Play Material : Mod-Making , Unmaking and Cross-Over Mutations, Anne-Marie Schleiner

"WELL Hey! My name is Kevin Conner, and I play Quake2, Half-life and any good game out there. I am an artist of many mediums; oils, acrylic, watercolor, pen and ink and of course...QUAKE2SKINS!! Here on this page I shall have some links and some skins that I have made as well as an occasional sampling of my traditional art work...I'm sure you'll find my skins very unique... DOWNLOAD THEM! I'd love to see them on others while i am FRAGGING them ..eheh thank you and good night!"   -Intro to a skinner website, 1996   .

Kevin Conner is one of scores of "modders" in the late 1990's and early 2000's who entered 3-D

commercial action and shooter game engines and hacked, remixed, made and unmade game

character "skins", sounds, weapons, play environments and game architectures. Weapon

parameters were reconfigured in ways narrowly relevant to avid gamers. Funny inversions

substituted chickens for soldiers, wallpapered sinister tunnels in pink anime textures, channelling

players along treasure trails of cupcake-shaped power-ups. Artists modulated game world

algorithms like music, fracturing the smooth surfaces of representation with vertiginous swirls of

pixels echoing and reacting to the player's movements. In an early version of the R/C mod by

Spanish artist Retroyou, cars and other game world objects were released from the mimetic laws of

gravity, floating into virtual infinity. The play material of these mutations, both cultural codes and

traceable bits, crosses into the spheres of the commercial game industry, the art world, popular

culture and the common.

Figure 1. R/C mod by Retroyou

Modding in the Digital Sphere of Action?

In the previous chapter I described plural constellations of player-makers where ludic mutation, playful experimentation and variability, as exemplified in the atelic transmutations of digital Kiss dolls, unfold in a common virtual sphere of action approximating Hannah Arendt's liberating aesthetic action arena. Yet when one considers other vectors for *ludic mutation*, such as the remixing modifications, (hereafter referred to as "mods"), and artistic unmaking of violent mission-oriented commercial 3-D action games, a variety of material questions blur tidy divisions between weighted (necessary) and lighter (freer) spheres. Productive *making* with material is excluded from Arendt's aesthetic space of appearance of language and action. Furthermore let us recall her brief contention in the *Human Condition* regarding both art and play, that art in modernity, under the elevated reign of labour and productivity, had been consigned to irrelevance, subsumed with other "trivial hobbies" under play. Can we fantasize that a reincarnated Arendt would reconsider the exclusion of both art and play from the sphere of aesthetic political action, were she witness to play material's ethereal digital velocity through the public world wide web, in its open development and lightweight travels through the common and other spheres more akin to words or to popular tunes than modern artmaking? How does the ludic mutator, the hacker, the remixer, the artist, the "host" or the "parasite" play with, pass around and remake this *play material*? And when do the work efforts of Arendt's Animal-Laborious or the industrious designs of Homo Faber, transform common play material into commodity, subsuming play under the logic of Capital?

Play Material

For Arendt, the Greek division between poesis and praxis preserves the open-ended lightness of the polis, the logos infused free action realm of praxis, of public appearance, of storytelling, drama, epic tales, poetry and contests. Speech actions instigate chains of happenings, beginning processes that involucrate others in a public space of appearance free from the demands of necessity. By contrast,

poesis, "Homo Faber's" making of an art object like a sculpture, is heavy, slow and instrumental, implements the instrumental skills of techne, and only the initial conception phase, the spark of inspiration or brainstorm preceding the production of an art piece, is of comparable lightness and contingency. But unlike bronze or clay, play material, like speech, like song, remains relatively light and flexible throughout its existence and permutations. Travelling in the immaterial medium of the online digital, an ocean of zeros and ones, cultural units and real traceable bits, play material replicates and mutates through adjacent and unequal systems of reciprocity, shareware, and proprietism, gifted, stolen, replicated, sold and borrowed.

At one level of legibility the digital can be reduced to a sea of tiny interchangeable binary bits sharing one protocol, a formless atomic malleable arche, and thus its network velocity. But play material, units of culture at multiple scales of legibility and grasp-ability, visibility and audibility, is not a passive inert blank substrate awaiting imprint or design. Ian Bogost refers to modular, configurable and discrete units of digital-cultural data as "unit operations" that are "characteristically succinct, discrete, referential and dynamic."(4) Like Bogosts' unit operations, play material exhibits and invites processes and behaviours that nevertheless do not predetermine the overall (global) character of the system within which they move. In favour of local movements over systematic behaviour, Bogost writes" The shift from genes as holistic regulatory systems to genes as functional actors in a larger intergenetic play marks a move away from system operations and toward unit operations."(4)

Play material contains pre-existing data that reaches out to other data and actors. Like language, like stories, like poetry, like advertising slogans, images and stereotypes, play material is pre-loaded with traces of its human and non-human history, persistent contagious cultural patterns, the ticklish hum of forgotten nuances and mythologies, and digital noise acquired in passing. And like the material of Mireille Rosello's verbal and visual stereotypes, units of play material replicate by iteration: "Because of their strong iterative force, they travel from mouth to mouth, text to text, from

discipline to discipline without losing much of their original shape and strength.."(35) Similarily, while replicating across player, artist and game industry spheres, play material may transmit a persistent gendered or ethnic stereotype along with other cultural bits. Yet play material is not necessarily destined to be locked into the repeated print-block combinations of words and images of the stereotype's etymological origin. While later offering a theory of stereotype "recycling" in *Declining the Stereotype* , Rosello intitially charactarizes the stereotype as an unchanging unit, "Like a block of cast iron, they form a whole that cannot be dissolved and whose main purpose is to be repeated endlessly."(23) Play material on the other hand attracts further playful "ab-use" by ludic mutators, abuse understood, following Michel Serres ' usage in the *Parasite*, as creative aberrations from preceding use, ludic mutation of the copies of copies.(80) Serres writes, "Everything passes through his hands, because, more or less, everything is transformed in his hands. The exchanger is also a transformer."(43)   When play material is played in the hands of a ludic mutator, a dialogue ensues between the player and the material's embedded play history.

