

## Chapter 30: Games as Cultural Rhetoric



*The World Cup, which begins on Friday in Japan and in South Korea, will be watched by billions. The spread of satellite dishes has taken the world's best teams to the farthest-flung places. People in Shenyang or Khartoum, who have no idea that Manchester is a town in England, now support Manchester United. A statue of the team's star, David Beckham, adorns a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. Osama bin Laden, if he is alive, will presumably be among those billions sitting in front of the television, and all of them, with the exception of most Americans, will appreciate the roiling political context in which the game is so often played.—Simon Kuper, "The World's Game Is Not Just a Game"*

### Introducing Cultural Rhetoric

Soccer fans do love their game. Although Soccer enthusiasts around the world have a passion for the game itself, there is no doubt that the meaningful play of Soccer also includes a diversity of symbolic functions. From the national and neighborhood team cultures to the reputations of players on (and off!) the field, Soccer is infused with values brought into the frame of the game from beyond the edges of the magic circle. Sometimes these values go beyond leisure fandom to acquire genuine political resonance. As sports columnist Simon Kuper notes, "Soccer is distinguished by its political malleability.... It gets presidents elected or thrown out, and it defines the way people think, for good or ill, about their countries."<sup>[1]</sup> At other times, the game's values resonate on a social level. In the U.S., for example, Soccer is seen as a sport that is female and child-friendly: the U.S. is the only country in which the women's national Soccer team is better known than the men's. Soccer in the U.S. is seen less as a professional sport and more as a family pastime: the ubiquitous term "Soccer mom" testifies to the integration of Soccer into suburban American life.

Soccer, like all games, embodies cultural meaning. In the [last chapter](#), we introduced the idea that the structures of a game are reflections of the culture in which it is played. As play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith writes, "One might ask two Olympic runners how much of their thought while racing is given to the moves within the race, how much to the gold medals that might follow it, and how much to the glory of the country they represent.... All of which is to say that the play and the game are played partly for their own sake and partly for the values attributed to them within the ideologies that are their con-text."<sup>[2]</sup> As objects produced and played within culture at large, all games reflect their cultural contexts to some degree. In this chapter, we dig more deeply into this premise, focusing specifically on the way that games reflect *cultural values*. We explore how the internal structures of a game—rules, forms of interaction, material forms—mirror external ideological contexts.

Another way of saying games reflect cultural values is that *games are social contexts for cultural learning*. This means that games are one place where the values of a society are embodied and passed on. Although games clearly do reflect cultural values and ideologies, they do not merely play a passive role. Games also help to instill or fortify a culture's value system. Seeing games as social contexts for cultural learning acknowledges how games replicate, reproduce, and sometimes transform cultural beliefs and principles. This way of looking at games—as ideological systems—forms the basis of this first contextual game design schema, ***Games as Cultural Rhetoric***.

Games reflect the values of the society and culture in which they are played because they are part of the fabric of that society itself. For example, the capitalist rhetoric of the American Dream infuses many American games. State lotteries are marketed with tag lines like, "Anyone can be a millionaire." The TV game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (adapted from the British version) glibly celebrates the pursuit of wealth in the rhetorical question that makes up its title. The question is not *if* you want to become rich, or *what* the ramifications might be, but merely *who* will be given the chance. These games encapsulate the paradox of American identity and its accompanying ideologies of wealth. They speak to the clash between a rugged, pioneering individualism and a desperate desire for shortcuts to success and submission to fate.

In historical games, as much as in contemporary ones, cultural ideologies permeate the magic circle to impact rules and play. The rules governing movement and interaction in the game of Chaturanga, an ancient forerunner of Chess, reflect the values and social hierarchies of the Indian military of the fifth century. According to historical sources, the unknown inventor of the game used the armies of India as his design model. The pieces of Chaturanga include the king, the minister, the elephant (which later became the bishop in Europe), the horse (knight), the chariot (rook) and the foot soldier (pawn).<sup>[3]</sup> Over time, as the game spread from country to country, modifications were made to the design of the game pieces to reflect the particular strengths of national armies. The introduction of these new pieces (such as the queen and the bishop) were not merely superficial changes, but impacted the formal structure of the game and the player experience as well.

<sup>[1]</sup>Simon Kuper, "The World's Game Is Not Just A Game," *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 26, 2002.

<sup>[2]</sup>Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 77.

<sup>[3]</sup>E.M. Avedon and Brian Sutton Smith, editors, *The Study of Games* (New York: Wiley, 1971), p. 274.

## What is Rhetoric?

We are analyzing cultural values and ideologies, but the schema is called ***Games as Cultural Rhetoric***. What does that term mean? We take the word "rhetoric" from Brian Sutton-Smith's remarkable treatise *The Ambiguity of Play*, a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary investigation of the cultural ideologies surrounding play. Sutton-Smith writes, "The word rhetoric is used here in its modern sense, as being a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity or worthwhileness of their beliefs."<sup>[4]</sup> Rhetoric, in other words, is a method of discussion or expression that contains underlying values or beliefs, a method that attempts to persuade others that it is correct. Rhetoric can be heavy-handed and obvious or can be subtle and nearly invisible, and can take a multitude of forms. Rhetoric can manifest in the words and discourse of a philosophy (the "language" of Catholicism or Marxism), in clothes and insignia worn by members of a group (the fashion that identified members of the '60s counterculture movement), or in more general behavior (the spitting and gratuitous rudeness that were part of Punk). In each example, cultural rhetoric is a language of expression embodying

and propagating particular values and beliefs.

Applied to games, the organizing principle of cultural rhetoric reveals how games represent broad patterns of ideological value. The design of a game, in other words, is a representation of ideas and values of a particular time and place. For example, historical research on the children's games of African-American slaves has revealed that combative activities and player elimination were strikingly absent. The rules and play interactions of the games were a reflection of an oppressed culture's need for solidarity and collaboration. The games of Israeli Kibbutz children also demonstrate "a strong expression of cooperation and egalitarianism, with a preference for as few overprivileged or underprivileged participants as possible," reflecting the communal philosophies of the Kibbutz lifestyle.<sup>[5]</sup> In each of these examples, the formal and experiential structures of games echo and reinforce external cultural rhetorics.

