

The following content is provided under a Creative Commons license. Your support will help MIT OpenCourseWare continue to offer high quality educational resources for free. To make a donation or view additional materials from hundreds of MIT courses, visit MIT OpenCourseWare at ocw.mit.edu. Some content in this audio is not covered under a Creative Commons license. For more information see the course materials on the MIT OpenCourseWare website.

GUEST
SPEAKER: --to Abe, who is going to give us a guest lecture on art games. And today's reading, the proctor reading is kind of like part two of a lot of the things that Jason maybe talked about when we did simulations. If you guys remember, is a quality reading that a [INAUDIBLE] question, where that came from. One thing that I think was of interest was that there are a couple of responses to that article. If you scroll all the way down to the bottom of the article that these responses vary [INAUDIBLE] back to them.

And those are kind of interesting, because it just carries on a conversation. People actually just turning his article into basically a blog post and then write on it. And they were pretty good. But a lot of that was kind of the state of art game discussion back in 1999, I think, I think a pretty old article, where they were very much thinking about games have to be simulations. Games and narratives, blaaach. Storytelling is like some other mediums' domain. It's all about the simulation.

Arguably at that time there wasn't a big discussion of an art games movement. There were other games movements, like new games which were really more about people interacting with you, trying to get games to where people were more cooperative, less competitive, and less cutthroat. There were other movements about people-- they were probably advertising game movements. And there was a lot of work in people making months of computer games that effectively made it unplayable, but made really pretty images in the process. So that [UNINTELLIGIBLE], for instance, where everything becomes black and white and is striped, including the monsters. There's no way you can see what the hell's going on, but they look pretty cool.

AUDIENCE: Have you seen-- I think it's 96 kilobytes-- there was a competition in full game [INAUDIBLE]-- no it's 4 kilobytes, I think. It's a 4-kilobyte game in full 3-D, with multiple levels, extremely clever, including the music and everything.

PROFESSOR: Yeah, yeah.

AUDIENCE: Have you ever heard of this or seen this?

GUEST
SPEAKER: There are a couple of those. A lot of those come up with the demoscene. Demoscene, which I will put off to some other time--

AUDIENCE: It's very impressive, too. It's like very--

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yeah, yeah. It's kind of this weird thing of computer hacking, really, really fast and really, really compact coding, and visualized statics and music, which goes more like a digital music video. Only there were some people who added mouse control, and game play into it and made these kind of games. But that's very different from the art game scene that we have today, or at least what's commonly described as art games. So I'd like Abe to talk about what happened since then, since 1999.

GUEST Yeah, yeah. Hi, guys. I'm Abe. I work here at the lab. I play a bunch of your games. I've met a bunch of you. It's nice to be here. Phillip asked me to come in to talk about, quote/unquote, art games. I think largely because it's a kind of, I'll say, sector of game development that my work at Gambit tends to intersect with, especially recently. And I think, too, that it's--

AUDIENCE: Sorry. I was choking from--

GUEST I think, too, that it's a sector that's a little bit confusing-- and possibly confusing, too. And so, just to give you guys a sense-- when you asked me about this it actually made me think, like, oh, yeah, cool, I'll talk about this art games movement or whatever, but that of course-- ooh, wait. I'm locked into some kind of weird mode right now. Sorry. OK. That brings up this question, which is, are games art?

And just to give you a sense for how this little talk thing, whatever, is going to go, I'm going to talk a little bit about this question, give you examples of what people have said about this, and opinions that I think are particularly important, particularly valid on this subject. I also after that want to show you some examples, some historical and then kind of moving forward examples. I'm actually going to get some of you guys to just come up here and maybe even play some of these examples that I think are particularly important.

And I'd really like it if we can keep this less of a me talking at you and you engaging me as you have questions on this. Because me blabbing at you as you fall asleep is maybe good for a nap, but less useful for getting anything out of this. So we'll try to structure this as a conversation, and then I'll try to pull back, hearken back, to any of my teacher instincts and see if I can get you engaged. But we'll see.

So are games art? I hate this question. Let's start off by saying that I fundamentally find it abhorrent, and I hear it all the time. And it's aggravating to me because I think it's incontrovertibly yes. I think that you can't possibly come up with any other answer other than yes, games are art, games have art, yes, yes, yes, right? But it keeps coming up. And it keeps becoming a question-- and I should say, too, that this is a wholly biased and slanted talk. This is my perspective on this, and hopefully by the time-- you'll be like, wow, he's absolutely right. There's no way that games could be anything but art. Or at least they are art, and then some.

So this guy, who's a little hard to see right now, but he's handily brought up, recently brought into the fore, and that's Roger Ebert of Siskel and Ebert fame. Or since you guys are, some of you, younger than me, probably Ebert and Roeper. He had some interesting, controversial comments recently. And I pulled this quote, "Nevertheless, I'm being convinced that in principle--" I love that he put that in italics. "--video games cannot be art. Perhaps it is foolish for me to say never, because never as Rick Wakeman informs us, is a long, long time. Let me just say that no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form."

So apparently we should all be dead already, according to Ebert, because we wouldn't have lived long enough to experience the medium as an art form. But here's a guy who, even though I don't think he's a particularly good film critic, is a popular film critic. And he's weighing in on a medium that he doesn't particularly understand. And I think it's important to look at what exactly is he doing when he makes this statement. He's in this business of classification, right? He's in this business of saying, all right, we've got this subject called art. What can we say falls under that subset and what does not?

So he says things like painting, sculpture, dance, opera, literature, film can all be classified as art and that games are not. Probably some other things. I don't know where he stands on comic books. I don't think he's written about it yet, but I'm sure he'd probably-- I don't know what he thinks about pornography. Although, since it's in film form, maybe he does think it's art. It's unclear. He hasn't weighed in on that yet.

But the interesting thing about this is, this is not new. This is like a high-culture, low-culture debate that's been going on for a really long time. And I think it's particularly hilarious because he would use films. And films had to fight out of the low-culture phenomenon to gain respect as a high-culture medium. So he's working-- reviewing a medium that was once conceived as low culture, had to work really hard to be considered high culture. And now he's saying, look, my films are high culture, your video games are low culture.

Which is totally hilarious because in the past 50 years, this has been completely collapsed by post-modernism. That's a whole 'nother talk altogether. Maybe high culture and low culture don't even exist anymore. So Ebert brings us all back. And you get everybody upset. And a bunch of trolls are on his website saying really terrible things about him and about what he said. But he kind of reinvigorated this talk.

And so new scientists, inspired by this Ebert controversy and looking for con tips on CultureLab asked the question, can games be art? And they sent it out to a bunch of game scholars saying, what is your opinion on this? Ian Bogost is a very smart guy and says some really interesting things. This is really why I'm not gonna read the whole thing, but in the first paragraph he brings up things like Fountain by Marcel Duchamp, which is a urinal in a museum, for those of you who don't know about it.

And that was a statement, a piece of art that he was literally trying to confront, what high culture defines as art by taking, literally, a urinal, putting it upside down on a pedestal, entitling it Fountain, and putting it in a museum, which is the pinnacle of high culture. If you can make it in a museum, you're art. And so this is something that--

He mentions Yoko Ono's performance art, where she's sitting in a chair, and she has scissors next to her and the audience is invited to come cut her clothes off one piece at a time. A lot of this kind of stuff. Andy Warhol pop culture paintings, Mondrian's abstract paintings. And he says a lot in that first paragraph.

