Manifesto for a Ludic Century
Eric Zimmerman

Games are ancient.

Like making music, telling stories, and creating images, playing games is part of what it means to be human. Games are perhaps the first designed interactive systems our species invented.

Digital technology has given games a new relevance.

The rise of computers has paralled the resurgence of games in our culture. This is no accident. Games like Chess, Go, and Parcheesi are much like digital computers, machines for creating and storing numerical states. In this sense, computers didn't create games; games created computers.

The 20th Century was the century of information.

Systems theory, communications theory, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, computer science – these fields, many of them emerging well before electronic computers, helped create the "information revolution."

The abstraction of information has made possible massively complex bureaucracies and technologies, from telegraph and telephone networks to NASDAQ and Facebook.

In our Ludic Century, information has been put at play.

Our information networks no longer take the form of vast card catalogs or webs of pneumatic tubes. Digital networks are flexible and organic.

In the last few decades, information has taken a playful turn. To take a prime example, Wikipedia is not about users accessing a storehouse of expert knowledge. It is a

messy, chaotic community in which the users are also the experts, who together create the information while also evolving the system as a whole.

In the 20ᵗʰ Century, the moving image was the dominant cultural form.

While music, architecture, the written word, and many other forms of expression flourished in the last century, the moving image came to dominate. Personal storytelling, news reporting, epic cultural narratives, political propaganda – all were expressed most powerfully through film and video.

The rise of the moving image is tightly bound to the rise of information; film and video as media represent linear, non-interactive information that is accessed by a viewer.

The Ludic Century is an era of games.

When information is put at play, game-like experiences replace linear media. Media and culture in the Ludic Century is increasingly systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory. Games embody all of these characteristics in a very direct sense.

Increasingly, the ways that people spend their leisure time and consume art, design, and entertainment will be games - or experiences very much like games.

We live in a world of systems.

The ways that we work and communicate, research and learn, socialize and romance, conduct our finances and communicate with our governments, are all intimately intertwined with complex systems of information – in a way that could not have existed a few decades ago.

For such a systemic society, games make a natural fit. While every poem or every song is certainly a system, games are dynamic systems in a much more literal sense. From Poker to Pac-Man to Warcraft, games are

machines of inputs and outputs that are inhabited, manipulated, and explored.

There is a need to be playful.

It is not enough to merely be a systems-literate person; to understand systems in an analytic sense. We also must learn to be playful in them. A playful system is a human system, a social system rife with contradictions and with possibility.

Being playful is the engine of innovation and creativity: as we play, we think about thinking and we learn to act in new ways. As a cultural form, games have a particularly direct connection with play.

We should think like designers.

In the Ludic Century, we cannot have a passive relationship to the systems that we inhabit. We must learn to be designers, to recognize how and why systems are constructed, and to try to make them better.

It took several decades for automobiles to shift from being a hobbyist technology requiring expert knowledge to being a locked-in consumer product. The constant change of digital technology means that our hardware and software systems may never stabilize in this way. To fully engage with our world of systems, we must all think like designers.

Games are a literacy.

Systems, play, design: these are not just aspects of the Ludic Century, they are also elements of *gaming literacy*. Literacy is about creating and understanding meaning, which allows people to write (create) and read (understand).

New literacies, such as visual and technological literacy, have also been identified in recent decades. However, to be truly literate in the Ludic Century also requires

gaming literacy. The rise of games in our culture is both cause and effect of gaming literacy in the Ludic Century.

Gaming literacy can address our problems.

The problems the world faces today requires the kinds of thinking that gaming literacy engenders. How does the price of gas in California affect the politics of the Middle East affect the Amazon ecosystem? These problems force us to understand how the parts of a system fit together to create a complex whole with emergent effects. They require playful, innovative, trans-disciplinary thinking in which systems can be analyzed, redesigned, and transformed into something new.

In the Ludic Century, everyone will be a game designer.

Games alter the very nature of cultural consumption. Music is *played* by musicians, but most people are not musicians – they listen to music that someone else has made. Games, on the other hand, require active participation.

Game design involves systems logic, social psychology, and culture hacking. To play a game deeply is to think more and more like a game designer – to tinker, retro-engineer, and modify a game in order to find new ways to play. As more people play more deeply in the Ludic Century, the lines will become increasingly blurred between game players and game designers.

Games are beautiful. They do not need to be justified.

This above all: games are not valuable because they can teach someone a skill or make the world a better place. Like other forms of cultural expression, games and play are important because they are beautiful.

Appreciating the aesthetics of games – how dynamic interactive systems create beauty and meaning – is one of the delightful and daunting challenges we face in this dawning Ludic Century.