

**PLAYER AS AUTHOR:  
DIGITAL GAMES AND AGENCY**

by

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## ABSTRACT

One of the key properties of the digital game genre is the proliferation of player-produced content and artifacts. The reworking of original game materials is an integral part of game culture that can not be ignored in the study of these games. This thesis explores player-production as a mode of authorship resulting from the agency of the game player. Agency—as an attributed, contextualized power to affect meaningful change—is a common subject for analysis in interactive media research. This thesis argues that authorship in the digital game environment lies at the intersection of designer/player agencies. At the level of player-created game artifacts, the player's agency extends beyond an instantiation of the designer's agency to the authorship of a new artifact. These artifacts, in turn, become vessels of the player's agency, and play a key role in the social validation of their role as authors.

This work reflects a reality that digital games are malleable, loosely bounded, and socially validated and defined. Rhetorical criticism is used as a methodology for examining player-produced artifacts: demonstrating how the exchange and interpretation of meaning in this environment represents player agency and authorship, and how these meanings are dramatized through player-production. The artifacts reveal specific themes that speak to the construction of agency, including the opposition or extension of the primary author, and the legitimacy, ownership and access players assume as part of the role of player-producer. These player works demonstrate a common underlying structure which both reflects the community at large and the individual social realities of the players: that of player agency via authorship.

This relationship between the game designer and player provides a new framework from which to examine the production and exchange of meaning in digital games. This framework suggests further inquiry both inward, into the game experience, and outward, into explorations of mass culture. It also puts forth rhetorical criticism as a methodology in game research, and provides an important documentation of emerging modes of player-production.

## **DEDICATION**

To infinite possibilities.

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## GLOSSARY

**Agency:** An attributed, contextualized power to affect meaningful change.

**Author:** One who is recognized as the creator of an artifact, such as a text or program.

**Digital Game:** (also *Videogame, Computer Game*) A system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome (Salen and Zimmerman, ch.7).

**Efficacy:** An individual's confidence in their ability to control their thoughts, feelings and actions, and therefore influence an outcome (Bandura 75-78). The belief one has the capacity to achieve desirable outcomes through one's actions, and forestall undesirable ones.

**Ethos:** One of Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals; *ethos* (appeal to character), *pathos* (appeal to emotion), and *logos* (appeal to logic). Ethos appeals may address either the character of the audience, or the character of the speaker.

**Flame:** Any intentionally inflammatory or derogatory posting, usually intended to provoke an argument.

**Hacker:** One who enjoys the intellectual challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations, particularly those that involve hands-on work manipulating programmable systems (based on entry in "The Jargon Dictionary"<sup>1</sup>.)

**Hacker Ethic:** 1) The belief that information-sharing is a powerful positive good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise by writing open-source and facilitating access to information and to computing resources wherever possible. 2) The belief that system-cracking for fun and exploration is ethically OK as long as the cracker commits no theft, vandalism, or breach of confidentiality (excerpt from "The Jargon Dictionary.")

**Meta-game:** *The game beyond the game*; aspects of game play that derive not from the rules of the game, but from interplay with surrounding contexts. There are four aspects of the meta-game<sup>2</sup>: what a player brings to the game, what a player takes away from the game, what happens between games, and what happens during a game other than the game itself (Zimmerman and Salen, ch.28).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://info.astrian.net/jargon/>

<sup>2</sup> Originally quoted in from Richard Garfield, [Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Essays on Roleplaying.](#)

**Mod:** (also *Patch*) Short for *modification*: an alteration to a pre-existing digital game. Game mods usually replace or change elements such as media, maps, or behaviours, although changes to the game engine are increasingly common.

**Open Source:** Software distributed in source under licenses guaranteeing anybody rights to freely use, modify, and redistribute, the code (based on entry in "The Jargon Dictionary.")

**Persistent World:** (also *MMOG*, *MMORPG*) A multi-player, continuous online environment that provides contexts for game-type interactions. Examples include games like Everquest, Asheron's Call and Ultima Online. These games are also be referred to as Massive Multi-player Online Games, or Massive Multi-player Online Role Playing Games.

**Postmodern:** Relating to art or theory that reacts against Modernist principles. Common targets include the rational individual and the pursuit of universal Truths. Postmodern thought often reveals the artificiality of structures of meaning, however, as a reactionary movement, it is often criticized for its focus on deconstruction.

**Rhetorical Artifact:** The tangible product of a rhetorical act, executed in the presence of a rhetor's intended audience (Foss 7).

**Skin:** A type of mod that involves changing the graphical appearance of a game object.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

**EQ:** EverQuest

**FPS:** First Person Shooter

**FTA:** Fantasy Theme Analysis

**MMOG:** Massive Multi-player Online Game

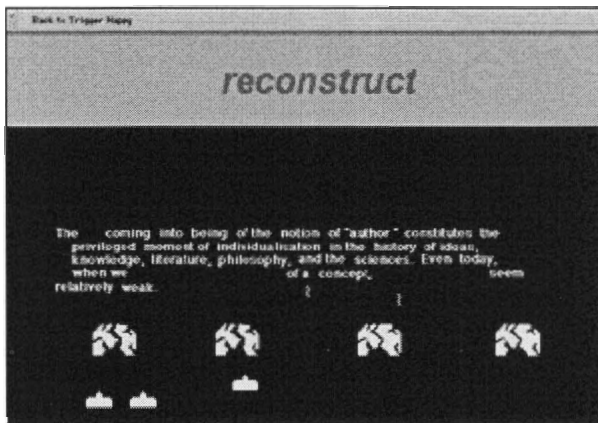
**MMORPG:** Massive Multi-player Role Playing Game

**TSO:** The Sims Online

**UO:** Ultima Online

## INTRODUCTION

Words from Foucault's "What is an Author?" advance like a hostile invading force on one of three tiny ships. Rapidly you click away; shooting desperately at the descending text, eroding Foucault's work. In Craighead and Thomson's game Trigger Happy, the arcade classic Space Invaders is re-mixed: the advancing invaders are replaced with paragraphs from Foucault's seminal text. As words are destroyed, they appear as links at the top of the game window, leading away from the game to instances of the term on the web. As Foucault blasts away at traditional notions of authorship, the player likewise blasts at Foucault.



**Figure 1:** Screen capture, Craighead and Thomson's Trigger Happy (1999). Figure by author.

What does Foucault have to do with digital games? An answer lies in the relationship between a game's author, and the game player who reworks game materials into game artifacts. The production of player-produced artifacts has become an integral part of game culture. Digital game players reshape, recontextualize, and remediate these games at the level of narrative, gameplay and/or cultural space. This secondary production demonstrates the agency of the game player—not only as one who instantiates the agency of the game designer—but an author in his/her own right.

This thesis examines player agency in the authorship of digital game artifacts. Authorship in the digital game environment lies at the intersection of designer and player agency. At the level of player-created game artifacts, the player's agency extends beyond an instantiation of the designer's agency to the authorship of a new

artifact. These artifacts, in turn, become vessels of the player's agency, and play a key role in the social validation of their role as authors.

Chapter Two (*Remaking Each Other's Dreams*) presents the context and central argument for this research: that players author artifacts in digital games, demonstrating their agency in the digital game environment. Chapter Three (*Digital Games and Player Production*) attempts to provide an open definition for the digital game, that reflects the reality of the digital game as malleable, loosely bounded, and socially defined and validated. It further examines the historical and cultural currents that lead to the emergence of the player-producer, demonstrating the technical and social imperatives that suggest a role for players in game authorship. This authorship (the focus of Chapter Four; *Agency as Authorship*) reveals the agency of the game player as having the capacity to affect meaningful change of the game, independent of the agency of another author (whether it be the game designer, or that of another player-producer). This goes against a hierarchical construction of agency (i.e. the player's agency unfolding within the context set by the game designer), suggesting instead multiple streams of agency that operate either directly through authorship, on a secondary level through an artifact, or on a non-authorial, contextualized level through the instantiation of the agency of the producer. This relationship is demonstrated through the rhetorical analysis of select player-produced game artifacts.

Chapter Five (*Methodology*) defines the research setup and methodology for this study. Fantasy-Theme Analysis, a method of epistemic rhetorical criticism, is used to analyse three selected player-produced artifacts: demonstrating how the exchange and interpretation of meaning in this environment validates player agency and authorship, and how these meanings are dramatized through player-production. The first of these artifacts is player-modifications for The Sims, a popular and often cited example of a game that implicitly relies on its player-production for satisfying gameplay. The second artifact is Velvet-Strike, a set of peace-themed graffiti sprays for the game Counter-Strike. This work is a good example of activist activity through game artifact creation. The third work stretches the boundary of player-production activity. Collective Detective is a puzzle solving collective that operates on both legitimate games and through selecting puzzle components from games. It is, in a sense, a player created game that operates on a meta-level, poaching from existing games to create a new, more satisfying experience for its players. In Chapter Six (*Rhetorical Analysis*) the artifacts are analysed with a focus on specific themes

referent to agency. Chapter Seven (*The Rhetoric of Player Authorship*) demonstrates that these player works demonstrate a rhetorical vision reflecting the community at large and the individual social realities of the players. This argument is that of player agency via authorship.

Chapter Eight (*Conclusion*) concludes with the argument that this construction of the relationship between the game designer and player provides a new framework from which to examine the production and exchange of meaning in digital games. If games provide agency through authorship to the game player, the act of digital play carries with it an awareness of the potential for mutation and exchange. This may be a key differentiator in the experience of digital games as play and as media. As games increasingly reveal cultural structures, values and meanings, players are placed closer to the means of cultural production than with traditional broadcast media. Digital games may thus become an outlet for expression, creativity, and influence. This framework then provides a basis for further inquiry both inward, into the game experience, and outward, into explorations of mass culture.

Press fire to start.



## REMAKING EACH OTHER'S DREAMS<sup>3</sup>

*From now on in computer gaming, there were to be no real barriers between creator and audience, or producer and consumer. They would be collaborators in the same imaginative space, and working as equals, they'd create a new medium, together (Au).*

### ***Player Agency and Authorship in Digital Games***

Digital game players enjoy unprecedented access to their media. Designers participate in player discussions, implement player suggestions in existing games, and even openly provide players with tools to facilitate the production of player content. When they don't, players still find ways to use games to their own ends. Players hack and alter game code and graphics, play in new and undetermined contexts, and occasionally cross over the divide to produce their own games. In other words, they not only use the digital game as a mediated experience, but often as a medium in and of itself.



**Figure 2:** Screen capture, Counter-Strike (with Velvet-Strike graffiti spray). By permission of Anne-Marie Schleiner.

Interactive media, such as digital games, are often examined in terms of agency; the power to affect meaningful change in a select context. However, this focus is often internal, examining an interactor's means of affecting change within the context provided by the interactive designer. Authorship in the digital game environment lies at the intersection of designer/player agencies. At the level of player-created artifacts, the player's agency extends beyond an instantiation of the

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<sup>3</sup> Phrase borrowed from Wagner James Au, "Triumph of the Mod" (Au).

designers agency to the authorship of a new artifact. These artifacts, in turn, become vessels of the player's agency, and play a key role in the social validation of their role as authors.

I use the term *authorship* in relation to digital games, aware of its problematic tie to the notion of the written word as textual artifact. Digital games consist of multiple "texts," including (but not limited to) the written, visual, and the enacted. The very notion of authorship (and agency for that matter) has been thrown into contest as a result of the Postmodern dissolution of the subject: the argument against a Modernist view of a stable, bounded, rational self which is the origin for action and discourse. The Postmodern argument contributes to the recognition of the author as a construct formed by society, towards specific ends, at a particular time and place (as opposed to an objective Truth). Foucault provides an interesting history of the author construct going back to the Renaissance, where it became important for the creator of a text to be accountable for that work, to provide an ethos for the work (a guarantee of truth and validity), and eventually, a lived history. In other words, the life of the author became a context in which to situate the work: a wellspring of supplementary information from which (the appropriate authorities) may create a valid interpretation of the text (Foucault, *Archaeology* 221-222). Barthes denies the work any extension beyond the text, instead placing the intersection of influence, culture and relationships at the point of reader reception. In this sense, the work is no longer a representation, but a process of construction—a speech act in progress. For Barthes, the text's value is not in determining the preferred meaning of an "author-god," but in acting as a "multi-dimensional space in which a number of texts are married and disputed and none is original" (Barthes 146). The later notion is, in fact, a promising description of modern game culture, in which the barriers between the designer and player are often permeable.

George Landow also examines issues of authorship, pertaining to hypertext. In this medium, Landow sees the role of the reader and writer as intertwined (Landow 90). Because the authority and autonomy of the text is called into question, the figure and function of author is eroded. Landow's view of the text as imperfect and artificially autonomous does not necessarily demonstrate the lack of an author, merely a denial of a readers' submission to authority (Landow 91). In other words, for Landow, the interactive author forfeits their agency. Landow clarifies what he sees as the three challenges to the hypertext author's authority, all of which have parallels in game authorship: a lack of autonomy in the text, the concept of text as

network, and/or the removal of the imposed limits of textuality (Landow 93). The latter comes from Foucault, who questioned how one determines the scope of an author's oeuvre: Does it include commentary on the works? Unpublished materials? Laundry lists (Foucault, Foucault Reader 161)? In the world of digital game authorship, the imposed limits of textuality, in particular, are highlighted by the player-as-producer.

Suggesting authorship as an indicator of agency for works of modification, adaptation, re-creation and remediation, can be a useful tool in attempting to delineate the boundaries of both primary and secondary works, or perhaps demonstrating the futility of this endeavour. This is not to say the dissolution of the author may not be valuable—Foucault, for one, was ready to trade the cult of the author for the immortality of the text. The “death of the author” can be seen as a deliverance and an extension: simultaneously negating, preserving and elevating the original work (Poshardt 375-376). However, while cultural attribution of agency and authorship persist (and we still live in a society dominated by the tenets of Modernism), we will make attempts to assume agency through authorship, whether it is through the creation of an original work or the reconstruction of a previous work. Agency and authorship are causally attributed to both primary and secondary media producers.

