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Poetry is for everyone:

A comparative analysis of the cut-up
technique, Magnetic poetry and the casual
word game Words of Oz

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ABSTRACT

Language is a system that fundamentally influences us as human beings. There are numerous schools of thought critiquing our use of language and celebrating attempts to break free of the control it has over our lives. In that perspective a transformative play with language can be seen as critical play, and a game design approach supporting this kind of play can be defined as critical. The cut-up technique is an aleatory literary technique invented by the Dadaists in the 1920s. It was the fundamental lack of belief in society and language that gave birth to the cut-up method. Mary Flanagan includes it in her book “Critical Play: Radical Game Design” as part of the critical game-design paradigm.

The singer-songwriter Dave Kapell invented Magnetic Poetry in the early 90s inspired by the cut-up technique and how artists such as William Burroughs and David Bowie used in their work.

I am a co-founder of Ozma Games – a game studio based in Malmö, Sweden. In Ozma we are working on a social word game called Words of Oz. Magnetic Poetry inspired us in the design of Words of Oz, as we wanted to make a casual game that could evoke players’ creativity.

The Dadaists clearly wanted to challenge the way we use language. In this essay I will compare the Dadaist cut-up method with its later adaptations Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz. My question is whether the critical design approach is sustained in Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz or if the change in technology and framing has limited the subversive potential from which they originated.

Keywords

Cut-up technique, Dadaism, Surrealism, word games, transformative play, critical play, poetry games, Magnetic Poetry, Words of Oz

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
Description	5
<i>The cut-up technique</i>	5
<i>Magnetic Poetry</i>	6
<i>Words of Oz</i>	7
Theoretical Framework	9
<i>Designing for Play</i>	9
<i>Language as an emergent systems</i>	9
<i>Play of Meaning</i>	10
<i>Transformative play</i>	11
<i>Critical play</i>	12
<i>Critique of Language</i>	13
<i>Critique of games as a medium</i>	14
<i>Open systems with room for creativity</i>	15
Method	16
<i>Practicalities</i>	18
Analysis	19
<i>Open-ended system design</i>	19
Creative goal	21
Non-judging of outcome	21
Summary	22
<i>Critical play with language</i>	22
Word selection	23
Summary	23
<i>Technology, playfield and context for play</i>	23
Cutting up newspapers	24
Refrigerators – the centre of the home	25
Making it digital	25
Summary	26
<i>Intention and context of creation</i>	27
Dadaist anti-art	27
Singer-song writer becoming entrepreneur	27
Ozma of Oz	28
Summary	28
Discussion	29
Conclusion	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY	31

INTRODUCTION

It was Tristan Tzara an influential French-Romanian avant-garde poet, who originally concocted the cut-up technique and published it in the end of 1920 as part of “dada manifesto on feeble love and bitter love” under the sub-title “TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM”. (Elger 2004, p.13) The manifesto was written two years after World War I ended – a war that deeply affected the artists of the Dadaist as well as the Surrealist movement. They were strongly disillusioned by the war and rejected bourgeois society. In the attempt to find an alternative way of thinking they turned to the ideas of the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and initiated a radical critique of reason – which they believed, together with bourgeois values, had brought the conflict of the war upon the world. They used playful provocations, performances, manifestos and frequently games as part of their exploration of chance, irrationality and intuition in order to rebel against the bourgeoisie.

Many artists were later inspired by the cut-up method and its invitation of randomness into the creative process. One of them was William Burroughs who discovered it 1959 in Paris through his friend Brion Gysin. He went on to experiment with the technique all through the 60s. David Bowie in his turn came across the cut-up method in the early 70s after reading Burroughs’ novel *Nova Express*. He tried it in his own song lyrics and later stated that it perfectly suited his own fragmented consciousness, and also enabled him to cut through the tangle of expectations (Savage 2013).

In the early 90s Dave Kapell, a songwriter from Minneapolis, happened to watch a documentary about David Bowie in which he talked about how he used the cut-up method. As Kapell was suffering from writer’s block he decided to try it out himself. But the use of cut-up paper was a problem because of Kapell’s allergies. Every time he sneezed the paper bits would fly around the room. To prevent this he glued the words to thin magnets, which later ended up on his fridge. As friends came around and started rearrange the word magnets on his fridge, as well as asking to get their own kits, Kapell realized he had invented something new. He made a hundred kits and tried to sell them on at local craft fair. It was so successful that he went on to found a company in 1993, which today has sold millions of Magnetic poetry kits. (Ward 2003) The cut-up technique was in this way popularized and made accessible to the general public.

Ozma is a small game company based in Malmö, Sweden that I founded in 2006 together with Bobbi A. Sand. Since the start Bobbi and I wanted to work with games in a new way, focusing on game design more than a specific technology. Our main interest was in play rather than games, and we found it particularly interesting to take topics not yet associated with games and use them to come up with new types of gameplay. Probably it was the fact that we did not come from gamer backgrounds that made us freer in our interpretation of what a game could or should be. During our explorations around games and creativity I had the idea of making a poetry game. Bobbi had used Magnetic poetry as inspiration for a project during her education in Interaction Design and we both liked the idea of coming up with a game mechanic that was based around the concept of words and forming phrases. What came out of this process was a board game that had a nice idea but simply didn’t work well enough, so we ended up putting it on the shelf. This was in 2007 - the same year as the first iPhone came out.



Figure 1: Concept art from Words of Oz

In the following years Casual and Social games exploded in popularity. They revolutionized the market for games and completely changed the ideas of how we play. Word Games soon became a popular subcategory within this area of games with titles such as Bookworm (PopCap Games, 2003) and Words with Friends (Zynga, 2009). More often than not, these games resemble crosswords or use typing as the main gameplay challenge. There have been few attempts to make creative word games for a mainstream audience.

In 2012 Bobbi and I decided to make a digital game out of our old poetry game idea. We called the game Words of Oz using Oz as a reference to our company name Ozma. The game is still in production and is scheduled to come out in 2014.

Description

The cut-up technique

Tristan Tzara gave the following instructions for the cut-up technique:

“To make a Dadaist poem:

Take a newspaper.

Take some scissors.

Choose from this paper an article the length you want to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Next carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag.

Shake gently.

Next take out each cutting one after the other.

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.

And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.”

(Brotchie 1995, p.36)

Magnetic Poetry

Magnetic Poetry comes in little tin boxes that include 200 - 300 magnets.

