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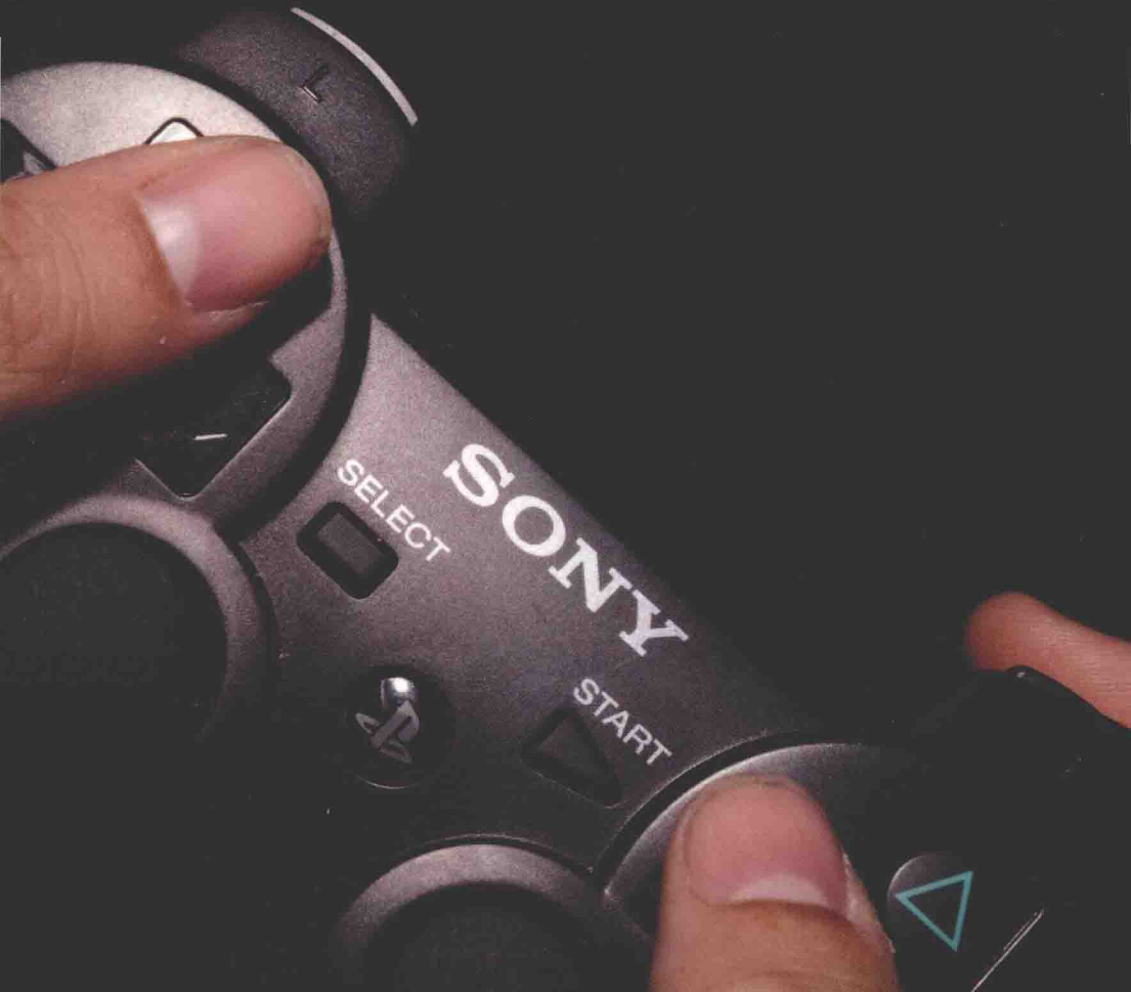
VIDEO GAMERS

Garry Crawford



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Video Gamers

Video gaming is economically, educationally, culturally, socially and theoretically important, and has, in a relatively short period of time, firmly cemented its place within contemporary life. It is fair to say, however, that most research to date has focused most specifically on either the video games themselves, or the direct engagement of gamers with a specific piece of game technology.

In contrast, *Video Gamers* is the first book to explicitly and comprehensively address how digital games are experienced and engaged with in the everyday lives, social networks and consumer patterns of those who play them. In doing so, the book provides a key introduction to the study of video gamers and the games they play, whilst also reflecting on the current debates and literatures surrounding the gaming practice.

