

Some New Rules of the Game

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Like many current and emergent technologies, video games begin with intended modes of play and interaction, but players may not play so nicely with those intentions. Tensions arise between developers and intended users and their forms of play shift as these groups interface. One phenomenon that has become popular in video games is a form of play called “speedrunning” in which players attempt to beat the game as quickly as possible, contrary to intended forms of play. Novel in this practice is that the way the game is played may not respect the rules of the game, or, as speedrunning communities refer to them, the “developer-intended” ways to play (e.g., according to the instructional manuals provided). While speedrunning brings these modes of play to the surface, they do not necessarily originate from this practice. For example, since the earliest eras of video games, cheat codes and strategies shared among players have served a similar function. This essay rethinks some popularly accepted understandings of video games, game logics, and notions of play that surround them, offering a historiographical reflection on games and examining the relationship between user and developer across several media examples.

Speedrunning shifts the objective of play altogether and invites us to question the ways video games are played. The fastest ways to beat a game are through glitches or hacks that allow players to abuse less solidly constructed parts of a game’s code or even write code directly into the game through the controller interface and perform various exploits. Much like in *The Matrix* (dir. Lily and Lana Wachowski, US, 1999) this can include occurrences such as flight, running through walls, skipping levels, or even

entire games, even when an avatar would not be expected to act in such a way. For some, the forms of play that emerge in speedrunning may even fall outside of any notions of play. Yet, the game is interacted with, and a player still interfaces with it. Speedrunning might be read as rewriting the rules, and, further, creating new games or virtual worlds entirely different from the original while maintaining a guise of originality. In an iconic scene in *The Matrix*, where Neo first performs bullet-time, a similar relationship is described in Trinity's dialogue: "You move like them. How do you do that?" The diegesis of the film takes place in a future where technological innovation has developed beyond human control. Human existence exists in cyborgian forms, and the logics of gaming and code; having escaped their virtual and technological containers and into human reality, it becomes unclear just who is it that controls sovereign logics, machine or human. Furthermore, it becomes difficult to distinguish human from machine and vice versa. In the play for dominant subjectivity in this world it becomes increasingly less clear who is playing the role of whom; subsequently, the boundaries between who it is that plays and who creates the rules of play becomes ever more blurred. Speedrunning and comparable practices prompt an exploration of new and emergent video game logics that shift classical video gaming logic. Do these new rules of video games entail new possibilities for agency or subjecthood?

There is an interesting tension between virtual possibility and the Lacanian real that can be understood via the logic of speedrunning and the notion of developer-intended play. The developer-intended way of playing games is established as a formal logic of the virtual game world. A game establishes this logic in several ways. First, in classical video games, players may open an instruction manual to familiarize themselves with button mapping, possibilities of action, and the basic aims of the game. Second, with the decline of printed manuals in contemporary video games, is the introductory tutorial sequence of games. These tutorial sequences tend to be instructive and provide simple scenarios for players to learn the basic modes of interaction of the player and avatar and to immerse themselves into the game's virtual world. They might start *en medias res* or from a black screen with the character waking from a dreamlike state, but they all begin with an alignment of players' subjectivity with their avatars in a manner not unlike the Lacanian mirror stage in which infantile beings recognize their limits of being in the world against various obstacles and governing entities. In this way, the "conventional narrative logic and video game rules" described by Warren Buckland become one and the same, perhaps a classical video game

rule according to the developer-intended way of playing the game.¹ Digital systems might have “higher levels of organization and greater semiotic freedom,” as Buckland argues, but there are limits to freedoms imposed by developer-intended logics of games.² In a corollary to more traditional media representations, we might say that in watching a film, like in gameplay, audiences are relatively free to interpret its outcome. Despite all this apparent semiotic freedom, directors may nonetheless make statements dictating such interpretations, or rather what the director believes they should be: a “director-intended” reading. With *Donnie Darko* (US, 2001), for example, director Richard Kelly has released various addenda that indicate certain ways the film should be read. Similarly, the developer-intended construction insists upon ways that games should be played: using the provided mechanics and interfaces, going from point *A* to point *B*, and reaching the game’s intended conclusion. This video game logic is modular in both the extent which the developers allow and which the players can circumnavigate. However, this modularity is challenged by the tension between modes of developer-intended play and actual modes of play that emerge in players’ interactions with the game. That is, even when a game or film may be produced and released as a contained object with set rules and objectives, its production never totally escapes the deviations made from its various conceptual forms, nor can it ever be in total alignment with any sense of its original concept; as already-published media, they may not be free from further modulation even as they are in the moment of being played; while they are described as having a contained diegesis those worlds bleed and spill into alternative realms while always evoking those prior ones in its eclipse.

