

Game Studies - Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now: On Self-Effacing Games and Unachievements

by Douglas Wilson

Abstract

In this paper, I use a party game that I co-designed, Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now (B.U.T.T.O.N.), as a case study to suggest some alternative possibilities for the design of digitally-mediated play and games. Specifically, I argue that that intentionally “broken” or otherwise incomplete game systems can help nurture a distinctly self-motivated and collaborative form of play. I propose two terms: “unachievements” and “self-effacing games,” which help articulate the specific qualities that distinguish broken games like B.U.T.T.O.N. from more traditional digital games. In addition, I situate these games in terms of Henning Eichberg’s concept of the “impossible game” and Bernie DeKoven’s notion of the “Well-Played game.” In drawing our attention not just to

players, but also to the relationships between them, Eichberg and DeKoven offer us provocative clues on what it might mean to design for togetherness.

Keywords: game design, design research, broken games, folk games, indie games, physical games, cheating, achievements, unachievements, togetherness

"The rule is not the game. The flow of the game is in contradiction to the achievement. The game is what starts beyond the rule and beyond the striving for the result "beyond the 'it'."

– Henning Eichberg (2010, p.191)

"[W]e find it best to play pointless games in which the wellness we are able to share comes not from the excellence of our performance but rather from the excellence of the joke we have perpetrated upon each other, the sublimity of the silliness, the perfection of the ridiculous."

– Bernie DeKoven (1978, p.99)

Two Introductory Anecdotes

It's the 2010 Game Developers Conference, and we're at the Mezzanine club in downtown San Francisco for the GAMMA IV party. I'm sprawled out on the ground - which is still damp with the residue of spilled cocktails - and I'm being trampled by three strangers as I desperately grasp for my Xbox controller. I am exactly where I want to be.

In this moment I'm showcasing my own game, Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally

OK Now (*a.k.a.* B.U.T.T.O.N., 2010), a digitally-mediated party game in which two to eight players take a number of steps away from the screen and then race to the controllers through physical space. The goal is to press your button (or, in some cases, to defend your button from being pressed by others) in a certain way as specified on the screen. The B.U.T.T.O.N. competition here at the GAMMA IV party has gotten so physical precisely because the game goes out of its way to encourage a playful kind of “dirty” tactics. As I lunge for my controller, I’m also hoping to grab some of the other ones. Hoarding your opponents’ controllers is, after all, an effective form of defense.



Figure 1: The author, trampled playing B.U.T.T.O.N. at GAMMA IV

There does seem to be a line between “good” and “bad” unfair tactics, though it’s a very fuzzy one. This night, we and most of our players have agreed - tacitly or explicitly - that the projector is off-limits. When one player tries turning it off, a number of us concur that the resulting game isn’t so much fun. These kinds of negotiations crop up constantly. My co-developer Lawrence, for example, takes some dubiously small steps away from the screen. The rest of us end up dragging him back to the “proper” starting position. The trick is to be bold and creative in how you bend the rules. Another one of my co-developers, Lau, starts taking some additional steps backwards in order to build up a running start during the countdown. He is making a fool of himself, but in a way that is both amusing and clever.

These improvisations, and the negotiations around them, are all fueled by the ambiguity of what is and is not allowed. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* seems to revel in this ambiguity, actively goading its players to out-hoodwink one another. And even if the rules were clear, the game wouldn’t be able to enforce them. We know that only we ourselves, the human players, are able to referee what happens in front of the screen, out in the physical world. This glaring absence of total systemization - all the more apparent because it is situated against the familiar frame of screen-based console gaming - opens up a space for a playful subversiveness. It is the magic ingredient that makes the game, so simplistic and so stupid on the face of it, worth playing.

But this first anecdote tells only part of the story. Here’s a second anecdote:

It is the 2010 Nordic Game Conference, and we are at a club in Malmö, Sweden

for the conference party. With some apprehension I am watching my friend Nicklas play B.U.T.T.O.N. Most people at the club are very drunk, and Nicklas' three opponents prove no exception. Nicklas is an experienced player, but his slender build and mild-mannered personality make him an awkward match-up for three belligerent drunks. The round begins, and one of the drunks gets a little too excited, tackling poor Nicklas down to the floor. Somehow, this is no longer the same game that Nicklas remembers playing with our own group of less aggressive friends.

In the company of friends or like-minded strangers, the punk rock, design-it-yourself spirit of the game can be liberating. But played carelessly - however we even define that - the game can quickly turn sour. Such are the opportunities and pitfalls of so physical and open-ended a game system, so obviously contingent on the particular players and the particular setting. Yet it is precisely because the game can go so wrong that it is so rewarding when the players manage to keep it going "right." Its contingent nature might well be the main attraction.

I would like to argue that these kinds of messy, hybrid analog-digital game forms deserve our attention. From a design perspective, it can be productively evocative to conceptualize these kinds of silly party games not as "systems," but rather as *festive contexts* - as excuses to laugh with and horse around with friends. Games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* foreground the material and social circumstances around the game, in an attempt to call attention to the people playing. These kinds of games can help frame multiplayer gaming as the pursuit of festivity, achieved *together*.

Outline & Method

In this article, I use *B.U.T.T.O.N.* as a case study to raise some conjectures about the possibilities of digitally-mediated play and games. Reflecting back on my experiences designing the game and showcasing it to the public, I believe that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and other games like it point to an alternative perspective on the design of digital games - a perspective which will help illuminate certain under-explored design strategies. My argument is that intentionally “broken” or otherwise incomplete game systems can help support a distinctly self-motivated and collaborative form of play. From a design perspective, the key to making these kinds of broken games work is to frame them in the right way. In this view, the practice of game design becomes less about crafting systems, and more about mood setting and instilling into the players the appropriate “spirit.”

First, in order to better articulate my team’s design aims, I provide a more detailed description of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and how the game works. Second, I situate the game against other recent efforts that try to pull digital gaming out into the material world. In particular, I examine the game in terms of Bart Simon’s (2009) notion of “gestural excess.” Third, I propose two terms - “unachievements” and “self-effacing games” - which help articulate the specific qualities that distinguish *B.U.T.T.O.N.* from more traditional digital games. Finally, I position the game in terms of Henning Eichberg’s (2010) concept of the “impossible game” and Bernie DeKoven’s (1978) notion of the “Well-Played game.” In drawing our attention not just to players, but also to the relationships between them, Eichberg and DeKoven offer us provocative clues as to what it might mean to design for *togetherness*.

Throughout the article, I deliberately focus on one particular example in order to explore at depth the issues it raises. That said, my interest here is not ultimately the game itself, but rather the broader design strategy that underlies it. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* may not be the best or most “successful” example of self-effacing game design, but it is an example to which I am uniquely qualified to speak. This article is motivated by a belief that there is something useful to be gleamed from someone who has “been there” throughout the entire development process and who is able to articulate those experiences, post-facto, within a specific set of academic discourses [\[1\]](#).