What is the relevance of cultural rhetoric to game design? Creating games is also creating culture, and therefore beliefs, ideologies, and values present within culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not. For example, what are the winning conditions of your game? Amass the most resources? Destroy the enemy's units? Arrive at a balance of powers? Each of these victory conditions implies a particular set of values, fleshed out through the game rules, materials, and experiences of play.

Although cultural rhetoric will always be intrinsically present in a game, it also can be actively incorporated into a game design. For example, the Mad Magazine Game takes a typical board game winning condition (accumulating the most money) and turns it on its head: the actual way to win the Mad Magazine Game is to *lose* all of your money. This simple formal reversal has a strong impact on the cultural rhetoric of the game. Parodying a Monopoly-style winner-take-all game, the Mad Magazine Game calls attention to conventional ideologies of greed and economic power. Just like *Mad Magazine* itself, the game pokes fun at American institutions and values.

Whether a game's cultural rhetoric is unconsciously implicit (Monopoly's capitalistic ideology) or consciously playful (The Mad Magazine Game's satiric reversal), it involves the play of cultural values. As we discussed in *Defining Culture*, our concept of play as *free movement within a more rigid structure* can occur on a cultural level. Games put culture "at play," not just reflecting culture, but shifting between and among existing cultural structures—sometimes transforming them as a result. It is not entirely clear whether The Mad Magazine Game ultimately undermines or reinforces the capitalistic rhetoric it parodies. But the fact that it plays with such ideas at all reveals the presumptions of more rigid structures involving economics, competitive conflict, and even game design. By highlighting the rigid structures it puts "at play," a game can shed light on the operations of culture as a whole.

<sup>[4]</sup>Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 8.

<sup>[5]</sup>Nwokah and Ikekeonwu, "Nigerian and American Children's Games," in *The Study of Play, Vol 1. Diversions and Divergences in Fields of Play*. Margaret C. Duncan, Garry Chick, and Alan Aycock, eds. (New York: Ablex / Greenwood Publishing Company, 1998), p. 61.

## Seven Rhetorics of Play

Games embody cultural rhetorics. But what specific ideologies do they represent? In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith does more than simply introduce the general idea of cultural rhetoric. Sutton-Smith identifies seven different "rhetorics of play," large-scale value-systems that have historically informed and defined the concept of play. These rhetorics—*progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self, and the*

*frivolous*—are part of broad symbolic systems (political, religious, social, and educational) that help construct cultural meanings. They are seven ways that the concept of play has traditionally been brokered by culture. As rhetorics, these seven categories are persuasive discourses, invisibly embedded in our day-to-day lives and conceptions of play, taken for granted until they are challenged by a competing rhetoric.<sup>[6]</sup>

Although we can't summarize Sutton-Smith's complex ideas and do them justice, we can outline the key concepts of his seven rhetorics. In the chart to the right we describe the way each rhetoric uses, interprets, and justifies the concept of "play." In addition, the chart also lists the types of games and play with which the rhetoric is usually associated, as well as whether or not Sutton-Smith locates the origin of the rhetoric in ancient or contemporary times.

Sutton-Smith's work investigates play in general and therefore includes ludic activities that are not games. However, his ideas are still quite valuable to game designers. Games can embody any of the seven rhetorics, and Sutton-Smith's framework can help identify ideological presumptions in your games or help you chart new courses for the cultural rhetoric you want your game to express.

For example, according to Sutton-Smith, the dominant rhetoric in our culture is *play as progress*. By and large, play is seen as an activity for children, and a play experience is valuable because it helps children evolve into better adults cognitively, socially, ethically, or otherwise. Some of the current controversies about computer and video games stem directly from the fact that they do not fit neatly into the idea of *play as progress*. It is possible, for example, to see video games as part of an ideology of *power*, in which values of conflict are celebrated through play, as with professional sports; but equating video game play with sports (an adult pastime) would threaten the *play as progress* idea that games are for children. Similarly, video games could be seen as a form of *play as the imaginary*, in which video game play is a form of creative cultural production; however, this connection ties games to art, threatening conventional distinctions between high art and popular culture.

Sutton-Smith's rhetorics of play are not descriptive terms that identify what play *actually is*. Instead, his categories identify how games and play embody ideological values and how specific forms and uses of play perpetuate and justify these values. Rhetorics conflict and compete within the ecosystem of culture. A museum exhibit that included video games might spark a clash of rhetorics: perhaps the curator uses *play as the imaginary* to justify the creative value of video games, offending outraged adherents of *play as progress* that see no cultural value in games that merely entertain.

Just as one rhetoric can include many games, a single game can embody more than one rhetoric. As complex objects, games can contain many different, and sometimes contradictory, cultural rhetorics in their design and use. The lottery is based on an ancient game form that embodies *play as fate*; at the same time, in contemporary culture it can be a way for players to share a sense of *play as identity* (the office workers gather during happy hour to Pick Five, sharing a communal desire to win big and finally tell off the boss.) The parodic inversion of the Mad Magazine Game is premised on the idea of *play as frivolous*, even while its very reference to Monopoly-style games invokes the rhetoric of *play as power*.

