

# What's good about bad play?

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## ABSTRACT

Here I examine the semiotic form of some common and conventionally accepted notions of “bad play” – particularly as these are most relevantly applied to computer games, gamers, and gaming. To do this, I employ a formal method of analysis that treats bad play as play that, without regard to any specific cultural or normative context, plays with – and often against -- the *rules*.

Within this analysis, digital games and their rules are positioned as a subset of a formal and cognitive mechanism guiding a broad set of behaviors in games, sports, and play. Identifying formal similarities between rules-based sports and games and less obviously rules-based (i. e., “free”) play allows the analysis to be extended beyond the relatively narrow domain of computer games.

Conclusions find that bad play in digital games – prominently including cheats, griefs, and exploits – is formally similar to and, in fact, a logical extension of good, proper, and socially acceptable play. The analysis further concludes that, when defined as functioning in opposition to existing rules structures, bad play is not only a common but a necessary component of human play associated with creativity, insight, and change.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

I.6.1 [Simulation theory]: Model classification – *play, games, formal categories, normative categories*.

## General Terms

Human Factors, Theory.

## Keywords

Play, games, simulations, formal systems.

## 1. What is bad play?

The concept of “bad play” is, at present, overly broad. Bad play might be, at different times, associated with inferior play, risky play, morally degenerate play, and/or many other labels and conceptualizations determined by and dependent on the context within which that so-called bad play is currently being defined and valued. And, further complicating this adjudication are the

many and varied (and often conflicting) definitions of “play” available to any well-read play theorist [49].

I deal here with two common indications of bad play: play that is threatening, risky, or otherwise harmful to the self or others, and/or play that is against the rules. Of these two, the former is most often considered a functional characteristic of bad play; the latter can then be considered, in contrast, a formal characteristic of bad play.

I will, of course, not attempt to give “bad” any sort of formal definition. I will rather attempt to examine a broad range of play to which the label “bad” is applied – in sports and in games -- and, if possible, find formal similarities in that play.

Indeed, definitions restricting bad play to a particular cultural (or game design) context may obscure formal similarities between conventionally unacceptable and conventionally acceptable behaviors – i. e., between “bad” and “good” play.

## 2. Playing with risk.

The first broad category of bad play to consider is play that is threatening, risky, or harmful – the sort of play about which protective mothers often waggle their fingers.

Significantly, much play that is physically threatening or risky to players is also considered pleasurable and is, for that reason, actively sought by those players who put themselves most at risk. This category of risky but enjoyable play includes so-called “extreme” sports [2, 27, 28] as well as less competitive but equally dangerous behaviors: bungee-jumping, skydiving, roller-coasting riding, and the like. Indeed, the pleasures of these activities seem, to a great degree, determined by the amount of risk (or “badness”) involved.

Putting someone other than yourself at risk during play includes bullying and other aggressive forms of childhood play – sometimes labeled “dark” play [44, 45]. Aggressiveness towards others has long been cited as an indication of bad, inappropriate, and antisocial play [23, 24] among children and adults.

However, just as putting yourself at risk may be considered either appropriate or inappropriate, pleasurable or not, depending on the context of play, putting others at risk may also be interpreted and approved of differently in different contexts.

Many violent sports – boxing, for instance – assume some risk to participants. More informal yet still willfully aggressive play – either during play-fighting or during those circumstances in which play-fighting and real fighting are blurred (for instance, within the movie *Fight Club* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999) or, perhaps, within hockey games [12] -- provide pleasures and gratifications largely indistinguishable from those provided by non-aggressive and non-risky play [17, 38, 39].

This is true of many quite risky non-competitive games as well -- as evident in the history of and popular fascination with Russian roulette. Originally appearing only in fiction (in a story written by Georges Surdez in 1937 for *Collier's* magazine [see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_roulette](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_roulette)]), Russian roulette has become as widely known and as it is infrequently actually practiced or “played.” Indeed, the classification of Russian roulette as a form of play (rather than suicide) seems critical to its popular conceptualization as intriguing behavior. The movie *Deer Hunter* (Universal Studios, 1978) effectively dramatized the peculiar appeal of playful acts of personal destruction – in this case, Russian roulette -- which are representational and yet, simultaneously and paradoxically, have physically harmful and, therein, non-representational consequences.