To quote Celia Pearce: “It is ironic that, although a virtual parade of literary theorists (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, L'Dieaux, et al) have spent four decades proclaiming the death of the author, it is not authors but game designers who have been able to innovate most boldly in the author-creator control negotiation” (Pearce, “Emergent Authorship”). What does it mean to be an author in a medium such as digital games, where teams construct the media product, only to have it continually reworked by the supposed audience? As Pearce suggests, this is a contest for power through authorship, a question of who has agency in the use of the digital game as a medium. For broadcast media, this issue is quickly resolved in favour of the media producer, by virtue of both the restricted means of production and channels of distribution. Past attempts at open media reworking, such as scratch video, ultimately suffered from lack of access to the medium (Huhtamao). de Certeau's influential work on audience tactics reflects this unequal relationship between producer and consumer—the audience is in constant struggle to contend with producer strategies (de Certeau 37). But in the digital arena, distribution networks arise spontaneously and flourish; code provides an insecure and malleable canvas for

recombinant works. Games retain a historic tie to the hackers with whom they originated (Kushner; Levy), creating an inward division between the “information wants to be free” ethos and the growing corporate nature of game production. This tension is increasingly apparent, as extensions of corporate ownership leave us “in a cultural space in which people have little say in shaping and reappropriating artifacts” (Taylor 229). That we even anticipate this freedom demonstrates a notable shift in cultural perspective on the nature of media.

Player-production emerges due to a convergence of both technological and societal imperatives. On a fundamental technological level, games are recreated by players because they are code worlds, and as such, hackable<sup>4</sup> (Kushner). Recreating and adapting original works is echoed in other media as they become digitized, most prominently in electronic music, where digital sampling has become the mainstay of DJ culture. The creators are often media outsiders, newly introduced to the tools of production. According to Huhtamao, these secondary producers possess “the aim of subverting the existing relationship between subjects and media” (Huhtamao), although I would suggest this aim is often not explicit. Antoinette LaFarge identifies three triggers for the popularity of digital game manipulation; including the rapid manufacture and distribution of game titles, lax copyright enforcement, and a culture of involvement on the part of players (LaFarge). Herz takes a similar view, citing a cultural assumption that users can, will, and perhaps should design game objects, and a social ecology that supports the exchange and production of this material within the game community (Herz, “Harnessing the Hive”). This ecology included the primary designer as well— “while the traditional entertainment industry is frantically trying to thwart the Tsunami with teaspoons,” Pearce notes the game industry tends to acknowledge, and even encourage, audience usurpation of design authority (Pearce, “Emergent Authorship”).

Because games, by definition, operate in an inherently artificial environment, they accommodate a recognition of the game structure and its potential for mutation (Manovich; Salen and Zimmerman; Wright, Boria and Breidenbach). Players are at an advantage in recognizing the constructed experience—both the designer's agency in their prescribed actions, and the possibility of their own agency through potential artifacts. The social nature of modern multi-player online games also reinforces this

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<sup>4</sup> Hacking understood here and throughout this thesis as a generic term related to reconstitutive programming, rather than illicit computer *cracking*.

notion of the constructed game, as players are made aware of the creative actions of their fellow players. This aligns with Bernie De Koven's description of games as social fictions, continually created by their players (De Koven 3). De Koven reminds us that the manner in which a game is played can be as important as the game by definition. This raises an interesting question: is a game bound by the context set out by the game designer, or can it be reinterpreted by the play community? In the reality of current digital games, reinterpretation is simply a part of game play and agency.



**Figure 3:** Screen capture, Desert Combat, Battlefield 1942 mod. Figure by author.

Espen Aarseth states, "to elevate a consumer group to producerhood is a bold political statement; and in the production and consumption of symbolic artifacts (texts) the boundaries between these positions becomes a highly contested ground" (163). Continuing interest and debate over the player-as-producer reinforces Aarseth's questioning of the boundaries between production and consumption, prompting us to question the relationship between designer and player, but also the politicizing of said relationship. The boundaries between game designer and player are arguably more permeable than most other media, and this relationship is primarily recognized and embraced rather than being a source of conflict (Pearce, "Emergent Authorship"). As such, facilitating player production can allow game designers to reinforce their own agency as game creator, while still encouraging the agency of the game player. Eric Zimmerman's pronouncement, that "there is something deeply satisfying about creating a game that allows players to participate as designers in their own right," (Salen and Zimmerman, ch.31) is increasingly common at game design conferences and in the press. While game designers tend to design for the masses, they may explicitly or implicitly encourage players to change what they don't like about a given experience. A growing number of game producers

passively support player-production by allowing networks of game modifications to exist unchallenged, or actively support it, at least as they envision it, through the open release of game engines, modification tools and distribution networks (such as Valve's Steam Network). Players have the opportunity for direct manipulation of a given design, encouraging active user engagement in creatively extending that design to fit their own vision of the experience. Such distributed design tools (described by Gerhard Fischer as *convivial tools*) "have the potential to break down the strict counterproductive barriers between consumers and designers" (Fischer). While a relative minority of players participate in the creation of independent artifacts, their contribution to the overall game community ensures a constant, vibrant flow of new game content into the play arena. This has become an integral part of gaming culture and experience.

LaFarge observes that industry encouragement of player content and customization, even within a designer's authored environment, heightens a player's sense of ownership in the game. This, in turn, may problematize issues of agency and control (prompting the question, to what extent designers are then responsible to these player-producers and to the game community at large?)(LaFarge). In the context of an internal agency, an agency affected by the secondary agency of the game designer, this feeling of ownership relies more on the player's efficacy, the belief that they are contributing to the construction of their experience (and the success of the designer's creation of that aesthetic). However, in the creation of a game artifact, the player demonstrates an agency distinct from the game designer, and thus outside the scope of the designer's responsibility. While beyond the focus of this study, this raises some interesting questions in relation to offensive or difficult player artifacts. Game companies are still struggling to form their own response to player subversion without appearing hostile to player-generated artifacts: a good example is in the Diablo team's creation of D-Bay, its own internal game auction feature created in response to an emerging player market in item trading (Pearce, "Emergent Authorship"). Some companies are quick to quash unfavourable user extensions, while others allow a free market of player generated content to continue. The possibility for a modified experience to subvert, or reflect badly, on the design brand is one of the challenges of a shared creative role. "Although the game industry tries hard to maintain the impression that computer gaming constitutes 'a people's technology which encourages and enables participation by all who wish to participate,'" states Huhtamao, "it is becoming more and more evident that such a

position constitutes a fabrication and, above all, an ideology.” In other words, the player-as-producer paradigm is fine as long as it generates positive content and increased revenue—as long as it retains the favour of the primary author, the game producer. This becomes contentious as the agency of the designer bleeds beyond the boundary of the game, and into the player-produced artifact. In the hybrid circumstances where these agencies often overlap, the game community may validate claims of authorship from either designer or player.

## ***Implications***

Player-production provides an interesting base from which to explore the meaning of agency in the context of the digital (primarily online) game. The relationship between the agency of the game player and designer reconfigures traditional notions of authorship, suggesting a more open, dynamic environment for the creation of meaning—a conversation as opposed to a broadcast. For the game designer, this may mean a different design approach is necessary to encourage and/or accommodate a more open concept of the game. For the game player, there already exists the awareness that digital games, like most real world games, provide the opportunity for expression through the modification and manipulation of the game itself. The mark of a game's success may come to be, not simply the number of units sold, but how broadly the game has lent itself as a canvas for the expression, extension, and/or reinforcement of a game culture.

Player-created artifacts not only affect our understanding of cultural production, but also challenge our definition of what constitutes *the game*. A common criticism levied at player-production is that it falls outside of the boundaries of the game, into the realm of meta-game<sup>5</sup>, and as such assumes this production cannot be studied as part-and-parcel of the game itself. The notion that in redefining game boundaries one is no longer playing the same game is articulated by Bernard Suits (Suits 27), and reveals a definition of author that privileges the original producer. This is increasingly a contentious construct, as players demand (and assert) more control over production. Through the authorship of game artifacts, players bring the game beyond the scope of the designer's agency, into something the designer could not

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<sup>2</sup> *Meta-game*: Extra-game activities that surround the actual gameplay. Meta-game activities may none-the-less be integral to the game itself, for example, the collecting and ordering of cards in a (non-digital) collectable card game. The issue of the meta-game will be discussed in later chapters.

foresee or plan for. Espen Aarseth argues this is not governed by the laws of the medium but "the aesthetic exploitation and subversion of said laws" (164). I would disagree with the implication player creation is necessarily subversive, instead insisting the player's agency exists through the medium, and is thus a natural extension of the human desire for expression. De Koven's description of the well-played game seems closer to the current cultural environment: the game can change for the better with the discovery of a new source of control that presents a new way of seeing the game played together (52). Rather than the game designer mandating a game experience, the relationship has the potential to become more symbiotic, by accommodating the authorship of the game player. For Pearce, this invitation to the audience to create or co-create the content, allows all participants "to entertain each other with their unique way of 'playing the story'" (Pearce, "Emergent Authorship"). In the end it is up to the play community that maintains the balance between the game as intended and the game as it is played (De Koven 54). Similarly, in digital games, it is the game community that, in the end, validates and negotiates both designer and player agencies.

The relationship between game player and designer has broad implications for how we interact with our media. Bolter and Grusin state that "networked games make a claim to improve on the social practice not only of other computer games, but of television and film as well" (103). The artificiality of games draws attention to game constructs (including those that can be seen as media), allowing a fluctuation between engagement and immersion (Bolter and Grusin; Douglas and Hargadon; Manovich). A number of researchers have identified the suitability for games for cultural commentary (Schleiner, "Cracking the Maze"; Frasca, Videogames of the Oppressed; Klevjer). "Because games are artificial constructs and involves meta-communication about the act of play, the cultural identity of a game play is ever present," state Salen & Zimmerman, "[games] are very good at revealing cultural assumptions at work" (ch.30). According to Taylor, artifacts created by game players are just one means of creative production situated within existing cultural works: these reworkings highlight malleability of cultural elements, and the way they are "made real" only through engagement with their audiences (Taylor 236). Player content draws attention to the borders of the game, and blurs relationships between producers and consumers. Salen and Zimmerman describe one persistent world



performance<sup>6</sup> as “[modifying] the game itself as it transformed the attitudes and assumptions of player and game designer alike” (ch.32). This suggests a powerful role for the player-producer that may at times supersede that of the primary game designer. Players have the opportunity to act as *cultural hackers*, with the capacity to, as Anne-Marie Schleiner describes, “manipulate existing techno-semiotic structures towards different ends or, as described by artist Brett Stalbaum, ‘who endeavour to get inside cultural systems and make them do things they were never intended to do’” (“Cracking the Maze”). Mod maker John Cook (Team Fortress) describes the result as “a living product” (Kushner), and indeed these reworked games appear more as a cultural exchange than a static artifact. As Pearce notes, these trends seem to represent a progression, or evolution, from non-digital genres (“Emergent Authorship”). As such, it may also be possible to use the relationship between designer and player in digital games as a framework for analysing other forms of digital production.



**Figure 4:** Screen capture, Tiny Signs of Hope (anti-war) posters in The Sims. Figure by author.

These wider issues reveal one of the interesting affects of games: their propensity to act as evocative objects<sup>7</sup>—*things to think with*—structures from which to examine our current definitions and meanings. In a sense, this thesis examines selected game artifacts in detail, with the goal of revealing something about our wider culture in general. However, its more explicit goal is to provide a lens from which to view the ways in which people communicate through the game, at both the

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<sup>6</sup> Salen and Zimmerman refer to the invention of a pimp character “Pimp Daddy,” and his prostitute “Jenny,” using in-game affordances in Ultima Online (Salen and Zimmerman, ch.32; Kolbert).

<sup>7</sup> A phrase coined by Sherry Turkle (Turkle 14)

design level (where it is assumed), but also at the level of player—a role which seems burdened by the constructs of the passive receiver. In the upcoming chapters, I hope to effectively demonstrate how the agency of the game player substantiates itself in the form of the authorship of artifacts, through examining the rhetoric of these artifacts as a reflection, prediction and instantiation of the rhetorical visions of the player-producer community.

## DIGITAL GAMES AND PLAYER PRODUCTION

*My initial motivation was probably the same as everyone else in the mod-scene [...] I just wanted to customize the game to fit my vision of what a game should be. First and foremost it is my vision, not anyone else's (Minh Le, Creator, Counter-Strike (Herz, "Harnessing the Hive")).*

Computer games have been around for over 40 years (ancient in computing terms), but it is in the past few decades games have come into their own as a medium. Games have become a prominent part of the cultural landscape, challenging the film and television industries in terms of revenue and attracting the attention of mainstream media, lawmakers, and the (non-gaming) public. In recent years we have also seen a major boom in serious academic research directed towards the digital game, with the formation of the Digital Games Research Association<sup>8</sup> (DiGRA) and the publishing of peer-reviewed research journals such as *Gamestudies*<sup>9</sup>. Researchers from a wide variety of disciplines have attempted to contribute to our understanding of this (relatively) new form: from critical theory to computing science, drama, cultural studies, sociology, computer graphics and animation, literature and film studies. The field of *ludology* has also emerged as a study of games and play, attempting to examine game definitions, form, and applications outside of extra-disciplinary frameworks (Frasca, "Ludology meets Narratology").

Perhaps because of the broad range of perspectives and theories researchers bring to game studies, one common area of debate is in the definition of the game. Salen and Zimmerman examine eight theorist's definition of games (including Roger Callois, Johan Huizinga, and Brian Sutton-Smith) in an attempt to create the following aggregate definition: *A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome* (ch.7). The definition asserts the following:

- 1) Games are a *system*, a set of small interactions that form a more complex whole,

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.digra.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Online at <http://www.gamestudies.org>.

- 2) A game has *active participants*,
- 3) Games are *artificial*,
- 4) Games involve a *contest of powers*,
- 5) Games have *rules*; and
- 6) Games have a *goal or quantifiable outcome*.

While Salen and Zimmerman's definition is constructed explicitly to apply to their study of game design, it nonetheless provides a thorough and flexible definition of the game<sup>10</sup> that still allows for a social construction as suggested by De Koven. As such, it will be used as the working definition of games in this thesis.

The frame in which a game exists, an artificial construction of time and space in which the game occurs, Salen and Zimmerman call the *magic circle*. The term is borrowed from Huizinga's work, and is based on the idea that "games are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (Huizinga 10). The magic circle defines the boundaries necessary to separate the game world from the real world (Salen and Zimmerman, ch.9). Although almost all game definitions specify a game takes place in a time and space apart from the real world, the question remains as to who defines these parameters. Game boundaries may be ordained (what the author intends the game to be), defined by technological constraints (what is contained in a given program, or what comes in the box), or socially attributed (what the play community recognizes as constituting the game). This study adopts a social, rather than technological or author-ordained, definition of the game: taking a broad view of game boundaries that presumes the boundaries of a game are as constructed and accepted by a play community. These boundaries may be redefined in play, as suggested by Gonzalo Frasca: "It is the player and not the designer who decides how to use a toy, a game, or a videogame. The designer might suggest a set of rules, but the player has always the final decision" (Frasca, Videogames of the Oppressed).

