Tham Jit 21049682

ENGL 294 Introduction to Critical Game Studies

Marcel O’Gorman

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**Bearly Playable: An Analysis of My Group’s Game “The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins”**

The games industry is growing at a rapid pace, from USD $120.4 billion in 2017 to $214.2 billion to 2021 (Gaming Boomed in Lockdown and Market Value Will Reach $320bn, 2022). It has permeated media and become an influential part of the entertainment industry, being “Gaming is bigger than Hollywood and the music industry combined.” (The Gaming Industry Is Now Bigger Than Movies and Music.. Combined, n.d.). As such, there is a corresponding rise in the knowledge that games do more than simply entertain, but influence players with values implemented (whether explicitly or implicitly). As Flanagan, Mary and Helen Nissenbaum said in Values at Play in Digital Games, “All games express and embody human values. From notions of fairness to deep-seated ideas about the human condition, games provide a compelling arena where humans play out their beliefs and ideas.” In this essay, I will be providing an analysis of such a game that was created with my group, titled “The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins”. In doing so, I hope to provide an insight into the values and design process into making a critical game.

To begin with, a short description of the game is as follows: It is a board game where up to 4 players will traverse once around the board, encountering different events. The 4 characters that players can play depict different forms of neurodivergence, Namely depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and the events represent examples of how they might react in different situations. There is also an additional token to represent the neurotypical person, who traverses as well but does not affect the win or lose conditions.

Within our game, we strived to impart our main values of education and inclusivity explicitly in all that we could. Beginning from the title, “The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins”, is a play on words of the phrase “may the better man win”. Since the game is completely dependent on the roll of the dice, with no formal definition of win or lose, the only concept getting ‘bettered’ is one’s knowledge of the different concepts of neurodivergence. Hence, anyone who plays or even spectates the game would win, as long as they had finished with new things learnt about the different conditions, could be considered a ‘winner’.

For the rest of the aspects, I will be examining our game through the lens of the values at play heuristic, created by Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum in their book *Values at Play in Digital Games*. In it, they provided a framework for the different aspects of where values at play can be found.

The first aspect where values at play are located is in the key actors, such as the developers and publishers. Our group is a small team of four members, with a development period of officially three months. However, due to a late formation of the team, actual game prototyping and developing was limited to a period of one month. This lead to a value of simplicity, which tied into accessibility. Our initial protypes included a way to affect the state of the board, using action cards. However, this would have increased the complexity of the game which would have lead to multiple conflicts. Firstly, the aspect of choice, without proper consideration, would lead to the formation of a metagame, whereby players would choose characters which are perceived as ‘more powerful’, to be the first one who manages to reach the end of the board. This would be counterintuitive to our message of education as a greater number of players would be focusing more on the numerical and strategical aspects of game as opposed to the educative ones. This strategical aspect may also lead to a higher skill floor on the game, leading to a loss of accessibility. Together with our limited development time, our group felt that overall, the addition of such skill-based aspects would be rushed and improperly done, impacting our overall values of the game. Thus, we decided to prioritize the educational aspects first, which had the bonus of increasing the accessibility of the game. Furthermore, in *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* by Juul and Jesper, “to play a videogame is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world.” (Juul, 2011). As a result, we focused on a cohesive and inclusive visual design and theme for our game, focusing on clean lines and animals as our characters. This provided an opportunity for people of all ages, races, and genders to choose the character they wanted to play without being ostracised. In addition, the board was made such that it represented going through four seasons, symbolising a year. While it is true that not all countries have four seasons, the overwhelming proliferation of four seasons representing a year in media has allowed for that to become a theme used to signify the passing of the year. Lastly, we ensured that the colours for our board game were of different shades, allowing for those with colour-blindness to be able to differentiate pieces of different colours. This continues to highlight the values of inclusiveness that we strived to aim for.

Apart from the key actors, one can also find values at play from its functional description. Our functional description is “Make it to the end! Each player must choose one of a variety of mental health issues as they try and navigate to the end of the board. Watch out though because the Average Joe is playing too and he does not believe in mental health, meaning that he might just win the game first! Can you beat him to the end?”. From the functional description, one can find our values of simplicity and empathy play a role here. Simplicity can also be seen within the game itself, where characters move along the board in a single path, again with little agency from the player. In *Homo Ludens: A study in the play-element in culture*, Huizinga writes: “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course”. In this case, ‘playing’ The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins is limited to the choosing of characters and rolling of dice on a board.

While functional elements provide a narrative into the more conscious values at play, one cannot forget about the influence that society has on the development of our game. The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins is developed in the University of Waterloo, which places a large emphasis on inclusivity. In addition, as an exchange student from Singapore, which has placed a lower emphasis on mental health, the disparity between Canada’s and Singapore’s treatment of mental health in general has provided an incentive to promote the awareness of neurodivergent issues. This also is a large reason as to my personal desire for the values of destigmatization and inclusivity to be included. In addition, the personal aspects of being an outsider to the school and country had provided me with a different perspective, helping me to learn the value of empathy, which influenced the games’ design.

Lastly, *Values at Play in Digital Games* posit that technical constraints would also provide an insight into values which appear in The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins. The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins is developed over a period of one month with no budget, leading to the usages of simple designs and cut outs within the games. Within the prototype, cards were purchased from a dollar store and were handwritten, while designs were printed. The board design was printed onto an old shoebox and cut to size. Hence, the value of simplicity is highlighted, with a total cost of prototyping racking up to less than CAD$10. However, in order to emphasize empathy better, as mentioned before, careful consideration and attention was placed on the art design. I worked on the art, spending a few days to design the characters and board. The art was cohesive and was the animals were designed to be ‘cute’ to allow for players to empathise with the animals more easily. In addition, the colours of the background, while pastel to avoid distractions, were also imbued with a small amount of grey to evoke a slightly darker and more introspective look, aiming to have players reflect and empathise with their animal characters.

In addition, the size of the cards and single deck means that there is would be a lack of upgradability and modularity. This values got thrown out due to the focus on the core values, but if given more time, having these values implemented in the form of allowing for additional animals with different conditions, would have been nice. As it stands, if a new animal would be added, all event cards would need to be rewritten to support the new animal. This hampers accessibility somewhat as the cost for new animal packages would be smaller than an entirely new game, reducing the number of players who would have access to it.

In conclusion, the values of play of The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins can be seen from many aspects, as noted in *Values at Play in Digital Games.* By applying the values at play heuristic, one can learn more about the games that one plays, and what it stands for. Our critical game aims to stand for education and inclusivity at the forefront, with accessibility and simplicity being more subtle. The game is designed for an educational purpose, highlighting its critical nature. As the industry ever grows larger and more influential, it is the heavy responsibility of us game developers to guide it with the values inserted into our games, and I hope that The ‘Bettered’ Man Wins is a step in the right direction.

**Citations:**

1. Gaming boomed in lockdown and market value will reach $320bn. (2022, July 29). World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/07/gaming-pandemic-lockdowns-pwc-growth/>
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