7 Superstructure

A great deal of what matters in a game takes place outside of or alongside the gameplay proper. There may be preparation before the game, crowds of people watching it, stories told about it, modifications made to it, or behavior that goes against the official or accepted practices of the game. In this chapter, we discuss various phenomena that might be thought of as somehow “outside” the game. This is in no way meant to be a value judgment, but merely a way of grouping content—many of these phenomena are just as important, if not more so, than the ones “internal” to the game.

We begin with a general discussion of the metagame: all those activities relating to the game that aren’t part of the play of the game itself, such as preparation for the game. We then talk about game concepts: themes that give the game cohesion and identity, even if they aren’t included in the rules directly. Sometimes these themes are story-based, especially in computer games, but very often they are not. We follow with a discussion of ways players can customize games, and then we look at ways players may violate expectations: whether by actually breaking the rules, or by breaking norms of “acceptable” behavior. Finally, we examine some factors that influence how long a player wants to keep playing the same game—does the game seem infinitely replayable, or does it at some point “run out” of content?

7.1 Characteristic: Metagame

The metagame is the “game outside the game.” It includes all the activities connected with the game that aren’t part of playing the game itself, such as tournament programs, online forums, magazines about the game, training and preparation players might do before the game, or even daydreaming about the game or staring lovingly at game equipment. If the game is the skeleton, the metagame is the “soft” structure outside the game, linking the game with other life goals such as status, self-expression, gaining mastery, money, socialization, or collecting. Many of the rewards for gaming come in whole or in part from the metagame, not the game itself.
The term *metagame* isn’t that common outside of hardcore gaming circles and is almost never used, for example, when discussing sports. So typically people will use the term *game* to discuss both the game proper and the metagame. But we will generally try to distinguish the two: if you are on the field trying to score a goal during a game, you’re taking part in the game of soccer; if you are practicing penalty kicks, or you are buying cleats, you are taking part in the metagame of soccer.

Hardcore gamers often use the word *metagame* in a narrower sense. If a game allows very specific preparation before the match, like building a deck in a trading card game, the “metagame” is the current environment resulting from all these preparations (e.g., perhaps people are playing a lot of fast red decks at the moment, and not many people are playing slow blue ones). With this usage, “metagaming” is game preparation done to prepare for the current environment (perhaps you’ll choose to put anti-red cards in your deck, or cards that will slow down a fast deck).¹ We won’t use the word *metagame* in this more narrow sense.

**Some Metagame Activities**

- Preparation
  - Drills
  - Reading strategy books
- Preparing equipment (building a *Magic* deck, waxing your skis)
- Discussing strategy with others
- Formal instruction (classes, coaching)
- Hanging out with other players

- Chatting while playing the game (happens during the game, but we group it with metagame activities because it’s not a necessary part of playing the game)
- Reading or posting in online forums
- Reading, watching, or hearing stories of famous players
- Watching live games or replays
- Arguing about how you would have done something differently
- Entering a tournament (everything involved other than the actual play during the tournament)

**Some Metagame Rewards**

- Status
- Socialization
- Self-expression
- Gaining mastery
- Explicit player rewards
  - Money
  - Prizes (including items usable in-game)
  - Trophies

The (broader) metagame is an extremely complicated subject, but an important one for a game designer or game critic. A great deal of the enjoyment of a game, and thus of its success or failure, comes from factors outside the game. For example, one can take a crowd of adults who would not normally enjoy rock-paper-scissors, put a tournament structure around it, and turn it into an entertaining experience. Given all the possible structures that can be added to a metagame, knowing where to put one’s effort—which structures are worth adding and which give little or no benefit—is extremely important.

**Player Communities**

Different players will have different preferred styles of play. The most obvious distinction is casual versus serious, but communities may have preferences around rule variants, formats, times and places to play, and so on. Unless a player is playing a single-player game in complete isolation, she’ll be
influenced by some sort of community. One can think of these different communities as forming different game environments or player microclimates—environments that may vary enough as to be almost different games. A player may very well be happy in one microclimate but not enjoy another microclimate at all, for reasons that may be social or convenience-related, or that may stem from the style of play the group prefers. Sometimes a player is unaware that her enjoyment or lack thereof is coming from the microclimate, and may say “chess is great” or “chess is boring” when really it is the microclimate that is great or boring, and a different environment might lead to the opposite reaction.

So for a player to enjoy a game, finding the right player community is very important. At the most basic level, it’s finding the right opponents: ones who aren’t too much stronger or weaker, and whose approach to the game is similar enough to be congenial. If you play Ultimate Frisbee, say, you will probably want to be with people who are not too much more or less dexterous than you are. If you don’t care to dive into the mud to catch the Frisbee, you will not want to be with people who will berate you for that choice—if you do go all-out, though, you may not want to play with people who “aren’t trying.”

For games that take place in the physical world, communities are dependent on physical location. You may not have a wide choice of different Ultimate Frisbee leagues where you live (indeed, you may not have any). But for popular sports, there are often multiple leagues, often in a fairly organized way: A leagues and B leagues, leagues separated by age or gender, leagues where the teams are formed around the workplace, and so on. For boardgames and card games, the choices aren’t as wide, and often not as formalized. But enter any game store and look at the postings for role-playing groups and you will see players trying to sort themselves into the right microclimates.

Online, there are bulletin boards, guild websites, wikis, and other player communities. But when it comes time to play the game itself, since geography is not a limitation, players are often thrown into one big hopper, and then some kind of player matching occurs. Perhaps players deliberately select people they already know to play with; perhaps they look at a list of games and choose to join one. More and more, though, some sort of algorithm is used to match people, although these algorithms currently use far fewer kinds of information than players use in offline matching.

When looking at a metagame, one thing to watch out for is how much it fragments player communities. Many games have deliberately built in choices about how you play them: different player settings (e.g., game speed, or starting money) when spawning a game in an RTS, different PvP battles available in an MMO, different formats to playMagic. Each new format choice is appealing, because it lets players customize their experience that much more, and there is always someone who wishes you could tweak this or that setting, or play on some new map. But too much of that, and there is the risk that none of the different formats will succeed: players will not be able to find the choice they want, or the minimum number of people required to join the game won’t be available. Smaller game communities—often physical ones—are especially vulnerable. If twelve players show up at your store to play Magic, you can run a tournament. But if half of them want to play sealed Magic, and half want to play constructed, and you need at least eight people to start a tournament, you may have nothing. And then next week they won’t come back. So it is important that there be a balance between having enough options for players to find something they like and having few enough options that players can make a choice and expect to find someone else to play with. Newer games, games that take place in the physical world, and less popular games have to be most careful about having too many formats; established games, online games, and very popular games have more
leeway.

**Metagame Support for Player Goals**

Features of a game and its metagame can support different player goals in a variety of ways. For example, in an MMO socialization is supported in-game with chat and guild systems. Apparently simple features like the ability to create a custom chat channel (and how the channel is moderated, and whether it is persistent through logoff, and so on) can make a real difference in how well players can socialize. The basic gameplay structure of an MMO supports socialization as well: there is a lot of downtime, such as while waiting for a raid to form, and not much to do during it. That downtime has a real negative side, as lengthy downtime generally does, but the socialization benefits are large (whether it is a net win is hard to say for certain—it’s almost certainly agential). Out-of-game, there are forums, informational websites (both official and fan-created), guild websites, and so on.

**Exercise 7.1:** For various sports, give some examples of game features and metagame features that support socialization.

**Exercise 7.2:** Pick a game you know with a lot of downtime that players use to socialize. Is the downtime a net benefit or a net loss? Why? Would more downtime be better? Would less?

Human beings certainly like accumulating stuff, and again there are both in-game and out-of-game ways to support that. Some games have collecting as part of the gameplay itself (e.g., the *Pokémon* handheld games), which is not a metagame feature per se. Some games (*Magic*, golf, bicycle racing) have a great variety of equipment available for players to collect—the equipment is useful in-game, but collecting it is a metagame activity and, for some people, can become an end in itself.\(^5\)

Games can have monetary benefits as well: playing for money (poker, backgammon), tournament prizes (many games), professional play. Even the dream of such rewards can be enticing for many players—certainly far more players are inspired by the idea of making a living playing basketball than can actually do so. If professional play is out of reach, players can still make money in the metagame: repairing bikes for other people, or trading for *Magic* cards and then selling them on the secondary market.

Besides money, other prizes may include goods useful in ordinary life, items useful to play the game, and of course trophies. Although trophies are strictly speaking a physical good, they are really more about status than wealth. Any prize, though, can help fulfill a player’s desire for status. Wealth is powerful in this way, since saying you have won a large sum of money is more convincing to most people as a sign of achievement than almost any other prize (especially people outside of the game’s community—many a game player has finally gotten some sort of understanding and respect from his nonplaying relatives by winning a tournament with a large cash prize). Ratings, rankings, and titles are another way for players to gain respect, although of course such achievements are better understood inside the game community than outside of it. If the game has any kind of media coverage, that will increase status as well.