Mutation.fem: A Cross-over Tale

Let us leave a suggestive description of play material to initiate the telling of a cross-over mutation that will unravel at various turns in this chapter. Although perhaps disdained as a minor sequence of mimetic substitutions by those of a nuts and bolts school of game studies, Mutation.fem is a tale of the cross-over mutability of play material between game industry and player spheres, and between game character genders and player genders. Mutation.fem is accessible as a small website I made for the Alien Intelligence exhibit at the then newly constructed Kiasma Museum in Helsinki, Finland in 1999.   On the website I traced male to female game character transformations over several iterations, beginning in a genre of once exclusively male character and male player populated shooter games.   The website chronicles largely male player's insertions of female fighters into early customizable action games like Loren Petrich's restrained "Female Bob" patch and J. Coffey's buxom bare-breasted "Amazon Fighters" for Bungie's Marathon (1994). Inside of multiplayer

Quake(1996), players pasted two dimensional feminine skins onto the bulky three-dimensional male figures already included within the game, resulting in mighty feminine characters who "fragged" each other over live "deathmatches" of up to sixteen players. Not seeing fit to copy this Frag Queen play material faithfully in the subsequent release of sequel Quake 2, Texan game developer Id software added the possibility of playing more normalized feminine characters, some of the first female game characters to appear pre-packaged in the shooter genre.

Quake 1's *Frag Queens* remain an interrupted evolution, an embarrassment for the emerging game industry, offspring of a friction between player desire and game design limitations. (At least Id Software's more standard Quake 2's fighter women sported visible musculature, contrasting to the magical strength of Lara Croft's sticklike arms in the contemporous release of British Core Design's action game Tombraider.) Id Software's key developers, John Carmack and John Romero, who not long before were college dropouts and avid game fans themselves, should be recognized for their pivotal role as early facilitators of game modding. In 1993 Id software released the Doom game engine code freely on the Internet, passing their game code to the ludic mutators who wrote the first editors to create early game mods, then referred to as "wads". The sharing of the code of Doom over the Internet contributed significantly to the development of game modding and towards establishing a common milieu for the mutation of online digital play material.

Figure 2: Quake 1 Frag Queens and Quake 2 PMS clan custom skins

Common Play Material and Poesis

In this chapter I am considering ludic mutation in relation to *remaking*, from the perspective of the ludic mutator or game artist who makes, unmakes and passes material on for further transformation. Material making has a long history of consideration but seldom are aesthetic theorists, who tend to observe making from the contemplative distance of the critic and arbiter of taste, sensitive to the position of the artist or ludic mutator. To invoke a modernist mediatic view of creation, (with undertones of Genesis), a portrait of the artist still persistent in art schools and in the art world, an artist has a relation to her material or medium, whether the material is clay, paint, video, ideas, language, people, games, or public space. The possessive pronoun attached to material, if used, does not indicate ownership of the material, which is common, but ownership of the artist's play relation to the material. The artist starts to own this relationship through iteration of making and identification with a role that solidifies into a specialized professional career or craft. On the other hand if the relationship to the material in addition to the material in itself is commonly shared, the artist might not know that she is an artist. For instance, before the advent of the professional popular music industry almost anyone, regardless of whether they considered themself a musician, had some idea of how to sing and had sung before. Unlike Kevin Conner whose website of self-labelled artistic game character "skins" is cited at the beginning of this chapter, many ludic mutators are unaware that they are ludic mutators. Modders might consider themselves personal customizers of games, or see themselves as amateur level designers.

Regardless of how the ludic mutator perceives themself, the medium of the ludic mutator, play material, is what is available in the common domain of online downloadable and modifiable games, videos and software. Thus, unlike Martin Heidegger's artistic "bringing forth" and revealing to the light from dark oblivion through creative poesis, (ex-nihilo creation), play material is already available in the light where it is further modulated and modified, reshaped and restructured, remixed to a minor or major extent. A poet plays with words; a musician plays with sound, melody,

noise, rhythm, pauses and refrains. A rapper masters the velocity and range of the poetic voice in the agonistic public space of the street. In modernity and post-modernity the creators' proprietary relation to material comes into prominence as "style", science or techne, relations themselves that also enter the common as play material for ludic mutation, the mutation of processes, approaches and techniques.

Ludic mutation follows in the wake of richly diverse creative remixing movements such as as hip hop music sampling, Reggae Dub, Beatnick poetry cut-ups, Dadaist collages, Situationist detournement, and the found objects of Marcel Duchamp. In Utopian Plagarism, a 1994 online and print manifesto for artistic recombinant approaches , Critical Art Ensemble contends that "This is the age of the recombinant, recombinant bodies, recombinant gender, recombinant text , recombinant culture." Creativity unravels in dialogue with the parameters, patterns and things of the common world and with stolen or borrowed material from the proprietary world. Roland Barthes "tissue of quotations", revealed as the source of any writing that is in some sense an act of plagiarism of the words and ideas of others, is approached by ludic mutators as a shameless source for the recycling of found play material.(142) Net artist Mark Amerika , promoter of "remix culture", describes the methodology of "the new tradition" of literary remixology as "breaking down its [literature's]material components into a potentially rich heap of source material that they can then re-embody in whatever formal experiment feels natural to them at any given time in history-- Think of it as compostproduction.." Play material is found in unexpected places. Composer John Cage's score from 1952, 4 minutes 33 seconds (of silence) plays audio scores of traffic and bird songs in the minds of any trained listener, a composition of the given environmental audio material of the moment .

