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Play the Message

Play, Game and Videogame Rhetoric

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Title:

Play the Message: Play, Game and Videogame Rhetoric

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes a framework for the rhetorical analysis of games, videogames, toys and play activities. Even though play predates culture and games have long been pervasive in our civilization, the advent of videogames has pushed even further the role of games as communicational and cultural products. This situation demands a set of rhetorical tools that take into account the particularities of games and how they are played.

The main objective of this dissertation is to provide a foundation upon which building play rhetoric, one that is complete enough to take into account the core elements that contribute to the player’s construction of meaning while engaged in play. In order to achieve this, it is first needed to question our current ontologies of play and game and propose an alternative one that shifts the current systemic bias towards an approach that also takes into account player performance.

Since ultimately the goal of this dissertation is to contribute to the nascent field of play rhetoric, it complements its theoretical tools with multiple examples of rhetorical analysis of games, videogames, toys and play activities.
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Preface

This is my third—and hopefully last!—videogame-related dissertation. Many things have happened in my professional life since the previous one, in 2001. Since then, I have worked in the game industry, first as a producer, then as a designer and currently as co-director of my own studio, Powerful Robot Games, which I co-founded in 2002 with my friend and partner Sofía Battegazzore. I have learned enormously from this experience and I hope this is reflected in my theoretical work. I am deeply indebted to Sofia and the Powerful Robot team: there has not been a single day where I have not been happy, proud and excited about working with you guys.

I would first like to thank the people of Denmark, for generously and wisely investing their tax money in videogame research. I am deeply indebted to all my friends and colleagues at the Center for Computer Game Research at the IT University of Copenhagen, Espen Aarseth, Miguel Sicart, Jesper Juul, Lisbeth Klastrup, Marius Hartmann, Olli Leino, Hanna Wirman, Simon Engenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, Tasha Buch, Sara Mosberg, Anker Jørgensen, Susana Pajares Tosca and last, but not least, T.L. Taylor, for always putting people first, both in work and play. It has been a fun ride and I am already missing you. There have been literally dozens of people from all over the world who made this dissertation possible. I will just name a few names because the high score list of all those who contributed is way too long (but you guys know who you are). Thanks to my students at ITU, the readers from my blogs, the players of my games, Markku Eskelinen, Aki “Wa-” Järvinen, Michael Mateas and Ian Bogost. Special thanks are due to my supervisor, Espen Aarseth, who went well beyond the call of duty during my Scandinavian stay and constantly challenged me to go further in my research quests. Last, but not least, I want to thank Virginia for her constant and unconditional support.
There was a little game that we played with my fellow game researchers at ITU. Every time that somebody shared a new theory, we put it through what we called “The T-Shirt Test”. According to the rules of the game, your theory would be as good as its resulting T-shirt. It was a silly game but it helped us to try to weed out our ideas to their core components. I guess at least two T-shirts could be created after this dissertation: “Play as if there was no future” and “Videogames made me do it”. The first deals with how play is conditioned to the player’s model of his/her immediate future and the second is about play and game rhetoric. I would have gladly just submitted these two, full-cotton, machine-washable shirts to my dissertation committee but, after reviewing the Danish PhD regulations, I had no choice but to go the traditional way and turn in a printed version.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents Ninie and Carlos who built a very playful family and to my sister, Inés, a constant playmate who shares many of my passions.

Gonzalo Frasca
Montevideo. May, 2007
This dissertation was produced at the IT University of Copenhagen between January 2004 and January 2007. A substantial part of it was written while on stay at the École Nationale du Jeu et des Medias Interactifs Numériques (ENJMIN) in Angoulême, France. I am particularly grateful to the staff and students, specially to Stéphane Natkin and Cécile Le Prado. I would also like to thank the kind support of Magelis Pôle Image Angoulême.

Some parts of this dissertation were previously published:

- The chapter “Verbs and gender in Super Princess Peach” inspired my column “Trouble in Super Macho World?”, published on November 15, 2006 at Serious Games Source (http://seriousgamessource.com/features/feature_111506_peach_1.php)

- The chapter “Intel discovers women: serious advergames, serious consequences” inspired my column “When Advergaming Backfires”, published on January 17, 2007 at Serious Games Source (http://seriousgamessource.com/features/feature_011707_intel_1.php)

- Parts of the chapter “Campaign games: Howard Dean versus the “Republican Dogs” appeared in “Videogames go to Washington: The Story behind the Howard Dean for Iowa Game” that I co-wrote with Ian Bogost, in Second Person: Role Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media, Cambridge: MIT Press 2006.
Seeing is believing,  
but touching is understanding.  

Sherman and Craig

A Wop-bop-a-loo-mop  
Alop-bam-boom!  

Little Richard, Tutti Frutti
SECTION I - INTRODUCTION

1. Make games, not war

The Kamchatka Peninsula, located at the far eastern section of Russia, is one of the planet's regions with the highest density of volcanoes. There are about 160 of them around the Kamtchatka river, 29 of which are still active. About 400,000 people live in the region, which is also known for its wildlife and notably for its large population of brown bears (Wikipedia, 2007). However, if you mention this peninsula to Western board game players, chances are that they will not think about volcanoes nor bears. This is because in addition to be a very real peninsula, Kamtchatka is also a very valuable piece of virtual real state in the board game Risk (1957).

In 1956, the French film Le ballon rouge (The Red Balloon) won the Palme D'Or award for best short film at the Cannes Film Festival, along with the Oscar for the best original screenplay. This story about a young kid who befriends a magical red balloon in the Parisian streets became a classic of French cinema. The film was directed by Albert Lamorisse, who tragically died in a helicopter crash fourteen years later. If you mention the name Albert Lamorisse to a group of Western board game players, chances are that they will have absolutely no idea of who he was. Unless you mention a game that he created a few years before his most famous film: Risk¹.

Currently marketed by Parker Brothers, Risk features a world map on its board. The game’s main goal is to use tokens (which represent armies) in order to take over the world. The map is not geographically accurate and only includes a limited number of countries or regions, with borders that have been modified in order to make it easier to accommodate

¹ The game was created in the early 50s but first published in 1957 (Wikipedia, Risk (game), 2007)
the tokens. One of the featured “countries” is Kamchatka, which plays a strategic role in the game because it bridges Asia with America.

Unlike *The Red Balloon*, Argentina’s submission for the 2002 Academy Awards did not earn any golden statues. The film, entitled *Kamchatka*, is a South American equivalent to Anne Frank’s story. It narrates the life of an Argentinean family that is forced to go into hiding while escaping from the murderous military dictatorship that ravaged the country during the 70s and early 80s. The story is narrated by the family’s oldest son, a young child named Harry. Harry’s family can barely leave their hiding place, so they have to improvise different activities in order to combat boredom. One of these involves playing *T.E.G.* (ca. 1976), an Argentinean *Risk* knock-off. *T.E.G.*’s board slightly differs from *Risk*’s—it includes a few different states like Uruguay, my home country– but both include Kamchatka.

During their confinement, Harry plays *T.E.G.* against his father but he is never able to beat him. His luck changes one night, when Harry’s tokens take over all the world except for one “country”. That place is Kamchatka, where Harry’s dad entrenched himself. In spite of his wife’s insistence on him letting Harry win, the father does not give in. Technically, when one player takes over the whole world except for one country, both *T.E.G.* and *Risk* reach a dead end, since it is almost impossible for the other player to overcome the situation. However, it is possible to continue the game for hours and that is exactly what happened during that particular match. Harry ended up falling sleep without being able to conquer Kamchatka.

Later on, Harry’s family has to leave their hiding and the story suggests that his dad is going to become one of Argentina’s thousands of “disappeared” – that was the name

\[\text{--------------------}\]

2 In Spanish, the acronym stands for “juego Técnico y Estratégico de Guerra”, which can be literally translated as “Tactical and Strategic game of War”.
given throughout Latin America to the people assassinated by the military secret police whose bodies were disposed in N.N. graves or dumped into the sea. The last time that they see each other, Harry receives the *T.E.G.* set from his dad, who whispers some words into his ears before leaving. Harry later explains what those final words were: his dad told him that Kamchatka was “a place to resist”. At that moment, the audience understands why the father did not let Harry win at *T.E.G.*: he has using the game to teach him a lesson. During that particular match, his dad has no chance to survive but he still did not give up. This experience was incredibly frustrating to Harry, who—for the first time in his life—had managed to build an all-powerful *T.E.G.* army. Harry’s dad compared the game’s the situation to their family’s, who was similarly surrounded by an all-powerful oppressive regime with no real chance to escape. Nevertheless, they resisted, just like his dad did in Kamchatka while playing *T.E.G.*.

One may wonder why Harry’s father chose a game to teach this lesson. He could have perfectly used a story or maybe a proverb. However, the game allowed him to create an experience that is quite different from the ones provided by storytelling. While playing the board game, Harry felt first-handedly the real frustration of being so powerful and still not being able to crush tiny little Kamchatka. Outside the game, Harry’s father had no real chance to survive the military secret police. All he was able to do was to stubbornly resist and becoming an annoyance to them. The game not only became a metaphor for the country’s political situation but it also phenomenologically explained to Harry how hurt his family’s powerful enemies would feel if they did not give up.

In the film, the father uses a ready-made game in order to teach his son a life lesson. Clearly, neither *Risk* nor *T.E.G.* were conceived as a tool for teaching children the importance of political resistance. Harry’s father exploited one of the game’s design flaws—the dead-end scenario when one player overpowers the other—in order to simulate their fam-
ily’s situation. However, it is not unconceivable that somebody could have proceeded the other way around and created a game from scratch in order to make that particular point.

What does it means that a game makes a point? Can a game—which, by nature, involves multiple different scenarios—convey a lesson? If we trust the long tradition of educational games, the answer is a resounding yes. This is particularly true when it comes to military training. After all, early videogames are indebted to military simulations—a relationship that is known as the military-entertainment complex (Swain, 1994). However, the military’s relationship with games is much, much older than videogames, as it is shown in Ed Halter’s excellent book From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games (2006). The case of the game Go—which is also known as Weiqi in Chinese—is particularly enlightening in this sense because of its close relationship with actual warfare. Sun Tzu’s famous book The Art of War (ca. 6th century BC) is the world’s earliest known military manual. As Halter argues—following Go historian Peter Shotwell (2003)—that The Art of War has been used by players as a Go handbook, even if that was not written for that purpose. The inverse situation was also true, according to Halter:

 [...] a Chinese scholar of the first century A.D. noted that ‘the people have a game called weiqi, which is a kind of ‘art of war’”—implying that the very game itself functioned as a military guide. (2006: 21)

This is not surprising according to Shotwell, because there are structural similarities between the game and Chinese military strategies:

 [...] Go is known as the “encircling game” in Chinese, and, in contrast to many other cultures, encirclement is the basis of Chinese war techniques, which were based on strategies used since c. 5000 B.C. for hunting big game animals. (2003: 134)

This dissertation takes for granted that games and toys can convey ideas and values. Sometimes, the mere existence of game censorship proves this. On November 20, 1981, the New York Times reported that in the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos banned
video game machines “because of complaints from parents and teachers that the games were creating ‘havoc’ with the morality of nation’s youth” (New York Times 1981). This was a general ban on videogames: not specifically against their content but against the act of playing them. This kind of censorship does not necessarily see the games themselves as conveying ideas but rather is an attack on the act of playing itself. There is, however, another kind of censorship that aims at restricting access to certain messages or content that the censors consider to be harmful, obscene or dangerous. This was recently seen in the “Hot Coffee” incident related to the popular game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). After the game was released, a small software patch started circulating online. When this patch was run on the game, it unlocked sexual content in the form of a minigame (Wikipedia, 2007). The files that made possible this minigame where included in the game’s software code printed on the DVDs that were available for sale. However, the content was not accessible to players without the patch. This caused a popular outrage, among concerned parents and politicians but also through the industry, which is self-regulated in the U.S. when it comes to age ratings. There were multiple calls to ban the game and eventually the producer did replace the game’s code in further versions, rendering the patch useless for new customers.

Generally, videogame censors have a penchant for sex and violence. However, game censorship can also affect regular games dealing with other subjects, such as politics does not just affect videogames but also regular games, as sociologist Paul DiMaggio explains based on a story he heard from a Hungarian friend:

Prior to World War II, Hungarians had played [the board game] Monopoly, known there as *Kapitaly*. But the competitive game of capitalism was banned by communist authorities, who substituted another board game, *Gazdálkodj Okosan!,* or “Economi-zize Wisely”! In this goulash communist version of political correctness, the goal was to get a job, open a savings account, and acquire and furnish an apartment.

---

3 This description sounds surprisingly similar to what would later become Maxis’ *The Sims* (2000).
My friend was too young to have a Kapitaly board, but his older cousins from another part of the country knew the banned game and taught him the basic rules. You did not need to be a nine-year-old dissident to see that Monopoly was the more exciting game. And so they turned over the socialist board game, drew out the Kapitaly playing field from Start to Boardwalk on the reverse side, and began to play Monopoly—using the cards and pieces from Economize Wisely. But with the details of the rules unclear and with the memories of the older cousins fading, the bricolage game developed its own dynamics, stimulated by the cards and pieces from the “other side”. Why, for example, be satisfied with simple houses and hotels when you could have furniture as well? And under what configurations of play would a Prize of Socialist Labor be grounds for releasing you from or sending you to Jail. (2001: 102)

The fact that a game is censored does not necessarily prove that the censor’s claim is true—in this case, it is not evident that Monopoly (1935) may be a great way to learn capitalism. However, it does show that to a large group of people, the game was rhetorically interpreted as transmitting certain values. A question that is particularly relevant to this dissertation is what elements of the game conveyed those values? Was it the game’s rules? The game’s characters? Its theme? Or maybe it was a combination of all of these characteristics? And, more importantly, how is it possible that a game conveys a particular idea if the game is supposed to be under the control of the player who may produce a multiplicity of alternative, sometimes contradictory, game sessions? This question is at the core of game interpretation which, as Espen Aarseth explains at the beginning of his book Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (1997: 2-5) works on two different levels. One level is shared with other texts: signs are interpreted in many possible ways (for example, a German person interprets a white dress as a wedding dress while a Chinese person may see the exact same dress as something he would wear when attending a burial). However, games and other cybertexts include a second level of interpretation: the ergodic level. Here, the signs are manipulated by the user—through play in the case of games—and this performance generates new signs. These new signs are again open to multiple possible interpretations. So, any attempt to interpret games needs to pay attention to both the semiotic and the ergodic level, since games are not merely made of signs but they are also directly affected by the player’s performance.
This leads us to question games’ materiality. What are games? What are they made of? A quick, primary answer tells us that they are sometimes made of physical objects\(^4\) such as balls, nets, tokens as well as rules. What about player performance? Is it also a part of what constitutes a game?

In their study about Sony’s Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) *Everquest* (1999), Mikael Jakobsson and T.L. Taylor ask a seemingly trivial question: “Who designed Everquest?” (2003). The obvious answer seems to be “Sony Corporation” or rather “Sony Corporation employees”, since we are used to the idea that cultural products are built by designers and then consumed by consumers. Jakobsson and Taylor’s study argues that the answer is not that straightforward, since *Everquest* is the result of a constant negotiation between the designers and the players. Certainly, MMOGs are very particular kinds of games so it would not be wise to extrapolate their argument to other cases. Nevertheless, their study shows that at least in that special case, player performance and creativity constitutes an essential aspect of the game itself.

The importance of player performance is also echoed by Aarseth:

> Games are both object and process; they can’t be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental like the appreciative reader or listener. The creative involvement is a necessary ingredient in the *uses* of games. (2001) [my emphasis]

It is particularly strange that Aarseth first claims that games are both object and process but then he immediately writes about the “uses” of games, as if playing was simply something that happened to games. The problem may not be in Aarseth’s claim itself but rather in the English language. Unlike other Western languages, there are two different terms in English to describe what is known in Spanish simply as “juego”. Personally, I always regarded the existence of “play” and “game” as a useful sophistication of the English lan-

\(^4\) But not necessarily, since riddles and math games can be played without the help of any physical object.
The term “game” is particularly problematic because it has multiple meanings. It can be used both as a noun (as in “I played a game”) and as a verb (as in “the gaming tables”), even though the first use is arguably the most common. It is also used to describe a match or game session (as in “let’s go to the stadium to watch a game”). More importantly, it can both be used in order to describe both an object and activity (as in “the game of Chess is fascinating”) and the game’s materiality (as in “he borrowed my game”, referring to the physical set including, say, a game board and tokens). On the other hand, “play” is used in order to describe the activity that players engage while executing a game, either as a verb (as in “let’s play!”) or as a noun (as in “the children were at play”). The main problem with these two terms is not that they are not useful. Indeed, as Aarseth rightly argues, games are both object and process. “Game” is both the default term that is generally used to describe our object of study (Chess, soccer and videogames are generally referred to as “games” and not “plays”) and it also denotes their material aspects. For this reason, it could be argued that the English language may be biased towards a material, objectified idea of games to the detriment of framing them as performance. I am aware that I am merely offering circumstantial evidence to support this hypothesis and I will not pursue it further than this. I simply want to question this relationship, so it is not taken for granted as a necessarily positive distinction. The main reason behind this position is that, as I will show, most of the recent approaches to game ontology –while being aware of the essentiality of player performance– have a tendency to focus more on the measurable, structured aspects of games such as rules, space, time and props. This may or not be related to the
English language potential problem that I previously pointed out. In any case, this systemic approach does generate several problems, such as generating “borderline cases” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004 and Juul, 2005) in game typologies, as well as framing player creativity as “emergent behaviors” (Juul, 2005). If we want to better understand how players construct meaning while playing, we need ontological models that better explain player performance and the nature of play.

2. Objectives and Goals

The main objective of this dissertation is to provide a framework for understanding how games convey meaning. Since I am a videogame designer by trade, my personal interest is principally in videogame rhetoric and that is why many of the examples in this dissertation will be from computer-based, electronic games. However, it would be foolish to ignore the long tradition of games and toys. After all, videogame history is measured in decades while games and toys predate culture and transcend humanity, since they are endeavors that we share with many other species in our planet.

The objective of understanding how games convey meaning can be also rephrased as how players construct meaning while playing games. Both phrasings have a similar significance, yet they stress different points of view by either focusing on the game’s components (tokens, fields, time, rules) or on the players’ performance (play). These two seemingly unimportant alternative framings will become a constant presence in the following chapters because they embody two competitive and yet complementary –and sometimes overlapping– perspectives in game studies: the system and the player. Each perspective carries its own ideology, benefits and limitations. As I will show, the tendency in many recent game studies works is to offer solid tools to understand the game as a sys-
tem but this is done in detriment of the player’s role and performance. I will not seek to in-
verse this attention towards the player, because both approaches are valid and useful. An
inversion of focus would simply shift the problem towards another end, without providing
researchers with a useful, balanced framework. Still, I am fully aware that it is questionable
to claim that a certain approach is unbalanced. Definitions delimit the sense of a concept
both by including and excluding meanings and the threshold between these can be sub-
jective. By “balanced” I then mean an approach that offers a broader explanatory power
by providing tools to understand games as both object and performance. If we can expand
the idea of what games are –both “what” they are and “how” they are– we will have a more
solid foundation upon which build the nascent field of game rhetoric.

In order to reach this main objective, this dissertation will cover a series of intermedia-
ry goals. These are as follows:

- Analyzing the current state of game ontology in order to identify the relationship between
the player and the game system.

- Providing an alternative, yet complementary, game ontology that takes more into account
player performance.

- Proposing a framework for analyzing game rhetoric that draws from the main aspects of
games and play, based on the previously proposed definitions.

- Illustrating the benefits of such framework through the analysis of multiple case studies.
3. Precedents and Theory

3.1 Before videogames: Unplugged games with an agenda

Even though rhetoric is a well established discipline with a 2500 year old history in the Western world, the field of game rhetoric has known far more practitioners than theoreticians. From the early examples of Go and The Art of War, games have been used for teaching and training, especially by educators and the military. The idea of edutainment – where education meets entertainment – had a couple of golden ages, particularly through German board games in the XIX century and during the 1980-90s with the advent of multimedia computers. There are some classic examples of games designed in order to support particular ideas – specially political ones – such as Lizzie Smith’s board game The Landlord Game (1903), which later evolved into Monopoly (1935). The fascinating story behind this game has been extensively documented (see Orbanes, 2003 and 2006). Another, less-known, example is the political toys and games designed and marketed at the beginning of the XXth century by the British suffragettes, a group of activists who fought for women’s right to vote. Interestingly, these games were not simply a way to convey their ideas about women’s rights but it was also a strategy for financing their struggle. More importantly, as Elizabeth Crawford points out in her The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928 (2002: 235) “not only funds were raised, but the message of

5 For a longer discussion about edutainment and educational videogames see Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen (2006)

6 It should be noticed, though, that according to Elizabeth Crawford (2002), not all the suffragette-themed games were designed by the Women’s Social and Political Union. Instead, some were created and marketed by independent business-people who did not donate profits to the women’s cause.
the cause was brought into domestic circles where more rabid propaganda might not have been welcomed”. Crawford later quotes a player’s recollection of one of these games that supports her observation:

I remember the colours of the suffragettes, they were purple, white and green. I remember this especially as we had a game at home, run on similar lines to snakes and ladders, with a dice, numbered squares, and pictures of banner-carrying suffragettes, with the slogan ‘Votes for Women’. Square one on the board showed a picture of the committee rooms of the Women’s Social and Political Union [WSPU] at the inaugural meeting at Mrs [Emmeline] Pankhurst’s [one of the founders of the British suffragette movement] house, 62 Nelson St, Manchester, and the last picture arrival at the Houses of Parliament. The ladders being the advances made by the WSPU and the snakes being the setbacks including the imprisonment of various members. (quoted in Crawford, 2002: 236)

It is particularly interesting how the player remembers certain characteristics of the suffragettes (mainly their distinctive colors and costumes) because of a game —remember that at the time both photography and films were scarce and they generally were in black and white.

Crawford offers the most comprehensive list of the suffragettes’ toys and games in her book. Some of these include: *Suffragette*, a card game (1907); *Rushing the house*, a game launched in 1908 inspired in current political events; *Pank-a-Squith*, a board game...
game (1909), *Panko*, a card game featuring political cartoons; *Suffragettes in and out of Prison* (?), the board game described on the previous quote. Some of these games seem to be adaptations of previously existing games. According to Constance Rover’s *Women’s Suffrage and Party Politics* (1967), *Panko* shared some similarities with the popular card game *Rummy*. The *Suffrage in Scotland Educational Resource (SISTER)* website (www.womenslib.org) lists a collection of suffragette-related artifacts. Among their collection, they include some pro-women suffrage games but, interestingly, also an anti-suffrage Jack-in-the-box toy, featuring an ugly-faced woman holding a “Votes for Women” flag.

In the light of the currently male-dominated videogame industry, it is particularly interesting to notice the role of women in these two early cases of political uses of games (*The Landlord’s Game* and the suffragettes’ games). These are two major examples of an alternate use of gaming that goes beyond entertainment, a political tradition that, as we will see next, continued with the invention of computers.

### 3.2 “Serious” Videogames

Chris Crawford is one of the earliest videogame designers concerned with conveying values through his games. In 1986 he argued that (quoted in Myers, 1990: 27): “a game communicates... an artistic message”. The statement appears in Crawford’s book –and companion to his game bearing same title– *Balance of Power: International Politics as the Ultimate Global Game* (1986: 9). In his analysis of that game, David Myers describes how *Balance of Power’s* gameplay is influenced by the fact that the author is attempting to communicate his views on the Cold War:

*Balance of Power* is playable; it is enjoyable. It is not as playable or as enjoyable as *Eastern Front* [a previous WII-themed Crawford game]. The relationship between German and Russian tanks in *Eastern Front* is a dialogue, a dialectic; the relationship between U.S. and U.S.S.R. in *Balance of Power* is a speech, a lecture. (ibid)
When analyzing the rhetorical potential of computer games—and particularly those of the “sim” genre such as *SimCity*—the natural tendency among game scholars is to focus on a systemic, rule-based approach. This is the case in Ted Friedman’s classic analysis of *SimCity* called “The Semiotics of SimCity”:

Playing a simulation means becoming engrossed in a systemic logic which connects a myriad array of causes and effects. The simulation acts as a kind of map-in-time, visually and viscerally (as the player internalizes the game’s logic) demonstrating the repercussions and interrelatedness of many different social decisions. Escaping the prison-house of language which seems so inadequate for holding together the disparate strands that construct postmodern subjectivity, computer simulations provide a radically new quasi-narrative form through which to communicate structures of interconnection (1999).

Indeed, rules are an essential component of games as simulations. It is their procedural quality which differentiates them from other genres such as film or novels (Murray, 1997). Rules are available in all games and they are always ideologically charged. However, they become evident when the subject of the game is a real-world referent to which we already have an ideological bias (the Cold War in the case of *Balance of Power* and urban planning and administration in the case of *SimCity*).

Previous studies in game rhetoric are related to research on digital rhetoric and ideology. Works directly dealing with videogame rhetoric are scarce. One particularly relevant study is Sherry Turkle’s work on simulation in her *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), which I have previously reviewed (2001). In his book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997: 90-92), Espen Aarseth also deals with the subject by identifying two master tropes found in hypertext fiction but also in games in general: aporia and epiphany. These two complementary tropes respectively represent the instances when players find that they lack an element that prevents them from advancing in the game—say, when they meet with a locked door—and when they find a solution to the problem—i.e. they either find the key or blow the door away with a plasma gun. Both Drew...
Davidson (2003) and Steffen P. Walz (2003) have worked on gameplay rhetoric, a subset of videogame rhetoric dealing with how games persuade players to play them. My previous work has dealt with construction of meaning in games from the perspective of simulation (2001) and I have also proposed a typology of game rules according to their rhetorical characteristics (2003). Ian Bogost has also analyzed this topic in his 2006 book *Unit Operations* and on his upcoming *Persuasive Games* (in press). I have extensively collaborated with Bogost on this subject in our joint weblog *WaterCoolerGames.org* where we review what we call “games with an agenda”: games that aim to communicate in addition than entertaining. However, this term—which we consider to be more accurate—has not caught on as much as the one of “serious games”.

The term “serious games” has grown acceptance among the videogame community to refer to games that aim at training, educating, persuading or communicating values and ideas. The term was introduced in 1970 by Clark C. Abt in a bearing the same title. On the one hand, the term “serious games” is useful because it stresses the game’s authors intentions. However, it is also extremely problematic because it implies that the rest of the games are non-serious. As Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen has shown on his research (2006), it is possible to use ready-made, commercial games for “serious” educational purposes, even though they may not have been conceived as such. The “seriousness” of games depends on the subjective values of the designer and the player, so the use of this term is only advisable as a casual term denoting the creators’ intentions for the game.

No matter how we call these games, there has been a growing interest on them, notably when it comes to educational and training uses. For example, a Serious Games Summit has been held at the Game Developers Conference since 2004. Even though most of the games in this context are created for training purposes—mainly through government funding, specially through the military—this umbrella term also includes political
and activist games and, to a lesser degree, games for advertising and propaganda. It would seem that the developers behind these games would be a particularly well-suited audience for videogame rhetoric studies. After all, they want to convey ideas, values, and sometimes at persuading the players. This relationship between “serious” creators and the development of rhetoric seems to have be fruitful in the past in other genres. If we take a look at the development of rhetorical techniques in filmmaking, we can observe that many were developed by artists with a political agenda. Early filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith, Leni Riefenstahl and Sergei Eisenstein pushed the envelope of visual rhetoric because they had clear political messages that they wanted to convey –and, incidentally, because they also had financial backing from political groups, notably in the last two cases. Many of the techniques that they developed are now standard in film language. This suggests that, even though the “serious” games movement is currently marginal within the games industry, its developments could potentially affect it in the long term by improving games’ arsenal of rhetorical techniques.

3.3 Play and game rhetoric

Even though this dissertation is about game rhetoric, the reader may be surprised to realize that most of the theoretical framework upon which it is based is mainly play and game studies. Strictly, it may be more accurate to say that my aim is pre-rhetorical in the sense that I am more interested in creating a theoretical foundation upon which starting research on play rhetoric. My research work is akin to the stage in game development known as pre-production, where before crafting the game, a plan is laid out based on a review of the work that needs to be done. I will, however, offer many examples of how games convey ideas. But even this exemplification is limited, since it is beyond the scope of this work to create rhetorical typologies of play figures. Instead, I will simply provide three aspects of games that are differentiated in the process of communication or con-
struction of meaning. These perspectives should be seen as a continuation of my first proposed game rhetoric typology (2003a), which included two main categories – game props and rules – and that now I will expand in order to accommodate a third one: player performance. This category draws a concept originally from cognitive theory but more recently also pervasive within human-computer interaction: the haptic perceptual system (Gibson, 1966). Within this context, body performance is not seen merely as action but also as perception. Since performance is a core dimension of play, the haptic dimension should be taken into account because it adds an extra layer of interpretation and, as such, it cannot be ignored from a rhetorical point of view.

The term “rhetoric” can have multiple nuances, so it is essential that I state what do I understand by it. My professional work as a game designer has been influenced by projects that understand play rhetoric in the classical sense, as devices that aim at persuading players into modifying their ideas and actions. Clear examples of this are videogames crafted for advertising – generally called advergames – or my work in creating games for political campaigns, such as The Howard Dean Game for Iowa (Battegazzore, Bogost and Frasca, 2003) – commissioned for the U.S. Presidential election and Cambiemos (Battegazzore and Frasca, 2004) – commissioned for the Uruguayan Presidential election. It also includes other non-electoral, activist videogames such as September 12th: A Toy World and Madrid (Battegazzore and Frasca, 2003 and 2004 respectively). Even though these examples show a penchant for politics, rhetoric will be approached in this dissertation as a political discipline indeed but in the wide sense of the term as understood by rhetorician Kenneth Burke. Within this context, politics loses its traditional activist and electoral meaning to mean the strategies that humans apply in societies in order to aim at living in harmony. When reviewing Ernst Cassirer’s Myth of the State (1946), Burke argues that one of the “most characteristic concern of rhetoric [is] the manipulation of men’s be-
lies for political ends” (1969: 41). This meaning is broader than electoral messages, since politics is also about negotiation, cooperation and, more importantly, understanding. For Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is a tool for social understanding and, as such, it has inevitable political consequences. Similarly, aesthetics does also overlap with rhetorics, because beauty can also be used for communicating effectively. Aesthetics also has a political dimension, as Burke warned: “whenever you find a doctrine of ‘non political’ esthetics affirmed with fervor, look for its politics” (1969: 28).

It is within this context of aesthetics and politics that I will place my rhetorical approach to play and games. Toys and games will be considered as semiotic devices—or literally sign machines, in Espen Aarseth (1997) terms— that, when manipulated by players, contribute to the creation of meaning. It may still be useful in these early stages to view play and game rhetoric as examples of persuasive techniques—and this explains why we researchers are particularly drawn to educational, activist, political and advertising uses of games. However this perspective can fall short in the long run, unless we view rhetoric within the broader perspective of communication, as defined by Kenneth Burke:

[Rhetoric] is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols. (1989: 188)

The classical—from Aristotle to the early XXth century—perspective of rhetoric as persuasion offered an unbalanced view of the communication process, favoring whoever issued a message that was aimed at persuading the receiver. Burke offers an alternative that sees the process as a form of cooperation where a power struggle may exist between those involved but not necessarily favoring whoever produces the message. According to Burke, it does not make sense to see rhetoric as mainly persuasion, because persuasion is a natu-
ral characteristic of language and communication: “Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning’, there is persuasion” (1969: 172)

If I had to sum up my approach to rhetoric in simple words, I would state that my main concern is with play as an activity for understanding the world. Play rhetoric will help us to understand this process as a communicational—and therefore, social— one. This process always carries an aesthetical and political dimension and that is why I will pay particular attention to these two elements in the rhetorical model that I will suggest in this dissertation.

As I have previously explained, in order to approach play and game rhetoric I will first analyze the ontological relationship between play and games. I will draw from the work of classic game and play scholars such as Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and notably Brian Sutton-Smith. Even though this dissertation is concerned with game and play rhetoric in general, it will pay particular attention to videogame applications. Therefore, I will also extensively discuss the work of videogame scholars that worked on play and game ontology: Espen Aarseth, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (from now on, S&Z) and Jesper Juul.

4. Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of two parts that are related but can still be read independently. The first part explores the ontological relationship between play and game. The second part proposes a framework for studying play and game rhetoric. The first part provides a theoretical approach that stresses the relevance of play and player performance—or, as I will call it, playformance—within games. This serves as the foundation for adding playformance as one of the three main perspectives through which understand play rhetoric, in
addition to the game mechanics and the game’s space and props—which I will call play-world.

The first section is the Introduction, where readers will be able to find the dissertation’s goals, objectives, methods and main theoretical tools.

The second section reviews previous attempts to understand play and its relationship with games. On Chapter 7 I provide a new definition of play that stresses the player’s subjective relationship with games. A new game definition will be built upon this new definition of play, shifting the traditional focus on the game system towards a more balanced approach that takes more into account player subjectivity.

The second part of this dissertation proposes three different, complementary perspectives to approach play rhetoric—play taken here in its broadest sense, including games and particularly videogames. Section three serves as an introduction to these perspectives and reviews previous works on this field. The following three sections—called, respectively, Playworld, Mechanics and Playformance—explore in depth each one of these perspectives. All these three sections examine multiple examples on how players construct meaning within games but also in play activities involving toys. The Playworld section studies the semiotic role of games’ space and props. The Mechanics section focuses on how rules convey meaning but also provides examples related to player customization, difficulty tuning and strategies. The next section illustrates the role of player performance in play rhetoric. Playformance is seen not simply as the physical manipulation of games but also as cognitive strategy for creating meaning within the game. This section pays particular attention to the performative differences between traditional games and videogames.

In order to show how these three perspectives work together, section eight puts them to test within a case study involving several different safe game adaptations of another,
dangerous game: Russian Roulette. From a design point of view, these iterations are particularly interesting because on the one hand, they have to persuade the player that she is playing Russian Roulette, while at the same time keeping the experience harmless. So, they use several rhetorical strategies in order to convey the ideas and feelings of the original game within the design constraints that bound the new ones.
SECTION II: PLAY AND GAME

During the late 19th century and early 20th century, a large wave of European immigrants sought refuge in the Americas. One of the main destinations for Spaniards was the Rio de la Plata region, specially its two largest cities: Buenos Aires, Argentina and Montevideo, Uruguay. Many of these impoverished immigrants happened to come from Galicia, Spain's northeastern region. This had two profound cultural consequences in the Rio de la Plata. Firstly, "Galician" became among Argentineans and Uruguayans the generic slang term to refer to any Spaniard, even if they were not from the Galicia region. This tradition is still popular nowadays –something that most Spaniards find particularly surprising. The second consequence is that Galicians became the token protagonists for most of the local jokes. In the same way that the French mock the Belgians and that the Americans make fun of the Poles, Argentineans and Uruguayans laugh at the expense of the Galicians. The stereotype behind Galicians being dumb may be due to the fact that many immigrants were poor, illiterate peasants. Not only out of political correctness but also due to my grandmother's Galician roots, I would additionally like to point out that Galicians are also stereotyped as hard working, generous people in spite of their naïveté. That been said, let's now have some laughs with a little help of Galicians.

