Valuing Play in Survivor: A Constructionist Approach to Multiplayer Games

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Abstract

The U.S. televised game *Survivor* is fascinating for the study of multiplayer games because the winner of a season of *Survivor* is not dictated by the rules. Instead, a "jury" of eliminated players vote for which of the remaining two to three contestants deserve to win the US$1,000,000 prize, based entirely on their personal opinion. In this article, I present an analysis of Final Tribal Council, where this decision is made, revealing the key themes that influence this decision. I subsequently propose a social constructionist approach to understanding and researching multiplayer games as moral economies, where diverse types of play are given different values by players. I argue that this approach provides a useful theoretical framework for an integrated understanding of how both game and nongame elements work to influence player behavior and experience.

Keywords

Survivor, multiplayer games, social constructionism, betrayal, informal rules

The U.S. televised game *Survivor* is fascinating for the study of multiplayer games. Unlike the majority of competitive games, the winner is not dictated by the rules but by a "jury" of eliminated players who vote based on their personal opinion. In the

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final episode of each season, contestants argue for why their play history makes them most deserving of the US$1,000,000 prize, and jury members can ask questions to help them make their decision. In this article, I present an analysis of eight *Survivor*'s *Final Tribal Councils* to identify what ideas, topics, and rhetorical strategies players draw on in this process of valuing play.

Based on this analysis, I subsequently propose a social constructionist approach (Charmaz, 2000, 2006) to understanding multiplayer games as *moral economies*, a "thought province" (Geertz, 1982) where different types of play are given different values by players. I argue that the key contribution of this approach is that it demonstrates how video game paratexts work alongside play histories, social and cultural contexts, and formal and informal rules to provide a repertoire to players for valuing their play. Conceptualizing multiplayer games as moral economies provides a useful theoretical framework for an integrated understanding of how both game and nongame elements work to influence player behavior and experience. In the conclusion, I connect draw on prior scholarship of the online game *EVE Online* to demonstrate the relevance of this work to digital game scholarship, arguing that understanding games as moral economies stresses different methodological strategies for studying the experience of multiplayer games, supporting the study of digital game cultures as a key part of understanding player experience.

Although an unusual choice for the digitally oriented discipline of game studies (Stenros & Waern, 2011), *Survivor*'s unusual mechanic of allowing players to select the winner exposes this moral economy and reveals—in their absence—what it is that rules "do" in games (recently called for by Stenros, 2017). This offers insight into the game of *Survivor*, and where it is understood to be played, but also the contested status of betrayal within the game. Further, by attending to the processes by which play is placed into this hierarchy, this article extends existing work beyond its current attention to "cheating" and the demarcation of boundaries (Carter, Gibbs, & Arnold, 2015; Consalvo, 2007), highlighting the ways that players' external norms, ethics, and prejudices work to coconstruct a multiplayer game's moral economy.

Survivor

While thoroughly examined in television studies, no prior work has approached *Survivor* from a game studies perspective. *Survivor* was created in 1994 by Charlie Parsons, but first aired on television in the 1997 Swedish show, "Expedition Robinson." The U.S. *Survivor* (2000-present [TV], CBS) has been renewed into its 36th season and there have been over 40 regional versions of *Survivor*, all of which follow the same loose structure. Sixteen to twenty players, referred to as "castaways," are split into two "tribes." They are taken to remote, typically tropical, locations and given little food and water or supplies. A season depicts 39 days, with each episode covering $\sim$3 days of play. Each episode has at least one "challenge"; elaborate physical challenges that test the castaway's strength, agility, teamwork,

and puzzle-solving abilities. The loser of the "immunity challenge" is sent to Tribal Council, where host Jeff Probst questions contestants on the events of the past 3 days and players vote secretly who should be eliminated from the game.

Once six to eight castaways have been eliminated, the two tribes are merged. At this point, tribal immunity is no more, and castaways compete for individual immunity. There are typically still reward challenges, but not all members of the merged tribe are able to receive the reward. These rewards range from food, time spent with loved ones, or unique experiences (generally also involving food). Often host Probst will tempt castaways with a food reward during immunity challenges, seeing players give up their chance to compete for individual immunity in exchange for a reward. Other in-game advantages, like hidden immunity idols that can be played after contestants have voted, or extra vote advantages are also part of the challenge of winning *Survivor*. Castaways eliminated after the merge join the jury and return to each tribal council to (silently) observe the game unfold, with their silent reactions as spectators part of the atmosphere of each vote. Once only two to three castaways remain, the power in the game is given to the members of the jury. In the Final Tribal Council, each remaining contestant gives a short speech about why they should be awarded the million-dollar prize. Each member of the jury then gets to question (or rant at) the remaining castaways. Once complete, the jury privately votes for the winner which is revealed during a live show, several months after filming.

