

7 Superstructure

A great deal of what matters in a game takes place outside of or alongside the gameplay proper. There may be preparation before the game, crowds of people watching it, stories told about it, modifications made to it, or behavior that goes against the official or accepted practices of the game. In this chapter, we discuss various phenomena that might be thought of as somehow "outside" the game. This is in no way meant to be a value judgment, but merely a way of grouping content-many of these phenomena are just as important, if not more so, than the ones "internal" to the game.

We begin with a general discussion of the metagame: all those activities relating to the game that aren't part of the play of the game itself, such as preparation for the game. We then talk about game conceits: themes that give the game cohesion and identity, even if they aren't included in the rules directly. Sometimes these themes are story-based, especially in computer games, but very often they are not. We follow with a discussion of ways players can customize games, and then we look at ways players may violate expectations: whether by actually breaking the rules, or by breaking norms of "acceptable" behavior. Finally, we examine some factors that influence how long a player wants to keep playing the same game-does the game seem infinitely replayable, or does it at some point "run out" of content?

7.1 Characteristic: Metagame

The metagame is the "game outside the game." It includes all the activities connected with the game that aren't part of playing the game itself, such as tournament programs, online forums, magazines about the game, training and preparation players might do before the game, or even daydreaming about the game or staring lovingly at game equipment. If the game is the skeleton, the metagame is the "soft"

structure outside the game, linking the game with other life goals such as status, self-expression, gaining mastery, money, socialization, or collecting. Many of the rewards for gaming come in whole or in part from the metagame, not the game itself.



Figure 7.1

©iStockphoto.com

The term metagame isn't that common outside of hardcore gaming circles and is almost never used, for example, when discussing sports. So typically people will use the term game to discuss both the game proper and the metagame. But we will generally try to distinguish the two: if you are on the field trying to score a goal during a game, you're taking part in the game of soccer; if you are practicing penalty kicks, or you are buying cleats, you are taking part in the metagame of soccer.

Hardcore gamers often use the word metagame in a narrower sense. If a game allows very specific preparation before the match, like building a deck in a trading card game, the "metagame" is the current environment resulting from all these preparations (e.g., perhaps people are playing a lot of fast red decks at the moment, and not many people are playing slow blue ones). With this usage, "metagaming" is game preparation done to prepare for the current environment (perhaps you'll choose to put anti-red cards in your deck, or cards that will slow down a fast deck).' We won't use the word metagame in this more narrow sense.

Some Metagame Activities

- Preparation

- Drills

- oReading strategy books

- Preparing equipment (building a Magic deck, waxing your skis)

- oDiscussing strategy with others

- Formal instruction (classes, coaching)

- Hanging out with other players

- Chatting while playing the game (happens during the game, but we group it with metagame activities because it's not a necessary part of playing the game)

- oReading or posting in online forums

- Reading, watching, or hearing stories of famous players

oWatching live games or replays

Arguingabout how you would have done something differently

o Entering a tournament (everything involved other than the actual play during the tournament)

Some Metagame Rewards

- Status
- Socialization
- Self-expression
- Gaining mastery
- Explicit player rewards

Money

oPrizes (including items usable in-game)

Trophies

The (broader) metagame is an extremely complicated subject, but an important one for a game designer or game critic. A great deal of the enjoyment of a game, and thus of its success or failure, comes from factors outside the game. For example, one can take a crowd of adults who would not normally enjoy rock-paper-scissors, put a tournament structure around it, and turn it into an entertaining experience.' Given all the possible structures that can be added to a metagame, knowing where to put one's effort-which structures are worth adding and which give little or no benefit-is extremely important.

Player Communities

Different players will have different preferred styles of play. The most obvious distinction is casual versus serious, but communities may have preferences around rule variants, formats, times and places to play, and so on. Unless a player is playing a single-player game in complete isolation, she'll be influenced by some sort of community. One can think of these different communities as forming different game environments or player microclimates-environments that may vary enough as to be almost different games. A player may very well be happy in one microclimate but not enjoy another microclimate at all, for reasons that may be social or convenience-related, or that may stem from the style of play the group prefers. Sometimes a player is unaware that her enjoyment or lack thereof is coming from the microclimate, and may say "chess is great" or "chess is boring" when really it is the microclimate that is great or boring, and a different environment might lead to the opposite reaction.

