

FREER THAN WE THINK: GAME DESIGN AS A LIBERATION PRACTICE

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0. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is that of exploring and framing what is – in my opinion – a quality of the process of game design that was largely overlooked by academia: its capability to function as a liberation practice. In pursuing this goal, this text will present arguments and observations that build on two fundamental beliefs: an understanding of ‘play’ as a transformative practice (section 1), and the embracing of the practice of design as a ‘technique of the self’ (section 2).

Proceeding from those premises, a synthetic claim on (game) design as a way of practicing freedom will be offered in the concluding section of this paper (section 3).

1. Play as a transformative practice

Transformative experiences are experiences that elicit profound changes in the people that engage in them. Their transformative quality consists, according to Edmund O’Sullivan, in their triggering deep, structural shifts in the basic premises of our thought. They irreversibly alter the way we are in the world as subjects (O’Sullivan, 2003). Transformative experiences can emerge from partaking in activities that are designed to provoke certain psychological, behavioural or convictional effects. In this sense, engaging in meditation exercises, going through psychological therapy sessions, completing a university course, keeping a personal diary, participating in team sports and mulling over a thought-experiment are often considered to be emblematic transformative experiences¹.

Not all transformative experiences are, however, the product of transformative practices. Not all of them emerge from engaging in activities that were specifically intended to promote particular transformations². Transformative experiences can, in fact, also emerge from events and activities that were not specifically meant to elicit shifts in our self-understanding and in our conduct. In this second sense, changes in our *ethos* and in our sense of possibility can be triggered by virtually anything: the appreciation of a specific art piece or literary work, a hike on the Bavarian Alps, a near-death experience, *et cetera*.

This second group of transformative experiences tend to come about in ways that are relatively rapid and unexpected, ways which appear to elicit changes in their recipients in ways that are that

¹ Clearly, this first understanding of what transformative experiences are is not meant to be interpreted deterministically. I believe it is also intuitively clear to the reader that transformative experiences are not the direct and predictable output of transformative activities, but instead emerge from the coactions of the transformative qualities of specific activities and the influence of individual sensitivity, previous experiences and a broad assembly of cultural determinants.

² In discussing transformative experiences in his 2007 book *Foucault’s Heidegger: Philosophy and Transformative Experience*, Timothy Rayner suggested the use of the Aristotelian connotation of ‘practice’ to indicate an activity that is pursued with a specific goal in mind. This is the way in which the term ‘*praxis*’ is utilized in this paper.

are accidental and personal. Differently from the experiences listed in the second group, the ones belonging to the first group can be recognized as having a more universal appeal and as emerging from a deliberate engagement in certain transformative practices. Additionally, I believe it is important to observe that the transformative experiences that derive from partaking in transformative practices customarily require an extended period of time for their transformative effects to take place (for example in the case of completing a university course or participating in therapy sessions). Some even require a continuous or even life-long engagement with the transformative practice in question (for instance in the case of keeping a personal diary or meditating) in order for them to influence how we develop our sensitivity and shape ourselves and our conduct.

This paper embraces ‘play’ as a transformative practice that has foundational roles in the establishing of social values, in the development of culture, and in the formation of individual identity. According to this understanding of ‘play’, it also allows us – from a very early age and as a life-long practice – to acquire new perspectives on who we are, and to test, negotiate and construct our *ethos* in relation to ourselves and the world. Among game scholars, the understanding of the primary socio-cultural role of ‘play’ as a formative and trans-formative one is a well-established perspective. One could go as far as claiming that it is the single aspect of ‘play’ (perhaps next to its characteristic ambiguity) that any theories and perspectives in the fields of game studies and anthropology have in common. Since Johan Huizinga’s 1938 pioneering work *Homo Ludens*, ‘play’ had been recognized as having transformative effects on individuals and social groups in various domains of culture and education³. Contemporary game studies still passionately embrace and analyse transformational applications of ‘play’ such as:

SOCIAL CRITICISM: Through play, we can challenge and reshape the norms and boundaries that are established in a certain culture. Throughout the course of history, artists and activists have designed playful experiences to raise social awareness and criticize the *status quo* (Flanagan, 2009).