#### *Brian-Sutton Smith's Seven Rhetorics of Play*

<b>Play as Progress</b>	Play is a way of turning children into adults. Play is valuable because it educates and develops the cognitive capacities of human or animal youth.	All forms of children's play and animal play	Contemporary origin
<b>Play as Fate</b>	Human lives and play are controlled by fate in the form of destiny, gods,	Gambling and games of chance	Ancient origin

	atoms, neurons, or luck, but not by free will.		
<b>Play as Power</b>	Play is a form of conflict and a way to fortify the status of those who control the play or are its heroes.	Sports, athletics, and contests	Ancient origin
<b>Play as Identity</b>	Play is a means of confirming, maintaining, or advancing the identity of a community of players.	Traditional and community celebrations and festivals	Ancient origin
<b>Play as the Imaginary</b>	The essence of play is imagination, flexibility, and creativity. Play is synonymous with innovation.	Playful improvisation in art, literature and other forms of culture	Contemporary origin
<b>Play as Rhetoric of the Self</b>	Play exists to evolve the self, by providing intrinsic experiences of pleasure, relaxation, and escape, either through play itself or through the aesthetic satisfaction of play performances.	Solitary play activities like hobbies and high-risk play like rock climbing	Contemporary origin
<b>Play as Frivolity</b>	Play is oppositional, parodic and sometimes revolutionary; this rhetoric is opposed to a "work ethic" view of play as a useless activity.	The activities of the idle or the foolish, and the historical multicultural roles of the Trickster and the Fool	Ancient origin

<sup>[6]</sup>Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 7–17.

## Two Examples

The challenge of recognizing cultural rhetoric is that ideologies often pass unnoticed in our own actions and behaviors. Luckily, because of their intrinsically playful and artificial nature, games present particularly ripe contexts for highlighting the operation of cultural rhetoric at work. Following are two detailed examples to help us better understand how games can embody rhetoric through design.

### The Landlord's Game

The Landlord's Game, designed by Lizzie Magie in 1904, is the precursor to the popular contemporary board game Monopoly, and was designed with very clear rhetorical intentions in mind. The Landlord's Game was created as a fun-filled vehicle for teaching the evils of land monopoly. Magie was a young Quaker woman living in Virginia, and an ardent follower of economist Henry George. George was the originator of the single tax movement, which held that the economic rent of land and the unearned increase in land values profited a few individuals rather than the majority of the people, whose very existence produced the land values. He



therefore advocated a single tax on land alone to meet all the costs of government, a policy that would erode the power of monopolies to suppress competition, and therefore equalize opportunity.<sup>[7]</sup> Magie designed The Landlord's Game for educational play: as a way to explain George's political theories in terms that the average citizen could understand.

In the decades that followed the release of The Landlord's Game, Parker Brothers released a series of titles that were clearly derivative, including Easy Money and, of course, Monopoly. The formal structures of the games bear a striking resemblance. Magie's game board included rental properties such as "Poverty Place" (land rent \$50), "Easy Street" (land rent \$100) and "Lord Blueblood's Estate" ("no trespassing: go to jail"); there are banks, a poorhouse, and railroads and utilities such as the "Soakum Lighting System" (\$50 fine) and the "PDQ Railroad" (fare \$100); there is also, of course, the well-known "Jail" space. Unlike Monopoly, however, properties in The Landlord's Game were for rent only, and could not be purchased and released.

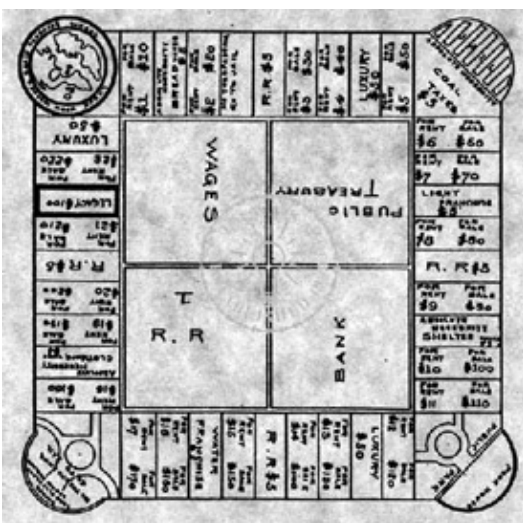
Despite the strong similarity between The Landlord's Game and Monopoly, there are distinct (and wonderfully incongruous) differences in the rhetorics each evokes. While the play rhetorics of *progress* and *power* apply to both games, The Landlord's Game was distinctly anti-capitalist in its conception. The game's conflict was not premised on property acquisition and the accumulation of monopolies, but instead on an unraveling of the prevailing land system. Because properties in the game could only be rented, there was no opportunity for domination by a greedy land baron or developer. Monopoly, on the other hand, championed the rise of the land baron and the art of speculation. Players were encouraged to exploit the financial weaknesses of other players to become the wealthiest monopolist, a conception of power in direct opposition to that explored within Magie's original design.

This difference in ideology is clearly evident in the way each game describes itself. The rules for Lizzie Magie's game read:

The object of this game is not only to afford amusement to players, but to illustrate to them how, under the present or prevailing system to land tenure, the landlord has an advantage over other enterprisers, and also how the single tax would discourage speculation.

The introduction to Parker Brothers' Monopoly reads:

The idea of the game is to buy and rent or sell property so profitably that one becomes the wealthiest player and eventually monopolist.... The game is one of shrewd and amusing trading and excitement.



The Landlord's Game

As the direct progenitor of Monopoly, it is ironic that Magie's game became a parody of exactly what it intended to critique. What began as an earnest attempt to educate the masses about the ills of land monopoly was transformed by Parker Brothers into a rhetorical tool for capitalism itself. Thus, although the two games share many formal elements, their designs embody radically different ideologies. These cultural rhetorics are

expressed through the language of the written rules, naming conventions of game properties, and the rules and victory conditions. Through the experience of their play and the distribution of the games in culture, their opposing rhetorics were propagated in competition with each other. (For better or worse, we know who won that game!)

## Vampire: The Masquerade

Vampire: The Masquerade illustrates another instance of game design and cultural rhetoric. Unlike *The Landlord's Game*, Vampire: The Masquerade was not designed with political, pedagogical intentions. Nevertheless, cultural rhetoric was an important part of the thinking behind the game.

