2 What Is Casual?

A publisher of downloadable casual games gives the following somewhat sarcastic piece of advice to potential game developers: "Your game needs to be a casual game, appropriate for all ages. Remember, over half of this audience is women, and over 80% are over 30. As realistic as the blood effects are in your Vampire Corpse Feast game, it isn't going to sell to a casual audience and wouldn't be appropriate for Oberon Games."[1]

This paints a picture of an immature game developer that focuses on vampires and realistic graphics. Vampires and graphical realism—this, then is what casual games *are not*. Casual games are positioned as a rejection of traditional hardcore game design, with its gory themes and focus on technological capabilities. But what is *casual*?

The idea of casual games that reach casual players gained traction during the late 1990s, but it has a longer history that I will return to. The more recent history of the term *casual games* appears to begin at the 1998 Computer Game Developers Conference,[2] where puzzle designer Scott Kim described the dispositions of casual players: "The point is that people play different types of games for different reasons. Expert gamers [synonym for players] play for the longer term rewards of competition and rankings, whereas casual gamers play for the shorter-term rewards of beauty and distraction."[3]

While Kim denies having coined the term *casual* in relation to video games,[4] the talk also describes a trend called "games for the rest of us":

> Most computer games are written for computer game hobbyists. Games like Tomb Raider, Quake and Dark Forces...are epic combat games aimed at young males willing to invest dozens of hours developing complex battle skills. Each

year the games get bigger and more technologically sophisticated. I call these sorts of games "games for gamers."

There is another rapidly growing segment of the computer gaming world that marches to the beat of a different drummer. Games like Myst, Monopoly, and Lego Island—also three of the most popular PC games of 1997—appeal to a much broader audience of males and females of all ages that want easy-to-learn family games. These games tend to use simple technology, and sell steadily year after year. I call this broad class of games "games for the rest of us."[5]

In the popular press, a 1999 *New York Times* article discussed the game *Deer Hunter*[6] as an example of a game for this new market: "The hunting games are also an early wave of what industry analysts call casual games, easier to play and more mundane in appearance than the special-effects-on-a-screen adventures preferred by what the industry considers hardcore gamers—male techies in the 16-to-35 age range. Computer Gaming World, the bible of computer game purists, once criticized Deer Hunter as 'boring' and 'repetitive' with 'lame' graphics."[7]

The terms *casual* and *hardcore* are, evidently, often used for positioning two categories of games against each other. The quote beginning this chapter painted hardcore games as vampire games with overly technical graphics, and casual games are sometimes dismissed as "boring" or having "lame" graphics. In the developer interviews in appendix C, Frank Lantz asserts that casual implies a "dumbing down" of games, and Eric Zimmerman argues that it entails a light and not-so-meaningful relation to a game: "As a producer of culture, I like to think that my audience can have a deep and dedicated and meaningful relationship with the works that I produce. And the notion of a casual game implies a light and less meaningful relationship to the work."[8] Neither Lantz nor Zimmerman are in any way opposed to making games for a broad audience, but they believe that "casual" connotes bland or shallow games.

While the term *casual* is sometimes controversial, it plays an important role in the changing landscape of video games. Let me therefore note that the idea of casual games has appeared specifically as a contrast to the idea that video games could only be made for a hardcore game audience.[9] The question then becomes: from where does the idea of a narrow, "hardcore" audience for video games come? Surprisingly, a 1974 press article introduced video games completely differently, emphasizing their "very nearly universal" appeal.[10] Another article states: "Never before has an amusement game been so widely accepted by all ages. Everyone from teenagers to senior citizens enjoy the challenge that the Video Games offer."[11]

While these early news stories present video games as appealing to "everyone," only a few years later video games were discussed with the assumption that they were intended for boys. A 1981 newspaper story singles out *Pac-Man* as a game that "surprisingly" appeals to women: "Midway, which licensed Pac-Man from a Japanese concern, is as surprised as everyone else by the game's appeal to women. 'We only became aware of it when women kept calling us and saying it was "adorable,"' Larry Berke, Midway's director of sales, said."[12]

