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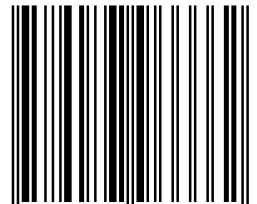
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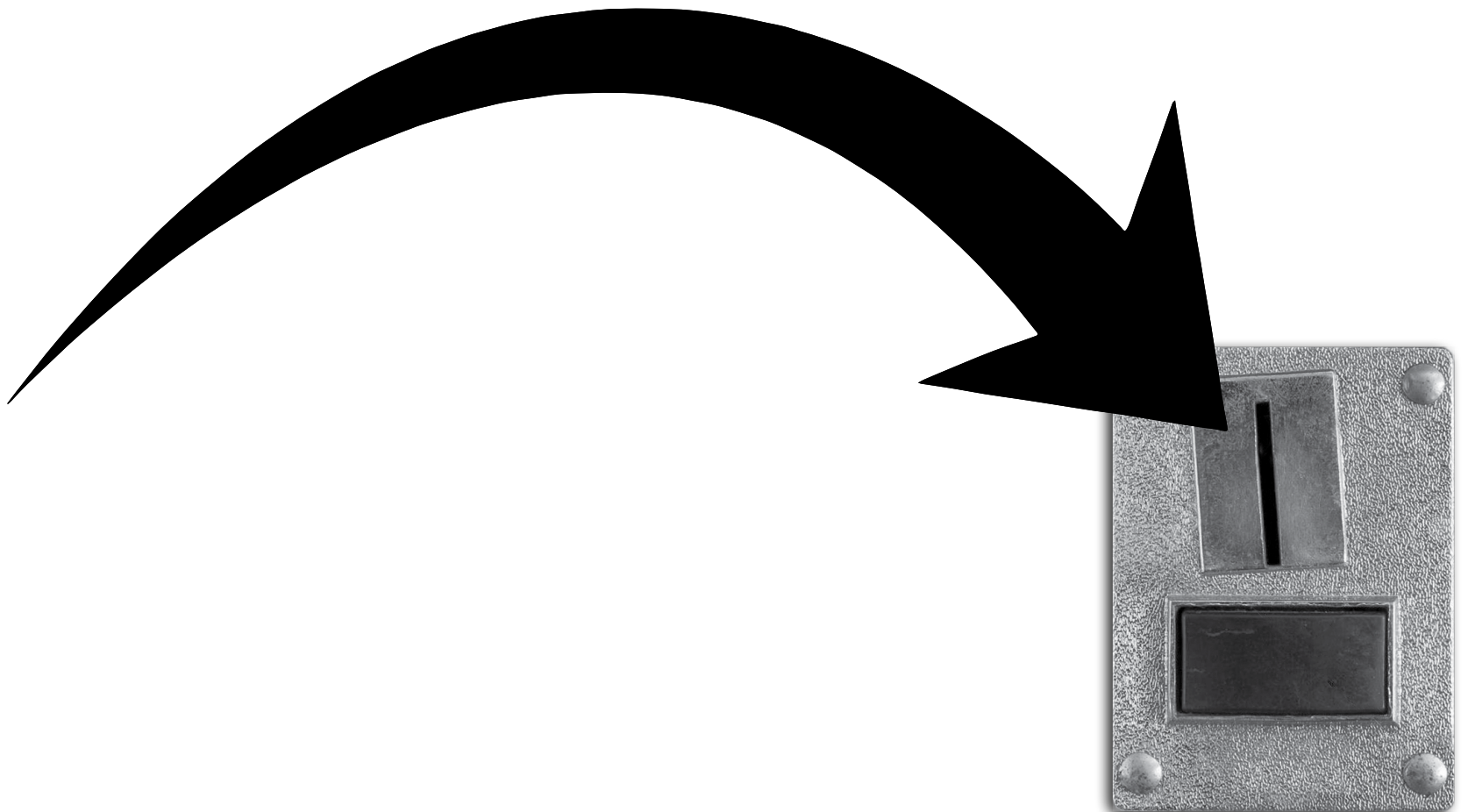
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PLAY- BOR

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**THERE ONCE WAS A TIME WHEN WORK
AND LEISURE WERE SEPARATE REALMS:
YOU WORK OR YOU PLAY. THESE DAYS,
PLAYING IS WORK AND WORK DEMANDS
PLAYING. WHO'S FOOLING WHO,
MAY WE ASK?**

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THE RAPTURE OF PLAY

ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY

INTERVIEWED BY DENISSE VEGA DE
SANTIAGO AND GEORGE JEPSON

By turns a media theorist, a programmer, a philosopher, and a gamer, Alexander Galloway continues to be an essential voice theorizing network(ed) cultures and their political implications. Across three time zones, we talked about how deep the notion of play has permeated the world of work.

