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The Value of Metas in Social Deduction Games

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By Julia Williamson

Abstract

Metas are patterns that arise from playing a game multiple times. Metas may form if players have each played a given game previously or if the same group of individuals plays a particular game together multiple times. Social deduction games, a class of tabletop games in which players try to deceive each other, easily lend themselves to the construction of metas over time. This thesis focuses on the metas of social deduction games, using anecdotes from individuals in the UVM Games Club to analyze different elements of metas and assess the extent to which meta formation is beneficial or harmful to the gameplay experience. This project aims to contribute to the growing field of the Philosophy of Games, which has yet to fully discuss metas as a concept.

1. Introduction

I was in my sophomore year of high school, in a classroom at lunch where students were playing a popular social deduction game called *Avalon*. It was my first time playing, but the rest of the players were regulars in the group who knew the ins and outs of the game well. In *Avalon*, players take turns being the "leader," who is responsible for nominating a group of players to go on a quest. If the nominated group is approved by majority vote, the group goes on a quest. During a quest, every quest goer anonymously votes for the journey to either succeed or fail. Most of the players in the game are randomly assigned to the good team, the "Loyal Servants of Arthur," who want quests to succeed, while a few are assigned to the evil team, the "Minions of Mordred," who want quests to fail. There are additional special roles in the game for each team, so when I started to play, I was nervous that I would make the wrong move.

When it was my turn to be the leader and nominate a quest party, I selected a few people, carefully following all of *Avalon*'s rules. Though I followed the rules to the letter, a few players at the table questioned my choices. One said, "Why aren't you picking the players nearest to you clockwise?" I was puzzled, because this was my first time playing and I'd done nothing wrong per the game's structure. What happened, I later learned, was that the group had a pattern of selecting parties in this fashion. I later came to learn that gameplay patterns like these are referred to often by gamers as "metas."

I'm writing about metas and Philosophy of Games at large because I think the field is underdeveloped and could benefit from a deeper analysis of games and their value as a social tool.

Many people play games. Early into this project I'll narrow the scope of games under observation, focusing on those which involve lots of interaction between players. Games of all genres have merit and value, but my goal is to examine certain phenomena in social deduction games, a genre in which individuals primarily talk and interact with their fellow players. Metas, which I'll describe in detail in the forthcoming pages, is a term that refers to patterns that form as people repeatedly play games. My aim is to examine metas, by studying the benefits and drawbacks associated with repeated patterns in gameplay.

Though games are not an important element of everyone's lives, it is undeniable that they are important to many (and that they are often undervalued for their perceived triviality). Games are a means for people to connect with one another, and our ability to play and enjoy games with others is a luxury. My goal for this project is to analyze metas by pinpointing the ways in which metas are helpful and deleterious. With those findings, I will aim to suggest changes that players

can make to their behavior and changes that game developers can make to their design choices to improve everyone's overall gameplay experience. The goal, simplified, is to maximize the joy we get from games, by focusing on one phenomenon that has varied impacts on gameplay.

My primary goal is to use a selection of social deduction games and metas that occur within those games to make value judgments about how metas are good and bad for the gaming experience. Metas refer to patterns that arise when players are familiar with a game and play it more than once. When they occur, in other words, it means that players are being repetitive in the decisions they make in gameplay. In this thesis I will explore the ways in which metas impact the gameplay within social deduction games.

In this research I plan to define and analyze two categories of metas: neutral strategy and tradition-based. Neutral strategy metas occur when players follow a particular strategy primarily because they believe it to be the objectively best way to succeed in a game. If eight players never previously met but were all reasonably good at a game, neutral strategy metas may occur in their first game together. When discussing games in general (beyond social deduction games), neutral strategy metas are typically the type of metas that players colloquially discuss. Tradition-based metas, in contrast, occur because a group of people has played the game together before and their familiarity has led to patterns in the gameplay that are specific to their gaming group. If one player in a gaming group is known to be great at lying, for instance, a tradition-based meta could be that the other players in the gaming group will treat them as a strategic threat more than they would with other players at the table.

Social deduction games are an emerging genre in the tabletop games field. The draw to them is that they entertain a large group of players, they are easy to learn, and they are

player-friendly to the average person and those interested in tabletop games alike. Social deduction games in many ways operate on the ideas of game theory that have been previously studied at length; this makes them even more interesting to analyze and draw conclusions from. They involve the group of players making a few, simple decisions throughout the game, where some of the players are attempting to deceive the rest of the group.

Metas are not limited to social deduction games; however, in my personal experience I have found that the impacts that metas have on gameplay, both neutral strategy and tradition-based, have particularly salient effects in social deduction games as opposed to other game genres. Metas are specifically important in social deduction games because social deduction games have a more skeletal framework of gameplay as opposed to most other game genres. They require players at the table to banter with each other, to make seemingly arbitrary decisions that have huge impacts on the game, and to covertly deceive other players at the table. Unlike most other games, in social deduction games, conversation and socializing between players is what propels certain players to win or lose. So, when metas exist that impact how players socialize, the impact those metas will have on a social deduction game are much more apparent and important than metas in *Monopoly*, for instance.

My view used to be that in most cases metas have a negative impact on the gameplay experience, though there are certainly some benefits associated with them as well. To demonstrate why metas are generally bad, I wanted to highlight how they reduce a player's agency, connecting the concept of agency to C. Thi Nguyen's work (Nguyen 2020). After interviewing others and upon further reflection, I think it's important to enumerate the benefits of metas as well. By showing both the ways in which metas are good and the ways in which they are bad, I will suggest changes that groups and individuals make to reduce the harm metas cause.

During this evaluation, I will look at Nguyen's focus on different archetypes of players. By analyzing the different player archetypes that Nguyen defines, I will suggest ways that players in social deduction games should consider focusing on their archetype to ensure everyone enjoys gameplay (Nguyen 42). My thesis structure will elaborate on the core idea of Nguyen's argument—games are an art form of agency—and I will use examples to show how metas impact gameplay in the ways they increase and decrease player agency (Nguyen 2020).

Organization of Project

First, I will examine the definition of a game, and whether it is even possible to define the concept of a game. Though this project does not examine nor make claims about the definition of a game, it builds upon Nguyen's work which operates with the Suitsian definition of games. For this reason, it is relevant to understand the history of the debate and the Suitsian definition of a game.

After understanding what a game is and whether it might be definable, I will touch on how the concept of metas are considered in the literature—this is to say, the concept is discussed in the literature, but to a minimal extent and in a different context than is used in the scope of this project.

For the final portion of the Background section, I'll explain a class of games called "choice games," in which players are able to exercise agency in a way that will impact the game's outcome. Most games that people are familiar with, aside from a select few children's games, are choice games. I'll explain how regardless of one's stance on the definability of games, any rational person would accept that games in the choice games category are games.

This project only addresses choice games, so one can assume that every game addressed in the project is undeniably a game, and it is therefore not necessary to enter the debate.

Continuing from understanding choice games, the Games Under Observation section narrows the scope of games I will examine. Specifically, I will focus on the class of games called "social deduction games," which involves players attempting to discern each other's motivations when players are assigned different goals and are pitted against one another. To finish the section, I will review the various classifications of games and highlight what falls under the social deduction games category.

Nguyen describes in his work three different classes of games that have different prescriptions for how players ought to interact with the games themselves; the non-exhaustive list he observes are party games, heavy strategy games, and community evolution games (Nguyen 133). While social deduction games as a genre share similarities with each of these categories, I will show key differences that demonstrate how they have a different prescription entirely. Specifically, I'll explain how players in this genre are encouraged to both not take the game too seriously and to become more skilled and knowledgeable about the game over time.

Then, I'll briefly touch upon the research methods used beyond examining the literature. The research involved interviewing fellow members of UVM Games Club[1] who each provided their own definition of the concept of metas, along with instances in which metas impacted gameplay in positive and negative ways. The primary benefit of interviewing fellow students beyond the data they provided was that they helped flesh out the concept of metas for readers who aren't familiar.

[1] Per Institutional Research Board (IRB) regulations, UVM Games Club members who were interviewed were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, though none of the content in the interviews was sensitive. See Appendix A for more details on the purpose of interviews and research methodology.

Next, the Metas section addresses what metas are, how they appear in social deduction games, and how they are used colloquially. Metas as a term is not strictly defined by those who play games, so I will show the different definitions used and my attempt to officially define two types of metas: neutral strategy metas and tradition-based metas. My claim is that these two types of metas impact games and are relevant for this discussion, but it is possible for more types to exist.

After defining metas I'll address the benefits and drawbacks that they provide. In the Benefits of Metas section, I'll explain how: they can help players feel more comfortable with a game which makes it easier to try new strategies, they can provide humor to a social experience, they can add layers of strategy to a game, and how they can help to foster social connections between players of games. In the Drawbacks of Metas section, I'll explain how: certain metas are inescapable and necessarily make games less interesting, how they limit the agency players have and therefore make them less enjoyable, and how they have the potential to exclude players who are especially skilled and those who are newcomers to a particular game.

Given the many advantages and disadvantages that metas provide to the gameplay experience, the penultimate section will discuss how we can use our knowledge of metas to improve gameplay experiences overall. My claim is that there are two major branches of obligations that arise from the downsides of metas, where game developers have an obligation to mitigate the drawbacks of neutral strategy metas, and where game players have an obligation to mitigate the drawbacks of tradition-based metas. I will also suggest a special obligation that a certain type of player has during social deduction games, working with Nguyen's outlined types of player archetypes (Nguyen 42).

In the concluding section, I'll review what metas are and how the narrowed scope of this project could be extrapolated onto games at large. Afterward, I'll highlight the significance of metas, why they are relevant to games, and the significance of games themselves as a social tool that unites many people.

2. Background

Definition of a Game

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to dwell on the definition of a game, or even to claim whether it is possible for a definition to exist. My project doesn't focus on the definition or definability of a game, because all the games I discuss are indisputably games. But much of this project ties into C. Thi Nguyen's ideas on games in his work *Games: Agency as Art*, where he chooses to operate with the Suitsian definition of games. Nguyen also doesn't present a definition of games, but he opens his discussion on the nature of games by limiting his scope of games he considers within his book to Suitsian games (Nguyen 2020). For this reason, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of this discourse to understand what a Suitsian game is, along with what other philosophers think of defining games. After covering the definition of a game, I will introduce Nguyen's main ideas and I will show how they relate to this project.

The Philosophy of Games is an emerging field and most of the work in recent years has focused on the analysis of video games. Before this emergence of discourse on video games, though, two names dominated the field: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bernard Suits, two authors with prominent works from the 20th century. At first blush, it seems that they have opposing views; I will show the ways in which they differ and highlight the nuance in their beliefs.

Wittgenstein was a Philosopher of Language, whose work in *Philosophical Investigations* was tangential to the Philosophy of Games yet helped to foster the debate of what it is to be a

game. He thinks that, as a concept, games are tricky because there is no one essential property unique to games that unites all games (Wittgenstein 1997). By this, he thinks it is impossible for one to find a commonality that is true of all games but makes the category of games distinct (Wittgenstein 1997). As an example, one might claim that games are competitive, and that there are "winners" and "losers." An easy counterexample to this is that some games are cooperative in nature, where all the players either win or lose together. And, some games might allow ties, so exclusive winning and losing could be ruled out completely. As a proposed essential property, this would clearly be too narrow as it excludes some games. Another example of a failed proposal would be that games are activities that take time. While this is a property that is true of all games, it is far too broad, and there are plenty of non-game activities that fit this description. Weddings and funerals alike are activities that take time, but there would be something seriously wrong if one were to consider either occasion a game.

Suits was a Philosopher of Games, whose work *Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* sought to define games. Suits devised his definition of a game, produced a condensed definition as well, and spent the entirety of this work defending his definition. Suits' extended definition of games claims that games are activities in which one attempts to "bring about a state of affairs" relying solely upon rules-prescribed means that cause one to achieve the goal inefficiently, where players of the game consent to the rules in order to consider themselves players of the game (Suits 2005).

To elucidate the definition, it seems reasonable to consider an example: the game of *soccer*. In *soccer*, the primary goal players are tasked with is getting the ball into the goal. This is the "state of affairs" that Suits describes, which is also known as the *prelusory goal* (Suits 2005). A distinct feature of prelusory goals, to Suits, is that they must be accomplishable apart from the

game itself. In this case, one could accomplish the prelusory goal by picking up the soccer ball with one's hands and setting it gently within the goal (Suits 2005). In *soccer*, the rules-prescribed means that lead to inefficiency are that one mustn't use one's hands to transport the ball. If this were allowed, it seems that throwing the ball would likely be easier, faster, and more efficient than kicking the ball in some circumstances. By limiting the capabilities of the players, the rules define how the ball may be moved and the means prescribed are certainly inefficient. Suits refers to these as *lusory means*, the options available to players to win, which are dictated by the *constitutive rules*, the rules that make accomplishing the prelusory goal inefficient (Suits 2005). Finally, in order to play the game players must agree to the rules in the first place, which Suits refers to as the *lusory attitude* (Suits 2005). This agreement on behalf of the player is what enables them to play the game. Now that we've gone in-depth on Suits' definition, I'll supply his simplified definition: in games, players voluntarily accept obstacles to achieve goals through inefficient means (Suits 2005). In *darts*, I agree to throw darts at the wall of a bar, rather than walking up to the board and daintily placing my dart on bullseye.

