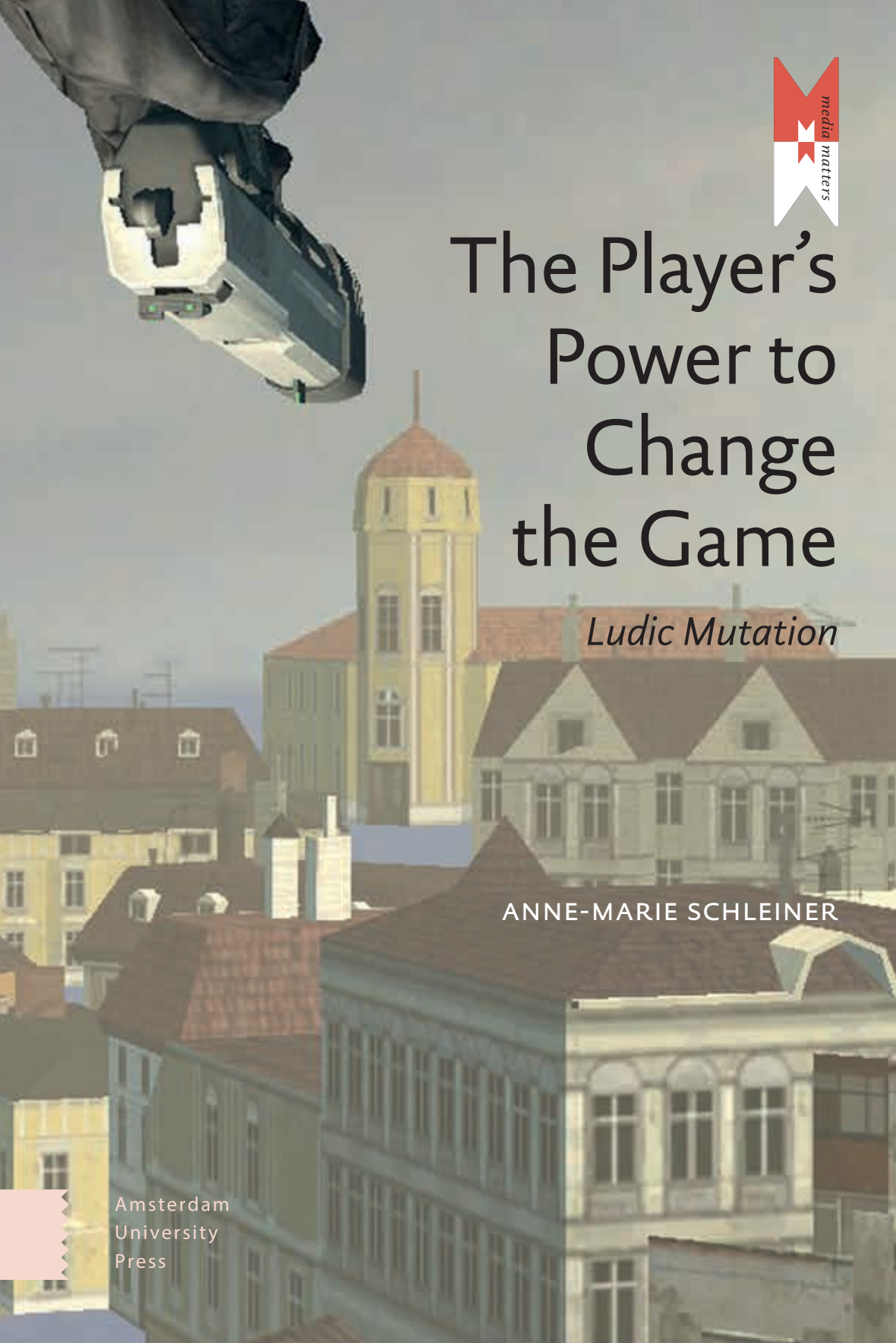

media matters

The Player's Power to Change the Game

Ludic Mutation

ANNE-MARIE SCHLEINER

Amsterdam University Press

The Player's Power to Change the Game

MediaMatters is a series published by Amsterdam University Press on current debates about media technology and practices. International scholars critically analyze and theorize the materiality and performativity, as well as spatial practices of screen media in contributions that engage with today's (digital) media culture.

