Performativities in Play: Deception in J.L. Austin, Theater, and Games

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Is calling someone a 'good liar' a compliment or an insult? Or does it depend on the circumstances?[1] Play, for example, complicates simplistic distinctions between real and virtual, tangible and intangible, truth and falsity. As a consequence, play transforms the significance of the language it appropriates. If statements in plays and in play are "lies" insofar as they subvert ordinary notions of truthfulness, then they must be lies of a particularly *interesting* sort. Statements made on stage and in games are meaningful in ways that play with the so-called "ordinary" uses of such statements.[2] In play, language *acts* both by performing actions and by enacting a performance itself.

This article questions the special meaningfulness of playful forms of deception, asking how language in theater and games can use their fundamental unreality to real effect. Such deceptiveness, I suggest, is no simple untruth, but rather establishes the fictionality of theater and the virtuality of games as ways of playing with and within reality.

When Saying Becomes Doing

Building upon Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion that "the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life,"[3] J.L. Austin defines *performative utterances* as ones in which saying becomes doing.[4] For example, statements such as 'I do' (during a wedding ceremony), 'I promise,' and 'I wager' *perform* rather than *describe* social actions.

What happens to performative language within theater and games, forms of social play that blend linguistic and bodily performance? These

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1. Two famous polemics—Friedrich Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in the Extra-moral Sense" and Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying"—challenge simplistic assumptions about the naturalness of truth and falsity, arguing that human experience needs certain productive fabrications such as metaphor and art.

2. Indeed, part of this play is to problematize this distinction insofar as the theater and games are woven into (and out of) so-called 'ordinary' contexts in many ways.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: MacMillan, 1958, §23.

4. J.L. Austin. How to Do Things with Words. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

performances, I argue, suspend certain elements of everyday conversation, such as the standard division between truth and lies. At the same time, however, the 'magic circle'[5] of the stage or game can only suspend so much—meanings inevitably slip between the special circumstances of the play and the social circumstances in which they are embedded. This contextual doubling generates a spectrum of meaningful possibilities for its participants. Playful deceptions, therefore, matter *because* they are simultaneously inconsequential and consequential, because they perform virtual realities that paradoxically may reflect, engage, or subvert the ordinary. This performance, moreover, operates as a kind of language play in which the doubled significance of words as actions generates potentially meaningful tensions, playful experiments with reality and unreality.

Austin on Performatives

Verbal utterances in and as play deserve more scholarly attention, especially with respect to analog gameplay, which tends to involve plenty of conversation.[6] Austin's 'ordinary language' philosophy is, therefore, relevant to game studies, although Austin himself bypasses contexts such as theater and play, explaining:

> *A performative utterance will, for example, be* in a peculiar way *hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways* parasitic *upon its normal use.*[7]

The recognition of the specialness and parasitism that characterizes playful utterances gives a glimpse of Austin's potential contribution to game studies. Precisely because Austin's theory is general, yet simultaneously recognizes the particularities of "a sea-change in special circumstances," it is able to bridge the

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5. The 'magic circle' is a common term in game studies for the separateness of a play space from everyday life coined by Johan Huizinga and further popularized by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. See Johan Huizinga. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949); Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

6. An example of recent work on the topic would be Angelina Ilieva. "How We Do Larps With Words." Playing Reality. Ed. Elge Larsson. Stockholm: Interacting Arts, 2010, pp. 231-242.

7. Austin, p. 22.

dual uses of language to constitute play within the game and circulate playfully around the game.[8] Moreover, this language of context-dependency might be used to more precisely articulate the interplay between the nested contexts of the game and its social milieu than the somewhat overused metaphor of the magic circle.[9] Furthermore, Austin's method of reading language *as* performance provides a compelling foundation for studying language *in* performance and, by extension, *in play*. Gameplay is not only interactive and performative *like* language, but is often interactive and performative *through* language. After all, in games, *words do things*. Finally, Austin is particularly relevant to an exploration of playful deception because he shows how *as* actions words confound typical notions of truth and falsity. In short, Austin helps elucidate how linguistic performances can become actions that can, in special circumstances, become play.