The design of Vampire: The Masquerade draws directly on existing subcultures to create meaningful play. As opposed to the swords-and-sorcery or science fiction narratives of most popular role-playing games, Vampire: The Masquerade is designed to appeal to a Goth sensibility. Its vampiric political storylines resemble Anne Rice novels, and game play emphasizes atmosphere and mood rather than combat. Compared to the typical role-playing game, its rules are approachably minimal. As a result of these features, when the game was first introduced it found an audience not merely among existing gamers, but among people who had never role-played before.<sup>[8]</sup> Players of the game, in many cases already immersed in the Goth subculture, brought their own systems of meaning to the game as they entered the space of play. At the same time, the game itself became a way to propagate Goth subculture and extend it to an audience of game players that might not normally have an affinity for black clothing, heavy eyeliner, and the occult. Cultural rhetorics entered into the game from the outside > in, even as the game itself became a bastion of Goth/gamer culture, extending its hybrid rhetorics from the inside > out.

Vampire: The Masquerade exhibits the cultural rhetoric of *play as identity*: the play of the game separates its players from the rest of society, creating a space that catalyzes their unique sense of community identity. The game embodies other cultural rhetorics as well, such as the alter-ego role-playing that implicitly advocates *play as the imaginary*—or even *play as frivolous*, since the underground, subcultural status of Goth celebrates a visible opposition to more dominant cultures and styles. Although Vampire: The Masquerade was in part a product of an existing ideology and culture, it is important to note that the designers of the game recognized the untapped Goth gaming audience by designing the game to directly incorporate the subculture. The simplicity of the formal system made the game inviting to novice gamers, while the overall design encouraged role-playing, storytelling, and knowledge of vampire lore over strategic deployment of rules. This design approach effectively allowed the *already existing* attitudes and ideologies of players to shine through and contribute to the play and culture of the game.

The success of Vampire: The Masquerade has changed the culture of gaming. Admittedly, there was already some overlap between role-playing subcultures and Goth subcultures, but Vampire: The Masquerade managed to mix these two audiences in the context of actual game play. The game made role-playing "cool" (at least in some circles), highlighting the fact that cultural rhetorics themselves are often a form of currency in culture at large. The transition from geek to Goth stretched the frame of role-playing across the space of the hip and cool, broadening the game genre's reach and establishing a new approach to role-playing game design.

In each of the two examples—*The Landlord's Game* and Vampire: The Masquerade—games act as social contexts that allow exploration of certain values and attitudes. Furthermore, in both cases the cultural rhetoric of the game was something consciously incorporated by the designers. There is a long-standing lament among digital game designers that the general public does not consider games an important form of media culture. One answer to this complaint is that game designers need to be more rigorous in how they conceive of their games as *culture*. Recognizing that all games contain and endorse particular cultural rhetorics is a good first step. But if we want to stretch people's conceptions of games into spaces beyond gaming subcultures, into spaces occupied by art, literature and film—or politics, punk rock, and the academy—then designers need to be much smarter in how they incorporate cultural rhetorics in the actual design of their games.

[7]Burton H. Wolfe, "The Monopolization of Monopoly: The Story of Lizzie Magie," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 1976.

[8]Greg Costikyan, RE:PLAY: Game Design + Game Culture. Online conference, <2000.[www.eyebeam.org/replay](http://www.eyebeam.org/replay)>.

## Rhetorics of Gender

By now it should be clear: when framed as cultural rhetoric, games are systems of representation imbued with cultural beliefs and values. Designers must recognize how cultural rhetorics operate within their games and design accordingly. What ideologies are you reflecting, replicating, and promoting in your game? Do you want your game to faithfully depict a particular set of beliefs? Or would you rather question, reverse, or undermine them? Can you incorporate cultural rhetoric into the very experience of your game, encouraging your players to actually play with cultural codes?

The challenge of designing with cultural rhetorics in mind is the sheer complexity by which culture operates. We can artificially isolate cultural rhetoric in a game, such as the way that *Vampire: The Masquerade* reflects and informs Goth subculture, but the subculture itself and its interaction with the game are tremendously subtle. To highlight the challenges of using rhetorics within games, we focus for the next few pages on an important debate involving the cultural rhetoric of gender. Our goal is not to draw definitive conclusions about how gender operates in games, but instead to demonstrate the complexity of the issues raised when we frame games as expressions of cultural rhetoric.

Investigating the cultural rhetorics of gender means examining the ways that games reflect, reinforce, question, or subvert cultural ideas about the categories of masculine and feminine, male and female, transgender and other concepts related to gendered identity. Saying that games can interact with ideologies of gender presupposes that gendered cultural codes exist within society at large. This is indeed the case. There is a long history of thinkers, from Virginia Woolf to Judith Butler, who have commented on the ways gender is socially constructed and performed in culture, including the role that media representations play in this construction. More recently, writers like Brenda Laurel, Justine Cassell, Henry Jenkins, and other scholars have examined the representation of gender within digital games. A concern for games and gender extends to game designers as well. A game design movement (loosely called *Girl Games*) was spawned in the early 1990s by designers and scholars interested in questioning and reinventing assumptions about gender and games.

Rather than summarize these theoretical and ethnographic investigations, material that is well covered elsewhere (see *Further Reading*), we instead explore a few ways that game design intersects with cultural rhetorics of gender. Our intention is to demonstrate the complexities by which any particular cultural rhetoric operates in games. We selected the rhetoric of gender because of the history of the debate within gaming. There are certainly innumerable other cultural rhetorics we could have chosen as well, from the representation of race and ethnicity to narratives of colonialism and imperialism.



## Boy Games

One writer that has commented extensively on gender in games is media scholar Henry Jenkins. In his essay "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces," Jenkins explores the ideology of boy's play spaces described in children's literature, as a way of characterizing contemporary forms of representation in digital games. He argues that the conventions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century boy's adventure story have affected the kinds of representation we see in current video games. Platform scrolling games such as Capcom's Mega Man and Nintendo's Super Mario Brothers, according to Jenkins, utilize the iconography of adventure stories. These games allow players to struggle against obstacles, explore fantastic lands, fight menacing enemies, and even die (only to be reborn at the beginning of the level). Above all else these games exhibit thrilling, non-stop action.

