CHAPTER 1

Bad Play

You wanna play rough?
Okay. Say hello to my little friend.

—Tony Montana, *Scarface* (1983)

There are many encouraging things about the rise of game studies over the past couple of decades, but there are many discouraging things as well. One of the most discouraging is the degree to which the youngish field of game studies has gained credibility by reproducing existing research methodologies and assumptions. Since game studies involves the study of play and since play incorrigibly approaches all objects and topics in an abject state of disbelief and doubt—that is, in a state of *play*—it might be hoped that young game studies scholars, of all their academic colleagues, might display a similar attitude of skepticism, doubt, and disbelief that would lead them, at least in their very own and brand-new field of study, to question the values and beliefs of their academic mentors.

But, no. Computer game studies have quickly become, like all other forms of academic scholarship, very much like all other forms of academic scholarship: *serious.* And imbedded in this seriousness of method (not so bad in and of itself) is a set of seriously debilitating values.

While theories of play and games are generally regarded as serious and therein good, play itself is most often regarded otherwise. Play is notorious in that it is most frequently non-serious and therein *bad*—ignorant, destructive, and/or illegal.

In computer game play, ignorant play is often denigrated as "noob" play; destructive play would include "griefing" and the like; and illegal play in game contexts involves, among other things, exploitation of game rules and codes (including commercial rules) during pirating and hacking activities.

But bad play is obviously a much larger category than just that associated with computer game play. The theoretical term for this bad play is often *dysfunctional play,* and most existing play theory has a hard time explaining why dysfunctional play exists at all. Here, by "most existing theory," I primarily mean *developmental theories* of play.

> Contemporary theories of play . . . are concerned with the ways that play benefits children's psychological development. They have continued to impact on early childhood programs, particularly in under-fives settings, where we now see play located at the heart of the curriculum and used as a vehicle for nurturing children's development across its various domains.[1]

Implicit in all development theories of play[2] is the assumption that the natural history and evolution of play documents some necessary and beneficial component of play vital to species survival. That is, play is deemed valuable, and that value is then awarded according to the functional benefits play provides.

However, if play is beneficial, then what exactly is beneficial about play that is risky, dangerous, and destructive? These and many other common and negative outcomes of play are either ignored by developmental theories or discounted by those theories as deviant abnormalities—or, in other words, as "bad" play.[3]

Yet the subjective pleasures of bad play[4] seem as direct, immediate, and engaging as those of good play. It is, then, difficult to explain why evolution has assigned the same visceral response to risky, harmful, and antisocial play as to safe, beneficial, and pro-social play.

There are some speculative answers. For instance, perhaps the pleasures of bad play are a vestigial response and, in humans, bad play indeed no longer serves the same species functions as it did and does within lower animals. Or perhaps the function of bad play is more positive at the group level of analysis than at the individual level; in this case, bad play would, in effect, sacrifice the welfare of the individual for the welfare of the group. Or, perhaps, on balance, bad play is more advantageous than its more obvious risks and harms would superficially indicate.

There is, at present, no firm evidence supporting these speculations. And, regardless, the perception of risky and harmful play remains clearly negative within developmental theories of play—and elsewhere. Even when the pleasures of bad play are acknowledged in less than serious, non-theoretical contexts—in popular works of art and fiction, for instance—these pleasures

are commonly attributed to animal, primitive, or otherwise irrational and, thus, undesirable origins. Yet these pleasures, guilty or not, remain.

And so, *why bad play?* In the remainder of this chapter, I am going to try to answer that question regarding two potentially inclusive categories of generic bad play: play that is threatening, risky, or otherwise *harmful* to the self or others; and play that is *against the rules.* Of these two, the former can be considered a *functional* definition of bad play; the latter can be considered, in contrast, a *formal* definition of bad play.

HARMFUL PLAY

Much play that is physically threatening or risky to players is also pleasurable and is, for that reason, actively sought by those players who put themselves most at risk. This category of risky but enjoyable play includes so-called extreme sports, as well as less competitive but equally dangerous behaviors: bungee jumping, skydiving, riding roller coasters, and the like. Indeed, the pleasures of these activities seem, to a great degree, determined by the amount of risk involved.

