# 1 Videogames as Avant-garde Art

Videogames are art. In order to value videogames as art, or a cultural force, we need to understand how the videogame avant-garde works. The avant-garde challenges or leads culture. The avant-garde opens up and redefines art mediums. The purpose of this book is to illuminate how the avant-garde emerges through videogames. Videogames shape the avant-garde, while the avant-garde shapes videogames. How does the videogame avant-garde diverge from contemporary and historical avant-garde movements such as tactical media, the Critical Art Ensemble, Net art of the 1990s, video art of the 1960s, Fluxus, the Situationists, Dada, and the impressionists? The contemporary avant-garde faces constraints and opportunities, both cultural and technological in nature, which historical avant-gardes did not face. Videogames were born of a marriage between the military-industrial complex and midway arcade games. The social anxieties and economic outlays of the Cold War were formative for many of the metaphors of power and domination that still frame videogames today. Contemporary culture flows in an elaborate and networked form of digital capitalism—a context that precludes some avant-garde tactics and affords others. As a convergence of technology and cultural practice, videogames are uniquely situated. They are ruled from the bottom, through mass consumption, and from the top, via multinational corporate power. In response to the sheer complexity of the cultural and technological structure of videogames, the avant-garde deploys a host of strategies, ranging from radical to complicit in degree, formal to political in nature, and local to global in scope.

Julian Oliver's *Quilted Thought Organ* (1998–2001) is an avant-garde game. It was built with id Software's first-person shooter *Quake II* engine. The familiar tunnels and mutant enemies, however, are replaced with colorful lattices saturating the space. The environment is navigable, but acting

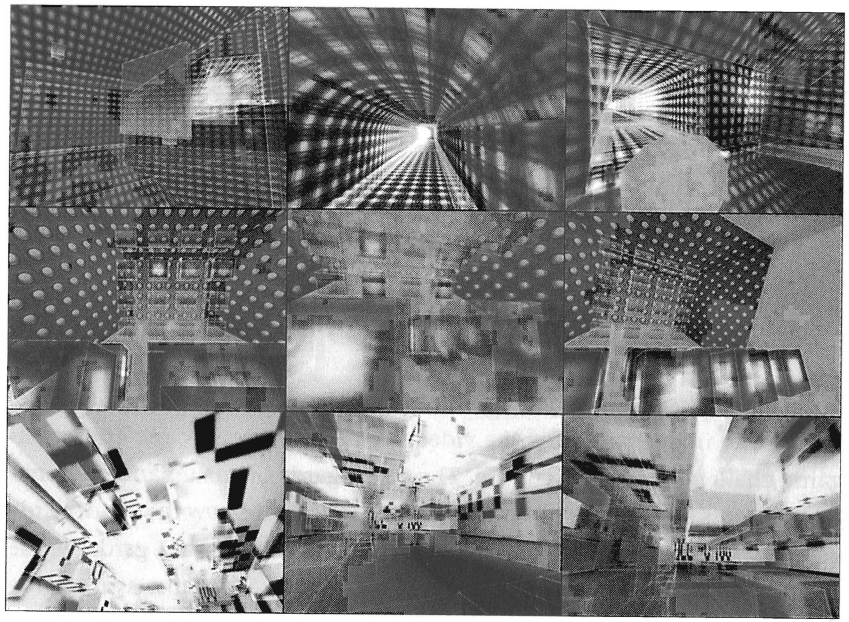

**Figure 1.1**
*Quilted Thought Organ*'s unusual gameplay opens up new ways for players to perceive, feel, and perform movement through virtual space. Image courtesy of Julian Oliver.

in the world is a strange negotiation. You walk around and atonal music is spawned when you brush through the diaphanous lattices. Turn around to glimpse hypergeometries transforming in your wake; if you stop, so do they. *Quilted Thought Organ* is a "game-based performance environment," a playable version of the call-and-response scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The allure of *Quilted Thought Organ* comes from trying to determine the nature and logic of this unusual experience. Reclaiming the experience as a game is its challenge.

*Quilted Thought Organ* is an avant-garde game in a similar way that modern, abstract paintings were historically avant-garde. In traditional painting, perspectival space (the illusion that an image is a virtual window on a scene) guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting. The rise of avant-garde painting techniques, such as impressionism and cubism, opened alternate ways of viewing and making paintings, calling into question how painting was defined as a medium. Games, like paintings, have their own patterns of perception, interpretation, and participation.



Whether they are 2D or 3D, games use standard regimes of spatial representation as well as entrenched formulas that guide and control players. Games reward certain behaviors, and in doing so, encourage specific actions in the pursuit of particular goals such as progression, dominance, or a high score. Avant-garde games are distinguished from mainstream ones because they show how the medium can manifest a greater diversity of gameplay and be creatively engaged in more kinds of ways by more kinds of people. They redefine the medium, breaking apart and expanding how we make, think, and play with games. The avant-garde democratizes games, and makes the medium more plastic and liquid.

Although it may seem surprising to suggest that the avant-garde is relevant to any contemporary creative practice, this is not a novel claim. Author and new media artist Mark Amerika (2007, 24) writes that "artists who are immersed in digital processes are contemporary versions of what in the twentieth century we used to call the *avant-garde*. Thankfully, they no longer have to pretend to be ahead of their time." The avant-garde has never been about newness or innovation; that is how the avant-garde has been co-opted by institutions and markets. For videogames, the avant-garde is the force that opens up the experience of playing a game or expands the ways in which games shape culture. And since culture is continually changing, the avant-garde must change as well. For example, in the 1990s, the Critical Art Ensemble (1994, 3) recognized that the avant-garde had evolved with the times:

> For many decades, a cultural practice has existed that has avoided being named or fully categorized. Its roots are in the modern avant-garde, to the extent that participants place a high value on experimentation and on engaging the unbreakable link between representation and politics. Perhaps this is a clue as to why this practice has remained unnamed for so long. Since the avant-garde was declared dead, its progeny must be dead too. Perhaps this brood is simply unrecognizable because so many of the avant-garde's methods and narratives have been reconstructed and reconfigured to such an extent that any family resemblance has disappeared.

Videogames too have employed methods that have been "reconstructed and reconfigured" but are still avant-garde. What makes videogames interesting is how their relation to culture and technology is distinct from mediums used by the historical avant-garde. They are also distinct from the cultural materials in use by contemporary avant-garde figures like Orlan, who has undergone plastic surgery as theatrical performance, contending

that the "avant-garde is no longer in art, it is in genetics" (quoted in Ziarek 2004, 89). The avant-garde uses materials that resonate with the time. Because videogames are both caused by and result from change within technoculture, they are especially relevant to contemporary avant-garde practice.

The term *technoculture* is used in media studies to describe the growing interdependence between technology and culture. Of course, technology and culture have always been interdependent, but the level of granularity at which they commingle rapidly grew in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Marshall McLuhan (1964, 3–4) describes this trend in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*:

> After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.