Here is the important distinction between Wittgenstein and Suits—it seems natural to consider their philosophical positions regarding the definition of a game to be antithetical to each other. While this may seem to be the case, Ralph H. Johnson and Dennis Hudecki's paper "A critique of Suits's (alleged) counterexample to Wittgenstein's position on the definability of 'game'" highlights an important distinction: Wittgenstein is anti-essentialist toward games, whereas Suits believes games can be defined (Johnson & Hudecki 2019). The key element here is that some categories of items have essential properties, which are common properties to all elements within a category. There are some cases in which definitions and essential properties may coincide, where alcoholic drinks necessarily all have alcohol, but Wittgenstein only argues

that games lack essential properties and Suits argues that games are definable (Johnson & Hudecki 2019). Though it seems clear that the two would disagree on each other's opinions regarding games, it is relevant to consider that their views are not perfectly oppositional.

Most of the research relevant to this project is from C. Thi Nguyen's *Games: Agency As Art*. One of the most important works in the field in the 21st century, the core argument of his book is that games are an art form wherein players are given agency (Nguyen 2020). In this book, Nguyen studies games, namely how games involve agency, among many other important issues. At the outset of the book, he addresses that he will focus on games that belong to the Suitsian definition of games, while choosing not to engage with the debate on whether games can be defined (Nguyen 2020). My research relies heavily on assumptions he makes, which is why it seems prudent to address this debate around the definition of games. While Nguyen acknowledges Suits's definition is debated and flawed, Suitsian games still function as a lens through which to observe games. In *Games: Agency as Art*, Nguyen elects to exclusively study Suitsian Games (Nguyen 2020).

Similar to Nguyen, I think it seems wise to limit the scope of games under observation for this project. There are a few different encompassing categories that I will observe: every game that I'm going to address happens to be a Suitsian game, but more specifically I will narrow that momentarily to "choice games" and later to "social deduction games." Fortunately, all the games that are relevant to this project will undoubtedly all be considered games by the average, reasonable person.

How Metas are Used in the Literature

When metas are discussed in the literature, they typically refer to the optimal strategies that one could use in gameplay (Crane, et al. 2021). Since metagaming is complex and can be used in multiple ways, one group of researchers outlined different types of gaming—coining the vocabulary of "orthogame" and "paragame" to suggest that adding specificity could help future discussions of the concept (Carter et al. 11).

This paper will broaden the definition of metas, discussing the main meta type that I'll refer to as neutral strategy metas, but expanding the definition to include other patterns of gameplay, regardless of whether they involve the optimal strategy. Metas have been discussed in some research papers in non-Philosophy academic disciplines, though this thesis will use metas in a different terminological sense than past research. Metas take on a new meaning in the context of this thesis because past research has not focused on arguing whether metas are good or bad, and when metas are discussed, they are seldom discussed in the specific context of tabletop games.

Choice Games

Central to Nguyen's thesis is the fact that games are an art form in which the actions of players are relevant, as the players have agency in the immersive experience of games (Nguyen 2020). Not all games that we know and play have agency, but it seems that most games that we care about do. While Nguyen operates on a Suitsian definition of games, I wish to limit the games under observation to "choice games." Choice games are a category I'm using as shorthand for "games in which players have some form of agency that they are able to express at some point in the game process." I use this term so that I can omit the lengthy descriptor when I need to refer to the category as a whole. It might seem natural to think that all games are choice

games, but there are plenty of examples that are certainly not. Some games involve no choices, such as *Candyland* or *Chutes and Ladders*, in which the players' outcomes are decided entirely by fate. Some games are largely one-sided, such as *Simon Says*, where *Simon* gets to make all the choices of what the players must do. All the other players in this instance do have a choice: either follow Simon or quit, which I don't consider a real choice within the game, seeing as choosing to end the game feels different from making a decision during the game (e.g., deciding whether to purchase Park Place in *Monopoly*). In sum, for the sake of this project I only care about choice games, a category that I will further limit to social deduction games, a genre of tabletop game where all its members are strictly considered choice games.

3. Games Under Observation

I think it's important to discern which games are up for discussion. In the previous section I introduced the category of choice games, which I'll primarily focus on. But I want to examine social deduction games, a more specific category that nests within choice games, and then I will connect the categories with a diagram.

Social Deduction Games

Social deduction games is a genre of games, most of which are considered tabletop games. Some social deduction games can be video games but those are a small minority compared to the volume of tabletop games that are known and played within the genre. These games often range anywhere from five minutes to an hour in playtime. While their name is somewhat self-explanatory, social deduction games involve players attempting to learn information about each other's goals or objectives within the game they're playing. Typical

social deduction games involve the random assignment of roles at the outset of the game—these roles dictate the players' win conditions. Often players are randomly sorted onto a 'good' team and an 'evil' team, and in many cases there may be one or more 'neutral' team players with other win conditions. On these teams, the 'good' players traditionally don't have any knowledge of the identities of other players at the table, while the 'evil' players might have decent or perfect information of every player's role. In these games, good players often attempt to deduce which of their opponents are on the evil side, evil players attempt to deceive the good players, and neutral players will have an independent objective. I'm now going to introduce a series of examples of social deduction games, which I'll reference in later sections:

1. *Avalon*

[2]

The Resistance: Avalon (casually referred to as "*Avalon*") is an Arthurian-legend-themed revamp of the game *The Resistance* (both games contain identical gameplay save for the thematics), where some players are "Loyal Servants of Arthur," the good team, and others are "Minions of Mordred," the evil team. For the most part the Loyal Servants have no clue who's good/evil, while the Minions know exactly who their comrades are. The game takes place over

[2] (Jones)

the course of a few "quests," wherein players take turns clockwise around the table serving as the "Leader," who's tasked with selecting a group of players to go on the quest. The quests themselves don't contain any plot or story like one might expect. Instead, all players will vote on a group that the leader proposes, and if the majority consents to that configuration of players questing, then each quest goer receives two cards, one saying "Success" and the other saying "Fail." Players on the quest anonymously place one of those two cards face down in the center to cast their vote for the quest's outcome. If everyone puts forth a "Success" card, then the quest passes, and if it isn't unanimous, it's considered a failure. The Loyal Servants of Arthur must succeed 3/5 quests to win, while the Minions of Mordred must fail 3/5 quests to win. There are additional roles and win/loss conditions I'm omitting, but this is what's needed to get a sense of the game. The game takes 20-60 minutes and it's medium-complexity.

2. *Secret Hitler*

[3]

[3] (*Game on Games*)

Secret Hitler[4] is arguably one of the most prominent social deduction games to exist, in part because of its controversy. The game is set in pre-Holocaust Germany, where most players are on the "Liberal" good team, a handful are on the "Fascist" evil team, and one of the Fascists is the role of Hitler. Similar to Avalon, players take turns clockwise nominating governments, where the nominating player is the "President" and they propose a "Chancellor" to accompany them. If the majority of players consents to that grouping, the President draws 3 cards, discards 1 privately and passes the 2 remaining to the Chancellor, who privately discards one and plays the other faceup to 'enact a policy.' All the cards represent policies, where the deck is skewed with only 6 "Liberal" and 11 "Fascist" policy cards. Liberals win if 5 Liberal policies are enacted, and Fascists win if they enact 6 Fascist policies. Liberals may also win if they kill Hitler, and Fascists may also win if they get Hitler into power as Chancellor midway through the game (each of these are cases that might happen in games, but passing policies is the traditional way to win). The game typically takes 30-60 minutes and it's medium-complexity.

3. *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*

[4] This game is known for its sensitive subject matter and themes. While I'm unsure if any of the designers for the game are Jewish, I'm personally not a fan of individuals profiting from Holocaust theming.

[5]

A classic party game is *Mafia*, a game lasting multiple rounds where a few evil "Mafia" team players kill innocent players at each round's outset, and the surviving innocent players are trying to deduce their identities. One of the issues this game runs into is that it easily excludes players who are killed in early rounds, as the game can last a long time which leaves lots of players waiting. *One Night Ultimate Werewolf* provides an adept solution to this issue: it's the classic game of *Mafia*, but with plenty of fun roles to increase player interactivity. There's only one night phase, in which no players die, but instead most players take interesting actions, followed by a day phase in which players discuss what happened during the night and end the game by voting to kill one player. The few evil players are "Werewolves" with the objective of evading capture, most of the other players are villagers who must catch a Werewolf at the end of the day, and there's an occasional third team of the "Tanner," who only wins if they ensure they're the one who's killed at the end of the day phase. The game takes 10-20 minutes and it can be light-complexity, but it's often a medium-complexity game when many roles are involved.

[5] (Jones)

4. *Tofu Kingdom*

[6]

The final game I'll introduce in this series of examples, *Tofu Kingdom*, is a social deduction game unlike the previous 3 examples in a distinct way: in this game all but one player has information on who's who, and one player attempts to discern the identities of the other players. One player plays as Prince Mochi, a member of the game's good team, who tries to identify the player with the Princess Tofu role by asking players questions to deduce the Princess's identity in a Holmesian fashion. The good team members for this game must always tell the truth, the evil team must always lie, and the neutral team (whose goal is to sow chaos) may tell the truth or lie depending on whatever they prefer. The prince has 3 questions he may ask: "Who are you?", "Who is this player?", and "Where is the Princess?" After asking each player one of those questions, he may ask a bonus question to the player of his choice and then he must flip over the role card of the player he believes is the Princess. The game is light-complexity and takes 5 minutes to play a single round.

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[6] (Blue Orange Games)

I'm writing this with the assumption that the reader may never have heard of nor played a social deduction game before, which is why providing some examples is necessary. I've played more social deduction games beyond these four, but I wanted to give each a detailed introduction because some examples later in the paper will reference these games in passing.

What's important to understand from these four examples are some of the key tenets of social deduction games. First, it seems misleading others is a necessary game mechanic within the genre. In many social deduction games, the evil team is incentivized to lie about actions they've taken to fly under the radar and achieve their objectives. There might exist some social deduction game that doesn't involve lying, but it's hard to envision one. Another aspect of the genre is that players are deciphering information, as the "deduction" in its namesake would suggest. In *Avalon* and *Secret Hitler*, the good players attempt to discern whether they can trust configurations of players to go on successful quests or pass liberal policies, respectively. In *One Night*, players try to learn who's lying about the actions they took at night, since it's often the case that multiple players claim to be the same certain role, or they might have conflicting stories and evidence. In *Tofu Kingdom*, the Prince tries to learn who the princess is after interviewing a cast of characters where different team affiliations force players to answer questions truthfully or dishonestly.

What might be the most relevant element of social deduction games for the sake of this project, though, is that social deduction games are often skeletal in nature. In *Avalon* and *Secret Hitler*, all the decisions players make are simply who should be in groups that decide the outcome of the game. *One Night* has a bit more meat on its bones with a wide and complex array of characters, but all of them take simple actions and players each only make a single, simple move in the Night Phase before conversing in the Day Phase. In *Tofu Kingdom*, the Prince surely

has power over which questions to ask folks and when to ask them, but many of the players are simply boxed into an answer. Truth tellers must tell the truth, liars must lie but have agency over the contents of their lie, and neutral players have the most agency of all three groups, but their power is still limited. Each of these games relies on a simple ruleset that relies heavily on socializing between players and interactivity to fuel the "fun" of the game.

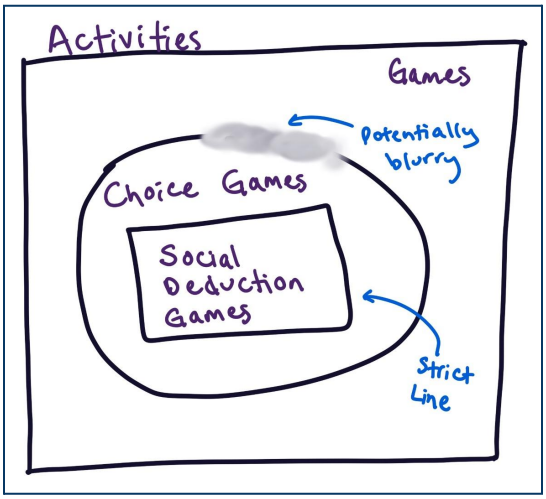
Interactivity in a game is often highly dependent on genre, where social deduction games have more interactivity than many other genres. In contrast, consider *Agricola*, a 2-3 hour worker placement game in which players compete to have the most successful farm. Though players compete, they don't interact much with their opponents because the decisions they're making are insular and focus on their own game. In other words, they have too much "stuff" going on to be bothered to pay attention and try to block other players—a more experienced player may be capable of this feat, but this is likely not how most players would experience the game. On the other hand, in most social deduction games nothing that each player is doing is particularly complicated. No one has to take five minutes to think through a strategic choice, to optimize how much of a resource they're going to be able to produce three rounds down the line, or to spend ten minutes learning more about the game's inner workings and lore to be able to properly play. While a new player to social deduction games would likely be bad at them, nonetheless, the learning curve is beaten after only a few playthroughs. And settings for social deduction games are often lively and fun, leading to players having shorter periods between plays of a game. (For years I grew accustomed to *Avalon* once or multiple times a week, but I wouldn't ever agree to *Agricola* so often.)

The skeletal nature of social deduction games makes them perfect as a genre to analyze in this paper for forthcoming reasons. Soon I'll explain the phenomenon of metas and I'll tie them

to social deduction games; social deduction games are relevant because they rely so much upon player interactivity and simple decisions, unlike many other genres. Before that point, however, I want to briefly review all the different classifications for games that I've mentioned so far.