Putting someone other than yourself at risk during play includes bullying and other aggressive forms of childhood play—sometimes labeled "dark play."[5] In fact, aggressiveness toward others has long been cited as an indication of bad, inappropriate, and antisocial play[6] among children and adults. However, just as putting yourself at risk may be considered appropriate or inappropriate, pleasurable or not, depending on the context, putting others at risk may also be interpreted and valued differently in different contexts.

Many violent sports—boxing, for instance—assume some risk to the participants. More informal yet still willfully aggressive play, either during play fighting[7] or during those circumstances in which play fighting and real fighting are blurred—for instance, within the movie *Fight Club* (1999) (or, perhaps, within hockey games)—provide pleasures and gratifications largely indistinguishable from those provided by non-aggressive and non-risky play.

This is true of many quite risky non-competitive games as well—as evident in the history of and popular fascination with Russian roulette. Originally appearing only in fiction (in a story written by Georges Surdez in 1937 for *Collier's* magazine), Russian roulette has become as widely known as it is infrequently practiced or "played." Indeed, the classification of Russian roulette as a form of play (rather than suicide) seems critical to its popular conceptualization as intriguing behavior. The movie *Deer Hunter* (1978) effectively dramatizes the peculiar appeal of playful acts of personal

destruction—in this case, Russian roulette—which are representational and yet, simultaneously and paradoxically, have physically harmful and, therein, clearly non-representational consequences.

Significantly, many other types of pleasurable human behavior—most pointedly, sexual behavior—can also involve acts of aggression, dominance, submission, and, on occasion, pain, up to and including bondage and torture.[8] Labeled abnormal and psychopathic—and, as such, conventionally discouraged—such extreme risk-taking (and risk-enjoying) behaviors nevertheless frequently appear within human virtual contexts, such as pornography. And these conceptual representations of bad play have demonstrable critical, popular, and commercial appeal, as with the writings of the Marquis de Sade, the stories of Anais Nin, Peter Schaffer's *Equus,* and even, to some degree, Mel Gibson films. In light of such acknowledged guilty pleasures—*schadenfreude*—it is unclear whether harmful or risky play can be rightfully characterized as "bad" without necessary reference to some preexisting normative context.[9]

Fortunately, perhaps, digital media and computer games provide a relatively safe and less-threatening context for play than a more rough-and-tumble natural environment. Bad play with computer games poses little to no physical risk to players—although risky and harmful computer game play can still involve severe emotional and psychological consequences.[10]

Nevertheless, within interactive digital media contexts, bad play is infrequently physically harmful and more frequently typical of a larger and more inclusive category of bad play: play that breaks the rules.

PLAY AGAINST THE RULES

Most often, bad play with computer games is characterized by play against the rules. These rules may include rules prohibiting risky or harmful play, so that these two categories of bad play—functional and formal, risky/harmful and rules-breaking—are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, if rules prohibiting harmful play are both conventional and widespread (most are), then the rules-breaking category of bad play subsumes the risky/harmful category of bad play. This is particularly the case when discussing play within virtual environments and—most pertinent to our discussion here—computer game play.

FORMS OF RULES

All computer games have some objective, explicit, and formal representations of their rules embedded in their software or *code.* For this reason, com-

puter games provide a relatively straightforward context for distinguishing what is and what is not rules-appropriate play. This is true despite ongoing social negotiations regarding rules, which always seem part of playful social contexts, and despite the potential of emergent play resulting from either loosely constructed or poorly understood rules. Thus, to avoid any confusion over what the rules actually are, we can define rules-breaking play—and any so-called bad play associated with it—as play not explicitly allowed by the rules *as represented by the game code.*

Breaking some portion of a game's rules—for example, rules governing the mechanics of the game's interface—may make playing that game impossible. Also, players may—and, frequently do, particularly during initial computer game play—disconnect the game's power supply (i.e., pull the plug) or in some other way physically disturb, interrupt, or step beyond the game's coded rules context.[11]

While these can be considered examples of transgressive and, therein, rules-breaking play, the most interesting category of this type of play involves players who break the rules while engaging (rather than destroying) the game code. Given such a circumstance, rules-breaking play can be understood as playing *with* (rather than within or according to) the coded rules of the game. This play is then in conflict not only with the rules but also with the "spirit" of the game as interpreted by other players and, significantly, by the game designer(s). Such transgressions in computer game play are commonly called *exploits.*

This particular class of rules-breaking play—exploiting—involves breaking game rules while still maintaining some level of integrity within the rules system (or game *context*) of which the broken rules are a part. Thus, bad play of this sort is one of the more paradoxical and, therein, one of the more formally interesting manifestations of computer game play.

