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# Making Sense of Play in Video Games: *Ludus*, *Paidia*, and Possibility Spaces

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Although play constitutes a significant part of all human activity, it is an exceptionally difficult phenomenon to define. To some, play is an exclusively human pursuit, a highly structured activity or set of activities designed to ward off boredom; to others, play is an outlet for expression, a spontaneous and complex manifestation of human emotions. Dutch historian and theorist Johan Huizinga (1955, p.1) begins *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, a seminal text on the subject of play, with yet another claim: “Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing.” According to Huizinga, play not only predates culture, but it also plays an important role in the formation of culture. Since the publication of *Homo Ludens*, a number of critics from a wide range of disciplines—including Roger Caillois (1961), the interdisciplinary and highly influential author of *Man, Play and Games*—have contested and confirmed Huizinga’s findings. Most recently, video game theorists such as Gonzalo Frasca (2003), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003), Ian Bogost (2008), and Steven E. Jones (2008) have begun to discuss the implications and meanings of play in regard to the emergent fields of digital literature and video games. Frasca (2003, p.229), for one, has attempted to establish distinct categories into which PC- and console-based video games can be placed by borrowing the terms *paidia* and *ludus*, or “play” and “game,” from Caillois; unlike Caillois, however, Frasca tends to elide rather than emphasize similarities between the two, pushing them into clearly delineated categories rather than onto opposite ends of a continuum.

Because of the transformative influences of culture, play, and a practice that has been referred to as “metagaming,” *paidia* inevitably transforms into *ludus*. Similarly, *ludus* can also regress or transform back into *paidia*. Movement back and forth between the two ends of the spectrum occurs constantly—and often inconspicuously. In the same way that the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin describes “centripetal” (or “organizing”) and “centrifugal” (or “disrupting”) forces working constantly against each other in language and culture (Morson and Emerson 1990), the forces that characterize *paidia* and *ludus* are in constant tension in video games. The result of this tension is what Will Wright (2004) calls a “possibility space,”<sup>1</sup> a site of constant but productive, generative conflict between order and chaos, between rules and uninhibited play. Consequently, the playing of video games can—and should—be understood not as an escape from reality, but as an engagement with the socio-cultural values that inform, and are informed by, play itself.

While the meanings of the terms “play” and *paidia* are intimately connected, the former is not simply a direct translation of the latter. As Caillois (1961, pp.27-28) explains, *paidia* is “a word covering the spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct.” Frasca (2003, p.230) complains that Caillois “does not provide a strict

definition” of either *paidia* or *ludus*, but quite the opposite is true: Caillois provides multiple definitions of each, demonstrating that both are complex concepts into which multiple other terms can be subsumed. Caillois (1961, p.13) describes *paidia* as “an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety” or “uncontrolled fantasy,” while Frasca’s (2003, p.229) “strict definition” of *paidia* is “the form of play present in early children (construction kits, games of make-believe, kinetic play).” It is interesting to note that Frasca’s definition makes no mention of similar forms of play present in adolescents or adults, although children are obviously not the only demographic who play the kinds of games which he designates as *paidia*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Frasca (2003, p.230) continues to expand his definition, arguing that *paidia* incorporate rules, but not ones that “define a winner and a loser”: “It is common to think that *paidia* has no rules,” he writes, “but this is not the case: a child who pretends to be a soldier is following the rule of behaving like a soldier and not as a doctor.” In other words, *paidia* incorporate implicit socio-cultural rules that guide a player’s actions and behaviour but do not lead to a “winning scenario” (Frasca 2003, p.231). Markku Eskelinen and Ragnhild Tronstad (2003, p.204) also maintain that “[s]imulation video games are one example of *paidia*, or play, that involve goals and subgoals without implying any winning situation.” While Eskelinen and Ragnhild inaccurately conflate *paidia* and play here, such a tendency is quite common, suggesting the complexity of the word “play”—as well as a general lack of clarity between terms such as *paidia*, *ludus*, play, and game. Indeed, even *The Oxford English Dictionary’s* (2012) various entries on “play” do nothing to lessen this confusion of terms: on one hand, play is described as “scope for activity” and as “activity engaged in for enjoyment or recreation rather than for a serious or practical purpose”; on the other hand, however, it is described as the “activity of playing a sport or game,” both of which belong in the domain of *ludus*. To further complicate things, play is both a noun and a verb. One can easily see, as Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003, p.203) suggest, that “play is a rather diverse category: usually actions will be performed in order to reach a particular goal, but sometimes the act of performing them will be sufficient in itself.” Salen and Zimmerman (2003) add further that, “As with ‘game,’ the word ‘play’ is used in many and varied ways” despite the useful, albeit complex, definitions and distinctions offered by Caillois.