The digital game, or videogame, gives us some further considerations. Digital games rely on fully constructed virtual components that increase the opportunity for

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<sup>10</sup> Salen and Zimmerman acknowledge a definition of a phenomena as complex as games is going to encounter instances where the application of that definition is somewhat fuzzy, such as with puzzles (a subset of games) and Persistent Worlds (which often rely on players to create the game) (Salen and Zimmerman, ch.7).

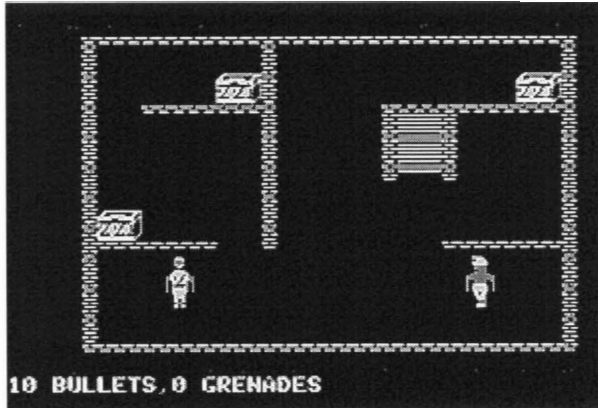
reconfiguration—they are malleable code worlds. Online games, in particular, allow for a social network that affords the use of games as media. The online environment also facilitates distribution networks, allows for the dissemination of instructions and advice, and lets players form impromptu project working groups. Even single player games, such as Maxis' *The Sims*, have the opportunity to become de facto multi-player games through the communities that spring up around them. According to Eriikki Huhtamao, digital games have become “an internalized model for an interactive relationship with the media, influencing other forms of computerized and computer-mediated communication” (Huhtamao). Part of this model lies in a participatory culture that encourages and enables players’ drive for agency through game elements of their own making.

### ***Player as Producer: Game Mods and External Artifacts***

Digital games are notable for their accommodation of player-created content and contexts. These games maintain a creation and dissemination culture that tends to be more prolific than any other type of popular medium, with the possible exception of electronic music’s DJ culture. In certain genres (notably the first-person shooter, or FPS), few popular games exist without sites devoted to exchanging tips and tricks, tools and modifications. Player production ranges from meta-gaming collectives to recombinant performances; from player-to-player design tools to game modifications (mods). It is estimated 10 to 20% of “hard-core gamers” alone participate in the creation and download of game modifications<sup>11</sup> (Au). Game mods are distributed on sites devoted to the review and download of both modifications and mainstream games, providing exposure and an assessment of quality. Player-content circulating among peer groups provides social fodder and novelty for players who may otherwise have grown tired of the core games (Herz, “Gaming the System”).

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<sup>11</sup> This data largely reflects First Person Shooter (FPS) mod makers (Au) that exist in the so-called “hard-core” gaming community. I would suspect the wider community of mod makers and users is much larger, particularly when low-level modifications such as Sims mods are included; although Frasca (Frasca) takes the opposing view, noting that given the relative number of mods to games, game modification must be an atypical practice. This is certainly an area where more quantified data is needed.



**Figure 5:** Screen capture, Muse Software's Castle Smurfenstein (1983). Apple //e Emulator. Figure by author.

Since the beginning of digital game production, hackers have reworked, reconstructed, and exchanged digital game code and ideas (Kushner). The close nature of early original and derivative works makes it difficult to define the first true game modification. If we're looking at player production in the general sense, game modification can be seen to originate with basic scenarios for early computer board game adaptations (Suciu), and text-based games (Kushner). However, in terms of taking an existing graphically-based game and completely reworking it, a mod called Castle Smurfenstein deserves recognition. Smurfenstein was a total conversion<sup>12</sup> for Castle Wolfenstein (a Nazi-themed shooter) that replaced the game's original cast and content with Smurf related materials (Au). However it wasn't until Doom that modification was intentionally integrated at the level of game design. Lead designer John Carmack authored the original Doom with modification in mind, intentionally separating game sprites into editable components called *wads*<sup>13</sup>. The extraordinary success and longevity of the Doom game is attributed to the resulting popularity and proliferation of Doom modifications: to this day, some of the most intense mod-making occurs in this genre.

Player creation has since blossomed in the gaming world, expanding beyond the modification of game code and graphic elements: to storyboards and photo albums<sup>14</sup>, movie-making, virtual art installations, cross-game guilds and collectives, and

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<sup>12</sup> One of the most difficult types of modifications to make, a total conversion overhauls the game entirely, including behaviours, levels and graphics. While the core engine is usually left untouched, mod makers are increasingly altering this code as well, as they build more complex behaviours.

<sup>13</sup> The separation of engine and content is now common practice among designers who wish to cater to the modification community.

<sup>14</sup> Particularly popular with The Sims.

various other diverse forms of appropriation, performance and expression. According to Salen and Zimmerman, player production can both expand *modes* of play (providing new ways of playing), and *contexts* available for the exchange of meaning. This production can either operate from the outside in (bringing new elements into the game) or from the inside out (using in-game elements for extra-game purposes)(ch.31). For example, players in Persistent World games such as Ultima Online and Everquest have held in-game weddings, created a virtual prostitute service (Kolbert), held online protests over Sony policy (Dodson), gathered for 9-11 candlelight vigils (Wadhams), held naked siege to virtual towns<sup>15</sup>, created seasonal events including a Santa Claus character (King), and acted out rituals (Condon), all without support or encouragement from the game creators, and often without the addition of new elements to the existing game. Players have remediated cinema in the form of *machinema*—the use of game engines to create and present movie-like scenarios. In some cases, entire games are used as part of a larger, meta-game, as is the case with collectives such as player guilds, which maintain their own rules and structures and often move nomadically from game to game.

What drives these players to assert their agency through the authorship of these kinds of artifacts? Celia Pearce likens game modification to a sort of “high-tech hobby culture,” similar to the model train culture of the 50’s and 60’s, often used “as an outlet for technological, creative, and sometimes, social expression” (Pearce, “Emergent Authorship”). Eriki Huhtamao notes strategies driven by ideology, reassertion of the player as co-creator, or the subversion of prevailing cultural relations in his survey of digital game hacks and patches. However, he cautions that this activist stance should not be overemphasized—that players have other motives ranging from humour to the demonstration of mastery (Huhtamao). Herz flags status as a primary motivator for game mod producers: player content is reviewed and downloaded, leading to personal accomplishment, laudatory emails, advice, and/or solicitations for other projects (Herz, “Gaming the System” 91). De Koven gives several reasons why a player may want to change the game: the game may not present enough of a challenge, the game presents too much of a challenge, or simply that the player is not playing the way in which they would like to be playing (De Koven 67). Far from ruining the game, changing the game restores equilibrium, and results in what is ultimately a more playable game.

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<sup>15</sup> Inflicted on the players of Microsoft’s Asheron’s Call, in 2001 (personal account).

The relationship between game companies and player-creators is often cited as an exemplar of the mutually complimentary contact that can exist between producers and consumers; often in stark contrast to the sometimes contentious relationship between music and film producers and fans in those media industries (Au; Pearce, "Emergent Authorship"). Many game companies rely on the creativity of "modders" for creative inspiration, to improve current games, or to work out complex technical challenges. Player-created content can extend the life of a commercial title by providing additional free material for players to download. This in turn encourages the purchase of the original game, the host engine, so that players can run an interesting or innovative modification. Huhtamao notes contact between primary and secondary authors is often tactile, familiar, and informal (Huhtamao). He states that, "[i]nstead of attacking a frightening monstrous alien, the game patch artist is really playing a[nother] game with a partner s/he knows, loves and, perhaps, hates" (Huhtamao). This familiar relationship is evident in the willingness for game developers to participate in online chats with game players, for developers to work with game hackers on independent projects, and in the number of former "modders" and toolmakers hired by game companies as developers. Most importantly, a perceived level playing field between designers and players reduces status barriers, to create an environment conducive to the fluctuation of agency in authorship.

This work takes a wide stance on what is considered a player-created artifact, in an attempt to break the synonymy between modification and player-production. As we have seen, players produce many kinds of extra-game artifacts: at both high and low skill levels, consisting purely of reappropriation of game materials, and the creation of social structures and other frameworks that maintain a meta-game. This thesis does, however, exclude *internal* artifacts: artifact creation systems that are explicitly built into games as part of regular gameplay. If I was to craft, for example, a sword in a game where this is a permissible action, I have not demonstrated an independent act of player creation, but an instantiation of a designer-created scenario. While some research appears to focus on oppositional content (Schleiner, "Cracking the Maze", "Parasitic Interventions"), or on the first person shooter modification community (Mactavish; Herz, "Harnessing the Hive"), I purposely



attempt to include artifacts that both extend and oppose the original work<sup>16</sup>, examine smaller modifications, and explore the boundaries of what may be considered player production.

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<sup>16</sup> This stance is influenced by Jenkins' (Jenkins 34) on fan culture, who cautioned about focusing solely on oppositional meanings.

## AGENCY AS AUTHORSHIP

*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 (De Koven 7).*

Games are virtualities—events must be instantiated through gameplay in order to exist. Because this act is such a fundamental part of a game, issues surrounding agency present themselves in various forms and at differing levels of the experience. The question of agency traces back to pre-modern philosophical discussions on free will—over the course of time, it has been centralized, distributed, attributed and dissolved. For the purpose of this thesis, agency is defined as *an attributed, contextual power to affect meaningful change*. This definition takes the position that agency, like authorship, is socially, and often self, attributed<sup>17</sup> —it may even be inferred (both from an individual and observer standpoint) from the behaviour it is presumed to cause (Marshall). This chapter presents a definition of authorship as the primary agency of the game player. To define authorship as agency means the digital game player is validated as an agent of change independent of the game designer. This agency is manifest in the secondary agency of the artifact produced by the author: whether it is an initial game design, or a player-created game element. In this context, meaningful change suggests the player is not merely instantiating the agency of another author, namely the game designer.

### ***An Interdisciplinary Survey of Agency***

Agency has often been contextualized for the internal structure of a mediated experience. Janet Murray provides an extensive description of the aesthetic of agency (defined by Murray as the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices) in interactive media, and Murray's Hamlet on the Holodeck is perhaps the definitive text in this arena. Murray describes the authorship of the author as providing the context for the agency of the interactor. In her more recent talks, Murray proposes the term *dramatic agency*, as the

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<sup>17</sup> This also suggests a rhetorical orientation for agency, as the experience must persuade as to a given attribution.

combination of agency (as an experience derived from interactivity) and the dramatic form (Murray, "Game-Stories"). Agency is presented not as an individual but a social experience, unfolding within the bounds of an author/interactor construct (Murray, Holodeck 152-153). Klastrup also looks at the relationship between author and interactor in her analysis of interactive experience (Klastrup). She argues "the programme" and the user have each their hierarchically defined mode of influence, respectively authorship and agency, where the latter unfolds within the boundaries defined by the former. One problem with this model is that neither Murray nor Klastrup incorporate a fluidity in this construct to allow for players' assertion of agency through an independent authorship. In addition, this construction of agency relies heavily on an internal definition of gameplay—the relationships are necessarily hierarchal if we don't look at any of the player behaviour that occurs outside the boundaries intended by the game designer. In this way, this definition implicitly excludes player-created artifacts as elements of the interactive work, and is less a framework for interaction than it is simply a description of a particular environment.

The issue that separates agency and authorship, according to Murray, is the embedding of the interactor's behaviour in a pre-defined (albeit mutable) context. If we ignore the artificial boundaries of Murray's framework, this demonstrates certain behaviours. In the authored environment, the game author maintains the agency of their authorship even through player actions that occur within the scope of their vision. The players are not authors of these actions, but reflect the agency of the game designer in creating a space of possibility. This does not contradict player agency, as players in turn play in mutable environments that allow them to follow suit: reconfiguring a game in certain ways, and creating authored manifestations of their own agency. The artifacts become tangible products of the authorship of both author and interactor—and games become a medium in which both parties may experience agency.

Alfred Gell proposes a model of agency that allows for the secondary agency of artifacts (Gell 17). Gell states aesthetic theories are too passive in their construction of art objects, and instead argues for art mediating social agency—made as a means of influencing the thoughts and actions of others. He uses artifacts as evidence of distributed agency of the artist, part and parcel of a distributed and extended self. This analysis extends beyond art and anthropological theory: Gell uses, as an example, the agency of a landmine lying both with the "soldier + landmine" agent, and in the capacity to will its use (e.g. with the officer who directs the placement of

such a mine in the first place). In this scenario, it is the officer that is considered an *agent*; the soldier and landmine are considered *patients*—potential agents, capable of acting as an agent or being the locus for agency (Gell 22). Gell uses what he calls the *Art Nexus*; a matrix that allows us to place relationships between artist (artist), audience (recipient), work (index), and object of representation (prototype—if applicable) in different contexts with regard to agency. For example, in the case of a commissioned artwork, the artwork would extend the commissioner’s agency rather than that of the actual painter: the painter simply instantiates the commissioner’s agency. This model also proves relevant to performance—for example, in examining the relationship between the musical composer and the performer who brings the work into being.

		AGENT			
		Artist	Index	Prototype	Recipient
P A T I E N T	Artist	Artist as source of creative act Artist as witness to act of creation	Material inherently dictates to artist the form it assumes	Prototype controls artist's action. appearance of prototype imitated by artist. Realistic art.	Recipient cause of artist's action (as patron)
	Index	Material stuff shaped by artist's agency and intention	Index as cause of itself: 'self-made' Index as a 'made thing'	Prototype dictates form taken by index	Recipient the cause of the origination and form taken by the index
	Prototype	Appearance of prototype dictated by artist. Imaginative art.	Image or actions of prototype controlled by means of index, a locus of power over prototype	Prototype as cause of index Prototype affected by index	Recipient has power over the prototype Volf sorcery.
	Recipient	Recipient's response dictated by artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. Recipient captivated.	Index source of power over recipient. Recipient as 'spectator' submits to index.	Prototype has power over the recipient. Image of prototype used to control actions of recipient. Idolatry	Recipient as patron Recipient as spectator

**Figure 6:** The Art Nexus, from *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* by Alfred Gell (1998). Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

This approach ties in well with the kind of epistemic rhetoric we will use to examine player authorship. Gell supports a distributed agency, as implied by a distributed self (Gell 98); a view that is further bolstered by the work of cultural

theorist N. Katherine Hayles (Hayles). According to Hayles, distributed cognition in the Posthuman<sup>18</sup> implies distributed agency as well, for multiplying the sites at which cognizing can take place also multiplies the entities who can count as agents. While Posthuman theory, as represented by Dawkins (the Selfish Gene) and Deleuze and Guattari (the Body without Organs), attempts to dissolve agency, agency is often merely displaced at the convenience of the authors (onto concepts such as memes, or in chaos theories, initial constraints). This displacing tendency aligns with Gell's portrayal of agency as relational, context-dependent, and attributed; a view supported in this thesis.

