Liberating Play: An Interview with Anna Anthropy and Miguel Sicart

Anne Gilbert

Anne Gilbert (Moderator): What are we liberating play from? What does that mean?

Miguel Sicart: One of the things that I want to liberate play from is games. In my opinion, the notion of gaming, and in particular the video game, is probably the most conservative form of expression we have. The video game is as conservative as one can imagine. Humans have a creative capacity of playing—playing with others, playing together, of creating things to play. We've constrained play and forced it into games. I would like to liberate play from games.

Anna Anthropy: I agree. I feel like I'm distancing myself from the game designer label, and embracing more of the play designer label. The discourse around play—especially in academic spaces—privileges games, and particularly video games. It embraces the idea of play as product, and not the broad range of ways that we interact with people through play. In this turn, we lose both the expressiveness of play, and a rich cultural and ritual history that predates game technology. The "ludic century," which was coined by Eric Zimmerman in his ludic century manifesto typifies this really technology-oriented imperialist discourse. Video games are the ultimate product of this discourse.

MS: It's a very interesting product. It feels like a little bit of a sausage machine to me. The game is a sausage. When you grind that playful meat in, on the other side you get a sausage. If you follow this metaphor, if we put people in, on the other side there's play. The important thing here is the machine. How does the machine create the activity of play—the sausage of play? For me, this machine absolutely challenges the history of why we play with games and each other, or what we do with other forms of expression that are also play. Our focus on technology presumes that we don't need to know anything about board games regardless of whether or not we are living through a modern board game renaissance. It also assumes that we don't need to know anything about toys, street games, or any of the other playful activities

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that we are engaged in.

AA: Recently, I was looking for online resources about toy design, or objects of play. I couldn't find anything, there was very little conversation about that. On the other hand, many academic institutions devote their resources to talking about *Mass Effect* and other digital games.

MS: The academy is interested in a very particular subset of digital games. Not every kind of digital game is discussed.

AA: There's a really formalist discourse around games. It focuses on quantitative and technical games. When you consider this really mathematical and formalist idea of games, it leaves out a lot of the work that marginalized play and game designers are doing: Work that doesn't fit the quantitative and competitive model of games.

MS: Games that don't fit are just...kind of cute. They won't be considered in most scholarship.

AA: They're not seen as games. It comes from a place of privileging the games as a medium over other mediums. I'm past the point where I worry if something that I've made is not a game. If it's not really a game, then it's just interactive art. I'm okay with making art.

MS: One good example is our lack of focus on toys. Toys are any object specifically designed for play. The ludic century, the century of play, is not about toys. It's not about playing. The ludic century is not even about all video games. It's about a small moment in the history of video games. This insular focus on a small subset of video games is imperialistic—it's the reason I no longer want to be a games scholar.

I realized that what I'm doing, if I'm a games scholar, is ignoring everything that is interesting about games. If I'm a games scholar, then I'm only supposed to analyze a narrow subset of games. A games scholar cannot look at people, they cannot look at communities, they cannot look at babies, they cannot look at playgrounds toys. A games scholar cannot look at all of the things that we, as humans, do while we are playing. A games scholar has to look at games. I don't want to be a games scholar.

AA: I feel very much the same way. There are many traditions of play that interact directly with communities. Communities form around play. They negotiate boundaries and seed political ideas. It was really interesting being at the Allied Media Conference a couple years ago, where Mohini Freya Dutta and her partner, Ben Norskov were running a workshop on physical games—on big, outdoor games—for activists. Although it was humbling for me, it was exciting to see how illuminating it was for people whose background was in politics and organizing. We played old activist games like *Bomb Shield.* This radical history of play

and games exists and has existed for a really long time. It's been used politically, like in the new games movement of the 60s. Unfortunately activist games are at the periphery of the conversations we're having about today. The blockbuster video game is in the center of our conversation.

MS: Your points on the history of activist games are interesting. When play studies was really interesting, back in the 1960s and the 70s, folks like Brian Sutton-Smith and Bates were discussing the social importance of play. Unfortunately they were shoved into folklore and education departments because they didn't have any grand model. Then, in the 1980s we started playing video games, and some people came up with game studies as a way to think through them as a new medium. It's too complicated to say in game studies, "Oh no, but I'm actually a play scholar." Although that might tie somebody like me to this rich history of play scholars, it also drives me away from the institutional environment of game studies. It's an interesting problem. I want to stay where I am, because I like working with machines and I like to see how people play with them. I'm most interested in games, but at the same time, I'm interested in something larger. If I want to say that I'm not a games scholar and that I'm a play scholar, then I need to go to an education department. Believe me, I'm not a good fit for education department. All these kids playing video games...thinking that they are learning.

AA: We need to view technology as an integrated part of play, instead of its source. In my own work, I've been thinking of games as experiences, instead of as media— performances. For me, this is a more interesting way to think about the kind of interactions that people have together around games.

To your point about indie games, I think that capital "I" indie games reproduce a lot of what's going on in the games industry. Today, Laine Nooney noted that Indie game designers were often not able to identify what it was that they are independent of. In fact, it's to the point where people are defining new labels now. We think of indie as sort of an oppositional label, but people are coming up with labels that are in opposition to indie— like the idea of the alt games.

