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Donald Trump and Truth Social: Media Platforms Making Exclusionary Worlds

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Let me begin with a fantasy, an analogy of sorts. Children are playing soccer on a football field in their neighborhood. They are playing a game and are joined by a boy they do not know well yet – a new kid on the block. He asks to be in the game and is welcomed. But soon it turns out that while playing, he has a tendency to kick other children on the shins, really hard and on purpose. It is a feature of how he plays, and, of course, street soccer can be rough. Yet this kid plays unusually ferociously, and his violence is only thinly disguised as accidental or part of the game. So, after a while, some of the older kids call a time-out to address the matter of sportsmanship. An accident can always happen, but this is foul play, they say. The new kid defends himself: He did not do anything wrong, did not hear any complaints, he scored. The other kids must be jealous. And after a while he turns around and says: "My dad made me a professional soccer court with the best facilities. Who wants to come along and play there without these sissies?" Nearly half of the kids decide to give it a try.[1]

What is the story here? It is a thinly disguised analogy, of course, for the rise and attraction of Donald Trump, whose use of social media I want to explore in this essay through the lens of *play*. What I want to think about in particular is how Donald Trump engages in overturning all the traditions of U.S. American constitutional democratic politics through playing in and with social

1 This metaphor was originally conceived of by Frans-Willem Korsten in a private conversation in the context of the NWO Project "Playing Politics: Media Platforms Making Worlds." He used it to outline the distinction between *play* and *game*. I want to thank him in particular, as well as my fellow researchers on the project team (Frank Chouraqui, Alex Gekker, Bram Ieven, Saniye Ince, Sybille Lammes, Eleni Maragkou) for their inspiring thoughts and input. I am grateful to Greta Olson for urging me to write and present this essay, and to Tazuko van Berkel for her editing and encouragement in the process.

media platforms. I contend that Trump is effectively replacing the old political world that was drawn up by the U.S. Constitution and a range of rules, norms, and democratic U.S. American political traditions with a world driven by his own whims and interests. He draws up this world on social media.

In this essay, I would like to do three things:

1) Explain what I mean by *play* and how play can function as a technique for making a *world*;
2) Think about the role of social media platforms both in *playing* and in *worlding*. This includes questions of: How can you play on social media? What kinds of soccer fields are social media platforms? And, how can a soccer field, particularly the soccer field of social media conjure up a *world*?
3) Look at Donald Trump's own soccer field, Truth Social, and notice how it helps him create a world that resembles in some ways the exclusionary U.S. American white-supremacist worlds from the past.

This essay takes its cue from a piece in *The Washington Post* to which Greta Olson addressed my attention: "How Trump's allies amplify his Truth Social messages to the wider world."[2] In this piece, Sarah Ellison and Clara Ence Morse take a deep dive into Donald Trump's social media communication platform Truth Social. This is the platform that Trump that set up in 2021 after he was thrown off Twitter, Facebook, and other mainstream social media platforms in response to his role in instigating the January 6th Capitol Insurrection in Washington.

Trump was let back onto Twitter after Elon Musk bought it in October 2022. Twitter was previously his favorite platform, where he had over eighty-seven million followers. Yet he never returned and stuck with his own platform Truth Social. Despite its being far smaller and him having only about a twentieth of the followers that he had on Twitter, Truth Social functions as a bully pulpit that he owns and controls entirely. Ellison and Morse trace the dissemination of Trump's posts on this platform, and show how his messages are, nevertheless, rapidly spread across more mainstream platforms and media by his supporters. This effectively protects Trump in a number of ways. Through working

2 Sarah Ellison and Clara Ence Morse, "How Trump's allies amplify his Truth Social messages to the wider world," The Washington Post, May 8, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2024/trump-truth-social-posts-amplifiers-right-wing-media/.

in this way, and, for instance, posting messages and then removing them after a few hours, he is protected from the legal consequences of his doxing of the law clerks involved in some of the cases against him and his revealing their personal data, such as their home address and phone numbers.