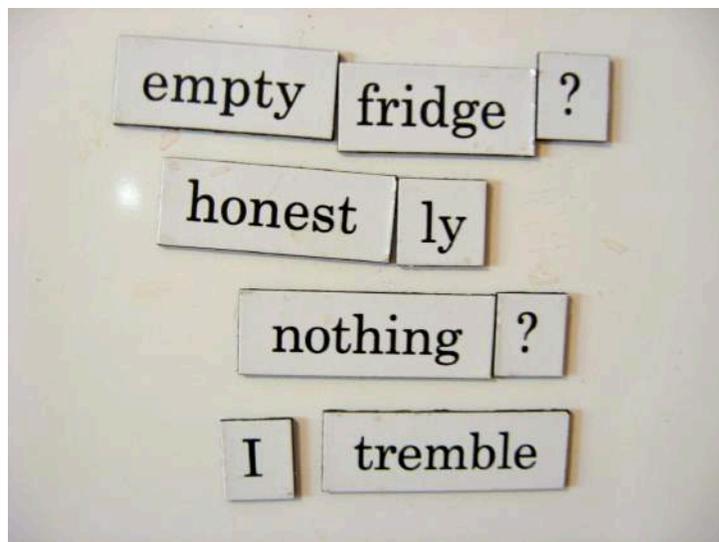
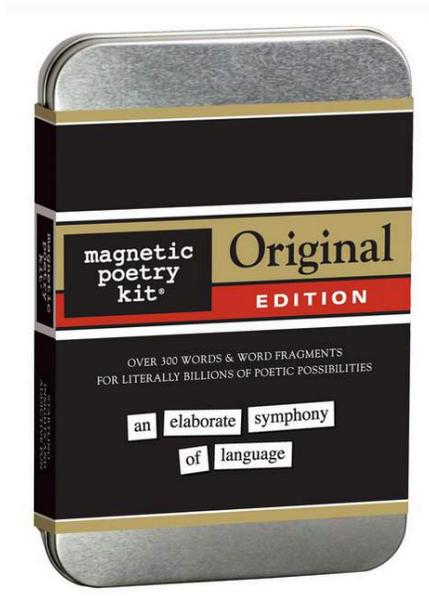


Figure 2: Original Magnetic Poetry kit and a fridge poem

Words of Oz

Words of Oz is a cross-platform casual game made in HTML5. It can be played in the web browser and as an app on IOS and Android tablets. Players create an account and login to the game.



Figure 3: Screen shot of login page

The game can be played as single player or turn-based. The player can have unlimited game sessions active at the same time. Finished games are saved in the Game Archive.

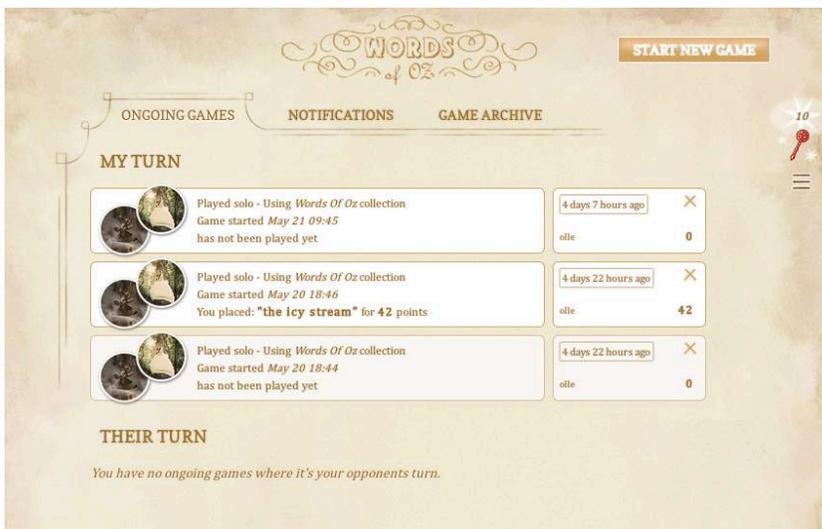


Figure 4: Screen shot of the lobby screen

In the beginning of the game session the player receives twenty words to play with. These can be used to form phrases that are placed on the game board. In two-player mode both players share the same game board, but not the same words.



Figure 4: Screen shot of the game screen

The players can buy new collections of words and images to play with.



Figure 5: Screen shot of shop

It took several iterations before the game-play fell into place. Both Bobbi and I worked on the design of the game. My role has been as Game Designer, Creative Director and Producer of the game.

Theoretical Framework

Designing for Play

In my professional career as a game designer I have always been interested in not just games, but the broader field of play. So what is *Play*? Anthropologist and well-known play-researcher Brian Sutton-Smith defined play as an activity that is fun, voluntary, intrinsically motivated, incorporates free choices/free will, offers escape, and is fundamentally exciting. In order to more fully understand how play manifests itself Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen in their book *Rules of Play* go on to divide the concept of play into three categories: Game Play, Ludic Activities and Being Playful, where the three categories are successively more inclusive. As a common definition to all three categories they suggest Play as free movement within a more rigid structure (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.311).

The three frameworks that I will study in this essay - the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and the casual game Words of Oz – I define as systems designed for play. The designed frameworks or “rigid structure” they offer are slightly different from each other, but all share the same core elements; the word-objects that should be put together to form phrases with the goal of constructing a poem. Although it’s only Words of Oz that can be strictly defined as a game, all three designs have the purpose of evoking play with language.

Language as an emergent system

To get a deeper understanding of what makes a framework for play successful, I feel it’s important to take a look at the characteristics of such a system. My experience as a designer has taught me that it’s easy to fail in the attempt to design for play. There is a delicate balance between designing actions that will influence the result of the game in ways that players can comprehend, and making the outcome too predictable. If players can’t understand what will happen when they take action in the game, it will feel too random. But on the other hand, if the result is too obvious or not interesting enough, there is no motivation for players to go on. If they already know who will win, why bother playing it to the end?

Unpredictability is a result of an emergent system. Emergence comes from a level of complexity that makes it too hard for anyone to foresee every possibility. A set of rules is combined in a way that it gives a lot of variations in outcome. (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.158) One could argue that if a person’s level of mental ability is extremely high, they could be able to predict more outcomes in a game, and therefore there is no exact definition of when emergence occurs. Never the less, there will come a point when no one, genius or not, can tell what’s going to happen when a system is put into motion.

Language is an emergent system. There are words and rules in the form of grammar, but the ways in which the words can be together are endless - giving rise to everything from senseless gibberish to amazing literature. Words put together in new, interesting ways will surprise and inspire us. This is what makes language a perfect system for play. Language can therefore successfully be used as a foundation to build other game systems on top of. This is what the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz are all about – they are systems designed to interact with language.

Play of Meaning

“Game play takes place within a representational universe, filled with depictions of objects, interactions, and ideas out of which a player makes meaning.” (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.364)

In *Rules of Play*, Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen frame games as the Play of Meaning. This means that playing a game is the same as interacting with representations. The players try to make sense of the representations within the cognitive frame the game sets up and quickly learn how to understand and manipulate their behavior (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.370). A seemingly meaningless geometric shape, that would have no value outside a game, can prove to be the most important last piece of a puzzle, which placed correctly will reward the player generously. This infusion of meaning into an otherwise meaningless object is pretty straightforward. The object is a sign that gains its meaning when it's interpreted within a specific context. But often games use signs that already have a meaning outside of the game context. The heart is a well-known symbol that signifies the blood-pumping organ in our bodies, but it also culturally connotes the emotion of love. Over the years hearts in games have come to signify the lives players can use up before they reach Game Over. Hearts in the cognitive frame of a game then means something else than outside of it. This shouldn't cause any problems, as long as the cognitive frame is clear. For game designers it is actually the safe way to go, to use well established symbols that already have been defined within a game context, and have a rather neutral meaning outside of it. Interesting things happen though, when representations in a game have many layers of meaning that will “bleed” into the game. Using words as signs in a game system has this quality. The words may simply represent building blocks in the framework of a game, which players can use to build patterns that will score them points. But at the same time the words still carry their established meaning within the everyday language – a different system of representations and meaning. The two cognitive frames - the one of the game and the one of language - interact with each other, and may oppose one another. There is a tension or even a struggle going on between the cognitive frames inside the player's mind.

