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**The Social Poetics of Analog Virtual Worlds: Toying With Alternate  
Realities**

by

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## **Dedication**

For Carlee, who is always lovely, and for my father, who may one day value all this pedantic sophistry as something more—or not.

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# **The Social Poetics of Analog Virtual Worlds: Toying With Alternate Realities**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Kathleen Stewart

While online virtual worlds draw increasingly wider audiences of players and scholars alike, offline games continue to evolve into more complex and socially layered forms as well. This dissertation argues that virtual worlds need not exist as online, digital environments alone and probes three genres of non-digital gaming for evidence of the virtual: tabletop role-playing games, murder-mystery events, and localized alternate reality games. More broadly, then, this dissertation is about deliberate make-belief: practiced by adults, taken seriously by participants, engaged with for long hours at a time, performed in public, and integrated into everyday social relationships. Drawing on scholars who study games as social activities (McGonigal 2006, Montola 2012) and social institutions (Goffman 1974, Searle 1995), I present three ethnographic case studies that illustrate how complex forms of social gaming can conjure and sustain environments best understood as analog virtual worlds.

Through the widespread use of mobile technologies and the concerted efforts of innovators, game spaces are increasingly permeating our everyday lives on- and offline. This dissolving boundary demands anthropologists to revisit questions of how, where, and with whom we play games. Dovetailing Martin Heidegger's notions

of *worlding* and *poiesis* to the semiotics of C.S. Peirce, this dissertation investigates how new forms of social gaming demonstrate the same qualities of shared intentionality, intersubjectivity, and performance essential to the production of new social meaning and cultural forms. Following, I situate the bold ethnographic case studies of make-belief in dialogue with scholars who figure exclusively online virtual worlds (Castronova 2005, Taylor 2006, Boellstorff 2008) and argue that analyzing both on- and offline virtual worlds together can help scholars better understand the fundamental nature of social interaction and shared intentionality, those everyday mechanisms that both sustain personal relationships on the one hand and maintain our broadest and most serious social institutions on the other.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Not being of “ordinary life” it [play] stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process. It interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there. Such at least is the way in which it presents itself to us in the first instance: as an intermezzo, an *interlude* in our daily lives. As a regularly recurring relaxation, however, it becomes the accompaniment, the complement, in fact an integral part of life in general. It adorns life, amplifies and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual—as a life function—and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function. The expression of it satisfies all kinds of communal ideals. It thus has its place in a sphere superior to the strictly biological process of nutrition, reproduction and self-preservation. (Huizinga [1938] 1971: 6)

### I. THE PLAY ELEMENT OF CULTURE

This dissertation is about play. While easily understood as an activity “out of the ordinary,” upon closer reflection, we see that play is one of the most ordinary, pervasive activities to comprise everyday life. We hop a crack on the pavement; we opt for colorful stationery; we affect an accent when repeating the words of an unliked co-worker; we laugh, a lot, even when we are alone. The ways an individual plays can be one of the most defining qualities of her personality to friends and acquaintances.

Johan Huizinga, a medievalist by affiliation, offers the most thoroughgoing work on play to date, *Homo Ludens* ([1938] 1971). For Huizinga, what begins as the inconsequential interlude ends as the sacred, the set apart. Play is a creative force, *the* creative force, behind meaning and thus behind meaningful sociality; and what is a better definition of culture than “meaningful sociality?” Following such a vein, this dissertation is about the ways that play permeates culture, where it turns up, how we can recognize it. More specifically, this dissertation is about deliberate make-believing: practiced by adults, taken seriously by participants, engaged with for long hours at a time, performed in public, and integrated into everyday social relationships.

## **Introduction of Study**

While online virtual worlds draw increasingly wider audiences of players and scholars alike, offline games continue to evolve into more complex and socially layered forms as well. This dissertation argues that virtual worlds need not exist as online, digital environments alone and probes three genres of non-digital gaming for evidence of the virtual: tabletop role-playing games, murder-mystery events, and localized alternate reality games. Drawing on scholars who study games as social activities (McGonigal 2006, Montola 2012) and social institutions (Goffman 1974, Searle 1995), I present three ethnographic case studies that illustrate how complex forms of social gaming can conjure and sustain environments best understood as analog virtual worlds.

Through the widespread use of mobile technologies and the concerted efforts of innovators, game spaces are increasingly permeating our everyday lives. This dissolving boundary demands anthropologists to revisit questions of how, where, and with whom we play games. My research focuses on two forms of public play: alternate reality gaming and the tabletop role-playing game. I argue that studying and situating the mechanisms of a deliberate playfulness will help us better understand the fundamental nature of social interaction and shared intentionality, those everyday mechanisms that both sustain personal relationships on the one hand and maintain our broadest and most serious social institutions on the other.

## ***Ethnography of Virtual Worlds***

In the summer of 2010, I undertook a fellowship with the Social Science Research Council to study virtual worlds under the direction of Tom Boellstorff and Doug Thomas. While ethnographic research into virtual worlds did at that time, as it still does today, focus solely on massively multiplayer online worlds (see Boellstorff et al. 2012), I entered the fellowship with the idea of looking for virtual worlds in offline environments. What other ways do humans use technology and design to produce virtual environments and virtual experiences? If the virtual is a fundamental part of what makes us human, as

scholars in various fields feel comfortable implying to (Boellstorff 2008: 5, 237; Massumi 2002: 89–108; Clark 2008; McCormackb), what might this “virtuality” look like outside computer-generated environments? What other infrastructures, activities, and institutions can present something like a virtual world suited for human inhabitance?

My research started with tabletop role-playing games, a genre recognized by the iconic title *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1974). While online virtual worlds captivate inhabitants by drawing users into digital environments that both open to and resist the human will, tabletop role-playing produces imaginary worlds, shared fantasies (Fine 1983), environments constructed only through symbolic language, aesthetic performance, material props, and objective procedure. Could the resulting structure comprise something more than mere words and fantasy? Could such a game produce an environment that both opens to and resists the human will in the same way online virtual worlds and their video game cousins seem to? This early research project, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, suggested that the unique—and no doubt complex—social institution that arises during fantasy role-playing, however ephemeral, conjures an experience of *worlding* similar to that of the massively multiplayer online games.

Over the following years, I have continued research into tabletop role-playing and at the same time broadened the scope of my study to include other genres of gaming, two forms of alternate reality game. I pursue the emergence of the virtual across these disparate genres in hopes of better understanding the productive force of play writ large and the roles imagination, virtuality, and intersubjectivity play in everyday social life. The longer I study these forms of gaming, the more I find parallels and analogs connecting such organized playfulness to everyday practices of public sociality more broadly. I have come to see these genres as more than mere metaphor, and I now find in them small societies or small publics of their own.

My central methodology relies on the notion of “cultural probes” developed by cultural geographer Nigel Thrift (2011). Each of the ethnographic case studies that follows hinges on an original game of my own design, a creative probe aimed at

leveraging the specific affordances of each genre I came to know. The goal in every case is to reach the very limits of the genre and to generate most conclusively and tangibly an analog virtual world comparable in as many ways as possible to the environments available online. Such games do not contain the virtual but elicit it, and a large portion of my research entailed long phases of interactive and experimental design, learning each new medium of gaming and working to produce something new within it. I designed each game to seek out and test the fundamental mechanisms and affordances of the genre, inviting the players themselves to construct their own meanings and goals and interpretations.

I worked with two other designers from 2011 to 2014 creating *Fantaji*, a tabletop role-playing game that participates in the nascent “story game” movement of the hobby while at the same time pushing beyond a narrative focus to incorporate novel forms of play within the tabletop genre. The game relies on qualitative traits and open-ended translation over constitutive rules and statistics to demand creativity from the players on every turn and require each local group of players to develop their own structures and systems out of the play.

With a handful of other writers, I wrote *The Ski Lodge Murder* in 2013, a murder-mystery event that combines role-playing and gaming to elevate the genre above pure pageantry and scripted performance. We designed the game to animate the social space of the host’s home and provide not a script but an atmosphere. The game remaps the space as something else and invites players to generate the connections and meanings that interpolate the material elements provided by the game into meaningful activity. *The Ski Lodge Murder* is detailed more closely in Chapter 5.

The development of *Fancy Bang*, a localized alternate reality game, took more than a year and produced a sizeable failure before resulting in a workable game. In August of 21012, the team of creators and I finally “charged” an environment with sufficient materials to conjure a virtual world. We peeled back the genre of the alternate reality game to expose its most essential elements and relied on these few mechanisms to

create a veneer of the virtual. Accounts of our most successful attempts are covered in Chapter 6.

### ***Taking Play Seriously***

It seems tantamount to taboo to take make-believe seriously. Erving Goffman observes that daydreaming, delighting, desiring can fill hours of every single day, and yet we talk about it so little (1974: 52). Where is fantasy given its due in discussions of the everyday? While dreams are fetishized as ciphers for our subconscious; daydreams, those things consciously and deliberately wished for and thought, go mostly disregarded. Daydreaming takes time; delighting engages the body; desiring can burn, brighten, or break us. But we relegate such pastimes to the realm of the inconsequential or epiphenomenal. Why is something so pervasive so dismissed? We muse constantly; we ruminate on old conversations and rehearse revisions; we take the long way home. It is as though the very nature of play, so self-aware of its “unseriousness,” resists our taking it seriously. Does play elude us on purpose, pleased with itself, tickled with its inconsequence? Play is the Jester who goes unnoticed when the King’s bailiff rounds up the usual suspects. Play is like Pan.

### **The Nature of Play**

What is the nature of play? Scholars of performance and game studies multiply definitions to suit their subjects, but for now we are talking about that fundamental *something* that is recognized locally, in whatever context, as playfulness. As I quoted earlier, Huizinga figures play as a necessary, fundamental element of whatever we understand as culture. Erving Goffman defines playfulness as a “keying” that turns a strip of actual activity into *something else* (1974: 44). Gregory Bateson sees play—along with threats, deceit, and rituals—as something set apart from “ordinary” communication and activity (1972: 177–193).

That play is “out of the ordinary” makes perfect sense. It is outside the required, the necessary, the important: gainful employment is required, being a productive member of society is necessary, maintaining a sane and sober mind is important. Then again, in

those rare moments of clarity, when the course of “ordinary” life is exposed as so many games, so many mazes, as a Rat Race that pits us against our very neighbors—in these Zen-like moments of clarity, all of those “ordinary” things seem to be the fundamentally optional, unnecessary, unimportant. What inevitably remains for the Taoist sage and the Buddhist monk—to say nothing of the hermit and the madman—is play.

Admittedly, this use of “ordinary” refers only to *social* life and *social* institutions, not to the procurement of food, shelter, and safety—biological necessity. But do we consider the brute facts of eating and sheltering “ordinary,” per se? Maybe *when* we eat, *how* we eat, *what* we eat come to feel ordinary, but I would argue that eating itself resists such an evaluation. It seems only the cultural—and only the cultural that is not living up to expectations, to promises made, to life in all its liveliness—can be described as “ordinary.” The teasing out of what can count as “ordinary” and what counts as “out of the ordinary” becomes illuminating questions in a study of play as cultural production.

### ***Play as Freedom***

First and foremost for Huizinga, play is free. Ostensibly, play has no consequences, risks no failure, demands no cost. When we speak of play, we speak of free activity, free movement.

C.S. Peirce defines play as “musement,” a mental and emotional freedom perhaps best experienced “during a stroll,” a mode of thought that “has no rules, except this very law of liberty” (2010: 120). He argues that play is essential to abduction, what he also calls retrospection, the process by which unconnected thoughts and experiences can be collected and assembled into the logic of argument or narrative. Wrangling disparate thoughts and images together to make connections and form an integrated could even be taken as the very foundation of meaningfulness. New perspectives and assemblages are “tried on,” donned, toyed with. New ideas along with their affordances are tested and evaluated through stochastic trial and error (see Bateson 1979: 165). Play as retrospection makes possible understanding and insight, both the facts of science and the truths of art.

This freedom underpins a more ontological primacy as well. As the root of everything free and ostensibly contingent, play is likewise the root of agency. Play occurs every time the individual pulls herself out of the determinism of biological processes and does something frivolous and unnecessary. Play qua freedom is the assertion of an *I* as something that is free, some *thing* that has agency. What at first glance stands for the very quintessence of the optional or unnecessary comes to be the basis of free will, a condition of possibility for the human. I can *choose* to stop sniffing about for food, to pause my pursuit of sex, to cease going about my business in the ordinary way determined by my genes, ontogeny, and environment. Prove it? I can play! But is this freedom necessary? For someone who is not a philosopher, not an artist, of what consequence is play?

I would suggest that to imagine a life without play is to imagine the most severe form of unfreedom. Consider a cosmic judge sentencing someone to a life without play. The individual is free to travel, work, socialize, produce—free to go on living however she chooses, but anything playful would be forbidden. What would be left? What actions would be possible? What does travel look like devoid of playfulness? Socializing? Such a sentence would render the individual entirely devoid of agency in any meaningful way. And here we see the absolutely fundamental role of play in culture. The plantation, the prison, the asylum—whichever institutions prohibit play most completely are the worst.

And this may be precisely why the only happiness that Camus' Sisyphus can find occurs at the very moment he turns "back to the rock." Despite his sentence, he yet *chooses* to bear it. He has at least this agency left to him, this last ounce of play.

### ***Play as Contest & Presentation***

But play is more than "free movement." Huizinga offers two core aspects that characterize productive play, that form of play of interest to academic scholarship:

The function of play in the higher forms which concern us here can largely be derived from two aspects under which we meet it: as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. These two functions can unite in such a way that the game "represents" a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something. (Huizinga [1938] 1971: 13)

This “representation” must not be taken in a linguistic or mediating sense. Huizinga figures representation here as “display,” “exhibition,” “performance,” as a “realization in appearance.” To represent is to re-present, re-image, to unconceal—before an audience of ourselves and whoever else cares to see—what was in one sense already there. It is precisely through the action of deliberate re-presentation that the ordinary becomes “something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime” (ibid: 14). I will call this re-presenting *presentation* throughout to distinguish playful display from commonsense notions of linguistic representation.

And beyond re-imagining, play is a contest. Essential as much to make-believe as sports, the “something different” that is play makes it somehow *harder* than ordinary life. Often credited to Bernard Suits (1978), an old definition of play denotes a game as an “obstacle we volunteer to overcome.” The resolution of such an obstacle would constitute both a contest and a presentation. Huizinga figures play as “tense,” and likens it to the tension of the sacred ritual. In play, we try to produce or accomplish something, even if the accomplishment is only the leaping out of the ordinary, a salmon breaking the surface of the water. I will argue that this tension, this risk of failure, is a crucial element of meaningful activity. This is the “world—or not” of Bruno Latour (2008: 13), wherein each act of presentation succeeds in conjuring a new, fuller world—or not.

### **Non-Representational Interventions**

This dissertation includes ethnographic research of three complex forms of public make-believe. I have chosen one of the simplest forms of playfulness (make-believe) and located it within three of the most complex social and material contraptions I could—all this to investigate how play permeates, and in doing so just might sustain, complicated cultural institutions. The formulation of this project itself is an argument, and Section II below will present in more detail what is at stake in my use of *games* and *play*. Beyond these ethnographic and theoretical representations, I have undertaken a corollary task.

I discuss at length in Chapter 2 how Nigel Thrift's (2008) non-representational theory informs my approach to play in general and to tabletop role-playing and alternate reality games specifically. In his presentation of *Lifeworlds, Inc.* (2011), Thrift calls social scientists to get out into the world with their theory. Anthropologists, especially, have the opportunity to *do* theory out "in the wild."<sup>1</sup> Thrift suggests that the goals of our research should reach beyond packaging nice representations of this or that community, that we should reach towards generating "provocative awareness" for those we encounter, colleagues as well as subjects. Thrift demands that our experiments be instigating, animating, agitating and asks for:

a new means of probing what is going on and instigating new behaviours/assemblages. We need, in other words, to invent an art of experiment which can up the methodological ante. I am looking, then, for a social science which promotes a rewoven empirics which, most particularly, generates the quality of provocative awareness. (2011: 8)

He calls these hypothesized arts "cultural probes." Taking Thrift's call to arms seriously, I present this dissertation alongside a corollary project, the design of the *Fantaji Role-Playing Game*, a tabletop role-playing game that seeks to elicit as much meaningful play as possible, to privilege *regulative* over *constitutive* rules, and to function as a *toy* as much as a *game*.

## II. CONTEXT FOR STUDY

In today's intellectual market, studies of consequential play are likely confined to discussions of sports and video games. Both forms of play are backed by billion-dollar industries that act to generate and legitimize the attention they gather. Games are hip, while mere play is not. And games that generate billions of dollars each year are social objects that demand careful study and understanding, while mere play, which boasts of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a phrase I borrow from cognitive anthropologist Edwin Hutchins (1995). His call for anthropologists to study processes such as cognition "in the wild" features prominently in this dissertation, a chord that will ring throughout.

no such economic worth, is childish, silly, unimportant. While I have nothing—or, just a *little* something—against games, I write this to privilege and celebrate play. Playfulness, as a fundamental mode of interaction and sociality, demands at least as much study as sports and video games. And anthropologists are just the scholars to do it.

To be a “gamer” in today’s global North is to be a player of video games, and when academics produce knowledge about games “in general,” they more often than not study video games to do so. Jaakko Stenros and Annika Waern flag this elevation of video games to the unmarked form of gaming and the concomitant focus on video games as emblematic of gaming in general as the “digital fallacy” (2011). Scholars of productive play—what I will champion as a flickering of *poiesis*—must challenge this fallacy at every turn, especially considering early successes in the academic field of ludology and the proliferation of “game labs” on university campuses that study video games exclusively.

Furthermore, just as much as studies of the industry surrounding professional sports, a thoroughgoing analysis of playfulness writ large can situate our world of late-capitalism, with its endless productions of leisure and dalliance that amount to “ultimately unsatisfying worlds” (Thrift 2011: 3). We need better theories of play to maintain a critical engagement with these endless productions. What is the current state of the culture industry? What are we gaining from the “gamification” of everyday life? Is play the same thing as leisure? What is leisure time? Is time money? Is money happiness? Etc.

Defining *games* in distinction to *play* is important. While there is a virtual consensus among ludologists in the United States to define a *game* as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” and *play* as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (Salen and Zimmerman 2003), I argue that this definition reduces play to its most sterile function. Such definitions preclude the most meaningful entailments of *freedom*, limit the scope of *contest* to pass-or-fail outcomes, and almost entirely strip *presentation* from the role of the player (figuring it instead as the task of the game designer). Salen and Zimmerman’s

definitions are well suited to studying video games, but they foreclose a larger conversation among scholars who study other forms of gaming and broader forms of play.

In response, I hold onto Huizinga's characterization of play as something akin to true *poiesis* and follow a series of scholars in Northern Europe who underscore the boldly social and analog qualities of play (see for example Juul 2005, Frasca 2007, Stenros and Waern 2011, Montola 2012). My research also engages scholars who study *games* in the context of *narrative* (see Ryan 1995; Cover 2010) and those who relate *games* to *worlds* (McGonigal 2006, 2007; Jenkins 2004, 2006; Montola et al. 2009), and I find this scholarship likewise more open to the wider perspective I embrace.

### ***Games as Social Institutions***

Following John Searle (1995), I take games as constituting a special kind of *social institution* that participates in the broader social reality. I will take Searle's definition of a social institution as a system or structure that participates in "an objective reality that exists in part by human agreement" (ibid: 2). He unpacks through insightful analyses of games, legal codes, and language the functions and foundations of social behavior and intentionality, building "social reality" from the *constitutive* formula "X counts as Y in Context C" (ibid: 44). He distinguishes these systematic constitutive rules from *regulative* rules, which we might summarize as taking an "If X, then Y" form and working on all kinds of behaviors outside the bounds of established contexts.

I am interested in the emergence of institutions and the ways entire systems of *constitutive* rules can be couched within ongoing social activity that pivots on *regulative* play. In other words, how and when does a "context C" emerge, elide, evaporate? How do we invoke and avoid contexts as necessary? When are systems entered into, and when are they suspended? Within a model of games as social institutions and playfulness as a kind of shared intentionality, I interpolate Bernard Suits position that

to play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permissible by rules, where the rules prohibit

more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted because they make possible such activity. (1978: 48)

Suits' definition of games nicely brings together Searle's focus on games as institutions, which operate around a distinction between constitutive and regulative rules, and Huizinga's study of play as the freedom, contest, and presentation of meaningful activity.

My own experimentation with games also invokes Erving Goffman's "frame analysis" (1959, 1961, 1974), as much to undo what has been done with Goffman in the field of games studies already as to present a clear, tidy format for approaching public make-believe with an eye to specific mechanisms, behaviors, and objectives.

### **III. EXEGESIS OF TITLE: GLOSSARY**

What does a dissertation titled "The Social Poetics of Analog Virtual Worlds: Toying With Alternate Realities" hope to address?

#### **Social Poetics**

If poetry experiments with "the grammar of unwritten languages," as the unnamed philosopher suggests, then a theory of social poetics would demand an experimentation with our broadest sense of what social situations and social interactions might look like. I follow Wittgenstein's admonishment that "philosophy ought only to be written as a poetic composition" (1980: 24), and at times I risk purpling prose to maintain this standard. Rarely is any *good* meaning symbolic; that is, rarely does any provocative meaning result from a tidy intersection of conventional syntax and semantics. Fortunately, everyday language use is rife with other forms of meaning; that is, rarely do we speak in utterances reminiscent of VCR instructions.

However, even fresh, embodied, creative language has a way of "capturing" its speakers inside itself and limiting certain kinds of experience/awareness (Wittgenstein 1953, 1981). Because of this, language must always be gripped deliberately, held like a

rag with so many spots, twisted, wrung out, and used carefully if we expect it to make clear more than it mars. I study meaning as both the substance and product of social interaction—as creative, bodily, invested, perspectival, tense, often spontaneous, etc. Theories of language and meaning will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Throughout this dissertation, my mobilizing of the term *social poetics* is less concerned with negotiating among deconstructionist, discursivist, and/or social constructionist agendas (see discussion in Cunliffe 2008), and I am—in likely an opposite footing—more invested in theorizing experiences of meaning-making that figure language less as a self-contained system and more as an assemblage of many *things* that are always already integrated within any number of other assemblages, domains, or registers apart from the strictly linguistic (see Shotter 1996).

That Symbolic meaning participates in a virtual system of grammar, the radical materiality of the Icon and Index in Peirce's semiotics opens up Signs to function as operators in the world outside the strictly grammatical and representational. Language and meaning are both tangled in social activity; neither floats above in the ether. Describing the motivations behind the methods of social poetics, John Shotter suggests that:

instead of seeking what might be called representational understandings, such a social poetics would be concerned with seeking what we can call relational understandings. Where again, it is worth reminding ourselves that we are not seeking, as already developed individuals, to discover what something is, but different possible ways in which we might relate ourselves to our surroundings—how to be different in ourselves, how to live in different worlds. (Shotter 1995)

This usage ties well into my focus on non-representational theory and new materialism. Such a usage services a study of gesture, wordplay, affect, and motive. What did *this* just do? *What* is happening here? Through what specific mechanisms is *this* meaning or *that* image being produced? I work to trace out the associations, habits, twitches, tries, patterns—the little things that people are doing when they are playing.

Echoing Latour's demanding argument from *Reassembling The Social* (2005), I believe social scientists will continue to come up empty handed unless they study material life and activity as a dynamic, productive series of moments. Taking habits, norms, laws, rules for granted directly undermines any attempt to understand them. The gestures, words, objects, affects, bodies and points of contact that make up everyday life do not reveal, illustrate, follow, enact, or point to the Social; they *constitute* whatever it is we could hope to call the Social. There is never need for an appeal to a higher order or underlying Structure; the "order of things" is precisely the assemblage of gestures, words, objects, etc. themselves. I will continue this conversation in Section II of the next chapter.

### **Analog**

The analog as Index stands in direct contrast to the digital as Symbol. Writing against the "digital fallacy" mentioned earlier, I privilege the Indexical over the Symbolic, traces and impressions over stand-ins and representations. The analog is a testament to nondualist ontologies where the world is always materially present even when not physically tangible. This privileging should not be taken in any romantic sense, and is on the contrary a move towards a pragmatic, singular world: how symbols are things, how information is an object, how bodies bear traces, etc.

Building a definition of *poiesis* around a Peircean model of semiosis cannot help but privilege the Indexical and Iconic grounds over the Symbolic. However, I do not forego Symbolic meaning entirely, and Peirce certainly opens the Symbolic to material processes along with the Iconic and Indexical.

### **Virtual**

Furthering scholarship that situates virtual worlds solely within video games and other digital, computer-generated environments, I engage theories that develop "the virtual" more broadly, as a potential register of the physical world and everyday life. By understanding how explicitly virtual registers are created from and within physical environments, social scientists can better theorize so-called "natural" worlds and better recognize emergent modes of being and associating in the present.

In his *Parables For The Virtual*, Brian Massumi (2002) describes virtuality as the co-presence of hitherto considered mutually exclusive states. It is the charge in the atom, the description that glosses over not a physical entity but a complex super position of possibilities. A charge is not physical like a rock or wall, but it is material and part of the world. A wave is not a substance, but it is a material entity. Massumi considers such material things virtual. The virtual is a potential state of all material things, an excess of presence created when the current state opens itself to possible future states. He connects the virtual to affect and the body's ability to prefigure potentials in the present, describing

affect or intensity in the present account is akin to what is called a critical point, or a bifurcation point, or a singular point, in chaos theory and the theory of dissipative structures. This is the turning point at which a physical system paradoxically embodies multiple and normally mutually exclusive potentials, only one of which is "selected." (2002: 32)

That these "turning points" can be figured/found in any moment and that they constitute not anomalous states but the very foundation of everyday materiality become central to Massumi's book. This level of tense poiesis, of incomplete meaning, surrounds us.

Cultural geographer Derek McCormack (2010b) cites Massumi's notion of the virtual when he describes the wreckage site of a hydrogen balloon expedition as a "spectral afterlife: a distributed field of affective materials that circulates through specific configurations of object, text, and image." In 1897, the Swedish Andrée Expedition left Danes Island headed towards the North Pole and shortly thereafter disappeared. In 1930, the wreckage was found: a scattered field that included photographic film, human remains, diaries, and research materials. McCormack uses the "spectral" and "virtual" to theorize how this new geography of charged space might best be understood. He clarifies:

The spectral does not refer so much to a realm of spiritual ether floating or hovering, wraith-like, above the reassuring solidity of living bodies or actual objects. The spectral is, rather, a constitutive element of geographical experience, taking place as a persistent and unsettling capacity of place to enchant and haunt. (2010b: 642)

Explained in this way, studies of spectrality are fundamentally concerned with physical presence and absence, with felt but unseen materiality. Furthermore, McCormack posits that any space, any environment, has the power to hold such a charge, to be haunted by something else. Though different individuals have different experiences at different times, there is nothing dismissively subjective about the affects and absences that charge places such as Gettysburg, Disneyworld, the ruins of Dresden, or the River Ganges.

Such encounters should not be relegated to mere hiccups of “mind over matter,” where the knowledge of past events clouds or tricks the mind. Rather, these physical places, in their very materiality afford experiences of the past. Moreover, within the space of a “charge” the distinction between past and future loses significance. What the present contains are *others*. Mechanical reproduction did not extinguish “aura;” neither could it hope to, for aura is not a merely a cultural memory or product of longevity. Objects and bodies bear traces of the worlds they inhabit, Indices that remain in the present and speak of worlds past. And minds are precisely those things meant to span that gap, the function of the assemblage that means to *affect* from the past a survivable future. It is neither science fiction nor religion to make sense of such affective geographies in ongoing social science. As we shall see, “mind” happens outside the body (Bateson [1979] 2002, Maturana and Varela 1998, Clark 2008); the imbrication of self and environment should never be theoretically suspended however easier it makes analysis.

That “specific configurations” of “affective materials” could emerge anywhere is McCormack’s point, not that they necessarily exist everywhere. The physical world *affords* such configurations, and they cannot be wholly erased. Collections of Indices may lie in wait anywhere as an affordance of the specific place awaiting recognition. Such a “charge” may, for instance, survive a whitewashing and even collective forgetfulness. Imagine taking a black light into an otherwise tidy hotel room: there may be “affective material” that retains its power to charge. Of course there is no ghost who haunts the area and infects the visitor’s mind with memories, but at any given moment

one body or another could recognize a configuration of affective materials and come to regard this other moment now made present.

### ***Virtual Worlds***

What McCormack describes I would liken to a virtual world, an environment that exists in circulation within the Indices that regard it. In this way, a virtual world, though characterized by absence, is not *smaller* or *less than* the actual, but rather larger, encompassing a more expansive horizon of affordances and possibilities. More than an imaginary or fictional world, the virtual world has the power to contain, trap, charge, compel, excite. It becomes larger than the individual and exists in circulation out atop the actual world.

While I might go the route of Brian Massumi and in the future explore a broader application and investigation of the virtual, in this dissertation I figure virtual worlds by delimiting McCormack's "spectral geography" in two ways. First, I define a virtual world as one that is deliberately manufactured through the creation and dissemination of fabricated "affective materials." These materials, insofar as they function as Signs, can be digital or physical, on a screen or in the park. Second, a virtual world holds at its core some virtual Object that is fundamentally unrealizable. I propose that a virtual world demands its inhabitants to don a new ontology, one that expands beyond an everyday ontology. This distinguishes virtual worlds from other Possible Worlds that may come to exist as "states of affairs" that share the same ontology as the Actual World (see Ryan 1991). This also, for the time being, disavows any direct intersections with discussions of politics, alternative lifestyles, religion, or conspiracy theories; however, I imagine future projects will broach such topics by way of the virtual.

### **Toying**

In a discussion of the imbrication of mind, intention, body, and sign, Paul Kockelman (2006) figures an "Instrument" within a Peircean paradigm as an artficed object (Sign) that fulfills a purpose (Object) when correctly manipulated (Interpretant). We can imagine any number of objects being instrumentalized in such a way, whether or

not they were designed as such. Crowbars, for instance, have a particular shape that affords it to serve expected purposes when articulated sufficiently in the world. Likewise wheels, hammers, bowls, and chairs.

Building on this work, I theorize a “Toy” as a kind of open-ended Instrument. Kockelman’s Instrument is approached with a necessary purpose, and fulfilling a needed purpose is precisely what would distinguish the Instrument from a contextually useless artifact. In contrast, the toy is approached within a practice of play—within a free but tense presentation—to look outward and instigate purposeful use. What the Instrument embodies of the agency and intentions of its designer the toy demands of its user. Where the instrument *contains* or *preserves* meaning insofar as it is designed with specific purposes and specific uses in mind, the toy *produces* meaning insofar as it takes on new purposes; indeed, the toy makes possible new purposes and new meanings that could not exist if not for the specific affordances of the artifact itself.

Of course, an “artificed object” designed for the purpose play would then be one kind of Instrument, which I both acknowledge and challenge. By focusing on the process more than the artifact itself, I figure “toying” as the activity of instrumentalizing some otherwise contextually useless object, utterance, gesture, etc. *as* a toy. Importantly, toying does not produce meaning by way of *activating* latent or dormant meaning in an object or environment; rather, meaning emerges in ongoing negotiation and “riffing” among the toy and a community of players. I will explain this further in Chapter 3.

### **Alternate Realities**

The alternate realities of this ethnography come largely in two forms, tabletop role-playing and alternate reality games, though I distinguish in practice between “small group” and somewhat larger but still “localized” alternate reality games, which leaves us with three rough genres. The question at the heart of this dissertation is if, when, and how such alternate realities develop into virtual worlds. I will throughout the following ethnographic case studies be pushing on the virtual and the imaginary to see what slim film separates them.

### ***Tabletop Role-Playing***

Tabletop role-playing games evolved as the direct descendants of *Little Wars*, a game designed by the well-known pacifist H.G. Wells and published in 1913. *Little Wars* used toy soldiers and large pieces of fabricated terrain to recreate historical battles. Wells presented his players with a “what if” of grand significance and asked them to take on the roles of generals, marching soldiers across fields, choosing targets for the artillery, making gambits with cavalry, and rewriting history.

As miniatures became more various and detailed, any number of worlds could be simulated. By the 1970s, dozens of games had evolved, many involving fantastical battles with magic and monsters. While individual units still had certain fixed abilities and rules of use, dice had become the central mechanic in arbitrating contests. Would the sniper miss his target? How much damage is dealt to the cavalry by the advancing goblins? How large a blast would the artillery’s shell produce? Does the fireball that hit the warrior damage his armor or leave it intact?

Rules for settling the various attacks and gambits with dice began to carry more of the weight than the arrangements of the models themselves. For instance, when a sniper or wizard became powerful enough, it did not matter where on the table the miniature was in relation to its target. When the model of the dragon became powerful enough, it could “fly” from any place on the table to another, making the physical relation of the tokens on the model less important. These developments in both the content (magical heroes) and materials (growing rules precluding the need for models) eventually led to a tipping point: the elaborate models and crafted miniatures were no longer necessary. All each master player needed was a sheet of paper that delineated the particular powers of his or her best hero and a handful of dice, and any duel could be settled without resorting to physical models at all. In other words, the pen-and-paper rules had outgrown the physical models.

In 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson published a set of rules for players who wanted to skip the models all together and get right to being powerful heroes in an imaginary world of magic and monsters. Enter *Dungeons & Dragons*.

### ***Alternate Reality Games***

Alternate reality games incorporate multiple media and live-action game elements to elicit intense player involvement in a story that takes place in real-time and evolves according to the participants' responses. Players interact with real-world content and characters controlled by the game's designers and eventually with each other to solve plot-based challenges and puzzles in the actual world, challenges and puzzles that become part of the interactive narrative. Small games take the form of murder-mystery events or dinner theater, and larger games play out like citywide scavenger hunts or elaborate global hoaxes. Large-scale alternate reality games can include millions of people, and several have been documented doing so.

In either case, large or small, participants share information and analyze the emerging story together, coordinating and competing in activities to resolve the narrative. The experience of an alternate reality game is explicitly designed to blur the line between the players' reality and the virtual world of the game. According to Dave Szulborski, one of the most successful ARG designers to date, "In an alternate reality game, the goal is not to immerse the player in the artificial world of the game; instead, a successful game immerses the world of the game into the everyday existence of the player" (2005a: 31). This seems the perfect way to study the virtual as an expansion of the actual world towards something else, rather than a reduction of the world into a smaller system or structure, which seems to be the function of most proper "games" (see Chapter 3).

## **IV. QUESTIONS & METHODS**

Much of my methodology grows directly from my theoretical grounds, which have been discussed briefly so far and will be developed and defended in the following chapter.

### **Hypotheses & Research Questions**

This dissertation arose from an interest in linking tabletop role-playing games with online virtual worlds, to uncover the similarities and explore what cognitive and

social affordances—that must be present in everyday life—are particularly leveraged in online virtual worlds. When does a *game* become a *world*? What do they both share that makes them commensurable forms? What holds them apart?

Though pioneering anthropological work in the field of virtual worlds has done much to explore the sociality that arises in virtual platforms (see Castronova 2005, 2007; Taylor 2006; Boellstorff 2008; Pearce 2009), I felt that the divide between the digital and the actual was too starkly defined. If social theory works so well when ported to the digital platform, what might such theories be missing? In other words, if the first close look at online virtual worlds came up with so many similarities between everyday life and computer use, I wondered if it may be our theories of everyday life that are lacking. Which elements port so easily between the digital and the actual? Which mechanisms translate so readily our day-to-day patterns and habits across media? Rather than using traditional social theory to explore and explain virtual worlds, maybe the virtual worlds can teach us something about our everyday sociality that remains less tangible or untouched in contemporary theories.

Holding those questions and curiosities in mind, I designed the resulting research project to revolve around three escalating clusters of data-driven questions:

1. How do playful actions, objects, gestures generate meaning? Using the pragmatic model of Peirce's semiosis, how can we trace the meaningfulness of play? What moments are meaningful? Where lies the materiality of meaning? How are new *things* presented, represented, conjured, experienced?
2. What is the nature of the worlds produced within these games? How do the fantastic or alternate realities interact with our own? How do players—consciously or not—navigate two realms? If they do not, and instead experience only a single, combined world, how do the overlays and overlaps come to be imbricated? What “virtual objects” circulate in our ongoing actual worlds?

3. Where might we see *poiesis* in different genres of role-playing? While Heidegger discusses *poiesis* only within the context of classical forms of art—painting, architecture, sculpture, music—how can new understandings of art expand on his thinking? If we can now see how films, food, games, or large-scale events work as art, what would *poiesis* at those levels look like?

By understanding how explicitly fictional worlds are inhabited, how “virtual” registers are created from and within physical environments, social scientists can better theorize the late-capitalist moment of “gamification” and Nigel Thrift’s *Lifeworlds, Inc.* We can discover new modes of being and associating in the present and uncover the hitherto unknown affordances that make such new modes possible. While paying attention to the market motivations that spawned—and to a large extent sustain—these entertainment worlds, my own approach privileges the everyday lives of players and takes account of the affective, cognitive, and social labor undertaken in playing/performing role-playing in alternate realities.

### **Research Strategy & Methods**

My research of “analog virtual worlds” entails three different kinds of worlds, or, rather, worlds produced by three different modes of make-believe: fantasy role-playing, murder-mystery events, and alternate reality games. I felt it necessary to investigate multiple forms of *worlding* to explore as varied and diverse practices of make-believe as possible. The focus of my dissertation being these mirage-like re-worldings that work to overlay our ongoing actual worlds, I wanted to experience worldings of various scales and scopes.

I needed to study relatively exceptional games, and not just the games themselves but also the playful elements of their execution. This focus on effervescent play and ontological labor makes archival research into alternate reality games or tabletop role-playing games less useful for my work. Orchestrating my own games seemed the best

way to get at my research questions, and I designed three original games as part of the research process.

### ***Fantasy Role-playing***

My research entails participant observation with four central groups of 4-6 gamers over the course of two years and culminated in taking three of my informants to the Gen Con gaming convention in Indianapolis, IN, in August of 2013. I logged hundreds of hours gaming with the groups. Each acted as a focus group, and individual and collective semi-structured interviews took place as needed throughout the months I worked with each group.

### ***Small-Group Alternate Reality Games: Murder-Mystery Events***

As a “small group” alternate reality game, murder-mystery dinners or weekends present a localized experience that focuses more on playful “keying” than the large-scale games do. While the games function as interactive puzzles and players must compete to solve the mystery of a fictional murder, the participants typically know at any given moment what the “frame” is, or, in other words, “what it is that is going on here” (Goffman 1974).

I participated in 13 murder-mystery events between October of 2010 and July of 2014, logging over 100 in-game hours. Of these 13 gaming events, I designed and hosted seven myself, five of them as iterations the same game in the same location over the winter of 2013–2014. The other six consisted of two “dinner theater” events and four iterations of the same store-bought MME hosted by an informant. Much like the tabletop gaming, these events provided excellent focus groups.

### ***Localized Alternate Reality Games***

To have sufficient perspective on and access to the “keying” and “fabricating” of an ongoing alternate reality game, I had to design and implement a localized game myself. While this game did not have the scope of the million-player ARGs designed by Jane McGonigal and Dave Szulborski, I was able to generate fabrications large enough to

contain more than 200 players in its final iteration. The game, tenderly referred to as *Fancy Bang* by myself and the other designers, first took place over 11 days during the SXSW Interactive and SXSW Music Festivals (March 2012). We asked players to solve puzzles, role-play, undertake scavenger hunts, and perform related challenges to uncover a narrative that recoded the city of Austin, TX, as a fictional city in the 1920s. It was a colossal failure, securing something like 12 players at the cost of almost \$3000.

However, the failure was illuminating as such, and my group of designers and I would build on the experience to create two further iterations. We retooled *Fancy Bang* around the tabletop gaming hobby specifically and later ran weeks-long iterations over the Web that culminated in localized four-day events at gaming conventions in August of 2012 and June of 2013, gaining 80 and 200 players, respectively.

*Fancy Bang* afforded participant observation among the scores or hundreds of players, and I gave three lengthy interviews with successful participants of the latter two iterations.

## **Analysis**

I interrogate make-believe as a form of play that relies on the pleasurable “keying” and the “fabricating” of frames to enchant a player’s experience of real-world environments and events. This make-believe is happening explicitly and tangibly out “in the wild” and in the actual world, participating in ongoing social relationships without the closed or bracketed boundaries that mark typical board and video games. By focusing on the “corpus” of cognitive, affective, and social practices required by the players to see one world as another, I can tune into the intersection of world-making and meaning-making. What does it mean to invoke and inhabit an alternate reality in the face of otherwise everyday urban events and environments? How do the players feel they are creating or shaping their worlds through participating in the game? These questions prompted me to employ two central forms of analysis.

### ***Peircean Semiotics***

This dissertation mobilizes the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce to interrogate how linguistic and poetic meaning is generated through Sign use. Adapting Paul Kockelman's (2006) figuration of the "instrument" as a physical object that can be seen to function as a Sign, I theorize what I call the "toy," a specific kind of instrument designed with affordances that open outward to instigate, agitate, and elicit meaningful usage from wielders. Further, eschewing a naïve dualism, I theorize what an *imaginary* toy that embodies *imaginary* affordances might look like and how such a virtual, or "epistemic," object might operate in the actual world.

### ***Frame Analysis***

John Searle must have titled *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995) in direct contrast to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). The thrust of Searle's constructionist argument is that "reality" as a meaningful construct will always be a social reality. And that is okay. Arguing against those philosophers who fetishize the sign—and, thus, the text—Searle posits that it is not that discourse creates objective reality, but that anything understood, defined, and instrumentalized as much as "reality" seems to be must necessarily be the product of social forces and representation. He maintains that there is, of course, an objective world *out there*, but that whatever it is, it is not that thing we so nicely and tidily refer to with the word "reality." In a similar vein as Ian Hacking (1983, 1991), Searle believes that the world out there is objective and knowable insofar as we interact with it, regardless of theoretical models or representation. Key to my own research is Searle's philosophical assumption that social institutions and social facts emerge through intersubjective intentionality, an intentionality that might not precede the individual but surely exists as something other or more than an aggregate of preexisting individual intentions. He writes:

The idea is that if we intend to do something together, then that consists in the fact that I intend to do it in the belief that you also intend to do it; and you intend

to do it in the belief that I also intend to do it. And each believes that the other has these beliefs, and has these beliefs about these beliefs, and these beliefs about these beliefs about these beliefs... [...] Collective intentionality is a biologically primitive phenomenon that cannot be reduced to or eliminated in favor of something else. Every attempt at reducing ‘We intentionality’ to ‘I intentionality’ that I have seen is subject to counterexamples. (Searle 1995: 24)

Taking such intersubjectivity as a given, Erving Goffman (1974) works through William James and Gregory Bateson to define his own take on reality and meaning-making. For Goffman, who remains a self-professed phenomenologist in the tradition of Husserl, the social domain is regularly experienced from within projects of meaning and is best treated—as far as everyday questions of intention and intelligibility are concerned—as the stuff of such a project. Any scientific claims to “reality” are made within the Primary Frameworks of the natural sciences, according to Goffman. The assumption is that there is of course an objective reality, a clash of forces, a material universe, and we can of course learn about this world; however, any such learning—as far as any such learning is intelligible and representational in nature—will always be social. Goffman’s approach, by explicitly focusing only on how “the social” emerges, does not concern itself with the wrestling of reality and representation and instead “bridges” the natural and cultural as one experienced world (see Latour 2008: 14).

In both cases the social capacities and necessary intersubjectivity of humans are taken for granted along with an objective world that persists despite our best efforts to cast “reality” over it. Coupling this approach with the semiosis of Peirce, then, allows me to trace just how meaningfulness is produced, felt, circulated, and recursively operated upon.

## **V. OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters, including the present. While the four substantive chapters demonstrate different forms of writing, a single logic connects the various chapters even as the objects of study change. Throughout the four substantive

chapters, I have distributed auto-ethnographic passages that convey my own experiences as a game designer. First proposed as a self-contained chapter, the most demonstrative auto-ethnographic moments ended up working better when embedded within the analyses of their respective genres.

### **The Setup**

In the first two chapters, I open up “analog virtual worlds” as worthwhile objects of study somehow tied to Heidegger’s notion of *worlding*, Peirce’s semiotic, and Nigel Thrift’s non-representational theory. Compelled by Brian Massumi’s (2002) conceptualization of “the virtual,” my research purports to locate virtual worlds outside popular online, digital worlds and out in everyday life: the virtual “in the wild,” as it were.

### **The Pivot**

Written with an eye to eventual stand-alone publication, Chapter 3 marks my intervention in the field of game studies. I work through the “digital fallacy” described by Stenros and Waern (2011) and note certain limitations to building the discipline around a *game-as-systems* approach. The second half of the chapter features my adaptation of Kockelman’s (2006) “instrument” as a “toy” and teases out the careful knot of what it might look like to study games—which are undeniably systems of rules—as constituting and consisting of toys. This *games-as-toys* approach maintains that games always look outward and operate in the actual world as much as we let them. This unique approach to games as open systems of affordances then informs the ethnographic case studies that follow.

While early work in the field of game studies distinguish between games (*ludos*) and play (*paideia*), recent syntheses have dovetailed the latter into the former: the dominant idea now is that *game* denotes a system of signs and rules while *play* denotes “free movement” within such a system (Salen and Zimmerman 2003). In some part, I can abide these definitions; they are well suited to the study of video games, procedural rhetoric, and systems theory. However, a broader notion of play following Johan

Huizinga ([1938] 1971) maintains a focus on play as poiesis<sup>2</sup>, how play participates in social and cultural production.

Following Huizinga as it does, my characterization figures the kind of “free movement” that happens within most games to be play of only the most sterile variety. For example, the quintessential moment of play for Salen and Zimmerman might be moving a pen through a maze on paper, an unscripted exploration of a very clearly defined system. In contrast, a quintessential example of play as poiesis<sup>1</sup> might be looking up at the clouds and shouting out recognized shapes and narratives. Following this broader scope, my dissertation distinguishes between *games* (qua systems) and *toys* (qua affordances), which allows me to demonstrate exactly how my understanding of play/poiesis expands on dominant notions: you play *within* a game but *with* a toy, e.g. you play *within* a maze but *with* a cloud. It is the specific activities that *with* entails that not only invite analysis but also justify a closer analysis than hitherto given.

### **The Payoff**

Chapters 4 argues that tabletop role-playing games (e.g. *Dungeons & Dragons*) are best seen not simply as *games* (e.g. poker, football), but as complicated *toys* (e.g. a deck of cards, a football) that offer *imaginary affordances*. To be sure, the book purchased from the store does contain the rules needed to play a game, but the mode of play that emerges *around* the game is what truly characterizes the experience of fantasy role-playing. Contrary to broad assumptions about the genre, my research suggests that the world of the game is intended to be open to the world around it and only functions when this is so.

My goal is to turn this chapter into an ethnographic article fit for publication, the central subject being the hitherto ignored “meta-game” nature of tabletop role-playing and expounding on the implications of seeing tabletop role-playing as producing an “analog virtual world” not unlike those offered in popular online, digital games.

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<sup>2</sup> That Heidegger would not consider such frivolous play poiesis bears keeping in mind; however, I use the term to distinguish the forms of play that could in the end lead to poiesis from play that takes the form of use or activation of a system.

In Chapter 5, I define murder-mystery events as “small group” alternate reality games. Almost all previous publications on ARGs take for granted the large-scale worlds that rely heavily on the Internet and ubiquitous computing technologies (McGonigal 2006, Montola et al. 2009). The rare study of less digitally distributed gaming is often seen as another, either more traditional or entirely unrelated, form of gaming. There is an argument entailed in my choice to speak of murder-mystery events—and similar activities such as “capture the flag” or live-action role-playing—as alternate reality games. In some ways this follows Markus Montola’s (2012) brilliant formulation of social play, though our subjects and ultimate conclusions differ.

As the culmination of the previous ethnographic chapters, Chapter 6 theorizes how small-scale, or what I call “localized,” alternate reality games offer emblematic examples of analog virtual worlds. I describe the events of two iterations of *Fancy Bang* in chronological order and tease out in each escalating encounter how a virtual world emerges and circulates among the players. Touching base with three players months after the events reveals provocative insights into the possibilities and futures of such localized alternate reality games.

The final chapter of the dissertation argues that the analyses offered throughout the four substantive chapters are immediately germane in other, less “playful” domains. I also discuss how my data may defend or refute the notion of a singular “actual,” “default,” “base,” or “normal” world upon which virtual worlds build. If there are multiple worlds, what are the implications of seeing every individual as a confluence of multiple worlds/ontologies rather than a sovereign actor who travels/switches between them? Is the individual’s experience of the world always singular, just as our two forward-facing eyes produce a singular visual field? I crack open the *Lifeworlds, Inc.* of Thrift and ask how worlds might compete. How are they alternative wholes apart from and how modules within the system?

I also question what it means to be a designer of games in the face of such facts. As creators of fragmented worlds and alternative ontologies, what is our responsibility?

What are our goals? Can we make the world better, as McGonigal (2011) and Castronova (2007) so boldly argue, in any lasting way?

## **VI. THE END OF THE BEGINNING**

This dissertation will move swiftly from the cybernetics of Gregory Bateson, to the phenomenology of Erving Goffman, from the assemblage theory of Gilles Deleuze to the logical types of Alfred Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, from the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour to the semiosis of C.S. Peirce. Some of these will seem like strange bedfellows, I confess, maybe even antitheses. However, this collage is not arranged to be some kind of aesthetic object or *tour de force*. Neither do I wish to evince naïve eclecticism or share in the dilettante's love of superficial similarities. Rather, I see strands that connect older American traditions of philosophy of science with contemporary social theory, and I want to continue on in these earlier projects that have in some ways been abandoned. Specifically, I wish to engage those anthropological and scientific questions that may have been marginalized in the social sciences during the "linguistic turn" of the 1970s.

In all cases I am interested in *presentation over representation*, not out of an aversion to Symbolic meaning so much as in aversion to systems that presuppose the magical force of Rules, Rationality, or Laws.

### **By Way of Foreword**

This dissertation was difficult to write precisely because such a chore precludes play. The research had been done; the experimenting concluded; the Peircean retrospection, which resulted in more than 417 pages of thought both raw and refined, was getting unruly; and what was left was the janitorial task of tidying things up for guests.

To write something is to finalize it, to encode it in a single representative image: a butterfly pinned behind the glass, a ticket stub kept for nostalgia, a jersey retired. To write something down also plays into the myth of media, the fiction that written words

are sufficient to share ideas. Plato hated writing for its false claims, its promise to contain forever the meaning of spoken words. Where is the dialogue? Where is the collaboration from which meaning arises? Are words that are written for *all* audiences suited for *any*?

While my qualms placed me in good company, it was time to move on. I am sure there are other dissertations I could have written, and I apologize if any one of those potential dissertations piques your interest more than the document you hold. As it is, I believe the scholarship here is solid and illuminating, albeit geared towards my own interests; the questions I ask echo the earliest concerns of philosophy and anthropology and yet relate to my own beliefs and revolve around my own goals. But here we are. So it goes.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter does not contain a synopsis of literature on “games studies” or “virtual worlds” to date. I covered a few notable debates within game studies and offered my working definition of virtual worlds in Chapter 1, and in Chapter 3 I will return to the topic of games and virtual worlds by way of a theoretical refiguring of toys. Rather, this chapter is dedicated to delineating the theoretical foundations and anthropological perspective of my current research project, the converging avenues through which I enter game studies. Because my work is focused as it is on “alternate realities,” careful attention is needed to tease out what “reality” might mean, and so some of the following uses technical language.

A central feature of my theoretical approach to gaming and alternate realities is a directed struggle against *cognitivism*. Admittedly a broad term, I will in each section describe the particular facet of cognitivism tackled therein. There are long traditions of scholars who share this struggle, vectors of research that have addressed and attempted to debunk cognitivism in a variety of forms. This cognitivism, described by Francisco Varela, Thomson, and Eleanor Rosch (1993), is precisely the foundation of the *objectivist cognition* that George Lakoff argues against (1988: 119) and the *cognitive representationalism* criticized in Nigel Thrift’s (2008) non-representational theory (for detailed discussion see McCormack 2010a). That each of these projects explicitly indicts the same family of cognitive science dominant in the 1970s makes the overlap clear.

