"dizziness and disorder": Aporia as Genre in Roger Caillois

Abstract: The study of video game genre is beginning to look beyond formal and aesthetic concerns towards the social, economic, and ideological premises that are embedded in each genre. Following the cue of Marxist literary theory, this paper argues that we can critically re-read existing typologies for moments in which they foreclose on these wider problems. Roger Caillois' foundational text *Man, Play, and Games* (1958/1962) is taken as a paradigmatic case and examined for its semiotic structure. Caillois four types of game are shown to be just so many types of uncertainty, and a limited subset of the possible kinds of playful uncertainty. Extrapolating from Caillois, this paper makes the argument that these moments, or aporia, are a primary site of ideological investment and as such help explain the reasons why certain genres gain hegemonic status.

In "What Defines Video Game Genre?" David Clearwater (2011) has recently emphasized the need to expand video game genre theory in ways that take account of social context, economics, and ideology. In response, this paper aims to integrate the Marxist history of literary genre criticism represented by Fredric Jameson with Roger Caillois' (1958/1962) four part division of games into those of competition, chance, mimicry, and vertigo. Caillois' formulation has the advantage of relating genre to a social totality and standing apart from the medium (ie. Chess played on a board, chess played in the mind, and chess played on a computer) used to instantiate the game. Caillois also critically transforms the categories of popular and commercial game genres so that they form a complete system. By developing a logic of game genres *Man, Play, and Games* unites seemingly dispersed and random categories such as role-playing, real time strategy, and turn based strategy games, first person and third person shooters, board games and card games, team and individual sports to name only a few. Despite these strengths, the text is also in need of critique for its simplistic narrative of progress and its moralizing evaluation of some kinds of play as destructive and contaminating. I will argue that both the positive and negative aspects are tied to the ideological closure that Caillois projects onto games, and that a re-reading that breaks through this closure is essential to linking games to a social context.

In *Man, Play and Games* (1958/1962) Roger Caillois argued that games can be divided into four principle types or genres characterized by competition, chance, mimicry, and vertigo. These categories focus on the style of play that dominates a particular game rather than say the games outward appearance, its history, or the medium in which it is played. It is worth briefly summarizing his categories to give a sense of their breadth and nature. Competition involves any game that pits players against each other to compare their talent and mastery of a specific field or quality. So, in a race the competitors restrict their challenge to the speed and endurance of the human body, in chess to long term strategic vision, in *Counterstrike* to guessing an opponent's position and dextrous mouse movements. These games restrict the influence of other factors and gather their excitement from the closely

matched skills of the opponents. Caillois' second category, chance, includes any game where there are still winners and losers but the outcome is removed from the player's influence. Dice, roulette, or snakes and ladders are games of almost pure chance, but games that are also competitive, such as poker, can have chance as their principle element. In these games the player must give up their own will in order to "[reveal] the favor of destiny" or have a chance to escape the monotony of the ordinary world (p. 17).

The third kind of games are those of imagination, make believe, and acting which Caillois calls mimicry or simulation, and in these games the player is transformed into something new. If both competition and chance are generally governed by rules, mimicry substitutes the quality of behaving "as if", which still provides a guiding thread for the player or players (p. 8). The pleasure of these games comes from the freedom that new roles provide, whether this is in a child's game of cops and robbers, the masked revels during carnivals, or a campaign of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Caillois' final category is what he calls games of vertigo which "consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception" (p. 23). This category, which includes roller coasters, carnival rides, and spinning in place, is one of the most idiosyncratic contributions and remains a relatively marginalized field of play. Perhaps this is because vertigo degrades and destroys the conscious subject by inducing panic, hypnosis, spasms and shock, and implies an anti-authoritarian movement in its destruction of all norms.

Of course this is not the only way to divide games into various categories, and other authors such as King and Kryzwinska (2002), Aarseth (2004) and Apperley (2006) have produced equally elegant typologies. Caillois' groups might also appear to be both too abstract and too formal to account for the explosion of diversity of video games (Dixon 2009). Mark JP Wolf (2001), for instance, lists no fewer than forty two game genres ranging from card games to collecting games, pinball to role-playing, and text adventures to demonstration software. Critiquing the rigidity of all these schemas equally,

