

Ludefaction: Fracking of the Radical Imaginary

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1555412014568665

gac.sagepub.com



Graeme Kirkpatrick¹

Abstract

This article presents the idea of ludefaction as the negative underside of ludification. The project of transforming human practices into games to “enhance” their performance is related to new management and technology design practices that have been dominant since the 1980s. Studies suggest that this is an ambivalent process through which work comes to seem more attractive even as it makes more intense and invasive demands on its human subject. Beyond this, however, ludefaction grasps the way in which gamification intensifies exploitation in the, probably unprecedented, development of allowing power to tap into the radical imaginary, that is, the facility we have for creating an alternative, better world. A comparison of games with relational art is presented to clarify the stakes and suggest negative principles for progressive game design.

Keywords

ludefaction, gamification, technology design, radical imaginary, work, play, art

Introduction

We are all familiar with the idea of ludification or gamification. It says that more and more traditional activities and practices are being recast as games. Discussions of the idea commonly suggest that computer game technology is being used to make those action domains more appealing and interesting for people. It is a claim that can be linked to the promotion of a range of values: pleasure and fun; education, even improved economic efficiency have all been associated with gamification. Jane

¹ University of Skövde, Skövde, Sweden

Corresponding Author:

Graeme Kirkpatrick, Professor in Media Arts, Aesthetics & Narration at the University of Skövde, Sweden.
Email: graeme.kirkpatrick@his.se

McGonigal (2012) has gone so far as to suggest that games present us with an alternative to the “broken reality” we seem to be stuck with: ludification is presented as a panacea for multiple social problems.

The main point of this article is to suggest that ludification has a less positive side. Boosterism of ludification fails to view it in wider historical, social, and aesthetic perspective. I want to restore some of the larger picture. This leads me to postulate a shadow concept that haunts ludification, namely, ludefaction.

I have taken my cue for this neologism from the work of geologists and earth scientists. Liquefaction, as everybody knows, refers to the process whereby solids are made liquid by dilution. Liquefaction is a less well-known term that geologists use to refer to processes in which an incoming liquid reduces the granularity of previously solid substructures, sometimes causing instabilities on the earth’s surface. Liquefaction is associated with sinkholes and other hazardous developments in which surface structures are made insecure and prone to subsidence.

If ludification, then, is considered benign and positive for making individuals feel better, ludefaction concerns the use of games to structure the energies of play in ways that may be not beneficial in a wider sense. I will suggest that the impact of ludefaction can be seen in a certain stymieing of the radical imaginary: the facility we all have for conceiving a different way of living together by rethinking and reenacting the social¹ (Castoriadis, 1975). The focus in what follows, therefore, will be on how ludification affects the subject–social relationship.

I begin, in the next section, with a brief discussion of some established reasons for being suspicious of gameness as a property that might be exported to things that are not normally thought of as gamelike. This establishes the potential ambivalence of ludification, which is a first step towards understanding what is at stake in the idea of ludefaction. Play was a central value of progressive emancipatory movements of the 1960s and 1970s but was subsequently important to the restructuring of work and other social processes at least since the 1980s (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). This is the context in which computer games themselves were formed and it is clear that gamification is only the latest phase in an ongoing process of ludification.

At the heart of these processes in which work but also our social and interpersonal relationships are all reconfigured to incorporate elements of gameness is a new experience of subjectivity. This is explored in the third section, with reference to the emphasis on competitiveness discussed by Dardot and Laval (2013) and the characterization of social media and online games as playgrounds of neoliberal governmentality in which that same sensibility is fostered and encouraged (Humphreys, 2008; van Dijck, 2012). This clarifies the proposition that ludification is always ambivalent between enhancing social connection and energizing existing processes on one side, and exacting a cost in terms of authenticity, or sincere connection on the other.

Ludefaction entails something more than this, however, and in the fourth section, I suggest that we can only see the full dynamics of ludification’s ambivalence—the way in which it involves us working against the very things we are trying to

achieve—by examining the aesthetic qualities of the computer game as a cultural form. More exactly, only an aesthetic appraisal of computer games discloses their capacity to extract the energies of the radical imaginary, the facility we all have for imagining and enacting the social world in new ways, and harnessing them to affirm the existing system. The article concludes with a definition of ludefaction based on this reading of contemporary gameness as an aesthetically empowered pro-systemic intervention into our subjective being.

The Ambivalence of Play and Games

The suggestion that we should be suspicious of games and, by implication, of gameness and turning things into games, is not new. Writing about the failed love of an earlier philosopher, Georg Lukacs reflected on the corrosive consequences of feeling that a relationship had had the quality of a game all along, for at least one of the parties. After jilting his fiancé at the altar, Soren Kirekegaard encouraged her to believe that he was a seducer who had been toying with her affections. He did this in an attempt to relieve her of the stigma of being party to a publicly failed relationship. For Regine Olsen, however, as we may imagine, the belief that she had been played in this way was not an unambiguous boon. Lukacs (1911/1974, p. 37) writes, “. . . something that has been lived . . . can only be poisoned by the realization that it was a mere game.” Being “only a game,” then, can correspond to being relieved of the burdens of seriousness, but it can also be a matter of hollowing out things that previously seemed important in order to make them meaningless. The discovery that something is a game can be a kind of disappointment.

