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The Construction of Play: Rules, Restrictions, and the Repressive Hypothesis

Rowan Tulloch[1]

Abstract

Rules are often cited as one of the defining features of games; however, few precise definitions of rules exist and those that do are often self-contradictory and/or reductive. This article seeks to reconceptualize rules for both traditional and digital games, not as a series of restrictions to which the player must submit but rather as a relationship of power that functions through the player and through processes of construction. I argue that the restrictive model of rules is embedded within the liberal humanist paradigm, where power is understood as an external force operating on the subject. Building upon poststructuralist theorizations of power, I demonstrate that rather than operating through restriction, rules construct the possibility of the game, producing the game world and norms of play practice. Through this, I show that rules should not be understood in opposition to player agency, but rather as a contributor to, and product of it.

Keywords

games, rules, agency, power, play

> Playing a game means making choices and taking actions—Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 33)
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> To play a game is to follow its rules—Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 117)

[1] Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Rowan Tulloch, Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.
Email: rowan.tulloch@mq.edu.au

Within the pages of their hugely influential game design handbook *The Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) mobilize two outwardly irreconcilable discourses around the act of playing a game. One constructs play as a space of control and mastery, a space for player empowerment, choice, and agency. The other views play as a process of submission and of voluntary obedience to the rules of the game. Yet despite the apparent incongruity of these two positions, they are used simultaneously. The player is at the same time active agent and prisoner of the system, author of events, and slave to the game's authority, creative contributor and mindless automaton. Paradoxically, play is understood as being contingent upon both agency and compliance.

In this article, I will suggest that the relationship between freedom and constraint only becomes paradoxical if viewed through a particularly problematic, though dominant, theoretical framework that understands these as oppositional processes. I will argue that player freedom and game rules are far from oppositional, indeed they are more productively understood as linked mechanisms of the same process. I will also show, however, that despite advancing perspectives of games as being about both choice and restriction, accounts such as Salen and Zimmerman's do not recognize or acknowledge the mutually constructive relationship of game rules and player freedom. I will argue this oversight reflects not a failure of individual theorists but a reflection of the limitations of a broader cultural and political discourse. I will show that the contemporary discursive contradictions surrounding gameplay are a consequence of a liberal humanist conceptualization of power informing the understanding of rules within the discipline of game studies.

This article is an analysis of the concept of rules. There are few concepts as central to the study of gaming as rules; however, there are few concepts so frequently overlooked and undertheorized. In popular, industry, political, and academic discourse, the term rules is widely used but rarely is a precise meaning offered. Rules, it seems, are too obvious and too familiar a concept to require dissection. Yet the few theorists who have sought to analyze and define rules have found it a difficult task. In this article, I show that the assumption that a simple and self-evident definition of rules is not only problematic but also unproductive. I deconstruct the popular conceptualization of rules as operating through restriction, denial and negation of possibilities, and functioning in opposition to player agency and suggest rules can be better understood as a productive force that operates to construct the game world, formalize its logics, and guide player behavior. The purpose of this article is not to offer a new definition of rules but rather to challenge, critique, and rethink the foundational assumptions about how rules function upon which current definitions have been built. It is only through such a major reconceptualization that the game studies discipline can continue to further develop and refine the theoretical framings through which the player/game relationship is understood. It is only by reassessing and rebuilding the concept of rules at its most basic level that we can resolve the contradictions inherent in our current understandings of player as free and yet simultaneously submissive.

To reframe our thinking about play, this article will reconceptualize the relationship between games and players, constituted through the rules, as a relationship of power. In doing this, I am guided by poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault and his insistence that we should not think of power as a top-down structural force functioning to deprive people of liberty, but rather as a set of micro-relationships and actions that run through society and function to privilege certain kinds of behavior, understandings, and subjectivities. I will be contextualizing the narrow discursive framing of rules mobilized in the game studies discipline within a broader context of philosophical analyses of power; and in doing so demonstrate that the ways in which game rules have been hitherto understood have been reflective of how power has been understood. While many ludological theorists have resisted framing game rules in context of "real-world" forces, I will argue that in order to develop a more nuanced, robust, and productive model of rules and play, it is essential to understand rules as a micro instance of the operation of power in contemporary society. Indeed, by understanding rules this way, we gain access to a powerful and developed discursive framework and consequently a new historical context for understanding gaming. Much of the ambiguity that exists around rules in contemporary discourse comes from the fact that our definitions of rules rely on a simplistic and inappropriate conceptualization of power. I will show how the liberal humanist discourse that has dominated western politics and philosophy for centuries has informed how we understand rules and has brought about much of the uncertainty and contradictions within contemporary rules discourse. I will instead propose that rules need to be understood through a constitutive model of power, where power creates rather than denies.

