Extending Play to Critical Media Studies

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Abstract

This essay fosters a dialogue between game studies and critical media studies. By taking Slender Man as its object of study, it argues that play should be understood as a disposition toward media. It suggests a new critical vocabulary for this approach, wherein the moods set by play can be understood as schemes, latitude, or slack. These terms help us to understand the way play is productive of particular affects that set our bodies to motion.

In May 2014, two 12-year-old Wisconsin girls stabbed a classmate and friend 19 times; when questioned, they claimed to be attempting to capture the attention of Slender Man, a fictional, creepy Internet meme. Nine days later, a 13-year-old in Ohio stabbed her mother while wearing a Slender Man mask. The so-called Slender Man Trilogy (Mukherjee, 2014) concluded in Las Vegas, where a couple shot and killed two police officers eating lunch before heading to a Walmart, shooting a third man, and committing suicide; they did all of this while dressed, respectively, as Slender Man and Batman villainess Harley Quinn. In the wake of these shocking attacks, conversations centered on sadly commonplace focus points: the identification and treatment of mental illness, the

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surge of random acts of public violence, and, of course, the perceived threat unsuper-vised media consumption. Underlying the fascination with these cases, both for the alleged perpetrators and for the public interested in deconstructing the tales, is horror at play being so transformed; an Internet meme created with no nefarious purposes, as part of an agenda of leisure and entertainment, has turned gruesome, bloody, and nightmarish.

Slender Man was created by Eric Knudson in 2009 on Internet discussion site Something Awful as part of an ongoing Photoshop game to create paranormal images; the figure quickly took off in popularity and began appearing in YouTube series and small horror video games (Vogt & Goldman, 2014). In response to the attacks, Knudson released a public statement: "It is imperative to understand that these things, like almost all works of the horror literary genre, are fiction. Many of these stories yes, are filled with an illusion of reality to them in an effort to make them much more unnerving. However, that does not change the fact that they are concoctions of fantasy" ("After Slender Man ... ," 2014). Fiction, fantasy, and illusion are invoked here as if to exonerate Slender Man, to relegate him to a realm of harmlessness because he is not real; the Slender Man is just something with which it is fun to play. This feint, however, obfuscates the ways in which the real and the fantasy are connected, in a primal and inescapable manner, by play. Play is a process that makes the fiction take on an affective actuality and that blurs the supposed dis-tinctions between illusion and reality that Knudson attempts to reify. In the case of the Walmart shooting, the point is clear: The distinction between fantasy and reality has become irrelevant, the tale is cold, sad, and perverse; the costumes adorning the murderers exemplify how play is somewhat superficial here, and lingers only as a mood. Play, for better or for worse, has consequences that extend broadly; this issue of *Games & Culture* is designed to simultaneously situate and move beyond exist-ing, disciplinary conversations about play in order to examine what those conse-quences may be.

In culture studies, play is often relegated to the realm of games, a straightforward by-product or the means by which the economic and structural interests of game designers and industry are able to influence the player. With the articles collected here, however, we argue that play operates as an organizing principle that extends well beyond its role in game and that a perspective of play focused on interaction between industry/game structure/player limits the transformative potential of play. This issue moves toward a concept of play that recognizes the degree to which its objects (games, rules, sexuality, history, etc ...), are forms of either media or mediation. We argue that, in understanding play, other disciplines matter; they can speak to its processes in a way that augment the role of play in game studies and create a more nuanced portrait of play as an organizing principle. Thus, here we argue for a new approach, that is, play as a disposition toward mediation.

Recognizing play as itself a disposition, as Johan Huizinga (1980) did, shifts the approach from a dialogue about effect to a conversation about affect. Instead of rehashing a series of arguments about how games, television, or movies cause their

audiences to feel, do, or believe, this approach encourages us to recognize the extent to which play produces affective worlds. These worlds carry with them practices that illustrate the critical dimensions of media consumption. That play produces affective worlds which themselves mold us as alternately or simultaneously competitive, collaborative, loving, scornful, or violent is one half of the critical problem; our response is to use this as a starting point. We focus on the accepted sites of play to deconstruct the affordances and implications present in play within them; we then, however, expand expected notions of play to unexpected sites in order to navigate the blurred boundary of play spaces; and further, we consider play as liberation, resistance, and subversion. Taken together, this approach is designed to better understand the spaces of significance allowed to the player through play.