If a player can develop signature moves, a unique play style, or even a notable personality, that can enhance his status. Poker players and sports figures do this a great deal, but it is part of almost any gaming community. These sorts of reputational benefits also provide self-expression, and sometimes gameplay benefits (e.g., intimidation) as well. Distinct player styles can arise out of the richness of the
game itself if there are enough different ways to play (basketball does well here, but sprinting, say, does not). Sometimes features can be put into the game deliberately to support player expression and style, as with special titles or visible armor in an MMO.

![Game Diagram](image)

**Figure 7.2**

A general metagame diagram

We can graphically represent various player life goals, and how metagame features connect their achievement to the underlying game, by drawing circles for the goals and connecting lines for the supporting features (thicker lines represent stronger support for those features) (figure 7.2).

Note that depending on the limitations of the game, it can be hard to support some of these things. There is not much call in a game like roulette, say, for rating systems, professional leagues, or strategy guides. On the other hand, a richer game like soccer has enormous scope for supporting almost any goal a player might have (figure 7.3). Or, directly comparing the metagame strengths and weaknesses of the *Pokémon* trading card game and the *Pokémon GameBoy* cartridge, see figure 7.4.
Figure 7.3

Metagame diagram for soccer

Figure 7.4

Comparing the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* to the *Pokémon Cartridge Game*

Status and money are better supported by a card collection than by a cartridge collection or even the collection of Pokémon creatures in-game. On the other hand, during gameplay, the fantasy of owning and caring for creatures exhibited in the cartridge game is stronger than the one presented in the card game. Socialization is best supported by the face-to-face play of the card game; achievement
and knowledge are well supported in both games.

It can be useful to detail as completely as possible the metagame potential of a game. Along with the thickness of the arrows, one can consider how expensive the various metagame aspects are to produce for the game’s publisher. For instance, a player’s desire to achieve money or its equivalent might be efficiently satisfied in a trading card game by making sure price guides are published and well distributed. Perhaps the underlying skeleton of the trading card game can be changed, for example by increasing the relative rarity of certain cards, in order to facilitate this. Caution must be exercised because changing the basic skeleton of the game might alter the metagame in many ways. The above change to card rarity could potentially make the game less amenable to the goal of personal achievement if it nudges the game away from one of skill for the average player and toward one of initial monetary commitment.

Of course, none of these diagrams comes close to listing all the features that support the various goals (and many features support multiple goals, so a perfectly accurate diagram would be an impenetrable thicket of arrows). Any value the diagrams have comes more from the process of making them and thinking consciously about which features support which goals and how, rather than in the end result.

**Exercise 7.3**: Choose two different games and draw the metagame diagrams for them.

**Exercise 7.4**: How might you increase the reward of money in Little League soccer (assuming direct monetary awards are forbidden)?

**Exercise 7.5**: How might you increase the reward of money in a children’s trading card game (assuming direct monetary awards are forbidden)?

**Exercise 7.6**: Discuss from a metagame perspective what you would expect to happen to sales/ play of Dungeons & Dragons with the release of the *Lord of the Rings* movies.

**Exercise 7.7**: In 1968, the U.S. Open tennis championship had a total prize purse of $100,000. What might the effect have been on the general (not just professional) tennis metagame if the purse were upped by $1,000,000? What if that money were spent on local tournaments instead?

**Exercise 7.8**: Discuss how Tiger Woods changed the golf metagame for the average local player.

**Exercise 7.9**: What are the advantages for the golf metagame of the golf rating system (golf handicaps)? What are the advantages for the chess metagame of the chess rating system (Elo ratings)?

### 7.2 Characteristic: Conceit/Motif

When we speak of a game’s conceit, we take conceit in the sense of an extended metaphor. Some games are purely abstract, such as go, *Tetris*, or poker, but most nonsports games are at least metaphorically “about” something. Games with a conceit might have a very light one, in the sense that chess is vaguely about medieval warfare, or they might have a more elaborate conceit, in the way that *Starcraft* is about science fiction warfare or *Tomb Raider* is about swashbuckling archeology. If the game also tries to model its (possibly imaginary) conceit, it is to some degree a simulation: *PanzerBlitz* surely qualifies, *Tomb Raider* probably doesn’t, but *Counter-Strike* probably does. In any case, a game’s conceit can provide a great deal of motivation and explanation for the action: imagine, for example, how much less compelling *Clue* would be as a purely abstract boardgame.
Many games (e.g., almost all computer role-playing games) have stories, which are a special kind of conceit. We don’t use the word story to refer to conceits in general, though, because chess and Monopoly don’t have stories, but they do have conceits. Conceit for us carries a similar meaning to what is often called “motif” or “theme.”

Sometimes people talk about the “intellectual property” of a game, meaning something similar to what we mean by conceit. We’ll only use the term intellectual property when the conceit is something licensed or licensable—that is, something ownable. So a Star Wars RTS has Star Wars as its IP, but chess does not have an IP—its conceit, medieval warfare, is in the public domain. Note that even a game not in the public domain can have a conceit that is public, and thus not “IP” in the sense that we use the term. For example, the game Squad Leader is not in the public domain, but we consider it a game whose conceit is not intellectual property, because World War II (which is Squad Leader’s conceit) is in the public domain—you can’t own World War II or license it out (although you could license the Squad Leader name itself).
Sports, and many older boardgames and card games, have no real conceits. But from around 1900 on, most deliberately designed games have had conceits. There have been a few exceptions, such as Scrabble, Pente, many party games, Othello, Sorry, and Uno (note, however, that many of these are repackagings of classic games). But there are far more games that do have conceits. Some examples, just to name a few at random, include Clue, Doom, Risk, Battleship, Starcraft, and the various Final Fantasy games. One of the early examples of a conceit that was added on top of an existing game mechanic (in this case, the race boardgame) was the Royal Game of Goose, which dates back to the sixteenth century. Today most games have conceits added to them—sometimes in a manner that is tightly integrated with the game mechanics, but sometimes simply to give the game more flavor.

The same game can come in different versions, one with a conceit and one without. For example, Uno has no conceit, but Doctor Who Uno does.

In some cases, particularly with sports, an abstract game almost becomes its own conceit or even its own IP. Think of baseball, say: the rules are public domain, and the game has no conceit in that it is not a specific representation of something else in the way chess is a representation of medieval battle. But there is a whole world around professional baseball: history, legends, heroes, customs, and so on. And in fact Major League Baseball itself is owned, and people can and do license it. Similar comments apply to most popular sports, and to a few other games like poker as well (to some extent, they apply to almost any game that’s played professionally, such as chess, Magic, or Starcraft). Perhaps the right way to think of this phenomenon is as an IP for the metagame more than for the game itself.

Note that very generic conceits, ones that are in the public domain or at least are well known to the players, you know to expect that a dragon is more powerful than an ogre, which in turn is more powerful than a goblin; you have a rough idea what to expect from a card named Fireball or Lightning Bolt; if a card is named “Sword of X” or “Shield of Y” you’ll know it somehow helps attack or defense respectively. Similarly for chess: you know that the king is the most important piece, followed by the queen, and that the pawns are least important (the middle pieces are vague, though, and you may be surprised by the weakness of the king). If you create a unique, nonstandard IP for your game, you have the advantage of something that’s easier to own from a legal standpoint, but it will be harder for people to understand how to play your game, even if the mechanics are no more difficult: this is what makes Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri, for example, harder to wrap your head around than Civilization II. In particular, abstract games (those with no conceit at all, such as tic-tac-toe) need to have very simple rules—playing a purely abstract game with the complexity of Civilization II or World of Warcraft would be all but impossible. One way to view all this is as an example of standards—concepts provide standards that help players know what to expect, but the information is coming from the real world (or well-known fantasy worlds) rather than from the world of game rules.

At an extreme, there are simulations: games that have a conceit and attempt to model it very closely. The more rules that are in the game not for pure gameplay reasons but because “that’s how it works in real life,” the more the game is a simulation. In Uno, there are no rules that model “real life”; in Civilization or World of Warcraft there are quite a few; in Squad Leader there are an enormous number. Full simulations tend to be very complex, and thus tend to have fairly small audiences. But games that are partially simulations are much more common. For games that are not in any way a
simulation, worries about realism are not an issue—no one complains that Uno is “not realistic,” because it is not trying to be. But once a game begins to simulate reality, the issue of how far to go in that direction rears its head. Partial simulations often have issues revolving around the compromises between “realism” (modeling the world they simulate) and optimizing the fun of the gameplay. Different players will have different ideas of where the game should fall. For example, different editions of Dungeons & Dragons have been more or less focused on simulation, and versions that have made D&D more like an abstract game have sometimes been met with dismay by those who want the game to be more of a simulation of a fantasy world.