As performances that generate actions, performative statements become meaningful in relation to when, where, why, how, by whom, and to whom they are uttered. That is, the significance of a statement is *context-dependent*. Understanding performatives requires understanding their circumstances, including implicit and explicit social conventions, particularities of the material environment, and roles of individual participants. This means, moreover, that performatives are not purely linguistic phenomena, but are moves within larger social practices.[10]

Statements mean (and do) more than they say. Take, for example, the statement "keep calm and relax" displayed on a throw pillow in someone's home. This statement performs the actions of *advising* and *inviting* the reader to keep calm and relax. It advises by being overtly displayed[11] where it will be read as applicable wisdom. It invites, moreover, by alluding to its immediate material context: a comforting environment within which the advice can be followed. In these ways, this printed utterance performs an active role within

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8. See Sicart's distinction between 'play' and 'playfulness.' Miguel Sicart. Play Matters. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

9. In my view, what is typically called the "magic circle" is not the separateness of the play context from the everyday context, but the appearance of separateness brought about by the doubled meanings that arise from the simultaneity of the play and everyday contexts.

10. In this way, Austin's work contributes to social constructivist notions like that of John Searle, who developed his famous speech act theory from Austin's work. What I find particularly compelling about Austin is that his philosophy—like Wittgenstein's—is more playful than some of this later work, being more a performance of reading ordinary language than a systematic theory of language or society.

11. If the pillow were put in storage, the sentence on it would not be an utterance at all because it would fail to circulate or be received.

the social contexts in which it is encountered, doing something for its readers *by* saying something to its readers. Although play performatives may differ from this everyday example, they nonetheless make meaning in similarly contextual ways. For example, a verbal utterance in a play may initiate a promise between two characters and an utterance in a game may count as a move within the game—advancing a guess, initiating a battle, selecting an available action, etc.

Understanding any performative, therefore, entails understanding both how the conventions of its context determine what actions are performed *and* how the purposes of its context structure how it is to be received. Understanding play, likewise, entails understanding the play context as systematically shaping how language performs. Contexts structure both the performance and reception of linguistic actions, determining both meaningfulness and appropriateness. Performatives (as actions) are threatened not by falsity but by *infelicity*, "*the things that can be and go wrong* on the occasion of such utterances."[12] Certainly, statements can go wrong in many ways, as when a player fails to make a move within a game by stating an action that is not allowed by the game rules.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, Austin draws on an ethics of speaker intentions to argue that performatives may succeed and still be infelicitous. False and broken promises are, for example, successful promises that play an improper role within their social circulation because they lack sincere intentions or are not fulfilled. They are not quite lies—because they are actions rather than assertions—but they have something of the feel of lies. They are, in Austin's terminology, *abuses*—not necessarily in the sense of being unethical, but of being abnormal or aberrant uses that undermine the social function of promises. This kind of abuse can also occur on stage or in games—for example, in disinterested acting or the play of a spoilsport—but is not characteristic of the productive deceptiveness of plays or play in general. Contrary to abuses like lies and false promises that undermine proper uses, theater and games properly belie everyday reality in ways that powerfully reflect or represent that reality.

Performative language, therefore, contributes both to the constitutive deceptiveness of the fictionality and/or virtuality of play in general and to the particular uses and abuses of deception within these play spaces.

Onstage Performatives

Turning first to the theater, the stage seemingly depletes performative content, since actors are not beholden to statements they make while performing their

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12. Austin, p. 14.

roles. The same words spoken in the same tone by the same individuals might
be a proposal, promise, or insult *offstage*, but count as none of these *onstage*
as actors are not expected to become engaged, promised, or insulted as a
result. It is tempting, therefore, to consider stage performance as inimical to
linguistic performativity, the theater as all saying and no doing. While onstage
performatives certainly differ from most conversational ones, it would be a
mistake to minimize the complex ways linguistic performativity bears on stage
performance. Plays gain significance as an interplay between a staged fictional
world and the reality of the stage itself. Within this doubled context, words
themselves may take on special doubled significance as they simultaneously gain
special meaning within the play and reflect or refract their everyday meanings.

Stage performatives are genuine insofar as they apply not to the actors
but to the *fictional characters* they play. There is nothing strange about uttering
genuine performatives on behalf of others, as interpreters and messengers
routinely do. And there is nothing strange about fictional language becoming
meaningful in much the same way that ordinary language does. Therefore,
although we do not consider actors beholden to the statements they make,
we do consider *characters* so beholden—if in the first act the actor utters a
marriage proposal, promise, or insult, we fully expect this to influence the
subsequent story. Staged language is certainly differently consequential from
offstage language, but I believe it is precisely this difference that makes fiction
so meaningful. Thus, whereas Austin writes that "Walt Whitman does not
seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar,"[13] this statement has both force
and seriousness when its doubled meaning as an expressive poetic image and
metaphorical rhetorical incitement to the reader are properly understood. If
such theatrical, fictional, and poetic language is fundamentally 'deceptive,' it is
deceptive in a way that generally aims not to mislead but to express.

