

# Emergent Systems in *Mao*: Negotiating the Meaning of a Game by Playing the Rules

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## ABSTRACT

In this study of a community’s play of the card game *Mao*, I have examined how the rules of the game are negotiated by the situated community to generate a desired spirit of the game. I examine the structure of rules in the game, critical negotiations of rules made by the community, and the implications of rules and their negotiation on the game’s spirit and system. My conclusion is that community creation, infringement, and negotiation of rules forms an integral part of the sociotechnical system that inform game meaning. “Meta” models formed by situated communities need to be taken as seriously as formal aspects of games. Community systems inherently have the power to affect, maintain, and negotiate the rules and meaning of games.

## Keywords

emergent systems, game culture, meta rules, play context, rules, social interaction

## INTRODUCTION

“The game of *Mao* has now begun.”

Silence enfolds the table and players begin placing cards down turn by turn to the center. Occasionally, the group resounds with an “all hail” or a single player utters a phrase, before lapsing into silence again. The rules are never explicitly stated, but vaguely called punishments are dealt for rule infractions. This is the card game known as *Mao*. It’s notorious for being difficult to pick up and a general pain. Why? Because it’s against the rules to discuss the rules and merciless its punishment of rule breakers. Moreover, the rules change from game to game of *Mao* as players implement their own unspoken rules that all are expected to follow.

*Mao* is a game that appears to thrive off of a sadistic pleasure of punishment. However, in a wing of a dorm community at a North American residential college, the emergent gameplay in *Mao* does not take on such a sadistic flavor. While the rules of *Mao* provide the contingency that would allow for sadistic play, the game must be understood in its situated community. As considered in work with situated play and esports (Carter et al. 2015) (Taylor 2012), rules do not comprise the fundamental identity of a game – “rule systems are dynamic, interpretable, and incomplete” (Taylor 2012, 55). As Jakobsson demonstrates in his study of *Random Smash* (2007), a community can vastly impact the nature of a game without changing the core rules. I will be interrogating exactly how – the methods and means by which – communities play with rules to negotiate the nature of a game, specifically, through examining and understanding this instance of situated play with *Mao*.

In this paper, I will argue that communities play with rules to co-creatively negotiate the nature of a game. I draw on my fieldwork within a college dorm where I both observed and participated in over one-hundred twenty games of *Mao*, starting from the community’s first game. I begin with an overview of the basic framework of *Mao*, the focus of this case. I will then analyze the emergent play with specific examples

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and examine how play is the means by which the community and players negotiate game meaning. Finally, I argue that this case of *Mao* provides insight into how communities engage in the meaning-making of games through the creation, policing, and playing of informal rules. Ultimately, I argue that similar moves and plays allow communities to intervene in the *sociotechnical structure* of various platforms by engaging in meaning-making.

### DID SOMEONE SAY MAO?



**Figure 1:** The community setting up for a game of *Mao*.

Around midnight, one of the *Mao* regulars calls out, “did someone say *Mao*?”. If enough interest is accumulated, voiced by the repetition of the question, a game of *Mao* begins. The group would congregate around the same circular table in the corner of the wing’s main lounge (the common spot after being asked to move due to noise). Typically, in one night, approximately five to ten games would be played in the span of around two hours. The first time *Mao* was played as a one-off in a wing of the dorm, but as people enjoyed the game, it persisted and a community quickly formed around it. At first, the number and composition of players generally varied, but almost always did a certain set of players participate. Soon, a very distinct community of regulars and semi-regulars emerged.

Over the course of one semester (approximately sixteen weeks), I participated or spectated nearly every game of *Mao*, perhaps missing about ten games, situated in the wing’s community. I initially played as a resident of the community, but as interesting conflicts and bending of rules occurred, I became fascinated by how important the negotiation of the rules of a “ridiculous” game were. I began keeping

detailed notes of games<sup>1</sup> and interviewing members of the community, both of which I will draw upon for this essay.

Before describing the community and their play of *Mao*, we must first break the most basic tenant of *Mao* and discuss the rules. *Mao* is a non-collaborative, turn-based, shedding-type card game. This means only one player wins and they do so when they no longer possess any cards in their hand. The game is played with a standard 52-card deck, although the number of decks used is not fixed. Players are initially each dealt seven cards and get rid of cards by playing up to a single card on their turn. These rules are much like *UNO*. A valid play of a card is one in which the card shares either the same suit or value as the last card played (which is face-up in the center). If a player can make no valid plays, they draw a card from the deck instead.

