

Sources of fun in games

A. Introduction

Entertainment in the form of video games has developed rapidly in the last decade, almost too rapidly. The technology and infrastructure has improved dramatically, leading to stunning visuals. The computer games market has become immensely popular, and more and more companies invest in it every day. However, with all the technological improvements and the huge investments required to produce games that compete in the market, the primary ingredient of games has become overshadowed: gameplay itself.

What makes us play games? Fun. The primary defining feature of games is that they are played to have fun. But what makes a game fun? What makes people enjoy spending countless hours on an activity with no material gain? Unfortunately, there is no single answer to this question. Fortunately, all answers to this question are valid, since fun is subjective. What this essay aims to accomplish is to quantify the many aspects in which games can be fun.

B. Sources of Fun

Richard A. Bartle, a British writer and game researcher, has separated the driving forces behind playing games to four types: Achievement, Exploration, Socializing, and Killing. Although his primary area of research was on massively multiplayer games, these criteria seem to fit the general types of players well, when expanded.

ACHIEVEMENT

For many players, achievement and progress is the main driving force of a game. A visible progress indicator is all the feedback they need. They play the game, they get rewarded. Sometimes, this is in the form of levels. Sometimes, it is in the form of skill increases. In some cases, it is transparent. Setting goals and working towards them is a popular method of playing open ended games. A goal can range anywhere between collecting all items of a set, making it to the top of the scoreboard, or winning a tournament.

The aspect of achievement is present in all game types. It is generally the process of working towards a goal. More often than not, this is already set by the game. For example, collecting 2000 credits in Dune II. Sometimes, the player sets his own goal. For example, becoming an Interceptor pilot in Eve Online. Goals set by the player himself are not as tempting as goals set by the game, unless the game provides means to track your progress in it. Tracking progress is the major element these players want in a game. The difficulty of the goal is also important, it should be easy enough to tempt the player to finish it, yet it should be hard enough to offer a sense of accomplishment.

One way of making a game addictive is by placing multiple goals that are progressed at the same time. By the time the player achieves one goal, he becomes close to achieving another. Primary examples of this phenomenon are the so called "role playing" games, where the aim is to increase the character's level and gain new abilities. A familiar chain of events like "Just one more quest" followed up by "I'm so close to the next level, I'll kill some more monsters" followed up by "Oh this quest is almost done as well, I'll finish it" often results in burned food in unattended ovens, or having to go to work with terrible headaches from lack of sleep.

EXPLORATION

However, achievement is not the only reason players try to reach the next level in role playing games. For some players, getting to a new level isn't exciting. They are more interested in discovering what skill they get at the new level. This is what Bartle refers to as Exploration; finding out new things.

There are many examples that fit this criterion. It is particularly more exciting when the player does not know he is about to learn something new, in advance. Getting to the 4th level in Dune II and seeing a new build option for tanks is a lot satisfying if the player has not seen them in action earlier. This is another way to make games addictive for players enjoying exploration - if players encounter new things every few levels, they will keep playing to discover more. That is why some people want to finish the single player campaign in a strategy game before they try the multiplayer mode - they want to discover the units one by one. Having all of the content presented to them at once takes away most of the pleasure.

In other game types, finding new weapons, scouting out new areas, and uncovering secrets are other examples of exploration. For some players, there is a mysterious form of pleasure associated with uncovering the "fog of war". They want to make sure not a single patch of black fog remains on their map. For other players, the number of people who already know what they are about to uncover is important as well. That is why finding out secrets is more pleasurable than merely picking up a new weapon.

Some game manuals contain a lot of information about the game. This may include the abilities of the units, and in some cases, even secrets. Although this brings down the entertainment factor for explorers in most cases, it sometimes serves a positive purpose. In some games the player has problems accessing the content. This may be due to difficulty, as the player may be stuck somewhere. It may also be due to lack of resources, where for example, the game might require the player to spend 12 hours a day or know 39 other people to achieve the next goal. In cases like this, these players spend a lot of time reading the game manual, game guides, or FAQ's as that is the only way they can explore the game content.

