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Unit 3: Play

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We are beginning to create a play community—not a forever community with a fixed code, but a temporary community with a code we make up as we go along, a community that we can continue creating anywhere, any time we find the people who want to create it with us.—**Bernard DeKoven**, *"Creating the Play Community"*

Introducing Social Play

The last few chapters have been a little bit lonely. In looking at experience, pleasure, and systems of representation, we emphasized an individual player's relationship to a game. It is, of course, important to consider each player as an individual: game designers need to make sure that every player who enters a game ends up having a meaningful experience, regardless of who else is playing. However, with this schema on *Games as Social Play*, we focus not just on the relationship between an individual player and a game, but also on the social experiences that occur when more than one player participates in the same game. The emphasis in the last few decades on single-player computer and video games is something of an anomaly in the eons-old history of gaming. While there are notable exceptions, such as solitaire card games, by and large over the centuries games have been valued as social experiences, as a way for people to relate to each other, as a way for people to *play* together. The fact that digital games are swinging back to favoring multiplayer experiences is not a new trend by any means: it is merely games returning to their roots as social play.

As players mingle with each other inside the magic circle, their social interactions highlight important aspects of a game's design. Meaningful play can be framed as a social phenomena. Understanding how social play becomes meaningful, manifest both as interactions occurring within an individual game, and as interactions across larger play communities, is the focus of this chapter.

This is not the first time we have discussed the interaction between players in a game. In *Games as Game Theory Systems*, for example, we explored the decision-making process of rational players within very specialized kinds of games. Even within the incredibly narrow constraints of game theory, the consideration of two-player strategies transformed simple choices into remarkably complex game problems. Now as we consider player interaction within the full gamut of social play, things get very tricky indeed.

Social Relations

When we frame a game as social play, we consider the relationships between elements in the game system to be social relationships. The word "social" refers broadly to player interaction, and occurs on two levels. The first level of social interaction occurs *within* the magic circle, as a product of the formal system of a game. For example, in a game of Tag players assume social roles of "It" (the chaser) or "not It" (the chased). These social interactions are *internally* derived, as they emerge from the game's rules. The second level of social interaction is derived *externally*—social roles brought into the game from outside the magic circle. Pre-existing friendships and rivalries that affect in-game strategic choices, for example, are externally derived elements of social play.

Whether internally or externally derived, social relationships between players are modified by every action taken in the game. Social roles playfully shift and transform as the game proceeds. (You may be "It," but not for long if you are quick!) Navigating, manipulating, and transforming these relationships is one way that players achieve meaningful play in the social realm. Furthermore, the social play that occurs between players is a function of the way the game operates as a system of meaning. Playing games generates meanings for players, which reproduce and challenge codes of social interaction. The kinds of meaning generated as players relate to one another within and through a game is at the center of our exploration of games as social play.

In earlier chapters, we established the idea that games are symbolic systems of meaning. Extending this idea through social play, we can consider a game as a symbolic system players use to communicate with each other. For example, two players can sit down and play Tic-Tac-Toe even if they don't share the same native tongue, because they both know the "language" of the game. This is communication via game play, in which a game becomes a context for stylized communication, mediated through social interaction. The rules of a game determine the

communication that takes place, limiting what players can do and say to each other. Marking Xs and Os on empty grid squares is how Tic-Tac-Toe players "speak" to each other in the language of the game.

External contexts always already affect communication via game play as well. Compared to other facets of play, the influence of factors brought to the game from external contexts is particularly strong when considering the social play of a game. Strategic and athletic skills, for example, generally evolve as a player becomes more familiar with the internal workings of a game. Social interaction skills, in contrast, build directly on human experience. Therefore, existing relationships of trust and distrust, friendship and enmity can have a tremendous impact on the way that a game is played from a social point of view.

Because the forms of social interaction that occur *within* a game have strong connections to forms of social interaction *outside* the game, it will be impossible to consider social play without straying just a bit into the realm of culture. For this reason, *Games as Social Play* has a somewhat ethnographic character: understanding games as social play requires a great deal of careful observation. These initial forays to the edge of the magic circle and beyond will help set the stage for the CULTURE chapters to follow.

Player Roles

From a social play point of view, when a player enters into the system of a game, that player is given a role to play. By "role" we don't mean that a player becomes a character in a story. Rather, we mean that each player has a role in the social network of a game. Within this system of social relationships there are a wide variety of roles that players can assume, from arch-enemy to team leader to partner-in-crime. Roles are not fixed and may change many times within the course of a game. For example, in a three-player competitive game with one winner, at any moment during play one player might play the role of fast friend, bitter enemy, cloying annoyance, feared power, or grudg-

Clarifying "Community"

The term "community" has gained status as a game industry buzzword in recent years, referencing the groups of players that can form inside and around multiplayer games. Although a group of players using their virtual avatars in an online game such as Everquest does indeed represent a game community, it represents only one very particular instance.

When we use the term *community* in the context of social play we are referencing something much more elemental and varied. As DeKoven indicates in the quote that opened this chapter, a play community occurs any time a group of players gets together to play a game. The community may last for years or decades, or only come into being for a single afternoon. A community could be created by a highly formalized professional car race, or by two friends sitting down to play Checkers. Play communities can persist across more than one instance of the same game or across the play of many different games over time. Communities can arise around a single game, a series of games, or a larger game context, ranging from two players having a quick match of Dance Dance Revolution in the mall arcade, to several thousand players competing every four years in the Olympics.

Every month, gameLab hosts a group of NYC-area game developers to play board games. These monthly gatherings create a social play community on at least three levels. First, each individual game forms a play community, which arises when the game begins and ends when the game concludes. Second, each evening get-together—in which a player is likely to play a handful of different games—also represents a play community, comprised of the people that attended the event. Third, it is also possible to consider a number of gatherings over months or years as a play community, even though the players that attend and the games that are played differ from evening to evening.

The exact scale at which you might conceptualize the notion of a play community depends on the game design problem you are trying to solve. If your intention is to have players take part in a game only once or twice in isolation, then you will most likely focus on the play community that exists within the magic circle of an individual game. The more cohesion you want to create between plays of your game (sequels and expansions, a website that expands the narrative of the game, a fan club, etc.) the wider your social design focus will need to be.

ingly temporary ally to the other players. As the game proceeds and the balance of power shifts, these roles change and fluctuate, reaching an endpoint in which one player assumes the role of winner. Games are complex emergent systems. The relationships between objects in the system—between players—is in a constant state of redefinition.

For example, imagine a different kind of game in which players work together to attain a common goal: in this case, players take on the social role of comrades who must use teamwork to play well together. What if there was a single enemy hidden among the group of friends? Suddenly, the relationships between players take on a completely different tone, and the game is infused with an air of deceit. The role Richard Hatch assumed as the self-proclaimed leader of "the alliance" in the first season of the television series *Survivor* created a sharp divide among the three other members of the group, culminating in feelings of bitterness and betrayal. Although the alliance was originally conceived as a collaborative game strategy, the emergence of one of its members as a cutthroat competitor forced a re-evaluation of social (and strategic) roles within the game. Clearly, the social roles that a game provides exert a tremendous influence on the overall experience of play.

The chart to the right presents a list of social play roles from Brian Sutton-Smith's "A Syntax for Play and Games" in *Child's Play*, a book he edited with R.E. Herron.[1] Each of the roles Sutton-Smith identifies represents *internally* derived social interactions. In other words, they are roles created by the formal system of a game. Sutton-Smith's category "motive of play" is an abstraction of the game's core mechanic. Each "motive" refers to a general kind of interaction between players.

Although the opposition of an actor and a counteractor is not the only way to frame social game play, it is one way of calling attention to the quality of conflict intrinsic to games. In Sutton-Smith's model, the roles of *actor* and *counteractor* are both

Role of Actor	Motive of Play	Role of Counteractor
To overtake	Race	To stay ahead
To catch, tackle, tag	Chase	To outdistance, dodge, or elude
To overcome a barrier, enter a guarded area, overpower a defense; to injure psychologically or otherwise	Attack	To defend an area or a person, to ward off, to be on guard
To take person, symbol	Capture	To avoid being taken
To tease, taunt, lure; to mistake or unsuccessfully attack	Harassment	To see through, to move suddenly and punish an attacker, to bide time
To find by chance or clue (object, person)	Search	To hide, to cover or mislead, to feign
To spring prisoner; to be savior	Rescue	To be jailer, to guard against escape
To tempt another forbidden action	Seduction	To resist, to have self-control

Social play roles

equally important in constructing the experience of play. The actual play activity is a function of the two player roles. The activity of Chase, for example, occurs when one player (the chaser) attempts to catch another player (the chased), who in turn attempts to elude the chaser. If the chased player decided not to run anymore, to give up the role of eluding the chaser, the chase play would end (possibly turning into a different kind of activity, such as the attack play of informal wrestling, or the seduction play of stealing a kiss).