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Ludic Mutation

Anne-Marie Schleiner

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I dedicate this book to my mother, Roberta Louise Schleiner (née Gittings), who introduced me to critical thinking at a young age. I never shared her love of sports, but games are close enough. And I did pick up her appreciation for science fiction.

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Introduction – The Player's Power to Change the Game

In 1957, the Situationists penned a hopeful manifesto calling upon the revolutionary potential of play, for 'the invention of games of an essentially new type' (Debord, 'Report'). The brief descriptions of these early Situationist capers and games that were actually played, not just theorized, recount exploring underground tunnel systems, occupations of Parisian railway stations, and spontaneous urban mappings (Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive'). During the Situationists' time, the object of resistance for such critical play was the capitalist, bourgeois routine of the city. Debord writes, 'The situationist game is distinguished from the classic notion of games by its radical negation of the element of competition and of separation from everyday life. On the other hand, it is not distinct from a moral choice, since it implies taking a stand in favor of what will bring about the future reign of freedom and play' ('Report').

More than half a century later, play does not seem to have realized its revolutionary potential entirely the way these young artists, architects, and writers envisioned. And yet, games may indeed have infiltrated everyday life only too well. McKenzie Wark describes an ominous growth of 'gamespace', an invasive agonistic, speculative, abstract game logic taking hold in global finance, education, narrative media, and other spheres once considered outside the game. He writes, 'Play becomes everything to which it was once opposed. It is work, it is serious, it is morality, it is necessity' (Wark). 'Gamification', a term that floats around marketing, software, and game industry circles, refers to the addition of gamic features to everyday activities that were once outside the game, like an electronic list of daily tasks on the mobile phone that rewards 'the player' each time an errand is completed or a grocery item is purchased. Gamified marketing schemes award points to loyal customers that later can be applied toward purchases. Joggers are motived to run faster when they are chased by virtual Zombies on their smartphones and players insert their own health and fitness goals, from weight loss to injury recovery, into *SuperBetter's* flexible, motivational framework.

Digitized student exams provide instant positive or negative feedback on the player's answers. The 'Quest to Learn' public elementary school in New York City boasts of an entire curriculum, from math to history, taught through games.[1] Spectator entertainment has also been gamified.

Fig. 1: Washington D.C. Level; Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. 2009. Game Screenshot.

After being deposited on a desert island for weeks, or visiting a series of crowded foreign metropolises for the first time in their lives, the players of reality television shows like *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race* suffer through betrayals of allegiance and friendship, exposing their anger, tears, public humiliation, and physical exhaustion to the camera.

Of greater consequence, are the so-called serious games that train the soldier to conduct a flanking operation in the close quarters of the urban terrain of Mogadishu or Washington D.C. These virtual exercises prepare soldiers for both the killing of insurgents and for 'life-sustaining' refugee and hostage rescue operations. For instance, at the 2008 Serious Games Showcase and Challenge, three of four winners were military games on the topics of 'geo-location, military procedures of the Canadian army, and medical treatment of burn victims' (*Serious Games Challenge*). Soldier-players apprehend the protocols of 'Military Operations in Urban Terrain' (MOUT) at sites of urban unrest, for application in even Western cities once considered secure. The militant operations of the 'asymmetric' War on Terror, the war of a few among the many, thus find their way via games into civilian population centers; in the imagination and on the ground.[2]

The game also tightens its addictive hold over players who spend years of their lives playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), amassing digital items and participating in quests and battles, all the while advancing their character up the game's intricate hierarchy of classes and levels. At its most extreme, such virtual game labor is exploited as a form of Information Age drudgery in Chinese 'goldfarm' sweatshops. During the work day, professional players earn virtual gold in gamic economies for their bosses. At night, these workers hone their skills by playing these