What I want to do here is theorize Trump's use of his own social media platform in the context of *playful worlding*. Eventually the claim I want to make is that with and through Truth Social, Trump *plays* his own world into existence. In a new, online digital manner, Trump's *playing* on social media reinstates the much older U.S. American institution of the whites-only country club. In this club, decisions are taken for a much larger world without engaging with those who will suffer from the consequences.

Play and Worlding

Let me start by saying something briefly about my definition of *play*. Play is an indeterminate social process and a practice linked to change.[3] This means that play is something people do, everywhere, all the time, in all phases of life and in all kinds of situations and spaces. Even when you play alone, it is often a social and socializing practice. Play hinges on ambiguity: It is serious even when it is frivolous, and potentially transgressive even when rule-bound.[4] In the soccer vignette, we saw that the violence involved in shin kicking can be part of the game. Or, it can be something 'real,' in the sense of consequential, also in the world beyond the play world: actual non-play violence happens under the cover of being part of the game. For the purpose of this text, I consider play to be any activity that is imaginative, inviting, participatory, improvisational, and autotelic. Play is autotelic because it is for its own sake. It has itself as its aim, but this does not mean that play is inconsequential or harmless. In fact, play can often have very real consequences that are obscured by their being caused by play.

When I was four years old, my best friend cut off all of my hair as part of a game. At the time, it seemed to be an entirely fun and innocent activity that we

3 Thomas M. Malaby, "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience," *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 205–218.

4 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

played for the sake of playing. Yet the result was irreversible in the real world: I was bald for months afterwards. This brings me to another aspect of play. Play creates a Magic Circle within which a *play world* exists with its own set of rules. This *play world* can become real if enough players are sufficiently engrossed in it.

I want to emphasize that this is an analytical definition. I have created this definition of play out of a variety of elements that I think are worth focusing on and that have previously been flagged as important by scholars in the field of game and play studies.[5] It is not the only definition, nor is it a definition that includes everything that could possibly be understood as play. An example of a more inclusive definition would be: "Play is an appropriation of an external activity towards shared engagement."[6] Even this definition does not necessarily include every kind of play. For example, "shared engagement" seems to demand that more than one participant is involved. I have chosen to define play as an indeterminate social process hinging on ambiguity and a practice linked to change that is imaginative, inviting, participatory, improvisational, and autotelic. This definition guides our focus to specific aspects of play that I think are particularly important to attend to when we want to understand what is now happening with one of the current presidential candidates.

Play, in common usage, tends to be associated with fun and games, but it is important to realize that politics is also full of play – for instance, playful political maneuvering, improvisation, performative 'battles' between different political factions and interest groups. I think it is crucial to understand that Trump is really *playing*. He is constantly sending out ambiguous messages and invitations to his followers and the media to play with these messages, whether intentionally or not. (I personally do not think that it is relevant to know what goes on in Trump's mind.) He invites people into a conversation that imagines a world where the 2020 elections were in fact stolen from him, and in which the United States can be "great again" along the lines of conservative, white-

5 For example, Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (DBNL, 1938); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Champaigne: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*; Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014); Leland Masek and Jaakko Stenros, "The Meaning of Playfulness: A Review of the Contemporary Definitions of the Concept across Disciplines," *Eludamos, Journal for Computer Game Culture* 12, no.1 (2021): 13–37.

6 Alex Gekker, *Playing Politics: Life After Social Media*, chap. "Introduction" (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

supremacist fantasies. This process of playing is fundamentally participatory and improvisational, if you are invited and choose to join the game. Belonging to Trump's world is about bluffing your way along in the game and then deciding with others collectively that this *is* the real world, that is, the world that matters.

Here the notion of the Magic Circle comes in. This concept is much older and was coined by the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga in 1938.[7] Johan Huizinga observed that when people are playing, they conjure up a Magic Circle within which their play-reality, co-constructed by themselves and the game, is dominant, although they still know, of course, that they are playing. An example can help to illustrate this idea. If we play that we are knights and imagine that this room is our castle, within our Magic Circle it *is* our castle. We know on some level that it is an ordinary room, but within the game, it really is a castle. This feature of play is, I think, extremely important to Trump. One thing that he does in almost any situation is invite people to play with him in a castle, or a soccer field, that does not yet exist but that fits his interests, and that he refuses to acknowledge is not real.

