuss how corporations control web browsing and internet use by providing individuals with an illusory feeling of control, agency, and involvement.[14]

Media scholar William Uricchio (2004) provides a useful chronology for shifting patterns in television consumption in relation to televisual flow and user control; his theory also explains how planned flow has mutated to continue the control of users. The first stage that he discusses aligns with Williams's idea of planned flow, where network programmers control the flow of content and design it to capture viewers. In the second stage, viewer control over televisual flows increases through interface technologies such as the remote control or VHS recording, thus shifting control from the networks to the user. In the third stage, digital technologies adapt to the viewer's preferences and behaviors, actively filtering and suggesting televisual content for the viewer. Uricchio argues that this third stage produces "a steady stream of programming designed to stay in touch with our changing rhythms and moods, selected and accessible with no effort on our part, anticipating our every interest" (2004, 177). Here, the programming of television's planned flow shifts to computer programmers who control the flow of media through algorithmic recommendations and predictions (e.g., used in services such as Netflix or Spotify). These algorithms assemble discrete media elements based on users' past behaviors and preferences. In digital media and online culture, planned flow returns with a vengeance, offering an automated, personalized flow that requires no effort on the part of the viewer, an idea that returns us to Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi's lament that the media control a viewer's attention from the outside and remove agency.

Within interactive media—gaming included—psychological flow theory operates in a similar fashion to planned flow by removing interruptions, directing attention, and sustaining the duration of media consumption.

Csikszentmihalyi once offered his advice to *Wired* magazine readers about applying the principles of flow to web design, although the stated aim was to increase the enjoyment of user experience, not necessarily to intensify consumption (1996). Yet flow theory has long been used to sustain engagement and consumption in more interactive environments. A body of marketing research applies flow theory to web design that aims at structuring pleasurable experiences to retain users.[15] From this perspective, psychological flow is not a neutral concept that simply defines an enjoyable experience, but it intensifies commodification.

Similarly, video game design draws heavily on flow theory to intensify consumption, even modeling flow computationally to create personalized flow experiences for individual players—similar to Uricchio's identification of planned flow's algorithmic mutation. While psychological flow theory struggled to distance itself from television because the medium seemed to control individuals from the outside, the irony is that video games implement flow theory within their design and technological structures to similar ends, manipulating players and their actions. In a sense, psychological flow theory takes over from the planned flow of television to sustain consumption when users have increased control over their interactive, mediated experiences. Recognizing this becomes important because psychological flow theory creates a sheen of innocence that allows flow to be mobilized as an enjoyable, fun experience that obscures its uses to intensify consumption and the commodification of the video game medium.

The Planned Flow of Video Games: Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment

The use of psychological flow theory within video games parallels the planned flow of television. Planned flow is related to the commercialization of television, seeking to capture viewers, expose them to advertisements, and integrate them into consumer culture. Media scholar Rick Altman explains that televisual "flow replaces discrete programming to the extent that (1) competition for spectators is allowed to govern the broadcasting situation, and (2) television revenues increase with increased viewing. In short, flow is related not to the television experience itself—because there is no such single experience—but to the commodification of the spectator in a capitalist, free enterprise system" (1986, 40). Economic processes shape televisual flow and calibrate the viewer to these processes. Television could

look very different given its technology (e.g., simply showing a continuous live feed of video like webcams), but it acquires the form of planned flow to compensate for its commercial nature. Planned flow smooths over commercial interruptions and helps networks retain viewers and increase the sustained viewing practices of audiences to increase profits. Just like the planned flow of television, a natural link does not exist between video games, their underlying technology, and psychological flow, but this link is strengthened through the commercialization of games and their promotion of flowing subjects calibrated to processes of consumption.

The fundamental idea behind planned flow concerns smoothing over potential interruptions caused by the discrete elements of the television text, especially commercials. Video games also strive to remove interruptions between their discrete elements, for example, minimizing load-times for levels, removing cutscenes, or using graphic engines for cutscenes instead of prerendered video (which can be jarring).[16] Yet breaks between game sequences, while significant, are not the key threat of interruption in gaming. This similarity to planned flow is superficial. Many media forms work to produce seamless products. For example, a classical Hollywood film eschews jarring edits and hides montages, and a Renaissance painting pursues a seamless illusion of depth through perspective.[17]

More threatening is the idea that players will cease playing a game that bores or infuriates them. According to flow theory, when the challenges of an activity outstrip an actor's skills, anxiety results, and when the skills of an actor outstrip challenges, boredom results. Both of these states can cause people to stop an activity. Video games often implement ways to adjust the difficulty to avoid this problem, balancing player skills and game challenges so that players can experience the feelings of control, absorption, and the dilation of time common to flow.

Video games implement difficulty adjustment in multiple ways. Many games use a static, linear system of difficulty adjustment where challenges increase as the game progresses in a preplanned fashion; this creates a standard difficulty ramp where game difficulty and player skills grow gradually, aiming to produce what game designer Jenova Chen calls "static flow" (2006, 11). Players have a small degree of control, for example, when they select easy, medium, or hard modes. Static forms of difficulty levels are the most common type of adjustment in video games; even the Atari VCS

included A/B difficulty switches built into the console itself, which programmers used to offer versions of games with varying difficulty levels.

Increasingly, games implement dynamic forms of difficulty adjustment that calibrate challenge on the fly. Chen describes dynamic difficulty adjustment (DDA) as an "ideal concept in the game design field. The difficulty of a game should change dynamically based on its player's skill and performance" (2007, 8). The video game *flOw,* discussed in chapter 1, tests this idea by incorporating a DDA system that allows players with different skill levels to find an appropriate level of challenge by quickly delving into the more difficult depths of the game or rising toward the surface, where the challenges are easier. The thought is that players will naturally seek their own flow zones, where skills are balanced with challenges.

The idea of dynamically changing difficulty has a long history, predating digital and electronic games. In the introduction to this book, I mentioned Csikszentmihalyi's description of the game "escape and pursuit," where a dog runs circles around someone who tries to tag or play with it. The dog adjusts the difficulty of the game according to how it perceives its companion's energy and motivation: if the person is energetic, the dog runs in wider circles, and if he is fatigued, the dog's circling tightens. Digital games replace the dog with appropriate game design or code that adjusts difficulty based on player actions.

For example, the descending aliens in *Space Invaders* (1978) famously increase in speed as one kills them off; the better you are at shooting aliens, the more quickly the difficulty ramps up. Supposedly, this difficulty adjustment was due to hardware limitations that rendered the aliens at a faster pace when fewer of them were onscreen. *Astrosmash* (1981), discussed in the introduction, added the element of decreasing the difficulty when players performed poorly. The game speeds up when a player's score passes a certain threshold, but also slows when a player's score drops (e.g., when dying). Another early computer game, *Archon: The Light and the Dark* (1983), also uses a surreptitious system to adjust the difficulty. Jon Freeman, one of the designers of the game (which was programmed by Anne Westfall), explained in an interview: "There's a built-in, self-adjusting difficulty factor in *Archon* so that if the computer keeps beating up on you, it will get easier and easier. But most people don't know that because it goes in little tiny increments" (Bateman 1984, 54). Arguably, these early experiments toyed

with the idea of automating challenges for single-player games and were not created with the hope of shaping optimal experiences for players.

Chen (2006, 2007) identifies two ways to implement DDA. First, designers can implement *player-centric* approaches, where gameplay mechanics allow players to *actively* adjust the difficulty of the game through their choices and agency (J. Chen 2006, 13). The game *World of Warcraft* color-codes the difficulty of a quest based on a player's current level of experience. Using this simple system—green quests are easy, yellow quests are more difficult, and so on—players can choose the intensity of experience that they desire. Likewise, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) does not have a static difficulty setting (for the base game), but players can decide to engage challenging creatures in the open world or avoid them, thus allowing players to choose their desired difficulty during play.

Second, game designers can use *algorithmic* approaches that automatically adjust the difficulty. These computational DDA systems—like the one used in *Archon*—*passively* monitor player skill levels by collecting data and measuring performance, and then change the game's content and behavior accordingly (J. Chen 2006, 11). For example, an algorithmic system in a typical first-person shooter might monitor a player's shooting accuracy, number of deaths, and kills over time. If these data indicate poor performance according to predetermined criteria, then the system automatically presents fewer enemies and increases the accuracy of a player's weapon. This adjustment can work in the other direction as well, increasing challenges when the system detects a player with higher skills. Theoretically, adjusting difficulty during gameplay automatically balances the game for different players, potentially removing undesired states of boredom, apathy, or frustration that can interrupt the attentive focus of the player.

DDA—also known as *adaptive difficulty* or *dynamic game balancing*—has grown into a robust area of games research. It is part of a field that models player experiences within games, a field dubbed "affective ludology" by game scholars Lennart Nacke and Craig A. Lindley (2009, 1). DDA research, as well as the modeling of subjective player experiences in general, draws heavily on flow theory to the point where it has become central to the field.[18] Nacke and Lindley describe the concepts of immersion and flow as "the holy grail of digital game design" and suggest that if researchers knew exact algorithms for producing immersive experiences,

they would "become an industry standard for most games" (2009, 1). DDA research pursues these algorithms, with flow theory operating as a primary ingredient.

For example, *Resident Evil 4* (2005) uses a difficulty scale that monitors player performance, adjusting the number of enemies encountered and their artificial intelligence (AI) behaviors depending on collected data. This system was hidden, unknown to most players when the game came out. Game journalist Mark Brown (2015) turned to flow when describing *Resident Evil 4*'s adaptive difficulty: "Because the game keeps pace with your own skill as a player, *Resident Evil 4* helps you slip into a zone that psychologists and game designers call flow, which is the fabled middle ground between a game being so easy it leaves you bored or so hard it makes you anxious or frustrated."

Resident Evil 4 was directed by Shinji Mikami, who also created the third-person perspective action game *God Hand* (2006). *God Hand* exposes *Resident Evil 4's* invisible DDA system, turning it into a gameplay mechanic. The game includes four levels of difficulty (1, 2, 3, and Die) and displays the current level on the lower-left part of the screen, along with a difficulty meter that adjusts automatically as one plays. If players take hits, the meter decreases, and if it depletes completely, the level drops; if players land a series of blows and dodge effectively, the meter fills until the level increases. These difficulty thresholds control a variety of game behaviors. At lower levels, the enemies cause less damage and often do not attack in groups, while at higher levels, the enemies hit harder, gain additional moves, and attack together. Skilled players receive more gold at the end of a level if they defeat enemies when the difficulty level is high, thus incentivizing improved player performance. When the difficulty level switches, the message "Level Up" or "Level Down" appears prominently on the screen, which employs this adjustment to increase or lower a player's anxiety (figure 3.2). This also demonstrates that the difficulty adjustment becomes a known mechanic, and players can intentionally manipulate the levels to ease the challenge. In fact, a special action called "grovel" will automatically drop the difficultly level to 1 while the player character prostates himself before enemies, who point and laugh. Arguably, the hidden, unobtrusive DDA of *Resident Evil 4* provides a smoother play experience than *God Hand*'s foregrounding of its DDA system, which can intrude on players' immersive experience by producing feelings of intense anxiety or sullen inadequacy.

Figure 3.2
"Level Down," displayed on the screen in *God Hand* (PCSX2 2011)

Nevertheless, *God Hand*'s DDA system allows players with less skill to traverse the game without quitting.

These approaches to difficulty adjustment—static, player-centric, and algorithmic—might appear alone or in various combinations, depending on the game. *God Hand* combines all three. It allows players to set a static difficulty level for the game, which manipulates a variable like enemy health; moreover, on the easy setting, the difficulty threshold never goes above 2, while on hard, it is always on Die. The game also adjusts difficulty dynamically using algorithmic monitoring, while allowing some player-centric control because players can intentionally manipulate the thresholds to their advantage or take an action like grovel. Whatever the chosen approach, difficulty adjustment calibrates the game challenge to remove potential interruptions and encourage players to keep playing. Mixing these approaches can create powerful systems that mold a gaming experience to a player's subjective state.

These three forms of difficulty adjustment parallel the differentiation of televisual flow by Uricchio (2004) into three types: planned flow or

"programming-centered" flow, where networks design the flow of broadcast items; "viewer-centered" flow, where viewers control their own experience of television through remote controls and other technological interfaces; and "adaptive agent" centered flow, where adaptive computational agents and machine learning algorithms track user-generated data in order to tailor a stream of personalized media flow to individual consumers (171, 180). A complementary differentiation in terms of video game flow includes *design-centric flow,* where static challenges increase in a linear, preprogrammed fashion; *player-centric flow,* where in-game player choices balance skills and challenges; and *adaptive flow,* which algorithmically mines data about a player's skill level to automatically adjust difficulty on the fly (table 3.1).[19]

Although related to different media, these similar techniques identify strategies to prolong consumption. For example, a similar process occurs when people consume a personalized stream of YouTube videos, or when they play a level of the video game *Left 4 Dead* (2008) orchestrated by "The Director," an AI monitoring system that algorithmically controls the pacing, difficulty, and intensity according to player performance and behavior. Both of these situations tailor media experiences for users according to collected data about their behaviors, with the goal of continual consumption.

In the remainder of this chapter, I draw parallels between DDA systems and how televisual planned flow (1) increases the duration of media consumption by removing interruptions, (2) recedes into an unnoticeable form, and (3) becomes increasingly oriented toward personalizing media experiences.[20]

Table 3.1
Stages of Televisual Flow and Types of DDA

Uricchio's Stages of Televisual Flow	Forms of Difficulty Adjustment and Video Game Flow
Programming-centered Planned flow	Design-centric flow Linear, static flow
Viewer-centered Remote control, VHS, DVR, DirectTV rewind/restart	Player-centric flow Active DDA (J. Chen 2006, 13)
Adaptive agent centered Recommendation algorithms	Adaptive flow Algorithmic monitoring systems Passive DDA (J. Chen 2006, 11)

Extending the Duration of Play and Media Consumption

Media scholar Jay Bolter explains that the key to flow is a "feeling of indefinite extensibility," the idea that an experience can be prolonged without end (2019a, 101). Television offers this hope—that we can turn on the flow at any time and be carried away. Planned flow aims at producing viewers who continue to watch, to "grab their attention" and offer "the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay" (Williams 1974, 88). This staying in place is the goal of televisual flow. It constantly works against the threat of interruption and the disruption of the viewer's attention by commercial breaks.

Encouraging players to stay and play is also the goal of commercialized games. When discussing flow in his popular design manual, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (2008), Jesse Schell encourages developers to become adept at identifying when players enter and exit flow. "You must watch for that crucial moment," he writes, "the event that moves them out of the flow channel, so you can figure how to make sure that event doesn't happen in your next prototype of the game" (122–123). The crucial moment is not the moment of entering flow, but rather its interruption—a fact that belies the importance of sustaining and prolonging flow in order to increase the playing time.[21]

Today, game designers do not need to become mystical mind readers, as Schell suggests. Freemium game developer Will Luton explains that designers can use data tracking and analytics to create games that induce meditative states of consumption by locating moments of interruption and removing them. "Determining where and when players leave will point to where they get confused, bored or frustrated," he writes, "From this information, you can identify problems and fix and increase retention, which increases revenue" (2013, 166). If the data indicate that players abandon a game at level 12, he says, then this tells developers to locate the point of disruption and remove it, or, as Williams said about television, to reiterate the promise of exciting things to come.

While there are doubtless many factors that keep players playing, flow appears as a central component of inducing consumption. "The industry knows that gamers crave flow and fiero," writes game researcher Jane McGonigal, "and the more game developers give it to them, the more time and money gamers will spend on their favorite games" (2011, 43). In this

context, *fiero* is the momentary elation that one feels after overcoming an extreme challenge, like defeating a difficult boss. Flow theory says little about elation and joy; rather, it focuses on prolonged enjoyment, in contrast to the pleasures of immediate gratification. While McGonigal explains that fiero is a quick burst of pleasure that gamers desire to experience again and again—like a hit of a powerful drug—the absorbing feeling of flow relates to longer durations of experience. In fact, the challenge-based flow experience can be strenuous and taxing, where one categorizes the experience as enjoyable in retrospect. McGonigal claims that flow and fiero keep us playing games—and even addict us to them—but she also points out that one cannot flow forever and can experience burnout. In her estimation, the video game industry wants to create "*lifelong gamers*: people who can balance their favorite games with full and active lives" (2011, 43; emphasis in original).

This generosity depicts the video game industry as a socially responsible business that marries profits with customer care. Yet if the industry wants to create lifelong gamers, then the fastest route to this goal is through addiction.[22] Writing for the website Gamasutra, game industry veteran Tony Ventrice (2012) explains that "addiction is a common phenomenon in successful games and tends to go by the name of 'flow' in the industry." Indeed, capitalism increasingly revolves around addictive media forms such as online gaming, gambling, and pornography.[23] Addiction and absorbing experiences like flow even function as ideologies and marketing tools in the video game industry, especially for online casual games. User comments such as "I'm so addicted to this game!" and "I can't stop!" proliferate on mobile distribution platforms, and developers use these comments to sell games and highlight their absorbing properties.

DDA researchers often frame their work in terms of designing fun and enjoyable games, which obscures the commercial use of flow theory and DDA to extend the duration of play. The authors of one book on game design write that "fun is intrinsically linked to flow theory. Most DDA systems are based on that assumption; give the player a challenge that suits their skill level" (Kumar, Etheredge and Boudreaux 2012, 86). This foregrounds that DDA and the implementation of flow in games are concerned with producing fun experiences, not consumption.

Another example from the video game industry reveals a different emphasis: Xue and other researchers from the mainstream game giant

Electronic Arts write that "the theme shared by almost all game difficulty adjustment studies is that they attempt to prevent a player from transiting to undesired states, such as boredom or frustration" (2017, 466). Here, the language of prevention and undesirable states belies the industry's goal to anticipate and head off emotions that might lead to a lapse of play. In this case, DDA does not strive to induce enjoyment, but rather reduce undesirable feelings. While enjoyment, fun, and producing compelling experiences are the outward face of the industry, these emotions are cultivated to commodify games and urge further consumption. "The longer they are engaged and playing the game," Luton explains, "the happier they are and more likely they are to spend" (2013, 115).

Both DDA systems and the planned flow of television seek to extend the time of media use for commercial reasons. The economics of television at the time that Williams was writing were determined by sustaining dedicated viewers that were then sold to advertisers (a process that still occurs today).[24] In the video game industry, the extension of playtime also affects the profitability of a title. In some cases, extending play increases exposure to product placement and tie-in advertising. In mobile and casual games, the advertising model is extremely televisual, where players must watch ads between levels before they can return to play and bursts of flow. Yet the commodification extends beyond advertisements. For example, a game that captures players' attention creates a dedicated fan base that spreads the word about it.[25] This extends the shelf life of the game, while also providing opportunities to expose players to new titles and products. Moreover, some online games and services require monthly subscription fees and thus financially depend on retaining customers over time. Finally, generating continued interest brands a title for sequels or spinoffs, while also encouraging the purchase of expansion packs, downloadable content, and other products like special avatar skins or desktop backgrounds.

DDA systems facilitate this commodification. Mike Booth, a former game director for Blizzard Entertainment and designer for Valve, gave a presentation at the Artificial Intelligence and Interactive Digital Entertainment Conference in 2009 entitled "The AI Systems of *Left 4 Dead*," which revealed the mechanisms of the game's computational adjustment system, known as the "AI Director." This AI system facilitates replayability by procedurally generating unique experiences each time the game is played, while also dynamically adjusting the intensity of player experiences during gameplay.

It controls multiple aspects of the game, but one part of the system automatically manipulates the game "to maximize 'drama.'" The AI Director adjusts the difficulty by measuring the emotional intensity of players and, as Booth explains, decreases threats for a period of time when the "intensity is too high." This creates dramatic "peaks and valleys of intensity" by oscillating between challenging moments and periods of recuperation. These procedurally generated experiences focus on replayability, which Booth (2009) links to player enjoyment and extended patterns of consumption. "Replayability promotes long-term engagement with the games," Booth explains, "resulting in growth of the game's community." The presentation also linked community growth to "ongoing sales" and "exposure opportunities for other related content."

Valve implemented the AI Director to emulate successes such as *Counter-Strike* (2000) and *Team Fortress* (1999), games that acquired player bases that have lasted for many years. From one perspective, the AI Director orchestrates a dramatic, intense, and enjoyable experience, but from another perspective, it is deeply ingrained within the commodification of games by extending the duration of play.

While many video games seek the holy grail of flow, they will also break flow to induce consumption and purchases in order to return to flow. Casual games and so-called *freemium* games often allow only a measured amount of play before players must wait for their energy to recharge, such as in *Star Wars: Galaxy of Heroes* (2015). When flow is broken, players who want to continue can spend real money to purchase more energy. This is an idea that *Little Inferno* criticizes by forcing players to wait for their packages to arrive before they can burn them—a painful delay. Games can also monetize situations where challenges and skills are unbalanced. For example, by creating difficult levels where a player continually fails, game designers can encourage players to make in-game purchases for power-ups or gear in order to rebalance the game and return to flow. In multiplayer games, an algorithmic matching system might use monitored player data to pit a weaker player against a stronger player with better, desirable gear (Chen et al. 2017). In this case, the weaker player will likely lose but see the stronger player's gear as a way to achieve future parity and balance. Thus, the weaker player might purchase this gear. A matching system could even monitor a player's victories, and after a string of successes, pit them against a stronger player to break immersion and nudge players toward further consumption.

In this and other ways, breaking flow and catalyzing a player's desire to return to it become monetized as well.

I am not claiming that difficulty adjustment accounts for *all* commercial success. For example, the aesthetically innovative and extremely difficult game *Cuphead* (2017) sold many copies based on its retro-looking, rotoscope animation style. *Cuphead* reminds us that other factors contribute to the commodification of video games, and certainly graphics (not just gameplay) have always been a core selling point for games. Difficulty adjustment is not the only factor in turning a game into a successful commodity, but the extension of playtime through DDA and flow remains central to this process. Indeed, *Cuphead* created buzz because its difficulty prevented some consumers from experiencing the content that they had purchased. Yet even *Cuphead* had a simple mode that decreased the difficulty so that players without the necessary skills could experience more of the game. This mode was included because of the fear that the game's difficulty would alienate a wider player base.

The chatter generated by *Cuphead* and its difficulty even influenced other games. For example, after the criticisms of *Cuphead's* difficulty, the developers of *Celeste* (a game discussed in chapter 2) quickly implemented an "assist mode" that would ease their game's difficulty, thus increasing its accessibility while ensuring a wider market of players.

Undeclared and Unnoticed Rules

DDA systems often remain undeclared so as not to intrude on players' flow and disrupt the extension of their playtime. The planned flow of television that Williams studied was also undeclared and obscured, and he struggled to articulate and provide evidence for how it functioned. He defined planned flow as "the replacement of a programme series of timed sequential units by a flow series of differently related units in which the timing, though real, is undeclared, and in which the real internal organisation is something other than the declared organisation" (1974, 93). While the schedule that lists a program's beginning and ending times is the official temporality of television, the planned flow that smooths over discrete elements recedes into the background, often unnoticed. Recommendation algorithms used on platforms such as YouTube or Netflix also recede. We know they exist, but they function behind the scenes as invisible, proprietary programs that

we cannot completely understand or access. They structure an "invisual" flow, as media scholar Christopher Cox calls it; this means that hidden recommendation algorithms organize what potentially becomes visible, what "possibilities and limitations" exist for the user (2018, 441). Uricchio argues that planned flow always had an air of ideology to it because "the timing of program elements and their organization are something other than they are declared to be, just as the world of appearances belies its material contradictions" (2004, 177). While viewers focus on the content of media, planned flow and its more recent mutation into hidden algorithms work in the background to facilitate the ongoing process of consumption and watching.

DDA systems in games are also composed of algorithms and rules that are meant to remain hidden. "Did you ever notice *Max Payne*'s DDA?" one game critic asks, "No? That's when you know DDA is working" (Tolentino 2008). DDA systems often follow a principle of "non-intrusiveness," as DDA researcher and software engineer Olana Missura puts it: "Our aim is to devise a difficulty adjustment algorithm that does not bother the actual players" (2015, 1, 45). Examples of intrusive DDA have become legendary in gaming culture, such as the rubber-banding method used in the *Mario Kart* series, where it seems as if an elastic band connects the player in first place to the vehicle in second place: no matter how well players perform, their computerized competitor remains close behind. In another instance, in *God Hand*, the DDA system that becomes part of its game mechanics can intrude on a player's involvement when the leveling system flashes a report across the screen (as depicted in figure 3.2), perhaps causing less skilled players to feel a lack of achievement and thus quit.

In one influential DDA article, game designer and researcher Robin Hunicke highlights the importance of the player's "perception of adjustment" during gameplay. She concludes that it is possible to design systems that are "nearly imperceptible to the player" and do not disturb "the player's sense of agency and accomplishment" (2005, 433). She cites the use of "change blindness" as an effective tool that obscures the use of DDA (432). This idea suggests that players' focused attention on a particular task will decrease their awareness of changes in a system—a point of connection with flow theory, given the use of flow to focus attention while overlooking other details of experience.

An entire history of hidden rules and algorithmic adjustments exists. These are not features such as Easter eggs—which players salivate over and are meant to be found—but secrets, buried in code, not meant to be found or thought about. A recent Twitter thread exposes some of these hidden rules in popular games. Game designer Jennifer Scheurle (2017) asked developers to discuss some of the hidden mechanics in their games. The responses were, well, revealing. The developers of the *Gears of War* series noted that novice players were given damage bonuses before their first few kills to keep them playing (or "stay," as Williams might have said). A *BioShock* developer mentioned that shots from enemies always miss in the beginning of an encounter, and Big Daddies—a major enemy in the game—slow down when they are behind the player.[26] These examples point toward concealed rules that seek to balance challenges with player skills without the player being aware of it, which reasserts questions of control in games.

The use of undeclared and unnoticed rules begins to function according to ideological models where players feel skillful, powerful, and in control at times when this is not actually the case. In games that use these undeclared rules or DDA systems, imperceptible machinic assistance might be more of a determining factor in overcoming challenge than player agency. If one ideology of flow discussed in chapter 1 refers to the importance of the growth of the self and its skills, DDA systems reveal one way that this ideology functions in video games. Some games might induce players to *feel* as though they have accumulated skills but their success actually is also due to the game becoming easier. This is how Freeman explained an effect of *Archon's* difficulty adjustment in 1984: "By the time it really starts kicking in, players think, 'Oh, I'm just getting better.' Well, they are, partly; but partly it's because the computer is not being as good" (Bateman, 54).

The feeling of self-improvement and growth is partially an illusion. In another example, one DDA study that compared different methods of aim assistance in first-person shooter games discovered that instead of offering assistance before a player performs a shot, there might be "value in letting the user plan and execute their own aiming motions, and only adjusting the shot during the flight of the bullet" (Vicencio-Moreira et al. 2014, 938). This possibility appeared because the techniques in question "were not highly perceptible." The adjustment occurs *after* the intentional moment of action, thus concealing the machinic manipulation within an emotional moment of effective agency. The active concealment of the adjustment

remains a false form of consciousness for many: "I made that headshot," one might think, when in truth, it was the algorithm. This concealment is one of the reasons that some designers and players dislike the idea of DDA. Players are haunted by the possibility that their perceived achievement is false, or, if players are on the other side of the adjustment in a multiplayer experience, that they have been cheated. This even creates a situation where DDA systems do not cause and sustain enjoyment, but perhaps the opposite.

The fact that game designers conceal DDA systems and undeclared rules is not surprising, but the effects of these systems are important to consider. Game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman write about the increasing popularity of DDA design in their book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004). They say, "Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment could be considered a heavy-handed design tool that takes agency away from the player, or it could be considered an elegant way of invisibly shaping game play so that every player has an optimal experience" (223). DDA systems might aim at the lofty goal of making sure that all players have an optimal experience—an allusion to Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990)—but this experience is manipulated, often in terms of commercial interests. "Are you then playing the game, or is it playing you?" speculate Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 223).

While their comment is playful, the darker undertones are clear. While designers might strive to create enjoyable experiences for a wide variety of players, DDA systems capture players within imperceptible systems designed to remove interruptions and keep players playing, which can also mean to keep them paying and consuming.

DDA and Personalization

Crash Bandicoot 2: Cortex Strikes Back (1997) and later titles in the series implement undeclared DDA systems that monitor player deaths and adjust aspects of the games accordingly. If players die frequently in *Crash Bandicoot 2* during a particular sequence, then the system provides a power-up or a new checkpoint. If players continue to die while fleeing a rolling boulder, then the game slows the boulder down. As Jason Rubin, a cocreator of the *Crash* games, put it, "Good player, bad player, everyone loved Crash games. They never realized it is because they were all playing a slightly different

game, balanced for their specific needs" (Gavin 2011). Depending on a player's skill and behavior, *Crash Bandicoot 2* offers a slightly different version of itself, personalizing the experience for players without their knowledge. On the one hand, games become democratic, open, and available to all; on the other, games expand their market, offering optimal experiences and customized consumer experiences that smooth over interruptions for a wide variety of players.

Salen and Zimmerman's quip that invisible DDA might play the player suggests that agency switches to the game. Instead of player agency, the computational agents that adapt to a player's behavior become the agents of change, while the learning that occurs concerns machine learning algorithms that slowly gain more precise knowledge about a player's skill and preferences. Meanwhile, the player is fed a stream of personalized content, as Uricchio (2004) says of planned flow in the age of algorithms. This dystopic vision of idle, mass-media-fed consumers is hyperbolic (and threatens to repeat the idea of a passive, controlled television viewer), but we should not discount the fact that personalizing game experiences calibrates a game to extend the duration of play—and consumption.

While *Crash Bandicoot 2* and other games provide little control over the difficulty adjustment, increasingly video games provide player-centric control over difficulty that promises additional agency for players. In his master's thesis, "Flow in Games," Chen explains that computational monitoring systems have a variety of problems. First and foremost, "performance is objective while Flow is subjective. When a player is in the Flow of just jumping around in *Super Mario Bros*. but not finishing any level, the DDA system will have trouble to sense [*sic*] that" (J. Chen 2006, 12). While the system can collect various forms of objective data about a player's performance, it is difficult to translate these measurements automatically into assumptions concerning a player's emotional state.

For players seeking immersive experiences that are not challenge-based like flow—or who are enjoying an unruly, active disruption of a game system—algorithmic DDA systems might make adjustments that *cause* interruptions rather than remove them. For example, automatically slowing the boulder in *Crash Bandicoot 2* might interrupt players who are having a wonderful time enjoying the intensity of the situation, running from the boulder again and again, unconcerned about the number of deaths that

they have accumulated. For Chen, the problem is one of control: computational difficulty adjustment systems remove control from players and embed it within the system itself. The system becomes the dynamic aspect of the difficulty adjustment, not the player's choices. Instead, Chen suggests that a player-centric approach to DDA allows players to customize their flow experiences and is needed "to make player[s] feel a sense of control over the game activity" (2006, 12). This approach avoids the problem of misidentifying subjective choice as a marker of objective performance and increases the breadth of a game's potential flow channel (figure 3.3).

DDA systems embody another aspect of flow theory that Csikszentmihalyi refers to as the "paradox of control": he explains that "what people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control

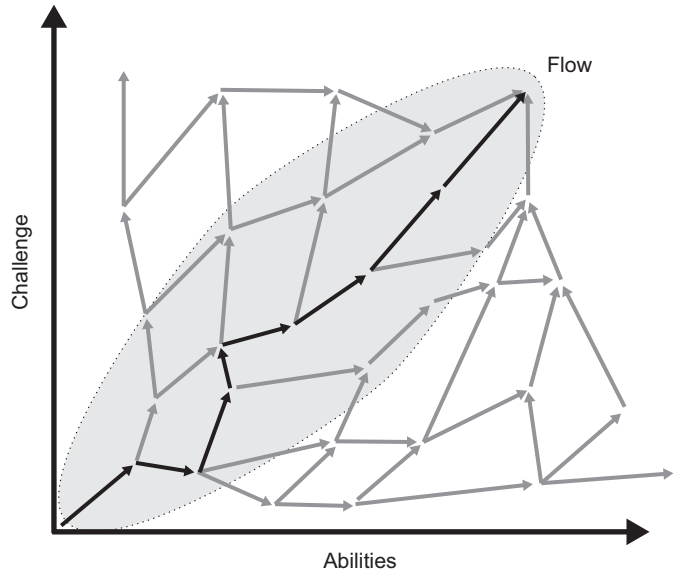

Figure 3.3
The branching arrows depict a series of player choices. The black arrows (middle) highlight one chosen path through the game. This model of player-centric difficulty adjustment potentially broadens the flow channel, depicted as the bulging, gray oval in the center. Republished with permission of ACM (Association for Computing Machinery) from Jenova Chen, "Flow in Games (and Everything Else)," *Communications of the ACM* 50, no. 4 (2007): 31–34; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

in difficult situations" (1990, 59, 61; emphasis in original). If a player is in complete control, then the outcome is known in advance. Why shoot hoops if we know we will never miss? Why play a game of *Tetris* if we will never fail in the end? This is why it is a paradox, because people are given a feeling of control while not being in control. This feeling can also operate ideologically, strengthening an illusion of control and an actor's sense of being a powerful, individualized agent—an ideology of flow, as I discussed in the last two chapters. While people enjoy the possibility of controlling a situation and tailoring games to their individual abilities, ideologically these systems provide players with a *sense* of control, not control itself.

Not all DDA systems are hidden. For example, *God Hand*'s system is integrated directly into the gameplay, and increasingly video games provide access to customizable game adjustments that offer players the possibility of controlling their experiences while making the game more accessible. Sometimes this accessibility extends beyond the simple choice offered at the beginning of a game: easy, medium, or difficult. *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) implements a tourist mode that removes threats and allows players to explore the entire world, see the virtual sights, go on guided tours, and take pictures. *Dishonored 2* (2016) allows the player to adjust over twenty variables related to gameplay and difficulty—from the audibility of a player's footsteps to the number of guards who will respond to alarms, from how likely a guard is to see the player leaning out from cover to how much ammunition the player can carry. In *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018), players can even adjust the difficulty of puzzles by calibrating the frequency of hints, the duration of timed puzzles, and visual indicators that assist solution. The game *Celeste*, discussed in the last chapter, offers an assist mode (figure 3.4) that allows players to select invulnerability and other features, such as decreasing game speed in 10 percent intervals, a choice that allows players to find their groove. Because *Celeste* is a game about empowering players and overcoming depression, assisting players and providing them with more control dovetail with its message.

While includification—or designing games to include players based on differing levels of ability—is a laudable pursuit, tailoring video games for individual players also buttresses the economics of commercial gaming.[27] When summarizing research in the field of personalized gaming, scholars Sander Bakkes, Chek Tan, and Yusaf Pisan note "that game personalisation

Figure 3.4
Assist mode options in *Celeste*

raises player loyalty and enjoyment which in turn makes gaming experience a (commercial) success" (2012, 2). This parenthetical mention of commercial success highlights that the economic forces behind personalization are often understood as secondary to player enjoyment. This is another example of how the discourse of enjoyment and fun obscures a deeper, commercial logic. If the ideal of personalized gaming "is a game in which every single component of the game is tailored to the individual player" (Bakkes, Tan, and Pisan 2012, 1), then game design, DDA research, and personalized games research will mix player-centric, design-centric, and algorithmic monitoring systems into media forms that will increasingly offer individuals customized cocoons of consumption. These individualized channels of enjoyment will expand to cover the entire flow diagram (as shown previously in figure 3.3), thus extending playtime and optimal experiences for all while extending profits for the few.

While ideas of accessibility, includification, and democratizing games are important developments for the future of game design, the discourses of personalized, optimal experiences and what we might call the *tailored totality* of the gaming experience extend beyond accessibility. Recognizing this does not detract from the importance of includification or the idea that the market might produce progressive forms of accessible games through its

desire to extend the base of consumers.[28] Nevertheless, in these situations, overcoming accessibility is one step toward broadening and sustaining play and profit. Advocating for inclusive games does not exclude the simultaneous awareness and critique of how games implement and personalize flow to extend consumption. In fact, a game like *Celeste* offers its accessibility option in a menu and informs the player that using these features might destroy the game, which hardly celebrates inclusivity in gaming. Arguably, this reveals that *Celeste's* accessibility features were included because of worries about limiting its demographic of players, not as an altruistic choice to foreground the diversity of players in game culture.

Designing a game with a diversity of players in mind from the beginning instead of making a game "accessible" after the fact would open new routes for thinking about difficulty adjustment in games beyond the commercial argument for expanding a game's demographic of players. In this situation, the goal would not be optimal experiences for diverse players, but rather diverse experiences for all players.

Conclusion

This chapter, like the ones before it, has sought to defamiliarize the concept of flow and make it appear less obvious. Comparing the use of psychological flow in DDA systems with the planned flow of television emphasizes continuities between media forms and reveals similarities between them from the perspective of commodification. When we see that flow in games is not simply about enjoyment and fun, but is also about consumption, then the flow experience no longer appears as a natural and neutral aspect of games or a goal that we should uphold unreflectively as an ideal for game design.

While Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) highlighted the flow-producing nature of games to distinguish them from television and its so-called passive viewership, the use of psychological flow within video games also intensifies consumption and undermines the unreflective embrace of player agency in game studies. This challenges the stereotypical distinctions between the passive spectatorship of television and film viewers and the interactive participation of game players. While passive spectators are simultaneously active when they interpret a television program or film (or produce works such as fan fiction), active players overcoming challenges

with skills in a video game can also be passive, even within their activity. Moments of active control and passive manipulation intermingle within an uneven experience of media consumption where *both* are employed to increase the duration of consumption. This perspective challenges assumptions that a radical difference exists between games and legacy media forms. As Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter write, "While interactive games are in many ways genuinely 'new' media, their possibilities are being realized and limited by a media market whose fundamental imperative remains the same as that which shaped the 'old' media: profit" (2003, 21). The commercialization of television produced planned flow, as Altman (1986) pointed out. It did not appear because it embodied the television experience as such. Likewise, the commodification of video games deeply entangles psychological flow theory within its processes.

From this perspective, video games could look different within social and cultural contexts that do not stress consumption. This idea might cause us to pause. Aren't ideas central to flow like clear goals and feedback fundamental properties of many games, commodified or not? Isn't the balancing of skills and challenges a property of games as such? While the planned flow that Williams analyzed on television appears as a kludge—a jerry-rigged response to commercial culture and commercials on television that can appear differently outside capitalism—plenty of noncommercialized games and sports create flow, which suggests that the experience is not linked to consumer culture.

This is true. Yet researchers model flow in game design to create systems that offer personalized game experiences to sustain play and media consumption. While imagining networked television without planned flow is likely easier than imagining video games without flow or some of its properties (like balancing skills and challenges), it is not impossible.[29] In fact, the expressive possibilities of games continue to expand with art games, twine games, queer games, the democratization of game development, and approaches to design that seek experiences outside the flow channel.[30] Players search for experiences beyond flow and challenge-based immersion, and players even appreciate games that seek to produce flow through DDA systems for diverse, multidimensional reasons, not just because they are absorbing. Understanding flow as a natural component of games or as an ideal, optimal experience that games should pursue smooths over the diversity of their possibilities. Nevertheless, at this historical juncture, the

intensification of playful consumption through the use of flow theory will likely persist and escalate with the further development of DDA systems, personalized gaming, machine learning, and other elements, even if this will occur largely within mainstream game titles or independent games bent on market success.

A growing trend in game scholarship responds to this situation with the idea that we should liberate games from commodification and free play from games and consumption.[31] This chapter contributes to this line of thinking by deepening our understanding of how flow theory and DDA systems align with processes of commodification and extending consumption. Csikszentmihalyi (1999, 2004) also struggled with flow's relationship to materialism and understood that flow can involve people in *any* activity, even consumption. He explained that we must learn "to distinguish the useful and harmful forms of flow" so that we can be aware of how to prevent its misuse (1990, 70). Today, the absorbing and enjoyable properties of flow align with capitalism and its mobilization of enjoyment to sustain consumption. The desire to liberate games from commodification, flow from games, or even play from games stands in for a deeper desire to free ourselves from capitalism's dynamic adjustment of our desires to the rhythms of its streams of consumption.

The fact that flow theory is central to games as a medium produces a dark vision of contemporary media culture. Games, play, and flow experiences inscribe a focused attention, meaning that they align with an attention economy that seeks to extend media consumption. Why have video games come to dominate contemporary culture and entertainment? Why are people playing so many video games? Why has gamification arisen as a way to create loyal customers and intensify consumption? These are multifaceted questions to be sure, but when games and play are commodified or used to aid the process of commodifying other experiences through gamification, their cultural associations with fun and enjoyment will mask the processes of commodification at work under a veneer of innocence. Why do we spend so much time (and money) playing video games? Many of us would probably respond because they are fun, because they offer an enjoyable escape from a harsh reality, or even because they challenge us. We are less likely to respond that we play video games because they are designed to capture our attention while keeping us playing and paying. We are less likely to exclaim that many video games are designed to technically induce

flow, as Henricks says, and thus seduce us to keep playing (2015, 218). Living as if the former answers are true—that video games are simply enjoyable and fun—is easier than living the truth of the latter.

This chapter began with a discussion of *Little Inferno* because it aligns television, video games, and commercial culture. The *mise en abîme* that appears when players burn a television set (as depicted in figure 3.1) provides a powerful image of the relationship between media and consumption. While differences abound between various media, through the perspective of commodification the historical development of media appears like an endless echo chamber of similar, repeated forms that tune individuals into streams and channels of consumption (Crary 1999, 33). This is true no matter how much agency we have to adjust a medium to our tastes and preferences.

Little Inferno criticizes this aspect of video games, while providing room for players to critically reflect on the relationship between games and consumerism. For example, one reviewer of *Little Inferno* reflects:

> Whenever I ordered a big new shipment of things to burn, I often found myself staring at my inferno, just waiting for the imaginary packages to arrive. I was accomplishing nothing. I could've been reading a book, or speaking to someone who matters to me, or even playing a different videogame that could challenge my mind and force me to think in new ways. Instead, I was gaping at an iPad screen, watching a timer tick down, effectively no longer connected to the world around me, with minutes of my life ticking away. (Rigney 2013)

This account highlights the alienation that *Little Inferno* foregrounds—the separation of players from their environment, sitting alone before their screen or fireplace, consuming while the world literally goes up in smoke. Waiting for packages to arrive forces the player to inhabit the boring interruptions that flow seeks to remove. Increasingly, freemium games follow the tradition of television and place commercials in these moments of waiting, while also monetizing the desire to remove these interruptions by paying a fee. While *Little Inferno* provides players with postage stamps that will speed up shipping (thus removing these moments of waiting), these stamps run out. Left to their own devices (so to speak), players might feel the itch of addiction to return to flow, but these moments also create distance from the game and a space for critical reflection—moments outside of flow to reflect on how it is used to encourage us to stay playing and paying. These moments of "interlude," as game scholar Aubrey Anable calls them, appear

"where desire and longing begin to intersect with a call for new social relations" (2018, 96). They create rich, affective moments that make us feel a desire to escape and move beyond alienation. They offer us moments to reflect on this desire, perhaps wondering how to realize this desire in real life.

Even though *Little Inferno* urges players to reflect during these moments of waiting—to become critical of the commercialization of gaming—the reviewer's comments imply that other games might offer a better experience that would not be a waste of time. The reviewer suggests that *Little Inferno* (like the casual and freemium games that it criticizes) does not offer complex mental challenges, and players could choose to pursue a more productive, challenging game. For this reviewer, such a game would involve a player's thoughts more closely instead of creating moments of interruption and distance that trigger painful reflection instead of flow. That is, if developers employ flow theory in games to smooth over interruptions, perhaps they can also smooth over the interruptions of reflection and critical pause. In the next chapter, I turn to this issue, analyzing the relationship between flow, play, reflection, and video games, arguing that many games manage to truncate the power of critical distance.

4 Flow, Play, and Critical Distance

The last chapter examined how video games integrate flow theory in order to extend the duration of play and consumption. When we are immersed in the flow of a game and our skills are adequate to challenges, we are less likely to pause and reflect on our experience. This raises a number of important questions: What is the relationship between flow, play, and thinking? Does privileging the continuous flow of action and removing interruptions erase moments of reflection and critical distance? Attaining critical distance from an experience means that one takes a step back from an experience in order to analyze it. The word *critical* signifies the crucial or decisive distance that one needs in order to remove oneself from the immediate influence of the experience. This distance allows one to reflect on the experience. The term also bleeds into criticism and the ideas of discerning, separating, and judging. Distance aids criticism, allowing the time and space for interpretation to unfold and consider an experience from multiple perspectives. Thus, the term *critical distance* implies that one attains crucial distance from an activity or situation in order to reflect on and articulate an experience.

Flow is said to counteract moments that interrupt action and cause people to reflect on their experiences from an outside perspective. The anthropologist Victor Turner explains, "Reflexivity tends to inhibit flow, for it articulates experience" (1982, 76). The immersive experience of flow replaces self-consciousness with continuous action. It causes one to forget everything outside the activity itself. It privileges action over critical evaluation and reflection, an ideology of flow discussed in chapter 1. In fact, the phenomenologist Joshua Bergamin contends that "in the flow, we are truly not *thinking* at all" (2017, 404; emphasis in original). This absence of

thought is said to characterize flow experiences. Csikszentmihalyi recalled in an interview that he adopted the term *flow* because the athletes, mountain climbers, and artists that he interviewed used that word to describe an unreflective absorption in their chosen activity: "I gave it the name 'flow' because 'flow' was very often mentioned by people. ('Oh, I am being carried by the river, I don't have to think, I just do it, spontaneously, automatically')" (2017b, 814). This image of the river foregrounds the idea of being swept away within an activity instead of attaining distance from it and climbing ashore to observe and contemplate the river itself.

While flow can occur in any activity, even in work, the experience has a special relationship to play. It is a subset of play and captures its sense of absorbing action. Csikszentmihalyi says that flow occurs *in ludes,* or "at play," whereas moments of worry and reflection occur *inter ludes,* or "between play" (1975a, 38). When we are absorbed in an activity, questions about our experience arise less frequently. Outside perspectives evaporate. Distance disappears. Awareness of the external world and its concerns fades. As sociologist Thomas S. Henricks explains, play "allows people to pull the world close to themselves, to experience it in more intimate and fulfilling ways than is normally the case" (2006, 130). This involvement can quiet our self-doubt and inner critical voice, forms of self-consciousness that separate us from the world. While we tend to think of play as an interlude in an otherwise serious life, especially for adults, proponents of flow and play desire to extend the occasion and duration of these experiences until they become central to life itself.

This vision runs counter to the idea that people should cultivate a *critical attitude* toward life. This attitude embraces skepticism, suspicion, doubt, and a deep questioning that seeks "to 'look beyond the surface'" of things and our experience (Bardzell and Bardzell 2013, 7). The philosopher John Dewey explains that critical thinking doubts "things at face value" and asks us to suspend judgment while we assess our experiences (1910, 4). The critical attitude causes us to pause, doubt our first conclusions, and gain distance from an experience in order to reflect on what forces shape it—forces such as capitalism, ideology, power, technology, and sexuality. In the humanities, for example, teachers often encourage students to approach media texts critically. In film studies, teachers extol the pleasures of taking a step back from the typical, absorbed experience of watching a film in order to analyze its composition, history, politics, and forms of representation.

Being immersed within a film can bracket this articulation, similar to the function of flow. Indeed, flow can counter the critical attitude. Flow is the "quieting of doubt," as the popular author Steven Kotler tells us (2014b, 47). If one pauses to take a step back, think, doubt, and evaluate, then flow can disappear.

The topic of critical distance in media studies has a long history. The use of media to either erase critical distance (e.g., through immersion in a seamless film narrative) or provoke critical distance (e.g., in avant-garde films that purposefully break immersion) has animated discussion on the topic of media aesthetics throughout the twentieth century. The Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht famously used distancing effects in his theater productions to disturb the emotional effects of engrossing narrative spectacles and encourage spectators to reflect on their experiences. For example, a play might reveal how it was designed in order to show spectators how it produces its immersive effects. Songs, placards, and didactic moments that directly address the audience might disrupt the enrapturing effects of the narrative. Actors might read stage directions or exaggerate their performances in order to interrupt the audience's identification with their characters. These techniques create cognitive and emotional distance from the performance, which allows audience members to reflect on their experience and how the play mediates their understanding of the world.

The goal of Brechtian theater was not only to break the spectator's immersion in the play, but also to urge spectators to adopt a critical perspective outside the theater as well. Writing about Brecht's plays, the French philosopher Louis Althusser explained that if a spectator "is kept at a distance from the play by the play itself, it is not to spare him or to set him up as a Judge—on the contrary, it is to take him and enlist him in this apparent distance, in this 'estrangement'—to make him into this distance itself, the distance which is simply an active and living critique" (2005, 148). In short, Brecht's plays would encourage spectators to adopt a critical attitude toward life itself, to become skeptical of dominant norms in society such as capitalism, and to understand how these norms shape everyday life. This adds a political component to the critical, and as I mentioned in the introduction of this book, the "critical" part of critical distance should also be attached to the hope of critical theory to emancipate humans from dominant and oppressive norms.

A tension exists between the hope that people will adopt a critical attitude toward life and the idea that we should live a life of play (or flow) and overcome our distance from the world. This chapter explores this tension in relation to video games. Because developers often integrate flow theory into games to involve players and remove interruptions, as I explained in chapter 3, then at first glance, many video games appear to remove distance and interludes of reflection. From this perspective, video games that promote flow are akin to the enrapturing theater experiences that Brecht sought to dismantle. Yet video games can teem with thinking and reflection. Many games interrupt the action and provide distance from the game so that players can assess their performance, strategize, solve puzzles, and reflect on a game's narrative development (e.g., through a cutscene).

This chapter examines the relationship between flow, immersion, reflection, and play.[1] I argue that flow does not erase thought and reflection, but the experience can channel reflection back toward the activity that produces it. Critical distance is not disappearing today—which some cultural theorists claimed in the 1980s—but popular culture incorporates this distance into its products. We are encouraged to reflect and think critically within media culture today, especially when playing video games. They gratify our desire for critical distance, for moments of pause and reflection, while simultaneously truncating this distance by turning reflection inward toward the game—toward strategizing, calculating actions, solving puzzles, assessing performance, and other actions. I call these moments *critical instances*, a concept that alludes to the distance of critical distance but foregrounds an inward turn of criticality. This inward turn of reflection in video games can inhibit thinking that moves progressively outward beyond the game toward understanding its significance in relation to contemporary culture, politics, society, and so on. While this process is not unique to video games—and I offer the concept of a critical instance as a way to conceptualize contemporary culture more broadly—gaming is a key area where critical distance is managed and commodified today.

Although many video games require forms of strategic thinking that inhibit more expansive forms of critical distance, some games are designed to produce expansive reflection. As the game scholar Brian Schrank explains, many games break flow to create moments of self-reflection and the chance to think about larger issues in society—like *Little Inferno*, which I analyzed in chapter 3.[2] Yet interrupting immersion to create moments of

reflection does not necessarily lead to a critical distance where one stands back from an experience to criticize it, but it can provoke a feeling of *playful distance*. Henricks says that "to play is to interrupt the flow of events" where "we poke at the world to discover its possibilities" and disrupt it (2006, 185, 208). This disruption—and the thinking, reflection, and distance that it generates—can lead to further involvement and flow in the play activity. Thus, I also argue that playful distance can work to eclipse a more expansive critical distance.

This chapter analyzes the lineage of the games *Half-Life* (1998), *Portal* (2007), *The Stanley Parable* (2012), and *The Beginner's Guide* (2015), which foreground distance and reflection within their narratives and gameplay.[3] This group of games produces a movement of self-reflexivity, where the latter two games build on the themes of the former two games. They chart a movement from action-based experiences to contemplative experiences, from doing to interpretation. Because of this, they offer a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between flow, play, distance, and reflection. While some argue that we should release play and its subversive powers from the control and commodification of games,[4] the fact that video games manage critical distance is equally important. In this chapter, I argue that flow in games and play itself facilitate this management, and that we should bring the critical attitude and its requisite suspicion to bear on play itself.

The Absorption of Critical Distance and the Quieting of Critique

We are not witnessing the loss of critical distance in contemporary culture, but rather its proliferation, absorption, and commodification.[5] This view differs from the idea that media abolish critical distance, such as the view articulated by the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson to the effect that critical perspectives external to capitalism were disappearing in the new world of postmodernism. He explained that the typical "slogans" of modernism and critical distance—from "negativity, opposition, and subversion, to critique and reflexivity"—were no longer viable (1984, 87). Modernist art sought freedom from capitalism through radical formal experimentation that resisted commodification. It used this autonomy and distance as a critical foothold to launch a critique of mass culture and consumerism. If art were difficult and unpalatable to mass consumer interest, then it could provide an example of an uncommodified experience outside of capital.

Yet capitalism coopts avant-garde experimentation within postmodernism (Jameson singled out punk music as a particularly loud example), and even radical art movements cannot achieve distance from capital in order to leverage an effective, lasting critique. While Jameson described postmodernism as the "abolition of critical distance," he also explained it in terms of an "explosion" that results from "a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm" (1984, 87). If modernist art retreated to an autonomous, isolated sphere to protect itself and high culture from the encroachment of capitalist commodification and mass media, then postmodernism exploded this bunkering. Henceforth, popular culture and high art intermingled and mass consumer culture absorbed and internalized critical distance.

On the one hand, immersive media experiences trump reflection, erasing moments for critical distance. Writing about postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s, Jameson explained that media saturation no longer allowed for moments of pause within its continuous streaming. These interludes were shrinking and disappearing. Turning to television as an example, he explained that the commercial interruptions of network television were ineffectual moments for creating critical distance.[6] In a dark caricature of distance, Jameson joked that commercial interruptions "are less intermissions than they are fleeting opportunities to visit the bathroom or throw together a sandwich" (1991, 70). He characterized these interruptions as moments of consumption or elimination, the minimum requirements for sustaining life so that we can return to our media immersion. Video games can appear to continue this process, replacing moments of pause and distance with the magic of immersive flow experiences. One need only think about the episode from the television show *South Park* that satirizes the game *World of Warcraft*. When the kids become addicted to the game, Cartman's mother brings them food and holds a cistern for her son so he does not need to stop playing to go to the bathroom. Hyperbolically, the lure of video games even removes interruptions for these biological necessities.[7]

On the other hand, postmodern media are self-reflexive and encourage reflection. As media scholar Jay Bolter puts it, today "the avant-garde experience of reflection has become popular entertainment" (2019a, 118). For example, a television show such as *South Park* foregrounds its means of production or alludes to events in popular culture that spectators will

recognize. This creates a form of distance when television shows break the "fourth wall" (as *Parks and Recreation* or *Mr. Robot* do) or films reference other popular media or genre conventions (as the *Scream* franchise does). Here, spectators are not necessarily lulled by a seamless narrative; they are made aware of their own viewing or find pleasure in being in on the joke when they understand a cultural reference. When describing the self-reflexivity of *The Simpsons* and its parodies of popular culture, media scholars Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain that "this does not constitute the kind of strategy deployed by modernists, who used reflexivity to make viewers stand back in critical distance, but rather suggests a deliberately playful engagement that allows us to enjoy our involvement in both the old text and its parodic remake" (2009, 330). The appropriation of popular culture by *The Simpsons* interrupts the story with nondiegetic references, but this playful distance leads to further involvement by the viewer. Sturken and Cartwright juxtapose playful engagement with critical distance to show how postmodern media create distance but use it to engage spectators more deeply in their media experience.

Video games go a step further, literalizing playful engagement as an engrossing form of interaction. In chapter 2, I discussed a boss battle in the game *Psychonauts* (2005) that illustrates this idea. In this battle, players leap onto a theater stage to defeat Jasper Rolls, an acerbic theater critic who is a psychic manifestation of the actress Gloria Von Gouton's relentless self-criticism. Jasper slings dangerous, critical words at the players, who must dodge them, becoming absorbed in the battle and impervious to Jasper's attempts to criticize and interrupt their concentration. Players are no longer passive, offstage spectators, but actors who literally jump into the "play." They do not embody the distanced position of the critic or "the cigar-smoking detachment of the Brechtian theatergoer," as Jameson (1991, 74) once said, but rather they overcome the critic's attacks through playful engagement. Upon defeating him, Jasper quips, "What's the matter, can't you take a little criticism?" His giant, robust form then shrinks into a box of popcorn. His once-booming voice now barely squeaks. He literally becomes "a little criticism." Metaphorically, the battle foregrounds the absorbing powers of play and flow and the diminishing power of the critic and critical distance.

Yet interpreting the fight solely as a metaphor for erasing critical distance overlooks how players employ distance to defeat Jasper. During the battle,

players must leave the stage, ascend to the rafters, and light spotlights that blind Jasper and open him up to attack. Historically, the purpose of public criticism aimed to uncover illusions and illuminate hidden truths. Through their actions, players literally expose the falseness of Jasper's criticism in the harsh light of truth. To do so, they escape to a distanced position by leaping into a stream of musical notes that carry them upward from the music pit like a river of visible sound. During this ascent, players gain distance and an aerial perspective through which to observe the state of the battle. On the rafters, players can duck behind the spotlights—the source of light, of metaphorical truth—which block Jasper's attacks. This creates an interlude in the action during which players can plan future actions, assess past failures, and reformulate strategies. From a design perspective, this interlude provides players with the necessary space and time for evaluation in an otherwise-hectic battle.[8]

Video games often oscillate between moments of play, *in ludes*, and interludes of more distanced reflection. Take the Blast Pit level in Valve's acclaimed video game *Half-Life,* where players must destroy an alien with giant tentacles—the only part of the boss that is ever seen (figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1
The alien tentacles are seen after a grenade blast in the Blast Pit level of *Half-Life* has destroyed the crates in front of the ladder.

Sometimes players explore the level at a distance from the alien, safe from its piercing tentacles. At other times, players learn to distract the alien with noisy grenades and then sneak past its tentacles. The boss battle is not designed as a blast-a-thon against a massive enemy because the tentacles cannot be destroyed in this way. As game designer and journalist GB Burford (2014) explains, "Being a shooter is a secondary priority in Blast Pit. It's not about combat; it's about problem solving." For example, at one point players encounter a ladder surrounded by wooden crates. Smashing the crates with a crowbar—perhaps one's first instinct—will draw the attention of the deadly tentacles. On the other hand, lobbing a grenade from afar will destroy the crates and distract the tentacles. Players then can wait until the tentacles finish stabbing the area where the grenade detonated and move quietly to the ladder. Throughout the level, players oscillate between moments of play, gunning, and reflex (when they encounter intense skirmishes with minor enemies) and interludes of reflection, thinking, and problem-solving (when they ponder how to overcome obstacles like the ladder and crates).

The interludes in games like *Psychonauts* and *Half-Life* provide examples of how video games absorb reflection and distance into their form. The new media theorist Lev Manovich argues that video games marry "Brecht and Hollywood" (2001, 209). Players move seamlessly between absorbed states of playful action and moments that interrupt that action—when they adjust control panels, scan information provided by feedback systems, or pause to strategize. As Manovich says, these interruptions are not moments of Brechtian "liberation" where players are free to critique the game, but rather a new form of interactive immersion that contributes to a player's involvement in a game (2001, 208). Sometimes players are absorbed in their actions, but at other times, they pause to reflect when encountering a difficult situation. For example, when I crowbarred the crates in *Half-Life*, the tentacles killed me, but the interruption offered the opportunity to develop new strategies. Game and learning scholar James Paul Gee explains that learners master a task through "cycles of expertise," where they test new skills, fail, evaluate the failure, try again, and so on (2005, 10); many video games implement these cycles, oscillating between flow and evaluation.[9]

Yet flow in games is not simply a state of unreflective immersion, where one moves between flow and reflection and back to flow again. Thinking

and reflection are key components of flow in games. Flow is a challenge-based immersion, and as game scholars Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä remind us, "Challenges can be related to motor skills or mental skills such as strategic thinking or logical problem solving" (2007, 45). Video games often contain this cognitive dimension, challenging players' mental skills. Given that flow experiences arise when there are clear goals and feedback, flow channels thought toward a particular goal, absorbing reflection into the current of an activity. Flow does not erase thinking, but it does inhibit thoughts about anything *outside* an activity while concentrating our thoughts on the activity itself.

This raises an additional question: what is the relationship between critical thinking and play? This question is not easily answered. The philosopher John Dewey (1910) describes thinking as climbing a tree, which can stand as a metaphor for critical distance that parallels the battle against Jasper Rolls, when players rise above the stage and assess their situation. The following passage resonates with play and challenging game situations and is worth quoting at length:

> Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a *forked road* situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives. As long as our activity glides smoothly along from one thing to another, or as long as we permit our imagination to entertain fancies at pleasure, there is no call for reflection. Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a belief brings us, however, to a pause. In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another. (Dewey 1910, 11; emphasis in original)

This passage evokes the idea that experience oscillates between moments of smooth activity—reminiscent of flow—and periods of reflection. It hints at play through the idea of entertaining fantasies, suggesting a playful imagination that pokes about without the need for strenuous thinking. Uncritical thinking, Dewey says at another point, occurs without pause when one accepts prior experience or acts on the first thought that comes to mind (1910, 13). For example, just blasting away at the tentacles in *Half-Life* without thinking about the implications of the action only gets you killed. Instead, Burford (2014) explains, "You've got to play it smart." In *Half-Life*, players must reflect in order to succeed. When a difficulty presents itself (like how to pass the tentacles), one pauses, weighs the available options,

surveys information, and metaphorically climbs a tree to gain a crucial distance from which one can assess the situation. Climbing a tree is also a typical play situation, of course, but Dewey does not use the metaphor in this way. Climbing is not done for its own sake (as when one plays and imagines the tree to be a pirate ship or secret hideout), but with the goal of ascertaining a solution to a problem: which path do we take?

Critical thinking and play harbor similarities, but they are different. Seeking alternatives is a common way to conceive of play.[10] Henricks says that "play's strength is its opening of possibilities" (2015, 225). A tree can become a pirate ship, a secret hideout, or a jungle gym. To the playful mind, the tree is an ambiguous structure that houses alternatives. As the game scholar Miguel Sicart explains, "To be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity" (2014, 28). Dewey (1910) also says that critical thinking emerges when one encounters an ambiguous problem that provides alternatives. Yet critical thinking weighs alternatives in order to resolve a problem, while play seeks alternatives and messes around with them. If play adds ambiguity to the world in order to mess around with its possibilities, critical thinking subtracts ambiguity from the world, resolving it as one resolves an image to make it clearer.

No doubt, play occurs in *Half-Life's* Blast Pit level, which offers ambiguities and alternatives to mess around with. As Burford (2014) notes, finding a few grenades when first encountering the tentacles falsely suggests the possibility of using them against the alien. This moment encourages experimentation and play. Will grenades destroy the tentacles? What other weapons should I try? Perhaps the tentacles have a weak spot? One plays, messes around, and experiments. Yet the level foregrounds strategizing, evaluating success and failure, finding a solution, and removing ambiguity. Dewey says that "a question to be answered, an ambiguity to be resolved, sets up an end and holds the current of ideas to a definite channel" (1910, 11). How do I defeat the tentacles? What is the most effective strategy to use? Even if play provides a method for exploring possibilities and testing alternatives, achieving a playful distance from the game, the Blast Pit level channels the reflection that this play generates toward problem-solving and finding a solution. While play might not always occasion moments of critical thinking (as we glide along from fancy to fancy or discover a solution by happenstance), in games, play often turns to critical thinking as players resolve ambiguity to discover a solution.

When progressing through the Blast Pit level in *Half-Life,* it can seem like one is not playing a game, but thinking it. Yet this is a particular kind of critical thinking. It is not engaged in interpreting the meaning of the battle, but rather calculating actions toward achieving a goal. Players could use interludes provided in games to interpret their meaning—why not?—but from the game's perspective, occupying these moments for interpretative purposes remains a secondary pursuit: the point is to fill them with strategizing and calculation. On the Blast Pit level, players encounter a scientist hiding on top of the generator that they must activate to help kill the alien. The scientist tells players that he will not move "until the situation is drastically improved." The scientist, who was sent to fix the generator, is a thinker who cannot act under pressure, and players electrocute him when they activate the generator's power. While unbridled shooting is secondary to problem-solving on the Blast Pit level, the scientist's extended reflection, deliberation, and inaction are ridiculed as well. At some point, the game suggests, one must truncate thought and channel reflection toward action. While critical thinking deliberates and suspends judgment, video games also encourage the suspension of deliberation. In other words, games provoke moments of reflection but also truncate them.

The substitution of strategic forms of reflection for more expansive forms of interpretation has been one way that game scholars have differentiated video games from older media forms such as literature and film. While these media often require audiences to decode texts to analyze their meanings, video games turn this decoding toward the goal of interacting with the game in order to progress. Game scholar Markku Eskelinen highlights this when he writes that "in art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation."[11] From this perspective, the cultural analysis of games is not the primary function of interpretation for players. In games like chess, *Tetris*, *Half-Life*, and even the cerebral *Psychonauts*, interpreting their meaning recedes as understanding their mechanics, rule systems, and goals assumes precedence.

While game scholars used this difference to separate games from media forms like novels and films, they did not analyze *why* this historic shift was occurring. Instead of noting how the function of interpretation shifts from older media forms to games, we must understand the reasons behind

this change. In my opinion, this transformation is symptomatic of historical processes where critical distance and reflection are managed. Games do not abolish distance but rather absorb it, channeling and redirecting the reflection that this distance generates back into the game. In *Psychonauts* or *Half-Life,* players gain distance from the action in moments of interlude and substitute strategic thinking for interpretation (where players might evaluate a game's meaning). Alternatively, players achieve a playful distance during play that pokes around and experiments, but the reflection generated by this distance is also channeled back into the game. This does not mean that players abdicate traditional forms of interpretation—it just says that one form of reflection (strategizing in relation to the game) takes precedence over the other (thinking about the game's meaning).

Clearly, one can interpret video games—I just did—but from the perspective of the games being played, this interpretation is secondary and merely "a little criticism." An ideology of playful engagement and strategic reflection waxes as traditional interpretation and criticism wanes and hence shrinks in significance. During this process, the idea of critical distance becomes what I call a *critical instance*, a symptom of the transformation and management of criticality within broader culture.

Portal: Video Games as Critical Instances

I define a critical instance as an object or activity that provokes and gratifies a desire for critical distance, while simultaneously truncating and containing this distance. The phrase *critical instance* alludes to distance, but it foregrounds that the reflection that these activities generate turns inward, back toward the activity that created it. The term also foregrounds that it is an *instance* of the critical—that is, an occasion of the critical, an event where criticality appears or emerges. The concept describes contemporary culture because culture does not abolish critical distance but rather proliferates multiple instances that provoke criticality. These instances differ from one another in their specific properties and how they appear in the world, but they all retain the basic function of gratifying critical distance while also managing and containing it.

Two questions arise here. First, what does it mean that critical instances gratify a desire for critical distance? Second, what does it mean that critical instances contain, truncate, or diminish the power of critical distance? In

this section, I discuss these questions and explain how video games and flow participate in this process. Then I turn to the video game *Portal* to provide a self-reflexive example of a critical instance.

When I say that critical instances gratify a desire for critical distance, I mean that they indulge a desire for being critical. The historical period of modernity (since the Enlightenment) cultivated a critical attitude where the public used reason to uncover hidden truths, to expose forms of ideology and falsity within individual consciousness, and to take a step back from inherited viewpoints in order to become aware of determining forces that influence human behavior. This impulse to take a step back and analyze experience has not disappeared today, although it has mutated in various ways, such as becoming attached to conspiracy theories (where one sees nefarious, external forces shaping history that do not exist) and cynicism (where one attains distance and uncovers hidden truths but distrusts that these truths have any power to change the world). These examples reveal that the impulse for attaining distance from our world, media, and experiences remains, but it has mutated. They gratify the critical impulse, but they also truncate and contain it.

The concept of a critical instance can apply to various activities. Conspiracy theory and cynicism are not the only ways that critical distance has been transformed today. For example, the emergence of debilitating forms of self-criticism marks an inward turn of critique, a point discussed in chapter 2. While individuals attain distance when they reflect on personal problems, they turn this criticism inward toward the self instead of outward toward the possible external causes of their problems (e.g., poverty, inequality, patriarchy, racism, exploitation, and oppression). Self-criticism gratifies the desire for critical distance, but it also truncates it.

In another example, some argue that focusing on local forms of resistance and political action gratify critical distance without gaining a wider, more encompassing perspective that would seek revolution or total social transformation.[12] Still another example is the contemporary experience of ironic detachment that game scholar Ian Bogost (2016) describes; this detachment allows one to hold consumer culture at a distance—cheap mass-produced beer, "bad" television—and signal our critical attitude and suspicion toward it, but once this distance is gratified and achieved, it allows one to turn back toward these things and enjoy them. The distance achieved from these objects is no longer enough to escape their lure. These

examples of critical instances embody what philosopher Bruno Latour calls the "miniaturization of critique," where critique becomes small and ineffective like Jasper Rolls's voice in *Psychonauts*, ubiquitous like the miniaturization of computers, and instantly available to gratify our critical itch for a "nickel" (2004, 230).

Many video games participate in the historical transformation of critical distance by substituting a strategic, calculative form of reflection turned inward toward the game for more expansive forms of reflection and critique. This leads to a "reduction in critical consciousness," as philosopher Bernard Stiegler argues, where critique mutates into a form of "mastery through calculation" (46). For example, to defeat the tentacles in *Half-Life*, players use interludes of reflection to master the patterns of the tentacles' attacks and calculate the steps needed to bypass them. Huizinga identified this issue in relation to play as well, lamenting the rise of professional sports and games such as chess and bridge "where calculation is everything;" he explained that "Proficiency at bridge is a sterile excellence, sharpening the mental faculties very one-sidedly without enriching the soul in any way, fixing and consuming a quantity of intellectual energy that might have been better applied" ([1950] 1955, 198–199). While Huizinga wrote in relation to play, this process is analogous to what happens to critical distance within games, where more expansive forms of interpretation are weakened, diminished, and quieted when thinking turns toward calculation. According to Stiegler (2010), forms of calculative thinking inhibit the trajectory of critical consciousness and modernity that promote the examination of life itself from a broader distance in order to become aware of forces that shape human thought and behavior.

Flow theory offers one way to explain how the withering or truncation of critical distance occurs. When discussing flow, game artist and scholar Anne-Marie Schleiner explains that "the player's critical and reflective capacity, political or otherwise, is easily bespelled amidst the movement of game actions" (2017, 74–75).[13] The reflection required to play a game often trumps critical and political forms of reflection. As discussed in chapter 1, flow theory embraces a growth model of the self, where individuals return from a flow experience with an expanded sense of self, augmented by newly acquired and practiced skills.[14] Typically, this self is *not* gifted with an increase in skills that seek more expansive forms of critical distance and outside perspectives because these skills are excluded from the flow

experience. Csikszentmihalyi explains that the flow experience removes interludes where questions arise such as, Why am I doing this? Should I be doing this? Flow erases the need to reflect on the *why* of one's actions and to "evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out" (1975a, 38; 1990, 54). Flow quiets doubt, the hallmark of the critical attitude. It does not exercise and grow this form of questioning because it threatens the immersive experience of flow itself. Yet such questions occupy the heart of the critical attitude and enterprise. Why am I doing *this* instead of something else? What determines and conditions my actions? What external forces or dominant cultural norms drive people to pursue this activity?

This form of critical questioning is a more profound version of critical distance than that encountered in a critical instance. The difference might be explained as that between criticism in general and philosophical critique. As the philosopher Judith Butler explains, "Criticism usually takes an object, and critique is concerned to identify the conditions of possibility under which a domain of objects appears" (Butler 2009, 108–109). On the one hand, when a flow experience ends or is interrupted, one has an object that draws critical attention: the experience just completed. When players die in a video game, they can turn back toward the activity, critically evaluate their performance, and calculate new strategies. The critical distance associated with critique, on the other hand, might examine broader questions: What ideologies influence the game that I am playing? What are its political meanings? Why am I playing it? Should I be playing it? Why am I pursuing flow instead of something else?

These kinds of questions push critical distance beyond a particular game and beyond the inward turn of a critical instance. My argument is not that video games completely replace reflection that functions at this level, but that many games displace it by promoting calculative reflection and using flow to turn thought back toward the activity itself. Thus, many video games are symptoms of the containment and truncation of critical distance in contemporary culture.

Some video games aim to produce more expansive forms of reflection—a worthy ambition. For example, the acclaimed video game *Portal* encourages players to become aware of how video games control and manipulate their actions. Packaged in Valve's *Orange Box* (2007) with *Half-Life 2* (created in 2004), *Portal* exists in the world of *Half-Life* and self-reflectively extends some of its themes. Both first-person perspective games embrace narratives

of emancipation where players must escape from research facilities gone awry. Moreover, if *Half-Life* sometimes foregrounds reflection over intense battles, *Portal* pushes this approach further, eschewing the fast-paced violence of shooters in favor of game mechanics based almost entirely on puzzle-solving. In effect, *Portal* illustrates a critical awareness of *Half-Life's* themes.

In *Portal*, the player embodies the protagonist Chell, who is trying to escape Aperture Science's Enrichment Center, which is controlled by an artificial intelligence (AI) named GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System). Through a voiceover, GLaDOS guides Chell through a series of lablike test chambers, introducing the game mechanics that allow players to use a "portal gun" to shoot two portals onto the walls and surfaces of the underground facility (figure 4.2). Entering one portal transports players to the other, and vice versa. *Portal* constructs challenges that require the manipulation of these portals in order to progress: players must use the portals to overcome obstacles, move objects from one position to another, and reach inaccessible locations. For example, by shooting one portal on the ground below Chell and jumping into it from a height, players can use gravity to launch themselves out of the other portal (like a bullet) to reach a

Figure 4.2
Two portals in the game *Portal*

faraway location. Moreover, there are hardly any enemies in *Portal,* so players have time to ponder how to solve the game's puzzles.

At first, GLaDOS appears to be a quirky, humorous AI, but it quickly becomes clear that GLaDOS is manipulating Chell as a test subject for Aperture Science, learning from Chell's use of the innovative portal gun that drives the game's mechanics. Halfway through the game, GLaDOS attempts to kill Chell after she has completed the system's experiments and is no longer of use. If players escape their demise, they flee from the immaculate test chambers into the decaying "backstage" of the Enrichment Center. They progress through the dilapidated infrastructure of the underground facility, solving puzzles before confronting and destroying GLaDOS. In the final scene, Chell is propelled outside of the facility, falling on the ground as explosions erupt around her. But Valve later released a patch for *Portal* that replaced this original ending. Now, when players defeat GLaDOS and Chell escapes, she lies on the ground exhausted before a small robot drags her back into the depths of Aperture Science, setting the stage for *Portal 2*.

