# Anxiety, Openness, and Activist Games:
# A Case Study for Critical Play

**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the boundaries of social issues or 'activist' games with a case study on a popular game released in 2009 which fosters a critical type of play among the audience. We assess the game's public reception to better understand how contradictory play elements led to an anxiety of ambiguity during open play. Borrowing from the "poetics of open work," we will demonstrate how the most powerful play experience in activist games result from a new relationship formed between the audience and the player through mechanics, subject position, representation, and content.

**Author Keywords**

Computer games , Casual games, Values, Politics, Social Issues, Method

**INTRODUCTION**

In the "Age of Information," videogames have become a viable medium to express complex systems or phenomena that pertain to the physical and social world. Political issues, scientific processes or social trends can be described by the mechanisms and vocabulary inherent in gaming systems. Educators and designers are becoming increasingly confident in the potential for games to provide new methods of learning. Students today can investigate photosynthesis or the carbon cycle through play[1]. Game designs that address social issues, as opposed to scientific processes, are significantly more challenging both to create and to assess. The spectrum of opinion on any one sociopolitical issue complicates system design, in part, due to existing computational practices. To avoid dogmatic decrees, sociopolitical games must permit flexible interpretation of content. The "openness" inherent in any flexible game is then a means to facilitate a relational experience among players.

In March of 2009 the Tiltfactor laboratory, Dartmouth College, released the causal game LAYOFF [17]. The

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[1] The University Corporation on Atmospheric Research, the BBC and the National Earth Science Teacher's Association each have created simulation games on the carbon cycle.

game was funded by Values at Play, a research project that intends to investigate how human values enter the game design process (http://www.valuesatplay.org). As part of that research, LAYOFF addresses the 2009 U.S. financial crisis and related values that reflect actual "players" in the scandal. The game content, provided by a factual news ticker and the player's limited agency within the game, incorporates actual news headlines from the 2009 financial crisis.

Part dark humor, part simple match game and part grim portent, players engage with the game from the side of management—needing to cut jobs and increase workforce efficiency by matching sets of workers. Interestingly, LAYOFF was conceptualized by the Tiltfactor Lab before rumor of financial bank scandals and before the public caught wind that corporate bonuses had been siphoned from government "bailout" funding. Upon release of the game, however, record numbers of workers had been laid off and financial institutions were receiving trillions of dollars to bolster the struggling economy. The changing state of economic affairs actualized the crux of LAYOFF's content. In only a few weeks after it was released, the game had attracted over a million players.

Using LAYOFF as a case study, we intend to explore the boundaries of "activist games," a developing genre fostered by both academic members of the gaming community as well as independent game developers. We will assess the game's public reception to better understand how contradictory play elements led to an anxiety of ambiguity during open play. Borrowing from the "poetics of open work," we will demonstrate how the most powerful play experience in activist games result from a new relationship formed between the audience and the player through mechanics, subject position, representation, and content.

Must an activist game propose a specific purpose or make one argument? Or can an objective develop through game play? The questions that guide our inquiry emerged anew in an analysis of LAYOFF and its dynamics. Should any activist game designer desire to control a player's interpretation of his or her game? Or should the element of collective interpretation—even divergent interpretations—govern the game's significance?

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## THE GAME

The notion of an "activist game" is continuously developing with the successes of existing, and addition of new, games that address social issues gaining new audiences over the past decade. In the past, artists such as Öyvind Fahlström created monopoly-styled "variable paintings" with hundreds of moving magnetic pieces to change the order and political direction of the play during the Vietnam War and Cambodian conflicts of the 1960s-70s [9]. Contemporary game makers have tackled social issues from poverty (*Ayiti*, Global Kids and Game Lab [8]) to the Fast Food Industry (*McDonalds* game, Molle Industria [12]) to terrorism (*September 12th,* Gonzalo Frasca [5]). Such games render social issues relevant to those engaged with contemporary media trends—games dominate today's media experience, like the newspaper, the nickelodeon, and theatre were 100 years ago—but they also explore notions of agency and education. An environmentally motivated game, for example, might inform players about agricultural practices that contribute to soil corrosion, or it may simulate processes that instigate terrorist attacks. An activist game might seek to inspire a specific emotion or perhaps it may intend to model a physical system. If we abstract the fundamental framework of any game ("activist" or not), we retain an objective rule-based system governed by efficiency and motivated by reward. Similarly, processes that exist in the real world can be understood in terms of simulation, which is also organized by a rule set.