Theorizing Rules

To understand how game rules have been conceived of and why it is important to reconceptualize them, it is necessary to look over some of the key texts in the area. I will begin my analysis of rules with two key game studies texts, Bernard Suit's *The Grasshopper* (1978) and the aforementioned Salen and Zimmerman text *The Rules of Play* (2004). These two prominent pieces of work articulate a very similar and very precise model of rules, one that makes explicit many of the underlying assumptions informing the construction of rules within ludological discourse. The former explores gaming in a largely predigital age, the latter analyzes both traditional and digital gaming.

Published in 1978, Bernard Suits' book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* has been an influential exploration of the concept of play. In one of its most famous passages, Suits outlines his model of play. He states:

> [t]o play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by the rules, where rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. (Suits, 1978, pp. 48–49)

Suits illustrates this idea with the example of a race on a racing circuit: "the rules stop competitors from cutting across the infield, and insist that they take the longer, less efficient, route within the lanes of the track" (Suits, 1978, p. 44). Similarly, rules forbid competitors in the high jump from bringing along a ladder to assist in their clearing of the bar. For Suits, rules stop the competitors achieving their goals by the easiest and most effective means.

Suits' account reflects a crucial understanding of rules that circulates through much of popular, industry and academic discourse: the assumption that rules operate through restriction. In this discursive construction, rules are about the denial of possibilities, about cutting back of an infinite range of possible actions to a limited and deliberately constrained set of practices. Rules function to deny free play; they deprive the player of their freedom of action, instead only allowing very limited and specific practices to occur. For Suits, rules are negative; they function by means of limitation, exclusion, rejection, and negation and force participants/competitors/players to use only inefficient means or methods of play.

Writing a quarter of a century later, play theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman base their understanding of rules on very similar assumption to Suits. Despite the revolution that had taken place in gaming in that time with the development and popularization of video gaming technology, the discourse of rules operating through restriction remains consistent. Salen and Zimmerman seek to construct a broad definition of rules. The first attribute of rules they list in this definition is "[r]ules limit player action" (2004, p. 125). Just as for Suits, Salen and Zimmerman conceptualize rules as a denial of player freedom. They argue rules are what stop players having *carte blanche* to do as they will; through rules, players are made to act in a prescribed, limited manner.

Salen and Zimmerman use the dice game *Yahtzee* to illustrate their understanding of the restrictive force of game rules:

> [In] Yahtzee, think of all the things you could do with the dice: you could light them on fire, eat them, juggle them, or make jewellery out of them. But you do not do any of these things. When you play Yahtzee you do something incredibly narrow and specific. Rules are "sets of instructions," and following those instructions means doing what the rules require and not doing something else instead. (2004, p. 122)

For Salen and Zimmerman, rules are about constraining the kinds of ways in which players engage with the game materials. They restrict players' actions to a finite set of approved possibilities.

What is of significance with Suits', and Salen and Zimmerman's, theorizations of rules is not just the idea that rules operate through restriction but that this restriction is of the player's individual agency. To play a game requires the player to conform to the specific logic of the game and not do any other activity they may desire to do, be that using more efficient means, or using the game materials in other ways. In other words, within this framework, rules operate to directly constrain player agency, they take away the player's freedom and limit his or her choices.

Rules as Restriction

As influential as Suits, and Salen and Zimmerman's work has been, these models of rules are not without their critics. Indeed, Jesper Juul, one of the game studies discipline's most prominent voices, has articulated a powerful critique of the underlying assumptions in both Suits' and Salen and Zimmerman's ideas (Juul, 2005). Juul's critique is a component of his attempt to synthesize existing models of play and build his own theoretical framework. He traces the theorization of play through its key theorists including Huizinga (1955), Caillois (1961), Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971), Crawford (1984), and Kelley (1990), but it is his account of Suits and Salen and Zimmerman that is most telling.