Take the game of Scrabble (Hasbro Inc. 1999). In Scrabble letters are game objects on a game board grid and players connect them to form words. The actual meaning of the created words, in the context of the game, is irrelevant; they only represent a correct sequence of letters (according to how the word is spelled) that will score the player points. But players can themselves play with the meaning and construct words that together form sentences. It won't give them extra points, even on the contrary players may even consciously choose words that will score them a lower amount of points, just out of the pleasure of making a meaningful sentence.

This tension between game systems and language lies at the core of many word games. It's hard to predict how players will react to this tension, since the cognitive frame of language seems to be much stronger with some people than with others. This is illustrated by the controversy that went on in the American Scrabble community in 1993. There was a campaign initiated to make Hasbro remove racial and ethnic slurs from the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary (OSPD). Hasbro announced that any offensive words should be removed from the OSPD, but when this happened a big part of the community went ballistic and accused Hasbro of censorship. The players, which included people from ethnic minorities who might have felt offended by the words that were to be removed, explained that inside Scrabble these words didn't mean anything. They were just a

sequence of letters that happened to be defined as a word. (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.43)

In the Dadaist cut-up method, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz, the cognitive framework of language is embraced but also challenged. All three methods play with the level of randomness used in how phrases are formed, as oppose to the conscious choices made by players.

A limited number of words used for constructing phrases is the common feature between the three methods. When using the cut-up method players decide themselves on the number of words depending on the length of the newspaper article they choose to cut-up. The number of words cut-up should be equal to the number of words in the poem created. When it comes to Magnetic Poetry the number of words is limited by the number of magnets in the set (two to three hundred) or the number of magnets placed on the fridge at the time. In Words of Oz the player always gets twenty words in the beginning of a game, but new words can be bought or swapped.

The rules or instructions around how the player should treat the words are somewhat different between the methods. The cut-up method instructs the player to randomly put the words together (drawn out of a bag) to form a poem, although it is questioned if total randomness is the preferred method to form the Dadaist poem. Tzara himself didn't seem to follow this instruction. The example he quoted of a poem that came out of the method was: "When the dogs cross the air in a diamond like the ideas and the process of the meninges shows the hour of the awakening of a programme...", (Elger 2004, p.13) a sentence that has some randomness to it, but was hardly put together out of complete chance. The conclusion therefore is that players have at least some freedom in rearranging the words according to their wishes. This would be similar to how the words are treated in Magnetic Poetry. Players have complete freedom in arranging the words by moving them around on the fridge. Although another family member, or even the family pet, might come around and change the positions of the words at any moment, leaving each player with less control of the outcome. Lastly in Words of Oz players can make any phrase they want, but under the influence that there are possibilities to score a higher amount of points if certain words are used.

The cognitive frame of language and its qualities of emergence is embraced in all the three designs, leaving it up to the player to formulate phrases that have meaning to them. But contradictory to this, the words are at the same time treated as objects that can be manipulated in a way that challenge the frame of language. In the cut-up method and in Magnetic Poetry the words can be placed upside down or twisted in a funny angle. In Words of Oz words give points even if they are not placed in a way that make sense in terms of meaning. None of the methods offers a way to validate grammar or to determine whether the poems created can be understood by anyone.

The play with meaning that occurs when the cognitive frame of language is mixed up with the cognitive frame of a game can lead to either the game system or the language system being challenged. Play that challenges a structure is called *transformative play*.

Transformative play

Play is in its nature unpredictable. After a ball is put into motion it's hard to tell what's going to happen next. Even though it is the rule system that enables play, it happens that play overtakes the system. This is very common and natural in children's play where the

rules are constantly transformed to fit the player's wishes. Players can get carried away in play and suddenly the ball is thrown into a window. A window smashing game could now begin if no one decides to put an end to the mischief. Zimmerman and Salen define this as Transformative Play. The power of play can transform the underlying system and a new playfield is established. This happens in all types of games; first person shooters as well as in hopscotch. But the possibility for transformation doesn't end there. The term transformative play is also used for play that transforms the players themselves – their way of thinking, acting or feeling.

From a designer's perspective this phenomenon is either a blessing or a nightmare. The nightmare scenario happens if players completely ruin the game, or if they are hurt by it. Although how transformative play is interpreted varies depending on perspective. A cyberfeminist game patch that creates transsexual versions of Lara Croft can be seen from the developer's perspective as damaging the Tomb Raider trademark (and ruining the male heterosexual fantasy). At the same time some players and game critics celebrated it (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.305). As a designer (and as a company) you have the option of trying to suppress transformative play or to encourage it.

A game system can be designed with the expectation of transformative play occurring. This depends of course on the intention of the game designer. Within the field of Serious Games this is the clear designer intention often with a goal of bringing awareness to a specific topic.

The motivations for both players and designers to engage with transformative play can be driven by political agendas (as in the case with the cyberfeminists), or it can become political if playing the game in some way challenges a power structure. The term transformative play therefore has a close relationship to the term *critical play*.

One way to determine whether a game design is critical is to figure out if it enables transformative play and to look at if there are any power structures that can be challenged by the transformative play.

Critical play

“Critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternatives to popular play spaces.” (Flanagan 2013, p.6)

In her book *Critical Play*, artist and game designer Mary Flanagan explores artistic games which in some ways challenge the norm through Subversion, Disruption and Intervention. *Subversion* means to overturn, upset or overthrow a law, rule or a whole system and to unveil the power relationship behind it (Flanagan 2013, p.10). Subversive acts have the potential to trigger social change, and the term is used in this context to mean a creative act rather than a destructive one.

Intervention is a subversive act. To intervene is “to interfere with the outcome or course especially of a condition or process” (Merriam-Webster 2014). An example is when performance artists occupy public spaces. In this way the border between art and everyday life is transcended. (Flanagan 2013, p.11)

The term *disruption* is used in “Disruption-Innovation” theory, meaning innovations that become paradigm shifting. Disruptive thinking is associated with radical creativity and stepping outside of your safety zone. (Flanagan 2013, p.12)

Games and other ludic activities all have a rule system that can be disrupted, pushed or broken. Cheating may not be subversive in it self, but breaking rules to invent new ones, or to influence players to go in a new direction, can be an subversive act and is closely linked to Zimmerman and Salen’s term Transformative Play. The difference may lie in *what* is motivating the players to cause the disruption. If the act of playing outside of the rules is in itself a more or less conscious statement of freedom, against a system with oppressive characteristics, then the play becomes critical. A game system can be used to lead player into critical play that challenges external systems outside of the game’s context. A game can also be designed to reflect back on to itself with the aim of criticizing the controlling character of its own algorithms.

To determine if a specific game design has a critical approach we can look to see whether it embraces methods of subversion, intervention and disruption. The intention behind the design and the context of play it offers can also help to determine whether it is part of a critical design paradigm.

Critique of Language

The cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz are all based around playing with language. The theory of language is a vast area which is outside of the scope of this essay, but in order to understand critical play in word games I want to touch very briefly on some theories and philosophies of language that are relevant for my study.

The Dadaists were in their days very suspicious of language. They came to believe that language signified nothing and could be easily manipulated and was thus tainted with ideology. They wanted to resist the bourgeois capitalist society’s prevalent belief in reason and logic, which they were convinced had led to the First World War. The only way out was to embrace chaos and irrationality. (Alexandrian 1985, p. 30)

Structuralism – an academic movement that started in France in the early 60s adopted the idea of language as a self-referential system that doesn’t signify anything outside of itself. There is no ‘Truth’ behind the words outside of the meaning that we ourselves give to language. The important realization that the Structuralists put forward was that structures underlie all the things that we humans think, do, perceive, and feel.