PLAY, GAMES & LIFE

George Jepson: Let's start the conversation by returning to definitions. In your thinking; what is a game? What is play?

Alexander R. Galloway: Play is a broad term. It can refer to highly structured activities like games but can also refer to whimsical or improvisational activities in which you are exploring and testing out things. Anthropologists have long pointed out how animals and children, all sorts of creatures, are able to engage in play.

There is also classic literature from the mid 20th century in which people defined play and games. Games tend to be much more structured and often involve things that can be measured. Because of that we can see a natural affinity between computation and games, really from the very beginning. You can go back as long as you want and find this coexistence.

Play however has another history in philosophy, particularly continental philosophy. You really cannot read any Post-WWII critical or post-structural theory without encountering play. It is ever-present in the works of people like

Derrida, the Situationist International; it's all over the anthropological stuff like Huizinga, Clifford Geertz, and all those social scientists. Actually, the Situationist International were influenced by Huizinga, who was a traditional intellectual historian. So you have suddenly these strange bedfellows.

On the other side, games tend to be fetishized by analytic philosophers, computer scientists, and mathematicians. Many philosophers are obsessed with chess and hypothetical scenarios. And of course, games are also a big factor in a lot of the social sciences that are influenced by economic models: rational choice theory, game theory, and decision-making.

Denisse Vega de Santiago: In these definitions, people like Huizinga argue that play and games belong to a 'second' reality, to a realm somehow separated from real life. But with the growing implementation of game logics across society, aren't play and games becoming a reality in themselves?

ARG: That is an excellent point. A lot of classic literature on games and play stresses the way in which play is a 'second' or a 'sacred' space. And there is a lot of overlap with mysticism and the sacred. A game is like a magic circle; one must step inside the circle before play can happen. We can frame this in the context of post-modernism very broadly conceived and the notion of 'hyperreality', where a secondary superstructure almost takes the place of real materiality. What we are seeing now is really the ongoing power and influence of social structures, ideology and the symbolic order in categories like play and games.

So, I think what you say is exactly right, we are seeing a kind of breaking down of this original principle of play. It's not true that play doesn't matter anymore, that it doesn't affect the world.

GAMIFICATION: PLAYBOR & SOCIETIES OF CONTROL

GJ: How far do you recognize these conditions to have permeated the space(s) of work?

ARG: I think this is the big story within the last 20 years: the mixture of play and labor. The classic position was that there was the sphere of work and the sphere of leisure or non-work; this labor mode was invented in the 19th century and continued through the middle of the 20th century. Coming out of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a desire for freedom and liberation, almost a kind of romantic desire to recapture innocence and authenticity. This is really when play comes into the picture.

Very soon big business wises up and realizes that play is a real cultivation of the productive forces of human beings. Consider the hippies, for instance, who expended so much beautiful energy in non-productive ways, ways that capitalism realized could be harnessed (for productivity). There were many steps and phases in harnessing it. Web 2.0 and social media are really only the most recent chapter in the harnessing of these expressive forces. After the 1970s, neoliberalism and post-Fordism invented a new mode of labor, one that mixes what we used to think of as separate: leisure and toil. You don't work 9 to 5, but 24 hours a day. That is where we are now.

GAMIFICATION IS AS INSIDIOUS, DOMINEERING, AND EXPLOITATIVE AS OTHER FORMS OF POWER

There are all sorts of social or demographic barriers that have also come down. It's a history of breaking down or bursting through these walls and overhauling the organic composition of labor.

GJ: We are then thinking about the extension of the exploitative arm of capitalism and talking, essentially, about power. Deleuze conceptualizes 'societies of control' as moving beyond disciplinary models that are manifested in a regime of technologized, late capitalist governance. How does gamification update this logic, forming conditions beyond repression and control?

ARG: One of the great insights of Deleuze, particularly legible in his essay on control societies, was to rethink the model of the subject that had been defined through repression; a kind of Freudian model. If you think about ideology, there is the event of ideological interpellation, and this is a very classic model of repression. For Deleuze, the repressive model was stupid and boring. It wasn't sexy. He wanted to just get rid of it, replacing repression with expression. Deleuze has a metaphor where he says; 'think about the freeway'. The freeway 'disciplines' you, of course. It forces you to stay between the lines, to stop when you are told to stop. Certainly, the police can stop you at any time, and there is a kind of structure in the freeway. But the whole point of it is to get you moving, to put your foot on the gas and move, expand and travel, to form a line of flight. Deleuze was much more interested in expressive bodies and I think gamification is much more expressive than repressive. Gamification wants you to do things, it wants you to strive, to achieve, to express yourself, to articulate. It is about internalizing that expressive logic, so you want to do it on your own.

