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Play as Affect

The summer of 2016 was a joyous one for gamers. The company Niantic had just released *Pokémon GO!*, a smash hit game that let players search for Pokémon in the real world. Urban and suburban landscapes across the world were transformed as players hunted near major and minor landmarks for these elusive and rare creatures. Suddenly games, which had long been associated with couch culture and the domestic space of a gamer den or living room, had spilled out onto the streets. Some shops even offered discounts and promotions for the players who were excited about the game. It was an exciting time, as people mingled happily striking up new conversations that led to new friendships everywhere. These good vibrations, unfortunately, weren't shared by all. Game designer Omari Akil (2016) wrote a popular post for *Medium*[1] with the simple title "Warning: Pokémon GO Is Death Sentence If You Are a Black Man."

Akil was truth telling. Black men in the United States are forced to constantly assess whether or not they are

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welcome in White spaces. Simple things like going to a grocery store or hanging out at the mall are coded differently when you're Black. Furthermore, tragedies like 2012's murder of Trayvon Martin and 2014's murder of Michael Brown were just recent memories.[2] In the article, Akil talks about the statistical likelihood that he might be approached by the police while playing *Pokémon GO!* he talks about how he might appear threatening to police if he reaches for his identification in his back pocket and comports his body to look as "pleasant and nonthreatening as possible" (para. 7). In other words, one player's fun is another player's pain.

Pokémon GO! is an AR or "augmented reality" game. It uses the phone's camera and GPS system to track and animate Pokémon as if they were hiding in the landscape around you. Thus, to catch Pokémon, you must pull your phone out and walk around—explore your neighborhood. Akil's point is that the gameplay of *Pokémon GO!* encourages players to transgress a number of unwritten rules that Black folk adhere to for safety. Aimlessly walking around a neighborhood with your cell phone, for instance, plays into a number of stereotypes that assume that the player might be milling around looking for trouble, selling drugs, or worse. He argues that in *Pokémon GO!*, we have a game that must be played differently by people of different races.

This hard truth is both sad and difficult to process. That one game might affect different groups of people in different ways—leading to two separate experiences—is

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upsetting, to say the least. The importance of this conceit cannot be emphasized enough, and it applies to far more games than just *Pokémon GO!* The stakes of play are simply different. BIPOC people are subject to forms of harassment that their White counterparts are not. The weight of this othering is oppressive, and it means that we BIPOC people *play* differently. Although the experience is often still joyous, we know that it can turn on a dime. Fun can transform into fear in an instant because the unspoken rules of play assume that it is a consensual affair between White folks.

It ain't all fun and games. The affects produced by play are different for BIPOC people. We know the score. We understand the depth of play. Black folk invented the blues, after all. Moody, dark meanderings in music that are more expressive than cerebral. Play, as it stands, is not an integrated concept. If we are to repair play, we must desegregate its affective connotations—pleasure and pain. Attention to affect allows us to better locate play on the margins, in the in-between, and through felt consequences.

In the introduction, I defined affect using the terms *stimulus* and *response*, but I noted that this was a partial and incomplete definition at best. Affect studies is a wide-ranging field and is also, in part, concerned with emotion. It is a wing of phenomenology that concerns itself specifically with what one might call the structure of emotion. This implies everything from the psychology of trauma and joy, to the physiology of pleasure and

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pain, to the role of often invisible sensations between us that are lived and felt. This chapter takes a detour into affect studies because it affords a window into how the emotional burdens carried by BIPOC people intersect with theories of play.

To recap, I have argued that canonical theories of play have been guilty of a kind of tunnel vision that sees it as productive of pleasure but not pain. Not only is this definition troubling because of the many commonsense ways that we know play to be dangerous, harmful, and difficult, but it also excludes the narratives of BIPOC people, who have long endured pain at the expense of White European play. For example, the leisurely consumption of spices, stories, and other exotic goods in Europe encouraged colonial regimes to enslave, subjugate, and steal from BIPOC people globally. Repairing play means centering these experiences and their legacies. This means understanding the emotional burdens still carried by BIPOC people and recognizing how, for many of us, play can be as frightening as it is joyful. Affect studies affords such a window into the souls of BIPOC folk, as it offers language for discussing feeling.

There is also some scholarly merit to this work. Scholars of games have begun the work of connecting games and affect, but curiously, they stopped short of describing how *play* is productive of affects. Instead, the research they engage in examines how games produce affect in a player. Aubrey Anable's wonderful book *Playing with Feelings* opens with a montage of examples that

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explain well how affect can structure collective experiences. Take for example how affects of boredom and melancholy might lead to a synchronicity of play when waiting for the subway:

A woman killing time on a subway platform with *Candy Crush Saga*; commuters being alone and together while playing similar games on their phones. In such moments of being in relation through a type of signifying structure, we do not lose sight of affect; rather, this is the only possible way to make sense of it. The rest of the time it is too blurry and diffuse. At the interface, we get fragments that tell us something about the larger picture that cannot be grasped at once. A video game is such an interface for grasping a contemporary structure of feeling. (Anable 2018, xix)

Anable gives us an excellent description of how affect —which resides in the in-between—connects seemingly disparate figures behaving similarly in the same space. Commuting is boring; people react to this feeling in a variety of ways; collectively, we can see that many people escape into the games on their phones. Affect describes the entirety of this encounter. It is the boredom; it is the escape; it is the innumerable other things (napping, chatting, craving coffee) that happen within this encounter with feeling. It is also multimodal and can be used to describe the specifics of feeling—boredom for example—as well as the entirety of the experience.