Striking at the very heart of the notion that rules operate through restriction, Juul refutes Suits' assertion that rules always function to force a participant to use less efficient methods of reaching an objective. Juul argues that:

> The concept of inefficient means makes sense in Suits' prime example of the race where it is not allowed to cut across the infield and the high jump where using a ladder is disallowed. The problem is that it would always be possible to set up a game using the most efficient means possible: a racing game where cutting over the infield was allowed; a race to climb a ladder, etc. (2005, p. 43)

What Juul is critiquing here is not just Suits' limited range of examples but the very notion that games and rules can be meaningfully understood by reference to a hypothetical, free activity. Juul is problematizing the underlying assumption that rules are necessarily limitations.

Juul expands this idea with his critique of Salen and Zimmerman, where he crucially states:

> [T]he limitation view of rules only paints half the picture: you could make jewellery of the dice, but it would be meaningless within the Yahtzee game. The rules of a game also set up the potential actions, actions that are meaningful inside the game but meaningless outside. It is the rules of chess that allow the player to perform a checkmate—without the rules there is no checkmate, only meaningless moving of pieces across a board. Rules specify limitations and affordances. (2005, p. 58)

The actions of play, Juul is suggesting, are only meaningful in context of a space defined and demarcated by systems of rules. Without rules, certain possibilities simply do not exist. Rules may define limitations, but they also bring play into being.

Juul's critique of Suits and Salen and Zimmerman highlights the crux of the contemporary crisis surrounding defining rules: Failing to recognize the productive actions of rules and therefore a reliance on notions of restriction undermines the usefulness of our models of play. One must recognize that it is through rules that the possibility of play exist in the first place. One cannot play a game outside of its rules,

because if one ignores the rules, one is not playing the game. Rules are not so much restrictions applied to play but the constitutive force behind it.

In his analysis of Suits, and Salen and Zimmerman, Juul also touches on (but does not fully explore) one of the key difficulties for modern theorists of play, the artificial nature of video game environments. Juul points directly to this difficulty when evaluating the appropriateness of Suits' ideas for video game analysis:

> [T]he concept of less efficient means completely breaks down in the case of video games. [. . .] If we look at any video game, how can we say that the player is using less efficient means? Would this be compared to making the game yourself? Hacking the game? Using a cheat code? (Juul, 2005, p. 43)

What Juul has identified is that video games are constructed environments: There are no conceivable "efficient means" of playing a game, only the means the software allows. Video games do not have a material form with which numerous activities are possible; every type of interaction a video game allows needs to be programmed in by the game designers. Although a heavy emphasis on restriction is arguably partially appropriate for the rules of traditional play, it is entirely inappropriate to those of video gaming.

Unlike traditional forms of play where a game's equipment has a very specific materiality, video games have no material reality; everything in the game world is artificial. Once cannot separate the game materials from the rule set, as quite literally in the video game's programming code, the rules of the game construct the game world and the possibility of play. Thus, it is very difficult with a video game to understand rules as restrictions; video games cannot be seen as having a natural form that is being restricted.

The problems of applying the logic of restriction to the artificial environments of video games stem from the implicit assumption that restriction can be perceived independently of a defined point of reference. This is questionable because restriction is a cutting back of options and as such requires a point of comparison, that is, the activity that is being cut back. In theorizing traditional play, Suits and Salen and Zimmerman fall back on understanding these reference points relative to the material properties of the game resources and of alternative resources that could conceivably be used. The potential physical possibilities of the game world (and the world more broadly) become the natural state in contrast to which the game is understood. The possible uses of the dice in *Yahtzee* that Salen and Zimmerman list are based or their perceived understanding of what is physically possible with this object (2004, p. 122). Likewise in Suits' example of high jump, the use of a ladder is an imaginable scenario because the physical properties of a ladder would make the clearing of the bar easier, thus the ladder is a more efficient means (1978, p. 34). Yet with video games, one cannot rely on the physical properties.