Survivor the Game

Despite being a reality television series, the rules and format of *Survivor* do not preclude it from a game studies analysis. I argue that the experience of watching *Survivor* is closer to that of a sport, having more in common with eSports than "voyeur television" like *Bachelor in Paradise*. Crew's (2006) study of *Survivor* audiences found that the "realness" of *Survivor* was key to its appeal, as was its unpredictability and fairness. Crew's (2006) quantitative research further found that audiences do not watch *Survivor* "as voyeurs, for the fantasy elements, or to witness the shame or humiliation of the show's participants" (p. 73). As a sport-like experience, the attraction is found in the strategies that emerge, following "meta" strategies across seasons, discussing the contests that are fought between its players online (see Jenkins, 2006), and the skill of those at playing the game. The emphasis in *Survivor* on the personalities of contestants is reasonable, as it is a contest of social interactions: Knowing the personalities, plans, social weaknesses, and strengths of a castaway is akin to knowing their height, weight, speed, and batting average.

A potential critique of this study is the suggestion that the production of the show—the distillation of 3 days of social interactions into a 40-min spectateable episode, with cohesive narrative—obscures, misleads, and corrupts the "gameness" of the practice game (Wright, 2006, presents a detailed account of how *Survivor* is "unreal") or my ability to analyze it as a game. Irrespective of the existing extensive mediatization of sports in similar ways (for instance, see Crogan, 2007), I note that in

the social constructionist epistemology that guides this research, all data are understood to be constructed. Interviews, for example, are *narrative reconstructions* (May, 2011, p. 155), "they are not the original experience itself" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 514), and neither is an episode of *Survivor*. While access to a *Big Brother*-esque 24-hr live feed of all interactions and events within a *Survivor* season may reveal additional insights, any process of analyzing and representing these data similarly constructs meaning (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Consequently, the contribution of this work to game studies—which acknowledges the history of the data as a produced, spectated televised game—remains strong.

Method

Due to *Survivor*'s unique method of selecting a winner, Final Tribal Councils provide a unique insight into the process by which *Survivor* players value different ways of playing the game. The finalist's speeches variously attempt to increase the value of their play (and devalue their opponents play) to win the million-dollar prize, and subsequent conversations with the jury further reveal the preconceptions and resources drawn upon to value play acts, strategies, and moments; represent and establish authority; demarcate boundaries; and draw on moral constructs to value play.

Consequently, I selected eight *Survivor* seasons (1, 8, 13, 15, 16, 19, 32, and 34) to transcribe and code using open and axial coding in accordance with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) recommendations. I employ a social construction grounded theory methodology, as best articulated by Charmaz (2000, 2006). These seasons are chosen in keeping with theoretical sampling to reach data saturation, that is, they each present different situations and outcomes reflective of the wider population of *Survivor* seasons. I focus here on Final Tribal Councils as they are the densest with discourse relevant to this study, and as the game has otherwise ended, the possible reasons a player might say something is limited to influencing the jury. The subsequently explored themes in how play is valued by players emerged through the data collection process, although concepts like paratexts (Consalvo, 2007) and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983, 1999) invariably emerged as sensitizing concepts (see Bowen, 2006) in the theory development process.

Results: Valuing Play in Survivor's Final Tribal Councils

In this section, I'll explore the overlapping arguments, topics, and rhetorical strategies drawn on by *Survivor* players to influence the process of voting for the *Sole Survivor* and winner of the US$1,000,000 prize. Here, these ideas are organized along the main themes that emerged through axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), specifically around the process of valuing play higher, or lower, and the ways the social and cultural context of play permeate the *Survivor* game. The goal of this analysis is not to be quantitative about the frequency of these themes but rather look at the

"repertoire of stylistic resources" (Gieryn, 1983) that are commonly leveraged in valuing *Survivor* play through key examples, reflecting the ideological and moral constructs players have toward their play. In the discussion, I'll argue that this gives insight into the nature of the *Survivor* game and use these insights to argue for a constructionist approach to understanding all multiplayer games.

Strategic Play

One of the principal ways contestants valued their play was by describing it as having been "the most strategic" (Todd, S15). However, this was exhibited in a variety of ways. Firstly, strategic play typically required a trajectory, an art of planning multiple moves in advance. For instance, in S15, runner-up Amanda provided a narrative of her play suggesting she "came into the game knowing a specific strategy that I was going to follow" and that she changed her strategy in the "end game" so that she "was with people that I had a chance to physically compete against." As Amanda won the final two individual immunity challenges, this account of her play strategy works to highlight her prescience, fitting decisions into a larger, and more impressive narrative of survival. This is like how players regularly justify voting out a "strategic threat" (Todd, S15), a player who would become a threat in the future, such as by attracting more votes from the jury at Final Tribal Council.

