

# Participatory Republics: Play and the Political

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we propose a critical reading of Sicart's concept of political play, and we suggest an alternative framework that expands his work. We will apply Chantal Mouffe's political theory to the core ideas in *Play Matters*, with the purpose of focusing and further developing the understanding of the political in the play activity.

## Keywords

Play, Agonism, Adversarial Design, Politics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article provides a new perspective for the study of political play and, by extension, of political games. To move the discourse beyond most work done on political games and play in recent years in the field of game studies [1] [2], this article proposes an perspective based on contemporary political theory, aesthetics, and play theory that can help us the multiple expressions political discourse through play.

This article proposes a perspective on political play that ties together contemporary digital art and videogame design and culture. This framework understands political play as an aesthetic-driven practice that leads to the configuration of discourses, practices and spaces in which political expression can take place. The framework is based on Sicart's theory of play [3] extended with an interpretation of Chantal Mouffe's theory on agonism [4] [5] [6], inspired by DiSalvo's work on adversarial design [7], and supported by Bishop's [8] [9] [10] history and theory of participatory art.

Political play is the emancipatory act of carnivalesque [11] [12] appropriation of the world that allows for the establishment of communities of dissent and identity [6], as well as for the manipulation of media and technologies to exploit their inscribed politics [13] [14]. In other words, political play is the act of playful appropriation of technologies, contexts and activities for the political expression of agonistic dissent.

ms *Play Matters*, Sicart addresses a similar approach to political play. However, his approach is theoretically unsubstantial, as he does not provide a definition of what kind of politics play create. This article shares Sicart's attempt at finding the common ground between politically engaged contemporary digital art, videogame design, and Internet cultures. However, the approach presented here is more grounded, based on a strong theoretical tradition of

defining the "political". The purpose of this article is to make clear what "the political" in "political play" means.

This article will first consolidate the concept of play as carnivalesque appropriation as introduced by Sicart, extending Sicart's original work with the application of Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory [15] so as to define this particular type of critical thinking as an important characteristic of political play. This extension will also lead to a discussion of the aesthetic nature of play, via Kant [16] and Schiller [17], which will be counterbalanced with Boal's [18] theatre theory. This will lead to the notion that while play, as understood in this article, is fundamentally an aesthetic experience, it is not devoid of political meaning and the capacity to comment and affect the world. Play can be an aesthetic, critical-thinking driven way of experiencing and formulating the political.

The second step in this article is to define the politics in play as agonistics politics. Mouffe's theory allows a better understanding of what politics emerge from the appropriation of the world through play, and why it is productive to think about the politics of play as a way of developing and maintaining new identities, ideas, and opinions.

The last part of the article will present these ideas on political play through examples of critical engineering projects, videogame design, and game/play spaces of dissent.

The goal of this article is to expand the work done on critical and persuasive games with a broader perspective, one that uses play to tie together different manifestations of political expression using technology as a vehicle or common ground, and playfulness as a dominant way of expression. In this article I understand play as an aesthetic mode of being in the world that can be used as an instrument for political dissent, as the element that ties together communities and breaks apart dominant technologies, as a productive, agonistic, confrontation with the world and its dominant power structures [19].

## 2. PLAYING OF THE OPPRESSED

In *Play Matters*, Sicart dedicates a chapter to the question of play and politics. Written very much in the form of a manifesto, Sicart's arguments are simple: following his definition of play, he argues that play is political when the appropriation of the world in the activity of play is directed at the expression of political ideas or opinions: "Political play takes place when a plaything harnesses the expressive, creative, appropriative, and subversive capacities of play and uses them for political expression. Political play is the interplay of form, appropriation, and context, or how politics is expressed and enacted through play in a fluid motion." [3 p. 74].

This expressions makes use of the ambiguity of play [20] [21], the fact that while being at play, we are different beings in a world with a different ontology than the world we usually inhabit, an argument also made by Henricks [22] [23]. The example of the (never-played) political game *Metakettle* [24] goes along these

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lines: Metakettle is a political game because it subverts a world situation, but it is only political because it makes use of the capacity of play to take over the world and modify it, while at the same time entering a conversation with the rest of the world.