As many of these jokes go, this particular one involves a Galician guy called Manolo (all Galicians in jokes are named Manolo, which is a common nickname for the name Manuel.) A man is walking on the street and he runs into Manolo, who is frenetically feeding coins into a Coke vending machine. Manolo puts a coin in, retrieves a Coke can and repeats the process over and over again. The man, puzzled at the pile of unopened Coke cans sitting next to the vending machine, asks Manolo "Hey, what are you going to do with so many Coca-Cola cans?" Manolo keeps feeding the machine with coins and replies: "I don't know but as long as I keep winning, I'll keep playing!"
The joke makes fun of Manolo, who is dumb enough to mistake a vending machine for a gambling one. Even though both machines are different enough, they have one big element in common that may have caused Manolo’s confusion: they both take coins. The main difference is that the Coke vending machine always delivers a can for a fixed amount of cash while the gambling one only exceptionally offers a reward. Both share a similar interface: a slot where you are supposed to introduce your coins. Both provide some kind of feedback: a soda can in the first case and hopefully a big cash reward on the second one. This joke is based on the elusive difference between play and not play—or, if you prefer, between play and work. Manolo confuses the vending machine with a game and he believes that he is enjoying a strike of good fortune. He does not see the Coke cans as the product of a purchase but rather as a reward from a game. Additionally, his final reply shows, he is not that much interested in the reward itself—the cans of Coke— but rather on the fact that he is winning. In his mind, he may be playing but to an external observer familiar with vending machines, he is not playing at all. Regardless of the designer’s—and social—intentions towards the Coke machine, Manolo is enjoying himself and using the purchase mechanism for play. We may laugh at Manolo because we think that we know better (and technically we do) but he is having a good time and who are we to judge him?

5. To be and not to be: the ambiguity of play

Manolo may be a fictional character but his behavior describes a central issue in play and game studies: what does it mean to be playing? What are the limits between work and play? Why the exact same activity—say, hunting—could be seen as a chore or as play? Why does work sometimes feels as good as play? Why do games sometimes feel boring and repetitive like bad jobs and yet players continue playing? The issue is also
relevant to game designers: why are some players attracted to certain activities while others are not? Why do some players behave in unexpected ways?

Brian Sutton-Smith, arguably the most important living play scholar, extensively examined this liminal characteristic of play. One of his books, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) clearly frames the problem. It begins with the following observation:

We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness (ibid: 1)

This ambiguity of play is caused, according to Sutton-Smith, by the vast diversity of play itself. Play is common to a multiplicity of activities that he classifies as follows: mind or subjective play (as in daydreams and *Dungeons and Dragons*⁷); solitary play (as in reading and playing crosswords); playful behaviors (as in playing tricks or playing with words); informal social play (as in joking and dancing); vicarious audience play (as in concerts and museums); performance play (as in playing music and playing a role); celebrations and festivals (as in carnival and Christmas); contests (games and sports) (as in gambling or playing board games); risky or deep play (as in extreme sports).

Sutton-Smith argues that this diversity becomes more complex due to the multiple types of players (animals and human, male and female, young and old), styles of play and kinds of play equipment. Additionally, he observes that play has been framed in alternative, partial ways, by a multitude of different scholarly disciplines. Because of all these previous reasons, defining play becomes a particularly complex task. The difficulty of finding patterns in common between the vast universe of play-related⁸ activities was an argument that was previously made by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1994: 48). Yet, as it will be shown in the following pages, there have been several attempts to systematically define the concept.

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⁷ Sutton-Smith provides several examples. For reasons of length, I have selected just a few to illustrate his points.

⁸ Notice that even though Wittgenstein is generally translated in English as arguing that it is impossible to categorize games, the original German term, spiele, can also apply to play.
Play is not only extremely diverse but it can also be an ambiguous activity. One of the most recurring cases of play ambiguity is that play seems, unlike Hamlet’s dilemma, to be and not to be at the same time. In *A Theory of Play and Fantasy* (in S&Z, 2006: 314), Gregory Bateson illustrated this issue with the help of two monkeys from the San Francisco zoo. Bateson witnessed the simians when they were engaged in some sort of make-believe battle. He observed that on the one hand, they performed a sequence of actions identical to an actual fight but, at the same time, it was clear to observers that they were not hurting each other. Bateson used this example in order to illustrate the concept of metacommunication, arguing that in order to play the monkeys had to have a previous understanding about engaging into make-believe combat. In other words, they had to be able to communicate “this is play and not actual combat”. Bateson’s monkeys may not have been fighting for real, as most players who engage into make-believe fighting do not really hurt each other. However, things get more complicated when we deal with violent or extreme sports, where players do actually take real risks and, many times, hurt each other in a very real way. This seems to be a problematic aspect of play that we cannot fully explain. How come that combat can both be combat and not being combat at the same time? Can anything be real and not being real? Both common sense and logic tells us that this does not make any sense at all. Still, the duality is, to use Bateson’s words, “evident” (ibid: 316).

In order to better understand play—and games and videogames—it is essential to take a deeper look into these ambiguous, borderline and fuzzy situations. In this chapter, I will review different takes on the concepts of play and game, while proposing an alternative approach that can help clearing up most of their ambiguity.
6. Understanding play

From a scholarly point of view, the concept of play is both fascinating and terrifying. These two effects share the same cause: the pervasiveness of play in human culture and animal life. In his *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, literary and play scholar Mihai Spariosu echoes the difficulty with grasping all the ideas associated to this concept:

Such a history [a comprehensive one of the modern concept of play], would not only reach monumental proportions but could also easily miss its mark. Play is one of those elusive phenomena that can never be contained within a systematic scholarly treatise; indeed, play transcends all disciplines, if not all discipline. (1989: xi)

Granted, play is such an intrinsic characteristic of human and animal behavior that it can be—and has been—approached by multiple disciplines and perspectives. The nascent academic fields of play and game studies certainly need to be multidisciplinary. Still, it would be easy to inverse Spariosu’s argument and claim that play’s elusiveness is not on its nature as he says but rather that it is a direct consequence of our current inability to systematically understand it. Indeed, the concept of play has proven extremely difficult to frame but this may be due to our own limitations rather than because of its nature.

Spariosu makes a stronger point when he argues that attempting to review how the concept of play has been analyzed by modern scholars is a titanic task. Sutton-Smith has brilliantly described the variety and complexity of such an endeavor in a paragraph of *The Ambiguity of Play* which here is reproduced in full, in spite of its length:

[...] biologists, psychologists, educators, and sociologists tend to focus on how play is adaptive or contributes to growth, development, and socialization. Communication theorists tell us that play is a form of communication far preceding language in evolution because it is also found in animals. Sociologists say that play is an imperial social system that is typically manipulated by those with power for their own benefit. Mathematicians focus on war games and games of chance, important in turn because of the data they supply about strategy and probability. Thermonuclear war games, it appears, can be either a hobby or deadly serious. Anthropologists pursue the relationships between ritual and play as these are found in customs and festivals,
while folklorists add an interest in play and game traditions. Art and literature, by contrast, have a major focus on play as a spur to creativity. In some mythology scholarship, play is said to be the sphere of the gods, while in the physical sciences it is sometimes another name for the indeterminacy or chaos of basic matter. In psychiatry, play offers a way to diagnose and provide therapy for the inner conflicts of young and old patients alike. And in the leisure sciences, play is about qualities of personal experience, such as intrinsic motivation, fun, relaxation, escape, and so on. No discipline is, however, so homogenous that all its members are funneled into only one way of theorizing. Nevertheless the diversity exists, and it makes reconciliation difficult. (1997: 6-7)

Providing even a schematic view on all the major takes on play is a much needed task for the field. However, it would be too vast a task for the scope of this dissertation. Instead, it will focus on reviewing general definitions of play developed by play scholars. These will be later contrasted with definitions of game because, as it will be shown next, the two concepts have a close albeit sometimes confusing relationship.

6.1 Play and Game

It is becoming a staple in game studies to devote a section of any new treatise to the fact that many Western languages, unlike English, do not distinguish between the terms play and game. The situation is actually quite complex, since both English terms can be used both as a noun and as a verb —even though, arguably, play is more often used as a verb and game as a noun. In any case, it is true that French (jeu), Portuguese (jogo), Spanish (juego) and German (spiel) have only one term that applies to both English nouns.

It would seem as if the play/game dichotomy is useful to researchers. After all, scholars such as Roger Caillois —who originally wrote in French— overcame his language’s limitation by proposing two alternative terms: ludus and paidia:

[Games] can [also] be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia. At the opposite extreme, this frolic-
some and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, an in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain of attaining its desired effect. This latter principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity. I call this second component ludus. (2001: 13)

Caillois differentiates padia from ludus through the complexity of their rules. I have previously argued (Frasca, 1997: 30) that rule complexity is a structural characteristic that is hard to measure. I then suggested that the main difference between both categories is that ludus games define winners and losers, while paidia games do not. However, this view is not compatible with Caillois’ assertion that both terms are part of a gradual spectrum and should not be seen as binary opposites. My previous suggestion was based on the work of French philosopher André Lalande (1928) who was the first to distinguish two forms of games into categories that could fit play and game, even though he did not differentiate them through specific terms.

Generally, it is common to frame games as a subset of the larger category of play. The New Oxford American Dictionary (2005) defines game as a a “form of play [...]”. S&Z echo this popular view when they say:

**Games are a subset of play:** Games constitute a formalized part of everything we might consider to be play. Playing catch or playing doctor are play activities that fall outside our definition of games (a contest of powers with quantifiable outcome, etc.). However, although not all play fits the category of games, those things we define as games fit within a larger category of play activities. (2004: 303)

However, play is also generally viewed as being part of games. This alternative—and opposite—take on play is also described by S&Z:

**Play is an element of games:** In addition to rules and culture, play is an essential component of games, a facet of the larger phenomenon of games, and a primary schema for understanding them. (ibid)
Once again, we face an example of play’s confusing duality. Even though both framings are commonly accepted both in the English language and in game studies, they are not logically sound. The first case frames games as a subset of play and the second does the opposite. S&Z (ibid) correctly point out that this seeming contradiction is a direct consequence of the terms having alternative meanings. It would seem as if the English distinction between *play* and *game* may actually not clarify things as much as we could hope.

The problem may be due to the fact that in clause A (“Games are a subset of play”) the term *game* is understood as an activity, while in clause B (“Play is an element of games”) it is understood as an object. This distinction is crucial and, as it will be shown in the following pages, can be at the root of major theoretical problems. If both games and play are considered to be activities, clause A is true: games are only a limited part of play activities. In other words, play activities are broader because they include more phenomena. This is independent from distinguishing both category through the complexity of their rules (as Caillois did) or through their outcomes.

When we view games as objects, we frame them as a system with different elements (rules, objects such as tokens, a particular space such as the play field and the play time). In such case, play is considered to be the fuel that keeps the system working. In other words, play becomes, as it is stated in clause B, an “element” of the system. As I pointed out in the introduction, there is a problem with the fact that the term “game” is generally used both to describe the system of rules, space and objects (as in “Dad bought me a new game”) as well as the activity itself (as in “I just participated in a game”). On the other hand, “play” is generally used to describe games as activities, since it is more frequently used as a verb related to the object (“She played the game”) than as a noun. This potential bias towards the system may be problematic for game research, because it could privilege a view of the concept as a system instead of also acknowledging its performative aspects.
Certainly, games can either be framed as activities or as objects. Games as activities are framed around the players: games are something players do. Framing games as objects shifts the focus towards the system. When that happens, games are something where players participate within. It is a subtle distinction but the consequences are crucial. Ideologically, the first approach is human-centric while the second is system-centric. As a direct consequence of this, the first approach may be more compatible with studies that favor player behavior (such as psychology, sociology or anthropology) while the second may be better suited for activities dealing with the system itself, such as game design. I am not by any means trying to separate scholars and disciplines between two opposite bands. Certainly, as I said, some can favor one approach over the other but the problem here is not the existence of a clear dichotomy but actually it is its absence. In other words, I would argue that some of the problems caused by play’s duality are caused by not being able to reconcile these two approaches. Any take on games that favors one over the other will be severely limited, as games are both objects and activities. If we want to understand how these two components work together, we first need to ask ourselves what do we understand by “play” and “game” respectively, and which approach—if any— their theoretical definitions favor. I will start then by reviewing the broader concept of “play”, in order to later continue with “game”.

6.2 Play definitions

This chapter reviews general definitions of play. By this I mean that they were created by scholars whose main object of study was play and did not analyze it as a part of some other discipline. As it was shown in the previous section, play has been analyzed through multiple perspectives, offering an interesting but limited approach to it. The following definitions—offered by Huizinga, Caillois, Sutton-Smith and Avedon, and Salen and...
Zimmerman– attempt to define play in a broad sense not necessarily attached to any particular research discipline other than play and game studies.

6.2.2 Huizinga on play

In his seminal book *Homo Ludens* (1938), Johan Huizinga offers two definitions of play. The first one, called the "broad"9 definition by anthropologist Daniel Vidart (1995: 35), states:

[Play is] a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (1999: 13)

Vidart heavily criticizes this definition. Surprisingly, his first complaint does not seem to apply to the English translation of the definition. Vidart refers to the Spanish translation published in Lisbon in 1943, which states that play is "a free activity performed 'as if' and perceived as being outside 'ordinary life [...]'"10 (my translation). The "as if" in the Spanish translation introduces a make-believe element that is not present in the English translation11. In any case, Vidart is right in claiming that not all games involve make-believe. He also argues --as also does Caillois (1958)-- that games can have material interest (in gambling, for example.) Vidart also questions the fact that rules are fixed, since he sees free-play as an example where rules are improvised. The fourth and final remark deals with the

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9 “Amplia” in Spanish.

10 The Spanish version of the definition as quoted by Vidart states that "actividad libre ejecutada 'como si' y sentida como situada fuera de la vida corriente [...]" (Vidart, 1995: 35)

11 Notice that in spite of the fact that Huizinga was Dutch, *Homo Ludens* was written originally in German. Huizinga did supervise the English translation, shortly before his death, according to the translator’s note (1999:vii). However, the translator also points out that his version mixes both Huizinga’s German and English versions and that these two presented several discrepancies between each other. These different versions may explain the differences between the English and Spanish versions.
"secrecy" element which, he argues, does apply to illegal gambling but not to all forms of play.

Later in his book, Huizinga offers a second definition that Vidart finds to be more appropriate:

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life. (1999: 28)

Huizinga was as interested in play as in he was in culture in general. So, his book reads like an erudite treatise on both that deals with so many different elements (such as war and poetry) that can leave the reader quite puzzled. Huizinga's attempt to describe ludic activities has been perceived as way too extensive by contemporary game scholars. Jesper Juul finds his work too broad for the purposes of studying games themselves (2005: 10). I have previously rejected Huizinga's approach as confusing (1997: 22). S&Z also see a major problem with it, but mainly because it is too inclusive:

In the end, the inclusive generality of Huizinga's definition is its greatest weakness. It does not, for example, ultimately differentiate between 'play' and 'game' (2004: 75)

My major concern with Huizinga's definition is not that with the fact that is incredibly diverse (after all, the multiplicity of activities that can be described as play is, indeed, very broad). What mainly troubles me is the notion that play –and games– are separate from "ordinary life". Sadly, this is also a view that is very popular, in different degrees, among other theorists such as Caillois (who calls it "a second reality" (2001: 9)), S&Z (who describe games as "artificial" (2004: 81)) and Juul (who, more cautiously argues that games can "optionally" have real life consequences (2005: 41)). I can hardly imagine a better way to stigmatize an activity than excluding it from normal life. What does it mean that some actions are not part of "ordinary life"? How does this apply to young children, who play a
large amount of the day? I would actually argue quite the contrary: in their case, play is ordinary life!

6.2.3 Caillois on play/games

In his *Man, Play and Games* (1958), Roger Caillois offers a list of formal attributes of play. He warns that it is a provisional definition, since it may not cover games as “kite-flying and top-spinning, puzzles such as crosswords puzzles, the game of patience, horsemanship, seesaws, and certain carnival attractions” (2001: 9). Play is defined through the following attributes:

1. Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
2. Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative;
4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life. (2001: 9-10)

Sutton-Smith seems to disagree with point number one, since he argues that play can also exist in cases where players are obligated to play (1997: 218). Juul (2005: 35) disagrees about point 4 (play’s lack of material production) on the basis that gambling is a huge industry. I would add that play activities such as drawing or building sandcastles do also create goods. Similarly, dramatic and musical performances do have economical value, since people pay to attend to plays and concerts, so they do create wealth.

Point number 5 (“governed by rules”) deserves special attention. Scholars agree on the fact that games have rules. However, there is no such agreement when it comes to play.

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12 Or game. Again, Caillois wrote in French about “jeu”, a term that can either be translated as “game” or “play”.

As it is common in many scholarly disagreements, this seems to be a semantic problem and it depends on how you define rules.

Jean Piaget faced an interesting problem related to rules when he studied play. According to him, the concept of rule implies that the player has been socialized (1990). A socialized person is aware that she lives in the company of others, even if they are not physically present at the moment. According to Piaget, young children who are not yet fully socialized cannot understand the concept of winning or losing a game, because this implies social recognition. In other words, games require a social rule that attributes social status to certain performances. Without socialization, winning and losing do not make sense. A problem arises when Piaget analyzes the case of a pre-socialized child who is running around a bush. The player told the researcher that he was trying to run around it without his body touching the plant. Piaget was confused, since the player obviously described a rule of behavior (do not touching the bush) but that contradicted his idea that rules require socialization. Piaget opted to call this a "regularity" rather than a rule. As I have previously suggested (Frasca, 2001: 6), I do not think that the example contradicts Piaget’s theory. What actually happens is that there are different kinds of rules. Some rules guide the player's performance while others define social status (winners and losers). Younger children cannot grasp the latter but are familiar with the first. Still, some authors, like Caillois, do not like to use the term rule when dealing with play. In fact, what happens with free-play is not that it does not follow rules but rather that they can be changed by a player without the approval of others.

S&Z (2004: 122-123) are also reluctant to apply the term rules to play. Here's how they characterize rules:

- Rules limit player action
- Rules are explicit and unambiguous
- Rules are shared by all players
- Rules are fixed
-Rules are binding
-Rules are repeatable

About the fact that rules limit player actions, they claim:

Rules are “sets of instructions”, and following those instructions means doing what the rules required and not doing something else instead. (ibid: 122)

This is compatible with the role of rules in allowing what can and cannot be done. However, the English language gives another, broader role to rules:

2. a law or principle that operates within a particular sphere of knowledge, describing or prescribing what is possible or allowable (Oxford American Dictionaries)

According to this definition, it would seem that there are two kinds of understandings of the term “rule”: one tells us what must be done and the other what may be done. If we stand by the first meaning, then free-play is not controlled by rules. However, according to the second meaning, free-play could be seen as rule-based. For example, let’s think about make-believe play as free improvisation, as in the case of playing doctors. There are certain limits to this activity: players must play the roles of doctors and patients and not, say, ladies in a tea party. Vidart argues that it is true that make-believe players can easily switch from one theme to another. However, once they are playing a particular theme, it is binding and they behave coherently with this rule (1995: 36).

If rules are understood in a descriptive rather than prescriptive way, then Caillois’ affirmations that play can have rules makes sense (even though this does not necessarily mean that all forms of play follow rules). If there is a difference between play and games, it then may not lay on the presence or lack of rules but maybe on the kind of rules that are present on each case.
6.2.4 Sutton-Smith and Avedon on play

After reviewing the difficulty of such a task, Brian Sutton-Smith and Elliot M. Avedon, defined the concept of play — in their *The Study of Games: A Source Book*, by drawing from behaviorist, phenomenological and biological approaches. According to them, play is “an exercise of voluntary control systems” (1979: 6). This definition frames play as an activity dealing with the individual mastery of the player’s behaviors but it feels more like a description of a characteristic of play than a definition on its own right. Jesper Juul calls this definition “very loose and somehow less than useful” (2001).

This definition was not repeated by Sutton-Smith in *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), his later attempt to provide a general definition of play. In this book, Sutton-Smith distinguishes and analyzes seven main different rhetorics of play (which will be studied more in detail in Part II of this dissertation). After reviewing its seven main rhetorics, Sutton-Smith’s recognizes that even though he has described and classified different aspects of play, he has not yet provided a concrete definition, as task he describes as “difficult, if not impossible” (ibid: 217) given how vast play is. He opts to take an evolutionary approach to play, focusing on its adaptive variability:

Biologically, [play’s] function is to reinforce the organism’s variability in the face of the rigidifications of successful adaptation (as formulated by [Stephen Jay] Gould). This variability covers the full range of behavior from the actual to the possible. Psychologically, I define play as a virtual simulation characterized by staged contingencies of variation, with opportunities for control engendered by either mastery or further chaos. (ibid: 231) [my emphasis]

With this approach, Sutton-Smith attempts to use play’s ambiguity as an asset rather than as a problem, by presenting its fuzziness and variability as its main structural trait. Sutton-Smith writes in extension about his functionalist evolutionary approach to play. Unfortunately, the above psychological definition is introduced literally on the last page of the book
without further development and without clarifying its terminology. I will nevertheless at-
tempt to summarize its main points:

- Play as a virtual simulation. The concept of simulation can be interpreted here as the “as
  if” present in make-believe play but also in the broadest sense of play as “separate” –to
  use Caillois’ (2001: 6) term– from the rest of life.

- Play is characterized by staged contingencies of variation. Here Sutton-Smith focuses on
  play’s variability, a concept that he has analyzed in extension as both the main reason be-
  hind its ambiguity and its evolutionary role. The choice of words –“staged contingencies”–
  is particularly interesting, because it integrates the idea of play as virtual (a set of possibili-
ties) and concrete (the actualization of those contingencies). Of course, all activities are
  the concretization of contingencies. I may be reading too much into Sutton-Smith’s words
  –again, he provides the definition without further exposition– but this suggests to me that,
  unlike normal activities, play is about funneling those contingencies in order to make them
  safer and more interesting.

- Play allows control engendered by either mastery or further chaos. Here Sutton-Smith’s
  pays again attention to the issue of control that he introduced in his and Avedon’s 1971’s
  definition of play. He focuses not only on the mastery of the played activity but also on the
  lack of it, echoing Caillois’ (2001: 31) description of play as illinx, where the player’s pleas-
  ure resides in losing control –to a certain degree– in a chaotic, vertigo-inducing environ-
  ment.

In addition to this definition, Sutton-Smith introduces an unusual, but maybe even
more useful, conceptual tool by suggesting a meta-definition of play. This is done by enu-
merating six main characteristics that, in his opinion, a good definition of play has to in-
clude:
1. [...] play's definition must be broad rather than narrow [...] 
2. [...] it should apply to animals as well as humans, and children as well as adults. 
3. [play] should not be defined only in terms of the restricted modern Western values that say that it is nonproductive, rational, voluntary, and fun. [...] 
4. [...] play is not just an attitude or an experience; it is always characterized by its own distinct performances and stylizations. 
5. Play can very narrow or very broad, both in spatial and time terms. 
6. [...] play is like language: a system of communication and expression [...] (ibid: 218-219)

Item number four may be connected to his definition’s “staged contingencies” because it stresses the importance of understanding games not just from a psychological terms but also through its physical performance (that is to avoid a Cartesian body/mind dichotomy).

Item number three warns play scholars about the importance to see the concept outside traditional Western values, an idea that Sutton-Smith later expanded on his later article Evolving a Consilience of Play Definitions: Playfully (1999), which he describes as a footnote to The Ambiguity of Play. Here he calls for an alternative to Western-centric framings of play because, he argues, play can be productive (for example, painting or building a sandcastle), as well as irrational (as in goofing around) and not necessarily fun (play can provoke tension and stress among players). More controversial is Sutton-Smith’s suggestion that play is not necessary voluntary, which recalls the debate about if professional players are playing or working, as analyzed by Caillois (2001: 45).

6.2.5 Salen and Zimmerman on play

S & Z offer the following definition: "Play is free movement within a more rigid structure" (2004: 304) . This can be read both literally –and it can describe most play involving physical performance– but also metaphorically, as in the “free play” of gears in mechanics. On a pedagogical level, it is a very elegant definition, since it conveys the idea of play with an image that is easy to grasp and gracefully express the idea on how the interaction between the player and the system. However, when it comes to its descriptive power, it can run into some problems because it covers too many cases that are not play. For example,
driving a car can be described as "free movement" (the car) "within a more rigid structure" (the highway system). Does driving a car qualify as play? It may but not necessarily. It could be play, for example, if the player pretends being a F-1 pilot while driving. However, the activity could simply be described as driving, without any play being involved. This definition is very appropriate as a metaphor describing a central aspect of play. It does not, however, allow us to clearly discern between play and non-play activities because it does not take into account the player’s state of mind.

7. A new general definition of play

After reviewing the previous definitions, I propose the following one:

Play is to somebody an engaging activity in which the player believes to have active participation and interprets it as constraining her immediate future to a set of probable scenarios, all of which she is willing to tolerate.

Let’s pay close attention to the different components behind this definition.

7.1.1 Play is subjective

Play is subjective on two levels: from the point of view of an observer and from the point of view of the player (who may, but does not have to, be the same person).

Play is only play “to somebody” in the sense that a same string of actions could be framed by different observers as either play or not. This subjectivity of play can be appreciated in the German proverb that states “What is sport to the cat is death to the mouse” (Spurgeon, 1889: 309). As psychologist Michael Apter (1991) observes, the difference between work and play –or rather between play and not-play– cannot be defined objectively. He provides two examples: golf and research. Apter tells that he used to be obsessed with golf because it played such an important role in his social life, that any failure caused him a huge deal of stress. Golf was technically a game but it ended up feeling like a bad job.
On the other hand, intellectual endeavors such as research are technically his work but he enjoys them as much as if they actually were a game. After providing these examples, he concludes:

I mention these personal trivia not out of any misplaced idea that they may be of interest to anyone, but simply to illustrate something which is fundamental—and should be obvious—about play. This is that it is a state of mind, a way of seeing and being, a special mental ‘set’ towards the world and one’s actions in it. It is therefore impossible to define play from the outside by relating it to a particular activities or behaviors. Golf is not necessarily play, and research is not necessarily work. Among other things, this kind of consideration makes any behaviourist approach to play impossible. (1991: 13-14).

The exact same activity can be framed as work or play, depending on the observer or the agent performing it. Every activity could potentially be play. However, this does not mean that every activity is play. Play, then, is an activity accompanied by a particular state of mind. The last part of my definition of play takes into account this particular player mindset.

7.1.2 Play is engaging

I understand the adjective engaging as "charming or pleasing in a way that attracts and holds the attention", as defined by the MSN Encarta Encyclopedia (1999). I prefer the term "engaging" rather than the more popular "fun" because the latter provides positive connotations that play does not necessarily needs to have. While it is true that play is usually a source of fun, it does not necessarily have to. Linking play to fun would imply that people would not play unless they had fun. Play can also be frustrating and boring—even though generally not for too long. Lack of fun is certainly a cause for interrupting a play activity. Nevertheless, a player may accept to be bored for a while, i.e., in order to give a handicap to her little brother because she knows that she will enjoy the activity once he catches up with her.

The two important aspects of play engagement are that:

-it is a source of pleasure (which should not necessarily need to be understood as fun)
-it holds the player's attention. In other words, the player is focused on the activity and cares about it.

7.1.3 Play is an activity

Play is always an activity but, again, the activity itself is not enough to define play. It is also a particular state of mind. Play also may involve objects (physical ones as in toys and even the player's own body, or either immaterial concepts, as in mind games). However, again, these objects are not enough to define play.

7.1.4 Players believe in their active participation

If players were rational beings, it would not be necessary to include this condition into the definition. However, players are not fully rational. Generally, play is interesting because of the player’s ability to affect the system through her performance. However, this is not always the case, particularly in games of chance. Within these games, the player behaves as if she had an influence in the activity. For example, let's say that a player bets that he will throw the dice and get a six. Probability tells us that he do not have control over the result: there is a one in six chances of getting a specific number. However, most players do behave as if they had some form of control over the outcome. This is clear from the simple fact that they get happy when they win and sad when they lose. If humans were rational beings, nobody would brag after winning a game of chance. Still, people do it all the time.

Many gamblers do have special rituals that, they believe, increase their chances to get lucky. They may talk to their dice, to the roulette or to the horses running on the horse track, as if that could help them winning. Still, this form of pretense is not only limited to gambling games but it is a component of make-believe play, too. Take, for example, a play behavior that can be commonly observed in arcades by children who do not have coins to play. These players still stand in front of the videogame, moving the controllers while
watching the game’s demo roll by. They may be aware that they are not really playing the game itself but they certainly behave as if they were. The mere belief in participation – connecting the hand movements with what happens on the screen – is enough for them to engage into play. Like Manolo form the previous Galician joke, they may not be playing the game designers expected them to play but they are nevertheless playing.

Because of these particular, but still relevant –especially for gambling – cases, play should not be defined by simple saying that it requires the active participation of players. Instead, it should be said that it is enough for them to believe that they are in control.

7.1.5 Players are willing to tolerate all of the probable consequences

This is the central part of the definition. The key words are "all" and "tolerate". As S&Z (2004: 304) affirm, play is the ability to behave with a certain degree of freedom within a rigid structure. Having freedom to behave means that a player can decide to perform any allowed activity or not. Imagine that I am bouncing a ball against the wall. The procedure is simple: I throw the ball against the wall, it bounces back and I catch it. Then, I start the process again. I could be doing many alternative things with the ball: chewing it, bouncing it against the floor, sitting on it. Instead, my choice is to throw it against the wall. Within those boundaries, I have different degrees of action. I could throw the ball really fast or really slow. I could catch it with my right or left hand. I could also decide not to catch the ball. Or I could unwillingly miss it because I did not react fast enough. If I am indeed playing, then this means that I am willing to tolerate all these possible scenarios. Notice that I used the verb "tolerate" and not "accept". As a player, not catching the ball could be a nuisance but I can live with that: I am able to tolerate that scenario. Bouncing a ball is a very simple game, with somehow limited probable scenarios. The situation can become more complex, as I will later describe, in games dealing with potentially serious consequences, such as in extreme sports.
The consequences of play activities have been a central aspect of different attempts to understand it. Is play productive or non-productive? Jesper Juul defines games as having “negotiable consequences”. This means that “the game [‘s set of rules] can be played with or without real-life consequences” (2005: 36). Juul is right about the fact that different forms of play can lead to alternative consequences that can affect the player’s life. My main objection is with his depiction of games as objects that can “optionally” be assigned real-life consequences. Based on this, it would seem that playing sometimes is not part of the player’s life. Juul is the first to acknowledge the multiple problems that arise from this approach. One clear example he provides is that all games have non-optional consequences (players become happy or unhappy because of them; they sometimes can fight over a game; they invest amounts of very real time on them). Additionally, Juul admits that many games such as extreme sports can easily lead to injury or death, so their consequences are not negotiable.

The relevance of the consequences of play cannot be pre-defined as part of a system. Their relevance depend on each player and therefore are subjective. However, Juul’s systemic approach does work well in many cases on a macro-level, because experience and tradition have told us over the years that playing with dolls is generally harmless and playing with fire is potentially dangerous. In these very popular and tried games, players can agree on certain so-called real-life consequences. While the systemic approach works most of the time, it is merely an approximation and when it fails it does so because it does not recognize that the relevance of play is ultimately a subjective matter.

Somebody is playing when she is willing to deal with the likely consequences of her play. Consider gambling. Let's say that I am about to go broke. I only have fifty euros in my pocket. My situation is not good because I do not have enough money to pay my rent and, if I do not, I will be evicted from my apartment. So, I take a train to Monte Carlo, visit the casino and bet all my money at the roulette. This is a desperate move. It is not play be-
cause I am not willing to tolerate the scenario where I lose all my money and cannot pay my rent. Imagine now that I actually won at the roulette and, a few months later, I return to the casino but now with a very healthy bank account. Once again, I bet fifty euros. One of the possible consequences of playing the roulette is that I may lose that money. Still, as I am quite rich, I do not really mind if I lose. The amount that is bet is the same in the two cases, as are the rules of the game of roulette. What has changed is me and how I think I will deal with all the probable consequences of my actions. Technically, the first time I was not playing but the second time I was. The two previous examples are extreme cases: I either was poor or rich. Play becomes more interesting in regular situations, when I am neither wealthy nor broke. If I am rich, I do not really care about the outcome of the game because in any case it will change my financial situation. However, if I am a mid-class person with a day job, things get fuzzier. If my finances are fine but not great, I may not like if I lose at the roulette but I will likely tolerate the situation. That means that I will be unhappy but not too unhappy as to become desperate.

It is important to keep in mind that the player’s ideas about the probable consequences of play may change multiple times during a play session. For example, imagine that a person is skiing down a mountain, just for the pleasure of it. If the person is a skilled skier, she may think that the likely worst-case-scenario is that she falls down, maybe losing her skis and getting all her suit wet. Imagine that the skier decided to try a path that she is not familiar with. Suddenly, she realizes that the path is too steep and that she is skiing at a much higher speed than she is comfortable with. Additionally, she now sees that there are too many rocks and trees within it. At this point, the skier’s mental model of the worst-case scenario shifts to crashing against a tree or rock and maybe breaking a leg or, at the very least, hurting herself. This may be enough for her to decide to stop playing and walk down the path rather than keep skiing. However, it could also happen that this scary path may be short and, before she could stop herself, the rocks and trees are left behind and
the skiing goes back to normal. After this, normal play can resume. That balance between serious and trivial consequences may be behind the thrill experienced by players pushing themselves a bit beyond their comfort zone.

The player cannot predict what will happen but she can create a mental model of the possible consequences that she can foresee. Within these foreseeable consequences, a smaller set of them will be more likely to happen. Both her interpretation of what is possible and what is probable may shift and get reevaluated during the play session. This evaluation is highly subjective and can vary depending on the player’s skills, experience, intelligence and on how the play or game unfolds. Certain consequences will be cherished by the player while others may make her unhappy. However, that unhappiness has to be tolerable to her. If the player estimates that it is probable that she may get hurt or lose her job as a consequence of her actions, then her frame of mind will probably change and play will stop. This distinction between tolerable and intolerable is not just subjective: it can also be fuzzy for the player herself, who may not clearly pinpoint what she is willing to deal with. This is generally not an issue in most games but becomes a concern when risky elements are introduced. Hence the attraction and perils of playing with fire.

Following Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory (1990), play can be described as a state that can match what he calls “flow”. This is when a person has clear goals for a rewarding activity, where she is focused on and from which she receives direct an immediate feedback. Csikszentmihalyi applies his theory to any kind of activity, not just to play (even though he argues that flow can make people feel as if they were playing). So, flow is present in play but the presence of flow is not enough to differentiate play from non-play. Additionally, even though Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges the player’s change of states from non-flow towards flow (and vice-versa when she gets bored), he does not claim –as I do here– that the player internally negotiates the future scenarios that she is willing to tolerate.
This particular state of mind can help us better understanding play’s ambiguity. First, it established that we cannot explain play without taking into account the player’s psychology. More importantly, it allows us to explain play without engaging in the dubious ontological strategies of calling it artificial or non-real. Play is a negotiation between the player’s current situation and the potential (virtual but likely) scenarios that she foresees. Certainly, players feel them differently from other activities but not because they are unreal but because they are part of a controlled reality. Unlike other non-play activities, play allow players to limit the consequences of our actions between boundaries that –they estimate– are tolerable to them.

