ACTING OUT, KICKING BACK: THE HALF-WAY REALISM OF DESIGN GAMES

Maria Hellström Reimer

INTRODUCTION

There we were, engaged participants, entering the circle, prepared to sharpen our attention, to adjust our bodies, to interact and respond to the situation. We started to play, committed to follow the jerky wanderings of the first ball. Then the second ball entered the circle, and with it came a new rule for throwing it, challenging our coordination and signalling skills. When the third ball came into play, intersecting in a new way with the trajectories of the first two, the calls, glances and moves across the field of interaction intensified into a palpable present, frequently interrupted by thudding and bouncing—sounds of misjudgement, friction, or misalignment. As a fourth ball was introduced into the circle, along with yet another set of throwing instructions, the communicative tension reached its breaking point, or its point of implosion, manifested in reflexive, collaborative laughter. We had played, hesitatingly at first, but soon with increasing enthusiasm. And as the game progressed, balls had travelled faster, accompanied by more and more imperative shouts, growing agitation and intensified responses.

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Finally, as the gameplay was broken, the balls rolled away, leaving us with an awareness of the fragility of collaboration, but also with an appreciation for concerted juggling. Flexibility, timing, spatial understanding, expressivity, alertness, foresightedness: these are all social skills most clearly revealed precisely at the point of miscarriage, insufficiency, or breakdown.

CLIMATE MOVES

The above anecdote describes an improvisation and communication exercise conducted with a group of Swedish PhD students and their supervisors visiting Parsons School of Design in October, 2013. Coordinated by acting coach and part-time Parsons instructor Roger Manix, it was an exercise that evoked, in a surprisingly straightforward way, the impatience and frustration characterizing both design research and design practice today. There is a growing readiness among designers and design researchers to take on the big challenges of community formation and shared existence, to step into the complex circles of users, participants, and publics. At the same time, playing such a communitarian game, catching different kinds of "balls" and passing them on in different directions and according to different rules, easily gives rise to a feeling of awkwardness, an unease that stems from not knowing whether the performance of which you are a part is in fact socially mobilizing, cohesive or transformative, or simply a fanciful form of make-believe in the often uncompromising arena commonly referred to as "the public good."

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The question raised by my anecdote is whether, out of the simple activity of a collective game of catch, a design sociology of sorts can be unfolded. I see design researchers today as engaged in, but also struggling with, a somewhat similar game of call and response, in which they expectantly and uneasily but also self-consciously act out materialities and trajectories, trying to make sense of increasingly complex and contested societal dynamics. Part of my own research involves the development of collaborative prototyping processes in the service of public institutions, with a particular focus on collaborative competencies shared across municipal, national, and regional borders as well as across diverse fields of expertise. For example, in a project entitled *Urban Transition Øresund*, together with colleagues I focused on the facilitation of situated interplay for climate transition in the Malmö-Copenhagen region. Supported by the European Union and its regional development fund, the project gathered municipal officials and researchers from a number of planning departments and universities on both sides of the strait separating Sweden and Denmark, with an explicit intent to promote joint climate action and narrow the gap between sustainability-oriented research and *in situ* implementation. In this context of transition, design, or more specifically, design research, was drawn in as a normative practice with a bordering and translational function within the municipal context, and also as a practice which might suggest new entrepreneurial ideas or ventures.

Sometimes regarded a bit suspiciously as a "soft" way of seeking out new working procedures, design approaches have nevertheless found their way into

1   While the standard reference on the cultural significance of play is Johan Huizinga's 1938 classic *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, a ludic approach to design, learning and social creativity has over the last decade become more widely accepted. See William Gaver, Andy Boucher, John Bowers and A. Law, "Electronic Furniture for the Curious Home: Assessing Ludic Designs in the Field," *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* Vol. 22, no. 1-2 (2007): 119-152; Jennifer Light, "Taking Games Seriously," *Technology and Culture* Vol. 49, no. 2 (April 2008): 347-375; Alice Y. and David A. Kolb, "Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: A Case Study of a Ludic Learning Space," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* Vol. 23, no. 1 (2010): 26-50; M. A. Eriksen, E. Brandt, T. Mattelmäki and K. Vaajakallio, "Taking Design Games Seriously: Re-connecting Situated Power Relations of People and Materials," in *PDC 14: Proceedings of the 13th Participatory Design Conference: Research Papers Vol. 1* (2014): 101-110.

2   N. John Habraken and Mark D. Gross, "Concept Design Games," *Design Studies* Vol. 9, no. 3 (1988): 150-158.

administrative and strategic spaces. Beyond the routines of board meeting protocols, local plans, consequence analyses and "vision" booklets, design, broadly speaking, presents methods for materializing complex problems, making it possible to twist and turn, modify and simulate, apply and contest. Yet, the sometimes-derogatory designation of such tentative and provisional approaches as unscientific play, subjective vagary, or commercial spectacle has all along been close at hand—and indeed, these accusations have not always been entirely inaccurate. Some of the inflated promises surrounding "design thinking" as a putative panacea for stimulating organizational creativity have turned out to be little more than business quackery.

