

# Classifying Classifications: A Meta-Perspective on Game Classifications

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Ontology, classification, taxonomy, meta-theory, game studies

## INTRODUCTION

The classification of games is a necessary field of inquiry. It enables game studies scholars to link their specific studies – be it the representation of minorities, media effect studies, design oriented approaches or studies of narratives and games, among many others – to a certain *kind* of game. In the young field of game studies, one of the early attempts to enable a rigorous classification was developed by Aarseth et al. in 2003. In fact, this is historically one of the later studies that is concerned with the classification of games specifically, as there have been numerous works before and after it. Regarding the different, even though related, topic of game definitions, Jaakko Stenros (2016) analyzed over 60 definitions of games, pointing out similarities and discrepancies between them. So far, such an effort is missing for the topic of game classifications.

Similar to Stenros' comprehensive approach, this paper will examine 18 existing game classifications (Aarseth et al. 2003; Avedon & Sutton-Smith 1971; Bell 1979; Borsari 2004; Caillois 1961; Culin 1975; Elverdam & Aarseth 2007; Hinske et al. 2007; Jünger 1959; Klabbers 2003; LaBrie et al. 2013; Mueller et al. 2008; Murray 1952; Pias 2000; Parlett 2000; Polizotto 2007; Raftopoulos et al. 2015; Sawyer et al. 2008), which were identified through a literature review of game and play ontological works. The inclusion criterion were classifications for games, or models that at least claim to be of such nature, instead of systems for specific game elements.

The aim is to achieve three main goals. First, the author critically examines each system individually. Important, here, is whether the systems are consistent in their classification or if criteria for classification differ inside of one particular classification system. This enables us to evaluate the usefulness of the systems themselves, while also pointing towards a meta-ontological perspective on what criteria are used to classify games in general. The abstraction of such criteria can be used to develop a more consistent and encompassing model in the future. While this meta-perspective is already useful, the paper secondly examines the outcome of the classifications, meaning it shows the actual groupings of games, as opposed to the criteria for classification. Some questions this approach can treat are: Are there interesting patterns in these groupings? Do they, intuitively, make sense? Do the groupings point towards interesting similarities, which are not obvious at a first glance? Thirdly, as the study includes classifications from over

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fifty years, this in depth discussion can also reveal possible historical changes in game classifications.

While the perspectives two and three give useful insights into game classifications and the history of games studies (and before), it is especially the first, meta-ontological perspective that will serve as a basis for the classification of classifications.

The author is aware that the classifications in question range from play categories, over games in general and video- and drinking games more specifically. Therefore, one of the paper's challenge is this diversity of the examined classifications. LaBrie et al., for example, are specifically concerned with the classification of "[...] games that precipitate alcohol consumption [...]" (2014, p. 2135). For example, a classification that aims for criteria such as reasons for alcohol consumption will aim at games that are likely not included in Parlett's (2000) classification of card games. However, especially because of this diverse sample, the classified classifications can give us interesting insight, as they bear the potential for interdisciplinary comparisons of classifications and criteria, after their abstraction. Through this abstraction of classification criteria, the author hopes to be able to overcome the challenges the diverse sample poses. The aforementioned potential is the reason for analyzing the diverse sample, with the awareness that certain differences might be caused by their varying, yet very related, objects of interest.

## **OPTIONAL BIO**

**Michael S. Debus** is a PhD fellow from the IT University of Copenhagen. He holds an M.Sc. in game studies from the same institution.

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