What is a Game?

In the German language a game is any activity which is executed only for pleasure and without conscious purpose. In this definition every activity that brings pleasure is a game. For example, people dance, play musical instruments, act in plays, and play with dolls and model trains.

This definition people use today comes from the works of Johan Huizinga (Homo Ludens, 1938) and Friedrich Georg Jünger (Die Spiele, 1959). But there are more ways to define games. Manfred Eigen's and Ruthild Winkler's definition for game goes beyond the definition used by Huizinga. They see a game as a natural phenomenon: half necessity and half coincidence (*Das Spiel*, 1975). Their definition of games comes closer to Adornos' definition, who set himself apart from Huizinga by identifying games as an art form.

But in our sense these definitions are too wide, we define game more succinctly. Thus, I am writing about games which belong to the class that includes *Chess, 9 Man's Morris, Checkers, Halma, Go, Parchisi, Monopoly, Scrabble, Skat, Rummy, Bridge, Memory, Jack Straws, Dominoes*, and so on. Unfortunately, our language does not have a good term to call these games. Terms like table games, society games, tournament games are too narrow. In my opinion, the best term would be "rulegames" = "games with rules".

I will now try to find the criteria for defining "game with rules". Kevin Maroney defined game in his *Games Journal* article, My Entire Waking Life. Scott Kim defined puzzle in his *Games Cafe* article "What Is a Puzzle?" as separate from a game. Kate Jones writes about less aggressive games in her *Games Journal* article Non Predatory Games. My definition is a further attempt to explore the nature of games.

2. A game always has components and rules.

In most games, the rules are more significant than the components. But

there are games where these roles are reversed: where the components are significant and the rules not very important at all. Usually, these are action games like Looping Louie.

The components are the hardware, the rules are the software. Both define the game. Both can exist independently from each other, but separately are not a game.

Archeology finds ancient game boards and game pieces, but no one knows what rules these ancients used to play their games. We will never know how these games were played.

Components and rules can be combined:

- a set of components may be used with different rules.
- a set of rules can be used with different components.

Suppose we just had the rules for *Halma*, but not the board and pieces and had to reconstruct the game.

- What should the board look like?
- How many spaces should it have?
- What shape do the spaces have: square, hexagonal, or round?
- How are the spaces laid out?
- Are all the spaces the same size or are they of different sizes?
- How many pieces are there?
- What do the pieces look like? Does a piece take more than one space when played?

The rules are not sufficient to define a game! (Unless the rules have pictures of the components and game situations.)

3. What criteria must a game have?

There are criteria which apply to all games and those that apply to the "games with rules". First, I will describe the criteria that apply to "games with rules".

- Game rules
- Goal
- The course of the game is never the same - chance
- Competition

3.1 Game rules

As already discussed, the rules and the components define the game. Everything that is in the rules is part of the game. Everything that is not in the rules does not belong in the game. The rules are the borders and the heart of the game. They only refer to the game and never exist outside of the game. Although the game has rules which are like laws, playing a game is voluntary and cannot be forced on the players. Whoever plays a game, voluntarily binds himself to the rules. Where force is involved, there is no game. All games without rules are not "games with rules".

3.2 Goal

Every game has a goal. Thus, there are two definitions:

- The victory condition or requirement.
- The strategy needed to win the game.

I would like to make clear the difference between the two definitions with an example. In the game Go, the victory condition is to earn the most points. In order to achieve this, a player must win space. Thus, the strategy, which players use during the game, is to win space. Therefore, I define the game goal as the strategy, which the players work on to win.

There are thousands of games, but only a small number of game goals. That means that most games have the same game goal. At first this seems

surprising. But when we look at it closely and see that every has a winner and a loser, the goal of the game must be something measurable, relatively simple to measure, and depicted in a game.

3.3 The course of the game is never the same - chance

This attribute, of all entertainment media, is only found in a game. Someone who reads a book, watches a movie, or listens to music, can repeat the experience at any time, but the course and the content is always the same. You can play a game any number of times, however, and the course will always be different. Also, with each game, the course is unknown and it is uncertain who will win the game. Uncertainty and unknown, that is what make games so exciting and delightful. The reason for this is in the game rules and the chance, which play a larger or smaller role in each game.

Playing is experimenting with chance (Novalis). Chance will be experienced in a game by luck (or bad luck). Games, which are mostly based on chance, offer little development possibilities for a player and are usually boring.

