The Persuasive Force of Uncertainty and Ends in Games; or The Whale

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I. Compelling and Persuading the Whale

In 2014, both the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) for the United Kingdom and the European Commission issued statements about regulatory efforts with respect to a specific category of mobile videogames, known as "free-to-play" (F2P) games, which are predominantly sold through virtual stores owned by Apple and Google. In the OFT's Principles, they specify "concerns that there were industry-wide practices that were potentially misleading, commercially aggressive or otherwise unfair," which is echoed with a similar sentiment in the EU common position.[1] Both institutions direct their primary regulatory concern towards the targeting of children with predatory business practices. These two efforts are not particularly new in their regulation on marketing practices towards children, nor as restrictions on gaming practices like gambling, but they do present the first governmental efforts towards these F2P games. One way to think about the political import of games would be to consider the relationship between corporations and consumers alongside the regulatory interests of the state, as these European examples suggest. However, the case of these F2P games allows for a different analysis due to the peculiar relationship between the nature of the play activities found within these games and the broader communities within which they occur. By considering the generic conventions of

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[1] "The OFT's Principles for online and app-based games," accessed Feb 7, 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/288360/oft1519.pdf
"In-app purchases: Joint action by the European Commission and Member States is leading to better protection for consumers in online games," accessed Feb 7, 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-847_en.htm
Jas Purewal, "EU regulation of free to play games: hot topic or hot air?" Gamer/Law, accessed Feb 7, 2016, http://www.gamerlaw.co.uk/2014/eu-regulation-of-free-to-play-games-hot-topic-or-hot-air/

games, as particular sites of human action, and the ways that they structure the activity of those who play them, we can elaborate a framework for thinking about what drives the playful attention that we find in games and how it might be important to our lives as political beings.

Videogames occupy a small portion of a long history of games and gaming as parts of human activity. Clash of Clans, frequently the top grossing mobile F2P game at the time of writing (at over $1 million per day), was initially published in late 2012 –[2] forty years after the founding of the pioneering videogame company, Atari. Nintendo, perhaps the most enduring and prominent name in the short history of videogames, began in the late 19th century selling *hanafuda* playing cards, well before it released its first home videogame system in 1983. These cards were developed in the context of strict gambling laws in order to circumvent those restrictions, which is but one example of the enduring association between games and gambling.[3] Over two millennia before Nintendo started making playing cards, Herodotus relates a story about how the Lydians invented games in order to endure eighteen years of famine.[4] This long history of games is interwoven with these seemingly-incongruous elements of leisure and high stakes that are framed by the different ways that we attend to, and act within, the context of the uncertainty of the human condition. The sites that we call games have the potential to inspire a range of dispositions in their players. These historically-vague (and particularly for Herodotus, dubious) claims about moments of origin in the history of games cannot provide a foundation for an analysis of a type of activity, but as we consider the implications of these new F2P games, we will find hints of how the generic conventions of games that could be applied to any of these examples shape, and are shaped by, human experience.

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[2] "Top Grossing iPhone Games," Think Gaming, accessed Jan 30, 2016.
[3] Florent Gorges, *The History of Nintendo (1889-1980) From playing-cards to Game & Watch* (France: Pix'n Love, 2012).
[4] Herodotus, trans. David Grene, *The History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988).

Returning now to this recent moment in the short history of videogames, these F2P games offer an initial play experience that is available for free to anyone with a mobile device that can run the application ("app") and then rely on purchases offered within the game itself in order to monetize the game for the developer/producer. The basic logic of the payment model is that players might be willing to try playing a free game when they would have otherwise never taken a chance on game with even a modest up-front cost, so the free initial experience gets them in the game and playing. As we will see, attracting and maintaining enough players is important to the success of this monetization model. The subsequent "in-app purchases" (IAPs) come in a variety of types – and we will delve into that below – but all seek to improve upon the basic play experience in some way for the player, enough to justify the monetary value. In the context of these games, we find that they operate on two levels in order to achieve their ends: 1) providing a play experience that is *compelling* enough for the player to continue to play, and 2) *persuading* players that their experience is worth enhancing by spending money. Therefore, for the sake of this argument, we can differentiate between two distinct, but related, ways through which human beings are motivated towards particular action: compulsion and persuasion.

Compulsion denotes the ability of something to convince an actor to engage in an activity, and continue to engage in that activity, through an affective desire to do so. It is important here to distinguish the sense of finding something compelling from the notion of being compelled. The former relies on the engagement of the actor, while the latter suggests motivation originating from an external source. Both are reasonable understandings of what it would mean if something operated by compulsion, but since we are considering how the structure of game motivates particular actions, we will focus on finding something compelling. The term compulsion is sometimes used in game studies as distinct from "fun" and "addiction," which are other common

terms used to describe the way that games draw the attention of their players.[5] Persuasion, on

the other hand, relies on an outside motivator that is interested in encouraging particular action.

In the context of these F2P games, the developers look to persuade players to spend money on

their game despite the ability to play for free. Although this persuasion requires that the game

also be compelling, the primary focus is on getting players to do what the developers wants,

which is for them to spend money. It is likely this sense of persuasion that would include both

words for someone interested in politics – with the difference being that compulsion suggests the

threat or use of force, while persuasion emphasizes argumentation. Nevertheless, the case of

F2P games demonstrates that this particular sense of compelling action – whether one wants to

use that term or not – serves a distinct function that is relevant to students of politics.