Social roles are crucial, because play emerges directly from the relationships between players. From a social play perspective, *Survivor* was a compelling example of the power of social roles. Debates raged about which contestant was the better person;

the fact remains that Richard was the better *player*, as he recognized that he could manipulate social relations within the game to strategic ends. (And of course, this observation won him a million bucks.) The example of *Survivor* gets to the heart of this chapter: when we frame a game as social play, the social relationships constitute the entire experience of the game. Even in a very simple game like Chutes and Ladders, players are still enacting a race, in which each player is trying to stay ahead of, or catch up to, the other players.

Sutton-Smith's model is quite useful in understanding play as a function of player roles. It provides a wonderful way to analyze the existing social play in your game, as well as provides ideas for new social play experiences. In thinking about how you might apply Sutton-Smith's model to your game, consider the following:

- ***Not just two players.*** Although Sutton-Smith's model is based on a relationship between two players (an actor and a counteractor), these roles don't have to be played by just one player each. Game roles are rarely so simple and singular. In Hide-and-Seek (where the core activity is the search), the player that is "It" plays the role of actor while all of the other players are the hiding counteractor.
- ***Many activities.*** As with other kinds of play, a player can assume a range of social roles in the course of a single game. In Capture the Flag, almost every one of the activities listed on the chart takes place at one point or another, with any individual player playing both actor and counteractor at different moments in the game.
- ***More than one activity at once.*** Beyond switching roles, a player might inhabit more than one role simultaneously. Imagine a pair of Hide-and-Seek players hiding together. As they bide their time they playfully try to get the other to laugh and reveal the hiding place. The laughing game is a daring example of seduction, in which players tempt and resist a forbidden action. The hiding players are thus playing several roles simultaneously (hiders, seducers, and the seduced).
- ***Not just human players.*** Both roles don't have to be taken on by human players. A runner might be trying to beat her own best time in a race, in which case her previous time serves as the opponent. In the single-player arcade game Robotron, the program provides different game elements that must be avoided (indestructible enemies), destroyed (shootable enemies) and rescued (humans).
- ***Different activities at different levels.*** Different social game activities can be applied to the same game depending on how the game is framed. Although Robotron can be described in terms of chase, attack, capture, and rescue, it is also possible to frame an entire game of Robotron as a race, in which a player tries to beat a previous high score.

Sutton-Smith's list of social play roles is quite extensive, but it is certainly not exhaustive. The essay "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs," by MUD designer Richard Bartle, considers another typology of social play roles. In opposition to Sutton-Smith's model, Bartle's roles are *externally* derived, coming from outside the magic circle. Sutton-Smith derived his model from a study of children's playground games, and Bartle similarly focuses on one kind of game: text-based online MUDs. Bartle finds that within MUDs there are four types of roles, or playing styles: *Achievers, Explorers, Socializers*, and *Killers*. Although many individual players assume hybrid roles, according to Bartle one is generally dominant. Bartle associates each role with a playing card suit. In his account of the categories below, he descibes how each player role regards the other three styles of play:

> *Achievers* [diamonds] regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimately subservient to this. Exploration is necessary only to find new sources of treasure, or improved ways of wringing points from it. Socializing is a relaxing method of dis-

covering what other players know about the business of accumulating points, so that their knowledge can be applied to the task of gaining riches. Killing is only necessary to eliminate rivals or people who get in the way, or to gain vast amounts of points (if points are awarded for killing other players).

Explorers [spades] delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features (i.e., bugs) and figuring out how things work. Scoring points may be necessary to enter some next phase of exploration, but it's tedious, and anyone with half a brain can do it. Killing is quicker, and might be a constructive exercise in its own right.... Socializing can be informative as a source of new ideas to try out.... The real fun comes only from discovery, and making the most complete set of maps in existence.

Socializers [hearts] are interested in people, and what they have to say. The game is merely a backdrop, a common ground where things happen to players. Some exploration may be necessary so as to understand what everyone else is talking about, and points-scoring could be required to gain access to neat communicative spells available only to higher levels (as well as to obtain a certain status in the community). Killing, however, is something only ever to be excused if it's a futile, impulsive act of revenge, perpetrated upon someone who has caused intolerable pain to a dear friend. The only ultimately fulfilling thing is...getting to know people, to understand them, and to form beautiful, lasting relationships.

Killers [clubs] get their kicks from imposing themselves on others. [Killers] attack other players with a view to killing off their personae. . . The more massive the distress caused, the greater the killer's joy at having caused it. Normal points-scoring is usually required...and exploration of a kind is necessary to discover new and ingenious ways to kill people. Even socializing is sometimes worthwhile beyond taunting a recent victim, for example in finding out someone's playing habits, or discussing tactics with fellow killers. They're all just means to an end, though; only in the knowledge that a real person, somewhere, is very upset by what you've just done, yet can themselves do nothing about it, is there any true adrenaline-shooting, juicy fun.[2]

Whether a player is an achiever, explorer, killer, socializer, or some combination, interaction depends in large part on the kind of social identity the player assumes within the game world. Although socializers are the only group described as overtly "social," all four roles represent not just styles of play, but more specifically, styles of social play. Achievers compete with other achievers for power; killers annoy other players with their mischief; explorers trade and covet information; and socializers, of course, spend their time in conversation. Each type of player role gains its identity through negotiation of the social framework of the larger play community.

One primary difference between the player roles Bartle identifies and the model Sutton-Smith offers is that Bartle is looking less at the social core mechanics of the game, and more at higher-level social roles that players can assume. Being a socializer, for example, is a role that emerges from a collection of activities and priorities, in which typing chat statements to other players and visting spaces of the game world devoted to social interaction are of primary importance. The role of socializer, is a kind of macro-role, emerging from a cluster of related activities and interactions.

Three Emergent Social Games

In ***Games Emergent Systems,*** we established that meaningful play in a game requires a complex, emergent system. The same is true for social play: social interaction in games is closely tied to the concept of emergence. When we frame a game as a social system, it literally begins to burst with emergent social play. From the emergent bluffing of Poker, to the competitive camaraderie of Gauntlet, to the collaborative storytelling of a large-scale LARP, social play results in a variety of emergent experiences. Think about Bartle's four categories of players. The remarkable thing about these wildly varying player types is that all of them can occur *within the same game*. If the space of possibility of a game is large enough, players will find ways to create their own roles and styles of play.

Next we take a close look at three different games that exemplify emergent social play. Each game is remarkably simple, stylizing player interaction through a limited set of behaviors—yet the social roles and activities that arise from the games is remarkably emergent.

Little Max

The first game example seems quite formal on the surface. It is a dice-bluffing game that has a number of variations; we will use the rules from the traditional game Little Max described in Reiner Knizia's *Dice Games Properly Explained.* Not only is Little Max a simple and elegant version of a dice-bluffing game, but a game rich in social play. Here are the rules, paraphrased from Knizia's description:

> You will need two dice and a cup. The object of the game is to remain in the game by making the other players believe what you say about your dice roll. The last remaining player in the game wins.
>
> Play moves clockwise around the table in turns. The first player shakes the dice under the cup and then peeks at the result so that no other player can see. Then he claims any result he wishes and passes the cup to the next player. When you receive the cup, you have two options:
>
> *Accept:* If you accept the claim, you don't look at the dice but instead shake the cup, peek at the result, make your new claim and pass the cup. Your claim must be a higher total than the previous player's claim.
>
> *Challenge:* You can challenge and lift the cup. If the dice show a result lower than the claim, the player that made the false claim is out of the game and you start a new round by shaking the dice. You can claim any result on the dice you want. However, if the dice show a combination that is at least as high as the claim, you are out of the game. The next player starts a new round.
>
> Following are the ranking of dice results:
>
> - *A Little Max,* when one die shows a 1 and the other shows a 2, is the highest result in the game and must always be challenged when it is called.
> - *Pairs* are the next highest results, with a pair of 6s the highest pair and a pair of 1s the lowest. Below pairs are *figures,* any other two numbers.
> - *Figures* are declared with the highest number in front (so a 4 and a 2 beats a 4 and a 1). A 6 and a 5 is the highest figure and a 3 and a 1 is the lowest.
>
> Play continues until only one player is left. Note that a player may decide not to look at his roll and simply claim a result. He doesn't even have to reroll the dice if he wants, in which case he passes the cup unseen with a higher claim.[3]

Along with his description, Knizia includes a chart listing the percentage chance for being able to make each potential die result. This resource is useful for players who are going to play strictly by the numbers. But as Knizia explains in his analysis of the game, there is far more going on in Little Max than mere number-crunching:

> *The Psychology, or How to be a Duck*
>
> Besides keeping a firm Poker face, Little Max is about making the right choice when the dice are handed to you.
>
> Your decision to challenge depends on your chances to better the current claim, but also on your evaluation of the previous player's chances to produce his claim....
>
> The chances of beating a 6-1 or better are exactly 50%. In theory you should challenge the claim if the previous player had to beat 6-1 or better, because the odds are in your favor.

Practical play turns out to be different. Challenges happen less frequently as most players tend to duck and hope that the evil will pass over them. If you can assume that the next player will follow this trend and not challenge you, why should you take any risks? Ducking among ducks is the best strategy.