Furthermore, I would suggest that one particular assumption of this broader cognitivism—one that has a much longer provenance in the West—what we might call a rather strong *ontological dualism* is also a familiar if perennial bugbear within anthropology. Explicitly combatting this dualism has been the goal of certain projects within the at times disparate fields of material (Pedersen 2007), linguistic (Keane 1995, 2003), biological (Bateson [1979] 2002, Ingold 2000), and social (Strathern 1991, 1999; Latour 2008) anthropology. Without a mean spirit or a hungry axe to grind, I situate my study in line with these other careful, intentional critiques of *cognitivism* and *ontological dualism*.

This chapter opens with a summary of cognitivism and then offers one key argument against such a view from within cognitive science. I then move forward into literature reviews of the three subfields of anthropological literature in which I participate: Section II deals with Nigel Thrift's (2008) non-representational theory and several related bodies of scholarship that I believe entail similar means; Section III covers my adaptation of the semiotics of C.S. Peirce towards *presentation*; and Section IV traces the work of some anthropologists who have already taken up another, explicitly nondualist ontology as inspiration, namely the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger.

## I. CONTRA COGNITIVISM

Along with Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, Francisco Varela (1993)<sup>3</sup> figures cognitivism as the founding paradigm of cognitive science, a hypothesis-come-presupposition of the earlier cybernetics movements. They write:

Simplifying for the moment, we can say that cognitivism consists in the hypothesis that cognition—human cognition included—is the manipulation of symbols after the fashion of a digital computer. In other words, cognition is *mental representation*: the mind is thought to operate by manipulating symbols that represent features of the world or represent the world as being a certain way [...] The central intuition behind cognitivism is that intelligence—human intelligence included—so resembles computation in its essential characteristics that cognition can actually be defined as computations of symbolic representations. (1993: 8, 40)

What cognitivism accomplished between 1943 and 1953 would make possible the birth of the digital computer. By hypothesizing for a moment that human brains operated in a particular way, as a device of world-independent symbolic computation, engineers were able to “replicate” this assumed functionality in the digital computer. However, as

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<sup>3</sup> In full disclosure, I share with Varela et al. an inkling that Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism, constitutes the oldest tradition of cognitive science and offers a unique breed of phenomenology, one unfettered by the dualism of Husserl and resistant to the common critiques lodged at phenomenology by contemporary cognitive science (ibid: 28, for an example of such a critique see Dennett 1991: 45).

Varela et al. argue, this instrumental hypothesis was by 1953 taken as a founding truth of the nascent fields of cognitive science and Artificial Intelligence robotics (ibid: 38), a presupposition which arguably hindered the development of both disciplines long into the 1980s (see Dreyfus [1972] 1997).

While both cognitive science and Artificial Intelligence robotics have developed beyond cognitivism in a variety of directions in the twenty years since Varela, Thompson, and Rosch's assertion, cognitivism still remains in academia, having leaked into other disciplines concerned with human nature and behavior. In fact, the most troubling assumptions of cognitivism may prove *more* pernicious today, precisely because they now exist outside fields of study that possess research methods capable of refuting them. Moreover, rather than tucked in technological fields that will at the end of the day be held accountable to market demands, cognitivism persists in politicized corners of academia that directly affect public policy, most notably psychology, economics, public health, and education.

And in public culture more broadly, cognitivism pervades “common sense” understandings of the human subject, bundled as it is with Modern notions of individualism, the rational agent, a referential theory of language, and binary thinking. Furthermore, the prevalence of digital computers has established cognitivist-informed metaphors within our foundational schemas of understanding.

Though Varela et al. present a theory of “embodied mind” that addresses the pitfalls of cognitivism in its own way, the “extended mind” theory of Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998, Clark 2008) is both more compelling and more up to date. Their central difference—a significant divergence—is that while Varela, Thompson, and Rosch argue against any and all forms of computational thinking, Clark and Chalmers grant the brain computational functions but situate whatever computations might occur within a much larger apparatus of brain, body, and world. The latter scholars, then, overcome the “brainbound” and “world-independent” limitations of the cognitivists without throwing out everything that has come before. I feel that Clark and Chalmers take new

developments within cognitive science into account and build evidence against cognitivism without requiring as a first step the outright dismissal of every related assumption.

I discuss “extended mind” theory at length below because the theory offers the best model available for how cognition seems to work and does so from an interactionist perspective. That is to say, the approach of Clark and Chalmers begins with successful cognition, and from there makes claims inward about neuroscience and outward about mind. On the other hand, Varela et al., along with related thinkers such as Humberto Maturana, base their arguments on then-cutting-edge neuroscience (which is subject to constant revision and redirection) and on a renewed phenomenology of mind, and then work inward from both edges to what cognition could/should look like. While I trust Varela et alia’s conclusions for the most part, I trust Clark and Chalmers’ approach more.

### **The Extended Mind**

Perhaps the most far-reaching critique of cognitivism comes in a provocative article designed to refocus a “hot topic” in cognitive science. Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) present a theory of “extended mind” to challenge the lingering effects of cognitivism and representationalism within their field. The theory suggests that the human brain is an opportunist, eagerly pulling outside objects and actors into the cognitive apparatus of the human body. Mind, as the body’s self-aware experiencing of cognition, becomes not only a point of contact but also a domain of ongoing negotiation between body and world, and this negotiation—this mind—can incorporate objects, activities, and other bodies into the mix. Clark writes:

What makes us distinctively human is our capacity to continually restructure and rebuild our own mental circuitry, courtesy of an empowering web of culture, education, technology, and artifacts. Minds like ours are complex, messy, contested, permeable, and constantly up for grabs. (Clark 2003: 10)

The negotiation is ongoing, and plays out as much in the cultural and technological domains as in the biological. Rather than culture and technology being mere products of

human minds, the bits and pieces of culture and technology can be drawn into our cognitive processes quite literally. According to Clark and Chalmers, thinking very often and quite naturally going on outside the head.

For instance, from an “extended mind” perspective, the act of writing is not always only a *representing* or *externalizing* of thinking that has already happened “in the head,” but instead an active, tangible thinking that is happening right there out in the world. In the same way, “thinking out loud” by talking to oneself not only results in the content of thought being *represented* out in the world; rather, the sounds and signs that are made “out loud” are fed back into the ongoing cognitive loop as new stimuli. Talking to oneself might be better seen as the building of a verbal “scaffolding” that the brain can instrumentalize as part of an ongoing cognitive process (Clark 2008: 44, 59; see Hutchins 1995). The human produces images in the mind and out in the world to differently instigate herself, to trigger further thoughts and access other subsystems and modules within the cognitive apparatus. Just as holding onto a handrail while walking up a flight of stairs brings your hands into the locomotive apparatus, language can be used by one subsystem of the brain to guide another in a risky task. The cognition is happening at least partially outside the head, outside the body even.

The summation of extended mind theory is this: “If as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process which, *were it done in the head*, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process, then that part of the world is (so we claim) part of the cognitive process” (Clark and Chalmers 1998: 11). In other words, if something would be called cognitive if it happened “in the head,” then it is only a familiarity bias that makes us reject the more embodied thinkings-through as truly cognitive.

In a work aimed at a more popular audience, Clark (2003) develops extended mind theory to theorize humans as “natural-born cyborgs,” organisms with brains specifically evolved to permeate their environments and opportunistically adopt, enlist, and co-opt the outside world to perform cognitive labor. His insights can fundamentally change how we regard the nature of cognition.

The line between biological self and technological world was, in fact, never very firm. Plasticity and multiplicity are our true constants, and new technologies merely dramatize our oldest puzzles (prosthetics and telepresence are just walking sticks and shouting, cyberspace is just one more place to be). Human intellectual history is, in large part, the tale of this fragile and always unstable frontier. [...] What the human brain is best at is learning to be a team player in a problem-solving field populated by an incredible variety of nonbiological props, scaffoldings, instruments, and resources. In this way ours are essentially the brains of *natural-born cyborgs*, ever-eager to dovetail their activity to the increasingly complex technological envelopes in which they develop, mature, and operate. (Clark 2003: 8, 26)

Such a formulation welcomes other scientists into the study cognition and opens the door for cross-disciplinary research into where Mind comes from, what it does, and what it means. In fact, Gregory Bateson's ([1979] 2002) definition of Mind suits Clark quite well and takes into account the integrated systems that work to embody cognition. Innovative work that explicitly cites Andy Clark's "extended mind" theory has already begun within the disciplines of material culture (Pedersen 2007) and new media (Hayles 2005).

### ***Analogies From Locomotion***

For Clark, and germane to the cognitive anthropologist, cognition becomes just one activity of the body among many. It may be highly complex and hard to envision, but not unlike other bodily activities. It is not walled off in its own special realm that only one field of experts can speak to. A key insight from decades of research into cognition is that our Body-Minds are first and foremost perceiving-locomoting organisms. Cognition evolved as one part of a larger system, one tool among many that help us along those primary tasks. Before the advent of language, before mathematics, before logic, the human organism evolved to be very good at perceiving (according to our particular needs/environment) and locomoting (according to our particular needs/environment).

Everyday locomotion provides two solid analogies that we can carry with us throughout this research, what I might call *L1* and *L2*. Together, they act as take-aways from our discussion of cognitive science. Andy Clark has long championed locomotion

as a fundamental function of the human organism, thus securing its place as a fundamental subject of whatever cognition turns out to be. In characterizing our locomoting brains, Clark writes:

It is expert at recognizing patterns, at perception, and at controlling physical actions, but is not so well designed (as we'll see) for complex planning and long, intricate, derivations of consequences. It is, to put it bluntly, bad at logic and good at Frisbee. (Clark 2003: 5)

And by this Clark means that the “higher order” processes we generally take to define the human (logic, mathematics, etc.) are not at all what our brains and bodies are best suited to do.<sup>4</sup> Humans are perceiving-locomoting machines. All that language and logic we prize so highly are still rather new and maybe unexpected developments.

Locomotion is a distributed activity of the body in space, the function of a goal-oriented feedback loop composed of at least our major muscle groups, the physical substance of our limbs and bodies, the eyes and inner ear, and the environment.

Much more than a stage upon which locomotion occurs, the environment is an operating part of the apparatus. To ask what human locomotion would look like in a vacuum—although possibly an intellectual curiosity—would be absurd. According to the research of a growing number of cognitive anthropologists (see Hutchins 1995; Whitehouse 2000, 2001; Day 2004; Pedersen 2007) and cognitive scientists (see Clark 2003, 2008; Maturana and Varela 1998; Varela et al. 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1999), cognition is a similarly distributed, situated, and embodied activity: it is the function of an invested, goal-oriented feedback loop composed of brain, body, and environment. It does not happen in a vacuum, in a vat, or without being situated toward a purpose. Cognition can be thought of like locomotion, not something that happens *in* the body but

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<sup>4</sup> For a more Heideggerean formulation of this same idea, maybe more directly relevant to anthropology, see Dreyfus 1991.

*with* or *by* the body. Cognition is happening out “in the world,” *within* the movements and mechanisms of bodies, objects, signs, images, and environments.

Running is not fast walking.

For the human animal, the activity of running is fundamentally, qualitatively different from walking. If one wants to learn about running, she cannot study walking and then simply imagine the same mechanisms sped up. This is one of the most significant insights in Edwin Hutchins’ (1995) seminal work on cognitive anthropology: cognition “in the wild” looks nothing like it does when we “stop to think” about it. Deliberate reflection and inner monologue, while useful as “scaffolding,” act as poor emblems of cognition in general.

In other words, when we want to study inner speech, embodied cognition, socially distributed cognition, etc., we cannot spend a moment in quiet reflection, enjoying a span of inner monologue, and then presume we know how thinking works. Because our minds work one way when we consciously slow them down and “walk” through things with words, we need not assume that our normal, “running” mind can be understood as nothing more than a faster version of that. However, this fallacy arises in several forms.

Taken together, we can see a problem in using models that bracket context or process in favor of a mechanical or formal understanding of locomotion. Such a formalist fallacy informs several projects that look at language and games as closed systems or take social norms as fixed “rules” or “guides” that have force of their own to influence behavior. Models and systems can serve a great analytical purpose, but they must not be misunderstood for existing “in the wild” when they emerge in the mind of the analyst.

It is *easier* to study language as a self-contained system of meanings and value, *easier* to study objects in essentialist terms, *easier* to study games as self-contained. We may tell ourselves that is only the first step: *Let us study games as self-contained systems for now, to learn what we can, and then we can try the messy, difficult, knotted approach after we have a solid idea of what we are working with.* The failure of this ostensibly

polite arrangement is, of course, that just about every conclusion we draw from the cognitivist approach becomes immediately suspect, seen as so much misinformation, when we begin to study the same phenomenon “in the wild.” And I would say that the reverse is not true. These are not two equal, complementary approaches to the same objects of study; the cognitivist approach precludes knowledge about emergence and process.

## II. NON-REPRESENTATIONAL THEORIES

Ian Hacking (1983) shares a compelling picture of how the divide between reality and representation arose historically in the philosophical language of the West, a divide then built into the structuring metaphors of language and scientific discovery, into the very underpinnings of society’s view of itself. Hacking, echoing Heidegger and foreshadowing Latour, warns that this divide cannot be overcome once it occurs, that such attempts to suture the two are forever doomed to fail. However, his program is not one of resignation. Hacking offers that bridging the two sides can be obviated, circumvented, entirely avoided: all we need to do is stop making representations *of* reality and start making useful presentations *within* reality. Hacking suggests that this is quite easy to do, too, since the difference between representation and presentation exists only in our minds anyway. Should some of those presentations work like mirrors and give us a good vision of reality, great; but they remain presentations, things in the world. Presentations *work* and *do*, not as symbols *of* reality but as operators *in* reality. Theories, models, laws—they are “likenesses” that help us explain phenomena only enough to intervene and interact with them.

I feel the best contemporary scholarship that follows in Hacking’s vein to be the non-representational theory within cultural geography. The following treatment hopes to bring several trends of movements within the social sciences together by means of this shared tone.

Nigel Thrift (2008) describes non-representational theory as a possible overhaul of traditional theoretical approaches in the social sciences. He presents a sustained and compelling argument as to why scholars might want to step away from the production—and subsequent *gotcha* applications—of large-scale representational models that do little explaining and more explaining away. He also urges the same scholars to produce new kinds of academic work, to explore new ideas for what the resulting *stuff* of scholarship might look like. Non-representational theory, according to Thrift, has seven central tenets, each worthy of a small treatment here:

1. *An emphasis on movement.* For Thrift, the always-moving “onflow” of everyday life is the central activity of the human body, evident even in the development of our “rhizomatic, acentred brain” (2008: 5). This movement is not just about purposive action, but also the many moments of mistakes, missteps, fallings, and fumbblings (*ibid*: 16).
2. *Attention to the pre-individual level.* This register is part of Thrift’s cutting away at humanism, which he retains only a sliver of (2008: 5, see also Wylie 2010). For Thrift, the cognitive, affective, and playful activities of human life are often rooted in processes and moments that are sensed/experienced in several ways prior to their being reflected upon in consciousness thought.
3. *Focus on practices.* Thrift wants to look at actions, making-do’s, and moves that make up, along with things and people, a world. More than a retooling of Bourdieu’s practice theory, which writes on human action a kind of teleology, this focus targets practices constitutive of daily life, what Bruno Latour (2005) might call “modes of associating.” Without neglecting the improvisational (see McCormack 2010a), Thrift seeks to make sense of unremarkable experience as also generative.

4. *Focus on “things.”* Things go along with people and practices as parts of worlds. Thrift includes the human body as a thing, particularly a “tool-being,” that ought to be contained within the world of physical stuff with which we humans engage.
5. *Being experimental.* There is no guarantee in non-representational theory. Because no pre-given model is brought to the field, there can be no guaranteed pay-off to the scholarly work. New approaches, however planned and rigorous, will generate unpredictable outcomes that might not obtain a portable, academic reward (see Thrift 2011). Again, play is a crucial part of Thrift’s (non-)paradigm. An openness to future states/moves that typifies play, argues Thrift, is exactly what is needed for open-ended social science.
6. *Attention to affect and sensation.* I feel this builds on Thrift’s emphasis on the pre-individual. For Thrift, affect and sensation touch on the virtual, a register of potentiality and present-ness (see Massumi 2002, McCormack 2010b). This register of the virtual exists for Thrift as “multiple registers of sensation operating beyond the reach of the reading techniques on which the social sciences are founded” (2008: 12).
7. *Foregrounding of space.* Coming from cultural geography, Thrift emphasizes the brute fact of space as an important element of human life—and one of the trickiest elements to experience and experiment within non-representationally. He writes, “This is a sense of the concreteness and materiality of the situation which is hard to put into words, a need to capture being there which is not just a report back – a finding which is also a leaving” (*ibid.*: 16).

The proper objects of such a non-representational theory are precisely *worlds*,<sup>5</sup> which must be seen as both the assemblages that emerge from everyday living—of things, movements, spaces, practices, affects, and sensations—and, at the same time, the felt order or logic that these assemblages seem to imply.<sup>6</sup> Each world is a *something* caught in the act of moving and changing, apprehended by the researcher only in part and experienced only through intervention (see McCormack 2010a), what might be more poetically grasped as a *worlding*. While the individual is at once part of and caught within a world, the world is also encountered as an object insofar as it resists the human will. The exact nature of a *worlding*, then, is something still open and still worthy of study.

While Heidegger, as we shall see, figures the *worlding* of history as a monolithic process shared by the entire human species, I do not feel it without precedent in a post-structuralist age to borrow his notion while multiplying its instances. This sense of worlding and the arresting moments of poiesis are precisely what my dissertation hopes to address by questioning what roles fantasy, fiction, and the imagination might play in the process.

### **Cultural Geography**

John Wylie (2010) discusses two aversions manifest in Thrift's non-representational theory, arranging non-representational theory in opposition to the tenets of humanism on the one hand and to language-based "social construction" theories on the other. Wylie finds that resistance to non-representational theories often stems from the ubiquitous, unquestioned commitment to "an undisturbed humanism." He continues, "I mean by this the persistence of beliefs in the inviolate, coherent and given existence of a free-standing 'creative' subject—an undisturbed 'I' who feels, speaks, expresses and so on" (2010: 102). Wylie shares how his attempts to communicate the careful experiment/experience of rigorous non-representational theory are somehow taken up as

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of "worlds" is tricky, and the term will be mobilized by myself in a particular way not precisely as Thrift uses it here but not at odds either. See my discussion in Section IV.

<sup>6</sup> My formulation of *worlding* in Section IV will hold these two views of world in tension as two sides of the ongoing ontologizing any organism experiences.

calls toward creative self-expression. The humanist subject proves difficult to supplant and stands directly against what Wylie calls the “affective ethos” of non-representational theory.

In terms of the second aversion, Wylie argues that Thrift “heralds a move away from, perhaps even a rejection of, the discursive cultural politics of identity and representation that characterized cultural geography in the early 1990s...” (2010: 103). Anthropologists will be familiar with such politics also, and Wylie finds in non-representational theory a method for addressing a world in bodily, active terms, circumventing the traditional reliance on language-as-meaning and language-based philosophy.

Derek McCormack (2010a) likens Thrift’s overall project to the intuitions of earlier scholars from a range of traditions, citing the work of John Dewey, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guatarri. His own adventure in non-representational theory led him to a series of experimental academic workshops and public art events. Following Wylie, McCormack sees the two crucial moves for non-representational theories as turns away from humanism and from “versions of social constructionism in which world is conjured into being through the performative effect of discourse” (ibid: 202).

From American pragmatism, McCormack focuses on how the individual must think and learn throughout ongoing experience, ongoing life. He equates learning to how one finds “different ways of being in and of the movement of things” (Dewey 1981:91, qtd. in McCormack 2010a: 205). Towards his own work, McCormack borrows Whitehead’s formulation of “experiment,” which echoes the French usage and conflates “experiment” and “experience” into one act. Ongoing life must become an experiment in the midst of being, a virtual trying on of new modes and movements. This kind of experimentation can—and needs to—happen anywhere. McCormack offers that “at any given point something might happen to force us to think, to create new lines of thought, to allow us to sense the genesis in affirmation of the moving midst of things [...] The sense of the world is as virtual as it is actual in any given occasion” (ibid: 206). This

virtual is the “more” and “and” of James and Dewey, an excess of world that *is* in the open possibilities being experimented with in the present. As in Peirce’s retrospection, ideas and affects are held in the mind and fit together, toyed with, lined up to see where the edges might fit. It is a trial-and-error attitude that plays with new possibilities.

McCormack is also quick to point out that there is no guarantee any of these experiments will turn out useful results. The workshops he attended, starting with *Dancing the Virtual* in Montreal in 2006, led to good work for some and little of value to others. This is like the *tension* of Huizinga’s play and the “worlds—or not” of Latour’s (2008) actor-network theory.

### ***Lifeworlds, Inc.***

In one such foray into non-representational theory, Thrift (2011) presents a striking analysis of self-surveillance technologies that engender what he calls a “security-entertainment complex” present in the global North, an assemblage of market and military technologies that works to dislocate and reassemble everyday life as a phantasmagoria of incomplete, ultimately unsatisfying worlds. He dubs this ubiquitous cultural machine “Lifeworlds, Inc.” and addresses several technosocial movements that engender and sustain the processes of multiplying worlds.

For Thrift, at least as far as everyday life in the modern North and West is concerned, “there is no world that is somehow more complete, in other words, but rather a series of incompletes” (2011: 6). These worlds emerge as manufactured systems of significance and relating, systems that generate affect and pull bodies into motion, tuning those caught in the movements towards behaviors—potentially purchasing and valuing behaviors, yes, though not necessarily malignant or dominating—intimated in the machine.

Exactly how does one world float atop another? In what situations do they come into contact? Compete? To experience everyday life, then, the researcher invokes/evokes/provokes an intentionally incomplete world. It would take a careful

analysis of moments and mechanisms to tease out how these worlds emerge and what individuals might feel like in their centers, at their peripheries.

### **Actor-Network Theory**

Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory parallels Thrift's concern with social scientists making their work about explaining and translating phenomena through normative theoretical grids rather than taking seriously/fully what is already happening. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour positions the term "Social" as a kind of chimaera, a false substance that offers no explanations and instead requires them. He laments:

ANT scholars are mainly defined as those who have drawn, from the thirty odd years of sociology of science, a completely different conclusion than those of their best and closest colleagues. Whereas the latter have decided that social theory works *even on science*, we have concluded that, overall and in the details, social theory has failed on science *so radically* that it's safe to postulate that it had *always failed* elsewhere as well. (*ibid*: 92, italics in original)

The Social cannot be used to explain anything, says Latour, and instead it must itself be explained. Moreover, that is precisely what a social scientist is charged with doing. How is something social? What does sociality look like here? How are actors coming together and associating? He writes, "A good account will *perform* the social in the precise sense that some of the participants in the action—through the controversial agency of the author—will be *assembled* in such a way that they can be *collected* together" (*ibid*: 138). This account is the network, a description of an organic trail of significance from one mediator to another. In a very real way, the network traced is an Interpretant that figures a chain of Signs all getting at some virtual Object that promises to be The Social.

Thrift (2008) is generous with his reading of Latour and draws many similarities between actor-network theory and his own strain of non-representational theory. I see the projects overlapping in key areas as well and hope to follow insights from both trajectories.

## Science as Intervention

Ian Hacking offers a serious critique of naive representationalism in his book *Representing and Intervening* (1983). Dissecting generations of philosophical positions, Hacking argues that Western philosophy has long been too obsessed with representation when discussing reality. His account (extended in Hacking 1999 against “social constructionist” theories) is a defense of natural scientists as scientists, not philosophers. Hacking distrusts much of what philosophers, who are generally not laboratory scientists, have to say in defense or critique of science. The central push of the book is that representing and intervening are two different enterprises, and that scientists are more often than not content with intervening.

It might sound ridiculous to an STS scholar, but Hacking does a compelling job presenting the work of natural scientists as a kind of non-representational theory. He writes:

We will have models and theory sketches [...] No one thinks that one of these is the whole truth, and they may be mutually inconsistent. They are intellectual tools that help us understand phenomena and build bits and pieces of experimental technology. They enable us to intervene in processes and to create new and hitherto unimagined phenomena. But what is actually ‘making things happen’ is not the set of laws, or true laws. There are no exactly true laws to make anything happen. It is the electron and its ilk that is producing the effects. The electrons are real, they produce effects. (1983: 37-38)

The theories of science, argues Hacking, are not for producing large-scale representations and models, but should instead be seen as heuristic tools for building physical technologies and aiding in future interventions. Representations, or “likenesses,” are used only to produce more probes and more material phenomena, not to answer theoretical questions about what is *real*. If the doctor describes his hand as an organ of flesh and bones and skin, Hacking asks, is he less *right* than a physicist describing the same hand as a cloud of atoms? What does arguing over representations matter to the actual world? The goal of science for Hacking is experimental tinkering with the world, and the

doctor's model could be just as *right* as the physicist's depending on its usefulness. No model, no likeness, is *real*; it is a conjecture useful or not.

Hacking continues, "Most scientists are fairly humble about their work, which they gladly admit is a string of tentative conjectures, temperamental apparatuses, and nervous results" (1999: 94). I would agree. I have never had such a hard time changing the mind of a chemist or physicist about his or her work as I have that of a social scientist. That is to say, following Hacking's "diagnosis," that I feel those who deal in representations tend to be more touchy about how their work gets represented than those who deal in intervening.

In the lines as much as between them, I see Hacking addressing foes surprisingly similar to those of Thrift. While Hacking at face value seems to have little in common with social scientists, his project sits against representationalism as a whole, which had become the dominant voice among social scientists long before 1983. Even his treatment of Latour is generous (1999: 39-41, 65), and Hacking seems genuinely confused—as was Latour (2005: 94)—with how Latour's work was taken up by self-proclaimed "social constructionists."

The observations of Latour and Woolgar's collaborative work, says Hacking, address quite well one side of science, the "processes of laboratory labor." In defense of Latour and Woolgar, Hacking writes, "The pursuit of truth and reason will doubtless be organized according to the same social formulae as other pursuits such as happiness or genocide. The fact that scientists are people, and that scientific societies are societies, does not cast doubt, yet, upon scientific rationality." (1983: 11). He gives Latour all the room needed to perform studies of laboratory labor and societies of scientists, and even welcomes more historical accounts of scientific discovery, admitting that textbooks—the most predominant source of scientific knowledge for the public—present too tidy a picture.

But what of the other side of science, what Hacking coins the "assemblage of knowledge produced?" Surely the systems, models, maps, and diagrams of natural science constitute exactly what Thrift is averse to. But, as we have already seen,

knowledge for Hacking is not representational at all; it is technological and use-oriented, geared towards more intervening. What Hacking is truly critiquing in *Representing and Intervening* is representational philosophy *about* the assemblages of knowledge produced by science. Speaking of Hilary Putnam, Hacking writes: “His is a philosophy founded upon reflections on language, and no such philosophy can teach anything positive about natural science” (Hacking 1983: 92). Representations accrue at the edge of natural science as scaffolding for future discoveries but are not what motivate or define the work of the scientist for Hacking.

Intervention is the production of new spaces, new phenomena, new moments. Representing, on the other hand, is a play of metaphor and language (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003). The fact that scientists must take part in representation does not detract from the fact that everyday “normal science” (to borrow Kuhn’s term) is about intervention, experiment, problem-solving, and a little bit of creativity.

Granted, this is one particular view of natural science, a view coming from a philosopher of science no less. But I find Hacking’s insistence on intervention as the stuff of science and his thorough dismantling of several strains of representational philosophy trenchant and convincing. Others may not, but my broader point is that non-representational theories may have more (and stranger) bedfellows than initially imagined.

### ***Philosophy Beyond Representationalism***

For Ian Hacking, philosophy not natural science is the representational theory *par excellence*, but philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1997) opens up the idea of *sense* to new scrutiny, exploring what *meaning* means and how the various levels of reality, symbol, feeling, and idea intermingle (see also Stewart 2011). When does sense-as-perception become sense-as-meaning? How and in what ways does a thing felt become a thing that means? And what about those things that do not mean anything, things that resist meaning and instead do things, are things, generate things? I feel Nancy smudges the

border between object and meaning, making the act of signifying a lateral rather than vertical move.

### **Material Culture**

Daniel Miller (2005, 2008) focuses on how humans attach to and think through objects. His project is explicitly nondualist and non-representational, and Miller avoids the pitfalls of Gell (1998), who uses material culture as a replacement or transparent bearer of symbolic meaning.<sup>7</sup>

In an interesting online debate that grew from Miller's (2007) review of *Thinking Through Things* (Henare et al. 2007), Miller and Martin Holbraad discuss the field of material culture and its relationship to social anthropology. Early in the exchange, Holbraad accuses Miller of a latent dualism, citing the latter's distinction between "world" and "worldview" from his introductory chapter in *Thinking Through Things*. In response Miller offers a useful reminder to anyone pursuing non-representational theories:

[The] colloquial world of everyday speech constantly affirms a dualist representation of the world with many terms for things and materials, and I think we have to respect that also. Otherwise we lose our power to even speak to others in a way that still communicates and can be understood and we also appear to repudiate the understandings of whole populations. The trick is to recognise the register of perception from philosophical transcendence to everyday dualism. (Miller 2007, *materialculture.org* blog)

I feel that Miller is right to defend representative language in academic work and everyday speech from claims of representationalism or dualism. Miller has no motive to "repudiate" understandings and institutions that rely on representations. That language, art, physics, or photography can be said to represent is not in itself the problem. That a scholar uses symbols at all or writes descriptive accounts, e.g. in ethnography, does not

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<sup>7</sup> What Latour (2005) would call an intermediary rather than a mediator.

believe her focus on and dedication to nondualist, non-representational theories “in the wild.”

### **Aesthetics & Performance**

Jacques Rancière (2004) proposes that aesthetic practices can agitate or reshape a “distribution of the sensible,” rearranging the felt world of a society. He writes:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it [...] This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution [...] The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed. (2004: 12)

I believe this argument to be a robust musing on the kinds of “practices” also introduced by Thrift (2011) as “cultural probes.” Such practices do not simply address the world, but intervene in a political way, shifting and tweaking exactly what kind of world can be said to exist. Rancière’s aesthetic practices “are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (2004: 13).

If connecting Rancière’s admittedly fanciful discussions of aesthetic practices to Thrift’s probes seems a stretch at first, Rancière can be seen to share the cultural geographers’ hesitation to allow a representing subject an objective perspective from which to map or model the world:

I always try to think in terms of horizontal distributions, combinations between systems of possibilities, not in terms of surface and substratum. Where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established. I have tried to conceive of a topography that does not presuppose this position of mastery. It is possible, from any given point, to try to reconstruct the conceptual network that makes it possible to conceive of a statement, that causes a painting

or a piece of music to make an impression, that causes reality to appear transformable or inalterable. (2004: 49)

These aesthetic practices work in a world of motion and horizontal attachments. There is no outside perspective from which to act, and practices shape the world more than simply participate in it. His purpose and his language echo Sloterdijk's argument that there is no natural space from which to view the globe (2009: 34). The globular earth, argues Sloterdijk, is a philosophical invention, a representation made with the aim of mastery and domination.

I find the practices of Rancière a helpful picture of what non-representational theory can look like politically; and just as Thrift calls for intervention in the moment of *Lifeworlds, Inc.*, Rancière likewise calls for political action to change current modes of being within a heavily policed society.

### ***Movement & Space***

Another move away from representational thinking highlights the political effects of aesthetic performance and comes from studies of space and rhythm, foci explicitly in tune with Thrift's central tenets. Michel de Certeau (1984) opens up a way of looking at space and everyday life that is not aimed at recovering or decoding meaning, but instead at tracing how habit, interaction, and use make space what it is. He explores how a city is opened up as one walks through it, privileging the route of the pedestrian as a critical intervention in the state-planned character and space of the city. He asks: How is something inhabitable, and in what ways is it then inhabited? De Certeau's focus on small, personal practices in navigating and sustaining a space underlines the greater scope of his work, the agency of the navigator.

De Certeau's work becomes a kind of "reader response theory" for lived space. He separates practices from tactics; the former being an intended use of the space, while by the latter he means some kind of oblique or diagonal use of the space. Cultural Geographer Cameron Duff (2010) faults de Certeau for relying too heavily on linguistic models and walking as "speech," offering Edward Casey's notion of "thick" places to

refocus pedestrian meaning-making in affective terms. This seems a fair critique of de Certeau, though I feel that his project and the project of Casey do not overlap as evenly as Duff suggests. While Casey is concerned with affect, belonging, and identity, de Certeau seems to me to be more focused on political actions that do in some ways communicate or signify, even if only to the walker herself. In either case, we can imagine the flaneur walking his city with a sense of toying or playfulness.

Henri Lefebvre (1991) also makes of space something worth studying and discussing outside the realm of signification. In a later work, Lefebvre (2004) offers another way of studying spaces apart from what they mean or signify. Rhythmanalysis is a way of describing the movements, fluctuations, and patterns of motion without reducing all of bodies in space to some underlying meaning or symbolic dimension. The real potency of this work, I feel, comes from its insistence on making of the rhythms and patterns nothing more than what they are. The goal is to describe them, not to explain them.

### **III. SEMIOSIS AS PRESENTATION**

Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structural linguistics and the root of what would inspire structuralism in the social sciences, developed a seminal definition of the sign that thoroughly dressed down the older “referential theory” of language. We can say that a referential theory of language holds the belief that any given word will necessarily refer to a specific object in the world. The “meaning” of a word is then the corresponding, real-world object to which it applies. A popular historical instance of this view can be seen in the book of Genesis, where Adam “names” the animals and by extension establishes a word/name for each thing/object in existence. Now, because humans are rational creatures and live in worlds of abstractions, there are certain abstract “things” that need names too: freedom, love, victory, etc. These things exist in the world albeit abstractly, and a referential theory of language affords heated argumentation over semantics, as any longstanding theory would need to. It sounds well and good, but

referential theories developed several tricky consequences, maybe epitomized in certain kinds of magical thinking wherein learning the name of an object grants power over it.

Saussure's theory of structural linguistics refutes referential theories of language with a two-prong approach. Again, in simple terms, Saussure offers that: (1) a sign consists of a signifier (signal image or sound) and a signified (its meaning), and the relationship between this sound/image and its *meaning* is arbitrary; and (2) the *value* of any given sign results not only from the one-to-one, signifier–signified relationship but from that relationship's participation within a larger *system* of other arbitrary signs that mean related things, thus rendering the conceptual world of meanings not necessarily attached point-by-point to things/objects in the world. What results is a world of objects, bodies, and images on one side and a detached world of meaning, value, and concepts on the other: textbook dualism.

### **A Critique of Saussure**

Such a theory of language leaves out the actual world. In moving beyond a referential theory of language, his account of signifiers and signifieds now precludes a way for signs to point toward an object in the world. Moreover, there is no way to speak of the operation of signs, how signs produce meaning for an observer. The real-world context of speech is less important to Saussure than the grammar of signs that allows for relational value to be recognized. As Paul Kockelman puts it, “Saussure's theory has fewer dimensions than the processes it attempts to theorize” (2006: 84). That third dimension of actual life, world, is also the dimension of process and interaction. Webb Keane notes this lacking dimension as well. He opens his essay on semiotic ideology with a question:

Have we even now escaped the ontological division of the world into ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’? To be sure, social analysts may no longer feel themselves forced to choose between ‘symbolic’ and ‘materialist’ approaches [...] Yet some version of that opposition seems to persist in more or less covert forms (2003: 409).

Philosopher Susan Blackmore (2005) names the same pernicious binary “the vestiges of Cartesian dualism” and traces the lineage all the way back to Plato in the Western tradition. Closer to home, other anthropologists tackle the same pervasive dualism under various names.

Tim Ingold (2000) characterizes what he calls the “complementary fallacy,” a widespread academic practice of studying human life as though it consisted of two disparate yet complementary worlds, the biological (matter) and the social (spirit). Anthropologists, he argues, have acclimated to this division and stick to one world without making claims about the other. There forms a kind mutual disregard between the “hard” scientists and the “soft” scientists; of course, a mutual disregard may at times feel more like a cold war to those near the borders. What Ingold calls for is a singular vision of the human, as at once organism and individual, a vision capable of giving the biological scientist and the cultural anthropologist a commensurable language.

Bruno Latour (2008) argues vividly against bifurcating reality into two opposing realms, the cultural and the natural, with “meaning” on one side and “world” on the other. The staunchly objectivist view, held by the Natural side, holds that only matter and physical Laws exist, considering the proliferation of social scientific theories as so much nonsense, nothing but aestheticism and moralizing. On the Cultural side, constructionists hold that science is itself “culturally constructed” and that “scientific facts” are political tools devoid of objective reality, which, after all, does not exist. The result of this bifurcation is “to make impossible the *truth* of poetry, as well as [...] the *realism* of science” (2008: 12, emphasis in the original). He asks, “What will happen if, instead of trying to bridge the distance between words and worlds, we were trying to move sideways along with the various elements that appear to go in the same direction?” (ibid: 14). His answer is to acknowledge the differences but move together regardless.

### ***Mentalism***

And so, whether he intended to or not, Saussure’s linguistic model fed into these “vestiges of Cartesian dualism,” and even went on to effect precisely what Plato’s and

Descartes' dualisms had before him: an idealism. For, if the philosopher takes for granted a dualism wherein one side contains everything tangible, earthly, bodily, subject to failure, and transient, the other side will inevitably contain all meaning and all truth. And which side seems the more important? From Plato to Descartes, and now Saussure, a dualism of Spirit (the Forms, mind, *langue*, respectively) and Matter (the material world, body, *parole*, respectively) will inevitably privilege the former over the latter.

While Saussure's structural linguistics acted as a needed counter to referential theories of language, his approach had limitations of its own. Words no longer related to objects/concepts that existed "out in the world" but, instead, to objects/concepts that now existed only in the head. Furthermore, these purely mental concepts were governed by a rigid, rule-oriented *system* that also existed mentally and yet out of reach in the social ether. In Saussure's model, language is a self-contained system of meaning. In fact, it only makes sense when it is assumed to be a closed, world-independent system. Scholars of language would go on to critique this specific brand of idealism as *mentalism*: wherein all linguistic meaning pre-exists as a concept/signified in the mind, is represented in the world via signifiers, and is then subsequently "read off" those signs to be replicated as the same concept/signified in the mind of the viewer. That this echoes the shortcomings of cognitivism should be no surprise since many of those who developed cybernetics theory into what came to be the cognitive sciences were structural linguists.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Sign as Fetish***

And this is what the "hard" scientists see from their side of the wall when they look over at the cultural anthropologists; when the meaning of any sign is forever cloistered within the realm of mental representation, no individual has trustworthy access to that meaning. The sign, as sole guardian of the signified, and thus keeper of all that is conceptual, subsumes any other form of apprehension and claims a monopoly on all forms of meaning. The social scientists appear to be thrown back into Plato's cave of shadows, and everyone is left to grope and guess after what signifieds might lie behind

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<sup>8</sup> See, as examples, Varela et alia's treatments of Noam Chomsky and Marvin Minsky in particular (1980: 40). Also Dreyfus (1972), Agre (1997), and Maturana et al. (1998).

any given signifier. The result is a free-for-all among academics who chase after “floating signifiers” and have no choice but to mobilize pure rhetoric and pathos to argue what any given sign means. And any opinion is as good as the next.

And so, just as the best cognitive science takes cognition (the “language of thought”) out of the brain and makes it part of social life and body-to-body interactions, we must build a theory of language that does the same. Fortunately, such a theory of language has already been built.

### **The Semiosis of C.S. Peirce**

Charles Sanders Peirce was an American philosopher and logician. While Ian Hacking considers him a rather odd duck in the lineage of American pragmatic philosophers, it is hard to deny Peirce’s broad range of insights and observations (Hacking 1983: 61). Peirce famously defines the elements of a Sign as threefold:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.

That is, a Sign stands for an Object by virtue of some “idea” or some “ground” of understanding, and in so doing it generates for some agent another Sign, an Interpretant, that regards the same Object in an equivalent or more developed way.

Importantly, the Interpretant is another Sign that “stands for” the same Object in a related way. Early in his work, Peirce distinguishes a Sign from the more general Representamen by positing that “a *Sign* is a Representamen with a mental Interpretant” (2011: 100; see also CP: 1.564). While he moves away from this specific usage, and we will too, the phrasing can anchor in our minds two things: first, that the mental nature of some Interpretants does not disqualify them as Signs; second, that many Interpretants

function as little more than recognitions of a Sign–Object relationship and will not always be glossed as fully developed Signs or representations of their own.

***Triad of Grounds: Icon, Index, Symbol***

While Saussure recognizes only the arbitrary and conventional (Symbolic) aspect of the Sign–Object relationship, Peirce allows for Signs to “stand for” Objects by sharing a likeness or quality with the Object (Icons)<sup>9</sup> or by being “contiguous” with the Object (Indices).

Symbols work as the arbitrary and conventional, encompassing most concepts and words in language; Icons manifest as diagrams; and Indices open semiosis up to the world: weathervanes Index the direction of the wind, a cocked arm Indexes an incoming punch, a footprint Indexes the person who made it, smoke Indexes fire, a bullet hole Indexes the bullet and by extension a gun and a shooter, etc.

While it appears easy to gloss Symbols as words, Icons as images, and Indices as physical evidence or action, this simple parsing works only in the most rudimentary sense. The word “that” for example is not a Symbol for Peirce because it does not denote a concept in itself. The word “cat” has a world-independent definition that brings to mind a concept, while “that” is a word that acts only as an Indexical point of contact between words and world. The photograph seems a likely Icon at first, but we soon realize that the photograph functions differently than the portrait precisely because of its nature as an Index; that is, because it does more than “share a likeness” with the subject and instead traces or records actual contact with the subject. Peirce famously explains the imbrication of Symbol, Index, and Icon in a short clause about love. I will work through the same example here with updated names.

Let us take the sentence “Alex loves Juno.” This sentence of words is meaningless unless we have some prior knowledge of Alex and Juno. These names function as pronouns with no antecedents if we have yet to encounter in the world, in the story, in our

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<sup>9</sup> Of course Saussure did have a notion of the Icon (what he called “symbols” rather than “signs”), and his dismissal of them as too unruly for a tidy system of signs is precisely why his structural linguistics works as it does.

dreams, etc. both Alex and Juno. Proper nouns function as Indices of actual individuals. Moving on, “love” is a Symbol that refers to a concept. However, the clause remains hollow unless we very quickly move from concept *love* in our minds to a series of Icons and Indices that extrapolate and expound on the idea. Peirce traces these meanings down to a base tone or qualisign, an Icon or “likeness” which is at the edge of all meaning. Without this chain of interpretation, the sentence is hollow. Furthermore, as several scholars are quick to note, the Index and Icon will likely take on conventional valences, rendering them Symbol-ish, and any Symbol will be materialized in a tangible form (font, handwriting, color, material, etc.) that likewise affords Iconic and/or Indexical valences. However, in shorthand, it can be useful to refer to particular Signs as Symbols, Indices, or Icons when we wish to note the pivot point or initial Ground upon which the Sign works.

Moreover, Signs can scale to a great degree in a Peircean paradigm. For instance, a book can be a Sign, a theory can be a Sign, a river can be a Sign. As I will discuss throughout this dissertation, games can function as a Sign and at the same time a system of Signs.

### ***Semiosis as Process***

Key to the paradigm, a Sign does not exist as Sign prior to its being interpreted as such; the Interpretant is what regards a Sign–Object relationship, and the nature of the Interpretant figures exactly what is Sign and what Object. This is why Keane identifies the Interpretant as the “meaning” of the Sign and not the Object alone; it is in the Interpretant that the force of the Sign is felt. The relation between the Sign and Object is not fixed but must be regarded in process at each moment, according to the ideology, ontology, or dictionary of the agent. That Signs are so deeply rooted in the lived and felt ontologies of Sign-users is of critical importance to my use of Heidegger’s *worlding* below.

Anthropologist Webb Keane (2003) presents the semiotics of C. S. Peirce as an alternative to the dualism-cum-idealism latent within Saussurean structuralism and the

social sciences as a whole, as a framework uniquely suited to bring sign and world together again. For Keane the strength of Peirce lies in two primary places: the processual nature of connecting Sign and Interpretant to Object that may very well be material in nature, and the subsequent “radical materiality” of the Iconic and Indexical grounds (2003). Of the nature of Signs as processual, he writes:

Signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification. This is important because, viewed sociologically, it can be taken to entail sociability, struggle, historicity, and contingency. This interpretation of the model offers a challenge to the facile but commonplace claim that to take things as ‘signs’ is to reduce the world to discourse and its interpretation, to give in to the totalizing imperative to render all things meaningful. (2003: 413)

Signs giving rise to more Signs is how meaning is created, and this process pivots around Objects that can take any imaginable form. Words, actions, mental images, objects—the world participates together, and things operate as Signs by giving rise to other Signs.

Peirce frames Signs as but one part of meaning-making pivots. Meaning is produced *around* an Object as Signs are made/seen and Interpreted “in the wild.” We might say that meaning *occurs* only in an act of interpretation, an act which can itself become another Sign as it is interpreted in turn. This is in bold contrast to the signifier–signified relationship inherent to Saussure’s notion of the sign *having* or *possessing* meaning/value within a fixed system. For Peirce, meaning is manifest as emerging from the process. A Sign is said to *do* something precisely and only because it forces some agent to *do* something else, which can then force something else to *do* something else. Systems and grammars exist, but they govern only the deployment of literal Symbols, a fraction of a fraction of usage.

I might offer that a Sign is like a three-sided coin. To *be* a Sign *is* to represent an Object *is* to elicit an Interpretant. These are not discrete moments, but three sides to the same event. I have found the broken metaphor of the “three-sided coin” invaluable in

conceptualizing Signs in a Peircean mind. Its brokenness only adds to its usefulness (as far as theory is concerned, conspicuous tools are best).

### ***Material Semiotics***

The consequence of this processual semiosis is that words and worlds can get tried up and tangled in the complex onflow of meaning-making. Keane writes, “What iconicity and indexicality begin to do is open up signification to causality, to the possible effects of material qualities, and of their logistical impositions, on persons and their social worlds” (*ibid.*: 417). That objects or artifacts can *function as* Signs is not a new concept, but letting those objects *be* Signs of the same rank as words and ideas is something else entirely.

Saussure’s paradigm of structural linguistics allows people to study material objects, but those material objects can only be rendered meaningful as signs for mental concepts. The brute physicality of any object cannot have meaning in any way outside serving as a representation of a concept or idea. Activity, the body, artifacts, the natural world—any given object is a placeholder at best and entirely inconsequential at worst. Of the structuralist approach, Keane writes:

The result is that even those who would study ‘things’ too often turn them either into expressions or communications of ‘ideas,’ or relegate those ideas to an epiphenomenal domain. Those who would study ‘ideas’ too often treat the associated material forms as transparent, taking their consequentiality to be suspect, and, at times, imputing implausible powers to human desires to impose meaning on the world. (*ibid.*: 410).

To take one example—though, to be sure, hundreds exist—Dick Hebdige writes in his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* that the purpose of social analysis is to “discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style” (1979: 18). The task he sets for himself is to uncover and decipher a secret code, hidden in plain sight but visible only to the expert. The ostensible object of his study, the material objects of the punk subculture—safety pin piercings, cut denim, shaved heads, makeup—become

mere placeholders for abstract ideas, a code that Hebdige must translate into words. The fact that punks communicate through style rather than words can only be seen as intentional trickery or shameful illiteracy. The objects become unimportant and ineffectual themselves and are rendered entirely equivalent to the words of the theorist insofar as both are said to signify the same mental concepts.

There is no such translation needed within a Peircean model, no need to “discern the hidden message” of material objects. They give rise to Interpretants insofar as they give rise to Signs and/or become regarded as Signs themselves. In fact, the Object *must* be taken as part of the world to some extent. Likewise, the Sign and Interpretant both participate in the world as well. This is a radical materiality entirely absent in the work of Saussure.

As a philosopher, Peirce was by any account unaware of the “general linguistics” of Saussure and concerned not with language per se but with issues of logic and pragmatic thought. While a growing number of contemporary anthropologists diverge from a previous generation’s reliance on Saussure, the idealist paradigm Peirce himself pushed against was that of G.W.F. Hegel. Of course, either idealist offers the same problems to the materialist, and Peirce uses a bit more humor than Keane when distancing himself from a philosophy of pure spirit. Regarding Hegel, Peirce offers, “In other words, he has committed the trifling oversight of forgetting that there is a real world with real actions and reactions. Rather a serious oversight that” (CP 1.368).

### **A Theory of *Significance*: Roland Barthes**

Another example, something less technical, can help get at the wisdom and usefulness of Peirce from another tack. To get at a world of meaning apart from structuralism and strict symbolic signification, Roland Barthes (1970) delineates three kinds of meaning that typify the experience of watching a film, *Ivan the Terrible* (1958). He calls the first, second, and third meanings of the text.

The first meaning, according to Barthes, arises at the “informational level, which gathers together everything I can learn from the setting, the costumes, the characters,

their relations [...] This is the level of communication.” He calls this the level of the “message” and considers it easy enough to analyze with a “basic semiotics” of recognition. Attempting to draw useful associations to the three grounds of Peirce, we might say this layer of meaning relates Signs (the visuals on the screen) to their Objects (objects in the purported world of the narrative) through Iconicity (resemblance). It might also be worth noting that even to an observer on set during filming, many of the objects at hand would be Icons of other, absent objects: King Ivan’s crown, for instance, would appear to be made of gold even on the set, but those of the cast and crew would know the prop to be a painted aluminum replica, an Icon of an authentic golden crown.

Barthes continues that the second meaning of any scene or representation on screen would be that of symbolism. Barthes spends a small amount of time pointing out the various symbolic meanings of a scene in which Ivan is doused in a downpour of golden coins. He works through at least four levels of symbolism (referential, diegetic, Eisensteinian, and historical) and ends by declaring the second meaning that of “signification.” These fields of symbolism collect the various traditional and accepted meanings of gold (authority, wealth, royalty, corruption) and dousing (chiefly baptism) familiar to the target audience of the film. The array of these connections resemble Peirce’s notion of the Symbol, conventional meanings attached to particular words or objects, as well as the Icon.

In a Saussurean model, the first and second meanings could be seen as the realms of *symbols* (Icons for Peirce) versus *signs* (Symbols for Peirce), respectively, which Barthes acknowledges. But Barthes, as Keane alludes to in his own essay, is not completely satisfied with Saussure’s detached world of arbitrary signs and sign-relations. In fact, the level of meaning most pressing and intoxicating to Barthes is the third meaning. Here Barthes finds the ineffable feel or “emotion-value” of the scene. This is the level of “significance,” the thick eye make-up on the courtier, the trembling hands of the peasants, the coarse felt of the costumes. These markers or features are meaningful, but they do not signify or “stand for” any other object in particular. These objects, the make-up of the victim and the “stupid nose” of the officer in the film, Barthes calls

“incomplete signs.” They seem to hint towards something, but there is no recognized signified, no take-away meaning, no greater register above the individual scene. Translation is impossible because there is no external reference or quality that could be used as a basis to liken these particular qualities or artifacts to another.

However, this “incomplete sign” is readily likened to Peirce’s notion of the Index. The “stupid nose” of the officer Indexes a known stereotype; the thick eye makeup Indexes the shaky hand or garish taste; the coarse felt of the garment Indexes the economic class of the wearer as much as the bodily memories of the observer. These are “incomplete” insofar as the meanings are not fixed but instead alive, open, awaiting on their meaning to arise in the mind/activity of the interpreter. I find this use of “significance” appealing, not as an anti-intellectual or anti-semiotic “feel” or sentimental excess; but as a mode of meaning-production that resists translation or paraphrasing, precisely affording the *poiesis* of Heidegger. The significant features of the film are somehow more than themselves and point away from themselves, but at the same time they do not take or “stand for” anything else, exactly.

### **Presentation Over Representation**

When I talk of meaning-making over meaning-preserving in Chapter 3, I use the notion of *presentation* that Huizinga introduces to focus on the moment a Sign is given, or, the moment a *thing* is given that may or may not be recognized as a Sign. In Peircean terms, we might say that the Object can be said to both give rise to the Sign and be formed by it. The triad does not break down so much as overlap onto itself. Take an example from Huizinga, where a child engages in some fleeting make-believe:

The child is making an image of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime, or more dangerous than what he usually *is*. One is a Prince, or one is a Daddy or a wicked witch or a tiger. The child is quite literally “beside himself” with delight, transported beyond himself to such an extent that he almost believes he actually is such and such a thing, without, however, wholly losing consciousness of “ordinary reality.” His representation is not so much a sham reality as a realization in appearance: “imagination” in the original sense of the word. (Huizinga [1938] 1971: 14).

