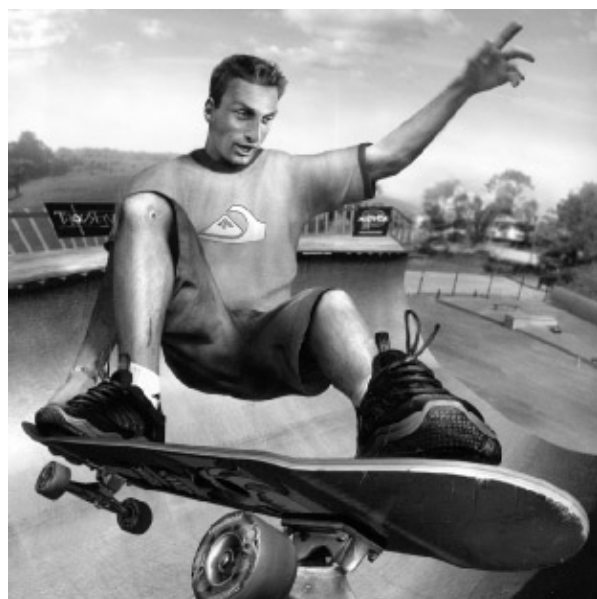


Chapter 21: Breaking the Rules



[The rules that players verbalize] are an idealized set of rules-they are the rules by which people should play rather than the ones by which they do play....we may have to know two sets of rules: the ideal ones and those by which the ideal rules are applied, misapplied, or subverted.-**Kenneth Goldstein**, "Strategies in Counting Out"

When you have to win, you're willing to break whatever rules you can if that would help you get closer to the goal. When you have to win, you're not concerned with fairness, feeling, the community, or even play. When you have to win you can't leave the game until you have finally, ultimately won.

What's amazing to me about all this is that the game itself doesn't change. The rules and the conventions are the same. But the manner of playing the game is completely different.-**Bernard DeKoven**, *The Well-Played Game*

Introducing Rule-Breaking

This schema opens with a pair of quotes from two thinkers we have heard from before. Folklorist Kenneth Goldstein first appeared in the schema on *Uncertainty*, where he looked at the ways that children subvert the ritual of counting-out through a number of subtle and devious strategies, such as adding an extra "eenie-meenie-minee-moe" in order to avoid becoming "it." We introduced Bernard DeKoven in the previous schema on *Conflict* as a leading figure in the New Games Movement.

Goldstein points out that although games have rules, they should be considered to have two sets of rules: the ideal rules of play and the actual rules of play, which sometimes misapply and subvert the ideal rules. DeKoven comes at the same set of issues from a different point of view. He points out that some players are so motivated to win that they disregard usual notions of fairness. What seems to intrigue DeKoven the most is that such opposing styles of play can occur alongside normal play within the same game structure.

Whether we are talking about ideal rules versus actual rules or honest players versus cheating players, both writers point to an important game phenomenon. So far in this book, we have described game players in an almost naïve way: we have assumed that every player is an earnest player, carefully and honestly playing by the rules. Although this does describe many game players, it is certainly not true of every single one. Take the children that Goldstein studied in his analysis of counting-out games. In manipulating rhymes in order to achieve certain desired results (*he* is going to be "It," not me!), what were these players actually doing? Were

they stretching and altering the rules of counting-out in order to win? Were they cheating at the game? Or were they simply playing the game very well? This final formal schema, *Breaking the Rules*, takes a direct look at how players bend, cheat, and break those carefully crafted systems of rules that we have so thoroughly investigated in the last several chapters.

In so many different ways, breaking the rules seems to be part of playing games. Whether it is trying to sneak in a foul while the referee isn't looking, altering a board game to play with a special set of "home rules," or making use of an ace of spades hidden up your sleeve, reconfiguring, breaking, and ignoring the rules seems to be an intrinsic part of games themselves. But what guides a player to break the rules? What is the effect of rule-breaking on game play? How does a game's design either encourage or discourage players from breaking the rules? Lastly, can rule-breaking be used as a creative strategy for game design? We investigate these questions in the following pages.

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Kinds of Rule-Breaking

Rule-bending and rule-breaking manipulate the structure of a game. To cheat or transgress in a game means to break the rules, to have a relationship to the formal system that is different than the relationship that the formal system itself presupposes and endorses. In considering the ways that game rules are broken, we can divide players into different player "types." Each type of player is defined by his or her relation to the formal systems of a game, along three related axes of behavior and attitude:

- The rule-breaking player's adherence to the rules
- The rule-breaking player's interest in winning
- The rule-breaking player's degree of lusory attitude

Player Types

The Standard Player: This player type is a "standard" and honest game player that plays the game as it was designed to be played, following the rules and respecting their authority.

The Dedicated Player: This close cousin of the standard player studies the formal systems of a game in order to master and perfect his or her play of the game, often finding and exploiting unusual strategies in order to win. *Examples: professional athletes, hardcore gamers.*

The Unsportsmanlike Player: This third type of player follows the rules of a game, but does so in a way that violates the spirit of the lusory attitude. *Examples: The older sibling that never lets the younger sibling win, or the baseball catcher that tries to distract the batter's concentration at the plate.*

The Cheat: The cheater, unlike the other kinds of game-players, actually violates the formal rules of the game, but does so in order to win the game. *Example: The hide-and-seek player that peeks while the other players are hiding.*

The Spoil-Sport: This kind of game player is hardly a player at all. Unlike the cheat, the spoil-sport refuses to acknowledge the magic circle of the game and does not care about winning or about following the rules. *Example: The frustrated Twister player that ruins a game by pushing over the other players.*

In the sections that follow, we describe each kind of player in more detail. But before moving on, it is important to recognize that these categories are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. The boundaries between

them are quite fuzzy, and often contextual. A player that is a dedicated hardcore gamer among gamer friends might be seen as an unsportsmanlike, overly competitive "power gamer" when playing a game with more casual players. Likewise, a player might shift between categories over time, or even within the course of a single game. Despite the fluid boundaries between them, however, these categories provide a useful typology for understanding the ways players stretch, bend, and break game rules.

