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Playing on the periphery: Metagaming and transgressive play

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PLAYING ON THE PERIPHERY: METAGAMING AND TRANSGRESSIVE PLAY

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This work is dedicated to players, gamers, and people who play. To people who play to escape and those who need escape from the harshness that finds them in play. To my girlfriend, my brother, and my mother who all know I appreciate a good challenge and that I cherish my time with them.

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ABSTRACT

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Gaming and play exist in connection to forces outside of the game systems themselves. Together, all these intersecting forces make up a *meta*game that informs and enables variance in play as well as creates barriers to entering play. This thesis fleshes out the framework of a metagame and shows how players can take a metagame perspective to transform, transcend, or even transgress barriers. This thesis discusses sources of metagaming and encompasses examples from video and traditional games.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

The world record for completing *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*

(Nintendo)*,* the 2003 Gamecube game, is held by Demon9 at four hours, 23 minutes, and

two seconds. From the time a player presses [Enter] at the name selection screen until the

final blow is dealt to Ganon at the end of the game, no player has completed the game

faster than Demon9, a Swedish gamer. Completing the game under ordinary

circumstances (visiting all the locations and collecting all the items the designers

intended) takes between 30 and 60 hours ("The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker").

Demon9 "speedruns" the game, making use of "sequence breaks" to make his time much

faster by skipping cutscenes and sections of the game. Speedruns are recordings gamers

make of themselves playing a game from start to finish in the fastest amount of time

possible without modifying the game itself or the gaming hardware.

In many ways, speedruns are the contemporary height of pursuing gaming capital,

the value system that gamers use to define good games and good gaming. Mia Consalvo

in *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* adapts the idea of "gaming capital" from

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (Consalvo 4). Cultural capital is a system

of preferences that serve to classify groups into classes, and gaming capital is a system of

values that gamers use define themselves as "gamers" or define "good" gaming. In

Cheating, Consalvo shows that gaming capital's definition originates in triumphing over difficult challenges without outside help--victory through skilled play in a well designed system of challenge--breeding the idea that good gaming is defined by proving individual skill. So while cultural capital defines and separates classes, gaming capital is what gamers use to define and separate themselves from "non-gamers," chiefly by arguing that "real" gamers don't get help and play "hard" games. At the same time, however, this vision of gaming capital is generated, codified, and mediated by paratexts that gamers consume and contribute to, from magazines to blogs, to FAQ databases that offer tips, advice, and guides for completing whole games or specific parts, effectively offering help to beat games. What Consalvo finds is that the theoretical tension doesn't hold up in practice, as gamers maintain that getting help from others is cheating when asked about it, but do, in fact, rely on help from others regularly, consulting each other in-person or through print and web paratexts for help. Asking for help and providing it to others is a staple of gaming capital, whether gamers admit it or not.

Speedrunning, then, is an epitome of gaming capital because it is the pursuit of the highest prizes in gaming (victory) through means that are very difficult to accomplish (skill), but that are developed in open, collaborative communities who work together to push at the limits of the games they play and transgress them. Speedrunning *Wind Waker* is a great example. Consider, for example, [this segment of a *Wind Waker* speedrun at a charity gaming telethon](#):

Figure 1

From 48:11 to 52:15 in that video, Cosmo, another speedrunner who currently holds the

number 3 fastest time for *Wind Waker*, performs and explains a common sequence break

in the *Wind Waker* speedrunning route: the zombie hover. Pulling off the zombie hover

involves an intimate knowledge of the *Wind Waker* game system combined with

consistent dexterity (an old-school definition of gaming capital) to defy gravity within the

game: Cosmo uses bombs to trigger his own death and then, while holding the L trigger

button, presses the A and B buttons in rapid succession at least 10 times a second in order

to gain height by triggering and canceling animations and float to an otherwise

unreachable floor of the dungeon before healing himself with an item from the Gameboy

Advance on his lap before the death animation starts and he loses everything. Throughout

the video, Cosmo explains how all this is done, recounts the people who made these discoveries, and tells the history of various breakthroughs contributing to the "best practices" of speedrunning *Wind Waker.* Cosmo is very open about the collaborative nature of speedrunning, and candidly shares insights into the theorycrafting of the game. This vision of gaming contradicts characterizations of gamers who hoard information to use against opponents and disdain the thought of making the game easier--a conception that still holds sway and that some gamers, disturbingly, wish to perpetuate.

Cosmo, and gamers like him, exemplify playing on the periphery of the game. Peripheral vision is vision of whatever is outside direct line of sight, the ability to see things other than what one is directly looking at, stuff the viewer knows is there but ignores because it's not what they're "looking at," or "looking for." The same parts of the eye responsible for peripheral vision enable seeing in low light and seeing at night. What's in peripheral vision might be judged unimportant or secondary to the primary subject of sight, but the periphery affects what is seen, and peripheral vision is part of other essential abilities of the eye. Things in the periphery are always there; they always exist, they always make a difference. We often think of what's in the periphery as distracting from the issue at hand, but by the same token, what's in focus distracts from the periphery. The periphery, as in Cosmo's case, is what makes the "zombie hover" possible. Not only does Cosmo employ literal "peripherals," like the Gameboy Advance, but he is also a part of the community of speedrunners who work from the game's periphery sharing knowledge about the game and finding secrets about the game that are peripheral to the main processes of the game--people we talk about games with are always there, but we rarely consider them "part" of the game. It's overwhelmingly things

that are not part of the game itself that make Cosmo so good at the game and if Comso only focused on the prescribed playing field, his character's journey through the adventure, he would never have encountered what enables him to transgress the established order of the game and take Link off the beaten path. Instead of developing "tunnel vision" (the medical term for loss of peripheral vision) for the game at hand, Cosmo plays the games that happen *around* the game *in the periphery*, so he can develop skills and knowledge to change how the game is played. The games around the game are collectively known as "metagames," and through "metagaming," Cosmo and his fellow "metagamers" make real and apparent changes to the central game *through* the periphery because the periphery is the domain of transgressive play and metagaming. When it comes to problems that drain energy or restrict movement (like how to save time in a speedrun), looking to the periphery brings the solution into focus, because the solution is there all along but looking right at it obscures it.

Video games are complex systems that people put a lot of time and energy into understanding, manipulating, and inhabiting, and speedruns show players playing games to their limits. In a speedrun, players analyze every bit of the game's system, from where hitboxes are, to how long animations are, to where/when animations trigger, to where game data is stored on the game media and how it's accessed, in order to play the game in the fastest way possible--definitely not the central focus of the game. Speedruns are particularly interesting because they illustrate an intriguing core value of gaming: they are transgressive—players achieve the highest level of success through means that the designers did not take into account; they take what the game designers wanted them to

achieve through *certain* means by means that the designers could in no way envision or, as speedruns prove time and time again, even comprehend.

This is part of what video games have to teach that is particularly interesting: a way of thinking that encourages people to learn systems in order to transgress them. Furthermore, a lot of this transgressive knowledge-making, as in speedrunning, is done in groups. Gaming communities work productively together on analyzing, decoding, and optimizing systems, and then put their theory into practice on a daily basis[1].

