(Play) Ground Rules: The Social Contract and the Magic Circle

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Abstract

In his 1950 work, Homo Ludens, Johanes Huizinga discusses the ritualistic qualities of play in describing the Magic Circle, a metaphor for the bounded nature of play that has received a degree of acceptance within the sphere of contemporary game studies. Since that time, a number of writers have alluded to the similarities between the social construction of game environments and the philosophical principles of the social contract. In this paper I provide an overview of the results of an online survey of over 700 strategy board game players which focuses specifically on the unwritten expectations that surround gameplay in a face to face social environment, arguing that these implicit regularities embody the liminal relationship between the game world and the social context in which it occurs. This is particularly evident in the consciously schizophrenic realm of contested games, where players are ostensibly obligated to play with each other, yet must actively strive against each other within the artifice of the game world. Drawing on Erving Goffman's notion of the "gaming encounter", this paper examines player attachment to the outcomes of games and the degree to which their contestual elements are foregrounded over social cohesion in an intimate game environment.

Introduction

The notion of the Magic Circle as a defining element of games is one that has been broadly adopted by many theorists and researchers in the area of modern game studies. A summary of these approaches suggests that the magic circle can be seen as operating on three levels; the literal delineating properties of the game state such as space and time, the reconceptualisation of components within the game world and the reconstruction of social relationships within the game space. In this paper, I wish to address the latter aspect, with a view to establishing ways in which players see their own role and that of other participants constrained by the implicit norms which hold sway within the boundary of a competitive social gaming encounter. My interest here in the socially negotiated nature of play is derived from my earlier observation that digital rulesets inevitably codify elements of gameplay that, in a non-digital environment, are more malleable due to the emphasis on player maintenance of the game state within a close knit interpersonal context (Woods, 2007a; 2007b).

In the case of socially competitive play this understanding is further complicated by the need to reconcile the agonistic nature of the game with the social environment of the gaming encounter. Where such games are ostensibly concerned with the pursuit of the various goals of the game as prescribed by the ruleset, the highest order of these goals defines the outcome of the game, in multi-player games generally the winning condition. Since contest play generally allows for only one victor the pursuit of a successful outcome invariably positions players *against* each other in either direct or indirect conflict. Yet, as Matthew Speier notes, social play demands a high degree of competence in terms of situated interaction and the ability to function within an intimate social grouping (1976). Furthermore, in the context of animal play, Marc Bekoff has observed that social play "relies on, and also teaches, trust, cooperation, niceness, fairness, forgiveness, and humility" (2007, p.100). Indeed, in studies of animal play it has long been understood that play serves as a facilitator of social bonding, establishing and reinforcing the social cohesion of participants (Carpenter, 1934). My interest here then, lies in the many implicit rules and social roles that are adopted for the purposes of the game instance and which transform sterile competition into a site for rich communication, offering a nuanced reflection of cultural norms.

In describing the magic circle as a form of social contract Salen and Zimmerman have suggested that, within games "the presence of the other players is important to maintaining the authority of the magic circle, because if a group of players are all obeying the rules, they implicitly police and enforce proper play" (2004, p.269) In this paper I will explore further the way in which the magic circle acts as a

constraint upon players in a similar way to the social contract. The essence of the social contract, often traced back to Socrates and further developed by philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau, is "the view that persons' moral and/or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement between them to form society" (Friend, 2006) where "in place of the individual personality of each contracting party, this act of association creates a moral and collective body" (Rousseau, 1762).

The suggestion that an unspoken obligation binds the player to a normative performance within a game is not a new one and is reflected in many discussions of the nature of play. In his observations of children, Lev Vygotsky notes that at a certain period in development children acquire the understanding that subjugation to internal impulses during social play often results in the maximisation of pleasure (1976, p.549). Although some writers see this kind of self-regulation in all forms of play, Fabio Paglieri identifies the "crucial element" in the identification of rules as being a sense of social obligation that is established through peer-to-peer negotiation (2005). The idea that players might give up a sense of complete autonomy in order to experience the play of a game is also central to Bernard Suits definition of games, which hinges on the notion that players submit to arbitrary constraints, both implicit and explicit, purely in order to experience the play of the game (1967). Famously, Stephen Sniderman has written on the implicit rules which surround gameplay and which facilitate the perpetuation of the game instance, yet which are not formally codified (1999). Finally, sociologist Erving Goffman also discusses the notion that gaming "encounters" can be seen as reflective of the broader social world in his essay *Fun in Games* (1961). Although Goffman's work is generally interpreted as exploring the metaphorical essence of the gaming encounter rather than establishing a literal correlation, his work is infused with the idea that the constrained performance of ritual social interactions typical of gameplay closely resembles those that we experience in our everyday lives. Indeed, Goffman's description of the transformative "interaction membrane" which bounds social encounters is, in places, remarkably similar to Huizinga's conception of the magic circle.

