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CAPITALIZING ON PARATEXTS: GAMEPLAY, ETHICS, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

On May 3, 2006, the founder of the popular MMO-themed Web site Allakhazam.com posted an announcement to let readers know that "we have added several new sites to our network and have joined them together to form the Zam.com Network which is now instantly the leading content destination for all MMO gamers. . . . Any changes we make will only be positive and will be ones that we think will make your site better."[1] The announcement went on to discuss how the Allakhazam site could now take advantage of greater resources, including faster servers, newly hired staff, and additional content.

What the initial post did not mention was the other parties involved in the business transaction. What site readers revealed in the discussion below the post, however, quickly turned the thread into a collective flash point for debate and anger, which then raged for days across the entire site and elsewhere on the Internet.[2] Allakhazam.com, long a proponent of fair gameplay and an opponent of real-money trade along with other forms of account buying and selling, had been bought out by a holding company that also owned the International Game Exchange, the largest real-money trade company in North America.[3] Many loyal readers were not pleased, to put it lightly.

While some readers professed not to care about the purchase, or adopted a wait-and-see attitude to determine whether the buyout would affect site content, many other readers were scathing in their response. One person's post spoke for many: "I hope you got a good contract from them [RPG Holdings], because it looks like it cost you your soul, even if you're too blind to see that. Two weeks left on premium then goodbye avatar, thanks for the ride."[4] The main thread dedicated to discussing the change (there were countless others) stretched over a period of weeks, with

over a thousand posts made on the topic—suggesting no shortage of player feelings about this change in ownership.

It's too early to tell whether the readers' dissatisfaction will have any long-term effects on the Allakhazam site, yet a cursory glance at the Black Mages job forum page for *Final Fantasy XI* indicates that most of the original guides for obtaining gear and finishing difficult quests have not been deleted by upset writers, and the number of postings per day does not appear to have dropped off in any significant number. What's most interesting, though, is the sense of outrage that the announcement generated, and what it suggests about player communities, digital gameplay, cheating, and the future of paratextual industries.

As I argued in previous chapters, gameplay doesn't exist in a vacuum, nor do game developers or publishers exert the only forms of control over how to play, understand, or enjoy a game. Of course, players aren't free to play entirely as they wish, with no boundaries or limitations on their actions. Before they even pick up a controller, their expectations are shaped to some degree about what to expect and what it means to play a game. Players and game developers exist in a push-pull of interdependence, constantly exerting pressure on one another to gain control of the experience of gameplay as well as how to define that experience. Certainly, neither could exist without the other, and the perspectives of each inform the other. Added to that mix, and helping to define and extend that relationship, are the paratextual industries I've discussed here.

From *Nintendo Power* to the International Game Exchange, some companies that neither make nor sell games have worked diligently to shape how we think of games as well as how we should and shouldn't play them. In this book, I've concentrated on the commercial elements involved in this practice, thereby omitting a large piece of the puzzle. Player-created content—in the form of free walkthroughs, online guides, postings and discussions on game boards, and free or shareware programs to help players in their games to varying degrees—all are important influences on how we understand digital games. I'd like to spend some time exploring a few of those elements here, but even as they offer independent ways of understanding paratexts, many of the larger arguments I've made concerning their for-profit relatives offer similar experiences.

What's most critical now about such forms, I believe, is that many of the more successful indie paratextual efforts are now being incorporated

into the profit-making enterprises. For example, will Allakhazam.com change because of its new owners? What sorts of changes might that mean? Did GameFAQs.com alter its approach after being purchased by CNET?

These questions not only explore the growing corporatization of the paratextual industries but also the concepts of gaming capital and what cheating means for gameplay as well as digital life. In particular, issues like cheating raise key ethical questions about the proper and improper, correct and incorrect ways to do things. From the beginning, I've taken the position that there is no clear-cut path and no objectively correct answer to what constitutes cheating in digital games. I've tried instead to describe cheating as a dynamic practice that players, game developers, and others have worked to define and shape, in games, over time, and across many different situations.