In Jenkins' account, the games' levels and worlds follow the set-piece structure of adventure stories, in which all elements are streamlined down to their essential features. The plots and characters are reduced to familiar genre archetypes, defined primarily through their capacity for action. Similarly, the game settings follow the pulp model of the "adventure island," a staple of boy's books and games. The island represents "an isolated world far removed from domestic space or adult supervision, an untamed world for people who refuse to bow before the pressures of the civilizing process, a never-never-land where you seek your fortune."<sup>[9]</sup> Many video games clearly embody features of the adventure island narrative as described by Jenkins, and therefore reflect established rhetorics of "boy culture."

Significantly, the cultural rhetoric of gender is not restricted to the visual design of the games Jenkins cites. Although it is true that the games share the graphic trappings of comic books, cartoons, and other forms of traditional boy's culture, the gendered rhetoric of these games is embedded in their systemic and interactive dimensions as well. As Jenkins writes, "Each screen overflows with dangers; each landscape is riddled with pitfalls and booby traps. One screen may require you to leap from precipice to precipice, barely missing falling into the deep chasms below. Another may require you to swing by vines across the treetops, or spelunk through an underground passageway, all the while fighting it out with the alien hordes."<sup>[10]</sup> The action-oriented, stimulus-based interactivity of the game is part of the cultural rhetoric of the boy's adventure archetype. Whether the designers intended to or not, they were reproducing an established rhetoric of gender in the design of the game itself.

Jenkins' work offers a great example of how cultural rhetorics can impact game design. The imaginary spaces to which boys find themselves attracted are not just neutral places of play: they are specifically gendered spaces that invite boys in and keep girls out. The kinds of games Jenkins mentions reflect gendered leisure preferences (thrilling non-stop action; settings outside domestic spaces) even as they perpetuate them, echoing earlier genres of boy's culture that operated in similar ways. Although the games may be new, the rhetoric they embody has been passed down from an earlier era.

<sup>[9]</sup>Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces." In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 279.

<sup>[10]</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

## Flipping the Gender Bit

The games Jenkins wrote about in his essay are primarily console or PC games from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since that time, graphics resolution in digital games has become more complex—and along with it, the rhetoric of game gender representation. An important case in point is Lara Croft, the star of the popular Tomb Raider series. Although the Tomb Raider games are 3D rather than 2D like the games Jenkins studied, they and other over-the-shoulder action-adventure games are direct descendents of "boy's game" platform scrollers like Mega Man and Super Mario Bros. The obstacle-avoiding, power-up-snatching, fight-and-explore-a-series-of-levels game play is remarkably similar, despite graphical differences.

Because games of this type typically feature male characters, as a female lead Lara Croft is in some ways an intervention into the cultural rhetoric of gender. Or is she? "At the time we created Tomb Raider, I don't think there had ever been a good game with a heroine," remarks Toby Gard, the game designer credited as Lara's creator. "Most women in games before Lara wore thigh-high boots and thongs."<sup>[11]</sup> Originally conceived as a cross between riot grrrl icon Tank Girl and British pop star Neneh Cherry, Lara developed into a buxom female version of Indiana Jones. The end result, according to Gard, was "an empowered woman.... Not a smutty sex object, but an inaccessible, gun-toting bitch."<sup>[12]</sup>

Gard is correct in one sense. Prior to Tomb Raider, there were few female characters that played active roles in a game. Previous characters such as Smurfette in Smurf Rescue and Princess Toadstool in Super Mario were merely damsels in distress, helpless females waiting to be rescued at the end of the final level. These characters are synonymous with the end of the game, acting as passive objects of desire, the carrot held out to entice the player to finish. This remote and powerless female is an archetype that fits neatly into the traditionally gendered space of a young boy's world. The female is structurally acknowledged as a source of desire, but she is not generally present during play, and certainly does nothing so threatening as usurp the leading role from the male protagonist.

Tomb Raider offers an alternative game role for players. Lara Croft is a gun-toting action hero, a powerful character that can kick ass as well as any male avatar. But does Lara Croft rise to the level of the "empowered woman" Gard describes? There were any number of ways that a female character might have been visualized, and the character of Lara represents some very specific design choices. Her impractical cut-off shorts and skintight tank top emphasize her waspy waist and enormous breasts. It is true that Lara is not as scantily clad as many other female game characters (such as the whip-wielding dominatrixes of Bad Dudes), but she is hardly the model for an "empowered woman." Lara is a kind of action slut, an adolescent boy's idea of a woman, a digital pin-up girl. This role is literally played out in the many provocative full-page images of Lara published throughout the gaming press since the first Tomb Raider game was released. Lara herself was a trend setter: scores of similar female game protagonists have followed in her wake.

How does Lara play into ideologies of gender present within culture at large? Which values does she reinforce and which values does she call into question? As a powerful and playable avatar, Lara challenges the passive role usually accorded female game characters. In fact, a disproportionately high number of women have been consumers of the Tomb Raider games. But as an overtly sexualized representation, she replicates and exaggerates images of women found in other media, images often seen as objectifying and disempowering.



Lara Croft



Smurfette



Princess Toadstool



### Lara Croft

The rhetoric of gender is complicated even further when we consider that the representation of Lara is composed both visually and interactively. Beyond her "looks," how does a player's interaction with Lara reinforce a rhetoric of gender? We know from our discussion of the immersive fallacy in *Games as the Play of Simulation* that players' relationships to game characters are never simple. When a player plays a game, he or she is never merely "immersed" within a representation; through the process of metacommunication, the player is aware of the constructed nature of the character within the larger system of the game. A game avatar is simultaneously both subject and object: on one hand a mask to be worn, and on the other a tool to view and manipulate. Lara Croft plays out this double role to its paradoxical conclusion. In one sense, a Tomb Raider player is the spectator of a grossly sexist female image, even as the same player interactively takes on an empowering female role.

