

Game Definitions: A Wittgensteinian

Approach

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Abstract

Games have been defined and redefined many times over, and there seems to be no end to this continual process or any agreement about the definitions. This article argues that such an agreement is not necessary, and presents a Wittgensteinian approach to discussing game definitions. Instead of the common core approach used in most definitions, this article argues for an approach based on language-games. The common core approach is based on a limited number of shared core attributes, while the language-game approach is based on the idea of family resemblances. The language-game approach sees the cycle of redefinition as a hermeneutic circle that advances our understanding of games. This article also clarifies the distinction between nominal and real definitions and shows how they serve different purposes. With the approach suggested here, the focus in research can shift from the essential attributes of games to understanding definitions as tools for practical purposes.

Keywords: game definition, hermeneutic circle, language-game, nominal definition, real definition, Wittgenstein

Introduction

In order to understand games, you must have some idea of what they are. This is the business of

definitions: to create boundaries for ideas and phenomena so that you can better know what is being discussed.

But definitions can also limit you. When you create boundaries, you always leave something outside those boundaries. The boundaries need not be final or impermeable, but in order to define things some boundaries must be established. Lines must be drawn somewhere, even if they are drawn on water. In the liminal spaces between definitions live things that resemble the ones you are trying to fence inside your boundaries, but are faulty in some small way.

These bounded cases are often as telling about the definition as the definition itself. What is the thing you are defining, and what is it not? With games, these borderline cases could be forms of gambling or roleplaying games (Juul, 2003), or maybe life itself (Suits, 1967).

There have been many attempts to define games (e.g. Abt, 1970; Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971; Costikyan, 1994; Juul, 2003; Maroney, 2001; Myers, 2009; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Suits, 1980; Tavinor, 2008; Waern, 2012; Whitton, 2009). The usual approach is to look at previous definitions, find common elements in them, discern problems, and then provide a synthesis that attempts to fix those problems. This form of definition is usually given as a list of features that form the core of what games are. This approach could be called the **common core approach**. This article will not follow this approach, for reasons that will hopefully become apparent.

The purpose of this article is to add clarity to the discussion of definitions in game studies. Currently, producing definitions seems to be a necessary ritual for any scholar discussing games, regardless of how necessary or useful it is for the issue discussed. This article sets out to clarify

1. when using definitions is useful and when is it not, and
2. what kinds of definitions serve what kinds of purposes.

The approach I am arguing for here has been mapped (but not fleshed out) before by Aarseth and Calleja (2009). They argue that definitions are not needed to have a successful field, and that in an

interdisciplinary field definitions can actually hinder discussion. Instead, they propose creating a descriptive model of games. Their concerns are valid, but definitions can still be of use, as I show below.

Frasca (2007) highlights an important distinction that is related to defining games: games are both systems and an activity, and any definition that excludes one in favor of the other is looking through a limited lens that does not encompass the entirety of what games are. However, this may be entirely justified, as shown later.

Defining Definitions

When defining games, it is enlightening to take a brief look at the traditional theory of definition (Cohen, 2008; Kneale and Kneale, 1991). The most basic aspect of the theory of definition is the twofold division of nominal definitions and real definitions. Nominal definitions are verbal agreements about the use of terms, or suggestions to use an expression in a certain way. These definitions are social, and they depend on the use of language and predominant social conventions. Because nominal definitions are verbal agreements, they cannot be true or false, but they may be more or less useful, and their correspondence with how words are actually used may also vary.ⁱ

By contrast, real definitions aim not just to tell us about the way words are used, but also to find some attributes that are in some way essential to the object being defined. A chemist trying to find out the structure and properties of matter is trying to form a real definition of the thing studied. However, identifying the essential attributes can be difficult, and the whole idea of trying to find essential attributes can be considered problematic.ⁱⁱ

There is a difference between trying to identify the discourses (Mills, 2004) surrounding games – and thus trying to find the current cultural or social (nominal) definition – and analyzing the structure of games and identifying shared attributes (real definition; see Tavinor, 2009). These might not be mutually exclusive goals, but making this difference explicit can help in understanding a definition. Confusing these different

types of definitions can lead to serious confusion (Waern, 2012).

