

A Short and Simple Definition of What a Videogame Is

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ABSTRACT

Videogames 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 videogame is, this definition being connected with existing academic works about *game*, *play*, *interactivity*, and *narrative*. The definition is: A *videogame* 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 videogame heritage teaches us about what a videogame is.

Keywords

Videogame, definition.

INTRODUCTION

Why should we define the term *videogame*? Because we have reasons to study videogames. 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 videogames by students of media, culture and technology, here, it is useful to briefly examine just three reasons why videogames demand to be treated seriously: the size of the videogames industry; the popularity of videogames; videogames as an example of human-computer interaction.”
[21]

Indeed, the videogame industry is now more than 30 years old and videogames belong to our culture [8]. But, we have studied videogames seriously only for a few years [1]. 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 videogame is. We know some definitions of this term—for example the book *Difficult Questions About Videogames* [22] 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 videogame heritage teaches us about what a videogame is.

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DEFINITION

Here is a possible definition:

A videogame 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 *videogame*. I will show that this definition is based on well-known thoughts about *game*, *play*, *interactivity*, and *narrative*.

GAME

Needless to say that a videogame 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, videogames are games:

“However, even if it sounds obvious, videogames are, before anything else, games.” [10]

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 videogames with adeptness.

Roger Caillois [3], inspired by Johan Huizinga [11], 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 [9] 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.” [28] (see also [26])

This definition, which is not far from Avedon and Sutton-Smith’s [2], is a very accurate definition of what a game is. But, it does not include toy-games and puzzle-games. Is there a quantifiable outcome in toy-games? Is there always an artificial conflict in puzzle-games? My answer would be: a videogame can be a puzzle-game, a toy-game, or any kind of game that can be handled by an audiovisual apparatus. Chris Crawford [5] calls this wide range of games *interactive entertainments* or *playthings*. Besides, Wolfgang Kramer [16] 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 videogame 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.” [28]

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’.” [16]

We can also try to list the pleasures of playing. The Le Diberder brothers [19] have their answer: 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 [18]. Richard Rouse [24] draws up a large list of players’ motivations and expectations. Newman [21] selects three of them: challenge, immersion, players expect to do (not to watch). 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 videogame, a videogame console, a handheld console, a computer, a personal digital assistant, a phone, etc. It means that we have human-computer interactions and that videogames can be seen as user interfaces. Thus, we can talk about *interactivity*. As Jasper Juul notices, this is a major difference between videogames and their “nonelectronic precursors”:

“The main difference between the computer game and its nonelectronic precursors is that computer games add automation and complexity — they can uphold and calculate game rules on their own, thereby allowing for richer game worlds; this also lets them keep pace.” [13]

Besides, interactivity is the heart of the Rouse definition of the term *gameplay*:

“The gameplay is the component of the computer games that is found in no other art form: interactivity. A game’s gameplay is the degree and nature of the interactivity that the game includes.” [24]

STORY

A videogame 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 videogame: 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 videogames 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.” [23]

Hence, videogames are often seen as *simulations*:

“Narrative is based on semiotic representation, while videogames also rely on simulation, understood as the modelling of a dynamic system through another system.” [10] (see also [9])

We know that a videogame can be based on a story. But is a videogame always a simulation? Answering is not easy when we consider abstract games like *Qix* (1981) and *Tetris* (1985). But the answer, according to Frasca, could be that these games are simulations of systems that their designers have imagined. It would mean that a videogame would always be a virtual game, because we do not manipulate the game elements in the real world.

VIDEOGAME HERITAGE

By looking back to the past, we can see how the videogame heritage can help us to know what a videogame is. Chris Crawford [5] lists games that “explore interesting design concepts or define a genre.” For example, *Space Invaders* (1978) and its “extremely simple gameplay [that] made this game accessible for everybody.” John Sellers [27] also identifies milestones. For example, *Ms. Pac-Man* (1981) was the “first game to star a female character.”

Besides, we can look at the history of videogames [14, 15, 4] to identify periods. Our starting point could be the first commercial game (*Computer Space*, 1971, the arcade version of *Spacewar!*, 1962) and we could identify the four following periods:

- 1971-1978: first years, pioneers’ success,
- 1978-1983: golden age, genre development,
- 1983-1994: less technological limits, strong ideas,
- 1994-now: CD-ROM, 3D, PlayStation, PC, big productions, less diversity, online games.

From the pioneers’ success, we learn what an arcade videogame is (for example: *Pong*, 1972).

From the golden age, we learn how diversified the videogames can be (sports, adventure, fighting, etc.).

From the years between, 1983 and 1994, we learn that strong ideas make the difference. I have to give some details about what I call *strong ideas*. I will do it through famous examples [7]: new powerful ideas (*Tetris*, 1985), deep gameplays (*Bubble Bobble*, 1986, and *Shinobi*, 1987), genre crossings (*The Legend of Zelda*, 1986), innovative narrative elements (fights in *Battle Chess*, 1988), complex system simulations (*Sim City*, 1989), multiplayer fun (*Bomberman*, 1990, *Super Mario Kart*, 1992), leading unintelligent animals (*Lemmings*, 1990), simple and strong ideas (*Pang*, 1990).

Finally, from recent big productions, we learn about the future of videogames: bigger and bigger, more and more online, and less and less diversity. About this last point, the Le Diberder brothers say:

“Wargames, games of skill, racing games, and even fighting games and shoot’em up games will be simple levels in simulators that will combine them.” [19] (freely translated from French)

CONCLUSION

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

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

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