same games 'for fun', before retiring to a communal dormitory adjacent to their game stations (Dibbell).[3] Common to these varied accounts of playing the game, is the broader relevance of game beyond that of entertainment. Wark's gamespace spreads into the world, into work, into economics, into the city, into art, into health, and into war. Frequently cited among game scholars is Johan Huizinga's notion of 'the magic circle', a separate ritual-like sphere where voluntary play unfolds, either behind an imaginary border or within a literal barrier like the fence that separates the playground from the city and the school (10). Less widely referenced from his foundational treatise on play, *HomoLudens*, are Huizinga's investigations into the diverse roots of play in ancient cultures (32). Huizinga's search for the elements of play in funerary rites, deadly Sanskrit riddles and pre-juridical Arabian contests presupposes that before modernity relegated play to the magic circle, play was on the loose amidst culture, confusing the rational boundaries of life's necessary activities with the ridiculous, competitive, and flighty contests of the ludic (108). As gamification and serious games attest to, in the early twenty-first century, we may again be witness to a return to a similar savage confluence of the game with everyday life, a blurring of the boundaries between play and world.

Still, these allegations of the game overflowing into life may seem overblown, analogous to the media's sensational critique of the effect of violent gun-shooting games on unbalanced youth. Are we really approaching *The Hunger Games'* dystopian Hollywood depiction of a cruel, competitive, gamified society with no boundaries between play and life, or between play and death? In response to such reception criticism, and its implicit or explicit call for game censorship, many in the game industry and in game studies have tactically adopted a stance that clearly separates the game as a type of fiction, like literature or film-making, from the world. Although my project will make a case for greater scrutiny of games, an entertaining cultural region that is often not taken seriously enough (even as fiction) ultimately, whether or not games are becoming a dominant paradigm of contemporary life around the globe, is a bigger question that I leave to those in diverse disciplines from philosophy to the social sciences.

The skeptical reader may at least accept the more limited claim that games are an increasingly popular form of persuasive and communicative media. At the beginning of the US led War on Terror, the army captured the attention of young recruits for deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq by setting up game stations running *America's Army* at high-schools in low-income neighborhoods. A government of a young nation teaches children about its older 'national heritage' by funding the development of *World*

of Temasek, a role playing game set during the emergence of Singapore's fourteenth-century spice trade. The Red Cross teams up with Yale University and Parsons School of Design researchers and students to develop the card game *Humans vs Mosquitos* as part of a health campaign to teach school children in Africa how to avoid mosquito-borne diseases.

The military, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not the only interest groups using games politically, persuasively, and even as blatant propaganda. Activists, artists, and protestors also comment on and critique current events, raise awareness and support for refugees, for natural disaster victims, for exploited workers, and use games to address other pressing concerns. One relatively early, deliberate attempt to make use of a computer game politically was *Escape from Woomera*, a modification of the *Half-life* action game from 2004. The game mod raised awareness of the plight of refugees who were subjected to human rights abuses in a remote government detention center in the Australian outback. The player launches on a quest to collect tools to escape from the facility, along the way encountering characters who share stories based on the trials of asylum seekers detained in Woomera.

Instead of raising awareness of the plight of others, some Games for Change aim to modify their players' own behavior and habits. Set in a near future without petroleum, Ken Eklund's *A World Without Oil,* is an alternative reality game that challenged players to devise and implement strategies to minimize their carbon footprint. After playing the game for a month, many players reported that their consumption habits had become less wasteful even after the game had ended. The tag line of the game was 'Play it—before you live it'.

The Game vs the Player

If we can at least agree that we observe a closer relation between games and activism, between games and war, between games and the city—in other words, an infiltration of games into certain regions of the world—we would do well to analyze the power of games. Rather than a revolutionary, freeing act of resistance as imagined by the Parisian Situationists, often the game imposes a kind of subjectification. To a certain extent, whatever kind of game it is, whether a military-themed, First-Person Shooter game, an online role playing game hinging on the exchange of digital artifacts, or even just an entertaining, casual game challenge of throwing cartoon birds with little correlation to worldly concerns, the game's rule space takes

over the player.[4] As phenomenologist philosopher Hans George Gadamer writes of the player's aesthetic union with a game: 'Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play' (102). The game's timed procedures demand reflexive acts from the player. The player engages with the game's pre-programmed interactions, losing minutes and hours to the fascination of overcoming the challenge, and then ascends to the next, incrementally more difficultly-scaled challenge. Claus Pias compares the player's race against the game's digital clock in single-player action computer games to timed efficiency tests conducted on early twentieth-century factory workers, writing: 'The similarity [between games and work] lies in that all work can be optimized following the rules of space and time studies' (43). The player submits to the game's regime.

