



Games

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Though there is no universally accepted definition for what constitutes a 'game', games are typically defined as goal-oriented, rules-based activities closely associated with the notion of 'play'. In anthropology, though seldom the primary focus of a monograph, games can serve as a window into the broader lives and valuations of their players. More practically, they can also be excellent vehicles for conducting participant-observation and building rapport with interlocutors. The three sections of this entry seek to provide a general overview of anthropological insights into the world of games. The first section covers attempts to define games as a concept. The second section asks what makes games meaningful. The third section examines anthropological approaches to the most recent major development in the world of games: the rise of digital games.

Games as a concept

The arenas that mark archaeological sites—like The Great Ballcourt of Chichen Itza or the Colosseum of Rome—and board games whose lineage can be traced back thousands of years—like Senet, Go, Mancala, and backgammon—are testaments to games' longstanding place in human [history](#). Games can also have strong geographic linkages. Global spectacles like the Olympic Games and World Cup draw participants and billions of spectators from most of the world's nations. Some games, like cricket throughout much of the British Commonwealth, can make manifest linkages between distant nations. Other games, like the Sri Lankan board game Carrom or the Finnish ball game Pesäpallo, are played primarily within the borders of particular nation-states. Games are played by people of different ages and walks of life: from hopscotch in the schoolyard to bridge in retirement homes, and from improvised football to exclusive polo.

Although games are widespread and familiar to many of the world's peoples, providing a compelling, overarching definition for what constitutes 'a game' has proved difficult. Rules are widely seen as an important component of games (e.g. Huizinga 1949; Caillois 1961; Suits 1967; Avedon & Sutton-Smith 1981; Meier 1995; Suits 1995; Salen & Zimmerman 2003). But of course, rules govern many aspects of human life and are not restricted to games alone. What ostensibly sets the rules of a game apart from other rules-based activities is not just the special reasons for which these rules are constructed, but also the players' attitude toward those rules. As Bernard Suits, who spent much of his career working on a universal definition of games, put it:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means

permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude] (2005: 54-5).

Suits connects his definition of games to a particular way of playing them (i.e. 'the lusory attitude'). He does not, for example, consider those who cheat to be adopting a lusory attitude and thus does not consider them to be playing the game (2005: 25). Yet, as Angela Schneider points out, games seldom play out so neatly in practice: some players might play by the rules, but others will not; some players will be invested in the game, but others might not be (2001). Nonetheless, for Schneider, a game like rugby is still a game even if the motivations for playing and adherence to the rules differ from player to player. When it comes to adhering to a game's rules, Schneider contends '[e]thically we should of course, but logically we needn't' (2001: 158). As we shall see in more detail throughout this entry, the diverse reasons people have for playing games and the different ways in which they go about negotiating a game's rules are where games can take on their most important meaning.

Anthropologists have offered many insightful analyses of the extent of the relationships between games and play. For example, David Graeber has theorised that play is unpredictable, whereas games are clearly defined by rules (Graeber 2015). For Graeber, what is special about a game's rules vis-à-vis the rules of propriety in regular life is that the rules of a game are easily discernible at any given moment, and thus present a 'utopia of rules'. Thomas Malaby, one of the most prominent anthropologists writing on the subject of games and play, has posited his own definition of games—'[a] game is a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes' (2007: 96)—and has praised efforts to

decouple playful experience from a determinate relationship with games, just as scholars of ritual (many of them anthropologists) have recognized ritual as a cultural form irrespective of whether it brings about religious experience (2009a: 212).

Malaby's 'decoupling' stance is not intended as an outright separation of games and play, but rather, akin to the point made by Schneider, is meant to point out that the two concepts need not necessarily go hand in hand. The strength of Malaby's approach is that it leaves the door open for interchange between anthropological work on games and anthropological work on play—such as that of Gregory Bateson (1987)—without fusing them into the same category.

Indeed, anthropological work on games and play, respectively, has greatly helped to refine understandings of games. For example, Roger Caillois, one of the twentieth century's best-known theorists of games and play, emphasised the role of games as playful activities largely outside the sphere of economic productivity. As he put it, '[a]t the end of the game, all can and must start over at the same point. Nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued' (1961: 5). However,

subsequent anthropological work on play, like that of David Lancy amongst the Kpelle—who, Lancy found, see [work](#) and play not as mutually exclusive but as components of all human endeavours—has compellingly questioned a hard work/play binary (1980). Meanwhile, [ethnographic](#) work on certain games, like T.L. Taylor's account of [professional](#) digital games players (2012), shows that there are most definitely games in which capital is accrued and all does not start over at the same point. It is in no small part because of these anthropological efforts that hard divisions like Caillois' between games and work have now largely been abandoned by theorists of games and play. As Jesper Juul, a leading scholar within the relatively new field of games studies, explains, 'both are clearly not perfect boundaries, but rather fuzzy areas under constant negotiation' (2003: 4).