I would also stress agency occurs in a social substrate (as is implied by relational and attributed), and is a temporal process (which relates to context). This second point can be supported in the work of social psychologists Emirbayer and Mische, who construct an exhaustive temporal framework for agency. They provide a thoughtful conceptual analysis of agency as a social phenomenon that occurs in time—"a temporally embedded process of social engagement informed by the past but rooted in the present and envisioning the future" (Emirbayer and Mische). This temporality is important in analysing the discourse surrounding secondary authorship in the context of a shared social reality. The temporal nature of agency supports the dramatizing of events and beliefs in the play community, as agency is attributed with regard to a shared social vision.

### ***Negotiating Designer/Player Agency Through Artifacts***

The literature suggests a variety of ways to conceptualize agency within digital games. The first is to follow the lead of Murray and Klastrup, and hierarchically define an interactor's agency as unfolding within the agency of the author. This view is similar to a traditional narrative view of the relationship between author and reader. Another possibility is to move entirely in the opposite direction: to return to Landow, and deny the author's agency in favour of the interactor.

However, I think it is more appropriate to adapt Gell's model of the secondary agency of an art object and his nexus of patient/agent (recipient/author) relationships to examine the digital game experience. The game author maintains a

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<sup>18</sup> Hayles sums up Posthuman philosophy as follows: "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, root teleology and human goals" (Hayles).

secondary agency in the game which is subsequently instantiated by the player. The author cannot be primarily responsible for the experience without interfering with interactor agency: the author's relationship to the text of the game is similar to that of the composer, creating the capacity for the occurrence of an experience (that is subsequently "performed" by a secondary agent). The role of the author in this setting is, to paraphrase Pearce, creating context, rather than content<sup>19</sup>. This invites the player to bring the game into being, in essence, to "[play] the story" (Pearce, "Emergent Authorship"). However, this potential for agency also extends to the game player, through the creation of game artifacts. These artifacts then carry the secondary agency of the game player, rather than the designer, and as such, demonstrate authorship.

Language only contributes to a hierarchal construction of derivative authorship. The *author* enjoys a privileged status as the originator of any given work. The terms used to describe those that would then rework this original are immediately disadvantaged by the language, which connotes a lesser value to their work: "derivative," "secondary," "parasitic;" even the prefix "re-" connotes a lesser status. Perhaps we can look outside Western culture for a less political framing of this relationship: maybe the "ying" author/"yang" author would be more appropriate. For clarity, I have chosen the terminology of the primary and secondary author. Despite the implicit hierarchy, this is not intended to necessarily indicate an embedded or value-loaded relationship: the work of the secondary author has the potential to surpass original, and the scope of the secondary author's agency need not reside within the boundaries of the former.

## **Primary Authorship**

A primary author, in this context, is the acknowledged creator of a game that does not rely on a prior work to the extent that it would be considered a derivative. I would like to emphasize that the purpose of this work is not to argue against the role of the primary author, but to create space for player agency as manifest in secondary authorship. If internal gameplay is viewed as an extension of designer agency, then players are left to negotiate the efficacy of scripted actions within these environments. States Murray: "There is a distinction between playing a creative role

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<sup>19</sup> Although this context may maintain ideological constraints that may still influence the direction of player authorship.

within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself” (Murray, [Holodeck](#) 152). Murray calls authorship by which one establishes a domain of action *procedural authorship*. For Murray, procedural authorship involves both creating texts and the rules by which texts appear; in her words “creating a world of [narrative] possibilities” (Murray, [Holodeck](#) 152-153). Her interpretation of derivative authorship as an authorship of a particular performance, relates to the idea that these actions are merely the reflection of another’s agency, rather than an expression of player agency. While Murray states “exerting power over enticing and plastic materials is not authorship, but agency” (Murray, [Holodeck](#) 153), it could be argued this is neither—rather it is an expression of authorial agency that, if well designed, allows for player efficacy. The construction of primary authorship only becomes problematic when it excludes both extra-game player activity (such as player-production) and emergence, or when it privileges a definition of the game which may lessen the value of the play experience and privilege authorial intent. In a medium that necessitates active reception (interaction), this position, in my view, should spark contention.

## **Secondary Authorship**

A secondary author, for the purpose of this study, is one that relies on a previous work (although not necessarily an original work) as material for the assertion of their own agency in producing a cultural product. Because of the focus on the agency of the secondary author, this does not include works that are merely instantiations of another author’s agency. Espen Aarseth argues that to be an author is to “have configurative power over content, genre, form. To control poetic elements and create new ones” (Aarseth 164). He goes on to stress, as I have, that authorship depends on a *recognition* of authorship: that it is a social, rather than technological construct (Aarseth 172). Examples of secondary authorship in the wider mediated environment include both parasitic and tactical works, such as fan fiction, music sampling, and some forms of graffiti. In game cultures, players create secondary artifacts that make diverse use of the primary object. This may include virtual performance (particularly popular in Persistent Worlds such as [Ultima Online](#) and [Everquest](#)), meta-gaming (such as puzzle-solving collectives and inter-game guilds), crafting (popular in [The Sims](#)), even creating new games from old (as in [Counter-Strike](#), a modification of the game [Half-Life](#)).

Secondary authorship has experienced a cultural insurgence, due perhaps in part to the popularity of remediation and self-referential, ironic cultural criticism that tears away at the reverence of the primary author. However, we can credit, in part, the practices of the primary authors that attempt to distance the primary work from the expression of their own agency. For example, when John Carmack (Doom) chose to tailor his primary game production to assist further secondary production, he described the open game as a “new canvas” for the game player. Carmack’s isolating of the core game engine, making it easier to add new sound, graphic and level elements, has been described as “an ideological gesture that empowered players” (Kushner). Players are not bound to instantiate Carmack’s agency through the production of new cultural products in order to play the game—however, they do gain easier access to the elements required to author new game artifacts<sup>20</sup>.

Game players demonstrate their agency not through the following of another creator’s script, but through their authorship of artifacts. The following chapters present an analysis of selected game artifacts from a rhetorical perspective. What interestingly emerges is not only a picture of these artifacts as media, carrying the messages of an independent secondary author, but a deep structure that presents the argument for agency through the work itself. A conversation is revealed between the primary and secondary author, in which the latter presents a social reality in which their agency lies in authorship. If we accept agency as a socially defined and attributed phenomenon, and authorship as the demonstrated agency of the game player, then we will have introduced a new type of author into the digital game environment: the player-author.

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<sup>20</sup> In a sense, these modifications reflect both agencies— the agency of the player in creating an artifact, and the agency of Carmack in creating a space for player agency (*a capacity to will its use*).



## METHODOLOGY

### ***Games and Rhetoric***

Rhetoric can be defined as *the management of symbols in order to coordinate social action*. Although rhetoric has traditionally focused on written and spoken discourse, it has also proven useful in analyzing other symbolic modes, including communication designed to transcend time and context (Hauser 23). Rhetoric focuses on the *process* of communication, often through the interpretation of rhetorical artifacts<sup>21</sup>. The rhetorical implications of implicitly or explicitly embedded ideological structures in both games and play have been examined by a number of researchers; including Sutton-Smith (Sutton-Smith), Gonzalo Frasca (Frasca, *Videogames of the Oppressed*), Rune Klejver (Klejver), and Salen and Zimmerman (ch.30). The rhetorical nature of games creates interesting questions of agency—whether it is in considering the rhetorical implications of manifesting an author’s agency, or examining the rhetoric of player agency in the creation of game artifacts (as is presented in the following chapters).

### **Player Products as Rhetorical Artifacts**

Rhetorician Sonia K. Foss defines a *rhetorical artifact* as the tangible product of a rhetorical act, executed in the presence of a rhetor’s intended audience. A rhetorical act can include anything that is produced out of a particular rhetorical or persuasive need, including non-combative persuasion (persuasion that does not intend to change the position of the audience, but to gain appreciation for the position of the speaker (Foss 5)). The scope of the artifact depends on the type of analysis and the phenomenon being examined. Contemporary rhetoricians have attempted to expand the scope of what may be considered a rhetorical artifact, particularly when taking an epistemic view of rhetoric<sup>22</sup>, and when attempting to study cultures socially constructed through language (Boese, etc.). Communication acts are often too ephemeral to properly study outside a rhetorical artifact. This is particularly true in

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<sup>21</sup> Although in popular discourse, it is these artifacts that are referred to as *rhetoric*.

<sup>22</sup> *Epistemic*: relating to the origin and nature of knowledge. In epistemic rhetorical methodologies, rhetoric does not only give effectiveness to truth, it creates truth (Foss 122).

the case of player-artifacts in digital games, where the artifact may exist in a narrow window (for example, if it consists of a live performance, or if it is ordered removed by the primary author/host.) Another advantage to the study of game artifacts is that both games and the online discourse surrounding them are mediated. As communication operates through an artifact, the artifact itself becomes a co-conspirator in the rhetoric—reflecting Marshall McLuhan's oft-quoted “the medium is the message.” Expression through a game artifact thus communicates both through its explicit message, and the implicit messages that exist as part of the artifact-in-game.

### **Epistemic Views of Rhetoric**

A third perspective on artifact analysis rests on the implicit assumptions of the theory used in analysis. A rhetorical theory may hinge on reconstructing the intent of the speaker through the artifact; or it may view the artifact as the site of communication, acquiring meaning at the site of interpretation. In the case of the latter, the interpretation of the artifact trumps authorial intent (although the influence of this intent is not discounted in the potential interpretation.) This is an example of the epistemic view of rhetoric: that rhetoric creates meaning. Epistemic rhetoric is a prominent feature in contemporary rhetorical theory, including the work of Kenneth Burke, Stephen Toulmin, Chaim Perelman and Ernest Bormann (Golden, Berquist & Coleman). It is also an important construct for this argument—when players create artifacts that manifest their agency as authors, the interpretation of these artifacts builds a subjective reality for players that includes the player-author.

### ***Fantasy Theme Analysis***

Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) is a dramatist<sup>23</sup> rhetorical methodology created by Ernest Bormann, based on the assumption that individuals in rhetorical transactions create subjective worlds of common expectations and meanings (Bormann, “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision” 400). Bormann's theory is influenced by the work of Robert Bales on the dynamic process of group fantasizing in small group communication. According to Bales, small group fantasizing both correlates to individual fantasizing

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<sup>23</sup> *Dramatism* is a rhetorical theory introduced by Kenneth Burke: it explores motivation in communication through the grammar of drama. Its core assumptions are that language use constitutes action (as opposed to motion, which is non-symbolic), and that humans develop and present messages in the dramatic form (Foss 455).

and extrapolates to speaker-audience fantasizing<sup>24</sup> (Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 396). FTA allows a group to link together interpreted themes to develop a common culture: the group's shared fantasies<sup>25</sup> serve to reinforce common experience and create a set of shared expectations. Group fantasizing explains why so much successful rhetorical communication simply reiterates what the audience already knows (Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 399).

Fantasy Theme Analysis is based on Bormann's theory of *symbolic convergence*. Foss defines the principles of symbolic convergence as: 1) that communication creates reality; and 2) that individual meanings for symbols converge to create a shared subjective reality (Boese L22<sup>26</sup>). The basic unit for the construction of a shared worldview is the *fantasy theme*, a public and creative interpretation of events that occurs after the fact—in other words, a relay or dramatization of these events. FTA views the recurrence of a fantasy theme in group rhetoric as evidence it is being shared (Bormann, "10 Years Later" 294), and symbolic convergence is taking place. Fantasy themes are based on a dramatic grammar, and categorized as to action (plot), character and setting. Themes that become so prevalent or salient that they are referred to in shorthand (e.g. Open Source), become a *fantasy type* (Bormann, "10 Years Later" 295). These fantasy types may serve to invoke multiple characters, events and settings familiar to that particular rhetorical community (for example, "Open Source" as a fantasy type may bring to mind Linus Torvalds, computer hacking, Linux, "information wants to be free," the hacker ethic, etc.). New events may become a member of that fantasy type, of which a particularly notable fantasy is an exemplar (Bormann, "10 Years Later" 296). Inside jokes are good examples of fantasy types—coded phrases or words that have meaning for the rhetorical community, but may appear cryptic to an outsider.

Both fantasy themes and types come together to form a larger, composite dramas, called *rhetorical visions*. Rhetorical visions come to influence, not only a shared group reality, but strategies of communication within that group. According to Bormann "[p]articipants [in a rhetorical vision] come to share the interpretation of the drama, the emotions, meanings, and attitudes of the drama towards the

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<sup>24</sup> A self-similar, fractal construction.

<sup>25</sup> The word *fantasy* is used in Fantasy Theme Analysis not in the sense of the popular culture genre, but rather as "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events" (Foss 123).

<sup>26</sup> Boese's thesis is an online work. The letters and numbers listed demarcate paragraph references included in the original.

personae and the action. They come to share a common view of an aspect of their common experience" (Bormann, "10 Years Later" 304). The rhetorical vision is, in essence, the larger dramatic narrative of the group—how it views itself and the outside world. The rhetorical vision is not, however, part and parcel of group membership. Members of a common culture or cause may have similar goals, but distinct rhetorical visions—as an example, pro-choice arguments may have a rhetorical vision that does not believe abortion is morally wrong, as well as a vision that may oppose abortion but support women's right to choose.

One assumption of dramatist methodologies is that motive does not exist to be expressed in communication, but rather arises in the expression itself, and comes to be embedded in the rhetorical vision that both generates and serves to sustain it (Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 406). In other words, motive is often attributed during the group interpretation of meaning (in turn influenced by a rhetorical vision). According to Bormann, to view motives as embedded in the rhetorical vision makes it possible to check a critic's insights by going directly to the rhetoric rather than relying on inferences about psychological entities often unavailable for analysis (Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 407). The motive of a rhetorical vision is the essence of *where (one is) coming from* in the (potential) presentation and reception of an argument. The rhetorical analysis in this thesis will attempt to demonstrate the rhetorical vision of the player-producer community is that of player authorship, motivated by the agency of the player-author.