Games or Media?

Our approach to play structures it as implicated within the flows of media, and though we are keen to expand beyond game studies, we nevertheless begin there. Understanding the urgency and importance of play as a disposition toward mediation is rooted in the critical turn, the critical turn taking place in game studies. Just as it has become increasingly difficult to suggest that games hold a marginal place in popular culture, death threats,[1] dickwolves,[2] and the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) "diversity" lounge[3] suggest that it is now impossible to justify an approach to games, play, and culture that is not critical. We have known the power of games to change the world long before Jane McGonigal popularized the notion in a series of TED Talks.[4] Yet change is slow to come, and racism, sexism, violence, and homophobia[5] replicate constantly through voice over Internet Protocol connections and group chat.

Game structures and significance, and indeed their players, are not limited to games, however, and therefore neither is play. The past 20 years have heralded prodigious shifts in the political, commercial, communicative, and material infrastructures of the world, including the ubiquity of computers and electronic media in our everyday lives and as a social turn toward the integration and appreciation of the ludic. Games and game mechanics, therefore, are reproduced as central to narratives in other platforms: They form the central conceit, for example, in *The Hunger Games* series of books and films, and to episodes of television series such as *Community* and *Parks & Recreation*, among others. The crossover works in the other direction as well, as players of *Grand Theft Auto V* listen to terrestrial radio stations and watch broadcast television within the game, and *Minecraft* players construct in-world media spaces that blur the boundary of game, film, television, music, and consumption. Games are therefore not simply another media platform, along with television, movies, music, and so forth; games have also infiltrated these platforms such that play has become a transmedia venture.

Approaching games *as* media, and not as a subset of media, has implications as well as opportunity. Media consumption—game playing, yes, but also television

watching and music listening and Internet using, and so forth—is frequently characterized as a form of interaction, a process through which individuals come into contact with, and are shaped by the structures of the game, the industrial aims, and the content message. Indeed, this is the threat of Slender Man, as well as of violent games and hypersexualized media content, through their interaction with consumers, these elements have personal and social influence. We argue, however, that interaction is a limited approach; this focus implies that there is a set power dynamic, one that drafts conversations as between user agency and structural exploitation, on industrial/textual cause and audience effect. These binaries may be fruitful and not inaccurate, but they do not fully expand upon the notion of play as a process that crosses platforms and blurs distinctions.

Moving play beyond this perspective while still accounting for its significance means merging what critical theorist McKenzie Wark (2007) named "gamespace" with media theorist Arjun Appadurai's (1990) "mediascapes." We must draw on Appadurai to recognize the ways in which overlapping systems—cultural, technical, financial, and more—produce a framework through which we can understand through moments and points of disjuncture and difference. Likewise, the superimposition of gamespace, or the reduction of all space to military and ludic rationality, allows us to glimpse a critical sense of difference between games and the media. This space, we argue, is the affective space of play. It is this dispositional space in which bodies are set to motion through their interaction with media.

From Effect to Affect

Although in this collection we have taken a broad definition of media, we are more specific about how we approach the term disposition. Dispositions clue us to both a particular sort of subjectivity, which springs from a certain degree of media interaction, and a sensibility to attitude, mood, and vibe. Though Huizinga (1980) also understood play as a disposition, he did so in an earlier time. Huizinga operated without the benefit of the considerable body of work aimed at understanding elements of embodiment and affect, which has since been realized. Furthermore, since he wrote at a time when mass media were still in their infancy, Huizinga could scarcely foresee the participatory nature of media as we understand them today. In short, our definition of play as disposition toward media helps us to better understand the embodied consequence of play.

By disposition, we are deliberately drawing on the term *dispositif*, as used in philosopher Michel Foucault's writings.[6] As expertly explained by Giorgio Agamben (n.d.), Foucault drew originally on "depository" in a historical, astrological sense, which implicates a sense of both immanence and lordship for his work: "[T]he lord of the astrological sign [that] embodies all the forces and influences that the planet exerts on the individuals restraining them in all possible ways" (¶ 1). This definition at first may seem an unlikely starting point in a discussion of play, which is often constructed as a space of freedom, not restriction. However, the definition of

play that we are advancing in this volume shows how freedom is not without its own restrictions. The moods of play have their own tonalities, just as the astrological rulers each had their own moods as well. When play is immanent, and everywhere in a domain, we must recognize how it sets our bodies to motion. The different moods of play equate to the different deities epitomized by the different astrological houses in a depository and how they set the very heavens to motion. What are the choreographies of play's presence, how do those translate to shifting moods, and why are they formally consistent within particular types of media?