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Standard Players

The *standard player* is the test case against which all other types of players are contrasted. The standard game player attempts to follow the rules as best he or she can, respecting their authority and honoring the limits they set. In terms of rules, goals, and possession of the lusory attitude, the standard player is a most law-abiding citizen.

Do most players fit this description? Actually, they do. The magic circle is fluid, but when most players play a game, especially a game with other players that can be seen face-to-face, they respect the rules and play the game from beginning to end. Why is face-to-face interaction important? A game is a kind of social contract. The presence of other players is important to maintaining the authority of the magic circle, because if a group of players are all obeying the rules, they implicitly police and enforce proper play. Why? Because if they have decided to invest the game with meaning in order to play, they all have a vested interest in maintaining the level playing field of conflict created by the rules. This does not mean that most players are mindless slaves to the rules of a game, but generally speaking, looking across all phenomena of games, players do follow the rules. If this were not the case, then cheating at games would be the rule and not the exception.

You may well disagree with our contention that most players do not break the rules. One could also take the position, for example, that cheating exists in all players, that the force of game-playing desire that drives a player to win contains the seeds of cheating. Cheating, in this view, would be an intrinsic aspect of game-playing, even if it did not always rise to the surface in the form of genuine rule-breaking. But whether the "standard player" is really the majority case or a fiction that doesn't exist in the real world, the notion of the "standard player" is still important. The *idea* that there is a standard player, a game player that earnestly follows the rules without trying to bend and break them, provides the backdrop against which less rule-governed styles of play can be understood.

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Dedicated Players

The next type of game player is the *dedicated player*. The dedicated player is really more of a special case of the standard player than a completely different player type. The dedicated player desires to become an expert at a game, and diligently studies the rules of play in an attempt to maximize the chances of winning. Whereas standard game players exhibit a desire to win and an interest in the rules of a game, dedicated players apply themselves to this task with a certain kind of zeal, to a degree that more casual players might not find enjoyable. If the game permits, dedicated players tend to practice their play, testing out strategies and perfecting their knowledge of the game.

A typical Las Vegas tourist who wants to enjoy Blackjack might play a few games here and there, browsing different casinos and tables, relying on intuition to guide him as he plays. A dedicated Blackjack player, on the other hand, won't merely play a few casual rounds of the game, but is likely to study a Blackjack "system" or two and implement it diligently in play, finding tables with advantageous rule variants, counting cards during play, and spending long hours at the Blackjack table in order to balance out his odds of winning. The difference between dedicated and standard players is a matter of degree, not kind.

Recall that the differences between types of players is drawn along three axes: their relationship to the lusory attitude, their respect for the authority of the rules, and their interest in attaining the goal of the game. Within each of these categories, dedicated players resemble standard players. But dedicated players have a deeper engagement with the game, a greater zeal for play. It is more important for dedicated players to win, and in order to do so, they will generally learn and master the rules of a game. At the same time, dedicated players tend to invest the magic circle with more authority, because of the value of their investment in the game as a whole. They possess extra amounts of the lusory attitude, relishing the inefficiencies of games as important challenges to overcome as proficiently as possible.

Who are dedicated players? Professional athletes and professional gamblers—those that make their living as game players. So are so-called "hardcore gamers," from grognard historical wargamers to deathmatch clan leaders with tricked-out custom

PCs. In general, dedicated players require more depth and complexity, a richer space of possibility in their games. This is why non-gamers often find the gaming fare of hardcore gamers bafflingly complex and unapproachable.

Dedicated players tend to play with a zeal that often puts off less dedicated players, who sometimes wonder if dedicated players are taking the game just a bit too seriously. The dedicated Blackjack player we described, who might spend most of a Las Vegas vacation at the Blackjack tables, might seem incomprehensible to the casual, standard player, who looks at games as a form of relaxation and leisure. A casual player does not wish to spend so many waking hours inside the magic circle of a game.

There is a very fuzzy line between dedicated game players and standard game players, and the difference is often contextual. Among your dedicated bowling buddies, you might fit in just fine as a standard player, scoffing at the league players that wear matching shirts and play the game "too seriously" to have fun. But when you end up in a game with a group of beginners who want to abandon a match in the middle to go see a movie, you might find yourself being accused of playing "too seriously" when you demand that they stay to the tenth frame and finish what they started.

As game designers, it is important to understand the range of player types that encounter your game, and the kinds of relationships they have to the rules, goals, and magic circle that your game delineates. Some games clearly appeal to both standard and dedicated players, such as Scrabble. Scrabble is often played as casual family fare, but it also supports an international tournament culture of hardcore players. Other kinds of games tend to attract one kind of player over another. The players that enjoy the low-pressure, exploratory pacing of *Myst* are generally not the same kind of dedicated player audience that would spend the many hours required to understand and master *Myth: The Fallen Lords*. There is a similar divide off the computer between players of party games such as *Pictionary* and fans of complex wargames and role-playing games.

The first two categories of game-players—standard and dedicated players—are not ultimately rule-breakers. They are "classical" game players, the kinds of players for whom designers usually design games, loyal functionaries of the rules. Like standard players, dedicated players are indeed rule-abiding. But as we'll see soon enough, even though they seem more invested in the magic circle of a game, their dedication takes them one step closer to actual rule-breaking.

Unsportsmanlike Players

The third type is the *unsportsmanlike player*. Unsportsmanlike players do anything they can to win. They try to find shortcuts to victory, exploiting the rigidity of the rules to locate holes that they can slip through to end up ahead. An unsportsmanlike boxer, for example, might constantly grab at the ropes or go into a clinch whenever the opponent advances aggressively. Note that the boxer stops short of actually violating the rules of the game. In fact, some might consider this approach a valid strategy for Boxing. But somehow, the unsportsmanlike boxer violates the spirit of the contest of Boxing, marring the purity of the battle between the athletic skills of the two players.