### **Structure of the FTA Method**

Sonja Foss provides a thorough framework for conducting a Fantasy Theme Analysis, breaking the analysis down into three stages: finding evidence of shared fantasies, coding for fantasy themes, and finally the construction of the rhetorical vision (126-129). In the first stage, the artifact is examined for evidence of symbolic convergence—that group members are sharing interpretations of common ground. This may be evident in conversational threads, the presence of fantasy themes, or in the repeated occurrence of any cultural object (be it a particular subject, visual element, stylistic presentation etc.) Evidence of shared fantasies may also occur outside the group itself in discourse related to the group (for example, the frequent mention of a theme, analogy or narrative in media accounts). The second stage involves a careful analysis of the artifact, noting references to characters, settings and actions as possible fantasy themes. In the third stage, the researcher identifies

major and minor fantasy themes—major themes may be demonstrated by the number of occurrences of the theme in the artifact, and/or by its ability to subsume minor themes. A rhetorical vision is then constructed from patterns in the identified fantasy themes. For example, characters may be linked to certain settings and actions, to provide an interpretation of group experience.

### **Fantasy Theme Analysis as Game Research Methodology**

Fantasy Theme Analysis is primarily used to study social movements and cultures (Boese L22). Researcher Christine Boese suggests this method is particularly well suited for cyberspace, “a place that is not really a place,” due to the need to create common ground in this entirely mediated environment. For participants in an online culture, “some sort of shared reality is necessary, perhaps even an extended set of shared metaphors that construct an interface” (Boese L22). The digital game culture examined in this research similarly exists in the online environment: using discussion boards, websites, and game artifacts to communicate and to form a rhetorical community. Even when the game itself is not online (for example, The Sims), an online community forms over the exchange of information, artifacts and commentary. If agency is defined as socially recognized and attributed, Fantasy Theme Analysis should help in revealing a rhetorical vision of player agency as demonstrated by the player-producer culture.

Bormann aimed Fantasy Theme Analysis at bringing humanist-style research together with social science and a grounded and adaptive symbolic convergence theory. Some implementations of the methodology go so far as to triangulate the rhetorical data with quantitative methods and Q-sorts. However, Boese believes the method can also be adapted to post-modern cultural critique because “the particular focal point of analysis is on dramatized fantasy themes and rhetorical visions within the cultural contexts in which they are chained out” (Boese L24a). Like Boese, this thesis situates the motives and vision of the player-producer within its cultural context: the agency of the player-author is validated by the play community, as is consistent with a rhetorical vision that sees player agency manifest in the independent creation of game artifacts.

## ***Research Design***

The first stage of this study was to survey the range of player-created artifacts, including game mods, machinima, events and performances, tools, guilds and collectives, and other demonstrations of extra-game player production. An extensive list of over 50 media accounts were also collected<sup>27</sup>, providing some insight into how the community presents itself (and to a lesser extent is interpreted by) mainstream culture. From these examples, 3 artifacts were chosen that I believe reveal interesting aspects of player production: because of their popularity, because they test the boundaries of player-artifacts, or because they are particularly contentious in the game community. The artifacts chosen are also distinct in their relationship to the game itself: operating from a variety of positions in relation to (a) core game/s.

The next stage was to define the boundaries of these artifacts. As all three artifacts operate in a networked environment (again, raising Foucault's question of the imposed limits of textuality), boundaries were necessarily delineated to provide scope to the analysis. The player product itself was used as a core from which to ground the artifact, although supplementary information was used to support the rhetorical construction surrounding this product<sup>28</sup>. The artifacts were then analysed with a focus on authorship relating to agency; through views of the primary author (opposition/extension), and views of the player-author (legitimacy, ownership and access). These positions were explored through the identification of dramatized themes in the artifact: characters, settings (including environment and meta-setting), and actions, and are manifest in the visual, textual and gameplay elements of the game artifact. From the fantasy themes revealed in this analysis, a rhetorical vision emerges: support for the underlying centrality of agency through authorship in the formation of player-producer reality. This drama is played out in the game environment through artifact creation, and focuses on the characters of both the primary and player authors.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://shinyspinning.com/links.php>

<sup>28</sup> Data points are available in **Appendix A**.

## RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

### *Rhetorical Artifacts*

In order to demonstrate the rhetoric of the player-producer community, three artifacts were chosen that illustrate the diversity of player production. The first of these is modifications for The Sims, a popular and often cited example of a game that implicitly relies on player creation for satisfying gameplay. The second is an artifact for the game Counter-Strike, a set of peace-themed sprays for a graffiti modification called Velvet-Strike. This work is a good example of activist activity through game artifact creation. The third work stretches the boundary of player-themed activity. Collective Detective is a puzzle solving collective that operates on both legitimate games and through selecting/creating puzzle components in games.

### **The Sims (Mods)**

Maxis' The Sims is one of the most popular computer games of all time, due to its broad appeal and massive online community support. The Sims has been described as a "dollhouse" game; a lifestyle simulator where you can direct the experience of AI-directed game characters indirectly through directing their paths, choices and household purchases. While The Sims is a single-player game (notwithstanding its online counterpart, The Sims Online), the proliferation of player-created game additions and tools are a significant presence online: so much so that it has been said that players created "the Sims Online" before lead designer Will Wright<sup>29</sup>. The Sims modular file structure readily accepts player-created add-ons, and Wright is often quoted in support of player production.

### **Velvet-Strike**

Velvet-Strike is a set of peace-themed sprays for a Counter-Strike graffiti patch called Counterspray. These sprays are publicly available for download off the Velvet-Strike website. A player would use the Velvet-Strike sprays in conjunction with Counterspray to introduce new graphic "graffiti" elements onto surfaces within a

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<sup>29</sup> Wright estimates player content "probably outnumbers the stuff we've created, 9 to 1" (Kushner).

multi-player Counter-Strike<sup>30</sup> game session. The Velvet-Strike sprays were conceived as a protest against the Bush “war on terrorism,” and invites submission of sprays related to this cause to the collection. The Velvet-Strike message is carried not only through the sprays themselves, but through the accompanying website, which includes a manifesto, the display of support messages and flames<sup>31</sup>, and the showcase of exemplary sprays, as well as instructions on how to download the necessary Counterspray patch. Velvet-Strike is the product of a team of well-known academics/artists: Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon, and Jean Leandre, although it is Schleiner to whom the manifesto is credited, and who appears to act as a spokesperson for the project.

### **Collective Detective**

Collective Detective bills itself as the world’s only complete collective gaming and immersive entertainment community. The members of this collective do not necessarily play any one game: instead, they isolate and solve online puzzles as part of a joint effort that involves information collection and the sharing of ideas and insights. Collective Detective exists in a unique space of meta-gaming, in which players join together for a multi-player puzzle solving experience that may or may not reflect the authored experience of any one game. While the collective's efforts primarily focus on immersive entertainment titles, they have also been known to “lit” on games designed for individual or contextual problem solving. This artifact pushes the boundaries of what is considered a game artifact, as Collective Detective player-members may construct their own game experience by recontextualizing aspects of other games (namely puzzles) as a collective problem-solving game.

These artifacts were analysed by examining the game contributions in and of themselves, in conjunction with supplementary material, such as player commentary and in some cases media accounts (again, these data points are detailed in **Appendix A**). Some examples, such as Velvet-Strike, are relatively self-contained in terms of their boundaries: you can download the Velvet-Strike mods and access the supporting materials in one location, as organized by the modification's creators.

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<sup>30</sup> Counter-Strike is not a persistent game, but a multi-player first-person shooter that allows you to play against a select number of players on a chosen server. Counter-Strike is a publicly available game modification itself, for Valve's Half-Life, a commercial first-person shooter (FPS).

<sup>31</sup> A *flame* is any intentionally inflammatory or derogatory posting, usually intended to provoke an argument.



Other examples, such as mods for The Sims, span hundreds of community and fan sites, and the materials analysed are a best attempt to examine the most influential and salient examples of player-created materials. The data was collected with the intention of providing enough materials to allow for substantive analysis, without claiming to be an exhaustive representation of all exchange surrounding a given artifact.

### ***Fantasy Themes of Secondary Authors***

Because of the diversity of the artifacts examined for this study, different artifacts reflect different segments of player-producer culture. Often these subcultures demonstrate distinct rhetorical visions within the overarching vision of player agency—for example, in one case a mod will be criticized for its lack of technical sophistication, while in another game, a player will apologize for the aesthetic appearance of a tool. In one subculture, a player will question the value of a total conversion, while in another, a player will make a series of objects without regard to integration with the game. Despite the differences in motive between groups, the artifacts produced maintain a vision of agency that is fundamental to the presentation of any subsequent arguments. The fantasy themes center around perceptions of both the player and primary author in the context of the work.

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#### **Fantasy Themes of Player-Authors**

<b>Sims (Mods)</b>	<b>Velvet-Strike</b>	<b>Collective Detective</b>
<b><i>Character Themes</i></b>		
(Authors) as Creatives	(Authors) as Gamers	(Authors) as Design Leaders
Maxis/Wright as Primary Author	(Authors) as Subversives	(Value of) the Collective
	Ignorant or Unreflective Player	
<b><i>Setting Themes</i></b>		
Economic (Pay vs. Free)	(Game as) Forum/Public Space	New Genre
		Mystery (extended metaphor)

<b>Action Themes</b>		
Thanks and Credit	Protest	Efficiency
Everyone Develops		Development (Advising Development)
Inclusion (in Core Game)		Solving
Collection and Exchange (as Game)		

**Table 1:** Summary of Fantasy Themes of Player-Authors<sup>32</sup>

These fantasy themes are analysed in the next section according to their relationship to the primary and secondary author: *Legitimacy, Ownership and Access Themes* reveal the claim for the validity of independent authorship, and the empowerment of other secondary authors; and *Opposition and Extension Themes* display support or contestation of the primary author.

### **Characterizing the Player-Author: Legitimacy, Ownership and Access**

With agency a socially attributed and recognized category, it is important for the secondary author to make a claim for the legitimacy of their authorship. Often this argument is implicit, and directed towards both the primary game author (the most likely source for challenge) and indirectly to the game community that must ultimately attribute agency. At the heart of the argument is the assertion that the player-author has presented a valid claim for agency in the creation of a new game element. As such, they are seen as the owner of the resulting artifact. Promoting access and awareness of secondary authorship provides the opportunity to create critical mass in the community that affects norms and values in relation to player agency. On a broad level, it is access to the medium that has allowed players to assert their agency through authorship. Access is an empowering message for the game player, which may boost the ethos of the secondary author, increasing receptivity to their message.

#### ***Velvet-Strike***

Some arguments towards legitimacy are more complex than others. The creators of Velvet-Strike, to a certain extent, benefit from the illegitimacy of their position implicit in the construction of their subversive character. As subversives, they can

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<sup>32</sup> A detailed coding of fantasy themes is available in **Appendix B**.

flaunt the criticism directed their way, they can disrupt the standard game experience that they oppose, and gain tactical advantage with the activist/artistic community by incurring the disapproval of the establishment and the non-reflective player/modder. States Schleiner:

[...] even the negative feedback I consider a success because it forced people to define their positions and also forced some strange people to come out of the woodwork (the sorts of people you see in Michael Moore's "Bowling for Columbine").

(Anne-Marie Schleiner, interview for [SonarOnline](#))

It is also important to recognize that while Velvet-Strike does uphold the worldview of the game community with respect to agency (as will be discussed further in this analysis), its primary audience is a largely external community of artists and activists. The Velvet-Strike sprays maintain an overt political message that does not address the game community directly, but instead appeals to outside groups—it is in some ways, both outsider and insider.

Velvet-Strike walks a fine line. Although their illegitimacy works for them in some contexts, they must still court the player community for legitimacy if they are to be recognized as player-authors. Velvet-Strike attempts to achieve this legitimacy through the establishment of an **(Authors) as Game Player** character, which serves to sanction their role as player-author. The establishment of *gamer credentials* can be seen in the assertion that the creators of Velvet-Strike do play games, enjoy shooters (in terms of acceptable values: social, complexity, and aesthetics), understand game production and technical structure (as in a response to the size of character meshes), have historical knowledge of the genre, and do not necessarily oppose violence (an issue that continually plagues the game community). There are also nods to hacker culture in the use of copyleft (in the Manifesto and on the site) and the opposition to censorship. To be legitimate player-producers, at least in the hard-core mod community that surrounds games such as Counter-Strike, the Velvet-Strike team must be seen first as gamers. They must gain the recognition, in this genre, as part of a particular community of secondary authors.

Although not a primary theme in the artifact, Velvet-Strike promotes access in two ways: indirectly by invoking hacker and open source values (which in themselves promote open access and freedom of information), and directly by inviting other players to "submit," "send (us) your own," remake the real, and "intervene" under the banner of the project. Players are encouraged to contribute

both sprays and intervention recipes, with one group (Banner-Art Collective) hosting “Banner-Strike,” a contest for the best Velvet-Strike sprays.

### ***Sims Mods***

Mod makers in The Sims community experience a slightly different cultural space surrounding their authorship. The Sims, as a game, largely appeals to a different target demographic than the multi-player shooter genre that much intensive player-production surrounds. There is less precedence for Sims mods (despite their proliferation in recent years), that would help build expectations of what a player artifact should be. As a result, the Sims community faces less of an internal challenge to their legitimacy. On the contrary, player-production surrounding The Sims tends to be extremely supportive of new developers and an extensive array of tools and community sites exist to encourage modifying the game.

Most of the rhetoric of legitimacy in the Sims player-producer community is thus focused externally, to supporting the agency of Sims players as creators in their own right. The **(Authors) as Creatives** role in The Sims is characterized by a willingness to tie in to a larger network of fellow authors in the support of a meta-game that consists of making, displaying and exchanging objects. Because of the openness of players to new creators, and also in part to the game demographics, there is a large base of technically simple game modifications, notably skins<sup>33</sup> for characters and objects. Technical wizardry is less important than aesthetics: items that are attractive receive a great deal of social validation. There is a wider range of differentiation in terms of roles for the player-producer: one can skin walls, floors, and characters exclusively, recolour objects, create new objects, change behaviours, build tools etc., although the producer base thins dramatically as the artifacts increase in technical sophistication.

