

## What is a game ?

**« A game is a closed system composed of fixed and unambiguous rules that allow one or more players to overcome obstacles through their choices and, with voluntary involvement in the entire game process without any interest in the eventual consequences on their daily lives. »**

Defining what is a game is not an easy thing. Since the beginning of humanity, games have existed and have not ceased to develop and diversify over time. Today, we have an amazing variety of games: video games, board games, role-playing games, etc. It is this great diversity of games, all so different from each other, that makes the game so difficult to define in a formal way. I will therefore try here to give you my vision, albeit subjective, of the game in order to reach my own definition of it.

If I had to start by mentioning one thing about the game, it is that it is an intrinsically human activity, invented by people for people. Its main objective, in my opinion, is to allow players (by which I mean people involved in a game) to pause their daily lives through an activity that is intellectually and/or emotionally stimulating but without any repercussions on their daily lives. In his definition of J. Huizinga evokes this in a very nice way: *Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but as the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.* The latter captures the idea that the player is, for the time of the game, in a cocoon in which the actions undertaken only affect the "universe of the game". For example, in a tabletop role-playing game, the actions taken, as well as their consequences, have no impact on the "off-game" lives of the players (and fortunately!). The same applies to video games, or board games. This idea is also found in R. Callois, C. Crawford, K. Salen and E. Zimmerman, which is mentioned in various ways: *"separate in time and space", "safety", and "artificial conflict"*.

Having said that, one may wonder whether what is known as "gambling games" is really a game. J. Huizinga and R. Callois respectively specify that the game is *an activity with no material interest and no profit can be gained by it* and that the game is *unproductive and creates no goods or wealth*. From my point of view, I think that some games can generate profit, however, the playing of a game must be done in a way that is disinterested in the consequences on daily life. The games considered as "serious games" or "educational games" are not games for me, but at most tools / means to learn.

The notion of play is therefore, in my opinion, relative: it all depends on the way the player approaches it. A person using World Of Warcraft for the sole purpose of leveling up accounts in order to earn money does not play a game according to me. On the other hand, a person who plays it for the proposed adventure and who eventually sells his account, this person has in my opinion "played" World Of Warcraft, in the sense that the practice of the latter was done in a disinterested way from the consequences on the real life. Also, to further develop the subject of gambling, let us consider a millionaire who is indifferent to the loss of his money, and whose wealth is such that the loss of money would not affect his daily life. Well, if that person is gambling, then it can be considered a game if the person is not looking for profit. The question of sport can also be raised. Does a person doing the long jump play a game? It all depends on the player's state of mind. The practice of sport at a competitive level or for healthy purposes is, I believe, beyond the scope of the game, while the practice of a sport without seeking any profit can be seen as a game.

The problem of addiction to games also raises some difficult questions: Does a person who is addicted to games really only play a game? Addiction to any game influences and can have

serious consequences on the player's real life. Again, it all depends on the player's state of mind when it comes to playing the game. The player must be free to participate or not in a game, the entry into the game must be voluntary, as mentioned by E. Avedon and B. Sutton-Smith: *Games are an exercise of voluntary control systems*. In the case of a game addiction, the player is not really free to choose to play, so voluntary involvement in the game is an essential component in defining the limit of what a game is. The game designer must take these elements into consideration, at least from an ethical point of view. He must ensure that the game that he elaborates does not have an excessively addictive feature, that he cannot put his players in danger. This may seem a little extreme, but I think that today it is a debate that deserves to be raised, especially in view of the current questioning of lootboxes in video games and their highly addictive nature.

Now that we have a better understanding of the reasons of the game and the connection between game and player, it is time to take a closer look at the specific elements of the game. What are the fundamental elements that can be found in any game?

The first thing that comes to mind when we talk about games are the rules. Each game has rules, i. e. a set of instructions, procedures to follow, that players must respect. The vast majority of game definitions refer to this component, either explicitly (J. Huizinga, R. Callois, E. Avedon & B. Sutton-Smith, K. Salen & E. Zimmerman, or J. Juul), or implicitly through terms such as *limiting context* (C.C. Abt). In any case, there is the notion that the game is governed by fixed and unambiguous rules that make it possible to restrict, or at least limit, the action of the players. Every game must have at least one clear rule that makes it possible to understand what is and is not allowed for players to do. It is up to the game designer to establish different rules of the game, and to make sure that they are perfectly clear to anyone who reads them.

Rules are tools that allow the player to overcome obstacles. This is what C.C. Abt says in his definition of the game: *achieve objectives in some limiting context*. Many other definitions are more precise about the nature of these "obstacles", and describe them as *conflict* (C. Crawford, T. Fullerton, C. Swain & S. Hoffman, K. Salen & E. Zimmerman). For my part, I do not prefer to use the term conflict because it is part of the lexical field of the opposition, and could lead people to believe, wrongly, that the game is only about opposition. But the idea remains that the player faces obstacles, which can be very diverse in nature. In a chess game - or more generally in opposition games - the obstacle is represented by another player, in other games, such as Sudoku, the obstacle is a puzzle, an intellectual challenge, in many video games the obstacle is none other than the game program itself, etc.

In any case, the player will have to make some choices to overcome these obstacles. The number of choices a player can make differs greatly depending on the game. It is common to quantify the complexity of a game by the number of choices the player faces (rock paper scissors offers a small number of choices to the player, while a chess game offers a much larger amount). Once again, it is up to the game designer to ensure that the player has a sufficient number of possible choices to overcome the obstacles that make up the game. Choice is therefore, in my opinion, a major component of the game, which is found in G. Costikyan's definition but in very few other definitions. Lottery type games of chance are not to be considered as games, we can not really consider that players make any choices during these games.

For now we have seen that a game is defined by explicit rules, offering the player the possibility to make choices to overcome obstacles. But there is still one decisive element that has not yet been mentioned: the involvement of the player. Why on earth is the player trying to overcome these obstacles when, as we mentioned earlier, his exploits in the game will not have any impact on his daily life? The involvement of the player in the game is crucial, a game must be able to retain the player and make him feel concerned about the game's progression. Many of the definitions studied refer to the fact that players must feel concerned about the outcome of the game, I think that this is not enough, and that the player must not only be concerned about the outcome, but also about the whole process of the game from its very beginning. Not being able to involve the player throughout the game means taking the risk of having passive players who only care about the

end of the game. Typically, I don't consider playing with cheaters to be a playful experience, neither for them nor for me. The cheaters have the sole objective of winning and are not, in my opinion, involved in the game. The game designer will therefore have to use tricks to keep the player's attention throughout the game (scenario, competition, or other). One consequence of this last observation is that if two programs log on to an online chess service to play a game, I don't consider it to be a game experience. A program cannot really feel involved or motivated by the game.

Throughout this document, I have tried to highlight the elements that I felt were essential to define a game. At the end of this process, I think I can give my personal definition of what a game is:

*A game is a closed system composed of fixed and unambiguous rules that allow one or more players to overcome obstacles through their choices and, with voluntary involvement in the entire game process without any interest in the eventual consequences on their daily lives.*

Of course this definition is purely subjective, and I imagine that others have their own definition of what a game is. But even if it seems impossible for me to formally define a game, I think it is essential to question yourself at least once, to better understand this medium and understand the stakes of game design.