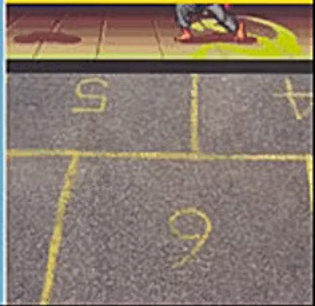
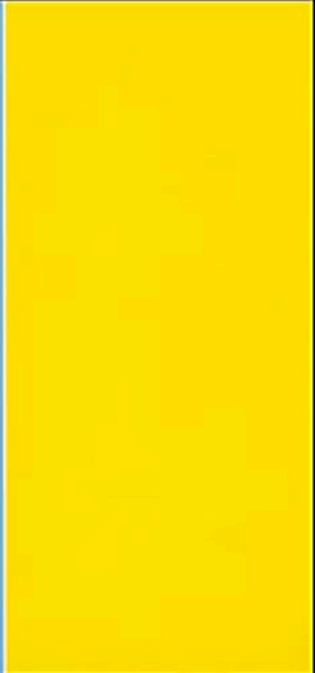


Katie Salen | Eric Zimmerman

# Rules of Play

Game Design Fundamentals



## Piercing the Spectacle

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Afterword for *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, eds. The MIT Press, 2005.

*The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images. —Guy Debord in The Society of the Spectacle, 1967.*

In our media-saturated world today, fewer and fewer experiences outside the spectacle present themselves to us. We must seek them out; a hike in open country may require several hours of travel to the trailhead, passing fast-food joints and gas stations clumped along the highway like fungi on rotting logs. The same junk sprouts out of all the screens in our lives—televisions, computers, PDAs and cell phones. Commercials and brands, spam and flickering web ads, friendly text messages from your cellular service provider, product placements in movies and computer games, all reminding—or rather un-minding—us of the web of politico-consumerism in which we are enmeshed like spiders' snacks, stashed for hungry marketers and politicians. The spectacle holds us fast.

“You have a mighty low opinion of us, Dr. Laurel,” you might say. “We are free people. We aren't passive consumers; we're *players*.” And you would have a valid point. Interactivity as we constructed it back in the days of early PCs and console games was a very hopeful thing. How not-TV it was to play a game of *Star Raiders*! But read the texts of our games, examine the roles of our player-characters, and see how we *enact* the spectacle—of wars and fast cars, of crimes and disasters and the other fare of the evening news, of heroic acts in magical worlds so far from our perceived agency in our daily lives as to engage us wholly in alternate universes of possibility.

I used to be fond of saying that people will always know the difference between media and reality. What I have come to understand is that, while we may know the difference very well, we are rarely called by representations of choice and action to enact our power more robustly in the real world. No, games are not rehearsals for life. Through fantasies of agency we are entrained to satiate our needs for personal power in a realm where we can create no real disturbance to the web of control that enfolds us.

What of those innocent games that simply occupy our time with pleasurable interaction? In an interview about Digital Chocolate, a company that builds games for web phones, EA founder Trip Hawkins said: “The first products we put out at Digital Chocolate to be honest (don't) do very much. And yet what (they) do is addictive and compelling....The games are geared to help you win. People get hooked.” [*USA Today*, 9/13/04] You heard the man. The philosophy of games as business—to get people hooked—hasn't changed much since Trip first started his trip. And while it may be all innocent fun, I wonder how it changes us.

A key premise of the mobile-technology game industry is that it's just too damned boring to sit on a train or wait in a line without doing something to distract your brain and hands. Idleness, slowness, contemplation, being mentally present in a situated context have no place in this wired world. But for those who were alive before this hyperactive culture grew up around us, it was during those interstices of life's activities that we breathed, relaxed, observed, thought things over. Listen up—even the smallest fragments of your idle time have now been colonized with meaningless, addictive junk. Junk that is part of the fabric of the spectacle.

For thirty years, people have been talking about using the magic of computer games in the service of learning. Why, when we are willing to learn so much detailed stuff to play a computer game, can't we simply design games in which that detailed stuff has some educational value? Why for thirty years have we failed at this? One reason comes immediately to mind. We think of that "stuff" as "mere" content. But content always has implications for action attached to it. Give me a game with mathematical concepts as its content and I'll show you a game that reminds me of sitting in a classroom, learning and doing things with no demonstrable personal relevance. Educational games typically fail to populate the dimension of action with choices that are personally relevant, creative or powerful.

The construction of public education in America is very much about the spectacle. School imparts basic principles, information, and skills. The information is not to be questioned. Now more than ever, the skills are about passing tests. School embodies an authority structure in which the rules are predetermined and transgressions are punished. Team sports in school subvert the sense of play by reinforcing a notion of ritual competition within a status hierarchy. Students pass from the arms of education into the arms of consumerism with virtually no change in the construction of power and personal agency. Yes, we can vote when we come of age. But that is rather like choosing between red and blue in today's America. Those students who emerge from high school with good critical thinking skills are an endangered species. Of course, those are the very skills that give power to the notion of citizenship. In the absence of critical thinking or the knowledge that one may intervene in the Way Things Are through the exercise of citizenship or personal choice, we become a nation of consumers, participating smoothly with the spectacle like parts in a well-oiled machine.

The reason we have not succeeded in building good games for education is that to do so would entail reconstructing the notion of education itself. In particular, we would need to redefine what it means to be a good learner. Instead of receiving information, we might construct understanding. Instead of giving the right answer, we might think of taking an appropriate action. Instead of obeying the rules, we might question authority. These are the sorts of rehearsals for living that games could be offering us.

Games about language or math, science or sociology, economics or geopolitics lack luster because the content as currently framed offers little in terms of significant interaction. With no models of ourselves as change agents in the "real" world, how can we envision such possibilities within a representation of it? In Middle Earth I can kick ass, but I am a helpless speck compared

to the nations and corporations that define the realities of my life. That is what both games and schools are teaching us. And both of them are wrong.

The spectacle is not all there is, and there are representations that pierce the spectacle by inviting us to have a look at the person (or web of relations) behind the curtain. Each of us can think of images or stories or poems that have powerfully revealed to us a hidden or un-sanctioned truth. Such representations can also take interactive form, and are perhaps more powerful when they do. Just as games can entrain us to enact the spectacle, they may enable us to enact its converse. Situationists call this sort of reversal a *reconstruction*. Game designers have it in their power to reconstruct notions of personal awareness, choice, and agency in ways that might seriously disturb the consumerist ethos that has been prepared for us.

Now, *that* could be really fun.