Zach Whalen (2004) has described genre as the result of a messy negotiation between producers, consumers, critics and journalists of games. Caillois' typology however has several merits over other approaches. First, it critically examines the common sense understanding of games to move away from a simple catalogue of market based categories, which Apperley (2006) has shown to rely on visual and narrative distinctions at the expense of the activity proper to games. While Caillois may move too far in the direction of abstraction, the categories that he substitutes are inter-related and internally consistent. He therefore avoids the problem of some other generic systems that seem rigid compared to the real multitude of genres, and isolated from the real evolution of genre (Whalen 2004). Caillois position lends itself to a structured understanding that also allows for interplay between categories in order to account for movement and change. Finally, Caillois moves in the direction that David Clearwater (2011) has called for, writing that "for a full understanding of a genre to be formed, we would need to contrast the economic and political contexts (the outside as it were) to the intricate circulation of meanings and values between producers, text and audience" (p.46). Caillois does employ a suspect sociology and cultural diagnostic, but his intent to relate games to social life brings him into the realm of right problems.

Which is why Caillois' approach can still seem fresh, while the details of his Eurocentric and ideological reading can feel so dated. As Jacques Ehrmann has argued, Caillois understands history as teleological and progressively improving (1968 p. 50). The level of cultivation a civilization has achieved is represented by the kinds of games it plays. 'Primitive' cultures for Caillois are caught in a stultifying combination of mimicry and vertigo, which produces catharsis but no real advancement. Only those rare cultures that supersede this combination and embrace chance and competition can really produce lasting cultural changes and become civilized. Caillois refines this further by limiting the really creative and active aspect to mimicry and competition, while treating chance (especially gambling) and vertigo as parasitic games that contribute nothing and are the epitome of destruction and

dissolution. To make use of Caillois' genres we would at the very least have to re-evaluate the hierarchical place he assigns each one.

However, Caillois' system is ideological in a more narrow sense. A large part of *Man, Play and Games* is spent categorizing the logical relations between the genres in a way that precisely fits the Greimasian semiotic rectangle. This rectangle is a way of systematically relating the Aristotelian logical categories of opposition, contradiction, and entailment to a simple semantic unit or seme. The basic relationship in the rectangle is that of binary opposition, or contraries, such as black and white or masculinity and feminity. These categories are opposed, but may meet in some mixed middle ground such as the colour grey. Looking at play Caillois sees competition and chance as two ends of a spectrum of games which "require absolute equity, and equality of mathematical chances of almost absolute precision" (p. 74). In both types of game it is the rules that rigorously produce equality by defining what is and is not a valid way of influencing the game, by creating equal starting conditions and opportunities. These two game types differ however in their treatment of the player's will: "to put all one's personal resources to work is contrasted with the deliberate refusal to use them" (p. 74), though there are a variety of games that combine these attitudes. Mimicry and vertigo also form a pair that is united in "presum[ing] a world without rules in which the player constantly improvises" (p. 75). These two stand in a similar contrast to competition and chance for Caillois: mimicry recognizes and valorizes the player's consciousness of play and creativity while vertigo erases the player's individuality.

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                              A + B

                    A  ·····················  B

       A + Not-B                                    B + Not-A

                 Not-B  ·····················  Not-A

                          Not-A + Not-B
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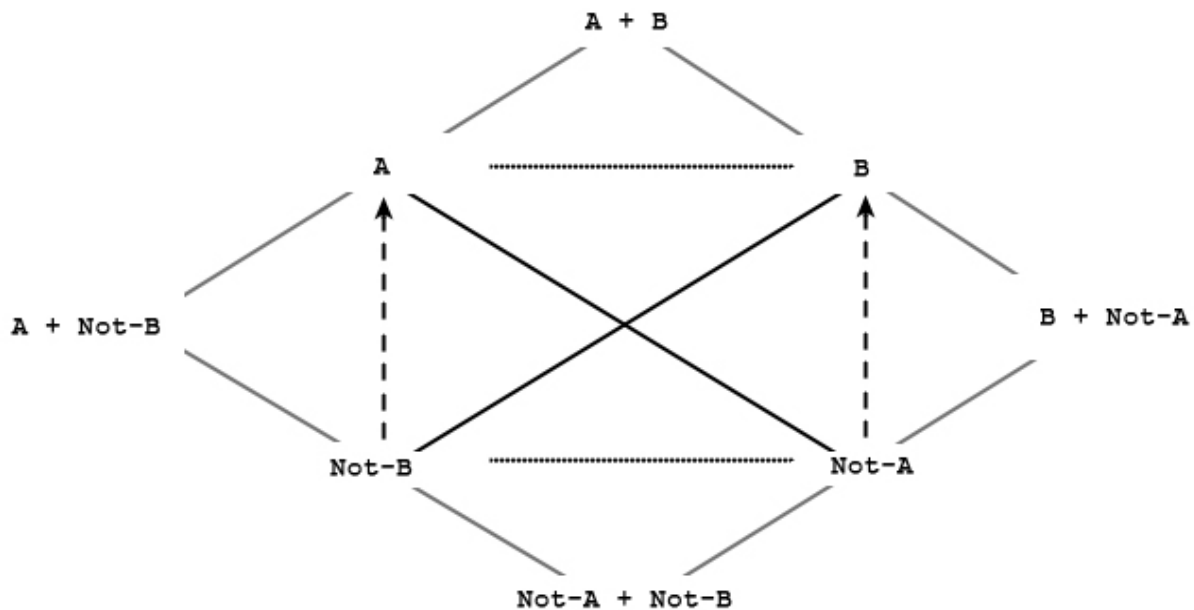
Figure 1: Basic schema of Greimas' semiotic square.