If a definition attempts to cover games as a real definition, it should attempt – at least in theory – to cover all possible forms of games (and thus serve as a definition for all games). Another possibility would be to use a real definition that delimits certain forms of games, for example only videogames or role-playing games (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009.). This makes choosing the essential attributes significantly easier, but it may still turn out to be difficult to agree on what is essential to some forms of games (as is shown by the multiplicity of definitions).

On the other hand, a nominal definition will change over time as the discourses around the definition shift. This makes nominal definitions more unstable than real definitions, which may or may not be desirable. If one is defining a temporal phenomenon, like culture, then this change may actually reflect a change in the object being defined. This could also lead to a real definition needing to be redefined, as the object itself has changed, and the definition no longer corresponds to it. Another possible example of needing to redefine a real definition would be to correct a previous error in the definition.

The Language-Game of Games

There is also an argument by Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]) against searching for essential (real) definitions in general.ⁱⁱⁱ Instead of searching for essential definitions for concepts, he suggests that concepts should be understood as sharing **family resemblances** (Wittgenstein, 2009, §67^{iv}).

The analogy is the resemblance of family members to one other. The father may not greatly resemble the mother, but both of them share characteristics with their children. There can be similarities between their physical characteristics (e.g. facial structure, eye color, manner of walking), but also in temperament.

We understand types of numbers as being similar in the same way (Wittgenstein, 2009, §67). There is a direct affinity with other kinds of things we are used to calling numbers. There are also non-direct

similarities with the things we have formerly called numbers, and so we consider any new examples of number-like-objects to also be numbers.

What makes an object number-like may differ from one instance to another, just like attributes differ when comparing children to their mother and father. The children may be blond like their father and have brown eyes like their mother. These shared concepts are meaningful only in a certain type of commonly shared way of speaking about things, which Wittgenstein (2009) interestingly calls **language-games**. Thus, language-games are ways of understanding concepts that differ from one speech-community^v (Connolly, 1986) to another, like from one field of research to another.

From Wittgenstein's (2009) concept, it follows that there are no core attributes that can be used in separating games from other phenomena. If Wittgenstein is indeed right, then there may be no single definition for games. Instead of having a common core of attributes, games share attributes as family resemblances, which vary from one instance to another, forming a continuum or a set rather than a single thing called a “game.”

The act of defining games can be considered as a language-game in itself. The question then becomes not what games are, but what elements are considered important when you identify games in this language-game. In this game of defining things, emphasizing different aspects brings some forms of games into a more central position. For example, if you emphasize

1. the **narrativity** of games, you will prioritize storytelling games over Chess (Ryan, 2001);
2. the **rules** found in games, you will prioritize Chess over free-form play (Juul, 2003);
3. **playfulness**, you will prioritize free-form play over storytelling games (Sicart, 2011).

The choice of emphasis usually depends on the reasons for making a certain definition, and these reasons may be more interesting or enlightening than the definition itself.

What does this mean in terms of defining games? If one understands the act of defining as Wittgenstein (2009) does, it follows that:

1. **Definitions resemble context.** LARPs (Live Action Role-Playing Games) are discussed with theater analogies, digital games with computer analogies, and board games like Chess and Go with war analogies.
2. **Definitions are distinct.** Different language-games are used when discussing digital games versus board games. There is overlapping in these language-games, but they are distinct because of the differences in context.
3. **Definitions may not be compatible.** It is difficult to discuss board games using terminology that is suitable for an analysis of digital games, given the differences in the media.

Context-sensitive, diverse language-games are what is discussed in *Philosophical Investigations* as parts of a **form of life** (Wittgenstein, 2009, §241). A language-game is associated with a certain way of being in the world, and these ways of being in the world are different forms of life.^{vi} To quote Tilghman (2009):

What is probably the single most important thing we have learned from Wittgenstein is that an expression can be understood only when it plays a role in a language-game and that our language is intelligible only when seen against the background of human activities and forms of life.

