
Games, Art, and Critical Play

An Interview with Mary Flanagan

Mary Flanagan, the Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Professor of Digital Humanities at Dartmouth College, creates artworks, situations, and games that seek transformative social encounters. Her work has been featured in the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Fine Art in Houston, and the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany. She is the recipient of an American Council of Learned Societies Digital Innovation Fellowship and commissions from the British Arts Council, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the National Academy of Sciences. For twenty years, Flanagan has directed the social impact design laboratory Tiltfactor, creating and studying games from web-based games to virtual reality escape rooms, from board games to role-playing sports. Flanagan has spoken about biases and stereotypes in the digital arts in diverse communities from the Museum of Modern Art to the Tate Museum in London, from the Sorbonne to Oxford University, from the World Economic Forum to K–12 teachers' groups. **Key words:** art; board games; colonialism; critical play; Dada; Fluxus; game design; Grow-a-Game; Tiltfactor; video games

American Journal of Play: How did you play as a child?

Mary Flanagan: I played a lot on my own, with many animal figurines, LEGO blocks, tiny plants from the yard—I always crafted combinations of miniature items to make worlds. My family also played board and card games on weekends and at almost every family gathering. From dominos to the popular card game 500, we had a lot of intergenerational game time. So, I spent my free time in both structured and unstructured play. As I was a sickly child, I could not pursue sports or clubs or scouting, so imaginative world building was very important to my sense of optimism and possibility.

AJP: How have these early play experiences influenced your work as an artist, writer, and game designer?

Flanagan: What brings my interdisciplinary interests together is a foundation

in values-based speculation about the possible. I think my creative work reflects a balance of structured and unstructured play and conceptualism. I create games for a public audience through my research laboratory at Dartmouth, Tiltfactor, and Resonym, my game company, with mechanics and outcomes goals and win states. Yet I also make imaginative, open play systems and unwinnable games, which tend to fall more on the artistic side of things rather than on the design side. I'm also someone who asks a lot of questions about why things are the way they are, and this incessant curiosity ends up being the basis of my motivation for writing critical essays and books. I am never content to study, describe, and possibly critique without also trying to make things on my own.

AJP: How did you start studying and making games?

Flanagan: Games have always fascinated me. You suddenly adopt the rules of another world and must find out how to succeed in that world. In addition to analog games, I played a lot of Atari games growing up and would replay them for hours—if you could do a speed run on a slow-loading adventure game cartridge, that was me as a kid.

When I was in graduate school, I was working on an MFA in film and media, but I was fascinated with the new ideas and the new notions of interactivity that emerged around computer games. Major video and performance artists began making interactive CD-ROMs, and I became hooked—they are often game-like but subvert some ludic norms that have become standardized, like winning, scores, and so on. Then I learned about Fluxus—a mix of nondigital artists, composers, designers, and poets in the 1960s and 1970s whose experimental works emphasized the design process over the completed work of art. In graduate school, I was hired for a project to digitize a collection of Fluxus works and make them able to be handled again, because years later these little Fluxus kits—pieces of paper and objects, meant to be interacted with—were too precious as art objects to be touched. Fluxus artists were playful, and they basically broke games by making provocative, nonsensical, and unwinnable games. After that project, I was committed to be a practitioner and a thinker. I studied film as an undergraduate and was attracted to avant-garde cinema, so it was natural to link the critical practices of avant-garde art with play. I made the first interactive portfolio as an artist at the University of Iowa and ended up right after school in the burgeoning games and dot-com town of Austin, Texas, in the 1990s. There, I was a designer and game producer making

games that had educational aspects. So, my involvement with games is really a long-term evolution.

The genesis of game development is interesting if you're working in both art and games contexts, because they involve very different trajectories and ideas of authorship. With ancient games, anonymous authorship is a given. Just who exactly invented chess? Although strains of evidence can be unearthed about the origins of some games, it's nearly impossible to divine the genesis for most ancient games. Games from the print era—we're talking seventeenth- and eighteenth-century games now—were often produced with news-related broad sheets for entertainment and sometimes, education. These authors, often printers and map makers, typically used two or three common game models and just changed the title and content depicted on the board. Over the past few decades, contemporary games have begun like art and books to be more associated with their authors.