While these genres are related by degrees, there are also relationships that completely exclude

each other as logical contradictions, namely the conjunction of competition and vertigo or mimicry and

chance. The impulse to let go of control in vertigo is "a strict negation of [the] controlled effort" of

oneself that competition demands (p. 72). Caillois continues that vertigo "destroys the conditions that

define [competition]...efficacious resort to skill, power, and calculation, and self-control; respect for

rules; the desire to test oneself...submission to the decision of a referee" (pp. 72-3). Mimicry and games

of chance also contradict each other in essence, as the thrill of chance is meaningless if it is directed

towards a disguise. In chance "the player asks for a decision that assures him the unconditional favor of

destiny" and "no mimicry can deceive destiny, by definition" (p. 73). Mimicry is rather the domain of

magic which Caillois thinks has the purpose of *influencing* destiny rather than submitting to it.
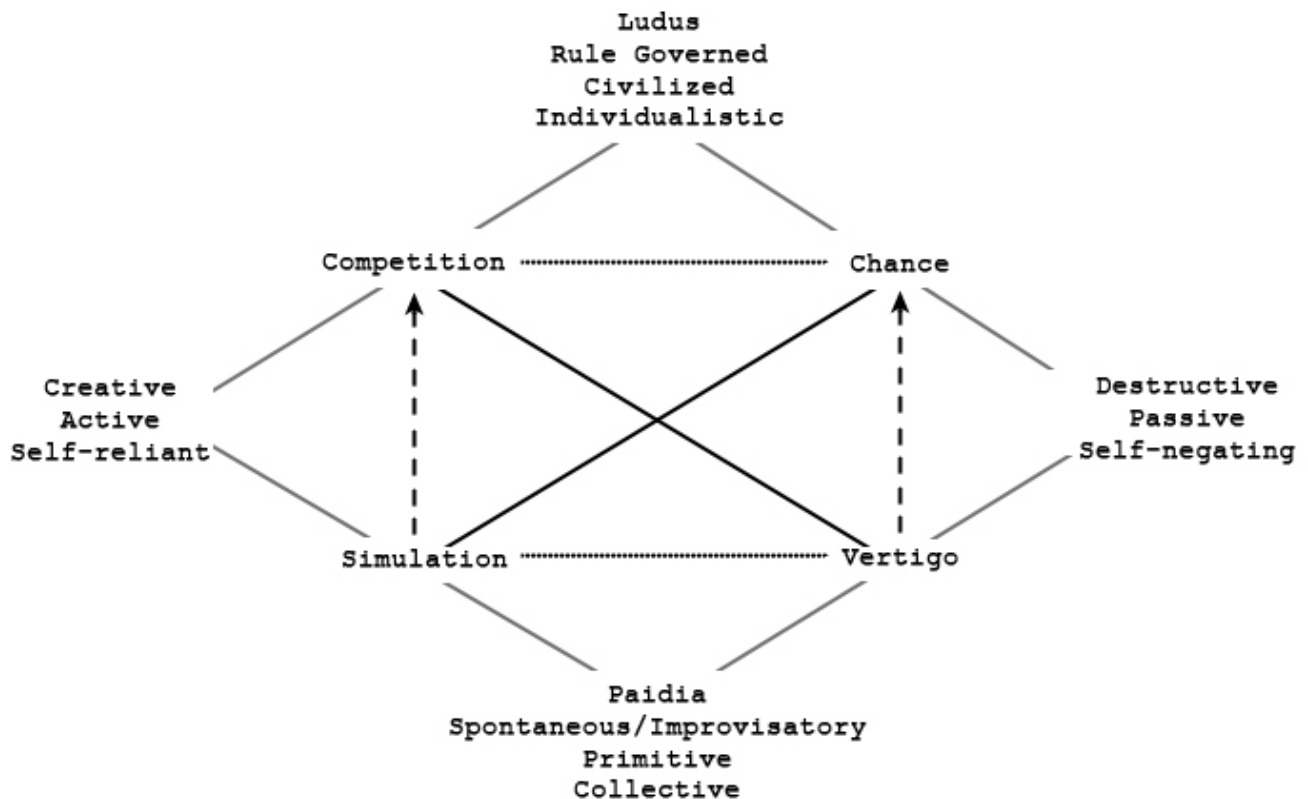
Finally, there are the logical links of implication, the negation of white (ie. not-white) will