Unlike standard and dedicated players who generally engage openly with the "fun" quality of play, there is something negative about unsportsmanlike behavior. The unsportsmanlike player turns the special zeal of dedicated players into something that seems to run counter to the joyful nature of play and games. An unsportsmanlike player is not a cheat. The unsportsmanlike player does follow the rules of a game, but in a way that violates the spirit of the game. By attempting to shortcut the challenges of a game, the unsportsmanlike player refuses to surrender completely to the lusory attitude, in which the inefficiencies of play are readily accepted.

Unsportsmanlike behavior is a violation of the "unwritten" rules of a game, the *implicit rules* that are not actually written out, but are observed by all players. This is how the unsportsmanlike player "technically" avoids designation as a cheater, while still failing to completely respect the lusory attitude. One of the implicit rules of Tic-Tac-Toe we discussed in *Rules on Three Levels* is the implied time limit between turns. Even though the operational rules do not mention a time limit, the idea that a player must take a turn in a "reasonable" amount of time is an implicit rule of the game. Imagine an unsportsmanlike player that is about to lose a game of Tic-Tac-Toe, but refuses to take a turn. The player might state that he is "thinking" about his next move, and claim that because the rules do not state a time limit, he can take as long as he wants, even years, before he has to move. This kind of behavior, although not violating the operational rules, clearly violates the spirit of the game.

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Degenerate Strategies

Dedicated and unsportsmanlike players have particular ways of engaging with the system of a game. One common behavior these player types exhibit is to make use of *degenerate strategies* or *exploits*. We first encountered degenerate strategies in *Games as Game Theory Systems*. A degenerate strategy is a way of playing a game that takes advantage of a weakness in the game design, so that the play strategy guarantees success.

Degenerate strategies often appear in complex games, where the numerous permutations of play sometimes afford shortcuts in the space of possibility. For example, you are playing a real-time strategy game against the computer and you realize that the program's AI does not handle pathfinding well. (Pathfinding refers to the aspects of the program that plot navigational paths for the computer-controlled characters through obstacle-filled terrain.) Whenever the computer-controlled troops move around obstacles, they begin the march in formation but end up disorganized, with individual units trapped in irregularly shaped pockets of the terrain. It is not difficult for you, however, to make the small corrections necessary to keep your units together. If you decided to take advantage of this weakness by strategically leading the computer-controlled opponents into obstacle-filled parts of the map, you would be using a degenerate strategy.

Taking advantage of the game's weakness in this way would not exactly constitute cheating, but it does exploit the game's structure as a means of winning. Although games are not designed to be exploited by players, what makes a degenerate strategy degenerate is not just that it goes against the intentions of the designers. Using an exploit is a way of playing that violates the spirit of the game, similar to taking advantage of the implicit rule governing time between Tic-Tac-Toe turns.

Degenerate strategies appear in non-digital games as well. In early editions of Magic: The Gathering, certain card combinations were simply too powerful and could destroy a player on the first turn, before a match had a chance to develop. Wizards of the Coast, the publishers of the game, declared certain cards "officially" illegal, most notoriously the Black Lotus card, in order to keep this kind of play experience in check. In regulated tournament play, the outlawed cards were not used. But in more casual games, players continued to include them in their decks for years.

Why isn't using a degenerate strategy considered cheating? Degenerate strategies take advantage of weaknesses in the rules of a game, but do not actually violate the rules. What kind of player would play in this way? The answer is both a dedicated player, who is overzealously seeking the perfect strategy, and an unsportsmanlike player, who has found a hole in the rules to exploit, even though he understands that he is not playing the game the way it was intended. These two kinds of players can both make use of degenerate strategies, depending on the context.

The difference between a dedicated player and an unsportsmanlike player is the degree to which the player subscribes to the lusory attitude. Dedicated players follow rules on all levels. Unsportsmanlike players follow the operational rules, but they do not follow all of the implicit ones. Dedicated players loyally uphold the magic circle of a game, but unsportsmanlike players fail to do so, occasionally stepping just outside its borders in order to bend the rules.

Often, whether or not a degenerate strategy is a "proper" way to play depends on how the game experience is framed. When it was discovered that Pac-Man could be played by memorizing patterns of movement instead of through improvisational moment-to-moment tactics, player reaction fell into two camps. Some frowned on using memorized play patterns as a violation of the spirit of the game. Other players, however, capitalized on patterns in order to get higher scores. These pattern players did not consider themselves to be unsportsmanlike at all: they saw themselves as dedicated players who had simply found a better (and more demanding) way to play the game.

One more example: remember the hypothetical fighting game from our earlier investigation of degenerate strategies? The game could be beaten by using one technique over and over, rather than exploring the carefully orchestrated system of fighting moves created by the game's designers. It could be said that the player making use of this degenerate strategy is behaving in an unsportsmanlike manner, improperly playing the game, sacrificing "fun" in exchange for a shortcut to victory. It could also be said, however, that the exploit was being used by a dedicated player who had "solved" the fighting game like a puzzle. As with the Pac-Man pattern players, instead of playing the game the way it was designed to be played, the dedicated player simply invented a new method of interaction. This is arguably an example of transformative play, an important game phenomena we will investigate in chapters to come.

Whether or not a particular degenerate strategy is considered proper is often contextual. For example, the use of the single-technique exploit to beat all of the computer opponents in our hypothetical fighting game might be admired by a group of players for its elegance. On the other hand, if the degenerate strategy were used against other human players, fighting bouts would devolve into uninteresting games, with both players relying on the one exploitable technique again and again. In this social context, the exploit would be frowned upon as unsportsmanlike behavior, a violation of the implicit rules and the enjoyable spirit of the game. The *meaning* of a game action, even if the action is the selection of a general strategy, is always influenced by the context in which it occurs. In a social context, the exploit unbalances the level playing field of conflict and shrinks the space of possibility to a very narrow range, threatening the meaningful play of the game.

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Degenerate Strategy Ecosystems

As a rule of thumb, you want to be on the lookout for degenerate strategies and keep them out of your game. The ability to win a game by playing in a singular way demonstrates a poor game design, a space of possibility with an unintended, limiting short-circuit. There is, however, an extremely fuzzy line between degenerate strategies and imaginative ways to play a game. There is something exciting about having players explore the space of possibility of your game, rooting around for new strategies and new ways to play. If the game is complex enough and the community of players is large enough, degenerate strategies that do emerge can be countered by new strategies created specifically to oppose the exploits. An ecosystem emerges from the community, in which different styles of play compete for dominance.

