THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JEEP TAG:
On Player-Imposed Rules in Video Games

Abstract

Video games, unlike traditional, non-digital games, are based on a combination of fixed rules which cannot be broken from the player position, and implied rules which are not enforced by the computer program. It is relatively common, however, for players to impose additional or alternative rules on video games, in order to refine or expand gameplay and to create new gaming experiences. This paper considers the implications of this phenomenon, dubbed "expansive gameplay," in context of video game studies and design. How does the existence of expansive gameplay help us to situate video games in relation to traditional games? To what extent is this phenomenon indicative of the ways in which players engage with video games? By theorizing expansive gameplay as a demonstrative example of the active, experimental and exploratory nature of gameplay more generally, this paper endeavours to open further discussion about the relationships between players and the rule-based systems which constitute video games.

Article Text

The official rules of Jeep Tag are as follows:

> 1. One player is "it" and drives an M12 Warthog all-terrain vehicle, scoring points by running over and killing players on foot.
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> 2. All other players are equipped with rocket launchers and fragmentation grenades, and must try to stay alive while attempting to score points by killing the player who is "it."
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> 3. If the player who is "it" is killed, the player responsible assumes the "it" position in the Warthog, switching places with the killed player.
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> 4. If the player who is "it" is ejected from the Warthog but survives, gameplay is paused while he or she is given free passage back to the vehicle, and a head start of roughly two seconds before gameplay resumes.
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> 5. The players who are not "it" must not attack one another.
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> 6. "Sticky" plasma grenades, as well as all other weapons and vehicles are expressly forbidden.
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> 7. At the end of a pre-defined time period, or upon reaching a certain score, the game ends, and the player with the highest combined score wins.

Jeep Tag is obviously no ordinary game. In fact, it takes place entirely within the popular video game *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001), and was invented by myself and a group of high school friends in basements and living rooms following the release of the game. I use the word "invented" because no such game exists *per se* in *Halo*. All the necessary components are present

in the game and its virtual world — the overall game program itself, appropriate playing fields, the aforementioned Warthog vehicles, rocket launchers and frag grenades — but the specific configuration of rules that constitutes Jeep Tag is not included in *Halo* as a built-in game mode. Rather, the rules of Jeep Tag exist in the collective agreement of the players to abide by them: they are superimposed on the existing rule-based system of *Halo*. Apart from boredom and waning interest in the official game modes available to us, Jeep Tag grew from our fascination with the gloriously unrealistic physics engine powering the game, which allowed the Warthog to soar impressively high into the air when struck with explosive weapons. Eventually our free-form messing about with this effect lead to the prescribed rules of Jeep Tag, which enabled us to enjoy the spectacle as part of a more formalised game; after all, we were *gamers*, and it is rules and competition that make games fun, not random, free-form play. Our apparent compulsion for formalised rule-based systems led us to establish and refine the rules and regulations listed above: we *invented* Jeep Tag using the existing rules of *Halo* as a foundation. I have termed this sort of activity "expansive gameplay." Rules are inherently expansive, in that the imposition of limitations creates a specific range of possibilities and outcomes, and this activity takes place in the process of playing a video game — thus, expansive gameplay.

Jeep Tag is not an isolated event and informal discussion with gamers (that is to say, video game hobbyists rather than casual players) suggests that most have engaged with video games in this manner at least once or twice. This is not to say that *all* gamers do, or that it is necessarily a fundamental part of playing video games, and this is not intended to be a social scientific analysis or survey of the phenomenon. Rather, this paper will consider and theorize expansive gameplay as a critical concept in context of existing video game scholarship, as a facet of what is commonly known as emergent gameplay. Additionally, I will present a series of examples of player-imposed rule-sets analogous to Jeep Tag, drawn from discussions in several online video game communities and from my own experiences as a gamer. In doing so, I will consider how this concept can be used to help situate video games in relation to traditional, non-digital games, and posit that expansive gameplay is indicative of the ways in which players engage with video games more generally. This preliminary treatment is intended to spark further dialogue about the nature of gameplay and its place in the academic study of video games.