When a game is highly realistic, those who don’t like realism tend not to complain, but simply go elsewhere. As an extreme example of realism over gameplay, there are hex wargames that model one-sided historical battles in such a way that the forces that won historically are essentially guaranteed to destroy the opposing forces during the course of the game (the player controlling the losing side “wins” by staving off defeat for a longer time than would normally be expected). Such a game, with its built-in loss for one side, would be unsatisfying to many, but those who desire accurate simulation will accept the odd gameplay logic.

### Scale of Intensity for Conceits

Conceits in a game can range from none at all, or a light conceit, all the way to full-blown simulation.

1. Purely abstract: tic-tac-toe, Scrabble, Othello, most sports, most classic card games
2. Theme only: Bejeweled, Candyland
3. Very light conceit: chess, fox & geese
4. Slight modeling of conceit: Battleship, Asteroids
5. Some modeling of conceit: Clue, Donkey Kong
6. Just barely a simulation: Monopoly, Diablo
7. Very light simulation: Starcraft, Quake
8. Simulation, but many sacrifices to gameplay: World of Warcraft
9. Simulation, minimal “unrealistic” elements: Counterstrike, Civilization
10. Full-on simulation (attempt to maximize modeling): Squad Leader

### Licensed Games

Many boardgames and computer games have for their conceit an intellectual property that they have licensed from someone else. This is a modern phenomenon and thus is not found in classic games (in their original forms) or sports. A game that uses a license has the advantage that it can get started more quickly—it comes with a built-in potential audience. However, when the licensed property dies, so does the game. Also, the game is unlikely to be successful with people who do not care for the IP; people rarely buy a Babylon 5 boardgame if they don’t like Babylon 5 (although they might buy a generic merchant trading game or an Egyptian-themed boardgame just because they like boardgames, even though they don’t care for mercantilism or Egyptology).

As an example, in 1965 Milton Bradley released a card game based on the TV show and movie
Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea. It was based on Crazy Eights. It’s long since forgotten. Six years later, another game based on Crazy Eights was released, but it did not have a license, or indeed any conceit at all. It was called simply Uno. The two games were not identical, and it would be wrong to assume that the difference in licensing was the only cause of the differences in the two games’ fortunes. But although being nonlicensed is by no means a sufficient cause for achieving classic status, it is close to a necessary one.

So using an existing license usually means gaining some initial success at the cost of breadth of appeal and potential for longevity. If you’re the first to market with a new and exciting kind of game (e.g., you’ve invented the first-person shooter or the trading card game), you might want to avoid licensing and have a fairly generic conceit (which might evolve into a real IP over time, as with Warcraft). If the market is already crowded with games like yours, you might want to license a popular IP to help you stand out. However, even in a crowded market one can sometimes be successful with a nonlicensed game and perhaps have a long-run hit; licensed games will almost never be long-run hits.¹¹

Note that if a conceit gives a great deal of added value to the consumer, to the point of being one of the main reasons for buying the game, that conceit is almost always a licensed IP. Being able to interact with that IP is one of the rewards for playing the game. You buy a Battlestar Galactica game because it’s about Battlestar Galactica. You don’t buy Fallout because of the Fallout IP; even with a very powerful property like Warcraft, not many people are buying it for the Warcraft IP (they might be buying it because of the Warcraft name, which they feel represents quality, but that’s a different matter).¹²

In general, games are not the best format in which to get people to like a new IP—something else had to get you to like Battlestar Galactica before you bought the boardgame. Books, movies, and television are all much better, probably because they are better at telling stories, and stories are what make people love IPs.

Licensed games are often not very high-quality,¹³ perhaps because goodness is not why people buy those games, so why spend money making them that good? There are of course exceptions—for example, there are several good Star Wars computer games. Perhaps the reason is that the Star Wars license is worth so much money, and costs so much money, that you can afford to spend some cash making the game good as well; perhaps it’s because there are enough other Star Wars games out there that you have to compete; or perhaps it’s because the Star Wars license is long-lasting enough that you can hope to have your game last longer, so that making it a good game is a better investment.

Sometimes an IP is deliberately designed to fit together with a game. This is fairly common for (nonlicensed) computer games, but less so for paper games. One notable group of exceptions includes a number of Japanese trading card games: Pokémon, Yu-gi-oh, and Duelmasters, for example.¹⁴ These games are also notable in that there is a game inside the IP itself, with the game the player plays being a mirror of the game the characters in the IP play. Done right, the presentation of the IP in various ways—books, comics, TV, various toys, and perhaps multiple games—can become powerfully reinforcing. Oddly enough, the dynamic here is not that different from the dynamic of sports, where a person who likes a sport might play, watch, and follow the “back-story” (personal lives of players, personalities of coaches, and so on), with all of these activities potentially supporting one another.

One tension between many licensed IPs and the games that use them is the so-called Batman
problem. If you have a game that uses the Batman IP, who gets to be Batman? Many strong IPs have just one or two main characters, and most have a relatively small number (which is what makes for good stories). Games, however, often call for more characters, and they may need more flexibility with those characters than the story allows. So making such a game involves some tough choices. If, in your Batman game, the user is not allowed to be Batman, it probably will not feel much like a Batman game. You might have Batman appear in cameos throughout the game, but then the player will not feel very important or heroic in comparison. On the other hand, if the player is Batman, you are pretty much locked into a single-player game (unless you want multiple Batmans running around), and if the game has its own storyline, it will be constrained to some degree (both by the licensor and by player expectations). These restrictions can all be fine for a platformer or a single-person FPS, but become very problematic for a paper RPG or an MMO. This is yet another example where a single-player game's requirement to satisfy only one person at a time is a powerful advantage.

Story/Narrative

Story or narrative is often part of a game’s conceit, but it does not have to be. Chess, for example, has a conceit but no story. Story in games is a fairly new phenomenon, and almost exclusive to the computer world. Traditional boardgames and card games never have explicit stories, and newer ones very rarely do. Even computer games rarely if ever had stories in the early days (e.g., Space Wars, NetHack). Now almost all computer games have significant story elements, and the exceptions tend to be confined to certain genres, such as rhythm games, simulations (including sports), and puzzle games.

Although many computer games have stories, those games may take the story more or less seriously. At one extreme, Doom and Quake lead programmer John Carmack has said that “story in a game is like a story in a porn movie; it’s expected to be there, but it’s not that important.” And in Doom, this statement is arguably true—but the many fans of the Final Fantasy games, well known for their stories, would probably not agree with Carmack’s viewpoint. Some players who enjoy games like Doom gnash their teeth in frustration at the many cut scenes that games like Final Fantasy use to tell their stories, and yet there are players who enjoy both types of games. Even games like Doom or Diablo that have fairly minimal stories can get good value out of them, in terms of setting player expectations, helping to make mechanics more understandable, and providing some extra motivation for gameplay goals. Such basic stories, however, are a far cry from the ones that the best of the story-rich games create, stories that create truly memorable characters that players care about.

There are a few examples of story in noncomputer games, such as paper role-playing games, choose your own adventure books, and murder mystery games like How to Host a Murder. However, these are exceptions rather than the rule, and they are all fairly modern.

Why are detailed stories so rare in precomputer games? Part of the reason is that a simple conceit can provide much of the help a game needs, in terms of adding interest and flavor to a game and helping the player understand more complex rules. So story is not absolutely necessary. And before the computer, options for presenting story in a game were very limited: mostly pure text, which many players might not want to stop and read during the play of a game. Reading chapters of Le Morte d’Arthur between turns of chess, for example, would not make a very satisfactory game experience. Another factor is that story is hard to present in multiplayer games—whatever method is used to present it will require time, and some players will be more inclined to spend that time and others less so, leading to problems with downtime. Since single-player games were less common before
the computer era, that may have left less scope for story. Lastly, there is some difficulty in combining story and game generally.

There is a certain tension between some of the elements that make for a good game and those that make for a good story. Playing a game involves choices, and those choices can go in different directions; repeated plays of the game will be different. These different outcomes are all equally valid (or at least many of them are). But with a good story, the outcome will feel in some way inevitable—other alternative outcomes will not represent as good a story. And a good story can be read again and again, even though it is the same every time. If a game plays the same way every time that is usually not a good thing—games rely on uncertainty in outcome in order to work. When a strong story is included in a game, it can sometimes make the game less replayable—a game like *Final Fantasy VII*, with strong story elements, may be less appealing to play again (you know how the story will come out) than a game like *Diablo* that has a weaker story. All that said, the powerful visual and audio presentations possible in a computer game make presenting story very enticing. Many highly successful computer games rely heavily on story, and much academic work examining the role of story in computer games has been done.