Sicart's arguments depart from the literature on critical play and political games from which it takes inspiration but also to which he opposes his theory, essentially the works of Bogost on procedural rhetoric, and Flanagan on critical play. Instead of locating the politics in the rhetorics of a particular object, or in the effects of interacting with a particular object inscribed with political values, Sicart claims that play is almost by definition political since it implies an appropriation of the world. When this appropriation has political intent, or can be perceived as political by spectators, play becomes "political": "Political play is expression of political ideas in the seams opened by appropriation; it is a critical expression through playful interpretation of a context. Because it is play, it can thrive in situations of oppression; because it is play, it can allow personal and collective expression, giving voices and actions when no one can be heard." [3, p. 81].

However, Sicart's arguments do not fulfill the promise of extending the domain of political play beyond the works he bases his theories on. His research, probably on purpose, is still compatible with Bogost's procedural rhetorics or Flanagan's critical play. Any form of playable media, from toys to art, could be designed with embedded values, or rhetorical arguments, and the act of playing would be appropriating those arguments for personal use, or adopting the values of the game after reflection. Appropriation is not necessarily individual expression or freedom. To make claims about the politics of playful appropriation, we need to better understand what appropriation entails. We need a theory of political play that has appropriation as a key concept, like Sicart's, but that qualifies that appropriation as a political act.

Let's start with Sicart's argument: when we play, we appropriate the world and we make it ours, for the "us" who is at play. To play is to redefine the world as a place in which we can play, or in which we can be "at play". Similarly, political thinking works with the idea that the action, in the case of Mouffe's theory antagonistic action, can alter the world. Before I can establish the connection between play and the political, I need to explain the relation between play and critical thinking. My understanding of critical thinking, as Sicart's, is derived from the Marxist educational theorist Paulo Freire: "Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved". [15, p. 93].

Play is a way of engaging in this type of critical thinking. To play, we need to appropriate the world. To appropriate the world we need to perceive it not as "a static entity", but as "a process, as transformation". Appropriative play can only happen when we perceive the world as ready for the transformation that takes place when playing. The most usual form of transformation that we experience when playing is that of turning the world as a stage in which the rules of a game determine the actions and outcomes, something that resonates with the concept of magic circle [25], even though it is always open to the social, technical and cultural

configurations that affect that transformation [26]. In this article I propose that the transformation of the world through play has the potential of exploring political expression through critical thinking, even in the case of games.

For instance, LARPs have shown [27] how creating and sustaining a shared reality between participants can lead to the exploration of political ideas and attitudes, from opinions on immigration like *System Danmarc* [28], to doomsday scenarios that explore individual and collective politics, like *Ground Zero* [29].

Play requires critical thinking to be possible. But that does not imply that all play is political. Political play happens when critical thinking is used for an action that leads both to a particular reflection, and to a particular transformation of the world.

To understand how this political action can take place in the framework of an aesthetic activity such as play, Augusto Boal provides a well-know frame of reference: "The poetics of the oppressed is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action! > Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!" [18, p. 135].

In Boal's work, the classic, Aristotelian theatre is seen as the poetics of the oppression: "(...) the world is known, perfect or about to be perfected, and all its values are imposed on the spectators, who passively delegate power to the characters to act and think in their place." [18, p. 135].

A new, critical thinking-based, revolutionary theatre happens when participants "are invited to 'play', not to 'interpret', characters" [18, p. 107]. Similarly, political play happens as a transformative act in the world through play, it happens when the act of playing brings forth the possibility of a transformational change, or a questioning of the status quo.

Let's look at one of the examples in Play Matters from this perspective: Camover is a type of popular game in which players get points by whacking CCTV cameras. For Sicart, it is enough to have a controversial topic like surveillance performed as a ludic action to claim that the act is an example of political play. But let's specify why Camover is political play: cameras and other surveillance technologies are manifestations of surveillance power structures (for a more detailed analysis of the relation between surveillance, games, and play, see [30] [31]). Players of Camover refuse to surrender to the behaviors that those technologies and, instead, turn their ubiquity into an abundance that can be quantified within a game. Turning CCTV cameras into simple points implies thinking critically about what these cameras make us do, but it also means the creation of a new world through play in which those cameras are stripped of their power agency and, instead, become mere tokens in a game. Through critical thinking that leads to playful action, a new world is configured that breaks power structures – not necessarily proposing alternatives, but liberating from those power structures.

