



PROBLEMATIZING POWER FANTASY

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What does it mean to be powerful in a game? If you look to popular notions about games, the answer is nothing good. The “power fantasy” of games implies escapism and meaninglessness, evoking outsize explosions and equally outsize displays of dominance. A “power gamer” is one who plays with a single-minded determination to win, at the expense of nuance, social relationships between players, or even their own pleasure in play. Gamers are seen as getting so lost in fantasies of violent power that they no longer understand the difference between fantasy and reality.

Fortunately, the popular take is wrong. Games can be full of meaning, are no more the cause of delusions than other forms of media, and most gamers are deeply embedded in a social fabric. What is being captured by these concepts is not the nature of games themselves, but rather a particular way of playing with power. The power being imagined here is “power-over,” or power in the form of dominance and control, as developed by the pioneering organizational theorist Mary Parker Follett.¹ But power-over is not the only form of power in games. Games also encompass “power-to,” the empowering of players to accomplish and achieve.

Game designer Sid Meier, best known for the *Civilization* series, once defined a game as a series of interesting choices. This definition is often used to challenge game designers to create richer and more interesting player choices, but the quote is revealing at a deeper level. Games are spaces in which the player *gets to make a choice*. Games allow players to have control over their fate, to experience authority, and to enact power in a safe environment. In a well-designed game, players are constantly making choices that are meaningful, powerful, and consequential within the context of the game. These meaningful choices embolden the player to feel powerful.

Consider an apparently simple game of tag. During the game, players are making choices about where to run within the agreed-upon bounds of the game. The player who is “it” must decide who to pursue and how best to trap, catch, or trick them. Meanwhile, the other players must analyze and respond to the constantly changing physical and social space of the game. How far away is “it”? How likely are they to target me? How fast can I run? How tired am I already? Am I getting bored with the current “it” and want to see a new one?

The game reduces players’ choices to an agreed-upon subset of human activity—in this case, running and touching. At the same time, it makes the stakes for those choices clear. Get touched by “it”? Your turn to chase others. Manage to touch another player? Then you’re back to running away. Players know what their choices are at any given moment, and what the consequences of those choices might be.

The clarity of these choices lets players make decisions that are consequential and meaningful within the realm of the game, and allows those decisions to have an immediate impact. A player might see another player lagging, about to be run down, and choose to let herself be tagged to save her friend. She has become a hero. A player, as “it”, might act winded, only to put on a burst of speed to catch and tag his target. He has become wily. A player might call out to the others in her group, telling them to spread out to make it harder for “it” to catch them. She has become a leader. None of these choices are dictated by the rules of tag, but the rules give players an arena in which to express those choices. Within the frame of the game, those choices matter – and that is power-to.

Giving people the opportunity to experience power-to is important. It taps into basic human needs for both autonomy and competence.² But we believe that power

in games can do something more than simply satisfy players' emotional needs. Exercising power takes skills – from imagining oneself as a leader to persuading others to follow. Games and their power-to can give players a safe space to practice the skills that out-of-game power requires.

We know that games can help people practice skills that transfer outside the game. For example, laparoscopic surgeons who play videogames make fewer mistakes during surgery.³ But that goes for less pragmatic skills, too. Someone who tackles the same puzzle in a game twenty times, failing each time, trying different angles of approach until at last they succeed, is developing real-world skills of resilience and follow-through. Someone taking on the role of a character in a role-playing game puts themselves in the mindset of a different person, allowing them to practice examining things from another point of view and build their empathy.⁴

Games are a particularly good place to practice power because they allow an inversion of conventional power roles. They can provide a stylized, structured space where power comes from the ability to use and manipulate the game system, and where ordinary rules of power and authority do not apply.

This suggests a radical call to action for games: people with the least real-world power need games the most. Imagine if games were for those who are disenfranchised by our cultural systems. Women are assigned the bulk of low-control, low-autonomy tasks around the house; games could become a place for women to practice lasting victory. Low-wage workers watch others profit disproportionately from their labor; games could become a place for them to claim what they deserve. By giving people who lack power-to opportunities to experience and practice it, games might help them bring power into

the rest of the world.

In short, games could, if we chose, challenge our existing power structures – but too often they only replicate them. While the potential of power-to may be at play within a game, there are hidden and not-so-hidden currents of power-over that surround and permeate the game experience.

Game culture as it stands is shot through with sexism, racism, homophobia, and other biases. Some of it is quite explicit; for example, women who dare to be identifiable as women in gaming spaces face more hatred and harassment than male players of equal skill.⁵ Others are subtle and institutional, such as Starcraft tournaments that run on Jewish holidays but not on Christian ones. These biases are in line with those held by the rest of our culture, but the degree to which they are violently defended as being essential to “gamer-ness” is unusual. Oddly, this is good news. The extent to which these boundaries are being defended is a signal to the careful viewer that they are particularly fraught. Because real-world power structures do not have to apply in games, people work particularly hard to ensure that they do.

Game groups can also be used to exclude, dominate, and control. Someone new to the game of tag might feel disadvantaged and powerless compared to people who are intimately familiar with it. They don't know that you can box people against the fence, or that the house rule is that you can't run farther than the swings. The group of players has the power to decide what is valued and honored in play, and what is literally or figuratively out of bounds. In theory, groups can use that power to create the best possible experience of play for all players, but in practice not all players' preferences matter equally. The new player's opinion matters less than the veteran's; the woman trying to speak up gets repeatedly interrupted by

men; the black person's enthusiasm is seen as threatening. Our cultural ideas about power and identity can leak into our game experiences, unless we are careful to choose otherwise.

