How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Gamer: Reframing Subversive Play in Story-Based Games

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ABSTRACT
Much like books have "implied readers" and films have "implied viewers", games have "implied players". The ways in which these implied players are constructed have material implications for how games are designed and studied. In this paper I explore a pervasive narrative about the ways in which players seek to subvert the desires of game designers and storytellers. This narrative of the subversive player has informed extensive research and design in both commercial games and scholarly interactive narrative research. I argue that addressing game designs to an *implied subversive player* intentionally misrepresents the complex processes of meaning making that occur during play, creating an artificial conflict between the player and the designer that is harmful to the development of rich narrative in games. I propose a way of understanding subversive play as part of the process of building the literacies needed by the player to better enact the narratives of the designer, rather than subvert them.

Keywords
Subversive Play, Transgressive Play, Digital Narratives, Story-Based Games

INTRODUCTION
For many years, prominent members of the digital games community have argued that players are motivated primarily by a desire for freedom. This argument holds that the freedom to explore, to create, and to tell their own stories is the dominant poetic of the digital games medium, and that to limit that freedom is to somehow undermine the expressive power of games. I consider this argument to be intimately bound up in the debates around games and storytelling that characterized much of early game studies. In 1999, Game Designer Ernest Adams wrote:

> "…the player and her actions are the most important things in the game. In computer gaming you subordinate the player to the plot at your own peril. It's not our job to *tell* stories. It's our job to build worlds where players can live a story of their own creation." (Adams, 1999)

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One can imagine where Adams was coming from: there were certain things that games could do that other mediums simply could not, and the most exciting of those was (and may still be) the power to place a player inside a simulated procedural world. It was difficult to reconcile the emergent dynamics of simulated worlds with the poetics of traditional narrative forms. When Adams wrote this, the golden age of adventure games had recently drawn to a close, and with the widespread adoption of 3D graphics, first-person points of view, AI controlled enemies and Non Player Characters (NPCs), the medium was increasingly hostile to linear storytelling. Many theorists of games adopted the label "ludologist" as a way of emphasizing that they were primarily concerned with the dynamics of play and simulation that differentiated games from previous media. What followed seems like an artificial conflict in retrospect, but it was a heated debate at the time: ludologists vs. narratologists; new media vs. old media; play vs. story. At the core of this debate was the perceived discontinuity between the actions and desires of the player in a simulated world and the narrative aspirations of an author or designer. In 2004, at the height of this debate, digital media and games theorist Espen Aarseth wrote:

> "In the adventure games…it is typically the simulation that, on its own, allows actions that the story prohibits, or which make the story break down. **Players exploit this to invent strategies that make a mockery of the author's intentions.**" (Aarseth, 2004) (emphasis mine)

This quote gets right to the heart of the fear that players–left to their own devices–will actively (and perhaps maliciously) seek to undermine the intentions of the "author" within a simulated world. From this standpoint, players and designers exist in natural opposition to each other: fighting over the right to shape the narrative outcome of the world. Even after the narratology and ludology debates cooled down, this perspective on the player persisted. In 2008, game designer Steve Gaynor wrote:

> "**The player is an agent of chaos,** making the medium ill-equipped to convey a pre-authored narrative with anywhere near the effectiveness of books or film…the game designer's role is to provide the player with an intriguing place to be, and then give them the tools to perform interactions they'd logically be able to as a person in that place—**to fully express their agency within the gameworld that's been provided.**" (Gaynor, 2008) (emphasis mine)

The experience of agency in a simulated world is undeniably one of the pleasures of digital games. The success of open-world games like *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) and construction games like *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) certainly confirms that there is a large market for games that emphasize players' freedom to "fully express their agency". However, the success of these games does not support Gaynor's claim that the medium is ill-suited to communicate pre-authored narrative and the fact of agentic pleasure does not exclude the possibility other pleasures, including those of an unfolding story. The trouble here lies with a seemingly-willful misrepresentation of player motivations in games: by casting players in the role of "agents of chaos", Gaynor disregards all of the players who have sought narrative pleasure in games over the course of the medium's history. When Aarseth describes players "making a mockery of the author's intentions" and Gaynor characterizes players as "agents of chaos", a harmful narrative arises about players.

