On the Internet I found the following interesting view on games and their importance with a critical attitude towards game theory. Even if I don't completely agree with his view, I think it's worth taking a look at the site by T. Burkhart

URL: https://www.tobiasburkhardt.com/blog/a-game-is-a-game-is-a-game
(access April 3, 2024)

A GAME IS A GAME IS A GAME

THE CHALLENGE OF DEFINING A GAME

The recent success of video games has led to a progressive adoption of game mechanisms in everyday products and services. Social science researchers have observed that the increasing ubiquity of gaming is having a formative impact on society. The world of video games has become more and more interwoven with cultural habits in everyday life. In recent years, sociologists have started to look at this ludification of culture in a more detailed fashion.

However, the definition of games as such is not to be confused with the fundamentals of game theory. This view is misleading because game theory is rather a mathematical approach that tries to describe decision making in formal structures. However, the question of how competing entities can make optimal choices is not relevant in our case because, although most games can be regarded as formal models, game theory fails to correctly explain the mechanics of games. The reason lies in the imperfect nature of the players who do not act according to optimal strategies. While game theory can help to explain why people make certain decisions while playing, it cannot help to create better or more successful games.

Furthermore, it is important to point out the structural difference between the notions of playing and gaming regarding the behavior of the players. The distinction goes back to the basic work of the French sociologist Roger Caillois. He divided the subject into two categories: paidia (playing) and ludus (gaming). They represent the two extremes. Paidia represents the more freely and improvised form of playing while ludus describes the rather structured, rule-governed, and competitive form of games. Caillois defined games basically as tools of acculturation that can be categorized in four game types based on chance, competition, pretense, and vertigo. He defined gaming as an activity that is voluntary, unproductive, governed by rules, imaginary in the sense of pretending a virtual reality.

Another important impact on the way we treat games today came from the work of Johan Huizinga who focused his research on the importance of play in the cultural lives of people. He introduced the notion of playground as the protected and clearly defined sphere for every game. According to game researcher Castronova this playground "can be considered a shield of sorts, protecting the fantasy world from the outside world". Later, Salen and Zimmerman applied this important idea to the world of digital gaming by rephrasing it as magic circle. Besides the fact that gaming is a free activity outside ordinary life several empirical studies dealing with the behavioral mindset of video gamers have reconfirmed that the games also have to be rule-bound and goal-oriented. While Salen and Zimmerman define a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome", Crawford points out that "games are a subset of entertainment limited to conflicts in which players work to foil each other's goals". However, this rather competitive approach, which is also emphasized by Jesper Juul, does not include the cooperative nature of many modern multiplayer online games.

Therefore, it is more appropriate to refer to games as a series of challenges where the player has the opportunity to make meaningful decisions that are not ruled by chance and that do have an obvious impact on the outcome of the game. From a more philosophical standpoint one could argue that a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. However, these rather static definitions do not integrate the notion of fun and personal entertainment. Therefore, the definitions of game designers have to be taken into account. According to Raph Koster games are "very fundamental and powerful learning tools" and the fun from games arises out of the experience of learning or mastering the game as such. For Koster "it is the act of solving puzzles that makes games fun".