Welcome to the discourse of the real: Constituting the boundaries of games and players

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ABSTRACT
Discourse shapes the way we see the world. In game design and game studies, discourse also shapes the games we make, the games we play, and how we think about games in general. One key discursive construction in contemporary game culture is to portray some games as 'real' or 'authentic,' rendering others as fake or lesser. In this essay we analyze the discourse of real games by focusing on four key discursive constructions that prop up notions of real games: developer pedigree, game mechanics, the celebration of depth and complexity, and the payment structure for games. Using the framework of constitutive rhetoric we argue that these appeals also construct a category of real gamers that has a substantial impact on what games are available and how we think about them.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
D.3.3 Human Factors, Theory, Design

General Terms
Design, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords
Rhetoric, discourse, game studies, constitutive rhetoric, real games, social games, Facebook.

1. INTRODUCTION
One of the eternal questions surrounding game studies and game production is: what is a game? As academic organizations struggle with sorting digital games from board games or folk games and sports games are often relegated to their own fields of study, analyzing the realm of what counts as a game offers an opportunity to better understand the communities of people making and playing games and, in turn, what games mean. The definition of what counts as a game is historically and culturally contingent and studying the intersections of games and what is counted as legitimate opens an opportunity to understand games and gaming at a deep level. Studying the entire corpus of games and gaming is well beyond the scope of this paper, but we contend that focusing on the notion of 'real games' provides an opportunity to shine a light on what is unspoken about games. By studying those deep recesses we contend that we can learn a great deal about the foundational assumptions of the game industry and game players.

The question of what makes a game real or legitimate and not fake or marginalized is typically tied to the assumptions and cultural norms of a specific period of time and moment in play. In the late 1980s this led Newsweek to cite a 16-year-old syndicated columnist on videogames who contended that games that are too complex simply do not count, claiming that "arcane simulations requiring thick instruction manuals 'aren't games to me…a game is something with action and a joystick and firing the buttons and shooting the aliens'" [1]. The idea that complexity precludes something from being a game clearly excises *Spacewar!* and the *Ultima* franchise from the corpus of games, while the centrality of joysticks casts doubt upon keyboard and mouse based PC gaming, motion control, and touchscreen games, not to mention games that do not depend on a screen. In the contemporary gaming environment the quote reads as the kind of thing that should only be said by a 16-year-old who is not fully aware of the history of games and the breadth and depth of the kinds of games that warrant investigation. However, we have found plenty of evidence that game developers and the gaming press currently rely on similar tropes to define which games are real and denigrate those that are not.

To analyze statements about real games we employ a rhetorical approach to survey documents found primarily on Gamasutra and Kotaku, industry-leading resources dominated by developer and gamer talk respectively. We use Maurice Charland's notion of constitutive rhetoric to argue that appeals to a notion of real games brings a community into existence either where there was none before, or where an influx of new potential citizens calls the identity of the group in question. Effectively, to identify with appeals to real games, one must take the subject position of a real gamer, even though that position is created by the discourse in the first place. Tracing four key appeals of real games: developer pedigrees, game mechanics, the depth and consequences of games, and the money trail, we contend that reflecting on what makes a game a game is a crucial question for game developers and those who study games to be asking of themselves and of others.

Understanding the concept of real games and its power as a rhetorical device requires examining three bodies of literature: rhetoric, the 'real,' and game studies. Rhetoric provides an analytical perspective and the specific application of constitutive rhetoric offers a means by which to explore how gamers and games are brought into being by the discourse of and around games. Further exploring the idea of real by drawing from examples ranging from sports to music and advertising campaigns demonstrates how the notion of a central core of real objects defined against a periphery of things that are not sufficiently hard core has happened many times and in varied fields. Finally, an exploration of game studies illustrates just how important this piece is, given a large gap in the extant literature.

2. CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC AND THE CREATION OF THE REAL

Rhetoric is effectively "the study of what is persuasive" [2]. In communication studies, much of this approach is built out of the work of Kenneth Burke, who contended that "the whole overall 'picture' [of reality] is but a construct of our symbol system" [3]. This notion was expanded as others argued that the symbols we use shape the world that we have. Words and symbols are not merely ways of describing things; they are the means by which things are created. This leads to the foundational belief that "rhetoric may be viewed not as a matter of giving effectiveness to truth but of creating truth" [4]. This idea eventually reached the point where rhetorical scholars operate from the belief that "everything, or virtually everything, can be described as 'rhetorical'" [5]. This broad context for rhetorical analysis created a situation where rhetorical criticism is more about "a mode or perspective of analysis, rather than with a distinctive critical object [like speech]. Rhetorical critics bring to any object the focus of making arguments about how symbols influence people" [6]. To this end, the two key questions rhetoricians need to ask about any text are: what's going on here and so what [6]?

Rhetoric has been integrated into game studies in a variety of forms. Pulling from resources in literary criticism, Ian Bogost articulates a version of procedural rhetoric unique to games [7]. Drawing from the kind of communication studies approached outlined above, others have articulated specific aspects of games and how they are made to mean [8, 9]. Other approaches have been largely sympathetic to a rhetorical approach by using analysis of paratexts [10] to examine patterns of cheating [11] or by focusing on the importance of critiquing the structures around games and play [12]. For real games, however, a different approach is required. Assessing the concept of real games necessitates a particular focus on key phrases and how they encourage audiences to conceive of the world in a particular way.

One aspect of rhetorical analysis that is particularly useful for analyzing real games is the concept of constitutive rhetoric. Constitutive rhetoric was developed by Maurice Charland in his analysis of separatist rhetoric in Quebec. Applying Althusser's notion of interpellation, Charland argues that those listening to political speech are brought into being "through a process of identification in rhetorical narratives that 'always already' presume the constitution of subjects" [13]. Particular messages are predicated on assumptions about their audience because of a "series of narrative *ideological effects*" [13]. Constitutive rhetoric focuses on the ideological underpinnings of messages, clarifying how "utterances constitute a range of different audience positions, how thereby writers position themselves in relation to these audience groups, and how these groups are expected to act on the writer's utterance" [14]. The process of constitutive rhetoric presents "that which is most rhetorical, the existence of…a subject, as extrarhetorical" and those subjects "do not exist in nature, but only within a discursively constituted history" [13]. Constructing a message in a particular manner encourages subjects who play videogames to see themselves as gamers—as part of a category or group that is outside of the realm of rhetoric, as one that has always been present. But calling attention to and analyzing the socially constructed category of real games helps illustrate the rhetorical implications of how we describe games and how those who play them are positioned in differential ways. To this end, Charland contends that "subjects within narratives are not free, they are *positioned* and so constrained. All narratives have power over the subjects they present" [13]. As a perspective, constitutive rhetoric works to help understand "how public discourse at certain historical times creates subject positions that inescapably contain directives for action. Such political positioning is ideological because it tends to presuppose, rather than lay open, how it has been historically formed and on what values it is founded" [14]. Looking at phrases like real games and how they work in practice helps articulate the relation of the phrase "to the writer as well as to other audience groups" [14].

Constitutive rhetoric enables a focus on how certain groups and subject positions are called into being by the messages targeted at them. In the process of using a phrase like 'real games,' people and games are brought into being as something different from and in contrast to other kinds of games and gamers. Perhaps most powerfully this process feels natural, inevitable, and not part of the construction of a particular historical and cultural moment. By naturalizing and normalizing this process, communities are encouraged to identify with or against a group, which furthers a process of dividing and targeting members of particular communities.

Games and gamers are far from the only community or interest area to grapple with questions about the 'real.' Analyses of the implications of claims as to what is real and what is not range from popular culture breakdowns of fan communities to ad campaigns and academic analysis. In dealing with an increasingly globalized world, sports fans deal with a landscape where their favorite teams may be located half a world away, yet they can watch the game on television or in a bar with ease. Fans and sports leagues have a vested interest in raising questions of what 'real' fans do, as it can fuel both attendance to games and consumption of media products surrounding sports [15]. Reality television is an additional ongoing site of contention for what is real and what is not, as shows increasingly integrate scripted elements into "reality television" while also depending on casting and production to enable "producers and editors to use [existing racial tropes] when shaping their preferred readings of how 'real people' deal with racism, or embody racial identities" [16]. Within the context of advertising, "increasingly, advertising practitioners are going to great lengths to design advertisements with female images that women consumers can easily identify with" [17]. Companies like Nike and Dove have explicitly appealed to the notion of 'real women,' with Dove launching a campaign for Real Beauty that "was an attempt to redefine the way society views beauty and attractiveness through the use of plus-size or 'real' women as models" [18]. These campaigns are predicated on using a different kind of model, one who likely looks more like the person viewing the ad in an effort to hail the consumer into a cycle of purchasing based on the premise that the company doing the advertising appropriately understands people 'like us.' Similar efforts can be found in music, where various genres of music are subject to rigid sets of norms and definition against other styles of music. Embodied in aspects like physical location and musical style, certain genres are constructed as more legitimate than others [19]. Yet all such studies and uses are ways to suggest that what is real is somehow more authentic or more valuable, compared to what is deemed its opposite, which is constructed, a copy, or a fake.