THE IMPLIED SUBVERSIVE PLAYER

This narrative is the story of the player as thug; the player as disruption; the player as subversive and transgressive. In this story, the player is selfish and disobedient: he plays for the pleasure of undermining the designs of the game-maker or storyteller. This notion of the subversive player has real implications for how games are conceptualized and designed. In a more recent work, Aarseth has written about the very real impact of designing with an "implied player" in mind (Aarseth, 2007). Aarseth's implied player exists before an actual real human player begins to interact with the game: it is the imagined player that the game addresses itself to, the role that the game invites players to step into. The way that we construct our implied players deeply impacts how and what we design. This is especially apparent when looking at the work of the Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDS) community where scholars focus on exploring the future of digital narrative through artificial intelligence.

In the IDS community the default player model is one who seeks to undermine the narrative aspirations of the designer. Magerko and Laird view the player as an uncontrolled variable in the interactive story system, one who will be dissatisfied if his or her freedom is too limited but who will be a threat to narrative continuity if allowed to act unchecked (Magerko, et al., 2004). They propose an Interactive Drama Architecture (IDA) that simultaneously attempts to steer players toward desired actions, while adjusting the story to mitigate damage done by them. Riedl et al. describe a technique called "narrative mediation" that is designed to detect and respond to unanticipated (and undesired) player activities in their *Mimesis* architecture (Riedl, et al., 2003). Champagnat et al. describe an interactive narrative architecture designed to correct for the inconsistent inputs of the player (Champagnat, et al., 2006). Aylett et al. go even further, arguing that interaction is completely inconsistent with narrative and that one must discard plot entirely, allowing stories to emerge from the actions of the player rather than the intentions of an author or designer (Aylett, et al., 2006).

These systems are foundational to the IDS community and represent some of the canonical work in digital narrative. They are connected by the common and unexamined notion that the dominant motivation of the player is to *act upon* the system in a way that is damaging to the story. As a consequence, the systems that emerge from this community of research are designed to either correct for undesired player behavior or to abdicate authorial responsibility to tell a coherent story. I have previously argued that the IDS community is in need of a new player model, and that reimagining players as something other than a hostile and uncontrollable variable will open up new design opportunities for interactive storytelling (Tanenbaum, 2011a, b). I believe that this also holds true for commercial games with narrative aspirations.

Designers create games with certain modes of play and interaction in mind: we can call these interactions "sanctioned play". However, in most cases, game engines permit players to recombine sanctioned interactions in unanticipated ways, leading to unexpected outcomes that seemingly undermine the intentions of the designer. When we witness a player using the mechanics of a game system to violate the narrative logic of the world, it is easy to conclude that the core pleasure derived from this play is in subverting and exploiting the system.

The construct of the subversive player has real, observable consequences on how we design games. When a designer succumbs to this notion, it commonly results in two possible design outcomes, which I term "Lockdown" and "Sandbox":

Lockdown: In Lockdown, the designer decides to *force* the game/story to turn out his or her own way, which means preventing the player from taking any actions that might potentially de-rail it. In this instance the designer *robs the player of freedom to act, in service of a desired experience*. Lockdown often manifests as a clumsy break in the reality of the game world (such as an invisible wall or un-killable NPC) in order to "railroad" the player to a desired outcome. Lockdown betrays a fundamental distrust of the player to electively take the action that will advance the story. Rather than providing the player with insight into what action is desired, the designer simply forces desired actions as needed.

Sandbox: The Sandbox solution is the opposite of Lockdown. In it, the designer decides to subtract his or her authorial voice from the system as much as possible, and emphasize the player's ability to act freely within the simulated world. In this instance the designer *sacrifices the ability to specify a desired experience in order to provide the player with as much freedom as possible*. Sandbox games, also often called "open world" games, present the player with a toolkit for creating emergent player-authored narratives within a simulated world, by creating lots of small interlocking goals spread across a large virtual geography. It relies on the poetics of what Jim Bizzocchi has called "micro-narrative" (Bizzocchi, 2007) but is a very limited medium for telling deeper narratives. Sandbox games work hard to not impinge upon the free actions of their players, often at the cost of expressiveness and specificity.

