

The Forms and Fluidity of Game Play

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Many theorists suppose suppose that game-play is unified; that is, that there is basically only one sort of game-play. I would like to argue, instead that there are multiple forms of game-play. What's more, I'll argue, once we see the multiple forms, we'll something even more important: that game-play is fluid - that the form of play is not fixed by the game, but chosen by the player. It is up to the player whether World of Warcraft is a game of imaginative role-playing, or a competitive game of scoring more points, or some mixture of the two. The presumption of the uni-dimensionality of play has masked a really interesting phenomenon: that the basic form of play is voluntary and highly variable, even inside one game.

To get there, I must first establish that game-play is multi-dimensional. There are at least two entirely different ways in which we can play a game. We can engage in make-believe play: the play of imagination, pretend, and role-play. We can also engage in striving play: the play of competition, challenge, and overcoming obstacles. I claim that these two forms of play are conceptually distinct, and not reducible to one another. A professional chess player is engaged in pure striving, and children playing house are engaged in pure make-believe. Many modern graphical video games - like World of Warcraft - offer play that is a hybrid of striving and make-believe. But even here, the forms of play are conceptually distinct. Sometimes the forms of play support each other, and sometimes they run at cross-purposes.

But much recent discussion has rejected multi-dimensionality, presuming, instead, that play is singular and uni-dimensional. The usual strategy is to reduce one form of play to a sub-variant of other. A make-believe theorist might treat competitive game like chess as a peculiar sort of improvisational theater, where the players take on imaginary roles, pretend to to be enemies. A striving theorist might take traditional theater and treat it is as a competitive game - an acting competition, for example, where the actors were all trying to outdo each other. I will argue that these reductions are wrong and that they essentially mischaracterize the complexity of play.

Once we've established the multiple dimensions of play, it will become clear that game-play is fluid across these dimensions. The form of play is not fixed for a particular game; it is, rather,

dependent on player choice. Take, for instance, World of Warcraft. Some players emphasize make-believe play, trying to imaginatively enter into their roles as shopkeepers, adventurers, or guild organizers. Others simply care about amassing the most experience points and gold, and are entirely willing to break the illusion for the sake of competitive success. Most players choose some mix of the two; a player can even transition play-styles mid-game.

The fluidity of game-play is a very useful concept. As an illustration of its importance, I will use it to resolve a debate from contemporary game philosophy. I will take up a debate about the metaphysics of game objects and game worlds - whether they are fictional or actual. I'll argue that there is no fixed answer to this - for games in general, or even for a particular game. The fictionality or actuality of an object will depend on whether the player is choosing to engage in make-believe or striving play. The fluidity of game play grounds a fluidity of game metaphysics.

What I'm attempting to do here is to invert the order of analysis of games: rather than studying play as a phenomena emerging from the nature of a game, I urge that we study games as a phenomena emerging from the particular play. Games cannot be adequately understood by just looking at the bare apparatus; they are ontologically entangled with the acts and choices of play. Games are essentially participatory entities.

Two forms of play

I'll begin by establishing that there are at least two distinct ways that we play games.¹

One currently popular view is that play is a form of make-believe. This view is present as early as Huizinga's classic study of play, *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga draws connections between game-play, children's games of make-believe, religious rituals and theatrical productions. But this view has its most influential contemporary form in Walton's *Mimeses as Make-Believe*. Walton argues that our basic form of engagement with the representational arts is make-believe. Make-believe, says Walton, is the use of external props as aids to the imagination. When two children play in the forest and pretend that all the tree-stumps are bears, then they are using tree stumps as this sort of prop.² When a child gallops around the house on a wooden stick and pretends to be a

¹ I am focussed on the narrow use of the term "play", where "play" is the generic term to describe the primary activity of engagement with a game. There is a broader sense of "play", in which it is used in contrast to the term "work" or "seriousness". The relationship between the narrower and broader senses is complex, and beyond the reach of this paper.

² Walton (1990) 21-4

cowboy, the stick and the child's body and the space of the house are props for an imagined world; in her imagination, the props become a horse, a weathered cowboy, a Western town.

In a similar way, representative paintings, novels, and movies serve as props for the adult imagination.³ We use the supplied details to imagine ourselves into the world. We imagine the characters, but most importantly, we imagine what it is like to be the characters - we imagine feelings of fear, embarrassment, rage.⁴ Thus, says Walton, the fine arts are an extension of the same sort of activity as children's games of make-believe.