Onstage performatives have additional force insofar as they are directed
to the audience, encouraging spectators to participate in producing the
significance of the spectacle. The stage invites the audience to share in the
deception, to collectively *dream* rather than *lie*. Devices such as the soliloquy
or aside, for instance, allows the spectator to share intimate secrets, promises,
or insights with a character. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for
example, famously concludes with an address to the audience beginning with
the performative: "If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all
is mended." Couched as a playful apology, Puck's soliloquy is essentially an
invitation to engage in the play's fantasy rather than judge its reality. This

13. Austin, p. 104.

performative invitation is characteristic of an influential approach to theatrical performance famously articulated by playwright Bertolt Brecht, who argues that exposing the artificiality of the theater opens up certain forms of theatrical meaning-making.[14]

I experienced this at a play called *Best of Enemies*, a dramatization of the radical transformation of a KKK member based on a true story. As one might expect, the play featured quite a few rather nasty racist insults.[15] While this was uncomfortable for spectators and actors alike (as one actor admitted in a post-play discussion), the staging was designed to situate the performance within a retrospective historical lens, using old newspaper headlines as a backdrop and period-appropriate music to accompany scene changes. Maintaining a realistic sense of the illocutionary force of the insults *within* the fiction while situating these insults within this historical consciousness created a kind of performative contract with the audience, a promise to redeem that language within the social justice motivation of the theatrical experience. Similarly, the design of a game conditions the relationships players develop with the game. To play is, in a sense, to navigate the game as stage. Insofar as players are actors, therefore, they use language in this theatrical way—to advance roles that have significance in how they are received by others who are both spectators and fellow participants within the world of the game.[16]

A Midsummer Night's Dream and *Best of Enemies* both intentionally highlight the artificiality of the stage to provide their audiences a particular self-awareness about the performance and its performative language. This is by no means the only way to navigate the double-layered context of the stage. The imperatives of realism, for example, suggest that plays be designed and performed to create a parallelism between the play's real and fictional contexts. Even as its artificial setting reminds the audience that it is just a story, for example, *Best of Enemies* strives to remind us that it is a *true* story and presents itself as realistically documenting America's history of racial violence. In so doing, the play echoes another of Shakespeare's famous lines by reminding us that "all the world's a stage," suggesting that the KKK's performative rhetoric is itself a social script and that its members are "merely players" stubbornly acting

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14. Nick Mizer also uses Brecht to discuss 'non-immersive gaming' in the first issue of Analog Game Studies. Nick Mizer. "'Fun in a Different Way': Rhythms of Engagement and Non-Immersive Play Agendas." Analog Game Studies 1.1. http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/08/179/.

15. Insults are a form of performative that, as Austin discusses, demonstrate the importance of uptake because they must be felt as well as understood. Thus, the formulation 'I hereby insult you' generally fails to successfully insult someone.

16. At least in standard multiplayer games.

out the fiction that their world is designed for them alone. Just as the artificiality
of the staging reminds the audience that the actor is not the character, this
realistic scripting and acting suggests that the character is not the role, as
demonstrated by the character's growing disenchantment with racist identity
politics that drives the *Bildungsroman* plot. In fact, the loci of Brecht's artificial
theater and realism represent but two points on a vast spectrum of possible
ways to navigate the interplay of the real and the fictional, which produces a
multiplicity of generative possibilities that characterize theatrical play. Similarly,
gameplay performances are arrayed along a spectrum of possibilities that
navigate a tension between distance and immersion that often accompanies
gameplay. Although theater and games are by no means identical, I believe
they are both appropriately termed *play* for this reason—that they perform
a meaningfully doubling of fictional/virtual play spaces and the interpretive
contexts that circumscribe them.

