

# Playing by the Rules of The Dominant Player

**Julie Tremblay**

Independent Scholar

tremblayj.design@gmail.com

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power, authority, game rules, player behaviour, dominant player, consent in gaming, game cultures

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper expands our definition of gamesplaining and rule lawyering from the perspective of the dominant player by reflecting on how they interpret and manage the rules of a gaming episode. Dashiell (2020) explains that gamesplaining and rule lawyering are done under the pretence of collaborative play but they benefit the dominant agent who interferes with other players' games, argues, and wins arguments regarding rules and strategies. Drawing on this, I discuss how the interfering player moulds the game to their interpretations and expectations of how it should be played and I reveal the fallacy that cooperative games eliminate authoritarian behaviours. This theoretical analysis examines how the rules of the gaming episode (Goffman, 1961; Hughes, 1995) are enforced by gamesplainers and rule lawyers in collaborative games. Thereby, I dissect Hughes' typology of rules (1995) and discuss hypothetical moments of play<sup>1</sup> from *Pandemic*. (Leacock, 2008) Cases were selected due to the game's capacity to afford them or because they reflect common occurrences of rule customizations in gaming. Research shows customizations are prevalent in analog and digital games; They involve bending rules or making house rules for example by modifying a written rule that does not support an action, personifying roles, tolerating cheating, or *modding*. (Consalvo, 2007; Goldstein, 1971; Jakobsson, 2007) This paper adopts a critical game theorists' perspective that games are social contracts between participants who constantly negotiate rules. (DeKoven, 1978; Hughes, 1983 & 1995; Sicart, 2014)

As Dashiell reports, Gamesplaining is recognized when a player advises or instructs another player on their strategy or tells them they are "playing incorrectly". (31) Rule lawyering occurs when a player argues over rules and strictly adheres to game rules. (32) Hughes (1995) defines Game rules as a set of instructions "recorded by an informant" (Sniderman, 1999) that refers to the structure of the game and informs us on how to play. We can infer from Dashiell's work that a player who is familiar with the game rules is in a better position to dominate the gaming because they display knowledge when referring to the rule book or to their past experiences. Therefore, I argue that the parameters of the game are set according to how the dominant player expects the game to progress, and interprets or manages the game rules. A rule lawyer adheres to a recorded rule instead of accepting to change it. For example, the analysis shows one player who insists on drawing roles randomly and refers to the rule book to stress one's argument, despite the preference of the majority. Hughes affirms that Social rules refer to the implicit cultural knowledge that

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is incorporated into the activity. Gaming rules refer to the process of moulding players' cultural knowledge (social rules) to the game structure (game rules), or vice-versa, for the activity to take place under what is socially "acceptable". (95) I argue that the gamesplainer and rule lawyer force others to reconsider the parameters of the episode according to their interpretations of such rules, while sometimes using their knowledge of the game rules to support their argument. The analysis shows one player demanding others to keep gossip conversations for after the activity. Here, one imposes a process for managing the episode by deciding what is allowed to happen, proceeding to mould one's own social rules to the game structure.

The analysis reveals that game rules can be enforced by the gamesplainer when a person explains game rules, denies that rules are socially interpreted and managed, considers their interpretation of a rule as Truth, gives unsolicited advice on how to achieve goals, for example by describing proscribed obstacles, and decides what actions others will take to achieve goals. In contrast, to enforce their own social rules or deny others', the gamesplainer denies the existence of social rules and advises on how to conduct oneself. To enforce gaming rules, one imposes their directives of how flexible game rules are (ex. if a rule can change) and how to conduct the activity. Similarly, rule lawyers tend to manage the group because they take it upon themselves to sustain the episode. Consequentially, they impose their interpretation of a social rule and enforce their own social and gaming rules. The analysis also leads to the affirmation that a collaborative game, if affording or requesting players to coordinate their strategies and actions, is conducive to authoritarian behaviours. Interactions open the door for the dominant player to display knowledge, gain authority, and dominate decisions. Following that rationale, it is plausible to suggest that collaborative video games wherein rules are established by the algorithm, yet players discuss strategies, might mitigate rule lawyering without restraining gamesplaining. I defer this investigation to future research.

I conclude by affirming that a player who engages in behaviours of gamesplaining or rule lawyering imposes their interpretations of the rules and processes by which these rules should be managed. That results in limiting the possibilities for negotiations between players and confining what occurs in the episode to their prescriptions. Critical theorists agree that the episode is maintained not solely by *playing-by* the rules but also by *playing-with* the rules. The gamesplainer encapsulates the episode into their ways of knowing the game or doing the game by focusing on their strategy; The rule lawyer's draconian adherence to rules restrains the group from exploring other ways to interpret and manage the rules; Neither adopts a playful attitude that is curious towards non-dominant ways of playing, refusing to negotiate and let go of their expectations, resulting in confining the gaming episode to *playing-by* their own rules.

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge the lack of empirical evidence but deem it unnecessary at this stage of the research.