Alternatively, strategic play was also constructed as being about control and centrality. This is well exemplified by Yul Kwon, the winner of S13 who described himself as having "played a pretty key role in leading these teams" as the person he voted for was always the person eliminated and is consequently described by a juror as having "played it like the big gangster boss" (Nate, S13). Reflecting this, players would also make attempts to devalue an opponent's claim that they were in control. Becky, who was in an alliance with Yul in S13, argued that "it wasn't Yul making the decisions by himself...we relied on each other, we worked together, and made decisions together." Ultimately, Yul won, while Becky received no votes. Where players weren't consistently in control, contestants would put their decision-making in the center of the game. Russel's (S19) opening statement describes the way he made "huge strategic moves all the way through the game." In later seasons, the notion of a "resume" of "big" moves—such as voting out a dominant player or betraying an alliance—dominates decision-making around who is a "threat" at final tribal.

Actively Versus Inactively Playing

Despite all contestants at Final Tribal Council having made it to the end of the season, a common valuation strategy was to describe themselves as having "more actively" played the game than their opponent or devalue their opponent as having not played enough.

Players drew on notions of work ethic, overcoming obstacles, and the underdog trope to emphasize the ways that they had more actively played, be it strategically,

physically, or socially. This is an argument that "it was not luck" (Michelle, S32), but a work ethic that gets a contestant to the end. For example, players commonly described narratives that suggested they had faced larger obstacles than the other contestants. In S8, Amber drew attention to how she had "faced a lot of obstacles in this game," meaning she had "fought like hell to stay" (Amber, S8), and contestant Ozzy drew attention to how, "from the beginning of this game, I was the underdog" (Ozzy, S13). Numerous contestants, such as Russel (S19), Sarah (S24), and Aubrey (S32) presented jurors with narratives that emphasized a greater *volume* of decision-making, key moves, and strategic effort that they had exerted throughout their entire 39 days playing the game, rather than the quiet calm control exhibited by winners like Yul Kwon (S13).

Further reflecting the way notions of work ethic are valued highly by *Survivor* players, jurors frequently complimented contestants for having "worked hard to get where you're at" (Sue, S01), "played it hard" (Peih-Gee, S15), and having "never stopped working" (Ozzy, S34), and contestants frequently emphasized the way that they "had to play aggressively" (Parvati, S16). These arguments reflect contestant's, and the show's, capitalist ethics around work and labor, and how they feel a prize must be earned, highlighting how players normative values from outside the game are brought into this process.

The notion of *actively playing* is frequently invoked in opposition to *inactively playing*. Typically, this took the form of contestants—most often women—being described as "riding on coat tails" (S13, Ozzy, regarding Becky) of more dominant (and typically male) contestants to be brought to the end, where they are perceived as less of a threat. In part, these arguments draw on the ideological notion of "best effort," commonly written into the codes of conduct of sports (Juul, 2012). This also often works to devalue a "social game," where contestants attract votes simply by being liked rather than being based on their strategic acts within the game. An archetypal example of this is S19, which host Probst described as "so lopsided in terms of one person [Russel Hantz] completely dominating the game" (Rocchio, 2009). At the final tribal, both other contestants were constantly devalued as having not played the game as actively as Russel. Mick was described as "feckless" (Shambo, S19), and Natalie was described as never having been "on the field" (Kelly, S19), as having lacked "passion" (S19, Monica), and having done "nothing other than align with Russel" (S19, Mick). Despite this, Natalie won with seven of the nine votes, buoyed by juror Erik who argued that her strategy of not playing was no "less admirable" than Russel's "unethical game" (S19). In other seasons, tensions often emerge around passive players who attempt to draw on their inactive playing to exculpate their conduct in the face of upset and betrayed jurors.

A Contested Contest

The nature of the *Survivor* contest is itself contested. Physical strength is measured in *Survivor*'s episodic challenges for team and individual immunity, and players regularly drew on their physical performance to value their play. Competitiveness in

challenges, which are predominantly physical, was one of the key ways that players drew on the "*Outlast*" part of the game's "Outwit, Outplay, Outlast" motto. Physical strength was also tied into other (heteronormative) ideas around the representations of masculine physical strength, such as how Ozzy (S13) drew attention to the way he was a provider for his tribe by catching significant amounts of fish, a form of what Champion (2016) calls "caveman masculinity" perpetuated in numerous survival-reality television shows.

