

Simon, Bart. "Instructions, Rules and The Other Market as Gameworld". Presentation for the *Do As You're Told* symposium, Greenwich University, London, UK. November 14, 2023.

Instructions, Rules and The Other Market as Gameworld

Welcome all – we're super excited to be here to share our work and continue conversations with and around the ever-inspiring ZU team. We are here as part of the Liveness research group in the Technoculture, Art and Games (TAG) research centre at Concordia University in Montreal. The collaboration between TAG and ZU spans about a decade of meetings, workshops, performances, academic and public writing and eating (don't forget the eating!) as we tease apart elements of making what we call "gamey experiences."

But our touchstone is not theatre-making or even performance so much as games proper. Board games, playground games, and especially digital games. We are a group of game design and game studies scholars and artists eager to explore the boundaries and edges of what are commonly understood to be games. So, if you are an avid ZU fan (as we are) then you'll understand why we started our collaboration. (And the day

I can sit with Jade for a session of Minecraft will be the happiest day of my life.)

For today we want to do three things – first we have prepared a kind of talk... a piece of our on-going conversation... maybe it's a kind of cheeky love letter to Jorge and Jade. We'll see. I'll prattle on a bit – then in part 2 I will introduce the Other Market and some of our hopes and dreams for the experience and for the last part we'll open up for any feedback and thoughts you might have on your experience of the piece yesterday and take the discussion in anyway you might fancy.

Okay - Part One – A hypothesis.

Games have rules, performances have instructions. That is, what defines a game as being different from a (participatory) performance depends on how we understand the difference between rules and instructions. Both terms are related in the sense that both a rule and an instruction specify an action in the form of an imperative. “Do this” and/or “do that”, “don't do this” and/or “don't do that” or the more classic “first this, then that.” Both rules and instructions have similar syntactic forms and are often used exchangeably so how can we understand the difference?

Let us take a game like chess. Chess has rules which we all generally know. Here are some of the “official” rules for how to play the game.

“The player controlling the white pieces is named "White"; the player controlling the black pieces is named "Black". White moves first, then players alternate moves. Making a move is required; it is not legal to skip a move, even when having to move is detrimental. Play continues until a king is checkmated, a player resigns, or a draw is declared. In addition, if the game is being played under a time control, a player who exceeds the time limit loses the game unless they cannot be checkmated.”

Now we don't often recite these rules when we sit to play chess, we sort of just know them... but they are there so that if there is ever a question or circumstance that requires it, we may “refer to” or “quote the rules” to know how to proceed. Crucially, players are only playing chess (and not some variant or other game) if they mutually agree (tacitly or otherwise) that they are playing by the rules of the game. This does not stop disagreements or fights from breaking out – rules are not natural laws – rules are binding only insofar as the players accept them as being so. Indeed, this is what happens when I say, “would you like to play chess?” and you say “sure.” What we are doing is agreeing to a course of action which is defined by a set of rules. This is amazing stuff. It means that

thousands, no millions, of people around the world can consistently play chess together. They can be strangers meeting for the first time and still have a wonderful game of chess in a park on a sunny day.

Things are a bit different if you have never played chess before. Maybe I know the rules and you don't. I ask you to play chess and you say, "ok, but I don't know how to play." What follows then are not a set of rules so much as a set of instructions: "first, choose the white pieces or black pieces," "next, set them up on the board like this," "white moves first", "you can move your pawn like this" "you should try to put my king in check"....

Instructions can come in written form or verbal form but what makes instructions for how to play chess different from the rules for how to play chess is the fact that the "force" of instructions are tied to the person who gives them. This position is crucially different from philosophical thinking that rules and instructions have different effects on the receiver. For instance, rules are not more binding than instructions – you can break a rule as easily as you can not follow an instruction. Moreover, both rules and instructions need to be interpreted, and misinterpretations (unintentional and intentional) are possible in both circumstances. No,

what really matters with rules and instructions is the differing status of the sender not the receiver.

I can give you instructions for how to play and generally you would try to follow my instructions (assuming you want to play) but why? Who am I to teach you the game of chess? At the very least I am someone who claims to know the rules. Do you trust that I know the rules? Do you trust that I can convey them accurately? Do you think I will skew the instructions to give myself an unfair advantage?

What if you don't like my instructions? What if you want to play differently than I say we should play? My only defence is that I know the rules... "but the rules", I say. Yet you do not know the rules, you only know what I say the rules are (and while google can often settle any dispute unless like fake news there are fake rules – but lets pretend our phones are out of power). Now, the matter at hand becomes less about the rules and more and more about whether the person conveying the rules as a set of instructions can/or should be trusted. The more you trust me, the more you are likely to accept my instructions without question (and of course it is possible to mis-learn the rules this way as well).

