

Assignment 1

What is a Game?

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1 Introduction

In this assignment I give my definition of what a game is and discuss it by comparing it to other definitions and analysing if activities, that can be considered games, fit that definition. Afterwards I reflect on how my definition of a game would change the focus in the role a game designer.

2 Analysis

2.1 My definition of “game”

A game is a formal system, in which one or more actors participate voluntarily to overcome an artificial problem and reach a goal by performing actions within a set of rules.

2.2 Other definitions of “game”

In this section I will compare my definition to other definitions as stated in slides to lecture 1.

In my definition I state, that a game is a formal system in which actions have to be performed within a set of rules. In this aspect I agree with the definitions of R. Caillois, C. Crawford, B. Suits, K. Salen and E. Zimmerman, J. Juul, T. Fullerton, C. Swain and S. Hoffman. However I would argue that I do not completely agree with C. Crawford and T. Fullerton, C. Swain and S. Hoffman as they define games as being closed formal

systems, because I would argue that especially some pervasive games[1], such as Killer[2], consider external factors as input, which would go against calling these games closed systems. I would also argue, that my definition coincides with the definition by C. C. Abt, as I would say that the set of rules of a game can be interpreted as a limiting context. I also write in my definition that a game is played by one or more actors. In this case I disagree with the definitions of C. C. Abt and J. von Neuman and O. Morgenstern, as they explicitly state a game having multiple decision-makers/agents. I don't agree with that as I think that especially computer-based games are on many occasions single player games. In the case of e.g. The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time[3] one could argue that opposing NPC's can also be considered actors, however this can not be said for a puzzle game like Tetris[4] or Solitaire[5], which I would consider being games.

I state, that the actors participating in a game do that voluntarily. I would say this corresponds to J. Huizinga's and R. Crawford's definitions saying games are free activities, B. Suits' definition saying playing a game is a voluntary effort and E. Avedon and B. Sutton-Smith calling games an exercise of voluntary control systems. Although I think a game is always played voluntarily I intentionally avoided to define a game as having to be non-profitable, like e.g. J. Huizinga and R. Caillois say, because I disagree with that definition as I think a game played in a professional context like League of Legends[6] as an e-sport or a professional Football[7] match should still be considered games.

My definition of a game also says, that the actors in a game play the game to overcome an artificial problem and reach a certain goal. The problem can be overcoming competition in a contest as well as solving a puzzle or just completing a certain task. Regarding this aspect I agree with R. Caillois', C. Crawford's, B. Suits', G. CostiKyan's, E. Avedon's and B. Sutton-Smith's, K. Salen's and E. Zimmerman's definitions. While some of them talk of reaching goals, which fit's part of my definition stating players participate to reach a goal, others talk of conflict, competition and overcoming obstacles. In this regard my definition is probably closest to B. Suits' and K. Salen's and E. Zimmerman's definitions as these explicitly state the the obstacle to overcome or the conflict is unnecessary or artificial, which I also included in my definition.

2.3 Activities

2.3.1 Weight-Lifting

Weight-Lifting[8] can according to my definition be considered a game. This is especially easy to argue in the context of a contest as here the artificial conflict between the competitors is obvious, the goal is to lift more weights than the competition and there is a certain set of rules that is to be followed. This is more difficult, when talking about a person going to a gym to lift weights as an exercise. While it is safe to assume, that the activity is clearly voluntarily in that case and one could argue that the problem might be just wanting to lift a certain weight and doing a certain amount of repetitions, it is harder to see clear rules and define it as a formal system.

2.3.2 Sudoku

According to my definition Sudoku[9] could be considered a game, as it is a formal system with certain states and rules on how to get from one state to another, there has to be one actor operating in the system and sudoku clearly creates an artificial problem for the actor to overcome to reach a goal, which is having to fill the grid with the correct numbers at the correct places.

2.3.3 Gambling

According to my definition gambling[10] like Roulette or a lottery could also be considered a game, as they can be portaid as formal systems with a certain set of rules, in which at least one actor performs actions like picking certain numbers to reach a goal. One could argue that the players are not active in overcoming the problem, of e. g. the right number being picked, but this is not explicitly required from my definition.

