

Negotiating Play: The Process of Rule Construction in Professional Computer Gaming

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ABSTRACT

When discussing how computer games work one often encounters the argument that a primary function computation plays in the space is “handling” rules. In this model of computer game play the device, be it personal computer or console, acts as central (and often final) arbiter of rules, upholding the contract of the game with its players and seamlessly and equitably enforcing a fixed set of rules. While other “layers” of rules are sometimes introduced to nuance this model, there often remains a core sense that the computer is centrally relied upon for the lion’s share of rule-governance.

Yet there are a number of studies that signal this story of the division of play labor is not so clearly demarcated. In Mikael Jakobsson’s fascinating article on a console game club and their competitions for the game Super Smash Brothers he shows how the gamers enact a dynamic set of rules to facilitate play that go well beyond the formalized ones set by the game itself [3]. This often includes on the spot “tweaks” to facilitate play at a particular event. T.L. Taylor’s work on MMOGs also highlights the complex negotiation around what counts as appropriate and fair play for online players and how they often interact with software to construct strong norms & rules governing their activities well beyond the fixed system the game software provides [7,8]. We might additionally look at the interesting work of authors exploring practices around cheating, hacking, and role-play to find waypoints in understanding rule negotiation in computer game spaces [1,2,4,5,6].

This piece picks up on the theme of rules negotiation by looking at how these processes are handled in the professional computer gaming scene. One might think that the kinds of negotiations described by the scholars noted above are a unique subset of play and that the very serious domain of pro-play (where large sums of money and prestige are often at stake) would surely represent a sphere in which the rules of play bear a more one-to-one correspondence with system rules & constraints and are certainly well-defined in advance of competition. I will argue, however, that rules negotiation is a consistent feature of multiplayer computer gaming.

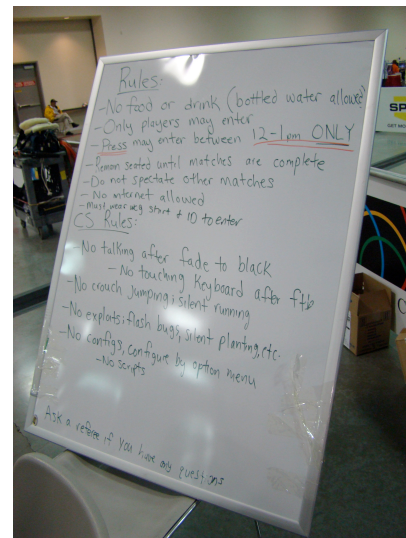


Figure 1: Additional rules noted on whiteboard at World Cyber Games Grand Final Tournament, Seattle 2007.

Based on fieldwork over the past several years at a number of professional gaming tournaments, as well as interviews with players, referees, and other participants, I show the ways rules are discussed, debated, enacted, and overturned across time, within a variety of sectors, and through multiple actors. Despite computer games such as *Counter-Strike*, *StarCraft*, *WarCraft*, and *FIFA* (regular tournament titles) having a built-in set of rule systems that formalize the game, professionals in all sectors of the pro scene regularly override these and set up complex systems of mediation to negotiate these structures in the service of both practice and competition play.

Rule construction and negotiation regularly takes place across time (including into the gaming session) and involves a number of actors (including non-human agents). This matrix includes:

The periods during:

- Practice time and non-competition play.

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- Regional qualifiers.
- Finals.
- Post-game analysis.

And amongst:

- The originating game software and its actual users (be they the players or other stakeholders).
- Players and teams as they engage in practice competitions with each other.
- Tournament and competition organizers / stakeholders (including sponsors or funders) and players / referees / other participants both in advance of matches and at times during an event.
- Cross-tournament “conversations”.
- Referees and players at the actual moment of play in a tournament.
- Technological actors such as software mods made for specific competitions.
- Competing technological actors such as the game software and broadcast media.

By unpacking the construction and negotiation of rules not only across a period of time but amongst a number of actors we can begin to complicate the notion that computation serves as a totalizing agent, a penultimate GM if you will, in computer game play. The professional gaming scene offers a particularly useful field site for this investigation given assumptions how rule sets might work in high level (moneyed) competitive play.

Author Keywords

rules, professional gaming, negotiation

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