Now It's Impersonal: On Player Decentered Design

Edward Morrell
Aalto University
Department of Art and Media
02150 Espoo, Finland
edward.morrell@aalto.fi

ABSTRACT
This paper presents Player Decentered Design as a design approach that actively opposes and subverts Player Centered Design. Arguments against Player Centered Design are that it restricts the possibility space of videogames, through a focus on player needs and desires above all other concerns. These criticisms are explored through an experimental game design documented as autoethnographic text. Player Decentered Design is presented as deriving from a reflective design process in communication with the literature and personal play history of the author. The approach is determined by a set of constraints that can then be utilised in future exploratory game design.

Keywords
game design, design research, player centered design, autoethnography

INTRODUCTION
Academic research into videogame design has developed through the work of scholars from a range of disparate fields, the humanities and social sciences, computer science and human computer interaction (HCI), design research and the applied arts. Much of this research is surprisingly relatable owing to the frequent use of commonly shared references, specifically two popular game design textbooks published at the start of the century; Salen & Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* (2003) and *Game Design Workshop* by Fullerton et al. (2004). Both books are seen as formative texts to the emerging field of game studies, remaining ubiquitous in the years and decades since, across contemporary game design research and teaching. Despite their widespread adaptation, critical appraisement of these texts has remained relatively slight. This paper provides one such examination, responding to these book's primary functions in turn, by utilising game design as part of the research process. An experimental approach to game creation is documented that purposefully aims to subvert and oppose some of the design assumptions disseminated from these seminal books throughout the studies of videogame design.

The *playcentric* design approach is fundamental to Fullerton's *Game Design Workshop* (2008). This Player Centered Design process integrates playtester data into each stage of game development, providing cyclical feedback to help guide the design decisions of game makers towards a successful final product. Throughout this process, the role of a game designer is positioned as an "advocate for the player" (Fullerton 2008, 2), whose focus is to design and iterate on systems to satisfy a user's demands and desires. Wilson & Sicart (2010) have argued that one negative consequence arising from the ideology of player advocacy and its resultant accessibility turn is the perspective of *player narcissism*. In this one-sided arrangement, designers are merely providers to the players who, as the customers, are always right. Wilson & Sicart recognise

Proceedings of DiGRA 2022

playcentrism as being a fundamentally conservative approach to game making, restricting the exploration of videogames as a medium. In opposing this concept of playcentrism, this paper proposes an alternative approach of Player Decentered Design.

Player Centered Design is central to several game creation methods in the literature, regardless of whether the resulting game is intended as traditional or experimental. The design process documented in this paper first looked at Flanagan's Critical Play method (2009) as a suitable framework for value-led game making. However, this method has been criticised elsewhere (Marcotte & Khaled 2017) as deviating little from the traditional player centered iterative model, beyond the inclusion of ethical values and diversity. Flanagan's method, alongside Waern & Back's (2017) Experimental Game Design and the MDMA method of Applied Game Design Research (Khaled et al. 2018) all descend from and reference the iterative model of Fullerton's (2008) playcentric approach. Even an apparently subversive game design method such as Howell's (2011) Schematically Disruptive Game Design is described as being decidedly player-centric. Player Decentered Design is a concept that developed by not being beholden to any existing game design method. This paper is an attempt to describe, evocatively through the use of autoethnography, the complexities associated with trying to break from playcentrism, presenting a foundation for future research to develop further.

PLAYER CENTERED DESIGN

Soon after *Year One* (Aarseth 2001) of Computer Game Studies, several influential game design guidebooks were published, following what Sotamaa (2007) has called a long gap between game book publications. Books such as Salen & Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* (2003) and *Game Design Workshop* by Fullerton et al. (2004) have been described as canonical to game studies, despite having been written for designers rather than the research community and thus lacking a "systematic view and epistemic transparency" (Kultima 2018, 11). Both books offer tools and theories intended to aid in the production of successful game designs. Central to Salen & Zimmerman's approach is the concept of *meaningful play*, defined as the player having a responsive, understandable and impactful relationship with the game system (2003, 50). Salen & Zimmerman promote an iterative model of game development, similar to the method Fullerton has described since the second edition of her book (2008) as the *playcentric* design process. According to Fullerton (2008, 10), this approach entails "involving the player in your design process from conception through completion". The playcentric design process is separated into three parts. First, players should be involved from the earliest stage of the game production, enabling designers to set goals for the intended player experience. Second, prototyping and playtesting is implemented early so that flaws in the design can be quickly detected and fixed. Finally, a cyclical and iterative process of designing, testing and evaluating the game continues between the designers and playtesters until the game is deemed complete. The designer's role, as the player advocate, is expected to primarily focus on the player experience above other production concerns such as story or art direction. Playtesting is thus described as "the heart of the design process" (Fullerton 2008, 2-4).

While never described by Fullerton as such, the playcentric design process is virtually indistinguishable from the concept of Player Centered Design. Similar to how the term playability derives from usability, and player experience derives from user experience (UX) (Sánchez et al. 2012), Player Centered Design is a gamified version of User Centered Design, inheriting related HCI research methodologies such as user studies and heuristic testing (Charles et al. 2005). Kumar & Herger (2013) discuss how both design philosophies centralise the users and their goals throughout a development process, in contrast to developers or engineers operating on a presumption of user needs while otherwise centralising technologies. Player Centered Design is then presented by Kumar & Herger as a process and framework to aid in the development of gamification

software, rather than videogame design. This application of Player Centered Design from within HCI could broadly benefit from existing game studies research as it has related to understanding players in more complex ways. However, Kumar & Herger's emphasis on fun, trust and delight as the goal of gamification, effectively strips out and sanitises other playful experiences that could still exist within a Player Centered Design framework, such as sadism, subversion and suffering (Korhonen et al. 2009).

