What is a (digital) game?

Definitions and perspectives in game studies

“a slippery lexicological customer, with many friends and relations”

| board game | a play (theater) |
| card game | play doctor/house/dead |
| roleplaying game | playmate |
| computer game | play an instrument |
| olympic games | play football |
| war games | to downplay something |
| game theory | fair play |
| “gamely” | play along |
| “the game is lost” | playboy |
| “on the game” | playful |
| “games people play” | “play the field” |
| “two can play that game” | “play with fire” |
| “game over” | “play up” – “play down” |

What does all this have in common?

Paida and Ludus (Caillois)

Paida
The wild, free-form, improvisational play
(in Swedish: “lek”)

Ludus
Rule-bound, regulated, formalized play ("game")
(in Swedish: "spel")

Some languages don’t have this distinction
e.g. French “jeu” (game) and “jouer” (play)

What about the Estonian language?

What is a game?

“The word is used for so many activities that it is not worth insisting on any proposed definition. All in all, it is a slippery lexicological customer, with many friends and relations in a wide variety of fields.”

(David Parlett, The Oxford History of Board Games)
Excercise 1

10 minutes discussion with your neighbour: Examine the use of mäng and mängima in Estonian!

**game** n. mäng, geim, partii; pl. võistlused, mängud; **play the game** ausat mängu mängima; **make game of** (kedagi) namma; the Olympic Games olümpiamängud; adj. vapper, valmis(for); die game vappit surema
adj. vijanemás, tombakas n. uluk (id); ulukilja; **game laws** jahiseadused; **game reserve** jahikaitseala

**play** v. mängima; mänglema; **play football** jalgpalli mängima; **play the piano** klaverit mängima;
**play for money** raha peale mängima; **play fair (või the game)** ausat mängu mängima;
**play tricks** vingerpusse mängima{on}; **play up to** (kedagi) kiitma, (kellegi) meele järgi olla
**be played out** väsinud või kurnatud olema; n. mäng; näitemäng, näidend;
**adj.** vapper; die game vappit surema
**be played out** väsinud või kurnatud olema; n. mäng; näitemäng, näidend;

**Observations and conclusions?**
What is a game?

Playing games in a broad sense:

Theatre play

Playing children (Brueghel 1560)

Playing games in a broad sense:

Sports, athletics, competition

Playing games in a broad sense:

board games, card games

Senet-player in Egypt
13th century B.C.

Medieval Backgammon players
What is a game?

Playing games in a broad sense:
puzzles, riddles, brainteasers etc.

LARP = live action role-playing game

Board RPG
D&D from 1974

What is a game in a more narrow sense?
Game scholars still give different answers to this seemingly simple question

Excercise 2

What is a game in a more narrow sense?

• Try to formulate a useful definition!
• ca 15 min discussion in group
• ca 15 min presentation in class.
What is a (digital) game?

Before you can answer the question "What is a digital game (or computer game or video game)?", you need to have an answer to the question "What is a game?"

Jesper Juul (2005) has gathered a number of definitions and formulates his own:

**Johan Huizinga (1938)**
Free activity, outside ordinary life, "not serious", absorbing the player, no material interest, time and space boundaries, fixed rules, promotes social groupings with secrets.

**Roger Callois (1958)**
Voluntary, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe.

**E.M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, 1971**
Specific state of affairs, using rules prohibiting more efficient ways, accepted only for the game activity.

**Chris Crawford, 1982**
Recreation, rules, object to be attained, means to attain it.

**David Kelley, 1988**
A system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.

**Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, 2004**
A system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.

Non-game activities and borderline cases

If we exclude one of Juul’s criteria, the definition will include other activities than games:

- **No fixed rules:** Free play
  - Improvisation, rules invented “on the fly”, ad hoc
- **No variable outcome:** Ring games (always the same outcome)
  - Ring a Ring O’Roses
- **No valorization:** Open-ended simulations
  - Pure simulators without specific goals. Some flight simulators
- **No player effort:** Games of pure chance
  - Games without challenge or conflict. Lottery, coin toss
- **No player attachment to outcome:** Unengaged pastime activity
  - Conway’s game of life, watching a fireplace
- **No negotiable consequences:** Pre-settled or “natural” real life consequences
  - Activities that always affect real life are not games or when playing becomes a profession. Traffic, war, gambling etc.
computer games, digital games, video games...

What is a computer game?
Not just PC-games
Digital technology
Interaction player-processor (CPU)
Monitor? ("video game")

Platforms (hardware)
PC-games
Arcade games
Console games
Handheld

What is a digital game?
In digital games the computer:
- Upholds the rules and
- Tracks the game state (how the game develops)
What is a digital game?

Since the computer also upholds the "physical" objects of the game: Fictional worlds and stories play a bigger role in digital games.

Game studies (theory and research)

RULES – game system, "ludology" in a narrow sense
definitions, structure, elements, mechanics, game history and classification of different games, analysis of game genres and specific games, quality analysis, game design (methods, design patterns etc.)

PLAY – the player's interaction with the game, gameplay
motivation, tactics and strategy while playing, gaming habits, addiction, educational view, cognitive view etc.

CULTURE – games as socio-cultural artifacts or media
semiology, visual values, narrative, gender perspective, communities, online gaming etc.

Games Studies since 2001

Earlier it was not a research field of its own. But games were studied in other disciplines, like anthropology (Huizinga), sociology/philosophy (Caillois), pedagogy (Linderoth, Hornwall and Johansson), gender studies and culture studies (Cassell & Jenkins), film studies (Wilhelmsson), literary studies (Murray), computer science/HCI (Laurel) etc.

"Narratologists" versus "ludologists"

Janet Murray

Espen Aarseth

Game culture

Dreamhack in Jönköping, Sweden (since 1994)
The world's largest LAN-party
Game culture