Cheating is fascinating because it shows us where we disagree about the limits of acceptable gameplay. If we all agreed on those limits, this would have been a short book. But we don't, and that's a valuable thing. As I conclude this book, I want to look at what sorts of ethical questions cheating and digital games demand we investigate. Because it's about more than finding a simple answer or concluding that to cheat in a game is of no real consequence—as John Pauly contends, let's take "popular culture seriously as a mode of moral imagination."[5]

Internet Gold: The Free Walkthrough

Before MMOs took hold of most of my free time, I was a dedicated single-player gamer, spending most of my time immersed in RPGs and a few action/adventure titles for good measure. And like many of my informants, the Internet was a gold mine for me in terms of finding places for reading about the latest games, previews of forthcoming games, and maybe most significantly, help to get through the game I was currently playing. While there are many individual and commercial sites dedicated to giving players more information about particular titles, one name kept getting recommended as the place to go to for the best in terms of walkthroughs and game help: GameFAQs.com.

GameFAQs.com is an aggregator of "gameFAQs," which literally stands for "game frequently asked questions," but is shorthand for walk-

throughs, the detailed guides that can tell you the correct direction to go in when you enter the "Zanarkand Ruins" in *Final Fantasy X* as well as the right series of moves to make when battling the final boss in the first *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* videogame. Started by one person in 1995 and acquired by CNET Networks in 2003, not only is the GameFAQs site comprehensive, well-written, and player created, it has that one thing that the majority of game players demand most from their gameplay help: free access.

While GameFAQs.com has many elements including discussion boards, game reviews, and cheat codes, the heart of the site remains its walkthroughs. It contains more than 35,000 FAQs and guides, and "more than 600,000 unique gamers visit GameFAQs each day."[6] Visitors encountering the site will find a list of the "top ten" FAQ pages as well as the top ten "most wanted" FAQs. Writers are encouraged to be the first to provide an FAQ for new games, for which they'll receive gift certificates. Most games don't have that problem, instead listing multiple guides as well as reviews, cheat codes, and discussion boards.

Moving to the pages for individual games, readers can find a detailed list of guides, depending on the popularity of the game or the particular genre (RPGs tend to have more guides than other types of games, it seems). For example, the page for the game *Pikmin* lists ten general FAQs as well as four "in-depth" FAQs, two entries for "maps and charts," and five "foreign language FAQs" in Swedish, Dutch, Spanish, and Italian. In contrast, the page for the first *Kingdom Hearts* game lists fifteen general FAQs, thirty-three "in-depth" FAQs, four foreign language FAQs (in Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch), and one "secrets" FAQ.[7] While the general FAQs are comprehensive guides to the entire game, in-depth FAQs will generally specialize in one area, such as a minigame, a particular level, one boss fight, or how to obtain a rare item or set of items. The general FAQs are the only ones rated by readers, allowing readers to see which FAQs are deemed more reliable or better presented than other guides.

As one reads through a general FAQ, it becomes obvious how much time and attention the creators have put into those documents. FAQs will list a revision number at the top, and for each revision, an explanation of what was updated in the text. FAQs also are divided into sections, usually corresponding with the progression of the game, and include lists of terms,

items, weapons, and other things that players would find helpful. Most general FAQs are quite long, and when printed can run from dozens to hundreds of pages of text. Writers are spending countless hours producing such documents, all for no pay. What they do obtain, if the guide is good enough, is gaming capital and recognition.

What is remarkable about the diversity of guides that can be found on GameFAQs.com is, in one sense, their uniformity. Part of that is structural; in order to be accepted for listing on the site, FAQ creators must use particular conventions, such as sticking with plain text, not using special formatting commands, and listing the author name, version number, and date of the last update at the beginning of the document. Yet in addition to certain formatting requirements, many guide writers stick to particular ways of presenting information in guides, often drawn from commercial guides and walkthroughs.

For example, most FAQs will let readers know if they contain spoilers, and most will also claim to not include "too much" spoiler information—only the pieces necessary to get the player through the game. Guides to characters, specific bosses, and logical ways to progress through the game—all are generally included in both the free and commercial guides. What that suggests is that even as some individuals are creating guides for free, there are certain norms that game players have accepted for what constitutes a successful walkthrough or FAQ. "Free" guide writers know those conventions and learn to emulate them, usually even more successfully than commercial publishers do.