In real-time strategy (RTS) game player communities, for example, players constantly look for ways to get ahead on the rankings boards. Command and Conquer, like most RTS games, was intended to emphasize steady planning and gradual development. But over time a degenerate strategy evolved called the "tank rush." Instead of slowly building up forces, a player using the "tank rush" strategy could quickly create a group of tanks and wipe out his opponent's base camp in the early game, before his opponent had a chance to prepare his defenses. Although the tank rush degenerate strategy ruined the games of many players that desired a more typical long-term conflict, it also spawned new kinds of defensive strategies. The introduction of a degenerate strategy enlarged the overall space of possibility of the game.

Although some player communities are resourceful enough to create their own antidotes to degenerate strategies, it is often necessary for the designers to step in and correct the breach themselves, as in the case of Magic's Black Lotus card. With popular games, play strategies sometimes evolve in a way that necessitates a refinement of the formal structure, like a gardener pruning branches of a tree to improve the overall health of the plant. The process of degenerate strategy correction is ultimately part of the iterative process of game design. One game that has undergone constant refinement is professional Basketball in the U.S.

Over the last several decades, Basketball has undergone a number of rule changes. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, most of the action took place right under the basket, where the chance of scoring was greatest. Play was dominated by tall players that could control this space with the greater offensive and defensive capabilities their height provided. Two rules were introduced that shook up the play of the game and defused degenerate strategies that were beginning to crop up. The three-point line incentivized players to play away from the basket, daring them to risk a longer shot in order to gain an extra point. At the same time, the three-second rule, which kept offensive players from spending more than three seconds parked in the paint under the basket, helped unclog the scoring zone traffic jam. The end result of these two rules is that quick players who could weave into the zone and out from under the basket, perhaps darting back to the three-point line to take a shot, became more important than static, towering giants. The space of possibility of the game expanded to include not just more diverse strategies of play but more diverse physical types of players to implement them.

Basketball has plenty of other rules that have been modified over time as well, from the introduction of dribbling near the beginning of the century to the more recent innovation of the shot clock and the back-and-forth controversies over zone defense. In his essay "The Heresy of Zone Defense," cultural critic Dave Hickey eloquently addresses this process of rule iteration:

The "illegal-defense rule" which banned zone defenses, however, did more than save the game. It moved professional basketball into fluid complexity...leaving the college game with its zoned parcels of real estate behind. Initially, it was feared that this legislated man-to-man

defense would resolve competition in terms of "natural comparative advantage" (as an economist might call it), since if each player is matched up with a player on the other team, the player with the most height, bulk, speed, or quickness would seem to have a permanent advantage. But you don't have to guard the same man all the time; you can switch, and this permission has created the beautiful "match-up game" in which both teams run patterns, picks, and switches in order to create advantageous situations for the offense or the defense-to generate shifting interplay.^[1]

Degenerate strategies can lead to iterative design. It is beautiful to think of a game design as a design in process, which can grow and evolve over time, remaining fresh in response to changing needs and invented strategies. As the athletic abilities of players and the strategic acumen of coaches tested the limits of the system, the rules of Basketball were refined. Changes in rules maintained the tautness of the space of possibility while allowing players to move freely within it. Even today, regular changes in the rules continue to keep the game fresh. The act of rule-modification itself-by game designers, players, or administrative bodies-is an important kind of game design which will be addressed further in the pages to come.

^[1]Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Los Angeles: Foundation for Advanced Critical Studies, 1997), p. 160-1.

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Cheats and Spoil-Sports

*The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a "spoil-sport." The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle...the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others.- Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens**

The final two categories of players are the cheater and the spoil-sport. Up to this point, we have had to look very carefully at the players' behavior to decide whether or not they are violating the formal system of the game and are actually breaking the rules. With these final two categories of players, things become more explicit.

What defines the *cheating player*? The cheater breaks rules. Unlike the unsportsmanlike player, who merely violates the implicit, unspoken rules of a game, the cheater transgresses the operational rules, the actual rules of play. The cheater is the player that secretly moves a piece when her opponent looks away from the board, the player that steals Monopoly money from the bank and hides it for future use, the player that uses a non-regulation golf ball in a tournament in order to gain a little more distance. The cheater surreptitiously takes actions that are not proscribed by the rules, in order to gain an advantage.

Does cheating destroy a game? The unexpected paradox of cheating is that, as Huizinga points out, the cheater is still in some way playing the game. The cheater breaks rules, but only to further the act of winning. So while the cheater sheds enough of the lusory attitude to disrespect the authority of the rules, the cheater still has faith in the sanctioned conflict of the game: being the victor still has meaning to the cheater. This may seem like bizarre behavior. What is the point of hanging onto the authority of the quantifiable outcome when the proscribed steps for getting there are thrown out the window?

It turns out that the cheater is only one step removed from the dedicated player. It is possible to sympathize with a cheat, for he or she too has a passion for winning. A cheater craves winning, but too much, committing crimes in order to attain the object of desire. Of course, the motivations for cheating are many. Cheating might grow from a desire to beat the game system itself, to show up other players, or to reap rewards of glory external to the game. But no matter what the psychological motivation for cheating, all cheating behavior shares a particular set of formal relationships to rules, goals, and the magic circle.

The *spoil-sport* is the category of player furthest from the standard player. As game designer Mark Prensky explains, "What spoils a game is not so much the cheater who accepts the rules but doesn't play by them (we can deal with him or her), but the nihilist who denies them altogether."^[2] The cheater breaks the rules but remains within the space of play. The spoil-sport is more destructive, refusing to acknowledge the game altogether. The spoil-sport is the frustrated player that knocks all of the pieces off the Chess board, the player that reveals the hidden information of Charades, the player that answers when it isn't his turn, the player that hacks into the game database to erase all of the player records. The cheater is a conniving actor, a spy within the magic circle, carefully pretending to obey all of its regulations even as he breaks them. But the spoil-sport has no such compunction. His destruction of the game does not require concealment, because the rule structure that would condemn his action as illegal is exactly the authority the spoilsport wishes to undermine.