This view of gaming is all well and good in single-player situations, like speedrunning. Video games provide safe spaces for experimentation and experience, so breaking down a system is fine if you are the only one inhabiting it. In almost any context outside of single player games, real people's lives come into "play" and there comes into question what effects this kind of transgression has on them.

Multiplayer gaming communities, however, use "metagaming" as a name for pursuing gaming capital through their collaborative paratexts. Metagaming, in truth, has many definitions, some positive and some pejorative. Multiplayer gamers, for their part, discuss metagames and metagaming in very positive terms, as it is essential to the work they do, particularly in Collectable Cards Games, because a multiplayer environment is built by players just as much of not more than it is by the game system and its designers and when a foundation of the game is interacting with people, looking to the periphery for new strategies and insight becomes the norm. Collectable cards games were invented in 1993 by game designer Richard Garfield when Wizards of the Coast published a game

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[1] Video games are not the *only* thing that teach this kind of transgression, and transgression of this level certainly occurred before video games, but video games *in particular* teach this kind of transgressive thinking and it's worth looking into cultivating.

he invented called *Magic: The Gathering*, still a well known game still today. The game is played by two players positioned as wizards dueling in a multiverse of epic fantasy, and players play the game with card decks of their own construction, adding layers of collection, negotiation, valuation, and mediation to the game that are just as important as the duels themselves. The implications of a system like this, especially when the players organize online to formulate ways to play the game to its limits like speedrunners do, are that, through play and the pursuit of play, players generate a large body of theory to support their actions in a system that is constantly changing because they are constantly adapting themselves to it. At times, the peripheral game *is* the game. Thus, metagamers accustom themselves to looking "away" from the action on the playing field as a way to thrive on it regularly. The result is a constantly changing environment defined by perceptions of stability amidst not chaos but rapidly changing and tested ideas. In the midst of all this, gamers produce real, workable solutions to the changing problems they present to themselves through the process of metagaming.

Gaming is often relegated as a "waste of time" or an activity that trains people to antagonize each other. This paper addresses gaming as a medium that teaches people to collaborate with each other and address problems as a community to transgress barriers that block their advancement and produce new knowledge. The second chapter discusses how gaming teaches transgressive, generative action and defines the practice of metagaming as well as what metagames and metagamers are. Chapter 3 Discusses metagaming in the context it is arguably most notable in: collectable card games. The chapter starts by looking at *Magic: The Gathering*, to establish the conventions of CCGs and fundamental theory generated by players of that game that informs players of the

genre, before moving on to focus extensively on *Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014), a digital CCG, and examines how metagaming produces solutions to problems and can change game systems.

CHAPTER 2.   GAMING AS MOBILITY, METAGAMING AS SOCIAL
PRODUCTION

2.1   <u>Gaming, Politics, and Transgression</u>

The value of video games in society is, and continues to be, a debate with no

resolution in sight. Leaving aside those who contend that video games have *no* value

(a camp that dwindles everyday), Jesper Juul classifies the major arguments *for* the

value of video games into two major positions: "Video games can do what

established art forms do" and "video games transcend established categories" (Kindle

Locations 376-381). Juul argues for combining these two by casting them as an 'art of

failure,' wherein we encounter failure (similar to other art forms) as a participant (like

no other art form). Failure is important to Juul in relation to video games because they

give us chances to experiment with failure as a learning pursuit whereas other

mediums let us merely observe it or insulate us from it in some way. Video games,

argues Juul, provide controlled environments to experience *real* feelings of failure

(disappointment, regret, frustration, etc.) without the harsh consequences of the video

game world's failure (often death or worse), so that we can learn from those harsh

failures and adapt to them. For example, when falling down a pit in *Super Mario*

Brothers (Nintendo 1985) one does not fall down a pit in real life, but one can still

feel the anger, frustration, and despair that (most likely) comes with it. Similarly,

Resident Evil 4's (Capcom 2005) cabin survival scenes (instances in the game that

challenge the player with surviving in an isolated space while zombies[2] try to gain entry through doors and windows) don't' threaten the person playing them with terrible death at the hands of mindless thrall, but they do effectively recreate pressure from multiple origin points, inducing increasing levels of fear and panic from competing demands on time and resources that must be overcome just as surely as the zombies.

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Gee writes about the concepts of internal and external "design grammars" as keys to understanding, navigating, and changing semiotic domains. Semiotic domains, according to Gee, are systems where a semiotic medium is utilized to communicate meanings that are distinctly associated with that community (Gee 18). As Gee is quick to point out, the list of semiotic domains is endless, giving them room to encompass any community, making not just "gaming" a semiotic domain, but also individual games as well as any field, discipline, or profession with its own jargon. Gee then moves on to define what he calls the "content issue" of games. The content issue is the belief of western tradition that knowledge not linked to a scholarly discipline is less valuable. For knowledge to have value, it must be linked to physics, history, art, or literature, for example, and video games do not meet this criteria, so goes the popular critique, which is why they are perceived as providing meaningless

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[2] Technically, the antagonists of *Resident Evil 4* are not zombies. The inhabitants of the small Spanish village and nearby castle and army base that Leon Kennedy and Ashley Graham fight through have been exposed to "las plagas," parasites that control their brain function and make them slaves to a master parasite controlled by a cult leader. Though they are not zombies in the sense of being undead humans that hunger for human flesh, they shamble, relentlessly attack, and hiss and moan like zombies (they can also use weapons and communicate in labored Spanish, making them all the more threatening and intimidating). However, given the tradition of zombies in Haitian folklore as reanimated corpses that serve a magic-user and have no will of their own, the "ganados," as the zombies of *Resident Evil 4* are called (which roughly translates to "mob" or "cattle"), perhaps have more in common with 'traditional' zombies than those of *Night of the Living Dead* or *28 Days Later*.

fun rather than contributing to a knowledge discipline (Gee 20-21). Gee's answer to the content issue of gaming is that what gaming teaches is not passive information but how information (content) operates in and on our world because they (re)produce semiotic domains; gaming, in other words, teaches how things come to make sense and have value. While a physics textbook describes physics to the reader, a game relying on a physics engine to support its core mechanics like the Rube Goldberg-style puzzle game *The Incredible Machine* (Sierra Entertainment 1992) or the action-puzzle game *Angry Birds* (which is literally marketed as a "physics game") (Rovio Entertainment 2009) create semiotic domains of physics that demonstrate the discourse and operation of physics that instruct the player in its *functions* through experiencing them. Juul's argument, then, is an extension of Gee's: in giving us a chance to experiment with a system, a game teaches how it functions, how test its limits, and how to apply that knowledge elsewhere in intersecting semiotic domains. According to Gee, active engagement with semiotic systems through games emphasizes three key factors: 1) experience, 2) affiliation, and 3) preparation--seeing the world in new ways, making connections between semiotic domains, and preparing for new problems, both in the primary domain and branching, related domains. Games teach not only seeing the world as it is, but how it *can be* connected and changed (Gee 23).

In order to engage critically with these factors and start innovating and changing a system, a learner needs to be able to engage with the situated meanings within a semiotic domain (Gee 23). This kind of meta thinking comes from understanding the internal and external design grammars of the semiotic system.