In order to capitalize on this trend, Midway introduced *Ms. Pac-Man*,[13] functionally quite similar to *Pac-Man*, but with a feminized protagonist: "We've noticed a recent trend in our game pavilions that indicates a tremendous female acceptance of the Pac-Man game," says Castle Park marketing chief Michael Leone. "I guess it was only natural for Midway, manufacturer of the game, to introduce a Ms. Pac-Man. To woo the potential female video addict, Ms. Pac-Man is outfitted with more fashion wrinkles than a new Halston. Pac-Man is a homely little yellow critter on a screen, but his female video counterpart is resplendent in red lips and eyelashes, with a bow above her brow."[14]

During the 1970s video games apparently became increasingly associated with young men, but since then a number of video games have been declared *the* game that finally attracted new players. In the history of video games, a few particular games stand out for reaching a broad audience:

- The preceding 1981 quotations suggest that the first game to challenge the then-new young-male-gamer stereotype was the 1980 *Pac-Man*.
- It could also be argued that the 1985 *Tetris*[15] was the first casual game.[16]
- Steve Meretzky has argued that the first casual game was the 1990 Solitaire on Windows 3.0.[17]
- A study of U.S. baby boomer game players (born 1946–1964) showed the 1993 *Myst*[18] adventure game to be the most common *first* computer game played, as well as the most common favorite computer game.[19]
- The 2001 *Bejeweled* is sometimes hailed as "the genesis of the casual gaming boom."[20]

What is new today is not that a single game reaches a broad audience, but that a large number of games do, and that dedicated distribution channels and video game consoles are reaching beyond the traditional video game audience.

The Stereotypes of Casual and Hardcore Players

Prior to the launch of the Wii console, Reginald Fils-Aime from Nintendo described the company strategy as a mission to reach a broader audience by downplaying the importance of graphics and making games that were not "intimidating." At the same time, Fils-Aime said, Nintendo wanted to assuage fears that [hard] "core" game players would be left behind:

Q: *What made Nintendo try to do something dramatically different with the Wii?*
F-A: Our focus is interactive game play, a whole new way to play, that puts fun back into this business. It allows everybody to pick up and play and isn't focused on the core[21] gamer.
Q: *The Wii seems to emphasize the controller, not heavy attention on graphics. Is that by design?*
F-A: That is exactly by design. Our visuals for Wii will look fantastic, but in the end, prettier pictures will not bring new gamers and casual gamers into this industry. It has to be about the ability to pick up a controller, not be intimidated, and have fun immediately. The trick is being able to do that, not only with the new casual gamer, but do it in a way that the core gamer gets excited as well.[22]

Here, Fils-Aime uses a common description of casual players: as players who are not so interested in "graphics" as such, who have little knowledge of video game conventions and are therefore easily intimidated, and who desire "quick fun." Furthermore, games must be easy to learn not only because casual players prefer simple games but also because it is assumed they spend little time playing games: "These are games created for people that weren't sitting down for hours to play games," said Mr. Tinney of Large Animal. "They're taking a break from something they're doing and play for a few minutes." In contrast to the audience for hardcore games, he said, "women play these games as much or more than men do."[23]

Casual players are also generally assumed to dislike difficult games,[24] and it has even been claimed that a game for a casual audience can *never* be too easy.[25] This description of casual players has a mirror image of "hardcore gamers," who are often described as being committed to a game at any cost: "Do not let anybody disturb you. As soon as you come from school or work, immediately turn on your computer (or, better, do not turn it off at all) and load your favorite game. Do not answer phone or doorbell. Do not go to the bathroom at all—you could have done that

at work! Newbies should play at least until midnight, advanced gamers need not sleep at all. On weekends, [hardcore players] must stay at their monitors non-stop."[26]

Even if this is an ironic quote, it identifies a *hardcore ethic*: spend as much time as possible, play as difficult games as possible, play games at the expense of everything else. Until recently, the game website Kotaku explicitly encouraged its readers not to "get a life": "As if you don't waste enough of your time in a gamer's haze, here's Kotaku: a gamer's guide that goes beyond the press release. Gossip, cheats, criticism, design, nostalgia, prediction. Don't get a life just yet."[27]

Let me sum up these stereotypical descriptions of casual and hardcore players. They should be understood as exactly that—stereotypes. As will become clear, most actual game players do not match these categories precisely:

- The *stereotypical casual player* has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games.
- The *stereotypical hardcore player* has a preference for emotionally negative fictions like science fiction, vampires, fantasy and war, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 illustrate the difference between stereotypical casual and hardcore players on the four scales of fiction preference, game knowledge, time investment, and attitude toward difficulty.