**Figure 1:** *LAYOFF*, 2009

LAYOFF was designed to be a simple in game play: it uses a "match three" to "match five" mechanic -- but complex in identification for the player. The interaction is relatively simple: In order to clear workers from the employment pool—symbolically represented by a shifting grid of employees—the player must align identical workers and take on the role of a manager needing to save funds by reducing redundancy among the staff. These "laid off" workers then descend to the bottom of the screen and the player is darkly "rewarded" with the spectacle of these laid-off workers. Players play from the side of management needing to cut jobs, and match types of workers in groups in order to decrease redundancy and increase workforce efficiency.

During play, players eliminate many workers in a row and find that as they gradually replace the workers with less skilled or lower paid new workers, financiers and bankers take the place of what were formerly working class jobs. The financiers in the game cannot face layoffs, but they can be moved around on the board in order to address redundancies of other worker's classes. The design of the game was intended to foster an atmosphere of unease as individual workers are laid off during the cascading real-world economic collapse.

LAYOFF uses a casual game paradigm to comment on social roles amidst a financial crisis. The game design aims to raise awareness, spark discussion, and most of all create a sense of empathy for people who are facing severe financial hardship. LAYOFF is one of several examples where the system of the game is used as a device for collective social criticism. Over a decade ago, MIT researcher Sherry Turkle noted in *Life on the Screen* how simulations could offer a site for players to think critically about their ideological assumptions in order to develop a more cohesive experience with social critique: "This new criticism would not lump all simulations together, but would discriminate among them. It would take as its goal the development of simulations that actually help players challenge the model's built-in assumptions. This new criticism would try to use simulation as a means of consciousness-raising" [18].

Among those members of the public who had simply heard of LAYOFF but did not play it, however, reactions ranged from harsh statements to individual protest, which suggested that the game was making light of people losing their jobs. Most players understood the point of the game, however, and noted the poignant or meaningful moments of play. In the game, the comments of the banker characters, culled from blogs and quotes from those in the financial industry over a period of a few months during the height of the "bailout" period, were almost too cinematic or fictional to be true, and provided a source of wry humor. Some players chose to closely exemplify their positioning as the purveyor of layoffs by closely monitoring those whose jobs they eradicated, lining up workers to face layoffs, then watch them fall into the unemployment line and wait to make sure they stay put.

Activist games are in some way didactic, that is, philosophically instructional or informative. The means by which their message competes with their capacity to entertain remains one of the inherent tensions in this type of work. Some games that address social issues do so through the technique of simulation, as the games are tied to what are considered "real world" events. In such games, what players are doing, what choices are available, and the

activities and habits of the players *matter*. In fact, Frasca argues that "simulation is an ideal medium for exposing rules rather than particular events" [4, p. 87]. LAYOFF, however, doesn't intend to portray an accurate model of the layoff process—it is not a simulation in this sense. What a designer faces when designing a simulation is that one must choose to include, or not, the various elements simulated. For example, a simulation on photosynthesis would likely take into account water, light, minerals, soil, seeds, and time under sunny or cloudy weather. Another approach might be to see how photosynthesis might work in different conditions, such as a gritty city or in ultraviolet-ridden light conditions in Antarctica. Still another might take into account discernable differences among GMO and organic crops, or heirloom or even ancient plants. Thus, the lens of the simulation can change. The social activist game *A Force More Powerful*, for example, requires players to direct large groups and organize political protests in a simulation style to "make decisions and see what happens." The game enables players to examine how various protest and communication techniques might work. Yet that very design might not allow for other types of grassroots, multi-person led decision-making. In short, the simulation is biased to a particular perspective. Scholars from Turkle to Flanagan to Frasca note that a critical environment is needed to investigate the assumptions – social ideological, and values-driven—in simulations and games [4, 6, 18].