Forms of life are the different ways of relating to the world, depending on social, cultural and historical factors. Forms of life are ways for speech-communities to relate to, and give meaning to, the world around us.

For example, when a fisherman talks about knowing the best places to fish, he probably uses the word 'know' in a different way than a philosopher who specializes in epistemology. The fisherman and the philosopher participate in different language-games, in which the word 'know' is useful in different ways. Neither of these language-games is inherently better than the other, but they are useful for different purposes and in different contexts. Some language-games are better than others for a certain purpose, like describing the qualities of fishing grounds.

Similarly, there are related but different language-games surrounding different forms of games (Bojin 2008). This is true even if we exclude from the discussion things like cultural differences. The language-

games of different forms of game playing are distinct and may diverge from one another, especially over time, unless there is interaction between them. This might happen, for example, between digital games and traditional folk games. The use of different language-games stems from the different cultural and social contexts these activities are associated with. This approach to game definitions could be called the **language-game approach**.

An example of this would be how the criteria of what makes a roleplaying game differ from one media to another. There is a wide variety of roleplaying games ranging from tabletop games to LARP to single-player digital games (Hitchens and Drachen, 2009). In tabletop roleplaying games 'roleplaying' is something that is done verbally, while in a LARP the player enacts their character's actions. In digital games, it is often enough that a game contains some kind of character advancement in order to be said to contain roleplaying elements.

But this is only one way of looking at the situation. There is also the language-game of games that encompasses all forms of playing that are usually considered games.^{vii} This language-game is part of the form of life that includes game playing, as well as all the typical social characteristics associated with it. Language-games exist in nested hierarchies with porous boundaries. Choosing which level of language-game to employ can be a strategic decision. This decision affects questions of inclusion and exclusion.

Language-games are not necessarily exclusive, but can coexist, even if they are not entirely compatible. An example of this would be the use of several definitions simultaneously in a field of research, such as the way in which genes are understood in biology as both the defining factors and the expressions of specific features (Moss, 2004). There are requirements for definitions, if they are to be used simultaneously: they cannot be completely mutually exclusive, lest they end up defining different phenomena. Additionally, to adhere to the demands of coherency, only one definition can be used per study. The definitions can vary only between different discussions, possibly resulting in completely different language-games.

It might not even be desirable to find a single definition. One is hard-pressed to find a single, commonly accepted definition for such widely used terms as “culture” or “structure” (Rubinstein, 2001). These things are defined and redefined all the time as a part of new research and discussions, creating new approaches, problems and answers along the way. This probably should not be viewed as a shortcoming, but as a consequence of the nature of the things being defined. Our understanding of cultural phenomena is constantly changing, at least partly because those phenomena are also changing, and partly because our own cultural perspective is changing. Our horizon of interpretation is widening, as Gadamer (2004 [1960]) would put it.

Defining things is also using power. “Knowledge is power,” as was already recognized by Francis Bacon, but more substantially analyzed by thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault (Rodríguez García, 2001). Both show how experts wield power over their fields by defining the terms of the discussion and the dichotomies that organize knowledge. This use of power is not simply formal, as “[t]he power effects that knowledge produces are immediate, for they reside in the categories and classification within a knowledge” (Wong, 2007, p. 11). Definitions are not simply tools for using power over a field, but inherently linked to power by their nature. Tavinor (2008) is worried about what kind of an effect this might have on game studies:

It seems to me that although ludologists, narratologists, and others would claim to be characterizing the nature of games, there does seem to be a large normative component in their proposals and that this comprises the most significant problem with how the definitional debate concerning videogames has been conducted to date.