7.1.6 Play limits player’s immediate future

Any activity that we embark on limits our future. For example, I may chose to dine at a fancy restaurant or at a fast food establishment. In both cases, I can potentially perform in infinitely different ways. However, those ways may be unlimited but they are still different. At the fancy restaurant I could chat with a friend, flirt with the waitress, make a cell-phone call but I am not likely to be able to get a fast-food hamburger sandwich. Similarly, I can do pretty much what I want at the fast food place but I will not be able to get canard à l’orange nor a bottle of vintage wine. Similarly, different games allow different kinds of freedom. These are achieved both through the playworld (the environment and objects involved in the activity) and the rules. In terms of play, the beach affords certain kinds of behaviors. Similarly, competitive rules lead to different experiences than collaborative rules. We cannot be sure of how a game session will play but we can predict that it will happen within certain boundaries. In other words, any action limits our immediate future. However, play is an aesthetic genre that funnels our options into a –generally– predictable set of possibilities that players are likely to find engaging.
In that sense, play works as the mirror form of narrative. Where narrative authors select particular bits of the past and structure them into a sequence of events, game designers try to funnel the future into sets of potential events. Phenomenologically, humans experience all activities in the present. However, traditional narrative is pre-set: the set of events that is told is fixed. Play events are not fixed beforehand. Instead, they are constrained and those limitations are the elements that constitute their aesthetic dimension. Narrative authors shape the past, play and game designers shape the future. The reader’s pleasure consists not on enjoying the past but a few, selected aspects of it. Similarly, the player’s pleasure is not based on enjoying the complete freedom rather the constrained future scenarios offered by play.

The reader may object the phrasing “immediate future” arguing that certain games, such as mail-based Chess, can take weeks, months or years to take place. If somebody has been playing Chess by mail for two years, does it mean that the person has been in a playful state of mind for two years –730 days– in a row? Of course, Chess players can take a long time to think about their moves and it is likely that our player may have been playing the game in her head while showering and grocery shopping. However, this does not mean that she has been constantly thinking about the game for two years. If play is subjective, then play time is also subjective and it may be hard to quantify. For a researcher, it is easier to argue that she played for two years but that is likely to be far from accurate. In any case, for the sake of purism, I would like to clarify that by “immediate future” I mean the player’s immediate future within the play session, no matter if that session is continuous or discontinuous.
8. Understanding games

Now that I have provided an alternative definition of play, I will move onto exploring its relationship with games with the goal of defining the latter. There are multiple scholarly definitions of game. However, these have been comprehensively reviewed first by S&Z (2004: 73-80) and then by Juul (2005: 29-36) so I will simply review the distilled definitions offered by these three authors.

Salen and Zimmerman's definition of game states:

A game is a **system** in which players engage in an artificial **conflict**, defined by **rules**, that results in quantifiable **outcome** (2004: 80) [my emphasis]

I have emphasized four terms that are key to this definition:

1. Games should be considered as systems, with elements interacting between each other within certain boundaries.
2. Games involve a conflict, which means that players will have to face some sort of challenge. This conflict is artificial in the sense that it is apart from real life.
3. Games are defined by rules. Rules are what delimit both the player's actions and the system's characteristics.
4. Games generate a quantifiable outcome. This can be a score or simply a judgment (winning or losing.)

Let's now take a look at Jesper Juul's definition:

A game is a **rule**-based system with a variable and quantifiable **outcome**, where different **outcomes** are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the **outcome**, the player feels attached to the **outcome**, and the **consequences** of the activity are optional and negotiable (2005: 36) [my emphasis]

Juul's definition has many points in common with S&Z’s. It does, however, focus on some extra characteristics:
1. Games have variable outcome. I am a bit confused at why the author uses both the adjectives “variable” and “quantifiable”. If games have a quantifiable outcome, therefore this outcome is necessarily variable (if the result was always the same, it would not make sense for it to be measured). Even if Juul does not mention it explicitly, he may have had in mind the case of puzzles which sometimes are not considered to have variable outcome because there is only one way to solve them. I would argue that puzzles and other games like riddles do in fact have variable outcome. The fact that there is only one right solution does not mean that at least two outcomes are possible: solving the puzzle or not.

2. Games require player effort. This means that the player must be physically and/or mentally involved in the game and her actions must affect the outcome.

3. Players feel attached to the outcome. This is a very important element because it introduces a subjective element into the definition: the player’s reasons for playing. Players do care, in different degrees, about the fact that they end up winning or losing the game.

4. Game consequences are optional and negotiable. By optional and negotiable, Juul means that games "can optionally be assigned real-life consequences." (ibid: 41) For example, somebody can play poker with a friend and decide that whoever loses will wash the dishes. According to Juul, washing the dishes is a real-life consequence of the game because it was assigned as one by the players but it is not an original feature of the game itself. In this aspect, Juul agrees with S&Z in separating games from “real life”. The main difference is that Juul argues that this is an optional decision. S&Z see games as always being artificial while Juul claims that this happens only if the players agree to do so.

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13 It would be possible to measure states in between. It is not the same when a player was only able to put together a few pieces than when he almost completed it.
8.1 The system and the player

Before analyzing the issues that arise from these definitions, I would like to make clear that I will simply criticize the framing of these definitions which, as I will show through examples, give an unbalanced attention to the game’s system in detriment of player performance. This is not necessarily a problem, since system-centric approaches can be useful for game design purposes because they identify its structural components and allow to dissect games as if they were machines (or, in the case of videogames, software). It would be unfair to claim that these authors solely take a system-centric approach in their works, since they all acknowledge the role of player performance in their works —particularly S&Z, who devote much of their book to play and players. However, my concern is not with the whole of their research but specifically with their definitions, which do consider games as mainly systems and generally disregarding the player’s mindset\textsuperscript{14}. This systemic bias can limit our understanding of the gaming situation because not only it fails to explain many fuzzy aspects but also it excludes from the category many examples that are broadly accepted as games.

8.2 Games as objects: a world of borderline cases

These two definitions present games mainly as objects, in the sense that they are framed as a system in which the player participates within but without fully acknowledging the particular mindset of the player. They argue that players engage in conflict and that they are attached to the game’s outcome but that is as far as we get into the player’s psyche. I cannot stress enough the fact that it is not my intention to replace a system-centric

\textsuperscript{14} Juul does, however, claim that players do feel “attached” to the outcome of the games they play but this is a post hoc observation that only applies once the game is over and fails to explain how the player feels during the play session.
Framing games mainly as objects can lead to an essentialist approach to the subject. From Juul's point of view, games are essentially games and do not change simply because of how players interact with them. In his own words, "[...] there is a distinction between a given game and a given playing of a game. All copies of a given title do not suddenly cease to be games because somebody is making money playing them" (2005: 36). This observation was made in order to refute Caillois’ argument that a game played involuntarily is not a game. Independently if it manages to refute his argument or not, it does describe games as objects with static attributes, without taking into account other circumstances. Juul’s observation is based on the fact that we colloquially use the term “game” to describe a physical set of attributes (a board, token, ball or software). Certainly, there are social standard uses for certain objects and so we simply call them games. For example, we call Chess a game because there are not many other possible uses for it. Nevertheless, people do not generally call a piece of rope a “game of jumping rope”, because it is an object with multiple possible uses. Similarly, when confronted by the example of the marathon where professionals and amateurs play together, Juul feels the need to point out that this is a problem because "it would mean that the marathon is and isn't a game at the same time." (2005: 42) Indeed, a marathon can be and not be a game, depending on the observer and/or player. In a similar way, shooting a bow can both be a game or part of war. Focusing on the system rules is not enough to explain arrow-shooting as a game. In order to separate it from war, it is mandatory to also take the player’s attitude into account.

_SimCity_ (1989) is one of the cases that both S&Z and Juul acknowledge as problematic. The city-building simulator fails to fully fit inside any of both models. Because there are no preset goals –the player can decide what to build according to her personal motiva-
tions—no standard quantifiable outcome is generated. Juul describes it as a “borderline” case (2005: 47) and S&Z as a “limit” case, that can either be framed as a play or game activity (2004: 82). The main issue here is to answer how we can objectively frame a subjective experience. The answer is that we cannot, because asking if SimCity is a game is the wrong question to ask. We should ask how and when it is a game.

Let us move away from SimCity for a few moments and concentrate on skateboarding, a fairly recent sport that has grown in popularity since the 1950s. If we believe its supporters, skateboarding is not a crime. But is it a game? The question needs to be answered with another question: if it is a game when did it become so? Since its origins, skateboarding has been a clear example of a play activity: riding the board and goofing around just for the sake of it. Certainly, it is possible to turn the activity into a game: a race, for example. However, as skateboarding grew in popularity, some of its more flamboyant acrobatics became standardized. These are known as tricks, an include maneuvers such as the “ollie” or the “720”. This standardization lead to the emergence of competitive skateboarding, which “is primarily judged on the difficulty and success of such tricks.” (Wikipedia, 2007) Before tricks had formal names, judging a player’s ability was quite a subjective endeavor. Currently, skateboarders can easily be judged according to the tricks that they are able to perform. For example, this is how a skater who goes by the nickname of “lilbigguy” describes himself on the skateboardvillage.com online community:

**About me.** sup [short for “What’s up”] guys my names i [sic] justin i am 13 years old. i have been skating since i was like 4, i am preety [sic] good i can do 360 hardflips, triple kickflips and a triple heelflips. and do a lot more. [...] (2007)

As we can see, lilbigguy attempts to differentiate himself from others by providing his name and age and which skating tricks he can perform. This allows himself to be ranked against other skateboarders. If what he tells is true, he is “preety” good indeed.
Competitive skateboarding basically has a set of rules that is used to evaluate which tricks players perform and how they do it. Within that context, skateboarding could clearly be a game. Certainly, until standard names and descriptions were agreed upon skateboarding could not have been a game. Technically, skateboarding is not a game, in the sense that it can be played as play or game depending on context. However, once there is social agreement on rules that allow players to objectively rank their performance, it is possible –on a macro level– to argue that the activity became a game, because among a group of people it is mainly played as such. In the case of skateboarding, I would argue that the standardization of tricks has lead to players playing it more as a game. Before standardization, skaters were in a similar situation to SimCity players: they could set their own goals and try to achieve them. However, since this standardization happened, players have a common way to frame and compare their performance. Even if the skater is simply playing around in a non-competitive way, the trick categories offer her ways to quantify her own performance (as in “I was not able to perform a 720”) and compared it to others’ (as in “Oh! Peter managed to pull out a 360 hardflip!”). The existence of these categories make it much easier for players to frame skateboarding play as a game.

Unlike what happens in skateboarding, there is no general agreement on standard performances in SimCity\textsuperscript{15}. It is not impossible, as it happened with skateboarding, that SimCity could evolve towards standardization and it could be broadly considered as a game in the future. However, right now this is not the situation. So, at this moment, to the

\textsuperscript{15} This may happen among hardcore SimCity communities but not a de facto standard for everybody else.
mainstream videogame community, *SimCity* is not technically a game even if they may call it so\(^\text{16}\).

The “gameness” of a play activity is relative to the players’ community, time and location. Still, framing it in an essentialist way can sometimes be useful because it denotes that there is a mainstream agreement to play it according to certain game rules. This is not problematic as long as we keep in mind that such mainstream agreement does not necessarily negate alternative or individual ways of playing the activity. Unless we take this subjectivity into our definition of game, it will resurface in the cases that we analyze. In *Pushing the borders* (forthcoming), T.L. Taylor explains how system-centric game definitions fail to explain many games, notably *Everquest*. She warns against “creating theoretical models that do not take into account, at a definitional level, player agency and activity —models that serve to produce a world of ‘borderline cases’”.

### 8.3 Games playing players?

A system-centric approach to games can also lead to unjustly fetishizing rules over player performance. A good example is the one of emergence, a concept that has received particular attention within videogame design research, originally through the work of *Deus Ex’s* (2000) Lead Designer Harvey Smith (2001) and later through Juul's.

It goes beyond the scope of this section to explain in detail the concept of emergence. I will simply say that it is observed when simple rules working together lead towards unexpectedly complex behavior. A classic example provided by Smith is the one of proximity mines in the game *Deus Ex*. This game has a labyrinth that players are supposed to traverse in order to reach their goal. However, the game is modeled through

\(^{16}\) It would be possible to take my social argument further. I have been claiming that games are games both because of structural characteristics but also because they are recognized as so by a group of people in a certain location and moment. I wonder if a solitary player of *SimCity*, who arguably could have a limited set of goals and techniques, does not personally view the simulation as a game because, in spite of knowing that it has a vast array of possible ways of playing it, she generally plays it within the range of her personal taste.
physics rules that allow players to alter the environment. Players soon discovered that
their avatars could stand over a mine. So, they found out a way to escalate walls by at-
taching one mine to them, jumping over it and repeating the process. The game designers
were not aware of this strategy, so they never predicted that players would be able to skip
the labyrinth by climbing over walls. This example of undesirable emergence shows how
the game's rules of physics had unexpected consequences for the design.

Juul extensively describes what he calls games of emergence (where the path to
victory is not predefined), in opposition to games of progression (where the player faces
challenge after challenge). He later describes the potential benefits of emergence for
game design (2005: 97-110). These are valuable lessons but as Ian Bogost points out
Juul focuses more on the generative effect of emergence than on the individual in-
teractions between player and game that make up that emergence. Emergence
structures are elegant and aesthetically appealing, perhaps even seductive or sub-
lime and it is understandable that one should admire the simplistic elegance of Go.
[...] As aesthetic structures, emergent systems are undeniably captivating, although
perhaps only as instances of the sublime, not the expressive.
For this reason, one must take great care when assigning value to such systems.
Juul’s formalistic commitment to emergence provokes visions of other aestheticized
and fetishized systems of computational representation [cybernetics and virtual real-
ity]. (2006: 150)

Juul presents emergence as a direct consequence of rules, as something that can
be attained in game design through rule creation and manipulation. Technically, it is the
same to argue that the proximity mine strategy "emerged" from the rules of the game as
arguing that it is a consequence of player creativity. Ideologically, it favors the system over
the player and it gives to designers the illusion that player creativity is a consequence of
the rules they authored, when it can actually be framed either way.

S&Z also illustrate this perspective when they claim that:

Play emerges from the relationships guiding the functioning of the system, occurring
in the interstitial spaces between and among its components. Play is an expression
of the system [...] (2004: 304) [my emphasis]
Once again, my intention is not to argue that these claims are technically wrong but simply to point out that they can also be framed alternatively. This is not about choosing sides between humans and systems but about being aware that each framing carries its own benefits and issues.

On the other hand, if the focus went exclusively to mythical, unpredictable, creative players, it would be impossible to design games. As Jonas Heide Smith points out in his dissertation *Plans and Purposes: How Videogame Goals Shape Player Behaviour* (2006), there may be a tendency among game researchers to overtly romanticize player creativity and alternative playing. Replacing a system-centric approach with an exclusively player-centric approach could certainly lead to problems like the ones Heide Smith warns against. A system-centric approach is extremely useful for game design because it pays attention to the game’s building blocks. But as game designers know, things look great on paper until you bring in the playtesters. Game design is an iterative process that alternates the focus between the system and the player. A definition of game should reflect this relationship, too.

### 8.4 Overcoming outcomes

Both S&Z and Juul are right when they claim that one of the characteristics of games is that some of its aspects can be discretely quantified. However, why does it necessarily have to be the outcome of the game session? Juul’s definition mainly defines games through their outcome: this term is used four times (five if you consider “consequences of the activity” as a synonym for “outcome”). By doing so, we get a retrospective, teleological approach to games that can only identify them once they are over, without telling us much about what happens during the game itself.
Game tradition states that a game outcome is generally qualified either as a victory or a defeat—or as a draw when neither of these states can be reached. Traditionally, winning and losing are the categories by which players are socially recognized. They are cultural standards: everybody understands that—both formally and socially—winning is better than losing. Thanks to formal rules, games make it quite easy to objectively formulate who is the winner and who is the loser. There are other forms of qualifying players but they are generally not standardized through rules. I could say that Jimmy is a great soccer player but that would be my subjective opinion: there are no objective rules on how to qualify “greatness”.

RPGs have also proven to be hard to classify as games—mainly pen and paper RPGs, since single-player computer-based RPGs generally have clear winning and losing situations. S&Z call them a “limit” case and Juul files them as “borderline” cases, because their rules are not standards since the game master can change them on the fly (2004: 44). Massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) are another interesting case because they never end—their sessions may end but, overall, there is always possible to continue (that is what the “ever” stands for in Sony’s Everquest (1999)). Therefore, there is no outcome and nobody wins nor loses a MMOGRPG. However, MMORPGs have contributed to the standardization of a different form of social recognition different from winning and losing: the player’s level number17. A game such as World of Warcraft (2004)—from now on WoW—provides other variables that could be used to socially rank players, for example the amount of money that she has. Interestingly, players can immediately see another player’s level number but not their economic power. This of course is due to technical characteristics of the game: if you are going to fight another player, she should better be within your level range, regardless of how much money she has. However, the level

17 One could also say that this happens in many pen and paper RPGs, too, but arguably the value of this ranking became a social standard as MMORPGs made this genre more popular among the masses.
number became a standard way of ranking players. It is socially accepted that a higher level is better than a lower one. Low-level characters are dismissed as “newbies”. Top-level characters are well-regarded\(^\text{18}\). When a friend tells another that she is playing \textit{WoW}, she is likely to describe her character through race, profession and, more importantly, level-status. Race and profession are choices but the level is a discrete way to quantify the player’s performance. Socially, level 60 players\(^\text{19}\) generally rank higher than level 20 ones. \textit{WoW} may not have an outcome but it provides a way to discretely and objectively quantify its players performances in a way that they can get standard social recognition similar to the one that they would get in a winning/losing situation. Victories and defeats are nothing but standard ways to socially rank players according to their performances. Because traditional games have an ending, they became the de facto categories. However, new game genres that do not provide an outcome can still provide ways to objectively rank players’ performances.

This kind of social ranking beyond victory and defeat is not unique to \textit{WoW}; I already discussed how the standardization of skateboarding tricks allows players to socially rank themselves, not necessarily along winners and losers but rather according to the tricks that they can perform. Both \textit{WoW} and skateboarding arenas have something in common: they are what could be called gamegrounds. An arena is a playground—a space for play—that is socially framed in a particular way: it is used by a community of players that have standard ways to rank (compare) their play performances. Players in gamegrounds constantly switch between play and game activities and, because of that, it is almost impossible to speak of clear-cut game sessions. There may be winners and losers of particular cha-

\(^{18}\) Of course, a higher level generally corresponds with a higher degree of expertise and weaponry, so the level can also be seen as a sign of experience. However, this is not always the case, since sometimes inexperienced players often buy high-level accounts online.

\(^{19}\) This refers to the maximum player level on \textit{WoW} without any expansion pack.
lenges but there are no overall winners and losers. For example, a skateboarder may fail
to perform a particular trick while his colleague may achieve it. However, the process re-
peats itself multiple times without a global score. By the time they go back home, none of
them will think “I won”. Still, they did challenge each other multiple times following game
structures. Gamegrounds encourage both play and game activities. However, their exis-
tence is made more difficult if there is not a common procedure for comparing perform-
ances (the level system in *WoW* and the trick categories in skateboarding). Even though
these cases do not produce a clear outcome, it is undeniable that their players do indeed
engage in game activities. In order to describe them as games, we need to come up with a
definition that not just focuses on the session’s outcome but rather simply on the players’
performance. In other words, a game is not a game because its outcome can be measured
and the player is assigned a social status. It is a game because the player’s performance
can be measured and the player is assigned a social status.

9. A new definition of game

Based on the previous definition of play, games can be defined as follows:

A game is a form of *play* where players agree on a system of rules that assigns so-
cial status to their quantified performance.

It is also possible to integrate the previous definition of play, in order to provide an ex-
panded definition of game:

A game is to somebody an engaging activity in which players *believe* to have active
participation and where they agree on a system of rules that assigns social status to
their quantified performance. The activity constrains players’ immediate future to a
set of *probable* scenarios, *all of which* they are willing to tolerate.

Let’s now discuss this definition in more depth.
9.1.1 Games are social

The definition is set to players in plural simply for rhetorical reasons, in order to stress the fact that games are, by default, social endeavors. Certainly, there are many single player games—and the definition can be adapted to those cases, too. In the same way that Robinson Crusoe framed his lonely life in the island through social patterns, single players who are old enough to be socialized frame their games through categories created for multiplayer games. As Piaget has shown (1990: 64), the concept of winning and losing a game makes no sense to young children who are not yet socialized. This is due to the fact that winning and losing provide social status and, as such, are social concepts. Single gaming may not be social per se, but it is always framed through social concepts.

9.1.2 Games are play activities and objects

This definition of games frames as activities. However, it also defines them as objects, too: a game is a system with rules that assign discrete values that define gains and losses to certain play performances and events.

9.1.3 Games have rules

Games are regulated, just like play. The main difference is that there are rules in game that valorize certain performances, generally through the categories of victory or defeat. This strategy of characterizing games through the performance and not necessarily through the outcome is not new and it was first suggested by French philosopher André Lalande in 1928. Even though French language uses the term jeu to describe both game and play, Lalande distinguished between both on his *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (1928: 403). His first definition of game reads:

Dépense d’activité physique ou mentale qui n’a pas de but immédiatement utile, ni même de but défini, et dont la seule raison d’être, pour la conscience de celui qui s’y livre, est le plaisir qu’il trouve.
This can be translated as:

Physical or mental exercise without an immediately useful goal, an even without a clear goal, that exists only to provide pleasure to whom engages in it [my translation]

Even though Lalande does not state that this definition could apply to the English term *play*, it certainly matches many of the structural elements present in that activity. Similarly, his second definition could be applied specifically to *game*:

Organization de cette activité sous un système de règles définissant un succès et un échec, un gain et une perte.

This can be translated as:

The organization of [the previously described] activity under a system of rules defining a victory and a defeat, a gain and a loss. [my translation]

What is interesting about Lalande’s definitions is that he does not only structurally differentiate both categories through the presence or absence of rules, but he specifically mentions that the rules define “a victory and a defeat, a gain and a loss”. This has previously lead me to suggest that the main structural difference between play and game is that the latter can be won or lost (Frasca, 1997: 24), focusing on Lalande’s “a victory and a defeat” but ignoring “a gain and a loss”. However, based on the previously analyzed examples of MMORPGs and skateboarding, it may be more accurate to frame victories and defeats as particular cases of gains and loses. In other words, it is not necessary to wait until a game session is over in order to identify the activity as a game. Instead, analyzing if the player’s performance is being quantified –and then assigned a social status– can be enough.

I have stressed in this definition the fact that these rules are the product of a social agreement and, as such, they can evolve through time. Even though a system-centric approach does not necessarily mean that rules are fixed, it may connote such belief. The term “agree” was introduced in the definition in order to combat this perception.
9.1.4 Player performance is measured and valued

Player performance is quantified—and not just at the end of the session through its outcome—and it is assigned a value that correlates to a certain social status. This status can be a token of social recognition, as in the cases when the player wins or is winning. It can also be positive or negative within the game’s system—when the player performance is considered to produce a gain or a loss.

A play activity may also be measured—however such quantification is not assigned a social status. Also notice that the term “social” also applies to single player games. In those games, players are socialized and therefore value their status from a social perspective, even if they happen to be playing alone. For example, a lone player may be very happy at beating a videogame and consider herself a winner, even if there is nobody around her at that moment.

9.1.5 Players believe to actively participate in games

This allows the definition to include games of chance within the category of games. Juul considers them to be borderline cases because they do not involve player effort (2005: 44). My proposed solution may seem to be merely rhetorical but it is backed up by the fact that gamblers indeed behave as if they had some control over the gaming situation. In games of pure luck, players react as if their performance was measured, even though their performance is illusory because it does not control, say, the place where the roulette ball will stop its trajectory.

9.1.6 Game consequences are not optional

This is a central aspect of my definition because it allows us to better understand the ambiguity in games. It is a direct consequence of framing games according to my previous definition of play.
Juul describes the consequences of games as “optional and negotiable”. This works in order to explain how a game can affect the player’s everyday life, as in the previous example of the players who agree that the loser will wash the dishes. However, it leads to two major problems. First, it frames games as a separate, alternative kind of reality, where actions can have consequences or not based on the players’ wishes and negotiations. Secondly, as Juul acknowledges, it contradicts itself since many consequences of a game are not optional—such as players being happy or sad at the game’s outcome. Additionally, games such as extreme sports can lead to injury or death and these consequences are not optional nor negotiable— it is possible to wear protective gear but is impossible to do extreme mountain biking without risk of injury.

Juul is right that there is a negotiation involved in this process but it is not among players: it rather happens within each player. Consequences are never optional. However, their probability can be kept under control—or at least that is what players estimate. The risk is always present but the player will consider the activity a game as long as she is willing to tolerate the consequences of the activity that she feels are likely to happen. The consequences of extreme mountain biking are not optional. However, if the player feels confident enough about her skills, she may think that an accident is unlikely to happen. So, as she feels she can tolerate what can happen, the game is on. This situation of course can change during the game session. At a certain point the mountain biker may stop playing in order to try to save her body from injury. This boundary negotiation is subjective and fuzzy and that is where part of the pleasure of extreme sports may lay: being on the edge of control and danger.

As play activities, games are not part of an alternative reality that shield them from the so-called “real life”. Their consequences are very real. However, games are a cultural

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20 Or if she totally underestimates the situation due to lack of experience or simple irresponsibility.
form that allow players minimize these consequences to the ones that they are willing to cope with. Frequently, this works fine and the consequences remain within the expected boundaries. Even though games are designed and performed in order to lead to a probable set of scenarios that are safe, this is not always the case. Sometimes players have to face harsh, unexpected consequences, such as injuries but also sadness or bitter disputes with other players.

9.2 Crossing the borders of play

This new definition of game allows certain “limit” or “borderline” cases to be included within its limits. For example, Juul (2005: 44) classifies games based on luck as a group of borderline cases, because there is no player effort involved. As I previously pointed out, players do behave as if they were actively involved, even though it is an irrational behavior. A game is a game as long as players believe that they are actively involved in the game’s consequences and react accordingly.

I have just reviewed the borderline case of open-ended simulations such as SimCity, but there is another group of games that both Juul (ibid) and S&Z (2004: 81) consider to be problematic: pen and paper RPGs. S&Z acknowledge that these games are indeed games and attempt to fit them within their definition by arguing that RPGs can be and not be games, depending on how you view them:

[... ] it would appear that multiplayer role-playing games are not, in fact, games. But this seems like a ridiculous conclusion, because RPGs are so closely bound up in the development of games and gaming culture. Our position is this: RPGs can be framed either way –as having or not having a quantified outcome. If you look at the game as a whole, there may not be a single, overriding quantifiable goal. But if you consider the session-to-session missions that players complete, the personal goals set for themselves, the levels of power that players attain, then yes, RPGs do have quantifiable outcomes. (S&Z, 2005: 82-83)

I could not agree more with S&Z. With this explanation, they clearly identify the major weakness of their own definition: that having a single quantifiable outcome is not a manda-
tory requirement for games. Instead, as they explain, outcomes can be fuzzier and depend on subjective views, such as the player’s own goals and the “power” they attain—which I would correlate with the status assigned to them by their peers and also by themselves. This particular but important case clearly exemplifies that games are more complex entities than S&Z’s own definition acknowledge. These authors agree that their definition is “too narrow” (ibid: 80) on purpose, arguing that it was made for pedagogical purposes. This is a valid argument since, from a theoretical point of view, it is not specific enough as to allowing us to differentiate between play and non-play.

9.3 The definition game

In this chapter, I have provided a definition of play and used it to build upon S&Z’s and Juul’s game definitions. My intention was to balance system-centric definitions with more insight about player performance and subjectivity, without turning them into open-ended, player-centric definitions. My definition of game is broader than the analyzed ones and it is certainly less objective, because it is built upon player subjectivity. However, the processes behind this subjectivity are explained into a model which takes into account the player’s evaluation of the risks involved, as well as the provisional social agreement that backs up the game’s rule system.

This definition does not just attempt to answer the question “what are games?”. Instead, it also focuses on “how are games?”. Games are not merely objectified systems; they are also social agreements where agents participate.

Definitions are not just created for heuristic purposes but they also serve to ideologically frame the object of study. Rather than attempting to eliminate the ambiguity of play through formalization, we have no option but to embrace ambiguity. However, this does not mean that we must succumb to it: we need to understand how it works. Similarly, it would
be foolish to negate the formal elements of games that the authors I reviewed so rightly identified. It is by combining these formal and subjective elements that may improve our understanding of how any activity can be a game but not every activity is a game.
10. Play and Meaning

After proposing an ontology of play and games in the previous section, I will now focus on analyzing how play activities—including games and videogames—convey meaning that can lead to changing the player’s views on subjects and/or induce her to perform certain actions.

This section will start with a brief overview of rhetoric as a discipline and then focus on previous attempts to understand rhetoric in play and in videogames. A proposal for play rhetoric—that integrates play in its broadest form, including toys, games and videogames—will be proposed, relying on three major dimensions. Each one of them will be illustrated with multiple examples, both from videogames and non-electronic games. These three perspectives will then be used in the analysis of a particular case. Different versions of the same game will be reviewed, showing alternative rhetorical aspects of each.

10.1 An overview of rhetoric

Over the last 25 centuries, the concept of rhetoric has shifted in meaning in spite of always remaining within the realm of communication. This can be sometimes confusing, because the term can be used to refer to different takes on the field which may be related but show considerable differences.

Originally, rhetoric began in Ancient Greece as a discipline dealing with argumentation in oral discussions. *Rhetorikos* is the Greek word for orator, so the origin of the term is not surprising if we take into account that oral discussions were predominant over written ones. Early scholars of rhetoric include Plato and his disciple Aristotle, who famously defined rhetoric as “the counterpart of dialectic. It is the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion” (quoted in Booth, 2004: 4). This classi-
cal Greek framing of rhetoric as a set of techniques for oral persuasion was continued in Roman times, notably by its two main scholars in this field: Cicero and Quintillian (Sloane, 2001).

In the Middle Ages, rhetoric followed the dominant communicational forms, particularly focusing on letter writing (ars dictaminis) and sermon writing for members of the Church (ars predicandi) (ibid). The Renaissance brought a revival of classical studies and paid particular attention to rhetoric. Erasmus of Rotterdam’s De Duplici Copia Verborum et Rerum (1512) is amongst the most popular works on rhetoric from this age.

Rhetoric started as an art of persuasion, in the sense that truth has no value unless it can be effectively communicated to others. However, since there is a fine line between persuasion and manipulation, the term has been colloquially used in derogatory form, as to indicate “empty talk” and devious ways.

Even though there are a multiplicity of possible approaches to this subject, modern rhetoric broke with the concept of rhetoric as mainly a persuasive discipline and expanded the field to contemplate the broader subject of communication. The development of mass media generated the need for a broader rhetoric that aimed further than its original oral and literary concerns. Not surprisingly, one of the most influential—if not the most—scholars in mass communication, Marshal McLuhan, was trained as a classic rhetorician. His works on mass media brought rhetorical analysis to everyday aspects of popular culture.

Kenneth Burke’s (1897-1993) work was a major influence in modern rhetoric since it focuses more on symbol interaction rather than on argumentation per se. His New Rhetoric is more interested in analyzing the cooperation between participants (authors, audience) and the text itself rather than framing rhetoric merely as persuasion. He famously defined the rhetoric function of language as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (Burke, 1961: 41).
Literary theory and narratology—notably the works of Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mihai Bakhtin—heavily influenced modern rhetoric. In his classic work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), literary scholar Wayne C. Booth framed narrative as a form of rhetoric. Walter Fisher (1985) proposed the concept of *narrative paradigm* in order to explain how arguments work in similar fashion than narratives and that they should be analyzed as such in terms of structure, conflicts and characters.

Even though modern rhetoric aims at covering the broadest semiotic spectrum of communication, it was still heavily influenced by its earlier verbal and textual tradition. This started to change thanks to the development of film, television and visual advertisement, which required the development of visual rhetoric. The aim of this sub-field is, according to Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers, to understand “How, exactly, images persuade? In other words, how do representational images work to influence the beliefs, attitudes, opinions and sometimes actions of those who view them?” (2004: 1). A classic early work in visual rhetoric is Barthes’ analysis of an Italian pasta advertisement in his “Rhetoric of the Image” article published in 1964.

As design rhetorician Richard Buchanan argues (1989: 91-109), visual rhetoric is particularly useful to deal with graphic design but falls short to cover the broader field of design. Even though Buchanan’s call for a design rhetoric is more concerned with industrial design, there is no reason why not including within it other design products such as toys and games.

**10.2 Precedent works on play and game rhetoric**

The cultural role of toys, play activities and games is undeniable, even though they have been historically ignored by most academics. Toys and games do convey meaning and have a long tradition of being used for persuasive goals, mainly as educational devices. Personally, my interest in them is both political and aesthetical: it deals with how
these artifacts and activities can be interpreted as conveying ideas and values in order to communicate clearly and/or beautifully. Before moving on to describe the characteristics of play rhetoric, the following section reviews previous approaches to the subject.

10.2.1 Brian Sutton-Smith and the seven rhetorics of play

In order to classify the vast field of human play, Brian Sutton-Smith frames this activity within seven categories of play rhetorics. Notice that this author uses the term not to refer to the discipline itself but rather in the sense of themes or arguments used for rhetorical purposes. Rather than being understood as persuasive techniques, these rhetorics are “part of the multiple broad symbolic systems –political, religious, social, and educational– through which we construct the meaning of the cultures in which we live.” (1997: 9) In other words, these rhetorics should be understood as different ways of viewing games and play, through different lenses that include them within a group with a global meaning that goes beyond the meaning of its signs, rules and performances. These categories are certainly overlapping, since a particular activity could belong to several groups. These rhetorics include:

- The *rhetoric of play as progress* is the idea that young children and animals learn through play. It frames children’s imitative play as a form of practicing the activities that they will later perform in adult life.

- The *rhetoric of play as fate* is connected to a deterministic view of life, arguing that human activities are controlled through fate rather than through free will. This rhetoric applies mainly to games of chance, including gambling games.

- The *rhetoric of play as power* frames play as a conflict or combat, where the victors become heroes as if they had won a war.
- The *rhetoric of play as identity* deals with how a community of players identify itself. It is particularly present in communal play such as festivals like carnival and also in traditional games and toys.

- The *rhetoric of play as the imaginary* is generally applied to make-believe, improvisation-based games.

- The *rhetoric of self* mainly deals with play as a source of individualistic satisfaction, generally within single player, solitary play.

- The *rhetoric of play as frivolous* currently frames play as a non-productive activity, as opposed to work. Originally, it was more closely related to the view of play as idle and foolish activities.

Throughout his *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith provides multiple examples of each rhetoric, analyzing their current role within culture but also providing clues on how they evolved through history.

Sutton-Smith’s typology of play themes is useful in order to understand play’s role in our culture. However, it does not directly deal with the processes and techniques through which play conveys meaning, which is the main interest of play rhetoric as a discipline.

