

What is a Game?

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I. DEFINITION

A game is a form of art with an entertainment purpose provided in the form of an interactive activity where a decision-maker, or groups of decision-makers, often referred to as “players”, consciously operate under agreed-upon rules in a subset of reality, outside of time and space and free from laws present in “normal” life, with the objective of achieving a state of variable and quantifiable success set by the aforementioned rules by voluntarily overcoming intrinsically contrived obstacles and challenges created by the game systems, which in turn creates an intensely absorbing experience for the players.

II. COMPARISON

I think the most apt way to start out this assignment is to define what a game is according to me and then compare this definition to other preexisting ones covered in Lecture 1 of the Gameplay Design course [1] in order to present which inspired my own.

A. J. Huizinga

The definition that influenced me the most is the one by J. Huizinga. The aspect that resonated with me the most in this definition is the concept of a game being an activity consciously outside of “ordinary” life and time and space. When we as players engage in a game, either in a single or multiplayer setting, we all consciously accept and understand that we are taking part in an experience where the rules and laws of ordinary life do not apply. The systems, rules and setting of the game create an engaging experience that allows the players to “escape” everyday life, in other words, the player operates inside a game world where success and failure depend solely on what the game defines them to be and nothing else. The actions we can take are limited by these rules and choices we make are judged only by how much they contribute to overcoming the obstacles and challenges contrived by the game systems. I think that this aspect of a game being outside of the normal functioning of life is crucial for an activity to be considered a game. I believe it is one of the reasons, if not the main reason, games can be so entertaining and absorbing, the strict rules of games are paradoxically freeing the players from the weight of everyday existence. The act of breaking these rules completely destroys this “flow” like state between players and the game, suddenly bringing the “real world” back into the activity, instantly ruining the experience.

B. C. C. Abt

A very important part of my definition has been inspired by C. C. Abt, more specifically, the concept of calling agents playing a game decision-makers. Using the word “player” or “individual” for agents playing a game would insinuate that for any activity to be considered a game, it has to be played by humans, which I find to not be necessarily true. This would entail that even though something is considered a game, if no human is present to play it, it would suddenly lose its status as a game and cease to be considered one. Using the word “decision-maker” instead allows for any entity capable of playing a game according to its rules to be included in the definition, such as AI programs capable of making decisions according to game states, for example. I think a game is not defined by who is playing it; it is defined by itself.

C. R. Callois

In addition to the concept of games taking place outside of time and space, just like in J. Huizinga’s definition, one very important topic that R. Callois defines is that games are governed by rules, which I believe to be another critical aspect that makes something a game. Precisely defined rules are what give games structure and, most importantly, give playing a game any sort of meaning. The game rules define what the player can and cannot do; they define how a player can interact with a game and what has to be done in order to achieve a state of success. If a game has no predefined rules or the rules keep changing while playing, the game loses all sense of meaning. If every agent playing a game doesn’t adhere to the same or even any rules whatsoever, there is no way to distinguish what success is; there isn’t even any indication of what the player is supposed to do or how to interact with the game; this activity becomes pointless, thus it stops being a game. From this logic, it is logical to assume that the player needs to be restricted in their actions by rules in order to be engaged. The question of the difficulty of the rules of the game or their fairness is up to debate and most likely contributes to the difference that we make between “good” and “bad” games, but nevertheless, a game needs a set of rules to be a game, in my opinion.

D. C. Crawford

A concept I have borrowed from C. Crawford in my definition is that games represent a subset of reality. This insinuates that games are independent of our own reality, but most importantly, I think it means that games can create realities

of their own, borrowing some aspects of our reality while also having the possibility of creating anything imaginable that doesn't have to necessarily exist. When we play a game, we as players accept the setting and world that the game attempts to create in the experience of playing it, and we use our prior knowledge of our world and other games we have played to understand the rules of that game and the functioning of its world. For example, if someone is playing a typical high fantasy game, like World of Warcraft, they can immediately recognize what things they are familiar with from their reality, such as castles and horses, but they also accept that in this game world, dragons exist, even though they are not real in our world. This game therefore creates a cohesive world that we can believe in and interact with that is a subset of reality where "real" things (castles, knights, medieval setting) coexist with "fake" things (dragons, wizards, trolls). It remains a subset of reality because it is only confined by what humans know, can imagine, and can create.