So for a player to enjoy a game, finding the right player community is very important. At the most basic level, it's finding the right opponents: ones who aren't too much stronger or weaker, and whose approach to the game is similar enough to be congenial. If you play Ultimate Frisbee, say, you will probably want to be with people who are not too much more or less dexterous than you are. If you don't care to dive into the mud to catch the Frisbee, you will not want to be with people who will berate you for that choice-if you do go all-out, though, you may not want to play with people who "aren't trying."

For games that take place in the physical world, communities are dependent on physical location. You may not have a wide choice of different Ultimate Frisbee leagues where you live (indeed, you may not have any). But for popular sports, there are often multiple leagues,

often in a fairly organized way: A leagues and B leagues, leagues separated by age or gender, leagues where the teams are formed around the workplace, and so on. For boardgames and card games, the choices aren't as wide, and often not as formalized. But enter any game store and look at the postings for role-playing groups and you will see players trying to sort themselves into the right microclimates.

Online, there are bulletin boards, guild websites, wikis, and other player communities. But when it comes time to play the game itself, since geography is not a limitation, players are often thrown into one big hopper, and then some kind of player matching occurs. Perhaps players deliberately select people they already know to play with; perhaps they look at a list of games and choose to join one. More and more, though, some sort of algorithm is used to match people, although these algorithms currently use far fewer kinds of information than players use in offline matching.

When looking at a metagame, one thing to watch out for is how much it fragments player communities. Many games have deliberately built in choices about how you play them: different player settings (e.g., game speed, or starting money) when spawning a game in an RTS, different PvP battles available in an MMO, different formats to play Magic. Each new format choice is appealing, because it lets players customize their experience that much more, and there is always someone who wishes you could tweak this or that setting, or play on some new map. But too much of that, and there is the risk that none of the different formats will succeed: players will not be able to find the choice they want, or the minimum number of people required to join the game won't be available. Smaller game communities-often physical ones-are especially vulnerable. If twelve players show up at your store to play Magic, you can run a tournament. But if half of them want to play sealed Magic, and half want to play constructed, and you need at

least eight people to start a tournament, you may have nothing. And then next week they won't come back. So it is important that there be a balance between having enough options for players to find something they like⁴ and having few enough options that players can make a choice and expect to find someone else to play with. Newer games, games that take place in the physical world, and less popular games have to be most careful about having too many formats; established games, online games, and very popular games have more leeway.

Metagame Support for Player Goals

Features of a game and its metagame can support different player goals in a variety of ways. For example, in an MMO socialization is supported in-game with chat and guild systems. Apparently simple features like the ability to create a custom chat channel (and how the channel is moderated, and whether it is persistent through logoff, and so on) can make a real difference in how well players can socialize. The basic gameplay structure of an MMO supports socialization as well: there is a lot of downtime, such as while waiting for a raid to form, and not much to do during it. That downtime has a real negative side, as lengthy downtime generally does, but the socialization benefits are large (whether it is a net win is hard to say for certain-it's almost certainly agential). Out-of-game, there are forums, informational websites (both official and fancreated), guild websites, and so on.

Exercise 7.1: For various sports, give some examples of game features and metagame features that support socialization.

Exercise 7.2: Pick a game you know with a lot of downtime that players use to socialize. Is the downtime a net benefit or a net loss? Why? Would more downtime be better? Would less?

Human beings certainly like accumulating stuff, and again there are

both in-game and out-of-game ways to support that. Some games have collecting as part of the gameplay itself (e.g., the Pokemon handheld games), which is not a metagame feature per se. Some games (Magic, golf, bicycle racing) have a great variety of equipment available for players to collect-the equipment is useful in-game, but collecting it is a metagame activity and, for some people, can become an end in itself.⁵

Games can have monetary benefits as well: playing for money (poker, backgammon), tournament prizes (many games), professional play. Even the dream of such rewards can be enticing for many players-certainly far more players are inspired by the idea of making a living playing basketball than can actually do so. If professional play is out of reach, players can still make money in the metagame: repairing bikes for other people, or trading for Magic cards and then selling them on the secondary market.