On this point about compulsion, the association with children as the vulnerable

population in statements by the UK and EU is worth dwelling on for a moment. While it is not

unusual to make the link between children as players of games and children as particularly

vulnerable subjects, the focus of the laws appears to be on moments of accidental or unaware

over-investment rather than on the genuine possibilities for agentic and yet compulsive behavior,

insofar as the two can coexist. A child can be one type of unwitting dupe – one who does not

realize the value of the money that they invest into the game – but what do we make of any

number of other potential players who "buy in" to these games? The prevailing story about the

pronounced financial success of these games relies on the expenditures of a small group of

players who invest more than the rest of the players combined. Known as "whales" – a term

borrowed from casino gambling – these players account for the majority of IAPs. In a bizarre

mirror of wealth inequality statistics, a 2015 report based on the expenditures of 20 million

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[5] Rob Cover, "Gaming (Ad)diction: Discourse, Identity, Time and Play in the Production of the Gamer Addiction Myth," *Game Studies* 6 (2006), accessed March 2, 2016, http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/cover

players found that the top 10% of spenders accounted for 64% of money spent on F2P games.[6] The nominal association with gambling behavior might provide significant explanatory power, and critics have remarked on operant conditioning and the "Skinner box" qualities of game mechanisms.[7] However, these gambling mechanisms only represent a portion of the ways that these games encourage IAPs through features of their games. The particularly interpersonal structures to these games allow for more complex ways of compelling and persuading players. Before considering the specifics of F2P games, we will first develop a framework for thinking about the generic conventions of games and how their structures facilitate the compulsion that allows for the game developers to persuade players to pay. In order to do so, we will consider some foundational insights from the literature on games and play in order to emphasize both the intersubjective and structural aspects of games as a genre of structuring human activity. Then, we will return to the specific example of F2P games to highlight how some common structural features that we find in these games use the generic conventions of games towards the persuasive goal of getting players to spend money.

II. The Generic Conventions of Games

The relatively small body of literature on games (and the related literature on play) demonstrates significant disagreement about the defining features of games and game-playing. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein heralds the ongoing debate when he claims that we cannot define games as such, and instead that games exist as an example of a family

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[6] Alex Wawro, "Report: Whales gobble up even more of the F2P mobile game revenue pie," *Gamasutra*, Apr 9, 2015, accessed Mar 9 2016, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/240739/Report_Whales_gobble_up_even_more_of_the_F2P_mobile_game_revenue_pie.php

[7] Mike Rose, "Chasing the Whale: Examining the ethics of free-to-play games," *Gamasutra*, Jul 9, 2013, accessed Mar 9 2016, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/195806/chasing_the_whale_examining_the_ Nicholas Lovell, "Whales, True Fans, and the Ethics of Free-to-play games," *Gamesbrief*, Sep 22, 2011, accessed Mar 9 2016, http://www.gamesbrief.com/2011/09/whales-true-fans-and-the-ethics-of-free-to-play-games/

resemblance. In providing the example, Wittgenstein notes the ways that we might find challenges to any given definition based on something else that one might want to consider a game that didn't share such features. Espen Aarseth, a prominent scholar in contemporary game studies, rearticulates the problem with using "game" as a formal definitional category, and advocates instead for an ontology of games. He says: "The range of phenomena recognized as games in everyday language is simply too broad for easy theoretical demarcation. Thus, an ontology of games cannot productively start with a crisp, formal definition of what a game is, but must accept that it means different things to different people, and that is as it should be." He points out the way in which the emerging field of game studies is currently struggling with the same problem that was "dismissed by Wittgenstein more than fifty years ago."[8] (053). Following Aarseth, I want to embrace Wittgenstein's challenge to definitions while clarifying what is contested about and within games. Instead of remarking as to whether or not any feature is present in every game, it seems more useful to ask about the functions served by those structures that they call games and how they relate to human action. In this way, we no longer debate whether all games need to have opponents or points or victory conditions, and instead ask what the functions of those elements are when we think of something as a game. Put differently, we can ask what types of activities are signaled by referring to their context as a "game," and how does doing so facilitate the intelligibility of that activity – both in terms of what we do and how we do it. "Game" as a category remains intersubjectively determined and contested in the way that Wittgenstein prompts us, but it also leads us to consider how games exist in relation to actions and communities, rather than as merely identifiable artifacts that stand on their own. A fundamental commitment, then, to this understanding of games is that they only exist as such

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[8] Espen Aarseth, "'Define Real, Moron!' Some Remarks on Game Ontologies," in *DIGAREC Keynote-Lectures 2009/10*, ed. Stephan Günzel, Michael Lieve, and Dieter Mersch (Potsdam: University Press 2011), 050-069.

through the human activity that renders them meaningful.[9] For that reason, I encourage us to think about games through the generic conventions that we bring to, and experience within, their structures that they provide for action.

Even as we resist the definitional impulse, one recent attempt at definition is helpful for orienting the discussion of the generic conventions of games. In his article "Beyond Play," Thomas Malaby captures the sense of games as socially-determined structures while identifying some central characteristics for achieving the generic conventions. For Malaby, games are "semi-bounded and socially legitimate domains of contrived contingency that generate interpretable outcomes."[10] Malaby's contention in his article is that scholars get distracted by the need to account for "play" – and, particularly, its loaded counterpart, "fun" – as some sort of necessary experience in the context of games, when empirical observation in numerous game contexts shows no such experience, and so his definition seeks to eliminate subjective experience. Despite its merits, then, Malaby's definition only recognizes the possibility of a range of dispositions towards the activity by omission of an account of play. In what follows, I want to recover an account of an ambiguity of dispositions that is found within, contested by, and affects players of games. In doing so, we will set the stage for seeing how the generic conventions of games emerge from a combination of the structure of the game and the people that recognize that structure.

