GAMES, DESIGN and PLAY

A DETAILED APPROACH TO ITERATIVE **GAME DESIGN**

Colleen **MACKLIN** | John **SHARP**

Praise for *Games, Design and Play*

"Sharp and Macklin break down the design process in detail from concept to code to completion. What I particularly like about this book is its inclusion of prototyping methods and design patterns that are often overlooked by others. I suspect it will be helpful to designers looking to break new ground outside the AAA space."

—Brenda Romero, Game Designer, Romero Games

"There are many books you can read about games. But *Games, Design, and Play* is something new. Colleen Macklin and John Sharp don't just explain what games are—they detail the game design process itself."

—Eric Zimmerman, Game Designer & Arts Professor, NYU Game Center

"*Game, Design and Play* is a detailed, thoughtful, and well-researched primer on the multifaceted discipline that is game design."

—Mare Sheppard, President, Metanet Software

"I've been studying and teaching game design for over a decade and this is the first time I've read a book that catalogs so many diverse aspects of the game design process. Colleen and John dissect and examine games of all types (not just videogames) and then expertly show you how to put all the pieces together to form your own unique design."

—Stone Librande, Lead Designer, Riot Games

"The authors share a wealth of experience, making for a text full of great concepts, thorough process and applied practice. Throughout they provide pertinent examples and use engaging exercises which makes it useful, informative and insightful."

—Drew Davidson, Director and Teaching Professor, Entertainment Technology Center, Carnegie Mellon University

"This is a book that fills the much needed space between systems thinking and play theory. Macklin and Sharp balance the process with practicalities, in a way that is as timeless, enjoyable and engaging as the games they discuss."

—Lindsay Grace, Associate Professor and Founding Director,
American University Game Lab and Studio

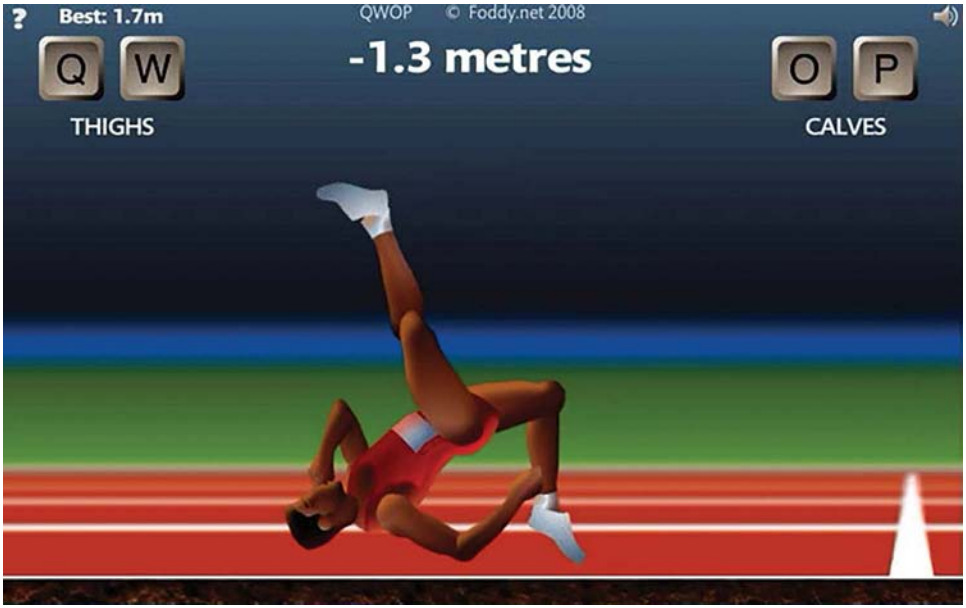

Figure 3.16 A screenshot from *QWOP*.

An example of conceptual whimsy is *Tenya Wanya Teens* by Keita Takashi and Uvula with the assistance of Wild Rumpus and Venus Patrol (see Figure 3.17). The game's silliness starts with its controller: a joystick next to a panel of 16 buttons with no identifying labels. The player is tasked with helping a little onscreen boy perform the appropriate task by pressing the correct button on the controller. So sometimes, this means the player makes the character cry when it should be bathing, or rock out on a guitar when the character should be sleeping. The game doesn't ask the player to physically move or act silly, but it does lead to all sorts of onscreen hilarity. Adding to this is the speed with which the game changes environments and tasks—nearly every 10 seconds, the character is presented with a new activity, and the player has to find the right button to perform the task.

