

## Defining the Videogame

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**ABSTRACT. Full article omitted due journal review.  
Available by request from author.**

*In philosophy the question ‘Why do we really use that word, that proposition?’ constantly leads to valuable results (Wittgenstein, 1922, 6.211)*

“You look much like your forefather,” said Skepticus. There was no answer. “Only a bit heavier and less agile,” Skepticus added to himself as he continued to size up Grasshopper who was slouched in a comfy chair, fingers dancing on a device that seemed to affect the screen on which his eyes were locked. Perhaps the visit had been a mistake. Then the sky turned grey and a thunderstorm took over. Lights went out. Curse words echoed through the house. Thus, after a few passing moments, Skepticus found himself in candlelight, talking to young Grasshopper.

S: Game playing seems to run in the blood of you grasshoppers.

G: Aren’t you the one who thirty-five years ago agreed with my forefather that game playing is inherent to all living beings?

S: We did draw that conclusion, indeed (Suits, 1978). Yet my point was not to state the obvious—that all intellectual beings are playful by nature—but to observe how your kind might perhaps be inclined to conscious game play more than usual.

G: Or perhaps you were, as they say, rhetorical?

S: Not at all. My visit here has in fact a rather serious purpose.

G: Seriously?

S: As serious as videogames get. The thing is, there is a conference on philosophy of computer games in the near future, and I have an excellent concept for a paper.

G: I’m listening.

S: You see; game scholars continuously pursue a definition for what we call a *game* (Parlett, 1999; Costikyan, 2002; Salen & Zimmermann, 2003; Juul, 2005; Frasca, 2007). Even the theory your forefather and I formed long ago is still under vigorous debate (Innis 2001; Bäck, 2008; Morgan, 2008; Ryall, 2013). However, I cannot evade the feeling that this ontological discussion requires a new approach.

G: Do you mean that people should stop crafting definitions?

S: What I mean is essentially what Espen Aarseth (2011) presumably means when he says that

instead of the impossible mission of turning the common word ‘game’ into an analytic concept, a useful task for an ontology of games is to model game differences, to show how the things we call games can be different from each other in a number of different ways.

G: Am I to assume that implementing this Aarseth guy’s approach has something to do with videogames?

S: Precisely. I am going to define the *videogame*. My simple premise is that videogames have a special ontological aspect that can be used to distinguish them from most other things we call games: *videogames evaluate effort*.

G: That reminds me of this game developer, Gonzalo Frasca, who termed games as activities in which the player's 'performance is quantified.'

S: Yes, my definition owes a great deal to his notion—to which he actually adds that the "activity may also be measured" (2007: 73).

G: But in your case, the compulsory process of evaluating effort implies that the player's performance not only may be measured, but rather is measured *de facto*.

S: Right, and there is another crucial facet that distinguishes our discussion from Frasca's. We are not talking about games but videogames. In other words, while Frasca hits the nail on the head by noticing that games quantify performance and some additionally measure it, in the process he happens to deliver a distinction between games and videogames. All games quantify effort (player performance), but measuring it is a process, and to be able to run an evaluative process the game must be computer-based, i.e., computational.

G: Aren't you overlooking these non-computational effort-evaluating components called 'referees' that are pretty common in non-videogames such as football?

S: Football, as played in the mundane world, may or may not include computational effort-evaluating components, electronic or organic, but the game itself, in a material sense, does not execute any evaluative calculations. It is merely a system in which evaluation takes place. A football videogame in turn, say, *Nintendo World Cup* (Nintendo, 1990) is a system that itself executes effort evaluation. And this, it is my thesis, is something that only videogames are capable of doing.

G: You might actually have something there. Before going further I must, however, address a concern. Was your intention to really submit this thesis in dialogue form like this Bernard Suits documented the discussion between you and my forefather?

S: Do you want your name to be changed?

G: I was more thinking about how academia will respond to that kind of formatting.

S: But Socratic dialogue has been employed in serious academic deliberation from Plato to our times! This concerns especially the legal scholars whose texts commonly contain exercises that can be worked through Socratically (Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, we must not forget Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Rand, to mention a successful few, whose literary fiction serves primarily the function of presenting their scholarly views. In short, it is my belief that the dialogue form, as a written discourse—which should not, I hasten to add, be directly equated with literary fiction—does have several rhetorical strengths that have hitherto been overlooked by scholars simply because of their categorical preconceptions of academic standards (for discussion, see Nelson, 1949; Seeskin, 1987; Carroll, 1992; Mikkonen, 2013; for examples, see Fuller & Jenkins, 1994; Areeda, 1996; Berger 2009; Sakellariadis, 2012).

G: Are you suggesting that Socratic dialogue is superior to conventionally formatted academic writing?

S: I do not want to make a claim like that at all. But I might be ready to state that some academic topics, such as the one at issue, may benefit from the rhetoric enabled by dialogue form articulation. While it must be stressed that the efficiency of the dialogue rhetoric depends highly on the subject matter, one must not neglect its use when there is a call for it, in game studies in particular.

G: And how are Socratic dialogue and literary fiction related to game studies, may I ask?

S: In my view, both of those forms operate in close relation to the continuously growing social phenomenon of *cultural ludification* (Raessens, 2006), which can be understood as an umbrella term for all the emerging types of gamification and playful amendment.

G: So you think that this cultural ludification is about to enter academia too?

S: As contemporary game scholars are well aware of how the concepts ‘work,’ ‘leisure,’ ‘education,’ and ‘entertainment’ are more and more difficult to separate in today’s society (see Kirkpatrick, 2013), they must also be ready to consider the possible effects that the phenomenon has on their own work environment. If Socratic dialogue and literary fiction are forms of cultural ludification in the academic domain, as I believe they are, the imminent discussion of their application must be pioneered by game studies. These arguments have not gone through proper testing yet, however, and that is where I need your professional succor.

G: Under these environmental conditions [Grasshopper glances at his powerless console] I see no reason to leave you aidless—and I’m more than happy to tell you that your undertaking has already conceived several counter arguments that I’ll be glad to pass on.

## Games

Nintendo World Cup. Nintendo, NES, 1990.

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