So, in the work of Sicart, how can play be political? I assume the core ideas of Sicart's program for a theory of play: that play is a mode of being in the world in which the world itself is taken over with the intention of being played. This move makes it possible to extend the study of play to those activities and objects that are not

traditionally the object of play studies, among which we can find political play.

Before continuing, it is necessary to address the question of aesthetics. Sicart's play theory is heavily based on romanticism: "Mine is a romantic theory (or rhetoric) of play, based on an idea of creativity and expression that has been developed in the highly postromantic cultural environment of the early twenty-first century." [3, p.5]. Having Kant [16] and Schiller [17] as sources, one could argue that Sicart's play is inherently an aesthetic mode of being in the world, and that, as such, it is, paraphrasing Huizinga [32], beyond the domain of morality (and, by extension, of politics).

However, the aesthetic nature of does not necessarily negate its political possibilities. Nor it necessarily implies that play creates political arts. Following Rancière, we argue that aesthetics and politics are closely interwoven, and that it is precisely that connection between both what makes play have the potential of being political: "[the] aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity." [33, Kindle location 221-222].

In the work of artists like Allan Kaprow [34] we see the use of art as a mode of dissent: "Power in art is not like that in a nation or in big business. A picture never changed the price of eggs. But a picture can change our dreams; and pictures may in time clarify our values. The power of artists is precisely the influence they world over the fantasies of their public [...] as it is involved in quality, art is a moral act" (p. 53). It is precisely in this mode of dissent that we see the politics of play: in the grounding of a political stance through an aesthetic mode of being in the world.

However, political play needs to be properly defined, asking the question what does "political play" mean, or, better, why is appropriation some times political. I propose that playful appropriation of the world can be understood as a political action when it is an instrument for critical thinking, that is, when it transforms the world from a stable collection of affairs to a structure that can be engaged with critically, an engagement that takes the form of play. Political play is using play to change the world, albeit temporarily, to allow reflective discourses of engagement. It is about action and possibility, rather than about performance and evaluation. Political play takes over the world to transform it, within the safe, negotiated security of the play activity that can nevertheless bleed [35] on the real world. Playing can be an act of political rebellion towards structures of power by taking them over as props for play, making them simultaneously crucial for an activity, and also devoid of their power effects [19].

But this is only a first step, a superficial use of the concept of political. I have laid out the basic idea of how play can be political, and what does it mean in terms of the appropriation process. However, for understanding why these actions can be political, we need to understand them using the lens of political theory.

### 3. PLAY AND AGONISM

From Sicart's perspective, it is enough to think about play as an appropriative act to consider it political action. This allows his work to have an interpretational flexibility that is very welcome - through this lens; he is able to put together such disparate things as Maradona's goal against the English in 1986, and Anonymous'

Chanology. However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, Sicart's play theory is not matched with a proper political theory, and this article should correct this.

We have already explained how the act of playing can be seen, on certain circumstances, as an emancipatory act of political expression through critical thinking - a type of critical play that is rooted in the work of Freire and Boal, and that is closely related with Marxism and radical politics.

However, it is not enough to understand the political capacities of play to assume that play is political because it can be used as an instrument for critical engagement with the world. We need to specify what type of political thinking can take that critical thinking and turn it into political action.

We need to understand play as an action and not a mode of reflection. Thus it requires that its politics are also a mode of action - they need not be exclusively about reflection and critical thinking, but also about applying critical thinking.

I have therefore chosen to extend the backbone of critical thinking theory presented in the previous section by turning to Chantal Mouffe's political theory. Mouffe's work is appropriate for a number of reasons: first, it is a Marxist, praxis-based political theory, and thus it connects well with the tradition of critical thinking proposed by Freire and Boal. And second, Carl DiSalvo has already applied Mouffe's theory in interaction design, and that work will be of extreme importance to apply Mouffe's theory to political play.

It is not my intention to write a comprehensive analysis of Mouffe's theory. What I am proposing here is the application of some of her key concepts to the use of play as a form of acting on critical thinking in the world - a modality of action that has aesthetic origins, but that is also political action. I will start the adaptation of Mouffe's political theory to the domain of play by introducing the distinction between the political and politics: "I am putting forward, the distinction between "politics" and "the political". By "the political", I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different type of social relations. "Politics", on the other hand, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of "the political"." [4 p. 15].

