

Framing Games

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I revisit the everlasting question of what constitutes a game. My purpose is to arrive at a permissive definition that can serve to bridge digital and non-digital game studies. The way I approach the issue is through eliciting the qualities of games for which I believe game studies provides appropriate tools. The article centres on the idea that games are *systems*, which have been designed to be *played* or evolved within a play practice.

I use previous literature to carefully examine what is required from a game system, as well as what signifies play in relationship to other human activities. The strength of game studies is that it has developed ways to understand how these two aspects are interrelated - how play is shaped by systems, and how systems need to be constructed to support play.

Keywords

Game definitions, re-signification, ludus, paidea, paratelic, telic, rules, game studies

INTRODUCTION

Modern research on games has emerged out of the study of digital games, and is still by and large focused on such games (Stenros and Waern 2011). The focus has been motivated both by the dominance and cultural significance of the digital game, as well as by significant differences between digital games and other games (Tavinor 2009). But the digital game is not an unmutable phenomenon, and today there exist many forms of games that mix elements of digital and non-digital games. Hence, there is a need to develop a modern approach to the study of all forms of games, in which studies of digital and non-digital games support and inform each other.

Before the era of digital game studies, games were primarily studied from ethnographic (Caillois 2001) and psychological (Piaget 1962, Vygotsky 1966) perspectives, resulting in an understanding of play activities rather than game systems. Although such perspectives have their own merits, digital game studies has now developed its own very useful perspective. I believe that the particular strength of digital game studies lies in its ability to uncover the relationship between the structure of a game and the way people engage with that system. Furthermore, I believe that the same approaches apply to a range of phenomena outside of digital games ranging from board games to children's games and even the gaming of systems developed for serious purposes.

GAMES AS SYSTEMS AND ACTIVITY: SKETCHING THE BACKGROUND

It seems like every game researcher must make his or her own attempt at defining games. One reason is that we feel uncomfortable with not knowing what phenomena we are

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studying; that the boundary between when we study games and when we study something else is unclear. More importantly, we create definitions in order to elicit the qualities in games towards which we direct our attention. Both desires create a need for essential definitions (Tavinor 2009). Although we know that Wittgenstein (2009, reprint) used games as a primary example of terms that lack precise definitions, this does not help us in delimiting our subject or focusing our research.

In his excellent book on video games, Tavinor (2009) emphasizes the difference between nominal and essential definitions. Nominal definitions aim to capture how a word is used in language, whereas essential definitions aim to establish a term that captures a particular concept or phenomenon. Just as Tavinor does, I aim for an *essential* rather than a nominal definition of game. This means that I am not trying to capture every meaning of the word game, and neither is it sufficient for me to address it as a family concept. This is all the more true since words like “game” and “play” do not translate fully between languages¹.

Let’s start by briefly revisiting a range of game definitions. The first thing I’d like to draw attention to is the dual nature of games as at the same time structured objects and human activity. Nominal definitions tend to focus on the latter aspect. An example is the Wikipedia definition that starts

“A game is structured playing, usually undertaken for enjoyment...”

This definition is rather unclear. Although the word “game” can be both a noun and a verb, it is far more commonly used as a noun, which is the case here. In the same way, “play” can also be both a noun and a verb, but is here used as a verb. A possible reading is that the definition speaks of an alternative meaning of the word “game”, as denoting a singular game session (“Let’s play a game of chess.”). But this is most likely not the meaning that Wikipedia attempts to frame, and furthermore it is not a meaning that you would find in every language².

Still, many similar definitions have been proposed.

“A game is a form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through game tokens in the pursuit of a goal.” (Costikyan 1994)

“A game is an activity among two or more independent decision-makers seeking to achieve their objectives in some limiting context.” (Abt 1970)

“A game is a form of play with goals and structure.” (Maroney 2001)

Of these three, Maroney happily steps into the Wikipedia language trap, and Abt and Costikyan avoid it by talking about games as activities rather than as systems or structures.

Not all game scholars consider games to be activities. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have been very influential with their system-oriented definition.