Internal design grammar is what makes something "acceptable or typical" in a semiotic domain and external design grammar is "the principles and patterns" the identify what social practices and identities are "acceptable or typical" within the semiotic domain's affinity group members (Gee 30). In other words, semiotic domains, in purposing language around certain issues, set up *value systems*, through their design grammars, that define what their members discuss and how they discuss it. Games teach active engagement with the discourse of semiotic domains and the value systems themselves. What is "acceptable or typical" is what is valuable. By learning the internal and external design grammars of a gaming community, gamers learn to make metaphysical connections between individual games, game genres, games they find good or bad, and how to employ strategies when playing a game. Bound up in all these judgments is a system of value that determines what is acceptable by consensus of the domain's affinity group members. For example, using a mouse and keyboard to play games on a PS3, though possible, is not typical, so *Uncharted* (Sony Computer Entertainment 2007) does not include support for it natively. According to Gee's theory, this is because the designers of the game have not included the option by default (internal design grammar) and the majority of players have not deemed it necessary, preferring the socially accepted practice of using a DualShock 3/SIXAXIS controller designed specifically to work with the PlayStation 3 (external design grammar)[3]. This issue may seem like a mundane or low stakes example, especially to people whose semiotic domains don't intersect with

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[3] There are workarounds that allow players to use a mouse and keyboard to play PS3 games, but it is very rare to hear players talk about doing so. Therefore, while the practice may be "acceptable," a relatively small group of gamers know about the possibility, making it acceptable in a very limited realm but not "typical."

this issue, but for a different semiotic system (like a government aid program or a college campus governing body), this kind of value distinction can affect decision-making and power differentials on local scales up to global. The two grammars are not mutually exclusive, and knowledge of both is what fosters critical engagement and the ability to innovate in and alter these domains, but it's important to not lose sight of the fact that these are value systems nonetheless. That games teach how to alter these value systems is part of what makes them so remarkable, but this process is also remarkably complex, to the point that the work can seem invisible or illusory--it seems just out of reach or out of sight. Play hides subversion in plain sight.

An inroad to understanding how play fosters transgressive action is to look at the relationships between rules and play and players and designers. Semiotic domains (around gaming or otherwise) grant members power and access through their ability to recognize and navigate value systems so that they are recognized by members of the community through their shared values. Video games, at the same time, are designed systems with values built in to them by their designers. Play, however, is not controlled entirely by those rules. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, in their game design manual *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, define three primary schemas of game design built off the work of Johan Huizinga on gaming from his 1944 book *Homo Ludens*: rules, play, and culture. Huizinga conceived of play as important and valuable in and of itself (opposed to a mere indicator or building block of more "serious" activity) because play veers away from focusing on the rational. Huizinga's point is not that humans playing are irrational or that play is not grounded in reality, but that humans playing are shifting focus away from rationality in favor of

focusing on irrational logic, proving that humans are not totally, as enlightenment convention dictates, beings of ration. Huizinga identifies three key characteristics of play: it is voluntary, it is not "real" but instead exists in temporary spheres, and it creates order for itself (Huizinga 7, 8, 10). Together these three elements make the case that play is something that departs from the logic of everyday life and grants experiential freedom to players, but is still governed by rules and remains linked to the non-play world. The concept of the "magic circle" is the most often noted idea from Huizinga's work because it provides a vehicle for understanding all three of these principles. Huizinga refers to play existing in "the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice" because these domains rely in location-specific logics that insulate their play from real life and provide indicators of when players are leaving them and thus "leaving" the game (Huizinga 10). The magic circle in which the game exists is the barrier that gives the rules validity by separating them from the "rules" of real life. When one violates the rules of the game, one violates the circle and ends the game (Huizinga 11). However, despite this separation, games are still productive because they allow people to embody things they are "not" and experience the world/versions of the world/new worlds from different perspective. "Magic circles" themselves are bubble worlds that recenter on "off-center" logics that come into focus when the center is temporarily put aside. Play exists as proof that irrationality has a productive place in rationality--that seriousness and experimentation are linked with irrationality and thinking of possibilities outside the dominant rules.

Salen and Zimmerman's work expands the scope of Huizinga's writing by differentiating how they delineate rules, play, and culture themselves and by taking into account criticisms of Huizinga's work that breaking the magic circle does not effectively end the game. For Salen and Zimmerman, rules are the organization of the designed system that contain the essential logic or structure of a game, play is the human experience of that system containing the "experiential, social, and representational schemas that foreground the player's participation with the game and with the other players," and culture is the larger context that the game system engages and inhabits (Salen & Zimmerman 26 & 27). In other words, the rules of the game are a rigid structure, and play is action that experiments within that structure and pushes against it, and both exist in cultural contexts providing touchstones that inform and are influenced by the game. Rules are meant to define what a player "can" and "can't" do in multiple ways. Salen and Zimmerman outline six basic properties of rules: they limit player action, they are explicit and unambiguous, they are shared by all players, they are fixed, they are binding, and they are repeatable (Salen & Zimmerman 132). What this means is that rules must be stable, they must be known to all players, they must be restrictive, and they must be portable between instances of the game, and they must be consistent in order to provide a stable backdrop for play. In the case of "traditional" games like Tic-Tac-Toe, Go, or Monopoly, they encompass things like board size and layout, how and when to move or lay pieces, and when victory is achieved. In the case of video games, they additionally encompass things like the terrain of the environment (because the environment determines what is an obstacle and what is dangerous), the size of the "PC" or player-

character avatar (which determines the size of the PC's vulnerable or actionable areas, also known as a "hit box"), and the relationships between action on the input device and the action on the screen (because how a player inputs commands and what commands are available determine what it is possible for the player to do) (Salen & Zimmerman 150 & 153). All of these things are part of rules because they serve to "restrict and stylize" the players' actions (Salen and Zimmerman 150). Rules are part of the internal and external design structures of individual games because they form the basis of what is "typical and acceptable" to find within a game and therefore what players and designers center their discourse around in the game; rules define the restrictions of play and therefore take part in defining the boundaries of what is normal and valued inside the system. While rules provide a structure that makes the free movement of play possible because movement lacks meaning without a context in which to move, rules cannot control play entirely (Salen & Zimmerman 300). Therefore, as Salen & Zimmerman put it, play exists because of rules (the magic circle) but also in *opposition* to them; play inherently resists and opposes rigid structures while following the rules (Salen & Zimmerman 300). Play is not complicit with the sameness or mathematical logic enforced by the rules of the system. Play even has the power to change the rules of the system it happens in, and Salen and Zimmerman call this kind of play "transformative" (Salen and Zimmerman 301). Transformative play is when the actions of players "overflow and overwhelm the more rigid structure" in which they are playing, necessitating reorientation or redesign of the system (Salen & Zimmerman 301).