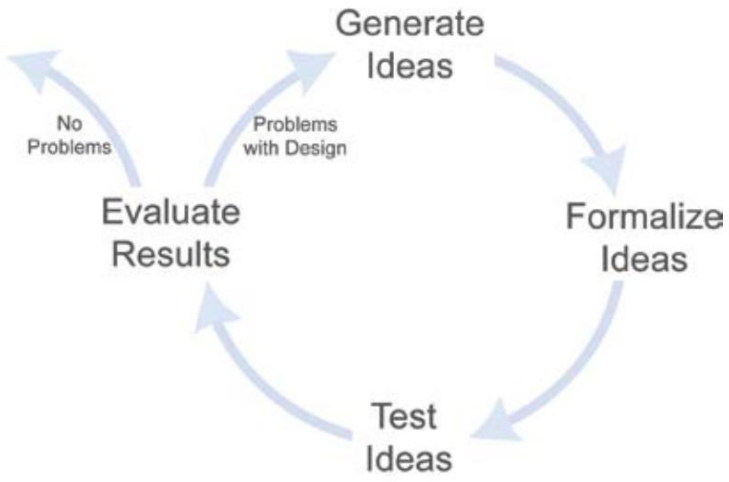

Figure 1: Iterative Process diagram from the fourth edition of *Game Design Workshop* (Fullerton 2018).

Player Centered Design is appealing from the perspectives of both industry and academia for several reasons. The Player's role, detached from the vested interests of game makers and other stakeholders, provides unique data to aid in the evaluation of the game design. This data can scale up in volume through expanding the playtester base and can be analysed via a range of qualitative and quantitative measures. Player Centered Design is understood as an iterative design process (Figure 1), which emphasises speed, to meet deliverable outcomes, and efficiency, to reduce unproductive time. The iterative cycle is not unique to the playcentric process and can be found across all software development as part of the Agile method (Keith 2010), which involves a continuous iteration between development and testing across the lifecycle of software. Agile is then often seen to contrast the older Waterfall method (Royce 1970), a development process following a more linear and sequential order.

The benefits of Player Centered Design were promoted by Ermi & Mäyrä (2005), who stated that such systematic and tested methodologies could offer a scientific legitimacy to the developing field of game studies. Speaking on their respective blogs, games researcher T.L. Taylor (2005) asked whether anyone was integrating Player Centered Design into their MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) game process, to which the game designer Raph Koster (2005) replied "anyone who isn't player centered in their design is an idiot." Koster went on to describe Player Centered Design as 'buzzwordy' before discussing it in terms of participatory design, focus groups and physiological testing, a looser interpretation of the term that represents many different areas of testing and development.

Sotamaa (2007) presents an analysis of game design books published between 2003 and 2006, including both the first edition of *Game Design Workshop* by Fullerton et al. (2004) and Salen & Zimmerman's (2003) *Rules of Play*. In attempting to offer some clarity on the issue of Player Centered Design, a concept not yet widely understood or

implemented, Sotamaa explored how the role of the player was being represented in game design textbooks. Presciently, Sotamaa discussed how the books would be influential not just to contemporary designers of the time, but in teaching game design fundamentals to future generations. Almost two decades later, the same core texts have remained popular in the teaching of game design worldwide, with books such as Fullerton's yet to be replaced, only regularly updated (Fullerton 2008, 2014, 2018), and the playcentric approach remaining central to the latest popular game design texts (Lemarchand 2021). Sotamaa acknowledges a growing academic interest in Player Centered Design, further exemplified by Björk & Juul (2012), when they describe five scholarly definitions of games as being essentially player-centric. Björk & Juul summarise these definitions as holding a perspective focusing on games as the product of a player's actions, rather than separately designed objects. In an uncommon criticism for game studies, they call this player-centric approach problematic because it ignores the individual aesthetic preferences, behaviours and investment that a player brings to the game.

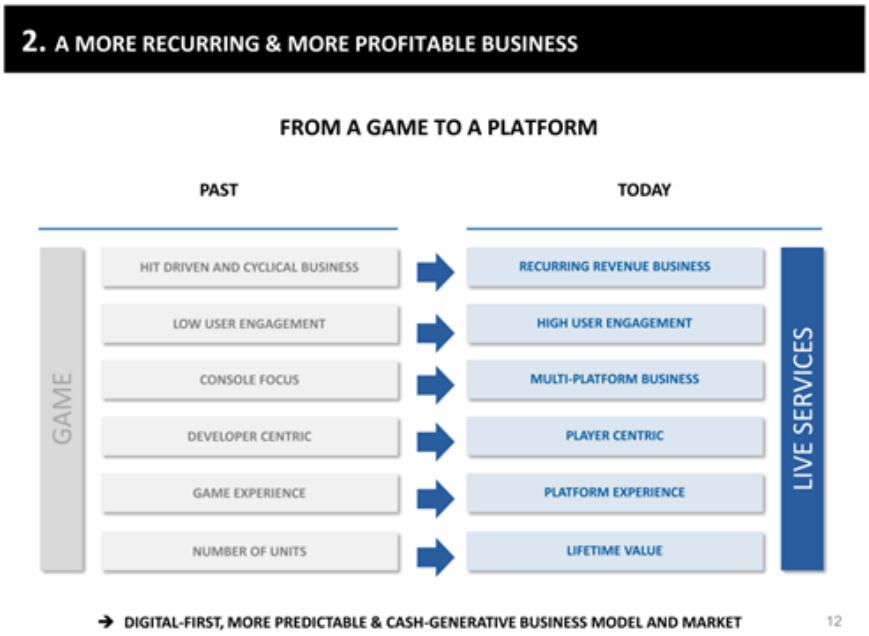

Figure 2: Slide from Ubisoft's third-quarter 2017-2018 financial report.