“A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.” (Salen and Zimmerman 2003)

Hence, there are two types of definitions of games: as systems or as human activity. Building on Aarseth (2001), Gonzalo Frasca (2007) emphasises that the distinction not only has consequences in respect of framing the object of study, but also affects what methods and disciplines are most appropriate for studying games. Frasca argues that games are of a dual nature: they are indeed *both* games and activities.

”...some can favor one approach over the other but the problem here is not the existence of a clear dichotomy but actually it is its absence. In other words, I would argue that some of the problems caused by play’s duality are caused by not being able to reconcile these two approaches. Any take on games that favors one over the other will be severely limited, as games are both objects and activities.”

I subscribe to Frasca’s perspective, and will follow Frasca closely in looking at games as both systems and as activities.

WHAT IS IT IN A GAME, WHICH MAKES IT A GAME?

The games we give *names* to, are systems. We talk about chess or Left 4 Dead as games. More often than not, we think of games as things that come in boxes. In his critique on definitions that require that games be played, Myers (2009) writes:

“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?”

Myers is right - games must be considered games whether played or not. Hence, the only sensible way to frame the concept of game is as a system. *But*, and this is a very important restriction, it is a system that is intended to be used in a particular way. It has either been designed to be played, or emerged out of a play practice.

A game is a game-like system, which has as its primary purpose to be played.

Although the phrase seems almost self-referential, it is not, because not all game-like systems are games. Further on, I will carefully consider what properties a system must have to be considered “game-like”, as well as deconstruct the concept of play in a similar manner. But both game-like systems and play exist outside the context of games, and it is only when they *coincide* - when a game-like system has been designed for the purpose of supporting play or emerged out of a playful practice - that we have what we call a game.

My approach thus combines a material perspective with a cultural context perspective. There exist a number of designed or evolved systems that structurally fulfil all criteria to be game-like, but that are not games due to their role in our culture (the legal court process is an example). But when a system has been designed or evolved with the primary purpose to be played, it continues to be a game whether it is played or not. Furthermore, games can be played, but players can also engage with them in other ways, and play can emerge outside of the context of games.

That which seems simple resides in a careful definition of two critical terms: what is a *game-like system*? And what is *play*? These concepts have been approached over and over again in literature, and in this article I will only manage to skim the surface of these discussions. In revisiting previous approaches I have a particular purpose in mind: I aim to make the restrictions on games minimal, as I believe that there is a wide range of phenomena that are useful to study from a ludological perspective. Even more

importantly, the aspects of "structure" and "play" that I put in focus are interrelated. There is a reason why games have as their purpose to be played, and there is a reason why play often is governed by game-like systems.

FRAMING PLAY

Let us first approach a framing of the concept of play. In my native language, "playing" and "gaming" have distinct meanings. Frasca (2007) notes that in English, both "play" and "game" can be used as nouns as well as verbs, but that the most common usage is that "game" is used as a noun and "play" as a verb. In daily speech, playing seems to be a wider concept than gaming: we play games, but we also play roles and play music.

Many authors view play as a basic human, or even pre-human activity (Huizinga 1955), and play has been studied long before digital games came into existence. Yet, returning to these sources leaves us with a rather fuzzy impression of what it means to play. The major reason for the discord among early work is that authors identified different *reasons* for play, and framed their concepts accordingly. We can find one major division in the ways that play has been framed, between framing it as a *cultural or social phenomenon*, or as a *mindset*.

Play as mindset: paratelic activity

Let us first cover the mindset approaches. Piaget (1962) identifies play as capturing a wide range of activities that are motivated with respect to the *self* rather than with respect to an external environment.

