



Letsplay I- Wiley Wiggins (2021) single channel video

Video introduction to a game in perpetual development, including recorded play footage of:
Sneek 'n Peek (1982, publisher: Vidtek, platform: Atari 2600),
SwordQuest: Earthworld (1982, publisher: Atari Inc., platform Atari 2600),
SwordQuest: Fireworld (1983, publisher: Atari Inc., platform: Atari 2600)

Mud Room is a game installation that turns family tree data into a maze of connected rooms. Some rooms hold shrines to the deceased that can be maintained and cared for, sort of a gardening game but in a vaguely dungeon-like setting. The name “Mud Room” refers to a transitional space between inside and outside, typically a place to take off muddy boots and wash hands. For me it also conjures the idea of a MUD (multi-user-dungeon) room, a multiplayer game space suggested by electronic text, but largely existing in the imaginations of its players. In my grandmother’s house the mud room was a room where children played. It was also a place where a family suicide took place, and the place where children were kept busy with an Atari game console while the ensuing family crises were managed. It was a place of unacknowledged work—like the work my mother did cleaning up after her stepfather’s suicide, sparing his birth daughters the experience. Other forms of “play work” happened here. My cousins and I played games like *Swordquest* and *Sneak 'n Peek* here against a backdrop of grim silence. At no time can I remember these games as being “fun”, rather they were a sort of ritualized, embodied children’s busywork. *Swordquest* had the unique distinction of being backgrounded by a rumored contest that would award the person who solved it with an actual gold treasure. *Sneak 'n Peek* was a crude approximation of a game of hide and seek, where in order to hide, invisible cracks in between the pixel blocks of an empty house had to be slid into, human figures disappearing and almost never found again, as a clock

ticked down till the time the game was lost and forgotten. *Mud Room* builds a new game off of the muscle memory left by those games, but builds a maze instead out of genealogical data built from family trees, starting with my own. Shrines to the dead can be built, maintained or defaced by me or others who enter the maze of cenotaphs. A lead weighted version of the Atari controller I used as a child is tethered to an installed version of the game and used to carry out these actions. The game operates in this installation, but it is backed by a persistent web-connected database that others can enter on other devices. With this in mind, my role in the maze is to perform as a non-player character, tending to dungeon rooms with my own motivations as others pass through. We cannot directly communicate with one another, only infer each other’s intentions towards each other and the empty digital monuments to the dead.

Mud Room represents an evolution in my approach to game making and how I situate games in data and in the indexical world around us. The kinds of game experiments that I build, and the performances that I carry out within them may radically change as I acquire new skills, but my intent is always to interrogate nostalgic and modern conceptions of technology and to use what I learn to create new kinds of spaces of play.

Artist's Statement

How do we build personally and communally meaningful spaces out of the termite mounds of ephemeral trash, products, symbols and software that form the sometimes invisible, seemingly impenetrable walls of our world? How does the act of play, a word I'll use here to stand for an action that contrasts against our modern conception of work, make and remake that world, our selves, and our communities? How does work seek to colonize and commodify play, and how does play succeed and fail in its subversions against work?

When I was young, my mother enrolled me in community computer art classes for children. Home computers at that time were rare, and the classes were my first exposure to them. Using the educational programming language Logo on Apple II computers, our class created complex, spirograph-like patterns with simple instructions, and I was transfixed by the idea of this new way of drawing and seeing. Later, at the homes of friends and relatives, I experienced the first wave of home computer games. Here were scenarios, symbols and tasks, as the images drawn out on the television began to work at meaning, like moving and mysterious petroglyphs. Somewhere between these two experiences— of image making and game playing on a computer – the notion that I could create my own game was implanted in my mind.

As an adult, I now contrast that experience with years working in tech-support phone banks and as an interface designer, lost in the bowels of large companies or toiling away at unstable cash-grab startups, watching the techno-utopian ideals of the early internet give way to the ugly reality of surveillance capitalism. Technologies that could augment and liberate people are instead used by those in power as barriers to access. Access to other humans to appeal to for help, to resources, to class consciousness. I think about people like my dyslexic mother, who I have watched struggle to use increasingly automated, online basic services. Services hidden behind chains of interactions which, while innately understandable to some, are baroque and torturous for her. For many people, the hostile architecture of software that surrounds us isn't just an inconvenience, it's a sword of Damocles that can mean the difference between life and death.

As an artist often working with computers, I think about how software can be both fluid and ossified, infinitely reproducible but rooted firmly in materiality, ephemeral and enduring, violently oppressive and empowering, a fount of information and of propaganda. Most of all, I think about how we act 'within' software. At the center of my understanding of software interactions is always the dance of play. I've been learning to build games as a place to deconstruct notions of software as barrier. Digital games for me are a way to retopologize software (to borrow a 3d modeling term)— to remap, to reskin, to overlay new rules and new meanings onto an otherwise unchanged structure— in order to serve goals other than productivity or compliance. Games can build space for co-creating meaning (for good or bad), for interacting with others, and for hiding memories (in the tradition of videogame Easter eggs). Software interactions (even ones with only one human participant) are social actions. I think of the people who interact with the things I create as collaborators, and I want opportunities to create the devices and physical environments in which the art I create is experienced, to situate it, to root it in place and time in defiance of overwhelming pressure to treat all of the work and play of games as ephemeral, discrete, sale-priced product. Properly situated, I can do the work of tailoring a game to a concrete someone in a material some-place. I'm reminded that what customer support, UI design, game design and acting (all jobs I've performed at one time or another) have in common is what sociolinguist Alan Bell called Audience Design— a shifting of communication style based on an imagined recipient and a resulting power dynamic. Communication styles on the internet have radically changed as our conceptions of who we speak to in various online contexts has necessarily changed. Games and software are a way for me to create a process of granting trust and speaking to a person that I often cannot meet, in a world that I do not necessarily trust— a letterlocked note that unfolds with time and attention. The performances that happen in these new situated game spaces constitute collaborative, embodied ways of learning and making culture and self. They can either be imbued with meaning and spirit or they can be turned into a form of meaningless busywork in an imagined vacuum, in denial of their material roots and effects.