

ENGINE THEORY

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When Natalie Libre and myself called one cold Saturday night, we didn't set out to internally resolve one of the most frustrating and dull arguments of the Twitter community in 2019—the conversation about whether “system matters.” But we did, and while we were at it we also defined games in a way that doesn't exclude lyric games and makes no assumption about authorial intent.

WAIT WAIT STOP BEFORE WE PROCEED ANY FURTHER SOME GROUND RULES:

- **THIS ARTICLE IS IN SYSTEM MATTERS QUARANTINE!**
No arguing about system matters will leak from here into the larger community! Do NOT vague-post about this article in a way that will start discourse!
- **IF YOU NEED TO START DISCOURSE ABOUT THIS ARTICLE,** because you're a big bumbly honey bear wandering into a beehive composed of elfgamers and storywanks, you may argue to your heart's content in the forum attached to this digest itself. That's a PvP-enabled zone, baybey.

Are you ready? Do you agree to our terms? Then read on, my friends, and read an in-depth explanation to a theory that will probably feel like common sense in just a few years.



1.0:

Defining Terms

Game

A game is a social construct, but we all know one when we see one. Some people call the game a system. For the purposes of this theory, I will provide some axioms of what a game is. A game can be more than this, but we will be looking at games that follow these axioms

Axiom of Ritual: A game has a meaningful separation between the world outside and the gameworld within. This separation can be massive or it can be almost invisible, but there is some kind of boundary between the two. You must “enter” one of these games.

Axiom of Informed Consent: A game is played by consenting players. If they have not consented, they are not playing the game (although they can still engage with it) Consenting to a game requires informed consent.

Engine Axiom: In order to play the game, someone or something must somehow teach the engine (or some portion of the engine) of the game to you, to a degree where you have the capacity to engage with the game.

Game Assumptions

A player can only enter a game when they have some kind of knowledge about what game they’re entering before choosing to do so, as part of the Axiom of Informed Consent. This can be as minimal as “knowing the name of the game” or even “that it’s a game”, but they cannot enter a game without some kind of expectation as to what the game is. It is possible (and likely) for the game assumptions to change once the player has entered the game.

Engine

An engine is the set of tools we use to perform the game. Some people call an engine a system. An engine is not a game - it is how we operate within the ritual space of a game. An engine doesn't have to be formalized. An engine can be constructed entirely during play. An engine can be impossible to utilize. An engine can be constructed with the intention to not be engaged with. An engine can potentially never be formalized. An engine can be partially formalized, but also contain unspoken or unspeakable rules. It is possible (and likely) that multiple people playing the same game will have different understandings of what an engine is.

Text

The text of a game is the material that explains the engine as the designer intended. Some people call the text a system. In my design community, there is the expectation that the text will explain the game enough that someone who has never played the game can pick the text up and play it using the engine. However, this is not necessarily true for all games. *B/x* is an engine where the culture of play exists outside of the written text as paratext, and in order to use the engine, you must understand the paratext in addition to the written text itself.

Engine Validity

A Valid engine is one that can be used by the players to play the game. Different people might have different ideas of what makes an engine Valid. An Invalid engine is one the players reject. It doesn't matter what people outside the game think of the Validity of the engine, although it can influence the players.

Lore

The lore is the narrative that accompanies a game. A game doesn't require lore, but it can be part of the game assumptions a player enters the game with, and can be one of the metrics used to determine whether an engine is Valid.

2.0:

Extrapolations and Implications

2.1: A Game Can Have A Single Valid Engine

Many story games exist with the game assumption of a single engine built into them. When we talk about playing these games, we often conflate the game with the engine, and/or the game with the text. These games explain the entire engine (or as much of the engine as possible) with the text.

Example 2.1.1:

There is an assumption that when we go to play *Ten Candles*, we will be playing the game taught by the text of *Ten Candles*. If we said we were playing *Ten Candles*, but used the engine of *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*, many people might reject the idea that we played *Ten Candles* at all.

Example 2.1.2:

There is an assumption that when we go to play *Chess*, we will be playing the game that is commonly understood as the rules to the game *Chess*, even if neither of us have ever read a rulebook. If we said we were playing *Chess* but on the first turn I replace my rook with a large rock as a tactical maneuver, my opponent might reject that I am playing *Chess* with them.