Connecting all the classifications for Games Under Observation

First, here is an Euler diagram representing all the relevant classes of games (not to scale):



Outside the square box is everything that is considered a non-game activity. Within the box are all the activities that are considered games (and as discussed previously I'm not going to try to define what exactly falls into the "games" category).

Everything inside of the game box's biggest circle represents a choice game, or games where players are making some type of decision that has an impact on the game's outcome. Unlike the box dividing non-game activities and games, I think that the circle encompassing choice games could have a blurred line, where sometimes a game might be a choice game and other times it might not. *Dance Dance Revolution*, as Nguyen suggests, isn't a game where

players are making any distinct choices, so much of the time it seems it wouldn't fall in the choice games category (Nguyen 2020). That said, sometimes players might decide whether to attempt certain moves to gain lots of points, or to play it safe and actively lose high-point opportunities to make sure they can earn easy points down the line, so one could argue that it might belong in the choice games category for a certain kind of player. What's important to note is that all the games that I care about are exclusively choice games.

The small rectangle within the circle represents the genre of social deduction games. All social deduction games are necessarily choice games, and the category is rigid because the genre is distinct from games that fall outside of it. While there are games that exist that share many mechanics with games in the social deduction genre, that doesn't inherently make them belong. *Poker*, for instance, involves bluffing, a mechanic that's used in many social deduction games. While that is true, and players are trying to read each other's facial expressions and make decisions based off of social assessments, it seems unnatural to classify *Poker* as social deduction because it lacks many of the genre's other main traits. For example, every player in *Texas Hold 'Em* attempts to configure the highest-value hand possible, where everyone understands each other's basic motive. In most social deduction, players have motives that are unclear to each other, where their success as a player often relies on discerning their opponents' motivations and objectives. A different case would be how, similar to *Poker*, *Secret Hitler* involves card-counting, where players often try to estimate the number of Liberal Policy cards remaining in the draw pile. Card-counting is a hugely important mechanic in *Poker*, but this similarity isn't enough to set both games in the same genre.

Even if *Poker* could be construed/argued for as a social deduction game, that feat wouldn't have much of a purpose. The reason why game players use genres in the first place is to

be able to communicate a game's basic ideas efficiently. If I were to go to a game store and ask for social deduction game recommendations, and someone suggested I play *Poker*, I would ask for another recommendation, just like an avid nonfiction reader wouldn't want to hear a hyper-realistic fiction book recommendation when asking for nonfiction recommendations. The upshot of this diagram is that I want to make clear the relations between categories of games before discussing metas.

4. Nguyen's Prescriptions of Gameplay

In *Games: Agency as Art*, Nguyen describes aesthetic striving games, a class that he coins in reference to games that are played for their own sake and the aesthetic experiences that engaging in gameplay provides (Nguyen 13). Within this designation, Nguyen highlights three genres of games: party games, heavy strategy games, and community evolution games (Nguyen 133). For each of these genres, he posits that each involves a different prescription for how a player ought to interact with the game and experience gameplay. He claims that this list of three is non-exhaustive, which I will support by showing what each of the prescriptions are for these genres to prove that the genre of social deduction games has its own prescription distinct from each of these categories (Nguyen 133).

The first of the three categories Nguyen discusses is party games. Party games are designed for groups of players to engage with the game at a surface-level. As he describes it, "Party gaming, I propose, is a practice in which the long-term development of skill is unimportant or actively discouraged" (Nguyen 133). With the game *Cards Against Humanity* which Nguyen uses as an example, players are tasked with picking a card from their hand that loosely matches a prompt (Nguyen 133). (Think grossly inappropriate *Mad Libs*.) *Cards Against*

Humanity's design is intended for little to no skill needed in gameplay. The success of players is limited to the luck of their card providing the statement that the round's judge finds most humorous. So, if one were to study all the cards beforehand and brainstorm some card combinations, they might increase their chances of winning, but they would completely miss the point (Nguyen 134).

Though social deduction games share similarities with the party games category, they do not actually fall under the party games category because their prescription is distinct. Instead of not being encouraged to become better at the game, social deduction games often are more fun when players are skilled at them. Social deduction games, though skeletal in nature, involve enough decision-making and strategy that players enjoy trying out new moves and pushing themselves to get better.

But regarding their similarities, party games as a class are meant to be played in lively settings, usually with a lot of players, which is a trait of social deduction games as well. It wouldn't be surprising if social deduction games were sometimes lumped into the party games category for this reason, because people can often choose to play social deduction games in contexts where no one's trying hard to play the game optimally. This is a good moment to highlight that the context of UVM Games Club are sober game nights, where the focal point is the games themselves. In many other situations, social groups play games in less strategy-focused contexts; in cases where the group's focus might be on drinking and casually playing games, or the group is composed of less competitive players, these situations would result in less competitive gameplay. Given that game designers for social deduction games likely envision their games being played and enjoyed in both contexts, it's reasonable to assume that

even in less competitive settings, players would still be following the prescriptions of social deduction games so long as their intent is still to try and win the game.

The next category that Nguyen focuses on are heavy strategy games. As Nguyen describes them, "In heavy strategy games, core features of the work *only become visible and coherent after repeat playings, and after the acquisition of significant skill*" (Nguyen 136-137). These games generally take at least 90 minutes to play, and involve many rules, components, and different strategies that players may employ to attain victory. These games are seldom played by casual players, and almost always are enjoyed only by folks who consider tabletop gaming a personal hobby.

Heavy strategy games also share many similarities with social deduction games. Both classes emphasize the value of skill in their gameplay. It's rare for players to win social deduction games out of sheer luck, and nearly impossible for heavy strategy games to be won with luck.

But there are two key differences between the game genres: 1) the type of skill needed for each is different, and 2) the degree to which skill is needed differs. First, the manners in which players engage with strategy differ, where the type of skill needed to excel in each genre is of a different kind. In heavy strategy games, each game involves complex mechanics and rules that demand players to become acquainted with the details to achieve success. In social deduction games, in contrast, players are required to understand the details of how the game works and how the different roles players are dealt impact the gameplay, but the games are far more skeletal and lack the details that heavy strategy games have. For this reason, much of being a good player in social deduction games is based on how good players are at lying and deceiving others at the table.

Another way of considering this distinction is that the skill involved in winning the heavy strategy games *Twilight Imperium: Fourth Edition* and *Agricola* will vary greatly, whereas the skill involved in winning the social deduction games *Secret Hitler* and *The Resistance: Avalon* are far more similar. Players who are good at heavy strategy games may be good at games in general but must learn the intricacies of each game to become proficient. With social deduction games, the skill set is more transferable and therefore players who are good at one only need to put in minimal effort to excel at others. Further, players of non-social deduction games that share similarities to social deduction games, such as *Poker* players, could easily become skilled players of social deduction games because they understand bluffing, probabilities, and reading other people.

Second, heavy strategy games, as their name would suggest, require a high degree of skill. Social deduction games also require skill, but there is more luck in the gameplay because there are fewer decisions that players have control over relative to heavy strategy games. Heavy strategy games necessitate practice to become good, but social deduction games are more accessible to the average person and have less of a barrier to entry.

The third and final category that Nguyen discusses are community evolution games. These games, he claims, "prescribe *participation in the larger community of players* for an adequate encounter with the work" (Nguyen 140). One of the most famous examples of these games is *Magic: The Gathering*, in which players continuously purchase cards to construct decks that will allow them to win in battle against other players. The prescription of community evolution games is for players to stay current with the larger group of players, products, and practices. In the case of *Magic*, players must purchase new cards over time as prior sets of cards are phased out and new ones are introduced.

In my experience, gaming communities dedicated to community evolution games are often insular, because there's a high learning curve to get into games like *Magic* and there's also a high paywall. I could, for instance, play with the *Magic* deck I received for Christmas in 2012 in a casual setting among friends, but most of those cards wouldn't be playable in a competitive setting.

One similarity shared by community evolution games and social deduction games is that some social deduction games have updates and expansions that add variety, in a similar manner to community evolution games coming out with new card decks and editions. With the case of *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*, the game is still playable with its original edition, but expansion packs have since come out that incorporate new role cards and game mechanics that players can mix and match to add variety. The reason why social deduction games aren't community evolution games is because, even in cases like *One Night*'s, it's not expected of players to buy and play with the more recent expansions, though fans of the game often succumb to the temptation of new roles and variety for a game they enjoy.

It seems that social deduction game's prescription is something along these lines: to sufficiently engage with a social deduction game, players are to take seriously the objective of their randomly-assigned team affiliation (whether as a game's good, evil, or neutral player), and become acquainted with the game's structure to the extent that they can put forth a good-faith effort to deceive their opponents (if evil), uncover the evil players (if good), or complete a separate objective (if neutral). Much of this prescription is broad and alike both Suits's conception of lusory attitude and Nguyen's conception of striving players, but what makes the social deduction game prescription distinct is that players are expected to try to win for their

team, where their win condition is variable and based on their randomized team affiliation (Suits 35; Nguyen 9).

5. Research Methodology

Since my goal is to assess the extent to which metas are good and bad for the gameplay experience, I will provide many examples in future sections that detail the benefits and drawbacks of metas in games. Many of the examples will come from metas I've personally experienced, and they should be especially helpful to a reader for whom this is their first time learning about metas as a concept. But, while I have anecdotes to share, it would be helpful to incorporate experiences that others provide, specifically on metas and social deduction games as a genre.

To do so, I've interviewed fellow members of the UVM Games Club[7], and inserted data from those interviews in three different ways:

1. I asked each interviewee how they would personally define metas as a concept and included their definitions in the *Colloquial use of metas* section.
2. I include their anecdotes in the *Benefits of metas* section, which details the ways in which metas as a phenomenon can benefit the gameplay experience.
3. I include their anecdotes in the *Drawbacks of metas section*, which details the ways in which metas as a phenomenon can harm the gameplay experience.

6. Metas

What are Metas?

[7] See Appendix A for more details on the purpose of interviews and research methodology.

Metas refer to patterns that form in gameplay as players play a game multiple times. The term has been used in different ways and contexts, where players casually consider a meta to be something akin to "the best current strategy based on how players are currently experiencing the game." For instance, if a family played *Monopoly* repeatedly and the mom always won, the meta would eventually become "try to target mom's gameplay to prevent her from winning," because then everyone else would likely have a greater chance of victory.

There are plenty of examples of metas and how the term is used in versatile ways. In *Super Smash Bros*, there are different characters that are known to be better or worse than others, so the meta might be to select a particular character to play as. In *Overwatch*, different players have stats that make them better or worse than others, so the meta one week might be to pick Mercy and another week it might be to play Lucio.

Metas can also exist in single-player games. In *Sudoku*, the meta for one player could be a specific way that they always try to solve the puzzle (e.g., they could always look within the boxes to see if there are any easy places where numbers can fit in).

Metas are tricky, though, because this definition doesn't seem to work perfectly. Metas, in the case with the mom skilled at *Monopoly*, are often oversimplified and conflated with a game's dominant strategy, which is just the best way to win a game most of the time. In the case of the *Monopoly* family, the meta was specific to one player and their ability at the game, but dominant strategies are generally detached from the players themselves and focus on the objectively best ways to win a game, regardless of the situation. When a game has a dominant strategy that is too strong, it ruins the game. For example, *Connect 4* is a "broken game" because if the player who goes first knows what they're doing, they can always win. Dominant strategies are often a game

developer's worst nightmare because they want players to figure out fun and creative ways to win, and being pigeon-holed into a single strategy will likely make the game worse.

Since metas and dominant strategies are such broad categories, it will be more useful to break metas down into smaller subcategories to analyze them properly. First, I will briefly describe the findings from the paper "Metagames, Paragames, and Orthogames: A New Vocabulary," which defines and reviews the concept of metagaming and suggests a few new terms that will further the discussion on metagaming. Then, I will define and explain two different categories of metas in this thesis, neutral strategy metas and tradition-based metas. To clarify, my claim is not that these two subcategories of metas are an exhaustive list, but they're all I'll need for this project. After defining neutral strategy and tradition-based metas, I will explain their prevalence in social deduction games, connecting them to some of Nguyen's ideas of prescriptions of gameplay. Then, I'll differentiate the terms "meta" and "strategy," and I'll conclude the chapter with some examples of colloquial usage of metas, as the term is defined and described by members of the UVM Games Club.

Background on the concept of metagaming

"Metagames, Paragames, and Orthogames: A New Vocabulary," by Marcus Carter, Martin Gibbs, and Mitchell Harrop, defines and describes the concept of metagaming, and puts forth two new terms, orthogames and paragames, to be used in discussions on digital gaming (Carter et al. 11). Their work, similar to my aim in this project, is to suggest terms that will streamline discussions on gaming, as metagaming is a complex concept. Metagaming is essentially synonymous with metas, where it is defined by the authors as having three facets, where it can be used in reference to: a) the use of "higher strategies," b) "breaking the fourth

wall," and c) as "something extra," such as earning additional achievements through a game that are not directly tasked by a game itself (Carter et al. 12-13).

To preview each of these facets, it makes sense to give examples. Higher strategies, as they describe, are similar to the common conception of metas, where players employ a technique that goes beyond the basics of playing the game and might take into account one's fellow players (Carter et al. 12). For instance, if one player always claims to be the Villager in *One Night: Ultimate Werewolf* when they're evil, another player using a meta as a higher strategy might take this into account and be suspicious of the Villager claim.