Games involve a certain acceptance of uncertainty – what Malaby calls "contrived contingency" – insofar as they render some end – related to his "interpretable outcomes" – more difficult to achieve than it might otherwise be by prescribing the way in which that end must be achieved through the rules of the game. These temporary ends and constraints on pursuit of

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[9] Another philosophical perspective on this point comes from Gadamer in his writing on play and the work of art in *Truth and Method*, in which the work of art only achieves its representation through the player/audience.
[10] Thomas Malaby, "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games," *Games and Culture* 2 (2007): 96.

those ends require that games permit a separation from ordinary life that will always be partial and vulnerable, and thus they are "semi-bounded." In another foundational work in the literature on games, Bernard Suits presents the simple example of a track race in which the racer accepts more uncertainty by agreeing to run around the track rather than pursuing the more efficient means of attaining the goal of crossing the finish line by cutting across the field. In Suits' dialogue, he gives the name of "lusory attitude" to the disposition necessary to engage in such a practice in the way prescribed by the game.

Insofar as all games exist as the products of human artifice – and here it may be helpful to consider the overlap with an Arendtian notion of work – they become enrolled in a process of social assessment of their value. In this regard, games are like anything else in that they can be viewed with an attention to instrumental or aesthetic value (or both). Games, however, inhabit a particularly liminal position in such an assessment by virtue of their structures. While a hammer has clear instrumental value for certain tasks (a consideration that surpasses aesthetic concerns), a painting is primarily treated through its aesthetic value. Games certainly skew aesthetic in terms of value - there is a reason that football is often referred to as the beautiful game - but they also invite us to consider their own instrumentality. As games get the players to invest in the outcomes, and the structures that shape action towards those outcomes, there is a proliferation of the value of the internal instrumentality, even to the point in which it spills out of the context of the game. When this occurs, we find that "the beautiful game" also comes with betting, corruption, rioting, and other ills that come from on an excess of seriousness applied to the ends internal to the game. Here Malaby's reminder that games are "semi-bounded" is important, as it drives home the liminality of the space and the action contained within it. Again, we ought to be reminded of the precarity of the Arendtian space of appearance as it relates to action.

Games, in this sense, are only defined by their features insofar as they have the requisite features to produce the context of fluid and contested liminality. They are rhetorical constructs that are shaped by the work of humans and shape the action of humans in ways that are contestable and invoke contestation. As such, games never exist for us as one thing, nor is their meaningfulness settled, but serve as human-devised structures within which we experience political life differently. The "differently" here relies on the fact that there are other things that we experience non-liminally, which is to say, as unproblematically serious or playful. This is not to say that these other contexts are not contested - we can think of someone who playfully engages with an appearance in court or who seriously engages with a child's birthday party - but games serve as contexts within which the fluidity and contestation become particularly pronounced through the structure of the activity.

Therefore, it is central to understanding games through a generic lens to consider the way that the structure of games, always embedded within a group of individuals that recognize, maintain, and appreciate the action that the structure enables, is fundamentally bound up in an ambiguity of disposition towards the meaningfulness of the activity. By this I mean that every game operates within a range in which players take the rules and structure of the game seriously enough to act while simultaneously recognizing that action as an act apart insofar as the instrumentality of success in the game is never fully identical with the instrumentality of the surrounding world. The liminal character of the affective experience of game playing affords a particular persuasive force that is worthy of our consideration as students of politics. We can call this element of experiencing games their *ludic* character, and that character is distinctly activated in the context of games (although not exclusively so). The immediacy with which the dispositional tension is felt within the context of games helps to distinguish games from other

sites of action in the political lives of humans, but it also serves to exercise the same forms of attention that we use as reflective political beings.

As recognizable means of structuring human activity – as a genre – games serve to simplify and codify the expectations of those who participate in them with respect to the appropriate types of, and approaches to, action ought to occur within the space of the game. Instead of a social contract, we might call this a ludic contract, because it always bound up in those particular approaches that comprise the ambiguity of disposition that we experience in games.[11] It is this ludic component that distinguishes the action in games from the other ways that we think about the order and political relations defined by the social contract. It is, however, central to the understanding of order presented in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, a work that is foundational to game studies. When Huizinga describes what he calls "the play-element in culture," he draws on examples of the ways in which activities that we might call play, or that are engaged in playfully, permeate human culture. He explicitly identifies the ambiguity of disposition as a part of his account: "Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play."[12] It is through this dispositional liminality that we experience the ludic, but how do games facilitate such an experience? There are both intersubjective and structural aspects to games that serve to uphold these generic functions of the ludic contract, which is to say that this dispositional ambiguity is both built into the structure of games and can be upheld or challenged by their players. In the following sections, we will consider these intersubjective and

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[11] I am indebted to Elizabeth Wingrove for this framework of modifying the concept of the social contract to recognize different generic forms

[12] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 8.

structural aspects as well as how they relate to the dispositions and attention of players in order to produce the compulsive and persuasive effects.

III. The Ludic Community

In exploring the generic context of games, the importance of the ludic comes to the fore as the central generic characteristic of games as structures for activities – how dispositional ambiguity is built into the structure of the things we call games – but it will be helpful to first develop a framework for discussing the people who make games possible. To that end, it is helpful to think about the community of individuals and groups that enable and sustain the structures and activities that make up games, which I call ludic communities. As noted above, games require the activity of players to be realized and do not stand alone as artifacts, but they also potentially involve many more parties. Any number of particular examples might stand out as particularly salient depending on one's own experience with different games, but the following general characteristics likely factor in some way into whatever examples jump to mind. Games may be designed and marketed – as is the case in mobile F2P games – or be promoted by professional organizations with celebrated players or passionate family members. They may require any number of fabricated or purchasable items to play – from everything contained within a board game to a ball and a net. The rules might require or suggest a referee, or it might be up to the players themselves. The scope and magnitude of participants in the ludic community make a significant difference in the activity and dispositions found within any particular game, and those differences will be felt across play sessions and contexts.

