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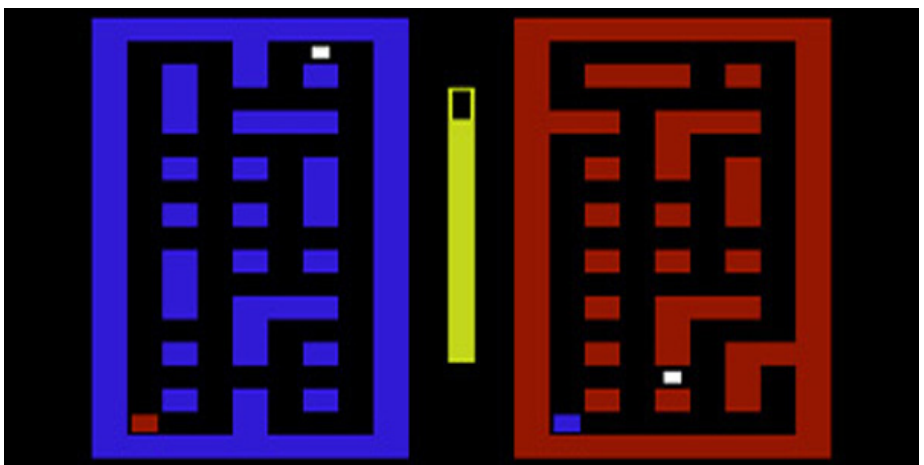
### Artists at Play: Jeffrey Daniels' Social Games

Posted by Sierra Nicole Rhoden on Jun 04, 2012 | [Leave a Comment](#)

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While games have historically crept their way into many creative endeavors— Surrealist, Dada, and Fluxus artists alike—the popularization of home video game systems in the 1990s brought with it a new set of artists creating altered “art games” and a new batch of critical eyes on games as a medium. **Jeffrey Daniels**, a Chicago artist, poet, professor, and School of the Art Institute of Chicago MFA candidate, carries forward this legacy of artful play in his custom built board and arcade games. His pieces strike viewers’ fancy with vintage, commercial toy aesthetics, but their apparent lightheartedness frames serious cultural criticism. *Three Doors to the Asiatic Exclusion League, 1905*, for instance, is a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey-esque wall-mounted board game featuring an exoticized Asian stereotype as its subject.



Three Doors to the Asiatic Exclusion League, 1905. Jeffrey Daniels, 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

Daniels believes that pioneers of the video game industry addressed cultural issues and left allegories behind in early commercial games. He cites the ever-ravenous *Pac-Man* as testimony to the “gluttony and random consumption” of the 1980s. The “kill them all” mantra of the 1970s shooting game *Space Invaders* exemplifies xenophobia. Through his work, he hopes to leave an allegory of his own, “growing up in poverty, as a minority in the United States,” he says, “a lot of that creeps into my work.”

Seeing play as a mode of thinking and learning, Daniels finds the tactile familiarity of games to be an effective vehicle for such commentary. While he approaches many contemporary art works with an “adult sensibility,” he finds games to be “disarming,” placing viewers in a more innocent and receptive mode. Daniels is also interested in “amplifying the role of the participant,” with pieces that are touched and experienced rather than seen. “[The process] becomes collaborative,” he explains, “Your interactions are making it what it is,” in what Daniels calls a “balancing act

between empowerment and restriction—I’m empowering you to make decisions but I’m restricting you to follow a rule system.”

His piece *Ten Ten*, currently on display for the MFA show at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s Sullivan Galleries, epitomizes this push-pull relationship and its pedagogical power. The game is a commentary on power plays, duality, and compromise of relationships, all wrapped up in a hefty 1980s style arcade game. “I wanted it to be framed as a self-portrait” explains Daniels of the “JEFFREY DANIELS” text in 80s arcade font prominently

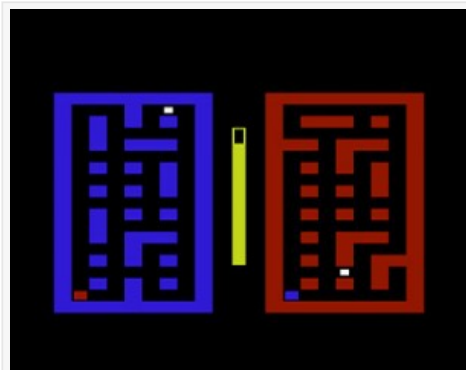
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Amanda Knox Board Game. Jeffrey Daniels, 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ten Ten title screen. Jeffrey Daniels, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ten Ten dual mazes. Image courtesy of the artist.

embellishing the top of the machine. Of the old-school aesthetic, he says, "I wanted it to look like a commercial product, but at the same time I'm dealing with a very serious theme." The piece is even hand-wired with historically accurate electronics.

*Ten Ten* appears to be a traditional two-player game. The controllers are slightly offset to the left to hint at driver's and passengers' sides rather than the equality of traditionally-centered joysticks. This nuance alone proves revealing—"If a couple approaches the game," says Daniels, "I find that the person who goes to the driver's side is the person that normally goes to the driver's side in a lot of situations. It's about power." Players must each guide a dot through a maze on their side of the screen, but there's a catch. Despite their differing mazes, the dots move in unison, both controlled by the left "driver" controller. Communication and compromise are required for both sides to meet their goal. Daniels observes that bystanders watching the game are often able to more quickly solve the puzzle, "like a real relationship, an outsider can see the whole picture and tell you what you're doing wrong." And very similarly to "real life" relationships, each time you play, you are more insightful of the rules.

"I see this as an extension of Pop art," Daniels explains of his practice, and like Pop art, his playful creations are often the butt of harsh criticism. "Video games exist in the margins of the art world right now, and I get a lot of eye rolls," he says, "I'm sensitive about it, but I imagine the infancies of a lot of art forms were like that. I imagine the first photographer in a gallery got a lot of eye rolls from painters."

Daniels finds the widely-used categorization of "art games," as differentiated from just "games," unnecessary. He feels compelled to accept the label only for the sake of his work's reception in the art world, a world where games and play were often marginalized. "There's a culture of the oppressed where naming becomes really important," he explains, "It's a defensive gesture. I'm trying to bring the art world closer to me." Daniels also participates in endeavors which, though nearly impossible to package and display as "art" in a gallery context, he considers to be part of his creative practice. One such example includes an extended game of

camera-phone stalking with friends, where participants sneakily snapped pictures of the backs of their competitors heads, competing to see who could achieve the most unsettling shots (sleeping? bathroom stall?).

Can a stalking game really be labeled artistic? Daniels offers a strikingly enlightened notion of what it means to play—"For me there's no question that play is art. The words are almost synonymous. If you're playing, you're creating something. Play is a base form of experimenting, and that experimentation allows me to understand and recreate the world that I'm in, and also to collaborate with others about what that world should be. Just playing tag is making art, because as I'm chasing you I'm working within a rule system, but I'm also using my creativity to convert those rules or conditions in a way that expresses my own individuality. In that way, I'm making art."

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To see more of Jeffrey Daniels' work, visit [www.sleepingelephant/daniels](http://www.sleepingelephant/daniels). The 3rd installment of the Artists at Play series, featuring **Claudia Hart**, will be published June 18th.

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