Metagaming as a higher strategy is similar to my concept of tradition-based metas, which I'll outline momentarily, because both concepts involve incorporating knowledge of one's opponents into gameplay (Carter et al. 12). A key distinction, though, is that tradition-based metas aren't always strategic in nature, and often arise from comedy and are used arbitrarily. I will also define and describe a second type of metas, neutral strategy metas, wherein players take actions that are considered to be an objectively good action (or the best action) that a game has to offer. Neutral strategy metas are completely different from higher strategy metagaming because neutral strategy metas are devoid of knowledge of one's opponents and solely consider what objectively is the best action to take per the game's abstract rules.

Breaking the fourth wall as a meta is when one is taken out of an experience because the game acknowledges that it is a game (Carter et al. 13). This concept of metagaming as breaking the fourth wall doesn't apply to social deduction games but does apply to other types of games such as roleplaying games. In their research, they provide examples of how metagaming in roleplaying games would be breaking the fourth wall. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, for instance, if a player steps out of the character they're playing and discusses the overarching narrative the

players are establishing, that would be metagaming. This could take the form of a player knowing of a particular monster and telling their comrades how to defeat it, even if their player in-game hasn't seen this monster before. It's important to make the distinction that in roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, players have roles but they're wholly different from the randomly-dealt roles they adopt in social deduction games.

Third, metas used as 'something extra' are aspects of gameplay, like achievement hunting, where players are doing something additional to the normal gameplay (Carter et al. 12-13). For instance, one way that players can achievement-hunt beyond a game's normal goals is through achievements listed on Steam. Steam is an application that allows players to purchase and store their videogames. Steam can list achievements for games and award digital badges to those who complete them, even when the games a player is experiencing doesn't list them anywhere during gameplay itself.

For social deduction games, the concept of 'something extra' isn't applicable. This is because each session of a social deduction game is self-contained. Some tabletop games are known as 'legacy games' and involve a through-line for players across multiple playthroughs. In cases like these, it could be the case that there are achievements that players could earn in a game over time, because there are aspects of a game that are involved in play across multiple playthroughs. If social deduction games were like legacy games, and involved components across games, then there could be metagaming related to taking actions that rewards players with achievements. This is not the case, though, and social deduction games lack the 'something extra' metagaming that Carter et al. discuss.

After explaining the three different uses of metas, they create a few terms that they believe can improve discussions on gaming by adding specificity. They define orthogames as

“what players collectively consider to be the ‘right and correct game,’” and they define paragames as “that which is performed peripheral to, but alongside the orthogame" (Carter et al. 14). Orthogames are similar to both my neutral strategy and tradition-based metas, in that this type of meta cares about what players consider to be the superior actions to take, but is broader than each of my subclasses. With neutral strategy and tradition-based metas, both types are what players deem the proper actions that one could take, but in the case of neutral strategy, players act objectively, and in the case of tradition-based metas, players establish and enforce additional social rules. And since it’s a matter of perspective, a tradition-based meta could also be part of the paragame, or the part of the game that’s not within objectively best actions, if some players dislike a meta and disagree with the fact that it’s a wise choice in-game.

Despite the differences in our conceptions of metagaming and metas, Carter et al. and I share a common goal in describing the great extent to which metagaming impacts both the game developer and the player. After describing metas at length, I will demonstrate how we can use our knowledge of metas to improve gaming from a game developer perspective and a player perspective (Carter et al. 14-16).

Neutral strategy metas

Neutral strategy metas are the kind of metas similar to dominant strategy, where they refer to the optimal way a game could be played. Neutral strategy metas regard the game abstractly, where they dictate what moves are good to make in a game depending on the situation and can be entirely separated from the identities of the players at the table. For instance, buying the orange properties when you land on them in *Monopoly* is generally a good action to take in the game, regardless of who your opponents are.

A dominant strategy is a different, pre-established game design term, which is similar to neutral strategy. Dominant strategy refers to the objectively best strategy to take in a game. In game design, if a game has a dominant strategy, it's almost always a bad sign, because a game that is only able to be won through a single strategy will make gameplay uninteresting. For the intents of the neutral strategy definition, a dominant strategy would fall under a neutral strategy meta, but neutral strategy is a broader term.

The concept of neutral strategy differs from that of dominant strategy in a few other ways. First, dominant strategy is often only used to discuss the direct way to win a game, or the overarching strategy a player might use. It's not inherently pejorative, but because it's bad to only have a game where one strategy works well, dominant strategies are rare in game design. Neutral strategies, however, are numerous. Think about a time when you first learned a new game. A good rule-teacher will only share the basics you need to get started, and probably won't delve too heavily into strategy. After playing a few times, you begin to realize that some of the moves you made weren't so good, or another player makes a move that you realize you should've done to secure the win. Neutral strategy merely refers to the better ways to play a game, unrelated to the personalities at the table.

A final trait of neutral strategies is that they can vary and are situation-dependent in a game. At first, it might be unwise to take X action, but if Y or Z occurred, then the neutral strategy could be to do X. The category is purposefully vague, because games with intricate strategy leave up to the player many choices and possible actions, which vary in value based on the player's position relative to their opponents and to past and future moments in gameplay.

Not only can neutral strategy metas vary in time during a single gameplay experience, but they can also adapt over the game's publication and time in existence. Returning to Nguyen's

ideas on community evolution games as a class of games, these games have metas that change over time. Nguyen's work describes the game *Android Netrunner*, a community evolution game where its game designers are continuously altering the game in response to current metas (Nguyen 139).

Tradition-based metas

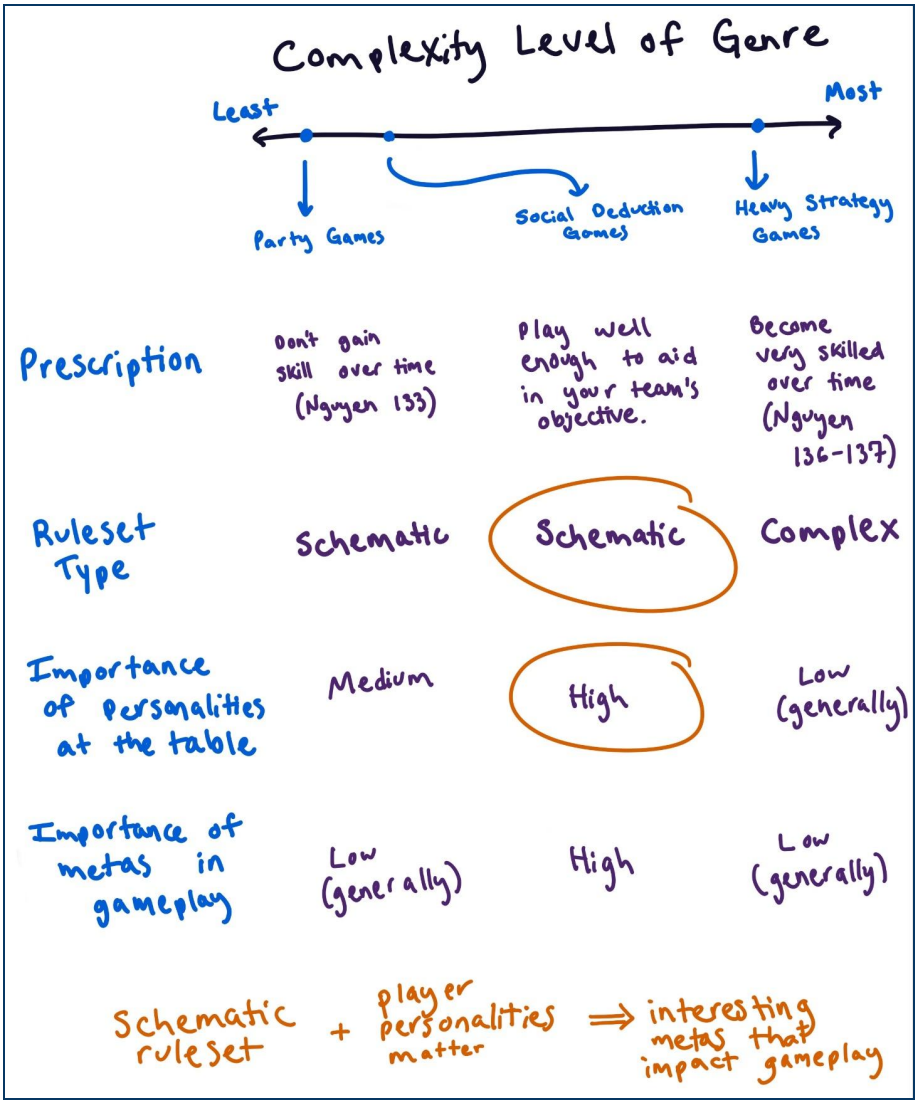
Tradition-based metas are far more interesting. They're the metas that players form in relation to each other while playing a game multiple times. One player playing *Go Fish* might always ask for one kind of card (e.g., Queens), and the other players might not focus on collecting Queens as a result. This is similar to Carter et al.'s descriptions of metas as higher strategies, where players use knowledge of their opponents to increase their odds of success (Carter et al. 12). Or a group that plays *Taboo* might have one player who always scores many points on their turn, so when teams form at the beginning of the game, everyone might try to get onto that player's team. In these cases, metas form as players adapt their gameplay to strategies that will best suit them to win, but the strategies are tailored to the opponents playing the game with them.

Metas in Social Deduction Games

Much of this thesis applies to games at large, since many games involve meta formation after repeated plays. While I'm open to the existence of different kinds of metas beyond neutral strategy and tradition-based metas, I find the tradition-based metas to be the type that will visibly improve or diminish the play experience. So, I wanted to focus on a class of games that heavily rely upon tradition-based metas—one such class is social deduction games.

The hallmark of these games, which makes them so prone to tradition-based metas, is that they have a schematic ruleset—there isn't much to them in terms of game content. There are seldom deep lore or tons of components. These games often focus on placing players in teams: usually a "good" team, a "bad" team, and sometimes a "neutral" team. Once sorted, players on the good team typically start out clueless as to who's evil, while all the evil team players often are given the identity of their accomplices at the game's opening.

Though I have previously explained what makes social deduction games stand out, it might be useful to contrast it again with party games and heavy strategy games to illustrate why it's worth discussing metas in social deduction games, specifically (see figure below). Party games and social deduction games are both simple, as opposed to heavy strategy games, and both have a schematic ruleset. As a result, the fun in the games is drawn from the personalities of the players. That said, I've argued that social deduction games encourage the development of skill as part of its player prescription, which contrasts with Nguyen's prescription on party games, where players are discouraged from developing skills (Nguyen 133).



This combination of social deduction games having a skeletal ruleset where the games are dependent upon player personalities results in the metas that arise during gameplay to have a visible impact on the player experience; this makes metas easier to analyze in this genre than in other game genres, which is why I chose to focus on social deduction games.

It is important to note that most games have important metas, including party games and heavy strategy games, despite the illustration. But, in these games the metas are either largely uninteresting, in the case of party games, or they're less difficult to access until a player has played a game numerous times, in the case of heavy strategy games. In both these instances, the

metas are rather inaccessible because they're either not worthwhile to address when playing the game because of the game's simplicity, or they're not easy to address because the game is so lore-packed that players are preoccupied before they can start thinking about and discussing metas.

Additionally, neutral strategy metas are typically more boring in skeletal games that aren't social deduction games because the rules and parameters of the games are so simple that there's usually not much thinking required when players make choices. In heavy strategy games, players might discover neutral strategies that make the game lamer after they've tried many different ones, but they get to enjoy the lore of the game for an extended period. A parallel to heavy strategy games might be watching a complex movie; it's fun to watch certain movies many times because there's often something more one could reap from it.

The difference between metas and strategies

After learning the definition of a meta, it's reasonable for one to question whether there's a distinction between the concept of a meta and the concept of a strategy. For all intents and purposes, the two terms often overlap. Metas can be strategic, strategies can involve metas, and in certain circumstances they can be identical. But there are two major differences.

First, metas can lack strategy. Carter et al.'s conceptions of metagaming focus on strategies that players use related to successful strategic choices in a game (Carter et al. 12-13). In contrast, my conception of metas includes metas that aren't strategic. Metas can be produced purely for entertainment, even to the extent that a particular meta is near game-throwing; game-throwing refers to the discouraged practice in which a player takes actions against their

prescribed win condition when they have far better strategic actions available. Metas that fall under this non-strategic category are usually created for humor's sake.

Second, strategies needn't involve metas. A strategy, as I see it, is simply a plan of action one uses when taking moves in a particular game. Considering that metas refer to specific kinds of patterns that arise from repeated gameplay, there is ample evidence that strategy as a term is distinct. This is because without prior knowledge of a game's content, players experiencing a game for the first time would surely only implement strategies, rather than a meta. (They could try to make a meta form during their gameplay, but metas are only socially cemented over time.)

Colloquial use of metas

Considering there are many variations in how metas are thought of as a term in gaming culture, it would not be a full analysis without including a discussion on how the term meta is colloquially used. During interviews with members of the UVM Games Club, I asked each interviewee whether they were familiar with the term metas, and if so, I asked them to explain it in their own words. For context, my personal portable definition of metas is: "metas are patterns that arise from playing a game multiple times."