Sara Ahmed (2004) argues that "emotions *do things*" (p. 119). They help us to understand both the connections between people and their communities and the many subtle ways that bodies are driven to action through the invisible lines of affect. Part of what emotions do, according to affect theory scholar Teresa Brennan (2004), is to provide refuge from the rational. The Cartesian dualism, or mind–body split, means that we flee one for the other in times of stress. In other words, Brennan argues that when one must overcome an overwhelming feeling in his body, he flees to the cold calculus of the mind for relief (p. 23). The relationships forged between bodies and their communities are neither arbitrary nor causal, they are instead ecologies of circulating objects, bodies, and feelings. Play, as explained by canonical scholars such as Johan Huizinga (1980), Roger Caillois (2001), Brian Sutton-Smith (2001), and Jesper Juul (2011), is considered an immanent but not affective concept. When bodies are at play, the immanence reaches far beyond the parties involved: Affects are invoked, players care, and those who find themselves romping along are subject to the moods and the mechanics of the play.

The concept of play is a moving target. Play meanders into the most unlikely of media, and in so doing takes on different forms and tonalities. A new vocabulary and approach to play is required to counter traditional understandings of play which reduce it to something we do, and neglect the ways in which play can take on a life of its own, and forget how it is always also acting upon us. Approaches that see play only as a sort of interaction will forever reduce play at its most profound to the seemingly mundane; they will mistake travesties like the Slender Man as something akin to a juvenile caper.

Play as a Disposition: Schemes, Latitude, and Slack

This special issue is deliberately interdisciplinary. By extending play into critical media studies, we investigate how a variety of disciplines bring play beyond its function in game studies and consider how play provides a means to bridge diverse theoretical worlds. These conversations began at the *MediaCon: Extending Play* conference, held on April 2013 at Rutgers University. The intent of the conference was to de-balkanize play as a concept and theory. Here, we bring together voices from disparate fields in order to consider how play unearths new ways to consider the sociotechnical shifts to which we are subject. Play offers a common touchstone for the discussion of affect, labor, identity, gender, performance, privacy, and more.

In short, it offers a new path from which questions of power can be addressed within the academy.

At the conference, echoes of those same canonical scholars ricocheted through the halls, but these figures were often evoked only as a way to get to the heart of various issues and to discuss the ways that we play with, around, and within media. Despite this common start point, there was little agreement as to what play does; it resides, for these scholars and others across disciplines, as a fundamental concept to their modes of thought and yet cannot be captured within one single definition.

We know play by what it has left behind, be it laughter, fatigue, balls, anger, fulfillment, dice, circuit boards, zines, or a melody. Play leaves traces of evidence that speak to its presence and absence at once. These jolly objects, the media with which we play, are complicit, also, within the schemes of their designers. We allow for a sense of latitude in their use and interpretation. As our bodies mold around them, they simultaneously go slack and pivot around us. The affective glue that constitutes the moods set by these relationships is, itself, play.

Allowing for some *play* in our collective definitions of play was itself a practice of divination and evocation. As such, this issue is structured around a progressively expansive idea of what play can mean and what it can be. The first section, *Schemes*, takes on play and its objects in expected environments: games themselves, and the affordances, mechanics, organization, and industrial implications of them. In *Latitude*, we blur the notion of what play is and where it happens; this section is about creating games in spaces not considered for play and about creating liberties in how we consider play operating in popular culture. In the final section, *Slack*, we take on play as part of everyday life, as freedom from restriction, and as a form of resistance. This is play as a refusal to work, and a rebellion against conformity, and a perspective and approach to the world.

Moving from schemes through latitude to slack, we consider play by what it leaves behind and what it pushes ahead of itself. Throughout, we approach play as a fleeting process. This method helps us to understand the ways in which play produces meaning in contexts beyond the deliberately instrumental. Huizinga (1980) intended to invoke such an understanding with his definition of what the field has come to refer to as the "magic circle."[7] In understanding the "magic circle," we pull from the following:

> Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not "ordinary," or "real" life. It is rather a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own. Every child knows perfectly well that he is "only pretending," or that it was "only for fun." (p. 8)

This rarely considered quote shows Huizinga building to a definition of the "magic circle" that understands play as a disposition, not a practice. The definition of play given here assumes that it is an affect. But playfulness, for Huizinga, implies only

freedom and agency. We contest this point and suggest instead that play occupies any one of the many dispositions; three of them, schemes, latitude, and slack, provide the organization for this volume.