The child is offering a kind of Sign, but it is more than this. The child does not want to represent the tiger, the witch, the Prince; rather, he *becomes* it. The child projects a world outward in which he is the tiger, and a friend can only be said to truly play *with* the child if that world is donned intersubjectively.

### ***The Virtual Object***

That there is no cosmic Law governing the use of Signs does not mean that meaning is “up for grabs” or risks spiraling into wild conjecture. Humans have a very good talent for recognizing the intentions of others. The fact is we do understand one another, and we are very good at it. What Peirce’s semiotics makes clear is that Objects often function as converging points for intentions and imaginations. As Kockelman observes:

Given the definition of semiotic process offered above, the object of a sign is really that to which all (appropriate and effective) interpretants of that sign correspondingly relate (Kockelman 2005). Objects, then, are relatively abstract entities by definition. They should not be confused with ‘objects’ in the Cartesian sense of *res extensa*. Nor should they be confused with the ‘things’ that words seem to stand for—be they entities like Saussure’s ox and tree. Indeed, it is best to think of the object as a *correspondence-preserving projection* from all interpretants of a sign. (2006: 82)<sup>10</sup>

The Object is then an intuited aggregate or average of these Interpretants. No doubt, any given community would consider which Interpretants were “correct” or “felicitous” and which were not, thus limiting what could constitute the Object. What a “house on fire” precisely *means*, while not imaginary or up for grabs, is still taken as a virtual object that allows for certain affordances and refuses others.

The sum, then, of these Interpretants constitutes via projection a *virtual* Object, at once material and abstract, an Object that has certain affordances to the degree it is

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<sup>10</sup> Kockelman’s account includes a footnote clarifying that, of course, objects *can be* physical objects represented by the Sign; they just need not be by necessity.

projected. Once it accrues enough Signs, enough vectors converging on it, the Object begins to function in the world in a more complete way. It exists not as imaginary projection, but intervening entity. Not as agent, but as entity. Like an “elephant in the room,” there can be Objects that give rise to and carry Signs outside tangible reality or abstract denotation.

These “virtual Objects” are the very stuff of Lakoff’s “schemas” in a way. It is not that representations in the mind are signs of objects in the real world. Objects, artifacts in the real world as taken as Signs of some virtual thing, and then that virtual thing is accepted as part of the world and interpolated into the bodily and cognitive system of the organism. As Clark offers in his discussion of “epistemic objects” that are in one sense representations but in another sense objects gripped and operated via imagination:

Internal representations worth their salt, then, turn out to be identifiable inner states or processes that stand in for features that may be distal or currently absent and where that mode of standing-in follows some kind of scheme determining a space of possible semantically related encodings. (2008: 150)

Dozens of studies in cognitive science work to trace how physical objects can be used as operators in the world and then internalized to have the same power within the mind. As apes are trained with blocks to recognize higher-order logical types, these mental images seem to function as more than imagined representations of objects. The mind has a great capacity for utilizing imaginary tools. Hammers and staircases might not work well as imaginary objects, but rulers, pencils, nametags, “memory houses,” etc. can all work as well in the mind as out of it.

What are the grounds upon which virtual Objects work? I think the grounds are ontological as well as intersubjective, which is to say they are social. This observation dovetails to how Erving Goffman formulates broader meaning-making processes as negotiations of an intersubjective projection of sorts:

The individual, it is true, can be ‘wrong’ in his interpretations, that is, misguided, out of touch, inappropriate, and so forth. ‘Wrong’ interpretations will be

considered throughout [this book]. Here, I want only to mention the belief that in many cases the individual in our society is effective in his use of particular frameworks. The elements and processes he assumes in his reading of the activity often *are* ones that the activity itself manifests—and why not, since social life itself is often organized as something that individuals will be able to understand and deal with. *A correspondence or isomorphism of what is perceived*, in spite of the fact that there are likely to be many valid principles of organization that could but don't inform perception. (Goffman 1974: 26; italics mine)

It seems to me that this frame is then a habit or familiar situation that takes for granted certain virtual Objects as meaningful affordances of the situation. The frame is the ground upon which the virtual Object can be shared as a point of convergence, a semi-tangible thing that everyone plays *with* or at least must regard to fully participate. The frame becomes the grounds on which “effective” attention and activity is performed, the understood “we intentionality” of Searle.

#### IV. WORLDS & WORLDING

Theories of *worlding* now circulating in anthropology borrow from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger an emphasis on incompleteness, the body, and non-representational modes of meaning. Taken centrally from Heidegger's philosophy of art, adaptations of *worlding* highlight the ongoing but ultimately incomplete labors of everyday sense-making.

I adopt Heidegger's *World* as: the historical, aggregate, emergent current of failed or waning collective *poiesis*, the onflow and vector of a figuring that drags behind it a particular distribution of the sensible that presumes a totality while remaining in itself incomplete. World is neither agent nor substance but a state of affairs, the heretofore resulting intelligibility and tentative totality that contains meaning, truth, sense. Any world is then better understood as a *worlding*. While this process of unconcealing and rendering is historical for Heidegger, I move to multiply *worldings* as tentative totalities that may be seen to exclude, cut, and contest with each other. The Human might not be so monolithic as the Moderns, especially the romantics among them, supposed.

Following such a treatment of *worlding*, I use the term *ontology* to denote the individual's figuring out from such a processual ground. The ontology of a body—public, private, at whatever scale we select—is an Index of the drag it feels when navigating some worlding, all those impressions, scars, traces left on the body. It is the inverse of the world as felt, as carried, as trudged. More than the “semiotic ideologies” of Keane (2003), an ontology is what makes regarding figures and grounds—not only Signs and Objects—possible, for the ontologizing body suffers also the excess of those systems and grammars that regard signs. Any body's ontology is its responsive memory of the clashing, the failings, and the flaws of those systems and grammars and has suffered because of them.

And insofar as this ontology is in process, always becoming, each body—at whatever scale—is best seen as the figured locus of some ongoing *ontologizing*. The body becomes something like Latour's “actors,” which arise not as agents making attachments but as bundles of attachments in progress (2005: 46). This adaptation of ontology dovetails to Deleuze and Guattari's “assemblage,” which I will mobilize below. I might use *ontologizing* when I speak to the smaller scales, the singular animal body or agent, and *worlding* when I speak of the larger, aggregate, collective processes of sense-making and world-trudging.

Finally, I figure *poiesis* as that special working of art—that bundle of Interpretants caught up in the “essential strife” that is World and Earth—which refuses to settle, to translate, to be made commensurable with anything else. Poiesis comes as a pocket of instability, an air bubble in the plaster of World. Sometimes the ontologizing body experiences an outward clash that cannot be assimilated into the sensible, taken in stride. When the body produces Interpretants that are themselves unstable, we get poiesis. The working of art is not a Sign of an Object, not a representation of some thing we can recognize, but an Interpretant that resists offering its final opinion and holds both Sign and Object in relation *somehow*. The nature of poiesis will be discussed at greater length below.

## **Living in Different Worlds**

If we multiply World into worldings, then there is something that needs to be said about people living in different worlds. More than an idiom used to express a feeling of disparate values, expectations, or experience, the notion of “different worlds” can hint at divergences more fundamental than opposing political views or differing tastes in art.

Donna Haraway (2008) pulls her reader into the modes and motives, routines and ritornellos of dog agility training with her pet, Cayenne, marking out the objects, affects, bodies, practices, and spaces that constitute the world, the *thing*, of canine agility training in Northern California. Is this a world or a subculture? Does such a hobby require a move into multiple worlds?

In *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, Susan Friend Harding (2001) recounts her participation in the subculture of Evangelical Fundamental Christianity in the 1980s. After immersing herself in the language and politics of the Fundamentalists, Harding begins to see the world through their eyes, feel the world in a new way. In the tradition of other anthropologists who find themselves thinking in “native” ideology, Harding shares a crisis of ontology that strikes her on the side of the road, where she finds herself almost “caught” in prayer (2001: 58–59). That her book focuses so much on language and politics, as the subtitle attests, her account does present her struggle in ideological terms. But is she in a new world?

About either case, I confess that I do not rightly know. Taking the distributed, de-centered subject of Andy Clark, the non-representational theory of Nigel Thrift, and the nondualist semiotics of C.S. Peirce, I see *worlding* begin at the pre-personal, bodily level. Questions of ideology and subculture are very much allowed after the fact, but a new world begins when a body first pulls itself up from the muck and feels the muck pull back.

Different bodies feel the same objective space differently. Rather than a subjective difference of perspective or memory, these felt differences then affect different bodies differently, mark and scar and bang them differently, rendering different bodies differently able even after the world is gone. A few mundane examples may suffice.

I take my date to a bar in Austin, TX, and after a few dances in the center of the room she needs to use the restroom. After three attempts to hear her question, I lean my head down to her height and am struck simultaneously by corollary realizations. One, she is asking me where the restrooms are; and two, at her height the bar is an entirely different animal. At 6'1" tall I rarely know what it is like to exist in a room without visible walls, visible doors, and perceivable avenues of navigation and exit. At 5'1" tall, she exists in a world that differently figures/renders her body; and this affects her ontologizing in a hardly negligible way. That the world around her be cultural or natural matters not one bit to the body; it must be regarded and negotiated. Same room, different world. While this anecdote is entirely mundane and hardly worth noting in a sense, are not the implications—the violent, pervasive, celebrated and protected, dehumanizing implications—of such a deliberately manufactured cultural world precisely the subject of feminism?

That the biological, the objective, the natural can play a role in producing meaning for bodies and societies is precisely what Cartesian dualism precludes. In the dualist paradigm, the world cannot mean anything unless we make it so; but as Webb Keane so rightly observes, when Max Weber underscores the divide between the Natural and Social in his birthing of sociology, he forever precludes the meaningfulness of natural phenomena such as floods, demography, and famine. Keane writes:

When Weber excludes these from interpretive social science, he is reproducing the very dichotomy between subject and object that also underwrites objectivism. For those things that are excluded because they are not elements of meaningful actions by self-interpreting humans are the 'objects' of objectivistic science. The efforts of people like Daniel Miller (1987, 1998), Marilyn Strathern (1988), and Bruno Latour (1993) to overcome this dichotomy and its exclusions have been crucial to making the question of materiality useful again. (2003: 411)

In the objectivist view the natural world is either a blank slate, even and equally empty for any individual to fill with meaning, or an agent possessed of gods and spirits that communicate messages through natural phenomena. Against such a view, Keane charges

himself to bring the natural world back into the operations of Signs and meaning, not as canvas or ghost, but as co-operant. This happens on the levels of bodies and worlds.

Especially after our invocation of “natural-born cyborgs” (Clark 2003), we must understand that the Body–Mind does not only open up to enlist objects smaller than itself; it likewise opens upward and outward to be enlisted differently into projects and systems larger than itself. Situation and circumstance can “come to mean” varying things to varying bodies, and as this meaning is made sensible and circulated it is precisely a *worlding*.

### **The Essential Strife: *World & Earth***

Heidegger makes much of the distinction between *World* and *Earth*. The very course of Dasein is tangled in the “essential strife” between these two modalities of history. Heidegger uses the terms to explore what it is that human-being consists in and might be characterized as. In *Holzwege*, his text of “woody” meditations along the forest trail, Heidegger offers:

Much of what is cannot be brought under the rule of humanity. Only a little becomes known. What is known remains approximate; what is mastered remains unstable. What-is is never something [entirely] man-made or even only a representation, as it can all too easily appear [...] The world grounds itself on the earth and the earth juts through the world... The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to raise the earth completely [into the light]. As self-opening, the world cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. (trans. Hofstadter 1971: 45, 53; interjections in original translation)

For Heidegger, the struggle between World and Earth is best made visible in the work(ing) of art, where sense-making is not so much an act of representing but of “unconcealing.” The artist renders sensible—and necessarily only to a partial extent—that which yet remains outside, gnarly, ineffable. The successful work of art is a *poiesis*, or *bringing into being*, that presents a tension and a frustrated *worlding* to the senses (see Dreyfus 1991).

Art is an arresting of the ongoing worlding. And while Heidegger may reserve poiesis for cathedrals, poetry, and peasant's shoes, I think lesser art, lesser poetics, may still exist as incomplete Interpretants, presentations that maintain to some degree the inexhaustibility of meaning.

### ***Poiesis as Successful Art***

The central feature of poiesis is that it plumbs what cannot be exhausted. While representations foreclose meaning by purporting to contain and translate one to another, presentation precludes such containment. More meaning, more connections, more arrangements are always possible. The art does not *mean* any translatable paraphrase. It is not information, it cannot be rendered in digital. Philosopher Ian Thomson defines Heidegger's view of art as:

the unending creative struggle to express that which conditions and informs our worlds of meaning and yet resists being exhaustively articulated in terms of these worlds. [...] Art teaches us to embrace the initially tragic insight that being will never be completely revealed in time as the very thing that makes it possible for human beings to continue to understand what-is in new and potentially more meaningful ways. (Thomson 2014: 3.1)

It is this inexhaustibility that makes art so key. The poiesis contains the struggle because, just like the onflow of life itself, the work of art is inexhaustible. It is pure presentation and cannot itself be re-presented. It will never be fully contained in any other set of symbols or rules or representations. The work of poiesis cannot be paraphrased.

An anecdote of the virtuoso John Cage comes to mind: after playing an original composition that lasts somewhere around eight or nine minutes, an audience member asks Cage what the piece "means." By way of reply, Cage sits back down and plays the piece again from start to finish. Beyond simply a call to reflect on beauty, the piece could be said to *mean* something apart from and in excess of any significations or representations offered as a paraphrasing or gloss. Cage's music is an Index of something, some Object, some thing maybe different for each audience member in a way,

but also recognized as something that Cage too experienced. It is as though the observer takes the piece of music not as Sign but as Interpretant; the observer feels interpolated into an ongoing process of meaning-making and the music does not work as a transparent Sign. Something is arrested for the viewer, who somehow senses that some struggle is not finished yet.

Heidegger's notion of *poiesis* is like the "incomplete sign" of Barthes that *brings into being* something new by presenting its own incompleteness and instability. The successful, worthwhile work of art is then an Index of this "eternal strife;" it has significance in what it *presents* to the senses more than in what is may be said to *represent*. As the saying goes, suited to the tastes of the speaker of course, country music says what it means, but rock-and-roll means what it cannot say.

### ***Representations Welcome Outside Art***

Heidegger positions himself explicitly against art as representational in two directions. He holds that art should not aim to represent objects in the world, whether "realistically" or not; and neither should art aim to represent the feelings or ideas of the artist. In either case the representation purports to contain that which is represented: as idea-representing-object or object-representing-idea. This is why *good* art cannot be taken as Sign alone. It does not regard an Object. Rather, *poiesis* embodies what we might call, following Barthes' chasing after the Index, an "incomplete Interpretant." *Poiesis* demonstrates an Interpretant in progress. It does not so much aim to elicit Interpretants in response in a chain of communication, but to instigate some kind of ontological contest or struggle. Entering the cathedral should give someone pause in its inexhaustible depths. The cathedral holds a charge that resists dissipation.

There is a two-fold flaw in seeing art as anything concerned with representations. "Of course, Heidegger does not deny that representations sometimes mediate our experience of the world," writes Thomson:

What he denies is that representations go 'all the way down,' that they plumb the depths of existence. Instead, representations presuppose a level of existence they

cannot explain. Heidegger's fundamental phenomenological critique of the modern theoretical picture is that it overlooks and then cannot recapture the more basic level of engaged existence, a practical coping with equipment in which no subject/object dichotomy has yet opened up because self and world remain integrally entwined and mutually determining. (Thomson 2014: 3.3)

On the one hand, representations of the Saussurean or Cartesian variety presuppose that such grounds exist to fully represent one thing in another; and on the other hand, they overlook the underlying connectivity that could hope to help make presentation and art meaningful. Heidegger explicitly reframes the Modern dualism in organic, nondualist terms. This critique of aestheticism can be equally directed at the cognitivism Clark criticizes and the objectivism Keane targets.

### **Theories of Worlding**

Katie Stewart (2011) figures worlding as the circulation of affects and attachments, motives and memories, tunings, tempos, and touches—the process of accruing space, atmosphere, that makes experiences of self and environment a *something* and something other than meaning-full. Echoing Karen Barad's "new materialism," Stewart defines a world as something "material yet abstract" (ibid: 445). Because the worlding happens in working, in living, the material products are but "traces" of the abstract verbing.

In later piece, Stewart (2012) describes time spent in a New England town as a movement through tactile compositions of bodies, objects, and environments that touch and weigh on the traveler as much as the native, but escape understanding within a single logic. These assemblages resist representation in terms of meaning and instead make sense only in part, in parts, on disparate yet simultaneous registers, registers of affect and sensation. And what they—the flags, porches, fountains, roads, shutters, colors—at one time *did* for the native they may not still *do*. In these ways, the very concrete environments built within these New England towns are themselves but traces of a *worlding* that may in the present exist intangibly, as much to the native as much as to the

visitor. Much of Stewart's work on such towns evokes worlds that seem not dead but no longer living (see 2007, 2011: 451).

### ***The Assemblage***

Drawing on the same strands of Friedrich Nietzsche as Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the "assemblage," now familiar to anthropologists (Marcus and Saka 2006) and scholars of the Humanities (Hayles 2006), draws from the same sources as Heidegger to figure a non-modern process of becoming. For Deleuze and Guattari, existence is assemblage all the way down, and the individual is literally but one figure among many potentially distilled from the greater ground: one assemblage maybe routinely and regularly figured, but an assemblage nonetheless, bound and tangled in desires, affect, motive, memory, pulse. They describe any living body as a "desiring machine" that comes into view less as a Subject, and more as a durable vector or bundle.

Underscoring the permeable boundaries within and among desiring bodies, Donna Haraway (2008) questions exactly whom and what she touches when she touches her dog, Ms. Cayenne Pepper. The question is at first mundane—the image of a middle-aged woman kissing her dog on the nose—but Haraway's description quickly evolves into an unfolding of molecules, a bleeding, a seepage from dog to master and back. There emerges a world shared by just those two, a world of microbes, tonsils, and tongues. The assemblage is not just "out there" in the world but within the individual body. On a larger scale, of course, the assemblage is "out there" worlding—the world of dog agility training.

I like the process and becoming inherent to Deleuze and Guattari's "assemblage," and I will put the image to use throughout, often tied to Latour's "bundle," which see vectors, drives, and attachments as prior to and constitutive of actors and subjects.

### **From *World* to *Ontology***

Heidegger defines ontology as "non-theoretical knowledge" of the world, a kind of learned but under-the-skin practical experience. Like Latour's "actor," which comes not prior to its bundles and attachments but arises from them, I view the individual as

ontology-in-progress, as ontologizing. The subject is the desiring machine, the vector that traces an experience of world.

Figured this way, ontologies cannot be shared insofar as they are the Index of the outer world and the individual clashing and mutually emerging. While similar beings—siblings, genders, classes—may have decidedly similar ontologies, this is only because both shared similar experiences, not because they share “information” among themselves. An ontology is, then, a durable mode of being that arises as a *thing* individuates from its background, a vector of movement that is itself the figuring of individual from ground. Hence, ontology is a feature of all animals, unlike *mind* or *self-consciousness*. It is the process of individuation that precedes self, a necessary but not sufficient cause of mind/self.

### ***Ontology vs. Semiotic Ideology***

Instead of finding the “hidden meaning” behind the signs of culture, Keane suggests that one of the roles of the anthropologist is to uncover and make sense of the “semiotic ideologies” that ground a community. He writes:

By *semiotic ideology* I mean basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world. It determines, for instance, what people will consider the role that intentions play in signification to be, what kinds of possible agent (humans only? Animals? Spirits?) exist, to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth. [...] A yam prestation that falls short of expectations, or a telephone call not returned, index malevolent human intentions, an individual’s character (but no specific intention), the disfavor of spirits, abstract social forces, one’s own fate, mere happenstance, or something else only with reference to a specific ideological context that makes these plausible and relevant inferences. (2003: 419, 422)

The work of the linguistic anthropologist now includes scientific understandings of the language group, their ontological beliefs, conversational practices, and material goods. The work of semiotic analysis is no longer detached from social analysis at all, and the two projects coincide in a study of the manifold meaningful activities of the group.

I entirely agree with Keane; however, I find “semiotic ideology” too narrow a term for my use in this research project. What I use to complement Keane’s concept is the weight of the assemblage, the body that holds these ideologies not as representations in the mind but as virtual parts of itself. The body works out an ontology as a “making do” or the like, less a system than a working muscle-memory of wins and losses. My use of ontology privileges the unconscious bodily interpretations and negotiations of reality in addition to any set of beliefs, relationships, or systems that Keane might otherwise be taken to mean.

In a way, questions of ontology are at the very heart of anthropology. Paraphrasing Clifford Geertz (1973), culture is exactly the lived process as well as the evidence/residue of the human interpretation of social and natural realities. Key to understanding Geertz’s seminal work, the task of the anthropologist is not the interpret our subjects’ culture, but to see how their culture is interpretive, how their culture is precisely the “trace” of their own active interpretation. We “look over their shoulder” to learn how they interpret.

### Chapter 3: What's in a Game?

This chapter theorizes the distinction between games and toys as germane to the study of *worlding* and virtual worlds, and even makes claims to broader implications as well. Much has been said about the distinction between *games* and *play*, and my own understanding is indebted to the distillations of Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003), Markus Montola (2012), and Jesper Juul (2001, 2005). However, as this dissertation focuses on forms of play that can exist outside structures of given meaning (see Huizinga [1938] 1971, Suits [1978] 2005), I frame my study of play around a distinction between *games* and *toys*. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, too easily are games theorized as systems and play as movement or activation *within* such systems. This formulation readies game studies for relevancy within discourses surrounding software and game programming, information sciences, organizational anthropology, UI design, and marketing; however, I will argue that such an approach precludes recognizing how playfulness—light or dark, shallow or deep—can function *through* games, even complex and rule-heavy games.

In contrast, I propose approaching games as open-ended toys that are played *through*, rather than closed-off systems that are played *within*, which I believe will help us better understand games in themselves and at the same time illuminate mechanisms of playfulness circulating as the social poetics of everyday life. The result is an image of games as focused and intensified instances of preexisting play, rather than systems or structures that host play. My goal is not to take a sociological stance about the content of games or an anthropological stance about how games operate in contemporary culture. On the contrary, I look at semiotic operations occurring within particular forms of gaming to see how different genres/forms afford new meanings to be keyed and new frames conjured with implications in ongoing social life. This study then analyzes the unique power of games to summon and sustain analog virtual worlds.

The work of Salen and Zimmerman (2003, 2005) is invaluable when studying games as formal systems, and I rely heavily on their insights in my own analyses of alternate reality games in Chapters 5 and 6 below. What elements of their paradigm I critique in the following reflect only their use of semiosis in characterizing “meaningful

play” (2005: 63), not their observations about systems design or implementation in general.

I first describe the games-as-system approach to “meaningful play” and work through various interpretations of play within that paradigm, demonstrating how each stumbles across the same pitfalls as structural linguistics and cognitivism, rendering any form of user-generated meaning impossible (Section I). I then introduce a different approach to play based on the work of Bernard Suits and John Searle (1995) that defines a game—even a video game—as a social institution that *conjured* through collective intentionality a context wherein new meanings can be donned, tested, and tried out (Section II). Building on the social poetics of John Searle and Erving Goffman (1959, 1974), I propose a higher standard for meaningful play and figure *toying* as a semiotic process that suspends the resolution of meaning and thereby destabilizing grounds. Toying both animates and agitates the ongoing *worlding* of everyday life, engaging playfulness as meaningful and generative activity (Section III). The chapter continues with a handful of case studies that look both quick and deep at various kinds of games and social institutions for insightful evidence of toying. My goal therein is to uncover what a strictly formalist or structuralist reading might omit (Section IV). I then conclude *What’s In a Game?* with a look towards the virtual worlds of my ethnographic case studies and a repackaging of virtual worlds suited to an anthropology of toying and social poetics (Section V).

## **I. HOW TO PLAY A GAME**

When *ludology* was emerging as a field in the 1990s, there was already afoot lively debate among scholars from various fields who saw games differently. That games were philosophically and culturally meaningful was well accepted; that they required academic attention was now taken for granted; that they were more than lists of rules was a growing opinion (Laurel 1991; Turkle 1995). As the field developed, what divided scholars was typically dependent on what fields of academics they belonged to.

Narratologists wanted to study games as narratives (Murray 1998, Jenkins 2003); sociologists considered how the content of games might factor into social behavior and how interactivity could better public education (Malone 1980, Gee 2003); economists and anthropologists studied games as fantasies, escapes, and little worlds (Fine 1983, Castronova 2001, Klastrup 2003, Mortensen 2004).

Camps were not hostile, and great work was produced; however, the nascent field was generating theories and approaches that were more complementary than truly commensurable. Of course, as things go, this could not last for long. Espen's Aarseth's seminal book, *Cybertext; Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), proposed that games needed to be studied explicitly *as games*, by which he meant formal systems characterized by interactivity but not entirely devoid of narrative elements. This text single-handedly founded ludology around two equally formalist poles: those who would privilege the analysis of interactive systems on one side and those who would study the scope of narrativity in games on the other. Scholars who would study the "soft" side of the debate (e.g. player or audience experience, cultural significance, economics of the industry, aesthetic import of games, etc.) were politely invited to continue studying games from their own respective disciplines. Within ten years a games-as-systems approach had all but marginalized narrativity in favor of "interactivity" and "navigation" to establish formal systems as the legitimate, proper subject of the discipline (see Aarseth 2001, Salen and Zimmerman 2003, Eskelinen 2004, Bogost 2009). These games-as-systems scholars theorize play as the interaction with or activation of a rule-driven system. According to this view, playing a game is in every way synonymous with navigating a website, where meaningful user experiences arise from a fluid and responsive exploration of a fixed structure. While I find this literature useful and compelling in how it figures spatial metaphors toward the study of games, I see limitations in how it figures what it is that is being explored.

## Games & Algorithms

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define a game as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (2003). First and foremost, what this definition does is divorce the game from its execution, i.e. it separates *games* from *play* as noun from verb. The system provides a challenge to the players, and quantifiably overcoming this challenge affords a meaningful experience. This “artificial conflict” need not be direct competition, and many systems afford cooperative play against objective hurdles, time limits, random obstacles, etc.

This is no doubt a pervasive and sensible understanding of games, hitting each of the big titles: Chess, *Monopoly*, football, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Halo*, and marbles. What this definition initially leaves out (all forms of role-playing, the dozens, tag, duck-duck-goose, etc.) typically do not make the cut because they forestall an outcome indefinitely or see qualitative evaluation as the outcome. Some of these modes of play can be granted the status of “game” if rules can be added to determine a “quantifiable outcome” (even if this is as “soft” as voting by audience applause or putting a time limit on the game). The idea of a “quantifiable outcome” is crucial to games-as-systems, because it galvanizes Symbolic value as the sole source of meaning in a game.

This divide between games as quantitative and play as qualitative has early roots, but the best modern example is Roger Caillois’ *Man, Play, and Games* (1961), which attempts to privilege play outside of games by figuring the latter as quantified or systematized forms of the former. It can be argued that Caillois felt Huizinga had focused too much on contest and games when theorizing play, inspiring the former to offer an account of play outside proper games. However, what results from Caillois’ account is an essentialist division between play and games that inadvertently figures the latter as organized, rational, sophisticated, or more mature evolutions of the former. In this light, that a games-as-systems approach leverages a reading of Caillois more than building on Huizinga ([1938] 1971) or Suits (1978) makes perfect sense.

Therefore, the current and commonsense use of “game” denotes a set of rules and markers that constitute a certain frame or activity for yielding an unpredictable,

quantifiable outcome. The privileging of *constitutive* rules over *regulative* rules—a historically traditional typology within scholarship of play and games (Searle 1995)—is important because only the former are world-independent. For example, there is no such thing as a *touchdown* outside the world of a football game. The rules of the game are what constitute the type *touchdown* and what work to guide meaningful iterations of token “touchdowns.” In games-as-systems language the rules of the game constitute the syntax and semantics of any action (what types exist and how they relate, i.e. their Symbolic *values*), and the playing of a game generates through contingent interactivity the quantifiable meaning (the comparative Symbolic value of the sum total of tokens activated within the system, e.g. a score). This figures the *touchdown* precisely in the same way Saussure figures his *signifieds*. The definition of the type only exists according to the system, giving the system priority.

Crucial to understanding this definition of games, what I have by now taken to calling the “games-as-systems” paradigm, is to recognize that a game must and only can exist as a fixed structure of algorithms that translate consistently input into output (see Manovich 2001: 222; Galloway 2006). This removes all points of contact between game and world, instantiating a *langue* with sole purchase on meaning. Following, to play a game is meaningful in one primary and one secondary way. Primarily, the game hinges on *Symbolic* meanings manifest in a system of algorithms that figure quantifiable outcomes. This meaning must be uncovered and learned as players interact with the game; play becomes an experience of the game-system (its various symbolic values and algorithmic relationships) through “free movement” within the game-world. Take for example a maze. A maze has a single quantifiable outcome: you eventually solve it—or not. This is the game as a system, and Salen and Zimmerman’s (2003) definition of play as “free movement within a more rigid structure” is perfectly suited to figuring a maze as game-as-system *par excellence*. Secondarily, playing the game may display more or less “evocative objects” that evoke meanings, attachments, and values for the player (see Sherry Turkle’s *Life on The Screen* in Ward 2007: 36n). While the latter is of course of interest, it is strictly outside the purview of ludology.

Unlike mazes, most games produce several symbolic values that can be seen to reach outside of the game, which becomes more a nuisance than a joy to the formalists who would see such entanglements as red herrings for the humanities scholars still banging on the door. Most professional sports, for example, produce dozens of quantifiable values within the fixed system of the game that come to have meaning outside it: win–loss records, league standings, statistics, awards, fines, etc. What any of these might mean outside the system of the game is inessential to the game itself. For example, monetary fines or sanctions levied at a player for unsportsmanlike conduct during play would not be considered part of the game itself but rather an instance of the “real world” dipping in to add its own meaning to some specific action made by a player. This sounds valid enough, and the reasonable observer may accept that fines and sanctions are more part of the “sports industry” than the “game.” However, that a baseball player’s batting average or a quarterback’s completion percentage is only meaningful *outside* the formal system of the game might seem less logical. Even the notion of durable *teams* that persist from game to game is decidedly outside a formalist study. That someone could offer a “meaningful” representation of baseball without acknowledging that teams exist might seem to miss a great deal. In either case, it becomes the task of the ludologist to bracket the game-as-system from these incidental anomalies.<sup>11</sup> My point is not to fault the ludologist for not taking *enough* into account but for *how* what it taken into account is decided.

### ***Oblique Play***

McKenzie Ward (2007) theorizes the contemporary world of ubiquitous computers and pervasive games in the West as “gamespace,” a mode of life wherein the individual’s constant exposure to and participation in gaming realizes the glaring dissimilarities between the objective algorithms of games and the putative algorithms of meritocratic capitalism. Using Walter Benjamin’s notion of allegory, Ward figures the force of “allegorithm” as that “gap between the intuitively knowable algorithm of the

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<sup>11</sup> I would argue that the invention of a “stat,” batting average, for example, is the very first step in Toying with a sport. We will discuss this in more detail in Section IV.

game and the passing, uneven, unfair semblance of an algorithm in the everyday life of gamespace” (ibid: 31). That individuals can come to see “real life” as an imperfect or unfair game is a cruel consequence of our virtual minds, but what Ward theorizes around without considering too closely is that, properly speaking, the game is always an incomplete overlay, an invasion.

A game does not exist in an Ideal, pure state before it is somehow cluttered with or mired by the actual world and all its untidy entailments; rather, the game must pull itself out of the world somehow, figure itself, make for itself a pocket, a vacuum, a hollow space. This *worlding* is always incomplete, and the best games—as poiesis—will in fact rely on their incompleteness. From mazes to sports, video games to parlor tricks, games are nested within ongoing social activity and sociality will always be happening *around* and *through* them as much as *within* them. Ward’s theory of gamespace will feature importantly in my figuring of analog virtual worlds in Section V, but for now it is worth noting that the ludologists’ insistence on studying games as world-independent systems of objective meaning only renders this “allegorithmic gap” wider. Such an insistence obfuscates the way all games—even, or especially, video games—can be played sideways, obliquely, against the grain. I will argue throughout this dissertation that, in spite of the predominance of video games in the literature, the games that typify our present moment most acutely are precisely those games that afford such sideways, oblique play.

### **Game as System of Signs**

To explore how games might be played sideways without denying their algorithmic nature (and thus studying them from the outside), we must first interrogate how the games-as-systems approach engages theories of the sign and symbolic meaning. I here collect two lengthy quotes to provide us sure footing as we work to unpack the implications of a games-as-systems theory of signs. In *The Rules of Play* (2003), Salen and Zimmerman characterize a game as a system of signs that constitutes a structure, as a

grammar that ultimately provides sufficient grounds for the production of meaningful play. They write:

Games can be characterized as a system of signs. The meaning of any sign (object, action, or condition) in a game arises from the context of the game itself—from a system of relations between signs.

[...] In language, for example, we refer to structure as *grammar*. The grammatical rules of a sentence create a structure that describes how words can and cannot be sequenced. We might refer to these rules as *invisible structure*, as we are not always aware that they are there. In games, this concept of grammar takes the form of game rules, which create a structure for the game, describing how all of the elements of the game interact with one another. Structure (in language or games) operates much like context, and participates in the meaning-making process. By ordering the elements of a system in very particular ways, structure works to create meaning. (2003: 61, 63)

Even before we see that “structure works to create meaning,” we are quite obviously on the trail of a signifier–signified relationship that can recognize only symbolic meaning. This is the very stuff of Saussure’s definition of *langue*, of linguistic *value*, and of world-independent *signifieds*. Each object, action, or state of affairs in the game is part of a system, and it is from modes of relation within this system that meaning arises. Although the authors explicitly base their use of signs on the semiotics of Peirce (2003: 65), their interpretation falls squarely within Saussure’s structural linguistics. In fact, the Interpretant of Peirce is glossed first as “interpretation” and later as the “context” that we see figured in the above quote as operating in parallel with the system itself.

Salen and Zimmerman’s definition of games as “systems of signs” would work just as easily with a board game as with a video game. We can, for example, imagine the plastic “hotel” token on a *Monopoly* board operating as a sign with fixed symbolic value within the rules of the game. Regardless of the appearance or substance of the little tokens, the “hotels” would mean the same thing in the algorithm of costs; the objects function only as placeholders for symbolic value and contain no other meaning in themselves. There is evidence enough for this in the dozens of versions of *Monopoly* that

have been published with absolutely no change to the rules, versions “skinned” in unique ways to replace the “hotels” with other representational objects of the same value.

In other words, the meaning of the signs/types in the game is not affected even when their representations change. The way signs participate differently on the two levels (as Symbols in the system and representations to the players) is a key distinction in a formalist paradigm. Salen and Zimmerman continue:

This concept of a sign representing something other than itself is critical to an understanding of games for several reasons. On one hand, games use signs to denote actions and outcome, two components of meaningful play. [...] On the other hand, games use signs to denote the elements of the game world. The universe of Mario, for example, is constructed of a system of signs representing magic coins, pipes, enemies, hidden platforms, and other elements of the game landscape. The signs that make up the game world collectively represent to the player—as sounds, interactions, images, and text. Although the signs certainly make reference to objects that exist in the real world, they gain their symbolic value or meaning from the relationship between signs within the game. (2003: 63, 64)

We can see in their introduction of game-worlds that the images on the screen function as signs to the players only as *means* to experience the system of “actions and outcomes” of meaningful play. Any aesthetic or representative qualities of the objects on the screen matter little. Whether the “magic coins” of *Super Mario Bros.* were coins or candy bars would have no affect on their meaning in the game. In fact, even if they were used to “buy” items in the game-world, their value would be solely a result of a structure in the game arbitrarily paralleling how coins work in the actual world, not by any actual relationship or connection between the coins on the screen and actual coins.

The system of symbolic values predefines the meaning of each entity and action in the game as Saussure’s *langue* defines the signified of any given word. The meanings qua value interact through artificial conflict to produce quantifiable outcomes. Signs let players know what is moving and mattering in the course of the game: walls *mean* barriers, pushing “A” *means* a jumping avatar, rolling a “6” *means* move six spaces, a flashing avatar *means* you are suffering Symbolic damage, “dying” three times *means* the

game ends, etc. Devoid of narrative and meaningful worlds, how do we define the meaning of sheer movement and interactivity?

### ***Meaningful Play***

Focusing solely on system-defined value, Salen and Zimmerman define “meaningful play” as a kind of interactivity or movement that occurs when “the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both *discernible* and *integrated* into the larger context of the game. Creating meaningful play is the goal of successful game design.” What becomes of key importance to the game’s designer is the player’s “emotional and psychological experience of inhabiting a well-designed system of play” (2003: 61). As the discussion goes, if the system is designed with meaningful actions, outcomes, and contexts, then the play will necessarily be meaningful. This is where it is easy to imagine games and websites being analyzed in overlapping terms, and it is no wonder that games-as-systems scholars take a great interest in User-Interface design.

That any value not operating within the grammar is inconsequential to understanding meaningful actions within the game is, of course, entirely valid. As a game designer myself, the production of “*discernible* and *integrated*” systems of value is what keeps me in business. Games should be consistent worlds of intelligible actions and reactions. However, this kind of play will never participate in social poetics unless values can be pulled legitimately outward *at the same time they are participating in the system*. Affording meaningful social interaction to occur around and through the system of the game might just be more crucial in determining the longevity of a title than the fluidity and consistency of the structure. As I exhorted earlier, we need a formal approach to play that takes social poetics as its foundation if we want to truly understand the many ways that play can be significant.

This call to take other forms of meaning into account beyond Symbolic value is not a breezy way to engage Peirce’s notions of the Icon and Index in a sociological or aesthetic study of games. I do not work to analyze the manifold Iconic and Indexical meanings of signs in the game, an approach that would be analogous to the “literary

criticism” or “reader response” angle. What *is* the difference between coins and candy bars? What does it mean that a mere plumber is saving a princess? Are goombas slaves or mercenaries? These are the questions asked by the sociologists and education scholars. Importantly, this approach does not challenge a games-as-systems paradigm but, rather, seeks to complement it. Such sociological approaches grant the game its systematic sovereignty and explore instead what the represented events and characters of the game might be said to signify in broader cultural spheres. In this approach, the meaning of the game is not produced by the players but inherent to the representations and events in the game-world (as reflections or reifications of meanings already existing in the broader culture), reducing games to meaning-laden objects in an even more sterile form than the games-as-systems scholars do. That games garner this kind of attention should be of no surprise; meaningful art draws criticism and conversation, which is a good thing.

It might behoove us to sketch a good example of “meaningful play” in Salen and Zimmerman’s terms before moving on. Free movement within a structure can elicit more than passive learning from the players and work with the representations of the game-world to engender what might be akin to an *ontologizing* of player-in-game. While all meaning in the game arises as the function of algorithms and symbolic values, actions and outcomes *within the representational domain of the game-world* can work on Indexical and Iconic grounds as well as Symbolic to offer a meaningful experience for the player. Any game-system must utilize the images of the game-world to communicate itself, which affords other grounds of meaning insofar as an environment of virtual objects is being represented and explored as such. For instance, several games utilize a simple “color swap” to represent a scale of difficulty for enemies, wherein the same 3-D model is simply colored differently to represent to the player a different “kind” or “level” of enemy. Let us imagine that all blue goblins deal only minimal damage and come with only a small number of hit points, while green goblins offer a slightly more substantial challenge, and red goblins provide formidable enemies indeed. If this Blue–Green–Red “schema” is similar for all monsters in the game-world, it turns the colors themselves—from the perspective of the learning, exploring player—into Indexical signs. What is

Symbolic in the grammar is rendered Indexical in the virtual presentation of the game-world, and the player responds by intuitively adopting an ontology that figures the game-world *as though it were real*. This is meaningful and fulfilling, and the experience of *worlding* is pleasurable in games as it is in everyday life. What I hope to add to this notion of meaningful play is a chance not only of worlding but *poiesis*, where players can instrumentalize the game in whole or in part to serve ongoing purposes and generate new meanings, new connections, new institutions.

### **Narrative Meaning**

From the narrativist approach, meaning emerges as the experiential confluence of contingent performance and narrative progress. They dovetail formal narratology with the formal game-as-system, and so the overall meaning of a game arises from two vectors converging in the moment of play. These two vectors of meaning pop up all over ludology in a variety of forms: performance of mastery vs. performance of belief, contingency vs. narrativity, rules vs. representations, etc. It takes both, argue the narrativists, to fully understand the meaning of play.

Importantly, both of these vectors can be typified by the gaming concept of “flow” (for best use see McGonigal 2011: 40–43). On the one side, there is performative flow, the cyberspace of system-inhabitation where players are “in the zone” and performing mastery. This is the final level of *Tetris* when the pieces are moving at an incredible rate without a mistake from the player, the firefight of *Halo* wherein Master Chief shreds three Covenant Hunters with the appearance of ease, the seventh inning of strike-outs as Justin Verlander takes the Tigers on yet another early-season victory. This is when the player has true fluency in the world/system of the game. On the other side, there is the narrative meaning that arises as events flow together and form in the minds of the players a development or progression, where jumbled events fit together to form a seamless and meaningful story. This is the player inhaling deeply when she learns at the end of *Knights of The Old Republic* that she was Revan all along, a narrative climax heard around the world; the high fives that come when the game-master tips over the Red

Dragon miniature on the table to signify that the heroes have slain the beast, recovered the hoard, rescued the wayward prince, and restored safety to the countryside.

These are emotionally charged experiences of meaning and make for fulfilling and rewarding gameplay. However, whether from the grammar or the narrative, meaning is fixed within the formal elements of the system and the story. Meaning can be experienced, but it cannot be made. In other words, both approaches make presumptions about the nature of meaningful play that preclude any true *poiesis*. There can be masterful and artistic performances, but no new meanings; each player will by and large experience the same meaning from any given game-as-system, which locates the meaning *in* the game somehow. The player has no input, makes no *presentation*. In the strictly formalist approach, the code holds all meaning; in the narrativist approach the code and player together produce meaning, but the player largely acts as passive agent or host. The player turns the page of the book, wondering what will occur next but not necessarily in control of it.

What if there are more than two vectors of meaning? What if there could be as many in the game as there are in life (or, at least as many as the game will allow)? What if everyday vectors from outside could be seen to pass *through* the game? Performative meaning, personal, narrative, competitive, nostalgic, sexual, cooperative...

## **II. GAMES AS LUSORY MEANS**

What we need is a theory of games that does not rest on the representational dualism of symbolic value alone. Importing our lesson from the domain of language, I hold that we cannot define a game solely by the grammar it obtains and at the same time consider it meaningfully connected to the world. Just as Saussure's linguistics aimed to study all of language but only included enough dimensions to study Symbolic meaning, so too the formalist vein of ludology aims to study games but only includes enough dimensions to study meaning as activation. Neither approach affords *poiesis*.

This is to say nothing bad of systems, rules, or symbolic meaning. A consistent and integrated system of rules can be an invaluable part of social poetics, so long as the assembled algorithms and virtual objects of the system can be seen to touch the actual world and operate within the ongoing social, cognitive, and bodily meaning-making processes of the players. Can the Signs that already participate in the game-system and the game-world be made to participate in the actual world as well? Can people use signs and systems that the game affords to make their own meanings, to play with meaning, to produce new ways of meaning? To answer—to even *ask* these questions, we would need to step away from Saussure and games-as-systems.

In this new approach, a game is poetically meaningful insofar as it can be reached into and out from, insofar as it can be *toyed* with. This requires us to move beyond the dualist paradigm of Saussure, where rules and objects have predefined meanings, and into the trenchant paradigm of Peirce, where each point of articulation within the system of the game is a semiotic process. What Peirce brings to the study of semiotics and symbolic meaning is not just a third or an *additional* dimension, but a way to *multiply* dimensions, which allows signs to keep up with and function within the actual world of infinite affordances and open-ended meanings. This brings the system of the game into the material world and straddles the divide between “formal analysis” and “audience response” put forth by Aarseth (1997, 2001). If we do not define meaning as the relational values contained in the grammatical/algorithmic structure of the game, where does meaning come from? How do we define the game outside grammar, system, structure?

### **Games As Voluntary Obstacles**

In a seminal work of both philosophy and ludology, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, Bernard Suits famously defies Wittgenstein’s insistence that there is no conceptual definition of a game with the equally brilliant and elegant: “A game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (Suits [1978] 2005: 54). He goes on to say that:

to play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs (prelusory goal), using only means permitted by rules (lusory means), where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means (constitutive rules), and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity (lusory attitude). (2005: 54)

In this view, a game functions as “lusory means” that connect a “lusory goal” with a “prelusory goal” through a shift in grounds toward a “lusory attitude.” The game itself is a *means*, the pivot of a semiotic process whereby the rule-oriented activity is instrumentalized to serve a purpose that only arises when a playful attitude is donned. This entails the *freedom, tension, and presentation* of Huizinga in terms that make room for the rules, systems, and quantifiable outcomes of contemporary ludologists. This definition of the game, as an outward-facing system of rules, gets outside grammatical thinking and situates each and every game, however complex, within social activity. I will trace through Suits’ included terms in reverse order.

The lusory attitude is precisely play in the sense of Huizinga. It is freely donned as an attitude and entails the full force of agency, an activity that takes place through contest and presentation. What is important here is that the lusory attitude manifests new grounds of meaning; a new context or world must be tentatively donned to reach the prelusory goal, drawing a “magic circle” that must be performed to be maintained. The constitutive rules entail the entirety of the game-system and will feature for us in John Searle’s (1995) terms of “Let X count as Y in Context C.” From Tag to Chess, Pinball to *Call of Duty*, the entire algorithmic structure of any game counts here as “constitutive rules” that act to make the overarching social play harder. The lusory means is the game as frame, the game as an understood activity apart from its constitutive rules. A lusory means may entail *regulative* rules that situate the game in the world or act as the entirety of the game itself. This is the realm of Spin-the-Bottle, where the rules exist as “If X, then Y” and become a game prior to Symbolic systems or grammars that would be understood as constitutive. In a way, the constitutive rules make the donned lusory *game*

harder, while regulative rules make prelusory *play* harder by framing the activity as “a game” in the first place.

We must introduce Suits’ “lusory goals” here as those means entailed by the constitutive rules that direct meaningful action within the game-world. For example, scoring touchdowns and earning points are lusory goals in football, goals established by the constitutive rules of the game that allow the player to meet the prelusory goal of exercising muscles, enjoying contest, and winning the game. Following, the prelusory goals reflect the initial impulse or desire that inspired the lusory attitude to begin with. Scholars will debate how Symbolic a prelusory goal can be (see Kolers 2015). Is the prelusory goal of chess, for example, to win the game, or is that a lusory goal? Is it so banal? Or, as Kolers suggests, is the prelusory goal to arrange our tokens into a checkmate in my favor, to create a “state of affairs” in the actual world that “counts as” or is equivalent to the lusory goal of winning the game?

I think Kolers takes the game too seriously when he defines checkmate as a prelusory goal but winning lusory. I would resolve this by suggesting that the broadest prelusory goal of straight chess is to *have won* the game, which is what drives the playing of the game towards the lusory goal of *winning* the game. I believe this definition of the prelusory goal figures properly moving the tokens towards checkmate as escalating lusory goals that point towards and literally converge in the moment when the lusory goal of winning the game matches the prelusory goal of having won. Of course, moving the tokens towards the lusory goal may or may not represent smaller prelusory goals along the way (practicing a new strategy, getting through the game without losing so many tokens, show off my new gambit, etc.). These multiple prelusory goals can permeate each moment of the game, drawing value from the actions and outcomes of the game up into the ongoing social world. Both worlds continue on in virtual space charged, or doubled by the lusory attitude of play.

Outside having won the game, prelusory goals abound. For Walter Benjamin, the prelusory goal of a game could be a cover for the childish desire to jump and kick and pull: “A child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wants to play with

sand, and so he turns into a baker; he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or a policeman” (2005: 115). For example, the prelusory goal of *Twister* is to touch and climb on other people in a socially acceptable way. Behind this alibi, the lusory goal of winning is pure pretense. For Johan Huizinga the prelusory goal could be nothing more than the pleasure of donning the lusory attitude, but it could also include a drive toward poiesis, toward creation. For Erving Goffman, whom we will discuss in more detail below, a prelusory goal might be the keying of activity towards socially meaningful outcomes. For instance, Goffman might figure Spin-the-Bottle as aimed not only towards the pleasure of kissing but also towards demonstrating sexual prowess and moving “in line” with a performance of self. For John Searle, the prelusory goal could be to collectivize and found social institutions. He might see the prelusory goal of “gamifying” a classroom project as not only motivating to students but also generative of new ways to understand students, public education, and the role of teachers. I would take all of these as equally and simultaneously important.

### **Games as Social Institutions**

John Searle offers the most systematic discussion of games that demonstrates the spirit of Bernard Suits. Searle defines a game as one kind of social institution among many that take the form “Let X count as Y in Context C” (1995: 28). Importantly, his “Context” is not the grammar of rules or pre-existing institutions of society, but the phenomenological meaning that emerges through collective activity. That this “Context” is emergent from the translation of X into Y is absolutely key to understanding Searle’s realism within his philosophy of social construction. The system does not constitute the rules, but the rules constitute the system. To count X as Y is then to establish a Context C, to shift into a frame where objects not only mean different things but *mean things differently*. Searle goes to lengths to maintain that these institutions are not grammars or structures that dictate behavior or manifest as force. Institutions at their very root are donned frames of meaning with no weight of their own. He says:

What we think of as social objects, such as governments, money, and universities, are in fact just placeholders for patterns of activities. I hope it is clear that the whole operation of agentive functions and collective intentionality is a matter of ongoing activities and the creation of the possibility of more ongoing activities. (Searle 1995: 57).

These structures may very well be rigid products of *worlding*, old meanings that resist change after having accrued both weight and mass for centuries, but they remain only patterns. Recognizing social structures as patterns of ongoing collective activity allows for the existence of certain pivot-points, toe-holds, fulcrums, upon which new meaning might yet be made. Each performance, each instantiation of the rule, each execution provides a moment where the institution might fail. Any such moment affords the intervention of failure, the *clash* of Peirce or *earth* of Heidegger, where meaningful systems fail to roll on unquestioned and at-hand. This is in essence the argument Judith Butler (1993) makes about the subversive power of drag performance. That gender can still be toyed with despite the weight of the system shows that institutions do not fix rules so much as discipline patterns.

This insistence on the tentative ground of social institutions needs to be carried over to our discussion of games. A games-as-systems approach can easily figure Searle as positing “Contexts” that subsequently demand translations of X to Y. While this reversal of course does happen once patterns are set, it is a consequence not a cause. Even within a project that situates games within ongoing social play, ludologist Markus Montola writes that:

Even though Searle (1969; 1995) does not discuss games as being surrounded by a boundary or requiring a particular spatial configuration, Searle’s idea of constitutive rules nails down the idea of the magic circle as a transformative boundary that produces endogenous meaning. It was mentioned above that Searle’s constitutive rules are of the form “X counts as Y in context C”. In the context of games, it can be expressed as follows: “X has the endogenous meaning Y in the context of the magic circle”. The original X does not vanish in context C, and thus everything in the magic circle carries one additional layer of meaning – termed endogenous meaning. Of course, players usually adhere to the rules of irrelevance and disregard X, focusing on Y instead. (Montola 2012: 53)

Citing Searle's own pragmatism, we can argue that presuming or correcting for an artificial boundary is not necessary. The "Context C" does not require nor necessarily entail a fixed structure or system and can instead be an intersubjective frame or horizon that is negotiated and enacted at every moment. I would argue that Searle intentionally leaves the game open and outward-facing to the greater social environment and ever-shifting contexts. Remember, Searle is talking about social institutions and using games as one example; social institutions have no such clearly marked boundary either. As I cited in Chapter 1, Searle theorizes collective intentionality as a "biologically primitive phenomenon that cannot be reduced to or eliminated in favor of something else. Every attempt at reducing 'We intentionality' to 'I intentionality' that I have seen is subject to counterexamples" (Searle 1995: 24).