contain the opposite of white (ie. black) among other contents. Caillois shows that the genres of competition and chance are in fact a subset of mimicry and vertigo respectively and imply their presence. Competition for Caillois is essentially competition against another person, and even in that duality is essentially social and performative. Each competitor plays for the respect of the other party, or more commonly, for the spectators. Caillois writes that "every competition is also a spectacle", and the audience participates in the thrills and tension by mentally mimicking the players (p. 74). The relationship is somewhat simpler in games of chance, where the player's surrender of her ability to affect the game's outcome is only a limited variety of the general chaos that vertigo creates. Thus in "games of chance a special kind of vertigo seizes both lucky and unlucky players. They are no longer aware of fatigue and are scarcely conscious of what is going on around them" (p. 73). While Caillois is not as explicit about the logical character of these relationships, he nevertheless takes pains to formulate their structure.

The semiotic square also provides four other positions that are extrapolations from the basic semiotic units. These positions are the positive deixis (white + not-black) and negative deixis (black + not-white), the complex term (black + white), and the neutral term (not-black + not-white). The positive and negative deixis describe both the evaluative direction of the binary and the general contrasts. The complex term describes "the ideal synthesis that would 'resolve' the initial binary opposition" while the neutral term is "the union of purely negative or privative terms which would subsume the simple contradictories" (Jameson, 1981, p. 154). These are also easy to identify in Caillois as he makes a point of naming at least one of the dimensions in the contrast between games with rules (competition and chance, the complex term A+B) and games of spontaneity or those which use as-if structures (mimicry and vertigo, the neutral term not-A + not-B). The first he calls ludus, and the second paidia, and these correspond to the civilized/primitive division that I noted above. The other axis corresponds to the creative/destructive binary especially as it relates to subjectivity. Ambition and

self-reliance are the creative element of competition, while in games of chance the player purposefully does nothing. In mimicry the player's concentration and wit in impersonation can take on the permanence of a work of art, while vertigo destroys all such concentration and abandons not only the will but also thinking itself.

Figure 2: Semiotic structure of *Man, Play and Games*

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                    Ludus
                Rule Governed
                  Civilized
                Individualistic


        Competition ·············································· Chance


Creative                                                      Destructive
Active                                                        Passive
Self-reliant                                                  Self-negating


              Simulation ························· Vertigo


                    Paidia
            Spontaneous/Improvisatory
                   Primitive
                   Collective
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The semiotic square reveals some interesting structural features of Caillois system. It shows for instance that his devaluation of chance and vertigo is neither simply a question of taste, nor Caillois' somewhat xenophobic sociology, but develops from the system's logic. Equally important, while Caillois claims to go beyond Huizinga's emphasis on the agon and games of competition, the whole system is derived from the various possible oppositions to agonistic games. Finally, we can see why the threat of illicit boundary crossing and contagion is linked to the conjunction of simulation and vertigo – which as the category that is neither term of the system must necessarily exceed it. Jameson identifies

the neutral term with utopian thinking, deconstruction, and negative dialectics, because in it the system's contradictions cannot be ignored but must be "retained and sharpened, made more virulent, their incompatibility and indeed their incommensurability a scandal for the mind, but a scandal that remains vivid and alive, and that cannot be thought away, either by resolving it or by eliminating it" (2005 p. 180). The excess of this term threatens the totalizing aims of the logical structure.