Often juxtaposed against an opponent's physical game, contestant's "play" of the social game—building personal relationships with their opponents, gaining trust, and advantage—was often incorporated into their play narratives. Unsurprisingly, where *Survivor*'s physical game is often owned by male players, a strong social game was often owned by, or attributed to, female contestants. This was typically situated within a notion of a strategic "tool kit" players had at their disposal for playing the game, where contestants emphasized the way they "played the game with my strengths, which were personal" (Aubrey, S32). Conversely, the social game was often leveraged as a critique of contestants. In S34, juror Michaela asked contestant Brad "considering that this was a social game based on relationships, I'm interested to know how much you know about me," quizzing him on his social expertise, and contestant Troyzan defended his play based on the fact he had "talked to every single one of you, I've had personal relationships" (Troyzan, S34). However, *Survivor*'s social game was most frequently invoked in the context of player's emotional reactions to one of its most provocative mechanics, betrayal.

Betrayal

Survivor is one of the few games to feature betrayal as a core, but optional, mechanic. Björk (2015) categorizes games with deception and betrayal as examples of "feel bad games" for the unusually negative emotions they provoke in players, and *Survivor* is no exception:

> If I were to ever pass you along in life again and you were laying there dying of thirst I would not give you a drink of water, I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you, with no ill regrets. (Sue, S01)

Sentiments like this are common; jurors will frequently avoid voting for contestants who have betrayed them, and the "bitter betty" (Michaela, S34)—players who refuse to vote for stronger players who have betrayed them personally—heavily impacts who has won many seasons of *Survivor*. Consequently, the way betrayal should be valued in *Survivor* is hotly contested.

Betrayal is primarily critiqued as being either inherently unethical, where the "ends don't justify the means" (Mick, S19), or unnecessary. Elsewhere, Brooks (2017) has discussed the ethics of betrayal in *EVE Online*, arguing that it is intrinsically unethical in situations—like *Survivor*—where players develop deep personal

friendships with other players. In *Survivor*, where players are together every day for over a month, contestants are often critiqued for having "convinced everyone that they were your best friend, and you brought people's personal feelings into it and emotions and I feel, I feel kinda gross" (Andrea, S34). Contestants are often aware of this, asking jurors to "see the difference between my strategic game and the relations I actually built with you" (Todd, S15). These critiques are heavily interwoven with the question of how players behavior in game reflects, or doesn't reflect, who they are in real life, discussed later. Even jurors who don't feel like their personal relationships were exploited, such as Erik in S19, will critique contestants for having "played an unethical game," devalued simply because it was based in betrayal and the exploitation of trust.

Even players who don't think that betrayal is necessarily inherently unethical will critique contestants for having *unnecessarily* betrayed (a common *Survivor* insult is to call someone a "flip flopper"). S34 winner Parvati was critiqued for "everything that you did that was not necessary for strategic advancement in the game" (Eliza, S16), and S15 runner-up critiqued the winner on the basis that "if he is that good of a strategic player, why didn't he play this game better to where he didn't have to deceive and lie to all these people. He lied too much for me" (Amanda, S15). This critique of unnecessary betrayal is never applied to other strategies available for winning *Survivor*, such as winning "too many" individual immunity challenges or being "gratuitously" social. While betrayal is explicitly permitted, and I would argue encouraged, by the game rules, some argue that "there is a way to play the game without going as low as you had to go" (Ozzy, S34, about winner Sarah). Even when players recognize that a betrayal was necessary, for whatever reason, debates around betrayal often involved attempts to minimize it, referring to social distance, control, and complicity.

Elsewhere I (2015b) present an alternative view of betrayal in multiplayer games, based on interviews with *EVE Online* scammers, as being equivalent to any other form of competitive player versus play. This is also often argued in *Survivor*, where betrayal is often (to mixed success) invoked as a strategic strength, or competitive edge. In S08, Boston Rob is heavily critiqued by members of his Alliance who feel betrayed by his choices in the game, which he defends as being both preemptive and retaliatory; "yeah, I broke the alliance but you bartered to get me kicked off beforehand and I found out first, so I got rid of you before you had the chance to get rid of me" (Boston Rob, S08). Similarly, S16 runner-up Amanda defends her betrayal of juror Erik because he was "unloyal" and had tried to get her voted out. In these ways, we see how the notion of in-game trust is constantly being defined and redefined, leveraged to players advantage. Where contestants betrayed first, it is often defended as being within a larger strategic plan, removing a contestant's "biggest competition" (Richard, S01), or biggest threat (Aubrey, S32), and is never justified as being personal. Strikingly in the seasons analyzed here is the significant shifts in the acceptability of betrayal in the game, from the extremely emotional treatment of betrayal in earlier seasons (S01, S08), to the way Sarah's betrayals in S34 are treated