A second term used by Caillois—and subsequently adopted by Frasca—is *ludus*. This word, which Caillois (1961, p.27) uses “to encompass the various games to which, without exaggeration, a civilizing quality can be attributed,” is perhaps more easily understood than *paidia*. In *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2012), “games” are diversions “of the nature of a contest, played according to rules, and displaying in the result the superiority either in skill, strength, or good fortune of the winner or winners”; in much the same fashion, *ludus* incorporate rules that clearly define a winner or a loser. As Frasca (2003, p.230) notes, “*ludus* provides us with two possible endings: winning and losing. The popularity of this formula is almost surely because of the simplicity of its binary structure. However, this is also its most important limitation.” Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003, p.203) usefully distinguish between play and games in stating that “[b]oth play and games will contain *paidia* rules, but only games will have the additional *ludus* rules.” These rules are established explicitly by the author or designer in *ludus*, rather than implicitly by the player, as in *paidia*. Frasca (2003, p.230) even goes so far as to say that *ludus* rely too exclusively on input from a single author figure:

*Ludus* games provide an ‘organic whole,’ a closed product that can only be explored within a secluded set of rules defined by the author. Certainly, just as it happens in narrative, the reader/player is free to participate within those limits and this is where the pleasure of reading/playing resides. Even so, *ludus* remains ideologically too attached to the idea of a centralized author. By contrast, *paidia* games are more ‘open-ended’ than their *ludus* counterparts.

As this article will hopefully demonstrate, Frasca correctly emphasizes the importance of participation or play within the limits established by *ludus*; yet at the same time, by placing too much value on the notion of *ludus* as distinct, “organic whole[s]” which are “too attached to the idea of a centralized author,” he effectively precludes the possibility of movement between the two “genres” and thus undermines the transformative and generative power of play, which is derived precisely from the point at which *paidia* and *ludus* necessarily intersect.

Salen and Zimmerman (2003) suggest “two possible relationships between games and play”—games as a subset of play, and play as an element of games—but they admit that “[n]either one of these two relationships is more correct than the other.” Indeed, the many definitions of “game” and “play” make it difficult to define either in an unproblematic way, and the same is true for the categories of *paidia* and *ludus* first proposed by Caillois. Frasca (2003, p.222) uses *paidia* and *ludus* to indicate set categories of classification, or what he calls “two different genres of classification.” While Frasca’s discussion of these two “genres” is quite useful as a starting point for related discussions of simulation, narrative, and interactivity, his cursory treatment of video game categorization is ultimately unsatisfying. According to Caillois, *paidia* and *ludus* are not separate genres but independent “principles” or forces that form two ends of a continuum on which all games are located. There are only games that are more “game”-like, or *ludic*, and games that are more play-like, or *paidic*.<sup>3</sup> If his definitions of either principle seem at times to be obscure or abstract, it is perhaps because *paidia* and *ludus* are extremely complex principles that are not meant to be easily distinguished from one another. As Salen and Zimmerman (2003) usefully explain, these principles

directly address a structural understanding of games, a continuum of relationships between structure and play. As play edges closer to the *ludus* end of the spectrum, [...] the rules become tighter and more influential. Located on the other end of the spectrum, *paidia*-based play eschews rigid formal structures in exchange for more freewheeling play.