A site such as GameFAQs.com serves as an aggregator not just for game help or player community formation but also for the creation and circulation of gaming capital. Successful FAQ writers gain a certain status, much like well-respected players in MMO games. And the site has capitalized on that capital, especially with its 2003 acquisition by CNET. While FAQ writers retain the copyright to their work, the site itself has become part of a larger brand that seeks to organize, classify, and commodify various types of game information and gaming capital. When readers now read an FAQ for *Kingdom Hearts II*, say, they can also check prices around the Web for the game, go to the GameSpot Web site for further reviews, news stories, and screen shots, and even download a ringtone based on the game's theme music. Playing the game is almost superfluous.

Player-Created Content: But Is It Players Who Own It Anymore?

Just as GameFAQs.com is one site where the users provide a majority of the helpful content, other places exist around the Internet that do the same thing for other types of games. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Allakhazam.com is another such site that relies heavily on input from individual readers. Allakhazam.com currently has game boards for *Final Fantasy XI*, *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest*, *EverQuest 2*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Lineage 2*, *Star Wars: Galaxies*, and *EverQuest Online Adventures*. On the pages for *Final Fantasy XI*, which are some of the most extensive of those in the network, players contribute the majority of information, which ranges from general discussions of updates and periodic inflation, to intricate walkthroughs and strategies for almost every situation imaginable in the game.

For instance, when players in *Final Fantasy XI* decide they need to advance in rank for their home nation, there are a series of missions they must undertake. Each successive mission is increasingly difficult, of course, and usually also requires more help from other players. Players have posted extensive walkthroughs for all of the missions in each of the home nations, and below each walkthrough is usually an extended discussion of whether the information is correct, where the walkthrough needs more information, how things might have changed since an update, or alternate strategies to try. Thus, the knowledge found on Allakhazam.com is dynamic in a way that no printed guide or magazine could ever be—it adapts to changing conditions and player needs, and often provides multiple forms of advice and help. If a player has therefore recruited high-level player help (such as a level 75 Paladin and a level 74 Monk), one strategy might be tried, but if there are only a few lower-level characters of a particular job class attempting the mission, certain other ways of succeeding are offered.

Such detailed, useful information is again offered free of charge from a range of players, and the site welcomes contributions from anyone. Certain forms of information are "stickied" so they always remain as the top postings on the discussion boards—those are usually deemed the most valuable and timeless guides, which many players have rated (through the board's karma system) as the most useful overall. Posters' whose writing

receives positive feedback can be identified in their posts as "sages," "scholars," and "gurus" by the board's rating system to indicate their helpfulness or value for other players. Such forms of gaming capital thus aid newer readers in identifying the most helpful information or people, in whatever forum they are looking in.

Such systems depend on individual player goodwill to succeed and prosper. The Allakhazam.com site is only as good as the information that its reader base has provided to it; there is no way the small staff of the site could supply that knowledge on its own. And it's that content that makes the site so valuable—a site by players, for players. Yet the site was sold in 2005 to a company that also owns the International Game Exchange. The question to ask is, will the site's readers continue to give away their content, particularly if they do not agree with the larger policies of the parent company or the International Game Exchange?

Founder Jeffrey Moyer had originally started the Allakhazam site as a one-page guide for *EverQuest* in 1999, and the site has grown to more than five million page views per day and more than half a million registered users.[8] Allakhazam.com offers free content provided mainly by its dedicated player communities, but if readers wish they can purchase a "premium" account each year for $29.99, thereby eliminating the banner ads from the site and offering access to extra features. So for *Final Fantasy XI*, readers can search all forums along with item and quest postings, which extend back to the beginning of the site. Given the limited way that most readers contribute financially to the site, the main way to respond to Allakhazam's announced buyout was to either declare that a person would stop visiting the site, cancel a premium membership once it expired, or possibly go through and edit prior postings to remove content. Time will tell what the response will be.

