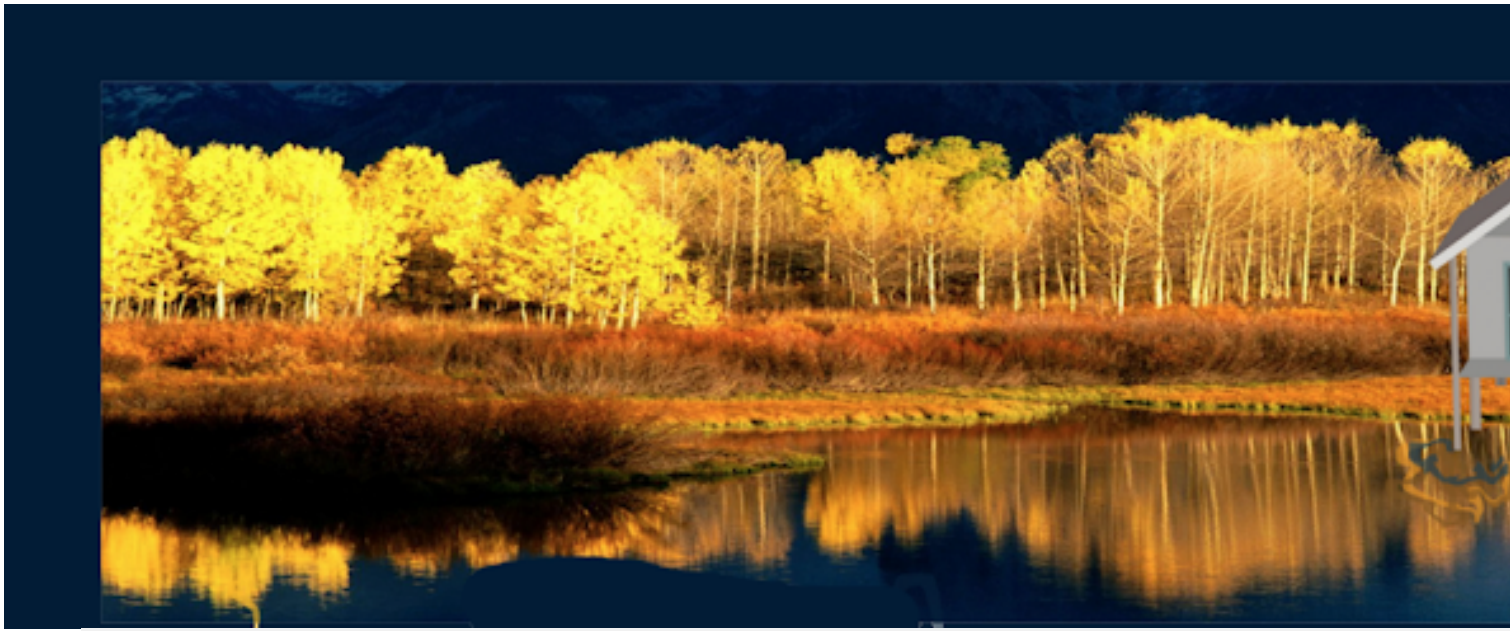

Wednesday, September 11, 2013

Notes On Eric Zimmerman's "Manifesto for a Ludic Century"

1.

Eric Zimmerman just put up a new 'manifesto' on Kotaku, excerpted from a book he's releasing soon, *The Gameful World*. "Manifesto for a Ludic Century" is a series of 12 propositions about the history and form of games and their trajectory as projected into the future, unpacked with a bit of commentary for each. **Full text below, cut with my annotations.**

1.1 - The sorts of futurist impulses on display here have always been exciting to me as a speculative practice, and even despite my misgivings I think there's some truth in what Zimmerman says. This idea of "entering an era of play"-- it's a beautiful image! And it is not only in games culture that we're seeing this rhetoric tossed around--

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there's some good precedent in *other play cultures*, too. In music, we can find similar theses in Adam Harper's recent *Infinite Music*, which makes a convincing case for replacing our concept of "music" (which is always an object) with "musicking" (which is always a *played* process, following Christopher Small); further back, Jacques Attali's

Noise presents a similar argument, that we are entering an age which has been pre-shadowed by free jazz improv practices, etc-- an age where *everyone is a composer* (the "era of Composition"). The Situationist project was a radical reading of Huizinga's play theory, an attempt, perhaps, to usher in a new era (or counter-era) of *radical intervention*-- that is to say-- *play, NON-SPECTACLE*. To this end, play tactics were developed (see *dérive, detournement*), as well as architectural speculative-constructions (games; see New Babylon, especially). In philosophy in general, we'll see this idea show up again as a kind of mix of present-realism / future-revelation -- in Derrida's *freeplay* (or 'the structurality of structure', which closely resembles Harper's variable variability, etc.), back to Nietzsche, who writes "I do not know any other way of associating with great tasks than *play*; as a sign of greatness, it is an essential presupposition" and describes, in Zarathustra, "A New Game" (The Child becoming a dancing star), himself perhaps indebted to Schiller's own post-French Revolution play ethics (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man*) which were intended to instill in Europe an earnest appreciation of beauty, and emerging naturally from here, a pre-conscious (from love!) play ethics, a universal harmony of mankind (his "Ode to Joy" used by Beethoven describing this universal harmony "all men are brothers!").
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In any case, we can see that there is some interesting precedent for Zimmerman's claims, a current of play-future-Idealism which is *not* limited to 'games' per se, but rather *all playspaces*, and which deserves a careful study of its own.

