

# In search of a minimalist game

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## ABSTRACT

This essay is a re-examination and critique of existing game definitions in parallel with the analysis of Juul [9, 10]. Juul's original study revealed six basic game components; the analysis here pares these to four more definitive components, isolated in game form: rules, goals, opposition, and representation. These four components are used to construct a "minimalist" game. The paper describes the implications of these minimalist game components to contrasting foundationalist and essentialist theories of games. Specific game examples are used to demonstrate how a minimalist game model might be used to distinguish among games, simulation, and play.

## Author Keywords

Game theory, game model, game rules, game goals, representation, philosophy, minimalism.

## INTRODUCTION

*Minimalism* is commonly associated with a group of artists working (primarily) during the 1960s in sculpture, photography, painting, and music [12, 16]. The minimalist art of this period was characterized by a common "stylistic austerity" [3] both reductive and abstract. However, these aesthetic characteristics are not limited to the 1960s, nor, in this essay, will the concept of minimalism be limited to aesthetic analysis.

More broadly, minimalism can be considered a sort of epistemology linked to essentialism and foundationalism.

*Foundationalism* prioritizes some beliefs -- considered foundational or basic beliefs -- over other beliefs, just as minimalism prioritizes some characteristics of aesthetic objects over other characteristics of those objects. The foundational or basic characteristics of aesthetic objects are chosen according to their evocative qualities. Minimal characteristics of an aesthetic object are intended to evoke an aesthetic response at least similar to and, in some cases, identical to the aesthetic response evoked by the object itself. Inside this functionalist goal, minimalism prioritizes relatively *abstract* characteristics of aesthetic objects that

can also be considered basic or foundational characteristics. Importantly, in order to assure similarity of aesthetic response, these characteristics must simultaneously be indicative of the original object and of priorities in human sensibilities and interpretative functions regarding that object.

Just as minimalism can rightfully be broadened to include foundationalism, minimalism can also be extended to include essentialism.

*Essentialism* assumes objects have some identity or "essence," regardless of their use as sociological or intellectual constructs. Similarly, minimalism and essentialism posit that the essential characteristics of an object are shared in some manner by all members of that object class. In contrast with essentialism, however, minimalism might be said to over-simplify aesthetic objects, since minimalism commonly assumes that the basic characteristics of an object -- those representing its "essence" -- are much fewer than *all* characteristics of that object. Neither essentialism nor foundationalism makes such an explicitly reductive claim.

For instance, it is conceivable within essentialism that *all* characteristics of an object compose that object's "essence"; likewise, it is conceivable within foundationalism that there is no limit to the number of foundational ideas and beliefs -- and, further, that these foundational ideas and beliefs may or may not be fruitfully combined into some greater number of "non-basic" ideas and beliefs. Commonly, however, both foundationalism and essentialism share with minimalism its focus on a limited subset of object characteristics that have the greatest effect on and/or closest affinity to those human cognitive processes that perceive and interpret the original object.

Here, I will use a minimalist approach -- incorporating assumptions of both foundationalism and essentialism -- in an attempt to prioritize basic characteristics of computer games. These characteristics will then be considered indicative of a computer game's *essence*. This is the main question I will pursue: What is the minimal number of

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concepts necessary to construct (and recognize) a computer game?

A similar sort of question has been asked -- and answered, at least in part -- regarding "play." The play bow of dogs, wolves, and other canines is an example of a minimal component of their play: A meta-communicative signal that this play thing is something other than a real thing. Without this signal, dogs' play does not take place. With it, their play becomes increasingly diverse.

Of course, pursuing a minimalist computer game assumes that some characteristics of a computer game *are* essential, and that, further, these essential characteristics are then indicative of a particular object class: the *game* class. Almost immediately, I expect, some would disagree with this assumption. There are two common arguments directed against minimalism in general that could also be directed at the approach here.

One -- an anti-essentialist argument -- might claim that games are most fundamentally cultural practices. This position maintains that games are defined not by their essence but through their practice (or playing). From this point of view, anything at all might be reasonably considered a game, depending on the manner in which we play -- or not-play -- that thing. Let us call this position *cultural relativism*.