To what extent do actual players match these stereotypes? The stereotype of the casual player tends to be thoroughly disproved when users are studied: according to a 2006 survey of players of downloadable casual games, two thirds of them played nine two-hour game sessions a week.[28]

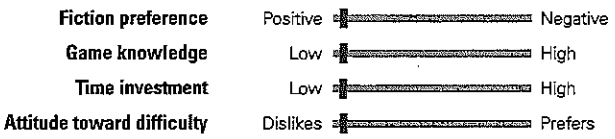

Figure 2.1
The stereotypical casual player

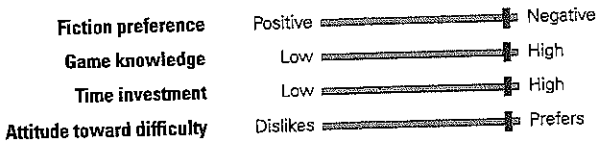

Figure 2.2
The stereotypical hardcore player

My own survey of casual game players in appendix A also revealed surprisingly time-intensive playing habits. One player reports: "When I'm at home I usually play them for two or more hours a day. I will often put in an hour and a half in the morning, and then a shorter stint in the afternoon."[29] In terms of time investment, these players of casual games are much closer to the stereotype of the hardcore player. This raises two questions:

1. Do casual players really exist, or is the casual-player stereotype without any basis in reality?
2. Can all games simply be played in either hardcore or casual ways—however a player desires?

To answer both, I will first look at the *design* of casual games to see the kinds of engagement these games afford players.

The Elements of Casual Game Design

Comparing the design of the games I have described as casual—including downloadable casual games, *Guitar Hero*, and many Wii games—to more traditional video games yields five common casual design principles. To understand how these five work, think about how you use a video game over time:

1. First you see or hear about a game's *fiction* on the web, via the game's packaging, or from another source;
2. Then you learn to play the game, depending on its *usability*;
3. Next you try to match the game with the time you have available, depending on its required time investment and its *interruptibility*;
4. Then you continue to play the game if it has the right level of *difficulty*;
5. And finally, you continue playing if you like the content, the graphics, and the general *juiciness* (positive feedback) of the game.

Figure 2.3
Wii Sports box art (Nintendo 2006)

Fiction

The first impression of a game comes from the presentation of what it is ostensibly *about*. There is a genuine difference between the setting portrayed on the cover of the casual *Wii Sports* (figure 2.3) and the cover of the hardcore *Gears of War*[30] (figure 2.4). The traditional hardcore game is often set in dangerous situations, allowing the player to take on the role of a soldier, or to crash cars, and so on. Casual games are often set in more positive and familiar settings. One could be tempted to say the sun always shines in casual games. In psychological terms, the fictions of the two games shown have different emotional *valence*, which refers to whether an emotion inclines you to approach something or to avoid

Figure 2.4
Gears of War box art (Epic Games 2006)

it. Chances are, if you walked down the street and encountered a typical casual game setting such as a restaurant or a tennis match, you would experience positive emotions and find the situation pleasant or attractive. On the other hand, if you walked down the street and encountered a typical hardcore game setting such as an armed conflict, you would in all likelihood experience negative emotions and perceive the situation as fundamentally unpleasant.[31] Casual games almost exclusively contain fictions with positive valence. Traditional hardcore games generally have fictions with negative valence, even if a few traditional hardcore games, such as hardcore tennis games, have a positive valence.

The cover of a game does more than signify a setting: if you are familiar with video game conventions, you can also use the cover to identify the genre of the game. The cover of *Gears of War* signifies a war setting to a non-player of video games, but to a player versed in video game conventions, the cover also signals that the game belongs to the genre of first-person shooters.