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Naturally, his own point of view isn't reducible to these others. But more than the above examples, it is representative of systems-love of the present tech-zeitgeist, shedding some light on a contemporary spirit of positivistic optimism we're seeing proliferate more and more in Silicon biomes all over the globe (maybe contrasting what MOMA/EXPO 1 billed as "dark optimism", as per my prior posting?). Responding to this optimism, a few critical pieces ("The California Ideology," "The Cybernetic Hypothesis"; thanks Bryan!) paired with some of the insider values of Jaron Lanier ("You Are Not a Gadget") might be a good places to stir-up ideas and kick off a counter-offensive..

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Rcall the end of the Kotaku piece, where Heather Chaplin responds to Zimmerman with a pressing question/critique of her own:

"Are we moving into a future in which plenty of people are logical, good at recognizing patterns, and analyzing the way

things work, but in which fewer and fewer of us are able to empathize?"

What she calls the *Dark Side* of the ludic century--

HYPER-RATIONALITY-- this is really the crux of it, though I'll hold back for now on what exactly its antidote, the *play/practice of empathy/material sympathy,* might entail...

Here's the massive tension: games are both playful-irrational things and highly structural things, and integrating the reality of these apparently contradictory tendencies is maybe the most important/baffling work there is to do-- in design, theory, and play. Right now, the *rational* aspect of games is WAY over-represented. Chaplin references a binary from a neuroscientist in which the 'male' brain, systematizing, is contrasted with the 'female' brain, intuiting, empathizing. No matter how ultimately "real" such split structures are, and whatever words we choose to use-- male/female, striated/smooth, quantized/unquantized, rational/intuitive-- there is a *very useful* dichotomy here, which has nothing to do with explicit gender roles, or actual *essences* of any sort, but with real, particular ways of being. Like all dichotomies it is ultimately illusory in the *split/gap* it assumes, but this is one with *pragmatic applications* which we would do well to attend to. I suggest reading Erin Stephens-North's "Gender and Brilliance" essays (1, 2) at this point-- on consistent and inconsistent creativity, and their analogs in maleness and femaleness, which are very much at the heart of the problem (the problem being the *lack of femaleness, inconsistency*). These problems are dealt with further in Alain Badiou's reading of Cantorian Set Theory (*Being and Event),* which provides ample conceptual support for a system of quantity rooted in non-quantity/inconsistency (Void). Ian Bogost has given us his own reading of Badiou, but it unfortunately does not address the idea (or *specter* in computer culture) of inconsistency, of *pure multiplicity*, that "the One is *not*", rather proceeding from that plane of consistency whereby the one has already been counted into "being" as a *unit*, and all that follows are operations on said units, on the informational-consistent plane. This, I believe, misses the major thrust of Badiou's *pure multiplicity* as well as Cantor's own maths/metaphysics. Indeed, Cantor's theory of sets posits an Absolute Infinity, infinitely more infinite than all other infinities, and necessarily *inconsistent* by nature. Cantor himself deemed his theory of hierarchical infinities a continuation of the study of *irrational numbers*, those infinitely precise *actualities* which, no matter how many times you divide a unit into 2 will always exist *between* the original unit and its divided parts.

Formally put, I believe it is **a search for** this pseudo-structural world of ***inconsistency***, ***irrationality***, **&** ***infinity*** that **must guide our play practices today**, and our structural models that follow-- and only now, play giving rise to *design*.

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Zimmerman's work is to be admired-- I learned a lot from *Rules of Play* (written with Katie Salen), and am really grateful for the paths of learning/thinking/playing it sent me down. But I do believe there is an imminent danger in the thinking of the present manifesto-- a danger of falling prey to the seductive tactics of reason, structure, consistency-- at the loss of *play*.

Here we go, with the manifesto, and my annotations. Zimmerman's propositions are in bold. His commentary in italics. My notes in regular (+ variation for emphasis).

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2. EZ MANIFESTO w/ COMMENTARY

Games are ancient.

Like making music, telling stories, and creating images, playing games is part of what it means to be human. Games are perhaps the first designed interactive systems our species invented.

The first fatal error is counting the activities of MAKING music, of TELLING stories, of CREATING images as if these processes were categorically different from PLAYING games. If games are ancient, play is even moreso, and what *isn't* played? *Making, telling, creating*-- these are all kinds of play, or different words for the same thing even. Can we admit to music, stories, & images being games for those who *played* them into being?

TOOL-BEING-- the "first designed interactive systems" need not be divorced from the material structure of the physical world itself-- making a knife out of a rock is itself a game in an important sense (even a Game Theoretical game with optimum 'sharpness' and 'sturdiness' conditions!), it is only because we do not account for all the forces (Rules) involved that we might consider it otherwise.

The thesis that "everything is play", that "everything is a game" (see Lila (cosmicplay), Leela (Zimmerman et. al)) is still ridiculed as if it were merely hyperbolic, a device used for rhetorical purposes but not meant to be taken seriously. We need to give this claim serious attention. Once we strip away games' requirement of explicitly stated goals (quantitative evaluative principles of 'optimum behavior'), it might seem as if we're left with nothing to hang onto -- but this is not the case, we still have *play, movement* (which is simultaneously the immanent actuality of the game in flux, *and its goal*, one and the same).

Without the 'explicit goals' requirement, everything opens up, and what we're left with is perhaps exactly what William James calls "activity situations" (Essays in Radical Empiricism), which are the grain of experiential reality (itself a game), but are by no means groundless (we're on the ground, right?). What might this new *ground* be? Planting a seed:

SHIFTING POSSIBILITY SPACES

(are ancient)

Digital technology has given games a new relevance.

The rise of computers has paralleled the resurgence of games in our culture. This is no accident. Games like Chess, Go, and Parcheesi are much like digital computers, machines for creating and storing numerical states. In this sense, computers didn't create games; games created computers.

