Excerpts from *Rules of Play* for the Critical Analysis of Video Games

A **schema** is important but not exhaustive information. Think of it like one of many lenses through which a game can be viewed. This book presents three primary schemas:

1. Games as **RULES**, a formal schema describing what can and cannot happen
2. Games as **PLAY**, an experiential schema describing what is it like to interact with a game
3. Games as **CULTURE**, a contextual schema describing how games influence and are influenced by the world in which they take place

The goal of a game designer is to creating *meaningful play*, which necessarily arises from the interaction between the player, the game, and the surrounding cultural context.

The **descriptive definition of meaningful play** describes how the game will respond to a player's actions, usually in a form similar to "if x, then y." For example, in Space Invaders, when you fire a missile and it collides with an oncoming alien, the alien explodes.

The **evaluative definition of meaningful play** tells us that the mechanics of a game must be:

- **discernable**, meaning that the player can perceive and understand the outcome
- **integrated into the larger context of the game**, meaning that each action is part of the larger experience that the game is trying to create

Semiotics is the study of how we derive meaning from signs. Signs represents something other than themselves and have a meaning designated by the designer. Game designers make semiotic choices when deciding on the vocabulary and setting of a game, which should:

- help the player leverage existing knowledge to understand a game more quickly (such as using a fist to represent rock, which crushes scissors and helps to explain why one wins and one loses)
- prompt the player to think about or experience something meaningful (such as the violation of someone's privacy when using the body scanner in *Papers Please*)

The context in which a game is experienced influences how we interpret these signs.

A **system** is a set of interrelated parts that form a complex whole. A system is many things which can be thought of as a single unit, such as how a grid board and 32 pieces come together and interact to make Chess.

- A **closed system** does not interact with its environment. When considering a game using the RULES schema, a game is closed. The rules of baseball are not influenced by the setting of an actual game.
- An **open system** is affected and in turn affects its environment. When considering a game using the CULTURE schema, a game is open. The physical setting, team history, and personal stories of baseball players are an important aspect of the game.
- When considering games using the PLAY schema, games can be either open or closed depending on what is being considered. A foul ball during a baseball game is a good example of how part of a game can leave its system and effect the outside world in a meaningful way.

Interaction is a key part of meaningful play, because meaning does not lie in the game itself or the player him or herself, but in the interaction of the player and the game. There are at least four kinds of interactivity which tend to overlap and are often experienced at the same time:

- **Cognitive Interactivity**, the emotional and imaginative experience of playing a game (such as the imagined personality of a character in a role playing game)
- **Functional Interactivity**, the physical act of using the pieces of a game (such as moving a wooden chess piece by hand or tilting a joystick)
- **Explicit Interactivity**, making choices created by the game designer (such as choosing a path in a Choose Your Own Adventure novel)
- **Beyond-the-Object Interactivity**, interacting with things outside the game in a way that is inspired by the game (such as chatting with fellow member of a guild in a Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Game)

Choices can be viewed at two levels of granularity:

- **Tactics** (micro-choices), have immediate consequences, such as a single hand of poker.
- **Strategy** (macro-choices), have long term effects on the overall trajectory of the game (such as choosing to lose a hand of poker to learn when another player bluffs).

When analyzing the relationship between player action and game outcome, it may be helpful to break down the choices in a game into the **anatomy of a choice**:

1. What happened before the player was given a choice?
2. How is the player prompted to choose?
3. How does the player communicate his or her choice?
4. What is the result of the choice on the game system?
5. How is that result communicated to the player?

When criticizing the choice-making mechanics of a game, it may be helpful to identify which part of this process is not working effectively.

The following statements may or may not be part of the definition of a game, depending on whose definition you use:

- Games specify a set of rules.
- Games feature some kind of conflict.
- Games have a goal.
- Games are an activity or process.
- Games are artificial and safe.
- Play is voluntary.
- Outcome is uncertain.
- Games are an art form.

Unlike toys, with which play might start and stop ambiguously, games have a distinct start and end. Games are surrounded by the **magic circle**, some ceremonial gesture that represents entry into a protected space. The magic circle is psychological, but usually also physical (such as the lines on a baseball field).

Like with other kinds of media, games require the **willful suspension of disbelief**, which is the act of pretending the game is real despite knowing it is not (for example, you can die in World of Warcraft without dying in real life). Games also require a **lusory attitude**, which is a willingness to accept the game's rules, maintain the spirit of the game, and be a good sport. Even though you could just grab all the Monopoly money, you don't, because that is not in keeping with the spirit of the game's banking system.

Rules of Play defines a **game** as a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome. Note that this definition includes puzzles and excludes certain Role Playing Games.

Digital games have specific strengths, which also exist for other games, but are especially effective in digital artefacts:

- We see the results of actions immediately in real time, but are limit by input/output hardware.
- Games can have encyclopedic and rich worlds, and they can also manipulate information for each individual player easily.
- Games make it easy to automate complex rule systems (such as physics), but this carries the risk of making a game's rules undiscernible.
- Networked communication allows for fast, possibly asynchronous interaction between distant players.