## ACTIVIST GAMES AND DIALECTICS

The paradox of representing sociopolitical content through the medium of causal gaming underlies a player's experience in LAYOFF. As anthropologists of play have argued, play has historically functioned as a tool to understand the self. Brian Sutton-Smith, one of the main contributors to the cultural study of play in the 20th Century, has argued that play is an effective way for children to work out social and cultural roles. "Play can cure children of the hypocrisies of an adult life," notes Sutton-Smith, arguing that children's play—spanning from early childhood to teenage years—offers narratives that negotiate risks in the world: "These stories exhibit anger, fear, shock, sadness, and disgust" [16]. Adult play may also function, at least in part, in this way.

One way to approach games that address serious issues is to explore through play social and political themes. Perhaps socially controversial games use the concept of dialectics, the exchange between two parties holding different viewpoints who try to persuade each other to move one of the player's opinions to one particular point of view. Such would be the method behind the Socratic and Hegelian schools of thought, for example. Through the Socratic method, a given hypothesis would be shown to result in an inherent contradiction, thus voiding the hypothesis in the ultimate aim for Truth. Georg Hegel's notion was to offer a hypothesis, give a reaction or antithesis, and search for capital-T truth through a synthesis of the tensions. At times, he chose to use the framework Immediate-Mediated-Concrete to represent these stages [11]. Both of these classic philosophical models, if used as lenses to study activist games as persuasive tools, would suggest, first, that the inherent contradictions in such games could someday reach a kind of Truth or resolution, and that second, the aim of the contradictory debate was to resolve a Truth in the first place. In LAYOFF, players know that they are set up to have a certain kind of pleasure and experience both sides of an emotionally charged issue—the game does establish a dialectic. The player manages only one side of a conflict, but he or she can also transgress the typical notions of persuasive debate and the more obvious ways that the relationship is initialized. Inherent in the game are contradictory notions of play for the player as he or she plays the role, for example, of a merciless boss. The unfavorable activity of laying workers off is ironically coupled with factual information about the status quo of U.S. layoff rates and with notions of play.

Few activist games set up such a situation to transcend the dialectic. One may be the *McDonald's* game, players enjoy playing as the character that both transgresses what the game designers' likely sensibilities might be, and instead allow disruption. Players must navigate a system rife with contradictions in order to progress. Yet the game promises no resolution and, like the incessant rigor of capitalism, the player can only seek to accumulate more money. Contradiction fuels a sense of tension, which has been acknowledged by play testers and bloggers alike.

## THE ANXIETY OF THE DIALECTIC

LAYOFF does not allude to any possible reconciliation with the game's embedded contradictions. If players seek fantasy—a break from reality—through game play, LAYOFF provides just the opposite. Anxiety replaces blissful abandonment as players grapple with dialectical conflict. One example of this conflict is in the game's music. The background music sets an unsettling mood—the tune almost sounds upbeat, but its tone is dulled and limp. The song is monotonous like the repetitive motions that any player must perform, like any worker in the mostly mid- to lower-working class jobs represented in the game. The sonic treatment reinforces apprehension towards the game and intensifies any anxiety a player might feel. A player is told to "play-boss" but through the only player agency offered, is denied a clean conscious, for the agency in LAYOFF is mediated through the matching mechanic.



**Figure 2:** *LAYOFF* Characters, 2009

Further, the laid off workers are not anonymous; humanistic blurbs for individual employees demand sympathy, or a sense of empathy, from the player. These mini-sagas pop-up as the player scrolls over their positions:

> Torrill, 36, is a line worker at Ponte Plastics with a union position where Torrills' tasks include making lighted signs for advertising. The workdays last 10 hours when in a rush contract, but over time for 2 hours is paid in these cases. Torrill never went to college but wants to someday open a bed and breakfast [17].

