THE RULES WE BREAK:
LESSONS IN PLAY, THINKING AND DESIGN

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E. Zimmerman is an acknowledged game designer, scholar, and educator, working in the game industry and game studies for more than 30 years. His early games include *Gearheads*[1] and *Sissyfight 2000*[2]. In the 2000s his New York-based studio Gamelab (co-founded with P. Lee) developed dozens of award-winning games such as *Diner Dash*[3]. The Institute of Play, a nonprofit spinoff from Gamelab, co-founded with P. Lee and K. Salen, aimed to "transform education through play and designed entire schools where the curriculum was based on games and play".[4] E. Zimmerman's design work includes large scale art installation projects with N. Pozzi and other non-digital projects like the tabletop games *The Metagame* and *Quantum*.

As a lecturer, E. Zimmerman worked at MIT, NYU, Parsons School of Design and The School of Visual Arts, and is a founding faculty and Arts Professor at the NYU Game Center, Tisch School of Arts. In 2003, he and K. Salen Tekinbaş co-authored *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, described as "the first comprehensive attempt to establish a solid theoretical framework for the emerging discipline of game design"[5] that has since become a standard textbook in game design courses all over the world. It was followed by *The Game Design Reader* in 2006 and dozens of essays, for example *Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline*, *Game Design and Meaningful Play*, *Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century* and *Manifesto for a Ludic Century*.[6] In the latter, E. Zimmerman develops in the "playfully bombastic" form his argument that "games are a lens for understanding media, art, and culture in the 21st century".[7]

His new textbook titled *The Rules We Break* is both an exploration and expansion of the same argument. If the *Manifesto* asserts that "[s]ystems, play, design [...] are not just aspects of the Ludic Century, they are also elements of *gaming literacy*" and literacy "is

1   PHILIPS MEDIA, R/GA INTERACTIVE: *Gearheads*. [digital game]. Amsterdam : Philips Media, 1996.
2   WORD.COM: *Sissyfight 2000*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Word.com, 2000.
3   GAMELAB: *Dash Diner*. [digital game]. San Francisco, CA : PlayFirst, 2003.
4   *Biography*. [online]. [2023-12-05]. Available at: <https://www.ericzimmerman.com/>.
5   *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. [online]. [2023-12-05]. Available at: <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262240451/>.; See: SALEN, K., ZIMMERMAN, E.: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2003.
6   For more information, see: SALEN, K., ZIMMERMAN, E. (eds.): *The Game Design Reader. A Rules of Play Anthology*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2006.; ZIMMERMAN, E.: Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline. In WARDRIP-FRUIN, N., HARRIGAN, P. (eds.): *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2004, p. 118-130.; SALEN, K., ZIMMERMAN, E.: Game Design and Meaningful Play. In RAESSENS, J., GOLDSTEIN, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2005, 2011, p. 59-79.; ZIMMERMAN, E.: Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century. In PERRON, B., WOLF, M. J. P. (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York, NY, London : Routledge, 2008, p. 45-54.; ZIMMERMAN, E.: Manifesto for a Ludic Century. In WALZ, S. P., DETERDING, S. (eds.): *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*. London, Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2014, p. 19-22.
7   *Thinking about Play*. [online]. [2023-12-05]. Available at: <https://www.ericzimmerman.com/>.

about creating and understanding meaning",[8] the book is correspondingly divided into three parts: Play, Systems and Design. It is not just game for gaming's sake nor an *unreal tournament* of thought experiments: in E. Zimmerman's view "[t]he problems the world faces today requires the kinds of thinking that gaming literacy engenders",[9] i.e., playful, innovative, interdisciplinary system thinking.

In 'understanding media' the author (consciously or not) uses a turn of phrase familiar to contemporary media theorists from M. McLuhan's work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, where he coined his famous aphorism "the medium is the message".[10] The "playfully bombastic", provocative style and content of the *Manifesto* certainly brings to mind M. McLuhan, seen by some as "more as a poet than a historian, a master of intellectual collage rather than a systematic analyst".[11] R. Williams described M. McLuhan's technological determinism as "a particular culmination of an aesthetic theory which became, negatively, a social theory [...] indicating a social and cultural determinism".[12] Grand metaphors and statements like the 'ludic century' run the risk of inventing analogical determinisms and promoting 'playful' or 'design' thinking as another cure for all, a foregone conclusion discouraging critical analysis. Given how quickly 'design thinking' has become a new catchphrase for corporatization of academia (replacing gamification and its derivations), at least some of the milk has already been spilt.

Visually, *The Rules We Break* may even artificially resemble *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*,[13] M. McLuhan and Q. Fiore's 1967 best-selling follow-up to *Understanding Media*. B. English's design implements disproportionally large titles, colours and sometimes turns the text on its head (see the cover) but does not go completely experimental like Q. Fiore did with *The Medium Is the Massage*.

That is perhaps the point where we can stop with looking for similarities. E. Zimmerman does not intend to revolutionize academic theory by turning into a multimedia artifact. His book is first and foremost a 'textbook' for students of game design. And since for him "design is about doing, [...] less about knowledge and data and more about experimentation and practice", the author urges his potential students: "Don't read this book. Play with it" (p. 10). Naturally, such prompts beg the question how we are supposed to do that. Let us see.

As I have already mentioned, the work is separated into three sections, Play, Systems and Design. Every section consists of eleven short essays. 'Short' means that each essay or chapter takes just one page. E. Zimmerman characterizes these essays as "a few ways of thinking about play, or systems, or design" (p. 15). There are some references to theoretical works, but no complete bibliography. Crucially, each of three sections is followed by game design exercises. These exercises require very little in terms of material or setup and no computers, but progressively more of practitioners' time, from 20-30 minutes in Play sections, through a "couple of hours to tinker with a system" to "a day or more to design a game" (p. 6-7). E. Zimmerman devises them from his lifelong experience in playing and designing games as well as in teaching design. They take considerably more space than his one-page essays and should be considered the main contribution (and attraction) of this truly playful textbook. Lastly, the book is appended with game sheets that can be photocopied to assist with some of the exercises.

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8   ZIMMERMAN, E.: Manifesto for a Ludic Century. In WALZ, S. P., DETERDING, S. (eds.): *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications.* London, Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2014, p. 21.
9   Ibidem.
10   McLUHAN, M.: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York, NY, Toronto, London : McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 7.
11   JOSCELYNE, A.: *Revolution in the Revolution*. Released on 1st January 1995. [online]. [2023-12-05]. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/1995/01/debray/>.
12   WILLIAMS, R.: *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. New York, NY : Schocken Books, 1975, p. 126-127.
13   See: McLUHAN, M.: *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. New York, NY, London, Toronto : Bantam Books, 1967.

To bring the fancy of his *Manifesto* somewhat down to earth, E. Zimmerman admits that 'playful', 'design' or 'system' thinking transformed into game design as culture and/or business, does not only have potential to help solve the world's problems, but also creates some of its own. He considers the destructive environmental impacts of the digital game industry together with "the politics of race, gender, or class [...] in the representations of a game [and] how those politics are reflected (or not) in the [game development] companies and teams" (p. 13). Hopefully, the strong moral appeal to students to become warriors for design culture deeply invested in climate, race and economic justice will recruit some passionate devotees.

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