Also, many other types of pleasurable human behavior – most pointedly, sexual behavior -- involve acts of aggression, dominance, submission and, upon occasion, pain, up to and including bondage and torture [15]. Labeled abnormal and psychopathic -- and, as such, conventionally discouraged -- such extreme risk-taking (and risk-enjoying) behaviors nevertheless frequently appear within human virtual and/or symbolic contexts, e. g., pornography. And these conceptual representations of bad play have demonstrated critical, popular, and commercial appeal: the writings of the Marquis de Sade, the stories of Anais Nin, Peter Schaffer's *Equus*, and Mel Gibson films [6].

In light of acknowledged guilty pleasures – e. g., schaudenfreude [29] -- it is unclear whether harmful or risky play can be rightfully characterized as “bad” without necessary reference to some pre-existing normative context [42]. This problem of being unable to detach normative context from any meaningful definition of aggressive, risky, or otherwise pejoratively labeled play clearly arises in the current controversies surrounding the study of the biology of animal aggression [4]. And, in parallel, the definition and conceptualization of human bad play is intimately connected with those assumptions guiding well-known development theories of play [1, 41, 53].

Contemporary theories of play... are concerned with the ways that play benefits children's psychological development. They have continued to impact on early childhood programs, particularly in under-fives settings, where we now see play located at the heart of the curriculum and used as a vehicle for nurturing children's development across its various domains. [51]

Implicit in all development theories is the assumption that the natural history and evolution of play documents some necessary and beneficial component of play vital to species survival. That is, play is valuable and valued according to the functional benefits it provides. This claim is then bolstered by the observation of

animal play – and its associated benefits – which are assumed to be similar to those of human play.

Sutton-Smith [49], in fact, conceptualizes the beneficial consequences of play as broadly as “adaptive variability.” This function is then made so vague as to include making people feel better about themselves through “unrealistic optimism,” which grants, among other things, “persistence in the face of adversity.” (p. 231)

However, development theories such as these justify evolutionarily sanctioned play only with reference to its *benefits* – i. e., only with reference to “good” play. Other common outcomes of play – including physically aggressive and, in some computer games, sadistic play [3, 10] – are either ignored or discounted as deviant abnormalities. And, even when the pleasures of bad play are acknowledged in popular contexts – e. g., in works of art or fiction – these pleasures are most often attributed to animal, primitive, or otherwise irrational and, thus, undesirable origins.

In contrast to the assumptions of development theories, however, the subjective pleasures gained through bad play (see [30] for examples of pleasures gained during “white-eyed” computer game grief play) seem more often individually gratifying than socially beneficial. Realizing this, it is then difficult to explain within development theory why nature grants the same visceral and pleasurable responses to risky, harmful, and/or antisocial (bad) play as it does to seemingly safer, more beneficial, and prosocial (good) play. Or, in other words, if we learn the good things associated with play, what prevents us from simultaneously learning the violent, the harmful, and the *bad*?

Of course, digital media provide a relatively safe and less physically threatening context for play than a more rough-and-tumble natural environment. And, for this reason, bad play with digital games poses little to no physical risk to players – though not without exceptions (e. g., see [10] and the play of “Painstation”). Yet risky and harmful computer game play is still evident when considering the emotional and psychological effects of play. (For instance, one of the better known and most widely cited examples of bad play in a virtual environment is the Mr. Bungle virtual rape episode as it took place within LambdaMOO [13, 32].)

And, within broader interactive media contexts, bad play as risky or harmful play may also characterize play posing some legal or economic risk to players, such as that involved in identity theft and the hacking and/or exploiting of commercial software. However, while the pleasures of this sort of play may well originate in the risks involved or harm caused, computer hacking, phreaking, and other such activities [50] are, in general, more typical of a larger and more inclusive category of bad play: play that breaks the rules.