Furthermore, I would like to stress that the game should not be viewed as an “experiment” or a research prototype [\[2\]](#). Developed as a project with the Copenhagen Game Collective, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was not designed in an academic context [\[3\]](#). It is the product of a particular social milieu and reflects a particular set of agendas [\[4\]](#). I do not consider my design work as a “method,” because for me the term carries with it some unwelcome institutional baggage. When I am “in the moment” of design, it is crucial that my practice not be instrumentalized towards a context external to the collective. As such, I view the “research” component of my work as the theoretical reflection contained in this article - a kind of literature-grounded creator’s statement, written in a university context. My aim here is to provide an evocative conceptual framework that will inspire us to think about digital game design in a different way.

Playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*

As described in the introduction, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is a rather simple game -

at least at first glance. The gist is that two to eight players race to their controllers, through physical space.

To start a round of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, each player presses their designated button [5]. This assigns the player a silly-looking avatar, used to provide some graphical indication of when that player's button is pressed and when that player wins or loses. Throughout the round, players follow a series of instructions that appear on the screen. First, they are instructed to put their controllers down. Second, they are ordered to take some specified number of steps backwards, away from their controllers. Third, they are given some kind of command, such as a specific task (e.g. "Do five pushups"), a position from which to start the round ("Lie on the floor"), or a gameplay constraint (e.g. "Slow-mo round!"). Finally, after a short countdown, a randomly chosen win or lose condition is displayed (e.g. "First player to push their button 15 times wins") and players rush towards the controllers. Ideally, a playful kind of chaos ensues. After a certain window of time, the round ends and the results are displayed. Players can then begin another round.

The game's defining characteristic is the "incompleteness" of its underlying system, in the sense that it is so obviously up to the players themselves to interpret and enforce the rules. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is not a game played with motion control technology. The computer has no way of refereeing whether you took exactly six steps back, or if you did indeed spin around five times. That the players are collectively responsible for policing themselves only serves to exacerbate the ambiguity of the rules. How is a "step" measured? How slow do you need to be during the slow-mo round? These physical world actions are not so easy to systematize

ad hoc.

Beyond the poorly elaborated instructions telling the players what they should do, the game has very little to say on the issue of what the players should *not* do. Admittedly, this is true of almost all digital games, which rarely specify what players can or cannot do in the physical space of the living room. The difference here is that *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, in requiring players to step away from and then rush to the controllers, sets a clear precedent for unsupervised physical play. In a party setting, the game can become quite physical as players jostle for position or wrestle for the controllers.

One of the few aspects of the game that is actually codified into computer logic is the win/lose conditions. Nevertheless, in designing the game we have tried to introduce some confusion wherever possible. Inspired by various folk games which playfully ostracize one player from the social group (Eichberg, 2010; Møller, 1990, 2010), we have designed explicit lose conditions (e.g. “Last player whose button is pressed loses”) in an attempt to complicate the supposed binary of winning and losing [6]. If a player wins, their avatar does a dance. If they lose, their avatar is replaced by a tombstone. If they neither win nor lose, their avatar starts crying. The players must decide themselves how to valorize the three outcomes in relation to one another [7]. Is it more satisfying to win, or to make someone else lose? Is winning as desirable as losing is undesirable [8]? In *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, as one of the in-game messages reminds, “not winning is *not* the same as losing!”

B.U.T.T.O.N. does more than just open a space for player improvisation and negotiation. The game actively embraces its ambiguities,

encouraging players to bend, break, and extend the rules [9]. “Unfair tactics” is the name of the game, both figuratively and literally. One in-game message, for example, reminds us that “it’s totally OK to push other players’ buttons.” This same message is also hinted by the game mechanics themselves. The lose condition which reads “Any player whose button is pressed loses” would hardly make sense if players restricted themselves to using only their own assigned buttons. Other commands, such as “Close your eyes” and “Turn around,” all but force the players to cheat; though the computer playfully scolds “Dude, no cheating!” the players have little choice but to peek if they want to find out when the race begins [10].

In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, we hoped to encourage the kinds of “house rules” and improvised modifications that often arise around non-digital games like board games and playground games - and not just encourage those house rules, but also get players to revel in and savor them, in a very conscious way. The idea here is that the meta-game - the negotiation around the game - can be just as engaging as the game itself, at least when framed in the proper way.

Situating *B.U.T.T.O.N.*

B.U.T.T.O.N., of course, does not represent some entirely unprecedented set of design ideas. In the academic world, for example, an increasing number of HCI and ubiquitous computing researchers have turned their attention toward digitally mediated games that encourage both physical activity and social play. These efforts, encompassing a variety of related subgenres like augmented-reality games, location-aware games, and

exertion games, are often grouped together under the banner of “pervasive gaming,” “an emerging genre in which traditional, real-world games are augmented with computing functionality, or, depending on the perspective, purely virtual computer entertainment is brought back to the real world” (Magerkurth et al, 2005, p.1).

In a recent theme issue of *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, a variety of researchers explore how computer technology can be used in designing for social interaction through physical play (Bekker et al., 2010a). Soute et al. (2010) advance the idea of “Head Up Games” - games that free their players from having to look down at screens, be they television screens or the smaller screens of handheld devices. In one of their outdoor games, *Save the Safe*, players wear a special belt that determines when an attacking player gets close enough to a defending player to steal a virtual “key.” Likewise, Bekker et al. (2010b) design and evaluate interactive play objects that use sensors and multimodal feedback to “stimulate social interaction between children through physical play” (p.385). Echoing our own intentions in designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, both Soute et al. and Bekker et al. emphasize the value of games that are open-ended enough to support player adaptation of the rules. Yet despite all these parallels, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* cannot adequately be understood from a pervasive computing perspective. As I argue later, the game embodies a very different, more skeptical attitude towards the role of technology in game design.

Attitudinally, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is better positioned in relation to a recent wave of physical indie games. Terry Cavanagh’s *Sumouse* (2010), for instance, is a simple game in which two players share the same mouse

and compete to guide the cursor in opposite directions. The contest is all but guaranteed to become a physical one. In a similar fashion, Anna Anthropy's *Chicanery* (2009) tasks each of its players with holding down one specific key on the keyboard. The winner is the player who manages to hold down their key the longest [11]. *Chicanery* is a game that only "makes sense" once players realize that the game is primarily a physical one. Like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, the game goes out of its way to signal the absence of total systemization. Before each round, *Chicanery* reminds us: "the game doesn't care what you do to make the other players let go of their keys!" *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, then, can be viewed as part of a growing movement of indie developers interested in exploring the social and material circumstances around the computer.

The mainstream game industry too has taken a keen interest in the role of physicality in digital gaming. Over the last decade, the overwhelming success of games like *Wii Sports* (Nintendo, 2006), *Dance Dance Revolution*, and *Guitar Hero* has fundamentally changed the landscape of the console games market. With the recent releases of Sony's PlayStation Move and Microsoft's Kinect, all three major console manufacturers seem to be betting on a future in which consumers are increasingly interested in the action "out in the living room," not just the action on the screen. Accordingly, the advertisements for these games typically focus less on the in-game visuals and more on the physical reality of players moving in space and interacting with one another. Bart Simon (2009), riffing on the term "eye candy," situates these ads as "body candy" - "a kind of fascination with what we can do with our bodies in the physical space in front of the screen." "The focus," Simon continues, "is not on the game but on the players, or more suggestively perhaps, the

focus is on the players as the game” (p.3).

