The Playful Attitude and the Critical Attitude

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INTRODUCTION
Today, scholars seem enamored with the ludic and the playful. They advocate for ludic media studies (Raessens 2014), analyze ludic subjects (Vella 2015), and embrace new forms of ludic and playful interpretation (Payne and Huntemann 2019, 3). We increasingly encounter popular and academic voices that extol the positive powers of the ludic and a playful attitude toward life while the critical attitude is downplayed as outdated, ineffectual, and obsolete (Latour 2004). When educators, managers, pundits urge us to think ludically instead of critically, it behooves us to understand the connection between the ludic and the critical more clearly.

In the field of game studies, game designers and scholars such as Mary Flanagan (2009) and Lindsay Grace (2019) marry the critical and the ludic through ideas of critical play. These approaches adapt an older, critical attitude stemming from cultural studies (which seeks to critique dominant and oppressive norms in society) and apply it to games—which are seen as not-yet critical. When Ragnhild Tronstad (2010) reviewed Flanagan's book *Critical Play*, she explained that Flanagan "doesn't address the apparent paradox in the concept 'critical play,' or how these two terms, put together like this, must necessarily influence each other. What happens to play when it becomes critical? And how might critical content be influenced by play?" While Flanagan and others opened new avenues for exploring critical play, questions such as Tronstad's require further attention. Indeed, in this "ludic century," as some have been calling it (Zimmerman 2014), these questions become urgent. Some worry that approaches such as Flanagan's turn play into a form of "critical thinking" (Bogost 2016, 101), or others argue that critique is itself a game and form of play with its own rules, goals, and exciting and boring moves (Upton 2015). Neither of these approaches investigate the deeper connections between the ludic and the critical.

This paper focuses on the relationship between the critical attitude and the playful attitude. As Miguel Sicart explains, playfulness means "taking over a situation to perceive it differently" and to see this situation as a potential opportunity for play (2014, 27). Adopting a playful attitude toward life potentially allows one to imagine alternative realities and different possibilities for acting and living. Politically, the hope is that playfulness can provide a different perspective on reality, that it can lead to critical distance from accepted norms and conventions. This is the hope of game studies scholars such as Flanagan—who upholds critical play as a method to imagine alternative, less oppressive, and more inclusive futures—and Sicart (2014), who sees

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playfulness as an attitude that subverts the instrumental functionality of everyday actions and situations while imbuing them with creative possibility. In these cases, the ludic is put in service of the critical as a tool that can potentially catalyze critical perspectives concerning an oppressive, alienating society. This is not a new way of thinking about the relationship between the ludic and the critical; as the sociologist Francis Hearn argued in 1976, "in play, imagination contributes to the formation of critical perspectives" (160).

Yet, with the rise of video games, gamification, the ludification of culture, ludic capitalism (Galloway 2012), and playful forms of entrepreneurship (Dodgson and Gann 2018), playfulness has become a more dominant and ideological way of perceiving the world. This paper argues that we should be skeptical when it comes to positive claims about the subversive powers of playfulness. I extend this argument through three points. First, I differentiate the playful attitude from the critical attitude. I argue that both attitudes ask us to achieve distance from the world and view it from an outside perspective. Yet the critical attitude cultivates suspicion, doubt, and skepticism toward the world while these mindsets are not fundamental to the playful attitude. Instead, the playful attitude allows us to see the world from a distance in order to engage with it more fully and play with its structures (Sicart 2014, 25-26). Instead of critiquing the world and trying to fundamentally alter and remove its oppressive and dominant norms, a playful attitude can remake the world while simply covering over these dominant norms. Second, I argue that adopting a playful attitude toward life does not necessarily provide us with a subversive, critical distance from dominant reality because increasingly this way of perceiving the world becomes the dominant reality itself. We need to entertain the idea that being playful is not some unqualified good, but that seeing the world playfully can function as an ideology while feeding into forms of ludic capitalism that sustain and entrench it without resisting it. Thus, I argue that we need to turn the critical attitude (and its suspicion and skepticism) upon the playful attitude itself. Third, I argue that self-reflexive video games such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2012), *Donut County* (Annapurna Interactive, 2018), and *World of Goo* (2D Boy, 2008) reveal how playfulness can usurp and manage the power of the critical attitude. These games encourage players to view video games with skepticism and a critical attitude, but their playful mechanics manage, contain, and diffuse their political and critical perspectives. As game activist and scholar Anne-Marie Schleiner explains, "the player's critical and reflective capacity, political or otherwise, is easily bespelled amidst the movement of game actions," which means that the playful actions within games such as these can trump and displace their aim to produce critical perspectives and reflection (2017, 74-75). Thus, games such as these can help us diagnosis and analyze the relationship between the critical and the ludic.

Today, playfulness and play do not necessarily catalyze critical perspectives (as Hearn suggested long ago and others claim again today), but they can manage the power of the critical, diffuse its insights, and also propagate emerging forms of ludic capitalism. Ultimately, I argue that in order to renew the power of the critical and clarify the meaning of ludic culture today, we should strive for a deeper critique of play and playfulness and their ideological uses in contemporary society.

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