3. REAL GAME STUDIES?

The question of how game studies has tackled the topic of real games is deeply tied to the history of the field itself. Game studies coalesced in the early 2000s in response to social-psychological

studies of players that did not take account of the deeper meanings of play but were instead mostly interested in narrow questions of effects. We quickly saw the establishment of dedicated journals, such as *Game Studies* in 2001*,* Sage's *Games & Culture* in 2006, the formation of the Digital Games Research Association in 2002, and the appearance of dedicated conferences such as the Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference held in 2002 in Tampere, Finland and the Playing with the Future conference met that year in Manchester, UK.

At the time of the field's emergence, games were largely understood as console or computer games, mostly created by large developers and publishers for distribution via retail. This was before the explosion of mobile apps and games; prior to the 'casual revolution' that Juul later investigated [20] and also prior to the normalization of digital downloading that Steam and other services established. Additionally, although independent developers have always existed, there was little in the way of a demonstrable or stable 'scene;' events such as Indiecade would not begin until 2005. And of course this was before the advent of Facebook and other social media, which would later become platforms themselves for so-called social games.

Some of the early work in game studies was meant to map out the terrain of the field, articulating the scope for study, establishing appropriate methods and theories, and framing a larger discourse over how games should be understood. As Aarseth famously stated with respect to how games should be approached, "games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again" [21]. And in that famous line, an attempt to demarcate a space for 'us' against other fields, Aarseth was also making the case that games were an object worthy of study, deserving of close(r) examination.

What this has meant in practice is that few sustained interrogations into the discourses surrounding games' legitimacy have taken place. Games are presumed to be valid forms of entertainment –because to believe otherwise would call into question the value of the larger enterprise. Early work in the field tended to show by example (as well as exclusion) which games were worthy of study and which were not. Multiple studies of *Tomb Raider, Myst, Counter-Strike* and *EverQuest* appeared, in the process demonstrating their worthiness as objects of study—as real games. Likewise the RPG, the FPS, and the MMOG have all received sustained attention, while other genres, including racing games, sports games, and games for young children have all tended to receive much less attention.

Probably the closest that game studies has come to grappling with the issue of 'real games' is in definitional debates about what constitutes a game from a structuralist perspective. Juul's early attempts to provide an over-arching framework for what it is we are studying were hotly debated, as he initially argued that to be considered a game, there must be elements including rules and goals [22]. Without goals, Juul wrote that one might have a software toy (such as *The Sims*) but not necessarily a game. Later scholars have argued against this framework, suggesting in turn that goals can be determined by players, and that goals in and of themself are not a necessary condition for something to be considered a game [23].

For our purposes, what this debate suggests is that game studies academics are themselves more and less interested in what constitutes a real game, as a way to legitimate the field and define an area of study. What gets left out of structuralist arguments is the value judgment going into labels such as game/not game. If something is 'not a game' then it is decidedly less important from the field's perspective.

Of course some scholars have moved beyond this narrow dichotomy and are instead interested in how notions of both play and games are part of contemporary cultural practices. Frans Mayra for instance looks at both photo sharing via Flickr and playing games via Facebook as playful practices that need more careful theorization [24]. And scholars are beginning to look at social games as spaces where players do come together and make meaning, although this area is still less developed than its widespread popularity might suggest [25-27].

Overall, game studies has largely bracketed the question of real games in its quest to create a field that takes games seriously. But in doing so it has helped to re-inscribe our ideas about what a real game should be- through definitions employed, discourse about the seriousness of the topic and through what is studied and ignored.