Another argument -- an anti-foundationalist argument -- claims that, even if computer games possess some particular essence apart from their realization within a specific cultural context, access to that essence is denied by the vagaries of natural language and/or natural thought. This position denies human ability to recognize, analyze, and define essences (whether they exist or not) through either sensory data or any other available means (e. g., logic and reason). Let us call this the *mysterian* position.

Thus, if I were to isolate some minimal essence of games, cultural relativists might agree only (if they were in an agreeable mood) that this represents some basic and essential quality of human game *culture*. Mysterians might agree only (if they were equally in the mood) that this represents only some essential characteristics of false, flawed, and/or incomplete human understanding and analysis of games -- not the games themselves.

I will not attempt to directly counter either of these immediately, but simply make my attempt to reveal a minimalist game. Eventually, I hope the results of this attempt will allow me to make some comment and give some response regarding these two contrary positions.

**WHAT ARE GAMES?**

Games and gaming are ubiquitous objects and activities, and game definitions range from the simple and the

common to the more focused and sophisticated.

In 2003, Jesper Juul presented a well-drawn summary of game definitions in his DiGRA keynote address. Juul's goal was inclusive: to develop a definition of games that consolidated definitions from a variety of historical and contemporary sources. My goal in this essay is more exclusive: to eliminate components of game definitions that are not equally shared by all games. To this end, however, it is useful to examine closely Juul's results.

Here are Juul's primary sources of game definitions as he summarized them in his keynote address [10]:

Source	Definition
Johan Huizinga 1950, p.13.	[...] a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.
Roger Caillois 1961, p.10- 11.	[...] an activity which is essentially: Free (voluntary), separate [in time and space], uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe.
Bernard Suits 1978, p. 34.	To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.
Avedon & Sutton Smith 1981, p.7.	At its most elementary level then we can define game as an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrium outcome.
Chris Crawford 1981, chapter 2.	I perceive four common factors: representation ["a closed formal system that subjectively represents a subset of reality"], interaction, conflict, and safety ["the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models"].
David Kelley 1988, p.50.	a game is a form of recreation constituted by a set of rules that specify an object to be attained and the permissible means of attaining it.
Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman 2003, p.96.	A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.

**Figure 1: Game Definitions.**

There are other game definitions available, of course, but these seven are well chosen and, for the moment, as good as any. And here, in abridged form, is what Juul extracted from these definitions: six common and potentially definitive characteristics of a game:

- rules
- variable and quantitative outcomes
- valorization of outcome
- player effort
- player attachment to outcome
- negotiable consequences

Juul associates these characteristics with a "classic game model." And, in later versions of his original argument [9], he emphasizes the *rules* of games (the "processing of rules," actually) as having fundamental and "transmedial" affinities with computer games.

However, Juul's six characteristics are not all the same sort or all the same priority. Of these six, "rules" appears most often and most centrally within game definitions; yet "rules" also seems somewhat least similar to other members of Juul's group.

For instance, only "rules" (and, perhaps, "variable and quantitative outcomes" -- if we interpret these latter as game *goals*) can be observed and measured without reference to anything other than game itself: its *form*.

While Juul considers rules, goals, and, curiously, "player effort" (or challenge) formal game properties, it seems that all but rules and goals require, at least in part, consideration of players -- particularly player cognitive states -- while playing, including player "efforts," "values," "attachment," and "negotiations."

Because these latter four *non-formal* characteristics of games require reference to player intention and choice, they are difficult to measure and often quite subjective. Not all game definitions mention them equally, if at all. And, when they are mentioned, their importance is less clear and less certain than that of rules.

Juul's criterion of "player attached to outcome," for instance, requires a referential context outside the game entirely -- and may differ from one player and playing to the next.

