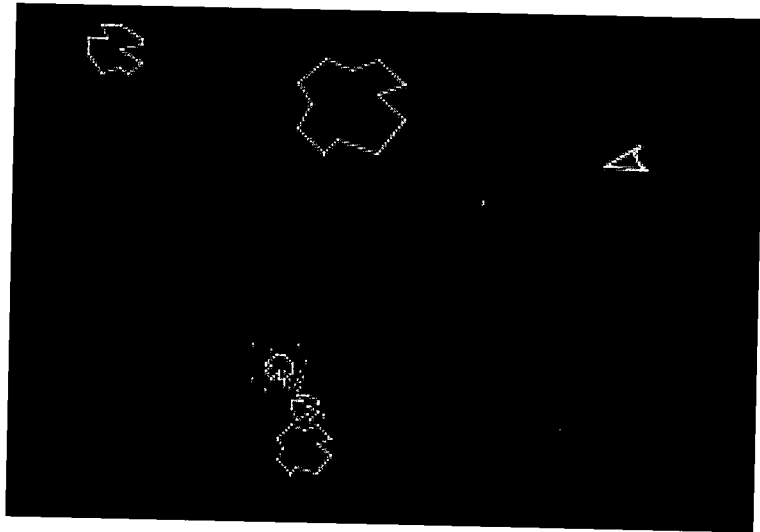
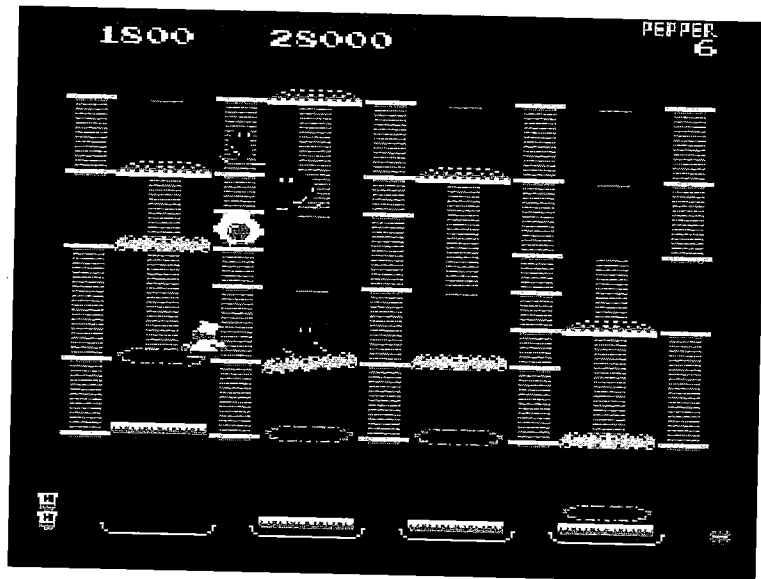


VIDEO GAMES AND THE CLASSIC GAME MODEL

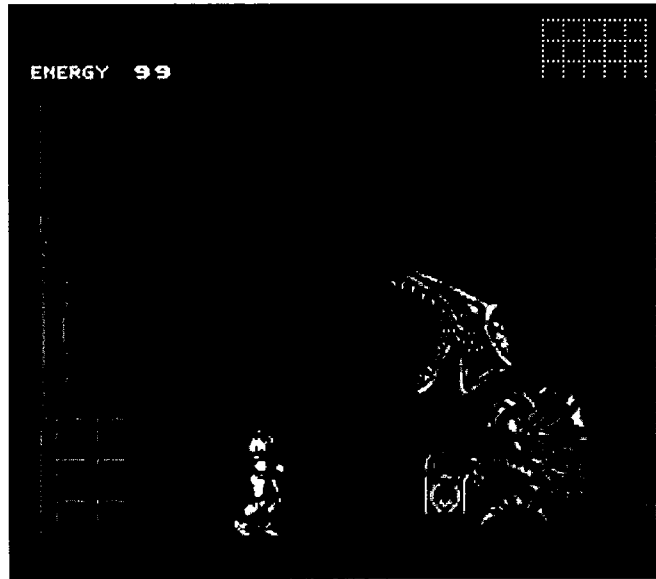
The eight games in figures 2.1–2.8 look to be quite different: One might be tempted to conclude that they have nothing in common and that their sharing the term “games” is an insignificant linguistic coincidence. In the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, “What is common to them all?—Don’t say: ‘There *must* be something common, or else they would not be all called “games”’—but *look* and *see* whether there is anything common to all” ([1953] 2001, 27). Indeed, this is the subject of this chapter. Building on seven game definitions by previous writers, I create a new game definition that I call the *classic game model*.¹ The model is *classic* in the sense that it is the way games have *traditionally* been constructed. It is also a model that applies to at least a 5,000-year history of games. Although it is unusual to claim that any aspect of human culture has remained unchanged for millennia, there are strong arguments for this. In the introduction, I mentioned the Egyptian board game of senet, which appears to be a precursor of contemporary games such as backgammon and Parcheesi (Piccione 1980). Additionally, the board and card games developed during the past few thousand years commonly have a shared European-African-Asian history, and the American anthropologist Stewart Culin has documented the games of the North American Indians (Culin 1907). This means that games following the classic game model have been known in the vast majority of human cultures.² While many definitions of games have been attempted, the one I will propose here has the goal of explaining what relates video games to other games and what happens on the borders of games. What should the definition look like? We are probably interested in understanding the properties of the games themselves (the artifact designed by the game developers), how the player interacts with them, and what it means to be playing rather than, say, working. So let