And yet, players also design and play their own games, thereby seizing back some of that which was lost to the game. My underlying focus over the course of this book concerns this power grab from the game. I understand these acts as player-driven transformation of an existing game into another, as a transformative process I will refer to as *ludic mutation*. In what now reads as a prescient forecast of the mutable power of play, within a series of letters written to Kant, poet Friedrich Schiller invokes a dynamic 'play drive' as the aesthetic force behind art making, an ongoing tension between an abstract 'formal impulse' and a 'material impulse' (65). Schiller questions, 'But why call it a *mere* game, when we consider that in every condition of humanity it is precisely play, and play alone, that makes man complete and displays at once his twofold nature?' (79). The player's power lies in creation, change, and modification of the game. The remaker of games sees the world not as a given, fixed place composed of static objects, but as *play material*, to be tweaked, hacked, altered, and reconfigured. Hardcore players bored with the existing conventions of shooter games modify the rules, challenging each other to finish guns-free 'Zero Shot' runs of *Halo*. A player augmented with a smart camera-phone intervenes briefly in the city's work-a-day routines, racing through the streets of New Orleans or Christchurch to capture virtual landmarks and make strategic alliances in a game like *Ingress*. Such game- or world-changing may be of short duration, a brief displacement of the dominant game or setting's normal procedures with a slightly different set of rules—and yet, even such temporary diversions have potential impact.

Over the course of this book, I conduct a critical analysis of player-driven changes to the game at varied scales and points of intervention, across gaming culture, in unique online communities of players, among artists, activists, and situated within the city—both in the digital game

city and the augmented city.[5] Players modify and evolve game structures and genres, taking back the authorial reins of game-making from a risk-averse commercial game industry. Artists conduct chaotic aesthetic hacks of the game's programmatic engine, reducing military-themed shooters and car races to abstract surges of color and noise. Game-makers with critical agendas simulate the world's problems in miniature toy worlds, critiquing environmentally destructive fast food empires, and raising awareness of the plight of refugees. Activist players carry out protest campaigns of ludic resistance on the digital streets and public arenas of online game cities. And children of a near future city invent and play augmented reality games, with smart-glasses gadgets that they use as reprogrammable street toys.

Chapters

The first and second chapters may be of greater interest to play theorists and media researchers of participatory digital game culture. I discuss open and mutable play structures that support gender and identity experimentation. I also address creative approaches to gaming such as modding and world-building. Game genres are contrasted and evaluated for their potential to facilitate ludic mutation. In this beginning portion of the book, I implement a media archeology optic that looks backwards from the present to early game modifications exchanged over the internet of the 1990s and even earlier. This historical approach is distinct from the focus on the now of the game blogger or industry journalist who reviews only the latest commercial game releases and player trends. Similarly, the new media approach in academia risks blindness to recurrent play patterns and evocative, historical examples that have more to tell, even decades, or in the case of pre-digital games, centuries later.

The first chapter focuses on an open-ended example of game changing, an unusual and queer 1990s adult game known as *KiSS*. Artist-players shared these digital doll games freely with other players via online archives on the internet. When older players began to play, these games departed from from the childish, domestic setting usually associated with doll play. Although this chapter's emphasis is not on the real-life identities of these international players, notably these games were created and played by an unusually diverse adult community that included heterosexual women and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) players and game-makers.

The player-maker transforms the *KiSS* doll-character's attire and body with toy-like variability, arriving at a different ending each time it is played.

I call such changeable games that lack predetermined goals, but still conform to a chain-like, iterative structure, *unfolding games*. In this first chapter, I make a theoretical analogy between these sorts of play actions and the open-ended, aesthetic political actions of political philosopher Hannah Arendt's 'Space of Appearance' (206). Modern understandings of political engagement, such as participation in formal systems like a representative democracy, or deployment of persuasive rhetoric, have little to do with playing soft-core, erotic doll games. Yet Arendt's individually disclosive, performative actions are a formulation of political exercise that I argue fits such gameplay (198).