### 3. Playing with rules.

Most often, bad play with digital games is characterized by play against the rules. These rules could, of course, include rules prohibiting risky or harmful play, so that these two categories of bad play – functional and formal, risky/harmful and rules-breaking -- are not mutually exclusive. However, if rules prohibiting harmful play are both conventional and widespread (as most are), then the rules-breaking properties of bad play subsume the risky/harmful functions of bad play. This is

particularly the case when discussing play within virtual environments and (most pertinent to our discussion here) within digital game designs.

### 3.1 Forms of rules.

All computer games have some objective, explicit, and formal representation of their rules embedded in their software or *code*. For this reason, computer games provide a relatively straightforward context for distinguishing what is and what is not rules-appropriate play. This is true despite ongoing social negotiations concerning rules, which always seem part of playful social contexts [9] and despite the possibility of *emergent* play [52] resulting from either loosely constructed or poorly understood rules systems. Here, to avoid any definitional controversy or confusion, I will consider rules-breaking – and the bad play associated with it -- as play not explicitly allowed by the rules as represented within the game code.

Breaking some portion of a game's rules may make playing that game impossible, e. g., rules governing the mechanics of the game's interface. Yet players may still break these rules through a variety of means. For instance, players often use -- particularly during initial play -- their supra-contextual ability to disconnect the game's power supply (i. e., pull the plug), or in some other way physically disturb, interrupt, or revalue the game context.

However, given the difficulty of encoding all rules necessary to govern and, if required, prohibit all possible transgressive play, here I will be most concerned with gaps or omissions within computer game rules systems, which allow players to play *with* (rather than within or according to) the coded rules of game. Such play is often considered in conflict with the spirit of the game as interpreted by other players and, significantly, by the game designer(s). The transgressions I will focus on are then commonly called *exploits*.

This particular class of rules-breaking involves breaking game rules while still maintaining some level of integrity within the rules system (or game *context*) of which the broken rules are some part. For this reason, bad play of this sort is one of the more paradoxical and, once divorced from any associated normative values, one of the more formally interesting manifestations of computer game play.

Despite the programmable and tangible nature of rules embedded in game code, computer game players seem to play as often in disregard of as they do in accordance with rules. To some extent, this behavior naturally results when computer game designs (either intentionally or not) hide rules from players – as is frequently the case when computer games involve themes of exploration, mystery, or subterfuge. However, a great deal of rules-breaking play can be observed among players who have full access to and full knowledge of all game rules yet willfully choose to ignore these rules in order to access a freer (and usually a more effective) style of play.

Examples of exploitive play are extremely common within complex online role-playing games, which typically display a characteristically incomplete and/or a continually revised rules set. Here, Maleki, a *World of Warcraft* (WoW, Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) In-Game Support Manager, explains the nature and consequences of a particular WoW exploit (WoW Hunter Discussion Forum, Feb 5, 2005):

To be a little more specific, the guild in question was using repeated line of sight exploits which prevented the mobs from attacking back. Also, using a pulling exploit which allowed them to only agro boss mobs. Both are considered exploits, and the guild in question was previously warned the night before. We want to reiterate that exploitation of high end content will not be tolerated.

Exploits which use unintended rules conflicts or consequences to aid play are common in single-player games as well – including exploits provided by game designers in the form of so-called “cheat codes.” In fact, realizing the widespread tendency of players to explore, manipulate, and transform game rules to their advantage, many game designers have attempted to incorporate rules-breaking play within rules-appropriate play through special forms of rules: self-reflexive and/or self-transformative rules. These rules allow, in effect, game rules to be broken as an acceptable, appropriate, and sometimes even necessary component of game play. While the most obvious example of this formal rules-breaking design remains cheat codes, there are other, more subtle and interesting variations as well.

For instance, within the many popular and extended versions of Sid Meier's original *Civilization* (Microprose, 1991), there is the self-transforming feature of “World Wonders.” When these World Wonders – the Pyramids, Michelangelo's Chapel, and such – are introduced into the game, they transform the game rules, including those rules that allow subsequent World Wonders to be built and introduced into the game.

