

## **Playing the critique:**

### **The subversive notion of the *Can you feel the spill?* board game**

by Andrea Palasti

### **'We should live out our lives playing at certain pastimes - sacrificing, singing and dancing'**

- Plato. Laws: Book 7. Paragraph 803e

Activities subsumed under the mantle of play (*playing a game!*) are considered to exist across diverse cultural and intellectual human activity as a unifying type of behavior. Playing is thus, a free and meaningful activity, carried out for its own sake, spatially and temporally segregated from the requirements of practical life (Huizinga, 1938/1955). There are many definitions of playing/gaming, but maybe the most conventional one would be that a game is a context with rules among adversaries trying to win objectives (Abt, 1970). Because of many different characteristics that games have, they may be played casually or seriously. Games can also be a constructive and integrative part of our society and can address fundamental aspects of mental, environmental, socio-political and/or geo-political issues. Games can be made to provide an engaging, self-reinforcing context in which to motivate, educate and/or train the players.<sup>i</sup> *Serious games*<sup>ii</sup> - even if they are entertaining - are carefully thought-out for educational intention and are not primarily intended for amusement. (ibid, 1970).

This emphasis on the didactic/educative intensity of a game is also the philosophical starting point of the game *Can you feel the spill?*. It proposes a *space*, where it is put in question the boundary between the notion of the game and conceptual art; playfulness and seriousness; playable and non-playable; and/or aesthetics and ethics. Using a concept and a practice of strategy, the board game is conceived as a turn-based strategy game for two players, that deals with a *glocal* ecological issue of offshore oil drillings and its environmental impacts. The board game is firmly tied to a specific Neringa issue that explores the /potential/ impact of the Kravtsovskoye /D-6/ oilfield on the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Curonian Spit. It is a detailed game system that stimulates the decisions and processes inherent to the management body of the D-6 oilfield - the Oil Tzar (player 1) and the Environmentalist (player 2). The primary object of the game is to occupy every territory on the board and in so doing, eliminate the other player. But, the game is not a simple play between the evil one and the good one. It also raises analytical problems such as the introjection of repressive power by the oppressed themselves. It raises ethical questions about civility and fairness, about the emancipatory struggle that has been silenced forcibly (Guattari, 1989). Its critique is not only directed against the offshore oil drillings, but also against the *environmentalist* (which, in theory, are struggling to defend the Nature), but are operating on the precisely the same level (e.g. supervision by political parties) as the capitalistic power. In its dense disposition of intricate rules, the game is therefore, using an ironic language to reflect the notions of the capitalistic power formations and, through that, to play around with the players' subjectivity.

The conceptual framework of the board game lies precisely within this convoluted and tangled capitalist power system, reflecting its rules and its functioning (working methodologies). The game is thus structured around these complex *symptoms* of our (political) society like: (i) corruption; (ii) racketeering; (iii) exploitation; (iv)

lobbying; (v) fraud; (vi) extortion (vii) bribery etc. Hence the game evokes a meaningful social conflict, but with uncommon game mechanics (playing by rules of the *black business!*), it gets the players out of their routines and forces them to think differently: it drives them to think critically. In this way, while playing in a role of a *criminal avatar*, the players create an interdisciplinary space in which they perform a micro-social and a micro-political performance. Therefore, the complicated and ethically problematic rules, the long playing hours or even the impossibility to finish (mostly because of the lack of concentration and/or interest) are the core of this *mind-game*.

This subversive character of the game surprises the players, it plays with their expectations, but at the same time it fosters change. It cultivates the players on the praxis of the *social* -, *mental* -, and the *environmental ecology* (Guattari, 1989). Because its focus is on society and environment, the game creates new solidarities, personal-ethical alternatives, new modes of knowledge that demands sustainability. And this sustainability can be seen in the maintenance of 'responsibility and ethical accountability' (Braidotti, 2006), in 'ethics of lucidity', as well as 'powers of innovation and creativity' (Hayles, 1999 in Braidotti, 2006). In this sense, the *Can you feel the spill?* board game is re-grounding the emancipatory struggle of the oppressed by playing the repressive power itself with the aim towards (im)possible responsible politics and social change.

#### References:

- Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; a study of the play-element in culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
- Clark Abt, *Serious Games*, New York: The Viking Press, 1970.
- Felix Guattari, *The three ecologies*, *New formations*, Number 8, Summer 1989.
- Rosi Braidotti, *Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity*, *Rhizomes* 11/12, fall 2005/spring 2006. [http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html#\\_ftn1](http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html#_ftn1)

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<sup>i</sup> *Kriegsspiel* was one of the first war games created in 1824 by a Prussian lieutenant Georg von Reisswitz. The games were published as *Instructions for the Representation of Tactical Maneuvers under the Guise of a Wargame* and it was somewhat popular among the German military as training exercises. See more in: Friedrich Kittler, *Grammaphone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> Serious or applied games are simulations of real-world events or processes designed for the purpose of solving a problem, to train and/or to educate the players. The term was coined by Clark Abt (1970).