When a set of Chess pieces are placed in their proper positions on the board and a game begins, the pieces gain meaning. But if, during a game, the action of a spoil-sport wipes the Chess pieces from the board, meaning is violently erased. Removed from their grid positions, the Chess pieces merely represent a collection of scattered figurines. The spoil-sport returns the game to its pre-game state as a collection of parts, no longer the embodiment of the space of possibility set out by the rules of the game.

The spoil-sport, more than any other kind of player, demonstrates the fragility of the magic circle. Not bound by a faith in the game, an interest in the lusory attitude, a respect for the rules, or even a concern for the outcome, the spoil-sport is the representative of the world outside the game. Armed with a powerful lack of belief, the spoil-sport has no qualms about ruining the play of others. The cheat may hack into a multi-player deathmatch to up his ping time and secretly improve his play performance. But the spoil-sport will unleash a virus that brings the game servers to a halt, making play impossible for all players.

^[2]Marc Prensky, *Digital Game-Based Learning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 119.

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Five Player Types Compared

On the following page is table that summarizes the five kinds of players discussed in this schema. Several fascinating patterns arise when we compare player types in this way. The slippery slope between the dedicated player and the cheat becomes particularly clear. An enthusiasm for playing a game can quickly become a zealous winning-for-its-own-sake, which can lead to unsportsmanlike behavior and outright cheating. In their shared investment in the outcome of the game, players and cheaters have a great deal in common.

	Degree of lusory attitude	Relationship to rules	Interest in winning
Standard Player	Possesses lusory attitude	Acknowledges authority of rules	Typical interest in winning
Dedicated Player	Extra-zealous lusory attitude	Special interest in mastering rules	Intense interest in winning
Unsportsmanlike Player			Intense interest in winning

	Sometimes resembles the Dedicated player, sometimes resembles the Cheat	Adherence to operational rules, but violates implicit rules	
Cheat	Pretends to possess lusory attitude	Violates operational rules in secret	Intense interest in winning
Spoil-Sport	No pretense about lack of lusory attitude	No interest in adhering to rules	No interest in winning

It is sometimes difficult to identify exactly when an instance of cheating is a true transgression of the magic circle or merely part of the play of a game. Is hacking into an online server to inflate a high score on a public ranking board cheating? The transgression is not taking place within the magic circle of a particular game, but it certainly demonstrates an overly serious interest in the act of winning. How about fouls in sports? And what about games that encourage rule-breaking as part of their play? Where do they fit into our understanding of formal transgressions? We end this chapter by looking at a series of games that incorporate rule-breaking into the game design itself.

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Sanctioned Violations: Professional Sports

In most games, rule violations threaten to destroy the magic circle. However, there is one category of game in which rule-breaking by players and punishments for violations of the rules are an important part of the overall game structure: professional sports. Double-dribbling in Basketball, icing in Hockey, using hands in Soccer-these are all rule-violations, but they are violations that are punished within the game itself, in ways that let the play continue. It is expected, and even anticipated that these kinds of events will occur in a sports game. It would be extremely unusual for an entire Basketball game to occur without a single foul being committed.

What is interesting about the way that sports handle rule-breaking is that there is always a sliding scale of severity for different rule violations, and often extra punishment for repeated offenses, as when a basketball player "fouls out" and cannot play in a game after committing six personal fouls. A single foul might be the result of an "honest mistake" and is therefore treated somewhat lightly. Six fouls, on the other hand, creates a pattern of rule-breaking behavior, and the player is ejected from the magic circle entirely. Sports referees, as extensions of the formal system of a game, have authority to decide when violations occur and how to interpret the rules to mete out punishment. For example, referees generally have the authority to throw players and coaches out of games if their behavior becomes too extreme.

When rule-breaking becomes sanctioned, as it is in sports, a whole new layer of implicit rules enters into the space of play. Whereas it is considered aggressive play (and a foul) to elbow an opponent on a Basketball court, it is truly bad sportsmanship to punch that same opponent in the face. As rule-breaking is integrated into a game, it is incorporated into the space of possibility. Depending on the particular game, players may strategically transgress rules, accepting a short-term punishment for a long-term strategic or psychological advantage.

This intentional brokering of rule-breaking can be quite complex. In Basketball, the players can attempt to "draw fouls" from opponents. This risky practice can result in the player who is attempting to draw a foul committing a foul himself. Players who charge the basket on offense hoping to be fouled on their way to the hoop are often called for "charging," an offensive foul that results in the loss of the ball for the offensive team.

In professional sports, the complex system of violations and punishments within a game is also reflected in the professional legislative bodies which can sanction penalties for larger violations. Outside the scope of an individual game, these organizations govern more serious offenses. If a professional athlete is found to be fixing games or is convicted of a criminal act, he can be banned from the sport for life by the game's professional body.

Why is there so much attention to breaking the rules in sports, particularly professional sports? One answer is the nature of athletic game play. On a Chess grid, there is little or no ambiguity about which square a piece occupies; a Chess player will not gain an advantage by having a little corner of his Rook peek into an adjacent square. But in the infinitely granular space of the real world, milliseconds and millimeters can mean the difference between winning and losing. The runner does not want to start running before the starting gun fires, but springing forward as close to that moment as humanly possible will certainly offer an advantage. As a result, many false starts occur in races. Most sports fouls are motivated by an attempt to maximize an offensive or defensive advantage.

In looking for a motivation behind the prominence of rule-breaking in sports, we must also acknowledge the economic component of the games. A great deal of capital is connected to professional sports, from player salaries to ticket sales to network advertising. When the external stakes of a game are high, it is especially important to maintain and enforce the level playing field of conflict. The premise of a professional sport, even more than with most games, is that it is being played fairly. This emphasis on fairness extends naturally to its opposite: an emphasis on breaking the rules.