This convergence of human and machine should be viewed as neither positive nor negative. It is simply the material and social reality that the contemporary avant-garde must face if it is to be relevant and effective. Our interaction with the world is increasingly mediated by computer technologies.[1] We experience ever more frequent interactions with machines. In technoculture, the contrasts between public and private, local and global, and human and nonhuman are breaking down. Not only are videogames an advanced product of technoculture, they are also a major site on which culture naturalizes the ways in which we think and play with technology. In this way, each game becomes a microcosm of technoculture itself. Games teach players how to engage and optimize systems as well as how to manage their desire in a contemporary world. This makes the world of games a principal site to expose, unwork, and rethink the protocols and rituals that rule technoculture.

## Mainstream and Avant-garde

If we compare two ostensibly similar games, we can generalize some differences between the mainstream and avant-garde. A mainstream title that follows the familiar flow of games is *Heavy Weapon: Atomic Tank* (2005), a commercially successful casual shooter.[2] An avant-garde game that does



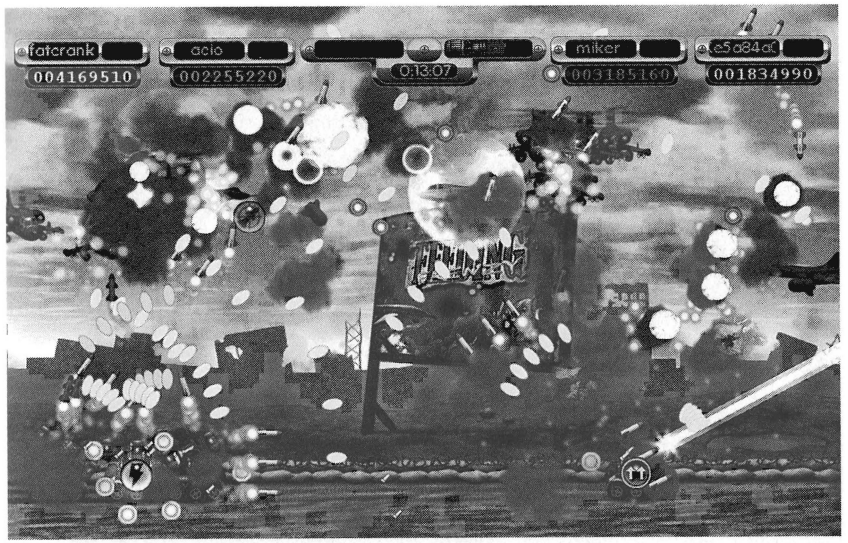


**Figure 1.2**
Players frenetically eliminate all that moves in a tight cycle of flowing action in *Heavy Weapon*. Image courtesy of PopCap.

not serve the familiar flow is *September 12th* (2003), a shooter that makes the requisite skills reflexive and awkward. Although both games are 2D, browser-based Flash games that use the mouse to point and shoot, they manifest remarkably different experiences.

In *Heavy Weapon*, a 1984 backstory lampooning America's mood in the Cold War collides with pre-9/11 war references. The player guides a tiny "atomic" US tank, the last line of defense against the invading Red Star army. The game opens with a cutscene, featuring a US official advising the president to surrender. The secretary of defense retorts, "I've heard enough liberal whining! This is freedom's last stand. . . . Send in . . . ATOMIC TANK!" The kitsch irony sets the perfect mood. The abundant references in *Heavy Weapon* (including atomic weapons, Cold War history, cartoon violence, etc.) jibe together in a jaunty postmodern style that cancels out the need to associate anything at all with the experience. The ensuing gameplay lights up the center of the brain with eye-fluttering finger clicks. According to PopCap, *Heavy Weapon* "brings classic shooter action to the casual gamer." It is a cartoonlike, side-scrolling shoot 'em up with "easy-to-learn mechanics." The real appeal of *Heavy Weapon* is the contrast between

**Figure 1.3**
*September 12th* simulates the ideology of the war on terror as a positive feedback loop of escalating violence. Image courtesy of Gonzalo Frasca.

its two core modes of fight and flight requiring the player to employ offensive and defensive skills simultaneously. The player tracks objects with the mouse to shoot at everything that moves while steering a vehicle to dodge a storm of bullets. Unexpected complications arise to keep the player off guard; an aid helicopter, for example, flies into the heat of battle to drop power-ups, nukes, shields, and upgrades. The entire experience collapses into a typical twitch reflex cocoon that is apolitical and ahistorical.

Developed by Newsgaming and designed by Gonzalo Frasca, *September 12th* immediately positions the player as a political subject. On launching the game, the screen reads, "The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror."[3] When the player hits play, they gaze on an isometric Arab town where residents circulate peacefully down narrow streets and a few terrorists, wearing kaffiyehs or white headdresses, mix in. The player might be inclined to aim and fire a missile at one of them. A short delay prior



to launch makes clean, accurate kills nearly impossible. Bystanders die. Onlookers grieve, and a few become enraged. Flashing and bleeping, the mourners morph into a new generation of terrorists. As more terrorists are targeted for destruction, more are created and the euphemism of "surgical strikes" unravels along with the flow of the game.

*Heavy Weapon* and *September 12th* deliver two opposing experiences. *Heavy Weapon* channels players into a tightly closed circuit of play; *September 12th* opens up that circuit, revealing and reveling in its own nature as a game. Instead of training players to aim clicks quickly, *September 12th* makes it obvious just how entrained and established these skills as well as expectations have become. A microcosm of twitch reflexes spirals out into a macrocosm of geopolitics. *Heavy Weapon* has the opposite effect. An expansive set of geopolitical references flush players into a singular flow of familiar experience. Mainstream games strengthen the prevailing paradigm of flow, while avant-garde games weaken it, opening play to alternate paradigms.

## Opening Up the Definition of *Videogame*

One of the difficulties with studying games is that definitions are often design documents in disguise. In this book, we will need the broadest workable definition of videogame possible, or the subject we set out to explore will be blinkered from view from the start.

The problem of prescriptive definitions is certainly not unique to games. The Renaissance definition of *painting* was a design document of sorts. It described what painting was, while elaborating on best practices to maximize its unique illusory power. In his 1435 treatise *De Pictura*, Leon Battista Alberti defined paintings as a virtual "window" and expounded on pivotal mechanics, such as establishing a vanishing point to achieve a convincing illusion of depth. The avant-garde ultimately challenged that definition at the turn of the twentieth century, and began folding, warping, cutting up, and reassembling the window. In "Definition of Neotradition," published in 1890, artist and critic Maurice Denis advised the salon public, "It is well to remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order." According to Denis, then, painting was no longer to be defined as a virtual window but instead as pigment on

a surface—which Jackson Pollock's drip paintings potently embodied a few generations later.

As expected, subsequent avant-gardes challenged Denis's definition. Mediums are always in flux, most of all for the avant-garde. Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt conceived of painting as an idea rather than a material construct. For LeWitt, the defining element of a painting was in the series of choices made in its construction, not the presence of fibers and pigment. Thus, anyone can produce a LeWitt painting, which called for bright acrylic paint or India ink washes, and read like a series of instructions: *Wall Drawing #46* (1970), for example, is "vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly."