"In heterotelic activities, the direction of the behaviours is outwards, in so far as there is subordination of the schemas to reality, whereas in "autotelic" activities the direction is inwards, in so far as the child, while using the same schemas, enjoys exercising his powers and being aware of himself as the cause of the activity." (Piaget 1962, p 147-148)

Piaget sees play as a matter of degree, in so far as he believes that all activities are based both on extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Apter (1989) makes almost exactly the same distinction. Apter distinguishes between a state of mind in which the goal is primary (the "telic" state), and one in which the intrinsic, experiential motivations are primary (the "paratelic" state). For the purposes of game studies Apter has the more interesting analysis, as he includes activities that have clear goals. His argument is that these still are paratelic, as they are played within a "safety zone" frame created by the rule structures of the game. So, following Piaget and Apter, I believe that the first essential quality of play is that it is *paratelic* (using Apter's terminology rather than Piaget's).

As is shown by Apter's work, this is not a unique quality of play - human engage in many other paratelic activities. Neither is it a quality that will allow us to distinguish between *playing* and *gaming*. The first person to detail that distinction was Caillois, who developed the now well-adopted distinction between *Paidia* and *Ludus*. Caillois reserves *paidia* for "the spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct" (Caillois 2001, p 27), and *ludus* for a more formalised mode of play, "the pleasure experienced in solving a problem arbitrarily designed for this purpose" (Caillois 2001, p 28).

Hence, we could choose to frame the play activity in games more narrowly, as the form of engagement that Caillois calls "ludus". But I am hesitant to do so. Many modern game scholars have attempted to categorize the reasons why people engage in games. Examples

include Bartle (2003) and Lazzarro (2004) who frame core reasons to play games, and authors like Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) or Sweetser and Wyeth (2005), who aim to deconstruct the “good” game experiences, assuming that a “good” experience is also the one that players seek and the core reason for engaging in play. Although there is some concordance between these authors, no two articles present the exact same categorization of experiences. Furthermore, it is not obvious that all of these modes of engagement are “ludic” in Caillois’ sense of the word, even though they arise from playing games.

Additionally, there are closely related phenomena to games that exhibit paratelic motivations but not ludic engagement. In designing playful artifacts, Gaver³ suggests a design ideal that emphasizes playful interaction:

”Designs such as these embody new, ludic activities we might pursue. They encourage exploration, wondering, and new forms of playful influence over our worlds and ourselves. They not only embody unconventional assumptions, but do so in a way that demands neither conviction nor rejection. They encourage an attitude of speculation, allowing us to explore our own values, even if these depart from perceived cultural norms.” (Gaver 2007)

The designs created by Gavers’ team are typically usable without any explicit purpose, functional but ambiguous, and left open for exploration and interpretation.

We may disagree on whether all of these examples are games - I am hesitant to call Gaver’s artifacts games. But it still is interesting, difficult, and useful to understand how their designs interact with playful engagement. If we limit game studies to the study of ludic engagement, it would be a strict limitation indeed.

Play as a sociocultural agreement

The second and more intensely debated aspect of play arises from a socio-cultural perspective. The early reference in this area is Huizinga (1955). Since his goal is to investigate how play manifests in culture, Huizinga leaves “the play instinct” as an undefined primary; his contribution lies instead in framing play as a cultural function.

Huizinga’s analysis of the play element of culture has been tremendously influential in game studies. Huizinga identifies three factors to be significant of play, as it appears in culture.

”First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it.”

”A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. Every child knows perfectly well that he is ‘only pretending’, or that it was ‘only for fun’ ” ... “As regards its formal characteristics, all students lay stress on the disinterestedness of play. Not being ‘ordinary’ life it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process.” ...

”Play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration. This is the third main characteristic of play: its secludedness, its limitedness. It is ‘played

out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning."

(Huizinga, excerpts from chapter 1)

The first quote establishes the paratelic motivation, and the latter two present a socio-cultural framing of play. Huizinga requires of games that players are 'disinterested' in them, and moreover that they agree on this disinterestedness. The third quote emphasizes the need for a demarcation of the game apart from the rest of our social reality. Apter's idea of a 'protective frame' is similar to this concept, but where Apter primarily sees it as an individual attitude⁴, Huizinga emphasizes its social aspect. Huizinga's demarcation is often referred to as the 'magic circle' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, Stenros 2012).