Instead: digital technology has given QUANTITY (numerical states) new relevance. This is NOT limited to "games" per se, except as considered in the broader sense of: dynamic-nondeterministic quantitative information flows. See next point. It need not be stressed that music and images are both reducible to terms of numerical states just as much as games are (and are just as dynamic during their creation processes, which *includes active listening*). The question is not that of setting games aside as the MOST relevant form as regards quantitative structure, but rather to *learn from games* about PLAY, and to tune into this play aspect of *all quantitative structure*.

This proposition ought to be re-formulated: "digital technology has effectively made all consistent quantity actualizable in the form of *material* games." Computational-information architectures are remarkable in this sense above all-- that these numerical states have become literally *materialized*, such that number is here not an ideal, but a property of 'natural' (here, electronic) force just as much as anything else (even if the infinitely precise *actuality* of irrational number is NOT accounted for, given information architectures' binary atoms which cannot be further split.

The 20th Century was the century of information.

Systems theory, communications theory, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, computer science – these fields, many of them emerging well before electronic computers, helped create the "information revolution."

The abstraction of information has made possible massively complex bureaucracies and technologies, from telegraph and telephone networks to NASDAQ and Facebook.

Fair enough! We will find plenty of systemic examples in finance, advertising, social media, sure-- but we would do well to be weary of the palpable effects on our own thinking of what we deem important, *what we choose to pay attention to*, and how this limits our sense of possibility.

It would be a shame, perhaps unwise, to neglect the informatics at play in the arts.

Instead of setting our sights on these financial-communicational spaces of quantity where information theory has already prevailed, and which are admittedly not very positive *value-images* to follow in the footsteps of, we should *gently* apply these concepts to the realm of ideas that have henceforth seemed to be unsusceptible to strict formalization. James Tenney's *Meta-Hodos* begins to do this with music (plenty of others have as well)-- we might find useful paths, too, in what Paul Klee called his "exact approaches to art" (see his *Notebooks*), which despite their strictness, play a major role in the foundational origins of non-representational images, giving rise to any number of abstractions, including (notably) the COBRA movement, which functioned as the sort of aesthetic-tactical source of the Situatonist project (COBRA all loved Klee-- where is the information theory of his chaos-cosmos?).

In our Ludic Century, information has been put at play.

Our information networks no longer take the form of vast card catalogs or webs of pneumatic tubes. Digital networks are flexible and organic.

In the last few decades, information has taken a playful turn. To take a prime example, Wikipedia is not about users accessing a storehouse of expert knowledge. It is a messy, chaotic community in which the users are also the experts, who together create the information while also evolving the system as a whole.

Yes, Wikipedia is a game, and a very good one! What would a ludological analysis of Wikipedia look like? How many other styles of analysis might there be? Certainly network/graph theory will provide some useful tools here-- it only needs now to account for a *player*.

To this end, the concept of *entropy* in information theory should be given special priority in the study of games. Tenney's *META Meta-Hodos* ends: "there is still nothing known about structural entropies in music,"

Entropy defines those information structures which are irreducible to higher-level patterning, those structures/strings which are *uncompressible*-- which cannot be accounted for by rule, pattern, but which are necessarily *immanent* to the patterning itself, the multiple prior to the count. Entropy is that which is the 'remainder' of optimum behavior, game theory.

I believe in this total variability of entropy, *pure multiplicity/Chaos,* we might find some source of a *cosmological* meaning of Play.

PROPOSITION: a *player* (as a *playing thing*) should never be defined aside from some concept of entropy, which is the *inconsistent* (uncompressible) stream of play itself (scaling).

We should study not merely computational information theories, but return to the source-- to thermodynamics, where (a different) *entropy* originally got its name. Here, might we find something useful in Stuart Kauffman's theory of "adjacent possibility at the edge of chaos"-- something which defines games, life, material flows, music-- all in one breath? These apparently 'diverse' structures; activity-situations-- *counted as one*.

In the 20th Century, the moving image was the dominant cultural form.

While music, architecture, the written word, and many other forms of expression flourished in the last century, the moving image came to dominate. Personal storytelling, news reporting, epic cultural narratives, political propaganda – all were expressed most powerfully through film and video.

The rise of the moving image is tightly bound to the rise of information; film and video as media represent linear, non-interactive information that is accessed by a viewer.

There is a sort of fear of the moving image in games communities-- as something that apparently must be transcended (games are not movies!). But I don't understand this fear. The fact is-- *video*games still use images.. almost always. Even Doug Wilson's games which appear to be non-video videogames still rely on the movement of players in a space (visible in all cases except "Beacons of Hope" which is played in the dark).

We need to come to terms with the reality of games and the moving image, and the fact that these are by no means mutually exclusive concepts-- that the moving image, too, is a game. (And here, we will open the way for a pragmatic theory of musick as well).

Jaron Lanier's prophecy, c. 1996: *"The art form of the next century is being born right now. It will be a fusion of the great arts of the 20th century: Jazz, Cinema, and Programming."*

The Ludic Century is an era of games.

When information is put at play, game-like experiences replace linear media. Media and culture in the Ludic Century is increasingly systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory. Games embody all of these characteristics in a very direct sense.