Further, according to this scheme, we would be unable to classify *Monopoly* or *Scrabble* or basketball as games without taking some measure of, among other things, player "effort." And, if one set of players displayed considerable effort and another did not, which would be more properly used to indicate the true nature of that game? Are games such as *Monopoly* not to be considered games at all unless they are, at the moment of that determination, played with proper effort?

For these reasons and for our purposes here -- to reveal a minimalist game -- we are forced to eliminate all reference to players and playings. If so, then we are left only with the two game characteristics previously mentioned from Juul's list: rules and outcomes, or, more definitively, *rules* and *goals*. However, while both these may be critical to defining a game, they are certainly not all that is necessary. Many objects and procedures have rules -- grammar and language, for instance -- but these are not games. Likewise, many objects and procedures have goals -- human survival, for instance -- but these too are not games. Even the combination of rules and goals -- as occurs during ballroom dancing, for instance -- is not sufficient to determine a game. Realizing this, attempts at defining games have normally attempted to finesse these limitations, as Juul has done, and to include in game definitions characteristics of

players and playing, contexts and culture, that qualify rules and goals according to the occasion.

Wittgenstein has made perhaps the most famous of these encircling moves in his reference to "games" (or, more accurately, "language-games") as indicating only a general family (rather than a specific form) of characteristics: "It is here [regarding language-games] that Wittgenstein's rejection of general explanations, and definitions based on sufficient and necessary conditions, is best pronounced." [4]

We might be able to classify Wittgenstein's position (given the right circumstances [17]), along with Juul's, as foundationalist -- but not essentialist. Both might be willing to agree that not all game characteristics are equally important, but neither easily admits to an essentialist game core. And both seem consonant, or at least in sympathy, with a relativist position in which any potential game core or essential set of characteristics is indeterminable through reference to game form alone. Players and playing must be referenced as well.

Burdened with our essentialist assumptions, however, we are, unlike the relativist, forced to look not beyond but within the game form: within game *rules*, for instance, to determine whether or not rules alone might be sufficient to determine a minimalist game. A potential answer to this query can be found in the Suits [19] definition of games. According to Suits, it is not just any rules and goals that a game requires, but rules of a particular sort and in a particular sort of relationship with game goals.

Rather than distinguishing among different types of play and players, Suits chooses to distinguish among different types of rules. The rules of the game, Suits maintains, are unique in that they are *prohibitive* towards the goals of the game. That is, game rules are instructions as to how to achieve game goals and, simultaneously, instructions as to how to *not* achieve game goals. And, given those two characteristics of game rules, the latter is more definitive than the former.

Tom Hurka, editor of the most recent edition of Suits' major work, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, helps clarify Suits' insight: "I think Suits's definition decisively refutes Wittgenstein's claims, and it does so because it looks at a level Wittgenstein didn't consider. He saw the surface differences between games—that some use playing-cards and some don't, that some are amusing and some not—and concluded that there can't be anything they have in common. But Suits's analysis operates at a deeper level, finding a shared structural [here, we might say *formal*] feature that's consistent with all these surface differences, one that involves the pursuit of a certain type of goal, restrictions on the permitted means to that goal, and an attitude that accepts those restrictions because they make activity governed by them possible. That structural feature

can be found in card games, cricket, chess, rock-paper-scissors—any game you like. But Wittgenstein didn't see it because he was looking only at the surface." [20]

### GAME RULES ARE RULES OF DENIAL

Prohibitive rules are rules of *denial*. Normally these rules are most evident in game-related boundaries established by those rules: in-touch, out-of-touch, legal and allowed, illegal and not allowed. Of course, the list of things you cannot do in a game is always larger than the list of things you can do. And, given this realization, it is remarkable that game rules manage to establish some semblance of order in their assertion of a largely indeterminable set of prohibitions.

The linked characteristics of prohibition and denial empower all game rules, but they are not characteristics restricted to game rules alone. Prohibition and denial are pervasive within the game form and vital to that form: an *anti-form* [13]. These characteristics naturally emerge during the separation of game from not-game, and during the subsequent denial of the not-game in favor of some alternative: e. g., Huizinga's "magic circle." For here, a "magic circle" does not refer merely to the isolation and containment of the game; it refers more critically to the *essence* of the game: what, without the game, is otherwise *not*.

