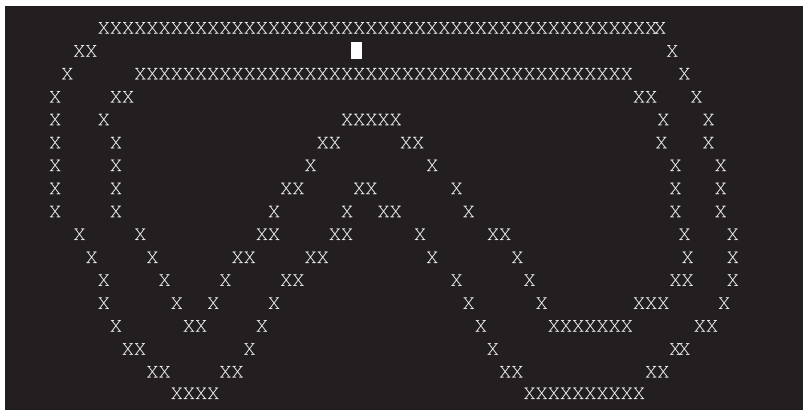


# Preface

It began on a slow summer afternoon, playing countless games of tic-tac-toe against a childhood friend. The contest was exhilarating, and we tracked the tally carefully until, to our surprise, every game began ending up as a draw. This was unexpected, but we had reached a point where we understood the game well enough to play it perfectly. We had exhausted the game, and we discussed its strategic patterns: If your opponent begins in the middle, *always* pick a corner.

Some time later, at the age of eleven, I created a racing game on an early computer terminal: I drew a racetrack made of Xs and moved the cursor around the track as quickly as I could (timing each lap with a digital watch), carefully making sure that my car (the cursor) did not collide with the barriers (the Xs). My game looked something like this:



| Figure P.1 |  
Almost a video game.

What had I created? It was a game by most counts. But it was and it was not a *video game*: It took place on a screen, and though the terminal's processing power was modest, I had really designed a game *on* a computer. However, it was not a video game in the usual sense since it was me, and not the computer, that was upholding the rules.

In addition to setting up the rules of the game, I had also performed an act of imagination—I imagined the green characters on the black screen to be something else, a racetrack and a car, and I imagined that the movement of the cursor was the movement of a car. None of this required any cleverness: setting up a game with rules and goals was easy because I had at that time been exposed to hundreds or perhaps thousands of games, and imagining a rectangular cursor ■ to be something else—a car—is easy for a child. I had also tried and thoroughly enjoyed a handful of computer and video games, and I sensed that there was a basic connection between computers and games. It was a connection that I urgently wanted to explore.

While the present book is the result of many twists and turns and changes of mind, it is also a book whose basic issues are clearly visible in the tic-tac-toe bout and in my crude video game of some twenty-three years ago: What does it take for something to be a video game, and when is a video game enjoyable? How do rules in games work, and how do they provide enjoyment for players? How and why does the player imagine the world of a game?

As for the first question, the object of this book is games played using computer power, where the computer upholds the rules of the game and where the game is played using a video display. I will be using *video games* as an umbrella term to describe all such PC, console, arcade, and other digital games.

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Some parts of this book have previously been published:

- Most of chapter 2 was published as “The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness,” in *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings*, edited by Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens, 30–45. Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2003.
- Part of chapter 3’s section on emergence and progression was published as “The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression,” in *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, edited by Frans Mäyra, 323–329. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002.
- An earlier version of chapter 4’s section on time was published as “Introduction to Game Time,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, 131–142. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004.
- Parts of the conclusions were published as “Just What Is It That Makes Computer Games So Different, So Appealing?,” *Ivory Tower* column for IGDA, April 2003. Available at [http://www.idga.org/columns/ivorytower/ivory\\_Apr03.php](http://www.idga.org/columns/ivorytower/ivory_Apr03.php).
- Some of the notes on *Grand Theft Auto III* were taken from the article “Hvad Spillet Betyder” [What the Game Means], in *Digitale Verdener*, edited by Ida Engholm and Lisbeth Klastrup, 181–195. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2004.