

# The right way to play a game

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*Is there a right or wrong way to play a game? Many think not. Some have argued that, when we insist that players obey the rules of a game, we give too much weight to the author's intent. Others have argued that such obedience to the rules violates the true purpose of games, which is fostering free and creative play. Both of these responses, I argue, misunderstand the nature of games and their rules. The rules do not tell us how to interpret a game; they merely tell us what the game is. And the point of the rules is not always to foster free and creative play. The point can be, instead, to communicate a sculpted form of activity. And in games, as with any form of communication, we need some shared norms to ground communicative stability. Games have what has been called a "prescriptive ontology." A game is something more than simply a piece of material. It is some material as approached in a certain specified way. These prescriptions help to fix a common object of attention. Games share this prescriptive ontology with more traditional kinds of works. Novels are more than just a set of words on a page; they are those words read in a certain order. Games are more than just some software or cardboard bits; they are those bits interacted with according to certain rules. Part of a game's essential nature is the prescriptions for how we are to play it. What's more, we investigate the prescriptive ontology of games, we will uncover at least distinct prescriptive categories of games. Party games prescribe that we encounter the game once; heavy strategy games prescribe we encounter the game many times; and community evolution games prescribe that we encounter the game while embedded in an ongoing community of play.*

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## 1. Introduction

Is there a right or wrong way to play a game? You might think that, if you wanted to play a game, you had to follow the rules. You might even think that

you should try to play each game in the right spirit: for example, trying hard to win, in the case of *Defense of the Ancients 2* (Icefrog 2013); or drunk, in the case of beer pong.<sup>1</sup> But many have resisted the claim that there are, or should be, any sorts of prescriptions on how a game should be played. For some, the demand for obedience to the rules of a game is an attitude stinking of authoritarianism, dogmatism, and subservience. According to such a view, a truly mature and self-actualized game-player will have transcended the sense that there is some right way to play a game. In other words, true game-play is free game-play. Such an antipathy to rules, I suspect, lies underneath the advocacy for free-form creative play over rule-bound games, and underneath the advocacy for creative toys and sandbox games over more structured, goal-oriented forms of play. But I do not think that this is always the right way to think about the prescriptions in play. Obedience to the rules and other implicit norms, I will argue, is what stabilizes games as objects of shared attention. Shared prescriptions are what enable shared experience, and so undergird communicative stability. Free play is one thing, but structured games are another, and games have something special to offer us in return for our temporary obedience to the rules and norms of play. Structured games let us design, record, and transmit forms of activity between people.

Let's consider two recent arguments that there is no right way to play a game. First, Olli Tapio Leino has argued that, for game scholars, an insistence on following the rules is simply a form of the intentional fallacy. Critical theory has typically held that an author's intentions ought to have no authority over how their work is received. A reader should be free to read and interpret a text as they please. Insisting that players play according to the rules, says Leino, is simply another instance of the intentional fallacy. Second, Miguel Sicart has argued that excessive obedience to game rules subverts the true purpose of games. Games, says Sicart, are for play, and play is essentially free and appropriative. Dogmatically following the rules and pursuing the appointed in-game goals is, in the end, a failure to see the real purpose of games, which is to cultivate free play.

I have several goals in this paper. First, I will attempt to defuse these worries and defend the importance of prescriptions for structured play, drawing on recent work in aesthetic ontology. Games, I will claim, have a very distinctive ontology. They are more than simply a set of physical materials. Games are a set of materials as approached in some particular, prescribed, way. Those prescriptions help to fix a shared and common object of attention. You have to play by the

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Tavinor has argued for the existence of two prescriptions for playing videogames properly. A player is prescribed to play the game while trying to win, and to interpret the narrative events of the game as they play (Tavinor 2017, 32-4). Notice that these prescriptions are not merely from our social obligations to other players -- such as, for example, our obligation to give our friends a good game since they drove all this way. Such social obligations are a distinct topic, and have been explored elsewhere (Weimer 2012, Nguyen 2017). Rather, Tavinor is describing a set of prescriptions that directly concern our behavior towards the game itself. His account is more in the spirit of the idea that a viewer might have, say, obligations to the artworks themselves (Moran 2012).

rules to even encounter the game. Second, I will show that those prescriptions serve a very particular purpose: they undergird the possibility of stable communication. Shared prescriptions enable shared experiences. Following these prescriptions is no more harmful to our autonomy than, say, following the simple prescriptions of language, in order to communicate. Finally, I will argue that games have their own special sorts of prescriptions, quite distinctive from the prescriptions which surround traditional artworks. And these prescriptions go beyond the simple demand that we play by the rules and try to win. Some games may demand that we become moderately skilled. Other games may require that we play them while embedded inside a strategic community, responding to the newly emergent strategies and styles. Games, like more traditional artworks, are partially constituted by prescriptions; but games have their own very special body of prescriptions, which arise from their interactive, emergent, and player-driven nature.

## 2. Works and Norms

Let us turn first to Leino's worry. Leino argues that game scholars have usually presumed what he calls the *ludic imperative*: that in order to study a game, one has to play it in the spirit that was intended by the designer -- adopting the goals of the game and trying to win by its rules. But, says Leino, this normativity is problematic; it is a form of the intentional fallacy. It permits the author too much power over the audience's experience.

Let's take a moment to dig into the details of the intentional fallacy. As it was originally introduced by W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe Beardsley, the argument concerning the intentional fallacy was quite narrow in scope. Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that the intentions of the artist ought not be used by an art critic in judging the success of the work (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946). Since then, a broader version of this thesis has become widely accepted. The intentional fallacy is now usually taken to show that we ought not take an author's intent to determine the proper interpretation or meaning of the work, or to set the audience's proper reaction to the work. For example: suppose Darren Aronofsky intended *Requiem for a Dream* to be a sorrowful portrait of addiction. But, says the standard doctrine, there is no mysterious norm that forces me, the viewer, to interpret it in accordance with Aronofsky's intent. I am free to react as I please - free to find it nauseatingly pretentious and emotionally ham-fisted, or to interpret it as a portrait of the death throes of late capitalism. The author cannot prescribe the reader's interpretation or reaction. But, says Leino, the ludic imperative posits prescriptions about how a player should play and derives them from authorial intent. So the ludic imperative is simply a version of the intentional fallacy, and we should ignore it. Players of games are free to interact with a game

as they please, just as readers are free to interpret a text in any way they wish (Leino 2012).

Suppose, for the moment, that we accepted that the intentional fallacy was, indeed, a fallacy. Even then, I do not think we should be so quick to discard the ludic imperative, because I do not think that the ludic imperative actually commits us to intentional fallacy. To see this, let's turn to some recent work from analytic aesthetics, concerning what has come to be called the theory of "prescriptive ontology." Theories of prescriptive ontology focus on the category of human artifacts called "works" -- including novels, paintings, movies, and musical pieces and performances. According to a prescriptive ontology, works are partially constituted by prescriptions about how they are to be encountered. For example: the practice of European painting prescribes that users look at the canvas, rather than eating it, and that they look at the front, and not the back (Davies 2004, 50-79). The work which is Van Gogh's *Iris* is more than just the canvas and the paint. If I run my hands over the rough feel of the canvas and lick the paint while keeping my eyes closed, I have encountered the canvas, but I have not encountered Van Gogh's *Iris*. Similarly, the work which is *The Brothers Karamazov* is more than just simply a physical book. It is the book, plus the prescription to read the words sequentially from front to back. If I read all the words at random, I have interacted with the physical object, but I have not actually read *The Brothers Karamazov*. Similarly, if I were to tear the pages out of *The Brothers Karamazov* and eat them with gusto, I would have interacted with the physical object, but not actually encountered the thing that is the novel. This is all just to say that a work is not identical with its material substrate. Works are rather more ontologically complicated than that. In order to experience the work, one must encounter the material substrate in a certain way (Currie 1989). The prescriptions on encounter reveal what the work is: *The Brothers Karamazov* is not this physical set of pages, but the more abstract entity which I can only access when I read these physical in a certain way: by reading all the words in order.

