

Games.

A conversation about art and games

Florian Bettel (FB): Mr. Fuchs, Mr. Strouhal, may I kick off – to use a term from football – the discussion about games by asking: you created an exhibition and an events series about games. Why games?

Mathias Fuchs (MF): I am interested in games as media. Games might be called the lead media of our society. Games are taking over positions formerly held by television, cinema, and music. They play a pivotal role in the mechanisms transforming our society. Whereas work and religion, and later television, were key to our understanding of the world, we now have play. It is the playstations – and not the workstations – that make the world go round. Commercially-successful games compete with Hollywood film productions and production budgets of five to ten Million US\$ are no longer exceptional. Sometimes the production costs exceed fifteen million dollars. The 'Sims' game by Will Wright, originally a simulation of urban development, has had a turnover of four billion dollars during the past eight years. A few weeks ago (spring 2008) the 100-millionth copy of the game was sold. An increasing percentage of the population can be considered to be actively playing computer games. It is not only teenagers who play. Games will therefore become the social and aesthetic frontier of our society.

Ernst Strouhal (ES): May I add that you are certainly right to say that games have turned into the lead media of contemporary youth culture. First-Person Shooters and online role-playing games (RPGs) seem to have become what music, drugs and fashion were for the youth culture of the forties, fifties and beyond, up to the eighties. But there is one difference: there is no longer a social group called youth. There is no need for grown-ups in a neo-liberal society based on lifelong learning and flexible lifestyles. Each and everyone of us is asked or even forced to live in an experimental and playful way. Another change we have to be aware of is that public space, i.e. space which has always been claimed by the young to articulate their objectives, has moved completely into virtual space. Players become increasingly invisible. At the same time games are the most relevant sector of the cultural industries. These numbers might not be popular, but the revenue from legal and taxable gambling is estimated to be around 115 million euros per annum. Revenue means: somebody profits from that. It also means: somebody must have lost this. This is the other side of the coin – if I may say so – of a ludic society. There is an incredible redistribution of wealth going on there and the redistribution definitely does not work upside-down.

MF: The classic texts of game studies, I am thinking of Jan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, speak in a low key about profit-making when playing. 'The corruption of play' is what they call games involving money. They suggest that there would be two separate worlds of play. One free of interest, the other one driven by economic interests. I would rather suggest that the realm of work and of play are today densely interwoven and that one can hardly see one without the other. There is an osmosis of a very lively kind between the realm of work, that is to say production, and the realm of play.

ES: We have to ask what a game is. The range of what could be understood as such is wide: it spans the whole range of playing activities from playing an instrument to cat-and-mouse games. It covers the tender play of lovers to de Sade's erotic games.

We can also look at the gambling tables and game boards. These are spaces of social joyfulness and at the same time locations of extreme loneliness and excitement. Most of all, play is pretence: pretence of a world without deprivation or scarcity. But games also transcend boundaries of conventions and morality. I would like to suggest that we ought not to search for the essence of play, but rather investigate the cultural framework and the social background of games at a given moment in time. I would like to understand the theoretical approaches of Huizinga, Caillois and Friedrich Schiller as theories of a specific historical situation as they look for the substance of games and the purity of play.

MF: The notion of purity - or sterility, as Oscar Wilde once called it - has often been challenged. In the Anglo-American world a term has been coined: serious games. It is MIT's Henry Jenkins who established the notion of serious games for the ensemble of educational games, scientific simulations, immersive environments for relevant teaching. Jenkins, Aarseth and others succeeded in legitimising games studies as an academic discipline and a serious research field. As a consequence, research institutes and universities set up Serious Games Studies and Master's programmes. The programme I run at Salford University is called 'Creative Games' because we discovered that Serious Games was quickly adopted by the US military as a pretty name for their advanced battlefield simulations. The notion of serious games is, however also problematic in another respect: if there is such a thing as serious games, there must be non-serious games as well. I doubt that. Even the most imaginative computer game carries some hidden references to a real world. There are elements of our economic reality, our conflicts, our way of living, acting and understanding each other in games. Final Fantasy, Unreal Tournament, Halo and Second Life might look different from our 'First Life' (i.e. real life) at first glance – but they share its good and bad sides, if you scratch beneath the surface. But let's go back to historic games. What about chess? Could that be considered an abstract game or a pure game?

ES: Not at all! Many would value chess as the finest of games. But many top players lose bodyweight during a match. You can't help dreaming about the game and there is a wide range of associative ideas. There are pawns and knights, a king and a queen. Shah-mat, Persian for checkmate, means: the King is dead. Chess is brutal, a kind of cerebral boxing, and because of its intensity it drives players into madness or addiction. From a pedagogical point of view, it should be prohibited. On the other hand, it constitutes a global code with no disparities regarding social status, ethnicity or gender. It teaches respect and self-consciousness. It also teaches politeness. Whatever you might say about Bobby Fischer – and the least thing you could say is he was a weirdo – at the chessboard he was self-conscious and polite to his opponents.