When you bend the truth, be careful not to squeeze the next player too much or he might find himself forced to challenge you. On the other hand, just going one step higher with your result looks implausible. The more you exceed your old claim the more you appear to speak the truth, because nobody expects you to go that far over the top. A contradiction! What about calling out the next possible result even when you produced something higher?

Body language and trembling nerves usually prevail over logical analysis. You will soon find yourself desperately searching for a good combination to claim while staring in disbelief at your incredibly low dice. Mumbling something like "five-six" obviously indicates that your mind is distracted. Could it be fear?...

There is the marvelous anecdote of a game of Little Max where one of the dice actually got lost during play and the game continued for several rounds because everyone was terrified of being caught out. What a feeling, if you claim "Two fives" with only one die under the cup.[4]

At first glance, the game seems to be a formal affair about number guessing and pushing your luck with the roll of a pair of dice. However, as Knizia makes clear, Little Max is really a game of psychology and social play. Even though it seems like the game takes place as a series of isolated claims between two players, the decision to challenge or not to challenge has far-reaching implications. It is safer to "duck" and accept a claim that comes to you; as soon as you do, however, you are going to have to immediately turn around and present a claim to someone else. Having just played the role of the guesser, you are now going to have to assume the role of the bluffer.

Furthermore, as a bluffer you always present a claim that is less likely to be true than the previous one, because you have to claim a higher result each turn. In Little Max, bluffing is at the center of the game. In Poker, you can *choose* to bluff or not to bluff. But in Little Max, circumstances can *force* you to bluff if your roll is too low. As if that were not enough, the rest of the players also come into play. How trustworthy are you? You can keep on ducking, of course, but eventually the cup will come back to you. How ridiculous will your claim have to be by then? The result of this tightly interlocking set of play roles is a game of deeply engaging social play. Even though Little Max is an abstract game of numbers and probability, the logical play of the game quickly becomes a desperate, nervous experience of deceptive bluffing. Such simple rules, generating such emergent social play!

Mafia

The social play of Little Max emerges from a tight fit between the game's formal structure and its changing play roles. Mafia is a game that strips down the formal structure even further, creating play activities that are almost entirely social. As with Little Max, although the rules of Mafia are simple, the social play is incredibly deep. There are a great many variations on Mafia, and below we outline one simple version we enjoy:

Mafia is a game for approximately 8–10 players, although it can be played with more or fewer participants. It works best when all of the players are sitting around a table and can see each other. At the beginning of the game, three of the players are secretly given roles. This is usually accomplished by passing out a pre-sorted and shuffled set of playing cards, one card for each player. The set includes one heart, two spades, and the rest of the cards are diamonds.

The player that receives the heart is moderator and is out of the game. The moderator serves as referee and runs the game. The moderator collects the cards at the start of the game—they are not used again. The two players that received spades are the members of the mafia. Their objective is to eliminate all of the other players in the game. The rest of the players are villagers. Their task is to eliminate the mafia.

A turn consists of two parts, night and day, beginning with the night portion of the turn. The moderator instructs all players to close their eyes. Then the moderator tells the mafia to open their eyes. Through silent gesture, they indicate to the moderator who they want to kill. The moderator then has the two designated mafia players close their eyes.

The moderator announces the dawn and all of the players open their eyes, as the moderator declares the name of the player that the mafia killed during the night. That player play-acts a horrible death and is out of the game. All of the remaining players begin a debate about who is in the mafia. After 5–10 minutes of discussion, the moderator calls for a vote. The player receiving the most votes is killed by an uprising of the villagers and is out of the game. A moderator can call for a re-vote if there is a tie, or can end the day without an uprising if there is a true deadlock. Then the moderator instructs everyone to close their eyes as night falls once more and the mafia select another victim.

The game continues until the two mafia players have been eliminated, or until there are only mafia players left and the moderator announces the end of the game. If one member of the mafia is eliminated by an uprising, the game continues (but the villagers are *not* informed that there is only one mafia member left). Players that are out of the game are not permitted to talk or give hints of any kind Note that because of voting mechanics, the moderator can end the game as a mafia victory when there are equal numbers of mafia and villagers.

If you've never played Mafia, the rules might seem perplexing. As long as the mafia do not noisily gesture as they select a victim, the rest of the villagers have little logical basis for making their decisions about who is a suspected member of the mafia.

In the case of Little Max, bluffing and guesswork are based on the formal framework of a progressively increasing probability of a bluff. In Mafia, on the other hand, the decision of the villagers is based entirely on hunches and social guesswork. The hidden information around which the game revolves in Little Max is the numbers on the dice. The hidden information of Mafia is the allocation of the player roles themselves. Who *are* the mafia? How many of them are left? The mafia players aren't just playing a role, they are playing a double role, strategically eliminating villagers during the night while playing at being villagers during the day.

The drama of the game, in which the circle of victims grows smaller and smaller, heightens the tension and makes for a remarkably subtle social experience. How will each villager make his or her guess? Has one player been too talkative? Or too quiet? What is *she* hiding? How innocent is *he*? Are those two exchanging glances? Just what motivated the mafia last night? Did they get rid of the villager that suspected one of them last turn? Or are they using double-psychology to get the villagers to kill one of their own? Suspense builds as the villagers are whittled away one by one, the mafia and the villagers both edging closer to winning, but also closer to elimination. Each player represents a point within a complex social space, each point mapped to the other points in delicate and puzzling ways. None of the villagers can fully trust anyone. Although the mafia players can work together, they have to keep their partnership a secret. The game of Mafia is truly a tangled knot of social play. Mafia also plays wonderfully with the magic circle. Once a player has been eliminated, that player steps halfway out of the magic circle, finally learning the information they had been seeking, but forced by the rules they are still observing to remain silent as the engaging drama unfolds.

Stand Up

We complete our trio of examples with another game that seems extremely simple on the surface: it contains no hidden information, all players have the same role, and there is only one thing they can do. The game is called Stand Up, and it comes from the *New Games Book:*

Sit on the ground, back-to-back with your partner, knees bent and elbows linked. Now simply stand up together. With a bit of cooperation and a little practice, this shouldn't be too hard.

By the time you've got this mastered, you'll probably have drawn an interested spectator. Have her join you on the ground, and all three try to stand up. This feat should take you just long enough to attract another onlooker. Have him join you. Four people standing up together might be a genuine accomplishment.

By this time you should realize that there's more struggling, stumbling, and giggling each time you add another person. But this very fact assures you of an endless supply of fascinated spectators, ready to join up to help you get off the ground.[5]

Believe it or not, Stand Up is in fact a game, a cooperative game in which the players win together when they accomplish the task of standing up. Yes, it is incredibly minimal, but it is also rich in social play. The core mechanic of Stand Up is not only athletically engaging for the entire body, but also extremely social. Even when only two players take part in the game, they are challenged to work in concert as they struggle to move from one stable state (sitting) to another (standing), by making their way together through an interstitial state of great unbalance.

As they play together, the fact that the players are facing away from each other means that their primary method of communication comes from their bodies. You can talk to the other player if you like, but you don't have time to make complex statements once you begin to stand up. The awkward interlocking of your elbows not only limits your movements, but ties these movements closely to those of your partner. You are, in a sense, creating a single body the two of you together must control. Although this kind of interaction may not seem "social," social relationships between players can take many forms, including physical interaction. There clearly is a great deal of meaningful social play in Stand Up.

The more people that are added to the game, the more emergent the group behavior becomes, and the more challenging it is to win. The more individuals that play, the more bodies there are to join into a single collective organism; the more moving parts added to this unstable system, the more difficult the collaboration becomes. As a system of rewards and punishments, the increasing challenge is leavened by the sense of accomplishment that the group feels when they achieve the goal together. This leads to what is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the design of Stand Up. As the description indicates, the game itself represents a simple repeatable activity that makes for an entertaining public spectacle. This means that the play of Stand Up itself can act as a lure to bring more players into the game. Stand Up offers a great example of social play in action. Many games advocated by the New Games Movement are specifically intended to recruit new players from the immediate environment, while also providing an experience of meaningful play. Stand Up is an example of such a game, designed to build and grow a play community as part of the play itself. We find it to be a truly remarkable game design.

Bounded Communities

Earlier in this chapter we introduced the concept of the play community, a term borrowed from Bernard DeKoven's book, *The Well-Played Game*. We like his terminology and use the idea of a play community in the spirit of DeKoven, even though our use of the term does not exactly coincide with his. For our purposes, a play community is a group of players engaged in play. This play may occur within the space of an individual game or across a series of games.

It may seem like play communities are social phenomena that spring up mysteriously and autonomously around a game. However, game designers can have an impact on the play communities generated by their games. It is therefore important to understand what a play community is and how it works. A play community arises out of the operation of a game. It is a function of the rules of the game, the personalities of the players, the interactions between players, and the larger social context in which the game takes place.

Play communities emerge from play. Although some play communities become quite official, such as professional sports teams, most play communities are informal, temporary affairs. A play community is not usually like a housing development, requiring extensive advance planning and preparation before it can be properly inhabited. Instead, a play community is often more like a conversation, in which the improvisational act of communication itself creates the conversational context. This emergence of a social play context is not unlike that of the magic circle, which also arises spontaneously and is experienced temporally. The social boundaries of a play community are tied to the boundaries of its game or games.