Portal is really an allegory about ideology critique and using its clarifying powers to seek emancipation.[15] Throughout the game, players expose GLaDOS's lies and the dirty truth behind the clean facade of the training facility. They slowly gain distance from the illusions that enshroud them, becoming aware of their subjection and their goal of attaining an outside position, freed from falsity. Similar to Plato's allegory of the cave, players literally escape an underground compound of control, overcoming challenges in order to ascend to the surface, where ostensibly they will obtain freedom and true understanding. *Portal* asks players to reach a true understanding of their own confinement by games and how they manipulate players. This game presents an example of the miniaturization of critique that appropriates, popularizes, and sells the opportunity to reveal and overcome the hidden machinations of power.

Portal provokes and gratifies the desire for distance and emancipation, but it ultimately suggests that Aperture Science vampirizes and commodifies this desire. Aware of its stereotypical narrative concerning the unveiling and defeat of hidden power, *Portal* provides a twist at its end. During the credit sequence, a digitized female voice sings a song that reveals that GLaDOS is, as the song title explains, "Still Alive." The lyrics operate as a final monologue delivered by GLaDOS, which explains that Chell's escape was the result of a successful experiment: "Now, these points of data make a

beautiful line. And we're out of beta. We're releasing on time! So I'm GLaD I got burned! Think of all the things we learned!"

These lines reinforce the self-reflexivity of the game, where GLaDOS stands in for the game designer, who has constructed a series of puzzles and challenges that players must overcome. As both test subject and game tester, the player's struggle to escape is retroactively revealed as a successful experiment for Aperture Science. If *Portal* is an allegory for the progressive movement of gaining critical distance from power to reveal its hidden falsity, then the song "Still Alive" suggests that the process of playful experimentation (and even critique) is not only ineffective against power (i.e., GLaDOS is still alive at the end), but it also aids and enriches power. The players' desire to escape from control, and their strategizing while doing so, provide data for Aperture Science to use to improve its product, move beyond beta, and release a finer tuned commodity (perhaps *Portal 2*).

Portal serves as a self-reflexive game that illustrates the function of critical instances in contemporary culture: to gratify the desire for critical distance while simultaneously managing and containing it—and even making it useful for those in control. The game provokes the modern impulse for critical distance, urging players to expose the falsity of power in order to emancipate themselves, but it simultaneously truncates the power of this distance, turning critical reflection inward toward solving the puzzles needed to progress. The hope of emancipation, and then its denial, even appear in the basic gameplay of *Portal*; the portals promise escape and distance from the facility (by literally opening holes in the confining walls), but when players leap through one portal to escape, the other portal just returns them to the facility.[16] Chell is even dragged back inside the facility at the end, which allegorizes the truncation of distance and the player's inability to obtain an outside perspective from the game's controlling forces. Chell and the player are too exhausted from their puzzle-solving and calculative labors to complete their emancipation—a point that figuratively illustrates how critical instances gratify but dissipate critical energies, or, as Huizinga put it, they "[consume] a quantity of intellectual energy that might have been better applied" ([1950] 1955, 199).

While *Portal* turns critical thinking back toward the game, toward solving its puzzles and fueling progression, it also encourages players to become aware that video games are manipulating and controlling their desires and actions. One does not need to dismiss the game entirely as a commodity

that packages the critical attitude for consumption. *Portal's* self-reflexivity attempts to raise players' awareness of their desire for emancipation and its manipulation. While Valve profits from this manipulation, it also exposes it. While *Portal* commodifies the critical attitude, it also embodies it. While GLaDOS still lives at the end, so too does the desire for critical distance and emancipation.[17]

The Stanley Parable: Critiquing Playfulness

Unlike *Half-Life* or *Portal*, Davey Wreden and William Pugh's *The Stanley Parable* does not substitute a calculative form of strategic thinking to manage critical distance. It eschews quick-paced gameplay, challenging puzzles, and absorbing action, allowing players to focus on interpreting and articulating their experiences. In fact, the game often breaks the fourth wall, acknowledging players' presence while encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences. It asks players to ponder questions such as "What am I doing here? What is the point of this? Why am I playing this game?"—the kind of critical questions that flow experiences typically seek to displace. Theoretically, this should jar players from immersion, but the game's self-reflexive prodding continues to engage the player. *The Stanley Parable* foregrounds the search for critical distance and gaining outside perspectives on games, but it also reveals that the playful search for these outside perspectives is another way that games immerse and manipulate players today. It demonstrates that a playful distance that seeks to subvert the game can also control its critical insights. Yet while *The Stanley Parable* engages its players through its playful attitude toward games, it also turns a critical eye on play itself.

The Stanley Parable was originally a mod of *Half-Life 2;* it draws on the lineage of the *Half-Life* series and *Portal*. In *The Stanley Parable,* the player assumes the role of a corporate button pusher named Stanley as he explores the labyrinths of an office building devoid of other people—again, like *Half-Life* and *Portal*, Stanley's goal is to escape the facility. Players begin in Stanley's office, sitting before a computer seen through a first-person perspective, and soon they are introduced to an omniscient and omnipotent narrator that accompanies Stanley (and the player) throughout the game. The narrator embodies the voice of the game designer, much like GLaDOS in *Portal*, and he wants players to follow the story that he is narrating.

The narrator tells Stanley what to do and ridicules player actions that go against his desires. Players can sabotage the narrator's wishes, which is one of the main themes and subversive pleasures of the game. For example, players can stand in a broom closet while the narrator berates their baffling choice to do nothing, just to thwart the developments of the story (figure 4.3).

Like *Portal*, *The Stanley Parable* foregrounds the players' desire to emancipate themselves from the cold, dehumanized corridors of an office building. Players slowly discover the different endings of the game, such as escaping the office into the outdoors, blowing up the building after realizing that the corporation is a mind-control facility, encountering a museum that self-reflexively catalogs *The Stanley Parable*'s development, and discovering a room full of giant buttons that Stanley can press forever and ever. When players encounter an ending, the narrator typically resets the game or waits for players to press *esc* (the escape key on the keyboard) and reset the game themselves. Players never truly escape the game. Instead, they discover multiple "endings," only to be returned to Stanley's office to begin yet another search for another ending.

Figure 4.3
After waiting in the broom closet in *The Stanley Parable,* the narrator asks Stanley (i.e., the player) to reflect on why they remain there, doing nothing.

The Stanley Parable mocks various tropes and conventions of mainstream video games surrounding player choice, narration, storytelling, and other elements of gameplay. For example, the narrator derides the idea that many games require players to solve puzzles, ridiculing the calculative forms of reflection needed to progress. In one scene, the narrator becomes upset that the player does not approve of the game that he created, so he teleports Stanley into the real, popular games *Minecraft* (2011) and *Portal*. In the *Portal* sequence, Stanley quickly encounters a puzzle: a switch on the floor opens and closes a door in the distance. The narrator mocks, "Ohhh! It's a puzzle! Critical thinking, Stanley. Your forte." The player must place a cube found in the room on the switch to open the door—a common game mechanic in *Portal* and other games. "Genius," the narrator sneers after the player solves the puzzle, thus undermining the idea that overcoming obstacles in games necessarily equates with ingenuity or critical thinking. The simplicity of this puzzle foregrounds that players often uncritically draw on prior experience and game literacy to search for solutions. This moment also criticizes the critical thinking typical of games as a diminished form of reflection bent on progression and solution (perhaps similar to Huizinga's criticism of games offered previously). Instead, *The Stanley Parable* invites players to reflect on and criticize the conventions of puzzle design in games.

Like *Half-Life* and *Portal*, *The Stanley Parable* provides time and space for this reflection. The game is a *walking simulator*, a term used to refer to games where players stroll around and explore a space without requiring complex game mechanics such as running, climbing, jumping, and shooting. It is an example of a "slow technology," a term that Sicart uses to describe a game that "breaks the flow of the interaction and creates moments of awareness" and "reflection against the pressure of function, efficiency, and speed" (2013, 72–73). These moments are necessary when game designers want to provide time for narrative comprehension or interpretation. Brian Upton, a game scholar and veteran of the video game industry, explains, "If a game mixes narrative and gameplay elements, the player must have the necessary mental space to engage with the story. If every moment of the experience is packed with interesting and challenging gameplay decisions, there is no room for narrative play" (2015, 273). Except for a few well-timed moves and button presses, *The Stanley Parable* includes hardly any challenging gameplay decisions that interrupt the time spent digesting the story. Most of the decisions required, like choosing to go through one door and not

another, merely branch the story in different directions. In fact, the game offers multiple situations of waiting (like standing in the broom closet) that give players time to ponder the narrator's criticisms of video games.

In one such situation, players discover that they can climb on a desk and leap from an open office window. They then fall into a white void, stuck below the window that now sits above them. Players can look around this emptiness but can barely move. The game gratifies the desire to escape and literally gain an outside perspective, but then it reveals that this desire was foreseen. If players believe that they have broken the game, the narrator's voice quickly assures them that this is not the case: "So now that you're here, what do you think? Isn't this a fun and unique place to be? Why don't we take a minute just to drink it all in!" The narrator urges the player to think and take in the view, but there is nothing to see. This creates a moment of pause and critical awareness: this is *not* a fun and unique place to be, and the player is aware of this, perhaps flicking the mouse around to look into the void and tapping buttons to try and move or trigger an event. We itch to move, to escape the void. Do we choose to remain, reflecting on the narration and hoping for something to happen, or do we press the *esc* key, restart the game, and return to play? Pressing *esc* promises a return to play, action, and control. It promises salvation from the uncomfortable suspension, deliberation, and reflection provoked by this void. After waiting, the narrator addresses the player, saying, "I'm enjoying what seems to be an internal conflict going on, where you are literally unable to act on your own desires to restart the game." The internal conflict revolves around the idea that players know that there is nothing to do here, and yet they continue to wait without restarting. A tension exists between a critical distance that encourages players to ponder their ineffective strategy to break the game and a desire to truncate this reflection and return to play.

If players continue to wait without restarting, the narrator adds a political dimension to the scene that pushes the player further out of the game, implicating the player in its criticism. He sings a song about Stanley's mindless job as a button-pusher that aligns with the gaming situation. This is, after all, what players do when playing the game: push a few buttons again and again in order to move around and explore—that's it. *The Stanley Parable* heightens one's awareness of having a presence in the real world, sitting before the computer, tapping at its keys. The song suggests that Stanley is unable to act to liberate himself from his dehumanizing and alienating

work. Just as Stanley is stuck in a dead-end job, unable to quit and escape, the player is stuck in a dead-end void, lacking the initiative to restart. Why can't Stanley act to free himself from his dead-end job, the song asks. And perhaps, why are players unable to free themselves from similar forms of alienation within the real world?

While *The Stanley Parable* does not offer direct answers to these questions, it ridicules players for being complicit in their inability to escape. Eventually, the stuck players can only choose to quit and press the *esc* key, thus becoming the simple button-pusher whom the narrator mocks. This moment satirizes the commonplace idea that games are a form of escapism where, as critical theorist McKenzie Wark puts it, gamers "click to opt out of making history," choosing simulation over reality, play over politics (2007, 165). Ironically, escaping returns Stanley to his office, where he and the player are still trapped, beginning the game again. The moment of critical distance that politicizes the game is eclipsed as the player returns to play.

The Stanley Parable is a deeply ironic game. It holds video games at a distance and invites players to relish its criticism of the medium, but it also encourages players to seek intimacy with the game, explore its possibilities and secrets, and embrace a playful attitude that subverts their expectations. Game scholar Ian Bogost calls irony "the great affliction of our age." He further explains, "Irony keeps reality at a distance. It has become our primary method for combatting the external world's incompatibility with our own desires. Today's irony uses increasingly desperate efforts to hold everything in between welcome embrace and sneering mockery" (2016, 10). *The Stanley Parable* keeps video games at a distance, ruthlessly mocking their illusion of choice, fractured narratives, critical thinking, and lust for achievement and solution, as well as the idiocy of simply pushing buttons on a keyboard or controller. Yet it also exudes a fanlike obsession with the structure of video games, their conventions, and their playful possibilities. For Bogost, play offers a solution to an ironic affliction that causes people to waver between rejecting the world and accepting it, and ironically mock consumer culture while also reveling in it. He explains, "Play is the opposite of irony: rather than distancing ourselves from things, in play we draw them close and meld with them" (2016, 92). If irony holds things at arm's length, then the world is within reach and can be drawn close through play.

The Stanley Parable invites this closeness and playful engagement, but it also urges players to gain distance from video games and develop an awareness of their manipulations. The concept that irony holds things at arm's length creates a middle ground. One can choose to draw things closer through play and overcome this distance, but one can also choose to let them go. That is, irony could be understood as an affliction that occurs because we do not gain *enough* distance from things. It occurs when the *critical* element of critical distance is no longer decisive and crucial. From this perspective, irony is not a production of distance where there should be none, but rather a symptom of the truncation of distance. This truncation occurs because the object of one's derision (often a commodity) continues to be alluring. Ironic detachment operates as another example of what I am calling a critical instance where critical distance is gratified but arrested. *The Stanley Parable* reveals how players are controlled and manipulated by games, but also that they cannot let them go. Critique goes hand in hand with playful engagement.

The Stanley Parable is also a playful game. It regards video games from a playful distance, poking fun at them. Just as critique has a mode of looking at the world, the critical attitude, play has a mode of distanced looking at the world, the playful attitude. Sicart explains that being playful means "taking over a situation to perceive it differently, letting play be the interpretative power of that context" (2014, 27). For example, instead of perceiving washing dishes or writing emails as regrettable tasks that we must perform, a playful perspective can transform them into a game or windows into an alternate world. While the playful attitude seeks distance from the world, this stepping back is not necessarily enacted to critique reality, but rather to engage us more within it.[18] Sicart says that the playful attitude always "respects the purpose of the activity" that it perceives in a new way (2014, 26). It transforms how we see or perform an activity—like doing the dishes—but ultimately leaves it intact.

In contrast, the critical attitude sees an experience from a distance in order to critique it, fundamentally alter it, and even let it go. For example, a critical feminist perspective might see household labor from a distance, not to make it more enjoyable through a playful approach, but to dismantle gendered rules that structure the activity and distribute household labor equitably. Sure, the dishes get done, but the critical attitude does not respect certain purposes of the activity, such as its social integration into

gendered forms of inequality. Returning to *The Stanley Parable*, this game regards video game conventions playfully. It challenges norms within game design while urging players themselves to be playful, to perceive the space of the game differently, to subvert the rules, and to search for alternative possibilities within it. Yet this playfulness also respects the activity of gaming and can end up involving players more fully within the game.

The Stanley Parable also cultivates a critical attitude toward playfulness itself. For example, there is an alternative, playful way to solve the simple puzzle that one encounters during the *Portal* sequence. Instead of moving the cube onto the switch to open the exit door, players can regard the conventional puzzle from a playful distance. They can stand on the switch, open the door, and toss the cube through it. Afterward, when players step off the switch, the door closes before they can exit. Without the cube to trigger the switch and hold open the door, players are confined within the room forever—or at least until they decide to press the *esc* key. While the narrator mocks the player's critical thinking when they solve the puzzle in the obvious manner (using the cube on the switch), the subversive, playful solution initially impresses the narrator. Yet he quickly undercuts his praise: "I don't think there's a simpler puzzle out there, and you've still broken it!" He scoffs at the desire to break the game, to develop new, novel moves that were not foreseen. This moment foregrounds that the playful desire to subvert the game was also foreseen, just like jumping from the window described previously. While *The Stanley Parable* mocks the critical thinking needed within puzzle games like *Portal*, it saves its most damning critique for the players' innovative, playful moves. Trapped in the room, players are left to reflect on the idea that their experimentation did not emancipate them, but only further confined them. Unruly players may try to break a game by subverting it, thus revealing their ingenuity, but it is not entirely clear that one *can* be an unruly player in *The Stanley Parable* because this is the kind of player that the game cultivates—ultimately, to mock them and question whether their playful subversion is actually subversive at all.

One can interpret this scene as a criticism of a culture obsessed with playfulness, thinking outside the box, and endless innovation—themes that I explore in chapter 5. While *The Stanley Parable* cultivates a playful attitude (asking players to seek alternative possibilities and endings and to revel in its ambiguities), the game is critical of and skeptical about this playfulness and its potential for liberation. The playful attitude that seeks alternative

endings throughout the game does not free Stanley or the player. Moreover, as players explore the game's secrets, their playful attitude becomes "uncritical" in Dewey's sense, requiring "a minimum of reflection" while one glides along looking for new possibilities to subvert the game and uncover its hidden secrets (1910, 13). Playfulness loses its edge and its rebellious ability to subvert expectations, and it becomes the norm.

Players' constant attempts to resist the game end up involving them more within it. Breaking immersion becomes a way to produce immersion and flow by challenging players to think outside the box, to adopt a playful attitude that seeks alternative endings as the goal and as the skill necessary to explore the game's mysteries. This playful attitude can eclipse the game's critical insights because players can become involved in their play instead of pondering *The Stanley Parable's* deeper critique: namely, that trying to get outside the box is the new box we're in. This is a valuable—and critical—perspective. This perspective does get outside the box and creates critical distance from playfulness itself. It reveals that the critical attitude moves in the opposite direction from the desire to draw the world closer through play, and that suspicion and doubt can be applied to the playful attitude itself.

The Beginner's Guide: A Coda and Conclusion

This chapter began by describing a tension between the idea that people should adopt a critical attitude toward life and the idea that we should live a life of absorbing play or flow to overcome distance from the world. From a critical perspective, flow is not simply a state of enjoyable immersion—it can manage and contain critical distance and reflection. Flow is a form of "challenge-based" immersion (Mäyrä 2008, 108). It does not necessarily erase reflection but directs it toward an activity while removing outside perspectives. For example, games like *Psychonauts* and *Half-Life* incorporate distance into their structures and redirect or channel reflection toward strategic thinking. This process turns reflection back toward the game and play, managing more expansive forms of distance. Self-reflexive games like *Portal* and *The Stanley Parable* push further outward, urging players to adopt an outside perspective on video games themselves in order to criticize how they manipulate player actions. *The Stanley Parable* purposely breaks immersion through a playful form of distancing, and yet this playful process can

involve players more thoroughly in the game as they embrace the goal of finding alternative endings and subverting the narrator. By managing critical distance, many video games and play itself can serve a cultural function: assuaging forms of reflection that have gone awry, such as excessive worry and doubt. But this management can have other undesirable effects, such as the truncation of critical distance. To counter this effect, we need to adopt critical distance from play itself.

Davey Wreden's video game *The Beginner's Guide*, his follow-up to *The Stanley Parable*, abandons the latter's lighthearted, ironic playfulness and examines themes of depression, alienation, self-loathing, the travails of artistic creation, and the troubled relationship between a work of art and its audience. In terms of its gameplay, *The Beginner's Guide* does not offer much room for play, spontaneity, or creative choice. There are no alternative paths to explore, no storylines branching in different directions. The game unfolds on rails. Yet, like *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide* is an ode to critical distance and reflection. It encourages players to see the game from a distance, to pause and reflect, and to interpret and contemplate issues such as depression, social anxiety, insecurity, and the toxic use of other people. While the game does not abandon playfulness outright—it creates a labyrinthine narrative that provokes the endless play of interpretation—it does cultivate a suspicion of play.

Similar to *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide* is a first-person perspective walking simulator that uses voiceover narration to guide players, but this time the narrator is Wreden, playing himself. In the story, Wreden befriends a game designer named Coda, who produces short, experimental games but does not share them with the public. While Wreden and Coda are different characters in the narrative, Coda is a fictional persona who likely stands in for Wreden, as the designer of these games. The entire narrative consists of a series of game interpretations: Wreden assumes the role of critic, fan, and friend, offering his insights concerning the meaning of Coda's games as players move through them in chronological order. Because Wreden is interpreting his own games, his commentary becomes a metaphor for self-reflection and self-criticism. Over time, Wreden's relationship with Coda slowly dissolves because Wreden modifies Coda's games by offering hints, removing puzzles, bypassing lengthy game sequences, and installing lampposts to illuminate parts of the game and guide the players. In the final game that Coda sends to Wreden, Coda tells Wreden to

stop sharing, modifying, and interpreting his games. One message reads, "Would you simply let them be what they are?" This question suggests that fans, critics, and the public should accept an artwork without excessively criticizing it.

The Beginner's Guide's narrative and design create a feeling of hostility toward criticism and interpretation, and this is a common response to the game in popular culture.[19] Yet if we let *The Beginner's Guide* be itself, the entire game unfolds through interpretation. At the beginning of the game, Wreden even invites players to email him their interpretations of Coda's creations, encouraging this form of involvement. Indeed, the game's major themes orbit ideas of criticism and critical distance. For example, at various points in the game, players must solve a simple puzzle to enter a dark room that does not allow them to turn back. Wreden's voiceover describes this room as a place "to pause just for a moment, a few seconds to reflect on and let go of the events that led you here. To step back and connect the pieces together, to grasp at that elusive bigger picture." These liminal spaces provide players with the distance they need to articulate their own experiences of Coda's games and Wreden's commentary.

This ritualized reflection is not the only way that the game foregrounds distance. *The Beginner's Guide* employs an image of distance as a driving component of its narrative. At the beginning of the game, Coda's creations mimic traditional first-person shooter games like *Half-Life,* where players tote a weapon around as they explore spaces, corridors, and rooms. In one of Coda's early games, players must step into a beam of energy and die, ostensibly to disrupt its nefarious technological energy and save humanity (figure 4.4). That is a reference to *Half-Life,* when players must leap into the Lambda Core (figure 4.5) to be transported from the Black Mesa Research Facility to Xen, the alien borderlands. Yet an error occurs in Coda's game. Stepping into the beam does not cause players to die; instead, they float upward through the ceiling, gaining an aerial view of the level's design (figure 4.6). Wreden explains that "this is technically a glitch, but Coda identifies something human about it, like how small it makes one feel in the face of this larger chaotic system." He says that this error—this moment of distance—begins Coda's creative development to explore "experimental designs" and "tiny little games that go in all sorts of directions" (just like the labyrinth that one sees below them).[20] This glitch allows Coda a moment of playful distance to see games and their structures from a new

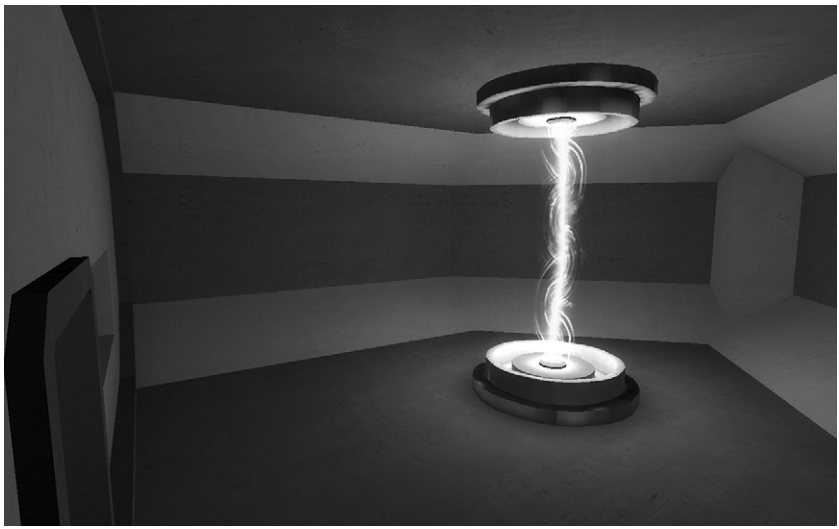

Figure 4.4
A beam that glitches in *The Beginner's Guide*

Figure 4.5
The Lambda Core portal to Xen in *Half-Life*

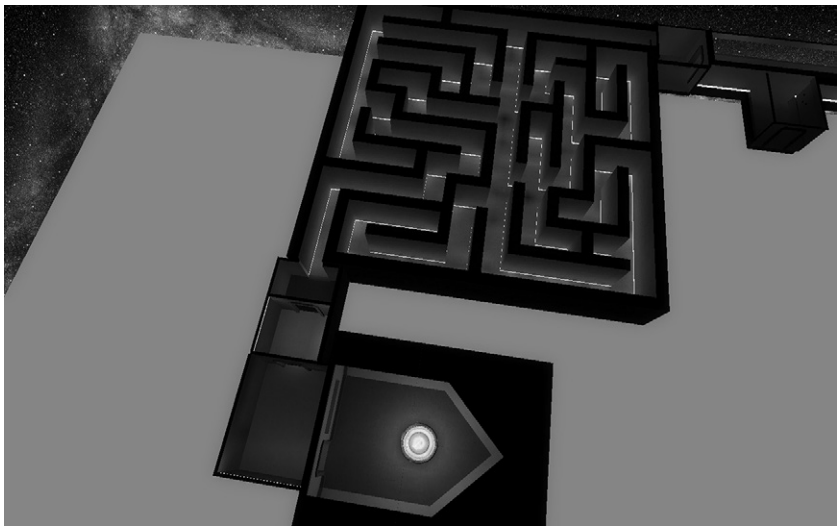

Figure 4.6
Aerial view of the level after jumping in the beam in *The Beginner's Guide*

perspective, just as in *Half-Life,* when leaping into the Lambda Core brings players to a strange alien world with floating platforms. It ostensibly awakened Coda's playful attitude toward games, allowing him to discover new possibilities for game mechanics, level design, and artistic expression.

Yet one can read the glitch not only as the beginning of Coda's creative experimentation, but also as the beginning of his supposed isolation and depression (a theme throughout the game). For players, the glitch interrupts the action, removing them from the level and causing a temporary loss of interactivity except for the ability to control the camera. If play draws the world close, this glitch interrupts the action and literally pushes players out of the world.

While the glitch is represented as a peaceful place beyond the chaos, Coda's games that follow are full of alienation and claustrophobia. There are stilted conversations with text-based decision trees where players constantly fail at social interaction. There are moments of imprisonment when Wreden must modify the game to skip arduous expanses of doing nothing. There is a game in an empty theater space where players shoot a machine gun into an absent audience, ripping jagged cuts into the fabric of the game's representation and leaving only an empty void beyond. Indeed, the

last game that Coda creates is called "The Tower," which "feels like it's trying to distance itself from the world," as Wreden says. He suggests that Coda is alienating himself from those who love his work by creating a level that contains almost impossible puzzles, such as navigating a labyrinth with invisible walls or guessing a six-digit code in order to progress. "By holding everything at a distance," Bogost says, "we trap ourselves within our imperfect minds" (2016, 11). This is an apt way to describe the narrative arc of *The Beginner's Guide*, since Wreden interprets Coda's work as a progressive withdrawal from the world.

Understood figuratively, proponents of play and flow could point to the glitch in *The Beginner's Guide* as simply that—an error or bug that requires repair. One can read the splitting of Coda/Wreden as the central glitch in the game, one that causes Wreden's distancing self-criticism, which becomes toxic and debilitating. Like defeating Jasper Rolls in *Psychonauts*, a return to play and flow could overcome the glitch of relentless criticism. As mentioned in previous chapters, flow seeks to mend a malfunctioning consciousness and remove the glitches of self-criticism by involving us more fully within reality. We draw the world close, and this closeness erases outside perspectives and self-consciousness.[21] We do not stop to worry or interpret our actions; rather, we become immersed in our lives and actions.

Yet, as Wreden says, there is something human in the glitch that Coda discovers. Proponents of play often suggest that humans are most human when they play.[22] I disagree. Humans are most human when they stand back and reflect on the world with a critical consciousness. *The Beginner's Guide* does not try to overcome the glitch of critical consciousness with a return to play; it embraces this glitch and works through its effects, no matter how unpleasant. Wreden's self-critical voiceover constantly interrupts players as they play the game. The hovering presence of his voice leads players through emotional waves of doubt, depression, anger, and uncertainty. Wreden personifies a poisonous self-criticism, longing for Coda's art (his own art) to make him feel whole, while diagnosing Coda (himself) as depressed and isolated. In the story, Wreden's behavior is even toxic. He releases Coda's games without his permission and tries to help Coda without being asked. He "vandalises" Coda's games, as game scholar Brendan Keogh (2015) puts it, modifying and interpreting them to make them playable and palatable. Thus, *The Beginner's Guide* constantly distances players

from Coda's games while cultivating a critical attitude in the players, who begin to suspect that Wreden is an unreliable narrator.

The Beginner's Guide also cultivates a suspicion of playful action and its absorbing appeal. One overlooked feature—perhaps the most significant choice in the game—is that players can turn off Wreden's narration in the Options menu, thus allowing them to encounter Coda's games unaltered. They can repair the Wreden/Coda glitch by erasing Wreden's modifications and critical commentary (making it disappear, like Jasper Rolls's shrinking voice after his defeat in *Psychonauts*). Turning off the narration promises a return to absorbing, playful action without the incessant, interrupting criticism. Yet this innocuous toggle changes everything—it annihilates *The Beginner's Guide*'s disturbing content, which reflects a culture reeling with the psychopathologies of contemporary life, thus truncating the game's potential significance.

In everyday life, self-criticism is not so easily toggled, although play and flow tempt us with this promise. If players turn off the narration (which most never do), Coda's games become increasingly unplayable. During one game, players must climb a giant staircase while their movement slows to a crawl, requiring them to hold the forward key for five minutes in order to ascend. In another game, players become locked in a prison cell and must wait for an hour before the door opens. Without Wreden helping the players to skip these tasks, playing Coda's games becomes arduous and strained. The absorbing powers of play evaporate, and the games seem like long interludes where one's thoughts wander. In the prison cell, for example, players need to wait an hour before the door opens. Any players who make it this far likely quit at this point (or do something else for an hour), but before they quit, perhaps they wonder why they are there, why they are playing a barely playable game, and what the elusive bigger picture might be. This moment, and Coda's games in general, urge players to approach their play with a critical attitude.[23]

While *The Beginner's Guide* eschews playful action and encourages players to reflect on what it means to play a game, it does not abandon play; rather, it shifts it toward the play of interpretation. Players and fans can engage in what Upton calls "narrative play," parsing the game's labyrinthine and challenging narrative (2015, 215).[24] Flow is agnostic when it comes to the activities that produce it. One can become immersed when writing poetry, working, interpreting a novel, shopping, planning a crime,

or even approaching the world with a critical attitude. No doubt, the narrative play in *The Beginner's Guide* can function as a critical instance, where players turn back to the game and immerse themselves in decoding it, but the game also pushes this interpretation outward, asking players to confront contemporary issues such as depression, social anxiety, and toxic behavior, while also reflecting on what it means to play a game. In doing so, *The Beginner's Guide* creates an experience that we might call *critical flow*.

This form of reflective immersion does not necessarily engage players through calculation and strategic thinking—indeed, *The Beginner's Guide* foregrounds its distaste for seeking solutions—but in more expansive forms of critical distance and interpretation. At the outset of this chapter, I mentioned that Turner explained that reflexivity inhibits flow. He also discussed the relationship between author, actor, and audience within the theater as a way to articulate a productive tension between flow and reflexivity: "Part of the potency of a 'great performance' comes precisely from this: the author *reflects*; the *actors flow*. There is a fruitful tension between the opposites. The audience is 'moved.' A cultural problem is irradiated into full visibility for the audience to reflect upon passionately" (1979, 490; emphasis in original). Unlike the audience of a theater performance, game players become actors themselves, *in ludes*, like the player jumping on stage in the battle against Jasper Rolls. By becoming actors, their play and flow can inhibit reflection. The trick is to combine flow and reflection in a fruitful tension, a passionate reflection, to create an experience of critical flow where the player becomes involved within more expansive forms of critique and interpretation that reflect on cultural problems.

The last scene in *The Beginner's Guide* repeats the moment of the glitch near the beginning of the game. Players step into a beam of energy and float upward. Below them, an endless labyrinth extends in all directions (figure 4.7). As players float away, the pathways in the labyrinth shrink, and the entire image wavers and blurs as the receding passages look like glitches shimmering on a malfunctioning television screen. This ascent—toward an outside perspective that promises a bigger picture—creates a spectacular moment that represents the universe as an impossibly complex, swirling pattern.

As I said before, the playful attitude and critical attitude both look at a situation from an outside perspective. The playful attitude invites us to turn back toward the activity, play with it, and engross ourselves within it, while

Figure 4.7
View of the labyrinth at the end of *The Beginner's Guide*

the critical attitude asks us to continue to deliberate, doubt, and ponder the conditions of the activity. In this moment of ascension, as one drifts away from the game space, a fruitful tension exists between these attitudes. A playful distance might see the endless labyrinth below as an invitation to return to the game and explore its ambiguities and its countless nooks and crannies—to return to play and the interpretation of the game's secrets. Yet as the player continues to float away and the labyrinth glitches and flickers, the critical attitude might perceive the wavering labyrinth as an illusion without an exit, a spectacular image of endless play as a form of ideology and entrapment. This critical distance invites us to extend interpretation outward, to become more skeptical and critical of play and playfulness—an approach that I continue in the following chapter.

5 Playfulness Untamed: Innovation, Play, and Flow in Independent Games

In 1979, at a presentation to the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, Csikszentmihalyi discussed the cultural significance of two concepts related to flow: *play* and *playfulness*. Before this talk, flow and playfulness seemed almost interchangeable. In his book *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, which introduced the concept of flow, he aligned playfulness, flow, and the "*esprit de jeu*" (the spirt of play), writing that flow sought to capture what he called "playful behavior" (1975a, 186, 190; emphasis in original). In his 1979 talk, he told the audience that he was not discussing his usual subject, flow, because he liked to approach his work playfully and see the world from a different angle.

As I described in the last chapter, the game scholar Miguel Sicart (2014) explains that playfulness is an attitude toward life that perceives alternatives within a given situation or reality. In his talk, Csikszentmihalyi also explained that playfulness allows one to "shift one's perspective on what goals and rules applied in a situation" (1981, 24). For example, instead of accepting a trip to one's local bureau of motor vehicles to renew a driver's license as a painful moment of bureaucratic necessity, one might take a playful approach, setting a goal to talk to three new people in line. It is the approach to the situation that matters, for playfulness is an attitude, not an action; we need not choose to play in order to be playful.[1] In contrast, flow occurs after one has chosen to play, for flow concerns one's *involvement* within an activity. Thus, we can differentiate between playfulness, play, and flow. *Playfulness* signifies an attitude that redefines reality and sees potential, alternative goals and rules to follow. *Play* occurs when one voluntarily chooses to enter one of these alternative realities and submit to its goals and rules. Meanwhile, *flow* intensifies one's involvement in the chosen reality.

In his talk, Csikszentmihalyi upheld the amount of playfulness within culture, not the amount of flow, as the best criterion for judging the progress of society. According to him, rigid cultures with unchangeable norms that do not allow people to experiment with different realities or to shift rules and contexts will stagnate, while a culture that allows for play and playfulness—for entering separate realities and experimenting with different rules and goals—will be more free, malleable, and adaptable. As Csikszentmihalyi put it, "The evolutionary significance of play is not that it maintains an already existing reality, but that it provides alternatives to it" (1981, 21). A healthy culture, he said, would be a playful culture where people would seek alternatives to dominant norms, where we would involve ourselves in playfulness and seek flow through a playful attitude.

The idea that play and playfulness can offer alternatives to existing reality is tempting, especially today, when it seems increasingly difficult to imagine alternative political, social, and economic realities. According to cultural theorist Mark Fisher, our reality *is* capitalism, and "it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative" (2009, 2; emphasis in original). Yet if play is defined as "a seeking of alternatives to established cultural patterns" as play theorist Thomas S. Henricks suggests, then play may make it possible to imagine alternatives to capitalism (2006, 205). Play allures because it offers hope that another world is possible, that one can escape the strictures and norms of society and enter into a separate existence with different rules, ones that we have chosen; playfulness allures because it suggests that we can perceive these alternatives in our everyday lives, within the strictures of our existing realities.

Does Csikszentmihalyi's view of playfulness as subverting dominant norms hold true today, in a world where play and playfulness seem increasingly central to capitalism? According to Sicart (2015), writing in *Wired* magazine, "Play is revolutionary," but I disagree. Play's evolutionary significance (the importance of seeking alternatives) does not translate directly into revolutionary significance, for capitalism encourages us to be playful in order to envision new markets and new desires to commodify, to frame all aspects of life as rigid forms that entrepreneurs can disrupt and reimagine as flexible sources of profit. Indeed, capitalism has instrumentalized play as a form of consumption, playfulness as disruption and innovation, and flow as a way to involve us in these activities while also increasing productivity. Instead of uncritically celebrating play as a subversive, revolutionary force,

we need to evaluate critically the complexities orbiting play in contemporary culture.

Donut County (2018), a casual independent game from developer Ben Esposito, illustrates some of the complexities revolving around play and capitalism. In *Donut County*, a raccoon named BK and his human friend and employee Mira run a donut shop where they use an app to take orders and deliver donuts. Unbeknownst to customers, the "donuts" that they order are not real donuts, but nefarious holes that swallow their homes, workplaces, and possessions. A raccoon entrepreneur named The Trash King developed the donut delivery app and enlisted employees such as BK to remove trash from the county, thus "helping" the community with this innovative business.

Players of *Donut County* operate the app as BK or Mira—pictured in a circle in the upper-left part of the screen. They move a hole around the playfield that swallows objects like rocks, animals, boxes, tools, cacti, fences, picnic tables, people, and so on (figure 5.1). The hole steadily expands until the player can consume larger items such as boulders, cars, campers, homes, and restaurants. Through various scenes, players progressively devour all of Donut County, including the donut shop and Mira and BK themselves.

