Abstract

This short paper will try to forward a discussion based on these questions: can we design games the same way we design toys? What influences how players enact a game we design? How do we balance between freedom of interpretation and excess of expectations? How do players effect other players' interpretations of a same game? This paper is intended for game design students, researchers, authors, and designers who are interested in creating original and experimental games, and challenging themselves with new takes on the process of game creation. It is especially targeted at developers that want to create games that are more open to interpretation and that accommodate more personal play styles: we believe this approach make games more powerful as communication devices, though this is not discussed in the paper. Instead, we will expand on the concept of “player deputization” and introduce a new take on designing games without focus on tasks and objectives.

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Keywords: game models; toys; authorship; folk games; player deputization; broken games;

1. Games as devices that enable play

We consider game design a process of enabling games to take place. Our personal take is that every material or otherwise directly designable part of games is, actually, a “toy”, including rules and everything that is delivered to the player. When we say “toys” we exclusively mean “devices that enable play” without any childish or trivial connotation, as we strongly believe games can be a rich, expressive medium that can tackle any kind of topic or theme, but we want to share a perspective on game creation that accepts the limits of the designer intervention on how games actually take place [1].

For example, a doll is a very inspiring toy, as it's made to encourage a wide array of games while giving a strong characterization: playing with a doll is partly instinctual, partly copied from parents activities [2]. Still, a

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doll is also a toy that relies vastly on the player responsibility to enact a game as there is not a detailed explanation of what the players can or should do to enjoy the toy. On the other hand, a game like chess, whose “toy-parts” are the board, chess pieces and rules, is put together in a way where it's very reasonable to predict that the “game chess” will be enacted in a way that is similar to the original designer's intentions.

We have witnessed in these years the rise of video games that have unclear victory conditions or which challenge the players to find their own games space (Markus Persson’s Minecraft, Ed Key’s Proteus, Douglas Wilson’s Joan Sebastian Joust to name a few): we believe that our approach is propaedeutic to the design of these kind of games by focusing on the potential of the material things that influence how a game takes place: the setting, the interface and the rules and their degree of enforcement [3].

We found very hard to adopt a definition for games that could fit our workflow and encapsulate everything that we felt connected to our field of research. As previously mentioned, in doing so we had to drop the word “game” as a describer for products and artifacts and substitute it with “toy”. Again, our idea is that the game is an enacted system that generates form the use of toys, where toys are artifacts, rules, aesthetics, tools and environment.

In this definition, we include everything that is designed to help a game - or many games - to take place. The player's body or the ground where the players stands are not toys per se, but rules can make them toys by including them as game elements. We feel that the most important thing for a designer in regards to a definition is not the epistemological value of the definition but rather its practical use for designing. This is why we consider toys as anything that can be designed that is used in games: these are the things a game designer should care about, and they include graphics, sounds and interface. We could say: “Games are not things, they are acts and processes which are enacted by individuals in the occasion of play”.

A videogame is hence not a “game”, it's a toy that is enacted as a game when the player runs it. Videogames are very good examples because they encapsulate the very concept of virtuality and possibility which are crucial for game designers as a base concept when designing games [6].

According to this definition, the system/relationship between player, games, toys and designers could be described as follows: the game designer hopes for an array of games to take place when players use the toys he or she designs, and as such we can call the activity “designing games”. As such, we do not consider “game design” more misleading, as an activity description, than “service design” or “communication design”.

To our understanding, this process could be described as follows: first, the designer chooses the aesthetics (intended as experience) he or she wishes for the players to live. This choice is the ambition of the game designer but is also a design guidance: through the whole design process this never changes from possibility to reality, as a game is never played the same, and for a game to take place the outcome must be ultimately unpredictable [7]. Secondly the designer makes the toys through cycles of iterative design, testing and modifying the toys until it's reasonable to believe that these could be used to enact a game that is similar to the array of games the designer wished for in the first phase [8].

What is, then, the actual role of the designer? How can he or she increase the possibility of the game taking place as envisioned? To explain this we tried to introduce a new concept, which we call “playability”. The playability of a game, something that we believe has improperly been labelled “gameplay” or “fun factor”, is in fact the design quality of a toy that inspires a game in a player.

This concept is strictly connect to the concept of “affordance” as described by Gibson in 1977 [9] (the array of possibilities in interaction with an object) and as it is used today as a metric for product and interaction design (the object's quality through which the user is invited to act upon it in certain way).

Affordance in toys is their playability, or the kind of games they inspire. This becomes obvious when we accept that different toys have different degrees of deputization towards players. We want to consider two aspects of playability: the freedom and the difficulty. While these characteristics are obviously interconnected, as a toy that lets the players free to enact different games also poses a creative challenge, on the other hand we
believe that the players' background (previously acquired knowledge) can be effectively used to reduce difficulty in enacting games through toy design.

