

GAMES AS DESIGN OF ACTIONS

An Attempt to Redefine Games and Play

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Kyoto Game Conference
8 March 2014

SELF-INTRODUCTION

I'm Shinji MATSUNAGA, a doctoral student majoring in *aesthetics and philosophy of art* at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts.

My study focuses on *signification* in videogames such as interrelations between game mechanics and representation or narrative.

INTRODUCTION

It's obvious that games involve *actions* in essence. However, surprisingly, there is no approach that tries to define games in terms of actions.

My idea is that we can reveal games' essential features by (1) taking games as *a kind of design of actions*, and then (2) seeking *what distinguishes* games from other kinds of design of actions.

WHAT'S DESIGN OF ACTIONS?

To design people's actions is to either *regulate existing actions* or *create new actions*.

(inspired from J. Searle's concepts of *regulative* and *constitutional* rules)

- Buildings regulate actions physically.
- Norms or the law regulate actions mentally.
- Instruments or devices enable us to perform new physical actions.
- Social institutions or ritual define and thereby constitute new social actions.
- Of course, *games do all these*.

HOW ARE ACTIONS DESIGNED?

Speaking roughly, an action consists of:

- (1) its *purpose*
- (2) a set of possible *means* to it
- (3) the *agent's understanding* of the means

You can design people's actions by *artificially constructing or operating some or all of these*.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES TO GAMES?

What features distinguish games from other kinds of design of actions?

“How” theories

Games are different from others in *how (or by what)* they design people’s actions.

“What” theories

Games are different from others in *what kind of actions* they generate.

“HOW” THEORIES

“How” theories may claim:

- Games design actions *based on rules*.
- The goal and means are *defined strictly*.
- Outcomes of actions are *quantifiable*.
- Games have *win or lose* as the consequence.

But “how” theories are unsatisfying at all because other kinds than games (stock trading, exams, trials, etc.) also have these features.

“WHAT” THEORIES

“What” theorists ask “*what kind of actions* do games produce?”

One very simple but plausible answer is:

“It’s the action of *play* or at least *game-playing*.”

EXTRINSIC vs. INTRINSIC

But what's "play" or "game-playing"?

Extrinsic approaches

define play *in relation to something else*.

Intrinsic approaches

define play *in virtue of its own properties*.

Both are not mutually excluded. In fact, many theorists combine them to define play or games.

EXTRINSIC APPROACHES:

Separation from reality

Classic definitions have emphasized a feature as distinctive to games or play: *separation from reality or interests in ordinary life*.

- “Disinterestedness” (J. Huizinga)
- “Unproductive” (R. Caillois)
- “Safety” (Ch. Crawford)
- “Magic circle” (K. Salen & E. Zimmerman)
- “Negotiable consequence” (J. Juul)

“WHAT DO YOU DO IT FOR?”

According to the philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe, actions in general are such that:

If you are asked “*What* do you do it *for*?”, you can answer the *reason* you do it.