The temptation to apply Walton's make-believe theory to games is strong. Many recent theorists have used a make-believe framework for their analysis.⁵ Tavinor, for example, argues that video games are art using an explicitly Waltonian framework.⁶ Games, says Tavinor, are interactive fictions, where the interactivity is a tool to increase our imaginative immersion.⁷ Some of the applications are quite plausible. A graphically realistic, narrative video game like *Grand Theft Auto* obviously affords its players opportunities for imaginative immersion in a different world. But though make-believe theory can account for some of our interactions with games, I think it is an incomplete account of game-play. For example, sports are paradigmatic examples of games and play, but they do not fit easily inside a make-believe account. In basketball, I'm not using the ball to imagine my way into an alternate world. I am, in fact, hyper-absorbed in the particular details of this world and the large, high-velocity objects it contains. The ideal state of sports play is not imaginative transport, but absorption in the actual.⁸ I am similarly absorbed when I play poker. I'm not imagining an alternate world; I'm paying attention to the actual probabilities, which cards actually came out, the little ticks and tells that might clue me in to my opponents' actual plans.

So what is this sort of play, then, if it isn't make-believe? Once compelling account can be found by stepping outside the discussion of fiction and narrative. In *The Grashopper: Games, Life, Utopia*, Bernard Suits attempts to define the term "game". His complete definition is quite complicated, but he offers this "portable version", which will serve our purposes:

³ Walton (1990) 51-4. Note that a "representation" here is not the same as a "communication". Walton thinks that representational art may communicate, but it always prompts the imagination. For example, a theatrical piece of political satire might be a representation and a communication, while Michelangelo's *David* is primarily a representation.

⁴ Walton (1990) 240-274

⁵ Gee (2006)

⁶ Tavinor (2009)

⁷ For similar examples, see Gee (2006)

⁸ It is striking to me that the connection between video games and sports is rarely discussed in the contemporary literature, while the connection between video games and cinema is constantly highlighted. This is, I believe, a consequence of an excessively narrow conception of play.

Games are unnecessary obstacles undertaken voluntarily for the sake of the experience of overcoming them.⁹

For Suits, the basic substance of a game is the restrictions on how its players may act. Some of these restrictions might be physical, like the walls of a maze, or the holds on a rock wall. Other restrictions are mental, like voluntarily upheld rules. But it is the restrictions which essentially constitute the game. The game of poker is not merely constituted by the goal of getting everybody else's money, says Suits, for I don't win poker by chloroforming my fellow players and rifling through their wallets, even if this is more efficient. The goal of running a marathon is not merely to get to the finish line first, for there are far easier ways to do it: cutting across the city, or taking a taxi. What it is to play the game is to take up a goal, and take up a series of restrictions on achieving that goal, for the sake of the experience of struggling against those restrictions. Playing games, says Suits, is an inversion of the usual relationship of means and ends. In practical life, we select the means for the sake of the ends. But in game life, we select the ends for the sake of the means they force on us.¹⁰

This definition, says Suits, extends the concept of "game" to cover such activities as chess, basketball, rock climbing, jigsaw puzzles, and, in some circumstances, jazz.¹¹ From this definition, we can easily generate a related conception of play: play is the attempt to overcome voluntary obstacles undertaken for the sake of the experience of overcoming them.¹² This conception of play I will call "striving".¹³

Crucially, Suitsian striving and Waltonian make-believe are activities organized around very different purposes. Make-believe is an activity built for the sake of imagination, where striving is an activity built around the experience of struggling. A simple account of game-play now presents itself. There are at least two distinct forms of play, make-believe play and striving play. Sometimes they go together, and sometimes they come apart. Children's games of doctor and house are usually pure make-believe; chess, basketball, and Tetris are usually pure striving. Graphical video games like Grand Theft Auto are typically played in both ways at once, as are tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons. We imagine ourselves into an alternate world, and then we undertake to overcome obstacles within that alternate world. Sometimes the challenges in the imagined world are linked to challenges in this world. For example, in a video game, I can overcome an imagined physical challenge in the imaginary world (dodging a punch

⁹ Suits (2005) 37-55. This is Suits' quick version of the definition, which is enough to suit my purposes. He offers a more extended definition in the book.

¹⁰ Suits (2005) 37-45

¹¹ Suits does not mention video games explicitly, but this is perhaps forgivable, since the book predates the existence of video games by a couple of years.

¹² Suits freely admits that this isn't a precise delineation of the colloquial sense of "game". Rather, he claims to be uncovering a crucial conceptual category.

¹³ The definition of games is entirely Suits', but the term "striving" is my own.

and then tripping my opponent) by overcoming a very different physical challenge in this world (pressing a sequence of buttons in response to images on a screen).