As an illustrative example, imagine that I come upon a street vendor in München while fresh out of Euros. I rummage through my satchel and subsequently offer the man a five-dollar bill for the kebab. The "ugly American" *faux pas* aside, my gesture is a flirtation, a toying, a presentation of X as *maybe* Y. The vendor himself, as my would-be partner in poiesis, has the power to confirm a new "Context C"—or not. This may be seen as the transformation of a pre-existing frame or the establishment of a new one. Either way, I ask him to let X count as Y and await his response. This is play insofar as it is presentational and tense; this is *worlding* insofar as we are rolling intelligible notions of currency into new futures; this is flirting... This is everyday life.

Figured this way, Searle's "collective intentionality" stands as one of the most basic "lusory means" of available to humans, our ability to establish and mutually inhabit meaningful contexts (which seems convincingly close to Goffman's frame). If the vendor accepts my offering, he "confirms" a frame/context/game, he goes along with the *world* I presented, bringing the lusory goal of my presentation in line with the prelusory goal of our mutual desire to resolve our incommensurable currencies. Even if the acceptance is begrudging, the vendor interprets X as Y and thus confirms C, if only for a moment. There is no appeal to a larger system or structure needed; all that is relied upon is shared

intentionality, which emerges quite naturally among individuals without requiring formal rules or systems at all.

Bernard Suits' "voluntary obstacles" fitted with the "Let X count as Y in Context C" of John Searle provides a definition of games that not only allows poiesis, but also in a way requires the slimmest degree of it. Play works to not only redefine signs but also to conjure new frames, new contexts, new structures. Each interaction risks failure, which is precisely where the precarity of ritual and the contingency of sports arise. In poetic play, signs and objects resist fixing on a single meaning and never fully merge with the systems that are produced. Figuring how signs and objects do this will draw us into the semiotics of C.S. Peirce again.

### III. HOW TO PLAY WITH A TOY

Paul Kockelman posits an *instrument* as "a semiotic process whose sign is an artificed entity, whose object is a function, and whose key interpretant is an action that wields that entity (so far as it serves a function)" (2006: 82). If *function* is a Second (the actual movement/activity of something) and *purpose* a Third (the value/meaning of that action according to some invested perspective), I would argue that *affordance* fits nicely as a First.<sup>12</sup> Following Kockelman's definition of the instrument as an artifact of *function* in a Peircean sense, I will define the toy as an artifact of *affordance*.

Most tools are designed with a particular function in mind, with the best tools hitting several purposes by means of this central function. For example, a crowbar has a particular affordance (some feature of its shape) that lends itself readily to a particular function (redirecting force to wedge apart two surfaces/objects), which agents can use toward particular purposes (separating nailed boards of wood, opening a stuck window, lifting a metal grate, etc.). Of course, to the agent using the tool, the purpose, function,

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<sup>12</sup> Each of these terms entails the agent's perspective and thus a full Triad, which is to say *purpose* comes as the Third of a Third, *function* the Third of a Second, and *affordance* the Third of a First. A First in itself could be better labeled a *quality*, and Second in itself could be better seen as *action* or *movement* devoid of meaning.

and affordance are often regarded as a single thing, a single tool ready-to-hand. As Heidegger reminds us, the tool ready-to-hand acts inconspicuously within the realm of purpose and meaning. This issue of use or process reminds us that Kockelman is careful to describe the instrument as a “semiotic process” not merely a Sign or artifact.

As a special kind of instrumentation, toying is a semiotic process wherein some artifact (Sign) elicits an activity (Interpretant) that evinces the establishment of some new context (Object). In simpler terms, the toy is an object primarily of *affordance* insofar as it comes alive by means of a feature or quality that is used to reframe or rekey the understood or given meaning of the object. This renders a toy as an object kept at all times present-at-hand in Heideggerean terms, though I would argue toying embodies a mood unlike Heidegger’s scientific or theoretical mood. What acts as the pivot of the Interpretant and the chain of following Interpretants is the virtual Object or collectively negotiated ground *presented* in the act of play, the new frame or context being conjured. Each Interpretant defers foreclosing on final meaning, leaving the Object tentative and teased. The charged space that arises as a result of this toying then becomes the Object, as each action and reaction self-consciously form, touch, describe, and conjure the intersubjective understanding of the space/moment.

Once the new context/ground is charged sufficiently, multiple objects can be enlisted, each with an affordance that works to continue the presentation of the new ground, the new order of things, the new world—or not. Properly, then, there is no *toy* only the *toying*. In essence, poiesis is then “toying” as a verb, to treat something as a toy, to locate affordances in things present-at-hand and play on them to the purpose of shifting or destabilizing grounds.

### **Not All Toys are Equal**

Of course, I am defining a particular use of the term *toy*. Not all store-bought toys function so poetically. What I am characterizing here does not just concern playing with familiar toys but those moments of broader poiesis, the moments of *thing-becoming-toy*.

That popular store-bought toys do not always elicit this poiesis may go without saying. As Roland Barthes offers in his *Mythologies*:

All of the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own. [...] The fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen, and Vespas. [...] These toys die in fact very quickly, and once dead, they have no posthumous life for the child. (1972: 53-55)

It would be unduly cruel to point his criticism at video games when dolls and board games have been doing the same sterile framing for centuries. But in contrast to these terminally ill toys, Barthes offers simple building blocks, which we might take as *things-becoming-toys* in precisely the way I discussed above:

Invented forms are very rare: a few sets of blocks, which appeal to the spirit of do-it-yourself, are the only ones which offer dynamic forms. As for the others, French toys *always mean something*, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life. [...] The merest set of blocks, provided it is not too refined, implies a very different learning of the world: then, the child does not in any way create meaningful objects, it matters little to him whether they have an adult name; the actions he performs are not those of a user but those of a demiurge. He creates forms which walk, which roll, he creates life, not property: objects now act by themselves, they are no longer an inert and complicated material in the palm of his hand. But such toys are rather rare: French toys are usually based on imitation, they are meant to produce children who are users, not creators. (Ibid: 53-54)

These blocks offer such affordances that meaning can remain unfixed, alive, different in each moment. It is my argument herein that while some toys can be as dead as Barthes laments, most proper “games” are entirely without hope. In fact, playing a heavily Symbolic game “straight,” willingly granting authority to such a system-stuck pattern of activity, would make lively poiesis largely impossible. This “do-it-yourself” framing is of

crucial importance, and any toy engages “do-it-yourself” meaning, “do-it-yourself” sociality.

As soon as the toy settles on an understood symbolic value (i.e. moves from present-at-hand to ready-to-hand), it dies. It becomes an instrument and loses its open qualities, its chimaeric force. A toy is always conspicuous insofar as it must maintain its prelusory affordances to best navigate the lusory world. The meaning of the artifact itself must remain unfixed, continually re-interpreted through use as new affordances are found. The ball is many things; the scarf is at once sash, then noose, then mask. The presentation can topple as easily as it begins, and the ongoing semiotic play becomes the recursive exploration of the actual environment to multiply affordances. This exploration of the environment as present-at-hand can lead to new ontologies even inadvertently, like an ontological “guess and check” method, or like stochastic splatters of play that might yield results unintended.

This mode of play is neither the scientific mood of Heidegger, nor an emotional or aesthetic mood. I think the idea of Suits’ “lusory attitude” must be retained here as a mood in the Heideggerean sense. It is the desire to ontologize, to figure the affordances of an object according to new schemas, new ideas; and if toying is very much a verb, we need not restrain ourselves to actual toys to toy with.

### **Toying & Social Poetics**

The toy is always only material, ontic; it is pushed and shoved to mark the world and imply virtual objects. Recalling our treatment of grounds and ideologies in Chapter 2, I figure prolonged toying as something like the role-playing of a shifted/skewed ontology, which acts to project the obverse, equivalent world. Successful and sustained toying manifests a kind of phantom limb that expands the actual world with a virtual presence that is felt as material but absent. Lev Vygotsky describes how play creates “a zone of proximal development” around the playing child. He writes, “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (1980). There is this sense that play creates a zone or

pocket that new meanings and new *worlding* will eventually inhabit, once the world catches up to the tense performance.

The proliferation of these virtual objects can succeed in sustaining a virtual world—or not. I will discuss virtual worlds in more detail in the concluding section of this chapter, but here I mark how virtual objects are created much like “social facts” to have weight-without-presence in the material world. The virtual object created through toying becomes a “hard fact [that] forms material for the exercise of my will” (Peirce, CP 1.358).

Toys do not respect games-as-systems insofar as toys bend rules, play with types, and conjure new frames. If we view games as systems, play can only be made meaningful when executed faithfully, properly. However, there are games that welcome such toying and feature systems of constitutive rules that face outward as a way to incorporate and invite toying. These are the games that interest me, and the ethnographic case studies of this dissertation will focus on three genres that present almost unbridled opportunities for toying.

In fact, when I look at games-as-systems, I am immediately transfigured into Roland Barthes’ child, who, “faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects,” can identify himself only as “owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy” (1972: 55). What toys allow for new worlds? For new frames of meaning and new contexts heretofore unheard of? What kinds of new ontologies can be donned to project *this* or *that* world into being?

By way of example, the act of producing new grounds on the fly is the core mechanic of a very popular game, *Cards Against Humanity*. The game features two decks of cards that both contain cards featuring dirty or adult phrases and/or objects. Ostensibly, the black cards offer a kind of “type,” and the white cards “tokens;” however, this typology does not always hold during play. Similar to the G-rated title it derives from, *Cards Against Humanity* asks players to pair two otherwise unrelated cards

together to produce the most playful result (a Peircean Triad) possible. The *idea*<sup>13</sup> of the relationship is entirely up to the players to toy with, though dirty and humorous responses seem to dominate. No card has any predefined meaning despite the words printed on its surface because each pairing will reframe both cards into a unit of larger meaning. The cards offer pure affordances. On player draws a black card, and each remaining player uses one of the white cards in her hand to present a Triad in the Peircean sense, two objects connected by a *means*. Whoever drew the black card then anonymously selects the “best” pairing on whatever grounds she decides in the moment. One turn she can choose the silliest, one turn the dirtiest, one turn the pair that reminds her of childhood; and, of course, the *idea* she sees in the pair might not be the same *idea* that the player intended at all. Hand after hand, each game begins to take its own character as patterns emerge among and between players.

*Cards Against Humanity* was designed for new meanings, new ideas, new connections. Inevitably, certain cards will develop Symbolic meaning over months of continued play within groups (for example, that *one* white card that wins every time it is played no matter what), and this player-driven *worlding* is the substance of social poetics. This Symbolic meaning is now a “social fact” produced by the institution of the game that can be played *with* and *against* as players vie to win.

#### IV. TOYING THROUGH GAMES

According to a games-as-systems approach, the Signs within a game represent in two directions: the Symbolic system that provides predefined value for each Sign, and the Symbolic/Iconic representation of an environment that players can move within and explore (Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 65). Importantly, neither of these directions allow for immediate poetics insofar as the meanings of each and every thing in the game are fixed. For instance, you cannot immediately change the Symbolic value of the Fire

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<sup>13</sup> I use “Ground” to denote one of Peirce’s three modalities of Sign–Object relations (Symbol, Index, or Icon), and “idea” to denote the ad hoc, specific ground or pivot figured in the moment of any given semiotic process, which likely participates in all of these to some extent.

Flower in *Super Mario Bros.* on the one hand, and neither could you alter its appearance or representational weight in the game-world on the other.

However, we can *toy* with it: a group of players may adopt a lusory attitude and approach the otherwise fixed video game playfully—i.e. poetically, toyingly—and, say, develop a drinking game around the Symbolic algorithms at work in the game-system. One simple *regulative* rule: Whenever a Fire Flower shows up on the screen, everyone take a shot. This establishes a new institution entirely, a whole new game (broader lusory means) that permeates and surrounds the first game.

This single rule adds outward-facing value to the Flower. This figures the video game as a toy, taking hitherto unregarded affordances within the game to have immediate and unintended meanings outside the fixed system of the game. We have made that game into *something else*; or, rather, we have dismantled the game as a world-independent system and interpolated an element from it into the actual world as *something else*. Other elements can be toyed with as well. What happens each time a warp pipe is used? Swap drinks with the person next to you? Does everyone drink or only the person holding the controller? In developing a drinking game around *Super Mario Bros.* we have now keyed/conjured/presented a new frame. To toy with the game is to toy with the meaning of the activity as a whole. We are no longer playing *SMB*; we are chopping up *SMB* and using it piece-meal to play *Super Drunk Brothers*, or whatever we might later come to call this new game/frame/activity. This is a larger frame that plays *with* the video game not *within* it. We have troubled and agitated the grounds that the system intended with your tentative meanings.

We have done nothing to change the gameplay of *Super Mario Bros.*, but we must recognize that we have, in effect, made *drinking* harder. We adjusted the prelusory goals of the game, broadened the lusory means, and so we cannot rightly say we are still playing *Super Mario Bros.* Any change in the lusory means engenders a new “frame” for Goffman, a new collectively intentional activity for Searle.

### **Frame as Lusory Means**

Erving Goffman introduced his notion of the “frame” as an answer to the phenomenological question “What is *it* that is going on here?” (1974: 9, italics in original). The frame is precisely the “*it*” that is at hand, the shared awareness that a loose model exists for the kind of activity that is occurring, the intersubjective awareness of a “thing” or “situation” that is afoot. It seems to me that a group of friends who are all engaged with a game would necessarily be on the same page; they would all know what *thing* is happening, what situation is afoot. Goffman writes:

My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment, this often involving a few other particular individuals and not necessarily restricted to the mutually monitoring arena of face-to-face gathering. I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: “What is it going on here?” Whether asked explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, the question is put and the answer to it is presumed by the way the individuals then proceed to get on with affairs at hand. (ibid: 8)

The “We are playing a game” answer seems to be the central frame—and maybe the only frame—that needs referencing. It encompasses the whole of the lusory means being adopted and draws in any and all prelusory goals carried by the players. For Goffman, who was explicitly following closely to Gregory Bateson’s (1972) use of the term, the frame is phenomenological before it is analytical. Frames do not need to be multiplied to account for different layers of interaction, different languages, or even processes of mediation or representation. Rather, the frame refers to what the consensus among the participants holds is going on in the moment. He warns:

I make no claim whatsoever to be talking about the core matters of sociology—social organization and social structure. Those matters have been and can continue to be quite nicely studied without reference to frame at all. I am not addressing the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives. (Goffman 1974: 13)

When we change the value of the Fire Flower in *Super Mario Bros.*, we have not changed the actual structure of the game at all. Rather, we have expanded the frame to include drinking *through* the video game. While using frame analysis to approach any of the gaming genres at the core of this dissertation, I am explicitly talking about the “structure of experience” not the game-as-system, the lusory means not the constitutive rules.

Frames are the “principles of organization which govern events” and “our subjective involvement in them” (ibid: 10). Everyday “frames” can be taken up and dropped in quick succession as needed, while “primary frameworks” (race, class, gender, occupational prestige, competitive capitalism, election cycles, etc.) might be best understood as constitutive of ontologies in the proper sense: an individual’s subjective, shared—and in many ways objectively durable—conceptualizations of the nature of reality and the purposeful activities of those around her. For the most part, I am concerned here with the smaller “frames,” the local situation of “What is *it* that is going on here?” that explains exactly what game is being played, what means are being deployed to reach the prelusory goals.

What, then, would a true frame analysis of gaming look like in a more strict sense? Perhaps the most illustrative example of how Goffman might tackle gaming himself would be his extensive treatment of the theater, which he considers a special case for exploring frame analysis:

Because the language of the theater has become deeply embedded in the sociology from which this study derives, there is value in attempting from the start to address the matter of the stage. There is value, too, because all kinds of embarrassments are to be found. All the world *is* like a stage, we *do* strut and fret our hour on it, and that is all the time we have. But what’s the stage like, and what are those figures that people it? (1974: 124)

And has not, by now, the language of the game become likewise deeply embedded in our current sociology? One could imagine that, were Goffman writing his book today, 40 years later, he might use something like video games or reality television as the emblematic example. While he delineates at least two “laminations” in place and four

“roles” that participants must play within the theatrical frame, it is still a single frame, a single activity.

The constitutive rules and fabricated objects work together to form an activity broader than whatever systems are involved. In this way, every game is bigger than its system, it embodies an excess beyond its grammar that incorporates more than “free movement” within that structure. Even a formal study of games must take this phenomenological frame into consideration.

### ***Toying Without Toys***

This idea of a “drinking game” is then a portable kind of frame that can be taken to other systems, overlain on other grammars with similar affordances. In this vein, Goffman introduces the idea of the *key*, which he defines as “the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying” (1974: 44). I see this process of keying as similar to toying, though much broader and not necessarily pregnant in the same way with the virtual.

Any novel, television series, game, play, or radio drama demonstrates the “keying” of some actual activities as fiction, as some form of make-believe. Just as film producers have a complex industry that helps them key by means of “movie magic” certain actual events into the stuff of fantasy and action-adventure, the gamer can bring her own familiar key to everyday life. For example, Spin-the-Bottle emerges as the result of a very simple keying mechanism: spin something with a recognizable “end” to see whom it points out, and then kiss that person. This transforms the primary meaning of the bottle from a container of soda pop into a diving rod of sorts, but the same regulative rule could be used to key/toy any object into such a device.

I imagine we could see a key as pattern of toying pointed toward some typical prelusory goal. To key is to present something as something else and in so doing conjure a new frame, though this might not always function as poetically as the strict toying we

characterized above. In this way, Goffman opens up toying well beyond a reliance on physical objects, and his keying incorporates gesture, objects, ideas, and actions to riff on the imaginary affordances of all kinds of abstract objects. The semiotic process can include any kind of Sign.

This allows Goffman to dovetail to Peirce so nicely: there is no *essential* difference between how an object, a word, a color, an idea, or an action operates to produce meaningful activity. The difference is purely operational, mechanical. No dualism necessary. If the activity or object is not taken as *something else*, then it is precisely *not* a Sign for Peirce nor a keying for Goffman. In both paradigms, the anthropologist must pay close attention to the mechanisms through which this *thing* presents as something *else*. Any key or the semiotic process could reach the level of toying when it retains its charge, its incompleteness, whenever it pivots on a unique *idea*.

### **Sports & Keying**

As I foreshadowed earlier, the creation of player statistics and league standings for any given sports industry creates a “frame” that surrounds the individual games. Symbolic values in the game-system are ported outward with new meanings added to or eliding their in-game value. So much of professional athletics in the United States is decidedly unrelated to the formal system of the game, with the rules of the game changing each year sometimes without notice. Even the existence of durable teams of regular players toys with the game as a whole and connects it to the actual world in a meaningful way, which is to say nothing of stats, records, leagues, MVPs, jersey numbers, salary caps, etc.

This process of what was once toying has developed a rather conventional feel now, more like a key, and the cultural significance of the major sporting leagues in the United States could hardly be overstated. While the industry of sports news may be likened to the field of literary criticism in its role of evaluation and translation, the sports institutions and franchises themselves are *formally* constituted by larger systems that permeate and enlarge the Symbolic values of any given action in any given individual

game. Meanings from the league regularly eclipse those of the games themselves, making a formalist analysis of the game-as-system itself absolutely uninteresting. Does this mean the ludologist must study the league as whole to fully uncover the “meaningful play” this wider structure provides? I would argue they might do better to stop searching for closed systems and instead focus on the ongoing semiotic processes themselves. For example, when fans watch a game knowing that Tom Brady might break a record for yards thrown, each play gains weigh more Symbolic value from outside the system than from within.

Maybe the most recent example of toying with a game that may even overlap with Salen and Zimmerman’s “meaningful play” is the season-long management of the Oakland Athletics in 2002 according to sabermetrics that privileged lesser-known statistics such as *on-base* and *slugging percentages*, a toying portrayed nicely in the film *Moneyball* (Miller 2011). The fact that such statistics emerge from the formal rules of the play does not account for their being seen as *affordances* and quantified by analysts, nor for the toying that Billy Beane and Peter Brand undertook in managing the team, which entailed interpreting each potential player according to an entirely nontraditional metric they were developing as they went.

Fantasy sports take the idea of toying with sports industries to a new level. If we now see the sports leagues as fixed institutions—dead toys, *worlds* of fully intelligible meaning—then fantasy leagues revivify the individual games, “actions and outcomes” within the games, and the leagues in whole. In fantasy football, for instance, the individual statistics of each athlete are recontextualized game by game in an entirely virtual team and league. Friends form virtual leagues and divvy up all of the professional athletes into virtual teams, each team then an assemblage of athletes playing various positions managed by one player. Each weekend, the virtual teams are paired up and pitted against one another, with the Symbolic value of the individual athletes’ performance statistics aggregating into the virtual performance of the imagined team. It is already a multi-million-dollar industry in itself, and the NFL has capitalized on the

growing hobby by forming officially sanctioned and supported virtual leagues on their website for the last two years.

It takes only an ounce of imagination to envision a world where these virtual teams persist year to year as virtual franchises and garner fans of their own, creating seasons and histories of their own. One day the *virtual* teams may be more popular than the *actual* teams. Toying with new meanings, new grounds as much as new institutions, is the very stuff of social poiesis. While a game-as-toy might not have the internal “quantifiable outcome” of Salen and Zimmerman, it very well can result in quantifiable social outcomes. Such a virtual football league just might constitute a virtual world according to the definition we will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

### ***Sports & Poiesis***

What about the games themselves being toyed with? We do have in the United States a very solid example of what a sport-as-toy might look like, though it comes from a work of fiction. Let us take a moment getting there. First, imagine something like football wherein the officials are taken to be the athletic agents that matter. As the conventional players go about playing the game, these officio-athletes call out new types and rules on the fly, labeling and re-labeling the activities of the ball-handlers according to affordances that arise during play.

For example, as a conventional running play is afoot when one of the officials calls “traveling” and throws down a yellow flag. As the players shake their heads and throw their hands in the air, the game continues with a new rule in place: no running with the ball after it is caught. Ten seconds later another flag: players can now only run laterally along the white yard-lines after catching the ball. At any given moment the officio-athlete is free to encode the immediately preceding activity as some token of a newly invented type. The officio-athletes—can we redefine them as the players yet?—play with and evaluate their own patterns of type-making and token-calling. Their own performance of mastery has replaced the athletes’ as the driving force of the game.

Another flag: give the ball to the new officio-players, and send the athletes home. And on it goes.

What we have just developed is a lively game of Calvin-Ball as portrayed by Bill Waterson in his iconic comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. As Calvin-Ball demonstrates, the nature of the game-sport would become the very *toy* with which the officio-athletes played. Notice that Calvin-Ball fits the definition of games given by Bernard Suits but not Salen and Zimmerman.

### **The Video Game Industry**

It is only a matter of time before video games generate the same kinds of institutions that other athletic sports have. We already have the birth of statistics, that first step. Like the player statistics of sports and fantasy football, different consoles track Symbolic actions within individual game titles and aggregate them for the player profiles, establishing new social meanings for actions that take place in otherwise closed-system games. There are leagues that surround competitive games and professional players who travel the world and play for high stakes. Furthermore, several websites, most notably *Twitch*, allow players and leagues to broadcast their play to viewers all over the world, expanding the potential spectator culture into the millions.

### ***Video Games Themselves as Social Institutions***

While it is easy to imagine an industry growing up around sports, can a single video game be seen as a social institution in Searle's terms? I would argue that video games rest on the constitutive rules of programming code, languages constituted by and accepted within communities of programmers, rendering the individual game more a "social fact" than social institution. The game is constituted by rules and virtual objects and offered by its creators to the individual player as a challenge.

The figure of the goomba on the screen is so deeply constituted by the game's code and by such far-reaching institutions of programmer communities that it confronts us as an object. In the virtual environment, where Grounds have shifted, the goomba *is* physical. It resists the player's will insofar as it first resists the will of the avatar. Facts

are hard to get around. They impose upon themselves. Peirce himself says that “a hard fact [...] is something which is there, and which I cannot think away, but am forced to acknowledge as an object or second beside myself, the subject or number one, and which forms material for the exercise of my will” (CP 1.358). These facts *almost* become Seconds—actual objects!—insofar as they confront and frustrate the will. The goombas are constituted by such a thoroughgoing and engrossing “Context C” that they are *virtually* there for the actual player.

On another level, any individual is free to hack into a game and recode it to do whatever she wants, just like she could sneak an extra \$50 from the bank in *Monopoly* or re-label a square on the board with her own hometown or school. The only difference is that toying with the grammar of a video game requires stopping the game and loading up some software. We might say hacking into a video game toys with the virtual objects that constitute the game at a level somewhere between rewriting the rules of a board game and remodeling your kitchen.

## V. TOYING IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

The idea of the *virtual* arises precisely when we are confronted by something outside ourselves that we know to be non-physical but cannot reduce to the imaginary, when our world is populated by material but abstract charges. The virtual is best characterized in the echo, the wave, the asymptote. Virtual objects force individuals to question whether they are dealing with objects or features of the objects. Is an asymptote a *thing* in itself or just a feature of a mathematical function?

The distinction between “material” and “physical,” though at times revisited, is a basic feature of scientific discourse (Hacking 1983, 1999; Massumi 2002; see also Chalmers 1999: 41 for the consequences of missing the distinction). Electrical charges, vibrations, waves, affect, mind, energy—many fundamental elements of our material world are not themselves physical. Despite existing outside the realm of physical stuff, these entities have regular and measurable physical causes and physical effects. In other

words, though intangible, they cannot be relegated to imaginary or symbolic registers. To say a particle “has a charge” is to gloss a complex scientific phenomenon: the particle exists and is measurable in the present but at the same time already participates in—and in some way contains—an inchoate but indeterminate future state (Massumi 2002).

Derek McCormack’s “spectral geographies” are made possible through affective registers of the body that allow for the “remote-sensing” of absent environments (2010b). McCormack characterizes the wreckage site as a “spectral geography,” an assemblage of physical objects that somehow comprise a portal into another, remote world. This remote world, the world of the expedition, persists as a material presence that somehow interpolates the observer into an affectively “charged” space. Significantly for McCormack and myself, the spectral becomes a potential register of all geographical experience, a literal echo in the present of something absent.

Massumi and McCormack act as anchors for my working understanding of virtual worlds as emergent, “charged” atmospheres that respond to material inquiry but resist a positivistic logic of the physical. While Massumi describes a fundamental puzzle of molecular physics and McCormack theorizes the tragic remains of an illustrious adventure, my own research considers the intentionally fabricated virtual worlds of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) and alternate reality gaming (ARG). And the evidence of these worlds is in the new ontologies they reflect, the way they impact human behavior.

I do not mean to explain the virtual mystically. In fact, quite to the contrary, I mean to explain it in the most material forms possible. However, that virtual worlds are material without being physical, they resist the objectivist’s logic of substances and their properties. When talking about virtual worlds, it seems it can be difficult to see the virtual forest for the digital trees. In Chapter 2 I developed a theory of “virtual objects” that was also touched upon in this chapter. Virtual worlds are populated with virtual objects, but not *only* with virtual objects. The virtual world expands our own world, drawing on all the affordances of the actual plus imaginary affordances as well.

I find it both troubling and amusing that we talk about novels as consisting of words but we talk of video games as consisting of objects. The images on the screen that we encounter when playing a video game are Signs, not Objects. They are *virtual* precisely to the degree that we experience them as Objects/objects. Most objects in video games are better seen as social facts, which can themselves be virtual objects, like race or gender.

The Signs of novels bring to mind imaginary objects, the Signs of video games bring into the world virtual objects. The objects on the screen act as Indexical Interpretants of every Sign you input into the machine, and it becomes almost impossible for the mind not to take the projected and visually constituted shapes as true objects. Like “hard facts,” they impinge on the player’s will in a way that words cannot.

However, in the worlds of tabletop role-playing, imaginary objects can take on such force as well, and imagined dragons become very good at frustrating the will as though material objects. And in a certain way they are material, insofar as they exist as asymptotes that resist any player of the game and push against your lusory means, offering obstacles to the lusory and prelusory goals.

The wall in the video game has the same force as any other “reality” or “fact” in the words of Hacking (1983, see also 1999: 22-24).

### **Discussion of Virtual Worlds**

Tom Boellstorff (2008, with Nardi et al. 2012) characterizes *Second Life* quite explicitly as a virtual world, *not* a digital world. However, it would be hard to imagine what a non-digital virtual world might look like from scholarship of online worlds. I feel that Ken Hillis (2009) rightly defines *Second Life* a “graphical chat” as it lacks the explicit game elements of other massively-multiplayer online worlds, including combat, puzzle-solving, teamwork, and narrative challenges. However, what expands *Second Life* from mere chatroom to virtual world is precisely the “graphical” dimension, which functions as the lusory means necessary to explore a world of virtual objects according to one’s own prelusory goals.

Hillis figures as radically Indexical. The digital bodies of an online world such as *Second Life* are indexical “sign/bodies,” traces that directly connect digital bodies to physical players. Drawing from Hillis’ work, I figure the virtual body not as the image on the screen but as the permeable, material body created by the digital image and physical body together.

I would argue that *Second Life* is a virtual world precisely because the platform elicits/demands activities of representation and framing in the same way the actual world demands of us representation and framing. It does not *represent* the actual in digital form, nor does it *reproduce* the actual in a digital world. Instead, it offers a new toy with which the user must undertake the representing and reproducing playfully; that is, it offers an *analog* to the actual world. This analog virtual world just happens to exist entirely in digital space. So it goes.

In contrast, *World of Warcraft*, while a virtual world in Boellstorff’s and Castronova’s terms, is only partially so in mine. Insofar as *World of Warcraft* functions as a single frame more than a domain that elicits framing, it fails to partake in the sense of virtuality privileged by Massumi, McCormack, and myself. The social poetics of *World of Warcraft* lack the ontological play that characterizes the user-generated worlds of *Second Life*. Admittedly, these are working definitions. A careful study of how role-playing or framing takes place within these platforms is welcome. While I have extensive experience within *Second Life*, the closed-frame nature of *World of Warcraft* turned me off immediately.

My goal is to study these virtual worlds, the worlds that are not yet our actual, felt worlds. These are the worlds that draw us towards them without being *real*. My argument is that they can exist in physical space as much as digital, in either case a “spectral geography” that haunts our everyday life. I want to study those spectral worlds, not as imaginary or symbolic, but as affective and virtual.

## Chapter 4: Fantasy Role-Playing & Imaginary Affordances

This chapter presents ethnographic data figuring tabletop role-playing games as complex, abstract toys that give rise to and instrumentalize *imaginary affordances* to engender new forms of meaningful social play. I argue that the activity of fantasy role-playing consists of toying with the elaborate and esoteric rule-system of the game, cracking the rules open to look outward and participate as *virtual objects* in the ongoing social lives of the players. What everyday mechanisms of poetic play pervade these games to weave these ostensibly self-contained systems into ongoing social life? Where does larger meaning come from beyond the “quantifiable outcomes” of the game’s system? How does studying a game as something analog, something attached, something integrated into the world change the way we understand gaming? In answering these questions, I argue that tabletop role-playing holds a unique honor as the smallest and most ephemeral virtual world, the hydrogen atom, as it were, of virtual worlds.

I rely heavily on Bernard Suits’ (1978) definition of games as “voluntary obstacles” and Erving Goffman’s several iterations of “frame analysis” (1959, 1961, 1974) to open up tabletop role-playing games to the same set of analytical tools that study theater, ritual, sports, film, and everyday social institutions (see Chapter 3). This framing allows me to engage the semiotics of C.S. Peirce to investigate where meaningful activity arises moment by moment within play. Such a study avoids simple media analysis and becomes necessarily social analysis. In other words, to answer the question “What is the game?” *is* to answer the questions “What does the game mean?” and “What role does the game play in ongoing social activity?” Rather than perform a formal analysis only to complement it with a secondary narrative or cultural analysis, let us rather walk slowly through the game once, like the ants of Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (2005). Such an approach traces out how the game occurs in ongoing social activity, how signs are read and made and mobilized. I suggest that such an undertaking *obviates* the need for some larger theory of integration/interpretation and *produces* a worthwhile explanation of the game itself.

Throughout this chapter, I am decidedly more concerned with the functions of make-believe and how generative play handles and grapples with constitutive rules to produce through struggle the bricolage images of a fantasy realm. This perspective flips on its head the more customary games-as-systems approach, which privileges the content of the imaginary realm as emanating from players activating a formal system.

After establishing the “frame” of a tabletop role-playing game (Sections I and II), this chapter discusses how an initial “keying” of make-believe defines the genre as its central lusory means (Section III). I then discuss the important—albeit typically overestimated—role that constitutive rules play in tabletop role-playing as a secondary keying. I argue that only by *toying* with the procedures and Symbolic objects of the game can *virtual objects* be conjured and then made to operate within ongoing social activity (Section IV). Taking a step back, I interrogate how ongoing processes of narrativity function as a third keying to repackage the experience of the entire frame/game (the actual world and both earlier keys) into a singular image. The chapter concludes with a look at this same narrativity at a temporal remove (Section V).

## **Methods**

My formal research in tabletop role-playing runs from May of 2010 to the present. The study included my logging hundreds of hours with four groups of gamers in two very different games (Appendix A). Although most studies of tabletop role-playing introduce the player-characters within the campaigns and spend much time immersed in the game-world, because my own approach privileges the outward-facing effects of these games, I spend less time describing in-game adventures and environments. While not explicitly comparative, the study intentionally features dissimilar groups that highlight different affordances of the two game systems studied.

While the groups represent a diverse cross-section of the gamer subculture indeed, the two games I feature have even less in common. I designed *Fantaji*<sup>14</sup> with the express

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<sup>14</sup> This chapter and the dissertation as a whole conflate my two published titles, *Early Dark* (2011) and *Fantaji* (2014). While most accounts do indeed refer to *Fantaji* throughout the two years of its development, certain moments with *Early Dark* will be included without note.

purpose of maximizing the affordances of role-playing and providing the fewest constitutive rules possible to engender poesis. *Fantaji* participates in the “story game” movement still building momentum within the hobby, whereas *Dungeons & Dragons*<sup>15</sup> works as a role-playing game only despite itself.

## I. THE GAME IS AFOOT

How is the tabletop role-playing game not just a system that is played *within* but also an abstract toy that is played *with*? I figure the rulebook of any given game—that is how role-playing games are published, as books—that a would-be player buys at her local gaming shop as an instruction manual for “rekeying” strips of fantasy narrative. This rekeying requires a complex kind of activity, and each title presents a unique key. The charts, procedures, lists, diagrams, and statistics that constitute the game-system comprise an assemblage of Legisigns loosely referred to as “the rules.” However, as I will explain, these rules are for much more than constituting a system; they are far from complete and have no fixed edges. What the would-be player buys is a toy, not a game; it is an imaginary obstacle, a virtual object, a *thing*. Or, from another perspective, what she buys is a how-to manual for making obstacles, for making objects—for making an already occurring, everyday kind of sociable performance more rigorous.

While other scholars figure role-playing games as a way to make shared fantasies *possible*, or ways to make sharing fantasies *easier*, I argue instead that the role-playing game is better seen as a way to make collective fantasy *harder*. This is what makes them games and what makes them fun. The rules operate on storytelling and collective intentionality, and players wield them intentionally to do so.

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<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the accounts that follow conflate various editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* despite several published versions existing. For the sake of clarity, “clones” published through the Open Game License, predominantly *Pathfinder* (Paizo Publishing 2009, 2014), will be referred to as *Dungeons & Dragons* as well, except where noted.

### **Lusory Means Distinct From Constitutive Rules**

An elucidating analogy for understanding fantasy role-playing as something other than a game-as-system is another recreational hobby that happens around dinner tables with small, esoteric groups of ironically braggadocios gamers: poker. While few hardened poker players might welcome an analogy between poker and fantasy role-playing, there is a clear formal overlap that helps to frame our conversation.

The *constitutive* rules of poker are fairly simple and consist of procedures for arranging and evaluating hands of 5 or 7 playing cards. Once each player forms a hand of cards, whether entirely in her own possession or along with shared cards on the table, each hand is ranked and compared. At the end of the round, the player who has the best hand wins. That is it. Or is it? As anyone evenly vaguely familiar with poker knows, the game is not *really* about arranging and ranking the hands. Poker is about winning money.

To define the game frankly, it does not *really* matter who has the best hand in a round or who wins the most rounds in a night. What really matters is who ends up with all the money. The constitutive rules of poker cover how the players arrange cards to build a hand with the highest value, but these only serve as one part of the lusory means—as one part of the game. Poker also entails collective intentionality, rigorous socializing, and importantly *regulative* rules that cover the appropriate ways people who are involved in the game can gamble on its outcome. This gambling is a primary social framework, an everyday kind of activity that could just as easily occur anywhere and revolve around anything. The purpose of poker, what really matters to it as a game, is that the game as a whole *affords* a particular domain for strategic, pleasurable, sportsman-like gambling. In other words, the game-system is only part of the game.

In this way, poker (as it is played by most people who enjoy it) is not only a game, but also a game that functions as a toy. It is a system, yes, but a system that opens outward and offers in several places affordances to transform—to rekey—the traditional, everyday activity of wagering on life. Euchre, on the other hand, is a game. The goal of Euchre is to win the game according to the constitutive rules of the game. There is much elaborate and pleasurable sociality that can occur around Euchre—and it may very well

be worth anthropological interest insofar as it involves teamwork, strategy, bluffing—but (as it is played by most people who enjoy it) it is *just* a game. In Euchre, the prelusory goals of having won the game and having contested with friends are subsumed by the immediate lusory goals of winning tricks and scoring points. It is as Markus Montola says about games in general, and “players usually adhere to the rules of irrelevance and disregard X, focusing on Y instead” (2012: 53). However, the prelusory goals of poker remain the motivating force of the game, and so the constitutive rules act as *secondary* to the regulative rules to establish a lusory means for sociable gambling.

Likewise, the goal of fantasy role-playing is not simply to slay a dragon according to the constitutive rules of the game (a would-be lusory goal), but to struggle with a story about slaying a dragon (prelusory goal) through a complicated system (lusory means). Players generate affective payoffs by literally—albeit abstractly—struggling with a system of virtual objects and imaginary affordances. Each action of the game is charged with various goals that come from and pervade through the system itself.

As another point of contact between poker and role-playing, the most important Signs in the game of poker do not come from the constitutive system of rules but from the other players—from the Indices of confidence, apprehension, and all forms of subterfuge that make the game challenging and rewarding. Similarly, the operant Signs in tabletop role-playing are created by the players.

### **Frame Analysis of Tabletop Role-Playing**

The first monograph of fantasy role-playing came in the field of qualitative sociology, Gary Alan Fine’s *Shared Fantasies* (1983). Fine sought to analyze three dimensions of the genre (the formal, the social, and the cultural) at a very early stage in the hobby’s history. While gaming culture has done nothing less than explode since 1983, Fine’s formal analysis still functions as the point of departure for most subsequent work in tabletop role-playing (for example Mackay 2001; Montola 2003; Bowman 2010; Cover 2010; Tresca 2011). He offers a worthwhile mobilization of Erving Goffman’s “frame analysis” and delineates three frames of meaning that overlap and interact during

play: the social frame (the friends around table), the game frame (the rules, artifacts, systems), and the diegetic frame (the imagined world and ongoing narrative of the fictional heroes). While most scholars agree with Fine that the purpose of a role-playing game is to produce and play with symbols that represent a fantasy world (signifiers and signifieds), it seems that each researcher cannot help but tinker with the three frames Fine offers to produce his or her own unique paradigm (Appendix B).

However, I find the multiplying of frames unnecessary. Rather than posit three or more distinct domains of meaning and then work to trace points of contact, I would instead look at the activities and semiotic processes of play and see what domains emerge—or do not emerge. I propose a new frame analysis of the study of tabletop role-playing games that I believe to be much closer in spirit to Goffman’s original usage.

Following, this analysis contains only a single frame, the game. It is the phenomenological experience of “We are playing a game” that covers all of the keyings and codes that transform the various utterances and images of into intersubjective fantasy. Within this frame, there are four layers, or what Goffman calls “laminations.” Worth noting, while these laminations at first appear to be roughly equivalent to the “frames” within the analyses of other scholars, they operate very differently, as sets of material conventions and mechanisms rather than abstract domains.

Frame: Playing a Game  
Keying 1: Risky, violent strips of action *keyed as* role-playing a “part” for fun  
Fabrication 1: The role of the game-master<sup>16</sup>  
Keying 2: Role-playing *keyed as* contest/sport (with performative elements)  
Keying 3: Bricolage of strips, contests, and memory *keyed as* dramatic narrative

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<sup>16</sup> This fabrication will not attract too much attention here, only because it can be fully explained in the definition of the game-master as the final arbiter of the game and the primary storyteller, who reveals the objects and happenings of the fantasy world to the players. I am currently writing an article with a colleague, Antero Garcia, about the specific role of the game-master.

There is no singular “social frame” that sits atop it all. While “primary frameworks” exist, they need not be especially noted here. To say again, of course no play is entirely free from larger social frameworks, as scholars rightly acknowledge (see Castronova 2005: 156; Lastowka 2009; Montola et al. 2009: 200); however, these would be analyzed only as needed depending on the situation. The players’ ongoing social worlds can entail any number of other frames afoot at any given moment and would only be recognized if something in the game triggered an awareness.

Each of the following sections discusses in detail one element of the diagram above: the singular frame (Section II), the first make-believe keying (Section III), the secondary keying that takes up the constitutive rules (Section IV), and a third keying that retroactively translates the activity of playing the game as a whole (Section V).

## **II. THE GAME IS THE FRAME**

Putting the “game frame” front and center lets the activities of rolling dice and narrating actions take place in the ongoing social lives of the players. Just like attending a play, watching a movie, or being on a date, the game is understood as “what it is that is happening” in an ongoing social life. To be sure, these games are complex, and many things are happening at once, but confusion about the frame is rare. While it is true that players often become confused over what precisely is happening at any given moment in the imagined game-world (and every scholar of tabletop games will have her favorite story about such gaffes), players rarely get confused about whether something that occurs is happening in the game or in actual life. Game designer Steve Sniderman observes how readily people seem to monitor frames of meaning even when precise markers are absent:

Players and fans and officials of any game or sport develop an acute awareness of the game’s ‘frame’ or context, but we would be hard pressed to explain in writing, even after careful thought, exactly what the signs are. After all, even an umpire’s yelling of ‘Play Ball’ is not the exact moment the game starts. [...] A human being is constantly noticing if conditions for playing the game are still being met,

continuously monitoring the ‘frame,’ the circumstances surrounding play, to determine that the game is still in progress, always aware (if only unconsciously) that the other participants are acting as if the game is ‘on’” (Sneiderman 2004, qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 75).

Though small corrections are required here and there, it would be misleading to make much of these easily re-enframed mistakes.<sup>17</sup> In most cases, the people playing the game have every interest to work together, and so they maintain the frame as clearly as possible.

### **Frame Negotiation, Staying in Key**

Maintaining a frame, what Goffman also describes as sustaining a “storyline of activity” (1959), is the very stuff of sociality. While gamers may have a reputation for being anti-social or insular in popular media portrayals, I find most sessions proceed with deliberately fuzzy edges around the game. Because the lusory means of tabletop gaming begin with simple storytelling, games are surprisingly permeable. In simple terms, when a newcomer to the room or scenes asks after “what’s going on,” players could either break frame to reference “the game” or respond in key; in the majority of cases players will respond to such inquiries in key.

### ***Answering in Key***

When playing with the *Techies* in the casita, the group has several opportunities to interact with Clark’s landlord, a middle-aged woman who lives in the main house on the property and frequently stops by to use the shared laundry machine or grab a tool from the shared closet. If she asks “what’s happening?” she will likely receive an answer keyed to entertain, devoid of any specific detail that would not make sense to anyone unfamiliar with the game: “We are at this very moment attempting to land ultra-light gliders on the back of a large military blimp so we can sneak inside the compartments underneath and assassinate a few people. You know, the usual. What are you up to?”

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<sup>17</sup> When we talk about alternate reality games in Chapters 5 and 6, we will be much more concerned with how the frame is itself constituted and negotiated. As it is, “playing a game” is a familiar enough frame for most people to navigate, even if they are new to the specific genre engaged.

This may seem banal enough, but it becomes a captivating thought: a response in key presumes that the newcomer is either already familiar enough with the frame to make sense of the keying or can be keyed into what is happening readily enough. It is an immediately intersubjective move—an intimate sort of thing—to respond from within the world of one’s own experience before the world of fact. It is like lobbing a ball at the newcomer in the park assuming she will catch it, like a flirtation or affecting an accent to “do a bit.” Such an answer pulls at the newcomer in a way.

Every so often I see the newcomer take the bait and join in. In Indiana, Jess’s wife, Beth, will often come out to the garage for a beer and sit with the *Townies* for a while. She cracks open a bottle and asks, “What’s up?” More often than not Jess will respond with keyed speech, unintentionally encompassing her with the make-believe. Beth nods and takes in the scene, checking out the illustrations, cards, tokens, dice, etc. She sips on her drink and listens in for a while to get into the stream before adding suggestions here and there.

Me: Okay, the *Giant Grackle* puffs its feathers and squawks at you. Hissing and whistling. Before emitting a series of fast chirps. Clicks and chirps. [Half-committed impersonation] You hear other birds in the distance but can’t tell if the display is meant to challenge you or summon them. I’ll give you two *checks* each in response before I take any turns.  
Jess: [To me] Two? [To all] I’m going to puff right back at him. I get all—  
Green: —all of us killed! [Laughing]  
Beth: Is there anything else around? Wouldn’t it make more sense to find a giant cat or something that can chase the thing away?  
Green: Would make more sense than squawking at it.

And at least partially, this first keying is what “playing the game” is, no matter if she rolls any dice or knows any of the rules for the second keying at all. While Beth’s suggestion might overstep the usual agency of a player-character in the game, she is participating in

the storytelling aspect of play. To speak in engrossed terms *is* to key *is* to make-believe *is* to role-play.

And once she is “in the game,” she no longer switches in and out of frame whatever else she might get up to in the garage. Beth will often add story elements and take part in group plotting even if she is working on crafting jewelry across the room. The “what it is that is happening” is still the game; we just happen to be playing a game at the same time someone is fashioning a necklace. If I tie my shoes or send a quick text during play, nobody would consider the frame “broken.” Likewise, Beth’s actions are taken right up into the ongoing socializing we do around the table. It is a matter of what the activity means to those involved, not what register or domain any given word, gesture, or phrase triggers. Conversations about what food we will order, whether the beers will last, and how tall Green’s daughters are getting surround and permeate the play without disrupting it.

### ***Added Laminations***

Some keyed answers arise as small performances for the benefit of the outsider, which technically adds another key or “lamination” onto the frame: the players are now performing for an audience at the same time as make-believing.

Settling in around midnight at a 24-hour diner outside Toledo, OH, the *Hicks* have no qualms about arranging their *Dungeons & Dragons* game on the corner table. When the waitress asks us “what’s going on?” she has to handle quite the gruesome reply:

Trash: Oh, it’s just—

Russell: We have bodies to get rid of.

Howard: We’re gonna be chopping up some bodies—

Amanda: The guards we just killed. Time for chopping.

Howard: [To Amanda] Yeah? [Pauses, to all] The guards *I* just killed, actually.

[Back to

the waitress] Gotta find a place to bury them before any of the elves show up

and—

Amanda: Kill us—

Howard: Kill *me* [Pausing again, feigning frustration], the only one who has done the killing so far. [Rolling his eyes at Amanda for the benefit of the waitress]  
It sucks  
being covered in blood all the time, but someone's gotta do it.

Halfway through Howard almost loses her, but the humor softens the image of mangled corpses. The waitress chuckles at the introduction and seems happy to have us in the otherwise empty diner. Her question gives Howard and Amanda a small space to translate and negotiate what is occurring within the game-world as though they were debating any actual event or encounter. The larger social framework of the restaurant factors little into the game, and we play for a few hours waiting for Terry to show up.

In each of the cases above, the players are aiming to elicit a playful response from the newcomer, whether related to the game or just for fun. Most keyed phrases aimed at outsiders do not come from an inability for players to “escape” from the game but from a genuine desire to bring the newcomer into it with them.

### ***Guarding The Frame***

However, answers keyed at the level of the game-system often function to intentionally close the frame off from outsiders. While make-believe and storytelling are relatively easily, the esoteric mechanisms of a game's rules can be mobilized to bar entry. Without a shared frame, other bodies in the room are noticeably outside the “what it is that is happening” for the players, which often results in a tangible boundary.

At Gen Con in 2013, I approach a table of gamers in the open-play area circled around an interesting and impressive arrangement of miniatures. As far as I can see, the setup does not seem to follow any representational order, but nevertheless it appears very precise and meaningfully positioned. It piques my interest, and I ask the least busy player what they are up to. The man looks at me and says in a quite pleasant tone, “We just finished round three and need to refresh our markers before we phase. He has three jets left, but I don't think he's going to use them. *I wouldn't.*”

Despite his smile and ready answer, it is clear from how he references the frame through esoteric details of the constitutive key that he would rather not welcome me into the game even as observer. He has successfully blinded me with science, and I move on to other tables and other games. A reply in that key that did not use specific terms from the game would likely communicate the opposite, as would a reply that demonstrates the make-believe keying. I never did figure out what game it was.

Interesting to note, responding in untransformed speech has a similar effect on outsiders, and gamers can communicate an unwillingness to share the frame by speaking from outside it when engaged. This amounts to a kind of “fabrication” in Goffman’s terms but in reverse, where the players hide what is “really going on” by talking in literal, everyday terms. For example, later on during our night at the diner, a customer who turns up in the early hours of the morning approaches the table of *Hicks* to ask what we are doing. Amanda replies, “We are writing things on bits of paper, rolling these fancy dice, attempting to get high numbers. It’s *really* interesting.”

Her refusal to speak in frame this time alerts the customer to Amanda’s intention to keep him out of the activity. This amounts to a strategic “frame break” from the game, which I will discuss more in depth below.

### **Other Frames**

All this is not to say that there is nothing outside the frame. Primary social frameworks persist, and other frames can override the game from time to time. During a night in Austin with the *Dorks*, we all take a short break for snacks and overhear Tony on the phone with his friend explaining that he is “playing cards” with some coworkers. This knowledge then reframes the rest of the night for everyone. It is hard to disregard that Tony has built a “fabrication”<sup>18</sup> around the game that now sets the rest of us “in on something” against his other friends.

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<sup>18</sup> For Goffman, the two ways to transform normal activity is to “key” it as something else or build a “fabrication” that masks it. Together, these two transformations can account for any and all frame play (see 1974: 83).

In fact, other frames are just as likely to be engendered by the game itself as by things prior to the game. The game can be utilized to negotiate and produce meaningful frames and unique situations.

For the *Townies* most games of *Fantaji* take place at Jess's house, but we occasionally play over at Green's house when he is needed to watch the kids. This typically finds the group of men half-sitting around a large island separating the kitchen from the dining space. On any given weekend Reanna will likely be visiting with Mitch from Chicago, and she Reanna and her sister-in-law Sandy teasingly refer to *Fantaji* as "My Little Pony." They have their own fun chiding their husbands for playing such a "childish pastime."

Over the years, the group has developed a fun tradition: whenever Reanna or Sandy enters the room and asks "what's up?" out of playful curiosity, a new lamination is added to the frame, and one player or another will attempt to transform the current moment of in-game narrative into a twisted and filthy phantasmagoria loosely inspired by images of *My Little Pony*. It is a unique art, and we have all taken our tries over the years; it has become the group's very own *Aristocrats!* joke, with the most celebrated reply to date given by Jess shortly before I joined the group.

But some of the participants in the joke see more to the tradition than another layer of performance. One late night over the summer Sandy comes into the kitchen with the twins in tow and asks her question, "So what's up in *My Little Pony* tonight, boys?"

We turn to see her wrestling with the twelve-year-olds, and so Green foregoes the traditional dirty response for the sake of his daughters, offering instead a straight take on the in-game action. Sandy is visibly upset and asks again with a frustrated tone, confusing all of us. Misunderstanding what led to her sudden shift in mood, Green answers with more detail but still withholding any lamination of performance. Sandy leaves in a huff, and the moment goes mostly forgotten until a few months later when I am talking with Green on Skype to plan another visit.

