

Aesthetics for a Ludic Century - Ericka Beckman's Play with Games

Games are basically operas made out of bridges.

- Frank Lantz

1.

In the perfectly controlled environment of a Las Vegas casino, a single Roulette ball waits to be launched into its spinning wheel of fate. Again and again, day and night, it will trace the same circular trajectory.

The home it finds in the wheel will be a number; the number will be communicated; this will beget other numbers as bets are lost and won from the house. These numbers too ripple outwards in their effects – as wallets shuffle, ATMs are consulted, bank accounts bobbing like plankton in the sea of data. Desire and anxiety will continue to tangle; theories of probability will be thwarted or proven true.

Then the ball launches – it spins, skips, skids, and rattles, finally, to its home.

In the Machine Age, game players had fantasies of control which meant breaking or destroying the games themselves. Now that we have entered the age of computers, we fantasize about mastering a game program, through interpreting and using its signs, with hopes to control the game strategies for our own ends, to play out our own games.

- Ericka Beckman

2.

Ericka Beckman's film work emerged in the 1970s, just as videogames themselves were entering into culture. During this time, research experiments at MIT and electronics corporations were spawning the original arcade and console games. Through early games like Pong, a moving image on a screen for the first time was not just an image – it became something that could be manipulated, controlled, and played.

It's no stretch to say that Beckman was into games before games were cool. When she made game-inflected films like *The Broken Rule* (1979), *You the Better* (1983) and *Hiatus* (1999), computer and videogames were the junk food of cultural cuisine. Games were widely considered the realm of nerds and children, often dismissed as dangerously addictive or gratuitously violent.

It is only recently – in the last handful of years – that the public perception of games has turned a corner. Independent games have become the darlings of subculture; the scholarly study of games is booming; the New York Times now reports on games in their Arts section, rather than in Technology; MoMA has started collecting videogames; and virtually everyone plays games on their smartphones. This transformation, from a culture that shuns games to one that embraces them, happened so quickly and decisively that it's difficult to remember how reviled they were only a decade ago.

Beckman is certainly not the first artist to take on games in her work. From Surrealist language games to Fluxus happenings, there is a tradition of 20th century artists adopting the ideas and forms of games. But Beckman makes use of them in strange new ways, coaxing games into revealing perverse and beautiful parts of themselves, building an aesthetics for our current age of play.

*In the Ludic Century, everyone will be a game designer.
- from the Manifesto for a Ludic Century*

3.

Games are ancient. For thousands of years, our species has played boardgames, sports, and other kinds of games. But while play has always been important, the rise of digital technologies has given games a new relevance today.

In contemporary industrialized nations, many aspects of our lives are intimately bound up with digital information networks. The ways that we work and learn, communicate and research, socialize and romance, conduct our finances and connect with our governments – are all completely intertwined with systems of data. Media today are not handed down from a higher authority – they are modular, customizable, hackable systems. Wikipedia has replaced the bound volumes of the encyclopedia as the essential information source; we stream our entertainment – when and how we want it.

In this kind of cultural ecosystem, it is no accident that games are on the rise. More than other forms of cultural expression, games are intrinsically systemic. Every game of Backgammon, or Tennis, or Grand Theft Auto is an occasion to experiment with the inputs and outputs of a mechanistic, dynamic system. While every song and every novel is certainly also a system, games take this notion to a kind of logical extreme, requiring their audience of players to directly participate with their underlying structures.

It could be argued that the 20th century was a century of the moving image, in which personal narratives, news and documentary, political messaging, corporate propaganda, and epic cultural myths were most prominently expressed through film and video. If that kind of historical generalization can be made, it seems just as likely

that in the 21st century, games promise to become the defining cultural form. We are entering into a century of play.

Cheerleaders: This team's on fi-re. Raise them shots and raise them – high-er! *(repeats)*

Announcer: That's it. It's court number two with the number three ball from the house in play. Court two step both lanes – eight courts to go.

Player: When I'm in the game, I'm gonna pass to the guys who *know* what I'm going to do. *These* two guys might as well be *holding hands* on the sidelines.

Players: (in response) What?!

Player: We're going to have to make another shot if we're gonna get out of this one.