There is a paradoxical relationship between a game and the play community it generates. In a sense, the play community is an effect of the game, an emergent property of the game system. At the same time, the game has no life apart from the play that activates it, and is dependent on the play community for its sustenance. One would simply not exist without the other.

To understand the beauty of this paradox, we can revisit systems theory and the concept of closed and open systems. A closed system has no exchange with its outside environment, while an open system does have some kind of exchange. As RULES, games are closed systems, as CULTURE, games are open systems, but as PLAY, we can frame games as either closed or open systems, depending on which aspects of the experience we highlight. As artificial social systems with their own special rules of meaning, games are closed systems of play. But as transformative systems that affect and are affected by what the players bring into the game, the play of a game is an open system.

Similarly, a play community can be framed as bounded or not bounded by the magic circle of a single game. A *bounded* play community is a closed system: it arises from the social play that takes place strictly within the space of an individual game. When we frame a play community in this way, it exists only within the time and space defined by the magic circle. However, we can also frame a play community to include more than one instance of a game. With this framing, we are considering a group of players across a number of games or across a number of sessions of play. These communities are not contained within an individual game and are *not bounded*. A play community that is not bounded is an open system. Both framings are useful, and in the sections that follow we look at each, focusing first on bounded play communities.

Contract for Artifice

Within the bounded play community of a game, the community arises with the onset of the game and disappears when the game is finished. A bounded play community is more synonymous with an individual game, and the rules of the game have a great influence on the nature and experience of the play community. In other words, a bounded play community is more *artificial* than an unbounded one, because it has less traffic with contexts outside the magic circle. This social contract for artifice affects the meaning of social relationships within the limited context of the game.

In order to understand how the social system of a game can be considered artificial, we turn to the work of the psychologist Jean Piaget. Much of Piaget's work focused on the cognitive development of children; his research had a tremendous impact on theories of the mind in the twentieth century. For our purposes, the most applicable of Piaget's works is his book *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, in which he details some of his research on child development. Working with children from a particular region of Switzerland, Piaget systematically studied the process by which young children acquire the ability to understand game rules. He did so in order to draw a correlation between the process of understanding game rule structures and the process of understanding moral structures. From this work, Piaget drew conclusions about a child's social and psychological development as a whole, tracking the child's entry into the moral realm through an understanding of the social contract engendered by the rules of play. Although we won't be detailing Piaget's experiments or the complex stages of a child's psychological development, he makes a number of important insights relevant to a discussion of social play and game design.

One of the assumptions shaping *The Moral Judgment of the Child* is that the rules of a game are fundamentally different than larger social rules shaping social convention, such as the cultural and legal rules that guide moral and ethical behavior. The difference lies precisely in the artificiality of a game's rule-system, as Piaget makes clear:

> All morality consists in a system of rules, and the essence of all morality is to be sought for in the respect which the individual acquires for these rules.
>
> Now, most of the moral rules which the child learns to respect he receives from adults, which means that he receives them after they have been fully elaborated, and often elaborated, not in relation to him and as they are needed, but once and for all and through an uninterrupted succession of earlier adult generations.
>
> *In the case of the very simplest social games, on the contrary, we are in the presence of rules which have been elaborated by the children alone*...the rules of the game of marbles are handed down, just like so-called moral realities, from one generation to another, and are preserved solely by the respect that is felt for them by individuals. The sole difference is that the relations in this case are only those that exist between children.[6] [our emphasis]

Although Piaget is referring specifically to traditional children's folk games such as Marbles, we can glean a larger point from his premise. "Rules of society," such as moral guidelines, permeate our lived social experience and affect all of our interactions with others. A person might need money to get on the subway, but by and large, observance of society's rules (for whatever mix of personal, cultural, and legal reasons) keep subway riders from taking that money by force from a stranger. These kinds of behavioral rules and guidelines are one way of understanding social identity within society.

Rules of games, on the other hand, are quite different. We know that games operate only within the time and space of the magic circle. Only when a game of Chess is in play do players covet the King and avoid the illegality of moving pawns backward on the board. Outside a game, players do not feel compelled to "capture" a king piece, or otherwise structure their behavior according to the rules of Chess. Conversely, within bounded play communities, game behavior is not entirely constrained by life outside of the game. As Huizinga states (or perhaps overstates), "Inside the circle of the game, the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count."[7]

This is why Piaget can use children's games as a special, isolated case of social rules: because the rules are, in fact, generated without concern for larger social institutions. The rules emerge from the context of the games themselves, the play of children, rather than from culture at large. As Piaget notes, "*We are in the presence of rules which have been elaborated by the children alone.*" Piaget's marvelous insight into the autonomy of children's folk games is true to some extent of all games. Even in the case of commercial games designed by adults for adults, there is a sense in which the games create their own private social sphere. Although it is true that there is plenty of interplay between game rules and societal rules, such as a game designed to propagate a certain ideology or make use of existing social content, the bounded play communities games create exist in an artificial space marked off in some way from society at large.

As a result of this isolation, the bounded play community of a game implies a kind of social contract. This contract consists of rules that determine how players interact with each other in the game, as well as the meanings and values that the players give life through play. Sustaining the contract to the end of a game requires players to maintain the integrity of the magic circle. Rule-breakers can damage this fragile frame. A cheating player will test the limits of the social contract and possibly disrupt it. A spoil sport is likely to destroy the social contract entirely.

A social contract, a commitment to a shared set of behaviors and values, is a social frame for understanding what it means to enter into the magic circle. For example, a game is a space of conflict with an uncertain outcome. In other spheres of our lives, most of us would not willingly enter into a conflict, especially one with a real risk of loss. The social contract of a game acts as a kind of psychological buffer against uncertainty, protecting players from the risk inherent in game play. There are many elements to this social contract, such as the level playing field of conflict we discussed in ***Games as Systems of Conflict***. There are also distinctly interpersonal aspects of the social contract of a game as well. DeKoven describes two of these, safety and trust, in *The Well-Played Game:*

> Safety
>
> The safer we feel in the game we're playing, the more willing we are to play it. But, for this experience of safety, we can't rely solely on the game. We must also be able to believe that we are safe with each other.
>
> Trust
>
> We need...some guarantee, somewhere, that no matter what happens in our pursuit of the well-played game, we will not be risking more than we are prepared to risk. Even though I'm aware that I might die as a result of trying to climb this mountain with you, I can accept that as part of the game. On the other hand, when I discover that you're cutting my rope so that you can get to the top first, I find myself much less willing to play.[8]

Safety and trust are two elements that are part of the social contract of a game. Generally, players must feel a sense of safety and trust to be comfortable enough to enter into the social space of a game. The concepts of safety and trust are, in many ways, more a function of a player's existing relationships and attitudes than something a game guarantees. As DeKoven states, players "can't rely solely on the game" for trust. They must rely on each other. Having a sense of trust allows players to enter into the game in the first place. What is trust? It is a shared sense of understanding, not just of the knowledge of the rules of a particular game, but of the way all games are played, including the rules of etiquette that allow you to trust that other players won't become cheaters, spoil sports, or bullies.

Once again we have a paradox. The game itself is an artificial social space that players enter, yet the "rules" by which players come to know a sense of trust belong to the world outside the game, to the realm of shared social and cultural values. What connects the values of the game and the values of the real world? The answer is a concept we introduced many chapters ago: the implicit rules of a game.

Knowing the Rules

> *When children play together, in the street or the back lot, they too establish a play community. When someone gets hurt, the game stops. When there's a little kid around, you watch out for him, you play softer when you're near him, you give the kid a break. At all times there is an acceptance of a shared responsibility for the safety of those with whom you play.*—**Bernard DeKoven,** *The Well-Played Game*

In ***Rules on Three Levels,*** we identified three layers of game rules: the underlying *constitutive rules* of a game, the *operational rules* that directly guide player action, and the *implicit rules* of proper game behavior, such as etiquette. The examples DeKoven gives in the passage above, that a game stops when someone gets hurt or that play is softened when little kids join a game, are implicit rules, unspoken guidelines for how to play.

The implicit rules of a game bridge the paradoxical relationship between the artificial space of the game and the social context in which the game is played. The fact that both players in a game of Tic-Tac-Toe know that each will take a reasonable amount of time on their turn is part of the social trust that enables players to sit down and play together. So is the assumption that players will not cheat or become spoil sports. All are examples of implicit rules. Similarly, the implicit rules that DeKoven identifies facilitate the social play of a neighborhood backlot play community. The implicit rule of stopping the game when someone gets hurt has an *intrinsic* effect (the game pauses temporarily) only because of an *extrinsic* social rule (help people that are injured).

