

HOW TO NOT SUCK AT GAME DESIGN



GAME DESIGN, ART, RESOURCES, RESEARCH, CRITICISM, TUTORIALS & STUFF BY ANJIN ANHUT.



November 21, 2010 [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=1391>] by Anjin Anhut.

I put this article down in words and pictures and it was originally published as an exclusive feature article on Gamasutra, A/N's Game Career Guide on September 19th, 2010. Thanks to Chris Nutt from Gamasutra for the stellar editorial work on this one. Well, now it was exclusive long enough and you can read it here too. Cheers

Why Am I Writing This?

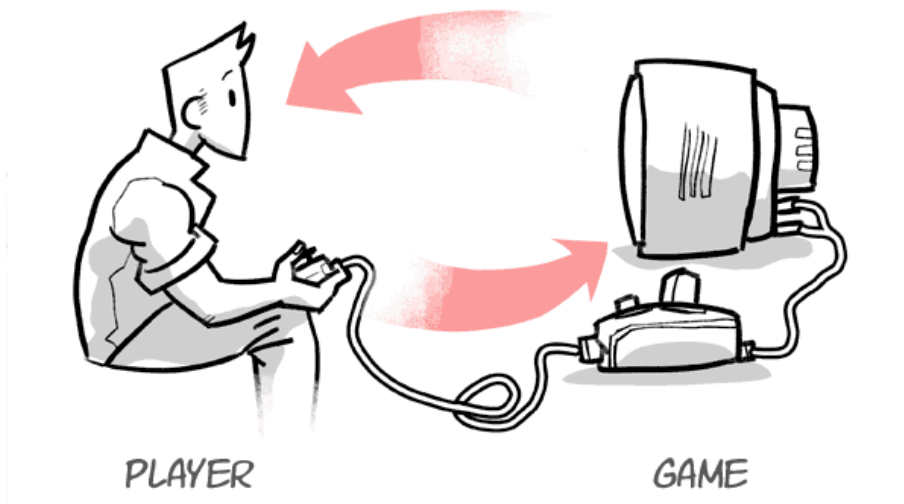


Well, I find myself playing most big budget games for only a couple of hours or sometimes just minutes before I get fatally bored. When playing, I also find myself complaining about the same prominent game design decisions over and over again. After trying to wrap my head around all the elements that make me lose interest, I came to one conclusion: When it comes to gameplay mechanics and campaign structure, many game designers are not offering a decent exchange with me as the player.

Harsh words, I know, but maybe viewing playing games as a conversation between the player and the designer could help getting behind what makes gaming more satisfying.

A Satisfying Conversation

A CONSTANT EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION



When somebody plays a game, there is a conversation happening between the player and the game designer. The same kind of conversation happens between a movie director and the movie goer or between a writer and the reader. The same kind of conversation you and me are having in this very moment. We both aim for the same goals with this conversation. You want to read something interesting and I want you to read something interesting. But we both have to do our part to make that happen. Unfortunately we two weren't able to have our conversation before I wrote this article, so I as the writer have to anticipate what needs to be in this article and how it needs to be written to guide you the desired interesting reading experience. After that, you have to do the rest on your own. You have to read it, understand it, draw your own conclusions.

The same thing occurs between the player and the game designer. Both aim for the player to feel like a winner, to be satisfied with the minutes he just played. For that the designer has to carefully anticipate the player's preferences, play style and skill level and has to cleverly craft a game, that guides the player towards the experience of winning. But again, the player has to do the second half of distance on his own. He needs to understand the game, play the game and make some progress while playing it. Both sides of this conversation need to do their part. This sort of exchange happens on a technical level also. The game utilizes the screen and speakers to send signals to the player and the player replies to that signals using the controller input device in his hand. This input from the player causes the game to display something different on screen and maybe give a new audio signal, which makes the player pressing buttons again. And repeat.

Unique to interaction design is, that the game designer can create media that reacts to the player, instead of just spilling a fix sequence of content, like a film or a piece of writing would. The designer can make the conversation change depending on the behavior of the player. The designer should capitalize on that special feature of interactive media. If the game designer was able to anticipate and prepare for the behavior of the player and to help him not only achieve but also experience a moment of winning, voila, the designer was successful in creating a satisfying gaming moment.

A Satisfying Moment



Let's have a look at what parts come into play here.

The part of the player simply is to make progress. Any sort of progress. He either makes in-game progress, like completing missions, beating bosses, leveling up his character or finding items, or he as the player makes progress, by learning new secrets, getting a better understanding of the game, practicing his skills and overcoming bigger challenges. If he manages to do either or both, he experiences a sense of accomplishment.

Your part, the part of the game designer is a bit more complicated. You have to do three things: Confront the player with a problem worth solving, guide the player towards solving that problem and after the player has solved said problem, reward him properly for his accomplishment.

To do that you of course have to know your target gamer. What kind of problems is your player willing to face? What kind of guidance and support does your player need to solve those problems? What kind of reward would enhance his experience of winning afterwards?