Peter Sloterdijk, in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, makes a related observation about the nature of politics in the modern media age. An important line is crossed when political representation becomes a kind of game in which parties manipulate messages to win advantage with reduced regard to the truth of what is being said:

Where the everyday ontological border between game and seriousness is blurred and the safety gap between fantasy and reality has melted away, there the relation between what is respectable and what is bluff slackens . . . Where insights of this kind are dawning, cynicism cannot be far behind. (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 488)

The cynicism he has in mind is that of politicians and PR managers, who come to be more concerned with the effects of their messages than their contents. Their realization that this is a game they are playing leads them into a mind-set that sees through every message to the instrumental purpose that motivated its sending, sidelining any value that might be expected to inhere in communicative acts as attempts to reach another person or other people with the truth.

The rise of such an attitude, in which everything is a game and no one is foolish enough to believe in anything really, while we all acknowledge the necessity of appearing to believe in lots of things, is the basis of what came to be known as

postmodernism. Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote of a time in which people realize that society doesn't rest on an ethically binding contract or important orientations that we share in common as a matter of anthropological or providential fact (practical reason), but is simply a game. Viewed in this way,

... the question of the social bond ... is itself a language game ... Each individual is referred to himself. And each of us knows that our self does not amount to much ...
(Lyotard, 1984, p. 15)

Society itself is only a game and we don't benefit from elevating it, or ourselves, into something higher or more important than that. Values like Kantian autonomy, for example, become signs that can be deployed when the game demands it. Here, we move beyond the cynicism of politicians mangling just war theory to justify a military intervention, or presenting the enemy as a threat to "freedom," to a situation where disappointment and cynicism become accepted as basic facts of social life.

The puzzling thing for many is that this situation does not lead to widespread rejection and rebellion. Rather, we all play along for lack of anything better, perhaps for fear of seeming ourselves to be "false": who really maintains that everything about society is wrong and yet continues to live in it? At what point do we stop playing along and when we do, how do we counter the charge of hypocrisy prior to this? When everything is a game in this way, it is because we are all skewered on Adorno's (1973) observation that "the wrong life cannot be lived rightly" and in a sense we only ever go through the motions of critique and opposition. Instead, we grudgingly admire one another for playing the game well or disparage other people when they "lose" the game. There is a place for principled losers, of course, but the difference between that place and the one on the winners' podium is well understood.

It is in this cultural context in which disappointment, cynicism, and resignation are established as key terms of the prevailing ethos that computer games must take their place. All this is a bit gloomy and one-sided, though. There is another aspect to the social context which also requires our attention.

There is no doubt that industrial modernity downgraded and neglected play, systematically opposing it to a highly esteemed seriousness. Its energies were viewed with suspicion as something to be restrained where possible or channeled into harmless diversions. Play was associated with children and, as far as adults were concerned, limited to specialized spheres, especially art and sport. There is, of course, a large critical literature describing bureaucratic rationalization and the capitalist imperatives of social order and stability as defining features of the modern period. Play was, perhaps, incompatible with the bourgeois pacification of adult society.

Johan Huizinga (1950, p. 75), often viewed as an author of foundational significance for modern game studies, described modernity as, "... a rank layer of ideas, systems of thought and knowledge, doctrines, rules and regulations, moralities and conventions that have lost all touch with play." Huizinga emphasized that play is at

the heart of all human creativity and invention. Even august institutions like parliaments and serious ones like the economy rest upon the human propensity to toy with things in the world; to bounce ideas around and see what happens when you try something new. Play is of the essence to all human social phenomena and only a rather unpleasant ('rank') social system would forget this fact or try to cover it over with "grown-up" seriousness.²

It was just this seriousness that the 1960s counterculture took exception to. In a movement sometimes characterized as a "great refusal" of work and of the social and economic positions on offer in late industrial capitalism, the youth of that time denounced the dull acquiescence of their elders. They refused to participate in ordered hierarchies, declaimed the virtues of punctuality and conformity, and advocated instead a return to the power of play. Editor of one of the subversive magazines of the time and prominently associated with what was widely referred to as "the underground," Richard Neville wrote,

The underground has abolished work. There are no 'positions vacant' columns in the underground press . . . No one takes vacations – do children holiday from play? Instead, underground people transform work . . . Work is done only for fun; as a pastime, obsession, hobby or art-form and thus is not work in the accepted sense . . . (Neville, 1971, p. 212–213)

The class of 1968 tried to tap into cultural forces beneath Huizinga's rank layer, forces that would reenergize and re-aestheticize the social world. In this context and well into the next decade, radical ideas flourished and it seemed as if people could change the world for the better if they allowed themselves to dream. Play could unleash creativity: schools would be abolished; the constraints of the patriarchal family overturned and capitalism would be history as everyone refused to work.³

Capitalism's response to this, the playpower critique, involves ludification. In what they call the "New Spirit of Capitalism," Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue that the forces uncovered in this period of refusal have largely been absorbed by the system. Their content analysis of management science texts in 1980s and 1990s reveals that the capitalist workplace was deliberately redesigned to take account of what they call the "artistic critique" of the class of 68. The "artistic critique" became the basis for a "recuperation" of the system.