However free of normative statements a researcher tries to stay, defining things necessarily frames the issue in a certain way, making certain ontological and epistemological assumptions. Tavinor wishes that “[d]efinitions should stay silent on these normative issues so that we can count as games those which we do not happen to value as games.” While Bourdieu and Foucault show how the terms of the discussion are necessarily tied to power, game scholars can at least become aware of the assumptions and norms they are basing their arguments on. Perhaps then game studies can be more open to the inclusive way of defining

things Tavinor calls for. However, regardless of how and on what terms the issue is discussed, participants will be necessarily using their position to wield power.

Language-Games and Hermeneutics

Wittgenstein points out that the act of defining games might not be a very fruitful exercise at all, and that family resemblances may be the only possible way of identifying games (Tilghman, 2009). Not everyone agrees (Suits, 1980; Juul, 2003). Suits (1980) has criticized Wittgenstein for not following his own advice of actually looking at games and seeing if there are similarities between them, rather than assuming that there are none. According to Suits (1980), Wittgenstein seems to assume that there are none, when he should have looked for, and found, some.

In one sense, Suits is right. There is no theory of games to be found in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2009). However, it is a mistaken exercise to try to read Wittgenstein as discussing games when he is actually discussing language. Wittgenstein is drawing an analogy between language and playful activity, not claiming anything about games in particular (Stern, 2004). This is more apparent when discussing language-games in German, with the term *Sprachspiel*. While the term is usually translated as 'language-game,' *Spiel* translates both to play and game. It is entirely possible for game studies to benefit from Wittgenstein's writings, like this article does, but he should be read as a philosopher of language, not as a game scholar.

The lesson to be learned from Wittgenstein (2009) is not, therefore that games are indefinable. Simply stating that games are indefinable is counterproductive to research (Suits, 1980). A better possibility is to understand Wittgenstein's conception of games as a **hermeneutic** one (Connolly, 1986). Connolly (1986, p. 272) argues that there are good reasons for seeing Wittgenstein's language-philosophy and Gadamer's hermeneutics as similar:

For one thing Gadamer shares Wittgenstein's metaphysical "anti-realism," for another his

insistence that understanding includes the application of what is understood resembles Wittgenstein's view that “an inner process stands in need of outward criteria,” where the “outward criteria” give the meaning of psychological terms such as “understanding.”

A hermeneutic conception of defining things would mean that each definition is understood as a starting point for a new act of defining, or in other terms, as a pre-understanding for a more complete understanding (Gadamer, 2004). This would make the process of definition basically endless, as it may be continued eternally without reaching any form of finality.

However, this endlessness is not a surrendering to a completely relativistic point of view (Weberman, 2000). Rather, it is a contextual understanding of truth. There may be no final truth, but an understanding may be more or less suitable for a given context. This would give criteria by means of which definitions are judged to be better or worse, but these criteria might change if the context changed.

Evaluating Definitions

Wittgenstein's (2009) way of defining things is essentially nominal. It means that his way of defining things does not try to find a definition that captures some essential features of things, but discourses, or “ways of speaking” about things (Foucault, 1972, p. 193). As shown above, the key benefits of using a nominal definition are:

1. **Avoiding essentialism.** If definitions are limited to ways of speaking about things, then none of the qualities of the object being defined are taken for granted. All of the qualities are subject to definition and redefinition, highlighting the social nature of these qualities.
2. **Flexibility.** Nominal definitions are, by their nature, sensitive to change and context.

However, there are drawbacks to nominal definitions, namely:

1. **Endlessness of definition.** There are no final nominal definitions as the discourses surrounding things are subject to historical change.
2. **Difficulty of comparison.** If a comparison of definitions is limited to different ways of speaking

about things, it is difficult to critique a definition.

3. **Unclear truth-value.** The truth-value of a nominal definition can only be evaluated within that discourse.

The flexibility inherent to nominal definitions stems from the fact that nominal definitions are under constant redefinition. This process of redefinition can be described as a **hermeneutic circle** (e.g., Gadamer, 2004), with the final result of the act of defining serving as the starting point for a new process of definition. A redefinition can also result from changes in the form of life that the definition is part of. Because of this sensitivity to historical change, nominal definitions are more useful in defining cultural objects than in defining, for example, objects studied by natural science, which are more resistant to historical redefinition.