But I think this interesting part that I've pseudo-highlighted down here is interesting. I'm starting in the middle. He says if the purpose of art is indeed to force us to see something we thought we understood in a new light, perhaps the most fundamental move video games have made in the artistic tradition is in the very eliciting of the question, can video games be art? I think that's really interesting. So the fact that people are even asking this question suggests that video games are doing something that we traditionally conceive of art doing. That's, I think, a really powerful statement, that we're even having this discussion renders the question moot in some senses, which is I would say classic Bogostian wordplay. I think I just made something up called Bogostian. I should tweet all about it.

John Sharp, from the Savannah College of Art and Design, has had a lot of thoughts on this. He's actually a great person to talk about this, because he studies video games, but he does it from an art history background as well. That's pretty good and useful. He talks about some interesting things here. Similarly to what Ian is doing, he's talking a bit about how video games and art are doing some similar things at times, and yet games have certain affordances that other media do not.

He says at the end here, which I think is interesting, all this poses the question of why are we concerned with giving video games the status of art? This is one of the reasons why I hate this question. Are we simply trying to legitimize them? Does being called, quote/unquote art change the qualities of video games. Only if we can answer these questions can we move the conversation forward.

I think he's reacting here to the question itself. Actually, he and Ian both are reacting to the question, Ian saying the question invalidates itself and John Sharp now saying that this question, it's not helping us. Asking how does calling it art, what does that do for the medium, that's the important question. Here's some thoughts about the question and some more evidence for why I think the question, are video games art is just quite wrong.

Mary Flanagan takes it as being assumed that video games are art, which I think is actually great. In *Critical Play* she doesn't go to great lengths to define video games as art. She just looks at art and she looks at games and compares them. She just assumes that this is so.

I think this is a really nice quote from the beginning of her *Critical Play* book, which is that, "*Critical Play* is built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics." This is really important. "Artists using games as a *medium of expression*--" Again, good use of italics. "--, then, manipulate elements common to games-- representation systems and styles, rules of progress, codes of conduct, context of reception, winning and losing paradigms, ways of interacting in a game-- for they are the material properties of games, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions."

It's a great point. You would have a really hard time making a painting with a chisel and no paint, like you were using marble and a chisel, a you were trying to make a painting. Two different things. Both are art.

It's the same thing with games. Games have rule sets, games have systems, games have win-and-loss paradigms. They have all these things that are conventions and things that we associate with even our definition of what a game is, which is at times faulty. But those are our tools. Those are how we communicate things.

I think her first sentence is really important. I'm guessing with the stuff that you've been talking about-- them and Gonzalo Frasca-- that's coming through. I actually see that in your games. You're trying to-- so, for example I play-tested that FedEx game, and I play-tested the game about marriage. There's all kinds of meaning in those systems and meanings in those choices that you get that are being communicated.

And that's very similar to what an artist would do with any other medium. You're communicating a message through those. And sometimes we do it accidentally. It's not always explicit. We make something-- I would say that the graveyard and when you get divorced and you put your divorced person in the graveyard is an interesting choice for me, because it was creating an equivalence between divorce and death, which I think is kind of interesting. That's just one interesting example.

So Mary Flanagan in her book talks about this art movement called Fluxus. Before I go into-- any kind of thoughts or questions? Does anybody else think-- does anybody think video games aren't art still? It's okay. Oh, crap, we're gonna fight.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE] when we were designing art, so our art project now is you have to choose a real-world system and relate it. That's what we're all working on. And one of the big things that really helped us get started is, what is the message we want to get across to each set of ablutions? What is a bad ablution? Do you want to say that's random, do you want to say that's this? And how do we express that, which [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

GUEST Totally. And it gets even crazier when you take-- when you try to look at systems that are not particularly
SPEAKER: tangible. You maybe looked at it, but Elude is a game about depression. There aren't exactly tangible kind of road maps the way there are with FedEx systems, for clinical depression.

And yet you're looking at things like emotions, feelings, stuff like that, that we might call abstract, or just not immediate. How do you communicate those in systems? It's really tricky.

AUDIENCE: I have friends that talk about all their games which are like more --genic or more abstract. Does Ebert [UNINTELLIGIBLE] art?

GUEST I mean, it's a really good question.

SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: What would he say about that?

GUEST I think that falls along the same lines as, like I said, does Ebert consider pornography art? It's a really difficult
SPEAKER: question. That's a much larger art history debate, about has high culture and low culture completely collapsed? Has mass-media proliferation deteriorated conceptions of what really high culture art are, versus low culture.

I don't have particularly good answers for that. I think just as all of the other media that we looked at, does a Jerry Bruckheimer film count as art? Just like we would look at that and ask that question, we don't then deny the entire medium of film from the possibility of being artistic. There seems to be this desire, because the majority of games in our sector-- which I actually do, too, because if you go far enough back-- I should say video games--

Because most video games are commercially intended and involve fairly similar things, does that preclude the medium from the possibility of being artistic? I go back to that Ebert comment about he says they can't possibly be, or at least he says never is a long time. But not in our lifetime, it apparently is impossible. It's a good point.

AUDIENCE: There's actually interesting effects with the game we're designing which is essentially city building and city creation in the time of the Roman Empire. And we actually didn't intend to instill any meaning in the game. But once we actually designed the mechanics and stuff, we realized that it was essentially a game about the rich getting richer and trying to control the board. So it's like there's almost this inherent meaning that came out from just designing the game.

GUEST Yeah, yeah. You almost can't help but have it happen in some instances. It reminds me of a good thing that
SPEAKER: Brenda Brathwaite put in one of her talks once, which was about the game Civilization, the mod Colonization for sig IV, which is a great mod in which you play one of the European colonizers and you come over to the New World.

And there's indigenous peoples there. You have to negotiate with them at first, but eventually you just beat them up and take their land, or they just give it to you because you're more powerful than they are. And she was making the point, there's this great box art, the Native Americans in the corner and the Conquistador in the middle, the Spanish, and the Dutch.

And it's like, if you were a Native American how would you respond to this game? And I'm like, yeah, I'm totally making America again. And other people would be like, oh my god, you basically just wiped out my ancestors, thanks. So it's true, sometimes you falling into meaning. It's something. And I think, again, a lot of art does that, right? And some art did it quite purposely, where they weren't divulging the meaning, they were inviting readings on it.

So, Fluxus. Fluxus is this really interesting mid-20th-century art-- they rejected the term "movement," they called it an "attitude"-- that Mary Flanagan talks about a bit in her *Critical Play* book. It's actually quite interesting. It really starts out early with John Cage. Have you guys heard of him, the composer? He's most famous for this piece of music that he wrote where, I forget the duration,

AUDIENCE: 4'33".

GUEST 4'33", yeah. it's 4 minutes and 33 seconds of not, well, not playing.

SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: He rests.

GUEST He rests. Exactly. So you'd sit down at the piano. You'd pull out the music and everyone would hush. And then for
SPEAKER: 4 minutes and 33 seconds you'd sit there, possibly with your hands on the keys. And then after the time, you would stand up, and you'd take your bow, and the audience would erupt into incredible applause.

He was really testing the idea of what they eventually called scores, or event scores. This idea that music is an art form where you can write it down, and then it becomes performable. It becomes this thing that someone can engage with. We don't think of paintings that way. We don't think of paintings as having a score, having some kind of, how do I engage with this?

It sounds kind of like games, in figuring out how does interactivity work in artistic mediums. Really interested in indeterminacy, too. I think you'll see in some of these examples, they're really kind of pushing on the boundaries of what art has been doing to this point.