as "bad ass" (Zeke, S34), with jurors (begrudgingly) acknowledging that "she fooled us all" (Andrea, S34). This highlights how fan responses to each season of *Survivor* influences its subsequent seasons, legitimizing or delegitimizing different tactics and strategies, developing a *Survivor* metagame. As noted by Jenkins (2006), *Survivor* is a show very thoroughly talked about and debated online; for some the experience of watching *Survivor* is coconstructed by the parallel discussion of *Survivor* as-it-unfolds on television. These participatory practices of fans online, examples of Jenkin's (2006) *Convergence Culture*, work to influence the way contestants in later seasons value betrayal in the game.

Blurred Boundaries

In this, almost literal magic circle of a remote tropical island, the boundaries between the game and real life are constantly being blurred. So far, I've highlighted several ways that player's out-of-game values, prejudices (particularly toward gender), norms, and ethics influence the way play is valued. It is also prominent in the way that players deride or compliment contestant's personalities, reflecting how the way we value people in real life influences the way we value play. Frequently, jurors will ask questions about what positive things a contestant will do with the money (S08), and how they are a better role model (S16, S13). Attributes like "intelligence" (Nick, S32), being "upfront" (JR, S08), "honest" (Becky, S13), being "polite," and having "integrity" (Jonathan, S13) are applied to contestants positively, and a player's religious faith is also frequently invoked. Conversely, traits like being "superficial" (Eliza, S16), "arrogant" (Erik, S19) "nasty" (Andrea S34), "entitled" (Jonathan, S13), or "ungrateful" (Amanda, S16) work to devalue a player's strategy and chances to win. Host Jeff Probst frequently points out that this is a legitimate part of the game. Surviving to Final Tribal Council, while still being sufficiently liked by the jury that they vote for you, is part of the challenge and competition of *Survivor*. But why? In some respect, it reflects the common desire for "good people" to get ahead, reflected across most media where the "bad guy" rarely wins, but also indicating the possibility that games involving social play blur the typical boundaries that work to separate our personal feelings toward a person from their performance in the game.

This desire for "good people" to win is also present in the hotly contested question in *Survivor* on whether a player's behavior in the game reflects who they are in real life. S34 was won by returning player Sarah who orchestrated several betrayals to get to the Final Tribal Council where a key question became "what allows you to say this is real Sarah, and this is game Sarah" (Andrea, S34). Sarah defended her play style on the basis that "in the first season I played who I was in real life [that is, an honest person], and that got Sarah nowhere" (S34), whereas Brad argued that his athletic and loyal play style was simply because "that's who I am" (S34). Irrespective of whether your play of a game reflects your character in real life, these strategies further show how players use the desire for the "good guy" to win to

maximize their chance of winning, with players strategically redrawing the boundaries and hierarchies of the game's contest to their advantage.

Discussion

This analysis of contestant discourse in *Survivor*'s Final Tribal Councils has highlighted the key ideas, topics, and rhetorical strategies that players draw on to value some play over others. The different sites of contestation—strategy, physicality, and sociality—reflect and reveal the different ways that players ideologically conceptualize the spirit of the game. It is not to say that any analysis can identify which of these key *ways of playing* is most prominent, or valued highest, but rather that these are the grounds in which the competition of *Survivor* is understood to be played out, much in the same way that the competition of soccer is understood to be played out through physical strength and speed, agility, and strategy. Yet this analysis has also revealed the way that betrayal remains—after 35 seasons—a hotly contested strategy, understood to be part of *Survivor* but with its boundaries still contested, redrawn, and renegotiated in the interests of the contestants vying for the million-dollar prize.

These results have also highlighted the prominent ways that player's external norms, ethics, and prejudices are brought into the process. The invocation of best effort, hard work, and luck mirror the importation of cultural conceptualizations toward sport and gameplay I've previously discussed (Carter et al., 2015) in an analysis of an eSport controversy, reflecting the broader and well-established normative values player have toward competitions and justifying an analysis of *Survivor* as a multiplayer game, and not voyeur television experience. The play of *Survivor* is highly gendered, with numerous discursive strategies working to promote aggressive play styles celebrated as more "masculine" and diminish social, and less combative, ways of playing. Finally, this analysis also emphasizes the ways that the boundaries between the game and "real life," and its relevancy in valuing play, is blurred and contested and how the ethics of in-game action is inseparable from real life.