Prescriptive ontologies help us to get clearer about the differences between different kinds of art. For example, traditional museum paintings have a simple prescriptive ontology, where we are prescribed to look at them from the front and attend to the visual aspects of what's inside the physical frame. Dominic Lopes suggests that interactive computer art, as one might find in a museum, has a different prescriptive ontology from painting. With interactive art, the audience is prescribed to interact with the artwork, to observe its changing displays, and to use that interaction to appreciate the possibility space of the game. The audience is supposed to use their actions to bring the *algorithm* of the interactive artwork into view. If they simply observe, briefly, the various interfaces and screens from afar, without actually interacting with them and exploring the possibility space, then they haven't encountered the work (Lopes 2010, 27-36,60).

Elsewhere, I've argued that certain kinds of games -- which I call "aesthetic striving games" -- have a different prescriptive ontology than Lopes' interactive computer art. In aesthetic striving games, players are prescribed to play the game, and then to appreciate *their own activity*, rather than appreciating the external algorithm (Nguyen forthcoming, Chapter 5 and 6). In this way, aesthetic striving games are less like paintings and interactive computer art, and more like certain contemporary art practices of social art. Consider, for example, Nicolas Bourriaud's discussion of relational aesthetics. Bourriaud focuses on those social artworks which try to create micro-utopias in the here and now. A prime example is Rirkrit Tiravanija's social artworks, which consisted of a makeshift kitchen installed in a museum space, where the artist prepared curries for the audience. For Tiravanija, the focus of the work was not the food, but the audience's involvement with the food, the place, and each other (Bourriaud 1998, Bishop 2004, 55-56). There, the audience is prescribed to attend to their own socializing and to how the food and the place brings about that socialization, rather than just to the food or just to the visual features of the kitchen installation. Social artworks and aesthetic striving games involve prescriptions for the audience to attend to their own activity, where paintings and interactive art involve prescriptions for the audience to attend to some external object.

Notice that the same bit of physical material can be a part of some very different works, simply by being attached to different prescriptions. We can vary the work by simply varying the prescriptions. Suppose that our artwork materially consisted of an old arcade cabinet for the game *Space Invaders* (Nishikado 1978), to which we had added some Marxist graffiti, in the middle of a warehouse space. We could display that cabinet as a sculpture, in which case the audience would be prescribed to walk around it and appreciate its visual and spatial properties. Or we could offer that cabinet for use as an aesthetic striving game, in which case the audience would be prescribed to play the game and appreciate their own activity of play. Or we could create a Tiravanija-style social artwork around such a cabinet, where the audience was prescribed to hang out and intermingle with one another, taking turns playing the game, while kibitzing and chatting -- where the audience was prescribed to primarily appreciate the emergent social interaction inspired by the arcade game.

Perhaps it seems strange to think that the same physical material might take part in so many different possible artworks. And it might seem even stranger that we could change the artworks just by varying the prescriptions for the audience. But this is an utterly mundane and familiar phenomenon. We could take the same bit of alcohol in a vial, and display it as a sculpture (prescription: look at it from all around), or offer it as a perfume (prescription: apply and smell, but don't taste), or offer it as a cocktail (prescription: drink and taste). The theory of prescriptive ontologies simply articulates, in a rigorous manner, something essential

about the nature of works -- something so basic that it is easy to overlook. A work is something above and beyond merely a bit of material. It is that material, accessed in a certain way -- under a prescribed set of activities, with our attention focused on particular aspects. It is a particular specified angle of approach to a bit of material.

Yuriko Saito puts it in a usefully elegant way. Works, she says, are *framed*. The frame tells us what to pay attention to, by telling us what is part of the work and what isn't. Sometimes, that attentional frame is partly physical. The physical frame around a painting tells us to look at what's inside, and not what's outside. But even with painting, the physical frame is not the end of story. Much of the attentional frame is specified through immaterial prescriptions. We know that we are supposed to look at, and not lick or touch, what is inside the frame (Saito 2010, 18-23). Prescriptions help to fix a common object of attention, which can be shared between artist and audience and between different audience members.

How do we know the right prescriptions? Sherri Irvin suggests that, for familiar and well-established forms of art, the prescriptions are transmitted as social practices. There is a social practice of novels, and another for classical music performances, and another for electronic dance music performances, and we assimilate those prescriptions as part of our enculturation. Each practice involves a stable set of prescriptions, and an artist declares the relevant prescriptions by placing their work in a particular context. I declare one set of prescriptions when I sell my book in a bookstore, and another when I place my book behind glass in a museum. But, says Irvin, when an artist wishes to place a different set of prescriptions on their work, they can simply declare those new prescriptions explicitly. Such explicit declarations are how many contemporary art practitioners, like Tiravanija, communicate novel sets of prescriptions to their audiences (Irvin 2005).<sup>2</sup>

The point here is not to issue global and authoritative commands to people about how to live their lives. Rather, it is to articulate something about the nature of works by analyzing our practices of encountering and talking about them. Ontological prescriptions aren't categorical -- there is no claim that everybody must look at the front of the canvas. The prescriptions are only hypothetical. I ought to look at the front of the canvas *if* I wish to view *Irides*. If I do not wish to view that work, than those prescriptions don't apply. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with my swatting mosquitos with my copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. But in doing so, I have not read *The Brothers Karamazov*, and there would be something wrong with my, say, reviewing the novel -- on Amazon, say -- based solely on my

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<sup>2</sup> Some may protest that one cannot read these prescriptions off the mere material itself; thus, it would be possible to dig up an artifact. Shorn of its context, it might be hard to impossible to ascertain what the prescriptions would have been. But this doesn't show us that the theory of prescriptive ontology is wrong; it just shows us that works, as socially embedded practices, are more fragile than actual stone and cloth.

experiences of using the physical object as a weapon or a doorstep. (“*The Brothers Karamovoz* is too heavy to swat mosquitos comfortably. 1 star.”) The work is ontologically distinct from the physical object.

Crucially, as Irvin points out, holding a prescriptive ontology is entirely compatible with still believing that the intentional fallacy is, in fact, a fallacy. Theories of prescriptive ontology don’t say that the author gets to set how the work is to be interpreted, received, judged, or to set its meaning. They only say that the author gets to set *what counts as a minimally adequate encounter with the work*. That is, according to a prescriptive ontology, the author gets to set with the work *is*, but not what it *means*. Thus, the commitments of a prescriptive ontology are entirely compatible with holding the author cannot set the correct interpretation of a work, and that the audience may respond in any way they wish. These ontological prescriptions are silent on what the proper aesthetic judgment is, or the proper interpretation it. They only indicate what the work is, by setting the terms of proper encounter. They set the boundaries of the object which is to be interpreted. And to see that there are such conditions, simply consider the following claim: “*Transformers 3* is a far better movie than *Django Unchained*; I tasted both DVDs, and the paint on *Transformers 3* is much yummier.”