Understandably, then, many video games do not fit into a single category. Clear-cut divisions between rules that define a winner or a loser and those that do not are not always apparent. In *paidic* games, players can still “win” as a direct result of conformance to implicit, culturally influenced goals; and in *ludic* games, goals can be established by the player, even if they do not help the player “win” or progress in a way intended by the developers of the game.

Inevitably, *paidic* games transform into *ludic* games as implicit rules and goals become explicit. As Caillois (1961, p.13) states, the *ludus* principle represents “a growing tendency to bind [*paidia*] with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions”—but the constraints it imposes are not necessarily confining in a pejorative sense. Instead, *ludus* “disciplines and enriches” *paidia* through a process

that “give[s] the fundamental categories of play their purity and excellence” (Caillois 1961, p.29, 33). Both *ludic* and *paidic* games have rules that define a winner and a loser; in *paidic* games, however, these rules are simply implicit rather than explicit. Even when unrestricted “play” is the intended goal of a video game, *ludus* rules are gradually introduced through two primary means: first, within the enclosed space of the game itself through metagaming and metarules; and second, through a game’s or game series’ development or evolution. This second kind of development or progression occurs as a result of add-ons, “mods” (modifications), hacks, patches, extensions, sequels, and paratextual materials.<sup>4</sup> As players interact with *paidic* games, implicit rules or goals become gradually codified, and socio-cultural values are inscribed in and inform the game. Again, this kind of interaction or gameplay is often extremely complex and can produce what Frasca calls a “winning situation” without resulting in the “end” of the game.

In a highly *paidic* game or digital environment like Linden Lab’s *Second Life* (2003), for example, “residents” are given no explicit goals and yet *ludic* situations can still emerge. The game’s users are essentially free to “play” in the sense that Caillois intends, with one notable exception: Caillois (1961, p.10) states that “play” is unproductive, “creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game.” In the case of *Second Life*, however, real wealth can be generated, and residents such as Anshe Chung have been able to convert virtual business success into real-world revenue (Rymaszewski 2008, p.67).<sup>5</sup> While *Second Life* is essentially *paidic* according to the criteria given by both Caillois and Frasca, it can quickly become *ludic* if an implicit goal—such as the attainment of wealth—is allowed to dictate a player’s actions or inform a whole community’s approach to the digital world.

“Metagaming,” which *Wikipedia* (2012) defines as “any strategy, action or method used in a game which transcends a prescribed ruleset, uses external factors to affect the game, or goes beyond the supposed limits or environment set by the game,” is a relatively unknown concept; nevertheless, in many ways metagaming may be said to account for the development of explicit goals—and therefore of *ludic* games—through the inscription of implicit or explicit socio-cultural values. David Cole (2010) observes that a “common form of metagaming is the speed run: beating a game as fast as possible.” Many other forms of metagaming exist, however, and each of these forms has the potential to transform a *paidic* game into a *ludic* game. It is important to note, too, that culture has a profound impact on metagames: users in individualistic societies, for example, might be more likely to invent metagames that focus on the accumulation of wealth or property, whereas users in collectivist societies might tend toward metagames that focus on social ties and community.

Frasca uses *SimCity* (Nintendo EAD), a popular city-building game first released in 1989, as a quintessential example of *paidia*—despite the fact that the original and SNES versions of the game include timed missions or “scenarios” that can be decisively won or lost. Frasca (2003, p.231) writes that “[a]ny *paidia* game, such as *SimCity*, leaves its main goal up to the player who can build any kind of city she wants (the biggest, the most ecological, the prettiest, etc.)” Scenarios aside, one can still see how *SimCity*, which is certainly *paidic* in nature, can become *ludic* through gameplay. As in other games, the shift from *paidia* to *ludus* is often regulated and

