How to Evaluate Games

Some Ideas from
The Art of Game Design, a Book of Lenses
Jesse Schell

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Playing a Game is an *Experience*

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- To evaluate a game, evaluate your experience of it.
- How does it feel to play the game?
- Exciting, frustrating, intriguing, frightening, ...
- Why do you keep playing? Why did you start?
- What could be improved to make the experience richer?
- What games give you similar experiences?
- What games are completely different?
- What experiences would you like to see in this game?

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- Observe silently, like a Zen master

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- Play is whatever is done spontaneously and for its own sake.
- Play is manipulation that indulges curiosity.

Curiosity: Play Answers Questions

- What happens when I click this?
- Can I beat this team?
- What can I make with this clay?
- How many freethrows can I make in a row?
- How do I finish this level?
- What new monsters will I find next?
- How do I use this weapon?

When evaluating a game, ask yourself what questions it raises, and how satisfactorily it answers them.

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- A game is an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires players to struggle toward a goal.
- A game is a closed, formal system, that engages players in structured conflict, and resolves in an unequal outcome.
- A game is a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude.

Game Qualities

- Games are entered willfully
- Games have goals
- Games have conflict
- Games have rules
- Games can be won and lost
- Games are interactive
- Games have challenge
- Games can create their own internal value
- Games engage players
- Games are closed, formal systems.

When you evaluate a game, look at how well or poorly it achieves these qualities. What could be done to improve them?

Games Pose Problems

- Find a way to get more points than the other guys
- Find a way to defeat a monster
- Find a way through a maze
- Find a way to complete this level
- Find a way to destroy the other player.

When evaluating a game: What problems does the game give the player? Are there hidden problems that arise? How does the game generate new problems each time, so players come back?

The Four Elements of Games

More visible

Less visible
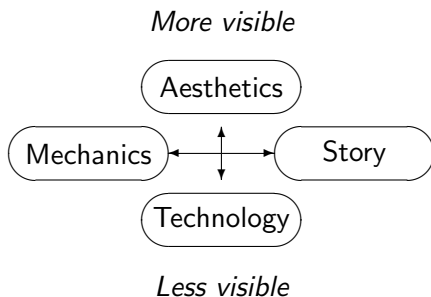
- ▶ Which areas are best? Worst?
- ▶ How could they be bettered?
- ▶ Is there *balance* and *blend* between all four?

Theme

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Theme

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- *Titanic*: Love is stronger than death.
- *Hercules*: Virtue can defeat death.
- *Toontown online*: Play can defeat work.
- Does every element of the game support the theme?

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- What is the target audience for the game?
- Age, sex, occupation, politics, personality,...

The Players

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- ▶ Age, sex, occupation, politics, personality,...

▶ Males prefer:

- ▶ Mastery
- ▶ Competition
- ▶ Destruction
- ▶ Spatial Puzzles
- ▶ Trial and Error

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▶ Females prefer:

- ▶ Emotion
- ▶ Real world
- ▶ Nurturing
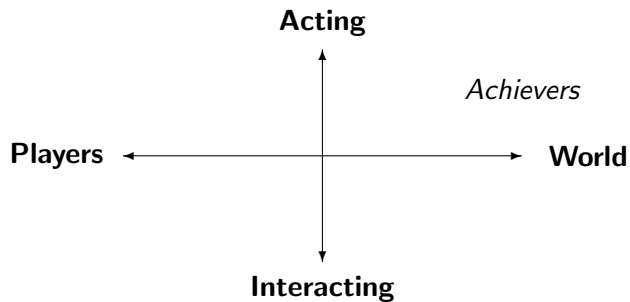- ▶ Dialog and Verbal Puzzles
- ▶ Learning by Example

Game Pleasures

- Sensation
- Fantasy
- Narrative
- Challenge
- Fellowship
- Discovery
- Expression
- Submission

Taxonomy of Player Types
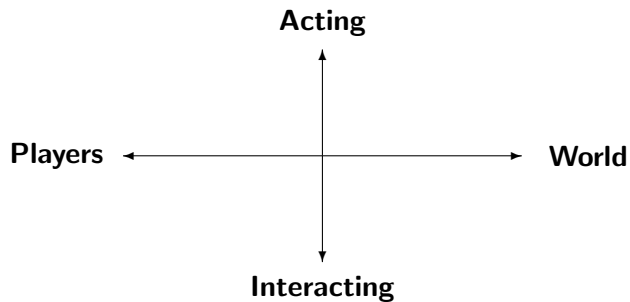
Acting

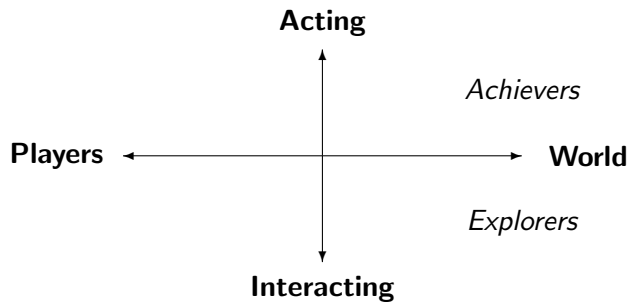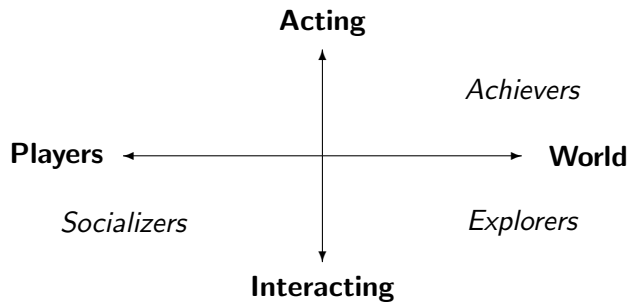**Players** ←————————————→ **World**