MS: At some point the indie game was this space for challenging how we play games. Then we see that sort of liberated play become more and more restrained. Is this what the capital "I" indie resists—independently, economically, and culturally, or whatever?

AA: It's interesting how well the formalist conception of gaming plays into the idea of the game as this pure product—as something that's not offensive. It's not really about people, it's about systems.

MS: It's a little bit like the movie *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." If you just build the game by a specification, they will play and have fun. I think that notion of fun is an

absolute and total misunderstanding of what games are as play machines and what machines can do with play. You designed this fantastic game, *Chicanery*, where players compete to keep their fingers on a button the longest. Most of the game occurs in physical jostling off-screen.

AA: That game was designed to make people break their iPads.

MS: That's the kind of risks that we should be taking. That's what liberating play is. We are worshiping these devices. In *Chicanery*, it's all about the rowdiness of playing with each other—pushing and shoving. The machine here is only an excuse for us to play. This is what's been lost in the current moment of game design.

AA: It's a mentality where games become the end unto themselves. We forget the interactions that occur around the game. We're counting pixels instead of thinking about gameplay.

MS: Exactly. Everything is quantified. *Chicanery* offers such a pleasurable disrespect for these conventions. That's the other thing that we are losing in the current moment. We are losing how disrespectful play can be. It's sanitized. Play should be messy! We should argue, and we should throw our iPads and break them!

AA: We've compartmentalized play. We've compartmentalized play in a way that's consistent with the structure of capitalism. We have a time for work and a time for play. We have safe, predetermined spaces of play. Technology companies, like Google, give employees mandatory time off for Burning Man, so that they can go there and express their weirdness, and then come back to work, no longer needing to express their weirdness and be better workers. Even within the capital "I" indie market, even when the voice of authority is largely absent, there's still that tendency to reproduce narrative twists and mechanics.

MS: I'm interested in your point about authority. To me, the games that created this kind of capital "I" indie scene are now being the ones that are cloned. They are the inspiration and the sources for other games. I think it's very interesting how creativity became, or ended up being the strength of games. It requires a group of people to see that something is worthwhile.

AA: Proponents of the e-sports model really fit these categories of being very de-personalized, very quantified, very mathematically competitive.

MS: Even when we think about something like e-sports, we are losing all the other things that we ordinarily look at. The interesting thing about e-sports is the e-sport game, rather than the e-sports community. Some people road test their own play, I think that's an incredible statement, that somebody actually wants to play live and road test those games, or to look at that for learning. But this research is bracketed, it's kind of outside. It's seen as an

interesting cultural phenomenon, not play. I'm always fascinated by how academics tend to say that when something escapes our nice way of understanding games, "Oh, it's a cultural phenomenon around games." No, it's an outcome of play. We have this habit of worshiping some games, and not others.

AA: Many marginalized people who make games don't make games which fill the formalist mold. Ask an academic formalist, and you'll open arguments about the relevance of the sea of Twine games, because those games are very messy, and are not about numbers or statistics. They're generally about lives and about the lived experience of people. That's a cultural problem, that's not games scholarship.

MS: No game can fit easily within this formalist definition. Any time you try to define a Twine game as a Game, (with a capital "g"), it's going to fail. But who cares if it's a game or not? It's a thing people play with! We should be focusing on the things people play with. Play can bring us all together.

AA: I think that play is more important than games, too. Like you said, we worship games; we talk endlessly about the game itself, and ignore the play that's going on. Sometimes, playing includes constructing communities, or performing. The culture here is what's interesting, not the thing that produces it. It is interesting how we can design things that will encourage playful experiences. Without players, a game is just a set of rules—it requires engagement.

MS: Exactly! *Pokémon* was uninteresting to me, until Twitch. That's the single most important game event of the last year. When thousands of viewers decided to collectively play it, it was the wrong way of playing the wrong game. But, because of sort of disrespectfulness it was exactly right. I think we should be playing the wrong games more often in the wrong ways.

AA: Everything that's come out of *Pokémon* has been more interesting than the game itself. The game is interesting as a piece of a culture, as all the spin-offs that have been created are so much more interesting than the game.

It's sad to me that so much history is being lost, just because we're not paying attention. My most recent book was specifically about these ephemeral communities, it's called *ZZT*. It's about the communities of sharer games designers in the 90s. Those sorts of communities have fallen off the established history of games, which is really corporate-centric. It's about Nintendo, about Sega, about the people who won. Why don't we see a lot of self-described games journalists talking about things like Candy Crush or the things that they have actually observed people playing? Maybe there is a more telling narrative about how people are interacting with games right now. Unfortunately, our history watches over these stories, in an effort to idealize an elite few working for giant corporations.

MS: It's always been difficult to write a history of play because it's transcendent—it vanishes over time. The only things that we have to hold onto are the objects that it leaves behind. Those, typically, are games, toys, and the spaces that we play in. The problem is that we fetishize video games—an object. It's a disservice to what computers can be, in the context of play, that we fetishize games in this particular way. There is no history of play because we fetishize what the video game object is.