Who is right: Alberti, Denis, or LeWitt? Are paintings illusions, materials, concepts, or something else still? Each definition presents a viable approach to understanding or making a painting, and suggests that painting is not advancing toward a specific predestined purpose or goal. In fact, the medium of painting is increasingly open, plastic, and malleable in the hands of each succeeding avant-garde.

Like many writers, I have been using the terms game and videogame interchangeably, but only for the sake of brevity. How have others used the terms? In *Half-Real: A Dictionary of Video Game Theory*, Jesper Juul defines videogame as "a game played using computer power and a video display." Most accept the tautology that videogames are defined by their gameness. Juul (2005, 36) elaborates:

> A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.

In this definition, the dance of visual phenomena on-screen serves almost exclusively as evidence to direct the player into certain courses of action. Such features are given attention, but only according to how they inform the subject as a game in the most conservative sense. Juul (2005, 1) does discuss the role of fiction, however, noting that to "play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules *while* imagining a fictional world." Although Juul's definition is useful, it omits from view forces that are material or sensual, so we must expand his conception.

In contrast to Juul, who targets games (again, in the most conservative sense) as the core of the medium, game industry pioneer Chris Crawford



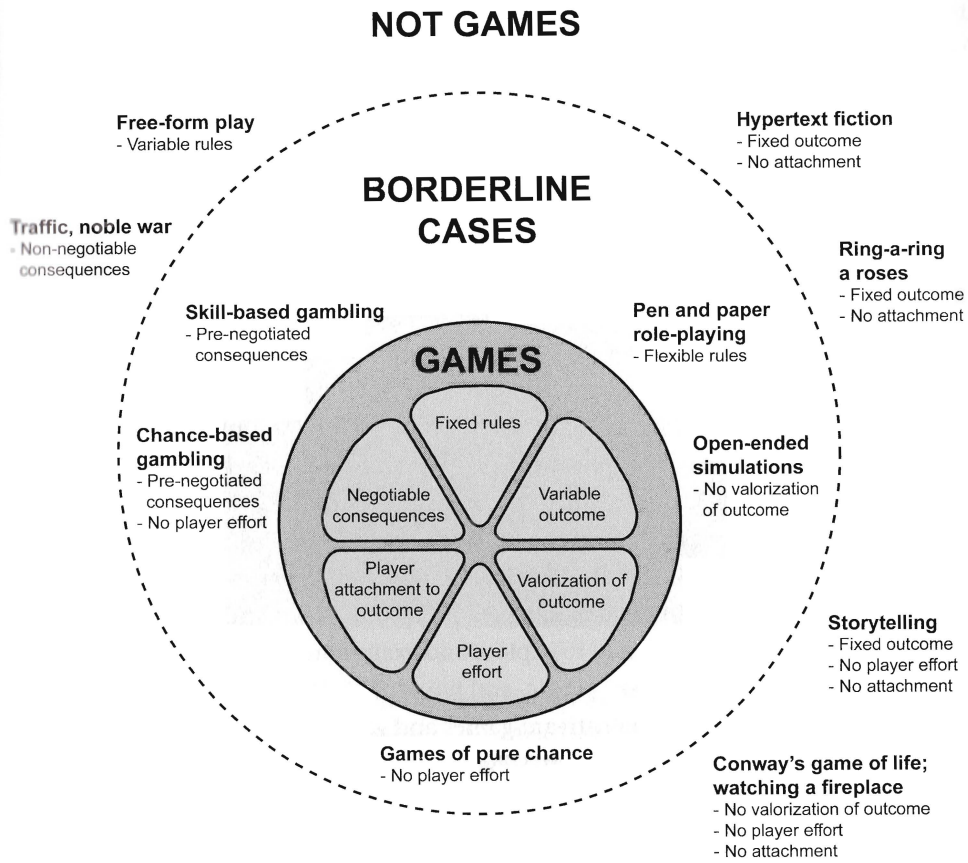


**Figure 1.4**
Jesper Juul targets a fictional center "gameness" in the medium of videogames. Image courtesy of Jesper Juul.

targets something else. Crawford acknowledged in the 1980s that videogames, by definition, have a core material component. In fact, that core material affordance must be fully exploited by game designers if the medium is to reach its full potential:

> Interactiveness is a central element of game enjoyment. . . . [T]he computer's plasticity makes it an intrinsically interactive device. Yet, the potential inherent in the computer can easily go unrealized if it is programmed poorly. A program emphasizing static data is not very dynamic. It is not plastic, hence not responsive, hence not interactive. A process-intensive program, by contrast, is dynamic, plastic, responsive, and interactive. Therefore, store less and process more. (Crawford 1984)

Although Crawford goes further than Juul by grounding his formulation of the medium in the physical properties of the computer, he cannot leave these open to play. There is just one path to follow: maximize procedural power above all else. He leaves no room for a diversity of play in games—say, for an artwork that stores more and processes less.

The technological affordances of specific hardware, software, and their contingent sensual signatures also comprise the formal nature of videogames. The commercial industry doesn't ignore these, so why should artists, designers, or academics? One of the lowest common denominators in recent decades has been the drive toward convincing photorealism and beyond. If we are to cultivate the potential of the medium, we cannot afford to overlook critical characteristics that don't fit our definition or narrative of what videogames are supposed to be. We cannot ignore what is happening right now with games. Indeed, a key strategy of the avant-garde is to engage videogames as they are, not just as we wish them to be. Sensuality, materiality, economics, commercial trends, and popular conventions are as definitive as well as integral to videogames as a platonic ideal of gameness. The avant-garde is not afraid to explore and exaggerate these affordances as it makes games more open, plastic, and liquid. This is how the avant-garde unravels and outstrips mainstream games and game culture.

For game culture, the idea that "videogames are games" is irrefutable. But turn this around. Why not also examine the idea that "videogames are videos"? Videogames are played on LCD, LED, and plasma screens, so video in the traditional sense does not describe the hardware. Nevertheless, it does stand in for all the support technologies that constrain and allow games to function. The avant-garde is able to see unique artistic potential in the *video* of videogames.

*The Night Journey* is a game collaboration by Bill Viola, a renowned video artist, and the Game Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California. *Night Journey* is a videogame-enabled dream, one part *Dragon's Lair*, one part uncanny video art, and one part virtual camera controlled in 3D space. The artists call it "explorable video" (Fullerton 2009). Intensity in games normally comes from rising challenges that demand an increase in skill or effort. In *Night Journey*, though, intensity comes from the visual slurring of a living environment and the player's warped presence within it. It does not feel like the player is traversing the environment, although that is what is happening. It feels more like the player is a ghost melting through



**Figure 1.5**
Looking up through the trees in *The Night Journey*, a collaboration of Bill Viola Studios and the University of Southern California's Game Innovation Lab. The work foregrounds the video in *video*game by bridging laserdisc games like *Dragon's Lair* and video art. Image courtesy of Bill Viola Studios and the USC Game Innovation Lab.

a black-and-white dreamscape. There is a lugubrious sensual logic that the creatures and slow-dancing plants emanate. When a fish or bird hauntingly appears, for instance, it hovers there like some endearing bug-eyed hallucination. It is trying to communicate something that is just beyond the edge of making sense, and in order for the player to "get it," their sanity must slip a bit into that dreamworld. Once the player has slipped, it takes a moment to realize that they are already moving on in that undulating dreamtime.