Critical Theory is a school of thought linked to Structuralism and Post-structuralism through the belief that we have the power to change the meaning we give to words and that by doing so we will affect the way we see ourselves and the society. Neo-Marxism and Feminism are examples of critical theories concerned with the oppressive forces in language. Associate Professor in Communication and Culture Robert M. Seiler writes in relation to Neo-Marxist theory:

“[...]communication practices are an outcome of the tension between individual creativity in framing messages and the social constraints on that creativity. Thus, only when individuals are free to express themselves with clarity and reason will liberation occur.” (Seiler 2006)

William Burroughs who used the cut-up technique extensively, had his own theory of the method. His idea was that "word and image locks" control the mind, that is, "lock" us into conventional patterns of perceiving, thinking, and speaking that determine our interactions with environment and society. The cut-up technique is a method of exposing word and image controls and thus freeing oneself from them, an alteration of consciousness that occurs in both the writer and the reader of the text. (Skerl, Lydenberg 1991, p. 213)

If we see language as an oppressive system, does that make all word games critical? I would argue no, because not all word games give room for transformative play. A game such as Scrabble doesn't really do much to challenge language as a system. The National Scrabble Association (NSA) created The Official Scrabble Players Dictionary (OSPD) (Merriam-Webster, 2005) in response to a need for an official word authority. If you have a club or run a tournament that is sanctioned by the NSA you can only score words that are in the OSPD. This gives very little freedom to play around with words. They either exist or they don't – all vagueness is removed. Of course such a game system makes it easier for players to avoid any grey zone that would cause a fight, but it also clearly puts a lid on creative freedom. To encourage transformative play then creative freedom is needed, and without transformative play there is no critical play.

Language is a system that fundamentally influences us as human beings. There are numerous schools of thought critiquing our use of language and celebrating attempts to break free of the control it has over our lives. In that perspective a transformative play with language can be seen as critical play, and a game design approach supporting this kind of play can be defined as critical.

Critique of games as a medium

Game theorist Alexander Galloway writes in his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* about video games as information control. The difference between digital games and other ludic activities is that the underlying system is written in code – hiding the mechanism from the players. Algorithms rule the player's actions. To win a game means to internalize its logic without being conscious of it. Players are in this way played by the game, or in other words; they are manipulated by it.

In order to make the transcoding of something into a game, decisions regarding triggers and scoring conditions need to be made by a game designer, and then coded by a programmer. Everything needs to be captured and quantified. Any vagueness is likely to cause trouble. The goal is to leave the complexities of real life outside the magic circle and invite players to experience a representation that is simplified to the extent that it gives meaning to play.

"Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection." (Huizinga 1971, p.10)

Galloway argues that this results in game designers reducing or limiting situations, interactions or relationships that in lived life have a diachronic meaning negotiated between people. Even though there is a metacommunication going on in games that makes it clear for players that they are "only playing" and not doing the act for real, the internalization of the game's rule system can be problematic. Galloway writes,

“A game’s celebration of the end of ideological manipulation is also a new manipulation, only this time using wholly different diagrams of command and control.” (Galloway 2006, p.106)

Ian Bogost argues in his book *Persuasive Games* that games are a form of procedural representations that are very useful for rhetorical purposes. Only procedural systems, such as games or computer software, represent process with process. Thus they have a native ability to make people to go along with the protocol. Learning by doing, so to say. Even if you’re not actually driving a real car, you may follow the representational actions and consequences of driving a car in a racing game like *Gran Turismo* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 1998). Games have a unique possibility to make claims about *how things work*. But as Bogost writes,

“[...]videogames are not expressions of the machine. They are expressions of being human. And the logic that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become.” (Bogost 2010, p.340)

Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter even go as far as stating in their book *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* that video games simulate the normalized subjectivity of a global capitalist order. They use the term “subjectivation” coined by Michel Foucault to describe how a player-subject is formed by the subject position of games disguised as a free play space. The refusal to go along with this process they call Counterplay – another word for critical play (Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter 2009, p.191). Players can choose to resist the dominant message encoded in a game (playing to lose) or produce alternative ways to play the game by changing its code.

If all digital games have an unavoidable tendency towards manipulation imbedded in their deepest core simply because they are made up by algorithms, how can this be counterbalanced by the design choices of a game?

A critical game design approach needs to take into consideration that digital games in particular use information control that can lead into manipulation of the players.

Open systems with room for creativity

Systems can be open or closed. Whether a system is open is determined by if it has an exchange with its environment. Framing games as rule systems means that they are closed systems – the rules and objects of the game have relationships with each other, but no exchange is taking place with the context outside of the game. If games are framed as experimental systems - which include the players – they are both open and closed. If the players would act exactly according to the rules and if everything else going on with them, which are not strictly defined by the game, is ignored - then they are closed systems. (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.53) But as players are humans and not robots, it is hard to ignore that the world outside the game will find its way in. If we look at games as cultural systems they are open, because this puts games as part of the larger context of culture where meaning is exchanged from inside the game out and from the outside world into the game. Games can be designed in ways to more or less embrace this exchange.

Open game systems are designed to offer players opportunities to participate in larger systems of cultural production. (Zimmerman, Salen 2003, p.539) This is done through the enabling and supporting of player-driven creativity. The game *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) is a famous example of a game which is based around the player’s freedom to create. The

game design is centered on giving good building tools for the players to discover and use, and it leaves it up to the players to make the decisions on what to do with them. They may build things that are worthless or destructive (like digging a hole you can't get out of), but with enough players that have the creative drive to make useful and meaningful things, magic happens and the game world will soon be enriched far beyond what any designers could have dreamed up on their own. To design an open system game is to create a rule system which is still well defined but which leaves even larger spaces for emergence. Less rigidity causes vulnerabilities in the system to be left open, meaning that the game doesn't cover for all the possible player actions to have a meaningful outcome – leaving players to become more responsible for their own actions.

Even though open-ended systems are written in code and have algorithms that control the player's actions, they are more permissive in the sense that they don't judge the players actions. Players can of course still make mistakes according to the rules of the game, but they are not punished or restricted in the way that they would be in a more closed system. This makes them very open to transformative play.

In a critical game design approach a way to counterbalance the information control that is inevitably part of all digital games, is to design an open system with creative goals that leaves room for a player's creativity without judging the result.

Method

MDA is a formal approach to understanding games, which is developed by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubek. MDA stands for: Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics. (Hunicke, LeBlanc, Zubek 2004, p.2)

Mechanics describes the particular components of the game, at the level of data representation and algorithms.

Dynamics describes the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and each others' outputs over time.

Aesthetics describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system.

Seen from a designer's perspective, the mechanics give rise to dynamic system behavior, which in turn leads to particular aesthetic experiences. To break down a game design in this way helps to trace the game-play experience back to the choices made by its designer. As an example let's take the game Sissyfight 2000 (Word Magazine, 2000) – a turn-based strategy game about a group of vicious little girls having a fight in the schoolyard. The mechanics are the rules and the components of the game, as well as the criteria for winning (which is really part of the rules). In the case of Sissyfight the players can use four attack-actions (“scratch”, “grab”, “tease” and “tattle on everyone”) and two defense-actions (“cower” and “lick your lolly”) and they each have ten hearts, which are their “self-esteem points”. The goal of the game is to eliminate each other's self-esteem until only one or two players are left standing. The players have a certain time to choose an action for each round. When the time is up the actions are revealed and the result is calculated.

