“I really think of these things more as toys”: Will Wright’s Toy-Based Design Philosophy

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ABSTRACT
This paper assesses the work of famed game designer Will Wright to understand his design philosophy and how his approach succeeded with unexpected game audiences. More specifically, it analyzes Wright’s design notebooks, public talks, and catalog of games to better understand what Wright means when he refers to himself as a toymaker, rather than a game designer, and his products as toys. It will explain how his design approach was inspired by cultural beliefs regarding toys and creativity that permeated the U.S. in the 1960s-70s, Wright’s early education in a Montessori school, his views on player narcissism, and theories of failure-based learning. In doing so, this presentation addresses how designing from a unique starting point—toys, not games—can challenge video games’ existing audience norms and structures of power, as well as how the work of even a single individual can illuminate alternative approaches to play.

Keywords
Game design, play, toys, game history, game audiences

INTRODUCTION
When most people think “video games”, they might think of popular shooting games like *Call of Duty*, sports series like *Madden Football*, or even the controversial *Grand Theft Auto* series. One’s perception of a video game player, or “gamer”, likely mirrors these titles’ expected audience—young, straight, primarily white men and boys with an interest in masculinized media content (Kocurek, 2015; Shaw, 2012). It may then come as a surprise that one of the best-selling game series of all time is not a shooting, sports, or otherwise stereotypically male-oriented game. Rather, it is the “virtual dollhouse” game *The Sims* (2000), created by renowned game designer Will Wright and famous for its gender-diverse audience. How has such a counter-stereotypical title succeeded? How did Wright’s design choices help draw in female players? And what can we learn from this and his other games? This paper begins to address these questions through a critical analysis of Wright as a designer. More specifically, it examines his games, project notebooks, and public talks about game development in order to address his frequent contention that he is more a toymaker than a game designer (e.g., Wright 2007) and to assess what this positioning means for game design more broadly.

Numerous designers, scholars, and game theorists have considered the relationship between toys and games, as well as between both of these and play. Roger Caillois (1961), for instance, mapped play on a continuum from *paidia* (unstructured play) to *ludus* (formal, rule-based play) and then separated games based on their dominant

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features: *agon* (competition-based games), *alea* (games of chance), *mimicry* (simulation games) and *ilinx* (vertigo- or physical sensation-based games.) In this model, games and toys become forms of play located at different points on a spectrum. Modern game designers have proposed several more specific definitions of games and toys. Jesse Schell (2008), for instance, argues that "A toy is an object you play with," "a good toy is an object that is fun to play with," and "a game is a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude" (p. 27, 37). Greg Costikyan (2002) defines games as an "interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires players to struggle toward a goal" (p. 24), while toys lack inherent meaning and goals. These explorations have generated a wealth of definitions, as well as a surfeit of disagreement and debate. One thing that (almost) all writers seem to agree on, however, is that there *is* some kind of difference between toys and games. More specifically, they generally agree that toys are open-ended and flexible, while games have some sort of built-in rule system and goal. Wright, too, draws on this difference in his designs, continually leaning more towards toys than games.

In his design notebooks, Wright describes toys as about exploration and imagination, and carefully writes in the margins that they are "what I want to build." In practice, this means that his games allow players to choose between multiple possible goals, that they center player agency and imagination, and that they offer creative options for failure. Assessed more deeply, his games also rely on and emerge from the cultural context in which he grew up—the changing views of childhood, creativity, and toys that defined the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. (Cross, 1997)— and from longer trajectories of educational "toys," especially those associated with Montessori education (Ogata, 2013; Squire, 2011; Sutton-Smith, 1986). This presentation will break down these different sources of inspiration, detail how Wright has applied them in different games, and illustrate what they bring to the field of game design more broadly. Although *The Sims*, as a "virtual dollhouse," is perhaps the most obviously toy-like of Wright's games, this paper shows toy-based inspirations appearing as early as his second game, *SimCity* (1989), and continuing through his later games, such as the science-fiction, civilization-building game *Spore* (2008), and even into his proposed mobile game, *Proxi* (forthcoming).

This analysis will, overall, demonstrate how changing the starting point for any given game's design—for instance, looking to toys rather than to existing video games—can alter the resulting products, as well as the audiences those games speak to and draw in. This will provide a critical perspective on market norms and structures of power within gaming spaces, as well as how they could change to be more inclusive. Assessing the work of a single game designer also addresses a key gap in game scholarship, which has tended to overlook the impact one person can have on a medium and its culture (Kocurek, 2017). Finally, Wright's use of toys for inspiration speaks to toys' cultural relevance, as well as to how we define and understand childhood and play.

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