### 10.2.2 Game master tropes: Aporia and Epiphany

In his book *Cybertext* (1997), Espen Aarseth identifies two main tropes in hypertext literature that also translate to game rhetoric. Aarseth starts by arguing that most previous attempts to discuss hypertext rhetoric may be more accurately described as hypertext poetics, because they deal with how efficiently communicate from the point of view of the creator. It is a valid criticism that could, to a certain point, also be extended to this dissertation and to other works of game rhetoric created by theorists/designers such as Bogost’s (2006 and 2007).
The two tropes in question are aporia and epiphany, which are also present in traditional rhetoric but work differently within games and other cybertexts:

In contrast to the aporias experienced in codex literature, where we are not able to make sense of a particular text, the hypertext aporia prevents us from making sense of the whole because we may not have access to a particular part. (1997: 91)

In other words, hypertext aporias create puzzlement not at the level of the meaning but literally create a puzzle where there is a physical piece that is missing. Aarseth identifies another trope, epiphany, that applies to the instance where the reader/player solves that situation:

Together, this pair of master tropes constitutes the dynamic of hypertext discourse: the dialectic between searching and finding typical of games in general. The aporia-epiphany pair is thus not a narrative structure but constitutes a more fundamental layer of human experience, from which narratives are spun. (1997: 91-92)

As it is usual in *Cybertext*, many of Aarseth’s observations are easily translated from cybertext literature to videogames. Aarseth revisited these two tropes in a later article while analyzing the videogame *Doom*:

In narratives, aporias are usually informal structures, semantic gaps that hinder the interpretation of the work. In ergodic works such as *Doom*, the aporias are formal figures, localizable “roadblocks” that must be overcome by some unknown combination of actions. When an aporia is overcome, it is replaced by an epiphany: a sudden, often unexpected solution to the impasse in the event space. Compared to the epiphanies of narrative texts, the ergodic epiphanies are not optional, something to enhance the aesthetic experience, but essential to the exploration of the event space. Without them, the rest of the work cannot be realized. (1999: 36)

This duo could be roughly translated to problem/solution, even though it could be more accurately described as puzzle/solution. It works very well for situations such as when the player needs to get a key in order to traverse a locked door. Aporia and epiphany work in games on the functional level because, as Aarseth claims, the player cannot otherwise move forward in the game. However, not all problematic game situations can easily be described in terms of puzzles. This is the case of action videogames where the player fast
reactions can be equally or more important than strategies. With the exception of boss fighting, surviving in many shoot'em'up games could be better described in terms of player performance than as a problem that requires a solution\textsuperscript{21}. Still, Aarseth has identified two core tropes of games that should stand in a dominant position within a much needed future attempt to create a typology of play and game figures.

\textbf{10.2.3 Play me please: two rhetorics of gameplay}

Following Wayne C. Booth, Drew Davidson (2003) argues that videogame gameplay has its own rhetorical dimension, in the same way that fiction has its own. It is important to point out that Davidson does not focus on the rhetoric of games \textit{per se} but rather on the more constrained notion of gameplay. This means that he views gameplay rhetoric as the techniques that help players to understand how to play a game. In other words, he is interested in the functional construction of meaning that helps players to behave within the game itself rather than in its ideological components.

Davidson offers a sample of rhetorical techniques that apply to three categories: game world (the virtual space where the game takes place), game progress (techniques that help players to track their status in terms of score, goals, etc) and game mode (dealing with the hardware interfaces used by the player to control the game).

Steffen P. Walz follows Davidson’s interest in videogame gameplay rhetoric, focusing on understanding “why and how players become consubstantialised and persuaded with game designs, and stick to gameplay [sic] these games” (2003: 194). In order to achieve this, Walz proposes a model that describes gameplay as a circular process relying both on the player’s identification with the game design and the game’s persuasive char-

\textsuperscript{21} Technically, we could say that there is one –or many– solution(s) involving a particular set of key strokes that allow players to traverse a shoot’m’up level. However, the vast number of possible “solutions” make such approach less practical.
acteristics. This model approaches game design from three perspectives: symbolically, structurally and systemically.

These two approaches aim at better understanding how players get attracted to certain games and become engaged with their gameplay. Their rhetorical interest is connected to how the games “persuade” players to play them. Gameplay rhetoric differs from game rhetoric in the sense that it is more specific and constrained. I would suggest to call Davidson’s and Walz’s gameplay rhetoric “internal” because it deals with the construction of meaning within the game, while game rhetoric is also “external” because it connects the game with the player’s world view. Certainly, this is a simplification since both rhetorics can overlap and work together. Still, the differentiation may be useful to offer a simple way to illustrate on which levels these two rhetorics work. A “gameplay rhetoric” would be too limited for my goals, since I am more concerned on how the player negotiates meaning with the game rather than understanding how the game manipulates the player into playing it. To put it in simple words, “gameplay rhetoric” is mainly concerned on how to create games with great gameplay, while “play rhetoric” aims at the more general issue of meaning construction in play and games.

10.2.4 Captology and computer-based persuasion

Stanford psychologist B.J. Fogg is interested in the persuasive use of technology. He focuses on computer technology in general and that also includes the use of videogames and simulations. In his book Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change what we think and do (2003) he introduces the concept of captology, an acronym based on the phrase “computers as persuasive technologies”. According to Fogg, this new discipline focuses on “the design, research, and analysis of interactive computing products”.

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22 This could happen in a Brechtian game where the player is “persuaded” to play a game according to certain gameplay rules only to later discover that these conventions are sabotaged in order to make her reflect about the situation that is being depicted.
created for the purpose of changing people’s attitudes or behaviors” (ibid: 5). Fogg’s framework is based on approaching technology from three complementary perspectives: computers as tools (as enhancers of actions), as media (in order to provide experiences) and as social actors (creating a relationship with the user).

Captology is interested in all computer-based technology, both software and hardware. As such, it analyzes the persuasive power of websites, tools, simulations and video-games. Fogg categorizes simulations in three major groups, based on their persuasive characteristics; simulated cause-and-effect scenarios, simulated environments and simulated objects. Among other cases, he respectively exemplifies these categories through a machine created to teach how the HIV virus spreads itself; virtual reality environments created to treat phobias and a baby doll simulator created to raise awareness about teen pregnancy.

Fogg’s approach to rhetoric should be literally taken as persuasion: his main concern is in changing attitudes and behaviors in a measurable way. Captology seems to be more concerned with practical results that could be turned into products rather than with communication. Even though my take on play rhetoric includes persuasion, this should be seen first as a communicational and aesthetical endeavor and not as a set of techniques with straightforward applications.

10.3 Simulation Rhetoric, rules and signs

In my article Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology (2003a), I laid out a typology of rhetorical game elements, based on their potential use to convey meaning. This “simulation rhetoric” focuses on the differences between goal-oriented (ludus) and open-ended (paidea) games. It also points out the rhetorical differences between argumentation done through simulations and narrative. This rule typology works on four different levels, which I will briefly review here. The first level is the one that simulations...
(such as toys and games) share with storytelling: texts, graphics, sounds, backgrounds, characters, cut-scenes. The second level includes manipulation rules, which state what is allowed for the player to do within the simulated model. The third level focuses on the goal rules: what the player must do in order to win. The last, fourth level, is the one of meta-rules. These regulate how players can modify the rules of a game, for example through customization or through the creation of mod levels.

In his upcoming book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Ian Bogost calls *procedural rhetoric* “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (2007: xi). Even though I agree that rules are an essential aspect of game rhetoric, they cannot work independently from objects, ideas, texts, sounds and images. Additionally, focusing mainly on videogames creates a serious risk of narrowing the rhetorical capabilities of play, ignoring thousands of years of meaning conveyed through toys and non-electronic games. While I find Bogost’s rule-based approach to be too narrow, I also think that my previous attempt to sketch a game rhetoric was very limited, too. Signs and rules are an essential part of play and game rhetoric but this nascent discipline must also take into consideration another aspect involved in the interpretation and creation of meaning: player performance.

### 11. Introduction to play rhetoric

My approach to play rhetoric should be taken in the broadest sense, not merely as a collection of figures or persuasive techniques, but rather as a “metalanguage” as Barthes understood it in “The Fashion System” (1990: 29): a code about communication itself. Certainly, the main goal of play rhetoric as a nascent discipline would be to identify how play can convey meaning or rather how players construct meaning through play. Needless to say, this will be a titanic task, given the breadth of existing games and forms of play. My
goals in this work are much less ambitious. I will simply identify some rhetorical techniques
used in games in order to convey ideas. My intention is not to be exhaustive but rather to
exemplify how play rhetoric can be approached from three different perspectives: in what
relates to the signs involved in the activity, to its rules and to the player’s performance.

By default, I will use the term “play rhetoric” to refer to the use of play in the creation
of meaning. The term rhetoric should be understood in the broad communicational sense
that Kenneth Burke gives to it but it can certainly apply to more specific persuasive and
argumentative uses, too. The term “game rhetoric” will also be used but in a more con-
strained way, limiting it to games and not to the larger field of play. Following Burke, play
rhetoric should provide us with tools for better understanding how play activities “form atti-
tudes or to induce actions” in other players. It should be noticed that players do not neces-
sarily have to be humans, but rather, to use Burke’s words, “beings that respond to sym-
 bols” (Burke, 1989: 188) since play can also occur with machines such as computers and
animals. In this spirit, I understand play (and game) rhetoric as “the use of play (and
game) activities in order to communicate meaning, forming attitudes or inducing actions
through signs, rules and player performance”.

Forming attitudes and inducing actions can certainly be framed as persuasion and
even manipulation in a strict sense but also as the basis for effective communication in a
broad sense. Games and videogames are generally used for persuasive purposes, such
as advertising, training and education. However, play rhetoric is not limited to these “seri-
ous” genres and also applies to games that mainly aim at entertainment, because rhetoric
also overlaps with the fields of poetics and aesthetics, particularly when it attempts to rec-
reate experiences in order to augment its argumentative power. I have previously used the

23 While it feels relatively safe to argue that humans and animals can play with each other and against a ma-
chine, the question about if two machines can play against each other is certainly more challenging. I will
leave it to scholars interested in metaphysics.
term “simulation” (understood as the modeling of a source system through a second one which maintains to somebody some of the original system’s behaviors) to refer to the recreation of events and experiences, not merely through audiovisual elements but also through behavioral ones. I am not presenting her play rhetoric through the optics of simulation simply in order to avoid complications —after all, this work should be seen as an introduction to the discipline. Still, it could prove to be a useful tool for later approaches to the subject.

Play connotes freedom. It is important to contrast that freedom with the term rhetoric, which historically has focused on a one-way approach of communication as the delivery of information —and therefore persuasion. This is why a rhetoric of play could easily be seen as contradictory: how can messages be shaped if the player seems to be free to do as she pleases? As I showed in Section II, play may connote freedom but it is always constrained and, therefore, authored —either by a designer but also by the environment and cultural conventions. Play —and even so-called free play— is always a constrained and constructed activity.

During my ontological analysis of play and games, I stressed that my rejection of a system-centric approach as such should not be read as a romanticist move aiming at replacing the cold, impersonal system with the freedom of human creativity. The model that I propose for play rhetoric intends to reach a complementary balance between both. The system and the rules are essential for understanding play and games. Essential and fascinating. But so is player performance.

Figure 2. Overlapping schemas, from Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen’s *Rules of Play* (2004: 102)
11.1 A conceptual framework for play rhetoric

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) built their study of games upon three different primary game design schemas (rules, play and culture) which they described as follows:

- RULES is a formal primary schema, and focuses on the intrinsic mathematical structures of games.
- PLAY is an experiential primary schema, and emphasizes the player’s interaction with the game and other players.
- CULTURE is a contextual primary schema, and highlights the cultural contexts into which any game is embedded. (2004: 102)

The first schema deals with the system, the formal characteristics of the game. The second is about the player and her experience of the system. The third schema deals with the world, the context where the game happens. These schemas are also at the origin of Juul’s approach to game ontology: The game as formal system, the player and the game and the game and the rest of the world (2003). Figure 2 reproduces a diagram from S&Z’s Rules of Play (2004) that depicts how these schemas overlap. As we can see, the act of play is naturally framed within CULTURE. The player’s experience has at its core the game system (RULES).

Espen Aarseth (2003) also identifies three categories in games, two of which are similar to the previous model:

- Gameplay (the player’s actions, strategies and motives)
- Game-Structure (the rules of the game, including the simulation rules)
- Game-world (fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc.)

Aarseth (ibid) connects these three categories to three different types of game research perspectives:
Gameplay: sociological, ethnological, psychological etc.

Game-rules: Game Design, business, law, computer science/AI

Game-world: Art, aesthetics, history, cultural/media studies, economics.

The main difference between S&Z and Aarseth’s approach is that the latter does not necessary see the categories as concentric. However, they all agree that the perspectives overlap.

It is following Aarseth’s categorization that I will approach play rhetoric. My only objection is merely about his choice of terms. It is not my intention to complicate matters by simply changing the names of pre-existent categories. On the other hand, names do set the tone of the categories and the main goal of this dissertation is to balance game studies towards a less system-centric approach. Additionally, my intention is focusing on play and not just on games, so Aarseth’s “game” suffix may not be broad enough for my purposes. I will approach play rhetoric from three perspectives: from the point of view of the player’s performance, the system of rules and the playworld.

I will define “playformance” as the player’s performance, both physical and mental. Then, why is there a need for a neologism given that the verb “play” means exactly the same thing? There is a subtle but important language issue that emerges from the fact that the term “play” can be both a noun and a verb. “Play” as a noun denotes an activity, while as a verb it means the performance(s) involved in such activity. As an activity, “play” can be a whole: an event that takes place during a certain amount of time (i.e. “the children were at play for half an hour”). “Play” as a verb is a component of that activity but it is not necessarily the activity itself (i.e. “the children were playing checkers but then they played with their dolls”). Imagine the following statement: “Play is a component of Play Rhetoric”. In that phrase, I am using the term “play” in two different senses, first as a verb and sec-
ondly as a noun. However, it would be impossible for the reader, without further explanation, to know exactly which sense is being used when. This is why I introduce the term “playformance”, as a noun that should be understood not as a play session but as the actions performed by the players at a certain moment during that session. Take the following statement “Playformance is a component of Play Rhetoric”. By it, I mean that the player’s actions are a component of the Rhetoric of “Play” (understood here as an activity). Actions and activities are very closely related but they are not always equivalent and that is the reason why we should be able to tell them apart.

The rule category is common to all the previously quoted authors. I will refer to this level as “mechanics”, because of its engineering connotation of a system of gears in movement. Mechanics is the area of physics that deals with movement and the simile translates to the rules as inner workings of the game as a designed, cybernetic device.

Last, but not least, by “playworld” I refer to the activity’s materiality: its objects, space and time. Again, I chose “playworld” instead of “game-world” because my concern is with play, which includes games but it is broader than it.

Once again, it is important to stress that these three approaches are guides rather than strict categories. What follows is a collection of analyses of different games and activities. Some examples are videogames but many also come form traditional, non-electronic games. Even though videogames technically excel as semiotic machines, ignoring play and traditional (non-computer based) game rhetoric would be both unhistorical and clumsy, since non-electronic entertainment offers a far wider range of activities than those available through computers. This is particularly true when it comes to player physical performance, which has traditionally been very limited in videogames –even though
recent hardware such as the Nintendo Wii is reverting this trend.

12. PLAYWORLD

The playworld includes the space, time and physical objects involved in a game or play activity. This category works in opposition with the mechanics, which refers to play and game regulations and rules. It is also different from the playformance category, which deals with the player's actions and behaviors within a game or play activity.

From a rhetorical point of view, the playworld is the dimension of play that shares more aspects in common with other expressive genres such as literature, film, drama, music, sculpture and visual arts. Every visual and textual sign present in a play activity will fall into the playworld category. That includes but it is not limited to illustrations in a deck of cards, written instructions, cutscenes in videogames, tokens such as pawns in Chess, the color and shape of game props such as balls, the textures and materials used in dolls or the sounds produced by the manipulation of a toy. The playworld category also includes play and game spaces such as the printed boards in board games, the fields in soccer and hockey stadiums, the house in a doll house or the park where children play hide and seek. Last, but not least, play and game time also fall into this category, notably the duration of games but also how time may be handled in videogames through techniques such as slow motion and/or so-called bullet time, flashbacks and ellipsis. All these visual and auditive elements work on a semiotic level: they can be interpreted by the players in order to understand the play activity or game. They do not, however, provide a complete understanding. After focusing on the playworld, the next chapters will show two other dimensions that complement it: the haptic system and the rule mechanics.
While it would not be accurate from a narratological point of view to explain the play-world as the “narrative” aspect of play game games, this is a way that game reviewers and players generally refer to it. The likely reason is that both share many elements in common. After all, the audiovisual elements in play and games can be similar to the ones in films or plays. They both can share descriptions, soundtracks, images and texts. As the upcoming examples will show, they both also share similar textual and audiovisual rhetorical techniques.

When it comes to videogame rhetoric, all the reviewed authors –Aarseth (1997), Davidson (2003), Walz (2003), Frasca (2003a) and Bogost (2006, forthcoming)– seem to pay more attention to the rhetorical potential of rules than of the playworld’s. There could be multiple reasons for this:

• The rhetorical characteristics of the playworld are similar to the ones of audiovisual works because they share images, sounds and texts. Because researchers are already familiar with this form of rhetoric, it may be less appealing to them to analyze it. The rule component of games presents an unchartered rhetorical territory that is more attractive for scholars.

• Non-playworld aspects of games may also be more appealing to designers, who can be more attracted to experiment with rules than with sounds and graphics. Because the mechanics dimension is exclusive to games, it may provide a way for this genre to find “its own voice” among other, more established, cultural genres. This view is hinted by designer Andrew Stern in a blog comment about Madrid, a game that I developed along with the Newsgaming.com team:

To be successful, works like [Madrid] must offer more than what a static (or even animated) political cartoon can; its reason for being interactive should be essential to its meaning, more than just a hook for getting us to look at an image… (2004)
Personally, I agree with Stern: experimental games must attempt to exploit novel aspects of the genre. However, this does not mean that a game that favors the playworld over, say, the mechanics, can still convey a powerful, effective message in videogame form.

There may be a deeper reason behind designers favoring rules—also known as procedural techniques—over the playworld. This may be due to the system-centric view that the playworld is an afterthought, something that gets laid over the game mechanics and that can be easily replaced with something else. This logic, while flawed, is not totally unfounded since it responds to the way videogames are programmed: graphic and sound files can be easily replaced while keeping the same underlaying programming code (Aarseth, 1997: 40). Historically, it is also true that videogames started with very abstract graphics: a couple of squares could represent anything from a dragon to a spaceship. Additionally, it can be argued that in certain games you may get so immersed in the gameplay that you do not care about its story or characters. This is what Rob Fulop, then a designer at PF Magic, claimed in a 1995 interview for Wired Magazine:

> When you play a game 10,000 times, the graphics become invisible. It's all impulses. It's not the part of your brain that processes plot, character, story. [...] If you watch a movie, you become the hero – Gilgamesh, Indiana Jones, James Bond, whoever. The kid says, I want to be that. In a game, Mario isn't a hero. I don't make this argument in general, not in defense of my game.

Actually, a big part of my early work in videogames consisted in “reskinning” Cartoon Network games. I would take a previously existing game and replace its graphics in order to launch a game that looked differently. In that way, Cartoon Network’s website was able to have a new game with a different character, for a fraction of the cost of making a new game. It must be stated that we did not do this very often, since we knew that players could easily be frustrated if we simply offered different versions of the same game mechanic.
want to be him; he’s me. Mario is a cursor. Maybe you do want to be the Street Fighter guys – I don’t know their names, Kung Wo, whatever – but I think they’re more like your tennis racquet. When I play against you, I play me using the Kung Wo racquet.” (1995)

Fulop made this claim in the mid-90s and while this suits arcade games that you can play “10,000 times” it is hardly the case in adventure games or RPGs. Mario may become a cursor after repetitive gameplay but this does not seem to collide with his popularity as a character, at least if we take merchandizing into account: he became a popular culture icon manufactured into hundreds of different products.

The following examples will show that playworld elements play a crucial role in game rhetoric. Certainly, they do not work independently from the mechanical and playformative levels but they can really make a difference. Two games that share the same rules but different playworlds may certainly feel identical when it comes to gameplay. However, it would be a stretch to claim that they are the same game. Similarly, Akira Kurosawa’s The Seven Samurai (1954) shares a very similar plot with Pixar’s A Bug’s Life (1998) – a group of heroes that protect a village from the attacks of enemies – but they are hardly the same film.

Most of the following examples are political in nature. This may seem an awkward choice, since political games are a rarity rather than a mainstream theme for entertain-
ment. Still, because these examples were made with a clear political agenda, it is easier to understand the rhetorical techniques that were put into place in their design.

12.1 Political Labyrinths

Figure 3 shows a 1939 game called *Plan the los Aliados*, which translates from Spanish as *The Allieds’ Plan*. It is a puzzle game where the player must control a ball through a labyrinthine path littered with holes. According to the text printed on the game, the path represents the “Road to Berlin” (“Camino de Berlin” in the original). Accordingly, the space at the end of the path is clearly labeled “Berlin”. Each hole has a description, which is either the name of a city –Cologne, Leipzig, Dresden, Hanover, Hambourg and Postdam– or an obstacle – trenches, broken bridges, mined roads and swamps. Additionally, each hole is also labeled with a number in what could possibly be a scoring system (I say “possible” because the version of the game that I had access to lacked an instructions manual).

*The Allieds’ Plan* is part of the city of Figueras (Spain) excellent toy museum, which features a collection of many similar games from the late XIXth century and beginnings of the XXth. The collection includes another game (figure 4) that shares similar mechanics, even though it does not seem to include a scoring system and features a less intricate path. The game is called *La Reconquista de España* (literally, *Spain’s Re-conquest*). Interestingly, while the first game was meant to be a WWII invasion plan, *Reconquista* is a historical game in the sense that it reproduces Franco’s army road to winning the Spanish Civil War. The first game, created in 1939 (years before the fall of Nazi Berlin) dealt with a “plan”: the potential set of events that could lead to Germany’s defeat. The second game, which is not dated, was clearly done after the end of the Spanish Civil War, since it includes the actual dates of major battles that lead to Franco’s victory. Each hole on the game’s path represents a battle, identified by a date and the name of a major Spanish city. Additionally, the game is illustrated with soldiers, tanks, warplanes and machine guns.
These two examples show identical game mechanics used within two different playworlds. Both games can be described as quest games, where “the player-avatar must move through a landscape in order to fulfill a goal, while mastering a series of challenges” (Aarseth, 2005). In this case, the ball is the avatar, the landscape is the board/path, the goal is reaching the end of the path and the challenges are the holes that need to be avoided. The images and text in one game frame it as supporting the wish that the Allies invade Berlin, while the second reproduces the major victories of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. The playworld elements in each game do not only set the political ideology of each game (the first being anti-fascist while the second being pro-fascist) but also its time (the first dealing with potential events while the second dealing with actual, past events).

It would be perfectly possible to think that these games could be played without any text or images. In fact, this genre of puzzle/labyrinth games are still popular. A videogame version for the Sony PSP console called Archer McLean’s Mercury (2005) follows the same game mechanics within a playworld that does not make any reference to any war or historical event of any kind. The fact that the game could be either be played with an non-representative playworld or with one that, as in the two previous examples, supports two opposite ideological bands shows that these mechanics per se do not carry an ideology. However, even a game with a non-representative playworld, without any text or illustration, could still convey meaning because the playworld is not limited to its visuals but also includes rhetorical elements such as the path itself and its layout. The paths in both games

26 From a design point of view, I found a bit puzzling that the holes that must be avoided are actually dates that the game wants to celebrate. I assumed that you would not like to associate a negative event (dropping the ball on the hole) with a victory. However, after further thinking I read the holes as symbolizing the challenge of the battle, not the victory per se, and that made the interpretation more coherent. As this example shows, game interpretation can be far from a straightforward endeavor.
draw upon three particular metaphors that play an important role in our culture, among the many described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They can be summarized as follows:

• time is linear. In both games, actual and potential events follow a –twisted– line, which one challenge always preceding the next.

• time is a moving object. The ball’s movement across the board represents a time progression –this is explicit in the Spanish Civil War game due to the battle dates.

• foreseeable future events are up (and ahead). In both games, the goal is located at the end of the path, in the upper section of the board.

Additionally, the difficulty of the two paths in each game could also be interpreted from a rhetorical level –even if the two games were likely designed by different authors. The intricacy of The Allied’s Plan’s labyrinth could be read as how difficult the task ahead looked at the beginning of the war. Spain’s Re-conquest’s arguably easier labyrinth may have attempted to convey that the struggle was hard but not too much since Franco was bound to win (remember that this game was created by the victors). These interpretations are definitively speculative but my goal here is not to understand the psyche of the designers but rather, by comparison, showing how different ideas may be conveyed simply by reworking certain playworld elements.

These games share a very simple mechanic. However, the next reviewed case will show a game with far more complex mechanics that, also through playworld variations, has lead to version that could not be more different in terms of the world-view that the represent.

12.2 Game ideology, monopolies and evicted landlords
In 1879, political economist Henry George published in the U.S. his book *Progress and Poverty*, where he proposed a “single tax” reform in order to benefit tenants against wealthy landlords. Henry George’s book struck a chord in Lizzie Magie Phillips, writer, stenographer, artist, activist and inventor born in Illinois in 1866. In order to illustrate the benefits of the “single tax”, Phillips created a board game, called *The Landlord’s Game* for which she obtained a patent in 1904. This is how she described her game, as it appears in its 1923 second patent application:

The object of the game is not only to afford amusement to the players, but to illustrate to them how... the landlord has an advantage over other enterprises and also how the single tax would discourage land speculation (quoted in Walsh, 2004: 48)

This political, pedagogical game happened to be a grassroots success among students, who created handmade copies of the game and popularized it across the United States. It was to become one of the most popular board games of the XXth century, even though not under the form that Phillips originally envisioned it. The later version took its name after one of the rules in Phillips’ game: *Monopoly*.²⁷

The story of how *Monopoly* became what it currently is makes a fascinating read and has been extensively covered by Philip E. Orbanes first in *The Game Makers: The Story of Parker Brothers, from Tiddledy Winks to Trivial Pursuit* (2003) and later on *Monopoly: The World’s Most Famous Game-And How it Got that Way* (2006). I will simply say that it involves multiple applications for patents, different “inventors” and a huge amount of money – according to its current manufacturer, Parker Brothers, the game sold more than 200 million sets in 80 different countries²⁸ (Walsh, 2004: 45).

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²⁸ Think about it as the unplugged version of *Tetris’* convoluted business story.
In addition to its complex business history, what is particularly interesting is how this game started as a statement against monopolies and ended up as a “celebration of the monopolists, eventually banned in Russia, China, North Korea and Cuba for its ‘representation of the evils of a capitalist society’” (ibid: 56).

Jesper Juul (2005) analyzes this ambiguity in a comment to one of his own blog posts on ideology:

Sims and Sim City are just prime examples of games that are often interpreted to contain all kinds of ideologies on what I find to be rather lose grounds. It happens to many kinds of games – when I was a child, my parents would talk about Monopoly promoting capitalism, but further inspection reveals that the predecessor (The Landlord’s Game) was made to warn against monopolies. The ideology isn’t in the game but in the assumptions around the game (if it’s American and popular, it must be promoting capitalism) [my emphasis].

I agree with Juul that ideology is a negotiation between the player’s interpretation and the game’s materiality. Nevertheless, I do think that, within certain social, cultural and historical boundaries, there can be consensus about a game’s ideology. Juul’s argument is made without taking the historical moment into account. Actually, the exact opposite argument could be made: that it is because of the game’s ideology that The Landlord’s Game lost grounds over Monopoly. When The Landlord’s Game became Monopoly, the economical situation of the U.S. could not have been more different than when the original game was conceived. It is by no accident that Monopoly grew in popularity in the 1930s, during the U.S. worst economical crisis ever. This was a game that offered “play money” –since then also generally called “Monopoly money”– to a society living under poverty and unemployment. Suddenly, impoverished players found a make-believe way to become capitalists and live again the American dream, even if it was simply over a piece of cardboard. The game’s promise of turning players into tycoons was welcomed by
the public. It could be argued that Monopoly survived— in a Darwinian sense— because it was successful at persuading a public in need of feeling like capitalists.

It should also been taken into account that The Landlord’s Game and Monopoly, while very similar, are not identical games. There are differences in their rules but, more importantly, also in the playworlds. The Parker Brothers game originally featured a rich, fat character as a mascot, popularly known as “Rich Uncle Pennybags” and later rechristened as “Mr. Monopoly” in 1999 (Orbanes, 2004: 122). The character is not by any means a playable character. It looks like the cartoon stereotype of a mid-XXth century successful capitalist: an old, fat, mustachioed character wearing a top hat. It may merely be a mascot, but it succeeds in framing the game within a context of getting as rich as possible.

I have discussed this story as an early example of political games in several conferences and with my students. Very often, critics see it as a clear example of the failure of a game with a political agenda, since Magie Phillips was not able to reach her ultimate goal of social change. To make things worse, her game became the antithesis of what she originally wanted to achieve. That may be true but it should be pointed out that whoever thinks that a country’s politics or economics can be changed through a board game is out of their mind. Games can be seen as messages and, as such, as activist tools. In spite of this, they cannot change social reality by itself. Magie Phillips may have failed to change the world but I would not hold it against this game design pioneer. I would rather say that it was the world which failed her.

12.3 Editing docugames
The playworld is not only limited to audiovisual signs but also includes the game’s structure, in the sense of the order of challenges in multi-event games, such as in decathlon. This also applies to the level structure in videogames. The next example shows how the order of levels can convey meaning to the player.

Under Siege (2005) is a PC game released by Afkar Media, one of the very few Arab game development studios. It is the sequel to another game called Under Ash (2001) and it is set in Palestine between the years 1999 and 2002, during the second Intifada against Israel. The game is presented by its producers as a documentary game—or docugame—because it is based on actual events (each level reproduces newspaper articles and other documents that support the facts being depicted). Interestingly, the game’s downloadable demo teases the player to judge the game on ideological grounds: “A real life story or a [sic] political propaganda? You have the right to decide”.

I must clarify that my experience with this game was conditioned by the fact that I cannot understand Arabic. This was indeed a problem, since the aforementioned in-game documents are written in this language. That is also the case with the mission descriptions and the game’s interface. Every time that I needed clarification, I emailed Radwan Kasmiya, who is the game’s lead designer as well as the studio director. Having access to the designer is a mixed blessing when analyzing games, because on the one hand you get first-hand information from a privileged perspective but obviously it will also affect your approach to your object of study. Still, given that the game is not distributed in Western countries, it was a methodological risk that I was willing to take. Still, there are a few other available sources in English, such as Islamic Law scholar Vit Sisler’s29, from Charles University in Prague, who has written extensively about this (2006) and other Arab videogames.

29 Here is a link to his publications. http://uisk.jinonice.cuni.cz/sisler/publications.htm
Under Siege is a first person shooter that can be played from the perspective of the five members of a Palestinian family. Each member is the protagonist of different game levels and they embody different approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This multiplicity of points of view is common in literary and film fiction but it is not as frequent in videogames. The developer’s website explained that certain family members approved violence as a legitimate solution to the conflict while others did not. Suicide bombing is not a possibility in the game, which will come to an end if the player kills a civilian. This lead me to the impression that the game was not going to be simply a first-person shooter that featured Israelis as the bad guys. Surprisingly, the first level of the game looked just like that. Because I could not read Arabic, I had not much idea what was the context in my character was shooting Israeli soldiers but it was clear that I was supposed to shoot at them.

The following levels proved to be much more interesting and diverse. One of them depicted what is known as the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre. On February 25th, 1994, an American-Israeli settler named Baruch Goldstein walked into a Muslim praying site and opened fire with a machine gun, killing 29 people and wounding 125 (Wikipedia, 2007). Under Siege presents this event with a very original approach. The player’s character is one of the Arab worshipers and he does not carry any weapons. So, if he simply tries to approach Goldstein—who is constantly shooting— the player will die and and the game will be over. The solution is to wait until Goldstein needs to replace the bullet magazine on his machine gun, because while doing that he’ll stop shooting for a few seconds. At that moment, the player needs to run towards him and punch him before he starts shooting again. A later level allows players to control a young child who has to dodge the tear gas thrown by the Israeli soldiers. In order to complete that level, players must pick up a tear gas can.
and throw it back against an Israeli tank. The following level requires stealth in order to dodge Israeli patrols and plant a bomb in order to blow up a bridge.

If I had simply played the first level, I would have ended up with a very particular impression about the game as a first-person shooter where players kill Israeli soldiers. That would not have been of much interest to me as a player, since it would have meant that the game simply used the Intifada setting to create yet another shooting game. However, this first impression changed in the following levels, revealing a sophisticated and intelligent approach to docugames. This example points out the rhetorical relevance of the order by which game levels or quests are introduced to the player. Montage has been studied in depth by film theorists, since Lev Kuleshov experimented with the juxtaposition of different cinematographic takes. Film theorist Noel Carroll summarizes one of the main aspects of the Althusserian approach to film as follows:

[...] ideology in film is not simply a matter of the content of films. Rather, ideology is, so to speak, built into the very instruments of cinema: the camera, especially in terms of perspective, and the projection apparatus. Moreover, narrative structure as well as the customary figures of film editing –such as the point-of-view editing– are also taken to be inherently ideological (1996: 276)

While film and games are certainly different genres they can share a common visual language, as it is clearly seen in videogame cutscenes. Caroll’s quote uses the example of point of view, which we will later analyze in games. In his book The Language of New Media, Lev Manovich (2001) proposes the term “spatial montage” in opposition to temporal montage. By it, he refers to the composition of different images on the same frame and he provides the example of Nintendo/Rare’s Goldeneye 007 (1997), which “used multiple windows to present the same action simultaneously from different viewpoints”.

If there was a game equivalent to montage, it would deal with how the elements are placed within the game’s simulated space. As new media artist Joe Tepikke (2006) states:
In contrast to Manovich’s formulation of spatial montage as various motion picture sequences viewed concurrently, [virtual worlds are] a cinema of space that functions through limiting the player’s view of an always already complete universe. Since the player can only see what is in direct proximity and can only effect what can be seen, be it an obstacle to be navigated or an enemy to be destroyed, the narrative of the game is directly linked to the player’s location within and movement through the space of the game.

In his article “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” (2004), Henry Jenkins introduces the concept of spatial storytelling, stressing also the importance of the avatar’s location as a way to access and enact the game’s elements and events. Certainly, the issue of space is crucial in most videogames but, as Markku Eskelinen has pointed out (2004) Jenkins uses an extremely broad definition of narrative and storytelling that goes against against most narratological studies, with perhaps the sole exception of Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2003; 2006).

In any case, spatiality does play an essential, primary role in computer games, as pointed out by Fuller and Jenkins (1995) and Aarseth (1998). In games with a linear and unicursal spatial structure, such as side-scrollers like Super Mario Bros. (1985), objects, enemies and challenges are introduced to the player in a sequential way. In games where the player is able to freely roam across the space, such as GTA III (2001), the designer has less control over the order in which the player may encounter these elements, even though it is likely that she will experience first those which are in areas closer to the player’s initial location on the game’s map. For example, the player may be more likely to shoot his way out of a challenge if she is first provided with a gun rather than with a power-up that encourages stealth, such as an invisibility cloak or camouflage suit. The designer has then the options of either introducing first the weapon or the stealth-tool. Additionally, she could also introduce them both at the same time, by locating the two objects next to each other. The first options arguably encourage the player to use a particular strategy to solve the challenge while the last possibility leaves the decision to her. This exemplifies
some of the rhetorical possibilities of level design, which can be loosely connected to Manovich’s idea of spatial montage.