E. G. Costikyan

As stated in the definition by G. Costikyan, a game is a form of art, a concept that I wholeheartedly agree with and have added to my own definition. Most definitions of what art contain that creating art is a skill that uses the imagination to create something that expresses feelings, which I believe to be highly applicable to games. In my mind, games are the culmination of all art forms; they are the only form of art that is capable of combining all other art forms and entertainment. They can contain beautiful visuals, music, and narratives, engage all of the human senses at once, and, most importantly, are still interactive while doing so. I think that no game is possible to be created without an artist, which makes it an art form on its own merit and therefore has to be said in my definition.

F. J. Juul

J. Juul defines games as systems that have a variable and quantifiable outcome, a concept that I have also used verbatim in my definition. If the outcome of a game is not variable and is preset, it cannot be a game, which would mean that the game is not interactive and that the choices of players have no impact on that outcome. The game would always play itself since the player has no agency over the game state; the player is not a decision-maker any more. This variability also touches on randomness, which is a very important attribute for a game to contain. The outcome also needs to be quantifiable since it is paramount to the experience of playing to know what the goal of the game is and how to achieve it successfully. If the goal of the game cannot be measured and determined, the game is pointless, and since there is no point to playing it, I do not believe it is a game.

III. ANSWERING QUESTIONS

A. Is high-jump a game?

I consider high jumping a sport, as would anyone else. According to my definition, I would define all sports as a

subset of games that are competitive in nature and where physical activity is essential. If we look at high jump, there are predefined rules on how to achieve a quantifiable outcome; it is interactive; the athlete or "player" is required to make decisions; it is competitive; and it is completely based around a physical activity and therefore a sport, which in my opinion makes it a game.

B. Is Sudoku a game?

I consider Sudoku a puzzle, so the real question for me is whether puzzles are games. I do consider puzzles a subset of games, more specifically games where the main adversary is the player's brain. The game consists of solving a difficult logical challenge created by the rules and the state of success that the finished puzzle needs to fulfill. Sudoku is an entertaining activity that has predefined rules, a quantifiable outcome of success, and a variable way of achieving it. The really interesting observation that can be made about Sudoku and other puzzles is that they are games that can be played only once. Once the player knows the solution to a puzzle, the challenge is gone and the game stops being entertaining, but nevertheless, it still remains a game. Just like knowing the twist in the narrative of a movie doesn't suddenly make a movie "not good" anymore, I think if something is considered a game, it cannot stop suddenly being a game just because the knowledge of the player engaging with the game changes.

C. Are all forms of gambling considered games?

In my opinion and according to my definition, all forms of gambling are games; the only difference from most games is that they are generally not reliant on any skill, are heavily based around randomness, and finally, involve the exchange of monetary assets. In the game of poker, if the money used in the game were exchanged for imaginary points that do not represent any real-life value, the game itself would remain exactly the same; only the incentive for the player would change. I do not think that the involvement of monetary assets, their gain, and most likely their loss, has the ability to change the game's status as a game. The real-world circumstances around playing the game are the only thing that differ, but the game is still a game.

D. If two programs log onto an online chess server and follow the rules of the game, are they playing a game? Is a game being played (with or without players)?

As I have already discussed in the previous section, games are capable of being played by decision-makers, not just humans. This means that the nature of the player has no influence on what a game is defined as. I think of playing only as a word that describes "interacting with a game", not an innate capability only available to sentient beings.

IV. DISCUSSION

I believe that my definition indicates that when game designers are creating games, they should focus their efforts on making sure that the set of game rules and systems they

defined is satisfying enough to be limited by, in other words, a set of rules that creates an engaging and enthralling aesthetic experience for the player that is approachable while still being deep enough to be highly replayable.

Now that I discussed at length my definition of a game, it is time to delve deeper into what games it encompasses and which activities this definition does not include.

My definition is pretty general; all recognized games are included, ranging from video games, board games, trading card games, role-playing, and even sports. I can therefore safely proclaim that games such as World of Warcraft, Catan, Magic: The Gathering, Dungeons & Dragons, and tennis are all games according to my definition.

A gray area of borderline games that can be considered games but do not necessarily fit my description are visual novel games, which can be considered more a form of interactive reading than a game with a variable and quantifiable outcome where the player has agency and can win or lose. The factor that can be used to categorize these as games is whether the dialogue choices of the player influence the evolution of the story and its ending; if they do, I would consider it a game. One of these visual novel games that does not possibly fit my definition criteria is "Doki Doki Literature Club!".

A category of activities that my definition does not consider games is something that I would call "puppy play". Two dogs might be "playing" together, but their behavior has no apparent rules or structure, which automatically rules it out as a potential game.

REFERENCES

- [1] S. Bjork, "Lecture 1 - introduction slides," *Chalmers, University of Gothenburg*, 2023.