A Constructionist Approach to Multiplayer Games

Based on this analysis, I now want to propose a social constructionist approach to understanding games as moral economies, a form of thought province (Geertz, 1982), where different types of play are given different values by players. I argue that while *Survivor*'s unusual juror-vote mechanic makes this process of valuing play extremely prominent, it is a fundamental process which guides player behavior and experience across all multiplayer games. Subsequently, I'll go on to unpack how this conceptualization of games provides some indication of what it is that rules "do" in gameplay and how this provides a useful theoretical framework for studying the play of multiplayer games.

Multiplayer Games as Moral Economies

Survivor's Final Tribal Council exposes the ways that players value play, and I argue that this is a universal process, integral to the function of all multiplayer games. Players value certain play acts, styles, strategies, and events over other instances of play, and this is intrinsic to the function of competitive multiplayer games, with which I am solely concerned in this article.

It is through valuing play that win conditions are established or can be met, for example, paper beats rock. The most common way in which value is influenced is through rules. Consider soccer, only passing a ball through goal posts in soccer awards points. The team with the highest number of points by the conclusion of the match wins. Consequently, the moral economy of play that emerges from these rules values play and strategies that result in passing the ball between the posts higher than not doing so. After all, "rules are such as to suggest strategies" (Geertz, 1980, p. 171). Rules are also extremely influential in devaluing play, principally through categorizing types of play as being against the rules, with some form of penalty. While picking up the ball and running it through the opponent's goal posts in a Roman-legion *Testudo* formation might successfully move the ball between the goal posts, rules against using your hands to touch the ball devalue that particular strategy. Rudimentary stuff—as noted, rules are at the forefront of the practice of valuing play and have consequently been given primacy in definitions of, and attempts to understand, games and gameplay (Stenros, 2017).

When players of the same multiplayer game value play differently, conflict can emerge. Elsewhere, I've (2015) referred to this as the demarcation problem in multiplayer games, particularly relevant in online massively multiplayer games like *EVE Online* where hundreds of thousands of players have competing informal rulesets for the game. In a simpler example, if we disagree on whether it is okay for me to steal from the bank in *Monopoly* when you go to the bathroom, you will probably call me a cheater and refuse to play. This is despite it not saying in the rules of monopoly that players shouldn't, or are not allowed to, steal from the bank. To avoid such conflicts, multiplayer games (particularly competitive ones) are highly structured; rules—formal and informal—govern (and thus give different values to) play. Win conditions are nearly always established by rules, such as by points, or in more abstract terms, such as the reward of "experience points."

However, rules are not the only mechanism with which play is valued in multiplayer games. Prior work has shown how terms and concepts like sportsmanship (Moeller, Esplin, & Conway, 2009), cheating (Consalvo, 2007), fair play (Butcher & Schneider, 1998), griefing, and trolling (Lin & Sun, 2007) are attached to play acts, events, and strategies to change their worth. The analysis of *Survivor* that I have presented in this article highlights the breadth of situated concepts players draw on to negotiate the value of different play in the context of the game's million-dollar prize. To return to the example of soccer, passing the ball out of bounds because a member of the opposing team is injured does not help you win the game. However, due to the

concepts of sportsmanship and fair play (inextricably linked to Soccer's Western historical context and romanticized notions of medieval chivalry), such play is valued by both players and spectators more highly than using that advantage to score goals.

Game paratexts are an additional way in which play is ascribed values in multiplayer games. Paratext is a concept initially developed by Genette (1991, 1997) to describe the material that surround a literary text, which work to "assure its presence in the world, its reception, and its consumption" (Genette, 1991, p. 261). Extended to digital games, Consalvo (2007, 2017) argues that game paratexts help "structure [play] and give it meaning" (p. 21) and that they play a key role in telling a player "how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world" (p. 22). For instance, Paul (2012) has extensively discussed and described the ways that games, and game paratexts, socialize players to play in the "correct" way; Glas's (2016) analysis of "making-of" materials, bundled with physical copies of digital games, highlights how paratexts can "draw our immediate attention during gameplay and even steer us into new game goals" (p. 10); and Egliston's (2017) exploration of the role of paratexts in in-game skill development situates this process within the embodied process of play. These examples show how paratexts persuasively influence how players value types of play and ways of playing or work to change value by acting as a resource for players to selectively draw on in arguments, as with *Survivor*'s Outwit, Outlast, Outplay motto.

