



Approaches,  
Issues,  
Applications

edited by **Steffen P. Walz** and **Sebastian Deterding**

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POSITION STATEMENT  
**LOSING IS FUN**

*McKenzie Wark*

If “Never work!” was the apex of critical strategy in the twentieth century, perhaps “Never play!” could be the same point of extreme negation for the twenty-first. It is of course almost impossible to never work, but it at least defines an ambition: to abolish wage labor and the commodity form.

It was and remains a surprisingly popular ambition. The cycle of struggles in the overdeveloped world in the late twentieth century took it as their lodestar, whether unwittingly or not. The whole counterstrategy of making work seem like something else, like play even, stems from the boredom that both wage labor and the commodity form generated.

This boredom is spreading even to what was once called the underdeveloped world. By their tens of millions, peasants left the land, in China and elsewhere, and in some cases ended up in the factories that make the world’s commodities. But it’s getting harder to keep them there. The riots and suicides at Foxconn are just the tip of the iceberg. Nobody much likes to do this sort of work if there’s any option.

In the overdeveloped world, work is only one of the ways of creating a value chain and extracting a profit. The more advanced form of spectacular economy extracts value from play. This is why the critical slogan of the times might need to be “Never

play!” Where play was some kind of alternative for so many late-twentieth-century avant-gardes, from the Situationists to the Fluxus movement to the New Games movement, the overdeveloped world in the twenty-first century is all about recuperating those energies, those desires, those appetites, for the commodity form.

There are several versions of the recuperation of play. Sony Playstation once had a perfect slogan for it: “Live in your world. Play in ours.” The exciting, fun stuff was not to be found in the world of work and the everyday. It was to be found in another, much more interesting world, one branded and metered by Sony or one of its competitors. The meta-game among competing firms was to find the best ways to commodify all those playful urges that wanted something other than what the commodity offers.

While we might like to think, when we turn on our smartphones, that they are there for us to play with, it’s more that the possession of one turns you into a nonplayer character. You are now emitting a string of data, about location and activity, with which Apple and Google and Facebook and Samsung and Amazon and all the rest get to play the meta-game. The game that seems to be for us is really for them. They play against each other, with us as the nonplayer characters, the meatbots.

The goal of the game is to turn the push-pull of data between us nonplayer characters and between us and our devices into money. It doesn't really matter how. It could be by selling things to the nonplayer characters. It could be by selling the nonplayer characters to others, to advertisers, for example. It could be by harvesting data from us and looking for patterns in that data that might suggest new ways of commodifying the game.

There's both a game and a play aspect to this, closed worlds and open-ended ones. The closed worlds are games or game-like activities in which play can be offered up, seemingly voluntarily, and from which value can be extracted in an orderly fashion. There will always be cookies. They are not for you.

The open-world play spaces are a bit different. They concern the design of the games themselves. Every interaction with your laptop or tablet or smartphone yields moves in the game, but are also play actions that map the potential space and possible design flaws of the games themselves. To play is also to game-design, to yield up bits of an aggregate of play-test data, which shapes the future iterations of the devices and software themselves. One does not buy products any more so much. One buys prototypes, with which one plays to yield design cues for the next prototype.

It's like Philip K. Dick's novel, *The Game Players of Titan*. It seems like we are playing some vast and incredible game, but really we are the tokens, not the players. It's the Vugs that play, and they play on Titan, on another world, in a meta-game of which one occasionally gets hallucinatory glimpses. Apple or Google or Samsung look in one light as if they are terrestrial companies. In weird moments, one sees them rather as the Vugs of Titan, playing their own meta-game by their own rules.

But there's another game, a meta-metagame. A game both us nonplayer meatbots and the Titans play. Both us and the Vugs like to think there's other worlds. We get our Sony Playstation-type games to play in, they get their meta-game that games our interactions with those games. But both are just subsets of the meta-metagame: a game that has levels, of increasing difficulty, but in which you can't start over. There's no reset. Its slogan is not Sony's, but the slogan of Dwarf Fortress: "Losing Is Fun."

One version of the meta-metagame is called climate science. It's a game that has a lot of distractors. We notice mostly the other players and make our gamer identities based on our rank against each other. Occasionally we see the Vugs. Your social network provider changes the rules to extract more value, so you quit and chose another one. Facebook (or whoever) loses a meta-game point—but not to you. They lose it to whoever you give your playtime to next. As for the Vugs, they don't notice much. They think they are on Titan. They think they have someplace else to go.

But there really is only one meta-metagame. All the games and meta-games are nested within it, like Easter eggs. Games, in their separateness, always have an externality. There's always a resource external to the game that its internal resources draw on. If it's a computer game, for example, there's always the power cord or the battery that powers the game and its internal decisions. This externality is doubled. Play always has an external input, but also an output that is put back outside the bounds of the game. There is always waste. There is always something not accounted for in the score, the result, the decision. And so there is always a meta-metagame, beyond the games and meta-games, the root game in which both externalities meet.

To play the game is always to treat as purely external the input of energy and the output of waste. And while games are in a sense always systems, they are always closed systems. We used to think that the closed systems of our games and meta-games nested inside an open system from which they drew freely and into which they could quietly extrude any remainder. But it turns out that the game at root is also a closed world. It has an external input—sunlight, source of all our power-ups. But it has nowhere for outputs to go. The game is closed.

That's why, if there's a game that might be emblematic for our time, it's Dwarf Fortress. It's a

game that has very little traffic with the meta-game. Just go download it, play it, send its designers some money as a gift if you like. There's no data trail issuing from it. It doesn't help any Titan to battle another for the world's resources.

And yet, despite its tiny size, it opens up into a remarkable world, with a physics engine that generates realities your characters may not even touch in their play. And if, like me, you are less than totally dedicated to playing it, you will lose. Again and again, and badly. And each time you play, and lose, the givenness of a whole world will appear briefly, then wink out of existence. It's excellent training for these times.