In some cases, designers attempt to split the difference between these two strategies by incorporating Lockdown-style solutions within sections of Sandbox games. In my previous work I performed a close reading of one such game, *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks, 2006), and determined that inconsistencies created by both strategies attempting to occupy the same storyworld significantly undermined the efforts of the designers to create a believable narrative (Tanenbaum, 2008, Tanenbaum, et al., 2008). Both of these strategies are problematic because both of them regard players as a *problem that needs to be solved.*

Aarseth describes the implied player as a "boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation to the playing person's freedom of movement and choice" (Aarseth, 2007). He argues that the actions of the player are at least partially determined by how we address our games to their players, what types of behaviors are afforded by the interface, and how the player's avatar is represented in the game world. Aarseth views subversive and transgressive play as *edge cases* in which players exploit or transcend the limitations of the identities crafted for them by the game system, and find themselves outside of the box of implied play.

I would argue that exactly the reverse is happening. When confronted with the possibility of an exploit or transgression, designers and storytellers panic. In this panic, they design games with either Lockdown or Sandbox as the primary poetics: designs in which the *implied* player is a *subversive* player. This creates a feedback loop: a self-fulfilling prophecy in which our own distrust of players becomes justified by creating exactly the types of play that we fear.

To break this cycle we need to start thinking about inviting our players into our games and narrative experiences as collaborators, rather than futilely trying to regulate their behavior. We must design for (and communicate) *desired* play, rather than designing *against* undesirable play. We need to invite productively subversive play into our stories, while also creating opportunities for the types of play that will advance our narrative aspirations. It isn't enough to simply *tolerate* modes of play that stretch the boundaries of our intended designs: we must redeem and celebrate them.

PLAYER TYPES AND PERFORMATIVE STANCES

While *some* players may be solely motivated to seek out hidden advantages and exploits in any simulation, this is not true of *most* players. Games scholars have crafted a significant body of work on different player types: some players are driven by the goals established within the game system, others prefer to set their own agendas. Some players play for social recognition or to engage with other players competitively or cooperatively. Some players want to be challenged by their game while others are more interested in something that will simply help them pass the time. Some players will engage deeply with a game's narrative while others want to skip past anything that isn't action. Theories of player typology abound, but the common thread between them all is this idea that we can't simply speak uniformly about "players" without glossing over the many important differences in how people play.

Stances and the "Subjunctive Mode"

I would argue that even this typological approach to players is an oversimplification of what happens during play. Assigning a player a particular "type", such as Richard Bartle's Explorers, Achievers, Socializers, and Killers (Bartle, 1996, 2003), implies that a player is predominantly motivated by a *single type* of play. Player typologies assume that a player in a game is acting based on a singular preference: "Right now I am exploring the map" or "Right now I am trying to get the most points". Some player typologies, such as Bateman and Boon's Meyers-Briggs inspired schema, operate on the assumption that core personality traits can be used to understand player preferences in games (Bateman, et al., 2006). The implication of this is that play preferences grow out of something intrinsic to a player's identity.

I suggest that rather than thinking about players as behaving according to a specific "type", we instead consider players as adopting different attitudes in the moment of play. These attitudes or stances are *performances* that the player enacts for herself as well as for any other players and/or spectators. Performative play exists within a social and cultural context: the situation in which a player is playing radically alters how she plays and what that play means. For instance, when I play *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) alone I am much more interested in accomplishing systemic goals (such as missions and achievements) than I am when I play the game with a group of friends. In the social setting, getting into outrageous and entertaining trouble takes precedence over accomplishing in-game goals. The stance adopted by a player in any given moment changes what the different elements of the game come to mean. If I am playing *Grand Theft Auto* with a goal of accomplishing specific missions, then I resent it when something happens to interfere with that mission, such as attracting the attention of the police. If I am playing the same game with a goal of entertaining my friends, I will often actively seek out police attention. The game situation remains the same, but the context of the play changes what that situation *means* to me as a player.