Although profits increase as more workers are laid off, the player can also choose to spare a worker—if maybe the character's story is particularly inspirational. Workers must, however, be sacrificed to continue game play. The sadistic power that a player has over these workers, however, does not seem to limit personal reflection in play. One 28-year-old male player from Grand Ledge, Michigan noted in a *MySpace* conversation:

> Kind of a sad game if you start reading the personal info of all the people. They become real people and it becomes hard to lay them off. Maybe I just feel this way because it hits close to home. This week is my last week at my relatively decent and moderate good paying job before I get put on a "indefinite" layoff.
>
> Unemployment rate is 11.6% here so that means I probably won't be getting another job anytime soon [14].

Employee identities in LAYOFF are imaginary but they represent *potential* scenarios to which players can relate. LAYOFF's graphics are highly abstract and yet reality enters the game as factual news —extracted from media coverage—broadcasting across a news ticker. Players voiced offense to the game's simple format, coupled with controversial material, and criticized its attempt to reduce the complexities of economic crisis:

> As a former banker with strong academic roots who has subsequently returned to campus life, I am appalled that the complex issues we face in this financial mess are reduced to a simplistic, one dimensional game. We are not talk radio. Our responsibility in academe is to apply reason and analysis to understand complex problems and help find solutions [13].

Do these contradictions satirize "businessmen" as players in the layoff game of the economy today? The economic system at work in our world is certainly more complex than a matching game. Nonetheless, perhaps the game reflects the disillusionment and contradiction associated with the 2009 scandal. These meditations demonstrate the problematic desire to extract any singular message from LAYOFF.

In response to bloggers' lamentation over the LAYOFF's "slow as molasses" mechanics and criticism about "reducing politics," Brazilian Henrique Magnini of Ideogames (http://ideogames.blogspot.com/) suggested that the notion of intertextuality is essential to the game:

> In the original game [Bejeweled], we are talking about "gems". This abstraction could be transported to the new game and we can have a tension about the material part (employees) and abstract part (the similar objects that needs to be in lines). The pop-ups help to intensify this tension. Treat "people" as pieces to be eliminated is more than a good metaphor. It's the essential thing to act like the corporation wants. To act in this way (in the game or in the life) it's essential to keep away from the emotional involvement or to consider the employee as a human being. A guilty conscience needs this involvement.
>
> So, who dismiss? Who really act? The "corporation"? The one that create the rules? Or someone that obey the rules? And what is be rewarded in this system? Who is winning? The player? [10]

Magnini's asserts that the incorporation of sociopolitical content into the mechanics of a simple matching game should not be understood as simulation but instead in metaphorical terms. His rhetorical interrogation reveals that, like many players, he fails to pinpoint any focused meaning from the game. LAYOFF instead remains a dialectic quandary for those who seek an explanation.

**THE OPENNESS OF CRITICAL PLAY**
While many activist games intend to simulate processes that model aspects of reality, LAYOFF instead seems to, at least in part, inspire productive dialogue between players. Yet the tension of ambiguity that LAYOFF imposes upon its players inspires a broad spectrum of interpretation, which resonates with the "poetics of open work". Semotician Umberto Eco articulates this theory as the, "use of symbol as a communicative channel for the indefinite, open to constantly shifting responses and interpretative stances" [3, p.28]. He has examined the canon of modern literature to explain this sense of openness:

> The work remains inexhaustible in so far as it is 'open', because in it an ordered world based on universally acknowledged laws is being replaced by a world based

on ambiguity, both in the negative sense that directional centers are missing and in a positive sense, because values and dogma are constantly being placed into question [3, p.28].

While Eco is certainly not evaluating casual games, LAYOFF's imbedded contradictions reflect the sense of ambiguity that also characterizes what he calls the "poetics of open work". LAYOFF offers no conclusion and it conveys no individual concrete moral to be learned. The game is malleable to certain convictions but it does not entirely reaffirm a player's values. In this way, it refutes both classic philosophical models and ideas that activist games should be read as persuasive in their approach to social issues.