Player Centered Design is presented positively in AAA videogame publisher Ubisoft's February 2018 quarterly report (Figure 2). This report documents how their games are transforming into live services, products that are updated regularly while incorporating additional transactions instead of generating profit exclusively through an up-front purchase. One of the key pillars of this transformation, generally derided by the gaming press (Sterling 2018; Schreier 2018; Orland 2018), is the movement away from a Developer Centric to a Player Centric model, in support of a "more recurring & more profitable business" for their shareholders (Ubisoft 2018). This framing at least suggests that Ubisoft titles had previously been created according to a developer centric model. Developer centered design has been described by Paul (2018, 141) as problematic, owing to a traditional lack of diversity, enabling and reinforcing a "relatively homogenous group of players, designers, games, and experiences". Following the casual turn, User Centered Design was described as crucial for developers (Kuittinen et al. 2007) who had different interests than their target audience.

The movement away from developer centrism can be seen as an effort by industry to smooth out certain disparities between creators and audiences, in the ultimate pursuit of marketable and relatively anodyne content. The large budgets associated with game development enforce a conservative approach to game development, where publishers are unwilling to invest money into unproven ideas when it is safer to replicate what has come before (Paul 2018). This conservatism is then mirrored by a traditional audience of gamers that these companies aim to serve, who argue for "what comes next, what is acceptable, and what should be designed" (Paul 2018, 67).

The academic manifesto of abusive game design (Wilson & Sicart 2010) relates the conservatism of the videogame medium to an accessibility turn, described as a contemporary practice of making games more accessible to a wider audience. This may be better described today as a usability turn, with accessibility more commonly referring to designing for the needs of a disabled audience. As Wilson & Sicart describe it, this turn describes a widespread implementation of forgiving game design decisions, such as immediate respawning, that aim to decrease a player's potential frustration with the played game. They connect this accessibility turn to the idea of player narcissism, an "extreme but inevitable consequence of user-centered design practices", implying that by centering the player and catering for their every need, a mindset is created where the player, or customer, is always right (ibid, 41). While *player* can be understood as a value-neutral term similar to *user*, the consumerist language used here better fits with the label of *gamer*, described by Shaw (2012) as being an audience constructed by the games industry and defined by the media they consume. Paul (2018) has argued that it is the way games are designed that can be seen as responsible for producing certain negative behaviours in gamer culture. He describes videogames as seductive power fantasies, providing a sense of fairness to an audience who may otherwise feel powerless in their own lives, causing them to fiercely defend games against those who appear outside of the culture. Paul has offered some suggestions for designers who want to design against this toxicity, which he relates to the meritocratic norms embedded in game design, such as designing for players to pay to progress in games, rather than gating their progress through skill checks alone. Where Paul has used theory in support of his recommendations, the research outlined here has more directly implemented game design in the formulation of new solutions.

METHODOLOGY

This research documents the design and development process of a videogame from the perspective of the author as the sole creator. The results are presented as an autoethnography that has been built from a reflective design diary kept as the primary source of data. As practice-led research, this work can then be understood as fitting Frayling's (1993) category of research through art and design, producing knowledge gathered through a process rather than embodied in a finished artifact. Frayling identifies a method of action research in this category, where a diary is used to record an experiment later contextualised in a different textual form. The use of design diaries to document and reflect on game design activity was evaluated positively by Kuittinen & Kultima (2011), who based their method upon the guidelines proposed by Pedgley (2007). Pedgley describes how design diaries can be used as data collection tools, able to communicate the reflection, analysis and theorising necessary for practice-led research. Rather than being simple logs of time and work, Pedgley draws on the work of Donald Schön (1983) when describing reflection-on-action as the main mechanism for making diary content, a process through which the diarist records the self-conversation with their inner voice, while taking deliberate pauses to reflect on their design activity. In total, the diary entries documenting my design process produced over 43,000 words between 24 September 2017 to 10 April 2018.

These diary notes have been transformed into a primary source using autoethnography to create an accessible story text, a method that fully acknowledges the researcher's influence on the research, and embraces this subjectivity and emotionality (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Autoethnography has some precedence as a method in game studies, used to describe the subjective gameplay experience (Bjørkelo 2018), game development practice (Roth 2015) and the treatment of women in gamer cultures (Vossen 2018). Coulton & Hook (2017, 102) label practice-based design research into games as 'research through game design', leaning on Frayling's (1993) categorisation, and state that action research is a similar approach that fits their conceptualisation. While action research is traditionally associated with reflecting on actions and research within the field of education, Ellis (1999, 677) has stated that autoethnography can be thought of as "action research for the individual".

The design processes and decisions made throughout this research can be additionally contextualised through understanding the design values and constraints affecting this work. Kultima & Sandovar (2016) have described game design as being pluralistic in nature, containing a multiplicity of values, such as the commercial, societal and traditional, all complimenting or contrasting against each other. They specifically describe the value of 'Player Centrism', deriving from what Wilson & Sicart (2010) call the accessibility turn, as designing for player's advocacy, co-creativity and user inclusion. My research essentially opposes this idea, focusing instead on values such as artistic expression and the production process, in creating experimental work that is nonetheless part of an academic practice-led research tied to my professional identity.

Lawson (2006) describes design problems as being built up of constraints that limit the actions a designer can take. While design constraints work through restricting the possible solution space, they also guide the design process through the act of delimiting. Kultima & Alha (2011) simplify the concept as it relates to game design by presenting two axes of constraints, the inclusive and exclusive constraints that determine what a game can and can not contain, and the internal or external constraints that arise from the designer or outside forces. External exclusive constraints for this research included the time available for the project, whilst internal exclusive constraints were discovered at the boundaries of my own skill set. Further internal inclusive and exclusive constraints that emerged from my design process then developed into the rules of Player Decentered Design.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

As my initial research formation was so heavily inspired by the manifesto of Wilson & Sicart (2010), I began by exploring the work that they had referenced in turn, feeling most drawn to the concept of videogames as Foucauldian power structures. The initial framing of this project was to be a research-led 'Michel Foucault game jam', in which I would prototype several games that played around with themes on power. I started reading Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison* from a game design perspective, sketching out small concepts such as the rhythm game *Rhythm, Action, Discipline*, the city-builder *Subdivide the Gaze*, and the strongest idea I felt, titled *A History of Normalization*. This hypothetical game would involve a 2D interface consisting of several detached window elements. The objects in these windows would change over time to represent a character progressing through stages of life, from school to work, and onto hospital or prison, depending on the player's performance. This would be measured through simple minigames of mundane and repetitious tasks such as washing hands, physical exercise or kitchen work. The game screen would then be decorated through other non-interactive windows, displaying figures of authority judging the player alongside other surveillance elements such as the panopticon. This idea of using multiple different windows in the game interface was inspired by my reading of Foucault's art of distributions, a collection of techniques in which "discipline

proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space" (ibid, 141). These techniques, the use of enclosure, partitioning, useful space and rank, were all concepts I felt could be mapped directly to this idea of ranked minigames enclosed in the separate partitions of a visual interface.