4. ANALYSIS

Although we found discussions of real games in many places, the bulk of our corpus comes from two places—Gamasutra and Kotaku. The first is a news and commentary site focused on the game development industry, while the second is news and commentary for the larger community of game players worldwide. Both have wide readerships and lively discussions often ensue about pieces that run on each site. What makes them important to us is how each draws from a particular perspective – as developer or as journalist representing player—to make a case. But even with those differing origins, we found similar discourses surrounding real games and those that are implicitly deemed fake games. Four over-arching themes are discussed in detail next. These themes centered on a game's pedigree, aspects of gameplay or game mechanics, and a game's business model. Briefly—arguments centered around a game's mechanics; depth and games; a game's developer; and a game's monetization strategy as ways to distinguish between real and fake games.

4.1 A game's developer: pedigree matters

Although much of the debate about what constitutes a real game is tied to the content in a game, and particularly its style of gameplay, there is also a key articulation between a studio and their 'signature' style (and/or genre) of game as well as their past development history and player relations. That information isn't trivial--knowledge of a game's origin often serves as a paratext for framing what future games from that company could or should be like. So, if a player knows that BioWare is developing a new game, she can draw on her knowledge of BioWare's past games (including its Dragon Age and Mass Effect franchises) to help develop a better sense of what a new game from them might be like. She can also perhaps relate how they have dealt with their fanbase in the past to future potential interactions with them. The case is no different when debating the limits of real games—indeed it is perhaps even more important. Calling out a developer's name, brand history and past business practices is a way to demonstrate their worth in relation to creating good or real games rather than bad or fake ones.

We can see this dynamic at play very easily when contrasting two developers that have both recently made social network games but

with very different histories –Zynga and Insomniac Games. Zynga is obviously a developer tied to games played via social network—its history is linked with Facebook as a platform, and the company has dealt with controversies concerning its business model, making copycat games, and a disregard for innovation. Indeed the name Zynga is sometimes used as shorthand when referring to social network games, the (most recent) apotheosis of games that are deemed not real. For example, in a (fairly snarky) column on Kotaku, Tim Rogers reveals his list of "What would make Facebook games great?" [28]. At number three on the list is "make a better art style than Zynga" [28]. Rogers goes on to say that despite a wish not to "talk smack" about Zynga, "let's not talk about how their games are the electronic equivalent of an unraveled coat-hanger, their collective customers the consumer equivalent of an old Buick in a supermarket parking lot"[28]. He goes on to explain that despite a horrific art style, "we see similar munchkin bobbleheads popping up in every other Facebook game" [28]. Being the early entrant that dominates much of a certain space has resulted in Zynga becoming a stand-in for whatever people don't consider as a real game: In a discussion about casual and social games, co-founder of Activision David Crane went further, arguing "I don't like to lump those social games in with casual games. I think it's those Zynga-like games that give the 'casual' market a bad name" [29].

At the 2011 Game Developers Conference Brenda Brathwaite (a 30 year veteran of the game industry) received cheers and praise when she ranted against what could only be Zynga and similar studios, characterizing them as "strip miners" [30]. Drawing a clear distinction between good and bad types of game studios, she argued that they "are not one of us or from us, but rather from another space… These people do not care about gameplay. They do not care about games. They do not care about players. They do not care about fun. … I dislike them just as much as you" [30].

What's particularly key about Brathwaite's argument is her continual positioning of 'us' and 'them' with respect to certain types of game studios. "We" are hailed as the studios and individuals that stood together over the years, she explained, "because we love games." If Zynga and studios like them are outsiders to not just a games industry but a culture that loves games, it is easy to believe that they are interlopers or trespassers that deserve no consideration. They are not real game studios because they don't care about fun, play or gamers. If they don't care and they are simply strip mining, they cannot be making real games at all--instead they are making 'glorified chain letters' with a 'monetization model' that 'drives engagement.'

But Zynga was formed to make this kind of game and its founder, Mark Pinkus, has never stated that he was interested in innovation or creativity. And so Zynga is the easy target, the company that is not a real game company. But it's also possible for a studio with a respected history in the game industry to have its products questioned and debated for their potential legitimacy, particularly when they move to new genres or new platforms. Questions about game studios trying something new are common, but critics don't generally question how real a particular game might be. But when Insomniac Studios created *Outernauts* just such questions emerged.

