Dissolving the Magic Circle of Play:
Lessons from Situationist Gaming

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> *Due to its marginal existence in relation to the oppressive reality of work, play is often regarded as fictitious. But the work of the situationists is precisely the preparation of ludic possibilities to come.[i]*
>
> *Guy Debord*

In recent years, commentators on game culture and ludology have undertaken the task of analyzing and structuring play. Such work has been strongly influenced by the Dutch researcher Johan Huizinga's 1938 study of play, Homo Ludens and Roger Callois's later structuralist elaborations of Huizinga's research.[ii] In this essay, I will draw upon a different stream of thought from the mid twentieth century (though one also informed by Huizinga but not exclusively) — that of the Paris Situationist artists and architects, including Guy Debord and Gilles Ivian (also known as Ivan Chtcheglov). As I will then discuss, a number of important engagements with play and games by the Situationists are newly relevant today. Rather than offer a historical assessment of Situationism's theories, I will take cues from their writings to reconsider the potential of games in art. I find useful their

critique of play within but nevertheless resistant to capitalism (and by extension imperialism and militarism), their architectural proposals for "player" navigation and transformation of urban "psychogeographic" zones (what we might call "ludic architecture"), their analysis of leisure and non-leisure activities, and their repurposing of Dadaist negativity. These proposals all have direct relevance to what McKenzie Wark calls our contemporary condition of "Gamespace."[iii]

LESSON 1: FREEING PLAY

A promising tactic for the early Situationists was the unpredictable yet forceful potential of play — what anthropologist Victor Turner termed the "liminoid," or the freeing and transformational, moments of play when the normal roles and rules of a community or society are relaxed.[iv] After these temporary situations "players" settle once more into fixed roles. The Situationists proposed to adopt this liminoid "subjunctive mood" (when anything can happen) into a more general approach, a way of doing and being in the everyday, in order to transform material life with ludic actions. As Debord remarked,

> We must develop a systematic intervention
> based on the complex factors of two
> components in perpetual interaction: the
> material environment of life and the
> behaviors which it gives rise to and which
> radically transform it. Our action on
> behavior, linked with other desirable
> aspects of a revolution in mores, can be
> briefly defined as the invention of games

of an essentially new type.[v]

Situationist games do not respect the boundary between play and work, leisure and non-leisure, between "real life" and Huizinga's "magic circle", the separation from "normal space" that facilitates immersion in games and play. Situationist games are not sports and are not relegated to sports stadiums, arcades, or Playstation home entertainment set-ups. Situationist games bleed into the city, the workplace, the buyplace, the personal computer, the mobile phone, public and private transportation and communication, and into and inside escapist rule-based game environments themselves. In transgressing the "magic circle," a Situationist gaming tactic attempts to give transformative potential not just to play but to "normal" life.

LESSON 2: WRETCHED WINNINGS, OR CHALLENGING COMPETITION

> The feeling of the importance of winning in the game, that it is about concrete satisfactions — or, more often than not, illusions — is the wretched product of a wretched society.[vi]

As Debord's quote above indicates, the Situationists were critical of the competitive aspects of play, what Callois called "agon." For them, competition was complicit with capitalism, with the British working class fans' mindless absorption in football, with the struggle to obtain material goods, with doing whatever it takes to be the last Survivor on the island, and playing to get the biggest family home in the Sims neighborhood. The Situationists, like avid gamers, rejected the modern division between production and consumption, active work vs. passive

leisure. Nevertheless, they did acknowledge that an element of competition might be necessary in their games:

> The only success that can be conceived in play is the immediate success of its ambiance, and the constant augmentation of its powers […] play cannot be completely emancipated from a competitive aspect[vii]

In our adaptation of Situationist games, perhaps we allow for a degree of competition, among other motivating playful components. Morever, for the Situationists, ludic actions were also "moral choices", and therefore the competitive drive should be questioned.