The "new spirit" of capitalism incorporates the notion that work should be attractive, even fun, and relies upon the autonomy of individual workers, rather than having managers telling them what to do all the time. In the reformatted version of work, it is essential that workers are imaginative and flexible: they should work because they want to and for this to happen work must become more like an adventure. Computer technology has been largely shaped by these developments and an important factor in implementing them.

Seductive interfaces on information machines make work easy and even appealing. Easy to use and pleasing computers become tools of work and play, effacing the

boundary between labor and leisure, so that people routinely answer work-related e-mails, for example, on the move or from home and at all hours of the day and night (Turkle, 1995, 2010). Contemporary workplace technology often feels so pleasant to use it can even become addictive.

Gamification extends and updates the aestheticization of work described in the texts in Boltanski and Chiapello's study. In recent years, the idea has been taken up directly by management studies. An article in the *Economist* magazine reviewed an example in the following terms

... players will happily fork out good money for the privilege of being allowed to attempt arbitrary jobs. What if, say the gamifiers, it were possible to identify the 'special sauce' responsible for this strange effect, extract it and, then, slather it onto business problems? Can the compulsive power of video games be harnessed to motivate workers? (*Economist*, 2011, p. 72)

The downside to this, however, is that the demands of their employment overrun the individual in dimensions that were previously withheld from public and economic processes.

The private individual and his or her inner life no longer really exist somewhere apart, perhaps in the confines of an intimate relationship or a family. Digital technologies monitor and record every action of the worker, so that employees no longer sell a portion of their lives as work time but are surveilled in such detail that employers can ensure their personal projects are completely identified with those of the organization. Modern workers have to be available for work at all times and every part of their personality is constantly being evaluated for its contribution to successful performance. Jobs that are exciting adventures don't last forever and part of doing the current job well is making it look that way to the next prospective employer. We have entered a world in which work looks like fun and to keep up appearances the worker must learn, in Barbara Ehrenreich's (2010) memorable phrase, to "smile or die."

Numerous studies (Chabot, 2012; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Lazzaroto, 2014; Sassen, 2008; Sennett, 2006) have suggested that contemporary capitalism is making more demands on its subjects, reaching into more dimensions of their existence—emotional, affective, and intimate—than in previous decades.

Computer games have played an important mediating role in many of these transformations and it is important not to underestimate their importance in the history of the last thirty years. Studies of contemporary work show that increasingly much of life resembles a computer game: the player is pitched into an initially intriguing set of challenges; overcoming them involves gathering information necessary to the management of a dynamic set of shifting and interacting variables and other players must be viewed as allies, threats, or both depending on the situation. The aesthetics of work more often than not involve colorful on-screen environments and a limited but choreographed physical routine of "clicking," stroking screens and

pushing data around.⁴ Gaming has consistently been the fastest growing part of the huge global entertainment industry for the last two decades. Historically, games have been important at every key juncture in the rise of the Internet and online forms of social life.⁵

The New Subject

The situation in which work has been redesigned and reconfigured as a kind of game produces the disenchantment and cynicism highlighted as dangers by Lukacs and Sloterdijk, even as it creates more appealing workplaces that “seduce” workers and involve them more and more intimately. A key strategic outcome of these processes is a new kind of human individual whom Boltanski and Chiapello call the “streamlined worker,” while other theorists write of a pervasive “neoliberal subjectivation.” (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Lazzarato, 2014)

Boltanski and Chiapello’s account involves a very specific tension. On one side, people are more committed to their work, it is theirs in a new way and, as we have seen, their responsibility for it is not bounded by old-fashioned temporal limits like “the working day” or “weekends.” As such, it is important for it to be authentic because it represents identity in a way that was never true for older kinds of work. At the same time, however, this intense commitment is, ultimately, still to something other than them. They have to deliver to an organization, to contracted partners, or whatever, and they operate under conditions that are thoroughly competitive. Labor is still answerable to its economic role, perhaps more than ever we have to “deliver” what our employers expect of us. But we must not let on that we feel that this is how it is because we are obliged to work as if we loved our insecure condition and its “excitement.” According to Boltanski and Chiapello, this leads to a pervasive anxiety bordering on paranoia:

[The]...contradiction between the exigency of manipulation and the demand for authenticity...creeps into the very core of the person...we can thus foresee an increase in paranoid behaviour by people who are forever fearful that they have been manipulated, plagiarised or hi-jacked. (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 460)

It’s not simply that games are competitive and so is work. The affinity between them encompasses whole repertoires of learned behavior.⁶ Much of modern labor involves interfacing with information systems and management of complex, dynamic sets of variables. It is often collaborative and it involves skillful presentation of self to others, in accordance with a studied understanding of the effects of our own performances, perhaps in multiple contexts. There is a manifest tension between the need to be true to oneself and the need to play well that can only be handled within a distinctive temperament, namely, one that oscillates between seeking authenticity and performing its attainment even when it is absent. In fact, contemporary work

involves everyone in a search for authenticity we cannot attain *because* we are striving for it.