Transgression is a core value of gaming that is especially relevant here. What gamers learn to do when they engage in gaming is identify the value system of a game world through its design grammars and rules and then play against them to move through the system and transgress against the values, making actions that are outside of the designers' scope "typical and acceptable." Good designers test and tune their games to produce desired actions in the player, but play can never be fully accounted for, and the possibility always exists for it to change the system (as in the *Wind Waker* speedrunning example). And because games, as Juul and Gee point out, connect to emotions, experiences, and domains outside their own systems, application of this transgressive system analysis and social mobility travels with gamers. Gee writes about how games involve players in behavioral challenges that result in growth beyond the gamescape:

> If children (or adults) are playing video games in such a way as to learn actively and critically then they are:
>
> 1.   Learning to experience (see and act on) the world in a new way
>
> 2.   Gaining the potential to join and collaborate with a new affinity group
>
> 3.   Developing resources for future learning and problem solving in the semiotic domains to which the game is related
>
> 4.   Learning how to think about semiotic domains as design spaces that engage and manipulate people in certain ways and, in turn, help create certain relationships in society among people and groups of

people, some of which have important implications for social justice"

(Gee 45-46)

In total, Gee claims that playing games trains players to apply the skills they learn about systems *within* the game world to changing the world *around* them. What games do for players is "*situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems and reflect on the intricacies of the design of imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined social relationships and identities in the modern world*" (Gee 48). What games teach is how to identify value systems and game those systems for productive ends—how to form the best solutions to problems and triumph over odds against as "worlds" change.

Intelligence that enables its possessor to move between contexts and modify identity according to conventions is called "metis." Marcel Detienne and Jen-Pierre Vernant in *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* define 'metis' as "wiley intelligence, of effective, adaptable cunning" (Detienne and Vernant 3). Detienne and Vernant further describe metis as "a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing; it implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years" (Detienne and Vernant 3). Metis, to the Greeks, was considered a height of mental growth because it represents a wisdom that reflects in action and not necessarily in "knowing," per se. Metis is practice-based intelligence, and not necessarily taxonomic or descriptive intelligence. On its own, metis is regarded as a kind of mental athleticism, an embodied intelligence that

classical philosophy came to associate with sophists and athletes though it is also notably linked to the iconic hero Odysseus and the Olympians Hephaestus and Athena (Dolmage 8, Hawhee loc 1003 1007). Hawhee writes that "metis […] acknowledges a kind of immanence—it emerges as a part of particular situations, cunning encounters" (Hawhee loc 962). Metis thrives because it is trickstery, resourceful, and hard to constrain. It's the kind of trickery that overturns brute force or destructive actions with finesse and cunning (Dolmage 9). Metis's resourcefulness, in part, is it's focus on finding different perspectives of problems, on reorienting focus and seeing solutions *come into* focus by finding new ways to see them.

Video games are highly conducive to teaching this kind of cunning, since games often task a player with crafting a solution from a variety of possibilities. *Starcraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010), for example, tasks players with gathering resources, training and upgrading armies, and managing their movements in battle with individual clicks of a mouse, making the game as much about micromanagement and task layering as possible, with play on the competitive level requiring lightning-quick action and reaction without hesitation (Konami 1998). *Metal Gear Solid* tasks the player with infiltrating a nuclear facility under the control of a terrorist organization through stealth instead of brute force, and challenges players to solve puzzles that lie in the paratextual space of the game and the outside world; in one notable example, characters in the game tell the PC to look for a communication access code "on the box." The purposefully ambiguous phrasing leaves room for the player to look for the solution in a screenshot *on the box the game is packaged in*, looking away from the central game world.

These skills of analysis and movement teach players to develop social mobility. Jacques Ranciere, in his book *Dis-Agreement*, proposes a revised definition of politics to address the traditional definition's limited application to actually changing societies. The typical definition of politics is a practice of deciding who gets what and how much. Ranciere disagrees with this definition, arguing that this process is a conversation, and if they are part of the conversation they are already entitled to the protection "politics" involves--they will "get" something regardless. Those that aren't granted access to the conversation are left out of the process, and they receive nothing because they are not included in the privileged group. Ranceire says specifically:

> Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*" (Ranciere 28)

"Policing" is an appropriate name for this conversation because its concern is protecting the interests of its participants and promoting stability of the system to insure that there continues to be "power, places, and roles" to be distributed--it enforces sameness and does not actually imply room for change. Ranciere dismisses that "state apparatuses" or other Marxist jargon is part of this policing. This kind of policing is conversation built into the social fabric of a system, what he calls, "the law, generally implicit, that defines a party's share or lack of it," 'it' here meaning

access to social relations and state functions--protection under the rules (Ranciere 29).

Things like voting in elections, passing laws, and arguing cases in court don't count

as politics to Ranciere because they fulfill the position the political system grants the

participant rather than changing it. A system can't be changed by following the rules

and roles of that system. "Policing," according to Ranciece, "is not so much the

'disciplining' of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of

occupations and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed;"

it's not what you *can* get, it's what the system *allows* you to get. Politics, then, is "an

extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: [...] Political activity is

whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination.

It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard discourse where

once there was only place for noise" (Ranciere 29 & 30). Politics changes what is

"typical and acceptable" by making what was previously unacceptable into something

that cannot be denied as acceptable; it expands focus to include new people, things,

and ideas.

Mia Consalvo, in *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*, looks

specifically at the most readily identifiable transgressive activity in gaming: cheating,

at least or what players and designers consider cheating. Cheating in a game, breaking

the rules, is a chief factor in ending games for Huizinga because it breaks down the

"magic circle." Consalvo establishes early that cheating doesn't really end games but

instead shifts and changes them. When a rule is transgressed against, it doesn't mean

the the game is always over. Much of what is called cheating amounts to getting help

with a game from paratextual elements (things that exist alongside games as support

networks) like online FAQ databases, message boards, and hardware or software modifications to games. Consalvo modifies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital into gaming capital to establish what gamers are pursuing when they play games, and finds that much of what is constructed as gaming capital (being a skilled gamer, finishing games, appreciating and differentiating good games and bad games based on agreed upon criteria) is formed by these same paratextual elements. Pursuing "good gaming" is, in a sense, pursuing cheating, because that is how gamers decide as a community what is "good" about playing and completing video games. What Huizinga characterizes as antithetical to gaming is part of what defines gaming, and cheating is another way that play creates and tests new logics against what is established. "Cheating" is a way that play expands focus by gamers literally looking "outside" their games. Paratexts even become new ways to play *with* a game, Consalvo establishes, because they change what is possible, making paratexts themselves ludic (Consalvo 70).

The main reason players "cheat" in video games, particularly online multiplayer games, is to overcome obstacles to progress, and most often they turn to community paratexts (like FAQ databases and message boards) for help. Most gamers do not even consider consulting friends, family, or other members of their community "cheating." Referring back to Salen and Zimmerman, this kind of advantage is part of the element of play that is transformative, that plays against the rules and has potential to reorganize the design grammars by making new actions "acceptable or typical" through the advancement of gaming capital it achieves for players. Consalvo takes the position that cheating through the use of paratextual elements is a practice

that is "ludic, situated, and iterative in its expression," because, in the context of games, it is playful, and distributed through community channels that offer players new ways to play (Consalvo 127). It is also a way that, connected to Ranciere, people organize to push against boundaries that constrain them, and expand of change focus to systems do not entitle them to. This kind of networked political action is one way to define metagaming.