AJP: In your 2009 book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, you explore alternative games and avant-garde game design. What does it mean to play critically?

Flanagan: In the book, I noted that “critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. . . . Criticality in play can be fostered in order to question an aspect of a game’s ‘content,’ or an aspect of a play scenario’s function that might otherwise be considered ‘a given’ or necessary.” So by that, if you are playing critically, you’re asking questions, and you might be intentionally tackling something difficult.

Often play and games are described as escapes, which connotes a kind of mindless engagement. While that is a fine role for play, it can be so much more than that. Play allows us to understand aspects of our identities, to empathize with others, or to test the rules and find new solutions. I suggest that through critical play such engagement can be mindful and aware, capable of playfulness and also of seriousness. Critical play is simultaneously about full engagement and full awareness. It takes practice.

AJP: You suggest artists more than a hundred years ago used games as a medium to subvert and disrupt. Are there any particularly important examples of this?

Flanagan: I’m particularly drawn to history for new insights on the present and future. In terms of games as a platform for subversion and disruption, I can think of no better twentieth-century example than sculptor Alberto

Giacometti's No More Play series, in which Giacometti creates provocative works of art that are also game boards. A few are unwinnable puzzle-type game boards crafted out of wood. Another seems to be a board game with holes and pieces across the board until you realize that this is a war zone, and the objects are people whose graves are nearby. Today, these works are as shown as art masterpieces, but they are also provocative conversation starters because they imply player agency quite astutely. I've mentioned Fluxus art as well, which, across performances, scores, and more traditional objects, consistently invoked play and the use of play to bring about absurd, conceptual, and provocative situations. But before all of these, there was Dada, the playful but absurd eruption of the avant-garde in the early part of the twentieth century. These are important exemplars, but there are many. I'm sure new examples will emerge as our knowledge of global art and game practices continues to be enhanced by international scholarship.

AJP: Why does the Dada art movement loom so large in this history?

Flanagan: Dada questioned everything, and this was essential for art to "modernize" outside of the landscape painting and the portrait. Earlier art movements and particular artists contributed to the eventual upheaval that was Dada. For example, Cezanne was an innovator who built form out of color. But the context of a totalizing war like World War I made "aesthetic" art irrelevant, or so Dada artists proposed. Instead, it was a time for mockery of materialism, for critiques of capitalism and nationalism, which many say caused the war in the first place. Play and ridiculous performances, bizarre situations, odd assemblages, and experimental texts show artists' expansive play in the era. In Tristan Tzara's "Dada Manifesto" from 1918, he rants that Dada is about freedom, the recognition of human's grotesque inconsistencies, and the need to abolish prophets, and he encourages all to protest logic with disgust. Tzara and the other Dada artists hit a breaking point at the intersection of art, culture, and everyday life. In its insistence on senselessness, Dada was an art movement screaming into the void about the terrible acts happening in the world, all of human making. It's powerful when truth is spoken to power collectively, and that's what they were doing.

Although it was unfortunately primarily a White, male-dominated artistic movement, Dada was among the first European art movements in which women were occasionally recognized for their roles. This recognition is important because so many female-identifying artists have been effaced

from history. The performance artist and poet Elsa Von Freitag-Loringhoven; the founder of *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson; writer Mina Loy; and artists Hannah Höch, Clara Tice, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp—these were vital influencers on twentieth-century thought.

AJP: Your research concerning artist's games helped you develop a critical-play game design model. How does this approach differ from previous methods?

Flanagan: The critical-play model for game design advocates subversion, such as unplaying games or reskinning them. As game design is taught now, most game development methods look a lot like design thinking methods, but there is an art-game contingency going strong, with lone artists or collectives making unique “works of game,” as my colleague John Sharp might say. Critical play focuses on this manner of artistic practice, with its contemporary emphasis on concept and criticality thrown into the mix.

AJP: What is Tiltfactor and how has your research informed its work?