However, what makes the example of *Under Siege* particularly interesting is not just how the levels are designed but also in which order they are introduced. The order of game levels –but also minigames, challenges and quests– can be shuffled as units of meaning in a syntagmatic way. The designer has the option of always providing the same sequence, setting it by random or making it dependent on a certain variable, such as the player performance in the game. In the particular case of *Under Siege*, the game always starts in the same shooting level. After I played several levels, I wondered why the game did not start with the level where the child tosses tear gas cans back to the soldiers but then I realized that maybe such a start would have framed the game as a romantic fight between the powerless and the powerful, which may also lead to a simplification of the conflict. Another hypothesis that I considered was that maybe the levels followed a chronological order. Later on, lead designer Kasmiya (2006, personal communication) confirmed me that the order to the levels is chronological. While this may encourage some players to interpret the game as a first-person shooter based solely on the first level, this design decision can also be seen as a rhetorical choice in order to legitimize the game as a documentary.

Docugames is a challenging new genre for game designers and there have been several recent games that, to different degrees, have succeeded at this task. As Tracy Fullerton argues in her article “Documentary Games: Putting the Player in the Path of History” (forthcoming), the emergent field of non-fiction games shares many similar challenges with documentary films. The latter, however, have evolved into being socially accepted genre for depicting so-called reality. The jury is still out on docugames which, unlike their film counterparts, do not have access to the perception of legitimacy provided by pho-
tographic images. If this emerging genre prevails, it will definitively have to pay attention to the order of its quests and levels. As Under Siege shows, it can be one of the elements that can influence the player’s interpretation of its attempt at a simulated, constructed documentation of reality.

12.4 Campaign games: Howard Dean versus the “Republican Dogs”

On December 2003, Howard Dean became the first pre-candidate in a U.S. Presidential Campaign to launch an official videogame as part of his communication strategy. The game was called the Howard Dean for Iowa Game and it was co-designed by Ian Bogost and myself. The game –unlike Dean’s campaign– was quite successful, as it gathered about 100.000 unique players during the first week after its launch. It could be played for free by accessing the candidate’s website. By request of the candidate’s campaign team, the game aimed not at conveying Dean’s ideas but rather at explaining how a campaign works. Therefore, it included three minigames where the player had different activities: sign waiving, door-to-door canvassing and pamphleteering.

Along with Bogost, I have described the process behind the game elsewhere (2007), so I will not repeat it here. Analyzing your own games is quite a challenge: on the one hand it provides direct access to the creator’s agenda but, on the other, it definitively prevents an objective approach to the subject. That being said, I would still like to use this example to analyze three different playworld characteristics of this game: visual style, intertextuality and symbolism.

Faced with the challenge of doing the first official US campaign videogame, we had one main fear: that the public would react negatively towards the idea of a political videogame because they would think that it could trivialize an important issue such as presidential elections. We also knew that the game would generate a lot of interest among the
mainstream media and that it was likely that more people would learn about the game through television and newspapers rather than by playing it. Therefore, it was clear to us that the visual characteristics of the game were essential because it would be the first—and maybe the only—impression that people how have about the game. Along with the game’s art director, Sofía Battegazzore, we decided to work on a look that was as un-videogame-like as possible. In other words, we did not want the game to look like a traditional webgame. Additionally, we did not want players to expect the game to be a realistic simulation that managed accurate economical figures. Following the remediation theory developed by Bolter and Grusin (2000), we believed that a new game genre should borrow from previously existing genres that the audience was already familiar with. This is why the look of the Dean game tried to emulate the visual identity of the U.S. political cartoon tradition. Battegazzore used as a reference multiple cartoons from U.S. magazine The New Yorker—which was also compatible with our liberal target audience. This choice explains the use of a clean line and watercolor pastel tones. The main idea was to reassure players by creating a game that looked like a genre that they were already familiar with.

The game’s visual aspect was consciously created in order to evoke something else from the player’s cultural knowledge. However, there was a huge concern about one of the three minigames evoking another game that shared the same gameplay. We had brainstormed with several possible gameplay strategies for the sign waiving minigame. At a certain moment, we realized that there was an already existing game that would suit perfectly. Our first concern was ethical: is it fine to almost exactly replicate the mechanics of another game? However, that was the least of our worries, since the game in question was suicide bomber videogame which, as it is easy to understand, it is not a topic that any democratic candidate wants to be associated with, particularly in the paranoid post 9-11 world. The goal of The Suicide Bomber Game (2002) is to have the bomber run on a side walk.
packed with passer-bys and detonate him when the player considers that he will cause the largest amount of killings. Dean’s sign-waiving minigame followed almost the exact same mechanics but instead of exploding, the character waves her sign. Its main goal was to get the largest amount of people to read your sign. We did not get much feedback from players who found the games to be similar. A comment from “Ken” at Geek.com asked: “Has anybody noticed that the Placard-waving section of the game is identical in concept to the suicide bomber flash game that caused such scandal about 6 months ago?” (2004). Thankfully for Dean, the similarity was not mentioned neither by his opponents nor by the mainstream media. This case raises an interesting question about the degree of similarity between the games. On the mechanics level, they are identical. From a playworld perspective, suicide-bombing could not be more different than democratic campaigning. This situation is similar, but in videogame form, to the same mechanics/different playworld case involving the games Plan de los Aliados and Reconquista de España.

Last, but not least, some players read some of the elements of the playworld as symbols. The door-to-door canvassing level encouraged the player to visit as many neighbors as possible within a time limit. In order to have a balanced gameplay, there was a need for creating an obstacle that could delay the canvassing. I suggested dogs. The reason behind my choice was that they worked very well in a 1984 ZX Spectrum game called Trashman. This classic British game (followed the same year by a sequel called Travel with Trashman) required players to visit every house in the neighborhood in order to empty their trash bins. The task was more difficult in houses that had dogs, because it was imperative to avoid them or they would bite the poor trashman. Based on this precedent –as well as on the trope of the dog chasing the mailman– we decided to include dogs as obstacles within that minigame. We were extremely surprised when a player told us that he did not like the fact that we used dogs to represent Republicans. Certainly it was not our
intention to do such but this interpretation makes at least some logic: the dogs are the only “enemies” in the game and Republicans were the “enemies” of the candidate. What is relevant here is not if such interpretation was widespread or not but that it showed us that some people are going to read the game through a political lens. It may now seem obvious that a political game is going to be interpreted politically but the thought of dogs as symbols for Republicans never crossed our minds during development. This may have been an unexpected “side-effect” of embedding the playworld with a look matching political cartoons, where this kind of symbolism is frequent. This suggests that the game was interpreted by some players through conventions similar to those used in the remediated genre. From a design point of view, remediating political cartoons into videogames provided some desired benefits (establishing legitimacy to the nascent genre; making the game’s simplicity acceptable) but the look also may have brought unexpected consequences (encouraging players to look for symbolic content).

On a personal side note, participating in the development of this game was a thrilling experience, since presidential campaigns are one of the toughest arenas for a rhetorician. Even though deciding which gameplay would suit this campaign was quite a challenge, it was the playworld elements that proved to be particularly complex to deal with. However, it should be said that both presidential games that I have worked on (along with Cambiemos (2004), created for the Uruguayan presidential elections) are small webgames with simple gameplay. If campaign videogames some day become a common genre, it is likely that they may require a far more complex gameplay. So my observation on the relevance of playworld over mechanics may be simply due to the genre’s young age.

12.5 Intel discovers women: serious advergames, serious consequences
On April 2004, the UK branch of Intel Corporation launched a web-based adver-game. Its title was *Intel IT Manager Game*, followed by the subtitle "The simulation of an IT department". The Macromedia Flash-based advergame was available for free on Intel's website, as long as players registered with a valid e-mail address. The game had above-average production quality. It basically simulated the management of Information Technology (IT) within a corporation. The player had to hire IT employees, as well as managing a budget and buying computer equipment. This equipment was either generic or Intel-branded. The game encouraged players to learn more about different Intel IT solutions. This advergame catered to a very specific target group: people working in the IT field. Again, the game was technically good and the gameplay was correct by my non-IT professional standards. According to the British Interactive Media Association's site, it was developed by Euro RSCG, a well-known advertising agency.

The *Intel IT Manager Game* was only available online at least for a few days.

Suddenly, the game page was removed and replaced by the following message:

Your Interest in the IT Manager game is appreciated. Intel is currently making revisions to the game, please check back again in the end of May to test your IT Manager skills.

Under normal conditions, such a message would mean that the game was buggy and that it would be made available once Intel ironed out the bugs. It had a bug indeed but not a traditional software bug. Intel's advergame was infected by a far more interesting form of problem: a social, cultural "bug". The actual problem was that the game was not compatible with over 50% of the population. This work environment simulation would not allow players to hire any women.

The "bug" was fixed the following month. In May, Intel re-launched the game, now allowing to recruit female characters. This second edition was indeed gender equal, with

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30 It has been impossible for me to verify the exact amount of time that passed between launch and the moment the game was put offline. The game is referred as working by BoingBoing.net on April 19th, 2004 and I recorded that it was unavailable in a post to WaterCoolerGames.org dated April 23rd, 2004.
the exception of the top management. A poster identified as "D. Dooler" posted the following comment about the Intel IT Manager Game thread at Watercoolergames.org:

I think it is a shame that just because a segment of the population is not represented in a game that people go all to heck over it. Who the heck cares, it is a game, leave it alone. It is examples like this that keep companies and products from being developed over fear of being 'politically incorrect' (2004)

Dooler's comment is a valid one: should we really care about these issues on games? Is it just political correctness? At least Intel cared enough about these issues to pull out their newly-released game in order to later republish a modified version of it.

In the same year, Peter Molyneux announced at the Games Developers Conference that his highly-anticipated game *Fable* would not include female avatars as it originally intended. He explained that the decision was made because it would save a lot of production time and otherwise they would not meet their original launch date. There is, however, a big difference between these two games. The Intel game is not merely an entertainment product. It was a product that simulated an IT workplace and it was catered to an audience of IT workers. The tone of the game suggested that Intel wanted to be seen as a friendly partner towards them (the game description starts by describing IT managers as traditionally being "overworked and underappreciated"). In other words, Intel tried to tell the target audience that they understood their problems and cared about them. Gender inequality is a real problem for IT workers. Arguably, not having a female avatar in *Fable* can be very disappointing but at least it could be seen as more detached from the player's real life, since the game is supposed to be set in a fantasy environment.\(^1\)

The IT workplace is definitively not gender-equal. According to the U.S. National Center for Women and Information Technology (NCWIT), in 2004 only 29 percent of U.S.

\(^1\) After I published a version of this section at SeriousGamesSource.com, I received several emails arguing that the lack of female avatars is a problem in any games, being set in a fictional environment or not. I sympathize with this view. In spite of this, I still believe that a fictional work and corporate advertising are two very different genres. Intel's gaffe was amplified by the fact that it is a corporation that actually hires employees and, as such, is directly implicated with the subject their game depicted.
IT employees were female. The situation in the U.K. –where the Intel game was developed– is not better. According to the Women&Equality Unit of the British Government, in 2002 only 23% of the U.K. IT workforce was female (2003: 29). It was within this context that Intel released a game that attempts to sympathize with workers. Instead, it literally pushed IT workplace’s gender inequality to its maximum by removing women employees altogether. The fact that the advertisement here is a game radically changes the communication situation. For example, if Intel had needed to create a printed ad for a magazine that only featured one character, it would have been probably acceptable to use a man. After all, according to the figures previously mentioned, men are two thirds of the IT workforce. If only three characters could have been featured in the printed ad, including two men and one woman would have reflected the status quo. Unlike what happens in traditional printed media, Intel was not limited by the amount of characters that it could depict on the videogame. The fact that the game was later updated with female characters proves that there was no technical constraint for their inclusion on the first edition. In older games –or in more ambitious games such as Fable–, it could have been argued that the exclusion was due to computer memory limitations.

From a technical point of view, Intel got into trouble for not including a few graphic files. From a rhetorical point of view, Intel created a game with rules that modeled the IT workplace but failed to build a playworld that reflected its players’ values. Would the situation have been different if the game presented a set of all-male characters without giving the chance to the player to decide the hiring process? The answer may be affirmative, since the game would probably still had been considered sexist game but, arguably, the problem in IT is not the fact that males are majority. The problem is due, partially, to the companies’ hiring processes. In other words, an all male game would have simply reflected the status quo. But a game that does not allow players to hire women goes beyond showing the current the status quo: it accepts it. Rhetorically, the cause for Intel’s “bug” is
a perfect example of how the mechanics and playworld levels overlap: its main problem was due to a rule (mechanics) combined with gendered characters (playworld). These two a sometimes difficult to differentiate because they work so closely together (generally ab-

stract rules need playworld elements to convey ideas but this is not necessarily true the other way around, since playworld elements do not necessarily need to be attached to rules).

This game was not only a lesson for Intel but also for advergame designers in general: games can try to model reality but, as Intel learned, reality can bite back.

13. MECHANICS

13.1 Rule typology

This chapter deals with mechanics –the procedures through which something is done or manipulated–, the other dimension of play and game rhetorics. In many cases it may be hard to clearly differentiate between the role played by mechanics and playworld in the player's creating of meaning. This is because rules and game elements go generally very close together, especially in videogames. There is a mission in GTA: Vice City (2002) that generated much controversy in 2004. At a certain point in the game, the player was be or-
dered to “Kill the Haitians!”. This triggered a strong reaction from US-based Haitian organi-

izations\textsuperscript{32}. In this case, there is a clear goal rule for the mission stating that the player must kill somebody. Killing is quite a normal activity in videogames but it generally deals with
generic characters from the fantasy world. Goal rules applied to different objects –such as “Kill the orcs!”; “Kill the kittens”; “Kill the Bulgarian hitmen”– would be interpreted in quite a different way. It may be tempting to see rules as abstract entities, i.e. “In order to complete

\textsuperscript{32} This command, which was extensively reproduced by the media, has quite a different meaning when read out of context. The text itself can be interpreted as a call to kill Haitians in general, which, based on their re-
asctions, was the likely interpretation of Haitian organizations. However, within the game, the phrase refers to a specific Haitian criminal gang.
the level, the player must kill X”. However, “X” is not a trivial aspect of the rule. There may not be a lobby defending orcs but the moment games incorporate non-fantasy characters with specific ethnicities, beliefs, cultural backgrounds, things change. Suddenly, politics walks into the scene.

I have chosen the term mechanics –from the branch of applied mathematics dealing with motion– to refer to the group of regulations in play and games. I have previously offered a typology for game and simulation rhetoric (Frasca, 2003a), along four different axes. The first dealt with sounds and images –what here is being called the playworld. The last three dealt with rules: manipulation rules, goal rules and meta-rules. Manipulation rules regulate what the player can do within the simulated model. Goal rules state what the player had to do in order to win the game. Last, but not least, meta-rules defined how the player could modify the game itself –for example by creating a mod or changing its difficulty through a cheat code. This classification was originally intended for videogame rhetoric and not for one including traditional games, toys and play activities. Therefore, it should be both updated and improved to accommodate to this broader universe of cases. Additionally, it should also be refined in order to polish certain inconsistencies. But before expanding this typology of rules it is worth paying attention to a point made by Andreas Gregersen (2005). He observed that certain aspects of a simulated environment are better understood not as governed by rules but by laws. These include the regulations that, for example, define how the objects and terrain behave within the simulated game world – I have earlier referred to these as paidia rules (Frasca, 2001). Gregersen makes a good point, even though his terminology can be problematic since “law” –as in “immigration

33 I am sure that I will be proven wrong by some Lord of The Rings fan.

34 I am not arguing that fantasy or science fiction works cannot be political. I am simply saying that it is more probable for non-fantasy work to start a political controversy such as the GTA III one, because human groups can directly relate to the labels used to depict characters or situations.

35 Most play activities literally deal with physical motion. Mental and symbolic play –such as riddles or mathematical challenges– may not involve moving parts but they always imply a change of state.
law”—is definitively also a set of rules. What Gregersen seems to have in mind is “law” as in “laws of physics”, understood as regulations that cannot be broken. These “simulation laws” are those that bound the player to perform in any way she wants as long as the game’s engine allows her. The distinction seems to be useful, at first, because, just like the laws of physics, simulation laws constrain what is allowed within a videogame. The problem is that, as Jesper Juul points out (2003 quoted by Gregersen, 2005) those laws are coded in the software at the same level of the game rules. I sympathize with Gregersen’s claim that it may be useful for game analysts to distinguish between laws and rules. However, following Juul’s point, simulation rules can be broken and manipulated, unlike the laws of physics, not only through hacks but also through patches, cheats and mods. It seems as if Gregersen does not feel at ease with the concept of a rule not just as a social agreement but also as part of simulational algorithms—and certainly these two meanings of the term “rule” can be misleading in game studies. In the following typology, the term “rule” will still be applied to this category primary on a mathematical sense rather than on a social one. That being said, within this category, “rule” could be easily be replaced by either “law”—in Gregersen’s sense— or even “regularity”—just to differentiate it from rules as social agreements.

What follows is a new rule typology that draws upon my previous work (2003a). Rules will be distributed among three main categories: model rules, grade rules and goal rules. Alternatively, these categories can also be better understood, respectively, as what the player respectively “can”, “should” and “must” (or “cannot”, “should not” and “must not”) do according to the system. A fourth category, metarules, is also present and it remains unchanged from how I previously defined it (bid). Metarules state what the player “could” do, not within the game but with it as an object.

Model rules define how a game or play activity is modeled—in the sense of a simulational model. Notice that simulation should be taken on its broadest semiological sense,
understood as the process by which a system is crafted to behave similarly to another—generally more complex—system (Frasca, 2001). This means that any system can be understood as a simulation, just like any object can be understood as a sign. Any play activity or game can be seen as modeling something else, even if no computer is involved and, more importantly, even if its referent is not a real system.

Model rules include, but are not limited to, Gregersen’s simulation laws. It may be useful to classify model rules according to the way that we generally classify the universe: through time, space and objects. In other words, model rules state how the playworld works. A direct consequence of this is that, to the eyes of the player, these rules define what can be done within the boundaries of the activity. In a videogame, they also define what an avatar can do as well as what objects can do. For example, a videogame gun can be manipulated, reloaded, and fired. The gun can hold a limited amount of bullets—or maybe an infinite load. All these characteristics are model rules. The avatar being a particular case of simulated object, all the actions performed by it are also part of model rules. Space and time rules are a subset of this category. For example, in Chess, space rules define the characteristics of the board. However, they also state how objects behave on that space: a piece can be moved in discrete sets of squares and it can only be placed on one square at a time. Additionally, two pieces cannot share the same square. Time rules define how time behaves in this simulated universe. Is the game real time or turn-based? Is time limited? Is it possible to put the game on hold? How does game time translate to real time?

Grade rules deal with any characteristic of a game or play activity that is measured within its system. Grade rules include scores but they are not limited to them. In soccer, for example, they include goals but also the number of yellow and red cards. In videogames, grade rules are generally the ones that deal with all the information that appears on the HUD (heads up display) or visual interface. These include points but also number of lives,
energy levels, objects in inventory and number of bullets left. But they also define things like “if Mario falls through a hole on the floor, the player loses a life” or “if the avatar gets in the trajectory of an enemy bullet, the player loses a life”. In other words, grade rules apply to anything that creates a gain or a loss for the player as measured from the system’s perspective. This is why these rule state what the player “should” and “should not” do according to the system. It is essential to understand that even though the system values actions through its measures—as in “losing a life is bad” and “getting a bonus score is good”—the player’s own interpretation of them may differ. For example, from the perspective of the Chess rule system, losing a pawn is seen as a loss. However, this may be not seen by the player as a loss but as a sacrifice in order to reach a gain in the next moves.

The category of goal rules remains unchanged from my previously typology. This group of rules define the states that lead to victory and defeat—and therefore, to the closure of the game session. Notice that some games, like SimCity (1989) or Space Invaders (1978) have goal rules that define a losing condition but not a winning one. Similarly, jigsaw puzzles or riddles have a winning goal rule but not a losing one (unless, for example, there is a time limit to solve them). From the point of view of the system, these rules what the player “must” and “must not”, because the system is built under the assumption that the player wants to win. However, this is not always the case. If I were invited to play soccer against stars like Pelé and Maradona, my personal goal would not be to win the match but rather to interact with these two players as much as I could. Notice that goal rules are a particular set of grade rules.

Metarules also remain unchanged from my earlier classification. These rules define how the player can modify the game’s rule system. These rules include the ones that allow to customize the game, changing the difficulty, creating mod levels and in certain cases they even regulate the player’s access to the programming code. To continue with the
“can”, “should” and “must” analogy, metarules define what the player “could” do not within, but with the game itself.

13.2 Verbs and actions

Chris Crawford calls “verbs” the actions that a player can perform within a game, following what he calls his “most sacred rule of software design (‘What does the user do?’)” (2003: 285). Why does he use “verbs” instead of “actions”? This may be a consequence of his focus on interactive fiction rather than on videogames. The term “verb” conveys the idea of a pre-set repertoire of actions—a vocabulary—offered to the player so she can control her avatar.

Before going any further, it should be pointed out that, as a theoretical term, the concept of videogame verbs is not precise enough for rigorous, in-depth analysis. For example, a character may “move” by using many other verbs such as “running”, “walking”, “driving”. Even so, “driving” can only provide us a limited understanding of the avatar’s activities, since in games such as the Grand Theft Auto series it is quite different to drive a motorcycle than a tank. Even though game verbs may not provide solid tools for analysis on the micro level, they can be useful for describing them on a macro one. Game verbs can help us to categorize games through what the player can and cannot do with the game. As such, they are are part of model rules: they make explicit what kind of actions the avatar can perform within the game. After this caveat was made, I will use the concept of game verbs in the following pages in order to show how the available avatar actions in a videogame can shape the interpretation of the playing experience.

The list of possible verbs defines a huge part of a game, both in terms of gameplay but also in terms of rhetoric. For example, parents might change their mind about buying a specific videogame just based on if the game allows players to kill or not.
Here's an overview of the concept by Crawford as explained in an interview, where he also exemplifies how certain games reduce the amount of game verbs by integrating them into others:

The verb is the core of all interaction. Any piece of software has verbs in it. The verbs in a word processor are the keys on the keyboard, set the tab, change font, different color for the font, paragraph size and so on, are all verbs. You're telling the application “do this” or “do that.” In a game you have verbs. The classic verbs in a shooter are turn right, turn left, move forward, move back, and fire. That's five basic verbs, and you'll find those five basic verbs in every shooter, and then there will be another dozen ancillary verbs and things like move faster, run, jump, aim high and low, that kind of thing. But the whole trick in all of these games is to reduce the verb set. For example one example in the great majority of shooters is the joining of the verb “pick up” with the verb “go.” In other words, you don't stop and pick something up, all you do is step over it and that picks it up. Same thing with a door…you bump into the door and it opens. So the verb “go” ends up handling an awful lot of other verbs implicitly. So you end up mapping a lot of verbs into a kind of spatial reasoning, and that in turn keeps the verb count low and game designers like that, game players like that. The problem is, with social interaction, you just can't get away with a tiny verb set, you need hundreds of verbs for social interaction (Murdey, 2006)

As Crawford points out, the set of available game verbs is always limited –too limited in his view in order to deal with social interaction. This means that part of the design process deals with keeping certain verbs while weeding out others. In film studies, the concept of framing plays a central role. The frame is not just important because of the images that it focuses on but also because it leaves out all the rest. Similarly, when the game designer selects the list of verbs available to the player, she is also deciding which verbs are being left out.

The list of possible verbs is particularly relevant when it comes to game characters (including both avatars and non-playable characters or NPCs). In traditional storytelling, a character is constrained by personal characteristics (race, class, skills, gender, nationality, etc). Technically, a literary character is free to do what she wants. However, her personal traits (couple with the environment) impose limitation on what she can accomplish. Part of the pleasure of storytelling comes from character who can perform beyond their assumed capacities (i.e. the beggar who became rich). In videogames, avatars are also limited but
not exactly by their traits but rather by the game’s verbs. Actually, game verbs are a way to shape a game character’s personality because they define their strengths and weaknesses. A character in Sega’s tennis game *Virtua Tennis* (1999) does not only look like a tennis player: she also behaves like one. Actually, all she can do is to play tennis! Fighting characters are also generally very constrained: they basically just move and shoot. Still, some games play with this limitation by introducing trivial, non-functional verbs (like *Duke Nukem*’s ability to flush toilets). Role-playing games are based on the creation of characters through the abilities that they can develop. A warrior character is blessed with a larger or more powerful version of game verbs related to fighting while a wizard is allowed to cast spells or create potions.

It is essential to keep in mind that even though action verbs do help to shape game characters, they are not the only factor in play. Compare, for example, the characters in a FPS game (i.e. *Doom*’s space marine) with the ones in a stealth game (i.e. *Splinter Cell*’s Sam Fisher). Even though Fisher has a broader list of verbs for stealth gameplay (i.e. knocking off enemies from behind or dragging bodies), both games share a similar set of basic verbs: move and shoot. The main difference is that the verb “shoot” is essential in FPS, while in stealth games it is simply an option within others.

I will now proceed to analyze how characters are defined through verbs in two different games: *The Sims* and *Super Princess Peach*.

### 13.2.1 Verbs in *The Sims*

*The Sims* (2000) allows players to customize their characters. In other words, they are no pre-designed characters like Mario or Sonic, who already come with a personal history, looks and a name. The characters in *The Sims* are open in the sense that you can customize their physical characteristics (size, gender, race, body shape, clothes, etc) as well as their personality by tweaking certain traits (neat, outgoing, active, playful, nice).
The player cannot introduce new verbs to the game (even though she may have access to new, pre-designed ones as the game goes through). In most cases, *The Sims’* game verbs are literally verbs that are displayed on the screen inside a balloon-based menu.

One of the interesting verbs in *The Sims* is “flirt”. You can basically flirt with almost any character in *The Sims* and this can easily lead to the couple falling in love. As Wired.com sex columnist Regina Lynn (2004) points out, this is somehow surprising:

[The Sims] is about life, so you would expect it to include sex. What you might not expect is the matter-of-fact way in which this mainstream game accepts the full spectrum of human sexuality [...] You can make your Sims straight or gay, bi or transgender. Sims of any sex can live together and make woohoo and become parents – through DNA transmission for hetero couples and through adoption for same-sex couples. Gay Sims are not confined to expansion packs and add-ons. They’re simply part of the game.

As Will Wright (*The Sims’* lead designer) often points out, this franchise is basically a videogame version of a doll-house. Interestingly, there is no way to prevent players from creating same-sex couples in a traditional dollhouse, because the game verbs take place in the player’s imagination. In videogames, the list of available verbs describes what a character can and cannot do. It is not merely a design option that affects gameplay. It is also an ideological choice. In an interview given to Salon on February 2000 –a month before *The Sims* was first launched–, Wright explained the considerations that he had with the subject of homosexuality in the game:

It gets back to the design goal that anybody should be able to do a reasonable interpretation of their family. We tried to make it so that the Sims won’t do this autonomously, unless you start pushing them in that direction. If you have a man start flirting with another man, it potentially gets the [characters] over the hump and they could become lovers. (Sieberg, 2000)

I often hear players discussing –praising or objecting– homosexuality in *The Sims* but so far I have not yet heard players referring to the game allowing interracial sexual relationships. This is not surprising even though chances are that if the game had been available in the 50s, this would have been a point of debate. This suggests that the game’s po-
The political statement is dependent on social and cultural contexts: the fact that there is no game rule against homosexuality is only a message if homosexuality is a somehow a controversial topic for the player and his society. If homosexuality was as accepted as heterosexuality, players would not notice the game’s rules relating to same-sex relationships as a potential issue, because they would have taken it for granted.

I previously said that the game allowed you to flirt with almost any character. The player can actually flirt with other game characters, as long as they are not minors. Once again, nothing prevents a traditional doll-house player from creating an incestuous, dysfunctional family if she wishes to do so. In *The Sims* there is no way to have a sexual relationship with a minor—at least not one that does not involve hacking into the game’s programming code. This was an explicit design decision, as Wright explains on the same interview:

> [...] we [the developers] wanted to keep this game as open-ended as possible. Some people are going to want to make their Sims fight or they're going to want to see more of a sex type of thing. [...] Basically, we wanted to stay as morally or ethically neutral as possible. But there were some things we didn't want to touch, like pedophilia. (ibid.)

*The Sims*’s ideology is conveyed through the playworld, by showing visual models of racially diverse groups of people living in U.S. suburban homes with a plethora of consumer objects. Additionally, it is also conveyed through its mechanics, notable its game verbs. As we have seen when it comes to sexuality, the player is allowed to fall in love with X, as long as X is human and an adult. That means that there is no sex with animals, plants or inanimate objects. There is no sex with minors. But players can love anybody else, regardless of gender, age, race, body build or number of polygons.
Interestingly, there is no mentioning about sex rules in *The Sims'* printed manual. This means that the only way to test the ideological boundaries of the game is to test it by pushing its limits. Players will realize that they can have same-sex relationships only by hitting on their same-sex neighbors. However, sex with minors is forbidden: the option for flirting will simply not show into the contextual balloon menu showing game verbs when players try to act upon minors. Unlike previous adventure, text-based interfaces, where any verb could be tried with any object (resulting in either an action or an error message), verbs in *The Sims* are contextual, so their absence shows the presence of the designer’s ideology.

13.2.2 Verbs and gender in *Super Princess Peach*

What preceded was an example on how verbs work when applied to customizable characters. After all, *The Sims*’s characters lack a pre-designed personality: they are more like puppets or dolls than actual characters. Game verbs also work rhetorically to convey the personality of consistent, designed characters. In Nintendo’s universe, Princess Peach—formerly known as Prin-
cess Toadstool in the Western world until 1996—has always played the damsel in distress role. Generally, all she did was waiting until Mario showed up and rescued her.

In 2005, Nintendo launched *Super Princess Peach*, a Nintendo DS game where, for the first time, Peach was the protagonist. Rather than being rescued, it was now her turn to rescue Mario and Luigi who are been held prisoners by the evil Bowser. What makes this game particularly interesting is the fact that Peach’s superpowers were not physical, like it was common for the male characters in the Mario universe. Instead, Peach fights with her emotions. Basically, the player can use different kinds of emotional attacks: rage, crying and happiness (along with a sort of neutral emotion called “Calm” which replenishes her energy bar). Each emotion is represented on the interface through a heart that can be activated on the console’s touchable screen. Ryan Davis (2006), argued in his Gamespot review of the game that it had “some weird sexist undercurrents in the game design”. Similarly, Bryn Williams (2006) wondered at Gamespy “Is Nintendo trying to say that females are all ‘emo’?” (2006).

The game seems, indeed, to be politically incorrect by our Western standards and that make us wonder if this is due to different gender politics in Japan and in the West. This seems to be confirmed if we look at how the game was advertised in those two markets. The game’s Japanese TV ad focuses on the use of emotions as powers by showing close-up animations of Princess Peach going through the game’s four different emotional states. However, the North American/ European TV ad seems to be completely aware of how problematic it can be to portray women in Western societies as primarily emotional beings. The ad makes no direct reference to the emotional superpowers of the

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36 When I published this chapter at SeriousGamesSource, many readers pointed out that Peach was playable in other Mario games such as *Super Mario Bros. 2*, *Super Mario RPG* and *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. While she was a playable character before, this is the first game where she is the main, sole protagonist of a Mario series game.

37 Available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoPB-ONk3hw

38 Available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Bhb6wXYSOY
characters, except for princesses closing their eyes and burning a wood fence (an action that, without the context of the other emotions, does not really convey the game’s core verbs). Instead, it focuses on the Peach’s change from damsel-in-distress into rescuer of Mario and Luigi. The ad features a filmed group of girls dressed as princesses who endured a boot-camp-like training process, running through mud and crawling under barbed wire. This Western TV commercial can be read as the absolute opposite of portraying women as frail and emotional: it has a clear girl-power message. The game’s three main emotions (Rage, Joy and Gloom) are not mentioned at all in the TV spot. Instead, they are conveniently replaced by the effects that they produce (respectively, fire, wind and water). The voice-over leaves no doubt about this when it claims: “Your mission: to use fire, wind and water to save Mario and Luigi.”

The stereotype of females as being more emotional than men is pervasive among most of our planet’s cultures (Lewis and Haviland-Jones, 2000: 339). Still, as social psychologists Fischer and Manstead point out, “most studies investigating the relationship between gender and emotions have been conducted in Western countries” (quoted in ibid: 72) Interestingly, they point out that while the stereotype of women being emotional is present in both Western and non-Western cultures, the degrees and kinds of emotions associated to women are different in Asian cultures. For example, “in response to emotion-eliciting stories, women’s tendency to report more shame, fear and nervousness was far more evident in the American-European group than in the other cultural groups” (2000: 73). These cultural differences should at least serve as a word of caution before we are too quick to assume that the game is to be considered sexist by the Japanese. That being said, nothing prevents us from analyzing the product through a Western perspective.
To be fair, the game does indeed offer several “girl-power” elements. After all, it is a profound change in the Mario universe: Peach, the main female character\(^{39}\), shifts from a passive soon-to-be-rescued lady into a woman that takes action into her hands. The Western TV ad is not lying: this is an action game where a female character plays a role that in this particular game series used to be exclusive to males.

The basic game verbs in *Super Princess Peach* are moving, jumping (and smashing) and collecting. These are performed through the buttons and the gamepad. The additional superpower verbs are being happy, sad and angry. Happiness helps Peach to float in the air (so she flies with the help of her umbrella); sadness makes her cry (so she can use her tears to water plants or put off fires) and anger helps her to burn things down. What can lead to interpreting the game as sexist is the fact that only a few game verbs are available in the game. Most of the verbs are the classic ones available in most platform games, so the only truly original verbs that Peach gets are the emotional ones. The situation would have been different if a bigger variety of verbs were available, so Peach would not be defined just by the emotional ones.

The selection of framing Peach’s actions through emotions can contribute to reading the game as a sexist depiction of women but there are also many other elements besides rules that affect this interpretation. After all, the character is a blond princess that dresses in pink! The game’s playworld is set in a very “girly” tone that reinforces the stereotypes (the action takes place in a place called Vibe Island). From the performance standpoint, it could be argued that the player can switch Peach’s emotions very rapidly, from happiness to sadness, from rage to calm. This lack of a transition period between phases—as long as the character has emotional energy available on the interface—could be read as reinforcing the stereotype of female emotional instability.

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\(^{39}\) I haven’t been able to find references about Yoshi’s gender. I always assumed that it was male but now that I think about it, with the exception of seahorses, males do not lay eggs.
On an incidental note to this analysis, I would like to mention that a few months after *Super Princess Peach* was released, Nintendo launched another Mario game for the Nintendo DS: *New Super Mario Bros* (2005). This game featured new superpowers for Mario, too. Rather than using his emotions, Mario was able to shift sizes back and forth between tiny and enormous\(^{40}\). I never before read this game as a male fantasy of erection power but, being compared to its Peach counterpart, the different gender-based superpowers attributed to each character are, to say the very least, amusing.

### 13.3 Goal rules and happy endings

From a systemic point of view, a game is a challenge that “must” be solved\(^ {41}\). A direct consequence of this is that games define an in-game moral system stating what is good and bad in terms of goals (Frasca, 2003a). In *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) any action that goes against rescuing Princess Peach is bad; rescuing Princess Peach is considered to be good. This logic is so pervasive in games that it can easily become invisible to players. In other words, games are designers so the action moves towards a happy ending. Surely, it is possible to include a tragic cutscene at the end of a game in order to provide a sad ending but this does not change the fact that the actions leading towards achieving the main goal as generally seen as acceptable.