A famous example of this occurred following Trump's Inauguration in January 2017, where he falsely claimed more people attended that had ever attended an Inaugural Address, a suggested later backed up by Trump spokesperson Kellyanne Conway, as "alternative facts." People come into the game thinking that they are playing, knowing that they are in the Magic Circle. Yet, in a sense, really transformative things then do happen. Even if people know they are playing, their engagement with the game transforms their experience of politics and of the world beyond the game – and Trump's offer to fans to play in a world in which different rules apply, makes him attractive to many people. The play world he invites them into can become reality.

Social Media Platforms in Play and Worlding

Both for contemporary forms of play and the making of worlds, digital media have taken on very important functions, because of the many things these media can do and the many ways in which you can interact with them. Pokémon GO is an interesting example. The mobile game invites you to collect digital Pokémon, little pocket monsters that players can battle against each other,

7 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 39.

which can be found in a variety of locations in the material world.[8] Players have to physically walk to a location with their digital character following in the Pokémon-populated game world. Thus, the game overlays that world with an augmented reality, and people go to places to collect digital creatures. These worlds can collide in unfortunate ways, for instance, when rare Pokémons that many people are eager to collect are hidden in cemeteries.

One term that I find useful in thinking about how digital media, and especially social media platforms, make worlds is "affordance." As James Gibson, who introduced and popularized the concept of affordance, defines it: "An object's affordances are the 'possibilities of acting' that we perceive when we look at it." [9] That an affordance is perceived is very important, since affordances are fundamentally relational and more than just "objectively given" possibilities of action that are offered by the environment. Gibson's "affordances" refers to the environment of the action and the human executing the action simultaneously, the physical (part of the world of matter) as well as phenomenal (part of the world of the mind).[10] "Affordances" is often used in design studies, where students may, for example, be invited to design 'sit-ability' rather than 'a chair.' The affordances of social media platforms comprise, for example, whether you are able to 'like,' 'share,' or 'repost' other posts, or whether there is a limit to post lengths, as Twitter was famous for. Affordances also include how selective the access to the platform is, and how visible posts are. Many of these affordances are or can be playful in the sense that they invite players to make things that become an invitation to others to continue the game. For example, Twitter's character limit – set at 140 characters until 2017 – invited users to be playfully simplistic in their messaging, and also to focus on sharing links or images rather than textual messages. This pushed the prevalence of meme sharing.

Memes are often funny and playful in themselves. But they also tend to snowball across platforms, because they are shared and reposted, and because people can easily add a layer to the joke, by making a small change to a given meme.[11] For instance, when Trump started to spread memes about his intention to build a border wall ("The Wall Is Coming"), using a font associated with

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8 Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson, "Pokémon GO: Mobile Media Play, Place-Making, and the Digital Wayfarer," *Mobile Media & Communication* 5, no.1 (2017): 3–14.

9 James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1979), 160.

10 Ibid.

11 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013).

the popular HBO fantasy television series *Game of Thrones*, other internet users instantly began to make and spread memes based on this association, adding a references to particular episodes and characters from the series. One way of thinking about play is to see it as a search for affordances. Social media platforms have all kinds of constraints and provide numerous possibilities for playing. When he was still active on Twitter, Trump was a master at generating tweets with affordances for play. Remember the time that he claimed to be a "stable genius,"[12] or when he tweeted about "the negative press covfefe…"?[13] The internet went wild with people playing around with these posts. Both Trump haters and lovers wanted in on the game.

Many voices in mainstream media[14] dismissed Trump's 2021 launch of Truth Social and Elon Musk's 2022 acquisition of Twitter as inconsequential. Musk then proceeded to change Twitter beyond recognition and renamed it X. Particularly left-leaning pundits framed these actions in terms of "boys and their toys."[15] Drawing on concepts of play, I argue that these critics were wrong to dismiss Trump's and Musk's moves as silly and as nothing but a game that does not relate to reality. For when powerful people like Trump and Musk own playspaces that they treat as toys, and they shape these spaces according to their wishes and rules, and invite others to play with them, this can have an enormous influence on how millions of people spend their time, who they connect with online, what information the algorithms expose them to, and to what kinds of political beliefs and conspiracy theories they can be exposed.