Despite the programmed and tangible nature of rules embedded in game code, computer game players seem to play as often in disregard of these rules as they do in accordance with them. To some extent, this behavior results when computer game designs (either intentionally or not) hide rules from players—as is frequently the case when computer games involve themes of exploration, mystery, or subterfuge. However, a great deal of rules-breaking play can also be observed among players who have full access to and full knowledge of game rules yet still willfully choose to ignore these rules in order to access a freer (and usually more effective) style of play.

Examples of exploitive play are extremely common within complex online role-playing games, for instance, which typically display a characteristically

incomplete and continually revised rules set. Here, for instance, Maleki, a *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) in-game support manager, explains the nature and consequences of a particular *WoW* exploit:

> To be a little more specific, the guild in question was using repeated line of sight exploits which prevented the mobs from attacking back. Also, using a pulling exploit which allowed them to only agro boss mobs. Both are considered exploits, and the guild in question was previously warned the night before. We want to reiterate that exploitation of high end content will not be tolerated.[12]

Exploits which use unintended rules conflicts or consequences to aid play are common in offline, single-player games as well—even including exploits provided by the game designers themselves in the form of so-called cheat codes. In fact, realizing the widespread tendency of players to explore, manipulate, and transform game rules to their advantage, many game designers have attempted to incorporate rules-breaking play within rules-appropriate play through special forms of rules: self-reflexive and self-transformative rules.

These "special" rules allow, in effect, game rules to be broken as an acceptable, appropriate, and sometimes necessary component of game play: they are rules to break rules. While the most obvious example of such a formal rules-breaking design is the cheat code, there are other, more subtle variations.

Within the several popular versions of Sid Meier's *Civilization* series of computer games, for instance, there is the self-transforming feature of World Wonders. When World Wonders—the Pyramids, Michelangelo's Chapel, and such—are introduced into the game, they transform the game rules, including those rules that allow subsequent World Wonders to be built. And, in fact, within most other, non-computer-based games—sports, poker, even solitaire—there are also frequent rules modifications, variations, and transgressions that serve to extend and enliven play within, ostensibly, those same boundaries established by the original game context.[13]

However, rules transformations in non-computer games are very often the result of social negotiations undertaken in normative contexts outside the game's rules system entirely.[14] The interactive nature of digital media makes it possible to include something like this negotiation process within the computer game design itself. That is, computer game designs provide a formal mechanism for recursively transformative—*rules-breaking*—processes.

During all initial computer game play, for instance, players make impor-

tant game decisions prior to full knowledge of the game rules. Players must decide where to build founding cities in *Civilization* prior to full knowledge of the game's world map; similarly, players must decide what sort of characters to build within online role-playing games prior to full knowledge of the relative abilities and disabilities of character classes in MMOs.

In the former instance, the game rules of *Civilization* might be considered purposefully hiding information from players in order to introduce random elements of play. In the second instance, however, the game rules (i.e., MMO rules manuals) are simply incapable of describing character abilities that are only determined most definitely within a constantly shifting and largely player-determined context of play. This latter circumstance is not merely the result of social play. It is equally true of all popular action/arcade games in which contexts are determined entirely through individual play. In both contexts—social and solo—the *experience* of play is considered by players to be a better teacher (and evaluator) of game rules than any text-based explication or secondhand account.

In situations like these—where game rules must, in effect, bootstrap themselves during game play—players constantly make and remake in-game decisions based on what they (mostly mistakenly) *believe* are the game rules. These decisions then affect subsequent rules-determined game outcomes and forms. During this play and replay process, computer games are started and restarted, loaded and reloaded; game representations (e.g., *Civilization* starting positions, MMO avatars) are valued and revalued, rolled and rerolled, built and rebuilt, constructed and destroyed—all without ever having full knowledge of the game rules, and all in order to conform, eventually and recursively, to those game rules as they are imbedded in the game code. Such repetitive and recursive play results in—and, simultaneously, is made necessary by—the characteristic incompleteness (either in perception or fact) of computer game rules.