In the context of F2P games, the ludic communities often involve relatively-anonymous players (often identifiable through a pseudonym) who participate in a game developed and published by computer programmers, designers, marketers, financial advisors, etc. that are sold

and played on devices produced by corporations like Apple and Google. They may be supported by official game websites or informal game communities (supported by websites like YouTube or Twitch), and shared by expensive television advertising, ratings in virtual markets, popular/celebrity players, or word of mouth. Players might communicate via text-based chat channels in games themselves or through other means outside of the context of the game, including old-fashioned talking. The scope of interactions and affordances that facilitate a ludic community is expansive and blurry along the edges, but serves as a helpful reminder that games do not simply exist when a group gets together to play. Games are maintained by a network of individuals, groups, and cultures that somehow or another participate in play activities or contribute to the sense of meaningfulness that perpetuates the dispositional ambiguity found in otherwise ephemeral action. The ludic community makes the Super Bowl into a national event, but also makes learning to throw a football at a park meaningful; the same goes for chess, or tag, or Super Mario Brothers, or any other number of games that we play. They all exist relative to these intersubjective parameters for our determinations of the value of play activities.

Just as those values are determined, they are also contested insofar as the different actors involved assess the value of particular activities differently. This is, of course, true of any sort of valuation – whether in the context of a game or not – but the precariousness of disposition prompted by the pressing lack of necessity confronted in games renders the discrepancies within the ludic community all the more pronounced. Again, there may be particular play experiences that stand out to any individual that illustrate this point, but it is likely that one can think of an example in which someone "took the game too seriously" or "was not taking it seriously enough." Such judgments tend to be affective – someone else's actions didn't convey the same sense of investment that you brought to the activity. They are felt in the moment by players (or

spectators) and reflect particular dispositions towards the play activity enabled by the game. The framework of a ludic community helps us make sense of the dispositional ambiguity and the affectively experienced discrepancies and contestation over meaningful activity. In this way, we can make sense of how activities that otherwise might be dismissed as insignificant or distractions from what matters become compelling to players. At the same time, the heterogeneity of perspectives and interests found within the ludic community provides the opportunity for that same compelling action to be used towards persuasive ends by others within the ludic community, which helps give usher in the possibility of the whale.

IV. Structure, Separation, and Specification

Although the intersubjective aspect of the ludic community bears significant weight with respect to establishing the context for the dispositional ambiguity of the ludic, the community relies on the actual structure of the game as a focal point for its interactions. If we momentarily dip our toes back into the troubled waters of definition, we can think of games as operating through two primary modes of shaping, and being shaped by, human activity: *separation* and *specification*. Separation denotes the way that games are signaled as outside of ordinary life, while specification refers to the limited set of possibilities for intelligible action established by the rules of the game. These two structural aspects are intentionally broad and not intended to lead us towards engaging with definitions, but rather to get us thinking about how games function as sites that bring together human beings in notably different ways. As we explore how games function through both separation and specification, we see how they enable the generic conventions of games and bear directly on the question of significance or meaning for action as it relates to the ambiguity of disposition.

Let us first consider how games operate by providing a sense of separation. Huizinga famously declared that play is an act apart with respect to both time and space. He emphasizes the ritualistic qualities of play and their demarcation. His use of the term "magic circle" as one such demarcation has been taken up (and contested) as a key concept by the literature in game studies. Relatedly, anthropologist Gregory Bateson describes metacommunication between animals and the way that they signal an altered intentionality to their actions. In doing so, they too embrace a certain separation of activity, although not in the same structured way as games. The structure of games facilitates an agreed-upon alteration of dispositions, set within the generic expectations of the ludic community, through the way that the separate out particular activities. Nevertheless, we cannot overstate the extent of separation either, and the game studies literature now resists the exaggeration that might be attributed to a "magic circle." As Malaby signals through his definition when he refers to games as "semi-bounded," the type of separation experienced in games is always partial and vulnerable. Special rules, which permit and proscribe certain actions, define the context within which it is appropriate for players to act. This sense of appropriate action, imparted by the context of a game, governs the affective experience of players and has the potential to provide the compulsion described above. However, even as players participate in (and find themselves compelled by) that context, they also always have the potential to become disconnected from that experience – that vulnerable separation can be contested. A player may still be physically on the field or at the table, but an event that happens to them or someone else – a physical injury, for example – draws them out of a sense of separation. The vulnerability of separation fuels the ambiguity of dispositions, as different members of the ludic community might respond differently to the separation and its potential violations.

On a basic level, the function of this separation is the enabling of the activity of play, which requires some separation from the instrumental logic that governs the Arendtian *animal laborans*, and yet the separation provides an instrumentality of its own by enabling the pursuit of separate ends – and, in doing so, allowing for an altered sense of what matters and why. It requires a certain separation for us to agree that shooting a rubber ball through a metal hoop suspended ten feet off the ground is part of a meaningful activity, a separation that temporarily both cedes necessity and suggests investment in an alternative end. The ability for players - and other members of the ludic community, such as spectators - to invest in the ludic context requires a mutuality of attention and sense of meaningfulness that is facilitated through separation. The separate context makes the activity possible, but also leaves it devoid of established instrumental meaning. This void forms the foundation of dispositional ambiguity – the possibility that this separate activity is not worthy of attention – but it also opens up the possibilities afforded by the intersubjectivity of the ludic community. People who want to play, and find the activity meaningful, can find others who are similarly compelled or co-opt others into the activity by convincing them of its merits.