After he bought up Twitter/X, Elon Musk used it to post his own conspiracy theories, which are pumped around by the algorithm with special zeal, because he is able to determine the rules of engagement on this platform and invisibly skew the supposed level playing field. Not only does social media have

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12 Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "To President of the United States (on my first try)," Twitter, January 6, 2018, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/949619270631256064.

13 Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "Who can figure out the true meaning of 'covfefe'??? Enjoy!" Twitter, May 31, 2017, https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/869858333477523458?lang=en.

14 Mainstream media comprises more traditional, often less clearly interactive, not natively digital platforms, such as newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, and also journalistic news websites.

15 For example, Ian Bogost, "The Ugly Honesty of Elon Musk's Twitter Rebrand," The Atlantic, July 31, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/07/twitter-x-rebrand-juvenile-internet-style/674875/.

many affordances for play but it invites play that can have consequences beyond the Magic Circle. Hence, social media platforms constitute perfect places for worlding.

Referring back to the Magic Circle, it becomes clear that a social media platform is a space somewhat outside of but also closely connected to the rest of the world. Particularly within their own bubbles, people can imagine a world in which they cannot be torn out of their castle. In fact, if more and more people come to adhere to a version of the world as it exists on social media, this will have political implications outside the platform. This phenomenon was very apparent during the early years of the (first) Trump presidency. Whenever Trump said something blatantly untrue on Twitter, news media would nevertheless report on it, because the president's saying something is by definition newsworthy. Even the process of fact-checking Trump's Tweets contributed to them appearing more true, or more likely to be true than they were before.

There are even more dangerous examples, for instance, of Trump tweeting that he did not want trans people in the U.S. army.[16] From the moment of Tweeting, and before this change in policy was legally or otherwise formalized, trans people were de facto barred from the armed forces, even if they had been employed there for years.

Truth Social as an Exclusionary World

Ellison and Morse's work for *The Washington Post* is very important for our understanding of why Trump has such a wide social media reach, even though his own platform is relatively small and inaccessible. Yet based on their analysis, it is hard to see why Truth Social is more than just Trump's alternative to Twitter. For one thing, Trump's campaign makes money from his social media posts and the responses in a way that Twitter has not generated. Much more importantly, play and worlding are implicitly acknowledged in Ellison and Morse's analysis, but do not come to the fore. In fact, play and the worlding that it produces are the major products of Trump's social media activity that make it important in the first place.

16 Matt Thompson, "How to Spark Panic and Confusion in Three Tweets," The Atlantic, July 26, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/donald-trump-tweets-transgender-military-service-ban/579655/.

Not only does Trump use Truth Social to spread his messages at a lower risk, but he earns more money from his own generated content there than on Twitter, as Ellison and Morse show. The mediation of Trump's content by others is the first step in the process of getting others to use, invest in, and help shape a playspace that is conditioned by Trump's needs and interests. In turn, this playspace contributes to shaping the traditional political world offline too. I use playspace in the sense of Eugen Fink's definition of the term (in German, *Spielraum*). This term refers to both the literal English translation as well as to the leeway or wiggle room, that is, the space in which a politician has to maneuver and manipulate.[17]

For Trump, Twitter was already a playspace that allowed him to inhabit a world in which he was the king and the emperor of an imaginary castle long before he actually became president. Truth Social is an especially interesting case, as it is a social media platform that constitutes a world made up by Trump and his supporters. Truth Social openly functions as Trump's campaign platform and communicates that its users have ultimate freedom and, following the platform's programmatic name, that what they say is by definition 'the truth.' Play is still important, at once in the ironic tone of the platform, and in the way Trump tends to very explicitly invite members to tinker with and to spread his messages on their own accounts and through their own channels. Yet it is also a world that in some ways has already been realized, and now only needs to be extended to other domains, too.