Places such as GameFAQs.com and Allakhazam.com point to the success of player-created content related to videogames found online. Such sites aggregate a large amount of information as well as individuals, making it easy for individual players to come together and create shared knowledge, if not community. The catch is that just as players can benefit from such accumulations of gaming capital, so too can larger corporations. Large media companies can acquire smaller start-up operations, offering them the scant resources they need to keep their sites flourishing. In return, corporations receive a vast amount of information and a (perhaps

somewhat miffed) player base gathered in one area. Provided the majority of readers get past any initial discomfort with buyouts, business will return to normal soon enough, with the profits and control being centralized.

So here's another instance of a paratextual industry forming—one that some players may not wish to see come together. Others, of course, likely do not care as long as their central sources of information don't disappear, or place too many restrictions on their access or use. But this paratext is forming, and it is exerting a fair amount of influence on the rest of the game industry. The International Game Exchange states that the "2005 marketplace for virtual assets in MMOGs is approaching $900 million," and further, "some experts believe that the market for virtual assets will overcome the primary market—projected to reach $7 billion by 2009— within the next few years."[9]

If such predictions are even close to correct, the paratext is gaining ground on the primary text of the game industry, and is moving in particular ways to shape its future directions. Seen in that light, the paratext becomes critical to consider as a way to understand gameplay as well as the business of digital games.

Paratexts and the Game Industry

Paratexts surround, shape, support, and provide context for texts. They may alter the meanings of texts, further enhance meanings, or provide challenges to sedimented meanings. Paratexts are also anything but peripheral, and they grow more integral to the digital game industry and player community with every year. Game magazines taught players about the many ways to play a game and the components of a game to consider as important when trying to figure out what game to buy next. They also offered cheat codes to players, so they could have more fun with games that they might have put down already. Strategy guides let players pick those games back up and maybe actually finish them, having gotten stuck along the way before. And GameSharks let players unlock hidden areas and start the game later in the narrative than they had progressed to themselves.

Likewise, mod chips have let North American and European players enjoy Japanese games before they are released in their home countries (if they ever are), and they make players question the need for region lockout

codes at all. Companies like IT GlobalSecure try to keep game code encrypted and thus multiplayer games fair, and Even Balance will label players as punks if they are found using certain hacks on its dedicated servers and then ban players from them. The International Game Exchange will sell in-game gold to players at a bargain price, while at the same time players on Allakhazam.com's boards will attempt to expose other players for that very purchase.

Those are only a few of the practices that the paratextual industries have supported or enacted as they've come into being. Their economic impact is growing, yet more important, as noted earlier, is the way that they shape players' expectations of what it means to play a game properly or improperly. Paratextual industries can support developer-imposed gameplay limitations or they may defy them. Mod chips, for example, challenge the practice of regional encoding, daring players to ask who should control what legitimately purchased games they can play on their own videogame console. Similarly, player communities such as those found on Allakhazam.com's site question the growing acceptance of real-money trade and wonder if they care to be affiliated with a site that is now partnered with a corporation they feel is ruining their gameplay experience.

Yet even as paratextual industries can challenge some practices, they also help to establish and firm up others. Game walkthroughs, whether free or for sale, now follow established conventions wherever they are found. Game players know what to expect from an FAQ, and how to go about finding one. Certain kinds of gameplay help are expected and demanded by players, usually instantaneously with a game's release. And that help can be found, for free or a price, with only a few clicks of a computer mouse.

To be successful the paratextual industries have had to be flexible, but I'm not suggesting there is an overarching centrality to their practices or organized activities. I've created somewhat of an illusion of coherence in order to demonstrate how different businesses and player activities have worked to shape, support, and challenge the business of the game industry. Increasingly, however, those businesses are coming together. Smaller deals like BradyGames working with Mad Katz to produce books of cheat codes are one thing; yet another is the purchasing of player Web sites and real-money trade businesses, and bundling them together.

Moreover, the integration of security software into games and players' computers raises important questions about the bounds of acceptable intervention, privacy, and control in games. So far, there aren't many people asking questions about those practices. But we need to know more, if we are going to let such activities continue.