The irreducibility of make-believe and striving

Such a multi-dimensional view of play strikes me as natural and quite plausible. However, much recent work on games has resisted such multi-dimensionality. Instead, the tendency has been towards unification and reduction. Suits argues so explicitly. He claims that striving play is fundamental, and that make-believe play is simply a subcategory of striving play. A children's game of make-believe, like Cops and Robbers is actually a striving game, says Suits. It is a game of improvisational theater, where the goal is to keep the story going as long as possible. It is much like a ping-pong volley, where two sides are trying to keep the ball going as long as possible. One might have missed it, because there is no victory condition in Cops in Robbers. But the ping-pong volley example shows us that a victory condition is not requisite for striving play; a loss condition is sufficient to inspire striving. Cops and Robbers is an improvisational acting volley where players try to keep the story going for as long as possible, against the demands of narrative continuity and the restrictions of genre rules.¹⁴

Waltonians often make the opposite reduction.¹⁵ The reduction are already present in Huizinga. Competitive games, says Huizinga, are descendants of older forms of life: activities theater and religious ritual. In games, as in theater and ritual, there is a sacred space, set apart from regular life - the magic circle. When we enter into the magic circle, we take up new roles. Friends take up the role of aggressors; cafe patrons begin a game of chess and take on the roles of medieval warlords. Inside the magic circle, new rules apply, sustained by our imagination - rules about what kind of motion is permitted, and what kind is not. And when the game ends, we shake hands, and it all goes away.

I think these reductions are both mistaken. Make-believe play and striving play are conceptually distinct, and game-play should be viewed as a complex interaction of at least two distinct forms of play. Theorists caught within a single model of play mischaracterize or ignore the other dimensions.

¹⁴ Suits (2005)

¹⁵ Tavinor (2009) and Gee (2006). Tavinor, in particular, argues that the striving elements are merely an instrument to increase make-believe. He claims that the purpose of interactive game-play is to enhance the player's emotional involvement in the imagined world and imagined narrative, and make it easier for the player to perform an imaginative identification with her in-game avatar.

First, we can imagine each of forms of play separately. Some games seem to support striving play without much make-believe at all. Sports play, for example, is typically pure striving, and no make-believe. Make-believe is marked by mental travel away from the props' real-world existence. One manipulates the physical doll, but one looks past it to the live baby in one's imagination. Sports play, on the other hand, is marked by a lack of mental travel. Athletes are hyper-attentive to the present moment and its particularities. The tennis player is focussed on the actual ball, its precise velocity and spin, on the exact placement of his opponent, the texture of the ground. "Serious" board games, like chess, are another example. The serious poker player is absorbed in the real details of that particular gaming situation - which cards are out, the actual probabilities of the next card, tiny clues to the actual emotional states of her opponents.¹⁶

But, one might respond, the imagination shows up in the most seemingly pure of striving games. The chess player imagines the possible responses of his opponent to his possible plays, and so explores the logical space of the game. The tennis player imagines different flight paths for he could give the ball, and imagines how the opponent would react to each. But this does not establish the reduction. First, not all instances of striving play involve the imagination. Think of the basketball player catching a pass and dunking it, instinctively reacting with skill and instincts built from years of practice; think of a marathon runner pushing through the lactic acid burn. Much high-level sports play happens faster than thought; athletes speak of the mind disappearing, the body taking over. Second, even when the imagination is engaged in a pure striving game, the imagination's use is heavily circumscribed, and merely instrumental. In make-believe play, imagination is the purpose. When I read Jane Austen, the more imaginatively absorbed I become, the more successful the make-believe. But when I use my imagination in poker, the purpose is winning, and the imagination is a mere instrument. I imagine only so far as it helps me win. If, in trying to figure out what whether my opponent is bluffing, that I become so absorbed in imagining my opponent's psychological state that I begin to imagine, his romantic problems, his childhood traumas, I am not thereby succeeding at poker - I am getting distracted.

Just as there is pure striving play, there is also pure make-believe play. Children's games of make-believe - Cowboys and Indians, and Cops and Robbers, playing Doctor, playing House - are examples of play that is almost entirely make-believe, with little to no striving element. Suits, of course, will deny that these are free of striving; he treats make-believe is a sub-form of striving. Says Suits, Cops and Robbers is simply an improvisational acting game, with the goal of keeping the action going as long as possible.