At this stage, I was drawing out user interface (UI) sketches on paper and developing a list of potential minigames. While I liked the concept of distinct windows with varying interactivity building a disjointed yet thematic narrative, I struggled to incorporate any philosophy of Foucault's in a manner more unique than 'a school is like a prison, which is also like a hospital, etc.' Benefiting an academic design process, I was still deep in the literature, and was surprised to find Foucault absent from both Wilson's (2012) refined concept of dialogic design and Sicart's (2015) article on game design research. I started thinking of repurposing the game structure I had to fit another philosophy, driven in part by a personal interest I had developed in creating ambient games. While this was inspired in part by Eyles' research into ambient gameplay (2012), itself inspired by the musical genre pioneered by Brian Eno, I was working to develop my own interpretation of the theme that I could still connect back to the idea of power. Another text I discovered at this stage was Schrank's (2010) thesis on avant-garde videogames, which criticised the dependence of flow experiences, as defined by Csíkszentmihályi (1991), to the best practices of game design. Schrank, like Wilson & Sicart (2010), talked about a possibility space of games being left unexplored, here when adhering to an ideal temporal positioning of the player to avoid anxiety or boredom. Schrank discussed how designing for flow could be compared to the ideal location of a viewer in relation to the vanishing point perspective developed in renaissance painting, with the price of this central role being "submission to the structure of that space and the established order of things" (Schrank 2010, 106). Whereas later art movements would dismantle established renaissance techniques, a similar deconstruction of flow in videogames is visible in a much smaller number of artistic games. In pulling together the theoretical threads of Schrank and Wilson & Sicart with my specific interest in ambient games, I started labelling my work as a potential *player uncentric design*.

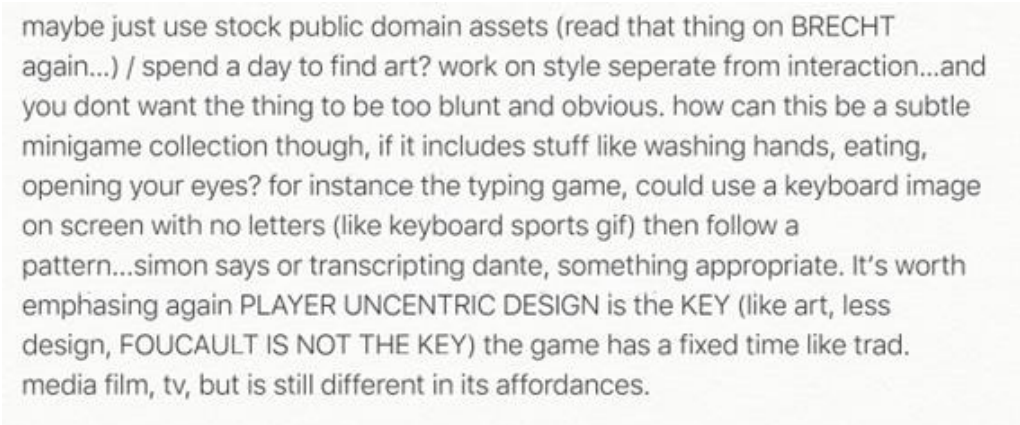

Figure 3: Screenshot of a diary entry, 2 October 2017

I was still relating this planned design to the concept of power and thought to communicate the theme through mechanics that would either increase or decrease the player's perception of power. One idea I had considered before starting the design process was to first clone classic arcade games such as *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), before subverting the underlying systems by altering the expected effects of in-game power-ups. I was able to connect this idea to a technique utilised by the filmmaker David Lynch, as described by Schrank (2010). The director is said to occasionally implement

moorings for the audience, understandable or conventional elements such as relatable characters, which then act as a gateway for more subversive or ambiguous themes and elements. This inspired me to incorporate a familiar arcade game as a central component within the game's grid layout, to act as a mooring for the player before gradually increasing transgressive elements. With this, I was able to finally move on from the assorted notes of pre-production and open the *Unity* game engine. I gave the project a title of *power-one*, to denote it as the first in a series of planned experiments related to power. I created the first interactive element of the game in a vertical window central to the screen. This window emulated a simple *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) game, with the player able to move a ship left and right, firing a regular stream of bullets towards asteroids that broke apart on impact. I had previously been searching through various public domain art libraries, wanting to produce a visual style that was less dependent on the limits of my own artistic talent. I incorporated some archival video to the top right window of the game, looping black-and-white footage of a pulsating star that I discovered from a 1960s public domain science fiction program. While eager at first to avoid situating the game to any specific time or location, I felt that the sci-fi aesthetic would fit within my visual ability and the available assets.