DVDS: I agree that gamification fits into the expressive logic of these societies of control, especially because a lot that is going on in gamified workspaces happens in the corporate sphere, the high-tech giants of Silicon Valley, Google, etc. But at the same time, gamification redefines this in a scarier way; it's not so much about controlling subjects but as much as creating new subjects of self-exploitation.

ARG: Yes, I agree with that 100%. Gamification is a new configuration of organization and power. It is as insidious, domineering, and exploitative as other forms of power that we can talk about; monarchy, hierarchy, bureaucracy. Here we should also talk about measurement and extraction. In the classic 20th-century labor model, labor is a physical activity that materially changes objects. If you work with raw materials, you create objects. At the same time, of course, there is a kind of ideological layer of abstraction and alienation, which we don't want to overlook. The shift under post-Fordism, and I am not saying anything new here, is really that capitalism figured out how to directly extract value from immaterial things, essentially cultural or symbolic things. Right now, capitalism extracts labor in traditional ways, factories still exist, people still do physical toil all day long. But using measurement, businesses are now able to extract other forms of value that are strictly mathematical in nature. When I say measurement, I mean

THE TRUTH IS, IF IRONY IS THE DOMINANT TYPE OF CULTURAL TECHNIQUE, WE ARE ALL FUCKED!

that very generally. If you send a Gmail, every letter and the position of every character in that email can be collated and brought together in massive databases, which provides a point of measurement for Google. This form of measurement and extraction seems to be a fundamental aspect of post-Fordism.

GJ: How do you see the future of playbor?

ARG: I think we are heading into a more conservative time, obviously signaled by Trump and Brexit. There are demographic reasons for this return to traditional conservative values: the baby boomers are old and senile; the millennials are growing up and becoming yuppies and buying houses in the suburbs, or at least trying to. I think all of this is going to intensify. In terms of labor conditions today, I don't see the workplace becoming more inherently rebellious or political, even as workers invent new forms of resistance. The 2008 economic crash reoriented a whole generation of people. People have been excited and bullish about digital media for so long, even up until a few years ago. I think in the future we are going to see more strategies of confusion, obfuscation and diversion. This includes various kinds of 'goofing off at work'. In some jobs now you can actually be on your phone all day long, punctuated with some brief moments of animation and activity. There are ways in which workers can, in small, piecemeal ways, yank back some of the value that has been extracted from them.

Even trolling, or a lot of online culture, is about taking a symbolic order and then inverting, confusing and diverting it in weird ways. Here irony becomes a strategy of basically taking a symbolic order and just inverting, just to fuck with it. Maybe that is one thing that we will see more of.



One of thousands of exemplary slides selling gamification to companies. Image: www.playxlpro.com

GJ: It is interesting that you brought up irony, because it is a concept that was quickly co-opted by alt-right figures. It makes it difficult to assess and respond to someone's political position because everything posed ironically becomes slippery.

ARG: Irony is fun, intellectually stimulating, and dark in weird ways. But the truth is, if irony is the dominant type of cultural technique, we are all fucked! If irony is dominant, it means nothing else is possible. It means all we can do is clown around with symbolic inversions of power.

