

Perceptions of Player in Game Design¹

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this short paper is to provide some clarity on the issue of player-centred design by analysing the notions on player in current game design literature. The paper presents a grouping of different designer-player relationships that reflect different design ideologies and traditions. This study also discusses the potentials a multifaceted approach on players can offer for the design of games.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing amount of evidence that professional game designers primarily rely on personal experience and intuitive sense of market demand. Further, it is often argued that games are designed primarily for game designers themselves. (Kerr 2006, Dovey & Kennedy 2006, Pearce 2002). In the words of Ernest Adams: “In eight years of working for Electronic Arts, I never once saw a really thorough, properly-conducted market survey. Our understanding of our players was based on guesswork and hunches.” (Adams 2006) The issue is of great importance since the designers’ formulations of “imagined player” not only shape the design process but also have an influence on the freedom of action players have with the finalized product (Taylor 2006).

Unfortunately there is not very much information available on the topic. Academic studies focusing on the role of players in game design are rare and most of the industry studies are never made publicly available. Therefore, this short paper poses the following question: how players are represented in professional game design? To answer the question I have decided to examine the recent game design books written to teach the fundamentals of game design². These books form a multifaceted source of accumulated knowledge, are based on practical experience and therefore provide an interesting spectrum of tested design approaches. I suggest game design books can be more influential than we recognize at the first glance. They are not only read by critical game designers, but also used in teaching the fundamentals of game design to the upcoming generations of game industry professionals.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON PLAYER

Ideal Player

Based on the current game design literature it would be a mistake to argue that game designers are not interested in players. On the contrary, players are mentioned frequently in various connections. More often than not the player is, however, a theoretical figure that is directed and guided through particular design decisions. It is relatively common to write about players in a collective and abstract manner. The various games-related needs discussed in the books are often addressed by “many players” or “most people”.

Thus, the ideal player is often produced by reducing players into a collection of needs and capabilities. The attributes connected to this ideal player are mainly based on anecdotal evidence, solitary cases, analogies, personal experience and common knowledge. The value of this information should not be underestimated but the problems start to occur when it is used to draw generalizations.

Another popular approach among the textbooks is to perceive players in the light of popular cognitive science. From this perspective players are taken into account through mental models, memory capacity, pattern recognition, reaction times and other features dependant on human brain. Be it different brain types, personality types or learning patterns, these divisions have a potential to produce an ever-increasing number of different player types. Thus, the introduction of different predispositions and talents highlights the need for player profiles.

Player profiles

Marketing segments

The most rudimentary popular division of players is made between novice players (newbies) and experts (experienced players). This classification is primarily useful when setting the difficulty of the game and tuning up the interface to serve players with varying levels of experience. Another basic model is to group players into hardcore and casual gamers. Hardcore players can be described as game literate people who play as a lifestyle preference and spend substantial amounts of time and money on games. Casual players are understood to be a more diverse group. They play for fun or to kill time, have little knowledge about game conventions and play few games. (Bateman & Boon 2006, 16.) This hypothetical split is primarily market-oriented and widely known in the game industry.

In their book Bateman & Boon introduce an approach called *demographic game design*. They argue that all game design inherently targets an audience and therefore, in order to produce successful products, the first step of game design is to study audiences. (Ibid, 14.) Based on a personality typing system and survey data they later introduce four clusters of play: *conqueror play* focuses on winning and “beating the game”, *manager play* revolves around a strategic and tactical challenge, while *wanderer play* involves the search of enjoyment and fun experience. People involved in *participant play* are told to prefer participating either in the story of the game or in social experiences with other players. While these player profiles are primarily based on personality typing there are different approaches that find their primary inspiration in different playing styles.

Play styles

Salen and Zimmerman (2003) introduce a player typology where player groups are defined by their relation to the rules of the game. *The standard player* follows the rules and plays the game as it was designed to play. *The dedicated player* studies the formal structure of a game and is able to exploit unusual strategies in order to win. *The unsportsmanlike player* follows the rules but violates the spirit of the lusory attitude. *The cheat* violates the formal rules of the game in order to win the game. *The spoil-sport* refuses to acknowledge the magic circle and attempts to ruin the game. (Salen & Zimmerman, 267-285.) If Salen and Zimmerman focus on the relation between player and the rules of the game, Mulligan and Patrovsky introduce a grouping based on the relations between players. *The general players* obey the rules and are fairly neutral, much like the standard players of Salen and Zimmerman. *Barbarians* exploit the bugs (cheat) and get their enjoyment from ruining other players' experiences (grief). *Tribesmen* focus on their micro-community. They help other players but can also cause problems if that is beneficial for their team. *Citizens* are described as “the good people” who are likely to help new players, lend their resources for greater cause and always have a nice word for other players. (Mulligan & Patrovsky, 216-220.)