It is important to point out, however, the difference between what the player must do—according to the grade and goal rules— and what she can do. This can be seen in *GTA III* (2001), a game infamous for allowing players to have sex with prostitutes, killing them and stealing their money. This activity is not, however, the goal of the *GTA III*. This means that it would be unfair to describe it as a game where you “must” kill prostitutes (it is a game where you “can” kill prostitutes. This activity is not a goal of the game but it is neither a

\(^{40}\) Mario has been able to switch sizes in previous games but never before to the extreme degrees depicted on this particular game.

\(^{41}\) This observation refers mainly to single player games. In multiplayer games, the challenge may be solving the game’s problem in spite of, or in collaboration with, the other players. In the former cases, the other players become part of the challenge.
gratuitous one: it allows players to replenish energy and increase the amount of money
that they hold. A game where killing prostitutes was the main goal would be validating this
activity as acceptable, granting it with legitimacy. GTA III does not go this further but it still
encourages it by making it a functional part of the game—a grade rule. However, it is not
mandatory for players to do it: they can obtain similar benefits through other means. We
could imagine a version of GTA III where killing prostitutes would be a model rule rather
than a grade one: you could kill them but it would not provide any benefit.

Similarly, in the Palestinian Intifada game Under Siege (2005), killing Israeli civilians
is punished by ending the game. This is a case of a goal rule leading to defeat. By using a
goal rule, the game is making the loudest possible rule rhetorical statement: killing civilians
is bad. It would have been different if the game had framed this activity as a grade rule that
reduced, say, the player’s energy. In that case, killing a civilian would be bad but still al-
lowed. A game where the player could kill civilians without any systemic reward would
frame the activity as something trivial. The in-game moral system, then, validates as posi-
tive the activities described as winning conditions in goal rules (“must” do) but their values
decrease in grade rules regulating gains (“should” do) and even more in model rules (“can”
do). The following pages take a deeper look into the rhetorical value of metarules, which
describe what the player “could” do with the game.

13.4 Metarules: rules were made to be changed

Metarules are rules about how to modify rules. Metarules appear in videogames that
allow players to modify the game itself, for example in games that include editors to create
mods where not only new levels can be designed but also the game rules can be tweaked.
Creating a new level would simply change the playworld. Metarules allow to change the
game on a mechanical level, by tweaking the rules governing object behaviors or charac-
ter stats. Cheat codes that allow, say, to increase number of lives, also work as metarules.
Outside the realm of videogames, metarules can also be hard to pinpoint, especially if they are not documented in written instructions. Some metarules, such as providing handicap for weaker players, are social conventions that can be applied to almost any competitive game.

Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (TO) is a set of games and techniques – notably Invisible Theater, Image Theater and Forum Theater– designed to use theater as a way of encouraging critical debate among participants. Most of its techniques focus on performance and improvisation. Boal’s most popular technique, Forum Theater, is based on allowing spectators to jump on to stage and work as actors. They work as scriptwriters, too: they are meant to create a short play that exemplifies a story about a specific kind of oppression that personally concerns them. For example, it could be a story about sexual harassment in a work environment. The story is supposed to include a first and second act but not a conclusion, leaving an open ending that is also open to debate. During the play, any member of the audience is free to interrupt and take over the role of the oppressed character in order to improvise a solution to the situation. For example, a person may make the character to face her boss. However, the rest of the actors may also improvise in order to sabotage the protagonist’s proposed solution (say, by firing her or humiliating her in front of other employees). These short plays are replayed over and over. The goal is not to find a real solution to the oppressive situation (most of these personal and social problems do lack a clear-cut solution) but rather create an environment for critical debate through performance, as well as showing people who take over the protagonist that solving a situation may look easy from the outside but it is harder once you simulate it.

In Forum Theater Augusto Boal both recognizes and encourages changing and experimenting with the rules but as long as the new versions remain true to the core values of TO. This has lead to multiple flavors of Forum Theater, adapted to different social and

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42 See Frasca (2001; 2003b) for more about TO.
geographical needs (Boal, 1992: 224). This openness to allow rule modification –coupled with TO's encouragement to performance improvisation– plays a crucial rhetorical role. TO was born as a set of techniques for questioning reality, for experimenting with change. The fact that TO’s metarules allow a certain degree of experimentation –albeit a constrained one in order to preserve its ideology– matches its political philosophy. In other words, TO’s metarules convey a message of coherence with its core values by allowing players to evaluate the game itself in a similar way than they evaluate reality while playing the game.

Metarules can be broad in scope but they cannot allow all kinds of changes. If a game could be changed in any way the player wanted, it could literally become any game or not a game at all43.

13.5 Difficulty and mechanical sabotage

A game’s level of difficulty is what results from the balance between its mechanics and the player’s playformance. It is definitively a subjective matter, since a professional player may find a game quite easy but the rookie may find the same game to be extremely hard. Nevertheless, it is also possible to generalize within a large group of players and argue that a certain game is too easy or too difficult for the “average” player, according to certain social standards.

A game’s difficulty level can be used as a rhetorical device. A common technique involves creating games that are extremely difficult –or even impossible– to beat in order to state an opinion about the activity that they are simulating.

Aiti: The Cost of Life (Gamelab, 2006) is a game developed to create awareness about the difficulty of living and getting an education in Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world. This strategy game allows players to control the activities of a family, so while

43 Fluxx (1996) is an often-quoted card game where players are supposed to play by constantly changing the goals and rules. In spite of its originality, the game has clear rules in the sense that while goals and rules may change during a session, these are constrained to the ones that are printed on its playing cards. In other words, players cannot really invent new rules but rather select among a set of pre-made rules.
some work others can attend to school. The game is extremely hard to win but it is winnable. However, as lead designer Nick Fortugno pointed out at the Independent Games Seminar at the IT University of Copenhagen on November 1st, 2006, some goals in the game cannot be attained. For example, the game offers you the possibility of buying many objects, including a house. However, Fortugno claimed that even though the game is not explicit about it, it is technically impossible to gather enough money to buy it. This is an interesting case of a game that is winnable but still uses unattainable goals within the game in order to make a statement.

A more drastic example of this same technique is September 12th: A toy world (2003), a videogame that I developed along with the Newsgaming.com team. This game sabotages a convention that is pervasive in all games: that there is at least one solution for every each challenge. The game is meant to be a comment on the U.S.-led war on terror and features a middle Eastern town where civilians and terrorist freely roam through its streets. The player controls a target that looks like the ones used in sniper rifles. However, when the player shoots, the weapon does not fire a precise bullet but instead it shoots missiles. The game is designed so it is extremely difficult to kill the terrorists without also killing civilians. However, every time that a civilian dies, other civilians mourn his death and become terrorists. This very basic rule—based on the biblical rule that violence begets more violence—leads to a steep growth in the number of terrorists. The player soon realizes that the game cannot be won, at least not with the provided tools (missiles). The game sabotages itself by implying a goal rule (getting rid of the terrorists), offering tools that allow to kill them but denying a winning condition by multiplying the number of terrorists that emerge after each attack. It is an extreme example of enhancing the game’s difficulty to the point that it becomes impossible to win. It does not provide a solution to the problem of terrorism but it aims to show that following the only allowed strategy (shooting missiles) is doomed for failure. This echoes the discovery made by Joshua, the intelligent
mainframe computer in the 1983 film *WarGames*, where after analyzing a game of thermonuclear war, the machine’s artificial intelligence concludes: “[This is] A strange game. The only winning move is not to play”.

Now that several examples have been provided on the rhetorical use of game and play mechanics, it is now the turn for a perspective that shifts from the system towards the player: most notably the player’s performance, both mental and physical.

### 13.6 Strategies and meaning

Strategies are a form of playformance, since they are constructed on the player’s mind and they are not part of the rule system. However it would be wrong to assume that strategies are always the consequence of a personal discovery. Strategies can also be shared and learned. While a similar strategy can be discovered independently by many players, it is also possible that a single person figures it out and then shares it with her peers—this is particularly true with videogames, where information about strategies can be quickly distributed online in forums such as Strategywiki.org. When this happens, some strategies become part of a code: they get standardized as techniques. They are not rules in the sense that they are designed into the system or agreed upon by the players. However, some of them may become so standard that they can be learned by new players along with the rules. For these previous reasons, strategies are located in the border between rules and strategies. Certainly, they do not regulate the game *per se* but they can become so commonplace that they can regulate player performance. So, before exploring the third dimension of play rhetoric (playformance), it may be useful to take a look at strategies.

Some strategies provide so many benefits to players that they become a *de facto* standard for the game. In some cases, these popular strategies can be read as rhetorical statements. That is the case of *Chess*, where the strategy of sacrificing pieces—particu-
larly pawns– is so commonplace. Sacrificing pieces is not part of the rules of Chess but players soon realize that it can be a very useful technique. This makes Espen Aarseth (personal communication) argue that Chess is a game that teaches players to dispose of “troops” in order to achieve a higher goal. This could be seen as a veiled statement supporting the creed that the ends justify the means. In political and philosophical contexts, the aforementioned strategy is generally associated with fascism and, less generally, to communism (Davies and Lynch, 2002: 5). Even though strategies are supposed to be abstract in the sense that they apply to a broad set of possibilities and not just to a particular scenario, “the means justifies the ends” strategy proves this belief to be wrong. Certainly, that creed is considered to be fascist when it applies to human lives and not to game tokens. Still, as we have seen about the relationship between strategy games such as Go and real activities such as warfare, strategies can easily jump back and forth from games to other domains.

Even though we may view some games as naturally competitive and others as collaborative, those characteristics are not part of the rule system but are strategies, too. Certainly, there are some obvious strategic choices for some games: a collaboration strategy is not likely to help a player to beat his opponent in Chess. In general, both kind of dominant strategies provide opposite statements about the relationship that they foster between the players. This is why a game that may want to, say, encourage understanding between opposite factions may want to encourage a dominant strategy of collaboration. However, as Heide-Smith (2007) argues, in certain cases –such as when there is extreme handicap due to the fact that one player is familiar with the game while the other just started to learn it– collaborative strategies may be used within competitive games. Other games, such as the television show Survivor (1992-2007), often require competitors to momentarily collaborate between themselves even though they know that sooner or later they will be working against each other.
Strategies may not be rules but can easily become rules-of-thumb: personal and sometimes social standard solutions to common game problems. Strategies are either discovered or learnt from other players. However, it is technically possible for designers who want to persuade or manipulate players to create games with a dominant winning strategy without making it explicit, in the hope that the player will assume that it was her own discovery.

14. PLAYFORMANCE

14.1 Performance rhetoric

Traditionally, we tend to think that we interpret the world through the senses, particularly through sight and hearing. The idea of performance as a form of interpretation, as a way to construct meaning, may at first seem alien to us. But doing also means understanding.

In his classic article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Walter Benjamin pays particular attention to architecture, claiming that it is a perennial art form because humans always needed and will always need shelter. Benjamin argued “Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception— or rather, by touch and sight.” Whoever has rented a house or an apartment will understand his point. Buildings look both great in photography and at first sight but we cannot wholly interpret them unless we live inside them. Their advantages—but mainly their problems—become evident only through use. It is through performance that we understand that the toilet flush is too noisy. It is by entering the house late at night that we understand that the light switch is too far away from the door. It is by sleeping in the new house that we learn that the walls are too thin (and that our new neighbor is a hard-rock fan).
This kind of “interpretation by doing” may be evident with buildings but it also happens with every single object or tool that we use. A cellphone may look sleek but we only learn about how hard it is to use after we bought it. The example of the house is particularly dramatic because it is easier to replace a badly designed cellphone than a badly designed house. Another painful example is shoes. We all know that a pair of shoes may be built with the best materials and may sport the most elegant design. However, this does not guarantee that they will be comfortable. Wearing the shoes and walking in them is a form of interpretation as important as appreciating their color, texture and shape. The value judgement “these shoes are beautiful” is done through a combination of sensorial interpretation (“these shoes feel soft”) and interpretation of cultural codes (“these shoes are trendy”). However, in order to state “these shoes are comfortable” it is mandatory to walk in them. Arguably, shoes cannot be fully beautiful unless they both look and feel beautifully. As Benjamin wisely noticed, we must judge both through use and perception.

Performance can teach us a lot about an object or an environment. We may regret having bought our phone, shoes or house after we get enough time to perform activities with—or within—them. However, performative interpretation is not just about the usefulness of an object. Performance also allows us to interpret an object aesthetically. In his book *Emotional Design* (2004: 215), Donald Norman interviews several users about everyday objects such as cars, watches and tools. This is what one person said about her bottle opener:
[my favorite tool is] The Screwpull level model wine opener. Push down and pull up: the cork glides from the bottle. Push down again, squeeze and lift, and the cork comes off the corkscrew. It’s wonderful! The day I got it I opened three bottles in a row, it was so much fun.

Having tried a Screwpull myself, I agree that the experience is never frustrating, as it usually is with a traditional bottle opener. If you have never used one, you can get an idea of how it works by watching a photograph or, even better, a video. However, images cannot convey both its simplicity and elegance. The person interviewed in the quote does not only praise the bottle opener on a practical level but also on an aesthetical one. Her aesthetical experience took over practicality, since she admits that it was so much fun to use the bottle opener that she went on a bottle-opening frenzy.

The same happens with toys and games. Some objects are just fun to play with; they feel nice when manipulated; they allow us to perform in pleasurable ways. In the same way that some drivers argue that some cars are more fun to drive than others, avatars in videogame can be more or less enjoyable to control. Game critics generally use the term “controls response” to describe how well a videogame vehicle or avatar respond to the player’s commands. As it happens also with sound design, it is generally easier to identify bad control response, because when it is good the experience is transparent. However, sometimes the control itself is one of the main sources of enjoyment. For example, this can happen when there is change in the way avatars are controlled. When Sega introduced Sonic the Hedgehog in 1991, game avatars did not usually run at such high speeds and that was one of the game’s original characteristics (hence the name of the character, who was supposed to run at sonic speeds). Similarly, the Burnout (2001-) series are driving simulators where players enjoy crashing their cars (there are multiple cameras and speeds in order to review the crashes). This can be achieved thanks to the game’s physics engine, which allows players to feel the experience of driving—and crashing—at high speeds in a way that was impossible in previous games such as Spy Hunter (1984).
Human computer interaction (HCI) and design theory generally assume that the user is always after a positive, enjoyable and satisfactory experience. This may be true for the design of tools that have a specific practical goal. However, the rhetorical spectrum of play is far vaster than simply fun and enjoyment. Probably the best way to understand playformance as communication is to return to Benjamin’s example: architecture. Not all buildings are created to be useful (in the design sense of usability). Cathedrals and pyramids are meant to impress humans, who end up feeling tiny in comparison. Banks also want to impress while showing stability. Labyrinths are meant to be a usability headache by design. The horror house in the amusement park wants to scare its visitors. Hotel nuptial suites are meant to be romantic. All these examples convey meaning through signs— for example, flower arrangements on the romantic hotel suite. At the same time, they also convey meaning through the performances that they allow, forbid, encourage or discourage. For example: the nuptial suite has a king size bed that can be shared by a couple rather than having two independent beds. The example seems so obvious because we take this for granted (it is a nuptial suite after all!) Two independent beds are never going to stop a couple in love from sleeping together, as well as that having only one bed is not going to force a couple to share it if they really do not want to do it. But in any case, bed design plays an important role in shaping the user’s performance (even in the case its design discourages its use and one of the persons ends up sleeping in the bathtub).

In this chapter, I will analyze different examples of how player performance in games can be used as a means of interpretation, as a way to construct meaning. Performance is probably the less intuitive dimension of play rhetoric, maybe because in spite of what postmodern theories teach us, we may still tend to assume that interpretation is a passive endeavor. Another possible reason for dismissing the rhetorical dimension of performance may be due to the fact that we know that, even if a player’s performance can be guided by
the game, at the end of the day the player can perform in any way that she wants. This potentially chaotic freedom certainly goes against the romanticist vision of the author as somebody who controls her audience. But again, we also know that a person can interpret the meaning of a phrase in multiple ways. The difference may be that semiotic interpretation can happen as an internal, mental process that may not provide any feedback to the author. Performative interpretation, on the other hand, is an explicit process: the designer can literally see if the player is not using the toy in the way that she meant it to be used. The author’s control over the person who experiences it is always fuzzy, no matter if the interpretation is semiotic or performative. However, the fact that the player has freedom to perform does not mean that she will always perform chaotically. Different design techniques are available to guide and encourage certain performances over others and this is why, in spite of not being an exact science, games can be used for communication and persuasion.

In his book *Where the Action is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction* (2004), HCI scholar Paul Dourish –one of the advocates of ubiquitous and tangible computing– claims that computers have traditionally being created without taking into account the user’s physical body. What he argues for is the creation of “embodied interaction” that acknowledges that perception, reasoning and physical performance are activities that are tightly interwoven. This is how he describes his approach:

Embodiment is not a property of systems, technologies, or artifacts; it is a property of interaction. It is rooted in the ways in which people (and technologies) participate in the world. In contrast to Cartesian approaches that separate mind from body and thought from action, embodied interaction emphasizes their duality. We act in a world that is suffused with social meaning, which both makes our activities meaningful and is itself transformed by them. Our actions cannot be separated from the meanings that we and others ascribe to them. Embodiment is about engaged actions rather than disembodied cognition; it is about the particular rather than the abstract, practice rather than theory, directness rather than disconnection. (ibid: 190)
Dourish stresses the fact that performance is both a form of creating meaning and interpreting it: both processes go together and cannot be split apart:

Embodied Interaction is about the relationship between action and meaning, and the concept of practice that unites the two. Action and meaning are not opposites. From the perspective of embodiment, they form a duality. Action both produces and draws upon meaning; meaning both gives rise to and arises from action. [...] This relationship between action and meaning implies a similar relationship between the physical and the symbolic. (ibid: 206)

Certainly, these claims are in tune with Benjamin’s observation, even though he uses the terms “use and perception” rather than Dourish’s “action and meaning”. Still, it is hard to clearly see the full relevance of this relationship in the arts, with the exception of architecture –the example provided by Benjamin– and designed artifacts. Indeed, houses can be used, manipulated and touched in ways that literature, music, films, drama and paintings cannot. However, the importance of action becomes more evident in the interpretation of other manifestations such as tools and toys.

Interestingly, Benjamin relates touch to the ability of using an object or a system. It is through those two dimensions that we “appropriate” –I would say “interpret”– buildings. It took psychology exactly thirty years to theorize what Benjamin observed in 1936. In 1966, American psychologist James Jerome Gibson\(^44\) analyzed the human capacity to understand the world through a combination of body performance and perception by introducing the term “haptic”, an adjective describing something that is related to the sense of touch. J.J. Gibson defined the haptic system as “the sensibility of the individual to the world adjacent to his body by the use of his body.” (1966: 97, quoted by Csordas, 2003: 61). However, it is essential to understand that the haptic perceptual system is not just integrated by the sense of touch. As Gibson explained:

\(^{44}\) Incidentally, Gibson also coined the term “affordances” which was later expanded and popularized by his student Donald Norman in his \textit{Psychology of Everyday Things} (1988).
The haptic system, unlike the other perceptual systems, includes the whole body, most of its parts, and all of its surface. The extremities are exploratory sense organs, but they are also performatory motor organs; that is to say, the equipment for feeling is anatomically the same as the equipment for doing (Gibson, 1966: 99, quoted by ibid.)

In other words, haptic interpretation combines both touch and body performance. As Biggs and Srinivasan (2002: 96) point out, the haptic system closely integrates the tactile and kinesthetic sensory subsystems, with the motor system (for exploration and manipulation) along with a cognitive system that orchestrates the experience.

The field of “computer haptics” has gained much attention since the early nineties, fueled by the interest in virtual reality and telepresence (as well as in medical, mainly surgical, applications). The term “computer haptics” mimics the structure of “computer graphics” since one of the goals of the field is the creation of tactile displays for the creation of virtual tactile experiences. An example of this is the virtual reality glove that reacts by creating pressure so the user to feel as if she was touching a virtual object. Even if most haptic research is driven by the need to build new technologies, researchers also need to understand how meaning is created through haptic manipulation. In their 2003 article “Contact Expressions for Touching Technologies”, HCI researchers Kevin McGee and Annika Harup observe with despair how little space traditional semiotics has devoted to touch – which they rightly identify as being larger than merely nonverbal communication:

Although semiotics in the large is concerned with the full range of “signification” (or “meaning”), physical contact is one of the areas that seems least explored by semioticians. The be sure, it is indicated (usually in a cursory manner) as part of the larger field of semiotics, but there seems to be very little detailed study, theory, or discussion about the signifying nature of physical contact (2003: 69)

Indeed, haptics research is making evident how little we know about what these authors call “the semiotics of touch” or, to use Simone Gumtau’s later phrasing (2005), “tactile semiotics”. Strangely, all these authors connect the term touch with semiotics, while the
term “haptics semiotics” seems to be more accurate (after all, haptics includes touch but it is not limited to it).

One of the earliest explorations in computer haptic interfaces was performed by Allison Druin and her team in 1986 when they built Noobie, a computer shaped like a giant toy meant to be manipulated by children through touch. Druin describes how toys drove her to imagine this new kind of computer:

It was during the fall of 1985, that I initially proposed the idea of the “furry computer”: an alternative to the traditional computer terminal. I wanted to build a place where you could hug your tools and build your fantasies. I wanted to squeeze my stuffed animals, and have them appear on my computer screen. I wanted to learn about animals, by playing with them. (1988: 46)

Even though today’s toys include more and more electronic components, the idea of a “furry” and “huggable” computer still sounds groundbreaking. It is not surprising that human-computer interaction researchers turned to toys as a natural example of haptic interface since arguably these generally touch-based technologies that have been culturally successful in delivering aesthetic experiences for thousands of years. Indeed, if we want to better understand the nature of haptic semiotics we should look into toys and, by extension into games, too.

14.2 Introducing haptic semiotics

The popular saying claims that “if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck”\textsuperscript{46}. This is an example of logical induction: it is based

\textsuperscript{45} So far, the oldest toy identified are the remains of a Bronze Age doll found in Pantelleria, Italy (Independent Online, 2004) Along with doll’s head were found miniature pots and plates, suggesting that this 4,000 year old doll was part of a toy kitchen set. Still, it can be argued that toys are probably much older than what this find suggest, since, for example, a wooden stick could have been used as a toy sword without leaving recognizable archeological remains.

\textsuperscript{46} This popular and charming example of inductive reasoning has a tragic history. According to Richard H. Immerman’s \textit{The CIA in Guatemala}, it was invented by U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala Richard Patterson, who used a similar logic to argue that President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán was a Communist (2004: 102). This lead to the CIA’s intervention in the country and it was the direct responsible for its unspeakably horrendous and long civil war.
on limited, specific information which leads to a generalization. Of course, this form of reasoning is not limited to animals: it could be applied to anything else, including tools and toys. Take, for example, a knife. We can recognize this tool from its name, from its shape, from its temperature (metallic blades are usually colder than the rest of the environment). However, we also recognize knives through their use. We could argue that “if it looks like a knife and cuts like a knife, then it probably is a knife”. The ability of cutting is then as important for recognizing a knife from a non-knife as it is shape, color or temperature. Following McGee and Harup’s previous point, semiotics has traditionally focused on visual, textual and audio aspects of signs than on its haptic dimension. In Peircean semiotics, the physical characteristics of a sign (shape, color, texture, taste, smell) is called the “materiality” of the sign (Chandler, 1995). But again, two objects may look identical to the senses even though they may not perform equally. For example, a toy knife that is part of a toy kitchen set may seem to be a real knife. However, we recognize that it is a toy when we test its blade and realize that it does not cut. Interestingly, this seems to frequently be one of the main differences between tools and toys that mimic them. Toys generally look like the original tools – even though they may be smaller and made of a different material. However, they cannot be used like the original tool, i.e. the toy gun cannot kill like a real one.

Tools and their toy versions may differ on the fact that they are not functionally equivalent. Still, many times toys allow the player to perform the exact same movements than “real” tools. For example, plastic toy guns may not kill people but they can be manipulated like the real ones: they can be held, pointed at different thing and their trigger can be pulled by a finger. Some toy guns may match the materials, weight and, to a certain degree, the mechanics of a real gun. Other toys may only retain certain characteristics: some may have moveable triggers, while others have fixed ones or no triggers at all. Independ-
ently from their looks, toys can allow different degrees of manipulation similar to the source from which they are modeled after. Similarly, a toy knife may not cut but it can still be handled, thrown and manipulated similarly than a real knife. This is because the toy may maintain certain traits that are similar to the knives: shape, consistency, texture, size and/or weight. I am pointing this out in order to stress the fact that the player’s physical performance in make-believe games can be similar—and sometimes even identical—to the one that she would be engaged in if she was performing the real activity. It may not “be” the real thing but it can “feel” like it. This is why it can be argued that the haptic dimension of the toy is part of its semiotic materiality. A toy gun represents a gun because it may share its color and shape but also because, on a haptic level, they both require a similar person to perform similar physical manipulations. In other words, I can interpret a sign not just through the senses—such as its color, shape, temperature, etc—but also through the way that I can perform with it.

For explanatory purposes, I offered two very particular examples: toy guns and toy knives, mainly because the player’s body and mental performances that they involve are identical to the ones involved in manipulating real guns and knives respectively. Of course, this is not always the case. For example, a child may use a wooden stick as a sword. From a visual point of view, the stick and the sword are similar: they are both long and thin. However, they are not identical. Their color, texture and weight are also different. From a haptic point of view, they both allow certain playformances but not others. Obviously, the stick does not have a hilt. Still, both the sword and the stick can be held on the person’s hands. They can also both be used to hit targets but the stick, lacking a blade, cannot cut through flesh. These playformative characteristics contribute to the interpretation of the stick as a make-believe sword.
Let’s now analyze the case of the “finger gun”. This kind of make-believe gun is constructed by the player through the use of her index and thumb fingers. The index simulates the gun’s barrel and it is used for aiming. The thumb represents the gun’s hammer and the player moves it every time that she pretends to shoot. Interestingly, the playformance is quite different from the movements required to shoot a real gun. For instance, the index finger –traditionally used to pull the trigger– remains quiet during the process (because it is meant to represent the barrel). The thumb –which generally is used to hold the gun and remains quiet in real gun shooting– is the one that moves in the finger gun. Basically, shooting a gun involves moving the index finger but shooting a finger gun requires moving the thumb. Both actions involve finger movement, albeit different fingers are involved in each case. This suggests that the haptic dimension of a sign can also be iconic. According to Charles Peirce, a sign is an icon when it “may represent its object mainly by its similarity” (2.276, quoted by Eco, 1979: 195). In this example, even if the fingers are not the same, the fact that the player moves a finger to simulate the act of shooting may be similar enough to connect the finger gun with the real gun.

We could similarly explore how Peirce’s categories of symbol and index signs translate into the haptic dimension. A sign is a symbol when the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (Chandler, 1995). A haptic symbol could be exemplified by the fact that the user needs to perform a double click on a mouse in order to open a virtual folder on the desktop. The “double-click” finger movement has no relation to the physical performance required to open a real folder. A sign is indexical when the relationship with what it represents is not arbitrary but physically or causally connected (ibid). The classic example of index sign is when Robinson Crusoe finds Friday’s footprint on the sand. The footprint is an index of the presence of another man on the island. An example of haptic
index would be the force feedback mechanisms embedded on videogame gamepads. These controllers shake every time that there is an explosion on the game (which is generally also displayed both through images and sounds). However, the same force feedback vibration could also be used symbolically (imagine that in a horror videogame the gamepad started shaking as if it was trembling in fear).

It is beyond the intention of this dissertation to further analyze the haptic dimension of signs. I merely wanted to point it out in order to later show how it can be a crucial component of toy and game rhetoric. Even though the haptic characteristics of a sign are often irrelevant in the case of printed words or images, they usually are when it comes to objects that can be manipulated. Still, the haptic dimension is generally complemented by other characteristics of the sign (such as shape, color, taste, odor, etc) so it does not make much sense to analyze it independently of these other traits. Overall, the role of haptics in interpretation can vary enormously depending on the kind of sign that is being analyzed but in many cases it can play a role as relevant as the sign’s visual and auditive characteristics.

What follows are some examples, mainly from toys but also from games and other play activities, of the rhetorical role of playformance. They show how haptics can contribute to the creation of meaning within play activities.

14.3 Playformance rhetoric

How does the haptic system get involved in the creation/interpretation of meaning? Which are the rhetorical techniques that draw upon playformance? In videogames, the most clear example of meaning conveyed through haptics is the use of force feedback in console gamepads. These controllers can vibrate in different forms according to instructions triggered by the game’s software. For example, the controller may vibrate each time

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47 Technically, most gamepads do not have force feedback but rather the ability to vibrate. Videogame marketing generally misuses the term force feedback, which literally means that the software can apply force to the joystick in order to create resistance to the player’s movement.
that you fire a gun in the game, as a way to represent the gun’s kickback. However, the use of force feedback goes beyond providing haptic feedback for the manipulation of virtual objects in the game. It can also serve in a non-representational way, for example to accentuate the beat of music in rhythm games.

The use of vibration to convey meaning is quite widespread, given the fact that force feedback has been widely available in game controllers since Nintendo launched its Rumble Pack for the Nintendo 64 in 1997. What may be harder to grasp is the relevance of the player’s own physical performance. This is particularly true in videogames, because its popular interfaces (gamepad or keyboard plus mouse) are mainly based on pushing buttons and performing constrained finger and hand movements within a two dimensional plane. Alternative interfaces, most notably Nintendo’s Wii controller but also the Eye Toy, are becoming mainstream and may revert this situation.

In order to better appreciate the rhetorical dimension of playformance, it can be useful, if possible, to frame any play activity as a simulation of something else –understanding play as a way of recreating a more complex system. Take, for example, Wii Sports (2006), the set of games included by Nintendo with its Wii console. One of the games is a simple version of tennis (from now on, I will call it Wiitennis to tell it apart from traditional tennis.) Tennis’ simplicity and elegance made it a natural game to be ported to computers. From the genre’s beginnings with Higinbotham’s Tennis for two (1958) to Pong (1972), video-game tennis has been a driving force behind the computer-based entertainment revolution. Wiitennis is played by holding the wiimote controller as if it was a tennis racket. The wiimote is a wireless gamepad that, unlike its predecessors, can track hand movements and its position in space. As a consequence of this, players can kick the ball by swinging the arm in a similar way that they would use an actual tennis racket. The physical arm performance is so close to the one required by tennis, that the Wall Street Journal reported
that early players were reporting physical aches dubbed as “Wii elbow” (Wall Street Journal, 2006).

*Wiitennis’* playworld depicts a cartoon version of a tennis court, complete with players, net and ball. While the performance required for serving and hitting the ball could be qualified as being close to actual tennis, this does not apply to the rest of the actions. For example, players do not have to run, since the movement of the avatar is automatically controlled by the computer. *Wiitennis* is a simulation of tennis and, as such, a limited version of it. So are ping pong –also known as table tennis– and *Pong*. The same applies to seemingly more complex tennis simulations such as *Top Spin* (2003). *Top Spin* aims at recreating tennis through detailed graphics and animations, as well as by introducing more complex mechanics than *Pong* or *Wiitennis*. It is by comparing it to *Top Spin* that we can appreciate the rhetorical use of body performance in *Wiitennis*. *Top Spin* looks like tennis because of its detailed graphics and a camera work that “remediates” (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) tennis television broadcasts. *Wiitennis* looks more like a cartoon but it feels like tennis because the players moves her body similarly to how she would do when swinging in an actual tennis match. Some of the actions performed in *Wiitennis* “feel” like tennis, in the same way that *Top Spin* “looks” like tennis. Notice that I have avoided the term “realistic” since, no matter how detailed the visuals or performances are, the experience of playing tennis in a
court is ontologically and phenomenologically different from playing indoors in front of a
television set.\footnote{Of course, the really interesting question is at which point the player stops caring about the simulation not being real and behaves as if it was. But that is a question that I will leave both psychology and metaphysics to answer.}

It would be wrong to assume that the only rhetorical use of playformance is to simulate a system by having the player reproduce the movements involved in it. Certainly, in the case of \textit{Wiitennis}, the arm playformance is quite similar to the one required by tennis. This aspect of simulation feels so close and natural that it may be hard to objectively see it as a rhetorical device. In these cases, which are quite frequent, it is useful to alienate the simulation by imagining an alternative playformance that simulates the same action but to a different degree. Imagine a modification of \textit{Wiitennis} that modeled tennis as played by super weak characters. On the playworld level, the avatar would look like a tired, thin guy that would be animated as if every simple action required all his strength. The player would be required to perform with extra difficulty, too, by having to swing her arm faster and wider than usually. This way, the task would both look and feel hard to accomplish. Displaying an old, tired, thin avatar draws upon rhetorical conventions born in cartoons and caricature. Forcing the player to exaggerate her physical performance is the equivalent to a rhetorical figure, not on the playworld level but on the haptic one. It is on these kinds of examples based on exaggeration that we can more easily see how performance cannot be just about aiming for immediacy in the experience but also as a way to understand the game (in this particular example, understanding how it would feel to be a super weak character).

Exaggeration and caricature are also good for identifying the rhetorical playformance in non-electronic make-believe play. Imagine that you ask a group of players to walk as if they were different from what they are. For example, you could ask them to walk like if they were in the moon or as if they were giants. A player impersonating a giant would likely
resort to techniques such as taking very large steps. This walking-like-a-giant technique communicates on two different levels. Visually, it mimics the clumsiness and strength of the giant steps (this visual level can apply both to spectators and the player who watches herself doing it). Additionally, it haptically refers to a giant, because of the feeling that it creates in the player (walking with clumsy, giant steps makes the player feel like a giant).

14.4 Virtual Playformance

Player performance can be mediated through tokens or avatars. Some games, like arm wrestling, do not require any prop manipulation since all it takes players sitting at a table. Some play activities, like puppeteering, mediate the player’s performance onto the puppet. Similarly, videogame character performance is mediated through interfaces. It is “virtual” in the sense that the player’s movements generally do not match the avatar’s. For example, most soccer videogames require pressing a button in order to kick the ball: pressing a button with a finger does not correspond to moving a leg. In this section, playformance will be divided into two categories: “virtual” and “full body”. This categorization is simply for the sake of clarity and does not aim to be a strict typology. In a broad sense, it differentiates between videogames and non-electronic games or, more specifically, between games involving avatars and those which do not. The first category involves cases where the player’s movement is mediated through an interface such as a keyboard or gamepad. “Virtual” playformance generally revolves around videogames and involves finger movements. However, it is not always connected to videogames, as the puppeteering example shows. “Full body” involves other body parts in addition fingers. Similarly, it can relate both to videogames and to traditional play activities.
14.4.1 Gamepad rhetoric

Unlike most game and play activities, videogames usually mediate actions through an avatar or some kind of on-screen representation that is generally controlled through a gamepad. In these games, the player generally plays while sitting in front of the display, so her bodily performance is constrained to moving hands and fingers and maybe some limited trunk movement. Traditional games and plays often offer far more rich examples of playformance, involving activities that seem extreme when compared to videogame playing, such as walking, jumping or running. Some recent videogame interfaces, such as those present in DDR (1998- ), Eye Toy Play (2003) and notably Nintendo’s DS and Wii consoles may be part of a trend that could increase the relevance of body playformance.

Let’s start by first analyzing rhetoric in virtual playformance, when the player’s body movements are generally limited to her fingers and focus on the avatar’s performance. Since its early days, videogames have developed several conventions to frame meaning within avatar performance. Once some of these conventions have been analyzed, it will be the turn to study videogames that encourage body playformance beyond gamepad manipulation.

