

PAPERS / Session 3, Maneuver Your Lenses!

Techno|theory deathmatch: An agonistic experiment in Theory and Practice

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Theories about humans and their relationships with technology are part of a lifeworld shared by many corporate ethnographers, although individuals' practices for engaging with theory can vary considerably due to factors such as disciplinary training and workplace norms. Within the EPIC community the perception of a constrained relationship between theory and corporate ethnographic praxis has emerged as a matter of concern. This paper recounts our experiment with bringing theory into daily work by designing and playing a game that had us adopt the personas of theorists while engaging in rhetorical combat, competing to surface insights relevant to an ongoing technology development project. Each phase, from initial game design, through prototyping play, to the final event, supported our collective practice of theory, brought to light bidden assumptions about the role of theory in our work, and provided actionable value to our daily work activities.

The analogy between forms of sport and forms of discourse and knowledge should be taken as literally as possible.
Peter Sloterdijk, 2013.

PLAYING AROUND WITH THE PRACTICE OF THEORY

Theories about humans and their relationships with technology are part of a lifeworld shared by many corporate ethnographic practitioners. Practitioners are typically exposed to theory in professional training programs, but may enjoy limited opportunities to deepen engagement with theory once inside corporations. Individual practitioners' approaches to engaging with theory can vary widely due to factors such as discipline, training program, and the workplace norms they have encountered across their careers. Moreover, corporate settings don't always offer teams the time necessary to engage with theory collectively, or at least to do so in what feels like a satisfactory manner. For our team, as for many practitioners in our field, daily work involves researching and contributing to the processes whereby new technologies are designed, developed, and brought to market. Despite the relevance of theories about humans and technologies to this work, opportunities for explicitly engaging with and contributing to theory may not always be recognized by our organizations, or even by ourselves, as integral to daily practice. These challenges help

explain why the historical relationship between theory and corporate ethnographic praxis has been characterized by a series of constraints (Baba 2005; Sherry 2007) leading to expressions of concern and even anxiety among EPIC practitioners about the state of our collective approach to leveraging and producing theory (Cefkin 2010). In this paper we seek to add to these conversations by sharing our experiences experimenting with a novel approach to connecting theory to daily practice during the course of one work project.

The large technology corporation we work for is actively involved in designing and developing technology-based products and services on a global scale. To this end, our team's designers and anthropologists work in cross-disciplinary projects in which our qualitative research and design contributions are combined with the contributions of technology researchers, market analysts and business development executives, among others.³⁰ In one multi-year project that is still underway, we are exploring opportunities for telemedicine in various global healthcare contexts. Taking stock of our situation after some initial project activities—these included a technology literature review, several months of project meetings, and ethnographic research at sites in the U.S. and abroad—we realized that many issues raised by the project (the use of new communications technologies by both doctors and patients during medical encounters, the displacement of embodied co-present humans by video-realistic digital avatars during remote conferencing, and the general impact of disruptive technologies on health care institutions) inspired us to want to refresh our broader thinking about the human and institutional implications of new technologies. In the normal course of the projects we work on, however, there are few formal or explicit opportunities to re-engage as a team with theory.

This is not to say that we don't at times make use of and engage with relevant theories. Within our team we often recognize and acknowledge moments when particular ideas taken from theoretical writings inform our work practice, whether it is working through the design of a research program or advocating for a particular interpretation of data. As professionals interested in developing our skills as designers and researchers, we read (usually alone) and sometimes chat together about new theoretical interests. In project work, however, we felt we lacked an organizational form for taking our personal, informal and somewhat invisible activities of self-development through theoretical engagement, and making them more collective and more explicitly linked to project goals and outcomes. In short, we found ourselves wanting to do more to keep current with new ideas, wanting to create a space for explicitly discussing theory in relation to our projects, and interested in exploring our assumptions regarding the value of theory and theoretical practice within the total set of practices of design research work in a corporate context.