2. Experiments

We tested our assumptions by applying them as operative guidelines in a didactical workshop in which we reviewed a wide gamma of different game mechanics and discussed how game design patterns, such as alliances and betray, affect players’ perception of the game and the other players. Twenty students were asked to design a board game that introduced a psychological phenomena as a game mechanic or dynamic.

Five complete “games” were developed during five consecutive days of design and prototyping, the workshop presentation made clear that it was aimed at the production of playful artifacts that did not focus on tasks and objectives.

2.1. See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil

The first example is called “See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil”, this game, developed by students Marco Bonfieni, Chiara Girardelli, Manuela Scarian and Andrea Vitali, features an interpretation of the relationship system that occurs between laws abiding merchants and criminals. The game's ambition is to describe the process of emergence of criminal organizations (in particular Italian Mafia) and the development of a code of silence (omertà).

The premises are quite simple: each player is a merchant that can perform a variety of actions, such as obtaining a given number of units of food supply, owning farms or factories, etcetera. Every player starts with an amount of money. This money is used to invest in activities that generate income in the form of products (factories produce building materials, farms produce food and so on). These products can be again converted in money and this money used to buy other products or to open new activities. Every player keeps the amount of money and resources secret from each other, with the exception of activities that are visible to everyone.

The communication between players is open but each and every couple of players has their own private journal for special communication and commerce. This means that each couple of player can communicate privately and secretly exchange resources through a shared booklet.

In every game one of the players secretly plays the role of “the criminal”, which is randomly assigned at the beginning of the game. “The criminal” plays exactly as the other players do with one exceptions: it has the ability to burn other players’ buildings.

The burning of other players' farms or factories is handled through the personal journal and, as such, it is impossible for other player to easily identify the culprit. This power encourage bribing and blackmailing in the form of asking for money, resources or simply “silence”. This game dynamic is made especially meaningful by the fact that each player can press charges against other players. This is again done secretly by putting a card, face-down, with the name of the charged player at the center of the table. When three players have pressed charges the fourth is obliged to join and then the charges are made public.

2.2. Identity Crisis

The second example is “Identity Crisis”, this game, developed by students Federica Bardelli, Laura Cantadori, Carlo De Gaetano and Monica Diani, features an insight into the role of prejudices and stereotypes in society. The game's ambition is to entertain players by making them realize how prejudices influence their behavior and how the perception of people and their personality traits can dramatically change depending on the observing group.
The rules are extremely simple: at the beginning of the game each player is given one “stereotype” card out of hundreds available, the stereotype card is kept hidden from other players. Stereotypes include: the metalhead, the know-it-all, the hooligan, the fashion-victim, the drop-out, the biker, the nerd, the hipster, and so on.

Nine “traits” cards are positioned face-up in the middle of the table. The “traits” cards describe a personal characteristic or a specific behavior: I wear glasses, I love Gucci, I dress in black leather, I love mathematics, I never party, I'm very lazy, I take pictures with my Lomo camera, and so on. Every turn each player has to pick the one that most represent the character in his “stereotype” card. At the same time the player can try to guess someone else’s “stereotype” card by looking at the “traits” card chosen by the other players. Victory points are awarded both to him and to the player whom “stereotype” card has been discovered.

The most interesting of these dynamics is encountered when a player has to choose between nine different traits that are not obviously referable to the assigned stereotype.

If the player consider himself a fashion-victim, or if he thinks the other players believe so, the chance of choosing a negative traits are heavily reduced. By contrast a player that is highly critical of fashion-victims could choose “I'm very lazy” as a defining trait, meaning that those who follow fashion don't have the spirit to decide on their own.

Finally the game is also powerful in outlining how association of multiple traits can contribute to evoke a stereotype: for example, “I talk a lot” and “I wear weird hats”, for a sexist male player, could refer to what he considers a typically female stereotype, such as the “fashion-victim”, whereas for a female player the defining stereotype could be the “know-it-all”.

What these games have in common is allowing for a wide arrange of possibilities in the way players enact them. In our observations, during play tests that lasted for seven days and involved over thirty students, no two games were played the same and the actual execution of the games, in terms of victory conditions and adherence to the rules, in no way influenced the effectiveness of the toys as entertainment and as communication artifacts.

3. Final Notes

A few considerations can be drawn from the premises and the experiments described in the paper: games may not exist in reality as objects or artifacts; games are enacted through designed element (that we chose to call “toys”) during play; toys have different degrees in playability that allow arrays of possible games of different size; playability can be considered as bi-dimensional, on one axis we have the difficulty of enacting the game and on the other axis we have the degree of freedom; the values of playability of a specific toy are not absolute but are strictly dependent on the player biological, cultural and personal background.

References