Considering the role of implicit rules in social play, questions arise. By what process do implicit rules come into being? How do players come to know these rules? How do they affect play? For answers, we turn again to Piaget's *The Moral Judgment of the Child.* Piaget outlines distinct stages through which children progress as they learn the rules of Marbles. In paraphrasing Piaget's more complex formulations, we divide the acquisition of game rules into three stages:

> During the first stage, beginning around age 5, the child does not yet understand there are fixed rules to the game. Children of this age will play Marbles in an improvisational way, possessing a vague notion of rules but not yet understanding the idea of fixed rules.
>
> In the second stage, around ages 8 to 10, the child comes to know that there are rules, and will regard these rules with a near religious reverence. The rules are felt to have their own implicit authority, which cannot be questioned.
>
> The third and final stage generally begins after age 10. Here the child comes to realize that the rules of a game are dependent on a social contract and can be changed if all of the players agree to do so. This final stage is essentially how adults view the rules of games.[9]

Our interest is in the transition into the third and final stage, when a child's consciousness of the rules undergoes a complete transformation. Rather than believing that rules are absolutely fixed, children begin to see rules as the outcome of a free decision reached through respectful mutual consent. Piaget sums up this transformation elegantly:

> He no longer relies, as do the littlest ones, upon an all-wise tradition. He no longer thinks that everything has been arranged for the best in the past and that the only way of avoiding trouble is by religiously respecting the established order. He believes in the value of experiment in so far as it is sanctioned by collective opinion.[10]

Piaget's model for the acquisition of rules sheds light on a number of issues relating to social play. When a child acquires an understanding of a game's rules, he or she also develops an understanding of the social contract of a game. Like adults, children at this stage of development are able to see rules as structures that describe how players are to relate to one another within the game, both formally and socially. They are also able to recognize that the game world is a flexible world that can be altered collectively. This is an important part of recognizing the existence of a play community.

Additionally, Piaget's developmental model has a loose correlation to the way an adult player comes to know a game. When a player is initially brought into the magic circle of a game, a player is often not yet familiar with its specific rules. Instead, a player has a vague sense of the game's operation, similar to a child in Stage one of Piaget's model. When a player is learning to play a game, the mechanisms of a game seem fixed and the player's attention is focused on learning how to play, like a child in Stage two. The more that a player plays a game the more she sees the game as a system open to manipulation (albeit one whose binding authority must be respected). When the player gets stuck in the middle of a computer adventure game, for example, she might purchase a strategy guide or go online to find a walkthrough guide. Later in her play experience, she might download a hack, design her own level, or start a fan web page. The play patterns of an experienced player demonstrate an understanding of the game as something that is amenable to change. In a very approximate sense, the progress of a player into a game or the general culture of games recapitulates Piaget's model of a child coming to understand the concept of game rules.

Transformative Social Play

Whether describing the way a child comes to know the rules of Marbles or the way an adult gradually enters into a game's fan community, the rules of a game are experienced and transformed through social play. In ***Defining Play,*** we identified transformative play as an instance of play when free movement within the more rigid structure of a game actually changes the game structure itself. We can also consider transformative play from a social play point of view, a phenomenon we call *transformative social play.*

In transformative social play, players use the game context to transform social relationships. They actively engage with the rule system of a game, manipulating it in order to shift, extend, or subvert their relations with other players. Transformative social play forces us to reevaluate a formal understanding of rules as fixed, unambiguous, and omnipotently authoritative. In any kind of transformative play, game structures come into question and are re-shaped by player action. In transformative *social* play, the mechanisms and effects of these transformations occur on a social level.

How does transformative social play work? Borrowing some useful terms from folklorist Kenneth Goldstein, let's begin by making a basic distinction between "ideal" and "real" rules.[11] *Ideal rules* refer to the "official" regulations of a game, the rules written in a player's guide to Zelda or printed on the inside cover of a game of Candyland. *Real rules,* on the other hand, are the codes and conventions held by a play community. Real rules are a consensus of how the game *ought* to be played.

As sociologist Frank E. Manning notes in *The World of Play,* "Real rules embody the players' ludic values and social relations while ideal rules have a legal, but not social, validity."[12] This distinction between ideal and real rules has less to do with the *interpretation* of rules (whether or not players of Pictionary may use hand gestures to encourage potential guesses, for example) and more to do with the *elaboration* of the rules of the game by players. Young kids playing Basketball, for example, might elaborate on the rule of "no double-dribbling" and transform it into "no double-dribbling unless you can't help it." This movement from the ideal, or legal rule, to the real, or popular rule, offers insight into the social values held by a community of players.

Ideal and Real Foursquare

In the early 1980s, sociologist Linda Hughes (then a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania) spent three years observing children playing the game of Foursquare on a playground in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Her interest was in understanding how children elaborate rules to support existing social relations. Hughes focused specifically on the difference between the "basic" (or ideal) rules of a game and the rules that were defined as the "real rules" by players. The basic rules of Four-square require that players:

1. Hit a ball that lands in your square to another square.

2. Let the ball bounce once, but only once, in your square.

3. Don't hit a ball that lands in another square.[13]

The real rules of the games, however, describe a much more complex set of interactions. A list of in-game calls documented by Hughes reveals a rich language of social play *(see Figure 1)*. Calls include such shots as Babies, Bops, or Spins, as well as types of play, such as Nice or Friends, which describe the quality and social tone of player interaction. The real rules matter a great deal to players, for they transform the formal structure to support existing social relations. Players often dismissed the basic rules as "just things you had to do"—they were not included among the list of "real rules" reported by the children. As Hughes notes, "Players were far more interested in the rules they generated and controlled, and that they could use to introduce excitement, variety, strategy, and fun into the game."[14] This elaboration of basic, ideal rules into a complex set of real rules is transformative social play. It is not that the basic rules of the game undergo a radical change; rather, they are experienced within a social context that decreases their value in favor of a socially-biased ruleset over which players have more control.

In "Beyond the Rules of the Game: Why Are Rooie Rules Nice?" Hughes presents a case study of a specific Foursquare ruleset developed by the children she observed. Foursquare offered fertile ground for such a study because a ruleset is called by an individual player (the "king") before each round of play. "Such calls can be used for a wide variety of purposes, including increasing game excitement, adjusting the level of difficulty, and assisting or scapegoating other players."[17] These rulesets prescribe and prohibit certain actions while setting a general tone for a particular round of play. A call of "Rooie Rules," for example—a ruleset named after a girl named Rooie who was one of the regular players on the playground at the time

1–2–3–4	Fish	No Outs	Time Out
AC/DC	Friends	Mandy-slams	Times
Babies	Front Spins	One-handed	Tough Rules
Baby Bottles	Frontsies	Part-Rules Poison	Trades
Baby Stuff	Goody Rules	Purpose Duckfeet	Tricks
Backsides	Half Slams	Purpose Stuff	Untimes
Backspins	Half Wings	Randi Rules	Volley Round
Bishops	Holding	Ready	The World
Bops	Interference	Regular Ball	Volleys
Chances	Kayo Stuff	Regular Rules	Volley Regular
Comebacks	Knee Balls	Regular Spins	Saves
Country & City	Lines	Regular Square	Saving Places
Donna Rules	Low Ball	Regular Volley	Secrets
Double Taps	Main Rules	Rough Slams	Slams
Duckfeet	Mean Stuff	Rough Square	Slow Ball
Fair Ball	Medium Ball	Spins	Smitty Rules
Fair Square	Mini-slams	Takeovers	Special Rules
Fakes	My Rules	Taps	Wings
Fancy	Nice Ball	Teenie boppers	
Fancy Day	Nice Slams	Three Square	
Fast Ball	Nice Square	Time In	

Figure 1: The "Real Rules" of Foursquare[15]
Many of the social concerns of this play community are apparent in their terminology. Terms such as "mean," "nice," "friends," and "purpose," for example, are extensively used to label game "moves."

Hughes' research was conducted—meant that players were to play "nice." Rooie Rules included the following: "no holding" (the ball must be hit, not caught and thrown); "no slams" (bounces high over a player's head); no "duckfeet" (being hit on the legs); "spins" are allowed; and so on. "Rooie Rules" operated as shorthand for a long list of individual calls.

Among the community of players Hughes observed, the call of "Rooie Rules" created a general framework for player interaction. This framework rested upon shared social standards for fairness, perceived intentionality (did a player illegally hold the ball "on purpose," or accidentally), and appropriate demeanor within the group (playing "nice"). Yet interestingly enough, despite the fact that everyone was able to play by Rooie Rules, no player, including Rooie, was able to supply a complete list of the real rules this call encompassed. According to Hughes, "What allows the game to proceed with such apparent ambiguity concerning the precise rules of the game is the tacit understanding that Rooie Rules are 'nice,' and 'nice' is perhaps the paramount concern among these players. It is far more important to understand 'nice' play than to understand the rules."[16] The community of players used the term "nice" to refer to a rather complex matrix of social rights and obligations. The real rules of the game referred to a standard of social behavior, a standard which players had to accept and uphold if they were to remain a part of the game.

When Players Won't Be "Nice"

In the cutthroat social ecosystem of the playground, games are often contexts for asserting and challenging social power. In the following extended excerpt from Hughes' research, Foursquare becomes an arena of conflict for boy players and girl players. The tension between the ideal and real rules comes to the fore, with both sides brokering social authority to define the game in a particular way.