Usability

Downloadable casual games and mimetic interface games provide great improvements in user friendliness and usability compared to many traditional video games, but they do so in slightly different ways. Mimetic interface games work by creating new interfaces that build on conventions and activities from outside video games, while downloadable casual games use more traditional strategies from the field of usability and human-computer interface design[32] in order to make games easy to use.[33]

When I say that casual games are *easy to use*, it seems a paradox because games are also expected to be *difficult*. Why would usability even be an issue if we really want games to be challenging and difficult? The trick is that challenge and ease of use are parallel concerns: for example, a computer chess game has a *badly* designed interface if it is difficult to move the pieces, but the fact that it is difficult to win against the computer is *good* design. According to Michel Beaudouin-Lafon, interfaces are *interaction instruments* that mediate between the user and the *domain objects* the user wants to act on.[34] This explains the example of the chess game: while it is good design if the domain objects—the chess pieces—are strategically challenging, challenging instruments for moving said pieces would be bad design in a chess game. This is not the case for *all* games—think only of pick-up sticks or block removal games like *Jenga*[35]

Figure 2.5
Wii Sports tennis (Nintendo 2006)

or *Boom Blox*.[36] A given game can place a part, or all, of the challenge in the interaction instruments,[37] so the value of usability methods in video game design is in making sure it is the right parts of a game that are easy and the right parts that are challenging.

Following Beaudouin-Lafon, an interface can be evaluated on its *degree of compatibility*: this is a measure of the similarity between the physical action of the user and the action performed on the domain objects. For example, traditional tennis video games implement the action of serving in the pressing of a button at the right time when an energy meter on the screen peaks,[38] meaning that there is a low degree of compatibility between the player's actions and the events on the screen.

In Beaudouin-Lafon's terms, mimetic interface games have a high degree of compatibility, with the concrete actions of the player similar to the in-game actions: to hit the ball in *Wii Sports* tennis (figure 2.5), a player must swing his or her arm. This is similar (though not identical to) normal physical tennis. A high degree of compatibility is not the only thing that makes mimetic interface games work, as most of these games are about activities commonly represented in the media. When playing *Guitar Hero*, for example, players may not have any concrete experience playing guitar, but will have seen enough media representations of guitarists to know that one should place the left hand on the fret board and strum with the right hand. Mimetic interface games generally involve

commonly known activities, and they have interfaces with a high degree of compatibility with those activities.

Downloadable casual games are played on personal computers designed for other purposes than playing these games, so usability must be achieved in some way other than by creating new game controllers. Going back to interface design literature, Ben Shneiderman recommends that interfaces should have

- continuous representation of the object of interest;
- physical actions (movement and selection by mouse, joystick, touch screen, etc.) or labeled button presses instead of complex syntax;
- rapid, incremental, reversible operations whose impact on the object of interest is immediately visible;
- layered or spiral approach to learning that permits usage with minimal knowledge. Novices can learn a modest and useful set of commands, which they can exercise till they become an "expert" at level 1 of the system. After obtaining reinforcing feedback from successful operation, users can gracefully expand their knowledge of features and gain fluency.[39]

Without mentioning such advice on interface design, the developers of the real estate game *Build-a-Lot*[40] (figure 2.6) reached the similar conclusion that objects should be continuously represented by making the game world no bigger than the screen:

> One item we addressed early on was free scrolling. While the game was still a list of ideas on our white board, we decided that the gameplay area (i.e. the "map") was going to be fixed. Reducing the map to a single screen had many positive benefits for the project: 1) Development time was shortened because we did not need to develop a scrolling system. 2) A mini-map was not necessary which meant we would have more room for interface items. And, 3) the game would be much easier for casual gamers to learn since navigating a larger virtual world was not required.[41]

Build-a-Lot embodies many other principles for good interface design. To buy a house, the user can simply click on the house rather than on a separate menu. Furthermore, the game follows the layered approach mentioned previously, especially in the use of *combos*, allowing players to first play the game by way of simple actions, but subsequently awarding the player with bonuses for combining the basic actions in a special way. As for reversibility, games rarely allow players to undo an action, but

Figure 2.6
Build-a-Lot (HipSoft 2007)

downloadable casual game design structures difficulty and punishment so that the player can generally recover from making a mistake by performing well during the rest of a level.

Interruptibility

In a European study, non-players of video games reported that "lack of time" was their primary reason for not playing games.[42] Does that mean that casual game design reaches new players by introducing shorter games? The two aforementioned surveys of casual players revealed that they often play for long periods of time. Therefore the broader picture is that casual game design can reach new players by allowing them to play in short bursts, to interrupt a game and put it on hold, but without preventing players from engaging in longer sessions. This is the *interruptibility* found in casual game design, giving casual games flexibility in the time investment they ask from players. This flexibility has a purely functional component and several psychological components. Functionally, downloadable casual games have *automatic saves*, allowing the player to

simply close the window of the game should the need arise, leaving the game within a few seconds. The next time the game is started, the player will be asked if he or she wants to continue the game. Compare this to more traditional console game design such as in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*,[43] where the player must

1. reach a save point in order to save;
2. select a save slot;
3. confirm to overwrite the file;
4. wait for the save to happen.