Video Game Restrictions

Salen and Zimmerman's analysis of the classic puzzle video game *Tetris* reveals the flaws of using a restrictive model of rule when analyzing video games. As with their analysis of the dice game *Yahtzee*, Salen and Zimmerman attempt to understand *Tetris* as a system, where rules deny certain player options, but when they attempt to list *Tetris*' rules, the problems and inconsistencies of this approach become highly visible. Far from cataloguing what this game denies, this list is primarily about what it allows: it is based on construction not restriction. The very first item on the list—"[p]lay takes place on a grid of 19 by 10 squares" (2004, p. 143)—displays the difficulty in applying their theory to a virtual object. There is no suggestion that a larger grid upon which *Tetris*' play might have taken place is being denied: It is the intention of the designer that the play action should occur on that grid and no other. This is not a restriction. Even when Salen and Zimmerman do articulate a property of *Tetris* as a restriction, such as when they note "[b]locks cannot be moved off the left or right borders of the grid" (2004, p. 143), it is simply a negatively phrased corollary to another item on the list, in this case their first rule. Their difficulty in matching their own observations to their framework becomes even more apparent with the rule stating that "[t]he up-direction on the directional pad has no effect" (2004, p. 143). To find a restriction on the player's actions, they have been forced to list actions that have no effect. Even in their own terms, this is not a rule, as it does not directly shape the player's play practices.

The difficulty comes from *Tetris* having no imaginable "natural" state that is being denied. *Tetris* cannot be understood through the framework of restriction. The possibilities of interaction in *Tetris* are indeed few: A block may be moved to the left, right, down, or rotated. It would be feasible to program in other possibilities: the ability to move a block up the grid, to shoot or move over blocks in its path, to rotate the grid, or even to give blocks artificial intelligence. These are all things we can imagine from experiences with other video games. But doing this would change the game; it would create a new game and thus does not prove that *Tetris* functions by restriction. Any variation in the rules means the game is no longer strictly *Tetris*.

This difficulty that Salen and Zimmerman face is not unique to electronic play forms. It is not that video games are profoundly different to traditional play in this respect, just that the problems of understanding rules as restrictive are more obvious and pronounced when viewed in context of video gaming. All games are produced by the rules; rules work positively to create a game world, a magic circle in which play proceeds. However, with video games, there are no potential other actions possible, so the constitutive power of the rules is more apparent.

Theorizing Power

Juul's work, while brilliantly identifying the issues with a repressive model of rules, does not offer many useful solutions. Juul's problematization of previous definitions

of rules becomes subsumed within his broader project of establishing a formalist logic for games. Indeed, one key reason Juul fails to offer new ways to move beyond this restriction-based model of rules is because of this narrow focus. Juul is looking at rules in the context of games and play, he is not interested in, nor attempting to understand, the theorization of rules within a broader cultural and political framework. As such, the theoretical resources he has at his disposal are not adequate to address the underlying issue and thus fundamentally reconceptualize rules. The games studies discipline has historically struggled to find a theoretical heritage through which the concept of rules can be made more nuanced and sophisticated. Rules, however, are not unique to games; a vast array of social formation have their enforced codes of conduct, laws, etiquettes, privileged cultural logics, and other prescribed and encouraged norms of behavior. Beyond game studies, a great deal of work has been produced examining the operations of what we commonly call "power," that is, the processes by which human behavior is influenced, shaped, and controlled. It is this theoretical heritage that offers us a way forward in thinking about rules. Juul's critique of Suits and Salen and Zimmerman has striking similarities to debates that have occurred in the theorization of power. As I demonstrate, the echoing of these broader discussions within game studies is not just coincidental; it is because this is the very same issue being discussed. Rules are a mechanism of power, whether they are enacted at a societal level or in the confined space of a video game. Indeed, the assumptions underpinning the logic we see in Suits' and Salen and Zimmerman's work, that rules function to restrict individual agency, can be seen to have a long history. The idea that power, in all its forms, operates by restricting and denying the agency of a previously free and autonomous individual has dominated western philosophical and political thought since the enlightenment and remains highly influential to this day. Outside of game studies, however, it is a belief that has been substantially critiqued and challenged.