If this was all there was to it, the dynamics of the game would be a bit limited. An important part of the mechanics of the game, is the possibility to send in-game chat messages to each other. This part of the game mechanics results in the players forming alliances and coordinating their moves - a vital part of the game. Based on this game dynamic the aesthetic experience given to the players is one of social tension, excitement, disappointment and a sort of harsh humor, which is reinforced by the graphical appearance of the game.



Figure 7: Screen shot of Sissyfight 2000

Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen use the term Transformative play to describe play which has the power to transform either the game system or the players themselves. In order to figure out whether a game design can give rise to a transformative aesthetic experience the MDA approach can be used to go back and look at the mechanics and dynamics of the game. A way to conclude whether the mechanics and the dynamics support a transformative aesthetic experience is to determine if they are part of an open-ended system. The reason for this is that open-ended systems strongly support transformative play.

Critical play is a form of transformative play. There is no formal distinction between the two of them more than that the term critical play used by Mary Flanagan puts emphasis on the phenomena of subversion, intervention and disruption (Flanagan 2013, p.10). Nick Dyer-Witthof and Greig de Peuter also look for signs of subversion and dissonance when they give examples of critical play (which they call "Counterplay") (Dyer-Witthof, de Peuter 2009, p.191).

A transformative play with language can be seen as critical play based on the notion that language can be oppressive - it has the power to control the way we see the world and express ourselves. Playing outside the rules of language is a disruptive form of self-expression.

Now coming back to my research question; whether the critical design approach of the original cut-up technique is sustained in Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz, I will start by breaking down these designs and do a comparative analysis of them based on the MDA approach. The aim is to determine if the design choices support a critical play with language.

Other important design choices when making a game are which technology to use, where the game should be played and who should play it. I therefore chose to broaden the analysis to include these aspects of the design, in order to figure out if they have strengthened or undermined the critical design approach.

In order to place the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz in a larger historical and economical context I have also chosen to look at the artists or designers behind the concept and what inspired them to come up with the idea in the first place.

In short I will do a comparative analysis of the following things:

- Game design (Mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics)
- Technology (material and medium used)
- Playfield (where is the game played)
- Context of play (target group and accessibility)
- Context of conception (intention behind the design)

My intention is to look for signs of subversion, intervention and disruption implied by the design choices made, in order to link them to a critical game design paradigm.

Practicalities

My approach to the analysis is mostly text-based. I will start by making an interpretation of the mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics as well as the technology and playfield by reading through the following things:

- The written instructions by Tristan Tzara “To make a Dadaist Poem”
- The text and images from the website *magneticpoetry.com*
- The Design Document for Words of Oz

The aim is to break the designs down into a format that is easily comparable. When I have found this format I will go on to do the comparative analysis.

In order to get more information about the inventors behind the cut-up technique and Magnetic poetry I will read interviews with Dave Kapell as well as accounts of the Dadaist movement.

Analysis

Open-ended system design

Game systems are formal structures that create gameplay. In this analysis I will start by looking at the mechanics and dynamics of the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz. I have broken down the mechanics in these parts:

- Components
- Rules
- Goal
- Reward system

As a designer these are the overall things that I will need to consider when I design a game. When these are in place the next level is to go deeper into the design and determine every detail around scoring and error handling. In this analysis I will not go deep into the details. The goal is to analyze the core design of these systems. This also mean that when it comes to Words of Oz I will leave out the parts of the game that are not directly linked to the core game-play.

Table 1: Core mechanics

	Cut-up technique	Magnetic Poetry	Words of Oz
Core game-play components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspaper article • Scissors • Paper pieces with words on them • Bag • Surface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rectangular shaped magnets with words or word fragments on them • A fridge door or another surface made of steel or iron 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rectangles with words on them • Game boards consisting of patterns of empty squares, circular picture tiles and bonus clouds • Workspace area
Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cut-up the news-paper • Place the words in a bag and draw words one at the time • Make phrases by placing the words together on the surface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place the magnets on the fridge • Arrange the words into phrases by placing them together • Use word fragments to change word endings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 words are given in the beginning of a game and placed on the player's workspace • Words on the workspace can be moved around freely • On the game board words can only be placed

			<p>within marked paths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When a path is full a phrase can be submitted • Words have word classes and categories • Picture tiles have related words as an attribute
Goal	Make a poem	Make a poem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fill out the game board • Win the game • Make a poem
Reward system	None	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players score by submitting phrases • Each word in a phrase give points • Bonus points can be scored by using related words or words that fulfill the bonus criteria • XP points is given in the end of the game • Leveling up rewards the player with Besoz – the internal currency

In the table above it is clear that the most complex rule system of the compared examples is the one of Words of Oz. Being the only digital game in the study this is not surprising. Players don't need to remember the rules that are encoded into a digital game. The player will find out about the rules by interacting with the game and receiving feedback. The cut-up technique and Magnetic Poetry are both analogue frameworks and have very few rules. They also lack reward systems. This is the reason why they are not fulfilling the criteria to be strictly defined as games. I will leave the question behind whether these

systems are strictly games or not and go on to examine whether they are open-ended systems, with the goal to determine if they encourage transformative play.

Creative goal

Zimmerman and Salen define open game systems as systems designed to afford players the opportunity to participate in larger systems of cultural production. This can be achieved by giving the players creative goals. The cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz share the same creative goal: players should make a poem. “To make a Dadaist poem” (Brotchie 1995, p.36) is the title Tristan Tzara gave the method of cut-up in his manifesto “dada manifesto on feeble love and bitter love”. In the case of Magnetic Poetry the name together with the tagline: “Magnets That Reveal The Poet Within” (Magnetic Poetry, 2014), should be enough to convince players of the idea behind these fridge magnets. In the end of a session of Words of Oz - at the point when the player has filled out a game board – the player have the option to “Make a poem”. This is stated on a button that will lead them into a process where they get to rearrange the phrases from the game board into a poem that can be saved and published on social media.

Non-judging of outcome

A closed system can be described as a system that handles all possible outcomes. All actions are strictly governed by rules to avoid any confusion or misinterpretations. An open system allows for players make the interpretations of outcomes themselves. The only judgment provided by the cut-up technique as stated by Tristan Tzara is at the end of the instructions he states: “The poem will be like you. And there you are - an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.” (Brotchie 1995, p.36). The Magnetic Poetry framework is equally open (and less sarcastic!) in how the outcome should be interpreted.

The game Words of Oz has a reward system and therefore it does place some judgment on the phrases provided by the players, in order to give them points. All words are given a random amount of points, which is clearly displayed on the top right corner of every word. Words also score extra points if they fulfill the bonus rules as well as the related word criteria. What the game doesn't do is to check the grammar of the phrases players make up. The reward system is also designed to always give the player some points no matter what words are used based on the random amount of points all words are given in the beginning of a game. This gives the players a lot of freedom to decide on which phrases to make, even if the reward system does function as a guideline.