Example 2.1.3:

I ran a game of *Monsterhearts* for my friends using only the free print-outs available online and our base assumptions as to what a Powered By The Apocalypse game is. We played *Monsterhearts* but did not use the engine expected by the text. Instead, we played *Monsterhearts* with an engine the text didn't supply, but aligned as closely as we could to the engine we imagined, because we felt that there was a Valid engine we were attempting to imitate.

2.2: A Game Can Have Multiple Valid Engines

When we consent to playing a game, we might not know what engine to use for the game until we start playing. It is possible (and likely) for each player to have their own idea of what engine to use. As play occurs, players will make use of a variety of tools to establish a shared engine, even if it's different than the engines players were expecting to use. However, a game must often align with the players' game assumptions.

Example 2.2.1:

Dungeons & Dragons is a game with multiple valid engines that can be used to play it. If my playgroup is using *5th Edition*, and your playgroup is using *4th Edition*, we are both playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, we just are using different engines. It is possible (and likely) for someone to agree to play *Dungeons & Dragons* without knowing what engine will be used.

Example 2.2.2:

Foursquare is a game with multiple engines based on regional variations. We can agree to play *Foursquare* and realize, during the course of playing it, that we were using different engines to play.

Example 2.2.3:

Imagine a hypothetical game called "Staring At My Therapist's Carpet While I Talk About My Feelings." You and I can both play this game, that we agree is a shared game experience, but use a different engine to play it—following different rules as to where our eyes wander and what we imagine between the strange Persian floral arrangements.

2.3: A Game Can Possess A Minimal or Unspeakable Engine

A game doesn't require an engine that can be articulated in order to play. People might enter a game with no concept of what the game could possibly be like, or imagine what could occur within the game, when they sit down. Players might be unable to describe in any way the engine they're using, either due to a conceit of the game or because it is impossible to explain.

Example 2.3.1:

A group of kids running around a playground screaming might have no justification or understanding of that behavior. There might be no pattern as to why they are running around and screaming. However, one of these kids can still look at the kid sitting on the bench alone and ask "Why aren't you playing?"

Example 2.3.2:

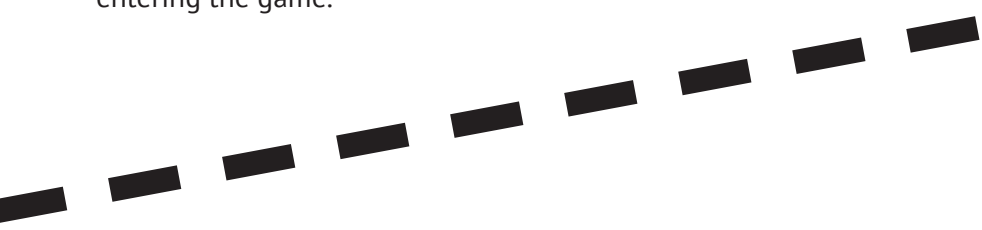
When Calvin began playing *Calvinball*, in the comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes*, he created a game without an understanding or expectation of how the engine operates. The game possesses a simulation of a more complex engine with unspeakable rules, but the game isn't operating on that engine necessarily.

Example 2.3.3:

Footsie, a game played by two people sitting across from one another at a table, might have no agreed-upon engine. The game's engine is completely inarticulable by both parties, in large part because the engine is entirely constructed through play. They couldn't teach anyone else how to play the precise game of *Footsie* they are playing, because part of the game assumptions come from the affection both people feel for each other.

2.4: Different Games Have Different Engine Assumptions

When people agree to play a game, they have their game assumptions. A game assumption can make assumptions about the engine (although it doesn't have to), and different people's game assumptions can accommodate varying engines, based on how they're entering the game.



Example 2.4.1:

I might ask you if you want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, and then when you sit down, you discover we're using the *Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition* engine, a variation of *Dungeons & Dragons* that many in its time derided for its tactical combat. Based on what your assumptions are about *Dungeons & Dragons*, this might either be unnoticed, totally fine, or unacceptable for the game you consented to. You might consider this to "not be *Dungeons & Dragons*."

Example 2.4.2:

I might ask you if you want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, and then when you sit down, you discover we're using the *Dungeon World* engine, a Powered By The Apocalypse engine of heroic fantasy that has a GM and rolls dice. Based on what your assumptions are about *Dungeons & Dragons*, this might either be unnoticed, totally fine, or unacceptable for the game you consented to. You might consider this to "not be *Dungeons & Dragons*."