Thus, whether the game rules and game design structures explicitly (in their code) allow such things to happen or not, the form of computer game play consistently displays *recursive contextualization*—through which rules are transformed during continuous, repeated, and, most important, recursive reference to those rules.

RULES AS SEMIOTIC FORMS

In order to discuss the implications of recursive contextualization during computer game play, let us consider computer game rules as *algorithms.*

These algorithms then also serve as *signs* (or references) pointing to some other object, process, or goal.

For example, game rules governing the movement of cars within *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) point (or refer) to the movement of cars in three-dimensional city-spaces. It is then useful to think of these isolated car-moving algorithms in *GTA* as similar to the algorithms of more realistic simulations, such as *Microsoft's Flight Simulator* (*MFS*), which are quite explicit in establishing a real-world relationship between game form and game reference. However, the relationship of the game of *GTA* to real theft, crime, violence, and cars—or the relationship of the game of *SimCity* to real cities, or the relationship of the game of *Civilization* to real civilizations—is quite different from the relationship of the *simulation* of *MFS* to real airplanes. *GTA*'s "algorithms," as is the case with most computer games, are dedicated to providing an engaging and enjoyable game-playing experience. *MFS*'s algorithms, as is the case with most simulations, are dedicated to modeling a particular mechanic of physics: fixed-wing flight.

Is the *experience* of play, then, shaped by the same rules—that is, by the same algorithmic forms and functions—as are the *mechanics* of flight? No. This becomes clear when we realize rules-breaking (bad) play within computer *simulations* is different from rules-breaking play within computer *games.*

We most often characterize rules-breaking play within simulations, such as *MFS,* as unlearned, unpracticed, or unskilled play. That is, players who are ignorant of the rules of the simulation break those rules and play "badly." Over time, these players learn the rules of the simulation and how to play well by conforming to those rules. Thus, we might consider the initial "bad" play within simulations to be ultimately functional: that is, bad play serves as a necessary prelude to subsequently better and, eventually, "good" play.

In games, however, this same form of bad play never seems to get "better." Game players who have increasingly complete knowledge of game rules still use that knowledge to sustain and improve the "bad" play of rules breaking. So, although we might label the outcome of ignorant bad play to be rules learning (and thus functional) and the outcome of knowledgeable bad play to be rules breaking (and thus dysfunctional), there are no clear formal differences between the two.

Both rules-breaking processes—in simulations and in games—tend to conceptually transform rules and the play experience that those rules evoke. And both sorts of bad play—whether ignorant or knowing—serve to accomplish the same function: to discover and explore exactly what the rules *are.*

Thus, both during game play and during simulation use, the rules-breaking function of bad play closely parallels the function of so-called *Garfinkeling:*[15] breaking game rules is necessary to establish the presence and, relatedly, the contextual (or experiential) function of those game rules.

Significantly, then, in advanced computer game play—as opposed to advanced simulation use—rules-breaking play does not decrease. The process of rules discovery, exploration, and exploitation does not end. During "play" with simulations, the more practiced and expert player displays both more skill and, in demonstration of that skill, more rules-abiding behavior; the more practiced and expert player of computer games, on the other hand, also displays more skill, but, in demonstration of that skill, is increasingly likely to be rules intolerant. Thus, the use of simulations, in opposition to the play of games, does not display the same continuously recurring forms of recursive contextualization, either in original design or during prolonged play.

Indeed, a great percentage of *all* play with computer games can be classified as recursive contextualization, regardless of the knowledge or expertise (or lack thereof) of the game players. The only portion of computer game play that does not consistently display patterns of recursive contextualization—resulting in successive conceptual transformations of game rules—is that portion of play involving the manipulation of the computer game's physical interface: learning how to move the joystick or what keys to push on the keyboard.