Those are the basic frameworks of how *card play* works. However, *Mao*'s uniqueness lies in its “unspoken” rules. These rules dictate extra mechanics and *how* the game is played. What player behaviors are allowed or what actions a player must take if they behave in a certain way. Players in the community often refer to the rules regarding these actions as *meta-rules*. But, this term is inaccurately applied as *meta* implies a transcendence of the ruleset or prescribed bounds of play. A *meta* has no inherent, formal power prescribed in the game. While in *Mao* these actions, which may in other card games be meta, are or can be incorporated into the scope of the game rules and thus, once incorporated, cease to be meta. For example, a typical stock rule is *Excessive Talking*<sup>2</sup>:

Players may not speak excessively during normal gameplay, they may only say words and phrases as required by cards [except for during a] “point of order” [... where] players may speak freely (Farejowicz 2017)

Talking, which may be bad manners in some card games such as *Shinji*, is specifically restricted by a rule and punishable in game. Using Salen and Zimmerman's framework of three types of rules (2003), we see *Mao* empowers what might typically be an *implicit rule* of “etiquette, good sportsmanship, and other implied rules of proper game behavior” impacts the game as much as an *operational rule*: “the ‘rules of play’ of a game [...] usually synonymous with the written-out ‘rules’ that accompany board games and other non-digital games” (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 130). *Implicit rules* become diegetic – absorbable into the game as explicit rules. Player behavior or manner not only directly impacts *card play*, but is also play in itself – what the community would call *meta-play* but what we'll refer to as *conduct play*.

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<sup>1</sup> I mostly took notes on games after they were over so as not to disrupt the flow of gameplay, only taking notes of quotes during a game

<sup>2</sup> Stock rules and their names may vary from community to community. This particular name was instituted by general consensus in the community

I specifically choose to use the term *conduct* and not *meta* here to make explicit the importance of player conceptual models of a game. Community generated rules, standards, and “*metas*” are not merely overlaid onto the formal system authored by the game developer(s). The two systems dynamically interplay – influencing one another’s architecture and power. *Meta* does not truly capture that interaction or power of the community negotiation with the core systems of games. Thus, I use *conduct play* to rebalance the conversation and remove the implication that community generated models of behavior are inherently outside the scope of a game.

Games of *Mao* also impact one another. The winner of a game of *Mao* gets to implement a new rule of their own creation for subsequent games, and, of course, not explain their rule. This means any actual player behavior can become a part of the game and *conduct play*. The rule system is emergent (Juul 2002).

Enforcing and retaining rules across games in an arc is a community burden. More specifically, rule makers are responsible for remembering and consistently enforcing their rules. As such, negotiations occurred to either omit or apply best-understanding of rules when details were either forgotten or the original rule maker was not present.

How does a game of *Mao* begin? I first learned a version of *Mao* that dictates if anyone asks, “what is *Mao*”, a game must then begin. As such, the game spread like wildfire among high schools and middle schools in my hometown. Under this starting condition, games of *Mao* began with at least one ignorant party (the original party who asked what the game was) that was often “preyed” upon. This unbalanced power structure often led *Mao* to be a revel of pleasure in punishment. And in particular, one community I played with silently punished players for all rule infractions without explanation. In general, players pick up on rules by looking for patterns, trying and failing/succeeding to follow a rule, observing others’ failures and successes, and picking up on social cues. As stock rules vary from community to community, I will interrogate how the wing community formulated their stock rules later in this essay.

When *Mao* was first suggested by a couple of members of the wing, there was a hesitancy to start a sadistic game. However, even over the course of several games, *Mao* did not take on this sadistic, power-exploitation flavor. And as the community kept playing and rules accumulated through games, the duration of a game of *Mao* would last as long as two hours. Players then decided “resets” were required as the game became too tedious and long. A reset would take out all player created rules and the next game would begin with only stock rules and re-begin the process of accumulating new player created rules. As such, arcs of *Mao* games where rules continuously accumulated naturally formed. These resets also led to a stretch of the rules: players would discuss the rules they implemented after a reset. This even led to the documentation and publication of rules in past arcs of *Mao* (Farejowicz 2017)<sup>3</sup>.