As might be predicted among boys and girls of this age, the boys almost immediately drove the girls crazy by very overtly using "rough stuff" ("slams" and "wings") to get the girls out of the game. This does not mean the girls were also not using such moves. What enraged them was the boys' failure to disguise "purpose stuff" in the kinds of "I couldn't help it" performances demanded by "nice" play. The boys would, for example, call, "Rough square. Getting out on serves," and then slam the ball high over one of the girls' heads on the serve.

Totally outraged, the girls would counter, when one of their number was "king," with a call of "Rooie Rules." But, as we might expect, calling "nice" rules had little effect. The boys blatantly continued to "slam" and "wing" the ball past them. Since the girls were still bound by their "nice" rules, which prohibited direct confrontation over such actions, there was little they could do. As play proceeded, however, the girls gradually abandoned some of the trappings of "nice" play. They began handling violations quite differently. The following are excerpts from field notes. We begin with three girls and one boy on the court.

Angie (the "king") [the player that makes the call]: "Rooie Rules. Rooie Rules."

Angie pauses, looks around, and then walks over to the players waiting in line to get into the game.

Angie (to Rooie, who is waiting in line): "Rooie, tell them your rules."

As Angie returns to her square, she glares rather pointedly at Andy, the boy who just entered the game, while Rooie lists her rules.

(It should be noted that another understanding among these gamers is that players are only responsible for violating a rule they know about. Only if they know, and then violate, a rule can they be denied a takeover of the last round. This attempt to list very explicitly the rules in effect is highly unusual. It functions as a kind of warning to the offending players.)

A little later, Cindy (who is now "king") calls: "Rooie Rules."

But Andy continues to "wing" and "slam" the ball consistently. After several such hits, Rooie, who is waiting in line, walks over to Andy's square.

Rooie (to Andy): "You're out! Wings are out!"

Cindy steps forward to back Rooie up.

Cindy (to Andy): "I called Rooie Rules and there's no wings! You're out!"

As Andy leaves the court he mumbles something about being a "fish."

The term "fish" refers to a scapegoated player. In over six months of observing this game, this was the first time the author had observed anyone being called out for "wings." The exchange above is a very significant departure from the usual patterns of play. Andy is well aware of this. He knows he's been had.

The girls' revenge was short-lived, however. In reacting to the boys' refusal to play "nice" by becoming more explicit in their calls of the rules, and by applying direct sanctions for violations, the girls began digging themselves into a rather deep hole. They expanded a call of "Rooie Rules," for example, to "Rooie rules. No slams. No wings. No rough stuff." They tried explicitly to prohibit each of the boys' offending actions. Naturally, the boys could always find actions the girls had not specifically prohibited. One particularly exasperated "king" recognized the problem when she tagged her call of the rules with, "And nothing you guys do!" Of course, on the other side, the girls could not completely avoid violating their own rules, now differently defined. The boys were not only too happy to point this out.[18]

The Foursquare players are not just playing Foursquare. They are playing *with the rules of Foursquare*, strategically bending and tweaking the real rules to their advantage. Significantly, the goal of each group is not just to win, but to play the game in a way that embodies the proper spirit of play, to play the game in a way that expresses their social being. These players are not merely playing a game; they are gaming the game itself, manipulating real rules within the boundaries established by the ideal rules and the larger social context in which they are playing. Framing play as *gaming the game* echoes some of the play styles we visited in ***Breaking the Rules***—and it also foreshadows many of the phenomena to come in **CULTURE**.

Rooie Rules offers an excellent example of transformative play within the social realm. Like Piaget's study of children and the rules of Marbles, Hughes exposes the underlying social mechanisms that direct the actions and motivations of a play community. Clearly, the *experience* of play must be understood as a highly complex system of interaction that is influenced by formal, social, and cultural factors. These factors shape the play of a game in wonderful and often unexpected ways.

Forbidden Play

There is an exception to every rule. Our prior discussions of implicit social rules have assumed that etiquette and proper behavior are the same both inside and outside of a game. After all, it is only when a player feels the safety and trust of a familiar social framework that he or she will be comfortable entering into the magic circle. However, there can also be strong differences between the implicit rules of society and the implicit rules of a game—between the rules for what is permitted in each context. Games create social contexts in which, very often, behaviors take place that would be strictly forbidden in society at large. In a game, you can plot treachery against your friends and backstab them when they least expect it. You can engage in representations of criminal behavior. Or you can put on padded gloves and try to knock another person unconscious.

Games permit and often encourage normally taboo behavior, or *forbidden play*. Games throughout history and across the world have subverted norms of social behavior. Perhaps this should come as no surprise. Inside the artificial context of the magic circle, games not only create meaning, but they *play* with meaning as well. The social contract of a game ensures that play spaces are "safe" spaces in which risks have fewer consequences than in the outside world. In "The Kissing Games of Adolescents of Ohio," Brian Sutton-Smith investigated kissing games played by high school and college students in 1959, and the complex social interplay they engendered. About the forbidden play of these games, Sutton-Smith writes:

> [A kissing game] allows for the expression of given impulses but at the same time safeguards players by putting limits on the way in which those impulses can be expressed. That is, the game allows the player to grow along the lines that he desires, but it safeguards him against the danger of risking too much. The game is essentially an adventure of a nonhazardous kind.[19]

Forbidden play, like all play, is "free within the limits set by the rules."[20] Recall the runner at the starting line we analyzed in ***Games as the Play of Pleasure***. The runner wants to spring forward, but the pleasurable restriction of waiting for the starting gun heightens the pleasure of the play. In forbidden play, the sense of pleasurable restriction continues through the entire play experience, the player always in danger of overstepping the social boundaries of play, jumping the gun, and breaking the magic circle.

The difference, of course, is that forbidden play embodies behaviors not normally permitted between players. Forbidden play both sanctions and restricts social play in the complex dance of desire that Sutton-Smith outlines in the quote above. Kissing games stretch the implicit rules of play just enough to accommodate the kissing behaviors of the game, but never quite going far enough to threaten a complete breakdown of the social order. These games simultaneously challenge and reinforce the rules of society.

On this page and the next, we quote descriptions and provide our own commentary on several games Sutton-Smith describes in his essay.[22] Each game offers a fascinating example of how games mold and shape desire and social relations by sanctioning and forbidding particular play actions.

> *The Card Game:* The players go round in a circle, and take turns to pick a card from a pack. Having picked a card they then pick a person of the opposite sex. If they pick a spade they slap the person they have chosen on the back. If a club, they shake hands. If a diamond it is a public kiss. If a heart, a private kiss.
>
> *The forbidden play:* This game operates as a system for determining the form of social interaction that a pair of players will have. Chance plays a very important role in this game, as it does in most kissing games. The players get to choose who they wish to have as a partner, but the cards determine the exact action. Thus the shuffled deck takes responsibility for the actual kissing, relieving players of that socially onerous yet libidinally desirable task.
>
> *Draw and Kiss:* All the player's names are placed in a dish. All the players place their hands in together and draw a name. They must kiss the name drawn out as well as be kissed by the person who has drawn their name. As soon as they have kissed and been kissed they may run to take their place in a line of chairs. There is one chair short, and the person who is left over must kiss everyone.
>
> *The forbidden play:* Draw and Kiss is a structural inversion of The Card Game. The form of interaction is fixed (kissing) but chance determines who kisses whom. The fact that there is an overall "loser" in this game is fascinating. What is the implied social message? Is the slowest player the one that was most prudish and hesitant or the most indulgent? Is being kissed by everyone else a punishment or an inverted reward?
>
> *Endurance Kissing:* It is essentially a comic endurance test, in which a couple sees how long they can hold a kiss without breathing. A watch is used. The bystanders laugh at the competitors. It is done

usually only with one's steady date. On a double date the losers might be expected to buy a Coke for the winners.

The forbidden play: In Endurance Kissing, we find an unusually agônistic forbidden play competition instead of a chance-based activity. The taboo activity—kissing—is made even more sexually indulgent by extending its length. At the same time, the normally intimate act is transformed into a performance of skill, which sanctions the activity as a contest, disguising its sexual nature. The wagering of a soda emphasizes the competitive nature of the activity.

Flashlight: Couples sit around the edge of a dark room. One person sits in the center with a flashlight. If he flashes it onto a couple that is not kissing, then he joins the opposite sex member of that couple, and the other member takes his place in the center with the flashlight.... In short it was normal in this game to be kissing, not normal to be caught unembraced.

The forbidden play: In Flashlight, there is a truly complex interplay with the taboo of kissing. The game provides opportunity for physical contact, while also offering a defense against the possibility of intimacy. The fact that players are hiding in the dark as they smooch makes it clear that kissing is something that is not a public activity. At the same time, the entire premise of the game is that another player spends his time "checking" to see if players are kissing. This moderator heightens the forbidden aspect by monitoring the action, while also punishing players who are not taking part. The game also acts as a sorting mechanism: if you don't like your partner enough to kiss him or her, you become the monitor, looking for a non-kissing couple with a partner that suits you.