*Night Journey* explores videogames both as they are and as they could be. Instead of rendering the visual spectacle as subservient to the gameplay, a popular practice among game enthusiasts, *Night Journey* accepts the game industry's quest for greater graphic intensity and doubles down. The artists leverage this feature as an affordance to focus on and exaggerate. In

looking at videogames as they could be, *Night Journey* goes beyond photorealism, dynamically connecting the spectacle to player action. The conventional qualities of immersive space fold inward, oozing through the dreamy wrinkles of zoned-out gameplay.

Game designer Will Wright has asserted that *The Sims* and *SimCity* are software toys rather than games. That is unfortunate. Mainstream culture refers to them as games. If we accept *The Sims* and *SimCity* as games, the challenge they present to our academic definitions becomes an opportunity to cultivate a richer appreciation of the medium. If we hold to the idea that not only *The Sims* but also *September 12th*, *Night Journey*, and *Quilted Thought Organ* are in fact videogames, then the cultural frame that holds them fractures, diversifies, and expands. If we can allow many definitions of videogame to aggregate into a composite, fractured image, we have an avant-garde perspective. It is a vision as uncomfortable as it is lively, challenging, and historically grounded.

Rather than carving out a perfect definition of videogames and holding each game up to that ideal, we can reverse the process. Each avant-garde game presents its own definition of the medium that challenges the status quo. If avant-garde games were to compose a collective definition of the medium, that portrayal would hang awkwardly open: *videogames are playing with technoculture*. Avant-garde games crack open the patterns of the world in games and beyond so we may reengage in a radical kind of play with them.

### Avant-garde Is a Diverse Field of Formal and Political Strategies

Historically, multiple avant-gardes have existed simultaneously, sometimes in direct opposition to one another and clearly contradicting the popular myth of a single avant-garde ideal. This is a feature as opposed to a bug. In 1914, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, a British émigré to the United States, surveyed modern feminism in a way that emphasized this quality of diversity in the avant-garde. Hale described feminism using avant-garde rhetoric: "The metaphor of an army to delineate the main body of parliamentary suffragists, the rear of municipal suffragists, a vanguard of 'advanced feminists,' and an ultra-radical group of 'skirmishers'" (quoted in Delap 2007, 1). According to Hale, certain kinds of feminist work could only be accomplished from certain positions of power. She recognized that radical, anarchistic actions could subvert government power and threaten social stability. On the other hand, complicit feminist forces within government could leverage those radicals in order to gain progressive concessions. This need not be seen as a leader-driven conspiratorial plot, however, nor is it limited to the suffragist movement. A similar dynamic was reflected in the 1960s in the tensions between Martin Luther King Jr. and the early Malcolm X: they opposed each other's strategies. From a position of peace and a position of violence, they flanked the white middle class from both sides, like a vise, creating an emergent, collective effort to seize equal rights. As an expansive, chaotic system, the avant-garde thus develops and distributes its efforts without a single coordinator (who would not likely be obeyed in any case).



Hal Foster (1996, 8), an art historian and theorist of the "contemporary avant-garde," similarly disputes the assumption that "*one* theory can comprehend *the* avant-garde." This realization is growing among academics. Regarding contemporary avant-garde theater, James Harding (2010, 12) criticizes the "notion that there is 'the avant-garde' rather than a variety of avant-garde communities, trajectories, or traditions."

Another popular myth is that the avant-garde is about negation, and presumably, the more critical or offensive it is, the better, or at least the more avant-garde. That story is not true either. Visual theorist and cultural critic Johanna Drucker (2005, 251) argues that the avant-garde "is not what the academy has made of it. Every instance of playful engagement, of serious exchange, of complex attraction and adoration and longing" has been overwritten. Drucker (ibid., 251–252) summarizes the problem: "The legacy of oppositional criticism, of a negative position claiming moral superiority and distance from those ideologies, . . . can't be sustained any more. Mythic though they were, these belief systems do not accurately describe either our current condition or our past history." The historical avant-garde has been mischaracterized, which has perpetuated a popular misunderstanding regarding the contemporary avant-garde among many theorists and academics. We must broaden and diversify our framing of the avant-garde if we are to understand it.

We can begin by distinguishing two broad avant-garde strategies, a *formal* avant-garde and a *political* avant-garde, thus opening up and supporting difference across communities of practice. The avant-garde described by the iconic modern art critic Clement Greenberg in "Avant-garde and

Kitsch" advances the formal view. The avant-garde depicted by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-garde* presents the political view. The formal avant-garde is realized in individual experience, letting art advance itself without regard for social concerns; the political avant-garde is realized in collective experiences, politicizing art or using art to change society. The formal avant-garde champions the old adage "art for art's sake."

The formal avant-garde investigates the properties of a given artistic medium. Each medium has unique affordances, sensual capacities, and a cultural history from which to construct work. The task of the formal avant-garde artist is to expose, challenge, or redefine these features. Greenberg (1939) portrays avant-garde painting in medium-specific terms:

> Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.

Greenberg's formalist category of avant-garde art is synonymous with modern art of the last half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. According to formal theory, mediums should seek to be reflexive and reveal their own form. Abstract splatter paintings revel in their own flat surface rather than trying to create illusions of receding space and dimension. Likewise in music, arrangements of the twelve tones need not sink us into reverie, evoke a preset series of emotions, or convey a story; dissonant tensions and collisions among tones can shape the experience instead. Avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage glued grass and insects directly onto celluloid. As the film clacked and flickered through the projector, the actual apparatus of film—the projector, celluloid, light, faculties of perception and cognition, the darkened roomful of people, and so on—was foregrounded and illuminated. In this way, Brakhage explored what the experience of film might be, beyond its established eventful, narrative structures.