At the core of Mouffe's political theory is the concept of antagonism, that she uses to oppose modern "liberalism", understood as the search for consensus derived from reason: "While consensus is no doubt necessary, it must be accompanied by dissent. Consensus is needed on the institutions that are constitutive of liberal democracy and on the ethico-political values that should inform political association. But there will always be disagreement concerning the meaning of those values and the way they should be implemented. This consensus will therefore always be a 'conflictual consensus' [6, Kindle location 236]. The political encompasses all politics that identify order as contingent practices, and create an antagonist from which new orders or power structures can be derived. The political requires antagonism, a questioning of dominant hegemonies, a confrontation under regulated conditions to reach not rational consensus, but "conflictual consensus".

In the domain of the political, then, subjects need to construct or identify antagonists so the agonistic struggle can take place. An antagonist is not an enemy, but an “other” with whom disagreement is possible but whose existence and presence we respect and require (for a dynamic democracy to prosper). To enter in the political is, in a partial interpretation of Mouffe, to identify antagonists with whom a productive contestation can take place.

What interests me in order to understand critical play as a political action is how structures, practices, institutions are challenged by the political, or how “<<politics>> consists in domesticating hostility and (...) trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations.” [4, p. 15].

In order to interpret Mouffe’s theory for the purposes of this article, I argue that the process of identify order in contingent practices, of creating antagonists or identifying structures to which opposition will lead to productive political action and thinking requires the type of critical thinking that Boal and Freire described. The identification of the contingency of the world, the expression of a particular structure of power relations that leads to antagonistic action requires the capacity of the individual to think critically.

Mouffe’s work has been adopted by the arts world to explain some contemporary trends in so-called critical art [6, chapter 5]. These artists have found in Mouffe a theory that supports and expands their practices of questioning dominant hegemonies from a confrontational point of view. The goal in these forms of public art is to create spaces, and works, that allow for the exploration and understanding of currently existing hegemonies, as well as the opening of spaces of dissent from which these hegemonies can be questioned.

In art theory, Claire Bishop has adopted Mouffe and Rancière’s theories to explain participatory art, and how it is an essentially political endeavor. In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop analyzes the theatre of Boal as a form of participatory art that opens for political engagement and discussion by diminishing the importance of the object and privileging the conversational space that is created when an artist opens a situation or space for public discussion [36].

The essence of Bishop’s arguments is that participatory arts create spaces open for critical reflection and action: “In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and to spectators – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term – an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle – that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary. Participatory art is not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution to a society of the spectacle, but is as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context”. [10, Kindle location 5791].

These conversational spaces are what should interest us when it comes to understanding political play: play, by appropriating a particular situation or context as cued by a community or a prop,

will create a particular space – the space of/for play. I argue that it is that space –not necessarily a physical space, but a more general space of possibility-, which can be political. Appropriating the world changes it and creates new configurations in which critical thinking that originated the appropriation can take place. In short: critical thinking can lead to an appropriation through play of the world, or a context, or a technology, and that appropriation creates a conversational space of possibilities in which the political is possible.

Taking Mouffe’s work as a starting point, Carl DiSalvo proposes a set of design strategies for engaging with the political. DiSalvo argues that adversarial design creates objects and processes of forever looping contestation. Adversarial design produces artifacts of dissent. A classic example of adversarial design, as analyzed by DiSalvo, is Sack’s *Agonistics: A Language Game* (2004), “a computational media project (...) that illustrates the qualities of agonism by engaging players in a state of agonistic conflict (...) online discussion forums become the shared space in which agonistic conflict takes place” [7, p. 5].

A similar example of adversarial design can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition *Disobedient Objects* [37], in which different mundane objects are revealed to have a political intent when appropriated in the right context: for instance, the shopping trolley can be used for seating, barbecuing, or forming barricades [37, p. 43], and the humble transparent water bottle can become a mask that helps endure tear gas [37, p. 50]. In this case, it is not a designer who creates these props, but a collective action that requires to appropriate the functionality of these objects to make them instruments in a protest. It is not playful appropriation, but an example of how objects can be appropriated for the expression of agonism. What adversarial design as a practice intends to do is to systematize in the very design of these objects this possibilities for adversarial engagement that can lead to the creation of spaces and practices of the political.

We have, then, the arts contributing to the creation of open spaces for exploring and challenging hegemony, and adversarial design that produces objects as adversaries to highlight the agonistic nature of the political. What is then the role of political play?

