Critical Play: Radical Game Design
Mary Flanagan
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.
Preface, notes, images, bibliography,
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There have been some marvelous scholarly
books on the history of games (conven-
tional and digital) and on the psychology
of play, but Mary Flanagan stakes out new
ground by bringing an artist's perspective
to *Critical Play: Radical Games*. This ambi-
tious book is a deep investigation of radi-
cal games—games designed not strictly for
entertainment but "for artistic, political,
and social critique or intervention" (p.
2). Flanagan is an accomplished radical-
game artist, but this book is not about
her work. Instead, this book investigates
how the history of interactions between
play, art, games, culture, and politics have
set the stage for today's radical games. In
doing so, it covers a lot of ground (flip-
ping through the notes, bibliography, and
index is an education in itself). Want a
history of playfully subversive art move-
ments? A critical analysis of Western doll
play and board games? A manifesto for
radical-game design with practical meth-
ods advice? Flanagan deftly integrates
these topics and more in a progression
from definitions to history to analysis to
prescription.

In the introduction, Flanagan explains
her motivations for writing the book and
defines some key terms. For example, radi-
cal games have been alternately labeled as
activist, critical, alternative, and avant-
garde games.

Chapter 2, cleverly titled "Playing
House," extends the analysis of domestic
play and domestically concerned art. In
artworks from the early Renaissance to
the Rococo era, Flanagan notes subversive
elements of superficially idyllic scenes of
people at play. She includes a fascinating
section referencing a variety of psycholo-
gists when she examines Victorian-era doll
play. Flanagan takes advantage of this con-
text, where girls sometimes veered from
the orthodox feminine script for doll play,
to more fully define the dimensions of
"critical play." Returning to the art realm,
Flanagan discusses how Dadaist, Surreal-
ist, and contemporary artists use dolls and
puppets to convey the damaging impacts
of war, violence, racism, patriarchy, and
other social challenges. The concluding
sections revisit the dimensions of critical
play introduced in the context of Victorian
doll play, and apply them to play with the
contemporary computer game, *The Sims*.

Chapter 3 addresses board games,
from the mancala-style games of ancient
civilizations to the Monopoly-style games
of recent times. With religious-ritual ori-
gins, board games have not lost all their
potency as they have become mere play-
things. While Flanagan devotes special
attention to the war games of chess and
go, she also considers the way board-game
forms and themes have both reflected
and (often intentionally) influenced the
culture of their players. Flanagan inter-
weaves the discussion of board games with
examinations of board games created by
artists—Dada, Surrealist, Fluxus, and con-
temporary masters. The author presents
another powerful artistic approach to alter
and "reskin" conventional board games in
unexpected and compelling ways. While
some artists were abstractly "challeng-
ing the predictable" (p. 113), others were

driven by specific political intentions. Flanagan applies the same lens she applied earlier to "educational" board games to the activist-artists' board games. That critical-play lens illustrates how artists instigate powerfully different, meaningful experiences for the game players.

Chapter 4, "Word Games," likewise begins with a history, this one of word games and secret languages, and then embarks on a survey of word play as manifested in the art world. From Duchamp and Man Ray's *Anemic Cinema* (1927) to Utterback and Achitiv's *Text Rain* (1999), Flanagan examines how different artists manipulate, automate, obfuscate, and physically locate letters, signs, and words in the quest to evoke critical play.

Flanagan devotes chapter 5 to "Performative Games and Objects." I had expected this chapter to open with a discussion of charades, professional sports, or television game shows. Instead, Flanagan briefly notes how all games have performative aspects. There is some organizational contortion and redundancy in the next sections, which are a catchall for reviewing the sometimes game-like processes, products, and performances of the Dada, Surrealist, Fluxus, and (the non-Western movement) Gutai artists. Next, Flanagan analyzes contemporary physical performances of games, starting with shogi chess enactments then moving on to art-driven game performances.

The coverage of participatory, performative play in art leads straightforwardly to chapter 6, "Artists' Locative Games," where play performances occur in public spaces. Before delving into contemporary approaches, Flanagan lays the foundation by introducing the Situationist Interna-

tional movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and site-specific artists such as Robert Smithson. Today, there are many mixed-reality commercial games that merge mobile technologies, remapped public spaces, and participatory play. Even in the art realm, there are large-scale games commissioned for cultural festivals and for conferences of organizations like the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts. Flanagan ponders how locative games sometimes ignore, commodify, and colonize the urban spaces they occupy. She also points to locative games that meaningfully and critically engage the play space and its original inhabitants.

With chapter 7, we finally arrive at "Critical Computer Games." First, Flanagan lays out an indictment of the commercial computer game industry—its problematic embedded ideologies and its lack of demographic diversity. She contrasts the industry approach with a selection of alternative games by activist artists engaging their audiences on a variety of issues. The chapter concludes with a discussion of computer games intended entirely for training and activism (not art or commerce), known as serious and social-impact games.

In the closing chapter, "Designing for Critical Play," Flanagan makes a direct appeal to game-maker artists with some practical design advice and a call to action. As an alternative to the conventional iterative game-design process used in game production, she proposes a critical-play game design process. Flanagan's alternative model incorporates values goals along with conventional design goals as a benchmark for game planning and quality. She finishes by urging artists as well as commer-

cial game makers to apply the critical-play design model and use the powerful social technology of games to change the world.

—W. Michelle Harris, *Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY*

Newsgames: Journalism at Play
Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010. Contents, images, notes, bibliography, index. 235 pp. $24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780262014878

Games and game-like dynamics continually increase the range of our digitally mediated experience. They make significant demands on our understanding of the wide-ranging, various subjects they affect, including those of work, entertainment media, and journalism. Authors Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer bring a powerful perspective on games and what they can do to the last of these. They provide a provocative framework for how we should think of (and design) games for a field whose challenges in a networked age have been well publicized.

The authors display a knowledge of the relationship between games and the news, one that depends as much on their own experiences with news organizations and the various roles games have played in the news. To their credit, they take a look at both significant news games produced by talented individuals independently of any sponsoring news institution and those commissioned by outlets like the *New York Times* and others. The selection and descriptions of these news games make rewarding reading—one gets an education from the book that includes a real sense of the changing landscape where these two cultural forms meet.

The authors succeed most at creating a scheme for categorizing and thinking about different kinds of games. In their view, we can usefully think of the games deployed in the contexts of news as falling into seven types, each of which gets its own chapter. Current-events games include those that express opinions—whether in a refined editorial style or in cruder "tabloid" form—and those that aim to report the daily news. Documentary news games look beyond current, day-to-day ephemeral events to engage more broadly historical and cultural contexts, which often require greater complexity and involvement to accomplish their ends, ends similar to those of documentaries in other media.

Infographic games build on the long history of infographics in newspapers to engage the audience through increasing interactivity, providing a context for playing with a complex system, and—especially with game objectives—prompting certain kinds of player performance. In a similar fashion, puzzle news games draw on the long history of puzzles (particularly crosswords) in newspapers as "literate" pastimes related to the news. Digital news games provide an opportunity to broaden the encounters between the puzzle and the news.

The authors are also interested in how games are emerging around the news, beyond the "doing" of traditional news tasks. Literacy news games seek to educate journalists and the public about