Finally, Huizinga follows this definition with a set of remarks about the necessity of understanding play as akin to a sacred rite and refers to participation within it as *methetic* as opposed to mimetic. The crucial distinction here being primarily sociological: Instead of engaging in herd behavior when we play, players are engaged, instead, in a participatory and collective ritual. In the context of the Slender Man, all involved have been indicted in the evocation and animation of the Slender Man. To deny this sense of production is to ignore the spiritual and divine aspects of play. An understanding of play as disposition insists that play be understood for the ways in which a sense of the divine can be produced through the embodied experience of the collective.

By providing a framework for the interaction between bodies and media, play produces a disposition that belongs, ultimately, to neither. This disposition could be anything, though we suggest that schemes, latitude, and slack are particularly useful—and certainly more exacting than the sense of playfulness Huizinga suggested. As an affective force, play propels us along the fulcrum points of an invisible dance. Similar to how a DJ plays with an audience by playing the correct records, the media with which we play set the mood and tone of the choreography. As such, play is a disciplinary chameleon and in revealing its camouflage, this collection aims to construct more thorough pathways to understanding how play has become an essential practice in today's hypermediated world.

Schemes. Schemes address what Ian Bogost (2007) would refer to as the procedural elements of computation. Procedurality encourages us to think of games as complex systems that model both processes and actions. In this sense, game designers are responsible for far more than representation, they model immersion, experience, and action in their designs. Schemes encompass the technical elements of games as sites of play as they shape design, experience, and understanding. Schematics allow both game engineers and game players to chart pathways in play that construct an experience of not just games but of the systems of organization that structure everyday life.

This particular disposition of play also has a deliberate double connotation: Schemes are ploys that imply manipulation and strategies for advancement. The notion of a scheme evokes a vision of the designer or player plotting in private, constructing parameters or strategy under a veneer of authenticity that masks ulterior purposes.

Schemes therefore means to address play as it operates within the field of game studies, where games and player behavior are broken down in order to analyze their impact on individuals and broader social structures. This section, however, also considers the significance of control to the disposition of play as scheme: The schemer is the game designer who constructs play to serve some unseen, greater purpose, and the schemer is the player who operates according to a plan that is not written in the game rules, refusing to allow the game to play him and instead manipulates the

particulars within it himself. Power dynamics underline how play operates within the game state, and schemes—as a section heading and as an approach—are meant to bring this to the fore. One considers power and play together when they scheme, and it is therefore a disposition.

In "On Balinese Cockfights: Deeply Extending Play," Casey O'Donnell offers a perspective of the game's structure, form, and environment by allowing it to melt away. O'Donnell uses Clifford Geertz's 1973 ethnographic work on Balinese cockfight to indicate embodied dimensions that are not adequately taken into account when theorists privilege a definition of play that places it in opposition to games. O'Donnell's essay situates games as being neither procedure nor assemblage, but instead contextualized through the play of swaths of interrelated and connected media.

"Strange Bedfellows: Subjectivity, Romance, and Hidden Object Games" by Shira Chess addresses overlooked games and marginalized players, questioning the deep infrastructural problems of genre and gender in game design. In looking at romance video games, Chess considers how the video game industry markets these games to women and deconstructs the constrained—and infantilized—subject positions offered to players. The underwhelming content and success of romance genre video games underscore the limitations of player agency, even as it provides an argument for why simply extending play beyond its usual haunts does not always prove a viable option. For Chess, the ephemeral is tantamount, and it is important to look into the forms of identity produced by often overlooked game genres.

Elena Bertozzi's "The Feeling of Being Hunted: Pleasures and Potentialities of Predation Play" looks at the pleasures of in-game hunting and killing as a strategy for success: Bertozzi suggests that all (but particularly women) might benefit from playing first-person shooter games, learning the quick-witted, competitive skill sets that men already enjoy in this form of play. Bertozzi's stance is particularly provocative in a cultural moment in which conversations about violence and misogyny are counted by neoliberal manifestos of empowerment such as Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. Unlike Johan Huizinga (1980), Bertozzi challenges us to consider a world in which the barbarism of capitalism cannot be fled or undermined and provokes us to think critically about the realities of the patriarchal and capitalist systems in which we are embedded. Play, here, is a scheme of survival.