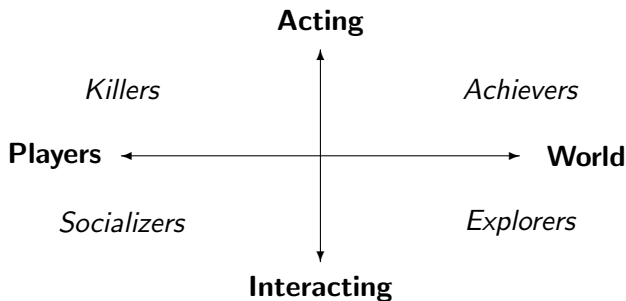**Interacting**

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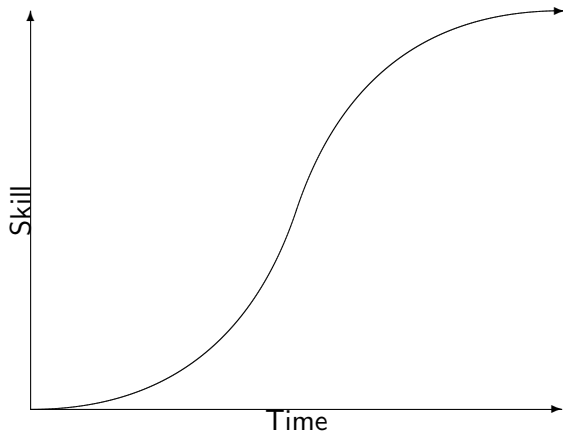
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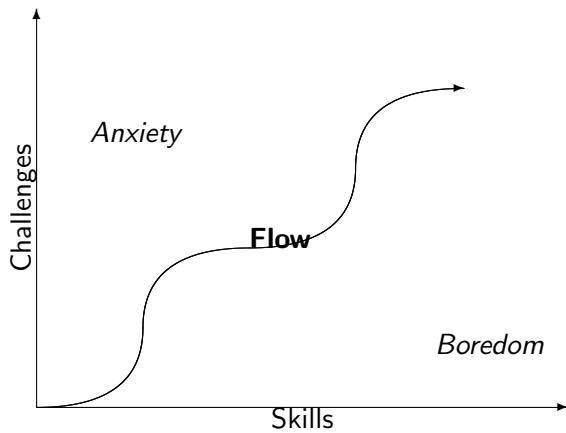# More Subtle Pleasures

- Anticipation
- Delight in Another's Misfortune
- Gift Giving
- Humor
- Possibility
- Pride in Accomplishment
- Purification
- Surprise
- Thrill
- Triumph over Adversity
- Wonder

The Learning Curve

Flow

Factors Affecting Flow

- Clear goals
- No distractions
- Direct feedback
- Continuously challenging

Game Mechanics

- Space
- Objects, Attributes, and States
- Actions
- Rules
- Skill
- Chance

Space

- Discrete or continuous?
- Number of dimensions?
- Bounded or infinite?
- Nested?
- Mental spaces?

Objects, Attributes, and States

- Objects are state machines, their attributes depend on their states.
- Secret attributes: known, shared, etc.

Actions

- What are the *verbs*?
- What actions are built in to the rules?
- What objects can they act on?
- What actions are *emergent*?
- What side effects are there?

Rules

- What are the fundamental rules?
- Are there "laws" or "house rules"?
- Are there modes in the game?
- Who enforces the rules?
- Are the rules easy to understand?

The Most Important Rule of All

- What is the ultimate goal?
- Is it clear to the players?
- Is there a series of goals? Do the players realize this?
- Are the goals related to each other in a meaningful way?
- Are the goals concrete, achievable, and rewarding?
- Are short-term and long-term goals balanced?
- Do players get to choose between goals?

Skills

- What skills are required?
- Are there categories of skill missing?
- Which skills dominate?
- What experience do the skills create?
- Are some players much better at these skills? Does that make it unfair? Is there a way to handicap the game?
- Can players improve their skills?
- Does this game demand the right amount of skill for its target audience?

Chance

- Are certain events governed by chance?
- What is the perceived chance?
- What are the rewards?
- Are the chance calculations complex?
- Estimating chance is a *skill*.

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- Beware dynamic balance!

Puzzles

- Goal easily understood
- Easy to get started
- Give a sense of progress
- Give a sense of solvability
- Increase difficulty gradually
- Parallelism lets the player rest
- Pyramid structure extends interest
- Hints extend interest
- Give the answer!
- Perceptual shifts are a double-edged sword

Interfaces

- Does the game do what is expected when you use the control?
- Do you get the experience of being in control?
- Is the feedback too busy?
- Does the feedback direct your attention correctly?
- Is it a joy to use (swiffer *vs.* sweeping)?