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Play as Capture

This is America
Don't catch you slippin' now
Look at how I'm livin' now
Police be trippin' now
Yeah, this is America
Guns in my area
I got the strap
I gotta carry 'em

—Childish Gambino, “This Is America”

Ten children walk in a playground casually chatting. One of them reaches out to another and cries, “You’re it!” The tagged child lunges in a desperate bid to rid themselves of the stigma by touching another. Soon the group scatters and a melee ensues. The game is tag, and its very grammar suggests that even innocent play may well be a violent activity. The game divides players into subjects and objects. Once a player is tagged, they are driven to reconcile their situation by tagging

someone else. The game's vernacular reduces players to a status of an "other" or even object; like it or not, they are "it." The word "it" implies less than human. "It" has been fundamental to the lexicon of bigotry and White supremacy in America since before the American Revolutionary War. The very basis of "it" equivocates humanness with objectness, as it strips "it" from the fundamental rights granted to other subjects. One does not consent to play tag, nor does one offer their consent to become "it" in tag. This, the simplest of games, reveals play is not a relationship between subjects. Instead, it is a relationship between subject and object.

Like Childish Gambino says, "This is America." A place where being Black has long been equated with being less than human. The wealthy and White here get access to leisure, while the poor and Black are left to toil in the fields. A place where George Floyd's final words, "I can't breathe," were heard as if he was an object. A place where the cops allow Kyle Rittenhouse, a seventeen-year-old White kid, to walk away after unloading an M15 rifle into a group of Black Lives Matter protesters. There are different rules for different people here. In America's playground, Black folks are always "it." When you break it down, play means different things for different people. Unfortunately, play for White folk can often be torturous and even deadly to Black folk.

The relationship between torture and play relies on the question of consent. Play, as many contemporary game design theorists have argued, is a fundamentally

consensual relationship (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 474; Stenros and Bowman 2018, 417). Because consent is central to most scholarly definitions of play, we are left with the paradox explained in the introduction where consensual torture satisfies a definition of play while nonconsensual torture does not. The examples they offer to justify this distinction are almost always formal. They speak more to a desire of what play *should be* rather than from an observation of what play *is*. Do we negotiate consent when we play with a computer or with ourselves? Play mediates in ways that are not as straightforward or confined as they may seem at first. In fact, interrogating the mediatory force of play challenges us to reconcile the violence that lies at the heart of innumerable social relationships.

The consensual relationship structured by play often works through another term: *negotiation*. As Miguel Sicart (2014) explains, “We play by negotiating the purposes of play, how far we want to extend the influences of the play activity, and how much we play for the purpose of playing or for the purpose of personal expression” (16). Here, Sicart nests the idea of negotiation within the concept of play, building on the prior work of Jesper Juul, who sought to locate the idea of negotiation within the concept of the game. For Juul, all games have negotiable consequences (2005, 36). Negotiation thus differentiates between what is a game and what is war. Distinguishing whether negotiation is considered fundamental to play or games reflects a broader

understanding of the consensuality of each phenomenon. To negotiate assumes that each player respects the other's ideas, positions, and sovereignty. When players negotiate, they treat one another as fellow humans, and not as objects. Yet, so often play defies negotiation. David Leonard argues that in sports video games, in which the presumed White player is invited to take on the role of Black athletes without being forced to live through the trauma of Black experience, play is not negotiated (Leonard 2004, para. 5). The Black community has not consented to this form of identity tourism, yet this sort of minstrelsy is a common form of play. Negotiation is more of an ideal than an observed reality in games and play today.

Repairing play starts from the premise that play is not necessarily reciprocal. If play is not reciprocal, then it becomes obvious how play itself is power. Back to the playground. The bullies tease, mock, and even fight with other children. They are all playing, but it persists because of the bully's whims. When I use the term *repairing play*, I am arguing for an approach to play that recognizes how painful the status quo of play is for so many BIPOC people. For without understanding the trauma lurking in the center of play, one cannot anticipate and work to assuage it.