On the other hand, chance makes games unpredictable and interesting, and causes the game's course to develop differently each time. How does chance get into a game:

- with a random generator (e.g. dice)
- with different start-up situations (e.g. dealing cards)
- with incomplete information (e.g. moving at the same time, unknown strategy of your fellow players)
- with a very high number of move options

Pure strategy games have some chance elements. If that were not so, the game's course would be too deterministic, and we wouldn't like a game whose result was known at the beginning. In strategy games, chance is shown in the large number of possible moves. Because of the many moves, no player knows the winning strategy, which leads to victory.

All games which have the same course, by definition, do not belong to "games with rules". For example, this would be puzzles, quizlets, and brain teasers, which lose their attraction when they have been solved. Solitaire games which follow a different course each time belongs, for me, to "games with rules". For example the card game *Patience*. Very interesting and informative in this connection is the *Games Cafe* article What Is a Puzzle? by Scott Kim.

3.4 Competition

Each game demonstrates competition. Players compete in a game. There are winners and losers. Even in cooperative games or when players work as a team, competition exists. In this case, the players compete against one of the predetermined situations, that means the players play cooperatively against the game system. The same applies to solitaire games (e.g. *Patience, Solitaire*). A competition needs a system, in which the game results can be compared. The competition and the measurement of the game results are criteria which limit the game and the cause that certain feelings won't be fulfilled throughout the game as in books, movies, and music. For example, love, freedom, harmony, pain, sorrow, etc. The criteria "competition" is also the reason why it is so difficult to develop games which are not aggressive. Please see the *Games Journal* article Non Predatory Games by Kate Jones.

4. Basic Criteria

For judging what is or is not a game, the basic criteria, which not only apply to "games with rules", but to all games, is as important as the special criteria for "games with rules". Here are the criteria which all games have.

- Common experience
- Equality
- Freedom
- Activity

- Diving into the world of the game

4.1 Common experience

Games bring people together, regardless of gender, generation, and race. Most games are multi-player games which lead to group experiences, which linger after the game is over. But there are groups of games which are played alone. These are the so-called solitaire games and most computer games.

4.2 Equality

In a game, all players are equal and have the same chance to win. Where else in this does absolute equality exist? I think that is one of the reasons that children love to play games, because in a game with adults, they are equal partners.

4.3 Freedom

Whoever plays a game, does it from his freedom of choice. He is not forced or coerced by anyone to play. Playing games is not work, not commitment, nothing you have to do. Therefore, we can say that playing games means being free. This freedom is basic to all games. Here the embracing game term has its value.

4.4 Playing means being active

Whoever reads a book, watches a movie, or listens to music, consumes or acquires, but does not act. While nowadays most leisure activities seduce people into passivity, the game makes people act. Depending on the game, the following activities may be undertaken:

Spiritual Area

- thinking, combining
- planning
- making decisions
- concentrating
- training your mind
- receiving knowledge
- understand the impact of systems

Emotional Area

- rules, accepting laws
- to learn how to work with others
- to learn how to lose
- to learn more about yourself and others
- to use fantasy and creativity

Motor Area

- practice skillfulness
- practice reactions

I am sure that games do not fulfill a purpose, but are not useless. Activity is basic to all games. Here again, the embracing game term has its value.

4.5 Diving into the world of the game

Whoever plays, leaves behind reality and dives into the world of the game. These game worlds are comparable to reality. This statement still applies to the big difference between the two worlds. I want to substantiate that the course of reality and the course of the game world will be steered by the same factors:

- laws/rules (natural laws and human laws - game rules, which are like laws)
- chance
- your own doing (within the frame of predetermined laws)
- competition (achievement of the best)
- course and end are unknown same language and means of expression

Despite these similarities, the game world is not the everyday world and reality is not a game world. Game worlds have a limited space and have a different understanding of time.

A game is only a game, when everything that happens in the game stays within the game world. This is not the case when the outcome influences reality immensely. In this case, the game is reality, for example games of chance (Roulette, Poker, Black Jack) or with professional sports activities (Rugby, Baseball, ice hockey, Cricket, Olympic games, chess championships and so on). With all reality games, the principal of freedom gets lost. With the reality games, you play the game from commitment not freedom. The game results directly effect reality.

Games are entertainment and fun. The players may only take their emotions from the game world into reality. Whoever spends an interesting and fun evening playing games with friends, takes this happy feeling into reality. By crossing this small border between the real world and the game world has the result that during the game one is relaxed and can escape from the real world and then return relaxed and happy.

5. Summary

Games are objects which consist of components and rules and have certain criteria: rules, a goal, always changing course; chance; competition; common experience; equality; freedom; activity; diving into the world of the game; and no impact on reality.

- Wolfgang Kramer

(Translated from the German by Jay Tummelson.)