

Defining Games

Precise Definitions Are Elusive

Many closely-related ideas like play, game, toy, puzzle, etc. overlap.

In some languages, “play” and “game” are the same word.

There will always be boundary cases.

We should focus on a definition that is helpful for game designers.

David Parlett

A game has a two-fold structure:

- **Ends:** the goal and terminating point.
- **Means:** the equipment and procedure for reaching the end.

Clark C. Abt

[...] a game is an activity among two or more independent decision-makers seeking to achieve their objectives in some limiting context.

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*[...] a game is an activity among two or more independent decision-makers seeking to achieve their objectives in some **limiting** context.*

Games may limit us, but they can also transport us to fictional worlds. In other word, game can also expand our context.

Bernard Suits

Playing a game is the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles.

Chris Crawford

A game is:

- **Representative:** a closed formal system signifying some subset of reality.
- **Interactive:** provides a focused set of causes and effects to explore.
- **Conflict-Centered:** players encounter difficulties while striving for a goal.
- **Safe:** the consequences of the game are much less harsh than the situation modeled.

Chris Crawford

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- **Safe:** the consequences of the game are much less **harsh** than the situation modeled.
(but also less rewarding)

Rules

Rules specify what can and cannot happen in the game. They define the meaning of a player's actions.

Virtually all definitions agree that rules are essential.

Conflict

A game involves obstacles to overcome, which may be part of the game system or the other players.