As noted above, I have chosen to refer to the imposition of rules by players as expansive gameplay*,* both because in a literal sense players are expanding their experience of the game, and because rules are expansive: adding rules to a video game creates a new range of possible game events and experiences. I see expansive gameplay as a particular form of emergent gameplay, a concept which has some measure of currency in video game studies. Emergent gameplay usually refers to the emergence of unexpected gameplay elements, solutions or strategies not originally intended by the creators (Juul, 2005, p. 76). The term is sometimes also used to describe user actions which take place outside the game itself, such as machinima (using games to create puppet-like animations), virtual trade and economies, and gambling on video games. Expansive gameplay can be seen as one of many specific facets and examples of emergent gameplay, but not as a synonymous concept.

I must also make the distinction between expansive gameplay and what is commonly known as "modding." Literally referring to the modification of a game by fans or other game designers, many games now include software tools expressly designed for producing community modifications, although some adepts will mod or "hack" games without these tools. "Mods" range from subtle superficial changes to "total conversions" which retain only the basic engine of

the game, modding the graphics, levels and gameplay to reflect a completely different creative vision. Some total conversions are re-packaged and sold as original product in their own right, such as the highly successful *Counter-Strike* (1999), based on the *GoldSrc* engine which powers *Half-Life* (1998). The important difference between expansive gameplay and modding, however, is that a modder leaves the player position: the modder is no longer playing the game when he creates his mod, he is using the game software as a tool and as material in order to redesign the game. Expansive gameplay, on the other hand, involves players dictating additional or alternative rules from completely *within* the confines of the existing game rules, using the game in a very different manner. Although there is certainly plenty to be said about mods and modding communities (and plenty has already been said by other scholars), suffice it to say that they have no further bearing on this study.

I will refer to the rules created in the process of expansive gameplay as "imposed rules." The list of rules to Jeep Tag above is composed entirely of imposed rules — although they rely on the rules of *Halo*, none of them actually exist in the basic game. As Juul suggests, although video games conform largely to traditional models of what constitutes a game, they also "modify and supplement the classic game model" (2005, p. 7). Perhaps the most unique feature of video games when compared to non-digital games is the presence of a core set of rules which cannot be moved, bent or changed in any way from within the game. Video games, as computer programs, present iron rules which the player cannot refuse. Players, and by necessity any rules which they impose, are bound by these core rules, which I will refer to as "fixed rules." In a traditional game the players can, if they desire, change the rules radically at will: *Trivial Pursuit* can be played without the board as a quiz game, and there are countless variations on the rules of *Monopoly*. Any rule in a traditional game can be broken, and so *all* rules are administered and enforced by the players themselves (and in some cases a referee), and not by the game itself. Thus, traditional games have no fixed rules (for it would be impossible for them to be fixed in the same sense as a video game's programming is fixed), but rather rely entirely on what I will call "implied rules:" rules which are suggested or indicated by the game, and are understood by the players, but are not made rigid by code.

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, in their 2004 game design volume, *Rules of Play*, also discuss different kinds of rules in games, including what they term "implicit rules," which refer primarily to the unwritten social conventions surrounding games, such as etiquette and fair play (p. 130). Although certainly these conventions should be considered alongside the more formalised rules of a game, I would argue that there are other rules equally as malleable, and as implicit. Implied rules, for my purposes, refers to all that which is assumed but not necessarily enforced about how a game should be played. To return to the example of Jeep Tag, the assumed goal of a *Halo* deathmatch is to score points by killing other players – this is an implied rule, as players are not bound to it in any absolute sense.

Video games have both fixed and implied rules. In a game like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), the player is bound to an extensive set of fixed rules, including a two-dimensional, horizontally side-scrolling environment, simulated gravity, a certain range of control over the game's titular avatar, the fixed boundaries of the game levels, and so on. The game also has a much smaller set of implied rules: among other things, the player is supposed to use power-ups, collect coins, kill the bad guys by jumping on their heads, and complete each level. It is in the space occupied by these implied rules that players can (super)impose their own rules: The implied rules can be modified, removed, replaced or simply expanded upon. For example, the player could choose to attempt the game without killing any bad guys, or without power-ups, whether as a challenge or

simply as a variation on a familiar gaming experience. This involves the amendment of certain implied rules, and represents a basic instance of expansive gameplay. One popular form of expansive gameplay, in *Super Mario Bros.* and other games, is the "speed run," in which the player attempts to complete the entire game (or a specific level) in as little time as possible, with no regard whatsoever for bad guys, points or high score. This involves the addition of a new quantitative rule (the goal of rapid completion) as well as the exclusion of certain implied rules (ChrisFranklin, TIGSource Forums, 2007). None of these alternative, imposed rules run counter to the fixed rules of the game— indeed, how could they? — but this type of expansive gameplay is possible because of the malleability of implied rules.