CONCEIVING DEATHMATCH

Techno|Theory Deathmatch (hereafter simply "Deathmatch") was imagined as a response to that situation. The exact design of Deathmatch emerged gradually through conversations, but its general outline, we realized early on, would involve two phases. First

³⁰ Past team member Eugene Limb moved to a new organization during this project but continued to take part in the activities described in this paper.

we would prepare by reading books we were interested in reading, works we thought might prove valuable to our project or to our professional development generally. Then we would play, by meeting and engaging in a series of matches of rhetorical combat, speaking not merely about our theorists but *as* them, channeling their worldviews and their voices, to



Figure 1. Gameplay avatars representing Lucy Suchman and Bruno Latour confront each other in Deathmatch Arena, while other theorist figures look on in the background. By reaching for and holding avatars during combat, players could fluidly signal shifts in speaking voice, a helpful device in a game in which players alternate between participating as themselves and as invited theorist combatants. Photo Credit: Tiffany Romain.

share and work out what we had learned and what that might contribute to our project. To clarify our nomenclature for the purposes of this paper, we will say the human player ventriloquizes an individual theorist, and that this player-theorist pair, this conjoint or hybrid speaking agent, is the *combatant*. During Deathmatch, combatants would face off one-on-one to present their views on our project and share the insights they would offer if they were members of our team, working alongside us on this project. Those insights would be treated as valuable (earning points in some as yet undetermined judging system) insofar as they surfaced actionable implications for our team's activities in the remainder of the project. We hoped that this chance to share, evaluate, and critique ideas arising from a range of perspectives would strengthen the project and our team's ability to contribute to it.

Deathmatch was also conceived, in part, as an effort to emphasize the view that theory is something that is and can only be part of practice. That is to say, to *practice* theory means to engage in specific activities (reading, writing, annotating, listening, talking, thinking,

arguing, explaining, etc.) in the course of elevating one's ability to make sense of the world. To understand theory as something that transcends these empirical practices is to risk locating it in an autonomous realm of ideas, created by knowing Subjects, about a world of Objects (Latour, 2013). Such a perspective imposes an ontology that divides Subjects from Objects by an unbridgeable chasm and contributes to the casting of theory as an all-or-nothing domain in which adepts must undergo some ritual transformation of social status (the graduate program) or cross over some particular threshold of virtuosity before becoming justified in claiming to "have theory" as part of their professional toolkit. Once theory is seen as something that one can never have mastery of, despite how casually we find ourselves slipping into believing otherwise (and this, usually, about others!) but rather something that must be practiced, something that is always and only approached incrementally, through the taking of small steps, then it becomes easier, we believe, to recognize the value in integrating elements of theory-practice, even in modest forms spanning weeks, days, or even hours, into our work routines.

A final element in the conception of Deathmatch was a willingness to embrace and even exaggerate the presence of material artifacts and embodied practices in the work of theory-practice. The initial idea of Deathmatch came into the world inseparably linked to a vision of using the material artifacts of game culture to shift us out of the realm of serious talk, and of using the convention of playing both as ourselves and as player-theorist combatants as a way to dislodge us from the social interaction conventions that come when we dramatize our own identities. These two playful elements would also, we hoped, help support our efforts to unite team members with different personal histories of theoretical practice in a shared experience of mobilizing theory in the context of our current project. Exactly how we would implement these approaches, we should add, did not become clear to us until after the prototyping session discussed below.

...useless play...and simulated fights celebrate their existence
somewhat wilfully, in the clearest possible contrast to the utilitarian
objectivism of the working world.
Peter Sloterdijk, 2013.