Anable theorizes affect in a way that foregrounds how technology, such as video games, structure affect.

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I differ from Anable's account of affect insofar as I think that the interface of the "structure of feeling" she describes isn't technology but technique. All the people sitting on the subway that Anable describes are playing with their phones. The practice of play here—focused on what Sara Ahmed would term the "happy object" of the game[3]—is what evokes pleasure. When players round a bend and encounter an inevitable paywall, it may well evoke pain. The games in the hands of the players may structure the feelings they encounter (as I return to later in this chapter when I discuss *Pokémon*), but it is play that produces the affect. To repair play, we must genuinely engage with how play is productive of affects, which can be pleasurable, painful, despairing, and melancholic.

The canon of play scholars that I critiqued in the prior chapter didn't use the term *affect* to describe play. Instead, Huizinga (1980) chose the term "disposition." He wrote that "[Play] is a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (8). Pretending, in other words, is what people do when they play. Importantly, for Huizinga, play is neither ordinary nor real. Thus play is a disposition toward reality; the players of a game realize that the stakes are lower and the edges are softer than they are in real life. Or at least, this is how Huizinga conceived of play. But play is not only make-believe. One person's game can be another's torment. I can remember being bullied as a child in the playground, while other kids ripped the

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legs off insects just for fun. Perhaps Huizinga was right when he labeled play a disposition, yet overly optimistic about the ability of people to separate fantasy from reality. Indeed, extracting play from reality undermines Huizinga's main argument that play is productive of "civilization."

Yet play is a disposition. It is an inclination to bend the rules of everyday life. What if instead of questioning the nature of "reality" Huizinga had settled for society? When we play, we inhabit worlds of feeling—visceral spaces where sensation, sensemaking, emotion, and articulation are jumbled together. It's nonsense that makes sense. The mangle of play is inscrutably affective. That play produces affective worlds—which themselves mold us as competitive, collaborative, loving, scornful, or violent—is only a starting point. From here, we might focus on the accepted sites of play to deconstruct the affordances and implications that embed play within them. Only by expanding our notions of play to include the practices of diverse populations can we navigate the blurred boundary of play spaces. It is then, and only then, that from this vantage point we can consider play as liberation, resistance, and subversion.

Sara Ahmed (2004) argues that "emotions *do things*" (119). They help us to understand the connections between people and their communities, and the subtle ways that these invisible lines of affect drive bodies to action. Part of what emotions do, according to affect theory scholar Teresa Brennan (2004), is to provide

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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 their body, they flee to the cold calculus of the mind for relief (Brennan 2004, 23). The aforementioned scholars of play have also struggled to reconcile this dualism. Play is theorized through embodiment, and games are associated with rationality. Children flinging their bodies around the playground are associated with play, whereas games are more cerebral—chess strategy comes to mind. The split, of course, is hogwash. Emotion is just as much a part of our mind as it is our body. What's more, this split has long been used to reinforce White supremacy by associating BIPOC people with the body and White folk with the mind. Research on affect aims to valorize the experiences of women and people of color by shining a light upon how central emotion, sensation, and embodiment are to our day-to-day lives.

By considering affect, the concept of play better speaks to the experiences of BIPOC people. Consider the customs and rules that we bend when we mourn a loved one: a day off from work, an excuse not to smile, isolation for days, allowances within one's community for the overindulgence of spirits. This, of course, is the dark side of play. Repairing play is that which deals with regret, sadness, and anger. It is the moment when the social contract is breached through entropy instead of enthusiasm and joy. We have the colloquialism "playing

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hooky" to describe skipping work to partake in leisure, yet we simply describe the opposite as "mourning." In both, we play with cultural norms. In both, we pursue different affects.

Sadness is key to understanding the affective state of BIPOC people. We are haunted by the ghosts of our ancestors. I admire how Ann Cvetkovich encourages us to engage with how the memorialization of trauma is productive of affect. She terms this an "emotional color line," and uses playwright Anna Deveare Smith's depiction of philosopher Cornel West to define it. Smith wrote *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, in the wake of the LA riots that followed the Rodney King verdict. Cvetkovich (2012) summarizes the "emotional color line" in terms of meritocracy, survival, and trauma. She writes, "[West] suggests that sadness comes when the belief that one should be happy or protected turns out to be wrong and when a privileged form of hopefulness that has so often been entirely foreclosed for black people is punctured" (116). Black sadness, in other words, is a condition endemic to Black people drawn from centuries of bondage, torture, and suffering. Repairing play must engage with Black sadness if it is to be reparative. Thus it is essential to mark and recognize the ways that play might produce pain.