If social mobility means transcending systemic barriers to join conversations where one previously had no voice, then videogames are an ideal incubator for it, particularly since games involve the ludic activity of creating bubbles of extra-normal possibility. Video games teach a way of thinking that encourages people to learn systems in order to transgress them, not to be beholden to them—or to at the very least have the choice of following or disobeying systems while still obtaining their rewards. While there are not necessarily opportunities for this transgressive action in every game, gaming trains people to look for it by reading design grammars and playing in ways that push against the system to achieve victory. Furthermore, players routinely turn to paratexts for help advancing their position over obstacles to their progress. Gaming communities, like speedrunners or *Hearthstone* players, work productively together on analyzing, decoding, and optimizing systems, and then put their theory into practice on a daily basis via Twitch streaming, posting to Youtube, and discussing on message boards. Nearly everything about gaming is in some way geared toward opening up possibility and creating opportunities to refocus attention. All of these things are part of *metagames*, the social aspect of games**.**

2.2   What is Metagame/Metagaming?

Despite its influence on many matters of practice, *metagame* and *metagaming* have very muddled definitions. The latin word "meta" encompasses meanings such as between, with, after, behind, over, or about, so a basic definition of metagame follows that it is a game *about* gaming, *behind* gaming, or some such other self-referential element of gaming that is not immediately associated with gaming but is foundational to it. Dutta and King, writing in 1980 for a business/economics audience, quote sources from the 1970's identifying metagaming as a kind of game that *would* exist if one player gets to pick their strategy after the other players of a game (with the knowledge of what the others had picked) (Dutta & King 359). Similarly, roleplaying gamers (*Dungeons and Dragons* roleplaying) see metagaming as the enemy of role playing, characterizing it as making decisions *in* a game based on information *outside* the game. These two positions together represent metagaming from an "old-school" game theory or "purist" gamer perspective that view gaming as either always agonistic or strictly beholden to the magic circle. As Conslavo and Salen and Zimmerman, as well as other, have pointed out, the magic circle is either nonexistent in everyday gaming or at the very least necessarily permeable. The magic circle must be permeable to facilitate gaming, and metagaming is part of that process of facilitation, relating back to its literal positions as *meta*game.

Richard Garfield, noted game designer of *Magic: The Gathering* (a game with one of the biggest metagames of all time) deals with the term "metagame" in his 2000 essay "Metagames," referenced extensively in Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*. Salen, Zimmerman, and Garfield refer to metagame as the way "a game interfaces

outside of itself," and go on to divide "metagaming" into four categories: 1) what a player brings *to* a game, 2) what a player takes *away* from a game, 3) what happens *between* games, and 4) what happens *during* a game other than the game itself (Salen and Zimmerman 475). Salen and Zimmerman encompass Garfield's definition in their own: "aspects of game play that derive not from the rules of the game, but from interplay with surrounding contexts," making metagaming "the relationship between the game and outside elements, including everything from player attitudes and play styles to social reputations and social contexts in which the game is played" (Salen and Zimmerman 474). James Gee and Elisabeth Hayes define metagame as "the social practice that happen inside and/or outside the game," saying that the presence of a metagame is what makes the difference between referring to "games" and "Games" (Gee and Hayes 130). Together, these definitions render metagaming as something that is either inherent, inseparable, or necessary to gaming on a social or cultural level. A metagame, perhaps, is a space where the tension between "cheating" and interacting with others through paratexts, as Consalvo finds, gels into practice. While the idea of metagaming raises a red flag when attention is called to it, it operates in many ways that are inoffensive and, in fact, necessary and productive to gaming in general. The controversy about metagaming, so to speak, becomes noncontroversial in everyday practice when, as with calling getting help from other players "cheating," people say they are against it but see no problem with it when they encounter it themselves, in fact finding it a necessary part of their gaming that helps them reach new realms of experience[4]. Metagaming is a process that is always

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[4] This odd tension is consistent in that people seem to comply with forwarding the idea that the individual should not seek help outside itself and that rules should not (not "cannot," "should" not) be

there, just outside the central focus on the periphery, from which it changes games in-focus over time, and gamers, both consciously and unconsciously, are part of this process. For this reason, I use metagaming here to mean a process of *social production* that moves and changes a game even if the rules of its system stay the same. When linked to the idea that games teach social mobility, learning how to grant speech in contexts where one did not previously have any or see what was previously out of focus, metagaming becomes a way people in groups work together to change systems and transcend them.

Returning to Garfield's division of metagaming into four parts provides valuable means to make metagaming tangible and discover more about how it functions. Each part describes another aspect of how metagaming encourages movement and reveals how it is social production:

1) *What a player brings* to *a game*. This includes both tangible and intangibles, like bringing a baseball bat to a baseball game or bringing a deck to a *Hearthstone* match. Likewise, it can also include knowledge of Chess opening moves, information from paratexts about a game like Consalvo describes, and even a persons' own reputations--are you known to be aggressive? Pensive? Trustworthy? Rude? These are all things metagaming takes into account. (Salen and Zimmerman 475)

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transgressed, but they recognize when this rule is holding them back and work together to "break" them. This focus on individualism is consistent with a meritocratic paradigm that argues that individuals can succeed without intervention but inherently favors those who enter a "game" with more inherent advantages despite denying the existence of those advantages. People know that working together to break boundaries that are oppressive is good work, but are not given acceptable channels to express that.

2) *What a player takes away* from *a game*. Again, what a player takes away can be both tangible and intangible. Tangible things are usually rewards or prizes, and intangible things are things like social status and knowledge. These stakes play a part in externally motivating players to play again (or not), but just as valuable (if not more) are the *experiences* players take away with them, like whether their beliefs about a particular strategy or opponent were validated or contradicted. Generally, what players take away from a game relates to the narrative that unfolded while playing it, providing instant reflection on the decisions made throughout the game that get immediately incorporated into play decisions going forward via the concept of metagame. (Salen and Zimmerman 476)

3) *What happens* between *games*. This space is what gamers themselves most often associate with metagames. Between games, players read up on new strategies, study how other players have performed at big events and why, build new decks for games like *Hearthstone* or buy new baseball bats or golf clubs. They reflect on their previous performances and practice to improve their strategies. Most of this activity, if not all, involves interaction with paratextual elements, which means that players are communicating with each other and practicing *with* each other via message boards, youtube video, twitch streaming, or scrimmaging with each other (*playtesting*). Narratives that spread practical and reputational information are also included in this part of metagaming. Things like making decorative changes to one's equipment (stickers on an equipment bag) or reading texts (watching *Game of Thrones*) not directly related to the game but that inspire action in the player are also part of

metagaming because they affect how people play a game and not just how they pursue victory. (Salen and Zimmerman 476)

4) *What happens* during *a game other than the game itself*. In one sense, this is the total effect of "real life" on game play. This includes things like feelings of competition or camaraderie, conditions of the physical environment, any social factors, "trash talking," or other interventions of reputation. It can be things like bluffing, noticing a player's tells, or playing in run-down facilities that are not well maintained.

Overall, when saying that metagames are what happens before, after, between, and during games, a metagame can be everything that is not *the game* itself. This is partially true. It is true that a metagame pervades and persists beyond the central game itself, but it is still tied to that game. It exists *on the periphery*. Furthermore, a metagame is made up of the *intersections* a game makes with concepts around it, no matter what they may be. Metagaming encompasses activities that we do on a daily basis, but are not necessarily viewed as essential or valued as productive; metagaming is a practice that is always there but not always in focus despite its essential nature.