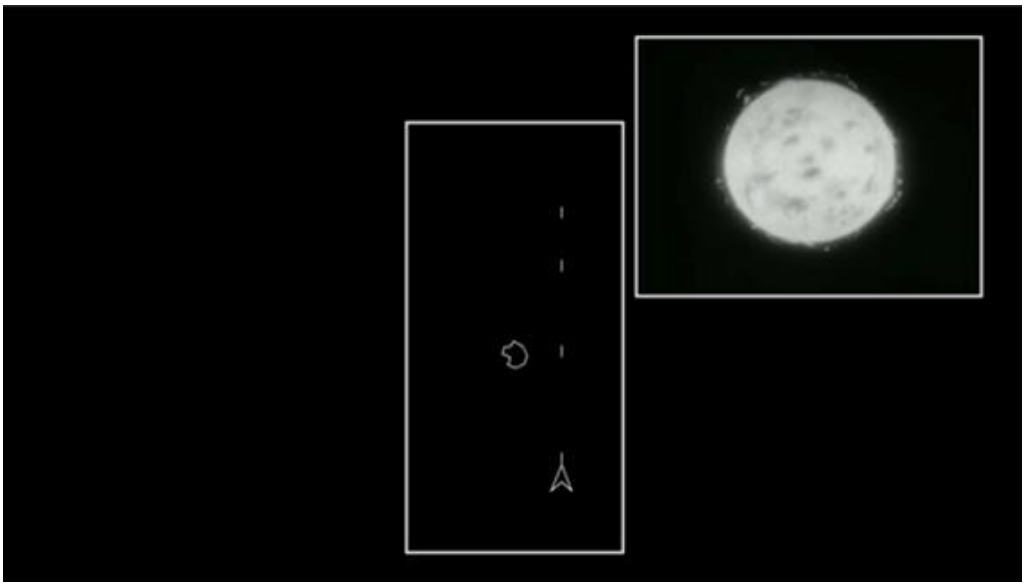

Figure 4: First Screenshot of *power-one*, October 2017

Despite the very limited interactivity I had in the game, I was still able to trigger some reflection on idle playtesting. I had not coded any fail state to the game yet, instead allowing the player to infinitely break apart asteroids, free of any stress or expectation. I started to situate this laissez-faire play experience as somewhat opposed to many of the difficult games mentioned in the abusive game design manifesto. I envisioned this ambient game design as involving a near total absence of difficulty, a game that could be played with minimal player input. While 'ignoring' the player in this sense could be framed as a modality of abuse, I was thinking about such ambient games in a more positive sense, as meditative or even transcendent experiences.

Having a clearer idea of what I was trying to achieve, I started a process of adding complimentary content to the game, filling out the additional windows of the game's UI (Figure 5). While the game's narrative was still unknown, I focused on adding a variety of different interaction types that could be repurposed later, deriving from familiar game mechanics. First, a turn-based first-person maze game inspired by *3D Monster Maze* (Malcolm Evans 1982) was added to the lower left corner of the game.

To the upper left of the screen, I included an alien non-player character (NPC) for the player to interact with through an additional dialogue text window. This component was designed to allow the player to ask set questions to an NPC who would then slowly select their response, inverting how dialogue is typically handled in role-playing videogames. Another idea related to forcing patience on the player was inspired by a public domain video of a man loading heavy items into a large machine. I imagined the player forced to watch this excruciatingly slow, nine-second video between each shot fired in the *Space Invaders* clone. At this stage I was already incorporating at least three different genres of game into *power-one*, indicating a looming problem of overscoping, but I was unfazed at the time by this growing expansion. I had at least scrapped the idea that I would create multiple games for this project, focusing all my efforts instead to this one design. Having first removed the philosopher from the 'Michel Foucault game jam', I now thought to remove the whole jam concept entirely.

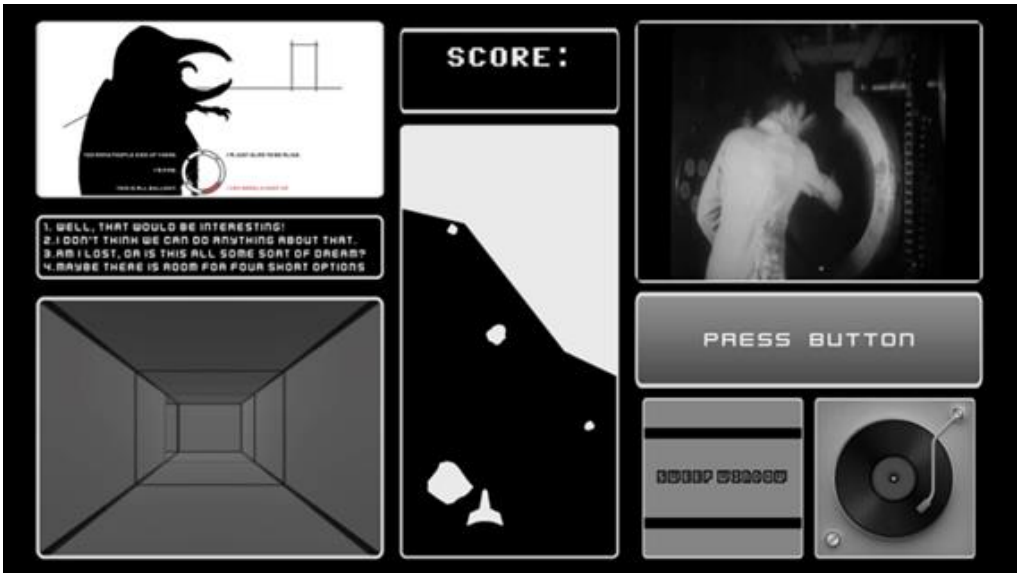

Figure 5: Screenshot of *power-one*, October 2017

I was still thinking that some of the knowledge from this game could extend to a sort of formal ambient game design method, and across diary entries I was working on a checklist of guiding rules to then be extrapolated to fit other games. At the same time, I still struggled with incorporating narrative to *power-one* in a way that retained ambiguity. Leaning in on the science fiction aesthetic, I began to envision the game UI as the controls of an alien ship, with the separate windows representing activities such as communication, navigation, maintenance, etc. The small spaceship in the central arcade game window would represent the exterior of the ship portrayed in the interface, with the player character representing a sort of space janitor, cleaning up the constant asteroid debris. Extending this any further still felt as a betrayal to the self-imposed rule that the game should be open to multiple interpretations. Eventually, I thought to focus the story on what I called the 'middle-y bit of narrative', avoiding any sort of traditional beginning or ending to the game. This was again inspired by Lynch, whose work often focuses on the middle part of a character's narrative, with backstories and resolutions left ambiguous. I thought to further incorporate this thinking in a mechanical sense, with no introduction of the player controls or any acknowledgment that you could ever stop playing.