The proliferation and exploitation of glitches and hacks present challenges to the idea of developer-intended video game logics, since glitch or hack is employed to change the rules of the game and potentially the internal codes that inform games’ causal logics and virtual structures as well. Glitches and hacks may involve increased power, invincibility, or access to unlimited resources that developer logics tend to limit. However, many of these features that once would have been considered glitches or hacks (e.g., super speed, bullet-time, or rewinding time) are increasingly prevalent as normative features in video games without exploiting glitches. Even altered physics—the inversion gravity or entire worlds for example—are becoming common gaming features. So, we can see how the glitch or the hack have become normative parts of video game logics, requiring expanded understanding of video game logics. Even in games where glitches are

disguised as developer-intended powers or interfaces, glitches' rule-breaking potential persists beyond developers' grasps, taking on existences as abject powers. Beyond merely reconfiguring existing rules, they present potential for creating new rules, interfaces, spaces, and even worlds within the game itself. For example, when developers grant the power to rewind time it is often limited (e.g., *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*). Yet, through player-developed gaming interfaces players can create "save states": temporary game states conjured at any moment thereby surpassing developer-intended limits. This "save state" is unlike the normative way a player would save their game; many of the more classical type of game would not even have a save feature, as they were designed for arcades and to increase the input of players coins for credits to play rather than the play itself; in games that would have save features, the save point holds some spatial and narrative implications for the game; typically some sort of hurdle or objective would first need to be accomplished before the player could access a save point. "Save states" sidestep this altogether with programs external to the game through which a player may perform an arbitrary input to create a total parallel state of the game. It can be returned to at any moment arbitrarily circumventing any notions of developer-intended play, space or time. Another classical example is warping. As early as the original *Super Mario Bros.* game, developers included warp points through which players could access new worlds, but only future worlds, never past worlds. These warps have served as developer-intended backdoors allowing for the play of incomplete games at points that may have had buggy code. Using warps, developers could test and implement code, ensuring that their game operated as intended. If it did not, they could repeatedly play and implement fixes until it did. Many of these backdoors are left in their games, sometimes due to developer laziness, but sometimes as a treat or "Easter egg" for the player. Even in these early examples where warps exist intentionally, glitches and hacks persist in novel forms, called "wrong warp" in some gaming vernaculars: "wrong" in that these phenomena refuse adherence to developer-intended logics and modes of play. For example, in the final level of the original *Mario Bros.* game, players might exploit glitches so that, upon entering warp pipes at specific pixel coordinates, they enter a world of remnant code that is not a part of the intended video game world. By traversing it, players and their avatars reach the end of the game, skipping large portions of intended gameplay. This glitch play manifests in even more extreme forms where, upon loading the game and entering a precise series of inputs, the code of the game is exploited so that a player warps immediately to the credits (i.e., finale) of the game, thereby beating the game while not

playing it. In a sense, “the interactive video game is . . . like the exploration of a narrative . . . thanks to a ‘world,’” as Thomas Elsaesser writes. Glitches still interface with that world, but they also allow players to move beyond that world into spaces neglected or unimagined by developer-intended logics.³ Glitches shift the game world away from the world-as-intended to world-sought-out. Rather than “the desire to attain mastery,” Buckland claims, there is perhaps another desire to exceed developer-intended limits of mastery, thereby challenging the developer-player relationship.⁴ It presents a new way of leveling up not intended for players to access. Beyond mastering a negotiation of being in only this world, this form of play keeps in tension abject realms that exist beyond the immediacy of our reach but whose invitation to play in it is irresistible.

Glitches and hacks appear in classical gaming and manifest as developer-intended interfaces of the video game world, but an interesting developer-player tension emerges in contemporary gaming in the practice of patching. “Patches,” the tech-industry term for updates to already released and seemingly totalized games, is a testament to the hyperscalability of the digital in terms of the rules intended to govern games. Like the director statements as addenda to filmic diegesis, since patches have become commonplace a player can never totally be sure if the game that they are purchasing and playing is the totalized complete version of it; while games may have the guise of totalized worlds and suggest that in play we interact with the totality of that world, the looming existence or threat of an incoming patch presents the always imminent total destruction of the world and its rules of play. Patches can be implemented for a variety of reasons. Generally, *patch* is a catch-all term: they can introduce new playable characters, levels, or general game improvements; they can adjust to characters’ power levels to maintain balance in the game; they might respond to “bugs” in the game, weak points in the code vulnerable to exploitation by players via hacks or glitches. Patches almost never contain only one of these things, but a multitude; they are almost never singular and may be followed up by any number of subsequent patches further altering the game and rules of play. The practice of patching indicates developer desires for the game to maintain a sense of balance, desires increasingly challenged by players’ use of tools that might have been unanticipated by developers during the game’s creation;⁵ a use of tools that gives players access to modes of play unimagined by developers. New here is the rapidity of developers’ response to players: rather than waiting until a sequel game’s development, developers can implement patches in as little time as a week, and can even “phantom” patch features