A commonly available digital online resource of play material can be likened to Paulo Virno's multiple "virtuoso scores." Virno's scores are performed in a political action arena shaped by Arendt's space of appearance . Following a line of thought at some junctures resonant with my

readings of Arendt, Virno proposes an alliance between "Action" and "Intellect", where a "coalition between Intellect and Action is counterposed to the coalition between Intellect and Work." (190) (I will return to what Virno means by Work later in this chapter.) In contradistinction to Arendt's solitary Intellect of the contemplative philosopher's tradition, Virno suggest that General Intellect, derived from Marx's notion of science and knowledge embodied in machines, should be elaborated expansively from Marx to "a faculty that makes possible all composition". Although Virno shys from specific examples of virtuoso performances , the General Intellect, when not "inhibited and distorted" by "Work", takes as its starting point a common participation in the "life of mind". We can interpret such a radical postulation of General Intellect as a non-state sphere of commonly shared play material, knowledge, words, images, ideas, software codes, videos, algorithms, and games such as are to be found freely available on the Internet. In the series of written lectures recorded in the Porcelain Workshop Antoni Negri , a contemporary of Virno's milieu of Italian "autonomists", champions wide-spread subjective rights to the common, beckoning the unruly multitude of singular beings who appear in earlier writings in Empire and Multitude to exercise their rights to a commonly shared and created domain. He writes "The multitude is a collection of singularities, and if the common is the ever-changing, ever-mobile, ever-renewed product of these singularities, then subjective rights henceforth imply the right to the shared informing of the processes that construct the common, and are the acknowledgement of the role of singularities within these processes." (*The Porcelain Workshop* 112)

But play material does not necessarily remain in the common as pure gifts for the multitude like the online digital KiSS Dolls of chapter one or free open source software. Like the unencumbered transformations of digital doll identities, Virno's coalition between General Intellect and Action can only take place in a condition of "Exodus", an escape and complete disengagement from Work, from capitalist labour. Whereas play material for modding is pilfered and absorbed from adjacent non-equivalent commercial spheres, and these relations may be characterized, following Michel Serres in

the Parasite, as impure exchanges between hosts and parasites, between the awe inspiring edifices of the wealthy, that is highly produced commercial games with detailed worlds, characters and effects, and invited and uninvited guests, the players and amateur modders bearing gifts (or bombs) from the common. Even as hosting game companies rob their invited paying "guests" of their customized creations, their personalized interventions in the game, proprietary play material is released back again into the common, both illegally through data piracy and legally through freely distributed game code and editors bundled with the games as added purchase incentive. Criticizing the techno-utopian tendencies of "digital potluck" exchange in the writing of Richard Barbook, Teziana Terranova would most likely consign modding to immaterial "free labour" that while unpaid, still services the operations of capitalism. Of free labour she writes "Such means of production need to be cultivated by encouraging the worker to participate in a culture of exchange, whose flows are mainly kept within the company but also need to evolve an 'outside' , a contact with the fast-moving world of knowledge in general. (79) Modding transpires over an impure mixed ecology of mercenatalism , gifting and appropriation, passing material over the crossroads of proprietary and common digital culture, yet I would hesitate to dismiss modding entirely as unpaid subservience to the game industry.

To return to our earlier mutation chain, at another iteration along Mutation.fem, female gamer "clans" like P.M.S. (Psycho Men Slayers) and Vicious Vixens, groups of six to fifteen players who wage battle together, engrave custom tattooed clan logos onto the smalls of the backs of the game's new ladylike characters in Quake 2. Play material has passed into the hands of this new set of geographically dispersed ludic mutators who share their profiles and modifications on the Quake Women's Forum website. Bored Australian housewives and mothers, Canadian female IT professionals gaming on the clock, playing with material consumed from the commercial host, who had previously evolved the material from a different earlier set, the Quake 1 male Frag Queen players. Thus despite differences between "hosts and parasites" or producers and players, modding

allows for more direct influence and material modulation of the products of popular culture than was feasible for Henry Jenkins' "textual poachers", the active often female fans of television series who distributed Xerox copies of fanzines, including homoerotic tales of Captain Kirk and Spock, such as a bisexual series by Gayle Feyrer entitled the Cosmic Fuck .(186) The limited means of production and pre-Web distribution scope of television textual poachers are disproportionately modest in comparison to the powerful reach of the 1980's broadcast television episodes from whom Jenkins' early ludic mutators pilfered their play material. According to Jenkins, "most commonly the zines are photocopied anthologies of short stories, poems and artwork centring on one or more media universes and written by multiple authors." (157) Rather than "scribbling on the margins", modders materially modify the internal digital components of games and share these modifications with other players on the Internet where the material became both visible in the common and to an industry at least intermittently responsive to the proclivities of its customers, such as a player inclination to play female characters. Changes are instigated through active material interventions and overlapping and conflicting modes of reciprocity comingle as play material crosses spheres in iterative permutations.
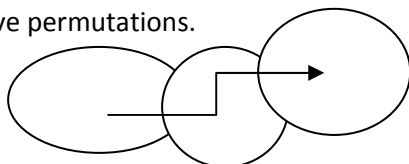

