

Let's Start Playing Games!

How games can be less about complying and more about playing

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Abstract

The input of players becomes increasingly valuable to game designers. In the past, players mainly negotiated with game designers in sale-numbers, coin-drops and through critical acclaimed game magazines. Today's game designers tend to communicate more directly with gamers through internet forums, beta-testing and data mining of gameplay. The increased negotiations between game players and game designers may account for the increased focus on user-generated games, making games more *playful*.

Introduction

Today's playful activities in games mainly concern the restructuring of game *objects*, *goals* and *environments*. Hereby game designers remain the sole authors of the game *rules*. Even more, game rules remain enclosed in difficult to breach systems. Due to a lack of programming skills or the inability of modders and hackers to change these game mechanics, games are historically related to formal and rigid rule sets. While play concerns rich social negotiations, elaborate restructuring and creative reconstruction of mechanics, games seldom offer these playful activities. Traditionally game designers are perceived as the sole author of game mechanics. We urge game designers to become less an author, and more a fellow gamer, so we can start playing games.

'Bang! You're dead!'

'No, you missed me.'

'I did not!'

'You sure did!'

'Yes I did... kill you! Now play dead for 20 seconds!'

Two children are playing *soldier*, they pretend to fight a war. They change the rules every minute, constructing new rules, new goals, new weapons, or new worlds. This is play in one of its purest forms. A simple wooden branch becomes a deadly Desert-5 pistol. Seconds later the branch transforms into a devastating M79 grenade launcher by holstering it on one's shoulder. By breaking the branch in two, the children run around yielding two pistols: *Lara Croft*¹ style. One of the children gets bored, and changes the game. The branches become two razor-sharp *rai*. The child, still bearing the long stick turns his branch into a *bö staff*.

'Now we are Rafael and Donatello!'

¹ Lara Croft is the main character of the *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1995) series.

‘No better: Kilik and Taki from *Soulcalibur!*’

‘I don’t wanna be girl! I wanna be a Turtle.’

The children continuously negotiate about the objects, rules and goals of their game. They change the meaning of objects, the rules, and by breaking the branches, they actually reconstruct the objects themselves. This way, new activities and new play experiences emerge from continuously restructuring the relations between *rules, goals, objects* and their *environment*.

This is why we like to play: we enjoy experiencing the new, and/or unexpected. What’s more, we enjoy the continuous play of social negotiations. As videogames are considered to be played, we would expect the same dynamically social play, and enjoyment as we find in children’s play. However it feels like most video gamers are *complying to*, instead of *playing with* the game rules, goals, objects and environments.

For example, in *Uncharted 2: Amongst Thieves* (Naughty Dog, 2009), gamers can choose between a Desert-5 and M79, similar to children imagining the wooden branch to be a gun. However, gamers cannot wield Drake’s grenade launcher as a Donatello’s bö staff. Nor will the game allow for close-combat similar to the swordplay of *Soulcalibur* (Namco, 2008). In contrast to the children’s play, the gamer cannot restructure the game’s *environment, objects, goals* and *rules* to construct new game mechanics. The construction of something new by restructuring the existing seems inherent to play. Games, however, seldom offer players these possibilities. Gamers merely comply with, or deviate from preconfigured game mechanics. Arguably, the game designers are the only ones whom are actually playing. Nevertheless, recent innovations in game design seem to turn the tides.

Game designers as authors

Traditionally, the work of game designers includes a wide area of creative work. They code, design and shape visualizations of the videogame. Today’s

game industry brings forth a fragmented workspace in which programmers, asset developers, graphical artists, audio designers, writers, managers and game designers work collaboratively on one game. All team members contribute to the gameplay from their respective specialism. But frankly, it is the game designer whom remains sole author of the game's rules and goals. Designers take the final decision about the toughness of an end-boss, whether or not a game contains a warp-zone, or if a special attack requires a three- or four-button combination.