Finally, there is the question of what the rules of the game look like in the first place. True, players have control over their choices within a game – but the game designer controls what choices they are offered in the first place. In a computer game, these rules can't even be negotiated with; they're enforced by code. In non-digital games, players have more freedom, but the rules still guide their sense of possibility and agency. To stay within the frame of the game, players must make only those moves that are permissible, and that gives the designers power over the players. As Foucault might argue, true power is not the power to compel a choice, but to define the landscape within any choice must be made. That is precisely what game designers do.

For example, players can adopt powerful roles within a game – but the game designer controls what identities are available to them. For example, only 15% of playable characters in top-selling games are female.⁶ Women might like to feel powerful within a game context, but more often than not, they can only do so by taking on the role of a man. Black characters are disproportionately likely to be cast as gangsters and thugs, which is not exactly the freedom to explore alternate identities that games could promise.⁷ These are not neutral decisions. Whether they're hiding behind the rhetoric of audience demands or of insufficient resources to model more than one protagonist, these choices are game designers' responsibility.

The difficulty is that it's not always bad for the game designer to exert control over the player. In fact, game designers can use their power to counteract the potential

for player-to-player abuses. For example, the online collectible card game *Hearthstone* has no in-game chat, only six canned messages. No matter how much a player would like to abuse their opponent, they simply cannot. The gay player does not have to fear being called a faggot, nor the female player a slut. The superhero MMO *City of Heroes* incorporated a sidekicking system, allowing new players to temporarily perform as well as veterans. The new player might not understand the rules as well as the experienced player, but they could still have an equal role in play. These are both examples of game designers constraining player choices, but doing so in the service of player agency.

One might even say a game designer's job is precisely to exert control over the player's choices. After all, Meier's quote posits that a satisfying choice is what makes a game a good one. In the wild, most choices are not satisfying. People react badly when presented with too many options or too few, options that are too similar or too hard to compare.⁸ Constraining the player's choices in an appropriate way is a critical piece of the game designer's craft.

The question becomes how to conduct oneself ethically in pursuit of this craft. Can we give players constrained agency, the power-to within the game, without ourselves abusing our power-over as we construct the game itself?

One answer is to resist our own assumptions, as game designers, about what power looks like. For example, we do not exist outside cultural narratives that tell us what color skin belongs to the hero, and what color to the villain; what gender rescues and what gender is rescued; what sexual orientation is central and what is secondary. If we are going to define who gets to be powerful in play, then we can at least undermine, rather than reinforce, the stereotypes of the rest of society. We can make games that

give a voice to the powerless rather than reinforcing the centrality of the powerful.

This responsibility doesn't just extend to how we represent power in games, but also in the way we construct cultures of play. When we create game structures that punish bullies rather than rewarding them, we are using our own power over players responsibly.

Another approach is to share power with players. Controlling someone else's pleasure and power is a heavy responsibility, and it gets heavier the harder it is for players to resist the constraints you create. But even the most tightly constrained game must have opportunities for players to make choices – and not every game is equally tightly constrained. Consider a game like *Half-Life*, where there is only one possible protagonist, compared to a game like *Mass Effect* where players have access to a character designer that allows all players to see themselves reflected in the game world. One tells players who they must be; the other gives players power. We might call this power-with, since the designer and the player are in effect collaborating using the gaming system.

Other opportunities for player power come from players' ability to create within games. The “no wrong way to play” movement chronicles players who tackle challenges within games that the designers clearly did not intend, from completing *Diablo 3* without ever striking a blow to performing elaborate bike stunts in first-person shooters. Players create hacks, mods, and house rules for games – sometimes with the support of the designers and sometimes without. Even grieving, or interfering with other players' fun, can be a way of resisting the pathways to pleasure the designer has laid out. The kinds of resistance the player has available depends greatly on the designer's decisions. It's much harder to hack your Xbox than it is to play *Monopoly* wrong (which almost everyone does). By

making games that allow committed players to co-construct their experience, we can share our power with them, again turning power-over into power-with.

But perhaps the most important way to respond to the issue of the power of the game designer is to democratize access to game design. If only a narrow slice of humanity gets to design games, then they have an obligation to reflect more in their designs than just their narrow experiences. The more voices we have making games, the more different visions of power we have, the more opportunity we give people to express their agency not just by playing games but by making them – the more we as game designers can feel comfortable expressing our own personal ideas of power within the games we create.

To be clear, this doesn't just mean telling people to “make your own games,” which is a common way of dismissing concerns about game designers' behavior and choices.

That approach dismisses the realities of limited access and of disparities in resources. Games take time, money, and skill to produce. As long as those resources are unfairly distributed, “make your own games” becomes a way of silencing the voices of those with less. Instead, we need to be actively supporting new voices in design, distributing resources to a broader spectrum of designers, and creating tools that lower the barriers of entry.

Fortunately, these are the kind of challenges that game designers are good at: building systems within which people get to practice power. We just have to apply our skills to the system by which game designers are made. If we can share our access, our skills, and our resources with those who struggle with powerlessness – if we can create power-with with them – then we can expect to see visionary, radical change in what power in games can mean.

Footnotes

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3. Rosser, J. C., Lynch, P. J., Cuddihy, L., Gentile, D. A., Klonsky, J., & Merrell, R. (2007). The impact of video games on training surgeons in the 21st century. *Archives of Surgery*, 142, 181-186.
4. For an example of the power of experience-taking, see Kaufman, G. F., & Libby, L. K. (2012). Changing beliefs and behavior through experience-taking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103, 1-19.
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6. Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). The virtual census: Representations of gender, race, and age in video games. *New Media & Society*, 11, 815-834.
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8. For an overview of the research on choice and cognitive complexity, see Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: why more is less*. New York: Ecco.