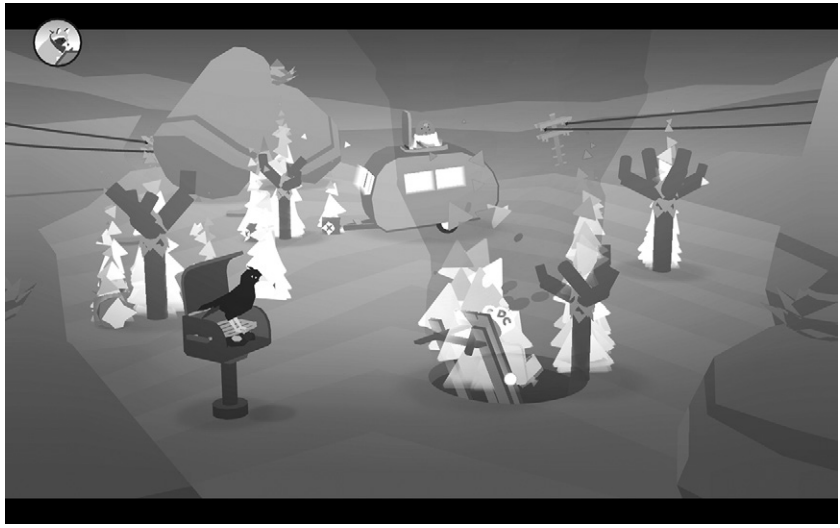

Figure 5.1
BK destroys Fox's campsite and lights Joshua trees on fire in *Donut County*

The first part of the story is told through flashbacks, for the game begins with Mira and BK (and the rest of Donut County) already inside the hole. Between levels, narrative cutscenes show the community siting together underground, piecing together the events that led to the their quite literal downfall.

Later in the game, after BK and Mira and the county's citizens revolt against The Trash King, we see that the raccoons have taken over Donut County, a fictional stand-in for Los Angeles. They replaced Disneyland with a leisure wonderland called Raccoon Lagoon, "the happiest raccoon place on raccoon earth"; Griffith Park Observatory has become The Trash King's mansion and Raccoon HQ; and the iconic Hollywood sign now simply reads "Raccoon."

Reviews from the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* explain that *Donut County* is not just a silly game with a unique game mechanic, but a critique of gentrification in Los Angeles. But the game also reveals a deeper anxiety about the dangers of play and gamification. The trash-collecting app played by BK and Mira (and hence the player) converts their play into work; moving the hole around the app moves it around in the world to devour the landscape. Moreover, The Trash King's app motivates BK, and its players/workers, through gamification techniques. BK gleefully uses the app so that he can accumulate points, level up, and earn a high-tech quadcopter drone as an upgrade and reward. The drone explains the god's-eye view of the landscape that *Donut County* uses, implying that the drone hovers over the landscape to transmit an image to the app so its users can see and control the hole.

In the beginning of the game, BK himself is figuratively a drone that carries out the directives of the Raccoon King. BK is seduced into destroying the community because it is framed as play via the app, as well as playing with the drone. *Donut County*'s use of the drone invokes the imbrication of play and work, for the drone is a high-tech toy, an entertaining flying device, a mode of surveillance, a weapon of warfare, and an innovative technology that will transform society all at once. The drone conflates work and play, toys and weapons, the virtual and the real. Like Ender's play in Orson Scott Card's novel *Ender's Game* (1985), BK's virtual play has real-world impacts. In the novel, Ender does not know that his play is carrying out an actual war. BK knows that his play/work is destroying the community, but the gamelike app and the drone separate BK from the effects of

his actions, allowing him to look the other way. Play typically occurs at a distance from everyday life and temporarily suspends the rules of normal life, and it is this playful separation that provides cover for BK's actions.

Donut County's use of the drone is instructive because drones allow us to perceive space differently, while at the same time they occupy, appropriate, and transform this space. This function of the drone positions it as a stand-in for playfulness, for as Sicart explains, playfulness allows us to look at the world from a different angle and "to appropriate a context that is not created or intended for play" (2014, 27). This is exactly how *Donut County* uses playfulness, for in the game, both the drone and BK's gamified app employ playfulness in service of capitalism. The Trash King's app literally confiscates space, playfully devouring the Donut County community while transforming an analog, lived location into a virtual, digital world ripe for exploitation. The Trash King's employees are called "hole drivers," referencing the reconfiguration of urban space that in the real world is being carried out by companies such as Uber and Lyft. From the playful perspective of these companies, a personal car parked in a garage and an idle human is a wasted chance for profit; they can be put to work—the car a source for new streams of profit and the potential human taxi driver a source of labor in the gig economy. Similarly, urban space is devoured and capitalized by scooter rental companies such as Bird and Lime, which transform public streets into a storage location for scooters that people can rent; the city streets are transformed into sources of profit by playful appropriation. Indeed, "The New Shared Economy is the New Entrepreneurz' favorite playground" (Gafni and Gluck 2014, 60).

Life today is a continuous exploration of alternative realities. Games reimagine the urban landscape as an alternative reality in which users can play.[2] Apps reimagine driving as a competition against other drivers who strive to reduce emissions, or they replace real neighborhood streets with a postapocalyptic, zombie-infested world where jogging is reimagined as a flight from voracious zombies.[3] Increasingly, games and apps playfully reconfigure reality, substituting instead an array of alternative realities. With a playful gaze, entrepreneurs also learn to see a different world—to view alternative realities where the old world is transformed into a landscape for the fulfillment of newly created desires. Entrepreneurs disrupt the status quo, appropriate situations in inventive ways, and salivate over new, untapped markets as playgrounds for potential profit.

The playful approach to reality that perceives situations differently is thus not an unqualified good, for it drives modern capitalism's creative destruction. It is this capitalist creative destruction that is figured in *Donut County* by the donut itself, which exemplifies how capitalism destroys the old to make way for the new, growing larger and larger in the process. While *Donut County* ostensibly explores the economic and social impacts of gentrification, it also exemplifies how playfulness is deeply integrated into contemporary forms of ludic capitalism.[4]

Within ludic capitalism, playfulness has become the norm. But what happens when everyone is urged to play, innovate, create, break the rules, think outside the box, and imagine alternatives? What happens when revolutionaries and entrepreneurs play, when artists play to create and students play to learn, when businesses institute play so as to extract more labor from workers? What happens when books such as *The Serious Entrepreneur's Playbook: Playing and Winning the Business Game* (Haynes 2015), *Game Changers: What Leaders, Innovators, and Mavericks Do to Win at Life* (Asprey 2018), and *The Playful Entrepreneur: How to Adapt and Thrive in Uncertain Times* (Dodgson and Gann 2018) begin to populate online wish lists? As life becomes increasingly playful, play itself becomes the *only* alternative.

Perhaps this is one reason why it is so difficult to envision an alternative to capitalism: today's ludic capitalism generates a maelstrom of endless alternatives, drawing on play as an inexhaustible source of creativity for producing these alternatives. In such a world, play no longer operates as an alternative to mainstream reality—it becomes the dominant reality. In his talk to the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, Csikszentmihalyi said that "Play can only exist when there is awareness of alternatives" (1981, 19). Yet if the *only* alternative that we can imagine is the endless, playful search for alternatives—as when capitalism itself incorporates a playful attitude—*then we are not really playing when we adopt playfulness as a norm*. Instead, we are reproducing dominant social relations. If playfulness identifies alternatives to current norms and the current norm is playfulness itself, then what is an alternative to playfulness? To be playful today, it seems, one must seek alternatives to play, or, at the very least, to play in a different way that is not enthralled with the lures of an unbridled playfulness.

This chapter explores these ideas in further depth and argues that we need to be more critical of play. A critical attitude toward play offers a real

alternative—one that takes account of our historical moment and examines how play is imbricated with capitalism and innovation.[5] Instead of jumping on the ludic bandwagon, where everything can be transformed by play—the self, culture, cinema, economies, politics, and other subjects—a critical approach to play can help us understand how it is transforming reality. Video games are an ideal medium in which to critically examine play, for game scholars and designers are deeply invested in understanding play and the ways that it can be commodified.[6] In this chapter, I examine the rise of independent games as a playful movement that chases innovation, outside-the-box thinking, and the endless search for new ideas in order to disrupt the perceived rigidity of mainstream game production.

This playful attitude to game development has led to a supernova of experimentation, to a surplus of indie and art games, to the democratization of game creation, where everyone can make a game. This is evident in game jams, where individuals and small teams produce thousands of game ideas and prototypes (a process that trains a labor pool of programmers and designers, generates ideas that can be transformed into marketed games, and cultivates and sustains an obsession with experimentation and novelty). Indeed, the independent game development market is a situation of total play and innovation. It reveals how under ludic capitalism, innovations become what the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht called *renovations*—new ideas and developments that do not resist dominant society, but rather reproduce it. In independent games, capitalism is renovated, not resisted, and it feeds off the frenzy and surplus of play to exploit new forms and create new markets. The questions become: How do we respond to this situation of total play? Do we embrace it as the apogee of a robust, healthy culture, as Csikszentmihalyi's thoughts on play suggest? Do we see it as a historical opportunity to use the glut of playfulness and harness it to more radical, political ends? Do we try to break our intense involvement with playfulness and think of alternatives to play?

In this chapter, I approach these broader questions about play and playfulness. Through a close analysis of games such as *This Is the Only Level* (2009), *World of Goo* (2008), *Οικοςpiel Book I* (2017), and *Donut County,* I examine the status of the independent game industry as both an alternative to and a handmaiden of the mainstream game industry.

Playfulness Tamed, or No Room for Play

While the independent production of computer games has always existed in some form—from games created by early programmers and engineers and distributed over mainframe computers in the 1970s to free shareware games distributed through bulletin board systems in the 1980s and 1990s—the rise of what became known as the indie games movement began around the turn of the twenty-first century. The Independent Games Festival (IGF) was founded in 1998 and presented its first awards in 1999 at the Game Developers Conference (GDC). Two influential game jams were started in 2002, the Indie Game Jam (IGJ) and Ludum Dare. From the very beginning, independent developers advocated for creative forms of innovation—thematic and experiential innovations that would go beyond the technical innovations of the video game industry, emphasizing experimental game mechanics beyond advances in three-dimensional (3D) rendering technology and other areas. Indie developers rallied around creative innovation as a reaction to the perceived lack of innovation in mainstream games during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This gave rise to many acclaimed independent and art games, chronicled by the film *Indie Game: The Movie* (2012).

The IGF was founded, as its website claims, "to encourage innovation in game development," and bolded text on the IGJ's website, dating back to the first game jam in March 2002, claims that the jam was "designed to encourage experimentation and innovation in the game industry."[7] By 2007, the indie game movement had solidified, and a statement from indiegames.com heralded "The Indie Game Movement," which "has unlocked a hive of creativity" and is "leading to innovation in a multitude of game genres" (CMP Game Group 2007). Some of these independent innovators, such as Jenova Chen and Jonathan Blow, participated in a panel at the 2007 Independent Games Summit at the GDC on the topic of "Analyzing Innovation in Games."

This is the context within which Molleindustria—the name under which artist Paolo Pedercini and collaborators release radical, political art games—created a looping flash animation depicting a dystopian vision of labor and consumption within contemporary capitalism. The animation, which originally appeared on the front page of their website, scrolls from left to right like a typical two-dimensional (2D) platformer game (figure 5.2). A figure

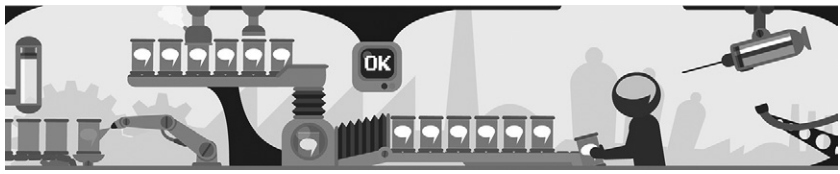

Figure 5.2
Untitled Flash animation, Molleindustria

of a worker at an assembly line with an empty brain grasps a can that has been spit out by a machine and then drinks from it, which fills the human's brain with fluid. The machine's needle extracts the fluid from the worker's brain and injects it into a capsule-shaped receptacle. Finally, the machine injects the fluid into another can, which is then consumed by the worker when the loop repeats. The animation continues ad infinitum.

Molleindustria's animation creates a bizarre hybrid between industrial forms of production—the assembly line and the factory—and the knowledge economy, which produces an intangible product: ideas produced by workers' intellectual labor. In this depiction of the knowledge economy, the worker's brain literally becomes the product's brand. As the animation indicates, the boundaries between production and consumption blur. The worker works by consuming. That is, in an economy that depends on ideas and knowledge, consuming culture and its products (films, television shows, video games, and other media) becomes an essential part of the production process because this consumption generates further ideas, which then can be extracted from the worker.[8] This is the dynamic on which the video game industry is built. As early as the late 1970s and early 1980s, companies such as Atari and Mattel Electronics encouraged employees to play games, at work and at home, to generate ideas for other games that the company would then produce, package, and sell.

Of course, Molleindustria makes games, and the animation can be interpreted as a critique of the video game industry. The animation appeared on Molleindustria's website around 2009, a moment when mainstream game development was seen as being formulaic and risk averse, caught in a cannibalistic cycle, recycling and repeating the same ideas with similar game mechanics and better visuals. The games that dominated the market when the mostly male game designers were young players themselves (usually

first-person shooters and blockbuster games) are the games that they produce as adults (Anthropy 2012b). The animation highlights the rigidity of the mainstream market—its lack of *play*, in the sense defined by game designers and scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman: "free movement within a more rigid structure" (2004, 304). This definition parallels that of sociologist Roger Caillois, who famously defined play as "free within the limits set by the rules" and likened this sense of play to the gears in a machine ([1961] 2001, 8). According to him, if there is no play within the gears, then the machine will cease to function. Molleindustria's noninteractive animation does not allow room for play, in either sense. There is no play. There is no player. There is no freedom of movement within the machine's rigid, repeating structure.

Molleindustria's animated machine, lacking play, can be seen as critiquing not only the mainstream game industry, but labor under capitalism. In a game developed around the same time that the animation appeared, *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009), Molleindustria investigated similar ideas of how playfulness relates to repetition and work. In this game, players are caught in a loop, guiding a businessman to the same corporate job, day after day. To escape the black-and-white, dull, repetitive cycle of corporate labor, players must think outside the box. For example, players can break the businessman's daily routine by not getting dressed in the morning and going to work only in underwear or stopping to catch a falling leaf from a tree. Players must seek room to move within the game's rules and rigid environment to escape the quotidian sameness of everyday life and work. They must seek freedom by finding the play in the system.

This was also the goal of indie developers, who sought to make room for play within the machine of mainstream game production. In his first post to the Ludum Dare community, a forum for independent game development, game designer Geoff Howland (2001) wrote that the forum's name, "Ludum Dare," means "to give free play to." This phrase expressed the independent game developers' desire to liberate play from the confines of the mainstream game industry and its repetitive products. The Ludum Dare game jams that followed—held every four months, year after year—became a mechanism outside the industry to catalyze experimentation and dare developers to playfully reinvent games. During the two-odd decades after Howland's comment, indie developers have pursued this creativity and catalyzed a wave of aesthetic experimentation.

Playfulness Untamed, or the Joys of the Ludic

Csikszentmihalyi once wrote that "games are only playfulness tamed" (1981, 24). Games bridle play, he thought, but playfulness can unbridle games. While the independent game movement did not attempt to liberate play from games, developers sought to revitalize the expressive possibilities of games through the playful search for new game mechanics. This revitalization eventually became a riotous exploration of the creative possibilities of games, giving birth not only to the already-mentioned game jams and conference panels, but also to Twitter accounts churning out endless game ideas, new distribution platforms such as Steam's Greenlight (2013–2017), and then independent game publishers such as Annapurna Interactive (which published *Donut County*). This wave of art game and independent game production reveals the independent game industry's ferocious obsession with playfulness, innovation, and experimentation.

This playful exuberance enacted within a moment of perceived stagnation is nothing new; the history of avant-garde art is full of examples of experimentation that sought to break free from tradition. When the critical theorist Walter Benjamin visited his friend Bertolt Brecht, who was exiled to Denmark, the two often played chess. According to Benjamin, Brecht lamented chess's stagnation and imagined how it might become more flexible—for example, he imagined that its mechanics might shift during the game, allowing pieces to become more or less powerful ([1966] 2003, 88). Brecht's desire to redesign the game expressed the modernist sensibility, which embraced the new in order to transform a culture that had become reified and seemingly unchangeable. As a modernist playwright, Brecht approached the institution of theater in the same way that he approached chess, seeking to unravel its rules and traditions: the use of Aristotelian plot structures, the insistence on the invisible "fourth wall" between actors and audience, music that reinforces content without reflecting on it, and other devices. As mentioned in chapter 4, Brecht dismantled these conventions through an array of techniques—which he called *innovations*—that undercut the idea of an unchangeable world. This overturning of theatrical traditions was aimed at training spectators to see the world as a Brechtian chess game, a potentially mutable experience that could be refashioned by innovative techniques.

Brecht viewed stagnant forms—such as chess, theater, and modern culture—with a playful eye. He imagined them as spaces that could be appropriated in new ways to save them from institutional ossification. Marxist critic Fredric Jameson called Brecht's aesthetic "a joyous process, a kind of creative play, in which new acts are formed together out of pieces of the old, in which the whole reified surface of a period seemingly beyond history and beyond change now submits to a first ludic un-binding, before arriving at a real social and revolutionary collective reconstruction" (1998, 47).[9] When confronted with a naturalized reality that seems unchangeable, the spirit of play disassembles the old to remake it anew, a process that game scholar Brian Schrank calls "liquefaction" (2014, 169).

This liquefaction is evident in a series of games by indie developer John Cooney—*This Is the Only Level* (2009), *This Is the Only Level TOO* (2010), and *This Is the Only Level 3* (2011), games that crystallize the joyfulness of ludic unbinding. *This Is the Only Level* is a 2D platformer that consists of a single room where players move their avatar, a blue elephant, from a start location to an end location that awaits behind a single gate (figure 5.3). The

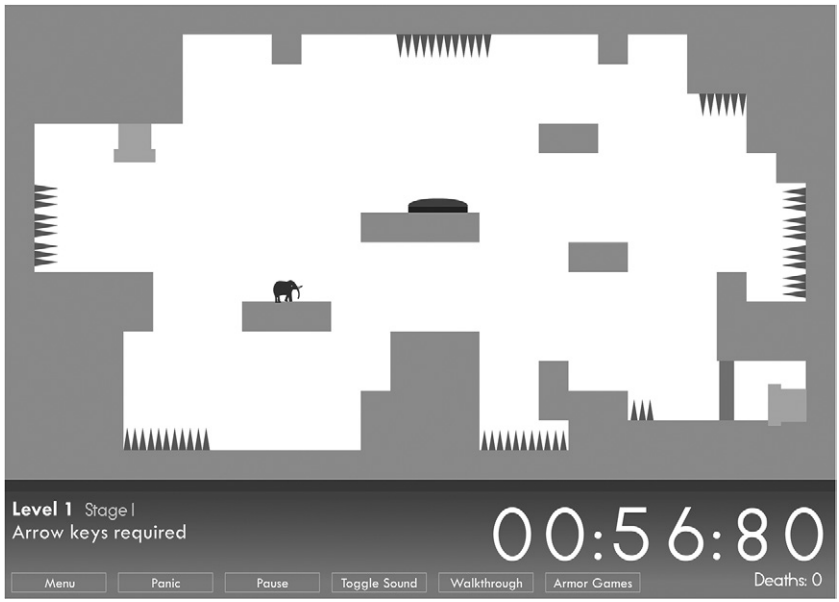

Figure 5.3
Stage 1, *This Is the Only Level*

player controls the elephant with the arrow keys on the keyboard, and the goal is to traverse the board without hitting any spikes, all while figuring out how to open the gate on the right. When players escape, they must play another stage of the same level again, though with a slight variation. For the most part, the spatial characteristics of the game board do not change (e.g., see figure 5.4), but the game mechanics often do. To complete the first stage, one must simply jump on a button in the center of the board to open the gate. In stage 2, everything remains the same, but pressing the right arrow causes the elephant to move left and vice versa. In stage 14, players can only jump once, and if they do not get to the button, they need to restart. In stage 26, the button does nothing, and players must simply run through the closed gate, which will not stop them. In stage 28, the camera zooms in on the elephant (turning the game into a 2D side-scroller). In other stages, the player must avoid spikes that have been turned invisible, navigate inverted gravity, or exit the game entirely and find a button in the credits section that will open the door (thus thinking literally "outside the box"). Throughout the game, Cooney playfully subverts the player's

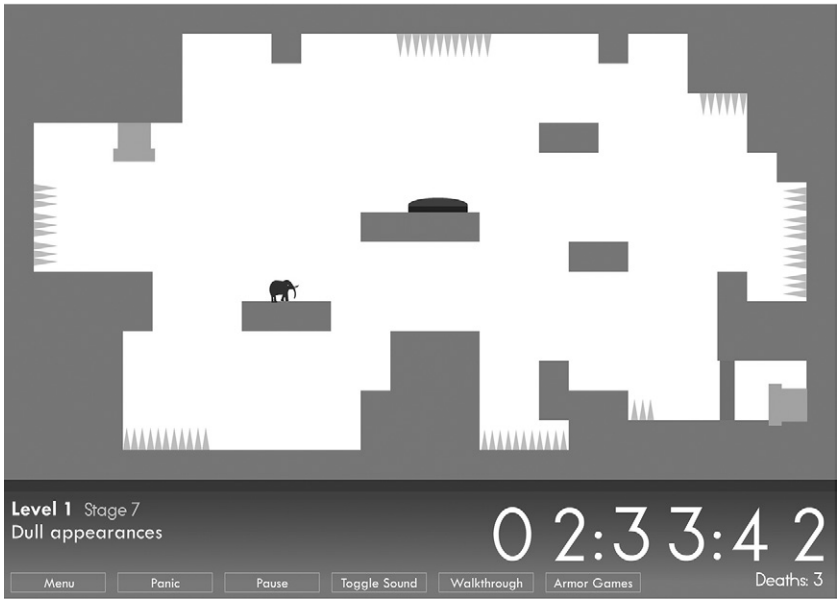

Figure 5.4
Stage 7, *This Is the Only Level*

expectations, unbinding the game's mechanics in a joyful kaleidoscope of experimentation.

This Is the Only Level constantly changes, materializing an aesthetic similar to Brecht's desire to change the fixed rules of chess. The only rule is experimentation itself, where each innovative stage interrupts the player's previous expectations. Players toy with each new level, searching for new solutions while learning how the new mechanics work. "My elephant is stuck. It's not moving. What do I do?" the player thinks, and then, in a moment of elation, discovers that the mouse moves the elephant this time, not the keyboard! This joy of discovery reinforces the human desire for difference, change, newness. Yet while everything changes, nothing changes at all. In the middle of the game, Cooney even repeats the first stage: because the player's expectations have been radically undermined by this point, this repetition becomes an innovation in itself, a new puzzle to solve or solve again (even though it was the first and simplest to overcome). Players continuously escape the only level, but each escape leads to a "new" condition that must be overcome again, even if this new condition is only an old mechanic that one forgot. As in *The Stanley Parable*, discussed in chapter 4, each escape brings players back to the beginning, so they are going somewhere and nowhere all at once. In both games, players must think playfully, imagining alternatives and possible solutions to progress, but this creativity only leads to more of the same. In the end, Cooney's innovative ideas for different game mechanics only renovate the level so that it dons the *appearance* of being new.

This Is the Only Level illustrates a key feature of postmodernism that Jameson characterizes as temporal antinomy—"an appearance of random changes that are mere stasis" (1998, 61). An *antinomy* is a contradiction where two laws or rules oppose each other but nonetheless exist, as in *This Is the Only Level*, where constant change coexists with no change. Jameson links this antinomy to our experience of culture, where "the supreme value of the New and of innovation, as both modernism and modernization grasped it, fades away against a steady stream of momentum and variation that at some outer limit seems stable and motionless" (1998, 59). While Cooney's games constantly disorient players, everything remains familiar. While the game constantly jars players from immersion, this only immerses them more in the challenge of solving a new (or old) puzzle. Constant change and playful experimentation—for both designer and

player—become the norm. In *This Is the Only Level,* there is an elephant in the room, something obvious that no one wants to acknowledge: namely, that playfulness and rapid innovation in the video game industry and culture at large are taking them nowhere.

Independent games like *This Is the Only Level* and *The Stanley Parable*, as well as games like *Οικοςpiel Book I, Vignettes* (2017), *Everything Is Going to Be Okay* (2018), and *Baba Is You* (2019), self-reflexively embody the process of joyful, ludic experimentation. Even *Donut County* has its origins in joyful experimentation. The idea for its central game mechanic—the devouring hole—came from a parody Twitter account started in 2009 by artist Adam Capone, the faux account Peter Molydeux. The account name poked fun at mainstream game developer Peter Molyneux, famous for games such as *Populous* (1989), *Black & White* (2001), and *Fable* (2004). Capone posted a stream of playful ideas for game design, and the account became an icon for experimentation. A game jam inspired by his tweets was the birthplace of the *Donut County* prototype, along with over 200 other games. Like *This Is the Only Level*, the Peter Molydeux phenomenon enacts an endless generation of variation based on a playful approach to video games.

The countless new game ideas exemplified by *This Is the Only Level*, the Molydeux Twitter account, and game jams reflect a massive surplus of games.[10] In game culture, developers are absorbed in the challenge of discovering new ideas for games and game mechanics. The explosion of independent and art game production, which emerged from the democratization of game development and distribution and the stagnation of the mainstream game industry, is a cultural situation that we might call *total play*. The resulting, bewildering explosion of games contributes to what is known as the *indiepocalypse*—a zombielike swarm of games from developers and hobbyists that threatens to overwhelm the industry. The name suggests dystopian anxieties that overproduction and market saturation will lead to the collapse of the game market.

The chaos of independent development unleashes playfulness: if the mainstream game industry is represented by Paolo Pedercini's rigid flash animation, showing the smooth operations of contained production, independent game development is more like the surreal croquet game that Alice plays with the Queen of Hearts in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll [1865] 1993). The croquet game literalizes playfulness untamed: flamingoes become the mallets, hedgehogs become the balls, and the legs of soldiers

form the wickets. The playing field, lacerated with furrows and bulging with ridges, is a constant spectacle of activity. Alice's flamingo twists and turns to look her in the face and attempts to fly into a tree. The soldiers mill about, moving the wickets from one side of the field to another. The hedgehogs battle one another and scurry this way and that. Exasperated, Alice complains to the Cheshire Cat that "they don't seem to have any rules in particular; at least, if there are, no one attends to them—and you've no idea how confusing it is, all the things being alive" (Carroll [1865] 1993, 85). This is Brechtian chess gone mad: the rules are nonexistent or constantly changing according to the whims of the human and animal participants. The game is in a constant state of flux, and the only thing Alice can do is play along.

As the indiepocalypse unfolds, its unbridled playfulness leads to intense uncertainty about the future of the video game industry. In an article for *Polygon*, game journalist Steven Wright (2018) examines the chaos of the independent game scene and explains that studios "all agree on one thing: Nobody knows what's really going on." Like Alice, developers must navigate chaos, and so they search for the latest, hyped distribution platforms and independent game publishers, cultivate relationships with streamers and influencers online, engage in endless self-promotion and creative forms of marketing, and double down on innovation. One developer quoted by Wright mentions that it used to be enough for independent game developers to have innovative, novel ideas, but "now, it has to be innovative *and* have incredible quality" (emphasis in original).

The precariousness of independent game production today emerges from a growing anxiety about the fact that innovation is not enough in the untamed croquet game of capitalism, but innovation is all there is. "Play leads to choices and options for innovation," say the authors of *The Playful Entrepreneur*, "and innovation is the only way of progressing when everything is in a state of flux" (Dodgson and Gann 2018, 66). In this situation of total play—what digital media theorist Alan Liu calls "total innovation"—play is not an alternative to the norm, but the norm itself (2004, 8). The endless alternatives that play and playfulness produce are converted by capitalism into more of the same. This is the elephant in the room: playfulness is no longer subversive and revolutionary; it has become a gimmick (as in *This Is the Only Level*), creating an illusion of chaotic, novel alternatives that work as predictably as the gears of Molleindustria's animated machine.

Independent Games: Renovation, *Not* Innovation

What can those who wish to resist ludic capitalism do in this situation of total innovation, total play? Put another way, how should we, as media theorist Steven Shaviro (2008) suggests, dislodge innovation from the purview of business?[11] Game scholar Andreas Jahn-Sudmann (2008) distinguished between innovation and opposition. He argued that independent games, rather than simply seeking innovative game mechanics, should oppose mainstream game design by offering paradigms that explicitly criticize the aesthetics of mainstream forms. Jahn-Sudmann offered *flOw* (2006), a game discussed in chapter 1, as an example that innovates without opposing. It innovates a player-centric approach to difficulty adjustment that allows individual players to find their personalized flow channel, but despite this mechanical innovation, the ideas behind the game are not truly innovative; the game simply distills core properties of player involvement related to flow that already existed in many games. Game scholar Brian Schrank explains that "*flOw* is culturally enriching because it opens up the market to more independent games, but is culturally restrictive because it perpetuates the hegemonic flow ideal in the guise of something new" (2014, 187). Thus, *flOw* is emblematic of the independent game movement itself. Although its release helped to rally independent game production around the idea of innovation, the game itself performed only a renovation, disguising the old concern with flow in games as something new.

The phrase "innovation *not* opposition" is shorthand for postmodernism itself, where the oppositional political forms of critical negation that are associated with an older aesthetic modernism seem outdated. Aesthetic modernism also was characterized by innovation and experimentation, with avant-garde artists pounding ahead of and outside traditions in the hope of "making it new," but *political* modernism combined innovation and opposition, for innovative aesthetic and political experiments existed alongside the critique and negation of the capitalist norm. Brecht, a key figure in political modernism, was crystal clear about the need for innovation to be in service of political opposition. He wrote: "it is not at all our job to renovate ideological institutions on the basis of the existing social order by means of innovations. Instead our innovations must force them to surrender that basis. So: For innovations, against renovation!" (2003,

31). For political modernism, innovations without opposition were simply renovations to be coopted by capitalism.

From the perspective of political modernism, the ludic unbinding described in the last section should be followed by a moment of political reassembly, what Jameson called "a real social and revolutionary collective reconstruction" (1998, 47). This reconstruction is what distinguishes innovation from renovation. As media scholars have long noticed, Brechtian aesthetics in popular media, divorced from political purposes, lose their force, as when television commercials disrupt spectators' mediated immersion without attempting to reconstruct that attention for a political purpose.[12] Independent and art games often abandon a political reconstruction, or at least relegate it to a secondary position. For example, *This Is the Only Level* foregrounds novelty and becomes a gimmick and a spectacle. It embraces Brechtian forms of defamiliarization, but not in service of opposition. It is pure renovation. Each innovative mechanic disguises the old in the new, repeatedly renovating the space of the single level.

While the term *independent* suggests an escape from the mainstream, the independent game movement has aimed from the beginning at renovating the mainstream. The independent game market was developed for "the introduction and testing of novel ideas & techniques that can be used to enhance larger games," said Thomas Arundel, the developer of the independent game *Darwinia* (CMP Game Group 2007). It was about "dissecting game development" and serving "the continual struggle for successful entrepreneurship," as Howland explained in his first post to Ludum Dare in 2001. Indeed, innovation in game development is a theme of many popular games from this period, like *Braid* (2008), *World of Goo*, *Flower* (2009), *Vessel* (2012), and *Thomas Was Alone* (2012). These games introduce new mechanics while striving to produce a more authentic form of innovation, but at the same time they question and criticize the technology and processes of innovation in game development.

World of Goo enacts the most obvious critique of the false innovations sought by the mainstream game industry, suggesting instead that true independent game innovation will emancipate society. *World of Goo* is a 2D-puzzle game that sets up its self-reflexive meditation on innovation in independent games from the very first moment of launch: even before displaying the main menu, *World of Goo* cycles through a series of phrases that mime and satirize the status updates that greet users as they wait for

software to install or a game to load data, such as "liquefying bytes," "sandbagging expectations," and "applying innovation." These parodies range from reflections on the independent game production process ("embiggening prototypes," "tokenizing innovation," "scraping funds," "placating publishers") to ideas often associated with the expressive possibilities of independent games ("debating games as art," "constructing emotional depth") to more abstract, philosophical ruminations ("swapping time and space," "deterministically simulating the future"). Even before the game begins, this random cycling of phrases triggers reflection on the topic of independent game production and its relationship to innovation. These phrases—Brechtian placards of sorts—color the player's interpretation of the game, making them aware that this game is about game production as much as gameplay.

The narrative begins with a species of strange beings—called *goos*—discovering pipes descending from the sky. As they explore them, the goos slowly realize that the World of Goo Corporation is using the goo species as a resource to fuel the human economy. Humans, represented as childlike 2D drawings, use the goos for various ends, such as generating energy and creating beauty products. Meanwhile, players learn that the corporation is about to introduce a new, astonishing invention called Product Z that "will change the world forever." Product Z is a giant cube that will encase the world and introduce a third dimension to its 2D reality (figure 5.5). The *z* signifies the *z*-axis, which will expand the *x*- and *y*-axes to create a 3D reality. Because *World of Goo* occurs in a 2D space, the game informs players

Figure 5.5
Product Z advertisement in *World of Goo*

that the goos are "incompatible" with the new reality and they should consult "technical support." Product Z promises to completely transform the in-game world, and at the same time threatens its existence. Throughout the game, players guide the goos to work collectively and destroy the corporation, eventually fleeing the planet to escape exploitation and avoid being sunsetted out of existence.

World of Goo serves as an allegory of the relationship between the mainstream game industry and the independent game world. Like the goos, the low-tech independent game developers must destroy the corporate game industry, with its focus on innovations in the technology of realistic representation (i.e., sophisticated 3D graphics); independent games, which innovate in the arena of gameplay mechanics, travel beyond this industry into an alternative space. *World of Goo* criticizes corporate innovation through Product Z. This product, touted as the omega of all innovations, is in fact a false, destructive form of renovation. The goos oppose this falsity with a true form of innovation expressed by the game's unique mechanics. Throughout the game, players build ingenious structures to move the goos from an entrance tube to an exit pipe elsewhere on a playing field (figure 5.6). The player has a certain number of goos to work with, often sacrificing some of them to build nodes in a structure that the other goos can climb to overcome obstacles. Players use the goos to build bridges to span gaps, towers to reach pipes in the sky, and other structures required to complete certain tasks. As the game progresses, new kinds of goos appear that offer slightly different game mechanics.

At the end of the first chapter in the game, the goos float upward into the sky and see the world from a previously unavailable vantage point. The text accompanying this scene reads: "In every direction, they could see unexplored new worlds, each crawling with undiscovered new SPECIES OF GOO. The gameplay possibilities would certainly be endless! The Goo Balls hoped a brave new adventurer would explore their new discoveries." The text invites players to become this new adventurer while gleefully extolling the possibilities for ludic exploration: the "new SPECIES OF GOO" promise the arrival of different game mechanics and suggest new horizons of gameplay innovations. Coupled with the multiple kinds of goos, the building mechanic allows for a variety of ways to complete each level. A single solution does not exist, and this offers players the freedom to explore novel forms of progression; it offers room to play.

Figure 5.6
Structure built from goos on the Road Blocks level of *World of Goo*

On one level, "Road Blocks," the game introduces rectangle and square block goos that players must stack to construct a pillar to support a bridge across a chasm (figure 5.6). Here, the game nods to the open experimentation of childhood play. Like toddlers constructing a tower, players have the freedom to build how they want; they can carefully erect a stable structure or haphazardly fashion a thin beam that wavers precariously. Playing a level in *World of Goo* does not feel as if one is searching for the single solution to progress—it feels open, allowing the design of wacky, outlandish, and unstable structures that are miraculously still successful. Thus, *World of Goo*'s mechanics offer playfulness, alternatives, variety, and novelty, all framed in opposition to the sameness and dull repetitiveness of the mainstream game industry.

Beyond its mechanics, the narrative of *World of Goo* is fundamentally political. The goos journey through the corporate empire and then escape its control by flying away to their own planet at the game's end. They make their escape through corporate-owned channels (the piping system built by

the World of Goo Corporation) in order to destroy these channels. The goos are represented as a diverse collective whose members work together to emancipate themselves, sacrificing individuals to build social structures that other goos climb on in their search for liberation. Unlike the mechanics in *This Is the Only Level*, *World of Goo*'s endless innovation and ludic unbinding are not valorized as such; rather, they are meaningfully reconstructed within the narrative. This reconstruction contrasts true innovation, which liberates (i.e., the goos and their structures), with false innovation, which confines (i.e., Product Z). Jonathan Blow, the developer of the independent games *Braid* and *The Witness* (2016), explains this difference as one between a deliberate innovation, "a deeper, more-compelling kind of innovation" that happens when designers take time to develop their ideas fully, and a gimmick (Blow 2009). *World of Goo* develops this deliberate, reflective form of innovation through its narrative structure, which frames its building mechanic in terms of an oppositional struggle against the World of Goo Corporation. As Jameson argued in relation to textual narrative, *World of Goo*'s embrace of an older political and narrative aesthetic challenges the postmodernist norm of unbridled aesthetic experimentation (1988, 211). Absent this narrative, *World of Goo* would be a gimmick like *This Is the Only Level,* where endless innovation and change lead to no change at all.