Example 2.4.3:

I might ask you if you want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, and then when you sit down, you discover we're using the *Venture* engine, a GMless belonging-outside-belonging engine of heroic fantasy without dice. Based on what your assumptions are about *Dungeons & Dragons*, this might either be unnoticed, totally fine, or unacceptable for the game you consented to. You might consider this to "not be *Dungeons & Dragons*."

Example 2.4.4:

I might ask you if you want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, and then when you sit down, you discover we're using the *Alone Among The Stars* engine, a solo game about a lone space traveler, using a deck of cards to determine what they find next. Based on what your assumptions are about *Dungeons & Dragons*, this might either be unnoticed, totally fine, or unacceptable for the game you consented to. You might consider this to "not be *Dungeons & Dragons*."

Example 2.4.5:

I might ask you if you want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, and then when you sit down, you discover we're using the *Tag* engine, a children's game where we run around in the field and avoid someone trying to tag us. Based on what your assumptions are about *Dungeons & Dragons*, this might either be unnoticed, totally fine, or unacceptable for the game you consented to. You might consider this to "not be *Dungeons & Dragons*."

Games Can Have Impossible Engines

You are not required to be able to play or even imagine playing a game in order for it to be a Valid engine for that game. A game doesn't require players in order to possess a Valid engine.

Example 2.5.1:

A game such as *Tag* might possess an engine that is impossible or impractical for you to use. It is still a Valid engine, it's just not possible for you to engage with. In order to play *Tag*, you might change the engine to allow it to align with your needs.

Example 2.5.2:

Many engines for *Dungeons & Dragons* are impossible or impractical for me to engage with, due to my ADHD. It is still a Valid engine, I just can't use it. In order to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, I might change the engine or create a new one to allow it to align with my needs.

Example 2.5.3:

In the game *I Eat Mantras For Breakfast*, the text is uninterested in articulating how to play the game. It is articulating an engine, just an engine that might only make intuitive sense, and the text lacks instructions for you to follow. It is still a Valid engine, it's just not possible for you to engage with by following the text.

Example 2.5.4:

Imagine a hypothetical one word game called *Be Free*, with the only engine articulated in the text being "Fly." As you (presumably) cannot fly, this is impossible or impractical for you to play. In order to play *Be Free*, you might change the engine to allow it to align with your needs. But you certainly don't have to, as perhaps you can use the game to remind yourself to actually fly, or any number of other emotional functions.



3.0:

No More System Matters

3.1: What Is System Matters

System Matters Discourse appears to be when people disagree on the vague and passionate statements “System Matters” and “System Doesn’t Matter.” The perspectives tend to be as follows:

People Who Say System Matters Often Mean that you cannot have the same game with different engines. The text informs and is conflated with the engine and the engine fundamentally shapes the game. Using a different text-engine for a game means you’re playing a different game.

People Who Say System Doesn’t Matter Often Mean that you can play the same game with different texts articulating different engines. The invisible engine surrounding the game is still the same, so changing the text-engine isn’t enough of a meaningful difference to disrupt the Validity of the engine.

3.2: The Miscommunication

As we’ve established (way back in extrapolations 2.1 and 2.2) some games can have only a single Valid engine, while other games can have multiple. This often comes down to your experience playing games, your personal mindset, and your lived experiences. When people argue about Systems Matter, they are using the word “System” to refer to different concepts.

When You Conflate System and The Engine Outlined in the Text, then system has the capacity to matter, as the engine used for a game can be determined to be Valid or not. However, it doesn’t have to matter, as it’s possible that the text doesn’t have a meaningful impact on the game.

When You Conflate System and Engine, then system has the capacity to matter based on whether you consider the system used to be Valid or not for the game. In a game like Dream Askew, there might be only one Valid engine. In a game like Dungeons & Dragons, there might be countless Valid engines.

When You Conflate System and Game, then system definitely matters, as by definition, changing what system you’re using changes what game you’re playing.

So, are we done now? Can we stop arguing about this?
Am I finally free, and can I float away into the trees in
order to run good games for teenagers and never worry
about any of this ever again?

PROBABLY NOT.