This led me to interrogate what kinds of rules were created by players and which rules were negotiable and why. How did play and rule creation shape the spirit of *Mao*? *Mao* is simultaneously authoritarian in the power it gives players to implement

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<sup>3</sup> The indentation of bullets in the site is slightly off

rules and democratic in how players collectively judge rule infractions. I discovered, play of *Mao* in the wing community provides a great framework to look at how community standards are created, upheld, negotiated, and played.

## THE RULES WE MAKE AND WHY WE MAKE THEM

Over the course of the semester, a wide variety of rules were created and for a variety of reasons. What the components of the rules deal with create a pretty good metric to distinguish between kinds of rules. Generally, rules are comprised of three components: a trigger, an effect, and a call. A trigger is what causes a rule to come into play. An effect is what the rule dictates must be done in response and who must do it. The call is akin to the name of the rule; it's what an infraction of the rule is called<sup>4</sup>. The call sometimes, but not always, informs about the effect or trigger of the rule. Let's examine these components in the context of the stock rule *All Hail*. For *All Hail*, the trigger is playing a face card. The effect is all players must say "all hail". The call is "failure to say 'all hail'". Triggers and effects can deal in either *card play* or *conduct play*. Going back to *All Hail*, the trigger is *card play* and the effect is *conduct play*.

Players created rules for a variety of reasons. Many rules acted as puzzles, making the game more difficult (which became fairly simple once players figured out the stock rules) by presenting a challenge to discover what the trigger and/or effect are. There is a wide variety of these rules that ranged in difficulty. An easy rule, for example, is *Prime*: it requires the player who plays a card with a prime value to say "prime". On the other hand, *Me IRL* required players to say "me irl" when the value of the card they play matches the number of letters in their name. Other rules act like *mods*, *modifying* or altering the mechanics of *card play*. For example, *Cockblock* requires the player who plays a 3 to call out a card value that the subsequent player may not play next.

The function of both puzzle and mod rules falls in line with what Marcus Carter and his colleagues note about informal rules, that they are developed "as part of an effort to collectively maximize the interests (typically, to have fun) of all players" (Carter, et al. 2015, Discussion). Puzzle rules attempt to balance the difficulty of the game for player enjoyment and mod rules attempt to make *card play* more interesting and enjoyable. The major difference is that they are not exactly "informal rules" in *Mao*.

However, in the discussions of subsequent resets, some players professed to implementing rules with the intention of regulating play they felt was not in the spirit of the game. Rhetoric like "I realized that's not what you meant for [this rule] to do" and "I implemented *Yeah Boii* [spelling theirs] so people would stop doing that" indicated such. *Yeah Boii* is a rule that requires a player to say "yeah boii" when they point with one or two fingers. During that arc, players were helping one another by pointing at the next person when it was their turn to play if it appeared they were not aware it was their turn (players can be penalized for *Not Recognizing Your Turn*). The player who implemented *Yeah Boii* professed they disagreed with this nicety and thus

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<sup>4</sup> It is to be noted that not every community requires players to call out the infraction they are punishing for.

added a rule to punish those who pointed and did not say “yeah boii” to discourage such behavior. There’s an attempt to bound what the attitude and spirit of the game is to what a player perceives it should be: ‘*Mao* is not about helping each other’. Another rule, *Teamwork*, similarly attempted to bound play not in the spirit of the game. The community had decided 1) one player’s turn ends when another player plays and 2) a player can only be punished during their turn (these are both *implicit rules* the community created in response to edge cases). *Teamwork* requires players who were not penalized for an infraction because the next player played too quickly to say “teamwork”. Thus, players who could not figure out another rule but were “saved” or didn’t understand *Teamwork* could now be punished. It reinforces the idea that “*Mao* is about figuring out and following the rules” by not letting players dodge punishment.

## NEGOTIATING THE NATURE OF THE GAME

The implementation of rules to bound “what the game is about” (arguably the nature or meaning of the game) and the spirit of the game parallels discussions surrounding controversial plays in esports. In Carter and colleagues’ study of a controversial play in *EVE*’s esports, they note arguments made by the community about “what play *should* [emphasis theirs] be about” and whether the play made “violate[s] the spirit” (2015, Play as Unsportsmanlike/Unskilled/Unfair). Similarly, T.L. Taylor discusses interpretation and judgement on rules in esports are often made corresponding to a perceived game spirit (Taylor 2012).

In *Mao*, players make the same arguments about “what the game is about” but through the diegetic rule making mechanic, utilizing procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric, as described by Ian Bogost, is “the process of using processes persuasively” (2008, 125). This concept implies that participating in a process can be persuasive. I’ll be applying the non-deterministic framework (Sicart 2011) of procedural rhetoric, that processes have the *potential* to persuade but are not deterministic of player behavior, to evaluate how rules argue.