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Sanctioned Cheating: Illuminati

For a different approach to the integration of rule-breaking into a game, we turn to Illuminati, a humorous strategic tabletop game based on the *Illuminatus* books by Robert Anton Wilson. In the game, players take on the role of all-powerful Illuminati, the shadowy power brokers pulling the strings behind world governments. The original edition of Illuminati contained an optional set of rules for cheating:

Cheating:

Some fiendish people think Illuminati is even more fun when nothing, not even the bank, is sacred. In this variant of the game, most forms of cheating are permitted.

Exceptions:

- You may not tip over the table or disarrange opposing power structures.
- You may not bring in counterfeit money or money from other sets.
- You may not cheat on the amount of money drawn from the bank during setup or the income phase (this would slow things down too much).
- Anything else goes. Anyone caught in the act must undo that cheat. There is no other penalty.

Suggested methods for cheating include:

- Accidentally misread the dice.
- Steal from the bank (other than during the income phase).
- Lie about the amount of power or resistance your groups have.
- Stack the deck or peek ahead.
- If anyone leaves the table, anything goes!

- We recommend you play the cheating game only with very good friends or with people you will never see again.^[3]

These "rules" for cheating in *Illuminati* provide a fascinating example of the relationship between rule-following and rule-breaking. Normally, cheating is considered something that runs counter to the spirit of the game rules. But in *Illuminati*, the sanctioned formal system of the game actually contains rules for cheating.

Illuminati's rules for cheating are different than rule-breaking in professional sports. In sports rule violations, most fouls are committed by players performing as close as possible to the limits of what the rules allow. In the real-world context of athletic performance, sometimes players miscalculate and end up breaking a rule. But in *Illuminati*, the suggested modes of cheating focus explicitly on player deception. The rules above directly suggest out-and-out, down-and-dirty cheating. The rules are not descriptions of penalties for fouls: they are proscriptions for different ways to cheat! In fact, there is no explicit penalty for being caught cheating, other than undoing the effect of the cheat.

Sanctioned cheating can easily destroy a game. Are *Illuminati*'s "cheating rules" a recipe for anarchy, or are they a well-designed extension of the rest of the rulebook? It seems like a contradiction that the rules themselves contain suggestions for transgressive play. But a close look at the rules reveals the care taken in crafting this section of *Illuminati*'s formal structure.

Illuminati places numerous formal restrictions on the scope of possible cheating. Forbidding players from tipping over the table (a classic spoil-sport action) lets players know that they cannot completely disrupt the game for the other players. Keeping players from inflating their income ensures that the game will not get too bogged down in mathematical squabbling. Permitted cheating focuses on keeping the rule-breaking play constrained, so that things do not swing too wildly outside the magic circle. For example, the rule that keeps players from smuggling money in from other sets of the game performs a number of regulatory functions. It keeps the designed economy of the game intact, while not letting players with "outside" resources (such as their own copy of the game) from gaining an unfair advantage. The result is that even with cheating, the game is contained within the magic circle, so that all of the players have an equal chance of being skillful cheats. The magic circle is such a strong focus of the cheating rules that when a player actually leaves the physical space of the game by getting up from the table, the rules state that "anything goes." Players are clearly discouraged from exiting a game in progress.

In addition to formal restrictions, the cheating rules go so far as to shape the lusory attitude of the players that might want to use them. The statements that begin and end the cheating rules place it within a particular context. The opening statement, which implies that only "fiendish" players would play this game variation, and the suggestions at the end, which imply that only good friends or near-strangers play this version of the game, are revealing. By removing the artificial nature of the game conflict, cheating can destroy the implicit camaraderie of the magic circle, letting its conflict leak out to infect the real-world relationships of players. Only friendships strong enough to weather such an experience or more disposable relationships in which further contact is not desired are appropriate.

The very notion that the rules could sanction cheating is a bit outrageous, but it ultimately fits the spirit of the game and its narrative world quite well. *Illuminati* is a parodic game about hidden organizations that rule the world, where the players are secret power brokers manipulating governments, media, and culture to their own devious ends. Seen in this light, the idea that the rules themselves are also subject to manipulation fits within the overall narrative trajectory of the game. Rule-break-ing is a way of expressing the humorous critique of power that *Illuminati* the game embodies.

In the right context, sanctioned cheating can be an innovative way to enrich a game design. But it must be done with great care. Beneath the light-hearted tone of *Illuminati*'s rules is a careful design allowing only those forms of cheating that leave the game intact, playable, and meaningful. Cheating in *Illuminati* does not remove all rules and boundaries from the game: it serves to re-draw them. Although the new boundaries might

be drawn in lines that are considerably more fuzzy, a clear formal system remains. Even cheating is something that can be intentionally designed to facilitate meaningful play.

[3]*Illuminati: The Game of Conspiracy*, Fourth Edition (Austin: Steve Jackson Games, 1991), p. 9–10.

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Hacks, Cheats, and Mods: Digital Rule-Breaking

When it comes to forms of rule-breaking incorporated into the design and experience of games, computer and video games offer a cornucopia of examples. Following are some sample instances of digital game rule-breaking, ranging from the timidly transgressive to the truly unlawful.

Easter Eggs

Easter eggs are secrets hidden in a game that players can discover. The first Easter egg was created by game designer and programmer Warren Robinett for the Atari 2600 game *Adventure*. In defiance of Atari's refusal to give credit to the creators of their games, Robinett programmed a secret room that could only be found with great difficulty. When players reached it, his initials were displayed. Hidden messages, images, and spaces are now a standard feature of digital gaming. In a mild kind of way, Easter eggs break a game's rules because they violate the otherwise internally consistent world of a game. Part of the pleasure of finding an Easter egg is a sense of transgressive discovery: by bending the rules of the game in just the right way, the player gets to see or experience something that more lawful players would not.

Cheat Codes

Although Easter eggs usually do not impact the strategic play of a game, cheat codes do. Like Easter eggs, developers design cheat codes into a game. Some of the best-known instances of cheat codes come from the first-person shooter *DOOM*, where a player can type special key combinations to gain weapons, health, and invulnerability. Sometimes a cheat code is a leftover tool from the game's development process, but often they are added just for the benefit of players. Although the name "cheat code" implies that these shortcuts to power are rule infringements, cheat codes frequently appear in game magazines and on official game websites, making them a form of officially sanctioned "cheating." The result is a rich culture of insider game knowledge, with fans scouring magazines and websites for the latest, coolest cheats.

