CHAPTER 1: VIDEOGAMES AS AVANT-GARDE ART

What is an Avant-garde Game?

Figure 1-1 Quilted Thought Organ’s unusual gameplay opens up new ways for players to perceive, feel, and perform movement through virtual space.

What are videogames becoming? If videogames are an artistic medium, what defines their art? If videogames are a technical and cultural force, how can they enrich society and redistribute power? A contemporary avant-garde is challenging our notions—academic and consumer alike—of what videogames are and what they are for. Games like Cow Clicker, World Without Oil, and Quilted Thought Organ question the realm of possibility in games. Julian Oliver’s Quilted Thought Organ (1998-2001) was built with Quake I and Quake II, first-person shooter engines, but the familiar tunnels, platforms, and mutant enemies are replaced with ghostly, colorful lattices that saturate the space. The environment is navigable but gameplay has become a strange negotiation. Walk around and realize riffs of atonal music are spawned by brushing through the diaphanous forms. Turn around and glimpse hyper-geometries transforming in your wake. Stop… so do they. Quilted Thought Organ is a “game-based performance environment,” a ludic version of the call-and-response scene from Close Encounters of the Third Kind. The allure of Quilted Thought
Organ is trying to determine the nature, logic, and reward loops of this unusual experience. Rediscovering the game as such becomes the game.

Quilted Thought Organ is an avant-garde game. It’s an avant-garde game in a similar way that Modern, abstract paintings were avant-garde historically. Renaissance perspective is an analogue to optimal gameplay flow. Perspectival space (the illusion that paintings are virtual windows unto staged scenes) guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting. The rise of avant-garde painting, such as Impressionism and cubism, opened alternate ways of looking at and making paintings, and called into question how painting was defined as a medium. Entrenched formulas guide and control the player in a videogame by rewarding and regulating behavioral patterns toward certain actions and goals. Perspective is mobilized not only in time, but also in function with games. The avant-garde shows how games can manifest a greater diversity of gameplay and be creatively engaged in more kinds of ways by more kinds of people. They redefine the medium, breaking apart and expanding how we make, think, and play with games. The avant-garde liquefies games.

It may seem dubious to suggest that the avant-garde is relevant to contemporary creative practice, but it isn’t a novel claim. Mark Amerika writes, “Artists who are immersed in digital processes are contemporary version of what in the twentieth century we used to call the avant-garde. Thankfully, they no longer have to pretend to be ahead of their time...”1 The Critical Art Ensemble developed new avant-garde strategies in response to new media in the 1990s:

For many decades, a cultural practice has existed that has avoided being named or fully categorized. Its roots are in the modern avant-garde, to the
extent that participants place a high value on experimentation and on engaging the unbreakable link between representation and politics. Perhaps this is a clue as to why this practice has remained unnamed for so long. Since the avant-garde was declared dead, its progeny must be dead too. Perhaps this brood is simply unrecognizable because so many of the avant-garde's methods and narratives have been reconstructed and reconfigured to such an extent that any family resemblance has disappeared...²

Illuminating how the avant-garde is emerging through videogames is the purpose of this book. If we care about games as an artistic or cultural force, we need to understand how the videogame avant-garde works. How does the videogame avant-garde diverge from contemporary and historical avant-garde movements: tactical media, the Critical Art Ensemble, net art of the 90s, video art of the 60s, Fluxus, the situationists, Dada, or the Impressionists? The contemporary avant-garde faces cultural and technological constraints and opportunities that historical avant-gardes did not face. Videogames emerged from the military-industrial complex in which social anxieties and economic outlays of the Cold War were formative to the metaphors and spatial schemas that still enframe them. Contemporary culture flows in an elaborate and networked form of digital capitalism, a context that precludes and affords certain avant-garde tactics that are specific to this moment in time. As a convergence of technology and cultural practice, videogames are in a unique situation. They are ruled from the bottom, through mass consumption, and from the top, via multinational corporate power. In response to the sheer complexity of the cultural and technological structure of videogames, the avant-garde deploys a host of strategies, ranging from radical to complicit in their degree, formal to political in their nature, and local to global in their scope.
What makes videogames interesting is how their relation to technoculture is distinct from the movements and mediums of the historical avant-garde. They are also distinct from contemporary avant-garde figures like Orlan, who has plastic surgery as theatrical performance, claiming that the “avant-garde is no longer in art, it is in genetics.” Not only are videogames an advanced product of technoculture, but they are also the nexus in which culture conventionalizes how we play with technology. This makes videogames a principal site to expose, unwork, and rethink the protocols and rituals that rule technoculture.

**Mainstream and Avant-garde**

If we compare an avant-garde game with a mainstream game, two games that are ostensibly similar, we can generalize some differences. The mainstream game that serves flow is *Heavy Weapon: Atomic Tank*, a commercially successful casual shooter. Developer of *Heavy Weapon*, PopCap, is famous for its *Bejeweled* series which sold more than 25 million copies from 2001-08. The avant-garde game that questions flow is *September 12th*, a shooter that makes the act of shooting reflexive. *September 12th* is a nonprofit work created by a handful of people at Newsgaming with Gonzalo Frasca as game designer. Both games are 2D, browser-based Flash games that use mice to point-and-shoot, yet they manifest remarkably divergent experiences.
A corny 1984 back-story collides with pre-9/11 war references of America’s mood at the height of the Cold War in *Heavy Weapon*. The player guides a tiny “atomic” U.S. tank, the last line of defense against the invading Red Star army. A cutscene opens the game, featuring a U.S. official advising the President to surrender. The Secretary of Defense retorts, “I’ve heard enough liberal whining! This is freedom’s last stand… Send in… ATOMIC TANK!” Kitsch irony sets a perfect mood of loose referents. The ensuing gameplay lights up the center of the brain with eye-fluttering finger-clicks.