Rather than relying on design thinking, therefore, our research approaches planning practice in terms of the concept of *games*. Games are relevant to planning in more than one sense. Besides general ideas of collective life as essentially "ludic," and of humankind as a species reflecting upon its own social conditions through more or less formalized modes of play, there are other more pragmatic reasons to explore the diversity of social interactions that can be comprehended within the conceptual rubric of games or of play, from open-ended, self-rewarding and mundane playfulness to regulated, competitive sports to escapist "gaming."[1] In relation to climate transition, however, the most pertinent reason is a renewed attention to the spatiotemporal dynamics of complex and emergent systems, combined with an interest in games from a computational point of view. While this interest is often aimed at optimizing digital, financial and social performance, typically by spreading risks and mitigating negative effects, our ambition was different. As Habraken and Gross observe in connection with their work developing "concept design games" for planning contexts, games provide an environment for exploration as opposed to rationalization, a milieu for a constellation of stakeholders or "players" to tentatively act out their different interests within a framework or program characterized by interdependence.[2] Within the confines of the game, we wanted to explore, but also creatively modify, complex infrastructural and societal configurations independently of current functional limitations.

The specific reasons for us to turn to games were the material, processual and dynamic qualities of game frameworks, as well as their combination of collaborative, agential and occasional aspects. The idea was that a reformatting of the initial phases of the planning process, not simply in terms of games as such but in terms of game *development*, would help support the needed transition from compartmentalized planning regimes to a more collaborative planning practice based on a broader ecological awareness of resources, distributional flows, temporal variations and feedback loops.

Within the context of "sustainable urban development," the critically exploratory aspects were decisive, focusing everyone's attention on the scope of the region's environmental problems, if not thereby leading to easy agreement about potential solutions. Indeed, the ensuing encounters between researchers and civil servants, and between officials from different departments or fields, are not always smooth, and at times are quite conflictal. Like games, these processes develop different power dynamics and different kinds of tension or *agon* (to use a game-related term). In our case, one fundamental agonism concerned the very notion of "public service," conceived by some as a "procedural" idea oriented towards management and by others as a "transitional" quality, alternative to other kinds of services, and as such facilitating change. Yet within the conceptual space of the game, a common point of departure would be the necessity of collaboratively engaging in, meddling with, or playing out of possible "public goods."

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Without explaining in detail how this meddling unfolded and against which background, it is of course difficult to determine its success. It was, however, generally felt to be a meaningful and productive learning experience, opening up new avenues for argumentation, new methods for the processual situating of specific issues, and even new possibilities to ground collaborative decision making.[3] The biggest challenges centred largely around post-game questions about how to develop and implement new insights, and how to deal with the participants' growing frustration with the asymmetries and short-sightedness of current urban ecological policies. One of the main values of the game development process, therefore, was its "non-ludic" and more serious facilitating of due space and time for a critical investigation of systems limits and of the process scope of public infrastructures and goods. The participants were led to grapple with basic questions such as: What are the issues around which publics appear? Who is included and who is excluded? What are the implicit values embedded in service infrastructures? Who benefits from certain mechanisms and arrangements, and who is disadvantaged? Finally, how are we to assess the performance of public services? Or rather, what service is needed in order to facilitate public assessment?

These and similar political questions frequently surfaced throughout the research experiment, contributing to an increasing sensitivity as concerns micro-political power plays and social controversies, but also to a growing awareness of the need to intervene in, or even interfere with, larger financial and technological systems if we hope to make real progress on climate transition. The game development approach therefore both necessitates and facilitates the uncovering of

4   Félix Guattari, "The Three Ecologies," trans. Chris Turner, *New Formations* 8 (1989): 134.

5   Robert Cassar, "Gramsci and Games," *Games and Culture* Vol. 8, no. 5 (2013): 330-353.

6   The "game" of environmental certification and the consequent "trade" among rating systems is increasingly governing urban sustainable development. See breeam.org or usgbc.org/certification.

the materially built-in value systems, programs, registers, "scapes," and norms scaffolding practices such as urban planning and design.