Gaming Capital: Capitalizing on Knowledge

Tightly linked to the concept of the paratext is gaming capital. As a form of currency gaming capital is highly flexible, able to adapt to different types of gameplay, various games, and changing notions of what's important to know about games. Players can accumulate various forms of gaming capital not only from playing games but also from the paratextual industries that support them. And depending on a player's social circle, that capital can be quite valuable in building a reputation.

There's also a struggle here, as players, developers, and interested third parties try to define what gaming capital should be, and how players should best acquire it. Clearly, commercial entities have vested interests in commodifying as many elements of gaming culture as possible, to then sell those bits back to players as the most desirable forms of capital. In the beginning, much of that information came directly from game developers, and could be carefully controlled and dispensed to interested players. Yet with the development of the Internet, players began to individually create their own sites and spaces for circulating knowledge as well as creating their own forms of gaming capital.

Not to be deterred, though, the corporations are encroaching on those spaces, packaging and selling back to players their own hard work and effort. A player visiting GameFAQs.com is now not only looking for answers to complete *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* but has also become a target demographic possessed of the correct amounts of gaming capital to take advantage of the many purchasing opportunities now appearing on the site.

Yet even as corporations work to commodify gaming capital, players resist at the same time. Players are the ones who ultimately judge what counts or not as such capital—so for many players, using an Action Replay is not a practice that will confer gaming capital, and neither is purchasing gold from the International Game Exchange. That might change over

time or if game companies work out systems that make real-money trade legal within MMO games. But corporations and even small businesses can't individually dictate how players will judge what counts as gaming capital or not, what types are useful in their own situation, and how those forms change over time. It will always be a dynamic and contextual process that involves sedimentation, fluctuation, contradiction, and individual negotiation.

The Players

A large part of this study has focused on how individual players have defined and negotiated various activities that they may or may not view as cheating in their regular gameplay. As I have learned, many players define cheating in a fairly restrictive way and then proceed to break the rules with abandon. In a different context (like writing a paper for a school assignment), such rule breaking might be troublesome, but here something different is at play. While some players do certainly keep connections between the rules of their nongaming and gaming lives, others draw distinctions between them. For at least some players, the game world is a space apart where normal rules don't apply.

Such behaviors raise interesting questions about the role of games in our lives. For many players, playing games is, in some measure, a playing with rules and their boundaries. Games offer a bounded space (although some games are more bounded than others, depending on how many people are playing) for the exploration of actions and consequences as well as the ludic expression of activities deemed inappropriate (if not illegal) in regular life.

Many players cheat in (single-player and multiplayer) games to "play God" or have fun, without necessarily wanting to get ahead or defeat another human player. Such individuals have made a decision that while their activity may or may not be self-defined as cheating, such shortcuts or code alterations are acceptable in the space of the game. Johan Huizinga suggests that games are a "stepping out" of real life into a space apart.[10] Although more games are now following us into real life (Instant Messages from guildmates, phone calls from games themselves, or real-money trade that alters game economies), the space of the game itself instantiates particular rules that players must negotiate. And apart from breaking the

terms of a EULA, there are few "real" consequences for breaking the rules of a game.

Similarly, many players cheat in games when they get stuck. Having reached a point where they cannot progress further without help, they turn to guides, codes, or friends to help them get past the difficulty. This is the most common and accepted form of cheating (some players don't see it as cheating at all), suggesting that the reaching of an impasse and the resulting request for help is not divorced from regular life.

Players also cheat in order to fast-forward through unpleasant or boring parts of a game, so as to reach its end point. That practice, found in single-player and multiplayer games (using cheat codes to skip levels or a power leveler in an MMO), is usually instrumental in nature, recognizing that a player wishes to complete a game yet not fully engage all aspects of it. Most of the time we can't fast-forward through our lives, and even if we could, we actively choose not to. Most students research and write papers rather than finding one on the Internet to download, and most drivers stop at deserted intersections, even if no police are in sight. Yet games offer us a space where we can experience that freedom, without significant consequences.