Game Guides and Walkthroughs

Related to cheat codes are the sources of information that players turn to for help with a difficult or lengthy game. These resources appear on the web and in print, and range from elaborate color maps and strategy guides to fan-generated text files that cover every conceivable aspect of a game. Game walkthroughs are step-by-step instructions for finishing a game, particularly useful to players of adventure games and role-playing games that have a more linear structure. Some players view these resources as unfair techniques that breach the spirit of a game. At the same time, walkthroughs have raised the bar of difficulty and complexity in certain game genres. Many digital games are so challenging that they seem designed to require a guide.

Workarounds

The complexity of digital games often makes it impossible for designers to test or anticipate every possible permutation of play before releasing a title to the public. Furthermore, players are infinitely creative in finding ways of "legally" working around game structures. In "The Future of Game Design," Harvey Smith writes about how players discovered new ways to play *Deus Ex*. For example, the proximity mine object is an explosive device that can be "stuck" onto walls in the game space. After the game's release, players realized something that the game's developers did not anticipate. Exploiting the game's physics and interactivity, players learned to climb up on proximity mines, and using (or misusing) a series of these objects like a ladder, they could ascend the game's vertical surfaces, ruining many of the carefully designed levels. Workarounds are on the borderline between dedicated play and unsportsmanlike play, and include degenerate strategies. Is it cheating to purchase game power by buying an EverQuest character on eBay, or is it simply a workaround that converts labor to capital?

True Cheating

In addition to fuzzier types of "cheating" behavior, there is plenty of bona fide cheating in digital games. More than clever workarounds or sanctioned cheat codes, true cheating breaks the rules of the game. In a multiplayer environment, guidelines for what constitutes cheating are generally made known to all players; cheaters are usually removed immediately and permanently from a game. In *SiSSyFiGHT 2000*, the most common form of cheating is multi-sessioning, in which a single player opens up two game windows on two different computers, playing two characters at once and gaining very strong play advantages. Although it is difficult to spot, multi-sessioning is outlawed in the game, and there are vigilante fan websites devoted to maintaining lists of known game cheaters.

Hacks

Hacking into a digital game goes beyond simply breaking the rules—it does so through intervention at the level of code. A player might hack a high score list, for example, to place her name at the top. Or she might modify the code of a first-person shooter to gain an unfair advantage in a deathmatch. If too many players hack a game, all sense of fairness can be destroyed. Therefore, the administrators of commercial multiplayer games put great effort into eliminating cheating and hacks from their games. According to massively multiplayer online game designer Ralph Koster, tracking down cheaters and hackers can occupy approximately half of all of the resources spent on maintaining and improving an online game.

Spoil-Sport Hacking

Most hacking is done in the spirit of the cheat: players want to do well in a game and do not mind breaking the rules in order to get ahead. Occasionally, game hackers can take the role of a spoil-sport as well, bringing down an entire game or game network. In this case, the aim is to dispel the magic circle for all players involved, not to better one's own performance.

Why are digital games so fertile a ground for these varieties of rule-breaking? First and foremost, code is a plastic and pliable medium. The complex processes that give digital games their uniquely automated quality leave gaps for hacking into the system, whether it is through officially distributed cheat codes, clever workarounds, or genuine code-breaking. The anonymous nature of digital game play, where computers and networks mediate players, encourages rule-breaking as well. The reduced physical presence of other players permits a greater sense of social autonomy, which can facilitate the surreptitious activities of rule-breaking. Lastly, digital games are pop culture with a rich fan base: game fans deconstruct and reconstruct the codes and structures of the works that interest them. Cheating and hacking in this sense is similar to the ways that *Star Trek* fans re-mix the narrative universe of the television show to invent new stories and characters.

The blessing and curse of digital gaming media is that they provide a pliable space in which to play. With so

many ways to gently bend and forcefully break the rules of a game, in playing a computer or video game players must decide what constitutes proper game behavior, navigating the space of possible rule violations. Is it acceptable to download a walkthrough guide? Do you use cheat codes to short-circuit your way through tough game levels? If you were offered a cracked version of the game that let you cheat, would you use it? As a digital game designer, you need to decide what kinds of rule-breaking you want to engender and what kinds you want to outlaw. Can you foster fan communities by offering sanctioned ways to violate the game without letting things get out of hand altogether? Ethics and game design collide in this rich space of rule-breaking possibility.

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Rule-Breaking as a Game Design Practice

Our discussion of rule-breaking is not just an explication of the ways in which players break the rules of a game. It is a game design schema, a way of looking at *all* games that offers a framework for solving particular game design problems. However, it is a different kind of chapter than the other formal schema we encountered in our investigation of RULES. Framing games as systems of rule-breaking questions many of the unspoken assumptions of earlier schemas. We did not, in considering games as emergent systems, information, or cybernetic feedback loops, ever consider that players might disrespect or transgress the authority of the rules and the magic circle.

Player behavior is not universally law-abiding. Given any particular game, there are many ways to play it and many ways to bend and break its rules. For game designers, this means that you should never take players' behavior for granted. You need to assume that your game will be played not just by earnest rule-followers, but by zealously dedicated players, inappropriately unsportsmanlike players, brilliantly secretive cheaters, and uncaringly nihilistic spoil-sports. Some of these player types can help expand your game's space of possibility, whereas others can wreck the game for everyone involved. How do you take these possibilities into account in your game design? As always, there is no single solution. But framing your game as a system of rule-breaking lets you formulate your own answers.