Some video games, such as *Super Mario Bros.*, have a relatively small number of implied rules, and thus offer limited possibilities for expansive gameplay — hence the somewhat simplistic examples listed above. A game like *Pong* (1972) creates even fewer possibilities, due to the almost total lack of implied rules. This is not to suggest that such games are somehow inferior, but simply to point out that different games are variously conducive to expansive gameplay. On the opposite end of the spectrum, video games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) that feature large-scale game-worlds in which the player may choose whether to follow pre-defined, implied paths or to follow their own imposed path are commonly known as "sandbox games," which should indicate the wide range of opportunities they present for expansive gameplay. Expansive gameplay ranges from slight alterations to more formalised rule-based systems like Jeep Tag, and examples of expansive gameplay and systems of imposed rules can be found in many different video games. Although similar in some respects to the concept of "house rules" in traditional games, rules imposed on video games cannot be in conflict with the foundational fixed rules of the computer program, which suggests to me a distinct kind of engagement.

Salen and Zimmerman do not extensively differentiate between the rules of traditional, non-digital games and the rules of video games, but there is an important distinction — I posit that the presence of both fixed and implied rules in video games sets them apart from traditional games in significant ways. In a traditional game, players must understand all the rules in order to play. If any of the players are not at least partially familiar with the rules, the game will not function and the pleasurable order of the game will be destroyed (Huizinga, 1970, p. 29). One cannot sit down at a chess board and begin to move the pieces around at random, hoping to learn the rules — the effort will be in vain. This holds true for most non-digital games, with some exceptions, such as tabletop role-playing games in which one participant "runs" the game, manually maintaining the fixed rules, refereed sports, and mechanical arcade games such as pinball or physical puzzles like Rubik's Cubes where the physical construction of the puzzle constitutes a sort of basic fixed "code," dictating the rules of the game. However, in most traditional games, the players are the sole administrators of the rules, which precludes the possibility of the experimental engagement *within static boundaries* necessary for expansive gameplay.

The same is not true for video games. Juul notes that there seems to be a basic affinity between games and computers (2005, p. 5). Computers are governed by rules on the most fundamental level: a switch can be on or off, 1 or 0. Computers are thus uniquely able to execute games. In a traditional game, the rules must be clearly laid out before the game begins. In a video game, on the other hand, the player gradually learns to operate within the rule-based system, (cued by the fiction of the game and by in-game instructions), establishing what is possible and what is not according to the fixed rules of the game, and how the game is "supposed" to be played according

to the implied rules (Juul, 2005, p. 95, 167). Although it is entirely feasible for players to learn the rules of a video game in advance, it is not *required*, and I would suggest that no matter how extensively a player reads the rule-book, it is the in-game experience of those rules which truly calcifies his or her understanding of the game, and many gamers to whom I have spoken prefer to learn by playing. As computer programs, video games can present extremely complex systems of rules which do *not* have to be understood by the player in order to function as games. Thus, there is no essential correlation between the knowledge of rules and the ability to play, allowing even novice players to experimentally determine both the iron boundaries and the flexible space created by the fixed and implied rules, in the process of playing the game. This creates interesting possibilities not only for game designers, but also for scholars, as it represents new ways of understanding player engagement in video games, informed by but removed from conventional notions of non-digital gameplay.

In the following section, drawing examples from single-player, multiplayer and massively multiplayer video games, based primarily on my own personal experiences as a gamer, but also on casual discussions with gamers in several online communities ([Pix Fu](#), [The Independent Gaming Source](#), and [Destructoid](#)), I will show how the fixed-implied-imposed model can be used to examine specific instances of expansive gameplay. Rather than attempting to establish a taxonomy, I will present a range of examples stressing not only the underlying similarities between each but also the variety of ways in which player-imposed rules can be used to refine, enhance and manipulate gameplay, ultimately demonstrating how the concept of expansive gameplay can be useful in understanding the significance of gameplay to video game studies at large.