Play can only be political if it uses critical thinking to formulate the very action of playing as adversarial. Political play is, then, the act of playing agonistic politics. Play, as a form of being in the world becomes a political, emancipatory action, an instrument in the confrontation between hegemonic projects.

A casual, humorous form of playful political activism is Hubhub’s application *Standing* [38]. Standing is a very simple app. Once you open it, it requests you to write what is it we are standing for, and then to press and hold a specific part of the phone’s screen to “start standing and broadcast your location”. As long as we are holding the screen, and we don’t move, our location and message (what we are standing for), will be broadcast to the app’s website. We will be sending a message to the world.

Standing was inspired by the non-violent forms of protest. Quoting from the project’s announcement: “The project was inspired by the standing wo/man protests, which were initiated by Erdem Gündüz, on 17 June 2013 by standing in Taksim Square in Turkey. The topic of ludic resistance has been a long-lasting interest of ours and after much speaking and writing on the subject we felt the need to make something that directly

contributed to it. Seeing the act of standing being used as an effective way of civil disobedience delighted us and we felt it served as a perfect starting point." (<http://whatsthehubbub.nl/blog/2014/05/announcing-standing-an-app-for-playful-activism/>, accessed 3/2/2015).

*Standing* is also an (unintended) ironic comment on the smartphone and the Internet as revolutionary networks. We have read many pundits praise social networks as key elements of political uprising (without any comments on the politics of those networks, both as services and as infrastructures: who owns the networks?). The smartphone is seen as a liberating machine, a gateway to the "freedom of the internet". Smartphone users are often portrayed, by pundits and Silicon Valley libertarians, as freedom fighters. Using proprietary software on private infrastructures that harvest data for commercial purposes.

The beauty of *Standing* is that using it denies the smartphone as an instrument. When *Standing* is running, the user has to both stay still and continuously hold the phone's screen. It is not possible to call or use the internet. Basically, *Standing* turns a smartphone into a relatively inanimate, mildly dumb object. To protest using *Standing* is also to stop using the phone, to nullify it. The smartphone might be a more pure instrument for social protest when we cannot do more with it than just hold it. Standing is a political toy - it opens the possibility for us to express political ideas, but always under the ambiguous mantle of play. This ambiguity does not devalue the political message - in fact, it almost amplifies it: we are protesting, but we are also playing, and in that double situation we thrive, we can express ourselves.

*Standing* is also an example of how play can be agonistic because of its carnivalesque nature. The activity of play has the capacity, through appropriation, of subverting social, cultural, and other forms of power structures, like *Standing* appropriates and subverts the mobile phone as an instrument for protest. For instance, play makes sports culturally, but also politically important: play is also a subversion of rationality, when we care about points, scores, winning or losing. But most importantly, the carnivalesque nature of play can be used to appropriate social and cultural contexts for expressive purposes.

When play is carnivalesque, it can be an instrument for exploring the relations between individuals and power, because it can act as a subversion of power. By creating worlds upside down, or allowing a multiplicity of voices in situations in which that plurality is not allowed, play can be create new spaces of conversation, new distributions of discourse that can lead to the political.

Political play is a mode of thinking critically about politics, and of developing an agonistic approach to those politics. This agonism is framed through the carnivalesque, through the appropriation of the world for playing. By playing, by carefully negotiating the purpose of playing between pleasure and the political, we engage in a transformative act. Playing allows us to assume other identities, to reveal hegemonies and position us against them. To play is at the same time a subordination to a state of affairs and an appropriation of that state of affairs. It is in the nature of that appropriation that we will find the agonistic nature of play.

Why should we then consider play as a form of practicing critical thinking for engaging with the political? As Mouffe suggests, the political is defined by its agonism, by the creation of adversaries and dialectic processes that lead to the establishment of political

discourses. Play is a mode of applying that critical thinking to the world, to formulate the position and the nature of the adversaries. Play can be political because it can, by means of appropriation, identify adversaries and establish relations of agonism with the world. It does so thanks to its carnivalesque nature, that allows it not only to identify power structures, but also to give itself the possibility of subvert them, of transforming them into more elements for playing with. What play can create is specific open situations for dialogue in which the political is possible. In the following section I will give examples of playful appropriation as adversarial interventions in the political.