As nominal definitions are part of a discourse, they cannot be verified accurately or judged outside of this discourse. This prevents the formation of nominal definitions that are verifiable independently from the discussion in which the definitions are used. Comparing the value of nominal definitions can be difficult, as not only the definitions themselves but also the surrounding discourses must be evaluated. This leads to a situation where definitions are not judged by their merits, but by the merits of the discourses in which they are situated.

Nominal definitions are defined as verbal agreements that cannot be true or false. They may be more or less useful in a situation, but they cannot be evaluated on the basis of their truth value alone, separate from the rest of the discourse. This may be considered an unfavorable quality when building a theory-base for a new discipline, like game studies. However, the work of defining things must start somewhere, and we are rarely (if ever) in the situation where a theory can be built using only basic concepts relying on real definitions. This is a problem that was encountered by logical positivism, a philosophical movement stemming from the Vienna Circle, who were drawing inspiration from the early Wittgenstein (1922). Logical positivism tried to produce knowledge from a set of verifiable propositions, based on logical deductions or empirical observations (Passmore, 1943). Unfortunately, the project ended in failure, as the

set of propositions that can be derived from these premises is rather limited.

The problem with talking about language-games instead of definitions is the apparent relativism implied. If, rather than searching for a perfect definition, it is conceded that there may be no perfect definition and instead there may be many different definitions, it would appear that there is no way to criticize these definitions. They are different, and that is all.

However, this is a mistaken notion: some language-games are better suited for talking about some phenomena than others, and they may be evaluated based on how well they are suited to the problem at hand. However, this is different from trying to find a single, perfect definition. A definition is always a tool: definitions are used in order to answer certain questions, and depending on those questions, different definitions may be more or less suited to the problem at hand (Wittgenstein, 2009, §23). A definition is a tool also in the sense that unless a definition is necessary, it tends not to be given. And maybe it should not be given: there is a reason why an artisan carries only the tools that are needed for a specific job. The rest can wait in the shop until they are also needed.

Additionally, Cohen (2008, p. 232) remarks that:

We have drawn a sharp distinction between verbal and real definitions. In practice, however, the distinction is never so sharp, and even in definitions which seem altogether verbal there is generally some reference to the analysis of what the words stand for.

We live in a world filled with language that both mirrors and creates our reality, and neither of these aspects should be forgotten. Language is the medium we use to make sense of the world around us. As Gadamer (2004, p. 470) poetically reminds us: “Being that can be understood is language.”

Wittgenstein's Ruler

In regard to definitions, there is one more mechanism to be discussed, called “Wittgenstein's ruler” (see Wittgenstein, 2009, §50). This concept comes from Taleb (2007), who saw it as a probabilistic

mechanism. It is appropriated here as a tool for understanding definitions (this approach is also probably closer to Wittgenstein; rules are necessarily related to our understanding of definitions, as Wittgenstein (2009) points out). Taleb (2007, p. 224) formulates the ruler as follows:

Unless you have confidence in the ruler's reliability, if you use a ruler to measure a table you may also be using the table to measure the ruler.

Any time a definition is compared to a phenomenon, the phenomenon is also compared to the definition.

The evaluation must necessarily be a two-way comparison about the similarities of the compared things.

This can occasionally be used as practical tool: a definition must encompass the thing that is being defined, and preferably nothing else (Tavinor, 2009). If it is noticed that this is not the case, it is probably an indication that the definition needs to be reappraised. When approaching a new phenomenon with a definition, there are some key questions that can be asked about it:

1. Does the phenomenon being assessed qualify?
2. Is it a borderline case?
3. Or does it fall outside the definition?
4. And most importantly, *why*?

In particular, the last question can reveal something significant about the definition being used. This is also a point raised in discourse analysis: in addition to what we say, it is also noteworthy to pay attention to how we say it (e.g., Mills, 2004). What is emphasized by a definition, and what is downplayed? Most definitions of games pay attention to rules, play and the systemic nature of games. What are the borderline cases, and why? What is trivialized, and what is ignored by the current definitions?