Goffman's (1975) notion of social frames has also been used to describe the socio-cultural agreement surrounding play. As with all socio-cultural frames, the social framing of play creates a context in which certain behaviours are interpreted differently than they would be if the framing were not in place. But I would argue that although the play situation can be appropriately described as a social frame, the play activity in itself does not take its meaning from this frame alone - something more is needed to turn it into play.

My central reference is Bateson's essay "A theory of play and fantasy" (1955). Bateson notices that even animals are able to meta-communicate that an activity is play:

"I saw two monkeys playing, i.e. engaged in an interactive activity of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat. It was evident, even to the human observer, that the sequence as a whole was not combat, and evident to the human observer that to the participant monkeys, this was 'not combat'." Bateson (A theory of play and fantasy, p 179).

Bateson identifies the core meta-communication inherent in play as *resignifying* the activity: 'These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand (original emphasis) would denote'. In placing a similar focus on the imaginary nature of play, Vygotsky (1966) notices that play also relies on severing the meaning of things from the things and actions in themselves:

"In play a child operates with meanings severed from objects, but not in real action with real things. To sever the meaning of horse from a real horse and transfer it to a stick (the necessary material pivot to keep the meaning from evaporating) and really acting with the stick as if it were a horse is a vital transitional stage to operating with meanings."

Where Vygotsky seeks a significant development function, Bateson notices a very basic function in social communication, but both identify the same core element: that play activities are re-signified and contain an element of pretence.

The second requirement that I would put on play is thus that *actions are re-signified*. As Bateson describes it, this creates a double-layered meaning of actions. Firstly, the meaning of an action is *different* from outside of the play situation: in the case of the playing monkeys, the nip stands for a bite. But at the same time, this meaning is 'not real'; it stands for a real action, but it does not mean what the action it stands for means.

Many scholars include some kind of requirement on “falseness” or “safety” in their definitions of games. For example, Juul (2005) requires that games have “negotiable consequences”, Salen and Zimmerman (2003) that the game enacts an “artificial” conflict, and Myers (2009) that games be “representations”. But game-play has also been framed without reference to safety or re-signification. Here, I would like to examine Bernard Suits’ (2005, reprint) definition of game-play in particular, as he carries a thorough and convincing argument that does not rely on re-signification. I quote Suits’ definition of game-play verbatim:

“... to play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a particular state of affairs, using means only permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.” (Suits, p. 48-49)

It follows from Suits’ definition that the actions in a game at least have an *additional* meaning, which would not exist outside of the game. Suits argues that what you want to achieve is not just a goal (like reaching the top of a mountain), but the achievement of the goal *while adhering to the rules*. Take the example of cheating: if you cheat, you not only step outside the boundaries of the game, you are in effect no longer playing the game, as the goal of “reaching the goal while adhering to the rules” becomes impossible (Suits, p. 58).

However, most socio-cultural frames infuse meanings into actions that would not exist if the frame were not in place. Take the university course as an example. A teacher can grade a student’s paper by writing a letter on it, a meaning that would not be created outside the context of the course.

Hence, the second aspect of Bateson’s re-signification is needed to make the play frame distinct from other social frames: that the combat in the game is ‘not combat’. The play activities that Bateson discusses include an element of mimicry (the nip that resembles but is not a bite), and similar elements of mimicry are indeed common in games and sports. We can use boxing as an example. A boxing match is very similar to a fight, and the actions performed in the ring come very close to a real fight. Still, they do not have the consequences that a real fight would have: as you step into the boxing ring, actions that would be illegal on the streets are suddenly permitted and encouraged. For boxing, it is clear that the game frame does infuse some kind of artificiality.

The problem with Suits’ approach is that the meaning *generated* by the game structure can still be taken seriously. Take the example of the Counter-Strike in-game act of shooting. Counter Strike lets a key press represent firing a gun. Firstly, the action itself is not “contrary to real” - it is a *real* key press. Through the game simulation, it is given a representational meaning as a kill, and this representation is *fictional* (as nobody actually dies). But the fictional meaning is rendered moot, as the key press has another and more important meaning as a way of *scoring*. This meaning is not simulated by the game but *created* by it: when you manage to press the key in the right way, you increase the score for your team.