Downloadable casual game design allows the player to enter and leave a game very quickly, making it possible to play a game while at work, for example, or while waiting for a phone call. One quarter of "white collar" workers play video games at work,[44] so there certainly is a demand for this type of flexibility.

Multiplayer mimetic interface games are not interruptible in the same way as downloadable casual games, but they are generally based on activities of short duration such as playing a song or a game of bowling. In the survey of casual game players discussed in appendix A, answering the phone was reported as the most common source of interruption (figure 2.7). When the game is played in a social situation, there is likely less need for interruptibility as there may be social pressure to *not* answer the phone.

Interruptibility also has the psychological aspect of whether the player is informed in advance of a game session's length. The player has such knowledge in *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band* (figure 2.8) when choosing to play a single song. In the tennis game of *Wii Sports*, the player can choose the number of sets to play. Downloadable casual games often have maps showing the player how many levels it takes to complete the game. Compare this to traditional arcade games in which play time is determined by player skill, and to a game like *Gears of War*, in which the player has to guess the game's length from other cues. In other words, the perceived ahead-of-time time commitment of a game can be just as important as the actual time commitment.

The second psychological aspect of time is whether it *feels* appropriate to leave the game. This runs across all game genres and the casual/hardcore distinction, but whenever a player has solved all pressing tasks in a game, it facilitates taking a break. Even if a game technically allows the player to take a break at any time, it is still important for the game to

Figure 2.7
Most frequent answers to the question "What typically interrupts you when you play?" (image created using http://wordle.net/)

Figure 2.8
Rock Band choice of song (Harmonix 2007)

provide break-facilitating moments when there are no outstanding tasks to solve.

Difficulty and Punishment

The stereotype of the casual player implies that casual game design should always be *easy*. This has, in fact, been described as a good rule for casual game design: "No casual game has *ever* failed for being too easy."[45]

Is this true? Do casual players like easy games? Catherine Herdlick and Eric Zimmerman have discussed how the original version of their game *Shopmania*[46] (figure 2.9) was criticized by players for being exactly that, too easy:

> In the original version of Shopmania, we approached the first several levels of the game as a gradual tutorial that introduced the player to the basic game elements and the core gameplay. This approach was based on the generally held casual game wisdom that downloadable games should be very easy to play, and that the frustration of losing a level should be minimized. However, the problem with going too far in this direction is that the game ends up feeling like interactive muzak: you can play forever and not really lose, and the essential tension and challenge of a good game are lost.[47]

Like the issue of time, difficulty is an issue for which the common stereotype of casual players is at least partially false; it turns out that casual

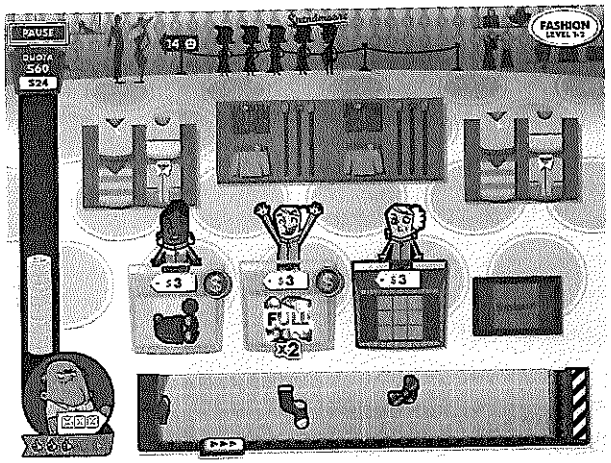

Figure 2.9
Shopmania (Gamelab 2006)

players often enjoy being challenged. When the game *Jewel Quest II*[48] (figure 2.10) came out, reviews described it as a *hard* game.[49] What did players think of this? One user described her relation to the game like this: "I love jewel quest 2. I [have] been playing jewel quest I for 4 years, and I think this game is very addictive and healthy, because it makes you think and is really fun!"[50]

