WORKS OF GAME

ON THE AESTHETICS OF GAMES AND ART

playful THINKING SERIES

John Sharp

frequently carried out while playing videogames. That Flanagan chose to focus on the run-time mechanics of a game, rather than on story elements, demonstrates a conceptualization of games as systems, with an emphasis placed on the actions (run, jump, etc.) and outcomes (explode, collect, etc.).

The title alludes to an experiential aspect of games—play experiences are indeed a series of secrets uncovered and interpreted by players. To play a game is to construct theories about how to act in order to best obtain one's goals, whatever they might be. These theories are enacted and evaluated, and then reconsidered and reenacted throughout the play experience. Flanagan collects these moment-by-moment decisions in *[pile of secrets]* and catalogs them for inspection, hoping to unlock the larger secrets of what constitutes games and their play.

The work is a commentary on the state of our shared understanding of play and games and their roles in our lives. *[piles of secrets]* approaches games as a dark continent to be examined in the hopes of discovering their meaning and purpose. It is no mistake that the work is presented as a series of videos; videogames are often considered offshoots of television and film rather than as part of the much longer lineage of games. *[pile of secrets]* engages play through reflection rather than through activity. To players, the actions and outcomes captured in the play footage provide memories of playing the represented videogames. The secret knowledge of understanding through play is revealed and reexperienced. For those unfamiliar with the videogames featured in the work, *[pile of secrets]* shows glimpses of the play experience, something usually accessible only through direct experience. Paradoxically then, by presenting play moments as video, Flanagan emphasizes the importance of play to games, and of play as the core of her own practice of critical appraisal.

Case Study: Nathalie Pozzi, Eric Zimmerman, and Games as Postmodern Craft

Nathalie Pozzi, an architect, and Eric Zimmerman, a game designer, collaborate on site-specific game installations. Their projects span the fields of architecture, graphic design, game design, and installation art in ways that vary from project to project but that always bring a polyglot design eye to artistic concerns. If I had to describe Pozzi and Zimmerman's work in a single phrase, I'd call it playfully conflicting. Their work is aloof and engaging, critical and entertaining, playful and austere, abstract and concrete, art and design. With *Cross My Heart + Hope to Die* (2010), they created a maze that filled a gymnasium with twenty-foot-tall billowing red cloth walls through which players darted about in minotaur masks. In *Flatlands* (2010), they created a game about discussing aesthetics through the lens of 1970s and 1980s boardgames. *Starry Heavens* (2011), designed for the Museum of Modern Art's courtyard, combined the children's game "king of the hill," race games, and weather balloons. And *Interference* (2012) is a strategy game in which multiple play sessions take place on a shared field of play made of a set of delicate metallic lace walls.

I would like to focus on their first project, *Sixteen Tons* (2010, figure 4.7). At first glance, *Sixteen Tons* has the sophistication of modernist Italian furniture design. The curve of the wall and the design of the craft paper folds interplay with light to create a complex, high-contrast, vertically patterned surface. It is a work that is vague about the value proposition its play offers; in some states it may even be illegal. Walking around the six-foot-tall work, there isn't a clear set of handles to guide interpretation.

If you look through the two narrow openings in the irregular oval formed by the two walls, you discover a small interior

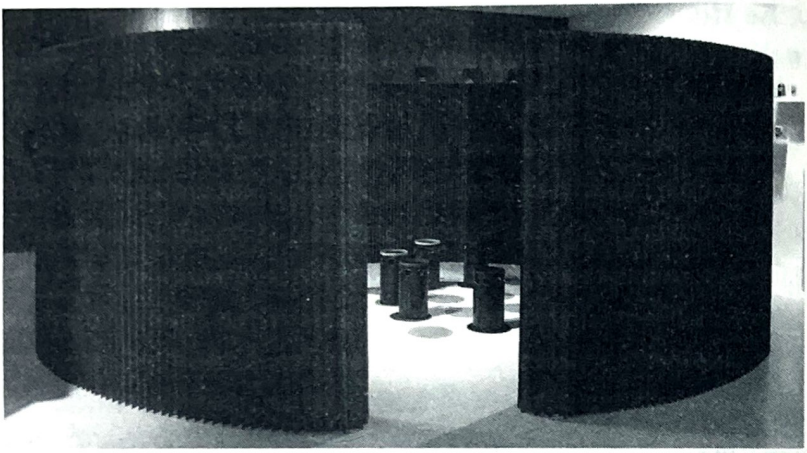

Figure 4.7
Nathalie Pozzi and Eric Zimmerman, *Sixteen Tons*. Image courtesy of the artists.

room. Placed slightly to one side of the space are eight steel cylinders arranged atop a four-by-four grid of colored dots. Each of the 1950s kitchen appliance colors are assigned to two pipes, two dots, and a corresponding number from one through four, each located along one of the sides of the grid. Should you try to pick up a length of pipe, you will discover it is quite heavy—about twenty pounds. Things become less clear with the discovery of these items. What are these objects? Why are they so heavy? Why are they numbered and color coded? And why are they inside these walls?