In terms of single-player games, expansive gameplay can take the form of a simple challenge (usually by changing the parameters of play or by adding goals), or can change gameplay on a more fundamental level. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) is a sandbox role-playing game with elements of first-person action games, set in a fantasy world spanning approximately 25 square kilometres of virtual space (Chihdo, 2006). If they so desire, players are free to ignore the main quest plotline and explore the world according to their own wishes. Obviously, this offers significant occasion for expansive gameplay. One way in which I as a player have often altered the gameplay in *Oblivion* and similar role-playing games is by imposing rules on my avatar's behaviour: if I am playing a character I have decided is evil, I will behave cruelly towards characters in the game, steal goods and attack innocent creatures with impunity. By contrast, if I am playing a good character, I will help non-player characters and avoid criminal activity and unnecessary violence whenever possible.

In addition to these self-enforced "moral" codes governing avatar behaviour, another example of expansive gameplay in *Oblivion* is the imposition of mundane necessities such as regular sleep and meals. Although a wide variety of food and drink is available and can be consumed by avatars, nourishment, shelter and rest are not usually necessary for survival according to the fixed rules of the game. However, one can easily impose rules which dictate that their avatars must eat regular meals and sleep every night. This sort of expansive gameplay, although it does not impose new goals *per se*, alters the experience of gameplay, role-playing and fiction by refining and expanding the basic rules of the game, and can foster greater identification with the player's avatar. Imposed rules in *Oblivion* can also take the form of player-defined challenges: I will have my avatar travel to this location, assassinate that character, acquire this item, etc. Imposed goals range from brief challenges mimicking the game's

numerous small fixed rule side-quests, to epic adventures which rival the scope and scale of the main plotline, in the case of a particularly creative player. Some *Oblivion* players go so far as to post detailed weblogs and forum messages online about their avatar's adventures beyond the fixed goals of the game, which indicates the degree to which imposed rules can enhance gameplay experience (Rider, 2006).

In other cases, the challenges imposed by players on single-player video games are even more formalised and are socialized beyond the confines of the game, to the point of resembling competition sports. As noted above, speed runs are a particularly popular form of expansive gameplay, and entire websites and online communities are dedicated to discussion and competition among speed runners. In essence, a record speed run isn't much good if nobody else knows about it. Although some of the most popular games for speed running are older side-scrolling platform games such as the *Mario* series, examples can be found using more recent games such as *Metroid Prime* (2002), *Dead Rising* (2006) and even *Oblivion* (Speed Demos Archive, 2007). Speed runs require that a game have clearly demonstrable completion criteria, and videos or screen-capture images are usually posted as proof. Variants include completing games (or individual levels of games) without using power-ups, or with other self-imposed handicaps. The community surrounding the horizontal- and vertical-scrolling spaceship combat games affectionately known as "shmups" (short for shoot-em-ups) is a common setting for competition of this sort. Players can greatly increase the difficulty of these games (and thus the prestige of their successful completion) by limiting themselves to a specific weapon type or, in one extreme case, by completing the game without scoring a single point (Ikaruga.co.uk, 2007). Social, formalised games of competition can thus be established by gamer communities by engaging in expansive gameplay.

To an even greater degree than in speed run communities, expansive gameplay by groups of people in multiplayer games requires communal agreement between all participating players on what rules are being imposed. As in the single-player examples above, imposed rules in multiplayer games range from simple limitations to full-fledged rule-based systems. One of the most common and straightforward forms of expansive gameplay in multiplayer first-person shooter games is the banning of all but one weapon. Pistol-, knife-, shock paddle- and rocket launcher-only rounds are popular among gamers, and although some games have in-game settings which can enforce such limitations, many do not. As such, these imposed rules are clearly established in advance (whether in posted server rules or between players), and are rigidly enforced under threat of being kicked from the server in an online game or berated by the other players in person. Similarly, the players of some multiplayer video games have, by gradual consensus, established conventions pertaining to certain limitations within otherwise normal matches. For example, in *Counter-Strike* communities, it is generally accepted that if an avatar draws a knife in the first-person shooter game and begins to attack the wall, that player wishes to engage in a knife fight, and the other player should comply. Another example can be found in *Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* (2002) and its sequels: in lightsaber duels, it is accepted practice among players to have avatars put away their weapons and "bow" by crouching before beginning combat. Interestingly, this example (like the avatar behaviour example from *Oblivion*) is deeply influenced by the fictional component of the game, unlike the example from *Counter-Strike* and others. These sorts of simple imposed rules allow players to refine their multiplayer experience "on the fly," and by common agreement.