Even within solitary play, players must adopt a complex tangle of overlapping and even mutually exclusive goals and desires. We are already very good at maintaining contradictory mental models of stories from our experiences with traditional narrative media. Margaret Makey describes our ability to believe in fiction on its own terms (in spite of our own often contradictory external knowledge) as the *subjunctive mode* (Mackey, 2008). The subjunctive mode is all about the "as-if": we read *as-if* we haven't read before; we watch *as-if* we haven't watched before; we do not allow our knowledge that "it's only a story" to make our experience less real, less powerful, and less affecting. When the subjunctive is working, we can put away our logical objections, our critical attention to errors and inconsistencies, and our need for the fictional world to obey the same rules as the world we inhabit in our daily lives. Players who enter a game in the subjunctive state of mind do not care if the rules of the simulation are inconsistent with the demands of the narrative: they play *as-if* everything makes sense. The subjunctive pleasures of the narrative as designed are not lessened by the pleasures of exploration and experimentation, even when they appear to contradict each other.

Case Study: *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*

For example, while playing an action adventure game like *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Naughty Dog, 2007), I might be simultaneously attempting to search for secret treasure, escape from mercenaries, and also complete an achievement for killing a certain number of foes with a grenade launcher (in order to unlock a special game mode). Frequently I will find myself in situations where these goals create contradictions: such as when my desire for treasure leads me to meticulously search a room, even as the game narrative and the character dialogue reinforce the urgency with which I need to complete my task and escape.

Figure 1: Searching for treasure in Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

The part of me that is attending to the narrative does not lose track of the sense of urgency, even though the part of me that is attending to the treasure hunt has temporarily taken precedent. I do not perceive the search for treasure as narratively incongruous, even though it undermines the rising dramatic tension in the scene. Am I an achiever or an explorer in this situation? Am I being driven by the game narrative, or by a set of external goals that I have devised for myself? In fact I am cycling between all of these different modes of experiencing the game and, to complicate things, my actions in the game take on different meanings depending on which of these logics I choose to apply at any given moment. For example, if I only apply the logic of narrative urgency to the character, his behavior becomes irresponsible, nonsensical and *unbelievable*: Nathan Drake (the protagonist of *Uncharted*) wouldn't stop to dig around in the bushes when being chased by mercenaries. But even as I am searching for treasure, the narrative logic of the situation cannot be wholly discarded, because then all of my actions become unmoored and meaningless: why is Drake even here and what does it matter if he gets treasure, or lives, or dies? Playing the game requires applying at least two contradictory frames simultaneously.

Multiple Overlapping Performative Stances

The only way to reconcile the meaning of my contradictory actions and behaviors with the story that is unfolding without undermining its narrative coherence is to selectively filter the game as a whole into separate, concurrent, "tracks". Thus the "narrative tension track" and the "treasure hunting track" can run in parallel without contradicting each other, and I can simultaneously enjoy the rising tension of the story while also enjoying being an "achiever/explorer" and finding every secret item. And like the separate tracks of instruments in a music recording, sometimes one track is more dominant in the mix than the others, and sometimes one instrument drops out for a little bit so you can hear the rest more clearly.

Most modern games are rife with these types of internal contradictions: discontinuities that require the player to suspend her disbelief along both narrative and ludic vectors. Consequentially, most players have learned how to maintain multiple contradictory models of the meaning of their actions as they play, because otherwise most games wouldn't make any sense. Many game conventions violate the narrative logic of their simulated worlds while others create new narrative logics that cannot be judged by any "real-world" criteria. What this means is that there are often multiple contradictory layers of "reality" that a player must negotiate while playing. Players do all of this complicated mental juggling automatically while they play: they adopt multiple stances or attitudes about their play, and pursue all of them at the same time. This is a form of the *subjunctive mode* at work: players play "as-if" their different motivations are in harmony rather than opposition.