At this point, you might protest that this all makes artworks out to be contingent, culturally relative affairs. It makes games out to be artifacts that are inextricably social in their ontology. But that is exactly the insight on offer. A novel is more than just this physical book, and a game is more than just this software and hardware, or these cardboard bits. Works are social artifacts. They are not simply material artifacts, but artifacts consisting of some material embedded within some normative framework. And we can see this by seeing that there are non-material prescriptions for what counts as minimally encountering a work.

Importantly, Wimsatt and Beardsley took, as one of their primary reason for thinking that we ought to disregard the author’s intent, the fact that such intentions was private and essentially inaccessible. But, according to Irvin, ontological prescriptions aren’t set by private mental acts, but by publicly available *artistic sanctions*. The artist engages in a set of public acts which declare the relevant prescriptions. They can present that work in a particular social context, associating it with a publicly available set of prescriptions, or simply declare some new prescriptions explicitly, as when a contemporary artist tells us exactly how we are to interact with a new kind of work. A work’s prescriptive ontology can easily be made public, because it is far less complex thing than, say, a work’s meaning. A prescriptive ontology is a simple set of rules for interaction: “Read all the words in order, from front to back, and imagine the character and the world described.” “Follow the rules and try to win.”

Games, like paintings and novels, have prescriptive ontologies. This is evident when we consider how attempted encounters with the work might fail to

meet the relevant prescriptions. Imagine, for example, a reviewer of *Super Mario World* (Miyamoto 1990) giving the game a bad review because the cartridge smelled funny, or giving a good review of the game based only on the box art. Or imagine that they judged the work boring, having only started up the game and stared at the opening menu for fifty hours. These would be failures of criticism, and failures of the same sort as one might commit by reviewing Paul Beatty's new novel, *The Sellout*, based only on having eaten the pages. They are failures to actually encounter the work. Only a prescriptive ontology can explain basic features of the social practices which surround games. Thus, the ludic imperative -- that game scholars play a game as it was intended to be played -- does not commit the intentional fallacy. Nothing in the ludic imperative permits the author to fix the appropriate meaning or reaction to the work; it only permits the author to fix what the work is, and so fix the conditions under which we can encounter the work.

Recall Leino's original argument: that there shouldn't be prescriptions on how a player interacts with a game, just as there shouldn't be prescriptions on how a reader interprets a text. The discussion of prescriptive ontology now reveals the problem in this argument: it assimilates *interacting* with a game to *interpreting* a text. But, in fact, an author can set the prescriptions on how a reader *interacts* with a text: by saying that it is a novel, the author specifies that it must be read in a particular order. And the existence of that requirement is compatible with the view that the author has no power over how a reader interprets the work, which they have encountered by following the interaction rules of novels. Similarly, there are prescriptions on how a player should *interact* with a game, even if there are no prescriptions on how a player should *interpret* the results of that interaction. The ludic imperative determines only ontology, not interpretation.

Which is not to say that there is not very much to be learned by abandoning the ludic imperative in some circumstances. Art historians can learn of much of worth from studying the back of canvas, and game scholars can learn very much from studying the code. In fact, historians of, say, chemistry may perfectly well ignore the artwork and just focus on the composition of the canvas. Similarly, historians of coding may perfectly well ignore the game's rules, and focus on the software. But if we are to do art history, the animating force of our interest is in the artworks. And if we are to be game scholars, the animating force of our interest is in the game.

We can now see what is compelling about Leino's claim and what we might wish to resist. There are two distinct objects of study: the materiality of a game, and the game itself. Game scholars should certainly study the materiality of a game, in which case they should not be bound by the ludic imperative at all. But they shouldn't think that, by doing so, they have actually encountered the game

when they ignore the rules. A biologist might learn all sorts of useful things by studying the cells from my feet in a microscope -- but they haven't yet met *me*. Similarly, a forensic chemist might learn all sorts of useful bits of knowledge for art history by studying the chemical composition of the canvas of *Irides* -- but if they haven't looked at the painting from the front, then they haven't encountered the work which is *Irides*. And something has gone wrong in art history, if no art historian has ever encountered the artwork itself. Similarly, game scholars might learn all sorts of useful things about a game without playing it in the prescribed way, but they haven't actually encountered the work itself. As game scholars, they may sometimes free themselves from the ludic imperative for some of their investigations. But if the organizing goal of those investigations is the game, then they also need to sometimes just follow the rules and actually play the damn thing.

What's more, these prescriptions do not force themselves into any encounter with the materiality of the work. Prescriptive ontologies leave room for other sorts of encounters with the materiality of a game. Take, for example, the practice of speedrunning -- a newly evolving gaming practice where players attempt to get from the start screen to the end screen of a level or game in as little time as possible. Some styles of speedrunning involve taking advantage of glitches in the game and unintentional consequences of various programmed phenomena. Speedrunning is an emergent practice, which often ignores some central game elements, and uses other game elements to purposes obviously unintended by their designer (Scully-Blaker 2014). Again, nothing about prescriptive ontology says that speedrunning *Super Mario World* is problematic or that a player must engage with the software as it was created to be played, rather than speedrunning it. It only says that speedrunning is an alternate mode of encounter with the material substrate of a game, and not an encounter with the work that is *Super Mario World*. Speedrunning the software of *Super Mario World* is simply a different game from the original *Super Mario World*. The prescriptions of speedrunning create a different work from the same materials, just as Duchamp created a new work when he displayed a urinal in a museum, thus applying the prescriptions for museum sculpture to that physical bit of porcelain. In fact, it seems most plausible to say that speedrunners create a new and distinctive work, by appropriating software materials from an established work and merging them into a distinctive social practice with differing prescriptions. Accordingly, if one has reasons emanating from elsewhere to play *Super Mario World* -- say a trusted friend told one that it was great -- one would not fulfill those reasons by speedrunning it. And if one were to have reasons to speedrun it, one would not fulfill them by playing by the original rules.

To sum up: the prescriptions that arise around works are wholly conditional. Nothing says that you need to follow the rules of Cole Wehrle's boardgame *Root*:

*A Game of Woodland Might and Right* (Wehrle 2018), full stop. You are free to move the pieces about as you wish, for any reason you wish. The prescriptions only say that *if* you want to experience the particular work that is *Root*, then you should follow the rules. The next question, then, is why we should care about encountering the work, rather than simply doing as we please with its material substrate? One answer to that question will emerge from a comparison between the goals of free play and of structured communications.

### 3. Play and Aesthetic Communication

Consider the criticism that structured, rule-bound games run counter to the chaotic and anti-authoritarian nature of play. Play, says Sicart, is essentially free and appropriative; it takes practical objects out of their usual context and transforms their use. Structured games resist this sort of re-appropriation, and so block true play. Sicart's claim is even stronger than Leino's. Sicart is not only arguing that it is permissible to ignore the prescriptions of game rules and goals -- he is arguing that we are better off when we ignore them.