Cheerleaders: Take down, take two, you know what to do. *(repeats)*

Announcer: Here we go. The number four ball from the house in play in court three.

Cheerleaders: Take a shot. Put a house on the lot, take a shot. *(repeats)*

Announcer: We're on court four with number four ball in play. Way to go!

Cheerleaders: Take a shot. We're backing you up - take a shot.

Player: The last two years I've had this policy – that I don't worry about what's coming up from behind me.

- Ericka Beckman, excerpt from *You the*

Better

4.

When game designer Frank Lantz posits that games are *operas made out of bridges*, he means that they are a rich and complex form of cultural expression – yet they are also highly technical at their core, requiring feats of engineering akin to the planning and execution of a monumental public project.

The code of a big-budget videogame can take dozens or hundreds of game developers years to make. Even non-digital games – sports, board games, gambling games – are highly structured machines. Game rules are not just sets of mathematical relationships, like notes on a page or architectural blueprints. They are sets of mathematical *possibilities* that play out in unexpected ways each time a game is played. Every Olympic event, every hand of Poker, every online Starcraft match is an improvised theater of chance and fate, power and free will, bitter conflict and longing for resolution.

Beckman's film *You the Better* unfolds as a series of games that grow in complexity as the film proceeds. Starting from a subdivision of fundamental atomic elements, the film presents games based on points, then lines, then more complex systems, putting players in increasingly convoluted relationships. Players philosophize, trash talk, and commiserate, as they cooperate with each other, nurse bitter rivalries, or are suddenly ecstatic or frustrated.

Each of *You the Better's* games borrow from other games – Basketball, Dodgeball, slot machines, pinball. And they often look quite fun. But although they are built from familiar pieces, the games themselves always slip just beyond understanding. Each one is a conglomeration of rules and structures, abstract mechanisms with shifting conflicts simmering beneath their clean surfaces. But they refuse to sit still.

Just as we are getting the hang of one game, its rules seem to change, a new element is added, or the playfield relocates to a new space. We never quite know who is playing and why – how they win and what is at stake. Like the Red Queen's croquet match in *Through the Looking Glass*, Beckman's games spin out in unexpected ways, flirting with coherence but stubbornly refusing to resolve. As the games are played, they play with the very idea of games themselves.

The many layers of the games – mathematical, visual, social – add up to a complex patterning. The soundtrack alone is a dense matrix of catchy robotic songs, sports cheers, oblique narration, and player dialog. The games of *You the Better* manifest as a set of intricate relationships – and even as the viewer struggles to parse them, these patterns shift and change and fold back on themselves. The result is a very particular kind of beautiful.

*Don't slow down now, don't stop!
Put that house on an empty lot!*

- Cheer from *You the Better*

5.

Beckman's films are more than just formalist fantasies of game mechanisms and their players. They also engage with the cultures that describe, produce, and consume games as well.

In *You the Better*, there is a constant play with visual and textual language – a play that becomes almost perverse in its expulsive exuberance. A word like “house,” for example, shifts and changes across the film, signifying at different moments the traditional domestic domicile, the monotony of suburban blight, the authority of the casino's position as “house,” the psychological safety of “home base.” These meanings are multiplied by the visual icons of the film – houses tumbling, houses subdividing, houses with gaping mouths that absorb balls and game tokens.

If games are a way of parsing our current era, then a film like *You the Better* becomes a kind of lexicon for mixing and matching the cultural semiotics of our time. What it offers is not a rational dictionary of meaning, but an ever-shifting, ever-playful font of concepts: the language of the Ludic Century.

While *You the Better* revolves around non-computer games of gambling and sport, Beckman's film *Hiatus* (1999), created more than a decade later, engages with videogames and virtual realities. Dressed in cyberpunk style, the characters in *Hiatus* range across a gamut of games. The virtual avatar Wanda tills her garden with interactions that reference classic arcade action games like *Tempest* and *Tetris*. The film also anticipates many of today's videogame trends, such as the gardening gameplay of *Farmville* or the character interaction of digital role-playing games. The focus of the plot – a war between Wanda and her frenemy Wang over virtual property – evokes the social gameplay of *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*.