In all these ways, contemporary work shares its logic with the game: it is exciting, it demands commitment, and it is an adventure but it is also shot through with disappointment and it presupposes a certain cynicism and a willingness to perform. The new individual goes together with the new ludified social contexts in which she operates. Beyond the workplace, social media apply the principles of ludic structuration to our relations with other people. The same temperament, which moves between seeking authenticity and knowing performance, accommodating the contradiction between them in an increasingly competitive disposition is present wherever social connections are ludified.

The ludification of interpersonal relationships sees them entangled with marketing and disciplinary strategies of social control. Jose van Dijck (2012) has described how Facebook turns each of us into a targeted advert for the things (and people) we like. The number of “friends” and connections we parade on these sites is often proportional to our worth to various corporations. It also serves as a kind of points system in a ludified form of social life—the game of popularity and esteem. Everyone who plays knows the strategies they use to maintain an appearance here, with one’s “friends” total a variable that has to be artfully managed. At the same time, we want to be authentic and we all want to have real friends. People on Facebook want it so much that on average, they each have about 200 of them! (Kirkpatrick, 2010). As is often pointed out, this kind of “success” is incompatible with the authentic meaning of “friend.” Here, our intimate associations and all that’s connected with them are caught up in a ludification of the social and entangled with advertising and other strategies of corporations.

Similarly, Sal Humphreys (2008) has highlighted comparable dynamics in Massive Multiplayer Games, which she says are models of neoliberal governance. Webs of social connection are entangled with gaming prowess, possession of in-game resources, and distributions of power within the online environment. Playing the game well requires making “social” connections and being well connected is pegged to points scored and overall game performance. In all cases, the arbiter of success in these things is an unaccountable corporation, which owns the society that the players produce—in contrast to the more democratic governance of older online environments like LambdaMOO (See Turkle, 1995).

The underside of ludification then is this penetration of the individual by the demands of the social system and the entanglement of selfhood and identity construction in social performances and economic roles from which the more intimate aspects of subjectivity might previously have been withheld.

Dardot and Laval understand the subjective dynamics of this process in a slightly different way, which is nonetheless complementary to the ambivalence described by Boltanski and Chiapello and which clarifies the role of ludefaction in this discussion. For them, each of us is forced to see ourselves as responsible for everything that happens to us in the “new way things are.” There are no social

safety nets in the neoliberal formatting of social experience but government is obliged to furnish us with “information” (2013, p. 278), which we use to play the game of life. The power of neoliberal rationality, “stems from establishing situations that force subjects to function in accordance with the terms of the game imposed on them” (2013, p. 281).

Thoroughly self-reliant, individuals are at the same time called upon to want everything and to believe that they can have all kinds of fulfillment by “playing hard.” “The new subject is required to produce ‘ever more’ and enjoy ‘ever more,’ and thus to be directly connected to a surplus enjoyment that has become systemic” (2013, p. 283). If previously the key to a good life was to find some kind of balance, they say, now it is imperative to give up all restraint and throw oneself into everything (2013, p. 285).

Dardot and Laval (2013, p. 294) call this situation a “mass psychosis” because it involves a destruction of the symbolic dimension of experience (2013, p. 294). According to Castoriadis and other theorists of the imaginary, its ineffable private world must secure fixity and gain expression in publicly meaningful statements or discourse: the imaginary must intersect the symbolic to become meaningful. In neoliberalism, the imaginary dimension of human existence involves “rationalized” desire; desire that is made consistent with, even identical to work. The question of meaning, or authenticity, no longer arises for Dardot and Laval, since the important thing is to be always striving and moving forward to the next sensational moment of personal triumph.

However, this disturbing characterization misses the irony in the situation, which is captured in Boltanski and Chiapello’s notion of a system recuperating itself by internalizing the artistic critique. Dardot and Laval (2013, p. 262) reject that idea, arguing that “it is only an optical illusion” that capitalism “relied on the ‘artistic critique’ of May ’68 to ensure the mutation of one form of organizational power into another.” But that rejection looks more plausible in proportion as one fails to look at the history and character of the technology associated with the neoliberal mutation, as I have tried to indicate above.

Consequent on this rejection, Dardot and Laval cannot really explain the appeal of the roles the new system now offers to its putative workers—this is evident when they speak of forcing people to play the game and when they fail to account for the presence of this “surplus enjoyment.”⁷ In my view, they take it too readily as given that the model for the neoliberal subject is the “entrepreneurial self,” a subject who is “bellicose in kind” and who “extols combat, force, vigor, and success.” It is this subjectivity which identifies with work as the “privileged vehicle of self-realization” (2013, p. 265), but this description does not really fit the behavior of individuals at work, which tends to be more nuanced than sheer bellicosity. It would be more accurate as a characterization of the attitudes that define the computer gamer. Indeed, Dardot and Laval (2013, p. 266) go on to say that the entrepreneurial self is “a response to new rules of the game that change the work contract to the point of abolishing it as a wage relation.”