The other mode through which games structure interactions between human beings is by specification. Games narrow the scope of activity to be considered by the ludic community, and by doing so, they render action more readily intelligible and estimable by those who recognize their structures. In this way, games function similar to Arendtian spaces of appearance insofar as they facilitate the appearance of players before the ludic community. Chess only asks us to consider the ability of a player to outthink and outmaneuver an opponent through a specific set of potential moves of game pieces, while Olympic diving requires an assessment of difficulty and execution of precise falling movements and entry into the water. We might note other things

about players and performance, but the game specifies how the ludic community ought to

marginalize other concerns through the pursuit of a particular end. Games structure our attention.

Garry Kasparov never bested an opponent in tuck position, nor did Greg Louganis ever have to

memorize chess openings to win a gold medal. Specification has an important role in the generic

function of games, because it provides the focal point upon which the experiences of, and claims

about, meaningfulness can be founded, asserted, and contested within the context of the

ambiguity of dispositions. One might need to be significantly invested in a ludic community

before being able to articulate distinctions between actions, or it might be relatively easy to make

such claims. In either case, such judgements will occur relative to a contested sense of how

much the specified actions defined by the context of that game ought to matter. The

intelligibility of action, and the possibility for judgment that it facilitates, can drive the

compelling qualities of games in the same way that we might think about the Arendtian *polis*, but

always in the context of a fundamental dispositional ambiguity relative to the activity and its

value. Given these two primary structural aspects and the contested significance of acting within

those structures, what is it about games that leads to compulsion for players and opens up games

as potential sites of persuasion? In order to answer that, we must focus on two ordinary political

experiences that we find altered through the structure of games: the experience of uncertainty

and the pursuit of ends.

V. The Altered Attention of Uncertainty and Ends in Games

Part of the generic expectations established by games is an altered relationship to the

experience of uncertainty. Rather than a general experience of uncertainty – one that is

characteristic of the human condition – players of games experience uncertainty relative to a

specified and temporary set of goals and constraints. Games, in this regard, recall the power of

the Arendtian promise through their ability to establish a refuge within a sea of uncertainty. However, games do not do so by offering something like certainty, but rather they work through a reorientation of uncertainty. The experience of uncertainty moves from the existential concerns of *animal laborans* to the peculiar concerns of the ludic community, allowing for altered attention. In doing so, games render uncertainty not only bearable, but compelling or pleasurable. Even with the vulnerable separation found through the structure of games – which is to say even in contexts in which there are real stakes in the play experience, such as gambling – the possibility of an affectively different experience drives the engagement of the players in the activity. These altered experiences of uncertainty are central to the structures we call games, from chess to poker to Clash of Clans to basketball, and they are enabled by a corresponding reorientation towards temporary ends. It is facile to think of games as being non-instrumental insofar as their effects are often – although not exclusively (again, see gambling) – limited to their particular contexts, since games have their own instrumentality that emerges out of their separation and specification. While shooting a rubber ball through a raised hoop might be viewed as relatively inane outside of the context of the ludic community of basketball, the same end can be meaningful and instrumental when placed in context. Whether it is a kid playing with friends outside of the school or a professional basketball coach, we can find particular senses of the instrumentality attached to the ends of the game that exist across a wide range of concern and investment.

Games, in this regard, are distinguished by the way that the generic expectations, which are established through the separation and specification of their structures, permit for an altered relationship to uncertainty and ends for political beings. Despite several helpful overlaps with Arendtian thought about political life, it is on this point that games find their most noteworthy

distinction from Arendt's conception of politics. In the Human Condition, Arendt describes how

uncertainty is a burden that we bear for the sake of action. For her, uncertainty is the necessary

side effect of the process character of acting in public. It is only through the faculties of

promising and forgiving that we are able to manage the consequences of uncertainty in action,

but we still suffer it as a burden. It is what opens up action to be tragic. In contrast, games

structurally introduce uncertainty that is distinct from either existential insecurity or the process

character of action, which permits for players to seek uncertainty in their activity in ways that

distinguish it from the Arendtian conception of action. In fact, it is precisely the uncertainty that

drives the engagement with the activity and makes compulsion possible. One common example

of this phenomena is the childhood game TicTacToe, which quickly loses the interest of anyone

who realizes that the game always ends in a tie when the two players understand the correct

strategic moves. Without the uncertainty of outcome, it becomes hard to convince anyone to

play the game, except in the case of someone like a child who has never encountered the game

before. Similarly, there would be little interest in watching me compete against a Garry

Kasparov in Chess or Michael Jordan in a game of H-O-R-S-E. Even though I may be

convinced about the meaningfulness of excellence in either endeavor, games rely on uncertainty

relative to particular ends to drive the attention to, and continued engagement in, an activity that

makes them compelling. Let us elaborate, then, on this relationship between the altered

experiences permitted by the generic conventions of games and how the forms of attention that

they facilitate coincidentally enable both compulsion and persuasion.

VI. Dispositions and Attention

Thus far we have considered how both the intersubjective and structural aspects of games

allow for an altered attention on the part of players, an attention that is characterized by the

expressions of, and responses to, the ambiguity of dispositions that is experienced through play. It is in this context of altered attention relative to uncertainty and ends that games can simultaneously function as both compelling and persuasive sites of activity. On the one hand, the affectively distinct experience of playing games allows the player to be compelled by the activity. On the other hand, that same compulsion might be harnessed towards some other persuasive ends by someone whose attention is not similarly altered. In doing so, the ambiguity of dispositions relative to the significance of the play activity might be rendered particularly significant in the eyes of some other member of the ludic community.