According to PopCap, *Heavy Weapon* “brings classic shooter action to the casual gamer.” It’s a cartoony side-scrolling shoot ‘em up with “easy-to-learn mechanics.” The real appeal of *Heavy Weapon* is the contrast between its two core mechanics of fight and flight: the player tracks objects with the mouse to shoot at everything that

Figure 1-2 Frenetically eliminate all that moves in a tight cycle of flowing action in *Heavy Weapon*
moves while steering her vehicle to avoid everything that moves. Unexpected complications arise to keep players off-guard: an aid helicopter flies into the heat of battle to drop power-ups, nukes, shields, and upgrades.

The abundance of references in *Heavy Weapon*: atomic weapons, cold war history, cartoon violence, etc., jibe together in a jaunty postmodern style—canceling out the need to associate anything at all with the gameplay. Irony coats the flow of repetitive, basic operations with a slippery buzz. The lack of meaning sucks players into a hardwired, seek-and-destroy cyclical cocoon, invigorating twitch reflexes, eschewing formal exploration and reflexive play that *September 12th* rewards.

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Figure 1-3 *September 12th* simulates the ideology of the war on terror as a positive feedback loop of escalating violence.
Immediately launching *September 12th*, the player is addressed as a political subject. The screen reads, “The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror.” Hit play to gaze down on an isometric Arab town. Residents circulate peacefully down narrow streets. A few terrorists mix in, wearing keffiyehs or white headdresses. The player might be inclined to aim and fire a missile at one. A short delay prior to launch makes clean, accurate kills near impossible. Bystanders die and onlookers grieve. A few become enraged. Flashing and bleeping, the mourners morph into a new generation of terrorists. The more terrorists are targeted for destruction the more they are created. The euphemism of “surgical strikes” unravels along with the flow.

*September 12th* and *Heavy Weapon* offer orthogonal experiences. *Heavy Weapon* channels players up into an ever-tightening circuit of play. *September 12th* grounds players in an ever-loosening circuit instead. It reveals and revels in its own nature as a game. The player consciously twists and toys with the circuit itself. Instead of training players to aim and time clicks effectively, *September 12th* palpably exposes how these skills are already trained. A frustrated microcosm of twitch reflexes spirals out into a pleasurable connection to the macrocosm of geopolitics. *Heavy Weapon* has the opposite effect. Geopolitics implodes in a flush of references that wash players down the fizzy flow of familiar experience.

**Redefining Videogames**

We’ll need the broadest workable definition of “videogame” or the subject we set out to explore will be blinkered from view from the start. The problem with studying games is that definitions parade around as design documents in disguise. The problem of prescriptive definitions isn’t unique to games. The Renaissance
definition of painting is a design document of sorts. It described what painting is, while elaborating best practices to maximize its unique illusory power. Leon Battista Alberti in his 1435 treatise *De Pictura* defined paintings as a virtual “window” and expounded pivotal mechanics, such as establishing a vanishing point to achieve a convincing illusion of depth. The avant-garde ultimately challenged that definition and began folding, warping, cutting up, and reassembling the window. Art critic Maurice Dennis advised the salon public in 1890, “It is well to remember that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.” In short, painting is not definable as a virtual window, but as pigment on a surface—which Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings potently embody.

It’s important to remember that Dennis’s definition was itself challenged by subsequent avant-gardes. mediums are always in flux, most of all to the avant-garde. Conceptual artist Sol Lewitt conceived of painting as an idea rather than a material construct. For Lewitt, the defining element of a painting is in the series of choices made in its construction, not in the presence of fibers and pigment. Thus, anyone can produce a Lewitt painting, which reads like a series of instructions: *Wall Drawing #46* (1970) is “Vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly.” Who is right: Alberti, Dennis, or Lewitt? Are paintings illusions, materials, concepts, or something else still? Over time it has become clear that all of these definitions present a viable approach to understanding or making a painting. Several approaches are combined in digital painting tools that blend Lewitt’s painting-as-procedure with material constraints, such as rendering within a hardware’s RGB color space. It took centuries for painting to reach its present form, but the process isn’t teleological. Painting isn’t progressing toward a predestined goal but churning at the hands of technology and global cultural practice. In fact, it
is always the opposite; mediums become increasingly liquid in the hands of the avant-garde. When no more avant-gardes touch a medium, it fossilizes and dies.

Like many writers, I’ve been using “game” and “videogame” interchangeably, but I do so only for brevity. In *Half-Real: A Dictionary of Video Game Theory* Jesper Juul defines videogame as “a game played using computer power and a video display.” Most accept the tautology that videogames are foremost defined by their gameness.
For Juul, any equipment is relegated to background facilitator, serving the heart of the matter, the game:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.⁸

In this definition, the dance of visual phenomena onscreen serves only as evidence to direct players into certain courses of action. Juul discusses the role of fiction; for example, to “play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world.” Forces that are material, cultural, sensual, and so on, are unseen, unfelt. Such features are only given attention according to how they inform the game in the conservative sense. I cite Juul because he strives to be definitive of games, but we could also look to formal definitions advanced by many game academics and find similar results.

