

## INTRODUCTION TO FIGMENT

### A game designed for Switching Codes

#### Game as Essay

I am a game designer. My contribution to this volume reflects my disciplinary activity: it is a game for you to play: the game whose rules and instructions are written on the preceding pages, and whose cards can be found at the end of this book. It is a real game. It's not a conceptual exercise that flirts with the form of a game or a playful gesture towards something game-like. No, it is actually a bona fide game, and the proper way to experience it is to go to the trouble of getting the cards out of this book, reading the rules, and sitting down with a handful of friends to play. (And for those of you suffering from a temporary lack of playmates, there is a solitaire version as well.)

Each of the 200 cards in *Figment* contains a small fragment of text taken verbatim from one of the essays in this book. In playing the game, players combine and recombine these fragments, making statements and declarations that are sometimes profound and sometimes comical. But in each case, a move in the game makes use of raw textual materials from this book, re-mixing them into novel statements. Playing *Figment* is thus necessarily an exercise in the playful creation of meaning.

As an essay that is manifest as a game, *Figment* hopefully demonstrates that games themselves can participate in the discourse of ideas that runs throughout *Switching Codes*. But their participation of necessity will not take conventional form. This essay is intended to help explain my intentions, and the relevance of *Figment* to the themes of this book. But it is supplemental to the main attraction, which is the game itself. Games cannot be browsed by reading their rules, any more than you can listen to music by skimming a written score. Games need to be *played*: inhabited, explored, manipulated, and reconfigured by their players.

#### Playing with Meaning

As structural objects, Games are remarkable engines for the creation of meaning. A game creates a place in both time and space, within which special meanings take hold. A Chess board, as a decoration on a coffee table, is merely an assemblage of figurines – aesthetic and cultural objects, to be sure, but lacking the structured and complex meanings that are assigned to them in a game. Before a Chess game is played, who cares where each piece happens to reside on the board? Who cares which pieces are “mine” and which are “yours?”

But once you and I sit down to play a game of Chess, special meanings take hold. Suddenly it is very important to know whether a piece is in *this* square or in *that* square, whose turn it is to move next, and which pieces seem to be threatening the all-important

king. The loose assemblage of decorative Chess figurines suddenly shifts into a tight grid of relationships, the two players locked into systems of time and space, mathematics and logic, strategy and tactics, psychology, and emotion.

It may seem at first glance that this kind of meaning appears in a game is merely a function of the game's rules. Rules do provide the structural underpinning for any game, but the experience of those rules is always enacted through play. The feelings of importance and preciousness, power and vulnerability that surrounds your king is not merely a rule: it *manifests* in the context of a game, through defense and offence, as the players inhabit the game's space of meaning and the inertia of the game's goals and rituals take hold. The meaning of a game thus arises not only from structures of rules but from very human desires, feelings, and relations of the players, within their social and cultural contexts.

Why is this important? Designers and technologists create meaning. Writers and scholars create meaning. Poets and artists create meaning. Games happen to provide an excellent context for understanding the creation of meaning, each game a miniature artificial laboratory where meaning is set forth, takes hold, and plays out.

## Technologies of Meaning

Games are millennia old, from the ancient Egyptian *Senet* to the Viking *King's Game* to the African family of *Mancala*. Not to mention a vast prehistory in social games, athletic sports, childrens folk games, and a host of other activities that place the heritage of games among the oldest forms of crafted human experience. But in the particular context of this book, the question arises: how does technology impact games? In terms of game design fundamentals, a game is a game is a game, whether it is played on paper, by means of a deck of cards, in the field of a sports stadium, or mediated via the Internet. But of course it is seems impossible to deny that digital technology has not had an impact on the forms and uses of games.

Let's begin with a case study: *Figment*, the card game to which this essay is a supplement. If you haven't yet played *Figment* (for shame!), it is much like other card games, in which several players draw hands from a shuffled deck of cards, play cards from their hands in turn onto a table or similar shared playing surface, and at times must discuss the outcome of a particular card being played in a particular way. Similar to the earlier example of Chess, it is these simple materials and activities that give rise to the meaning-making in *Figment*: the pursuit of the game's goals, the transformation of rules into play, the social interaction of the game, etc.