A game designer is an artist: iteratively creating the game's rules, goals, objects and environments, to construct the optimal game-flow. As a direct consequence of the authoring behavior, gamers can either comply with the game mechanics or deviate (cheat) from them. Within strongly authored games, gamers cannot restructure essential game mechanics, let alone construct something new or personal. The gamers' restructuring activities mainly concern the dynamics and aesthetics² of the game. This becomes particularly clear in online role-play. Role players change the meaning of game objects through negotiations within the online community or by altering (player constructed) narratives. In *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), an *Aurora Robe* signifies +54 points on armor, +5 stamina, and +15 spirit³; however, a role-player could use it as a fancy white dress for occasional role-playing parties. Gamers can construct new dynamics and aesthetics, but they can seldom restructure the game's mechanics like the playing children as mentioned above. Authored games, are games as Salen & Zimmerman (2003) define them: artificial conflicts, based on rules, with quantifiable outcomes. In their perspective, the designers wield the scepter. They decide what can, and what cannot be done.

² The MDA model describes Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics consequently as 'Mechanics describes the particular components of the game, at the level of data representation and algorithms.

Dynamics describes the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and eachothers outputs over time.

Aesthetics describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system.'

(Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004)

³ See Thottbot for more information on the Aurora Robe: <http://thottbot.com/i6415>

Nevertheless, the game mechanics of MMORPGs⁴, Social Games⁵ and User-Generated-Content Games seem less authored than the traditional retail titles are. In these games, gamers and designers increasingly negotiate about the game mechanics. These negotiations enable the restructuring of formal rules and regulations, constructing new mechanics and alternative playing styles. However, most re(con)structuring practices are still authored by the game designer. Gamers have a say, but are not empowered: we argue that games can become more playful if gamers are presented with a higher degree of re(con)structuring activities.

We will discuss a taxonomy from the most authoring practices (i.e. game creation) to the most re(con)structuring (i.e. playing) practices of today's videogamescape, to clarify the aforementioned trend. Firstly, this is done from a game designer perspective by discussing *patching*, *beta-testing*, *tweaking*, and *editing*. Secondly *modding*, *adding*, *hacking* and *cheating* from a player's point of view will be discussed. In the latter practices, gamers have a greater influence on the game mechanics, which can be considered to be more playful.

Authoring Practices

When we think of authoring practices in games the initial creation of a game comes to mind. In this view, **patching** can be described as an authoring practice of a lesser degree. It describes the process of making alterations to existing games. For its greater part, patching is made possible by the connectivity of the internet. Blizzard Entertainment releases monthly patches for the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, in which the differences between classes are changed, bugs are fixed and some significant rules are altered. An example of a significant change in game mechanics is the *drop-rate* alteration in *World*

⁴ MMORPGs are Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games. These games are played online with (or against) other players around the world. *EverQuest*, *WarhammerOnline*, *Lord of the Rings Online*, and *Star Trek Online* are such games.

⁵ Social games are typically found on online social network sites like FaceBook, or Hyves. These games often transform the quantity of friends connections into an ingame asset / commodity. *FarmVille*, *MafiaWars*, *RestaurantWorld*, *HappyIsland* are such games.

of *Warcraft*. In the MMORPG, gamers loot items from defeated foes. Which item is looted depends on the foe and on loot-probability⁶. Players, however, expected the items would drop more easily after repetitive killings. Clearly in practice this does not happen. Some players kill numerous foes without looting a particular item, while other players loot the precious item after their first fight. In response to players' looting-expectations, Blizzard created a system in which the drop-rate increased every time a foe was killed. So, the more foes killed, the higher the drop-rate, the more likelihood of looting an item. By restructuring game mechanics in monthly patches, mechanics become less rigid.