Perhaps the closest such commercial analog to *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is Nintendo’s *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* (Intelligent Systems, 2006) [12]. *Smooth Moves* features a collection of zany “micro-games” that only last a couple of seconds. In each micro-game, one player uses their wiimote to adopt a silly pose, such as “The Elephant” or “The Samurai.” From that pose, the player attempts to complete a simple little task, such as tracing a shape or slicing a virtual piece of wood. None of these micro-games would work very well individually. Rather, they work together in series, synergistically. Because *Smooth Moves* fires off these micro-games at such a manic pace, it is difficult to get too emotionally invested in any one challenge. The focus is shifted away from the game-delineated reward system of winning and losing, towards the human beings performing and willfully making fools of themselves.

Still, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* somehow feels less systematized than most Wii titles. One key difference is that gestural games like *Smooth Moves* evaluate the players’ moment-to-moment physical movements in a very explicit way. The fun of playing a game like *Smooth Moves* or *Wii Sports* stems at least in part from the challenge of learning to how to satisfy a complex technological system with the right accelerometer and optical sensor input. In *Wii Sports Tennis*, for example, there is a certain skill to aiming the ball in the right direction, or in serving it at top speed. It is precisely because these skills require non-trivial effort to learn that mastering them can feel rewarding.

In *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, by contrast, the majority of the central gameplay actions

- stepping away from the screen, jostling for position, and rushing to the controllers - remain entirely unmonitored by the computer. It is not the technological system that motivates the players to move around and follow the directions, but rather the *play community* (DeKoven, 1978) - the presence of competitors and spectators, and the general agreement, tacit or explicit, that “yes, we’ve agreed to play this silly game, and we’re going to try our best to have fun with it and each other.” Indeed, it is difficult to imagine anyone ever playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.* as a single-player game. The system underlying the game amounts to little more than a glorified button-press detector.

Yet in another view, gestural games and open-ended physical games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* may actually share more parallels than this comparison admits. As Simon (2009) argues, gestural gameplay is not just play with fancy motion detection technology - it is also play *against* and *around* that technology. If playing *Wii Sports Tennis*, for instance, could be reduced to the instrumental pursuit of optimizing one’s actions within a certain technological system, there would hardly be any reason to move the wiimote much. As players quickly learn, a small efficient flick of the wrist generates enough acceleration to hit the ball well. Yet as Simon points out, many players continue to play *Wii Sports Tennis* with exaggerated, full-armed swings, even when they understand that the system “neither demands nor acknowledges” these more mimetic movements (p.12).

Gestural gameplay, in this view, is not just the challenge of learning a technological system, but also an excuse to engage in a type of bodily play that is as theatrically performative as it is unnecessary. As Simon sees it, these “gestural excesses” speak to an intrinsic reward - an end in

itself, beyond any rewards as framed by the game system. He writes: "There is a kind of group-induced karaoke effect where the act of playing, singing or dancing becomes a performance for others that are as important as, or more important than, the gameplay as defined by the software" (p.13).

Gestural excessiveness, as a showy form of inefficient gameplay, represents a refutation of hardcore instrumental play. As Simon argues, "It is precisely because the gesture of the overhead smash is not necessary given the system of control that it becomes meaningful" (p.13). Paradoxically, the intrinsic rewards of gestural excessiveness are framed against the extrinsic win/loss rewards as defined by the system. Performative and instrumental styles of play are inextricably linked, in a kind of juxtapositional relationship.

Not all gestural games, however, support this kind of excessive bodily play to the same degree. Simon, comparing the different gameplay modes of Rockstar's *Table Tennis* (2007), observes that the "increased complication and fast pace" of the game's advanced mode "arguably leaves less room for gestural excess as players' gestures become increasingly enveloped by control imperative of the advanced simulation" (p.13). In other words, the more challenging and complex the game, the more the player must perform to the system, on the system's own terms. On the other side of the spectrum, a simple game like *Wii Sports Tennis* can become, as Simon puts it, "deathly boring" (p.13) without the players' own intrinsically motivated embellishments.

B.U.T.T.O.N. takes this latter, less-is-more approach to system design

and runs with it ad absurdum, to a point at which the excess all but eclipses the actions acknowledged by the system. Actually, the very notion of “excess” no longer even seems to apply. The game consists of little else *besides* the players’ embellishments. Like *Wii Sports Tennis*, it would be deathly boring without them. The difference is that in *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, these kinds of embellishments frequently double as good strategy. A well-timed shove or a gutsy dive is not just showy - it can make all the difference between success and failure. In *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, the line between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, between performative and instrumental, is very blurry indeed.

Achievements, Anti-Achievements, Unachievements

Perhaps it would be more accurate to classify *B.U.T.T.O.N.* as a kind of contemporary playground game, instead of as a videogame. Anthropological studies of children’s playground games have demonstrated such games to be fertile sources of performativity and improvised rule modifications (Hughes, 1983, 1995). Such a genealogy seems especially relevant given that our design thinking was influenced by various New Games and folk game traditions (DeKoven, 1978; Eichberg, 2010; Fluegelman, 1976). Yet even these classifications do not feel quite right.

The following hypothetical design may help articulate why not: Imagine an entirely non-digital version of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, in which the computer system is replaced by a human moderator who announces the various commands and win conditions, and who assesses when the various buttons are pressed. I would like to argue that this non-digital

adaptation, though structurally similar to the original game, would likely nurture a very different player experience.

This discrepancy is largely a matter of differing expectations. When we play a game refereed by a human being, we do not expect the rule system to enforce itself. We ourselves enact the game logic as explained by the rules, and we entrust ourselves or the referee to supervise, however fallibly or inconsistently. By contrast, when we play a console game, we typically expect the computer to carry out the rules for us, or at least the core rules around which the game is designed. So, when such a system so egregiously fails to enforce the very rules it decrees, it gives a distinct impression of brokenness or incompleteness, as if the system were somehow defaulting on its end of the bargain. We, the players, are forced to pick up the computer's slack, collectively.

In short, what ultimately distinguishes *B.U.T.T.O.N.* from its hypothetical non-digital adaptation - and from other more "traditional" games, both digital and non-digital - is the way it manipulates context to deliberately toy with player expectations. The very obvious gaps, between what the system tells us to do and what it actually processes, set the tone for a kind of generalized mischief. If even the system does not take the game so seriously, why should we?

Here we have identified the central tension that defines the *B.U.T.T.O.N.* experience: the system gives us explicit orders, but is not even able to validate whether or not we follow them. These gaps, embraced as a purposeful design strategy, can productively be utilized as a kind of "unachievement." Whereas achievements try to motivate players to

pursue specific rewards as delineated by the game system, unachievements try to motivate players to hijack, modify, or otherwise subvert these kinds of extrinsic rewards. Unachievements signal to the players that they should not take the game-specified goals too seriously - that they, the players, should instead confront the game on their own terms.

Achievements, in contrast to the extrinsic goals of the core game (e.g. score more points than the other team), often systematize eccentric or extreme actions that may otherwise have been intrinsically motivated, for example, "Trick an opposing Medic into healing you" (Valve, 2007). In this sense, achievements and unachievements are diametric opposites. Whereas achievements often monitor actions that players are *not* strictly required to do to win the game, unachievements self-consciously *fail* to monitor actions that players *are* (supposedly) required to do.