This idea, of designing for no beginning or ending, became the first two rules of what I labelled now in the diary as ‘Player Uncentered Design’. I complimented these rules with three others from the checklist of ambient concepts; that the game should progress without the player, be open to multiple interpretations, and always include some form of interaction. These five rules combined formed the first iteration of the ‘manifesto’ (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Player ‘Uncentered’ Design Manifesto, November 2017

While I now had these rules to help in guiding the project, I also felt their restrictions more acutely on a previously unbridled possibility space. I worked to make the game better fit the rules, first by stripping out the 3D maze that I felt couldn’t fit the narrative in any satisfyingly ambiguous way. I encountered a design issue that Barr also mentions in the development of his UI game, *It is as if you were doing work* (2017) (Khaled et al. 2018), relating to whether the game should contain English text or rather a language more inscrutable and alien. Barr states that he settled on English to help ground the player and avoid distracting them into deciphering the language, which didn’t support the goals he had envisioned with his game. I took the opposite approach, reasoning that an additional opportunity to distract and disorientate the player was desired. I had grown attached to a window that displayed multiple alien NPCs and tried to work out how they could now communicate nonverbally to the player. I settled on creating a set of glyph symbols to represent the alien language, and further plotted how this could be utilised to receive requests from the aliens, that then required translating and responding to through interaction with different UI elements. For the sake of variety, I had planned for three alien characters with unique models and animations. I felt this dictated the need for three distinct alphabets of glyphs, as I continued on a path of further overscoping the design.

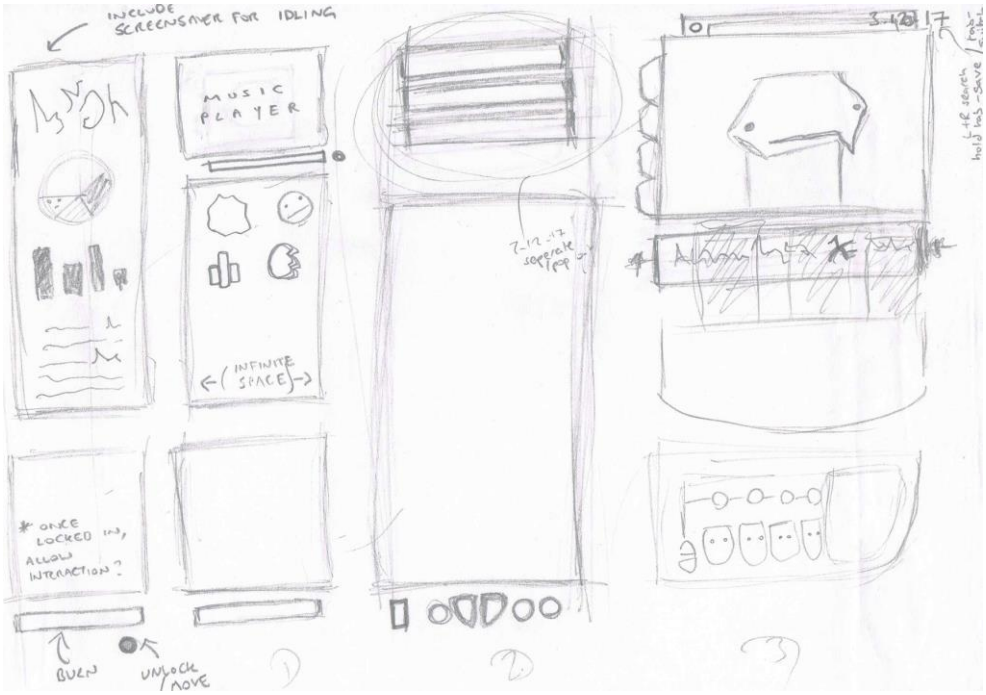

Figure 7: Paper Sketch, December 2017

One of the rules I had formulated was that the game should always include something to interact with. As a UI game, *power-one* was able to incorporate a vast array of buttons, levers and switches, all of which provided audio and visual feedback to the player. I worried that without a constant stream of available interactivity that the final game would more closely resemble an animation. To counter this, I took a maximalist approach where I aimed to include at least one hundred unique interactions in the game, from simple button presses to the more complex manipulation of alien glyphs. I chose the number arbitrarily, thinking that it would help to prevent overscoping rather than exacerbate the problem further. I started to grow a desire to fill the game with a multitude of secret interactions, almost rewarding the player for choosing to explore the interface more deeply. This led to a situation where I would get excited by certain interactive possibilities before having to remove them entirely on account of them being too 'puzzle-like'. A lot of my internal dialogue at this point related to whether providing feedback to the player, or hiding secrets in the game, aligned with the ultimate goal of decentering them. I justified the inclusion of certain interactive elements to myself, for being either optional or without any intrinsic reward, but was hyper aware not to hide a secondary 'real game' to be discovered by an investigative enough player.

To have the game play itself, I added the required functionality to allow the spaceship in the centre of the screen to autopilot by default, including a toggle for this functionality in the interface. The ship would avoid the falling asteroids while occasionally firing at them and using a beam to collect the scattered debris. The game visualised the collected 2D debris as 3D models piling up in a separate window until it grew full, when an incineration animation would play to clear out the whole section. This part of the interface created a satisfying loop that I was able to sit back and enjoy, although I anticipated the difficulty of incorporating self-playing elements into the other sections of the game to be much higher.

Perhaps in avoidance of more technically challenging aspects, I started to spend more time working on art assets, while tweaking incremental details of the UI. At some point in the process, the game had shifted in my mind from being a prototype to a work of interactive art, requiring much more aesthetic care. Frustrated with the limits of my

artistic and technical ability, I began to lose motivation and spent more and more time away from the project. Every time I would return to the game it only became more difficult to decipher the piles of arcane notes, spreadsheets and code that the project had accumulated.