Hiatus contributes a critical vocabulary to our moment of games. As with *You the Better*, it does so not by commenting on games from the outside – but by also going deep inside. The art world has long snubbed the complexity of videogames – often, at best, appropriating their glittering surfaces. But Beckman goes so much further. Unabashed, she rigorously engages with the mechanistic intricacies of games, even as she leverages them for bigger insights about culture at large.

*A symbol is necessary to play singles.
If a sign is to replace a symbol
The group must strip the single
Of his imagination
And obligate a common imagery
To go hand in hand
With the rules.*

- intertitle from *The Broken Rule* (1979)

6.

Beckman's films are rife with repetition. Events, songs, structures – all repeat themselves, often with only subtle changes over time.

The latter half of Beckman's film *The Broken Rule* (1979) is a case in point. Two teams line up on a court and repeat a simple relay race: a runner sprints a short distance, returns to his line and slaps the hands of the next player, who then darts forward – as the previous runner moves to the back of the line and waits to come to the front again.

Like a baroque sonata, the theme is repeated with endless variations. A yellow briefcase is carried by each runner and passed down the line of players, overhead.

Or it is passed between their legs. Or it is passed alternating overhead and between the legs. Or it is passed along with a hat. These variations are highlighted by the problems of one player (played by artist Mike Kelley) who just can't get it right. He passes the briefcase in the wrong way. Or drops it. Or runs in the wrong direction. It's never clear if his mistakes are errors of incompetence or mischievousness, but by the end of the film, the rule-breaking player has found his own way to play – running in circles, holding the briefcase aloft like a stolen trophy.

Repetition is the raw material of games. Chess might be a highly complex intellectual practice that millions have played across the centuries, but all a Chess player ever really does is move a token on a grid. Over and over. In endless variations. A soccer player runs and kicks and kicks and runs. Videogame avatars sprint and jump across vast digital landscapes, a simple set of actions repeated with small differences over time.

Games are a cultural form of the *same but different*. Each time a particular game is played, the rules – the underlying structures – are the same. But a game can become engaging, subtle, and sublime through the surprise and variety of how those rules play out. Thus the rules of Basketball or Crosswords remain fixed, but through the circumstances of the moment, a particular game becomes a memorably epic match.

Fundamental elements repeating, again and again. Like a pornographic film, one random frame of a game is very likely to be similar to another. Beckman's films – particularly those most game-like – become a kind of pornography of systems; an aesthetics that fetishizes repetition. Through repetition, Beckman explores games, explodes them, and turns them inside out.

But she does so in order to connect them to larger structures of language and culture. *You the Better* dismantled notions of "home" – and *The Broken Rule* takes on similar territory. *The Broken Rule*'s misbehaving player acts within a larger filmic world that is highly gendered: men play games with briefcases and hats, while women stay behind with the laundry. Beckman's film renders this entire machinery absurd, while celebrating the inner mechanics that keep the whole system going, for better or for worse.

Now if anything's going to change around here, it's only going to change for the better.

- player from *You the Better*

7.

There is something rational about games. About their rules, about their complicated structures, about being invested in winning through the machinery of an artificial system. Yet taking games and play seriously also means leaving the rational behind. Beautiful games dismantle themselves. *The Broken Rule*, *Hiatus*, and *You the Better*

are not just about games in and of themselves. They explore what happens when players resist the rules and invent their own ways to play.

The title “You the Better” masquerades as a kind of self-improvement manta: *Become a better person!* But lurking behind the *better* is the *bettor* – the player, the schemer, the desperate gambler making a bet. Perhaps it is possible to really become better - to change the rules and improve the game.

But to be the ghost in the machine, or call forth the *deus ex machina*, it is necessary first to know the machine, to inhabit the machine, to accept the part one plays in the system. The result is never clear – like the misbehaving player in *The Broken Rule*, have we gotten stuck in a loop, or have we escaped by finding a new way to play? And so Beckman asks us: Is this a bet you want to make?

That is the strange and delightful tension of Ericka Beckman’s films. They are at once rigorous celebrations of highly complex systems. But as she observes her own inventions, they begin to shift and self-deconstruct through her looking-glass gaze. They hack themselves in pursuit of transformative play. In this way, her work could well be the handbook for the Ludic Century in which all of us already live.

The Roulette ball drops. On the other side, it will be home.

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