He explains to me that what the gamers took as an invitation to playfully rekey our narrative for the entertainment of Sandy and Reanna had developed into a "check"

from the wives to their husbands. The coded *My Little Pony* reference in the question had come to mark, for Sandy at least, the instigation of a new frame, a “check” on her ability to control the situation and secure the attention of her husband when desired. In her mind, the question put to the group a request to “frame shift” from the world of the game to a world that includes her. She was understandably upset when confronted with the realization that Green had hitherto entirely missed that level of meaning in the question and in each of those earlier moments had *not* been sharing a semi-private frame with her as she had presumed. Now when we hear the question, we gladly pause the game and let Green or Mitch check in with their families. The performance is no longer necessary because the coded reference to *My Little Pony* is now understood to exist outside the game.

### ***Frame Breaking***

While the misunderstanding between Green and Sandy was fixed quite easily, sometimes the negotiation of frames turns hostile. Goffman discusses competition over the frame in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), when participants at a cocktail party, for example, are competing over control of the situation and defining exactly “what it is that is happening” here. I have yet to see a fight begin due to someone *misunderstanding* the nature of the frame; however, I have seen several fights begin due to someone entirely *correctly* understanding what was going on:

Dale: Dammit. I am never going to get a break on this guy.

Me: Don’t look at me. I haven’t killed any of y’all yet. Can’t blame me for trying.

Dale. No. Yeah. I just wanna fucking kill him.

Aytek: Guys. I can use my *Burst* and deal the final *Mortal Wound* with the six *Tokens*. It

will be faster, and we don’t need the *Tokens* for healing anyway.

Me: Easy enough!

Dale: [To Aytek] You are not gonna fucking do it, man.

Aytek: Yes, I just did. It’s done.

Me: You sure?

Aytek: [Ignoring Dale’s glare] Yes.

Dale: Fuck you, man. Fuck you.

Aytek: You quit crying so much.

Dale: Fuck you.

This is the equivalent of a player “charging the mound” in baseball. The frame of the game is broken, and the primary framework of offense and retribution comes to the fore. When Aytek succeeds in slaying the beast that Dale is having trouble with, the effect is larger than the game. Dale feels slighted, and Aytek intentionally or not offends the former’s pride. Events within the frame of the game are not acceptable at the level of the primary framework of the presentation of self, and Dale makes sure his friend knows that by stepping “out of key” and refusing to continue. We spend the next few hours keeping Dale in check and “contained” in the frame.

That games never fully escape primary frameworks has been acknowledged before. My point is the frame of a role-playing game is continually negotiated and refigured in each act of keying without requiring a hard “in” or “out” at every moment. The game is afoot to the degree that anyone maintains the key, but so is everyday life. Like having two conversations at once or playing a game of cards at the bar, it is typically relatively easy to share a sense of what is going on and negotiate expectations for maintaining an immersive and pleasurable experience for everyone.

I figure three distinct keyings within this frame: the prelusory make-believe and fundamental lusory means of social storytelling (Section III), the constitutive rules of the specific game-system (Section IV), and the later production of a singular narrative thread (Section V).

### **III. PLAYING IN THE KEY OF MAKE-BELIEVE**

Tabletop role-playing games manifest the explicit intention to turn make-believe into a game. The genre emerged in its present form at a very specific moment in the development of computer technologies, but it echoes much older forms of play in the tradition of word games, parlor games, dance, and other time-passing hobbies. Fantasy role-playing entails a particular mode of interaction that works as an alibi for changing up

social expectations and creating new atmospheres of sociality. Like speaking only in song lyrics or spending a lunch break speed-dating, tabletop role-playing games present a fresh way for friends and strangers to interact socially. What is so interesting about the medium is precisely how complex and convoluted a game can become while its immediate social function—that of a rule, an abstract toy—remains relatively simple.

The first keying in the frame is the cluster of practices and conventions by which strips of fantasy action are keyed into make-believe. What unique activities allow the players to all “key” the story the same way? What small gestures, tones, corrections, and nudges keep everyone going along in the same direction and keep everyone engrossed? Important to note, these practices and conventions lie entirely outside any of the constitutive rules of a game-as-system. This is the key of make-believe itself. Goffman suggests that “a corpus of transcription practices must be involved for transforming a strip of offstage, real activity into a strip of staged being” (1974: 138). I am interested in this “corpus” of practices, a indefinite list of micro-moves, intentions, and gestures that I abstract around three crucial poles: *grounds*, *agency*, and *performance*.

### **Getting In Key**

For anyone in the United States under 40, video games are easy. The once strange directional-pad made famous on the original Nintendo has become second nature. And mastering the dual toggles used to control a 3-D avatar’s movement (the left toggle) and orientation (the right toggle) with the newer consoles took no time at all by comparison. Speaking technically about how the interface through which a player-character inhabits the digital space of a video game, there are surprisingly few modes of embodiment available. Though buttons will activate different commands in different games, the ontology of embodiment has become rather conventional across games and platforms. In a third-person platform game, you see the avatar in front of you and control its movement as described above with your thumbs. In a first-person game, the monitor represents the field of your avatar’s vision, and you control an off-screen body in space just as you would in third-person. Several titles allow the perspective to be shifted between the two

modes without changing the gameplay at all, perhaps demonstrating fewer modes of play than we might think.

The player watches Iconic representations of avatars and objects navigating environments on the screen. She pushes buttons with her thumbs and fingers in response to the movement on screen and through trial and error learns an Indexical relationship between the clicking of the fingers and the movements of the avatar. The nature of this movement and the nature of the timed, responsive, dexterous button-pushing interact as Symbolic values in the game-system, digital inputs pushed through algorithms to reveal digital outputs. Most anyone casually observing the performance will likely care more about the play of the representations on the screen than the playful moving of the thumbs, while waiting players might also study the movements of the thumbs as any student of a craft.

The manual lusory means, the clicking of buttons and toggling of toggles, is second-nature to a younger generation of gamers in the global North. Fantasy role-playing is a little trickier.

***Grounds: Now That You've Found Another Key...***

I noted earlier how readily experienced players negotiate the edges of the frame, but it may take a while to get “in key” initially. Importantly, this negotiation has less to do with learning the actual rules of the game-system (we will get to those later) but instead demonstrates the mechanisms of keying, make-believing, public fantasizing that are learned prior to any formal game.

When the *Dorks* introduce Ismael to role-playing, he has a little trouble catching on. This is the first session with everyone together, and it is Ismael's first time role-playing ever. The rest of us are on our second session together, and we are doing everything we can think of to steal a small drake<sup>19</sup> from its cruel owner. The experienced players start the night negotiating with the villainous pet-owner and get nowhere, and Frederik turns to Ismael:

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<sup>19</sup> A small, quadrupedal dragon with no wings or noteworthy magical abilities.

The drake scampers up to you and flicks a forked tongue near your feet. Taking a liking to you, it slithers up your leg and under your shirt, crawling up and out of your collar, twisting down your arm, and resting flatly in your hand. The reptilian critter balls itself up in your palm and stretches like a playful cat. After a few moments it seems to catch a scent and sniffs with its flickering tongue around your fingers... It begins to nibble on your hand.

Frederik's narration is a small keying, an invitation to respond, not necessarily with dice or pantomime, but to get Ismael's "head in the game" as it were. We are playing make-believe together, and the performance is a shared responsibility. Frederik presents a dangerous condition in the keyed environment, which invites Ismael into the game as though he were lobbing a ball at him in the park. Ismael, failing to recognize the invitation and step "in key," waits for something. Frederik could very easily lead with a direct "what do you want to do?" question and bring Ismael into the story; however, I have come to learn that Frederik's style of "sink or swim" works very well with a certain type of new player. Also, Frederik is not the kind of game-master to act as prompter or problem-giver. He describes the world, and you react or die. The following transcript is an abridged version edited from more than thirty minutes of prodding:

Frederik: You feel the teeth biting down on your skin.

Ismael: [Smiles, waits]

Frederik: The drake breaks the skin, nibbling through blood now.

Ismael: [Laughs, showing amusement]

Frederik: [Rolls a die to settle a random event in his head] He swallows a chunk of flesh.

Ismael: Does it hurt? That sucks.

Frederik: Yes, if you don't get him off your hand, he will keep eating it.

Ismael: Damn. [Still waits]

Frederik: The drake crawls around your forearm and grips into you with his claws...

Frederik: It opens its mouth and chomps down hard on your finger now...

Frederik: The drake is gnawing your finger to the bone...

Ismael: Ah! Damn! That sucks!

Frederik: The drake eats through your finger...

Frederik: Your finger is gone.

Ismael: I want to shake him off!

[Applause, and everyone cheers before they jump into teasing him]

Frederik: Thank you. Now roll a *Reflex Savings Throw*.

After several long moments, we have Ismael fully embodying his player-character. The difficult adjustment has little to do with the rules of the game and instead revolve around the entirely unfamiliar practice of public make-believe, something he says he has never even considered before. Ismael has no siblings and cannot remember ever running around the backyard pretending to be a ninja, or a barbarian, or a dinosaur. He recalls drawing fantasy pictures and being interested in the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon, but he never entertained the thought of sharing his make-believe or performing it somehow. Since joining the group, Ismael says “a new world has opened up,” and he thinks of gaming as a new way to socialize with people he has known for years. Ismael is the most dedicated player in the group after Frederik by far, and he plays with two other groups besides us, though less frequently.

The *Dorks* must listen to Ismael recount his “origin story” to every new player who stops by our game, and it becomes a bit of a big fish tale over the years. Each time the telling gets a little longer, and his dullard immobility is exaggerated another step. When the narration is directed at someone who is role-playing for the first time, it will end with the same moral. As Ismael put it the last time I heard the bit: “You can’t steer a parked care. You can’t help someone if they aren’t pushing the gas.”

This entrance into the keying through first-person projection is a fundamental mechanism of tabletop role-playing and collects all the rest together. It seems that the absolute ease of it is what makes the genre confusing to new players, who expect there to be some more complicated procedure dictated by harder-to-learn rules. As simple as can be, the first lusory means engaged is first-person storytelling “as if” the game-world were actual. In a Peircean sense, the player must shift perspective in a way and take the signs of the game-world as Dicent, rather than Rhematic. The Signs that arise are not potentials or quotations only, and to be “in the game” is to Interpret each action and each signal as actual—albeit keyed—activity. What are Rhematic Symbols (“The drake eats through

your finger”) for the players around the table are keyed into Dicient Indices (*There is a drake eating through your finger, and you need to do something!*).

I would here argue that this subtle shifting of the ground is not a simple code-switching or linguistic move, but represents a frame-switching or cognitive adjustment. Such an adjustment acts as foundation of toying with the game. Each utterance must be read according to the larger frame and situated as “in game” or not.

### ***Agency: ... What Are You Going To Play?***

Once the first lusory means is taken up, that shift into a new ground or perspective, a tabletop role-playing game becomes an exploration of conjured space and individual agency. While most games-as-systems ask the user to reach a certain lusory goals within the system, the toy lies open and waiting the motives of the player. That proper games are defined by their lusory goals and toys by the ever-changing prelusory goals they afford is crucial to my analysis. Worlds do not come ready-made with goals, and if a tabletop game is to offer a virtual world, then the genre would need to sustain all kinds of socializing, all kinds of prelusory goals. A game demands a certain agency; it interpolates the player into its system of values and forces investment. If a user fails to invest in the system, then the game stalls or ends. On the other hand, the toy is interpolated into the agency of the players who make demands of it.

In tabletop role-playing, players individually and as a group must decide on their own lusory goals. If the motive is to role-play a brave hero, what would that brave hero want to do? There is no “right” thing to do or “objective” in a role-playing game. It is a world, a space, a platform. Depending on the particular setting of the game, player-characters could just as easily protect dragons as slay them, just as easily open a hospital as build a castle, just as easily open a business as rob one, etc. However, this freedom can be heavy, and the existential crisis will strike every player and every campaign at some point. The player-characters in most role-playing games are more often than not “condemned forever to be free.” Players familiar with video games or board games alone

rarely create their own motives within a game and can find the responsibility burdensome.

When Amanda joins the *Hicks* shortly after I do, there is a barrier to entry slightly different from Ismael's. Amanda is eager to share in the make-believe and catches on quickly to key, but the completely open-ended freedom of the story paralyzes her. The scene is a skirmish between our band of heroes and a scouting party that works for a hideous naga<sup>20</sup>. Amanda decided to accompany Russell at the last minute, and for her first night gaming Trash provides a pre-made player-character. She follows along in the combat and picks up the system easily enough, but when her player-character is finally presented with an open-ended decision, she is stuck.

Everyone exhales after the hard fight, and Trash asks Amanda, "Okay, fight's over. What do you want to do now?" She balks for a long moment and describes the feeling to me later that night:

What are you supposed to do? I mean, it's a game. But it's me, or almost me. And you want to do something useful and fun. But you don't know what's going to be fun or what's going to be useful to the other players. Everyone else was in gear. You have to figure out what you *can* do and then decide what things you *want* to do. It sounds easy now, but it wasn't. I just decided [the player-character] should be like Sharon Stone from *The Quick And The Dead*, and from then it was easier. I had a picture to go on.

It could also be that Amanda had trouble finding direction or motivation because she was not playing "her character," but the above paralysis occurs with a good portion of new players, even those who have spent hours customizing the perfect avatar before their first session. There is a sudden awareness that characters can do *anything*, and the player has to provide the impetus for action herself.

The same paralysis hits people in the popular online virtual world *Second Life*. The central activities are building worlds and building relationships, and oftentimes new

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<sup>20</sup> A half-human, half-snake creature similar to the Medusa depicted in *Clash of The Titans* (Davis 1981) with Laurence Olivier as Zeus.

users are either overwhelmed or underwhelmed by the amount of options. Local social poetics sustain the entire platform, and creative meaning-making arises because there is literally nothing else to do but float around. Ken Hillis (2009) figures *Second Life* not as a virtual world but a “graphical chat” for this very reason: it has no lusory goals. Goals must be invented by the users and shared among the groups and cliques that form in each environment. The activity of a virtual world functions much like a detached, open-ended *worlding*, where meaning must struggle to arise out what is otherwise just *stuff*. On the other hand, as a proper game, *World of Warcraft* has hundreds of lusory goals ready for players to chase.

The most popular tabletop role-playing game in the world today, *Pathfinder*, is produced by Paizo Publishing and hit the market in 2009. The game began as a licensed clone of *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5*, though it has developed in its own direction since then. I would argue that one of the strongest selling points of the game over *Dungeons & Dragons* came tucked in its first few pages, where an off-hand explanation for the title of the game intimated that the player-characters are like intrepid “pathfinders,” individuals with some vague, unofficial calling to adventure and roam unknown territories. Having gamed for over two decades now and encountered dozens of gamers like Ismael and Amanda, I cannot help but see brilliance in having a clearly stated (and entirely vague) lusory goal printed in black and white to anchor newcomers.

It is common practice for game-masters to break the paralyzing spell of this existential crisis for a player by quoting the self-professed motive of the iconic adventurer Indiana Jones in his second film, *The Temple of Doom* (Spielberg 1984): “Fortune and glory, kid.”

### ***Performance: A New Skill***

Beyond the concerns of *ground* and *agency*, another issue with keying that comes up at some point in every group is simple self-consciousness. Few of the role-players eager to participate in an ethnographic study seemed all that shy, but many new role-players can feel the pinch from two sides. From one side there is self-consciousness

surrounding public play and theatrical performance even as tame as the simple keying needed to role-play, and from the other side there is the realization that the presence of explicit rules makes “failure” an option. It becomes known that the performance itself can fail (the first keying), and, should that not happen, the attempted action of the player-character within the game-system could fail (the second keying). That role-playing is a skill often goes entirely unanticipated until the new gamer sits at a table of her peers and feels all eyes on her. There is a recognition that the outcome of your choice is not entirely under your control, and it causes hesitation.

Much like the problem of paralysis that comes from facing complete freedom, the problem of anxiety over public performance fades quickly, most often the very first night. Each new player addresses these issues in her own way, usually with open discussion and encouragement from the group.

However, stress over performing successfully within the system can remain permanent, and many gamers familiar with video games take succeeding within the game-system as the explicit goal of play.<sup>21</sup> For instance, my friend Greg has been gaming with me for over 15 years, and he holds the honor of having rolled a “natural 20” as his first move in each and every game I have designed (I lost count at ten or so). I must admit that this could be entirely mythological, but the record is clearly important for Greg. The streak indexes in both directions: inward, that his heroes always begin strong, undefeated for at least a single roll; and outward, that he himself possesses some kind of role-playing “mojo” as he calls it.

Jane McGonigal (2011) explains how “making failure fun” is one of the most important lessons “real life” can learn from games. In the best games, she says, failure is fun. How tabletop role-playing games accomplish this or not depends on the rules. I will take more time working through performance within the game-system in Section IV below.

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<sup>21</sup> They are called “power gamers” in the hobby, and many games will explicitly advertise themselves as “not for power gamers” or “suitable for power gamers.”

## A Peculiar Key

When I first started playing *Fantaji* with the *Techies*, one of the would-be players, Michael, just could not get into the hobby. I think his stumbling block came somewhere between the first and second keyings of my frame analysis chart. As game-master, I set the scene as I would in any other game, keying a strip of fantasy actions as though present around us:

The five of you wake up as your property is being ransacked by a large group of seemingly haggard brigands. Some are digging through your barn. Some are hooking up horses to your wagon. A few are running off with your goats. You run outside to stop them, all of you now outside in the yard just in front of the house. It appears as though they would have gladly come and gone unnoticed, but in response to your rousing they draw their blades. There are no less than a dozen of the buggers, and while you have time to collect your things and get outside, you are immediately surrounded and pressed into combat. What will you do?

I lay cards out on the table to represent each of the *things* that exist in the scene according to the rules of *Fantaji*. A few players ask qualifying questions to orient themselves:

Hannah: So, we slept late? It's late morning?

Me: Sure.

Clark: No, it's better if it's early.

Hannah: Yeah.

Me: Okay, sure. It's early and the ground is damp. The sky is still purple.

Clark: Are we officially surrounded, unable to move?

Aytek: We can't be *totally* surrounded before taking a turn.

Me: You are surrounded as in they are in all directions. But, no, you are not stuck in the

middle of a tight circle or fenced in. You just have them on all sides.

Michael: Why do I care about the goats?

Me: You don't have to care about the goats.

Dale: Can I tell who the leader is?

Me: Yeah, you can tell one of the guys near the wagon is barking commands.

Clark: Do they have a wagon or transport of their own anywhere?

Me: You can't tell yet.

While the questions seem to be requests for pre-existing information or permission for certain actions, the actual operation resembles something more like a “we should make-believe X unless Calvin offers a reason why not” suggestion. As the game-master, I maintain a very basic “fabrication,” which means I must pre-plan or spontaneously decide every possible natural and social event that will occur outside the active agency of the player-characters. However, as we see in the above examples, the players take as much liberty as possible adding to the make-believe outside their own player-characters.<sup>22</sup> They know I am making up most the details in response to their questions, playing off existing affordances and offering stochastic details I hope will be fun to *toy* with.

I nudge them into the scene one at a time with “What do you want to do?” Nobody takes initiative, so I press the danger a little: “The men are running at you with swords.” Hannah starts in first, braving the new game. She declares her turn and rolls according to the rules, and we settle the outcome of her turn. She lands a solid hit to one of the villains’ leg, dealing damage to the enemy. After first blood, the others jump in and take turns until only Michael remains.

Michael: I can do *anything* I want? Anything I want to do? There are no rules?

Me: Well, there may be the limitations of physics or capacity, but you can choose to

attempt anything you want. Yeah.

Michael: I can just do *anything*?

Me: [Encouraging nods, smiles] Yeah.

Michael: [His best “gotcha” smile] I fuck one of those goats.

[Everyone laughs]

Michael: Don’t blame me, man. *You* invented a game that lets people fuck goats, man.

You said I could do anything.

Me: Yes, I did say you could do anything. You could have done anything in the entire

world. You could have attacked one of the guy’s, hopped on a horse, bellowed a

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<sup>22</sup> The ways that any given player may add to the story outside the fixed actions of her player-character may or may not be determined by the rules of the game. I will discuss this in the following section.

manly challenge and prepared to defend—*anything*. Instead, of *all the options* available in the world, you chose to hump a goat?

Michael is not put off with my retort. As far as he is concerned it is just “silly to *pretend* to do something,” which is the very point of the keying in the first place. He suffers none of the hesitation over “meaning” that the earlier players did because he just cannot get himself to care. No discussion of the creative force of play sways his opinion, and nobody takes any offense that he opts to leave the night early. While Michael fully understands that the game requires direct, creative make-believe and a self-made motive, he has little desire to key in this way.

If an individual lacks the attitude to make-believe a story, to conjure a fantastical situation into being, the hobby falls flat. Where does this desire to key come from? Who has it? Who lacks it? I have yet to find a study that answers any of those specific questions, and I am no better at predicting who will enjoy role-playing now than I was twenty years ago. The idea that there is a “type of person” into it seems only tautological: that “type” seems to have nothing else in common other than role-playing, making it a rather hollow analytic tool to posit. Writers, artists, performers all do well; but so do just as many athletes, lawyers, and programmers.

Overcoming the performance hurdles of a video game excites Michael, and he seeks out video games with dragons and castles and magic similar to the game the group offers. However, the tabletop gaming could not do any less to pique his interest. This happens all the time, a demonstration of a clear distinction between “gamer” and “role-player.” The *role-playing* did not have enough *role-gaming* for Michael.

Jane McGonigal (2011) presents a strong case that gaming is enjoyable precisely because it is challenging. She offers chapters of evidence that—entirely outside any playful intent—the most successful forms of gaming will engage the mind to learn, master, and perform. Castronova likewise defends gaming as a creative but at the same time labor-intensive practice (2005: 177). Henry Jenkins (2004) also makes much of the “exploration” challenges that a game can provide.

Maybe make-believe is too *easy* for some people. Does it offer too little to measure learning, demonstrate mastery, evaluate performance? Do we need to make it *harder*?

#### IV. KEYING WITH THE GAME-SYSTEM

At this point we should note that none of the practices covered so far get inside the “black box” of a game-system. As I discussed will argue throughout that the seemingly self-contained systems of rules function by design to make ongoing role-playing *harder*. The best role-playing games design *game-constituting* rules that double as *play-regulating* rules. These two keys occurring in tandem is what characterizes the frame of tabletop role-playing and make the hobby such a unique medium. Any game that loses sight of this two-fold keying could only work to key make-believe inadvertently, despite itself.

*Dungeons & Dragons* was designed deliberately to reproduce the activities of playing a tabletop war-game without requiring miniatures, models, or elaborate pieces of terrain. In a very real way, the game acts as an *imaginary* tabletop war-game, and its rules are meant to constitute Symbolic representations of elements that existed in the earlier genre. Bear in mind that tabletop war-games were decidedly *not* about role-playing (keying), storytelling (narrativizing), or immersion (engrossables). Though Gygax and Arneson were wise to see the potential for an imaginary and abstract version of war-gaming—an entirely new hobby and multi-million-dollar industry would develop around their singular product and make them famous—even today *Dungeons & Dragons* has not outgrown this consequence of its birth: it is a Symbolic transfiguration of a tabletop war-game, not a Symbolic keying of make-believe or storytelling.

#### **Making Make-Believe *Harder***

Watch three nine-year-olds enjoy a fight with a dragon. I growl and snarl at my nephew and his friends, chasing them around the lawn. When they stab their arms at me, I dodge the invisible blades that extend another yard outward in space. When they shake

their open hands in my direction, I wince at the impact of their fireballs. When I mime a gigantic jaw with my two arms, they spin and reel, gesturing the bloody spray from their arteries. The game is fun for the three of them, engaging enough to keep them from checking their Nintendo DSs sitting on the picnic table near the patio door. Despite the fact that no entertainment device is ever *off* anymore—despite the fact that every piece of gaming technology produced by Microsoft, Sony, or Nintendo today constantly screams out for attention—these three inhabit a world of imagination without a single prop or device. I admit I can only half-remember slipping so seamlessly from a Michigan lawn into an elven wood. But at my prompting, a handful of words, these boys are there. The world around them is alive, enchanted. Though I remain—jaded, cynical, ironic—at some remove, I too am there with them, the dragon who fears the wood but refuses to relent his pursuit. Despite the limitations of my rigid adult mind, our play in every sense of the word is *easy*. Too easy.

Fines' (1983) characterization of fantasy role-playing as “shared fantasy” grants too much weight both to the rules of the game and to the diegesis described by the players. He sees the tabletop role-playing game as a set of procedures used to mutually represent and enjoy a shared imaginary world, a tool that makes sharing an intersubjective fantasy space possible. But surely I did just that with my nephew and his friends without delving into the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The rules of *D&D* are as arcane and esoteric as the magic they imagine. The game is *hard*. And as Bernard Suits' (1978) underscores, play is largely about opting for “less efficient” means of reaching one's goal.

### **Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Better Pencils**

In an insightful text about contemporary digital technologies, Dennis Baron (2009) discusses the fate of two important inscription technologies, the pencil and the typewriter. Milestones in the field of writing, both instruments led the way to dozens of derivatives, including, respectively, zero-gravity pens and roll-away computer keyboards. The question Baron asks: Why do we still use pencils but not typewriters? True,

typewriters are collected and displayed for nostalgic purposes, much like cassette tapes or compact discs, but they have been replaced by the technologies they inspired. On the other hand, the pencil is still decidedly useful. Highlighters, crayons, erasable pens, even digital recording styli—all derive from the common lead-stick. Yet the pencil abides.

I argue here that tabletop role-playing games are like pencils. While the video game industry generates billions of dollars each year and massively multiplayer online games host millions of players at a time, the low-fi hobby that inspired such entertainments still abides. When artists and programmers sought to “upgrade” the tabletop technology by porting it to the screen, they instead built something new that did not replace—but complemented—what existed before it. If tabletop games are about representing and experiencing fantasy worlds, would not the moving-pictures of the video game provide better immersion than words and gestures around a table? In a world of computer games, why do tabletop games still exist? If virtual worlds are exploding online with better immersion and better graphics, how do their pen-and-paper ancestors survive?

Any failed mission to manufacture obsolescence is enlightening. The perseverance of the tabletop role-playing game in the face of its betters highlights dimensions of the genre that went overlooked before, and so figures in relief precisely what makes tabletop games unique. That is to say, those elements of tabletop gaming improved upon in video games (predominantly detailed representations of fantastical environments, artifacts, and bodies) are precisely the elements of role-playing games that are *not* intrinsic to it. If the representation of a fantasy world was the point of tabletop gaming, the hobby would have been replaced.

And so what was left behind in the digital conversion turns out to be the most important or at least quintessential elements of the hobby, the “analog excess” of the genre. Like soil left after the floodwaters retreat, the remainder is often more fertile than the original.

## **The Odd Case of Dungeons & Dragons**

Any historical account of the tabletop role-playing game cannot help but focus on the advent of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), and the specifics of its origin are immanently relevant to this discussion of games as systems or as something more. The immediate predecessors to *Dungeons & Dragons* were a brood of related war simulations that incorporated miniatures and models. A swell of titles had evolved as emulations of a particularly popular game designed by none other than the pacifist H.G. Wells and published in 1913 as *Little Wars*.<sup>23</sup> These tabletop war-games used toy soldiers and large pieces of fabricated terrain first to re-imagine historical battles and later to represent fantastic campaigns of war across imaginary worlds.

By the 1970s, dozens of games had evolved, many involving fantastical battles with magic and monsters. As miniatures became more various and detailed, any number of worlds could be simulated. Rules for settling attacks and gambits with dice began to carry more of the weight than the arrangement of the models themselves. When a sniper or wizard became powerful enough, for example, it did not matter where on the table the miniature was in relation to its target. New rules supplemented what could not be represented on the table, and soon dragons could “fly” from any place on the table to another. Wizards could read minds or disrupt another unit’s turn, and priests could call on boons or blessings from the gods.

At some point, the generals themselves were inserted onto the table as miniatures and allowed to carry their victories from battle to battle, gaining new abilities with each new level of success. As avatars of the players that would grow more powerful with continued use, these generals came to represent legendary heroes, eventually overshadowing any and all of the other units on the table. Soon enough, a single miniature representing the experienced player-hero could be waged against an entire army controlled by a novice with a relatively less powerful general. This, of course,

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<sup>23</sup> The full title is *Little Wars: a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books*.

meant that masters of the game would then need only one miniature each to face off on the battlefield.

The developments in both the content (specialized heroes) and materials (growing rules supplementing the physicality of the models) eventually led to a final tipping point: the elaborate models and crafted miniatures were no longer necessary. All each master player needed was a sheet of paper that delineated the particular powers of his or her hero and a handful of dice, and any duel could be settled without resorting to physical models at all. In other words, the pen-and-paper rules had outgrown the physical models. In 1974, Gygax and Arneson published a set of rules for players who wanted to skip the models all together and get right to being powerful heroes in an imaginary world of magic and monsters. Enter *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The central limitation of this origin may not be immediately obvious, but in the transformation from miniatures-and-models to pen-and-paper, *D&D* internalized a rather rigid, objectivist<sup>24</sup> view of meaning as Symbolic representation and manipulation alone. Every miniature and obstacles that constituted the physical war-game was slowly replaced with a Symbolic rule, and piece by piece an abstract system reproduced the tactile figurines and modeled terrain. Every object (character, monster, weapon, wall) in *Dungeons & Dragons* functions as a Symbol with a fixed value, a simulacrum of the once-physical miniature, and every possible action in the game corresponds to some movement or manipulation upon those Symbolic objects. This reproduces exactly the two vectors of meaning that Salen and Zimmerman described: signs with inherent Symbolic value within a grammar of rules, and signs that represent imaginary game-world objects and items to the players. What makes tabletop role-playing so abstract is that this second vector of representation happens without moving pictures on a screen and is for the most part imaginary or verbal.

If we call these defined entities *objects* and these delimited actions *commands*, then you have a reasonable facsimile of a software programming language. Imagine

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<sup>24</sup> I use the term “objectivist” here following George Lakoff’s (1988) critique of “objectivist cognition.” Throughout this dissertation we find the hobgoblin of dualism concealing itself within both idealist and objectivist constructions.

playing *Pac-Man* in an arcade in the 1970s. There are a fixed number of commands (up, down, left, right) and a fixed number of entities (Pac-Man himself, ghosts, walls, pellets, fruit, power pellets). The entire game is then the “free movement” within this fixed ontology, this fixed semantic system. The game is fun as a challenging practice, a performance of mastery not wholly unlike athletic performances; but there is no interpretation, no poetics, no role-playing, no particularly noteworthy immersion that would evince any similarities with *Dungeons & Dragons*. Though we can retroactively narrativize our experience of playing a game such as *Pac-Man* by highlighting the dramatic moments of emergent contest and organizing them within a narrative structure, we could do the same with a game of *Tetris* (see Murray 1998). And who would at first consider *Tetris* and *Dungeons & Dragons* analogous games either?

As it turns out, just like *Pac-Man* and *Tetris*, *Dungeons & Dragons* was built to be a world-independent, closed-system game, a Symbolic representation of earlier forms. Put properly in formalist terms, *Dungeons & Dragons* is not a game of storytelling or role-playing but an *imaginary* tabletop war-game. Moreover, one could just as easily complicate the issue one step further by figuring *D&D* as an imaginary video game. That players have instrumentalized the basic mechanics of the game to function as a storytelling game for almost 50 years is a testament to the power of poetics.

### *An Imaginary Board Game*

The hardest part about learning a new tabletop role-playing game is acclimating to the specific ontology the game-system demands. In a video game the software dictates according to fixed rules where walls are, where the avatar can move and how fast, what the player must do to impact and be effectual in the world, etc. In a tabletop role-playing game, the players themselves must learn the complex rules and equations that determine the “brute facts” of the game-world. This entails not only learning the algorithms but also knowing when to apply them. Every single turn the player takes in a tabletop role-playing game presents a “story problem” for the group to quantify and resolve. The players must

remember where the walls are, what a wall “means” in the system, and what happens if their characters bump into one.

Consider a game such as chess. Each of the six pieces/types is a semantic entity with a specific value within the grammar of chess constituted only by two qualities: its starting position on the board and how it can move on any given turn. Each piece/token has an estimable value at any given point in the game based on the current “state of affairs” in the game and the possible imagined futures projected by the two players. Chess has a very simple ontology, but the game supports notoriously broad domains of strategy. Before one learns how to arrange the board at the beginning of the game and how each piece can move, she cannot be said to know “how to play” chess.

Tabletop role-playing games mostly suffer from the opposite notoriety. Each entity has dozens of qualities that afford value within a surprisingly complicated system of operations. For example, the following is a “stat block” for a *Giant* from a *Pathfinder* sourcebook (Shel 2013: 61):

**GIANT**

**XP** 1,600

NE Large humanoid (giant)

**Init** –1; **Senses** low-light vision; **Perception** +6

**Defense**

**AC** 16, touch 8, flat-footed 16 (–1 Dex, +8, –1)

**Hp** 57 (6d8+30)

**Fort** +7, **Ref** +1, **Will** +6

**Offense**

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** club +10 (1d8+7)

**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.

**Special Attacks** Gale Breath (See below)

**Statistics**

**Str** 25, **Dex** 8, **Con** 20, **Int** 7, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 9

**Base Atk** +4; **CMB** +12 (+14 bull rush); **CMD** 22 (24 vs. Bull rush)

**Feats** Awesome Blow, Improved Bull Rush, Power Attack

**Skills** Intimidate +4, Perception +6, Survival +6 (+10 in snow)

**Racial Modifiers** +4 Climb (when climbing rocks), +4 Survival (in snow)

**Languages** Giant

**Ecology**

**Environment** cold hills and mountains

**Organization** solitary, pair, gang (3–5), or clan (6–16)

**Treasure** standard

Special Abilities

**Gale Breath (Su)** Every 1d4 rounds as a full-round action, a [giant] can draw in a mighty breath and expel it outward in a 30-foot cone. Targets within 10 feet of the origin of this cone must succeed at a DC 18 Strength check or be knocked prone. Those who succeed at the check or are standing farther away from the [giant] treat the effects of the gale breath as a *gust of wind* spell.

Rather than two qualities (a starting point on the board, and a single allowed command), the *Giant* above has no less than 30 specific qualities that constitute its identity in the game. Each of these qualities is an affordance of Symbolic value waiting to be leveraged according to “the rules” of the game.

And “the rules” are purely constitutive rules just like most board games and all video games, although unlike these other games, the tabletop role-playing game is markedly imaginary. The “analog excess” that differentiates tabletop role-playing games from their video game counterparts is tied up in their imaginary nature, and I argue that it is only by taking advantage of that imaginary nature that players can make poetic use of the system itself.

### **A Broken Video Game That Works**

The truth is that *Dungeons & Dragons* can be captivating, enthralling, engrossing. Hobbyists have studied its systems and enjoyed its worlds for decades, generations. My argument here is not that *D&D* is a bad game, only that it is not out of the box a role-playing game. However, as I will point out here, because *Dungeons & Dragons* contains the “analog excess” that video games lack, it can still be made to *function* as a role-playing game in the hands of creative players.

In other words, players can do *more* with the constitutive game-system of *D&D* than make a drinking game out of it or gamble on it. *Dungeons & Dragons* lets us see how the entire system can be toyed with. There are three central features of the genre that make this grammar-level toying possible:

8. Applying “the rules” to resolve player actions is a process fraught with interpretation and inconsistency. This might be the biggest “public secret” or “disavowal” in tabletop gaming, that the rules are rarely applied “objectively” and that they would be terribly tyrannical if they were.
9. No group of players can embody “complete knowledge” of the rules, which means any given rule or value will come into play only when someone remembers it, and then only *how* someone remembers it.
10. Even if the rules were applied to the letter, they are buggy and disconnected. Certain supplemental books rewrite old rules, others try to patch over incomplete rules, and yet others are caught translating between versions of the same rule.

Much of the creative work of the game comes from linking an evaluation of the suggested make-believe with an appropriate semantic operation contained in one of the rules. The translation between open-ended make-believe and the closed system is an alchemy that every group executes in their own way. Sometimes the strips of fantasy narrative can get caught up in the cogs of the machine in interesting ways. Players toy with the game because they *have* to, but sometimes making the game actually work is the part of the fun.

### **Multiplying Symbolic Affordances**

If anyone attempted to play *Dungeons & Dragons* with machine-like precision “right out of the box,” it would crash. The system works as a role-playing game only because it is too unwieldy to implement intact, and each group inevitably invents their own rules to patch things with their own chewing gum. It only works when it is toyed with, but this “broken video game” might not need fixing.

Those who publish *Dungeons & Dragons* and similar purely Symbolic role-playing games eventually realize that the rules are incomplete, disjointed, and buggy. Unfortunately, their repeated response to this is to add more Symbolic rules. *D&D* has gone the way of LEGO blocks: where the point of the game was once to use the basic structures of it to build whatever you imagined, the expectation shifted to include increasingly specific and derived structures that now refigure the nature of the structures as meaningful in themselves, as having Iconic (LEGO) or Symbolic (*D&D*) value in themselves. Natural and player-driven *affordances* are replaced with predefined *purposes*. As the theory went, to become more mature, more sophisticated, more powerful, the game had to grow more predefined.

Bear in mind that for 14 years, *Dungeons & Dragons* had only one command: attack. When the game was first released players could literally do nothing else in the game with any meaningful consequences. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* added “non-weapon proficiencies” in 1988, which amounted to a fixed list of skills that operated similarly to attacking. If a player wanted to make-believe an action for her player-character within the story of the game, it would be *absolutely meaningless* if it could not be made equivalent to one of the listed skills. What results is that playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, even in 5<sup>th</sup> edition released in 2014, resembles playing an *imaginary* board or video game: the player selects an object to affect and chooses a command from a set list with which to target it.

The game worked for 14 years without anything else. The wizard and later the elf could cast a spell, but that occurred automatically; and rogues could “disarm traps,” but this amounted to a single perfunctory role at each new hex on the map. That players attempted and accomplished other feats was largely due to ingenuity and innovation, to toying.

When I play *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* with the *Dorks*, who would never admit to toying, I am always getting myself into trouble. While I acclimate to the system well enough, it feels constricting when any fudging or smudging of “the rules” is outlawed. The initial strips of fantasy narrative I imagine and hope to add to the story are

largely outside the bounds of the possible commands. For example, because flipping over a table has no real consequence in a game like *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, nobody ever does it. In all of the bar fights and ballroom brawls that have ever occurred in my twenty years playing the game, I have never seen anyone flip over a table. An iconic moment from any Western gunfight is lost on the game.

The solution for the publishers was to add more rules about “taking cover” and “environmental armor” to later editions of the game, but such additions do not fix the essential problem. The player still has to *first* ascertain what imaginary actions carry Symbolic value in the closed system of the game and *then* weave her make-believe. It works backwards and precludes poetics. In fact, the more semantic objects and operations that are added to the game, the less space free make-believe has to manifest itself in the gaps.

### ***Make-Believe as Pure Pageantry***

Not only is there a problem with Symbolic commands overriding open-ended make-believe, there often arise situations when make-believe becomes absolutely irrelevant once the Symbolic system is invoked.

“Shit. Can I roll for Diplomacy?”

Russell holds his face still for a minute, eyeing the other players, wondering if he will get away with it. He slaps his forehead to confess his shame and pantomimes a hellish scream. The rest of the *Hicks* laugh, having all been in this position before. The Diplomacy skill built into the *Dungeons and Dragons 3.5* allows a player to calculate a probability of success according to “the rules” and then simply roll the die to determine if he can talk himself out of a dangerous situation. There is no actual role-playing required; it was literally written out of the game.

The scene is familiar to any later-edition *D&D* gamer, when for one reason or another you must resort to the “get out of role-playing free” card and use the dice to extricate yourself from some tricky encounter.

The sad consequence of this is that all make-believe becomes not only unnecessary, but also entirely extraneous to the game. It is no wonder Gary Alan Fine found the performative and theatrical parts of the game unimportant (1983).

### **What Remains to Toy With?**

The desire to socialize in a particular way comes first, and the game is picked up as a means toward that end. Walter Benjamin reminds us of the body that instigates play: “A child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wants to play with sand, and so he turns into a baker; he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or a policeman” (2005: 115). And some children like math, like keeping records, like tweaking. I suggest that the central part of the constitutive keying that remains formally open to toying is the customization of the Symbolic values attached to the player-characters.

Many gamers find the esoteric rules and procedures of tabletop role-playing pleasurable in themselves: collecting booty, recording inventory, optimizing weapons, calculating bonuses, tracking stats, etc. And it is this corpus of tasks that come from the *constitutive* rules of the game. That this function is entirely outside the activity of the game is worth point out.

To be sure, many gamers who enjoy *Dungeons & Dragons* absolutely love this element of mechanical optimization, but just as many despise it. The point remains: if we imagine that these rules *are* the role-playing game, then we are left with studying systems and activation. Just as the fun in poker happens around the constitutive rules, so too the fun of role-playing happens around the systems of representation while at the same time being dependent on them. Studying games on one level alone will limit any application of games studies in social theory, and it will provide poor metaphors or schemas for understanding everyday life.

## **V. THE NARRATIVE KEYING**

I agree in one sense with Jennifer Grouling Cover's (2010) argument that a specifically *narrative* keying arises in tabletop role-playing. While I would not attempt to extricate the narrativizing that happens during a player's turn from the other processes of translation and presentation, I see narrativizing play a major role in the hobby when gamers reflect on earlier gaming sessions. Reliving previous adventures—or even pausing during play to rekey around narrativizing—can take up as much time as the other keys for players, and this reflective form of keying seems less studied by scholars. The importance of players revising and honing a singular narrative—one that inevitably grows similarly to any “the one that got away” tale—is an interesting process that has many implications outside the world of gaming.

However, in contrast to Cover, I argue that the narrative produced will always include the entire frame, not simply the imagined worlds, heroes, and events. This third keying will necessarily be a translation of the ongoing game, which includes at least two other forms of keying. What Cover might see as a negotiation or arbitration *between* the two previous keyings, I see as a third transformation that affords more opportunities for toying and another medium of potential poetics. Moreover, I do not see the purpose of narrativization rooted in producing a pleasurable or meaningful narrative; rather, I value the processes and mechanisms of narrativizing in themselves, as small moments of potential poetics, when the story is open and alive, testing out new directions, moving in and out—being toyed with.

A tabletop role-playing game is not necessarily the only way to produce a compelling story, but it is a good way to experience rewards in the micro-moments of motive, decision, and arbitration that occur when people tell stories together. It is a process that affords more of these meaningful moments than other games and other methods of storytelling. That players attach so much value to the resulting narrative is not surprising, but it takes only surface scratching to uncover where the deeper value comes from. Like Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, it is not the actual character of choice that is eventually chosen that matters—rendering the “less traveled” evaluation entirely moot—but that one choice was chosen, and life is forever different. I argue here that it is the

social play of choice, risk, chance, competition, creation that makes the storytelling fun, not necessarily the resulting narrative.

### **Good Story Not The Goal**

There are at least three solid clusters of evidence against a view of tabletop role-playing that puts too much value in the resulting narrative of the play. I would argue that these clusters incorporate several elements and work just as well as evidence against a view that emphasizes the creation of a particularly interesting or beautiful fantasy realm as the purpose of play.

### ***Mismatched Drama***

It becomes clear after only cursory reflection that the moments in the game most fun to play are not necessarily the parts of the narrative that are most dramatic. There is a marked disconnect between drama in the frame and drama in the fantasy realm. Of course there are times when overlap occurs, and veteran game-masters will likely plan with great care for that to happen. In fact, that it takes such careful planning to match them up reinforces my point. Drama emerges from all corners and all keys; narrative has no monopoly on swelling affect.

With the *Townies* in Indiana, I spend an entire night of dramatic and fulfilling role-playing in which our player-characters do nothing but build a hideout. What would be covered by a four-minute montage in any self-respecting film took six hours of careful rolling, drawing, designing, and fussing. We had major dramatic moments that focused on the second keying of “quantifiable outcomes” and calculations.

The *Hicks* can and regularly do spend entire sessions with their player-characters undertaking harrowing adventures and epic quests of god-slaying and world-saving, but many of these nights feel entirely mundane and dull at the level of the frame.

### ***Mutually Exclusive Accounts***

Another thorn in the side of perspectives that privilege the resulting narrative is the simple fact of mutually exclusive accounts existing in the same group (and the same

individual). The activities of making narrative choices and trying out narrative directions are largely more fun than remembering the final decisions made. For example, the *Techies* ceaselessly argue about what occurred in the session before, and these arguments end when they agree not on the arc of the narrative but what was happening *just before* the current moment. The course of the story will likely be rewritten throughout the course of the current session as well so there is no need to make things official.

In a related vein, any “big fish” tale needs to grow and change over time, and it is the process of the telling that is fun to perform and fun to observe. Somebody recounting the same details later would be pointless. If the narrative were fixed, it would never need to be recalled.

### ***Random Survival***

Role-players who have been playing for several years, especially those familiar with early versions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, rarely hesitate to jump right in and start swinging in whatever direction presents itself. This does not come from cavalier personalities, but emerges as a condition of the game itself. In early editions of *D&D*, a player-character took all of five minutes to create, and she could just as easily die in four. There was less of an attachment to new player-characters when those games dominated the hobby; I have played upwards of four player-characters in a single gaming session and still ended the night with death. These characters needed no backstories or personalities: those things were meant to evolve over time as memories, auras, experiences grow. This echoes my earlier point about the fate of poetics when structures become to fully formed.

In all of the above instances, the narrative account of those sessions is somehow dramatic and engaging. Even when the diegesis of the game-world is dull, the overlapping lusory keyings of the frame are exciting enough to render the final transformation also exciting. What this means is that the narrative key works on the frame as a whole, not just as a representation of arc of the diegesis.

### **Poiesis in Detritus**

The narrative key seems to function another way in tabletop role-playing as well. There is a more remote narrativity that enacts precisely the same key, but does so at a temporal remove. If the narrative key does engage the entire frame of play, then it is easy to imagine the translation on a broader scale. That the process of play exhibits vast poetic toying with performance and systems has been argued, but I feel that a similar toying can happen later with the detritus gaming produces. This keying still operates on the frame, but now the frame is longer. I suggest here that a temporally remote narrative keying may illuminate an affordance of tabletop role-playing that might even work as *poiesis*.

The traces of play that role-playing produces are vast: game-master notes, drawings, working calculations, diagrams, maps, piles of scratch paper: The record amounts to a bricolage of marks and markings that Index long-absent moments, images, affects, and vectors. I suggest that, just like a work of art, these records elicit reflection and contemplation; they can be regularly gone back to and re-interpreted. It may be through embracing the under-defined meaningfulness of actual playfulness that activities of play can then be made and remade as needed.

When I help Trash prepare for a night with the *Hicks*, I see him digging through his old box of scraps. He flips through the pages of an old notebook, and I can visibly detect the change of mode, of mood. When I ask him what some of the notes mean, his inability to explain the different scribbles and markings frustrates him, which makes sense because I was asking him to translate a complicated text into easy Symbols.

“It’s just,” he pauses, “I can remember each and every moment. I can remember 9<sup>th</sup> grade Howard asking whether every single elf we met looked like Kathy Ireland.” Importantly, he is still trying to rekey both the regulative and constitutive keys. He flips the page and almost shouts at me, “This was a huge battle with Kathy Ireland-looking elves!”

### **Facebook Timeline**

In the summer of 2012, Facebook made a fundamental change to its user interface by releasing the new “Timeline” layout. The changes to the popular social network

refigured the user's page as a deliberate representation of his or her life. Rather than a virtual corkboard or calendar, upon which timely bits of news and mundane updates were communicated as needed, the page now acted as a kind of manicured scrapbook open to public view. Users were encouraged to curate and edit this representation in acts of self-performance. For instance, you could now enlarge certain pictures over others, feature major events more loudly than mundane activities, add notes to particular entries, etc. Changes in romantic relationships and employment positions, at one time simply displayed along with other static biographical information in a separate page, were now pushed front-and-center as meaningful "Milestones" in the story of your life. The site was performing interpretation for us.

While ostensibly a cosmetic change only, Timeline marked an entirely new purpose for the social network. No doubt recent usage data had prompted Facebook to follow what it perceived to be the new role of the site in the lives of its users. No longer a tool of communication or a record of correspondence alone, the user's page was now a *thing* in itself. No longer simply a trace, it would become an object open to aesthetic interpretation and aesthetic curating. *You and a friend are attending a concert tonight?* The site searches through your pictures, locates your history with that friend, figures how important he or she is to you based on how the two of you interact on the site, and potentially adds the "event" to your Timeline on your behalf. Facebook was no longer content to be your desk *calendar*; it wanted to be your *diary*, your *scrapbook*.

That many users resisted this change enough to see Facebook roll back the feature piece by piece over the next two years is interesting in its own right, but the struggle is relevant here because it demonstrates what happens when the *trace* of social activity is confused *with* social activity. One could easily psychologize why Facebook appears so desperate to insist that using the site constitutes meaningful social activity in itself, but we can imagine what convinced Facebook that the change was a good idea. I cannot deny digging through old posts on Facebook now and then: opening pictures from five years ago, adding comments to long-dead threads, "liking" the mention of a remembered event. And of course all that usage was tracked and interpreted.

### *Adventurous Exploration*

We have all at one time or another pored over an old calendar or datebook only to re-imagine the days recorded in jot and tittle on the pages. There is something magical in the act of interpretation that makes flipping through a marked-up calendar very different from re-reading an old diary. The diary is already an interpretation, a Symbolic gloss on how life was, but the calendar acts as so many Indices that await interpretation and re-interpretation. That date, a scratched deadline, birthdays, appointments with lost friends, all those concerts—a messy calendar provides inexhaustible new meanings in a very different way than a diary does.

I remember crawling through my attic as a child and coming across long swaths of one-yard-wide paper that my dad had saved from his years at Michigan State University from 1968-1972. Once pinned up on dormitory walls and used as message boards for coordinating activities, recording phone messages, and voicing complaints, the paper triggered for me the specter of my father's youth. I imagined which handwriting belonged to him and whether he had drawn any of the lewd illustrations that filled much of the scroll.

## Chapter 5: Murder-Mystery Events as Small-Group Alternate Reality Games

I previously characterized tabletop role-playing as a form of make-believe that produces the glimmer of a virtual world as players toy with a game-system and in so doing confront virtual objects. The more intense and engrossing the make-believe, the more these virtual objects come to frustrate the will of the players and participate as any other object would in ongoing sociality. In other words, to the degree that players actively *shift* into the frame of the role-playing game, they step into a new ground, a new atmosphere, where mental objects can bear the weight of materiality. This chapter moves beyond imagined objects to imagined ontologies.

I argue here that the successful murder-mystery event demands a unique form of make-believe, one that evokes a similarly unique analog virtual world. Whereas tabletop games conjure virtual objects that demand a novel ontology to explore fully, the murder-mystery event works in reverse: it evokes a novel ontology through performance and thereby conjures a corollary virtual world into being. I might say that the performed ontology works like a negative pressure, creating a vacuum that draws the actual world up, outward, to distend in response. While language is tricky and metaphors necessarily abound, such a virtual world is only as magical as a vacuum, only as mystical as using the invisible power of the diaphragm to “levitate” water up a straw. The *Ski Lodge Murder* provides us our case study of a small-group alternate reality game that relies heavily on performative keying to charge the actual world and evoke the virtual—or not.

The current chapter begins with a discussion of the unfamiliar frame of the murder-mystery event and how groups of players typically get in key through ice-breaking lusory means and build their frame outwards (Section I). Following a setting of the scene, I take a step back to explain what goes into scattering lusory obstacles throughout the environment to aid in the keying (Section II). With the frame in place and the lusory goal of the murder made explicit, the event continues as players explore the environment, interact according to the lusory means available, and pursue gamed-defined as well as player-generated goals competitively (Section III). I then examine a few

common hiccups and hurdles that arise in such an unstable and unfamiliar frame, closing the chapter with a discussion of social poetics and what kind of virtual world might be said to emerge if/when such events succeed (Section IV).

## **Methods**

I participated in 13 murder-mystery events between October of 2010 and July of 2014, logging over 100 in-game hours. Of these 13 gaming events, I designed and hosted seven myself, five of them iterations the same game in the same location over the winter of 2013-2014. The other six consisted of two “dinner theater” events and four iterations of the same store-bought MME hosted by three different informants.