Social Games, like *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009-2010) or *Happy Island* (CrowdStar, 2010), build on this iterative design process. Apparently, these Social Games never leave **beta phase** (i.e. the development stage of a production cycle). Instead, Zynga changes the mechanics almost real-time to satisfy immediate needs and actions of the player's community. Blizzard, Zynga and CrowdStar do not only change the rules, they add new objects, administer environmental changes, and even present gamers with new goals to accomplish. Social Game designers carefully analyze the players' actions and participate on game-forums to accommodate to the player's expectations. While the time span is shortened in comparison to patching, it is still the game designer who authors the changes instead of the players themselves.

The same is true for **tweaking**. Tweaking is the possibility to make small changes to game mechanics, which may significantly influence the gameplay. An example of tweaking can be found in *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007). Gamers can choose to improve the abilities of the game character, which in turn will change the way that gamers comply to the game mechanics. Also players can choose to act polite or ruthless in conversations and circumstances. This changes the narrative of the game and its sequel. Tweaking parameters are common to many RPG-like games. *Super Smash Brothers Brawl* (Sora, 2008), however, offers other alterable parameters. Amongst others, gamers can play with the amount of usable power-ups, add multiple characters, limit play

⁶ Common items have a 15% change to be looted.

opportunities per character or change the time limit. Although gamers are given more freedom to tweak specific rules in the game, the game designer authors the parameters.

The game *WarioWare D.I.Y.* (Nintendo SPD Group No.1 & Intelligent Systems, 2009) offers players the opportunity to create their own *WarioWare*-minigames, without any programming knowledge whatsoever. These games are based on tapping or flicking the *Nintendo DS stylus* on a specific point, or in a particular way, within a certain time limit. Players can change an extensive number of parameters (graphics, time, number of tabs, flick gestures, sounds, etc). Although Nintendo's advertisements recruit gamers by saying 'I want YOU to create games', gamers merely edit typical *WarioWare* games. Gamers are not actually constructing new game mechanics, the gameplay remains essentially the same as other *WarioWare* titles. *WarioWare D.I.Y.* seems to equal the restructuring qualities of 'level editors'.

Level **editors** are available for an extensive number of games. They present players with the opportunity to create their own game levels⁷, racing tracks⁸, battling stages⁹, cars¹⁰ or characters¹¹. Still, the addition of a level editor may not offer players the possibility to restructure the actual game mechanics. Most of the time, editors concern environments and objects, not the rules and goals of a game. Moreover, editors are less about restructuring, but more about constructing instead. A level editor is to a game, as a text editor is to an ebook. By writing fanfiction, readers are not playing with the initial text, but readers are playing with the theme, characters, timeline or environment of the original story to create something new. By reading a book, we cannot rearrange sections or sentences to change its meaning. That is because a printed (Epub) text in itself is unchangeable. Game rules do not have to. Games, especially videogames, can do so much more if we give players the opportunity to

⁷ *LodeRunner* (Smith, 1983), *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998)

⁸ *Stunts* (Distinctive Software Inc., 1990)

⁹ *SuperSmashBrothers Brawl* (Sora, 2008)

¹⁰ *LEGO Racers* (High Voltage Software, 1998)

¹¹ *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)

reconstruct both the sociocultural values associated with the gamerules (like role players¹² and cheaters do), as the game mechanic itself.

The game players' perspective

Without an editor, gamers may only comply or deviate from pre-configured mechanics. Nevertheless, some gamers change more than the aesthetics and dynamics alone. *Modders* and *hackers* actually restructure existing games and reconstruct them to their personal liking.

'The word 'hacker' describes in computer culture a person with sophisticated programming skills developing creative solutions to complex and challenging problems' (Scheäfer, 2008, p. 29). Many hackers develop **addons** or cheat programs for games, which are a debated issue within the gamers' community. For example in *World of Warcraft*, The AVR (Augmented Virtual Reality) mod allows players to visualize strategies by drawing in 3D space. Blizzard did not allow this mod, and broke the ability for the AVR to continue functioning in their latest patch (3.3.5). The game developer reported that addons are never intended to interact with the game world itself. AVR and the act of visualizing strategy within the game world simply goes beyond what Blizzard is willing to allow (Boubouille, 2010). Blizzard upholds a rather strict policy when it comes to addons and other mods. According to Blizzard and many other game developers, addons or mod may significantly destroy gameplay. In other words, addons or mods may liberate gamers too much from the authoring gameplay that was preconfigured by the game designer. We wonder if this anxiety is justified.