influenced by what Frasca (2003) calls “manipulation rules,” or by what Ian Bogost (2008) calls “procedural rhetoric.” These two concepts are not interchangeable, but they are similar insofar as they both use forms of persuasion in order to subtly convey ideology. According to Frasca (2003, p.231), manipulation rules are “opposed to goal rules in that they do not imply a winning scenario;” they are “[a] more subtle—and therefore more persuasive” means by which ideology can be conveyed. Similarly, Bogost (2008, p.125) defines procedural rhetoric as a “practice of authoring arguments through processes” comparable to verbal, visual, and other forms of rhetoric found in a wide range of media. In both cases, winning scenarios can often be implied and tacit ideologies can be made known: when players create their own goals or metagames and those goals coincide with outcomes that the game rewards through manipulation goals or procedural rhetoric, implicit or player-defined goals are reinforced, transforming *paidia* into *ludus*. In *SimCity*, too, winning scenarios may be made evident as a player’s actions reveal the game’s manipulation rules and procedural rhetoric. If, for example, your personal goal or “metagame” is to earn \$100,000, the necessity of taxing your citizens will soon become apparent. In addition, the game’s manipulation rules and procedural rhetoric are such that you can make your city grow much faster—and thus reach your immediate goal of making money much faster through taxation—if you keep your citizens happy by paying attention to issues such as crime, pollution, and transportation. The game actively encourages you to expand your city by rewarding you with a mansion, a casino, and other buildings or structures not normally available to you. As a result, a certain type of behaviour—that is, growing your city—is reinforced, and can therefore become more explicit if it is repeated in subsequent gaming sessions.

Because *paidia* and *ludus* exist on a continuum, it is also possible for *ludic* games to regress or transform into *paidic* games. As Chris Bateman (2005) points out, “play is arguably always on a journey from *paidia* to *ludus*, although it would be wrong to think that it cannot also travel back towards *paidia*—as when a group discard a tedious boardgame rule because it doesn’t suit the way they want to play.” Regarding built-in achievements or explicit metagames, Cole (2010) contends that “players find that they are substantially less rewarding than the metagames they create for themselves.” In other words, both Bateman and Cole come to somewhat similar conclusions as Caillois (1961, p.31), who posits that “*Ludus*, in itself, seems incomplete, a kind of makeshift device intended to allay boredom.” If a game becomes too *ludic*, it no longer fulfills this intended function, and boredom ensues as a result. As Caillois (1961, p.43) notes, “it may be of interest to ask what becomes of games when the sharp line dividing their ideal rules from the diffuse and insidious laws of daily life is blurred,” or when *paidic* forces act on established *ludic* structures. This regression or transformation toward the *paidic* end of the gaming spectrum occurs as a result of play, and it can take place within the game itself or over time through cultural influence, paratext, and “mods,” hacks, patches, sequels, or add-ons. A quick study of Rockstar North’s massively popular *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) series, which combines adventure-based missions with “sandbox”-style, open-ended virtual worlds, shows how each new release has facilitated and encouraged play. Although all of the *GTA* games have essentially *ludic* structures and include a number of clearly defined missions, “the playground world that the team builds with each successive *GTA* iteration supports more and more *paidia*—more and more free play” (Bateman 2005). The player character (PC) in *GTA IV* (Rockstar North 2008) can, for instance, go on a date to the local Burger Shot restaurant, sip leisurely on

Pißwasser beer, or even visit a Cabaret Club in the Hove Beach neighbourhood. Bateman (2005) notes that the creation of a convincingly open-ended environment like that found in *GTA IV* “is devastatingly expensive”—perhaps because, as Raph Koster (2005) argues, “paidia activities generally have MORE rules [than *ludus* activities], not less.” In some *ludic* games the inclusion of a metarule, or “a rule that states how rules can be changed” (Frasca 2003, p.232), makes transitions toward the *paidic* end of the spectrum even more likely to occur. Frasca (2003, p.229), who distinguishes between narrative authors (“narrauthors”) and simulation authors (“simauthors”), seems aware of the possibility for metarules to transform *ludic* games:

Narrauthors have executive power: they deal with particular issues. On the other hand, simauthors behave [sic] more like legislators: they are the ones who craft laws. They do take more authorial risks than narrauthors because they give away part of their control over their work.