TRAINING AND TEACHING: Play can be understood as a structured activity that allows players to learn notions and practice behaviours in ways that are safe, pragmatic and pleasurable. As such, play can be employed in the processes of training and teaching in a variety of different disciplines and contexts.

ETHICS: Play provides the occasional freedom and distance from moral conventions and is a part of a healthy, mature and complete human life. Play is ethically important because it allows us to recognize and challenge our values, so that they become more than mindless habits (Sicart, 2014).

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: Play stylizes and ritualizes our encounter with the ‘other’ (other people as well as other species). As such, it is recognized as affecting individuals’ interpersonal skills, social lifestyles and personal relationships. From an early age in the development of humans as well as animals, play provides a safe ‘possibility space’ to shape one’s own sense of identity and possibility.

³ In her 2009 book *Critical Play*, Mary Flanagan, explained how artistic currents such as Dadaism and Surrealism embraced play as part of their subversive artistic arsenal as early as the onset of the 20th century. They utilized board games and puppetry to intentionally influence their players and their cultural environment and were frequently driven by specific political intentions as also testified by their manifestoes (Flanagan, 2009, 153 – 163).

CREATIVE THINKING: According to a concept called ‘serious play’, the playful visualization and manipulation of ideas can foster creative thinking. Serious play, often performed with LEGO bricks, serves as a practical method for building confidence, commitment and insight.

PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY: Playing and acting within virtual worlds discloses objective, interactive experiences. Digital games and simulations materialize human thought in ways that go beyond subjective imagination and past what is merely actual. As such, they provide the experiential context where a new humanism has already begun to arise (Gualeni, 2014).

In the previous passages of this paper, the experiences that emerge from engaging in the transformative practices – including ‘play’ – were recognized as capable of bringing about profound, long-term changes. This perspective on transformative experiences is, however, exclusively developed in relation to the recipients of the transformative experience itself. In doing so, it overlooks the effects that transformative practice might engender in the ones who set the experience up, the ones that bring it to fruition. It is important to understand that transformative experiences can be designed. Miguel Sicart observed that some of them are not designed in the Bauhaus-inspired tradition where a creator shapes an object for a determined function and for a certain community of users, but are designed in a looser sense. In the case of ‘play’, for example, we can say that the experience is “designed as mediated by things created to facilitate the emergence of play.” (Sicart, 2014, 7)

It is a commonly accepted notion that the practice of psychotherapy can elicit desirable psychological and behavioural shifts in a patient. Can the practice of psychotherapy also be recognized as a transformative activity for the therapist involved? Is the creation of a literary piece or a philosophical treatise as changing an experience for their writers as it is for their readers? And, back to the original question that motivated this paper, are the inventors of a game or the designers of a certain playful experience going through a self-transformative process while engaged in the process of its design?

In this paper I argue that when engaging in the interrelated processes of researching, iterating and decision-making which takes place when designing a specific experience (regardless of its ludic nature), the designers themselves acquire new knowledge. Philosopher John Dewey already observed that the idea of transformational play draws upon the epistemological position that both knower and known constitute and are constituted through meaningful inquiry (Barab et Al., 2001, 526). The new knowledge and the new perspectives developed by the designers of a structured, playful experience have a wide epistemological range, as it includes, at the very least:

- understanding the needs and (cognitive and operational) capabilities of the intended recipients of the designed experience,
- researching and framing the aesthetical metaphors of the game,
- envisaging and controlling the effects of their design decisions,
- and recognizing their very attitudes and beliefs in relation to the designed experience⁴.

⁴ Heuristic, critical, and transformative aspects of the practice of designing experiences and interactions are not exclusive to the design of games and structured play, but are common in a critical approach to any forms of design as recently argued by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (Dunne and Raby, 2013). In their work, the design of artefacts,

In the process of design, designers materialize not only their functional plan, but also their *ethos* and their sensitivity, making them objects for (their own as well as other people's) critical evaluation.

As outlined in the introductory paragraph, my argument for an understanding of game design as a practice of freedom (or liberation practice) will proceed from an understanding of design as a transformative practice. The passage from a transformative practice to a practice of freedom will be discussed in the next section of this paper utilizing the concepts of 'freedom' and 'power' as elaborated in the later work of philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault.