In Chapter Two, I analyze players' appropriation and modification of commercial computer games. Contingents of players and amateur game-makers known as modders actively produce their own variations of commercial games. A game modification, or 'mod', might be a relatively minor change to the game; for instance, an early 1990s hack of a female character into the male turf of the militant First-Person Shooter genre. Or a mod might be an entirely new game with a new architectural level, thematic setting, and play style, referred to among players as a 'Total Conversion'. Some mods have outlived and eclipsed the popularity of the original commercial game, such as the *Defense of the Ancients* (*DoTA*) mod of Blizzard's *Warcraft III*, a strategy game of territorial invasions.

Modding entails an interaction between two distinct spheres of cultural production, on the one side professional and commercial, and on the other volunteered and gifted. This relationship between game developers and modders is imbued with inequalities and tensions. In this second chapter, I draw on Michel Serres' multivalent figure of *The Parasite* as a key to understanding these complicated relations, approaching modding as a kind of parasitism or borrowing from a wealthier industrial 'host' (5). In addition to appropriation, the parasite also makes disruptive noise in the game system. Artist-made mods explore the chaotic pleasures of dismantling industrial game engines, reducing a photo-realistic First-Person Shooter game of militant competition to abstract fields of pixelated color and fragments.

Who is the biggest parasite in such cases—is it the player or artist who hacks the commercial game, or is it the commercial game developer who profits from the voluntary labor of player-modders? Critics of participatory digital share culture contend that voluntary digital labor constitutes a too easily exploitable 'outside' deliberately cultivated by Information Age industries (Terranova 79). Is research that valorizes participatory gaming also complicit with such exploitation? Are modders and other ludic mutators, like the youngsters who contribute to the universes of sandbox games

like *Minecraft*, the game industry's naive dupes? These questions of power and exploitation should be posed. Still, the rewards of participation are not only financial. For instance, modders derive creative, authorial satisfaction from designing a level or 'map', and the young apprentice or game hacker revels in learning the inner workings of a game system. As share economy advocates contend, prestige within a digital information community is also a form of recompense, although, again, the picture is complicated by the disparate exchange systems that commercial game developers and amateur modders inhabit.

Continuing with biological metaphors, instead of either parasitism or exploitation by the host, in other cases modding appears closest to mutually beneficial, symbiotic evolution. Players leave their mark through customizations and other changes, and, subsequently, the game industry incorporates some of these player innovations. Commercial games evolve in concert with the contributions of players, and some companies like Valve Software make it their policy to absorb innovative, player designed mods. That said, many play styles and themes developed in modding have ended up as evolutionary dead-ends, ignored by the game industry, even when lauded by other players. If a more open and inclusive game culture is to be hoped for, when does the game industry choose to ignore free contributions from modders? In this chapter, I identify moments when the modder's 'gifts' to gaming have been too feminine, queer, or otherwise divergent in play style to cross over into the industry.

The third chapter, 'Activist Game Rhetoric', explores rhetorical strategies relevant to activist, political, and persuasive games. In a genre of serious games that I label 'activist simulation games', game-makers model the operation of a harmful process in the miniature toy world of a game. Benchmark examples from this genre include Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12* simulation of a satellite powered air-striker for eliminating minute cartoonish Middle-Eastern terrorists. And in bold and cheerful colors, Paolo Pedercini of Molleindustria simulates the overseeing of environmentally destructive farming, cattle slaughter, and fast-food hamburger production in *Macdonald's Videogame*. The makers of these activist games are often one- or two-person independent developers who had the foresight that games need not be large, Triple A Hollywood productions. A political game can be a smaller and quicker, lower-fidelity expression, commentary, protest, or persuasive argument in motion, often stylistically belonging to 'the casual' genre of games made with relatively simple, cartoonish graphics.

