The Critical Ambivalence of Play in Media Art

Dr Daniel Palmer
Art & Design
Monash University, Australia
daniel.palmer@artdes.monash.edu.au

Like interactivity, the related concept of play is an overused and ill-defined term in discussions of media art. Play is associated with the imagination and spontaneity, with pleasure and fun. Play can manifest in a dizzying variety of forms, from the intellectual to the physical. It is clearly crucial to experiencing art. And yet play does not feature in the index of books on aesthetic theory or contemporary art, and surprisingly rarely in discussions around media art (with the obvious exception of game art, which is not my primary concern here).[1] This paper, which forms part of a larger project that seeks to explore the impact of technological media on art criticism, considers the ambivalence of play within the critical vocabulary of media art. Taking art criticism as part of a project involved in a political ecology of the senses, I am especially interested in Walter Benjamin's contention that the 'withering' of aura in the art of the technical age is accompanied by an increase of play elements in art.

Visual documentation of media art installations are peppered with pictures of happy children. A child interacting with an artwork tends to signify its success. This might be seen as a defensive strategy on the part of the media art community, given that such documentation is often prepared for various funding agencies who are known to desire accessibility. This is undoubtedly the case in the major, audience-focused biennial exhibitions held by Melbourne-based organisation Experimenta Media Arts, such as *Vanishing Point* (2005) and *Experimenta Playground* (2007). These exhibitions have included a wide range of 'playful' Australian and international media art with relatively little concern for political content or critical reflection on the technology utilised[2]. Hence, for some observers, media art is akin to commercial culture — it infantilises, lacks critical capacity and eventually banishes seriousness itself. A report on the 2006 ISEA likewise proposed that "The festival's imagination… seemed to be characterized by a spirit of play which feels increasingly oriented towards middle-class consumer spectacle and the experience economy."[3] As Geert Lovink notes, interface tinkering is partly responsible for this association with entertainment spectacle, since it gives artworks "a playful, naïve feel" that "invite the user to experience alternative interfaces."[4]

To the extent that media art aspires to be taken seriously by the broader contemporary art world, the links between media art, children and mass culture are fatal. But there is a certain irony in the contemporary art world's dismissal of interactive media art as infantile. In contemporary art more broadly we see an increasingly fine line between what Sean Cubitt dismissively terms 'high-concept pointlessness' and the 'fun park'.[5] Carsten Höller's extraordinary slide installation at the Tate Modern in 2006 was emblematic of this trend. On the one hand, museums now consider children as part of its key audiences, creating extensive kids' programs and activities around contemporary art. Even more importantly, contemporary art itself displays a huge debt to notions of children's play, games and adolescent pastimes. True, some artists like Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley take this into the psychoanalytic realm of the abject and traumatic. However, contemporary art in general is highly *playful* — which is often confused with a lack of serious purpose. Cubitt is rightly critical of what he sees as a sublime endgame of post-Duchampian self-referential permutations within contemporary art:

> Art has become a discipline. To play even the wildest jesterly card in the game, it is absolutely necessary to know the entire book of rules. This discipline then becomes a mode of play, but a play no longer legible as the innocent expression of freedom, but rather the controlled and configured creativity of a corporate system which needs play in order to produce innovations, yet which fears creativity as revolutionary. Play is now an alibi for enduring the present, rather than an inkling of a postponed future.[6]

To be sure, contemporary art revels in the one-line in-joke. However, Cubitt risks missing the Romantic impulse and 'ludic formalism' behind such apparently cynical play, as well as the nuances within emerging forms of spectatorial complicity.[7] Meanwhile, and

paradoxically, even as play and the comic are interrelated in their opposition to seriousness, the technologically mediated aesthetics of play associated with media art are often humourless in their formality and eagerness to be taken seriously. Could it be that, despite appearances and claims to the contrary, it is in play — and an expanded exploration of embodied pleasures — that media art and contemporary art might be in shared territory?

According to its classic theorists, play is a realm of freedom. Freud's view is that play is normally restricted to childhood and, in the course of development, is replaced by *fantasy*, transformed into creative activity, or subordinated to the reality principle. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938), Johan Huizinga argues that games are a cultural universal, yet innately artificial, separate in some way from 'ordinary life' and intrinsically *voluntary*.[8] In his *Les Jeux et Les Hommes* (1958), usually translated as *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois built upon Huizinga's prior work and suggested that play is "an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money."[9] Caillois offers a typology of games that has been influential for recent game theorists, but continues to define play as a free activity separated from everyday life. Less problematic is his point that play is uncertain, since within the set of rules the outcome may not be foreseen, and that hobbies, in particular, are a compensation for the drudgery of the modern worker.