And, within most other, non-computer-based games – sports, poker, even solitaire – there are equally frequent rules modifications, variations, and transgressions which serve to extend and enliven play within, ostensibly, those same boundaries established by the original game context.

While most rules transformations in non-digital games are the result of social negotiations undertaken in normative contexts outside the game's rules system, the interactive nature of digital media makes it increasingly possible to include something like this negotiation process within the computer game design itself.

During all initial computer game play, players make important game decisions prior to full knowledge of the game rules. For instance, players must decide where to build founding cities in *Civilization*, or what sort of characters to build within online role-paying games (such as *World of Warcraft*) prior to full knowledge of the world-map (in *Civilization*) or prior to full knowledge of the relative abilities and disabilities of character classes (in MMORPGs).

In the former instance, the game rules of *Civilization* might be considered purposefully hiding information from players in order to introduce random elements of play. In the second instance, however, the game rules (i. e., rules manuals and/or texts) are simply incapable of describing character abilities which are only determined most definitely within a constantly shifting and largely player-determined competitive context. This latter circumstance is equally true of all popular action/arcade games in which the experience of play is widely considered by players to be a better teacher (and evaluator) of game rules than is any text-based explication.

In situations like these, in order to play an interactive computer game properly and according to its coded rules, players must constantly make – and subsequently remake – rules-determined game decisions. And these decisions then affect subsequent rules-determined outcomes and forms. During this choosing and re-choosing process, computer games are started and restarted, loaded and reloaded, while game representations (e. g., avatars) are similarly rolled and re-rolled, built and rebuilt, constructed and destroyed – all without full knowledge of the game rules and all in order to conform, eventually, to some newly realized set of game rules. Such repetitive and recursive play results in and is made necessary by the characteristic *incompleteness* (either in perception or fact) of computer game rules.

Thus, whether the rules and game design structures explicitly (formally) allow such things to happen or not, the structure of actual play with interactive digital games consistently displays a “recursive contextualization” [35] process – in which rules are transformed through continuous, repeated, and, most importantly, recursive play.

### 3.2 Rules as semiotic forms.

In order to discuss the implications of this recursive contextualization process, consider computer game rules as *signs*. These signs then serve as representations (or references) pointing to some other object, process, or sign.

For example, game rules governing the movement of cars within *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (GTA, Rockstar, 2004) point (or refer) to the movement of cars in three-dimensional city spaces. It is useful to think of these representations as similar to those of *simulations* – and many games (*Microsoft's Flight Simulator* [MFS, Microsoft, 1984] and the *Falcon* [Spectrum Holobyte, 1987] combat flight series, for instance) are quite explicit in establishing this relationship.

However, the relationship of *SimCity* (Brøderbund Software, 1989) to real cities – or *Civilization* to real civilizations, or *GTA* to real theft, crime, and violence -- is quite different from the relationship of *MFS* to real planes. *SimCity's* signs and symbols, as is the case with most computer games, are dedicated to providing an engaging and enjoyable play *experience*. *MFS's* signs and symbols, as is the case with most simulations, are dedicated to modeling a physical *process*, e. g., flight mechanics.

Is the *experience* of play then shaped by the same rules – that is, by the same semiotic forms and functions -- as are the *mechanics* of physics? In brief: no.

The use of simulations, in opposition to the play of games, does not display structures of recursive contextualization, either in original design or during prolonged play. For this reason, rules-breaking (bad) play within simulations is characterized differently – i. e., has a different outcome -- than rules-breaking play within games.

We most often recognize rules-breaking play within simulations such as *MFS* as unlearned, unpracticed, or unskilled play. That is, players who are ignorant of the game rules break those rules and play “badly.” However, playing without knowledge of game rules is not precisely the same as playing, with foreknowledge, *against* those rules. For this reason, we most often consider the outcome of knowledgeable bad play to be rules-breaking (and thus dysfunctional), and the outcome of ignorant bad play to be rules-learning (and thus functional).