If we are to cultivate the potential of videogames, we can’t afford to overlook key characteristics that don’t fit our narrative of what videogames are supposed to be. We can’t ignore what is happening right now with games. In fact, a key strategy of the avant-garde is to engage videogames as they are, not only as we wish them to be. Sensuality, materiality, economics, commercial trends and popular conventions are as definitive and integral to videogames as a platonic ideal of gameness. The technological affordances of specific hardware, software, and their contingent sensual signatures also comprise the formal nature of the medium. The commercial industry doesn’t ignore this so why should artists, designers, or academics? One of the lowest common denominators of recent decades has been the drive toward
convincing photorealism and beyond. The avant-garde isn’t afraid to explore, exaggerate, and dissect this key affordance in its liquid working of videogames. This is how the avant-garde unworks and outstrips mainstream game culture.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 1-5 *Night Journey*, a collaboration of artist, Bill Viola and USC, foregrounds the video in *videogame* by bridging laserdisc games like *Dragon’s Lair* and video art.

For gamer culture the idea that “videogames are games” is irrefutable. But turn this around. Why should “video” blot out “game”? Videogames are played on LCD, LED and plasma screens so “video” in the traditional sense doesn’t describe the hardware, but it does stand in for all the support technologies that constrain and allow games to function. The avant-garde senses artistic potential in the video of games. *Night Journey*, for example, is a game collaboration by Bill Viola, a renowned video artist, and USC. *Night Journey* is a videogame-enabled dream. It’s one part *Dragon’s Lair*, one part uncanny video art, and one part virtual camera controlled in
3D space. The artists call it explorable video. Intensity in games normally comes from rising challenges clashing with rising skill or effort. In *Night Journey*, intensity comes from the visual slurring of a living environment and the player’s presence within it. It doesn’t feel like you’re traversing the environment, that is what’s apparently happening. It’s more like you’re a ghost melting through a black and white dreamscape. Or, you’re the environment itself, dilating around the roving camera image. The artists wished to evoke an archetypal spiritual journey of an individual’s enlightenment. That’s one way of experiencing it. But it’s more interesting how it fails in this regard as it accomplishes something quite different—a common fate of avant-garde works, as we shall see time and time again. There’s a lugubrious sensual logic that the creatures and slow-dancing plants emanate. When a fish or bird hauntingly appears, for example, it hovers there like some endearing bug-eyed hallucination. They’re trying to communicate something that lies just beyond the edge of making sense. For you to “get it,” it feels like an inch of your sanity, or waking self, must slip into that world. Once you’ve slipped, it takes a moment to realize that you’re already moving on into the game’s dreamtime.

*Night Journey* explores videogames as they are. Instead of rendering the visual spectacle as subservient to the gameplay—a popular goal among game enthusiasts—*Night Journey* accepts the game industry’s quest for ever greater graphic intensity and doubles down. The artists leveraged this feature as a shiny affordance to exploit. *Night Journey* also explores videogames as they could be. It goes beyond and askew of photorealism, dynamically connecting the spectacle to player action. The conventional qualities of immersive space fold inwards, oozing through the dreamy wrinkles of zoned-out gameplay.
Game industry pioneer, Chris Crawford, acknowledged in the 1980s that videogames, by definition, have a material component. In fact, he claims the computer is a novel resource that has yet be fully exploited by game designers:

Interactiveness is a central element of game enjoyment. As mentioned earlier, the computer’s plasticity makes it an intrinsically interactive device. Yet, the potential inherent in the computer can easily go unrealized if it is programmed poorly. A program emphasizing static data is not very dynamic. It is not plastic, hence not responsive, hence not interactive. A process-intensive program, by contrast, is dynamic, plastic, responsive, and interactive. Therefore, store less and process more.  

Although Crawford grounds his characterization in the physical properties of the computer, he can’t leave the resource open to play. There’s one path to follow: maximize procedural power above all else. There’s no room for a diversity of play in games, a work that stores more and processes less, for example. Where does this leave a groundbreaking, ethereal game like Night Journey that draws significantly from the instantiated content of video and spatial environment? Even if processing power is a unique feature and strength of the computer, why must games always strive to maximize that power? Why must weakness be hidden away?

Will Wright suggests that The Sims and SimCity are software toys rather than videogames. That is unfortunate. If we bring them into the fold, the “problem” that they pose becomes an opportunity to cultivate a deeper appreciation of the field. If we hold fast to the idea that not only The Sims, but September 12th, Night Journey, Quilted Thought Organ, and all the works examined below, are in fact videogames, then the cultural frame that holds them fractures, diversifies, and expands in
response. If we can allow many definitions of videogame to aggregate into a composite, fractured image, we suddenly have an avant-garde perspective. It’s a vision as uncomfortable as it is lively, challenging and historically grounded.

Rather than trying to carve out a perfect definition of videogames, we can accept each definition while requesting that it remain nonexclusive. The aggregate definition is uncomfortably open: *videogames are playing with technoculture.* Culture increasingly imbricates itself with technology, and technology with culture. Avant-garde gameplay allows us to reflexively play with this blended structure in as many scales and ways as artists can fathom. It’s the dynamic nature of this spectacular scene that the videogame avant-garde allows us to appreciate, to feel, and to affect.

