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Experimental Game Design

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**Artwork #2: Madmen’s Hack**

For this assignment, I appropriated a few simple objects: my laptop, some dice from Dungeons and Dragons, and a pair of pawns from the board game “Sorry”. Its rules are straightforward, understood almost the moment one is presented with the materials. The result is a simplistic generative game that asks the players to question their assumptions about why they play games.

Two players take turns to move pawns with the intent of capturing their opponent by moving their pawn onto a space occupied by the opponent. The game is played on a computer keyboard, using the keys as you would a standard game board. The players’ movements are determined by asymmetric dice rolls; one player uses a single ten-sided die, while the other uses a pair of four-sided dice. The player must move their pawn onto a key that at least partially shares an edge with the key their pawn occupies at that moment, must move to as many keys as the number that they rolled on their die/dice, and may not move their pawn onto a key that it occupied at any other point in their turn. The computer must be turned on and have some key-operated program running, such as a word processor, video game, or online resources such as [a virtual keyboard](http://www.bgfl.org/bgfl/custom/resources_ftp/client_ftp/ks2/music/piano/). This last rule was added shortly after the initial playtest, and it is what gives the game its meaning.

Essential to the idea of this game is the Dadaist idea of generative art. This piece takes no small inspiration from Johann Philipp Kirnberger's "Musikalisches Würfelspiel," the “Musical Dice Game” where the player would compose a piece music using die rolls. I also drew influence from a number of artists we discussed in class, particularly the performative ideas of Yoko Ono and the discordant musical philosophy of John Cage. Where something like "Musikalisches Würfelspiel” could in theory create some pleasant composition, it is virtually impossible to create something aesthetically pleasing by following these rules.

The game itself is simplistic and unsatisfying, not unlike many Dadaist paintings and other works. The players have deceptively little choice in how the game progresses. The most important factor- perhaps the only important factor- is the roll of the dice. Instead of a demonstration of skill, “Madmen’s Hack” is an exercise in randomness and brevity. The game itself is meaningless. The important part is what it generates. Be it a string of letters in a word document or a bashed and arrhythmic tune on a virtual keyboard, the game creates something unique each time it is played. That is what makes the keyboard essential, for as a tool of creation it turns the play into an act of making something new. Therein lies the fundamental question of “Madmen’s Hack”: When you play, is the game really what’s important? I posit that the answer is no. The game is incidental. What we seek is not the implementation of a set of rules. Instead, we are looking for a moment of experience. We look for moment in time when we are not alone, those instances where something beautiful that, once it passes, is impossible to find again. “Madmen’s Hack” is trying to draw attention to that quest. “You are not looking for a game,” it says to its players. “You are looking for what a game might create.”