First, this description is simply wrong. When children play at Cowboys and Indians, they aren't simply trying to make the story last as long as possible. If that was truly the goal, every time one

¹⁶ Some might respond to this tack by refusing to consider sports as "games", and calling them instead "athletic endeavors". I do not care what we call them, but the re-naming does nothing to change the point I am trying to make: that there two distinct forms of activity that we engage in, that interweave in fascinating ways.

child pretended to shoot another, the other child would simply act out dodging, and the simulated battle would go on ad infinitum. The very fact that a child is willing to pretend to be shot, to fall dramatically and die and so end the narrative, shows that the activity is not at all like a ping-pong volley. The children are doing it because they want to take part in a satisfying story; they want to imagine and take part in a thrilling climax. Suits' particular account of children's make-believe games as a kind of acting volley is surely wrong.

But perhaps this is a minor error. Perhaps make-believe could be understood as a striving game of creating the most dramatic possible story, or something along those lines. Such a response, however, threatens to bloat the concept of striving-play beyond any usefulness. Striving-play is not any goal-directed activity; it is an activity of taking up obstacles for the sake of the experience of overcoming the obstacles. Therapy, building construction, and cancer research are not striving play¹⁷. They are straightforwardly practical acts, done for the sake of their end-goals. In striving play, we set the end for the sake of the means it will force us to take. Make-believe play occurs for the sake of the imagination itself, and not for the sake of the challenges along the way. Take, for instance, one of my favorite activities: looking at pictures of an excellent food and imagining, in great detail, its consumption. In such an act, I am not placing obstacles in my path; I am simply imagining for the sake of the experience of imagination itself. Contrast this with, for example, formal acting games played by improvisational acting groups. Improv comedians, for example, will take random suggestions from the audience, and immediately act out scenes from them, while trying to be as funny as possible. This is surely partially a striving game: there are obstacles, put in place to make the task harder, and the point of the obstacles is the experience of overcoming them. It's obvious that improv comedy acts like this are striving games, because we can easily imagine how one might break the rules. If the actors secretly planted fake audience members and used pre-planned prompts and scripts to avoid having to improvise, this would be cheating. We can imagine how improv comedians could cheat, but it is very hard to imagine how I could cheat at my food fantasy.

This suggests a different angle from which to view the distinction. We can clearly see the distinction between striving and make-believe by seeing how differently they break. Striving play, says Suits, is broken by the cheat. The cheat, says Suits, acknowledges the goal of the game, but not the authority of the rules. The cheat secretly breaks the rules to generate the illusion of a win.¹⁸

¹⁷ Thought, as Suits notes, they might be. What makes striving play is the purpose and voluntariness of the action. A scientist trying to cure cancer for the sake of saving people's lives is not engaged in striving play. A scientist trying to cure cancer because it's an interesting challenge might be. And a future citizen, in a world without cancer, who was taking up the challenge of figuring out the cure for cancer using only the limited means available to her ancient ancestors, would surely be playing a striving game.

¹⁸ Suits (2005) 59-60

But cheating is not the only way to break play. Huizinga distinguishes between the cheat, who subverts the game from within game-play, and the spoilsport, who withdraws from the game entirely.¹⁹ The cheat breaks the rules, but he does so while pretending to follow them. In doing so, the cheat maintains the illusion. He has to, in order to get what he's really after: the appearance of a win. But, says Huizinga:

...The spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion...²⁰

The two forms of play are clearly distinct activities, because they break in distinctive ways. Make-believe play is broken by the spoil-sport, who shatters the illusion of play; striving play is broken by cheat, who breaks the rules of play while maintaining the illusion.

The difference is easiest to see in instances of pure make-believe or pure striving. When children are playing House, and somebody pauses to ask what the rules are, the others might become frustrated, for the question has broken the illusion - it has shattered their absorption in the imagined world. When two people are playing chess, on the other hand, and one player pauses to ask for a point of clarification about, say, the rule of en passant pawn capture, this cannot break the illusion of play, for there is no illusion to break. One can cheat at chess, but one cannot be a spoilsport at chess. On the other hand, it is extremely hard to imagine what it would be to cheat at House. There are no rules that a child could break, no obstacles they could subvert.

It seems important that it is marginally possible to imagine a child cheating at Cops and Robbers. Suppose a child who had acted out her gruesome death suddenly jumps to her feet again; the other children might complain that she wasn't playing by the rules, that she was cheating. This indicates that, as most children play it, Cops and Robbers is played as a hybrid game - it is a game of mostly make-believe, but with a touch of striving. But it is very hard to imagine how a child could cheat at House, or Doctor, or at having a tea-party with their stuffed animals. This gives us our best response to the Suitsian reduction. Striving play involves voluntarily taking up obstacles, and so always opens the possibility for cheating - for subverting these obstacles to create the illusion of successfully overcoming them. The fact that we cannot imagine what it would be to cheat at playing House shows that House is quite lacking in obstacles and constraints, and thus that playing House doesn't involve any striving at all.

