CASUAL GAME MECHANICS

GREGORY TREFRY – CASUAL GAME DESIGN: DESIGNING PLAY FOR THE GAMER IN ALL OF US

**Introduction**

At the heart of any great game is an elegant core mechanic, a mechanic that is both firm enough to provide clear gameplay but flexible enough to allow players to develop strategies.

The game designer must pick out the proper mechanics and combine them in a way that creates the desired aesthetic and experience for the player

The following are some general strategies for casual game design

* Know your audience; you need to develop a sense of your audience’s interests, because a lot of successful casual games build off this
* Piggyback on neuroses; sometimes nothing makes a better game mechanic than an established obsessive-compulsive behaviour e.g. organising record collections
  + With some work, these simple activities can be given goals that turn them into games
* Delivery is everything; knowing your audience also means knowing where they want to play games. Different audiences have unique moments of free time – tailor your games to these moments and you can break through the competition for attention
* Conceiving and iterating; it is imperative that the experience be clean and streamlined

**Chapter One; What is Casual Gaming?**

* While casual games use a wide variety of mechanics to appeal to the different interests and limitations, there are four key elements that inform the design of casual games. These are as follows;
  + Rules and goals must be clear
  + Players need to be able to quickly reach proficiency
  + Casual game play adapts to a player’s life and schedule
  + Game concepts borrow familiar content and themes from life
* Diner Dash and Rock Band are both examples of games that can be picked up and enjoyed by novices within minutes. Each game focuses on one clear game mechanic and polishes it to a shine.
* Ease of use is an essential ingredient in casual games.
* Short time to proficient play is a crucial aspect of casual games – Players are not necessarily looking for a long, deep play experience, but more likely something to simply divert their attention or offer a few moments of relaxation
* Casual games start out as curiosities and wind up habits
* Bejeweled is successful because people enjoy matching and sorting things – there is an immense satisfaction to be had from bringing order to chaos.
  + Despite being based on chance, Bejeweled gives the player that feeling of control as they manipulate the gems
  + Like Solitaire, the game allows for almost instant mastery, and with the implementation of untimed mode, players can match at their own pace

**Chapter Four; Matching**

* We like to pattern match, matching and sorting games provide a very basic form of pattern matching and bring it to the surface of the game
* The core mechanic of Bejeweled is engaging and addictive because the game itself fosters success- you are unable to do something unless you are doing it correctly
  + The game will not let you make a wrong move, in stark contrast to almost all other games, in which the number of wrong moves you can make seems almost limitless
  + This limitation on your moves stops the game from being a tedious activity of organising coloured gems
  + The game provides the player with immediate pleasurable feedback
* Matching games need constraint
  + Once players feel they’ve entirely won, the game no longer presents a challenge and it loses much of its attractiveness
  + Instead of constraining a player’s actions however, Snood presents players with a fairly free range of movement and one crucial choice and strategic depth; match Snoods or release Snoods. By introducing a danger meter that adds a line of Snoods when full, it introduces a pressure mechanic that encourages player to start developing a strategy to remove Snoods and reset the meter.
* Matching offers very clear goals and feedback for each move

**Chapter 5; Sorting**

* Sorting mechanics up the ante from more basic matching mechanics.
* We order information in several different ways, it’s a process so natural to us that we scarcely realise that we do it
  + For this reason, it comes to no surprise that we enjoy games that involve sorting. They enable us to practice a natural skill and challenge our ability
* Solitaire and games of patience focus on literal sorting of abstract symbols relevant only to the game
* Sorting makes for natural casual gameplay because it doesn’t require the player to develop a new skill but rather leverages mental skills that the player already possesses
* Games are all about reading information from the game system and deciding how to act
  + Sorting games make this process explicit, the player simply must learn and apply the sorting scheme the game demands
* Sorting extends the pleasure of matching by adding the idea of distinguishing and sequencing – it requires more cognitive though
* As with matching, players have a natural affinity for sorting, especially if the characteristics being sorted are obvious and highly legible.
* Sorting allows for more complicated patterns than straight matching and thus more diverse gameplay.
  + Use of mechanics like randomness, replacement and move patterns can add variation to basic sorting
* However, the more complicated the pattern gets, the more important that the designer crafts a game which clearly teaches the player how to match the pattern required by the sorting.
* For casual players, using real-world (extrinsic) information can be a very potent tool
  + Jojo’s Fashion Show made use of extrinsic information about fashion to create a sorting game which scored players on their subjective view of fashion. Each item of clothing had a list of attributes and these would be considered when the player created an outfit of a certain kind.
* Casual players get frustrated more easily and grow dismayed at losing

THE SEDUCTION SECRETS OF VIDEO GAMES DESIGNERS

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/may/15/video-game-design-psychology>

* In casual puzzles, a completed level is accompanied by over-elaborate displays, such as the “Ultra Extreme Fever” sequence seen in Peggle
  + These make the player believe that they are powerful and attack the brain’s pleasure centres
  + This is known as disproportionate feedback and is known to boost endorphins. These endorphins trigger a positive feeling in the body/mind, and encourage us to continue chasing the thing in order to feel the associated pleasure
* Farmville is successful as it taps into the idea of signalling. Having a well-tended garden is a public signal of how responsible you are and how well you can take of things for example– this may be associated with being a good parent

Analysis of Research and How We Can Use It to Cater for Patricia

* “Energy bar” promotes short gameplay sessions as it sets a limit for the number of objects that can be sorted, unless the player earns stars to replenish it
* Like Jojo’s Fashion Show, we can make use of extrinsic information to guide the sorting for our game. Using real world objects means that Patricia won’t need to learn anything new in order to be able to sort objects – this means the game is accessible to her and should avoid any unnecessary frustration
  + This relates to having obvious and legible characteristics for sorting
* Consider the use of disproportionate feedback when Patricia unlocks a reward or earns an achievement in her journal

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/aug/08/popcap-secrets-of-game-design>

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