Unpacking the complex cultural rhetorics of gender in Tomb Raider, fundamental ambiguities remain. Is Lara a feminist icon or a sexist object? Does she challenge gender stereotypes or reinforce them? Perhaps we can never ultimately resolve these questions. When we consider representations of female characters in other games, similar double-meanings appear:

- *Ms. Pac-Man* is arguably the first game avatar gendered female. Although she is cute, she certainly wasn't given a curvaceous "womanly" figure. Rather, she is nothing more than a feminized version of Pac-Man, designed as if lipstick and a bow were equivalent to being female. Pac-Man, the male gerund, is the presumed neutral identity. Ms. Pac-Man is the marked, special case.
- *Female Fighting Game Characters* also offer active female roles for players to take on. But by and large, these characters suffer from the same hyperfeminization as Lara Croft, even joining her in game magazine pin-ups and posters. The marketing of contemporary fighting games (touting features such as a "breast jiggle" option) emphasize the sexist stereotypes these characters embody.
- *Samus Aran*, the heroine of the popular *Metroid* series, is a female character that in the original *Metroid* game doesn't reveal her gender until the end, when she removes her high-tech helmet. This clever design decision reveals the rhetorical presumptions players make about game character gender—many gamers recall with relish their shock when the hero of *Metroid* was unmasked as a heroine. But why is it only at the end of the game that Samus Aran can "come out" as a woman? Would the play of the game, or the interest of the players, be any different if the protagonist were male?
- *SiSSYFiGHT 2000* features unusual female characters that are neither passive Princess Toadstools nor sexist action sluts. They are bratty schoolgirls, equal parts cute and ugly, designed consciously as a playful intervention into existing cultural rhetorics of gendered game representation. Despite these feminist intentions, the bratty girls of the game have been criticized as portraying negative images of women, perpetuating stereotypes of catty, gossipy female behavior.

The politics of gender representation in media has been endlessly debated within the academy, the press, and culture at large. The recent visibility of female protagonists in games has only fueled these discussions. The question is, where do you stand? Any design decision you make regarding the representation of gender in your game will be connected to one form of rhetoric or another. There is no single "correct" rhetoric that your game should embody. However, be aware of the rhetorics that your game reflects and perpetuates. The cultural dimensions of games are exceedingly complex; your game should recognize this complexity and do it justice within its design.

[1]Katie Salen, "Lock, Stock, and Barrel: Sexing the Digital Siren. In *Sex Appeal: The Art of Allure in Graphic and Advertising Design*, edited by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), p. 148.

[2]Ibid., p. 149.

## Transforming Spaces

Do not despair! It's true that cultural rhetorics are complicated, but that does not mean they cannot be successfully incorporated into a game design. In fact, it is possible for games to take the concept of cultural rhetoric by the horns, not only representing and challenging ideologies, but also changing them. Most of our examples so far in this chapter have focused on the way that the space of meaning *internal* to the magic circle reflects cultural rhetorics *external* to the game. Both *The Landlord's Game* and *Monopoly* reflect existing ideas about power and economics and were designed to express these ideas. But games have the ability not only to reflect but to transform cultural values. When this happens, *external* contexts are shaped by ideologies *internal* to a game. We have already mentioned that the cultural play of a game is free movement within more rigid cultural structures. But when game play alters and shifts those cultural structures, the play becomes truly *transformative*: the rigid structures out of which play emerges are themselves reshaped through the very act of play.

A wonderful example of transformative play as a game design practice is the New Games Movement, which utilized play to comment on and experiment with new conceptions of culture and community. An outgrowth of 1960s San Francisco counterculture, the New Games Movement believed that the kinds of games people play and the ways they play them are of major significance to society. "Sports represent a key joint in any society," George Leonard writes in *The New Games Book*, "How we play the game may turn out to be more important than we imagine, for it signifies nothing less than our way of being in the world."<sup>[13]</sup> The New Games Movement was less about the design of individual games and more about the development of an ethos intended to alter the way people interacted with one another. Its goal was to transform culture by creating opportunities for people to play collaboratively.

*Play hard. Play fair. Nobody hurt.* These three core principles order the design (and play) of any New Games game. The movement organized festival-like "Tournaments" that brought people together to play cooperatively, erasing (if only for a brief time) barriers of race, age, sex, size, ability, socioeconomic background, and creed. Values of freedom and the creation of community through game play were woven into a utopian rhetoric that advocated new forms of player empowerment. As Bernard DeKoven notes in *The Well-Played Game*, "No matter what game we create, no matter how well we are able to play it, it is our game, and we can change it when we need to.... This is an incredible freedom, a freedom that does more than any game can, a freedom with which we nurture the play community. The search for the well-played game is what holds the community together. But the freedom to change the game is what gives the community its power."<sup>[14]</sup> This powerful, poetic rhetoric conflates the act of changing an individual game with changing the larger "game" of society—a premise at the heart of the New Games Movement.



Earthball, a classic New Games design, clearly embodies the movement's rhetoric. Created in 1966 by Stewart Brand for a public event sponsored by the War Resisters League at San Francisco State College, Earthball involved a huge inflatable ball painted with continents, oceans, and swirling clouds, guided by opposing teams. The game had a single rule, which Brand explained in the following way: "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who want to push the Earth over a row of flags at that end of the field, and those that want to push it over the fence at the other end. Go to it."<sup>[15]</sup> Intended as a way of formalizing player interaction and victory conditions, when the game was first played these simple rules created a space of possibility with a surprising ideological outcome:

People charged the ball from both sides, pushing and cheering. Slowly it began to move, first toward one end, then back to the other. The game got hotter. There was plenty of competition, but something more interesting was happening. Whenever the ball approached a goal, players from the winning side would defect to lend a hand to the losers.... That first Earthball game went on for an hour without a score. The players had been competing, but not to win. Their unspoken and accepted agreement had been to play, as long and hard as possible. <sup>[16]</sup>



Samus Aran: Metroid



MS.Pac-Man



Vanessa: Virtua Fighter 4



SISSYFIGHT 2000



Chun Li: Street Fighter



Nina: Tekken 3



Ling: Tekken 2



Ivy: Soul Calibur 2

Although the game was premised as a competition between two teams, the play that emerged was radically cooperative (in the sense of *player cooperation* defined in *Games as Systems of Conflict*). The emergence of collaborative play from a formal structure designed to support competitive interaction demonstrates the power of the New Games Movement rhetoric. The game may have looked competitive on the surface (two teams facing opposite goal lines), but the players enacted cultural rhetorics that valued collaboration and play-for-play's sake. These philosophies emerged from within the game to transform the game, turning traditional competitive play into something else entirely.