We can also see the distinction in games that partake of both sorts of play. When a group of players are playing a fantasy role playing game, like Dungeons and Dragons, it often seems that

¹⁹ Suits (2005) 60, mentions the term "spoilsport" briefly as somebody who does not recognize the importance of the game at all. This does not strike me as satisfying, for, under Suits' account, a passerby would count as a spoilsport. I take Huizinga's version to be significantly more fleshed out. Suits has no discussion of the illusion or imagination in game play, which may explain why his notion of the spoilsport is underdeveloped.

they care both about the pleasures of overcoming obstacles and the pleasure of imaginative absorption. We can see that these are distinct activities, because we can see that it is possible to break play in two entirely distinct ways. A player that quietly erases her character sheet and changes the amount of gold and experience points she's accumulated is a cheat, but hasn't shattered the imaginative illusion. On the other hand, a player that constantly calls for rules clarifications and accuses other players of not playing by the rules is not a cheat, but she is a spoilsport - she is shattering the shared illusion. In fact, there is a special term for such a person among game-players - they are a "rules lawyer", and they are the opposite of a cheat.

When I am engaged in make-believe - pretending, for instance, that tree-stumps are bears - I might ignore certain aspects of reality. I might, for instance, pretend that the small, brown stumps are actually large black bears. If my play-partner insists that I am wrong about this, because the stumps were really brown, then I would declare him a spoilsport - he has shattered the illusion, and I was perfectly happy to imagine black bears in the place of brown stumps. But when I am imagining all the possible reactions to a certain chess move, and gleefully imagining the inevitable checkmate, and an observer points out that I seem to be neglecting the position of my opponent's rook, I can't really complain about the shattering of my illusions. The illusions were not the point - they were merely a tool I used to further my striving, and, in this case, their shattering improves my striving. I cannot complain about losing these illusions, because illusions were not the point - winning was. I am beholden to reality in striving play in a way that I am not in make-believe.

A truly devoted Waltonite might respond in the following way: even in physical games, the make-believe element dominates the striving element. What we're doing when we're playing a striving game is using environmental elements as props in a subtle, but crucial way. Take, for instance, a game of tennis. Even when we are absorbed in the present moment and its physical details, there is still a subtle fictiveness, and a crucial use of the imagination, for we are infusing dull matter with meaning. The white lines on the tennis court are, outside of the game, simply paint strips, but in play we transform them into crucial boundaries. Outside of play, the ball is a trivial object, but during the game, the ball becomes all-important. They are not visual transformations, but normative transformations, establishing a fictive set of values and rules, which can be created and destroyed at will.²¹

Even if this Waltonian is reading, it does not undermine the distinction between make-believe and striving. First, a brute example. Imagine that I am an ex-special forces scout, and terribly bored by my new desk-bound life. I arrange to have myself dropped into a remote part of Alaska in the late fall, for the challenge of escaping the wilderness before winter kills me. Here, there is

²⁰ Huizinga (1950) 11

²¹ I owe this objection to Scott Clifton.

no use of the imagination at all, because the dangers are entirely non-fictive. I treat the wolves and the cold as dangerous because they really are. Once we see the category, other examples come easily to mind: river-running, mountaineering, free-solo rock climbing, and, in certain moods, picking a fight in a bar.

What the tennis example shows is that make-believe can be an excellent technique for producing good environments for striving. The make-believe technique has much to recommend it: cheap, portable, convenient, and more controllable. We can set aside the fictive dangers for the sake of safety or even a quick beer break, as the mood strikes us. But make-believe is not the only way to have an environment fit for striving. We can also travel to them, or even build them - as when we make hedge mazes, obstacle courses, and snow-boarding half-pipes. But it's also clear that make-believe is an excellent technique for producing environments of striving: it's cheaper than a helicopter flight to Alaska, for one.

The distinction between the two senses of play begins to make clear a continuum in striving play, and its reliance on the imagination. In some play, the constraints and obstacles are present as rules, and so require our mental cooperation to instantiate as constraints and obstacles. But in other sorts of games, the obstacles are actual. We can even see the same sort of activity emerge in differentially imaginative environments. A paper maze, a hedge-maze, and cave diving offer perhaps structurally similar navigational challenges, but they vary heavily in the degree of mental participation required to bring that environment into being. In a paper maze, the limits are wholly imagined; we erect them using the lines of the maze as a prop. On a hedge maze, the walls are more real, but we cooperate with them to fully realize their existence as boundaries. We pretend that we cannot possibly force our way through the hedge, or clamber over it. We transform the hedge walls, with an exercise of the imagination, from mild barriers to impenetrable boundaries. But for the recreational cave diver, the walls are real, genuinely impenetrable, and potentially deadly.