Like paratexts, game imaginaries—the fictive world that contextualizes and helps players make sense of play (see Krzywinska, 2008; Wolf, 2012)—also serve a similar role to game paratexts in valuing play. These can be drawn on by players in contestations over the legitimacy of certain types of play, such as how *EVE Online*'s hypercapitalist dystopic imaginary works to legitimate financial theft (Carter, 2015b; Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2013). According to U.S. host Jeff Probst, *Survivor* was "sort of inspired" by the movie and book, *Lord of the Flies* (Probst, Survivor S08E14), a dystopic imaginary which similarly works to legitimate betrayal and transgressive play. Alongside a game's design, mechanics, and story, the fictional context in which a game is set works to influence a player's goal, the choices they make, and the way they interpret the outcomes of their actions.

A multiplayer game's cultural and social context transforms the ways in which play is valued. To again return to our example of soccer, social context constantly influences the way we value play; an enthusiastic sliding tackle against a 6-year-old child in a backyard soccer game is generally frowned upon. In this way, we see how social context mediates the way we interpret the rules, favor different strategies, and negotiate competitive play. Woods (2012) discusses this regarding board gameplay, describing the example of self-handicapping, which is where players purposefully adopt "non optimal play when opponents are mismatched," such as when teaching new players (p. 182). Woods (2012) explains this phenomena by identifying how "the social fabric of the gaming encounter was of more importance than the game goals" (p. 184). If we compare this to the likelihood of a similar practice at a World

Chess Championship, we see how influential social context, and the game as spectacle (such as in *Survivor*), can be in establishing a game's moral economy, and consequently, how we choose to behave when playing a game, and how we interpret our experiences.

This analysis of *Survivor* showed the way personal norms, ethics, and prejudices were also drawn into this process of valuing play. Strategies based in betrayal and the violation of trust were often valued poorly, reflecting the way those behaviors are valued in the real world. Prevalent heteronormative values around specific play styles influence the way they're valued when exhibited by a man, or by a woman (see also Wall, 2011, on gender and survivor voting patterns). This is similarly the case in digital games: Bergstrom (2015) notes that in *EVE Online* different ways of playing are differently valued according to conventional gender norms, with social and collaborative, mining and manufacturing play gendered feminine and consequently derided within the game's community (p. 158). Other racial and stereotypical prejudices have been more widely identified in massively multiplayer online game scholarship. Also studying *EVE Online*, Goodfellow (2015) has highlighted the ways that Russian players are played against differently, expected to be more cutthroat. Both Yee (2014) and Nakamura (2009) have written about the way play is racialized as "Chinese" in online games, perpetuating and leveraging negative stereotypes. This is not to describe this as a hierarchical process by which these elements of the social and cultural context "pollute" an "objective" or "pure" system of values established by the rules, but rather that the very existence of the multiplayer game is codependent on player's negotiation and interpretation of a broad variety of resources that informs the way they value play.

It is in the mutual, shared recognition of this moral economy that multiplayer games can be considered a form of Geertz's thought province, a socially constructed system about which players collectively conceive reasonably similar values. In the context of a commentary on the concept of disciplines, Geertz (1982) proposed "thinking about thought as a social activity, diversely animated, organized and aimed" (p. 30). Doing so is essentially a means to understand how it comes to be that "separate individuals come to conceive, or do not, reasonably similarly similar things" (p. 23). This, Geertz (1982) argues, overcomes the error that lies "in attempting to interpret cultural materials as though they were individual expressions rather than social institutions" (p. 16). This way of conceptualizing disciplinary thought—as a key example of a thought province—underpins Geertz's cultural anthropology and the development of ethnography, which has been widely and fruitfully applied in the studies of game cultures.

Here, I propose that conceptualizing moral economies as a form of thought province is useful, as it is necessary for the successful function of multiplayer games that separate players collectively come to conceive reasonably similar values about the game world. Attention has previously been given to this question indirectly in the study of informal rules (Brown, 2012; Carter et al., 2015; Moeller et al., 2009; Taylor, 2012), but typically as an exhibit of game culture. This is crucially different

to understanding the games themselves (around which game culture importantly inhibits, constraints, and influences) as constructed social activity, or as Geertz (1980) elsewhere put it, "little universes of meaning, in which some things can be done and some cannot." To understand and approach games in this way calls for research to "attend therefore to such muscular matters as the representation of authority, the marking of boundaries, the rhetoric of persuasion, the expression of commitment, and the registering of dissent" (Geertz, 1982, p. 21), guiding future work. As such, we can further interrogate how places of participatory fan culture are key grounds in the shaping of a game's moral economy.