This is important—it involves more than just a play on words—because the “psychosis” they describe is, perhaps, genuinely schizoid in that it exists in a realm of “soft facts” (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 325), where nothing is really real; nothing really matters that much, including the social bond and our connections with other people. In other words, if we fail to see the essential role of gameness saturating social relations, we cannot understand how the structural shift Dardot and Laval are describing might take place. Work appeals because it is more like a game and being competitive to the point of bellicosity is acceptable because it is contained within an ethos of play and a disinvestment of seriousness. The destruction of the symbolic and letting loose of the imaginary that they invoke⁸ casts a strange spell of levity, playful meaninglessness over the entirety of social reality.

Ludification, then, does not stop at highlighting the ambivalence of ludification between its playful and exploitative aspects. It says something more about the precise nature of that ambivalence. It is not that games as structurations of play can be both good (pleasurable, aesthetic, and promoting social connection) and retrograde (associated with exploitation, unaccountable forms of social control, and universal competitiveness). To an extent, perhaps even Jane McGonigal already knew that. I want to suggest that ludification entails something more, namely, an obstruction or misdirection of the play principle itself, which pertains to this notion of a new subject who is functionally adapted to neoliberal reality. The consequences of this are evident in the seeming collapse, over the course of the last three decades, of the radical imaginary. To see this, we need to look more closely at what computer games are and, in particular, at their relationship to art.

The Aesthetic Theory of Computer Games and Subjectivation

Computer games are not like other “media.” The normal critical analysis of media artefacts focuses on ideological discourse and articulation. These processes concern signs. Discourse analysis focuses on chains of equivalence that function ideologically to form webs of belief through which we systematically misperceive the world. Viewed in this way, politics is about subverting some chains of signification and promulgating others to promote preferred interests. The emphasis is on language and meaning: stretches of language can be endlessly recombined, dis- and rearticulated in accordance with different social interests⁹—an idea originally formulated by Ernesto Laclau, following Althusser (1974), in terms of “class principles of articulation” (Laclau, 1977).

This focus on linguistically mediated meaning enjoys a kind of hegemony of its own in contemporary media and cultural studies. In general, this has impeded an adequate comprehension of the distinctiveness of computer games on the part of humanities academics. As Marrku Eskelinen points out, “narrative scholars . . . take for granted that narratives have an absolute monopoly for representing events.” He points to the “current fetishizing of both players and game cultures that causes the

field to gravitate towards an interpretative and meaning-oriented synthesis of cultural studies and social sciences” (Eskelinen, 2012, p. 9) and suggests that, in fact, computer games pose a strong challenge to these intellectual biases.

The reason for this is that, properly understood, computer games present experiences that are profoundly disruptive to narrative frameworks and to the capacity of story to contain and make sense of the activity of engaged humans (players). Games nearly always come wrapped in some fictional scenario, that is, elements of a visual narrative will unfold on the screen; there will be a story with characters communicated by the game documentation, and the different elements of the game (sounds, style of visual representation, etc.) will be tinged by qualities that converge on this “story” as a setting for our action. These sensations point us a certain way, incline our actions or dispose us to participate in a certain kind of fictional “role.” Yet all of this is not the game. The degree to which a coherent fiction organizes the play is easily mistaken by someone who only watches it on the screen, rather than holding the controller.

Indeed, it is easily “mistaken” retrospectively by players themselves who must, when challenged, struggle to impose some kind of linguistic order on the experiences they have had with a game. When they do this, discourse clearly struggles to contain what has actually happened. Game walkthroughs, for example, are dull documents itemizing actions performed and taking terms that would ordinarily elaborate a meaningful fiction merely to present a dry account of a sequence of actions and events for which no other words are available. This reflects the fact that they are using language to try and portray an experience with a “post-representational” medium.

The active experience of gameplay involves, in addition to the obvious elements of a narrative fictional “context,” ludic structures and embodied performances. These properties of the game rub up against the visual, literary, and audio elements, subverting them and shaking them up. Any computer game is a challenge to play against it by mastering its rule structure. Accepting the challenge is, initially at least, motivated by the projected fiction but that soon ceases to be foregrounded as each player fails to do what they have to do, tries again, thinks about it, directs their attention to their hands and the controller (that piece of gaming apparatus that is rarely considered by media theorists), and then fails again.

The many fails of gameplay are integral to the aesthetics of the experience. What they present us with is a disaggregation of the elements that tantalize us with the promise of a coherent representation and the challenge that they present seems to be that of being able to pull them back together. Ironically, it is our efforts in this regard that disrupt the narrative container entirely and, when we are successful, completing the mission, making the jump or whatever, the completeness we find never restores the meaning that made us want to play in the first place.

Art and games come together here in establishing what Jacques Ranciere calls dissensus. Dissensus is defined by Ranciere’s commentator, Joseph Tanke (2011, p. 61) as “the means by which the sensible is deprived of its self-evidence,

punctuated and subject to dispute . . . Dissensus breaks open an interpretation of sense thought to be incontestable.” The power of art lies in its ability to make people think in ways that take them beyond the current ordering of the sensible. It subverts dominant orderings by establishing alternative, sensible possibilities.

According to this view, it is the *play* of the artwork that defines it. In particular, “The dissensual operation takes the form of a superimposition that transforms a given form or body into a new one” (Ranciere, 2009b, p. 66). This is the formula for what Ranciere calls a new subjectivation.