Not all game developers police the modding community as Blizzard does. Valve Corporation, for example, seemed more willing to have modders change their game by opening *Half-Life's* (Valve Corporation, 1998) *Source-Engine* to the public. In response, Le & Cliffe created a new game, based on its

¹² For an extensive account of the restructuring of sociocultural rules by role-players, read Taylor (Taylor, 2006). In turn, Consalvo (Consalvo, 2009) presents a extensive description of cheater-culture.

predecessor *Half-Life*, but with new characters and objects, new environments, and above all new rules and goals. *Half-Life: Counter Strike* (Le & Cliffe, 1999) may be the most stunning example of gamers utilizing their programming or artistic skills to change the game's environment, objects, rules and goals, to actually reconstruct the game mechanics and enrich the playful experience in accordance to their personal likings. Modders do not only play the games, they play *with* the games (Sihvonen, 2009).

Facilitating play

Creative outlets, similar to the modding community, are recognized in the game *Little Big Planet* (Media Molecule, 2008). In contrast to *WarioWario D.I.Y.*, *Little Big Planet* players are not confined to tap- and flick minigames. Instead, players are encouraged to use the objects in *Little Big Planet* to create their own rules, goals and environments. Players can even upload personal imagery into the game, and alter visualization and characteristics of objects and environments. *Little Big Planet* offers players the most re(con)structing possibilities to date without the need to learn a programming language. Its flourishing community, with more than 2.3 million uploaded levels, high praise from both gamers and game critics, and the sale of three million copies so far, prove that the game has a huge appeal to the gaming community.

Still, *Little Big Planet* remains a level-editor for the majority of gamers. It is extremely difficult to create other games than platformers¹³. Its successor, *Little Big Planet 2* (Media Molecule, 2010), may change this. By adding building blocks with simplified artificial intelligence, Media Molecule makes it easier to create new games by using the *Little Big Planet 2* tools. Interestingly, the game designers of *Little Big Planet 2* claim that they themselves have no other tools at their disposal than those available in the game editor. Even more, Media Molecule promised to strengthen social negotiations in the game, by improving

¹³ Platformers are games like *Super Mario Bros.* in which gamers need to make their character jump from one platform to the other.

interface design, the visualization of user-generated games, and enhancing communication services.

This may be one of the most significant changes in game design today. Media Molecule is promising an environment in which the play experience is as rich, diverse and communicative as in children's play. Game designers and game players may become equals in their 'programming abilities', much alike children are equals in their ability to change play mechanics. In *Little Big Planet 2* the game designer ceases to be the sole author of gameplay. Thanks to negotiation tools like online leader boards, popularity voting systems, game-objects sharing, ingame chat and out-of-game forums, game designers no longer wield the scepter, deciding what is possible and what is not. Players and designers become peers as they are presented with the same toolset and digital mechanics.

In theory, games like *Little Big Planet 2* can be re(con)structured in an even richer way than a children's playground and two branches, described in the introduction. One could say, a wooden branch has many functionalities; an interactive virtual object, however, can do so much more, thanks to unending combination of potential functionalities.

Through restructuring practices, game mechanics are changed and new games emerge. No longer are game mechanics rigid and definite. Like play, game rules can be in a constant state of flux and subjective to social negotiations. MMORPGs and Social Gaming already showed that game rules are not unchangeable after all, and that these changes and social negotiations are key to an enjoyable playful experience. *Little Big Planet 2* promises to go even further, not only by changing the aesthetics and dynamics, but also by offering players to restructure the mechanics and construct new playful experiences.