Yet, significantly, despite these differences in outcomes, there are no comparable formal differences between these two types of play; both tend not to follow, i. e., to break, the rules and, subsequently, to conceptually transform those rules and/or the play experience which those rules evoke. In fact, knowledgeable, skilled, and practiced bad play serves to accomplish precisely the same function as ignorant, unskilled, and unpracticed bad play: to explore and fully determine precisely what the game rules *are*.

In this sense, both during game play and during simulation use, the rules-breaking function of bad play closely parallels the function of so-called *Garfinkeling* [18]; that is, breaking game rules is necessary to establish the presence and, related, the contextual (or experiential) function of rules.

Significantly, in advanced computer game play – as opposed to advanced simulation use -- rules-breaking play does not decrease. During “play” with simulations, the more practiced and expert player displays both more skill and, in demonstration of that skill, more rules-abiding behavior; the more practiced and expert player of computer games, on the other hand, also displays more skill, but, in demonstration of that skill, is much more likely to be rules intolerant.

Indeed, a great percentage of play with computer games might be classified as rules-breaking play, regardless of the knowledge or expertise (or lack thereof) of game players. The only portion of computer game play that does not consistently display a pattern of recursive contextualization and its resulting conceptual transformations is that portion of play involving the manipulation of the computer game’s physical interface – i. e., learning how to move the joystick and/or what buttons to push on the keyboard.

Within computer games, the representations associated with the game interface point to something other than the subjective play experience: They point to the means to access that experience. Their function in this regard is similar to that of representations in a simulation. Once players have full knowledge of and sufficient practice with the game interface, its signs and symbols become increasingly habitualized and, therein, incapable of easy, useful, or enjoyable transformation. Indeed, subsequent rules transformations must take place within precisely such a learned and *fixed* context – or representational interface -- which then provides a necessary, stable, and conceptually unassailable “ground” [22] for further assignation of values and meanings.

Learning the game interface is, therefore, more comparable to simulation use (or pre-play) than to game play. For, once interface rules have been learned, play with those rules ends. Play thereafter occurs not with (or against) but through (or within) the interface and is increasingly focused on the manipulation of other, more subjective components of the play experience.

Since these subjective components are, by and large, semiotic forms – i. e., relational and combinatorial -- it is rare that players exhaust all the possibilities of the play experience during a single and/or predetermined transformation of game rules. Increasingly, at this stage of play, game rules governing simple, linear, and/or singular manipulations of game content (e. g., such as those manipulations guided by embedded narrative structures) become superfluous.

Games played by expert players take on less of a “rigid-rule” and more of a “free-form” [25] structure, in which play is determined by, if any one thing in particular, the player’s own localized and

individualized sensation of the game experience or “flow” [11]. And, it is at this stage that the conceptual transformation of rules is most likely to transgress the original game context and engage the so-called “metagame.”

Within action/arcade games, for instance, this stage of play might include the creation of graphic contexts (e. g., wad files in *DOOM* [id Software, 1994]) which then extend play within the context of the game’s original interface; or, within role-playing games, this might include more active participation and leadership in those social activities conducted outside the limited scope of the game’s fantasy world; or, within strategy games, this might include more abstract play with the game rules themselves – and so on. Or, alternatively, at this stage the original game is simply placed aside, and a new game is taken up in its place.

During this culminate stage of expert and endgame play, it is interesting to note parallels with how game designers play their own games. During the design process, for instance, game designers have the ability to play outside the rules of the game and thus engage in rules-breaking play. In this and many other respects (see the description of the design of *Civilization* in [35], pp. 132-133), game designer play ignores the boundaries and restrictions placed on conventional game players. This designer play, then, is a sort of formally bad play.

Playing with rules in the manner of game designers is common within all free-form games. Yet attempting to implement free-form game play within a rigid-rules game context inevitably causes self-referential paradoxes and, if those paradoxes are not trapped and handled properly, the game defaults.