Metagames are not unknown to players. In some circles, particularly competitive games (i.e. non-single player) games with active communities, "metagaming" is one of the highest forms of strategy that players develop. This is the case because it involves building practices that extend "beyond" the game to learning about the context that individual matches exist in, and this information is offered freely through paratexts. Writing for the competitive *Hearthstone* community to introduce new players to the concept of "metagame," Varranis of team Don't Kick

My Robot (TeamDKMR for short) explains that the metagame is progression of ideas motivated by reaction to what is perceived to be most popular or "strongest" in the current landscape. He writes that this progression "constantly refers back to itself to determine the best deck at the moment," invoking a definition of "meta" as self-referential, making "metagame" the flow of ideas that configures what is popular/strong at the moment as a constant heuristic to produce new strategies that take its place. *Magic: The Gathering's* community wiki defines metagaming as "prediction of how others will make decisions in a game based on their personality or their previous decisions," putting emphasis on paying attention to and analyzing the choices other players make as much if not more than your own ("Metagame"). The meta (gamers refer to their game's metagame as "the meta" for short) is a constantly moving process that is just as concerned with what the "now" of a game as it is with the "future" of a game because it produces both by being a framework for players to solve ceaseless, resurgent problems that change with every iteration[5]. While some gamers position "the metagame" as a monolithic or stable entity that they look to "break" with innovative strategy, Varranis captures the always-moving nature of the metagaming, rendering the metagame as an entity that breaks down constantly rather than something that solidifies and then shatters periodically. Varranis discusses how the meta is a constant process of responding to dominant ideas, displacing them and replacing them with new ideas that players immediately set about displacing. This constant motion makes the meta recursive and iterative while it continues to move forward; there is no "going back" in a meta despite the resurgence of particular ideas. A metagame is always going forward even if it recycles. Whereas Garfield, Gee,

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[5] Wicked Problems

Hayes, Salen and Zimmerman's definition of metagame describes a set of practices, Varranis and other gamers engaged in those practices see a metagame as moving entity, a product and process of practical iteration.

Being a good "metagamer," then, means knowing the "now" of a game in order to craft the "future." However, one does not have to be an elite gamer in order to participate in this process. In fact, no player can be effectively excluded from metagaming. Metagaming can be as simple as looking at whatever practice is dominant and trying to find what counters it, but doing that effectively requires active involvement in the community such that you can understand what made to current "most popular" entity popular in the first place because that gives insight into its logic in order to counter it. In order to be a good metagamer, one needs to not just *know* things like who or what is popular, but maintain interest in those people and ideas, developing their knowledge as the metagame progresses. Being a good metagamer means *caring* about the people you play with and what they do because they form a metagame with you that you all develop to push a game forward into the new. It means being on the lookout for things, people, and ideas on the periphery and bringing them in to change the game.

Metagaming produces theory that is rigorously tested in a practical landscape in real time. A metagame is a space where what *could* be is just as powerful as what *is*, and metagaming is a process of figuring out how to implement what *could* be in the practical context of now, moving the metagame forward in the process. Metagaming links invention and delivery through play because the "delivery" of metagaming (playing the game itself) is part of the invention process for the

metagame as well. Metagaming is taking action in the present based on primarily the future and not the past. Metagaming is the networked political process that makes a multiplayer game different every time it's played; though the game pieces are always the same the landscape of the game shifts over time because of metagaming. This is what gaming produces: ways to do new things with the same tools and necessitate new tools in the process, an expanded view that redefines periphery and centeron a regular basis. Metagaming is a messy, mangled, unfinished thing that produces workable and and effective answers to ever-changing, emergent problems on a daily basis, as the digital, always-on-always-global metagame of *Hearthstone* (discussed at length in Chapter 3) proves. What works one day isn't guaranteed to work the next, and players work together to reorient themselves to the conversation on a daily basis. They practice metic nimbleness because of the constant experimental, experiential play to test the limits of the rules.

Rhetoricians might have better insight into the everything-and-also-nothing nature of metagames, given its role as a thing/practice/process that underpins daily activities but has an amorphous and highly contestable definition despite its irrefutable existence. In some senses, "metagame" is to the magic circle formalization of gaming as Jenny Rice's "rhetorical ecologies" are the rhetorical situation formalization of rhetoric. Strict interpretations of the magic circle view gaming as contained within these circles with predetermined factors playing out (players, rules, roles) that are insulated from the rest of life, similar to how constraining rhetoric to situations tends to make them closed off to each other and relegate them to one-way exchanges, denying their impact on each other (Edbauer 13). The metaphor of

ecology, however, better captures how rhetoric moves through social connections (Edbauer 14). A metagame, then, is an example of a rhetorical ecology because it is a way that information moves around socially, not constrained by the magic circle because metagaming is also usually peripheral or out of focus to people outside gaming communities that discuss it as part of their daily work, it has some infrastructural qualities as well. Infrastructure, like, metagaming, is usually peripheral to people's everyday live while being integral to them.

2.3   Metagaming as Infrastructure

In "Toward Information Infrastructure Studies: Ways of Knowing in a Networked Environment.", Bowker, Baker, Millerand, and Ribes define infrastructure as "*pervasive enabling resources in network form*" that encompasses both physical and abstract entities (97, 98). Metagaming fits this minimal definition: it *pervades* gaming and individual game systems, it *enables* different types of gaming and advancements in the playing of games, and it functions as action between players like a network. They also point out that infrastructure involves social organizational and community issues, meaning that mediation, the process of forming information through infrastructure "encompasses relations between people, between machines, or between communities as well as a vast variety of human–technology interfaces," meaning that infrastructure is not defined by any one type of relationship; humans and machines commingle and all their interactions are part of infrastructure (107). Thus infrastructure is an embodied cooperation between any combination of humans and machines to create knowledge. Metagaming operates the same way, relying on

interaction between players, designers, game rules, and game pieces in a variety of locations and settings to create knowledge.

In "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," Susan Leigh Star gives a lengthier definition of infrastructure as having eight qualities. Each one provides an entry into discussion on metagaming as infrastructure on a more rigorous level. Exploring each gives different insight to metagaming as a practice and how it changes centers from the periphery.

Embeddedness. Infrastructure is sunk into and inside of other structures, social arrangements, and technologies (Star 381). Metagaming is embedded inside gaming, which is embedded in a variety of social interactions itself. It can't be disentangled from those structures because it feeds from these structures and vice versa. It can't be "unearthed" and separated from other practices; it must be connected to something else

Transparency. Infrastructure is transparent to use, in the sense that it does not have to be reinvented each time or assembled for each task, but invisibly supports those tasks (Star 381). While the metagame reinvents itself continually, because it is an engine of production, that is what makes it transparent to players. No one questions that metagaming is happening because it is what moves the content of topic of the game, so while the metagame is constantly moving, it's the content that appears to be moving, rendering metagaming itself an invisible, taken-for-granted process. This is especially true outside gaming communities or even gaming communities that do not discuss metagames as part of their design grammar. Since cutting out a

metagame means cutting out all the social elements associated with the game itself, a metagame can never really not be present.

Reach or scope. This may be either spatial or temporal--infrastructure has reach beyond a single event or one-site practice (Star 381). Metagaming is far reaching in that it happens on multiple levels and in multiple groups. This means that it can (and does) happen in friend groups, all the way up through local tournaments and competitions to state, regional, national and globals level. A *Scrabble* group among friends has its own metagame as does the Scrabble world championships. Wherever there are people playing a game, metagaming happens, and it's metagaming that makes a game interesting enough to be played more than once, because how people play the game and the interactions they have around and over the game are what make it fun and meaningful. Players produce new knowledge through metagaming as part of their reciprocal relationship with the game: to keep it going, which keeps them playing. Having a uniform experience at any level is detrimental to both of those pursuits.