The notion of the "unachievement" should be distinguished from that of the "anti-achievement." In gaming culture, the term "anti-achievement" has been used to connote a specific type of achievement that is humorously orthogonal to the stated goal of the game. For example, in one thread on an online *World of Warcraft* forum (Shellar, 2008), fans of the game brainstorm hypothetical anti-achievements such as "Staying Down," earned by players who "Fall from a height of less than 20 yards and die." Anti-achievements poke fun not only at the game, but also at the player. In *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 09* (EA Tiburon, 2008), the "Afraid of the Dark" achievement playfully mocks those players who "get the ball within a few inches of the hole without sinking it," rewarding them with a paltry ten Xbox achievement points.

What anti-achievements do is take the theatrical or the subversive - the perfectly bad shot, the irreverent antic, the silly joke - and codify them into a system of clearly delineated extrinsic rewards. Anti-achievements, like achievements more generally, instrumentalize performance, thereby allowing the game system to subsume portions of the meta-game. Anti-achievements simply make this instrumentalization all the more apparent.

Unachievements, by contrast, strive to do the opposite. They open up a space where instrumental gameplay can readily be infused with double meanings and intrinsic motivations. For instance, in a round of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, when I tickle my opponent in an attempt to make them drop their controller, I am not just playing strategically. I am also performing a showy, outrageous action to the crowd, to my opponent, and to myself.

To be clear, the unachievement in this example is not my act of tickling, but rather the systemic gap that facilitated the action. My decision to tickle my opponent is egged on by a game that pretends to “run the show,” even though it cannot possibly referee the very kind of physical play it encourages. As such, unachievements can only be defined negatively, as conspicuous *absences* of systemization. They should be viewed as provocative *circumstances*, not clear directives. After all, intrinsic rewards, by definition, cannot be prescribed by the game. They must originate from the player. The best a game can do is set its players off with a nod and a wink, then lead by example. In the case of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, the hope is that its irreverence will be contagious.

Steve Jackson’s famous tabletop game, *Illuminati* (1987), provides a

useful illustration of why unachievements can only be formulated indirectly. The *Illuminati* rulebook proposes a humorous variation on the game in which players are permitted to cheat. However, the rulebook also qualifies this rule with a list of clear exceptions, such as “You may not cheat on the amount of money drawn from the bank during setup or the income phase” and “Anyone caught in the act must undo that cheat” (p.9). As Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) observe in their analysis of the game, “Cheating in *Illuminati* does not remove all the rules and boundaries from the game: it serves to re-draw them” (p.279). Sanctioned by the official ruleset, these “cheats” become a kind of game-approved strategy. The players are still playing a game provided to them by someone else, not carving out a space for their own game [13].

Salen and Zimmerman write that “sanctioned cheating can be an innovative way to enrich a game design,” but warn that “it must be done with great care” (p.279). They argue that, in *Illuminati*, this care manifests itself in a “careful design” which allows “only those forms of cheating that leave the game intact, playable, meaningful” (p.279). Tellingly, this phrasing locates “meaning” as a quality of the system - of its intactness. The implied design strategy here is one in which the designers use their experience and expertise to filter out “bad” ways of playing.

An alternative strategy is to build a context in which players feel like they are *supposed* to change the game, together. A game like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is so broken that it arguably was never very “meaningful” or “intact” in the first place anyway. What it does is try to convince its players that any meaning ultimately resides in *themselves*, not in the system. The game

goads us to bend the rules, but in contrast to *Illuminati*, it does not set such explicit boundaries. It leaves more (even if not all) of the negotiation work up to the players. In developing the game, our aim was not to make a readily consumable game system, but rather to deputize the players to interpret, enforce, and even modify the rules we prescribe. In other words, the bulk of our design work resided not in engineering the system of rules, but rather in successfully rallying the players to approach the game with sufficient silliness and self-irony.

My claim is that unachievements foreground the game around the game - the social interchange between players. In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, our hope was that the rounds would be too short and the rules too contentious for players to get so invested in winning and losing. It is not that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is not played competitively; the lure of winning (or of making others lose) is what occasions the game. Rather, it is that this competitive play gravitates towards the self-ironic, tempered by an awareness that the real stakes exist at the level of the meta-game. The “true” competition, if “competition” is even the right word here, is to see who can make the funniest cheat or the cleverest improvisation. In short, unachievements encourage theatrical performance of instrumentality, as opposed to the instrumentalization of performance. Unachievements invite the meta-game to intrude upon the game system.

Self-Effacing Games

Admittedly, my claim that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is somehow more “incomplete” than other games is a tricky distinction to draw. “House rules” are already part and parcel of digital gaming culture (Jakobsson, 2007), and

almost any game can (and will) be appropriated by players to improvise strange new games and challenges not envisioned by the original designers (Lowood, 2005; Pearce, 2009; Sotamaa, 2006). More generally, it is certainly true that any game can devolve into *B.U.T.T.O.N.*-styled shenanigans. There is no reason, for example, why I could not physically tackle my opponents while playing a game of, say, *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* (Capcom, 1996), if we deemed that a fun way to play.

As Mikael Jakobsson (2007) observes in his study of a Swedish console game club, even a seemingly “traditional” game like *Super Smash Bros. Melee* foments contentious debates about how the game should be regulated and played. Jakobsson is right when he argues that: “Even at the most fundamental level, rules are influenced by, and affect, the social and cultural aspects of the gaming context” (p.392). Mia Consalvo (2007), in her book on cheating in videogames, points out that gameplay is always subject to “soft rules” - ethical judgments and social customs that shape how the coded game rules are interpreted and appropriated. For instance, in the world of massively multiplayer online games, it remains a controversial issue as to whether it qualifies as “cheating” to use macros and other tools that automate certain aspects of gameplay. Even when game makers deem this kind of play illegal, some players continue to engage in and defend the practice, arguing that automation provides “a way to fast-forward through the undesirable elements of gameplay” (Consalvo, 2007, p.122). Rule negotiation is, as T.L. Taylor (2009) puts it, a “consistent feature” of computer gaming. Total systemization is a myth; it is impossible.

Still, a game like *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* certainly does not *invite* us

to engage in physical play. Tackling my opponents, if we had not already somehow sanctioned that type of play, would likely be taken as a “cheap” or unreasonable action, a violation of what my opponents had implicitly consented to by agreeing to play the game. It just is not the general convention, when playing an arcade puzzle game, for the competition to spill so messily out into the material world.

What distinguishes *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, then, is that it is actively *self-effacing* [14]. The game *does* invite physical and subversive play, hinting to and even telling the players that the terms of the game are up for debate. Thus, it is not just that the rules are ambiguous; it is that the game *signals an acute self-awareness of this ambiguity*. The game makes it clear that players are consenting to something different than when agreeing to play a more traditional digital game. It is then up to the players to negotiate what, exactly, they have consented to.

Of course, the *B.U.T.T.O.N.* experience is not a fully malleable one. No matter what the players improvise, the gameplay will always revolve around (or will at least be haunted by) pressing buttons as specified by the game logic. The game is more self-effacing than it is self-destroying. The trick is to design a system contentious enough that players feel compelled to hijack it, but not so contentious that players immediately abandon the game. With this balance in mind, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* provides an accessible hook to kickstart the game (i.e. a race to the controllers), then signals some self-awareness of its contentiousness so that players feel they are licensed to reshape the rules. The players need to feel like they are in on the joke, so to speak.