Besides from personal preferences regarding subject matter of games or genre, it comes down to measuring how much challenge, support and reward you mix together to create a gaming experience and how you balance those factors out. Like with a cup of coffee, everyone prefers a different mix of coffee, milk and sugar. Getting that mix right for your target gamer is key to satisfaction. Getting it wrong may make him spit your game back into the cup.

Simply put: For a decent conversation, you got to know who you are talking with.

The Chemistry Of Challenge, Support And Rewards

CHALLENGE - SUPPORT = ACCOMPLISHMENT

ACCOMPLISHMENT + REWARD = SATISFACTION



Challenge, Support And Rewards, those three key ingredients have a very delicate chemistry with each other.

Challenge and support are opposing forces. Adding challenge makes things more difficult for the player, while adding support make it easier. When the player manages to solve a problem, his sense of accomplishment depends on the size of the problem. The more dangerous an enemy is, the more impressive it is to actually beat him. The more hidden an item is, the more impressive it is to actually find it. Giving support to the player, in form of a map, heavy armor, better weapons or an invincibility star, reduce the sense of accomplishment for solved problems. But it also makes playing more comfortable, of course.

Giving rewards to the player, coins, gory animations, fighter's winning poses, xbox achievements, game endings and support for further challenges, should be recognizably be triggered by the player's accomplishment. So the player personally feels to have earned the rewards. So that he feels like a winner. ... satisfied.

What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

ACCOMPLISHMENT GAMER



REWARD GAMER



Well here is where knowing personal preferences of your target player is mandatory.

With coffee again, some people want theirs strong and black, and some people prefer it decaffeinated and with lots of milk and sugar. This kind of opposing preferences are quite common in video games. We even tried to give them names: hardcore gaming and casual gaming. When considering the two factions as the far ends of a spectrum we can create a map on which every player's personal recipe for satisfaction can be located.

Giving too much support to an accomplishment oriented player results in a lack of challenge and feels too easy to the player. While using a rocket launcher to zap zombies is rewarding, with all the flying gibbs, the explosion and the sense of ownage, the rewarding sensation losses its bang over time and leaves the player with little sense of accomplishment after every battle.

Also handing out rewards without the player recognizing his own accomplishment ends up very unsatisfying. If a game gives away achievements for free, it quickly can come off as cheaply trying to bribe the player into liking it.

on the other hand, reward oriented players can easily become frustrated by oversized challenges and a lack of support. They too want a sense of accomplishment, but achieving that should not require hard labor or a high threshold for pain. They view gaming as rewarding experiences first, enjoying the entertaining presentation, finding items, roaming the in-game worlds and having manageable challenges along with comfortable gameplay. They do not draw motivation from getting squished over and over again by a level boss. They feel pushed away by that. In the worst case they consider the game itself to be kind of mean.

When it comes to rewards they of course want to be rewarded for their accomplishments, but don't mind getting a freebie from time to time. Giving freebies might even generate some heartfelt sympathy for the game.

You see that preferences in the right mixture of challenge, support and reward do not only differ, they can actually strongly oppose each other.

A Waste Of Time



Now that we have established what factors into a satisfying game moment, let's check on another factor of satisfaction, the big one: time. How much satisfying moments per minute do we deliver to the player? And how do we keep the game experience satisfying over time?

Playing a game is a series of moments and the goal of both parties, player and designer, should be to make every moment satisfying. This only works if the game designer was able to prepare for a long long conversation with the player. Any conversation, where arguments get repeated over and over again, and where there are noticeable lengths of silence over and over again, is doomed to feel exhausting and sometimes even pointless. Especially when said conversation runs for a couple of hours. Also when one of the parties in a conversation has to say "...uhm.." a lot, or is stuttering, or has hick-ups, it gets uncomfortable or even annoying for the other party to keep following.

Your game should always be able to bring new arguments forward and new questions for the player to answer... or at least change in tone, to give the player something adjust to. Many games do that by providing a clever difficulty curve. Or they have the in-game world start off rather generic and mundane and have it become more and more fantastic and outlandish over time. Ever noticed how many fantasy themed games start in regular streets or in your virtual bedroom and in the end you are in some sort of place unknown to man, some underground laboratory, sky castle, in another dimension or time? Adding new and fresh enemies from time to time is another method. There is way more to do, of

course.

Your game should be able to avoid moments of silence, moments where there is nothing said and nothing asked. Open world games often fall into that trap by having the player spend a lot of time traveling to the location of the next objective. Without anything of significance happening on the way or nothing of significance to do, the conversation gets silent in those moments.

And finally, your game should avoid stuttering, uhm-saying and hick-ups. This does not only refer to bugs in graphic and gameplay, but also to issues of usability. Please remember, that your game is a piece of software, with a user sitting in front of an interface. Playable characters should smoothly react to the player's button input. Browsing menus should be fluid and swift. Mundane tasks like picking up items from the floor or opening random doors should not be difficult or complicated. Difficult in-game situations are allowed to be difficult to master, but making using the software a chore, is just slowly grinding away much of the satisfaction the gaming experience originally had to offer.