For, within computer games, the algorithms governing the game interface point to something other than the subjective play experience: they point to the means to access that experience. Their function in this regard is then similar to the algorithms of a simulation. Once players have full knowledge of and sufficient practice with algorithms of the interface, these algorithms become increasingly habitualized and, therein, incapable of easy, useful, or enjoyable transformation. Indeed, subsequent transformations in game rules must take place within precisely such a learned and *fixed* context—or interface—which then provides a necessary, stable, and conceptually unassailable "ground"[16] for further assignation of relatively unstable values and meanings.

Learning the game interface is, therefore, more comparable to simulation use than to game play. For, once interface rules have been learned, play with those rules ends. Once the computer game interface has been mastered, computer play thereafter occurs not with (or against) but through (or within) the game interface; play is then increasingly focused on the manipulation of

other, more subjective components of the play experience: the game code rather than the game hardware.

The subjective components of the game play experience are relational and combinatorial, and so it is rare that players exhaust all these possibilities during a single episode of play—or expect to. For this reason, game rules requiring a simple and linear, singular and focused manipulation of the game code—such as those manipulations guided by embedded narrative structures—quickly become intrusive and, eventually, during repeated play, superfluous to the game-playing experience.

Computer games played by longtime and expert players inevitably take on less of a "rigid-rule" and more of a "free-form"[17] structure, in which play is determined by, if any one thing in particular, the player's own localized and individualized sensation and experience. And it is at this stage that a conceptual transformation of rules— recursive contextualization—is most likely to transgress the original game context and engage the so-called metagame.

Within action/arcade games, for instance, this stage of play might include the creation of graphic contexts (e.g., wad files in *DOOM*) that then extend play within the context of the game's original interface; within MMOs, it might include more active participation and leadership in those social activities conducted outside the limited scope of the game's fantasy world; within strategy games, such as *Civilization*, it might include more abstract play with the game rules themselves; and so on. Or, alternatively, at this stage, the original game is simply placed aside, and a new game is taken up in its place.

During this culminate stage of expert and endgame play, it is interesting to note parallels with how game designers play their own games. During the design process, for instance, game designers have the unprecedented ability to play outside the rules of the game—and thus engage in rules-breaking ("bad") play. In this and many other respects,[18] play by game designers ignores the boundaries and restrictions placed on conventional game players.

Playing with rules in the manner of game designers is common within all free-form games and within all self-sustaining biological systems (e.g., ecosystems)—and certainly within the broader context of evolutionary biology. Yet attempting to implement free-form game play within coded game rules inevitably causes self-referential paradoxes: rules that break themselves. And if those paradoxes are not trapped and handled properly, the game defaults.

Suber (1990) and others[19] have noted the potentially self-destructive paradoxes that result when rules-based political, social, and biological systems attempt to transform those rules systems of which they are themselves

part. Suber, in fact, has constructed a general case illustrating this problem of self-reflexive and self-transformative rules within the game *Nomic*. *Nomic,* a "game of self-amendment," is most fundamentally characterized by its rule 213.

> **213.** If the rules are changed so that further play is impossible, or if the legality of a move cannot be determined with finality, or if by the Judge's best reasoning, not overruled, a move appears equally legal and illegal, then the first player unable to complete a turn is the winner. This rule takes precedence over every other rule determining the winner.[20]

Thus, *Nomic* is a simulation of a rules-making process, wherein winning conditions are determined by, in effect, breaking the rules of that process. In parallel, play itself may be understood—in the same Garfinkeling sense mentioned earlier—as a simulation of a *simulated* rules-making process. For just as *Nomic* simulates breaking the rules of a game, play simulates breaking the rules of simulating.

Here, however, it is vital that play remain a simulation (or an algorithmic *representation*) of a rules-breaking process, rather than that process itself, since if play were the latter, it would remain bound by the mechanics (i.e., the rules) of that process. However, as a *representation* of that process, play (or, more generally, *playing*) is free to transform rules of any sort—including rules related to the rules-breaking process—without having any permanent (and potentially disastrous) impact on the biological and cognitive restraints and forms that evoke and sustain play itself.