While magic circle debates rage now and again [1, 6] as to exactly how such a circle might be constructed or exactly what such a circle might contain (or if it exists at all), the magic circle concept is clearly indicative of an *essentialist* position regarding game form. This essentialist position must claim separation (a spatial form of *denial*) between game and not-game. This is in sharp contrast with those who argue against this separation from, almost exclusively, non-essentialist points of view.

This non-essentialist position includes Juul's analysis discussed earlier, Wittgenstein's definition of language-games, and, more recently, the argument by Pargman and Jakobsson [14] (and many others, it seems), who maintain that digital media and computer games blur the distinction between what is and isn't a game -- particularly in new media social settings. On the contrary, from an essentialist point of view, digital media and computer games appear to accomplish exactly the opposite: these new media forms reveal and affirm a single and essential, rules-based, goals-oriented, and steadfastly *oppositional* game form that belligerently opposes assimilation by either culture or culture-based analyses.

The tension and conflict resulting from the prohibitive nature of game rules seems another potentially definitive characteristic of our minimalist game.

Let's examine it.

### The origin of opposition

Prior to the advent of computer games, competition *among and between players* has at least partially masked the more fundamental and essential opposition *between player and rules*. If so, then competition among and between players has been given an unjustly deserved central role in prioritizing social contexts of play over game form. This makes some further sense in that, in comparison with the rules of computer games, pre-digital game rules are relatively static, non-interactive, and largely incapable of directing the formal prohibitions and denials of their rules into self-reflexive loops that emphasize and isolate their own unique form (with some exceptions, of course; see for instance, Peter Suber's *Nomic* [18] as an example of a non-digital, but nevertheless self-reflexive set of game rules).

This is not to imply that play theorists prior to digital games failed to acknowledge rules variants, modifications, and other sorts of rules transformations implicit in game form, but that these alternative or oppositional rules were generally regarded as something other than integral to that game form. Oppositional forms of games and play were more often associated with improper or "bad" play of some sort -- or, more generally, with roguish social activities.

For instance, Huizinga [8] notes that the "cheater" opposes in-game rules -- and the "spoilsport" is even worse in opposing the rules governing game rules. These are classifications of game player and play with primary reference to game form (rules). But, while game rules are emphasized in this analysis, in-game oppositions are not.

Huizinga, also in *Homo Ludens*, associates competition -- or, put more broadly, *opposition* -- more often with play than games: "Some find the principle of play in an innate urge to exercise a certain faculty, or in the desire to dominate or compete"; and, later: "[I]n whatever shape [competition] comes, it is always play."

Likewise, Caillois [5], in *Man, Play, and Games*, assigns competition a fundamental role in governing play and classifying games, but then mutes that competition ("agon") inside a collection of other non-competitive game types equally influential: chance, simulation, and vertigo.

Neither Huizinga nor, later, Caillois make the claim that the game form is essentially oppositional. Yet, as digital games allow more interactivity and real-time manipulation of game rules, it is increasingly unclear how the manipulations of those rules by cheaters and spoilsports can (or should) be formally distinguished in any significant way from the manipulation of game rules by more conventional players.

While some may toy with the notion of eliminating the boundary between games and not-games, it seems more reasonable for our purposes to consider eliminating the

boundary between good players and bad players, legal play and illegal play, in order to emphasize that all players, good and bad, are placed in a similar sort of oppositional relationship with the game and its rules.

Fortunately, implicit even in Huizinga's early analysis (e. g., "the after-play of a civilization in decline") is the recognition of a fundamentally *self-reflexive* game form. As rules of denial are recursively applied within games, these rules of denial must eventually themselves be denied, resulting in the paradoxical other-worldliness of game play: its *liminal* properties.