It may seem like such meanings created by the game’s structure would be inherently fictional. But this is not so: the meaning created within a game can be taken very seriously. A world tournament in soccer creates inherent meaning, but winning or losing such a tournament is still serious business. To conclude, while it is true that the game

frame changes the meaning of actions in games, players do not always interpret those meanings as in any way 'less real' than meanings created outside the game frame.

So although re-signification is an important element in play, we must keep in mind that its re-signification, safeness, artificiality, or fictionality is rather brittle. It is easier to mark actions out as re-signified if the actions are very dissimilar from the ones they stand for (such as fighting with soft rubber swords rather than real swords and safety padding). The meanings created within the play frame can also be taken very seriously: this happens in particular for competitive games where there is some kind of skill involved in winning, and even more easily if that skill is useful outside of the context of the game. There are effects that cannot be avoided (such as getting hurt or exhausted), and there can be agreed-on effects such as when playing for money. There are also more subtle social effects such as status shifts and friendship bonds. Furthermore, players are more than willing to play with re-signification. Alternate reality games (McGonigal 2003) blur fiction and fact in clever ways, and brink games (Poremba 2007) play on transgressing taboos under the excuse of "just playing". But I would argue that unless there is *some* collective agreement on re-signification, the activity is not play.

My final issue concerns whether re-signification is always culturally and socially framed. After all, play is not always played in groups. When playing alone, people can pretend in much the same way as when they play together (and this is the situation that Vygotsky focuses on). But even when playing alone, the person playing knows that it is 'just a game', and this understanding is already culturally, if not socially, dependent. When playing together, the social setting adds the requirement that we collectively agree on what is pretended as well as the boundaries of this pretence. The social frame provides implicit rules about how we are expected to behave in a gaming situation in general, and this is what allows us to establish a play agreement.

FRAMING GAMES AS SYSTEMS

As discussed in the introduction, most game definitions focus on defining games as *systems*. Still, such definitions tend to require that players engage in the system, as in Salen and Zimmerman's definition.

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

Based on a criticism that games must be games whether played or not, Myers (2009) sets out to define games without any reference to their players. Building on Juul (2005), he ends up with the following set of criteria on a game.

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

- 'prohibitive' Rules "..."
- 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." (Myers 2009)

Although I do not agree with Myers' definition, his suggestion is a good starting point for framing what a *game system* would be. In the discussion below, I wish to point out that I do not consider game systems to be fixed over time. They can be designed, or negotiated, emerge as a result of centuries of refinement, or arise temporarily in a play situation only to sink into oblivion once play ceases.

Rules

Myers' first requirement is that games have rules. I do not think anyone would disagree with this requirement.

There are two reasons why rules are a necessary requirement of games. Firstly, rules are useful to make games repeatable, as Huizinga (1955) noticed. More importantly, rules support the re-signification that goes on in games. Rules can *infuse meaning into otherwise meaningless activity*. Goffman (1961) saw games as "world-building activities". Walking around on a field hitting a ball with a club is pretty meaningless, but in golf, it is intensely meaningful (Suits 2005). Unless there are rules, the social play agreement cannot generate in-game meanings for actions, but can only exclude ordinarily accepted meanings.

However, it is not entirely obvious what these game rules must be. Salen and Zimmerman point out that play is governed by a whole range of rules: constitutional, operational, and implicit (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, Chap. 12). Myers requires that game rules must be "prohibitive", a requirement I find rather awkward. The inherent meaning-making that happens in games seems to be better explained by rules being at the same time prohibitive and constructive, as argued by Suits (2005, reprint).

Based on the role of rules in re-signification, I believe that the most important requirement on game rules is that they be *explicit*. Rules in code, rule books, and explicitly negotiated house rules all fall in this category⁵. Unless rules are explicit, there is no way for the players to understand and agree that the meanings established through rules hold only within the game. The implicit conventions that surround social play do not belong to this category; rather, they are there to create a frame (in Goffman's sense) within which it is possible for people to establish explicit rule agreements.