THE GAME OF THE GAME

Focusing on game development rather than simply on game play allows an environmental reflexivity and attention to the situatedness and material conditions of the very cultures of planning, not least in relation to "natural" systems. According to Félix Guattari, while ecological breakthroughs might have called our attention to the fundamental imbrication of culture and nature, scientistic structuralization has prevented us from fully recognizing the ontological consequences. Instead, an over-confidence in technoscientific ideas of natural and self-organizing systems has "accustomed us to a vision of the world in which human interventions—concrete politics and micropolitics—are no longer relevant."[4] On the one hand, this vision points to the risks of a "gamification" of social life that merges social, technological and ecosystemic management into one integrated machine driven by the laws of supply and demand. On the other hand, it draws attention to the coordinating power needed in order to sustain such a "hegemonic equilibrium."[5] Today, the monitoring of this equilibrium increasingly happens through the translation of political decision-making into quantified rating systems or spreadsheet processes, reflecting an uncritical confidence in game-like platforms and their seeming capacity to automatically negotiate human needs as well as those of other organisms, thereby maximizing the good "for all."[6] Paradoxically, the political relevance of a design games approach emanates precisely from these and similar, functional rather than political, expectations. Whether economic, technological or social in nature, complex systems are supposed to run by their own inherent and organic rules, not to be messed with by humans. A design games approach, however, starts off with the opposite idea: human social systems are bound to interfere, and there is indeed a creative potential in this frictional interference—a performative and materially constructive potential, to different degrees conditioning what we refer to as societally meaningful, genuinely *public* good.

Understood as a mode of systemic interference or friction, design unfolds as a non-neutral yet publically accessible faculty for societal becoming, as such continuously and creatively regulating distributional patterns and courses of events, and constantly challenging the supposed naturalness of given orders.

Such an understanding of design as systemic interference, or friction, is qualitatively distinct from an understanding of design as a limited, formal expertise or consultancy function within the context of a given mode of production. While this latter definition of design refers back to its function within an industrial economic system, the former suggests a wider role for design as relational and performative, fundamental for the continuous facilitating of different kinds of exchange—or different degrees of

openness and permeability between human and non-human systems. Understood in this way, design unfolds as a non-neutral yet publically accessible faculty for societal becoming, as such continuously and creatively regulating distributional patterns and courses of events, and constantly challenging the supposed natural-ness of given orders.

The staging of design as a dynamic force field or societal game does not disqualify the idea of design as a possibly intuitive and spirited acting-out of abundant poten-tials. Instead, it calls into attention the function of creative impulses as agitated and critical moments of potential reconfiguration, as power-sensitive interference evoking systemic change. Within the framework of a design game, singular moves may have decisive and transformative effects. However, as expressed by one of the design PhD candidates participating in the work-shop referred to previously, "we are not trained to do activism." Designers and design researchers are not trained to question the rules, or educated to act outside of professional hierarchies. Despite their training in creative moves, designers are poorly prepared for the consequences of those moves: for the effects that their throws, catches, and leaps might have within large and intricately entangled settings.

Building on the fact that even the same present may appear differently depending on the "mechanics" through which it is being approached, games problematize the entire idea of "the future" as a common horizon.

One of the advantages of design games is that the engagement and embodied expression that take place in games are separate from a given reality. As pointed out by Roger Caillois in his classic study of play and games, "play and ordinary life are constantly and universally antagonistic to each other."[7] There is a separatist tension in games, potentially reflecting and potentially undermining the institutions, habits and patterns of the "real." Nevertheless, games are no less intense than any serious activity; they encourage people to apply greater energy and attention than they oth-erwise would. There is thus an ambiguous freedom of behaviour in games, a scope of action including agonistic confrontation, unpredictable turns, metamorphosis and vertigo—all occasions of transformation exempt of answerability, which, for Caillois, is precisely what explains their articulating power, showing the degree to which games reveal "the character, pattern and values of every society."[8]

Considering this ambiguous combination of open-endedness and habituation in games, it comes as no surprise that today there is an enormous amount of corpo-rate interest and capital invested not only in game design, but precisely in design games—both as an efficient mechanism for the user-generation of data and the subsequent mapping of habitual behavior, and as a model for innovation as the rapid prototyping of futures for development. However, inasmuch as design is a

7   Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 63.

8   Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 66.

What modes of knowing allow for *response*-able re-orientation, re-positioning and re-location? How can one facilitate the crisscrossing and navigation of multiple positions and boundaries? What "formats" allow for local and material specificities to play a role, while also taking into consideration the tensions and shifts introduced by relational circumstances?

9   William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-organising Processes, Neo-liberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 87. The performative concept of "machinic assemblage" originates with the process philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and has further inspired process-oriented and social constructivist thinking in many areas, not least in science and technology studies, e.g. in the writings of Bruno Latour. For a related discussion from a design games perspective, see M. A. Eriksen et al., "Taking Design Games Seriously."

socially constructive game it is also corruptible, always vulnerable to being dissipated into speculative gambling and narrow profit-seeking. In their computation and channelling of probabilities, design games are increasingly fundamental for an economy that feeds on socially transformative flows. In a target-setting and revenue-oriented rather than relational and transformative mode, the game of design can be a controlling and manipulative practice, just as it can be an enabling and differentiating one.

