

What is a Video game

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ABSTRACT

Video games have been studied seriously only for a few years. So, we can wonder how we could use the recent academic works to approach new design methods. This article proposes a first step: a short and simple definition of what a video game is, this definition being connected with existing academic works about *game*, *play*, *interactivity*, and *narrative*. The definition is: A *video game* is a *game* which we *play* thanks to an *audiovisual apparatus* and which can be based on a *story*. The article also shows what the video game heritage teaches us about what a video game is.

INTRODUCTION

Why should we define the term *video game*? Because we have reasons to study video games. What are these reasons? James Newman gives us an answer:

“While scholars identify a range of social, cultural, economic, political and technological factors that suggest the need for a (re)consideration of video games by students of media, culture and technology, here, it is useful to briefly examine just three reasons why video games demand to be treated seriously: the size of the video games industry; the popularity of video games; video games as an example of human-computer interaction.” [1]

Indeed, the video game industry is now more than 30 years old and video games belong to our culture . But, we have studied video games seriously only for a few years . Regarding this situation, we can wonder how we could use the recent academic works to approach new design methods. The first step can be a definition of what a video game is. We know some definitions of this term—for example the book *Difficult Questions About Video games* [2] offers many of them—but the goal of this article is to propose a short and simple definition that is connected with existing academic works (a definition that we could easily reuse in an academic context). We will also see what the video game heritage teaches us about what a video game is.

DEFINITION

Here is a possible definition:

A video game is a *game* which we *play* thanks to an *audiovisual apparatus* and which can be based on a *story*.

This definition is short and simple, and I would like to demonstrate that it really defines the term *video game*. I will show that this definition is based on well-known thoughts about *game*, *play*, *interactivity*, and *narrative*.

GAME

Needless to say that a video game is a game. It is obvious but we have to clearly remember this. Before being a cultural form, an art form, a narrative form, an education tool and more, video games are games:

“However, even if it sounds obvious, video games are, before anything else, games.” [3]

So, what is a game? We have had games for a very long time, but the definitions are not numerous. Nevertheless, some of them are applied to video games with adeptness.

Roger Caillois , inspired by Johan Huizinga , provides elements to define what a game is: a fictional, unpredictable, and unproductive activity with rules, with time and space limits, and without obligation. He also presents an approach for classifying games. He especially identifies two orientations. He calls it *paida* and *ludus*. We can understand it as freedom and constraints. Gonzalo Frasca says it “describes the difference between play and game”. Effectively, some games without quantifiable outcome can be considered as toy-games (two famous examples: *Sim City*, 1989, and *The Sims*, 2002). I use words that Eric Zimmerman also use quantifiable outcome, so it is time to discuss his definition of what a game is:

“A game is a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome.” [4]

This definition is a very accurate definition of what a game is. But, it does not include toy-games and puzzle-games. A video game can be a puzzle-game, a toy-game, or any kind of game that can be handled by an audiovisual apparatus. Wolfgang Kramer advances two sets of criteria to differentiate “games with rules” from the others. Basic criteria for every game: common experience, equality, freedom, activity, diving into the world of the game. And additional criteria for “games with rules”: game rules, goal, the course of the game is never the same chance, competition.

PLAY

To introduce what playing a video game is, I will quote Zimmerman again:

“Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system.” [4]

Zimmerman also defines three categories: game play, ludic activities, being playful. Given these categories, the famous Huizinga definition is related to the first category:

“Such a concept, we felt, seemed to be tolerably well defined in the following terms: play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’.” [5]

We can also try to list the pleasures of playing. Competition, accomplishment, system mastering, narrative enjoyment, and audiovisual experience. Moreover, we can think of other aspects beyond system mastering and that game designers know very well: discovering hidden elements (secrets, Easter eggs) and cheating . This last item brings me to the next term of my definition: the audiovisual apparatus.

AUDIOVISUAL APPARATUS

The audiovisual apparatus I am talking about is an electronic system with computing capabilities, input devices (controllers, mouse, keyboard, etc.), and output devices (screen, loudspeakers, etc.). It can be an arcade video game, a video game console, a hand held console, a computer, a personal digital assistant, a phone, etc. It means that we have human-computer interactions and that video games can be seen as user interfaces.

STORY

A video game can be based on a story. In most cases, it is, but sometimes not. *Tetris* (1985), for example, is an abstract challenge that does not need a story. There are many ways to insert *narrative elements* in a video game: back-stories (videos in the beginning for instance), cut-scenes between levels or to introduce a special event in the game, discussions with other characters, etc. Then, academics wonder if we can study and design video games like literature and film [6, 12, 17, 20, 25, 29]. Some answers are very clear, for example:

“The first and most important thing to know about games is that they center on PLAY. Unlike literature and film, which center on STORY, in games, everything revolves around play and the player experience. Game designers are much less interested in telling a story than in creating a compelling framework for play.” [6]

Hence, video games are often seen as *simulations*.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how we can connect existing academic works with one short and simple definition of the term *video game*. We have also seen that this definition could easily be completed, for example with what the video game heritage teaches us.

To conclude, we can add that knowing what a video game is, is obviously very useful to know what a good video game is. This could be the next step and it could be verified thanks to the video game heritage. Then, it could give us criteria to analyse video games and ideas to improve video games. Finally, we could build a new design method that would be based on this work.

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