Suber [48] and others have noted the potentially de-habilitating paradoxes that result when rules-based political, social [14, 20] and/or biological [33, 34] systems attempt to transform those rules systems of which they are themselves a part. Suber, in fact, has constructed a general case illustrating this problem of self-reflexive and self-transformative rules within the game *Nomic*.

*Nomic*, a “game of self-amendment,” is most fundamentally characterized by its rule 213,

**213.** If the rules are changed so that further play is impossible, or if the legality of a move cannot be determined with finality, or if by the Judge’s best reasoning, not overruled, a move appears equally legal and illegal, then the first player unable to complete a turn is the winner.

This rule takes precedence over every other rule determining the winner. [48]

Thus, *Nomic* is a simulation of a rules-making process, wherein winning conditions are determined by, in effect, breaking the rules of that process. In parallel, play itself may be understood – in the same Garfinkeling sense mentioned earlier – as a simulation of a *simulated* rules-making process. For, just as *Nomic* simulates breaking the rules of a game, play simulates breaking the rules of simulating.

Note, however, here it is vital that play be a simulation (or a *representation*) of a rules-breaking process rather than that process itself since, if the latter were true, play would then be bound by the physical mechanics, i. e. the rules, of that process.

However, as a *representation* of that process, play (or *playing*) is free to transform rules of any sort – including rules related to the rules-breaking process itself – without having any permanent (and potentially disastrous) impact on the biological and cognitive restraints (i. e., the rules) that evoke and sustain play.

Likewise, *Nomic* must retain its position as a game of self-amendment rather than the self-amendment process itself. Otherwise, *Nomic* might unravel itself. For, while the self-amendment process that *Nomic*’s rules refer to remains paradoxical and, ultimately, untransformable, the simulation of that process within the game manages to amend rules in such a way that those amendments have no permanent or lasting effect on the broader and more inclusive process of self-amendment. Thus, *Nomic*, as a game, is unable to transform the play of self-amendment to which its representations refer. Or, more precisely, if it were to do so, then, according to Rule 13, the game immediately ends.

This, then, is the crucial point at which the rules of simulations, games, and play diverge. While game rules may be unbound within the game context, and thus capable of self-reflection and self-transformation and, indeed, even self-destruction through simultaneous and paradoxical application, the rules of play are irrevocably bound to and limited by the biological context of their generation. Thus play cannot fail to produce paradox, and, somewhat paradoxically, play cannot fail to survive the paradoxes it produces.

For these reasons, it is useful to think of game signs and symbols as occupying an intermediate position between the signs and symbols of simulations and the signs and symbols of play. As **Table 1** indicates, the representations within simulations point to an objective process (i. e., “reality”); the representations within games point to a subjective experience (i. e., “fun”); and the representations within play point to the pointing (or representational) process itself. In this sense, play may be considered a simulation of *simulating*.

**Table 1. Relationships among play, games and simulations.**

	<b>Formal reference</b>	<b>Functional outcome</b>
<b>Play</b>	Representation	Pretense
<b>Game</b>	Experience	Interaction
<b>Simulation</b>	Reality	Model

A game such as *Nomic* is then perhaps the closest possible “good” (non-rules-breaking) implementation of a free-form game within a rigid-rules game design, since free-form games can only be defined and implemented in an oppositional relationship to some pre-existing set of rules. That is, free-form games cannot be rules-free games. And, likewise, play cannot take place outside of the context of the simulation (or representational) process that isolates and protects that process from its own effects and outcomes. Or, put more simply, you can’t play with play.

Thus, rules-breaking of the sort that characterizes bad play has a definite formal structure with an indefinite functional outcome. This formal structure provides for the evaluation, manipulation, and transformation of existing rules structures – forcibly so. And the outcome of this process is most typically paradox.