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (1936), Benjamin argues that with the decay of aura (which is another name for beautiful semblance, *schöner Schein*) the work of art integrates into itself an element of play (*spiel*). Benjamin's complex argument proposes that semblance and play have a common denominator in *mimesis*, which is related to

his investment in the indexical media of photography and film, which in turn raises the question of *methexis*, participation. Miriam Hansen has persuasively argued that *spiel* "provides Benjamin with a term, and concept, that allows him to imagine an alternative mode of aesthetics on a par with modern, collective experience."[10] Importantly, she shows how Benjamin attributes to repetition in play a function that modifies Freud's pessimistic slant to some extent by imputing to repetition in play an existential quest for happiness. This was famously rejected by Adorno, who responded that "Art that seeks to redeem itself from semblance through play becomes sport."[11] And as Hansen also notes, "The imbrication of play with technology, along with the large-scale industrialization of leisure and amusement (in the West) since the mid-nineteenth century, complicates any clear-cut opposition of play and work or, rather, play and (alienated) labor."[12]

I want to conclude this brief paper not by attempting to squeeze the *play impulse* into a Romantic celebration of the freedom of the imagination, nor with the pessimism of Adorno, for whom "art qua play abdicates its responsibility to engage with an antagonistic, heteronomous reality."[13] Nor do I intend to redeem *repetition*, which Hansen calls the mark of ludic forms in art, as difference. Instead I want to turn to a diverse area of contemporary art practice that lies between media art and post-Duchampian irony, and borrows from a French tradition of Marxist theorization of everyday life – from Henri Lefebvre to the Situationists to Michel de Certeau and Felix Guattari — to celebrate alternative forms and ethics of life. This has come to be known today by what Nicolas Bourriaud calls 'relational aesthetics', and it privileges not only a strand of contemporary art in which the sphere of human relations constitutes the site of the artwork's meaning but also the practical arts

— the arts of preparing, cultivating and modeling — rather than aesthetic technique.[14] Curiously, however, these often collective practices, while including media like video and cinema, have excluded mediated interactivity from their view. This is a fundamentally nostalgic position, since technological media and life can no longer be separated. Only by including media art can a dialectical relation between a reconfigured subject and a technologically constituted new collectivity be explored. For its part, media art must address the reasons for its continued isolation from contemporary art discourse. To bring us back to the potential role of play in negotiating this territory, if the art situation is to became an adult playground and enable us to behave as active participants, these temporary roles must be linked back to the far more constrained possibilities of daily social life. This is already happening in some of the most successful media art works such as those of Blast Theory and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, which move beyond mobile entertainment to draw attention to the antagonistic, performative, interdependent and embodied basis of our social relations.

1   Darley, Andew. 2000. *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. London: Routledge is a key exception. Darley interprets the aesthetics of play – ephemeral, sensuous, physical distractions and repetitive forms – as displacing an aesthetics of representational meaning, but is skeptical of 'playful resistance'.

2   With an organisational mission of presenting the space 'where creativity and technology meet', Experimenta have, in recent years, essentially focused on mediated theatricality in visual art (fittingly, their major exhibitions begin their tour in a darkened performing arts centre).

3   kanarinka/Catherine D'Ignazi quoted in Lovink, Geert. 2008. *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*. New York: Routledge, p. 45.

4   Lovink. *Zero Comments*, p. 44

5   Cubitt, Sean. 2007. "Unlock the Gates: New and Unprecedented Tools for More People." In *Artlink* 27 (3).

6   Cubitt, Sean. 2000. "The Ephemeral Future: Art, Amateurs and Corporations in the 21st Century." In *Futures* 32, pp. 57–58.

7   Drucker, Johanna. 2005. *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*. London: University of Chicago Press, p. 42.

8   Huizinga, Johannes. 1955. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

9   Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play and Games*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 5–6.

10 Hansen, Miriam. 2004. "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema." In *October* 109, p. 6.

11 Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 100.

12 Hansen. "Room-for-Play," p. 14.

13 Hansen. "Room-for-Play," p. 33.

14 Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, Bourriaud's exemplary artist, Rirkrit Tirvavanija, is known for preparing Thai noodles at openings.