Although appreciative of the contributions such pioneering activist gamemakers have made to the still evolving field of Games for Change, in

my view the time has come for a more critical evaluation of how such activists address a cause through game rhetoric. To better understand how an otherwise well-designed game might get in the way of an intended message or critique, in this chapter I draw on a tradition of philosophical thinking from outside the customary realms of game studies, interaction analysis, and design. Functional clockwork operations, the toy-like routines modeled in miniature in the simulation genre of activist games, are normalized when the player adopts a common-sense view on the workings of the world, what Martin Heidegger referred to as 'everyday sight' (107). While interacting with the instrumental toy world of the game, the player does not reflect on the damage such goal-oriented tasks cause in the outside world, for example on the effect of cleared tracts of rain forest on climate change, or the loss of civilian lives and cultural heritage resulting from war (105). The only way for an activist game-maker to awaken a player's criticality may be to program the game to interrupt and sabotage its own play mechanics. When the operationality of the toy world breaks down, what I call the *broken toy tactic*, becomes a relevant approach for critical game design.

I also dedicate a portion of this chapter to discussing another tactical approach to making an activist game, one that borrows its rhetorical form from the commercial action/stealth game genre. In a *harrowing mission*, such as Susanna Ruiz' *Darfur is Dying*, a refugee-child ventures from her camp to forage for water in the desert, hiding behind rocks from rampaging militia trucks. The player's mission in such a relatively simple challenge is to find water and survive. If the game is effective, the player acquires empathy for refugees by walking for a short while in their shoes as a game character—albeit without actual hunger pains or experiencing physical violence or rape. Players may later contribute to a charity that supports refugees; for instance, *Darfur is Dying* directs players to a charity website mid-game. Or players may later adopt a stance supportive in other ways of persons undergoing a crisis outside the game.

The designer of a harrowing mission predetermines a fairly narrow path for the player to advance through the game. If the game were to offer the player a wider array of possible game actions and decisions—for instance, the option to steal water from other refugees—such choices might risk losing empathy for the alleged powerless victims of the crisis. Could a more open-ended game still harness rhetorical support for a particular population in crisis? Interestingly, *This War of Mine*, inspired by the civilian experience of the Siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War, is a refugee experience game that affords the player multiple branching decision pathways and many endings. But after making hard ethical choices and virtual sacrifices

in order to survive the siege, does the player end the game fearing refugees more than empathizing with them? This chapter critiques and explores these emerging rhetorical approaches to activist game making.

Of potential interest to culture jammers, urbanists, augmented reality researchers, and to political and military theorists, in the last chapters, Chapters Four and Five, I situate play and resistant ludic campaigns within the city. Games and digital toys are evaluated for their resistant or liberatory promise, in the face of the militarization of formerly civilian turf and the growth of a data-driven, mobile, control society (Deleuze). The fourth chapter, 'City as Military Playground: Contested Terrain', draws on theories developed outside of the humanities during the build-up of the War on Terror. Global military powers, in collaboration with serious games developers, the securities industry, and the entertainment industry, turn their attention not only outwards to sites of long-standing conflict, but also inwards to potential terrorist threats at home, to Paris, Washington D.C., or New York.

Players rehearse twenty-first century battle strategies in entertaining virtual game cities, with virtual mortar, machine guns, remote drones, bombs, and small elite units of professional combatants. Lessons learnt from the urban teamwork formations of Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) are then transferred to sites of live conflict. Some of the soldiers returning from deployment in Iraq or Afghanistan play these same 'Militainment' games in therapies devised by military psychologists to treat post-traumatic stress (Stahl). In this chapter, I explain military theories relevant to military games such as Full Spectrum Warfare and Asymmetrical Warfare. I also discuss 'post-mortem' reflections on combat game design from the game industry, walking through the components of what adds up to a militarization of the city.[6]

I then turn my attention to the 'artist's camp,' starting with the early formulations for urban play of the Parisian Situationist artists and architects. Information Age culture jammers both consciously borrowed from, and unwittingly reinvented earlier Situationist tactics. They accessed new publics over the internet and in online war games through their disruptive online protests. I once counted myself among such hacktivist artists who combined activism with hacking and in this chapter I discuss *Velvet-Strike*, an anti-war game protest I co-orchestrated. I contrast an artistic, disruptive, ludic approach to hacktivism to other approaches, such as transparency hacktivism and government whistleblowers. Is a playful and artistic approach to organizing protest actions even appropriate for raising awareness about serious concerns like the plight of refugees, the impact of globalization on exploited sweatshop workers, or animal species that are endangered by

climate change? Would it be better to treat these and other activist topics with more gravity? Toward the end of the chapter, I discuss a ludic and artistic turn within protest movements, both virtually and on the actual street.