Sicart's argument depends on two steps: first, that games are created for play -- or, as Sicart puts it, "games are just a formal manifestation of play (Sicart 2014, 85). Second, that play is, by its nature, essentially unstructured. Play, says Sicart, is carnivalesque and appropriative. "...Play appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them and trivialize them" (3). Play is disruptive -- it takes over its context and disrupts the normal state of affairs. Thus, there is a tension between designed games and this idea of play. The game designer, says Sicart, is lauded and respected for harnessing, controlling and steering play towards their intended purposes. But this runs counter to play's essential nature. Games which attempt to control the player are doing so under a problematic model, says Sicart, treating the game designer as a kind of artist, who embeds meaning in a game's system. The very modern notion of a game designer implies authorship, privileged communication and authority, and this is troublesome. Instead, says Sicart, makers of games should provide nothing more than context, a focus for inspiring play (86-91).

Designing for play means creating a setting rather than a system, a stage rather than a world, a model rather than a puzzle. Whatever is created has to be open, flexible, and malleable to allow players to appropriate, express, act and interact, make and become part of the form itself. (90)

The argument here is representative of an attitude common throughout both the popular discussion of games and the academic scholarship. This attitude prefers toys to structured, rule-driven, goal-oriented games. It favors creative sandbox

games, such as *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011, which provide virtual environments, but leave the players free to decide their own goals.

I do not wish to argue against the importance of freeform play, or to contest the usefulness of games like *Minecraft* for promoting freeform play. Freeform play is certainly a valuable and essential part of human life. I only wish to resist the claim that freeform play is the *only* legitimate purpose of games.<sup>3</sup> Another purpose, I claim, is communication. Gary Iseminger's discussion of aesthetic communication will be quite useful here. Iseminger starts by considering the nature of aesthetic appreciation. Aesthetic appreciation, for Iseminger, can be of many things, including natural objects, like sunsets, and unintentionally aesthetic artifacts, like ruins. But sometimes we make artifacts for the sake for the sake of others' aesthetic appreciation. When we do so, we are engaged in a very particular act, which Iseminger calls aesthetic communication. In aesthetic communication, one person formulates a plan to intentionally bring about a state of affairs, with the aim and effect that somebody else finds experiencing that state of affairs to be valuable in itself (Iseminger 2004, 31-61).<sup>4</sup> Notice that aesthetic communication does not require the transmission of representational or conceptual content; it only requires aiming to bring about some sort of experience. Making sushi counts as aesthetic communication.

Aesthetic communication thus encompasses a significantly broader set of games than does, say, Ian Bogost's treatment of games as a kind of argumentative rhetoric (Bogost 2010). Surely, as Bogost suggests, some games are a kind of rhetoric – they make arguments. Such games are one kind of communication. But many other games offer a different kind of communication: aesthetic communications. Aesthetically communicative games attempt to bring about specific sorts of valuable experiences, to transmit them to others through an artifact. Specifically, in many cases, games are attempting to communicate aesthetically valuable experiences of activity: of doing, of skill, of decision and action. And the idea of communication can help us to understand why we might ever wish to follow the prescriptions associated with a work. Why we might we wish to take up all that ludic structure – and play inside certain rules while following specified goals? Such structure and specificity are the means by which a game's creators can sculpt and transmit specific types of experience. Again, we're not talking about the artist fixing the meaning or interpretation of that experience. We're talking about the artist fixing the basic structure of the experience itself – the stable structure which is to be differently interpreted and investigated by different users. The delicate awareness of inner life in *The Remembrance of Things Past*

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<sup>3</sup>For a careful dissection of the line between artistic games which seem to ask us to play them as games, and those that only ask for a more freeform exploration, see (Leino 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Note there is no claim here the artifacts of aesthetic communication always thereby count as art. The status of art is, for Iseminger and most modern aestheticians, complexly dependent on the relationship of the artwork to historical institutions of art practice.

depends on the particular ordering of the words; in order for there to be effective aesthetic communication, I must read the book in a particular order, and hold to certain norms of what words mean. A perfumer makes a perfume, concentrating entirely on how it smells, and ignoring how it tastes. They do so under the presumption that the audience will try to experience it by smelling it, and not drinking it. In general, an artist creates a certain artifact, knowing that it will be experienced following certain prescriptions. They are designing a particular kind of experience, and they do so under the presumption that others will experience that artifact while following those prescriptions. The audience needs to follow those prescriptions to retrieve that experience.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the rules and goals of striving games are the means by which a game designer interested in aesthetic communication achieves experiential specificity -- the means by which they sculpt the particular experiences of practical action and practical reasoning for a player (Nguyen forthcoming). Notice how obedience to the rules of a game helps to create the experiential specificity of that particular game. For example: the restriction on speaking in partnership Bridge makes possible the particular practical experience of deduction, information management, and communication under adverse conditions. In a rock-climbing gym, a climber must climb under specific restrictions. To count as having successfully climbed a route, a climber may use only the holds designated for that route and must reach the top without weighting the rope. Climbs are often set to force interestingly novel motions out of the climber, to tease the climber into discovering some particular graceful movement. Novices will sometimes complain about the restrictiveness of all those rules and then proceed to swing about on the rope, using all the holds on the wall. They are certainly playing in Sicart's sense, and they are getting at one particular sort of valuable experience. But if they never climb according to the rules, then they will never experience the particular form difficult motion and action that has been sculpted by the route setter. They are failing to experience the work, as surely as somebody who attends a Turner exhibit blindfolded and tripping on acid fails to experience any Turner paintings. They may have had a different experience, entirely valuable in its own way, but they will have failed to get the particular form of value on offer from Turner paintings.

I am not denying the importance of free play; I merely arguing that free play and communication are different practices, each valuable in its own way. And there is a trade-off between these two activities. Most communication involves shared norms -- not just aesthetic communication, but linguistic communication and more. Communicating with language requires that we share a set of norms and prescriptions, in order to stabilize the ground between us. The more I reject any shared norms, the more freely I can play, but the less I can communicate and

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<sup>5</sup> For a very useful survey of work on the normativity of meaning, see (Glüer and Wikforss 2009)

receive communications. The more I wish to communicate, the more I must bind myself, for the moment, to a set of shared norms. The promise of communication thus gives us reasons to sometimes abide by certain norms.

And, furthermore, the promise of communication gives us reasons to sometimes value participating in certain established practices with established norms. When a social practice becomes established, and when a type of prescriptive ontology becomes established -- when we know what to do with a painting, a novel, a performance art piece, or an arty videogame -- then artists and audiences can start to rely on each other. Artists can rely on audiences to know how to engage with a work, and to be skilled at that form of engagement. And audiences can develop those skills, knowing that more art will likely come along in that vein.

To speak loosely: different bodies of prescriptions help to create different languages. The prescriptions around painting help to create a visual language, the prescriptions around novels help to create a language of stories, and the prescriptions around games help to create a language of activity.

#### **4. Aesthetic Prescriptions and Adequate Encounters with Games**

So far, I have argued for the existence of prescriptions in games. Games are works, which are partially constituted by prescriptions about our interaction. Those prescriptions carve off what the work is, ontologically speaking. Furthermore, I have provided at least one reason we should sometimes submit to these prescriptions. Prescriptive stability helps, among other things, ground the possibility of communication. This is a feature which games share with other, more traditional works.