Similarly, *Nomic* must retain its position as a *game* of self-amendment, rather than the self-amendment process itself. Otherwise, *Nomic* might unravel itself. For while the self-amendment process that *Nomic*'s rules refer to remains paradoxical and, ultimately, untransformable, the *simulation* of that process within the game manages to amend rules in such a way that those amendments have no lasting effect on the broader and more inclusive process of self-amendment. Thus, *Nomic,* as a game, is unable to transform the play of self-amendment to which its rules refer. Or, more precisely, if it were to do so, then, according to rule 213, the game would immediately end.

This, then, is the crucial point at which the rules (algorithms) of simulations, games, and play diverge. While game rules may be unbound by the game context and thus capable of self-reflection, self-transformation, and, indeed, even self-destruction through their simultaneous and paradoxical

application, the rules of play are irrevocably bound to and limited by their biological context. Thus, play cannot fail to produce paradox, and, somewhat paradoxically, play cannot fail to survive the paradoxes it produces.

For these reasons, it is useful to think of the algorithms and rules of games as occupying an intermediate position between the algorithms and rules of simulations and the algorithms and rules of play. The former are bound by context; the latter are not. The algorithms and rules of games are then "sort of" (and always temporarily) bound by context.

Since the algorithms and rules of games, simulations, and play are *representations,* we can position each as separate categories of *semiotic form* based on what they represent and how they represent it (e.g., either strictly or loosely). As figure 1.1 indicates, the algorithms and rules of simulations point to an objective process (i.e., "reality"), the algorithms and rules of games point to a subjective experience (i.e., "fun"), and the algorithms and rules of play point to the pointing (or representational) process itself. It is in this sense that play may be considered a simulation of *simulating.*

A game such as *Nomic* is, then, perhaps the closest possible "good" (non-rules-breaking) implementation of a play process that is, most fundamentally, "bad" (rules-breaking). Or, in other words, if you play with a simulation, it becomes a game; if you play with a game, it becomes just play; and if you play with play—well, you can't play with play: *play pwnz.*

Thus, rules-breaking of the sort that most characterizes bad play has a definite formal structure with an indefinite functional outcome. This formal structure provides for the evaluation, manipulation, and transformation of existing rules structures—forcibly so. And the outcome of this process is most typically paradox.

The representational and interactive qualities of computer games allow the construction of rules—like those in *Nomic*—that allow game players to engage in play analogous to that of game design. In a recursive contextualization process, computer game rules are then manipulated and transformed indefinitely *so long as those game rules remain incomplete.* However, should a rules system be finalized in some rigid (i.e., fully coded) form, then game play must thereafter either descend into the "good" and rules-abiding play of simulation use or ascend into the increasingly "bad" play of rules breaking. In the latter instance, play ultimately either breaks or abandons game rules.

Whether this formal, rules-breaking process of bad play is functional or dysfunctional, then, entirely depends on the quality (level of completeness) of the game rules and, simultaneously, on the social and cultural (or theoretical) context within which those rules are valued and given meaning.