Besides money, other prizes may include goods useful in ordinary life, items useful to play the game, and of course trophies. Although trophies are strictly speaking a physical good, they are really more about status than wealth. Any prize, though, can help fulfill a player's desire for status. Wealth is powerful in this way, since saying you have won a large sum of money is more convincing to most people as a sign of achievement than almost any other prize (especially people outside of the game's community-many a game player has finally gotten some sort of understanding and respect from his nonplaying relatives by winning a tournament with a large cash prize). Ratings, rankings, and titles are another way for players to gain respect, although of course such achievements are better understood inside the game community than outside of it. If the game has any kind of media coverage, that will increase status as well.

If a player can develop signature moves, a unique play style, or even a

notable personality, that can enhance his status. Poker players and sports figures do this a great deal, but it is part of almost any gaming community. These sorts of reputational benefits also provide self-expression, and sometimes gameplay benefits (e.g., intimidation) as well. Distinct player styles can arise out of the richness of the game itself if there are enough different ways to play (basketball does well here, but sprinting, say, does not). Sometimes features can be put into the game deliberately to support player expression and style, as with special titles or visible armor in an MMO.

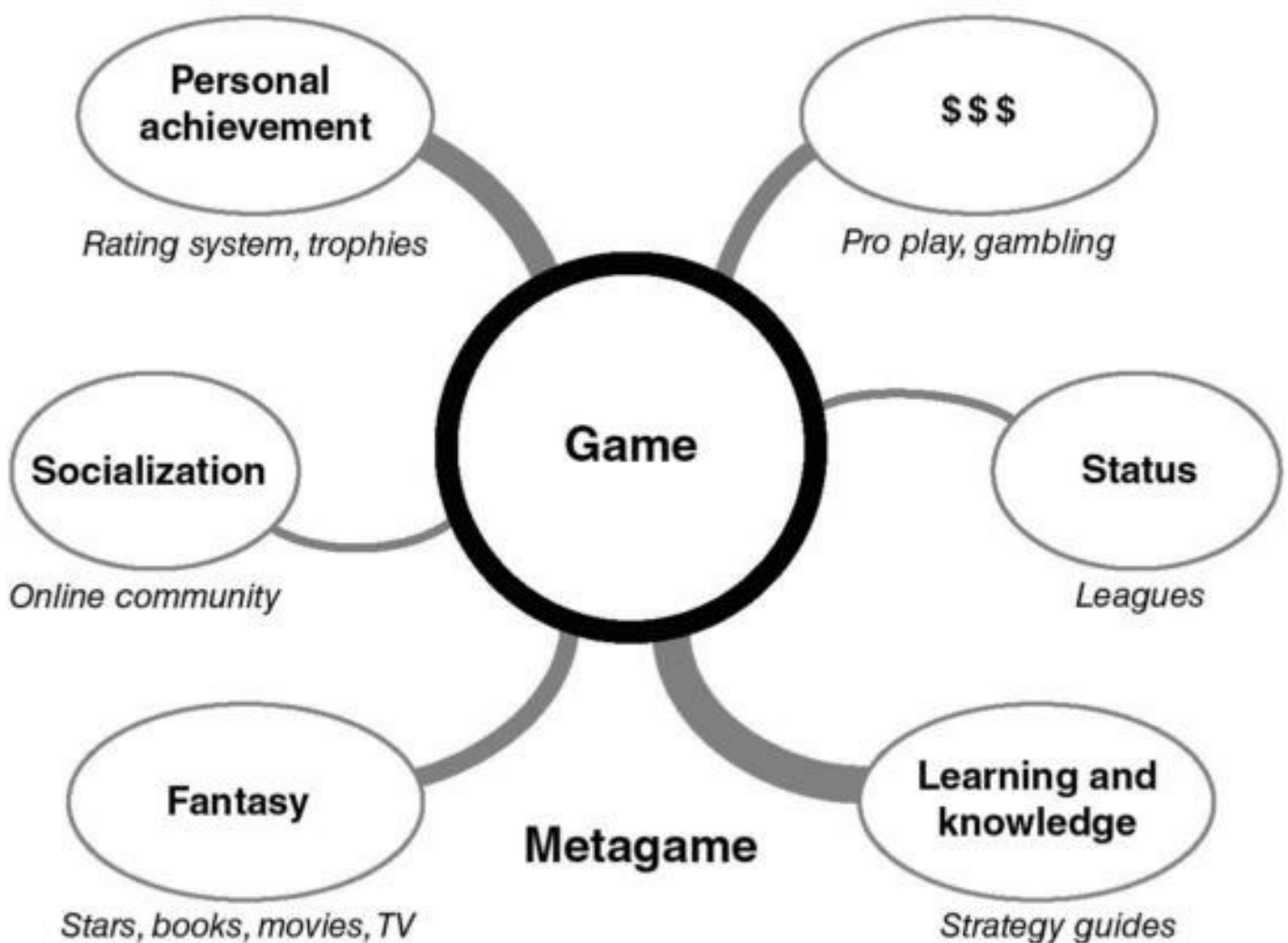


Figure 7.2

A general metagame diagram

We can graphically represent various player life goals, and how metagame features connect their achievement to the underlying game, by drawing circles for the goals and connecting lines for the supporting features (thicker lines represent stronger support for those features) (figure 7.2).

Note that depending on the limitations of the game, it can be hard to support some of these things. There is not much call in a game like roulette, say, for rating systems, professional leagues, or strategy guides.' On the other hand, a richer game like soccer has enormous scope for supporting almost any goal a player might have (figure 7.3). Or, directly comparing the metagame strengths and weaknesses of the Pokemon trading card game and the Pokemon GameBoy cartridge, see figure 7.4.