Performatives in Gameplay

Just as theatrical performatives do not fully bear on actors, gameplay
performatives do not fully bear on players. Yet, as with their theatrical
counterparts, gameplay performatives only suspend so much.[17] As statements
circulate in and around the game, they gain significance through the interplay
of two overlapping interpretive contexts, namely the *conversational* and *gameplay*
contexts.[18] In some cases, statements are clearly situated within one of these
contexts, but this is often not so clear. A statement, for example, may be
ambiguous as in how the imperative "pass the chips" may refer either to
tokens within a poker game or snacks outside the game. More common,
however, are hybrid cases that fall along an interpretive spectrum generated
by the blending of the two contexts. This includes various forms of
metacommentary—discussing, explaining, exclaiming, strategizing, asking,
congratulating, taunting, etc.—that address gameplay from its conversational
context. It also includes a range of gameplay performatives that link verbal
game actions to the conversational context, such as "check" in *Chess* (a
metacommentary warning that functions as a game action insofar as its
utterance is mandated by the rules). Similarly, performative utterances may

17. Also drawing on Austin, Ian Bogost's post "Persuasive Games: Performative Play" explores unusual
cases in videogames where in-game actions are also actions outside the game.

18. More accurately, at least two, since contexts often overlap in everyday circumstances. For example,
any or all of the following contexts might be layered atop the conversational and gameplay contexts: a
tournament, a charitable fundraiser, a gaming organization, a coffee shop, a local community, a national
community, etc.

shorthand non-verbal moves (as in correspondence *Chess*) and even end, suspend, or alter the game within the meta-discourses of the 'forfeit,' 'time out,' and 'do-over.'

Since gameplay is a symbolic activity, *saying* becomes *doing* often and in many ways. While not all statements made during play are performative in the same way, there are some common conventions for translating speech into game actions. It would be impossible to fully capture this dynamic range of possibilities in a simple taxonomy, so I shall briefly present three examples of the diverse uses of (deceptive) performative language in gameplay, specifically in guessing and trivia games, gambling games, and social deception games. In each case, game design facilitates a particular kind of interplay between the conversational and gameplay contexts, relying on their simultaneous unity and disunity to generate play.

Guessing and Trivia Games

One of the more straightforward interplays can be found in guessing and trivia games (*Trivial Pursuit*, *Twenty Questions*, *Charades*, etc.) and game shows (*Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy*) that involve answer-giving as a performative that submits itself for evaluation. Most such games directly involve real world contexts, aiming at matching verbal game moves to facts about the world (or its language). The challenge of such games is usually the difficulty in forging the desired link between gameplay and reality due to the deployment of uncommon knowledge, partial information, and/or time constraints.

Complicating such straightforward guessing games, deceptive guessing games like *Balderdash* and *Wise and Otherwise* require players to invent plausible fictions that lure other players into believing them to be the correct real-world response. In these games, the acts of writing the fictions and of voting for particular responses both function as gameplay performatives that simultaneously commit the player to actions within the game and a stance towards truth or plausibility[19] outside the game. As *Balderdash* asks players to complete incomplete facts and *Wise and Otherwise* asks them to complete incomplete aphorisms, both games bring the world outside the game into the game as an object of play. Most guessing games rely on fluency with discourses outside the game, bringing not only the social context but also knowledge and competencies from players' everyday lives into play.

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19. This relationship is subverted but not eliminated if a player chooses to write or vote for answers that are silly rather than plausible.

Gambling Games

When guessing games bring the real world into play, they often trivialize
it—hence the term 'trivia.' Gambling games, in contrast, are at once trivial and
serious as the increased stakes render the play consequential in a real-world
sense.[20] According to Jesper Juul, the possibility—but non-necessity of—real-
world consequences is definitional of games (he calls this *negotiable
consequences*).[21] Thus, so-called gambling games can, like *any* game, be played
for any stakes. The design of a gambling game like poker, however, aligns
with real-world consequentiality such that even when no money is involved
the game nonetheless *plays at* gambling. In fact, the relative simplicity and luck-
dependence of the hidden information card games that underlie poker facilitates
an emphasis on wagering. The wagers themselves are generally conducted
through verbal performatives which draw a parallel between the conversational
and gameplay contexts—one wagers chips within the game that are associated
with money, whether in fact or in play. As a zero-sum game whose play
aims at the circulation and accumulation of chips (which both conventionally
represent and mimic money by being abstract signifiers of value), to play poker
is to gamble, even if only to gamble signifiers. Wagering is, in fact, an everyday
performative that is adopted and adapted in poker's game design. As with its
everyday counterpart, wagering within poker is subject to standards of felicity
and infelicity. While certainly deceptive, however, bluffing is no abuse in
Austin's sense because the performance of the wager does not require claiming
anything about the particularities of one's hand. Instead, the actual abuse in
poker would be wagering what one is unwilling or unable to pay.