All except one of the interviewees knew what metas were and were able to come up with a definition. The interviewee who didn't know what metas were was vaguely familiar with the term, and in the open-ended portion of the interview we had an interesting conversation that I'll go over after providing the others' definitions.

James Connor[8] suggested that metas are "the set of unwritten rules, especially somewhat group-dependent." This phrasing brings out the significance of metas existing in settings of groups of players, where the configuration of people involved in gameplay experiences is

[8] All interviewees were given pseudonyms.

relevant to what the unwritten rules are. This definition is similar to the specific definition of tradition-based metas.

Phoenix Allred described metas as “things outside of the normal rules of the game that you use to influence your decisions in-game.” This is more general than James’s definition, but both definitions are similar in that they fixate on the idea of norms extending beyond the game’s normal rule structure.

Layla Ivy considered a meta to be “a strategy seen as the best option or the best way to play the game.” She emphasizes the extent to which metas are used to positively impact one’s gameplay, where players abiding by metas are doing so in the best interest in maximizing chances of success.

Wile Baker said, “I think it’s a pattern of what is perceived to be a good or a bad move in a game, in a certain group... If a group agrees that taking a card is bad because it’s not as good as another card, I think that would fall under a meta.” This definition, similar to James’s, also suggests that group-dependence is relevant. The example Wile provides implies that the group’s perception of certain actions in games can be important, since it is rare for a group to establish a meta that doesn’t impact gameplay in a significant way.

Mark Kittredge provided the final definition: “I would say it’s a pattern or set of things you’re expected to do, or actions you’re expected to take in a game, under certain circumstances.” One special element about his definition is that players feel obligated to take certain actions by other players in different situations. One similarity between my definition and his is that we both described metas as being patterns that occur during the gameplay experience. After giving an initial definition, Mark elaborated with the following example:

"So like, the example I would give is when I play Secret Hitler a lot at game nights with UVM Games Club, where the meta was if you were a Fascist and you investigated[9] a Liberal, you would always say that they were a Liberal. Because if you said that they were a Fascist, basically the way the math of the game works, if the whole table treats you as if both of you are Fascists and just never include you in a vote, then they have better odds of only including Liberals in a vote."

Mark's example shows how, though the rules of *Secret Hitler* don't stop anyone who is a Fascist in that situation from calling a Liberal player a Fascist, it's generally a bad idea. With social deduction games, since deduction is logic, there is a lot of simple math that players can do to improve their chances at success. Most of the time, doing the math is helpful but will not guarantee someone's success in a particular game. But in this situation, given that the dynamic of the group is to play the way the math makes sense, it would be a poor choice for a Fascist player to call a Liberal player a Fascist, because they would be alienating themselves from gameplay. Of course, this situation could be different if there was a meta where the math wasn't important in cases like this, or another similar meta that was rooted in arbitrariness that negated the usefulness of using logic in gameplay.

The final interviewee, Hilma Lane, was not initially familiar with the term. Interestingly, of the interviewees, she is the newest member to the club and was not around for some of the

[9] For those not initiated, the gameplay of *Secret Hitler* involves moments in gameplay where one player is allowed to privately view the team card of another (Liberal/Fascist). Liberal players start the game with no knowledge of the group's identities. Fascist players know most of their teammates but are still often in a position where they can take the investigation action. After privately seeing another player's alignment, all players at the table will ask the investigator what alignment they saw, because it provides some relative information on the identities of those two players. If an investigating player claims the player they saw is a Fascist, whether the investigator is actually Fascist or not, the group will often discount both players' testimony and reduce their power for the rest of the game. Mark's explanation shows that a Fascist player investigating a Liberal should claim that the player is Liberal so they're not excluded from future gameplay—this is an example of a neutral strategy meta.

earlier game nights where the term metas was used more commonly[10]. When I asked her whether she knew the term, she responded, "Not really, I've heard the term before but I don't really know what it means." At the very end of the interview, where I give each interviewee an opportunity to say anything they'd like, she said, "I want to know what 'meta' is because I feel like I've heard it before." I gave my definition and a brief explanation, which she followed with,

> *"...I do think they can make it a little more boring after, if you just consider it as the only approach that you can take. But, I don't know, if it works out, though, it can be a kind of satisfying feeling to do it...Okay, I understand more what a meta is right now. But I feel like they do often develop during social deduction games more than other games."*

Admittedly as a researcher, I was hoping and expecting for all interviewees to be able to define the term so that I could have as many explanations for colloquial uses as possible. But having her work through her understanding of the term on the spot was interesting, because her initial intuitions corroborated my takeaways that metas can be fun, but understandably they would get tiresome with repeated use. She later supplied an example of a meta with the game *Res Arcana*[11], a deck-building game where players use cards sparingly and pool resources, where certain cards have synergies with each other.

7. The Benefits of Metas

[10] The interviewee gave written consent that I could include this personal detail.
[11] *Res Arcana* is not a social deduction game, so her example showed how metas exist beyond the social deduction genre, but I omitted it from this section for brevity. See Appendix B for her full quote.

Though I think there are also many downsides to metas, they can certainly benefit the gameplay experience. In this section I'll describe a few of their major benefits, those being: player comfort, humor, human connection, and emergence of viable strategies, and I'll include some anecdotes from members of the UVM Games Club related to each of the categories.

Player Comfort to Expand Strategies (with neutral strategy metas)

As someone who plays games regularly as a hobby, I've found that I treat gameplay experiences a bit differently from the average person, which is the case for many folks who also play games as an extracurricular activity. Most game players can be roughly sorted into two categories: casual players and hobby players. If you only play games on occasion with your family on holiday, it's fair to assume that you would be considered a 'casual player.' If you play games multiple nights a week and have an expansive knowledge of games, you'd probably fit into the 'hobby player' category. These aren't cut and dried categories, but most of my family who aren't into games would be considered casual players, and most of my friends at the UVM Games Club would be considered hobby players.

What I have found among the casual gamers is because they generally play games less often, wins and losses are more memorable for them. Last year, my friend introduced a significant other at a game night I hosted, and I happened to win a game of *Spy Alley*. Months later, I had them over for another game night, and he made a comment to the effect of, "I need to win this time," which prompted me to ask who'd won. He looked at me incredulously, and said, "You won!" I'd completely forgotten and I felt bad about it, but it was amusing that the loss had stung him that much.

Though a casual player might fixate on wins and losses more, it seems natural to do so given that each time they play a game, it's a more memorable experience. I don't have any way to know how many games I've played at game nights throughout college, but my best guesstimate would be 500+ games, bare minimum. So, the only moments I really remember are players making insane moves, and other instances that stick out, for better and for worse.

Another difference between the casual and hobby player is that, as a hobby player, I'm usually willing to play a game at least twice, if not three times before making a full assessment of how much I like it. This isn't true of every hobby player, but I think that a general trend is for casual players to assess a game more willingly after a single playthrough. Because of that, they're more inclined to want to succeed as much as possible in a game, because the win feels important.

Admittedly I'm hyper-competitive at times, but I enjoy playing games enough to feel comfortable losing at the expense of trying out fun strategies and exploring the game a bit within my first playthroughs. It's typical among hobby gamers to call one's first game a 'learning game,' where one of the players typically teaches to the rest of the group. Usually, if the teaching player has experienced the game previously, they have a leg-up from knowing the game and its basic strategies and therefore are more likely to win (especially in games involving heavier strategy). Hobby gamers understand that the teaching player has an advantage and that they're likely to become better at the game upon playing it more. So, the loss that players face in learning games is cushioned by the knowledge that having to learn the game requires focus from working out the more in-depth strategies.

This is all to say that, whether one is a casual player or a hobby player, one's first time playing a game will be a learning game, whether it's referred to by that name or not. As folks get

more familiar with the game over multiple playthroughs, assuming they're a rational player, they'll get a better sense for the game and what works and what doesn't; they'll start to learn the neutral strategy metas that the game has to offer.

Once players understand a game's basic strategies, they often feel comfortable branching out and trying new things. Personally, during the first playthrough of a game I'm so focused on playing the game by its rules that I don't focus too much on the more complicated actions available, defaulting to the easier ones, and I don't usually pay any attention to what the other players are doing because I'm so focused on making sure I'm playing the game right.

Many games even have built-in layers of complexity for players when they've become used to the game. This typically takes the form of "Advanced Rules" or "More Ways to Play" at the very end of a game's rulebook. Once someone understands how a game works and they've played multiple times, through neutral strategy metas they'll learn some of the better moves and choices in the game. When one has enough experience with a game to get better at the strategy, they could add variety to the game by incorporating complex rules. In *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*, it's recommended for players to use some of the simpler roles in their first plays, and once they get better at the game, they'll branch out with some of the more fun roles.

To summarize these examples: learning games is tough. Whether one is a casual player or a hobby player, they'll usually need to take a few plays to fully grasp the better ways to play, those being the neutral strategy metas. Once they've grasped it, they may want to incorporate more complex elements into their gameplay, or they may try some moves they hadn't previously. This expansion from basic strategy is only possible because they have understood the neutral strategy metas.

Humor (usually with tradition-based metas)

One of the best things about metas is that they can lead to funny moments that make the game worth playing. Since tradition-based metas form by a group playing a game together multiple times, players become familiar with each other's strategies and, in social deduction games, they become familiar with each other's bluffing tells.

One meta that formed in my time with the UVM Games Club was called "Girls' Trip." In *Avalon*, when the leader selects a party to go on a quest, their choice can include any players at the table. As is the case with many communities involving gaming, the UVM Games Club is a male-dominated group where the ratio of men to women is unsurprisingly high. So, when one of the girls was in the leader position in *Avalon*, as a comedic bit they'd often exclusively pick girls at the table to go on the quest, announcing "Girls Trip!" to the group. This was hilarious the first few times it happened and would occasionally result in a few guys being slightly frustrated. We got such a kick out of the bit that we continued it every so often over the course of a few months. Then, the bit escalated when a few guys got sick of the Girls' Trip meta, and announced, "Guys' Trip!" and exclusively picked guys as a group for the quest. Of course, we proceeded to call them sexists and say, "it doesn't work the other way around," which served as an appropriately funny way to retire the meta.

Contrasting Girls' Trip with other kinds of metagaming, it is a case where players use knowledge of each other's strategies (like in Carter et al.'s ideas of metas used as a higher strategy), but the meta is typically used in non-strategic ways (Carter et al. 12).

Additional notes on the Girls' Trip meta: how metas can add layers of strategy

Not only was Girls' Trip an example of a meta relevant in that it shows how metas can add humor to a game to amplify its enjoyability, but there are two other important aspects of Girls' Trip worth mentioning, which occur in other metas as well. First, the group is often aware of tradition-based metas as they form. While it's not always the case that folks will explicitly discuss metas, within our group it is common for individuals to express when they're growing tired of a particular meta, usually indicating that they want more variety in gameplay. Second, when the group is aware of metas, and actively discusses them, it can also lead to players deliberately exploiting the metas.

Here is an instance of how exploiting a meta could work. Imagine I'm dealt the role of Merlin in *Avalon*, a player on the good team whose special power is that they know the identities of all the evil players. It just so happens that I'm the leader of a quest for a particular round, and because of my role as Merlin, I just so happen to know that the two other girls at the table are also on the good team. Under other circumstances, it might raise eyebrows if I were to select those two girls over other players, but because the Girls' Trip meta exists, I'm able to claim that I'm picking the girls because of the arbitrary meta, when I'm in fact picking them for strategic reasons. Instances like these, where players use a tradition-based meta that seems arbitrary when they in fact have ulterior strategic motives, enriches the gameplay experience for players.

Additional moments of humor through metas

James Connor provided an example of a neutral strategy meta that the group developed in the game *Avalon*, called the 'Hammer Meta.' He said, "...you get some extra entertainment when otherwise it's sort of random,[12] like if you have Hammer Meta with Avalon...We were playing it

[12] In *Avalon*, the bulk of the game is selecting combinations of players to go on quests, and there's an edge-case rule that gives a different player veto-power each round. That power is seldom used, so players abiding by the Hammer

online and there'd be a little hammer symbol for the one arbitrary rule that never comes up in play. So it's easy, 'First round, who goes on the quest?' The guy with the hammer." This meta was usually only used in arbitrary cases, though there were some moments where players used the Hammer Meta to their advantage; similar to Girls' Trip, this was another meta that was socially agreed upon as purely arbitrary and silly at face-value, where players could pretend to play arbitrarily when they were actually making a strategic choice.

Human Connection (usually with tradition-based metas)

Another benefit of tradition-based metas is their ability to unite a group. When players play a game together enough to establish tradition-based metas, part of it is from a perceived closeness within the group. When I play social deduction games, there are a few recurring metas I've seen develop across social groups, which generally improve the game for everyone.

First, there are the strategic masterminds. There are a few players in the group who are too good at the games for their own good. When I play social deduction games with them, all I can do is hope that we're on the same team, because the odds are stacked against me if I'm not. I'm usually wary of these folks, and if the slightest suspicion is on them then I'm going to assume they're evil.

There's also the tell-less friend. One of my friends has such an emotionless face in everyday life that I've never managed to learn one of their tells. I'm convinced they have none. So, when I play games, I just assume that I won't be able to read anything from their facial expressions and body language.

Meta would select this player for quests in situations where there was no evidence in favor of selecting players methodically.