On drawing on these ideas, I am not concerned with the play of specific games and player understandings of them, but with the kinds of normative constraints which hold sway over gaming encounters and the ways in which players interpret them. Consequently, for the purposes of this research I have chosen to focus specifically on face-to-face strategy games since their play involves a far greater element of in-game metacommunication than is possible with digitally mediated gameplay. In face-to-face games, players are constantly able to adjust their framework for understanding and negotiating the game experience through the "tone of voice, intonation, gesture, posture, and facial

expression" (Tyler, 1978, p.408) of other players which characterises the metacommunicative element found in social play. As Goffman observes, face-to-face games "bear differently on one's sense of reality" than do those played at a distance (1961, p.41). This propinquity, along with the emphasis upon social interaction found in contemporary strategy games, makes the modern board game an ideal site for the exploration of ways in which players experience the social nature of gameplay and the expectations that accompany them as they enter the magic circle.

Since this research forms a part of a much larger project investigating various aspects of this particular game culture, a survey format was preferred as the means to discern the attitude players have towards the games they play. Although participant observation might be an appropriate choice for analysing player behaviours, this research is primarily concerned with attitudes and internal understandings of gameplay that often prove difficult to ascertain in this way.[1] In light of this, I conducted an online qualitative and quantitative survey of over 800 players of modern strategy board games in late 2007. Responses were gathered from the popular website Boardgamegeek.com, the newsgroup rec.games.board and a mailing list dedicated to the discussion of European strategy games, Spielfrieks. The average number of responses was between 700 and 750 for each question. The survey was aimed at establishing general demographics of the player base and, further, to draw out the types of expectations players have when entering a game instance. The conclusions drawn from this survey are largely in alignment with my own experiences as a researcher situated within the culture of strategy gaming.

Social Strategy Games

Strategy board games have one of the lengthiest documented histories in studies of games outside of sporting activities. However, as the work of scholars such as R. C. Bell and David Parlett clearly indicates, board games were, until the advent of the printing press and its associated technologies, largely two-player abstract games with a focus on directly competitive spatial and positional reasoning (Bell, 1979; Parlett, 1999). With the commercialisation of games that accompanied the industrial revolution and the emergence of proprietary games, however, board games quickly evolved to the multiplayer model that is commonly seen today. In doing so they have, generally speaking, moved away from those games in which "the player's primary concern…is the analysis of geometrical relationships between the pieces"

[1] As an example, self-handicapping and deception over intent are particularly difficult behaviours to identify through observation.

(Crawford, 1982, p.5) towards those where play is centred "…in the minds and interactions of the players themselves" (Parlett, 1999, p.7). The most recent form of the strategy game to garner significant interest in English speaking countries is that of the 'Eurogame', a style of strategy game whose generalised traits are located in the gaming culture of post-war Germany. Eurogames (also termed 'designer games') now occupy a significant position in the overall gaming hobby and are considered by gaming writer Greg Aleknevicus to be one of the "four pillars of hobby gaming" (Aleknevicus, 2008). The defining traits of Eurogames are generally cited as manageable playing times, streamlined rule systems which stress strategy and tactics over luck, engaging aesthetics and an emphasis on mechanics which promote social interaction without direct conflict (Pulsipher, 2006). The popularity of these games is reflected in the survey of player preferences, which sees eurogames played at least once a month by 86% of respondents.