Anthropologists have compellingly argued that games and play are distinct, if often related, concepts. However, many who read about games in the English language will likely find this position discordant with the existence of games and play as interrelated words. As Johan Huizinga—a scholar to whose seminal work *Homo ludens* nearly all subsequent theorists of games and play make reference—noted, this connection seems inexorable: one plays a game (1949: 37). How might we reconcile these two facts? While Huizinga claims that 'you do not "do" a game as you "do" or "go" fishing, or hunting [...] you "play" it' (1949: 37), it might actually be useful to think of the English term 'to play a game' in the sense of how one does a game (just as one sings a song or drives a car) in order to better distinguish between various ways in which people approach games. Thus one might play a game playfully—or angrily, or reluctantly—just as one might drive a car playfully, or angrily, or reluctantly.

Similarly, it can at times be useful to take a step back from efforts to precisely define games, and instead use a broader conceptualization of what games are. One prominent example of such a move comes from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said of the various types of games:

...we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way—And I shall say: 'games' form a family (1986: 31-2).

Wittgenstein by no means had the last word on games, a fact to which the subsequent accounts of Caillois, Suits, and others is testament. However, his description accords well with the implicit approach of most anthropologists to games, whose preoccupation—like when handling most subjects—is less with providing a universally tenable definition of games, and more with discerning what is meaningful about the particular games in which their interlocutors partake.

Indeed, some of the most insightful discussions of games within anthropology emerge when particular games are described in contradistinction to related themes. For example, Arjun Appadurai has examined the enduring popularity of cricket in [postcolonial](#) India as an example of decolonization being a 'dialogue with the colonial past' rather than a 'dismantling of colonial habits and modes of life' (Appadurai 1995). Roberte Hamayon, Harry Walker, and Ted Leyenaar have all shown how games can both impact and reflect [relations](#) between Indigenous peoples and the state (Leyenaar 1992; Walker 2013; Hamayon 2016). Leyenaar, for example, studied the ancient Mesoamerican ball game Ulama in contemporary Mexico and found that, like many of the Indigenous peoples who created and developed the game, Ulama had been pushed to the margins of the Mexican state. Victor Turner and others have made productive comparisons between ritual and games—for Turner, for example, both are notable for how they place their participants (and potential observers) in a transitional state that falls outside normal life (Turner 1982; Seligman et al. 2008). Ellen Oxfeld has studied Mahjong amongst Chinese entrepreneurs in Calcutta and found the nature of the game, with its risks and rewards, similar to the nature of her interlocutors' business endeavours (Oxfeld 1993). Loïc Wacquant has discussed boxing and [race](#) in Chicago's Southside neighbourhood, where for his interlocutors the order of a boxer's regimen stood as a counterpart to the disorder many experienced in their lives outside the gym (Wacquant 2004). And Robertson Allen, T.J. Cornell, and T.B. Allen have examined the relationships between war and games – including those specifically made to acclimatise [citizens](#) to the military (Cornell & Allen 2002; Allen 2017).

This is not to say that in such accounts games are relegated to mere foils for understanding more important concepts; just as games can help to hone our understandings of other phenomena, these phenomena can help to hone our understanding of games. Such a fact has been famously displayed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his comparison of games and ritual:

[a]ll games are defined by a set of rules which in practice allow the playing of any number of matches. Ritual, which is also 'played', is on the other hand, like a favoured instance of a game, remembered from among the possible ones because it is the only one which results in a particular type of equilibrium between the two sides. The transposition is readily seen in the case of the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea who have learnt football but who will play, several days running, as many matches as are necessary for both sides to reach the same score (1962: 20).

What makes games meaningful?

Both the games an anthropologist chooses to focus on and what she or he reads into them can have significant implications. It goes without saying that not all games are equally meaningful, and one of the tasks facing anthropologists and others interested in analyzing games is figuring out how to parse the myriad varieties of games often on display. For example, Huizinga contended that '[s]olitary play is productive of culture only in a limited degree' (1949: 47) and that it is the 'play-community' formed

between players that gives games their social importance (1949: 17-8). Though much of Huizinga's work has been critiqued by subsequent scholars of games, almost all of them focus on multiplayer games as sources for meaningful play—a point which takes on new importance with the rise of digital games, as we shall see in the next section. Monetary stakes are another way in which games can be meaningful to their players. Indeed, much of the anthropological literature on games focuses on those in which [money](#) is at stake (see, for example, the entry on [gambling](#) in this encyclopedia). Nonetheless, anthropologists have compellingly argued that money alone is seldom what makes games meaningful.