MF: But he still engaged in competition. Chess clearly holds aspects of aggressiveness, of competitiveness and of *agôn*, as Caillois used to call it. Even in chess you want to beat your opponent, don't you? I kill in a rather sublimate form. I would not slay my opponent, I'd rather move a pawn. I am not a murderer, so when I kill the king, I even give him a warning: I say 'check!' What kind of killer would do that in real life?

EF: The player knows the difference between the *figura* and the *persona* of the opponent. Even if we cannot imagine a form of play without an instance of cruelty the

distinction between the personal player-opponent and the pawn he controls sets up an ethical divide. You don't want to destroy the person, you just want to win. Why? Because you want to keep playing. We might therefore say that conceiving life as a game constitutes an immanent ethical position. I think it just does not make sense to propose that play implies violence.

FB: There is, however, a technological rupture in the world of games caused by their digitalisation. Physical boards have been replaced by virtual worlds. Is this a continuity of disembodiment from sublimated gameplay to digitalisation?

MF: I guess disembodiment via virtualisation is accompanied by re-embodiment. Think of the new haptic devices like steering wheels, force-feedback joysticks, Wiis and other input devices. Or think of a simple child's game like cowboys and Indians. One might argue that this is a disembodied form of an ethnic conflict, or even a war, where nobody is killed. You shout out: you are dead! You do not kill in a physical way. But on the other hand there is a re-embodiment in chasing, bonding and fighting. Take pinball as another example. Without the physical action of nudging and pushing, pinball is not much fun. That is why a disembodied form of pinball will not work well. Barry Atkins seems to be thinking of bodily actions when he suggests that computer games should be interpreted as a form of performance – as opposed to cinematic experience or fine arts. In this regard Atkins disagrees with a school of games theory called narratology. Narratologists argue that you can always find a plot, personae, composition of the scene in a computer game. Ludologists, however, suggest that this might not be the case. In the case of a game of pinball it would actually be hard to find a story being told. In many Wii games there is little composition and the personae are pretty flat characters. This decade seems to be getting rid of the couch potatoes who proliferated in the era of television. The games generation is a re-embodied clan of performers. It is, however, not only the user who has discovered that embodiment is of interest, but the game artists as well. The 'Chess-Set' of Jake and Dinos Chapman turns abstract pawns into erotic sculptures. Margarete Jahrmann, an Austrian game artist, designed a dress which allows players to play PONG on her very body. How much more re-embodiment could you think of for such a simple and abstract game as ATARI's game classic, Pong? Another set-up is the telematic installation which Paul Sermon designed to create a mixed-reality conversation amongst Second Life users throughout the world and physical visitors to the Kunsthalle project space at Karlsplatz in Vienna. It is quite amazing how far we got during the last decade in accepting that a layer of virtual reality is superimposed on our everyday life and that bodies hover between these layers, disintegrate and find themselves re-embodied after all. Another piece we will show is 'Legshocker' by //////////////fur//. The German artist trio created a computer game which does not remain on the screen. If you play the modified football game your actions are partially fed back into real life. An interface attached to the player's shinbone transforms computer game action into a kick on the shinbone. Committing a foul causes pain in this game. And real pain it is, one might add. It seems to be a main concern of contemporary game art to point to the migration of physical experience from the body to cyberspace and back. These artists are serious about the body. Their serious game is a game of re-embodiment and disembodiment.

ES: This reminds me of the carnevalesque in games. An element always present in play. Of course European bourgeoisie and the prevailing culture rejected ludic joy and banned anything playful that could not be associated with child's play. Games

would only fit into the framework of socially-imposed bourgeois virtues if they were codified, pedagogically adequate and executed in a strictly puristic manner. 'Whack-a-mole' was an erotic game in the eighteenth century, but during the nineteenth it transformed into something completely different. Then we had it getting in line with bourgeois standards by transforming games into an aesthetic piece.

MF: Or the other way round: transforming art into games. Is art a game in the end?

ES: I guess there is still a difference between a work of art and craftwork. A bicycle wheel by Duchamp is not bound to win the Tour de France, and neither can a well-crafted wheel make it into a Museum of Modern Art. Avantgarde art flirted with ludic concepts and chance was an essential ingredient of early-twentieth century art. But art and games are two different animals. Whatever we think games might be, playing is an activity to dispose of time and a gamer is a person who has a lot of time to dispose of. We know that the rules of the game are written in stone, and therefore playing is 'coercion to the eternally identical' – as Adorno put it. Seen in this way, a game is not a progressive activity, it is regressive and ruled by disciplinary constraints. We would be stuck with playing, and playing well, but we would not be able to transcend what the game is about. We are to follow the rules and follow the rules only.

MF: It is for that reason that 'God does not throw dice', as Einstein put it? Or may he only do so secretly? Christian ethics denies existence to be of a random nature. So where would the joy of playing come from?

ES: It seems that the desire to play is closely related to the desire to be played. This is a sinister desire. We have to accept, however, that a homo ludens is not a jolly fellow, but a person driven by melancholy.