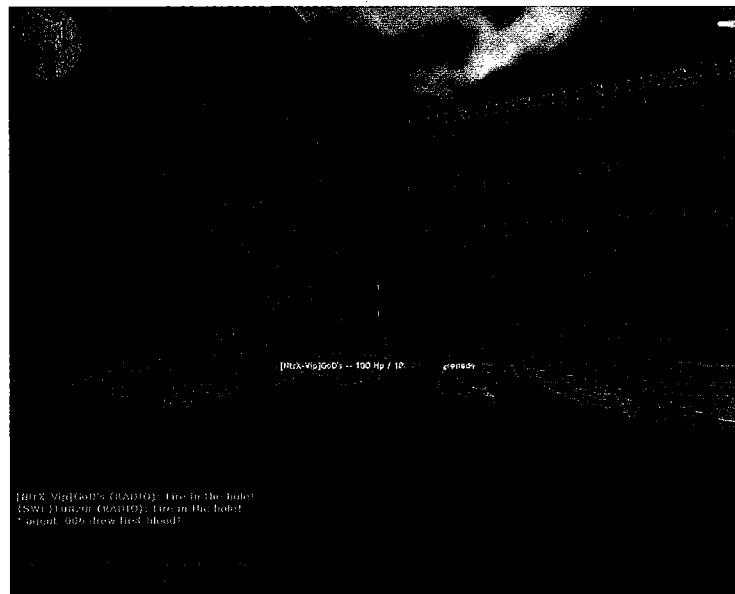
| Figure 2.1 |
Asteroids (Atari 1979).



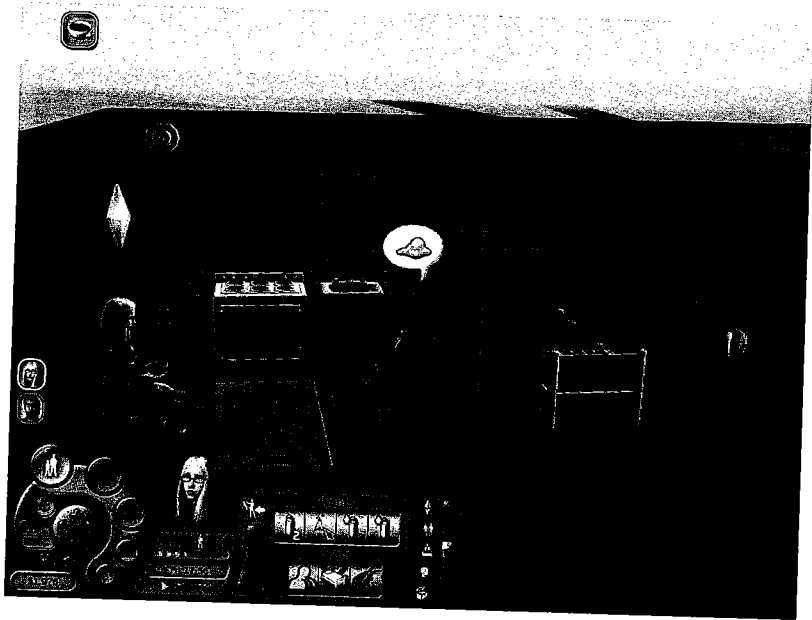
| Figure 2.2 |
Burger Time (Data East 1982).