Suits' and Salen and Zimmerman's models of rules are best understood within a context of the liberal humanist tradition. Liberal humanism has been a leading political and philosophical framework in western culture for many centuries. At its most basic, liberal humanism conceptualizes the subject as a coherent individual, possessing the potential for, and right to, autonomy and freedom and existing prior to and outside of the manipulations of power. Inspired by enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau, liberal humanism understands the subject as naturally discrete from, and distinct to, society. At the heart of liberal humanism are agency and rationality. Agency being the ability to act based solely upon one's free will and rationality being the ability to discover and perceive truth. Within this framework, power can be conceptualized as an external force that functions to subvert or deny both agency and rationality. Power exerted over the individual by others can deny his or her free will or obfuscate the truth. Agency and rationality, for liberal humanist thinkers, are innate capabilities of the individual and as such power is a force that functions to restrict the individual's nature.[1]

This understanding and privileging of both agency and the possibility of rational thought have become deeply embedded in Western ontological frameworks. The appeal to the free rational individual, that is, to the autonomous agent unshackled from power is commonplace; it guides everything from politics to advertising. The logic permeates culture down to the level at which we understand ourselves. The liberal humanism logic teaches us to imagine our taste, values, and beliefs as what makes us unique, that is, what separates us from others. We understand power to be a top-down, outside force acting to invade and interfere with our lives. Power in this framework always works to repress agency and deny possibilities. It cuts back freedom and restricts individual autonomy.

The liberal humanist paradigm cannot be simply identified with any one political movement; it informs neoconservatism and neoliberalist doctrines as well as left-wing counterculture movements and humanist projects such as the human rights movement.[2] The liberal humanist model of power is a near ubiquitous underlying idea pervading western societies. And despite the great variation in how individuals position themselves politically in relation to the broader liberal humanist project, the conceptualization of power (be that governmental, military, corporate, patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial, etc.) as denial is dominant.

Given the influence of the liberal humanist discourse, it is of little wonder then when it comes to video gaming the most obvious mechanisms of power: rules are thus so often framed as a top-down restrictive power functioning to deny freedom and agency. The ludological approach does not read this as a political issue or a moral concern; it does not condemn rules as a sinister force, rather it acknowledges them as a necessary element of play, but the model used by theorists like Suits and Salen and Zimmerman is informed by liberal humanist framework and thus embodies its logic, where power is understood in opposition to individual agency.

Ultimately, the difficulties facing theorists of rules like Suits and Salen and Zimmerman go beyond gaming. The problems inherent in this approach are problems inherent in any model of power founded in a liberal humanist understanding. Understanding power as restrictive ignores the ways in which power constructs and constitutes the world. In order to develop a more robust and appropriate model of game rules, we must reconceptualize power in its entirety. To build a new model of rules, therefore, we need to explore alternative conceptualizations of power. As such, I shall now turn to one of the power's most radical theorists Michel Foucault.

Constructive Power

Foucault's: *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978) is a poststructuralist analysis of the discursive construction of sex and sexuality since the 17th century. It is Foucault's model of power, as articulated in this work, in which we find the productive parallels between the study of video game rules and broader notions of power. *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* is not simply a theorization of discourses surrounding sexuality, more importantly, it is an account of how western thought has

conceptualized power through an analysis of sexual discursivity. Foucault offers a critique of a dominant understanding of power as functioning through a top-down hierarchy, where the powerful wield their power to restrict the possible actions and behaviors of the powerless.

Foucault's purpose in *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* is to look at how our language and understandings of sexuality embody and encode a specific model of power. Key to Foucault's analysis of the discursive construction of sexuality is a critique of what he terms the "repressive hypothesis." That is the prevalent liberal understanding that sexuality has been and continues to be controlled, confined, and prohibited. Foucault's purpose in this interrogation of the repressive hypothesis is not to argue that sex has never been subject to censorship, subjugation, and repression but rather to examine how our contemporary understandings of sex have been produced and are maintained (Foucault, 1978, p. 12).

What is said to be "repressed" within a repressive hypothesis framework is "natural" sex, a supposedly instinctual, acultural, and free activity. This is an understanding prevalent in the discourses surrounding sexuality, most obviously in liberatory ones, which espouse a return to sexual freedom, the extrication of sex from power and a recapturing of the "natural" so long repressed by Church and state. Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis queries this kind of logic by illustrating the constructedness of this "natural" model of sex.

