

Beyond the Recipe: A Critical Analysis of Craft in Games

Anne Sullivan

Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA, USA
unicorn@gatech.edu

Anastasia Salter

University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL, USA
anastasia@ucf.edu

Gillian Smith

Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Worcester, MA, USA
gmsmith@wpi.edu

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The desire to represent material systems in digital games is inherently contradictory: the more material the system, and inherently physical the interface, the more the digital risks becoming reductive and trivializing by comparison.

The word “craft” is itself loaded with value judgements, and particularly a need to draw a line between art--which occupies an elevated space in galleries, and is assumed to have individual expressive merit recognized as a type of originality--and the work of those who typically lack the same formal training and recognition within existing status structures. Because craft is associated with the domestic sphere, it is frequently connected with the labor of women, and thus associated with patterns of informal training, communal practice, and social activity where the making is as (or more) important as the outcome. Craft traditions passed through communities might not be formalized, or may be co-opted and documented by an outsider as a discovery: when craft is featured in art galleries and other gatekeeper-mediated spaces, it frequently features the work of men or other “discoverers” of a craft typically practiced by more marginalized makers.

Materiality is essential to outcome in craft, and the choice of precise material (as opposed to a category of material) is one of the most determining aspects of aesthetic outcome. The same quilt pattern rendered in modern fabric versus 1800s reproduction print will have an entirely different look: more pragmatically, the choice of batting will determine its functional use as a ward against the cold. This aspect of material choice is missing from most craft systems in games, where materials are typically categorized to neatly fit into recipe definitions. The physical spaces of craft shops

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(which are rarely, if ever, rendered in games and simulations) are a testament to the importance of material choice and practice, particularly in fiber arts, paper crafts, knitting, and other feminine-coded craft spheres where the original material composition and coloring takes a primary role in determining the aesthetics produced. Such material flexibility is inherently even greater in digital representations (indeed, the advent of digital sources of fabric printing, etc, has offered crafters greater flexibility and control of their work)--however, it is rarely part of the digital representation of craft.

There are many different ways in which crafting can be implemented in games. For the purposes of this paper, we use the definition by Grow et al. (2017), “crafting in games is the thoughtful manipulation of materials by the player to create something else within the context of the game.” In the same work, Grow et al. further conducted a large-scale survey of crafting systems in games and identified seven axes along which games can be placed in order to compare crafting systems across games: fidelity of action, completion constraints, variable outcome, recognition of outcome, progression, player expressiveness, and recipe definition. This taxonomy is constructed from a mechanics-first perspective, defining the myriad ways in which games support player interaction in their crafting systems, and is intended as an analytical framework to better understand the space of existing craft games.

From a design and practitioner perspective, King has also suggested a taxonomy for crafting systems (2015). King’s taxonomy is intended as a tutorial for game designers who aspire to create crafting systems in their own games, and focuses on the impact of particular crafting systems on player experience, as well as the challenges found in successfully implementing them. King identifies five categories of crafting system: “money by another name”, “find the recipe”, “guess and see what sticks”, “made-to-order customization”, and “anything is possible”.

In the real world, craft expands far beyond these five types of crafting systems that we see in digital games. The taxonomies that already exist to describe crafting in games do not capture the values or principles underlying craft itself because of the vast differences between them.

Thus, in this paper, we examine crafting systems in games from the perspective of craft scholarship, borrowing terminology and theories from Adamson’s work that defines “craft” (2007). In *Thinking Through Craft*, Adamson describes real-world craft through the lens of five principles - supplemental, material, skilled, pastoral, and amateur. We find these lenses to be helpful to direct the focus of the role of craft in games and in real-life, highlight the differences, and discuss how this way of considering craft in games opens up new possibilities in the design space.

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