2.3.4 Chess played by programs

I would argue, that chess[11] played by two computer programs, can't be considered a game, although I would say that chess played by people would be a game. While chess can easily be defined as a formal system, there is a set of rules, which defines e.g. how the pieces can be moved, there is the artificial problem of trying to checkmating the opponent and I would argue that the computer programmms can be considered actors, it is hard to argue for the computer programmms playing chess voluntarily, as they were most likely programmed for exactly that purpose and do not have a free will.

2.3.5 Minecraft

Minecraft[12] is according to my definition not a game in itself. While games can definitely be played in Minecraft, by players creating problems to overcome and setting user-defined goals, Minecraft by itself does not really offer an overarching goal that is to be reached.

2.3.6 Pokémon GO

I would argue that Pokémon GO[13] faces a similar problem as Minecraft, as while Pokémon GO has quests, called "field research" in the game, it still relies heavily on the players setting goals and is lacking to offer a goal state for the player to reach.

2.3.7 Football

As a football[7] match usually consists of 22 players devided into two teams, each team trying to score more goals than the other team within 90 minutes, I would argue that it fullfills all my definitions criteria to be considered a game. Football has actors, that try to overcome an artificial problem, trying to score more goals, and reach a goal, having scored more goals at the end of the 90 minutes play time. Football can also be seen as

a formal system with rules, that are in a professional context enforced by a group of referees.

2.3.8 Russian Roulette

While most people would probably argue, that russian roulette[14] is not a game due to the impact of the non-negotiable consequence, which is death, it would fit my definition for a game. Russian roulette can be defined as a formal system, which follows a certain set of rules, in which actors voluntarily participate to overcome the artificial problem of possibly getting shot. Some people may even argue, that the problem may not be considered artificial since the consequences of failing have a real-life impact, however I would define an artificial problem as a problem that exists for the sole reason of playing the game, which would still be the case for russian roulette. Another argument that could be made against russian roulette being a game according to my definition is that some people may feel forced to participate, which is however an assumption.

2.3.9 Solitaire

I would argue that Solitaire[5] is a game according to my definition as it has an artificial problem, which is having to sort the cards into four stacks, while following a certain set of rules on how to achieve the goal of having sorted all cards, performed by an actor.

2.4 The role of a game designer

According to the slides of lecture 1, the role of a game designer usually is being an advocate for the players, having a clear vision of the target group, being a project leader, providing good game play and making sure that this intended gameplay is achieved. A game designer is also responsible of creating ideas and ensuring quality.

When designing games according to my definition, I would argue, that the focus of the game designer's role would be on creating a goal, which motivates players to play, and a problem, which keeps the players engaged while playing, as not offering a proper goal was where most of the games discussed in the previous section, that failed to match my definition, were lacking, e.g. Minecraft[12] or Pokémon GO[13]. This of course requires a game designer to be able to look at the game from a player's perspective. A game designer would have to worry about making a game as attractive as possible, as players have to engage in the activity voluntarily. While doing so the game designer could disregard all real life impact the game would have, as my definition neither requires the game to be unproductive, nor to have a negotiable outcome. I also intentionally stated in my definition that a game had to be a formal system and not a closed formal system, which would allow the game designer to introduce new elements and rules to a game, even after the release. A game designer could also design games in a way that allows players to introduce new elements or rules and games that consider external influences.

3 Conclusion

I would consider my definition of what a game is, a rather broad definition. While I defined a game as a formal system, I did not define whether a game had to be closed or open system, as I think that defining a game as a closed system is outdated, as today it is common practice, especially for computer-based games, to update them over time and extend them with downloadable content. However defining games as having to be open systems did also not seem that reasonable to me, as that would exclude many activities, that are commonly considered games, like chess[11]. I also intentionally excluded the requirement for a game to be unproductive and having non-negotiable outcomes, as I did not want to exclude professional sports (e-sports and traditional sports alike).

I can see how people may disagree with this definition, as some may think a game having to provide an overall goal is outdated, as so called sandbox games[15] like Minecraft[12] are very common today, while others may dislike that my definition allows activities like gambling[10] to be considered games. While conducting the analysis for this assignment I came to the realization, that I myself do not completely agree with my stated definition of games, as according to my definition Russian Roulette[14] could be considered a game, which I would personally not want to classify as a game. I would suggest, that my definition of a game leaves room for refinement, I could however not formulate a definition, which would not, at least to some extent, contradict my opinion on some specific cases.

4 References

Literatur

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