Foucault seeks to problematize the model of power underpinning the repressive hypothesis that privileges the negative elements of the operation of power, the censorships and denials, while failing to engage with the operations of power that function through production (1978, p. 12). It is this process of production that Foucault sees as central to the operation of power. Relationships of power function primarily by shaping our understandings and expectations. For Foucault,

> [w]hat makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (1978, p. 119)

In other words, power produces us. It standardizes and determines what we enjoy and seek out, what we recognize and understand, and the very modes of thought we use. At a very basic level, power impacts our every action: It is not just at those moments when we are being restricted or denied that we are shaped by it. For Foucault, this relationship between power, our discursive frameworks, and what we find pleasurable is mutually constructive. Indeed, so much so that he groups them all under the single term power–knowledge–pleasure[3] (1978, p. 11).

Foucault is constructing a model of "productive power," where power functions to produce norms. It is in relation to these norms that we position ourselves. In context of sex, certain types of sexual practice (such as heterosexuality) get privileged as

"normal" and all other practices are often positioned as abnormal or deviant. Foucault acknowledges that systems of repression exist, which punish deviation from the norm, but for him the importance of such systems comes in the way they contribute to and reinforce the established norms.

Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis is a critique of the traditional conceptualization of power as a monolithic, top-down superstructure that restricts and censors the subject's "natural" actions. For Foucault, there is no natural outside of power, for him power is productive in that it determines how we understand and thus engage with the world. Those configurations of power that offer us things we find pleasurable are the least likely to be resisted. What we find pleasurable we are least likely to see as an operation of power, but as Foucault is arguing, this concept of pleasure is far from natural; power constructs what we find pleasurable, and simultaneously what we find pleasurable enables and reinforces certain structures of power.

For Foucault, a subject's agency is not denied or restricted by power but constituted by it. An individual's choices, behaviors, and subjectivity are not preexisting natural formations, as they are in a liberal humanist discourse; rather they are constituted in relationship to power. Certain structures of power (like the discursive construction of sexuality or the rules set of a game) allow for particular types of agency, they afford particular types of engagement. All actions and understandings are formed through relationships of power (even when they understand themselves to be resisting power, they are still shaped by it). Agency, for Foucault, is not just the product of power; it is also the means by which power propagates. Agency cannot exist without relationships of power, and relationships of power cannot exist without agency. It is through repeated performance that particular configurations of power become entrenched. Be that in the constant repetition and discussion of sexual norms or a player's adherence to the rules of a game and recognition of its authority. An individual's agency both produces and embodies relationships of power. Far from in opposition as liberal humanism would conceptualize them, power and agency are mutually constructive.

Rules and Agency

Games are about agency. They are about giving players choice and opportunity. The major problem inherent in a restrictive model of rules is that it understands the primary mechanism through which games function: the rules, to be working in opposition to the other key feature of the form: agency. This is an unnecessary contradiction. Rules do not need to be understood as the denial of agency, as Foucault's work suggests, such formations of power are what produce the possibility of agency.

To return then to our previous examples from Suits of the high jump: It is not that high jump events regularly have to ban the use of ladders or that disqualify competitors who use them. Participants in the sport willingly perform without the aid of a ladder; indeed, the pleasure of high jump comes in performing within the rules. Rules are productive in the Foucaultian sense; they do not cut back player options

so much as they enable the very possibility of play. Philosopher Brain Massumi articulates this quality of rules in his analysis of their function in sport:

> The capture and containment [by rules] is not simply negative. [. . .] The rules are a preservative organ of the field of play. They are the condition of the play's identity across its serial repetitions in disparate times and places. (2002, p. 79)

If a high jump contest was determined by who could afford the biggest ladder, it would be a very different sport and would highly likely be less popular. Our understanding of the high jump, and the pleasure competitors and spectators gain from it, cannot be isolated from the mechanics of power (the rules) in operation. Power doesn't take away from our enjoyment, it shapes our enjoyment and in turn is shaped by that enjoyment.