Likely the most famous such example, and perhaps the best-known account of a game within anthropology, comes from Clifford Geertz's account of the Balinese cockfight. In Geertz's analysis, the cockfight is not a mere spectacle upon which the Balinese wager vast sums of money, but a process through which 'the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society's temper at the same time' (1973: 451). Framed as such, the cockfight is meaningful for how it perpetuates the traditions and valuations of the past. Moreover, Geertz's presence at one particular unsanctioned cockfight meant that he was also present for the police action which broke it up: by fleeing with the rest of the participants and hiding out alongside some of them, he finally established a convivial rapport with his interlocutors (1973: 415-6). While the fame of Geertz's rendition of the cockfight might make it seem like it was the only game in town, Geertz's own account shows otherwise. As he notes, in his field site there was a 'sociomoral hierarchy' of players and games:

At most cockfights there are, around the very edges of the cockfight area, a large number of mindless, sheer-chance type gambling games (roulette, dice throw, coin-spin, pea-under-the shell) operated by concessionaires. Only women, children, adolescents, and various other sorts of people who do not (or not yet) fight cocks—the extremely poor, the socially despised, the personally idiosyncratic—play at these games, at, of course, penny ante levels. Cockfighting men would be ashamed to go anywhere near them (1973: 435).

Geertz's decision to focus on the cockfight gave us an arresting view into his field site. But one must wonder whether these other games were as meaningless as he made them out to be, or whether a closer look at them might have revealed a different type of [ethnography](#) more sensitive to the daily lives and valuations of Balinese who were not elite men. Indeed, [children's](#) games have featured as a specific point of focus in other ethnographic accounts, from Stewart Culin's writings about cat's cradle amongst North American indigenous peoples (1907: 761-80), to Mizuko Ito's work on digital games amongst Japanese and American schoolchildren (2009).

Newer anthropological accounts of games tend to criticise approaches like Geertz's. Malaby, for example, critiques Geertz's analysis of the cockfight because

[t]his treatment of a game...trades one kind of reductionism for another. In his zeal to trump

whatever material stakes were in play with the different stakes of meaning-making, Geertz eliminated from consideration any consequence beyond the affirmation of meaning. On his view, games become static appraisals of an unchanging social order; and thereby one element that is vital for any understanding of the experience of play is lost. That element is the indeterminacy of games, and the way in which, by being indeterminate in their outcomes, they encapsulate (albeit in a contrived fashion) the open-endedness of everyday life (2009a: 207, 208)

The structure of Malaby's argument is reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss' distinction between ritual and games. In this case, Geertz appears to have inverted game and ritual by interpreting the cockfight 'like a favoured instance of a game' (i.e. Lévi-Strauss' ritual) rather than as an actual game which might have different outcomes from one instance to the next. This, however, begs the question of whether the Balinese cockfight is really best considered a game, a ritual, or some combination of the two.

It is worth noting the work of Anthony Pickles for how it manages to highlight both the perpetuation of tradition found in accounts like Geertz's, and the potential for changes to social order found in accounts like Malaby's. Pickles offers a fascinating account of two card-based gambling games in Goroka, Papua New Guinea. One game, called *kwin* (queen), is strategic and slow-paced, slow to adopt changes in rules, and popular amongst older players, while the other game, called *bom* (bomb), is faster-paced, part of a quickly changing genre of games, and popular amongst younger players (Pickles 2014). Pickles' dual focus allows us to see in *kwin* one game that is akin to Geertz's interpretation of the cockfight, and in *bom* another which has more in common with newer anthropological interest in the negotiability of games. Crucially, meaning here is found not just in these respective games and what they stand for, but in the tension between them and their respective players—a point worth bearing in mind for anthropologists who encounter several distinct, prominent games in one field site.

Pickles' account of *bom* shows us how new rules and new games can be created in a relatively short period of time. But it is also worth remembering Schneider's aforementioned point that, while games may have a set of rules, these are not always universally and perfectly adhered to. Rather, rules are constantly susceptible to being undermined or renegotiated by their players, either inadvertently, as in a new player making an error out of ignorance, or purposefully, as in cases of cheating (Consalvo 2005, 2007, 2009). This process is not the corruption of games so much as it is an essential and important part of them. In other words, games are not just meaningful for the potential actions that their rules dictate, but for how players choose to go about adjudicating disputes about those rules. For example, Linda Hughes, studying American schoolgirls who play the ball game *foursquare*, finds that the game serves not simply as a playful pastime for the children, but also helps them to learn lifelong skills like problem solving and teamwork (1991, 1999). Indeed, in many games, adjudication of the rules is handled by the players themselves; think, for example, of playing a board game with friends.