And finally, there are the bards. In social deduction games, though the game's leadership positions are passed around the table, it's typical for a few players to try to dominate the conversation. This can be problematic for a player who suspects one of the outgoing players is evil and can't overpower them vocally. Alternatively, quiet players who are dealt evil roles can use the louder players as a distraction to fly under the radar, which is often a successful strategy.

When players become familiar with each other in gameplay, they're able to adapt their gameplay to the habits of the other players in the group. In my case, even though I'm not the best liar, I can often win as an evil player because I know how my friends will operate. Members of the UVM Games Club often spend time together outside of club hours, but this knowledge of my friends and their gaming habits is a testament to the amount of time we've spent together and how I feel closer to them as a result. While my enjoyment of their company isn't completely due to the tradition-based metas that we've formed together while playing games, this has contributed to my connection with others in the club.

Hilma Lane, one student, expressed that, "...tabletop gaming has been for me at least, a really good way to make friends and get to know people...it's really valuable to be able to do something face-to-face with someone, or online even, and kind of understand how their mind works a little bit and see what they find fun." Though this sentiment rings true regardless of the cultural context of this project, it's important to highlight in this case. For most members of the UVM Games Club over the past few years, COVID-19 has stunted many students' abilities to form social connections, and I've heard from many club members individually that they found the club instrumental to their social life at UVM.

Emergence of viable strategies (usually from breaking the mold of metas)

When players fall into routines with games, breaking those routines—usually by breaking a meta—they can add new strategic layers to a game. A few of the interviewees provided some anecdotes to this effect. Wile Baker said, "I think [metas] can be good for an established group. They can kind of change how the game is played, like if a group is getting tired of a game and someone figures out there's a mechanic that's been overlooked that is more powerful, it can change the game up for that group."

Regarding breaking player habits, Mark Kittredge said something similar: "When people are trying to figure out what the best way to execute it is, and when the best times for it are...that's when having a meta can be exciting." He provided one example from his time in high school playing *Secret Hitler*:

> *"...there was a time where it was the first time that I'd ever been in a game where a Fascist investigated another Fascist and called them a Fascist. And it, like, completely broke the brains of me and all the other people who were on the Liberal team... we completely discounted the possibility that both of these people were Fascists. And it was what helped them win... that was a really cool moment where the meta changed, and something that wasn't possible before became possible, and something that you had to think about."*

This example demonstrates how, when a group becomes used to actions and styles of play, they might naturally fail to consider certain possibilities within the game. So, when a player or group of players finds a way to break that mold, it's an exciting experience, even for those who end up losing as a result. (Of course, many players who lose might still be frustrated with

their loss, but as previously mentioned hobby gamers don't typically keep track of overall wins and losses so closely.)

Summary

Overall, metas have multiple benefits to the gameplay experience. They can help players feel comfortable to deeply explore the game and what it has to offer because they've grown accustomed to the basic rules and patterns in gameplay. They can provide humor, through goofy tradition-based metas, and those seemingly arbitrary metas can be subverted in strategic ways that bring new life to the game's possibilities. They can foster human connection, helping those enjoying a game together to share laughter and get to know each other better. And, when routine strategies are ignored, or when new metas are formed, players feel invigorated to analyze new methods and ideas that the game and their social group have to offer.

8. The Drawbacks of Metas

Though there are benefits of metas, there are numerous drawbacks that arise from their formation. Neutral strategy metas and tradition-based metas each cause different problems, so I will show how each leads to worsened gameplay. Though each type of meta has downsides, it's important to note that the harms from neutral strategy metas are largely unavoidable as a player, and the harms from tradition-based metas are largely unavoidable as a game developer. In the following section, I will explain how game developers can reduce harms caused by neutral strategy metas, and how players can reduce harms caused by tradition-based metas.

Their Inescapability (for neutral strategy metas)

To some degree in social deduction games, neutral strategy metas cannot be avoided. When a player plays a game multiple times and becomes better at it with time, it's because they understand how the game works and what strategies are superior to others. Because of this, unless a game is purely luck, there will be neutral strategy metas somewhere in the game's design. And games that are purely luck do not qualify as choice games nor as social deduction games. So, there will usually be neutral strategy metas in social deduction games.

While it's inevitable that there will be neutral strategy metas, some cases are worse than others. In cases where there's only really one or two "right" ways to play a game, neutral strategy metas will be harmful because they will strongly restrict what is considered good versus bad gameplay. For instance, in *Avalon*, imagine a case where the leader chooses themselves and Players B and C to accompany them on a quest. If the quest succeeds, meaning all players privately voted for the quest to pass, then it makes sense to use those players (or a similar configuration of players) in future quests. In a game with 10 players, this neutral strategy meta is unfortunate for many players, because so many players will be excluded from quests through no fault of their own, but simply because the same few players who happened to go on the first few quests are inherently more trustworthy and will get to have the most fun and playtime.

Hilma Lane, one of the interviewees, reflected on her time playing *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*: "[metas] get old pretty easily, if um, like some strategies are getting reused a lot. Like, if people just claim villager all the time [in *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*] it's like, eh, why are we playing this?" For Hilma, along with many other gamers, the fun lies in unpredictability of the strategies that players use. With a strategy that becomes so rote, it makes sense to question whether players should pick up that game in the first place. When describing her preferred social deduction games, she said, "I like to have a little bit of drama involved in them."

Lost Agency (with Tradition-Based Metas)

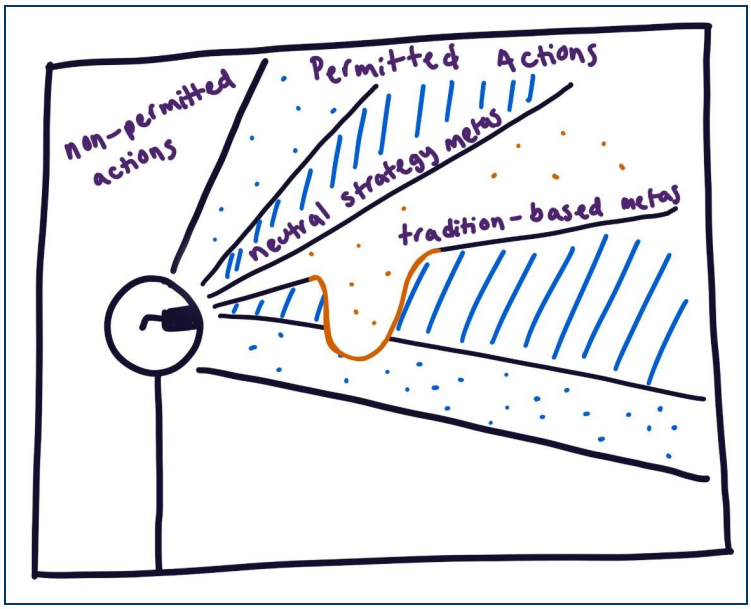
Nguyen's work discusses the ways in which games are an art form in which players can exercise agency (Nguyen 141). Nguyen's ideas of agency are directly tied to the agency that players lose during meta formation. This is because the value of many games lies in the choices they make available to their players, so artificially reducing those choices via meta formation reduces the value that games have as an art form of agency. In other words, if a game is considered valuable and artistic for the choices given to its users, a reduction in that choice will prevent players from fully enjoying the game for what it should be.

Nguyen describes agency in games in this way: "For many of the most valued types of aesthetic striving experiences, it's important that the player make genuine choices—that a player genuinely invent a solution, or choose one from a rich set of distinctive possibilities, each with different downstream consequences" (Nguyen 153). To Nguyen, in games, a player needs to feel that they are impacting a game in a way that will define and alter the course of the experience. So, when players are socially limited to a set of fewer choices than they previously possessed, they have less of a felt impact on the game experience because their power as a player is undermined and they have fewer interesting choices to make.

This idea of lost agency has explanatory power in why games that are broken aren't fun to play. If a game is broken, it means that it has an objectively 'right' way to play it, so players aren't able to explore a range of possibilities sufficiently. Though it's widely known that *Connect Four* is broken, this might not matter for a player who only plays it once or twice and isn't perfectly good at the strategy. But, for a player who lives to play *Connect Four*, once they learn

the sure-fire way to win every time (an algorithm that always works so long as they get to go first), their possibility space that once seemed broad becomes myopic.

The lost agency drawback that arises from metas was the original kernel around which this project was built. The core idea is that, when deciding what actions to take in a game, players are presented with a field of options like this:



The diagram shows the options in a game (represented as a field of vision) that are available to a player. All the actions beyond the field of vision are non-permitted actions in the game, where the player would be cheating if they were to take them. Within their field of vision lies all the permitted actions, where the player could take that action and it would count as a valid choice in the game.

Everything inside the first inner layer of the field of vision are actions that players may take that conform with neutral strategy metas in the game. In other words, they are actions that are smart and reasonable to take. While it might be legal to take a particular action, for instance, it might not necessarily be wise to do so, and would fall beyond this layer. The neutral strategy meta region will likely shift over the course of a game, to represent how actions might enter or

leave the realm of neutral strategy as the conditions of a game change. For example, in *Clue*, a popular game in which players solve a murder, it is legal to take a final guess at who the murderer is at any point during the game. But, choosing to do so on the first turn, barring exceptional luck, would be an unwise choice.

The final region nested within the neutral strategy metas contains the actions recommended by tradition-based metas. Using the Girls' Trip meta from earlier as an example, in those instances it was customary for women to pick others to go on quests in *Avalon* when given the power to do so, which would fall as an action within this category. As a result, when a woman in UVM Games Club had the chance to do a Girls' Trip but decided against it, she wouldn't be taking an action falling within the region of choices recommended by tradition-based metas, and other players who adhere closer to the metas might feel inclined to question her decision making. There's a bubble drawn within the tradition-based meta region that interferes with other regions, because sometimes actions that are tradition-based metas are more or less strategic than other actions. In other words, certain tradition-based metas are primarily arbitrary and non-strategic, and involve taking actions that aren't meant to meet a strategic end. So, the tradition-based metas that lie closest to the central part of the player's vision are those which align with neutral strategy metas, and the tradition-based metas that are farther out in the bubble represent actions that are taken less for strategic success and more for silly or humorous moments.

This is all to say, when games involve tradition-based metas like these, certain actions within the scope of the game become customary. And, because players get used to a particular set of actions, when another player takes a perfectly legal action, but one that doesn't fit the pre-established metas, they will break certain social norms. So, players are naturally

peer-pressured into following metas to ensure their highest chance of success within the game. Here is a formal argument that explains what happens as a result of meta formation:

1. Having more agency in a game is more desirable than having less agency.
2. Playing a game repeatedly may lead to meta formation.
3. When playing a game, metas lead some players to taking certain actions over others in a pattern.
4. So, for whatever amount N of choices that players could make, metas may reduce the number of choices by X (the number of choices players make post-meta formation is N - X).
5. Reduction of N to N - X choices available to players is often a bad thing, because having less agency is less desirable.

The key idea here is that repetitive metas often have a negative impact on the play experience, which lies in the artificial narrowing of the scope of choices that players are afforded by the rules of a game.

Exclusion for Returners (with tradition-based metas)

As I mentioned before, because I've played so many games with a single group of people, I'm aware of which friends are especially good at social deduction, lying, or specific games. This naturally impacts the ways that I interact with them in-game to be different from my interactions with other players. Often, when a player is especially good at a game, other players will try to prevent them from taking power or control in the game, even when it's not warranted. Without trying, the skilled players can end up excluded due to unreasonable circumstances,

purely because other players might overcompensate and attempt to protect themselves from being duped by the talented player.

Exclusion for Newcomers (with tradition-based metas)

By the same token, newcomers may also be excluded from gameplay as a result from tradition-based metas. An analogous example to illustrate this point is through inside jokes. Inside jokes serve as a means for people to connect with each other. When two friends have an inside joke and are hanging out with a third friend, it would be considered rude for them to reference the joke, especially if they don't bother explaining it to the poor third friend. Relating this to metas, because metas often become habit and second nature to players who use them, these players will often inadvertently use those metas in the presence of a newcomer. This was the case in the anecdote from my first time playing *Avalon* in high school, where there was a meta that the group was privy to, but I was not. In that case, the quest leader was supposed to select certain individuals based on their seating order at the table, and I lost the group's trust because I wasn't following their pre-established meta.

To this effect, Wile Baker said, "[metas] can be bad for new players jumping in, specifically with social deduction games, if most of a group is familiar with their meta in a game and is trying to show it to a new person, that can be a little overwhelming, just to be bombarded with, 'Oh, don't pick that thing because it's bad.'" In these cases, the players are usually trying to help the newcomer. But what they fail to realize is that they made up unnecessary social rules that they're foisting on someone, specifically a player who's already overwhelmed by bearing the mental load of jumping into a game with intricate rules when they know they're significantly worse-off strategically relative to their opponents. When James Connor highlighted the same

issue in his interview, he described it as "it does make it hard then when you switch people in and they're playing it 'wrong,'" which is interesting because the word 'wrong' implies that the new player is failing to grasp the rules when ironically the social group is unfairly forcing a fake supererogatory rule unto the newcomer.

Play style is tracked across games (with tradition-based metas)

An issue that metas cause specific to social deduction games is how players are judged in their social group from game to game—namely, players in a group tend to keep track of each other's play styles and take note of when their style changes. It's only natural for players to pay attention to how each other act, considering social deduction often includes bluffing and deception elements, but this does lead to issues after repeated play within a single social group.