Garry Crawford is a Senior Lecturer in Cultural Sociology at the University of Salford. He is the author or editor of a number of books, including *Consuming Sport* (2004), *Dictionary of Leisure Studies* (2009, with T. Blackshaw) and *Online Gaming in Context* (2011, edited with V.K. Gosling and B. Light).

For Victoria

Preface and acknowledgements

Video games have been part of my life since my early childhood, ever since I first played on my older brother's *Pong* console in the late 1970s. However, I cannot claim to have ever been either a particularly talented or dedicated gamer, especially as it becomes increasingly difficult to find the time to dedicate to playing video games. But as a sociologist what has always interested me is people – what people do, why they do it and what their actions mean to themselves and others. For me, people's passions and interests, whether in film, sport, video games or another cultural area, are what makes us all interesting and significant in our own specific ways. Hence, this book is less about video games, and certainly less about my particular gaming history and preferences, and more about people who play video games, their lives and their culture, and also the theoretical tools we might employ to better understand this.

This book draws and builds upon my developing thoughts and work on video games and video gamers. It therefore incorporates ideas developed in previous published work, both sole-authored and written with Ben Light, Jason Rutter and, in particular, Victoria K. Gosling. So I owe Ben, Jason and Victoria a big thank you, as well as an acknowledgement of their contributions to many of the ideas and work utilized in this book.

I would also like to thank those who have shared in my video gaming over the years, and sometimes still do so, and in particular Ian Groom, Toby Hill, Stephen Lees, Eamon Mason, Mark Mundy, Ian Peek, Daniel Seddon and Jason Storr, without whom my video gaming would have been a much poorer, and lonelier, experience. I would like to thank Paul Joyce for being Paul. I would like to thank Frans Mäyrä for permission to use, and also for supplying, the diagram in Chapter 5 (Figure 5.1); similarly, Russell Fenton for Figure 5.2. I thank also the organizers of, and contributors to, the annual 'Under the Mask' conference at the University of Bedfordshire, and in particular Steve Conway and Gavin Stewart, where over the last few years I have listened to many significant papers that have greatly advanced my understanding of video game culture.

As always, I would like to thank my (other, not already mentioned) family and friends for their continued support. Finally, Victoria Gosling deserves a second mention, not only for contributing ideas and comments throughout the entire process, but also for putting up with me. Thank you to you all.

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1 Studying video games

Introduction

This is a book about video gamers. That is to say, it focuses specifically on those who play video games, their practices and their culture, as well as the theoretical tools that can be used to understand associated social patterns. Though it is probably fair to say that video games were once a relatively under-researched area, certainly in comparison to other entertainment industries and forms, such as cinema and music, since the early to mid-2000s, interest in and research on video games and gamers have risen significantly. This is a welcome development, as it is evident that video games do matter, and not just to those who play them.

Though the origins of video gaming can be traced back to the 1950s, it was in the late 1970s and 1980s that it began to develop as a common leisure activity, largely as a result of the rapid rise in popularity of arcade-based games such as *Space Invaders* and home-based consoles and computers such as the Nintendo NES and Commodore 64. Today, video gaming is a major cultural industry whose economic worth rivals that of the film, music and book publishing industries, if not frequently out-performing all of these sectors. Major video game and console releases have become important consumer and cultural events, as witnessed by the release of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, which in November 2010 sold over 1.4 million copies on its first day of sales in the UK alone (Dring 2010). Research by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA 2010) suggests that 'more than two-thirds' (67 per cent) of all American households now 'play computer or video games' (see also Chapter 4).

However, the significance of video gaming cannot be captured in sales statistics and participation rates alone, as video games also matter in many other ways – educationally, socially, culturally and theoretically. For example, video games are proving an extremely useful way of engaging and educating children (see for example the Quest to Learn School in New York), provide a source of identity, conversation and friendship networks (discussed further in Chapter 8) and have also had a significant impact on other cultural forms, such as films (such as *eXistenZ* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* – see Chapter 8). Books, too (such as *The Beach* by Alex Garland), have begun to draw on the culture and even styles of video games (see du Sautoy 2010). Furthermore, video games provide patterns and models of use and engagement which can significantly advance our understanding of contemporary consumer patterns.