Later New Games games explored game structures that more explicitly embodied the cultural rhetorics of the movement. For example, the game of Catch the Dragon's Tail (first mentioned in *Games as Systems of Conflict*), has a definite winning condition and goal, but certain players (in the dragon's middle) are not clearly on one team or the other. The New Game titled Vampire (analyzed in *Games as the Play of Simulation*, not to be confused with the LARP game Vampire: The Masquerade) also plays with competition,

collaboration, and victory conditions. The game can end with the players either all turned into vampires or all cured of their vampirism; in both cases the initially heterogeneous group resolves to a state of homogenous equality.

Was the New Games Movement a success? Did it manage to transform society in the way that its founders intended? Yes and no. Although the New Games Movement has waned in recent decades, it asserted tremendous influence on physical education in the United States. If you played with a giant rubber Earthball or a parachute in your elementary school gym class, you can thank the New Games Movement, which helped transform the traditionally sports-based curriculum of phys ed into a more play-centric, cooperative learning experience.

Much of the success of the New Games Movement emerged because of its relationships with other forms of counterculture.

New Games "Tournaments," for example, mixed the communality of a peace protest with the cultural nihilism of an art happening. There is no doubt that in many ways the New Games Movement and its game designs emerged out of a particular cultural milieu. But the uniquely transformative agenda of the movement is truly inspiring. Playing with the codes and conventions of gaming and social interaction, the New Games Movement sought to create positive social change through play. It did so not by creating games with explicit political content, but by designing play experiences that intrinsically embodied its utopian ideals. Is there room for a similar movement in present-day game design? The New Games Movement was a function of its historical moment, and could not be revived in precisely the same form today. But the notion that game designers could take on transformative rhetorics, unleashing them in culture as a mighty revolution of play, is by no means unrealistic. It did happen; it can happen again.

[13]Andrew Fluegelman and Shoshana Tembeck, *The New Games Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 10.

[14]Bernard DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), p. 68.

[15]Fluegelman and Tembeck, *The New Games Book*, p. 9.

[16]Ibid.

## Battling Toys

By now it should be clear that we can connect games' artificial spaces of meaning to the values and ideologies of the world at large in countless ways. Each of the examples we explored within this chapter shares a common premise: games are part of culture. Whether they reflect or transform notions of economic class, subcultural style, gender identity, or utopian community, games exemplify ideas about the ways things are, or even the way we would like them to be.

This chapter concludes by exploring the reflection and transformation of cultural rhetoric in the context of a particular game design. Toys is a game for two players Eric created in collaboration with school children during a residency at the Bellevue Museum of Art in Seattle in 2000. The design mimics the battling character structure of a game like Pokémon, feeding on the rich social codes created by children for their toys— one plays the game by inhabiting, interpreting, and disputing these codes.

To begin the game, each player selects three character toys from a large collection of action figures scavenged from Seattle flea markets; the figures then "fight" with each other one by one. The battles between toys are waged via modular sentences, randomly constructed from a set of 44 cards. These statements, such as "*The female toy beats the unwanted toy*," or "*The American toy beats the expensive toy*," determine the outcome of conflict. Once the sentence has been dealt, it is up to the players to resolve the battle between the pair of toys by interpreting the statement and coming to an agreement on which toy it identifies as the victor.

## Toys: A social game for two players.

### Setup:

- Each player selects 3 toys to create his or her toy collection.
- Shuffle the game cards and deal 2 to each player. Keep these cards hidden.
- Place the rest of the cards face-down in a pile.

### Object:

The goal of the game is to defeat your opponent's toy collection.

### Game play:

First, each player selects one toy to fight. Deal two cards from the deck face-up and place onto the dotted line rectangles printed on the gameboard. The result will be a statement like, "*The naked toy beats the violent toy*."

Both players must then decide the result of the match based on the best application of the statement to the two toys. If the players cannot agree, deal two new cards to create a new statement. At any point in the game, players can use the two cards they were dealt to change the statement on the board.

After a match the loser selects a new toy from his or her collection to face the winning toy. If you defeat all three of your opponent's toys, you win.

Conflict is an intrinsic part of every game. As we outlined in *Games as the Play of Simulation*, game conflict is typically a territorial military conflict, a numerical economic conflict, or a conflict over fixed units of knowledge. The design of Toys, however, presents an alternative model. Although it superficially resembles a fighting game, in actuality, it is a game of *cultural* conflict. Battles between toys pit cultural feature against cultural feature (expensive, popular, American, female) and are resolved through an explicit ranking of these features within a shared system of meaning. The resolution of each match rests in the negotiation of the toys' symbolic value. In order to reach the conclusion that a Transformer toy is more masculine than a Big Bird figure, for example, players must agree that the value of one toy exceeds that of the other when it comes to relative maleness. What makes the collaborative element of Toys so compelling is that players work together not only to meet a set of victory conditions (this toy beats that toy) but also to navigate a rich playground of cultural signs. The game complexifies this negotiation by using not just one comparative term but two (*the American toy beats the expensive toy*) and by allowing players to intervene twice during a game to strategically change the linguistic equation.

The statements generated in Toys contain a high degree of strategic and cultural ambiguity; resolving this ambiguity is the point of the play. Although there are many games that reward players for cultural knowledge (such as Trivial Pursuit), these games generally provide correct answers to game questions. Toys does not provide the right or wrong answer to the resolution of a match; the game instead relies on the players' authority in determining the answer. In most games, players are expected to act in their own self-interest. But Toys turns the conventional authority structure of a game inside-out: instead of relying on the rules of the game to resolve the conflict each turn, players must resolve the battles through a potentially heated negotiation.