**Thanks and credit** are extremely important to the community, as they reinforce value in the legitimacy of player authorship. Redistribution of player artifacts is strictly forbidden, as is downloading known stolen files or altering another player's work without permission. Stealing is a frequent topic of commentary for the Sims player-producer, depictions range from “an irritating faux pas” to “we hate

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<sup>33</sup> A *skin* is an adjustment of the current graphic appearance of an in-game object. Skins are often easier to create than other modifications, as they involve no programming to change and the original graphics files on which they are based are often easily extracted and modified.

graphics thieves," and "we will not support theft sites." Responses like this one from secondary authors and players alike are prevalent:

In response to theft reports I've gotten from helpful community members, I remind potential thieves how Sims download fans despise thief sites. What we have is an aware, active, and generally ethical Sims community. What's the point of stealing if the audience they want is going to shun them? :)

("Waltzing Velveeta," interview on [TSR](#))

Simple acknowledgement can also drive the community, as it demonstrates a recognition of their work as legitimate creators. Player-producers and community members alike encourage others to recognize and appreciate their fellow modders:

I just read an email from the owner of a small Sims-site who needed someone to talk to about feeling unappreciated. She said no one ever emails her to say 'thanks' for the things she makes, and offers for free download. She's feeling so alone that she's thinking of closing her site, because she feels like no one cares...That's sad...and it made me think about all the times I've downloaded a bunch of stuff and not said 'thanks' to the person or people who created it. Maybe I was too busy with my downloading frenzy, or didn't feel like opening my email program. No excuse... It's just rude to take what someone has given and not say 'thank you'!

("Hairfish," posted on [Mall of the Sims](#))

It's important to not only recognize the people that put so much work into creating objects, but give them a pat on the back and respect their work. People like Claw and SimFreaks take pride in their work and work hard at producing new and unique objects that people use everyday. They should be commended for their contributions.

(Bil Simser, interview on [TSR](#))

This often spills into frustration, as is evident in an update to this popular creator's site, after being accused of stealing by another player:

It's only that I keep this website up here for people to enjoy, I have payed for the webspace I use for my downloads out of my own money, and I dont feel it's worth it [...] all they wanne do is destroy [...] and I'm sick if it!

("Trond," [simstitution](#))

Recognition from the primary game producer also plays into this theme, considering the communities view of its own value in promoting the life of the game. Player-creators recognize their role in attaching a compelling meta-game onto a sometimes dull primary game:

Without the community and downloads, I probably would have grown tired of the game within a couple of months...

("mrnocal," posted on [Mall of the Sims](#))

[...] Maxis have a lot to be thankful for, because if it wasn't for places like Mots<sup>34</sup>, and talented object creators, then this game would have died a very quick death.

(“Sticky,” posted on [Mall of the Sims](#))

As legitimate creators, the difference between player-artifacts and the core game become blurred, from a basic level in adopting the Sim-words pattern of the Maxis original (as seen in the site names “Persimmon Grove,” “My Funny Simmentine,” “Versimilitude,” and the laments of new creators in finding an available name that incorporates “Sim”), to a more aggressive demand for testing the core game with user-objects and backward compatibility for these objects in Sims expansion packs. This expectation of **inclusion** with the core game derives in part from the mingling of authored elements at the boundary of [The Sims](#).

This view of legitimacy creates a bit of a character conflict when it comes to the primary author. **Maxis** is often the target of negative response in terms of butting against the agency of the Sims mod community. Interestingly enough, when the primary author is seen as infringing on player agency, that author is named as Maxis; when player agency is supported, the primary author is seen as **Will Wright**. This makes sense in terms of Wright's character, as a Torvalds-type<sup>35</sup> hacker hero, who frequently praises the player-producer community and rhetorically supports their efforts<sup>36</sup>. Maxis, however is described as having a weak relationship with modders, as opposed to some companies (such as id and Valve) which are viewed as having an active support for the community. The company is portrayed as following (rather than taking) the lead, releasing lower quality tools (when at all), and, perhaps most damning, “forcing” users to “play their way.” Player evidence for this theme spirals around Maxis' closing of avenues for player creation, the lack of backward compatibility of new [Sims](#) expansions, and Maxis' hold on intellectual property such as editing tools and source code:

Seems they forgot about us sometimes, and sometimes it's pretty devastating to the community [...] I mean when Hot Date came out, no user created objects were able to be viewed downtown, until someone from the community not Maxis made a program to fix that problem. But then months

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<sup>34</sup> MOTS: [Mall of the Sims](#)

<sup>35</sup> Linus Torvalds, the original creator of the Linux operating system. Torvalds represents, what in FTA would be the character of the Hero: embodying the ideals of the hacker ethic.

<sup>36</sup> Although Pearce's 2003 interview (Pearce, “Sims, BattleBots, Cellular Automata and Go”) would suggest this support is limited to the context (or possibility space) Wright defines.

later Maxis released a program to do the same thing, but it still isn't up to par with the user-communities version!

(Chad Authier [7deadlysims], interview for [IGN](#))

Player's response to Maxis' assertion of their authorial privilege in designing the program their way, while ignoring player creation, certainly demonstrates a desire to be acknowledged as game creators in their own right:

[A]t the very least it should include testing in real situations where there is user created content added.

(Rick Halle [Simenhancer], interview for [IGN](#))

The company's perceived disregard for the value of the players' contribution to, what players see, as an integral part of the game experience becomes an obvious source of contention.

Sims modders and toolmakers have a strong emphasis on promoting access to Sims modification. This ranges from a support of the beginner-creator, or "newbie"<sup>37</sup>, to the offering of free materials for production, to a more wide ranging rhetoric that encourages everyone to develop. This **everyone can develop** theme begins with providing help and support for the low level player-producer. Automation, step-by-step, and ease of use are stressed. New tools also focus on ease of use, automation and simplicity, both in their presentation and the tasks which they accomplish. The tone of this presentation is often friendly and colloquial (for example, [Transmogrifier](#) tool users are dubbed "Tmoggers"). Higher level producers show an openness to requests and assistance, and encourage other production:

That was the idea for [Blueprint]. To allow anyone with little or no experience to build new goodies for the game and of course share them with the rest of the world.

(Bil Simser, interview on [TSR](#))

This extends to a call for Maxis to recognize the agency of [The Sims](#) players, through the support of tools and data structures that also encourage new development:

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<sup>37</sup> Newbie: Any novice computer user, or novice to a given computing environment.

One thing that Maxis should do eventually is release the Edith editor. The Sims mod community can already do everything that Edith can do. Creating and debugging new object without it is quite a chore. They have stated publicly that it would be made available to the Sims community. I want them to make good on that.

(James Sausville [Simwardrobe], interview for [IGN](#))

The differentiation between Maxis' attitude towards secondary authors and Will Wright's public support of player production also plays into this debate:

Will Wright had a dream that anyone would be able to customize the game to their heart's content. Unfortunately, the valuable Edith tool was blocked from release. Fortunately, a certain programming genius, created various other tools for us to partly achieve Will Wright's vision of the game [...] We are correcting a lack of fun in the program and we are making toys for others to enjoy.

([c & c enterprises](#), "hacking policy")

Player advocacy for user production demonstrates a worldview in the Sims creator community of open access for players to take the role of game author.

The **economic** setting of the Sims environment provides another channel for the theme of access. [The Sims](#) itself relies on a consumer model: the more you buy for your Sims, the happier they are. [The Sims](#) also attracts a more traditional audience in terms of ethics and values, creating an occasional contention between hacker ethic values and more mainstream consumerist models:

I believe 100% in the free software movement and wish more people would adopt that view. People say nothing is free in this world but I'm out to prove them wrong by offering my work for whatever niche I can fill.

(Bil Simser, interview on [TSR](#))

WHY would some of the same people who refuse to pay for a user-made download, or pay for a subscription site still agree to pay EA \$10 a month to play a game that they've already paid some \$40 for??? It boggles my mind.

("Hairfish," posted on [Mall of the Sims](#))

While players are prohibited from charging for objects themselves, websites frequently charge for access, often to cover bandwidth costs from frequent downloads. While this may increase legitimacy in terms of protecting the value of player artifacts, it also restricts access and thus counters the achievement of critical mass for the player-author.



## ***Collective Detective***

Collective Detective members continually validate the activity of the Collective as a game in of itself; through a rhetoric pronouncing a new form of gaming, and a new approach to standard games. This feeds into two themes: the **legitimacy of the collective**, and the role of **Collective Detective as leaders** in the emerging collective gaming genre. The value of **collectivity** is continually put forth as the key to the game experience: words and phrases such as “join,” “together,” and “team effort” run consistently throughout player posts and site messages on the Collective Detective hub, tools are perceived as “second to people.” This is also shown in opposition, such as questions over the standard puzzle reward system of “the prize,” awarded to the individual, as inconsistent with the purpose and spirit of Collective Detective.

Collective Detective positions itself as a de facto **creator of the games** it likes to play. This view is demonstrated through case discussion determining how they will affect (lead), define the genre, what games are and should be (manuals etc.), phrasing such as “tailor to us” and “ they must adapt.” It is also evident in the way games may be appropriated or puzzles may be extracted from existing games. That these Collective Detective elements are defined so often as “new” (new way of approaching, new form of gaming) with the inclusion of the collective, selective and cross-genre model argues for the legitimacy of the Collective members as authors of these game experiences. Game designers are invited to follow the models proscribed by Collective Detective, or, as is quoted in one article, “game developers watch out!” as Collective Detective assumes this control itself, carving out its own game space from the digital game environment. In Collective Detective, this is made even more apparent by the overlaying of an extended **Mystery metaphor** onto the game experience. Game elements are renamed “mysteries,” “clues,” and “cases;” players are “detectives” who “solve,” “investigate” or pick up a “trail.” The remapping of the semantic game experience allows players to take ownership—new experiences are simply appropriated into the players’ context.

## **Characterizing Primary Authors: Opposition and Extension**

Player created game artifacts can often be viewed as extensions or oppositions to the core game. Oppositional artifacts have been studied by researchers such as Schleiner (Schleiner, “Cracking the Maze”, “Parasitic Interventions”), Huhtamao

(Huhtamao), and LaFarge (LaFarge), and commonly take a critical stance on the core game or the game form. Extensions dominate what has been described by Mactavish (Mactavish) as the "culture of hardcore gaming," and often involves extending the conceptual or technical boundaries of the game, with the aim of creating what may be considered a superior game (although the motives for such production may be mixed). The opposition or extension stance of a given player-created artifact demonstrates a relationship with the primary author: an extension may reveal a perceived equality or even superiority, while an opposition may be a counter-argument against design intent<sup>38</sup>, or, in some cases, a disregard for the agency of the primary author. In the later case, extension may not exist in relation to the primary author's game, but relate instead to the secondary artifact. An example is in extending the primary game through meta-game activities that in turn become the game itself.

### ***Collective Detective***

Collective Detective members emphasize the actions they've taken to drive the "new" genre of the immersive game. This emerges in the sharing of meanings related to **directing and advising** primary game designers in the development of collective gaming environments. The Collective Detective site includes guides and player suggestions for "Puppet Masters"<sup>39</sup>. The discussion boards offer deconstructions of puzzle game experiences and means of improvement. The Collective itself offers member info (for a price) to developers interested in creating a more tailored experience for the members of Collective Detective. In all, Collective Detective is rather aggressive in providing the means for primary designers to create *the preferred experience of Collective Detective members*, as opposed to the other way around.

However, the group does not leave game development solely in the hands of the designers they advise. One of the puzzles they attempt to solve is how to create puzzle games out of existing game environments, including games in the Persistent World genre. This is formalized as a "case" on the group's discussion board, and

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<sup>38</sup> Although this is a process that in turn legitimizes the primary author as a creator of a meaning to be opposed.

<sup>39</sup> A term derived from an earlier collective, the Cloudmakers, on the alternate reality game nicknamed "The Beast," released as part of the marketing initiative for the movie AI. Members of Cloudmakers are among the founders of Collective Detective.

represents an active role in creating the desired game experience from original core games. Players post:

I think it would be very worthwhile to investigate the feasibility of immersive gaming inside The Sims Online [...] It seems at least possible, if perhaps difficult, to PM<sup>40</sup> a treasure hunt or mystery in-game. For now it's on the back burner, but I plan to investigate the capabilities of the SO<sup>41</sup> framework in relation to this idea.

("Timbojones," "In-game cases," Collective Detective forum)

I'm trying to figure out how you could technically do puzzles in the game. I know that you can have placards with messages, those could contain codes. I don't think you can pick up items and put them in your inventory, so we probably couldn't do a scavenger hunt that involves gathering items [...] Has anybody ever been to a murder mystery dinner? We could host something like that pretty easily and charge an entry fee. We'd write a mystery story, act out different parts, and then interact with the guests and let them ask questions. The person to solve the mystery gets a small prize.

("FrankenPaula," "Re: In-game cases," Collective Detective forum)

Other initiatives include the use of guilds<sup>42</sup> within games such as A Tale in the Desert (eGenesis) and Star Wars Galaxies (Sony) for both the mutual support of the collective and to pool information and collectively solve in-game quests. The theme of **solving** extends from the game play into the meta-game experience, and supports the reframing of an experience as a collective puzzle. As such, it allows Collective Detective players to absorb a variety of experiences into their game, extending the collective puzzle solving which is at the core of their game experience.

A third theme evident in the Collective Detective artifact is that of **efficiency**. The drive for optimal and improved experience is a common theme in player-production, including, as we will see, in games such as The Sims. Players stress how their creation (the Collective) allows them to achieve game goals "faster," "in weeks that would have taken others months to achieve", or long before scheduled/anticipated. In the words of one player:

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<sup>40</sup> Puppet-Master

<sup>41</sup> Sims Online

<sup>42</sup> This guild system, a player created framework of relationships and tasks, is common outside the Collective Detective experience as a way for players to add additional meta-structures onto a relatively unstructured Persistent World (also called Massive Multi-player Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), and Massive Multi-player Online Game (MMOG)) experience.

[...] again CD members are taking the world by storm! it would take ages to list what they have done they really have achieved so much in a very short space of time!

(“Paul,” “Collective Detective in MMORPG's,” Collective Detective forum)

Keywords such as “3 days” become symbols of past victories (through efficiency); in this case, the collective solving of the first stage of a puzzle game called Terraquest that was intended to last over a month<sup>43</sup>. This again ties the gameplay back to the player game, the puzzle, as opposed to any individual component game: in the competitive puzzle game, the core gameplay lies in rapid problem solving. Collective Detective’s efficiency speaks to the quality with which they’ve extended (their version of) the game experience, much improved over any single player intentions of the component game designer.

