The Play Experience

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GAM 224
Outline

- Admin
- Play
- Experiential aspects of play
- The Core Mechanic
- Examples
Rules paper

- Due today (11:59)
- ½ grade per day late
Design Project

- If absent on Monday, contact your team ASAP.
Play

- New unit
- What are rules for?
  - Rule create play experiences for players
- When we design rules
  - We must have player experience in mind
Play

- a very complex phenomenon with deep roots
  - animal play, esp. among the young
  - in most primate species, adults play
- Play is a kind of performance
To play

- Requires that you acknowledge the "performance" that is happening
  - and that the performance is somehow not real
    - "we're not really fighting"
- This is where the "magic circle" comes in
  - the theatre stage is a magic circle
  - we know that no one actually dies during a staging of "Hamlet"
  - murder is performed for a communicative purpose
Source of great confusion

- Critics say that violent games make kids violent
  - more so than movies, TV
  - because they are interactive
  - this makes the game "real"
    - so kids are practicing real violence
- But even puppies know the difference between "play" and "real"
  - by age 9 or so, kids have a strong sense of the difference between performance and reality
  - this is the same age that they start to take a great interest in games and rules
Kinds of play

- Caillois' categories
  - Agon
    - competition
  - Alea
    - chance
  - Mimicry
    - role-playing
  - Ilinx
    - disorientation
Agon

- Greek word for competitive struggle
  - n.b. "agony", "antagonist"
- Competitive play
- The goal is to defeat an opponent
  - especially another human opponent
- Winning demonstrates superior mastery of some skill
- Examples
  - any competitive sport, chess, Warcraft
Alea

- Latin word for dice
- Chance-based competition
- The goal is to win
  - but it is fate that decides
- Winning demonstrates one's luck
  - or perhaps one's understanding of probability
- Examples
  - Sorry, Thunderstorm, Lottery
Mimicry

- The assumption of a role
- The goal is to sustain the role
  - through acting and improvising
- Success demonstrates one's ingenuity and empathy for a character

Examples
- "House", Dungeons & Dragons, Any MMORPG
No simple translation
- "the inducement of vertigo"
- "creation of disorientation"

Is this play?
- how else to categorize play activities like "Crack the Whip"?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caillois' Play Taxonomy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paideia (free, improvised)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimicry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wind Waker
Application

- Most video games combine multiple forms of play
- Wind Waker
  - Mimicry component
    - through the avatar
  - Agon component
    - combat (ritualized) with other characters
  - Alea component
    - random treasures appear when exploring
- Guitar Hero
  - ?
Play Schemas

- Play of Experience (10/3)
  - the "core mechanic"
    - what is the major activity of the game

- Play of Pleasure
  - fun
    - what makes the game enjoyable

- Play of Meaning
  - coherence
    - how does the game create meaning

- Narrative Play
  - story
    - what makes the game tell a story

- Play of Simulation (10/8)
  - verisimilitude
    - what makes the game feel "real"

- Guest speaker (10/10)
  - Patrick Curry, Game Designer for Midway Games’ Stranglehold

- Social Play (10/15)
  - the play community

- Play quiz (10/17) / Case study (Katamari Damacy)

- Play paper due (10/24)
What makes a game fun?
- Difficult question
- Fun is hard to define

Two answers
- reinforcement
  - system of rewards and punishments
  - keyed to mastery of game skills
- flow
  - state of total involvement
  - induced by tight feedback, concentration and compelling environment
  - the "channel" between boredom and frustration
Example

- Wind Waker
  - player is periodically rewarded with new artifacts (weapons, etc.)
  - some artifacts let the player defeat enemies
    - rewards of ability
  - some artifacts let the player access new parts of the map
    - rewards of access
Meaning

- The play of a game gives rise to a system of meanings

- Symbols
  - red cross = health powerup
  - blood stain on the floor = proximity of monster

- Semiotic system
  - the linking of different symbols to a "language" unique to the game

- This is part of what we mean by being "immersed" in a game
  - we "see" the game world as a complex web of meaning
  - just like the real world
Aporia and Epiphany

- **Aporia**
  - doubt, difficulty in establishing the truth of something

- **Epiphany**
  - the moment of realization or recognition

- Many games confront the player with objects / situations of unknown meaning
  - produces aporia ("What am I supposed to do now?"
  - through interaction with the game world the player discovers what to do ("Aha")

- **Epiphany is a reward**
  - "I have solved the puzzle"
    - often also of access or ability

- **But it also is an enhancement of meaning**
  - our understanding of the game world become deeper
Example

- Wind Waker
  - a variety of environments
    - volcano
    - forest
    - ocean
    - mountainside
  - monsters
    - each has a preferred environment
    - player learns what monsters to expect
  - abilities / weapons
    - weapons are effective against different kinds of monsters
    - weapons are made available when needed for puzzles / monsters in a given environment
  - boss
    - boss monster related thematically to the environmental level
  - player
    - learns what to expect in each environment and how to respond
Every game has a narrative structure
  - tension / relaxation
Some games add many other narrative devices on this structure
  - Final Fantasy
  - Halo
Others very little
  - Asteroids
  - Soul Calibre
Narrative descriptors

