

**An essay: What is a game? Building Critical Vocabulary for Games and thoughts on the published writings of Greg Costikyan.**

*“They are playing a game they are playing at not playing a game, if I show them that I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me Therefore I must play the game of not seeing that I see the game.” – R.D. Laing*

Games are a fundamental part of human existence. More often than not, an extremely sketchy definition of a game stems from an exaggerated perception of our understanding. Some loosely define them as a vicarious activity with fantastic objectives while others adopt a more seminal approach as games being the elixir to life where one stays young at heart as long as they play games.

*Costikyan* postulates a game as an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires participants to struggle towards a goal. What follows is a thorough deconstruction of the aforementioned definition of a game. A struggle encompasses the vital elements of chance and conflict. To have that element of discernable human intention or lack of it makes all the difference when it comes to gratification associated with playing games. The introduction of obstacles and challenges vastly enhances the richness and emotional appeal of a game. Conflict resolution is done by way of skill and familiarity gained over frequent experimentation and immersion in a game. Any successful game has to be designed such that its ‘real-world’ value exists only in the context of the game. For example, the currency in *Monopoly* is determinant of success or failure only within the confines of the game and has no consequence in the real world whatsoever.

Purposeful interaction translates to a response, as best, from a player attempting to achieve his/her objective. In effect, this implies that games are goal-directed interactions. Finally, the structure of game is exactly what gets players into a state of suspended disbelief, every once in a while. The process of creating a refined and seamless structure for a game is tedious. Numerous iterations, continuous adjustment, prudent scheduling and management is what it boils down to. The biggest challenge posed is to convince a player into believing that “he was attacked by the enemy” and that it had nothing to do with the underlying game-play algorithms, numerical data, 3d models or image bitmaps.

An industry veteran, game designer Eric Zimmerman once said “Games are structures of desire”. “Desire” being a fluid interplay of the game’s rules and components that create a framework within which people play. Game structure is an effective tool used to shape player behavior in a game. Thus, game design can be defined as the creative attempt to imagine, the kinds of experiences players will have with a game, and through that, to fabricate a structure to lead them toward experiences you’d like them to feel.

Thus, from the above functional perspective and taking into account Marc LeBlanc’s taxonomy of game pleasures, there emerges a more integral definition of what games are - a mode of interactive entertainment, at the forefront of artistic expression created with a thorough knowledge of the medium and a sense of intensionality.

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