So, yes, the material and social circumstances behind gameplay - from the players' bodies to the negotiations that happen around the rules - play a key role in shaping *any* gameplay experience, even the experience of a very traditional computer game. The difference here is that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* gleefully smears these considerations in the players' faces, giving players an occasion to consciously celebrate these oft-neglected facets of console gameplay.

This self-effacement also explains why *B.U.T.T.O.N.* cannot be adequately described as a so-called "augmented-reality" game. Arguably, the pervasive computing research agenda is centrally motivated by the belief that technology can indeed "improve" traditional gameplay. Bekker et al. (2010b), for example, examine "how (outdoor) physical play can be *enriched* in a way that appeals to children, thus creating attractive play alternatives to computers and television" (p.385, emphasis mine). Soute et al. (2010) do recognize that "it is not necessary (or even feasible) to capture all rules in technology," but are nevertheless primarily interested in designing new types of digitally mediated games "that are not playable without the introduction of technology" (p.443). By "merging" traditional and digital play, Soute et al. hope to "combine the best of both worlds" (p.435). Their attitude towards technology is unmistakably optimistic.

In creating *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, we approached this confluence of gameplay and technology from the opposite direction. Rather than try to "enrich" or "augment" traditional physical games with computer technology, we took as our starting point the familiar frame of the console game, then tried to *disenchant* or *un-augment* that frame. This distinction is largely a

matter of attitude. Instead of exploring how technology can be used to “improve” gameplay, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* questions whether games even need all that much “technology” in the first place. The answer, of course, is complicated. Though *B.U.T.T.O.N.* strives to transcend the limitations of computer-enforced rules, the game also enjoys the multimedia capabilities of its supporting technology. This tension notwithstanding, the game at least raises the question. Self-effacing games and the people who design them adopt a decidedly ambivalent attitude towards technology, exchanging optimism for skepticism, irony, and absurdity.

Impossible Games and Festivity

As design strategies, unachievements and self-effacement do more than just encourage players to bend the game to their own, intrinsic motivations. More importantly, they ask players to do this bending *collectively*. A purposefully “broken” multi-player game like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* shifts the focus not only towards the players, but also towards the relationships between them. In goading people to negotiate with and perform to one another, the game challenges its players to forge a shared sense of *togetherness*. In this regard, self-effacing games can be usefully framed in terms of Henning Eichberg’s (2010) concept of the “impossible game.”

In an essay on the history and philosophy of pull and tug games, Eichberg describes the traditional Inuit game of Iqiruktuk (Glassford, 1976, p.180), or “mouth pull”:

“Two human beings stand shoulder to shoulder. They each put their arms around the other’s neck, mutually, symmetrically, like

good friends. Opening their lips, they grab with their forefinger into the other's mouth. On a signal, they start pulling. The mouths and cheeks are distorted, the eyes are rolling, the sight acquires grotesque features. The competitors keep tugging. Intensifying their pulling, they turn their heads outward, trying both to relieve the pain and resist effectively at the same time. Finally, one of them gives up, at first slowly following the pull by turning his head, and then overtly surrendering by turning the rest of his body. He is overcome."

As the starting point for his investigation, Eichberg raises the question of whether mouth pull qualifies as a "sport." If we characterize sport by bodily action, competition, and performance, then mouth pull certainly seems to fit the bill. Yet as Eichberg remarks, it is difficult to imagine mouth pull as an Olympic sport. If players were to engage in cutthroat competition, to the rule of "the stronger mouth wins," the game would surely lead to mutilation. Mouth pull is "impossible" in the sense that it is "impossible to carry through, if one really follows the rules" (p.191). Indeed, this tension is built into the very material and social circumstances of the game.

Beyond just mouth pull, many games can be viewed as "impossible" in their own way. Eichberg points out that the common playground game of run-and-catch, if played strictly to the rule, will quickly isolate the slowest runner. To keep the game going, the faster players must flirt with danger by running close to the chaser. "If the process of play is to continue," Eichberg observes, "this can only happen against the rule, against the production of the 'fair' result of speed" (p.191). What sets

mouth pull apart, then, is that it is impossible in an especially visceral way.

B.U.T.T.O.N., like mouth pull, is “impossible” in a very immediate sense. As demonstrated by Nicklas’ ill-fated game in Malmö (described in the introduction), there are clearly limitations to how “brutally” the game should be played. Moreover, like run-and-catch, the game would destroy itself if players insisted on optimizing their chances of winning. An ultra-competitive player, for example, could refuse to put down the controller or follow any of the other instructions. This would certainly be an effective strategy, but it would also defeat the entire purpose of playing the game. Such a player might very well win, but they would do so at the cost of “losing” the meta-challenge of being a good sport and a fun companion. In this way, impossible games compel players to take into account the preferences of their competitors and their audience.

In addition to this resistance to ultra-competitive play, games like mouth pull and *B.U.T.T.O.N.* are “non-sportive” in still other ways. There is something decidedly “unserious” about mouth pull, in a way that seems at odds with the seriousness of modern sport - or at least sport as it is sometimes portrayed by institutions like the Olympics. Modern “sport,” as Eichberg depicts it, is characterized by “the solemnity of achievement production” (p.197) - the production of results and records, and the quantification of outcomes. Through its “ritual of the perfect achievement” (p.171), sport differentiates itself from other, more traditional forms of game and play. In this light, a festive game like mouth pull can be viewed as a kind of outcast or “joker” - its “‘unserious’ features of popular laughter and grotesque carnivalism

stand in the way of [its] consequent sportification" (p.187). "An 'International Mouth Pull Federation'," Eichberg quips, "would sound strange" (p.187).

Eichberg's characterization of sport can be usefully applied in thinking about the achievements of commercialized digital gaming culture. In dissecting play activities into defined segments and demanding results, achievements, like Eichberg's "sport," reify an ideology of perfectionism. My contention here is not that this perfectionism is somehow "bad" in it of itself, but rather that it is also possible to design for other, alternative styles of play. To this end, unachievements and self-effacement represent attempts to reclaim the kind of festivity and laughter marginalized by the current culture of perfectionism and systems geekery. Intentionally "broken" or "impossible" games celebrate *imperfection*.

"The grotesque body," Eichberg argues, "displays what is imperfect in human form. The fool and the carnival are images of things going 'wrong' in life." Eichberg continues: "All this gives birth to laughter, which is thus linked to a deep recognition of human failure and blurs the edges between success and failure that are sharpened by the modern culture of perfection" (p.167). Laughter at failure - both at the failure of others and of ourselves - betrays a mutual vulnerability between players. And it is precisely this laughter-filled acknowledgement of vulnerability that nurtures a feeling of togetherness.

B.U.T.T.O.N., with an eye towards these relational qualities of laughter, attempts to establish such mutual vulnerability in a digital gaming context. The entire experience is designed to coax players into making

themselves look silly, and into having fun doing it. The various commands, such as "Act like a monkey" and "Sing Happy Birthday," are doubly awkward given that the system does not even monitor them. We're acutely aware that it is we ourselves that choose to enforce these instructions. The rush to the controllers is similarly awkward, both physically and socially. Again, the context here is paramount. This messy scramble, so out-of-place in the familiar setting of controller-based console gaming, is unmistakably ridiculous. Laughter is not just a "side effect" of the game; it is "central to the social-bodily process" (p.162). Laughter occasions the game as much as the game occasions laughter [15].