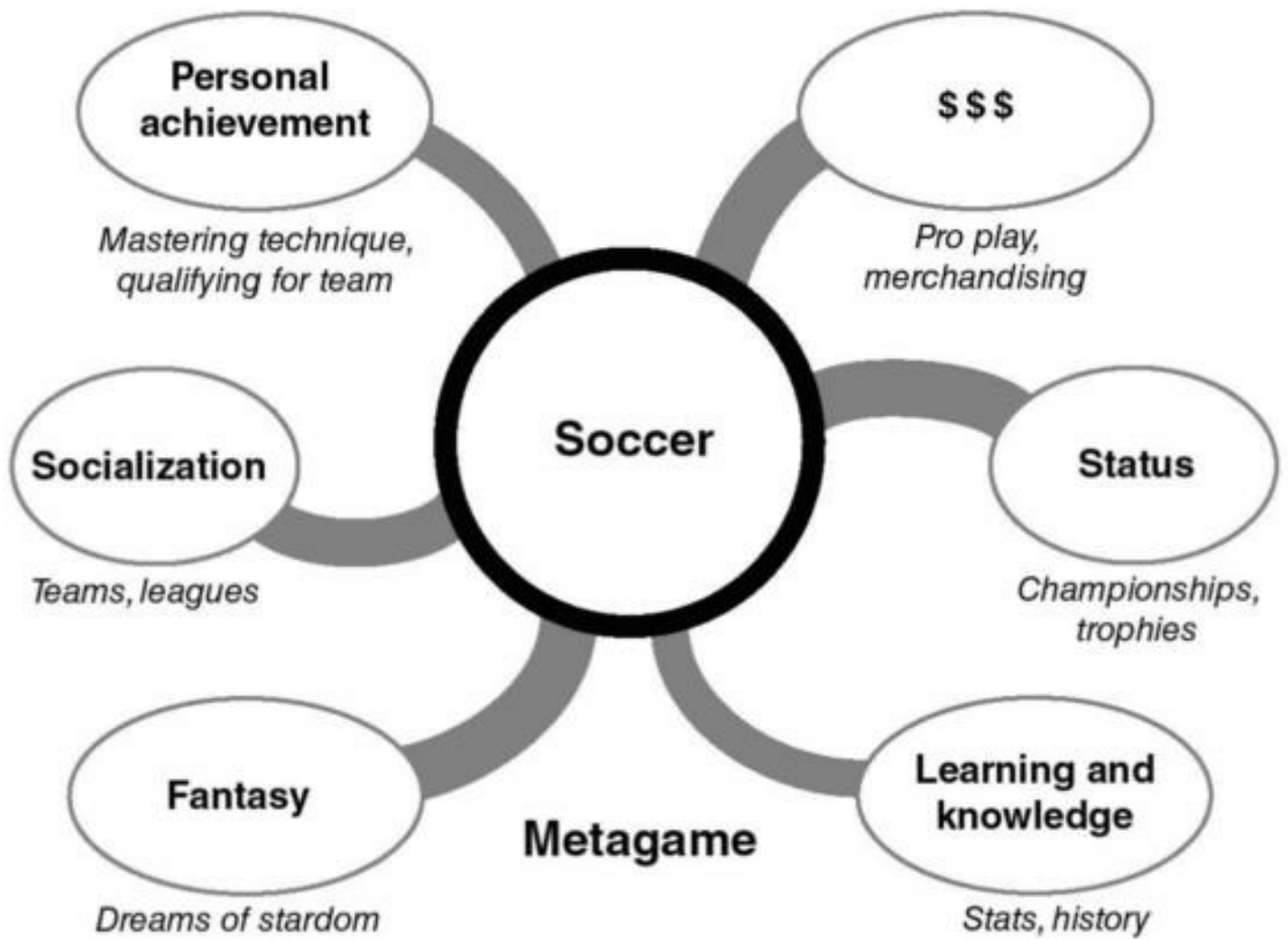


Figure 7.3

Metagame diagram for soccer



Figure 7.4

Comparing the PokCmon Trading Card Game to the Pokemon Cartridge Game

Status and money are better supported by a card collection than by a cartridge collection or even the collection of Pokemon creatures in-game. On the other hand, during gameplay, the fantasy of owning and caring for creatures exhibited in the cartridge game is stronger than the one presented in the card game. Socialization is best supported by the face-to-face play of the card game; achievement and knowledge are well supported in both games.

It can be useful to detail as completely as possible the metagame potential of a game. Along with the thickness of the arrows, one can

consider how expensive the various metagame aspects are to produce for the game's publisher. For instance, a player's desire to achieve money or its equivalent might be efficiently satisfied in a trading card game by making sure price guides are published and well distributed. Perhaps the underlying skeleton of the trading card game can be changed, for example by increasing the relative rarity of certain cards, in order to facilitate this. Caution must be exercised because changing the basic skeleton of the game might alter the metagame in many ways. The above change to card rarity could potentially make the game less amenable to the goal of personal achievement if it nudges the game away from one of skill for the average player and toward one of initial monetary commitment.

Of course, none of these diagrams comes close to listing all the features that support the various goals (and many features support multiple goals, so a perfectly accurate diagram would be an impenetrable thicket of arrows). Any value the diagrams have comes more from the process of making them and thinking consciously about which features support which goals and how, rather than in the end result.