**Avant-garde is Diverse**

A British émigré to the states, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale surveyed modern feminism in 1914. In avant-garde rhetoric, Hale described feminism using “the metaphor of an army to delineate the main body of parliamentary suffragists, the rear of municipal suffragists, a vanguard of ‘advanced feminists’, and an ultra-radical group of ‘skirmishers’.”¹⁰ Hale subverts the popular myth that there is one avant-garde ideal. There are many. No feminist column is above the other. The feminist avant-garde must operate along a broad spectrum if it is to get things done. Its operational space is so broad that single positions within it oppose one another. Certain kinds of work can only get done from certain positions of power. Hale recognized that radical, anarchistic actions could subvert government power and threaten social stability, on the one hand. On the other hand, complicit feminist forces within government could leverage those radicals in order to gain progressive concessions. This needn’t be a conspiratorial plot. This is analogous to the
relationship between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, who opposed each other’s strategies. They flanked the white middle class from both sides like a vice, from a position of peace and a position of violence. As part of an emergent, collective effort to seize equal rights, they couldn’t have orchestrated it better if they tried. As an expansive, chaotic system, the avant-garde tends to distribute its efforts without the need of a coordinator, which wouldn’t be obeyed in any case.

Hal Foster, an art historian and theorist of the contemporary avant-garde, disputes the assumption that “one theory can comprehend the avant-garde.”¹¹ This realization is growing among academics. Regarding contemporary avant-garde theater, James Harding criticizes the “notion that there is ‘the avant-garde’ rather than a variety of avant-garde communities, trajectories, or traditions.”¹² Another popular myth is that the avant-garde is about negation, and presumably, the more critical or offensive it is the better or at least more avant-garde. The problem is that story isn’t true either. Johanna Drucker argues that the avant-garde, “is not what the academy has made of it. Every instance of playful engagement, of serious exchange, of complex attraction and adoration and longing” has been overwritten.¹³ Drucker summarizes the problem:

the legacy of oppositional criticism, of a negative position claiming moral superiority and distance from those ideologies … can’t be sustained any more. Mythic though they were, these belief systems do not accurately describe either our current condition or our past history.¹⁴

The historical avant-garde has been mischaracterized which has perpetuated a popular misunderstanding regarding the contemporary avant-garde. We must diversify our framing of the avant-garde if we are to understand it.
If we can begin by distinguishing a *formal* avant-garde from a *political* avant-garde, we open up and support difference across communities of practice. The avant-garde described by the iconic Modern art critic Clement Greenberg in “Avant-garde and Kitsch” advances the formal view. The avant-garde described by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-garde* advances the political view. The political avant-garde is realized in collective experiences, politicizing art or using art to change society; the formal avant-garde is realized in individual experience, letting art advance itself disregarding social concerns. Art for art’s sake. Videogames for videogames’ sake. To simplify the difference: the political avant-garde manifests *events*, while the formal avant-garde creates *works* or *games*. 
Figure 1-6 Stan Brakhage glued moth wings and grass onto celluloid in the film, *Mothlight* (1963), so we may “imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective” and see moving images without perceiving them as narratives, symbols, and spaces.

The *formal* avant-garde explores the properties of an artistic medium. Each medium is believed to have unique affordances, sensual capacities, and cultural history from which to construct work. The task of the artist is to expose, challenge, or redefine these features. Greenberg describes avant-garde painting in medium-specific terms:

Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation
with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to
the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.\footnote{15}

Greenberg’s formalist category of avant-garde art is synonymous with Modern art of
the last half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. According to
formal theory, mediums should seek to be reflexive and revealing of their own form.
Abstract splatter paintings revel in their own flat surface rather than trying to create
illusions of receding space and dimension. Likewise in music, arrangements of the
twelve tones need not sink us into reverie, evoke a preset series of emotions, or
convey a story. Instead, dissonant tensions and collisions among tones can shape the
experience around the formal properties of music outside of canned narratives and
emotions. Stan Brakhage crafted a film by gluing grass and insects directly on the
celluloid. As it clacked and flickered through the projector the entire process and
apparatus of film—the projector, celluloid, light, faculties of perception and
cognition, the darkened room full of people, and so on—was foregrounded and
illuminated. The persistence of vision and phenomenology of moving imagery
become palpable entities to scrutinize. Brakhage explored what the experience of
film could be beyond the established eventful, narrative structures.

Formal games manifest the irreducibility of play that lives beyond the familiar flow
channels. Julian Oliver’s \textit{Quilted Thought Organ} richly rewards an examination
through the lens of the formal avant-garde. Oliver’s work offers a novel mechanic of
movement-as-sound, emphasizing one of the core features of FPS engines: the
moment-to-moment act of navigating Cartesian space. Trying to make sense of this
distorted, alternate gamespace presents a meta-challenge that compounds the usual
challenges. The conventional challenges of games are displaced, leaving a rawer
gameplay experience in their wake. Game enthusiasts often get snagged on the
demand that the player must read the artist’s intent or expression in the work. Perhaps, but formal games often yield the most provocative experiences if they can also speak for themselves.

Figure 1-7 Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) played *with* the rules of art, reworking its definition, rather than playing *in* the established rules of art.