Earlier I mentioned that we can call Caillois' text ideological in a narrow sense, and this is because it is structured in terms of the semiotic square. As an account of a semiotic system this square also diagrams the artificial limits imposed on a system of thought. Jameson describes it as "a virtual map of conceptual closure, or better still, of the closure of ideology itself, that is, as a mechanism, which, while seeming to generate a rich variety of possible concepts and positions, remains in fact locked into some initial aporia or double bind" (1987, p. xv). While the logical relationships seem to exhaust all possible combinations, and claim the status of truth, they in fact depend upon the choice of an arbitrary semantic unit – which in Caillois' case is the agon.

The point here is not, or not only, to identify and critique the problems of class and race in Caillois work, but to identify the more fundamental aporia that he forecloses upon. As Caillois' problem is the relation of game genres to social totality, the aporia at the root of his semiotic system should offer a less obscured, though perhaps more messy, image of this relation. Methodologically what we are looking for is a common thread through all four primary categories, one that points to the dimension from which they were selected and of whose possibilities they represent a specific sub-set. Caillois offers two readings of the relationship between games and culture: the first explores the social role of mimicry and vertigo, and the second that of competition and chance. These readings usefully begin to synthesize the categories and give us a fuller picture of the neutral term with its explosive properties.

We have already seen that Caillois calls the neutral term paidia and that he associates it with a kind of unrestricted, pure play. It is this negation or privation of rules that unite mimicry and vertigo.

Expressed positively in mimicry this privation takes the form of spontaneity and the ideal of acting 'as if' one were something else, while negatively it appears as the active destruction and willful ignorance of rules. These two elements appear separately or in various conjunctions in specific games, but for Caillois the true expression of paidia itself is only available through anthropological abstraction in those "primitive" cultures that use masks and mimicry to invoke a state of trance.

The basis of the mimicry-vertigo society for Caillois seems to consist of four logical moments. First, the social group must come together at a festival. Second, the festival must use all the means at its disposal to induce a state of vertigo including music, dance, magic, and masks; the people wearing these masks try to imitate the gods or legends, though not simply in order to deceive spectators but also to hasten their own possession. Third, the destruction of the self and self-consciousness that vertigo creates is undergone collectively by the group. Finally, the mask provides the basis for a collective identification that henceforth symbolizes the group, and for a collective fear and awe that practically unifies the group in the vacuum left by the negation of self-interest. In general then these two forms, while actually in play, cause the social group to forget their everyday interpretation of events and of themselves and to become radically open to another interpretation. As the play closes each individual takes away a new view of themselves as identified with the collective – which then wears away in everyday life and has to be periodically renewed.

Caillois argues that this kind of society forms the norm from which civilized social groups occasionally evolve, and whatever is the cause of this mutation it is always accompanied by a change in play towards the duality of competition and chance. These impulses function in a significantly different way than mimicry and vertigo by seeming to guarantee each individual's equality in complementary ways. Competition is the core of these societies as it promises to deliver each person their just rewards according to talent. For Caillois voting and capitalism are two of the fundamental results of the competitive play spirit. But the equality of competition proves to be ideological, with success available

to only a select few, and merit often being decided by birth. The element of chance forms the repressed core of all competition, and its celebration through lotteries, game shows, and celebrity is a kind of return of the repressed. Games of chance prove that there is another system that can overthrow the order of the meritocracy, and gives hope to those who are exploited by that order. Each game thus compensates for the perceived injustices of fate and power. Again, while they are being played both kinds of game point to a possible re-ordering and a new interpretation of power, which is solidified through a victory. And again there is an identification, though now the whole of society is asked to identify with the glorified lucky or talented individual: the lottery winner, the beauty queen, the trivia guru.

We can add another contrast then on the vertical axis between play that promotes individualism and play that promotes collectivity. This difference however remains within the semiotic system, and follows the questionable logic of Caillois sociology. If we focus on what the two civilizations share, we see that the games both break down existing interpretive frames and lead to a moment of social uncertainty. Framed in this way it becomes clear that not only the social types, but the individual genres of play all provide ways of producing uncertainty. In competition every effort is made to exclude unfair advantages and produce a situation where the players or teams are balanced. In games of chance, though the percentages are known, each individual cast of the dice brings a glimmer of possibility. In simulation the ability to act "as if" one is something else, an animal say, while still retaining a human body and mind means that one has to improvise and create gestures, sounds, and stories in uncertain territory. Finally, vertigo renders the most basic assumptions about time, space, and bodily movement null and void – giving the player over to a world out of control. Each kind of game not only creates uncertainty but strives to maintain it as long as possible through repetition. Finally, each type of game ends along with its uncertainty and in the production of a new interpretation.