Flanagan: Tiltfactor is the game research laboratory I founded back in 2003, when I first joined Hunter College, and then I moved it to Dartmouth College in 2008. In the lab, we research ideas about games and invent and study games that, through the playing of, take on pressing social issues. We've made games to educate people about pandemics, to support public health reform, and to understand health care quality better. We've invented games that work to change negative biases and stereotypes and games that help make science disciplines welcoming to female students. Each of these projects is backed by an evidence-based approach, and we conduct research studies, often using social psychology methods, to determine if the design is doing what we intend it to do. It's essential that we use transdisciplinary methods to understand play, from humanistic inquiry to the social sciences. No one discipline is right or wrong when exploring a problem; each sheds light on a problem in its own way. The foundation of interdisciplinary research in the social sciences and design works well with the humanities- and arts-based notions embodied in critical play.

It's important to advocate for funding sources to study games rigorously. They are a key part of everyday culture, and we know very little about how they impact us, both short term and long term. Given what I have learned over the years, I believe that we're only at the beginning stages of this.

AJP: What is Grow-a-Game?

Flanagan: Grow-a-Game is a speculative game design tool—a card deck to help both new and experienced designers make games with a central focus on

human values. All games embody values, whether designers intend them to or not. The deck is fundamentally a brainstorming tool that incorporates possible values as lofty human aspirations, such as equity, democracy, inclusion, fairness, sustainability. Designers can use the cards to invent new games or reflect on design decisions. There are other cards in the deck that encourage the designer to summon an existing game to modify or verb cards to help invent new game mechanics. A lot of university design programs as well as after-school programs for kids use the cards to foster speculation about game design. They were developed as part of the Values at Play project I pursued with Helen Nissenbaum and a great group of advisors. Details appear in our 2014 book *Values at Play in Digital Games* published by MIT Press.

AJP: Could you tell us more about some of your artwork such as *giantJoystick* and *Mapscotch* that intersect with play and games?

Flanagan: A sense of surprise pervades my art practice—I like to encounter new ideas in the process of creating and throughout the life of a work. I use various technologies to help create these unstable conditions, but I also employ playful scenarios and game paradigms to bring out emergent discoveries. These situations and games often instigate transformative social encounters, but they can also provoke a sense of wonder or introspection. I use playful methodologies to make the familiar aspects of our social world strange—deconstructing what is assumed and posing exploratory solutions. To make these ideas concrete: the *giantJoystick* of 2006 turns everyday classic Atari gameplay into something monumental and collaborative through (literally) a ten-foot tall functioning joystick. An object originally designed for solitary play (or two players at most) becomes, in my iteration, a grand site for collaboration. The game interface is so large that it requires collaboration and new kinds of embodiment when approaching classic games, so the work makes the relationship with others, and with the body, something altogether new. This is similar to *Mapscotch* works, which are a series of utopian, critical, or conceptual little rules for the player to use in creating a hopscotch. These are small instructions that serve as provocations.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized that I have been making the *Mapscotch* pieces for twenty years, so I collected them in a handbook, *Mapscotch*. Here's an example, entitled "Linescotch."

Draw a line.

Stand on one side.

Hop over the line.

Draw another line.

Invite someone to follow you.

Linescotch instructs participants to draw, but it's fundamentally about action, space, and engaging with other people. So, you will make a friend, if only for a brief moment! Some of the mapscotches are rather dreamy, but others take on difficult subjects. Bombscotch, for example, asks players to document U.S. wartime atrocities and hop on them.

Because they are enacted, not just viewed, these little poetic instructions transform into experiences. In certain art circles, this approach could be called "relational aesthetics" or "social sculpture" because games are systems capable of social engagement; they can create relationships. Both Mapscotch and giant*Joystick* use the generous capacity of play to create an experience for the player that is, I hope, thought provoking and moving in some small way.

AJP: How did your 2023 book, coauthored with Mikael Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression: The Legacy of Conquest and Empire in Colonialist Board Games* come about?