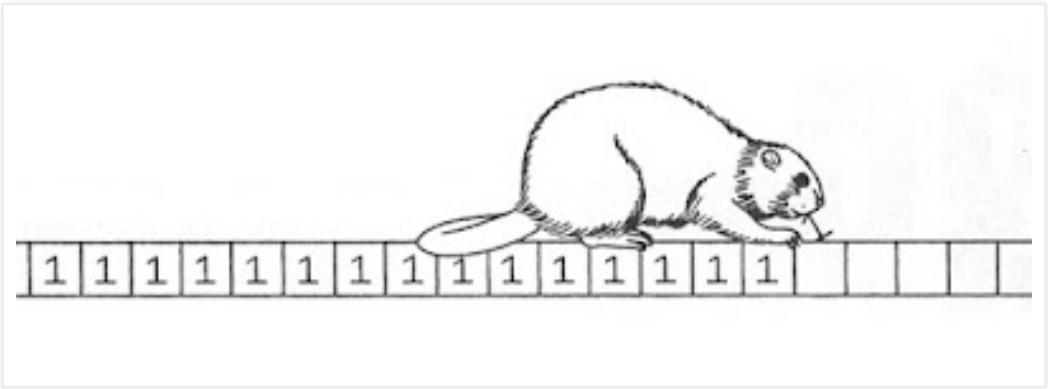
Increasingly, the ways that people spend their leisure time and consume art, design, and entertainment will be games - or experiences very much like games.

This is accurate-- but only insofar as games are considered in a broad sense (jazz, cinema, programming, *at least*). This cannot be stressed enough. What Zimmerman says in the last sentence, "or experiences very much like games", suggests that these experiences themselves *will not BE* games, and so long as this exclusive position is common, whatever "progress" is desired will be very very slow indeed. If we think that something is not a game, then it is *something else*, and thus is apparently immune to our critiques from the spirit of play. Worse: if we believe it is other than a game, than it is not meant to be played, and *we have made it immune to our own play*. This is a horrible mistake! *SPECTACLE*. A game is just a way of playing-- a game, to use a common game design term, is a LENS, and we can wear this lens all the time (but *softly*-- watch out...).

For these same reasons, we MUST NOT pretend that there is a strict dividing line between games and "linear media". A line is a space just as much as anything else-- that it is only 1-dimensional should not be of concern-- have we forgotten that it is possible to map a space of any number of dimensions onto the Real number continuum? That we can keep dividing a line for as long as we like, and we'll still have neglected to make contact with ANY of the irrational numbers? That the line itself is infinite?

Have we even forgotten, more relevant to our craft, that a piece of software is itself a *line of information* (though atomic, not continuous)? That all software structure is serial-sequential (linear), just as all software sequence is structural?

Here is a picture of some Turing tape, to illustrate this point:



We live in a world of systems.

The ways that we work and communicate, research and learn, socialize and romance, conduct our finances and communicate with our governments, are all intimately

intertwined with complex systems of information – in a way that could not have existed a few decades ago.
For such a systemic society, games make a natural fit. While every poem or every song is certainly a system, games are dynamic systems in a much more literal sense. From Poker to Pac-Man to Warcraft, games are machines of inputs and outputs that are inhabited, manipulated, and explored.

Systems theory will talk about *phase spaces*, and this has very much to do with the concept of a *possibility space*, to the point that the two concepts can be confused, at our loss. In a phase space, a system's degrees of freedom establish a graph's dimensionality, and the lines/planes/hyperplanes traced around the graph establish the "space of all possible system states", each representing a "point" of actuality, and this has the potential to be a *very useful* concept in games--

However, systems theory always looks on from "the outside", the objective/'publicly verifiable' position where a given state is merely one possibility among many, and where the flows from state to state can be reduced statistically to probabilistic relationships. Game theory proceeds in this way.

All of this is to say-- the *sense of possibility* itself is ignored. That which is fully *local* to the 'system' itself, *our own play*. Once we tune into this aspect, the system's connective flows blow open in all directions. Our own being has become connected to the system, and thus our memories join in, extending its information flows into the past, projected again into the future, the 'edge' of which ('gateway of the moment') houses the *sense of possibility*.

There are NO CLOSED SYSTEMS. When we *play*, it is to prove this thesis, to enter into *connections* with supposedly rigid spaces, to prove that we are real agents of causality, that, despite any quantitative reductions involved, we are not a gadget, we can enter in, let chaos flow, and create the world anew. That *we* will be the conduit for the openness of the system, the channel/medium for the causal effects the game has on the world

There is a need to be playful.

It is not enough to merely be a systems-literate person; to understand systems in an analytic sense. We also must learn to be playful in them. A playful system is a human system, a social system rife with contradictions and with possibility.

Being playful is the engine of innovation and creativity: as we play, we think about thinking and we learn to act in new ways. As a cultural form, games have a particularly direct connection with play.

Yes! The real question here, though --

The message that's sent from "it is not enough to be *merely* a systems-literate person" is that that systems literacy is one necessity among others. Is it really *necessary* to be a systems-literate person?

If this idea of 'consistent' and 'inconsistent' (male/female, structural/intuitive) creativities has some reality, need we really deem the *maleness* (structure) necessary at all? As it's written, it almost sounds as if consistency is a precondition of inconsistency-- as if Eve were born of Adam's rib (and not the other way around, as Badiou might be inclined to say). Especially at a time like now when there is a kind of *excessive consistency* at play in our medium-- is this something we want to actively foster? Might we instead just let creativity flow as it wants to flow?

Bret Victor is strong on this point-- so many technologist folks say artists should learn to code (for empowerment/systems literacy), but he rejects this idea. ARTISTS SHOULD NOT LEARN TO CODE (unless they desire it, of course!). Instead, fluid systems should be built for artists to PLAY.

Playing does not need to count quantities, only to *touch qualities*.

"YOU CAN MAKE VIDEOGAMES" -- but *should you*?

We should think like designers.

In the Ludic Century, we cannot have a passive relationship to the systems that we inhabit. We must learn to be designers, to recognize how and why systems are constructed, and to try to make them better.