**Exercise 7.10:** How does a game’s conceit affect the metagame?

**Exercise 7.11:** How does a licensed game affect the cost to the player in terms of time and money?

**Exercise 7.12:** Would you expect single-player or multiplayer games to have stronger conceits/motifs? *(Hint: Think in terms of rewards.)* What types of conceits might be best for multiplayer games?

**Exercise 7.13:** Name three games with the same basic conceit, but that use it in very different ways.

**Exercise 7.14:** Name five classic games without a conceit. Name five modern games without one. Which list was harder to come up with? Why?

### 7.3 Characteristic: Spectation

Two games might be equally fun to play, but one is much more enjoyable to watch than the other. This characteristic of a game—how amenable it is to watching—we call “spectation.”

Spectation includes everything from a TV audience for poker, to fans at a baseball game, to people at a bar casually watching a game of darts, to family members at home watching a game of *Monopoly* that they’ve decided to sit out of. Variables include the size of the audience, the formality of the viewing (e.g., purchased tickets to a sporting event versus watching a game between friends), and the game itself (watching chess is different than watching soccer). Normally people think of sports when they think of people watching a game, but in fact almost any game can be watched.

Sports do, however, generally have very good spectation. The initial demands placed on the viewer in terms of specialized knowledge tend to be fairly low: a five-minute explanation could be enough for someone to watch a soccer game. Imagine watching a chess game after a five-minute explanation. And yet the watcher of a sports game will still gain considerable extra enjoyment by being highly knowledgeable—sports do no worse than nonsports games in this regard. As we will discuss below, sports tend to have relatively few impediments to spectation in other areas as well.

In general, single-player games are not as good for spectation as multiplayer ones. Much of the enjoyment of the spectators comes from watching the human drama of competition. So even if a
single-player game is easy to follow—think, say, of card solitaire—it may not be as exciting to watch as a head-to-head battle. Even for single-player games, though, spectation still matters, because it is a big part of how new players are brought into the game. If it is easy to watch someone else play, understand what they are doing, and imagine oneself having fun doing the same, the game is more likely to spread. So even a game that will never become a spectator sport can gain from spectation as a form of marketing. In the digital world, on average, arcade games do best here, followed by console games, with PC games in last place—this rank order is natural enough, given the physical environments (and in particular, the availability of spectators) where each of these game types is found.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 7.6**

© iStockphoto.com/Adam Kazmierski

If one thinks of games as evolving and competing organisms, in the sense that they change over time and become more or less prevalent, it's clear that good spectation is a big bonus for a game. Players will usually feel better about their choice of game knowing that people want to watch it. An audience may inspire them to want to play better, which in turn may make them spend more time playing and practicing so as to improve their skills. Members of the audience are in some sense participants in the game, and some of them may decide to become players later on.

**Spectation After and Before the Game**

Spectation does not even have to happen at the same time as the game itself. Watching a game can be interesting even if one knows the outcome. A newspaper article written about a game that happened the previous day is an example of delayed (and filtered) spectation—a friend describing the game to you is another.
Games that have distinct highlights rather than a more or less continuous stream of action tend to do better here, because they are easier to recount in a condensed yet still interesting form.[21] In this sense, football is probably better than soccer, which is still better than basketball, and a marathon is worse than any of them. Another reflection of how easy it is to condense the events of a game can be seen in the amount of information that can usefully be given in something like a box score. Poker as commonly played at home is decent in terms of how well it can be recounted—many roughly similar hands are played, but there are often some big wins and losses to talk about—but tournament poker is even better, because players can be eliminated on single big hands.

Games can be interesting to talk about or watch even before they happen: witness the pregame shows so common in sports. These can vary widely in content, from human-interest stories (the troubled home life of the big star who is about to play) to very detailed analyses of game strategy. Note that this variation is, like so much else that we discuss, both agential (How much does the intended audience know about the sport? What will they be interested in hearing?) and systemic (there is more to say about different plays to execute in football than there is about different ways to run fast in a sprint).

Impediments to Spectation

One way to think about spectation is to consider what factors impede it. Agential impediments tend to revolve around the amount of technical knowledge required to watch the game. Must I be a player to watch effectively? Must I be a good player? Can expert commentary make up for lack of knowledge on my part? Can I even understand the expert commentary if it’s provided?[22] How much attention do I have to pay to enjoy the game—can I take breaks?

The amount of attention one must pay is not entirely systemic—it depends on how the game is presented and on what the viewer knows—but some systemic impediments are important. Obviously the overall complexity of the game is a big factor. It’s more work to watch and understand a game of chess than a footrace. Even at the same complexity level, though, the amount of game state information in a single moment is a big factor. Poker is a complex game, but between hands the state information is very simple: How many chips does each player have? Someone who stops watching and then starts again is at no great disadvantage. Chess is a lot worse, but at least all the state information is directly visible, if not easily comprehensible. An RTS is horrendous: a highly complex visible state, plus much state information that may not be visible at all (e.g., unseen areas on the map, or how far into each tech tree a player is).

Most sports tend to have a very simple and easy-to-understand state: there is just one really important thing to know, namely the score.[23] Other things might also be important, like who currently has possession, but they are quickly gleaned from looking at the game by someone whose attention has wandered (or who has just returned from the restroom). Football is somewhat of an exception: one wants to know the current down and the number of yards to go until a first down. It is not a disaster if one loses track, since a viewer can simply wait until the next first down, at which point she again has complete state information. But television spectation in football made a big leap forward with the introduction of the strip at the bottom of the screen listing the down and yards to go (not just the score), and another step forward with the electronic colored line showing the location of the line to gain the next first down. So presentation improvements can make up for
systemic difficulties.

Speculation relies on the viewer’s understanding not just of positional heuristics but strategic ones as well. What is a good move? What is an amazing one? Sports have an advantage here again due to people’s innate understanding of real-life physics. A brilliant move in an RTS may return only blank stares from all but the most hardcore spectator. A Dr. J dunk from the foul line will be seen as amazing by everyone. Similar situations occur with a diving catch or with the thunderous roars and amazing speeds of racecars.

Systemic impediments are often visual. How easy is it to see the game from a distance? Is it easy to use cameras and microphones to good effect? Are the results of player actions clearly visible (computer games often score especially badly here—think of a player using hotkeys to build something in an RTS)? Is there important hidden information in the game?

PC games often fare poorly at speculation, with small screen sizes and little use of the spectators’ physical intuition. Contrast this state of affairs with sports, where the “screen size” is very large, and much activity is easily understandable due to the spectators’ unconscious understanding of physics. The speculation problems of PC games are not necessarily critical given that opportunities to view other people’s games in progress are often limited anyway. Coin-op arcade games, however, give better opportunity to view others’ games, and enhanced speculation can lead directly to increased revenue due to the ease of impulse purchases. Taken together, all these facts imply a higher value to ease of spectator understanding for arcade games. Perhaps the emerging dominance of fighting games with humanoid characters and motion-capture technology appears more predictable from looking at speculation than from looking at any other gameplay characteristic of the progenitor of these games, namely *Karate Champ*.

### Speculation and Hidden Information

Hidden information’s impact on speculation is perhaps worth a few more comments. Here we are considering the common case of a game with multiple players, each of whom has access to her own private information. In general, the more information is hidden, the worse the game’s speculation—draw poker is less interesting to watch than stud poker. Audience members don’t necessarily want to follow the game from the point of view of a single player, but revealing information belonging to multiple players for the benefit of the audience can annoy the players. Both of these facts can be seen in the common occurrence of the bridge kibitzer who stands behind each of the players in turn. However, if the problem can be solved in some reasonable way, such as the hole cam in televised poker, the audience may find the revelation of secrets quite appealing, leading to good speculation.

Computer games often do badly on speculation due to hidden information. The standard setup of each player having his own screen, with information that only he knows, creates an enormous amount of hidden information. Indeed, there may be no public information at all, at least not in a systematic way—just hidden information that both people happen to have at a given moment (such as the progress of a specific battle in an RTS while both players are watching it). However, arcade games or split-screen console games avoid the hidden-information problem, and of course single-player games (whatever other speculation problems they may have, such as lack of drama) avoid it as well.
Improving Speculation

To make a game’s speculation better, the most basic thing to do is make the game better in general. Most things (but by no means all, e.g., adding hidden information) that would make the game more enjoyable to play would make it more enjoyable to watch. Special emphasis should be placed on heuristics, especially beginner heuristics (since watchers typically have lower levels of skill than players). Good, and very simple, positional heuristics make it easier for viewers to understand the state the game is in, which is especially important since the viewers are typically paying less attention than the players and may even be absent for a time. Good directional heuristics let viewers say “I would have done that differently!” and thus become more involved in the game.