Whimsical play is often about physical silliness. Spinning around on a merry-go-round and then trying to walk is whimsical play. Twister and the ways it asks the player to move their body around other players is whimsical play. As we see in *Hit Me,* a careful interplay of actions and goals can set up silly interactions. With *QWOP*, whimsical play can be produced through the careful application of constraint to player actions. Whimsical games like *Hit Me* and *QWOP* emphasize the role of the body, and differently from sports, focus on our physical foibles over our skillful grace. And with *Tenya Wanya Teens*, the silliness is conceptual, as the comedic design of the unexpected outcomes from the player's attempts to click the correct button lead their character to perform actions that don't match their setting. And in so doing, the designer has created whimsy through the interplay of actions, goals, and theme.

Figure 3.17 A game of *Tenya Wanya Teens*.

Role-Playing

For many people, games are a form of storytelling. Perhaps better stated, they are a form of story experience; as the player engages with the game, and through their actions, the story unfolds. There are multiple traditions of storytelling that wind through games, from the character-driven experience of tabletop role-playing games to the more cinematic storytelling associated with many AAA titles. Let's look at an example of both kinds: Leah Gilliam's tabletop RPG Lesberation: Trouble in Paradise, and Tale of Tales' first-person dark fairytale *The Path*.

Leah Gilliam's role-playing game Lesberation: Trouble in Paradise (see Figure 3.18) puts players in the role of a group of lesbian activists trying to establish a utopian society. The game's structure is much simpler than the average RPG. Players are given a set of cards representing objects—coffee mugs, Volkswagen minivans, microphones, rope, and so on—and verbs—rock, love, shout, know, and so on. Players lay their cards out face-up so that everyone can see what everyone else has. Players then take turns playing a card of each type to advance the story scene established by the game-runner. Players have to agree upon decisions as a group and can use other players' cards with permission. The game promotes discussion and consensus-making within a socio-political scenario.

Figure 3.18 A game of Lesberation: Trouble in Paradise. Photo by Leah Gilliam.

Lesberation: Trouble in Paradise uses the basic ideas and structures of role-playing games, but in a way that is accessible to a larger audience. No character sheets, no long rules manual, and no monster manual are needed to play the game. There are just a few simple rules for role-playing a group of activists in a near future scenario. We could pretend to be in those roles without a game, but the light structure of Lesberation makes the experience more enjoyable and facilitates the creation and interaction of the characters.

That is really what this sort of play is about: providing the structure within which stories unfold through role-playing. Jesper Juul has referred to this as **games of emergence**.[1] By this, Juul refers to a space of possibility that is in part defined by how its players enact the actions, objects, and playspace. Lesberation allows players to develop stories within a loose set of rules through which all sorts of possibilities can emerge, limited only by players' imaginations.

Tale of Tales' *The Path* (see Figure 3.19) is a very different kind of role-playing game. Rather than the character and the events being generated by the players, it is designed by the game's creators and experienced by the player. The storyworld of *The Path* is loosely based on the *Little Red Riding Hood* fairytale. Six sisters between the ages of 9 and 19 are on the outskirts of a forest. The girls' mother asks that one of them run over to their grandmother's house in the woods. The player picks one of the six sisters to inhabit on the journey. As the game progresses,

1 Jesper Juul, "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression." www.jesperjuul.net/text/openandtheclosed.html. 2002.

players inhabit all six characters and experience the world through their eyes. This sort of role-playing experience happens inside a predefined storyworld, one authored by the gamemakers and unfolded by the player.

Figure 3.19 A screenshot from *The Path*.

This approach is much closer to movies in that a tighter storyworld can be constructed, with characters and situations designed by the gamemakers rather than by the players themselves. While this approach provides less open-ended play, it provides richer, authored storyworlds to investigate. Jesper Juul refers to this as **games of progression**—those in which the player makes decisions, but all possible outcomes are already defined by the game's creators. In *The Path*, players are free to choose to wander into the woods, but nothing they see or encounter exists without having been preauthored by the game's creators.