PREPARING FOR DEATHMATCH

Once our commitment to seeing the game through to the end was acknowledged, we began our preparations. Each player informally nominated authors whose works they wished to read, and a shortlist was established. Players proposed theorists based primarily on personal interests in reading particular recent books; in some cases the interest was in re-reading a familiar work, now with a different perspective and with the intention of sharing it with the team. We explicitly sought to welcome authors operating in a range of theoretical registers, spanning not only various academic disciplines but also the kind of popular technology writing that represents and informs the perspectives of many actors in the world of technology innovation in Silicon Valley. The final selections made were (in alphabetical order): Anne Balsamo's *Designing Culture*, Steven Johnson's *Future Perfect*, Kevin Kelly's *What Technology Wants*, Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Evgeny Morozov's *To Save Everything, Click Here*, Peter Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life*, Lucy Suchman's *Human-*

Machine Reconfigurations, and Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*. Once these works were chosen, we distributed them amongst ourselves. Recall that the game emerged in response to a work environment where we felt we had insufficient time to engage deeply with theory.



FIGURE 2. *Creating insight cards for each theorist made it easier to manage the sharing of ideas during gameplay; cards could be sorted, arranged into sequences, pointed to, and placed near and around the related insights of other theorists. Photo Credit: Tiffany Romain.*

The decision to have each book read, at first, by just one player, meant that each player could read two books yet come away from Deathmatch having gained some measure of benefit from eight. Players who wished to serve as second or third reader of a particular book were welcomed to do so. In the month leading to our first Deathmatch encounter, participants set to reading their books plus any additional materials by their authors they felt would help bring those theorists to life while presenting and defending their views on our telemedicine project.

PROTOTYPING PLAY

A first session of Deathmatch gameplay was convened to prototype the game design. We met on a Friday evening, at one of our homes, over dinner and beers. Players were expected to arrive having read the works by their authors and prepared to enact the role of combatant. Because many aspects of gameplay had not been finalized before we gathered that evening, we found that players had taken different approaches to equipping themselves for gameplay. Some arrived armed with direct quotes or summaries of arguments and

proposals for how these could be turned into design criteria. Others had moved directly to offering specific design ideas inspired by their readings. We spent some time sharing stories about our experiences preparing, then played through two matches, and as we played, we allowed ourselves to shift between the game frame and the prototyping frame, carrying on a conversation about elements of gameplay, the role-playing experience, what should count as a relevant insight or contribution, what methods we would use for scoring, the value of physical artifacts to support gameplay, and so forth.

Prior to that session we had imagined that combatants would fight for three rounds, each round providing an opportunity to deliver different types of 'moves'. In Round 1, combatants would deliver insights focused on making sense of what had happened so far over the course of the project, such as shifts in strategic direction, or changes in positions taken by different stakeholders. In Round 2, combatants would offer insights that helped us assess the impact of our team's contribution in relation to other inputs into the project. In Round 3, combatants would vie for supremacy in generating and evaluating ideas for actions we might take during the remainder of the project. As a result of our prototyping session, we decided to adopt a much simpler approach.

For our final Deathmatch event, each match would be a single round with the following structure:

- Each combatant has 3-5 minutes to present topline critiques of and proposals for the project.
- Each combatant then takes 2-3 minutes to rebut their opponent's remarks or elaborate on their own earlier comments.
- The floor is then open to all players for 15 minutes; players may speak as themselves, discussing and evaluating combatants' suggestions, and can also talk back and forth with combatants, seeking clarification of or challenging their proposals. This conversation will include six voices, the four players and the two player-theorist combatants.
- After approximately 30 minutes of total match play, each player assigns a score to each of the two combatants based on some criteria to be determined. Scores are tallied to determine the winner of the match.

By the end of our prototyping play session, we also agreed that moves by combatants would be valid if they fell into one of three categories:

1. Insights surfacing ideas for improving existing product features or creating new offerings or new features based on the core technology.
2. Suggestions for process innovations and methods our team could adopt to increase chances of success for the project going forward.
3. Perspectives for understanding the macro context, such as (political, economic, legal, cultural, etc.) structures and drivers impacting the course of the project and the future trajectory of its offerings out into the world.

After prototyping, we had moved closer to a shared vision of what our goals for the game would be. We had also learned that, despite our best intentions to arrive prepared, none of us felt adequately immersed in our theorists' works to channel their presence. We concluded that we needed several more weeks to adequately prepare before we could expect to have a successful game.