Written instructions encounter the same problem. One must also have to reckon with the provenance of those instructions. Does the writer

have some special knowledge or authority about the situation? Cooking recipes are excellent for thinking about written instructions for that is simply what they are. A recipe is a set of instructions for how to cook something written by some author who is presumably someone who has cooked the thing (successfully) and not ChatGPT. Recipes are not rules.

Cooking does indeed have rules (like don't serve raw chicken) which we all depend on when we go to someone's house for dinner, but recipes are categorically not rules – they are instructions where the reputation, authority, sincerity, and trustworthiness of the author is critical. There's lots we can say about this but one thing that is interesting is how each time you follow a recipe, and it turns out badly, often lowers one's trust that the next recipe by the same author will be worth following. That is, trust and distrust in instructions from a single source are cumulative.

So. We are getting somewhere perhaps. Instructions, in a sense, intensify the relation between a sender and a receiver. They challenge the receiver to trust the sender and force the receiver to look for signs beyond the instructions themselves to somehow guarantee or ground their veracity. Rules, on the other hand, obviate the need for a sender since their destiny is to be generalized and systemic. An imperative that is recognized as a rule does not need an authenticated sender. A rule is a rule.

Where does this leave us? Games have rules. Performances have Instructions. The goal of game design is to create a system that in effect can operate independently of the designer. A good game is like chess where the rules are basically common knowledge. It should be clear to all players what is allowed or not allowed, and this common knowledge then facilitates amazing feats of collective action across time and space. This is true of chess and other board games, playground games, and party games and it is also true of video games and digital games. Whether the games function by hard-coded rules (in software or hardware) or socially accepted and agreed upon ways of playing one seldom needs to look outside the rules to guarantee their veracity.

Performance and especially instruction-based performance does the opposite. It draws participants in close and intensifies the relation between performance-maker and participant. Participants learn to wait for and count on getting instructions for what to do. They are bound to the instruction and the instructor. The participant is waiting with baited-breath, eager for the experience that following each instruction brings... like following a treasure map.

Now we might say that this modality can only exist one time. Like learning to play chess the first time... each move following an instruction is a

discovery but after the first time you know what to expect. In instruction-based performance this is not the case however – because the experience is in following the instruction not learning rules. There is never the assumption that one would go off and do the experience somewhere else without the instructor as one would do with a game, with chess. For an experience to be game... it must be freed from the instructor, from the designer, from the maker and from the artist. It must live or die in the hands of the players themselves.

If the participants catch themselves waiting or wondering what to do, if they do not consult each other to figure out the next (valid) move, if they must seek outside guidance, if they credit or blame the designer instead of themselves then the experience is not (yet) a game. In this sense, the job of the game designer is to create the conditions under which participants might play a game and in so doing become players. Its not at all easy and in fact much of the contemporary game industry is built around convincing people they are playing a game when in fact they are just following instructions.

Indeed many video games take this form – here is your character, now go to that place and shoot everyone you see, take the stuff off their dead bodies and use it to buy or make a new more powerful weapon. Now

go to the next place and shoot everyone again. Repeat this cycle until you get to the big fight at the end. This is not like chess, you don't know the rules you are just following instructions. We refer to this as "gaming-on-rails" and this form of instruction-based play as "signposting".

If following the instructions brings you some pleasure or horror or whatever then like with the cookbook you are likely to keep "playing." If you feel frustrated and keep dying over and over and you don't understand why, then you will blame the game designer and quit. In neither case have you actually played a game.

What good instruction-based performance does that this kind of game design doesn't is take responsibility for the giving of instructions. The performer is called upon to cultivate a relationship with the participants and earn their trust. We feel this is an adequate way to describe ZU's approach to instruction-based performance (even if we don't think they are games :) and there is a way to theorize this in pondering the relation between rules and instructions.

Part 2 – The Other Market

Now lets talk about our approach to The Other Market. There are many ways into this because there are many threads of thinking and making that meet in what we have produced. But for today we want you to consider The Other Market as a wannabe game and not instruction-based performance (in spite of the fact that there are indeed many instructions!). Its destiny is to be played by legions of fans in market spaces all over the world. The rules, the materials and the assets (like the stories) would all be publicly available on a website and players could get together in groups of 3 to have a bit of fun. The MC character is not needed, the support team is not needed.... Indeed, the entire provenance of the experience may be denuded over time as with all the best folk games.