But thinking in terms of prescriptive ontologies will also help us to see how distinctive games are from more traditional kinds of works. Games are interactive, emergent, and socially embedded artifacts; thus, they give rise to substantially different sorts of prescriptions than with other, traditional forms of art. I will spend the remainder of this paper exploring some of these distinctive prescriptions.

Let's consider two sorts of requirements which might emerge from a prescriptive ontology. The first requirement concerns what counts as a *minimally adequate encounter* -- for example, to have a minimally adequate encounter with a painting, we must visually encounter the painted surface. Minimally encountering a novel requires that we look at the words, in sequence. The second requirement concerns what counts as having a *deeper* or *fuller encounter* with the work. For example, the ontology of, say, 20<sup>th</sup> century painting prescribes that a deeper encounter involves looking more carefully at the details of the brushstroke, and perhaps reading the artist's statement and learning some art history. Smelling the canvas, or weighing it, or eating it, doesn't count. Different sorts of practices seem to

require, for their justification, different depths of encounter. To say that I saw *Irides*, or to register a casual aesthetic judgment, I may need only have had a minimally adequate encounter. But I ought not review *Irides* for the *New York Times*, say, until I have had a deeper encounter.<sup>6</sup>

What might the prescriptions involve for games? Two sorts of prescriptions immediately come to mind: prescriptions to engage with the fiction -- to use the elements of the work to imagine a fictional world,<sup>7</sup> and prescriptions that arise from ludic engagements with the game -- from trying to win by the rules. Jesper Juul suggests that videogames are half-fictional and half-real (Juul 2004), but I do not think that the relevant prescriptions always apply in equal measure. How do we ascertain which prescriptions apply? Let's suppose, for the moment, that the game designers have made no overt declarations of their sanctions. Irvin suggests, in those cases, that we deduce the relevant prescriptive practice from the context of placement -- novels occur in a bookstore, and paintings in a museum. But I do not think contextual clues are always sufficient. Most computer games are purchased in the same sorts of places -- Steam, iTunes, Amazon. Most board games are purchased from great disorganized piles in hobbyist game stores or from haphazardly organized online sites. But this situation is far from unique. If I peruse a friend's bookshelf, I might encounter encyclopedias, tour books, poetry collections, and novels all mixed together. Note how different the prescriptions are in those cases. If we wanted to read a novel, reading the numbered subsections in random order wouldn't count. But, for a short-story collection, reading the numbered sub-section in random order would count. In these cases, we classify works into a prescriptive practice by examining prominent features of the work itself and searching for a best explanation those prominent features. Even if I knew nothing else about it, I could tell that Jane Austen's *Persuasion* has the prescriptive ontology of novels, because it has features -- a continuous plot and recurring characters -- that are best explained by fitting into the social practice of novels. When lacking contextual clues, we can look to *prominent basic features of the work* that identify it as being part of one practice or another, which can then point the way to the prescriptions associated with those practices.

Let me briefly touch on the prescriptions related to games' aspects as fiction. Certain elements of some games are best explained in terms of their participation in the social practice of fiction. For example, consider the kinds of characters we might encounter in a videogame. As Espen Aarseth points out, some games offer us shallow bots, where other games offer us rich, round, full characters (Aarseth 2012, 130-1). The best explanation of a game with rich, round, characters is that

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<sup>6</sup> Brock Rough aided this paper enormously by pressing for the distinction between adequate and deeper encounters.

<sup>7</sup> Grant Tavinor offers us a careful account of the prescriptions involved in engaging with a videogame as fiction, developed from Kendall Walton's account of fiction as make-believe (Tavinor 2009, Walton 1990).

it partakes in the social practice of fiction, and that we are prescribed to imagine a fictional world and those fictional characters within it.

What might the ludic prescriptions be for games? Surely, at the very least, we are to play by the rules and aim at the specified goal. But I think that isn't all. Since games are emergent and strategic, there will also sometimes be prescriptions involving the *number of playings* and *skill level* required for encountering a game. I will argue that, for some games, multiple playings and moderate skill are a pre-requisite for an adequate encounter with the game, and that, for some games, a deeper encounter involves a very large number of playings and a developing a high degree of skill. One practical outcome of this view is that, while it may be permissible to judge a film after a single viewing, for certain types of games, reviewing or otherwise offering a summary judgment of the merits of a game after a single play is as improper as, say, reviewing a book after reading only the first chapter.<sup>8</sup>

There are threads of this thought sprinkled in recent works on games and related objects. Take Gonzolo Frasca's suggestions that games are representations of causal networks; a game, says Frasca, can say something about the world -- about politics, or economics -- in the way that a static work cannot, precisely because it can model different outcomes to different decisions over different playings (Frasca 2003). Dominic Lopes has defended a similar view in his analysis of interactive computer art. In interactive computer art, he says, the work is the algorithm -- the possibility space. A single interaction with the work isn't sufficient to explore the possibility space; in fact, interactive computer art prescribes multiple encounters, in order to apprehend the possibility space (Lopes 2010, 27-36,60). Similarly, Tavinor suggests that some videogames may have interactive narratives such that multiple playings are required to explore the possibility space (Tavinor 2017, 27).

But surely not all computer games prescribe multiple play-throughs. Take, for example, puzzle games, like *The Room* (Fireproof Games 2012). Puzzles have single solutions; for a game consisting entirely of puzzles, further play-throughs yield no further features.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, then, we should follow Jesper Juul's

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<sup>8</sup> It is surely permissible to offer an explicitly partial judgment. "I've only read the first two chapters, but so far..." "I've only played the introduction, but so far..." It is summary judgments, which present themselves as being of the whole work, that must be responsive to the prescriptions for encountering the whole work. Note that the following arguments, combined with my discussion of the ludic imperative, function as a defense of Aarseth's claim that game skill is required for game scholars, against Leino's criticisms (Aarseth 2003).

<sup>9</sup> An anonymous reviewer has suggested that these remarks are problematized by Veli-Matti Karhulahti's claim that puzzles are not games, because games, by definition, evaluate the player, and puzzles do not (Karhulahti 2015, 25). I do not take this to be troubling, because I don't accept that account of games, as I argue elsewhere. Briefly, I take the need for evaluation to be a local and contingent cultural phenomenon, related to a recent rise in the culture of quantification. In fact, in many cases, there is coherent ludic activity which only gains quantitative and evaluative features when they evolve into formalized competition. Consider, for example, skateboarders informally competing for most stylish trick. Such ludic activity is coherent as such, without any built-in system of evaluation; such skateboarders, in fact, can compete without deciding in the end who won. It is only when those practices are formalized in a professional context that we find the imposition of regimes of quantified evaluation, such as in professional

suggestion and separate the space of games into games of emergence and games of progression. Games of emergence have simple rules that lead to complex play; where games of progression may have vast sets of rules but have simple solutions. Chess is a game of emergence -- it has rules that fit on one sheet of paper, but vast libraries of strategy books. Many traditional puzzle-based computer adventure games are games of progression. They may have vastly complicated rules (in the form of computer code), but the solution can be written on a single sheet of paper -- what's called a walkthrough (Juul 2004, 67-82).