They call it intermedia, meaning that the more multiple modes that you can use for communicating it was really important to the attitude. Simplicity was really big, having basic systems and basic scores. And then this idea of play was really important.

Yoko Ono, it's funny we sort of just attach her to John Lennon, but she was an artist before she was in a relationship with him. She's actually well known as one of these kind of Fluxus practitioners.

This is interesting. This is the Fluxus manifesto. I wanted to put this up because I think you can get a little bit of a sense for what they were trying to go for. They were taking the word "flux" and putting definition-- but then they were mending it here, so, purge the world of Bourgeois sickness, intellectual, professional, and commercialized culture. Purge the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art. I like this, purge the world of Europeanism. I don't think that's a word.

AUDIENCE: [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

GUEST
SPEAKER: Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art. Promote living art, anti-art, non-art reality. These things sound totally crazy. I love the, "to be fully grasped," but then it crosses out "fully." I don't doubt that was completely intentional, or if they wrote fully grasped and were like, oh, this is gonna be great. I'm crossing it out so you can see that I crossed out fully grasped. We want it to be not fully grasped. We want it to be partially grasped by all people. Not only critics feel this class is professional.

It's just a really interesting thing, and it sort of screams the avant-garde. They were trying to push against boundaries. They're trying to figure out what is the edge of the medium and then how can we jump way off it? Some of the classic Fluxus works were these things called Flux boxes or Flux kits.

Flux kits tended to have event scores. This is one of the most famous called Water Yam by George Brecht. And basically this is a box with 70 event scores. These are an example of these event scores. It's interesting. The event scores really seem like rule systems. They're like the instructions to your board game, except they're kind of whacky. If you look at air conditioning, the rule is move through the place. Which is really interesting. If you encounter this game and you're like, all right, I'm gonna play Water Yam. And you're like, move through the place. I think that's pretty characteristic of movement, right, present you with some sort of objective or some sort of requirement, but one that is abstract or nebulous, or just kind of strange.

This one's even better. On a white chair, a great tape measure, alphabet, flag, black, and spectral color. In this instance, it's not even clear what you're necessarily supposed to do. Are you supposed to compile these things on a white chair? Are you supposed to sit on a white chair and hold all of these things? It's not particularly clear. This is the playfulness of this movement. This is the energy of this of avant-garde movement.

You can see the relationship, I hope, between rule systems and these. The next example is, I think, an even better one. But you can see how they're playing around with these ideas. At least they're incorporating interactivity into these art movements. And keep in mind, these are being shown in galleries These are being shown in high-art places. These are being sent out to their friends as works of art.

This one's great. This is White Chess by Yoko Ono. It's often depicted on its own and you have to imagine what the rules are. But I actually think her rules as they are written are actually pretty important to it. She says, play it for as long as you remember who is your opponent and who is your own self. Very interesting wordage.

What are the complications with white chess. Anyone. Any thoughts? Based on your perceptions of non-white chess or white-and-black chess?

AUDIENCE: You'd get into arguing about is that my pawn or your pawn?

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yes, you definitely-- it will be hard to keep track of, I would think. That's why she said, "as long as you can remember." Any other weirdness from this?

AUDIENCE: Who is friend and who is enemy?

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yeah, certainly. This sort of like, wait, was that my piece? Was that your piece? Not only does that complicate your relationship to the other player, but now it's like, to the game itself, it's like, wait, what was the strategy I was doing?

AUDIENCE: Friendly or unfriendly fire?

GUEST
SPEAKER: I mean, it's really hard to keep track of stuff in chess. What about the board?

AUDIENCE: He writes off the king and the queen by mistake because you don't have to--

AUDIENCE: There's not really any actual boxes on the board.

AUDIENCE: There are boxes--

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yeah, they're all white. That complicates things a little bit, too, because you need to remember how you were moving.

AUDIENCE: How large is--

GUEST
SPEAKER: This one's really big. This is like a garden installment of White Chess. And I think the cool thing, too, this is another example of the movement. As long as you have the components you could play this game. You could create this art piece. I think the intent is not go play my installation of White Chess. It's that this is the rules, these are the pieces, it can be played. That screams game, that screams that portability of a game.

Again, this wasn't considered anything but art, except probably by people who turned their nose at this sort of thing. they've Any thoughts on what White Chess could be about, in a--

AUDIENCE: Two different sides merging to one. And so you eventually get, why am I fighting? Who is my enemy in this situation?

GUEST
SPEAKER: Sure, sure. Any other thoughts?

AUDIENCE: Racial relations.

GUEST
SPEAKER: Sure, racial relations.

AUDIENCE: It's probably a whole antiwar thing of, like, are we actually destroying ourselves?

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yeah, and that's an interesting thing. Yoko Ono was a decidedly antiwar activist at the time she was making this in the early '60s. One thing-- you can't take anything for granted, but the pieces aren't all black, they're all white. So I think the race thing does play a factor.

The inability to remember who you're attacking and who you are, even. I think that's actually why I really like her words. Because, "for as long as you can remember who's your opponent and who is your own self," there's something about incorporating your own self in there, not just saying what your pieces are.

She's not saying can you remember what your pieces are. She's saying remember who you're playing against versus who you are. That's very different verbiage. I think it's very much a game about who are you fighting, anyway? What is the point of war, what is the purpose of war? And how does war particularly function? And in the rhetoric of the time it makes a lot of sense, right?

So that's Yoko Ono's White Chess, which is part of the Fluxus [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. Yes, it's pretty cool. Actually, Fluxus and artists in this period have a really interesting relationship with chess. There's like some quote, and I'm gonna butcher it, but it's-- I think it was Marcel Duchamp saying that not all chess players are artists, but all artists are chess players, or something like that. He is particularly fascinated with chess, and you can see elements of chess in his work, ought to be painted or whatever.

AUDIENCE: He was completely obsessed with chess.

GUEST Yeah.

SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: He played it really hard. He wasn't necessarily a very good player, but he played a lot.

GUEST Very into it. So now I'm gonna move out of this Fluxus movement. I just wanted to show you a couple examples.

SPEAKER: But I think this next one is actually an interesting-- this is a current theme that I'm really excited about, which is called Sixteen Tons.

This is a game I unfortunately have not been able to play yet, but I've witnessed play because it's a game for four players. This was created by Eric Zimmerman and Nathalie Pozzi. It's a really interesting game. It's a little hard to see from these pictures. But it's this giant circle, I would say almost the size of this room, of corrugated cardboard, maybe even bigger, a little bit bigger than this room.

Inside you've got this array of colored and circles in these pretty hefty steel tubes that have color. Let's go through the rules. The first thing you notice is that they contextualize the title, Sixteen Tons, with a quote from the song, "You load 16 tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt."

This is doing an interesting thing that John Sharp, who you can see in the middle, thinks is actually particularly important for games and games that are working this art movement is that they declare their intentionality. Whether they declare what they're meaning is or not is less important. To be taken seriously, you take yourself seriously, I think was one of things he said.

And I think this is another good example when you talk about how games maybe in the digital space do this. But right now they're already priming you for reading the rules in a way that is different than just, ooh, let's play. Could you imagine if Monopoly had some sort of Marxist quote in the front of it, or something like that, your experience of it would be completely different.

You set up, you put the pieces in this array, you stand on a number and that indicates what color you are. And this is great, you take out \$3.00. Although you can see in this second picture they're playing what Eric the designer has deemed high stakes. Sixteen Tons where you pull out three five-dollar bills.