The emphasis on social interaction in eurogames is largely derived from the engagement of multiple players and the use of mechanics which often promote temporary collaboration and collusion in the pursuit of mutual goals (Zagal, Rick, & Hsi, 2006). Indeed, in my survey of players, it is this social element which engenders the most enthusiasm in relating the pleasures of the game play experience. Fully 93% of players surveyed cited social interaction as either 'quite important' or 'very important' in their enjoyment of gaming. Of the other player experiences to which pleasure was attributed, only the element of competition (83%) was regarded as a significant factor. Other experiential elements such as mastery, a sense of narrative and the feeling of playing a role were largely dismissed. Overall then, the principle attraction of this form of play arises, not surprisingly, from what Nicole Lazzaro has described as "people fun", the understanding that "games [are] mechanisms for social interaction" (2004). Similarly, when queried about the elements of the game system itself from which pleasure is derived, a principal attraction of these games was found to be either direct (86%) or indirect (79%) player interaction, with only strategic depth (92%) and replayability (96%) garnering higher levels of response. The suggestion that can be gathered from this, and indeed one that is supported by my own experience and discussions with players, is that the popularity of modern strategy games is principally located in their capacity to facilitate social encounters or, to use Chris Crawford's term, the extent to which they provide "social lubrication" (1982, p.20).

Clearly then, multiplayer strategy games serve as a social experience. However, the recognition of agôn[2] as another principal pleasure of play highlights the apparent contradiction which is evident in all

[2] I refer here to Roger Caillois' use of the term agôn to denote contested games of skill (1961).

competitive games, wherein players agree to abide by a set of rules which enables them to play against each other, yet which demand a degree of civility in execution. In physical activities, the term that describes this self-inhibiting behaviour is that of 'sportsmanship'. In other forms we often hear the term 'fair play' to describe the implicit understandings that govern this social performance. Since my research suggests that board games are most commonly played in the home, it is reasonable to assume that this balance is not enforced by a separate authority but is largely achieved through a self-correcting system of implicit understandings. It is these understandings that are my principal interest in this paper.

For the Win

> *For game scholars interested in the social dynamics of gaming and of the actual patterns in player behaviour, the general goal-orientedness of players remains a hypothesis which is curiously understudied.* (Heide Smith, 2005)
>
> *Heartbreaking losses and lucky last minute wins are an important and valued part of my gaming experience not because of the win or loss, but because of the reactions of the participants.* (Survey Respondent, 2007)

Competitive games are, ostensibly, about pursuing the various goals of the game as prescribed by the ruleset. The highest order of these goals, the winning condition, serves as the overarching objective towards which players strive in the pursuit of victory. As Jonas Heide Smith observes, this observation appears so trivial that it is often overlooked by game scholars and designers as an a priori assumption (2005). However, the understanding that players pursue this goal exclusively is primarily based upon the postulated existence of an ideal rational player, a stance which has proven particularly problematic in other fields which seek to address the nuances of human activity. Indeed, when such a player position is examined with relation to the games discussed here, it quickly becomes apparent that, within a specific gaming encounter, whilst the goal of the game moves the game forward and provides all players with a shared focus, the notion that pursuit of victory is ultimately the objective of the encounter proves difficult to uphold.

Upon cursory examination, the reaction of players to the question of whether they are actively seeking victory during the play of a game appears relatively stable. 79% of players surveyed were in general or unequivocal agreement with the idea that victory is the goal towards which all players must strive in order to retain the stability of the game system. In many cases these players indicated that to not

pursue success within the game would violate the social contract that the play of a game implies. As one respondent observes, "[t]hat's what makes a game: everybody trying to win. There wouldn't be a game if none would want to win" (Survey Respondent, 2007). So far, so good. The structure of the competitive game that hinges upon this unspoken agreement remains intact and players arrive at the table with a shared understanding as to the purpose of play. However, when we begin to investigate more closely player responses to this question, it is notable that a significant number of respondents indicated that their allegiance to the higher order goal is often context-dependent.

Many players who affirmed the primacy of the pursuit of victory also included qualifying statements that tended to focus on two other elements of the game encounter. The first of these emphasizes the process of play enabled by this goal as being of more importance than the goal itself. As one player states, "[v]ictory gives you a goal to guide you through the game to its conclusion but the getting there is much more interesting to me than the end result". This observation by players is reflective of Suit's understanding that it is the process of play enabled by voluntary subjugation to the rules (including the goals) that defines the nature of the gaming encounter. There is here a conscious awareness of the schizophrenic nature of socially competitive play wherein the arbitrary goals laid down in the rules serve only as a facilitator of the play experience, yet the desertion of these goals renders play of the game inadequate, if not impossible. As one player observes:

> A large part of the enjoyment of games stems from the fact that they are a social activity, and the enjoyment is only elevated when everybody is pursuing the same goal. (Survey Respondent, 2007)

A second qualifying trend that emerges from these responses can be identified as the awareness of a shared responsibility to maintain the integrity of the social fabric during the game encounter. A number of players stipulated the potential social consequences of play as being of higher importance than pursuit of the game goals. Of particular note is that group of respondents who did not fully agree that they were usually pursing victory during the course of the game. In these cases, a significant number expressed the belief that the social experience of the gaming encounter constituted the primary consideration in playing the game. As one player states, "[v]ictory is tertiary to socializing". A number of players expressed recognition that, for some individuals, the experience of playing a game unsuccessfully can be emotive enough to threaten the gaming environment and disrupt play. Indeed, in many cases an explicit reference to the norms of a specific group of players was mentioned i.e. what is and what isn't considered acceptable in terms of the relationship between the game encounter and the social one. So,

initially presented with a simple question of whether they actively pursue victory in a game, players, although agreeing in principle, apparently felt obliged to justify and/or qualify this behaviour.

Further, when asked to consider how much importance they place upon achieving victory as an ends, rather than the means to propel play, the evidence of subjugation through shared intent becomes even more apparent. Whilst 27.7% acknowledged that winning contributed positively to the experience of a game, only 18.6% indicated that this was an important element in their enjoyment of the game encounter. Thus, it becomes clear that most players are aware that enjoyment of the game is largely derived from the pursuit of the first order goal, whilst acknowledging that the achievement of the goal itself does not contribute significantly to this pleasure. From these responses we can draw three implicit understandings which are shared by most, if not all players. Firstly, that the game encounter is held together by an embedded agreement to pursue the highest order goal. Secondly, that the achievement of this goal is of relatively little importance, and thirdly, that the maintenance of shared pleasure and the social fabric of the gaming encounter are often considered more important than either the pursuit or attainment of the goal.

This apparently contradictory relationship between pursuit and attainment of the highest order goal can be summed up in game designer Reiner Knizia's words, "[t]he goal of the game is to win, but it is the goal, not the winning, that is important". Implicit in Knizia's statement and evident in this research is that in social games, there exists a metagame goal that functions as the ultimate purpose of the encounter for the individual, that of deriving pleasure. Furthermore, in social games, the knowledge that this purpose is common to all players requires a degree of trust that each participant in the encounter shares the same understanding of the relative priority of these contributions. To further investigate this relationship between the explicit goal and this social metagoal, players were subsequently questioned as to situations where they would not actively pursue victory and for what reasons. Upon doing so, it can be observed how carefully, if unconsciously, some players balance the explicit rules and the implicit expectation of equality within the encounter.

A Higher Goal

> *Supreme dedication to a game…may be repugnant to nearly everyone's moral sense.* (Suits, 1967)
>
> *I would not pursue victory if I believe I will hurt someone's feelings by doing so.*(Survey Respondent, 2007)
>
> *I enjoy playing, they enjoy playing, we all win.* (Adams, 2008)

Having established that the majority of players are generally pursuing victory during the course of a game, each was then further questioned as to any circumstances under which this would not be the case. The variety of answers is detailed in figure a.

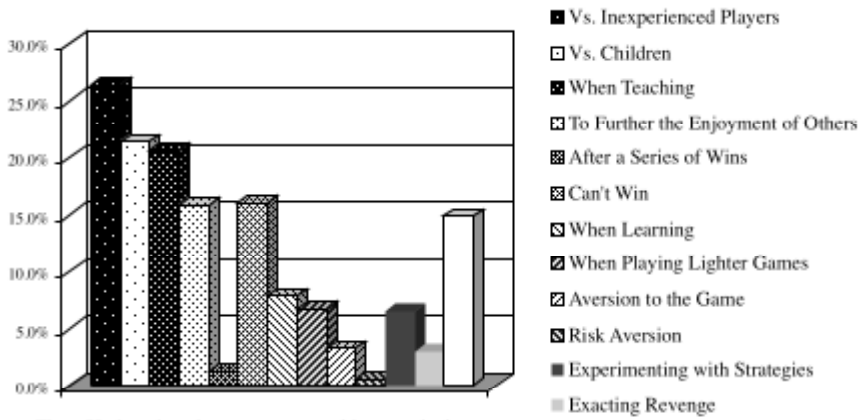

Fig a. Under what circumstances would you actively not pursue victory in a game?