Moving into the space, you see four large text panels hanging on the interior of one wall. The panels are not the standard didactic text found in museums, but instead display a title ("Sixteen Tons: A Game for Four Players"), a quote from an obscure mid-twentieth-century country song, a set of instructions for setting up a game, and rules for playing the game. At this point,

everything about the grid, pipes, and numbers transforms. What were moments earlier inscrutable objects of art or design now compose a large-scale game board and its play pieces.

The walls can be read as a playful literalization of the "magic circle," a concept derived from Johann Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* from 1938:

> Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[20]

The craft paper walls become the magic circle of the game, and the openings in the walls become the passage through which you enter the space to perform "an act apart." The exhibition space itself, whether a museum, gallery, or game show floor, is another form of hallowed space "within which special rules obtain"; the game is inside a game, so to speak. By putting the game inside a second set of walls, Pozzi and Zimmerman have created a protective barrier that shields the game and its players from the normal behavioral expectations of a gallery space.

Next to the game's title is a quote from the 1943 Tennessee Ernie Ford song "Sixteen Tons": "You load sixteen tons, what do you get? / Another day older and deeper in debt." The lyric creates an interesting frame for the game. Does the sixteen reference the number of dots in the grid? If so, is it suggesting that playing the game is work, and that its players are laborers? Or maybe it is a reference to the weight of the lengths of pipe? Is this a nod to the fraught connection between manual labor and the post-industrial fear of leisure? Do the walls form a mine or

factory? Or a gambling den? What kind of debt could possibly be accrued here? And what does any of this have to do with a game for four players?

Moving to the next panel of wall text, you find a set of instructions for positioning the steel play pieces and the four players. All three instructions hint at *Sixteen Tons*'s layers, simultaneously establishing and commenting on its gameness and artness. The explicit instructions for how to position and manipulate the pieces—"Move the pieces to the matching colored spaces"—goes against the grain of "look, don't touch" gallery conventions while providing straightforward explanations of what the player should do with the pipe length when playing the game. The second setup instruction—"Stand on a number. This determines your color and the turn order"—continues the transformation of the art viewer into a player.

The third and final setup instruction, "Take out three dollars," is the real kicker, and the source of much of the playful conflict in the game, opening up all sorts of problems for games and art. Depending on who you listen to,[21] money has corrupted, made boring, or otherwise transformed contemporary art into something unrecognizable. Brought to the foreground here is the crass act of commerce, whose integral role in the subcultural ecosystem is often glossed over. Games as cultural objects, unlike art, are almost exclusively considered as mass-produced commercial entertainment products, which excludes them from serious consideration as high culture. Money has also plagued games and their cultural status over the last five or six thousand years—money separates games of skill from games of chance, legal from illegal, and athletic honor from compromised integrity.

Just below the setup instructions is the game's win condition: "You win when the two pieces of your color are directly adjacent

to each other." Looking at the game—a four-by-four grid with two pipe lengths per player—things do not seem very promising. At this point, without having fully read the rules, *Sixteen Tons* feels like an enlarged variant of tic-tac-toe or one of those peg games on the tables at Cracker Barrel restaurants.

Moving over to the next panel, you find the game's rules. Another layer of preconceptions peels back: players do not necessarily move their own pieces. Instead, one player puts her move up for auction by asking her three opponents to "put me to work." The winning bidder gets to tell the active player which piece to move to an adjacent or diagonally adjacent "square"[22] that is not already occupied. Should no one bid, the active player can move her own piece.[23] Play then continues until one player has met the win condition of having her two pieces directly adjacent to one another.

Sixteen Tons nests two interlocking game systems: a simple "match two" movement game constrained by a resource management game. The tension produced by these two simple game systems and the layers of indirection they produce is wonderful to watch unfold. Almost from the start, one or more players gets within a move or two of winning. With a win seemingly so close at hand, players often spend their money trying to block the player closest to pulling off the win condition of directly adjacent play pieces. Soon, this phase of the game feels intractably stagnant. How will anyone ever break out of this cycle of short-term defensiveness? Is this the drudgery alluded to in the lyrics?

This is when *Sixteen Tons* gets interesting. Players have to start thinking strategically about the money in relation to turn order and the position of their pieces. As simple as the two game systems are, it can be really difficult to keep track of the play pieces and the flow of money. Strategies are developed for manipulating

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creating yet another layer of interaction and conflict.
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keep what you have. If the players are simply redistributi
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opponents into moving the pipe sections around the grid and the money from player to player. Whoever has the most money is able to coerce her opponents into doing things that hurt their own interests. As the rules state, "You MUST accept the highest payment and take the money," which means that the active player has to move a piece however the highest bidder requests. It also means that one player is going to win the game for one of her opponents in her attempts to try to earn enough money to win the game for herself. The bartering and orders issued by the turn-buyer are full of submission and dominance, though it is not always clear who comes away from each transaction with the upper hand until the game is over.