2. Freer than We Think: design as a 'technique of the self'

In his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault showed in how many ways the human being is historically (and literally) *subject* to a multitude of powers. In our disciplinary society, according to Foucault, 'power' "takes the form of self-control and does not necessarily represent a system of rules only imposed from without, but a system of rules we also self-impose in order to create and maintain a functioning society." (Gerrie, 2003, 20) In this sense, 'power' is not understood by Foucault as being univocally oppressive and alienating, but it is rather presented in his work as a creative force that produces and shapes subjects in several ways.

Until the end of the 1970s', Foucault's scholarly work chiefly focused on understanding what can be broadly understood as two expressions of 'power':

- 'power' as pervasive systems of thought (for example the human sciences or the way in which governments strive to produce citizens that fulfil and align with governmental policies), and
- 'power' as expressed the physical institutions through which the aforementioned systems of thought actively shape and dominate its subjects, such as psychiatric clinics, asylums, schools and prisons, *et cetera*.

Foucault's critical practice between 1980 and his untimely death in 1984 is characterized by a shift in its focus, as it starts to examine more closely the processes of 'subjectification' (the way in which humans constitute themselves as moral subjects in relations and networks with 'power') that occur within those institutions. In particular, in the second phase of his thought, Foucault explained how the very structures that dominate and constitute the human individual as a subject also establish a field of possibilities where it is possible for the subject to re-shape, or rather re-create, itself (Markula-Denison and Pringle, 2006, 138). This later perspective of Foucault's also entailed a shift in his understanding of the concept of 'freedom', which, I believe, is worth analyzing in detail. His later understanding of 'freedom' is also crucial in understanding game design as a practice of liberation.

Common readings of Foucault's pre-1980 work understand 'freedom' as a reaction to the controlling presence of 'power': as the act of "rebell[ing] against the ways in which we are already defined, categorized, and classified." (Sawicki, 2003, 69) In that sense, analyses of privacy threats and the growing pervasiveness of 'power' fostered by technological advancements are frequently inspired by the Foucauldian idea of a surveillance society (Verbeek, 2011, 71). This is, however,

artworks or experiences is recognized as 'critical' when it directly addresses, challenges and questions existing values and practices in culture, rather than adapting to them.

not the interpretation I want to adopt here. With the objective of exploring design as a practice of liberation, I will read the later Foucault's concept of 'freedom' hermeneutically, rather than framing them into a Marxist dialectic of oppression and rebellion.

Embracing Foucault's later work from a hermeneutical perspective, 'freedom' can be understood not as the state of being liberated from restrictions and interdictions, but rather as an activity that always emerges in relation to its historically-specific constraints and its relationships with 'power' (Foucault, 1982). Consequently, subjects are not recognized as 'free' when they manage to secure a place outside of the controlling reach of 'power', but when they engage in the critical activity of shaping themselves in relation to it.

This understanding of 'freedom' matured in Foucault while studying classical antiquity, where he encountered an ethical approach that was not primarily about showing or establishing what kinds of behaviours are to be considered morally right. Foucault argued that in ancient Greece, ethics was not a discipline trying to answer the question 'how should I act to be a moral subject?', but rather to 'what kind of subject do I want to be?' More simply put, in ancient Greece ethics was not practiced deontologically (that is to say normatively), but rather projectively⁵: as a form of self-design. Methods and practices that were involved in experimenting one's dealing with pleasures and knowledge, with other people, with political life, and with styling one's self were labelled by Foucault as 'technologies of the self' (Verbeek, 2012, 75; Foucault, 1982). He defined 'technologies of the self' as techniques that

“permit individuals to effect [alone or with the help of others] [...] a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves [...].” (Foucault, 1988, 18)

The reader will certainly recognize in Foucault's description what was already encountered in the first section of this paper under the label of 'transformative practices'.