Videogames’ default interfaces are the gamepad, the joystick and the computer keyboard and mouse. Because these interfaces are so popular, designers have developed multiple techniques and conventions that apply to how players perform with them. Many of the techniques that I will list could be viewed as performance equivalents to rhetorical schemes. In rhetoric, figures of speech are “the smallest structural units of rhetorical stylistics” (Sloane, 2001: 309). They are divided into two categories: tropes and schemes. Tropes deal with the meaning of words while schemes deal with their structure (order, length, syntax). Many kinds of performances have coded meanings and, as such, they could be seen as tropes (using just the index and thumb fingers to mimic a gun, for exam-
ple). However, because gamepad performance mediates the avatar in-game performance, here I will rather focus on the player’s finger movements from a structural approach. I will analyze how different ways of pressing buttons and moving the pad can create meaning. My intent is not to create an exhaustive list but simply to identify some obvious cases in order to show how much we take for granted these rhetorical conventions, as well as illustrating some figures that seek to create a particular rhetorical effect.

-Natural mapping. According to interface expert Donald Norman, mapping can be defined as the relationship between “the controls and their movements and the results in the world” (1990: 23). Norman defines natural mapping as a relationship that takes “advantage of physical analogies and cultural standards” (ibid). An example of natural mapping in video-game controls is when players move the digital pad to their left, their avatar will also move accordingly on the screen. This is the default control convention in most videogames and it is hard to perceive it as a rhetorical device unless we study examples that sabotage it.

-Abitrary mapping. Travel with Trashman (1984) features a fascinating example of mapping—and therefore performance—sabotage in order to simulate drunkenness. One of the game levels requires that the avatar picks up empty beer jars during the Oktoberfest, the beer festival in Munich. The problem is that drinkers can take a while before fully emptying their jars. If the player is short on time, she may decide to grab some full jars before they finish with them. This means that her avatar ends up drinking the remaining beer and he can only do so a limited amount of times before getting drunk.

There are multiple possible visual conventions to convey the idea of drunkenness, such as a blurry image or a shaky camera movement. However, Travel with Trashman’s designers opted to create the effect of alcohol through a novel way: by creating a fuzzy control over the avatar. Instead, the designers could have simply inverted the control map-
ping. So, if the player expected that his avatar would go forward by pressing the forward key, he would actually be surprised to see it going backwards. This trick could have been effective for a short while, until the player learned how to move with inverted controls. In order to prevent this, the mapping is only inverted randomly, only during a brief amount of time. This means that the mapping switches back and forth between natural and inverted. If the players presses right, the avatar may go to the right for a few seconds but then the mapping would get inverted and he would start moving on the opposite direction. In order to make him move to the left again, the player then should press the right key. Again, this works for only a moment until the mapping gets inverted again. The resulting experience delivers a similar experience to drunkenness: rather than total lack of control, it is a fuzzy control over your virtual body. If you look at the avatar on the screen, he actually reacts to the player’s performance by moving in a drunken fashion. Notice that other games since then have used this technique. There is a spell in *World of Warcraft* that creates the same effect on players, even though it is not related to drinking.

- **Control interruption.** In many RPGs, enemies can momentarily trap you. For example, your avatar can get trapped on a spider web for a few seconds. During that period, the controls stop responding in order to simulate your avatar’s entrapment.

- **Physical endurance.** Atari’s *Decathlon* (1983) required the player to frantically move the joystick to the left and right in order to make the avatar run. This could be a physically demanding experience for the player. The resulting player exhaustion could be compared to the one she would have experienced if she had been running one of the sections of real decathlon. A similar technique has also been used for simulating masturbation in an untitled, anonymous Commodore 64 game from *circa* the mid 80s.
-Tiptoeing. In many stealth games such as the *Metal Gear Solid* (1998-) or *Splinter Cell* (2002-) series, the avatar can walk at full speed if you move the controller to its full capacity. However, if you want the character to tiptoe in order to avoid making noise and, therefore, being spotted, then the controller needs to be pushed just a bit. Moving your avatar in this mode requires some training.

-Stunned avatar. In many RPGs, when the avatar receives a particular kind of hit it will get “stunned”. This is simulated through the fact that the avatar speed decreases.

-Control continuity and consistency. We tend to assume that the interface conventions will remain consistent during the whole game session. However, this can be interrupted or modified for dramatic effect. For example, the playable character in the horror videogame *Eternal Darkness: Sanity’s Requiem* (2002) gradually goes insane. As his sanity level gets lower, strange things start to happen. Many of them are visual effects but in a certain moment, the game takes over the save function. It does not matter if the player presses the right buttons: the game will pretend that it erased all your save files. It is as if somebody else (the player’s crazy alter-ego) was controlling the game instead of her.

14.4.2 Elegant Avatar Performance

The previous examples showed some techniques related to the mapping between the player performance and the avatar’s. Within those cases, there is a subset of games where avatars are controlled to perform aesthetically pleasing moves.

Avatar body, gestural and facial language and expressions are the primary mode of conveying affect in MMOGs (Eladhari and Lindley, 2003). Generally, as it happens in many RPGs, players can trigger different pre-designed animations (such as dancing, kissing, bowing, spitting, waving goodbye). The use of avatar body performance in MMOGs replaces the lack of real body language, which helps disambiguating messages in these
games which heavily rely on textual chat. The subject of body and avatar performance in cyberspace has been covered extensively (see for example Stone, 1991 and Balsamo, 1993). This is why I would rather focus here on offline games that stress the ability of the player to play with the avatar’s body aesthetically. Not surprisingly, many of these games are related to sports. I would classify them in two groups: functional and non-functional aesthetic avatar performance. By functional I mean that the aesthetic avatar performance has a reward on the mechanics level (i.e., it allows the player to earn points). By non-functional, I mean when the avatar is manipulated mainly for the pleasure of it.

An early example of non-functional aesthetic avatar performance is found in Jordan Mechner’s *Karateka* (1984). In this game, the player controls a karateka that must rescue princess Mariko after fighting countless enemies. The game included a key for bowing, which apparently had no functional use on the game. I consulted the author (2006, personal communication) and he confirmed that the feature was originally included just for the sake of it but then it was tested as a requirement for winning the game. The original idea, he told me, was to introduce an action that seemed had no point at all but that would serve at the end of the game. If the karateka did not bow at the princess before rescuing her, she would kill him. However, Mechner explained that after testing the game, nobody figured that out, so they removed the requirement but left the bowing action. Still, he said that the bowing served one function: if you bowed at the first enemy by the gate, he would let you in without fighting. However, after that, bowing was completely useless and could only be used for entertainment purposes.

49 Of course, there are multiple videogames without avatars. It can certainly be argued that the elements on these games can be manipulated with grace and elegance, too. I merely focus on avatar-based games because it may be easier to grasp the potential beauty of their performance, based on the artistic conventions drawing from dance, sports and drama.

50 That puzzle was actually replaced by another one. At the end of the game, you would have to run towards the princess to prevent her from killing you. If you walked towards Mariko in fighting stance, she would kill you with a karate blow.
Videogame sports is a particular genre where aesthetic body performance is generally present. This is of course not surprising since sports are generally viewed as elegant experiences, both for the players and the spectators. Here are some examples where the player has a degree of control over the avatar that allows her to perform with elegance: Football (*Pro Evolution Soccer* (2001- ) series), Rollerblading (*Jet Set Radio* (2000)), Skating (*Tony Hawk* (1999- ) series), Dancing (*B-Boy* (2006)), Surfing, Cycling, Surfing (*California Games* (1987)). Such focus on elegant moves also applies to fighting games (such as in the *Street Fighter* (1987- ) series) and also to mechanized avatars, such as in flight simulators (following the real life tradition of flying acrobatics).

In the *Tony Hawk* series, it is generally required to achieve certain goals in order to move on to the next level. Some of those goals can involve tricks (difficult and sometimes spectacular moves). However, the player is always able to perform the tricks for the sake of them and/or in order to increase the score and/or to create a combo (a sequence of tricks can create a combo, a term used here in a slightly different way than it is used in fighting games\(^51\)). Independently from the player’s motivation, these games allow for a degree of avatar movement control that is far more complex than in other videogames. The degree of control –when mastered– can result in aesthetically pleasing performances similar to dancing (even though not necessarily tied to music). Dance-like performance is possible in many games, as it is exemplified by the *Quake III* rocket jumping videos created by the Tricking iT team (2004). The main difference is that the *Tony Hawk* games require and encourage players to perform aesthetically pleasing skateboarding tricks and stunts. In other words, the main goal of the game is to create a beautiful performance. Other games, such as *Quake III*, can also be used as tools for pleasing performances but they were not necessarily conceived for that purpose.

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\(^{51}\) In fighting games a combo is a combination of moves, while in this particular game a combo is a combination of moves but grouped as a series of small challenges.
Within the games where aesthetic avatar performance is functional to the scoring system, there are some where the task is particularly difficult and requires player virtuosity. This is best exemplified by fighting combos, generally available in fighting games such as in the Street Fighter series. Combos are “a set of actions performed in sequence, usually with strict timing limitations, that yield a significant benefit or advantage.” Wikipedia (2007). Combos are generally very difficult to perform and commonly make the avatar to perform in a spectacular way. Interestingly, Wikipedia does not recognize this aesthetic dimension—which applies both to the avatar movement and the virtuoso skill of the player—and instead focuses on the functional value of combos:

Combos are either used as an essential gameplay element (more commonly), or used merely as a high score or attack power modifier, not explicitly necessary for victory or survival. (Wikipedia, Combo (video games), 2007)

In many cases, the spectacularity of the avatar movement is matched by the virtuosim of the player’s own moves, who frantically presses buttons and moves the stick according to a complicated sequence. Within this category, the Mortal Kombat (1992-) series became famous because of its so-called “fatalities”: special combos that were used at the end of a match, where the player had the chance to kill the opponent in one out of several spectacularly violent ways52.

14.4.3 Performative mockery and parody: the virtual “chicken dance”

One interesting aspect of the Street Fighter series is the ability to taunt the opponents by performing moves that mock them. This is the in-game equivalent of the “chicken dance” and other actions performed in traditional games in order to humiliate an opponent. Notice that taunting can both be performed against an NPC fighter or against an avatar

52 While in Mortal Kombat I fatalities did increase the player’s score, they did not in the next two sequels.
controlled by a human player. Within the *Street Fighter* series, there is a particular character named Dan Hibiki who was introduced by Capcom, the game manufacturer, as a parody of their rival company SNK’s *Art of Fighting* series (1992-1996). Dan’s looks reference *Art of Fighting* characters but the parody was not merely visual but also performative: Dan’s moves are extremely weak. Actually, he is so weak that most players would simply ignore him when selecting a fighter.

There is another extra layer to this incursion into fighting parody. Since Dan’s character is actually playable, selecting it is a way of taunting your adversary, as it is described in this quote from Wikipedia:

> Due to his weak moves, Dan is widely regarded as a joke character, not to be used for any serious competition. He is also popular as a handicap to skilled players, as his weakness makes winning matches more difficult. As such, selecting Dan can in itself be seen as a taunt, since doing so implies high confidence that a player is superior in skill to his or her opponent. (Wikipedia, Dan Hibiki, 2007)

What was created as a parody for mocking the designer’s competitors, ended up being used as a tool for the player for taunting her opponents.

### 14.5 Full-Body Rhetoric

In the following examples the player’s body plays an essential role. This is particularly relevant in the case of videogames, which until recently only exceptionally were controlled with body parts other than fingers. New videogame technologies, such as *Eye Toy* or the Nintendo Wii, allow players to implement a broader set of body movements in order to control actions and avatars on the screen. Two particular videogames will be analyzed

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53 Interestingly, in spite of this intertextual dialogue between the two rival companies, they actually exploited their confrontation by creating together the *Capcom versus SNK* (1999- ) series, where players could play fights between both companies’ characters.
in depth, mainly because they directly refer to performative arts: karaoke games to singing and *Dance Dance Revolution* to dancing. In the later examples, playformance is not mediated by the computer and it involves the body in one of its most essential ways: as an erotic object. The examples will include traditional kissing games and a commercial party game.

**14.5.1 Karaoke as role-playing**

“You are a star, so act like one!” That was the motto of the original *SingStar* (2004), a karaoke-like party game for the Playstation 2 (PS2). Unfortunately, judging from many of the players that I heard during the last few years, most may act like a star but they certainly do not sound like one.

This PS2 game includes two microphones and allow players to sing along to popular pop songs. The lyrics are displayed as text on the screen as they need to be sang. The game also provides visual feedback on the accuracy of the singing, so it is easy to see if the player is singing off key.

New games do not grow in a cocoon and this is also true both for *SingStar* and karaoke in general. When Sony launched *SingStar Legends*, it created a promotional video that paid homage to the long tradition of singing and role-playing. The video shows different scenes in the life of a girl, from her early years to her late teens. In each scene, she is shown singing along to a song. At first, she does it without using any props but later she creates make-believe microphones by first singing into a spray can and then into a shower nozzle. The video ends with the girl now as a young woman who is playing *SingStar* while holding a real microphone (the one provided with the game). It concludes with the *SingStar Legends* logo followed by the message: “We know that you’ve been practicing”. The mar-
Marketing tradition in the videogame industry has always been to frame products around their novelty and high technology. It is particularly interesting that instead of going this way, SingStar designers decided to situate the game within the larger context of musical role-playing. Thus, SingStar becomes just another way of doing what you have been doing all your life: singing along while mimicking real pop stars. As the game’s motto suggests, if you want to pretend that you are a star, you should behave like one. It would be too short-sighted to argue that SingStar is just a singing game. Based on its own advertising, it is clear that it is marketed also as a game for role-playing, even though not a classic RPG.

The rhetoric of make-believe is particularly exceptional. Traditionally, when a speaker attempts to persuade her audience, she tries to convince them, to change their views or positions on a certain subject or even act in a way that they originally did not intend to. The situation with role-playing games is different because the “audience” does indeed want to play along: they actually want to be persuaded. It would be particularly hard for the game designer to force the player into believing or doing something that she does not want to. What the game designer can do is shape the experience and discourage or facilitate certain actions and performances. Within that range of options, the player will play along.

Both karaoke and SingStar encourage a very specific kind of singing, which is solo and duo singing with an audience. Of course, both games can be played in solitary but it is clear that they are marketed as social, party games. These games offer an excuse to sing and goof around with friends, regardless if players are good or bad singers. Naturally, competition is also possible but, even in that context, these games can serve as an ice breaker to encourage singing and dancing among people who would normally not do it in public. The main rhetorical message of SingStar is: you can perform like a rock star in front of your friends. The game does not guarantee that the singer will not be embarrassed but the fact that everybody is taking their turn can help making the experience less threatening.
for shy and/or poor singers. The game provides players not only with an excuse for singing but also with all the required elements: the music, the lyrics, the video clips, microphones and a little help from the game rules. The latter is what differentiates SingStar from traditional karaoke. Karaoke machines simply allow players to sign along by displaying the song’s lyrics on the screen. That text is synchronized to the music, which generally is a voiceless song track (in Japanese, karaoke literally means “empty orchestra”). SingStar also follows these mechanics but introduces a couple of minor but essential changes. The videogame measures the tone of the player’s singing and tells her when he is singing too high, too low or getting the right tone. According to this, the player performance is measured into a final score. Traditional karaoke is different because it is not judged by a computer but by the audience. Since the audience is not a machine that can objectively measure sound frequencies, they may not simply judge the singer’s pitch, but also other dimensions of the performance, such as originality, body movement, style, dancing, attitude, etc. Outside competitive and professional karaoke environments, the judgement is generally informal and may include congratulation, mockery or indifference towards the singer. However, since SingStar introduces a discrete form of measuring singing abilities, it offers a way to objectively measure competition between players through a grade rule. In other words, it turns the karaoke play experience into a game. Certainly, karaoke can be a competitive game but SingStar is different because it offers this possibility out of the box. So, SingStar is competitive by default, while karaoke is not. Does this mean that SingStar is more competitive than karaoke? Probably, but that does not necessarily mean that SingStar players do not engage into other non-quantified performances such as dancing and mimicking rock stars. Arguably, the mimicking of pop stars can also be a powerful source of joy for players that can complement and even become more important than the actual singing competition. Technically, the rules of SingStar state that players must sing in the right key in order to win. However, it would be hard to infer from these simple rules the role
that body performance can play in this game.

Traditional games allow players to empathize with characters through avatars. In Halo: Combat Evolved (2001), you are a space marine because you control the actions of Master Chief. However, SingStar does not use empathy to make players feel like a pop star. Instead, they allow them to make the connection solely through body performance. Arguably, singing *Like a Virgin* in SingStar may get a player closer to feeling like Madonna than any photorealistic depiction of the diva controlled by a joystick. An image may be worth a thousand words but, sometimes, playformance can be worth a thousand images.

14.5.2 DDR: You can dance!

What karaoke is to singing, *Dance Dance Revolution* (DDR) is to dancing. This series of games developed by Konami allow players to dance to a particular song while stomping a pressure-sensitive mat. The player stands in the center of a square mat with nine subdivisions that serve as giant feet buttons. These mat buttons need to be stomped upon while following a particular sequence of arrows that are displayed on the screen. The button sequence is pre-
synchronized to the song, so the player dances as a result of managing to press the floor buttons on the right order.

Even though now people can play DDR by themselves at home, the game originally started as an arcade game. This meant that the game’s performance was a public one. Just like karaoke, it started as a game where players could not hide from an audience watching their performance. This has lead to virtuoso players to showcase their skills not just by reaching high scores but particularly by skillfully dancing and performing complicated moves and tricks (most of these being non-functional to the game’s scoring system).

Body performance is so important in this game that probably one of the few ways of appreciating its relevance is by analyzing how reducing the dancing mat in size can have enormous consequences in the game itself. Figure 12 shows a mini-dancing pad, a novelty controller that allows players to use the console-based version of DDR with their fingers and not their feet. This kind of controller is a rarity; it never caught on as a popular interface for the game. What is particularly interesting about it is that the only material difference between traditional DDR and its “finger” version is the size of the buttons. Everything else remains exactly the same. On the rule level, the rules remain unchanged – both versions share the exact same software. On the playworld level, the music is the same, the visuals are the same, again the only change is the size of the mat. But on the performance level, the games are completely different. If you watched, side by side, one person playing DDR and another playing it with a finger controller, it would be hard to argue that they are playing the same game. A system-centric approach to the game that merely focused on the rules would simply ignore how relevant player performance can be. Arguably, DDR can be as much about dancing as it is pressing buttons in the right order.
Unlike SingStar, DDR does not have a motto. But if it had one, following ABBA’s old hit *Dancing Queen*, it could be: “You can dance!” Rhetorically, the game persuades the player into becoming a dancer on a dance floor (the arcade machine clearly simulates a discotheque environment, complete with boom speakers and strobe lights). Certainly, some players will dance more than others but even those who methodically follow the arrows without any unnecessary body movements could be said to be dancing. After all, they are moving their bodies to the rhythm of music, even if they do it in a clumsy or unsophisticated way.

Outside the videogame sphere, dancing mats such as those used in DDR can also be used to persuade people to dance in places where they usually would not. In 1587, Japanese feudal lord Hachisuka Iemasu finished the construction of his castle in the town of Tokushima—then known as Awa—in the island of Shikoku. In order to celebrate this event, he offered sake to the villagers, who became so drunk that they started dancing. These are the origins of the Awa dance—or Awa Odori—which is traditionally performed in Tokushima each August during the Bon festival. The Awa dance is performed by everybody, regardless of gender or age. It is danced in the streets as a parade where most of the citizens participate. This is how the Japanese National Tourist Organization (JNTO, 2007) describes the event:

![Image of Awa Odori museum in Tokushima, Japan, featuring a dancing mat for visitors to learn and practice the traditional Awa Odori dancing moves.](image)
The Awa-Odori is characterized by irregular steps and by the jovial and energetic uptempo rhythm. Separated into groups of men and women, the dancers parade through the city while dancing to music played on drums, gongs used when praying to Buddha and at festivals, three-stringed Japanese musical instruments, and flutes. The basic rule of this dance is to move your right arm forward with your right leg and your left arm forward with your left leg in turns to the two-beat rhythm.

The festival is a well-known tourist attraction but the city of Tokushima managed to create a solution to satisfy tourists who happen to visit it when the festival is not taking place. The Awa Odori Hall combines a museum and a dance hall that promises “Awa Odori all year around! Exciting stage will make you want to dance!” (Discover Japan, 2007). The museum explains the history of the dance, as well as displaying costumes and artifacts related to the festival. Additionally, it includes videos of the dance being performed, not just by humans but also by robots—this is Japan, after all. One particularly interesting artifact is a DDR-like game, freely available to visitors. It features a five button mat, designed to match the different steps of the Awa dance. Unlike all the other elements in the museum, this game serves two main functions. Firstly, it certainly teaches visitors the basic steps of the Awa dance. Secondly, it persuades them into trying the dance by themselves on the museum floor. One could think of other strategies used by the exhibit designers to encourage visitors to dance. For example, they could run a video asking visitors to follow the steps and dance along. However, it would seem as if the dancing mat was a more persuasive to get participants to give the dance a try. Even though the mat can recreate the feeling of dancing the Awa Odori, it is a limited experience given that the dance is by nature a multiplayer event. Still, through her playformance, the player understands certain aspects of Awa Odori in a way that is different than the other audiovisual
artifacts available in the museum. Dance is a clear example of an art form that cannot be fully grasped simply through images and sounds: it needs to be experienced in order to be understood. The dancing mat may not turn visitors into Awa Odori expert dancers but provides them with an experience that, while still mediated and constructed, may feel phenomenologically closer to the actual dance54.

14.5.3 Kissing games

By kissing and sexual games I am referring to traditional games that play on the borderline of what is socially acceptable. These games generally involve kissing and minimal bodily contact but never nudity nor intercourse. There are, of course, several non-ambiguous games for adult couples, such as Paradice (figure 14), a sex position dice available for sale online at sites such as BacheloretteParties.com. This game consists of two sets of dice which are advertised to glow in the dark. One dice features six different sexual positions. The second dice features six different house locations, such as kitchen, bathroom, etc. The game consists on throwing the dice and performing the featured sexual act in the featured room.

Paradice is a straightforward sex game, in the sense that it takes for granted that players want to fully engage in sexual activity. Traditional sexual folk games are less explicit and more ambiguous, in the sense that participants are attracted by their sexual nature but are not willing to engage into sexual activities in an openly way. In his 1959 article “The Kissing Games of Adolescents in Ohio”, Brian Sutton-Smith describes about fifty different games involving kisses which were particularly popular among teenagers. He also identifies how these games had evolved from the 19th century, where they were generally

54 The Awa Odori hall, which is located in the same building as the museum, offers a stage where the dance is performed by professional dancers. At the end of the session, the public is invited to dance. In this case, the Awa dance is also understood through playformance. It lacks the dancing steps cues offered by the mat game but, on the other hand, it offers a multiplayer experience.
associated with games representing courtship and marriage among other activities. Interestingly, he also notices that at that time kissing was more often used as an in-game penalty rather than a reward.

A popular example of kissing game is known as Spin the bottle. The rules can vary but it generally involves players sitting in a circle and spinning a bottle in the center of them. The player who spins the bottle must kiss the one that the bottle points at. The kissed player becomes the spinner in the next round. As Sutton-Smith points out, part of the interest of the game comes from the cheating and the negotiation that emerges when players argue to whom the bottle is really pointing to. There is not, however, ambiguity in Spin the Bottle's design. Kisses are a direct consequence of rules, so the sexual activity is determined by the player's decision to abide or contest those rules. Pass the Orange is a relay game also described by Sutton-Smith where a person holds an orange under her chin by pressing it against the neck. The goal is to get it under another player's chin without using the hands. Once again, this game only involves kissing by the enforcement of rules. Sutton-Smith describes three possible variants, where players kiss if they successfully pass the orange or a different variant where they must kiss if they drop it to the floor. The third variant does not involve a kiss at all. Still, it is fair to call the three variants sexual because, even if there is no kissing, the game raises sexual tension by leading two players to keep their bodies and faces extremely close.

Of all the kissing games described by Sutton-Smith, there is one that generates particularly ambiguous situations. Its elegant design is based on the fact that, unlike the pre-
vious examples, kisses are not instructed by rules but may still happen. Call it “emergent kissing” if you want. The game is called *Biting the apple* and sets two couples of the opposite sex against each other. Two apples hang from the ceiling, each one by a different string. This first couple to eat the apple without touching it with their hands wins the game. Because the game is a competition, players wants to eat the apple as fast as they can. Such a rush sabotages any attempt at taking a methodic strategy, such as the one when one of the players holds the apple still with his/her mouth so the other one can chew it away. However, what commonly happens is that the apple slips away from between the players, who can end up kissing each other because of the inertia of their movements.

Sutton-Smith quotes Swanton (quoted originally by Alice B. Gomme (1894-98)) as saying the “kissing occurs only by accident and is something to avoid”. This statement is right in the sense that most players would arguably agree that this is what happens “in theory”. However, the thrill of the game is due to the ambiguity of the possibility of kissing. On the one hand, kissing does not necessarily have to happen – hence it becomes an “accident”. However, it is frequent enough for it almost becoming an expected “norm” of the game. To use computer terms, these kisses are somehow located between being a “bug” and a “feature”: an ambiguous state that elegantly matches the feelings that many young adolescents have towards the opposite sex. Sutton-Smith’s sources also point out two other variants involving doughnuts or candy bars instead of apples. However, I would argue that among Western players the apple is a more interesting design choice because it provides an additional erotic subtext to the game, given the apple’s sexual symbolism within the Judeo-Christian culture.

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56 Even though Sutton-Smith does not mention it, the variant of the game that I am familiar with also states that a couple will lose if the string is broken or if the apple gets detached from it.

57 Sadly, there are also some not-so-charming side-effects, such as biting your co-player or bumping your teeth against his/hers.
When I mentioned the apple kissing game to one of my students at the IT University of Copenhagen, he mentioned a similar game involving cards. I do not know if the game has a name, but I will refer to it as *Pass the card* [58]. This is how Marie Epson (2007) describes its rules at Party Game Central, a website specialized in party games:

Have everyone stand in a circle alternating girl-boy-girl-boy etc. The first person (a boy for example) takes a playing card and puts it to their mouth and inhales sharply to allow the card to stay suctioned to their mouth without using hands. The next person (a girl) then must place their mouth on the opposite side of the playing card and inhale to suction the card to their mouth. The first boy at the same time exhales to release the card. The girl must quickly turn around so that the next boy in line can suction the card to his mouth in the same way. This continues around the circle as many times as possible.

This game is similar to the apple kissing game in the sense that the rules introduce kissing as an accident that may or may not happen. There are however a couple of subtle distinctions. The first is that this is not a competitive game involving teams, so it is possible that “achiever” players of the apple game—to use Richard Bartle’s (1996) typology of players—are so focused on beating the other team that may ignore the kissing aspect. But more importantly, kissing on the apple game only happens if the apple slips and the player lips happen to encounter each other. While this is likely to happen, it is perfectly possible to avoid it players are careful enough. The card game has a time limit created by the lung capacity of each player. In other words, the kissing is always bound to happen if the players do not switch the cards fast enough. Additionally, because this game requires both players lips to be next to each other—only separated by the card—a player simply can modify the amount of air in his/her lungs if he/she wants the kiss to happen. Arguably, the card game is better suited for players who want more kissing, because not only it is more likely to happen than on the apple game but also it is easier to provoke it without generating much suspicion.

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[58] Not to be confused with the game that Sutton-Smith describes as “The Card Game”, involving kissing and slapping.
I first wrote about this game just by hearsay. A few months later, I was in a party describing my research and I happened to mention this particular kissing game. Some friends decided to give it a try, so we found a deck of cards and started passing the card around. I thought I had a pretty good idea of how the game worked. After all, I was familiar with the rules and, I assumed that it was enough to infer what a typical session would look like. I was really wrong. I could not have predicted a little detail that heavily affects the gameplay. It is one of those things that once you see it, you think that it is so obvious that you should have thought about it. What happened to the players is that, at least during the first game sessions, sucking a card and passing it around is quite a surreal and comic situation, particularly when the players faces get really close to each other. What I was not able to predict is that, facing this situation, players seem to naturally tend to laugh. Physiologically, breathing in and laughing are incompatible actions. So, as soon as a person laughed, she would drop the card. And she would laugh at the fact that she dropped the card, so a vicious circle started. The game was still playable but in a much more difficult and hilarious way that I could have thought. It was a double lesson for me as a researcher. First, I should have tried the game before writing about it. And secondly, I found myself experiencing firsthand my own thesis: rules are not enough for understanding games; some aspects can only be learnt by doing. It was playformance in action.

Figure 15. La Gallina Ciega ("Blind Man’s Bluff") by Francisco Goya, 1789.
There is another variant to this game that involves an ice cube instead of a card (let’s call it *Pass the ice cube*). The mechanics are similar: the ice cube must pass from one player to the other just by using their mouth. Unlike in *Pass the card*, kissing here is almost inevitable, since the ice cube is wet and slippery and it must be held by the player’s teeth and/or lips.

In *7 minutes in heaven*, two players agree to lock themselves in a closet for a certain period of time (supposedly during seven minutes). No other player can witness what happens inside the closet, so the kissing (and potentially hugging and caressing) is up to the two participants.

The previous games are clearly built around kissing but other games can acquire a sexual dimension, too. This is true about a game called in Spanish “La Gallina Ciega” (literally, “the blind hen”) painted by both Pieter Brueghel The Elder in 1560 (as part of his famous *Children’s Games*) and Francisco Goya in 1788. The game is known in English as *Blind Man’s Bluff*. According to Sanchez et al. (2006), the origins of this game can be traced to the Roman Empire, when it was known as *Musca Aenea* which literally meant “the metallic fly”. In this game, one of the players is blindfolded and she must both catch another player and recognize him or her through the touch (generally by touching the face). Children generally play this game with total innocence but the situation can change if played by teenagers or adults.
Adult sex games such as *Paradice* are nothing but ambiguous: they take for granted sexual intimacy and they mainly influence how it is going to take place. It is not by accident that adolescents—who are discovering their sexuality—are the main players of kissing games. In order to explain the concept of metacommunication, Bateson gives the example of two dogs who play to bite at each other: “The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (1972: 181). Similarly, kisses in kissing games are both kisses and not kisses at the same time. Certainly, they are kisses and, as such, they can be sexually arousing. But at the same time, players have the excuse that they are part of a game. Rhetorically, these playful kisses can work as a simulation of a kiss given in a situation outside of play, such as in a date\textsuperscript{59}. The game and date kisses may be identical in performance but the experiences are framed differently.

This collection of games induce kisses in many different ways. As such, it offers a good panorama of examples upon which infer different design techniques for encouraging kissing interactions. All the reviewed cases are popular games. They have evolved through decades and probably centuries and it is impossible to trace back a single author. In that sense, it is difficult to argue that a designer persuaded the players to kiss or not. Nevertheless, even without an identifiable author, these games generate a nuanced spectrum of play behaviors. In *7 minutes in heaven*, the game provides a private environment that is constrained in time and space. It is up to the players to enter the secluded area. Of course, entering does not necessarily mean accepting to kiss. The pair may or may not kiss once inside the closet, even though players may feel that it is risqué enough simply to accept to be alone together. Kissing is certainly the main reason for this game but, arguably, part of its attraction is also due to not kissing. This can happen when one of the players is aware

\textsuperscript{59} Be certain that I am not arguing that date kissing is better than make-believe ones: I am just saying that they are different. Following a similar line of thought, it could be argued that sex could be a simulation of love—or vice-versa.
of her partner’s attraction to her and entices him to believe that they will kiss only to refuse it at the last moment. In other kissing games where public is present, kissing is masqueraded into an accident (Biting the apple) or a command (Spin the Bottle), rather than as a straightforward action. In Pass the card, kissing can also happen as an accident but one that it is very easy to trigger. Pass the ice cube works similarly game but kissing is almost inevitable. Rather than being a game that plays on the border between kiss and no kiss, it serves as an excuse for having fun kissing people you would normally not kiss. The difference between the last two games is merely a prop: a card and an ice cube. However, the behaviors that it provokes among players are notably different.

The study of variations of the same game can be extremely useful not only for the play rhetoric scholar but also for the game designer, who can identify techniques that may lead to different nuances of player behaviors. That is why the next case study is not a traditional game but a commercial one. Even though it does not involve kissing, it draws upon the tradition of this genre of games.

14.5.4 Twister: Designing sexuality

In spite of their popularity among teenagers, sexually ambiguous games can also be played by adults. One of the most popular examples in the 20th century is a game called Twister, created in 1966 and marketed by Milton Bradley (now Hasbro). The game involves two or more players (three or four are the ideal number) and it includes two props. The first is a plastic mat with large colored dots...
printed on it. The second is a spinner that tells players to put one of their extremities (right and left hands and feet) over a dot of a certain color. The game requires quite a deal of acrobatic skills, because players have to maintain their equilibrium in awkward positions while sharing the limited mat space with the other participants.

Even though, according to the manufacturer’s website, the game is currently marketed to ages “6 & Up”, it started as a party game for adults. According to German game and puzzle scholar Tortle Sillke (2007), “Milton Bradly’s competitors accused them of selling ‘sex in a box’ when they released [Twister]”. Certainly, part of the attraction of the game is based on the fact that it generally evolves into complex body entanglements. Unlike the previous examples that I analyzed, players are not standing up but instead they are required to stay on their fours for extended periods of time. This results in the physical contact or proximity between multiple erogenous zones. Similarly to what happened in Biting the Apple, sexual performance is not required by rules. However, due to the gameplay, it is likely that a player will end up being “too close” to another player’s body. Unlike Biting the Apple, Twister generally involves more than two persons and has no gender-exclusive rules. Because of this, bodily contact can happen both between same and opposite genders.

Before its launch, Milton Bradley executives were nervous about the sexual content of their game and considered it to be a risky business move. However, the game became extremely successful after being first broadcasted on Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show, a very popular, mainstream U.S. TV program. This is Sillke’s (ibid) account of how the game was first introduced to the U.S. public:

[Milton Bradley’s] fear of public criticism and its own skepticism about its potential for success were obliterated when Johnny Carson demonstrated the game on the "Tonight Show". And it didn’t hurt matters that Eva Gabor [Zsa Zsa’s sister], wearing a low-cut gown, was one of Johnny’s guests that night.
With Eva splayed out on all fours on the polkadot vinyl mat, Johnny twirled the spinner and took his turn. When he climbed on top of Eva, the studio audience went into hysterics, screaming and laughing. Milton Bradley executives knew immediately (sic) they had a huge hit on their hands. More than three million copies of Twisters were sold during its first year of release.

In spite of its origins as a game for adults, Twister seems to be currently marketed towards a younger audience, mainly children and teenagers. This is hinted by the age of the players displayed on the current game’s cover as well for the fact that, according to Hasbro.com, “Milton Bradley runs a TWISTER program for colleges and high schools. More than 1,000 schools have taken part in this program.”

Even though the previous games that I have analyzed are categorized as sexual, I am not necessarily arguing that sex is necessarily the main reason behind people playing them. Nor I am saying that they cannot be played in an innocent manner. However, what games like Pass the Orange, Biting the Apple and Twister have in common is that, while not being explicitly sexual, they do frequently create sexual situations. And even if they do not actually happen, the mere idea that they could happen may be enough to arouse the players.