It took several decades for automobiles to shift from being a hobbyist technology requiring expert knowledge to being a locked-in consumer product. The constant change of digital technology means that our hardware and software systems may never stabilize in this way. To fully engage with our world of systems, we must all think like designers.

More importantly-- *we should design like players.*

DESIGN is the most dangerous thing we're forced to deal with at the moment. It is the systemic process of COUNTING systems (following Badiou-->Bogost-->Harper), stripping them of the the entropic remainder of inconsistency (following Finny). There is absolutely nothing *necessary* about this process-- it is quite possible to play for a lifetime without explicit design (even though play has its own self-organizing tendencies), to achieve some beautiful things in this way..

Beautiful things happen in design, too, but I think only insofar as the design is *played*.

So much more austere *ugliness* comes from design than *beauty*. All that design requires is structure, and it is easy enough to satisfy that requirement, over and over, again and again, always structural, thus always successful-- but structure without play is just ugly bureaucracy.

Art (play) is fluid; design is fixed. Stuart Kauffman's theory of adjacent possibility sounds like some of Manuel DeLanda's work, too-- where all matter is conceived in its *states* -- i.e. solid, liquid, gaseous water -- and where it is at the phase transitions between states (the EDGE OF CHAOS) that the immanent Creativity of the world is actualized.

Design, then, is like ice, and art is like water-- and we have seen that, at the very least, it possible to simulate some very *watery things* on computers. Let's keep playing with the natural substances to learn more-- touching the surface of an ice cube, rubbing it a bit, pressing in heat-- gradual melts, it is possible to 'sculpt' in this way. And how long will our sculpture survive? Coming to terms with this flux is only the beginning.

Games are a literacy.

Systems, play, design: these are not just aspects of the Ludic Century, they are also elements of gaming literacy. Literacy is about creating and understanding meaning, which allows people to write (create) and read (understand).

New literacies, such as visual and technological literacy, have also been identified in recent decades. However, to be truly literate in the Ludic Century also requires gaming literacy. The rise of games in our culture is both cause and effect of gaming literacy in the Ludic Century.

Now we've melted a few buckets full of ice-- our sculptures didn't last long! But we have some other materials handy, too. There are some colorful powders-- we'll throw that in one bucket to make some paint; and we have some dirt-- we'll pour that in another. Keep mixing the dirt in, watch the consistency get thicker and thicker. Once it's fairly thick-- dunk in your hands, oatmeal texture! Get it all the way up your arms, now your shoulders are almost in, too. The buckets are quite large, it turns out, so now step into the paint bucket, all the way up to your neck -- the play is about to begin -- your friends are all in their buckets, too, with different colors, different dirt-consistencies-- a big room, probably the size of one of those Boeing hangars, we're all gathered in the middle of it, in our big buckets, and we're all trying to climb out-- they're so tall, it's a proper challenge! When you pull yourself up to the ledge, the weight goes off balance, the bucket spills over, and you fall out with it. All around the room, buckets spilling-- colors, dirt, materials everywhere. The buckets were so tall, you couldn't really see what the room was made of until now, but now you can look around, and there are slopes of all kinds surrounding you-- some have water sliding down them, some have ledges that make them climbable. There are good smells all around, too, which you didn't expect, you'd been smelling your dirt for so long! Fruit trees-- that's what the smells come

from. These are drippy, too, like slow liquids on a gravity slope-- the sun must be melting them! Look up, and yes, the sun is getting brighter, the fruits are turning into goo as you look, a whole pool of pulpy grapefruit juice, luckily you don't have any open wounds, so you don't think it will sting to slide down, hop in -- your friends are already there, someone was daring with their leap, so now you all know that the pulp is shallow enough not to be a drowning-danger, and you remember your coating with goo, and now you hear a shout: "you wouldn't believe it! the mixture of the dirt and the colors and the pulp all tastes really great!", and you look down at them, and are ready to hop in, but something strikes your fancy off to the left, you don't even know what yet, but it seemed curious, and so you turn around to follow it. Meanwhile the stars have come out overhead, the temperature is perfect-- you've forgotten what you were here for in the first place.

[HERMES SMOOTHIES]

Gaming literacy can address our problems.

The problems the world faces today requires the kinds of thinking that gaming literacy engenders. How does the price of gas in California affect the politics of the Middle East affect the Amazon ecosystem?These problems force us to understand how the parts of a system fit together to create a complex whole with emergent effects. They require playful, innovative, trans-disciplinary thinking in which systems can be analyzed, redesigned, and transformed into something new.

"Gamification" .. bleghh... :(... The word does have a nice ring to it, though...

As an alternative, how about a more *playful* means of surfing this zeitgeist: *soft gamification*.

Hard gamification (the Normal kind) takes an activity-situation or structure of some sort and *stratifies* it, supposedly making it supposedly more 'game-like', but really just more goal-directed, metric, capable of being evaluated in terms of optimum behaviors ("addressing our problems").

Soft gamification *solves no quantifiable problems;* instead, it *poses questions*. It merely takes an activity/situation, and ADDS DEGREES OF FREEDOM such that it is more malleable (more PLAYED, *more of a game*). An example of this would be listening to some music in iTunes, but instead of letting it play start to end, hopping around in the middle of the piece and finding zones that you enjoy surfing, and surfing those, and relating those zones to one another, until the 'line' of the song is experienced as a multi-dimensional intensive space (Cantor mapped N-dimensions onto a 1-D line, and you can too!).

Soft gamification can be done like this *with everything*. It is a means of *working with available materials*, and OPENING THEM UP, finding *more freedom* in them, and

finding *YOUR OWN goals/constraints within those freedoms*.