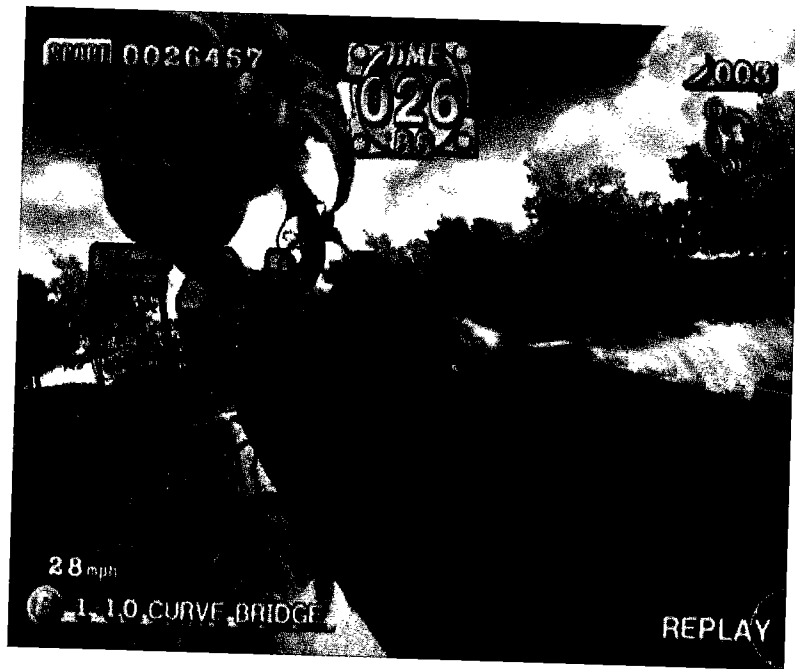
| Figure 2.3 |
Super Metroid (Nintendo 1993).



| Figure 2.4 |
Counter-Strike (The Counter-Strike Team 2000).



| Figure 2.5 |
The Sims 2 (Maxis 2004).



| Figure 2.6 |
Super Monkey Ball 2 (Amusement Vision 2002).



| Figure 2.7 |
Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar Games 2001).



| Figure 2.8 |
Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker (Nintendo 2003a).

us assume that a good definition should describe these three things: (1) the system set up by the rules of a game, (2) the relation between the game and the player of the game, and (3) the relation between the playing of the game and the rest of the world.

As demonstrated by Bernard Suits (1978), the simplest way to test a game definition is to test it for being either too broad or too narrow. To set up the test before the definition, I will assume that *Quake III Arena* (ID Software 1999), *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami 2001), checkers, chess, soccer, tennis, and Hearts are games; that open-ended games such as *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) and *SimCity* (Maxis 1989), gambling, and games of pure chance are borderline cases; and that traffic, war, hypertext fiction, free-form play, and ring-a-ring o' roses³ are not games. The definition should be able to determine what falls inside from what falls outside the set of games, but also to explain in detail why and how some things are on the border of the definition. The existence of borderline cases is not a problem for the definition as long as we are able to understand *why* and *how* something is a borderline case.

In the big perspective, practically every single game found in any compilation of traditional card games, board games, or sports falls squarely within the classic game model I describe here. It appears that it is only during the last third of the twentieth century that new game forms have challenged the classic model.

Like the fact that mentioning the rules of a game can make it sound dull, the idea of a definition may sound limiting but it is really the opposite. In fact, to define games is to create what Douglas Hofstadter (1985) has termed a *productive set*. An example of a productive set is the set of all shapes that represent the letter *A*, where the mere description of the properties of the set help show how the set can be expanded. Having described all possible *A*'s makes it much easier to come up with new typographical designs for the letter *A*. Having a definition of games also points to how we can create new kinds of "games" that try new things that games have not tried before. It is easier to break the rules once you are aware of them.

The Language Issue

The first thing to note is that it may be easy to accept that there is a difference as well as a close relation between *play* and *game*.⁴ *Play* is mostly taken to be a free-form activity, whereas *game* is a rule-based activity.

The problem is that this distinction is very dependent on the language used, and much confused by the fact that in French, Spanish, or German, neither *jeux*, *juego*, or *Spiel* has such a distinction. In English, this is also a bit muddled since “play” is both a noun and a verb (you play a game), whereas “game” is mostly a noun. In English, it is common to see *games* as subset of *play*. Scandinavian languages have a stronger distinction with *leg* = play and *spil* = game with verbs for both—you can play play (“*lege en leg*”) and game game (“*spille et spil*”), so to speak. When writing about games in Danish, it is therefore not self-evident that games are a subset of play, whereas while writing about *Spiel* in German, it is not obvious that one should distinguish between games and play from the outset. This manifests itself with the English translations of writers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Roger Caillois who write in languages with no clear play/game distinctions.⁵ At the same time, even within the English language, our focus is not on the letter sequence g-a-m-e, since we probably consider big *game* hunting to be a slightly different thing. To clarify, the focus here is on the set of games that we can describe as *rule-based games*.