The most influential model based on play styles is introduced by Richard Bartle. Bartle argues that “[p]layers are all different, and they all behave differently. Nevertheless, there will be general playing styles that they adopt [--]” (Bartle 2003, 127). Bartle then introduces four different player types: *achievers*, *socializers*, *explorers*, and *killers*. Bartle's model has been criticized in different occasions and Bartle has later introduced more detailed categories but it

is the original Bartle taxonomy that has been very influential both among online world designers and game scholars.

While profiles can surely be useful in anticipating or simulating player behaviour it can be questioned how extensively they after all grasp the rich ecosystem of player motivations and creativity. Therefore, I will in the following move on to shortly contemplate the offerings of player creativity to the design of games.

Players as co-creators

Rollings and Adams argue that thinking about and modifying the rules is actually an act of design and therefore “[e]very game player is a potential game designer”. (Rollings & Adams 2003, xxi). Certainly there is a long way from a simple change of rules to a development of entirely new game but this observation highlights the overlapping between the categories of ‘player’ and ‘designer’.

In connection to massively multiplayer games Mulligan and Patrovsky point out the importance of allowing players to create and tell their own stories and provide their own amusement. They further advise designers to be flexible and willing to change their games according to the actions of players over time. (Mulligan & Patrovsky, 145-148.) The authors continue that designers who allow players to have an impact on the game world will find players to be eager to create their own content (Ibid., 152-153). Similarly, Salen & Zimmerman argue that instead of being afraid that the productive players ruin the game “one of the sweetest pleasures as a game designer is seeing your game played in ways that you did not anticipate” (Salen & Zimmerman 2003, 540).

An alternative view to the player perceptions can be produced by examining the game design process.

PLAYERS IN GAME DESIGN PROCESS

Game design can be divided into distinct stages. The descriptions of design process have slight differences but in general it can be brought back to following stages: concept design, pre-production, production, and post-production (Kerr 2006, Fullerton & al. 2006, 347-358). The process model offers another useful perspective on the roles reserved for players. Sykes and Federoff suggest that game designers could gain clear benefits from different user-centred design techniques throughout all four of these stages (Sykes & Federoff 2006).

It is likely that some of the player categories discussed earlier can inform both the early phases of design and the pre-production phase when the potential user base is sketched in more detail. More concrete methods include focus group testing and playtesting. Marketing executives are eager to use focus groups to evaluate game concepts and to study how much people would pay for the product. Game design, however, probably benefits the most from focus groups that concentrate on generating ideas for new games.

Both Salen and Zimmerman and Fullerton et al. argue in favour of iterative design method, which relies on inviting feedback from players early on. ‘Iterative’ refers to a process in which the game is designed, tested, evaluated and redesigned throughout the project. As part of this approach designers are encouraged to construct first playable version of the game immediately after brainstorming and this way get immediate feedback on their ideas (Fullerton et al., 10-11). Salen and Zimmerman suggest that the iterative approach is of great concern since it is not possible to fully anticipate play in advance. Later Salen and Zimmerman note laconically that most digital game designers of today do not for varying reasons follow the iterative process. (Salen & Zimmerman, 12-13.) Playtesting, which lies in the heart of iterative approach, is probably the most established method to involve players in design. Playtesting is not primarily about identifying the target audience or tweaking the

interface but it is performed to make sure that the game is balanced, fun to play, and functioning as intended. (Fullerton et al., 196.)

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN PLAYER AND DESIGNER

To conclude some of the central themes discussed I have sketched a list of possible relations between players and designers. The various roles and relations can be seen to reflect different design ideologies and traditions.