According to Foucault when we engage institutions and networks of 'power' through 'technologies of the self' (or 'transformative practices'), we become aware of the arbitrariness of institutions, and "show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made." (Foucault, 1988, 11) In this sense, by reframing our understanding of 'power' and 'freedom', Foucault prompts up to realize that we are actually freer than we think we are. It is important to note, however, that not all 'technologies of the self' are automatically also practices of liberation. According to Foucault, in fact, in order to exercise one's freedom as an ethical subject, the 'transformative practice' in question needs to be framed in a certain way by the individual: for the practice to be liberatory, one must first recognize the constraints imposed by 'power' that are shaping one's subjectivity and then deliberately engage and challenge the societal rules in question (Foucault, 1982). In other words, Foucault argued that it is only through a critical approach to one's constraints and interdictions that a 'technology of the self' can also have a liberating effect on the individual.

⁵ In Martin Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time*, the term 'projectivity' (*Entworfenheit* in the original edition in German) indicates the way a Being opens to the world in terms of its possibilities of being (Heidegger, 1962, 184, 185). In this sense, this papers understands technologies as the materialization of mankind's tendency and aspiration to overcome its 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit* in the original German edition of *Being and Time*), that is to say the historical dimensions as well as the physical, perceptual, cognitive and communicative limitations that define *Dasein* in its being-in-the-world.

Starting to focus more specifically on game design as a practice of liberation, it is important to notice that in Foucault's later work he never explicitly mentioned either the activity of 'play' nor being involved in the design of a game and/or a certain playful activity as 'technologies of the self', but I believe that a closer look at the concepts of rules in the context of 'play' could be illuminating in connecting game design to Foucauldian 'freedom'.

In the context of game studies, rules are commonly identified as formal instruments that have a primary role of structuring gameplay and allow for the creation and the identification of a context of 'play' (Sicart, 2014, 8). In a way that is analogue to the relationship between Foucault's concepts of 'power' and 'freedom', rules are the boundaries that set up the context ('power') within which play can take place ('freedom'). All contexts of 'play' are defined by rules of some kind, no matter how vague and flexible. Paraphrasing Foucault, one could say that there is 'play' only when there are rules. It is important to add here that rules are not sacred constructs, but can be negotiated with, transgressed and stylized. Examples abound in this sense, from the idea of house-rules (variations or further restrictions of the rules of a certain game that are specific to a certain location or community), to transgressing some of the rules (cheating), to willingly playing in ways that are sub-optimal as a way to further enjoy the game (playfulness), *et cetera*.

In a way that is analogue to dealing with the rules of 'play', in their lived experience subjects can impose additional, optional rules to their lives and in doing so they can "gain some measure of power or control over themselves and their experience." (Parker, 2011) Foucault hoped that this particular way of self-fashioning, this critical and flexible engagement with 'power' could lead to the kind of 'freedom' discussed above, that is to say the exerting of power over oneself in the same way that an artist exerts power over his tools and materials in order to produce a work of art (Parker, 2011)⁶.

3. Game design as a practice of freedom

In the independent game development community, the idea of game design as a creative urge and an activity which is personally meaningful (in opposition to being an economical necessity) is well established and rooted in a tradition that dates back to 'bedroom coding' in the eighties. This aspect of the practice of game design is often discussed informally among game developers, and is occasionally examined in specialized conferences and publications. Academia, instead, largely overlooked the idea that game design (or design in general) can be engaged by the designers as a way to reflect on themselves, to clarify and materialize one's own belief and conduct, and to practice ethical and aesthetical self-fashioning⁷.

⁶ It must be added, here, that the analogy between structured play and Foucauldian 'power' is not as direct or as unproblematic as I simplified it in this passage. Parker himself is very critical and sceptical about this association in his 2011 paper 'In the Domain of Optional Rules: Foucault's Aesthetic Self-Fashioning and Expansive Gameplay', where he clarified that this way of understanding gameplay relies on the concept of structured play as being entirely part of the larger system of 'power'. Besides, Parker further observed, "the relationship between games, culture and social reality is complex, with games existing in an in-between space that is not entirely real *nor* entirely imaginary." (Parker 2011) Although Parker accepts the theoretical possibility to use play as a liberation practice, in his perspective it would more aptly work as a simulation of a freeing practice: a space where the players can practice (in both sense of the term) ways of refining lived and played experience alike.