In the literature on games and play, we see the issue of attention emerge in the above account of the fluidity of disposition from Huizinga, as he describes the tendency to find an overwhelming seriousness within play activities. The dispositional component is contained within an assertion about the way in which the player attends to the activity. This type of engrossing attention and the absorptive qualities of games also recalls the more recent work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on the concept of flow.[13] That work locates varying levels of absorption in a particular activity as a combination of the challenge of the task and the relative skill of the actor. Challenges that exceed the capabilities of the actor lead to anxiety, while insufficient challenge can lead to boredom. We need not replicate the argument about flow to think about how disposition relates to attention and drives investment in an activity in ways that resemble the above claims about uncertainty and ends. Games rely on a particular attention to drive engagement just like any other activity. It is important to clarify that, as is the case with the ambiguity of disposition, the attention invoked by a game is idiosyncratic and any particular game will not induce something like a flow state in all players, nor should it. It is possible that a game is intended to, and does, structure an experience of leisure for players that resembles what

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[13] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi identifies as relaxation (high skill/low challenge). Our concern with attention, then, relates to any number of possible ways in which players find games compelling. In fact, one of the common critiques of F2P games is that they almost always fall under what would be considered low challenge by the flow framework.[14] Although not a perfect match with the concept of flow, a related understanding of attention and its relationship to compulsion grounds our understanding of how games become persuasive.

On the most basic level, games require the attention of players in order to compel the initiation, continuation, and completion of the play activity (as well as potentially suggesting future initiation). Insofar as there is a lack of existential concerns driving the activity – although we must remember that the semi-boundedness of the game does not forego external interests, as in the case of a professional athlete and their salaries – it means that engagement is driven by intrinsic motivation that must be found within the structure of the game and the ludic community. Attention, then, is directed through the reorientation of uncertainty and ends. However, there still remains members of the ludic community whose attention might not be similarly directed, but who still understand and potentially maintain the altered attention. We might recall here Herodotus' story of the Lydians and the endurance of eighteen years of famine by alternating attention between the uncertainty of being able to fulfill the needs of the body and the uncertainty of dice games. On Herodotus' account, this altered attention was the great success of the Lydian king Atys, who used the context of games to persuade the Lydians to only eat every other day. Moving from Herodtean mythos to our contemporary subject, we can think of these F2P games as prompting a sort of compelling, playful attention to the uncertainty and ends found within their contexts such that engagement in the ludic community becomes worth the

[14] Pascal Luban, "The Design of Free-To-Play Games: Part 1," *Gamasutra*, Nov 22, 2011, accessed Mar 9, 2016, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6552/the_design_of_freetoplay_games_.php?print=1

investment of their resources that defines the persuasive ends of the game developers. It is the particular relationship to uncertainty and ends in the context of games that affords the ambiguity of dispositions and altered forms of attention that we find in games. The developers of these games seize on the varieties of engagement to fuel monetization of their games. What is compelling for one part of the ludic community opens up the possibility of persuasion for another part of that community. Let us now look to the structures of a couple examples from current F2P games as guides for understanding how this duality of compulsion and persuasion comes to be realized.

VII. The Free-to-Play Game Model

We return to F2P games in order to consider more fully the implications of this relatively new model for monetizing games based on the investment of particular players. Recalling that the regulatory concern with these games focuses on predatory practices relative to children, it is important point to note from the outset that there is often a diversity of ways through which companies attempt to promote further spending on the part of players. They may be specifically targeted at children using deceptive marketing or bright colors and friendly cartoon images, but they also make use of the characteristics of ludic communities and the altered attention associated with the context of uncertainty and ends framed by the context of games.
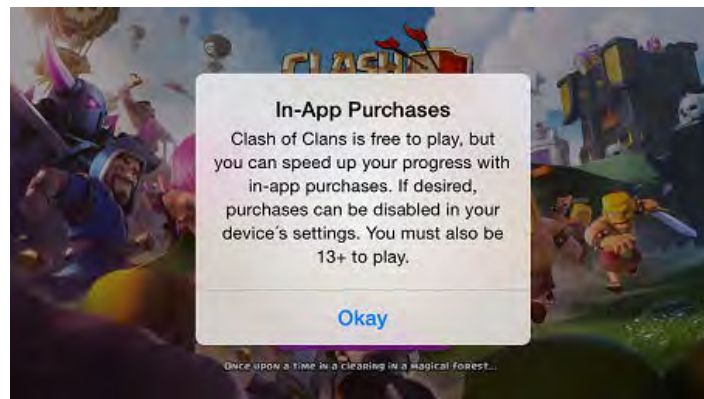

Image 1. Clash of Clans (Supercell 2012) alerts the player to IAPs on the first play session

The numbers suggest that this effect is most pronounced in the relatively small group of players known as "whales,"[15] and their sustained engagement with games and their ludic communities suggest something more than making a quick buck off of unwitting children. As we see from the alert that appears on the first time playing Clash of Clans – again, currently the highest grossing F2P game based on daily IAPs – the game reminds players of the advantages of speeding up progress while including language suggesting ways to avoid unintentional purchases by children. While there has not been much research on the phenomenon, one study by Electronic Entertainment Design and Research (EEDAR) found that 66% of their survey group who were in the top 5% of spenders identified as male and the average age across men and women was 30.2 years old.[16] Without delving into concerns with the validity of those numbers, they at least suggest that the "whale"-like spending is not limited to children. Instead, we can think more broadly about how the compelling characteristics of these games enable the developers to persuade players to spend money on the game in significant and recurring ways.