Removing specific impediments can help. It’s important to limit the knowledge burden for the viewer: either systemically, by keeping the basics of the game simple (which goes back to beginner heuristics), or agentially, by presenting the game to viewers with helpful commentary or summary lines of key information. Another important point is visual: making sure that hidden information is revealed where appropriate, that player choices are clearly visible in results within the game, and that important game events visible to the players are made visible to the spectators as well.

In addition to designing games with speculation in mind, a game can be designed specifically for speculation—Roman gladiatorial combat and TV game shows spring to mind—or modified after the fact for better speculation. Sports appear once again as examples in this latter case: modifications like the shot clock in basketball, tiebreakers in soccer and tennis, and the instant replay rules in football are all designed in greater or lesser part to improve speculation. An older and more extreme example of adaptation to speculation comes from Tokugawa Japan: the annual go games played before the shogun were eventually played out entirely in advance, the players sequestered to prevent knowledge of the results from leaking out, and then the games replayed before the shogun, all to prevent the games from lasting too long for the spectators. The shining modern example is the use of instant replay in football. The rule change occurred not mainly because of the increased accuracy of calls, but far more importantly so the game watched more closely equaled the game officiated.

Exercise 7.15: Choose a game and describe its speculation. What could be done to improve it? Would it be worth it, or would it be a net loss for the game as a whole?

Exercise 7.16: Consider computer games. Break them up by genre (or according to some other grouping that seems helpful). Which categories have good speculation? Which don’t?

Exercise 7.17: How did lax rules on steroid testing and punishment help the speculation of baseball? How did they hurt it—or did they?

Exercise 7.18: How did the lipstick camera (aka hole cam) help the speculation of poker?

Exercise 7.19: What are the advantages of stoppages of play in football versus soccer for spectators? What are the disadvantages?

Exercise 7.20: Why do so many game shows feature three or fewer contestants?

Exercise 7.21: Discuss some reasons for the number of contestants on Survivor.

Exercise 7.22: Why do game shows often have bonus rounds?

7.4 Characteristic: Game Customization
We have mostly been thinking of players as choosing a game that meets their needs, or even adapting themselves to the needs of the game. Often, however, players adapt a game to their own needs, by customizing that game in some way. On the narrow end, this can be the very mild customization of choosing to emphasize one part of the game over another, as when a chess player memorizes only very aggressive openings and always opts for an attacking style of play. On the broad end, sometimes the entire game is built around player customization, as with trading card games or role-playing games. When the scope for customization is very great, the original game may feel more like a family of games than like a single game, with each customization representing a different member of that family.

![Image of a game scene](image_url)

**Figure 7.7**

Sometimes the players are customizing the game as a whole—for example, when a group decides to play *Monopoly* with money going to whoever lands on Free Parking. Sometimes each player customizes his own play—the aforementioned aggressive chess player, or a person making his own character in *World of Warcraft*. In the former case, the customizers are taking on (perhaps unconsciously) the role of game balancers, by choosing a modification that they feel makes for a fun game. In the latter case, though, each customizer is trying to make a choice that will benefit herself in some way (often, though not exclusively, by making her win more often), so game balance gets quite tricky. It is very hard to make a system that allows players to make all kinds of individual choices but still ensures that all possible choices are balanced in the end.²⁵

The customization may take place outside the game, in a preparatory period (building a *Magic*
deck, deciding on a house rule). Or it may take place during the game (building all air units in Starcraft, getting as much +Strength gear as possible in WoW).

We’ll break game customization into three rough categories:

• *Personal style* Favorite chess openings, or always rushing in Starcraft
• *House rules* Playing by some variant set of rules
• *Built-in customization* Where the game allows individual players to choose specific rules or game pieces for themselves, as in Magic or World of Warcraft

Afterward, we’ll also discuss one particular type of rule variant: handicap systems.

**Personal Style**

Almost any reasonably complex game allows players to develop some kind of personal style. In chess a player might be more or less aggressive; in go a player might choose to emphasize territory or power. In either game a player might choose to memorize some openings rather than others. More explicit choices might be built into the game: an FPS might allow a player to be a medic, sniper, or heavy weapons specialist; an RTS might allow choices of different races, and surely will allow choices of different units.

If a player makes only light use of these kinds of options—perhaps attacking aggressively when he sees an opening, but playing a very positional game otherwise—it may not be clear where personal style ends and simply trying to play well begins. With heavy use—say the player always plays a medic no matter what—it starts to look like the kind of built-in customization an RPG might have.

**House Rules**

Another common customization option is for players to play some variant of the game given to them, whether for variety’s sake or as a way of fixing perceived flaws. Sometimes the variants are given within the game (as optional rules or alternate scenarios). But sometimes the players simply make them up. The *Monopoly* variant where players get money for landing on Free Parking is perhaps the most famous example—this variant is so common many players don’t realize it is not an official rule.

Some games are meant to be modified: informal games such as “playing house” or (fictionally) Calvinball, or more structured games such as *Eleusis*, *Icehouse*, *Fluxx*, or dealer’s choice poker.

If the variants are different enough, the new “homebrew” is essentially a new game built from the parts of the old game. Paper RPGs tend to attract this kind of attention. More recently, computer games are often built with an open architecture allowing fans to build all kinds of mods, from minor tweaks to so-called total conversions. These mods may look somewhat like the original game, or they may look wildly different: a new *Quake* level might be quite similar to other levels, *Counterstrike* is fairly different from *Half-Life*, and *Defense of the Ancients* is wildly different from *Warcraft III*. 
Calvinball. CALVIN AND HOBBES (c) 1990 Watterson. Dist. by UNIVERSAL UCLICK. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

Some game structures are so much of a whole that it is difficult to modify them. For example, it is hard to see how to change a game like go without just having a completely different game. Chess, on the other hand, has a basic structure (move your pieces to checkmate the opposing king) plus many pieces with different characteristics, lending itself to countless modifications: just create new pieces!

Built-in Customization

Some games have built in the opportunity for players to customize their own individual experiences. This can be thought of as a form of personal style, but much more than that. Allowing players to customize at this level can lead to a very strong attachment to “my character” or “my deck,” but at the price of greater complexity and more difficulty in game balance.

Basic customization would include a choice of character type in an FPS, a race in an RTS, or the different player abilities in Cosmic Encounter. More serious customization tends to be found in RPGs (paper or online), trading card games, and miniatures games. However, the concept has been experimented with in many other genres—for example, in the RTS Impossible Creatures players bring to each game their own army design, created in advance of the game much like a Magic deck.

Games with heavy player customization are much harder to design and balance. As mentioned before, letting every player have some of the power of the game designer, but with personal goals
rather than game-level goals, puts enormous pressures on balance. Also, players are likely to expect a stream of new content, to keep the game fresh, in a way they would not with a less customizable game such as a standard boardgame.

The player skills involved in customizing a game are often quite different from the ones involved in playing the game, and players may choose to specialize: some players may become quite good at building decks or characters, and others might choose to simply use those builds rather than make their own. Occasionally this state of affairs can become discouraging for players who would like to make their own custom game experience, but are intimidated by all the expert templates running around. To help protect such players a bit, it is often a good idea to balance choices based on templates people will want to play (for flavor reasons, say) so that they are within striking distance of choices built purely for power.

Games that allow a lot of player customization also tend to have a lot of scope for personal style and house rules—D&D and Magic both have lots of game variants and different play styles. Even when the technology does not seem to allow house rules, as with an MMO that does not allow modding (player modifications to a game), house rules nevertheless may crop up: that, after all, is what guild rules (such as DKP\textsuperscript{26}) are.

These types of games have structures that allow a rich metagame experience to develop around the player desire for creativity and personal expression. It is easy to be aggressive in a game that gives you explicit choices to do so as a standard variant in your play. The rewards of self-expression present in-game tend to be magnified in the metagame. Players can buy and paint miniatures representing their characters, post blogs about their RPG adventures, or publish their favorite TCG decks to fan websites.

**Handicaps**

Handicaps are a kind of rule variant, but one deserving of separate discussion. They may be made up by players on the spot, or there may be an official handicap system as part of the formal rules of the game or metagame. The goal is almost always to take an uneven player matchup and make it more even, so that the outcome is not a foregone conclusion. Examples include golf and go.

Since the purpose of the handicap is to give both players a chance to win, games with a lot of luck don’t need a handicap system as much. Handicaps are usually found in low-luck games.

Even if a game could use a handicap system, it is not always easy to give it one. If the game has some uniform resource, you can give a player more or less of it without altering the game too much: hence go (stones), golf (points), and horse racing (weight) all handicap fairly well. Chess, on the other hand, does not: taking a piece away from someone really changes the character of the game. But speed chess is fine: just give the two players different amounts of time.

