Game Design Education for AAA, Creativity, or Critical Thinking

Mika Edström

Uppsala Universitet
Cramérgatan 3
621 57 VISBY
mika.edstrom@speldesign.uu.se

Keywords

game design education, experimental games, alternative controls, creativity, playfulness

INTRODUCTION

Uppsala University's Game Design Program is known for the Gotland Game Conference, where our students showcase their game projects to an audience of industry professionals, scholars, and the general public. The first-year's alternative controller games are a part of the exhibition that commonly attracts much attention and inquiries on how the students can create such engaging experiences. These projects are made in our Experimental Game course, where students work in self-assigned teams to design, prototype, and construct their arcades over just ten weeks. The course yields approximately 16-18 games annually, and representatives from this course are consistently selected for events such as alt.ctrl.GDC, Creative Gaming Awards, and BitSummit, among others.

This extended abstract aims to share how this outcome is achieved, as understood through years of teaching experience from the author's perspective. It concludes that the focus is on designing playful experiences and supporting students to leave behind their preconceptions of what games should be so that they can experiment more freely. It suggests that implementing alternative control designs can be one way to prepare game design students for careers in several fields, addressing some issues about the conflicting goals often encountered in game design education.

Of the projects created over the last decade, I have found commonalities shared among a majority of the most successful games. While occasionally, a more traditional arcade with high production value stands out, the clear majority of the most impactful games included the following components:

- The game is designed around an intuitive controller or activity.
- The game facilitates a shared experience with other players.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2024

© 2024 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

- The game creates an embodied experience, going far beyond a traditional arcade machine setup with joysticks and buttons.
- The game invokes a sense of magic or wonder.
- The game lends the player an excuse to be playful.

When games that managed to create outstanding embodiments that matched the controller and game setting did not do well, they often included mechanics such as requiring high accuracy or having a fail state that prevented players from having the full game experience.

As a teacher responsible for various iterations of the course, the seemingly most important takeaways and advice for those running or planning to run similar design courses are the following:

- Prepare the students.
  This project is the third digital game project the students undertake in their first year. The first is a multiple-author-style microgame using visual storytelling to construct a cohesive narrative between the different individual games, and the second a *shoot 'em-up* intended to express a specific aesthetic prompt assigned to the groups. This approach provides the students with practical experience with increasing stakes and lets them experience both recreating more traditional games involving systems that often exploit players and discover how a game experience can be significantly improved by approaching it from the standpoint that play should consist of meaningful activity (Zimmerman, 2022).
- Efficient design and production.
  With the entire production cycle taking place in under ten weeks, it is ***crucial*** that the design is kept simple. Following Fumito Ueda's design philosophy (Mecheri, 2018), I ask the students to examine every element in their game and remove anything that does not contribute to the experience. By utilizing role-playing, the students can rapidly prototype different input ideas without having to construct physical inputs, and with an organized playtesting schedule, we ensure that they can iterate their design to align with their intended player experience.
- Challenge presumptions.
  Commercial games are often designed to cater to user retention and monetization rather than a positive player experience. I often find that students implement such mechanics without reflecting on their purpose. Students come to us with a mindset that if their game is not easily understood and liked by every player, it will be a failure, and by trying to cater to everyone, they hamper the experience instead. Challenging this presumption on their side that is limiting their creativity is an important step in helping them to allow themselves to design for human beings.
- Mutual trust.
  For the students to make something they are genuinely passionate about,

> they must trust the instructors enough not to try to make something just for approval. As instructors, we must trust the students enough to support their visions wholeheartedly.

Game design education often finds itself being pulled between conflicting ideas of what should be its purpose. Should graduating students be sought-after commodities in the games industry job market, fledgling academics, or innovative artists of the future? As things stand now, it seems that students are expected to be able to publish games successfully, as well as gain academic-level theoretical and analytical knowledge about game design, while simultaneously living with the added pressure to create competitive portfolios and novel experiences that impact players and game culture on a larger scale. The necessity of balancing these often conflicting aims means that game design educators need to engage with systems that mirror broader societal structures actively and often encounter tension among different disciplinary cultures, ideologies, and aims (Keogh, B., & Hardwick, T. 2023).

Our approach, while not without its challenges, may offer one possible path forward from the above-mentioned conflict. By trusting the students to build games for the public early on in their educational path, we provide an opportunity for them to gain both practical skills that support them if they wish to pursue an industry job while also asking them to engage with concepts that challenge fixed understandings of what games can be. By setting the public stage, we let them observe firsthand that they can create profound and memorable human experiences. In other words, our students get to build games that impact others and, in turn, themselves as others respond to their creations.

REFERENCES

Keogh, B. and Hardwick, T. 2023. “Creative, Technical, Entrepreneurial: Formative Tensions in Game Development Higher Education.” *Games and Culture.* 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231176874

Mecheri, D. 2018. *The works of Fumito Ueda: A different perspective on video games.* France; Toulouse: Third éditions.

Zimmerman, E. 2022. *The rules we break: Lessons in play, thinking, and design.* USA; New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.