At key moments of play, *Sixteen Tons* transforms into a gambling pit. Money in hand, the players take on a demeanor resembling something between gamblers and bidders at an auction. With all the "put me to work" cries coming out of the walls, nearby spectators gather to see what is going on. As more people come in and the doorways seal closed with bodies, the temperature inside the walls rises, sometimes by ten or more degrees. The space is now a far cry from a reserved art installation. No one is paying attention to the texture of the walls, the elegant mid-century muted palette, or the symmetry of the play pieces. Everyone, players and spectators alike, is crowded inside the walls, transfixed by the movement of pipes and dollars.

Looking deeper into the game, we see a potent critique of the post–industrial age fear of leisure time for the poor. *Sixteen Tons* pushes on class prejudices by having the players perform the role of gambler, in the process embedding class and race issues within their play performance. The labors of the day that produce the meager cash alluded to in the lyrics are no longer separated from after-hours pursuits. At the height of activity, the

walls barely contain the game's energy. All the references to gambling raise the specters of race and class, as well as their relation to the fears associated with gambling spaces filled with poor, brown-skinned people. Once the Industrial Revolution set in, politicians, sociologists, and clergy all fretted about how to keep working class people entertained during their hours off the job.[24] Could they be trusted with their time? Could they be trusted at all, despite their importance to the economy? It was in part this line of thinking that created the border between high and low culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Late in the game, the refrain from the song lyric rings true: "Another day older and deeper in debt." At some point, all but one player find themselves digging deeper into a hole, further from the seemingly easily obtained goal of placing two steel pipes next to one another. Despite their best efforts, three of the four players will be left with too little to stop that one shrewd (or lucky) player from winning the game.

But what happens to the money at the end of the game? The rules are ambiguous on this count. Does the winner take all? Do the players get to keep whatever is in their hands at the end of the game? Does everyone get their money back? How players decide to settle this transforms the game yet again. Sometimes, to win is to lose. Other times, money doesn't actually mean anything at all beyond an abstracted resource that could just as well be *Monopoly* money. At the end of each game, players are left standing in the middle of a gallery to sort this out themselves, creating yet another layer of interaction and conflict. I have heard of three variants—redistribution, winner take all, and keep what you have. If the players are simply redistributing the money to its original owners, then the money was nothing more than a prop, a little bit of artificial thrill. If playing winner take

all—what has become known as "high stakes *Sixteen Tons*"—there is no choice but to win if a player wants her money back. If players keep what is in their hands when the game ends, then the winner, according to the win condition, has likely just paid off another player with at least one-third of the total economy and lost all her money, while one or more of the other players who "lost" just received a cash bounty.

Pozzi and Zimmerman are as close to modernist ideas of design as they are post-structural criticality. The degree to which they focus on a finely tuned game experience played with a just-so set of materials seems to run counter to the post-medium tendencies of contemporary art. Yet their work finds a way to have its game cake and eat its postmodern conceptualism, too. *Sixteen Tons* is a game, but a game used to explore a series of ideas about labor, the transformation of space through use, the role of money in games and art, the unease of gambling, and so forth. So as much as the work operates as a game, it is toward a conceptual end. The conceptual territory covered by the game is enacted by the four players and their audience. Along with steel and paperboard, play becomes another refined material crafted by Pozzi and Zimmerman.

5 Games as a Medium

To make sense of the artists' games of Viola and the Game Innovation Lab, Pozzi and Zimmerman, Flanagan, and Blast Theory, we need a new aesthetics attuned to the ways that games and play operate within the traditions of artistic practice. We need an understanding that can assess the materiality of play as much as that of the ideas or the objects themselves. A game can produce meaning or, perhaps better stated, experience. But what kinds of experiential meaning can games generate, exactly? What do we get by playing *The Night Journey*, *Sixteen Tons*, or *The Goody Bullet*? Is there a different sort of aesthetics at play in an artists' game that combines the values of both the art and game communities than that found in a more traditional approach to games or art? Are these three games' play experiences different than those of *Candy Crush Saga* (2012) or *NBA 2K 12* (2011) or *Spelunky* (2009)? Are they different than the experience provided by artworks like Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993), Ryan Trecartin's *Re'Search Wait'S (Edit 1: Missing Re'Search Corruption Budget)* (2009), or Tino Sehgal's *The Kiss* (2010)?[1]

In his essay "Situational Aesthetics," Victor Burgin speaks to the issue at the heart of these questions:

> It may no longer be assumed that art, in some mysterious way, resides in materials. Attempts to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions