

Critical Gameplay

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ABSTRACT

How do games effect the way we problem solve, socialize, or even view the world? When we shoot do we learn to destroy obstacles instead of work around them? Does the binary world of enemies and adversaries teach us to ignore the gray in the everyday? Are we forgetting how to *play with* each other because playing *against* each other is more fun?

Critical Gameplay is a collection of "strategically designed" video games. Each game asks what common game mechanics teach us. The four games in the collection are designed to help reevaluate our perspective on gameplay experiences. As Critical Cartography changes the way we perceive the world, Critical Gameplay seeks to offer alternate perspectives on the way we play.

Critical Gameplay does not attempt to answer these questions. Instead it seeks to open the dialogue with demonstrative experiments in gameplay. It attempts to fill the space of what if, with something tangible - a game. What if that avatar did have a history before you destroyed it? What if you couldn't read the game world by stereotyping characters? Critical Gameplay is simply about raising questions that encourage critical reflection on gameplay experiences. A Critical Gameplay game is valued in intellectual profit.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: Arts Fine and Performing – computer games as educational spaces

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Critical Gameplay, computer game theory, computer game art

1. INTRODUCTION

The practices set forth in this document and exhibition are a subset of philosophical investigations first articulated in writing entitled the Philosophies of Software and the Enculturation of the Arts published by the author as chapters in the Handbook of Research in Computational Arts and Creative Informatics.

The prior research by the author adapts concepts introduced by Jaron Lanier, Jean Baudrillard and Noam Chomsky to claim the innate effect that software systems have on the way their users solve problems.

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Critical Gameplay is the application of these theories and Critical Design, as introduced by Dunne and Raby of the Royal College of Art, on video game mechanics. It asserts that the way a game is played is both instructive and rich with meaning. As a production practice, the goal is merely to investigate the assumptions and values in video games, in the hope of initiating an intellectual dialogue.

2. The Games: Overview

The Critical Gameplay project is comprised of the rapid design and development of four critical games by a single developer, designer, and artist. The games are titled Wait, Bang!, Black/White and Charity.

The content of the critical games works to subvert the dominant assumptions in contemporary video game experiences.

Wait is a game where the player is encouraged to refrain from acting on the world. As the player moves the world disappears, but when the player waits, the world becomes more rich. Players are awarded points when the little things in life reveal themselves.

Bang! is a game that allows the player to kill other players, but by killing them the player must endure a long interruptive experience which forces the player to review the fictive history of their victim.

Black/White, figure 1, is a game in which stereotype is challenged. Instead of being able to identify a threat by appearance, the player must examine the threat by another means, behavior. To survive the game, the player must react to NPCs based on how they move. Two characters that look exactly the same, may act very differently. The game is constructed in binary sets, two levels with two types of characters, each animated in two frames, within two colors.

Charity is a two-player cooperative game. The player must "give" the ball to the other player to continue play. Every time the player receives the ball, the paddle grows. When a player gives the ball, the ball grows, increasing play time. Play ends when either player's paddle shrinks to nothing.

Each game is played on a PC computer with the keyboard, mouse or joystick.

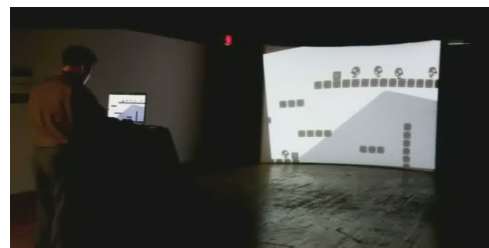


Figure 1. Black/White Game at exhibition.