The historical *political* avant-garde played with the category of art itself, and often denied that what they were doing was art. This is similar to contemporary artists denying that what they are making is games—even mainstream figures, like Will Wright, do this. Responding to the upheavals of WWI, Dada created shocking art events as a means of transforming and challenging culture. Richard Huelsenbeck, a Dadaist, asks: “What is German culture? Answer: Shit!” Opposing the formal avant-garde, Dadaists mocked Manet and Cézanne, two prominent formal artists of the 19th century. In *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Hal
Foster argues that we must adopt a more nuanced perspective of the historical avant-garde if we are going to understand the contemporary avant-garde and all that has changed in the past century. He begins with Duchamp, whose:

aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation of art and life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice is at its best contradictory, mobile, and otherwise diabolical.16

Duchamp placed a rotated urinal on a pedestal, signed it with a pseudonym, titled it *Fountain*, and submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists, of which Duchamp was a member. The Society agreed that they would accept all submissions in alphabetical order—a transgressive move in its own right. But they rejected *Fountain. Fountain* toys with the institution of art, its arbitrary assignments of value, and adhering to fossilized definitions. But it makes another move in plain sight. It foregrounds and aestheticizes how we normally sense, or more accurately, how we don’t sense, technology. An industrial object that we routinely interact with privately is lifted from this conventional use to become a heavy object in pristine gloss. This familiar thing now gazes back, asserting its presence and mass in an unfamiliar way. It has a surreal quality, sitting useless, glistening and gaping. Like other readymades, it deviates from artistic convention while manifesting the irreducibility of artistic experience at the same time. This is how the political avant-garde creates and destroys art. Art is made impossible and possible again. Failures and successes get tangled.

The political avant-garde creates and destroys games in a way that’s different from how they create and destroy art. They preclude one kind of play, the modern, safe
notion of play, while opening up the play of worlds. Johan Huizinga mischaracterized the magic circle in *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga constrained his examination through a modern lens that splits the world in two: science (rational world) and magic (irrational world). The political avant-garde recalls what the magic circle meant and did historically—it blends worlds together. It recovers what we have collectively lost, radical play.

The political avant-garde of games sees political force in every button press. Politics can’t be bracketed from view. Mark Wark describes the strength and weakness of the radical political philosophy: “The question of the form of the game cannot be separated from the question of the form of the world…” The very idea of a radical formal avant-garde becomes a farce. Form and politics are always inextricably linked. Aesthetic play—playing with the grain of flow for its own sake—is impossible because the world is in play and it demands our attention. Who cares if videogames are an artistic medium! We play so the powers that be, powers both within and beyond the game, are broken, shared, and remade.

Each avant-garde emerges from and contends with its own cultural moment. Today, it engages the category of technocultural entertainment rather than art because that is where the action is. Foster summarizes it best, stating that a “reconnection of art and life has occurred, but under the terms of the culture industry” and rather “than render the avant-garde null and void, these developments have produced new spaces of critical play and prompted new modes of institutional analysis.” Culture increasingly mobilizes its values through entertainment and technology rather than the church, museum, or academy. That is where routines of control, violence, and desire are normalized and propagated.
Politically avant-garde gameplay is more socially targeted than single-player works like *Quilted Thought Organ*. Videogames are created and destroyed in a publicly viral way. Let’s begin with an obvious, extreme example, keeping in mind that dozens of more sophisticated, subtler examples will follow. Griefers are players who harass or challenge other players beyond the established scope of the game. Griefers question the rituals and protocols of massively multiplayer games, like *World of Warcraft*, and virtual worlds, like *Second Life*. One tactic is to deploy “grey goo” or self-replicating objects that multiply beyond the system’s ability to model and present them. In *Second Life*, for example, grey goo can take the form the golden rings from *Sonic the Hedgehog*. As rings fall from the sky, each serves as a spawn point for more rings. Spreading exponentially, they outpace the capacity of the server at Linden Lab.
running that section of the world. If a server crashes or slows, everyone logged onto it is affected, hence the moniker “grid attack.” Grey goo is a visual-spatial analogue of a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack that floods websites with spoofed data requests until the server is crippled.

Griefers open up alterior play patterns that restructure the very systems in which they arise. Virtual commodities are illegally replicated until their value zeros out, for example. From a mainstream perspective, griefers only break games. But from a political avant-garde perspective they conjure new form of game altogether. The presence of protocols—normally veiled and subservient to the flow of consumption—irrupts as grey goo that pushes back. Griefers reframe gamespace as a shared public space. They demonstrate that virtual worlds have a greater diversity of artistic properties for us to play with. Scripting, social engineering, swarming and hacking the collective flow become the core gameplay mechanics. The frame of the online social experience is itself in play. Just as academics once wrongly assumed that the early 20th century avant-garde brought about the end of art, only to realize later that they opened up the definition of art, today’s radical political avant-garde may seem to ruin the game, but it will become apparent that they are cracking apart the flow of games in the 21st century.
If the goal is to cultivate understanding of the videogame avant-garde we must illuminate the most prominent and divergent features of works and events rather than adhering to observations derived from one dominant view of art. The avant-garde varies in intensity and ranges from enacting politics to crafting formal works. To comprehend its diversity, we might imagine its members spread out across a field. For example, most political figures aren’t as radical as Dada or griefers. Bertolt Brecht was a prominent playwright after WWI, who used theater as a way to propagate political thought through popular culture. Brecht valued theater as popular entertainment and curved its force toward political ends, rather than overtly challenging it. We can think of Frasca’s September 12th in the same vein. Frasca and Brecht are no griefers. September 12th challenges the medium, of course, but not in an especially radical or difficult way. The game implicates the player in an
argument on the futility of the war on terror while also being a fun game. Frasca and Brecht are a more *complicit* or easy political avant-garde. The relative ease with which we engage their work is evident when compared to the incendiary Dada and griefers. The latter could be seen as a *radical* or hard political avant-garde. To play through or with a griefer attack is extremely difficult if not impossible for most people. *Complicit* works or political events aren’t as mind-bending, sense-assaulting, or code-demanding to play as *radical* works. Players are given greater opportunity to find their bearings, give their senses and computer a break, and lean more heavily on conventions.