Social Deception Games

The lying within social deception games such as *Mafia*, *Avalon*, and *Bang!*
generally lack the explicit consequences of gambling (although *social* capital
can be staked and lost) that so strongly link conversational and gameplay
contexts. Instead, the lying in such games often depends upon the disunity
between these contexts, constituting both a legitimate *move* within the game
and an illegitimate *description of* the game. This disunity, moreover, reveals the

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20. Raising the stakes of play moves towards what is sometimes called 'deep play' after Clifford Geertz's
essay of the same name.

21. Jesper Juul, "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness," Level Up:
Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings, ed. Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens. Utrecht:
Utrecht University, 2003, pp. 30-45.

constitutive oxymoron of *social deception* games which are designed to promote social interaction by subverting social norms.[22]

In the card game *Coup*, for example, each player receives two hidden characters which enable certain game actions. Any player may perform any action, but that player must be able to produce the corresponding character card if challenged or suffer the consequences (the challenger suffers the consequences otherwise). The first time I played this game, I developed a verbal tic of using unnecessarily oblique language, saying "I declare myself to be the Contessa" rather than "I am the Contessa." In Austin's view, these statements are identical performatives except that the first is unnecessarily explicit. Within the doubled context of play, however, these statements differ significantly—the first performs a move within the game *without* making a corresponding infelicitous statement (i.e. lying) whereas the second does both. In this way, such games play with social norms regarding truth and falsity by establishing a context in which certain forms of deceptiveness become viable social interaction. These performatives entail performances, as players' success in deceiving others depends on their ability to lie convincingly—being a 'good liar' may be acceptable or even desirable. At the same time, since social interaction is one purpose of such games, their play treads a delicate balance between maintaining and suspending social relationships.

Thus, there is another spectrum at work in performative gameplay—a spectrum of player response, the diverse individual reactions that players may take when confronted with the interplay of conversational and gameplay contexts. At one end of the spectrum, deception games play with the psychology of *lying aversion*,[23] in which individuals experience difficulty lying even in circumstances where lying is warranted or permissible. At the other end of the spectrum, the carnivalesque pleasure of deception gameplay depends upon transgressing commonplace norms within the playful suspension of everyday reality. Lying aversion and carnivalesque pleasure are, in fact, sides of the same coin—the taboo makes the transgression pleasurable yet fraught. Thus, more than a simple spectrum, there is an entire topography of differing play responses which waver, touch, and blend within the doubled context of the gaming experience.

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22. Something similar is the purpose of the taboo-defying game Cards Against Humanity, which uses the magic circle to—for good or ill—trivialize the uttering of otherwise offensive statements.

23. Uri Gneezy has done several controlled experiments on lying aversion (primarily in economic transactions). He notes that such aversion varies amongst the general population.

Claiming to be the Contessa (far right) in Coup can counteract pesky assassinations, but being caught in that lie could instantly lose one the game. Image by Indie Boards and Cards, used with permission.

Conclusion

Both theater and gameplay maintain a doubled context for utterances to attain meaningfulness both within and outside the magic circle. Theater performs fictions by staging performative language that simultaneously generates distance and intimacy with the audience. Similarly, gameplay depends upon entering a rule-governed virtual play space that suspends certain aspects of the everyday but simultaneously gains significance from the social contexts within which the game is played. Any incongruities between these doubled interpretations should, I argue, be understood as a complex play of reality and unreality. In gameplay, deception can be a form of *play-acting* (both acting and play) which, like theatrical play, depends upon performing a role that crosses between reality and unreality. While play-actors are not necessarily beholden to their performative utterances, their performance is a meaningful experience of slipping in and out of the game-stage, an interplay which I suggest is part of what makes such performances *play*. Saying becomes doing in theatrical and gameplay contexts precisely because language is always a performance, whether social, theatrical, or playful. Or, to put it another way, theater and games are special circumstances in which *saying* can become *playing*. Indeed, performatives seem peculiarly at home in plays and in play—perhaps because

these activities are, after all, some of the important ways we explore how to do things with words.