

## Chapter 19

# The Mechanic is the Message: A Post Mortem in Progress

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter provides two entry points into Brenda Brathwaite's series *The Mechanic is the Message*, a group of six non-digital games that explore difficult topics. Brathwaite writes from the perspective of the game's designer, covering the inception of the series, its inspirations and the challenges inherent in working with content one might deem questionable in the game space. Sharp, on the other hand, writes from the perspective of a game designer and an art historian and critiques the game's entry and reception into both the world of art and games.*

### INTRODUCTION

Brenda Brathwaite's series *The Mechanic is the Message* is composed of six non-digital games, each of which invites the player to explore a difficult topic and engages the player in an ethical simulation. The first game in the series, *The New World*, was completed in February of 2008. As of this writing, the series is half-way to completion.

During the process of design, Brathwaite talked regularly with a number of individuals, one of whom was game designer and art historian John Sharp, a

colleague at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Their shared perspective as two game designers led to conversations during the design process, and Brathwaite shared many of her experiences as well as her reasoning with Sharp, particularly during the development of the game, *Train*.

In the essays that follow, Brathwaite and Sharp independently look at the series as it stands as of the early summer of 2009. First, Brathwaite discusses the origins of the project, her design process, and her thoughts on the early reception of the series. In the second half of the chapter, Sharp looks at the series as games within the traditions of art and

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exhibition. The essays were originally written blind without one another's input. Only in the final editing process did Brathwaite and Sharp share their essays with one another.

## **Brenda Brathwaite, Game Designer**

There is a moment in the design of every game where its designer asks a fundamental question: What is this game about?

Games have themes, narratives (both in-game and player-made) and opportunities for wish fulfillment and conflict resolution. Even the most abstract games like *Tetris* have stories both inside and outside the game. The interaction of the player and the rules, the story that arises from the play of the game, or in the case of *Tetris*, the designer Alexey Pajitnov's story of forfeited profits, all present compelling game stories to explore.

But if all games are about something, what experiences should we simulate or tell through games? As I write this, Konami's "Six Days in Fallujah" is embroiled in a controversy and finding support and condemnation in equal amounts. Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series has evoked similar feelings for its inclusion of violence, racial tensions and sexual themes, something one might critically appreciate in Academy Award-winning films such as *The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver*, or *Scarface*. And what responsibility does the designer have to the situations, feelings or tensions she evokes? By viewing the games in the series through the lens of game design and art criticism, we can begin to answer these questions.

Games, in their digital form at least, are a relatively new medium in which artistic decisions and player reactions to those decisions are occasionally questioned as appropriate, ethical and ultimately acceptable. Designers self-censor, knowing certain narrative paths, rules or visuals ought not to be explored lest they make something commercially unviable, cause it to encounter retail resistance or obtain an undesirable Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) rating. Even

the term "game" is problematic and evocative of something that must be, or intend to be, fun and entertaining. Games could provoke us. They could make us angry, make us think, call us to action or make us cry. They could leave us feeling shaken. They could touch all our emotions just as other arts do. I have cried standing in front of Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist*, felt nauseated by photographs of war and felt my Irish Catholic upbringing instinctively flinch at the Seranno's *Piss Christ*.

In the creation of the six games that make up the installation *The Mechanic is the Message* and particularly the game *Train*, I had not intended to explore these questions. Rather, the exploration started spontaneously at the confluence of two events: a chance conversation over dinner between two photographers and an equally chance creation later titled *The New World*, a game about the Middle Passage that was originally played between me and my daughter Maezza at the kitchen table.

## **Photographer to Photographer**

In early 2008, I was invited to a dinner sponsored by the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) where I am presently chair of the Interactive Design and Game Development department. The dinner included a number of other SCAD faculty as well as staff from other colleges. There were two photography professors at my table, and their conversation turned toward an innate challenge of their art form: "Should I take the picture or not?"

This particular evening, one of the photographers at the table told of his 2005 trip to the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota where a 16-year-old boy had just killed nine people before committing suicide. "I couldn't take the pictures," he said, referring to the people in the town and their reactions. The photographer, a Native American himself, had not gone to cover the story for any media outlet, but rather to capture the experience of his people on film as he had

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