It says, how to win. You win when the two pieces of your color are directly adjacent to each other. So diagonally adjacent does not count for a win. The way you play is, players take turns, starting with player one.

When it's your turn, you say, put me to work. Players may then offer to pay you one or more dollars in any order. So anyone can just say, I'll give you this. You have to accept the highest payment, except if there's a tie.

Because with specific denominations there is very likely to be a tie. Then you get to choose which of the highest bidders you can take. The person who pays then tells you what move to make. And if no one offers to pay you, you get to decide what to do. And then it's the next player's turn, and you would continue until one player wins.

Just off the top of your heads, having not even played it-- it's tough to critique games when you haven't played. But just looking at the rules and hearing about it and even-- I love that picture on the left, because it embodies some of the spirit of the play, too. What are some interesting things about this rule set of that you notice?

AUDIENCE: You play with money, but you won't win money?

GUEST SPEAKER: Well, that's an interesting question. What happens to the money at the end of the game?

AUDIENCE: Who knows? Do you keep it?

AUDIENCE: It's unclear.

GUEST SPEAKER: Very unclear. That's one of the things that's really great about this game, is that it puts you into these social situations where now you're playing with real currency that was your own. And now it's like, what happens to this? It says you win if your piece-- but maybe you feel like you win if you moved those pieces and you have the most money at the end of the game. You've got this kind of weird economy in here.

I think the fact that it's not explicit in this rule set is great. That's what creates this potential for an interesting social dynamic. Other things that are interesting about this game?

AUDIENCE: If you're the only person who has money, then you can basically win.

GUEST SPEAKER: You can basically win if you're the only person who has money, yeah. So it does require a little bit of strategy, too.

AUDIENCE: Technically, from that set of-- could you win on the first turn, because it seems you only have two pieces of a certain color.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, but the right is still the starting position.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, I know. And so on your turn, you could take one-- your piece and have it be moved to the square right next to yours.

AUDIENCE: No.

AUDIENCE: Move to any adjacent--

AUDIENCE: Oh, you have to move it--

AUDIENCE: Read the rule in the red there.

AUDIENCE: Oh, any adjacent number, okay. I didn't read the adjacent part.

GUEST Yeah, it's any adjacent or empty square.

SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: It's actually really interesting.

GUEST Yeah, it's a really weird-- I also think you're not-- the agency you have in the game to win is not by moving your own pieces, it's by paying someone to do the work for you. So then we get back to this quote at the beginning, "You load 16 tons and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt."

SPEAKER:

It's like, what is this game about. It could be about a lot of things. And we honestly probably shouldn't dissect it until we've played it. I think, too, the corrugated cardboard, it gets hot inside of there, if you're not outside. And that's a really interesting thing, too. You're in there, it's hot, it's sweaty, you've got dirty money in your hands, you're moving around these sizable-- they have weight to them.

That was really important, too. This could have been played around a table with go-pieces or something, painted go-pieces. But these are substantial steel pieces that you've got to pick up and move.

Obviously the song was about manual labor. So this is a really interesting game. This was released at the Art History of Games conference last year. And it did well at IndieCade this year. It won the Developers Choice Award. And it's really cool. I want to try to get it up to MIT so that we can all play it.

AUDIENCE: It occurs to me that if you went by rules where you keep the money you get to the end of the game, you basically could throw the game to get all the money.

GUEST Yeah, you could try. But people are gonna know what you're doing. Because they're going to see you're shiny. So

SPEAKER: it's--

AUDIENCE: I'm not gonna pay you back.

GUEST Yeah, the multiplayer gets-- the multiplayer, the game gets in it. Just cycling back to what we're talking about, is

SPEAKER: this art? It would be hard for me to call it much of anything else. So this is one of my favorite games. It's certainly my favorite that Jason's ever made. Who's played Gravitation here? A couple of games? Alright, cool. And a bunch of you haven't. That's awesome. So I'll get one of you to play it.

One thing I want to point out with this-- we can talk after someone's played Gravitation, a little bit about what we think about the game itself. But I think this quote is interesting. He has artist statements with all of his games. Some of them say more, some of them say less.

This one responded briefly 'cause this was after Passage was released. And I think you guys have all seen Passage, right? You can immediately identify the aesthetic similarities because the character is exactly the same. He was responding to criticism from people about his pixel art, and why did he go for Pixel art.

He says, "I now see ultra-low res pixel art as a kind of digital cartooning. It stands right on the line between the symbolic and the representational, leaving plenty of room for viewer interpretation. Why draw sideburns when the viewers can imagine sideburns on their own. You just need to give them something to pin their imagination on, something to guide them a bit. Cartoons are perfect for that."

I think it's a really interesting point. And I think what he's also suggesting here, which is maybe not clear, is that this is doing a similar thing to what that quote from the music does. It's priming your experience of the play. You load up this game, you see that it's got this low-res pixel art that we now associate with this kind of art game movement, and you're ready to read this in another way.

If I gave you a first-person shooter and told you nothing about it except that it was gonna be the fastest, awesomest, multiplayer first-person shooter experience, but it looked like this, would you be inclined to read it like an art game? I don't know. But certainly in this instance with these kind of little games, this pixel-art aesthetic that you see being duplicated in a lot of places, is sort of priming the pump. It's establishing some sort of context in which you can read this game.

So who wants to play Gravitation? Oops, no, that's not what's supposed to happen.

Why did it click on link. Oh, 'cause I clicked on my screen, not on this screen. All that does is take me out of here. Yay.

AUDIENCE: Me not being here, it might be a problem. Let's see. Let's see what screen it's logged up on. One.

GUEST SPEAKER: Hold on one sec. I've got a mirror on my screen. I should not be choosing who plays. Who wants to-- I can't make the choice. Who wants to do it?

AUDIENCE: Interesting that it's a version zero. You have to explicitly make that the case.

GUEST SPEAKER: Anybody. It's free to download, so if you don't play it now, you can play it on your own.

AUDIENCE: We have a few games, right?

GUEST SPEAKER: Yeah, we have a few. We have a few opportunities, so anybody jump over and play.

AUDIENCE: Just talk with Jason, and then we'll do join me in Dubai--

GUEST SPEAKER: And actually, if you wouldn't mind talking about your experience to play Gravitation as you play it. Let's play, but live, say.

[GAME MUSIC]

AUDIENCE: I seem to have a restricted view, and it's falling. I caught it.

AUDIENCE: She stole your ball.

GUEST SPEAKER: She seemed to like you, but she stole it for the moment. Now she seems to be playing, which is better.

AUDIENCE: We seem to-- he bats it back and forth and my screen gets bigger whenever I especially do so. And it's getting brighter.

AUDIENCE: It gets bigger when she loves you.

AUDIENCE: It changes this fiery thing and it seems to be batting the ball more. [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

AUDIENCE: You're on fire. [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

AUDIENCE: I'm on fire. This seems bad. Now I'm really confused.

AUDIENCE: You should go to the furnace.

AUDIENCE: Oh, now you're not on fire. That makes sense. Whoa!

AUDIENCE: Wait, can you bounce the ball up there? I didn't see anything that showing me how to get up there. Oh, here we go.

AUDIENCE: Isn't that always the case?

AUDIENCE: What's that star? Uh-oh. Well, now you can bounce the ball up here.

AUDIENCE: Oh, you can jump higher when she loves you.

AUDIENCE: --the size of the screen.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, that's how high you can jump . OK, so-- I guess maybe bounce it more to get higher?

AUDIENCE: You're losing her.