But *World of Goo* is still a renovation of the mainstream industry because it embraces playfulness as a generator of subversive innovation. The game's paean to newness is apparent at the end of the first chapter, which foretells the discovery of new species of goo, new worlds, new possibilities, and new adventures. This positions the player in the mindset of the playful entrepreneur. *World of Goo* metaphorically illustrates how independent game developers are infected with the virus of newness, eventually giving rise to the indiepocalypse. Some critical developers, like Pedercini, have criticized the link between unbridled independent game innovation and capitalism. In a "fake business talk" presented at Indiecade Europe, Pedercini (2017) mocked independent game developers, satirically suggesting that the indiepocolypse could be averted: with enough imagination, he suggested, one could make games for babies, for sleeping gamers, and even for plants. His more down-to-earth advice followed capitalism's typical approach, suggesting that independent game developers could colonize developing game industries across the globe.

From this perspective, the annual Global Game Jam seems less like a global village of game makers coming together around the world and more like the cultivation of potential underdeveloped markets, an extension of the capitalist dynamics of expanding markets. Like the players gazing out over the endless field of new possible game mechanics near the beginning of *World of Goo*, the playful game jammer or independent game developer chases the dream of new ideas, new markets, and global, entrepreneurial success.

Even seemingly progressive games like *World of Goo* (which narratively reconstructs its ludic unbinding to create a political message and breaks the fourth wall, a Brechtian form of distancing and self-reflexivity) encode the logic of renovation rather than that of opposition.[13] However agreeable a critical and socially aware game industry would be, perhaps renovated by progressive games like *World of Goo* or *Donut County*, it is doubtful that the industry will become imbued with moral consciousness and abandon its profit-maximizing cycles to pursue the goal of real opposition. It is an error to think that capitalism can work this way. Social entrepreneurship is still entrepreneurship, and it will never transform the game industry into an anticapitalist space of equality, social responsibility, and utopian diversity and inclusivity.

We must be critical of reformist mindsets that suggest that oppositional forms of narrative and gameplay can slowly transform the industry. We should question the idea that things will always get better while at the same time staying largely the same—what Brecht understood as renovation without true innovation.[14] And make no mistake: independent games are part of the industry that they purport to oppose. Fisher says—and others have said before—that independent media "endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time. 'Alternative' and 'independent' don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream" (2009, 9; emphasis in original). A game like *World of Goo* repeats gestures of opposition—narrative reconstruction, Brechtian distancing, and playful subversion—that we have seen before.

As the indiepocalypse and the massive expansion of alternative game production suggests, this form of production is not marginal, but rather central to game culture. Ludic unbinding and total play are increasingly the norm. If flow involves us deeper in a reality, then being playful and

experimental and incessantly seeking alternatives create the dominant reality that flow intensifies today. Developers endlessly raise their skills to meet increasing challenges of capitalist success as they chase innovation and design new game mechanics, immersing themselves in the task of renovating capitalism from inside the house. Meanwhile, players become involved within the playful (not political) defamiliarization of games and fetishize experiments with gameplay and mechanical renovations.

To Flow or Not to Flow: Breaking Immersion

When asked in an interview if *World of Goo* was trying "make a statement about the world today," developer Kyle Gabler replied, "*World of Goo* is just a silly physics game. There were no subversive themes that snuck past the ratings boards" (Gabler and Carmel 2008). From the designer of such a self-conscious video game, such a statement must be taken with a grain of salt (or perhaps a glob of goo), but it *is* a silly physics game; its subversive themes of resistance, opposition, and exit from empire fade underneath its jubilant foregrounding of innovative mechanics, and the political tone of the narrative can become lost on a player involved in the engaging gameplay. *Donut County*, like *World of Goo*, is also a silly physics game that began with a prototype made at a game jam,[15] and it too combines its unique game mechanic with a narrative framework that adds a subversive, political dimension by criticizing the potential destructiveness of a playful, innovation culture.

Donut County is a story of political awakening and the use of the master's tools (The Trash King's app) to dismantle the master's house, in this case, quite literally: at the end of the game, players use the hole to devour The Trash King's headquarters. Players begin in a position of complicity, acting in concert with the raccoons' interest, and slowly become politically aware activists that use the hole to destroy the raccoons' empire and return the inhabitants to their homes and lives. To produce this transformation, the game interrupts both the main characters' and the players' flow; this distances the players from gameplay to foreground its political narrative.

The pivot in *Donut County* occurs about halfway through. An enlightened Mira tries to make BK aware of the destruction that he is causing, but BK is too involved in his play/work to listen. He wants to level up and win his quadcopter upgrade; he is immersed in the pleasures of his ludic work

and the promise it offers of more immersive and more destructive forms of play to come (the quadcopter). In other words, he is so deeply immersed in the flow of playfulness that he has tunnel vision and cannot see the consequences of his actions on the game's world. Mira realizes that she needs to interrupt BK's involvement, and when he receives his quadcopter upgrade, Mira smashes it at his feet and uses a donut hole to engulf BK, the donut shop, and herself.

With his flow broken, BK listens to his neighbors recount their stories of how the donuts destroyed their livelihoods. In the same way, *Donut County* interrupts the player's flow in order to ensure that its story of political awakening and struggle is attended to, rather than ignored in favor of engrossing play. After each level (a natural breakpoint in flow immersion), Esposito's game design encourages players to reflect on the social dimensions of their actions. As Esposito explains, "the music changes and I give you some extra time to sit with the nothingness" (quoted in Martens 2018). Players see a progress bar that depicts points toward obtaining the quadcopter overlaid on an animation of one of the county's inhabitants plummeting down the hole. This creates a cognitive dissonance between reward and its consequences, between the drone as a promise for flight and the downfall of the community. Players can also cycle through depictions and descriptions of the "trash" that they accumulated in the previous level, some of which foreground the social consequences of capitalist accumulation (which is always accompanied by destruction). For example, the Quonset hut devoured in the first level carries the description, "Potter & Pup used to live here." After this, players observe the town meeting of the inhabitants as Mira tries to convince BK of his complicit role in their downfall.

These pauses in play do not allow players to zip from one stage to the next, entranced by the game and its alluring mechanics; they serve to interrupt the game's flow, allowing space for reflection. This is not a reflection that turns inward toward strategizing, as I described in chapter 4; it points outward, beyond the game, toward larger social issues. Eventually, Mira, BK, and the community turn the innovative app—the game within the game, which figures the independent game movement writ large—against the raccoon robber barons, a narrative development that transforms the game's innovative game mechanic from a silly toy (a gimmick) into a tool of subversion.

The game's interruptions in the player's flow also seem designed to interrupt the dominance of flow in driving game design. In his book *Uncertainty in Games*, game designer and critic Greg Costikyan interrupts his text "to embark on a tangent that has nothing to do with the central argument" and advocates that game designers should break flow in their games (2013, 25).[16] His performance of an interruption within his book attests to the influence of flow on game development. The ubiquity of flow as a goal of game design, discussed in chapter 3, compels a veteran designer to interrupt his broadcast with an urgent public service announcement about flow. He explains that the concept of flow enraptures designers, who believe that if they design a game that produces intense involvement, then the game is good. Instead, Costikyan argues that games should sometimes intentionally jar players out of the experience of flow.

But Costikyan sees these interruptions as serving aesthetic purposes, not political ones. And, as I described in chapter 4, interruptions do not necessarily break flow; many games integrate oscillations between flow and its interruption (such as dying or encountering a puzzle or a tough boss battle), and this oscillation itself becomes a form of immersion. The inertia of flow and one's immersion in play can dilute the impact of intentionally interrupting flow. In his review of *Donut County* for the *Los Angeles Times*, Christopher Byrd (2018) writes that "BK's journey from a clueless destroyer to a dissembling hero didn't make me think any differently about gentrification but it did, for a spell, take my mind off other real-world cares which was welcome all the same." For this player, the immersive power of play cast a spell difficult to break.

No doubt, some players experience the political interludes in *Donut County* as ideological commercials to skip on their way back to play. Flow seems to have a death grip on games; as game artist Anne-Marie Schleiner asserts, "only by interrupting or ejecting the player from the game, the no play imperative, is a critique illuminated and political questioning made possible" (2017, 83). Schleiner's no play imperative—a concept that she defines as "a stance of disengagement and refusal to participate in a harmful operation of the exterior world" (2017, 138)—is similar to ideas discussed by other scholars and designers in varying contexts, such as never playing, unplaying, or playing a game against the dictates to have fun.[17] *Donut County* does not go so far as to eject the player from the game, to create what Schleiner calls the "broken toy tactic" where players "shift from

fascinated immersion in moving game world operations to a disturbed confrontation with a malfunction of play" (2017, 64–65). But it *represents* this tactic and the no play perspective, for Mira destroys BK's quadcopter, and BK and Mira eventually refuse to participate in their prior, harmful actions. Near the end of the game, The Trash King tries to convince BK to rejoin the raccoons by offering him a promotion, health care, and the chance to fly a real, life-size quadcopter. "If you join me," The Trash King coaxes, "you'll get to play with the REAL big boy toys: The King Quadcopter." But BK refuses the gendered promise of more hardcore play and continues his struggle to save his community. By representing the interruption of flow within the narrative and breaking the player's involvement between the levels, *Donut County* foregrounds a struggle over play and playfulness itself.

Games like *World of Goo* or *Donut County* are not going to change the world, but that is not their purpose. They exist as contradictory aesthetic representations and experiences that register popular anxieties and unconscious political desires. While *Donut County* condemns gentrification (as the popular press always makes sure to note), the deeper cultural anxieties that it critiques concern the suspect uses of play. *Donut County* displays a critical attitude toward play and its questionable uses under capitalism that today seems increasingly important when confronting the lures of absorbing play and flow. When Byrd valorizes play as distraction from life's worries rather than appreciating *Donut County*'s political subtext, it makes clear how play and flow can operate to quiet criticism and the critical attitude—as I explained in chapter 4. And it offers an alternative to Byrd's position: in response to the contemporary problem of play, Mira's and BK's absorption in a destructive form of play is redirected toward community activism.

Let me be clear—*Donut County* is not a radical game. It won Apple's iPhone "Game of the Year" award and was intended to operate at two levels: it is at the same time a playful diversion for kids and a game about gentrification; its frivolous fun of sucking things into a growing hole commodifies its political and critical components. Indeed, while it critiques the insatiable augmentation and destruction of capitalism, the growing hole also operates as an ideology of growth that can hypnotize players as their destructive power increases. If true innovations *oppose* the industry, forcing it to surrender its basis, as Brecht said, then *Donut County* is pure renovation.

Its subversive narrative, like *World of Goo*, is part of its commodification, and like the latter, its attempts at creating critical distance from one's experience is not guaranteed. While this is not a reason to dismiss these games entirely—because their critical components can function to jostle conventional, uncritical forms of play in mainstream games—stronger forms of oppositional innovation exist.

Although in the current moment, many methods of estrangement and interruption have lost their impact, Brecht's notion of true innovation remains useful. Developers can still produce innovations that the dominant system rejects. For example, Molleindustria's *Phone Story* (2011) reveals complicity between iPhone users and Apple's exploitative labor practices. Predictably, the App Store banned *Phone Story*. While this is hardly a moment that made the system tremble, *Phone Story* reminds us that there are limits to capitalism's incorporation of ideas; as Schleiner explains, game artists, players, modders, and designers can introduce ideas into games that capitalism cannot easily incorporate and commodify. An idea of this type is one that "deviates too far from accepted cultural codes, game forms, representational codes and stereotypes" and therefore resists cooption (2017, 60). While a voracious capitalism seeks to commodify anything to turn a profit, deviations that challenge racist structures, patriarchy, anxieties over difference and queerness can trouble the system—or at least point beyond it. We can also hope, as does Schleiner, "that industry will exploit more of the unusual, outside gifts" that come from subversive others in order to spur diversity within game expression, even if this incorporation is ultimately a form of renovation (2017, 60).

Innovations that force the surrender of profit will not be incorporated. This was Brecht's point. Examples of these include innovations that might vitalize unions and collective structures of production, nonprofit development of games, income distribution, universal basic income, and planned economies; these do not invite incorporation, but oppose and fundamentally alter existing social norms. For example, David Kanaga's *Oikocpiel Book I* offers an example of a video game that resists flow and seeks to channel the desire for flow outside the game toward community organizing—an invitation for players to enact the narrative of *Donut County*. This game does not lure players with the goal of playfully thinking outside the box to progress; instead, it hopes to push them outside the box of play. This game cannot be incorporated into the system completely, for it is fundamentally

oppositional, while also advocating for ideas that would potentially alter the economies of game production.[18]

Oikoςpiel Book I is a glorious experimentation in ludic unbinding that is explicitly political and Brechtian (figure 5.7). In the game, a team of dogs is hired by Koch Games to develop an opera game based on Laurence Sterne's experimental novel *Tristram Shandy* from the eighteenth century. The dogs fail to satisfy their boss—Donkey Koch, a parody of the conservative businessman Donald Koch—who then terminates their contract. The game's narrative thus focuses on themes including the precariousness of independent game development, exploitation of knowledge workers, contractual obligations, the blurring of work and play, and the unionization of the video game industry.

Oikoςpiel Book I's convoluted narrative parallels its equally tortuous gameplay, which is bathed in perpetual experimentation. Writing for *Paste Magazine*, Daniel Fries (2017) notes that the game "doesn't want you to get wrapped up in its story or relax and have fun playing a game. It's constantly trying to jar you out of any trance or flow state." Like *This Is the Only Level*, *Oikoςpiel Book I* endlessly interrupts players' expectations, but while

Figure 5.7
A dog on the computer while sitting in an airplane seat, with clouds and rain, from *Oikoςpiel Book I*

the former remains eminently playable, even fun, the latter veers toward the unplayable. It resists easy consumption and requires labor and patience in order to make sense of it.

If the immersive qualities of flow are based on challenges, *This Is the Only Level* produces flow as it challenges players to discover new ways to escape each stage of the game. Even if the game interrupts players, changing controls and mechanics from one stage to the next, it involves players deeply in their playful attitude and Cooney's ludic unbinding. Playing *Oikoςpiel Book I* does not produce absorbing flow states engineered by fluid game mechanics, for its challenge lies in simply playing the game at all—in navigating its mechanics, not mastering them. The game's controls rarely operate smoothly and in expected fashion. Traditional keyboard and mouse controls trigger surprising movements. The camera perspectives shift frequently, from familiar third-person perspectives to distant shots where the player's avatar appears as a tiny ant, or from perspectives flipped upside down to camera angles that suddenly plunge underground or peer out from the center of objects. Glitches abound as one struggles to discover how to move and where to go. The graphics—many purchased from an asset store—shatter, dissolve, bend, and break. Like Alice's croquet game, there seem to be no rules for how the world behaves or how its physics operate. They change from chapter to chapter, from scene to scene. Because of this, the game is exhausting to play—an experience that reflects its narrative about overworked developers, who have their own yoga studio (in the game, anyway) so they can recoup their energy for more labor.

Oikoςpiel Book I rejects the use of flow-producing techniques by constantly shifting the skills needed to play, obscuring the goals to progress, and denying the player feedback concerning their progression toward these goals. This generates fatigue and creates a rare experience: one wants to play and explore the game's mysteries, but it is too demanding. It does not employ principles of flow to engage attention and distract players from its exhausting demands. This can cause some players to quit, but it can also push others beyond the game toward its paratextual elements in order to learn more about it.[19] While *Oikoςpiel Book I* does not forcibly eject the player from the game, as Schleiner (2017) suggests, its demanding mechanics encourage the player to move outside the game—not to learn how to progress by consulting a walkthrough or a "let's play" video (it is not entirely clear that these guides would assist the player to play the game), but

to seek relief from its laborious requirements and to consult paratexts that might clarify its meaning. Outside the game—exploring its website, Itch.io page, libretto, interviews with Kanaga, and other paratexts—one begins to parse the game's critique of independent game development, labor, and its politics of unionization (Kanaga 2017). Ironically, the laborious work of playing the game is eased when one begins to explore the ideas behind it, including Kanaga's thoughts about alternatives to existing game industry structures. The game itself might resist absorbing its players, but it creates its own form of engagement, its own kind of *critical flow*, where one moves between the game and its paratexts, between moments of play and reflection, becoming immersed in its critique of game production and the video game industry.

In both online interviews and the game's libretto, Kanaga outlines ideas for a *real* union of indie game developers, a general precariat union (GPU) where dues from designers, programmers, artists, and actors would go into a general fund that would support a universal basic income for participants, with the remainder split between administrative costs and political actions (which might include a variety of activities, like legal action, organizing, and holding conferences). By pushing the player outside the game through an interruption of flow, *Οικοςpiel Book I* urges players to become activists battling economic disparities in the game industry—to, like BK and Mira, redirect energy that would otherwise be channeled into flow into real community political action outside the game. If flow concerns a deep involvement in an activity, the frustrations of *Οικοςpiel Book I* prevent players from immersing themselves in the game itself, making it possible to channel flow toward real life. *Οικοςpiel Book I* can cause one to question how video games use flow to sustain and prolong consumption, suggesting that involvement in the world beyond the game is more rewarding than the game itself.

If *salting* is a process where a labor organizer takes a job in an industry to facilitate the process of labor organizing in that industry, *Οικοςpiel Book I* might be a way of salting video game culture itself. The game lures independent game developers and the public with its promise of unbridled experimentation and its critical accolades, but after they experience the game's rejection of the absorbing properties of play and the involvement of flow, it sends them out into the real world looking for relief and answers—answers that happen to be political.

Conclusion: Beyond Playfulness

When Csikszentmihalyi gave his talk to the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play in 1979, he explained that "flow describes a process of involvement in a given reality, while playfulness refers to one's attitude towards the reality in which one is involved" (1981, 24). Playfulness renovates rather than opposes. Playfulness does not change what exists; rather, it changes how we view what already exists. As mentioned in chapter 4, Sicart says that the playful attitude always "respects the purpose of the activity" that it entertains, and, furthermore, that its "most usual transformation is from functional or goal oriented to pleasurable or emotionally engaging" (2014, 26–27). When we view our experience at the department of motor vehicles playfully, we might transform it into an enjoyable game, but the alienating, bureaucratic, class-privileging bureau lives on beneath our alternative reality. To be revolutionary, our thoughts and our technology must imagine innovative, oppositional possibilities and bring them into the world, as *Oikoςpiel Book I* and its paratexts try to do with game labor. Perhaps in 1979, playfulness appeared more subversive than it does today. Yet now playfulness is a dominant way of perceiving culture, and people are addressed as players in many aspects of life; moreover, play and playfulness are put to work to generate novelty and innovation that can be commodified. In this situation of total play, we must follow Csikszentmihalyi's spirit of playfulness in another direction: we must take a new attitude toward the play-soaked capitalist reality in which we live by questioning the dominance of play itself. A game like *Oikoςpiel Book I* is playful not because it induces flow, or even because it is appealing to play; it is playful because it questions the laborious nature of play today and then suggests innovations (not renovations) that would provide an alternative to capitalism.

If games amount to playfulness tamed, perhaps we need to free playfulness from games, as Sicart (2014) and others argue. Why isn't playfulness directed at rethinking the entire industry instead of only individual games themselves? Where are the numerous game jams for imagining new distribution systems, for new collective safety nets such as Kanaga's GPU, for large-scale development of platforms dedicated to inclusivity and equality and radical democracy? Given the institutional history of the independent game industry—its focus on individual (and small-team) success over collective action and its uncritical adoption of playfulness as an ideology

of innovation in service of entrepreneurial success and wealth—it is not surprising that in current game jams, innovation and experimentation are applied only to games, their rules, and their mechanics.

For example, the rules for submitting to the Experimental Gameplay Workshop (2019) at the GDC limit submissions to experiments with gameplay, such as "promoting unique feelings within players through mechanics" or "innovative user interfaces." The rules explicitly exclude "purely technical innovation, experimental business models or distribution mechanisms, or games for underserved audiences—unless the game itself is experimental as outlined above." By barring ideas that look outward toward the industry rather than inward to the player's flow experience, the workshop makes clear the extent of developers' interest in such experimentation. Yet there is room for game jams that playfully explore real-world possibilities for unionization and game developer organizing: this would help to unbridle playfulness from games, returning it to a subversive state and allowing its creative and oppositional potential to spill out into the wild and real worlds—in other words, to put play in service of the political.

While I am sympathetic to this idea—why *not* have game jams that playfully rethink income distribution in the video game industry?—we cannot uncritically propagate the dominance of the playful attitude in contemporary culture. Just as BK and Mira channel their playful energy outward, toward overthrowing the oppressive raccoons, the energy required to playfully imagine alternatives to contemporary game production perhaps could be better spent on implementing existing ideas for improving the video game industry. As the critical theorist Alexander Galloway has put it, "The world does not need new ideas. The challenge is simply to realize what we already know to be true" (2012, 139). We already know the problems of the video game industry; as the journalist Simon Parkin (2018) explains, "The problems, from the long working hours, employee churn and burnout, are deeply ingrained and systemic." And we now know that these and other industry problems are imbricated with play itself, particularly its use as an ideology aimed at intensifying work by making it seem more enjoyable.[20] We even have viable proposed solutions, such as unionization, being forwarded by organizations such as Game Workers Unite and argued for by popular game magazines and even mainstream news outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.[21] Perhaps playfulness is not what is needed at this moment.

Playfulness can generate excitement, novelty, and even subversion, but by itself it does not lead to emancipation. Playfulness requires a critical attitude to channel its energies toward political opposition. In his article "Toward a Critical Theory of Play," sociologist Francis Hearn argued that "the playful celebration of freedom is nonrational in origin and, by itself, incapable of producing human emancipation," and therefore "play must be informed by critical discourse" (1976, 160). The political must come before the playful. As the game designer and scholar Mary Flanagan suggests, a critical play design process would integrate values and critical discourses into the process of playful design from the very beginning (2009, 254–259). One needs to know one's political ends before designing play to facilitate them.

Putting politics before play is also what Brecht sought with his playful approach to the theater, and it is arguably what Csikszentmihalyi sought in the 1970s with his concept of flow. He sought to bring flow to the masses in order to critique a world and society that had no room for play. He sought to use flow as a way to politically challenge a world of alienation, advocating for a politics of enjoyment that would spread the absorbing properties of play throughout life as a critique of its alienating norms.[22] As Hearn, Brecht, and Csikszentmihalyi argued long ago—and Flanagan and even Sicart do today—in the service of the critical, playfulness can imagine new political alternatives. From this perspective, play, playfulness, and the ludic are not ends in themselves; the critical must come before them and direct their subversive energies. Without the primacy of critical understanding, play and playfulness can, like the quadcopter in *Donut County*, serve as shiny distractions—or, worse, they can be coopted and absorbed to reproduce dominant culture by drumming up innovations that are truly renovations.

When the ludic preempts the critical and the political, imaginative energy is drained off into flow activities carried out for their own sake rather than mobilized toward forcing the industry (through organization and unionization) to surrender its basis. Eventually, the process of incorporation and renovation will be all that remains—Molleindustria's busily turning gears, repeating the same well-honed movements again and again, but going nowhere. Gatekeeping independent game houses such as Annapurna Interactive, Double Fine Productions, Revolver Dev, and others will

cultivate gardens of experimental production, selecting only the finest, most profitable independent game titles for distribution.

Meanwhile, beyond the gates, the precarious remaining game developers will struggle to survive the indiepocalypse. Some may create short-lived encampments of experimental production that thrive for a moment and then disappear, and many others may simply return to mainstream game production. In other words, in the flux of change, everything will remain the same.[23]

Nevertheless, moments of transformation and sheer overproduction such as the indiepocalypse create situations fit for harnessing in directions that could make the game industry tremble. The critical theorist Paolo Virno offers exodus or exit from capitalism as a potential political strategy—a strategy that, in fact, shares characteristics with the situation of total play in which we find ourselves. Virno explains that "exit hinges on a latent kind of wealth, on an exuberance of possibilities," and that "exit consists of unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance" (2004, 70).[24]

While the precariousness of independent game developers has some, like Parkin (2017), noting that the exodus might lead *back* to the mainstream industry (given its promise of relative stability), in many ways the democratization of game production and the expansive independent game market is already a form of exit, one that has thrown the industry off balance. Yet has the indie market's ludic unbinding actually destabilized the video game industry, or capitalism itself?

As this chapter has shown, the goal of independent development was always to *renovate*, not dismantle, the industry. In all likelihood, the industry will shift to manage the wealth of innovation created by the playfulness that grounds independent game production—this is what capitalism does. Moreover, as the critical theorist Sarah Sharma (2017) explains, the dream of exit is related to the masculine desire for escape, where men have the privilege to flee the world and its everyday requirements in order to pursue aesthetic autonomy, while all other people without this privilege remain within an exploitative system struggling to survive. Sharma calls this "sExit," not exit—a process seen in the early emergence of the independent game movement that clearly privileged the autonomy of white, male developers.[25] Harnessing the wealth of game production for political ends requires a critical attitude to guide the playful exuberance. This critical

perspective will seek to solidify and sustain radical diversity, equality, and democratic openness that is inclusive for all game developers instead of for those whom dominant culture has already selected for success.

No doubt, possibilities for a critically aware exit are generated by a period of playfulness. Even those suspicious of play's subversive powers when used in isolation, such as Hearn, embrace it as productive for imagining new political ideas about society and sustaining political action. Yet at this historical juncture, we need less unrestrained invention and more implementation—less play and more politics. When it is approached critically, play can guard politics from cooptation; as Flanagan argues, "Playful aesthetics might be able to stay one step ahead of the political machine that seeks to appropriate it, precisely because play is such a fundamental human activity" (2014, 268). How can play be both the unalienated avant-garde beyond the edge of appropriation and the driver of capitalism itself? How can we use play without becoming subject to it? We can strive to follow BK and Mira's lead, shifting from unrestrained innovation and play to implementing real-world alternatives that might provide a more sustainable future, or at the very least, we can cultivate a critical attitude and skepticism toward playfulness itself.

Conclusion: The Critical Futures of Flow

At the close of his book *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975a), Csikszentmihalyi offered a political vision of the future where individuals would organize to overcome alienation in the modern world by becoming aware of the positive powers of enjoyment and redesigning all of life's activities to be more playful and produce more flow. This politics of enjoyment, which I discussed in chapter 2, was his grand narrative to compete with the motivating worldview of revolutionary social change forwarded by Marxism. Instead of the individual submitting to the collective, the politics of enjoyment empowers individuals to find playfulness, satisfaction, and flow in their own lives. The hope was that this would then spark a social movement to redesign all aspects of life to produce flow and thus cure alienation and feelings of separation from the world, other people, and one's work. When Csikszentmihalyi first wrote about flow—indeed, when video games were poised on the verge of their meteoric rise—play was not a privileged cultural category, and he lamented that in a time when "people seem to feel more destitute and unfree than ever before, the intuitive grasp of playfulness is difficult to recapture" (1975a, xi). As I explained in this book, flow sought to capture the absorbing properties of play. Urging individuals to find flow, and designing activities to produce it, amounted to a method of recapturing playfulness, freedom, and a life beyond alienation.

Yet even when he wrote *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, Csikszentmihalyi understood that flow could be hijacked, that it was a "dangerous resource," that it could fuel addiction, intensify materialism and consumerism, and promote egotistic involvement instead of social integration, and he warned of these dangers (1975a, 139). He provided a cautionary tale about a surgeon who so loved his work that when he went on vacation, he sought out

another hospital to perform surgery. The moral was clear. While the surgeon found satisfaction, absorption, and flow within his work, this absorption became an addiction and consumed his life. In the surgeon's case, flow turned the self inward, buttressing the ego at the expense of everything else. While the surgeon might have helped people at the hospital, he also separated himself from his family, from others, and from an integrated life of work and leisure. The flow experience became the sole experience, bracketing the external world beyond its absorbing appeal. From the beginning, flow offered salvation from alienation, but also the threat of its continuation.

On the one hand, proponents of flow tell us that it engages us and sweeps us up in its action. It channels play's absorbing properties. It defines enjoyment, fun, and playful behavior. It connects people to their actions, removing feelings of separation from the world. It pushes aside worry and uncertainty. It assuages doubt, conquers self-criticism, and dissolves psychological blockages that threaten stagnation. It focuses attention, filters distractions, and catalyzes action and productivity. It taps into an internal source of inexhaustible energy that motivates people to act without the need for external rewards. It allows one to overcome adversity, feel in control, and deploy the skills necessary to cope with an activity's challenges. It grows the self, increases its complexity, and works against the dissipating forces of entropy. It cultivates self-determination and a powerful sense of individuality, intention, and agency. These are some of the attributes and beneficial claims of flow that flow theory expounds and that draw people to the experience. From this ideal perspective, the flowing subject is an individualized, powerful agent, focused and productive, growing in skills, and acting confidently while suppressing negative thoughts and self-criticism.

On the other hand, and from the critical perspective offered in this book, the flow experience can have more concerning effects. Flow's association with fun and enjoyment can obscure its use as a coping mechanism to sustain the stresses of the status quo. Its enjoyable properties can cause people to overlook how capitalism mobilizes flow to extend the duration of consumption and marshals it as compensation for an alienating and anxious existence. Flow's power to focus attention on a task can bracket the external world and turn attention away from the causes of personal and social ills. Its focus on empowering individual agency can work to alienate

the self from others. Its power to motivate people intrinsically can coax them to increase their productivity, ignoring their exhaustion. Its promise of growing the self and accumulating psychological capital aligns with economic growth and the insatiable desire for more. Its shushing of doubt and erasure of outside perspectives can stymie thoughts that question reality and catalyze a critical attitude toward life. From this perspective, the flowing subject is an ideological subject that capitalism uses to sustain consumption, increase productivity, grow the individual at the expense of the social, and subdue critical consciousness.

When Csikszentmihalyi told the surgeon's story, he wrote that flow was a coin: on one side we see its dangers, its narcissistic lure and addictive properties, while on the other side, we find its "metasocial critique," which exposes an alienating void at the heart of modern, everyday life. This critique holds that "a rich flow activity provides a perspective from which people evaluate everyday life and from which they gain impetus for social change" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 139).[1] From inside the flow state, everyday life under capitalism looks gray, listless, fragmented, endlessly exhausting. Here, flow can become a standpoint to critique reality and its shortcomings. This is flow put to critical use: it offers an outside perspective, a critical distance from everyday life that seeks to catalyze change rather than distracting us from the problems of life or numbing us to exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Yet this critical flow—its politics of immersion—is all but forgotten today. Flow seems to sustain the dominant reality, not challenge it.

Can we return flow to its metasocial function and renew its criticality? This task will be challenging. While flow continues to grow more influential within culture at large, the experience is too easily repurposed to mollify and sustain problems of alienation and thus reproduce the social conditions of existence. The author and self-optimization coach Camille Preston argues that culture is experiencing a "flow movement" that "is about giving individuals the understanding and tools to reclaim what it means to feel great" (2017, 5). The language of reclaiming parallels Csikszentmihalyi's earlier hope to recapture playfulness and suggests that flow can return us to an exuberant happiness in a world that threatens it. Flow offers the idealized promise of a focused, enjoyable life beyond malaise and fatigue, as well as the possibility of superhuman productivity and optimal performance. As the flow guru and popular author Steven Kotler writes in

his best-seller about flow, *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance*, "if we can master flow, there are no limits to what we can accomplish. We are our own revolution" (2014b, x). This desire responds to a precarious world where individuals must cope with instability, uncertainty, risk, overwork, and psychological maladies such as anxiety and depression. While Kotler speaks of flow's revolutionary powers, the discourse of the flow movement often trades in the problematic currency of the unlimited growth of the individual, and in the absence of critical evaluation, it threatens to expand the ideologies of the flowing subject. Flow might make some people feel great, but the popular rise of flow does not couple this feeling with a metasocial critique: flow is the end of social change, not the beginning.

In the video game industry, the coin of flow has been weighted to land on the side of addiction, the extension of playful consumption, and the egotistic growth of the self, but perhaps a critical understanding of flow can flip the coin, turning up the face of flow as critique. Politicizing flow could contribute to new, diverse approaches to flow within games and challenge the ideologies of the uncritical, flowing subject. Alternatively, as I described in chapter 5, now that game labor is restless under the weight of ludic capitalism, exhausted by the push toward constant production and innovation, perhaps flow can be sought beyond games, in the realm of politics. Instead of calming doubt and quieting critique, flow could be deployed as it was designed to be: as a fulcrum for social change. This is a worthy goal—for both games and beyond—but not an easy task. The first step is simply to get the coin in the air again. This will open the possibility that we can recapture, not the spirit of playfulness or the feeling of greatness, but the critical edge of flow and its potential politics.

This has been the goal of this book—to critically evaluate flow and its close friend, play. Instead of immersing ourselves in flow's current, we must plant our feet on the shore and see it from a distance, because flow theory, like the experience itself, discourages outside perspectives and critical evaluation. Flow can cause tunnel vision, where we forget "everything else but the activity itself" (Csikszentmihalyi 2009, 394). This is likely why new media theorists Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey see the experience as "endemic to stupidity" and as "the automation of habits" that "hijacks intelligence" (2012, 171). Flow threatens to shut down thought and reflection

about and beyond itself—which is a problem when its proponents say that we should live a life of flow and when flow pervades media culture.

Through the lens of video games, this book has sought to counter the uncritical and breathless depiction of flow as a state of enjoyable immersion that appears when skills are balanced with challenges. This typical understanding obscures a richer sense of the concept's history, ideologies, and uses within games and beyond. Instead, this book has explored less obvious aspects of flow in relation to games: its privileging of the individual over the social, its function as a coping mechanism to alleviate symptoms of alienation without curing its causes, its use to extend playing time and game consumption, and its privileging of action over critical evaluation. As I explained in chapter 1, flow can be useful, and we can mobilize its absorbing properties toward political ends to critique the shortcomings of reality, but this first requires that we view the experience critically. It requires that we critique its purported universality and timelessness, ideas that make it seem like flow exists outside of history and social influences. Yet we have not arrived at the point where flow theory has become denaturalized and defamiliarized, where players, designers, scholars, and students have become aware of its ideologies, history, and uses within video games and beyond. As we journey into the new millennium—and Csikszentmihalyi hinted that flow theory could be "a psychology for the third millennium"—we must critically evaluate the ideologies of flow in order to imagine its progressive future.[2] If such a future cannot be imagined, then we can also resist flow or reject it.

I began this conclusion by presenting a wider, more expansive view of flow to contextualize the larger stakes of this book. This book focused on flow and games, but it has done so because video games and their use of flow can be read as symptomatic of processes underway more broadly in contemporary culture. In concluding this book, then, I step back and consider how its themes and ideas point us toward possibilities for the future critical study of flow and play, both in games and beyond. I first discuss flow beyond games to explain its broader reach and impact within media culture. Then I turn to the critical futures of flow in video games, the focus of this book, because they are a key media form through which to study and interpret flow's effects and also intervene to transform and shape these effects. Finally, because flow was born from play, I end with a more general discussion of the relationship between play, flow, and the critical.

Flow beyond Games: Digital Media Culture

While I have not dwelled on the application of flow theory outside of video games—in work, business, the wellness industry, online media, and so on—if we move outward to examine media culture more broadly, we see the influences of flow as well. Flow, as a form of "challenge-based immersion" (Mäyrä 2008, 108), appears throughout contemporary culture as a way to facilitate productivity and consumption. For example, one finds the principles of flow operating within the proliferation of productivity apps where it is often used to promote digital tools.[3] With clear goals and feedback, setting achievable milestones, and the steady increase of challenging tasks over time, productivity apps offer assistance to overcome distraction and promise to block out self-criticism so that individuals can get into the zone and achieve a flow state. Cultivating challenge-based immersion also occurs in an obvious manner through gamification, where businesses and institutions use game design principles like point systems, achievements, rewards, and leveling-up structures to encourage user engagement. In the wellness industry, for example, fitness apps promote a healthy lifestyle by gamifying exercise and nutrition. Businesses also use gamification to intensify consumption and customer loyalty and to increase employee satisfaction, catalyze productivity, and induce competition between workers.[4]

Beyond gamification's cultural niche, similar processes occur in a general fashion, where users of social media seek views, reads, likes, followers, retweets, and so on—metrics that function as goals and feedback that can produce absorption and the aspiration to increase media skills and meet the challenges of digital life online. Using these metrics, individuals grow their selves and personal brands, aspiring to become more powerful influencers and agents within the social realm. The potential for challenge-based immersion also extends beyond social media, where complex forms of television and ludic puzzle films present challenging narratives and sophisticated formal experiments that encourage savvy consumers to hone their media literacy skills and unravel the secrets of their favorite media franchises. Skillful consumption can also overflow into user-generated content, fan production, and participatory culture, where online platforms seek to capture the creative activities and products of users and vampirize their productive, enjoyable flow activities.

Today, we live in a *flow culture*, says media scholar Jay Bolter (2019a, 2019b). "One of the principal pleasures offered by both video games and social media is the experience of *flow*," Bolter writes, "Flow is an aesthetic principle for first-person shooter games, for platform games, for puzzle games. It is also the state induced by watching one YouTube video or Netflix episode after another or by monitoring Facebook feeds for hours on end" (2019a, 100). Bolter focuses on the loss of self-consciousness and time consciousness associated with flow to explain that media experiences such as the endless scroll of Instagram and Twitter allow users to lose themselves within streams of content that promise to go on forever.