The reader should note that I do not require that the rules are *fixed* - they can be negotiated and re-negotiated within a play session. Just as I do not require that rules be fixed, I do not even require that they completely define the game or are particularly detailed. (This implies that many of the 'grey scale' cases that Caillois places between ludus and paidea would be games.) If a player gets instructed to 'play a dog', this very vague description is still a rule. The most extreme example may be a range of Alternate Reality Games that were staged with the poignant motto, "there is only one rule: Pretend that it's real" (Denward 2011). This motto is a game rule that encodes nothing but Bateson's re-signification.

In this, I depart from most digital game scholars, who see rules as constructing a space of possible game states, just as Aarseth did in *Cybertext* (1997). My primary motivation for doing so is that non-digital games have much more flexible rules than digital games, and furthermore that the distinction between vague, flexible and incomplete rules is not easily made. Even in digital games, social play is often subject to vague and incomplete rules that are enacted by the players rather than inscribed in code. I believe that even when the

rules are incomplete and vague, there are strong and interesting relationships between rules and activity.

Goals and Opposition

Most game scholars would also agree that a game system must have both rules and goals, and very often authors also require some kind of opposition that prevents the player from reaching the goal without effort. When players willingly subject themselves to such game systems, they engage with a “lusory attitude” (Suits 2005), and their mode of engagement is “*ludic*” (Callois 2001).

I have already expressed my concerns over limiting game studies to ludic activity. Similarly, I would argue that there is a vast range of rule-bound systems that are sufficiently similar to games to be worthy of study from a game study perspective, but that lack either goal or opposition. In the context of digital games, there are a range of sandbox games that offer opposition but no goal, and a number of casual games that offer goals but very little in the form of opposition. Juul (2012) notices that both are particularly common for casual games.

Still, I believe that it makes sense to require of the phenomena we call games, that they have some form of goal and at least minimal opposition. Goals play an important role in shaping the intrinsic meaning of gaming, in that all game situations are not equally desirable. Without valuation, there is no direction in the play activity. Suits proposes that seemingly goal-less games may have as their goal to keep going for as long as possible. In the case of sandbox games, it is more an issue of creating space for player agency, as they allow players to be creative in setting their own goals.

Representation

Apart from my minimal requirement on rules that they be explicit rather than prohibitive, I have so far largely followed Myers. But I find his final requirement problematic. Myers requires that the structures in games must be *representing*, rather than being the things they represent. They must have “a falseness that is contrary to the real”. I fail to see how this requirement could be fulfilled by a game’s system; the fact that games are “less real than reality” is true only because we will it so.

It is true that games can represent aspects of our physical world or imaginary game worlds. Digital games in particular have strong diegetic qualities similar to those of film and literature. Representation is also important in non-computerised role-playing games, which rely on players and game-masters acquiring a thorough understanding of a game world to compensate for sometimes rather vague rules. Walton (1993) analyses fiction as props that support make-believe, and this is the role of fiction also in games.

But in games, players act, and since the actions are carried out, they are to some extent real. The central “falseness” in games does not arise from their representational structure, but from the fact that the actions that players make are re-signified. The role of the game system is to determine what the actions mean in the context of the game world, but it is the role of the socio-cultural context to ensure that this meaning is “not real”.

THE CORE AND THE FRINGE

I have selected two requirements of play activity, that it be paratelic and re-signified; and two requirements on game-like systems, that they have explicit rules and goals. My overall approach to framing games can now be spelled out.

A game is a (designed or emerging) system of rules, goals and opposition, which has as its primary purpose to allow people to engage with it for paratelic reasons, while agreeing that the actions performed are re-signified.

There exists a range of systems with rules, goals and opposition, that sometimes are played and sometimes not. Sports are boundary phenomena, as they can be played for both telic and paratelic reasons, and the activities carried out within a sport are not necessarily re-signified. The legal court system falls outside of the scope of games as it is not intended to be played - even though this sometimes happens. Furthermore, many forms of play are not inherently goal-directed. I have already discussed pure sandbox games, and to this we can add some forms of transgressive play, where the goals of an otherwise goal-oriented game are subverted.