Figure 3: Diagram of multiple spheres

Intention and Contingency of Making

The modder dispenses with a variety of approaches and tactics to ludic mutation, such as an opportunistic openness towards glitches and accidents. Play material is any aspect of the world that can be modified or transformed, borrowed, customized or hacked. A player decides to project something of herself into the game. She photographs herself digitally and stretches the image horizontally, intending to wrap it around the head of a pre-existing 3-D game character. Accidently, due to a given design parameter, instead of wrapping naturalistically, it smears. She decides to exaggerate this unintentional plastic effect, stretching ears and nose across mid-torso. Other players

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ridicule her or mimic her, asking her to share "her" technique that resulted from an open encounter with the game world, with the boundaries of the game.   Inspired by a stranger wearing a chair as a hat, a player downloads a free script for attaching objects to himself. He wanders about the Second Life 3-D virtual social environment wearing a vertical car shape, clumsily negotiating the narrowness of doorways , colliding with people in small rooms and disrupting conversations. His willed acts are interrupted by unexpected obstructions, glitches and noise, diverting the projected results of his interventions. As the player transforms his character, he bumps into the limits and peculiarities of the virtual world, modifying the modifications of others, and modifying codes he need not entirely comprehend to unplanned effect.

Creative Rule Breaking

Creative cheaters are among those modders of play material who may not realize that they are artists. Cheats, creative or mundane, are contagious and despite the indignant, ethical gamer's disdain for cheaters as rule breakers and spoil sports, the line between a successful tactic and a cheat is negotiable. Avid gamers who write start-up scripts for binding customized mouse buttons and keyboard buttons to actions in the game world for optimum speed and efficiency are seldom regarded as cheaters. Cheaters apply camouflaging wall and floor textures to game character bodies to hide from other players and blend into the game world habitat. Like tax lawyers and troublemaker school children, such players are more attentive to rules and world limits than non-cheaters. Cheaters comb the parameters of the world for advantageous loopholes, for a wall collision glitch that mistakenly opens onto locked areas. Cheaters download cheat codes to evaporate gravity, to convert walls to transparent wireframes, and to highlight their enemies in red halos. When limits on behavior, that is game rules, coincide with the limits of virtual game space, an effective convergence of game world and rules noted by Jesper Juul, cheaters modify the rules through modification of the game world. (163)

Artistic Unmakes

Artists have remade game worlds to the extent that the original game is no longer recognizable, no longer playable as a game. In the a series of Unreal Mods at Synworld: hyperspace, an early art exhibit of game art at Public Netbase in Vienna Museumsquartier in 1999, Austrian artists divested the Unreal game engine of its reputed photorealistic effects, hurtling the player down a well surrounded by semi-transparent walls textured in green text. The Australian website Selekt Parks displays an archive of artist made game modifications that have been exhibited in varied international art venues, galleries, museums, festivals and online, ranging from political activist interventions to aesthetic remakes. In the late 1990's Jodi, an artist duo consisting of Dutch Joan Heemskerk and Belgian Dirk Paesmans, assaulted shooter game engines with the same destructive playfulness that marked their hackerish approach to HTML net art a few years earlier. In "Untitled Game", a series of nine remakes of the Quake engine, Jodi eliminate representational properties from the game world, flattening the textured surfaces of the original game's space station to shadowless black and white walls. Standard keyboard controls for jumping and shooting initate delayed rains of pixel bullets and spinning vertigo. Like electronic VJ(Video Jockey) musicians who lose themselves in the flow of modulating lively algorithms, frequencies and loops, Joan of Jodi, spent hours tweaking and recompiling software code, amplifying movement and navigation controls, transforming bullets into delayed staccato sprays of white pixels, and rendering invisible the monsters who shuffle and attack ineffectively in the player's periphery. In a conversation with Joan and Dirk in Barcelona in the fall of 1999, they indicated an empathy in approach with the then lively VJ scene of audio-video modulations in Europe. A short description of Jodi's Unitled Game on Selekt Parks online archive of game art mods states: *"Quake* 1 mods, "untitled-game" mutates the semiotics of navigational perception, abstracting original game ontology, controls for mobility, enemy identification, narrative cognition; reward systems, landscape and gravity are reduced to symbolic fragments."

Paidia

Towards the end of *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* media theorist, artist and programmer Alex Galloway charges game modification artists with marginal impact on game culture at large, faulting the unplayability of "broken" artist-modified games. "By radical action, I mean critique of gameplay itself. Visual imagery is not what makes video game special...counter-gaming is an unrealized project." (125-126) Game Mod artists, according to Galloway, only unmake games, break games, or modify surface appearances, without changing the fundamental algorithms of play. Galloway characterizes Jodi's Unititled Game as ignoring "all possibility of gameplay" and propelling "the game into fits of abstract modernism."