Video games are therefore an important and very contemporary area of study; however, it is fair to say that most research, to date, has focused specifically either on the video games themselves, such as their content or systems, or the direct engagement of a player, or players, with a specific piece of game technology. They are of course important areas of study, and are discussed in this book, but there has been significantly less focus on the importance of video gaming and its culture away from the actual video game machine and screen. There are, of course, some very good books that pay attention to the culture of video games in the course of their wider consideration of the genre, such as Dovey and Kennedy (2006) and Mäyrä (2008), to name but two, as well as a small number that look at video game culture more specifically, such as Newman (2008). However, this book aims to provide a more general overview and theoretical introduction to the study of video gamers. Though the book covers and draws on a wide range of theoretical tools and approaches, the main theoretical thrust is a sociological analysis of video game culture.

Though there are sociologists who have provided significant insight into video games and gamers, such as Mary Chayko (1993), Graeme Kirkpatrick (see, for example, 2004), Jason Rutter (see, for example, Rutter and Bryce 2006), T.L. Taylor (see, for example, 2003, 2006, 2007) and Holin Lin (see, for example, Lin and Sun 2008, 2011), to name but a few, the potential contribution of sociology to video game studies is still a significantly underdeveloped area. Also, the willingness of sociology, as a wider discipline, to engage with this developing area of study has been somewhat underwhelming. In particular, Albrechtslund (2008) sums up what appears to be a more general attitude towards the contribution of sociology to video game analysis, when she suggests that game studies as a discipline (a subject I turn to shortly) has been dominated by three key approaches: the theoretical/aesthetical, technological/design-oriented and the sociological/ethnographic. Her assumption appears to be that sociology is at least closely related to, if not interchangeable with, ethnography and distinct from a 'theoretical' approach to game analysis. That is to say, while sociology can, and does, provide some insight into the patterns and intricacies of video game culture, researchers tend most commonly to look elsewhere for their theoretical tools. Even when sociological theories and scholars are drawn on in game analysis, their disciplinary origins are often overlooked or confused. Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 454), for instance, who cite the work of Gary Alan Fine and Erving Goffman, describe both of these professors of sociology as 'psychologists'. Therefore, a second, related aim, and one which connects with my own disciplinary background, is to argue that sociology can offer important insights and theoretical tools for the study of video games and gamers. This is not necessarily to argue for a specific and distinct 'sociology of video games' as a separate subdiscipline, but rather to recognize more fully that sociology has a number of theoretical tools and research parallels which can prove useful in the analysis of video games, video gamers and video gamer cultures.

However, before we can begin to address further important and relevant questions, such as 'who plays video games?' and 'what do video gamers do?', a much more fundamental question must be 'what is a video game?' The answer is far

from simple, as before we even begin to consider how to define a video game, we must first agree as to whether this is in fact the most suitable term.

Terminology

Perron and Wolf (2009) argue that an inconsistency in terminology is one of the key challenges to the study of video games. Certainly, for what is now a fairly common and widespread leisure activity, there is surprisingly little agreement as to what term, or terms, should be used to describe games played on electronic game consoles, arcade machines, computers, mobile (cell) telephones and similar technologies. Probably the most commonly used term, both outside and within academia, is 'video games'. It is the term used by Nielsen *et al.* in their book *Understanding Video Games* (2008), by Newman in *Videogames* (2004) and *Playing with Videogames* (2008) and by Perron and Wolf in their two edited collections, *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2003) and *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (2009), to name but a few. It is primarily for this reason that this book adopts the term 'video games'; not necessarily because it is the most useful or best suited, but simply because it is probably the most recognizable and widely used term currently on offer.

However, it is important to recognize that this is by no means the only term available. For instance, 'computer games' is sometimes used instead of, or interchangeably, with 'video games'. For instance, Carr *et al.*'s 2006 book is entitled *Computer Games: text, narrative and play*. Though Carr *et al.*, and others, use the term 'computer games' to refer to all games played on consoles and computers, and in arcades and so forth, this term is sometimes used by others more specifically to refer only to games played on personal computers. Similarly, the term 'video games' is sometimes used just to refer to games played on game consoles or in game arcades. Some academics drop all prefixes, preferring just to use the solitary word 'games'; one such is Mäyrä in *An Introduction to Game Studies* (2008). This, as discussed below, is inspired by a 'ludic'- (play-) focused perspective, which suggests that video games can and should be considered as sharing fundamental features with other games.