Video game designers have the ability to write metarules and therefore empower the player to disassemble a game’s formalized *ludic* structures and challenge its “built-in assumption[s]” (Frasca 2003, p.232).

As one can see, the lines separating built-in goal rules from manipulation rules are easily blurred—as are any of the lines critics have attempted to draw between *paidic* and *ludic* games. Manipulation rules and metagames are heavily influenced by socio-cultural values and thus can develop gradually into goal rules as the “infinite possibilities of paidia become mediated by the pragmatics of interaction” (Bateman 2005). This transition is especially likely to occur if the possibilities afforded by a particular set of manipulation rules help a player to work toward a specific goal, whether that goal is defined within the context of the game or without, as in the case of culturally reinforced goals. As one can see with games like *GTA*, however, shifts between *paidia* and *ludus* occur in both directions. Bateman (2005) elaborates:

Pure paidia, then, is short lived—but the impulse for paidia can exert itself at all scales of ludus. Whenever we are given a set of rules for play, it can be fun to explore what happens when those rules are bent, overlooked, or replaced, although the group must be willing. The more that a form of play is repeated, the more likely it is to become more formally expressed—this is the journey from paidia towards ludic play—but paidia can re-exert itself as a temporary escape from the rules at any time.

Bateman not only emphasizes the impossibility of keeping play strictly within the domain of *paidia*, but he also emphasizes, quite significantly, the impact of community and culture on games. In a similar fashion, Bogost (2008, p.119) asserts that “video game play is a cultural activity where values develop over time,” even if “the values of a video game community . . . exist *outside* the game.” Furthermore, in an essay entitled “Community, identity and digital games,” Martin Hand and Karenza Moore (2006, p.166) state that “gaming is performed in the context of existing social and cultural networks, friendships and relationships while at the same time producing novel forms of cultural activity.” These “novel forms of cultural activity” take many different forms, but they are always influenced or informed by creativity and play. In open-ended Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), or in other virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, rules are introduced incrementally into the gaming community as

players interact and as new, occasionally undesirable socio-cultural possibilities or behaviours are revealed. In *Second Life*, for example, residents have had to learn how to address issues such as “box traps”<sup>6</sup> and in-world intellectual property theft. *Second Life*’s community standards warn against “six cardinal sins” and urge residents to “employ the same common sense you use in real life to decide what sort of behavior is acceptable” (Rymaszewski 2008, p.13). Such guidelines demonstrate how out-of-game values necessarily intersect with in-game play. Hand and Moore (2006, p.180) allude to this collision of virtual and physical realities, suggesting that “playing digital games involves working with, but never wholly transcending, the rules of the game’s programming and the norms of particular gaming ‘communities.’” Simply put, in-game activities are inextricably linked to out-of-game social and cultural contexts.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of opposing “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces, which refer to the organizing and disrupting forces affecting language and culture, can be usefully applied in discussions of *paidia* and *ludus* principles in video games. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990, p.30) provide a concise summary of Bakhtin’s terms:

The cultural world, Bakhtin argued, consists of both “centripetal” (or “official”) and “centrifugal” (or “unofficial”) forces. The former seek to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy world; the latter either purposefully or *for no particular reason* continually disrupt that order.

Bakhtin’s terms usefully subsume or group together a number of roughly analogous terms from video game theory: centripetal forces encompass the rules, constraints, and procedures that act on *paidic* games to transform them into *ludic* games; and centrifugal forces encompass the anarchic, subversive, and carnivalesque impulses that transform *ludic* games into open-ended or *paidic* games—often “*for no particular reason*.” Moreover, just as it may be impossible to draw a line definitively between *paidic* and *ludic* games, Morson and Emerson (1990, p.30) posit that “it may in principle be impossible to draw a sharp line between the centripetal and the centrifugal.” Like *paidia* and *ludus*, these forces exist on a continuum and are in constant tension. One might ask, quite reasonably, what Bakhtin’s seemingly abstruse ideas contribute to discussions of video games; and yet, if video games can be seen as being impacted by culture and language in any way—either within the games themselves or through the external influence of audiences, gaming communities, and socio-cultural values—then centripetal and centrifugal forces are not only relevant to, but inherent in, the medium. While it is important, as many video game critics have pointed out, to keep in mind the qualities, characteristics, and even physical components unique to video games, it does not necessarily follow that “relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games,” as Jesper Juul (2001) argues. Video games are not so unique that they warrant the rejection of theories that have provided insight into human behaviour and the world for centuries—especially since many of the ideas proposed within theories such as Bakhtin’s operate independently of media altogether.