While significant attention has been given to the demarcation of the boundaries in games (Carter et al., 2015; Consalvo, 2007), I argue that conceptualizing games as moral economies is a useful starting point for addressing Stenros's (2017) call for further work on what it is that rules are (p. 515). In his review of over 60 definitions of games since the 1930s, Stenros (2017) points out that:

> Although rules are often conceived as central to games, very few definitions specify what "rules" are. Are only explicit rules considered rules? What about implicit rules and more general social norms? Indeed, what about material rules imposed by reality, such as limits of human physiology and gravity? These questions are important if one wishes to construct a definition that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions for a game. (p. 502)

So, while rules are important for gameplay (Stenros, 2017, notes that this is "something most game definitions agree upon," p. 501), the approach I have outlined here decenters rules in the way we conceptualize, and therefore study, multiplayer games, by placing the way they influence our behavior and experience *alongside* social and cultural contexts, play histories, norms, prejudices, and our ideological constructs toward play. Rules heavily influence how we value play in multiplayer games, but it is through various social activities that we come to agree on reasonably similar things about how to play, what to do, and how to experience it.

Conclusion: On Studying Moral Economies

Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. Social constructionism embraces the view that "that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). A consequence of this epistemological stance is the assertion that multiple social realities exist; there is no single "true" or "valid" interpretation of reality, but rather, interpretations that can be useful, liberating, and so forth (Crotty, 1998, pp. 47–48). These interpretations are couched in their historical, social, and cultural contexts. This is not to deny the existence of a true external reality but just its accessibility and objective representation.

Consequently, the contribution of this work is not (another) definition of what games are and are not, but rather, a conceptualization of games as moral economies that is useful for guiding the future study of multiplayer games. One of my goals here has been to develop a theoretical perspective toward multiplayer games that develops from the study of multiplayer games as a distinct, socially negotiated, and playful context. This is not to say that the study of a single-player game's moral economy would not be useful, but such a claim exceeds the goals of this article. Examining how the hierarchy of values is established—the representations and attributions of authority, the demarcation of boundaries, the rhetoric's of persuasion and dissent, and so forth—distinguishes the study of multiplayer games, as an innately social process contingent on interactions between people and their world. It suggests that examining the contests around how these thought provinces are maintained and acquired will reveal the moral constructs players have around their gameplay, and the role that various in-game and out-of-game elements play in establishing them, without establishing a hierarchy or centrality for either. For this process, the televised competitive game *Survivor* is an ideal site of study, as the process of Final Tribal Council makes this process transparent.

I argue that this provides a greater theoretical defense for ethnographic studies of digital game cultures as a lens for understanding player experience and behavior in multiplayer games. I draw heavily on examples from *EVE Online* in this article to demonstrate the relevance of this study of *Survivor* to a complex sandbox online game like *EVE Online* and to acknowledge the way the ideas presented here have grown out of my, and others, scholarship of *EVE*. For instance, research on *EVE*'s player cultures have shown how its paratexts (Bergstrom et al., 2013; Carter, 2015a) and imaginary (Carter, 2015b) work alongside player's heteronormative values (Bergstrom, 2015) and prejudices (Goodfellow, 2015) to influence the way that players come to agree reasonably similar things about how they value play in *EVE Online*, and consequently, what *EVE Online* is. *EVE*'s notorious (Bergstrom & Carter, 2015) reputation for thefts and scams is not the outcome of its rules and coded design (e.g., see Warmelink, 2013), but it is coconstructed by players and developers over time. This is why studying elements like *EVE*'s tutorial, which demands players seek assistance from the game's community (Bergstrom, 2013; Paul, 2012, 2015), how the cultures of its communities are established (Milik & Webber, 2017), the cultural differences in *EVE* play (Page, 2017), and players who have "quit" *EVE* (Bergstrom, 2017) offer significant insight into how and where *EVE*'s moral economy is established and the role participatory fan cultures play in this process.

Further, I argue that this approach provides an epistemological defense for the widespread practice of researcher play, often presented as the most "crucial element" in a game studies methodology (Mäyrä, 2008) but still rarely situated within a project's methodology (see Van Vught & Glas, 2017, for a recent review and in-depth discussion). In ethnographic research on games, it is suggested that the researcher "cannot simply observe because, by definition, [they] must participate in

the fieldsite" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012: 142), which has translated into researchers playing with (and becoming an active member of) the community and culture they are studying. To conceptualize and study multiplayer games as moral economies suggests two ways that researcher play is a core and essential part of a researcher's data collection strategy. Through playing a game, a researcher is exposed to the stylistic repertoires that players employ, or are exposed to, in valuing play. This is both in the order and experience of encountering game rules, mechanics, and rewards, but also the game's paratexts, the social and cultural context of games, and the game communities' culture, norms, and ethics. It is in reflecting on how it is that the researcher, as player, comes to learn those *reasonably similarly similar things* about the "right" ways of playing a game, through which player experience and behavior can become better understood.

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