It can even be done in software. Here's a simple example in Processing code made with a rectangle object defined (topleft_x, topleft_y, bottomright_x, bottomright_y):

```
// rectangle object
rect(100, 100, 400, 400);

// rectangle object (soft-gamified)
rect(100, 100, mouseX, mouseY);
```

So simple! Just OPENING up a corner to movement. And this could be a *ground* of a theory of soft gamification, which is to say-- AFFORDING variable control to the player. "Affordance and attention" -- Richard Lemarchand spoke on this a couple years ago. Right on-- still a problem there to explore (and let's *explore* problems, not pretend to *solve* them).

At yoga up in Berkeley, they tell you to "make your face soft", and it really does feel better that way. Focusing on the breathing, breathing through *all of your pores* (your eyes and ears, too)...

In the Ludic Century, everyone will be a game designer.

Games alter the very nature of cultural consumption. Music is played by musicians, but most people are not musicians – they listen to music that someone else has made. Games, on the other hand, require active participation.

[Music is ALWAYS PLAYED. Even if you just hit "play" in iTunes, and your finger-contribution ends there, you keep listening, and there is a play-aspect to this to. Sometimes you walk into a club, and there's a music playing there. You can leave, you can move, you can listen. There are no exceptions to this rule of *music always playing*, just as there are no exceptions to the same claim about games. The task is to *keep playing*.]

Game design involves systems logic, social psychology, and culture hacking. To play a game deeply is to think more and more like a game designer – to tinker, retro-engineer, and modify a game in order to find new ways to play. As more people play more deeply in the Ludic Century, the lines will become increasingly blurred between game players and game designers.

Anyone can practice soft gamification at any time. This is to say: you can *play everything*. If the Ludic Century is going to be a real thing, it won't be defined by everyone being a game designer, but rather *everyone being a player*-- even designers.

Games are beautiful. They do not need to be justified.

This above all: games are not valuable because they can teach someone a skill or make the world a better place. Like other forms of cultural expression, games and play are important because they are beautiful.

[or rather-- because they are AFFECTING, more generally]

Appreciating the aesthetics of games – how dynamic interactive systems create beauty and meaning – is one of the delightful and daunting challenges we face in this dawning Ludic Century.

I agree!

David

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3. Talk of Magickians : Post-Human Empathy & Material Sympathies in Computational Alchemy

To return to the question of EMPATHY. This is a big topic-- commenters on Kotaku mention multiplayer games, single-player games with human issues, *Journey*, etc.

Obviously there's loads of interesting stuff to be done in this vein, but I believe limiting our idea of 'empathy' to be something happening between humans or between *representations* of humans is necessarily missing out on *a lot*, perhaps not even beginning to touch the empathetic *grain* of the medium as well as we might like it to..

It will be instructive to recall a piece of Chris Crawford's game theories--
his proposal that **all games are multiplayer**.

This is a concept which should be reinstated, as a computational pragmatics, and precisely because of the bizarre ontological consequence it entails-- which is to say that, to account for the structures of supposedly 'single-player' games like *Super Mario Bros.* (etc etc), *we must be open to admit every THING with causal influence on a game's outcome to be a player.*

More than "what is it like to be a thing?", I am interested in asking, playing-- "what is it like to affect and be affected by a thing?". To give ontological priority to *PLAYERS* rather than *OBJECTS.*

(though of course, the words mean exactly the same thing-- *SPACES, SUBSTANCES,* too-- they are all situations)

Super Mario Bros., then, is anything *but* 'single-player.' The game software object itself is another player-- in this sense the game is 2-player, between human player, and *line of information* (game object). The line, of course, is interpreted/read by further players which form the 'skin' of the game object (that is, audio-visual output & input haptics), which is the top-level unit player, and the *whole* of the surface that the human player has access to. But even the game object information itself is, following Bogost's unit ops, not to be counted as one, but rather as a *multiplicity* of players. Each Goomba is a player, Each block type, each 'floor feel' (honey, ice, grass, etc) is also a player. Each level is a player which is composed of these lower-level players and which forms a part of the higher-level game object (player) itself.

It is always *between players* that play happens. Play is always a *composition*, a *mixture*, an *assemblage* of players. And these players need not, by any means, be human.

Empathy, likewise, happens between players, and these players need not be human.

We would not look kindly on someone who called himself a humanist, loving of all his fellow men, if he was also murdering & skinning cats every night. There is a common-sensical understanding of empathy that extends far beyond something existing exclusively between humans. We might feel a nagging sympathy even upon crunching a spider, a more alien creature. Of course, these are all forms of LIFE still...

Is it possible to feel empathy in regard to a non-human player? Is there any sense in such empathy? or is it be merely illusory?

It cannot be illusory, because it is felt-- it is a *physiological fact*. Empathy is *in the belly*. The belly is connected at a distance to the spider, the cat, the game object-- *all players, all materials*. And, upon connecting the body with the world it is *in*, the process of computer game development begins to point toward the possibility of a new kind of computational *alchemy*.

The classical alchemy of history was ruled by a belief in the fundamental unity of the human soul with the order of the cosmos, and *all of its material actuality*. We can be satisfied even with the positivistic understanding of material-energetic continuity between the body and the world. The alchemical practice that was to become modern chemistry played a game ruled by the working hypothesis of *material sympathies*-- the belief that there is a real *affective* bond between compositions of chemicals (players, w/ *elective affinities*) and between chemical compositions and the alchemist herself (this is

the cat-belly play at a distance). The process of 'doing alchemy' was thus simultaneously working/playing on *matter-energy* and working/playing on the *soul*.