By imposing certain processes (saying “yeah boii”/“teamwork”) to legitimize particular kinds of play (pointing/getting away with breaking a rule) and then *hiding* the process (rules are not explained) by which makes that action legitimate, these rules attempt to restrict certain kinds of play through a procedure. The rules argue about how the game should be played (don’t point to help people/don’t help others avoid being punished and don’t rely on others to help you).

These procedures do not, however, completely restrict play, as with *Yeah Boii*. Instead of dissuading people from pointing, once some players figured out the rule, they used it to say “yeah boii” and dodge punishment for *Excessive Talking*. Additionally, some players enjoyed helping others figure out rules by following a rule in an excessively obvious manner. Thus, we see a community rejection of an argument. On the other hand, *Teamwork*, once discovered didn’t guarantee a player could continue getting away with breaking a rule if they didn’t know it. And unlike *Yeah Boii*, when players figured out the rule, they used it to demonstrate that they had figured out someone else’s rule and had been planning to follow it. Following *Teamwork* signaled competency. The community embraced *Teamwork* to the point that even in other arcs, players would reference the rule by making a T with their hands when they recognized they had been “saved” from following a rule. By

applying *Teamwork* as intended and even referencing it in other arcs, the community signals agreement to *Teamwork*'s assertion about what *Mao* is about.

## THE ACTUAL META-RULES

Why didn't players simply implement a rule to outlaw play they think breaks the spirit of the game? For example, instead of implementing *Yeah Boii* where pointing is permissible with the inclusion of a phrase, why not simply ban pointing? Because aside from implementing unspoken rules of their own into the game, the community also perpetuates and negotiates some "*meta-rules*" that govern what kinds of rules are acceptable to create – and such a rule would break them. These rules are more "*meta*" than those surrounding the previously discussed *conduct play*. They govern the content, creation, and application of other rules and cannot be punished for within the scope of the game. To distinguish this from in-game-punishable, conduct rules, I will refer to these conduct rules as *meta-rules*. In the community's play of *Mao*, some unchallenged rules emerged:

1. Infractions will always be punished by dealing the offender an extra card
2. Rules cannot target one specific player (can apply to whomever the dealer is, but cannot only apply to, per se, Bob no matter what)
3. Rules cannot require excessive movement, excessive time, or leaving the vicinity of the play space
4. Rules should follow a general structure of "if [play], player must [make some other play]" or the converse "player must [make some play], if [some other play]"
5. Players should be given a fair amount of time to follow a rule before being punished
6. Rules should stay consistent in trigger, effect, and call (allows for rulings based on precedent)

These are negotiable, but have been uncontested by any play in the community, implying the general community shares these values. The accepted meta-rules also attest to a certain view of what the game means to the community. Meta-rule (1) takes the emphasis of the game off of creative punishment and places it onto creative rulemaking. A definition of "fairness" is negotiated in (2), (4), (5), and (6). And (4) and (3) negotiates with the kinds of play rules should encourage by limiting what rules can do. These meta-rules are implicit rules upheld by the community.

The definition of a kind of fair play in a game about not explaining rules but nonetheless punishing others for breaking them appears ostensibly odd. This was directly addressed in a fascinating discussion surrounding fairness after the implementation of the rule *Ten. Ten* dictated that cards of value ten "must be played either to the left or right instead of on the pile" (Farejowicz 2017) and can only be played on the pile when received by a pass from another player. A player argued that the rule unfairly hurts the player whom the ten was passed to. Normally on a player's turn with no punishments, if they play a card their hand goes down by one card (a -1 net change). But, *Ten* changes the balance of the player who's passed a ten's turn

with no punishments, if they play a card, they still have the same number of cards in their hand as before their turn (a +0 net change)<sup>5</sup>. A player can injure another player's play with *Ten*. This argument against *Ten* outlines the idea that 'Rules created in *Mao* should not be able to be used offensively against other players' that doing so is unfair. Others argued that *Ten* is as fair as a skipping rule, of which one already exists in the stock rules. "It's not unfair. It's just a dick rule" one player argued.

Both sides of the argument employed the concept of fairness. Neither side argued that *Mao* is not about fairness, despite the fact that the base mechanic of hiding rules seems to be inherently unfair. Because while the contingency offered by *Mao*'s stock operational rules would empower all kinds of "unfairness", the community creates and upholds its own moral standard.