When the [financial](#) or physical stakes of a game rise (and especially when both happen at once), very often adjudication shifts from the players themselves to a third party responsible for ensuring both safety and fairness. Think of the referees in many games typically referred to as '[sports](#)', such as football or boxing, or the presence of dealers in casinos. As Geertz notes, the cockfight too has its 'umpire (saja komong; djuru kembar)...[whose] authority is absolute' (1973: 423, 424). The presence of a third-party adjudicator does not necessarily mean that a game is more meaningful than a game adjudicated by its players, but it can have important implications. For example, compare two different instances of the game football: one is a [professional](#) match with a referee, the other is a pickup match played in a public park. In professional football, the practice of 'simulation' or 'diving' is commonplace. It involves players exaggerating or outright feigning the effects of physical contact from opposing players in the hopes that the referee will be fooled and call a foul against the opposing team. In pickup football, where players determine fouls communally, this practice is far less prevalent. Both instances are technically the same game, sharing football's rules and objectives, but nonetheless operate quite differently in practice.

As we can see from the works discussed in this section, determining what makes games meaningful is a tricky endeavour contingent upon many factors. One must consider what constitutes the particular game being discussed, how that game relates (or does not relate) to other games played within a particular field site, and the different ways in which players go about negotiating particular instances of gameplay.

New frontiers: the rise of digital games

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed one of the most significant changes in the history of games: the rise of digital games, colloquially referred to as 'video games'. Unlike their analogue counterparts, digital games are written in code, played on computers or consoles, and viewed on monitors or television screens. Their rise to prominence—concomitant with the profusion of ever more affordable, portable, and powerful home electronics—has brought with it numerous different types of digital games. These run the gamut from digital forms of games like chess and billiards, to 'Massively multiplayer online roleplaying games' (MMORPGs), which consist of vast spaces in which thousands of players simultaneously navigate their respective avatars. This profusion of new games has rejuvenated an interest in efforts to define 'games' (Juul 2003), and has given rise to the new discipline of games studies (Aarseth 2001; Jenkins 2004; Boellstorff 2006). Perhaps predictably, many analyses of digital games bemoan the potential influence of their violent or sexual content (Grossman & DeGaetano 1999; Anderson & Dill 2000; Breyer 2011)—in so doing repeating the same concern that faces nearly all new and popular entertainment media (McLuhan 1964: 314; Galloway 2006: xii).

That being said, the rise of [digital technology](#) represents a potentially fundamental shift in the world of games. Namely, one of the most important characteristics of digital games vis-à-vis their analogue counterparts is how they change spatial relations. While some analogue games are carried out by

distance—such as correspondence chess—the vast majority are conducted with the participants in close proximity. Conversely, while some digital games are played with one's teammates and/or opponents nearby—such as playing 'splitscreen' (multiple people playing a digital game on the same television or computer monitor) at [home](#) or in a group at an internet café—most multiplayer digital games involve people playing alone from their homes while [sharing](#) digital space with their peers.

This fact problematises distinctions like Huizinga's between solitary and communal games, for players might be in one sense solitary—playing a game alone in their rooms—but at the same time be connected to other players through the Internet and in the game itself. This fact can perhaps help to explain some anthropologists' findings on digital games. For example, Nicholas Long notes that the players and producers of the digital game Ultima Online often make note of amazing 'community' within the game, but that Long himself found the [relations](#) between players to be far more ephemeral and individualistic (Long 2012). Conversely, Celia Pearce notes how players of one particular game stuck together as a social group even after the game itself had been discontinued (Pearce 2006, 2007, 2010).

Another key facet of digital games is their role as goods. They are a multibillion dollar industry, and anthropologists have turned their attention to not just their players but their producers (Malaby 2009b). The role of gender can loom particularly large, as some digital games are primarily marketed to and played by men, whereas others are primarily marketed to and played by women (Mason 2013). Real-world gender inequities can manifest in digital games. For example, Julian Dibbell found that players whose avatars were women were often subjected to sexual harassment, whereas the same was not true for players whose avatars were men (Dibbell 1993). [Race](#) can play a similar role to gender in terms of both marketability and gameplay, as some have shown in games where racial stereotypes are part of a game's content (Leonard 2003), and others have highlighted in games where players themselves use real-world racial slurs (Shanahan 2004).