Galloway implicates artistic modding with an incompatibility with the logic of play, what he seems to take for granted as constructive programmed steps leading towards a goal, a mission. Game designer Chris Batemans' blog entry entitled the Anarchy of Paidia, on the other hand, reflects on rules and their counterpart, disorder, offering a more expansive notion of play influenced by sociologist Roger Callois' 1958 *Man, Play and Games*. According to Callois, play vacilates between order and chaos (paidia), "from somersaults to scribbling, from squabble to uproar, perfectly clear illustrations are not lacking of the comparable symptoms of movements, colors, noises." (28) Such colourful, kaleidoscopic descriptions recall the gyrations of Jodi's Untitled Game mods. Children (and animals) play in an unstructured, undirected mode of paidia with toys or other found objects such as appropriated toys, tree branches, and cardboard boxes. Paidia can coalesce into an ordered goal-oriented game, only to disintegrate again into chaos. For Callois, paidia is creative variability, its direction, aims, goals and material unset at the beginning of play. Even if an objective is formed, the play of paidia is unintegrated into a larger systemic whole constrained by competitive or goal-bound rules. Artists, game modders and cheaters, while modifying play material, breaking and unmaking, have been playing all along.

Unmaking as Shooter Game Critique

To entirely ascribe the unmaking of a game to the joy of paidia neglects another dimension of these art practices. Virtual game worlds have solidified into genres whose violent play is narrowly replicated in release after release in the game industry, in the case of the shooter and action genres, the genres mostly closely associated with modding. In the FPS (First Person Shooter) players engage in agonistic violent combat alone in the world against artificial non-player monsters(NPC's) in single-player games like the original Doom or on teams against each other in multiplayer matches. These agonistic conflicts are laden with the binary logic of exclusionary fraternity, solidarity and teamwork against a common enemy. In *the Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida describes the non-familial brotherhood of friendship and politics as an adaptation of fraternal relations that at best neutralizes women, turning them into subservient sisters but at worst effects total exclusion or invisibility, a "fratriachy may *include* cousins and sisters but as we will see, including may also come to mean neutralizing."(viii)

Such brotherly erasure occurs at a later turn of Mutation.fem. The transformation of science fiction game world themes to more contemporary middle-eastern environs at the advent of the "War on Terror" in the early 2000's was accompanied by small but key shifts in conflictual play strategy as well, (the development of more specialized teamwork play strategies against an enemy). Players learn the movements of armed combat with potential theoretical traction in real life combat situations. In the once popular maps of America's Army, a freely available recruitment and propoganda game developed by the United States Army , the player, no matter which of the two sides he chooses, is always on a team of American soldiers playing against terrorists. At this juncture the strain of mutation.fem fades out from multiplayer shooter games as female soldiers like the clans of science fiction Quake 2, are erased from the more "real world" battle scene, despite what we know of women soldiers and medics in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Abstract artistic mods on the other hand, like Alone's Quake 3 mod, Retroyou's R/C and Jodi's

Untitled Game series remove all traces of any such representation, eradicating the means for the

player to project themselves mimetically into the world, erasing the slate, begging the question of

what else might be projected into virtual game worlds by the omission of the expected content.

Untitled Game simultaneously exaggerates and exposes the violent algorithms of the genre,

multiplying bullet sprays, amplifying the grunts of monsters, modulating the game system at key

operational nodes. Only when the game is broken, do the interlocking operations of Heideggerian

"in order to relations" come to light that were previously taken for granted when the play machine

was running more smoothly. The player of Untitled Game becomes aware of the act of shooting

when he can no longer easily visualize his target. As Heidegger writes, "unhandy things are

disturbing and make evident the obstinacy of what is initially to be taken care of before anything

else." (104) Once the player can no longer smoothly handle his weapons, the algorithms of play are

stripped bald.

Constructive Play Material

Ludic mutation is not only destructive hacking, cheating, accidents, ruptures, modulation and

unmaking but also creative rebuilding, remaking. The pole of order-chaos in paidia, oscillating

between the rules and their chaotic counter-part, misses the positive constructiveness of a trend in

the game industry labelled "sandbox style" game play. In the casual game "World of Goo", game

play consists of piecing together precarious bridges consisting of modular gooey cells to transport

goo creatures. Each unit of goo has lively behaviours of stickiness, gooiness and weightiness

associated with it than when combined with other goo units react in "emergent" and unpredictable

ways. Unlike disorderly paidia, the toylike construction of sandbox play is subject to rules, such as

the overarching aim to build bridges over cliffs to transport creatures in World of Goo. At a more

local level, generative rules or lively "behaviours" are attached to smaller units of play material.

When these units are combined, they produce unexpected emergent effects.   This modularity, the

breaking apart into discrete pieces that can be reassembled differently, is also present in modifiable

computer games analysed thus far. Game modders and game hackers take apart and reconfigure

games in ways unplanned by the designers, although there maybe be greater effort expended in

breaking the game open. Open-ended sandbox games like Grand Theft Auto, and Second Life allow

variable player actions and explorations. Second Life offers the player object making tools, modular

"primes" short for the primitive objects typically used as a base to build up more complex shapes in

3-D programs. The player herself becomes a deity in the genre known as god games, games of

controlled construction and management. The creative artistic impulse here is closely tied to

mastery over a world and the desire to explore a dynamic system, a world of small lively units and

creatures, such as the doll-like world of Sims people designed by prolific god game designer Will

Wright. Or the construction of battle forts populated by tiny extra-terrestrial minions in Blizzard's

Starcraft.

Optimized play work

Die Ahnlichkeit liegt darin, dass alle Arbeiten nach den Regeln des Raum- und Zeitstudiums
optimierbar sind. Arbeit hat demzufolge nichts mit "Geist" versus Korper zu tun, sondern lediglich
mit Bewegungspatterns und Timingsfragen.