José Muñoz (2006) describes brown affect in a similar way. He describes brown feeling as an "ethic of the self" and uses it to discuss what it means for BIPOC people to survive in White society. I sit writing now in a majority

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White coffee shop in a gentrified neighborhood. Music from White bands plays on a speaker, and I listen to gleeful chatter from the folks around me. All the while, I feel out of place. I wonder how these strangers might react if I struck up a conversation. I wonder if my father could have inhabited a similar space fifty years ago? All in all, it bums me out. Yet, I spy another BIPOC individual working alone and am comforted knowing that I am not alone in this sadness. The alienation I just described, as well as the solidarity in sadness, are "brown feeling" (676). As established in the prior chapter, the typical affect produced by play is that of pleasure, it is an affect closely tied to White "civilization." The "brown feeling" that Muñoz describes is an ethic that is intended to locate a common ground among BIPOC people. The sense of belonging found within the depression that he and West describe is reparative because it recognizes how the violence of racism is systemic. Repair means more than identifying villains; it means recognizing how the ideology of what bell hooks (2010) terms "imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (para. 2) divides and turns everyone against one another.

An understanding of play that comprehends the concept as productive of affect can better help us grasp how play relates to systems of oppression. Even when play is productive of pleasure, it may be masking layered social trauma beneath. Take postindustrial Japan's embrace of precarious labor, or the gig and service economy, as

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an example. Japan's embrace of precarity[4] has led to a generation of hopeless-feeling, despairing youth. Kids working low-paying service jobs feel terrible inhabiting their day-to-day routines and escape to the vibrant and pleasurable worlds of games to escape. Thus the social demand for affect is now at a premium, and the advertising and entertainment industries have exploited this market.

Critical media scholar Anne Allison (2009) describes the affective appeal of *Pokémon*. For her, *Pokémon* is both an instance of soft, affective power—the power of attraction, the promise of escape—and a global economic product (96–7). It succeeds, in part, because of the labor of its participants. The ability for friends to communicate with one another, trade, and compare Pokémon encourages the proliferation of Pokémon as a platform. In other words, Pokémon sells because it rewards its consumers. It provides a fantasy experience that is integrated into the very fabric of everyday life. The fantasy is a positive one—designed to help pull players into an affectively pleasurable context of play.

The affective context of play—pleasure and pain—is also crucial to understanding the inclusivity of play spaces, as well as who is hailed when play is invoked. As Ahmed (2004) points out in her work on the economies of affect, "My argument is not that there is a psychic economy of fear that then becomes social and collective: rather, the individual subject comes into being through its very alignment with the collective. *It is the*

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very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies" (128, italics mine). Feeling down. Feeling brown. Some kind of blue. These fragmented feelings are distributed and shared communally. How players identify with the collective mood, or (to borrow from Muñoz) disidentify with it, informs the collective subjectivity of BIPOC players today (1999, 5–6).

Returning to Anna Deveare Smith's vocalization of West, the disidentification with the pleasures of meritocracy that constitute the conditions of Whiteness is a part of the story of Black people in North America. The White American dream of a stable income, middle-class home, and safe neighborhood denies identification with a common history of discrimination, struggle, and bondage. The erasure of torture and other painful tonalities of play from game design is intimately tied to the theorization of play advanced by a canon of White European scholars. Inclusivity means more than tending to representation; it also means tending to the stories that the games we play tell, and the texture of the experiences that they provide. Play that is inclusive of BIPOC people must work to conjure moods of joy, exuberance, and excitement alongside the traumatic, painful, and torturous.

For those looking to design inclusive games, the insights shared in this chapter are undoubtedly tricky to navigate. On the one hand, recognizing how painful

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experiences can bring depth to game design opens up portions of one's creative palette that were previously inaccessible. On the other hand, designing interactive experiences that are painful and traumatic runs counter to many of the genre tropes many have come to accept when consuming games. This impasse is real, and I can admit that I don't know an easy way to navigate it. The uneasiness many of us have in confronting a broad spectrum of feelings is part of the point.

Repairing play is that which, like the BIPOC people it centers, cannot be at home in any one affect or feeling. It is imperative to recognize the ways that the affective and the aesthetic work together to produce evocative experiences. Muñoz's work on brown feeling recognizes how recognizing, discussing, and understanding feelings such as depression can be a common point of solidarity and community. The point is not just that feeling out of place is difficult; it is also that from this difficulty new potential forms of community can emerge. By focusing on the uneasy and difficult affects that play can produce, we open the door to new and radical forms of community. These new and emergent forms of community foreground the shared histories of imperialism, oppression, slavery, and torture that unite BIPOC people across the globe. We know the importance of sorrow, lamentation, and pain. These low affects must be foregrounded alongside joy, fun, and pleasure as we strive to repair play. By imagining a kind of play that

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runs the affective gamut, we imagine a potential play that is less captivating, more sincere, and ultimately more inclusive. In other words, repairing play courts resistance by promising more than mere fun—it flirts with difficult and undesirable feelings—thus it is decidedly against the capture of our attention, bodies, and money within its aesthetic.

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Repairing Play

A Black Phenomenology

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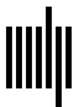

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