In the fifth chapter, 'Toys of Biopolis', I analyze fictional, not actual, augmented reality games played throughout the episodes of Mitsuo Iso's Japanimation television series *Dennou Coil*. The populace of Iso's science-fictional Daikoku City become the subject of a city-wide experiment with mobile, augmented reality gadgets that project data and artificial life forms into the everyday urban habitat. The series hypotheses the societal effects of this augmented reality technology that many predict as the next phase of digitalization, extrapolating from current mobile smart-phone usage. Episodes of *Dennou Coil* follow the augmented games and adventures of an intrepid set of girl-hacker protagonists, who are both technically skilled and cutely '*kawaii*'.

Outside of science fiction, recent technological experiments promise of similar mobile, wearable developments on the horizon. Upcoming pilot studies and recent prototypes include the Google-Glasses Explorer Project, Microsoft's Hololens entertainment system, and Samsung's patent for augmented contact lenses that communicate with the user's mobile phone via blinks and eye movements. In the near future, envisioned in Iso's science fiction animation series, a fluid web of informatic control is imposed upon Daikoku City's citizenry via the electronic glasses and the wireless infrastructure that electronically tags every place, object, and person on the municipal grid (Deleuze). The series Japanese creator, in ways both comparable and distinct from Western science fiction counterparts like Cyberpunk, speculates on the societal impact of such innovations.

In this chapter, I draw upon theorizations of the biopolitical to explain an erasure of political space and everyday freedoms in Iso's near future city. In what might be read as an especially Japanese and Asian depiction of youthful rebellion, these individual freedoms are sacrificed later in adulthood to the greater needs of the population and corporation, to a society configured as one big family. But despite a biopolitical conclusion to the series that seems to enforce traditional Asian family values, *Dennou Coil's* earlier speculative scenarios predict similar privacy concerns to those that arose in the West in response to a 2014 Google Glasses pilot study. Northern Californian cafés and restaurants closer to Google's main headquarters banned the glasses and 'Stop the Cyborgs' stickers were posted in public venues. The US Congressman Joe Barton, with bi-partisan support from other Congress members and from his constituents, sent a letter to Google raising privacy concerns about the glasses' facial recognition capabilities

and data collection for the company. In Daikoku City, much like the most sinister fears of the detractors of Google Glasses, a corporation allows a variety of 'biocontrollers', including government, corporate medical researchers, and family, manipulative access to young citizen's data.

Still, I make the case that such gadgets are not inevitably hardwired for control and surveillance. In the second half of the chapter, I explore how the informatic hold that the city has over its inhabitants, and the biopolitical logic legitimizing this control, is broken and reprogrammed in the augmented reality games of *Dennou Coil*. The children of the series are continually inserting new games into the urban fabric. If the toy apparatus can be diverted from its control function through reprogrammable play, it may be that a vestigial 'polis', a free urban populace, lives on in the child characters of Iso's future Asian bio-control city. These kids are equipped with the power of disruptive play.

My original motivation for this research was to take a step back from my own practice and reflect critically on artist games, modding, and activist games. My hope is to inspire further game changing on a number of fronts, from art and entertainment, to political activism. From adult unfolding games of dolls, to avid player modding, to ludic activist campaigns on digital streets and hard pavement, to the near futureware augmented reality toys and games of children, *Ludic Mutation* explores the potential for channeling the power of games back through the players' hands. The book concludes with a synthesis of the tactics covered across my examples of ludic mutation. In this final 'Tactical Sketchbook' chapter, I contrast a critical, 'negative' tactical stance that resists a system from within, to ludic mutation that more evasively steps outside to invent a new game. My framing of these practices is intended to critically illuminate the power of the game over the player, as well as to offer hope of changing the game.