into or out of games overnight. Patching is an economic response to the "continuous self-modulation" of players described by Seung-Hoon Jeong.⁶ In the video game industry, he argues, this response presents a "new way of controlling—or forcing us to control—new cognitive-kinetic skills."⁷ It is a developer's assertion that "you can go wherever you like as long as I've been there before you," as Elsaesser writes.⁸ In other words, it is an assertion that suggests players return to the original codings of the player-developer relationship. The difference is that players have new tools that potentially exceed the terms by which developers control how their games should be played. Prior eras of video games might have had players totally subject to the rules of the game, inputting coin as prerequisites to inputs of gameplay, and having recourse to nothing but money as a way to interact with video game worlds. Patches continue this imposition of player subjecthood, as they demand continued purchase to play. but these new tools threaten developer-intended rules with the suggestion of a form of play that breaks boundaries never before imagined by player or developer. As such, patches present a negotiation of agency and play in player-developer antagonisms.

Patching is not entirely new nor is it exclusive to video games. There are already striking similarities to previous film examples discussed, and other forms of games are marked by patches presence as well. Patches have existed as early as the 1990s era of computing and gaming. For instance, patching is visible in Microsoft's yearly releases of new iterations of their Windows operating system from 1995 onwards. While these updates had some basic functions of patches, such as eliminating bugs and overall system improvements, they were also sometimes packaged as entirely new operating systems which demanded new purchases and installations. A feature that more closely fits my established framework of patching is the Windows Update system, which was first implemented to add free add-ons and upgrades to the current version of the Windows operating system, such that the current version seemed always already obsolete. However, a shift occurred as the new millennium approached and fears of the Y2K bug proliferated: Windows Update served a critical function ensuring users that their computers would not go offline or suffer fatally from the bug. Rather than supporting new features and add-ons to improve the operating system, here, a patch was implemented to prolong the system's life against the new agency of glitches or hacks.

Patching has appeared in card games such as the *Pokémon Trading Card Game*, *Magic the Gathering*, and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, mirroring this electronic or digital

response to hacks. In what are commonly called “trading card games,” players purchase and collect cards to assemble decks to play competitive games with other players in real life. In a sense, trading card players create their own contained game system and vie for superiority in competition against other players’ game systems. Like computers and video games, trading card game decks are coded numerically and systematically; a deck operates by developer-intended rules of play; each of these trading card game decks is created by players after numerous revisions and sorting through many cards, only for the best components for play. Yet, there are also combinations of cards that exist which produce combinations of effects outside of the view of developer-intended play—something always escapes the quality assurance engineering process. The life cycle of these analog games similarly contains a form of patch that responds to player agency and their attempts to find these gamebreaking combinations. These analog paper patches come in the form of new sets of cards, and new tools, which players can use to strengthen and alter their card system. These card sets share the mechanism of controlling the players’ interface with the exploitation of game mechanics in video games. This manipulation comes in two forms: first, a card’s quantity can be restricted to only single copies in a deck. Second, a card’s original text, its original rulings and functions, can also be subject to errata altering the code by which the card operates or acts; later reprints of cards may have certain words rewritten or rephrased, such that it operates according to different rules. All the while the original print of the card’s written text may never change, always maintaining its guise of originality even as its operative modes are drastically altered. These analog card game patches have a digital corollary in the respective series’ television, film, and video games productions. In the case of *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, the digital films and video games contains traces of the analog patches installed via the trading card game; likewise, the media that spawn from the analog card game, there might be new features hinted at in the animation, which are later implemented into the card game itself through patching card sets. The digital and the analog media here develop dialectically, never able to shake the trace off the other. Signaled in these practices is an escape of the player-developer antagonism outside of the digital world and into the realm of the analog, or an escape from the medium specificity of the digital and a diffusion into the symbolic coding of the outside world.