In spite of the fact that some videogames have dared into sexual content on their graphics and sounds, it is harder to find examples of games that encourage sexually suggestive performance. This may be due both to the fact that most games are more focused on what happens on the screen than on the player’s body, as well as the videogame industry being prude. Apart from rumble packs or Rez’s “Trance Vibrator” been used as a masturbatory aid (Pinckard, 2002), videogames generally do not create physically-ambiguous situations similar to the ones generated by Twister, at least not with the player’s real body. As Yee, Bailenson et al. (in press) have noticed, avatars in MMOGs maintain the player’s cultural values for personal space. In other words, players from different backgrounds have different ideas of what it means to stand too close to another avatar and this maps to
the distance that they keep when they speak to people offline. Hopefully, the current trend on both “party” videogames combined with new interfaces such as the Eye Toy camera or the Wii controller could at least technically lead to the creation of such games.

Kissing and sexual games offer a particular insight on the issue of game rules because they show how a same set of rules can lead to totally different games. *Twister* designers\(^{60}\), Chuck Foley and Neil Rabens, explain the same ambiguity about their game:

> The sexual innuendo that grown-ups projected onto the game sashayed in on the heels of its introduction. Neil Rabens was disappointed. “Watch kids play it and its nothing but innocent fun,” he said. “The rules are exactly the same, no matter who’s playing – it’s adults that twist everything around.” Chuck Foley offered the best explanation of Twister’s often-contradictory allure: “Dirty mind, dirty game. Clean mind, clean game.” (Walsh, 2004, p.204)

Rabens’ observation is a perfect illustration of the limits of approaching games as rule systems. As *Twister* shows, different players can play different games, even if all follow the same exact rules. Rules, as it happens with laws and regulations in the judiciary system, do leave plenty of room for ambiguity and interpretation (otherwise lawyers would not have a job.) *Twister* shows us something that a generation raised on gamepads and keyboards may have forgotten: the human body is a source of enjoyment.

### 14.6 More artsy performances

There are many other examples of games and play activities that heavily rely on player’s performance. The two previous cases dealt with singing and dancing respectively. What follows is a brief list of examples connected to other classic forms of expression

- **Drawing**: The game *Pictionary: The Game of Quick Draw* (1985) combines both drawing and visual language skills. Because the game is played in real-time, it does not only fo-

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\(^{60}\) As it happens sometimes in toy and non-electronic design, different people attribute themselves authorship. Designer Neil Rabens also claims co-authorship of *Twister*. However, Foley and Rabens contend that they are the sole inventors of the game (Walsh, 2004: 203-204).
cus on the end result (the final drawing) but also in the process. This means that the player generally does not have enough time to create an elaborate picture. Instead, she must transfer her vision onto paper through rapid sketches.

Very few videogames involve real-time drawing. The introduction of Nintendo’s touch screen interface allowed to incorporate simple drawing performances into some of its games. An example is Namco’s *Pac-Pix* (2005), where the player is in charge of drawing a Pac-man avatar as well as the walls of the labyrinth were the action takes place.

- **Acting**: This kind of performance is present in multiplayer role-playing games, such as LARPs or MMORPGs. It can include body performance as well as verbal.

- **Music**. In addition to dancing, certain games and toys allow players to compose music. One example is *Electroplankton* (2005) for the Nintendo DS, which allows players to compose electronic music. However, there are multiple non-videogame-based examples of musical games centered around performative skills. A clear example is the “cutting session”, a form of jazz battle where musicians improvise while trying to outdo each other.

- **Poetry**. There are also examples of games that require on-the-fly verbal skills, such as rap or freestyle battles. These contests require participants to improvise rap lyrics in order to engage into a sung conversation while trying to insult or outwit their opponent. Such singing duels have been traditional for centuries in South America, where Argentinean and Uruguayan gauchos engage in what is called a “payada” (short for “payada de contrapunto”, which is one of the direct musical influences of tango). Two singers, accompanied by guitars, must engage into a singed conversation that both follows the rhythm and replies to the other with the Wittiest response. It is quite easy to identify formal mistakes that may lead to a player losing one of these duels—such as playing or
singing off-key or creating verses that do not rhyme—, a task that a computer could conceivably perform. However, identifying who created the wittiest and more elegant verses is an aesthetic judgment that current computer technology cannot deal with. Videogames such as SingStar may be able to tell if players sing off key but we are far from being capable of creating a payada or rap duel videogame that takes into account elegance both at the wit and bodily level.

15. A CASE STUDY: Rhetoric and meaning in russian roulettes

In order to conclude this section, I will provide an analysis of a group of games. Unlike what happens in other disciplines within the communication field, rhetoric is particularly concerned with authorial intent. However, it is generally extremely difficult to know for sure what was the designer’s agenda when she crafted a game. Nevertheless, certain genres offer some hints. For example, a game released by a political party is likely to be created in order to support its ideas. Similarly, a game that is marketed as educational will almost certainly attempt to educate. However, most games and toys fall into the broad category of entertainment and do not provide clear clues about their agendas, except that they are made for the enjoyment of the player. Naturally, this does not mean that the game does not carry an ideological baggage and may attempt to convey ideas or induce actions in the player.

This last case study reviews several games and toys. They are particular in the sense that, while they aim at entertaining, they all attempt to recreate another game. We could say that they are simulations—in the traditional, computer science sense of the term— or, to use Bolter and Grusin’s (2000) terminology, “remediations” of another game. These games are also adaptations, meaning that they recreate another game but they do
not retain all of its original characteristics (in this case, for safety reasons). The cases that I will analyze are harmless versions of the game of Russian Roulette.

Russian Roulette—from now on, RR—is a fascinating game for many reasons. It is a gambling game where the player’s life is at stake—arguably the most “serious” kind of game that there is. More importantly, because the game is haunted with the presence of suicide, it is not the kind of party game that people openly play. Therefore, it is both a taboo and mysterious game that appeals because of its extremity. A famous depiction of RR in popular culture can be seen in Michael Cimino’s film about Vietnam war, The Deer Hunter (1978) which won 5 Oscars including Best Picture. The film features Robert De Niro playing Michael Vronsky, a U.S. soldier who is captured by the Vietcong and forced to play RR against his friends.

Most of the available research on RR has been done by psychologists specializing in suicide—a discipline known as suicidology. RR is particularly difficult to analyze because it is generally played under a shred of secrecy. Additionally, police statistics may simply catalog its deaths under “suicide” without specifying that a game was involved. There is an interesting legal problem, because RR deaths can either be classified as suicides—because the person shoots herself—or as accidents—because arguably the person meant to win the game, hence her death is an accident (Keck et al., 1998 quoted by Goldsmith (ed), 2002: 380). Even though the game is closely connected to suicide, its players differed significantly from suicidal people who shot themselves. According to Fishbain et al., RR victims are:

- significantly less likely to die in the bedroom, die in the morning, leave a suicide note, and be depressed but were significantly more likely to have alcohol or drugs in their body fluids and to have a previous history of drug and alcohol abuse. (1987: 563)
Once again, RR studies are generally performed *a posteriori*, after the player died, so it is very hard to evaluate how frequently this game is played (because it is possible to argue that significant amounts of people play it only once and desist from playing again if they survive\(^{61}\)). RR is generally featured both in popular culture and in research as a multiplayer game. However, unless they left a note stating “I was playing RR” the game could perfectly be played by single players whose deaths would be simply attributed to normal gunshot suicide.

The rules of RR can vary but its basic mechanism involves including one or more bullets inside the cylinder of a revolver, spinning it, pointing the barrel to the player’s head and pulling the trigger. If the player survives, the gun is handed over to the next participant, who spins the barrel again and repeats the process. The playformance involved in this game is quite limited—pointing at the head and pulling the trigger— but the tension that it builds seems to be its main appeal, along with the player’s defiance towards death.

For obvious reasons, RR never became a mainstream game. However, several games tried to capture the fascination that it provokes by creating simulations that leave out its deadly risks. Certainly, it can be argued that a RR version without the risk of death

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\(^{61}\) Players have 5 chances in 6 of surviving but, again, it is possible to play the game with more than one bullet on the revolver’s cylinder.
is a different game from the actual RR. That is precisely why RR game adaptations are
such a challenge, since they aim at reproducing the suspense and thrill of the original
game while keeping the game harmless. I will describe four different games based on RR,
while analyzing the rhetoric techniques used to provide players with a substitute experi-
ence that tries to remain true in spirit to the original game.

15.1.1 Kaba-Kick: Russian Roulette for kids

The Kaba-Kick gun was manufactured by Takura Toys and discontinued in 1992 (The
Anchorage Press, 2004). Information is scarce about this toy gun but it is a staple in web-
sites dealing with odd Japanese products. While I have never been able to manipulate this
toy, the included illustration seems to be quite self-explanatory. The pink, plastic gun can
be loaded with plastic “bullets”. The player must point it to her head and pull the trigger. In
some cases, the player will get a “kick” by the feet of the pink Hippo character which spring
out of the gun’s barrel.

According to vito90, a poster at community weblog Metafilter, the hippo featured in
the toy’s box carries a sign that means “Safe!” in Japanese. Certainly, this seems to be the
main concern of the designers –after all, how would you convince parents to buy children a
toy based on such a controversial amusement as RR? However, its safety is not just con-
veyed by the written sign but it is part of the toy design. This game’s playworld was cre-
ated to clearly differentiate it from the one in RR’s. The Kaba-Kick gun is without a doubt
different from an actual revolver in terms of size, shape, materials and colors. This oddly
shaped, brightly colored plastic gun has only structural similarities with a metallic revolver
–basically, it has a barrel, a grip and a trigger. Additionally, it features a hippopotamus
character, an animal that never appears in any literature associated with real or fictional
depictions of RR. Unlike a revolver, the Kaba-Kick does not feature a cylinder: the over-
sized, plastic bullets are loaded through the back of the gun, as shown on the picture included on the toy’s box cover. While the Kaba-Kick playworld distances itself from RR, both its playformance and mechanics are quite similar. It would seem that the main difference at the mechanic level seems to be that there is no spinning of the cylinder. From a haptic perspective, it is impossible to know if there is a kickback after firing a shot but it is unlikely that it would be similar to the one produced by an actual gun. It is unclear through which mechanical device the game generates the required randomness for the shots. A possibility is that some of the bullets “kick” while others do not, a fact that is hidden to the player because all the bullets look alike. The process of passing the gun, pointing it at the player’s head and pulling the trigger can be identical to the actions involved in the original game.

Obviously, the core difference between Kaba-Kick and RR is that the former game is not potentially mortal. It is interesting that death is represented through a mix of surprise and physical pain produced by the kicking. Of course, neither the designer nor the player have a first-hand experience of how does it feels to be dead. So, the experience is recreated by the use of metonymy, a rhetorical trope that works by replacing “death” with “pain”, based on the fact that generally we connect violent death with pain.
The Kaba-Kick is an interesting case of a toy that attempts to be RR to a certain degree and not just by removing the possibility of death. It attempts to be on the edge between its controversial subject and a harmless toy “aiming” at kids.

15.1.2 The Beer Hunter

The name of this drinking game is an obvious pun of the title of the film *The Deer Hunter*. There are multiple variations of this traditional game but basically it involves a six pack of beer cans, one of which it is shaken vigorously to build up pressure. The cans are mixed so it is impossible to know which one is the “loaded” can. According to some versions (as described on Drinknation.com) players must hold the can under their nostrils. Other online descriptions versions (such as Chris Tann’s at galactic-guide.com) indicate that players must hold the can’s opening next to one of their ears. Again, according to different accounts, the game can be played turn-based (as in RR) or simultaneously.

Unlike the Kaba-Kick, *The Beer Hunter*’s playworld does not try to make any reference to an actual gun. In terms of playformance, there is no trigger to pull. Instead, the player must pull the can’s ring. These are different actions but they have in common that both are performed with the index finger and both involve metallic objects that show some resistance to pressure and then are followed by a click. There is no bullet involved but the “shot” is mimicked through the high-pressured splash of beer and the pain/discomfort that it produces to the player. Interestingly, the versions of the game in-
volve the “shot” entering the head—in what could refer to the entrance of a bullet—through the head’s orifices through which beer should not normally enter. Once again, the shot is recreated metaphorically but, unlike the Kaba-Kick’s, it actually enters into the player’s head.

15.1.3 Chocolate Russian Roulette

If the previous example was a case of “drinking game”, then this one is an “eating game”. The Chocolate Russian Roulette Game is distributed in Europe by Firebox.com (information about its manufacturer, however, is not available online). The box does not include a toy gun—even though one is featured as a box cover illustration. Instead, it includes a dozen of chocolates shaped like bullets, one of which is filled with hot chili pepper. Players are supposed to eat the chocolates simultaneously until one of the player experiences the hot filling which, according to the box, will “blow your head off”. Online retailer Shushhh.co.uk offers different descriptions on how to play the game. Players can either select a bullet or the case holding them can be spun and players must chose the bullet that is pointing at them.

In this version of RR, the gun is not reproduced but rather evoked through the bullet-shaped chocolates, as well as by the container that can spin like a barrel. However, the game features twelve chocolate bullets, while most revolvers only can hold six. There is no trigger to be pulled, so the playformance is quite different from RR’s. The mechanics of the game—taking turns—remains similar to the original referent. However, the suspense of RR is reproduced by chemical means. According to the game’s description at Firebox.com:

“The great thing about encasing something so palate-peelingly hot in chocolate is that it takes a few seconds for the ‘victim’ to register that he or she has just bitten into the wrong bullet.”
As in all the previous examples, death is again simulated through pain. Just like in *The Beer Hunter*, the toy bullet enters the player head (through the mouth in this case). However, unlike what happens in the drinking game, bullets always end up “inside” the players’ heads, regardless of them being winners and losers.

15.1.4 The gunloon

I found this game for sale in a store in Kyoto, Japan, in 2004. Since its official name is *Russian Roulette*, I will refer to it as the *gunloon*—as in gun + balloon—in order to avoid confusions. Just like the Kaba-Kick, the gunloon is a toy that simulates RR without deadly side-effects. Unlike the Kaba-Kick, it is not clearly marketed towards children. Incidentally, it was not sold in a toy store but rather in the party section of a novelty shop, along costumes for adults and other party paraphernalia. The gunloon models both the shape and color of an actual gun in a realistic way. However, it lacks a barrel. Instead, it features a detachable plastic ring that holds an inflated balloon. Instead of firing an actual bullet, the gunloon gives one chance in six of exploding the balloon—through a needle hidden in the cylinder—that should be held against the player’s temple.

From a playworld perspective, the toy gun is very interesting because it looks almost identical in shape, size and color to an actual revolver. However, the replacement of the barrel by a brightly colored ring holding a
balloon clearly indicates that this is not an actual gun. Additionally, the use of a balloon serves multiple rhetorical functions. Firstly, balloons connote party and, by association, this element conveys the idea that this is a harmless party game. Additionally, the balloon serves to create a mental model of how the game works. Unlike the Kaba-Kick –where the player did not know what could come out of the gun’s barrel– the balloon contains air under pressure. In other words, it is an explosion waiting to happen. Players are likely to be familiar with the surprise provoked by the explosion of a balloon and they can figure that such a noise should be quite annoying if it happens next to one’s ear.

Playformance in the gunloon is almost identical to the one in RR –with the exception that death is replaced by pain. Similarly, the mechanics are identical, with the exception that there are no bullets to place inside the cylinder. The core change provided by this toy works at the playworld level, where the bullet explosion is replaced by a balloon explosion.

The gunloon features an elegant design that provides the same rules of RR along with a gun model that follows that characteristics of a real revolver. The only design difference is the presence of an inflated balloon that leaves no doubt that it is a toy meant for party games. The balloon could be interpreted both as an index sign of party ambiance, a device under pressure that is ready to explode and maybe even a metaphorical head that blows off when the player “shoots” the bullet.

15.2 Make-believe Russian Roulettes games

It would be silly to argue that some of these examples are more realistic than others at reproducing RR, since they all lack RR’s essential dimension: the chance of dying. Still, they all use several techniques to convince the player that she is going through an experience that feels closely to RR’s. Interestingly, all of them attempt to metonymically replace death through pain. Most of them reproduce the mechanics of RR almost
identically—players take turns and perform an action. At the playformance level, some are
quite similar to RR (notably the gunloon and the Kaba-Kick) while others do not require
pointing devices to the head nor pulling any triggers (*Chocolate Russian Roulette*).

All of the examples visually stress the fact that they are not RR by not faithfully
reproducing a revolver (the clearest case is the Kaba-Kick). Still, all of them—with the
exception of *The Beer Hunter*—maintain some physical connection to RR’s main
instrument, either the gun (Kaba-Kick and gunloon) or the bullets (*Chocolate Russian
Roulette*). Two of the games simulate the bullet’s entrance into the player’s head (*Beer
Hunter* and *Chocolate Russian Roulette*). Like it happens in RR, the gunloon also features
a sound explosion. The *Beer Hunter* also provides audio feedback and it would seem as if
the Kaba-Kick also produces some kind of sound (based on the dialogue balloon that
emerges from the gun on the toy’s box cover).

All these techniques—at the levels of playworld, playformance and mechanics—
communicate to players and observers the points that these games have in common with
RR, as well as their main differences. These make-believe RR games are interesting
because of this rhetorical ambiguity: on the one hand they aim at conveying the idea that
they are connected to RR but at the same time they stress the fact that they are different in
order to show their safety. All of them take different attempts to recreate something else,
knowing from the start that they will never succeed. On a first look, these games are
simply tools for entertainment. However, they are incredibly ambitious on a design and
rhetorical level. What is particularly beautiful about these RR wannabes is that they try to
simulate death, an experience that no player knows firsthand. If these simple party games
can have such a sublime objective, imagine what could be possible for designers once we
are more literate in the challenges and complexities of this nascent discipline, play and
game rhetoric.
SECTION IV: CONCLUSIONS

16. The limits of play

On November 26, 1905, Mark Twain was interviewed by the New York Times in an article entitled “Mark Twain: A Humorist’s Confession”. Three decades before that interview, Twain had reflected about the nature of play and work in his famous book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*:

If [Tom] had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. (1876: 24)

What Twain describes is the popularly accepted difference between the two categories: people are forced to work but they enjoy play precisely because they are free to do it. However, it seems that Twain changed his views on the subject, at least according to what he argued on the interview, which was performed on the eve of his 70th birthday. On that occasion, Twain confessed to the journalist that he has never worked in his life:

No, Sir, not a day’s work in all my life. What I have done I have done, because it has been play. If I had been work I shouldn’t have done it. Who was it who said, "Blessed is the man who has found his work"? Whoever it was he had the right idea in his mind. Mark you, he says his work – not somebody else’s work. The work that is really a man’s own work is play and not work at all.

Indeed, for some lucky people as himself, work can become play. Whoever had met a videogame beta tester knows that the opposite is also true: play can easily become a gruesome work. The distinction between the two categories is not as clear cut as Twain originally claimed in the first quote. That is quite unfortunately for us theorists, whose life would be much easier if we could easily fit the world into binary formalist oppositions. Of
course, if that was the case, the theorist’s life would not be very enjoyable because that
would take the challenge out of our jobs, something that Tom Sawyer also found to be
particularly problematic:

Tom said to himself that it was not such a hollow world, after all. He had discovered
a great law of human action, without knowing it –namely, that in order to make a
man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain
(1876: 24)

Play has been –and will likely continue to be– a puzzling activity for researchers. Far from
being an obstacle, its ambiguity is what is so appealing about it. Play is often presented as
a wild, free activity, in opposition to the structured, ordered game. However, as Salen and
Zimmerman (2004: 304) so elegantly have stated, play emerges as a negotiation between
the player’s freedom and the game’s structure. However, these two perspectives are hard
to reconcile. A systemic approach that favors the game’s structure provides a clear benefit
if we are interested in the authorial view, since it offers tools for understanding the design
techniques that the game puts into place. It lacks, however, explanatory power to deal with
player behavior that does not perfectly match the designer’s intentions. The solution is not
to replace a systemic approach with a player-centric one, because the player never really
plays alone but in collaboration with the designer. That being said, in certain cases it may
be useful to favor one perspective over the other, but only as long as we are aware of the
limitations of each position.

17. Playing with ambiguity

Play’s ambiguity has both confused and fascinated many game scholars (Bateson,
1955; Spariosu, 1989; Sutton-Smith, 1997). When does work stop and play start? Is it as
simple to distinguish these two activities, as Twain argued, simply because players are not
forced to play and workers must work? One of the most elusive aspects of defining play is
that any activity could be play—or not. As psychologist Michael Apter (1991: 13) pointed out, play is subjective: it is a state of mind. Therefore, any attempt to define play must take this aspect into account.

If play is subjective and any activity could be play, does this mean that play cannot be defined? Of course not. Play can be defined but the definition must take into account the player’s mindset. The fact that anything could be play does not necessarily mean that any activity is play.

The following definition that I proposed takes player subjectivity into account:

Play is to somebody an engaging activity in which the player believes to have active participation and interprets it as constraining her immediate future to a set of probable scenarios, all of which she is willing to tolerate.

Here are some of the main direct consequences of this definition:

- Play is subjective and this applies both to the player(s) and/or external observers.
- The term “engaging” is more accurate than fun, since play can trigger mixed feelings such as frustration and pain, in addition to joy.
- Even though the player generally has active participation in the play activity, in some particular cases such as in games of pure luck, it may be enough for the player to believe that she has control over the game in order for play to happen.
- Play is an aesthetic genre that funnels the player’s options into a—generally—predictable set of possibilities that they are likely to find engaging.
- Even though the actual situations that will emerge from play cannot be predicted, players evaluate their probability and accept to keep playing as long as they fit within what they are willing to tolerate. This last point is particularly relevant because it does not simply stop at arguing that play is subjective but it also offers a model to understand the player’s mindset. Certainly, it is a simple model and likely players hold many other things into consideration while playing. However, their evaluation of their tolerance of the probable scenarios offers us a tool for discriminating between play and not play. Not only the same
activity may or not be play but actually the same activity may stop or start being play for a person, depending on how she evaluates her tolerance to what she considers to be the activity’s probable consequences.

Based on the previous definition of play, games can be defined as follows:

A game is a form of play where players agree on a system of rules that assigns social status to their quantified performance.

This new definition places games as a subset of play activities. I had previously argued (1997) following French philosopher André Lalande (1928), that the main difference between game and play is that the first defines a winner and a loser. However, those two categories are problematic for many reasons. First, some games such as Tetris can be lost but can never be won. It is true that many games are zero-sum –one player must fail for the other one to win– but not all games work like this. In same cases, players compare their social status by measuring their accomplishments and performances without discriminating between winners and losers. That is the case, for example of the level system in many RPG games, such as WoW. WoW is a game not because it can be won or not but because there are measurable, conventional ways to assign social status to players. Please notice that these conventions can be subjective to certain groups that may or may not include the game designers. In WoW, the level system became a de facto way to compare players. For example, low-level players are generally called with derogatory terms such as “newbies” or “n00bs”. By reaching higher levels, newbies may not technically “win” the game but they advance in a measurable, objective way within WoW’s social conventions. A play activity such as two people playing “catch” with a frisbee does not constitute a game because there is no social status attached to their performance. Of course, the players could create rules in order to turn it into a game.

These two new definitions of play and game provide a better way to deal with problems created by previous definitions. As it was previously stated, they offer a model
for understanding why and how the same activity may or not be a game depending on the player's mindset. Juul (2005: 41-42) argued that games are characterized by the fact that they have negotiable consequences, even though he acknowledges that extreme sports fail to comply with this requirement. Games that play on the edge of danger, such as extreme sports, depend on the player's perception of danger. If the real-life consequences of a game could be negotiated beforehand, as Juul argues, there would be no gaming accidents. Perhaps, more importantly, there would neither be any epiphanies for players who could learn unexpected lessons about, say, friendship and collaboration. The negotiation does happen but not beforehand. It is a constant re-evaluation of the situation that takes place into the player(s)' mindset. The extreme sportsman can be said to be playing until she loses control and starts working to prevent an accident. At that point, she is not playing anymore. Of course, the thread between the two states of play and non-play is a thin one and those who enjoy extreme sports probably get a big part of their excitement by being within this ambiguous limit.

The new definitions also allow us to better understand several games that are considered “limit” (S&Z, 2004: 82) or “borderline” (Juul, 2005: 44) cases, such as games of pure chance and pen and paper role-playing games. Keep in mind that there will always be games that are situated at the border of any proposed definition. This can only be a problem when a large group of cases, such as role-playing games, do not fit into a definition in spite of being widely recognized as games. The main problem in both S&Z and Juul’s approaches is that they define games by their outcome, that is by the status that they reach when the game is over. However, certain games such as pen and paper RPGs or MMOGs do not have a clear ending and, therefore, no clear outcome. Instead of measuring the outcome, I proposed to measure the player’s performance—something that can be done during the game’s session and not necessarily at its end. What matters in this case is when players agree to provide a certain social status to certain measured
performances. If having lots of money or weapons or accomplished quests is seen by the players as a positive thing, then the activity is a game. Certainly, the standards to judge this may vary depending on the players and may not be set in stone, so this definition is subjective. Still, what counts to differentiate games from non-games is, as Piaget observed, social recognition (1990: 64) based on quantified performance. This approach to games that does not narrow itself to winning and losing but also takes into account gains and losses is not new. It was suggested by Lalande’s (1928), who observed that games are not just organized through victories and defeats but also through gains and loses. Victories and defeats are easy to measure because they are objective. On the other hand, gains and loses are much more complex and subjective. Still, if we want to understand the complexity of games, we should, as Lalande hinted, take its subjectivity into account.

18. Three paths to play rhetoric

This is how a development psychology manual describes hopscotch:

An ancient game played around the world, hopscotch takes children from earth to heaven and back again [...] The game symbolizes the perils of early childhood, as children try to move ahead in their lives without stepping on lines, going outside the boxes, or stepping into forbidden areas (Newman and Newman, 2005: 249)

Indeed, that is what hopscotch may symbolize to a psychologist but such interpretation would likely be deemed completely insane by any young hopscotch player. The game can also be read from a religious perspective: the space is shaped like a cross; the main goal is to reach heaven. Certainly, multiple readings are possible for this game. Multiple, but not infinite. A young player may even be surprised at the notion that a game may have a “meaning” at all and that does not prevent her from playing. The multiple possible interpretations of games is a subject that I have previously analyzed from a semiotic perspective
(Frasca, 2001). However, from a rhetorical point of view, the question is how does the
game and the player collaborate—communicate—in order to reach those interpretations.

As Espen Aarseth pointed out in *Cybertext*, game interpretation works on two
levels: the semiotic and the ergodic. Traditional media genres made researchers familiar
with the first one, which is made of signs that can be interpreted in multiple ways. The
ergodic level, however, produces signs by means of player performance and has not yet
been studied in depth. Most of the recent ontological models of game that I have reviewed
favored a systemic, formalist approach to ergodicity. Such take on games could have
potentially lead to a deterministic flavor of play rhetoric which prescribed certain meanings
to certain rules. In fact, on my first attempt to understand play rhetoric (2003a) I did mainly
focus on the game rules as a way for constructing meaning—Aarseth would have called
this the ergodic level and I currently call it the game mechanics—along with the semiotic
level—which I call the playworld. On the first section of this dissertation, I questioned such
a systemic approach to games while also trying to stress the relevance of player
subjectivity in play activities. This subjectivity is essential to explain the ambiguity of play
and any attempt at play rhetoric would have been too limited or too simplistic if it did not
take this into account. We first needed to better understand what play is about before
attempting to deal with the problem of play rhetoric.

In the previous section I have provided multiple examples showing the role of the
playworld in play rhetoric. Even though it can be argued that once they are comfortable
with its mechanics, players can “see through” the game’s visuals and sounds, two
videogames sharing the same mechanics but different graphics can be interpreted as
different. Actually, those interpretations can be so strong as to boycott the game, as it
happens with the Intel IT Manager Game, which was frowned upon in the blogosphere
because it did not allow to hire female employees. From a functionalist point of view, the
virtual employees’ gender did not affect the gameplay. However, some players took
offense because the game seemed to reproduce an unequal gender structure that affects the real work environment that the game was supposed to simulate.

The rules of the game can also contribute to the construction of meaning. The rules that define the game’s final objective create a moral system within the game that can be interpreted as supporting the objective as good and dismissing anything that goes against it as bad. Other rules define what can be done and what should be done (because it offers a reward) within the game. Last, but not least, some games include metarrules: rules that state how and to which degree the player can modify the game itself. On a first approach, games convey meaning through their signs. A board game about buying real state is different from one about performing surgeries. A simple look at the board game can sometimes give us a hint of what the game is about. However, unlike non-simulational media forms, games are procedural and their ability to convey meaning through rules has long fascinated videogame scholars (Turkle, 1995; Murray, 1997; Friedman, 1999; Frasca 2001 and 2003; Bogost, 2006 and 2007). The rhetorical potential of game mechanics is so appealing partly because a subtle change in the rules can not only modify gameplay but can also lead interpretations in alternate directions. For example, GTA III (2001) would be quite a different game if instead of the player being able to shoot prostitutes he would have to kill them in order to win the game (Frasca, 2003).

These two dimensions alone –the playworld and game mechanics– provide the basic tools for understanding play rhetoric. However, they are limited for two reasons. The first is that rules need to be performed in order to contribute to the creation of meaning. By solely focusing on the mechanics, this formalist strategy is biased towards the system and towards the game designer in detriment of the player. In other words, as Bogost pointed out on his response to Juul’s emergence model (2006: 150), it unfairly attributes to the author the credit for player creativity that magically “emerges” from the ruleset. This common systemic bias that affect play rhetoric—a bias that has also been present in my
own work in the past (2003a)—is essentially the same one that influenced the definitions of
game that I have previously analyzed. Secondly—and more importantly—, this is not merely
a matter of favoring the system over the player or vice versa. One of the major
breakthroughs in cognitive science was to argue that body performance is not just a form
of manipulating our surroundings but also literally a way to perceive them (Gibson, 1966).
In other words, the human ability of moving and touching is not just our way to act but also
to perceive—and, therefore, providing us with information for interpretation. Since a large
amount of play activities heavily involve body performance, it would be a serious limitation
not to include this additional perspective for rhetorical analysis. The player’s bodily and
mental performance—which I call playformance—is not an afterthought nor a requirement
of the game system to function: it is also a way of interpreting the game and understanding
the player’s experience.

A playformance category for rhetorical studies is then needed because the
playworld and game mechanics are not enough to explain many examples of how players
constructs meaning. A classic case involving the haptic system is the gamepad’s rumble
function, which allows the controllers to provide vibrating feedback after a virtual gun is
shot or in order to increase tension by following a rapid heart beating pattern. However,
not all games include physical interfaces such as gamepads. Most of the times outside the
videogame realm, there is no interface at all and the player directly interacts through her
body. As it was shown in the case of Twister but also in the case of kissing games, body
performance plays an essential role in order to create situations dealing with love and
personal relationships. A game such as DDR recreates a discotheque ambience not just
through flashing lights and music (playworld) and following the beat (mechanics) but also
by encouraging players to move their feet (playformance).

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62 It may seem obvious that the body plays an essential part in sexual games. However, keep in mind that
many strictly verbal games, such as Truth or Dare, can arouse players without any physical contact.
These three perspectives –playworld, mechanics and playformance– provide us with a framework for rhetorical analysis. As it was shown in the multiple previous examples, they cover a wide spectrum of cases. Certainly, it would be possible to go even deeper and create further, more specific categories. My main concern here was to provide an effective, yet simple framework for play rhetoric that did not leave out any major angle. After reviewing play and game ontology, the lack of a third perspective based on playformance became evident.

It would have been irresponsible to have jumped into play rhetoric without at least first taking a moment to think about its foundations. Yet, this is a framework to be built upon. I have provided several examples of rhetorical analysis but, ultimately, its relevance will only be proven in the field. The really exciting work is ahead.

19. Future Research

The field of play rhetoric is a vast, almost unexplored continent. Because of this, the amount of studies that could be realized is overwhelming. Therefore, I will simply list a few of the possible ramifications of this dissertation, following my strict personal interests. A particularly appealing challenge would be to explore the play equivalent to rhetorical figures of speech or tropes. A trope is a figure that either that substitutes a meaning for another or works as a second meaning to the original one (Todorov, 1982: 29). Since many games and toys simulate systems and involve some form of make-believe, it is likely that the long tradition of game design has developed several techniques that work as tropes. We have seen a couple of cases in the previous pages –i.e. causing physical pain to the player in order to simulate death– but a deeper inquiry is needed in order to create a typology. The next natural step would be to compare those with other established figures, such as literary and visual tropes, in order to identify relationships but also to discriminate
some that may be exclusive to play. Because the playworld is closely connected to other media genres, this exploration should focus on both the mechanics and playformance perspectives, since these are particular to play.

   It may be a natural tendency for early game rhetoricians to get attracted by examples of games that clearly attempt to convey meaning. These games —which I have called “games with an agenda” in my joint blog WaterCoolerGames.org— are generally very straightforward about the ideas that they want to transmit. Among them, there are two main genres with clearly persuasive intentions: advergaming and political games. As the result of mixing advertising with videogames, advergaming is a particularly interesting topic for studying persuasive techniques in videogames. The discipline is still young and it has not fully reached all videogames genres but nevertheless it has provided multiple examples for analysis.

   Campaign and activist games are related to advergaming in the sense that they are propaganda —a term that is commonly used in a derogatory sense but that technically refers to publicizing political views. There are a few examples of games that have been used in recent history by political, social and religious groups as a way to promote their views. Certainly not all of these games have been successful, but even failures hold potentially interesting material for research.

   Kenneth Burke’s New Rhetoric has served more as an inspiration for this work than as an actual theoretical tool. Still, it would be interesting to see how his pentadic model for communication that stresses the role of agency would work within play studies. Burke’s dramatist method literally saw the world as a stage. The work of some play and game theorists —mainly Augusto Boal and Brenda Laurel (1990)— tells us that stage and playgrounds are very similar spaces, if not the same. It is certainly tempting to explore what a New Play Rhetoric would be like but maybe that is going too much ahead of our time and we desperately need a limited but persuasive classic play rhetoric first.
20. Final Considerations

As a theoretician and designer, my interest in play rhetoric is twofold. I want to better understand games from the point of view of the player and the designer: how meaning is constructed and how meaning is designed.

Even though early game rhetoric may pay an excessive attention to certain genres with sometimes grandiloquent intentions such as political games, its core interest is not necessarily connected to transcendent messages. The main interest of rhetoric is meaning and this is a field as vast as players and designers want it to be.

There is a misconception of seeing play as chaos, an activity where everything is allowed. As I have shown on the precedent chapters, play can allow a high degree of freedom but there are always limits and constraints, imposed either by the environment, the rules or the players themselves. Similarly, play can generate a vast spectrum of —sometimes contradictory— meanings. However, this does not mean that play can be interpreted in every possible way —otherwise play would be meaningless. These may be the early days of videogame rhetoric but we do have an older tradition of unplugged games, toys and playfulness to draw upon in our quest to better understand the relationship between play and meaning. Play is not necessarily a better or worse way to understand the world. It is, however, an alternative to traditional means. Additionally, it can be an engaging alternative and, sometimes, even a lot of fun. It is up to us to find ways to use it in order to better understand our world and each other. Game rhetoric may help us to reach this goal and it also may become a new playfield for academics —I suspect and hope that it will become both. But even if it is understandable that some may be suspicious about how play can change our world, we could at least follow the advise of a very wise man who lived a long time ago. This person, who went by the name of Confucius, ultimately encouraged people to play because, he argued, playing is “better than doing nothing at all” (1971: 329).
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