⁷ One notable exception is Sasha A. Barab's education-oriented theory of transformational play. Instead of relying on Foucault, Barab's perspective on transformational play can be interpreted as an extension of John Dewey's concept of 'transactivity': the idea that "every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes... For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them." (Dewey, 1963, 36 in Barab et Al., 2010, 526)

The aware pursuit of game design as a practice of freedom is, I argue, more frequently and openly pursued among game developers in contexts such as serious games, games for change, self-reflexive video games and propaganda games. In other words, and perhaps not surprisingly, it is generally acknowledged in relation to applications of structured play that also have a deliberate transformative purpose for its players. The design of structured play as transformative practices requires, in fact, that their designers engage in

1) critical thinking (see notes 3 and 4), and

2) the establishment of a specific relationship with ‘power’ in the real world (and thus bypassing Parker’s scepticism about their ‘freeing claim’ discussed in note 6).

In that respect, Italian activist and critical game designer Paolo Pedercini often stated that in his experience “[...] there is a greater liberation potential in designing games rather than playing games.” (<http://www.molleindustria.org/blog/making-games-in-a-fucked-up-world-games-for-change-2014>) Pedercini creates video games that have the overt scope of raising awareness and stimulate activism with regard to certain socio-political issues. When designing such games, according to him, the foremost ethical responsibility of the game designers is that of researching and fully comprehending the topics and the positions that they are disclosing (procedurally and aesthetically) through their games (ibid.).

For example, if one were to design a game to call the attention of the players on the socio-political issue of pathological gambling, it would be the designers’ duty, at the beginning of the process, to develop a meticulous understanding of the chemical effects of gambling on the brain, the several cognitive biases it relies on, the potential social harm deriving from them as well as possible solutions and policies that could be implemented to counteract it.

Later on in the design process, the designers critically systematize their findings and concentrate on certain key aspects of the experience they are trying to disclose experientially and interactively. In doing so, they customarily focus on behaviours and qualities of the system that they are designing that they consider as having the most rhetorical potential and excise the ones that are superfluous or secondary and might muddle the clarity and persuasiveness of their message⁸. “We build our games like a Japanese garden,” stated Jenova Chen, game designer for the award-winning, transformative 2012 video game *Journey*, “where the design is perfect when you cannot remove anything else. I think that by doing that, the voice of your work is more coherent. If you have a lot of clutter on the top, the work may be more impressive, but you won’t really know what it’s trying to say.” (Smith, 2012) These operations are normally carried out by the game designers in the pre-production phase of game development, but they are modified and refined throughout all the iterative process.

I believe it is, however, quite intuitively obvious that the transformative steps of researching, shaping an interactive experience, refining it and making it clearly and easily accessible for the intended recipients is not an exclusive of game design, but is rather a quality of any forms of design once they are engaged with the projectual ethics discussed in the previous section of this paper. Architecture, graphic design, industrial design, scenography, game design... Any forms of design that permit the designers to take ‘care of themselves’ (that is to say to critically confront existing

⁸ Pedercini demonstrated a clear awareness of the fundamental (and often overlooked) expressive role of the ‘unsaid’ in transformative video games. Details and aspects of a certain experience that were removed or simplified for the sake of a certain argument, the boundaries of the game levels and virtual worlds (the ‘invisible walls and puffy clouds’) that limit and guide player’s behaviour clearly participate to the ‘power’ dimension of game design. Pedercini warns us that “[a]s designers we should be constantly aware of where we draw these boundaries, because it’s easy to mistake scoping for a purely technical choice.” (<http://www.molleindustria.org/blog/invisible-walls-puffy-clouds/>)

structures of power and knowledge, socio-cultural limitations and interdiction with the scope of shaping and fashioning one's *ethos* and beliefs) must be recognized as the potential contexts in which the designers can engage in liberating self-fashioning.

