

Chapter 9

Critical Gameplay: Design Techniques and Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces critical gameplay design as a technique for creating digital games that offer alternative play. Critical gameplay provides the opportunity to explore game ethics through the way games are designed to be played. Since game designers outline the rules of play, game designs outline designer's definitions of what is ethical and important. Taking the notion that design is a reflection of the designer's values, this chapter outlines methodologies for exposing the intrinsic values in play and creating gameplay models from alternative ethics and values. The chapter concludes with examples of critical gameplay games that have been demonstrated to international audience.

INTRODUCTION

In his keynote to the participants of the International Game Developer's Association's (IGDA) Global 2010 Game Jam, Ste Curran spoke of the wilderness outside the space of traditional game design. He claims in his address that "gaming is this giant creative space, surrounded by a frontier, and beyond that frontier there are so many countries left to explore" (Curran, 2010). This chapter suggests outlines one approach to exploring that frontier, where many game designers see an ever

more rich set of possibilities. It is the space of undiscovered processes, or game play mechanics beyond our dreams. It is also the space of alternate ethics and morality. We are just beginning to map the discipline of software studies; likewise, game design is only starting to explore the ways in which game mechanics are in themselves ethical prescriptions.

One need only consider the conventional models of play to identify the edge of this frontier. It can be found in the prevalence of absolute assumptions in game design. Some examples include the following: collection of objects is good, elimination of obstacles is the best way to

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handle them, and that tools always offer benefits to us, never complicating our relationship with the challenges we face. This “wilderness” is also expressed in the host of assumptions we make and accept about the ways games are to be played and the expectations that enshroud them.

Critical gameplay is the study and production of computer and video games that seek to explore alternative ways to play. These play models are derived from critical reflection on the standards of gameplay and the culture that exists around them. As a three-step process, critical gameplay is created by observing a set of standard assumptions, deconstructing the assumptions in that standard, and reorienting that set of assumptions through the production of an alternate model of play.

By introduction the concept of critical gameplay design, this chapter will explore and enhance opportunities for critical evaluation of conventional game mechanics to create a clearer vision of the contours and boundaries of game design.

Such study is not part of the established practice of understanding how shooting game characters may or may not encourage violent behavior (Kutner & Olson, 2008), for example. It is not merely about understanding game scenarios and identifying their ethical underpinnings. It is more critical and more philosophical. It is no longer enough to ask about whether or not games train us into new patterns (Squire, 2003). Instead, this new area of study, calls for the inverse. It addresses questions about the rules in games. These questions may be about how games reinforce specific rationales or how designs bias toward specific ethics.

The proposed method for exploration of games delivers the potential to offer different paradigms for both the way we design game and the way we play them. Discovering alternative ways to play offers benefits in games for entertainment, education, and persuasion. The application of this methodology to digital game technology offers benefits to education, business, and societal study.

Just as explorers benefited from accepting that the world is not flat, game design can benefit from

the understanding and acceptance that games are not merely a reflection of social values, but they actually prescribe models of ethics (Barr, Noble, & Biddle, 2007). These ethics are transmitted more deeply than through the superficial monologues of non-player characters, or in the story-driven decisions a player makes. They are an integral part of the gameplay, surfacing in the actually mechanics of play. Yet, the evaluation and creation of alternate game mechanics still remains an uncharted wilderness.

BACKGROUND

Any understanding of the integration and necessity for play in society typically begins with a reference to J. Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1955). Much like the requisite attract screen of an arcade game, or a magic potion in a role-playing game, Huizinga’s text serves as a lure. It brings the uninitiated into an academic understanding of games and society and the nearly omnipotent and certainly pervasive power of play.

Like good game design, this writing will not disappoint by glossing over this seminal text, but like good game design, its purpose is not to replay what has already been experienced. Instead, consider Huizinga as a foundational prerequisite. Many of the phrases and brilliant quotes of the text are unlike the focus of this chapter, familiar and often reproduced. Just as a player assumes multiple lives or the value of manna, you as reader can begin reading under the specter of *Homo Ludens*. But like the alternative play this chapter champions, a healthy critical distance to the often-referenced text will afford new potential. For the reader Huizinga exists as traditional game design, and this chapter seeks to address the non-traditional.

Consider only one small quote from Huizinga’s book, “play creates order, is order. Play demands order absolute and supreme” (1955). If play is order, than an analysis of the unexplored

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