### ***The Sims***

The Sims skin and object makers also have a prominent rhetoric of game extension and improvement. Like Collective Detective, this theme focuses less on the original game and more on the player driven meta-game of collecting and sharing objects. In this sense, it both extends (by expanding the space of possibility) and opposes (by moving the focus away from the core game to the meta-game) the initial game design. Tool making in The Sims is predominantly for meta-game purposes: for the organization, sharing, and development of other player-created artifacts. While these items are frequently attributed to filling a “need” in the game, the game being referred to is not the core Maxis game, but the player-driven meta-game. Tools makers encourage creation by other player-producers (both explicitly and implicitly), and are said to produce better quality tools, faster than Maxis (which would make sense, as Maxis is likely focused on their own, primary game, rather than the user-driven meta-game). This tool maker’s post is representative of this line of argument:

When Hot Date first came out there was no way to use any user made content downtown. Maxis eventually release a program for The Sims that did allow such categorization. Many users found the program severely lacking. More specifically, it was very hard to find the object that you wanted to

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<sup>43</sup> The story goes that this eventually lead to the demise of Terraquest, forcing its producer, Mind-Quest Entertainment, to discontinue the game and refund player subscription fees (Ward). While this interpretation of events persists in the community (an excellent example of a fantasy theme), it is unsubstantiated by Mind-Quest, which claimed it simply did not have the resources to maintain the planned six month effort.

modify. My categorizing program, SimCategorizer, remains the most popular sims program of this type.

(James Sausville, Simwardrobe)

This producer goes on to state that while these tools are not obligatory (at least to play the core game), gameplay (notably the meta-game) "can be greatly enhanced by their use." **Toolmakers** thus **extend and improve** the game by fostering the meta-game activity players find most enjoyable.

### ***Velvet-Strike***

Velvet-Strike, on the other hand, makes a point of opposing the Counter-Strike game as opposed to extending it. The Velvet-Strike authors display a character-centric *us vs. them* dynamic that reflects their status as an oppositional group. The character of **the Subversive** is central: this role is emphasized through an established political rhetoric including the use of terms such as "manifesto," "graffiti," "capitalism," "consumption" and "politics." The tool of this subversive is graffiti (as opposed to vandalism), and the selection of this form of representation supports attempts to reframe the multi-player game environment as a public space. The Velvet-Strike producers and supporters are bolstered by a set of common allusions ("politics of the other," Orwell) and stylistics (in the use of ironic quotes and brackets). Their character is presented as logic driven, as opposed to the logical contradictions of players who oppose the Velvet-Strike patches (representing a simplistic logic, disregard for the "realism" of replay and inter-changeable game positions). The *us vs. them* dynamic is also supported by including a flame gallery on the Velvet-Strike website, showcasing personal attacks (revealing misogyny and homophobia) from game players to the Velvet-Strike group. The original game, Counter-Strike, falls under attack as an accomplice in the "binary logic" of "war on terrorism" rhetoric. While the true opposition of Velvet-Strike appears to be to the prevalence and adherence to this logic (as opposed to the game in of itself) on a global scale, the game becomes symbolic ground on which to fight this battle.

The protest action of Velvet-Strike borrows heavily from off-line models, reframing the **virtual space as a public forum** in which they are claiming a voice. The resistance encouraged by the site may disrupt the game experience (the graffiti sprays less physically than psychologically), or mimic real life forms of protest (such as sit ins and martyrdom). The site's inclusion of both supporting and opposing voices targeted at their patches further models an offline protest model. Rather than

using Counter-Strike as a game space, Velvet-Strike uses it as a setting for protest-themed performance art; less as persuasion in the context of the game itself, but (intentionally or unintentionally) as an appeal to the political activist community.

As Velvet-Strike attracts a fair amount of resistance from what may be considered a core gaming audience, it is also interesting to see how their status as an oppositional artifact is received in this community. The player counter-argument, “this is just a game,” rebuts the use of the game as a forum for political protest—it resists the reframing of the multi-player environment, instead supporting the original game design. Other critiques of the Velvet-Strike patches as technically simplistic and graphically poor demonstrate an expectation of game extension that speaks at cross purposes to the player-producer's opposition. However, this expectation of extension, rather than opposition, may reflect the community's relationship with the tradition of modification that traces back to the core game, Half-Life. Anne-Marie Schleiner alludes to the relationship between this culture and the Velvet-Strike sprays in interview:

I think it also depends on how open-minded gamer communities are. Some people just want to play the same type of games over and over again with slight variations in environments and characters. Other people are hungry for new types of games.

(Anne-Marie Schleiner, interview for SonarOnline)

The support for the modification community shown by the primary authors may vest potential secondary authors in a FPS modification tradition, encouraging extensions and creating a resistance to oppositional artifacts such as Velvet-Strike.

## Summary

The analysis of these select game artifacts reveals symbolic convergence in the sharing of fantasy themes relating to views of both primary and secondary authors. As these themes take hold in the community, they are continually reinforced as a shared worldview. This analysis also suggests several minor visions forming in game subcultures: themes that envision the game as a canvas for creative expression (themes that dominate Sims production), themes that are appropriated from art/activist rhetoric (as are prevalent in Velvet-Strike), and, although not predominant in these artifacts, themes that spiral around technical sophistication and status (themes that dominate the first person shooter mod community, although seen to a lesser extent in the drive of the Collective Detective group). However, even

when these minor visions are taken into account, a dominant rhetorical vision emerges in each of the distinct artifacts analysed: a worldview in which players hold the agency to author new game artifacts.

## THE RHETORIC OF PLAYER AUTHORSHIP

### *Agency as Rhetorical Vision*

Player-producers maintain a rhetorical vision of agency that both reflects the reality of their position as authors, and argues this reality to the primary producer and the community as large. This can be demonstrated most prominently through the fantasy themes revealed in the previous chapter relating to both the support or contestation of the primary author, and the claim for the validity of independent authorship.

First, player artifact themes address the question of legitimacy of authorship, making an important claim to the game community, including both the primary game author, other player-producers, and other players. This call is for the recognition of the player-producer's agency in the production of secondary artifacts to which they have a valid claim of authorship. The argument is essential as it is the game community that will assess the validity of such a claim. The ownership of said artifacts can then be attributed to the player-producer, an important supporting component in the construction of their agency. Themes of access also play a role, with player-producers encouraging other players to make similar claims, thus reinforcing their ethos as a significant segment of the player population. These themes are revealed in all three artifacts examined. While Velvet-Strike enjoys a tactical position as outsider, it courts recognition as a player-producer, and encourages like-minded activists to contribute to its initiative. Collective Detective members situate the game as part and parcel of the community itself, and in this way share the common vision of the Collective as creators of a new form of collaborative puzzle gaming, independent of the primary games it uses as part of its meta-game. Even its use of language, dominated by an extensive detective metaphor, shows that while players may be playing The Sims Online or Star Wars Galaxies, they're doing so as part of Collective Detective's game. The Sims modders are active in promoting the agency of the player-producer, particularly in providing support and tools for both new and current authors. Respect for the player-producer is a strong theme, both from game players and from the primary game author (Maxis/Wright). Like Collective Detective, the legitimacy of their authorship is also



facilitated by the presence of a player-driven meta-game that extends the boundaries of the primary game.

The secondary author's relationship with the primary author may be one that indicates co- or re-authorship. In the first case, players demonstrate their ability to extend the work of the primary author, most often in line with their personal vision than with regard to "authorial intent." In the latter (re-authorship), the work of the player-producer opposes authorial intent, although to some degree legitimizes it in the process. This framework of extension or opposition thus reflects the relationship of the player-producer in regard to the primary author. Collective Detective's secondary authors can be seen to both extend and oppose the games they absorb—according to their worldview, they extend the genre of collective gaming by providing models, data, and leading by example in their collaborative puzzle-solving and creation. However, this game may be unconcerned with, and may disrupt, its component games: by changing game dynamics and/or by ignoring primary design intent. What may be an improvement to the game to these secondary authors may be considered disruptive or even destructive to the primary authors of the games they include. Sims player-producers face similar issues surrounding the creation they choose to extend, with relationship to a single game, The Sims. The rhetoric of this community is one of extension—contributing to a better game—however issues with Maxis' support of the community indicates an opposition to (or at least a disregard for) intended modes of play. Velvet-Strike positions itself in clear opposition to its host game, Counter-Strike. The meanings created by the Velvet-Strike graffiti works rely on a juxtaposition<sup>44</sup> of opposing meanings between the primary game and the sprays and interventions. The artifact is an attempt to reinscribe the game space with new meanings, including a reconceptualizing of multi-player game space as public space. Both extension and opposition of the primary game implicates the agency of the secondary author by moving the game beyond its initial vision into a space populated by the agency of a new author.

These themes addressing primary (opposition and extension) and secondary (legitimacy, ownership and access) authors emerge from the artifacts presented as shared interpretations of the collective knowledge of the player-producer culture.

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<sup>44</sup> Salen and Zimmerman define 3 modes of game modification as a "resistant strategy": **alteration** (the reworking of existing forms of representation or interaction); **juxtaposition** (the strategic inclusion of unexpected elements together in the same space); and **reinvention** (modification of the core structures of the game itself)(ch.32).

Each theme demonstrates an aspect of player agency manifest in this mode of authorship. Opposition and extension themes demonstrate the relationship between primary and secondary author agency as potentially complimentary, potentially in conflict. We cannot assume every player artifact will, or should, respect the authority of a primary author, simply because this authority may not exist. Themes of legitimacy, ownership and access reveal more about the player-producers themselves, as they establish their ethos as agents in the game community. That player agency rhetoric chains distinctly through a sampling of artifacts as diverse as Collective Detective, Velvet-Strike, and mods for The Sims, implicates player agency through authorship as a rhetorical vision in player production. In this vision, players maintain a co-authorial relationship with primary authors, in the context of a mutable game.

## CONCLUSION

### *The Player-Author*

The analysis of the chosen artifacts reconstructs the world views of the community members to which these artifacts are directed, and in which their meaning is constructed. This world view includes the player-producer as an agent in digital game authorship. By creating game artifacts, players are recognized as authors of new objects and contexts that are significant, expressive and instantiate their agency. The player does not need to explicitly state in an artifact “I am the author”—the community vision as embedded in the game artifact reveals this through its support of player creation as a mode of authorship. In terms of rhetorical communication, this provides a solid basis on which to ground further argument (as political/conceptual artifacts such as Velvet-Strike illustrate) or on which to engage in personal expression. What is also important to recognize is that agency itself is a socially defined and attributed construct. Agency exists primarily as a social reality. To say that the play community validates a player's agency in the authorship of game artifacts is to prove the primary agency of the game player as potential author. This conclusion has significant implications on how we view both game designers and players in digital games.

This thesis introduces a new type of player, the player-author. This player is empowered not only in the interpretation of meaning, but in the creation of new meanings that can, in turn, affect not only other players, but game designers themselves. This is a player who, as Wright, Boria and Braidenbach note, “[moves] with a reflexive awareness of the game's features and their possible modifications” (Wright, Boria, & Breidenbach). The agency of this secondary author is revealed in the production of new meanings, independent of the primary author. As such, the power dynamic between designer and player changes (creating a closer, mutually respectful relationship that can already be observed in game culture). This interpretation is supported in current research such as Andrew Mactavish's determination that “[...] the configuration of the developer-player relationship is not arranged according to an uncomplicated division of roles where developers only develop and players only play” (Mactavish). The potential for agency through

authorship may change the nature of how one perceives the game environment, and how much control is felt in participating in cultural production. This may also affect the aesthetic satisfaction of yielding to a designer's agency that dominates current interactive media, as players are increasingly validated in their game communities as authors. How this will play out in the continuing development of digital game culture is yet to be seen.

### ***The Relationship between Games and their Authors***

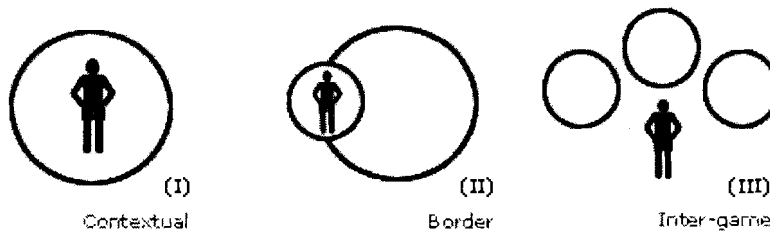
Games can now be said to have two modes of authorship: primary and secondary. The role of the primary author is well documented and continues to be observed, analysed and theorized by game researchers. Primary authorship carries with it a long cultural history, in particular modernist notions of the sole, creative individual author, who inscribes their work with meaning and who themselves reveal meaning through their body of work and personal ethos. In recent history we've seen the pendulum swing back, to focus on the reception of the work, with authors such as de Certeau emphasizing the audience's role in appropriating the work to create personal meaning. This thesis acknowledges the audience's role in interpretation, while recognizing an author's work carries with it the distributed agency of said author: whether its a commissioned work, a musical composition, or a digital game. While there is no question of the aesthetic pleasure of manipulating a digital game, the interactor remains part of a secondary agency (in conjunction with the work), under the scope of the primary author.

However the secondary author, the player-author, moves beyond the scope of the designer's agency. Players create artifacts that exist within the digital game, but are by no means derivative in the sense that they can be attributed to the agency of the primary author. This agency (of the player-author) is an acknowledged part of the game community, validating the continuing production of game modifications, collectives, tools and performances that rework the existing game (or games). Authorship in digital games can adopt a conversational (over a broadcast) model, representing a cultural interaction between authors that may be distinguished more accurately on a temporal level than a hierarchal one.