Other scholars concur that not all play is consensual. Here I want to signal my appreciation of scholarship that acknowledges how the assumed norms of consent that are hailed by the "magic circle of play" are often

transgressed by White men. In her autoethnographic writing, Emma Vossen explains, “Unfortunately, because of contemporary practices surrounding gameplay, most video gameplay that I have participated in has contained practices that were not consensual or enjoyable, such as harassment, gender-based insults, or trash talk” (Vossen 2018, 206). Appreciating how play is wielded as an instrument of power begins by recognizing accounts of play that would otherwise be lost in a definition that presumes voluntary participation.

My argument relies on three premises. First, drawing on the work of Johan Huizinga (1980), I argue that play is voluntary if you are the player (7). Second, building on the historical work of Clifford Geertz and recent scholarship by Miguel Sicart, I concur that play is a “way of being” (Geertz 1972; Sicart 2014). Third, I build on the proposition laid forth by Roger Caillois’s (2001) work that play is not necessarily voluntary for the played (52). Based on these premises, if play is voluntary for the player, but not necessarily voluntary for the played, then play is a subject–object relationship and not a subject–subject relationship. Following a subject–object orientation, then torture is a form of play, even in its most brutal and disgusting forms.

Importantly, this chapter crystallizes the aforementioned logical conjuncture through the metaphor of policing. Given the larger premise that play is often torture for those who are its object, I think it is crucial to draw parallels between it and law enforcement. In every

game, there is a player who remembers and enforces the rules, a rule cop,¹ so to speak. The lens of policing helps to drive home the point that play is often one-sided. Will a bully relent if his victim gasps, “I can’t breathe?” We know that the rules of the playground are different for kids with different backgrounds. Indeed, the language of law enforcement helps to underscore the point: play is often brutal, one-sided, unfair, and punishing.

Play Arrests

In this section, I juxtapose the concept of arrest—the ability to cease the free movement of another body—against the concept of voluntarism. Arrest helps to reveal, through the language of discipline and policing, that the voluntarism of play is a one-sided affair. Huizinga’s original theorization of the term argued strongly that voluntarism was a key aspect of play. I believe that this is true for only one of the many parties engaging in play. Like a police arrest, which is voluntary for the police, I argue that the power relationship construed by play is similar. Play captivates; it captures. And when we play, we capitulate.

The idea that play is voluntary has been a fundamental part of play theory since Johan Huizinga penned *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga (1980) writes,

First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could be

at best a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process. It is something added thereto and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment. Obviously, freedom must be understood here in the wider sense that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism. It may be objected that this freedom does not exist for the animal and the child; they *must* play because their instinct drives them to it and because it serves to develop their bodily faculties and their powers of selection. . . . Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom. (Huizinga 1980, 7–8)

When Huizinga argues that play is essentially a voluntary activity, he compares animal and child play. He specifically considers these categories because, as he articulates, children are yet to develop the rational faculties we attribute to adult humans. He is wary that the subjectivities of children and animals may be different than that of adults, and thus they may be driven to play by instinct. It's worth noting here that comparisons to animals have long been a White supremacist tactic used to dehumanize BIPOC. I make this comparison because—as I will argue in more depth later—the experience of Blackness holds remarkable similarities with the experience of play. We can find these similarities in Huizinga's comparison of children and animals.

Despite these comparisons, it's important to note here that voluntarism implies that every participant in a game is a player. But what if someone decides they don't

want to play, such as in the example of tag posed earlier? In this example, if one acts as a spoilsport and chooses not to play after they are tagged, they still become “it.” In other words, Huizinga uses terms like *spoilsport* to allow for play practices where one voluntarily opts out of the play space. What he doesn’t account for are play practices that pull the spoilsport back to the game table even after they have flipped it. After all, a price is paid when one refuses to play.

The spoilsport is a figure who has been violently arrested by play and refuses its discipline. Sara Ahmed’s killjoy is a paradigm example of this case. The killjoy “flips the table” after being subjected to the patriarchal diatribes of her family. She kills the joy of her father, the patriarch, because she aims to resist the discipline of patriarchy. Yet, she is disciplined by him (and the rest of the family) for this act of resistance. She is arrested by play, despite her desire to leave the game altogether.