Flanagan: I've been studying and making games for social impact since I launched my research laboratory Tiltfactor in 2003. For me, the book project started with an awareness—and concern—about the problematic models in contemporary European-style board games. I attend many board game conventions because I make commercial board games, and the number of exotic locales and colonial themes in such games troubled me. In my practice too, it started to become clear that particular assumptions in Euro games such as "unlimited resources" and "worker placement" mechanics felt problematic to use without some rationale as to why these exist in a given game without sneaky ties to problematic thinking. In 2017 I was doing research as a museum scholar at the Getty Museum, and in the special collections of the Getty Research Institute, I found a collection of older games with colonial themes. After keynoting and presenting some ideas on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French and Mexican board games as tools for enculturation at the 2017 Board Game Studies conference, I was chatting with my colleague Mikke Jakobsson. We found that we had both been thinking about, even obsessing over, the plethora of colonial tropes and assumptions in board games. We felt strongly we had to say something, and to say something worthwhile to the wide range of both scholars and

players who love games. We had to do the research. It was an emotionally grueling project, too, because each new finding seemed more disgusting than the last. In the book, we were able to cover only a fraction of what we actually found. It's hard to document so much negative bias, disrespect, and, really, hatred that's been formalized into what many think of as an art form, as an entertainment platform, as a plaything.

AJP: What is the 4X model of board games and where does it come from?

Flanagan: The 4X genre of board games and video games dates from the 1970s. The four Xs stand for explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate. These continue to be popular: 2015's *Empires: Age of Discovery* and 2017's *Twilight Imperium* are more recent examples of empire building and colonial thinking. The 1975 game *Stellar Conquest* is one of the first 4X games, and it has had strong influence on the genre. It's a Milky Way galaxy colonizing game played on an outer space map of hexagonal spaces—a war game genre standard game board. It's a big game, in which players have forty-four turns to explore, conduct technological research, expand their industrial capacity, move their population, and engage in combat. The goal is for players to explore different stars on the map, set up industry, and grow their colonies' population to get 'colony' points (victory points). To do this, players look for useful planets, whether rich in minerals or habitable environments. If other players have already entered a particular star system, players can choose to exterminate the other group. These 4X games are typically grand in scale: a population counter in *Stellar Conquest*, for example, marks a million inhabitants, and distances are measured in light-years. As an "engine-building" strategy game, it plants the seeds for several Eurogame conventions.

There is no intelligent life on the *Stellar Conquest* planets, so technically there is no extermination of existing civilizations (one of the Xs), but like other war games, the strongest win and war is inevitable. Games inspired by *Stellar Conquest* do feature alien enemies, though, and assume the colonial ideas that outer space is there for the taking, with or without inhabitants. In our book, we show that this notion of outer space empires, particularly generated by United States sci-fi, extend frontier myths and create a "space cowboy" trope. In the end, colonial mentalities, space exploration—all the fantasies around *terra nullis*—fed into what was to become contemporary games.

AJP: Why is it important that scholars and players understand the histories and legacies of colonialist board games?

Flanagan: The purpose of our book is to move board gaming in a positive direction, to show how colonial thinking has dominated games in a surprising and lasting way, and to help designers resist taking these design patterns and assumptions that developed over hundreds of years as neutral. Many people—even historians—looking critically at board games stop the search at the game theme. In our book, we dig deeper and look at game mechanisms themselves and their interplay with theme, place, and culture. In the end, we wanted to communicate two essential observations. First, the logic of colonialism has seeped its way into contemporary games in small and grandiose ways. Second, we wanted to show that these designs matter to players and player experience. Gaming can benefit greatly from this history as a disruptive force for more justice and fairness that cultures, peoples, and societies around the world deserve. Frantz Fanon wrote about the way colonialism's grip involved not just lands and territories, but also the mind. He pointed out how colonialism distorts and destroys people's pasts. Once readers are aware of the sheer reach of these colonial narratives woven into games, they might change their thinking and question if games are relatively neutral systems open for everyone to play.

Ultimately, we can create new possibilities through inventive design, but only if we really see existing tropes for what they are. Our plan for the book was to share this history and offer a different framing from other typically apolitical and noncritical board game histories.