SOCIALIZING

Although some players simply enjoy accomplishing a goal, for other people, what is important is telling others about their accomplishment. While some players take pleasure from finding a secret, for other players the pleasure comes from sharing their newfound knowledge with others. These players are who are referred to as socializers.

Most multiplayer games promote socialization between players, but there are different degrees to it. In a first person shooter deathmatch game, a socializer tries to achieve a better social status by getting better at the game. However, he also has to make his name heard. Creating a signature spray-paint for Half-Life Deathmatch, or using a catch phrase extensively in Quake 3, are acts of socializing.

In cooperative play, including strategy and RPG genres, the level of socialization is higher as players spend more time talking to each other. Friends can be made, and in some games, friendships are important. An even higher form of socialization is achieved in hotseat games, usually played on consoles or arcade machines. Small scale LAN events also fall into this category. In these events, players can socialize at a much stronger level, as the socialization does not interfere with their gameplay. Using the keyboard for chat prohibits the player from using it to play the game, but talking to other people in the same room does not limit the players in any way.

Although players of this type seem to be more inclined towards multiplayer games, singleplayer experiences also exist. Most singleplayer games have communities, fansites and forums in which people socialize. It is not uncommon for some people to spend more time in the game forums than playing the game itself. Overall, a community is what keeps a game going. It is always easy to stop playing a game, but leaving a community is not as simple. This is why experienced game companies often try to create communities for their games. It can easily be done by creating a well moderated forum, and providing a fansite construction kit.

Another thing that should be mentioned is that some games actually try to mimic social interactions. Games like Sims, and to a lesser extent, other genres such as RPGs, allow players to build up an influence with non player characters. Although this type of interaction is quite artificial, it still appeals to some socializers in a way similar to communities of real people. It could be said that a socializer rates his success in a singleplayer RPG with the number of NPC's he is positively involved with.

KILLING

The last category of players is quite the opposite of socializers in many ways, yet quite similar in others. They are generally quite concerned about what other people think about them, but what they are looking for is negative reactions like hatred and fear. Most killers take pleasure from simply grieving other players. This can be done through scamming, theft, or simply murder. They try to undermine the efforts of other players, and simply take pleasure from the frustration of others.

Although this is what the category normally symbolizes, there are other types of pleasure that would best fall into the killer category. Competition is one case. For example, a Starcraft tournament is an activity in which an achiever and killer derive separate forms of entertainment. An achiever aims to be the best, and get to the top. Individual battles are not of significant importance to him. All he wants is to eventually get to the top. On the contrary, the killer cares little about winning the tournament. He simply wants to win the game at hand, in the most overwhelming way possible. Or perhaps he only signs up for the tournament because he wants to battle a specific person that he has a grudge with.

In order to interest these kinds of people, a game needs to offer competitive elements, and ways in which players can grief others. Most games prefer to do it in contained environments, such as the pvp continent (Felucca) in Ultima Online. Other games allow free grieving, but punish players who overdo it. An example would be getting a weapon lock for teamkilling too many people, in Planetside. On the contrary, some games like Eve Online are actually built around grieving. Interestingly, these games are still playable because of the way grieving is managed and contained.

Most gamers can be accurately described with these four types of enjoyment. Noone belongs to a single category; everyone gets all the different types of pleasures at different times. Most people are simply more inclined to focus on one or two types of enjoyment, but it would be best to tailor a game to accommodate all four types of enjoyment described here.

C. Additional Sources

Although types of fun can be separated according to types of players, there are other important aspects of the game that influence how the fun is received. Although these do not count as types of fun on their own, they support and strengthen the overall enjoyment the player gets.

INTERACTIVITY

The interface of a game is extremely important for keeping the player interested. The amount of agency given to the player, and the transparency of the controls allows players to decide what they want to do and immediately do it, without having to worry about how to express it to the computer, or double checking to see if that action is allowed within game mechanics. Restrictions are never a problem; inconsistency is. As long as a player knows what he isn't capable of doing, he will not try to undertake actions outside his character's limitations.