LESSON 3: VIRTUAL GAME WORLDS: TOWARD A LUDIC ARCHITECTURE

> The architecture of tomorrow will be a means of modifying present conceptions of time and space. It will be a means of knowledge and a means of action[viii]

Situationist Russian architect Gilles Ivain imagined a "playful-constructive" movement through a city's "psychogeographic" zones — urban zones defined not only by streets, buildings and businesses but also by how people inhabit the city and the collective psychic ambiances they project. Or as Guy Debord later wrote, while describing the now famous Situationist notion of dérive, or drifting through a city, "from a dérive point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones."[ix] High speed

surveillance cameras tracking shopping patterns in stores like

the Gap map these hidden currents, effectively becoming a time-

based techno-capitalist development of the study of

psychogeographic zoning that the Situationists did not forecast

for their fledgling "science."

> With the aid of old maps, aerial
> photographs and experimental dérives, one
> can draw up hitherto lacking maps of
> influences, maps whose inevitable
> imprecision at this early stage is no worse
> than that of the first navigational charts.
> The only difference is that it is no longer
> a matter of precisely delineating stable
> continents, but of changing architecture
> and urbanism.[x]

Beyond the remapping of existing cities as psychogeographic

zones, new city forms were imagined. In "Formulary for a New

Urbanism", Ivain described a futuristic Situationist city's

quarters. It contained public and private architecture that

would be in continuous flux and modifiable according to the whims

of the inhabitants, including zones such as a Bizarre Quarter —

a Happy Quarter (specially reserved for habitation) — Noble

and Tragic Quarter (for good children) — and a Sinister Zone.

It is this last example that games have provided countless

imaginings, and Ivain described the Sinister Quarter in a way

that predicts the contours of many video game worlds:

> The Sinister Quarter, for example, would be a good
> replacement for those hellholes, those ill-reputed
> neighborhoods full of sordid dives and unsavory characters,
> that many peoples once possessed in their capitals: they
> symbolized all the evil forces of life. The Sinister
> Quarter would have no need to harbor real dangers, such as
> traps, dungeons or mines[xi]

In contrast to a current rule-based "algorithmic" emphasis in academic ludology publications, some game researchers such as Chaim Gingold and Henry Jenkins have made convincing arguments for the importance of spatial poetics in structuring game play.[xii] This latter approach can be informed by the psychogeographic characterization of the city provided by the Situationists. Rather than seeing games as solely algorithmic rule machines, there is a significant attraction in players' exploration of virtual game spaces provided by games like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Tomb Raider*, and the classic exploratory *Myst*. Activities within these games incorporate spatial puzzles and goals tied to specific psychogeographic locations within the virtual game environment or city. For level design of more action based shooter games like *Halo* and *Quake*, ludic architectural design of multiplayer fighting terrains (for hiding, for sniping, for jumping, for flying) and the placement of enemies and obstacles are a significant portion of game level design. The avid gamer's extensive time involvement in level modification, as was once common with PC games like *Doom*, *Quake* and *Unreal*, is motivated by a desire to focus on and transform not the telic aims of the game but the paratelic space of the game world itself, invoking the Situationist's call for modifiable, changeable architecture:

> Architectural complexes will be modifiable.
> Their aspect will change totally or
> partially in accordance with the will of
> their inhabitants.[xiii]

LESSON 4: SITUATIONIST GAMES BEYOND THE VIRTUAL: INTERVENING IN REAL CITIES

Situationist games are not necessarily confined to virtual digital game space.   Guy Debord described the original Situationists playful exploits into Parisian cityspace:

> Our loose lifestyle and even certain amusements considered dubious that have always been enjoyed among our entourage — slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking nonstop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public, etc. — are expressions of a more general sensibility which is no different from that of the dérive. Written descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game.[xiv]