"In festivity," Eichberg writes, "we get high in the here-and-now together" (p.195). The festivity of play and games reveals the supposed duality of objectivity and subjectivity - of "I-it" and "I-self" relations - as a false dichotomy. Play and games also evidence a third relation: "togetherness, body-to-body contact and the interaction between 'I' and 'you'" (p.193). Here, the practice of tickling serves as an evocative analogy. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, like tickling, cannot be played alone. It is only made possible by the company of an other - of a "you."

As Eichberg reminds us, "What is human in the human being is not - not only, not primarily - inside the skin-body, but it is in between human beings" (p.197). In foregrounding the dialogic relation between "I" and "you," unachievements and self-effacing games attempt to humanize digitally mediated gameplay in a very explicit way. Specifically, the ambiguity and physicality of these games work in tandem to shift the focus from formalized rule systems to interpersonal relationships.

B.U.T.T.O.N., inspired by the festivity and laughter of folk games, advances one possible design strategy for nurturing a feeling of togetherness, confronting, in Eichberg's words, the "body we have" with the "body we are" (p.197).

The Well-Played Poorly-Played Game

On the surface of things, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* hardly seems like a congenial or "well-played" game. The game aspires not only to "abuse" its players (Wilson & Sicart, 2010), but also to inspire them to abuse each other [16]. Players frequently push, tackle, and otherwise brutalize one another. Cheating, as the game's title announces, is not only sanctioned - it is encouraged.

What the players do, however, only tells part of the story. We should also consider player intentionality. A hard shove, for example, might speak to a ruthlessly competitive (instrumental) mindset, but it might also reflect a more self-ironic (performative) intension of doing something extreme, "just for show." Our aim in designing the game was to nudge players towards this latter mindset, with a special emphasis on performing together *with* the other players. The kind of attitude we were hoping to instill in our players can usefully be articulated in terms of Bernie DeKoven's (1978) notion of the "Well-Played game."

DeKoven, a self-described "funologist," champions an approach to play and games that centers on the group identity of the people playing - the so-called "fun community." Players in a fun community, as DeKoven describes it, care more about fun and each other than they do about winning. This community-oriented attitude makes possible what

DeKoven calls the “Well-Played game,” loosely defined as an “experience and expression of excellence” (p. xi). This “excellence” is not a quality that can be quantified by measurements or results. Rather, the excellence of the Well-Played game stems from the manner in which the game is interpreted, played, and perhaps even modified - together. For DeKoven, maintaining a sense of togetherness is paramount. “Either we achieve it *together*,” he admonishes, “or we don’t achieve it at all” (p. 7).

This prioritization of togetherness over results does not imply that game rules themselves are irrelevant or that freeform play is somehow preferable to structured games. To the contrary, clear goals give us a focus of purpose, allowing us “to maintain our connection when that focus [is] transcended by our delight in the way we [are] able to play together” (p. 21). In other words, the structure provided by rules and goals serves as a perfect foil against which to celebrate one another, the human beings who are playing the game.

That said, DeKoven warns against a gaming culture in which rules become inflexible regulations: “Not only do we give our authority over to the referees and umpires, but we also allow their authority to be determined by an even larger authority, unnamed, unspecific, to which we ascribe the responsibility for determining the regulations by which we play” (p. 39). As such, it becomes crucial for the fun community to maintain its authority over the game: “It is strange that we would ever allow a game or a score to evaluate how well we’ve been able to play together - strange that we have ever allowed our authority to reside in anything other than ourselves” (p. 8). In a twenty-first century world where scholars and practitioners increasingly look towards computers to

enforce rule systems for us, DeKoven's concerns seem more relevant than ever.

Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings (2007), for example, argue in their game design textbook that "The *most* important benefit computers bring to gaming is that the computer relieves the players of the burden of personally implementing the rules" (p. 18, emphasis theirs). In a similar vein, they warn that "Ambiguous or conflicting rules are a sign of bad game design" (p. 11). Self-effacing games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* demonstrate how limited this perspective is. Indeed, implementing rules need not be viewed as a "burden." Quite the opposite, the task of interpreting, enacting, and modifying rules enables us to tailor games to the specific people we play with and to the specific contexts we play within. As DeKoven reminds us, "Rules are made for the convenience of those who are playing. What is fair at one time or in one game may be inhibiting later on. *It's not the game that's sacred, it's the people who are playing*" (p. 53, emphasis mine). Our capacity to play with rules, together, is precisely what makes gameplay so deeply human.

DeKoven, writing from the 1970s, states nothing about digital games in particular. Nevertheless, the Ludica collective (2007a, 2007b), challenging what they see as the "technocentric culture of digital games" (2007b, p. 261), speculate on how DeKoven's notion of the Well-Played game could reinvigorate the design of computer-mediated games. Ludica imagine "a game that is created by and for the players within a safe digital environment built not to wield authority over them but to provide an even playing ground in which they themselves are empowered to play: a temporary world that encourages a new, participatory relationship

with *each other* rather than to a machine" (2007b, p. 277, emphasis mine). Inspired by Stewart Brand's "New Games" movement (Fluegelman, 1976), Ludica call for a "new, New Games" movement that could transform our expectations of how digital games can be designed and played.

B.U.T.T.O.N. offers one possible answer to this call. In the face of rhetoric touting the computer's ability to handle the rules for us, the game draws attention to its ambiguities - its unachievements - in an attempt to convince players that the Well-Played game is indeed attainable through digitally mediated play. The egregiously "broken" nature of the game - the fact that it does not enact but only prescribes most of its rules - opens up a highly visible space for players to bend the game to their own needs. To play the game "well" means to interpret the rules in creative ways, to gauge the appropriate intensity of physical play, and to find ways of cheating that are enjoyable for everyone playing. Sustaining a Well-Played game requires that players stay carefully attuned to the subtleties of context.

To be clear, it is not *B.U.T.T.O.N.* itself that should be viewed as the Well-Played game. The game merely facilitates such an experience. Because there exists no one single game that can satisfy the needs of the fun community forever, we must be ready to evolve or change a game when the community requires it. Nevertheless, intentionally broken games strive to be as accommodating as possible. Successfully or not, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* aspires to be a kind a gaming "platform" - a digital toy that beckons players to improvise their own gameplay. The game is only *disguised* as a well-formed console game in order to take advantage of the

players' (mis)expectations.

DeKoven's notion of the Well-Played game also speaks to my team's motivations in making *B.U.T.T.O.N.* such a self-consciously silly game. Like Eichberg, DeKoven values the important role that humor plays in maintaining the sense of togetherness: "We need the humor. We need the foolishness. Our play community could never feel as important to us as it does if we ever thought it was really so terribly important" (p. 121). Humor acts as a defense against taking the game too seriously, and also against taking *ourselves* too seriously. Paradoxically, focusing too intently on the play community can disrupt the feeling of being "in the moment," thereby *impeding* on our sense of togetherness. As such, the abusiveness encouraged by *B.U.T.T.O.N.* actually provides a convenient cover for the Well-Played game that possibly underlies an outward show of brutality, unspoken. The game cheekily avows that "rude" is the new congenial, so to speak.