We can evaluate the avant-garde according to how it opens us up to being with games (*formal art*) or with the world at large (*political art*), in ways that deviate from our own adaptations—whether they are scientific, capitalistic, or functional—such as our training in the efficient use of computer interfaces and networks to extend our agonizing desire for greater control and mastery. The avant-garde helps us unwork the flow of power and act according to logics that are neither dominating (agonistic) nor submissive (instrumental). The constituent parts of technoculture are given playful room to drift, giving us slack to appreciate a blended and open way of being, not a better synthesis with technology, nor a Rousseauian decoupling from technology via some idiotic “return to nature.” In short, the goal of the avant-garde is to realize alterity in games and the world. Individual groups realize alterity differently; some fixate on form, others politics; some take radical positions, using extreme measures, while others take more complicit positions. Each of the six chapters that follow examines one family of avant-garde strategies: radical formal, radical political, complicit formal, complicit political, narrative formal, and narrative political. This book isn’t exhaustive; there are other avant-gardes to be explored and other ways to slice through the field.
Chapter Summaries

Figure 1-10 Each of the four following chapters examines an avant-garde category. Every chapter touches upon mainstream games that occupy the lower right area.

Chapter 2: Radical Formal

It’s standard in the game community to desire gameplay that puts players into the zone or flow.10 Most games don’t offer it, at least not consistently, but most designers strive for it. Although not every developer uses the word “flow,” it’s a given concept that permeates the industry. In simple terms, flow is “optimal experience,” according to psychologist, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. Csíkszentmihályi describes flow as a dynamic balancing a person’s constantly shifting horizon of skill, focus, and interest. Flow is:
a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a
goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how
one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left
over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-
consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted.\textsuperscript{20}

The radical formal avant-garde plays with the form of a given medium. By
foregrounding and manipulating a medium’s form, artists and critics push it beyond
conventional usage within technocultural entertainment—which for videogames is
\textit{flow}. To play a formalist game is to sense its infrastructure and confront its
contingent nature. Formalist works expose the tricks normally used to help players
chase flow. The experience resists interpretation because it breaches established
boundaries and closures.

Renaissance perspective is an analogue to optimal gameplay flow. Just as
perspective guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting, common
formulas guide and control the player in a videogame by rewarding and regulating
behavior along certain paths and goals. Perspective has been mobilized not only in
time, but also in function. Formal games set up situations in which we can play with
the materiality, sensuality, and conventionality of videogames in richly reflexive
ways. Only when gameplay is allowed to resist the drive for flow can the question of
what it means to play a videogame be asked in real-time.

The term “medium” is everywhere in writing on games. It implies something
beyond material support, evident in the profusion of terms: storytelling medium,
expressive medium, medium of communication, and so on. However, a formal
definition that attends to this implication has not been advanced. Several formal
definitions exist in the history of art theory. To gain a multifaceted perspective, we can aggregate several definitions within one frame: an artistic medium is comprised of three formal supports: material technology, sensual affordances, and cultural conventions. Formal practice occurs within each of these supports individually and in combination.

Summarizing all of a medium’s genres and conventions within a single work helps advance the idea that the medium has reached a threshold of cultural relevance and prominence to be approached as an artistic medium—the idea, for example, that Painting deserves a capital P. This capitalization occurred with the rise of novelist Literature in the 19th century, with French Painting in the late 19th century, and eventually with Film in the 1950s and 60s, aided by the advent of Film Studies as an academic discipline. Before film culturally ascended as Film, enthusiasts lamented it wasn’t taken as seriously as Painting. This historical parallel helps fixate the film envy afflicting the game community and suggests how games are passing through this phase. By looking inward, yet in the broadest possible ways, conventions across many game genres can be aggregated and condensed in single works to help advance Videogames with a capital V.

Chapter 3. Radical Political

The political avant-garde recalls what the magic circle meant and did historically. It recovers something that what we have collectively lost, radical play. Johan Huizinga mischaracterized the magic circle in Homo Ludens. Huizinga constrained his examination though a modern lens that splits the world in two. Play is excised from work, real from the unreal, sacred from the mundane. However, if we look to historical fiction, for example, the magic circle blends rather than separates worlds.
In *Doctor Faustus*, a 16th century play, the magic circle summons real scientific knowledge but also demonic threat which is a source of death. Huizinga’s error has been propagated throughout game studies in which designers conjure magical bubbles to protect. The avant-garde challenges us to reassess the definitions of play established in the mid 20th century. To believe play is only possible through the grace of rules is to constrain play to the conventional technocentric perspective. Actual play is inherently transformative of the structures through which it moves.