Challenging the play concept, some game-like activities exploit the brittle nature of re-signification. The dangerous sport and play activities that Apter focuses on (Apter 1992) are seldom re-signified, and phenomena such as pervasive (Montola et al 2009) and brink games (Poremba 2007) deliberately challenge re-signification. Finally, games are not always played for paratelic reasons, but for reasons such as external rewards, social status, or a salary.

Hence, I end up in much the same approach as Juul did in Half-Real (2005): there are games, but there are also bordering phenomena that are important and interesting to study from very much the same perspective. The table below is an attempt to chart such phenomena, with examples taken from the discussions above.

	Is re-signified	Is paratelic & re-signified	Is paratelic	Is neither
Has rules	Role-play as therapy	Sandbox games, transgressive play	Gaver's 'ludic engagement', Couple dancing	Traffic
Has rules & goals	Role-play as therapy	GAME	Sport, Bureaucracy	Sport, Court process
Has goals	?	Alternate Reality Games	Paragliding	War
Has neither	?	Monkeys playing	Free dancing	

Table 1: Games and bordering phenomena.

As I believe that the game studies perspective is to deconstruct the relationship between system and engagement, a phenomenon must share both structural and activity traits with games in order to be fruitfully studied in this way. Professional gaming and free play are the exceptions, as these shift status in and out of the game sphere. Free play will often

become structured by (at least incomplete) rules (Huizinga 1955), and professional gaming typically emerges from play.

It is hard to find examples of some of the boundary classes. I found it difficult to find examples of play activities that are re-signified but telic, but role-play as a form of therapy may fall into this category. But role-play is still regulated by rules. I could not find *any* examples of telic activities that are re-signified but lack rules. A possible reason for this might be the significant role that explicit rules play in re-signification, in creating an in-game meaning for actions. Another is, of course, a certain lack of imagination on my part.

CONCLUSIONS

I have made an attempt at framing games as *game-like systems that exist for the purpose of being played*. I have also deliberately made that frame as wide as possible, and I have even stretched beyond my own delimitation towards bordering phenomena that share some, but not all, traits of games. My main reason for presenting such a wide scope is that I believe that phenomena that share these traits benefit from being studied in similar ways; they give rise to closely related research questions and benefit from similar methods of study.

If we accept that games exist to be played, this influences how we understand their meaning. The meaning of games is not created by the game designer, and nor is it created by the human player in playing the game. It lives in between, emerges through play and is structured by design. I would argue that this duality creates the core question in game studies and informs its methodology: we must study the *relationship* between system and play. Independent of what we study, how players organize themselves in games, what is hard and what is easy, what players experience, how designers think when they build games, when we classify genres or discuss in-game ethics; the interrelationship between structure and gameplay always lies at the core. This is true even when we consider games as having an inherent meaning shaped by their rules and goals, as this meaning must take the form of potential activities and game states. The methods and approaches developed within the field of game studies thus provide tools towards deconstructing games *and* gameplay in order to detail this relationship.

In order to fully understand games, the devil lies in the detail. There are huge differences between studying play within incomplete and socially negotiated rules, and computer games with their rigid programmed structures and strong representational meanings. Furthermore, in order to uncover any interesting interrelationships, it is often necessary to ignore fringe phenomena. However, the adoption of a wide scope does not exclude the possibility to limit this scope when needed. Instead, it raises our awareness of when we make such limitations, and what we exclude by making them.

ENDNOTES

¹ In my native language there are two words for “play”, of which one is used for ‘play games’ and ‘play music’, but not for children’s play.

² It’ does not work in my native language, where there is a separate word for game sessions.

³ Gaver calls this ‘ludic engagement’, which is a bit confusing since his use of the term is inconsistent with how Caillois uses ‘ludus’.

⁴ Apter allows for cases where players feel ‘safe’ despite being in danger.

⁵ The code example means that rules can be explicit but yet hidden to players - it suffices that players know of their existence.

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