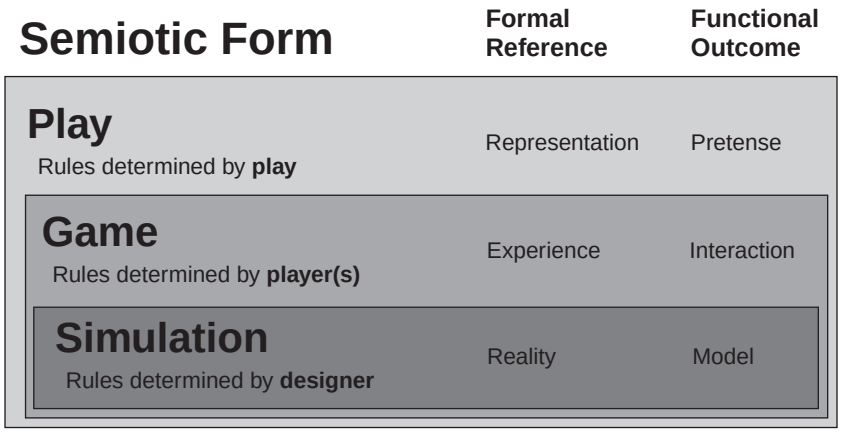

Figure 1.1. Relationships among play, games, and simulations

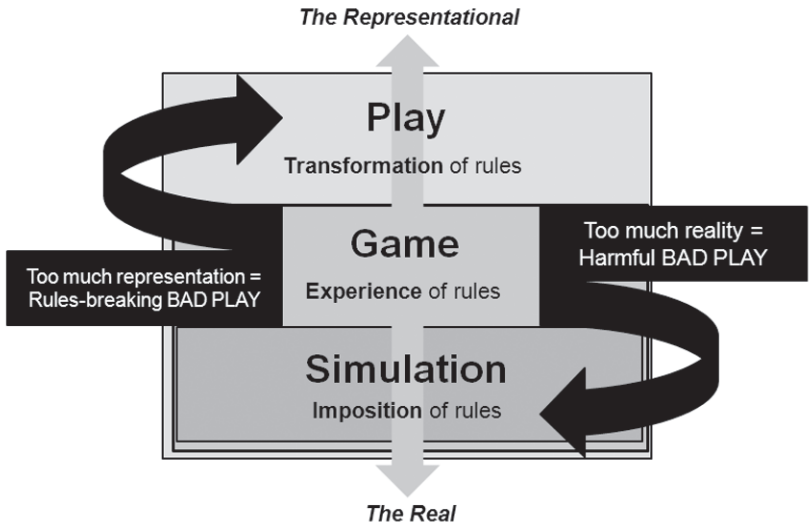

Figure 1.2. Representations of bad play

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter introduces a formal approach to the study of computer games and, in particular, to the study of a common component of computer game play often discounted by cultural analysis: bad play. While functional analyses of game play tend to distinguish between good and bad play based on their culturally relative consequences and associated values, a more formal

analysis can demonstrate similarities between the two and, in fact, as has been suggested here, prioritizes the "bad" play as the more fundamental of the two. This sheds a new perspective on the nature and origin of the so-called good play that is most often supported and promoted by developmental theories: it may not be so "good" after all. Likewise, this perspective allows us to see "good" and "bad" players in a much different—and more equal—light.

Formal analysis also demonstrates how focusing on references and referencing—that is, on *semiosis*—can help us understand how human meaning-making processes function during the self-reflections and self-transformations of play. As those meaning-making processes are turned increasingly inward through recursive contextualization, the consequences of game play become not the meanings and values of the rules of the games but the paradoxes and devaluations of the forms of games.

Acknowledging a formal distinction between play and game implies that at least one function of game play must be to maintain that distinction—that is, to restrict and, where necessary, *punish* free and uninhibited play. Thus, we are motivated by this analysis to look for game structures that restrict and limit play—structures that are easily and widely found in all those (primarily developmental and educational) contexts that prioritize the algorithms and rules of simulations.

Can such restrictions be imposed successfully and fruitfully? Can the energies and pleasures of play as a whole be harnessed to accentuate the positive and de-emphasize the negative? Can bad play be tamed? As the following chapter will show, I think and hope not.

The success of any "serious"[21] or "persuasive" game (these were called "edutainment" in an older, pre-digital age) would necessarily depend on, in some important way, distorting and curtailing the natural progression of human play as a rules-breaking process. This may be tantamount to trying to teach human beings either a new way to see while using the same old retina or a new way to speak while using the same old larynx. It's possible, perhaps, but tedious and awkward compared to the original. Trying to teach human beings a new way to play using the same old cognition requires less promoting the new than suppressing the old. And human play may well be (again, hope seems in order) irrepressible.

If so, then an irrepressible play appears to have a dual function within all game-like rules structures: it delimits and explicates those structures, and, simultaneously, it creates paradoxical contexts within which those rules structures are either transformed or broken (or both).

These two related functions are, in brief, profound. They are as necessary for the existence of games as they are predictive of the fragile and impermanent nature of games. And, importantly, theories of play that have no primary explanatory role for common and widespread "bad" play should be questioned solely on that basis. Of available theories of play, *agonistic* theories[22] best offer an interpretation of play consonant with the position presented here, yet those theories also commonly seek refuge in normative contexts in order to distinguish the good from the bad.

An important theoretical advantage offered by a formalist approach is that, without recourse to normative contexts, it is possible to justify the existence of bad play as a necessary and unavoidable consequence of the peculiar and related representational forms of simulations, games, and play.