The suggestion that play is voluntary neglects all the instances in which it is not. It presents a radically subjective vision of play instead of one that is always-already constrained by a shifting set of social relationships and experiences. The spoilsport still engages in play even if they don’t engage with the game.² By recognizing that play is only voluntary for the individual initiating play, we demystify the spoilsport by showing how their violence toward the game may be a result of another player’s violence toward them and their feelings. This contradiction, that play is voluntary for some

yet not for others, confounds Huizinga's theory of play. His is a romantic vision that idealizes the voluntary.

Play is not voluntary for those who are objectified through it. Yet, in all cases here—that of the child, other, and animal—pleasure is offered as the primary explanation for what drives individuals to play. In pleasure, we find a common link between the actions of subjects and the actions of objects. If we are to understand how objects play, we must consider, as Miguel Sicart does, the relationship between play and pleasure.

Captivity and Play

Moving away from an instrumental understanding of play, which defines play as an activity, Miguel Sicart (2014) posits that play is a way of being that exists within all activity (6). Sicart's work is a sharp turn away from Huizinga's approach to play. Extended by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, 95), a neo-Huizingan approach suggests that play thrives in ritual spaces marked as distinct from everyday life. Although the opacity of the magic circle has been questioned by many, a neo-Huizingan approach still provides a compelling foil for Sicart's philosophy. He suggests that play exists within all things, but is often focused during events, within play-objects (like games), and in particular spaces. But what if this phenomenology of play as being is itself a form of captivity? When we play, are

we not back on the slave ship, captured and waiting in the hold?

Play as being extends and generalizes Huizinga's theory that play is productive of "civilization." It suggests that play is a necessary part of what it means to know oneself as a person. If play is being, then it is a condition that everyone is caught up in. Thus it is also captivity. BIPOC folks know this. Here in the cage of society, there is a hierarchy that enforces the rules. It's the values of White society that the police are made to enforce.

Play as captivity prompts a rethinking of questions that have long generated curiosity in the field of game studies. There has long been a scholarly thread fascinated with the seemingly paradoxical similarities between labor and leisure. Are professional athletes working or playing? Is the slog of video game playtesting leisure at all? These questions all play on a binary distinction between labor and leisure. Recognizing that play has encircled and arrested both concepts has great explanatory power here. Understanding play as captivity speaks better to the painful aspects of play in everyday life.

In his definition of play, Sicart suggests several characteristics that this mode of being takes on. Play is contextual, he argues, and varies in degree by circumstance. It is carnivalesque—a way of challenging traditional understandings of status and power. Sicart also argues that play is appropriative, suggesting that it can latch on to almost any circumstance and transform it. Finally,

and most salient to this book's arguments about torture, Sicart argues that play is pleasurable:

It is pleasurable but the pleasures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happiness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not playing. Let's not talk about play as fun but as pleasurable, opening us to the immense variations of pleasure in this world. (Sicart 2014, 3)

The comparison of pleasure and fun helps us understand how play exists in the world. If we look at play as pleasure as opposed to fun, we turn away from the rhetoric of play as progress that defines it as a positive activity. Some forms of play, such as BDSM, are often considered pleasurable as opposed to fun. What's more, BDSM highlights how torture is commonly accepted as a pleasurable form of play. Following this line of reasoning, should brutal, disciplinary torture also be considered play? Traditional scholars of play would draw the line here. Yet, I feel these approaches to play are naive. Although there is a strong sentiment that the phenomenology of play is wholly positive, we know from the feminist accounts, such as Vossen's noted earlier, that this is far from the truth. Thus, I argue that brutal, disciplinary torture is always (unfortunately) a form of play, and this definition is wholly consistent with Sicart's understanding of the term. To argue this, I draw a distinction between the player and the played.

This distinction is significant because it encourages us to rethink how we classify others in multiplayer games.

Policing Play

The distinction between the player and the played has been invisibly policed in play scholarship. It is best brought to focus by Roger Caillois in the introduction to *Man, Play, and Games*, as he considers the historical circumstance of Huizinga's work. Caillois attributes the curious omission of games in Huizinga's work on play to the somewhat sordid connotations they had in early twentieth-century society. Because Huizinga sought to construct a theory of play that would show how all "civilized" society related to the concept, he was forced to omit games with connotations of street life and gambling. Caillois (2001) argues that if Huizinga was to include morally dubious games in his theory of play, he would undermine his assertion that all civilization springs from play (5). Hence, the moral gray area of gambling undermines the premise of civility that Huizinga's play is premised upon. In other words, games are accepted as an invisible and thus inconsequential part of the play phenomenon.