The central account of this ethnographic chapter draws on the fourth iteration of *The Ski Lodge Murder*, referencing other iterations where noted. References to *The Speakeasy Murder* will not distinguish between specific events, as the closed-system game plays out similarly in every event. The “dinner theater” events feature only once, but it was during such an event that I first realized the importance of rigorous keying for the participants.

### **I. EVERYTHING IS REAL BUT THE MURDER**

It is a Texas night in December, two hours west of Austin, and couples stir about the two-story cabin waiting on dinner and some ominous “event” that is promised to begin soon. Richard and I are cooking this dinner, and the Friday night festivities are about to begin. While the open-design ground floor fills with the smells of oregano and parmesan, giggles and dirty jokes escape the lofts set in either side of the great room. The couples fight over beds and bathrooms upstairs, and it looks like the two guests yet to arrive will be competing for space on the downstairs couches. The cabin could exist in a furniture catalog: exposed logs polished to shine, brushed aluminum appliances, several cow-skin rugs, themed rooms, and carefully staged magazine racks and bowls of plastic fruit. Our setting is already surreal, already a little fake. It belongs to Kelly’s parents, and

though they visit only once or twice a year, they maintain the cabin, grounds included, in photo-ready condition.

I choose this moment of chaotic unpacking just before dinner to strike, and all ten of the players, including the two I have yet to meet, receive their character biographies via email at the same time. The cabin is now officially a game. The boundaries are unknown. The facts are unknown. The future is unknown. But everyone knows that *something* is happening. Or already did happen. Or was about to happen. From this point on, the cabin is quickly enchanted as a gaming space as folks check their phones and open the attachments I just sent. Each player in turn pauses for a moment and wonders over the alternate reality that the group will slowly come to realize and perform has been presented, offered as a world—or not. Their every action is now potentially part of the game, and everyone begins to take measured steps. Nobody knows exactly what counts, what matters, what is the game and what is *merely* real life. Something has shifted.

Or so that is the goal.

### **The Novel Frame**

The email conjures our frame for the weekend, alerting everyone staying at the cabin that we are *doing a thing*, playing at somehow transforming or “rekeying” to one extent or another every activity to follow. From a game-as-system perspective, this is the moment when the system descends and replaces the actual world, marking off the environment and all ensuing activities as beholden to the Symbolic meaning of the system. However, a good murder-mystery event relies on blurry edges, on never officially constituting the boundaries of a system or the details of an overarching logic. Rather, the actual world retains its own norms, objects, and affordances while being forced to take on even more. Whatever changes to behavior or situations that might occur do so by means of an expansion of elements, not a reduction. Before the parlor game introduces the lusory goal of the mysterious murder, there is the addition of an ambiguous keying, of “a something afoot” that charges the space and confuses conventional expectations. It embodies a “more is less” dynamic.

### ***Something Missing***

At the cabin, Mara hangs her torso over the rough-cut railing of the “Seaside Loft,” one of the two rooms in the south wing of the cabin; the other has been coined the “Horse-track Room” by Kelly’s family. Mara looks down into the great room from above and lowers herself dangerously over the edge to get a look into the kitchen.

“Hey. Hey,” she calls.

I look up, but my poker face is already in place. She scrunches her nose at my lack of acknowledgement. “I think it happened,” she says, now more to the house than to me, and swings her body up over the railing to the loft. When her boyfriend, Keith, comes down the stairs a moment later, he is wearing an outfit inspired by a Duran Duran music video. Richard almost drops his drink, and we both shake our heads and laugh encouragingly at the commitment Keith has for the game. The 1980s are upon us.

That Mara and Keith are so keen to move things along is a great sign for things to come, as I am a little thrown off after the previous, lackluster weekend. This is my fourth time running the *Ski Lodge Murder* at Kelly’s cabin, and it is off to a suspiciously good start. Every event starts a little differently, and all of the usual social hiccups typically occur: someone wears the wrong clothes and feels uncomfortable the whole time, people show up late and disrupt the activities, folks take it too seriously or not seriously enough, “plus-ones” can feel neglected and derail the proceedings, technical difficulties force restarts and work-arounds, etc. So far, this run has been smooth.

### **Public Make-Believe**

Beyond the common interruptions and entanglements, there is a specific vulnerability in public play in the United States. Activities as undefined as weekend-long excursions into role-playing invoke a vague and unfamiliar frame that most players have trouble settling into: awkwardness, the death knell of the social. The murder-mystery weekend is a testament to the absolute awkwardness of rigorously unscripted social interaction.

Of the 70 or so players I run or attend murder-mystery events with, only nine have participated in one before. Touching base with as many players as I can in the following

years, not one has participated in another MME since. Tabletop role-playing games attract dedicated players, many of whom take up the game for hours at a time, several days a month, over the course of many years. Larger alternate reality games regularly bewitch players so completely that “chasing the dragon” is considered a “natural phase” at the close of any individual’s first game (Szulborski 2005b). In contrast, murder-mystery events work more like skydiving and other “bucket list” activities. Individuals try them once, and they rarely look back.

One Halloween per year is enough for most people, it seems.

Despite their close kinship to two engrossing and successful forms of gaming, murder-mystery events systematically and regularly fail. Why? As a halfway point between two superlatively captivating and engrossing forms of gaming, discovering the miscalculation in the common design of the murder-mystery event might elucidate its own character as well as those of its relatives. I explore more of the framing difficulties that regularly arise in such games later in the chapter (Section IV), but what needs making clear early in the analysis is that there is something tricky with murder-mystery events, something unique.

After participating in so many failed murder-mystery events as well as the rare success, I feel that the foundation of this precarious mode of social activity comes down to negotiating the frame. Before any social poetics or shifting ontologies can occur, everyone needs to be on the same page, a necessary condition of which is that the page exists in the first place.

### **A Touchy Frame**

Everyday life often goes on smoothly without local frames. We can do things within what Goffman calls “primary frameworks,” which require no negotiated script or pattern at all. These become such taken-for-granted structures that they function as “second nature” outside the individual’s perception. Proper ontologies, doxa, the models of natural science—we may acknowledge that certain orientations and understandings must be internalized to some extent for the individual to continue functioning in the

absence of other people. Moreover, social interactions can occur without frames as well. For example, I can wait in line at the post office to mail my brother a parcel, and I feel no responsibility to behave a certain way despite the fact that I have obviously been conditioned and socialized to the norms of culture. Again, when I stroll through the grocery store, I do not feel any particular expectations on my performance of self. These are of course in part a consequences of the privilege my unmarked body affords, but as simple examples they suffice.

By sending my email during a chaotic moment just before dinner, I am playing with everyone in the cabin on that December night. There is nothing afoot *yet*. Nothing has *happened* yet. The only change is that the group has now acknowledged that something is going to happen soon or that the something that is happening now will be happening *differently*. This is one of the strengths of Goffman's "key" to better represent Searle's "Context C:" even when players do not know what is happening, they can *know* that they do not know; this lack of being "in frame" can be felt. How does this tentative frame work?

If there is an arbitrary keying afoot, one that cannot be situated toward a goal or social purpose, towards a particular "line" or to advance a "footing," individuals will not maintain it for long (Goffman 1961). A continued expectation to key or perform can become boring as well as burdensome. Likewise, if there is a seemingly arbitrary fabrication afoot and no evident means to break out of it, then the frame becomes frustrating and burdensome. I want to suggest here that most murder-mystery events fail because they expect players to don and maintain a keying for its own sake without providing lusory goals to explore and/or expect players to take interest in a fabrication without providing any engaging lusory means to address it.

I say all this not to rush into the chapter's conclusions, but to lay a foundation for the experiment to come and to defend the medium for any readers who may have had dull or empty experiences in the past. Yes, the vast majority of murder-mystery events are either hollow pageantry with no real game, or boring games that amount to the social equivalent of filling out a worksheet to get to the end.

Taking this diagnosis to heart, my ethnography will look at the keying of the make-believe and the pursuit of cracking the fabrication together. The frame as a whole is at stake; the overall party or weekend must be entertaining and lively if we are to find a virtual world. Both tabletop role-playing and online virtual worlds have no official lusory goal, but they buzz with activity. Murder-mystery events can only sustain such a world when everything goes just right. To have any chance of success, the host or hostess must sustain the key and the fabrication with adequate lusory means right from the beginning. There need to be *toys*.

According to Bernard Suits (1978), a game governs activity whereby players attain a prelusory goal (some “state of affairs” in the actual world) by donning a lusory attitude (the poetic, playful “contest and display” of Johan Huizinga) that promises/contracts to—through some available lusory means (props, rules, activity, dice, etc.)—regard the attainment of lusory goals (the “quantifiable outcomes” of a game) as *equivalent to* the original, prelusory goals. Every game is an alchemy, a sleight of hand that swaps lead for gold.

The magic, then, occurs within the lusory means. We might describe the lusory means of a typical murder-mystery event as a complicated interactivity characterized by individuals role-playing fictional characters in a thematic environment according to a set of rules that govern how players are to treat specific objects of that environment as meaningful signs within the world of the game. The best murder-mystery events will feature outward-facing rules that allow player-generated meanings to operate *within* and *through* the game, while a poor event will rely on a game-as-system approach that figures play as “free movement” within this system.

### **The Lusory Means**

The emails I send at 7:00PM contain a brief re-introduction to the event, setting up the nature of the key and offering backstory for the fictional “Class Trip” event, and also each player’s fictional character biography. The biographies include a 200-word

backstory for each character to explain his or her personality and quirks, details that might be typical of a character sketch for any other murder-mystery event.

At Mara's summons, Kelly and Kyra come running down the stairs, scrambling to find their phones to open up the email. The cabin is from now on keyed as a ski lodge in 1985, the site of Bedford High School's "Class of 1985 Senior Ski Trip." After each player reads his or her character biography, there are twenty or thirty minutes of open keying. The players don these personas and poke about in the new social environment, learning names, making connections, performing cursory investigations into who knows what about whom, testing the edges of play, etc.

For example, Richard is Hans Kier, a German foreign exchange student; Kyra and Aleya are Sam and Alex, two athletic sisters on the school volleyball team; Hanson is Terd Kool, the "big man on campus" and stereotypical stud; Kelly is Rhoda, the shy book-nerd who has promised herself to break out of her shell on the trip; etc.

Importantly, all of the roles are open to interpretation, intentionally "generic" and stereotypical, which encourages the players to perform around shared iconic images rather than work towards faithful or accurate portrayals. This lack of realism in the character biographies is precisely what makes the personas *toys*. Such personas, as the very stuff of the game's keying, can then afford and encourage poetic interpretation and social negotiation from the very beginning. The personas work like Barthes' (1972) "building blocks" or the early, five-minute player-characters of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The player will come to embody his or her character by toying with a persona. In other words, the character does not exist yet, and the player has a role in defining who he or she is: genuine poetics.

Conveniently, I am the Class President who planned the ski trip and works as liaison with the facility. My social role as host in the actual world keys easily into my persona in the game, which makes my giving instructions and guidance an ideal luscious double.

### ***Individual Lusory Goals***

However, we are not playing at open-ended make-believe alone. We are playing a game, and games have rules—sorta. The introduction of implied lusory goals into the character biographies acts to structure the event and offer direction for players, which renders the ensuing *keyful* behavior purposeful and deliberate. The other designers and I offer meaningful dynamics between and among characters with the inclusion in each character bio of three Hints, three Missions, and three Reactions.

The Hints on the character bios point players towards particular locations or objects of the environment that contain Clues, our Symbolic objects. Players will likely check these out and explore a bit, but without the system in place yet few of the Clues take on much meaning.

The Missions are specific lusory goals for players to pursue throughout the night. These all present a possible “Pass or Fail” outcome and debut as more or less meaningful depending on the character. For example, Rhoda has a Mission to “Get a neck and shoulder rub from Terd and offer him a kiss.” If, at the end of the weekend, any other players remember this event happening, whoever played Rhoda gains a point. Relying on the “quantifiable outcomes” of Salen and Zimmerman (2003) can work within a games-as-toys approach when such values are built into the otherwise actual and ongoing social interactions. Though each Mission will take on one of two Symbolic values (“point” or “no point”) at a later moment in the game, this evaluation comes about only after the Mission animated the player to scheme, seduce, trick, lie, hide, perform, etc. earlier in the weekend. In other words, meeting the lusory goals requires open-ended activity outside any Symbolic systems or demands.

The Reactions are tied to the Missions of other characters. In a web of cause-and-effect, players will be acting and reacting over the course of the entire weekend. This web is non-linear, with many beginning points. For example, Paola’s character Tory has a Reaction to “Throw a fit when Big Mike openly flirts with Alex and chuck food on the floor in rage.” This responds to a Mission on Big Mike’s character bio and subsequently triggers another Reaction from Rhoda.

Such a chain will encourage multiple and overlapping concentric keyings as the players go about their purposeful performances. To recognize behavior as part of a character's Mission is important because one never knows if such performances might trigger a Reaction; the melodrama and heightened "donning" that occurs must then Index that a Mission or Reaction is afoot. The smaller performances become small keyings of their own and operate to reinforce or reinvigorate the overall keying of the 1985 Class Trip.

Keep in mind, we still have yet to introduce any *constitutive* rules at all. The Mission–Reaction chain is a series of "If X, Then Y" rules that only become regarded as a system in the mind of the interpreter. They exist outside the grammar or matrix of the game that serves to provide the Symbolic value of the Clues. So far, all of the character descriptions and suggested relationships are part of a playful keying with only hints of the system of Symbolic value to come. That players are interacting towards purposes they do not yet fully understand only works to heighten the play and keep everyone's ears open. They do not yet know what potential Symbols exist so the activity is purposive without being parsed

In the hour between my sending the email and dinner being served, every participant stays in key and goes about purposive lusory activity that provides actual moments of humor, flirtation, trickery, and learning. The frame has instigated new modes of interaction, a new medium.

Paola and her boyfriend Forrest arrive before dinner as well and get into character. Paola plays Tory, the tough girl who rides a motorcycle to school, and Forrest plays Big Mike, the bully of Bedford High.

### ***The Other Murder***

On the other hand, the keyed social activity of *The Speakeasy Murder* is either hollow pageantry or direct inquiry. The only clues are "pieces of information," which means all evidence comes in the form of symbols, words, representations of an imagined

and untouchable world. Players are generally given character bios before the game begins so they may dress the part, and the core version of the game features a cast of almost 20 characters. Of course, only six or seven of those have anything unique about them, including full names; unsurprisingly, these are the same six or seven characters who contribute to the plot. A similar phenomenon existed in professional wrestling in the 1980s: the wrestler with the longest name and the most unique costume always won.

In every case, the players spend less than thirty minutes sharing information and swapping details contained in their bios to help make sense of the situation. Because the frame offers no other lusory goals, the players seem to take “sharing information” as the default activity. We try to repeat as much information as we can remember from our bios. It is all very rote, and soon the playful air grows stale. Players become guests once more, and they move back to their original cliques and actual friends. Everyone stays vaguely in key, speaking in 1920s slang and performing towards iconic types as much as they know how, but mostly everyone waits for the host or hostess to offer the next prompt.

### **Constitutive Rules: How To Solve A Murder**

At the cabin, dinner is served promptly at 8:00PM. We eat and chat until everyone is just about finished, and then I trigger the second major event of the night: “Reach under your seats and pull out the blindfolds. Put them on and imagine with me...”

With the players blindfolded, I describe their first evening out on the slopes after dinner, rekeying the dinner we just had as though it had taken place several hours earlier in the night. While offering the exposition, I am also running around the lower floor of the cabin hiding last-minute props and making intentional noises in various places both to entertain and dissemble. Like Tim Curry from *Clue* (Lynn 1985), I scurry about setting the trap and filling in the performers. After two or three minutes of exposition, I ask them to remove the blindfolds. Just when most of the eyes are on me, I continue, “And then you all meet up in the lobby just as I...” And then I drop dead.

The Terd player-character has a Reaction listed on his bio telling him, “When the murder occurs, take the lead and investigate. Without your leadership, where would these

kids be?” My toppled body has a small pink note on it, the first Clue of the game. My role is mostly finished, and, stepping out of character, I get up and find a seat to observe.

### ***The Grammar***

To solve the crime, the players must uncover whichever character had all three of Motive, Means, and Opportunity to have killed the Class President. The game is structured so some characters have Motives right from the beginning (listed as Hints on other character’s bios), while others do not. Likewise with Means and Opportunity. Different murder weapons are introduced as props as the night progresses, and facts come to light that attach them to certain characters—or not. If you have an alibi that lasts, you are kept off the list of suspects for now. These will be augmented, interrogated, and revised as the events of the party go on; Clues can function to “switch on” or “switch off” any of the categories. These categories make piecing the murder together a process of innocence elimination: whichever character ends up with Motive, Means, *and* Opportunity is guaranteed to be the guilty party. There can be no “false positives” in *The Ski Lodge Murder*, and—as in any 1980s crime comedy—circumstantial evidence is all we need for the most part.

Solving the murder becomes the central lusory goal, and we add more as we develop the game. By the fifth iteration, there is: one prize for whoever solves the murder first, another for whoever turns out to be the murderer (which encourages an entirely opposite strategy), another for the first person to complete all three Missions on his or her bio, another for whoever first completes all three Reactions, and so on. On the second weekend, the players created two of their own rewards as well determined by ballot: “Best Backstab” and “Worst Backstab.”

The personalities and prelusory goals of the players can work through this system however they might. Some players prefer certain prizes to others, and so toy with the game in one direction. Other players maintain actual alliances and rivalries and toy with the game to attain those. In any case, there is bound to be conflicting and engaging

agendas throughout the weekend. The game is not a different world to enter but a different way to participate in our world.

### *Clues as Toys*

Other than the very first Clue, the note pinned on my body after I key my death, none of the other Clues are as conspicuous. Players will discover them inadvertently as the weekend goes on, be pushed towards them by the Hints and Missions on their character bios, and even hide them when needed to eliminate their Symbolic weight.

In fact, there are no more rules needed at all. The second Clue the players will find—based on the first Reaction written onto Rachel’s character of Diana—explains the rules to them and procedures of the game, all this from within the game itself. The Reaction leads Rachel to a Clue I hid in her luggage. As captain of the debate team, Diana fancies herself a lawyer and shares with the group her *How To Catch a Killer Notebook*, which appears as a manila envelope containing all the materials and procedures the players need to keep track of details for themselves. Also, should any other player at some point look at the manila envelope, they will see a pink note on the back (Clue 3!) that reads:

DIANA HAS MEANS: Diana is trained in the ways of the law. If she wanted to kill the Class President, you bet she’d know just how to do it, and without anyone being the wiser. Well, you won’t let her make a fool out of you!

(If you are not Diana, take this note and share it with whomever you like in public or secret. If you are Diana, you must leave this note on the envelope and the envelope in plain view, but you’ll probably want to keep it facedown. Just saying.)

Every discovered Clue comes written on a deep pink notecard and does one of the following: switch “on” or “off” one specific category of one particular character, switch “on” or “off” a specific category on a character chosen by the person to find the Clue, or act as a “switch on” or “switch off” veto power that can be used publicly according to set parameters.

All Clues come as notes with exposition that clearly mark the operation, translating the object into a Symbol. For example, two early Clues are:

The Muddy Boots: Hidden in the environment for anyone to find, but also alluded to in a Reaction demanded by Keith's character Nigel.

NIGEL HAS OPPORTUNITY: These are Nigel's muddy boots, and it looks like they match a set of footprints leading up the lodge that were made around the time of the murder. Somebody has some explaining to do!

(If you are not Nigel, you must publicly declare the facts of this Clue. If you are Nigel, you must share with two other people the facts of this Clue in secret.)

The Tissues: Three character bios contain Hints that point the character to a box of tissues in one of the bathrooms.

OFFER AN ALIBI: Somebody was down in the casita bathroom crying all evening during the murder. Who was it? You know! And you would testify to that effect in court.

(Take this box of tissues and the note. Whenever another character is publicly granted Opportunity for the murder of the Class President, you can cover for him or her. Just this once!)

Not all the Clues are in place on the first night, which ensures the murder is not solved too quickly. Likewise, more than half of the Missions and Reactions cannot be triggered until an official event happens the next morning. The first, second, and third iterations of *The Ski Lodge Murder* all have errors and mistakes that need the meddling fingers of the designer, but by the fourth iteration we have a smooth game. The fifth iteration is made up a few repeat players who realize that there is no "one true" murderer, and they keep so many Clues secret, we have a "stand-off" on Sunday morning. I will discuss how these Clues operate on and within the ongoing activity in Section IV.

### **Central Fabrications**

Finding out who the murderer is comprises the central fabrication within the realm of the game, and each player is attempting to get outside this central fabrication to

get “in on” the truth of the matter. Of course, this does not mean they will get out of the frame, which is the greater keying of the weekend as a 1985 Senior Class Trip. In fact, the fabrication only exists within the frame itself. If one gets out of key (stops make-believing we are in a 1980s ski lodge where a murder has taken place), the fabrication ceases to exist (you are no longer “in the dark” about anything).

While most of the lusory goals point in this direction, the tangled mess of interactivity allows for any number of smaller and player-driven fabrications to arise.

### ***Other Fabrications***

If there can be no smaller fabrications among the individual players, the game is less interesting. Most murder-mystery events will include what might be called “subplots” to the murder narrative, things that guide or instigate certain actions throughout the course of the night, giving the players more goals to reach. Of course it is best when the players invent their own machinations, plans, and rivalries. This is where role-playing gives way to toying, and meanings that the game *affords* but does not *assign* can be pursued and shared. To constitute a virtual world, the conjured totality must act as a platform capable of sustaining the players’ ongoing and exogenous frames and agendas.

*The Ski Lodge Murder* includes Missions and Reactions that serve to encourage smaller fabrications but mostly according to the designs of the players. For example, Forrest’s character Big Mike has a Mission to: “You are the drug dealer of Bedford High and you made the mistake of selling on someone else’s turf. You must switch clothes—swapping an ENTIRE outfit—with another character to hide from the local dealers who are after you.”

When Forrest sees this, he has to start working on softening people up right away. Just a strange request obviously marks itself as a Mission or Reaction of some kind, and players do not know right away if helping out Big Mike may have repercussions later. Forrest spends most of Friday night prodding Richard to swap clothes with him without getting anywhere. Richard (as Hans) has his own agenda, and resists. Later in the day on Saturday, Big Mike finally gets Hans to swap clothes, but only because Forrest has

offered to cat-sit for Rachel next month, persuading Rachel (now in her role as Diana) to help him convince Hans (portrayed by Richard, her real-life boyfriend) into swapping clothes. However, now Diana knows that Big Mike is the drug dealer even though Hans does not, a truth that Forrest has to monitor if he wants to reach other goals. Forrest and Rachel are now “in the know” where other player-characters are not, and later events will put strain on this fabrication.

The lusory and prelusory goals swirl seamlessly, and the operations of the game are so many overlain-but-actual operations. There need not be any true distinction between lusory and prelusory goals in a virtual world, precisely because the world functions to sustain all kinds of social activity (not just games). Constructing an environment with such a pervasive and integrated lusory attitude is a good step toward both conjuring a virtual world and hosting an event that does not bomb.

### ***Major Fabrication***

By the second iteration of *The Ski Lodge Murder*, we already feel that something is missing, and we add what I call the *major* fabrication, which is unrelated to the *central* fabrication of finding the murderer. The major fabrication, a truth I hide from the players at the beginning of the game, is that there are enough clues with enough valences of Symbolic interpretability that any one of the 10 characters can end up being the murderer. Clues are fun to write, and once we work out a system for keeping them integrated and smooth, we develop a system that includes Clues with player-driven interpretations and Indexical value.

We consider this more a “rule” of the game than a “fabrication,” and most players end up figuring this out at some point throughout the weekend. However, after the fifth iteration of the weekend, in which players who already know this “rule” participate with that knowledge from the very beginning, the knowledge has a dramatic affect on play. In fact, the “rule” of the game operates more like a “fact of the matter of the situation” that certain participants may or may not be privy to. It is a textbook fabrication in Goffman’s terms.

### **Activity Outside The Frame**

Starting with the second iteration of the game, from the moment Terd pulls the note off my chest, I stand up and take on the role of “The Class President’s Ghost,” offering answers here and there but mostly staying out of the way taking field notes. Anyone talking to me is then “keyed” as talking to a ghost, which leads to an entirely entertaining dynamic wherein anyone talking to me gets teased and jeered by everyone else. By the second morning, asking me a question or directly engaging with me at all more often than not triggers a mass response of one kind or another. It works similarly to yelling “O–H” in Columbus, OH, which invariably earns an “I–O” in reply.

The game provides sufficient lusory means and lusory goals to sustain a great deal of in-game activity, but there is no pressure or expectation to stay in key at all times. The weekend is long. After three hours of role-playing and performing, many of the first night’s Clues are found and Reactions made. People chill out, watch a movie, make snacks. However, the game is still afoot, dormant, like a bear trap. It keeps things lively without getting in the way.

During our third *Ski Lodge* weekend, Kelly and I are writing music for a friend, entirely unrelated to the *Ski Lodge* key. We pore hours into it as her co-workers likewise spend a great deal of time doing legitimate work. None of this gets in the way of the game, just as nothing in the game gets in the way of work. We still key, and we still live in the virtual “double” that does not *require* “code-“ or “frame-switching” so much as *afford* it. The virtual is alive so long as we adopt a particular attitude; it arises if we cross our eyes or hold our breaths.

### **Lusory Means in The Other Murder**

The fabrications of *The Speakeasy Murder* are multiple, but each is tied to a particular character or faction of characters. The players themselves have no role in deciding how the fictional characters are arranged. In other words, the game presumes a “social structure” that the players can act against but not “officially” change.

When I participate in my third iteration of *The Speakeasy Murder*, I am in Toledo, OH, I am on a date, but otherwise among strangers. I have played this particular MME

twice before with the same host as “practice” for studying the genre. Meeting this particular woman and getting invited to a MME is a nice coincidence six or seven months later, and I am eager to take notes for the first time and not have to half-host the event. I hear ahead of time that it is a 1920s theme, but I consider that one of the stock MME eras and think little of it.

As soon as I walk into the hostess’s house, I see the posters and decorations, all of which she has printed from her home computer after buying and downloading the same 90-page PDF my friend had the year before. I am “in the know” in a serious way, and I happen to be assigned a rather important character. I know from playing the game twice before that my character, the Sheriff, is a big decoy throughout most of the night before the real murderer is found.

Because I am portraying the Sheriff, I have to share agendas with the person portraying the crooked Mayor. I have nothing against the guy playing the Major, but my date and I promised “to be a team and work together to win this thing” in the car on the way there. When I tell her I know every single meaningful thing that will transpire and when, she becomes giddy and eager to impress her friends. However, there is no way for me to do anything with my character that is not scripted. Even if I do not disclose information I gather throughout the night with the Mayor, the “script” calls on me to do certain things at certain times, and the game only works if he has access to most of the information on my character bio. The game as “social structure” has assigned me an agenda I am supposed to role-play (or activate); my value is fixed.

This has two serious implications on the night. First, I cannot continue my prelusory goals of teaming up with my date. The game as a system demands that I adopt the agency and the goals determined by the system; the game demands that I “play straight” and follow the path laid out for me. In fact, the game would come to halt if any player strayed because the balance of the carefully constructed narrative would stop making sense. Second, even though I know the end, I can do nothing differently. As though reading a book or watching a film, the fact that I know who the killer is, when he

strikes, why, how—None of my prescience matters. In the land of the blind, the sighted man is no king at all; his vision is useless.

Whether I am a good player or a bad player does not matter. Even investigation or gathering information is a hit-or-miss endeavor in futility. The game has planned events and planned connections, and all of us go through the motions enacting the script. I can be creative with my performance and offer a heartfelt pageantry to the other players, but I cannot be poetic and have actual affect on the meaningfulness of what I do.

### ***Constitutive Rules in The Other Murder***

The rules of *The Speakeasy Murder* are simple. There is an indefinite amount of information on the central character bios, but only three facts matter. Lies abound, most players do not read their bios that closely, and everyone is presented with what seems like a random and cacophonous boom of rote facts upon entering conversation with anyone else. The game goes on for an hour or so before the host or hostess triggers the next event, which will occur according to script and purport to offer some new critical piece of information. This happens three or four times over the course of the night, and at the final event, the “clues” are laid out. There are four or five printed images from the PDF that represent “the clues that we should have uncovered.”

Each player is then given the chance to walk past the table and examine the artifacts as though taking a personal moment at a coffin. After every player has a chance, the host or hostess calls for the final event and passes out ballots on which every participants votes on categories such as “Best Costume,” “Best Actress,” etc. The final question asks for the name of the murderer. Following, the host or hostess tallies up the votes while everyone continues hanging out. Finally, a small award ceremony is held whereupon all is revealed.

The variety of awards are nice, but the “solution” to the murder hinges on one piece of information from one of the four printed clues: a small pair of initials that are listed in a bookie’s ledger. This one clue, combined with three pieces of information scattered about all of the character bios—the Deputy’s middle name, the fact that the

Deputy has a gun unlike that of the Sheriff, and some detail about the Deputy once dating another of the key characters—“proves” that the Deputy killed the husband of the woman who runs the speakeasy. *Voila*. That any number of other just as logical connections could have been just as loosely tied together from the accounts does not factor in: there is a “right” solution provided by the game that by chance entirely two or three people might latch onto by the end of the night.

In the four iterations of *The Speakeasy Murder* that I participate in, the number of winners is slim: two the first night, one the second, two the third, and three the fourth.

## **II. MURDER, WE WROTE**

In Texas, although the players are confronted with a fantastical murder only an hour after entering the game, I and my three collaborators have been living in this fictional game-world for weeks, planning and debugging things in preparation for each weekend. While the responsive system takes a few tries to get moving, eventually the event can almost run itself.

### **Building The Time Machine**

A MME is much easier to inhabit than a tabletop role-playing game. There are fewer codes and complicated instructions, and players inhabit the space of the game as they would most other cocktail parties. The layering of signs and signals begins with simple redecorating: by the fifth time I run the game, the cabin of central Texas is decorated to resemble a ski lodge from the 1980s, reminiscent of the recent film *Hot Tub Time Machine* (Pink 2010). The cabin itself provides the most compelling effect (all that gorgeous wood), but we bring ski equipment to litter the main living area, music from the era plays, and the staged magazines have been replaced with equally staged 1980s counterparts. Even the Texas weather cooperates in January, and two of the weekends see a dusting of snow as the players drive up on their respective Friday afternoons. We ask players to arrive dressed in fashion from the 1980s, but the character biographies are

always sent later. Most players find clothes either tugged from long-forgotten storage units or picked up the day before at local thrift stores.

### **Designing The Matrix of Clues**

*The Ski Lodge Murder* is easy to design for two reasons. First, we eventually decide to allow an open-ended resolution, which means Clues can be multiplied and made more fluid; there is not one set ending—and the concomitant story arc—that we have to plan, obfuscate, and implement. Second, we agree that each Clue will hold Symbolic value. Though these Clues might operate as unpredictable Symbols, that they ultimately function as Symbols means we can start at the end and work backwards much more easily.

Taken together, we fill the matrix with “On” Symbols and simply work backwards making sure to add one Clue for each, 30 in total. Exactly what these Clues will look like is inconsequential, only the value matters. For example, whether the “Universal Opportunity Alibi” Clue is a box of tissues in the bathroom, a used condom in the bedroom, a time-stamped bus ticket, or a medical bill does not matter. All that matters as this point is the Symbolic value of each Clue.

After determining the entire matrix, we decide that the idea of Clues working to switch categories “Off” is fun as well, and so we work back through the Clues to see which can be variable, making sure to balance the characters. Each character now has one Clue that switches something “Off” on their matrix as well, so we are at 40 total. Again, these are Symbolic, and while we will assuredly tie them thematically into the event and the lives of the characters, the gloss or flavor will not have any *formal* meaningful effect.

Further refining, we want to make more specific Clues that target individual characters in specific ways and tie these into Missions and Reactions, smaller subplots that can cut against the straight game entirely. These include a drinking game, spin-the-bottle fun, practical jokes, and even a human pyramid. That is 10 more, for a total of 50. We then run through all of the variables to make sure that no matter what choices are made at least *one* of the characters can be identified, and we are set.

We then decide that each character bio will have one Clue stated outright within their Hints, Reactions, and Missions, which reduces the number of physical props we need to 40.

### ***Too Much System?***

Although we have designed a purely Symbolic system of meanings for each Clue, the system demands that each Clue be toyed with and operated upon by the players. Some Clues can be applied to any character, building connections and layering meanings of the players' designs. Some Clues are kept secret, others made public, others shared with one or two specific people. From another angle, the fact that a player wins a prize for *being* the murderer means that Clues can be used to gather blame for oneself and resist exonerating evidence. The Symbols will be exchanged, shared, manipulated, and repurposed according to the agencies of the players.

Despite their Symbolic value, the Clues are toys. They do not each have one single value, and none of them are simply “used” or activated by the system. There is no “host” in the game, and players will make choices that impact the outcome of the event. The successful murder-mystery event, like poker and the tabletop role-playing game, offers a system designed specifically to be toyed with and situated *within* ongoing social activity.

For example, when Mara (as Eva, the editor of the Bedford High School newspaper) uses the *Box of Tissues* Clue to exonerate her friend Kelly, Kelly is upset because she is aiming to become the murderer this weekend. Kelly then takes Mara's action as an Index of their out of sync agendas and acts accordingly. Rather than an aesthetic or subjective judgment around the Symbolic Clue, such an interpretation has actual weight over the course of the event: the next day, Kelly finds the *Owl Lamp* Clue, which grants her the power to switch “On” either Eva's or Tory's Means intersection when she finds a small, feminine fingerprint in the soft wax of the candle in the lamp. The Symbolic value of this Clue is now based on the Indexical value Kelly freely added to the Symbolic move that Mara made the day before.

Of course, the same thing happens when two people play a video game. *Hey, you knocked me off the cliff! I'm going to get you back for that!* However, the difference is that the murder-mystery event is operating within the actual world at all points, not just the Symbolic. The video game presents a contest between lusory goals, while the MME affords and encourages that it be pulled up into the prelusory contests of the players. In other words, the world of the game does not meet the actual world in only small points of contact or competition. Precisely the opposite, the world of the game entirely overlaps our own but for these places of Symbolic paraphrasing. The virtual elements of the game produce a distance, a gap, that constitutes the virtual mirage. It is in the production of distance that the virtual emerges. The points of overlap are exploited by the designers as much as they can be, and the fewer virtual elements necessary the better.

The system accepts toys, which makes it part of our world. More accurately, it becomes part of the players' world. We write no narrative, no twists, no arcs, no drama... The story is their own. We provide the toys, and they make a game out of it.

### **III. ON THE TRAIL OF THE KILLER**

The three categories of Motive, Means, and Opportunity limit the otherwise infinite scope of meanings any object might have to three registers of Symbolic value. Players have only to determine “on” or “off” for each intersection of character and category: if one character gets all three boxes filled, then we know the killer! The chart fixes what values can be attached to particular Clues, each Clue capable of switching one or more of these values, more likely to “On” than “Off,” though we have Clues that go both ways. What results is a simple checklist of Symbols representing very simple constitutive rules. However, these Symbols come as the results of complex chains of semiosis.

The social and cognitive labors of the game begin with determining whether any given action, prop, tone, etc. will count as a Sign at all. The “Context C” of the charged atmosphere makes “X” and “Y” co-present. We can pass Brian Massumi's (2002) vision

of the virtual through John Searle's (1995) social institution theory of games and imagine that when "X counts as Y" what is really happening is that "X" participates in a wave or takes up a charge that we recognize as "Y" emerging. No Sign is complete or finished; no toy is dead.

### **Scanning For Clues**

We have already talked about being nudged towards Clues from the Hints, Reactions, and Missions on the character biographies, but there is also good, old-fashioned detective work. Whereas true detectives would hunt for Indices of the crime based on their own ontologies and experience of cause and effect in the world, the game works differently because players know that each and every Clue has been established already and designed by the human mind.

Recognizing an object in the environment as a potential Clue becomes a unique semiotic act; the environment is being "read" for Indices of human tampering, human design. We might say that the Object of this semiotic process is the human mind itself. Players scanning the environment are looking for that conspicuous Index that says, "This arrangement of things was put here by a human." After all, the Clues are created to be semi-conspicuous Signs. I recall the experience of watching older cartoons from the 1980s and before: the viewer can always perceive what objects are going to move because they—as overlain animation cells—stand out from the more organically painted background. The mark of the human mind rests on those objects even before they move.

The best MMEs, and even localized alternate reality games as we will discuss in Chapter 6, will enchant the environment enough to keep players guessing, on their toes, vigilant. Clues can turn up in any conversation, any exaggerated gestures or attitudes in other players, or behind any suspicious object or artifact.

### ***Human, All Too Human***

During our second run of the event at Kelly's cabin in December, one of the players finds six Clues right away just by exploring the environment. Impressed to say the least, I ask him how he managed to do that. None of Clues were from his character

biography either; he just scans the cabin and walks right up to them. In response he puts me quite readily in my place:

They were too much. You had *one* issue of *Highlights* magazine on the table. *One*. You didn't think anyone would pick up on that? There was a snowsuit hanging on the coat rack. That lamp wasn't plugged in. Nobody wore boots. And *that* curtain was untied, but *that* one wasn't. I don't think Kelly's mom would have left it like that.

Everything he says is obvious as soon as he points it out. The lack of solid 1980s décor in the first few runs both made the Clues more conspicuous and ruined the engrossment. "What about the frozen gloves?" I ask.

"Oh. There's always something in the freezer. Even *I* hide shit in my freezer." Fair enough.

### **Clues in The Other Murder**

In contrast, *The Speakeasy Murder* attempts to take a major step forward by building a resolution mechanism that consists of Indices alone. Or, more accurately, the clues in the game are all Symbolic representations of *real* pieces of evidence, and these representations and descriptions are all spread out across the various character biographies. The major problem is that nobody knows which elements of his or her character are important elements. Because nobody knows what happened in the game-world, they cannot extrapolate from the biographies what facts are Indices of something important, which means the only meaningful conversation that occurs is direct, verbatim information-swapping.

Readers of a Symbolic description of an event can draw no new information out of the Signs than what the author put into it. At first that seems a facile observation, but consider Icons and Indices. The Index is inexhaustible; it embodies infinite affordances. As an actual trace of activity, it can represent any number of Objects. It points in all directions. This is the very reason why anthropological field notes must be both meticulous and excessive: the researcher must write things down that do not yet have a

meaning. She must write traces, Indices, Icons. The words are likely Symbols, yes, but the pages are not. The paragraphs are larger than Symbols. The Symbols have not been figured yet. Notes must work as tomes that can be interpreted again and again like the detritus of tabletop gaming or a work of art.

In an actual murder investigation, worthwhile clues function as Indices that point incontrovertibly towards one and only one definite fact: the presence and murderous activity of a specific person (and even the psychical intentionality if the prosecutor is going for murder in the first degree). All clues are Indices because they participated in this actual fact. They are traces.

Natural Indices converge. For example, if I detect a particularly shaped hole in my apartment wall and suspect that someone has shot a gun in my room, I can look around for a bullet casing, which would if it existed corroborate my interpretation of the hole. If I find no such casing, my suspicions are not corroborated; however, neither are they controverted.

The fundamental flaw of most murder-mystery events as facsimiles of actual murders is that very rarely do they offer converging Indices. Most evidence is circumstantial and interpretable in any number of ways. The “right” interpretation is whatever Symbolic value is assigned to the clue by the game’s designers.

#### **IV. FINDING A POETIC KEY**

A good sign the game is going to be a success is players adopting the frame and rekeying of their own initiative, even better when pursuing their own goals. In middling cases, when a full-on adoption does not occur, there can still be players “trying on” the new key in small bits or exchanges. The problems arise when new players hesitate to join in the keying because they do not have a grasp on exactly “what it is that is going on.” Without knowing the frame, players do not have expectations, scripts, or patterns to rely on. It is almost as though making a meaningless action, an action not already laden with cultural definitions, would be worse than no action. I saw as much in tabletop gaming as

well (see Chapter 4). Without being able to predict the other participants' "footings" or know what "lines" to expect (Goffman 1959), players can become paralyzed.

Before any particular lusory means are deployed, the participant needs to freely choose to don the lusory attitude, the first step toward bringing into alignment lusory and prelusory goals. This is easier said than done, and there are people who lack any semblance of playfulness. On the other hand, there are those of us who have maintained a lusory attitude for years at a time. Speaking of myself, for instance, I cannot remember a recent time I was not keying in a markedly playful way. However, to study frames that arise from gaming, we will take the lusory attitude for granted.

The purpose of this section is to explore where murder-mystery events go wrong. What makes the genre such a one-off experience? As I argued in the introductory section, the troubles of murder-mystery events revolve around the awkward task that it is getting to learn a frame. We take our frames for granted so often. Various media are constantly flooding us with scripts, models, patterns, examples, stereotypes—We live in a world where we see almost as many people on screen as we do in person. Frames should be so easy. However, the murder-mystery event is an odd animal that presents hurdles with interesting implications.

### **Games-as-Systems Frame**

At this point, it may behoove us to consider a frame that works without much effort at all. Video games, board games, sports—We have excellent examples of games that offer familiar and understandable frames. However, without being too entirely dismissive, we might question whether any of these activities require local frames at all. Goffman himself muses over what it is to play in a hockey game or tennis match, considering for a moment whether such contests were not entirely sensible within Primary Social Frameworks of competition, dominance, showmanship (1974: 57). Just because rules are in place does not mean we are being pulled into a social frame. While professional boxing might require the management of a frame for the sake of safety. *Is this guy really trying to kill me here, or are we still just boxing?* Does playing

professional basketball or football in the United States similarly require such a protective frame? After consideration, we might take such sports as entirely sensible without any intersubjective frame. The players are doing precisely what they seem to be doing, and there are no keys nor meanings nor fabrications. Players on a team are likely working together according to some pattern or model; is that the same thing as a frame?

It is worth wondering about. We might say that a “systems mentality” is part of our Primary Social and Physical Frameworks in the West. Logistics, scalability, models, diagrams, flow, grids—We live in systems. However, I have gone to great lengths to distance myself from understandings of language, mind, society, or nature as bounded systems that organize endogenous value.

### ***The Authority of Constitutive Rules***

The base dynamic of the game *Werewolf* is pure social performance and influence. It requires a relatively large number of players, typically eight or more, though even larger groups can be better. The game requires one leader or “warden” who does not take part in the action. After randomly and secretly assigning one of the other players the role of “werewolf,” all the players sit in a ring; everyone closes their eyes and puts their heads down. When the warden sees that everyone has turned away, she tells the werewolf to lift her head and point to one person who will be killed. Whoever is the werewolf opens her eyes, points to a victim, and puts her head back down. The warden announces that the deed has been done and tells everyone else to lift up his or her head. All of the players find out who died, and they must now decide who the werewolf is. The group votes to kill one person, and then everyone else puts their heads down. If the werewolf is still alive, the warden asks her to “wake up” and point out who will be killed tonight. And on it goes until the group figures out who the werewolf is and executes the right person. *Who is it? Who gained from killing that person?*

More sophisticated versions of the game add other roles for participants to play. I was playing a game once that included the “child” as a role. The child has the authority to “wake up” during the “nighttime” phase as well, after the werewolf has killed her victim.

The child can point to anyone else in the group to ask the warden, “Is this the werewolf?” The warden nods or shakes her head and tells the child to put her head down. Then everyone wakes up with another victim missing.

There is no benefit to saying, “I am the werewolf,” of course, because you will be killed. However, neither is there any benefit to saying, “I am the child! I saw the werewolf! Trust me!” and expose yourself because you will very well be the next victim when nighttime comes. There are no rules against exposing what role you might have, but it is just generally not a good idea. Whatever roles are afoot, the performance is pure dissembling and influence. To be a good child or a good werewolf, you must do so without letting anyone else know.

I explain this game to offer an elucidating anecdote. I recall playing a game of *Werewolf* with friends here in Austin a few years ago that started with over 20 participants. When only seven of us were left in the game, I spoke up to say, “Hey, I’m the child. That dude is the werewolf. Let’s end this.”

I had good influence within the group up to this point, but it was getting too close to the end. I wanted to take the cocky werewolf out before she killed me, and I thought it was in the bag. Unfortunately, everyone in the group (still participating or long “dead”) became furious that I exposed the truth about my role. They assumed I had broken some rule. Despite my best efforts, I could not explain to them the difference between a common strategy and a constitutive rule. The secrecy of the rules was pure lusory means, just a strategy of play.

“It is a suggested norm that expert players will share with new players, but it is a norm that can be superseded at this point in the game!” I offered, but there was no budging.

A perfectly suitable, if rarely utilized, strategy of the game had been taken as a constitutive rule in a game that is slim even on prelusory regulative rules. This happens in MME all the time. In *The Speakeasy Murder*, each host and hostess I had would demand strict adherence to constitutive rules that I knew to be more suggestions or guidelines than rules necessary to constitute the system of the game. In one case, this

overdependence on the authority of constitutive rules was intimately tied up with the host's own reaching after authority.

### ***Playing vs. Role-Playing***

A major issue in murder-mystery events that comes up in *The Speakeasy Murder* is whether or not the killer is to know at the beginning of the game that she is the killer. This amounts to a small fabrication that has a large impact on the dynamics of the game. In *The Speakeasy Murder*, the killer finds out at the event that occurs just after the killing, second phase of the night. Unfortunately, as I learned during my third time through the game, the killer's own character biography holds one of the central pieces of evidence against her. This leads to a conflict of interest between "playing the game" and "role-playing the game."

We ran the first iteration of *The Ski Lodge Murder* with a naïve murderer, and things did not work well. Other popular MMEs for sale online advertise their titles by celebrating that "everyone is in on the game." The board game *Clue* works this way, and if your character turns out to be the killer, you just announce the fact as you would if it were anyone else.

What the game gains in inclusivity, it loses in complexity not to mention verisimilitude. Would you not act differently from the very beginning if you were the killer? By giving the killer something to do or having players compete to *be* the killer just as they compete to *find* her, it seems to me, the game could include more vectors and interactivity. We went with that option in *The Ski Lodge Murder* for the second iteration and never looked back.

### ***Frame-Breaking & Griefing***

Any frame has the vulnerability of attracting griefers, people who take pleasure in intentionally breaking frames and transgressing the "we intentionality" of a group engaged in activity. The MME is more vulnerable than most. Because *The Ski Lodge Murder* takes place over an entire weekend, the frame of the game would wax and wane as Clues came into play. However, a game that is as focused and narrow as *The*

*Speakeasy Murder* risks complete shutdown if too many players begin to break the frame or become hostile.

The drive behind griefing is not necessarily a bad one: the griefers are toying with a frame, which in most cases I would celebrate. The problem is that they toy with frames being enjoyed by others. In the case of *The Speakeasy* griefers, I could sympathize with their wanting to invigorate the night by donning new prelusory goals and playing *through* the game. I did the same when I turned *Super Mario Bros.* into *Super Drunk Bros.* in Chapter 3.

### **Lusory Means Outside Constitutive Rules**

When I ask players what “worked” for them in the *Ski Lodge* game, the most common positive element is the feeling of environmental enchantment. Their words are invariably spatial, rather than social or mental:

“The whole house is enchanted, different.”

“It feels like anything can pop out at you. Like you could *step* on something!”

“It’s like the place is playing back with you.”

“You *have* to go *everywhere*. It’s like hunting for Easter eggs when you’re taking a pee.”

“I had no idea where to go. Everything was everywhere.”

While we had a great resource in Kelly’s cabin, I do not think they were merely referring to the locale. Something about the game made the space charged from early on, even before there were Clues strewn about. Four of the above quotes come from talking to people at dinner, before the murder took place!

When asked about *The Speakeasy Murder*, the responses are more mixed, and the most prevalent positive experience of the event is the excuse to dress up and play. When asked about the game itself, players typically respond with a shrug.

“It was like Halloween. That’s fun.”

“I got to buy a really cool dress.”

“It was fun wearing these little glasses all night.”

“I wish people still wore these [suspenders]. They’re pretty cool.”

Note that these players are talking about a prelusory goal that has little to do with the game. The only lusory means that connected with them, the only technique that worked to align the lusory goals of the game with the prelusory goals was the fashion. Then again, the costumes are entirely *optional*, which means they are not technically part of the lusory goals of the game. This means the game was not experienced as a game at all but simply a keying, a performance, a pageant.

I think one of the players from my second time going through the game put it best when he said, “I put on different clothes than I normally do.”

The lusory means of the MME can work to enchant the world and afford new kinds of behaviors, or they do the exact opposite and demand a keying that serves only to constrain behavior. I suggest that it is not a fine line at all, rather one that underscores the difference between a game-as-system and a game-as-toy.

### **Making Systems Work**

Dramatically simpler than the complex rule systems of tabletop role-playing games, the typical MME features only a small set of constitutive rules for translating the actions and objects that occur into meaningful Symbols in the game-system. However, sparse constitutive rules do not necessarily lead to open-ended, player-generated social activity and toying. While the role-playing demands of any MME will be more or less pressing depending on its design, the system itself needs to open outward beyond pageantry or playfulness and respond to the players’ ideas and emergent goals. To see player-generated meaning and unique poetics, the system must *afford* and *encourage* toying, and a game cannot encourage toying unless it *responds* to it.

### ***Possibility of Social Poetics***

I am reminded of all those hours as a child spent pretending the floor was lava. *The floor is lava! You have to jump from furniture to furniture! Throw down pillows as stepping-stones!* To be sure, what is pleasurable and fun in such a simple game is not the idea of having lava on the floor. The content of the fantasy is not always the point. What

*is* fun is jumping and performing acrobatics, on the one hand, and developing a frame with friends in which the floor is charged as something different, on the other. The lava only needs to last for a moment; soon the floor is water, and you can touch it but only for an instant; the next moment you can *only* touch the floor, and the trail of pillows behind you are landmines.

My point is that toying maintains the “X” as an open-ended Sign and takes pleasure in developing and teasing whatever “Y” emerges from moment to moment. The shared space and poetic activity works to maintain the dual substance of the floor; as soon as the two worlds collapse again, the play ends. The tension and exhibition of playing create the double, the gap, the vacuum.

I believe *The Ski Lodge Murder* provides a rigor that makes a certain mode of playfulness *harder*. This playfulness permeates the game through an open-system, allowing players to inhabit the frame and build out their own fabrications and goals. It happens in each moment: the game disappears, and the lusory means expand the actual world to bring the lusory and prelusory goals together like two magnets: close but not touching.

### **Virtual World or Alternate Reality**

Whether online or analog, the virtual world presents inhabitants with a different way to be social, a different platform to do all the things that we do when we socialize. The world under-defines just enough objects and actions to invite playful toying, to offer affordances for meaning-making before it offers ready-made meaning.

The resulting assemblage is a world within which we can tease, bond, boast, compete, share, and teach. The success of a virtual world depends on how well it invites and sustains activities that enable all of those familiar modes of associating, and then offers new ways. I believe the events collected and represented here provide a compelling case for small-group alternate reality game offering new ways to reach desired rewards and pleasures, maybe even suggesting new rewards and pleasures in the process.

## Chapter 6: Fighting The Fabrications in Local Alternate Reality Games

Unlike the tabletop role-playing games of Chapter 4 and the murder-mystery events of Chapter 5, the genuine alternate reality game has no constitutive rules, no system. What defines the tabletop role-playing game is the *frame*, an easily conjured but tensely maintained engrossment in a world of “hard facts” and performance. What defines the murder-mystery event is the *key*, a corpus of practices and performances that govern how players must inhabit the space of the game, without which the event would grind to a halt. What defines the alternate reality game is the *fabrication*, a simple wall of secrecy that exclaims, “I know something you don’t know!” However, like the voice of one crying in the wilderness or the sound of a tree falling in the forest, the game cannot exist unless there is an ear to hear it. The more ears, the better.