So let us consider how the structures of the game enable such sustained behavior. It may be helpful to think of these IAPs as different barriers, or gates, that money can be used to bypass in the game. In order to monetize the game, the developers build into the structure of the game moments of interruption of the play experience that call upon the player to spend money to enhance or facilitate that experience, as we see the player is reminded in Image 1 above.

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[15] Wawro, "Report: Whales gobble up even more of the F2P mobile game revenue pie"

[16] Owen Good, "Who Are the 'Whales' Driving Free-to-Play Gaming? You'd Be Surprised," *Kotaku*, Aug 25, 2013, accessed Mar 9, 2016, http://kotaku.com/who-are-the-whales-driving-free-to-play-gaming-youd-1197333118

Image 2. Main Screen of Summoners War (Com2Us 2014) with time-gated resources in upper right-hand corner

On perhaps the most basic level, and potentially the most familiar to the casual observer or player, we find that these games are time-gated. It is common in these games to allow for players to play for a limited amount of time, which usually takes the form of allowing for a certain number of attempts at a challenge before having to wait for the number of attempts to replenish. On this model, the designer needs to make a game that compels the player to want to keep playing enough to be willing to pay in order to avoid waiting when their resources are up. In Image 2 above – which is the primary screen from Summoners War, currently in the top-20 for daily revenue –[17] you can see timers next to two resources of energy (noted by a lightning bolt) and wings that indicate how long the player must wait for one unit to replenish. The cost of paying to bypass these time-gates (as well as other structural mechanisms of the game) is often hidden behind in-game resources that alter attention away from the cost in local currencies, as can be seen in Image 3 below. In doing so, these games reflect the points made about attention and disposition made in the discussion above.

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[17] "Top Grossing iPhone Games," Think Gaming, accessed Mar 2, 2016.

Image 3. In-game currencies are often used, which masks financial costs

There are other F2P games that are content-gated. There may be experiences in the game that can only be had if you're willing to pay something. In these cases, the developers promote a "base game" that defines the core game experience that can be expanded on through purchasing new content. Another related model is power-gated experience, which rely heavily on competitive play experiences. These gates function by exposing players to how the game works before showing them that they cannot possibly reach the highest levels of achievement in the game (or not in time to keep up with the competition) without paying to improve their ability to succeed.

Image 4 Pop-up IAPs offering increased power, followed by added confirmation page with time-gated reminder

This model relies on players readily perceiving what power looks like in the game, and how

spending money will help them achieve it. In Image 4, we see an offer that pops up during the

play experience to remind the player of a way to enhance their power relative to other players

combined with a time-gated sense of immediacy for purchasing. In Image 5 below, there is an

example of a leaderboard that drives the type of compelling competition that can also drive

spending on the part of committed players. In cases like this one, players both have the potential

to be recognized by members of the ludic community while also forming closer connections to

members of that community, similar to the model of team sports.

Image 5. Monthly Leaderboard in Clash of Clans based on "clan" performance

It is worth noting that, although the highest levels of competition encourage spending in

order to compete, the players who spend little or nothing on the game are still fundamental to the

ludic community that supports the F2P model. The "whales" need other players who illustrate

the power disparity that their spending affords them and continue to provide the context within

which their action might be meaningful. Of course, as with all claims and experiences grounded

within the ambiguity set up by the generic conventions of games, different players can accept or

contest the significance of this sense of gaining power in the game by investing money. Some

players might credit what another player has done to succeed in the game and celebrate that success while others might invalidate achievements based on the financial means used. In the latter case, members of ludic communities use the term "P2W" or pay-to-win to mock the uneven playing field created by F2P games.[18] Even given these internal disagreements in ludic communities about the merits of being successful at achieving the goals of the game by spending money, it remains the case that the structure of the F2P game model relies on a broad group of players, both paying and non-paying, that enable the continued existence of the game as a potentially meaningful site of action and, therefore, as a potential site of persuasion.[19]

Importantly, however, there are often ways in which these games allow alternative means of displaying status within the ludic community beyond these internal senses of power, which are often referred to as "cosmetic" items. It is on this aspect of how players spend money on F2P games that is most intriguing for grasping the logic of how these games work as modes of persuasion that are not simply predatory. Unlike the power-gating mechanisms, these cosmetic elements do not improve your ability to succeed in the explicit ends of the game. Instead, they focus on elements of display that make the player stand out before the ludic community in ways not tied to their power in the game, but still signal investment of some sort. These can be thought of as vanity items or conspicuous consumption, which might factor in to a significant amount of "whale"-like spending patterns. However, even if that is the case, this cosmetic spending also maintains the interesting ambiguity of disposition that drives the generic play

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[18] Daniel Shumway, "Pay-to-Win is Not the Problem," *Gamasutra*, Jan 23, 2014, accessed Mar 9, 2016, http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/DanielShumway/20140123/209073/PaytoWin_is_Not_the_Problem.php
[19] In his 1996 article, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs," game designer Richard Bartle discusses four types of players found within early multi-player online games, organized according to what they find compelling about the game. His taxonomy divides players into "killers," "achievers," "socialisers," and "explorers." Of these, all but the explorers rely on other types of players for their enjoyment (and the explorers rely on other explorers). Although these specific categories might not translate directly to F2P games, the framework of relying on other players to maintain the compelling aspects of play activities remains salient to how we ought to think about ludic communities.

experience found within the game, and the same can be said about all of these IAPs. As a player

spends money on something in the game, the contested sense of meaningfulness and significance

of that action in context becomes particularly pronounced with respect to how the ludic

community receives it. Whether any purchase represents, from the perspective of the player, a

genuine investment in the ludic community or a frivolous display of wealth remains a question

that only further fuels the ambiguity of disposition that makes up the context of the game.