It stands to reason that, having played the first version of the game for four years, this player had reached a point where she would enjoy a very difficult game. Casual game design must be usable, but the level of difficulty still needs to match the player's skills and preferences. Contrary to the stereotype, many players of casual games actively enjoy difficult games. A casual game player reported the following about her relation to difficulty in games: "I will quit any game that I can master in under ten minutes and doesn't introduce any more complications to the gameplay. Difficult games will frustrate me, but I'll keep playing."[51]

Another player of casual games described how she would retry a given level numerous times:

Q: Can you assign a number to how many times it is still enjoyable to retry a level before it becomes "too much," or does it depend on the game?

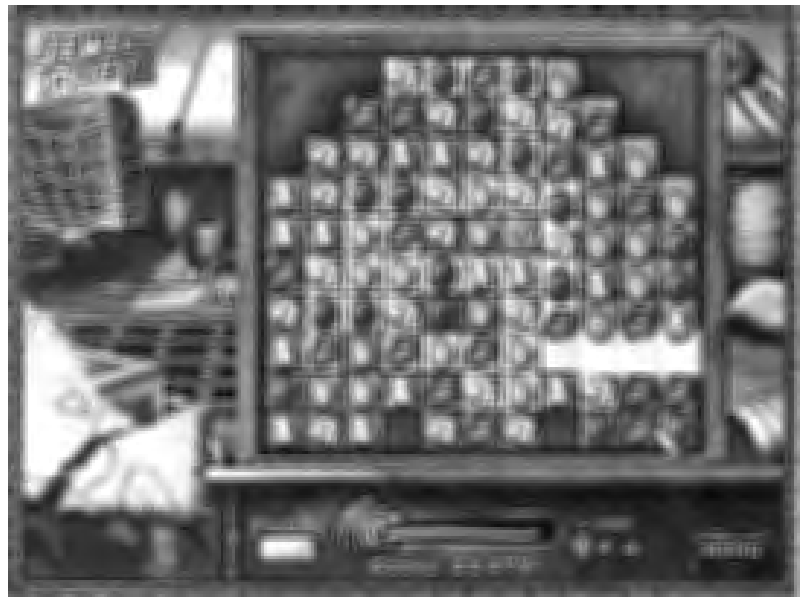

Figure 2.10
Jewel Quest II (iWin 2007)

A: I would say that if your skills have been honed by a steadily increasing learning curve, then ten to twenty would be the maximum replay number.[52]

For her, replaying a very difficult level in a game is perfectly acceptable and enjoyable, as long as the difficulty increase is reasonable. At the same time, she was willing to replay a level ten to twenty times—a high number by any standard.

In another common description, casual games are "easy to learn, but difficult to master."[53] That a game is difficult to master is sometimes referred to as *depth*, which means that players must continually expand their repertoire of skills[54] in order to progress in the game. A game that is too easy (like *Shopmania* discussed previously) does not require players to rethink their strategies or develop their skills. A separate study of players of a simple game showed that players who did very badly at that game gave it a low rating, and players who did somewhat well rated the game higher, but *players who never failed also gave the game a low rating.*[55] The ideal experience, for most players, seems to be failing some, and then

winning. The experience of improving your skills, of gaining competence, is arguably at the core of almost all games, and those that do not provide that experience rarely become popular. Downloadable casual games, therefore, are not *easy* games; rather, they punish the player for mistakes in a slightly different way than the traditional hardcore game does. The real issue is not difficulty as such, but *how* the player is punished for failing.[56]

Consider a short history of difficulty and punishment in video games. Early arcade games were generally based on giving the player three tries to play the game, making it consistently more difficult as the player progressed, and forcing the player at the "game over" alert to start from the beginning (and insert new coins). When video games moved into the home in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they started to become longer affairs, but many retained a structure that forced a player to restart the entire game after running out of lives. For example, *Manic Miner*[57] (figure 2.11) has twenty levels that the player must complete with only three lives. Whenever game over is reached, the player must start over from the beginning. This is as different from casual game design as can be: the player is supremely punished for mistakes, the game is not in any way interruptible, and there is no way to save the game state and continue at a later point. The player is asked to commit hours of uninterrupted playing time in order to complete the game.