#### 4. PARTICIPATORY REPUBLICS

This theory of political play does give some solid theoretical background to Sicart's rushed description of political play. However, in order to better explain this extension of political play theory, we need to present examples in which the activity of play allows for a critical-thinking engagement of the world through adversarial positions.

I will briefly analyze three possible examples of how agonistic political play can be applied to understanding different cultural manifestations, from contemporary digital art to videogames and videogame events.

The reason why we can apply agonistic political play to the understanding of both art and videogames has to do with the inescapable relation that, for theorists like Mouffe and Rancière, politics has with aesthetics. While not all forms of aesthetic expression are necessarily of agonistic nature, some forms are better understood within the theoretical program of Mouffe, both because of their intentions and effects, and because aesthetics and politics are closely related: "to apprehend their political potential, we should visualize forms of artistic resistance as agonistic interventions within the context of counter-hegemonic struggles" [6, Kindle location 1364].

In the domain of contemporary digital arts, one of the most interesting applications of agonistic play for aesthetic expression is critical engineering [39]. Critical engineering is a form of art practice that engages with the complex materialities of computation, and more specifically of computer networks, communication and encryption, with the purpose of disclosing through aesthetic practice the politics of devices: "The Critical Engineer notes that written code expands into social and psychological realms, regulating behavior between people and the machines they interact with. By understanding this, the Critical Engineer seeks to reconstruct user-constraints and social action through means of digital excavation." [39, accessed 4/2/2015].

The critical engineer wants to break down and reconfigure the engineered materials that we take for granted in our use, and submission to, computers. In that process, the critical engineer reveals the politics of the artifact, in a process that also empowers users beyond the domain of mere consumers.

In Sicart's work, it is enough to single out that critical engineering appropriates technologies to be able to define it as a political type of play. His analysis of *Newstweek*, while hinting at some interesting interpretations of political play, fails to explain why this modified man-in-the-middle attack is a political action. For Sicart, when *Newstweek* appropriates the networks to transform the news, the act in itself is political, and it is so because it has a

relative carnivalesque nature. But that is not enough, since Sicart does not qualify what he means by political in his analysis.

*Newstweek*, and Critical Engineering, can be described as agonistic political action that uses carnivalesque playfulness to create a situation of antagonism that forces users to take a political stance. The mode of operation of Critical Engineering is deceptively simple: by re-engineering or modifying the technological commodities that surround us, challenging their smooth surfaces and ease of use by subverting, glitching, or breaking their inner working, the Critical Engineer positions the technologies appropriated as antagonists of the structures they insert themselves in: “The Critical Engineer considers the exploit to be the most desirable form of exposure” [39, accessed 4/2/2015].

*Newstweek* manipulates the flow of information by literally insert dissent in that flow. It not only breaks our assumptions about how news are transmitted, but also our trust in the neutrality of networks, facilitated by the always present rhetoric of seamless, invisible integration that permeates contemporary commercial technology discourses. Critical Engineers make the networks visible; they make the processes of transmission of and submission to data take an explicit role. And by doing so, not only they question them, but they also allow us, critical users, to take an antagonist position. Critical Engineering is an emancipatory political action that fosters critical thinking (in the Freire sense) by allowing for new forms of antagonism in our use and experience of mundane digital technologies. The Critical Engineer is, at heart, a creator or antagonism.

But how does this process qualify as play? Here Sicart’s observations are appropriate: while there are different ways of creating these kind of antagonisms through technology, as DiSalvo proposed, the works of Critical Engineering do so under the rhetorics of the arts. Critical Engineering has an aesthetic purpose, and, like Sicart claims, that aesthetic purpose is driven by a playful, mischievous will to appropriate the world and turn it upside down, revealing its inner contradictions. Critical Engineering has its own form of deadpan humor; it has its own playful rhetoric, a stance that allows it to perform semi-illegal actions as possible under the banner of art. Like Bishop has argued [8], critical arts have used its nature as arts to justify their critical interventions in politics. Similarly, Critical Engineering uses that approach to antagonize our consumption of modern technologies. The aesthetic turn in Critical Engineering is, we argue alongside Sicart, a consequence of its carnivalesque playfulness.

In summary, Critical Engineering is a good example of how an aesthetic practice driven by playfulness can develop a proper political stance rooted in antagonism. Critical Engineering is political play because it creates an antagonist situation by playfully appropriating the world – it is not only the act itself that is political, but its continuous presence that demands us to take a critical stance what makes it political play: through play, an opening to antagonistic relations is created.