This ethnographic chapter focuses centrally on two iterations of a local alternate reality game, or ARG, hosted by several fellow designers and me. The argument sustained alongside the ethnography holds that a successful alternate reality game incorporates players into an analog virtual world, an unfalsifiable world of virtual objects similar in many ways to the online virtual worlds of Edward Castronova (2005, 2007) and Tom Boellstorff (2008). Essential to this argument is understanding how the social interactions and meaningful activity that emerge during play are at once *actual* and *other*. I suggest that much of the game’s excitement arises from the players’ conscious negotiation between the *actual* and the *almost* at each moment, a doubling that I have previously argued characterizes the virtual. Of course, to be considered a proper *worlding*, the virtual environment must afford players to explore whatever prelusory or lusory goals emerge from the player-driven public. Following, and contrary to most scholarship on alternate reality gaming, my ethnography focuses more on the experience of *worlding* and the machinations of the player-public than on the specific narrative planned by the designers.

First developed in 2001 as a technique of viral marketing, ARG has since become an autonomous form of interactive media (McGonigal 2006, Szulborski 2005b). A decade after the first large-scale alternate reality game—designed to promote Steven

Spielberg's film *A.I.* (2001) and attracting over three million participants worldwide—scholarship on this new form of gaming remains largely within the disciplines of performance studies (McGonigal 2006, 2007) and media or narrative studies (Szulborski 2005a, Jenkins 2006), with only a later showing among game studies proper (Montola et al. 2009). While paying attention to the market motivations that spawned—and to a large extent sustain—the genre, my own investigations aim to privilege the perspective of the players and take account of the affective, cognitive, and semiotic labor undertaken in playing/performing an alternate reality game.

This chapter first introduces the “fabrication” at the heart of the game and describes at length how unsuspecting participants typically stumble upon a new game (Section I). I then cover the labor required to produce the virtual objects that populate the alternate reality conjured by the game and discuss the role of material infrastructures that make possible such virtual worlds (Section II). Stepping inside the frame, I then work through later stages of the game from the perspective of a handful of players (Sections III and IV). The chapter concludes with a word about *poiesis* and the roles of player-driven creativity and player-generated meaning, contrasting alternate reality games that take a closed-system approach with those that leave the narrative open for the actions of the players to decide (Sections V).

## **Methods**

Though the first local alternate reality game I ran with a handful of fellow designers in March of 2012 at the SXSW Interactive and SXSW Music Festivals, *Fancy Bang*, generated only twelve or so players at a cost of over \$2000, it provided most of the hard-knock lessons needed to fashion us into the successful designers of two later games (with a third taking place in the near future).

We created the second iteration of *Fancy Bang* shortly thereafter, designing the game to intersect with the Gen Con gaming convention to be held in August in Indianapolis, IN. Gen Con, or “the best four days in gaming,” is actually a five-day event that takes place in early August each year and attracts around 50,000 attendees to the

downtown convention center. Gen Con focuses centrally on tabletop role-playing games and miniature war games, though any such gathering of geeks in recent years will feature all popular forms of games and performative play. This version of *Fancy Bang*, which hacked into regularly scheduled events of the larger convention and permeated several levels of the administration, drew 80 players together to investigate and resolve the “champion’s curse” of Mark “Crocodile Fingers” Harshman, a fictional veteran gamer caught up in no small amount of intrigue. Through my connections with industry professionals and convention organizers, I was able to sneak props and clues for the *Fancy Bang* players into some surprising places. According to player feedback, the game acted as an animating part of their convention as a whole, a charge that lasted all week even outside proper events.

The following year, while attending the A-Kon convention in Dallas, TX, the same group of designers and I hosted another iteration of *Fancy Bang* for attendees of the longest-running and fifth-largest anime convention in the United States. With less responsive program administrators, less frequented pre-convention Web forums, and only three days of full attendance on site, we had to cut out or condense several of the phases from Gen Con. Despite the drawbacks, this iteration of *Fancy Bang* attracted 200 of the 26,000 con-goers. It exploded into six area hotels and became a huge success, largely due to a fortuitous night of drinking and a serendipitous slip of the tongue.

The August 2012 iteration of *Fancy Bang* at Gen Con in Indianapolis will act as the cornerstone of this account, while I use references to the SXSW and A-Kon iterations when appropriate to highlight other details and insights for the genre.

## **I. THE SLIMMEST ALTERNATE REALITY GAME**

Every public alternate reality game begins as a hoax, a conspiracy theory, a rabbit hole. The manifold virtual elements created by the game’s designers populate the environment in something akin to Derek McCormack’s “spectral geographies” (2010b, see also Chapter 2), hoping to circulate enough to develop a *charge*. As a whole, the

virtual world exists as a puzzle box awaiting an audience; it only works to the degree it can generate interest, pique curiosity, elicit investment. Once the participant wanders down into the rabbit hole, she, like Alice, is confronted with so many equivalents of a “Drink Me” sign, and it is through the willingness to drink—through an early act of *Why the hell not?*—that the *participant* enters the game to become a *player*.

### **Localized Alternate Reality Games**

Jane McGonigal (2006, 2007) theorizes alternate reality gaming at the intersection of “ubiquitous computing and experimental game design,” analyzing formal elements of the diverse genre as well as new technologies that make such games possible. Likewise, in his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins (2006) theorizes how the “hive minds” of similar movements develop across multiple platforms as people and attention converge in cyberspace. *Fancy Bang*, with 80 and 200 players in each substantial iteration, is admittedly logarithmically smaller than the million-player games McGonigal and designs and studies; however, I feel focusing too closely on the dazzling technologies that make larger games possible can reaffirm the “digital fallacy” warned against by Stenros and Waern (2011).

We must bear in mind that both McGonigal and Jenkins look to wildly successful alternate reality games produced as guerilla marketing campaigns by the likes of Sony Pictures and Microsoft to theorize the formal elements of the genre. That a fabricated “grassroots” advertising campaign designed to engage millions of potential customers would employ all kinds of mass-media and Internet technologies to mobilize activity and attention seems obvious; digital infrastructures provide unparalleled access to consumers, and marketing firms have long been drivers of innovation into technologies of access and attention. However, in a move to reorient the study of alternate reality games away from technological innovation, I suggest that such mass-market mobilization is not essential to the genre.

In contrast, I argue that the essential elements of the alternate reality game are shared with those needed to sustain any analog virtual world: the presence of sufficient

virtual objects to expand and thereby *charge* the actual world with a spectre that becomes materially present despite its physical absence. What the alternate reality game adds is only that the virtual objects serve as lusory means that typically entail an ultimate lusory goal. In any case, such a world must afford individuals to bring their own prelusory and lusory goals to the platform and host any ensuing player-directed sociality. While “ubiquitous computing” offers solid means to produce virtual objects, we have already discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 how other media—after human cognition itself—afford such constructs as well. Rather than defining the genre with the games of McGonigal and Szulborski and stepping inward to smaller scales, my own study begins with the virtual worlds of tabletop games and murder-mystery events and steps outward to what I call “localized” alternate reality games.

### **Framing The Game**

In August of 2012, *Fancy Bang* started slowly on the Internet with unassuming call-outs on the official Gen Con forums for attendees to pre-register for scheduled events at the upcoming con. Every year the convention hosts thousands of individual gaming sessions arranged into four genres, with the tabletop role-playing games where we will stage many of our events coming in four-hour slots. Official gaming sessions run from Wednesday evening thru Sunday afternoon, and forums are lively from the day they open six months before the con until well beyond the event itself. Unofficial gaming happens everywhere as well, and threads open on the forums to arrange private games and longer campaigns that will run outside the set schedule of the con.

Attendees negotiating for room-sharing arrangements will be the most popular online forum overall, generating dozens of threads, and a third-party market exists of attendees reserving several rooms and “scalping” beds to the late-comers. However, the most active gaming-related threads come from game-masters advertising the adventures they have planned. Each gaming slot has only a unique ID-number and a brief description listed on the convention website, and so game-masters plug their four-hour events by posting longer synopses, images of the miniatures and terrain pieces to be featured,

unofficial prizes offered, parameters for the player-characters permitted, intended mood or atmosphere, etc. Any game-master who runs 16 hours of gaming gets free admission to the con (a reimbursement worth more than \$80 in 2012), and the competition for mustering pre-registered players begins as early as February.

As I already have several slots reserved to feature my company's new role-playing game, the designers of *Fancy Bang* and I take advantage of the forums to begin laying out the narrative. Instrumentalizing the existing infrastructure of the con, we begin the slow build of the legend of Mark "Crocodile Fingers" Harshman. For *Fancy Bang* to work, we must "contain" potential players in a frame that will figure multiple events hosted over the duration of the con as the tumultuous rock-bottom plunge of Crocodile Fingers. Goffman (1974) theorizes what he calls the *fabrication* in contrast to the *key* as one of two possible ways to transform actual activity into *something else*. While the common mechanisms of Goffman's fabrications are tricks, schemes, confidence games, and ruses, fabrications are not essentially about a lie, but a secret. The multiplying falsifications and untruths constructed by the fabricators serve a greater purpose: protect the secret.<sup>25</sup> Fabrications arise when some participants in the frame are aware of one or another specific "fact of the matter" that other participants are intentionally kept in the dark about.

I will here characterize the alternate reality game as an overarching key that contains two crucial fabrications, both of which can likely contain an indefinite number of smaller keys and fabrications. I consider this *major keying* the lusory make-believe of the entire story and world of the game that encompasses designers and players alike. Following, the *major fabrication* is then the unsuspecting *participants'* experience of the fantasy make-believe as actually happening. Only those who break out of being "contained" in this fabrication become *players*. Finally, there is what I will call the *central fabrication*, which contains the secrets of the game-world only known to the

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<sup>25</sup> Goffman's idea of the fabrication fits easily into Bernard Suits' longer definition of a game (1978: 48), an observation that reframes the childlike pleasure of telling lies from being about generating falsity or untruths to being about hiding. The lie is reframed as a lusory means toward the prelusory goal of hiding, of concealing, of playing.

creators. This is the mystery that participants and players alike engage and resolve. Importantly, these fabrications are not concentric; for example, a *participant* may work within the game to uncover facts about the fictional characters and conflicts without knowing them to be fictional.

### ***Opening Fabrications***

The *Fancy Bang* design team spends the late spring and early summer of 2012 building the legend and arming our fabrications. Using the Internet to create false trails and false accounts of the talent of Mark Harshman is easy, and we soon have each of our slots filled with five gamers hoping to unseat Crocodile Fingers as the undisputed “world’s best” *Fantaji* player. This ensures us at the very least 65 participants, though whether or not they will be interested in what occurs enough to slip down the rabbit hole remains to be seen.

In the 2013 game at A-Kon, which focuses more on anime art and culture than gaming, there is no such activity prior to the con itself. We reach out to potential participants through the convention’s website only through small blog posts and contest announcements that the convention administrators request from attending exhibitors and programmers. While we gain promising feedback on post performance from the con’s website administrators, none of the 200+ players who pushed the game forward in Dallas, TX, mention any of our Web articles in follow-up interviews.

### ***The Ethics of Fabrication***

Although the overall goal is to keep some people in the dark about “what is *it* that is going on” in the current situation, fabrications can be malicious or benign in spirit (Goffman 1974: 85). The planning of a surprise birthday party entails a fabrication, as do the magic show, the intervention, and the guerilla concert. By all accounts, alternate reality games fit squarely in the benign category, as the important fabrications are all eventually revealed as they are. The only negative feeling I have seen attached to a game is simple disappointment, when a game fizzles before its intended conclusion or ends up not as fun as some previous game. That this is true even when the most popular alternate

reality games are advertising campaigns is interesting, and it seems that even the unveiling of the self-interested motives of the creators generates more excitement than criticism. We might all remember semi-fictional Ralphie's disappointment in *A Christmas Story* (Clark 1983) to discover that the vitally important secret message he saved up for and worked so hard to decode advised him only to "Drink more Ovaltine;" however, the similar experiences I have had myself at the conclusion of a game have never detracted from the remembered intensity and excitement of such large-scale gaming and problem-solving.

### **The Performance of Belief as Keying**

Borrowing from Bernard Suits that a game is "a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles," McGonigal (2007) offers that one of the pleasures of ARG is the "performance of mastery" that allows players to overcome these obstacles: multimedia literacy, problem-solving prowess, teamwork, and strategies of collective intelligence. While large-scale alternate reality games rely heavily on puzzles hard enough to sustain the efforts of thousands of minds together, my own interests in frames and virtual worlds see this performance of mastery embodied in the sleuthing of players to break out of either important fabrication. Smaller puzzles, scavenger hunts, decodings, and competitions all provide pleasurable conflicts and—more importantly—opportunities to demonstrate value to peers and self-organize. What can go overlooked in studies that focus too closely on the technological side of ARGs is the presence of an ongoing prelusory goal of social organization that overlays the goal of deduction and computational mastery.

McGonigal coins another pleasure in alternate reality gaming the "performance of belief," in obvious contrast to the theater's familiar "suspension of disbelief," her implication being that the player takes an active role in generating the lusory attitude needed to play. The game becomes a justification or excuse for the kind of play desired by the player. This performance of belief occurs when participants break out of the major

fabrication and join with the creators of the game in *keying* their ways through the central fabrication.

### ***From Participants to Players***

While the murder-mystery event involves players who know from the very beginning that they are playing a game, the genuine alternate reality game floats out in the actual world as pure possibility, a net of Indices and virtual objects trawling for players who eventually realize—or not—that they have been interpolated into a virtual world. Like Chris Kelty’s (2008) “recursive public,” the participants in the virtual world begin to realize themselves as players of a game and the sole constituents of its body. At this point, in this step towards investment and responsibility over the progress of the game, the *participants* become *players*. The motto of the genre, “This Is Not A Game” or “TINAG” (Szulborski 2005a), ensures that the players must be both self-starting and self-directed. There will be little prompting by the creators, and the narrative works best when it unfolds organically as unfalsifiable. To expose the game as a game ruins the fun, and virtual world can only persist as long as the players remain partially caught in a charged doubling that makes their world something else, something bigger.

### **Staying in Key**

From the perspective of the designers, *participants* are those individuals fully “contained” within the *major* fabrication, who follow the events and activities of the game at face value and have no idea something else is afoot. In contrast, *players* see through the major fabrication in part and work from this position to construct knowledge in two directions. Both directions work to amplify the virtual world through the labor and performance of players.

In one direction, initiated players must decide whether and to what extent they should organize and communicate with each other outside the major fabrication. Such planning is risky in a localized alternate reality game because the more participants any player “lets in,” the greater the risk of her being left out or left behind when later events occur. In other words, the more people who know “what’s going on,” the farther from the

center of the action any given player is likely to feel. Of course, players cannot be sure how many other players there are in any case, never knowing how central they might be to the narrative or what greater narrative may remain entirely unknown to them. This competition over being “in on” and “in control of” the fabrication works exactly like “frame-working” in Goffman’s (1959, 1961) sense, where individuals vie for position within the intersubjectively negotiated frame. In this vein, players struggle to have control of the situation and gain or retain leadership and decision-making roles in the game. I feel that this social conflict and “negotiation” is the neglected heart of McGonigal’s performance of mastery and deserves at least as much attention as problem-solving and technical performance.

In the other direction, the very same players must still decide what to do about the unfolding narrative within the *central* fabrication, playing along—*keying*—with the events and challenges. However, this keying takes on a charged valence because there is no way to tell precisely what is *actually* happening and what is *almost* happening. To the extent that the fabrication is unfalsifiable and distended across hundreds of individuals and thousands of square-feet, even the players who realize that *something* is afoot cannot be sure what is what, and so they can never be certain just how much they are pretending.

The former direction towards struggling with the major fabrication will be the subject of Section III, while the latter issue of cracking the central fabrication fills Section IV. The upcoming section (II) covers the work that goes into constructing the material infrastructure that aims at conjuring the virtual world.

## **II. THE MATERIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

There are 11 designers altogether and over 30 volunteers, but only four designers and I participate in two or more iterations of *Fancy Bang*. I will refer only to these four by name in the following accounts, though no game would get off the ground with a crew of only five: Greg, a long-time friend and gamer who has an exceptional mind for logistics; Mitch, a new *Fantaji* gamer who designs most of the in-game conflicts that

further the narrative and portrays “Crocodile Fingers” in 2012 at Gen Con; Andrea, who writes most of the copy in our fictional and fabricated materials and comes through with clutch graphic design whenever I drop the ball; and Jake, a self-professed workhorse with the mind of a Carl Sagan and too many natural science degrees.

From here on out, the designers and I must key the narrative of Mark Harshman and maintain a fabrication on at least two levels. The question now is whether and to what degree our three laminations—along with the circulation of physical props, actors, a virtual “curse,” player-driven organizing, real and imagined conflicts, and affective labor—can conjure and sustain an analog virtual world for the players.

Being in such close quarters and lasting only a few days, *Fancy Bang* has little chance of containing players in the *major* fabrication for too long. It is a small game with modest aims, but the iterations prove popular enough to feature the essential elements of larger ARGs.

### **Unfalsifiable Worlds**

One of the heaviest burdens on the designers of an alternate reality game of any size is their commitment to unfalsifiability. Not all alternate reality games attempt to maintain unfalsifiable narratives and so abandon what I call the *major* fabrication entirely, though several very successful games have held fast to the “TINAG” motto as a way of amping engrossment.

Regardless of the practice in alternate reality gaming, every proper virtual world at least has the potential for unfalsifiability, if only because it is impossible to prove a negative. When I spent 30 continuous hours glued to the /b/ board of 4chan.org one summer years ago, I could not be *absolutely* sure that the person posting all those time-stamped photographs was actually Danny DeVito messing around on the Internet with fans. However, his posts came with such reasonable timing and accurate deixis that “performing belief” came easily.

If we consider a more substantial virtual world, the phenomenon is the same. No *Second Life* user would mistake the digital images of high-rise condominiums and trim,

tawny bodies displayed on his monitor for physical buildings or bodies, but that is not what is at stake: there is no way he can definitively prove that the person controlling that other avatar *isn't* a 24-year-old graduate student at Cambridge University—though maybe we could wonder why she only logs on at what would be 4:30AM Greenwich Mean Time...

Beyond providing social activity and Indexing the mere existence of other individuals, a virtual world generates a presence; the power of the virtual world is not in its *physicality* but its *materiality*. Ken Hillis (2009) describes the avatars of *Second Life* as “sign-bodies” that generate empathy and attachment precisely because they are Indices of actual individuals with actual bodies, however distant. It is not simply their existence that matters, but their virtual proximity via the avatars. Each jitter, each gesture, each rotation of the avatar is an *actual* signal from that distant person, a signal that still *means* something even if the body performing the gesture is not physical.

What I have added to Hillis' account is that the colorful and engrossing Indices on the monitor can also function as virtual objects that participate in the same doubled environment that includes not only the user's digital avatar but his actual body as well. Each image on the monitor is apprehended as *almost* an object, a “hard fact” that plays with and against the user's own will, resisting activity and intention as any physical object would, entering a user's cyborg mind as any object might (Clark 2003). If our minds permeate actual space, what is to stop them from taking up virtual objects as well? *Second Life* acts as the cliff face or cave wall that carries and reflects the very material—albeit non-physical—echo of other actual bodies. When the other user claims that the appearance and gestures of her avatar Index an identical appearance and similarly intended gestures, such claims are—at the most mechanical level—entirely unfalsifiable. In such a way, navigating *Second Life* can be akin to playing a never-ending Turing Test, which many users find part of the excitement.

After the initial SXSU run, a strict level of unfalsifiability becomes the goal for *Fancy Bang*; we want to contain players within a lively Turing Test that will keep them on their toes.

### ***Singular Virtual Object***

Many of the most successful alternate reality games include supernatural elements that attempt to truly transport the players to another world. In a research project designed around alternate realities, such an inclusion would seem to make sense. However, although the *Fancy Bang* designers spent several weeks developing a supernatural plot and even ran the first game featuring an alternate timeline for the city of Austin, TX, I was able to persuade Mitch and Andrea to develop the “champion’s curse” as the only paranormal element for the next iterations.

In the interest of creating the thinnest analog virtual world possible, I felt that a plot without wild supernatural elements would stick truer to my research goals. Tabletop role-playing games cover the imaginary elements of analog virtual worlds well, and every murder-mystery event revolves around a “fictional” murder; for the final case study (and after the utter failure of *Fancy Bang 1.0* at SXSW), I decided the project could increase potential engrossment and at the same time generate more transportable data by leaving out the properly supernatural and deploying only a single, slim virtual object. Enter the champion’s curse!

### **Constructing the Champion’s Curse**

After deciding on the virtual object that will work as our game’s focus, we have to generate all of the objects that will help Index its existence and turn the “curse” into a “hard fact” that can resist the will of the players and become a part of their ongoing ontology. We know it will take something like stage magic to create a believable and engrossing “curse” to haunt Crocodile Fingers, and I consult with two professional magicians to work on tricks that the actors portraying Mark Harshman and I can perform at the gaming table. The whole team has dreams of being street magicians and blowing the minds of our players with theatrics at grand scales. I confess that YouTube research into “street magic” sucked up about a week of collective time.

The first contact with a magician comes by complete coincidence the next month. I am attending an art show with fellow-designer Andrea at a speakeasy in East Austin. The event is hosted by local cartoon-creating celebrity Mike Judge, and part of the

entertainment—definitely the tamest—is a professional magician who performs card tricks and simple illusions while circulating through the party. Though I prove entirely incompetent at performing the magic tricks, Andrea is able to pick them up quickly; I am even more amazed when, over a year later, she passes a remembered trick along to the actor who plays Mark Harshman in Dallas, which scores a great effect in the game.

I give magic another shot by contacting a local card magician from Craigslist. He works in the kitchen of a bar in downtown Austin, and I spend two hours very late at night in an alley of the Warehouse District dropping cards in puddles of crud. With Gen Con a few months away, we need a more secure way to conjure this virtual curse, and the team brainstorms new ideas.

The strongest asset we settle on is my list of industry contacts who will be attending the con in August. I go about making calls and filling in those professionals who will be making public appearances during the convention. I line up four solid commitments that will be temporally spread out over the course of the convention, and I later give each of these industry names a small phrase offering condolences to Mark Harshman that they can work into whatever appearances they make and spread gossip about. To my surprise, one of the guys makes an immediate post online about it, which marks the first outsider participation in the game and gets the design team excited about the prospects of building a fictional gamer hero with larger-than-life status.

Additionally, we come up with some great scenes to enact that require the following items:

- Loaded dice to botch rolls
- Lost stuff in fabricated “stashes”
- Crutches
- 2 Fake T-shirts
- Small fake diary

We also pay \$200 to a prominent gaming blog that promises to be broadcasting live from Gen Con for some screen time during one of their segments, which will lead to mixed results.

## Planning The Props

What physical props are needed to run a successful alternate reality game will vary with the game, but attempting to develop a “spectral geography” takes carefully designed objects and environments. While virtual objects make up a large part of tabletop games and online virtual worlds, murder-mystery events and alternate reality games thrive on the “infinite affordances” of the actual world. The actual world is fully interpolated into the virtual construction and becomes its own best map.

In the terms of John Searle (1995), each prop is designed in such a way to function as “X” for the participants or uninitiated and at the same time “Y” for players who have shifted into “Context C.” The best props, like the best clues, can seem to mean one thing at one time, only to mean something else after more knowledge is uncovered. In other words, they exist robustly enough to afford multiple interpretations, a necessary condition for player *toying*. Such props constitute a material infrastructure—or, a “patch” that hacks into various actual infrastructures—with the aim of expanding or distending the actual world enough to create a pocket big enough for the game to slip in.

The lusory means of the game come from these fabricated Indices peppered throughout the environs of the convention, which work not only to Index the curse but also simultaneously lead players through the events of the game, which manifest as the unfolding (pre)lusory goals. The second and third iterations of *Fancy Bang* are much cheaper than the first, as it is much easier to generate a single virtual object rather than an entirely virtual downtown environment, although the A-Kon game will take a surprising turn in that direction thanks to a minor celebrity. Most of the other lusory goals and contests embody conflicts generated within the *Fantaji* games and throughout the tournament, which is easy enough to manipulate.

For the 2012 Gen Con iteration of *Fancy Bang*, we purchase or fabricate the at least the following items:

- 20 11” X 17” fake gaming schedules
- 20 11” X 17” fake posters from last year used as false histories
- 5 copies of a 24” X 36” foam board signs for fake “open-gaming” room

- 2 vinyl banners
- 2000 *artifact* cards in 50 different styles
- 1000 coupon cards
- 400 poker chip tokens
- 50 poker chip tokens with “decoder” design
- 3 T-shirts from real conventions with Mark’s name on them (2 bad, 1 good)
- 3 fake convention programs with Mark in them
- Old printed diary from previous champion
- 200 fake business cards for 2 fictional characters
- 1000 printed schedules of table events (2 versions)
- 1 pair of crutches
- 10 loaded dice
- 2 full backpacks of used goods to be Mark Harshman’s “stash”
- 50 tiles of 5 custom *Fantaji* enemies to suit narrative
- 80 stapled packets of the 60+ page quickstart packets (see below)
- 300 blank character sheets
- 80 copies of 8 sample characters
- 4 previous character sheets of Mark’s characters

These props are all designed to *charge* the halls of the Indiana Convention Center (ICC) and the Hilton Anatole hotel in Dallas with our fictional world and singular virtual object. Together, a world slightly bigger than our own can emerge. Surprisingly, the props cost us just under \$1800 per convention (beyond the \$1000 or so my company already spends to attend, which covers lodging). The amount we spend on each of Gen Con and A-Kon is only slightly less than the price of the doomed SXSW iteration, which resulted in only 12 unique players over 11 days.

### ***Take-Home Quickstarts***

What become the most important props by far are not properly part of the virtual world. We publish 80 small packets for each convention that contain free “quickstart” copies of *Fantaji*, preview versions that contain just enough of the game for a tutorial and some fun. These each include the stories of our successful 2010 Kickstarter campaign and the rise of Mark “Crocodile Fingers” Harshman, which we fictionally attach to the previous year’s con. The packets also contain a few character sheets, sample *artifacts*, and plenty of information to bring people into the *Fancy Bang* fabrication. Our hope is

that these portable “rabbit holes” can be used to lure promising tabletop gamers already interested in *Fantaji* seamlessly into *Fancy Bang*’s alternate reality. Mitch and his own team take great care designing an encounter for the quickstart that resonates with the plight of Harshman, and Andrea puts everything together impeccably.

### ***Murphy’s Law of Infrastructure Hacking***

For the smaller con in 2013, we print only 20 posters altogether to hang around the Hilton Anatole in Dallas, TX, that appear to be official schedules and reminders from the A-Kon administrators. The posters feature the *Fantaji* play-offs “featuring Mark ‘Crocodile Fingers’ Harshman” alongside the official sponsored events of the con. In our post-event interviews, nobody recalls seeing the posters, and before the 2014 con I find it is cheaper to simply pay for advertising space at the convention than to go guerilla. So it goes.

### **The Central Fabrication & Schedule**

The narrative flow-chart we plot out serves to feature the curse as centrally as possible and to give players opportunities to interact with our actors and each other to animate their environments and get caught up in the doubling world. From Wednesday through Friday at Gen Con and all day Friday at A-Kon, we will have up to four projects running at any given moment: scheduled four-hour *Fantaji* sessions in the gaming halls to offer “rabbit holes” and spread gossip, two-hour *Fantaji* sessions that constitute a loose “play-off” tournament at our own dedicated booth, Crocodile Fingers himself schmoozing the con to enlist “allies” and “impostors” whom he coaches to win the tournament and take his place as champion, and any one of our pre-designed live-action challenges or latent puzzle-games.

Andrea and I design two twists, the first scheduled for Saturday morning at both cons, wherein Harshman’s *Fantaji* player-character will die in a third-round play-off session at our dedicated booth, before the presumed finale. By this point Harshman will have been amassing allies and coaching them how to win the tournament with puzzles, challenges, and impromptu gaming sessions. His early loss should confuse the players a

bit, and Harshman will continue to offer puzzles and challenges with the promise of still having some trick up his sleeve that yet gives him power to determine his successor.

The second twist will happen later in the day on Saturday after Harshman publicly confesses to losing on purpose to shed the “champion’s curse.” Most of the players will have already known and taken advantage of his intention to lose throughout the tournament; however, the twist comes after the new champion is crowned. For the Gen Con iteration, another actor will play the new *Fantaji* champion, Aurora, who suffers from the curse and then swears to spread it through force of will to any and all who played in the *Fantaji* tournament over the last three days. Saturday night will see more curse-Indexing hijinks, and there will be a final event early on Sunday morning to “cleanse” any player of the curse, though attendance is mandatory for the spell to work. By this point the major fabrication will have been set aside, and players will likely be invested in *Fancy Bang* only to see what happens next and how far we can take the curse before resolving the central fabrication.

The second twist occurs differently at A-Kon. When the next year comes around, we cannot fill out a full ensemble of actors and decide to leave the role of the “new champion” up to chance. The con has fewer days anyway, and we figure it will be easier having Crocodile Fingers himself seek to spread the curse to every player in the tournament out of spite after losing, potentially arguing that because he did not lose in the championship game his curse lingers. We plan to test the mettle of whoever wins the tournament to see what we might do with the curse for the rest of the day Saturday. *Does it stay with Harshman or move to the new reigning champion?* Either way, the narrative will lead up to the denouement event early Sunday morning.

Climactic forks in the road will occur on Thursday and Friday nights, swaying the direction of the tournament and revealing new information—or not—about the nature of the curse. The Saturday night event will function as a headline climax that has a preset result, though Sunday morning can go in a few directions based on our sense of the night before.

### **Wednesday Morning: Press & Educators Day**

Although the *Fancy Bang* designers spend months prepping players online, generating buzz and planting evidence around the Web, the participants have few opportunities to investigate the frame until they arrive at the con. In Indianapolis, this means the localized portion of the game will begin at noon on Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup>.

Wednesday at Gen Con is reserved exclusively for the press and educators. It is the “soft launch” of the con, and researchers are permitted to roam any of the open-gaming areas and demo rooms; only the hangar-sized Exhibition Hall is closed as retailers hang their signs and build their booths. The convention has several panels throughout the day, but only one or two thousand such researchers are in attendance. There is talk of letting small-studio designers attend on Wednesday as well and expanding the programming to include how-to and *Shark Tank*-style events, where amateur designers pitch ideas to larger publishers; however, I cannot foresee this happening anytime soon. Gen Con is becoming increasingly industry-driven as private companies direct more and more of the programming and reshape the con as a business retreat and “state of the union” expo, rather than as place to interact with and support their fans and gamers. The change has been rapid, interestingly coeval with similar shifts in the many national Comic Con events and even Austin’s own SXSW Festivals. I have “yellow badge” access to Gen Con each year as an educator, though 2012 would be the first year I would use such clearance for Wednesday activities.

### ***Early Framing & Scouting***

After the team of creators arrives on Wednesday, only four of us for now, we immediately scope out the new layout of the convention center. The Indiana Convention Center (ICC) has a modular floor-plan, and each year the con is a little different. In 2011, the ICC completed a \$275-million expansion and renovation project in preparation for hosting Super Bowl XLVI along with the nearby Lucas Oil Stadium in February of 2012, and the *Fancy Bang* team, most of us veteran Gen Con attendees, prepares for an unfamiliar environment.

I check in with my contacts and my company's retail partners via SMS and have them slip me into the Exhibition Hall to drop off some printed materials at various booths. Things are still being fixed together in the enormous space; small forklifts and hydraulic cranes move the metal armatures of larger displays and hanging three-dimensional signs and models resembling float-balloons from the 30' ceilings. Andrea and Greg have created a coupon for a free *Fantaji* PDF download that requires a kind of "booth crawl" to activate: con-goers must learn code words from different booths to fill out blanks on the postcard-sized coupon and bring it to us in our dedicated booth in a smaller program hall. Several of the third-party booths are happy to be involved in the "crawl," and we get a small chance to start some Crocodile Fingers gossip with smaller companies eager to be a part of the action.

### **Wednesday Afternoon: The Playtest Hall**

My company has taken out a booth in the new "Playtest Hall," an unofficial test-run of a program that would go on to become officially sanctioned in 2013 and 2014, doubling in size each year. The Playtest Hall allows large and small studios to debut games in progress and elicit feedback from specifically targeted gamers. *Want to test your new game or module with a gaming group of three middle-aged couples?* Easy. Fill out the worksheet, and the company running the Hall will find the six volunteers from among the con and schedule them at your table.

On Wednesday, we open up our booth at noon and request groups of six gamers each who will be attending the con for the full duration (we would not want to waste the time advertising to researchers only here for the day). I am soon in rhythm running short-form games of *Fantaji*, taking e-mail addresses, names, and the occasional cell-phone number to "keep the gamers updated on special events" that are bound to turn up throughout the convention. Every chance I get, I plug the saddening fate of Mark "Crocodile Fingers" Harshman, who has been the undisputed "world champion" of *Fantaji* since the game launched in 2011. Overall, I catch a few fish, and I end up passing

out six of the quickstart packets to promising gamers who seem eager to continue the game in their rooms after hours.

Most of the Wednesday programming ends at 5:00PM, and the ICC gets eerily quiet after the scheduled events end. The team calls it a night pretty early on and heads up to our rooms for drinks and stapling more quickstart packets. Checking online the night before each convention launches, we have 65 pre-registered participants for Gen Con and 40 for A-Kon. I will be up early running games and working the booths in either case. The game is on!

### **III. BREAKING THE MAJOR FABRICATION**

This section traces the transformation from *participant* to *player* of key attendees from both conventions. Two Gen Con gamers who take up leadership roles in Indianapolis, Sid and Nico, become playful rivals to replace Crocodile Fingers. Alex takes an early lead in solving puzzles and quickly picks up on the “quest-giver” function Mitch plays. Juno suffers from the “champion’s curse” and enlists the aid of her entire European tour group to further the tournament. Three unacquainted A-Kon attendees find themselves at the center of the action at different times in Dallas, and each changes the direction of the game: Melinda, Thomas, and Wamae. Finally, one random encounter almost entirely ruins our A-Kon *Fancy Bang*, but ends up being just the thing to double our base.

#### **Thursday: Gathering Gamers**

By 9:00AM in Indianapolis there is a line of almost one thousand people winding its way around the largest foyer of the ICC, the vast plurality of the bodies white, male, and over 30 years old. The costume parade is not until Saturday, and Gen Con is not particularly known for its cosplay. There are attendees in various stages of half-

costume—the odd piece of mail armor, a foam sword, some Orc or Drow<sup>26</sup> face-paint, some quality superhero outfits—but most individuals look like stereotypical “gamers” from film and television. While the personalities and mannerisms of fictionalized tabletop gamers in the media are rarely accurate, it seems most directors can capture the outward appearances well enough. In 2012, “geek culture” was just at the edge of mainstream, and it would take only one or two more superhero movies to push things over.

My first game runs 10:00AM-2:00PM, and for the rest of the day I work the booth in the Playtest Hall spreading rumors or wandering the convention meeting friends and contacts. One of my best game-masters, Davis, meets Sid, 36, and Ash, 34, in a game scheduled at the 2:00-6:00PM slot. The two drove in from Milwaukee the night before and stayed with old college friends in a nearby suburb before driving downtown early in the morning. With their bags tagged behind the front desk awaiting check-in, they started into their scheduled events at 9:00AM with a panel on the television series *Firefly*, hosted by the company that purchased the license to publish the *Firefly Role-Playing Game*.

Davis starts up the planned adventure and shares some of our printed materials with Sid and Ash, staying in key and dropping bits of Crocodile Fingers lore when the opportunities arise. Davis recalls that a few of the other gamers in the session became very interested in the curse and asked direct questions that caught him off guard. He cannot say whether Sid or Ash ever chimed in, though he remembers that both did fairly well playing through the *Fantaji* adventure. The three-part module we are running at the convention progresses from day to day in gamers who enjoy their officially scheduled sessions can visit our Playtest booth to continue the same campaign.

Sid remembers being captivated by *Fantaji*. He reads through the entire quickstart booklet at the table during play and suggests the gambit that eventually pushes the party to victory against a *Clutch of Ember Goblins* and an *Painted Ogre*. Ash role-plays as a *Wood Elementalist* but gets killed halfway through the session. He spends the rest of the time looking over the tiles, cards, and coupons Davis has on display. At 5:30PM or so the

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<sup>26</sup> Orcs are the default antagonists of certain fantasy realms, inspired by the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, and Drow are evil, charcoal-skinned quasi-elves with silver hair first appearing in *Dungeons & Dragons* tie-in fiction.

game is over, and Sid wants to know what slot Mark Harshman is scheduled to play in for the *Fantaji* tournament that starts Friday. From that moment on, he has a new personal goal for the con: take down the giant.

He and Ash take one of the quickstart packets and flip through it a few times over the course of the day while waiting in line, working out their own characters to use the next day if they join the tournament. Like most Gen Con attendees, Sid and Ash have full schedules and come to the conference with a long to-do list that leaves little time for spontaneous events or detours. If they want to play *Fantaji* at some point on Friday, they will have to do it over lunch or miss out on a panel during the afternoon.

### ***Nico Catches On at The Booth***

Later in the day, after I have been running non-stop *Fantaji* games for over 10 hours, three middle-aged, heavy-laden con-goers notice an empty table near my Playtest booth and stroll up to take a load off as they wait for their own scheduled session to begin with another company. As I lead six *Fantaji* newcomers through a small skirmish, the resting guys eavesdrop a bit and take interest. A half hour later, when the encounter at my table ends, I give a little Crocodile Fingers pitch and flash some of the knock-off materials that Andrea and Mitch designed featuring fictional conventions and tournaments. I pass out a quickstart or two and start cleaning up the table for the next scheduled group of testers. One of the waiting guys steps over with a grin on his face.

“I want in, man,” he offers. I assure him that I have no idea what he means, but it is my first time deflecting such direct inquiries and this man knows his stuff. He calls out the fake tournaments, drops some knowledge about the various conventions that *actually* take place in the cities mentioned on the fake T-shirts, and tells me again that he “wants in on” whatever is happening.

Feeling caught but unwilling to give up on the fabrication on the first full day of the convention, I explain that Mark Harshman himself had brought those T-shirts by earlier in the day to intimidate new gamers with his legacy, and I had just assumed they were real. *Faked? How could he?* The middle-aged veteran, Nico, buys it reluctantly and

moves into sharing some of his war stories from attending the *real* conventions in Columbus, OH, and Ann Arbor, MI. He seems a great guy, and I invite him to join in on the play-offs that will be starting the next day where he can confront the counterfeiter himself. I hand him a quickstart packet, and we shake hands before both of us start up our next shifts of scheduled games.

### ***“Crocodile Fingers” Making Allies***

While most of the *Fancy Bang* designers and my team of game-masters endure long shifts either at the Playtest booth or in the overlapping series of four-hour registered events, Mitch is working the crowd as Crocodile Fingers on crutches and having a ball. He passes out printed artifact tiles that players can use in *Fantaji* sessions to boost their player-characters and get ahead in the tournament, and he sends interested gamers on challenges and quests we have hidden across the con. He regales all who will listen on the series of tragic accidents that almost made him miss the con and landed him in crutches; he claims that the curse follows him everywhere and prevents him from attending the con to the fullest and taking advantage of his role as *Fantaji* champion. If the mark seems keen to step into the fabrication, Mitch then invites them to impersonate him and attend one of two smaller events as the guest of honor in his place—so long as they do something for him first or prove themselves somehow.

Mitch distributes forty artifacts cards throughout the day and invites a dozen or so participants—who may or may not be onto his shtick—to attend either a late-night dinner in his honor at a nearby hotel or an early morning gaming session with his pre-made player-character. Though we have a competitive event planned for Thursday night to take place during an otherwise unrelated private party, none of the invited guests will arrive. However, three of his new “allies” will show up early Friday morning to compete for two powerful artifacts that can help them in the tournament, one of those being Alex.

### ***A-Kon Crocodile Fingers***

The actor who plays Mark “Crocodile Fingers” Harshman at A-Kon is a professional. He comes recommended from a friend I have in Dallas, and while he lacks a

certain imagination, he will do anything we ask. There is no self-consciousness about causing scenes in public, no embarrassment at wailing in front of strangers or stumbling over furniture. He is a riot, and his obvious melodrama weakens the major fabrication only a little. *What if the real Crocodile Fingers is a histrionic diva with a penchant for self-abuse?*

Though he plays a major role at A-Kon, he and I have less of a personal relationship than Mitch and I; subsequently I see him less during the con and trust that he is keeping up with his duties, which he does.

### **The Curse Strikes—Without Us**

Juno, 31, lives in Germany and attends Gen Con every year with her husband. She backed the *Fantaji* project on Kickstarter and held off on having the materials shipped to them at home to save money. She has been waiting almost a year to pick up the book, custom dice, deck of cards, and other materials at Gen Con. When Juno and her husband come to the Playtest Hall to meet with me on Thursday afternoon and pick up their items, I am busy in the gaming hall. However, Mitch is taking a break with the crew and, not knowing Juno is an acquaintance of sorts, he sidles up on his crutches and gives the couple his pitch about the curse. They speak for a while, but after Juno explains herself and what she is looking for, Jake steps in and hands her the package I had marked and set aside for her earlier.

Later that night, Juno and her husband come back to the booth, again when I am away. Apparently a few elements of Mitch's pitch as *Crocodile Fingers* were lost in translation, and Juno has come to playfully share that she sprained her wrist during a game in which she was using the "cursed dice" from her *Fantaji* materials. It takes a few moments for Jake and Davis to put together what she means, since neither listened too closely when she spoke with Mitch several hours earlier. Apparently she took Mitch to mean that *all* the custom *Fantaji* dice were cursed, not *his* dice. Juno stopped by to tease him about jinxing her and spraining her wrist. She sits down with a small group of strangers and plays through the round-one encounter with the *Golem* and *Wizard*.

Fortunately, no other players are harmed during the game. The crew does a good job keying Juno into the game, and she proves a sharp contender.

### **Thursday Night in Dallas**

If Gen Con is that weird uncle you see once a year, A-Kon might be that charmed cousin ten years your junior who somehow knows more about the world than you do. A-Kon has an average age closer to 20, and the convention unofficially begins Thursday night when guests begin arriving at the Hilton Anatole hotel. My carpool arrives from Austin around 7:00PM, and the elegance of the hotel astounds me. *They are going to let teenage, con-going otaku<sup>27</sup> run amok in this place?* The ivory-colored floors shine something like opal, and the vertical ebony frames that act as walls lead the eye upwards to art installations hanging from the ceilings. We drag our roller-boards onward, and I recognize what looks like historical art from south and east Asia: sculptures, paintings, silks, tapestries.

My *Fancy Bang* team is not coming in until tomorrow, and my carpool friends—including the guy who told me about the con a few months ago and suggested that we stage another game here—offer to help me get the company table put together for the morning. We pass two large chambers, as many cafes, a trendy bar with LED displays for tables, and another art gallery. It takes us three hours to unpack and put out the materials.

Meanwhile, Melinda, 19, and five of her friends arrive at the hotel closer to 9:00PM and drag their multiple suitcases and makeup kits up to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the “Tower,” one of three wings of the hotel, a vast chamber outfitted with exposed hallways pointed inward, a 25-floor panopticon wrapped around hanging art. She and her friends each have four costumes for the convention: one for the Thursday night rounds, one for Friday, one for most of Saturday, and one for the masquerade ball on Saturday night. The six of them coordinated each set of costumes to highlight the full cast of a different anime series or video game title; it takes them over an hour to get ready, the co-ed crew now decked out as six popular enemies of the Marvel Comics anti-hero Deadpool. They

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<sup>27</sup> The word means “fan” or “fanatic” in Japanese and applies to various fandoms in that country, but in the United States it typically applies to anime fans and cosplayers.

distribute a handle of vodka among six water bottles, mix in a little Redbull, each pop a tab of ecstasy, and strut out to the lobby.

Thomas, 22, gets to the hotel a little later than Melinda. He comes alone but plans to meet with his friends tomorrow. For one night he has a room to himself, and Thomas intends to make the most of it. When he wakes up Friday morning to a buzzing phone and knocks on the door, he has no recollection of what happened the night before. In fact, the blackout will extend back into Thursday evening, and come Sunday afternoon Thomas will be unable to find his car. He has to ask hotel security for help and does not leave Dallas for Forth Worth until late Sunday night.

Wamae, 20, arrives closer to midnight with three friends. They have three costumes each and do not bring any drugs or alcohol to the convention. Wamae scored free passes to the con for him and his friends by signing up to volunteer as ushers and runners for various programming events. Each of the men had to commit to be on-call for four hours on Friday and Saturday each and to stay after the convention closed on Sunday for cleanup. As things would go, Wamae will spend his full four hours on Friday morning running for us in the gaming room.

### ***Loose Lips Sink Ships***

After setting up, two of my new acquaintances head up to their room to change into costumes, but Joel, 22, and I both set out to find a drink. When Joel and I turn the corner from the southwest corridor and step off the burgundy carpet towards the central foyer and the bar, we step right up against hundreds of young otaku buzzing, strolling, and dancing from floor to ceiling. The atmosphere is progressively queer, and most of the attendees are decked out in costumes specifically designed for the rave-like feel of this one night. Half of the bodies are half bare, and both metallic and animal print body-paint seem popular. Gender is fluid, judgment is absent, and red plastic cups pass from stranger to stranger to keep the hotel security from catching any single person with the contraband alcohol. The environment could not be more different from Gen Con, and I worry for a moment if any of these Millennial ravers are going to be into tabletop gaming.

I figure the bar will be packed at 10:00PM, but as Joel and I stroll up we see only a handful of out-of-place patrons inside. *Of course! Everyone else is underage.* He and I are both haggard and bearded, and a few middle-aged hotel guests—obviously in town for a reason unrelated to the con—flash us commiserating glances as we walk in. I am enamored of the atmosphere in the lobby, and we pay the curmudgeons no reply and no mind. I snag a stool at the bar and turn to face the spectacle just on the other side of a small, open patio that juts out into the atrium. It seems a virtual world of some sort is already afoot, and watching the assemblage of bodies move, flow, quake is inspiring.

We meet Hibiko and his friends, well-dressed actors who have been hired by the convention administrators to portray popular anime ensembles and perform small scenes throughout the weekend in character. Tonight they wear expensive suits and a touch of metallic makeup around their eyes. They seem good people, and the hours pass as we talk about working the con and being at such a remove from the culture of the young attendees. Hibiko is a tabletop gamer, and I let him in on *Fancy Bang*, asking if he can help spread gossip about the “champion’s curse.” He leaps at the idea, and we stay up talking until 2:30AM about ways he and his troupe can help the cause.

### **Friday Morning Players**

Friday morning comes easily in Indianapolis, and we begin to hear from newly constituted *players* who have cracked through the major fabrication after working with Mitch the previous day and reading through materials at night. They want to ask us about “the game” that is seemingly afoot.

“The story just seems like one of those indie gamer movies,” Alex says after stopping by the booth to play an exclusive session he was invited to the night before. “If it *is* a movie and you guys are making it, I mean, I want to be in it too,” he adds. We get a full table of six players together and let them fight it out for some powerful artifacts. Alex wins handedly and hangs around for a bit, seemingly taking in the dynamic of the group and plotting.

As other gamers from the last couple days trickle back in to check up on the story, they pick up on the team's performances. I am busy enough running the booth to hide my poor capacity for dissembling under very real stress when I respond to their questions. Other designers are much better actors and work to deflect (but encourage) these new players throughout the morning. They give the newcomers tips on how to find Crocodile Fingers wandering around the con, offering that they have "heard he has been up to something."

Nico, the middle-aged man I met in the same place the evening before, returns late in the morning with new friends and wants to join the tournament. He says that he and his group breezed through the quickstart last night and played *Fantaji* for a few hours, and the three of them have filled out the blank character sheets with custom player-characters. Nico shows his friends the fake T-shirts and speaks in key about the "champion's curse," obviously eager to play along. He proclaims to other visitors at our booth that he fears no curse and prophesies that he will win the tournament Saturday night after a final showdown with Mark "Crocodile Fingers" Harshman. His friends are keen as well, and they play through the first official module with three other gamers who volunteered through the Playtest Hall, easily tearing through the *Golem* and the *Wizard*.

The first good sign of the virtual world is Nico performing to us as much as to the others crowd. He knows something is "up" with the fake T-shirts and the purple quickstart narrative, but we have so far played dumb enough that he figures the hoax may be of Mark Harshman's creation. Following, his performance is noticeably guarded, and he constantly reads the faces of the crew as he makes claims and fishes for information. He takes liberties adding more to the fictional legacy of Crocodile Fingers and, hearing no resistance, positions himself as the top contender to any who will listen. He is making the ruse his own and seems to be intentionally trying to con us. Nico works his unique style of positive and gregarious energy to motivate other players at key events throughout the convention.

### ***First A-Kon Player***

Wamae is on-call in the Tabletop Gaming Room when it opens at 10:00AM, and he is called in immediately to set up tables for the free miniature-painting workshops to take place. He makes several trips to the small office supply store in the hotel for event organizers, and we rely on him three or four times ourselves before 11:00AM.

The room is only 60' square, and there are six or seven contingents of gaming organizers each working a cluster of tables. My company has two tables right near the door, and *Fantaji* is the only anime-themed game at the con. Wizards of The Coast are running official *Dungeons & Dragons* modules on two tables in the back corner, no anime or otaku vibe at all; a crew of twenty-somethings in full costume run a steampunk game on seven tables in the middle of the room, again devoid of themes related to the convention; a polyamorous collective of middle-aged and older volunteers run Palladium Publishing games on four tables nearest us, a company that has not published a new game in more than a decade but has a large cult following; and volunteer crews of two or three other companies play miniature war-games along the far wall, all themed for science-fiction.

I run three or four short sessions of *Fantaji* in the four hours that Wamae runs errands for the gaming programmers, and whenever he gets a spare minute he hangs around our table picking up on the game. After hearing my canned "curse" pitch two or three times and reading through some of the materials, he figures out what is happening. He asks about the tournament, clearly already outside the major fabrication, but I stay in key and invite him and his friends to sign up for a session later in the day.

### **Friday Afternoon Events**

While I run two long sessions with new participants in the gaming hall, Davis and Jake work the Playtest Hall booth most of the day Friday. Sid and Ash play the first module of the tournament, bringing their lunches to the table. Two of the six player-characters must die in the first round, and Ash gets killed again after role-playing the same relatively powerless player-character he took to the four-hour session. The have a

laugh, and Sid advances to the next round, which means he can stop by whenever he wants and see if enough second-round gamers are waiting for a table to start.

Arguably the most important thing to happen on Friday at Gen Con—even more so than the first tournament appearance of Harshman later in the night—is the meeting of Sid and Nico. Before Sid and Ash leave for their afternoon event, Nico comes into the Hall and asks to start up a second-round game. He keys himself as the “big contender” against Crocodile Fingers, and Sid has no choice but to stay. As he tells me later, it is through Nico’s bombastic performance that Sid breaks himself out of major fabrication and figures out what is going on: a *fake* champion whom *real* gamers have to compete against in a *semi-staged* tournament.

Sometime just after lunch, Sid and Nico play a second-round session with four other gamers. They are both veteran gamers confident in their abilities, and *Fantaji* encourages over-the-top theatrics with rules that are easily *toyed* with. They turn the entire session into a competition between the two of them. From what I gather, after both survive the session by dumb luck they strike up a gentlemen’s agreement to key the rest of the con as hated rivals.

Davis explains to them that after the third-round encounter, which will kill off half of the player-characters who begin the session, there is only the championship table left. Sid and Nico hang around the booth for a while inventing backstories for their rivalry before agreeing to meet the next day as enemies.

### **Live-Action Challenges Create An Economy**

At both conventions, the side quests Harshman offers to help players build up more powerful characters to take into the tournament spawn a small economy of artifacts and tokens. Some players repeatedly find the same rewards and want to trade, others do not care to play *Fantaji* at all and offer their rewards for cash or tickets<sup>28</sup>, and a few bands of players work together pooling resources and taking turns checking in with Crocodile Fingers.

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<sup>28</sup> Gen Con sells “generic tickets” that are required to play any officially scheduled gaming event. Each ticket is worth \$1.

### ***The Curse Steals Harshman's Backpack***

It is scripted that sometime during the day Harshman has to unleash the curse on himself. We have prepared two backpacks of clues and artifacts, hoping we can pull the same stunt twice at each con with different players to increase circulation of the rumors and backstory. Harshman will hide the bag somewhere and then enlist new participants or keyed players to help him retrieve the “stolen” or “lost” bag of gear, however he feels like selling it.