Digital and analog versions of patching have recently become commoditized versions themselves known as “downloadable content” (DLC), a new economic model for video gaming. The once free update now only offers new

services and add-ons to the game at a price. Though it has always had paid-for antecedents in the analog tradeable card game, as the patching model became more successful, it became locked behind DLC paywalls. The most contemporary model has developers releasing intentionally incomplete versions of their game. Games may be released at full price (average 59.99 USD), with their full code available, but certain portions of their code, their full diegetic world, are hidden in DLC. Often, these new levels, or new worlds, will be present in the code but only unlocked on later dates, giving the illusion of expansion of the diegetic world on developer terms. In many cases, this model has become the expectation in the contemporary era of video games: the incomplete game has become the totalized version of the game. But "mods," fan-made patches distributed as open-source code, also exist and are freely accessible, save for perhaps a request for donations to community-based developers. Many mods develop around older games that are no longer supported by their original developers and give them new life through new, community-developed modes of play. Mods offer an economic model that is free to play, as opposed to types of games increasingly limited by paid DLC.

Complicating the semiotic freedom of the game as dictated by the developer, DLC introduces economic variables that correspond to symbolic components in reality (currency) and command elements of the games' diegesis, no longer purely virtual, into being. Two aspects emerge here. First, the player-developer loop of patches in response to glitches does not remain neatly contained within the medium of the game. Second, the mods present crises of control in the real world where players can potentially reverse the player-developer relationship. This dynamic raises the question: which entity in the antagonism necessarily grants agency and subjecthood, and to whom? Another insight gleaned from this phenomenon is developer acknowledgment of nuances in codes of video games on the level of complexity of the tripartite structure of the Real, Symbolic, and Imagined. That is, that developers seem to acknowledge that there is a version of the game that exists perfectly prior to their development: it may never be achieved or realized, and only actualized from the realm of Imagination; that it is actualized only from the realm of the Imagination however is something that seems to, at times, evade developer conceits. It is then from this imagined realm that developers construct the Symbolic ridges of play and exert a subjecting power onto players. Because players are not bound to the same imagined codes of subjectivity however, a greater closeness to a plenitude of play is actualized than that which was originally intended by

attempts at developer control. When this moment of play is actualized, there is a brushing up of players with the Real and a confrontation of developers with an inability to totally grasp it. On these terms, players transcend the developer, if only momentarily, bestowing upon themselves and their communities symbolic economies not dependent on obedience to governing entities and pre-established sets of codes.

An interesting object for the contemplation of these new game-narrative logics is *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (Japan News Network, 2011), a series that has spawned a universe of media and exhibits the diffusion of this player-developer tension within and beyond the medium of video games. Like the previous examples, the proliferation of forms the series demonstrates exists coterminously with the development of patches and updates to its universe. What will be examined here is the general structure of the original series and, specifically, the third film in the Madoka Magica universe: *Puella Magi Madoka Magica: Rebellion* (dir. Yukihiro Miyamoto and Akiyuki Shinbo, Japan, 2013). The series can be summarized as a conflict between human characters who become enticed by an entity known as Kyubei into a contractual agreement: they may have a wish fulfilled so long as they engage in combat as “magical girls” against entities known as “witches” who haunt the earth, causing grief, natural disaster, despair, and suicide. Kyubei’s promise, however, is insidious: it contains a fatal ending for the magical girls whose fate is to become witches inevitably. The magical girls are introduced first to the player-developer structure through the magical girl versus witch contract. They eventually realize they have entered an antagonistic relationship which requires their death to sustain the diegesis. Put another way, the player in the relationship also experiences pressures to exceed being a player or otherwise fall out of the antagonism, becoming abject; the player must not only play the game, but must play in such a way that reconfigures the player’s being (i.e. the very qualities of what it means to be a subject of play at play); their play is expected to not only exceed the boundaries of play itself, but for these very transgressions of the boundaries of play to also be generative of new worlds of play. To a degree, the player is asked to be productive of the means of shifting contours of play and for developers continued production of games that operate under the guise of new modalities. This is all however withheld from players who play with varying commitments and unaware of these productive demands. Nonetheless, players continue their commitments to play for play itself, unaware of the capitalization of their productive potentials. Similarly withholding rules, Kyubei deceives the magical girls and lures them with

promises of proper subjectivity in the player-developer relationship, with the unspoken caveat being an unspoken rule that the players never exceed their developer's subjection.⁹ In the player-developer cycle of patches and DLCs, players' exploitation of glitches, hacks, and mods present a threat to the relationship that become potent disturbances to the intended sovereign-subject antagonism. Here we can see a "thin line" between developer as sovereign and player-developer as an abject agent, where the indistinction between the abject and the proper subject becomes readily apparent in the antagonism between player and developer.¹⁰ Regardless of their status as player or developer, neither is able account for if they or the other is a proper subject or if operating in abjecthood. This presents yet another moment in which the participants in play become aware of the abject/subject negotiations in the history of the dialectical relationship between player and developer.