Cheating, too, despite its negative connotations, can aid our pursuit of the Well-Played game. Specifically, cheating gives the fun community a tool for altering a game to its liking: "The Well-Timed cheat works because a game isn't working. It helps us regain a sense of play that we had lost in the process of maintaining a game that we were no longer interested in playing well" (p. 32) [17]. DeKoven even goes as far as to suggest: "If you think it's a rule but you're not sure, see what happens when you break it" (p. 62). He qualifies this advice by recommending that we cheat openly, for everyone to see. In making our cheats visible, we signal that the cheat is for the benefit of the entire community, not just for our own personal gain.

Risk, danger, and “bad surprises” are all part and parcel of playing and gaming. Yes, playing well together can only happen if we feel safe within the game, but the definition of “safety” depends on the specific community of players: “We’ve constructed other things - such as the conventions of the play community, and the rules of the games we play - not to keep us from bad surprises but rather to help us maintain the balance, no matter what happens. That’s the safety we’re talking about” (p. 116). In other words, we should not rely on technologies or rules to keep us safe, because “safety” is located, first and foremost, in the community of people playing.

DeKoven’s view on safety and gameplay speaks to some of the attitudinal differences between games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and the pervasive games literature. For instance, Mueller et al. (2009), present their networked exertion game, *Remote Impact*, in which two geographically separated players compete by hitting a mattress [18]. Explaining the motivations behind the design, the authors point out that physically separating the players reduces the chance of injuries. This may indeed be true, but in focusing on how computing technology can “augment” gameplay interactions, the authors overlook what might be lost in ceding that authority to the machine. The possibility of bad surprises can actually work to strengthen our sense of togetherness. The risk gives us the opportunity to reaffirm the kind of safety and trust that can only be found in other human beings. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* reminds us that it is the *players* who are responsible for each other’s well-being. This responsibility, as the Well-Played game teaches us, is equally enlivening as it is unnerving.

As children's folklorist Linda Hughes (1983) puts it: "Games aren't much 'fun' when rules, rather than relationships, dominate the activity" (p. 197). Games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, in the spirit of the Well-Played game, deliberately efface themselves in order to give those interpersonal relationships more room to flourish - even when that flourishing calls for a little pushing and shoving.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have used my own party game, *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, as a case study through which to discuss the design of intentionally "broken" or "self-effacing" games - games that not only open themselves up to player improvisation, but that also *actively deputize* the players to uphold, reinterpret, and negotiate the rules as provided. I explained that these kinds of games are characterized by their "unachievements" - conspicuous absences of systemization that goad players to modulate their gameplay with a degree of self-irony and theatricality. Finally, using the work of Henning Eichberg (2010) and Bernie DeKoven (1978), I argued that self-effacing games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* aim to heighten, through festivity and laughter, a sense of *togetherness*.

Despite my interest in these types of games, I do not mean to cast them in an unconditionally positive light, as if they represented some utopian alternative. Indeed, my friend Nicklas' ill-fated experience in Malmö (described in the introduction) clearly demonstrates the potential pitfalls of a game so ambiguous and mischievous. All games, of course, are heavily contingent on players and setting, but self-effacing games seem particularly sensitive to circumstance. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* tries its best to shape

the context of play, but given the degree of willful silliness and self-abandon required to sustain the game, it is no wonder that it falls flat in certain situations and for certain groupings of people. These limitations notwithstanding, my experience playing and exhibiting *B.U.T.T.O.N.* suggest that, with the right mix of people and the right frame of mind, the game does indeed nurture a sense of camaraderie through a chaotic kind of play.

Still, the issues raised in this article are larger than any single game. Though it is a convenient case study, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is just one example of one possible design approach. More generally, I have tried to advance the idea that game developers can design enjoyable digitally-mediated multiplayer games without needing to balance complex systems or grapple with cutting-edge technologies. Game design cannot be reduced to the art of crafting formalized systems. Sometimes, it can be more productively conceptualized as the creation of *festive contexts*.

Above all, I hope I have shown that enacting and negotiating game rules need not be viewed as a “burden,” even in the context of digitally-mediated games. It can be deeply empowering, and even uproariously fun, to improvise and bicker over rules. By taking a more skeptical, confrontational stance towards the technologies with which we design, we might open up a fertile ground of underexplored design possibilities - hybrid forms where digital games are not so readily distinguishable from their non-digital predecessors. Drawing from the wisdom of folk games and children’s play, games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* remind us that modifying and making rules is sometimes the most enjoyable game of them all - especially when done together.

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End Notes

[1] Alex Seago and Anthony Dunne (1999), discussing three particular PhD projects from the Royal College of Art, argue that design researchers can embrace creative practice as a productive methodological strategy. They point out that “there is a kind of tacit knowledge creative professionals possess which cannot be separated from their perception, judgment, and skill” (p.16). Though I agree that a designer’s perspective offers important insights that would otherwise be unattainable, my own views on the relationship between practice and research differ in some key ways from those elaborated by Dunne. In *Hertzian Tales* (2005), Dunne remarks that the conceptual designs he presents “are not necessarily illustrations of the ideas discussed in

earlier chapters, nor are the earlier chapters an explanation of these proposals. *They evolved simultaneously and are part of the same design process*" (p. xviii, emphasis mine). As I explain below, I do not view my practice and my research as part of the same process or context.

[2] In the design research literature, there is strong precedent for incorporating one's own creative practice into a research project (e.g. Dunne, 2005; Gaver, 2008). However, in methodological discussions about how design practice relates to research, it is often emphasized that the practitioner does so with a clear "intent" to produce knowledge (Fallman, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2007). Even Fallman's notion of a looser "design exploration" speaks to creative processes "driven by ideals or theory" (p. 8). The fact is that the design of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was driven neither by a particular research question nor by any particular ideal. As I explain below, it was driven by its social context and by a desire to score free GDC passes. Only months after the initial design did I realize, post-facto, how relevant the game was to my research interests. That said, I do not mean to suggest that my practice and my research are somehow unrelated. I admit that my university work must, at some level, affect my practice - after all, I only have one brain. As Christopher Frayling (1993) argues, research does indeed act as an important source of "nourishment" for creative practice. My point is simply that the notion of "research" evokes a certain kind of contextual frame that cannot satisfactorily be applied to *B.U.T.T.O.N.* Thus, I eschew the term "method" in order to call attention to the marked difference between contexts.

[3] *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was originally designed in January 2010 as an entry to

the GAMMA IV competition. The challenge was to design a game played with only one button. We stumbled upon the idea for the game somewhat unexpectedly, while drinking beers at an impromptu birthday party. In part, the brainstorming was an end in itself; we enjoyed making each other laugh through absurd design proposals. But the brainstorming was also fueled by a desire to score free GDC passes - the reward for making the GAMMA IV showcase. Given the sheer volume of competing submissions, we knew we would have to distinguish our game from the other entries. To this end, we realized that we could subvert the one-button constraint by encouraging players to interact with each other in the material world. After realizing the potential of this concept, we began prototyping in earnest later that month. Only months later did I realize, post-facto, how relevant the game was to my research interests.