In repeated participating in high jump without ladders, players are actively reinforcing the rules of the sport, that is, the power–knowledge–pleasure norms are being defined and communicated. All sports, indeed all games, require players to time and time again perform within the rules to perpetually reinforce and recreate the game world. In doing so, they are the vehicles of productive power. When players repeatedly defy the rules, or more accurately when they construct and perform a new set, the possibility of new games emerges. The history of sport has many examples of such occurrences.[4] Rules and play are mutually constructive, that is, rules produce play, and play produces rules. The identity (to use Massumi's term) of high jump does not include ladders. If it did include ladders, then it would be a different sport. The rules of this sport construct a particular event, and particular experience, that assesses a particular skill. There is no natural being denied, there is an act being created by rules.

If one looks closely at Salen and Zimmerman's example of *Yahtzee*, we can likewise see the production of a game world through the rules. If we look at the printed rules of *Yahtzee*, we can see that it is not a list of restrictions but rather a set of guidelines enabling certain types of normalized agency. Even the terminology emphasizes player action and choice. For example, in the Milton Bradley's (1996) American edition of the game, the section on "Taking a Turn" player agency is explicitly acknowledged: "On your turn, you may roll the dice up to 3 times, although you may stop and score after your first or second roll (pp. 1-2)." Even when the player is required to take a particular course of action, the wording frames it as an act of producing a specific type of agency, not a repression of agency: the rules tell the player "you must" and not "you must not" (Milton Bradley, 1996). These are minor semantic differentiations, but they point to the underlying impossibility of defining a game through restrictions: the rule set would be infinite. Rules function by constructing player agency, they require the player to perform the game in a certain way to produce and reproduce the game's identity.

Even with digital games, where there is less flexibility with rules, fixed as they are within the game code, the player is still required to perform in line with the game

rules, not to cheat, hack, or exploit the software. The player is essential in the operation of rules; rules do not act upon them but through them. Indeed, with digital games, where the rules are hidden from the player and often solely monitored by the computer, it is even more important for the player to perform in expected ways (be that in line with the actual rules or the perceived rules) for the game's identity to be reproduced/preserved. It is quite possible to play Tetris within the coded rules but produce an entirely different game identity. For example, a variation exists, whereby players write words for a teammate to decipher. A player writes a word, a letter at a time, out of blocks, until his or her partner is able to guess what it is. The other team then attempts the same task with a different word, the team that guesses its word the fastest wins. The game demands great skill and patience from the player as well as adding teamwork and competition to an otherwise single-player game. While this practice does not break the coded rules of the game, it does break the implicitly socially defined norms of the game (indeed it suggests the need for a rethink of exactly what we define as rules in digital gaming but that is a question for a future article).

All games have their nonstandard and so-called counterplay practices (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005). Some are obscure and rarely witnessed; others have become so commonplace they are becoming norms in themselves. YouTube has collections of footage from players who have recorded themselves making *Tomb Raider* protagonist Lara Croft climb to the top of the highest cliff they can find so as to hurl her off to her death, deliberately causing spectacular crashes in racing games, or demonstrating their control over *Grand Theft Auto* by attempting to drive around the city obeying the road rules.[5] These practices are just a fraction of the play practices players worldwide perform. In themselves, the practices are perhaps of no great significance, they still represent just a small fraction of what gamers do, standard practices of engagement still dominate,[6] however, what it shows is the need to acknowledge the production of a game world or game's identity as taking place through player agency, not in opposition to it. As such, we need our theory in game studies to move beyond its liberal humanist roots to acknowledge that agency and power do not always function in opposition, indeed most norms behavior are enacted through free choice.

Conclusion

Recognizing the mutually constructive relationship between rules and player agency is necessary to open up new possibilities for theoretical interpretation. It gives theorists a new way of understanding the central act of gaming: play, which up to now, as we have seen, has been conceptualized through the problematic and reductive frameworks I have explored in this article. In this, academia is falling behind game designers who have in recent years been subverting liberal humanist assumptions about agency for narrative and ludic effect (see Tulloch, 2010 for an analysis of how the first-person shooter *BioShock* does this). Within academic accounts of rules, where the restrictive model continues to dominate, our theoretical tools for

understanding play fail to acknowledge the complexity of the player–game relationship. The role of the player within a restrictive model of rules is profoundly limited. To play, the player must choose to follow the rules of the game, but beyond that initial choice, the player has little involvement in how the rules of the game function. As fitting with a liberal humanist logic rules are something that happens to a player not something they are actively part of. A Foucaultian framing, however, offers an alternative perspective. For Foucault, the subject is both a creation of power and the means by which power operates (1978, p. 98). As such, players are constituted by the rules, their practices and expectations are shaped by the game, but at the same moment, the game only comes into being by their play.