A similar example is Porpentine's text adventure *Howling Dogs*. Instead of using 3D representations of a space, the game is delivered entirely through text. Players navigate through Porpentine's surreal storyworld by clicking on text links inside the game. The story is set in a dystopian prison in which the player engages with virtual reality devices. The experience is heightened through its text-based narrative in the same way novels provide us with opportunities to imagine the worlds they present to us. Because of the fractured structure of the game's story, players are left to move through the space in a more impressionistic manner, seeking to construct an understanding of who their character is and why they are where they are. *Howling Dogs* drops us into a role that we must play through to begin to understand. Attempting to find a traditional story

progression will only lead to frustration, but embodying the experimental nature of both the format—interactive fiction—and the storyspace provides for a deeply striking experience.

What we see in Lesberation, *The Path,* and *Howling Dogs* are three of the many ways role-playing can be experienced inside a game. Lesberation lets players generate their own stories by providing a structure and set of processes for collaboratively telling a story. It's a system that establishes the general rules for storytelling and lets players feed their story through these rules to create an emergent play experience. *The Path*, on the other hand, has a preauthored story that the player explores by moving through the gameworld. In *The Path*, players experience the game differently through each of the sisters, playing a series of roles that are defined by the game. It's like a machine that contains the threads of the story, delivering each thread as players experience each of the characters that delivers a progressive play experience. *Howling Dogs* is similar in structure, but instead it uses branching text structures to deliver the story experience and help the player piece together who they are. The player makes choices, and as they do so, they experience one path through the story. These three examples mark the different approaches to how role-playing can tell stories in games, as games of emergence and games of progression. And there are many ways in between.

Performative Play

Some games use performance as the core of the play experience. When they do, they're often as much fun to watch as they are to play; generating dramatic action and acting. A game of Charades is based on player performance, adding challenge by taking away some of the expressive abilities like speech to emphasize the qualities of gesture to give clues to the team. Hasbro's Twister provides yet another form of physical play: using a spinner to randomly select the color players must place their feet and hands on, within the colored dots on a floor mat. This creates a form of modern dance where the fun is all in the foibles of the body. Two videogames illustrate different kinds of performative play: Die Gute Fabrik's *Johann Sebastian Joust* and Dietrich Squinkifer's *Coffee: A Misunderstanding*.

The hybrid physical/digital game *Johann Sebastian Joust* (see Figure 3.20) generates improvisational performance through the physical interplay of players attempting to jostle each others' controllers. Players also need to listen to the game's classical music score to learn the speed with which they should move. When the music is slow, players also move slowly—carefully protecting their controllers. When the music speeds up, play becomes more frantic, with players making faster moves and larger gestures. To the spectator, the dance of the players to the music looks like mercenaries at a classical ballroom dance.

Figure 3.22 A game of *Johann Sebastian Joust*. Photo by Elliot Trinidad. Used with permission of the IndieCade International Festival of Independent Games.

Like a playground game, *JS Joust* is flexible, allowing for individual or team play. But it is also a videogame in the tradition of *Wii Sports*, where the Playstation Move Motion controller provides feedback and input into the game and is responsive to different musical styles and speeds. What *JS Joust* emphasizes the most is player performance—in terms of agility and strategy, but also in the sense that there is a dance that everyone is participating in. The interesting thing is that the players, who are deeply absorbed in keeping balanced while unbalancing everyone else, have little time to think about what they are doing or what they look like while doing it. So *JS Joust* is performative, but in a fairly unselfconscious way that spectators observe more than the players are aware of. Absorption becomes an important design tool for creating unselfconscious play, as it takes the player's mind away from their everyday focus on self-presentation and opens them up to an unselfconsciously performative play experience.

A very different example is Dietrich Squinkifer's *Coffee: A Misunderstanding* (see Figure 3.21). In this theatrical game, two players perform as online friends meeting in person for the first time at a fan convention. The players receive prompts for how to interact with one another via their phones from the game's moderator. How they interpret and enact the prompts is up to the players: will they work together to have an enjoyable experience? Will they be at odds and create a tense conversation? Will the conversation simply be awkward? To add to the challenge