Interestingly, a number of themes emerge from this secondary examination which can be broken down into three key motivations for setting aside the explicit goal of the game. These being those related to the shared encounter, the game itself and the metagame that arises from play.[3]

The most common reasons cited for abandoning the explicit highest order goal of the game are apparently seated in a conscious desire to improve the gaming encounter for other players. In some cases, such as when playing with children (21.5%) or against inexperienced players (26.4%), this consists of pulling back from optimal play in order to artificially construct a sense of equality in the game. Similar accommodation also occurs when actively teaching a game (20.6%) as one respondent identifies:

> In a one on one session when teaching another player to play a game I would deliberately take neutral actions which would prolong the game and provide a more beneficial learning experience to another player. As part of this I would allow the other player to win if they were able to master the basics of the game. This helps in encouraging the player to play again and builds self

[3] Although intoxication was listed by at least two respondents, I have chosen to not include this for the purposes of clarity.

> confidence in the individual - this could be particularly important if the individual was a younger member of the family or a friend who had no experience of boardgaming. After all who wants to play a game where they get beat every time and the experience of the game was so poor that they were not learning the game and what's more they felt belittled. (Survey Respondent, 2007)

As is suggested here, a number of players describe guiding players through initial plays, pointing out optimal moves and explaining strategic decisions, often with a view to bringing new players into the hobby, an evangelistic attitude which I have found to be typical of strategy gaming culture. Of course, a simple rejoinder to this observation is one that was noted by several players. That is, if players are not actively pursuing victory then they are not "playing the game". Viewed in this light, the player here is not playing the game, but teaching it, a somewhat different activity. Certainly, this would seem to be the case if we define the play of a game through the rational lens of player optimisation and authorial intent. Yet, if we understand the gaming encounter as more than merely the interaction of players with a rule system and begin to embed play in the context of the social fabric which surrounds it, the teaching and learning of the game become a part of the play activity as much as games between our idealised optimisers. Moreover, the artificial reconstruction of the level playing field seems an appropriate response to the differing levels of expertise present in the encounter. It is, in effect, a voluntary handicapping which restores the equilibrium that players have come to expect from competitive play.

This voluntary handicapping in the form of non-optimal plays does not only extend to teaching and learning scenarios. A proportion of players (15.9%) attest to de-prioritising the goal of victory specifically in order to further the pleasure experienced by the group or particular individuals within it. Most commonly, this scenario involves the degree to which players exert themselves when set against the perceived need to ensure that the play remains pleasurable for all involved. For example:

> If I see a player having trouble understanding a part of the game or having a run of bad luck, I will play down to their level to keep them interested, involved, and happy. I will make moves that I know will hurt me and help them. (Survey Respondent, 2007)
>
> …if the win would utterly crush the opponent. I enjoying winning by narrow margins, thus allowing all players to have an enjoyable experience. (Survey Respondent, 2007)

Still another example of this altruistic concern can be seen in those players who withdraw optimal effort after a series of wins. Interestingly, this can be contrasted with Jonas Heide-Smith's research on goals in

physically co-located digital play where players actively assist and encourage other in the immediate social context but wherein "concerns about fairness do not extend to gamespace behaviour" (2006, p.242).

Evident in these observations is a further reminder that some, if not all, players prioritise the enjoyment of the game by all participants over the victory condition, once again suggesting a metagoal infused with a desire for social cohesion. However, the ideal that everyone should be enjoying the game equally is not the only reason that players abandon the explicit goal of the game. A number of respondents indicate that there are often game-related reasons for the withdrawal of this sustained effort. The most common of these occurs when such a pursuit is deemed futile, that is when the player feels that he or she cannot achieve the win (16.1%). In terms of more voluntary behaviours, some players use learning games as an opportunity to experiment with strategies more so than to engage completely with the endgame conditions (7.9%). Beyond this, a relatively small number of players understandably admit to playing with little enthusiasm in games they do not enjoy (3.3%), while others note that lighter, more luck-driven games do not call upon players to actively pursue victory so eagerly in order to further the play experience (6.7%). Generally, the games cited here were party games wherein the social goal of shared enjoyment is generally more explicitly recognised. Metagame-related motivations including experimental play (6.6%) and personal vendetta (3%) as a reason for setting aside the victory condition of the game were also noted, though not particularly common. Finally, of course, it must be noted that a significant percentage of players (14.9%) could not envisage a situation in which they would not be trying to win.