In order for players to experience this peculiar aesthetic, the game form necessarily must place the player – all players -- in an oppositional relationship with the game and its rules. This oppositional relationship does not then differ in form or substance from player to cheater to spoilsport; it differs only in degree. Computer game cheaters and spoilsports do not turn this oppositional relationship on its head or transform it beyond recognition; they merely extend this relationship beyond initial game boundaries – beyond, for instance, the "magic circle." To actually become a spoilsport is to break that circle, perhaps; but, simultaneously, to push the rules of the game to the brink, to the point of breaking without being broken, is to experience the game in its purest form, in its most liminal state. And it is this pushing that extends and invigorates the game upon its play: an unruly act of creative will.

While Huizinga and Caillois see game rules as invariant ("absolutely binding" and "fixed," respectively), it seems more currently appropriate, given the interactive nature of computer games, to view an essential game *form* as invariant, with game rules a necessary and definitive, but hardly static and unyielding, component of that form.

If so, then the game form is most directly experienced through player opposition, even player belligerence, and certainly not through player acquiescence. Further, the more (or, perhaps, just the right amount of) belligerence, the purer the game play. And, if so, then opposition can be added as the third essential characteristic of our minimalist game.

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Meanwhile, embedded in Suit's qualification of game rules as prohibitive is perhaps an even more fundamental property of those rules: game rules *reference* game goals. And, further, since game rules are rules of denial, this reference is necessarily a reference of denial -- i. e., game rules most significantly reference that which is denied by those rules.

This paradoxical reference of denial takes a dialectical form that, during play, is reflected in competition and conflict

and opposition, but also in the necessity of a game engaging the opposite of the real: the *representational*.

Indeed, contemporary definitions of computer games add to the notion of oppositional play an important qualification: that this opposition must be in *representational* form, or, as put by Salen and Zimmerman [6], that in-game conflict is "*artificial* conflict."

## GAMES ARE REPRESENTATIONAL

In opposition, there is always reference. Just as game rules reference both a goal and its denial, so too does one game opponent reference another. Likewise, from an essentialist point of view, the game itself must separate from and therein reference, in its absence, an opposite. This opposite of the game is normally construed as less false and more "real" than the game.

Among Juul's collection of game definitions, we find this opposite of the game referenced in Caillois's "separate [in time and space]," Huizinga's "not serious," and of course, Crawford's [7] "representation." Each of these characteristics is in opposition to more concrete and substantive characteristics of the real: the unified, the serious, and the iconic.

If the definitive components of our minimalist game are, at this point, rules, goals, and opposition, then to those three, we add a fourth and final component: reference, or, more generally, *representation*. To this end, it will better to call our minimalist game *representational* rather than, strictly speaking, a representation. For, if a game represents something, anything, too closely -- i. e., in *iconic* form -- then that game becomes less game and more *simulation*. Similarly, if the game represents nothing, neither human values nor human desires, than that game becomes less than a game: overly simple and meaningless play.

If reality is a game's formal opposition, then simulation is a game's formal dissolution. Within a simulation, players become increasingly less belligerent and increasingly more docile and submissive to the authority of rules. Players become incapable of rules intervention and manipulation when game rules become too closely analogous to reality and/or when game objects and events become too closely similar to the things they represent. When this occurs, game play may become more than just too serious; it may become deadly -- as, for instance, in the life-threatening situations of Connell's (1924) "The Most Dangerous Game" and the "game" of Russian roulette in the classic movie "Deer Hunter" (1978).

Within the simulation, the liminal properties of games fade. Indeed, Huizinga's notion of cheating is impossible in the simulation. Any failure to obey game rules is simply a failure to participate in the simulation. Spoilsporting is likewise thwarted insofar as the rules governing the rules of

simulations are incontrovertible laws. Exploiting the rules governing the rules of simulations, as spoilsporting requires, occurs only when simulation rules are rewritten and replaced entirely (as, for instance, *Star Trek's* fictional Kirk accomplished in his response to the "Kobayashi Maru simulation").