AUDIENCE: I'm on fire again. Oh, but you're gonna be on fire in a while. She's not gonna love you very soon.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, apparently getting the stars is also good.

AUDIENCE: It seems it goes faster and faster the higher up you get, I think. Or maybe the more stars you eat.

AUDIENCE: And that's all ice. Oh, yes. She seems happier when I bounce the ball. I guess-- so I don't have a which is I think the start of it because the stars into the fire so that they melt or something. [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

AUDIENCE: Oh, now it's a star. Interesting.

AUDIENCE: Well, there's been [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

AUDIENCE: What?

AUDIENCE: All right. Look what's [UNINTELLIGIBLE] into the fire.

AUDIENCE: Otherwise, he's gonna have a hammer.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, you're dead.

AUDIENCE: The numbers of the stars are all going down. The ball can't get to you. It's [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

AUDIENCE: OK, now I can-- --push the ice into the fire?

AUDIENCE: And the number on the top goes up every time you-- yeah, the numbers on the star corresponds to how many, like--

AUDIENCE: You know, fire seems like it would be bad.

AUDIENCE: Yeah.

AUDIENCE: Try to get rid of the ice--

AUDIENCE: But she doesn't want to play.

AUDIENCE: That's because I got rid of the ice. He was happy I think.

AUDIENCE: Oh, it's getting icy, though. It's getting colder. There's no way to recharge my thing, though.

**GUEST
SPEAKER:** I think you just have to go higher. This is where you were last time, I think. Yeah, there.

AUDIENCE: That was really like--

AUDIENCE: Do you think [UNINTELLIGIBLE] too fast, and your hair's burning, that means you just gave him too much love, and he starts falling really fast.

AUDIENCE: Oh, no.

AUDIENCE: But there's a counter on the ice blocks of the stars, and you get more points if you get them into the furnace faster. I think they went down and he started warming up in the furnace. The warmer the world, the less points you get for de-icing?

AUDIENCE: Is this about global warming?

AUDIENCE: I think he's on drugs. He gets love from this girl, and then the ice and the stars make you happy, but only for a little bit. Yeah. Yeah.

AUDIENCE: So if I'm on fire it seems to reduce at a much faster rate. [INAUDIBLE] said

AUDIENCE: I think it's about drugs. I think everything's about drugs. I mean, yeah, obviously.

AUDIENCE: You can actually catch the purple guy into that cave.

AUDIENCE: Oh, no.

AUDIENCE: It's a really stupid design, going all the way back down there.

**GUEST
SPEAKER:** There's a [INAUDIBLE] on the right, you can fall faster.

AUDIENCE: The higher you climb, the further you fall.

AUDIENCE: Ooh, poetic.

AUDIENCE: Now I probably have a [UNINTELLIGIBLE] stars, so I think they need to play--

AUDIENCE: She's gone.

AUDIENCE: She's dead. You killed her.

AUDIENCE: So sad. And it's not the fire left.

AUDIENCE: Oh, no.

AUDIENCE: And the fire isn't bringing things back.

AUDIENCE: Oh, my god. You didn't get any stars for her, so she died. She eats stars.

AUDIENCE: Oh, there you go. Is she there now? The fire started warming you again.

AUDIENCE: Nope. She's gone forever. You can't play ball alone.

AUDIENCE: When she's gone. Maybe she only comes in the spring. Maybe winter's too cold. So maybe if I wait by the fire.

AUDIENCE: Does it go faster right there?

AUDIENCE: Yeah, why is it getting bigger?

AUDIENCE: 'Cause he's by the fire. It's getting warmer.

AUDIENCE: That wasn't working earlier.

AUDIENCE: Now it is.

AUDIENCE: He's at rock bottom.

AUDIENCE: Looks like it's spring.

AUDIENCE: But when she--

AUDIENCE: How high can you jump right now?

AUDIENCE: Can you hit the ball?

AUDIENCE: Pretty high. That's a lot of jumbos.

AUDIENCE: No, I can't hit the ball.

AUDIENCE: Only she can hit the ball.

AUDIENCE: While you're increasing, you should probably go up and get--

AUDIENCE: Go up. Go up. Go up.

AUDIENCE: Ah, there you go.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE] stop [INAUDIBLE]. It stopped contracting, too.

AUDIENCE: You're on fire now.

AUDIENCE: He's on fire.

AUDIENCE: Can you go [UNINTELLIGIBLE] high if he's on fire?

AUDIENCE: Uh-oh. Whoa. Four stars.

AUDIENCE: Are you getting all of them?

AUDIENCE: That might have been a bit of overdose.

AUDIENCE: You totally OD'd on stars just there.

AUDIENCE: Or, or, you can only hold four, and then it retracts and you get four that turn to ice blocks.

AUDIENCE: What? That was intense.

AUDIENCE: That's a lot of falling.

AUDIENCE: There was so much energy.

AUDIENCE: Wait. No. No.

AUDIENCE: You won. Yay! Now what you won is a good question.

GUEST SPEAKER: That's Gravitation. Actually, I'm not even kidding. That's certainly my favorite Jason Rohrer game. It's one of my favorite games. And I think even just the example of you guys playing is great, because you're just shouting out all these different ideas for what it could be about. There's some clear intentionality in his design with this game, in terms of the system's trying to communicate something that's other than just engagement or fun. Was it fun?

AUDIENCE: Yeah.

GUEST SPEAKER: Oh, all right. Cool. Yeah, it's pretty good. Thoughts on what it's about? I heard a couple people be like, drugs.

AUDIENCE: It's definitely drugs. I saw tons of analogies.

GUEST SPEAKER: Yeah, it's kind of like drugs.

AUDIENCE: Or love. Or both.

AUDIENCE: Love is a drug.

AUDIENCE: Your relationship versus whatever you're trying to do for your career.

GUEST SPEAKER: Yeah. I think it's like the ultimate MIT game. If I told you that this was his daughter, would it change your interpretations of the game?

AUDIENCE: Yes.

GUEST SPEAKER: So now, if you know that that's his daughter, what do you think it's about?

AUDIENCE: Neglect.

AUDIENCE: Job versus family.

GUEST He says explicitly, before you play, that this is a game of motivation. He doesn't go too far into telling you what
SPEAKER: the game is specifically about. I think playing through it a couple times-- I will tell you the first time I played and I came back down and she was gone, it was very upsetting for me. I was like, and I don't know if it's just I was ready to play it that way, or my life stage or something like that. But the idea of he's playing with his daughter, that inspires him, he travels, and then one of these days if you're gone too long, she grows up. I don't know if she dies, but--

AUDIENCE: He didn't bring her any money. Because she had no money, she dies [INAUDIBLE].

GUEST So I think this is a really--
SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: What did they say, it's a game about motivation?

GUEST It is, yeah.
SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: Or she OD'd on drugs.

GUEST It's free. If you just Google-search Gravitation Jason Rohrer, you'll find the links to it. You'll find his artist
SPEAKER: statement, which I think is really good to read. Again, with John Sharp's point about declare your intentionality. Whatever you say what game's about is important. I think this qualifies, at least for me, as art. It's doing things that I see other piece of art doing.

GUEST OK, so Paolo Pedercini-- how many over time? Oh, good. Paolo Pedercini is one of my favorite game designers
SPEAKER: right now. This game actually is one of his newest ones, and I think it's hilarious and great. It's called Memory Reloaded The Downfall. Test your concentration with Memory Reloaded matching game for these unstable times. History may be different from that which you remember.