This open-endedness doesn't pose any problems in the case of cut-up and Magnetic Poetry - on the contrary that is what gives them meaning. When it comes to Words of Oz the dynamics are a bit more complicated. Players could accuse the game of encouraging cheating based on the possibility in the game of scoring points using phrases that are gibberish. The design is based around the self-regulating quality of a system that uses the players longing to achieve a semantically meaningful result in a tug of war with their longing for a good score. To further counteract the players longing for good scores rather than a semantically meaningful result, the game produces no high-score list. The possibility to show off, not the score, but the poem created in the end of a game session, using social media, is another strategy to push players to make semantically meaningful phrases without being forced to by the rule system. The mechanics of language is mixed with the mechanics of the game, and it's up to the player to balance the two in order to

have a meaningful experience. In this way the player needs to take the responsibility of her own actions.

Summary

The cut-up method, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz all share a creative goal and give opportunity for players to create freely. This means that they are open-ended systems. Having an open-ended system design poses an aesthetic challenge for Words of Oz because of the dynamics of the rewards system. In order to secure meaningful play, Words of Oz supports self-regulating play rather than a restriction of player creativity. This design choice maintains the possibility for transformative play.

Critical play with language

Critical play has qualities of subversion, intervention or disruption. A critical game design is a design that supports critical play. My aim is to analyze whether the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz support critical play with language.

Based on the summary of the core game play objects of these three systems it is clear that the thing they all share are the word-objects. Let's look closer at these objects.

Table 2: Word-object mechanics

	Cut-up technique	Magnetic Poetry	Words of Oz
Word object's attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word • Shape • Placement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word or word-fragment • Shape • Placement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word • Shape • Placement • Word class • Category • Points
Restrictions in placement	None	None	Can be placed anywhere on the workspace but only on dedicated places on the game board
Selection of words	Determined by the newspaper article which the player has chosen to cut-up	Themed kits are put together by designers	Themed collections are put together by designers

The word-objects are rectangular shaped objects with a word displayed on them. During play the words printed on the objects can be disregarded. There are no rules based on semantic meaning that stop any words from being put together. This means that a person that can't read or write can still play with them. They can be used to build patterns that give meaning based on graphical impressions rather than the understanding of the words

used. This is an important quality, which is contrasted by how we treat words as part of everyday language. Playing around with the word-objects and moving them around freely - not strictly considering their semantic meaning - can lead players into a disruptive use of language. The result can end up being very surprising and funny when the focus is switched back to the semantic meaning of the words. Almost by mistake players can create phrases that end up being very important to them. This is the reason why the Dadaists and artist like Burroughs and Bowie were so fond of the concept. André Breton wrote:

“I madly love everything that adventurously breaks the thread of discursive thought and suddenly ignites a flare illuminating a life of relations fecund in another way.” (Brotchie 1995, p.10)

Word selection

A difference between the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz is the mechanics around how the words are selected. Using the cut-up technique players decide themselves on the article to cut-up and can influence the word selection in this way. When it comes to Magnetic Poetry as well as Words of Oz the words are picked from themed kits or collections compiled by designers. Examples of Magnetic Poetry kits are “Beat Poet”, “Zen” and “Edgar Allan Poet” (Magnetic Poetry 2014). The decision the player makes as to which theme to use, is actually similar to the decision of which article to use for cut-up. An article on a certain topic would produce words that are connected to a certain theme (although the instruction to use a newspaper and not just any type of magazine is guiding the players in a certain direction). In this way the player keeps a certain control over which words to expect regardless of whether they use the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry or Words of Oz. Arguably the choice of letting the players control the word selection could work against the disruptive qualities provided by these frameworks. The words used in play would be familiar to the player and probably of their liking. Magnetic Poetry kits such as “Bacon poet” and “Boobs” (Magnetic Poetry 2014) suggest themes that confirm current oppressive cultural norms, which seems far from subversive forms of play. On the other hand if these familiar words are used in unexpected ways, it could make an even stronger impression on the player – an aesthetic experience that would cause a disruption in their relationship to these words.

Summary

The design of the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz enables players to play around with word-objects in a way that has disruptive qualities because of the tension it brings between semantic meaning and other object attributes. How the words used for play are selected could influence the perception of the outcome, but probably it wouldn't decrease the chances of disruptive play. All the three frameworks embrace a certain amount of randomness and irrationality – a foundation for a critical play with language to occur.

Technology, playfield and context for play

When it comes to technology, playfield and the context for play the cut-up method, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz differ significantly. There is a big jump between paper, magnets and pixels. Since the 1920s many new cheap materials have been introduced, until today when pixels are the favored building blocks. In the 20s, paper was a very accessible material, as it is today. A newspaper and a pair of scissors were all that was needed to produce a Dadaist poem. The problem with paper is that it is ephemeral –

pieces go missing easily and if they aren't glued to anything, they will inevitably end up in the trash bin. Dave Kapell invented Magnetic Poetry in the early 1990s because he was allergic and couldn't have the paper bits flying around the room every time he sneezed. He made the ephemeral paper clippings into something more durable, something that would stick to the surface but not in a permanent way. They needed to stick but be movable, which made magnets the ideal choice. Words of Oz was put into production in the end of 2012, and at this time there was no question about the advantages of a digital production. Although it had once been conceived as a board game, the game wasn't considered feasible until the idea was adapted to become a digital product.

Table 3: Technology, Playfield and Target groups

	Cut-up technique	Magnetic Poetry	Words of Oz
Technology	Paper	Magnets	Digital
Playfield	Table or other convenient surface	Fridge door	Computer and tablet
Target group	Avant-garde artists	Families	Women and men 25-75 years of age

Cutting up newspapers

To use a newspaper as the foundations for cut-up poetry was definitely a devised provocation by the Dadaists, newspapers being the respected channel for rationality and reason in the early 20th century western culture. To cut-up a newspaper and to use the words to express something entirely different than news, goes against the idea that what is said in the newspaper is of high value. Meaning is removed from the sentences produced in the article by the act of cutting out the words and setting them free from their context. The cut-up words stand alone; ready to be put together in infinite variations far from the original purpose. The repurposing of the newspaper and the somewhat violent act of cutting it into pieces are subversive in the sense that it dismantles the status of the newspaper and the authority behind it. The cut-up method celebrates a fearless do-it-yourself attitude that is provocative in the eyes of a suppressive society seeking to control its citizens.

The table or any other convenient surface becomes the playfield for the cut-up technique. The words are drawn out of a bag and arranged on the surface. It can be done in the office, study or at home. Anyone can do it. But do they? Although its accessibility in the choice of technology and play space, the cut-up method is something strongly associated with avant-garde artists and not the general public. Maybe it was the sarcastic remark in the end of Tzara's instructions "And there you are - an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd." (Brotchie 1995 p.36) that didn't appeal to the so-called 'herd' itself. Calling the general public 'vulgar' and suggesting that we have no more intelligence or artistic appreciation than a herd of animals, doesn't help introducing the cut-up technique as something for the public. On the other hand Tzara's remark ridicules the artists themselves as well, by ironically suggesting that they will become "infinitely original authors of charming sensibility" by using chance rather than their own creative skills to produce a poem. In Tzara's text "To make a Dadaist poem" there is a tension between a spontaneous, playful attitude and something

arrogant, if not bitter. Bitter or not the use of newspaper is brilliant, but the act of cutting something up becomes a threshold that only the brave will pass over, which further proves its disruptive qualities.