Exercise 7.3: Choose two different games and draw the metagame diagrams for them.

Exercise 7.4: How might you increase the reward of money in Little League soccer (assuming direct monetary awards are forbidden)?

Exercise 7.5: How might you increase the reward of money in a children's trading card game (assuming direct monetary awards are forbidden)?

Exercise 7.6: Discuss from a metagame perspective what you would expect to happen to sales/play of Dungeons & Dragons with the release

of the Lord of the Rings movies.

Exercise 7.7: In 1968, the U.S. Open tennis championship had a total prize purse of \$100,000. What might the effect have been on the general (not just professional) tennis metagame if the purse were upped by \$1,000,000? What if that money were spent on local tournaments instead?

Exercise 7.8: Discuss how Tiger Woods changed the golf metagame for the average local player.

Exercise 7.9: What are the advantages for the golf metagame of the golf rating system (golf handicaps)? What are the advantages for the chess metagame of the chess rating system (Elo ratings)?

7.2 Characteristic: Conceit/Motif

When we speak of a game's conceit, we take conceit in the sense of an extended metaphor. Some games are purely abstract, such as go, Tetris, or poker, but most nonsports games are at least metaphorically "about" something. Games with a conceit might have a very light one, in the sense that chess is vaguely about medieval warfare, or they might have a more elaborate conceit, in the way that Starcraft is about science fiction warfare or Tomb Raider is about swashbuckling archeology. If the game also tries to model its (possibly imaginary) conceit, it is to some degree a simulation: PanzerBlitz surely qualifies, Tomb Raider probably doesn't, but Counter-Strike probably does. In any case, a game's conceit can provide a great deal of motivation and explanation for the action: imagine, for example, how much less compelling Clue would be as a purely abstract boardgame.