By now, Mitch has a stable of allies who check in with him now and then for ways to earn tokens and artifacts. Any initiated players who hear the quest about a lost backpack assume correctly that the contents of the bag will constitute quite the haul. Jake and I spent forever planning the crossover for this challenge, and the entire team is excited to see how it goes. The players have to enter an entirely unrelated tournament to get the bag, which has been “accidentally” tagged as part of the booty. The tournament is being run by one of my industry friends, and I asked him for a simple favor: if my players win, give them the backpack with the other prizes; if someone else wins, cause a little scene fussing over why “some filthy backpack got mixed up with the prizes” and toss it in a corner for my players to retrieve.

The group that wins the first backpack are part of the growing “puzzles only” culture, the design team loses track of the bag. We later reckon that it hit some kind of “chop shop” that took the artifacts and tokens before ditching the rest. Unfortunately, there was a painstakingly made fake diary in the backpack that we only had the one copy of. So it goes.

### **Friday Evening Event: Enter Crocodile Fingers**

When Mitch arrives for his first scheduled session as Crocodile Fingers, our booth is surrounded by 20 or so players who have been vying for spots to join in the game with the champion. Nico is there, but he already played the second module earlier in the day with Sid and knows how powerful the enemies are. The people running the Playtest Hall are a little frustrated with our taking over much of the space in the room, but they dutifully help us set up more tables to accommodate all the gamers. While I run

Harshman, Alex, and four other players through the second *Fantaji* module, Davis and Jake do the same for the other players.

Everyone there is already keying along with the narrative so we play up the “curse” hard, even a little campy: the loaded dice, spilled drinks, a text from Harshman’s mother alerting him his dog died, etc. Just when campy curse jokes die down and the battles get more intense, Juno and her European Gamers Tour Group arrive, and she shares her own experiences with the “curse.” They schedule their own sessions for the next day and cheer on the gamers before heading back out.

Harshman scrapes by the session, and players start speculating about what might happen the next day when the third-round sessions start. Unfortunately, Alex’s player-character gets killed off, but we see him quickly walk over to Nico with a deck of artifacts he has been saving up. All of our important players are keyed in and waiting to see how the next round goes.

### **Hibiko Hijacks The Game in Dallas**

The final Friday sessions in Dallas start at 9:00PM because the Tabletop Gaming Room closes just before midnight. One table features a second-round encounter, and the other hosts the final first-round session. Melinda won an artifact earlier in the day and strolled over to the room just to see what was happening. She sits down to get a better look at the printed materials, and we assume she is claiming a spot. Before she knows it, the encounter is starting around her; she just goes with it.

Somehow the professional actor Hibiko has been collecting artifacts and tokens throughout the day on Friday by manipulating a large group of impressionable attendees with relatively “insider” information about the game that I had spilled to him Thursday night. He arrives at our cluster of tables in the Tabletop Gaming Room around 10:00PM with a trail of followers in the form of a long parade. Hibiko announces that he will win the tournament on Saturday to be the next undisputed *Fantaji* champion, and Jake has to inform him that there are no spots left tonight nor will there be any more first-round tables starting up for the tournament tomorrow. Were I not busy with a table, I would

have seen the number of gamers and told them to come back in the morning for catch-up games. However, Jake is a very by-the-book guy, so he denies them.

Hibiko does not seem to mind. He waits around with a smaller retinue of followers to see how the two tables turn out, asking when everything seems to be wrapping up which the survivors is the weakest. Not entirely aware of what he is up to, I let him know that the first-round table had some inexperienced gamers that could use some help if he wanted to get rid of the stacks of tokens and artifacts he is holding. He thanks me but just mills about puffing out his chest while the team and I close up shop for the night. After midnight, the team takes its first break for the day, and we stay up drinking and sharing stories about the day until late.

### ***Friday Night in Dallas***

While the designers and game-masters sleep, Hibiko and Melinda enact some grand symbolic war marching and charging large groups of con-goers back and forth across parking lots and up into the nearby hotels. According to Melinda and some of the dedicated puzzle-solvers who talk to Harshman the next day, the “war” starts when Hibiko gifts most of his amassed power-ups to Melinda and then announces her his vassal. She performs a dramatic refusal, and the two begin a long theatrical contestation that ends up splitting Hibiko’s followers in two. The performance escalates into a drug-fueled but formally judged pageant of sorts. Though the rivalry reportedly lasts all night, it appears to fizzle as soon as the majority of the performers crash sometime after sunrise.

## **IV. CRACKING THE CENTRAL FABRICATION**

This section covers the actions of key players as they resolve the narrative of Mark “Crocodile Fingers” Harshman and work to alleviate the curse that soon afflicts them all. The major events of Friday night take different directions at the two conventions. At Gen Con, two rival factions led by Sid and Nico, who also enlisted the aid of Alex, are gearing up to meet Harshman in the tournament finals Saturday evening. At A-Kon, Hibiko has hijacked the entire game and created a veritable army of

underlings overnight now poised to solve all of the puzzles we have to struggle to hide about unnoticed. Hibiko's influence fades by late morning (and his employment responsibilities take up most of his time), with Wamae and Thomas surfing the wave of players he attracted.

### **Saturday Mornings at Conventions**

Tens of thousands of new faces arrive at both conventions on Saturday, many attendees being unable to take off of work and attend a con on weekdays. In many ways, a convention does not start until the weekend hits, and all of the most important programming events happen on Saturday (awards shows, reporters, organization or club voting, national competitions, etc.). However, for the diehard attendees, Saturday mornings at any con are rough. Despite the fact that Gen Con has only been in full swing for two days and A-Kon even less, both cons are 24-hour affairs.

When we wake up on Saturday morning after four hours of sleep, we are the lazy ones. We dig through roller-board suitcases, step over bodies curled up on the floor, sniff socks, brush teeth—it already feels as though we have camping for weeks. My bones ache, and my voice is almost gone after two 14-hour days of running games. The Saturday morning events are pivotal for *Fancy Bang*, and we have get things prepared perfectly to attract as many players as possible for the homestretch.

Amphetamines and energy drinks are popular party favors at both conventions, and I know many con-goers who do not even reserve hotel rooms. They crash in quiet corners for cat naps every so often and run on fumes as long as possible. We get down to the lobby just after 8:00AM only to see many of the con-goers just where we left them five hours ago.

### **Crocodile Fingers Takes a Dive**

When Mitch as Crocodile Fingers sits down at the third-round table at 10:00AM, there is already a small crowd of players forming. Sid and Juno are there to share a table with him, along with our actor, Aurora, and two less prominent players. Half of them will not make it to the championship table later in the afternoon. The game is scheduled as a

two-hour session, but we know that it will not take that long. Nico and Alex are not on scene when the encounter begins, but they show up before things get too heated and take notes to prepare for their own session, which will take place soon.

Mitch and Jake designed the encounter to be “freakishly hard,” and Mitch’s most difficult task of the convention is right here: do not accidentally survive longer than the rest of the players. He has to be one of the first three out to be disqualified. An opportunity shows up early in the battle, and Mitch bites. In what would be analogous to a “hale of gunfire,” Harshman’s player-character dies. The room explodes. Mitch stands up, takes a bow, and throws off his crutches to celebrate the lifting of the curse.

It is a chaotic moment, and I switch out Aurora’s dice for Mitch’s loaded set. As the session continues, Aurora becomes the recognizable bearer of the curse. We had planned for her to outlast everyone at the table and emerge as “the one who ended Crocodile Fingers,” but we did not want to bump Sid or Juno out before the finals. She performs very well, and the *Fancy Bang* players have trouble figuring out her role in things. The two other players drop out, and Sid, Juno, and Aurora all survive to play in the final table later that night.

When Aurora and the others stand up from the table to congratulate each other for knocking Mark “Crocodile Fingers” Harshman out of the *Fantaji* tournament, Greg has his only major performative role of the convention to play: he “accidentally” spills a giant soda on her (actually water). With our new victim drenched to the bone, suspicions are confirmed that the curse has shifted.

Channeling her best “Carrie” impersonation, the soaked Aurora spits out curses to the group, “I curse you all. *All of you*. Any one of you who has rolled a single die in this tournament is cursed!” It goes over well, and she spends the rest of the day as a rival puzzle-giver and plotter for Harshman. The game already has the Nico–Sid split so we do not push hard establishing the Harshman–Aurora split we had planned.

## **The Curse Spreads**

We spend most of Saturday hosting puzzles and challenges and spreading rumors about the curse. *Did you know so and so lost his wallet? Did you see how such and such bombed at the Dominion table?* Harshman, now the resurrected leader, spreads the word that there will be a healing ritual Sunday morning to counter Aurora's curse, but it will require everyone working together to succeed. More than the other puzzles of the game, he and Greg spent ages designing an elaborate scavenger hunt that included material objects hidden all over downtown, Internet research for magic words, certain articles of clothing crowd-sourced from among the players, and ceremonial eating. Much of the communication works like the game of telephone, which always keeps people bustling. We still have two tricks left to try intensifying the experience as well.

## ***Confiscation of Booty***

At both conventions we nonchalantly suggest to players that they can check any merchandise with the "Unopened Merchandise Only" desk to keep from hauling around expensive and heavy purchases. Unfortunately for them, this does not really exist. Two of our team absconds Saturday morning during the game with the player's things. The complaints are surprisingly minimal, but we hear on Sunday after the desk reappears that players were in a tentative panic.

## ***Iron DM Saturday Evening***

Erik, one of my friends from junior high school, happens to be a famous dungeon-master, (a game-master for *Dungeons & Dragons*). In 2012, he has won the *Iron DM* tournament at Gen Con for the last two years, which likely makes him the most famous single *Dungeons & Dragons* player in the nation. The *Iron DM* event takes place each Saturday at Gen Con from 12:00-6:00PM, pitting dungeon-masters against each other to generate the best player experiences and build the most dramatic adventures around three thematic elements that are released just one hour before play begins. The event features 120 players randomly selected from over one thousand volunteers, and over the course of

six hours the hall that hosts the event attracts hundreds of spectators who stop by to walk among the tables, eavesdrop, and explore.

When Erik is introduced at the tournament, he is to offer a small pitch explaining the “champion’s curse” and why he feels apprehensive about the *Iron DM* tournament “for the first time in years.” I speak with him just before the event begins, and he is eager to play the troubled hero. Erik will go on to win *Iron DM* that year and again in 2014. He and I joke that we should have planned *Fancy Bang* for 2013, where his performance was infamously terrible.

Despite Erik’s victory, the ripples and rumors work very well to stun the players about the scope of the game, *Iron DM* being one of the top three or four events of the convention.

### **Saturday Evening Championship**

Sid, Juno, and Nico are all in attendance at the final table on Saturday evening. Along with Aurora and two other players, the encounter begins. There has been a full day of strange happenings and misfortune, and we have a smaller crowd than expected to see official—if anti-climactic—championship game. Nico has been buffed with all of Alex’s remaining artifacts and tokens before the encounter begins, but the advantage is quickly lost. Aurora, Juno, and Andrew all drop out faster than expected, and for a moment Nico and Sid look equally matched. Eventually, after bringing in more artifacts, Nico lands a killing blow. According to the unofficial “best practices” we have established throughout the con, any player who makes a kill has “immunity” from being attacked by any monsters on his or her next turn.

As soon as Nico makes the kill, Sid knows that he will have to defend all three remaining monsters in the ensuing round. He takes a breath and quotes Harry Callahan to me. I make his day by killing his player-character with a *Psionic Vesbear*. The two players applaud each other before slipping back into character and pantomiming a short fistfight. Everyone else cheers, offering high fives and pats on the back.

The design teams hangs out with some of the players that night, but we make sure to stay far from the ICC, where the puzzle-culture players work to solve the curse.

### **A-Kon Saturday**

Hibiko makes an appearance Saturday morning before I hear about his nocturnal escapades. He asks if “we’re okay,” and I tell him that everything is fine. He likely drew over 100 players to *Fancy Bang* single-handedly, and I am only hoping he does not give me a bill. *Had I implied that I was hiring him when we shared drinks Thursday night?* He smiles, shakes my hand, and slips off; I never see or hear from him again.

A dedicated if dull player, Jeremy, manages to be the only survivor of the third-round sessions at A-Kon and becomes our new champion. He has few friends at the con, and more of the players are concerned with taking up the factional politics of the night before than celebrating the tournament.

With more attention than we ever expected, it becomes much harder hiding the puzzles and scavenger hunt items around the con. The team has to get creative tricking all the players who hang around the Tabletop Gaming Room. Thomas is quick to stalk any teammate he sees leaving the room, tracking our movements and hoping to catch us hiding props, scavenger hunt lists, rewards, or artifact tiles. We do not realize how close Thomas hovers until we attempt to hide the backpack and use the fake diary as one of the objects needed to dispel the curse.

Wamae and Thomas work together as leader and silent partner for the entire day, toying with or against *Fancy Bang* a bit. I am running tables all day, collecting anecdotes about players being cursed, passing information back and forth, and answering questions about the missing merchandise.

### **Sunday Morning Ends The Curse**

The ritual takes place Sunday morning entirely self-directed and self-organized by the players, according to the details that Mitch and Greg devised months prior. At the Gen Con iteration, 19 players are there. At A-Kon we have over 50. Both gatherings end

with the fake arrests of both Aurora and/or Harshman by “undercover officers,” and the expected resistance or intervention of the players does not occur.

## **V. POIESIS IN ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES**

Most research in alternate reality gaming focuses more on the games themselves or on the culture of the producers (coincidentally a booming industry and a marketable skill-set) than on the experiences, meanings, and practices of the—dozens, thousands, millions of—players each game can attract. This imbalance is palpable: the high-energy, financially successful, hybrid authors who produce knowledge about ARG come to the field—almost without exception—as producers. In many of these accounts, players are the faceless agents of the designers’ machinations. Creativity and expression are defining characteristics of the designers, while the affects and intentions of the players are left undiscovered. It raises the question, “Who is playing these games, and who is getting played?” An anthropology of the contemporary demands scholars come to grips with the new publics formed within and around these pervasive games and to understand why they are becoming so popular not just for marketing campaigns and a new generation of designers but for the thousands playing them.

Henry Jenkins’ book *Convergence Culture* (2006) looks at ARG directly, offering an important survey through the lenses of media and literary studies. While Jenkins grants that we “need to rethink the goals of media education so that young people can come to think of themselves as cultural producers and participants and not simply as consumers” (2006: 259), his book contains example after example of how corporate institutions promote consumerism and use alternate reality games to construct loyal fans and future buyers. Where did the explorers and “spatial storytellers” go (Jenkins 2004)? Mary Flanagan (2009) foregrounds the critical, resistant elements of play convincingly, but I am left anxious over how those elements can be expressed in a greater culture defined by corporate “gamification,” minimal funding of the arts, and ever-elongating work weeks.

The alternate reality game, when constructed as a durable virtual world, can offer no less than a life-changing experience for participants. ARGs should be designed and studied as “cultural probes” (Thrift 2011), as local and ephemeral happenings that change how people imagine socializing can happen. They *do* something. Participating in an alternate reality game offers more than a false sense of power or control; players experience for themselves the sizable effects individuals and collectivities can have when generating new meanings together. I know the feeling firsthand, and at least twenty *Fancy Bang* players have said as much as well. I have likened the experience of playing an alternate reality game to taking hallucinogenic drugs several times, and I suggest the positive effects are similar. Playing an alternate reality game enchants the world, makes everything suspect. Just like the experience of hallucinogenics, this capacity to “see through” the face-value presentation of meaning and matter can last for years. Everything becomes a toy, conspicuous, present-at-hand. I might suggest that experiencing such a game has the power to nudge someone into a perpetual lusory attitude.

### **Fancy Bang & Worlding**

Gen Con went pretty much according to plan. We knew we would be butting up against the rigid scheduling practices of the con, though I was still a little disappointed to attract only 80 verified players. The success of the game at A-Kon was heartening, and we officially verified more than four times the 50 players we set out to attract, 211. Not only was the con in Dallas a paragon of progressive values and a testament to the unique strengths of the Millennial generation, the attendees’ pre-existing lusory attitude was so resonant it likely did much of the work for us. There was so much life in the objects, costumes, accessories—our cyborg minds were reeling in virtual presences.

### ***Player-Generated Goals***

*Fancy Bang* sustained a surprising amount of player-driven activity that added to the world of the game and inspired genuine social poetics. At both conventions, the *Fancy Bang* world was large enough to host conflicting interpretations, fulfill unexpected intentions, and satisfy multiple agendas. Rather than a linear “game,” it encompassed and

made possible a great amount of interactivity and world-building. These goals were not only shared; they were intersubjective, responsive, and negotiated.

1. Sid began a personal quest to topple Harshman that ended up engrossing several other players and forming a small faction within the game. It changed his convention entirely, and likely those of the other gamers he marshaled as well. He and Ash cancelled most of their Saturday events to focus on cracking the central fabrication and dispelling the curse. Speaking with me on Sunday, he lamented that “there won’t be any way for it to happen again. I’ll never trust you guys and your stories anymore!”
2. Melinda sat down at our booth in the Tabletop Gaming Room to play a quick game on a Friday evening and only a few hours later helped to organize over 40 young people on a charge across a large complex of hotels to hunt for Hibiko and his actor friends after the troupe disappeared from the pageant. We had no idea what was going on that night, and it took several interviews to get the details straight. The game had gotten away from us in the best way possible. Whether all of these individuals knew what was happening or not only makes the event more interesting. As Benjamin (2005) observed, sometimes the body wants to run, charge, kick. A game can offer an alibi for such childlike exuberance.
3. Wamae volunteered to work for a few hours to pay his way to the convention and made friendships that have lasted almost two years. His puzzle-solving abilities made him one of the collective’s leaders on Saturday and offered him a fair amount of celebrity that he had never felt before. When I Skyped with him a week or so later, he said the attention made him feel how he imagined the football players at his high school felt years before. I saw him in 2014, and he attended the con that year with the friends he had made playing *Fancy Bang* the year before.

4. Like Sid, Nico wanted to meet Harshman in the finals and become the new *Fantaji* champion. The rivalry between Sid and Nico was never hostile, and it functioned to retain dozens of *Fancy Bang* players who had lost in the *Fantaji* tournament and still wanted to play along. The design team had never even considered what would happen to gamers after their player-characters were killed off. When Nico's player-character outlasted Sid's at the championship table on Saturday night, they both applauded each other's performances as combatants in *Fantaji* and as keyed rivals in *Fancy Bang*.
5. Hibiko hijacked the game for his own purposes, and the virtual world buckled a bit but persisted. I was surprised he broke the frame to enlist players, but I never thought he would become a problem or liability. Without his advertising, there is no way we would have reached 200 players. I am sure it must have been a unique experience for him as well, but after a brief handshake Saturday morning I did not see him again.
6. Thomas spent long hours organizing activities and running around the con keeping players informed of new puzzles that came up all day Saturday. He told me later that he never even tried to start one on his own. His self-chosen role was that of Hermes. Spying on my and the design team's activities gave him purpose throughout the weekend and this self-defined role-playing became the dominant thread of A-Kon for him. I cannot quite imagine what he would have gotten up to otherwise.

### ***Virtual Object***

I also believe that the "champion's curse" worked effectively as a virtual object. At various times, the curse functioned similarly to one or another of our three models for virtual objects: the "epistemic objects" first manipulated physically and later projected and toyed with by the mind when the physical objects are absent (Clark 2008: 47), the

“hard facts” of Peirce, and the material but abstract natures of *waves* and *charges* theorized by Brian Massumi (2002).

1. The curse was present enough at Gen Con to change the course of the tournament by leading a dozen gamers in Sid’s faction to debate over strategy that literally included “the curse” as a negotiating point. While they may not have believed there was a magical affliction (by that time focused on Aurora), they knew there was *something* that could not be fully predicted, and they were apprehensive about tempting it.
2. Four players at A-Kon apparently recorded the results of Harshman’s dice over a two-hour period and worked out probabilities that accounted for “cursed” rolling. They made “cheat sheets” for other players and passed them out. I did not find out about this until one of the last sessions of the con when I spotted the crib sheet next to a player’s character sheet. I felt bad; this was long after we had stopped using the loaded dice.
3. Two years later, when I met up with Juno again at Gen Con in 2014, she told me how she explained her previous wrist injury to strangers as the result of a “cursed gamer” at Gen Con. Barthes might criticize that the virtual curse had “died” and become pure gloss or symbol, but that the phenomenon made it into her life narrative is worth noting. Similarly, other players have shared with me over the years how the “champion’s curse” comes up in their home games now and then when dice go wrong or someone spills drink on the table.

### **The Bigger Con**

While conducting post-con interviews with players from Gen Con, I found that the moment most commonly held as the “climax” of the narrative was when Crocodile Fingers lost his status as champion in the early round on Saturday morning. We had

planned Harshman “taking a dive” to be expected, hoping this would focus the players’ attentions more on the curse than “beating the champion.” As it went, the culture that developed around the puzzles and quests did not communicate the more subtle narrative points Harshman was feeding them with the tournament players. There emerged a stark division of labor between the two realms even though they worked together: the puzzle-minded gamers on one side, and the role-players on the other.

Even our best players took Harshman’s loss to be unscripted and felt the victory as an actual accomplishment by the collective, a mistake by us, or both. Nico described the tense moment when everyone leaned in after the big roll and counted up Mitch’s dice. He said that he felt “mortified” for us after realizing the character was dead because he assumed it was a mistake. Sid and Ash said as much Sunday after the con in not so many words. Juno’s idea was closer to the truth; she felt that we left the outcome open on purpose, and she took Aurora’s victory as actual if unexpected.

In explaining the facts of the ruse to them individually over conversation or emails, I caught myself *keying* where there was no *key*. It made me think of my best memory of the SXSW iteration of *Fantaji Bang* that came from interviewing two players after our biggest event (30 participants that resulted in two players). After one of the girls described to me and another actor in the game how she “pretended to chase the bus” up Congress Ave. in downtown Austin, her friend corrected her, “No, we *did* chase the bus.” They both laughed about the phrasing for a long while. Similarly, when I was debriefing players on the Saturday morning session, I slowly realized something about the nature of the fabrications for the Gen Con run.

In Indianapolis, Mitch portrayed Mark “Crocodile Fingers” Harshman, the fictionalized “champion” of *Fantaji*, while in the actual world, Mitch likely *is* the world’s best *Fantaji* player. Beyond that, the climactic moment when Harshman “takes a dive” to lose the session intentionally, Mitch was *actually* taking a dive as well. The lusory and the prelusory overlapped in such a way that it was only the intentionality of our keying that kept them apart. It made the whole plot seem awfully uninspired.

However, when I shared that observation with Mitch a year or so later, he laughed it off. He argued that playing all those “coaching” sessions with scores of gamers at Gen Con over two days and three nights is what *made* him the best player. With a mixture of pride and embarrassment, I had to admit that we may have captured ourselves in our own virtual world.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions

I set out to locate virtual worlds in everyday and not-so everyday life. That online virtual worlds offer new windows into and images of the human seems obvious in hindsight, though a great deal of scholarship went into making sense of these virtual rabbit holes that draw our minds and imaginations into a seemingly endless universe (see Castronova 2005; Taylor 2006, Boellstorff 2008). That humans can experience contact, sociality, intersubjectivity through Internet technologies took many people by surprise, but some scholars seemed to think it only natural (Stiegler 1994, Clark and Chalmers 1998, Clark 2008).

After studying, critiquing, and creating three genres of analog virtual worlds, I would suggest that it seems some of the power online virtual worlds have to bedazzle and confound us rests only on our own long-held misconceptions about minds, bodies, and sociality. Digital worlds, from *Frogger* to *World of Warcraft*, possess power over us because they have the ability to frustrate our wills. We push on them, and they push back. *But images cannot do that! Symbols cannot do this!* It may be the case that our digital worlds are finally teaching us that images *can* do that. Symbols *can* do this. And maybe it is not just images, not just symbols.

Taking Andy Clark's theories of "natural-born cyborgs" (2003) and "extended mind" (2008) seriously, I take for granted that objects can be taken up into my cognitive processes, that my will can feel the resistance of facts similarly to that of walls, and that the images "in my head" are not so in my head.

My dissertation attempted to locate virtual worlds connected and built into the actual environments we inhabit. I wanted to see if and how individuals could push their minds down into rabbit holes that did not exist on a screen but in a city, in a church, around a table. I believe I found them. And I believe I built at least one, maybe more.

### **Building Analog Virtual Worlds**

We began with the "spectral geographies" of Derek McCormack (2010b), those physical spaces of history—crash sites, battlefields, ruins—that have a way of retaining a

material *charge* and circulating palpable affect despite the physical absence of many objects we imagine necessary to activate such a response. The trick is that enough physical objects exist as Indices of the absent world, and these Indices—when the arrangement and situation are just right—can be enough to bring remote or absent presents into alignment around the human body. This experience is nothing magical or mystical, just a phenomenon of affect and consciousness produced by our cyborg Mind–Body, which interpolates objects into itself, has the ability to read and feel the world through signs, and evolved strong empathetic and intersubjective faculties. Objects physically absent seem to exist, do exist, persist, haunt—as though our bodies are feeling the world in cross-eyed tension.

Add to one of these spectral geographies manipulable lusory means, *toys* of open-ended meaning, and a virtual world can emerge. I consider virtual worlds to be fabricated and somewhat controllable spectral geographies large and durable enough to sustain the complicated and manifold social interactivity of human frames and agendas. Analog virtual worlds reproduce Indices with enough verisimilitude to function as genuine spectral environments that draw players into them. These specters are not imaginary; they exist in affordances objectively present in the environment, affordances that the human body consciously or not can regard and experience. Digital virtual worlds reproduce physical virtual worlds in digital space, constructing through code and floating images the sensation of physicality. Through the interplay of Signs, these virtually-there-objects seem undeniably real; they resist our wills, frustrate us, and react to our actions. Importantly, these digital environments can likewise sustain manifold human sociality and player-driven poetics. The worlds themselves possess no teleology or purpose; they are environments that must be stepped into, donned, accepted.

Upon these virtual worlds we can layer lusory goals to engender an alternate reality game. These are almost easier to create than a genuine virtual world because the lusory goals often entail grids and systems of lusory means that strengthen and galvanize the world; however, such games, which multiply virtual objects and direct vectors of

activity, must be able to host and encourage player-driven meanings to function as a full world or reality.

### **Games vs. Play**

I understand play in the vein of Johan Huizinga ([1938] 1971), as the very substance of culture, ritual, art. Play is not a specific form of activity; it is the fundamental element of poiesis that exists in *all* activities. Play in this sense does not respect rules, systems, or structures; it creates rules, designs systems, builds structures. These many human societies and their concomitant projects of *worlding*—these rely on play.

I am less impressed by games, particularly games that claim to exist as their own worlds, segregated from the actual world due to their nature as abstract systems. No proper game-as-system can function as a world precisely because it attempts to be outside the world. Every virtual world I encountered only existed as such because it was happily grounded in the material world. It seems a waste to reduce games to “black boxes” that turn analog and affective inputs into binary outputs. This is not to say that machines are cold or that new-fangled technology will never retain the romantic spirit of pre-modern modes of play; on the contrary, modern technologies make possible positive and enlightening forms of gaming each year. My issue is that we seem to be focusing on the *least* interesting thing games can do. Games are more than mazes, more than calculators.

All of the literature on “gamification” that celebrates how modern games promise this magical revelation about how to live more fully (Castronova 2007, Wark 2007, McGonigal 2011) then goes on to define games in terms that I cannot see as anything but entirely sterile. I have argued that the transformational power these scholars ascribe to games misses the mark; it is the forms of play least associated with “gamification” that serve to transform and improve this human life. Like Nigel Thrift’s (2011) *Lifeworlds*, which act as kaleidoscopes that offer phantasmagoric fragments of worlds, the kinds of games celebrated by certain literatures often work to reduce and replace meaningful

sociality with “free movement within a more rigid structure.” What about the creation of structures? What about climbing over and through structures?

### **Can’t Win Them All**

The three ethnographic chapters of this dissertation each trace one “cultural probe” that I created over the course of my research as a way to engage and better understand the respective genre. Though *Fancy Bang* only attracted a sliver of players, I believe the game managed to demonstrate for them new ways to play, to game, to socialize. Both *Fantaji* and *The Ski Lodge Murder* have been huge successes, and laboring over producing a portable system that would afford and encourage toying within the constitutive rules shaped my understanding of games and play. However, one genre of make-believe left me stumped.

North American live-action role-playing (LARP, or larp) works as a local alternate reality and may seem like the more obvious middle step between tabletop role-playing and alternate reality games (see Montola 2003, Loponen and Montola 2004). Though several variations exist, North American larping comes in two predominant forms. One form focuses on competitive duels where combatants use boffer swords to simulate combat. Instead of rolling dice to imagine oneself a knight of the realm, the actual fencing skills of the players determine who hits their target. The other predominant form involves large-scale combat and generally entails the creation of factions and teams, much like sports franchises, that develop their own cultures and hierarchies. Larping more often than not takes place in public parks or other play spaces and can include hundreds of participants in a single instance, and it has produced a colorful culture known centrally to the uninitiated as “those kids swinging foam swords in the park.” While in many ways North American larping is a direct derivative of tabletop role-playing, I could not find a way to root the form in toying. After cursory research, larping—like role-playing video games—seemed to borrow from tabletop role-playing only those modes of associating not involved in the virtual.

Like sports, North American larping revolves around fixed systems of value that

define what any given action means and is worth in the game. Objects, actions, and gestures are codified and regulated for what amounts to competitive play. The fantastical costumes and trappings, while admittedly aesthetically interesting, are subservient to the Symbolic order of “scoring” and taking out enemies. While the resulting worlds are worthy of study and interesting, for the same reason studying sports and sport franchises can be enlightening, the traces of the virtual I was looking for did not appear to feature as the central work of the game. To clarify, any given larp is a game, like football or billiards or *Monopoly*. It has a set of rules and procedures that code behavior and determine winners. To be clear, the key difference is not that the game is competitive in nature but rather that the game means precisely what it says. The constitutive rules of the game set the value of any given action or object, and those values are fixed. The rules of the game, then, act as a translation dictionary for how to value gestures and bodies in the game-world.

Nordic larp is a cultural form very different from its North American cousin, with its key feature being the pursuit of full immersion. “Dreaming in character is seen as the ultimate goal” (nordiclarp.org 2014). The purpose of the larp is to reconstruct a world that *replaces* the actual world. While objects, bodies, and events participate in the world of the game, they do so only insofar as they are separated and removed from the world around the player. In a way, Nordic larp is about producing temporary alternative lifestyles. Nordic larp also precludes a sense of the virtual because the explicit purpose of the game is to replace the actual with the fictional. Any doubling is viewed as a failure of immersion and so squelched.

### **Theoretical Observations**

In *Persuasive Games* (2007), Ian Bogost marshals theories of culture to explore how video games move beyond traditional forms of verbal rhetoric, implementing what he calls “procedural rhetoric,” to persuade gamers and constitute particular kinds of subjects. Bogost’s point is that we need to move beyond analyzing verbal rhetoric alone, acknowledging more embodied modes of persuasion when looking at how games

function. While proper ludologists study the rhetorical means through which game-systems operate on their users, I suggest the opposite tack; let us research the ways creative, motivated players operate with and through game-systems.

With so many independent producers and amateur designers, why the recent move to celebrate mass-market games that amount to little more than interactive novels? And when indie games are studied, why glorify the games themselves? I am more concerned not with games as works of art, but games as tools, as cultural operators. I want to see games work for people not on them. Adopting a lusory attitude is the first step in playing a game, but it is also the first step in creating art, changing culture, and founding a field of science. We need more games that let players ask, “What if?” and then build the answer.

Figuring certain genres such as tabletop role-playing and alternate reality games as assemblages that can be toyed with and through—rather than systems that interpolate users—allows us to see how games participate in the world. Even the most rigid game is organic, soft, responsive to the griever, the hacker, the drunk. Did ludologists of previous generations truly exhaust the study of games as play, as ritual, as creative?

While I might make too much of the toy in the ethnographic chapters, I find it a useful construct in contrast to the tool. Whereas the tool has purpose, the toy exists only insofar as it affords new purposes each time it is taken up. The toy, as an object of affordance, elicits and encourages tweaking with the world, with systems.

I wanted to study games because I felt that of all God’s goodness the game was the one place where Plato and Saussure were right. Games really were Ideal, pure form. They cannot be denied; they have rules that cannot be broken. Growing up as I did at the advent of the video games, I felt them as worlds that really did have all the logic, order, and structure that philosophers and scientists were finding did not exist so much in our own domain. However, very early in my studies, I found out that games were just like language; the game was another false prophet who claimed to govern and organize how people played, to provide the system that play activated. It took me a short time to realize

that games—like language—have only the very same power as the Wizard of Oz: they are very good at tricking us newcomers into thinking that they are the ones performing some magical feat that in truth we are quite capable of doing. In fact, our masterful capacity for performing said feat on our own is precisely what allowed us to invent games—and language—in the first place.

So I study play instead. Play makes no such boasts, and yet a little digging exposes its great accomplishments. And I study the virtual. The virtual is the wet paint on the wall. It is very much *not* the wall yet; it is paint on a wall. But as soon as it dries, as soon as it stops being alive, it will just be the wall. And we might recognize by scraping such a wall with our fingernail that there is a chance it is paint all the way down.

### **Methodological**

I have traced out a handful of approaches that seem to borrow one or several tenets from Nigel Thrift's (2010) non-representational theory and from the arguments of Thrift (2011), Latour (2005, 2008), and Miller (1987). It seems to me, an "anthropology of the contemporary" (to borrow from Rabinow 2006) needs to be less about accumulating data and more about intervening in worlds to produce "provocative awareness" at the moment of experience. Ethnographic fieldwork can attempt to produce probes that generate social change or impact communities by experimenting in/with worlds already in progress. Writes Thrift:

cultural probes need to be understood as spaces, frames constructed to produce uncertain outcomes which still have grip, frames which both interrupt and restart the process of association and, in the process, conjure up invitations to act differently. (2011: 19)

I believe the worlds of games, specifically those that emerge in alternate reality gaming, can be provocative spaces to invite new kinds of action and sociality. Studying games as cultural probes turns the games-as-systems approach on its head.

We need cultural probes more than representational accounts. Collecting and packaging data should no longer be the job of the sociologist. Likewise, describing the

everyday lives of faraway people should no longer be the job of the anthropologist. Let people make their own products, their own representations, their own interpretations.

### **Implications & Future Work**

I argued in Chapters 3 and 4 that viewing games as systems of grammar renders them detached from and inconsequential to the actual world of everyday life. In contrast, I offered that every game can be toyed with and that the best games are designed specifically for that purpose. Grounding my theory of games in the work of Huizinga and Suits, I made much of lusory means that exist in excess of the constitutive rules of a closed-system game. If the game itself does not provide such situating lusory means, then players tend to bring them along on their own. Why not study the many ways players work against systems? No system is as digital as it thinks.

I want to pursue other studies along similar lines and see where games act not as systems that interpolate users but as toys, tools, alibis that participate in agendas and vectors larger than themselves. No game is as hermetic as it thinks, and there is much to learn from seeing just where and how these larger agendas and vectors not only use games but also pervade them.

This is where “gamification” can be useful: where are people using games productively and progressively? I am not so interested in how corporation bosses use “games” to extract labor from already strained employees. I am sure they are very good at it. I am not so interested in how McDonald’s Monopoly gains the company increased revenue. I am sure it does. But I am interested in how people use games to accomplish real goals, games like *Twister* and spin-the-bottle. These games are more like toys. Do we use games to fall in love? To teach? To save money? Do we do this by toying with the rules of the game, or by obeying them?

I believe the implications of Chapter 5 can be aimed in many directions as well. Insights from murder-mystery events as virtual worlds provided several practical images of social poetics. Corporate retreats, classroom learning, youth camps, sex, or just

everyday life—systems that open outward can participate in the world not as “systems” at all, but as assemblages. They are made up of parts, these systems. We cannot forget that.

The murder-mystery event offered us a model that changes what “incentives” might mean for creative labor, a new model that sees games as lusory means for meeting prelusory goals. If the lusory goals cannot be made to fulfill the prelusory goals, then the game is a lie, a trick, a booby trap. Simple matrix systems with a multitude of keyed objects could be used to generate genuine social interaction in just about any setting. The game does not *encourage* sociality; it *is* sociality. I would be interested in looking at how these systems can be distended—or already are distended—in fetish cultures, family structures, and sports teams.

Also, the absolute paralysis that can strike individuals and entire groups in the face of an absent frame was striking. I would like to pursue further research into situations that refuse certainty and intersubjectivity to occur naturally and tease out precisely what mechanisms can make possible their emergence.

Lessons from Chapter 6 beg for treatments in political campaigns, religions, true cults, conspiracy theories, and hoaxes. These could not be addressed here for lack of space and the necessary fieldwork that would not have dovetailed with the games. This is a higher aim of my research, to explore religion and politics as “necessary play,” thus redeeming play as ever-present. This would then critique what it means to treat politics or other activities as “a game,” which I would distinguish from play in its sleight of hand that replaces the actual prelusory goals with lusory goals and “lusory goods” only valuable within the system.

While I did not get to experience much of the alternate reality game I designed because of the responsibilities inherent in making sure it ran smoothly, there is truly a place for such broader games in everyday life. Leagues? Virtual friends? Alternate currencies? The alternate reality game exists physically as only an infrastructure, but this infrastructure spreads out far enough to act like a spider’s web; anyone on it can feel everyone else. This is the virtual element of the game.

I imagine being hired to run games that turn into worlds. It would look something like giving your neighbor a piece of your rosebush. Families borrow from your game and soon grow the practice into an entire world, local and responsive to their needs.

## Appendix A: The Players of Tabletop Role-Playing

While I have gamed with over 1000 players since the summer of 2010, this ethnography focuses on four long-term gaming groups I participated in: the *techies*, the *townies*, the *dorks*, and the *hicks*.<sup>29</sup> I game-mastered<sup>30</sup> the first two groups in *Fantaji*, a game designed by my own company; and I role-played roughly the same player-character with the latter two groups in two distinct *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns.

### *The Techies*

A long-running group in Austin, Texas, the *techies* includes four friends who work downtown at a Web 2.0 start-up and one of the friends' significant other. They began gaming together in 2007, trying various systems and titles over the years, and I was able to invite the group to try *Fantaji* in 2012. We played for over two years regularly (one to three times per month) and still have the odd gaming session even today.

Alan, 26, is a copywriter for the start-up company. He titles incoming how-to videos and writes copy that surrounds the videos to ensure a good performance on search engines. Alan's claim to fame is suggesting that the site misspell "Smoky" as "Smokey" for the "Smokey Eye Makeup" video because the correct spelling gets typed into Google less frequently. His office is decorated with small illustrations that Hannah draws during lunch each day on colored Post-it notes and gifts to him. Alan played *Champions* (Palladium Books 1981), a superhero role-playing game, in high school and enjoys *Fantaji* for its over-the-top style.

Hannah, 24, is Alan's girlfriend and works at a locally owned, upscale retailer downtown. She is also a professional artist and regularly has gigs in town doing makeup or costuming for local films. Hannah moved to Austin specifically for the indie film

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<sup>29</sup> All of these monikers were chosen by the respective groups and are used by permission to retain anonymity and help the readers keep them distinct.

<sup>30</sup> A "game-master" acts as the arbiter of the game-level mechanics and the creator of the diegesis-level events in any campaign. Colloquially referred to as "god," the GM does not participate as a player-character but instead acts to embody the game itself and present problems to the heroes in the narrative. GMs control the weather, the terrain, the monsters, and the mechanics of the game-world.

scene and also works as an extra, being featured in more than a few Robert Rodriguez movies. Role-playing an old curmudgeon with no conscience, Hannah is the most die-hard of the gamers in the group and acts as the *techies*' in-game leader.

Clark, 46, is a former rock journalist who landed his copywriting gig at the company after writing for a product-review blog, sneaking into each article references to a mythic community of mimes that exist under the streets of the city. He toured with some well-known southern rock bands in the 1980s and '90s, but lost his job when print journalism markets shrank after the advent of the Internet. Clark took a job with the company in hopes of revitalizing his career as a music critic, but the promised opportunities to set his own writing agenda have been non-existent.

Clark's best friend in Austin is Dale, 33. Dale works in another department of the company, managing filmmakers from all over the world who produce the how-to videos for the website. Originally from Los Angeles, Dale has mixed feelings about Texas. He never gamed before starting with the group, and Hanna considers him "a cat that needs constant herding." Dale has a knack for creating powerful player-characters in *Fantaji*, though his unpredictable attention span often renders his heroes unreliable at best.

Aytek, 36, is originally from Turkey and moved to the United States as a political refugee in 2005. He is a programmer for the company, the only one of them with a good opinion of their employer. Aytek played *Dungeons & Dragons* for several years in Turkey with his childhood and university friends and an American soldier.

The *techies* use their time gaming to joke and jab at each other, and work-talk flows throughout the game, a conversation analyst's nightmare. We meet in Clark's tiny bungalow most sessions, though special nights take place at my home in Hyde Park when roommates are out of town.

### ***The Townies***

The *townies* met at a small university in the Midwest in 2001. They began gaming together in 2004, after they'd graduated and put down roots in the area. The group started *Fantaji* without me after one of the members backed my product on Kickstarter in 2011.

After being contacted by Green a few times with questions about the game, I was impressed by his enthusiasm; and, as the *townies* live just an hour from my parents' home in southeastern Michigan, I make regular visits to their hometown to run one-off *Fantaji* adventures whenever I visit the Midwest. These one- or two-night adventures take part outside their own ongoing campaign.

Green, 34, is a pastor at a relatively large “mainline” Protestant church in the middle of town. He has a wife of fifteen years and three daughters. Green lost his hair before he was twenty, an experience he credits for his self-deprecating but upbeat attitude: “How can you take life seriously as a teenager with no hair?” He comes from a wealthy family in Noblesville, Indiana, and lives in a house a step or two above what his salary as pastor affords.

Jones, 34, is a pastor at a small Brethren church two towns over. Jones is in the middle of a divorce but still lives with his wife in a small house several miles out in the country. They run the church together, and little animosity exists between them despite his recent decision about the marriage. Jones has a heavy soul and suffers from bipolar personality disorder. His meticulous and interested nature has led to many improvements in *Fantaji* over the years.

Mitch, 32, is Green's younger brother. Mitch went to law school after college and now lives in Chicago with his wife, who is also a lawyer. His occupation affords him time to travel, and he visits his brother one or two weekends a month in Indiana. Mitch has also proven invaluable in debugging *Fantaji* since its inception.

Jess, 37, was a non-traditional student at the university and has seems to be the adopted older brother of the entire group. He bought his house in town during college with money he earned in a short career as a robotics engineer in Canada. Jess lives with his wife, and most of our games take place in his garage, which has been outfitted as a “man cave” complete with billiards table, neon beer signs, remote-controlled lighting and music, and personal electric coolers for each player.

### ***The Dorks***

Frederik, 38, has been playing *Dungeons & Dragons* since the 1980s. He runs his group in Austin, Texas, with a great attention to detail, and it was only after much negotiation that I was allowed to start participating in the already underway campaign. The *dorks* only know each other as gamers and do not socialize outside their *Dungeons & Dragons* meet-ups, which occur every two weeks like clockwork. Frederik takes his role as GM very seriously and spends 10-20 hours a week preparing for upcoming sessions: he builds models and set-pieces to house the miniatures that help represent the game-world; he finds props, artifacts, and toys to amplify immersion; he pores over references texts and fantasy literature for scripts and characters; and he creates carefully organized soundtracks to accompany the narrative.

Although I have logged over 40 hours with the *dorks*, I know the rest of them only through our interactions in the game. They practice a ritualized form of gaming, the rare token of how gamers are typically represented in film and media, “method actors” who identify strongly with their characters, wear homemade partial costumes, and almost always speak in first-person when declaring game actions. Nancy, 34, role-plays an Elf Sorcerer; Maggie, 35, role-plays a Halfling Rogue; Ismael, 33, plays as a Human Knight; and Tony, 33, role-plays a Half-Orc Barbarian. We play in Frederik’s spare bedroom, which is outfitted as a games-only den and decorated with Medieval-inspired artifacts and artwork.

While Frederik takes a no-nonsense approach to running his *Dungeons & Dragons* game and demands an air of formality and order, he has a personal aversion to running any module or using any published material as-is. He obsessively customizes and adapts the “official” version of any character, story, location, etc.; and his books are riddled with notes and edits that record how he has changed the system and the game-world to suit his vision. Frederik’s game is very much a personalized version of the *Dungeons & Dragons 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* system originally published in 1988. Nothing enters his campaign “raw,” and Frederik is the only player trusted to “cook” the material.

### ***The Hicks***

Howard, 32, has been playing with the same group off-and-on for about twenty years, which amounts to the longest tenure of any group I have participated in. They began playing *Dungeons & Dragons* when Howard was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and played into high school before going separate ways when the older members graduated. After high school, some of the players tried college for a couple years; one joined the military; two moved in with relatives in another state. Somehow their paths all led them back to their hometown within a few years of graduation to take up working-class occupations in or near Ottawa Lake, Michigan. Howard never left Ottawa Lake. He works in nearby Toledo, Ohio, as a “first responder;” and while he paints the job as something akin to a paramedic, his crew is under contract to clear wrecks on the highway and replace damaged guardrails.

Though we attended schools in different townships, with no fewer than two sets of train tracks between us, I have known Howard since we were kids. For a brief stint, he became a regular in a gaming group of mine during our senior year of high school, after his had split up. He and I met up for the first time in over a decade by chance at a bar in Toledo in early 2011, and he shared with me that his old gang had gotten back together.

Terry, 34, has been a semi-professional bull-rider sponsored by Jack Daniel’s whiskey for over ten years, though his age keeps him from riding much lately. It is not the bull-riding he misses—his body bears too many marks to ever forget—so much as the travel and the post-rodeo drinking. The cowboys would often wear their body-armor into dive bars on the road and intentionally start trouble with locals. Terry enjoys drawing analogies between any fight we encounter in the game with one wild night or another from his past; he stops the action on his turns regularly to regale us. The last night I played in the group in January of 2013, Terry had received his final case of Christmas whiskey and a severance letter.

Russell, 32, works at his family’s dog kennel near the quarry. Amanda, 30, is Russell’s new girlfriend and also works at the kennel. Together they live in his grandmother’s basement one town over.

The GM of Howard's gang is an older guy who goes by the name Trash. He is at least five years older than Howard, but when the group got together in 1995 Trash was dating a girl from Howard's church, Heather, who brought everyone together. Heather gamed with them all in high school but now worked in "some office" and lived in downtown Toledo near the river and the baseball park.

The gang meets up once a week for gaming and once a week for drinking, though both nights typically involve both activities. Marijuana and prescription pills of various types are present as often as not, and Trash continues the tradition he started when the others were in high school of providing the substances. Howard, Terry, and Russell all role-play as bruiser characters, a Barbarian and two Fighters, respectively. Amanda plays the Cleric. Starting in January of 2011, I join in as a Rogue as often as I can during semester breaks, and over the next two years I log about 80 hours of gaming with the group. Terry is eager for a fresh audience member; Russell and Amanda enjoy asking about my life in Austin; and Trash seems thrilled to incorporate a Rogue into the narrative and add some espionage to what are otherwise hack-and-slash adventures.

## Appendix B: Frame Analyses of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Gary Alan Fine's (1983) ethnographic account introduces the reader to a group of colorful gamers and presents tabletop role-playing as a hobby of performance, creativity, and ingenuity. Moreover, the formal analysis of the genre which constitutes the first half of the book offers a worthwhile mobilization of Erving Goffman's "frame analysis" and delineates three frames of meaning that overlap and interact during play: the social frame (the friends around table), the game frame (the rules, artifacts, systems), and the diegetic frame (the imagined world and ongoing narrative of the fictional heroes). His Fine illustrates how much activity and action goes into role-playing, leaving a comparison to the mundane pointing-and-clicking of computer-users only implied. However, his three-frame paradigm prevents him from considering how the rich performances and meaningful activities around the tabletop act as anything other than a flowery, theatrical pageantry (the *social* frame) that surrounds, dresses up, or at best enlivens an otherwise mechanical, calculated procedure (the *game* frame). The social occasionally dips into the game, for instance when a player who is angry at her friend takes it out on him by not protecting his character from a dragon or the like, but these are seen as anomalies—"frame breaking"—that exist outside the normal activity, which centers on how the rules function as signs that constitute and represent the world of game (*diegetic* frame).

Daniel Mackay (2001) implies that Fines' framing misses a key element of sociality. Mackay draws heavily on Fine's research but adds to the earlier study a fourth dimension, the aesthetic. He argues that Fine's analysis must inevitably remain incomplete without emphases on performativity and concomitant registers of performance. This would mean we need to pay attention to those moments when the social performance dips down into the game and muddles up the role-playing? Not quite. To take account of this new dimension, Mackay expands Fines' three frames into five: "the social frame inhabited by the *person*; the game frame inhabited by the *player*; the narrative frame inhabited by the *raconteur*; the constative frame inhabited by the *addresser*; the performative frame inhabited by the *character*" (ibid: 56). Mackay

redeems the costumes, props, acting, and pageantry that Fines relegates to the social frame by granting performative elements of play frames of their own.

In a later study that characterizes fantasy role-playing as a family of games that “possess narrativity” (2010: 75, after Ryan 2005), Jennifer Grouling Cover calls Mackay’s expansion into question. Cover shares with Mackay the absolute need to differentiate between the fantasy world of the game (the fictional setting and inspiration) and the narrative story (the processual development of narrative meaning for the individuals and the group), but she argues that Mackay’s redistribution is only necessary within his specific project of highlighting the modalities of fantasy performance. Cover’s frame analysis, then, subsumes the constative (the *addresser*) and performative (the *character*) frames within a singular *narrative* frame. What result are three frames that at first appear to reproduce Fines’ original paradigm, but Cover makes clear that her *narrative* frame is both less and more than Fines’ diegetic frame. For Cover, the *narrative* frame does not encompass the imagined world of the game but does contain all narrativizing activity (in the vein of Ryan 1991, Murray 1998, and Herman 2004). Following, Cover’s paradigm includes the *social*, *game*, and *narrative* frames. She argues that the imagined game-world is not a frame in itself but better seen as the imaginary byproduct/background of a narrativizing activity that is deeply rooted into human social and cognitive functions.

### ***Imagination as Interpretant***

Cover cites Ryan’s (2005) treatment of “Actual” and “Possible Worlds” to make a domain for the events and objects of the fantasy world. I find this argument compelling, but I would reframe this treatment within my own Peircean project. Towards this end, I would say that the imagined heroes, dragons, castles, and magics of the game’s setting are not to be seen as “signifieds,” not as Saussure’s “objects in the mind.” Rather, they need be regarded as imagined Signs, mental images that arise as Peircean Interpretants within ongoing Sign play in the world. This is an absolutely crucial step towards understanding games (or anything) in non-representational terms. Of course mental

representations in the form of imagined objects and actions exist, but these work *not* as Symbolically predetermined “meanings” floating above reality; rather, they are just one kind of Interpretant (and thus one kind of Sign) among others, arising and affecting as part of the actual world. That they are mental rather than physical only restricts the number of agents capable of interacting with them, not their essential nature.

The central limitation of Cover’s paradigm for us is that it distinguishes between the work needed to narrativize the diegesis of the game on the one hand and *every other* social, bodily, and cognitive function of the human animal that the game might engage on the other. What about the interpretive translation of mechanical rolls into story events? What about the reflexive dynamism between player and character? What about the rewriting and redoing of the rules? What about the negotiation of space as well as story? Maybe most importantly, what about the narrativizing work that is happening at the social level already, prior to and around the imagined events/worlds of gaming?

Most of the sources<sup>31</sup> Cover relies on are not talking about deliberate storytelling. In fact, these scholars reference performative storytelling only to uncover and underline the ways “narrativization” or “narrativity” occurs amidst everyday sociality and makes possible a modern understanding of the self. In other words, narrativity is not a special element of fantasy gaming but one element of sociality/subjectivity as a whole. If we take these sources seriously while retaining Cover’s overall correction of Mackay and Fines, then the resulting frames would be something like the *social* frame, the *game* frame, and the... *sociality/subjectivity* frame. There seems a small redundancy here that we will need to address below.

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<sup>31</sup> See specifically Ryan 1991, on language and representation; Murray 1998, on reflective experience; and Herman 2004, on narrative as a primary cognitive template.

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