Another characteristic of a game like *Manic Miner* is that a level starts with exactly the same setup every time you enter it, so completing the game is a question of rote learning, of repeating a specific series of actions until you master it. This makes for a subjectively strong experience of being punished for failing in having to replay *exactly* the same early levels of a game over and over. Compare this to how failure works in *Magic Match: The Genie's Journey*[58] (figure 2.12): in the first picture, the game starts on level five. Subsequently, time runs out and level five restarts in the second picture *with a new random distribution of gems.* Downloadable casual games generally feature randomization, making the replaying of a level more interesting and less punishing. Another casual game, *Diner Dash*,[59] does not actually have randomization, but since the player rarely performs an identical set of actions at a given level, a level is experienced as nonidentical when replaying it.

The final feature that characterizes the difficulty and punishment structure of casual game design is that you rarely fail due to a single mistake

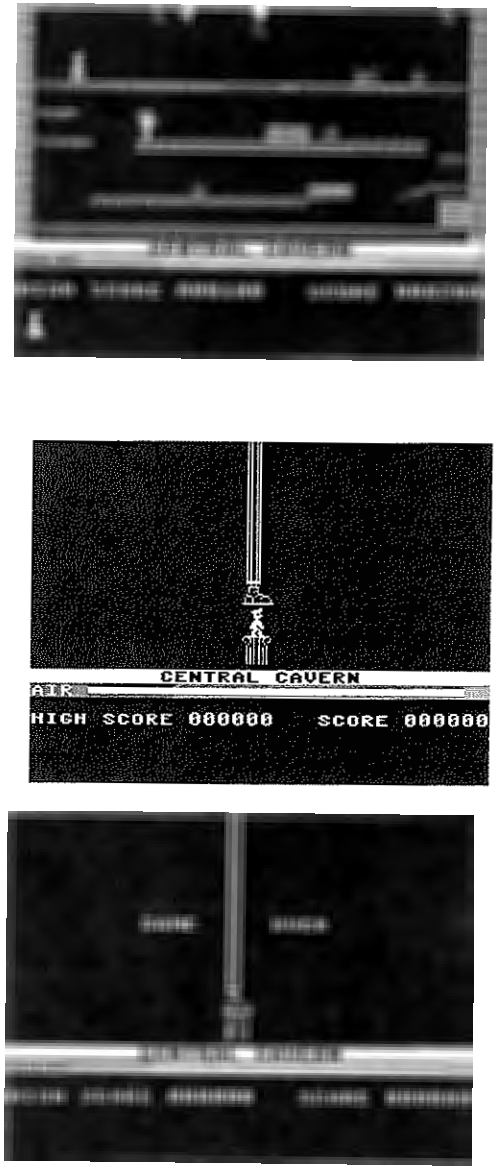

Figure 2.11
Manic Miner (Smith 1983)