Possibility spaces in video games work in essentially the same way as possibility spaces in any other medium, and it is within these spaces that centripetal and centrifugal forces exist in constant tension. Bogost (2008, p.120) states that the

“possibility space of play includes all of the gestures made possible by a set of rules. As Salen and Zimmerman explain, imposing rules does not suffocate play, but makes it possible in the first place.” Salen and Zimmerman (2003) themselves define play as “free movement within a more rigid structure”; similarly, Caillois (1961, p.8) states that, in games, players are “free within the limits set by the rules.” In video games, then, as in any other medium, pleasure and meaning are derived from the possibility space, the locus of contact between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Bogost (2008, p.121) alleges that we “encounter the meaning of games by exploring their possibility spaces. And we explore their possibility spaces through play.” In addition, Bogost (2008, p.120)—who agrees with the definition of play proposed by Salen and Zimmerman—adds that “play refers to the ‘possibility space’ created by constraints of all kinds. Play activities are not rooted in one social practice, but in many social and material practices.” In other words, the centripetal and centrifugal forces encompassing play and constraints are informed by their socio-cultural contexts. As Jones (2008, p.14) writes, a game’s paratext, or cultural and material reception, “is integral to the experience of play, manifest in something as familiar as interface conventions, or in gamer community interaction. The space of play is not impermeable, hermetically sealed.” Instead, the possibility space is a site of constant negotiation between implicit and explicit rules that are introduced both by the game and by the player. Jones (2008, p.15) goes on to say that “the delineated space of any game is necessarily a social convention. That makes it very much part of the real world.” In the same vein of thought, Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003, p.205) remark that “[t]he proposed line between play and life is [...] never absolutely fixed.” This latter statement is somewhat complicated, however, by their (2003, p.205) claim that a “separateness of play and games from ordinary life” does, in fact, exist—whereas Jones seems to argue that there is no separation of play and games from ordinary life, despite his (2008, p.15) claim that the possibility space is “socially co-constructed” by developers and players, both of whom must “agree to ‘see’ it as the space of the game, for the duration of the game.” In a sense, then, possibility spaces are paradoxical spaces, or what Huizinga (1955, p.10) calls “magic circles,” spaces that demarcate “temporary worlds within the ordinary world”: play and games may not be distinguishable from ordinary life, but all play occurs, nevertheless, within an implied or arbitrarily defined playing space.

Possibility spaces are sites of constant conflict between order and chaos, between constraints and open-ended play. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that the interplay between these forces is extremely productive. By entering a video game’s possibility space, players engage with socio-cultural values that are inscribed in the game but that also exist in “real life.” As Gareth Schott (2007, p.134) suggests, “gameplay may be no different from many other areas of human activity. It is a regulated activity, governed by the boundaries of social and physical environments, but equally in real life we live in environments that place constraints on our behaviours.” Play is a paradoxical exercise in that it simultaneously conforms to and reacts against established rules, whether implicit or explicit. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) contend that “play exists *because* of more rigid structures, but also exists somehow in *opposition* to them.” As players engage with a game’s possibility space, new forms of creative expression and culture emerge. Caillois (1961, p.27) describes this generative process in relation to a game’s movement from the *paidic* toward the *ludic* end of the gaming spectrum: “Rules are inseparable from play as soon as the latter becomes institutionalized. From this moment on they become part of its nature.