The relationship here entailed is simple-- that of *causal agents* (players) in an *activity-situation* (game) defined by a scaling multiplicity of players and their interrelations (affects, 'interactions'), wholes (*super mario bros*.) and parts (goomba, koopa). This looks like Alfred North Whitehead's *mereotopological* cosmology, which might be worth digging into (*Process and Reality*, difficult; *Modes of Thought,* friendly intro)-- at least to see where Bertrand Russel's teacher and *Principia* collaborator kept tunneling when BR & everyone else's faith seemed to turn to scientific-logical positivity.

Causality is the key-- this is what we are implicated in, *we transform the world*, and it is what the alchemists called *magic*. Aleister Crowley's *magick* formalizes this concept for moderns as the directed action of the Will onto the world. *Magick* is the more generalized *whole* of *musick*, the (ck) seems to mean: CKAUSALITY. *Play*. Timothy Morton recently wrote an OOO book on this (*Realist Magic*), and delivers the thesis that *the causal realm is the aesthetic realm*. The aesthetic realm is the realm of pre-conscious feeling-- of mutual affects, in and out. Nietzsche was right to critique all theories of aesthetics that approach the topic from the *viewer's* perspective-- aesthetics is only rightly approached from the perspective of *creation,* without which it cannot exist at all. And creation is IN ALL CASES *play between players*. Even 'single-player' art is-- *the artist and her materials*. Composition is the constitution of the unit player, or *playspace*, which serves as the "receptacle of becoming", the variable possibility space into which further play is delivered by way of its affective constraints and conditioning influences on play.

Play itself, in this sense of always existing as causal influence *between* players, is always magickal, musickal-- is always an immediate flow of causality, of localized flux, of *shifting possibility spaces*. Scientifically: play is *movement*, simple as that. The task is insane and unthinkable, but the "talk of magicians" is timely-- it would behoove us to begin feeling our way toward a new computational alchemy, surely unspeakable at first, which is guided by an affective sense of transforming (playing, moving) *quality* in *all materials* (ALL PLAYERS), & wholly *prior* to our structural understanding of them, even while taking into account structural quantities that can be accounted for (that which is consistent, rational, finite).

Pseudoscience will need to be embraced. But not others'-- *your own*. Here's how: reading pop science (and proper science when it's handy!), pretending we're scientists-- *playing with the available materials*. Without something pseudoscientific to embrace in the materiality of the world as it relates to ourselves, we in this tech-culture of quantities are too in danger of being seduced by so called "science" proper, which is forever incapable of integrating inner and outer experience, no matter how much else it may be capable of. A theory of play requires such an integration. Apologies for being to

be too rash, hasty or dramatic, but I believe it's possible that *a properly useful theory of play & videogames requires the composition of a 'Third Culture' as a dissolving agent/medium between the Two Cultures (of Science and Humanities)*, one which will naturally offend sciences and humanities both (offending the sciences by being pseudoscientific; offending the humanities by *dissolving all works of art* (objects, artists)).

The Hermetic tradition, source-stream of the alchemical practice, has throughout history served as just such a culture. It is a scientific practice insofar as it is concerned with the objective materiality of the world, but it is an inner practice insofar as it refuses to take the *finite-consistent-rational* logics (Positivism) as its ground. There is a dream in some formalists' sleep of a new science (more or less) of game design, but these folks unfortunately seem scared of the generative potentiality of the psuedosciences to stir up Chaos, and thus unthinkable order-- perhaps they have forgotten how often the emergence of the hard-positive sciences throughout history has been composed of more or less stratified *magickal* (causal) practices, just as the emergence of "music objects" (compositions) is always a stratification of *musickal* (improvisatory) practices.

Existing science should not be ignored. This would be to align too firmly with only one of the Two Cultures, and to miss out on so many beautiful ideas. But neither should it be taken on its own terms, which necessarily is built on the premises of what Whitehead called "the bifurcation of nature", the dualistic split between objective reality and personal experience. Science will provide new tools for magic, but it will most emphatically *NOT* provide instructions as to *how* we should use these tools-- *what to make*. *The causal burden is on us*. This is our alchemical *objective reality*. Here the practice of "material sympathies" must be admitted into our toolbox, whereby we develop an affective feel for the relations between ourselves and the materials, and between the materials in composition, amongst themselves. A Theory of Harmony, where empathy exists in shifting relations between scaling players, human and otherwise. As for an empathetic pragmatics-- we can begin this whenever/wherever, just by *listening*, and by *moving* from here.

...

Ending with an excerpt from Plato, whose *secrets* have been admired by the Hermetic tradition for ages. Here, a partial account of his too-often downplayed *musical* theory of justice, via harmony via motion-gymnastics (body-play, sports & games),

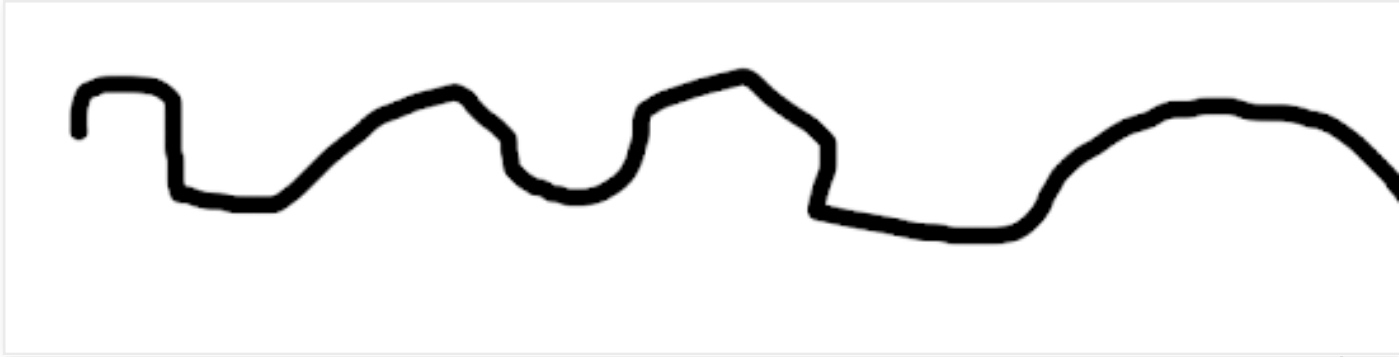
"The man who makes the finest of gymnastic with music and brings them to his soul in the most proper measure is the one of whom we would say most correctly that he is the most perfectly musical and harmonized ... "