The similarity (between games and work) lies in that all work can be optimized following the rules of
space and time studies. Work therefore does not have to do with Soul vs. Body, but rather with
motion patterns and timing questions. (My translation from Claus Pias' chapter Arbeitswissinschaft)

Contrasting to the open-endedness of paidia and the emergent contingency of the sandbox, in a

2004 lecture at the "Game as an Interactive Strategy" conference in Bilbao, Spain, Claus Pias

presented a more rote depiction of play in the single person action game. Pias draws parallels

between the repetitive motions of game play and 1920's motion studies of workers such as those

conducted by Taylor's student Frank B. Gilberth .(33) Looping through the same oft-repeated

movement sequences, a player traces predesigned steps to defeat enemies and obstacles in an

action game, racing against time through each challenge along the way as if she were a worker

performing an efficiency test. Pias' vision of controlled play under the timed vigilance of the program can be extended into considerations of space and virtual game architecture. The player's movements through the virtual world are confined to predetermined routes set by the level designers, paths that lead the player repeatedly along preset spatial trajectories through the game world that only approximate a maze because the ever-vigilant program seldom allows the player to be truly lost. In Battlefield 1942(2002), a death threat message flashes on the screen addressed to deserters , warning the player who drifts too far away from the combat zone. In Left for Dead 2(2009) campaigns, ever vigilant artificial intelligence will always automatically generate zombies behind the back of the players when their health levels are too comfortably high.

Electronic Arts's Mirror's Edge(2009), a single player action game set above towering skyscrapers, is an action game featuring optimized programmed play and preset lines of player movement. The player controls an avatar named Faith, a lithe young East Asian woman, descendent of the action heroines of Mutation.fem, who is tasked with delivering underground messages over a sequence of missions. Bright red paint on doors, pipes and game world objects highlight one optimum path for running and jumping over rooftops, at least initially precluding the impulse for self-directed exploration of the game city. Always rushing to complete the mission while avoiding attackers and a vertiginous death, the player is possessed of an urgency that discourages exploration and deviation from the indicated route, invoking the appeal of Bartle's psychological player archetype "the Achiever" over that of "the Explorer". (The Bartle Test of Gamer Psychology, Gamer DNA is available as an online survey that results in a profile consisting of Bartle player types.) Roger Callois divided play into four prime characteristics: agon (completion), alea(chance), mimicry (roleplaying) and ilinx(vertigo). Mirror's Edge, while dynamic, dizzying, and imbued with Callois' fourth prime play quality of ilinx, ("whirling, walzing,..tight rope walking"), habituates young players to the rote efficiency of completing directed tasks, a modality (and a pleasure) transposable from play to work.(36)

Who is the parasite?

A three dimensional American, European or Asian commercial game is the synchronized product of the 24/7 labour of a team of lead and follower game designers, a coterie of producers and art directors, a branch of programmers and artificial intelligence specialists and minions of 3-D modelers and animators, pressured by deadlines from a board of game publishers and public relations publicists or internal Japanese managers. (The one person programmer/game designer of the 1980's resurfaces only as an impoverished casual independent game designer.) Upon public release of the game, players, consumers, potential modifiers, enter the "cathedral " of the game in awe, mouths agape, reverently feasting on layers of special effects, fog and chiaroscuro vistas, fluidly responsive character movements, vastly intricate and complex variable statistics , upgrades and levels. A player setting out to modify a game might initially be intimidated by the host company's accomplishments, secretly working alone late at night, testing out his level on a small group of geeky friends. The modder inhabits the host game system like a parasite, an interloper, breaking and prodding the game at key junctures, erasing files to see what effect their lack produces, changing parameters at to discover and isolate their operations. Canadian modder Gooseman's developed Counter-Strike(1999) while in college with a small group of local and long distance game friends who volunteered their efforts in constructing a mod with a combat style simulating more contemporary modes of teamwork conflict and with maps of contemporary war zones. Upon release, Counter-Strike captured the interest of world-wide majority of mostly male team shooter players and continues to be played worldwide. Counter-strike is a rare mod whose popularity eclipsed the original game of Half Life, and also is a rare instance of the hosting game company, Sierra Online, sharing some financial proceeds of the mod with the modder. More often the host keeps the parasites within the legal bounds of the user agreement which stipulates that no commercial gain is to be made by players for their creative modifications. The host(the game developer) parasites the

parasite(the modder), stealing and modifying what was made with the skeleton of another

commercial host during long, sleepless , afterschool nights of unpaid labour.

"Each one found his or her own way to penetrate the secret of those blackened white pages. The little chimney-sweep and showman, Claude Genoux, found a fragment of paper on the ground and had it deciphered by a passing schoolboy..."(51)

Like the self-motivated 19th century labourers Jacques Ranciere describes in *the Nights of Labour*,

who spent their late night off work time teaching themselves to read and write, modders comb

internet forums and downloads seaching for the heuristic tricks and secrets of modding. Upon

successful reception of a mod, the modder basks in the glow of success, flattered by the mimicry of

the game designer, honour seems sufficient reward for giving, for giving back what was stolen, what

was once borrowed and modified from someone else. Unravelling this chain of borrowed, thieved,

received and given play material back to pre-computer game history, we enter a more unilaterally

common play domain, when games and play material, like folk songs, were not commercially

owned property but were passed on through avenues of culture, school playgrounds, the ball courts

of Aztec and Mayan empires, Egyptian queens of backgammon, Chinese military strategists, bored

drunken sailors, and Go playing courtesans, the names of these great game designers, players and

makers lost to history.

Returning to the present we observe clear distinctions between hosts and parasites of play material.