Caillois's work continues this mode of policing. If gambling is a morally dubious activity for some, then the bloody and sordid affair of warfare is as well. As I described in more detail in chapter 2, Caillois's worked

hard to disambiguate forms of play that he felt were constructive from those he felt were corrupted. Just as the police discipline citizens as they divide and judge whether their behavior is criminal, Caillois's work polices the concept of play itself. In making a case for how war functions as a game, Caillois adds a caveat to war's most brutal and amoral characteristics. War is a game, Caillois (2001) argues, but when brutal, it is play that has been corrupted:

Various restrictions on violence fall into disuse. Operations are no longer limited to frontier provinces, strongholds, and military objectives. They are no longer conducted according to a strategy that once made war itself resemble a game. War is far removed from the tournament or duel, i.e. from regulated combat in an enclosure, and now finds its fulfillment in massive destruction and the massacre of entire populations. (Caillois 2001, 55)

Play arrests some players, while others get to hand out tickets. Play is not necessarily voluntary for those it objectifies. Caillois's awareness of this is visible in his remarks that brutal moments of war are a "corrupted" form of competition. While Huizinga reserved that moments of grotesque and extreme warfare ceased to be play (Huizinga 1980, 9), Caillois recovers a conversation about play and games free of what he considered arbitrary delineations about what could not be play in Huizinga's work, such as between gambling and non-gambling. The victims of war do not volunteer. Nor

does the object of abuse in “Hide the Switch.” In both examples, play has turned grizzly and corrupt. Although there have been attempts to make the violence of play invisible, I argue that it is important to recognize how the rhetoric of play polices what is and is not considered a game. When we neglect what Caillois refers to as the corrupt aspects of play, we participate in policing that removes BIPOC from the discourse around play and games.

Play Is a Subject–Object Relationship

In this chapter, I have deliberately invoked the language of policing and to some extent, discipline in an effort to subvert a commonsense understanding of play as voluntary. Play is voluntary, but only to the players who initiate the experience. Play polices, it arrests, and it captures others on a whim. By theorizing play as a relationship to captivity, we might begin to make space for people who previously have been victims of one of play’s cruel games.

This chapter has been an attempt to justify three premises that lead to the conclusion that play is a subject–object relationship. I argue that play is voluntary for the player but not the played. Play is a way of being in the world rather than an activity. Together, these stances lead us to the understanding that play is not necessarily voluntary for the played. One concern that

one might have at this point is that the played does not necessarily occupy an object position; therefore, play is not necessarily a subject–object relationship. For example, if both participants in tag willingly engage one another in the game, play is then a subject–subject relationship and therefore a consensual relationship.

This counterexample is important because it highlights a simple way that my argument can be misunderstood. I am not arguing that either player in this example loses a sense of subjectivity (or an ability to consent) when played with. I am instead arguing that neither characteristic necessarily defines play. Toward my desire to repair play, it is necessary to locate play as not necessarily a relationship that inherently invokes consent. When we play, we transform others and the world around us into play-objects. The destructive and violent aspects of play emerge from this transformation and must be contended with if we are to understand the term.

The definition of play as a subject–object relationship leaves us with a new paradox to contend with. If play is a subject–object relationship, how should one reconcile their own subjective experience with the fact that through play they will be treated as an object? To answer this question of what it means to objectify one’s self, we must turn to philosophy concerned with the phenomenon of double consciousness and the Black experience.

Perhaps the metaphor of policing will be enough to make the theory in this chapter intriguing to designers.

So much of play theory today imagines play as a form of freedom, and this chapter encourages us to imagine it as the opposite. Did you think play was fun? It can be torture! Did you think play was freedom? It's captivity, arrest. I reiterate these points because they allow designers the creative freedom to design against the muscular power fantasies that characterize so many games today. As the cultural crises we contend with here in America remind us, a White person's freedom is a Black person's death sentence. This is America, after all.

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