... and the liquefying danger of *too much music* without enough gymnasticks (music needs games as much as games need music):

"When a man gives himself to music and lets the flute play and pour into his soul through his ears, as it were into a funnel-- using those sweet, soft, wailing harmonies we were just speaking of-- and spends his whole life humming and exulting in song, at first, whatever spiritedness he had, he softened like iron and made useful from having been useless and hard. But when he keeps at it without letting up and charms his spirit, he, as the next step, already begins to melt and liquefy his spirit, until he dissolves it completely and cuts out, as it were, the sinews from his soul and makes it 'a feeble warrior' [not enough gymnasticks!].

4. CODA: Invitation to Dark Play:

"Now, to state it briefly, the overseers of the city must cleave to this: there must be no innovation in gymnastic and music contrary to the established. They must beware of change to a strange form of music, taking it to be a danger to the whole. For never are the ways of music moved without the greatest political laws being moved-- as Damon says, and so I am persuaded."



P.S.

Ian Bogost mentioned that he had backed off of Badiou in *Alien Phenomenology*. This short excerpt, which concludes his critique in that book, is a relevant transition into further studies of played inconsistency / irrationality / infinity:

"In *Unit Operations*, I offer the count-as-one not as a model for or analogue to the unit operation but as a related idea. The point is this: things are not *merely* what they do, but things *do indeed do things*. And the *way things do* is worthy of philosophical consideration. Units are isolated entities trapped together inside other units, rubbing shoulders with one another uncomfortably while never overlapping. A unit is never an atom, but a set, a grouping of other units that act together as a system; the unit operation is always fractal."

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Reminder of Tom Lieber's *Infinite Sketchpad*--

Infinite Sketchpad (iPad)
Infinite Sketches Gallery

Probably the best software that has been released on the iPad, grandmas and luddites all seem to love it. Remarkable magical-*material* means of studying (IN PLAY) some classic *problems* of metaphysics-- of parts and wholes, continuity/discontinuity, movement/causality, etc-- all this, just visual-haptic, prior to the intervention of language. I have been working on an essay of what I've learned from *Infinite Sketchpad,* and I hope to post a draft soon.

Also see:

Infinite Doodle (David Johnston, PC/XBOX)
Doodal (Neil Thapen, Web)

Also see:

cosmicplay.net - (Karen Pohn's play cosmology)

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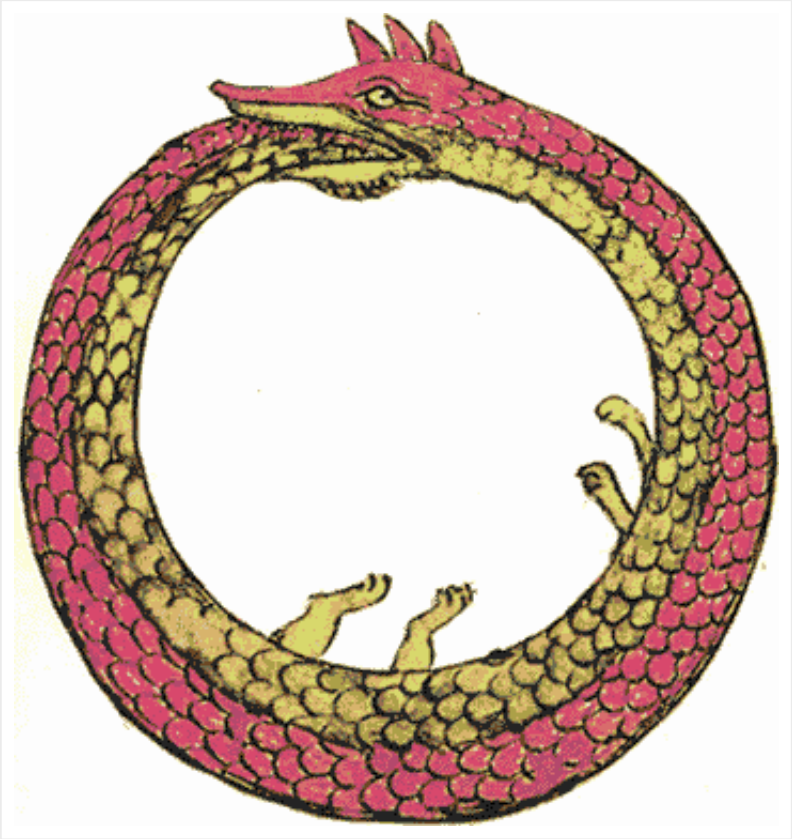
We will need to take that zoomed claim of Bogost's to heart, and to tunnel into this, to really develop the capacity for *zooming* in so many different ways.... And what do we know of Badiou's *event*? is it not fractal, too? I'm skipping ahead in the book, but:

"I term EVENT of the site X a multiple such that it is composed of, on the one hand, elements of the site, and on the other hand, itself"



Posted by David Kanaga at 12:48 PM

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