What is unfortunate is that popular discourse tends to judge in-game behaviors by the rules that operate in daily nongame life. I can see this in the way that many players have defended their actions, trying to reassure me that a particular code use was necessary to continued progress in a game. Players also state that "it's just a game" as a way to deflect criticism in advance of their actions. But why must players hold their actions in games to what is really a separate standard? Why don't players allow for more play and variation in games, permitting themselves to experiment with actions, identities, and practices that in real life are forbidden?

Individuals might find in games a space to explore the consequences of various actions, and challenge or reify their own beliefs about what are appropriate or inappropriate actions to take in specific circumstances. They can also play at taking what are normally the wrong actions for them in daily life, gaining perspective on other choices made. We expect children to play, but adults are considered juvenile when engaging in "childish" actions. Games are and can become even better at becoming spaces for exploration of not only fantastic worlds and rhetorics of power but also playing with rules and their boundaries.

A Future for Ethics and Gameplay

For the past six years, I've been asking game players how they define cheating in games, and how they negotiate and enact cheating practices. Some react as if I'm asking them to reveal their utter lack of ethics and values, and they then respond with clear denunciations that cheating is wrong and they would "never do anything like that." When asked "Like what?" the answers begin to fragment and lose moral certainty. Clearly, we need a better understanding of how ethics might be expressed in gameplay situations, and how we can study the ethical frameworks that games offer to players. Research in this area is getting started, but many interesting questions remain to be asked.[11]

As John Pauly argues, we need to "ground our ethical discourse in the understandings of our ordinary, everyday activity."[12] Digital games have become one of those activity spaces, a common part of contemporary culture. With millions of players engaging with virtual worlds alone as well as with others, we must see such spaces as important areas for learning about how we play, how we make decisions, and how we think about what is right and wrong for us, in different contexts and different situations. Examining cheating is only one possible way into studying those practices, and we need to continue that investigation in as many directions as possible.

We can look at players, games, and their intersection to ask many things: Do games pose interesting ethical questions for players to take up? What layers or levels are involved? For example, many games offer the player the opportunity to revert to a previously saved version of the game. So if I feel guilty about leaving my Sim zombie fenced up outside to die (which I did), I can revert back to a stage of the game where my zombie's still alive (which I didn't). How do players think about and engage with such choices? Are players seeing such opportunities in games to experiment with ethical decision making? Is Sim "murder" a common activity? What reasons do players construct for such actions? Furthermore, how has our larger culture(s) portrayed games, and what implications does that picture have for how we all approach (and judge) games?

So what is game ethics or what would it look like? To begin with, there are at least several layers that we can consider as a basis for asking questions. The actions and choices made as well as offered by game developers, game publishers, marketers, and game players, and the choices

coded into the game itself, can all be analyzed. Here are just a few examples of where such questioning can lead.

In the game industry, for instance, we can look at the decisions made by a company such as Rockstar Games, the developer of a string of controversial titles such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *Manhunt*. What did the company's management consider when deciding to create such games? Was the potential for controversy and divisiveness considered? Was it considered a positive or negative component of each game's release? Does the company have any wider responsibility to the game development community? Do their games set precedents for legislation? Should the actions of one game company speak for all game companies?

Moving down a level, we can ask what game developers consider as they build games. How much violence and of what type is considered acceptable? Does that change with different player demographics? Do game developers even see their software coding in ethical ways? What about the design of individual characters—both central and peripheral avatars?

Finally, we can examine the individual player. How do players make choices about what they will or won't do in games? Do they follow rules in all circumstances or bend rules to achieve a greater good? Would a player shoot a dog in a game if that was the only way to win? How does a player justify murder in a game? Do players position the experience as "just a game" or a cathartic release from everyday pressures?

Such questions only scratch the surface of what we can investigate in relation to games and ethics. Yet they point to central issues and areas of interest. We need to move beyond the simplistic ideas of good and bad, legal and illegal, to the more interesting and relevant factors related to the process of making moral choices. How do developers, publishers, and players decide what is right and wrong? What do they conclude is right and wrong for them? And how does that play into or break through a magic circle into the everyday? We're only starting to ask such questions; the answers should prove fascinating.