Carlin Wing concludes the section on schemes by drawing our attention away from the computational space of procedurality and toward the glass walls of a squash court in "Hitting Walls: Captured Play." Wing explains how the architectural design of the squash court encourages a particular set of embodied player motions. In addition, Wing connects the micro level of embodied practice to the macro level of consumer capitalism by explaining how subtle architectural schematics are derived from larger institutional pressures. Glass walls serve as a parable for the ways that design schematics enact an ever present, yet invisible discipline upon our bodies: The best laid schemes of designers and players have implications for spaces far away from what we ordinarily reserve for play. And, despite these limitations, Wing considers

the ways in which these often-nefarious schemes yield paradoxical affects of respect, honor, and love within those who are systematically excluded from them.

Latitude. Play acts as a disposition of interaction with forms of media beyond the game; in this section, we show the ways in which game schematics can be seen in a variety of media. These essays explore the latitude afforded to play to operate in unexpected contexts, to both procedurality and practice in a range of spaces. Play hardly exists exclusively in the realm of games, and yet it is theorized only rarely outside of this domain. This section demonstrates play and playfulness as a means to blur boundaries between notions of serious—politics, art, work—and the frivolous.

To do this, we return to McKenzie Wark's concept of gamespace to understand the significance of latitude to the concept of play. Wark's theorized gamespace constructs asymmetry between the debris of the military–entertainment complex that litters our reality and the reproduction of this environment within the games we play. This definition finds a new sense of urgency in light of the recent trends in gamification that have been embraced by the commercial sector. Not only can our reality be configured theoretically as a gamespace, but it is now also being explicitly and materially engineered as a sort of gamespace. By this, we mean that games are becoming the predominant paradigm of the commercial sector, and as such, play has been incorporated to a range of everyday experiences. Latitude is a disposition because it shows a consideration of how play occurs, and which objects and individuals can be said to be at play.

In "Electing to Play: MTV's Fantasy Election and Changes in Political Engagement through Gameplay," Maxwell Foxman and Michelle Forelle consider MTV's attempt to construct political involvement during a presidential election as a game and bring play into politics. Play here is leveraged to produce a sense of biopolitical engagement, but these attempts face challenges as much as potential for play to transform the experience of alternative contexts. Using quantitative and ethnographic methods, Foxman and Forelle reveal the limitations to MTV's attempt at producing a political subjectivity, which helps key us in to the sensitivity of play as a mode of engagement.

Ri Pierce-Grove's essay, "Pressing Play: Game Techniques and Interactive Art" brings play into museum spaces, galleries, and the realm of visual arts. Via the design process of *Fragments*, an art installation conceived of and led by artist Adriana Paice which courted play as a technique for interaction, Pierce-Grove reveals how play is a fundamental component to both the creation and consumption of art fragments in visual spaces. As *Fragments* has a sonic component, however, this understanding of play is configured to extend beyond a purely spatial dimension to new work in Sound Studies that concerns itself with sonic forms of mediation. Pierce-Grove demonstrates the flexibility and problems that arise as artists and curators contend with nontraditional approaches, challenges that echo recent trends in game studies that delve into the politics and affordances of curating games.

Peter McDonald considers how attempts to shoehorn play into a static and causal model miss the big picture in his essay "Bouncing and Time: Toward a Hermeneutics

of Play." For McDonald, to understand play is to think through the metaphor of the throw and the motion produced therein; play can be predicted but never captured and is therefore resilient to attempts to implicate it within the logic of sequence. Just as in this introduction, we motion to the ways in which play is itself a disposition, McDonald's work supports this claim by elaborating on the philosophical thought that it is play that sets both bodies and media to action.

"No One Cares, Apostolate: Working at Play, Playing at Work, Karma, and Social Cheating" author Kathryn Thompson considers how a member of the online community of Reddit attempted to game the group structures of reward and reinforcement, and, in doing so, reveals fractures in Reddit's collective notion of play and in the boundaries between leisure and work. This section concludes by returning to where it began. Just as Foxman and Forelle show the degree to which player agency is involved in MTV's political schemes, Thompson's essay reveals the ways in which play within systems beyond games offers a latitude that allows players to cheat the rules to their advantage. In this sense, Thompson also offers an excellent transition to our final disposition, "slack," which offers an opportunity to glimpse the ways in which play extends beyond the formal structures to which it is often tethered.