There is yet another way to frame rule-breaking: as an attitude toward playing and designing games. We have seen a number of examples of how rule-breaking can enhance meaningful play. In professional sports, digital games, and in the cheating variant of *Illuminati*, breaking rules is part of the game itself. In all of these cases, through rule-breaking the space of possibility fills with alternative modes of play. What is the lesson here? Perhaps it suggests a shift in the way that we think about game design. In *The Well-Played Game*, Bernard DeKoven advocates a fundamental adjustment in players' attitudes towards the rules of a game:

You're not changing the game for the sake of changing it. You're changing it for the sake of finding a game that works.

Once this freedom is established, once we have established why we want to change a game and how we go about it, a remarkable thing happens to us: We become the authorities.

No matter what game we create, no matter how well we are able to play it, it is our game, and we can change it when we need to. We don't need permission or approval from anyone outside our community. We play our games as we see fit. Which means that now we have at our disposal the means whereby we can always fit the game to the way we want to play.

This is an incredible freedom, a freedom that does more than any game can, a freedom with which we nurture the play community. The search for the well-played game is what holds the

community together. But the freedom to change the game is what gives the community its power. ^[4]

Rather than obeying game rules as an ultimate authority, DeKoven would like players to assume authority over the rules. Once they feel confident and in control of the rules, players can break them and modify them in the course of playing a game. They do so not out of a mischievous desire to disrupt the authority of the rules, but out of a directed attempt to create a deeper experience of play. This beautiful vision for games does not describe the way that most people normally play. However, there is one type of game player that already has this attitude: game designers. Game designers, particularly those that design through an iterative process, already possess a methodology in which playing a game means breaking, tweaking, and modifying rules. In a sense, DeKoven is advocating that game players become more like game designers.

How are game designers rule-breakers? Being a game designer means that you are constantly testing the limits of a game you are creating. Which aspects of the rules are working and which are not? Do you need to add a feedback loop, or modify the amount of randomness in the game? Are players being faced with meaningful decisions at every moment? The best way to answer these game design questions is by changing the rules of your game, trying out new variations, and seeing what happens.

Of course, DeKoven's vision for dethroning the authority of a game extends beyond just professional game designers. He would like to see all game players adopt this attitude toward play. What would it mean if all players felt free to break the rules of a game, to play not just inside the space of a game, but to modify and change the shape of that space itself? One answer to this important question is that it would require a fundamental alteration in the attitudes of game players and game designers. If players regularly break the rules, are they really rules at all? If players no longer stay inside the magic circle, are they really playing a game? Making this shift might be liberating, but it would certainly change the way we conceive games, game play, and game design.

Yet another answer to DeKoven's challenge is that perhaps the phenomenon he describes already exists. Perhaps all players already play, not just inside the frame of a game, but with the frame of a game itself. If this is indeed the case, then all the varieties of rule-breaking players, from dedicated and unsportsmanlike players to cheaters and spoil-sports, are natural extensions of the flexibility of game structures. Rule-breaking is simply one of the ways that we play.

Lastly, rule-breaking can be considered not just a way to play or design games, but a more general attitude about game design itself. If the conventions and genres of game design are the rules by which most designers "play," then the innovators are those designers that manage to break the rules. Games hold great promise, but only if we are bold enough to truly break the rules of our field. This is harder than it seems. We know that to skillfully break rules requires an intimate knowledge of the rules themselves. And our hope is that this book provides some of those "rules of play"—rules that you will mercilessly and playfully violate in order to expand the space of game design's possibilities.

With this chapter, we finish our first Primary Schema. In **RULES**, we consciously limited our gaze to the strictly formal boundaries of the magic circle, generally ignoring the player experience and the larger contexts in which a game takes place. But as we move forward, we will slowly widen the scope of our investigation, as we include those aspects of games that have been left out. How stable is the authority of a game's rules? How permeable is the boundary of the magic circle? How is it possible to not just play a game but play with the very structures of gaming? We directly address these questions and many more in the **PLAY** and **CULTURE** schemas to come.

^[4]Bernard DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game* (New York: Doubleday, 1978)

Further Reading

Grasshopper: Games, Life, by Bernard Suits (see [page 98](#))

Recommended:

Chapter 4: Triflers, Cheats, and Spoilsports

The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy, by Bernard DeKoven (see [page 21](#))

Recommended:

Chapter 2: Guidelines

Chapter 3: The Play Community

Chapter 5: Changing the Game

Summary

- Breaking the rules is a phenomenon that occurs in almost every kind of game.
- Relative to rule-breaking, there are **five player types**. Each type of player has a particular relationship to the following aspects of a game:
 - ◆ adherence to the rules
 - ◆ interest in winning
 - ◆ degree of lusory attitude
- The **standard player** is the typical rule-following player that obeys the restrictions of the game and possesses the lusory attitude. Even if the standard player is a theoretical fiction, it is important to acknowledge this player position, which stands in contrast to the other four types.
- A **dedicated player** is similar to the standard player but has an extra zealotry toward succeeding at a game. The dedicated player follows the rules, is interested in winning, and possesses the lusory attitude.
- **Unsportsmanlike players** violate the implicit rules of a game without actually breaking operational rules. Their strong interest in winning gives them license to violate rules of etiquette and proper game behavior.
- **Cheaters** break operational rules of a game in order to win. Cheating players thus possess a strong interest in winning, but will forgo the normal means of achieving victory. Acknowledging that other players can invoke the authority of the rules, cheaters break rules secretly.
- A **spoil-sport** is a player that refuses to acknowledge the authority of a game in any way. These nihilistic players do not hesitate to destroy the magic circle of a game.
- The five player types are not always distinct. During a single game, a player can move from one category to another. The same behavior in different contexts can fall into different player categories.

- A **degenerate strategy** or **exploit** is a way of playing a game that ensures victory every time. Dedicated players and unsportsmanlike players make use of degenerate strategies. In general, degenerate strategies are detrimental to a game. However, within a community of players, degenerate strategies can sometimes act to expand the space of possibility.
- There are many examples of the integration of rule-breaking into game design and player experience, including professional sports, digital games, and games that sanction cheating such as Illuminati.
- Game designers need to recognize that rule-breaking is a common phenomenon in gaming and incorporate it into their game design thinking. One solution, which comes from the New Games Movement, is to empower players to be more like game designers by creating games with rules that are meant to be broken and modified.

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