- Detailed characterization
  - appearance
  - backstory
- Cut-scenes
  - video
  - in-game
- Text
Example

- Wind Waker
  - dialog
  - cut-scenes
    - intro / preview
    - rewards
  - characters
Core Mechanic

- What the player does to play
- Performative loop
  - perception of the game world
  - analysis of the situation
  - selection of action
  - performance and evaluation of action
- Different games emphasize different aspects
Terminological note

- This is not how everyone defines the term
  - some would describe this as the "primary gameplay mode"
- We will use our book's definition
Phenomenology

- takes as fundamental the physical and haptic experience of objects
- giving perception and interaction priority over reasoned reflection
  - study of "phenomena" (how things appear)
- Heidegger's hammer
  - when we use a hammer
    - we don't think about how it works
    - we think about what we will do with it
    - it "comes to hand"
  - we only reason about it
    - when something goes wrong
    - when it is designed badly
How do we describe the experience of using well-made hammer?
  - very hard

≠ Description of Outcome
  - "The nails went in easily."

≠ Description of Tool
  - "The hammer was well-balanced, solid without being too heavy."

We need precise vocabulary
  - sensation
    - grip, fit to hand, vibration on impact, sound
  - mental state
    - confidence associated with a good tool
  - etc.
    - Ask a carpenter!

More importantly
  - we need the ability to interrogate our own flow of experience
    - and not get caught up hammering
Our Task

- Develop such a vocabulary for games
- We need to describe the experience of play
  - not the outcome
    - "It was fun."
  - not the game itself
    - "The graphics were beautiful."
- What is the "experience of play"?
Core Mechanic Loop

Evaluation

- Perception
- Analysis

Execution

Decision
Guitar Hero

- Perception
- Analysis
- Decision
- Execution / Evaluation
Core mechanic themes

- Limited number of core mechanic themes
  - common to many video games
  - often combined

- Most common
  - aimed attack
  - strategic battle
  - collection
  - exploration
  - race
  - puzzle
Aimed attack

- Characteristics
  - Conflict with fast-moving opposing force

- Examples
  - Asteroids
  - Centipede
  - Soul Calibre

- Basic elements
  - Perception
    - range of enemy
  - Analysis
    - available moves
    - my strengths / weaknesses
    - opponent's strengths / weaknesses
  - Decision
    - move to use
  - Execution / Evaluation
    - move, attack, defend, impact
Strategic battle

- Characteristics
  - Conflict with slow moving opposing force
  - Gathering and deployment of resources

- Examples
  - Civilization III
  - Warcraft II
  - Chess

- Basic elements
  - Perception
    - range / configuration of enemy
    - available resources
  - Analysis
    - available moves
    - strengths / weaknesses
    - resource exploitation
    - long-term consequences
  - Decision
    - force deployment
    - force development
    - resource acquisition
  - Execution / Evaluation
    - direct units
    - consequences may not be immediate
Collection

- Characteristics
  - accumulation of something

- Examples
  - PacMan
  - Katamari Damacy

- Basic elements
  - Perception
    - location of items
    - obstacles
  - Analysis
    - path to items
    - avoidance of obstacles
  - Decision
    - trajectory to follow
  - Execution / Evaluation
    - move, grab
Exploration

- Characteristics
  - Exploration of a large unknown environment

- Examples
  - Legend of Zelda (all)
  - Myst

- Basic elements
  - Perception
    - opportunities for traversing the world
    - obstacles
  - Analysis
    - navigational options
    - overcoming obstacles
  - Decision
    - where to go
  - Execution / Evaluation
    - move
Race

- Characteristics
  - Rapid traversal of defined path

- Examples
  - Mario Kart
  - F-Zero GX

- Basic elements
  - Perception
    - path of motion
  - Analysis
    - desired trajectory
    - vehicle capabilities
  - Decision
    - optimal trajectory
  - Execution / Evaluation
    - adjust speed, steering
Puzzle

- Characteristics
  - Solving logical puzzles

- Examples
  - Mastermind
  - Tetris
  - Lemmings

- Basic elements
  - Perception
    - puzzle elements
  - Analysis
    - reasoning
  - Decision
    - likely solution path
  - Execution / Evaluation
    - attempt solution or partial solution
Multiple modes

- Most modern games have multiple modes with different mechanics
- Example
  - Wind Waker
    - sailing
    - fighting
    - exploring
    - flying
- The player has to master these modes
Combinations

- Race + Aimed Attack
  - Mario Kart Double Dash!!

- Exploration + Aimed Attack + Puzzle
  - Zelda, Metroid, Halo, Tomb Raider, etc.

- Exploration + Strategic Battle + Puzzle
  - KOTOR, Pokemon, many RPGs

- Exploration + Puzzle
  - Myst, classic adventure games
Core mechanic

- Specific instantiation of the thematic ideas
  - what kinds of moves?
  - what must be perceived?
  - complexity of decisions
Monday

- Simulation
- Chapter 27