Refrigerators – the centre of the home

The production of refrigerator magnets exploded in the 70s. They are cheap to produce, and the fridge being at a central position in every home, makes them an ideal channel for promotional messages to reach into the core of the family unit. There are studies that suggest that the popularity of the fridge as a display is due, in large part, to its physical form, with its relatively expansive surfaces, and to its central location in a household. The magnet affords the idiosyncratic arrangement of materials across fridges, and it promotes a fluid structure and movement to these arrangements. (Taylor, Swan, Eardley, Sellen, Hodges, Wood 2006, p.1) They enhance the fridge's role as an interactive surface in the home's everyday affairs. In an article about refrigerator magnets Patricia McLaughlin writes,

“Our refrigerators are little shrines to our household gods. They are picture windows into the American family.” (McLaughlin 1999)

To use the fridge as a playfield is therefore interesting. By transforming the paper clippings into magnets Dave Kapell made it possible for the concept of cut-up to find its way into the everyday lives of ordinary people. There is a world full of kitsch when it comes to fridge magnets – mostly produced with cheap labor in China. Pictures of funny or cute cartoon figures share space with brand logotypes and iconic fragments of famous artworks or buildings picked up at some souvenir shop. Photos of family and friends, lists of grocery shopping, reminders of important meetings – all find their way to the refrigerator door. To introduce a way to create poetry in this space can be seen as an intervention – an injection of highbrow culture into the mainstream. Making an artistic process available to people who wouldn't dream of sitting down to write a poem, is an achievement in itself. The fridge is a shared space for all the family. The word magnets can function as a tool to make family members play around and express something together. The popularity of Magnetic Poetry in the 90s might reflect that need for playful communication, right before social media came and took us all over.

There are negative consequences of manufacturing words into magnets; using cheap labor in China, natural resources and so on. On the positive side comes the possibility of putting a neat package of words into someone's hands, which makes the effort needed for them to create something very small. The readiness of the words as magnets just sitting on the fridge waiting to be played with is a powerful call for interaction. There is almost no threshold to participation. The downside to semi-permanent words though, is simply that they won't change. After the initial interest they might stay untouched for a long time. But just having those phrases once made, sitting there on the fridge, could at least serve as a reminder of a playful, disruptive attitude towards language.

Making it digital

Digital products are today something we take for granted. Pixels can be copied over and over again without any cost involved and without any resources drained. Using software is almost the ideal way to implement complicated game systems without the players having to struggle through thick manuals to understand how they function. Making a game today you need specific reasons not to make it digital, since the advantages are so

overwhelming. Computers, smart phones and tablets have opened up new windows into the everyday lives of a vast amount of people. These windows are connected with each other through the Internet. Using digital technology allows us to reach out and connect people in new and disruptive ways.

The downside of using digital technology is the built in bias towards rationalization that it creates (Galloway 2006, p.103). To make a digital product, the design needs to be defined using algorithms and code. There is no way around it, the design has to be broken down and quantified. Looking at Words of Oz it is clear that this has caused some tension within the system. On the one hand there is a need to analyze outcome in order for the reward system to work, and if the computer should be the judge, there need to be criteria for success or failure that can be quantified. On the other hand Words of Oz provides an open-ended system to support player's creativity that is not quantified. Players score based on which words are used but not *how* they are used. This is a way to get around the problem of rationalization and open up for transformative play. A certain amount of rationalization boosts creativity, because creating within strict limits can be liberating, but too much rationalization will surely kill all will to create. Strategy games and other games that are based on systems that are completely quantified, can of course still be creative on some logical and mathematical level – problem solving is in some sense creative too. But such systems inevitably have to deal with the possibility of manipulating the players.

Words of Oz can be played in the browser and on tablets as an app. This means a playfield that is in need of a device to exist. If players don't have access to a computer or a tablet, they can't play the game. This is excluding everyone who can't afford such a device. This is the downside of using digital technology. In other ways, as with all casual games, the entry level is kept low. The game starts with a tutorial and tries to lead the player smoothly into play. There is no restriction of who can register to play as long as they have a device to play on and an internet connection. An important feature of Words of Oz is that the game can be played turn-based over the net. This makes it possible to share the process of creating of a poem with someone else – a friend or a complete stranger. The sharing of a virtual play space with strangers, who could live anywhere in the world, strengthens the disruptive qualities of the game, which could not have been done without the use of digital technology.

Summary

The cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz have very different approaches to technology, playfield and context of play, but in different ways their unique choices come to their advantage. Cutting up newspapers to use the words for poetry becomes a subversive act in itself, because of the high status given to newspapers – which perfectly fits the Dadaist's purpose to criticize authority and rationality.

Magnetic Poetry is using refrigerators as the playfield, which introduces the artistic process of making poetry right into the everyday lives of families. If the cut-up appeals to avant-garde artists, Magnetic poetry takes the same concept but makes it accessible – disrupting the idea of poetry as something only for intellectual snobs. Although one could argue that using the word “poetry” to frame the outcome of this word play is taking a step back into the highbrow culture out of which the intention was to break free.

Words of Oz is taking advantage of the digital technology by making it possible for player to play together with strangers and friends over the Internet – enabling a collective play space that give room for a shared transformative experience. The game also tries to

counterbalance the rationalization that the digital medium implies by keeping an open-ended structure when it comes to scoring – leaving it up to the players to judge the creative value of their own phrases.

The design of the cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz offers different solutions but they all have ways to support transformative, disruptive and critical play.

Intention and context of creation

Dadaist anti-art

“Dada began not as an art form, but as a disgust” (Alexandrian 1985, p.29) was Tristan Tzara’s definition of the movement he founded. Disgust with a world plagued by war, with boring dogmas, conventions, and the art which did nothing but reflect this limited universe. Dadaism was anti-art. It was born in Switzerland in the height of the First World War, and it came into being as a declaration of the right of fantasy. The Dadaists sought freedom through the *idiotic*. The cut-up technique is conceived in this spirit of mocking and derision. Destroy something to make something new – something seemingly stupid and meaningless. This is something that deeply influenced the Surrealists – another art movement that was born during the same time. “[...] art should be monsters which casts servile minds into terror.” (Alexandrian 1985, p.31), Tzara wrote in a manifesto that attracted the attention of André Breton – the leading figure of the Surrealists. Although the Dadaist and the Surrealist shared many of the same principles, the Surrealist needed an underlying cause. Through the nonsense and the absurd the Surrealists were seeking a different way of being – a dreamlike mind state of heightened sensitivity that Breton called “The Marvelous” (Rabinovitch 2009, p. 5).

The cut-up technique reflects both the Dadaists frustration and buffoonery and the Surrealist striving for awakening the creative mind to explore unknown areas in our consciousness. It is part of an artistic practice which tests the limits of creative freedom and it has served as an inspiration for generations of artists.

Singer-song writer becoming entrepreneur

Dave Kapell describes the invention of Magnetic Poetry almost as an accident. The writer’s block and then the allergy that made him glue words to magnets doesn’t make him sound much like a ruthless entrepreneur whose impetus would be solely financial profit. In an interview Kapell says:

“Poetry doesn't have a lot of pop-culture appeal. But there's just something about ‘words on magnets’ that pulls in a potential poet. That's because Magnetic Poetry isn't intimidating. [...] They're kind of messy in a nice way, and that's part of the appeal of them. You don't have to be intimidated by them. You just sort of walk up and stick your finger in the mess and stir something up.” (Ward 2003)

It is quite clear that Kapell feels for his magnets and that he sees their potential for breaking down barriers to let out peoples creativity.

