Why Study New Games?

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This article recalls the New Games Tournament of 1966 and with it, two ways to imagine play in the period: one, military war gaming and the other, the protest-oriented play of the counterculture. It then analyzes the legacy of these cultural styles for contemporary forms of gaming.

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In late 1966, as the American commitment to the Vietnam War was ramping up, the War Resisters League at San Francisco State College asked an itinerant multimedia artist named Stewart Brand to stage a public event on its behalf. Brand, who would soon become famous as the founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, gathered a hundred or so pacifists into an open field and with their help, inflated a 6-foot-diameter medicine ball that had been painted with continents, waterscapes, and clouds—an "Earthball." He then took up a megaphone and announced,

> There are two kinds of people in the world: those who want to push the Earth over the row of flags at *that* end of the field, and those who want to push it over the fence at the *other* end. Go to it. (New Games Foundation & Fluegelman, 1976, p. 9)

The crowd on the field charged the ball from all sides. The ball began to roll toward one end of the field—yet as it did, members of the pushing team defected, rushing around to the other side of the ball and pushing it back the way they had just driven it. When they reached the other end of the field, they turned around again.

Glimpsed from half a lifetime away, this hour-long runaround may look like little more than the most ephemeral of countercultural happenings. Yet, over the next 10 years it gave rise to an entire New Games movement, with publications, organizations, and events held around the world. For the members of this movement, as for the War Resisters at San Francisco State, to play a new game meant far more than to amuse oneself. Pat Farrington, who would help organize the first New Games Tournament in 1973, explained that "By reexamining the basic idea of play, we could . . . [create] a sense of community and personal expression. People could center on the joy of playing, cooperating, and trusting, rather than striving to win" (New Games Foundation & Fluegelman, 1976, p. 10). Andrew Fluegelman, who would later become an important designer of free software, wrote, "We can be free and foolish in the arena of New

Games and let the spirit carry us. Everything else the games may serve will follow naturally" (New Games Foundation & Fluegelman, 1976, p. 20).

For Fluegelman, Farrington, and others, to play New Games meant to imagine and perhaps to create a new social order. And for that reason, their movement offers a window on the importance of studying games, both new and old. Like the Balinese cockfighters made famous by Clifford Geertz (1973), New Gamers played in ways that were culturally "deep." For them, games were not bounded regions apart from daily life but instead constituted a sort of *cultural genre*—a collection of practices, rules, and symbols that together, like a three-dimensional novel acted out in time, created rich social roles for players and audiences alike. The arrangement of players and observers on the field, the construction of rules (or the lack of them), the deployment of technologies and techniques in and around the space defined for play—for the New Gamers, to rearrange these elements was to rearrange the structure of society itself. In that sense, the New Gamers were not only playing but committing politics.

Those politics belonged to a very particular historical moment, but one that continues to have a substantial impact on our own. For the most part, the first Earthball players were young, White, college-educated children of the Cold War. They had grown up in the shadow of nuclear weapons and within a society dominated by massive military and industrial institutions. Within these institutions, and within much popular discourse at the time, the social world had begun to be understood to be a series of overlapping games. The most far reaching of these games was the Cold War itself. As Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi (2005) pointed out, within the precincts of government and political theory, the dropping of the atom bomb drove an extraordinary turn away from experience and toward the rule-based simulation of war games. Nuclear weapons brought with them a paradox—their use was literally unimaginable, and yet, by defense planners at least, it had to be imagined. Moreover, because no one had ever actually fought a nuclear war, the battlefield experience of generals counted for little in the envisioning of nuclear conflict (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2005). For that reason, planners and theorists such as Herman Kahn gained significant authority. Clustered in think tanks such as the RAND institute, MIT, and the Stanford Research Institute, they began to simulate nuclear Armageddon. Day after day, they imagined nuclear warfare as a game, outlined its various moves using the finest computers of the day, and measured its possible outcomes in beautifully abstract accountings of civilians killed, cities annihilated, nations' capitols captured.