They transform it into an instrument of fecund and decisive culture.” But although play “can overflow and overflow and overwhelm the more rigid structure in which it is taking place, generating emergent, unpredictable results” (Salen and Zimmerman 2003), it does not have to be structure-altering. Even so, play reveals, and even produces, a game’s meaning. When we play a video game, Bogost (2008, p.121) writes, “we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides. The rules do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the meaning of the game.” Meaning is inscribed internally in a game’s processes or procedures, as well as in play or metagaming practices, which import socio-cultural values from beyond a game’s designated or implied playing space.

Video game critics are well aware that games can, of course, be both enjoyable and educational. Nevertheless, such critics still have much to learn by studying how *paidic* and *ludic* forces interact in video games. Even Caillois (1961, p.27), who wrote *Man, Play and Games* more than a decade before the release of the first home video game console in 1972, realized that games “reflect the moral and intellectual values of a culture, as well as contribute to their refinement and development.” Jones (2008, p.15), writing half a century after Caillois, expresses a similar view, stating that “the meanings of play—of video *gameplay* in particular—are ultimately connected to social and material realities (rather than offering merely a means to escape from those realities, as it’s widely believed).” Video games are valuable not only as socio-cultural artifacts, but as objects of study that reveal the centripetal and centrifugal forces inherent in culture, language, and, consequently, video games. More complex possibility spaces can be created—thus encouraging more complex forms of play—but these spaces also naturally emerge on their own over time. Video game developers have always attempted to push the limits of technology in order to encourage new, unrestricted forms of play, but the job of video game critics remains a simple one: to play. As Bogost (2008, p.136) maintains, playing video games “helps us make or critique the systems we live in.”<sup>7</sup> More specifically, playing video games and examining the ways in which centripetal and centrifugal forces interact can teach us about unspoken societal or cultural values.

Discussions about the definitions, classification, and broader implications of play and games were initiated long before the advent of video game criticism. Even so, the ideas presented by Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois more than fifty years ago can be usefully applied in analyses of contemporary video games. As recent critics such as Katie Salen, Eric Zimmerman, Ian Bogost, and Steven E. Jones demonstrate, video games are influenced by the same forces that transformed pre-digital *paidic* games into *ludic* games through the addition of goal rules and *ludic* games into *paidic* games—if only temporarily or gradually—through metagaming and socio-cultural influences. The possibility spaces in every game allow for creative, generative possibilities for new forms of play and constraints. By examining the centripetal and centrifugal forces inherent in video games, critics will continue to learn from games at all points of the *paidia-ludus* continuum, gaining insights into the broader socio-cultural contexts in which they are created, played, and inevitably transformed.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Wright (2004). Jones (2008, p.15) also makes reference to Wright's idea of a "possibility space," but he feels that Wright renders it as "an unromantic grid of possibilities [which] offers the relative freedom of play within its own defined constraints."
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Stuart Brown's TED Talk, "Why play is vital—no matter your age" (2008). In Brown's lecture, he points out that adults are commonly left out of contemporary discussions or depictions of play.

- <sup>3</sup> Because *paidia* and *ludus* exist on a continuum in a relative rather than quantifiable way, I will be using Chris Bateman's (2005) neologisms, *paidic* and *ludic*, to refer to games that tend toward—but do not belong exclusively or indefinitely to—one end of the continuum.
- <sup>4</sup> Jones (2008, p.8) describes paratext, a term he borrows from Gerard Genette, as “a way of thinking about the material and cultural articulations of texts and contexts.”
- <sup>5</sup> According to *Second Life: The Official Guide* (Rymaszewski 2008, p.67), Linden Lab has estimated Chung's earnings at \$150,000 U.S.D. per year.
- <sup>6</sup> See Torley Linden's official video tutorial, “Free yourself from a trap” (2008), here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEnQOCACHYs>.
- <sup>7</sup> Similarly, in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet H. Murray (1997, p.26) writes that “we rely on works of fiction, in any medium, to help us understand the world and what it means to be human.”