Slack. This final section considers play as a process of unfettering. Once again capitalizing on the multiple meanings presented by the term, slack here positions play as without restraint, without aim or activity, and without allegiance. Slack is meant to explore play as freedom from constraint but also as resistance. Play defies the drive toward productivity, economy, work, and purpose. The resistance of slack is similar to that of a loose rope; instead of pushing back against the forces which try to control it, the disposition of slack shows a play which collapses and works around the 'Powers That Be.'

To understand slack is to understand the disposition which suggests phrases such as, "I'm just playing," or, "it's only fun and games." In other words, to slack is to play in a way that claims exception through reduction, and in so doing, produces a sense of resistance. Slack bends social rules and transforms the serious into the playful. It is also an attitude toward labor that hits toward the ways in which global production networks are, to cop a term, always already being "played." Slack is a disposition because it is an explicit decision made by the slacker.

In his book *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Resistance*, Stephen Duncombe (1997) puts forward the idea that underground punk fanzines of the 1980s, 1990s, and even today were written by self-identifying losers for other self-identifying losers. What's more, in this underground space, zines were used as a way to resist the dominant cultures of oppression which zine authors frequently found themselves writing in response to. Duncombe explains, "Considered in their totality, zines weren't the capricious ramblings of isolated cranks (though some certainly were), but the variegated voices of a subterranean world staking out its identity though the cracks in capitalism and the shadows of the mass media" (p. 2). This form of resistance, giving in and producing utopic conditions in the least likely of locations, is precisely the sense of resistance we hope to draw attention to in this final section on slack.

Nico DiCecco and Julia Lane play with the limitations of the academic form in their essay "Choose your Own Disruption: Clown, Adaptation, and Play." Drawing on literature from performance studies, they stage an experiment of disruption within the article itself, one that subverts the format of academic writing in order to play with the notion of disruption, of progress, and of attention. Ultimately, DiCecco and Lane are concerned with the ways that certain practices of interpretation are privileged over others, and in order to contest this problematic, they seek the playful disposition of adaptation as a way out. Their methodology invokes a rethinking of the ways in which Brechtian-styled disruption can be used to provoke a productive sense of play that might allow a semiotic opportunity for new meanings to emerge.

Graig Uhlin explores the reemergence of anachronism in his essay "Playing in the Gif[t] Economy," in which the circulation of gif images mark a cultural totemism. For Uhlin, the gif offers a mode of "dispossessed spectation," which resists the default consumerist modalities through which we consume the moving image. This new, playful mode of consumption and mimetic circulation of gifs imagine a new media landscape of micro media and active audience productions. Though slack may be a form of resistance, Uhlin's analysis illustrates that it can be simultaneously playful rebellion.

Finally, Mathias Fuchs' essay "Ludoarchaeology" is itself a schematic for a new and playful approach to archeological work. Within this essay, Fuchs reveals a document that helps us to posthumously reimagine Huizinga's engagement with critical theorists from the Frankfurt School. From this document, Huizinga's work on play is shown to be a line of flight from the barbarity of World War II. Play, however, is misunderstood. While it often advanced in a somewhat innocent manner, implying freedom, Fuchs shows how Huizinga would have seen the potential of play to liberate in more stoic terms. For all ways that play produces freedom, it produces an equivalent amount of resistance. As Fuchs plays with the epistemology of the discourse, it prompts us to consider how play resists, challenges, and evades the most sedentary of definitions.

The Playful Depository

The understanding of play as a disposition, epitomized by schemes, latitude, and slack, helps us to understand our affective bodies when we encounter media. To return, briefly, to the Slender Man case that with which we opened, we can see these terms offering an explanation that helps to make sense of the incidents. In particular, Knudsen's defense of Slender Man as a fantastic figure reduces it to merely a product created, distributed, and consumed, which misses the point about how the figure actually operates. The popularity of Slender Man depends on the fact that Slender Man has, from the start, operated as a nearly open-source horror meme that evolved via the collective imaginations of innumerable participants across Internet sites. In this sense, if Knudsen had been more strict in policing his intellectual property, his creation would not have proliferated—or, potentially, been used as a convenient

scapegoat for violence. The Slender Man, as an unregulated, memeish creature, was produced, literally out of the collective will of many.[8] This lack of regulation, the precise scheme of Slender Man, insists that the figure should circulate promiscuously. In other words, it has a life of its own.