MAKING ARTIFACTS — CARDS, AVATARS, ARENA, SCORING

As a result of our prototyping experience we decided that each player would make insight or 'move' cards as part of our preparations for game day, a constraint intended to help us distill our potential (and potentially abstract) contributions into discrete units. Cards created for a given book were not intended to capture the most generally significant or representative ideas it contained, but rather those insights and ideas that seemed most useful in the context of our project. During final gameplay these cards did prove helpful by anchoring a move delivered orally by a combatant to a physical marker that could be pointed to later, or placed in some configuration relative to other cards that it supported, extended, or contradicted. Having things we could literally point to during philosophical debates about abstract ideas made it easier to keep track of our conversations.



FIGURE 3. To facilitate gameplay, players created 10 to 20 cards for each theorist they represented. Some cards captured ready-made insights that players anticipated presenting during combat, others were meant to serve as crystallization points for generating collaborative ideation.

During our first gameplay prototyping session there was occasional confusion about when a player was speaking as a combatant and when she or he was speaking as her or himself. Having an avatar to speak through would, we hoped, facilitate and streamline the mechanics of turn-taking and position taking. To address this we created game figures for our theorists out of paper, foam-core, and a large dose of levity. Figure 1 shows, for

example, a Lucy Suchman avatar with the body of WALL-E, and Bruno Latour as Spartacus. Figure 3 reveals two other avatar figures: Peter Sloterdijk as a golem, and Kevin Kelly with the body of a Sentinel from the Matrix films his work helped inspire. Mikael Jakobsson has described *levity* as an essential characteristic of play in virtual worlds. For him levity is an emergent phenomenon resulting from “a complex interaction” among potentially indeterminate factors, but elements he identifies as crucial include aesthetics—“The environment evokes a certain state of mind. The look and feel of the environment is not a given, it is the designer who sets the tone” (2006: 133)—and the use of avatars: “The avatar works as a mask which has the psychological effect of shielding the participant and thus affects the way participants interact ... The avatar allows us to be together without some of the pressure that physical presence exerts on social interaction” (2006: 133-134).

During our final Deathmatch event these figures supported us in making the transition into an alternate world, and offered practical support for gameplay in two ways. As we expected, by reaching for and holding these simple artifacts during discussion players could fluidly and instantly signal shifts between their own voice and the voice of a given theorist. A second phenomenon was less expected, and requires some explanation. Each match of our game pitted two combatants against each other, and during their match the figures of the competing theorists were placed on Deathmatch Arena, a decorated raised platform in the middle of the table. After the match was over, those combatants left the arena and joined the four of us on the sidelines as observers of subsequent matches. This led to the unexpected circumstance of past combatants becoming active participants in the conversations that arose during later matches. That is to say, at the point when players were invited to discuss or directly confront combatants, we discovered that combatants from previous matches spontaneously invited themselves to join our conversation (by having the player who voiced them reach out, move the avatar back into Deathmatch arena, then take the floor speaking in the voice of the theorist). As a result, in the first match, the four players found themselves interrogating only the two active combatants; in the second match, the players found themselves joined by the two combatants from the first match, so that six voices were challenging the two active combatants. By the fourth match the four of us found ourselves taking turns with six past combatants debating the strengths and weaknesses of newly offered moves. This element, which emerged unplanned during our final gameplay interaction, turned out to be both fun and productive.

The final artifacts needed for our game, along with cards, figures and the arena, were simple scorecards. After each match, players silently scored each combatant’s performance using a numerical scale in the categories we had agreed upon, and these score sheets were tallied to determine winners.

The basic subject-forming exercise...[is] the methodically performed withdrawal from the complex of shared situations one calls ‘life’ or ‘the world’.
Peter Sloterdijk, 2013.