Jane Austen and the Fluidity of Play

I've been arguing for a conceptual distinction between striving and make-believe, and to make my point, I've focussed largely on extreme cases - pure striving and pure make-believe. But these are only the extreme cases; game-play is often a hybrid of striving and make-believe. Some games seem to encourage make-believe play with a healthy splash of striving - table-top role playing games, like Dungeons and Dragons, for instance. Some games seem to encourage striving play with a touch of make-believe: arcade games like Street Fighter 2, and many modern

German board-games, which often offer a thin thematic veneer over fairly abstract play. And many modern graphical video games like Grand Theft Auto seem perched right in the middle of the continuum, designed to offer just as many opportunities for make-believe as striving.

I have spoken so far of games “encouraging” a certain type of play. Let me be more explicit now about what I mean. I mean that the form of play is chosen by the player and not forced by the game. The discussion of play has been burdened recently by an unspoken presumption that the game was the primary entity, as opposed to the activity of play. The presumption has been that that the game²² sets the form of play. But I think, instead, that game-play is fluid. The same game can be played in different ways, and thus the form of game-play is up to the player.

World of Warcraft is an easy example. It’s common currency among the playing community, and among game designers, that different people play the games in different ways. Some play for the fantasy - they want to, for example, live out a make-believe life as a shopkeeper in a medieval town. For these players, it’s very important to stay in character, to speak only in the terms of the fantasy world, to preserve the illusion. Others play the game entirely as a striving game, seeking to work the system to as efficiently as possible to amass the greatest amount of experience points and wealth as they can. Such players typically have no problems shattering the illusion in service of their striving goals - they talk freely in-game about the rules of the game and exploiting gaps in the system. A majority of players seem to be interested in both, to varying degree.

The deep differences between these forms of play goes a long way towards explaining the frictions between the player types. One kind of player will exploit every aspect of a game-system to maximize their points - using bugs in the programming to transport in strange ways through the landscape, discovering unplanned loopholes that make it easy to gain experience point quickly, or “save spamming” - saving and re-loading the game constantly to find the optimum, most point-rich path. The disgust that other players have for this kind of behavior is rooted in a difference of play goals. The make-believe players cannot imagine taking advantage of a bug in the system, for this ruins the sense of reality in the imagined fantasy world. The striving player sees no reason not to.

These differences in attitude exist in many other games. There is, for instance, evidence that high-level players of graphical shooting games turn down the quality of the graphics to get better processing capacity, and so improve their tournament performance.²³ They are choosing to engage with the striving aspect of the game, and sacrificing some of its capacity to inspire make-believe. And although serious tournament chess-players usually disdain novelty chess sets, like a Lord of the Rings themed chess set, other players prefer them. Tournament chess-players complain that the non-standard chess pieces get in the way of their ingrained chess-vision, and

²² I mean here the fixed components - the rules, the board, the software

²³ Juul (2011)

get in the way of optimally competitive play. Presumably, those who purchase and use a Lord of the Rings chess set are doing so so that they might engage in the fantasy of being Gandalf or Sauron, directing the action, in a fight for the fate of the land. I myself have participated more than one game of chess with young children who, even with over a traditional abstract board, seemed far more interested in pretending to be king, and ordering mad dramatic dashes of his knights, than in strategic play.

I owe some of these insights to Ron Edwards, a game designer and the founder of The Forge, an on-line community dedicated to innovations in tabletop role-playing game design. Edwards claimed that he constantly saw friction within role-playing groups, and he attributed the friction to an unrealized difference in the purpose of play. Edwards suggested that there were three distinct reasons people played role-playing games; he called them Narrativism, Gamism, and Simulationism. Narrativism is the interest in stories, emotional engagement, and imaginative absorption. Gamism is the interest in fair competition between players, under a stable set of rules. Simulationism is an interest in working out alternate histories and alternate societies, with some eye towards realism. It was possible for multiple of these game styles to be engaged in simultaneously, but cross-purposes lead to friction. Pure Narrativist play would frustrate pure Gamists, for the Gamists might not explain why a player was sacrificing the play that would yield the most experience points, in acting out the impractical reaction of a drunken, raging barbarian. Similarly, pure Narrativists would be alienated by the Gamists refusal to enter into the illusion of play. Edwards' solution: groups should be explicit about what their goals were, and game-designers should be explicit about the kinds of play supported by their games.²⁴ Given the discussion above, we can now offer a clear account of this friction. The problem arises because, though the two forms of play are compatible, they are not perfectly matched. The rules lawyer example and the save-spamming example are cases where optimum striving play breaks make-believe play.