Who would like to play Memory Reloaded? I'm laughing already, because it's funny. Has anybody played it? I need somebody who's not played it. OK, good. Do you [UNINTELLIGIBLE]?

AUDIENCE: Sure.

GUEST Awesome. OK. You're up.
SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: I will click.

AUDIENCE: Don't do it. Oh, you're on.

AUDIENCE: You're done. You lost already.

AUDIENCE: --go away. It's kind of scary. I could already see what they can do. You're gonna play a game switch on me. Afghan Freedom Fighters. He's gonna be a terrorist later. Migrant Workforce. Migrant workforce. Iraqi Oil. Afghan Freedom Fighter.

AUDIENCE: I bet if you grab Iraqi Oil before Afghan Freedom Fighter, it becomes terrorist. Global Inequality. Peace in Palestine. Global Inequality. Global Inequality. Yes. Global Inequality. Yes.

GUEST
SPEAKER: All right.

AUDIENCE: I'm doing well. Ruthless Banker. Loan shark. Was Iraqi Oil here? No. Universal Health Care. Man-made Global Warming. Natural Global Warming. Ha! Hey, not cool. Universal Health Care. Universal Health Care. Sweet. Oh. One over. There.

Peace in Palestine. There we go. Wait. Needy Banker. Ruthless Banker. Does it matter, the order you click them in? Ruthless Banker. What? What did the other one [UNINTELLIGIBLE]? There we go. Nice. So that means now-- He's never a satisfied banker. What the hell? Oh, dear. Did we? Shoot. Better move.

GUEST
SPEAKER: This-- [INAUDIBLE] Natural Climate [INAUDIBLE].

AUDIENCE: Oh, I get it. That's fun. Is that the entire game?

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yes, that is the whole game. Of course, you get different outcomes. Yeah, that's the idea. I think you guys have seen some of the Molleindustria's [UNINTELLIGIBLE] You guys saw Every Day the Same Dream?

AUDIENCE: I like that one.

GUEST
SPEAKER: Which is interesting. Yeah, that one's also one of my favorite games. This is looking at another kind of sector of art, the activist political statement sector of art is doing that through games, and it's something-- this music too [INAUDIBLE]-- something that he does particularly well with his games. And I think this one's particularly interesting and kind of funny.

I love the reworking of a really classic game mechanic. The entire point of memory is your expectation that they would be the same the second time you turn it over. And when it changes on you, it really worsens that kind of perspective, I suppose imbalance, that can exist when you're not just turning over Toadstools and Bowsers, but actual, interesting things. I love the crying, sweating polar bear with a beach chair. It actually cracks me up.

Humor is actually something that shouldn't be ignored here. If we remember, that was one of the central Fluxus things, this idea of satire. Humor is important. So I think Paolo Pedercini's work is really awesome. Again, for me, it's certainly arcing up.

This game's really cool. Who's played Love? A few people who's played Love? All right, cool. I'd love someone who has not played Love to play for a little bit.

I don't know if we can play the whole game. This is actually a game that I really don't like, but I like the things that it does, if that makes any sense. It bothers me for some reason. And yet-- it's such an articulate statement, this game bothers me-- but I think it's worth looking at, because he's doing a particularly interesting thing, Alexander Ocas. I suppose it's a soft C, Ocas. I have the sound turned off. I'm sorry, top right.

[GAME MUSIC]

AUDIENCE: If you say, yes, will he like not teach you how to play?

AUDIENCE: Don't touch the buttons. It's like [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

GUEST
SPEAKER: There's two paths.

AUDIENCE: Can you find them?

AUDIENCE: [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. I'm not gonna listen--

AUDIENCE: It says travel the lower paths.

AUDIENCE: Who's gonna be able to listen to all this?

AUDIENCE: What's appearing?

GUEST
SPEAKER: Weird slowdown.

AUDIENCE: You [UNINTELLIGIBLE] disobey him.

AUDIENCE: What? I can't hit the red blocks now?

AUDIENCE: Disgusting. [INAUDIBLE]

AUDIENCE: Just give us not only art, it's all so [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

AUDIENCE: Patience. Yay.

AUDIENCE: Those are red.

AUDIENCE: I know. That means they can't touch him.

AUDIENCE: Don't do it. Don't do it, dude.

AUDIENCE: Do it.

AUDIENCE: Do it.

AUDIENCE: Do it.

AUDIENCE: You're just gonna have to go back to the part that was just hard.

AUDIENCE: You get red blocks when you disobey.

AUDIENCE: You still can't touch them.

AUDIENCE: So if you disobey, it hides from you what things actually are. Or if you obey, they're getting the victory.

AUDIENCE: It's so funny. Just that little--

AUDIENCE: What are the controls for this?

AUDIENCE: You should disobey.

AUDIENCE: What? Can you no longer jump?

AUDIENCE: I'm just screwing around.

AUDIENCE: He's [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

AUDIENCE: Oh, I thought that was bad.

GUEST This game is well aggravatingly tuned, because it's difficult enough.

SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: Are you doing that intentionally?

AUDIENCE: I just like to.

GUEST It's actually a pretty long game. I encourage you guys to-- it's pretty- it's all flash-based.

SPEAKER:

AUDIENCE: What's the message?

GUEST It's a really good question. Let me just jump in and go back to that place where-- thank you for playing. Thank
SPEAKER: you for playing.

AUDIENCE: Disgusting.

AUDIENCE: You are a changed person because of it. So the question then becomes what's the point, which already we're in a position now where we're asking questions like that. Which is, if you were playing Modern Warfare II, you might say what's the point, and be like, to blow a lot of stuff up, right?

This is the response he had in one of his interviews he gave after his release and said, I wanted to get people to wake up and think about the games they are playing. Much of the industry appears to be pushing in the opposite direction, as we'll have tutorials, holding your hand from beginning to end in subtext, screens for pointless exposition. It is treating players like idiots. It is absolutely infuriating.

When you think about it in terms of the tutorial, if this is the tutorial for playing the game, it's pretty obnoxious. But it's not that much different than the kind of tutorials we encounter in a lot of games that just basically hold your hand and tell you how to do everything. I think he's really confronting that. I guess if I were to say the reasons that I don't like this game, I think the control scheme is actually, it's a weakness.

The game is so hard that, I mean, you saw you couldn't even get to the things that he was trying to communicate. It gets weirder, the further along you get, I can promise you. It's just you have to get really skilled at doing it. There's kind of like a play barrier for entry on it.

It's also, for me, I think dare I say, it almost gets too abstract for me at certain points. Clearly he's trying to say something, but there's nothing I can latch onto to understand what it is. That's entirely his prerogative, but for me, I'm just like, what? I have no clue what this is about at all. So that's a little tricky, not fully grasping. Clearly I'm not-- I'm partially, so it's like the perfect Fluxus piece of art.

OK, so I've only got a couple more to talk about. I've got about 15 minutes. This, I think, is actually one of the most important games we can talk about today, which is Cow Clicker. Who's played Cow Clicker? Yay. This is by Ian Bogost-- that's the guy we saw earlier.

And he said, Cow Clicker is a Facebook game about Facebook games. It's partly a satire and partly a playable theory of today's social games, and partly an earnest example of that genre. So this is kind of like a classic sort of art thing to do. You take something that you're going to satire, and you make a version of that, that maybe does something differently, but it's fundamentally what you are satiring.

It's like the Andy Kaufman comedic kind of style. You just assume that kind of character or role. It's something that I think is like joyfully subversive in doing satire. So hopefully I'm logged into Facebook so you can see. I haven't clicked recently, so you guys can witness one of my clicks. [UNINTELLIGIBLE] Facebook is down. Facebook is canceled forever.