A Kotaku piece on the game summarized things perfectly with its headline- "When a PlayStation Hit-Maker Created a Facebook Game… They *Tried* Not to Pull a Zynga." The headline alone makes many things clear—creating a game for Facebook is worlds apart from creating a game for a Sony console. And even with a history of making credible games, a studio has to studiously avoid replicating what the strip miner of the space—Zynga—built as norms. The headline also makes clear the conceptual, if not ideological, gap between developers who work on console games and developers who work on Facebook games. Finally, Insomniac is chastised for trying but apparently failing to completely avoid making a Zynga-like game, which other Kotaku articles have clarified are "evil" and "not real games." The piece raises the stakes with its very first sentence:

> If you buy the argument that there are people who make real video games and there are people who make things that merely pose as video games—and if you are convinced that these fake 'games' threaten to undermine *real* video games—then a game called *Outernauts* should have filled you with hope. [31]

Author Stephen Totilo goes on to make clear that Insomniac Studios is a company potentially to be trusted:

> These are the kinds of people who make first-person shooters and action games that are full of jumping and rocket launchers, games you pay $60 for, not the kind of games that permit you to progress only if you wait, pay or spam your online friends with requests to send you some virtual tomatoes. … They make games you can lose at. Even the snobbiest of critics would say Insomniac makes 'real' video games. [31]

The comparison the article makes is stark—Insomniac's games cost money up front, they have made games with violence and guns, and their games have win/lose conditions. Clearly these are the requisite elements that demonstrate Insomniac can make real games. And despite the creation of essentially a "Pokemon clone" Insomniac has the reputation to pull it off, as "better a studio of Insomniac's caliber knocks out a compelling 'homage' than some grasping, copycat-peddling app sweatshop" [32].

Where a game comes from has a great bearing on whether or not it is considered real, by developers, journalists and players. Of course companies with a history of console hits still have a case to make if they move to a suspect platform such as Facebook (perhaps even casual or mobile) but are given the benefit of the doubt. Companies that are positioned from the outset as making games specifically for questionable platforms do not get the benefit of the doubt and must work against the assumption that any game they make is not real. Zynga itself has struggled against this positioning, trying various measures such as hiring designers well known for their PC or console titles (such as Brian Reynolds, a former developer of *Civilization* who was hired to design *Frontierville*) and purchasing well-known studios (such as Area/Code, creator of *Parking Wars* and *Drop 7*) in order to create the credibility of a real studio because it (now) has developers who have created real games.

4.2 Game mechanics matter

One of the key means by which to define games is to look at their mechanics. Game mechanics help define what games are and bring them into being. Invocations of real games carry with them a set of beliefs about how games should work and how they are played. Laced throughout real games are expectations of complicated console or PC interfaces that give players substantial,

specific control over action within the game. How developers and players of casual and social games talk about gameplay mechanics can show us which mechanics are valued, which are not, and which are necessary conditions for making a game real.

Developer comments about games frequently appeal to how the mechanics of their game are designed in a suitably real manner. This habit is pronounced in the work of Facebook game designers who seek to battle the presumption that their games are not sufficiently real. In attempting to rebrand games on that platform, designers build traditional gaming elements into their game mechanics and then hype those particular pieces of the game in its promotion. In the lead up to the release of *RISK: Factions*, producer and designer Spencer Brooks contended that "when core gamers say 'there are no real games on Facebook,' I think what they're striving for is, 'I want a game with a win condition; when I play somebody I want to play that person, I don't want to play an abstraction of the person, or the statistics of the person" [33]. *RISK: Factions* was designed to re-appropriate an intellectual property that was likely deemed a real game by most of the core audience to whom Brooks appeals while attempting to redefine how the Facebook games genre approaches competition in and resolution of games. Appealing to conventional game mechanics, *RISK: Factions* sought to become more real by organizing the design of the game around approaches built into the canon of real games.