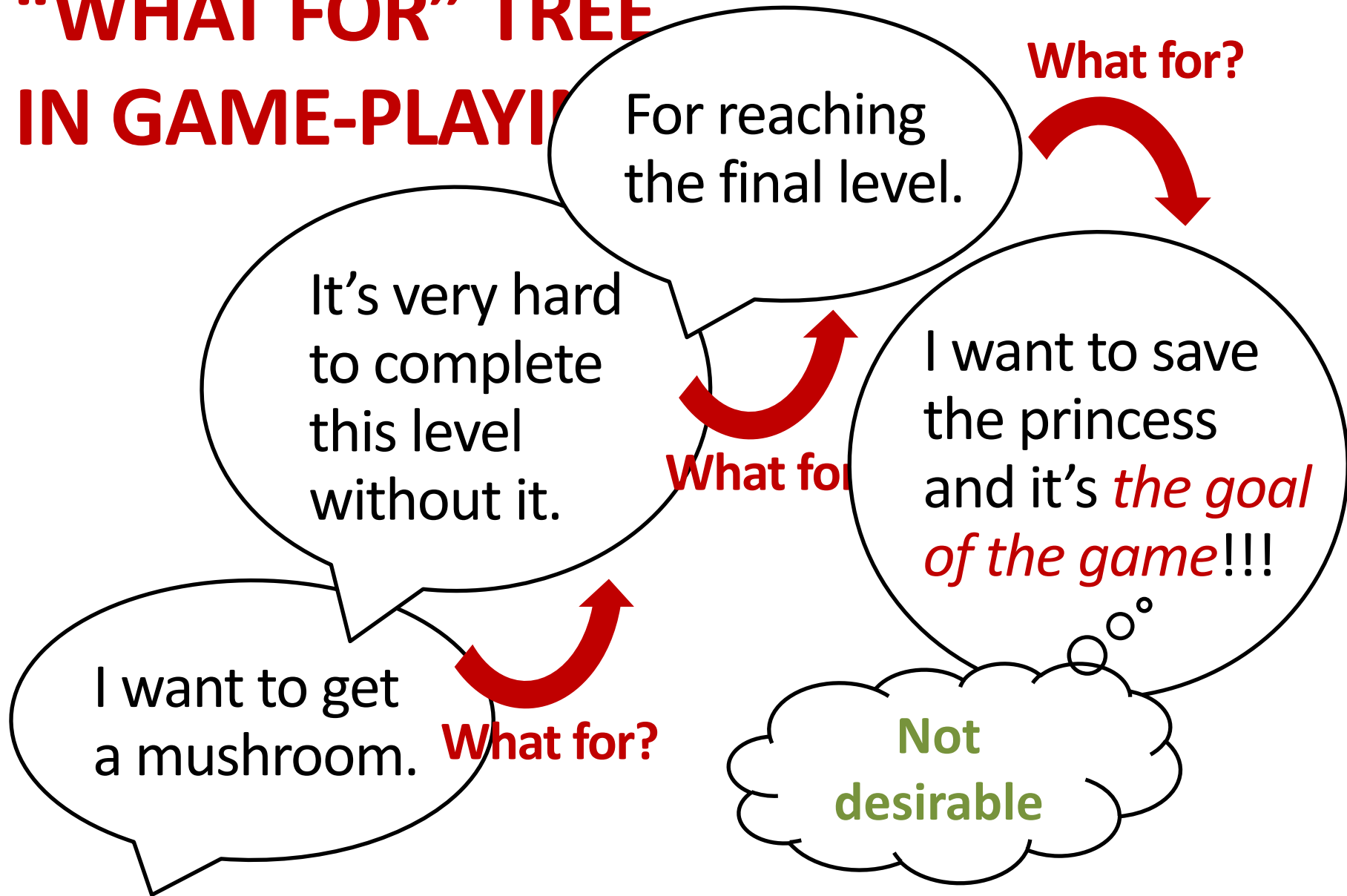
In case of ordinary actions, if such questions and answers proceed, you will end in the reason that itself *characterizes desirability*.

(Anscombe, *Intention*, §37)

“WHAT FOR” TREE IN ORDINARY ACTIONS



“WHAT FOR” TREE IN GAME-PLAYING



DESIRABILITY TEST

Test 1

If you push this button, you will get that cloth.
Do you want to push the button?

Test 2

If you push this button, you will win the game.
Do you want to push the button?

BUT “BECAUSE IT’S INTERESTING!”

This is certainly a desirability-characterization.

But it’s *not* the reason why you do the game-playing actions (such as “getting a mushroom”).

It’s the reason why you *participate* the game (i.e. why you *start* or *continue* playing the game).

PLAY AS THE AUTOTELIC ACTIONS

Thus, extrinsic approaches suggest that:

- Game-playing actions are such that *not their purpose but means to it* is desirable.
- Game's goal is only for bringing its means.
- So to speak, *its purpose is the means* and *its means are the purpose*.

The philosopher Bernard Suits calls this feature “autotelic”.

INTRINSIC APPROACHES

What property that game-playing actions have is desirable?

Plausible answers:

- *Pleasant* actions.
- Actions with *immersion*. (“flow”)
- Actions in a *challenging* situation.
- Actions as part of the process of *learning*.

MY SUGGESTION

Playing is the *autotelic* and *aesthetic* actions.

The concept of “aesthetic actions” is an analogy to that of “aesthetic judgments”.

Aesthetic judgments (“it’s beautiful”, “graceful”, “balanced”, “garish”, etc.) are those that *require the exercise of sensitivity*. (F. Sibley)

Sensitivity in aesthetic judgments is passive, but there is also *sensitivity active*, isn’t there?

SENSITIVITY REQUIRED IN ACTIONS

Physical sensitivity

Even if you understand what you should do, you often need *the sensitivity of physical behaviors* in order to do it, in such cases as sports, action-games, etc.

Decision sensitivity

When you decide what you should do as a means to a given purpose, you often need *the sensitivity of thought and decision*, in such cases as puzzlers, strategy games, etc.

