

Ludo Mix as an Aesthetic Experience: Designing Games for Franchises

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Keywords

Ludo mix, game design, aesthetic experience, pragmatism, creativity, creative industry, design methods

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

How can we design games in a ludo mix? Inspired by the ‘media mix’ or media franchise (Steinberg 2015), ludo mix can be seen as a convergence of products organized around one (or several) central games. While this convergence might be an opportunity to build worlds and create new intellectual property, it is also a marketing strategy. These two perspectives are often contradictory, and difficult for game designers to address. This research project suggests that the player’s experience and that of the consumer can be encompassed by the pragmatist definition of ‘aesthetic experience’ and designed in a cohesive manner.

A media mix can be understood as an opportunity for creating original narratives. As Eiji Ōtsuka put it, each piece of a media mix is an occasion to develop a ‘grand narrative’, an extensive world inhabited by multiple characters (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010). The work of Jenkins (2006) on franchises also points toward an ensemble of media creating a greater narrative, and offering the opportunity to build something outstanding, like a modern counterpart to traditional mythological tales (Patrickson and Young 2013). This perspective is inspiring for game designers.

But in front of these noble aspirations is the economic reality. Media mix is often first and foremost a marketing approach (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015; Steinberg 2015). Patrickson and Young (2013) stress how Japanese author Azuma warned the Japanese industry that the ‘grand narrative’ tends nowadays to be reduced to disparate bites of information consumed without meaning. TV shows and video games can be created from scratch in order to sell toys (Hartzheim 2016). The ‘grand narrative’ is subordinate to the concerns of marketing. White (2009) even warns us that “market forces are killing digital games”: companies keep making similar profitable games belonging to a license, with no concern for creativity or quality. In this situation, game designers tend to see the ludo mix as an economic necessity that hinders their creative process.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

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Paradoxically, marketing teams often want their product to offer meaningful experience for players. As Carù and Cova (2003) explain, marketing teams do not simply aim for a banal or common experience, but an extraordinary one, intense and unforgettable (Carù and Cova 2003). Thus, it looks like game designers and the marketing team could work together toward the realization of these ‘great experiences’ in a ludo mix.

The term ‘experience’ is used in many game design books (Rollings and Morris 2004; Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Fullerton 2008; Rouse III 2005; Brathwaite and Schreiber 2009; Schell 2008), and the concept has been studied from different perspectives. Some authors, like Cailliois (1958), Lazzaro (2004) or Yee (2003) have described types of players’ experiences (competitive, social, etc.). Elements contributing to video game experiences have also been identified (visual, audio...), for example by Sutton-Smith (1986). Concerning the meaning of ludic experiences, Salen and Zimmerman’s work on ‘meaningful play’ (2003) stresses the idea that games should offer experiences that “make sense” (like a ‘grand narrative’ would). Moreover, Kultima and Stenros’ model of the *Expanded Game Experience* (2010), defends the idea that design should touch-on all aspects related to video games (like buying or installing them) in order to be significant.

However, the very definition of ‘an experience’, and the way to design a ‘great’ one is still difficult to grasp. How can we design (good) games in a ludo mix?

To answer these questions, this project aims to introduce the pragmatist vision of *aesthetic experience*, mostly developed by John Dewey (Dewey 2005 [1934], 1958 [1925]), as a philosophical guide to help game designers torn between creativity and marketing (Tschang 2007).

‘Aesthetics’ can refer to the specific attributes of video games, or in a narrower sense, to the graphic aspects of a game, its visual style (Niedenthal 2009). But Dewey gave the term a new meaning and uses it to define a special kind of experience. According to him, aesthetics refer to Beauty with a larger significance: aesthetic experiences are those experiences that are ‘whole’ and ‘complete’.

Dewey’s aesthetic experience comes from a critique of ‘Art’: he thought that limiting aesthetic experience to the one we have in museums, in front of a masterpiece, means that we have stripped everyday life from any aesthetic pleasure, any beauty. On the contrary, he thought that any experience can turn into an aesthetic one: mowing the lawn, eating a meal or finishing a game can be aesthetic experience as long as each **component fits with the whole and has meaning for the person doing it**. Dewey’s aesthetic experience is more of a guide to appreciate life and create a coherent whole, without necessarily aiming for something exceptional.

In order to demonstrate the relevance of the pragmatist approach to game design, we will use a case study from an advanced game design course. In this course, the students (some of whom have jobs in industry) worked on a media mix—using Sanrio’s character *Aggressive Retsuko* (Sanrio 2016)—to create a video game. **Their process differed depending on their vision of the ‘experience’**. They often started with a market-oriented vision: the game had to incorporate different strategies to make money. However, when presented with the pragmatist vision of the aesthetic experience, the students developed very different design solutions. They tried to understand the original experience of *Aggressive Retsuko* and further it in a video game. In the end, these second designs would be more coherent and valuable for the franchise.

While pragmatist philosophy might seem intimidating, it can be an opportunity for game designers and marketers to develop a new vision of the ludo mix, where video games can be at the heart of meaningful experiences. Each new addition to the mix should add to a cohesive experience and avoid shattering what has already been constructed. The goal is not to stretch intellectual property, but to enrich it; it is not to create extraordinary, crazy experiences, but more well-rounded ones. To reconcile franchise and players, the ludo mix could be best understood by game designers as a pragmatist aesthetic experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Isabel Prochner for her English vocabulary and grammar corrections.

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