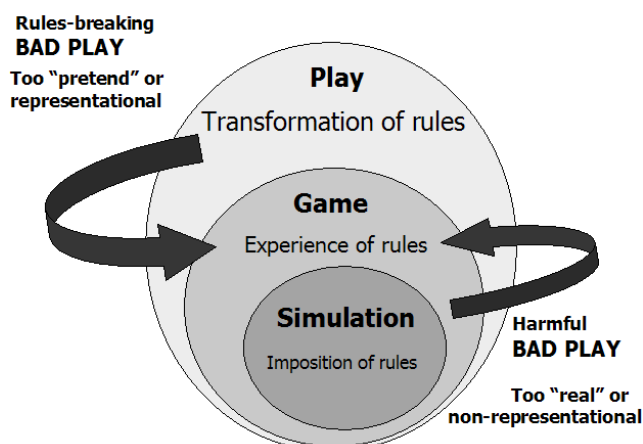


Figure 1. Representations of bad play.

The representational and interactive qualities of computer games allow the construction of rules – like those in *Nomic* and *Civilization* -- that allow game players to engage in play analogous to that of a game designer. In a recursive contextualization process, game rules may then be manipulated and transformed indefinitely *so long as those game rules remain incomplete*. However, should the rules system be finalized in some rigid (i. e., fully coded) form, then game play must either descend into the “good” and rules-abiding play of simulation use, or ascend into the increasingly “bad” play of rules-breaking. In the latter instance, play must ultimately either break or abandon any fixed set of game rules.

Whether such a formal rules-breaking process of bad play is, at this latter point, labeled functional or dysfunctional entirely depends on the quality (level of completeness) of the game rules and on the social, cultural, and/or theoretical context within which those rules are valued and given meaning.

#### 4. Conclusions.

This analysis focuses on the form and function of bad play. Based on this analysis, there are several advantages to assigning a primary role to the formal properties of bad play rather than to the functional properties of that play. One is that the form of bad play is common to all games, while the functions of bad play are not. Another is that, in the model offered, the formal properties of bad play subsume and therein both explain and predict the functions of bad play.

However, an examination of the formal properties of play does not preclude or even de-prioritize an examination of play functions. On the contrary, certain functions are often implied – and required -- by formal classifications.

For instance, acknowledging a formal distinction between play and game play implies that at least one function of the latter is to sustain such a distinction. That is, the distinction between play and game play is not only an indication of their separate functions but also a necessity to *insure* their separate functions. This, in turn, implies games are, at some fundamental level, incompatible with free and unrestricted play. Therefore, we are motivated to look for forms of free play that decompose or otherwise subvert

the control features of games – which we find in abundance in the many manifestations of exploits, cheat codes, and other transgressions of so-called bad play.

Likewise, we are motivated to look for game structures that restrict and limit play in order to resist its destructive functions – structures that are easily and widely found, for instance, in all those (primarily developmental and educational) contexts that prioritize the representations of simulations and their real-world references. And, of course, in all game designs, there are equally abundant structures for rules enforcement, including extensive mechanisms for finding and punishing rules-breaking players (e. g., see the earlier cited *WoW* example).

Given this essay’s emphasis of form, I have not considered any particular player characteristics or motivations as more or less associated with bad play [16]. Nor have I considered any particular social characteristics or contexts (other than development theories of play) that are more likely to encourage, discourage, or otherwise influence play values [26, 46].

Focusing analysis in this way allows the identification of generic functions of bad play and, further, subsumes those functions within a formal definition of *rules-breaking* play. In general, this rules-breaking play has a dual function within rules structures: it delimits and explicates those structures, and, simultaneously, it creates curiously paradoxical contexts within which rules structures are either transformed or broken (or both).

These two related functions – or outcomes – of bad play are as necessary for the existence of games as they are predictive of the fragile and impermanent nature of games during play. Development theories of play have no similar explanatory role for the common and widespread destructive functions of bad play. Of the available theories of play, *agonistic* theories [47] offer an interpretation of play most nearly consonant with the position presented here, yet those theories also commonly seek refuge in normative contexts to distinguish between what is good and bad, proper and improper play.

The primary advantage offered by a formal approach then is that, without recourse to any normative context or relative validity thereof, it is possible to justify the existence of bad play as a necessary and unavoidable consequence of the peculiar and related representational forms of simulations, games, and play.

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