In the domain of computer games, a different type of adversarial political position can be exemplified with Molleindustria’s *Unmanned* [40]. This is a strange, brief computer game designed around barely interactive vignettes that illustrate the mundane life of a drone operator. On each of those vignettes, the player is given a task, from smoking a cigarette, to shaving, or deciding whether to shoot a missile from an airborne drone. The game is a

dissection of mundane events in which interaction is not much different in the case of shaving or shooting a missile.

The excellence of *Unmanned* resides in the way it positions the extraordinary act of shooting missiles from an airborne, remotely-controlled robot, within a string of regular, mundane, daily activities. For the drone operator we are controlling in the game, causing death is roughly equal to flirting, driving, or bonding with their son.

The easy critical discourse about drone warfare can be too focused on the extraordinary situation in which we are living: skies populated by remotely-controlled, semi-autonomous war machines with high capacity for destruction; and a political system in which oversight, accountability and transparency over those drones is not only seen as of secondary importance, can also be seen as a political threat.

Unmanned creates an adversarial political discourse by performing the opposite rhetorical move: the actual dread we should feel should come from the fact that drones are mundane, they are a part of a daily life, they are, for some members of the military and for some decision-makers, just another interface for war. *Unmanned* does not make drone warfare the exception, the outstanding event in a narrative of emotions (like the game series *Call of Duty* uses when tackling the issue of drone warfare), but just another event in a series of domestic, mundane events.

This rhetorical proposition is, I argue, an instrument for creating a political confrontation. Instead of repeating the obvious political and ethical problems with drone warfare, *Unmanned* presents it within a context of mundanity. To play *Unmanned* is to engage and perceive not the world, but any normal day through the eyes of a drone operator. This focus on the common, rather than the exceptional, challenges both our assumptions about what we think is the political discourse regarding drone warfare, and its true, horrific consequences, both for the innocent targets but to our own social, moral, and political structures.

In fact, I’d claim that *Unmanned* is confrontational in two ways: first, denouncing the de-humanization that drone warfare promotes by presenting it within the context of a human daily routine; and second, by antagonizing our own trite critical (or uncritical) opinions about drone warfare. *Unmanned* forces us to revise, even to antagonize easier critical discourses on unmanned warfare. By contextualizing and situating drone warfare in the domain of the domestic, *Unmanned* demands we take a stance on towards drone warfare, but also towards our own assumptions regarding its morality and its social, cultural exceptionality.

The beauty of *Unmanned* lies in its double adversarial nature: it creates an opening for political thinking both regarding the drone warfare, and our own assumptions about the “wrongness” of that type of warfare, if we had them. That second move makes *Unmanned* a good example of political play: by playing *Unmanned*, we are given an instrument to appropriate a discourse, and antagonize it, developing our own critical thinking skills that might lead to emancipatory thinking.

A different example of agonistic politics can be found in the emergence of public spaces and events for alternative videogame cultures such as Babycastles (<http://babycastles.com/website/>, accessed 3/2/2015), the Silent Barn (<http://silentbarn.org>, accessed 3/2/2015), or events like Lost Levels, or the Lyst Game Summit (<http://lyst-summit.dk>, accessed 3/2/2015). All of these events are spaces in which new videogame types, developed with

affordable technologies, are presented to audiences that break the conventional stereotyping of gaming culture. These are, in a broad sense, queer spaces, as they queer both the dominant aesthetics, technologies, and cultures of videogames (my use of the concept of “queering” is based on [41] [42], though I admit further work needs to be done on the application of queer theory to political play).

But it is not my intention to describe these spaces using queer theory – even though that view would be possible, and compatible with the one I am about to present, this is an article about political play, and as such I want to keep the focus on defining these spaces as antagonistic spaces, as spaces created by particular cultures and aesthetics positioning themselves as adversaries of the dominant power institutions in game culture and society.

Mouffe’s theories have been appropriated by artists to justify their politically active work, and consequently, Mouffe has developed aspects of her theory to match that application. These forms of art, the participatory arts as Bishop defines them, are not so much focused on the objects they produce as in the situations they create – as Kester famously described them, they are conversational pieces, objects or events that create the possibility for conversations to happen – and these conversations are, in Bishop’s theory, at the core of the political capacities of the arts.