Taking a look at Truth Social, we can see that it cannot be accessed without having an account on the platform. Yet you can make an account, also in Europe, if you are willing to share your personal data including your date of birth, email address, and phone number; the latter two are then verified. Subsequently, you get a confirmation email welcoming you with "Hey Truthsayer." Simultaneously, you sign up for the Trump campaign's email lists and text messages. This is both an obvious campaign strategy, and a tongue-in-cheek gesture, expanding and shortcutting an increasingly common practice for platforms of requiring a large amount of personal data to feed users political messages according to their advertising-driven algorithms. Yet platforms rarely funnel you directly into a political campaign or address their members in the joking propagandistic manner that is initiated with a "Hey Truthsayer."

17 Fink, Eugen. *Play as Symbol of the World: And Other Writings*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 11.

In the past, I have considered how particular hashtags or communities on social media platforms such as 4chan, Reddit, or Twitter can mobilize a political constituency online.[18] But here, the political constituency is already assumed to exist. You cannot use the platform unless you agree to also receive the campaign messaging. If you are willing to play by those rules, you are automatically addressed as and understood to be "a Truthsayer." Everything outside of this realm is by implication at least potentially false, fake, and not real.

Traditional White Supremacy in a New Shape

For centuries and up until today, the United States has had a tradition of supporting white-supremacist coteries that create isolated bubbles for themselves in schools, universities, and gated communities, and whites-only country clubs. Next to being a terrorist organization, the initial Ku Klux Klan can be understood as a white-supremacist coterie that was surrounded by secrecy and special procedures for admission, and whose members played a ritualistic game. The Ku Klux Klan's mode of playing and using costumes and rituals functioned to disguise and render more palatable its barbaric violence to its victims and its intimidation of millions of others back into a racial caste system that had been temporarily interrupted by the abolition of slavery and the early phases of Reconstruction in the U.S. South. However, being a Klan member was for many also, no doubt, truly play – imaginative, inviting, participatory, improvisational, and autotelic. Indeed, the Klan's reliance on ambiguity – of presenting actual violence as playful and performative – is part of what made its actions work as play. The ensuing worlding was a product of the fact that this play did hugely impact the reality that surrounding people inhabited particularly in the South, especially for those people who were not participants in the game.

In the 2010s, Trump invested a great deal of his Twitter energy into decrying the fact that then president Barack Obama played golf. Trump had consistently sought to delegitimize Obama's presidency by claiming falsely that Obama had not been born in the U.S. Seen in this light, Trump's insistence that Obama ought not to play golf carried strong racist overtones. The

18 Sara Polak and Anne Zwetsloot, "'And Then I See the Disinfectant Where It Knocks It out in a Minute': Donald Trump as Patient Zero and Superspreader of Covid-19 Cartoon Logic," *European Journal of English Studies* 26, no. 3 (2022): 377–398.

obvious underlying sentiment that Trump tapped into was the racist notion that a Black man should neither be allowed to play golf nor be president of the United States. A kind of reverse engineering was essential here. To delegitimize Obama as president, Trump playfully began to kick around other arguments about why he should not play golf such as that he should be too busy to play the game. Trump did not overtly attribute Obama's alleged unfitness to his race, but argued, implicitly, that Obama was a racial impostor, transgressing boundaries. Implicitly, Obama's involvement with golf was part of his trying to 'pass' as white.

The idea that Black men should not be involved in politics or in sports other than in very muted and politically inconsequential ways has always had currency in the U.S. In 2016–2017, when Trump was president, NFL football quarterback Colin Kaepernick regularly took a knee during the national anthem to protest racist police violence as part of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In reaction, Trump called for him and other protesting Black players to be "fired."[19] At once, this statement playfully embraced Trump's trademark phrase from his television show *The Apprentice* and demonstrated Trump's very real political conviction that white football team owners should be able to make their Black players play and not protest.

Although in many ways a quite new iteration of an old idea, Truth Social renders a world in which only Trump and his cronies can play real in a novel manner.

19 Associated Press, "Trump says NFL should fire players who kneel during national anthem," Los Angeles Times, September 22, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-trump-nfl-anthem-20170922-story.html.