To complicate matters more, the game industry tends to use its own terms and phrases, but, again, with no universal definition or term dominating. For instance, the USA's main video game trade organization is called the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), but before this (between 1998 and 2003) it was known as the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA).

In recent years, the term 'digital games' has been offered by some in academia as an alternative to the somewhat confusing and interchangeable use of terms such as computer and video games. This is the term adopted by the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), the leading academic organization in this field, which was founded in Finland in 2003, and, similarly, it is the term preferred by several authors, such as Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce in their edited collection, *Understanding Digital Games* (2006). However, this is just as problematic as any other term, since many non-computational games could equally be described as digital. 'Digital' simply refers to the delivery of information in binary; hence, a

game of peek-a-boo could be seen as digital, as it has at its core a binary code (the person can be seen or not seen). Furthermore, as the case of Esperanto has proved, it is very difficult to convince everybody to speak the same language, especially when there already exist more common and popular terms. So, at least for now, I am adopting the term 'video games' in this book. Now that we have a term, the next question is, how do we define it?

What is a video game?

Addressing the question of 'what is a video game?' is not as straightforward as many may first assume, and attempting to answer it has provided considerable debate and disagreement. As with most words and terms in common usage, the majority of people will at least have a basic understanding of what the term 'video games' means, and a universal dictionary can provide a rudimentary definition. For instance, the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* defines a video game as 'a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program'. However, this becomes *necessarily* more complex when we consider video games as an area of academic study. This is not merely a case of semantics, but rather the fact that how we define and categorize video games provides an important indication and direction as to how we study and understand them and also what falls within this particular domain of analysis (Nielsen *et al.* 2008).

Though authors have offered a sizeable list of ways of conceptualizing video games, for instance Jenkins (2005) suggests that video games could be understood as works of art, by far the two most dominant readings of video games are either as 'media texts' or 'games'.

Video games as media

The consideration of video games as media texts has sometimes been characterized as a narrative or narratological approach. In many respects, this is a somewhat misleading label. At its simplest, a narrative can be understood as comprising a 'discourse' and a 'story' where the story provides resources for the narrative but the form that each particular narrative takes will be shaped by discourses (Carr 2006a). However, many authors (such as Juul 2001) question whether video games possess the same kinds of narrative structures and elements as other media forms, such as those evident in many films and novels. The presence of narratives in video games, and therefore the relevance of narrative analyses to video game studies, is considered in more detail in Chapter 5. However, narratives are only one of the many forms of representational systems or elements present in media texts. These include, but are not limited to, ideologies, discourses, representations of gender, race, sexuality, and much more. The influential work of Janet H. Murray, and in particular *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the future of narrative in cyberspace* (1997), provides many of the sources for the labeling of an approach to video games informed by media and literary studies as 'narratological'. In this important book, Murray considers computers as a medium of representation and links this to discussions of other media, such as films, literature and television,

and in doing so, suggests that computer technologies expand the possibilities of storytelling. Murray's, and others', focus on narratives has resulted in many studies of video games that draw on literary, cultural or media theories being, somewhat inaccurately, labelled and critiqued as a 'narratological approach'. As we shall see in Chapter 5, narrative analysis is but one of many forms of content analysis, and content analysis is but one approach among many employed by literary, cultural or media scholars, many of which could be useful and applicable to the study of video games.

In particular, Nieborg and Hermes (2008) suggest that several of the questions that video game studies has wrestled with, and continues to do so, are similar to those also encountered in disciplines such as cultural, literary, or media studies. For instance, questions of interactivity, interpretation and representation are central to the analysis of both video games and other media forms. Nieborg and Hermes (2008), and others, therefore suggest that other disciplines may provide important parallels and tools in the analysis of video games, while, similarly, video games may cast new light on existing debates.