Considering the definitions of gaming

Salen & Zimmerman's definition of games as an artificial conflict, based on rules, with a quantifiable outcome, suggests that the games are all about rigid (unchangeable) rules, challenge and artificial (i.e. not real) experiences. However, in the future starting today, every action, every rule, goal, object, and environment can be debated and changed. Games can no longer be considered 'formal systems that provide informal experiences' (Juul, 2005), as the rules are no longer fixed. Therefore, Caillois' (2001) distinction between 'ludus' (explicit and rigid regulations) and 'paidia' (implicit and spontaneous regulations) becomes debated, which as such asks for a redefinition of gaming.

First and foremost, playing is not something artificial as Salen & Zimmerman (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) suggest. Abt incorrectly stated that 'games do not have direct real-life effects' (1971, p. 127). Conversely, Huizinga (1951) already pointed out that play is of profound value to our culture and that games exist on the border of culturally defined boundaries. Games, in Huizinga's opinion, have a tremendous influence on our real-life and vice versa. Sutton-Smith (2001) suggests that play's definition must be broad, including human and inhuman participants: 'play is like language: a system of communication and expression' (2001, p. 129).

In turn, Marinka Copier (2007) describes this system of communication as continuous negotiation of (role) players with socio-cultural network of human and inhuman actors. Underlining the importance of a player community. Inspired by the *Actor Network Theory* of Bruno Latour, Copier formulates a comprehensive description of (role) play, which does not focus on actors like rules, goals, objects, or environments, but instead describes / investigates the relations between all actors. Earlier Copier (2005) emphasized that a game only exists when it is played. Role-players actively negotiate with the game mechanics, socio-cultural mechanics, and individual-personal ones. From these negotiations a play experience emerges. The play experience and the activities related to these experiences are in a constant state of flux. How players act differs every negotiation, because they themselves are part of the actor network

as well. It is in this continuous change that the characteristic of play can be found.

The developmental psychologists Jarvis, Brock & Brown (2008) describe that play ‘emphasizes the restructuring, enrichment and discovery – building on personal experiences and knowledge to create new concepts and experiences’ (Jarvis et.al, 2008, p. 25). Through this restructuring, new forms of activities and meaning are constructed. The restructuring process described by Jarvis, Brock & Brock concerns cognitive psychological changes, and Copier focuses on the cultural changes that emerge from social-negotiations. Both do not specifically address the restructuring of game mechanics themselves. In other words, the iterative design of rules, goals and activities to construct new experiences. This is not surprising, as rules are easily changed in the aforementioned children’s play, while it is increasingly difficult to change rules in a videogame. However, as *Little Big Planet*, the modding community, MMORPGs, Social Games, and the advance of user generated content show, the game mechanics of today’s games *do* change and by doing so, gaming can become more playful.

Conclusion

We advocate to bridge the gap between game designers and gamers. By doing so, gamers can become game designers, and vice versa. We discussed the open construction of rules, objects and contexts in play. People tend to search for ways to restructure the game mechanics and construct new playful experiences as well. Traditionally this was not fully facilitated, due to the inability of many gamers to code, and due to the authoring attitude of game designers. However, we witness a change in gamers’ abilities and designers’ attitude toward authorship, which make games more playful than they were before. Instead of being an author, game designers become the sidekick of gamers, presenting gamers with alternate points of view, knowledge, skills, or anything else’ gamers can play with.

By presenting game designers with the same tools as the game players. Gamers and designer can become equals in their restructuring and constructive possibilities. Instead of rewarding gamers for compliant behavior, or punishing cheaters for deviating from preconfigured regulations, game designers could inspire, enrich, and empower gamers, by creating games that are less about complying and more about playing.

Moreover, gaming can no longer be described as a social negotiation with fixed, and formal rules. Gaming is a continuous restructuring of relations between human and inhuman actors, which constructs new experiences, and in turn, new games. This change in paradigm may open new avenues for game design, game engine development, and most importantly, the way we play games.

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Figure 1 *The continuum of play reconstructing*

