Introduction

Half-Real

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- Video games consist of real rules, which control and constrain the player's actions, as well as a fictional world, which tells a story and provides both meaning and context for the player.
- Rules may indicate vital information, which includes elements of the fictional world that hold necessary function
  - Highlighting a key interactable item
  - Indicating the current objective
  - Highlighting potential actions and key information such as health, ammunition, etc
- Fiction is provided in the audiovisual presentation of the game
- Rules can be considered from a system or player perspective
- The fictional world can similarly be considered how the world is presented, or something that the player is able to discover and engage with using their imagination

Play vs Games

- Play is free-form and unrestricted actions for enjoyment
- Games add rules, constraints, and limitations
    - These limitations may foster interesting social interactions or scenarios
- Games provide a shared experience with structure
    - After you played on the jungle gym a bunch with your friends, you would play tag, adding structure
- Games provide challenges and give feedback about performance
    - Meeting, adapting, and overcoming these challenges provide positive engagement for the players
- The same game may be compelling to people for different reasons
    - Halo may be enjoyed for its story, challenging missions, multiplayer, or even as a medium to spend time with friends
    - Though some of the audience may not be heavily invested in some aspects, the audience as a whole benefits from these features as it draws in a large and broad community

Games as Rules

- The rules provide the player with challenges that can't be easily overcome
- Rules are generally **definite**, **unambiguous**, and **easy to use**
- Challenges can be based on emergence, progression, or (often) some blend of the two
- Emergence is the notion of a small number of rules that, when combined, yield a large number of game variations which players must react and adapt to, creating strategies that work well within the given variation.
- Progression presents a series of challenges sequentially, meaning if you are working on objective E, you have necessarily completed objectives A, B, C, and D (or a similar but non-linear form of progression has been completed)
- Emergence and progression both attempt to create increasingly difficult challenges for the player to overcome
- Emergence generally offers more replayability than progression

Games as Fiction

- Fictional worlds in games often have inconsistent and/or incoherent logic
  - Death and respawning
  - Creating units from minerals in <1 minute
  - Dying and loading
  - Characters discussing control schemes with the protagonist
- The importance of the fiction can vary heavily from game to game, and player to player
  - Online games, and games of emergence, often see players "tune out" fictional elements to focus on the rules and functional distinctions
    - Many multiplayer games see players lowering graphical settings for a technical edge
  - A game focused on progression may go to great lengths to immerse the player in the fiction

Classic Game Model

- Model defines games in a historic capacity
1. A rule-based formal system
2. With variable and quantifiable outcomes
3. Where different outcomes are assigned different values
4. Where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome
5. The player feels emotionally attached to the outcome
6. And the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable
- These six features are both necessary and sufficient for something to be a game
- These features work on three different levels:
1. The game itself as a set of rules
2. The level of the player's relation to the game
3. The relation between the activity of playing the game and the rest of the world

Study: Games vs Players

- Games can be considered from the perspective of the rules playing off of each other, creating a game, or
- Games can be considered purely from the perspective of the player experiences that they create
- In reality, people select the rules that lead to the desired experience
    - I.e. a mix of official and unofficial rules used in 4-square
    - Some rules like "no smashing" are open to interpretation, leading to rule negotiations and social power play
    - When this plays out over a large period of time, a local "variant" is settled upon
    - When applied to strategies, this process could describe the "meta-game"
- Choosing to play a game is a meaningful choice even if rules are modified
- Ultimately, different games (and rules) yield different kinds of experiences

Rules or Fiction

- Rules of Irrelevance - Certain things are agreed upon as not being actually important
  - The shape of the token representing you in monopoly
  - How a checkers board and pieces are represented - bottlecaps, plastic, gold, or people in a courtyard
- Analysis of games for a long time argued about whether they are rules or fiction; this author maintains that the two are inseparable, **rules create the fiction**
- The "meaning" of a game is not connected to the program or gameplay, the relationship is arbitrary
  - Taking a simple game and altering the graphics can give it a radically different meaning
  - Imagine space invaders with enemies remodeled after a public figure's face

Other analytical axes

- Narratology (games as stories) vs Ludology (games as something unique)
  - Two sides have somewhat reconciled, with cut-scenes being asserted as a valid reward, and observable occurrences of a two-way interaction between video games and cinema
  - Quests are considered an effective way to provide narrative within a rule based system
- Ontology (what games are) vs Aesthetics (what makes them enjoyable)
  - One system for analysis involves three levels: Rules, Play, and Culture