I take myself to have made two distinct, but interrelated points. First, game-play is multidimensional: there are at least two distinct ways in which we play games that are irreducible to each other. Second, game-play is fluid: the kind of play is dependent on a voluntary choice of the player, and not fixed by the game. Thus, a particular game can serve as a setting for different sorts of play in different instances. Certainly, games can be designed with the intention of supporting a certain play-style. The abstraction and strategic complexity of chess make it a happy home for pure striving players. The graphical richness and the environmental immersiveness of Grand Theft Auto seem designed to support make-believe play, while the point structure seems designed to support striving play. But we've already seen that one can engage in make-believe while playing chess; and there are plenty of players who play Grand Theft Auto focussed only on maximum points.

²⁴ Edwards (2003a), Edwards (2003b), Edwards (2003c)

The fluidity of play seems obvious once we've seen how different the two forms of play are. Fluidity has simply been obscured by reductionism. But we also have, now, the resources to explain why the style of play is set by the player, not the game. Walton's account of make-believe and Suits' definition of striving depend essentially on voluntary factors of play. Walton's conception of make-believe is of an action, where a player takes a prop and uses it to inspire an imagination; something's being make-believe depends on the free mental action of the make-believer. Make-believe involves a mental act. Suits' definition of striving is that the player voluntarily takes up obstacles for the sake of the experience of overcoming them. This definition makes striving not simply dependent on the action of the player, but on the intentions of the player - it must be for the sake of the obstacle-overcoming experience. Thus it is impossible to ascribe make-believe or striving to an inert game-object - a collection of pieces, a collection of rules, a program. A game may encourage a particular kind of play, but the actual form of play depends on the intentions of the player.

The fluidity of play is an extremely fruitful concept. Once we have seen it, new applications beckon, even outside the realm of what are usually called "games". Mysteries, for example, allow for an interesting hybrid of make-believe and striving.²⁵ When I read a Sherlock Holmes story, I am absorbed in the usual make-believe of reading fiction, but I am also engaged in a striving game: I am trying to hunt for the clues, and figure out the solution before the story reveals it to me explicitly. When I figure it out, when I get it right, I feel perhaps inordinately proud, for I have beaten a little obstacle. And I could have found out the answer simply by flipping to the last page, but I choose not to, for I prefer the challenge of trying to figure it out on my own. Of course, not all readers will try to out-guess Sherlock. Some simply sit back and let the story roll in - which simply goes to show, again, that play is fluid, and that the same object may inspire very different mixes of play in different people.

This might also help to explain certain rifts in reading cultures. We might think, for example, that readers of Jane Austen can be separated into two categories. Many readers are reading Jane Austen as an exercise in make-believe - they are imagining themselves into the world, imagining themselves into the psychological experience of Elizabeth Bennett - her fears, her hopes, her angers. But many literary theorists are reading Jane Austen with no internal act of make-believe at all - they are, instead, playing a striving game, of trying to see how well they can fit the objects and words of the book to one or another literary theory. We might also think that some texts better support one sort of play or another. Finnegans Wake, for example, is rarely read in the make-believe sense, but supports very satisfying striving-play, for it is full precisely of the sort of ambiguities, symbols, and grammatical entanglements that make the act of decoding so difficult and, hopefully, so satisfying. And, like the Gamists and the Narrativists, players devoted

²⁵ I owe this application to suggestions from Servaas van der Berg and Madeleine Thomas.

entirely to one sort of play are typically confused by, and perhaps occasionally contemptuous of, the other sort.²⁶

Participatory Ontologies

The fluidity of play illuminates something about the nature of games: that what they are depends deeply on how we choose to engage with them. This is, I think, a very productive insight. I'd like to demonstrate its usefulness by applying it to one particular discussion about the basic nature of games.

There is a contemporary debate over the ontological status of computer games. Grant Tavinor has argued that game-objects and game-environments are often fictional, in the Waltonian sense: they are props for the imagination.²⁷ We see the graphics of Grand Theft Auto and use them to imagine that we are actually in that world. Aarseth has argued, contra Tavinor, that game-worlds and game-objects are not fictional, but actual. In video games, they are virtual actual objects - that is, they are electronic depictions of objects, but they are actual objects. Says Aarseth, we don't use the electronic depictions as props to imagine something else; instead, the actual electronic depictions themselves are the direct object of our attentions.²⁸ The difference between the two accounts is perhaps easiest to see if we think of that old Nintendo game, Duck Hunt, where we are using light-sensor plastic guns to shoot at ducks on the screen. Under Tavinor's description, I am engaged in a make-believe act of generating a fiction. I am using an electronic toy gun, and the two-dimensional image of the duck as a starting point, to generate an imaginative fiction about being in a field, shooting a three-dimensional duck with a big old rusty shotgun, or something along those lines. Under Aarseth's description, I am engaged in an act of shooting an actual flat electronic image of a duck with an actual plastic light-sensor gun.²⁹