Learned as part of membership. The taken-for-grantedness of artifacts and organizational arrangements is a sine qua non of membership in a community of practice (Bowker & Star, in press; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Strangers and outsiders encounter infrastructure as a target object to be learned about (Star 381). While one can play a game without knowledge of its metagame, playing it over a period of time and talking about it with people generates knowledge of the metagame because one is becoming enmeshed in it. Learning the metagame changes how one talks about the game, and that is a primary sign of membership.

Links with conventions of practice. Infrastructure both shapes and is shaped by the conventions of a community of practice (e.g. the ways that cycles of day-night work are affected by and affect electrical power rates and needs) (Star 381). As stated above, metagaming is integrally linked with conventions of practice. One way to look at it could be that the game system (cards, rules, manufacturers, distributors) is the infrastructure that enables metagaming, but it is much more reciprocal than that. Designers design sets and cards in reaction to metagames so that they can participate in diversifying, pushing, and shaping the metagame. Without question, the cards, pieces, and rules players use while playing would not exist or continue to evolve without the metagame to necessitate their evolution, and the metagame evolves in part *because* the rules and game elements change. Thus, this relationship is a reciprocal cycle wherein metagaming shapes and is shaped by community conventions.

Embodiment of standards. Modified by scope and often by conflicting conventions, infrastructure takes on transparency by plugging into other infrastructures and tools in a standardized fashion" (Star 381). As stated previously, gamers see metagames as embodiments of standards even though the metagames themselves change because they are a major factor in determining what will be effective and what strategies are obsolete. The way metagaming embodies standards is through gameplay and discussion around gameplay on message boards, at tournaments and between players anywhere. Any time people are discussing strategy in terms of how to have "answers" for dominant of popular moves or game pieces,

they are embodying standards because they are reifying those moves/pieces as standard metagame fixtures that must be accounted for.

Built on an installed base. Infrastructure does not grow de novo; it wrestles with the interia of the installed base and inherits strengths and limitations from that base (Star 382)*.* The installed base of a metagame is whatever game it is connected to, and the inertia it wrestles with is the fixed nature of the rules. Once defined, rules and game pieces to not evolve without metagaming, and the metagame inherits the strengths and limitations of that base. Metagaming is also the struggle against those strengths and limitations.

Becomes visible upon breakdown. The normally invisible quality of working infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks: the server is down, the bridge washes out, there is a blackout. Even when there are backup mechanisms or procedures, their existence further highlights the now-visible infrastructure (Star 382). Though all players participate in metagames, it is usually only visible to those who explicitly make it their goals to shape it, same as infrastructure is visible to those who maintain it, non-metagamers (or those who do not consider themselves part of metagaming) are usually introduced to the concept of a metagame existing when there is such a perceived problem with it that discussion shifts from what is good or powerful to literally what is "broken" about the meta. An example of this contention is the subject of Chapter 3. Ironically, a metagame is "broken" when it stops moving and one idea can reign to dominant. Such events call attention to the metagame in order to mobilize players to try and take down to idea that is strangling the meta.

Is fixed in modular increments, not all at once or globally. Because infrastructure is big, layered, and complex, and because it means different things locally, it is never changed from above (Star 382). This, above all, is certainly true of metagaming. While metagaming incorporates elements from designers and distributing companies that could be seen as "above" the game, these entities cannot, at the end of the day, control how players play, and metagame, a game. Therefore, players are the ones primarily in control of a metagame, even if that means killing it by leaving the game after designers make a decision that alienates them or certain moves become so dominant that toppling them is too difficult or uninteresting. Good designers know players are the lifeblood of their games and build their games accordingly, with consideration that players *will* metagame and they, as designers, have limited control over how.

Overall, if gaming is an activity that fosters transgressive action by fostering safe spaces to learn how to assert one's ability to speak in new contexts by learning what a system values and using knowledge of those values to present oneself in such a way that one's speech can't be denied, then metagaming is the networked practices of players working together to achieve those ends. Metagaming is when a groups of people work together to identify problems and produce, through their collective social action, solutions to those problems and reinvent stable systems. Metagaming is one way players take control of rules prescribed by someone else and circumvent limitations of those rules to enter conversations that are otherwise blocked off to them. Metagaming exists on the periphery of those rules and it is from the periphery, not out

of sight but out of mind, that players change and resist the rules through play. By examining the metagames of *Magic: The Gathering* and *Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft* collectible cards games, the next chapter provides examples of theory produced by metagamers, shows how that theory is put into practice, and shows how it changes the conversations of those games by providing inroads from the periphery.

CHAPTER 3. THE HEARTHSTONE METAGAME IN ACTION

3.1   Background

As stated previously, metagamers test their theory through rigorous practice as part of their being. This chapter will discuss the metagame of one game in particular, *Heathstone: Heroes of Warcraft.* The tradition of Collectable Card Games is important to understanding the metagame of *Hearthstone*. Most, if not all, of that tradition (and a great deal of the theory produced by it) comes from *Magic: The Gathering,* the first Collectable Card Game. This first section is a brief history of *Magic*, its legacy as it pertains to *Hearthstone*, and the lasting effects the theory and practice of playing *Magic* have on Collectable Card Games as a genre

3.1.1   Basic Design

Magic the Gathering is the first Collectable Card Game (CCG) and still arguably the most successful and notable. The game was created by Richard Garfield and the first set was published by Wizards of the Coast in 1993. Garfield was inspired by games like *Cosmic Encounter* and *Strat-o-Matic Baseball* (Garfield). *Cosmic Encounter* is a board and card game about aliens vying for control of territory in space, and *Strat-o-Matic Baseball* is like a fantasy baseball game where players use baseball trading cards to build a teams that compete against each other based on the cards printed stats (Garfield, "Strat-O-Matic Baseball (1962)," "Cosmic Encounter (1977)"). *Cosmic Encounter* appealed to

Garfield because it featured 50 roles for the player to take on along with cards that granted players abilities to break certain rules, making the variance of play virtually limitless, and Garfield liked how players brought their own playing pieces to *Strat-o-Matic* (Garfield). Garfield wanted to combine the two into a modular card game, wherein players constructed a role through making a deck of cards they would use in combat against the other, resulting in something that was "wild and not entirely unpredictable, but not entirely unknown, like a set of forces you almost, but don't quite, understand" (Garfield).