Our goal in this sense is to build the Other Market as a gameworld which can be occupied by people who become players as they assume the roles the game specifies along with the material means to apprehend the everyday market differently. The ears have an easy to make listening device that picks up snippets of recorded narrative, the eyes have the polaroid camera that makes everything look different, the hands have sheets of paper that must be turned into some kind of compelling object. All this should seem both familiar and unfamiliar to most players and when set within the context of a live bustling market – all the set design, all the

environmental storytelling, all the atmosphere, and all the world, comes ready-made. Like a pick-up game of football/soccer – all you need is a bunch of players, a ball and field and you are good to go.

But the Other Market is also performance. Everything rests on those first few moments when the MC/bunny character must relay the instructions that define the rules of the game. For this iteration, we tried to reduce the role of the performer even further by using written instructions that each team finds at their table. But we could see right away how important the MC is – directing traffic and holding attention, ushering and inviting participation, making people feel comfortable, resolving confusion, and just generally reminding everyone that they are doing something out of the ordinary. Indeed, for some reason early on we imagined the MC in a bunny suit to make it clear that something slightly off was going on.

We have two directions here – we can lean into the performance and the MC's relation with the players, and we can lean into the game and sever the relation with the performer. When fully a game, the performance such as it is would be entirely in the hands of the players. They may be brilliant or terrible but that is how games go. So, game making is ultimately, we think, about a loss of control... or maybe it's a controlled loss of control. We don't mean for the experience to be anything goes (but of course it could

end up this way) but rather like all games the rules (once you are confident about them) set a stage in which some actions make sense to the players and others do not.

The other tricky thing to manage without instructions is the moment in the game when players need to move from collecting stories and objects to building a collection which culminates with storytelling. That transition would be difficult without an instructor/MC because we don't want players to know what the finale will be before they start playing. The performer as a kind of governor may introduce new elements which would be otherwise have to be done by other means (like maybe every player gets a text on their phone telling them they must make a collection and be ready to tell a story about it). More than this, the MC's continued intervention serves not only to keep players moving, but they also serve to remind players that they are playing in a gameworld that bleeds easily into everyday life (for instance as some players may walk off or start shopping for real).

In hybrid game spaces like the one we want to create this might be critical. Carving gamespaces out of everyday physical places is difficult and holding those spaces together over time is even more difficult. Having a gameboard helps (the team table is gameboard – the players gather round), having the timers helps (this is like game shows or timed chess) and having

weird tools helps (who walks around a market with a weird listening device... it must be someone playing a game). We don't need the MC if these other things are working but having the MC helps bind it all together.

But most critically, without the MC, why would anyone act in accordance with our instructions? Maybe if we were some reputable game company – Ubisoft presents, The Other Market (maybe Punchdrunk presents... 😊). You get your tickets, walk into the pub, see the table and read the instructions... then play. Confusions and different interpretations are resolved collectively... perhaps everyone decides to play wrong even. But you try to follow (or not) the instructions based on your assessment of instructor. If you aren't quite sure what to do, or what its about... you can just choose to have faith that the instructor will guide you.

The MC character must do “trust” work that can't be done otherwise... to allow the participants to settle into being players. But once the players get it... they should disappear and ideally be forgotten so that the players come to value their own choices and actions and each other's in the creation of what becomes a mutual accomplishment. In the Other Market we are striving for feelings of merriment, creativity, and pride. We want the players to think there is more to the game than what they alone got to experience (maybe warranting a repeat playthrough?). The goal then

should not be to follow the instructions but to suss or grok the rules (in our lingo) and play the game as they would a game of chess or monopoly or marbles.

In our opinion, good games and good rules specify the horizon for a mutual collective experience that unfolds beyond the limits of the experience itself. As you play the game it should be possible to think of, and imagine, all the ways in which the experience might unfold differently. Choices not made and choices yet to be made (choices that could be made another time – remember the whole point of chess is that you never play just once!). Is such a form of world-making possible with participatory performance? Is it desired?

What should we make of the legion of sleepnomore-like immersive experiences which promise such worlds? We venture to suggest that this new breed of commercial immersive experience design neither produces game rules nor do they take responsibility for giving instructions but pretend to do both. Perhaps in this there is common cause for concern because at the end of the day both games and performances aim to provide a means for participants to experience their world otherwise.

Part 3 – Okay enough ranting... lets open the floor to discussion of rules, instructions, games, performances or anything else you like. What did you think of The Other Market?