Given the operation of these mechanisms, chew on this as a thought experiment: what would change if *Figment* were turned into a digitally mediated experience – say, a computer game where players logged in from remote locations to play together over the web? In this thought experiment, the rules of the game and all of the text borrowed from the *Switching Codes* essays would remain the same. Now understand that there are many

ways such a game could be realized. For example, instead of displaying the *Figment* cards as images of cards on the computer screen, the cards could instead take the form of groups of buildings with the text sprayed on graffiti-style, or the cards could be animated animal characters that speak the game text aloud (instead of a visual display). But for the sake of keeping our thought experiment simple, let's set aside such divergent possibilities. We'll assume that the computer version of *Figment* has remained more or less true to the original: it consists of virtual cards played onto a shared virtual table. And all of the formal game rules and all of the text on the cards will be identical to the paper original.

I would contend that even though the structural underbelly of the game (the number of cards and their text, the activities a player can take on a turn, the victory conditions, etc.) would remain identical, the game experience of our computerized *Figment* would be radically different than a paper version, in many ways. First, consider the cards. The significance of shuffling, dealing, and playing with physical cards extends beyond merely the sense experience of handling them. When we play with a physical deck of cards, all players have a sense of the total structure, the limits of the deck, the ontological status of each individual card. On a computer, all of this intuition vanishes. Even if the players were given explicit information about the makeup of the computerized deck, virtual cards lose their sense of definite physical identity, and seem more vulnerable to sudden erasure and transformation, something like playing a game of poker with a table of sleight-of-hand artists. Certainly there are many examples of online card games. But the play sensibility of such games differs markedly from their paper referents.

Perhaps an even more important difference is the social experience of play. Playing a multiplayer game on a computer, one generally loses the spontaneous verbal table talk, subtle glances and facial expressions, and other forms of indirect communication facilitated by the physical proximity of playing together. In the competitive, playful context of a game, such real-world interactions contribute immensely to the experience of play – and certainly often impinge on the strategic choices that players take as well.

There are yet other changes that happen when we shift *Figment* online as well, changes that are quite specific to its particular design. For example, the collaborative physical construction of making statements loses some of its agency when the computer arranges the cards for you. And the connection that the printed cards make with the printed text of *Switching Codes* – the re-mixing of the essay content that is the premise of the game – also seems to disperse once the game is removed from its designed context.

Yet let me be perfectly clear: I'm not asserting that there is something better or worse about real-world or computer games. The restrictions of online play make for deliciously interesting design parameters, and although physical card games lose something when they are taken to the computer, they also gain many new possibilities as well. The point of this thought experiment is to underline the fact that a game's meaning will change with the introduction of technology. Although games are at bottom abstract rules which can generally be ported from one form to another, the medium in which a game manifests and the context of play are just as important in shaping how it signifies. The identical musical

score can be played on a grand piano in a concert hall, or at the bottom of an abandoned quarry by 88 kazoo players, each vocalizing one keyboard note. Both concerts would retain the exact same underlying formal structure, but they would produce radically different experiences and meanings.

## A Ludic Century

If digital technology can change the way we play one game (such as *Figment*), how has it changed the way we play games in general? There's no doubt that the rise of digital technologies in the last several decades has transformed the possibilities of games – as they have many other aspects of our lives – propelling them to what might be the ascendant mass medium of our budding century. Today, nearly every form of American media is on the decline. Television viewership is down for the first time since its invention. The music industry suffers from annual decreases in revenue. Consumers are buying and reading less books and newspapers. Traditional performing arts struggle to find audiences. However, spurred by the contrasting rise of the internet and digital technology in general, the videogame industry continues to grow and expand, inventing new platforms, finding new audiences, and creating new ways to play.

What has been the impact of technology on games? The inventors of games have always made use of technologies of the time, from the full-color printing extravaganzas of Victorian parlor games to the vacuum-molded plastic of boardgames from the 60s and 70s. With the rise of computers, we have gotten an entire host of new trends for games, some of which are curiously backwards. The dominance in the 80s and 90s of single-player videogames runs counter to the ancient function of games as a social experience. The most elaborate games being created today – 3D adventures for cutting-edge game consoles and massively multiplayer online virtual worlds – suffer deplorably from cinema envy as they attempt to replicate the aesthetics and pleasures of film. And even as many game creators begin to tackle subject matter that lies outside the pulp roots of videogames, there remains something undeniably unsophisticated about games. Where are the political documentaries, historical dramas, and avant-garde experiments of the gaming world?

