
New Games for Extant Contexts

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Figure 1: Pig Chase (<http://www.playingwithpigs.nl>)

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CHI'13, April 27 – May 2, 2013, Paris, France.
ACM 978-1-XXXX-XXXX-X/XX/XX.

Abstract

We describe the alternate approach and process we have to make gameful systems to achieve goals within existing contexts. Our approach is a middle ground between those who say games cannot be instrumentalized and those who say that games are a panacea. We argue that by sensitively and rigorously employing a set of tools from the broader design space it is possible to create experiences that are both fun and tend towards a goal.

Author Keywords

Games, play, gameful systems, gamification, design, process

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous. See:
<http://www.acm.org/about/class/1998/>

Introduction

Hubbub (<http://www.hubbub.eu>) is an international studio that makes new games for social and organizational change. Hubbub conceives, designs and develops wholly new games to fit into existing contexts. These games are fun to play but often there are ulterior goals attached to the brief as well. Our aim is to deliver on those goals while staying true to the playful nature of games.

Games developed include *Pig Chase* for the conscious interaction between humans and pigs, *Code 4*, a large scale game to be played within corporations and *Beestenbende*, a game for families in a science museum.

We do not believe in the prescriptive trend that currently passes for gameful design in the broader industry. We think that an approach is necessary that is more subtle and respectful to all parties, not just the commissioning stakeholder. Our initial findings indicate that such an approach works better as well. Players like to play these games and the goals we set from the onset are met.

We have created games for contexts varying from academic settings, artistic endeavours but also for companies large and small. In all cases we use a similar toolbox of context immersed game conception followed by a rapidly prototyping hands-on design and development process.

In the following sections we'll describe our process for creating games, discuss pitfalls, contrast our way of working with normal development practices and conclude with issues we think are pressing.

Process

Conception

Conceiving a game starts with a brief that sets the direction for initial data gathering and analysis of the problem space. This usually involves a visit to the site and an exploration of the existing rulespace.

We make an inventory of what is important to our stakeholders and target audience and synthesize this into a set of requirements to be used during ideation. We then embark on sketching either with or without the client to quickly cover a broad swath of terrain and identify potential avenues of exploration.

When we have determined promising concepts, we develop these into prototypes. This is done initially using simple means: playing cards, dice and poker chips. After that we

develop increasingly high fidelity paper and software prototypes with whichever tools are convenient to quickly achieve the required level of fidelity.

Playtesting

When working on games and gameful systems, playtesting is an even more essential navigational aid than it is for evaluating other interactive products. Regular products will be approached by users with a need to fulfill a goal. This need is often absent for the end user —'player' in game parlance— of a game. Players in a game don't care a lot about what the commissioning party thinks they should do. First and foremost they expect something that is fun, non-confusing and aesthetically pleasing. This sets a high bar for the development of such a system.

It is impossible to determine whether something is fun or not without trying it. However useful expert reviews can be to spot usability errors and muddled metaphors when designing interactive products, they are mostly useless to determine whether something is fun.

Playtests should start early during development, involve the actual target audience on-site and feedback should inform further development. Tests should validate current issues and the level of detail that has been recently developed. If applied correctly, the feedback from these playtests will cause the project to converge towards the end result of a successful game.

Delivery

Iterative development with regular playtests continues until final delivery. During the principal development stage many of the roles (front-end and back-end engineer, graphic designer, producer, interaction designer, game designer) that were covered by a skeleton team may be fleshed out further into one or more people per role.

Eventually the game is deployed and run in its given context by a team consisting of people from the target organization and a crew provided by us consisting of among others technical support and a puppet master who manages the player experience and any non-player interaction.

Contrasts

We do not subscribe to the notion that players can be made subservient to institutional goals and that games can be used to fix any problematic issue within an organization. We believe that the essence of games and play require a more open ended and generative approach where it is hard to specify or predict beforehand what direction development will take or what outcomes players will achieve.

This does not mean direction is impossible, just that it will need to be subtle. A game should not aim directly towards the end goals set by the stakeholders. Instead it should step back at least one level and create interesting outcomes whose interplay creates the desired effect.

To do justice to all parties, everybody should be involved as early as possible and their requirements should be acknowledged. The game should wear its stated aim on its sleeve and not want to trick players into doing something. Ultimately both the game and its outcomes are whatever players make of it.

Playtesting determines what works and what doesn't and should be applied more rigorously across the field. This would serve both as a useful guide and uncover the failure of many naive approaches to game development.

Pitfalls

A brief overview of the field would suggest that there are many pitfalls when it comes to the development of gameful systems. The amount of successful approaches does not reflect the amount of hype surrounding applied games.

Stakeholder goals may be averse to the approach we detail here. From the outset of the process we propose, we know as little of the outcome as our client does. What we do know is that by following this process we will create a gameful system that does justice to both the stakeholders and players. This requires a leap of faith on the side of the stakeholders, but the early playtests and continued collaboration are designed to build the necessary trust.

Many practitioners in our opinion do not understand the resources required to create a gameful system that delivers on all of the goals of play, usability and aesthetics. We know that in many interactive projects user testing is neglected almost as a rule, but we argue that none of these can be skimmed upon, least of all play.

Depending on the context, it may not be immediately obvious to prospective players that play is an allowed or encouraged activity. To ease adoption it may be necessary to encourage a playful mindset and have the stakeholder clearly communicate about the game and its intended goals.

Conclusion

By using the above approach we have created games that we consider to be successful. Still there are a lot of issues that require further study and discussion.

It is unclear whether large organizations can or want to truly adopt open ended play. The nature of these

organizations values predictability, economies of scale and legibility, principles both our process and games are often opposed to. Organizations are of course also in flux and the barrier between their processes and the play deployed within them is a gliding one. What will be interesting is to research how this barrier moves, what causes these movements and what stresses that movement causes.

The approach detailed above harnesses play and creating games into a repeatable and reproducible process. It is inevitable that these practices and methods will at some point become commonplace. To continue to create appealing gameful systems, it will become necessary to go out and uncover new playful elements to add to this repertoire.