Regarding metas in social deduction games, Mark Kittredge said, "...there are a lot of things you can do consistently, whether you're on the good team or the bad team, that, like, if you always do them consistently, maximize your winning percentage when you're on the good team and hurt your winning percentage when you're on the bad team."

After he said this, I suggested an example to corroborate his point, which he agreed illustrates the issue. It's relevant to note that social deduction games with good/evil teams usually have most players on the "good" team, so players are statistically likely to be dealt a "good" role most of the time. When they play most of the time as good, some players are used to being talkative, but when they're dealt an evil role, certain outspoken players tend to be quieter. So, if one only cared about maximizing the number of wins they had in social deduction games over a historical track record, it makes a lot of sense for players to act this way, and to be especially outspoken when they're a good role, even if it means it'll be obvious when they're evil. Most

non-social deduction games don't have a similar dynamic across multiple instances of playing a game, so this is an issue with metas of player behavior that's genre-specific.

Summary

To summarize, metas can be bad for a few reasons. While games with strategy will necessarily have some kinds of neutral strategy metas, certain neutral strategy metas will still be frustrating for players, especially those that inadvertently exclude some players from enjoying and participating in the game. Tradition-based metas raise many issues for players, because their presence shrinks the set of permissible actions available for players to take and decreases the agency that each player possesses. Additionally, they can lead to the exclusion of returning players, because players who are known to be good at games will be singled out and treated differently than other players. Metas can also lead to the exclusion of newcomers, who don't yet know what the tradition-based metas are nor do they know how to conform to them. Finally, players focused on winning as much as possible across many iterations of a social deduction game might end up playing in ways that make obvious their team affiliation and their truthfulness, detracting from the joy in games from the genre.

9. How we can use our knowledge of metas

By understanding the impacts metas have on the player experience during social deduction games, we can actively pursue the benefits of metas while avoiding their disadvantages. It's plausible that these ideas could apply to games beyond the social deduction genre, but to keep the scope limited I'm only claiming that this knowledge extends to how players and game developers approach social deduction games.

By and large, I think that there are two different types of potential obligations that individuals and groups have in their interactions with social deduction games: some obligations are specific to developers of games, and some are specific to players of games. When it comes to obligations of game developers, I think that all game developers of social deduction games (and games at large) need to protect against harmful neutral strategy metas. When it comes to players, the obligation is primarily upon those who engage in the same social deduction game(s) enough to experience tradition-based metas that lower the quality of the gameplay experience. After explaining both of these types of obligations, I'll discuss special obligations that a player might have based on the kind of player one is, using Nguyen's concepts of the achievement player and the striving player (Nguyen 32-33).

Obligations of game developers to prevent harmful neutral strategy meta formation

Many people are involved in a game's production, but I'll explain why game developers in particular have a unique obligation regarding metas. People are often familiar with the concept of a game designer, but game designers are only the first step in a publication process. Designers do the concept work and first steps in prototype-building for their games, which they then pitch to game publishing companies. (Some designers self-publish, but this is uncommon.) If a publisher wants the designer's game, just like a book publisher would have its staff edit a manuscript, games undergo a rigorous editing process referred to as game development. Game developers, like book editors, try different strategies through playtesting to smoothen out a game's edges as they work to find and fix potential issues with a game's design (Selinker 74).

Here's how metas are relevant for game developers. Revisiting neutral strategy metas and tradition-based metas, it seems plausible that game developers have different degrees of

obligation to prevent each kind of meta from forming in the game they're developing. Strictly speaking, a basic duty of a game developer is to spot one specific kind of neutral strategy meta: dominant strategies. If a game has a single neutral strategy meta that consistently leads to wins, it's a dominant strategy. To improve the game, developers must either strengthen other strategies or decrease the effectiveness of the dominant strategy. If a game developer produces a game that has a dominant strategy, when there are supposed to be a variety of strategies that could lead a player to victory, players might deem the game "broken" and the developers would have failed.

Tradition-based metas, in contrast, are trickier to spot, and seem to lie beyond the purview of a game developer's traditional role. This is because tradition-based metas are often about the games themselves to some extent, but they form primarily because of the identities of the people playing them, and how those players interact with one another. Since game developers are just trying to make a game that is playable and fun for their target audience, it seems unreasonable to claim that they have to anticipate metas such as Girls' Trip, because tradition-based metas can harm gameplay, but their formation is beyond the realm of abstract game design.

While it seems to be the case that game designers have no obligations around harmful tradition-based metas, it's reasonable to conclude that they should prevent other types of harmful neutral strategy metas beyond dominant strategies. Dominant strategies can entirely ruin gameplay and are extreme versions of harmful neutral strategy metas. But there are less dramatic cases of neutral strategy metas that are still harmful. For instance, take the cases of *Avalon* and *Secret Hitler*, which each have rigid "right" and "wrong" strategic choices a player can make that are entirely rooted in the math of the game itself. In cases like these, there are obvious neutral strategy metas that make it necessary to exclude players from gameplay, which usually ruins the

fun for at least a few members playing the game (especially in games with larger player counts). While there will always be neutral strategies in a game, it seems fair to suggest that game developers in social deduction should do what they can to reduce neutral strategy metas that exclude players.

Obligations of game players to prevent harmful tradition-based meta formation

Within hobby gaming groups, it's often understood that players are aware of meta formation and prevalence in gameplay. It's great when metas improve gameplay, but cases where players are excluded because of tradition-based metas are easily avoidable.

Similar to game developers not being obligated to prevent tradition-based metas, before I discuss what game players are obligated to do, I want to establish that they aren't obligated to prevent neutral strategy metas. Since neutral strategy metas exist because of the game design decisions made by a game development team, it's unfair that players should be expected to make their own house rules to solve game design issues. (Of course, it's wonderful if players can produce house rules to solve game design issues, but it shouldn't be expected of them.)

Players, it seems, are obligated to prevent harmful tradition-based metas by avoiding repetition in their gameplay. Consider a group of players establishing a group-wide meta such as Girls' Trip. Every time an opportunity arises for a Girls' Trip to potentially happen, the norm in our group's experience was for players to comment on the situation, cheering on a successful Girls' Trip, or booing a player who had the opportunity to assemble one but chose to refrain. If instead, players as a group pointed out when the meta of Girls' Trip was getting boring or making the game worse, people could collectively stop enforcing the meta as a social rule. Though it might take some cajoling and reasoning with fellow players, if one player makes

enough of a fuss about the meta worsening the quality of the game and the group is composed of reasonable people, it's easy to prevent metas like these from making games worse.

A tougher scenario of combatting a harmful tradition-based meta might entail one player competing with another player who's particularly skilled at a game—I'll refer to this as the Suspicion meta. One of my friends is so talented at *One Night Ultimate Werewolf* that I will almost always be more wary of them during the game. This often results in worse strategic decision-making on my part because the core of my tradition-based meta is that I am suspicious of them as a baseline, rather than only becoming suspicious after gathering evidence and playing rationally. The reason why I choose to be especially suspicious of them is intuitive: I would rather treat them as evil too often and catch them when they are, rather than letting them successfully deceive me, purely because my ego would take a greater hit if I inadvertently let them slip by. Assuming I'm dealt a good role and I'm trying to discern other players' identities, there are a few issues that arise from my preconceived suspicions. For one, if they're also a good player, then I'm wasting time in-game that could be spent more effectively discerning who's actually evil, and that time lets players with evil roles fly under the radar with ease. If they're a bad player, I would be content in accurately figuring them out, but if I always act suspicious of them, then other players will discount my view when it really matters.

This situation differs from Girls' Trip in a few respects. First, Girls' Trip as a meta comes with more benefits and is a group-wide experience. When Girls' Trip begins to cause problems and noticeably worsens gameplay, players can individually opt out of conducting Girls' Trips, but the group could easily talk it out and agree to cut down on it partially or entirely. With the Suspicion meta, on the other hand, it's up to an individual to quash. In this case, I'm tempted to let go of my Suspicion meta geared towards other players, because I want to behave in the most

inclusive way possible. But, because the meta is emotional and rooted in my ego whereas Girls' Trip isn't, metas such as the Suspicion meta seem to be harder to part with.

Regardless of how difficult it might be to stop operating under a harmful meta, if players put forth a good-faith effort to stop using them, it seems that gameplay experiences would improve over time because players would feel less socially constrained to take certain actions and would have more agency in their choices and gameplay.

Obligations of game players tied to Nguyen's player archetypes

Nguyen's work defines and explains certain player archetypes and how these different kinds of players differ in their interaction with games. There are two primary types of categories: striving players and achievement players (Nguyen 32-33). The difference between these two types of players is what they get out of playing games themselves. A striving player, Nguyen describes, engages with a game for the intrinsic value of the game itself (Nguyen 32-33). In contrast, an achievement player engages with a game for the purpose of winning (Nguyen 32-33). Striving players, of course, try to win as well, and as much as it might feel satisfying to win, they're participating in the game because they want to experience the game, not because they want to experience the win.

Social deduction games as a genre usually lends itself to more casual play than hobby play, despite all the interviewees for this project classifying as hobby gamers. Usually, these games are played in lighthearted settings, where players are socially discouraged from "try-harding" the game and participating with a hyper-competitive attitude. So, in addition to the obligations players have to reduce the formation of harmful tradition-based metas, I think players—especially those who identify as hobbyists who choose to engage with social deduction

games around casual players—ought to monitor their behavior if they have achievement player tendencies. If they take the games less seriously, they will avoid running the risk of ruining the game experience for casual players, which will improve the group's overall gameplay experience.

The upshot: overall obligations to preventing harmful metas

So, by analyzing the ways that players and game designers can reduce harms caused by metas, each of the two groups has different kinds of obligations. Game developers (and others involved in a game's production) are not obligated to anticipate and prevent against tradition-based meta formation, because those metas form from the specific player interactions that cannot easily be accounted for during game development. But they have control over neutral strategy because neutral strategy metas occur from a game's particular design rather than the identity of its players. Therefore, it seems developers have an obligation to ensure there are many viable strategies for a game, because they have control over a game's abstract design and it's boring for a game to only have one dominant strategy or a few neutral strategies that one could use to win.

Conversely, it seems game players are obligated to reduce the impact of tradition-based metas on their gameplay, because players have a lot of control for how these types of metas arise. Hobby players also seem to be obligated, when engaging with social deduction games, to ensure they're operating with a striving play attitude rather than an achievement play attitude, because becoming overly competitive will worsen the experience for their fellow players (Nguyen 42).

10. Conclusion

Review of Project

I began this project by highlighting some common debates and questions in the Philosophy of games field. I showed how there is an ongoing debate on whether the definition of a game exists. While that question still harbors disagreement and my project doesn't address it, I found it worthwhile to mention because C. Thi Nguyen's work on games operates under a Suitsian definition of games (Nguyen 2020).

I described different categories and classes of games and demonstrated that, regardless of the debate on a game's definition and the Suitsian definition Nguyen operates with, I would only focus on a class of games I called 'choice games.' These are games in which players make choices that impact the game's outcome; this allowed me to evade the debate, because any reasonable person would agree that the games I discussed—which happen to be exclusively choice games—would be deemed games. I narrowed the scope within choice games to a specific genre of games, social deduction games.

I compared the player prescription for social deduction games with other game genres, where Nguyen's work outlines how players should approach party games, heavy strategy games, and community evolution games. I showed how each of these prescriptions differs from that of social deduction games, and this analysis helped me outline the prescription for social deduction games. These games are unique in that they operate with a skeletal ruleset, but also encourage players to become skilled over time, and their skeletal ruleset forces the game to be propelled by the personalities of the players at the table. Players must navigate the rules for the game whilst also taking on their team affiliation and attempting to gain skill over time.

Then, I introduced the concept of 'metas,' which is a phenomenon referring to repeated patterns that arise from repeated play of a game. I did not coin the term metas—it's used

commonly colloquially and in certain academic settings. I began by showing some of the discussion in academics, which is mostly limited to digital gaming. Then, I introduced two new terms, 'neutral strategy metas' and 'tradition-based metas,' which I believe prove useful in discussing how metas can impact the player experience. I followed this by introducing colloquial usage of the term, with independent definitions provided by members of the UVM Games Club.

Afterward, I provided personal anecdotes along with anecdotes from UVM Games Club members on how metas have improved the quality of and detracted from the overall gameplay experience. To the good, metas can add humor, novelty, and new strategies to games, as well as fostering connection between players. Conversely, certain neutral strategy metas are inescapable and are tied to a game's design, making it boring to play over time. Metas lead to the exclusion of newcomers and skilled players alike, as well as encouraging players to police each other's behavior across games. The drawback I focused on at length was that metas lead to a reduction of agency. Specifically, I examined Nguyen's thesis in *Games: Agency as Art*, where he posits that games are an art form of agency; since tradition-based metas lead to groups imposing social rules on what moves are good and bad to take in a game, additional artificial limitations are placed on the players' scope of acceptable actions to take and thereby reduce their agency.

Using these distinctions of neutral strategy and tradition-based metas and how they impact the gameplay experience, I argued that we can use this knowledge to improve the gameplay experience. I claimed that game developers ought to reduce the amount of neutral strategy metas present in a game, because neutral strategy metas are formed because of a game's abstract design. To do their job properly, a game developer must ensure that a game has many viable strategies, rather than a single dominant strategy or a few neutral strategies. So, when

playing a better-designed game with fewer metas, players would feel they have more agency and control of the game's outcome, expanding their horizons and options on their path to victory.