## Player-Authors and the Definition of the Game

*[W]hen players become producers, their activities as players fall outside the magic circle to take up a strong presence in a space largely external to the game. The player-as-producer paradigm exaggerates metagaming tendencies to create more radical forms of open play. When the player becomes a producer, metagaming elements take on a life of their own, expanding beyond activities that merely comment on the play of the game to become pursuits that literally transform the structure of the game itself (Salen and Zimmerman, ch.31).*

The *meta-game*, as defined by Zimmerman and Salen, traditionally relates to aspects of game play that derive not from the rules of the game, but from interplay with surrounding contexts. Meta-gaming activity appears common in player-production, as game players would naturally seek a relatively uncontested space outside the agency of the primary author. Meta-gaming activity is loosely defined, but often falls into one of three categories:



**Figure 7:** Positions of the Player-Author, in relation to the original game. Figure by author.

Some meta-game activity falls on a contextual level (I), and as such, may operate from both inside the game and in a wider cultural forum. Some meta-games manipulate a space at the border of Huizinga's magic circle (II), often making it difficult to separate core game activity from extra-game activity. As Salen and Zimmerman note, this may draw attention to these boundaries (ch.31). Finally, some meta-game activity may be quite distinct from any core game, even acting across game boundaries (III). In this scenario, a new magic circle is defined by the meta-game creator.

The meta-game is often overlooked, from both a game design and research perspective, in an attempt to define game boundaries in favour of a primary author (whether this is attempted through said author's intention, or designed technical constraints/initial conditions). However, as games such as The Sims and player-produced artifacts such as Collective Detective demonstrate (and as is well

established in the collectable card game genre), the meta-game often surpasses the core game in terms of locating the primary game play. Even Will Wright has recognized this shift in the active site of game play with regard to The Sims, stating: "The game becomes this little nucleus, but it's not the main experience" (Platoni). Authoring as part of a meta-game can permit the manifestation of game player agency in contexts relatively unchallenged by the primary agency of a game designer. Velvet-Strike demonstrates this approach on a contextual level in repurposing the multi-player arena as a public forum. Velvet-Strike patches thread meanings through the initial Counter-Strike game aligned with off-line protest, and counter-culture aesthetics. The Sims also reinterpret the "real life" model of The Sims' environment through popular culture and personal experience. However, these Sims objects and their relationship with the game itself are often external to an active meta-game of item re-creation and exchange, and the infrastructure that supports this meta-game, such as the proliferation of production tools. The primary attraction of a creation such as Collective Detective, arguably, is the meta-game. While it primarily plays as part of games explicitly designed to be puzzle games (and which often recognize the collaborative efforts to solve such games), it can also appropriate the space of other games, extracting puzzle components and/or designing new puzzle initiatives. In these cases, Collective Detective reframes the initial games as components in its own game. To the extent the component games exist beyond this context may be irrelevant in terms of the new game being played.

The classification of much player production activity as meta-gaming creates an interesting question of game boundaries. Whether the meta-game is considered part of the game is largely decided by the play community—Salen and Zimmerman leave this an open question, noting that sometimes a meta-game can be closely tied to a closed system, and other times it exists more clearly beyond the game itself (ch.32). If players are seen as capable of demonstrating agency through authorship, then the need to classify player artifacts as extra-game activities contradicts the position that these artifacts are valid authored elements of digital games. In the social construction of games, game boundaries are player defined, and where player-production activity is validated by the play community, these boundaries accommodate the redefinition of the game itself. In this view, player production can no longer bear the automatic stamp of being a meta-game activity—players as authors may truly redefine the games they play. In the context of the player-author,

the term *meta-game* may be insufficient to describe a continuing authorship of the game itself.

### ***Implications for Digital Games***

Player authorship in digital games has several implications for further study; from the need to take a closer look at the relationship between primary and secondary authors, to examining how the experience of the game is affected by expanding player agency. While the player-author has been established, there may still be a need to examine the ideological constraints that persist through the continued authorship of a primary game source. Another interesting issue lies in the implications of player agency within the context of game boundaries. Player production can manipulate the boundaries of the game, sometimes even relocating active gameplay outside what was considered the core game. What is commonly referred to as meta-gaming may simply reflect the shifting of game boundaries in light of the player-author. It may be useful to examine whether we can then define games as innately participatory, particularly where a culture of player production has changed the face of the original game (such as The Sims, or Half-Life). In light of the player-author, defining digital games in a manner that privileges the scope of the primary author's agency may do a disservice to the poetics of the digital game.

Digital games are emerging as a significant modern day cultural channel. The opportunity for games to act as media has just scratched the surface: their potential to act as an interactive, participatory medium carries with it tremendous potential for cultural exchange. Player agency as the author of game artifacts represents a shift in access to the means of cultural production, opening up the digital game as a means of expression. Salen and Zimmerman describe the use of games as catalysts for creative expression as a profound feature of games considered open culture systems (ch.31). The rhetoric of the game community already demonstrates the player-author is a reality. What remains to be seen is the implications of this mode of authorship on the evolution of the digital game, and in the wider sphere of cultural exchange.

## APPENDIX A

### ***Data Points for Rhetorical Analysis***

#### **Collective Detective**

##### ***Internal Data:***

(CD:I:1) Collective Detective. Website. TaxiCafe Media. 22 May 2003  
<<http://www.collectivedetective.org>>.

##### ***External Accounts:***

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## APPENDIX B

### *Fantasy Themes of Secondary Authors*

Table 2: Themes of Legitimacy, Ownership, and Access

#### *Velvet Strike*

##### Character

###### *(Authors) as Gamers*

"plays games" (VS:I:1)

"logged in a good many hours/days/weeks/months playing Tribes2" (VS:I:1)

"like shooters" (social, complexity, aesthetic aspects) (VS:I:2)

technical knowledge, game engine rendering/character meshes (VS:I:1)

historical knowledge, Wolfenstein, Quake (VS:I:2)

"A.M.S. does not support censorship nor does she oppose violence inside computer games." (VS:I:1)

copyleft (VS:I:2)

#### *The Sims*

##### Character

###### *(Authors) as Creatives*

credit (\*see *Thanks and Credit*)

sharing, linking, giving (common thread, S:I)

differentiation in skinning (walls, floors, objects), recolouring, behaviours, tools

smaller, simple one-off tools (S:I:7, S:I:8)

tools targeted to other creators

###### *Inclusion*

use of *Sim-words* (Persimmon Grove, My Funny Simmentine, Versimilitude) similar to game

backward compatibility (S:E:1)

testing with user objects (S:E:1)

###### *The Beginner*

help, support for low level of technical expertise (S:I:6, S:E:4)

tools stress ease of use, automation, simplicity (S:I:3, S:I:9, S:I:8, S:I:6)

blending of player tools and Maxis (S:I:6)

simple tutorials, low on lingo, high on examples (S:I:6)

"to allow anyone with little or no experience to build new goodies for the game and of

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course share them with the rest of the world" (S:I:8)

\* see *Everyone Develops*

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## Setting

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### *Economic*

know any free sites (S:I:6)  
encouraged to charge, accept donations (S:I:4)  
why pay for TSO, not content? (S:I:6)  
will not redistribute for pay items (S:I:6)  
redistribute for pay (AOL) as retribution (against Maxis) (S:I:6)  
"believe 100% in the open source movement" (S:E:4)  
want to give away for free (S:I:5)

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## Action

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### *Thanks and Credit*

stolen files; recolor allowed (S:I:6)  
underappreciated (thanks) (S:I:6)  
make sure creators get credit (S:E:4)  
no remodding (S:I:5)  
despise thief sites (S:I:4)  
utilities to attach name, ownership info  
sick of being bashed (S:I:5)  
recognize tool makers (S:E:4)  
"irritating faux pas" [theft](S:I:9)  
"I detest graphics thieves" (S:I:6)  
permission, copyright common

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### *Everyone Develops*

support for beginners (\*see *Beginner*)  
  
release Edith (S:E:1)(S:E:4) (S:I:2)  
open source The Sims (S:E:1)  
consistent data structures (S:E:1)  
bonding, community spirit (colloquial language (S:I:6), "T-moggers" (S:I:4))

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## Collective Detective

### Character

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#### *Collective as Design Leaders*

help plan better games, a resource for developing these games (CD:I:1)  
will affect (lead); define the genre (CD:I:1)  
"others adapt"; what games are and should be (manuals etc.) (CD:I:1)  
tailor to us (CD:I:1)  
genre naming  
new (way of approaching, new form of gaming, "new ways to approach entertainment forms traditionally geared to individuals") (CD:I:1)

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"game developers watch out!" (CD:I:1)  
"pose a real problem to solo players and game developers alike" (CD:E:2)  
Meta-verse slogan: "Our immersive community in their immersive worlds, and vice versa. Better hold on to something." (C:I:1)

\* see also *Developing and Advising*

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*(Value of) the Collective*

"join" (CD:I:1)  
"together" (CD:I:1)  
"collective team effort" (CD:I:1)  
"collective team spirit" (CD:I:1)  
"we" (CD:I:1)  
"pure team work" (CD:I:1)  
game core interacting with others (CD:I:1)  
game is community, tools second to people (CD:I:1)

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Table 3: Themes of Opposition/Extension

**Velvet-Strike**

Character

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*(Authors) as Subversives*

us vs. them ("invite others" (join), "intervene," "submit," "please send us your own," (VS:I:1) "remade by us," although according to [designer]) (VS:I:2); flame gallery (VS:I:1)  
graffiti [alt (them): *vandalists*] (VS:I:2, VS:I:1)  
art/artists (VS:I:2)  
"politics of the other" [and allusions to] (VS:I:2)  
ironic quotes ("reality", "realism", "dies") (VS:I:2) and brackets [mature?][government-backed?] (VS:I:1)  
manifesto (VS:I:1)  
capitalism (VS:I:2); anti-capitalist (VS:I:1)  
consumption (VS:I:2)  
politics/political (VS:I:2)  
intervention (VS:I:1)  
put aside differences to concentrate on "hate of you, the subversive!" (VS:I:1)  
anarchy (VS:I:1)  
"conservative american radio invite" (VS:I:1)  
"there status quo is affronted, I'm clapping" (VS:I:1)  
Banner-Strike (Banner-Art Collective, external initiative publicized on (VS:I:1)

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*Ignorant or Unreflective Player*

display of personal attacks (misogyny, homophobia) (VS:I:2)  
logical contradictions of the other side (realism and replay, physical proportions, interchangeability) (VS:I:2), misspelling (VS:I:1)  
"misogynistic, homophobic, semi-dyslexic, and otherwise mind-locked at fourteen."  
(VS:I:1)  
"shame them into peace" (VS:I:2)  
Regression (VS:I:2)  
Negative feedback a success: forced strange people out of the woodwork (VS:E:1)

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Action

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*Protest*

disruption of experience (intervention recipes) (VS:I:1); artifact-in-play [psychological]  
performance art (over game) (VS:I:1)  
public, social space (VS:I:2) (alt zone, play space)  
forum (VS:I:2)  
offline protest (modelled form of): graffiti, sit-ins, martyrdom (VS:I:1)  
detractors as well as supporters (reaction) (VS:I:2)

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Setting

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*Game as Forum/Public Space*

"some gamers cannot conceive of using public social game space for anything except rigidly following the rules of the game. (Anything else is associated with cheating)." (VS:I:1)  
Some people want to play the same games over and over again, others are hungry for new types of games (VS:E:1)

*Opposition Views*

economic opposition (paid to play) (VS:I:1)  
"...don't realize that videogame is just a VIDEOGAME, an that it's a fake world..." (VS:I:1)  
"you DO know this is just a game" (VS:I:1)  
"nothing wrong with playing a fucking game" (VS:I:1)  
"its just a game" (VS:I:1)  
"join/start a protest group that's concerned about realife" (VS:I:1)



Character

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*Maxis/Wright as Primary Author*

Maxis weak relationship with modders, as opposed to other companies (id, Valve)  
(S:E:1)  
"seems they forget about us" (S:E:1)  
closing off of creative avenues (S:E:1)  
"or whoever owns" (S:I:9)  
"months later Maxis released a program to do the same thing, but it still isn't up to par with the user-communities version!" (S:E:1)  
should include testing in "real situations" with user created content (S:E:1)

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"Will Wright had a dream", "Will Wright's vision" (S:I:2)  
Wright's support of blueprint (S:I:8)  
Wright: "game becomes this little nucleus, but it's not the main experience" (S:E:3)  
Wright: "I'm not sure what the game is" [his game or player's game] (S:E:2)

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#### Action

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##### *Value of Tool Building*

"encourage" (S:I:8)  
better than Maxis (S:E:1)  
meta-game items  
"what the Sims need" (S:E:1)  
not necessary for the game, but game greatly enhanced by their use (S:I:3)  
most popular tool of its kind (S:I:3)

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##### *Collection and Exchange (as Game)*

Maxis have a lot to be thankful for, because if it wasn't for (community and object creators) this game would have died a quick death (S:I:6)  
"Downloading and playing with new items" 40% (TSR most popular game activity, number one) (S:I:8)  
value of new: "new downloads" "updates" "cool new" (S:I:6)  
for "public consumption" (S:I:8)  
use of archive tools (themed collections)

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#### Collective Detective

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#### Actions

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##### *Efficiency*

"achieve stuff in weeks what others have taken months to achieve" (CD:I:1)  
"achieved so much in a very short space of time!" (CD:I:1)  
"long before (the game developer) scheduled" (CD:I:1)  
"first" (CD:I:1)  
"3 days" (CD:I:1)  
"Terraquest" (CD:I:1)  
"several games at once" (CD:I:1)  
multiple current "cases"; keep tabs on different games (CD:I:1)  
"And the fact that we managed to collectively force a company to bring down its so called "flagship game" because they could not handle the pressure of this group ripping the game apart within 3 days of launch!" (CD:I:1)

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##### *Development (Advising Development)*

plan better games (CD:I:1)  
resource for developing these games (instructions for "Puppet Masters," release of member information) (CD:I:1)  
post-mortems (past games) (CD:I:1)

\*see also *Legitimacy*

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### *Solving*

puzzles/quests in MMORPG (A Tale in the Desert, The Sims Online) (CD:I:1)  
"solving" 911, other real world problems (CD:E:1) (CD:I:1)  
"examine framework" (CD:I:1)  
"The Beast" (CD:I:1)  
"case" (CD:I:1)  
"investigate capabilities" (CD:I:1)  
"figure out" (CD:I:1)

\* see also *Mystery (extended metaphor)*

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### *Setting*

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#### *New Genre*

Naming (immersive entertainment, alternate reality games, distributed investigative environments) (C:I:1)  
"new": "new way of approaching", "new form of gaming" (collaborative) (C:I:1)  
Cross-game (multiple cases, following several games) (C:I:1)

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#### *Mystery (extended metaphor)*

detective, case, clues, solve, mystery, investigate, headquarters, trail (C:I:1)

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#### *Think Tank (minor motif)*

think tank for gamers (C:E:2)  
ultimate recreation think tank (C:I:1)  
apply to real world (C:E:1)

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