Employing similar strategies, formal avant-garde games manifest the irreducibility of play that lives beyond the familiar flow. *Quilted Thought Organ* is a good example. Oliver's work offers a novel mechanic of movement as sound, emphasizing one of the core features of first-person shooter engines: the moment-to-moment act of navigating Cartesian space. Trying to make sense of that distorted gamespace presents a meta-challenge that



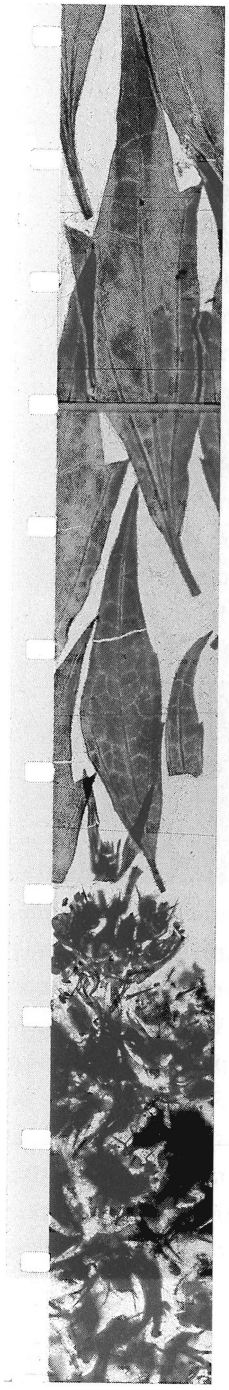

**Figure 1.6**
Stan Brakhage glued moth wings and grass onto celluloid in the film *Mothlight* (1963), so we might "imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective," and see images without perceiving them as narratives, symbols, and spaces. Image courtesy of the Estate of Stan Brakhage and Fred Camper (http://www.fredcamper.com).

compounds the usual challenges. The conventional challenges of games are displaced, leaving a rawer, more essential experience to play with. Game art enthusiasts often get snagged on the demand that the player must read the artist's intent or expression in the work. Perhaps, but the more that formal games are able to "speak" for themselves, the more provocative the experiences of playing them can be.

Historically, political avant-garde artists played with the category of art itself, frequently denying that the work they were making could even be categorized as art. This is similar to contemporary game artists who deny that what they make are games—an assertion so common that leading mainstream figures, such as Wright, as mentioned earlier, make this claim. The Dadaists provide examples of the historical political avant-garde. Responding to the upheavals of World War I, Dada created shocking theatrical events as a means of provoking and transforming culture. Richard Huelsenbeck, a Dadaist, asks: "What is German culture? Answer: Shit!" Opposing the formal avant-garde, Dadaists mocked Édouard Manet and Paul Cézanne, two prominent painters of the nineteenth century.

In *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, however, Foster argues that we must adopt a more nuanced perspective and less dualistic perspective on the historical avant-garde if we are to understand the contemporary avant-garde and all that has changed in the past century. Foster (1996, 16) begins with Duchamp, whose "aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation of art and life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice is at its best contradictory, mobile, and otherwise diabolical." Duchamp placed a rotated urinal on a pedestal, signed it with a pseudonym, titled it *Fountain*, and submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists, of which Duchamp was a member. The society agreed that they would accept all submissions in alphabetical order—a transgressive move in its own right. But they rejected *Fountain*, a piece of art that toyed with the institution of art, its arbitrary assignments of value, and its adherence to entrenched definitions. *Fountain* makes another move in plain sight, though, and one that is often missed. It foregrounds and aestheticizes the ways in which we normally sense—or more accurately, fail to sense—technology. As the institution of art is brought down, an industrial object that we routinely interact with in private is lifted up from its conventional use. It becomes a heavy object in pristine gloss, a familiar thing



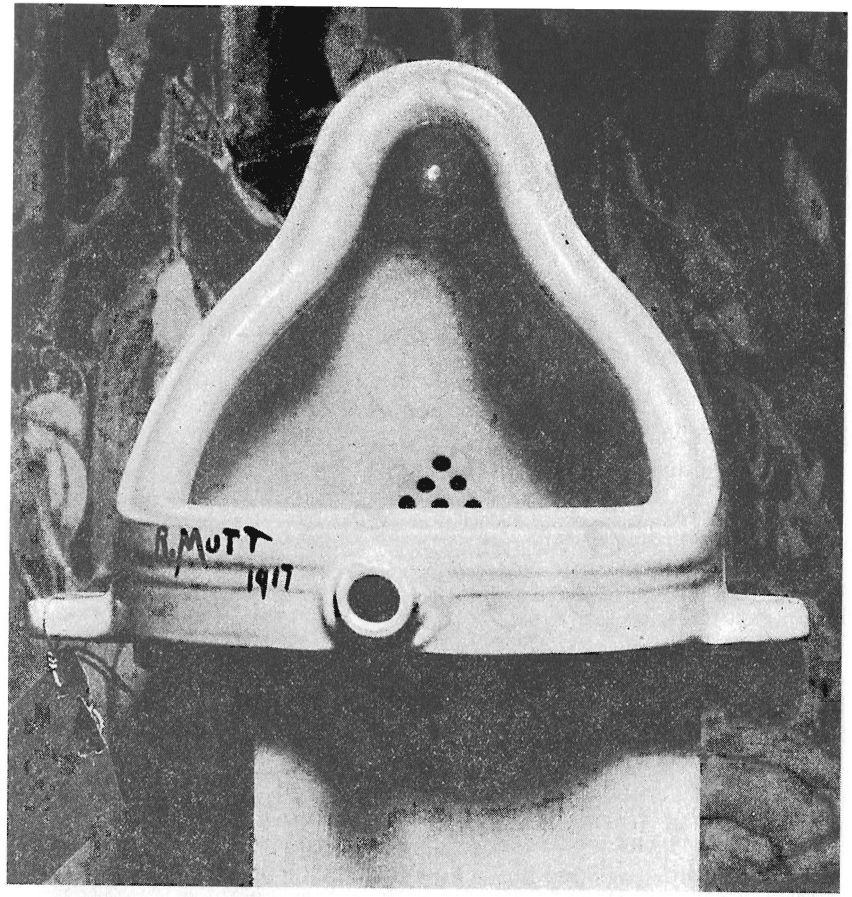


**Figure 1.7**
Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) played *with* the rules of art, reworking its definition, rather than playing *in* the established rules of art. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz. Reproduced with permission from Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

that gazes back, asserting its presence and mass in an unfamiliar way. *Fountain* is surreal, sitting useless, glistening and gaping. Like other readymades, it manages to flout artistic convention while still evoking the irreducibility of artistic experience. This is how the political avant-garde creates and destroys art. Art is made impossible and possible again. Failure and success lose much of their meaning in avant-garde art.

So what of the contemporary political avant-garde? Each avant-garde emerges from and contends with its own cultural moment. Today, it engages the category of technocultural entertainment rather than art in the traditional sense, because that is where the action is. Foster (ibid., 21) summarizes it best, stating that a "reconnection of art and life *has* occurred, but under the terms of the culture industry," and rather "than render the avant-garde null and void, these developments have produced new spaces of critical play and prompted new modes of institutional analysis." Culture increasingly mobilizes its values through entertainment and technology instead of though the church, museum, or academy. That is where routines of control, violence, and desire are normalized as well as propagated.

Politically avant-garde gameplay targets social institutions, as games are destroyed and reborn in public. Griefers provide a good illustration of this. They are players who challenge other players beyond the established scope of a given game. Griefers question and manipulate the rituals as well as protocols of massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like *World of Warcraft* and virtual worlds like *Second Life*. One griefer tactic is to deploy "grey goo," self-replicating objects that multiply beyond the system's ability to model and present them. In *Second Life*, grey goo can take any form, ranging from the golden rings in *Sonic the Hedgehog* to severed heads. It can begin with a single ring falling from the sky. It spawns two more rings, which then spawn four. Growing exponentially, the rings outpace the capacity of the server at Linden Lab running that section of the world. If a server crashes or slows, everyone logged on is affected; hence the term *grid attack*. Grey goo is a visual-spatial analog of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack that floods websites with spoofed data requests until the server is crippled.