As I argued in chapter 3, flow theory can be used to facilitate capitalism's calibration of subjects to streams of attentive consumption that appear online, on television, in video games, and beyond.[5] Flow theory provides an example of how the subjective experience of enjoyment is studied and integrated into media to absorb and retain users. While video games offer the most effective way to implement flow theory through dynamic difficulty adjustment (DDA) systems that balance player skills with game challenges, we see similar processes at work within the tracking of online behaviors and the algorithmic adjustment of personalized media content on streaming platforms and digital marketplaces that foresee our wants and needs. While these platforms do not emphasize the challenge-based immersion of flow, they can produce experiences akin to flow that focus user attention, cater to individual tastes and preferences, sustain media use, and even mollify the pressures of an alienating world by providing an easily accessible cocoon of mediation.

Scholars have linked the use of flow to the addictive properties of digital media technologies.[6] For example, David Courtwright (2019) warns of the digital transformation of flow. He argues that an emergent form of "limbic capitalism" draws on psychological and physiological processes of addiction to induce continual media use and consumption (2019, 6). Thus, digital media often flip the coin of flow to the side of addiction. "Like gambling machines," Courtwright says, "social media and other digital diversions offer alternative flow states through virtual shortcuts that exact their price in money, time, and diminished real-life accomplishments" (2019, 209). For Courtwright, "socially constructive flow states" arise within challenging activities that require years of practice (like playing chess or the piano), but digital technologists have studied ways to quickly trigger alternative

flow states that allow users to bypass negative emotions such as boredom or frustration. Video games constitute one medium that aims to provide short cuts to immersion, but this process extends to other technologies as well.[7] For example, principles from flow theory parallel influential ideas like the "habit zone" discussed by Nir Eyal (2014, 15) or the Fogg Behavior Model, which has been used to create addictive and absorbing technologies.[8] Beyond the actual design of technology itself, marketers and advertisers draw on discourses surrounding flow, such as losing track of time, intense absorption, and addiction itself to sell mobile games and apps on online platforms. Through its integration into technology and its use to market that technology, flow theory increasingly shapes digital media culture.

Given this influence, Bolter argues that we are witnessing the rise of a new "politics of flow," which he associates with a "weak political narrative in response to the stronger narratives of liberal democracy and Marxism" (2019a, 182). This politics revolves around individuals who act in precarious networks, supporting social causes and then abandoning them, fashioning a politics from individual tastes and whims that does not have an overarching goal or collective structure. This politics privileges the individualistic tendencies of flow theory—as "therapy for the individual" or "narcissistic self-absorption" as Bolter refers to it (2019a, 166). For example, he suggests that "filling out your Facebook profile, visiting a website, or making online purchases can engage you in the new politics of flow" (2019a, 176). These actions circulate within flows of information and can become political when they link individuals to online communities based on identities and interests. Yet Bolter conflates flow theory with flows of information when he discusses the politics of flow in relation to digital media, social media, and online politics.[9] This politics focuses on networked life and does not extensively engage the challenge-based form of immersion that characterizes psychological flow.

The extension of flow beyond games to social media and networked life complicates the application of flow within digital media culture. The social media scholar danah boyd observes that the engagement offered by digital media often diverges from attentive absorption. She writes, "Being in flow with information is different than Csikszentmihalyi's sense, as it's not about perfect attention, but it is about a sense of alignment, of being aligned with information" (2009). While online media can produce states of absorbed attention, boyd suggests that within networked life, these states

are less important than riding flows of information, spreading memes and links and images in quick moments of action and distraction, dipping into the data river quickly and jumping out before being carried away.

It's true that we binge-watch YouTube videos, stream entire television series online, or relax with lazy currents of Instagram feeds. This is part of flow culture too. Yet we also tap notifications on mobile devices in stolen moments from our hectic lives, firing off a photo, a comment, a message, a link, or a like, and then turn to another task. We can connect flow theory to this accelerated mode of digital being and alignment with information, but it seems more understandable in terms of microflow, the simpler activities "that we use to relieve the stress or boredom of everyday life," rather than the absorbed states of challenging macroflow (Csikszentmihalyi [1975] 2000, xxvi). Spreading information, posting links and comments, consuming memes or brief videos—these actions provide order to one's day, the definition of microflow.

Flow itself is being repurposed on a micro level to intensify productivity within a distracted, fragmented, and networked culture. Self-optimization gurus advocate for hacking flow in order to achieve flow faster, more efficiently, and in shorter bursts of time. In her book about flow, Preston explains that hacking "is about the ability to rekindle our playful, mischievous, childlike creativity and about the ability to innovate" (2017, 30). Flow hacking turns the playful attitude that I discussed in chapter 5 toward flow itself, encouraging people to tweak it through various organizational tools, daily habits, vitamin supplements, and even coffee intake in order to harness its focusing powers. This creates a metagame around flow, where people "game" flow and become involved in innovating new ways to produce it quickly or use it to sell their products and services.

Through playfulness, flow hacking is put into the service of dominant culture. In a world where distractions reign and capitalism constantly shouts to grab our attention, flow hacking seeks to create bursts of concentrated attention that will raise productivity while providing a sense of on-task involvement in our daily lives. For some, flow does not need to be an intense state of absorption that makes time melt away for hours on end, but flow hackers devise cognitive tools that integrate flow into the fragmentation of modern life and thus calibrate flowing subjects to the fast rhythms of networked capitalism. On the one hand, flow hacking responds to the distractions of networked life, shielding one from the demands of constant

notifications and interruptions. On the other hand, it operates as a behavioral technique to intensify productivity.

I agree with Bolter that we live within flow culture, or at least within a culture that flow theory can help us understand, but we need a more nuanced understanding of the experience to properly grasp its multifaceted influence on contemporary culture, digital media, and politics. The rise of microflow, flow hacking, and quickly attainable flow states offer one way to think about flow's relationship to online life and politics. Yet the absorbing and challenge-based powers of flow also contribute to online politics, such as when YouTube's recommendation algorithms deluge individuals with streams of racist and misogynist content—what media scholar Tara McPherson (2019b) has called "immersive racism."[10] Algorithmic agents hungry to collect views (and metrics of sustained watch time) intensify these experiences. The deep absorption of such experiences can be used to recruit individuals into ideological worldviews, offering them a sense of new, challenging ideas to master while gratifying them with feelings of subversive critical reflection that envelop them within reactionary subcultures—a diminished form of critical distance, as I argued in chapter 4. These magical flow experiences can quiet critical consciousness and self-reflexive questions such as "Why am I doing this?" or "How is my experience being orchestrated?" In these experiences, we see flowing subjects consuming video after video, without pausing to attain an outside perspective needed for critical evaluation. They are absorbed in a challenging activity that can assuage feelings of alienation while experiencing a sense of a growing, individual self who accumulates new knowledge.

While flow is useful for understanding digital media culture and online life, we must be aware that the emergence of flow culture is not only related to platform capitalism (which seeks to capture and retain users) and limbic capitalism (which seeks to addict them), but also to the rise of ludic capitalism and culture—in my view, a more significant development than flow's integration into digital media culture. Instead of using flow as shorthand for the multifaceted experiences of networked life, this book has examined flow on its own terms, as a subset of play and as an acknowledged, central component of many video games. Media scholar Joost Raessens (2014) explains that we are experiencing the general ludification of culture, where a playful attitude toward life transforms networked and social media, cinema, television, the arts, politics, health, business, entrepreneurship, and so

on. Video games are the central media form within this ludic transformation, the most culturally visible examples of flow for the masses, and flow and its ideologies are pervasive in video games. For this reason, they are a key medium through which to study and transform flow and the culture that the experience increasingly influences.

Articulating and Interpreting Flow in Games

The centrality of flow theory to games means that game culture offers an abundance of opportunities to analyze flow and that flow theory offers a paradigm for interpreting their meanings. Interpretation compels us to move beyond the banal question concerning whether a game produces flow—the "yes or no" of flow—and toward analyzing the significance of its use, implementation, and representation. Throughout the book, I have offered interpretations of games based on their use of flow in order to enliven our critical grasp of the experience. The directive to ponder, to interpret, and to read opens a humanities-based approach to the critical study of flow in games and beyond. This interpretative approach counteracts the immersive absorption of flow that can discourage outside perspectives and critical distance while also demonstrating that flow is more interesting than the standard way of thinking about it as an enjoyable experience.

Artists Pippin Barr and Jonathan Lessard's *Game Studies* (2016) provides a short, playable introduction to five key concepts used to study games, including flow. Players control a suited avatar—the detective John Carey, stolen from the video game *Police Quest: Open Season* (1993)—who explores vignettes illustrating these concepts in action. In the scene illustrating flow (figure 6.1), players move Carey around a playing field that represents the typical flow diagram (reproduced in the introduction to this book). If players venture into the "boredom" space—the black space, indicating the lower-right corner of the standard flow diagram—the screen darkens, a spotlight beams down, and Carey's movement slows to a painful crawl. If players walk into the "anxiety" space—the red space, indicating the upper-left corner of the typical flow diagram—pink lightning periodically erupts from above, striking Carey with a thunderous crash and briefly paralyzing him. Walking in either of these areas is extremely frustrating, which encourages players to return quickly to the center. Within the grayish middle path, which represents the flow channel, players move without impediment and

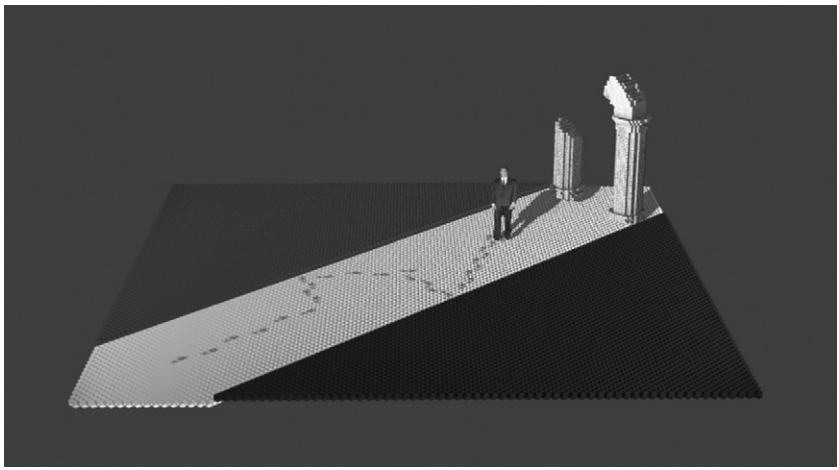

Figure 6.1
The flow level from *Game Studies* with footprints in the flow channel

Carey leaves visible footprints in his wake, perhaps like footsteps over a thin sheet of snow.

Barr and Lessard's *Game Studies* does not put the player in a flow state. There are no goals to absorb one's focus and no challenges to balance with skills. The game (or teachable toy) invites us to read and interpret flow, not experience it. The footsteps, the lightning that ruptures interactivity, the spotlight that slows movement, the gameplay that entices players to feel unhindered within the middle path, and even the character, the suited white male—all of these elements are significant clues that offer themselves to the player as detective. For example, the footsteps left by the player's avatar remain mysterious and entice users to ponder their significance. Perhaps these footsteps mean that states of boredom and anxiety erase an individual's power to affect the world, while individuals within flow will leave their mark. Alternatively, perhaps they signal the impact of flow on one's life, because Csikszentmihalyi and sport psychologist Susan A. Jackson explain that "flow experiences remain etched in memory," leaving behind a trace of past experience (1999, 4). I read these footsteps as marks in the flow channel that intentionally invite and provoke interpretation, and interpretation compels us to understand experience instead of simply becoming absorbed within it.

While *Game Studies* is a lighthearted, playful art game, it also holds the major concepts that it analyzes at a distance, encouraging reflection and suspicion about their significance.[11] Barr and Lessard's depiction of flow is cold, unspectacular, and mundane. It undermines the idea that flow is the secret ingredient that produces the magic of games and their spellbinding effects. Although game designers and players typically associate flow with mastery, optimal experiences, expert performance, intense absorption, fun, and a positive state of enjoyment, Barr and Lessard defamiliarize flow and challenge us to think about the experience differently, a theme of this book as well. They ask us to see the typical flow graph with fresh eyes and a critical attitude, perceiving it as a sort of demilitarized zone between boredom and anxiety—a place where normalcy, not ecstasy, resides. If flow is "as happy as the human can be," as the anthropologist Victor Turner once said, then this stroll through the flow zone paints a boring picture of human existence (1982, 58). Game scholar Ian Bogost says that flow is an exercise "in statistical averages. It's the Goldilocks Principle, where every experience must be 'just right'" (2016, 68).[12] Perhaps this is Barr and Lessard's critique of flow as well—that the understanding of flow by game studies is lukewarm and uninteresting (the drastic, interesting moments occur outside the flow channel). The positive psychologist Martin Seligman contends that at the heart of flow is "the absence of emotion, of any kind of consciousness" (2002, 116). From this perspective, at the heart of flow there is no heart—no feeling, no emotion. The loss of self-consciousness that is one of the hallmarks of flow begins to seem like a cipher, a form of pure automaticity, the optimized functioning of a machine.

Yet flow in games is more nuanced and messier than the clean, sanitized idea that we are swept up into the zone, our bodies and minds blinking out of existence, temporarily suspended by the lizard brain that supposedly lies dormant within us. In games, flow might feel differently along the graph at different times; sometimes a player may experience it as calmness, sometimes as an adrenaline rush, or at other times a fluctuation between different levels of anxiety and tension. Sometimes flow energizes (motivating people to push through exhaustion) and sometimes it drains (continuous action is enervating). Sometimes meaningful feelings are produced as one leaves and reenters the flow channel, zigzagging through it as Brian Upton suggests (2015, 105). In *Celeste*, for instance, one's absorption in the game is shot through with anxious tension and then boring repetition; and in

Donut County, the feeling of flow might be mixed with guilt or shame if players become immersed in the gameplay without attending to the consequences of their actions. Becoming attuned to flow and interpreting our experience of it can allow us to explore emotions, affects, and expressive possibilities within, outside, and around the flow channel—a goal articulated by other scholars and designers.[13] This will allow us to understand the flow experience in a more nuanced fashion, while also providing more elements of the experience to interpret.

Barr and Lessard's *Game Studies* also teaches us that an appreciation of flow is not reducible to our psychological experience of it. This book has sought to demonstrate that flow theory offers a theoretical paradigm through which to interpret games. The ideologies of flow that I discuss throughout the book provide a deeper historical and theoretical context concerning flow as a concept. We need this critical understanding in order to frame our interpretations. This approach would examine how flow feels in games and what particular instances of flow *mean* in relation to both our own experiences and to larger cultural contexts and debates. For example, realizing that flow theory emerges from a rejection of Marxism and privileges individualistic solutions to alienation matters; this context can enrich the ways that designers implement flow and the way that scholars interpret how flow is used or appears in particular games (whether intentionally or not). Likewise, less conventional meanings of flow—that it privileges action over critical evaluation, that it can be used to commodify games, that it can function as a method to cope with existing reality instead of critiquing it—can enhance interpretation and design as well. We might call this approach *critical flow*, where the use or interpretation of flow is based on a critical understanding of its politics and ideologies. This critical approach to flow will contribute to a more nuanced articulation and implementation of flow in games and beyond.

New Architectures of Critical Flow

At the end of his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, the digital media theorist Alexander Galloway argues that radical game designers "should reinvent the architectural flow of play and the game's position in the world" (2006, 125). Galloway does not refer to flow theory specifically; instead, he writes generally about reinventing the flow of play—the feel

of a game, its core dynamics and mechanics, what players do in the game and how the game is designed to move the player through its structures. Flow theory operates as a key design strategy to produce this game flow, especially when games balance challenges and skills and implement standard difficulty ramps that gradually increase over time. Imagining different architectures for flow is an apt way to think about the critical futures of flow. Game scholar Brian Schrank suggests that designers can challenge the "hegemonic flow ideal" that monopolizes game aesthetics (2014, 187). A critical attitude toward flow can help us to understand *why*, *how*, and *when* flow is hegemonic or oppressive, when we should undercut it, and how to do so for maximum effect. While I do not offer a specific road map for this exploration, a critical approach to flow can steer designers away from depending on flow theory for their renovations of games, rather than using it intentionally and critically to produce real innovations—and perhaps even oppositions to the status quo.

What would a critical flow look like, or even feel like, in games? Exploring different architectures of flow does not simply suggest that we abandon the flow experience. This can be an option—perhaps ejecting players from a game in order to break a player's deep involvement in an ideological action, as game designer Anne-Marie Schleiner suggests (2017, 74–75), or jarring players from flow for aesthetic purposes, as game designer Greg Costikyan explains (2013, 25). Others might want to employ flow and its absorbing properties to motivate people to pursue political goals and actions. Others might highlight the positive feelings of flow as a critique of everyday life, alienation, and feelings of separation from the world. Still others might want to experiment with different forms of immersion for diverse players dissatisfied with standard forms of flow in games. These ideas do not treat immersion "as an inherent attribute of the videogame," as game scholar Brendan Keogh argues, but as a "perceptual strategy" that can be used, abandoned, or transformed (2018, 33).

Many of the games examined in this book already offer examples of critical flow, using it or resisting it in ways that are significant, and even political. For example, games like *Little Inferno*, *Donut County*, *Οικοςpiel Book I*, *Celeste*, and *The Beginner's Guide* move players in and out of flow in different ways, seeking to produce awareness and critical reflection about issues surrounding immersion and absorption related to flow.[14] Perhaps just as flow is a subset of play, critical flow is a subset of what designer Mary Flanagan

calls "critical play," or designing "games that instill the ability to think critically during and after play" (2009, 261). This critical awareness is important in itself, especially when flow can function to quiet the critical attitude. Yet flow can involve us in any activity, even if it is critical, and thus critical flow can also seek architectures that involve us with the enjoyable labor of critique.

Continuing a critique of flow in games and beyond is necessary to lay the foundations for new architectures of flow. For example, as I explained in chapter 1, flow theory establishes a powerful sense of agency and individualism, positioning the flowing subject as ahistorical, timeless, and universally achievable across cultures and genders (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 4, 48). Simply put, flow theory claims that difference does not matter to the absorbing flow experience. But it should. As flow theory increasingly goes mainstream, we must articulate differences in users' flow experiences and critique its history and use to sustain privileged and oppressive forms of flowing subjects.

For example, flow can become gendered and racialized. This occurs most obviously in popular culture depictions of flow or discourses surrounding flow: the predominantly white, male TED talkers pitching the power of flow or the able, muscleman flow hackers hawking the flow state on YouTube. Indeed, Kotler (2014b) links flow to the rise of the superman, which resonates with a return to an ideal, powerful, masculine subject.[15] Gendering flow occurs in games as well. While Barr and Lessard's *Game Studies* does not depict an absorbed superhero at the peak of performance, the player character is a man in a suit, gendering flow by relating it (intentionally or not) to the male professional.

In chapter 2, I discussed how flow can become gendered in games, such as when masculinized forms of deep flow contrast with feminized forms of flow that appear as coping mechanisms or less complex microflow.[16] Csikszentmihalyi acknowledged the difference in access to types of flow when he argued that "alienated people, women, and young subjects" need microflow as a coping tool because they do not have full access to professions dominated by men that make room for deep flow (1975a, 174, 178). This uneven access to different intensities of flow—more complex macroflow and less complex microflow, uninterrupted flow and fragmented flow—suggests that the experience of deep flow can be exclusionary and determined by one's relative privilege or marginalization.

Flow may also privilege particular worldviews and epistemologies. Some people might not value the ideals and ideologies of flow, such as self-growth, individuality, mastery, challenge, or even an experience of absorbing action that inhibits critical self-awareness. Therefore, video games that seek to provide the standard version of flow using the standard channels and the standard triggers may alienate some users. Turning a critical eye on the ideologies of flow as they are deployed in the video game industry could encourage the development of architectures of flow attuned to difference. What if the universal subjects posited by flow—genderless, ageless, classless, raceless, and able—were instead specific and inclusive? What would a feminist flow look like? Or queer flow? Or postcolonial flow? Or nonableist flow? Or collective rather than individual flow? As phenomenologist Sarah Ahmed's work suggests, the world allows some people to flow through it more easily than others (2010, 11–12). A critical rethinking of flow that challenges its exclusions could ignite possibilities for designing games and technologies that allow for different forms of flowing that might be less oppressive and more appealing to diverse audiences.[17]

Social Flow as Critical Flow

The ideas of social, group, or collective flow that I mentioned in chapter 2 perhaps offer the most palpable example of a different form of flowing that might challenge the ideology of the flowing subject as a powerful, growing agent that dovetails with neoliberalism's embrace of individual responsibility.[18] For example, in his book *The Playful Path*, the play guru Bernie De Koven explains that confluence—which means "flowing together," like two rivers meeting—can emerge from group play situations and lead to feelings of community, togetherness, love, and interconnectedness (2014, 165).[19] Yet we need to be careful when positing social forms of flow or confluence in a play situation as a simple corrective to individual flow. Collective forms of immersion come with their own potential problems—conformity, fascism, or even privileging action over critical evaluation. Moreover, as Upton says of flow in the context of social play, "if we are completely absorbed in navigating the immediate challenges before us, the social aspect of the experience can recede to near invisibility" (2015, 104). For example, when playing a competitive or cooperative board game, individuals can become focused on their own play to the detriment of social interaction. Alternatively, in

an online social media game, the social can become a resource for prolonging individual flow instead of an opening toward meaningful connection or confluence.[20] Being skeptical of social flow as an absolute good remains important for approaches invested in critical flow.

Examining social flow in terms of its relative merits versus individual flow is a worthy pursuit, but one can also view the social as a way to ignite criticality during play. While Henricks identifies flow theory as the most widely recognized theory of play's satisfaction and engrossing properties, he also notes that "rapt attention is not always a theme of play. Sometimes players exhibit a distanced, critical perspective on their own activity" (2015, 32). He explains that when we play, we become *players,* but we also remain *persons* in the world. For example, Csikszentmihalyi once explained that a basketball game in high school might not produce flow for its players when compared to an individualistic activity like composing music (1975a, 182). In the basketball game, persons might not become players because the social anxieties of the context interrupt absorption in the game. Some might worry about their performance in the eyes of their classmates (doing poorly, or too well!), or they might think of the game as a chance to show support to a friend or spurn an enemy.

It is instructive that the social sphere ruptures individual flow in Csikszentmihalyi's example. In this case, the person (a being in a social context) can emerge from the player (absorbed in the game) and see the play situation from an outside perspective. Yes, we can discuss social flow in terms of absorbing feelings of oneness, confluence, love, *communitas*, carnival, comradery, and so forth, but the social can also break individual absorption and act as an occasion to spark critical distance from a play situation. One can use the social not only to create flow among the many—producing confluence—but also to ignite a kind of critical flow that oscillates between absorption and distanced reflection, between player and person.

For example, De Koven rightly references challenge as the key property of flow, but then he rethinks it when he juxtaposes competitive games that seek balance and uniformity between players with cooperative games that cultivate diversity among persons. The point of cooperative games, De Koven says, requires finding a challenge that will suit all people, regardless of ability. Think of the game Earth Ball, where a group of people try to keep a giant ball aloft as it tumbles and careens off their outstretched hands. In designing cooperative games, differences in age, ability, and desire become

"the source of the challenge, the very thing that makes the game inviting and worth playing. It is the differences between the actors that make the play worth playing" (2014, 92). This perspective rethinks challenge-based flow, moving from players (abstract participants in a game) to persons (existing people with diverse abilities and desires). Focusing on players when balancing competitive games creates a sense of uniformity—"playing with people who are like us in skill and capability" (2014, 92)—but focusing on persons who will become players in cooperative games foregrounds the challenge of negotiating social differences, thus opening a pathway to affiliation across these differences. This creates a situation where people can think of themselves and others as both players and persons—as players who experience confluence and social bonding when they play, but also as persons in the world with different needs that must be negotiated.

Reconsidering the challenge-based form of flow in terms of radical differences based on ability (and also desire) shifts attention to different, inclusive forms of flowing and troubles the potential exclusions of standard versions of flow where one size fits all. It also redirects attention toward the world and the challenge of negotiating collective formations, thus operating as a protopolitical lesson in solidarity and political affiliation.

Diversifying Flow

The critical transformation of flow can occur in solo games as well. Increasingly, designers question the pitfalls of conventional flow channels in games. Game designer Brie Code (2017) wonders what is absent in current approaches to game design and asks, "What does it take to induce a flow state in the player? Does it always require frustration? Who designed all these rules? What players are we studying?" This form of asking views flow critically, from a distance. If Ahmed suggests that the world allows some to flow smoothly more than others, Code's critical questioning applies this thought to video games, apps, and digital companions.[21] Code not only points toward a desire to think about flow differently, but also suggests that new architectures of flow emerge by studying players who have diverse desires concerning games or who feel stressed by typical approaches to flow with standard difficulty ramps. Moreover, asking who designs games that foreground the conventions and ideologies of flow opens the potential to

critique designs based on issues of exclusion in the industry and the ideological worldviews of designers.

Cozy games, carewave games, and experiments with self-help genres seek to diversify dominant architectures of games toward ideas that embrace care, safety, healing, inspiration, and "tend-and-befriend" dynamics.[22] Such design approaches seek to move beyond the zombified flow states of technocapital toward what Code calls "a relief from the constant overwhelming shock of capitalism" (2017). For example, the mobile app *#SelfCare* (2018), designed by Eve Thomas and TRU LUV founder Code, places its user in the familiar space of a bedroom with the blinds closed. A person hides under a plush comforter with an empty hand peeking out from the covers, while a cell phone rests nearby on a pillow (figure 6.2). "Hello. This is us! We're staying home for the day. We refuse to leave our bed," says the app's online description. *#SelfCare* cultivates a subtle act of refusing the demands of technology and labor, while assisting its users to reduce stress, relax, and contemplate life through various minigames and activities. Users can perform breathing exercises, pet a cat's face until it purrs, gather dirty clothes from the floor in a Match 3 game, and so on. Code explains that *#SelfCare* cultivates "care and connection" while transforming typical forms of flow based on "frustration and reward." Instead of always moving from easy to hard, *#SelfCare* often moves users "from awkward to smooth, empty to full, disconnected to connected, messy to tidy" (2019). In one activity, for example, users can massage a circle on their screens to change it from one color to another—or from empty to full. Meanwhile, a gentle sound vibrates and even tingles their fingers. Here, flow is rethought as an inattentive spacing out that displaces the idea that skills and challenges grow over time and undercuts the frustrating growth of productivity that flow often serves.

The *#SelfCare* app does not abandon challenge-based flow completely. One sees the model of increasing challenges and skills operating in a *Wheel of Fortune*–like minigame where players spell out words and phrases such as "slowly," "compassion," and "personal touch." In the beginning of the game, players must place a single letter to complete a word or phrase, but as the game progresses, the app provides fewer prearranged letters until players must construct a word or phrase from a pile of unsorted letters. Trying to arrange "enjoyment" or "we are so insightful" from jumbled letters can be challenging. Indeed, players encounter the phrase "zoning out" near the

Figure 6.2
The *#SelfCare* app

game's beginning, but later they must arrange letters to spell "in the zone." Players move from zoning out to being in the zone, and they probably feel it too—a sense of accomplishment and increased concentration after just ten or fifteen minutes of play.

The tone of the words changes over time as well. Players first encounter words like "numb," "escape," "block," "schedule," and "demands," which foreground self-critical moments that seep into the mind and interrupt flow, but the words become more empowering over time: "unique," "dignified," "capable." This progression signals that being in the zone can assuage the demands of everyday life under capitalism, while creating critical awareness

about the alienating emptiness within the modern world. "We can't put our life in order, but how about these words," reads a message from the app while solving the puzzles. This message does not sugarcoat accomplishment with positivity; rather, it foregrounds the disorder and fragmentation of modern life while subtly suggesting the power of challenge-based flow to provide a feeling of order and a method to cope.[23]

The *#SelfCare* app walks a fine line between experimenting with flow to recapture its critical edge—using flow to critique reality and refuse the demands of capitalism—and continuing flow's ideological use as compensation for an overworked life, assuaging the symptoms of alienation while blanketing its deeper causes. On the one hand, *#SelfCare* renovates flow for new markets of stressed, privileged consumers with comfortable beds and expensive technologies at their fingertips. Its coziness can obscure its commodification of comfort.[24] On the other hand, the app mollifies the shocks of capitalism while urging critical awareness about the addictive properties of technology. When one touches the phone or laptop within the room, these actions do not launch an interactive minigame (as do many other objects), but players might receive a message like "How powerful to give our phone a break." While the player gives the phone a break in the game, the person in the world likely uses the phone to play *#SelfCare*. This creates a moment of cognitive dissonance and self-awareness. It reminds players that refusing capitalism's technical means of attentive consumption is difficult and nudges their critical attitude in order to promote a healthy suspicion toward even the app that they hold in their hands.

The empty hand that peeks from under the covers of the bed self-reflexively highlights the tensions between the privileged appendage of technical interaction and its slack emptiness—an image of refusing the demands of our devices. Sometimes when users touch the phone or laptop icons, *#SelfCare* accedes to the request. "Let's check something," it responds, but instead of satisfying a triggered itch to check our messages or favorite social media site, the app asks players to train their attention on their bodies—to "scan from our toes to our heart." Here, the scanning or scrolling of online media is rethought as a therapeutic, mindfulness technique to focus attention on the body and "check" anxiety. Through moments of such dissonance, *#SelfCare* produces critical flow, an oscillation between absorption and self-awareness, between players immersed in comforting

actions within the game and persons aware of their social context within a technological milieu that demands constant attention.

#SelfCare is just one example of an app that explicitly seeks to reimagine and diversify flow.[25] No doubt, it is a contradictory text that fortifies gendered stereotypes, potentially reinforces the use of flow as a coping mechanism, and mollifies the symptoms of alienation under capitalism. Yet it draws on gendered tropes—crystals, sorting laundry, tending plants—to reach different communities of players, seeking to transform the architectures of standard flow into a more open set of design principles, while using flow to criticize the shocks of capitalism. The app also travels beyond the traditional scope of the video game industry—reinventing "the game's position in the world," as Galloway said (2006, 125)—where it exists within the increasingly influential spheres of mental health, wellness communities, and digital media cultures more generally.

Will an app like *#SelfCare* spark a return to a politics of enjoyment, where flow critiques the deficiencies of everyday life and ignites social change? No. Gamification scholar Sebastian Deterding explains that those who follow a modern politics of "critique, resistance, subversion" must ask themselves if, first, their critiques speak to the "already converted"; second, if they create "a form of repressive tolerance that discharges revolutionary energy and resells it as commodified dissent"; and third, if they enact "refuge *from* the world" that "is always already instrumentalized as a restoration *for* that world" (2014a, 49; emphasis in original). When thinking of *#SelfCare,* my pessimism agrees with each of these questions. Yet if the goal is to diversify flow and dislodge the hegemony of traditional forms of flow (Schrank 2014), then *#SelfCare* succeeds. It experiments with a critical form of flow that challenges the incessant demands of labor and technology on everyday life, while cultivating an awareness of these demands—even if limited in scope—and nudging users toward refusing them. It puts the coin of flow into the air, spinning it away from addiction and landing it on the side where flow's absorbing properties suggest a critique of reality instead of merely sustaining it.

Understanding Culture through Flow and Games

#SelfCare is symptomatic of culture and reveals the contradictory operations of flow today, as a compensation for an alienated life and simultaneously a

critique of this life. A critical approach to flow in games is not only useful for designing new game architectures, but it also allows us to understand, interpret, and critique contemporary culture. "Games are our contemporaries," the critical theorist McKenzie Wark writes, "the form in which the present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through" (2007, 225). This has been one of the goals of this book as well—to read video games as symptoms of larger cultural issues.

Today, life under capitalism can feel exhausting, and flow both manages and sustains this exhaustion. Csikszentmihalyi once said, "The most interesting aspect of flow is its motivational power, it is like a source of personal and social energy" (1981, 25). While *#SelfCare* employs the motivational power of flow in some of its minigames, at other times it motivates its users to become unmotivated. "Is this death or are we just tired? Let's take a break," reads a message that greets the users of the app. *#SelfCare* foregrounds the exhausting pulse of life and suggests that we take a break from it, perhaps to rejuvenate ourselves, but perhaps to critically examine our lives as well. It challenges the status quo and a modern life under the aegis of capitalism that can make us feel tired, drained, and dead—even though we are alive. In this way, *#SelfCare* works against flow or at least recalibrates it, turning it away from its use to fuel productive action.

Let's admit it—play can be exhausting. So say the parents of small children, but so say gamers with gamer fatigue too. Just the idea of play can be tiresome, for example, when opening a Steam account and staring at a list of games that are largely untouched, or started but not finished. Where should we begin? Which game will be fun? Which one will take too much time or require too much grinding and work? Which one are we likely to finish, and which will we probably abandon? Game scholar and popular author Jane McGonigal links gamer fatigue to "happiness burnout," saying that while we might want to indefinitely experience the intense state of enjoyment brought by flow, it is simply not possible (2011, 43). Turning to David Sudnow's book *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983), which chronicles Sudnow's enrapture with the Atari VCS game *Breakout*, McGonigal discusses his descent into what we might call a flow-hole, where he "was so exhausted by the three months he spent suspended in nearly continuous *Breakout* flow that he subsequently stayed far away from video games for quite some time" (2011, 43). In Sudnow's case, the intensity of absorbed

play eventually led to a withdrawal from play. Flow's source of energy ran dry while running him into the ground.

The exhausting side of play and flow is more rarely discussed than their absorbing, enjoyable aspects. Perhaps this is because of the historical separation between play and work, labor and leisure, which considered work as exhausting and play as rejuvenating and recuperative. Flow theory sought to replace the work versus play binary with a different opposition: flow versus anxiety, boredom, and fatigue—an opposition that could be applied to any activity, including work *and* play. Flow is figured as fluid, as the alternative to drain and depletion. We can see this in a game like *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), in which players must manage Link's stamina to keep fatigue from rupturing the gameplay. If Link sprints for too long, his stamina meter empties, causing him to walk, pant, and blink red until the entire stamina meter refills. This is a significant temporal interruption that can lead to Link's death, whether from geographic hazards that he is too fatigued to overcome (drowning or falling from a cliff) or in combat, where Link can no longer fight or flee from danger. When given the choice of upgrading Link's health or his stamina, many players choose stamina. Not only is it central to gameplay, it also unlocks the game's world: with more stamina, players can climb higher, glide farther, and swim longer, meaning they can access parts of the world that would otherwise be unreachable. Stamina allows players to flow into the game world more freely, without the interruption of fatigue.

Reading this symptomatically in terms of culture, stamina is equally central to surviving in our real world, which is always exhorting us to succeed, grow, and become more productive. Flow, with its promises of increased energy, time on task, and productivity, is put forward as the path to the kind of real-world mental stamina required by capitalism. But flow and play are not the opposite of fatigue; according to Csikszentmihalyi, flow "often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity" (1990, 54). The absorption of flow does not cure fatigue; it simply allows us to ignore it. Indeed, flow has even been defined as the forgetting of fatigue.[26] Flow is not like the food in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild,* which quickly replenishes Link's stamina. It would be closer if Link had a special ability to ignore fatigue when absorbed in an intense activity, like running or fighting. Perhaps seeing flow as a cure for fatigue is most similar to the famous mechanic in Midway's arcade game *NBA Jam* (1993), where

players could suddenly be on fire, gaining superhuman abilities such as limitless turbo, faster speed, higher strength, and the ability to hit baskets from almost anywhere. In this case, being on fire, or in flow, is like gaining a supercharged second wind, a comparison that Kotler draws (2014b, 68).

Near the end of his best-selling book on flow, Csikszentmihalyi explains the difficulty of extending flow to the entirety of life: "It is relatively easy to bring order to the mind for short stretches of time; any realistic goal can accomplish this. . . . But it is much more difficult to extend this state of being through the entirety of life. For this it is necessary to invest energy in goals that are so persuasive that they justify effort even when our resources are exhausted" (1990, 227). At the beginning of this book, I explained that Csikszentmihalyi admired the collective goal of the Marxist revolution to motivate human action, but he wanted to find a goal for Western democracies that would motivate individuals to change their lives for the better. What would this persuasive goal be? Can it be flow itself?

According to Kotler, flow "appears to be the only practical answer to the question: What is the meaning of life? Flow is what makes life worth living" (2014b, 21). This creates a strange enigma, where the goal of life becomes the means to get there.[27] When we are in flow, we are already where we want to be. And it can seem that there are no practical limits to flow. In certain activities, "the level of skills that one can attain is in principle inexhaustible," and as skill grows, flow can also grow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 192). This is an odd notion—that the growth of the self is endless and can produce inexhaustible power and attainment. Not only does this invoke a problematic association with an ideology of growth, as I discussed in chapter 1, but it also fits too neatly into the needs of capitalism. Must we grow endlessly and flow endlessly in order to manage and forget the fatigue caused by constant work, disguised as play? Is pushing through exhaustion the meaning of life? If Marxism falsely promised an immediate salvation from alienation through radical revolution, flow theory moves in the other direction, promising salvation through a long life of managing exhaustion.

