

Introduction to Part I

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In the first part of this book, we present a collection of chapters on the relationship between the design of games and other playful media on the one hand, and the politics of citizenship and participation on the other. More specifically, all the chapters relate to notions of ‘ludo-literacy’ as discussed in the Introduction. In what follows, various elements of games and play-related literacy—being able to play, critically understand, and create games—come into view, showing that without such literacy, citizens lack the critical skills to understand how game and playful design operates. These elements also allow game and playful media developers to enrich their work, creating more interesting, participatory experiences. Such skills, as will become clear, can be employed for political gains and needs, but also for acts of resistance. Moreover, having a critical understanding of games will allow us to think about the limitations of civic game design.

One key question asked when discussing games with political themes or goals is in what ways they facilitate civic engagement and political engagement. In the first chapter of Part I, entitled *Engagement in play, engagement in politics: Playing political video games*, media and communication scholars Joyce Neys and Jeroen Jansz ask this very question. What makes this work especially interesting as a starting point for this collection is their exploration of contemporary notions of citizenship and how these notions relate to modern (Western) democracies. They look at what constitutes a ‘good citizen’ in our contemporary mediatized culture and how political games arouse civic engagement and political participation in their players. Discussing both theory and empirical findings, Neys and Jansz highlight the persuasive potential of games, but they also call for further investigations of these effects.

New media and games scholar Stefan Werning is also interested in the relationship between citizenship and engaging with games, but he approaches this subject from the perspective of design rather than play. His chapter, *Analytical game design: Game-making as a cultural technique in a gamified society*, highlights an aspect of ludo-literacy—game design—that is key to understanding how games and playful media operate. According to Werning, being an independent citizen requires a basic knowledge of how software and programming operates due to our society’s heavily reliance

on digital media. Game-making, he argues, should be seen as a cultural technique. By engaging with ‘analytical’ game design experiments, the process of game creation allows citizens to understand and give shape to their surroundings, moving beyond enhanced ludo-literacy toward active civic engagement.

Moving away from games, media scholar William Uricchio focuses on interactive documentaries as a playful format in his chapter entitled *Rethinking the social documentary*. In this chapter, he stresses the potential of this new documentary film format for increasing the participation of viewers in the creation of documentary productions. He shows that through playful participation, viewers can collaborate and co-create with makers, influencing the final product. It allows viewers to pick and reorder content that they find relevant for their own personal engagement with a certain topic. This creates individual experiences and is a move away from having a strong authorial voice. For social impact documentaries, he points out, being able to trace and collect such individual experiences could also provide further insight into how civic engagement through contemporary media actually works. Uricchio’s chapter presents a strong case for the civic potential of allowing viewers to play with the documentary film format, foregrounding the interactive documentary as a potent challenger for its traditional linear and author-driven counterpart.

In contrast to the previous chapter, new media and game scholar Joost Raessens focuses on a close reading of one particular example of a political game, the ecology-themed online production of *Collapsus – Energy Risk Conspiracy*. In his chapter, entitled *Collapsus, or how to make players become ecological citizens*, he aims to tackle the psychological climate paradox, namely the observation that the more climate facts people hear, the less likely they are to take action. The question is whether climate communication can be channeled through a game in such a way that it actually manages to change citizens’ thinking and behavior regarding climate change issues.

The contributions by Neys and Jansz, and Werning provide more general overviews of the potential of playing and making politically charged games, while Uricchio and Raessens focus on the potential of a new playful genre and a specific production respectively. The final two chapters in this section of the book take a more critical stance on the often alleged or implied emancipatory or empowering potential of such productions. In her chapter *The broken toy tactic: Clockwork worlds and activist games*, media artist and theorist Anne-Marie Schleiner takes the procedurality of games as her focal point. She examines what she refers to as the ‘toyiness’ of activist simulation games, a ludic abstraction of the real world that can negate a

game's potential critical impact. It reminds us that we should not take the persuasive capacity of procedural rhetoric as a given: the clockwork logic of a game can be so enchanting to the player that he or she can lose track of its argument. To confront players with the inner workings of a game, and consequently its inner argument, might require such toys to be broken by disruptive game design or deviant player strategies.

Finally, new media theorist Ingrid Hoofd tackles the civic potential of digital play head-on in a chapter entitled *Video games and the engaged citizen: On the ambiguity of digital play*. With a critical reading of a key piece of empirical research on the civic potential of games, she unpacks the overly positivist undertones of such research. By situating political games in a larger framework where digital play meets global neoliberal capitalism, she points out that games that might look empowering or emancipatory actually make such notions part of the pre-shaped and predicated mechanical logic of games. Taking cues from Baudrillard, who discusses the seductive nature of games that try to divert energy away from efforts to actually change a system, Hoofd considers playing games as engaging with the highest-order demands of cybernetic capitalism. This, she argues, applies to most civic games as well. Like Schleiner, though, she recognizes ways for resistance and subversion through playful self-reflexivity and hacking practices.