MF: Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests that play should be more than a purely repetitive exercise. The 'to and fro' of play – Gadamer calls it *das Hin-und-Her* – has to be transcended so that play can lead towards knowledge, or *Erkenntnis*, in Gadamer's terms. To play is still a state caught in the 'to and fro' and only if this state is left behind might we understand. Adorno uses a similar notion when he talks about multi-stable images like the famous duck-rabbit image. *Vexierbild* is the term Adorno uses for multi-stable images. Differently from Gadamer, Adorno believes that we ought to stay in the state of 'to and fro' when watching the images. There is no knowledge to be gained by separating the duck from the rabbit. In his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno states: 'Every work of art is a multi-stable image. For the work of art we remain in a state of change and uncertainty. This is the visitor's defeat. The multi-stable image repeats as a joke what the artwork does in complete earnestness'.

ES: Here we go. Play and seriousness as opposite sisters. You can't have one without the other. We have to analyse games in relation to those, and not be tempted to search for the essence of games. Even the alleged purity of games has to be viewed with regard to what purity can be used for. Purity – or sterility, as Oscar Wilde called it – might be observed as driven by personal interests. When Wilde found out that art is 'superbly sterile, and the note of its pleasure is sterility', he was probably the first to contextualise it in a non-sterile way. The player is hardly a free individual who indulges himself in pure pleasure. Walter Benjamin made us aware of the amount of alienation in a gamer's activities. The process of repeatedly throwing the

dice or shuffling the cards is not one of freedom, but of alienation. If we look at the game of football, for example, we will find competitiveness, individualism, strategic cooperation. These are virtues of meritocracy, the system we are living in. It seems at first glance that football is a rule-based, fair game. But then there are referee decisions. There are few performance indicators like goals. Sometimes the superior team is beaten by the inferior team, say three versus four.

FB: ... like when Austria lost against the Netherlands...

ES: Exactly! Blatant injustices like the one you mention are not an exception to the rule nor an accidental mistake. This is what makes the game so interesting. There is no justice there. Isn't that the story football wants to tell us? It is chance – not justice – we are watching when watching a match.

MF: *Alea*, chance operations in games, never had a very high reputation. Huizinga and Caillois despised them, socialist ethics did not cherish them either. That is because discipline, austerity and rational planning were supposed to guide our lives. We might analyse virtues and values of a social system by looking at how this system fares with games. In this respect socialist ethics were closer to bourgeois ethics than one might expect. It is all about rationality, efficiency, competition ... not much space left here for fun, parody or chance. We know, however, that chance, an almost addictive drive towards objectives, laughter and fun play a role in a revolutionary movement. There is *ilinx* and *alea*, and not only *agôn* and *mimicry*. Communism was, however, not too happy with ludic-anarchistic strategies. The revolution is a serious matter. We have to ask, however, whether play can be a form of resistance.

ES: Herbert Marcuse and a few '68 rebels might like that idea. Play is resistance against the predominant system of reality and oppression. It also questions the primacy of economic rationality. On the other hand, we have to admit, you won't play when you are starving. Serious problems cannot be tackled by non-serious play.

MF: If it is true that we live in a game society, it will not be a big surprise to find game-art as a central form of artistic practice. Fluxus and the Situationist movement have had their go at games already, but what we encounter now as game-art is a new beast. Games are lead media and playing artistically with games or about games is a comment on popular culture. Like Pop-Art did, game-art looks at everyday objects and processes. One group of game-artists, the modders, modify existing game engines to bend the software towards their objectives. So did Max Moswitzer and Margarete Jahrmann when they modified a First-Person Shooter. Every shot in their game triggered an email to the White House and contained a message in protest against the war.

ES: I doubt whether George Bush read too many of those protest emails.

MF: Probably not even one of them. The White House just tried to shut the server down. It is obvious that such anarcho-ludic behaviour cannot change reality. Politics are run on rails more rigid than artistic practice. Such practice has, however, an impact upon the art world and ideas and concepts developed within. Take Carsten Höller as an example. His fictional game rules comment on our society and the 'games people play every night and every day'. We were keen on representing artwork of this kind - both in digital and other forms.

FB: How have the pieces for the exhibition been selected?

MF: We tried to develop games by artists along the lines of desire, aggression and economy – sex, hate and bucks, if you like. These are the dark sides of games, the unpleasant aspects. Some might say that these are aspects of games beyond limits. That they are more likely to be found in corrupted games than in proper games. Desire, aggression and economy are not what you find at Toys ‘R’ Us, but the games we play contain those aspects. We already mentioned earlier that Caillois did not sympathise with ‘gambling joints, casinos, racecourses and the lottery’.

ES: Those who make profits from gambling like it, however. The best way to win in a lottery is to run one. This is, by the way, also true for a savings bank.

MF: Here we go! One man’s corruption is a nice business for the other one. We try to show both sides of the coin in gambling and gaming. The jolly aspects and the dark sides. Games need not be shown in Barbie Pink, Pacman Blue or Atari Gold. We will show games that are red as blood, black as the night and green as a dollar bill.