DEATHMATCH — POSTGAME ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

The benefits of having worked out our own rules and expectations for the game, and of having done so in response to our specific situation, should not be underestimated. A different team interested in holding its own Deathmatch would choose different theoretical works, pull out different insights, choose different criteria for scoring, and find different value in individual moves made. For this reason, those teams would not be well served, in our view, by having us provide more details about the choices we made in our playing of the game. With Deathmatch providing a general framework, making choices as a team regarding specific aspects of play becomes itself a valuable part of playing the game. This is meant as a partial justification for our not saying more about the particulars of our final Deathmatch event. In what follows, however, we will share some of what we felt we learned when looking back on that event and on the experience overall.

A Space of withdrawal

One benefit of Deathmatch was the opportunity to withdraw from our daily routines and enter a new space, one defined initially by its anti-structure, by the absence of the procedures, expectations and artifacts encountered in organizational life that help us make sense of “what to do next.” As we collaborated to develop a sense of what exactly would be involved in gameplay, we gradually filled that empty space with new structures, new artifacts and expectations, but these existed in a kind of counter-world that stood outside our everyday work routines. Seeing the game as what Sloterdijk might call a *space of withdrawal* has two sides, however. What does it say, for example, that we felt we needed to conduct Deathmatch outside of work hours, meeting once at one of our homes and once in a local public library? Were we providing ourselves with the necessary conditions for self-transformation, or continuing to relegate theory to the margins? Keeping these activities separate was as much a way of defending ourselves against others in the workplace, those who might see time spent in the game as outside the legitimate work of the organization, as it was a way to create a temporary state of *communitas* outside the constraints of our work environments and our own work personas. Recall, as well, that the circumstance of our feeling we lacked the time to engage deeply with theory was an inspiration to us for exploring more *ad hoc* and lightweight ways to bring theory into our work. This too could be seen as making a virtue out of necessity. Was our choice to treat theory as something that can be meaningfully engaged even under conditions of constraint merely an indication that our work environment had succeeded in imposing a structurally necessary over-valuation of *flexibility* into our collective habitus (Martin, 1994).

The winner

It should not go unrecorded that the ultimate champion of our Deathmatch event, the competitor seen as offering the greatest value for our team, turned out to be Anne Balsamo. Balsamo’s victory was perhaps not surprising. Her book is about and directed at people like us, designers attuned to culture, engaged in the development of technology innovations.

Combatants earned points by directing insights toward three aspects of our project (future offerings, our process, and drivers shaping the world within which the project unfolds), and it was perhaps inevitable that Balsamo was able to be successful speaking to more of these issues than her opponents. Other resonances between her work and our situation became apparent when we considered her success. Her approach to design involves taking the tools of social science and applying them to design practice in a lightweight but meaningful way. This is essentially what we had hoped the game would do for us. Balsamo, in *Designing Culture*, also presents design as, at least in part, a form of mediation, emphasizing that designers “negotiate shared understandings and meanings among participants, who come from different disciplinary backgrounds, hold divergent assumptions and values, and have particular investments in the innovation process” (2011: 11). For us, not only was Deathmatch a way of enacting an intentional approach to the process of working through



Figure 4. Combatant AnneBalsamo|MikeGriffin unleashes a deadly “Single Air Quote” move on KevinKelly|EugeneLimb during Deathmatch play. Photo Credit: Jay Dautcher.

assumptions, of making our own and others’ theoretical commitments more explicit, the game helped us rethink the negotiations that are always part of project work. As one game player said:

“One benefit of the game for me personally was helping me adopt more of a ‘Yes, and’ attitude toward people with more technologically positivist worldviews. I was surprised that it taught me to tolerate Kevin Kelly and Steven Johnson. It reduced my hostility toward them. Having

gone through Deathmatch helps me see that there are always frames people are committed to. So now, I can just feel, 'You're not wrong, it's just that the things you care about are not the things that matter to me'. In our lab we're always coming up against people's worldviews, and being able to manage that is really important in our design work. Sometimes you can feel like you're getting steamrolled by them, or like there's a fight there [to be had], and it helps to realize how deep the differences in our theoretical commitments can be".

