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Voices (Towards Other Institutions), Chapter II, #29



False Door of the Mastaba of Unis-Ankh, plate L. from the Annual report of the Director to the Board of Trustees for the year 1906, 1906, © Field Museum of Natural History.

A Room With A Door

On games and the so-called ‘real world’

Until less than a century ago, growing up meant leaving the days of toys and games behind. An adult was someone who had outgrown playing, and who had exchanged the inane freedom of childhood with a serious position as a fully fledged member of society. Then-nascent psychoanalysis immediately warned of the dangers of this sharp cut between “real” life and that of games, especially in terms of its impact on the human psyche. Two World Wars, decades of totalitarianism and the invention of nuclear warfare further stressed this point, until the inhabitants of the 20th century were finally persuaded to relax their attitude towards play and the pleasures of their younger years. The notion of the “teenager” was invented, and with it came the fantasy of creating a middle space between adulthood and childhood, one where a person would be free to move seamlessly between the serious and the ludic. For a little

while, it seemed that the liberation of play was going to take place as a full revolution of everyday life, and as a transformation of the very idea of society. The streets of '68 Paris and of '77 Bologna resounded with chants about 'reclaiming the impossible' and 'abolishing work'. This playful insurrection, however, was destined to die out soon enough. By the 1980s, the forces of capitalism had caught up with the demands for the "gamification" of life, and they presented themselves as those best suited to satisfying this desire – while at the same time erasing any possibility of real social change. The notion of "gamification" acquired a very different tone: no longer revolutionary, but conformist; no longer an insurrection against work, but a full submission to the logics of production.

And here we are, in the age of total gamification, where hyper-exploitation in the workplace is presented as a 'fun' part of life, consumption is a 'game', and even warfare has become indistinguishable from games (at least for those who pilot the drones). How did it go so wrong? What was missed in the understanding of 'games' that allowed for such a complete defacement of what playing means?

It is useful to take a closer look at the overlaps and differences that exist between the so-called 'real' world and the world of play. The overlaps, indeed, are difficult to miss. Games take place within limited, artificial and imaginary spaces which are governed by sets of modifiable rules: when playing 'characters' in a videogame or in physical reality, the players create a world of their own, the reality and structure of which depend on the mutual agreement of all participants. The very same traits, however, could be assigned also to the so-called 'real' world. Institutions such as citizenship, money or gender, for example, are nothing but artificial entities, existing within limited and imaginary spaces of sense (those imaginary spaces where a piece of paper is believed to be worth ten euro, or to testify for someone's belonging to an imaginary community). The so-called 'real world', like games, can be modified by the mutual agreement of its participants – as for example when, during the age of modernity, the people of Europe started to abandon a world full of souls and demons in favour of a gameboard of reality populated by molecules, atoms and electrons. The very notions of 'sense' and

meaning' that govern our lives, being untraceable in nature, are the 'playful' creations of the social mind of a certain age.

But, despite these similarities, it is always possible to distinguish between what society holds as the 'real' world and what is relegated to the airy realm of games. To appreciate the difference, let us imagine two rooms, identical in all their elements: both of them are artificially built, limited in space and modifiable by their occupants. One of the two rooms, however, is provided with a door; the other one isn't. Real games, from chess to roleplay to videogames, allow the players to exit their world at any time, and they do not incur any cost outside of the game for their leaving. If one abandons a game of chess mid-way, the game itself doesn't have the power to sanction the player except for the meaningless notion of 'losing' or 'winning' a match. The player is free to leave the games room and to go to another room in the house, or to leave the house altogether, leaving the match behind. The so-called 'real world', on the contrary, is a room without a door. If one wishes to exit the realms of production, citizenship or gender and so on, the world demands payment that often amounts to their life itself. Although the world and its social institutions are technically indistinguishable from the stuff of games, they use a claim of 'seriousness' and 'reality' to justify the ferocity with which they capture their players.

Back in 1977 Bologna, Dadaist groups such as the Indiani Metropolitani aimed their insurrection specifically at the violent seriousness of the so-called 'real world' – not in order to replace society with chaos but to remind their fellow humans that the world itself, as we inhabit and understand it, is indeed indistinguishable from a game, and that it should be treated as such. Play was to take over the world, and society was to become a space of free passage between countless ways of understanding life and reality. The capitalist backlash that immediately followed it, with the malign acuteness that is typical of Neoliberalism, responded by turning these two terms 'world' and 'play' on their heads. Under the misleading label of 'gamification', contemporary society has imprisoned the playfulness of games within the door-less room of the so-called 'real world'. Nowadays, games are reduced to being

the instruments of exploitation, of hyperconsumption and even of the latest, cowardly forms of long-distance warfare. By abolishing the distinction between work and play, between art and life, contemporary society has attempted to desertify the realm of play, and along with it, to do away with any chance of conceiving of an exit from our present condition.

If the ideologues of contemporary society actually exist somewhere, we may imagine them laughing gleefully, while donning their goofy teenage caps and logging into their Animal Crossing account on the way to a board meeting. They might believe that the real world's war against play has been won once and for all, not with the hard approach of their puritan forefathers but with the tricks of soft power. They wouldn't be the first ones to think that the cage of the world has at long last been able to capture the totality of life and to sterilise any ability to imagine an altogether different reality.

While they laugh, like so many emperors and tyrants before them, they might not notice that somewhere in their door-less room, perhaps in the shadows hiding in the corners, the old mole of play is once again digging a tunnel through the plaster, through the bricks and beyond the wall. Until one day, as has happened countless times in history, the prison that they built will be emptied of its inmates, and "everything that is covered up will be revealed."