Griefers break down games and rebuild new kinds of games with the pieces. They open up alterior play patterns that restructure the very systems that make the games possible. The presence of computer protocols—normally veiled and subservient to the flow of consumption—erupts as grey



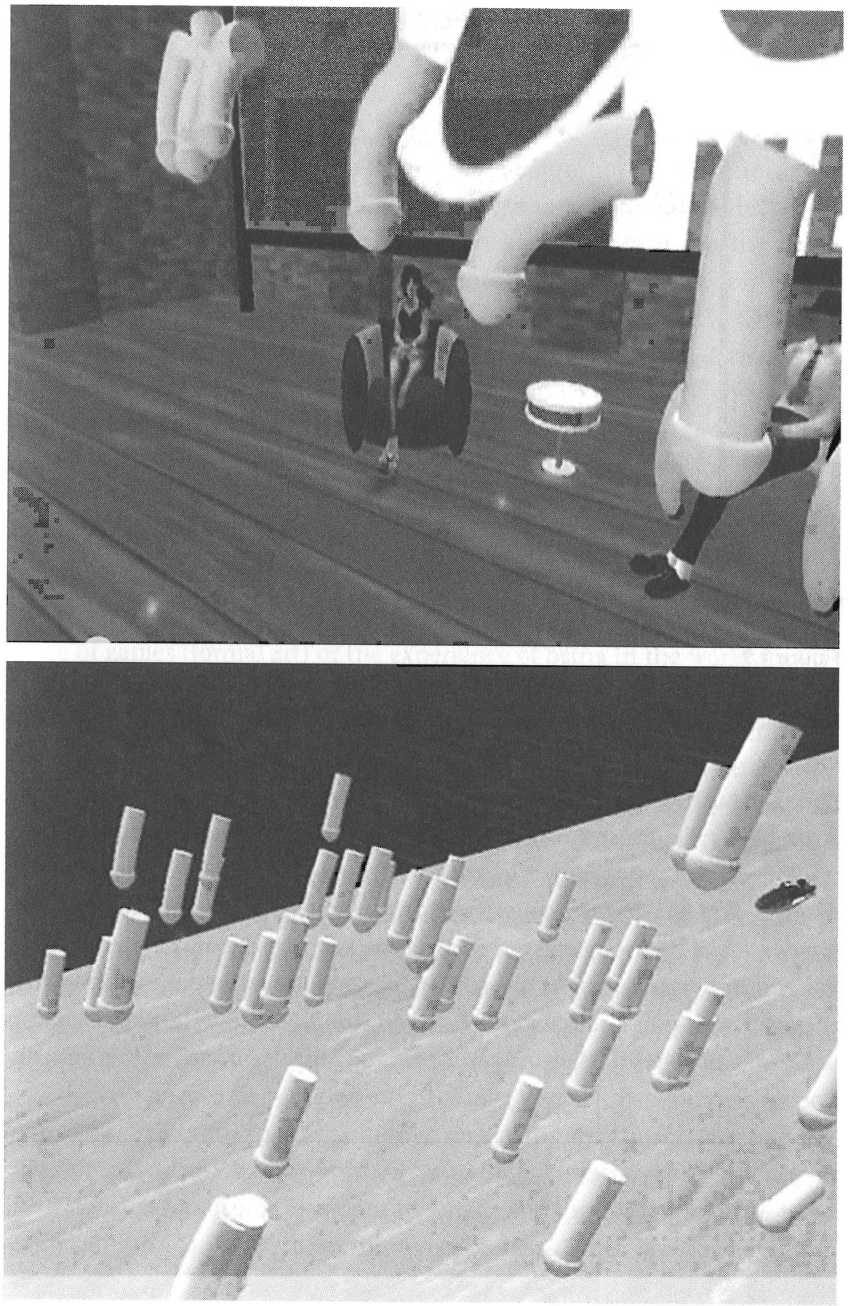

**Figure 1.8**
A griefer attack at a CNET conference in *Second Life* spawns grey goo objects that self-replicate beyond control. Images courtesy of Richard "Lowtax" Kyanka.

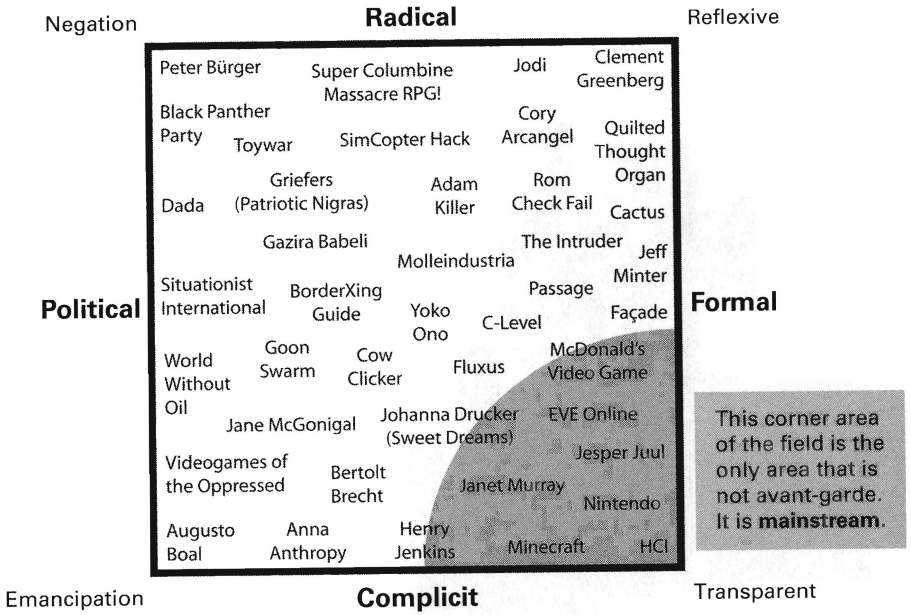


**Figure 1.9**
The avant-garde is comprised of a diverse field of figures. The only area that is not avant-garde is the lower-right one, because it is both complicit and depoliticized.

goo that pushes back. Griefers reframe the gamespace as a contested public space. They demonstrate that virtual worlds have diverse and previously unrealized aesthetic properties with which to play. Scripting, social engineering, and hacking the collective flow become core gameplay mechanics. Academics once wrongly assumed that the avant-garde of the early twentieth century brought about the end of art, only to realize decades later that the avant-garde had actually redefined art itself. Although it may seem that today's radical political avant-garde is merely breaking games, it is actually opening up the definition of games in the twenty-first century.