Occasionally, the appeals to mechanics are less about the broad notion of win conditions and competition and more about appealing to the tradition of specific kinds of games. The promotion for the Zynga title *Adventure World* sought to appeal to numerous pieces of core gaming culture in an attempt to legitimize the game. From the eventual branded partnership with Indiana Jones to a name that seeks to place the game within a well-known genre, *Adventure World* was infused with connections to traditional games. The range of these appeals was made most explicit in the promotion surrounding the game, where lead game designer Seth Sivak claimed that "much of the inspiration for the game came from classic core gaming franchises such as *The Legend of Zelda* and *Tomb Raider*" [34]. Appropriating the rhetorical forces of these particular, iconic game titles helps Sivak attempt to reposition the game, so that he can say things like "we love the action adventure genre, we love games like *The Legend of Zelda*, for example, and we want to find a way to make that for everybody" [34]. By positioning *Adventure World* in this manner, Sivak encourages gamers to consider the mechanics of the game in comparison to beloved core games, reclassifying *Adventure World* out of the frequently marginalized corpus of Zynga games. Further, Sivak portrays the game as an attempt to democratize adventure gaming, broadening the audience by integrating real game mechanics to make Zynga games more real.

Beyond the specific appeals to redescribe a game within the frame of accepted game mechanics, games are also defined in terms of how they progress and what specific gameplay changes may appeal to core gamers. Coverage of Zynga games frequently defines real game mechanics through articulation of how casual games are changing. Indicative of this kind of coverage, the release of *Pioneer Trail* prompted the following:

> For Facebook-game-shunning skeptics (aka many hardcore gamers who prefer the kind of stuff you can play on an Xbox 360 or through Steam): Pay attention to what Zynga is doing. They're not just making more and more resource-management click-a-thons. Their recently-released *Empires & Allies* added a light layer of strategic combat to their usual formulas. *FrontierVille* is set to add a lot more elements that might sound familiar" [35].

In this case, new, more legitimate Zynga game mechanics are defined in opposition to the mindless click-a-thons from which core gamers recoiled. Facebook games were becoming more real by changing, by integrating the kinds of strategy and other elements endemic to PC and console games such as *Diablo 3,* which has also been called a click-a-thon, but which marries that mechanic to accepted strategy components and penalties for poor play.

One of the reasons why Facebook games have sought to appropriate the mechanics of traditional games is due to preconceptions about how non-core games are devoid of popular, interesting, or compelling game mechanics. Real games are often defined by decrying other games as having trivial mechanics. From the motion-control of the Wii that was marginalized until it was adopted by Microsoft and Sony [8] to the Zynga fueled click-fests mentioned above, game mechanics make games what they are. In the case of Facebook games, energy systems, resource management, and friend maintenance/acquisition leads to situations where Facebook "gameplay frequently feels to more traditional gamers less like a game and more like one Excel spreadsheet warring with another" [36]. These mechanics, in combination with the business model of these games, means that things like the high score rankings celebrated in the arcade become "utterly meaningless" as "not a single person at the top achieved their position because of skill, and no amount of playing will let you beat them if you don't pay up" [37]. Real games are constructed because they are not these things. Instead of warring with spreadsheets or paying to get ahead, real games are defined by the skill one wields in competition on a level playing field. The mechanics of real games encourage the development and exercise of proper gaming skill, while fake games simply aren't the right kind of challenge.

4.3 Real games are deep and consequential

A key function of proper game mechanics is to ensure the appropriately rich and meaningful interactions on which real games are allegedly predicated. Facebook and social games are not necessarily just the Excel spreadsheets of their mechanics, but they are also bound by a perception that they are merely "glorified chain letters" [36] that fail to promote real sociality. Real games are defined by their deep mechanics and complex systems of interaction. Frequently reviews of core games will discuss elements like the number of hours needed to complete the game under the presumption that too few hours makes for an inferior game. Real games are defined in terms of the modes of play they facilitate, with the assumption that there should be rich single and multiplayer environments. Real games are also defined by how they look and what they sound like and for AAA title that often translates into a discussion of the vast amounts of money spent on the game's development.