## PLAYING WITH THE RULES

The players are the system in *Mao* which both *operational rules* and *implicit rules* are upheld and enforced, much like in eSports and other multiplayer games. A rule, as Taylor notes in sports, "only becomes embodied and takes force, assuming legitimate authority, when participants collectively recognize it as such" (2012, 57). We have noted that players use procedural rhetoric in rulemaking to argue for a construction of *Mao*. But players also play with the rules to challenge these constructions and push the game to evolve.

In the stock rules of *Mao*, the rule *Spades* requires a player to say the value of their card and "of spades" (i.e. "king of spades") when they play a card whose suit is spades. But as the community of regulars played more and more, they began "playing with" the rule. Players began to replace the word "spade" in the rule's effect with a word that rhymed with spade. While this technically breaks the rule *Spades*, none of the other players punished for these infractions. Eventually, players took this so far as to replacing all words in the rule's effects with words that rhymed with the proper effect (i.e. "ring of braids" for "king of spades"). This pattern of accepted infractions moved to *All Hail* such that "fall sail" in replacement of "all hail" was not punished. At the beginning of this trend, some players expressed discomfort (through disgruntled not-word noises and faces) with the riffing of the rule, but it was later generally accepted.

The community ultimately accepted these riffs because the existence of the rule was still acknowledged and it demonstrated player understanding of the rule including what correct play is. Players just put a creative spin on it. By accepting such a riff, the community asserts that '*Mao* is about figuring out the rules', which such a riff demonstrates, and not that '*Mao* is about rigidly following the rules'. In addition, the community also shows that they value creativity. This word play mini-game persisted across arcs of *Mao*. As such, the community's constructed meaning of *Mao* is renegotiated by the playing of the rules and the acknowledgement of that play. This play falls in line with how "concepts like 'spirit' are inherently ephemeral" and how they can be "negotiated and renegotiated in each unique context" (Carter et al. 2015,

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<sup>5</sup> A passed ten must be a valid play on deck, and thus can always be played by the person it's passed to



Play as Violating the Spirit). Together, as Jakobsson also observes (Jakobsson 2007), the community constantly works towards a desired spirit of the game.

### **SO WHEN CAN WE TALK ABOUT THE RULES**

As we discuss what rule stretching or breaking is allowed, I want to briefly discuss the first rule broken in this essay and by the community – talking about the rules. As previously mentioned and cited, the rules developed by the community over arcs of *Mao* were discussed, documented, and published after arcs. But even before that, during the first game of *Mao*, the rules were discussed. In the first game, many members of the wing had played *Mao* in the past, but varying versions. They decided they wanted to try and honor not talking about the rules and began their first game. As varying versions collided, members often called a point of order and made vague gestures and phrases to signal a collision. Members who had similar rules but with a slight variation (for example, order reversals triggered by cards of value 2 or by cards of value 8) often would concur to having such a stock rule, maybe voice how their version varied, compromise, and accept the rule. It often sounded something like:

A: “Point of order? Woah, you guys say ‘point of order’?”

B: “Yeah, wait what do you say?”

C: “Yeah, I also learned it as ‘point of order’”

A: “Woah, I think we said, ‘coffee break’ or something”

C: “Okay, I’ve also heard it as that”

B: “I’ve never heard that before”

A: “It might be a southern thing. Interesting.”

D: “Nah, I’ve definitely heard ‘coffee break’”

B: “Are you okay with-”

A: “Yeah, yeah, we can say ‘point of order’. End point of order”

Most of the stock rules accumulated through such a process. However, the rule *To-It* (arguably spelled *Two-It*) only existed in one member’s version. As such, a very explicit discussion was had about the exactitude of the rule and what it meant for the game. In other games, the community had embraced speed mods in games, and *To-It* was similar to a speed mod the community implemented for the game *President*. The community explicitly considered *To-It* as a speed mod and debated whether they wanted to add a speed mod to *Mao* before explicitly agreeing to add *To-It* as a stock rule.

From the beginning, the community chose to discuss, compromise, and implement rules together. It set the tone and precedent for “democratic”<sup>6</sup> negotiation and acknowledgement of rules for subsequent games. As such, the community asserted agreement that ‘*Mao* is ironically not a game with one dictator’. The community shaped the spirit of the game by the communal breaking of a rule that existed at the core of *Mao*. And, in a way, almost explicitly acknowledged the community effort that goes into developing the meaning of a game.