Parasites could be anyone with the means to acquire a pirated copy of a game on an illegal Third or

Second World street market of pirated software, Hollywood movies and games. Hosts, every

weekend subject to the exploitation of grueling deadlines and mandatory late night overtime pizza,

imbue their games with pervasively fraternal militarist American European Japanese or Korean

algorithms and mythologies. Wives of men who work at the global, California originating Electronic

Arts Game Developer formed a support group of "EA Widows" to cope with the absence of their

men every weekend and weeknight. Caught up in an immunological response to a historical

moment haunted by ancient conflicts, how many games since the September 11 attacks on the

United States has the Western host produced, that repeatedly simulate a conflict between

upstanding American soldiers and shady middle-eastern terrorists, as if in 2000 the Counter-Strike

mod was a premonition of the future of PC(personal computer) gaming?

Conversely the parasite infects the host , boys and men play female characters inserting and hacking

their own crude "Roberta's" and "Amazons" into the game, eventually infecting commercial action

games with female heroines who later attract live human female players and female ludic mutators.

Exchange is impure, an uneven jungle of propriety hosts and nested gifting parasites, and of

parasitic hosts and robbing horny parasites. Unabsorbed by the gesture of capitalism that

appropriates subversion, a play practice remains as an excess, a forgotten or troublesome gift from

the perspective of the host, unexploited by commercial interests who ignore the variable queerness

of KiSS dolls. Michel de Certeau writes, "The loss that was voluntary in the gift economy is

transformed into a transgression in a profit economy: it appears an excess(a waste), a challenge (a

rejection of profit), or a crime (an attack on property). (27)The host, in the grip of an impulse to

channel ludic eroticism into a heterosexual norm, following North American, European or Japanese

industrial standards, and subject to pressure from his game publisher to release yet another sellable

sequence of action-packed missions, misses opportunities to steal from parasites, the ludic

mutators and frag queens.

Pressing Material Concerns Enter into Play

"To labour meant to be enslaved by necessity, and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions
of human life." (Arendt, *The Human Condition* 84)
 "Serious" educational games, quite unabashedly if we speak of military sponsored games like

Americas Army that train for the manoeuvres of soldiering, also serve material economic and

vocational interests outside and "para" to the enchanted circle of play, the fence between the sports

green and the rest of the city, the playground and the school. According to Johan Huizinga "as a

sacred activity, play naturally contributes to the well-being of the group, but in quite another way

and by other means than the acquisition of the necessities of life."(9)Yet tendrils of necessity breach

the separateness of the magic circle of play, Huizinga's "consecrated spot"and also enter into

Arendt's aesthetic sphere of action. Returning to the articulations of active work set forth by Arendt

in *the Human Condition*, we observe kittens pouncing on plastic toys before they kill their first

mouse, animal mimesis training for future the hunting labour of animal laborious, Arendt's shared

human and animal category of survival and upkeep labour. The level designers of artificial game

worlds are the architectural descendents of Homo Faber, Arendt's man the maker, as they erect

artificial worlds to shield from nature, from dirty biological processes of decay and overgrowth.

Saved on internet servers, these durable, clean play worlds of persistent online games persevere at

least a while longer than the planned obsolesce of individual consumer's computer hardware, the

piles of toxic parts accumulating in junk yards. Confronting Arendt at the initial peak of the

information revolution from a post-Marxist orientation, Paolo Virno dissolves Arendt's Labour and

Homo Faber into one category of "Work", a category that additionally absorbs qualities from

Arendt's action sphere so as to account for immaterial labour: "In the post-Fordist era, we have

Work taking on many of the attributes of Action: unforseeability, the ability to begin something new,

linguistic "performances" and the ability to range among alternative possibilities."(Virno 191) Virno's

"Work", when in coalition with General Intellect, "performs" servile actions in the interest of Work's

necessities, thus we could characterize the iterative "training" of computer games, stressed by Pias,

as performative enactments in preparation for Work.

Mercantile Play

"For every item or character sold on E-bay and other Web sites, many more are traded within the games themselves—some for barter, most for fanciful in-game currencies (with not so fanciful out of game exchange rates..)..Magic weapons won on arduous quests, furniture built with tediously acquired carpentry skills, characters made powerful through years of obsessive play-taken as a whole the gross domestic product of fantasy land." --Dibbell, Julian, Play Money 12

In MMO's, massively multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft and Everquest , played in both

the West and the East, players accumulate and exchange digital material. Korean players frenetically

bid on cutesy digital objects of designed measures of scarcity and abundance found on quests in Nexus' online game MapleStory.   A gleeful MapleStory owner of a MapleDragon Sword declares his 8-bit digital sword of such rarity that he will never part with it! Towards the end of Julian Dibell's foray into the business of play fantasy money, before the global economic crisis of 2008, he is presciently struck by the realization that "real life" contemporary stocks, derivatives , real estate values, and currency can seem as immaterial as game fantasy worlds and also involve a fantasy component of agonistic competition. Dibbell writes "Marx almost had it right, solidity is not melting into air, production is melting into play". (*Play Money* 24) Returning again to the confluence of immaterial labour and play brings us to virtuality of Maurizio Lazzarato's description of the "cycle of production": "The cycle of production comes into operation only when it is required by the capitalist; once the job has been done, the job dissolves back into the networks and flows that make possible the production and enrichment of its productive capacities. Precariousness, hyper exploitation, and hierarchy are the most obvious characteristics of metropolitan immaterial labour." (*Radical Thought in Italy* 137) Global capitalism has indeed, as pointed out by Virno, acquired the speed and flexibility that was once the province of Arendt's "Action".