Conclusion

In short, every player enjoys the feeling of accomplishment and rewarding gameplay on its own. But to make the experience truly satisfying you have to make both factors add up. Being graciously rewarded and actually having earned it is the most fulfilling outcome of whatever challenging situation one might face.

To allow the player to accomplish something and to reward him properly afterwards, you have to know your target gamer's preferences. Those preferences do not only differ, but often oppose each other.

You also have to communicate with the player, making the conversation between him and your game fluid, clear and rich in variety.

Not a small feat. But when you are able to keep the conversation fresh for hours and inject the right dose of accomplishment and reward into it, you may pull off an awesomely satisfying game.

Additional Reading:

Before we dive into some selected examples, I'd like to point to other articles that tackle the same subject from a different angle:

[Evaluating Game Mechanics For Depth by Mike Stout](#)

[Edmund McMillen on Risk and Reward](#)

Some Examples:

Let's have some quick examples play us out.



Super Mario Series: The invincibility star is very rewarding to use. It not only makes you invincible but also makes you an unstoppable killing machine. Of course it becomes very very easy, dealing with enemies and that takes a lot of the accomplishment away. To balance this out, the designers made the star especially hard to get. Not only is the star rather rare in the game it also bounces away and you have to catch it in order to use it. This extra challenge plus the rewarding effects of the star add up to a very satisfying item.



Mortal Kombat Series: The infamous fatalities are only in the game for satisfactory purposes. Pulling off a successful fatality has no influence on your progress in the game. You just do it, because it feels good. The gory display of gruesome executions and mutilations is rewarding for fans of the genre, but the fact that you have to win the fight first and also have to know the secret button combination to perform a fatality added more accomplishment to the experience.



Street Fighter Series: The info texts popping up during rounds, displaying "First Attacks", "Combos" and "Reversals" are nothing more than small acknowledgements of the player's accomplishments. Being recognized for your skill is rewarding. In later installments Capcom made the popups bigger, more colorful or like with Devil May Cry even called them "awesome combo", "cool combo" or "stylish combo" instead of relying on blank numbers.



Doom: The chainsaw is one of the most popular and iconic weapons from the doom series. The bloody melee chainsaw combat seems to be rewarding even for the in-game character itself, since the small character portrait in the hud flashes an evil grin whenever you pick up a chainsaw. To add accomplishment to the reward, the weapon is difficult to use (it's a melee weapon in a shooter), and hard to find.



Rise Of The Argonauts: Now here is a bad one. The missions are planned in a way that king Jason has to travel a lot from point a to point b to reach the next objective... and he has to travel by foot. The environments are lifeless and slowly walking thru them creates annoying moments of silence, which are worse than loading screens. Why can't he have a horse? He is the king of his island, isn't he? How about a kingdom for a horse?



Brütal Legend: Another example for a bad conversation. Whenever the player accomplished to finish a mission he doesn't get rewarded, he gets cast out. In Brütal Legend every new mission takes place in a completely remote area, far away from the point the player gets dropped off after the last successful mission. So the player is forced to travel there first. This happens every time. The player always has to search for the next gameplay segment by himself, often spending minutes just driving aimlessly around instead of playing the game.



Darksiders: To make the gaming experience satisfying over the course of the full campaign, one thing Vigil did, was to make every newly discovered area more fantastic and outlandish than the last one. In the very first level, we start of in modern day New York (where else?), when apocalypse strikes. Next level we are set in post-apocalyptic New York and slowly work our way thru dead cities, deserts of ashes, ancient Temples, palaces until we reach floating cities in heaven. Starting with mundane set pieces and making them more and more exciting with every playtime hour has worked for the Gears of War series pretty well also.



Borderlands: Collecting items in Borderlands becomes a chore, by having every item you wanna pick up being locked in a box or buried under trash first. When there are three bundles of money on a desk in Borderlands, since they are in boxes the player would have to do the following to grab them: Aim at box1, open it, aim at bundle inside, collect it, aim at box2, open it, aim at bundle inside, collect it, aim at box3, open it, aim at bundle and finally collect the third bundle. To not make the money lying openly on the desk and making it easy to collect it by just walking close enough would not have been that complicated. All this aiming, opening, aiming, collecting is just plain bad usability.



Borderlands: Clap Trap on the other hand is an example of game designers trying to have a good conversation with the player. The designers created a likable agent, who speaks to and guides the player in a direct, charming and understandable way.



Facebook Social Games: One key element of social games is rewarding the player for just starting the app that day. Without actually doing anything in-game, the player gets goodies from the game. This reward without accomplishment is only satisfying for the reward oriented player. The accomplishment oriented player gets very little satisfaction out of freebies. The reward

oriented player enjoys being appreciated just for playing plus all the rewarding things he could buy with his free in-game credits, so he has a strong incentive to come back the next day. But make no mistake when you give him the same amount of rewards for actually accomplishing something, he will feel much more satisfied.

I know almost every hint, tip and complaint I mentioned has just been scratched on the surface and would be worth an own blog entry. But I hope you may get some inspiration out of this article.

See ya next time.
Anjin