The radical political avant-garde recalls the premodern magic circle. They remind us that reality is in play and also that play requires risk to transform reality. They play with art and politics, fictions and everyday life, blending and transforming these categories in their events. Several founders of the Black Panthers arose from street theater in Harlem, such as the Black House. The highly stylized marches and protests were a form of avant-garde political theater. In spite of their stated goal of social revolution, the Black Panthers accomplished something else. They demonstrated how blacks could transform their own place and function in society and that they didn’t need the paternal support of whites, the government, or church to do so. The U.S. government understood that the Black Panthers were committing a symbolic form of violence through their political theater and pushing them “across the line from symbolic to literal violence was one of the main goals” of the FBI program, COINTELPRO.

*Toywar* emerged in two worlds simultaneously in 1999. The first was a fictional game and the other a real economic intervention. A billion-dollar toy retailer, eToys.com, threatened to sue the artist group, etoy, for trademark infringement. The retailer assumed that the etoy artists would submit to conventional power in one of two ways: give up the intellectual property or respond to legal claims with legal
responses in the court system. etoy responded by drawing a magic circle called, Toywar, around themselves, the corporation, the market, and the news media. Toywar was an MMO in which players tried to drive down the actual price of eToys’s stock in the NASDAQ. An internal check system allowed players to compare, remix, and record public-relations stunts. eToys’s continual public relations triage was tracked as well. A flurry of articles about Toywar appeared in national and local newspapers from The New York Times to Le Monde. Within weeks of launching Toywar the price of the eToys’s stock was in freefall with the company eventually declaring bankruptcy. The artists claim that Toywar was “the most expensive performance in art history: $4.5 billion dollars.”

The radical political avant-garde expands the liminal aspects of play to draw technoculture into the magic circle. They show us the world is already blended and that life is in play, transforming the world in which we live.

Chapter 4: Complicit Formal

The term “complicit formalism” was coined by Johanna Drucker in Sweet Dreams to distinguish contemporary practices in art from radical formal practice (which Krauss calls old-style or Modern practice) that dominated art in the first half of the 20th century:

Old-style formalism in a modernist mode had a conspicuous allegiance to a kind of formal essentialism or faith in the power of an object to communicate directly as a form. Complicit formalism, by contrast, draws on… the material existence of artifacts [which] embodies cultural systems of meaning.
Complicit formalism denies medium-specificity whereas radical formalism asserts it. The complicit formal avant-garde doesn’t advance videogames as a medium. On the contrary, it calls into question whether videogames are a medium at all and not a product of technocultural entertainment indistinguishable from media at large. Even the artists themselves are unstable. Instead of calling them artists, Mark Amerika calls them an “artist-medium,” “flux persona,” “aimless drifter,” or “digital thoughtographer.” What differentiates the complicit formal avant-garde from the political avant-garde is its belief in having artistic experiences for their own sake. Individual mediums may be dead, but art as a cultural practice is not.

Complicit formalists lose the central mooring of a “medium” but gain a lyrical elasticity in return. And humor lubricates any resulting discomfort. Nam June Paik, a Fluxus artist arising in the 1960s, humanized and demystified Cold War technology, assembling, for example, a tottering robot that defecated beans while broadcasting a Kennedy speech. In Cockfight Arena, players awkwardly don feathered costumes wired to manipulate two fighting roosters onscreen. The players’ physicality and presence draws more attention than the action onscreen. In other complicit works, players are sexually serviced, lovingly massaged, hobbled with circuitry, and willfully electrocuted. Procedural loops binding player-and-game are brought into high relief in one moment and blurred beyond recognition the next.

Chapter 5: Complicit Political

The efforts of the complicit political avant-garde are political but not as extreme as the radicals. The magic circle blends worlds in a more populist way. Rather than confronting multitudes head on like a Dada performance or a griefer attack, the multitude is seduced to celebrate and grief itself. In the 1960s, the situationists used
new media to reshape everyday life. They took the remix tactics of Dada and articulated how a broader public could use them. In March 1968, anarchist and Leftist students seized power at Nanterre University on the outskirts of Paris, demanding government reform. The situationists threw fuel on the fire through art, manifestos, and slogans that helped inflame millions to protest in France. They developed methods in which urban space is reconceived as an open game.

Contemporary practices like certain alternate reality games (ARGs) develop these strategies further. ARGs are collective, participatory narratives played by scalable, networked communities across new and old media platforms, usually incorporating physical space like streets and parks of urban environments. Socially transformative desires are fed and fostered by affording innovative ways for the multitude to unwork power, redefine urban space, and restructure social relations in surprising ways. The alternate reality game *World Without Oil* (*WWO*) appears to be about what people in the developed world will do when peak oil is reached and demand for oil far outstrips supply. The puppetmasters of *WWO* incrementally raised the fictional price of gas over several weeks. National economies went into recession, depression, civil and international wars ensued—all determined collectively and spontaneously by players who produced thousands of in-game narratives via blogs, videos, images, and other media. The actual subject of *WWO* was not fossil fuel economies or an oil crisis, but the mediated construction of crises themselves, demagoguery, and fear in popular culture. To play the game was to détourn and unwork shock media itself.

