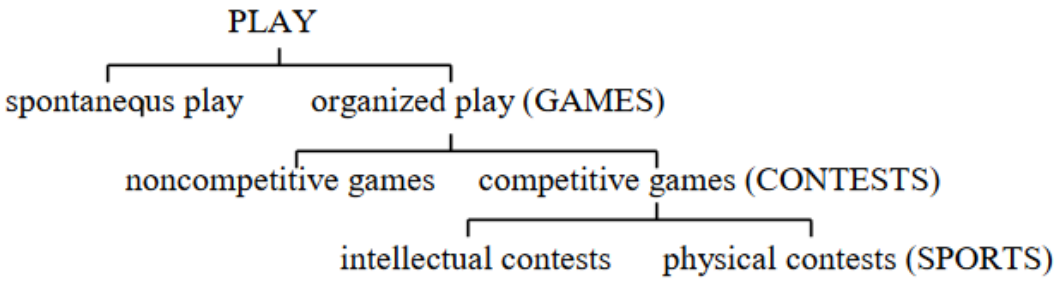
What Makes a Game a Game? Six Structural Factors

(trechos retirados de: Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw-Hill, 2001) - Marc Prensky

The Encyclopedia Britannica provides the following diagram of the relation between play and games: 35



Our goal here is to understand why games engage us, drawing us in often in spite of ourselves. This powerful force stems first from the fact that they are a form of fun and play, and second from what I call the six key structural elements of games:

1.Rules

2.Goals and Objectives

3.Outcomes & Feedback 4.Conflict/Competition/Challenge/Opposition

5.Interaction, and

6.Representation or Story.

There are thousands, perhaps millions of different games, but all contain most, if not all, these powerful factors. Those that don't contain all the factors are still classified as games by many, but can also belong to other subclasses described below. In addition to these structural factors, there are also important design elements that add to engagement and distinguish a really good game from a poor or mediocre one.

Rules are what differentiate games from other kinds of play. Probably the most basic definition of a game is that it is organizedplay, that is to say rule-based. If you don't have rules you have free play, not a game. Why are rules so important to games? Rules impose limits – they force us to take specific paths to reach goals and ensure that all players take the same paths. They put us inside the game world, by letting us know what is in and out of bounds. What spoils a game is not so much the cheater, who accepts the rules but doesn't play by them (we can deal with him or her) but the nihilist, who denies them altogether. Rules make things both fair and exciting. When the Australians "bent" the rules of the America's Cup and built a huge boat in 1988, and the Americans found a way to compete with a catamaran, it was still a race — but no longer the same game.

Goals or Objectives also differentiate games from other types of play, as well as from other non-goal-oriented games. In some designers' eyes, if your game doesn't havea goal but is rather something that can be just played with in many ways depending on your whim, you have what they refer to as a "toy." "Toy" in this sense is a technical term, because they use it to refer to things as complex as Sim City and the Sims, or even an airline simulator. These "goal-less simulations", however, are generally known as games, at least by the people who market and play them. In speaking to this, Will Wright, the designer of Sim City says "I'm not sure there's a real firm distinction. I think of our models as something you can either just play with, purely kind of Zen-like, un-goal-directed or in fact you can pick a goal and turn it into a game at any time." 37

Outcomes and Feedback are how you measure your progress against the goals. The classic games are ones you either win or lose. "Games seem to want to have a win-lose state or at least a goal state that you can measure yourself against, says Wright. Obviously wining and losing has strong emotional and ego-gratification implications, which is a big part of the attraction of games. Feedback comes when something in the game changes in response to what you do — it is what we mean when we say computers and computer games are interactive. Feedbacklets us know immediately whether what we have done is

positive or negative for us in the game, whether we are staying within or breaking the rules (“Tilt”), moving closer to thegoal or further away (“Hot or Cold”) and how we are doing versus the competition (high score tables). Feedback can take a variety of forms, from an outside referee, to the other players, to the computer, but its main characteristic is that in almost all games it isimmediate. I do something; I get a result. (This does not preclude a number of actions combining to produce longer-range feedback, such as an outcome, as well).

Conflict/competition/challenge/opposition are the problems in a game you are trying to solve. “A computer game is nothing but a problem that we’re selling,” says Will Wright. “And basically your solving that problem is playing the game.” 40The conflict or challenge that produced the problem to solve does not necessarily have to be against another opponent, real or AI (artificial intelligence).It can be a puzzle to solve, oranything that stands in the way of your progress (How do I get this Sim married off?) Conflict/competition/challenge or opposition is what gets your adrenaline and creative juices flowing, and makes you excited about playing the game. While not everyone likes head-to-head competition and some shy from conflict, most of us enjoy a challenge, particularly if we get to choose it and set its difficulty. Keeping the level ofconflict/competition/challenge or opposition in synch with the player’s skills andprogress is called “balancing” the game, and as we shall see is a key skill in game design.

Interaction has two important aspects: The first is the interaction of the player and the computer, which we have discussed under feedback. The second, though, is the inherently social aspect of games — you do them with other people. As we saw earlier, play promotes the formation of social groupings. While you can play alone, it is much more fun to play with others. This is why in pre-computer games the category of “solitaire games”, although not insignificant, is tiny compared to games that are played with others. Despite the industry’s initial (pre-networking) focus on single player games or games against the machine (an era in which we are still involved), the tendency of allcomputer games today is to become multi-player. And while game designers do attempt,through better and better AI, to put more and more of the creator’s “mind” into computer-based opponents or collaborators in games, we are still very far from being able to create anything with the true wiles of the real human mind. Critics who see computer gaming as an isolating activity, should be aware of this. Like the Net, computer games are actually bringing people into closer social interaction — although not necessarily face-to-face.

Representation means the game is about something. This can be abstract or concrete, direct or indirect. Chess is about conflict. Tetris is about building and

recognizing patterns. The Age of Empires is about the history of the art of war. Representation includes any narrative or story elements in the game. There is somewhat of a difference of opinion here among various computer game theorists. Some think representation is at the essence of what makes a game, while some think it is just the “candy” around the game. One thing that is happening, though, is that consumer games are becoming much more detailed in their representation, and that story and narrative are becoming a bigger part of games. This is raising a number of issues, both about narrative and games, since the integration of the two, as we shall discuss later in more detail, is neither obvious nor easy.

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