## THE RIGHT TO PLAY

On the other hand, what happens when a player disagrees with the community about the nature of *Mao* and “breaches” the kind of play the community asserts, as “Twixt” did in *City of Heroes* (Myers 2008)? What happens when players grieve? During one arc of *Mao*, one player, Robert<sup>7</sup>, did so by continually talking regardless of the rules. At first, players punished Robert for breaking the rules, but continually having to punish him disrupted the flow of the game. Instead, players ostracized Robert and generally ignored when he broke *Excessive Talking* except to punish him to keep him from winning, much as Twixt was treated. The disgruntlement of the community and their decision to generally ignore the player sends the message that ‘we disagree with this kind of play and we refuse to legitimize it by allowing you to engage with the game’. The community withdrew the ability of that player to interact with their rules – rules that argue what the game is about – thus withdrawing the ability of the player to argue for their kind of play. This additionally reinforces the community assertion that ‘*Mao* is not about rigidly following rules’.

The right to play the game is gatekept by the community (the majority). In one instance, during a point of order while a player, Brian, was voicing disagreement with a punishment, point of orders became jumbled as the group lost track of when one began and one ended. Typical card play is suspended during a point of order and players may speak during its course. It ends once the original player who called the point of order says, “end point of order” and play resumes. At one point, Brian called an end point of order and half of the players resumed play. The other half thought that Simon, another player, had originally initiated the point of order and did not resume play. Confused, Simon then called a point of order to assert that the original point of order had not been called by Brian – thus Brian had resumed play during a point of order, a punishable rule break. Brian asserted he couldn’t remember for sure that he had started the point of order, but it also didn’t matter: “the point of the game is not to hold the game hostage to point of orders”. While arguing, Simon ended the point of order, silencing Brian, and enforced a “speaking during a point of order” infraction backed by half of the players (who waved at Brian to take it).

Not only was Brian’s play punished, thus rejected by the community, but diegetically punished – a play. As seen in that case, the majority can easily illegitimize play and thus rescind the right to play, and do so *through play*. By silencing arguments with

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<sup>6</sup> Quotation marks are used as “democratic” is a term used by the community and not necessarily textbook “democratic”

<sup>7</sup> All names in the paper are pseudonyms

play, the acknowledged “silencing” becomes part of the game’s precedent, infrastructure, and spirit, giving it authority.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that the community acts as an arbiter while engaging in constant negotiation of the rules. Community and players determine what values of the game are important to them and carry it out through creating, upholding, and playing the rules. As such, a *sociotechnical* system composed of both the formal, developer-designed system and the community-negotiated system emerges. It is this shapeshifting, cyborgian system (Dovey and Kennedy 2006) comprised of both that maintains the continuity, structure, and spirit of the game. Communities inherently have power to impact the game.

This is not just true with *Mao*. Play with rules in *Mao* parallels play with rules in other multiplayer games. Rules in *Mao* are created to increase the difficulty of the game, implement mods, and negotiate the nature of the game. Communities of multiplayer games make similar moves. Metas in *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009), which in this multiplayer online battle arena game are strategies that transcend the official ruleset or relies on external factors, dictate a community driven standard, such as how many players can be in certain lanes. These metas increase the difficulty of the game by imposing a restriction. Mods like *Garry’s Mod* (Facepunch Studios, 2004), a multiplayer first-person game, are created to facilitate player creativity in finding new ways to enjoy a game by changing the rules. And, as I have already noted, the discourse surrounding the negotiation of rules in esports negotiate the nature of the game. Rules in *Mao* and the *implicit rules* in multiplayer games are upheld and enforced by the community, allowing players to intervene in the “mangle of play” (Steinkuehler 2006).

The insights gained by analyzing rule play by the community around *Mao* can be applied to rule play by communities around multiplayer games in general. Communities and players negotiate and engage with meaning by creating, upholding, and playing with informal or implicit rules. The meaning derived by these engagements may vary from community to community, context to context, as play is situated. These engagements are players participating in co-creative labor. By doing this work around rules, players participate in structuring the meaning and value of games. As such, drawing on discourse around co-creativity (Dovey and Kennedy 2006) (Banks and Humphreys 2008), players have power to impact the game and push it to evolve. Communities are embedded in the cyborg circuitry that powers the rules and meaning. It’s incredibly important to remember that players don’t have to strictly play by or against the system.

We play the system.

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