An example of this is the distinction between digital and non-digital games commonly made in game studies (cf. Stenros & Waern, 2011). This distinction is echoed by other categories, like videogames, electronic games, and computer games. At first glance it seems like there is a clear distinction between digital and non-digital games. However, simply evoking the term 'digital' does not do much to clarify the situation. How do digital games differ from non-digital games? Aarseth (1997, p. 14) writes about a

similar problem with digital technology in relation to literature:

The ideological forces surrounding new technology produce a rhetoric of novelty, differentiation, and freedom that works to obscure the more profound structural kinships between superficially heterogeneous media.

Instead of invoking 'digital' as a categorical explanation, it might be more worthwhile to look at family resemblances between forms of games, regardless of their technology. Looking at a group of social games in the same framework might yield insights not available, for example, by only looking at massively multiplayer online role-playing games.

However, it is also enlightening to compare pre-digital definitions to definitions made after digital games became more common. While earlier game definitions emphasized games as an activity, modern definitions highlight games as systems. This could be viewed as a change in the language-game of game definitions, resulting from the form of life around games changing.

Conclusions

This article identifies the usual approach to game definitions as the common core approach, where games are defined by a core of essential attributes. However, this article argues for an approach to game definitions based on Wittgenstein's language-games. Instead of trying to find a common core for all games, it is more useful to look at games through family resemblances, features that connect some, but not necessarily all, games.

This move away from essential definitions also enables researchers to look at definitions as tools for practical purposes. With this approach, researchers can more easily ask what kind of purpose the definition is trying to fulfill, what kind of phenomena it is leaving out, and why. These questions serve to show what aspects of the object the definition is highlighting and what it is downplaying.

It is also shown that this approach to definitions does not lead to relativism, as there are still practical

criteria for evaluating some definitions as better than others. However, these criteria may shift, either as the practical needs change or as the context of discussion shifts. It is also entirely possible for games as a cultural category to change, leading to a need to change a definition.

The process of definition is not neutral, and always carries with itself questions of power. Experts and scholars define the terms and limits of how a discussion is carried out. That way, knowledge production is always also use of power.

The nominal definitions this article argues for are not completely unproblematic. They cannot be meaningfully said to reach an end, since the definition may always need to be revisited. They may also be hard to compare, since they cannot be evaluated outside the discourse they are used in.

Games are a sociocultural phenomenon and, therefore, they should be defined and redefined in a hermeneutic circle that enhances our understanding of them. This process of redefining will tell us valuable things about the discourse of games at any given moment. It will also highlight some aspects of games, some of which may not previously have been discussed, therefore providing more things for scholars to study. This may provide a way out of the established discourses that have become so self-evident that we are no longer able to see them clearly (Stenros and Waern, 2011). A similar conclusion is reached by Ellis (1973, p. 22) in discussing play:

The perplexing problem of how to define play will only be resolved by continually regenerating new definitions that fit current concepts of play behavior.

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ⁱ Whether this is important is another matter, and is related to what kind of epistemology is used. In this sense, epistemology is one's attitude towards questions of knowledge, truth and justification.

ⁱⁱ Again, whether essentialism is a problem depends on the epistemology to which one subscribes.

ⁱⁱⁱ This article is based on one reading of *Philosophical Investigations* (2009). However, there is considerable difference of opinion on the ways to read Wittgenstein (Stern, 2004). This article does not strive to be a definitive reading, but to use Wittgenstein's thoughts in a constructive manner.

^{iv} The numbers refer to chapters in *Philosophical Investigations*, which are numbered equivalently in all translations.

^v See also "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1976).

^{vi} Wittgenstein (2009) emphasizes that language-games are not limited to speaking about things. Our actions are also part of a form of life and, accordingly, language-games (see Bojin, 2008).

^{vii} This is slightly contradictory, since not all language-games share the same borders. Trying to portray the language-game of games (or game playing) would make a very messy picture.

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