The avant-garde varies in intensity from radical to complicit as it ranges in purpose from enacting politics to crafting formal works. To comprehend its diversity, we might imagine its members spread out across a field, organized around two intersecting continua: a radical-to-complicit axis and a political-to-formal axis. For example, most political figures are not as radical as Dada or griefers. Bertolt Brecht, a prominent playwright after



World War I, used theater as a way to propagate political thought through popular culture. He valued theater as popular entertainment, curving its force toward political ends rather than overtly challenging it. We can think of Frasca's *September 12th* in the same vein. Frasca and Brecht are not griefers. *September 12th* challenges the medium, of course, but not in an extremely radical or difficult way. The game implicates the player in an argument on the futility of the war on terror, while also being a fun game. Frasca and Brecht belong to the more complicit or accessible political avant-garde. The relative ease with which we engage their work is evident when compared to the incendiary Dada and griefers. The latter could be seen as a radical or hard political avant-garde. To play through a griefer attack is difficult, if not impossible, for most people. Complicit works or political events are less mind bending, sense assaulting, or code demanding to play than radical works. Players are given greater opportunity to find their bearings, give their senses and computer a break, and lean more heavily on conventions.

We can evaluate the avant-garde according to how it opens up the experience of games (formal art) or the experience of being in the world (political art). The common feature of the formal and political avant-garde is how it deviates from our own adaptations, such as our training in the efficient use of computer interfaces and networks to enact our desire and extend our control. The avant-garde helps us to unwork the flow of power as well as act according to alternate logics that are neither agonistic and dominating nor submissive and instrumental. The constituent parts of technoculture are given room to drift, giving us slack to appreciate a blended and open way of being. The goal is neither a better synthesis with technology nor a decoupling from technology via some idealized return to nature. The aim of the avant-garde is to open up games and the world to what is unfamiliar to each. Different artists use different strategies to achieve an avant-garde perspective. Some fixate on form, and others on politics; some take radical positions, using extreme measures, while others take more complicit positions. In chapters 2 through 5, I examine those strategies and the artists who take them up. I look closely at four families of the avant-garde—radical formal, radical political, complicit formal, and complicit political—while noting that there are yet other avant-gardes to be explored and other ways to slice through the field.

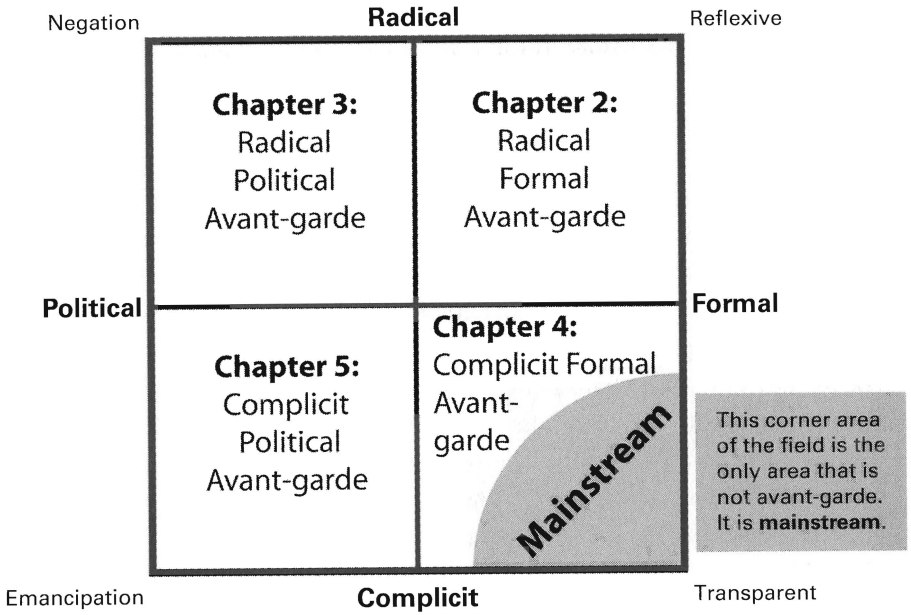


**Figure 1.10**
Each of the four following chapters examines a category of avant-garde strategies. Every chapter touches on mainstream games, which occupy the lower-right area.

### Chapter Summaries

#### Chapter 2: Radical Formal

It is standard in the game community to desire gameplay that puts players into the zone or flow.[4] Flow is the "sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing" (Csíkszentmihályi 1991, 71). Although most games do not consistently offer a sense of flow to all players, most designers strive for it. The contemporary radical formal videogame avant-garde opens up alternate ways of engaging and playing videogames, calling into question what defines them as a medium. Formal games break up the flow in richly reflexive ways. They set up situations in which we can play more explicitly with the materiality, sensuality, and conventionality of videogames as an artistic medium.

The use of linear perspective in naturalistic painting is analogous to the creation of optimal gameplay flow. Just as perspective both guides and



controls the viewer in traditional painting, common formulas guide players toward flow in videogames. Perspectival space guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting. The rise of such formal avant-garde painting movements as impressionism and cubism rejected perspectival space, and revealed alternate ways of looking at and making paintings. These changes called into question how painting was defined as a medium.

#### Chapter 3: Radical Political

The radical political avant-garde challenges the definitions of play established in the mid-twentieth century by recalling the premodern magic circle, which blends worlds rather than divides them. This avant-garde strategy reminds us that reality is in play and that play requires real risk. Political avant-garde works like *Toywar* play with art and politics as well as fictions and everyday life, blending and transforming these categories in the process. In 1999, billion-dollar toy retailer eToys.com threatened to sue the artist group etoy for trademark infringement. In response, etoy launched *Toywar*, an MMO in which players could drive down the actual price of eToys' stock on NASDAQ.

Similarly, the highly stylized marches and protests organized in the 1960s and 1970s by the original Black Panther Party were a form of avant-garde political theater, inspired by such Harlem street theater groups as the Black House (Reed 2005, 49–50). In spite of the internal violence that weakened the movement, the Black Panthers nevertheless helped redefine "black people" in US popular culture as self-assertive subjects of history rather than submissive objects of history.

#### Chapter 4: Complicit Formal

The complicit formal avant-garde does not advance specific mediums. On the contrary, it questions whether videogames or any other art medium (painting, film, video, and so on) are indeed unique mediums. Videogames are treated as a resource from popular culture that can be used to make fun and relevant contemporary art. Individual mediums may be illusory, but art as a cultural practice is not. Complicit formal artists still pursue art for art's sake, yet are mischievously liberal and humorous in what they consider to be art, because they have learned from the failures and successes of the historical avant-garde. For example, Nam June Paik, a Fluxus artist, humanized and demystified Cold War technology in the 1960s by assembling a

tottering robot that defecated beans while broadcasting a Kennedy speech. This avant-garde creates "art games" in the loosest possible sense, making use of diverse strategies such as putting games in traditional gallery spaces, constructing manic cyborgs, and affordance mining household materials for their hidden, play-enabling properties. In *Cockfight Arena*, a game by C-Level, for instance, players wear awkward, feathered costumes wired to control two fighting roosters on-screen.