As already observed by Foucault, the self-fashioning of an individual, one's 'taking care of oneself' was, for the Greeks, the essential principle of cities: one of the main rules for social and personal conduct (Foucault, 1988, 19). The whole idea of the *polis* relied, for Foucault, on the becoming aware ethical subjects of its members. Socrates himself, when teaching people to occupy themselves with their beliefs and conduct, was actually teaching them how to take care of the city (Foucault, 1988, 20). This paper argues precisely the point that there is a great and overlooked potential for personal transformation and the fashioning of better citizens (and overall more thorough and ethical human beings) in the practice of design, when design is approached critically.

In the first section of this paper, the activity of 'play' was presented as happening for the most part in contexts and spaces (regardless of their 'actual' or 'virtual' qualities) designed for that activity. As such, 'play' and its contexts can be designed, and this is one of the reasons why games are the dominant form of 'play' in the age of digital technology. But why is my argument focusing specifically on the liberating qualities of game design? Apart from its diffusion in contemporary society, does it hold a special relevance or a particularly advantageous position in terms of self-fashioning when compared to the practice of design in general? My answer to this question is that it does and that, at the same time, it does not.

As observed throughout the paper, the challenges and processes of game design are analogue to those of other forms of design. Consequently, it would be illogical to make a case for the remarkability of game design on the basis of some of its inherent qualities as a practice. However, I claim that game design has a particularly advantageous position when it comes to the self-fashioning of individuals, and that such position is fostered and supported by the digital mediation of 'play'. The pervasive penetration of computers in social practices and the becoming more democratic and accessible of video game development tools made it faster and easier for everybody to distribute games, to discuss about games and to contribute to the development and the refinement of games. In my opinion, the speed and flexibility in the creation of games and/or playful experience is not, however, what affords video game design a particularly interesting socio-cultural role: after all we could still design and prototype critical experiences quickly and cheaply with paper, cards, pawns, cardboards, chalk, beads *et cetera*. In my vision, the aspect that makes contemporary game design particularly desirable and relevant as a practice of liberation consists in its affording the designers the possibility to effortlessly release experiences of digitally-structured play to a global community. A community of players-designers that is willing to 'play', to discuss, to participate in the refinement of an experience and even, in some cases, to refashion it independently⁹. In other words, the digital medium is recognized as particularly efficient in allowing designers to – allow me to repeat it once again – materialize not only their functional plan, but also their *ethos* and their sensitivity, making them objects for (their own as well as other people's) critical evaluation. I claim that this particular advantage chiefly revolves around the

⁹ In this regard, it might suffice to think about the phenomenon of video game 'modding' (an informal expression deriving from the verb 'to modify'). Video game 'modding' refers to the act of modifying the hardware or software of a video game in order to allow it to perform a function or a set of functions that were not originally conceived or intended by the game designers. In recent history of video games, cases of 'modding' resulted in entirely new and community-driven games. There are several commercially successful examples of the re-absorption of independent 'mods' by the games industry. This is famously the case for games such as *Counter Strike* (a 1999 first-person-shooter that emerged from an independent 'modding' of Valve's 1998 *Half Life*) or *Defense of The Ancients* (or *DOTA*, a 2003 multiplayer online battle arena 'mod' for the *Blizzard's* 2002 video game *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*).

volume of games and game-related information that is exchanged globally¹⁰, and is an advantage that is already earning video game design a spot among the dominant ‘technologies of the self’ of the twenty-first century.

I would like to conclude this paper with a cautionary note borrowed from media theory and that prompts us to always be wary: different ways of establishing relationships with ourselves and with reality through mediators necessarily entail a balance between the increase in acuity of certain cognitive functions and the desensitization of others (McLuhan, 1994). As designers we need to remain aware of the fact that the digital medium is not a neutral instrument in shaping ourselves and pursuing liberation, but it inherently poses external constraints that are themselves shaping our design ideas, our expressive possibilities and our ‘freedom’.

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¹⁰ In this sense, communities revolving around video gaming and video game design have definite affinities with what Daniel Bell defined as a ‘caring society’. Cfr. Bell, D. (1973). *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: I would like to thank Ivan Mosca and Dr. Felan Parker for the constructive criticism and the support, Dino Dini for the useful and ongoing discussion on these topics and Matthijs van de Laar, Sjors van Gelderen and Bart Huisman for proof-reading and well-wishing.