I think this is right. Furthermore, it seems most likely that there are a great many different gaming social practices, each of which grounds a different prescriptive ontologies, just as there are different traditional art world social practices which ground different artistic prescriptive ontologies. The practice of puzzles -- crosswords, acrostics, and logic puzzles -- is one where an adequate encounter requires only solving the puzzle once. But the practice of high-skill board and card games is a tradition where having an adequate encounter may first demand a lengthy process of skill-development. There is an old saying around Go players: "First thing you do, lose a hundred games as quickly as possible. Then you are ready to begin studying the game." So let's explore some of the possible variety of game-types, in terms of their prescriptive ontologies.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Party Games, Strategy Games, and the Number of Playings

So, what are these differing practices with games? I will not pretend to offer any exhaustive list. As an opening exploration, I will identify three distinct types, which cross both physical gaming and computer gaming. Two are older practices, one is new. They all occur within Juul's category of emergent games: none of them have single solutions, or are based around puzzles. But I will argue each sub-type is embedded in a practice which calls for a different prescriptive ontology, with differing prescriptions for what counts as a minimally adequate encounter. Let's call them *party games*, *heavy strategy games*, and *community evolution games*.

First, consider two party games: the supposedly funny tabletop game *Cards Against Humanity* (Dillon et al 2011), and the video game *B.U.T.T.O.N*

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tournament skateboarding. Furthermore, we could easily take even videogame artifacts, and imagine luscious engagement with them without substantive evaluation. For example, imagine *Super Mario World* without points -- there is a goal, rules, and ludic engagement, but no quantified scoring. At least, there is only a single success/failure condition -- which we also find with puzzles. For a more in-depth version of this discussion, see (Nguyen forthcoming, Chapter 9).

<sup>10</sup> Please note that I am talking here about categories of prescriptive ontologies -- what have been called work-types -- which is distinct from the question of game genres. One genre can exist across many work-types -- the fantasy genre, for example, exists across board games, computer games, traditional novels, cinema, and interactive adventure books. The notion of a work-type here is also different from classifications based on game mechanics, such as the one offered by Aki Jarvinen (Jarvinen 2003). As should be evident later, any of Jarvinen's mechanical categories -- trading, bidding, allocating -- can occur in any of the work-types I suggest.

(Copenhagen Games Collective 2010). In *Cards Against Humanity*, players answer questions or finish incomplete phrases by selecting from their hand of cards, each with some intentionally absurd, ridiculous, or supposedly offensive phrase. For example: to the prompt, “If you detect it early, you can stop \_\_\_\_\_” different players might respond with cards such as: “A sneezing fetish,” “Old people smell,” “Vigorous jazz hands,” or “Totally fuckable aliens.”<sup>11</sup> *B.U.T.T.O.N.* (a.k.a. *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now*) is a multiplayer XBOX 360 game, in which players are surprised with any variety of mini-games. For example: the game will first order all players to put their controllers down and take five paces back. After a brief countdown, the game will suddenly provide a new mini-game: like telling the players that when the X button on their controller is pressed, they will lose. Sprinting, wrestling, and occasional fisticuffs typically follow.

Suppose, for the moment, that one has simply been handed copies of *Cards Against Humanity* and *B.U.T.T.O.N.* without any contextual information. In both cases, obvious features in the games classify them within an established practice. Party games, I propose, are a practice in which the long-term development of skill is unimportant or actively discouraged. (Imagine if you found out that I scoured forums for *Charades* tips and strategies, studied Youtube videos to watch effective *Charades* players, and practiced their techniques with my siblings to be sure that I won at the next *Charades* event.) In fact, in both games, the system by which a victor is selected is obviously and patently arbitrary. In *Cards Against Humanity*, one player each round is the judge, and selects which card strikes them as funniest. As for *B.U.T.T.O.N.*: here’s the co-designer, describing the inspiration he took from an earlier party game, *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* (Intelligent System 2006).

*Smooth Moves* features a collection of zany “micro-games” that only last a couple of seconds. In each micro-game, one player uses their wiimote to adopt a silly pose, such as “The Elephant” or “The Samurai.” From that pose, the player attempts to complete a simple little task, such as tracing a shape or slicing a virtual piece of wood. None of these micro-games would work very well individually. Rather, they work together in series, synergistically. Because *Smooth Moves* fires off these micro-games at such a manic pace, it is difficult to get too emotionally invested in any one

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<sup>11</sup> Actual examples from the game.

challenge. The focus is shifted away from the game-delineated reward system of winning and losing, towards the human beings performing and willfully making fools of themselves. (Wilson 2011)

Notice the lack of any discussion of elements of skill development, decision trees, or possibility spaces. There is no reason to think that party games have, as part of their ontology, a prescription for repeat encounters. Their designs, in fact, foreground arbitrariness, skill-lessness, and intentional chaos. I suspect that the social practice of party games, in fact, requires that they be played with a spirit of levity. Somebody who has played a silly party game like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* in a spirit of deadly earnest competition has, I suspect, not yet earned the right to issue any kind of conclusive judgement of the game.

Compare these sorts of games with *heavy strategy games*. First, consider the board game, *1850: Railways & Robber Barons* (Tresham 1986), created by Francis Tresham (who also designed the board game *Civilization* (Tresham 1980), and in so doing introduced the idea of technology trees into board gaming and video gaming (Woods 2012, 40)). *1850* is an extraordinarily complex game -- it is almost two separate games merged into one. Half of the game is stock manipulation: players buy and trade stock in train companies, manipulating stock market prices through their actions. The other half of the game involves managing those companies: laying track, designing efficient routes, improving one's train technology. Much of the complexity of the game evolves from the relationship between these two halves, as the stock valuations of the companies change and shift with the companies' operations. A player can build a train company with a hidden flaw, trick others into investing into it, and then loot the company and dump it on their minority shareholders. But *1850* is full of features which make no sense on a single playing. First, there are features that don't make sense until players are high-skill enough to use them, and the development of that skill takes many playings. For example, there is a rule that, when a stock price declines sufficiently, that stock becomes a junk stock and can be traded in greater volume. This rule only makes sense as part of the game when players understand stock market manipulation enough to intentionally bring about and take advantage of a junk rating. Second, there are early decisions in the game that simply cannot be made intelligently on a first playing. For example, when a player starts a company, she must set its "par value" -- its price-per-stock. Players set par values on many of their companies in the first round, but the implications of that decision will not be apparent until players fully understand how the various sub-systems of the game interact -- which cannot happen until at least the second playing, and probably many more.

Second, consider the computer game *Dream Quest* (Whalen 2014), part of a family of games called "rogue-likes." The key features of rogue-likes are that each playing involves a new procedurally generated dungeon to explore; and that

death is permanent. *Dream Quest* adds to this a deck-building element: one fights monsters using a deck, and one builds that deck piece by piece, picking up new cards one at a time as one explores the dungeon. Many of the early card-powers have synergies and possibilities that can only be understood after having seen how they interact with later-stage card powers. These are core features of the game, but they are invisible or incomprehensible in early playings. In heavy strategy games, core features of the work *only become visible and coherent after repeat playings*.