In *Yet Another Exhausting Day* (2018), a game by Gao Ming and Candleman Games, players cannot forget their fatigue because they play as a person dragging themselves across the floor like an inchworm, completely exhausted but still trying to finish a few more tasks and collect a few more coins. In one version of the game, players guide a programmer who, we are

told, "has worked for two years but has three years of working experience." In another version, players must avoid pillows on the floor, lest they fall asleep and lose the game. The cadaverlike avatar is difficult to control and turns like a puppet in a deep sleep, rolling over in bed. This makes the pillows challenging to avoid. If you press a key to lurch forward or roll over, even when you stop pressing it, the body might continue to flop around, touching a pillow. The controls of the avatar emulate the delayed response of our bodies when exhausted. Sometimes players must even climb the walls to avoid pillows and pass a level—a surreal experience that emphasizes the dream daze that engulfs an experience of fatigue.

Yet Another Exhausting Day tuckers players out as they desperately try to control their flopping avatars. The itch to move faster and the frustration that we cannot seamlessly control the game's avatar makes us aware of how we take effortlessness and even flow for granted when we play games. It also creates a conflict between our goals to progress and achieve and the avatars' sleepy resistance to this prodding demand. In one scene, players navigate a giant smartphone that lies flat on the floor like a king-size bed (figure 6.3). Players must bash their heads against the phone's power button to "wake it up." Then they must flop the avatar onto an outline of a body—like a corpse at a murder scene—to provide a "fingerprint" to access the

Figure 6.3
The player inching across a giant cell-phone bed in *Yet Another Exhausting Day*

phone. The screen then illuminates, filled with apps, each with little red notifications demanding our attention. Onward players drag themselves, using the avatar's "head hammer" ability to whack each app icon and clear the notifications. While darkly humorous, the comedy does not obscure the cause of this particular form of suffering: our technology hailing us to respond and work and play, even at home, even when dead tired, even in our beds before we get to go to sleep.

This version of *Yet Another Exhausting Day* expresses that the form of video games—with their achievements, absorption in tasks, goals, and so on—becomes a way to keep us striving, even when exhausted by the demands put on our attention in capitalist culture. By bashing the avatar's head on the apps to clear the notifications, the game allegorizes our own need to wake up, to raise our consciousness, although this is difficult to do when all we want to do is sleep. Indeed, the critical theorist Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2012) argues that exhaustion in the Western world is the "new paradigm of social life" that opens a pathway toward political affiliation.[28] Exhaustion offers an approach through which to critically examine flow and its related ideologies of the endless growth of the self, the promise of an inexhaustible flowing subject.

Many of the games analyzed within this book thematize exhaustion and use it to criticize flow and play as the management of fatigue.[29] Understanding flow as a way to forget fatigue counters conventional and positive ways of approaching the experience and opens a critical understanding of its relationship to contemporary culture, a culture that overflows with productivity while simultaneously being plagued with burnout and exhaustion.

The Critical, Play, and Flow

The primary goal of this book has been to encourage the evaluation of flow and its history, politics, ideologies, and influences on games from a distanced, critical perspective; to step back from flow and to think about it differently; and to travel against the mainstream and conventional ways of understanding the experience. For example, a critical approach to flow can critique the ideological assumptions of flow theory, its history, and its links to dominant, powerful, and exclusionary forms of agency. It can critique the use of flow to compensate for alienation under capitalism and augment productivity. It can challenge game studies' unreflective use of flow and

the use of flow in game design to fuel consumption. It can aid the critical interpretation of games and their meaning while leading to experiments in game design that leverage forms of critical flow. A critical approach to flow might also seek to revitalize a politics of immersion that foregrounds its use to resist capitalism and its exhausting demands.

Why is this critical approach necessary? Because the flow experience, as a channeling of play's absorbing properties, can work to erase outside perspectives and distance from our lives. While this is its alluring power and its treatment of the illness of alienation, one of the side effects of this palliative self-care is that flow can weaken, not strengthen, the critical voice. Instead, a critical perspective should guide flow and our relationship to it.

Linking a critical mindset to the politics of play is an old idea. As I described at the end of chapter 5, the sociologist Francis Hearn explained that play, by itself, cannot transform society, but "play must be informed by critical discourse" (1976, 160). Hearn's landmark essay "Toward a Critical Theory of Play" is still as applicable to today's politics of play as when it was written, over four decades ago. It continues to chart the horizons of the possibilities of play in the twenty-first century. Hearn argued that play allows people to "freely create an alternative 'reality' which projects what 'can be'" (1976, 152). Play offers hope for a different future, simulating different realities that, when submitted to the critical perspective and implemented by the political, can become actualities. He wrote, "Through play, protest becomes more than a task, it becomes rejoicing and, in play, imagination contributes to the formation of critical perspectives" (1976, 160). In other words, playfulness can provide motivation and joy during labor, hardship, pandemics, and even political action, while its creative ideas of what the world can be will serve as critiques of what the world is.

It is possible, then, that play can lead to critical perspectives, what game scholar Miguel Sicart calls the "carnivalesque," but this is not a guarantee (2014, 10).[30] The critical attitude must guide play in order to channel its potential subversions. When playfulness comes into the service of dominant culture—as I argued in chapter 5—it loses its subversive edge and feeds into capitalist dynamics of endless innovation and imagining the world as a playground for profit. Moreover, when play is privatized and intensifies consumption, as Hearn says, it helps us to forget the real political problems we face: "Unable to confront reality," he writes, "play serves a compensatory role, tending to make existing conditions momentarily tolerable"

(1976, 156). This too was the Marxist philosopher György Lukács's position, and he long ago rebuked play as a compensatory force that would sustain, not repair, alienation. This is still the ground on which we stand. Today, play and flow are extended over life in order to make the exhausting conditions of hyperproductivity tolerable.

As I said previously, Csikszentmihalyi wrote that flow is a coin, with beneficial properties on one side and dangerous effects on the other. For me, the metaphor of the coin forges an inseparable connection between the "heads" of enjoyment and the "tails" of alienation. The problem is that the heads-up coin obscures but also sustains the presence of the tails; the problem is that the politics of enjoyment cannot lead to total social change by itself. It privileges individual enjoyment and assuages feelings of alienation that can motivate and drive political change.

At the end of chapter 2, I invoked Ahmed's linking of revolutionary consciousness to alienation and the absence of flow: "The revolutionary is an affect alien in this specific sense. You do not flow; you are stressed; you experience the world as a form of resistance in coming to resist a world" (2010, 169). While criticizing hegemonic forms of flow in games will create the possibility for more inclusive forms of flowing, this process should be coupled to a politics that recognizes alienation, and the desire to remove it, as a powerful, motivating force of social change. While the hope of the politics of enjoyment is that a rewarding flow experience can catalyze a critical awareness of alienation in everyday life, demonstrating that life could be better, we need to couple this potential with a critique of flow's role in compensating for an alienated existence by allowing us to forget fatigue, exhaustion, and external problems in reality such as racism, patriarchy, economic exploitation, and injustice. Perhaps then, both sides of the coin—the heads of enjoyment and the tails of alienation—can serve as politically motivating forces to change reality.

In the beginning of this book, I discussed Csikszentmihalyi's game of escape and pursuit with his dog, Hussar. In the game, Hussar modulated the challenges to match Csikszentmihalyi's current state. If the psychologist was revved up and full of energy, Hussar bounced far away and was difficult to tag, but if Csikszentmihalyi was tired and drained, Hussar would slow and move closer to ease the game's challenges. In this way, the dog helped to produce flow, which motivated and sustained Csikszentmihalyi's play. Like the image of the coin, this game of escape and pursuit has at

least two sides. From one perspective, Hussar's game appears exhilarating and inviting, but from a critical perspective, it can appear draining and manipulative.

Today, the fun, pastoral game with Hussar has been replaced by refined techniques—in games and beyond—to keep people striving, growing, playing, working, and consuming within contemporary capitalism. The cultural critic Terry Eagleton once wrote, "History and modernity play a ceaseless cat-and-mouse game in and out of time, neither able to slay the other because they occupy different ontological sites. 'Game' in the positive sense—the ludic disportings of disruption and desire—plays itself out in the crevices of 'game' in the negative sense—game theory, the techno-scientific system—in an endless conflict and collusion" (1985, 64). This process can seem interminable, as if we are going around and around in circles as in Hussar's game. Yet if we step back from the circling—and from play and flow as well—a critical perspective helps articulate a path toward the future.

In an article for *The Nation* called "The Rigors of Play" (1969b), Csikszentmihalyi discussed one of his leisurely pastimes, rock climbing. He sought to salvage the spirit of play from the savagery of technology, rationalization, and quantification that was transforming play activities into vast systems of calculation and efficiency. He discussed how climbers and other players created their own "quirks" within rationalized systems that resisted their effects with personal flourish, yet he lamented that these moments "prove that grass can grow even in the cracks of a concrete pavement—but an open field is still something else" (1969b, 210–211). He wanted more for playfulness than these vestiges of spontaneity. He wanted an open field—a culture defined by playfulness and flow instead of a technoscientific world that allowed play within its crevices. Today, a half-century onward, our world is different: the ubiquity of flow culture and an untamed playfulness are laid out before us. Now the critical peeks out from the cracks of absorbing play. If we choose to embrace and cultivate a critical attitude toward life and play, we can cease our circling. Then, we might discover a path through the field, a critical path that will dispel the lures of play and flow and become a prelude to a freer, more just, and more equitable future. Don't worry—there will be plenty of games, play, and even fun along the way.

Notes

Introduction

1. Various pronunciation examples exist for Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a name that in Hungarian appears as Csíkszentmihályi Mihály. I used the pronunciation example on Csikszentmihalyi's Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/mihaly.csikszentmihalyi) and a blog post about his name from the sinologist Victor Mair (2015) from the University of Pennsylvania Language Log. In the post, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's son Mark was quoted as saying that Hungarians pronounce the name like "Cheek-sent-me-high," emphasizing the first syllable.

2. In his first book to introduce flow, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games*, Csikszentmihalyi began the preface by explaining his interest in how players "get immersed in games so deeply as to forget hunger and other problems" (1975a, ix) and how the book sought to explain "the immersion into enjoyable experience which is typical of play" (xi). Indeed, Thomas S. Henricks writes that flow is "perhaps the best-known contemporary account of the satisfactions of play" (2015, 31).

3. Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow contributed to the rise of the field of *positive psychology,* which focuses on a person's well-being, motivation, and ability to thrive rather than on negative, psychological blockages diagnosed in terms of pathologies such as mental illness.

4. *Flow hacking* is the practice of searching for ways to produce the absorbing powers of flow more quickly and with less effort. See books such as Steven Kotler's *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance* (2014b) and Camille Preston's *Create More Flow: Igniting Peak Performance in an Overwired World* (2017). Moreover, organizations such as Jamie Wheal's the Flow Genome Project (also founded by Kotler), Camille Preston's AIM Leadership, Cameron Norsworthy's The Flow Centre, and Maximilian Gotzler's FlowGrade coach individuals and corporations to reach their full potential through cultivating and hacking flow.

5. For example, a service called Flow State emails customers daily song playlists to help put them in flow (Douglas 2019), and Dropbox used flow in an advertising campaign in 2019; their marketers tweeted and blogged about the benefits of flow while financing a "Flow Thinking" podcast.

6. See Gilliland (2019); Robb (2019); Ribera (2019); Wapner (2019); and *Maxim* staff (2019).

7. Jesper Juul associated flow theory with what he called "the complete theory of video games," which describes a wide variety of games through their use of goals and challenges that provide fun and flow (2007, 192).

8. For exceptions, see Myers (1992), Sutton-Smith (1997), Mortensen (2004), King and Krzywinska (2006), Mäyrä (2008), Pearce (2009), Schüll (2012), Schrank (2014), O'Gorman (2015), Upton (2015), Bolter (2019a, 2019b), and Kunzelman and Lutz (2020). These authors criticize some aspects of flow theory, but a more sustained investigation of its history and ideologies is needed. Kunzelman and Lutz (2020) express "shock" that more critical attention has not been paid to the history of flow, with Lutz exclaiming that "it is deeply surprising to me, that [flow] is a thing people talk about," at least, without knowing more about its origins and problematic elements.

9. Csikszentmihalyi makes a similar point (1990, 12). More recently, Bogost echoes this idea when he advocates for embracing a playful life: "We are obsessed with freedom, but we are also miserable and bored, despite living in an era of enormous surplus" (2016, 13).

10. See Konnikova (2013), Pavlus (2016), Statt (2014), and Ismail (2019).

11. See Sicart (2014, 17); Bogost (2016, 229).

12. In *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (2006), game scholars Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska analyze Csikszentmihalyi's principles of flow one by one, providing examples of how video games adhere to these principles. For more applications of the theory of flow to games, see Poole (2000); Järvinen, Heliö, and Mäyrä (2002); Sweetser and Wyeth (2005); Gackenbach (2008); and Cowley et al. (2008).

13. For articles that discuss immersion and flow, see Brown and Cairns (2004) and Ermi and Mäyrä (2007). For a discussion of the social aspects of immersion as distinct from flow, see Bartle (2007). Also see Bolter (2019a) for his differentiation between the immersive effects of flow and catharsis.

14. More recently, flow theory was used to produce the business management game and simulation *FLIGBY* (ALEAS Simulations, 2012), which Csikszentmihalyi helped produce. *FLIGBY* ("FLow Is Good Business for You") is a business management training simulation that "gamifies" principles from flow theory, allowing players

to manage a fictional California winery, which was Csikszentmihalyi's idea for the simulation. The game teaches managers "how to foster Flow and use its psychic energy to enhance the happiness of their employees, customers, stakeholders and even themselves" (FLIGBY 2020). In his remarks about the game, Csikszentmihalyi noted, "When I wrote *Good Business* in the early 2000s, I had no knowledge of 'serious computer games.' I was aware, however, that in designing video games, the industry had put to practical use my scientific description of the key elements of the Flow-generation process" (2015, 9). Thus, by the turn of the millennium Csikszentmihalyi was aware of flow theory's use within commercial game design.

15. McGonigal claims, "Flow was fast and virtually guaranteed. From zero to peak experience in thirty seconds flat—no wonder video games caught on. Never before in human history could this kind of optimal, emotional activation be accessed so cheaply, so reliably, so quickly" (2011, 40). In contrast, Seligman explains, "There are no shortcuts to flow," and adds that flow requires one to draw on their "highest strengths" (2011, 11). To positive psychologists such as Seligman, video games might have exemplified the commodification, corruption, and cheapening of flow, turning it into an easily consumable experience.

16. Game scholars and designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman describe *Monopoly*'s appropriation of *The Landlord's Game* (2004, 520–521).

17. On video games forcing players into flow, see Cowley et al. (2008, 24). On video games as the holy grail of design, see Nacke and Lindley (2009, 1).

18. See King and Krzywinska (2006, 206–207).

19. Juul argues that designers can explore games that pursue different expressive aesthetics beyond flow (2007). Heather Alexandra, game critic and writer for Kotaku, makes similar claims in a video that criticizes flow and the need to move beyond its focus on mastery and challenge (2016). There are similar approaches in experimental game design. For example, the Zero Gamer art exhibition (2007) showcased games and artworks that broke flow. Explicitly drawing on flow theory, the exhibition was framed "as a meaningful interruption of the playing process in order to facilitate a platform for reflection" (Stockburger 2007). Further, the queer game movement today criticizes the aesthetics of mainstream games and questions ideas such as fun, challenge, growth, and failure in relation to gaming—ideas related to the model of flow (Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Ruberg 2019). Also see Code (2017, 2019) for a design perspective that explicitly challenges standard forms of flow.

20. Game artists and scholars Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux examine "alternate histories of play" and player practices that resist the commodification of play by the game industry (2017, 4). For further analyses of unruly players, see ideas such as transgressive play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, Aarseth 2007); the "ludic mutations" that players bring to mainstream games (Schleiner 2017, 25); queer play

(Ruberg 2019); subversive play (Grimes and Feenburg 2009, Sicart 2014, Flanagan 2014); the idea of "unplaying" (Flanagan 2009, 33); and "trifling" with games (Wark 2007, 40).

21. See Sean Baron's Gamasutra article, "Cognitive Flow: The Psychology of Great Game Design" (2012), which he wrote when he was a user experience researcher for Microsoft.

22. For a robust discussion of the textual interpretation of games that includes a phenomenological awareness of player experience, see Keogh (2018).

23. For examples of game design approaches that advocate for moving beyond the flow channel or experimenting with its effects on player experiences, see *Beyond Game Design: Nine Steps Toward Creating Better Videogames* edited by Chris Bateman (2009), in particular game researcher Nicole Lazzaro's chapter "Understand Emotions" (2009). Schrank (2014) also explores avant-garde games that resist flow, while game developer and author Brian Upton discusses flow experiences in his book *The Aesthetic of Play* and describes players "drifting" and "wandering back and forth across the flow channel" (2015, 102–103).

24. The appearance of psychological flow theory in the mid-1970s was contemporaneous with a variety of theoretical discourses that turned to the term *flow* as a way to discuss the fluid processes of social and cultural change during transitions from industrial to postindustrial society, from modernity to postmodernity. One thinks of the futurist Alvin Toffler's analysis of the accelerated "flow of situations" in his popular book *Future Shock* (1970, 32), the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's heavy reliance on a concept of flow to construct a theory of desire and capitalism (1972), the Marxist critic Raymond Williams's influential concept of planned flow in relation to television (1974), and then later ideas such as the sociologist Manuel Castells's theory of the space of flows (1989, 1996) and the cultural critic Arjun Appadurai's analysis of global cultural flows (1990). Indeed, flow became a key ideological metaphor in the late twentieth century (Sutherland 2013). In the edited collection *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture*, communications scholar Sandra Braman argues that flow is "an important keyword for the twenty-first century," and this "is an interesting moment in which the politics of flow could and should become an issue" (2016, 126). Although she briefly mentions Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, she does not relate it to either games or the wider social and cultural contexts that she describes. For another brief discussion of video game flow in relation to theories of flow in media and ecology see Chang and Parham (2017).

25. See Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett (1971).

26. This renewed interest in play has revitalized attention to Csikszentmihalyi's work, particularly because his research over the last fifty years addressed many of the issues that populate current discussions surrounding games and play. In the 1960s

and 1970s, he worried about the technological rationalization of play, penning an article about technology's threat to play for *The Nation* (1969b), complete with images of robots playing golf and tennis. He examined his hobby rock climbing, and how it was being quantified and rationalized (1969a). He wrote about hippies as populating an individualized, playful movement that offered an alternative to the perceived conformity of political movements (1968). He thought that play and flow could combat depression, anxiety, boredom, and alienation. He advocated for extending flow and play throughout life. All these themes—the rationalization of play, the political possibilities of playful communities, the use of play to combat depression, and gamifying society—are prevalent once again. Some scholars, like Jane McGonigal, say that Csikszentmihalyi was a visionary who simply arrived too soon, before the positive turn in psychology became firmly established and the video game industry produced generations of avid players with high levels of gaming literacy (2011, 37).

27. Miguel Sicart explains his work "as a call to playful arms, an invocation of play as a struggle against efficiency, seriousness, and technical determinism" (2014, 5). Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) analyze subversive forms of play and play communities that break free from the game industry and its logic of commodification. Anne-Marie Schleiner (2017) explores how players can politically resist and reconfigure games that have been shaped by capitalism and oppressive social norms. Others see play and playfulness as potentially subversive and disruptive (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009a; Grimes and Feenburg 2009; Flanagan 2014), as queer (Ruberg 2019), or as a source of productive deviance (Clark 2017).

28. In his book *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, The Uses of Boredom, and The Secret of Games* (2016), Bogost argues that play can help us commune with the world of things and escape our worried minds. In her popular books *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011) and *Superbetter: The Power of Living Gamefully* (2015b), McGonigal advocates for using games and play to fix reality and social and personal problems.

29. For example, Upton (2015) explains how interpretation and narrative comprehension in films are a form of play. Alternatively, the collection *How to Play Video Games*, edited by Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann, encourages students to "*think playfully*" and "*act playfully*" as they seek to interpret and understand games (2019, 3; emphasis in original). In fact, game scholar Joost Raessens argues that culture is increasingly defined by playfulness and suggests that we apply insights gleaned from the study of play to create new modes of ludic, media analysis (2014).

30. For example, see de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2005), Kücklich (2005), Chaplin (2011), Bogost (2014), Fuchs (2014), Rey (2014), and Woodcock and Johnson (2018).

31. See the discussion of ludocapitalism in Dibbell (2007, 2008) and Alexander Galloway's critique of play and ludic capitalism (2012).

32. For a selection of such books, see *The Serious Entrepreneur's Playbook: Playing and Winning the Business Game* (Haynes 2015), *The New Entrepreneurz: Changing the Way You Play Life* (Gafni and Gluck 2014), *The Playful Entrepreneur: How to Adapt and Thrive in Uncertain Times* (Dodgson and Gann 2018), and *Game Changers: What Leaders, Innovators, and Mavericks Do to Win at Life* (Asprey 2018).

33. See, for example, Schrank (2014), Sicart (2014, 2015), Flanagan (2014), and Boluk and LeMieux (2017).

34. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004) began with a call to establish a critical discourse surrounding games. Scholars have continued this project. For example, Gordon Calleja describes his book *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* as "an attempt at a refinement of the concepts and models that have thus far described player involvement and immersion" (2011, 184).

35. Max Horkheimer explained that critical theory "never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery" (1972, 246). Critical theory seeks to free humans from dominant ideologies that produce oppressive social conditions.

36. See Flanagan (2009), who seeks to inaugurate "a new discipline of theory and practice" called *critical play*, where designers would create "games that instill the ability to think critically during and after play" (261). Also see Grace (2011, 2019).

37. The list of books in this tradition is too long to include here. See Boluk and LeMieux's *Metagaming* for a brief recounting of this history (2017, 3–4). My critical approach is similar to what Julian Kücklich (2006) called "Game Studies 2.0," a movement away from identifying the formal properties of games toward a broader consideration of the theory, history, and politics of gaming. My approach also follows Soraya Murray's call to "[analyze] games as dynamic forms of representation, using the tools of cultural critique" (2018, 3). Also see *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon* (Lowood and Guins 2016), which "debugs" game history with critical approaches to game terminology.

38. Although used in a different context, media scholar Nicole Starosielski used the phrase "against flow" to introduce the importance of turbulence and interference to flows of network signals in her book *The Undersea Network* (2015, 25). In a similar fashion, the title of my book seeks to add productive turbulence to the typical understanding of psychological flow as an optimal experience. "Against Flow" was also the title of an article by the philosopher Barbara Gail Montero that critiqued ideas of flow related to optimal performance (2017).

39. Lukács criticized the German philosopher Friedrich Schiller, who upheld art and play "as the key to the solution of the question of the meaning of man's existence in society" and the way that humans will be saved after "social life has destroyed man as man" ([1923] 1971, 139). Lukács argued that turning to play and art was "an evasion of the real problem and is just another way in which to make the subject purely contemplative and to annihilate 'action'" ([1923] 1971, 140). Play aestheticizes life and compensates for its dehumanizing aspects, but it fails to solve social problems stemming from class exploitation, inequality, alienation, and so on.

40. Csikszentmihalyi understood his work as contemplating "what could be," not just "what is," and hoped that flow would emancipate individuals from the "iron cage" of "capitalist production" (1975a, 190). He wrote "that the task of social sciences is to be critical as well as normative," meaning that the social sciences should seek the possibility of freedom (1975a, 196).

41. See Csikszentmihalyi (1981, 24), Bogost (2016, 113), and Sicart (2014, 34), respectively.

Chapter 1

1. The video game *flOw* strives to offer all players an opportunity to achieve an experience of flow, regardless of their gaming literacy and skill level. When writing about *flOw*, game scholar Ian Bogost argues that Jenova Chen "misinterpreted" Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow because "true flow does not exist all along the line bisecting the two axes, but only at its top-rightmost corner, where both challenge and skill are highest" (2015, 14). This suggests that flow is only for experts. Instead of referring to the simple diagram of flow (shown in the introduction), where flow can appear at any point when skills are matched with challenges, Bogost invokes a later diagram, where flow occurs only when skills and challenges are high, whereas apathy occurs when they are low. Yet Csikszentmihalyi points out that this later diagram maps skills and challenges against the average skills that someone already has: he writes, "When people perceive themselves to be above their own personal average level of challenges and skills, they experience flow" (2003, 72). This idea of an average level is important because it explains why players of different skill levels could experience an absorbing state of flow even without mastery or expertise. Csikszentmihalyi did not think that flow was the sole property of experts, and neither did the designers of *flOw*.

2. Aware of Csikszentmihalyi's idea of flow, media scholar Sherry Turkle related the absorbing power of games to what she called the "holding power" of the computer, explaining that video games require "total concentration" and often transport the gamer into an "altered state" (1984, 82). Ted Friedman expressed a similar idea when explaining the player's absorption in relation to the computer game *Civilization:* "When a game of *Civilization* really gets rolling, the decisions are effortless,

instantaneous, chosen without self-conscious thought. The result is an almost-meditative state, in which you aren't just interacting with the computer, but melding with it" (2005, 138).

3. Even the basic game scenario does not encourage deep reflection beyond commonplace thoughts such as "Organisms evolve" or "The big fish eats the little fish"—ideas that appear in games similar to *flOw,* such as *Shark! Shark!* (1982) and *Spore* (2008). For a critical analysis of the game *flOw*, see Riccardo Fassone (2017, 117–120).

4. See Sicart (2014, 16) and Bogost (2016, 146).

5. See Csikszentmihalyi (2017b, 813) and Thomsen (2000, 14).

6. For example, Csikszentmihalyi's book that introduced flow, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games* (1975a) later became *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*: *Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* ([1975] 2000), a significant change that shows both the rise of the importance of flow and its ability to substitute for play.

7. These biographical notes are drawn from Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988); Cooper (1998); Thomsen (2000), Csikszentmihalyi (2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2017a, 2017b, 2018); Kotler (2014b).

8. In 1999, Csikszentmihalyi moved from Chicago to Claremont Graduate University in California, where he founded the Quality of Life Research Center.

9. Csikszentmihalyi wrote that "the future does not lie in the direction of a unity achieved by relinquishing individuality to the demands of a however lofty social goal. A worthwhile union can be reached only by increasing the individual's consciousness and freedom" (1967, 276).

10. See Csikszentmihalyi (1978). Also, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton invoked Marx to describe how consumer culture alienates attention by wresting control of attention from the individual (1981, 186). If play and flow could absorb individuals in activities that were not geared toward consumption, then alienation could be solved. Yet this approach does not address the fundamental alienation within Marxism based on workers being separated from the products of their own labor and the ownership of the means of making these products.

11. Miguel Sicart writes, "We play not to entertain ourselves or to learn or be alienated: we play to be, and play gives us, through its characteristics, the possibility of being" (2014, 18). Also see Csikszentmihalyi's preface to *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games* (1975a).

12. This is why Csikszentmihalyi cited the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, explaining that the true solution for alienation from one's labor is the worker learning to

love their work (1975a, 190). See Roberts (2018) for an opposing view that we must continue to struggle to free ourselves from work in order to cultivate more time for leisure and play.

13. Jung uses "libido" in place of "psychic energy," purely "as a matter of historical justice" and homage to Freud without carrying over the constant return to sexuality in Freud's work ([1928] 1942, 32).

14. There are many ideas contained within "On Psychical Energy" that parallel Csikszentmihalyi's ideas about flow and play. For example, Jung discusses how "the mind is gripped and possessed by" a magical item in moments of play and ritual ([1928] 1942, 51). He also writes, "Through a sustained playful interest in the object, a man may make all sorts of discoveries about it which otherwise would have escaped him" ([1928] 1942, 52). For Jung, play and ritual channel attention, sustain interest, and divert psychic energy toward useful ends—ideas that became important to flow theory and shaped Csikszentmihalyi's idea that flowing individuals were the catalysts of historical change.

15. On the relationship of attention to psychic energy and mastering consciousness, see Csikszentmihalyi (1978; 1990, 30–41) and Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 17–24).

16. Csikszentmihalyi writes that flow activities are "*designed* to make optimal experience easier to achieve. They have rules that require the learning of skills. They set up goals, provide feedback, and make control possible. They facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from so-called 'paramount reality' of everyday existence" (1990, 72; emphasis in original).

17. "One cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level for long," Csikszentmihalyi writes, adding, "We grow either bored or frustrated; and then the desire to enjoy ourselves again pushes us to stretch our skills" (1990, 75).

18. Also see the business management game *FLIGBY*, which Csikszentmihalyi helped to produce and which trains managers to integrate flow into their business practices and decision making process (FLIGBY 2020).

19. See Anthropy (2012b); Mcdaldno and St. Patrick (2013); Goetz (2017); and Ruberg (2017, 2019).

20. In his book *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (1993), Csikszentmihalyi adopts the framework of evolution to think about the development of the self, but he grapples with various external forces that challenge self-determination, such as the biological determination of evolution, the sexual determination of Freud, the economic determination of Marx, and even the linguistic determination of postmodernism and deconstruction (38–39). Also see Seligman (2002, 66).

21. Csikszentmihalyi claims that the ideas of thinkers such as Freud and Marx "will always be useful and valid" because they exposed limitations on individual agency and generated freedom in their own particular ways (1990, 22).

22. This example is related to Csikszentmihalyi's personal experience as a youth within an Italian prison camp after World War II while his family was checked for fascist ties (Flaste 1989). As I mentioned previously, he coped with this situation by learning to play chess. The concentration camp example reappears in his work (1990, 128; 1993, 210–211).

23. Flow experiences "seem to be the same the world over," Csikszentmihalyi says (1990, 49). The universality of the flow experience also denies differences in the psychological experience that might result from "culture, stage of modernization, social class, age, or gender" (1990, 48). Different people and cultures might do different things in different historical periods to achieve flow, but Csikszentmihalyi argues that the actual experience is the same. Also see Mao et al. (2016). One of the frustrating aspects of flow theory is that it shrouds itself in neutrality. The flow experience is agnostic toward the activities that might produce it—basketball, shopping, writing poetry, betting on horses, a rewarding job, or planning a crime (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1978). Revolutionaries can flow, reactionaries can flow; pacifists can flow, fascists can flow. The neutrality of the flow experience contributes to its appearance as innocent, apolitical, and ideologically inert.

24. Csikszentmihalyi himself upheld forms of dominant essentialism, holding that people were differentiated "in terms of natural endowment" and "traits" such as "health, strength, physical attractiveness, intelligence, skin pigmentation, temperament, and character" (1993, 98). For example, he argued that trying to "deny" the biology of sexual difference "is one of the silliest conceits of our time," before turning to suggest that the rise of the men's movement made sense given the "facts about masculine biology" (51). Such problematic and transphobic statements cause us to wonder how flow is articulated in terms of sexual difference (an idea that I approach in chapter 2), while also foregrounding that flow theory might be shaped by notions of dominant, privileged forms of a masculine, universal subject.

25. While Csikszentmihalyi worries that growing income inequality and economic exploitation might make flow available only to the privileged, his theories surrounding flow also express racist anxieties. For example, in his book *The Evolving Self*, he discusses forms of "parasitic exploitation," where the psychic energies of the powerful are drained by weaker individuals, and he turns to seemingly innocuous examples such as groupies surrounding rock stars (1993, 105–106). At other times he will discuss issues of immigration in similar terms, for example, seeing immigrants as potentially dislodging the harmony and equilibrium of a nation and explaining that "a Turkish worker in Germany, or a Mexican worker in the U.S., will soon begin aspiring to the social benefits available to the more powerful citizen"; he will even mention "sensible" programs implemented by "richer nations" where immigration

is temporary and seasonal (1993, 90). In another instance, he links addiction and the "chemical parasite" of tobacco with race, explaining that "the plantations required more labor, which meant that slaves had to be imported from Africa. Today we have lung cancer and ghettoes in large cities" (1993, 127–128). These examples could be multiplied. When he argues in *The Evolving Self* that we must "control the direction of evolution," the specters of social Darwinism and eugenics arise; although he rejects the "racist applications" of controlling evolution as "panicked overreactions" that led to Nazism and other moments of ethnic cleansing, Csikszentmihalyi's gentler version of controlling evolution through flow also revolves around deep, racial anxieties (1993, 149). For a further critique of flow theory and racism see Kunzelman and Lutz (2020).

26. The anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll critiques flow in her book *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* and argues that video gambling machines prey on hardcore gamblers by putting them in a psychological zone that prolongs and sustains destructive forms of addictive gambling (2012, 167).

27. See Bogost (2015, 10–21).

Chapter 2

1. See the academic collections *Rethinking Gamification* (Fuchs et al. 2014) and *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (Walz and Deterding 2015). These works critically assess and clarify the idea of gamification, theorizing its history, understanding its relation to play, work, and motivation, and discussing its future applications through the use of improved game design.

2. McGonigal channels flow theory, writing that Csikszentmihalyi "was right about the need to reinvent reality to work more like a game. He was just too early" (2011, 37). According to McGonigal, the growth of gaming and positive psychology has created a situation ripe for gamification's success. Also see Deterding (2014b; 2015).

3. See McGonigal (2015a) and Parker (2019).

4. Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes this point again and again (1975a, 38; 1990, 54). Also see Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 167).

5. Positive psychologist Martin Seligman explains that flow erases consciousness: "In fact, it is the absence of emotion, of any kind of consciousness, that is at the heart of flow. Consciousness and emotion are there to correct your trajectory; when what you are doing is seamlessly perfect, you don't need them" (2002, 116).

6. Barbara Ehrenreich's criticism of positive psychology centered on this issue as well: "The real conservativism of positive psychology lies in its attachment to the status quo, with all its inequalities and abuses of power" (2009, 289).

7. For example, György [Georg] Lukács advocated for "the *abolition of the isolated individual*" in favor of class formations ([1923] 1971, 171; emphasis in original). Other Marxists have made similar remarks, such as Balibar (2013, 18–19) and Dean (2013).

8. See Chess (2012, 2017), Kubik (2012), Vanderhoef (2013), Anable (2013, 2018), and Soderman (2017).

9. The feather is a recurring image in *Celeste*, first appearing when a crow drops one at the beginning of the game, bequeathing the midair dash ability to Madeline. This links the feather to Madeline's initial power that she learns to control.

10. The psychologists Lazarus and Folkman wrote, "Although the experience of flow is characterized by a feeling of effortlessness, it occurs at times when great coping effort is usually required and during these times serves as a powerful sustainer of coping" (1984, 209).

11. Others have made similar points about gamification, where critics have suggested that it uses play and games as a drug to distract one from real problems (Chaplin 2011). Alternatively, in the workplace, gamification is used to make work less alienating, intensifying productivity and exploitation while distracting from labor organizing (Rey 2014).

12. For the Italian autonomist Franco "Bifo" Berardi, forms of disaffection and psychological disorder are "clots" and impasses that must be "dissolved" through a type of perpetual political therapy (2009, 139). Instead of commodifying discontent, which sustains a focus on the self, Fisher explains that mental health conditions can be mobilized toward political *affiliation* against capitalism: "We must convert widespread mental health problems from medicalized conditions into effective antagonisms. Affective disorders are forms of captured discontent; this disaffection can and must be channeled outwards, directed towards its real cause, Capital" (2009, 80).

13. No doubt, the politics of enjoyment and games like *Celeste* or *Diner Dash,* or even *Hellblade,* can be empowering and therapeutic. People should pursue resources that assist them to cope with stress and discontent. The idiom "More power to you," should be spoken with genuine intent when people discover methods to cope with hurt and mental illness. Yet this coping should not exclude the exploration, recognition, and analysis of the causes of social and personal malaise.

14. At a later point in *Psychonauts*, a liberated Fred chases off his nemesis, Crispin. Healed from his psychosis, Fred no longer wears his straitjacket and yells at Crispin that he is now free and dangerously "armed," an ableist joke that reinforces Fred's rejuvenated, supposedly normalized power.

15. Even beyond the particular games analyzed within this chapter, gaming can function as a form of coping. As individualized forms of managing the distractions and problems of everyday life, video games perform a social function. While they

mollify symptoms of alienation, they often encourage a heroic form of individuality that intensifies ideas of personal responsibility when it comes to solving issues beyond an individual's control.

16. As I mentioned in chapter 1, flow theory teaches that one does not need to change external problems to ease suffering, but just change one's mind about them (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 48–49).

17. See Jameson (1981).

18. It is worth noting the narrative indicators of dreaming in these games—from the surreal level design in *Psychonauts* to Flo, eyes closed, sleeping on a cloud in her final "dream" restaurant, from the mystical powers of Mount Celeste, which bring Badeline to life, to Senua's psychosis, where one cannot tell dream from reality. The narrative frames of these games elicit symptomatic interpretations.

19. At the end of the game, a comic cutscene shows the goddess explaining that Flo has attained her destiny, but an alarm interrupts this moment, cutting off the word *destiny* to form "Dest-." Flo is awakened from her dream to return to work. Her destiny to move from a truncated form of "flo" to the wholeness of flow is denied. Indeed, *Diner Dash* even contains an "Endless Shift" mode, where players try to accommodate a relentless stream of demanding customers until the frenzied multitasking overwhelms them, thus foregrounding that Flo's destiny is endless work and coping.

20. For example, Csikszentmihalyi wrote, "A self that is only differentiated—not integrated—may attain great individual accomplishments, but risks being mired in self-centered egotism. By the same token, a person whose self is based exclusively on integration will be connected and secure, but lack autonomous individuality. Only when a person invests equal amounts of psychic energy in these two processes and avoids both selfishness and conformity is the self likely to reflect complexity" (1990, 42). Turner also dreamed that individualistic flow could spill over into *communitas*, which he called an "'unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals'" (1982, 45). For him, the flow experience produces an individual feeling of oneness and the merging of consciousness with the environment which he thought was similar to the oceanic feelings contained within collective action and social communion. Nevertheless, like Csikszentmihalyi, Turner wanted to retain individuality and autonomy without having it washed away in an undifferentiated collective (1979, 497). For work that focuses on the idea of social flow, see Walker (2010), Raphael, Bachen, and Hernández-Ramos (2012), De Koven (2014), Kaye and Bryce (2014), Kotler (2014b), and Kaye (2016).

