What Can We Learn From Games?

By Stephen Turbek

What are good experiences?

Imagine your everyday life as a perfect experience - you can focus on one thing at a time, you know exactly what you want, and how to get it. Imagine there is no penalty for failure and you can start over anytime.

This is a pretty compelling scenario, and a good indication for why people have always loved games. Studying games and what makes games compelling can make us better designers, strategists, and business people because it focuses us on what people want, and how they want to get it. In designing an experience (from Web site to business plan), the lessons of game playing are a good guide to people's desires, needs, and ultimately, fulfillment.
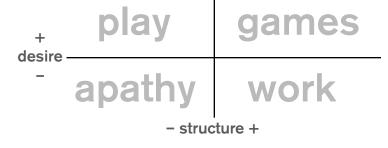
Because games are played for entertainment, they must be almost perfect experiences -hassles and disappointments quickly kill the fun. This makes them good models to compare with less entertaining experiences, and suggest new models. Game design has consistently lead the way in creating innovative interactivity and immersive environments. This doesn't mean that anything can be turned into a game, but many of the aspects of game-playing are extremely relevant to creating engaging design.

Games Reflect Our Desires

For all their rules, games allow us a range of freedom we rarely see in every-day life. They let us act out serious emotions in a positive, communal way - a way for us to be confrontational without the threat of consequences. They let us act out our fantasies and share them with other people. They help us learn, and give us a reason to spend time together. Games let us predict the future, read our opponents face, embody a different character, act strategically and ultimately see how we measure up. When we lose, they teach us to lose gracefully. Most importantly, we can do that most elusive thing in real life: WIN.

> **A game is a challenging experience defined by rules where the players make choices to beat their opponents or chance.**

All games start from some insight into what we want –our desire for physical power fuels violent games, our desire to figure things out feeds puzzles. Games take inspiration from where people come from and what they want. A popular game in the Soviet Union was the very capitalist Monopoly™. Good games find a subject that interests people and put it into a competitive structure. Putting a trivia memory challenge on a board, enabling the players to keep score and race toward an end, makes Trivial Pursuit™ . The structure of a game can make simple tasks enjoyable. Since the dawn of time, parents have been getting their children to do chores by making them into games. The first thing to learn from games is that a successful experience is about what your audience wants and how they want to get it.

Games Engage Us

There are thousands of games with many variations, but they all incorporate a few basic types of game play. Each invokes a different aspect of what engages us. Strategy games like Chess or Go have the player work within a contained environment and plan out the future. Action games like Quake™ or Pinball require quick reflexes and engage the senses with intense visuals and sound. Physical games like Pictionary™ or Charades have the player draw or use their body in unusual ways to illustrate an idea, or act out a scene. Narrative games like Dungeons and Dragons™ let the player act as a character within a story. Puzzle games such as Tetris™ and Where's Waldo™ challenge the player to recognize patterns and manipulate them. All games have a bit of each type of game play, but the best games engage the player on multiple levels of game play, giving a rich experience. If the experience you are creating helps your audience get what they want, they will be interested. Engaging them in the experience with graphics, sounds, and narratives will increase their enjoyment of the experience and your success. While keeping your audience engaged is important, it is important not to distract them from their goal, or they will find another way to do it (potentially with a competitor).

Games Impose Voluntary Order

The essence of a game is its rules: the clarity of them is what makes games dif-

The Ideal Experience Balances Structure and Desire

ferent from life. The best rules are those that work with the premise to define and direct the experience without hindering it. The most successful games are those with rules that are simple to understand, but are difficult to accomplish. Mastermind™, a board game, was advertised as taking "a minute to learn, a lifetime to master". Games where the player learns the rules in stages keeps them from losing confidence along the learning curve. In every experience, a sense of rules and boundaries is required. If the experience you've designed breaks down or becomes confusing, your audience will lose faith in its ability to deliver and they will give up.

Games Are Social

Who plays the game is almost as important as the game itself. We often play games simply as an excuse to get together. Group games have a lot of interaction, simple rules, and a leisurely schedule. Games played alone or with only two players can be much longer and more complicated. Whether the experience is alone, with two players, or in a group, the social context will determine its effectiveness. Giving your audience the opportunity to share information and communicate with you will make them feel connected and increase their confidence in the experience you're creating.

Games Give Us Roles

Games create a world in a player's mind: a stage and a story for the game play to unfold in. For most games, this is more conceptual than visual. Many games require only the hint of a narrative. Chess is obviously about a conflict of kingdoms, but the names of the pieces (Kings, Queens, Knights, Castles, etc) is all it takes to add a rich flavor to the game. In every experience, the audience wants to be sure of the role that they are playing: Shopper, Researcher, Author, etc.

Games Stimulate Our Senses

Whether a game is digital or physical, we respond to iconic and tactile cues. Pong, an early arcade game, represented the player only with a white rectangle, but the sound and simulated impact of a ping pong ball made the player feel like they actually were holding a paddle. The visceral aspects of a game (the rolling of dice, the sound of a cascade of coins, feedback in a joystick, lining up captured pieces) stimulate our senses and make a richer experience.

Games Let Us Win

Winning can take many forms, but the common thread is a sense of accomplishment over an uncertain situation – and we want to feel we earned it. Our innate sense of fairness makes us want to win or lose based on our actions, even if our opponent is chance. The Western mind is very attuned to the Aristotelian dramatic triad. Prologue, Climax, Conclusion are the three stages in a classical play and they apply directly to game play. Experiences that do not follow this structure, cause the player to feel lost. The player wants to know there is an overall structure and goal, but experience the process on their own.

In order to keep the game interesting, the overall narrative must be punctuated with small obstacles that renew the player's enthusiasm. Trivial Pursuit™ is a series of mini-challenges leading up to a final goal. If your audience is to reach a complicated goal, they must have milestones to see that they are making progress.

What Games Can Teach Us

Games are a process, a social convention, and a temporary mental state. They only differ from other experiences in that their function is to entertain. The experiences we create can func-

tion more effectively by learning from games. When creating a new experience, start with what your audience wants. Explore what they call it and how they expect to get it. The context of their experience colors how they will act. Think about why they are having this experience, how they got there, and with whom they are having it. Engage them in as many senses as possible to keep their interest. Make boundaries and rules for the experience, and communicate them clearly. Let them know how long the experience will last, what they will accomplish, and what they have to do. Make sure they understand their role and the goals and responsibilities they have. If possible, enable them to communicate with you and other audience members to socialize the experience. Keep the user informed of their progress and reward them if they succeed. Most importantly, have a sense of humor – after all, it's only a game!

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for more information:

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