Viewed as aesthetic objects, games work on the extralinguistic knowledge that we have in our bodies, which, viewed in relation to narratives and linguistically mediated meanings, is a site of excess. It’s here that we find that critical margin of maneuver, the element that makes us more than our investments in discourse. Affinities established here move beyond articulation. Each of us is more than we can express in public language; we are always turning in this dark space between what we are and what we can express. The “more” here is located in the body, in the things we know over and above what we can say.

It is not a coincidence, or an incidental feature, that this marginal territory is where gameplay is located. The play of computer games is here, in the discrepancies between our movements and linguistically formulable meanings. Computer games intersect us across multiple sensory planes in ways that require us to reflect and work out how to make the experience “mean” what it is supposed to mean.

According to Ranciere, there is an inherent affinity between art and the radical imaginary: art really lets us see things differently, revealing the deep contingency of current arrangements, and creates an opening onto different ways of living. If we are to get anything from it we must pass through the moment in which we know that everyone else also gets something from it (although we don’t exactly know what). Here, the artwork touches on the playful fundament of creativity essential to our capacity for rethinking the social and collectively transforming it. Referring to Friedrich von Schiller (1794/2008), for whom art was both essentially play and inherently revolutionary, Ranciere (2009a, p. 32) argues that “what aesthetic appearance and free play challenge is the distribution of the sensible that sees in the order of domination a difference between two humanities.”

The “social imaginary” is our facility for producing an idea of “society” that is functional for our integration—we all select the same signs to determine that this space is the place X—and a condition of possibility for us to produce, share, and embrace ideas about how X might be configured. This latter is the radical imaginary and it is essential to meaningful participation in society, as against cynical conformity with it. Art is an excitation of the radical imaginary. In aesthetic experience, we are alone with the work, but the moment in which we know that others also have this experience and that they too wonder is a point in which equality makes itself known. Contemporary art “is a way of redistributing the objects and images that comprise the common world as it is already given, or of creating situations apt to modify our gazes and our attitudes with respect to this collective environment” (2009, p. 21).

Art exists in the distance it takes from the dominant perception of the social world as divided by some preexisting order of varying merit.

Computer games also contain dissensus and this is especially clear when we analyze the discrepant relation of controller use to the game's fiction. Talk of "virtual worlds," "cybernetic closed circuits" of action and reaction, even of "simulation" are all far removed from the true aesthetic properties of computer games. In reality, we find a practice of multiple embodied rehearsals in which the hands are often foregrounded and the manual challenge is embraced as just that; we find awkwardness, failure, frustration, and laughter. Dissensus is integral to these experiences, albeit handled very differently than in the artwork.

In gameplay, the body can even be in a frenzy of movement. The game's fiction is superimposed on this as a kind of pseudo-ordering. It is an attempt to impose sense on movement that is actually quite disconnected from and at odds with the fictional narrative. More accurately, it tries to contain that movement. Most of the time when play goes well, we don't look at our hands and what they are doing. But when we crash and have to start again, then we may be more attentive to what our hands have to do: we rehearse like dancers (Kirkpatrick, 2011). At those points in the experience, we are not really *in* the game fiction. In a sense, what we are doing is not a game, but it is pointed at the game: that is the destination of our improved and thoroughly well-learned activity.

Like contemporary art, then, games rest upon an experience of dissonance and as such they involve a degree of distance from the dominant, hegemonic reality (the way of the world); but unlike art, they don't speak against it. This is because their logic is thoroughly cynical, that is, we have to keep grinding away at them to get the right sequence, and when we have it, we no longer care about the thing that made us play in the first place. We don't want to jump across the ravine and rescue the princess anymore, now we just want to progress and will do anything "for the win."

This is not, of course, the only possible outcome of gameplay. It is quite possible to enjoy the challenge of *Resident Evil 5* (2009) while dismissing its story as incomprehensible nonsense. Within our families and friendship groups around the controller, we may decide on other meanings than the authorized one for the continuity of our play.

Ironically, perhaps it is the attempt to impose a meaning on the movements of gameplay that prevents them from taking on any kind of meaning. Looking at the body in gameplay threatens us with meaninglessness. But this doesn't have to be a threat, as Roberto Farne (2005) points out when he describes repetitive gameplay as involving an experience of emptiness:

The perception of emptiness does not refer to something which is inconsistent, non-existent or anomic, but to a different attitude consisting of "looking at the world from a different perspective, a different logic, other methods of knowledge and examination," that makes you realize that "emptiness is as concrete as solid bodies.(Farne, 2005, p. 176)

Aesthetic art is a refusal of any definitive representational ordering. It offers instead an opening to reflection. As Farne's observation makes clear, something similar can happen as a result of gaming experience: the component parts can come unstuck and we can be left with a sense of our action as free, senseless perhaps, but the same as other people's. Most of the time, though, games do not have this effect. They touch on the radical imaginary but only to summon it in support of a hegemonic meaninglessness.