We might now take a moment to recognize how this example speaks to Uhlin's work regarding gift economies and their circulation on web forums. The circulation of Slender Man is itself a disposition of slack, of unregulation. We see in Slender Man an animistic figure for which no one wants to claim total responsibility. It is a figure that is animated precisely by the plurality of representations that the latitude of open source has allowed for it and the complete lack of regulation, which slack also allows for. The Slender Man is the product of a collective intelligence between both people and objects. This sense of interaction between people and objects is what we know as play, it is what helps us to understand how figures like Slender Man are more than the sum of their parts. Our playful imprints in big data have produced depositories filled with beings that possess powers and ramifications far greater than those possessed by most individuals, yet we constantly and consistently deny our hand in their production. Play allows us to neglect responsibility for these creations, while simultaneously allowing them to take on lives of their own.

By contemplating how play is productive of several dispositions toward media, we can begin to recognize its utility as an explanation for the seemingly inexplicable animism of today's media systems, epitomized by big data, participatory and social media, and interactive, integrated, advertisements. The critical turn in game studies has occurred specifically because the ugly and barbaric aspects of play (racism, sexism, homophobia, and rape culture) have become apparent in far too many communities of gamers. And just Slender Man has been given a pardon by so many, we too pardon the games that set the mood for so many of the travesties, such as rampant violence, misogyny, and discrimination within the greater game development industry. By locating affect within play, however, we can begin to glimpse a collusion of bodies and objects and how their nimble steps add up to so much more. Though play seems at first to be the means through which we collect objects, attitudes, and affects, really what this approach to play as a disposition reveals is how these very things interpellate us and set us to motion.

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Notes

1. Anita Sarkeesian hosts the *Tropes versus Women in Video Games* video series, which argue that the video game industry replicates sexist and misogynist narratives in the plots of most games received. In response, she has received rape and death threats; for details, see Sarkeesian's (2012) documentation at her site *Feminist Frequency*.
2. Mike ''Gabe'' Krahulik and Jerry Holkins, the two leaders of Penny Arcade Expo (the largest gaming convention in North America), released a comic that made light of rape. After critiques by feminists on websites like *Shakesville*, they unapologetically returned with a second, completely unsympathetic, strip, which insisted that portrayals of rape in the media are unproblematic. For more, please see Lesley Kinzel's (2013) article at *XO Jane*.
3. In an epically failed political maneuver, Penny Arcade Expo then decided to open a ''diversity lounge'' for historically marginalized gamer groups, a poorly thought-out idea that was heavily critiqued for serving to alienate these groups even more (Rosen, 2013).
4. Game designer McGonigal is notorious for her optimistic take on the power of gaming to change the world and is well known for her colorful media appearances and the personality she cultivated in a series of TED talks. For a good list of her media appearances, please see her website: http://janemcgonigal.com/2013/07/21/watch-videos/.
5. Even Nintendo, who is infamous for their tightly moderated and censored chat relays, stood firm on their decision to exclude same-sex marriage in the recently released *Tomodachi Life*.
6. Often translated as apparatus or procedure, the *dispositif* has been used to explain concepts like the panopticon (Foucault, 1975). Important for Foucault was the fact that the panopticon was not only an engine of surveillance in the prison system but also an attitude toward surveillance that was invisible and systematic within all society.
7. It is worth noting that the materiality of the ''magic circle'' has been the object of much critical debate in recent years. Specifically, the definition provided by game studies scholars Katie Salen and Zimmerman (2003) within their *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* has been revealed as a mischaracterization of Huizinga's original point. Salen and Zimmerman take a number of liberties with their definition, ''In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins'' (p. 95). Here, the magic circle is of a somewhat material or at least tangible nature, and the gray areas regarding in-between zones of play render the definition suspect. Though Mathias Fuchs does an excellent job in summarizing much of this controversy later in this collection, we would like to return to the original definition which understands the ''magic circle'' as something which is evoked through dispositions of playfulness.

8. We mean here to draw attention to the ways in which Slender Man can be empirically seen as a product of collective intelligence. Its animism has been literally produced through the collective use of animation tools on the Internet.

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