The game Garfield created is *Magic: The Gathering*, a game that is still in circulation today and follows the same basic rules. The mythology of the game casts players as wizards who survey a multiverse and collect creatures, sorceries, and artifacts from across the worlds to create their "library" (deck) of spells to use against other wizards (hence the subtitle "*The Gathering*"). Players play resources, creatures, and other spells to build strategies and disrupt their opponents' efforts until one of them either runs out of life points or cards/spells in their library (either vanquishing or exhausting them beyond the capability to continue). Today, there are over 10,000 unique magic cards in circulation, and 12 million players in 70 countries ("Magic: The Gathering Fact Sheet"). The depth and customization offered by *Magic* led Wizards to establish the *Magic* "Pro Tour" tournament series in 1996 and has awarded over $30 million in prizes since then ("Magic: The Gathering Fact Sheet"). To further foster the extensive network of *Magic* players, Wizards of the Coast established the Wizards Play Network to help local stores and organizations set up their own tournaments ("Magic: The Gathering Fact Sheet"). The genre of games *Magic* created established the emphasis on community and

customization that is the lifeblood on CCGs. The following is a breakdown of the

essential rules of *Magic: The Gathering* compiled from the basic rulebook and including

information from the "Comprehensive Rules" occasionally. While the terminology has

changed to become more accessible and consistent, the core structure represented by

these rules has not changed since 1993 when the game was published.

   Hearthstone is a digital CCG published by Blizzard, currently avaible for personal

computers and iPads. The game was released to the public via a closed beta program in

2013, 20 years after *Magic's* debut. The *Hearthstone* CCG draws from the mythology of

the *Warcraft* series, an epic fantasy-strategy-roleplaying universe, with cards representing

inhabitants, spells, and items from the span of the entire series (similar to how *Magic*

posits a time-nonspecific multiverse to draw spells from). Players pick a "hero" from the

Warcraft lore to play as, each with their own inborn ability that can be used once per turn

throughout the entire game, and build decks from a common pool as well as a pools of

cards unique to each hero. The structure of the game is very similar to *Magic*, but the

digital environment allows *Hearthstone* to streamline and automate various upkeep and

rules-related elements. For example, there is no rulebook for *Hearthstone*. Instead, the

game teaches players how to play through 5 short tutorial matches that each cover one

essential element of Hearthstone. In addition, *Hearthstone's* cards are easy to read and

the digital nature takes care of rule confusion, instantly making definitive and reliable

decisions about how cards interact. The game takes the complexity, specificity, and

player dependent rules of a CCG like *Magic* and distills it into something that can be seen

and understood through playing, putting emphasis on the complexity of the play by

relieving players of the need to debate and argue rules. It makes visual what is otherwise

metaphysical about traditional CCGs--from showing cards moving from deck, to hand, to field to showing fireballs crash into their targets. The accessibility and complexity of *Hearthstone* has made it one of the fastest rising e-sports yet.

Nearly every successful CCG is centered around the the paradigm *Magic* popularized: two players with hands of private cards build up resources and play cards that stay on the field or dissipate after playing, and players fight each other with these cards until one player loses all hit points. *Hearthstone* is not exception. As such, there are some key ideas that are essential to what CCGs are:

Players build decks. This idea emphasizes "collection" Collectable Card Games. Players collect cards from randomized booster packs and premade "starter" decks to build 60-card "full" decks and play against each other. Collecting cards and building decks instills social, economical, and role-playing elements in the game, with players negotiating with each other for cards and using them to construct decks. Different cards have different levels of rarity, giving them inborn value, but other overlays of value added as well, such as usability in particular decks, usability overall, the amount players want to include in decks, and things like whether or not the art is cool. There's also an element of role playing, as in crafting a deck a player also crafts a personality that gets demonstrated through playing with it. As current *Magic* card designer Mark Rosewater states, players play *Magic* (and other cards games) for many reasons, like getting to harness big monsters, winning tournaments, and as a form of expression (Rosewater). Both the interaction of personalities (in game and outside) and community negotiation over cards are things Garfield wanted to cultivate in the original design of the game. According to Garfield, "while the duels were for two players, the more players playing,

the better the game was. In some sense, the individual duels were a part of a single, larger game," the metagame (Garfield).

Drawing one card and playing one resource per turn. These are the primary way players get new resources, both by playing resources and by gaining new cards at random from their deck. Since they get these resources one at a time, maximizing use of them as well as playing cards that get extra card draws or resources in a turn are very valuable. These constants gives rise to essential strategic concepts in CCGs like "mana curve," "card advantage," and "tempo."

Creatures that stay on the field vs. spells that leave the field. For whatever reason, the idea of having creatures/monsters/minions that stay on the field and become the primary vehicles of combat has stuck. It makes sense from a practical standpoint, since, in a game where the goal is to reduce an opponent's life value to zero, it's easier to win if your cards can hang around and do damage over time rather than take effect and leave the game--the latter is probably more boring, as well. For better or worse, it adds another element of complexity that makes playing fun and challenging. All of a sudden you're not just fighting your opponent but also their horde of orcs, elves, merfolk, and whatever else they've brought with them, so you must raise your own army in response. It adds to the mythological, epic fantasy mood that *Magic* and most other CCGs are grounded in and build on the roleplaying element as well. Regardless, there are almost always cards that stick around versus leave the battlefield and interactions between cards hinge on these basic abilities as much as anything else

Cards are organized around themes. In *Magic*, there are five "colors" of magic. Each color (white, blue, black, red, and green) has mythological and strategic themes that

make the color recognizable and give it thematic strengths and weaknesses. Blue in

Magic, for example, is the color of "trickery and manipulation" and red "erupts with fire,

frenzy, and storms of rock and lava." The inborn strategies of blue and red respectively,

then, are that blue draws extra cards and counter moves but is creature poor and broadly

lacks the power to push for victory while red is very damage oriented with burst-like

spells and creatures that are and powerful but frail and red sometimes damages itself in

the process of damaging opponents. To further complicate things, mana sources in *Magic*

are affiliated with these colors, meaning that in addition to the capabilities of the cards,

players have to decide how much land and of what colors to run in their decks in order to

have the resources necessary at the right times in order to use their cards. These choices

get even more complicated when including more than one color in a deck, which

admittedly is often a smart thing to do since the strengths of one color can compensate for

the weaknesses of another. In its most rudimentary, this means players have to choose a

theme to work with or against based on the color(s) of mana they choose, they necessarily

limit the pool of cards they can put in a deck, and they must be conscious of what other

strategies/decks/categories have thematic advantages or weaknesses in relation to their

own choices.

  The Golden Rules. The golden rules of *Magic* are that what a card says is always

takes precidence over the rules of the game, if two cards conflict then the one with a

'can't' effect takes precedence, and any effect that can't be fulfilled is ignored ("Magic:

The Gathering Comprehensive Rules"). This is a guiding principle of all CCGs. Garfield

was inspired by this mechanic in *Cosmic Encounter*, where the different alien races had

special abilities that let them do things otherwise forbidden by the rules. Garfield

initially, when designing *Magic*, wanted to have the cards explain all the rules--*be* the rules. This idea proved unfeasible at the time, but the idea that a card took precedence over the rules remains. It's essential to building complexity in the game, and it sets the precedence for players looking for ways to subvert the rules through metagaming. It's part of makes CCGs inherently about looking away from the central structure of the game to see how new elements change it.

Part of the intoxicating appeal of CCGs is that they challenge players to balance multiple concepts of value across different scales and contexts, from which single move in one duel is right to what a fair price for a card based on how likely it is to be useful across multiple games and composition of the entire metagame. These core principles are part of it, and debates over how to effectively maximize play under the restrictions/constraints of these conventions is what amounts to, produces, and reinvents a CCG metagame. A detailed breakdown of the rules of *Magic* and *Hearthstone* reveals the similarities and key differences (Table 1).