Rebellion encapsulates this cycle of production of product, commodity, and the subjects meant to consume them but presents potential interventions to what I suggest is a proper sense of developer-intended sovereign-subject antagonism. In the film, a reversal of sovereign-subject formation occurs and mutates understandings of glitches or hacks in the diegesis of *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. The proper notion of play in the series establishes the players as magical girls and the abject players as witches, while Kyubei is the sovereign developer of their economy of play. In *Rebellion*, however, the magical girls negotiate their abject antagonism with the witches and seek codes outside their sovereign relationship to build new subject formations. This scenario involves two main characters, Madoka Kaname and Homura Akemi. Rebelling against the sovereign-subject relationship that they are lured into by Kyubei, Madoka and Homura eventually reach an impasse. Their glitched play and attempts at circumnavigating normative developer-coded play lead to them being understood as glitched constituents of the world, anomalies that cannot be accounted for: incorporable entities. The girls manifest, literally and aesthetically, as glitches while simultaneously existing as constitutive elements of the structure of the diegesis. The solution that the entropy of the universe orients itself towards is to situate all participants in the tripartite sovereign-subject-abject formation into a universe of their own, and here the entities involved in organizing disappear entirely from this decision, if it can be said to be decided. The world they emerge into is a desert of the real: Homura and Kyubei still exist as magical girl and sovereign entity, but the antagonists take the form of beings called "wraiths"; neither the characters nor the viewers discover if they are former

magical girls or not. Homura and Kyubei have entered a new realm of play, but who or what do they play with now?



Figure 1. Madoka appearing during the transformation with glitch aesthetics.



Figure 2. Homura capturing Madoka and splitting her into two in an act of exposing how one symbolic body, one sign, may house subject, sovereign, and everything in excess and in between.

When playing video games, and especially when playing beyond developer-intended modes of play, what players play with are modes of interfacing with

the world. The object of play exceeds the mode of the game itself and engages structures of agency that may exist in classical sovereign-subject relationships. However, as in *Rebellion*, emergence into this new world does not mean it is not haunted by old codes of sovereignty; while negotiation of boundaries of play may briefly suspend the codes that identify subject-object relationships, the desire to play is a potent one and seems to demand quick reinstallation of rules. These modes of play open the possibility of utopian readings that escape developer logic, however momentarily or fleeting, and presents possibilities for surpassing their power entirely and creating new virtual worlds. These new video game logics open opportunities to interpret what game we are playing and determine who the developers or players are. The intricacy of the rules of the game in *Madoka Magica* allow closer involvement and inspection than films that might be considered antecedents. There is an expansion beyond the rules of the game in terms of whether it limits a diegetic world or if it is productive of new diegetic universes. The tension between players and developers and the ways players can exceed their role by taking advantage of glitches and hacks and creating new communities and games may also illustrate responses to the increasing economic demands of the game. In any case, the video game has expanded beyond neat terms of linear narrativity and diegesis and, likewise, the mind-game and other filmic tendencies are increasingly bleeding into the video game. As such, new video game logics must be explored if we are to understand how they affect players and games economically and culturally and influence other media realms.

Notes

- 1 Warren Buckland, "Source Code's Video Game Logic," *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 185.
- 2 Buckland, "Source Code's Video Game Logic," 186.
- 3 Thomas Elsaesser, "Pushing the Contradictions of the Digital: 'Virtual Reality' and 'Interactive Narrative' as Oxymorons Between Narrative and Gaming," *New Review of Television and Film Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2014.927182>.
- 4 Buckland, "Source Code's Video Game Logic," 188.
- 5 Ibid., 189.
- 6 Seung-Hoon Jeong, "A Thin Line Between Sovereign and Abject Agents," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 7 (2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.7771/14814374.3663>.
- 7 Ibid., 6.
- 8 Elsaesser, "Pushing the Contradictions of the Digital," 304.

- 9 Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 16.
- 10 Jeong, "A Thin Line Between Sovereign and Abject Agents," 3.

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