The company behind Magnetic Poetry has recently moved as much of their production as possible back to the USA from China, as a strategy to fulfill customer’s demands (Schroeder, 2013). If this a cynical strategy to skip the rising labor cost in China and in

the mean time scoring some goodwill in the home market is hard to tell, or if there are some genuinely good intentions behind it.

Magnetic Poetry is a commercial product born out of a spontaneous, messy, artistic process and the concept still carries some of that intention to break free from a creative blockage.

Ozma of Oz

The game industry in 2014 is a very competitive and financially successful business. It is in a state of rapid growth and tumultuous change, driven by new platforms like Facebook, iOS and Steam. One new business model that is increasingly popular has also been subjected to the most ethical questions and criticism — free-to-play (Meade, 2014). By offering free games to people that cunningly get them addicted to playing, and then charging them for extra credits or bonus features, companies are trapping players in a destructive loop where they spend more money than they intended, to advance in the game. This view of a cynical game industry goes well together with Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter harsh political critique in their book “Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games”. They say:

“A media that once seemed all fun is increasingly revealing itself as a school for labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital.” (Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter 2009, p.20)

As a contrast to this exploitative, money-sucking industry they suggest the existence of Dissonant Developers – game developers that produce games that operate against exploitation of the players (Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter 2009, p.194).

Ozma – the company behind Words of Oz – was founded in 2006 and before the production of Words of Oz, the company worked with research projects such as URBLOVE – a project that involved youth from the suburbs of Malmö, as well as skateboarders, to empower them into making their own location-based games using the city as a playground. The company has a background in educational games and games for change. Words of Oz is their first game to be released on the consumer market.

Words of Oz is part of the free-to-play paradigm. The monetization model is mostly based around selling new content to the players. As in the case with Magnetic Poetry it is a commercial product released with the intention to make money. The unusual design statement made by Ozma is to keep the disruptive open-endedness in the system design, which allows for greater player creativity but is making the game vulnerable to critic from players that are driven to score points rather than making meaningful poetry.

Summary

The cut-up technique, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz were all created by people having some sort of artistic vision. Tristan Tzara was an avant-garde artist, Dave Kapell was a songwriter and the founders of Ozma have a background in social innovation. The design choices made are clearly influenced by this and it becomes mostly evident in the open-ended structures they provide – giving room for creativity and transformative play.

Discussion

When I founded Ozma Games together with my friend Bobbi A. Sand in 2006, we called ourselves ‘Ozma’ after a character in L. Frank Baum’s story about the Land of Oz. Princess Ozma is the rightful ruler of Oz but as a little girl she is transformed into a boy called ‘Tip’ by the wicked witch Mombi to prevent her from ascending to the throne. She spends her childhood as a boy with many adventures, but she is eventually transformed back into a woman in time for her to take the throne after the wizard has fallen.

This story somehow became important for Bobbi and me, and it served as a symbol for our endeavors as female game designers and entrepreneurs in the very male dominated game industry. I don’t know if there will ever come a time when we will “ascend to the throne” but our struggle has been to make room for our vision of what a game could be, without getting discouraged by the lack of understanding that we often meet. To make a game about poetry has proven to be not only a laughing matter for some venture capitalists but also something that makes people curious and even puzzled. “This is not really a game”, we often hear people say in the game community, as if that mattered a great deal.

Words of Oz came out of our longing to make something different and a little bit magical – a casual game that would make players feel like they weren’t wasting their time on something unproductive. I can’t say that Ozma has a great deal in common with the artists that were forming the Dadaist movement almost a hundred years ago, but we might share a rebellious need to use play as part of our means of expression. Creativity is closely linked to play and without creativity our society will surely suffer. It’s easy to see that by making products that enhance people’s creativity there is a lot to gain, but to introduce commercial aspects into this equation is a challenge. Being aware of which design choices we can make to support transformative as well as critical play, helps me as a designer to make an informed choice of which direction to go in the continuous balancing act between artistic vision and commercial needs. Even the tiniest glimpse of “The Marvelous” (as the surrealist called it) might be enough to change people forever.

“The heightened moment of epiphany encompasses multiple shades of meaning, expanding and compressing time itself. Sparked by chance, the surrealist epiphany the force that unlocks the revelation of the mundane moment.” (Rabinovitch 2002, p.31)

Conclusion

Language is a system. It contains words as well as Grammar – the structural rules that govern how we put words together to make meaning. Language is deeply embedded in our everyday lives. It is a fundamental tool for communication between people, and it is also part of the building blocks that form our thoughts. In this way we are ruled by language. Schools of thought such as Feminism and Neo-Marxism are critical of our use of language and argue that to become free we must become aware of the power it has over us – an idea that can be traced back to Dadaism – an art movement in the 1920s.

Games use representations to simplify the world and to make it into systems that are easily understandable and fun to play with. These representations are infused by meaning through the cognitive frame created by the game. The Dadaist cut-up method, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz are all systems designed to play with language. They use the system of language as a foundation to build on, and by doing so they enable a blending of the cognitive frame of language itself with the cognitive frame of the game. The result is a play with meaning in which the semantic meaning can be overruled by the game system or vice versa. Players can form phrases based on grammar, but just as well based on total randomness since words are treated as physical objects that can be moved around freely.

Transformative play is a form of play that has the power to transform the underlying game system or the players themselves. Critical play is a form of transformative play that happens when the system challenged by play has oppressive characteristics. Critical game design is a broad approach that uses subversion, intervention or disruption as methods to give rise to critical play. Based on the view of language as a system of power, a transformative play with language can be defined as critical play.

When designing a digital game, such as Words of Oz, it is important to remember that digital games are made in code, and code is a form of information control. Players need to internalize the algorithms of the game in order to play the game. In this way game systems have the power to manipulate players - in the same way as language do. In order to maintain a critical game design approach when it comes to digital games, one strategy is to expose the controlling characteristics of the medium. Another strategy is to design an open-ended game system - embracing the player's creativity and strengthening the possibility for transformative play.

The cut-up method, Magnetic Poetry and Words of Oz all share a creative goal ("Make a poem!") and the opportunity for players to create freely. This means that they are open-ended systems. They all enable players to play around with words in a way that has disruptive qualities based on the tension it brings between semantic meaning and the meaning given to the word-objects by the game context. Such a design makes a critical play with language possible, and yet these systems have very different approaches to technology, playfield and context of play. The Dadaist method of cutting up newspapers was originally a subversive act in itself, because of the high status given to newspapers in the beginning of the 20th century. Magnetic Poetry uses refrigerators as the playfield, which introduces the artistic process of making poetry right into the everyday lives of families. Words of Oz takes advantage of digital technology by making it possible for players to play together with strangers and friends over the Internet - enabling a collective play space which gives room for a shared transformative experience. All these design choices have different ways of supporting critical play.

I might not have had critical play in mind when creating Words of Oz, but I did want to make a game that could change people, by encouraging them to create things during play that they never expected. The same seems to apply to Dave Kapell the creator of Magnetic Poetry. Tristan Tzara was much more radical in his approach to design. Thanks to the courage of the Dadaists to break with society as well as the art world of their time, a new and playful approach towards language was made possible.

Game mechanics and dynamics that enable transformative and critical play is a field of study that I would like to see more fully explored. As a game designer I find it important to realize that games can be used to manipulate as well as to set someone free.

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