It is beyond the scope of this article to trace a history of this emergent new spaces for videogame culture. What we want to argue is that communities who share an antagonistic identity to mainstream videogame culture create these spaces. And so, these spaces are spaces of antagonism, where the conversation between alternatives to existing power structures can take place. These are spaces of alternatives, where Twine or Game Maker are the technical norm, where text-based games push the boundaries of expression beyond pixels and polygons, and where communities who were alienated from mainstream videogame culture get together, share and explore and draw new futures antagonistic to those plotted by dominant cultures. Adopting Mouffe’s [6] words, the emergence of these new spaces for/of play “opens the way for novel forms of social relations in which art and work exist in new configurations. The objective of artistic practices should be to foster the development of those new social relations that are made possible by the transformation of the work process” (Kindle location 1349).

In this way, these antagonistic spaces are propelling the actual discussion about what the future of games as a form of expression and as a culture can be. By proposing alternatives on all domains, and giving them a space to happen, to gain identity from, and to gather, the open spaces of antagonistic videogame culture are playing the ultimate political game on mainstream culture: it is the others, the aliens, the pariahs who, in those spaces, become the dominant force. By creating these spaces they also create events in which they are not the exception, but the norm, effectively tipping the balance towards a more diverse game culture.

Following Mouffe’s theory, I would define these as antagonistic spaces of play, where communities are created around an adversarial identification of power structures in games and technology culture. This new identities develop disagreement, and propose alternatives, further enriching the cultures of playing with computers. As Hickey puts it: “[art] is more—and less, as well. It is a mode of social discourse, a participatory republic, an accumulation of small, fragile, social occasions that provide the

binding agent of fugitive communities. It is made in small places and flourishes in environments only slightly less intimate”. [43, Kindle location 2270].

There are, then, multiple examples in which the proper application of Mouffe’s theory to Sicart’s intuitions on political play can yield interesting theoretical observations: from the capacity of Critical Engineering to playfully modify devices to highlight a new possible, necessary antagonism in network cultures, to the new spaces where other forms of playing with computers are possible, political play can be seen permeating different forms of radical expressions in the arts and game culture. Political play is not, then, just the consequence of the creation of politically engaged games – it is a more complicated critical attitude towards technology, culture, aesthetics and power that does not necessarily yield objects we can observe, consume, and analyze, but that creates cultures, attitudes and modes of thinking that in transitory, playful ways allow to break the world, and mend it again, like a puzzle. Political play does not need games, or machines – it needs a critical mind, an antagonistic attitude, and the knowledge that, because all is play, the worlds it creates are fragile participatory republics that show previously unthinkable presents, and futures.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have tried to correct Sicart’s theory of political play by extending it with a proper political theory. This perspective can be applied to understand aesthetic, cultural and social manifestations of political play.

Political play is using the appropriative and carnivalesque nature of play to propose an antagonistic situation in which a new constellation of power structures (social, cultural, technological) are proposed, with the purpose of forwarding a productive political agonism, an emancipatory act of critical thinking and acting.

Unlike adversarial design, or participatory art, forms of expression with which it shares some common strategies, political play requires first the development of critical thinking, as a resource for establishing the appropriated, carnivalesque, adversarial world in which action leads to political reflection, or to a new order. That is, the communities behind the new spaces for play first required to critically identify why they were not represented in current game culture, and then those new spaces, that occupied the arcade, that appropriated it, became possible.

In the framework I’ve proposed here, play is a consequence of critical thinking, rather than a part of the act of antagonism for participating in politics. It is the act, then, that is antagonistic, rather than the object: *Unmanned* is just a videogame, but playing it is an antagonistic, political act.

The type of adversarial, political play I am proposing here is an alternative that can co-exist, but is different from, both persuasive games and critical games. It is less focused on the object and more focused on the processes: the act of playing becomes political, rather than the act of producing. And its intellectual roots are different, more closely connected to critical pedagogics and contemporary Marxist political theories.

There is, I believe, much work to be done with this concept of political play. This has been a mere introduction, a necessary expansion on an already existing theory. We need to have a theory of political play that allows us to see all these playful

antagonistic expressions, from Critical Engineering to Babycastles, under the same category of the political. And as such, we will be able to see how these artistic and social practices might be a sign of the rise of emancipatory systems and cultures around technology, playful critical worlds with liberating rules, creating small, fragile, playfully antagonistic participatory republics.

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