Released in the mist of an economic crisis, perhaps it is appropriate that the game does not provide any conclusion. While LAYOFF's game play is open to interpretation, especially as the economic climate shifts, meanings culled from play will change over time, but a core attribute to the game is the opportunity for the experience of "multiconsciousness", in which contradictions (merciless boss vs. laid off employee, abstract symbolism vs. textual fact, and even fun music with dark foreboding undertones) can be simultaneously experienced. This multiconsciousness, this openness, "poses problems in several dimensions" [3, p.39] and invariably leads to an unresolvable position in the play experience. Such a site can be fostered for criticality in order to question an aspect of the game's content, or an aspect of a play scenario's function, or the world around us. Criticality can provide an essential viewpoint or an analytical framework through rules that would be somehow relevant to the issue itself, and create the opportunity for the multiconsciousness in play in a given game that invites a new relationship between designer and consumer. Both digital and analogue games have long been recognized as vessels of potential: a game provides specifications suggesting a flowing iteration of any system that serves to organize those specifications.

Of course, games are incomplete without players to enact their specifications. The new relationship between designer and consumer becomes even more symbiotic as the designer imparts a greater responsibility upon the consumer to conceive of original meaning, which develops through play. Perhaps the openness of a sociopolitical game like LAYOFF, "installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art" [3, p.39]. Beyond its links to the economic crisis, the game can question, for example, how the values embedded in the game (such as, business must seek efficiency to succeed) are in play to question larger assumptions. To achieve the multiconsciousness of critical play, game designers—especially of games that incorporate sociopolitical content—must surrender control ultimately to the player's experience [6]. In fact, recent theory in the field of activist games advocates "openness" to maximize innovative

potential. Game designer and theorist Gonzalo Frasca, for example, has related open games to Augusto Boal's politically inspired Forum Theater:

> Unlike traditional theater that offers just one complete, closed sequence of actions, Forum Theater sessions show multiple perspectives on a particular problem. They do not show 'what happened' but rather 'what could happen.' It is a theater that stresses the possibility of change, at both social and personal levels [4, p. 89].

Frasca here calls on Boal to harness the incredible capacity of open interpretation for activist games. He also introduces a separate mode of expression, with less abstraction and increased simulation. Both simulation (persuasive games) and critical play games (multiconsiousness) achieve a state of dialogue between points of view and other dichotomies. In Boal's words: "It is more important to achieve a good debate than a good solution." [4, p. 89]. Play can be is used as a tool—not as a goal to resolve an argument or persuade players, but rather to open up possibility. LAYOFF is a casual game but it doesn't offer an entirely fun experience for the player. The genre of activist games is more effective in providing a good debate rather than a concrete solution applicable to the social and political world.

## CONCLUSION

Current sociopolitical games—especially video games—may not only help open up the condition for the contemporary digital game, but may also redefine some of the very notions of contemporary science and culture which still, despite critiques of rationalism, require universally acceptable laws, encourage notions of scientific progress, and maintain the possibility for knowable truths. Rather, we argue for the inherent strengths in ambiguous systems that anxiously open states provoke possibilities for problem solving, for dialogue, and for critical play:

> …ambiguity is the principal source of the inexhaustible richness of art. If we do not quickly tire of a picture or a piece of music, it is because we do not always see exactly the same pattern of coloured patches or hear the same pattern of tonal pitches. Instead we pick up or resonate each time to somewhat different relations within the pattern … The picture or music, however aesthetically pleasing in its own right, is only interpretable as an abstract pattern…[1, p. 73].

The game celebrates disjunctions and collusions between fact and fiction, true and false, game and world, avoiding conclusions and allowing the performative and interpretive freedom of the player to emerge as an essential element of critical play. Each play session, like a good performance,

provides an experience of the work, but not the only experience of it. The collective participation through such public dialogue in order to avoid embedding any dogmatic decree, lest they become, as games studies scholar Ian Bogost has described in his book *Persuasive Games*, videogames that make arguments and influence players; that is, to use visual imagery and metaphors, sound, and procedural rhetorics to open up "a new domain for persuasion"[2]. Games like *LAYOFF* move away from such a purpose, from classic philosophical models of persuasion in their approach to social issues through critical play. Time with LAYOFF may offer players a "version of the work, but at the same time makes it incomplete for us, because it cannot simultaneously give all the other artistic solutions which the work may admit" [3, p.33].

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