AUDIENCE: Yes. [LAUGHTER] It actually has no friends. It's also possible that the wireless-- the wireless in that corner is kind of bad.

GUEST
SPEAKER: Should I switch to Google Guest? I can actually, before we can see it, I can talk a little bit about the sort of interesting controversy that Cow Clicker is creating. It's making money. Let me try Google Guest. I'm not connected. How about now? It seems to be working better.

AUDIENCE: You're still not--

GUEST
SPEAKER: The last part of his statement is about an earnest effort at a game. It is fundamentally a Facebook game. You can see I've got 5 mooney and my next click is in a minute and 40-- ah, man, I missed one of my clicks. But maybe if we wait while I talk about it you can witness one of my clicks. Oh, wait, I actually have some clicks left. I've got one this week.

AUDIENCE: That's in two hours?

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yeah, it looks like that's when I get my next one. So basically you can click your cow. Why can I not click my cow here. But you can click your cow, and then you can-- oh, it's because I'm on scroll? Anyway, you can click your cow, and then you can use your mooney to buy new cows that are fundamentally the same thing as other cows, just with aesthetic differences.

So plain cow. These are the cows I have. I have a plain cow and a steel cow. I haven't been playing a lot of Cow Clicker. If I go to buy a cow, I can buy a new cow. So you can see lots of different cows. They cost you in game currency.

AUDIENCE: Paisley cow.

GUEST
SPEAKER: Holy cow. Oil cow [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. It's got a BP logo. Cute. Like the [UNINTELLIGIBLE] cows. That's pretty good. So there's lots of different cows. You can buy cows, you can give cows, you can invite a cow, there's cow rankings.

AUDIENCE: You can buy a cow.

GUEST So you can see, mooney's actually pretty inflated at this point. You can get 10 mooney for 50 cents, which is pretty good, 1,000 for \$10, which is awesome. And collect a lot of cows. You can trade cows. And you can go to your friends barns and see how many cows they have. And you can click on your cows when you make your appointment to actually visit a cow.

So I think you can see how he's poking fun at things like FarmVille things like Ravenwood Fair, which I'm obsessed with now, actually, these kind of games where all you're fundamentally doing is clicking and acquiring an in-game currency that's you can then use for in-game goods. But then, of course, you reach this barrier where you don't have enough in-game currency and you use moo currency.

Of course the interesting thing is there are 500,000 people playing this. I don't know if it's that many. It's a lot. If you go to the Cow Clicker front page it'll tell us. It just [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. Where does it say how many players there are?

AUDIENCE: Ranking, probably in ranking. He's milking the cow clicker. You can see this person's-- Monica's--

AUDIENCE: Is the cow--

AUDIENCE: Is that their all-time clicks or this week's clicks?

AUDIENCE: Is there a--

GUEST Here we go, yeah, yeah. 12,000 monthly active users. That's 500,000 in a business [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. But that's a lot of people. And he's making some interesting money on it. And I think one of the things that was important that he did is there's an active forum where people can talk about it. So it is a little bit weirdly controversial, 'cause he made this game that is poking fun at Facebook games. And yet it is a Facebook game and presumably making some money, too.

But I think it's really good. This is the kind of art that's also important, where it's taking what we do and purposely looking at how is it constructed and how it's set up and forcing us to kind of be introspective about the things that we do and the way that we engage.

So this is a kind of subversive game design that I think along the lines of Paolo Pedercini's work and even Gonzalo Frasca if forcing us to look at how we interact. And Cow Clicker-- So that's that one.

And I've got like 15 minutes. Phillip asked me to talk a little bit about some work that I'm doing in this space. So I'm gonna talk to you about a game, it's still a work in progress. It's tentatively entitled Before and Now, and it's by me. And the idea from it is it's inspired by Fluxus boxes and those Flux kits.

I'm really interested in physically tangible games. I don't know why I'm all of a sudden obsessed with holding something. But I was at IndieCade and I heard again-- and this is the question that drives me more nuts than the are video games art question, although they're interestingly related. But it's when will we have the Citizen Kane in video games?

It drives me absolutely nuts. I think 80% of the time people who say that have never seen Citizen Kane. I don't really know that. But I heard it for the umpteenth time at IndieCade. I wanted to throw the television out of my hotel room window. And I was going nuts. And I was like, all right, what is Citizen Kane about? I don't want to spoil it. Who's seen Citizen Kane in this room actually? All right, good.

So I see Citizen Kane and it's about this very interesting idea about presents and mementos and happiness in a very kind of real way. And the temporality of happiness, like are you happy now? Were you happy then? Do you remember being happy? When is happiness?

And so I was like, well, I'm going to make a Citizen Kane in video games, but it's not gonna be known for being epically innovative with camera movement. It's going to be about the things I think Citizen Kane are about. So it's basically in this form, although I'm rethinking what kind of box it's gonna be in. But in this form it's a box.

And inside of it are various objects that start out as-- the starting objects of the box are the things that have personal significance to me. One of the rules of the game, in fact, I think the most important rule of the game is this one. Rule number one, you may permanently exchange an object of personal significance for any object of equal value. So when you're playing this game, you can take something that belongs to you, and you can exchange it for anything in the box.

And of course, the interesting thing is these objects in the box are of varying degrees of interactivity. You can [INAUDIBLE] so you can draw something on the Etch A Sketch. The rules are kind of veiled at this moment now, where's there's like a couple other rules that are causing to reflect. This is actually an extension of Yup on Word which is a project we worked on in the summer, which was a game that as you're playing it's a platform where you're typing, and the game stops and asks you personal questions.

What I really liked about that is it was doing something that I was referring to as a mechanic of reflection, where the activity of playing is reflecting, is thinking, is contemplating. It's not interactive in a very active way as we think of it, it's more reflective. I liken it to the moments in chess where you're planning your move. There's not a lot of action in chess. But it's a lot of contemplation in chess. So if it's personal-- what if that were personal. And so what I didn't particularly care about with Yup on Word it inspires you to reflect, but it doesn't do it with tremendous grace. It just asks you a question. It just comes up out of the blue and and says, hey, when was the last time you lied? Sometimes you're surprised by that, and that's a good effect, but it's also not subtle.

So I'm trying to explore how can we be subtle in causing reflection. So there are a few things here. The value question is interesting. How do you know what the value of the object is in the box? Do you think of it as monetary value? Do you think of it as value in terms of significance to the person who put that in there?

Why is it significant to the person who put that in there? What is this thing? You can look at it and reflect. And then when you leave a trace of yourself in this box, the next person who comes and plays is going to see that. And they're going to wonder what was that. So I'm also kind of interested the organicness, the kind of never-ending, interminable nature of a game that carries the effect of the person who's played it on and on and on.

The next iteration of this that I want to do-- actually this was an idea that Jason Bean gave me was to use an apothecary chest. Because one of the things that we play-tested it here with-- I left it out for two weeks and people-- you probably saw it. It's right there. People were engaging in-- this is a photo with objects that people had left in.

So it was really fun for me after two weeks to go into this box and be like, what is all this stuff. What got left? I was actually surprised the Etch A Sketch was left. And then I was like, what is this stuff? And to give you one really good example, one person at the lab put in a Nintendo DS flash card, which was really a wrapped DS flash card.