CASE: RADICAL PHYSICAL SENSITIVITY

Hardest action games such as *Maverick Bird*



CASE: MORE PHYSICAL LESS DECISION

Hotline Miami



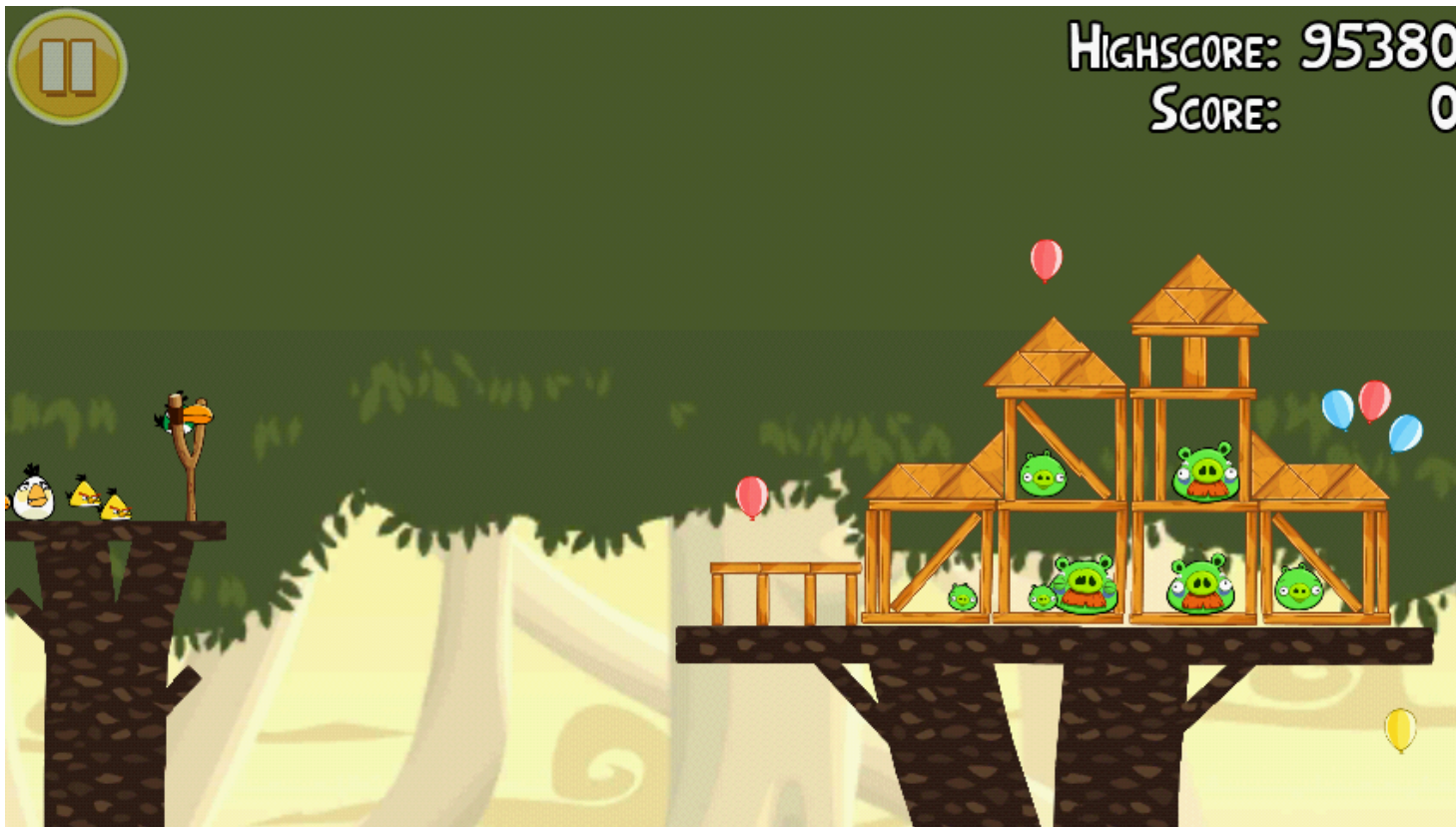
CASE: SOPHISTICATED COMBINATION

Action-oriented puzzlers such as *Portal*, *Braid*, *Limbo*



CASE: CASUAL SENSITIVITY

Angry Birds requires a moderate sensitivity but provides an impressive gameplay.



HOW TO MAKE AESTHETIC ACTIONS?

This is an ultimately difficult question.

I think:

- We *cannot generalize* the methods for making aesthetic actions, just as the methods for making aesthetic properties.
- All we can may be *planning, making, testing, and tuning it.*

CONCLUSION

Games are the things that (are intended to) produce autotelic and aesthetic (sensitivity-requiring) actions.

THANK YOU!

My claims in short

- Games are a kind of design of actions.
- “How” theories define games in terms of how games design our actions.
- “What” theories define games in terms of what actions games produce.
- “What” theories are divided into extrinsic and intrinsic approaches.
- Games are design of autotelic and aesthetic actions.

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