The social practice of heavy strategy games is very different from that of party games. Players of a heavy strategy game may study the game, devise new strategies, discuss strategies with others, and slowly master the game over many playings. Games like *1850* and *Dream Quest* have design features which make sense only within that elongated context. So: first, there are publicly accessible features in *1850* and *Dream Quest* which indicate the artist's sanction, by indicating a gaming social practice into which the game has been sanctioned. Second: the heavy strategy game sub-type is a practice which prescribes multiple playings. There are features of the work which only come into view after multiple encounters. These features, though unobvious to the new player, are, in fact, central. And we can tell they are central because that centrality is the best explanation for clear design elements of the game. So players need to develop enough skill to bring those central features into view, in order to adequately encounter the work. Thus, for a work of heavy strategy, a player must play multiple times and develop sufficient skill in order to adequately encounter the work.

Think about what players engaged deeply with games like *1850* and *Dream Quest* are doing. Their attention is on emergent features, which require significant skill to see. One might reasonably object here that this is a feature common to many other artistic practices. Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* and Hieronymus Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* are full of subtle details that reveal themselves on repeat viewings. But let's distinguish here, again, between a deep encounter and a minimally adequate encounter. Though many readings of *Jane Eyre* may reveal many nuances, and foster a profound and subtle understanding, a single reading suffices for a minimally adequate encounter. Not so, for Chess, Go, Bridge, *1850*, and *Dream Quest*. The difference is that central features of *Jane Eyre* are visible to the competent reader on a single reading, but central features of Chess are not visible on a single playing. Consider: if we asked somebody who had read *Jane Eyre* for the first time, and somebody who had read it for the thousandth, what the most important features of the work were, what the central narrative elements were, they would largely agree -- it would be *Jane Eyre*, her poverty and helplessness, her relationship with Rochester, and Rochester's mad wife. But if one were to ask the same questions of an experienced Go player -- if one were to ask what the central features were, to which they were

attending -- one would receive entirely different answers than from a novice. An experienced Go player attends constantly to features like *influence* -- that is, the way a piece or structure on one side of the board radiates potential power in complex ways towards other areas of the board. To even begin thinking about influence, a Go player needs to have internalized enough of the basic mechanics of the game to be able to read certain basic sequences effortlessly (Kageyama 2007, 55-64,87-109). And then their basic experience of the game is transformed.

Simon Dor calls this kind of transformative effect *strategic perception*. Experienced players of both Chess and *Starcraft: Brood Wars* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998) have different perceptual experiences of objects in the game. An experienced Chess player, for examples, looks at a rook and sees, not a particularly figured piece, but lines of movement and potential. In fact, says Dor, visual game design decisions can help enable that transformation of perception. The shape of Chess pieces is simple and consistent across most non-novelty sets, and *Starcraft* repeats visually identical tiles. This all aids the transformation of perception (Dor 2014). For many games, key elements of the game only come into view through training and experience. When those skill-dependent elements are central to the work, then the work can only be adequately experienced by a skilled player. This is, in some sense, a familiar point. Many other sorts of works require significant backgrounds skill to access. Written works require a complex background skill of language; I may pass my eyes over the characters in a Chinese poem, but since I don't read or speak Chinese, I have no access to the work. With literary works, however, one language skill grants access to many different works. We might say that, with heavy strategy games, each game has its own distinct skill and learning process, by which one learns to see perceive its elements. One has to, so to speak, learn the language of each game anew.<sup>ix</sup>

Heavy strategy games then, prescribe not only following the rules and pursuing the designated goal, but also prescribe multiple playings and the development of sufficient skill to interact with the core features of the game, where those core features are often emergent strategic phenomena. You have to play a game a lot and gain enough skill with the game in order to actually encounter the work, and to ground any sort of legitimate judgment of the work. There's a normative sting here. Consider a sort of figure that has become quite popular nowadays: the online reviewer of strategic boardgames. Many of the most influential reviewers in the boardgame world have achieved popularity and cultural influence by providing a regular stream of reviews; they end up reviewing an enormous number of games. In many cases, in order to pull this off, they play each game a bare handful of times -- sometimes even only once. If this account is right, then for heavy strategy games, such reviewers have never actually encountered the games that they are reviewing. And it is easy to see how damaging it might be to the social practice of heavy strategy games, if its most influential critics are issuing

largely illegitimate judgments, based on inadequate encounters, in which they have not yet brought basic features of the work into view.

## 6. Community Evolution Games

This leads us to another class of prescriptions: that, to encounter certain types of games properly, one must encounter them in groups. This is, in part, blindingly obvious. The prescriptions of many games are such that they can only be adequately encountered by acting with groups of people. Perhaps, with a game like Chess, a single person might be able to play both sides of an encounter by themselves. But any game which involves hidden information -- cards, or pieces with concealed information like *Stratego* -- cannot be adequately experienced by a single person. This is also true of embodied team sports and simultaneous-action multiplayer game, such as multiplayer shooters. For many multiplayer games, the prescriptions of minimal encounters can only be met by an individual acting with a group. Call this the *multiplayer requirement*.

But there is a type of game which is even more deeply socially embedded, and which gives rise to prescriptive requirements significantly more complicated than the multiplayer requirement. Let's consider the category of *community evolution* games. Key examples in this genre include *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield 2013), *Android: Netrunner* (Garfield and Litzsinger 2012), and *Hearthstone* (Blizzard 2014). This is a relatively new practice in gaming. I will discuss *Android: Netrunner*, since it is the one I know best, but all the comments I make below are applicable to the whole class. *Android: Netrunner* is a customizable card-game. A player designs their deck before play from a large pool of possible cards. Decks usually are designed around some particular strategy, with the various card powers intended to interact in some way. Some decks are fast and aggressive; others build slowly. Some work by brute force; others depend on deceit and misdirection. The possibility of different deck types gives rise to an emergent, complicated form of second-guessing, like rock-paper-scissors with a PhD. Serious players become deeply involved in what's called "the meta", or "metagaming" -- what Marcus Carter et al. describe as "a complex interplay between the game community and the game itself" (Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2012, 2-3). Serious play of these games involves engagement with a constant flow of information and strategic analysis through the community of players, usually via Internet sites and forums. Certain types of decks become known as particularly effective or powerful and thus become popular. Players must design their own deck to cope with the various deck-types they might encounter. The strategic space evolves as players respond to the deck-types currently in play, and then respond to those responses, and so on (Johansson 2009, 5-7). What's more, the pool of available cards constantly changes. Fantasy Flight Games releases a new set of cards every month,

resulting in an ever-changing changing, unstable meta. Most serious *Netrunner* players will tell you that the constant flux of the meta is the point; that the most interesting part of the game is when the new cards get released, and all the players scramble to figure out how they change play (Smith 2015; Majewski 2014). And, in fact, the designers of *Netrunner* are constantly monitoring the meta, and creating new cards in response to the current state of the meta: to tweak it, to break emerging strategies that seem to dominant, and to keep things interesting (Browne 2017). For example, when the meta starts to get stale and devolve into a predictable set of deck designs, designers will usually introduce a new mechanic specifically to encourage a greater diversity of decks (Ventre 2016). There has been some debate about whether the metagame is part of the game, or external to the game (Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2012, 2,4). This analysis offers a clear answer: insofar as major features of the game design are publicly declared as attempts to alter the endgame for the purposes of better play, and the best explanation for those features is that effect on the community's strategic discourse, then the metagame is surely part of the *work*.