So now there's this kind of next level. The game has changed with another level of interactivity, where it's like, if I want to get at what was the significance of this object to this person, I need to get a DS and play this. So I open up the-- it's got folders, and it's got a copy of the game Lemming. It's got some music in it. So now it's kind of like you've uncovered this next layer. And it's like the interesting traces of the people who played this game are now marked onto this box forever.

Marley even said to me-- I was talking to her about her play after she had done it, and I was like-- She told me she wanted to take the instructions. She wanted to take the rules. That's one of the objects that she could take out of that. And I told her I had thought about that actually when I was designing it, that someone might be like, ha, I'm going to take the rules.

And I was going to put in a rule that said you can permanently exchange for an object that's not the rules, so that the game could persist. But I didn't want to artificially impose that. If someone takes the rules because that's what they want, and now the game has changed. And maybe someone comes along later and modifies it. And maybe they put something in that makes it a whole new, different game.

And I really liked the idea that you could encounter this game and that it's gonna be in this state of flux, I guess you could say. That's what I'm working on now. And like I said, I think one of the things I didn't like is that all of the objects are accessible all at once. So if it's an apothecary chest with lots of drawers, this was Jason Bean's idea, then you have to do a little exploring.

And maybe the rules are in one of those drawers. And maybe you see the rules first. Maybe you see the rules way after you've looked at a lot of stuff. And now you've seen all this stuff and played with it all and you really like something. And now it's like, ooh, what do I trade?

And yeah, I also am trying to find a way to give the box a history as well. I've contemplated some ideas of putting in some kind of clues that you could then, if you felt, if you thought about it or looked it up, you might be able to find a story to this box. Like if you did an Internet search you might come up on a fake website-- well, it wouldn't be fake, it'd just be a website-- but a website with a fake story that tells you a little bit about this box, and then it gives you a few more hooks into what the meaning of this game or the inspiration for this game was. And so this is one of my projects that I'm working on right now, like I said, I'm interested in essentially. But you can see where a lot of the other things that I was talking about are inspiring this work. And so we come back to that question of, are games art?

Of course we only have five minutes. I don't know if you guys have administrative stuff afterwards. But this is, like I said, this is my viewpoint. It's certainly shared with a lot of people. But it's not guaranteed truth. This is an opinion that I have just shared.

Any thoughts you guys have about this subject or these ideas or these games? Anything at all? Yesterday's football game?

AUDIENCE: [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

GUEST Well, cool. I hope this was useful. I hope it was helpful. I think if, at the very least, it causes you to continue to think about your own games that you're developing and how meaning can be embedded in the play that you might not even realize is there. And also just to count the possibility space. I really am excited by-- I'm discouraged by the safe choices that a lot of independent game developers make and excited when some game developers really push on the edge.

I don't think we have a clear understanding of what the rules are or what even constitutes a game. Or what degree of interactivity is appropriate for a quote/unquote game. And I think some of these designers are really testing the waters of the medium, you know, what can we really do with this?

Where can we go? How edgy and satirical and avant-garde can we be? I think that's always good. 'Cause I'm a revolutionary, crazy person.

AUDIENCE: Crazy person.

AUDIENCE: Hope 7 played yet one more this year, which were some of the games that Abe worked with the team on over the summer. Those are all on our GAMBIT website, just until 2010 and as yet [UNINTELLIGIBLE] which we're booked about this summer. This sounds like tri-season will be digital work.

GUEST Yeah, and please play them and give us feedback, too, right? Because that's the other thing. These are not perfect articulations of game as the pure art form. We're constantly evolving and trying to improve, so any feedback you can give us on this stuff is greatly appreciated.

AUDIENCE: Do you still have that box, like somewhere?

GUEST Yeah, yeah. It's in my office. Yeah, totally. I have the box and the other part of it is when I do the second version of it in the apothecary kind of chest-- The one thing that's important to me is that each of the-- For the prototype I just sort of threw some reasonably meaningful objects in there. But I want it to be populated with objects that are personally significant to myself or symbolic to myself.

And populating that box at the outset with meaningful objects I think is important, because once it's released into the world for play that it's constantly changing. So that first instantiation of the game is the one that's about me in some sense, and about my experiences and then it becomes the world's to just play.

AUDIENCE: So the way that your game kind of reminds me of is I'm pretty sure I heard somewhere that some person had a pen. He started with a pen and kept trading--

AUDIENCE: The red paper--

AUDIENCE: No. This is a different one. Not the red paper clip for a car. I think someone started with a pen or something and kept trading it. And over the course of a year or two, he'd got-- From that initial pen, he was able to trade for a house or something.

GUEST It was [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. And that was sort of an interesting-- I think it was on eBay, too, or something like that.

SPEAKER: And that's even using a pretty well-designed game system-- 'cause eBay is totally a game-- and using a game system and subverting the system itself to do something really interesting. Yeah, that's a really great-- it's a game inside of a game. I love that. It's kind of like the Cow Clicker, like making a game inside of the game that subverts--

AUDIENCE: Are you familiar with the concept of geo-caching? When I first saw-- the game you were talking about using [UNINTELLIGIBLE] reminded me of it. So initially what it was, was when GPS's first came out, people were like, oh, hey, this is really cool technology. We should think of something fun to do with it. So what they did was, these people started hiding empty tins of little trinkets and stuff on various hiking trails or other locations. And you would look up the coordinates on your GPS finder, and you would find this box. And then you'd trade trinkets, and you get them. And you keep traveling to these other--

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yeah, and in that sense this whole worldwide game becomes-- There's some shared ideas with some location-based games that do some really interesting things with that, whether it's alternate reality, but not even with the narrative. There was one I was reading about that was, come out and play, I think, in New York City at one point. It was Cruel to be Kind, it was called.

It was a game where you don't know who's playing, you don't know who's on what team, but you get missions and you get a weapon that's a complement, like to kill someone who's on the other team, mistake them for a celebrity, or something like that. So you're using these random acts of kindness-- you know, helping somebody across the street-- and you don't know, it's in New York City, so you don't know if someone's playing the game.

So now all of a sudden you're wandering around doing really nice things for people on the chance, on a hunch that you have that maybe they're playing the game. And maybe they're not, so you've just helped somebody across the street, which is totally nice. And it comes to this massive conclusion where you just have these two giant teams who meet up in a location to "nice" each other to death, basically.

There's a lot of really, really interesting stuff, especially in the location-based, around. Big games are really cool. There's a lot of people doing really neat stuff with big games.

AUDIENCE: I think in particular with the box and the geo-caching idea, and talking about the paperclip-for-a-house thing, it's really interesting how people value things. In particular, you have this very vague rule, and it just says something of equal value. And what does it actually mean? Like what someone is willing to trade for something else.

GUEST
SPEAKER: Yeah, those are the kind of implicit rules like you see in Sixteen Tons, where it's like, what happens with the money? Jason Bean really pointed it out, 'cause he was thinking about value when he was doing the trading. And it's such a good word, because value is such a different thing to different people.

Someone might see the flash card for the DS, which has a very clear, higher monetary value than an Etch A Sketch. And yet, maybe you played with an Etch A Sketch when you were a kid, and all of a sudden it floods back these memories that you have. There's also a component to it that I didn't really talk about, which is the sacrificing of an object.

And I think, too, that we tend to be beholden to our material objects too much. In giving it up, in sacrificing it to this game so that you don't have it anymore, if it's something of personal significance, you're letting go and being able to say, OK, the memory is one thing. I don't need to-- And that's how it relates a bit back to Citizen Kane, which is a movie you should see, because it is good. It's everything they said it is, depending on who they are. Cool. Thanks, guys.