Magic Circles and Play Boundaries

A final area to consider is the role of games and play in our lives, and how the spaces of games intersect with those of daily life. Huizinga felt that play and games were central experiences of human beings, and went so far as to assert that play constituted culture.[13] While games have always

existed, they defy easy categorization—as games can be for fun or in deadly earnest (as in war games), with no stakes or high stakes involved. Games can involve escape, but not always. Huizinga, as mentioned earlier, believed that games were protected by a magic circle or bounded space set apart from the everyday (much like the difference between the sacred and the profane), with rules as a boundary system for maintaining them.

Yet is this indeed true, or is it a useful way to think of games? Is there some boundary that delimits the playing field, separating the game from other, nongame space? If we take this idea to be valid, what happens to our conceptions about games? In that scenario, games are walled off as a space apart—a space in which to create different rules, rewards, and punishments for the activities that take place within. Killing can be rewarded, or civilizations might best be taken over by "culture flipping" them to join your side. Players can experiment (to greater and lesser degrees) with potential actions, including exploring, socializing, empathizing, killing, being selfish, being silly, being inconsistent, or being all-powerful. The results of those actions will vary based on the game being played and its own particular rule set. Attempts to "game the game" can also provide players with elaborate, rich opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and greater knowledge.

If we acknowledge that games can provide such opportunities in "walled off" spaces, is it appropriate to judge games or game player actions by an external set of rules—rules that originate outside the magic circle? Games may reward players for specific actions—actions that would definitely not be rewarded in daily life. But should our standards for appropriate actions in daily life carry over to our game life? *The Sims* encourages players to create happy, successful families, but it also allows players to kill their Sims through neglect as well as indirect actions. Yet the player may be rewarded by the game for such violent actions (getting that family wrecker out of the home, for example). We should not be so quick to question such actions, if we do believe games really are a space apart, governed by a different set of rules.

What results when such judgments are applied is an infantilization of the game space. It suggests players cannot understand a separate set of rules and rewards, or that we can have no spaces where such alternate systems might function. A one-to-one mapping of values robs games of their unique character and rule set, creating a space derivative of real-life standards of behavior. When that happens, choices that might be interesting or

significant within a game are diminished, and choices are robbed of their playful, experimental quality. And the game space becomes impoverished, leaving game players with two sets of rules to negotiate: the in-game rules for rewards, and the daily life rules that impose larger judgments on to their actions.

And what if we don't believe that games are a walled off space? As I've argued, games increasingly follow us around, as we surf the Web, talk with friends and family, and flip through magazines. Friends send me instant messages to ask me to log on to *Final Fantasy XI* to help with quests, and once in the game, I receive other instant messages from family, asking about my day at work. There's no easy boundary to let me know when I'm inside or outside that magic circle. Other game theorists have also convincingly maintained that we shouldn't make simplistic judgments such as that games are magic circles set apart from everyday life.[14] Yet if games aren't that space apart, does that negate the arguments I've just made?

I believe that while games are experiences we integrate into our daily activities, and there is no game space that's easily walled off, there are rules and rewards that apply to games, and these do form a boundary of some sort. While I may move fluidly between writing an academic paper and playing *Kitty Spangles Solitaire*, I also recognize that the rules for engaging each activity are different. I won't cheat while writing the paper but I might try to cheat in *Solitaire*. And just as I might (if I ever figure out how to) cheat in *Solitaire*, I've already decided that I'd never buy gold to advance my avatar in *Final Fantasy XI*. I've constructed boundaries around each activity, and for now, have negotiated what rules apply for each, and what sorts of gameplay I find acceptable, enjoyable, and right for me.

Where does such theorizing of play and games leave us in relation to ethics? Obviously, play and games are central parts of the human experience, and ethics are likewise centrally placed in our lives. How do the two come together? To suggest that games are a space apart from daily life and our normal rules for living is just as much of an ethical choice as making them part of our daily practices, which conform to and integrate with our daily codes of conduct. We cannot say that there are no ethics in games or that players bring no ethical frameworks to their gameplay; we simply leave the question unexamined, which is itself a choice. What we need to do instead is actively involve ourselves with the questions, seeking to determine how ethics fit, how we see them informing games and gameplay, and how we choose to integrate games into our lives.