HALF-WAY REALISMS

Collaborative design game development, including the multidisciplinary approach referred to as design thinking, in no way offers a suspension bridge to sustainable futures. Building on the fact that even the same present may appear differently depending on the "mechanics" through which it is being approached, games problematize the entire idea of "the future" as a common horizon. In the words of political theorist William Connolly, one could say that as with any other creative complex, design is in fact a "machinic assemblage" operating here and now—performative rather than representational, "neither pulled by a final purpose nor reducible mostly to chance, nor simply explicable as a mechanical process."[9] Actualizing the very staging of primary conditions or the degree of "fairness" of the initial scene, a design game makes it clear that there is neither a pre-given holistic oneness from which to depart, nor a single common outcome to be reached, but rather a set of more or less unbiased game "rounds" or decisions through which to proceed.

The question raised through design game practice is therefore also ontological. How does "the world" as we know it come into being? The only way to answer this kind of question is from within the dynamic of that "world" itself, from within the specific modalities of adaptation and change that it makes possible. The experience of *staging* and *restaging* these modalities therefore offers an important refutation of scientistic or computational forms of game-inspired modelling methods, which continue to reserve a neutral position for the game master as arbitrator

or referee. In her version of realism, theoretical physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad insists on a more complex and dynamic idea of knowing as *intra-action*, emphasizing the constructive entanglement needed for any circumstance whatsoever to emerge.[10] There is an independent reality, albeit one graspable only through "agential" configurations, temporary regulations, constitutive and positioning "cuts." As dynamic exercises of power, "intra-actions reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible."[11]

In a similar way, the design of a game constitutes a situated knowing, which, as Donna Haraway has expressed it, also makes us aware of "our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings"[12]—our own game mechanics, if you will. In strategic and transitional design processes, at the intersection between economies, technological infrastructures and ecosystems, semiotic technologies are never given and are often hidden, embedded in scientific conceptualizations about reality. Typically taken for granted as "natural" features of the world itself, these hidden value systems eventually reveal themselves, seemingly unpredictably, as unwanted bugs: accidents, break-downs, paralyses. Uncovering the field of tension, intra-active design games do not remedy or establish one's total agency over matters, since as Barad puts it, the world, including the self-organizing processes referred to as systems, whether economic, technological or ecological, inevitably and repeatedly, "kick[s] back."[13] This "kicking back" is moreover not negligible, but materially merged with our more or less entangled coming-in-to-being. The question posed here is really one of responsivity and answerability. What modes of knowing allow for *response*-able re-orientation, re-positioning and re-location? How can one facilitate the crisscrossing and navigation of multiple positions and boundaries? What "formats" allow for local and material specificities to play a role, while also taking into consideration the tensions and shifts introduced by relational circumstances?

These questions coincide with the questions lurking behind the idea of "public goods"—questions that are fundamentally political, concerning the potential intra-agency of different more or less creative, more or less self-organizing, spheres.
There is in the proliferating notion of "design thinking" an ambiguity at play, a vicissitude in between morality and recklessness, an acting out of a pre-staged randomness under the cloak of the "public good." As seductive and successful as this interchange might be, it unveils a problematic merger of relativism and fatalism, effectively eliminating the potentially transitional effects of the design game as an open matrix for exploring a situated and material assemblage of relations and variations.

It may be that trying to "understand" is spatially and materially the wrong attitude. Instead, what we should aim for is to *interstand*, to actively relate.

10   Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 422

11   Karen Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism Without Contradiction," in Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson, *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Press, 1996), 177.

12   Quoted in Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway," 186.

13   Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway," 188. See also Guattari, "The Three Ecologies," 134.

14   Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 104, 110.

CONCLUSION

Design processes can be understood as diverse varieties of games: transitory, materially messy and condemned to endless iterations, endless annulations of results, endless new beginnings. Yet, on the privileged ground of tentative becomings, within designated circles, interrogative "perspective-taking" may be acted out, attentive interception may take place, as well as transgression of individual limits and proscriptions. For these reasons, the serious game of design potentially constitutes an ontologically different point of departure for our further entanglements with the world. In summing up what it means to actively "meet the universe halfway," Barad invokes the American queer poet Judy Grahn, who proposes that trying to "understand" may be spatially and materially the wrong attitude. Instead, what we should aim for is to *interstand*, to actively relate. Barad playfully returns her gambit through an *intra-standing* move. There is not one game of design, and not just one way to play the game. Instead, as a "gymnastics" of material sensibility, design as game might unfold as what William Connolly has called an "ethics of cultivation,"[14] an ethics of cultural and social emergence. Infused with mutable intensities and dramatic options, the multiple game of design might provide an unsettling yet reconfigurable ground for such emergence, allowing for "intra-standing" launches and cuts that, in being acted out, also call forth the kicking back of an obdurate but evasive "reality."