On the other hand, much about games holds promise. As computer networks take a greater and greater hold on our lives, games represent one of the most robust and inventive vectors of digital culture. In games, players are learning to play with complex systems, to collaborate on a global scale, to turn the tables on media consumption as they mod, hack into, and transform the games they play. Games are particularly relevant to our contemporary lives; they do not merely represent new systems of meaning, but are new paradigms under which meaning might be created.

Over the last century, the industrial age was replaced by an era of information, as factory processing and paper bureaucracy – pillars of industrial production and governance – reached their practical and physical limits. In this context, the study and production of information in and of itself arose. Information was a necessary abstraction, a new kind of

commodity that allowed for greater degrees of complexity in systems of commerce, knowledge, and communication. Human-operated telephone switchboards, library card catalogs, and pneumatic tube networks sprung up as the physical embodiments of information systems. But it was the introduction of computers in the second half of the last century that accelerated this process by orders of magnitude, making information fluid and flexible, permitting the vast landscapes of data that we inhabit today.

Yet information in and of itself does not suffice as a concept for understanding the transformations taking place today. Just as the information age replaced the industrial age, a ludic age has already begun to replace the information age. Information as a paradigm is inadequate to describe emerging cultural systems like Wikipedia, multiplayer online games, or global financial networks. These phenomena are not just based on the formal complexity of abstract information processing, but are very human, creative systems. Wikipedia is not merely accessed and referenced by its audience, like the bureaucratic systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact it is inhabited, played with, evolved, and transformed, by a social organism that itself is changing over time. It is a site continually in the state of being recreated, a signifying system constantly redefining its own meanings. It is not just a fixed utilitarian system, like an indexed filing cabinet. It is a system *at play*, productively forming new meanings as it changes shape.

Games are the ancient precedent for just this kind of playful meaning-making. Unlike other kinds of culture, they are at base formal, mathematical systems, but the rigid strictures of information and rules is hardly sufficient to understand how it is that games generate meaning through play. In English, the word “play” can mean the free play of gears or a steering wheel. In this understanding of the term, moments of play in a system are the interstitial spaces of that system, where things happen in looser and more unexpected fashion than in the more inflexible utilitarian functioning of the system. The “play” of a steering wheel (loose movement back and forth) happens because of more rigid structures like car wheels, axle, and drive shaft, but the play itself is a manifestation of precisely those moments when that system of parts breaks down as a purely logical system. The play *only* exists because of the more rigid structures, but also exactly *despite* them.

Games are the embodiment of this paradox of rigid rules and free movement, of locked formal structures and playful improvisation. And it is this movement from systems of information to systems of play that is increasingly defining our time. Games have already had a tremendous impact on technological culture. For example, over the last several decades, the design of games has helped to establish our contemporary notions of digital interaction, complex interfaces, computer graphics, interactive storytelling, virtual embodiment, network interaction, and a host of other crucial concepts.

It is not true to say that everything is becoming a game. However, the coming century is one in which our love lives and work lives, the way we learn and the way we engage with our governments, the way we research, create, and exchange knowledge, increasingly will be mediated by digital technologies of information. All of these activities, as they bend and flex in the play of data, will come to resemble the way that we play games. As

the form of culture that is native to the emerging paradigms I am describing here, it behooves us to play with and to better understand games.

### Time to Play

Which brings us back to *Figment*. Compared to the grand pronouncements above, *Figment* is quite modest, a small gesture towards these larger cultural transformations – and embodied in the guise of a paper game, no less! Provided for you are cards and rules, and this little text that points to some of the ideas behind the game.

At the risk of sounding repetitive, *Figment* is a game that, like all games, must be played to be experienced. Why? Because games are a medium of uncertainty. Almost no one would play a game (or even watch one) if they knew how it would turn out. As a game is played, its permutations and possibilities are explored, played out, expended and extended – in ways that cannot be fully predicted from the start. And from this playful navigation of uncertainty arises the meaning of the game.

So play *Figment*. Or if my game does not happen to be to your taste, there are innumerable others, just waiting for you to play with them.

What are you waiting for?

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