For those who came of age in the 1960s, the war games of the defense industry and the computers that supported them were more than a military exercise. As Paul Edwards (1996) showed, they provided intellectual and practical support for a vision of the natural and social worlds as closed systems. In the military version of what Edwards called "closed world discourse," the American Army and Air Force deployed massive computer systems to assist them in monitoring the skies for enemy activity. These computers in turn became metaphors for the human mind, the human body, and even the constellations of interpersonal relationships in which men and women found themselves enmeshed. As Elaine May (1988) argued, the 1950s and early 1960s comprised an era of "containment." Even as young men stared into the radar screens of

America's missile tracking technologies, watching the nation's borders for signs of encroachment, so too young civilians sought to monitor the boundaries of their lives. The body, the office, the suburban home—each was to become an impenetrable box within which the individual could feel secure.

It was these boxes that the New Gamers hoped to crack open. In their view, the social rules that their parents had played by had helped create a world in which nuclear holocaust was possible. They had helped segregate the adults of the Cold War era from one another, helped cut them off from the whole range of their own emotions, and turned them into mechanical creatures, working the "system" to survive. In building New Games, the young adults of the late 1960s and early 1970s hoped to create a new set of rules and with them, a new way to live. If the games of the Cold War had presumed competition and enmity, New Games would foster cooperation and empathy. If the simulations of the defense planners had turned people into information, then New Games would return them to their bodies. If the games of Cold War military-industrial bureaucracy had been played in office towers and bunkers, New Games could be played among the flowers and hills. In their own minds, the New Gamers played together to practice a new cultural logic, a logic that they counterposed to what they believed to be the bureaucratic logic of Cold War military-industrial institutions.

This opposition continues to thread its way through contemporary games, particularly in the online environment. Simply sitting down in front of a computer and engaging in the monitoring and targeting of digitized enemies resuscitates the professional practice of Cold War soldiers. Likewise, to create new characters, to build new bodies, to engage the full range of human emotions as many games demand is to act out the ideals of those who kept the giant Earthballs of the late 1960s in motion.

Yet, as the image of the Earthball itself suggests, something else is afoot here as well. Even as they came together to protest the Vietnam War and the men who were leading it, the War Resisters of San Francisco State aped the logic underlying both. Like the leaders of the American government at the time, they imagined themselves to literally have the whole world in their hands. They were, as Stewart Brand (1968) would later put it in the *Whole Earth Catalog*, "as gods." Young, White, and in many cases, training to enter the professions, the protestors of 1966 were playing in part with their own futures. After all, they were the ones who were supposed to grow up to inherit the world of their parents. As they pushed the earth to and fro, they acted out not only a world-saving mission but their parents' authority to rule, more than a little of which depended on their shared race and class. Even as they claimed to turn away from the world of their parents, the War Resisters and many of the New Gamers who followed them in fact embraced key elements of their worldview.

This paradox afflicts our own moment as well. To the casual observer, many online role-playing games look like hyper-buffed, cartoon versions of Cold War defense computation. Much as the monitors of early warning radar once concentrated on their screens, feeling their bodies and those of the nation's enemies dissolve into information space, so now gamers disappear for hours into the informational nether regions of games such as World of Warcraft. Teams form, enemies and friends collide on digital battlefields, but no one really dies, and the next day, it all starts over again. Yet at the

same time, on and around those battlefields, players often build societies that depend as much on cooperation as any commune ever did. Much like New Gamers, they challenge the psychological and social boundaries of the bureaucratized material world; more than a few seem to play to enjoy a region in which community and individual expression rule (Yee, in press).

As this tension between intimate collaboration and digitized war making suggests, contemporary digital games, like the New Games of 30 years ago, matter in ways that have only a little to do with the moment of play. If, as the New Gamers suggested, games can be a sort of theater in which to try out new forms of society and culture, then we need to ask the following: What kinds of society can we imagine through our games today? What kinds of politics are we playing at? Moreover, if the cultural and social forces that flowed through the New Games continue to inhabit our collective play, then how should we think of our place in time? If neither we nor the New Gamers have entirely escaped the cultural gravity of the Cold War, then what are we doing with our computers?

What kind of history are *we* making?

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