The structure of digital games also raises questions about how best to approach them methodologically. There have been two primary ways in which anthropologists have gone about doing so. The first method conceptualises these games as 'virtual worlds' (Pearce 2006; Nardi & Harris 2006; Taylor 2006; Pearce 2007; Boellstorff 2008; Pearce 2010; Nardi 2010; Long 2012). Treating the space within these games in a similar way to a physical field site, these scholars conduct long-term participant-observation within them by registering accounts, creating avatars, and interacting with other players in the virtual world. In this vein, the title of Boellstorff's book *Coming of age in Second Life*—Second Life being the virtual world in which he conducted his fieldwork—is purposefully designed to emphasise a similarity with Margaret Meade's classic *Coming of age in Samoa* (1928). This approach gives us an in-depth view of what playing these games looks like in action and the type of interrelationships that it involves—though it is worth noting that, perhaps because of this approach's emphasis on virtual worlds as a 'space', some who adopt it question these games' status as 'games' at all (Boellstorff 2008: 22).

The second approach more pointedly engages with digital games from the vantage of the physical world, in so doing taking a page from the book of anthropologists who emphasise the local importance of various forms of media, such as television (Abu-Lughod 2005), radio (Englund 2011), and blogs (Doostdar 2004). Daniel Miller has studied Facebook use amongst Trinidadians, and he includes in his book a chapter on the Facebook game FarmVille. Articulating his methodological approach toward one interlocutor, Miller notes that he would spend 'hours looking over his shoulder as he does Facebook' for a view into this person's online life (Miller 2011: 78). Similarly, Florence Chee has examined Korean gamer culture from within internet cafes (2005), and Mizuko Ito has studied the use of educational games by Japanese and American [children](#) in classroom and home settings (2009). Alex Golub has used his own experience with the MMORPG World of Warcraft to explicitly critique virtual worlds scholars for underemphasising important extra-game spaces, such as online message boards and real-world gatherings (Golub 2010).

While proponents of each respective approach can sometimes clash, both methods have their strengths when applied to specific genres of digital games. For example, it is unsurprising that the majority of virtual worlds work is conducted within MMORPGs like World of Warcraft. These games most closely resemble the physical world in the sense that players control an avatar within a broader game world, and often contain robust economies where significant amounts of real [money](#) changes hands (Castranova 2001). Meanwhile, many other digital games, such as those that require no Internet connection, single-player games, those in which players are disembodied manipulators of many variables (such as Real-time Strategy Games), or those where players are under the finite time constraints of individual matches, are often only practically observable from a physically in-situ vantage. Nor are the approaches inherently mutually exclusive. For example, virtual worlds scholars have more recently and explicitly acknowledged the need to at least be open to physical aspects of games when they arise (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 33, 34).

A final point to make about digital games has to do with adjudication and negotiability. The previous section noted the distinction between games that are adjudicated by their players and those games which are adjudicated by a third party referee. Many digital games present a third form of adjudication: the code itself. For example, the previous section took the example of football, and noted the difference between 'diving' in a match adjudicated by players and a match adjudicated by a referee. In a digital game where football is depicted, such as Electronic Arts' popular FIFA series, diving is simply not an option coded into the game. Even if it were, unless the game also added human referees, it would involve trying to press the 'dive' button at the right time and hoping that the computer code would confirm it, rather than the process of tricking a human referee or negotiating with human teammates and opponents. When the ball goes out of bounds in FIFA, there is no arguing with the linesman or quibbling with teammates: the code simply confirms it. The implications of this third type of adjudication found within digital games are still not fully understood, but it may help to explain the ephemerality of social relations some anthropologists have found characteristic of certain digital games (see Watson 2015).

Conclusion

This entry has provided an overview of anthropological work on games. It has underscored key themes and developments in the world of games, from varying conceptualizations of what a game is, to how games are meaningful to their players, to the rise of digital games.

Games will continue to be important sources of anthropological theorization not just because new games are being crafted every day, as the advent of digital games makes clear, nor just because instances of games have unpredictable outcomes, as Malaby's work reminds us, but also because new connections between games and other important phenomena can always be uncovered. As is often the case with ethnographic work, people engaging in a seemingly innocuous activity like a casual game can offer unexpected vantages onto significant issues. Like with most interesting themes, this means that a discussion about games will never be complete. Readers are therefore encouraged to take a closer look at games in both their own field sites and daily lives. Who knows just what you might find...

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