However, the assertion that video games are media, and hence that parallels can be drawn between these respective literatures, is challenged by some. In particular, this is illustrated by the provocative arguments of the game designer and writer Frank Lantz (2009). Lantz presents four key arguments. First, he suggests, 'media' refers specifically to contemporary electronic forms of communication, particularly those from the twentieth century onwards, while games are thousands of years old, and hence predate media. This is very closely linked to his second argument, which suggests that games are frequently seen as media, as they are associated with computers, but he argues that computers are merely the contemporary means by which a game is played. Third, Lantz argues that video games are not content that is *consumed*, but rather, like other games, such as soccer (football), video games are *played*. Fourth, Lantz suggests that video games are not primarily message carriers. That is not to say that video games do not have meaning, but Lantz argues that unlike forms of media, games are not a process of communication between a sender and receiver, but rather meaning in video games is created though the active participation of the gamer.

There are, however, a number of fundamental weaknesses to these arguments. First, turning to Lantz's (2009) argument that 'media' refers specifically to contemporary electronic forms of communication. The word 'media' is simply the plural of 'medium', and hence means midway, linking or communicative points. Most people would accept that newspapers are media whose origins can be found in 'popular prints' that became fashionable in Europe from the fifteenth century onwards (Blackshaw and Crawford 2009), but all forms of language, whether written, spoken or pictorial, are media, all of which significantly predate the twentieth century (Long 2009).

This relates also to Lantz's second argument, which suggests that computers are merely a contemporary form of a much more ancient practice of gaming. This argument I find less contentious, as it is evident that video games do share many continuities and similarities with non-computational games. However, as discussed in the following section of this chapter (see below), this does not mean

that video and non-computational games are necessarily the same, and it is important to look for differences as well as continuities here.

Third, Lantz argues that video games are games that are played and not media that are consumed. However, this presents a very limited understanding of what consumption is. The act of consumption has frequently, and long before Lantz wrote, been dismissed as a passive, even destructive and hence largely an uninteresting endpoint to processes of production. Raymond Williams (1976) alerts us to the etymology of the words 'consume', 'consumption' and 'consumer', which refer to processes of destruction and wasting away, such as something being consumed by fire or a person suffering from a consuming disease, like tuberculosis. Hence, while production is understood as the process of creation, consumption is perceived simply as an endpoint, reception or destruction. It is also the case that 'consumption' is not a term usually associated with new technological forms, such as the Internet and video games. Consumption is frequently seen as a passive act that 'belongs to the "bad" pre-digital media' (Lister *et al.* 2009: 248), while new technology users are seen as engaging in participatory acts, such as surfing, browsing and gaming.

However, the sociology of consumption teaches us that consumer practices need to be seen as creative processes and part of a cyclical relationship. In particular, Lury (1996: 1) argues that consumption needs to be understood as part of a wider 'material culture'. 'Material culture' is the term given to the study of 'person–thing' relationships; such as the relations between a person and a video game console or piece of software. That is to say, the study of material culture is the study of objects and how they are used. Lury, following Warde (1990, 1992), suggests that consumption, rather than being the outcome and antithesis of production, needs to be understood as a constituent part of a continuing process and cycle of various forms of both production and consumption. As Lury (1996: 3) writes:

> The identification of consumer culture as a specific form of material culture helps ensure that it is studied in relation to interlinking *cycles* of production and consumption or reappropriation. The consumption that is referenced via consumer culture can, through the lens of material culture, be seen as conversion, or, more precisely, 'the manner in which people convert things to ends of their own' (Strathern 1994: p. x).

Lury (1996) suggests that consumer objects should be seen to have a social life of their own. In this view, consumer goods will have changing and different meanings throughout their lifespan, depending on who is viewing or using them and in what context they are located. People will use consumer goods in different ways and they will have different meanings invested in them by different people. It is the consumer who gives a product meaning and use, and therefore this needs to be understood as a process of production. However, Lantz, as well as numerous others, such as Frasca (2003), would argue that there are still fundamental differences between the activities of players of a video game and the consumers of a television show or book. The main line of argument here is that video gamers engage with a dynamic and interactive game system, while media audiences

consume static texts. The question of interactivity is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5; however, it is my assertion that the interactive potential of video games is often greatly overestimated, while audiences of media forms such as films and literature are too readily dismissed as passive. This is not to say that playing a video game and reading a book are necessarily the same, as of course they are not, but merely that the differences here have been somewhat exaggerated in an attempt to distance video game scholarship from disciplines such as cultural, literary and media studies.