This description, like much of the Situationists' practice, anticipates the emergence of new forms of game play as art practice today, most clearly in the example of the London-based artist collective Blast Theory. Blast Theory projects *Can You See Me Now?* (first manifestation, 2001) and *Uncle Roy All Around You* (first manifestation, 2003) reinscribe urban space with the rules and scenarios of their games. *Can You See Me Now?* players carry GPS modified devices which contain a simple graphical *Pacman* style game interface displaying the location of other players in the city. Running panicked through the city streets of Rotterdam in the first performance of *Can You See Me Now?*, players tried to escape these non-corporeal pursuers who were less restricted by the actual geographic and urban obstacles such

as traffic and traffic lights, pedestrians and hills. Similarly, *Uncle Roy All Around You* repurposed existing city infrastructure like pay phones and car rides to play a mysterious detective style game on the streets of London. Clues and game play advance through text instructions to players' mobile computers and planted "actors" (who seem like artificial intelligence players in a computer game played by humans). As Blast Theory explained, "The city is an arena where the unfamiliar flourishes, where the disjointed and the disrupted are constantly threatening to overwhelm us. It is also a zone of possibility; new encounters."[xv]

The convergence of ludic activities and "real" cityspace are not the exclusive domain of Situationist-inspired artists. The Situationists did not foresee that mega-players within the "superstructures" would also engage in playing their games. For instance, during the annual E3 game industry conference in 2003 in Los Angeles, the United States Army staged a "playful" publicity stunt for their free recruitment shooter game America's Army. They catapulted soldiers from a helicopter into downtown Hollywood. Passersby on the street were confused and frightened, as civilian city space was militarized through an intervention blurring the distinction between a soldier's job and playing soldier in a game. The use of game tactics and play to equivocate and familiarize urban warfare has become increasingly common in the wake of 9/11. *KumaWar* is a hyperreal, life is stranger than

fiction, attempt to maximize the blurriness between soldiering
and play. This episodic game enterprise released shooter game
missions based on current American military events in Iraq. The
designers of *KumaWar* regularly solicit advise from a retired
United States general, and the player always is an American
soldier battling "insurgents" in Iraqi cities. Distinguishing
civilians from insurgents becomes an important skill for success
in the "game". Again city space (civilian space), military space
and game space are conflated.

   A Situationist-style game more covertly complicit with
militarization of civilian space through ludological means was
the innovative *I love Bees* designed by Jane McGonigal. Microsoft
hired McGonigal, then a doctoral candidate in ludology at the
University of California at Berkeley, to design a viral marketing
campaign and Alternate Reality Game (ARG) for their upcoming X-
box release of *Halo2*. In public places like pay phones, players
of *I love Bees* retrieved information and advances in the game
story (a sci-fi "War of the Worlds"-like scenario leading into
the storyline of *Halo2*). When they received game information
players would make an ironic military salute (echoing the
gestures of futuristic American style soldiers in *Halo*) and were
thus able to identify other *I love Bees* players in public places
like concerts and streets. *ILB* players posted numerous photos of
this military salute on the web. Overall, the civic space of the

city became militarized — even if for a fictional conflict.

LESSON 5: A DASH OF DADAIST NEGATIVITY: ILLEGALITY AS PLAY

Debord, after describing the role of Dadaism in combating "stale bourgeois culture" and fascism in post-WWI Europe, postulated that a dadaist-type negative aspect would be a necessary component of Situationism as long as undesired social structures were still in existence.

> The dadaist spirit has nevertheless
> influenced all the movements that have come
> after it; and any future constructive
> position must include a dadaist-type
> negative aspect, as long as the social
> conditions that impose the repetition of
> rotten superstructures [..] have not been
> wiped out by force.[xvi]

These "rotten" conglomerates continue today in the form of — rapid globalizition, imperialisism and militarization, border closures and increasingly hedged in civil liberties in the post-9/11 War on Terror. In contrast to the complicit works described above, Situationist tactics have also been adopted as tools in activism.