The spirit of playfulness we tried to design into the Deathmatch approach to engaging with theory contributed, we think, to achieving the outcome of promoting mediation across competing commitments. The play frame helped to take away from the seriousness, even ferocity, that sometimes overtakes us when we find ourselves articulating and defending theoretical approaches in the face of opposition. The role-playing element was also consequential. That we took part *as* our chosen theorists, and hence found ourselves in a group dialogue *with* those theorists, shifted us in an empathetic direction in a way that merely discussing their ideas would not have done. Conversations about theory, in the context of workplace relationships, can also carry with them an element of concern for the associated face-work, the presentation of the self as qualified to speak competently about certain things. Role-play shifted things here, too, and speaking *as* theorists, while maintaining (by literally holding in our hands) *their* faces, did something to reconfigure that peculiar burden that comes with needing to always be taking one's own position relative to what one is saying someone else is saying. With Deathmatch we were as free to speak *as* our theorists as were to speak *about* them.

Rethinking the place of Theory-Practice in our work

A new way of thinking about our design practice also emerged from Deathmatch, partly through exposure to Sloterdijk's writings on practice in pursuit of virtuosity. Practice, for Sloterdijk, is "any operation that provides or improves the actor's qualification for the next performance of the same operation, whether it is declared as practice or not" (2013: 4). As practicing beings, our lives are shaped by our responses to "the phenomenon of vertical tension, without which no purposeful practicing is possible" (2013: 14). And it is the "awareness of the inner gradient" (2013: 60) in all of our practice that leads us to seek elevation, that is to say, virtuosity. Academic graduate programs present students with a clear path for becoming increasingly competent theorists, training them in the repetitious work of engaging with theory, compiling bibliographies and conducting literature reviews, reading passages of mind-numbingly incomprehensible prose, presenting summaries and critiques to peers and professors in small seminars, and so forth. And professors, through their written work and their presentations, if not also teaching, provide a clear model of what the virtuoso performer of these same academic theory-practices might aspire to, a model that is reinforced regardless of any flaws that might mark individual professors as being, after all, just practicing humans, aiming at the impossible. In the context of corporate ethnographic work, however, and in ethnographic work in support of technology design in particular, it is less clear that there *is* a shared model for what virtuosic practices of theory-using and theory-

building are meant to look like. If it is true that we all aspire to be virtuoso practitioners of what we do, what then is our vision for the place of theory-practice in our work? What *are* our most common theory practices, and what does virtuosity in those practices look like? Digging deeper, we might also ask, how do we operate as a community despite not having such a model, and why do we not even recognize its absence?

A loss of focus, or, Deathmatch going feral?

During the matches of our prototyping play session, our invited theorists were generally very cooperative, making contributions that helped us stay focused on imagining new possibilities for our telemedicine project. In the month that followed, as we prepared for our final event, we maintained a loose conversation about how to relate theory to our practice, and the more we read that month, for some of us at least, the more it seemed serendipitous that the works we were reading were not only providing inspiration for designing telemedicine technologies that were good for people, as we intended, they were also proving “good to think with” when reflecting on the game itself, how to design it, and how to understand its value; that is to say, for helping think about the place of theory in everyday practice. During our final Deathmatch, as a result, some of our combatants seemed to want to talk as much about the place of theory in design practice as they did about our technology project. While we realized, after the game, that this took some of our focus away from our intended goal, it also shows a certain generative capacity of the game to “go feral” (Bell 2010), to take us in unexpected directions, lead us into unexpected environments, and ultimately to behave in ways that defy any simple notions of control and supervision.

Prior to our final Deathmatch event we also had not anticipated the dynamic that past combatants would speak up to challenge and support both players and other combatants. This transformed the game into something that did more than juxtapose and oppose theoretical perspectives, it helped us see those theories woven together in dialogue. This helped us also move closer to a way of looking at the world, or at least of looking at theory, that accepts that no one theory or instrument can provide total understanding, and that theoretical views in combination deliver a more multi-dimensional understanding than any one theory alone. As one player said:

“What was surprising was how helpful the whole activity was for brainstorming new possibilities. one thing to look at an individual theorist and draw inspiration for design ideas, but juxtaposing different, sometimes wildly contrasting, theories next to each other and hashing them out, helped tease out ideas that we, as a team, might not have thought of otherwise.”

