

# What's Important to a Game? Adding a Hierarchy to the Cybermedia Model.

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## INTRODUCTION

The ontology of games has, by now, been broadly discussed (e.g. Caillois (1961), Suits (1978), Juul (2005), Salen & Zimmerman (2004)). In 2015 Espen Aarseth and Gordon Calleja set out to solve the problem of our undefinable object of interest (Wittgenstein 2001), by proposing a descriptive model of games that should both serve scholars, searching for a definition, as well as adhere to the scepticism of Wittgenstein's followers. In Aarseth and Calleja's model games are the players' perspective on cybermedia objects, which consist of three dimensions: a sign system, some kind of materiality and a mechanical system. Here, the player as an important part of *materially dynamic literature* (Aarseth & Calleja 2015) observes and interprets the sign system to manipulate the game's mechanic structure through its materiality. They argue, that by putting different emphasis on its specific dimensions, this descriptive model is able to describe a vast variety of artifacts (as well as processes) that are considered games by someone, ranging from *Ring Around the Rosie*, over *Monopoly* (Magie & Darrow 1935) and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003-present), to "infinite games" (Carse 1986), such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1974).

The graphical representation and description of this model suggests that the all three dimensions are equally important. Aarseth and Calleja argue that, for some games, the mechanical system is interchangeable, and the different artifacts are still considered the same game, due to their shared materiality or sign system. And yet, it is rather easy to notice that Aarseth and Calleja are at pains when it comes to providing the reader with compelling examples of games, which are determined solely by their materiality or sign system. This problem of the framework becomes especially conspicuous once you realize how easy it is to create opposite examples of games that are defined by their mechanical systems. Aarseth and Calleja point at paintball and marbles as games defined by their materiality, but both examples do little to clear things up. After all, the only connection between these games and their material basis may be the contingent choice of their

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names. In order to secure the symmetry in their model its authors should have shown that it is possible for the artifact's materiality or sign system to determine the game (or the type of game) that is being played, similarly to the way mechanical systems structure the players' behaviors (see Järvinen 2008, 254).

We claim that such symmetry is unattainable. The reason for this is that it seems impossible for any material object to completely determine all the possible ways it can be used. Thus it is not possible for materiality to force a particular activity onto the players. And how could we ever determine a game (or even a type of game) without ever mentioning the players' possible actions.

This leads us back to our initial observation: the cybermedia model demands a hierarchy to be added to it. We intend to add this hierarchy by answering a series of conceptual questions: How to evaluate the relative importance of different aspects of the cybermedia model? Is materiality lower on the scale than mechanical systems? How is the player perspective situated on this scale of importance? And how the semiotic aspects should relate to materiality?

### **OPTIONAL BIO**

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