One artist group who have been playing some urban interventionist, Situationist-like games with a dose of Dadaist negativity is Yo Mango, an Italian/Spanish art collective based in Barcelona. Yo Mango, slang in Spain for "I steal", regularly stage playful actions such as potlucks where every dish must contain an element of stolen food, Tango dancing in a chain supermarket while stealing, and distributing stylish "Yo Mango"

patches to cover the holes left in stolen clothes by cutting out the plastic security clip. (They recommend stealing only top designer brand name fashions.) Some members of Yo Mango are also loosely connected with the European Squatter Movement, an organized youth movement in opposition to private property who also participate in other activist activities like protesting against gentrification.

Mexican Artist Rene Hiyashi is another artist creating ludic interventions in public space. In India, Indonesia and Argentina he has realized playful architectural structures for street children. In 2006, in collaboration with Mexico City based artist Eder Castillo, Rene Hiyashi created Guatemex, an imaginatively constructed island with computers with Internet access for illegal immigrants, floating on the river dividing Mexico from Guatemala. (His own laptop keyboard was water-damaged during this project.) Like the anti-corporate antics and publicity stunts of the Yes Men and Rtmark, the older public interventions of Critical Art Ensemble, and many of the political art actions that took place during the 2004 New York Republican National Convention, Yo Mango's and Rene Hiyashi's artwork can be described as ludic activism in which societal rules (laws) are willfully broken. Within activist culture itself, maybe since the anti WTO demonstrations in Seattle of 1999, Dadaist humor and ludic activities are more prevalent.[xvii]

LESSON 6: GAMES INSIDE GAMES: INTERVENTIONIST TACTICS IN VIRTUAL SPACES

In their handbook for game designers, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman repeatedly emphasize the importance of the "magic circle" and the investment of the player in a separate, pretend space of play (whether abstract or photorealistic, virtual or non-digital).[xviii] They stress the pleasure in following the rules of games within the clear-cut boundaries of this magic circle. Situationist gamers, however, are more akin to the creative cheater, the game "griefer" or the hacker. They blur the peripheries of the magic circle, taking pleasure in changing the rules of the existing gamespace, which they see as problematic in a fixed state. Situationist mods and hacks intervening inside preexisting games can be more entertaining than the original game. For instance, the popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) *Second Life* has been playfully manipulated by the avatar Gazira Babeli, one of the members of the Second Front collective of Second Life artistic hackers. Her *Gray Goo* hack was an infestation of Second Life space with out-of-control repetitive self-replicating objects, inspired by nanotechnological disaster scenarios. *Grey Goo* took various forms, from endless Mario character replications to rampant Velvet Underground bananas. One day it effectively slowed down Linden Lab's game servers, interfering with game play system-wide. Babeli's *COME.TO.HEAVEN* similarly exploited a loophole in

Second Life allowing players to create gigantic avatars in proportion to the Second Life world, resulting in unexpected interesting glitches. While the identity (identities) behind the Babeli avatar are kept secret, the code for her Second Life interventions are always made public by posting it online so others can learn from it and reuse it.

A similar, Situationist-themed interventionist game strategy is offered by Pierre Rahola, a French gamer and DJ. During the early phase of the US war on Iraq, Rahola and his collaborators would spray anti-war graffiti inside online shooter games. When I interviewed him in Paris in 2005, he admitted that "intervening in games is more fun than playing the game." Around the same time Pierre and his friends were playing online shooter games with an activist edge I began a body of work I would describe as Situationist gaming. In collaboration with the artists Brody Condon and Joan Leandre, we initiated *Velvet-Strike*, tagging the then-popular online soldier shooter game *Counter-Strike* with anti-war graffiti. *Velvet-Strike* was not only visual modification but also included "recipes" for disruptive actions designed to interfere with regular *Counter-Strike* gameplay, like one for making friends with your enemy.

Recipe for Friendship

1. Find a *Counter-Strike* server with 0 or 1 other player on line.(If you go to an empty one most likely someone will show up to see who you are.)
2. Shoot a few times at your enemy.
3. Tell them you are a newbie and ask them to show you how

to plant the bomb.
4. Ask them which country they are from.
5. Ask them all about themselves.
6. Arrange to meet another time.