With computer games for two or more players, it is often not that hard to put in some sort of handicap system, perhaps a tax of some kind on the stronger player, or making all the weaker player’s units 10 percent stronger. Such systems are not all that widely used, though. Perhaps that is because most handicap systems need more than a mechanism for altering player strength in-game: they also need a rating system and a correlation between rating and handicap (indeed players often rate themselves by the handicap they need—again look at golf or go). When two players meet, if they can instantly understand what handicap would give an even game, they are much more likely to use the
handicap. Such systems do not generally exist with computer games, and worse yet, many games are one-shot affairs with no follow-up, so there is no chance to institute a handicap in a second game (let alone adjust it in a third). Besides, the larger pool of people online means it is easier to look for someone else to play rather than tweaking a handicap with a given opponent.

Computer games for one player, though, do typically come with a handicap system, namely difficulty adjustment. Here the player usually chooses for herself what the right handicap is, making a more systematic structure involving exact ratings less necessary. Dynamic difficulty adjustment is also an option in computer games. This may turn out to be fine if the player never realizes what’s going on, but has the potential to lessen the sense of achievement one might feel if it is revealed.

Exercise 7.23: What are some advantages and disadvantages of easily customizable games in terms of strategic collapse?

Exercise 7.24: What are some advantages and disadvantages of easily customizable games in terms of reward/effort ratio?

Exercise 7.25: What are some of the advantages of personally (as opposed to group) customizable games as far as the game’s rewards are concerned? What are some of the disadvantages?

Exercise 7.26: What are the customizable aspects of NFL football?

7.5 Characteristic: Misbehavior

Game players engage in a wide variety of behaviors that may be viewed negatively by other players. We divide those behaviors into three broad categories: cheating, sharp play, and griefing.

Cheating

Games have rules, and rules restrict players. It is easier to win without those restrictions, so sometimes players cheat: they disobey the rules. One might think there is not that much more to say about cheating, but it turns out cheating is a surprisingly rich metagame area. How hard it is to cheat, how effective cheating is, and what costs (both in-game and out-of-game, both formal penalties and informal ones) are associated with cheating all vary widely. Perhaps surprisingly, even the acceptability of cheating varies widely, to the point where certain violations of the rules are not even considered cheating.

Cheating is hardest in turn-based games with no hidden information. As long as your opponent is paying attention, it is hard even to imagine how you could violate the rules of chess unnoticed. If the game contains random elements or hidden information, cheating becomes more practical because it is less detectable, although it is not always easy—manipulating dice or cards often requires some skill. If the game takes place in real time, that often helps enable cheating as well, since the pace of the game gives less chance for opponents to detect it.
In informal games, penalties for cheating are usually not precisely defined. They range widely, though, from eye rolling and a demand that the game revert to its pre-cheat state, to outrage and loss of friendship (or even risk of physical harm, if money is on the line). In more formal situations such as tournaments and refereed games, there are usually very explicit penalties for various violations of the rules. When the game has more at stake, the penalties for cheating tend to go up, and all the more so if money is involved.  

Usually violations of the rules are met with social disapproval on the part of most of the player community. Sometimes, however, they are not, and occasionally the violations are so widely accepted that they are not considered “cheating” at all. For example, being offsides in football is against the rules, but not many people would call it cheating. Factors that push a violation into the “not cheating” category include: the violation is relatively easy to catch, there are referees available to penalize it, an appropriately severe penalty is applied, the violation is not a deliberate attempt to injure someone, and the violation is possible to commit by accident. All of these factors mean that people’s sense of fairness is less likely to be upset, and the rule violation may be seen more as a reasonable strategic choice or an unfortunate accident rather than cheating. Another example of a violation that might not be considered cheating is using your hands on the ball in soccer (when you are not the goalie) in a desperate attempt to stop the other team from scoring. Taking steroids, on the other hand, is more widely viewed as cheating. Although it does have severe and established penalties, it is hard to detect, it involves injury (although mainly to the perpetrator), and it is hard to do by accident.

Note that small and moderate rule violations tend to be punished in-game (foul shots, sitting out
for two minutes). More severe violations involve penalties that go beyond one game (being banned for several games, or even for several years). Violations with more severe penalties are more likely to be viewed as “cheating,” although it is arguable which way the causation runs.

One normally thinks that the less cheating possible in a game, the better, and in general this is surely true. Certainly large amounts of cheating are unsustainable: noncheating players don’t want to be at a constant disadvantage, so they will leave the game, and the cheaters are looking for an advantage over the majority, so they will ultimately be dissatisfied as well. However, some of the most exciting metagames have a moderate amount of cheating, at least of the “perceived as okay” rule violations discussed above. Much excitement in sports comes from the tension and drama (often involving heroes and villains) of rule violations and the resultant penalties. Pro wrestling (which might be thought of as spectacle for a game with no actual game underlying it) has elevated this to an art form. Note that having this tension correct in a metagame all but requires refereeing of some kind, so that the cheaters (or rule violators, if one prefers not to think of it as “cheating”) can be caught and punished, at least a fair amount of the time.

With computer games, cheating takes on different forms. Since generally speaking the computer is the referee, cheating is often impossible for an average player, but for a player sophisticated enough to modify the game code, cheating can take place that may be difficult to detect. Sometimes so-called cheats are built into the game code for single-player games, but given that these are part of the shipped game, using them is probably closer to using an alternate game mode or alternate difficulty setting rather than actual cheating. For online games, the owner of the game code can serve as a kind of referee, but often cheating becomes ill-defined—in addition to modifying the game code, any behavior the game owner dislikes (see the discussion of exploits in the section on “Sharp Play” below) might be labeled cheating.

A few more examples:

- **Card games** (bridge, say) Simple forms of cheating, such as not following suit, are easily detectable by good players. More sophisticated cheating, such as altering shuffles and deals, or illegal signals during bidding, can be hard to detect but is also hard to do.

- **Battleship** Cheating is very easy in Battleship, and all but impossible to detect if done carefully. With such temptation, people who might not otherwise cheat will do so, and the game can break down as a workable enterprise.

- **Baseball** Baseball has a rich history of cheating: steroids, corked bats, pine tar, spitballs, and of course the Black Sox.

- **Starcraft** The cheat of choice is the “map hack” (an add-on program that reveals the parts of the map normally hidden by fog of war), which shows the dangers of trusting the game client. Because the client knows the full game state, there is no way to be certain the player is not using that knowledge to reveal hidden information.

This last example, of the map hack in Starcraft, brings up an interesting point: the perception of cheating may be more damaging than the cheating itself. It is possible for cheating to be relatively rare, but perceived as much more widespread. A good Starcraft player, with a strong intuition for what his opponent is likely to do and where (or simply with a strong tendency to build observers), will often be accused of map hacking even if he is completely honest. Both accuser and accused are likely
to feel their game experience has been tainted, and too much of this sort of thing and many players will quit. This is why it is so important to stamp out cheating in multiplayer online games: not so much because of its direct effects, but because of the discouragement it causes among honest players, who feel either that they are falling behind or that they must work harder than the cheaters to achieve the same results.

**Sharp Play**

Sometimes certain in-game practices are acknowledged as being within the rules, but still somehow “disreputable”—as taking advantage somehow. In older books about games, these practices were often described as “sharp.” A classic example from poker is sandbagging—that is, opening with a check when you have a strong hand. Nothing in the rules forbids it, and many players now would consider it simply a possible way to play with no moral connotations at all, but in the past many people considered it slightly shady.

Other examples of play that some playgroups will find disreputable:

• Rule lawyering: using the rules of complex games to one’s advantage, perhaps by bringing up certain little-known rules only when it helps one’s position.

• Rushing in an RTS: some casual RTS players feel rushing (attacking very early in the game) is unfair, or not fun, and expect it not to occur in “casual” games (typically meaning the game they are playing in). Sometimes this policy will be announced with a statement like “20 minute no rush,” but sometimes it will merely be assumed, leading to bad feelings if other players don’t share the assumption.

• Playing an especially powerful strategy in a casual environment: more generally, playing very aggressively or using very powerful gameplay techniques can be seen as unsportsmanlike. A typical example is bringing a tournament-quality *Magic* deck to a more casual play environment, but even just being a much better player (say at one-on-one basketball), or bringing a “ringer” to a team game, can evoke a similar reaction.

• Simply trying too hard to win

• Counting cards in blackjack

• Some political behaviors, especially kingmaking

As mentioned above, in sports with explicit penalties for certain rule violations, violating those rules (and paying the penalty) is often not perceived as “cheating.” However, doing so deliberately (because the benefit gained in some particular instance is perceived by the violator as being greater than the penalty) is often seen as sharp play, especially in casual games.