I claimed that players ought to reduce the amount of tradition-based metas in a game, because tradition-based metas are formed because of the relationships within a social group and between players. Players can accomplish this by eschewing tradition-based metas they dislike, and monitoring and discussing them openly as a social group when it seems a particular meta is growing tiresome. I also suggested that hobby players refrain from using an achievement play mindset if possible, because taking a game that's meant to be lighthearted too seriously will detract from the fun and tamper with how the game is meant to be enjoyed (Nguyen 42).

Final Thoughts

Games are important in almost everyone's lives. Understanding what elements make games better or worse has the potential to make games better for everybody. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that metas have a serious impact on the player experience, and that we can use our knowledge of these metas to enjoy the moments when they bring value to games and to circumvent the moments when they typically worsen gameplay.

While the project takes a narrow scope by focusing on social deduction games in particular, these results could likely be applicable to games in many other genres as well. The reason why I chose to analyze metas through the lens of social deduction games is because this genre is one in which metas are particularly prominent and impactful on gameplay. For other game genres, metas have a significant impact as well, but in my time playing games, metas are most explicitly discussed within the context of social deduction games.

As someone who's been passionate about hobby gaming from a young age, I understand firsthand how the activity is naturally trivialized by those not familiar. I think it's important to highlight that while tabletop gaming certainly requires the luxury of free time, it is a relatively affordable hobby which has united so many people. Even though the contents of a game might be trivial at face value, a game's power as a social tool is undervalued and undeniable. And, while some individuals are hobbyists who can dedicate a lot of time to the practice, the community is inclusive and players who interact with gaming on a casual level still reap the rewards that gaming has to offer.

No matter how many details I provide on the games, the community, and the phenomena that community members experience, my wholehearted recommendation is to take the time to try a few new games and have fun with friends and loved ones. I guarantee that, with enough time, you'll begin to notice metas yourselves.

Appendix

Appendix A: Research Methodology

Purpose of Research

While philosophy theses don't traditionally involve research beyond analysis of texts, I wanted to add more depth to this project by interviewing members of the UVM Games Club, a student-run organization at The University of Vermont dedicated primarily to playing tabletop games.

This project would not exist without my involvement in this club. When the COVID-19 pandemic ensued in March of 2020, I was in my first year in college. Because of this, the brunt of the pandemic overlapped with my college experience, and most students couldn't socialize as normal for the bulk of it, despite UVM operating partially in-person beginning in the Fall of 2020. I began playing games as a hobby long before college, but the UVM Games Club was one of the few social spheres that was able to convene during the pandemic, in a limited capacity.

Working on the executive board for the club, I helped run many game nights on the digital meeting platform Zoom. Since our club mostly played board games, there were few digital options that would work for remote play for a large group of people. Of our limited options, social deduction games were the main event at many game nights, where we played many rounds of *Secret Hitler*, *Avalon*, *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*, and other social deduction games such as *Spyfall*. Since we were a group that played so many of the same games repeatedly, almost every time we played, I found that metas were a major element of gameplay.

To be clear, I do not intend nor need to prove through this research that metas exist—the extent to which it's discussed colloquially among gamers is evidence enough.

Interview Methodology

For this research, I received approval from the University of Vermont Institutional Research Board to conduct student interviews. I advertised for these interviews over the UVM Games Club Discord Channel and in-person at game nights. I made it clear that interviews would be purely voluntary, and interviewees would not be compensated. Interviews covered a few topics, including basic information, opinions on tabletop games, social deduction games, metas, and the interviewee's personal identity as a gamer. All interviews were audio-recorded so that I could focus on the conversation and revisit interviews as needed.

My goal with the interviews was to primarily collect opinions and anecdotes about metas, which I would weave throughout the sections that describe the benefits and drawbacks of metas. For all the examples collected, I assigned each interviewee with an alias, but they're aware that their identity as a member of the UVM Games Club won't grant them full anonymity and that the interviews don't involve dispersal of sensitive information.

Appendix B: Noteworthy Interview Quotes, Unabridged

Hilma Lane on social deduction games: *"I do think that if, like I've played social deduction games with people and it's gone really badly because people don't get into it. But I think that they can be some of the most enjoyable experiences if people are actually trying to play."*

Hilma Lane on social deduction games: *"I think they get old pretty easily, if um, like some strategies are getting reused a lot. Like, if people just claim villager all the time [in One Night: Ultimate Werewolf] it's like, eh, why are we playing this? Or, I don't really like the cannibal game that we play [Donner Dinner Party], because I feel like there's really no real reason for you to lie in that game. I mean, you can lie if you want, but it's just like playing rounds where you're handing in cards. So I think social deduction games, for me, I like to have a little bit of drama involved in them."*

Hilma Lane's initial thoughts on metas: *"I do think I understand that, yeah. I do think that it makes sense after you figure out how to play a game and it's like, oh wow, this is considered to be*

the best way to approach the game, but I do think they can make it a little more boring after, if you just consider it as the only approach that you can take. But, I don't know, if it works out, though, it can be a kind of satisfying feeling to do it... I think it's like, it definitely depends on the case, because as long as you have fun in a social deduction game, I don't think it really matters what you're doing as long as it's not being rude to other people. So if it's going to give you the most gratification to just play the way that you have heard about it... hmm. Okay, I understand more what a meta is right now. But I feel like they do often develop during social deduction games more than other games. And I have kind of noticed it in some of the other games we've played a little bit because, for Res Arcana for example, we figured out how the cards worked together in a specific way, and it's like, oh, I'm going to absolutely take those cards in combo every time. So I think it can be a bit preventative in you discovering something new, but if it works out, it works out."

Hilma Lane, on why gaming is important: *"I think that tabletop gaming has been for me at least, a really good way to make friends and get to know people, because it's really easy to find common ground with someone if they also like games and you can make small talk with someone during a game and get to know someone. And I think it's really valuable to be able to do something face-to-face with someone, or online even, and kind of understand how their mind works a little bit and see what they find fun."*

Mark Kittredge, on the repetitive nature of social deduction games: *"I think that they are definitely fun sometimes, and I think they're interesting because I think if you play with like the same group of people for a certain amount of time, there's like a curve where at the start your first few games are going to be worse than your next chunk of games. And there's a point where the games become less enjoyable again. And so I think that's the interesting thing about social deduction games versus other games. But they're also good because if you play with a different group of people they can be completely different. That's a big plus."*

Mark Kittredge, on impact of the group on game experience: *"Well it's interesting, because the thing about One Night Werewolf is that the first time I played it I absolutely hated it. And it was because I played with people in my family, who very much do not enjoy or approach games the way I do. And it made me...it put me in a position where I just, it seemed like if I was trying to win the game, the correct thing for me to do was nothing, which just like isn't an enjoyable way for having a game be. But, playing it with other people who approach games similarly to me and also want to, like, learn all the roles and have access to all the knowledge that you need to like, kind of play the game at more than a surface level, that makes the game good because you can kind of know what other people are going to expect you to do, and try to figure it out and play based off of that and other people try to do that to you. I do like that aspect of it."*

Mark Kittredge on the benefits and drawbacks of metas*: "I think it really depends. I think they are bad in that they make the game stale and repetitive. But also, when someone, like, goes against the meta and breaks it and succeeds, it can lead to some really fun and exciting moments. Um, and also when a new meta emerges, that can be really interesting. When people are trying to figure out what the best way to execute it is, and when the best times for it are. So I think that's when having a meta can be exciting. And I also think, specifically in social deduction games, metas are really weird because there are a lot of things you can do consistently, whether you're on the good team or the bad team, that, like, if you always do them consistently, maximize your winning percentage when you're on the good team and hurt your winning percentage when you're on the bad team. And so, I don't know, I've always...that's something that's always made me feel weird when I'm playing those games, because sometimes trying to win—doing the thing that's best to win the game you're in—if everyone is thinking super hard about it, will end up hurting your performance in future games. And, I don't know, I honestly think that's really interesting. And that's kind of a cool thing to think about."*

Mark Kittredge on breaking metas: *"When I was in high school, I had some friends that I played Secret Hitler with. And there was a time where it was the first time that I'd ever been in a game where a Fascist investigated another Fascist and called them a Fascist. And it, like, completely broke the brains of me and all the other people who were on the Liberal team, and we just like, were trying to solve the game, and we completely discounted the possibility that both of these people were Fascists. And it was what helped them win. And so, that was a really cool moment where the meta changed, and something that wasn't possible before became possible, and something that you had to think about."*

Mark Kittredge, on why games are worthwhile: *"I think games are awesome and everyone should be more open to trying games because I know there are a bunch of people in my family who don't ever want to play games with me... and that's probably good because the games I want to play are not games that they'd like, but there are a really wide variety of games out there, and if you get a game that you like and people that you like, it's a good time."*

Wile Baker, on the benefits of social deduction games: *"It's really easy to, like, get people who are not into board games into a social deduction game. Because it's very simple. I feel like people are pretty hesitant if they look at something like Werewolf and they go, 'I don't know about all these roles,' but that game kind of holds your hand and a lot of the other games aren't as complicated, you're just good or bad and that's kind of all you need to know and you can start lying. So it's fun to introduce new groups."*

Wile Baker's example of a meta: *"If a group agrees that, oh taking that card is bad because it's not as good as taking another card, I feel like it would fall under a meta."*

Wile Baker on the benefits and drawbacks of metas: *"I think they can be good for an established group. They can kind of change how the game is played, like if a group is getting tired of a game and someone figures out there's a mechanic that's been overlooked that is more powerful, it can change the game up for that group. It can be bad for new players jumping in, specifically with social deduction games, if most of a group is familiar with their meta in a game and is trying to show it to a new person, that can be a little overwhelming, just to be bombarded with, 'Oh, don't pick that thing because it's bad.'"*

Wile Baker on a meta in *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*: *"I think the saying the wrong swap as Troublemaker in Werewolf is really interesting and fun, because of the way that it tries to bait out people to say a lie, or to admit that they were bad when they otherwise wouldn't. Like in the group I was playing with, we didn't do that for a long time and then someone did it and it changed the game and that was a lot of fun."*

Wile Baker's personal view on hobby gaming: *"I don't care if I win or lose playing board games, which is, I feel like, kind of weird being so into board games. I just like the social aspect and interacting with the rules, especially if a game has nice components."*

James Connor on the benefits and drawbacks of metas: *"Sometimes it's just convenient or they just happen because you need some way to do things. So you get some extra entertainment when otherwise it's sort of random, like if you have Hammer Meta with Avalon which was pointless. We were playing it online and there'd be a little hammer symbol for the one arbitrary rule that never comes up in play. So it's easy, 'First round, who goes on the quest?' The guy with the hammer. It has no purpose but it's as random as anything else, so like, in that case it works. It gives you something to yell out when someone goes against it, just for the sake of yelling. But in theory they can get old or stale, when you have, especially a consistent group playing a lot. Or it does make it hard then when you switch people in and they're playing it 'wrong.' So it's not really inherently good or bad, it's just how it works in the moment that it can be."*

Phoenix Allred, on social deduction games: *"Like I said, I think when you're getting to know people it's fun because it's like a way to get everyone involved and talking, but for like, people you're already friends with it's fun, cause it's like, that's when you get into the metagaming aspect of it, I guess. Cause, I don't know, you know everyone well, so I just think it's fun to like, I don't know, interact with people in that way. And obviously I'm a very argumentative person otherwise I wouldn't be [personal detail omitted], because that's a fun aspect of it too, because I like to try to convince people to join my side."*

Phoenix Allred, on metas: *"But it's like, annoying when people just like, rely on that solely to make their decisions. So I think I would say like, net neutral, but if I had to pick a side, I would say I think it makes it more fun."*

Phoenix Allred, on the 'Hammer Meta,' a popular meta from *Avalon*: *"I mean, the classic is the hammer meta in Avalon, which is just stupid. Picking whoever has the hammer to go on the trip or whatever. It's been a while since I've played Avalon or whatever. It's just stupid, it's just meaningless, I don't know."*

Phoenix Allred on a meta in *Mafia*: *"I guess also just like, in general with Mafia, like trying to analyze how like, people are talking and stuff. So not really like a strict rule, but just like, thinking about, 'Oh this person wouldn't do this if they were bad,' and stuff like that."*

Phoenix Allred, on gender in gaming spaces: *"I didn't really feel this at UVM, but I think in some situations gender can play a lot of a role in games—all board games but in social deduction games especially. Because it's like, I feel like in gaming spaces it's like, in gaming spaces men are the ones that are overrepresented so it's like, easy to feel like, I don't know, you're in the minority. So I think that's an important thing about the gaming community. But I never really felt that at UVM, but I feel like that's something that can be felt elsewhere."*

A Note of Gratitude

Thank you so much to James Connor, Phoenix Allred, Layla Ivy, Wile Baker, Mark Kittredge, and Hilma Lane for being willing to be interviewed for this project. It was a joy playing games with all of you in the UVM Games Club and I know we'll be playing games together for many years to come.

A Note on References of Games

I came up with the descriptions of games for this thesis based on my own knowledge and experience (or games mentioned were from examples provided by interviewees). Though I didn't need to directly research anything, when I could find a citation, I still wanted to include credit for the designer because games are works and should be acknowledged as such. I did not include in-text citations, though, because I never needed to read up on the games themselves.

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