Operation Urban Terrain (OUT) was another project I initiated to alter the dimensions of an existing gamespace — the free US army propaganda game America's Army. With OUT, I wanted to counter the convergence of military and civilian space with a kind of activism that merged virtual urban game space wirelessly with cityspace. I invited gamers, activists and artists whom I had met online through *Velvet-Strike* to participate, including Chris Birke, one of the original *Counter-Strike* game texturers, Mexico City architect Luis Hernandez and Pierre Rahola. We projected our live performances onto the walls and surfaces of Manhattan and Brooklyn, connected wirelessly to five players around the world during the NYC Republican National Convention of 2004. I matched virtual locations within the America's Army game servers with physical New York City sites, projecting a live performance of a virtual sit-in inside a tunnel with yellow taxis onto a building in midtown Manhattan, where there were many yellow taxis, and pairing a red brick warehouse in the game with a brick building in Harlem. For the last location I merged a live soldier dancing performance in the popular America's Army map "Bridge" with projection onto the Manhattan Bridge in Brooklyn.

Riot Gear for Rollartista, another game inside a game, was a series of machinima performances calling attention to European and British police abuse of Islamic and African immigrants, with

players wearing padded "riot gear" costumes designed in collaboration with artist Talice Lee. In the first performance of the project, two player/performers roller-skated around the small Spanish city of Castellon projecting the Playstation2 games *Narc* and *Mechwarrior* from an ultra light projector attached to one of the player's helmets, (technology had developed since the heavy battery and projector of OUT). At each projection location in the city, one player "roller-danced" and handed out flyers with stories of immigrant abuse to interested passers-by while the second player performed with a portable Playstation, controlling a dancing policeman character who violently beats up on civilian city dwellers.

CONCLUSION: LEARNING THE LESSONS

The Situationists predicted an age of expanded ludic possibilities for artists and for anyone. Paraphrasing and remixing both gamer Rebecca Cannon and Situationist architect Gilles Ivain, we are bored with shooter games. We are bored with the suburbs, the stale imperialist sexist engineering biased corporate game industry, and with new academic ludology that reifies existing conditions. We are ready to play reality TV off camera. We are frustrated with the imperialist military terrain of game cities. We don't want to play by rules we never agreed upon in the first place. Anyways, even if enjoyed playing those

games to begin with, it is now more entertaining to dismantle them, or to invent new unsanctioned games inside gamespace. If big players are intervening in gamespace, then it is time for Situationist gaming.

Preliminary versions of this essay were shared on nettime.org.

[i] Guy Debord, "Contribution to Situationist Definition of Play," *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (June 1958) Situationist International Online http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/play.html

[ii] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1961).

[iii] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007)The Cave, .007 http://www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory/?cat=1&paged=2

[iv] Jon Dovey and Hellen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures* (London: Open University Press, 2006).

[v] Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," June 1957 Situationist International Online http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html

[vi] Guy Debord, "Contribution to Situationist Definition of Play"

[vii] Guy Debord, "Contribution to Situationist Definition of Play"

[viii] (Gilles Ivain [Ivan Chtcheglov], "Formulary for a New Urbanism, October 1953" *Internationale Situationniste* 1 Situationist International Online http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/formulary.html

[ix] Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action, June 1957 Situationist International Online http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html

[x] Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive, Les Lèvres Nues #9, November 1956," *Internationale Situationniste* 2 (December 1958) Situationist International Online http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html

[xi] Ivain, "Formulary for a New Urbanism"

[xii] Chaim Gingold, "Miniature Gardens and Magic Crayons," thesis, M.A., Georgia Institute of Technology, 2003, http://www.slackworks.org/~cog/writing/thesis/; Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan, eds. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004)

[xiii] Ivain, "Formulary for a New Urbanism"

xiv Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive"

xv Project statement, http://www.blasttheory.co.uk

xvi Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action, June 1957"

xvii Brian Holmes, "The Revenge of the Concept: Artistic Exchanges and Networked Resistance," nettime.org, 2003

xviii Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004)