### Chapter 5: Complicit Political

The complicit political avant-garde uses the magic circle to blend life, art, play, and reality, in a manner similar to that of the radical political avant-garde. The difference is that the complicit political avant-garde blends worlds using more inviting, populist methods. We are asked to risk the stability of the world so that we may collectively generate ad hoc utopias and moments of collective, festive anarchy. The word *utopia* evokes a fantasy of perfect governance, thanks to writers such as Sir Thomas More, who coined it. The problem of utopia as a literary genre is that it is something already written—a dead law on a page. In contrast, avant-garde utopias can be continually rewritten in play. In the 1960s, the Situationists used new media in an attempt to reshape everyday life. They took the remix tactics of Dada and made them accessible to a broader public, reframing urban space as an open artwork and game. A contemporary example can be found in alternate reality games (ARGs), which bring Situationist strategies to a contemporary public. ARGs are collective, participatory narratives played by scalable, networked communities across new and old media platforms.

### Chapter 6: Narrative Formal

The narrative formal avant-garde expands how narratives and language are structured as well as engaged in both radical and complicit ways. For new media theorist Janet Murray (1997, 142), a "game is a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest." The narrative formal avant-garde does not merely resemble the world through games; it disturbs that resemblance to make it stand out in relief. The historical precedent for this avant-garde is Russian formalism, a progenitor of various modern literary and aesthetic



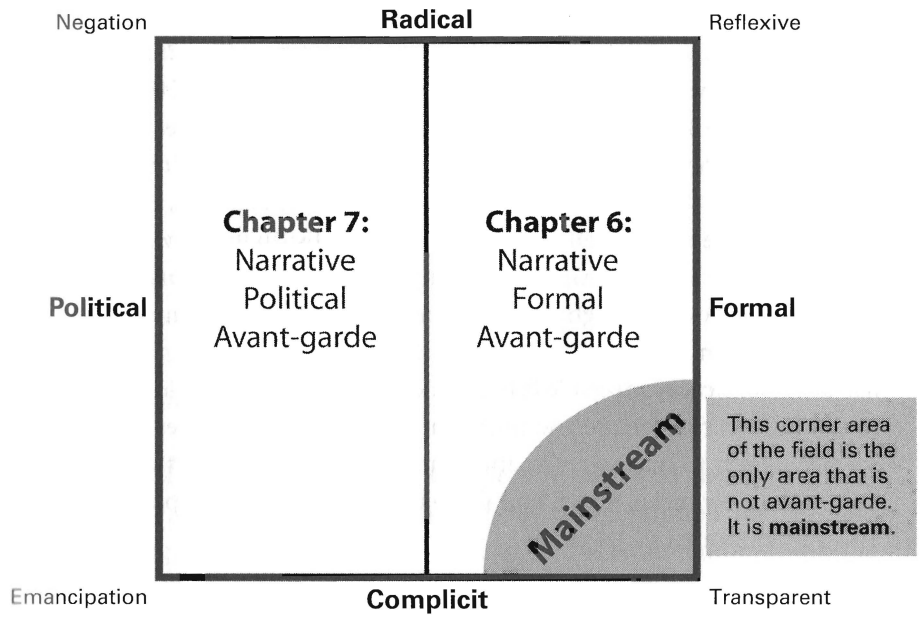


**Figure 1.11**
Chapters 6 and 7 examine the narrative avant-garde along formal and political perspectives.

philosophies in the twentieth century. The Russian formalists were the first avant-garde to formulate theories of medium specificity in general along with the autonomy of poetic language and literature in particular. Their goal was to pull "us into a dramatic awareness of language, [which] refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more 'perceptible'" (Eagleton 1996, 3). The key tactics are to *defamiliarize* and *estrange*. Interactive fiction (IF) is a treasure trove of narrative formal avant-garde games. In classic text adventures, the player types commands to control their avatar, manipulate objects, and advance the story. Because of the parser's inability to accept the plasticity of everyday language, the effect of defamiliarization is often unintentionally realized.

### Chapter 7: Narrative Political

The narrative political avant-garde uses popular entertainment to transform culture. Brecht, as noted earlier, was a prominent playwright after

World War I who bent the force of theater toward political ends instead of uncompromisingly challenging the status quo. *September 12th* is a Brechtian game in which players experience the causal structure of the war on terror. Augusto Boal, a contemporary activist, founded the Theater of the Oppressed movement, which builds on the Brechtian model of political art. In Brecht's theater, the audience is still passive. For Boal, spectators must breach the stage to tell their own stories. To distribute knowledge and power over the social "weapon of theater," Boal traveled to rural villages and urban ghettos throughout Latin America. In Boalian games, players become programmers, easily reworking games. The long-term goal of the narrative political avant-garde is to democratize or liquefy artistic mediums so anyone can reconfigure and use them. It will eventually be easy for the average person to make, remix, and share videogames, just as the average person can now make, remix, and share digital texts, photographs, videos, and music through social media.

**Chapter 8: Conclusion**

This volume is not an exhaustive account of the videogame avant-garde. It is instead a map of some of the territory that the avant-garde is currently exploring with games. Although critics commonly label examples of videogame art and the avant-garde as a single type (political, formal, radical, narrative, expressive, critical, etc.), that kind of reductionism is misleading, as each of those strategies represents just one perspective on a sprawling, disordered, changing, and complex movement. The strategies of the avant-garde can only be realized and understood in collective, counteradaptive, and ad hoc ways. We must recognize that many kinds of forces perpetuate the status quo in game culture. If we wish to counter these forces, we must develop a diversity of tactics ranging across technical, aesthetic, and cultural strategies in order to break open game culture and advance games as an artistic medium.

# 2 Radical Formal

## Rise of Avant-garde Painting

The radical formal avant-garde both deconstructs and develops artistic mediums. Avant-garde painters historically revolutionized the medium of painting, just as formal avant-garde artists cultivate and redefine the medium of games today. Whether they work in paintings or videogames, avant-garde artists play with a medium beyond easily consumable formulas.

The term *medium* has a different meaning in the discipline of media studies than it does in avant-garde art history. According to media studies, medium refers to material and technical supports (e.g., the medium of painting is the paint and canvas). According to the avant-garde, an artistic medium has three formal dimensions: material supports, the social and cultural conventions at work, and the range of sensations and aesthetic experiences afforded.[1] Formal artists (a term synonymous with formal avant-garde artists) can manipulate mediums in such diverse ways because they grasp them in three dimensions, according to their materials, conventions, and aesthetics. Each dimension is in play, which is why formal art can seem incoherent to casual players or novice viewers. As avant-garde artists collectively advance a medium, what was shocking or incoherent for one generation of viewers or players becomes conventional for the next. If we trace the historical rise of formal painting, we will be able to draw parallels that can help us identify how the formal avant-garde is emerging in today's videogames.

As mentioned in chapter 1, Alberti defined painting as a virtual window and explained many pivotal mechanics, such as the implementation of a vanishing point in a picture to achieve a convincing illusion of depth.[2] Renaissance artists perfected such techniques to achieve a gravitational