I do not mean to suggest that thinking about games as systems of uncertainty is a particularly

new perspective. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), for example, devote a chapter of *Rules of Play* to exactly this approach, Espen Aarseth (1999) has argued that the temporality of games is structured by the complementary experiences of aporia and epiphany, and Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) after reviewing the diverse rhetorics surrounding games argues that they are fundamentally ambiguous. Even Johan Huizinga (1955) thought that uncertainty and tension were key elements of play. My point, and what an analysis of Caillois leads to, is that we can treat this uncertainty in new ways. First we can explore how uncertainty links a game to its social world, and second, how the social mediation of uncertainty reveals something about a game's genre.

The fundamental aporia that Caillois' system closes off is therefore nothing other than aporia itself. By limiting his investigation to four generic ways of producing uncertainty he forecloses on a general understanding of the relationship between playful uncertainty, its social conditions, and uncertainty more generally. The kind of strange doubling here, treating one set of aporias as a fundamental aporia in order to produce an ideological closure around them is not accidental. Caillois, in fact, mirrors on the conceptual plane the structure of games themselves, which also limit the uncertainty that they produce. Through rules, through limits in time and place, and through imaginary goals games produce a unique enclosure. They allow the player to trust that the uncertainty that play unleashes will only go so far. In this sense the closure of the game introduces an irreducible ideological element into the play which structures and buffers the player from the 'real' world. This "magic circle," like ideology, is never complete, but does not have to be to function. Through it games offer a compensatory satisfaction for the confusion of real life by reproducing that confusion in an isolated and ideal form. While this closure is crucial to the pleasures of play, Caillois' repetition on the conceptual level obscures the issue.

Here I part from a reading my reading of Caillois to offer some speculation on what I think this image of play as aporia can reveal. Writing about symbolic production generally, and literary fiction

specifically Jameson argues that "ideology is not something that informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological" (1981 p. 64). I am arguing something similar here about games. It is not that some games are ideological while others are somehow pure, but rather that the very form of a game is constituted by the ideological image of uncertainty that it offers. This is close to Ian Bogost's (2006) argument that "all simulations are subjective representations that communicate ideology" (p. 103) In the literary text however the ideological element resides in the fact that an "individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (p. 62). Novels offer a variety of ways to solve social problems in an imaginary way, whether this takes place through exceptional individuals, symbolic resolutions, formal equivalence, or pure magic. More specifically Jameson means that "the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (p.66). The production of a game is also an ideological act, but it seems that the place of imaginary investment shifts from the solution to the problem or uncertainty.

With this shift to imaginary problems comes a change in the nature of game resolution, which is never as ideal as that of a novel. For one thing, many games end as often in victory as in defeat, and in games defeat is not subordinated into a larger moral lesson or philosophical purpose. But even victory often feels hollow because it brings an artificial end to a repetitive activity the player enjoys. Other games, such as many simulation games or MMORPGs, simply have no end. At the root of these symptoms is the player's investment in the imaginary problem and acceptance of the rules that govern it. These rules determine what objective acts the player can take, and to that extent separates those acts from the fantasies, desires, and thoughts that motivate them. So, for example, famous chess openings or gambits can be studied at a remove from the player's intentions or reasons for playing. In this sense games invert Jameson's formula and present real solutions to imaginary problems. This is not simply a glib reformulation but reflects the profound formal differences between games and other texts – yet it

also gives us a way of connecting to Jameson's powerful interpretive tools.

What I have put forward here is a method of decomposing game genres into smaller units of uncertainty that take both their content (what counts as an interesting uncertainty to players) and their motivation (how an uncertainty is isolated and tamed) from a wider social context. I have advocated a view of games as fundamentally ideological, and that this ideology must be read from the structure of play. I do not mean to denigrate games by describing them this way, being ideological does not mean that games are a waste of time, a squandering of energy, or merely for the naive any more than the ideological aspect of literature makes it simple propaganda. Games can teach us about our own ways of understanding social conflict. Moreover, when a game's tension is grasped as a mediated social tension, the player's acts – trying to resolve this conflict – take on a political character. Which means that in games there is real political will and political action taking place daily on a mass scale, a utopian impulse if ever there was one.

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