CURIOSITY:
What's Inside the Cube?

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Let's not call it a game. *Curiosity – What's Inside the Cube?* is a self-proclaimed "one-of-a-kind social experiment."[1] This iOS and Android app is masterminded by software studio 22Cans, and Peter Molyneux—famous among gamers for designing *Populous* (1989), the first PC god game. Opening *Curiosity*, a player is presented with a three-dimensional cube, skinned with pictures, floating and slowly spinning in a glowing, white room. Pinch-zoom half a dozen times and the surface dissolves into itty-bitty "cubelets," exploding seemingly at random. If you happen to touch one, it shatters, and you receive one coin. Players join "thousands of people worldwide to simultaneously chip away [in real time]…"—a massively-multiplayer tapping experience.[2] "Deep in the centre [sic] of the cube is something life-changingly amazing," claims 22Cans, "but only the first person to reach the centre will discover what's inside."[3] To get there, the world must tap through thousands of layers, each made of millions of cubelets, and each distinguished by a distinct color or picture scheme.[4] There is some variation in gameplay—accurate tapping multiplies coin values; coins may be used to buy chisels and bombs for enhanced demolition; you can draw pictures. Molyneux also hopes players will be "curious" enough to unlock new features unveiled during the course of the game, even paying real money through iTunes/Google Play for special abilities. But the core mechanism is constant: tapping cubelets.

Version 1.0 launched at the end of October 2012. The initial flood of tappers crashed the 22Cans servers. The *Curiosity* in-app "stats" section shows this usage declining quickly, however, and, perhaps in response, the cube's surface imagery started to change. Mystical CGI graphics shifted to architectural travel photographs. A month later, the cube began to feature snapshots of faces, four per side, layer after layer. A quick Google search suggests that these snapshots are most likely crowd-sourced[5] from those who funded 22Cans' Kickstarter campaign for their forthcoming "delightful reinvention of the god game"[6] called Project GODUS. As of this writing there are nine faces per side—tiled underneath a giant countdown number.

For the uninitiated: god games are a type of AI simulation where the player is an unseen divinity with modest influence over a digital world of worshipers. When the followers prosper, the player gains more powers—and so the game progresses. Importantly, the player is not striving to reach the end of a path, but rather works to shape a world—a community, even—through an open-ended series of manipulations. Hm. Sounds like the Cube. Unwitting worshippers tap away on their iPads and Samsung Galaxy phones, while visual "clues" and new game features are revealed willy-nilly—to keep us curious. Rather than allowing these powers to emerge within gameplay itself, the programmers of 22Cans assume the deity role, transforming *Curiosity* into an undeclared god game through

their manipulation of the user community. Meanwhile, the seemingly endless Cube has become a successful launch pad for Project GODUS. 22Cans' carrot-dangling veers more toward funding stunt than experiment, forestalling the potential outcomes of such a massive (though decentralized) collaborative effort.

Well, players may be getting fleeced, but I'm still tapping. *Curiosity* is a slick and somewhat new-agey take on the satisfactions of popping bubble-wrap. Molyneux's quest for meaningful gaming channels simultaneous connectivity into some kind of digital utopian workplace, evoking a breezy sense of accomplishment. Meanwhile, as all the world gathers 'round the collective digital abstraction, the Cube anchors a real-time community, sibling to Second Life or the Twitter-verse—but with a crucial difference: while the vanity space of social media can reflect worldly classifications through language, appearance and politics, each user of the cube is the exact same anonymous, tapping finger. Indeed, perhaps it's more communist than utopian—or more capitalist: an MMP sweatshop. In any case, the ulterior world looks pretty dark and boring in comparison. Isolated and jabbing at the screen, the idealistic benefits of Web 2.0+ are channeled into the rote pleasures of endless zoom, scroll, and tap.

Indeed, despite the dull reality of Curiosity's mechanics, the Internet is full of talk about all things Cube—from speculation over just how many cubelets make up the total volume to YouTube videos demonstrating the Diamond Chisel (available for three billion coins). One lyrical blogger went so far as to imagine the Cube suspended by space tethers or anti-gravity near a Swiss lake.[7] This quirky nodal

community, shaded by discourse, is vastly more satisfying than the strict restraints of the game's architecture, and here, in the Curiosity experiment at large, is where Molyneux somewhat unintentionally succeeds.

So much chatter over this highly aesthetic virtual object—we're reminded of Claire Bishop's recent admonishment of much contemporary art for turning a blind eye to the technological advances fundamentally shifting communication, media, and social relations.[8] Bishop goes on to explain that adherence to physicality and intellectual property will doom art to nostalgic farce. Her description of the few art works that do successfully incorporate Web 2.0+ is an awfully good description of Curiosity: "Each suggests the endlessly disposable, rapidly mutable ephemera of the virtual age and its impact on our consumption of relationships, images, and communication; each articulates something of the troubling oscillation between intimacy and distance that characterizes our new technological regime." Though Curiosity isn't art per se, Molyneux comes yet one step closer to the truly contemporary work: absorbing lessons of the hastily advancing virtual era, but largely to promotional and narcissistic ends. Whatever its designers' intentions, Curiosity's ambivalent embrace of digital "community" draws out and exemplifies the darkness at the center of social media—the Web, Cubed.

Notes:

1 *Description of* Curiosity – What's Inside the Cube? *on the Apple App Store. Accessed April 9, 2013. The Cube has since been opened, and the app is no longer available for download.*
2 *In actuality, much of this "simultaneity" appears to be approximated by animations—no doubt owing to the technical challenges of syncing millions of cubelets across thousands of connected devices.*
3 *Description of* Curiosity – What's Inside the Cube?
4 *Internet rumors suggest that these pictorial schemes hint at the Cube's secret.*
5 *Harry Slater. "The Curiosity Cube Diaries - Volume II."* Pocket Gamer, *April 3, 2013. <http://www. pocketgamer.co.uk/r/iPhone/Curiosity+-+what%27s+inside+the+cube/feature. asp?c=49452>. Accessed June 11, 2013.*
6 *See the Project GODUS Kickstarter page. <http://www.kickstarter.com/ projects/22cans/project-godus>. Accessed April 21, 2013. Before proceeding into the Curiosity online shop, a pop-up suggests supporting GODUS on Kickstarter. The £450,000 project was successfully backed on December 21, 2012.*
7   *Harold Schellinx. "Curiosity, Cubes & Numbers."* Soundblog, *December 9, 2012. <http://www. harsmedia.com/SoundBlog/Archief/00789. php>. Accessed June 11, 2013.*
8 *Claire Bishop. "Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media."* Artforum, *September 2012, 434-441.*