Deathmatch provided an excellent platform for bringing multiple theoretical frameworks into mutual engagement and then positively articulating the contradictions and complementarities between them, and for recognizing when, how, and why different theoretical perspectives can be applied to the same or overlapping problems to provide different, but perhaps equally important, insights.

Moving forward

One measure (though *not*, we think, the only measure) of the value of Deathmatch, will be determined by the positive impact it ultimately has on our team's contributions to a successful outcome for the telemedicine project. These effects will be evident only in a future that has not yet come to pass as we write this paper. Barely one month has elapsed since we held our event, and we continue to discuss among ourselves ideas for taking the insights that emerged during gameplay and moving them forward in the project. At the very least, we have created shared content we find ourselves drawing on in everyday conversations. The process of taking up and applying our findings more formally is made complicated by the fact that some of the parameters shaping the project and our role in it are (as they always somehow seem to be) in flux. We do imagine moving the game forward in our own practice, and anticipate playing in the future, keeping most game elements in place while making slight adjustments to others; perhaps creating a short list of questions each combatant must answer early in the match, for example, as a way of normalizing combatants whose theoretical registers can vary tremendously. We also see opportunities to include a wider range of colleagues into the game, technologists, marketing people, colleagues whose training has left them committed to different values and different ways of thinking about the relationships people have with technology.

Most technologies, Kevin Kelly tells us, "don't know what they want to be when they grow up." It is only through encounters with a range of adopters, and collusions with other inventions, he says, that new technologies can find their roles. Deathmatch is no exception, and the possibility that the game will be played by other teams leads us to consider other future versions of, and permutations of, the game. While the structural elements of the game as we played it were sound, much of the game's value for us emerged as we worked out together the particulars of gameplay, and later evaluated the implications of choices we had made; we expect the same will be true for other teams. Which theorists to invite, which insights seem useful, these will of course vary relative to the specifics of the project (or theme or topic) that a future team makes the focus of their Deathmatch interaction. Perhaps the most challenging concern will be how to adapt the game to the more typical business project time-frame of a few months, a scale of action that offers even less of an opportunity to engage with theory by withdrawing into play. We believe the challenge can be met. The primary time cost is in preparation, and there is no reason the game could not be fruitfully played by participants who had read a single 20-30 page article each. If a no-frills approach is taken to creating game figures and insight cards, the game, including negotiating goals and expectations, reading and preparation, gameplay, and then analysis, could perhaps be turned around in the space of several days.

The main thing is to carry out the exercise, not to reason over it.
Peter Sloterdijk, 2013.

CONCLUSION

Our team, by designing and playing a game that embraced the idea of allowing players to draw on contemporary theory in a fun, flexible, partial manner as a means of enriching daily professional practice, found success in multiple ways. First, the game provided a platform that allowed us to bring a diverse range of invigorating new ideas into a research project and mobilize them for insights that support us in making useful contributions to that project. Second, the game design process itself pushed us into conversations about the relationship between theory and practice (or more properly, about the place of practices for engaging with theory in that larger set of practices that is, quite simply, everything we do as corporate ethnographic practitioners), and this helped us surface previously internalized expectations and assumptions that may have limited our vision of how we can usefully engage with theory as individuals and as a team. Third, a number of serendipitous resonances between ideas we encountered during gameplay and areas of application beyond the intended target project made the entire experience unexpectedly rewarding. To share one example, our simultaneous immersion in reading about technology while conversing about theory led us to re-conceptualize (or perhaps just recognize) theory as itself a technology. Cast this way, questions about the place of theory in our practice become questions about the implications of the use of technology. This opens up new ways of reading technology theories as theories about theory itself.

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