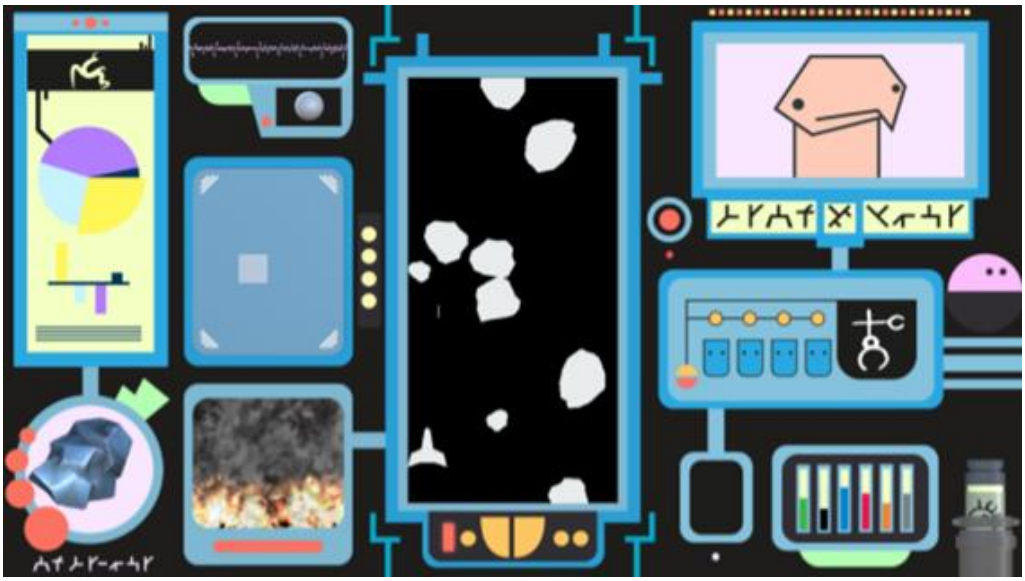

Figure 8: Final Screenshot of *power-one*, April 2018

I had already decided that any playtesting would not be valuable data until the game was complete, or at least until each of the rules had been incorporated in a satisfying manner. I felt that implementing any changes suggested by playtesters would be succumbing too much to the playcentric approach that I was taking such pains to avoid. I justified the lack of any outsider input because I thought of the game primarily now as an art-piece, making wild statements in diary entries such as that 'you wouldn't playtest a painting'. The absence of any external feedback had allowed anxieties to further grow, and before long I was describing the work as a form of 'nihilistic game development'. If a game can play itself, what action could a player possibly take that wasn't meaningless, or destructive to a system that operated fine without their input? This thought process deteriorated further over time until I started to consider that having someone else play the game, even after it was complete, would have ultimately been a betrayal to my conception of the decentered approach. Some months later I had reached the final revelation, that if the game should never be played, why should it ever even be completed? The last artistic decision I made with the game then, out of principle, was to leave it unreleased and unfinished, far from the hands of any possible player, including myself. Despite how I tried to justify it, I still felt for the longest time that the game had utterly defeated me. It was only later when I had a chance to revisit the entire research with some distance that I could start to discern some of the value discovered in the process.

Discussion

In this discussion I will first look at the design process in relation to the presented methodology, before considering some of the design insights gleaned from the entire process. The above text was constructed from an over-abundance of diary entries that often suffered from a lack of clarity, reducing their effectiveness when referring to them as the primary source of data. Had I discovered the guidelines given by Pedgley (2007) earlier in the process, I could have attempted to keep the diary entries more focused on the act of design rather than recording my every thought related to the project, including technical details and learning notes. I expect that collaborating more directly with

others on the game would have helped tremendously in reducing the amount of internal dialogue I felt was necessary to record. One benefit to the MDMA method outlined by Khaled et al. (2018) is that the diary entries are incorporated as part of a publicly available source control project, which could help focus the note keeping at the expense of some candidness. While the more casual diary-keeping comprising my methodological approach did make it more challenging to synthesize this whole process into a legible story, I was unable to find any suitable, alternative method of design research in game studies that was not descendant of the Player Centered Design approach. That the story retold here involved me sat at or near a computer has been limiting to its dramatic retelling as autoethnography. Still, I have attempted in the autoethnographic text to describe how key ideas developed and where certain problems with overscoping or inner confusion may have specifically originated, attempting to share just enough about the specificities of the design and development that I could reflect on them in an evocative sense.

Situating this research as opposed to the design value of Player Centrism helped in my formation of rules against that paradigm, although this value has to be understood as existing within a plurality (Kultima & Sandovar 2016). Other game makers working to oppose the design value of Player Centered Design may not put as much emphasis on the value of artistic expression as I have done here. Player Decentered Design was created as a literal set of rules, an internal set of constraints, both inclusive and exclusive. However, my strict adherence to the letter of these rules resulted in a design space that was more restrictive than I was eventually able to operate in. My intention with this research was to utilise game design in a practical sense rather than exclusively using theory to explore ways to critique Player Centered Design and resultant concepts such as player narcissism. While I have intended this design process to be in communication with the literature, this was still limited to the work I found immediately relevant from game studies, and to a lesser extent design studies. In any future, relatable design work, I would like to incorporate some of the more philosophical work critical of Human Centered Design from object-oriented perspectives, such as that embodied in More-than-Human Game Design (Akmal & Coulton 2021).

Several times in the process I explain how I struggled over attempting to adhere to the rules I set, against an internalised conception of what good game design is. My preconceptions of what a game should be influenced much of my thinking. This can be especially seen in the later stages of the game's development in my expectations of the visual elements and my desire to incorporate secrets for a curious player. I describe in the diary how 'designing for no fun is no fun', a conflict between what I value as a player and designer, and my interpretation of the rules. Similarly, it felt impossible for me to create an ambiguous narrative for an unknown player, when the story always remained crystal clear in my mind as creator and sole playtester. This relates to the difficulty I felt during the isolated development to maintain an enthusiasm to finish the project, ultimately leaving it incomplete. In attesting to these difficulties, and considering how the project could have succeeded differently, I would now yield to the advice of playtesting early and often. Rather than as part of a playcentric practice of absorbing player feedback, outsider testing could still allow for valuable design reflections to be externalised in a social setting.

