Elements of a game definition	Parlett	Abt	Huizinga	Caillois	Suits	Crawford	Costikyan	Avedon | Sutton-Smith
Proceeds according to rules that limit players	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Conflict or contest	√					√		√
Goal-oriented/outcome-oriented	√	√			√		√	√
Activity, process, or event		√			√			√
Involves decision-making		√				√	√	
Not serious and Absorbing			√					
Never associated with material gain			√	√				
Artificial/Safe/Outside ordinary life			√	√		√		
Creates special social groups			√					
Voluntary				√	√			√
Uncertain				√				
Make-believe/Representational				√		√		
Inefficient					√			
System of parts/Resources and Tokens						√	√	
A form of art							√	

A Comparison

The chart above summarizes the elements of a game, as described in each of the definitions.

In simplifying complex ideas to a grid of common elements, much of the context and subtlety of the authors' ideas is clearly lost. Each author defines games for particular reasons within specific contexts; for example, with the exception of Chris Crawford and Greg Costikyan, none of the authors are operating from within the field of game design. On the other hand, this cannibalistic dissection of their approaches to defining games yields some interesting comparative results. All of the authors except Costikyan include rules as a key component. Beyond this there is no clear consensus. Although 10 of the 15 elements are shared by more than one author, apart from rules and goals, there is no majority agreement on any one of them.

It is clear that not all of the elements need to be included in a definition of game. Some elements, such as games being vol-

untary or inefficient, do not seem to apply to all games. Others, such as the fact that games create social groups, describe the effects of games rather than games themselves. Still other elements, such as the representational or make-believe quality of games, appear in many other media and do not help differentiate games from other kinds of designed experiences.

Our Definition

Cobbling together elements from the previous definitions and whittling away the unnecessary bits leaves us with the following definition:

A *game* is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.

This definition structurally resembles that of Avedon and Sutton-Smith, but contains concepts from many of the other authors as well. Here are the definition's primary ideas:

System: We introduced the concept of a system in chapter 5. Systems are fundamental to our approach to games.

Players: A game is something that one or more participants actively play. Players interact with the system of a game in order to experience the play of the game.

Artificial: Games maintain a boundary from so-called "real life" in both time and space. Although games obviously occur within the real world, artificiality is one of their defining features.

Conflict: All games embody a contest of powers. The contest can take many forms, from cooperation to competition, from solo conflict with a game system to multiplayer social conflict. Conflict is central to games.

Rules: We concur with the authors that rules are a crucial part of games. Rules provide the structure out of which play emerges, by delimiting what the player can and cannot do.

Quantifiable outcome: Games have a quantifiable goal or outcome. At the conclusion of a game, a player has either won or lost or received some kind of numerical score. A quantifiable outcome is what usually distinguishes a game from less formal play activities.

For the rest of this book, this definition is what we mean when we say "game." It applies to all kinds of games, from computer and video games to parlor games and sports. We can also use this definition to define the field of study at the center of this book:

Game design is the process by which a game designer creates a game, to be encountered by a player, from which meaningful play emerges.

Aren't you happy to finally know what it is this book is about?

The Puzzle of Puzzles

This definition of games is intentionally quite narrow. It is not our intent to understand the broad phenomena of play, but instead to clearly demarcate the realm of games and game design. But is the definition *too* narrow? Are there things that are clearly are games but that don't fit this definition? This chapter on defining games concludes by looking at two kinds of game-activities that may or may not fit into the category of games this definition delineates. These "limit cases" will help clarify how this definition can help us investigate game-like phenomena.

First, puzzles. According to puzzle and game designer Scott Kim, puzzles are different from games because puzzles have a correct answer or outcome. Think of a crossword puzzle: the puzzle designer creates the correct answer, and the player's activity consists of trying to reconstruct that answer. This is a very different situation than a game of Poker, for example, in which there is no fixed "right answer" posed by the creator of the game. Instead, in Poker, players make complex decisions at every moment, taking into account the evolving dynamics of the game.