Pass the Orange: This is usually played as a relay. The orange is placed under the chin and then the next player, a member of the opposite sex, endeavors to get it under his chin without the use of his hands. Or it may be played with the members of each sex alternating around in a circle . In a number of reports the couple must kiss if they drop the orange while passing it from one chin to the next. In one, they kiss if they pass it on successfully.

The forbidden play: Like Endurance Kissing, Pass the Orange permits physical contact in public, by framing the game as a competitive activity. The kissing component of the game can act as either a reward or punishment for dropping the orange, depending on the game variant used. This ambiguity makes it clear that the elements of taboo, desire, and sexual contact can be configured in a myriad of arrangements within the social play space of the game.

Spin the Bottle: All versions have the traditional circle of players with one player in the center spinning the bottle.... Generally, the center player must kiss the peripheral player pointed out by the bottle. Usually the kissing is done in public, but the couple may go off and do it in private. If it points to a player of the same sex that player may go into the center, or it may be spun again, or the person to the right may be kissed.... There is much report of pretending to avoid the bottle, and of cheating so that it ended up pointing toward the pretty or the handsome and not towards the unattractive.

The forbidden play: Spin the Bottle remains the classic game of adolescent kissing. It offers a flexible structure that allows for both public and private smooching, while also providing a defense against the responsibility of choice. As with the eenie-meenie-miney-moe "counting out" games we discussed in ***Games as Systems of Uncertainty*** and ***Breaking the Rules,*** the role of chance in Spin the Bottle is clearly manipulated as part of the play of the game.

The social play of kissing games is highly structured, allowing players to experience normally taboo behavior within restricted contexts. Games such as Pass the Orange and Endurance Kissing guarantee gratification of certain desires (physical contact), while placing limitations on excess. As Sutton-Smith notes, "One may enjoy a kissing relationship, but be protected from a more total and intimate commitment. The uncertainty of what "might" happen is removed by the structure of the game."[21]

Forbidden play entails a shift in the implicit rules of a game. Playing in a sportsmanlike manner usually means adhering to the etiquette of proper behavior that exists outside the game. Implicit rules embody more general social values. It isn't proper to cheat in a game, in the same way that it isn't proper to cheat on your spouse. But by permitting improper behavior within defined limits, the operational rules of forbidden play trump the implicit rules of society. Thus when a player engages in forbidden play, he isn't only rebelling against the general rules of game play, he is also rebelling against larger social rules as well. If that were not the case, forbidden play would not have the transgressive quality of being *forbidden.* Like the Rooie Rules Foursquare players, people engaged in forbidden play don't just play games, but play with social structures. The Foursquare players gamed the system of rules. Forbidden play participants game the tension between desire and the limits of the socially permissable.

Forbidden play can appear in commercially designed games as well as in folk games, and it doesn't have to involve sexual play. Dressing and acting like a fictional character in a LARP, for example, is a kind of behavior that only happens within the sanctioned space of a game. So is the ruthless mob mentality of SiSSYFiGHT 2000 or the physical melee of full-contact martial arts tournaments and Rugby matches. In all of these examples, forbidden play bridges social relations inside and outside the game's boundaries. Without the "proper" social contexts that exist outside the game, the playful expression of hidden desires, nutty behavior, or normally criminal actions would not gain status as pleasing and transgressive; forbidden play would just be plain old play. At the same time, the game's magic circle protects those within the game from sanction. The game itself maintains this paradoxical tension with the real world: the forbidden play occurs only because of the artificiality of the game, even while it gains intensity as it both challenges and satisfies real-world desires.

Metagame: the Larger Social Context

Throughout this schema, we have investigated many kinds of play communities, from the elemental social roles of actor and counteractor to the complex social tangles of forbidden play. Each offered a different instance of the interplay between the game and the outside world, between social interactions on both sides of the magic circle. We finish this chapter by presenting a powerful concept, one that can help us make sense of the relationship between the artificiality of game play and genuine social reality. This concept is the *metagame.* The Latin root "meta" means *between, with, after, behind, over,* or *about.* Thus metagame means "the game beyond the game" and refers to the aspects of game play that derive not from the rules of the game, but from interplay with surrounding contexts.

Metagaming refers to 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. Post-game locker room conversations about the match are metagame interactions. Memorizing words in the Scrabble dictionary is a metagame activity, the honing of in-game skills. The typical playing strategies of a particular Go master are metagame information, useful if you are playing against him in a tournament next week. In all cases, the metagame refers to the way a game engages with factors permeating the space beyond the edges of the magic circle.

Game players use the term "metagame" in several different ways. For example, in live-action role-playing games, "metagaming" is when a player gains an advantage by using information that his or her character would not possess—and it is generally considered cheating. Some forms of metagaming, such as trash-talking to distract your opponent in a Racquetball match, fall into the category of unsportsmanlike behavior. Still other kinds of metagaming, such as painting and preparing wargaming figures, are thought of as valuable pursuits. These various uses of the term essentially all refer to the same thing: activities that link the game to outside contexts.

A Metagame Model

In an essay titled "Metagames," written for *Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Essays on Roleplaying*, game designer Richard Garfield presents a useful model for thinking about metagames. In it, he defines metagame as the way in which "a game interfaces outside of itself."[23] Under the rubric of this broad definition, Garfield includes a wide array of social play phenomena. He divides manifestations of the metagame 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
4. What happens *during* a game other than the game itself[24]

On the next few pages, we outline each of these categories in turn, using some of the examples that Garfield himself presents.

To: What a Player Brings to a Game

Players always bring something to a game, sometimes in tangible form and sometimes not. For example, a deck taken to a game of Magic: The Gathering or a bat carried to a Baseball game are physical components a player might bring. The study of certain openings in Chess or the ability to memorize cards in Hearts are examples of intangible, mental resources. A player usually has some level of choice in what to bring to a game, though some resources are mandatory: no Soccer ball, no Soccer game. Garfield notes that the selection of resources for a game is a process that players often enjoy. In minatures wargaming such as Warhammer, players spend many hours prior to a game designing their armies, both aesthetically and strategically.

Garfield organizes what players bring to a game into four categories. *Game Resources* refers to necessary game components, such as a deck of cards, a pair of dice, a Tennis racket, Baseball bat, or even physical reflexes. *Strategic Preparation or Training* includes studying an opponent's playing style or memorizing levels. *Peripheral Game Resources* refers to optional elements like game guides, cheats, and knowledge of play patterns. These resources are often created and shared among a game community, either through "official" channels or unofficial ones, such as fan sites. *Player Reputation* is the final category of what players bring to a game, and is often not voluntary. Are you known to bluff, open up the board early, or take advantage of weaker players?

From: What a Player Takes Away from a Game

Players always take something away from a game. It is not uncommon, for example, to play a game for some kind of *stakes*. Winning a stakes game might mean taking away something quantitative, like prize money or standings in a formal competition, or the stakes might be something less tangible, like gloating rights or social status among a group of players. Sometimes, a player takes something away after just a single game. Other times, victory might emerge from a series of games: *best two out of three*. Large-scale tournaments can span weeks or months. The seriousness with which players take a game is affected by how much the current game affects another game, particularly within a ladder structure or other organized contest. This aspect of the metagame can have a strong postive or negative influence on player attitude and performance.

Players also take things away from a game unrelated to the stakes, such as the *experience* of the game itself. A player's experience might serve to validate or contradict their beliefs about an opponent or about the game as a whole, thereby influencing future games. Crafting play experience into a tale, a player can also take away the story of the game: the way victory was seized from the jaws of defeat (or vice versa), spectacularly good or bad moves, the bizarre occurrences that happened during the course of play. *I can't believe I pitched a perfect game!* As we discussed in **Games as Narrative Play**, some games, such as a driving game with replay capability, make this *retelling play* an explicit part of the game. Of course, players can also take away *resources* for future games, whether it is the knowledge about how the game works or a collectible card won as the stakes of the game.

Between: What Happens Between Games

The space between games is filled with a rich palette of metagame activities that can add value to the core play experience. For many players, the activities that take place between games can be as important as what happens during a game. Players commonly reflect on strategy, training, or planning for the next game. *I have got to play more aggressively next time.* Planning what to bring to the next game, whether that involves assembling a new deck for Yu-Gi-Oh, buying a new Tennis racket, or planning a new Go strategy, are all important between-game activities. But not everything that happens between games is a solitary pursuit, and between-game metagaming can include players communicating with each other about what happened last game or players spreading stories and building reputations.

Additionally, not all between-game metagaming is strategic. Decorating a skateboard with stickers between X Games competitions, or reading historical accounts of a battle about to be enacted in a miniatures wargame is also part of the metagame. Both of these activities occur between games and add to the meaning of the play experience, but neither is usually done primarily in order to win.

During: What Happens During a Game Other than the Game Itself

This category of the metagame is quite diverse, and refers to the influence of real life on a game in play. There are many factors external to the magic circle that enter into the experience of play, factors that are always present and often quite powerful. Among the ways that the metagame occurs during play are social factors such as competition and camaraderie, or the physical environment of play such as good lighting or a noisy atmosphere. Trash talking, playing "head games," and exploiting player reputations all affect the metagame as well. If you are playing Table Tennis and are trying to distract your opponent with a steady stream of vociferous insults, you are playing a metagame against him. This kind of metagaming behavior may turn into unsportsmanlike behavior, violating implicit rules of play. It is then up to the social community of players to either endorse or censor the metagame behavior.