A primary point of demarcation for the lack of depth in Facebook and other non-real games is to highlight their shortcomings in contrast to core gaming norms One place of focus is on the art style of Facebook games, particularly those of Zynga. In an attempt to "stick to the facts" Tim Rogers contends that "the fact

is the characters in Zynga games look like something you'd see in a coloring book used for the part of the therapy where the child is encouraged to show the therapist which things in this barnyard scene he wishes were purple" [28]. These graphics are so offensive that "when I see them, I am filled with a semi-intense desire to see them suffer. I am a perfectly normal person, so I imagine this is a perfectly normal reaction" [28]. Although Rogers goes on to mention that there are technical limitations for Facebook games, as they need to play in browsers, the lack of graphical excellence is part and parcel of an issue with the depth and polish of games. Graphics are part of the first and most persistent way in which players interact with games and real games are frequently venerated for the depth, polish, and sophistication of their graphics.

The depth of games can also be seen in the social interactions at stake in games. Part of a game's role as a cultural object is the surfaces on which we can use it to develop our own modes of meaning. We remember games in part because of how we play them and with whom we play them. To this end, Leigh Alexander argues that "playing *Mario 2* in a basement with my neighbor, making up songs for luck, is a sharper memory of 'social play' than anything I've ever done on Facebook" [38]. Although this is not a shot at Facebook games specifically, it does illustrate how real games work as platforms of meaning making largely because they are rich and deep enough to facilitate interaction among people. Real games are memory conductors, and the glorified chain letters of Facebook cannot reach a sufficient level of depth to promote the kinds of interaction Alexander witnessed with *Mario 2*.

Much like casual games have attempted to claim the mechanics of real games, Facebook games have promoted the richness of the interaction in their specific titles in the lead up to their launches. *Adventure World* was lauded for the system in which it would "reward players who build relationships and interact with the same people on a regular basis" [34]. Although this may fall short of the songs of luck sung by Alexander in the basement, this appeal marks an attempt to alter the mechanics of non-core games to make them seem deeper and richer to gamers who grew up on *Mario 2* by seeking to elevate interaction beyond the level of begging one's friends for ribbons. *Pioneer Trail* took a different approach to a similar issue by limiting "the number of friends you can connect to in order to ensure that interactions with friends feel like the most powerful interactions possible in the game. Friends need to matter" [35]. Turning away from the abundance encouraged in most Zynga games, *Pioneer Trail* attempted to develop a richer, deeper experience through scarcity. Promoting the chance for more important interactions, the game opted to use restrictions to seek out depth in an effort to be more real.

Real games are typically defined in terms of their richness, depth, and consequential interaction. All of these factors work together to promote a conception of games as worthwhile, interesting, and meaningful activities. While core gamers often deride certain games as not sufficiently deep or meaningful, those who create the games seek to appeal to the kinds of ordering principles that justify and legitimize playing a certain kind of game.

4.4 You get what you pay for: real games and real $

A final way that real games are distinguished from fake games is through appeals to their pricing structure. Although in other contexts individuals may complain about the prices of AAA games for consoles or even game apps that cost more than 99 cents, the "free to play" (or F2P) model in particular is seen as one key signal that a game probably isn't real. Whether or not the game is good then becomes the criterion used for judgment, and if the game is worth the investment made by the player. Payment up front for a game—regardless of the actual price point—is a way to position a game as legitimate. Similarly, completely free games do not require any sort of payment, and are still judged to be games, although they may be wonderful or terrible examples of games. And finally, games that require continuing payments in order to play- such as arcade games that require quarters to begin and then their regular addition; or MMOGs that require an initial purchase and then a monthly subscription fee are all considered games. Yet if a game is free to start and then does not require but instead *encourages* spending money, the system is called into question.

But why is this particular model so suspect? There is much hyperbole surrounding F2P, with some developers and journalists alike believing that the model "Is 'evil' or that it perverts gameplay. … you can build f2p games that resemble slot machines and are designed to prey on people with addictive personalities" [39]. Of course such people are not real gamers anyway, as currently social games are played by "the lowest common denominator, which is Facebook" [40].

Yet a key assumption underlining the concern and which applies to real if not all players alike, focuses on how the F2P system subverts a player's sense of rational choice in regards to the purchase. Even those without apparently addictive personalities fear the pull of such designs-- in a review of *Outernauts* Minkley writes that he was "desperately trying to resist the ceaseless attempts to persuade you to shell out real money to aid your progress" [32]. Totilo writes that *Outernauts* likewise "is resorting to nickel-and-diming its players" [31], suggesting that rather than ask for money upfront, such games try to persuade the player to pay for content already consumed (much like National Public Radio fundraisers in the US).