Some Previous Definitions

Let us go through some previous definitions of games, focus on their similarities and point to any modifications or clarifications needed for our current purpose. First, we should note that the definitions do not necessarily try to describe the same aspect of games: Some concentrate purely on the game as such, some on the activity of playing a game. Additionally, it turns out that many things can be expressed in different ways. When one writer talks about goals and another discusses conflict, it is possible to translate between them: conflict entails (conflicting) goals; the notion of goals entails the possibility of not reaching the goal, and thereby a conflict. We will get back to this, but let us simply list seven game definitions, which we will categorize afterward (table 2.1).

There are more similarities than differences in these definitions. If we want to look at games on three different levels, we can sort the points of the individual definitions according to what they describe. For example, “rules” describes games as formal systems. That a game is “outside ordinary life” describes the relationship between the game and the rest of the world. That a game has an “object to be obtained” describes the game as a

Table 2.1
Seven game definitions

| Source | Definition |
|--|---|
| Johan Huizinga 1950, 13. | [...] a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. |
| Roger Caillois 1961, 10–11. | [...] an activity which is essentially: free (voluntary), separate [in time and space], uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe. |
| Bernard Suits 1978, 34. | To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. |
| E. M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith 1971, 7. | At its most elementary level then we can define a game as an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrium outcome. |
| Chris Crawford 1982, chapter 2. | I perceive four common factors: representation ["a closed formal system that subjectively represents a subset of reality"], interaction, conflict, and safety ["the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models"]. |
| David Kelley 1988, 50. | [...] a game is a form of recreation constituted by a set of rules that specify an object to be attained and the permissible means of attaining it. |
| Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman 2004, 96. | A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. |

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formal system *and* the relationship between the player and the game. If we allow ourselves to translate between different points, seeing for example “goals” and “conflict” as different ways of expressing the same concept, we can group all the points of the definitions according to the level(s) they describe: the game as a formal system, the player and the game, and the game and the rest of the world (table 2.2).⁶

The definitions have many overlaps, but with some work, it is possible to separate the actual disagreements from mere differences in wording.

Rules and Outcomes

All writers agree that games are rule-based (Crawford calls this a “formal system”). While there are many things to say about rules (see chapter 3), let us for the time being focus on the fact that rules are designed to be above discussion—it is supposed to be clear whether a given action is or isn’t allowed by the rules of a game.

The question of outcomes is more interesting: It is a salient feature of games that they have variable outcomes—if the outcome is the same every time, it does not qualify as a game. The variability of the outcome follows from Crawford’s mention of conflict (only one side can succeed).

Salen and Zimmerman’s contribution (2004) here is to point out that the outcome of a game shares some features with the rules of the game: the outcome of a game is quantifiable, meaning that it—like the rules—is designed to be above discussion.

Goals and Conflict

Only Bernhard Suits talks explicitly about goals (a specific state of affairs to be brought about) but goals are implicit in Salen and Zimmerman and Crawford’s *conflict*—a conflict presupposes mutually contradicting goals between two entities or, in a broader sense, between a player and the difficulty of reaching a goal. As we will see later, a game without a goal is a borderline case.

Voluntary

Roger Caillois claims that games are voluntary. The problem is that it is quite unclear what this means. Is it not a game if social pressure forces the player to play? Because human motivation is too complex to be simply explained in terms of its being voluntary/involuntary, I believe that it is

Table 2.2
Game definitions compared

| | The game as formal system | The player and the game | The game and the rest of the world |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Rules Fixed rules (Huizinga) Rules (Caillois) Rules (Suits) Procedure and rules (Avedon and Sutton-Smith) Formal system (Crawford) Rules (Kelley) Rules (Salen and Zimmerman) | | | |
| Outcome Uncertain (Caillois) Disequibrial outcome (Avedon and Sutton-Smith) Changing Course (Kelley) Quantifiable outcome (Salen and Zimmerman) | | | |
| "Goals" Bringing about a state of affairs (Suits) Opposition (Avedon and Sutton-Smith) Conflict (Crawford) Object to be obtained (Kelley) | | | |
| Interaction Interaction (Crawford) | | | |
| Goals, rules, and the world Artificial conflict (Salen and Zimmerman) | | | |
| "Separate" Outside ordinary life/proper boundaries (Huizinga) Separate (Caillois) No material interest (Huizinga) Unproductive (Caillois) | | | |

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