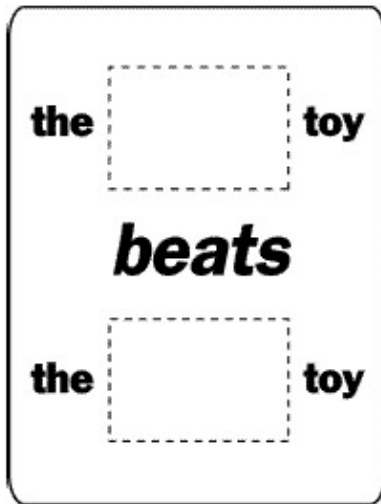


In developing and testing the game with school children, Eric found to his surprise that two players would virtually never both gratuitously claim victory, but almost always reached rapid mutual agreement on which toy won a conflict. In effect, the game revealed that the kinds of meanings circulated in children's play culture are shared, and through their shared value, they acquire the status of fact—a fact that overrides even a player's desire to win. A game about the negotiation of complex social and cultural systems, *Toys* illustrates how symbolic codes of race, class, gender, and aesthetics circulate within culture at large. Throughout the game, the signifiers of a toy's cultural status are used as the basis for both conflict and resolution. Knowing which toy is "stronger," "faster," or more "popular" than the other not only makes the game possible but fun as well. *The Swamp Thing versus My Little Pony: The ridiculous toy beats the naked toy. Who wins?*

As *Toys* playfully demonstrates, games are *social contexts for cultural learning*. Games always reflect the cultural rhetorics of the spaces in which they were designed or played; some games can even transform the ideologies of their contexts. The real game design challenge is to engage with cultural rhetoric on more than just a superficial level. Rather than merely applying a veneer of political content or cultural narrative to your game, how can you embed your questioning or refashioning of cultural rhetoric into the actual play itself? These are truly difficult design problems. But for game designers seeking to create meaningful play on not just a formal or experiential level, for game designers that want to explore play and innovation in culture itself, *Games as Cultural Rhetoric* is an indispensable design tool.



Toys: sample playing cards



Toys: gameboard

## Further Reading

*Air Guitar*, by Dave Hickey

The essay "The Heresy of Zone Defense" is cultural critic Dave Hickey's love letter to the game of Basketball, couched as a critical essay on the democracy of rules. A funny and moving piece on the joys of rule-breaking and the artistry of Dr. J, the text makes clear the connection between games, culture, and the often hidden ideologies that the rules of a game express and exploit.

*Recommended:*

"The Heresy of Zone Defense"

*The Ambiguity of Play*, by Brian Sutton-Smith

Brian Sutton-Smith has made monumental contributions to the study of play. This work is in some ways a summation of his decades of study, a skeleton key to his interdisciplinary investigations of play and games in culture. In the book, Sutton-Smith outlines seven primary "rhetorics" or ideologies framing play and explores how each rhetoric offers a different understanding of how and why we play.

*Recommended:*

Chapter 1: Play and Ambiguity

Chapters 2–11 focus on the seven rhetorics of play

*From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds.

A collection of essays focusing on connections between girls and computer games and the kinds of cultural and gender identities evoked by such connections. Much of the discussion is based on the early research of the Girl Games movement, which argued that girls have play patterns and interests different from those of boys. The ideology of this movement has itself come under attack, represented by the book's final essay,

recommended below.

*Recommended:*

Chapter 1: Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games

Chapter 12: "Complete Freedom of Movement": Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces

Chapter 14: Voices from the Combat Zone: Game Grrlz Talk Back

*The Interpretation of Cultures*, by Clifford Geertz

In the classic essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that the function of rituals such as games is interpretive. Games are a culture's reading of its own experience, a story that people tell themselves about themselves. In understanding how games can operate as forms of cultural rhetoric it is useful to think about them in regard to the kinds of stories games tell about the cultures in which they are played.

*Recommended:*

"Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight"

*Testimony Before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, May 4, 1999*, by Henry Jenkins  
<<http://brownback.senate.gov/FinishedDocs/MediaViolence/990504jen.pdf>>

Jenkins is the Director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT. In May 1999, he was invited to speak in front of the U.S. Senate committee on the effects of video games and violence. Jenkins makes a compelling argument against links between medium and behavior, debunking many of the myths commonly touted in the media. According to Jenkins, media and violence have a complex relationship that cannot be reduced to singular arguments.

## Summary

- **Games are social contexts for cultural learning.** This means that games have an ideological dimension: they are one context through which society passes on its values.
- **Rhetoric** is a persuasive discourse or implicit cultural narrative. It is a set of connected ideas used to convince others of the truthfulness of one's own beliefs.
- All games **reflect** the rhetoric of the cultural context in which they are designed or played. This is true of both historical and contemporary games.
- Cultural rhetorics can be an unconscious aspect of a game's ideology or they can be consciously designed into a game. When game designers allow cultural rhetorics to enter into the play of a game, they are creating an instance of free play within more rigid cultural structures.
- Brian Sutton-Smith identifies seven **rhetorics of play**. Four rhetorics stem from ancient ideologies—**fate, power, identity, and the frivolous**. Three rhetorics have more contemporary origins: **progress, the imaginary, and the self**. The prevalent rhetoric of contemporary Western

culture is *play as progress*: the notion that play is for children and that it is valuable because it helps them properly evolve into adults.

- Cultural rhetorics, such as the representation of gender in games, are exceedingly complex. Such rhetorics do not always resolve into a single ideological interpretation. For example, although the game character of Lara Croft challenges rhetorics of boy-based play in some respects, in other respects the character follows rigid gender stereotypes.
- Sometimes the cultural rhetorics of a game can change the cultural structures in which they exist. This is the phenomenon of **transformative cultural play**.
- **The New Games Movement** is an example of a game design ideology that consciously sought to transform cultural rhetorics through specific forms of community and play design.