

What Makes a Game Good?

Wolfgang Kramer, Kramer-Spiele

This article, first published online in The Games Journal in 2000, lists a number of objective criteria that go beyond personal preferences in deciding whether a given game is 'good' or not. These criteria form a set of guidelines indicating the characteristics that a good game should have.

1 Introduction

GAMES are a matter of taste! The perceived value of a game depends greatly on the individual preferences of those who play it. Some players prefer games of luck; others prefer games of tactics; still others enjoy communicating with fellow players. Then there are those who like games based on reaction, manual skills, or memory, etc. But whether a game is considered good or of little appeal does not depend entirely on personal preferences. There are also objective criteria that must be considered.

1.1 Originality

Any new game must be original. It has to possess elements that have never – or at least not in this particular combination – been part of a game before.

1.2 Freshness and Replayability

The more a game makes its players want to play again, the better the game. An important aspect of this is the course the game takes should be as different as possible each time it is played. A game lacking this quality will soon become boring. A good game will be as exciting each time it is played as it was the first time.

1.3 Surprise

A game should be rich in surprises. Repetition in sequence, progress, and events should be strictly avoided.

1.4 Equal opportunity

At the start of the game, every player should have an equal chance of winning. In particular, the first player should have neither an advantage nor a disadvantage over the rest of the field.

1.5 Winning Chances

A similar rule applies to the end of a game. Every player must have at least a theoretical possibility

of winning until the very end. This possibility might be infinitesimal, but it must be present.

1.6 No 'Kingmaker Effect'

A game loses its appeal if, at any stage, a player who no longer has any hope of winning can somehow determine the winner. This problem arises primarily in strategy games.

1.7 No Early Elimination

All players should be involved in the game until it is almost over. No one should be eliminated until the very end.

1.8 Reasonable Waiting Times

Nothing kills players' interest as easily as long periods of inactivity while they wait their turns. Chess provides a useful counter-example: a player can use the waiting time to plan his or her next move.

1.9 Creative Control

Any game that is not based on chance must give players the opportunity to affect its progress and direction. Nothing is more boring for a player than the feeling that he or she is being 'played by the game' instead of the other way round. A good game should be challenging.

1.10 Uniformity

The title, theme, format, and graphics of a game must give a unified impression.

1.11 Quality of Components

Durability, functionality, and the visual appeal of the materials contribute greatly to the perceived value of a game.