　　　These different models for eliciting payments from players are often used together, and

can often be mutually-reinforcing. As one builds up investment in a ludic community, or any

community for that matter, one is more likely to commit more of one's attention to the activity of

that community (and with an increased sense of meaningfulness). There is an existing

framework used in discourse about videogames that captures this sense of varied investment well:

casual and hardcore gamers. The former is used to describe players for whom games most

closely match the identity with fun and leisure, while the latter denotes a certain intensity of

playing habits. Someone who identifies, or is identified as, a "hardcore" gamer is willing to

sacrifice other potential uses of time and attention in order to spend more time playing games or

participating in ludic communities (by posting on messageboards, producing content related to

the game, etc.). Such a level of sacrifice also maps onto the financial investment in games, as we

might find in the example of "whales" and the F2P model. Mobile games, which make up a

large portion of games adopting the F2P model, tend to be considered as games with

predominantly casual players because they tend to be relatively easy to understand with simple

possibilities for game interactions. The affordances of the mobile technology tend to be limited

in ways that preclude complex engagement, while simultaneously lending these games the ability

to fit relatively conveniently into idle time. Of course, as we have seen, the relationship between

game structure and disposition is not prescriptive, and the incidence of the so-called "whale" who invests heavily in these F2P games helps to illustrate the multiple possibilities for engagement in ludic communities, which helps further emphasize the central ambiguity that we find in the generic conventions of games.

The terminological relationship between casino gambling and F2P games is certainly relevant to the ways that we have been discussing matters of disposition, investment, and compulsion. Game studies draws on psychological work on feedback loops, operant conditioning and the Skinner box to explore compulsive behavior in games. Games provide (usually positive) reinforcement for the play activities enabled by their structures, and ludic communities that derive pleasure or meaning from those game structures tend to reinforce those signals. These are particularly important ways for thinking about compulsive behavior, the myopia of an Ahab captured by the whale, but they also limit us to a mindset of thinking of players as unwitting dupes with susceptibility to the gambler's fallacy and risk-seeking tendencies. Again, the ethical question about particular gaming practices is important and can pose necessary critiques of exploitative systems, but there is more to learn about the persuasive force of games than the possibility for predation. When we consider games from the perspective of a ludic community, we open up the possibility of a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that we collectively establish and maintain spaces for the altered affective experience of fundamental political dispositions. Insofar as that means considering the destructive possibilities attendant to that space, it also suggests productive capacities as well.

VIII. Whales and Citizens

In the regulatory efforts against these games, there is a targeted negative valence with regard to how these companies draw on the persuasive force of games. However, we ought to

hesitate before broadly condemning these practices and others like them categorically. Insofar as these games thrive on the exploitation of vulnerable populations – and there are arguments that most "whales" fall into that category, although there are arguments to the contrary as well –[20] we would accurately describe their persuasion as predatory manipulation. In other contexts, however, we might easily praise significant investment on the part of some individuals that allow for the perpetuation of an activity that a large group of people finds enjoyable or meaningful. In fact, we likely would chastise those "free riders" who rely on the investment of others without contributing. Conversely, we might find the conventional political analog – such as campaign donations from a few wealthy interests – to be more alarming than how someone chooses to spend money on a game. The situation is, of course, more complicated than any easy analogy allows, but it returns us to the ambiguity of disposition that games emphasize. The case of the "whale" suggests ways in which one's experience of such an ambiguity, and then one's ability to contest other accounts of meaningfulness of such an activity through action, is central to our experience of citizenship. It is for this reason that it is beneficial to consider the importance of ludic communities and the games that they play in the same way that we recognize political communities relative to the various political institutions. Games exist as contexts within which we intersubjectively maintain a tenuous balance of disposition through an altered attention to uncertainty and ends, and the ways that human beings look to separate out such experiences make for important differences in how we understand the different activities. However, we would be remiss to ignore the rhetorical effects – both compelling and persuasive, as identified in

[20] Rose, "Chasing the Whale"

Lovell, "Whales, Trues Fans, and the Ethics of Free-to-play games"

Brendan Sinclar, "Free-to-play whales more rational than assumed," *gamesindustry.biz*, Apr 1, 2014, accessed Mar 2, 2016, http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2014-04-01-free-to-play-whales-more-rational-than-assumed

this argument – that emerge out of those contexts, and how they might benefit our understanding of political life.

In the spirit of that end, it seems worth making a final remark about the confluence of dispositions, altered attention, and distinct sites of human activity with respect to the context of American electoral politics in 2016. There may not be anything as unexpectedly contested in public discourse currently as the legitimacy of Donald Trump's candidacy for the presidency. His viability was long dismissed as insignificant, but he is, as of March, thought of as the favorite to win the nomination of the Republican Party. There are those who question how seriously he has approached campaigning and the electoral process, while he has the support of those who believe him to be the serious alternative to a corrupt establishment. On these and other related aspects of the campaign, we find points of contestation relative to an ambiguity of disposition similar to that we find through the generic conventions of games. In doing so, the Trump candidacy muddies the simple distinctions between what ought to be taken seriously by political communities. There also seems to be something to the way in which the Trump campaign has altered the attention of political debate – although using common ideological tropes and strategies to do so – but not obviously with the same relationship to uncertainty and ends that we find in games. Nevertheless, there is something playful to the charisma that has driven Trump's cult of personality into a powerful position, leaving the American public exposed to an ambiguity of disposition without the generic expectations of a game to make sense of it.