Feedback is also part of this feeling. A player needs to be able to receive whatever information he needs. A game should provide means for players to see what is going on. On a beat-em up game the focus is on killing enemies, thus their health bars should always be up, and updating regularly with each hit. On an RPG game, when a player is using a skill or casting a spell, the appropriate button should flash. In any game with mouse controls, the button flash is very important: Any clickable object or button should glow in some way when the player hovers over it with the mouse. There should also be a separate visual and audio feedback for clicking the object or button, so the player receives immediate verification of his actions.

Although these sound like small details, they increase the awareness of the player, and the pleasure he receives, by minimizing the amount of time he has to spend passing the intermediate barrier between him and the game. He clearly sees his commands were received, from the feedback given. As long as the feedback is consistent, he starts to understand how the game works in general, and after some time, he does not even rely on feedback anymore. The learning curve for a game is directly related to its degree of interactivity.

ORIGINALITY

Another important aspect that attracts many gamers is the ways in which a game offers a new experience. Unfortunately, this aspect is highly subjective, as it depends on what other games the player has played in the past, and it is also hard to add to a game, as it requires a lot of time and effort. Fortunately, there are still ways to work towards this aspect when making a game.

The easiest way to give players new experiences is to dig up old ones. By analyzing ideas used in popular games in the past, and putting them in a new one, it is possible to revive these ideas for the new generation, and have them experience something new to them. Even for gamers who have played the old game from which the idea was taken, the new game will hopefully provide a new setting and technology, giving the idea a new hue and making the new experience unique.

Another way of creating original content is by combining some features or genres together. Although this is quite risky, it can produce spectacular results if done right. Although merging does indeed produce unique results, it is quite a challenge as there are always gaps to be filled, and although most features of the mixed genre can be derived from the parent genres, some features will have to be created from scratch, to strengthen the transitions where the two genres meet, and fix any inconsistencies that arise.

Although originality does not make a game entertaining on its own, it increases the strength of the pleasure players receive from other sources, as they will look at the whole gameplay experience from a more fascinated perspective.

IMMERSION

The last way a game can reinforce a player's experience is engulfing him in it. Some game types are more suitable for this than others, but all games should aim to push the degree of immersion offered, to the limits of the genre.

One way in which this can be offered is through the creation of an atmosphere. Sound and visuals are very important, but are not enough on their own. Text is what characterizes the setting. Speech is vital. Random talk between non-player characters gives the player an idea of what his character would say in the same situation. Some games try to establish a personality for the main character, while other games allow the players to do it. Both methods work, if done right. If the game establishes a personality, it needs to be interesting and appealing. If it allows the player to do it, the other characters must reflect on the personality the player created accordingly.

Another way to immerse players into the game is to offer a deep story. The way in which the story must be told is of utmost importance, as it may end up not interesting the player, and alienating him from the game instead, if not done right. Furthermore, how interesting a story is, is subjective. Thus, it is never a good idea to exclusively focus on the story and neglect other areas of the game. It should be used as an auxiliary tool to promote other types of pleasure.

All in all, immersion makes the player forget about game mechanics, and fully experience what he wants. It makes the experience long lasting, and makes the player become part of the game.

D. Can you have it all?

Although these are all distinct forms of pleasure associated with separate events, they work together, and there is no reason a game can not be experienced in all these ways at the same time, by different people. The key to successfully appealing to all the kinds of players is to choose features that appeal to multiple types of gamers. For example, as has been pointed out, competition attracts both achievers and killers. Secrets attract explorers and socializers. There are countless other examples. A game does not need to drown the player in features to provide all forms of pleasure. It simply needs to offer enough to make it interesting to everyone.

Whatever features it chooses to include, the game should also make sure it has the technical capabilities (graphics, sound, interface design) to deliver the gameplay experience fully to the player. Regardless of how good a game design is, if the game can't deliver it to the player, it doesn't work. The aim should be to work on core features first to address all types of players, but leave enough room to fully develop the means to deliver the features as well.

By including the means to provide different forms of entertainment, a game becomes long lasting and never loses its popularity over the years, as players themselves develop, and find new ways to enjoy the content. This gives the player an even stronger experience as he replays the game. Thus, it is important to study these forms of entertainment, and tailor a game accordingly.

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