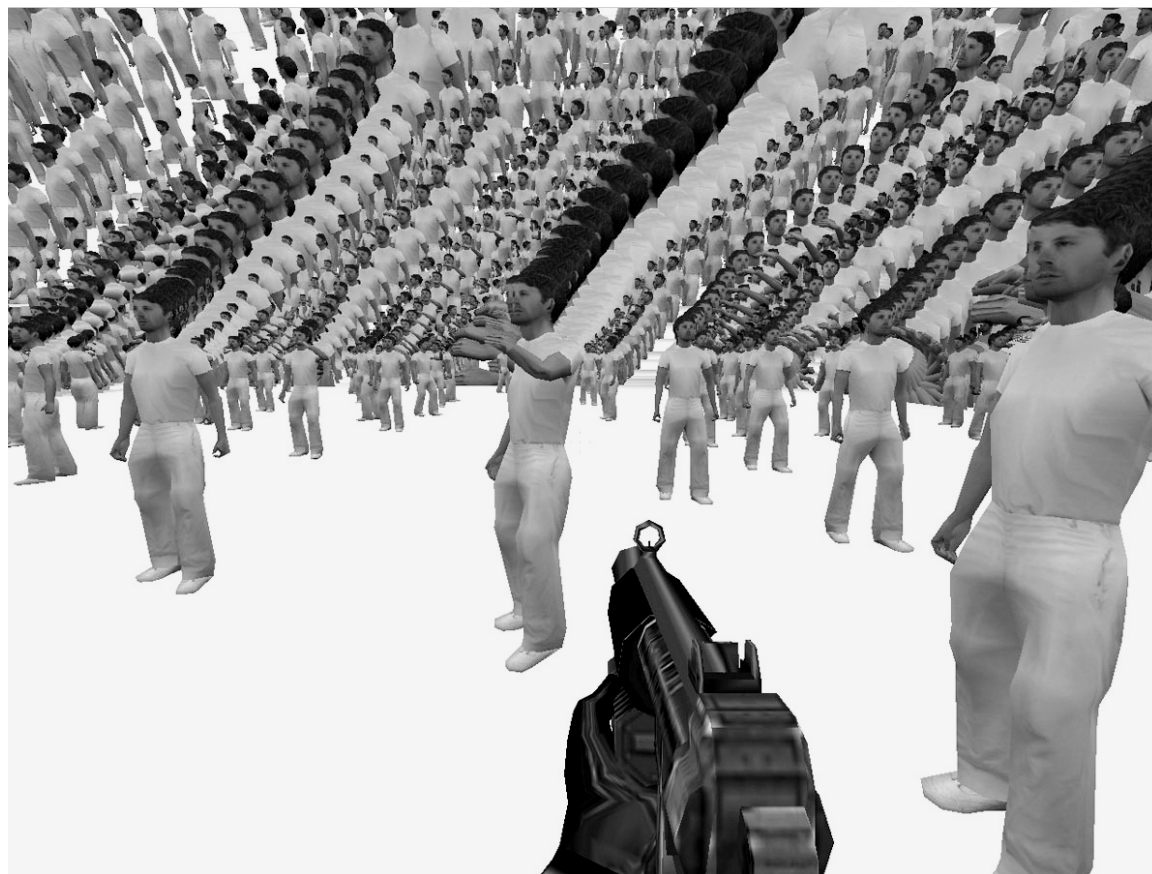
It used to be that if you were a rebel you rebelled against some figure dubbed 'conservative'; a priest, a boss, a patriarch or some category like that. But then maybe because of the Clintons, New Labour, or Obama, because of the slow triumph of the liberal order, today's rebel will more likely pantomime some sort of alt-right position. I think it's pathetic, but it's not unexplainable.

For at least a generation, if not more, the proof of entry into the left was being relentlessly critical and heavily skeptical of any absolute category like, say, morality. All those corny categories like authenticity, sincerity and purity have been relentlessly deconstructed and criticized. But talk to anyone with a single atom of political awareness in them, and they absolutely will adhere to some sort of moral principles, some conditions of authentic liberation, no matter what they say. It's in there somewhere. Faced with Trump and the conservative populist wave, many people today, myself included, find themselves waxing nostalgic about terms like truth that were still relentlessly criticized by academic leftists only 10 or 15 years ago. Maybe truth isn't that bad after all.

COUNTERGAMING

DVDS: Thirteen years ago, you wrote *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, which has been very influential for the development of video game theory. In the last chapter 'Counter gaming', you argue about possibilities of resistance or avant-garde gestures within games. Could you expand a bit on this claim?

ARG: When I wrote *Gaming*, people had just started to think and write about computer games. But the trend in the 90s and early 2000s was a bad tendency in which scholars would take any new digital media phenomenon and essentially reduce it to their own home discipline. So, the Cinema Studies people would say; 'computers are like interactive movies'; the English professors would say; 'computers are just hypertext', etc.



Still from video game *Adam Killer* by Brody Condon, 1999.

WHAT IF THERE IS A FORM OF AFFECTIVE EXPENDITURE THAT CANNOT BE RECUPERATED?

At the time I felt emboldened to say: No, games are a completely self-contained format, and we should not try to reduce them to other things. Computer games have an 'active' or 'executable' quality what makes them different, a quality also shared by computers more generally.