The complicit political avant-garde redefines what “politics” means in society. Traditional liberal politics is issue-based, representative, party-dominated, orderly, and hierarchical. For the complicit political avant-garde, politics is open, bottom-up, personal, concrete, and participatory. Due to its complicity with mainstream culture
and our media ecology, this avant-garde may or may not inspire overtly critical readings, even as it fosters collective empowerment by redistributing the flow of power from the bottom.

Figure 1-11 Chapters 6 and 7 examine the narrative avant-garde along formal and political perspectives.

Chapter 6: Narrative Formal

The narrative formal avant-garde explores the narrative and literary nature of games in both radical and complicit ways. The genre that’s most ostensibly literary, Interactive Fiction (IF), is a treasure trove of narrative formal work. The challenge isn’t picking out avant-garde works but the ordinary ones. In classic text adventures, players type commands to control their avatar, talk with characters, move through environments, manipulate objects, and advance the narrative. The game states:
“There is a rock on the ground.” The player types, “take the rock,” to which the game replies, “I don’t understand ‘rock.’” The player racks her brain, perchance realizing the programmer’s laziness, and types: “take the stone,” to which the game now replies, “stone taken.” Through idiotic irony and the inability of the parser to accept flexibility inherent to everyday language, the effect of defamiliarization is realized.

The avant-garde elaborates on the affordances of game narrative in more sophisticated ways than parser frustrations. The plot of Adam Cadre’s IF game, Photopia, is kaleidoscopic and never closes. The player begins as a hung-over passenger in a speeding car packed with college kids. They crash into another car and someone dies. Through non-sequitur scenes and mystifying shifts in perspective, the game jumps back and forth in time. The characters you play shift. The life and death of a character named Alley is the axis around which the bizarre structure turns, serially distorting its own topic as haunting, humorous, sad, alien.

Façade, a graphical “interactive drama” by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, one of the finest works of the narrative avant-garde ever made. You play a longtime friend of a bickering couple on the brink of divorce. As a visitor in their apartment, you click around on objects and type to speak to Grace and Trip. They speak via audio clips, leaving you to mutely type. An AI “drama manager” orchestrates “dramatic beats,” the smallest unit of story change, while trying to flesh out the larger, coherent and satisfying plot. Mateas asks, “how can an interactive experience have the experiential properties of classical, Aristotelian drama (identification, economy, catharsis, closure) while giving the player the interactive freedom to have a real effect on the story?” Of course, none of this works as planned. Grace and Trip are just plain creepy. They’re suspended in what we could call a dramatic uncanny
valley. There’s a rich discrepancy between the conventional mediation of dramatic human characters established in Hollywood film, TV, and increasingly games, and the zombie-like and alien behavior of Grace and Trip. They seem to half understand what you type, picking up the tone but not the content. This causes their responses to seem off, Lovecraftian, imposter-like of the human. This is accentuated by the fact that while the drama manager calculates what to do next, the couple blankly breathes, staring down the player like lobotomized automatons awaiting orders from an unseen mind controller. The marriage isn’t the façade; it is Grace and Trip who are husks of an alterior presence. An electric pulse unfamiliar with how humans should act is suddenly “down there” clicking its heart out, failing to draw you through its unintentionally psychotic drama.

Chapter 7: Narrative Political

The narrative political avant-garde uses the political affordances of narrative to transform popular culture. The assumption is that the political logic that governs culture is both embedded and exposed in popular media. September 12th is a game in which players experience the causal structure of the war on terror. By playing the game players expose their own biases, bending and breaking their own seek-and-destroy, point-and-click behavioral (and perhaps political) logic.

Augusto Boal teaches the poor in Latin America to use the medium of theater to simulate and present their personal situations of domestic abuse, corporate exploitation, government corruption, and so on. As a skit plays out, any audience member can replace an actor on stage, start the scene again and change how the scene unfolds. Social and personal agency replaces apathy and frustration, as people’s everyday lives become theatrical, replayable, and malleable. Gonzalo
Frasca applies Boal’s *Theater of the Oppressed* to videogames in his thesis, “Videogames of the Oppressed.” Videogames can both model (virtually simulate) and manifest (materially realize) social forces.

Frasca’s thesis can be drawn out further than he realized. The long-term goal of this avant-garde is to democratize or “liquefy” the medium of games so anyone can easily make and reconfigure them. Print was once the domain of the church and aristocracy; photography, the domain of tinkerers and artists; video, the domain of engineers and commercial studios. Video artists of the 60s and 70s presaged the ubiquity of remix videos and “YouTube Poop” today, just as today’s videogame artists presage a future of videogames. Over time, it will become easy and obvious for the average person to make videogames from scratch or mashup code and share new games, just as the analogues of these have become easy and obvious to do with print, photography, and video.

**Conclusion**

This is not an exhaustive account of the videogame avant-garde. The strategy of the avant-garde can only be realized in a collective, ad hoc way. A radical diversity of tactics that are technical, aesthetic, and cultural is required to realize alterity in videogame culture. It’s common for critics to reduce videogame art and the avant-garde to one type: political, formal, radical, and so on, but each of these are different face of a complex composite. Understanding the videogame avant-garde is predicated on recognizing this diversity.


3 The term “technoculture” is used in media studies to describe the growing interdependence of technology and culture.


14 Ibid., pp. 251-252.


16 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 16.

18 Ibid., p. 21.

19 Flow, as a media concept, dates at least back to Raymond Williams’s observation that television maintains a flow within and between programs.


22 Ibid., p. 61.