The picture that emerges from this data is one of players who do not share a common belief about when or where it is appropriate to set aside the pursuit of victory. If anything, the observation that 60.5% of players see self-handicapping as legitimate when given clear inequalities between players further suggests that the consideration of the social fabric and the perception of fairness is common, if not shared by all players. What is of interest to me here is the degree of awareness that the gaming encounter is not only shaped by the rules of the game, but by a set of meta-rules which are understood differently by each player. Up until now, I have largely confined my enquiries to those elements of the social metagame that shape player actions with regard to limiting their pursuit of victory. A further consideration here is the degree to which players incorporate a social metagame into their play when they are actively engaged in that pursuit.

Practiced in the Art of Deception

> *Games provide many examples in which sharp dealing and an effort to obstruct others or to cause them to suffer loss is encouraged, whereas such conduct would be morally disallowed in other contexts.* (Shiffri, 2007)
>
> *Once in a game there are no friends, merely resources to exploit in your pursuit of victory.* (Lawrence, 2008)

It is a natural consequence of social gaming encounters that players engage in conversations which pertain both to their lives outside of the game and their positions within it. Indeed, drawing on the work of Brian Sutton Smith and his discussions of the ambiguity of play, Wright et al. note that the meaning of the video game Counter Strike is not only found in the graphical and mechanical elements which reside in the game itself but "in the social mediations that go on between players through their talk with each other" (2002). In face-to-face games this social mediation is often referred to as 'table talk', a name inherited from partner discussions in card games. Although frowned upon in more competitive environments and specifically forbidden in select games, table talk in a typical social gaming situation often includes an element of misdirection and 'kibitzing' (another term borrowed from card games which refers to the provision of unsolicited advice during play). Wei-Hwa Huang suggests four motivations for the kibitzer; those of instruction, selfishness, altruism and socialising (Vasel et al., 2006). Both misdirection and kibitzing often involve multiple layers of deception that would, perhaps, be frowned upon in a broader social context. Addressing this transformative element of the gaming encounter, players were asked whether they consider misleading others appropriate when playing. The results suggest that within the confines of the gaming encounter, such misdirection can be considered acceptable, even necessary:

> Statements regarding intent should be never be taken at face value as telegraphing your moves transparently is obviously not a winning strategy. In many abstract games, intent is the only aspect of play that is hidden and this requires either complete silence regarding the game or misdirection to achieve your goals. (Survey Respondent, 2007)

57% of players surveyed were in complete agreement with the attitude of the player cited here, unequivocally agreeing with the suggestion that misleading others regarding intentions constitutes reasonable behaviour within a gaming context. Respondents typically referred to bluffing, feinting,

distraction and misdirection as tactics that reflect a degree of gamesmanship. That is, although perhaps not explicitly encompassed by the ruleset, they are implicitly a part of the broader metagame and are often seen as valuable skills:

> Deception is an important part of gaming. If players take your word so much that they fail to see that you are working contrary to it, then so be it. They had their chance. In-game deceptions such as these are different than cheating in my opinion. (Survey Respondent, 2007)

In contrast to this approach were the relatively small number of respondents who felt that misleading other players was entirely inappropriate (<4%). Finally, a significant number of players surveyed offered conditional responses to the question (38%). Of these, 83% qualified their responses as being dependent upon the type of game being played. A number of players indicated that such misdirection must be explicitly encouraged within the rules of the game, typically where they involve mechanics of diplomacy or negotiation. Most notably, however, 28% of those who offered conditional responses indicated that the decision to employ such tactics would be dependent upon the other players in the group. Understandably, reference was occasionally made to the inappropriateness of misdirection when teaching or when playing with younger players. Moreover, many respondents made reference to the degree of familiarity with the other players, citing explicit discussions or implicit understandings that dictate the degree to which such metagaming is allowed and/or appropriate:

> …a lot of this relates to the fact that I play with a regular group, and we've learned about each other's general psychological approaches, and can therefore make sensible decisions about claims that other players may make. (Survey Respondent, 2007)
>
> If I wanted to play that way, I would discuss it with my group first and make sure everyone's on the same page. There are lots of different styles of gaming interaction that can all work, as long as all the parties involved agree on that style of play. (Survey Respondent, 2007)