Computer games, where essentially the game code is the rules (i.e., the things the code lets you do are ipso facto what you are allowed to do), have the concept of “exploits”: things you are capable of doing within the game, but that you are “not supposed to do.” MMOs are especially prone to this problem. Sometimes it is quite clear that a certain game action is leading to results the programmers did not intend (clicking five particular buttons in a particular order to make a million gold pieces land in your lap), but sometimes it is not clear at all (finding a path that avoids several dangerous monsters but still reaches some valuable loot). Since players are always trying to find clever ways to do better at the game, it is a real burden on them if some of these ways—and how can they know
which ones?—are deemed “too clever.” Removing the possibility of the behavior in a patch is one thing, but branding the players as cheaters and punishing them is quite another. After all, one person’s exploit is another person’s clever play.

So what counts as sharp play is highly agential. Some playgroups (typically more serious or “hardcore” ones) will accept a given practice; other groups (typically more casual ones) will feel the practice is unfair or inappropriate and will disapprove of it. An interesting example that highlights this difference is the practice of taking back moves. In very serious groups, it is usually considered cheating (although it may not be mentioned specifically in the written rules), in fairly serious groups it might be allowed occasionally but frowned on, and in very casual groups not allowing your opponent to take back a move might be considered “sharp”: technically a player may forbid her opponent to take back his move, but doing so is the mark of an unpleasant player, one who is “too serious.”

If sharp play is seen as “taking advantage,” what is it taking advantage of? One view might be that it is taking advantage of holes in the rules, weaknesses that prevent the specific and exact written rules from fully reflecting the “spirit of the game.” Since the spirit of the game will seem different to different players, what violates it and what does not will seem different as well. Looked at this way, it is further evidence that “the rules are not the game.” And it brings out again the parallel to law brought up by the phrase “rule lawyering”: a common objection to law is that laws are supposed to represent just outcomes, but too often an outcome is in accordance with the law but still unjust. Similarly, players may see certain behaviors as in accordance with a game’s rules but against that game’s spirit. Since it is impossible to get complete agreement on what a game’s spirit (or societal justice) is—insofar as it is possible, those agreements tend to be encoded in the rules (or laws) already—some disagreement is inevitable.

Griefing

Sometimes players engage in gameplay behavior that does not benefit their own position in the game, but instead merely makes another player miserable. In online games, especially when done out of pure vindictiveness, such behavior is referred to as “griefing.” Although meanness has always existed, in games as in life generally, the anonymity of online gaming has made griefing much more common (and, in particular, common enough to receive a name).

In a way, griefing can be thought of as kingmaking’s evil twin: it is political in the sense that it is gameplay behavior not intended to help the perpetrator win. It’s done to make someone else lose rather than to make someone else win.

Common forms of griefing include repeated dominance of a weaker player (a lower-level player in an MMO, or a much weaker player in a high school football game) and refusal to concede (see the discussion of “hide the farm” in section 2.1 on player elimination).

Note that griefing, although an in-game problem, often requires metagame solutions. It is hard to prevent griefing purely from in-game mechanics, because there are just too many things a creative player can do to annoy others. In offline games, griefing is typically controlled by other players refusing to play with the griever, or applying out-of-game repercussions, from social shunning to even (in extreme cases) physical violence. Current online systems make it hard to avoid griefers or to shun them in out-of-game contexts, but examples like eBay’s reputation system or Facebook’s friend
networks show that it is possible in principle. Even in practice, grieving can be controlled where the same group of people play together regularly. For example, MMO guilds effectively limit grieving within the guild itself—someone who frequently grieved his guildmates would simply be ejected from the guild. It is imaginable that a more general reputation system, properly fed into online player matchmaking, could help control grieving further. As players start to have more consistent online identities, and thus reputations to protect, perhaps online grieving may become not that much more common than offline grieving.

Restrictions on Misbehavior

It is easy for game designers to get upset about misbehavior: they have a vision of how they think the game should be played, and player behavior can disrupt that vision.

The important question, though, is whether the behavior is actually making the game less enjoyable for most players. In that sense, adjusting a game to stop misbehavior is like fixing game balance: the important point is not whether some element in the game is working differently than how it was foreseen (some amount of that is inevitable in any complex game), but whether the element is creating a bad experience. Moral outrage is unlikely to be useful—in the case of sharp play, it may be misplaced, and in the case of grieving or cheating, the perpetrators are unlikely to pay attention.

If the game system allows too much bad behavior, the fault is with the game design and not with the players. Part of game design is understanding what incentives the game system presents to players, and understanding how the players are likely to react to those incentives. Players will try to push the game system as much as they can to win (whatever “winning” means to them), which is only to be expected, and demanding that players “play the game as intended” is unlikely to yield good results.

So the approach most likely to be effective is to adjust the game’s incentives—ideally before the game is released, but sometimes afterward. Proper rule enforcement, perhaps done automatically (for an electronic game) or by judges (for a paper game or sports), is key so that players who want to follow the rules don’t feel driven out by the success of those who do not. In MMOs, restricting PvP by zones, consent flags, and no-PvP servers are all examples of systems that restrict play automatically. Deck registration rules in Magic tournaments or rules about touching a piece in chess require human enforcement, but similarly serve to limit behavior that most players would rather not see become widespread.

In small groups of people that play together regularly, behavior rules can be made up on the spot and enforced by social pressure. With larger and more anonymous communities, such as online games, sports leagues, or boardgame tournaments, the temptations to misbehave and the lack of social enforcement mean formal structures are needed—hence the existence of special rules for tournaments and leagues that are not part of the rules of the game itself. Some of these rules are needed strictly for the running of the tournament (e.g., rules about how players are paired, but some are extensions of the game rules (e.g., explicit penalties for various violations of the game rules) needed because of the misbehavior-prone anonymous environment.

Exercise 7.27: What are some examples of grieving in nononline games? Why is it more prevalent in online games?
Exercise 7.28: What are some advantages to the metagame (especially spectacle) of the existence of cheating in sports? What are some of the disadvantages?

Exercise 7.29: Name some games you (or your friends) have cheated at, and how.

Exercise 7.30: Give some examples of games that are hard to cheat at in face-to-face play, but easy to cheat at online.

Exercise 7.31: Give some examples from sports of “sharp play” (legal behaviors that are nevertheless often viewed negatively). Is it easier to think of examples from casual play or from professional play? Why?

7.6 Characteristic: Play Lifetime

Some games are bought, played for a few hours, and then set aside and never revisited. Others are played for months, years, or even a player’s entire life. A great many factors go into the lifetime of play a game can have—every characteristic we’ve discussed can affect it. Perhaps a player set the game aside because he felt it had unsatisfying heuristics; perhaps the rewards were not worth the effort. Another player might have kept playing for years because she enjoyed the amount (large or small) of randomness in the game, or because she found the metagame compelling.

For digital games, being technologically up to date can make the difference. Asteroids is not as popular now as it was when it was cutting-edge arcade technology. Many older digital games have all but vanished today. Some of the best ones, though, survive, whether on emulators, on carefully preserved old hardware, as ports to new platforms (the web games and handhelds of today often make good platforms for the console games of yesteryear), or in new versions (sometimes these sequels capture the magic of the original and sometimes they don’t).
Beyond these issues of overall game quality and (for digital games) of technology, there is the question of the game’s content—how easy is it to exhaust the possibilities the game has to offer? Can the player eventually explore everything interesting in the game, or is there always something new to discover? Tic-tac-toe and chess are in some ways similar games structurally—two-player turn-based games with no overt luck—but one has at most an hour or two’s worth of play for an adult, and the other has more than a lifetime’s. Myst may be very enjoyable the first time through, but once a player reaches the end, she may not want to play again, since she now knows how to solve all the puzzles. A Final Fantasy game offers more than Myst on a second playthrough, but enough of the pleasure is in the story that many people might decide not to play again. A game like Starcraft, though, can be played again and again, and indeed it has continued to be played long past its expected technological lifespan.

A long play lifetime is perhaps better thought of as a goal that a game may or may not have, rather than as a “defect” of the games that lack it. Play lifetime varies based on the type of game. Classic games and sports tend to have long lifetimes, arguably because ones that do not are unlikely to reach classic status. Classic games with short play lifetimes are often meant for children, for example tic-tac-toe and war, but there are exceptions such as sliding-block puzzles and the like.32 Online subscription games and digital object sales games need long play lifetimes to support their business models. Digital games that rely on boxed sales do not—if a player buys the game, plays it through, feels it was a good value, and never plays again, the game can still be successful. However, a game that people can keep playing is often perceived as a good value, and a boxed-sale game can succeed by giving long-term play value. For example, Diablo II is a boxed-sale game but has an enormous amount of repeat play value: new character classes to play; nightmare, hell, and hardcore difficulty modes; an enormous item-chasing subgame; and online play. It has sold well for ten years after its launch, despite being technologically far behind more current games.

