Make Games No One Wants to Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The playground was never about playing for me. At times, it was about being forced to do things I did not wish to do, with people I did not wish to be around, because I might enjoy them but would not know unless I tried. At other, more frequent times, the playground was a space for me to read my book in a more informal setting than a classroom, or later on in life to play Pokémon Gold on my purple Game Boy Color. While others opted for social and physical games, I couldn't jump high enough in time and the rope would get tangled around my feet. I liked swings, but everyone wanted access to the swings and they were ready for a bloodbath. So I chose more solitary games, ones that I enjoyed despite their lack of popularity and rather for the message they hold.

I am not alone in this sentiment. In fact, Google Scholar displays almost four million hits for the keywords "serious games," an umbrella term that groups educational games, ludic activism, biomedical software and even games purposely designed to make players uncomfortable. Throughout this research, I ask: Are all games meant to provide us with fun play and a good time? What player experience do alternative games bring forth? Why then would players play such games, if not for fun?

Fullerton (2014) explicitly states that game designers need to put players' wants and experience first: "The role of the game designer is, first and foremost, to be an advocate for the player. The game designer must look at the world of games through the player's eyes." This rule does not leave much room for critical design that focuses on sending players a powerful message for example, or "user-unfriendly design" (Wilson & Sicart, 2010) that actively seeks to provoke players. Other game scholars point to a necessity of looking at the reason behind certain design choices (Bogost, 2007; Marcotte & Khaled, 2017). In other words, as put by Wilson and Sicart (2010), examining what is gained from designing eccentric and unusual games. Sometimes, it boils down to "creating a dialogue between designer and player," as is the example of abusive and embarrassing games highlighted by Wilson and Sicart (2010). This resonates with what I get asked often as a game designer by people looking to turn their data into a game: how can I make it more fun for players? Playability is then still

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regarded as the first frontier that determines a game's success, which may cause some discomfort in people playing games with strong messaging.

Throughout this research, I borrow Geertz's concept of "Thick Description" (1973) to introduce my own which I call "thick discomfort." In Thick Description, Geertz (1973) addresses early on what is on every ethnographer's mind: how to make sure that what we're observing and seeing is indeed what is truly happening. He focuses particularly on the intentions behind the actions which the observer cannot be aware of unless the interlocutor makes them aware of it. The observer fills in the blanks deliberately and subjectively. Through thick discomfort, I invite players to sit with this discomfort and ponder on what it means in terms of their game and play experience, but also in terms of their intentions as players akin to performing autoethnography. It is then up to the players themselves to choose what to report to the observer. This helps gauge what is retained by the players in the play session and how the message of the game affects them.

One key difference between softwares and digital games is that games use persuasive messaging packaged in experiences in order to alter players' behaviours, akin to holding a mirror to the world. Drawing on Aristotle, Bogost (2007) posits that we should consider more than what an object is made of but also the purpose it was made for. Computers are procedural; they follow a set of orders to display messages and produce a representation to their best interpretation of what the coder intended (Bogost, 2007). Digital games hosted on computers are a set of procedural computational executables that mimic real life, according to the interpretation of the designer living in said real life, and use persuasive messaging to alter players' behaviours, a process akin to holding a mirror to the real world (Frasca, 2001; Bogost, 2007). This is more obvious in visual novels and narrative games that rely on text-based rhetorical techniques. While both still and moving images rely on visual rhetoric instead, which is more provocative at a first look, the slow-release of textual rhetoric remains more efficient in terms of persuasion, yet procedural expression is the one that involves the subject (here, players) the most by invoking their moral choices (Bogost, 2007). Thinking about games as systems helps justify design choices as the players interact with them and also explains the outcomes of these messages on the players' behaviours: "Systems with similar feedback structures produce similar dynamic behaviors" (Meadows, 2008).

This research is still in process, in tandem with my doctoral project which touches on similar concepts of pushing ideology through games, experiencing pleasure while playing serious games or being exposed to uncomfortable topics in commercial games, meant to be enjoyed casually. Additionally, the questions I introduce in this abstract are ones that I revisit constantly in my own practice when designing games, especially in situations where monetary growth is not the main indicator of success.

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