In the counter gaming chapter, I made a very specific claim about how hard it is to do an avant-garde gesture in games. At that time there were artists doing 'counter games' or art projects in games, only what they produced were non-games. They produced things that you couldn't play or were non-interactive or were basically films. Play is the source of the problem, in a sense. Play is so intimately tied up with human affect, experimentation, and pleasure. If you deny these things, it's very hard to do anything. There is something about unfun or unplay, that just doesn't work for most people.

(Which, of course, makes it politically interesting; I'm thinking of Laura Mulvey's "unpleasure" or Sara Ahmed's "killjoy".) My whole point in that chapter was not to shut down art making, but to be brutally honest and say, 'we just don't have any good examples of that happening yet'. Hopefully we will in the future.

DVDS: How? Do you have any ideas?

ARG: I think one avenue would be to pull back from the highly quantized digital side of gaming and to flip over into a much more analogical mode. I'm thinking of games more concerned with qualitative experience than with measurement. That seems kind of romantic, and I grant you that. But I think there's a lot of possibilities there. It's a sort of anti-digital or 'anti-game' option. Parallel to this is the 'non-game' option. I tried to define this mode in my last book on the work of Françoise Laruelle. Here the issue is not replacing the digital with the analogue, but doing away with the distinction to begin with. The non-game would abandon both modes of representation and pursue other activities.

DVDS: How can these practices of counter-gaming be imagined in their intersection with architecture and design practices?

ARG: I don't have an answer to that, but I do have an impression about what isn't the answer. The answer isn't what everyone is still taught in architecture school, to continue to pantomime what we've conceived of as avant-garde gestures since basically the 60s and 70s: no more structures, blobs instead of grids, make it a social experiment rather than a fossilized monument. That is basically the model that gets congealed and completed by the end of the 20th century and as far as I can understand, is still the model that is taught in MFA programs and MArch programs today. But times change and I don't think we should perpetuate those models.

Assuming that the organic will save us is totally false. Assuming that rhizomatic, non-hierarchical horizontal topology will save us, I think is also totally false.

On the other hand, I am skeptical of the computationalist turn in architecture, architects just adopting algorithmic methods through a plug-in or a filter. I am very skeptical of the uncritical adoption of tools. It is actually not even that good! If architects were – no-offense – writing their own programs instead of using whatever plug-ins for Rhino, that would actually be a lot more interesting. I know that doesn't answer your question...

GAMES, HACKING & CAPITALISM

GJ: As in this uncritical adoption of tools, often we are at risk, in games and game theory, of mirroring the conditions of capitalism from which it emerged. How can we cease to reproduce these structures?

ARG: Well, we could just go back to the original definition of play and games that we were talking about before. What if play *is* separated from real life; a magic circle that can be some kind of break from the normal hum-drum routine of daily exploitation? Maybe the original definition of play and games is radical, not withdrawing from life but moving in parallel with it. What if there is a form of affective expenditure that cannot be recuperated?

The link now between games and play under post-Fordism is really about measurement and capture. If you can sever the link between capture and extraction, then capitalism doesn't work anymore, at least that type of capitalism.

GJ: This relates heavily to hacking and modding in games, right?

ARG: Yeah! But say more of what you mean because modding is so prevalent in digital capitalism.

GJ: That is exactly what I am thinking about. In modding there is this awkward interaction between the performing of leisure time in which a game is manipulated in a way that is satisfying to you, and this action being sucked back into the sphere of production. This labor of course has monetizable value, but you accrue none of it, skewing the relationship between you and your own product, because at no point was it really ever yours.

ARG: What you're talking about is the fundamental law of capitalism: get labor that you don't pay for. That was true for Marx's analysis of capitalism in the 19th century, where Marx showed the fraction of labor that was unpaid. I think that argument is true today, even if the context has changed. *Counter-Strike* (1999), which was a modification of the first-person shooter *Half-Life* (1998), was an early example of gaming companies outsourcing their own research and development to their user base and then essentially getting it for free. This is part of a much broader trend that capitalism has been very good at from the beginning, to basically outsource labor to the consumer. You can see this now when you go to any grocery store: you check out your own groceries. You become the cashier, just like when you send a Gmail, you're performing free labor. In the store you're performing the work of the cashier and you aren't getting paid anything for it. Ironically, we are in an era where everything needs to be measured and quantified by metrics and measured through performance expectations, excellence and that

sort of discourse, yet when it really counts, the measurement stops. So suddenly Google claims not to know how much value they extract from you when they scan your emails. I don't know if the world would be a better place if every affective quantum was measured and remunerated. Probably it would be a terrible place. But at least in that scenario there would be accurate accounting!

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