21. There are exceptions, such as the flash game *Billy Suicide* (2008), which depicts a male protagonist coping with anxiety and depression while struggling to reach flow and stability during his workday at home. Yet the game also implies that Billy's anxiety is caused by the reversal of stereotypical gender roles. For example, Billy

stays home and works as a webcam model in the porn industry, while his girlfriend goes out to work—an idea that suggests that his depression and anxiety is caused by his lack of access to traditional gender roles and work outside the home.

22. While Deterding's work seeks critical forms of gamification, it retains the idea that gamification's ultimate goal is to cultivate a "positive vision" that functions "in the service of human flourishing" (2014b, 307). This critical approach is not critical enough, in the sense that it could be informed more clearly by critiques of normative happiness, enjoyment, and flourishing. In cultural theory and game studies, voices have begun to question the goals in both society and video games that are related to the politics of enjoyment and flow theory. See Ehrenreich (2009), Ahmed (2010), Halberstam (2011), Anthropy (2012b), Fuchs (2014), and Ruberg (2019). For related work by Deterding, see his article "The Lens of Intrinsic Skill Atoms: A Method for Gameful Design" (2015).

Chapter 3

1. Media scholars Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss the endless borrowings and repurposing of historical media forms in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1998).

2. Film narratives, cinematics, and cutscenes were often the privileged reference points for early game scholarship. See Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's *Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces* (2002) for an edited collection that focused on games and cinema.

3. There are exceptions, such as Gillian Skirrow's article "Hellivision: An Analysis of Video Games" (1986) and Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games* (1991). Twenty years later, Murphy stated that television "acts as a bridge between more historical forms of new media as well as a theoretical model for computer use, spectatorship, and interactivity," thus arguing for the centrality of television in the study of new media (2011, 26). Building on Murphy's work, Michael Newman's *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (2017) also extensively analyzes the relationship between television and video games. One might also mention Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort's book *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (2009), which analyzes the key role of television technology in shaping the look and operation of Atari VCS games. Other scholars have turned to media spectatorship theory to compare television, cinema, and video games. For example, see Morris (2002) and Chesher (2007).

4. See Henry Jenkins's *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers* (2006b) and *Convergence Culture* (2006a), Jonathan Gray's "In the Game: The Creative and Textual Constraints of Licensed Video Games" (2014), Jason Mittell's "All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic" (2008) and "Playing for Plot in the *Lost* and *Portal*

Franchises" (2012), Adrienne Shaw's "On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience" (2013), and Bryan Behrenshausen's "The Active Audience, Again: Player-centric Game Studies and the Problem of Binarism" (2012).

5. Williams's concept of flow is one of the most popular concepts used to analyze television, while Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow occupies a similar, central position in game studies. The centrality of these concepts to their fields occasions my comparison more than their terminological identity.

6. Also see Fassone (2017, 117) and Bolter (2019a, 109).

7. On television's prefiguring of developments within new media and games, see Murphy (2011, 6).

8. For a discussion of flow theory in relation to communications and media studies, see Sherry (2004).

9. Csikszentmihalyi writes, "Some researchers stoutly defend [television], claiming that viewers are perfectly able to use [it] for their own purposes and turn viewing to their advantage, while others interpret the data to show that it makes the viewers passive and discontented. Needless to say, this writer belongs to the second faction" (1990, 272).

10. Csikszentmihalyi writes, "TV can provide continuous and easily accessible information that will structure the viewer's attention, at a very low cost in terms of the psychic energy that needs to be invested" (1990, 119).

11. In his popular book *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (2006), Steven Johnson traces a growth of complexity in shows throughout the history of television and argues that viewers' skills have grown to meet the increasing challenges of contemporary, complex television programs. Television scholar Jason Mittell also argues in his book *Complex TV*, "For television, contemporary complex narratives foreground the skills of narrative comprehension and media literacy that most viewers have developed but rarely put to use beyond rudimentary means" (2015, 54). These complex television programs challenge media literacy skills and thus produce possibilities for flow.

12. Also see Schüll (2012, 167).

13. For example, Jenkins describes media convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2006a, 2). This creates a dance between engaged users and fans taking control of their own consumption of media and the media industry's attempt to capture their attention. For other scholarship that updates Williams's concept of televisual flow for contemporary times, see Brooker (2001), Jenkins, (2006a), Butler (2012), Thompson (2013), Miller (2014), and Cox (2018).

14. See Seiter ([1999] 2002) and McPherson (2006).

15. See Hoffman and Novak (1996); Chen, Wigand, and Nilan (2000); Novak, Hoffman, and Yung (2000); Rettie (2001); Pace (2004); Hsiang Chen (2006); Hoffman and Novak (2009); and Obadă (2013). This research seeks to use flow theory to increase the "stickiness" of web content, a term used by marketers and also media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green to discuss how online digital forms draw and engage a user's attention (2013, 4–5).

16. For example, the video game *flOw* (2006), discussed in chapter 1, pushes this removal of interruption to the extreme. In his analysis of *flOw*, game scholar Riccardo Fassone calls this removal of interruption and fragmentation "a holistic design strategy" (2017, 118). Players always remain in control of their fishlike creature: they swim around during the opening credits, the avatar selection screen, the various game levels, the credit sequence, and even the pause screen. By allowing this continuous control, *flOw* actively removes interruptions and pauses between these discrete game sequences.

17. Game scholar Brian Schrank suggests that video game flow operates in a similar fashion to Hollywood cinema and perspective painting, which both developed conventions to produce seamless, unified representations (2014, 32).

18. Video game researchers Cowley et al. argue, "Flow is the experience description construct used in most computer mediated experience (CME) research" (2008, 10). For a sampling of other research in this area that draws on flow, see Hunicke and Chapman (2004); Hunicke (2005); Sweetser and Wyeth (2005); Jenova Chen (2006; 2007); Nacke (2012); Vicencio-Moreira et al. (2014).

19. As video games and television remediate one another, planned flow and video game flow will mix, producing powerful streams of commodification. Other forms of automatic adjustment, such as *Skyrim*'s Radiant AI and Radiant Story systems, will also contribute to a player's immersion. These systems in *Skyrim* are less about balancing skills versus challenges (i.e., flow as challenge-based immersion) and more about adapting the story-world into a personalized flow of content that will keep the player immersed. For each individual, these systems keep track of a player's choices in the game in order to ensure that nonplayer characters behave according to prior player actions. This smooths over possible interruptions between narrative game segments for different players and their choices.

20. Before developing *flOw,* Chen created a simple game called *Traffic Light* (2004) that touched on these three ideas. In the game, players must press the mouse button at the precise moment when a traffic light changes from yellow to red. If players press the mouse button within one-tenth of a second before or after the light changes, then they win a round. If not, they lose. Before the game begins, players can adjust the temporal interval between the light changes. This allows players to locate a rhythm that feels comfortable. Perhaps some players succeed when the

light changes every second, while others succeed every half a second, and so on. Players can calibrate the game until they find their individualized groove, an idiom that writer Steven Poole uses to discuss playing video games and flow (2000, 292). By developing *Traffic Light*, Chen found that (1) the ability to control the game's temporal parameter increased the duration of play by a few minutes; (2) adjusting the game manually interrupted play and was too noticeable; and (3) the adjustment allowed individuals to personalize their experience to increase their engagement (2006, 15). I discuss these three elements in this chapter.

21. Also see Schrank (2014, 32).

22. Schüll's exposé of the interactive gambling industry suggests a darker version of flow's use. This industry subjects players to sophisticated technological devices that replicate an experience akin to flow, where players zone out until they reach "extinction," an industry term for an extinguished bank account (2012, 74–75).

23. See Crary (2013, 53). Also see Courtwright (2019) for a discussion of what he calls "limbic capitalism," which "refers to a technologically advanced but socially regressive business system in which global industries, often with the help of complicit governments and criminal organizations, encourage excessive consumption and addiction" (6).

24. Networks fought to increase the "share" of their programs, a market research term for the percentage of all viewers that a program receives at any one time. Even if television viewing is a complex phenomenon irreducible to absorbed viewing (e.g., some viewers might have the TV on while doing other things), as Caldwell says, "it is still very much in television's best narrative and economic interests to engage the viewer" (1995, 27). Thus, networks might tent-post an evening schedule where strongly rated shows start and end the evening, with weaker shows in between. This strategy aims at increasing viewership for the weaker shows during the middle of the evening's broadcast, prolonging an audience's engagement with a particular channel while exposing them to more commercials.

25. For scholarship that explains why strong player bases extend the duration of a title and its commercial success, see Kücklich (2005) and Postigo (2007).

26. The hiddenness of undeclared rules is never absolute. For example, players discovered *Resident Evil 4*'s DDA system after an official strategy guide discussed difficulty scaling within the game. Alternatively, in the Twitter example, designers themselves revealed hidden adjustments of various games.

27. See Mark C. Bartlet and Steve D. Spohn's *Includification: A Practical Guide to Game Accessibility* (2012) from The AbleGamers Foundation.

28. See Orland (2012) for an example of a popular article that links the extension of accessibility in games to broadening markets and audiences.

29. As mentioned in chapter 2, game designer and writer Anna Anthropy questions the centrality of challenge and duration of play as defining characteristics of video games (2012a). Also see Keogh (2018, 6).

30. Also see Lazzaro (2004, 2009) and Upton (2015).

31. See Kirkpatrick (2011), Anthropy (2012b), Schrank (2014), Sicart (2014), Flanagan (2014), Boluk and LeMieux (2017), and Schleiner (2017).

Chapter 4

1. Academics have addressed the relationship between immersion, reflection, and video games from various perspectives. Some argue that interactive technologies, including video games, can create unreflective, automatic experiences akin to flow that lead to manipulation, and even addiction (Stallabrass 1993; Schüll 2012). Others argue that video games teach critical thinking skills and can be employed in educational contexts to encourage learning (Gee 2003, 2005; Squire 2005). Others see video games from a Brechtian perspective, imagining that designers can transform games into political theater by interrupting their absorbing properties and allowing players to reflect critically on their experiences (Frasca 2001; Schrank 2014; Pötzsch 2017). From this latter viewpoint, some designers create playable theories that encourage players to reflect on games, their structures, and even philosophical ideas (Gualeni 2013, 2016; Micallef 2016). Alternatively, they see critical theory as a form of play itself (Upton 2015). Others combine critical distance and play in order to politicize games and use them as tools to critique society's problems (Grace 2019). For example, game designer and scholar Mary Flanagan advocates for what she calls "critical play," a design paradigm that produces "games that innovate due to their critical approach, games that instill the ability to think critically during and after play" (2009, 6, 261). In contrast, others argue that play and critical thinking are separate activities and question the entire motivation for turning play into a form of critical thinking (Bogost 2016, 101). From this point of view, play offers an opportunity to get out of our heads, overcome distance, and embrace a closer relationship to the world.

2. See Schrank (2014, 38–46). As Bolter says, drawing on Schrank's work, flow-breaking games "move the player to ask herself what a video game is and what it means to play one" (2019a, 116). See Caruso et al. (2016). Also see Stefano Gualeni's game *Necessary Evil* (2013) and Josef Florian Micallef's *Illusion Master* (2016). Many other political and serious games seek to produce reflection about issues in the real world, for example, Mary Flanagan's *Massively Multiplayer Soba* (2008) and Interactive Diversity Solutions' *Guess My Race* (2011).

3. These games form a spiritual lineage because *Portal* exists within the *Half-Life* universe, *The Stanley Parable* was originally a mod of *Half-Life 2*, and both *The Stanley*

Parable and *The Beginner's Guide* were built using Valve's Source Engine and reference games in the *Half-Life* universe.

4. See Csikszentmihalyi (1981) and Sicart (2014).

5. The title of this section evokes Jameson's section title, "The Abolition of Critical Distance," in his essay "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984, 85).

6. Invoking Raymond Williams's concept of televisual flow, Jameson wondered if television had made critical distance "obsolete." He lamented a cultural situation of complete media saturation, which he called "total flow," and "the blockage of fresh thinking" before the television's relentless stream of images (1991, 70).

7. Natasha Dow Schüll documents real-world scenarios where the design of interactive gambling machines creates such a strong pull that players do not stop playing even to eat or go to the bathroom (2012, 179). Some of the interactive machines that Schüll analyzes allow players to progressively minimize audiovisual elements that could interrupt the players' zone or flow, even reducing interactions to the point where the machine plays itself.

8. Brian Upton describes the need for these reflective spaces in game design: "Many games ask us to split our attention between immediate tactical challenges and long-term strategic challenges. The more we have to scramble to keep alive right now, the less time we have to think about what we are going to do next. If a game is going to ask us to make strategic decisions, it must provide us the mental space to do so. It should have either periodic lulls in the action or an overall slower pace of immediate challenges so that we have time to engage in anticipatory play" (2015, 273).

9. Invoking Gee's cycles of expertise, games and learning scholar Kurt Squire identifies this oscillation and argues that "if we attend to games' ability to put us in states of flow (which may be unparalleled among media) then we miss the way they are constructed to also encourage new learning" (2005, 85). Flow theory recognizes this oscillation as well. After a flow experience ends, individuals can reflect on their experiences, acquiring an outside perspective through which to evaluate their performance (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 66).

10. See Csikszentmihalyi (1981).

11. See Eskelinen (2001) and Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003).

12. The activist and cultural theorist Jodi Dean laments that the incessant activities of the left, such as "small projects and local actions" and "criticism and interpretation," replace larger collective forms of action (2013, 87). One can also think of the loss of grand narratives in postmodern culture—including political narratives of revolution—that are replaced by local language games, famously theorized by the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984).

13. Likewise, the critical theorist Julian Stallabrass argues that video games lead players into "a state of trance," a point that brings to mind the principle of a loss of time consciousness in flow theory (1993, 89).

14. Csikszentmihalyi explains that when flow ends, "the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience: it is now enriched by new skills and fresh achievements" (1990, 66).

15. I would like to thank game designer and scholar Tess Tanenbaum for an illuminating conversation about the relationship between *Portal* and critique that helped to clarify the ideas offered in this discussion.

16. See Montfort (2009).

17. Game scholar Bonnie Ruberg reads *Portal* against the grain, advocating for playing *too close*, "getting queerly intimate with a game" in order to "make space for alternative desires" (2019, 64, 68). Despite the terminological dissonance between distance and closeness, the queer intimacy with a game also can be a way to create critical distance and difference. As Ruberg says of *Portal*, "the value of too-close reading is not necessarily to find the tiny detail that unlocks the bigger picture, but to gain new perspective on the bigger picture itself—to think with portals differently" (2019, 76). I read this as an invocation of critical distance—that getting too close through play allows one to see the bigger picture differently, to see games themselves from a queer perspective.

18. See Sicart (2014, 26–27).

19. See Laura Hudson (2015) and Cameron Kunzelman (2015). Also see Susan Sontag ([1966] 2001) for an example of an approach to artistic reception that eschews interpretation.

20. In one of Coda's later games, players enter a room filled with floating phrases that express different, experimental game ideas: for example, "You start in a small room, until you realize you can just walk through the walls," "Play as a pair of floating eyes emitting footstep noises," and "A normal game where you have to scream into a mic every 15 seconds to keep playing." The room contains a plethora of little game ideas and foregrounds the creativity of Coda's approach to games.

21. Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett write, "Awareness merges with action, and a play episode is begun. A most outstanding quality of this state of ambience or participation with the environment is the actor's lack of an analytic or 'outside' viewpoint on his conduct: a lack of self-consciousness" (1971, 46).

22. See Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett (1971, 57).

23. If play is defined as "free movement within a more rigid structure," as designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman suggest, then oddly enough, a prison cell might be the most basic form of play, if one voluntarily enters it (2004, 304). The idea that

interrogating play is crucial to this prison scene is reinforced by Wreden's commentary. If players have the narration turned on at this moment, then Wreden describes how he and Coda argued about the need for games to be playable. Wreden says that Coda "sent me a zip file entitled 'Playable Games,' that was full of hundreds of games, each of which was just an empty box that you walked around in and nothing else." Wreden says that he played all of them but found no secrets hidden within them. Such moments provoke reflection about play and its meaning and limits.

24. Players can fill the moments of reflection and distance provided by *The Beginner's Guide* with interpretative moves that parse the game's narrative complexities. In his book *The Aesthetic of Play*, Upton examines "the mechanics of how we navigate a text" and how a narrative has rules that allow players to make interesting "interpretive moves" within its constraints (2015, 217). He calls this "narrative play" and explains that interpreting a story can be understood as a kind of game (2015, 215). Are Wreden and Coda the same person? Is Coda a woman? What do the three dots that appear again and again mean? What is the meaning of the labyrinth, the simple dark room that reappears, and the beam and glitch? *The Beginner's Guide* offers countless threads of interpretative possibilities, becoming a challenging game of decoding that can involve players' interpretative skills and even produce flow.

Chapter 5

1. See Sicart (2014, 21–22).

2. The video games *Ingress* (2013), *Pokémon Go* (2016), and *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite* (2019) augment reality, overlaying gameplay elements on maps and mobile camera feeds that transform real space into game space.

3. For example, the NissanConnect EV app for the Leaf electric vehicle gamifies efficient driving, and *Zombies, Run!* (2012) turns jogging into a game to escape the undead.

4. The digital media theorist Alexander Galloway calls ludic capitalism a complete transformation of the economy that combines the blurring of play and work, the turbulent play of the market, and the playful search for the new (2012, 29). The lawyer and technology writer Julian Dibbell calls ludocapitalism an "emergent mode of production" for the twenty-first century, where play no longer occurs outside of work but *is* work (2008, 85). Also see Dibbell (2007).

5. Play is often discussed in terms of creativity, discovering possibilities, and generating novelty. For example, in their book *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation*, the biologists Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin examine the evolutionary properties of play with the hope "that humans and organisations can exploit playfulness as a

tool for fostering creativity and innovation" (2013, 1). Playfulness becomes useful for businesses and organizations that depend on innovative thinking and new ideas. For example, the former assistant editor of *Business Week,* Bruce Nussbaum (2013), describes play as one of the key properties of creative intelligence. Alternatively, as the popular author Steven Johnson puts it, "Because play is often about breaking rules and experimenting with new conventions, it turns out to be the seedbed for many innovations" (2006, 15). Game scholars also link play with "novel possibilities" (Flanagan 2009, 6) or explain that play is "a kind of creation" during which "we can fashion novelty from anything at all" (Bogost 2016, 223). Finally, flow is linked to innovation and novelty as well. According to popular author Steven Kotler, "Flow is a creation engine" (2014b, 173), and Csikszentmihalyi explained that flow "presents a tremendous opportunity for managers who are committed to enhancing joy and innovation in their workplaces" (2003, 75).

6. See Giddings and Harvey (2018), who explain that play and games have long been ambiguous as *both* a source of resistance to dominant culture and a force that supports dominant culture. The authors argue that we need to perform a "deep, grounded analysis" of game culture and its economics in order to move beyond this binary (650).

7. See Independent Games Festival (2019); Indie Game Jam (2002).

8. See Lazzarato (1996).

9. Like Jameson, the literary theorist Terry Eagleton also turned to what he called "the ludic disportings of disruption and desire" to explain how play disrupted the "techno-scientific" game of modernity when it became too overbearing (1985, 64).

10. This game surplus was created in part by game jams that aim at "discovering and rapidly prototyping as many new forms of gameplay as possible" (Gray et al. 2005). The 2018 Global Game Jam had over 50,000 participants worldwide, who created over 8,000 games. Ludum Dare, which began in 2002, produces 2,000 to 3,000 games every four months. On the website Indiegamejams.com, one can find hundreds of game jams depicted on a color-coded calendar. Jams now exists for every occasion—the Nostalgic Jam, the YouTube Jam, the Anti-Fascist Jam, the Tattoo You Jam, the One-Hour Jam, the Radical Game Jam, and so on.

11. Shaviro laments that "we can neither give up on innovation, creativity, and the New, nor accept the way that the relentless demand for them is precisely the motor that drives capitalism and blocks any other form of social and economic organization from being even minimally thinkable" (2008, 325). One could say the same about play.

12. In a discussion about Brecht's radical aesthetics in the 1970s, film scholar Paul Willemen explained, "The interruption represented by commercials in a television film or drama does sometimes create a certain type of Brechtian effect, but it's purely

by accident," or as another discussant concluded concerning the TV commercial, "It's not Brechtian, it's not political" (quoted in Mathers 1975, 96–97).

13. Some game scholars, such as Gonzalo Frasca (2001), embrace the political opposition of Brecht and the work of Brecht's spiritual successor, Augusto Boal, as potential sources of rethinking video games and simulations as oppositional forms of political theater. Yet others claim, like game scholar Holger Pötzsch (2017), that Brecht's ideas could "serve as a source of inspiration for a games industry often trapped in profit-maximizing cycles of generic repetition that makes it difficult to take wider socio-cultural functions and potentials of the medium sufficiently into account." Here, Brechtian experimentation itself renovates the industry.

14. As Schrank argues, "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" (2014, 182). And the radical game artist and scholar Anne-Marie Schleiner hopes that the industry will incorporate more radical themes into its products that are derived from the subversive experiments of game modders and artists (2017, 60). While I am sympathetic to these ideas, I am more pessimistic about the process of reforming capitalism through the incorporation of subversive elements. This experimentation does not transform capitalism's deeper structures and potentially contributes to the illusion that play and playfulness are subversive in themselves instead of functioning as sources for a dominant form of ludic capitalism.

15. *Donut County* was originally developed as a simple interactive toy, called The Pits. It did not include the narrative about gentrification; rather, it allowed players to enjoy the pleasures of simply sucking things into a hole that grew larger and larger. This core mechanic is engrossing without the narrative frame. Indeed, before *Donut County*'s release, the game *Hole.io* (2018) appropriated its core mechanic (sans story) and became a top game on the App Store.

16. Costikyan has made a similar claim before, linking it explicitly to Brechtian politics (e.g., see Scholder and Zimmerman 2003, 97).

17. Here, I am thinking of McKenzie Wark's idea that the slogan for the twenty-first century should be "never play" (2014, 163), Mary Flanagan's idea of unplaying dominant forms of "expected play" (2009, 33), and Bonnie Ruberg's political refusal of "fun," which emerges from a critique of games from the perspective of queer theory (2015, 2019).

18. I am indebted to Justin Keever for bringing this game to my attention.

19. Game designer Melos Han-Tani (2018) also suggests that the game pushes one to look beyond it in order to understand its meaning.

20. See de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2005), Kücklich (2005), and Rey (2014).

21. See Hall (2018), and Colwell (2019). Also see Schreier (2019) and Dean (2019).

22. See Csikszentmihalyi (1975a, 196–197).

23. Take, for example, the *Meditations* (2019) collection of experimental games curated by Rami Ismail and other collaborators such as Jupiter Hadley, Adriel Wallick, @moshboy, Khalil Arafan, Krzysztof 'dalton' Pachulski, Dominik Zgutka, and Michał Odziemczyk. *Meditations* released one game a day by a different developer for an entire year. This collection of short games (no more than six minutes long) provided an alternative to conventional game jams that produce an overwhelming glut of game ideas in a short period of time.

Perhaps we could call the *Meditations* model a slow game movement—a daily dose of video game yoga and meditative mechanics that would use its slowness as a form of critique (Scully-Blaker 2020). But at the end of the year, the experiment resulted in yet another database of games, not so different from the databases of ideas generated by more traditional game jams. Moreover, as critical responses to the experiment indicate, the unpaid labor, the crunch of developers to finish their games on time, the lack of an equitable crediting system, and even the marginalization of some developers suggest a lack of sustainable and progressive change (Rose, Harrison, and Brinegar 2019). No doubt, the support of game developers for slowness and diversity is laudable—as is the desire to create an alternative game community—but this slow playfulness reacts to the mainstream glut of games without deeply opposing it. See the *Meditations* credits page (https://meditations.games/credits.php) for a list of game contributors.

24. Virno says that exit "modifies the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives" (2004, 70). This sounds a lot like playfulness, which seeks to shift one's attitude toward the context. In this case, the playful shifting of contexts is fueled by opposition.

25. The exodus that occurred during the rise of the independent games movement—and chronicled in *Indie Game: The Movie*—seethes with what Sharma (2017) calls "sExit" and the privileged, white, male, independent developers cleaving to their dreams of escape from the control of others and a life of unbridled, adventurous entrepreneurship that results in critical accolades. Games such as *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide*, *World of Goo*, *Thomas Was Alone*, *Every Day the Same Dream*, and *This Is the Only Level* fetishize escape and propagate the heroic, aesthetic journey of independent and art game development. Meanwhile, in a game like *Quing's Quest VII: The Death of Videogames!* (2014) by Dietrich Squinkifer ("Squinky"), the genderfluid social justice warriors are kicked out of the planet Videogames by the Gamer Police and must ponder returning to the planet to destroy Videogames or escape to another planet, safe from the interference of the "misogynerds" that oppress them. Here, exit amounts to exile. Criticizing the exodus that has occurred with the indiepocalypse and its potential connections to sexist ideals of masculine escape is one way to understand and promote its more radical and diverse aspects, seeking an

alternative to dominant cultural norms where capitalism is enmeshed with patriarchy, racism, and sexism. The rise of the queer games avant-garde (Ruberg 2020) and of platforms like itch.io, as well as the growth of personal games emerging from a more diverse set of developers, suggest that the exit occurring within video game culture since 2015 or so is more heterogenous than that which came before. These diverse elements could be expanded, cultivated, and sustained by implementing ideas that would provide equitable economic structures to support future game development.

Conclusion

1. The critical theorist McKenzie Wark sees the potential of video games to offer a metasocial critique, where the digitally enforced fairness of video games contrasts with the unfair, exploitative world of "gamespace" (her term for an everyday life that has been transformed by the logic of games) (2007, 1). From this perspective, video games offer a critique of the real world and how the latter is unfairly rigged to benefit the privileged and the powerful.

2. This phrase comes from the title of Csikszentmihalyi's book *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (1993).

3. Productivity apps often reference flow on their websites and blogs. For example, the *Momentum* extension for Chrome offers "Tips for Getting in the Zone" on the extension's blog (Momentum Team 2018). The website and application blocker *Focus* is promoted in the article "How to Achieve Flow for Productivity and Happiness" on its website (Jasper 2019). Similar articles appear for the timer app *Toggl* (Neely 2017) and the team workflow and management app *Trello* (Metcalf 2019).

4. See Chaplin (2011), Rey (2014), Fuchs (2014), Walz and Deterding (2014).

5. See Crary (1999, 33).

6. The anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll critiques interactive gambling, where flow does not appear as a peak experience of a growing, complex self, but rather as a "desubjectifying" experience that removes user control (2012, 166).

7. Game researcher Jane McGonigal writes about the lightning quick attainment of flow in games (2011, 40).

8. The Fogg Behavior Model employs subjective factors similar to flow, such as motivation and ability (among other attributes), and has been linked to the creation of addictive apps and technologies. See Stolzoff (2018) and also Dichev et al. (2014).

9. For example, Bolter argues that the anarchic hacking practices of the leaderless collective Anonymous provide "the perfect instrument for a politics of flow because its point is to deny access to an organization that (in the attackers' view) has itself

sought to deny the flow of information to others" (2019a, 182). Here, the politics of flow has little to do with the psychological experience of flow.

10. See Roose (2019). McPherson (2019b) discussed the idea of immersive racism in remarks entitled "Platforming White Supremacy" at the Society for Cinema and Media studies conference. Also see her talk "Platforming Hate: The Internet and the Rise of Hate Online" (2019a).

11. When the journal *Game Studies* was founded in 2001, scholar Espen Aarseth (2001) heralded it as "Year One" of academic game studies, but when Barr and Lessard created their version of *Game Studies* fifteen years later, the urgency and novelty of the field had faded. The disciplinary "policing" of the field's key concepts—now, just a gag in the game *Game Studies*—seemed less important. The concepts that were once so exciting had become stale and worn, and the artists could assess these concepts from a historical distance. This shift in the discipline is also reflected in the game: players must often exit through ruined arches to progress to the next level, suggesting that game studies' aging concepts are now less stable and are becoming sites for archaeological investigation.

12. Also see Bolter (2019a, 103).

13. See Bartle (2007), Juul (2007), Lazzaro (2004, 2009), Costikyan (2013), Schrank (2014), Upton (2015), Alexandra (2016).

14. *Little Inferno* interrupts play, causing players to wait for packages that are needed to continue the game; this can induce a longing for flow, making players aware of its allure and their desire to return to it. *Donut County* challenges players to see their absorbing play as a form of complicit action and narrativizes the redirection of this absorption toward progressive political ends. In the same vein, *Oικoςpiel Book I* continuously disrupts flow with turbulent game mechanics and glitches, while channeling absorption outward toward exploring the game's paratexts and politics. *Celeste's* intense, challenge-based immersion induces awareness that experiences of flow and absorption are complex states composed of multiple feelings, even acute frustration and boredom. Meanwhile, *The Beginner's Guide* eschews strategic thinking and solutions that can absorb players in challenge-based flow, instead providing reflective moments of distance for the players to spend contemplating their play, their interpretation of games, and social issues such as depression and social anxiety.

15. Kotler (2014a) contributed an article about flow to the website "Art of Manliness" that uses the slogan "Get Action" as its insolent call to reinvigorate masculinity. As I noted in chapter 1, Csikszentmihalyi wrote about the men's movement as well. After accepting the determining powers of biological sex (using an example of how a neuroscientist failed to raise her children gender neutral because her boy would not play with dolls and her daughter would not play with trucks),

Csikszentmihalyi explained the rise of the men's movement as a reaction to the denial of biological sex. He wrote, "Pretending that we can be anything we want to be without taking into account how physiology controls the mind is not only useless but dangerous" (1993, 51). While he argued that people needed to transcend the forces of physiology—and the psychology of flow was one way to do so—his problematic use of the men's movement at this particular moment suggested that flow could channel "masculine biology and its psychological consequences" in an appropriate, socially acceptable fashion (1993, 51).

16. Scholars (including Chess 2012; Kubik 2012; Vanderhoef 2013; Anable 2013, 2018; and Soderman 2017) discuss the gendering of feminized casual games (seen as simple, easy, less time consuming, and distracting) and masculinized hardcore games (seen as complex, challenging, time intensive, and all-consuming). Because, as Costikyan puts it, hardcore gamers "want to be swept up in the moment of play, to be, for the most part, in a flow state" (2013, 91), casual players—who are often feminized—are represented as being outside the flow zone or using less complex forms of microflow to cope with the distractions of everyday life.

17. This shift toward inclusive flow and diversity in flowing subjects also illuminates contemporary issues in game culture, such as Gamergate. This culture war reveals that society—or at least game culture—has not embraced difference. Instead, a dominant gamer identity centered on young, white, male players mobilizes to attack others who do not fit this identity. In Gamergate, we see a disconnect between flow theory and toxic gamer culture: if games and flow experiences cultivate positive states of human enjoyment, where does the toxicity against others come from? While there are many contributing factors (the form and content of games, the rise of the alt-right, industry practices of exclusion, and so on), some blame can be laid at the feet of flow's ideologies. Flow's privileging of the individual over the social, its primacy of immersion, and its bracketing of critical evaluation all contribute to dominant gamer communities' rejection of games representing "outsider" perspectives. According to Costikyan, hardcore gamers desire flow and want to remain within it (2013, 91). They do not want to be jarred out of flow or to reflect on their experiences from an outside perspective—in other words, they do not want to think critically about games because that would disturb their unreflective enjoyment of gaming, the activity that is central to gamer identity. Instead of allowing players to surrender to the immersion of flow, critical perspectives on games can interrupt flow. Thus, outside perspectives that are critical of game culture and its racism, misogyny, and homophobia are seen as threatening the dominant, immersive pleasures of the privileged gamer community.

18. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) warned of flow becoming too individualistic without a social component, leading to egotism. Also see Celia Pearce's concept of intersubjective flow (2009).

19. This was Turner's (1982) hope for individual flow—that it could liquefy dominant reality, spilling over from individual feelings of absorption within an environment to spark occasions for *communitas*, or a social bonding, togetherness, and sense of oneness where people feel connected to a greater purpose that might upend social norms. As Henricks says, "communitas is a stepping away from the distinctive patterns and schemes of the individual" (2006, 198). Confluence and *communitas* mark the absorbing, immersive satisfaction of group flow experiences, "the satisfactions inherent in participation itself," as Henricks says (2006, 198). In *communitas*, the self gives itself up to oceanic feelings of the crowd, the carnival, the spectacle of the sports event with cheering crowds, and even a protest, with streets swarming with the discontented.

20. Discussing the social media game *FarmVille* (2009), game scholar Alenda Chang writes, "Social games begin to feel rather asocial when the interaction is limited to annoying, asynchronous requests for help and people-gathering for in-game advancement" (2019, 182).

21. Others have taken similar approaches to the question of inclusivity and diversity in game design. For example, see Celia Pearce, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, Tracy Fullerton, and Janine Fron's Ludica Collective ([2005] 2020) and Ludica Collective (2008). For a different approach to alternative forms of game design that challenge dominant architectures of flow, see Wilson (2011).

22. See Code (2016, 2017, 2019). Also see Carewave Games (2020) and Meiners (2017). Code (2017) explains that, "Like fight-or-flight, tend-and-befriend is an automatic, physiological reaction to threatening situations," but instead of battling or fleeing, "You instinctively want to protect your loved ones, to seek out your allies, and to form new alliances."

23. Another message reads: "Sometimes we need to spell out the bad to create the good." Players again encounter clichéd wellness-speak, but *#SelfCare* uses this language to focus critical attention on the negativity of overwork, anxiety, and distraction in contemporary culture. It urges a critique of this culture through the lens of motivating and cozy forms of flow, thus channeling the critical edge of the politics of enjoyment. While *#SelfCare* does not spell it out directly for the user, its critical refusal of the shocks of capitalism is there for players to puzzle out.

24. *#SelfCare* monetizes discourses from positive psychology, self-help, and wellness communities by offering purchases of additional content and personalized graphics. Indeed, the game designer and critic Liz Ryerson (2018) warns of "a fanatical desire among many who work in videogames to find new facets of a person's life to create and exploit markets inside." While it would be unfair to suggest that *#SelfCare* exploits people, it participates in the process of commodifying comfort, new desires, and affects.

25. Other games could have been used here to discuss new architectures of flow, such as Zoë Quinn's *Depression Quest* (2013), which disables choices in the game in order to foreground how depression limits possibilities and removes playful alternatives. Through its disruption of immersion by limiting player choice and making players aware of these limitations, the game's mechanics foreground a critical awareness of how depression suppresses one's ability to flow into the world. Thus, players experience a dissonance between making choices that might absorb them in the game and the constant reminder that this immersion is partially foreclosed by the erasure of particular choices.

26. See Csikszentmihalyi (2009, 354). In another book, *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure*, Csikszentmihalyi and his coauthors define flow as being absorbed in an activity and "losing track of time and of being unaware of fatigue and of everything else but the activity itself" (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen, 1996, 14).

27. This is what Sarah Ahmed meant when she said, "Positive psychology involves the instrumentalization of happiness as a technique. Happiness becomes a means to an end, as well as the end of the means" (2010, 10).

28. Berardi writes: "Exhaustion has no place in Western culture, and this is a problem right now, because exhaustion needs to be understood and accepted as a new paradigm of social life. Only the cultural and psychic elaboration of exhaustion will open the door to a new conception and perception of wealth and happiness. The coming European insurrection will not be an insurrection of energy, but an insurrection of slowness, withdrawal, and exhaustion" (2012, 68). If flow and play can become tools to manage exhaustion and ignore fatigue, we might rethink the blurring of boundaries between work and play that flow theory encourages and argue, like the sociologist Michael J. Roberts (2018), that we should retain these boundaries and struggle for time freed from labor. Also see Crary (2013) and Woodcock and Johnson (2018).

29. *Celeste* is an exhausting game, and Madeline's depression is described as an endless, exhausting battle with the self. In *Diner Dash*, before Flo attains nirvana and rests with her eyes closed on a cloud pillow, she is fatigued and harried, although players are encouraged to ignore this state and send her dashing toward her next task. *Hellblade* ends with exhaustion in a final battle that tours the extremities of flow: from comfortable control and a focused ability that copes with growing challenges, to anxiety and a feeling of being overwhelmed, and finally to an inevitable, fatal fatigue. In *Portal*, Chell is dragged back into Aperture Science's underground facility, unable to resist after her exhausting escape. In *Οικος piel Book I,* play itself becomes exhausting because the controls and camera angles mutate again and again, forcing players to continually adjust to these fatiguing new perspectives and mechanics of motion.

30. Because the carnival upends social norms and also trembles with a festive exuberance, it can sustain political acts of critique and subversion with joyfulness. Yet it can also serve to purge and drain off that resistive energy, which, as Turner says, becomes only a "subversive flicker" (1982, 44). Turner also says that these carnivalesque moments from the premodern period can become more powerful forms of transformation through modern revolutions, although here the ludic has been put in service of the critical and play is used, as Hearn (1976) says, to sustain revolutionary energies. Also see Deterding, (2014a).

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