AJP: How have game designers pushed back against these colonial and imperial legacies?

Flanagan: Luckily, we're seeing a few things starting to change. The board game industry is diversifying (albeit too slowly), and designers are emerging who strive to change colonial themes and mechanics. There are amazing new examples, however, so for those readers who might not know about them, I want to mention a few titles. Probably the best-known game is 2019's *Wingspan*, in which players take on the role of bird-watching fans building the most welcoming wildlife preserve. Shifting points of view and shifting perspectives are part of the solution to create new models. Shifting scale is, too. Instead of a game that charts out the global tea trade and encourages players to think of world dominance, 2019's *Chai*, by Dan and Connie Kazmaier, positions players in the role of tea brewers running a teashop. In 2017's *Spirit Island*, by R. Eric Reuss, players play the part of deities who fight on behalf of the indigenous population to protect

their lands and culture. *Abandon All Artichokes* is a deck-building game created by Emma Larkins in 2020. Typically, the genre of deck-building games is a preferred mechanical format for combat-based games, but Larkins reverses this battle narrative in favor of gardening. That same year *MonsDRAWsity*, by Eric Slauson, has players drawing the monster they saw based on descriptions from unreliable witnesses, subtly linking fantasy game mechanics to the history of African Americans falsely identified in police lineups in the United States. And the tabletop, role-playing game (TTRPG) community is moving fast to develop and distribute anticolonial games. *Coyote & Crow*, is a speculative TTRPG in which Europeans never colonized the Americas, created in 2022 by a team of Native Americans and led by Connor Alexander, a GWY/Cherokee board game designer. We're in an exciting new chapter in game creation!

I also hope to see more interesting intersections between art, experience, and games. There is a lot of room in this space.

AJP: What advice do you have for game developers who are interested in creating games that have social impact?

Flanagan: Oh gosh, there is a lot to say on this topic. I'd suggest getting to know the archives and ongoing games selected by the Games for Change organization and its festival, the unique games emerging from the IndieCade festivals, and reading articles documenting any studies on games—research studies in the social sciences and education are important places to start. Learning about what works and what doesn't is vital for the designer, and the approaches that get results aren't always intuitive. My lab Tiltfactor has published quite a bit on gender bias, for example, and games for health, while other research groups and labs have other specialties. Jump in—some of the methods and language in social science papers might not be familiar, but it is not too challenging to get the hang of it.

AJP: What are you working on now?

Flanagan: As usual I'm working in a transdisciplinary way across art-focused projects, research projects, and writing. Games to me are not so much a medium but part of a larger system of art and representation, along the lines of music or narrative. Perhaps games are also like a technology—not like a computer per se but an invention that nonetheless shapes the world around us. As Bruno Latour noted, "Technology is society made durable." In this view, then, the systems I work with could become durable, integrated, and omnipresent, with transformative power, woven into the

complex web that links materials, environments, communication, sustainability, people, and culture. I aim to collaborate across these zones to reduce biases, discover new knowledge, and craft transformative experiences for a better planet. Practically speaking, that looks like making and thinking. I'm currently working on a commission for the Baltimore Museum of Art involving monumental architecture, urban configurations, and rewilding in the form of giant play space. I just took a fantastic research trip to Turkey with a bunch of board game scholars and archaeologists, and I'm interested in the trajectory of game play and ritual in prehistory, which is not the easiest topic to find data on, but is a line of inquiry that is inspiring me. I'm also interested in analog games and their use in protest, defiance, and critique. I'm also following up on the UNESCO sponsored "Sharing Desired Futures" conference and the "Practices of Futurecasting" retreat in Linz, where I advanced the use of games as speculative futures frameworks. Like many of us, I feel called to action in the face of drastic climate instability and the destructive results of the Anthropocene, and I wish to act by using the transformative potential of games. Games can make abstract issues tangible. Games are particularly good for trialing and mediating our being in the world. I will keep working on the world's pressing issues by bridging the gaps among games, speculative design, and art.