Considering my acknowledgment of the player and their presumed experience throughout my design process, it is apparent that I remained captive to them throughout, centering them in my thought processes before, perhaps inevitably, falling into a trap of my own making. Someone less familiar with the best practices of game design practice, or the videogame medium entirely, would likely be far less interested in how a potential player would interact with their game, but this is not a position I can ever

return to. This process of Player Decentered Design can be interpreted as my attempt to un-learn much of what I had absorbed from game design literature, realising only too late that I was still very much stuck in the paradigm of Player Centered Design. In the following section I will present Player Decentered Design as the set of guidelines that first emerged from this research, with the intention that they could still provide inspiration and consideration for others in further understanding this captive design space.

PLAYER DECENTERED DESIGN

Player Decentered Design is an approach to creating games that attempts to shift the player's centralised location within a videogame environment. While Player is used to describe the human user of a videogame experience, Decentered is a far more nebulous concept to define, being utilised here to supply an oppositional stance to that of being centered. The intention is not to replace the player's central position with the author or computer, but rather to make design moves that reposition them in purposeful, interesting ways. The five rules I chose as structural to my interpretation of Player Decentered Design derived from a reflective design process, in communication with academic literature and my personal play history. While these rules fit within the goals of their intended purpose, they are still a result of my subjective design process and do not define what Player Decentered Design has to be.

These rules of Player Decentered Design were intended to act as a set of guidelines in designing games against the paradigm of Player Centered Design; to decentralise, disorient or deconstruct the notion of a player. The rules were designed to be platform agnostic in order to fit every conceivable electronic gaming system, from the Atari to the PlayStation, mobile phones to virtual reality, and other as yet unimagined devices. The rules should be understood as malleable and porous and can be read as either creative prompts or strict constraints. While these rules can be adapted, translated, expanded or contracted to meet the needs of future projects, they were specifically designed to complement each other in interesting ways.

1. There is no beginning, no tutorial or instructions, no level one or exposition.

2. There is no ending, conclusion, game over or credits.

3. The game will progress without you.

4. There should be no singular meanings or explanations.

5. There is always something to interact with.

The first two rules can be understood as attempting to deconstruct traditional narrative frameworks, focusing on a climactic middle that is detached from the stages of rising and falling action (Freytag 1863). These rules break from the tradition of the Hero's journey or monomyth (Campbell 1990), alluded to by Jenova Chen (Joystiq Staff 2012) as one of the biggest inspirations to *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), a game created by students of Fullerton's playcentric approach. The third rule supports ambient experiences not dependent on a player's activity, whilst the fourth rule encourages artistic ambiguity over emotional manipulation. Without the final rule, which stresses the interactivity associated with the videogame medium, the preceding rules could just as easily fit into alternative art forms.

In isolation, each of the rules can already be seen as relating to existent videogames, so it is through their combination that new experiences can be created. The first rule references the early age of arcade games, where control instructions were embedded as

part of the machine and tutorialising was constrained by technical restrictions. The second rule in part references e-sports and other massively multiplayer online games designed to be played in perpetuity. The third rule is partially exemplified by game genres such as the auto-battler, auto-playing battles in Japanese role-playing games, or for a more specific example, *The Longing* (Studio Seufz 2020), which progresses through four hundred days in real-time regardless of whether the player opens the game again after first launch. The ambiguity of the fourth rule can apply to multiple games, such as *Proteus* (Twisted Tree Games 2013), where no context is given for your freeform island exploration. The fifth rule can then be interpreted as acting as antithetical to games such as *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013), where interaction is deemphasised in favour of narrative storytelling, instead favouring a maximalist approach of game design.

While these rules were developed alongside a process heavily inspired by abusive game design (Wilson & Sicart 2010), Player Decentered Design is separate from this concept in essential ways. Here, there is no deliberate attempt to facilitate a dialogue between the designer and player, with the hypothetical games of this approach being somewhat more relatable to a monologue. While it is possible that in attempting to remove 'player narcissism' from the game, it has only been replaced by 'developer narcissism', this is disputed by the author. Essentially, 'player' may be a value-neutral term, unlike gamer, which is impossible to decouple entirely from the medium of videogames. Despite this tension, Player Decentered Design demonstrates how testing the limits of that interdependence can result in new insights into how we understand games and their design.

CONCLUSION

This paper began by discussing how concepts such as the playcentric model have grown fundamental to contemporary game research. A number of methods that promote an experimental approach to creating games are seen to derive from more traditional user-centered design principles. Player Centered Design developed as a concept from an eagerness to bring scientific models and methods from HCI into game studies. While abusive game design was proposed in an academic manifesto over one decade ago, it continues to stand out in a more crowded game studies field as an uncommon example of alternative, radical game design thinking.

The design process recorded here utilised reflective diary keeping as a data collection tool. This enabled the creation of an autoethnographic text that allowed for the communication of an explorative design journey, as I attempted to break apart from the best practices of game design in exploring the medium further. The design process describes one example of game making that, while never reproducible, includes insights that are distinct and valuable.

Player Decentered Design is presented as a set of rules that arose from my personal design process, which can be utilised or modified further in the development of experimental videogames. While my own research suffered through a literal interpretation of these rules, there could still be additional value to be found in applying them with more compromise.

Fighting against the paradigm of Player Centered Design is difficult and ambiguous but can result in the formation of unique knowledge. This research began by exploring the boundless area of potentiality in videogames highlighted through the research on abusive game design. Just as that manifesto led me to this exploratory work, I hope this work can inspire others in examining both inside and outside the possibility spaces of games.

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