The context dependence and the variability of player attitudes towards this type of play style suggests that players are often involved in gaming encounters where differing implicit rulesets might be experienced by each player. Clearly then, groups who play together over a period of time form shared understandings concerning the level of metagame play, suggesting that although two groups might share a set of explicit rules in the form of the game itself, the social metagame in each situation, and hence the game being played, may differ considerably. Of course, where such rules are unambiguously

codified (such as in tournament environments) these ground rules are made known to all. In more informal environments, however, differing players expectations might threaten the stability of the social encounter, suggesting again that participants are involved in the shared maintenance of this social fabric in order to maintain the integrity of the magic circle.

Your Cheating Heart

> *Cheating has its own pleasures and gratifications and will remain an integral part of gaming culture.* (Kücklich, 2004)
>
> *If you cheat, we are done playing.* (Survey Respondent, 2007)

I have argued in the past that any action taken in a contested multiplayer game involves, in essence, an ethical decision, since any action taken has the potential to affect other players (Woods, 2007). Nowhere is this ethical dimension more apparent than in the obligation to conform to the explicit ruleset of the game. In face-to-face games where no referee is present the implicit requirement to play by the rules demands a sense of mutual trust between players, even as the sense of competition (and the game structure itself) compels them to win during the encounter. Unlike digital games, where the procedural rules are embedded in the algorithms of the game itself, or organised sports, where the presence of an impartial umpire ensures compliance, strategy board games require that players adopt, at least partly, the lusory attitude that makes possible the play of the game. In an idealised game, players do not cheat. In the case of computer-mediated games however, the experience of the game boundary as being established by a fixed ruleset leads to a variety of understandings as to what constitutes cheating. For the small number of researchers who have touched upon this area, the common thread appears to be the perception of the cheat as an exploratory, creative player, whose undermining of the predetermined rules is evidence of the subversive potential of the medium. As Mia Consalvo has discussed at length, while players may have varying ideas as to what constitutes cheating in a digitally mediated game environment, to many, "shortcuts or code alterations are acceptable in the space of the game" because "games offer us a space where we can experience that freedom, without significant consequences" (2005). Julian Kücklich appears to share Consalvo's belief in the creativity of cheating activities, stating "authorial intention plays second fiddle to creative use of the objects created" (2004). Moreover, Consalvo sees the cheat as acquiring "gaming capitol" within the culture through the demonstration of

knowledge. Yet, as Kafai and Fields note, the majority of work in this area is principally concerned with the consequences for the game rather than for rival players (Kafai & Fields, 2007).

In social strategy games, the physical co-location of players has a significant effect on the perception of cheating and the ethical problems attached to it. Of the players who responded to the question of their feelings regarding cheating in a face-to-face game, 97.5% expressed a deep displeasure at the thought of engaging in such an activity, or having those who did play games with them. The most common reaction was an insistence that such players would be ejected from game play and would not be entertained as participants in the future (25%). Indeed some respondents felt that cheating within the context of a social gaming environment constituted a "pathological act" suggesting "a severe social disorder". Particular emphasis in responses was also placed on the notion of mutual trust and the understanding that cheating not only disrupts the game but detracts from the enjoyment of other players. Of course, when compared with digitally mediated games an additional factor bears heavily upon a player's decision to cheat within a face-to-face game. In such games the act of cheating involves a level of intentional deception, "the conscious, planned intrusion of an illusion seeking to alter a target's perception of reality, replacing objective reality with perceived reality" (Bell, 2003). Yet whilst it is apparent from this research that some players see deception as an integral part of the play experience, the rules as codified in the printed ruleset appear to hold a far greater weight than do those of the digital game as prescribed by the algorithms which define the rules.

It is also interesting to note that the act of cheating in face-to-face games is comparatively easier than it is in digitally mediated play. At the same time, the consequences are also potentially more disruptive for the game and for the individual. Thus, the level of self-regulation demanded by the encounter in order that it be successful is far higher than is typical in digital games. The repeated assertion that players caught cheating will experience a social penalty appears to leave little room for exploring the creative potential of rule-breaking within the confines of social strategy games. In order for the social contract to remain intact, the implicit understanding that cheating is prohibited within the confines of the magic circle appears to hold significant weight in the maintenance of the integrity of the gaming encounter. While the manipulation of players through other forms of deception is not nearly so universally condemned, the disruption of game play through violation of the explicit rules seems largely to be an aberration, potentially resulting in significant consequences for the perpetrator.

