Introduction to Part III

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In Part III of this volume, the discussions in all the chapters converge on forms of political action enabled by playful media technologies. In the chapter *On participatory politics as a game changer and the politics of participation*, philosopher of technology Mercedes Bunz notes that we cannot simply take the alleged participatory nature of digital media technologies as self-evident. She addresses a similar point to Ingrid Hoofd in Part I, namely how discourses about participatory media are all too easily co-opted. How radical is this gesture really, Bunz asks. She critically unpacks claims about the revolutionary impact of digital technology on society and shows how digital media both facilitate increased participation and the splintering of the public. The idea of playfully ‘hacking politics’ may help to turn political problems into challenges that can be solved through public participation, but advocating participation can then easily morph into the outsourcing or offloading of state responsibilities onto citizens. Bunz notes how as a corollary many participatory projects have become non-monetary-centered organizations.

With her contribution, Bunz opens up the debate on the potential scope of ‘true’ political change that playful media can instigate. The chapters that follow take the play perspective to provide new insights into the relationships between digital technology and political action. Critical geographer Sam Hind’s contribution, *Playing with politics: Memory, orientation, and tactility*, investigates political agency by highlighting the jovial and carnivalesque qualities of anti-austerity demonstrations in London in 2011. During the March for the Alternative, which attracted over 250,000 protesters, people carried a giant Trojan Horse with them that variously served as a dynamic landmark used in identifying and directing the group of protesters, as a satirical comment, and as a seemingly frivolous ‘incident.’ In Hind’s analysis, such ludic political interventions constitute a playful, material, and performative relationship between digital technology and embodied political action. Hind analyzes three ways in which social media are instrumental in making this work: they enable the production and preservation of memories of protests, they enable the orientation and the navigation of protesters, and they provide a tactile combination of body and action during events. Even though the Trojan Horse was burned afterwards, its political memory lives on thanks to the various social media that captured and commented on its existence.

In *Meaningful inefficiencies: Resisting the logic of technological efficiency in the design of civic systems*, civic media scholars Eric Gordon and Stephen Walter pick up Bunz's notion of digital participation technology as pre-formatting citizen engagement by highlighting the rhetoric of efficiency that is present in many civic media platforms. Participatory media profess to make interacting with the government more 'user-friendly' or 'customer-friendly,' but in opposition to this narrative Gordon and Walter argue that the true productive power of public engagement lies in creating participatory technologies that do not aim at smooth and seamless usability as their main objective. Building upon the distinction made by Hannah Arendt between labor, work, and action, Gordon and Walter propose that the notion of 'meaningful inefficiency' offers an escape from the co-optation of civic participation as productive labor and work. Meaningful inefficiency as found in play, they argue, allows for truly participatory civic action as it opens up a way of "expanding technological civic systems to accommodate more than just the 'good user' of systems, but also the marginalized, the emergent, and the playful."

Continuing this focus on the range of possibilities and limitations that participatory technology can offer to playfully operating citizens, media theorist Douglas Rushkoff begins his chapter *Permanent revolution: Occupying democracy* by historically contextualizing and critically discussing the 2008 Obama presidential campaign as a landmark event that is often referred to as having redefined citizens' political engagement for the better, thanks to the widespread use of social media. Given that the Obama administration seemed to still largely act as a 'read-only government' and today's net culture seems to reward participation with hits, likes, and binary answers instead of knowledge or insight, Rushkoff disputes the idea that digital media inevitably promote participatory communication. Still, he identifies certain characteristics of digital media —feedback, deconstruction of narrative, prototyping, and programmer/player—that do help to rethink expectations of agency, participation, and change in the digital environment that we live in, perhaps as catalyzers for creating meaningful inefficiencies. Studying the Occupy Movement as a prime example embodying these characteristics, Rushkoff claims that it reflects "values and insights of twenty-first-century science and technology" and that it stands for a form of political engagement that is much more inclusive and iterative—and therefore playful—than was possible in previous media environments.

In his chapter about playful urban planning, *The playful city: Citizens making the smart city*, media scholar Michiel de Lange argues that play and games can help foster smart citizenship. In recent years, many cities

have embarked on what is termed smart city policies, deploying ICTs to optimize a variety of urban processes. Many authors have noted that these smart city policies often leave little room for civic action and agency. De Lange proposes the notion of the ‘playful city’ as an alternative vision for leveraging the smartness of people in creating more livable and lively cities. Play, he argues, should not be positioned as offering potential solutions to urban problems. Instead, as an alternative narrative about city-making, play allows the future of smart cities to be made political again instead of technocratic and tech-driven.

While Rushkoff and De Lange see ways to approach existing systems of governance as ‘hackable’ and therefore as enabling playful counter-narratives or co-creative narratives to gain ground using digital technologies, the contribution *Dissent at a distance* by The Janissary Collective (composed of digital media and journalism scholars Mark Deuze and Lindsay Ems) argues that while protest movements and civic groups may indeed benefit from ‘mediatization,’ their playful character is less the result of a conscious strategy than it is the outcome of the performativity of means-over-ends focused engagement, which manifests itself in the ‘slacktivism’ inherent in participating online only, and the gaming of the telecommunication system. In this, The Janissary Collective is also skeptical about generalizing the transformative role of new media tools, and proposes to regard today’s political and social movements as thriving on the unruly and affective ecologies of media that mostly emphasize the ‘feeling’ of belonging to a community instead of actually being part of one. Participation in these movements, according to the Collective, is an expression of a playful way of being and therefore a mode of being human.

This playful mode of being human in a mediatized world, finally, is explored further by media scholar Alex Gekker, who aims to extend the vocabulary of the field of digital game studies—and casual game studies in particular—to the realm of political studies. In *Playing with power: Casual politicking as a new frame for political analysis*, Gekker’s argument picks up on the Janissary Collective’s notion of mediatization and notes that this is a meta-process in which the molding forces of games congregate and operate within political spheres, which in turn makes politics today less about fully fledged participation than about playful and casual types of engagement. Echoing Bunz’s take on the outsourcing of governmental decision-making to citizens via digital technologies, Gekker’s notion of casual politicking sees citizens being enticed to participate in politics *because* it is regarded as a game, one that does not ask too much of the player and is easily discarded when a certain goal is reached. By analyzing the ‘gameful designs’ of the

Obama 2008 and Trump 2016 presidential campaigns, Gekker attempts to lay bare the possibilities of casual politicking to overcome a range of common dichotomies: between passive and active citizenship, between sender and receiver, and between citizenship as a duty and citizenship as a vocation.