Ludefaction and Gaming the Socius

Both art and games can take social interaction as their raw material and it is here, in the difference between the relational artwork and the "social game" that the meaning of ludefaction may finally be clarified. In relational aesthetics, artworks take the behavior of their audiences and make that the stuff of the work. A famous example is Felix Gonzalez Torres' installation, which uses piles of sweets and other objects to create an interface with the public behavior of art-goers, who may take a sweet and eat it or just move the sweets around, or just look at them, or do nothing. Their behavior *is* the artwork and everyone sees her own and everyone else's actions in this light. Here, the point of the work is to "display and explore the process that leads to objects and meanings." (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 54)

Massive Multiplayer Online Games make social relations their raw material too. In *World of Warcraft* (2004), it is mandatory to participate in a guild with others if you want to succeed, with certain missions requiring a minimum number of players to collaborate. And part of the "fun" of the game lies in putting the team together, getting everyone together at the right time, setting goals, agreeing that certain behaviors will not be part of the performance. In contrast with art, though, games are an attempt to force those processes towards a determinate meaning. The dressage essential to gameplay takes the same resource of creative, embodied responses to puzzles and obliges it to "make sense" according to the strictures of the game.

Somewhere between these two examples we might position a third, *Journey* (2012), a game in which we encounter one other player in the course of our play. Both parties to this encounter are mute and can only issue semi-melodious calls to one another, while gracefully flying, circling, and lightly bumping one another in an abstract environment. During these sequences, it is also possible to lose certainty as to which of the on-screen characters is "me," since they are basically identical in appearance. Here, it is not the social connection that fascinates but, as with art, the process through which we might attain it (but are thwarted). Although the game has ludic structure—we are on some kind of mission—and the encounter with the other is essential, the overriding feeling we have at the end is one of wonder.

Part of the mission of games design (to some extent its guiding myth) is the closed cybernetic circuit, the virtual illusion. Much of game design is aimed at foisting this interpretation onto players who are then charged with the responsibility of holding the game together, pulling it under the presiding unity of the fiction. As I indicated

earlier, games enter our sensorium in a unique way but these authorial descriptions of gameplay contain an unacknowledged and thoroughly ideological element of anticipation. This conceals the tensions, disaggregations, and dissonance that define computer game aesthetics and which make the games interesting from the perspective of cultural theory.

The full significance of ludification, then, lies not at the level of the export of game-type rules to social situations that did not previously have them, but rather in the kind of reaction these strategies require in order that players make them cohere as games to be played. It is in the way that ludification taps the radical imaginary and channels it towards the requirements of the system that we see the true significance of ludification as a kind of “fracking” of the human subject. The energies and capacities that make critique possible (not just critical ideas themselves) are being harnessed by the system—consider how unarticulated feelings of dissatisfaction can get folded into the resolve of a player. The result is an opening onto our capacity to think freely and to envision other ways of living.

It should be clear from this that ludification is not the co-option of radical ideas for recuperation of the system. It works instead by providing openings for the system directly onto the source of such ideas in the radical imaginary. This is an aspect of the new subjectivation often referred to in connection with neoliberalism. The resulting new way of being is sometimes referred to as “affirmative subjectivity,” which, as Dardot and Laval (2013) point out, paradoxically solidifies social control by operating at its margins. In short, it is increasingly difficult to “think against” because our situation has been configured in such a way that thinking itself—the effort to thematize experience in alternative ideas and proposals—has become “for.”

In ludification, the processes of play are directed towards a predetermined, authorized meaning. Gaming subjectivation is, where this succeeds, the opposite of that associated with art’s event. It leaves us in the unpleasant territory described previously, where we grapple with the struggle to be authentic while knowing that we are only performing. In pursuit of a playful connection with others, we firm up the game that keeps us opposed to one another. Play’s pleasures, its addictiveness, are the force that locks us ever more firmly into the new “way things are.” *If art makes us alone to bring us together, ludification throws us together to make us more alone.*

What is disturbing about ludification is its use of the radical imaginary. Through activating playful response, it reaches right into the inner body of the social. It enables power to reach beyond articulation and discourse into the extralinguistic sources of creativity in play. I tentatively submit that one observable consequence of ludification may be the impoverishment of the radical social imaginary, which is manifest in the decline of visionary works—where are our Illichs, our Firestones today?

We can define ludification, then, as what happens when the radical imaginary is harnessed through play to affirm what is already there in the prescribed possibilities of the system. Ludification will be present in all gamified social situations but this is not to say that it is always regrettable or that it is always what is most regrettable

about a ludified situation—consider the position of Chinese prisoners forced to play *World of Warcraft* to make in-game profits for their guards, which has worse aspects, to be sure. I would argue, though, that on principle, the raw material of a game should not be social connection but its absence, that is, everything that stands between us and other people. This is because we don't want to “gameplay” with our relationships, but rather, as with *Journey*, to play with what inhibits and prevents social connection. This kind of play might create fertile ground for the radical social imaginary, encouraging us to think about how others share our experiences and how the social world might be better configured—perhaps to insist on a better game. Like art, it could highlight the contingency of current social reality and invite us to think about sociality in its discontinuous, awkward reality.