Designer as Player

Game design books unanimously argue how important it is for a game designer to play a variety of games. The idea is that the required understanding and expertise develops on the basis of the personal gaming experience. Arguably, the game literacy needed in the job is very difficult to gain without playing a variety of games. There is, however, a drawback to deriving game ideas purely from other games and individual experience. As mentioned in the beginning of the article designers are often claimed to design too much for themselves and forget the variety of players. This is argued to result in very similar and at best mediocre game projects. Thus, even though playing games is essential for designers it can be only a starting point in understanding the wide variety of players and play styles.

Player as Designer's Muse

One function for players in design is that of inspiration. Non-anticipated uses players invent for games and other anecdotal evidence can surely produce new game ideas. During the design process designers can every now and then come back to the inspiring pieces and re-evaluate their targets. The downside of this approach is that the player in question mostly remains very abstract and ideal.

Player as Designer's Patient

Many promising game projects suffer from interfaces and control schemas that are nonassociative, hard to use or illogically mapped. Therefore the known usability methods have their place also in connection to games. Interviewing and observing players and recording their play session to identify the problems players have in interacting with the game is valuable when hunting down the inconsistencies of the software. From this perspective the interaction between designer and player to a large extent resembles doctor-patient relationship. Designer first diagnoses the problems players experience while playing the game or prototype and then carefully attempts to cure those problems.

Player as Designer's Adviser

Focus groups offer a quick method for collecting player conceptions. As mentioned, game design probably benefits the most from focus groups that concentrate on generating ideas for new games. In any case, the central method of getting advice from different kinds of players is playtesting. The proponents of iterative design argue that inviting feedback from players early on is the single most important activity game designer engages in. Even if one has studied the audience of the game and has an adequate player model in use it is still not possible to fully anticipate how people play your game. Therefore it is difficult to argue strongly enough on behalf of iterative game design.

Player as Designer

As mentioned earlier, opening parts of the game structure for player manipulation will encourage players to create content of their own. Allowing players to become co-designers can result in novel innovations and diversify the field of games. At the same time there are signs that some developers are considering opening parts of the production pipeline to player input (Banks 2005). While openings of this kind are certain to produce headaches to design teams, once successful they may open whole new perspectives to our understanding of game

design. The growing reliance on players work noticeably blurs the boundaries between the categories of 'player' and 'designer'. Therefore, it is not surprising that it has become relatively common to recruit new design team members from player community.

I hope the grouping presented above can increase the understanding of the roles of players in relation to game design. Typically these roles change during the design process. My suggestion is that a successful large-scale design project should possibly involve all these different approaches.

DISCUSSION

Bateman and Boon argue that "because you cannot ask them [players] personally to participate, an audience model is needed in order to make intellectual assumptions about their needs" (Bateman & Boon 2006, 53). Based on the projects I have earlier participated I have to strongly disagree with this (Sotamaa et al. 2005). Instead, one should seriously consider recruiting player representatives that can actively participate the different phases of design process and share their knowledge with designers. I suggest that if game designers acknowledge the status of players as the specialists of "everyday gaming" they can actually focus more freely on the things where they are good at.

The different manifestations of player creativity indicate that game developers should not get too attached to their designs. Once players engage in negotiation with games they often end up reinscribing and remaking them anyway. Therefore focusing on providing space for player production and supporting the emergence of player-created content seems to be an increasingly gainful alternative also profit-wise. Another issue is the usage of commercial game engines in teaching and non-profit projects but that can be hopefully discussed further in the seminar.

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¹ A longer version of this paper will be presented in DIGRA 2007 – Situated Play Conference, Tokyo, Japan, September 24-28, 2007.

² The books consulted in the original article are as follows: Bartle, Richard A. (2003) *Designing Virtual Worlds*, Bateman, Chris and Richard Boon (2006) *21st Century Game Design*, Björk, Staffan and Jussi Holopainen (2004) *Patterns in Game Design*, Crawford, Chris (2003) *Chris Crawford on Game Design*, Fullerton, Tracy; Christopher Swain & Steven Hoffman (2004) *Game Design Workshop: Designing, Prototyping, and Playtesting Games*, Koster, Raph (2004) *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, Mulligan, Jessica and Bridgette Patrovsky (2003) *Developing Online Games: An Insider's Guide*, Rollings, Andrew and Ernest Adams (2003) *Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design*, Rouse, Richard III (2001) *Game Design: Theory and Practice*, Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman (2003) *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*