The restrictive model of rules disempowers players, presenting them as akin to a willing dupe, happy to surrender their freedom for the duration of play. This is politically problematic, reinforcing the stereotype of gamers (particularly video gamers) as mindless automatons. Players are more sophisticated and creative than this logic suggests. The adoption of rules is not a given but rather a complex negotiation. Rules must offer the player the kinds of experiences and pleasures they are looking for or the rules will be challenged (either by rewriting in traditional games or by finding new play tactics, hacking, modification, or looking elsewhere with video games). Players are far from unwitting prisoners of restrictive rules; they are active agents in the construction of play. The theorization of rules has long been embedded in a liberal humanist logic, where power is an outside force operating on the player to restrict and deny their freedoms. This has had an inevitable negative implication for both our understanding of rules and of players. It denies the creativity and agency of the playing community. Foucault's model of power offers a new way to conceptualize rules. This framework, offers a way of understanding rules as part of a relationship of power between the playing subject and the gaming apparatus. It offers us a means of understanding all aspects of play including the operation of rules as a constructive process. It allows us a way of viewing rules and player agency not as competing forces but rather as part of the same force.

Perhaps most importantly the Foucaultian framework allows us to explore a new politics of gaming. For too long game, audiences (particularly young video game players) have been positioned as the potential victims of violent and sexually charged gaming experiences. By rethinking the role of player agency, we can start to see players not just as passive consumers of these messages but as active agents in the production and reinforcement of, or resistance to, some of these particularly problematic cultural logics. Play is a relationship of power; to better understand it, we must not try to reduce it to restriction but recognize the complexity of the process of mutual construction of game and player that is taking place.

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Notes

1. In his classic text, *The Confessions* (1953) 18th-century enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that man was inherently good and had been corrupted by the evils of society, the unnatural world he had made. In this project of Rousseau, the seeds of modern liberal humanism can be identified (Mansfield, 2000, p. 15–21).
2. Liberal humanism can currently be seen manifesting in radically different ways on both sides of American politics—for example, in both the Occupy and Tea-party movements.
3. Foucault's addition, in *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, of "pleasure" to his famous concept of "power-knowledge" from *Discipline and Punish* (1977, p. 27), is an important one to acknowledge in context of both his work on sexuality and my work on video gaming. Where pleasure is somewhat of an unnecessary concept when dealing with austere institutions, like prisons and barracks, it is a critical one when looking at the everyday practices of sex or popular entertainment. Through this triple linkage, Foucault illustrates that activities the subject finds pleasurable, indeed even ones that are voluntary, are nonetheless constructions of power. By adding to his concept of power–knowledge rather than replacing it, Foucault signifies that he sees these cultural processes as reflecting many of the same processes as the more sinister institutions he talks about in *Discipline and Punish*. This addition marks an important development of Foucault's ideas but also demonstrates that this is a continuation of the same academic project.
4. Many sports trace their origins back to a single moment of defiance of the rules. For example, the moment when schoolboy William Webb Ellis ran forward while holding the ball during a game of football/soccer is often cited as the birth of the sport of Rugby.
5. Examples can be seen at:
   www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1ojKZp6QYM, (Laracroftlover93, 2009),
   www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZU_5Sb8NCQ (Smoceskreen, 2012)
   www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtDG9wyxodg (Karatekid00548, 2010)
6. YouTube still has far more footage of standard play throughs than these alternative practices, and player forums and discussion sites reflect the pleasure the seeming majority of players find in the norms of play. However, the growth in counterplay, glitch exploits, and online grief practices (see Apperley & Dieter, 2010; Chesney, Coyne, Logan, & Madden, 2009) suggests that we cannot dismiss the significance of nonstandard play practices.

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Author Biography

Rowan Tulloch is a lecturer in digital media and video games at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. He has designed and taught courses on digital culture, mobility, and video gaming. His research looks at the technological and cultural logics embodied within practices of interactivity. Rowan received his PhD from the University of New South Wales in 2009.