By contrast, Jeep Tag is a more complex instance of expansive gameplay in multiplayer games, and the *Halo* franchise (perhaps simply due to its popularity) serves as the basis for

numerous others. A particularly well known example is a game known as "Zombie," which was originally cultivated by players of *Halo 2* (2004). The game begins as a timed round, and requires each player to be equipped with a shotgun and an energy sword (a powerful close-range melée weapon), and two teams. One player starts on Team A, as the Zombie, and uses the energy sword exclusively. All other players start on Team B, and use the shotgun exclusively. If the Zombie kills a player on Team B, that player must manually switch teams, joining the Zombie on Team A and now using the energy sword exclusively. In keeping with the zombie theme, this is known as "infection." The game ends either a) when there are no players left on Team B, because they have all been infected (zombies win); or b) if when the time runs out there is still at least one player left on Team B (humans win). This example is particularly interesting because it involves the expansion of the game's fiction as well as its rules — the fictional world of *Halo* is fused with the conventions of zombie horror.

Another highly formalized multiplayer example was developed in the racing game *Project Gotham Racing 2* (2003). An online game known as "Cat and Mouse" involves at least four players, divided in teams of two. One member of each team drives a very slow vehicle (the mouse) and the other drives a much more powerful car (the cat). The objective of the game is for a team's mouse to cross the finish line first, while the cat variously defends his own mouse or rams the other cars in order to ensure this victory (UtahSaint, 2003). Like all multiplayer forms of expansive gameplay, Zombie and Cat and Mouse rely heavily on communal acceptance of the imposed rule system (they are sometimes referred to as "honour games"), on pain of being forcibly removed from the server or ostracized by other players. Interestingly, both "Zombie" and "Cat and Mouse" have been officially integrated into subsequent versions of *Halo* and *Project Gotham Racing* due to their overwhelming popularity.

Expansive gameplay geared towards a specific goal or achievement as found in certain single-player games is less common but not completely absent from multiplayer gaming. Speed runs in games which feature cooperative multiplayer are not unheard of, for example. "Jeep Jumping" in *Halo* involves players using grenades and other explosive weapons to send the Warthog vehicle flying through the sky as high as possible (or sometimes in an attempt to clear a specific obstacle). Videos and screen-captures are then posted (AlbertWeskerSWC, 2006). This is a more casual form of expansive gameplay than speed running, however, as it is difficult to gauge exactly how high or far players have managed to propel the vehicle. One could argue that Jeep Jumping is less of a quantitative competition and more of a qualitative performance, with aesthetic considerations at the forefront of its evaluation, but in either case it is based on an underlying set of imposed rules, however flexible these rules might be.

Massively multiplayer games are multiplayer games featuring a large-scale, persistent world such as *World of Warcraft* (2004) and other online role-playing games, in which multiplayer gameplay is continuous rather than round-based. All the varieties of multiplayer expansive gameplay outlined above can be found in analogous form in massively multiplayer-games. It goes without saying that the sorts of imposed rules relating to avatar behaviour and quests found in games like *Oblivion* are also common in massively-multiplayer online role-playing games, along with other forms of expansive gameplay which take advantage of the large scale of in-game worlds and the presence of other players. "World racing" involves a race between avatars from one landmark to another (or through a series of landmarks). *World of Warcraft* includes an item called the Leather Ball, which can be thrown from player to player, which has led some players to develop rudimentary versions of baseball and ball tag by imposing rules around this simple game mechanic.

In conclusion, I suggest that expansive gameplay is a product of the exploratory spirit of all gameplay, which is engendered in unique ways by video games. Although many and varied, the examples discussed here can all be situated between the fixed and implied rules which constitute video games and make them distinct, though not wholly separate, from traditional games. Although many players may never engage with video games in this way, the fact that some *do* to me indicates the degree to which any experience of video games involves an extremely active relationship between player and rules. In establishing expansive gameplay as a critical concept, I hope to have demonstrated that in order to understand video games, game designers and scholars alike must continue to discuss and consider how the active, creative and experimental engagement with complex rule-based systems makes gameplay meaningful, situates video games in relation to other cultural forms, and can help to expand and refine the serious discourse of video games.

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