

Demarcating Games and Play: Empathizing and systematizing as modes of being in the world

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ABSTRACT

This paper problematizes the assumption that the essence of ‘game’ and ‘play’ can somehow be distilled into a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a phenomenon to be demarcated as ‘game’ and ‘play’. This is the notion that it is possible to come up with a definition of the necessary and sufficient conditions that make all games ‘games’, and the necessary and sufficient conditions that makes play ‘play’. This notion has been discussed in literature on game design as well as game analysis (e.g., Huizinga, 1955; Caillois, 1961; Meier, 2000; Koster, 2004; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Costikyan, 1994; Crawford, 2003; Juul, 2005; Malaby 2007; Aarseth 2007).

This paper argues the non-essentialist perspective, that in fact, there is no set of incidental attributes, which are necessary to establish the existence and function of game and play. By imposing a formal definition of game and play, one necessarily excludes games and types of play that fall outside of the proposed demarcation in question. There is no one essential common feature to all demarcated phenomena, but they are defined by overlapping similarities, or what Wittgenstein termed ‘family resemblances’. Adopting this position thus allows us to navigate more safely through “a complicated network of similarities, overlapping, and crisscrossing” (Wittgenstein, 1953), meaning that Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances serves to show the lack of boundaries and exactness that characterize different uses of the same word, thereby avoiding the imprudent consequences of a generality of meaning (Biletzki & Matar, 2011). This is in line with the assertion that ‘computer games’ is too inclusive a category to be of academic use (Aarseth 2003).

This paper speculates that the myriad expressions of ‘play’ in our culture might move along a continuum between two extremes that can be completely at odds with each other. At one extreme empathizing play is the product of the ability to predict and respond to the behavior of an agent by inferring their mental states and responding to them

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appropriately. At the other extreme systematizing play is the ability to predict and respond to the behavior of non-agentive deterministic systems by analyzing input-operation-output relations and inferring the rules that govern such systems. This perspective is adapted to games from *the empathizing-systematizing framework*, which underlies *the extreme male brain theory* (ibid.). This theory suggests that the human mind has a finite capacity to understand the world, which is of an either empathizing or systematizing nature. The *empathizing-systematizing framework* posits, that an individual's total capacity for understanding is finite so that an increase in one means a proportional decrease in the other. This position is put to the point by putting the *empathizing-systematizing framework* into context with FIFA13.

Keywords

Empathizing, Systematizing, FIFA13, game, play.

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