A Social Strategy

In this article I have touched briefly upon one area of my research, which examines the relationship between the game rules and the shared understandings of the embedded social rules which govern face-to-face play. From examining player attitudes towards higher order goals and the role of deception within the game it becomes apparent that players in a social game are constantly negotiating the perceived demands of the strategic game as defined by the rules and the social contract as determined by the context of the encounter. The combination of these two influences constitute the fluctuating rule boundaries of the magic circle as perceived by the individual player. The fragility of the magic circle that is highlighted by Huizinga and re-affirmed by Salen and Zimmerman lies here in the differences in shared perception of the implicit rules of play. For the explicit rules, there remains on the table a rulebook authored by the game designer which clarifies any incongruence in player understandings. In terms of the implicit social regularities, however, no such binding document exists, suggesting that players construct this part of the encounter 'on the fly'. When expectations of the nature of these social codes are incongruous, there exists the potential for the game to break down. Consequently, players are drawn into an ongoing metacommunicative negotiation in order to maintain both the social fabric and the integrity of the game system.

In social strategy games, where players themselves are responsible not only for the management of implicit social norms but also the functioning of the game itself, it would appear that they manage their own in-game behaviour significantly in order to achieve an approximation of fairness. Moreover, players are often conscious of a shared responsibility for the maintenance of enjoyment by all participants in the encounter. Although Heide-Smith has challenged digital game researchers to abandon the artificiality of the magic circle as a conceptual framework (2004), I have found that Huizinga's 'object to think with' retains relevance in the context of the social game when interpreted as the rule boundaries in both their explicit and implicit forms. It is interesting to note, however, that Heide-Smith sees in-game behaviour and the social context of play as being somewhat separated by incongruencies in player activities in these respective areas. It is, perhaps, a trait of digital games that the abrogation of responsibility for upholding the explicit rules of the game contributes to this perceived schism. That is, as player participation in the construction of the game world is lessened, so too is the sense of shared responsibility for player enjoyment within it. Such a conclusion is certainly supported by the problematic role of cheats and grief players in highly mediated play environments.

To the game theorist, this apparently altruistic behaviour might be attributed to "a belief in the interdependencies of group members and expectations of reciprocity among the members" (Kollock, 1998). A further explanation for the self-regulating behaviour of players might be found in the collective social identity that coalesces around a face-to-face gaming encounter. It is interesting to note that Huizinga's assertion that play predates culture can be seen reflected in Goffman's discussion of interaction rituals:

> One must look […] to the fact that societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters. One way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual…The general capacity to be bound by moral rules may well belong to the individual, but the particular set of rules which transforms him into a human being derives from the requirements established in the ritual organization of social encounters. (Goffman, 1967, p.44-45)

The implication here, that the ritual of structured interaction brings about a collective social identity, establishes a link between gaming encounters and the performance of culture generally. If, as suggested by my research, the maintenance of the social fabric of the gaming encounter is commonly a higher order goal than those defined in the ruleset, then a direct relationship between the normative nature of gaming encounters and the broader social contract can be observed.

Although many game scholars assume the existence of such a relationship, the form of this contract has rarely been explored with any depth, perhaps due to the structuralist emphasis on digital games that has dominated the recent resurgence of ludology. My research suggests that an important element of social gaming encounters is that of self-regulation, the conscious management of behaviour in the pursuit of shared enjoyment. As contemporary ludology coalesces around the idea that there must be something shared between all games that identifies them as such, it is also worthwhile at every turn to examine what delineates differing genres/modes of games. Clearly, there are elements found in intimate gaming encounters that do not find an immediate counterpart in the digitally mediated experience. The topic of this paper serves as one example. The anonymous and transitory nature of gaming encounters in digitally mediated environments, the noticeably altered role of the transgressive player and the dependence upon code as ultimate arbitrator asks little of the participant in terms of self-regulation. As much as the transmedial nature of games holds extraordinary promise for the future of digitally mediated play, it is important to question what is being lost in translation.

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