Garfield's categories of To, From, Between, and During illuminate the diverse possibilities of the metagame. In his essay, Garfield uses these categories to discuss the metagame of Magic: The Gathering, a game he designed early in his career. Its wildly popular success is due in large part to the innovative way in which Garfield actively incorporated metagame play into the game design itself. Even the game's subtitle, "The Gathering," references the game as a collection of parts that pass in and out of the magic circle. The comments that follow regarding the game are taken from a talk Garfield gave at the 2000 Game Developers Conference:

> *To:* Magic was distinctive in that each player brings half of the cards for the game. Choosing game resources to bring is a large part of the appeal to many players, and it can occupy as much time as the actual play of the game. This is such an important part of the game that there are players who specialize in it, known not as Magic players but as deck constructors and analysts.
>
> *From:* A traditional way to play Magic is for ante, in which each player randomly selects a card from her deck before play and sets it aside before the game starts. The winning player wins both cards.

Magic is often played in formal tournament settings as well, in which official standings or cash prizes can result from play.

Between: Between games of Magic, there is much circulation of game resources and information. Players trade cards, share strategies, and take part in rich player communities.

During: Reputation is important in all kids of Magic play. While some people simply strive to be victorious as often as possible, others are driven to win with unusual strategies, or in order to prove that particular combinations of cards are viable.[25]

Designing the Metagame

Magic's rich metagame emerges from a handful of key game design decisions. The essential structure of the game is that players create their own collections of cards and bring them to a game. Because preparation is a necessary part of play, players quickly understand that the planning metagame of Magic goes hand in hand with the game's face-to-face dueling.

The rules of play revolve around a simple turn structure. The complexity of Magic doesn't come from these core rules but instead from the many special cases that the thousands of different cards make possible. Magic is what game designer Greg Costikyan calls an "exceptions game," a game that contains many variants on a simple set of standard rules.[26] For example, Magic contains a simple set of rules to resolve creature attacks, but individual cards detail many special kinds of creatures, such as walls, which can only defend, or flying creatures, which can bypass any non-flying defending creatures. These "exceptions" lead to new creature-combinations, such as flying walls, which can intercept flying creatures, but can only defend. This kind of classificatory complexity, combined with variability in creature "stats" (casting cost, attack rating, defense rating, color type), plus numerous other "special case" abilities, makes for thousands of different kinds of possible creatures. And creatures are only one of several types of Magic cards!

The modular, specialized nature of Magic cards ensures that part of the metagame is exploring the range of cards, card combinations, deck constructions, and play strategies. As game pieces, the cards are portable and collectible and lend themselves naturally to trading and wagering. On innumerable levels, Magic: The Gathering facilitates and encourages metagaming play. That is one of the reasons why, more than ten years after its release, it still continues to engage players.

To guarantee a game's long-term success, the designer must take the metagame into account. As game designer François Dominic Laramée writes, "Metagaming can drastically increase a game's life span. I remember an online adventure game where players stayed on for months after solving the mystery, serving as 'elders' and giving clues to newbies."[27] Without a metagame, a play experience will provide its own short-lived intrinsic pleasures, but will not affect meaningful play in contexts outside the game.

Designing meaningful social play, usually means designing a meaningful metagame. But how? As we have noted in earlier chapters, game design is a second-order design problem. Game designers only directly design rules; the play experience is an emergent, indirect outcome of the rules. In a similar sense, social play, and the metagame in particular, are only indirectly linked to formal game design. In fact, most of any given game's metagame is beyond the reach of the game designer, for it emerges from play communities and their larger social worlds.

Yet careful game design can contribute to the emergence of a rich metagame. In many online games, web community features such as chat systems transform play via the metagame by allowing players to establish and nurture in-game social relations that gain life outside of game play. For example, the online gaming group *homemakers* spends hours online playing Hearts and Bridge while devoting most of their attention to chatting with friends. Players who make friends playing Hearts with

homemakers will value the game not only for the formal play experience it provides, but also for the social community developed as part of the metagame. The strength of this community, like that of Magic, largely derives from the designed context in which it makes it meanings. Although the metagame can only be indirectly designed, it is up to you to encourage the experiences you want for your players, both within and around the games you design. Richard Garfield might not have designed a particular player's style of Magic trash-talking, but he helped provide the play context in which it is put to use.

Too often, game designers get caught up in the intricacies of design and production, losing sense of the larger social contexts where their game will be played. What will players bring to and from your game? How will they metagame between and during play sessions? What structures can you provide that will encourage the right kind of metagame? Will it be narrative worlds that open up imaginative metagame play? Deep formal structures that reward players for boning up on strategy before a game? Physical economies that encourage social trading and playing for stakes? Tools that let players create their own play communities? There are endless game design approaches.

One key: remember to *observe* your players. As you go through the iterative design process, pay attention to how your players interact before games, after games, between games. Ask them how they'd play if you let them take your game home. *Let* them take your game home—and see what happens. It is true that you can't directly design the metagame. But by understanding that you are always already designing within and for social contexts, you can do your best to cultivate rich metagaming play.

The Limits of Social Play

The metagame and social play bring us to the brink of the magic circle and beyond. In our RULES-based explorations of games, we kept our understanding of game systems firmly closed. In PLAY, things shifted. We sometimes viewed games as enclosed, internally driven systems of experience, at other times as systems that interact with the world at large. Nowhere has this double-framing been as evident as in our discussion of social play. Whether it is bounded and unbounded play communities or the ideal and real rules of games, social play is at once contingent on the formal structures of rules, while also very much a product of larger social contexts.

What are those larger social contexts? They are, of course, the cultures of games. Every Magic duelist, every *homemaker* card shark, every Spin The Bottle kisser doesn't merely exist in a play community, but is part of myriad cultural contexts, from spheres of nationality and ethnicity to ideologies and political beliefs. It is to those contexts we now turn, to the cultures in which games are played. In doing so we leave behind the sometimes open, sometimes closed territory of PLAY to take up instead the wonderfully open-ended landscape of games as CULTURE.

Further Reading

"Beyond the Rules of the Game: Why are Rooie Rules Nice?" by Linda A. Hughes

An excellent case study of children playing Foursquare and the differences they hold between ideal rules and "real" rules. "Real" rules refer to the actual rules children make use of, rather than the rules they are *supposed* use. Hughes' study reveals the close connection between games and the social contexts in which they are played, and helps to identify how social relationships between players dramatically impact the enactment of a formal systems of rules

Children's Folklore: A Source Book, **Brian Sutton-Smith, Jay Mechling, Thomas W. Johnson, and Felicia R. McMahon, eds.**

A collection of essays from fields as far ranging as American studies, folklore, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and education, focusing on interactions among children at play. The essays include case studies, historical surveys, and methodological treatises on the study of play and children. Several of the essays offer excellent explorations of the interactions that emerge from the context of play, and offer insight into different forms of pleasure and social play engendered by games.

Recommended:

"Overview: Methods in Children's Folklore," Brian Sutton-Smith

"Double Dutch and Double Cameras," Ann Richman Beresin

"Urban Schoolyard," Ann Richman Beresin

"Children's Games and Gaming," Linda A. Hughes

"Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs," by Richard Bartle <http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm>

In this online essay, Bartle creates a taxonomy outlining four approaches to playing MUDs. Different player types interact with each other and with the game world in different ways toward radically distinct ends, and Bartle outlines how to build and manage communities to encourage particular player types. His essay is useful in considering the kinds of social interactions and play styles games encourage, especially in online multiplayer games.

The Moral Judgment of the Child, **by Jean Piaget**

Piaget's study of "the rules of the game" of Marbles draws a parallel between the cognitive development that allows children to play and understand games and the moral development by which children learn to distinguish right and wrong. Piaget focuses on the qualities of rules handed down from one group of children to another, and tracks the changing attitudes of children toward the authority of these rules.

Recommended:

The Rules of the Game, chapters 1–6

Notes

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5. Andrew Fluegelman and Shoshana Tembeck, *The New Games Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 65.
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10. Ibid., p65.
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21. Sutton-Smith, "The Kissing Games of Adolescents of Ohio," p. 213–216.
22. Ibid., p. 213.
23. Richard Garfield, "Metagames." In *Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Essays on Roleplaying* (London: Jolly Roger Games, 2000), p. 16.
24. Ibid., p. 17.
25. <http://www.gdconf.com/archives/proceedings/2000/ >
26. Greg Costikyan, "Don't be a Vidiot: What Computer Game Designers can Learn from Non-Electronic Games." Speech given at the 1998 Game Developer's Conference. Archived at: <www.costik.com/vidiot.hmtl>.
27. <http://www.gignews.com/fdl_mainstreamdesign.htm>.

Rules of Play

Game Design Fundamentals

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

book design and photography | Katie Salen