What makes such tactics particularly troublesome is that they are not mandatory, yet alternative options presented are perceived as even worse, and rely on mechanics that real games do not employ. Such alternative mechanics allow progression "only if you wait, pay or spam your online friends with requests" [31]. But players seem to feel that agreeing to pay means you must really like the game in question, "to assert while playing that the work of Zynga's game designers is good and worth paying for- is to relent. Otherwise you're freeloading" [41]. And if one pays, one is tacitly agreeing that Zynga's products are worth money, and are (via this circular logic) real.

The cycle can become still more troublesome. If a player has acceded to paying, "once you convince yourself to spend two hundred dollars on it, another two hundred dollars isn't that much more" [42]. The rational player has started to spend money, and once started on that slippery slope there is no return. But being considered a whale is not the worst part of it, instead such a model of pay to improve one's play "is the embodiment of everything that is wrong with the 'freemium' or 'pay-to-win' business model for games. … I know that games like *Farmville 2* are designed to make lots of money instead of providing a cool gaming experience … What I don't know is if I'll be able to ever take a game like this seriously ever again" [43]. And again the cycle continues—to accede to paying recognizes the legitimacy of the

game's creator and the mechanics of the game itself, betraying what the gamer and the developer have claimed are not real at all. Thus to spend money on this system at all is to legitimize it, and to call into question all sense of what makes a game real—its developer, its mechanics and its revenue model.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In an article discussing the future of games on Facebook, Leigh Alexander asks if such games need scored reviews as a way to innovate, since "console publishers take review scores and Metacritic performance seriously when deciding which projects to greenlight" [44]. This then begs the question of where such reviews would come from. It's telling that the article offers an extensive discussion of Kotaku and its approach to game reviews and Facebook games more generally. Alexander then poses the question "does the kind of gamer that reads reviews play or care about the Facebook space?" The obvious yet unstated answer is that real gamers don't care about Facebook games, which is why they aren't covered on sites like Kotaku (except with extreme skepticism or sarcasm). Yet there is a key absence at play here- there are indeed sites that cater to players of Facebook games and other games that have been deemed not real—sites such as Gamezebo. That site regularly reviews and provides commentary on social, casual, mobile, and PC games, and even a few core games. But this is not an audience that also reads Kotaku (readership of Gamezebo is predominantly younger women; while readership of Kotaku is largely male), and is thus not a real audience. This erasure continues the process of keeping real games safe—they are reviewed, scored, and given attention, while fake games are not.

Constitutive rhetoric was originally intended to analyze how an ideologically based political group can be brought into being through words. Charland argued that the language used hailed an audience and activated them around system of beliefs about how the world worked. It is striking that discourse about videogames does much the same thing and the impacts of that approach are substantial. By creating a category of real games and real gamers, discourse about videogames solidifies a subject position for gamers and games out of the ether. Before many of us put a disc in a tray or boot up a program, we are always already real gamers set to play real games. What is most notable is that, unlike the politically marginalized Québécois studied by Charland, real games and real gamers are not marginalized subject positions. The game industry and those of us who participate in it have normalized a particular way of thinking about games that structures how we think about games, what games are made, who ends up playing games, and more.

It's not difficult to see the same level of attention given to real and fake games in game studies—real games are those worthy of study, worthy of being included in the definition of what constitutes a real game. Fake games are not interesting, are messy, and are not deep or meaningful enough to invite careful and sustained investigation. Thus, *World of Warcraft* might be the apotheosis of a real game, while *Ghosts of Mistwood* deserves barely a second glance. Clearly we need better systems to account for games and how to understand them. But a first step is acknowledging our collective blind spots. This paper has explored how game developers and journalists have worked to define what real games are, in part by contrasting them with what does not count- the fake games. In doing so we have seen how a game's developer, its mechanics and depth and how it is sold all help to determine whether or not it is deemed real, and thus given a certain kind of attention and validation. Games that fall outside those criteria, in contrast, may make a great deal of money and appeal to a large number of players, but are not real enough for gamers to acknowledge. This all contributes to a certain imagined community of gamers and developers who make real games for them, leaving the fakes outside, looking in.

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