Game Content, Exhaustible and Otherwise

Why does someone quit playing a game? If you ask them, they will often say it’s because something else intervened: perhaps another game that came out, or perhaps some real-life event. But there are always interruptions of one kind or another, so it is worth looking at the game in question to see if there is anything that made it easier to put down, or less likely to be picked up again afterward. In multiplayer games by far the most common answer is “because my friends stopped playing it” or “I can’t find anyone to play with anymore.” This is of course a second-order effect—somebody had to stop playing it first.

There are two basic reasons to stop playing a game: you’re bored with it, or you’ve finished it. In the first case, there may be a weakness (or just a bad fit with your tastes) in one or more characteristics—unsatisfying heuristics, or reaching a very flat part of the reward-for-effort curve, for example. In the second case, the game must be of the sort that can be “finished.” Such games are especially common in the digital arena, and are rare among sports or classic boardgames and card games: one doesn’t say of soccer or chess that “I’ve finished the game”!

A game has two basic strategies to hold a player’s interest. It can provide content for the player to consume, content that, after being experienced by the player, may not have further
appeal—exhaustible content. Or it can attempt to provide intrinsic variability: play patterns that differ from play session to play session without a game designer having to create new material. Most often, intrinsic variability comes from other players (for digital games, possibly including AI opponents): soccer and chess remain interesting in large part due to the constant and yet ever-changing pressures that opponents bring to the game.

Although exhaustible content is more common now than it used to be, it is by no means a new phenomenon. A crossword puzzle\textsuperscript{39} is exhaustible content: having done it once, a person is unlikely to want to do it again. As with any game built on exhaustible content, to keep a person interested in crosswords, puzzle creators must keep making new puzzles.

If a game relies on content, there are a number of ways to extend that content’s reach. Sometimes content can be created randomly: the random layouts of card solitaire, the random minefields of Minesweeper, and the random dungeons of NetHack and Diablo are examples. Other times the content can be reused by means of various game modes. A single-player RPG with multiple character classes gives one way to reuse game content; multiple difficulty levels are another. If the game allows extensive customization, players may replay it several times, customizing it differently each time. While all these things take some effort to create, they can be very efficient ways of extending content, because they serve as content multipliers rather than merely adding to the existing content.

One game feature that pushes against replay is having an explicit ending. Some games, like Tetris, most arcade games, or chess, don’t have an explicit end. Puzzle games do: they end when you’ve solved the puzzle. Computer role-playing games usually do: single-player ones have an ending point when you finish the story, and massively multiplayer ones have a level cap. Often RPGs have ways to keep playing past the end: replay using a new character class, replay to find hidden areas or complete some in-game collection, replay on a higher difficulty, or continue playing an MMO through PvP or raiding (and the equipment-collection game associated with them).\textsuperscript{34} Even if there are options for continued play, though, many players will take the “end” as a natural time to stop.

In general, it is the games with an explicit end that are built on exhaustible content, and the games without an explicit end that are built on intrinsic variety. (For a counterexample, think of a paper role-playing game, where there may be no specific end, and the game carries forward based on the gamemaster creating a continued stream of content.)

**How Goals Drive Play Forward**

Games, and their associated metagames, have goals that give players reasons to keep playing. Nowadays these goals are often formalized in explicit achievement systems, such as those found in Xbox Live Arcade or in World of Warcraft—or in the certificates, ribbons, and trophies found in children’s sports. However, games have always had goals, the most basic one being simply to win a given game. Achieving a certain level of skill—being able to run a marathon in under four hours, or mastering the Caro-Kann opening in chess—is another common goal that players set for themselves. Defeating a particular opponent, say beating grandpa at checkers, is another.

Goals in a game may be primarily linear: defeat a succession of harder and harder opponents, beat the game on an increasing series of difficulty levels, or complete a series of story quests in order. They may also be nonlinear (i.e., independent of one another): win a battle using only marines, complete a task without resorting to combat, or find the hidden flower.
Goals are very appealing (indeed, every game has them in some form) as game elements because they keep players interested until the goal is reached. But goals, especially powerful overarching ones like “finish the storyline” or “reach the level cap,” also provide stopping points for players. Chess doesn’t have a big overarching goal, so it doesn’t get the benefits that such a goal can provide. On the other hand, it doesn’t have a point where a player thinks “now I’m done” either.

Goals have evolved a great deal in computer games. Originally, there may have been no goal other than finishing the game, if it was the type that could be finished, or perhaps a high-score list was provided—especially common for arcade games, where “finishing” was undesirable for business reasons. Nowadays, there are explicit achievement systems, campaign frameworks (e.g., a global battle map framing a game centered on small tactical battles), and RPG frameworks (e.g., world exploration, leveling up, and collecting equipment for a game centered on snowboard racing). There are still high-score lists, or leaderboards, but often there are many of them for many different categories. As mentioned above, if there is a single overarching goal, such as completing a story or reaching a level cap, there are often postcompletion goals such as PvP. All these things provide additional goals for players. One danger, however, is that as online play (or offline play with online performance comparisons) becomes more common, many of these goals, if they involve comparison with other players, seem unachievable to the vast majority of players. It’s one thing to get the high score on *Pac-Man* at the local arcade, where you’re competing against dozens or hundreds of local players; it’s much, much, harder even to make the top ten on a leaderboard that shows everyone on the Internet. Comparison against smaller pools (everyone in your guild, everyone on your server, everyone in your friends network) can make achieving these goals seem possible again.

**Goal Chunking**

Players’ progress is often tracked by very fine scales: ratings (e.g., the Elo system) and scores (computer game scores, golf scores, race times, etc.). Such tracking is very good for comparing player performance, whether it be comparing one player with another, or comparing a single player’s performance today with her performance last week. These comparisons are especially useful for races—it is often how you tell who has won—and for single-player games, where it supports a multiplayer metagame based on score comparison.

On the minus side, though, it is often hard for players to care about fine distinctions in points. So it can be useful to “chunk” fine scales into coarser ones. For example, *Dance Dance Revolution* gives players not only a point score, but also a letter grade. Many players do not care about their exact point score but do care if they have managed to get an A or a B on a particular song. When games do not do this explicitly, players will often do it for themselves by setting cutoff points: perhaps they will strive to get over one billion points in a certain pinball game, or to run a marathon in under four hours. In direct head-to-head games, chunking is less relevant (or if you like it comes built in): beating the other player is a clear and satisfying goal. Even in chess, though, when you consider the single-player metagame of improving your rating, there are chunks: one can be a master, an international master, or a grandmaster.

While chunking goals can make them more compelling, completion of such chunks does give a game “stopping points.” Having chunked goals in a game may simply result in players playing until bored, and then continuing to play until the next chunk is finished, only quitting after that. Still, some kind of grouping of fine-scaled goals is probably a net benefit, especially for a single-player
game.

**Play Lifetime and Number of Players**

Very often (although there are many exceptions) single-player games tend to be content-oriented games, and have the issues surrounding completable goals, explicit endings, exhaustion of content, and so on. In other words, single-player games are most prone to being “finished.” Multiplayer games are more likely to be based on intrinsic variability, in large part through the medium of the other players.

Thus formal goal systems (achievements, collections to complete, different game modes, and the like) are especially useful in single-player games. Players need goals, and without other players to provide them, it’s up to the game itself to do so.

In a game with two or more players, the other players provide the goal: win against them. This goal always renews itself, and if a player’s skills increase and he wants a more difficult challenge, the goal comes naturally in more difficult versions: win against more difficult opponents.

With single-player games, simply winning may not be the best goal for long-term play. That’s because (even without issues of content exhaustion) once a player has won once, future victories may be too easy. After a few wins, a player needs new goals, such as winning on Very Hard, getting the “Blasted Lands” achievement, or collecting every Pokémon in the game. Typically the game designer needs to add these goals directly, unlike games for two or more players, where to a great extent the opponent does the work.

One can see enormous evolution here. For example, look at arcade games. Thirty years ago, a typical Asteroids player’s goal might be simply to get the highest score he could. Today, a *Dance Dance Revolution* player has not only score, but chunked goals (the letter grades) and subgoals (each song is a goal in and of itself), all of which come in various player-selected difficulty levels. Players will continue to set goals for themselves, or choose them based on the competitive and social influences of other players, but they now have a lot more material to work with.

**Exercise 7.32:** What’s the game you have played for the longest period of time? What features gave it that longevity?

**Exercise 7.33:** What’s a game you enjoyed very much but only played briefly? Why didn’t you play it longer?

**Exercise 7.34:** Think of a game you play that has a great many different in-game goals. How many of them do you pursue? What value to the game, if any, do the other goals have?

**Exercise 7.35:** Name a game whose “standard” way of evaluating performance is very fine-grained. What are some ways players of that game chunk this fine-grained measurement into pieces that they care about?