Acknowledgment

With thanks to Sarah Carling for numerous discussions of ludefaction.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. “The creative role of the radical imagination of subjects . . . is their contribution to the positing of forms, types/*eides* other than those that already exist” (Castoriadis, 1975, p. 264).
2. Adorno (1973) pointed out that there is something ridiculously childish in the idea of being a serious “grown up.”
3. Texts of this period testify to an infusion of force to the radical imaginary as authors questioned institutions comprising Huizinga's “rank layer” from Ivan Illich's (1971) critique of schools to Shulamith Firestone's (1968) devastating and inspiring indictment of the family and patriarchy.
4. Nigel Thrift (2007) refers to a new process he calls “qualculation” in which the hand takes on “epistemic functions.”
5. We can see this in three key moments in the history of the information society: In the 1970s, the first home computers were sold, even to business customers, using one of the first games, *Spacewar!* to demonstrate what they could do (Turner, 2006); surveys in 1990s showed that playing games like *Doom* was the second most common “first use” of the Internet, and the rise of social media in the middle of the last decade is firmly connected to gamification (cf. Kirkpatrick, 2013).
6. According to Carstens and Beck, there is an affinity between this organization of work and the gaming mentality, such that those employees who have grown up playing games seem

- to be functionally well-adapted to the new workplace: “Games . . . have created an entirely new individual . . . Gamers are more likely to believe that ‘winning is everything’ and ‘competition is the law of nature’ than non-gamers” (Carstens & Beck, 2005, p. 22–23).
7. They refer to visual media and entertainment as “generalized doping” (2014, p. 292), but this limits the impact of the cultural revival of play and games to what, in old-fashioned Marxist terms would be called the superstructure, whereas contemporary capitalist technology does not.
 8. In principle, such a collapse of the imaginary/symbolic could lead anywhere. Maurizio Lazzarato (2014) suggests it is the basis for a proliferation of subjectivations that capitalism will struggle to control.
 9. This is how we have understood ideology and its relation to politics at least since Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) important reformulation of Gramsci’s idea of hegemony.

References

- Adorno, T.W. (1973). *Negative dialectics*. London, England: RKP.
- Althusser, L. (1974). *Essays on ideology*. London, England: Verso.
- Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The new spirit of capitalism*. London, England: Verso.
- Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational aesthetics*. Paris, France: Le press du reel.
- Carstens, A., & Beck, J. (2005). The gamer generation. *TechTrends*, 49.
- Castoriadis, C. (1975). *The imaginary institution of society*. Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Chabot, P. (2012). *Global burn-out*. Paris, France: Presses Universitaires de Paris.
- Dardot, P., & Laval, C. (2013). *The new way of the world: On neo-liberal society*. London, England: Verso.
- Economist*. (2011). *The serious business of fun*. December 10th–16th.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2010). *Smile or die: How positive thinking fooled America and the world*. London, England: Granta.
- Eskelinen, M. (2012). *Cybertext poetics*. London, England: Continuum.
- Farne, R. (2005). The pedagogies of play. *Topoi*, 24, 169–181.
- Firestone, S. (1968). *The dialectic of sex*. London, England: Women’s Press.
- Huizinga, J. (1950). *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston, MA: Harper Torch.
- Humphreys, S. (2008). Ruling the virtual world: Governance in massively multi-player on-line worlds. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11, 149–171.
- Illich, I. (1971). *De-schooling society*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.
- Kirkpatrick, D. (2010). *The facebook effect*. London, England: Virgin Books.
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2011). *Aesthetic theory and the video game*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2013). *Computer games and the social imaginary*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Laclau, E. (1977). *Politics and ideology in Marxist theory*. London, England: Verso.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy*. London, England: Verso.
- Lazzarato, M. (2014). *Signs and machines*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Lukacs, G. (1911/1974). *Soul and form*. London, England: Merlin.

- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The post-modern condition*. Manchester, England: University of Manchester Press.
- McGonigal, J. (2012). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. London, England: Vintage.
- Neville, R. (1971). *Playpower*. London, England: Paladin.
- Ranciere, J. (2009a). *Aesthetics and its discontents*. Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Ranciere, J. (2009b). *The emancipated spectator*. London, England: Verso.
- Sassen, S. (2008). *Territory, authority, rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schiller, F. von. (1794/2008). *Letters on the aesthetic education of man*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger reprints.
- Sennett, R. (2006). *The culture of the new capitalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1987). *The critique of cynical reason*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tanke, J. (2011). *Jacques Ranciere: An introduction*. London, England: Acumen.
- Thrift, N. (2007). *Non-representational theory*. London, England: Routledge.
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet*. London, England: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Turkle, S. (2010). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. London, England: Basic Books.
- Turner, F. (2006). *From counter-culture to cyber-culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Dijck, J. (2012). Facebook as a tool for promoting connectivity and sociality. *Television and New Media*, 13, 160–172.

Games

- Journey*. (2012). Thatgamecompany. CA: Sony Computer Entertainment.
- Resident Evil 5*. (2009). Nintendo. Japan: Capcom.
- World of Warcraft*. (2004). CA: Blizzard Entertainment.

Author Biography

Graeme Kirkpatrick writes on critical theory, technology, and computer games. His recent books include *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* (Polity Press, 2013), *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (Manchester University Press, 2011), and *Technology & Social Power* (Palgrave, 2008).