At the other end of this representational spectrum, game rules may become too arbitrary and flexible. In this extreme, game player opposition, belligerence, and denial turn into indifference and whimsy: free and random play. Play in such contexts likewise results in the dissolution of game. While simulations overly objectify game goals, play overly "subjectifies" those goals. While the goals of play and simulation may be overtly similar to those goals of a rules-based game, their representations -- including the conditions under which those representational goals are to be achieved -- remain distinct. It is only by establishing the proper level and degree of representation, neither too strict nor too loose, that we can most definitively distinguish between play and simulation, game and not-game.

### Types of representational games

To linger on this notion of the representational a bit longer, consider a very simple game: *TicTacToe*. While it is easy, perhaps, to recognize the representational qualities of *Monopoly*, or *KOTOR*, or *Zelda*, or *Portal*, what exactly is "representational" about *TicTacToe* -- or *Tetris* or *Bejeweled* or any other similarly abstract game?

The symbols used by these games are relatively simple -- simplest in the case of *TicTacToe*: i. e., "X" and "O." These two symbols are arbitrarily chosen and assigned arbitrary values. The "X" of *TicTacToe* could equally have been a "C" or "dog" or red; and the "O" could equally have been "N" or "cat" or blue. The "X" and "O" symbols have value and meaning within the game solely on the basis of what they represent *inside the game*. In the case of *TicTacToe*, the "X" and "O" represent little more than a mark of distinction, a difference between player one and player two, but are nevertheless necessary to that end.

In *Tetris*, representations of distinction are extended to include five symbols of importance rather than just two -- the long rectangle, the square, the L-shape, etc -- which represent opportunities for play in their rate of fall and position in the game space. In this case, these representations are more *iconic* than those in *TicTacToe*. That is, at least in part, the shapes of *Tetris* are non-arbitrary and therein non-representational: they represent a simulation of physical objects falling through space, and their shapes must properly fit within the space provided. Yet this verisimilitude is obviously imperfect: the *Tetris* screen is (commonly) two-dimensional, and the speed of the falling shapes varies. So, inside the game, these shapes still represent rather than reproduce physical laws. *Tetris* is not a simulation; yet, *Tetris* remains, overall, more iconic than

*TicTacToe*.

In the case of *Bejeweled*, the primary symbols of the game -- the jewels -- are also iconic to some degree: they can be considered representations of jewels of the real. But their value and use in the game really requires only some indication of similarity and difference for matching and juxtaposition. For this mechanical purpose, "X" and "O" and "C" and "N" and such might equally suffice.

However, the representations of *Bejeweled* function beyond this basic level of distinction. Their value is not so intimately connected to their realism as to their evocative qualities: their theme or mood or, we might say, their *imagery* rather than their images. From this imagery comes the name of the game, after all, as well as a variety of more idiosyncratic pleasures. These pleasures may be ultimately peripheral to game form, but they originate within representations found within that form -- representations of metaphor rather than mechanic -- and these representations are then equally critical to the game's identity and essence.

These three examples show something of a range of representations that are combined, mixed, and matched in games. There is, on the ground floor, the relative simple representations of distinction we find in the "X" and "O" of *TicTacToe*. Then there are representations of iconic form; these may become increasingly less representational and increasingly more real, ending in the rigor of the simulation. And then there are also representations of theme, or mood, or imagery, which evoke their own independent aesthetic pleasures, and, when compared to the previous two representational forms, are less critical to game mechanics. When separated from game mechanics entirely, in fact, these latter representations may well be spun into art and story.

Just as rules and goals are interdependent in the game, both denying and asserting the other, so too are opposition and representation interdependent, particularly at their most fundamental levels. A simple mark of distinction, such as that between the "X" and "O" in *TicTacToe*, carries within it the genesis for all subsequent oppositions within the game. For this reason, in constructing our minimalist game, we are moved to place representation in a primary position.

In fact, we might ask now if this essential characteristic of the representational is not only at the root of opposition, but also at the root of rules and goals as well. Consider the following components of a very simple version of the game *Slapjack*...