From an observer's perspective, however, it is hard to parse a player's actions against this dense tangle of motivations. This is perhaps why the notion of the subversive player is so dominant in the discourse of design: a player acting out a subset of different stances and motivations perceives no contradiction between her behaviors, but from the standpoint of an observer, many of these behaviors appear to be incoherent. This gives lie to the simplistic notion of the subversive player: certainly some players might prefer breaking a system to following the rules, but for most players, subversive play is just one of several simultaneous goals that are motivating their actions. Actions that seem like transgressive play on the surface are actually deeply connected to the other stances that players adopt toward the game. A player looking for exploits, bugs, and cheats is testing the

boundaries of the simulation: an important method for developing the literacies and competencies needed to better perform within that system.

INTERACTIONAL GRAMMARS AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Many recent games, especially those designed to be played on consoles, share similar core conventions and controller mappings that are known to all but the most uninitiated of players. It is widely understood, for instance, that the leftmost joystick of the controller governs the movement of the player's character in the game world, while the movement of the right joystick controls the character's point of view. The presence of these conventions has created a set of "core literacies" for many game genres that designers can leverage when designing new games. Within a game or simulated world, the types of actions that a player can take can be understood as the vocabulary that is available to the player; interactions are a form of language that designers create. This "interactional vocabulary" is the core of the relationship between the player, the software system, and the designer: it is the mechanism by which the designer communicates to the player the range of possible meanings that she may make within the system, and it is the mechanism by which the system is able to interpret the meaning expressed through a player's actions.

Case Study: *Mass Effect*

A simple example of this can be found in the dialogue system in the *Mass Effect Trilogy* (BioWare, 2007, 2010, 2012). In these games, the player is often given a choice between three different dialogue options, each reflecting a different aspect of the game's internal moral system which is broken into "paragon", "renegade" and "neutral" values. The game uses a consistent interactional grammar to communicate which option on the game's "dialogue wheel" [Figure 2] maps onto each of these values: the paragon option is always and on the top, the neutral option is always in the middle, and the renegade option is always on the bottom. This is important because the moral implications of the dialogue options are not always readily inferred from the text [Figure 3]. A player who is more familiar with the game's grammar is better equipped to make a choice that reflects her preferences for the character's personality.

A player with a full command of the particulars of a game system–a fully literate player–is empowered to act meaningfully: to choose the meanings he or she wishes to express and to understand how those meanings will impact the game software. In their seminal work *Understanding Computers and Cognition*, Winograd and Flores draw on Speech Act Theory to understand how meaning emerges in conversations and in computational systems. They define *Communicative Competence* as "the capacity to express one's intentions and take responsibilities in the networks of commitments that utterances and their interpretations bring to the world" (Winograd, et al., 1986). I have previously written about the ways in which acting in games can be seen as a way of "committing to meaning", and about how interacting in games requires the development of certain communicative literacies to make meaning (Tanenbaum, et al., 2009, 2010). This process of developing literacy and communicative competence often requires actions from players that push at the boundaries of the game system as designed. In doing so, players engage in types of play that are apparently subversive, but which are motivated by goals that have nothing to do with subverting the will of the designer.

Figure 2: The dialogue wheel in *Mass Effect 1*

Figure 3: Dialogue options do not always clearly communicate the moral valence of the choice.

Tutorials and Learning to Play

Most games come with some sort of instructional material to help players orient themselves to the rules of the simulated world. These instructions can take many different forms, ranging from a line of text–"Use the arrow keys to move. Use the spacebar to jump"–to extensive interactive tutorial levels with scripted learning goals, and complex instruction. This material is sometimes external to the gameplay experience, located in a printed or digital manual, help file or website, but more and more frequently it is becoming integrated into the play itself. The tutorial is usually the first and only

place in the game where players are exposed to an authoritative vision of how the game designers think the game should be played.