[4] Following the game's debut at GDC 2010, we showcased further iterations at several other public venues, including Roskilde Festival 2010, E3 2010, Indie Games Arcade at the 2010 Eurogamer Expo, Babycastles, and IndieCade 2010. In December 2010, we publicly released the game on Xbox Live Indie.

[5] Because *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is a one-button game, multiple players are able to share one controller. In the current version of the game, there are two play modes: a standard mode which supports 2-4 players, and "Epic Brawl," a mode which supports 5-8 players. In the 2-4 player mode, players can choose to share one controller (one button is assigned to each player) or to assign different controllers to each individual player. In the 5-8 player Epic Brawl mode, the players choose between sharing two controllers (up to four players per controller) or four controllers (up

to two players per controller). In the PC version (not yet released), players can also choose to play both modes by keyboard (each player is assigned their own key).

[6] Møller, writing from a Danish perspective, discusses *syndebuklege*, which translates as “scapegoat games.” Typically, these kinds of games feature one player who is pitted against the larger social group, as a kind of outcast. For example, in the common playground game of run-and-catch (also known as “tag,” or in Danish, *tagfat*), the player who acts as the chaser is declared “It.” Often, these games continue without clear winners or a defined endpoint. In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, however, we were inspired by a somewhat different take on scapegoating. In particular, we were influenced by Danish drinking games that declare one clear *loser*. For example, in Denmark, the bluffing game of Liar’s Dice is typically played to isolate one loser who then buys a round of drinks for the table.

[7] A game like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* strives to undermine the definition of “game” as proposed by theorists like Jesper Juul (2005). In particular, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* challenges Juul’s stipulations that a game provides “quantifiable” and clearly “valorized” outcomes. Juul writes: “Since playing a game where the participants disagree about the outcome is rather problematic, the specification of the outcome develops like the rules of a game, towards becoming unambiguous” (p.39). Even if this observation holds true for many, if not most games, we should be careful not to embrace these definitions as generalized design wisdom. The design of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was informed by our concerns that precise definitions like Juul’s embody a kind of inherent conservatism, reifying

certain conventions at the expense of alternative possibilities.

[8] In the current version of the game, the outcome valorization has become less ambiguous. Players are now rewarded with a medal if they win, displayed next to their avatar. Each player can accumulate up to three medals, and loses all their medals if they ever lose a round. This feature, which serves as a visual indication of win streaks, was added to give some sense of continuity over multiple rounds. In retrospect, however, I would argue that the medals make the outcome valorization *too* unambiguous. In the future, we would like to replace the medals with special hats (e.g. a crown, a dunce cap) given to winning and losing characters in various situations. Hats would still provide visual emphasis for wins and losses, without so clearly quantifying who has won the “most.” More importantly, hats would be given to both winners *and* losers. Again, our design goal is to make it unclear whether winning is preferable to making other players lose.

[9] The idea that ambiguity can serve as a valuable resource for design has famously been explored by Gaver et al. (2003). Writing from a design research perspective, Gaver et al. emphasize the ways in which ambiguity can raise questions and interrogate values. They argue that ambiguity can “compel people to join in the work of making sense of a system and its context” (p. 237). In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, however, we employed ambiguity for somewhat different reasons. Beyond just opening up the game to interpretation, we wanted to enlist our players as active co-designers. Our goal was not to provoke a heady kind of reflection, but rather to facilitate a transgressive kind of fun. We are less interested in how ambiguity affects the relationship linking user and

object than we are in how it affects the relationships between different users.

[10] To this end, we have deliberately muted the “Go!” sound in these situations in order to reward cheaters.

[11] It is also possible for everybody to lose a game of *Chicanery* if the last remaining players release their keys near-simultaneously.

[12] More recent is Nintendo’s *Wii Party* (2010), which features a number of quirky mini-games that take an approach very similar to that of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* Particularly relevant to this article is the Animal Tracker mini-game, in which players set their wiimotes down on the table in front of them. Each round, the game plays different animal sounds out of the wiimotes’ built-in speaker. The goal is to grab the one wiimote playing the sound specified at the beginning of the round. Though the game stops short of actively encouraging the same kind of shenanigans that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* does, the scramble to the wiimotes is all but guaranteed to become a physical one. *Gamespot* reviewer Austin Light (2010) remarks that mini-games like Animal Tracker “seem to step beyond the TV screen” - that “they’re more about having fun *with a group of people*” (emphasis mine).

[13] Like *Illuminati*, a number of other well-known tabletop games try to sanction cheating with well-specified rules. Examples include *Cosmic Encounter* (Eberle et al., 2008) and *Crunch* (Sheerin & Tompkins, 2009). Cheating, as delineated in all of these games, becomes a kind of gameplay flavor, rather than full-fledged, self-motivated transgression.

[14] Bill Gaver, in his discussion of “ludic design” practice, also uses this same term “self-effacing” in relation to some of his own design projects (p.174). By “self-effacing,” Gaver is alluding to a kind of ambiguity and strangeness of purpose geared towards making designed objects more open-ended and personal - designs that “encourage us to play - seriously - with experiences, ideas and other people” (p.173). Much like the *B.U.T.T.O.N.* team, Gaver aims to facilitate a “self-motivated” form of play beyond the purely instrumental. However, though he mentions play with both ideas and with other people, Gaver ends up giving more attention to the former category - self-effacing designs that get people to play with objects and ideas via consideration, interpretation, and personalization. By contrast, my own interests lie primarily in the latter category - self-effacing designs that get people to play with and think about *each other*.

[15] Dormann and Biddle (2009), in their survey on the role of humor in computer games, reach a similar conclusion. Though they initially focus on how humor can “support” and “enhance” gameplay, the authors also call attention to the ways in which humor nurtures creativity: “Games are very good at being absorbing and at persuading people to play, but it is possible that in some ways the entertainment derives less from the scripted play and more from the stage that the game provides for the players themselves” (p. 810). In other words, humor not only enhances gameplay, it also facilitates the improvisation of *new* gameplay.

[16] In particular, the game can be viewed as “socially abusive” in that it tries to embarrass the players - or rather, it tries to get players to embarrass themselves. For example, one condition orders: “Any player

who picks their nose, take 1 step forward.” Here, the players face the dilemma of whether to admit to (or lie about) bad hygiene in order to gain a positional advantage in the game. The current version of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* also includes an optional “Naughty Mode” which features content that is sexually charged. In Naughty Mode, players are routinely instructed to strip off articles of clothing or to touch each other in awkward places (e.g. the stomach or the thighs). Underlying all of these shenanigans is the hope that mistreatment by the game will inspire players to mistreat one another - playfully and responsibly, of course.

[17] Mia Consalvo (2007), in her book on cheating in computer games, makes a similar observation. Consalvo’s research indicates that cheating is sometimes geared towards “fixing” a game, not breaking it: “It’s a way for individuals to keep playing through: boredom, difficulty, limited scenarios, rough patches or just bad games. Cheating, or however such activities might be differently defined, constitutes players asserting agency, taking control of their game experience” (p. 95).

[18] In *Remote Impact*, the “shadow” of the opponent is projected onto the mattress, and the goal is to hit that shadow with any body part. The harder the impact, the more points that are scored. Inspired by the physicality of contact sports, the authors are interested in how the “brutal” qualities of sportive activities can be utilized in the design of human-computer interactions.

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