- turn the cards until a Jack appears (rule)
- slap the Jack (goal)
- before any other (opposition)

According to our position, all games must contain the three

components above, *plus* representational form. But what is representational here? Surely, it is the goal of the game itself -- Jack-slapping -- which has no intrinsic value other than that given it by the game form. Thus, the necessity of having games rules assign game goals immediately embeds even a minimalist game with this most essential quality of the representational.

### THE MINIMALIST GAME: CONSTRUCTED

We now have, instead of Juul's six compiled characteristics of games, a more essentialist list of four:

- "prohibitive" **Rules** (taken largely intact from Suits's definition)
- **Goals**, (most importantly including the game's winning conditions)
- **Opposition** (e. g., an antagonist), and
- **Representation**, or a falseness that is contrary to the real.

This minimalist game model allows us to determine what is, and, equally importantly, what is not a game.

Is, for instance, a crossword puzzle a game? It has rules; it has goals. And it is representational to the degree that its words and letters have spatial values as well as their conventional semantic values -- i.e., some words have a higher value than others based on their unique position within the puzzle space. However, if there is no opposition -- no contest or competition -- then this remains an important distinction between puzzle and game. Should opposition of any sort arise, however, then it is certainly conceivable that puzzle could become game -- as is the case, for instance, within the game *Yahtzee*, in which the player struggles in opposition with the rudimentary AI of repeatedly random dice rolls.

Given our essentialist assumptions, the formal properties of this minimalist game object *class* can be used to categorize play activity regardless of any subsequent social negotiation or context.

### THE MINIMALIST GAME: OBJECTIONS

With our goal of a minimalist game accomplished, we can now return to earlier stated objections to such a thing.

Let's review.

The mysterian is an anti-foundationalist. The mysterian's argument goes like this: Your four characteristics are not foundational. They are interesting and important to you, perhaps, but they are interesting and important to you for some unknown reason, which may or may not be, but most likely isn't, that they are foundational characteristics of a game. More likely, these four characteristics are artifacts of

your imagination. They are a sort of myth about the game that results wholly from your muddled human myth-making faculties.

How might we respond?

The mysterian is normally inscrutable, so he is a difficult nut to crack. Best to attack the mysterian's position might be this: Perhaps our characteristics are not foundational and from them we could neither build nor understand all games. However, it appears that we can build a great number of games from these simple characteristics and, furthermore, it seems that this notion of games as representational, in particular, can not only be used to classify games but also to distinguish between games and not-games. And this is a useful thing.

The mysterian may then sneer and call us functionalists and pragmatists, but that may be our best hope under the circumstances.

The cultural relativist, on the other hand, is an anti-essentialist. Her argument goes like this: Your four characteristics are not essentialist. They are interesting and important to you, perhaps, but they would be less interesting and less important to someone else. Games have no essentialist quality -- no "essence" -- that does not come from their players and their playing. And, since your minimalist game does not deign to include players and playing at all, it cannot possibly be considered essential.

How might we respond?

The best we can do against the relativist might be this: A relativist position might still be possible, if we consider that each of the four characteristics of our minimalist game might be applied, more strongly or weakly, within different cultural contexts. For instance, we have already demonstrated how a game's use of different representational forms might be associated with either simulation or free play. So, perhaps it is the different emphasis of different players and playings that adds or subtracts to the strength or weakness of each of the minimalist game's component factors, resulting in different types of games and different types of game play.

This well may please the relativist in admitting social variation and cultural relevance to our results; but there is danger in this compromise. For the relativist is commonly like the camel, and once the relativist nose gets under our minimalist tent, the rest of the relativist may well soon follow. We may wish to set some limits on what is added or subtracted from each of our four essentialist game components so that simulations do not turn into games, and games do not turn into societies. At greatest risk in this case is that game studies as a separate field of study may itself dissolve before our eyes and turn into the study of the

social variations and cultural relevancies of (what used to be, but are no longer) “games.”

But then this battle with the camel is always possible whenever we deal with the relativist, and so we must simply dig ourselves in and prepare ourselves for it.

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