For an ontologist interested in works, *Magic*, *Netrunner*, *Hearthstone* and their customizable kin should now seem rather fascinating. What might their prescriptive ontologies be? Given the actuality of the practice, and given evident design features of the game, the prescriptions demand not only multiple playings, but to demand *participation in the larger community of players* for an adequate encounter with the work. Many central features of *Netrunner* can only be explained in virtue of their interaction with the community of players and the evolving meta. Most obviously, the constantly changing card pool -- especially the way older cards drop out -- only makes sense as an attempt to keep the meta interesting. And since this central feature of the game only makes sense in relationship to the meta, then being in contact with the meta -- reading the forums, thinking about the currently popular decks, responding to them -- is requisite for an adequate encounter with the game. Two players who purchase the game and play it at home may have a very nice experience, but they have not had an adequate encounter with the full game, just as I have not yet had a minimally adequate encounter with Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, even though I have thoroughly enjoyed the first eighth of it that have read. Core features of the game are incomprehensible, invisible, or inactive without active participation in a gaming community.

T. L. Taylor has argued that using information from outside play-sessions -- from online forums -- is legitimate gaming practice, and so argued against the idea of any impermeable membrane separating sessions of game-play from outer life (Taylor 2009, 2007). My argument goes one step further: I claim that, for these sorts of games, using information from outside the game, from resources such as online forums, is ontologically prescribed by the game, and so a necessary precondition for having an adequate encounter with the game. Call this the

*community embedding requirement*, which is significantly stronger than the multiplayer requirement. The multiplayer requirement can be met merely by playing a game once with a group of people. The community embedding requirement requires multiple plays within the same community and responding to newly developing strategies within that community.

If this is right, then community evolution games are ontologically very distinctive from other sorts of works. I can appreciate other types of works in communities, but communal experience isn't required for a minimally adequate experience. It is probably more enjoyable to watch *The Big Lebowski* in a crowd, but I can still make a legitimate aesthetic judgment from having watched it only by myself. Discussing the movie with a group may deepen my experience, but I can still encounter the central features of the work on my own. But community evolution games are different. I cannot have an adequate experience of them unless I am embedded in a larger community, and taking part in the community's evolving and emergent metagame.

I doubt that these sorts of games are alone in having some sort of community embedding requirement. We might plausibly expect to find a similar sort of requirement with, say, street art. Nick Riggle argues that street art is essentially public, and depends partially for its artistic merit on its interaction with public spaces and community responses (Riggle 2010). Similarly, one might think that the aesthetic appreciation of urban design requires that the appreciator be part of a community actually living within that design. What unifies all of these types of art is that they are socially embedded, essentially communal works. And it should be no surprise that the traditional art world -- which has largely focused on the sorts of practices aimed at individual and private encounters -- has often been unwilling to recognize the merits of such radically social and communal works. Such communal works are a poor fit with traditional aesthetic theory, but the fault here lies in the problematically individualist presumptions of traditional aesthetic theory. The theory of art has been historically aimed at understanding the sorts of artistic experience that could be had solitary individuals. But some of the most interesting game designs are that can only be adequately encountered by individuals embedded in groups and communities of game play.

## 7. Negotiating Social Practices

Let's take a step back from the details. Thinking about prescriptive ontologies can shed some light on the social reception of games, and our attempts to negotiate how we are supposed to engage with and respond to them. Consider, for example, John Sharp's discussion of the aesthetics of games. Sharp distinguishes between games, artgames, and game art. According to sharp, *games* are things like *Super Mario World*. They are meant to entertain us by being played.

*Artgames* are things like *Braid* (Blow 2008), which also need to be played, but aim to providing some deeper value than mere entertainment. And *game art* is things like Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (2002), which is an installation artwork for display in a museum, which redeploys graphics from *Super Mario Brothers 3* (Miyamoto 1988), while removing all the game elements. *Super Mario Clouds* is not really meant to be played in the familiar sense; it is intended for exhibition in a traditional museum context.

But why should we care about which is which? Are we just fussing about labels? The story of prescriptive ontology gives us a clear view of what's at stake. What we are actually doing, when we make these classifications, is placing games in a social practice, with associated norms. *Artgames* are embedded in the social practice of gaming and inherit many of their prescriptions from that gaming practice. *Game art* is embedded in a social practice rooted in the museum art practice — paintings, sculptures, installations, and interactive installations — and inherits many of those prescriptions. When we are fussing about classifications, we are actually fussing about what the right prescriptions for interaction are, for each work.

The larger point here is not to impose taxonomic distinctions or to fix eternal boundaries from on high. The point is to recast certain of the taxonomic struggles we've seen in a social and practical light. Because, crucially, we are in charge of our social practices, and so in charge of the prescriptions underlying our works. They are not set in stone. And we are perpetually in the process of re-shaping those social practices to best fit new technologies and new innovations in game design and artistic practice. Elizabeth Cantalamessa suggests that we should view all those endless debates over what is or is not really art as a kind of collective practical exercise in conceptual engineering. There aren't any independent facts of the matter about what art really is, or what game art really is. Rather, when we're arguing about what is or is not art, we're actually negotiating about what the best way to cut up the conceptual space, and how we should change our concepts going forward. When we're arguing about whether performance art is really art, what we're doing is *deciding* whether or not they should be treated in a similar way to other arts — whether they should be funded, taught, displayed, and reviewed alongside the other arts (Cantalamessa 2018).

Something similar is going on, I suggest, when we try to taxonomize these new gaming phenomena — when we try to locate various artifacts in the categories of games, *artgames*, and *game art*. What we're doing is *trying out* those artifacts within different prescriptive regimes and seeing how it goes. We are, in a sense, taking some material and it them through the paces of different possible prescriptive ontologies — and, in doing so, generating a variety of works, to see what works for us. This taxonomic struggle, and the cultural struggle behind it, is exactly the kind of thing we should expect to see whenever an art culture

encounters new media, new techniques, and new technologies. First, we attempt to shove artifacts into the various social practices and prescriptive regimes that we already have, to see how they do. We are *trying out* treat games as conceptual art, or installation art, or performance art, since these are prescriptive regimes that are ready to hand. But I expect we should see, as we come to terms with the special technologies and techniques of games, that new social practices will arise, merging, synthesizing, and evolving from our older practices, with their own distinctive sets of prescriptions and ontologies.

So, in the end, is there a right way to play a game? The answer is complicated. Literally and narrowly, yes: a particular game is a work, and there is a right way to play it. Playing it that way retrieves the particular sorts of experiences that the artist intended to embed in the material artifact. Obeying the prescription is the only way to experience the original work – and so the only way to actually experience that work as a communication. In a larger sense, however, we are not always bound to experience particular bits of material under the regime of the artist's intent. We also have reason to experiment, to re-mix and re-shuffle, to try out various artifacts under various different prescriptive regimes, and so generate new works. In that way, we can explore the space of possible social practices, to generate new patterns of prescriptions, and to figure out which ones we should focus on. And creating new practices will, in turn, create new possibilities for new types of works and new forms of communication — which we can receive only by playing the game the right way.

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