At the heart of the debate is this notion of the "actual". Aarseth argues that a dragon in a video game is crucially different from a dragon in fiction - we can interact with a video game dragon. We are not ontologically separated from the video game dragon, as we are from the dragons in a fantasy novel. Background decor, says Aarseth, might be fictional, but interactive game-objects

²⁶ I owe this marvellous application to Elijah Millgram, though once he suggested it, it seemed to me that I had perhaps always believed it, though inchoately.

²⁷ Tavinor () and Tavinor ()

²⁸ Aarseth ()

²⁹ It seems to me that this argument is in no way dependent on the particular nature of video games. The same duality applies to, for example, being in a shooting gallery at a carnival.

are actual.³⁰ Tavinor criticizes this claim by pointing out that there are plenty of interactive objects in make believe. Children playing house with all their stuffed animals involve no ontological separation with the props - the children move around the dolls, pass back and forth teacups, and the like.

I think Tavinor is right here, and that the interactivity of a game-object is a poor basis for dividing the actual from the fictional. But I think we can improve Aarseth's view with a better notion of "actual". Game objects, I propose, can be usefully thought of as actual when they are functioning as constraints. It is their recalcitrance, their refusal to bend instantly to our will, that makes them suitable obstacles, fit for striving-play. In make-believe, the imagined world is in my head; I have ultimate control over it. But for striving, the world has to be stubborn. The recalcitrance of a game-object is essential to their functioning as obstacles.

So, which is it, then? Are game objects fictional or actual? My answer is: it depends. To the extent that we are engaged with a game as make-believe, then the objects are fictional. To the extent that we are engaged with it as striving, then the objects are actual. And when a player plays in both ways, the object is both fictional and actual.

And, since play is fluid, then the actuality and fictiveness of the game objects depends on the player, and the player's choice about how to play the game. The ontology of the game objects depends on the way game is played, and thus on the choices of a particular player. Remember, we are not using some simple, physicalist notion of "actual". Under such a notion, there would be no debate at all, for there are physically objects underneath all games and all fictions. Of course there is a simple physical substrate for the fictional whale called Moby Dick; it is these words on the page. Of course there is a physical substrate for my imagined duck; it is these pixels on the screen. The debate between Tavinor and Aarseth is about the further use we put these simple physical substrates to. Under Tavinor's account, the player pushes past the pixels on the screen to an imagined gun; the "fictional object" under consideration is the gun in my imagination, not the one on the screen. What matters for actuality is whether the object functions for me as a constraint. In both cases, the ontological category of the object depends in how it is used.

Much of the tangle in this debate emanates, I think, from treating the game as the primary object of consideration, isolated from the choices of the player. But, I think we can now see that the game objects' full nature is activated in play, by the player, and that nature depends in part on how that player chooses to play. A World of Warcraft player who treats an in-game dragon as an

³⁰ Aarseth also argues that a dragon in a video game is already visually filled out, and requires no further use of the imagination. Tavinor effectively criticizes this claim, pointing out that in the Waltonian imagination is not merely visual. In a movie, for example, we use the provided visuals to imagine our way into the psychological life of the characters.

obstacle to get over is focussed on the in-game properties of that dragon - its health, its range of motion, how much damage it can inflict. For the striving player, that dragon is actual. A World of Warcraft player who treats an in-game dragon as a prop can use it to imagine herself into the world of Warcraft - to imagine herself there, holding a sword, overcoming fear, to best the dragon. For this player, the video dragon is a prop for an act of fictive imagination. And, of course, many players do both, and so interact both with actual and fictional objects.

Play is not fixed by the game alone. In fact, the ontological nature of the game follows from the activity of the player, and that activity is highly variable. From the fluidity of play, we have discovered the fluidity of game metaphysics. Our view of games has flipped. From thinking that play emerged from games, we now see that, in many interesting ways, the basic nature of games emerges from particular instances of play.

What we begin to see is that games are very ontologically peculiar artifacts. Questions about the metaphysical nature of game-objects, and game-worlds, cannot be answered by looking at the game itself, separated from particular instances of play. Games have their full existence only when they're being played, and people play differently. They are participatory entities.

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