Subtle Playability: Orienting Players' Actions Beyond the Threat of Failure

Romi Sofia Abatangelo
Institute of Digital Games
University of Malta
(Msida, Malta)
sofia.abatangelo.20@um.edu.mt

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Through subtractive design practices (Aristov 2017; Leino 2013) - consisting in the removal of all unnecessary features in order to emphasise the core aspect of a game - game artists and designers have created works that often challenged the common conception of what games are. *Walking simulators* (Grabarczyk 2016) and *notgames* (Harvey & Samÿn 2010) in particular remove the possibility of failure in favour of open ended exploration and ambiguous forms of engagement, thus eliminating the very features that define games from a ludological perspective (Leino 2013, 2020). However in this extended abstract I will propose the argument that even by removing failure, walking simulators and notgames still retain an underlying ludic structure which differentiates them from non-ludic interactive artefacts. Therefore a ludological analysis of walking simulators and notgames can provide useful insights about how "gameness" manifests beyond the implementation of a failure condition.

While it's not possible to provide a univocal definition of what a game is (Aarseth & Calleja 2015), both Juul's *classic game model* (2005) and Leino's concept of *playability* (2012, 2013) shed light on the importance of valorised outcomes orienting player's behaviour as one of the defining traits of games. According to Juul's model, games are rule-based systems having multiple outcomes with different values, some more desirable than others. Players will therefore intrinsically try to achieve positive outcomes whilst avoiding negative ones (Juul 2005). There is however a difference in the way rules manifest between analog and digital games. In analog games players are responsible for upholding the rules to successfully play the game, hence the necessity of explicit rules that can be communicated and collectively agreed upon by all players. In digital games, however, the rules are encoded in the materiality of the digital artefact (Leino 2012, Salen Tekinbaş & Zimmerman 2003) and emerge from the interplay between the player actions and the subsequent feedback from the game system. Therefore rules do not necessarily need to be known in advance in order to play the game but can be discovered by players as they interact with the artefact. Moreover Leino (2009, 2012, 2013) considers a digital artefact *playable* only if it affords its players both freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of said choices. For Leino, that freedom and responsibility requires the presence of a failure condition unambiguously orienting the player's actions: by removing the possibility of failure - Leino argues - actions are taken for their own sake and not in order to avoid defeat. However, by creating this clear cut distinction Leino (2013) conflates under the umbrella of *interactive artefacts* both freeform activities in which

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the users can play with the system according to their own preferences and taste, and ludic artefacts in which the value of the users' actions is enforced by the system. A good example of this difference is the comparison between the walking simulator *Proteus* (Key & Kanaga 2013) and the virtual reality installation *Traversing the Sectors* (Ruzanka 2016). Both virtual environments are designed for aesthetic-driven exploration. However while in *Traversing the Sectors* exploration is open ended, with no goal or win condition, *Proteus* is structured as a progression between three stages leading to an ending, therefore subtly orienting the player's action towards a goal. To understand how interactive ludic artefacts such as *Proteus* work and to be able to distinguish them from non-ludic interactive artefacts, I will expand Leino's concept of playability beyond the strong and unambiguous feedback provided by a failure condition and discuss more subtle strategies that can otherwise be employed to guide the player's actions by creating a system of values embedded in the artefact. While an in-depth analysis of this *subtle playability* falls out of the scope of this extended abstract, I will provide some examples of how walking simulators and notgames can attach value to the player's actions without implementing a failure condition.

Leino's (2013) discussion around playable non-games leads to the argument that success and failure are not necessarily two sides of the same coin. Leino discusses how the player actions in The Sims (Maxis 2000) are oriented towards avoiding failure, and how the elements of the game gain value as they help the player doing so. It is interesting to note that the lack of win condition makes it so that success is never validated in terms of feedback from the game system, and the closest thing to success for players is to remain in a state of non-failure as long as possible. I argue that a similar but mirrored situation is occurring in games in which only the pursuit of success orients the player's actions. Without failure being validated by the game system, the player's activity consists in moving from a state of not-success (searching for a solution) to success (finding it), a process described by Aarseth (1997) and Jayemanne (2017) as *aporia* and *epiphany*. This valorisation strategy can be employed even without providing explicit goals to the player. *Islands: Non-Places* (Carl Burton 2016) is a notgame interpretation of the point and click adventure in which explicit puzzles are replaced with simple interactions within an ambiguous world characterised by weird causal relationships, thus constructing for the player the implicit goal to figure out what is the "correct" interaction in order to trigger the sequence of events.

Valorisation can also be unrelated to a win or failure condition and be attached instead to the value of a single player's action, both in terms of immediate reward or punishment or in the broader context of the game as a whole. The feedback received from the game system can provide advantages or penalties in relation to gameplay: in *The Night Journey* (Viola & Game Innovation Lab 2022) interacting with specific objects within the gameworld increases the avatar's speed and increments the duration of an exploration session (Fullerton et.al. 2007; Fullerton et.al. 2009). Therefore players are incentivised to explore the gameworld in search of interactable objects in order to enhance and prolong their experience in the game. Feedback can also take the form of narrative or aesthetic rewards: in *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2016) exploration rewards the players with randomised textual fragments which are part of an ambiguous narrative (Pinchbeck 2008). While unlocking the fragments is not necessary to complete the game - as the game ends when players reach a specific place in the gameworld - discovering the narrative emerges as the implicit goal of the game as "the player's engagement with the piece rest entirely with the narrative, visual environment and audio" (Pinchbeck 2008). Thorough exploration

therefore configures as “desirable” even if it’s not evaluated by the game system, as it allows the player to collect enough information to make sense of the story as a whole.

With the help of the examples discussed above I can suggest that “gameness” in walking simulators and notgames emerges from an implicit structure of valorised outcomes orienting players actions. The concept of *subtle playability* outlined in this work could prove useful beyond the specific genres discussed above. It can be used to discuss “gameness” in other participatory media such as interactive art (Kwastek 2013) and immersive theatre (Frieze 2016; Machon 2013), and also to identify instances of subtle valorisation in “traditional” digital games. In that regard, an analysis of the design strategies of *cosy games* (Waszkiewicz & Bakun 2020) could represent a fruitful line of inquiry to further develop my argument.

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