The role of the tutorial is a contested one. In an article on Gamasutra.com game designer Sheri Graner Ray encapsulates this:

> "No one likes tutorials.
>
> Marketing doesn't like them because they are never done until the very end of the project.
>
> Producers don't like them because they can't spare the resources to make one.
>
> The team doesn't like them because they've been living, eating, breathing and sleeping this product for so long they can't imagine anyone NOT being able to figure it out.
>
> Finally–the users rarely like them because they simply don't teach anything well in any way.
>
> Yet tutorials are the players' first contact with our product–their first impression of our work.
>
> We only get one chance and we usually blow it.
>
> Here's how it normally happens. At the last moment before ship, someone from marketing or PR or community comes in to a meeting and says, "What about the tutorial?"
>
> The team groans, the producer gets a headache, and then some smart person pipes up with "Is that intern still around? The one we put over in QA? Isn't he a programming intern? Why don't we give it to him? Oh, and we can have him do the install while he's at it."
>
> And that's how tutorials get done in today's industry." (Ray, 2010)

Tutorials are endured, tolerated, and ignored. Perhaps in response to this, many game tutorials only teach players the most basic elements of the game system, leaving more complex dynamics to be discovered by the player as she plays. Invariably this means teaching the player about the combat interface in the game and little else. Take, for instance, *Mass Effect*: while each game in the trilogy spends significant energy teaching the combat and navigation systems to the player, no tutorial time is allocated to explaining the narrative layer of the game. Players teach themselves the narrative conventions of the game through trial-and-error. One consequence of this is that the rules governing the narrative of the game are always hidden from the player: implied but never laid bare. This might arguably help maintain a sense of mystery and magic around the dynamics of the story, but it also is profoundly limiting to the designers and the players. In order for the interface to be learnable without instruction, it is necessarily simplified, especially when compared to the interface for the game's combat and navigation systems.

Our inability to introduce players to our games effectively means that players often have to take this learning into their own hands. There is evidence that suggests that some players learn more fully when given freedom to explore for themselves: that the more specific the instructions given to players, the less comprehensive their eventual knowledge of a system will be (Madigan, 2012). This might be true of some players, but

Ray argues persuasively that there are at least two styles of knowledge acquisition that shape how players learn about a game: *modeling* and *exploratory* (Ray, 2010). Players who learn better through *modeling* want to know what the impact of their choices will be before they make them: they grow anxious when asked to do something without knowing its potential consequences. *Exploratory* players, by contrast, grow impatient with instructions and would rather make choices and take risks in order to see the consequences of their actions (Ray, 2010). What looks like subversive play to designers is often simply exploratory players teaching themselves the rules of the system.

Modeling players and exploratory players may have very different strategies for learning about a game, but they share a common goal: to develop a deep knowledge of how the game works, both as a piece of software and as a dynamic meaning-making space. This goal is *not* about *subverting* the intentions of the game designers; it is about *divining* the designer's intentions. It is about acquiring communicative competence.

Trial and Error

This is all part of how players learn the rules of the game: not the *"official"* rules but the *real* rules. Many game systems–especially those designed in the Sandbox mindset–support a greater range of activities and permutations than can be realistically anticipated, tested, or accounted for by a design team. Therefore, the *official rules* of play are more often a set of prescribed ways of playing: a subset of the types of play actually allowed by the game engine. Players, then, are left to negotiate the gray areas between prescribed play and possible play–to learn what it is possible to express within the constraints of the software system, and to learn how to interpret the system's responses. A designer doesn't always need to ask questions like "How does the game respond if I try to kill this plot-essential character?" A designer *knows* how the game will respond, because she was involved in determining the parameters of the software. A player, on the other hand, needs to know this information, and often only has trial-and-error as a tool for acquiring it. When a player tests the limits of a system it is to better understand the design parameters of that system. Mia Consalvo discusses how even when players do cheat to gain some sort of advantage in the game (like unlimited life or ammunition) they often do so only *after* having completed the game first without cheating (Consalvo, 2005). Cheating is something that players do to extend the life of a game or to more completely consume a game's content.