Chinese and Mexican "gold farms" hire live-in worker-orcs and mages to collect virtual loot in the game to be later exchanged on illegal trading websites for real world currency. In "My life as a Chinese gold farmer," an ethnographic reportage for the New York Times, Julian Dibbell interviews professional players who play on the clock during their 11 hour day, and then continue to play at night, (nights of labour) in their "free time" before falling exhausted onto sleeping mats in a simple communal bedroom located above their workroom. (HomoLudens Conference, Gijon, Spain, Julian Dibbell, 2008).   Exploitation and trade is accelerating along multiple circuits, converting what was common into the private, stockpiling surpluses of recourses and immaterial labour, and leveraging global differences in wage labour and consumer spending power. Operating legally or corruptly and with and without state support, play material is transformed into material commodity.

The game industry's moral outrage towards the professional sweatshop players of newer upstart enterprises in Mexico and mainland China waxes ironic when considering the common roots of play which they only recently have privatized. The multi-million dollar game industry is indebted not only to the common play material of more recent ludic mutators and modders, (and to the free suggestions of players gathered in game beta tests, a standard phase of professional game development), but also to the common ancestor of both computer games and ludic mutators, the first computer game, "Spacewar", a simple black and white space shooter developed on the PDP1 computer in 1963. Spacewar, inspired by radio science fiction "space operas", was programmed by Slug Russell, a member of a group of teenage MIT college and high school students who later went on to form the free software movement and to contribute to developing the Linux operating system. These self-labelled "hackers", understood as tinkerers and hobbiests rather that the later more destructive connotation of hacking, shared the code of their programs with one another. The first North American computer game was developed commonly, (on stolen time mainframe computer time).

Play in the grip of mercantile interests, transpiring though powering up exchanges of digital objects and characters within the peripheries of the genre of persistent (long-term) online games (MMO's) and liquidated through RMT (real money trading into real currencies) is generally not the province of open-ended ludic mutation. But even in such games an avenue may open up for a shift within a situation over-determined by material or immaterial "necessity", within a hierarchical web of in-order to relations. The membranes at the edges of ludic constellations of online gatherings of players are semi-permeable, and this porosity is open to incursions of the military and state, mercantilism and exploitation, but also to performance artists and hactivists, game modders, war protesters and environmentalists. Some ludic mutators discover a threshold within and between spheres, shift the given rules and parameters of the simulation, and inject new scores into the game.
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So might game modding be admitted to a digital space of appearance, a free sphere in which a

member of a plurality begins a process, attracting and repelling others in the wake of her

aesthetic, agonistic actions? These conflations of zones undeniably blaspheme a phenomenological

tradition which Arendt partook of, the richness of embodied sensory presence in one world, not a

doubled virtual "reduced" and simulated world, despite her emphasis on fluid immaterial language

paired with action. But more relevantly, it seems useful at this juncture to explore the dissonances

as well as the resonances resounding from this overlapping of Arendt's spheres and categorical

distinctions with virtual play environs as a generative map towards understanding aesthetic political

actions and playful cultural change(ie. ludic mutation). It becomes ever more difficult to separate, to

purify, various incursions of material necessity into the aesthetic sphere of action. Roger Callois

describes this impure contamination effect of the sphere of play, the entrance of real world

interests into the allegedly "free, separate and unproductive" sphere of play in a chapter entitled

"The Corruption of Games." Despite the immateriality of the digital, artists, remakers, hackers, game

destroyers, players are still makers, producers, exercisers of and subjects to techne, an

instrumentalism anathema to Arendt's action sphere while co-sympathetic with the processes of

immaterial labour. But how are even stories told without storytellers who modify the rhetoric of

other story tellers? How does action proceed if not through steps that bump into the in-between of

the world separating individual actors from one another? Modders may not breathe an entirely

lightweight ether, bound as they are to the algorithms of the ludic combat zone, yet their

approaches to play material transform many aspects of the game world into potential avenues of

mutability. Ludic mutation has much to learn from modding.

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Within personal computer game mods and online Sandbox games we have observed playful

modulation with unexpected outcome, playful reconfiguration, playful destruction and the modular

making of the sandbox within the creative repertoire of approaches to play material adopted by

ludic mutators, (whom we also call artists). Play material travels and mutates as it is passed through the hands of various ludic mutators and ricochets between common and proprietary game spheres. Amazons to frag queens, to futuristic action game heroines are but one branching among other past and future chains and blossomings of iterative, modular mutation of play material. We can imagine tracking units of play material as if they were cultural viruses, a scientist visualizing lively movements and squiggles, spectacular dead ends and straight plodding lines.

Modding unfold under the auspices of a non-innocent host, commercial vendors of playful militaristic conflict, (although in the agonistic sphere of appearance Arendt champions the Nietzschian capacity of the player to rise above normalcy to greatness in relation to one's peers). The host exploits the creations of players, absorbing play material and incorporating it into repetitive serial product excretions. Mercantile games in Asia are ever increasing in popularity and Western Action and MMO games train players to be future workers or professional sweatshop players. First world game companies project their fears and battles into their games and more recently players seem lulled into the complacency of unmodifiable console games like Playstation and Xbox, disinclined or physically blocked from altering play material fixed in place by the game industry. On the other hand online Sandbox games like Second Life, despite multiple opportunities for application of local in-game currencies like Linden Dollars, persist as active open sites of free-flowing ludic mutation of play material, of digital objects and characters, scripts and artistic happenings. The perverse wish forms that industry would exploit more of the unusual gifts offered up into the common from ludic mutators who continue to remix and play, to make and unmake the material of digital culture.

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