Fourth is Lantz's (2009) argument that video games are not necessarily conveyors of messages. This argument is particularly weak, for semiotics teaches us that all 'signs', such as a word or image, carry with them meaning, whether it is intended or not – see Chapter 5 for a consideration of semiotics. All games, video or otherwise, convey varying levels of discourse, meaning and message. As Long (2009) clearly argues:

> Philosophically speaking, all it takes to disprove Lantz's implied argument that 'Games are not media because games do not subscribe to the message model of meaning' is trotting out *one* game that *does* subscribe to the message model of meaning, and as counter-evidence I'd like to introduce as exhibit A every *Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest* and other delightfully story-centric role-playing game ever released. As long as *one* game *does* subscribe to the message model, then it disproves Lantz's argument – and you'd better believe that at least one game out there most certainly does.

Video games do carry messages. They can be quite simple: in *Tetris* the gamer is shown that if they do not stack the falling shapes quickly enough into a tessellation then they will lose the game – this is a message. However, messages can be far more complex and multilayered. For example, 'success' in *The Sims* is normally seen in the player acquiring more and better household items, this therefore carries a simple (denotative) meaning of the need to acquire items, but possibly a deeper (connotative) meaning about the importance of capitalist accumulation (see Chapter 5).

Authors such as Lantz (2009) and Frasca (2003), as well as numerous others including Aarseth (1997), Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and Juul (2005), to name but a few, suggest that the most profitable way of understanding and analysing video games is to consider them first and foremost as games. However, for most writers, unlike Lantz, this does not necessarily preclude also discussing video games as media. For instance, Jesper Juul (2005), one of the key advocates of a game-focused (or ludological) approach to video game analysis, seems comfortable referring to video games as media, and, as discussed in Chapter 5, most contemporary writers, such as Mäyrä (2008), seek to define video games as involving play and representational, as well as social, elements. However, most ludologists argue, what fundamentally distinguishes video games from other media texts, like books, films and television, is that video games are game systems that are played, and it is this which renders their study particularly significant.

Video games as games

A play-focused, or ludological, approach argues that video games are fundamentally similar to, if not the same as, any other game. As game designer and Carnegie Mellon University professor Jesse Schell stated in interview, 'a game is a game is a game' (Schwartz 2003). Furthermore, Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 86) argue, 'computer hardware and software are merely the materials of which the game is composed', and, they add, 'digital games are systems, just like every other game'. Following such lines of argument, ludologists have often been less concerned with specifically defining what a video game is, but rather seeking to incorporate them into a wider definition and discussion of games more generally. This is particularly evident in the work of Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and Juul (2005).

Juul (2005: 23) seeks to define and understand games, including video games, through his development of what he terms the 'classic game model'. That is to say: 'the model is *classic* in the sense that it is the way games have *traditionally* been constructed … a model that applies to at least a 5,000-year history of games' (Juul 2005: 23, original emphasis). In seeking to understand and define this classic game model, Juul draws on and interrogates seven definitions of games and play (the section on theories of play in Chapter 2, below), ranging from the work of Huizinga ([1938] 1949) to Caillois (1962), to more contemporary definitions of games, which were specifically created to incorporate video games within their parameters, such as Chris Crawford (1984) and Salen and Zimmerman (2004). Juul analyses these definitions, and concludes that 'classic' games can be understood to share six common features. These he categorizes as:

1 *Rules*: games are rule-bound.
2 *Variable, quantifiable outcomes*: games have variable, quantified outcomes.
3 *Valorization of outcomes*: the different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values, some positive and some negative.
4 *Player effort*: The player exerts effort in order to influence the outcomes (games are challenging).
5 *Player attached to outcomes*: the player is emotionally attached to the outcome of the game in the sense that a player will be a winner and 'happy' in case of a positive outcome, but a loser and 'unhappy' in case of a negative outcome.
6 *Negotiable consequences*: the same game (set of rules) can be played with or without real-life consequences.

Juul 2005: 36

These six features Juul summarizes into a general definition of games: 'a game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable' (Juul 2005: 36).

This is generally a well-thought-through and potentially useful definition of some of the key characteristics of a game. But it is not without its weaknesses