It's also a challenge for historians to write the proper history of video games. All these communities and games matter, but how can we learn about them? We need to abandon this idea of authorship. It makes no sense in the context of games. We should talk about the organizers of communities, but that's not how we document games.

AA: I absolutely agree with you. The people I interviewed for my book were not game designers, but people who designed tools for making games. These people were involved in the dynamics in their communities, not just the creation of games.

MS: You can also see that the human face behind modern games is the community manager. It's the people that reply to threads on Internet forums. It's not the game designer, it's the community. Those are the authors of the game (if you want to discuss authorship).

I hope I won't be mistaken for saying something crazy here like: "I burn computers!" I like computers, I think they are interesting devices. But, as I was saying before, when we think about games and game design—though a particular set of formalist reductions—we are forgetting what computers can actually do as creative material. This is sad. We don't see a machine that can let us run a particular batch of activities without asking "are you playing?" Instead we see a vague input for things to do, rather than a creative medium.

AA: This transition has been very much designed. It's the transition from computers as tools to consumer products. Take, for example, the history of the HyperCard on Macs. In HyperCard, you could build your own programs really easily. There's a really good blog post on the internet called, "Why HyperCard Had to Die," that's specifically about Steve Jobs' decision to discontinue HyperCard because he wanted the company to focus on making products, rather than tools. Now, if you want a calculator, then you have to download a calculator from the App Store—maybe it will have ads in it. The creativity has been designed out of computers in a lot of ways. It was a really deliberate effort to change the user base of computers from tinkers to consumers.

MS: I want to push this idea back to my own work. We now have an array of tools— game-makers have game-making tools. But, we see them only as instruments that create products. But when we open them, and consider what they make, we tell our students to follow simple instructions in order to make simple games with them. Instead, I think we should teach people to misunderstand them. We should teach students Unity with no in-

struction whatsoever. We need to teach that all these technological development platforms need to be misunderstood. We have too much respect for tools. I want to play more broken games made with broken platforms. This could generate a new and different sort of play.

AA: Yeah. I think the glitch has been really appropriated by marginalized people—queer people. Things can break in ways that are more interesting than when something works perfectly. It's these moments of rupture that are really interesting and worth talking about. Marginalized people—people who exist at the margins of society—might be considered broken persons by some social standards. Where some see clumsiness and rough edges, others see brokenness as a form of expression.

MS: Brokenness is both positive and creative. It's what we do when we are playing. When we play, we are constantly breaking things and then mending them—that's how we have fun. Some people are doing great work with broken game mechanics. I'm a huge fan of Robert Yang, and I really look forward to the day when Unity is packaged and shipped with *Stick Shift* as a kind of Easter egg. Yang's games are great fun, but they're totally improper from a certain perspective. They show that industry standards, we can have a creative push, even by industry standards. Instead of using first-person shooters as an example of what Unity can do, we could use *Stick Shift* as the example of what Unity can do.

AA: Yeah, I support that. I think several of his feature a cool down period that can go into weeks of real-time...

MS: That's the other thing, we are so conservative with the way we think about time. You've made this beautiful 15-second video....

AA: Oh, it's 10 seconds. It's called, "Queers in Love at the End of the World."

MS: Exactly, "Queers in Love." Time is tantamount to it. Even in video, ten seconds is not normal, but it's a way of thinking through what a medium can do. Because we have standard ways to think through time—standard templates for games and for play—we've forgotten than we can engineer games like *VESPER.5* that take one step a day to play.

AA: Unfortunately, temporality is often exploited in games. Gamification is a way to train us to be better consumers. It exploits behaviors we've learned though play. I think there's also a lot of room for abuse in the way that games consume, use, and structure our time,

VESPER.5 is a really great example. It's not authoritarian in how it manages your time, but it does demand that you invest your time in it— you have to play it every day. It takes something like one hundred turns to finish the game, but doesn't tell you when to take them. *VESPER.5* doesn't impose on your schedule—the play is in figuring out how to fit this game into your daily schedule. It was developed to encourage its players to find ways to ritualize

the game into their daily routines. For me, this is really interesting. Neither the game nor the game developer is telling you how to play, and so a negotiation between the game and player about how this game will be played emerges.

MS: Yeah, I think that there's a dominant discourse within mainstream video games about the effective use of a player's time. I'm all for having proper, harmless, even fun encounters with most games, too. But that's only a tiny segment of why we play. You can see this if you look at all of the different kinds of games we play—how some interest kids, and others even interest us grown-ups. If you look at toys, some toys are pretty harmful, and you could get really hurt—that's why they're fun; that's the pleasure of it. Without this sort of pleasure, this kind of technical play just takes over. This is why gamification is a particularly capitalist way of thinking: Play is given in a way that also fits your schedule. I admire those games and toys that do not fit our schedules, but instead push us outside. They ask, "Do you really want to keep on playing? You're going to have to play by my rules rather by your own." As a player I seek games which challenge me to rethink my use of time.