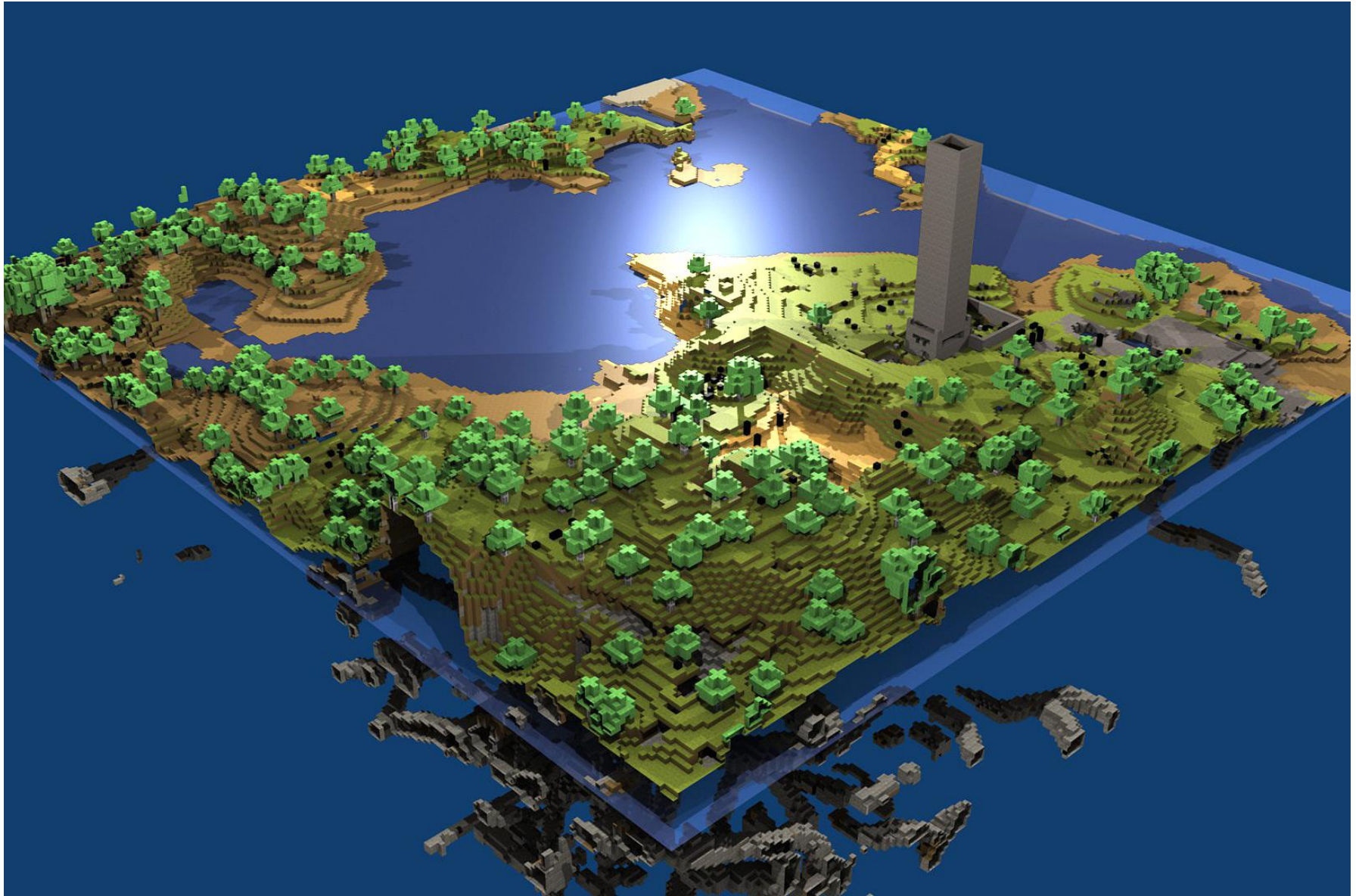
Pandemic, 2008



Goal-Oriented

The players are working to achieve some objective which signals the end of the game.

Minecraft, Mojang 2009



“Mine All Mine, Part 2,” *Penny Arcade*



Goal-Oriented

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Game vs. Toy

Players can make a toy into a game by setting their own goals.

Activity

A game is an activity or process.

Game \neq Gameplay

Artificial

A game is make-believe and not part of the real world. A game is safe. After the game is over, the players should be in more or less the same state as before.

Voluntary

The players in a game must agree to play.

Poker



Artificial and Voluntary

What about “playing for keeps” or betting?

What about injuries?

What about addiction?

Uncertain

The outcome of the game is not known before hand.

What about a novice playing a master to learn?

Art Form

Games are a unique form of artistic expression.



Games are necessarily interactive. How does this affect their value as a form of expression?

Playing with Toys vs. Games

- Play with a toy can start and stop frequently and ambiguously.
- A game has a clear start and stop. Leaving during a game requires that the game be paused.



The Magic Circle

- A game is enclosed in a protective frame that separates it from the real world.
- This frame is psychological, but also usually has a physical manifestation.
- Entering the magic circle is the ceremonial beginning of the game.
- Entering requires a **lusory attitude**, which means a willingness to play by the rules and maintain the spirit of the game.

Metroid (start screen), Nintendo 1986



Games, According to *Rules of Play*

A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.

Crossword Puzzle

Across

1. Teammate of Tony and Tim
5. Provides energy for
10. Talked above one's pay grade, as it were
14. QB Lemon, now in the CFL
15. Orange muppet
16. Like an unassisted triple play
17. Light-hitting infielder acquired by the Mets in exchange for Nolan Ryan (d'oh!)
19. Muezzin's mosque colleague
20. Distance equal to four laps
21. Biblical hymn
23. "Don't ___ stranger!"
24. Sell, as wares
26. South American wool source
29. The Expos got one year of him for Brandon Phillips, Grady Sizemore, and Cliff Lee (oops!)

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Boundary: Puzzles

This definition includes puzzles.

A puzzle is a kind of game which pits the designer against a single player that is attempting to discover a single solution.

Computationally speaking, most puzzles are NP-TIME complete, whereas most games are P-SPACE complete.

Dungeons and Dragons, Tactical Studies Rules 1974



Boundary: Role Playing Games

This definition excludes RPG's because they may never end or may not have a quantifiable outcome.

However, we can frame an RPG as a game when we consider the many smaller games that make it up, such as leveling up, fighting monsters, etc.

Digital Games

This is not Bridge.



This is not a symphony.



This is not a computer game.



Challenge

When designing a computer game, don't get caught up in the hardware.

When designing the rules, don't get caught up in calculation.

When designing the aesthetic, don't start by considering the graphics card.

When designing the interface, don't start by laying out the screen.

Digital Games

- Immediate but Narrow Interactivity
- Information Manipulation
- Automated Complex Systems
- Networked Communication

These features are not unique to digital games, but they are the main strengths of digital games.

Immediate but Narrow Interactivity

- Fast responses to player inputs without the need for tedious calculation or a referee.
- Input is limited to clicking, typing.
- Output is limited to screen, speakers.

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World of Warcraft is not a game about clicking and colored pixels.

Information Manipulation

- Game worlds can be vast and encyclopedic.
- Information can be hidden or asymmetrical.
- Players can learn as they play; no need for an experienced player or teacher.

Automated Complex Systems

- Computers quickly apply long, tedious lists of rules and calculations (e.g. physics).
- This can make the game mechanics undiscernible.

Networked Communication

- Fast communication over long distances
- Asynchronous communication

Schemas

Schemas are important but not exhaustive information.

A schema is one lens through which to view a game.

3 Primary Schemas

1. **Rules:** formal (what can and can't happen)
2. **Play:** experiential (what it is like to play)
3. **Culture:** contextual (how the outside world affects and is affected)

Cleveland Indians Baseball Game