Boundaries and Invisible Walls

The way that our systems respond to these exploratory actions–the ways that games present their boundaries and rough edges–is an important source of information for players. Take these different cases:

- **Flower** (Thatgamecompany, 2009): The player controls a stream of flower petals floating on gusts of wind. When the player encounters the edge of a level, she is gently but firmly blown back into play by a gust of wind.
- **Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception** (Naughty Dog, 2011): The player is running through streets and encounters barricades manned by NPC police officers. If the player attempts to cross the barriers, the character she is controlling will turn to face the opposite direction and will remark on his desire to not be caught by the cops.

- **World of Warcraft** (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)**:** If the player swims out into the ocean too far, her character begins to become "fatigued". If she doesn't turn around, the character will die of fatigue.
- **God of War III** (SCE Studios Santa Monica. , 2010): When the player attempts to steer her character over a cliff she encounters an invisible barrier…except that sometimes these invisible barriers are poorly placed and the character falls to his death instead.

Each of these strategies for preventing the player from going out of bounds communicates something different about the intentions of the designer. *Flower's* playful but gentle rebuffing of the player uses an established feature of the game world–gusts of wind–to keep the player in bounds without interrupting the flow of the experience. *Uncharted 3* uses narratively appropriate barriers and characters to regulate player movement, while also communicating something about the Nathan Drake's relationship to authority: a relationship that provides a template for the dynamic between the player and the system. In contrast, the broken invisible walls of *God of War III* exist as an expression of the designer's distrust of the player, rather than a manifestation of anything within the game's reality, and the fatigue meter in *World of Warcraft* comes across as disingenuous in a game where characters can run and fight for hours without a need for rest.

"Invisible Walls" are often cited within the player community as destructive to the suspension of disbelief required to imagine oneself into a simulated world (TV Tropes Foundation, 2013). A common complaint is characters that can't step over short ledges, jump over low barriers, or–even worse–characters that can blow up helicopters with their rocket launchers, but need to search for hours to find the key to that one locked rickety wooden door. In situations like this, the narrative the players experience is one in which their character is rendered as less intelligent or capable than the physics of the world could plausibly support. In spite of this, players *want* the game to make sense, and so are often willing to forgive or even justify even the most egregious violations of common sense if it will help them find the pleasure in the experience (Leblanc, 2011).

CONCLUSION: SUBVERSION AS LITERACY

This is the critical lesson that the designers and scholars quoted at the beginning of this paper fail to realize: that most players are more interested in playing *with* the game than *against* it. "Subversive play" is seldom actually about subverting the will of the designer. Sometimes it is about a player pursuing multiple goals at once. Sometimes it is about a player trying to learn how to best make meaning in a game system. It is often not even to cheat or gain an unfair advantage.

"I Want to Believe"

Most players *want to believe* in the fiction of the game world. They want to have the experience that the designer intended them to have. They might *also* want the freedom to play around the edges of that experience, or express themselves within the bounds of the system, but they are fundamentally interested in the game *as designed*. The same part of the brain that lets us immerse ourselves in a book or a film allows players to surrender themselves to the fiction of a simulated game world, even when they have it in their power to wreak havoc on that world. This is the part of the brain that knows how to enjoy a story even when we already know how it is going to turn out: the part of the brain that watches Romeo and Juliette and still desperately hopes that the two star crossed

lovers will reunite and live happily ever after, even though we know that this will never happen. And like books and film, games have their own literacies, the mastery of which only deepens a player's enjoyment and ability to make sense of the experience. As designers we need not fear exploration and experimentation, we simply need to understand them.

This is the antidote to the damage caused by the implied subversive player. This means accepting that subversive play does significant work to prepare a player to better perform within a narrative game. It means understanding the ways in which the subjunctive mode creates a safe space for narratives to retain their coherence, even when the logics of play contradict them. It means designing games where players are invited to live up to our best narrative expectations, rather than games where they are forced to live down to our basest fears.

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