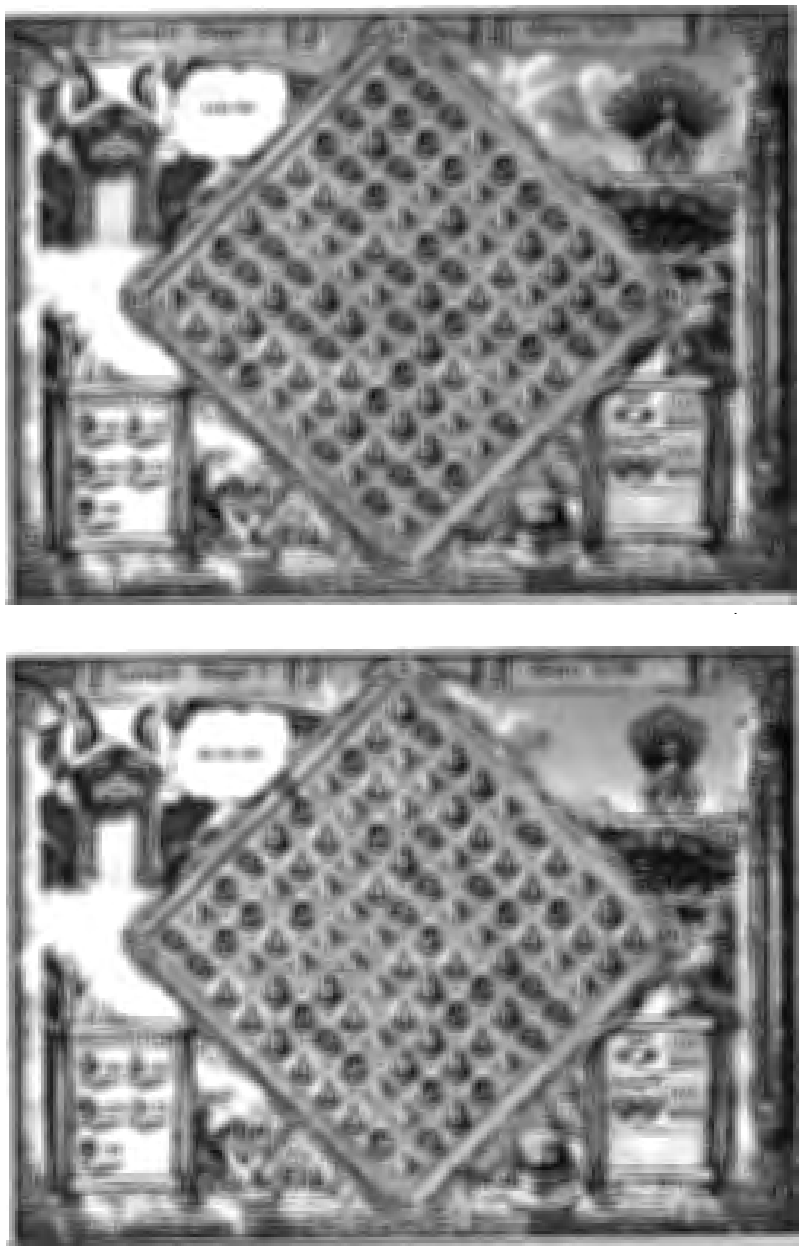

Figure 2.12
Magic Match: The Genie's Journey (Friends Games 2007)

but rather to an accumulation of mistakes. Whereas you will instantly lose a life in *Manic Miner* if you touch an enemy, most downloadable casual games, as well as *Guitar Hero* only cause you to lose a life after you have accumulated a number of mistakes.

Excessive Positive Feedback: The Enigma of Juiciness

I watched a non-player of video games try the modern casual game *Peggle*.[60] When experiencing the end-of-level sequence shown in figure 2.13, he exclaimed, "It feels like somebody is praising me!" In discussing the usability of casual games, I described the design of a game interface as a question of *function*. But there is something else going on in casual games, something that is not predictable from the description of casual players. The end-of-level sequence of *Peggle* gives clear feedback to the player that he or she has completed the level, yet this is about more than *information*: the player already knows that the level is completed, so neither the "EXTREME FEVER" display, nor the extra bonus when the ball exits the bottom of the screen, nor the rainbow, nor the final extra bonus tally provide any new information to the player.

In the book *Emotional Design*,[61] design expert Donald Norman tells the story of how he changed his mind about the role of *beauty* in design: in his earlier work *The Design of Everyday Things*,[62] he had argued that the single most important attribute for an object like a teapot was its function, and how that function should always have a higher priority than secondary attributes like beauty. *Emotional Design* is about the realization that it *is* important how a teapot looks, and that Norman's earlier work on usability had underestimated the importance of this visceral level of design.[63] Concerning video games, independent game designer Kyle Gabler uses the term *juiciness* to describe the type of visceral interface that gives excessive amounts of positive feedback in response the player's actions: "A juicy game element will bounce and wiggle and squirt and make a little noise when you touch it. A juicy game feels alive and responds to everything you do—tons of cascading action and response for minimal user input. It makes the player feel powerful and in control of the world, and it coaches them through the rules of the game by constantly letting them know on a per-interaction basis how they are doing."[64]

Juiciness does not simply communicate information or make the game easier to use, but it also gives the player an immediate, pleasurable experience. Juiciness is tied specifically to feedback for the actions of players,

Figure 2.13
The juicy interface of *Peggle* (PopCap Games 2007)

Figure 2.13
(continued)

Figure 2.13
(continued)

Figure 2.14
Gears of War (Epic Games 2006)

seemingly enhancing the experience of feeling competent, or clever, when playing a game.

Juiciness is characteristic of casual game design, but does this mean that hardcore game design is not juicy? This is a bit more complicated. Consider *Gears of War*[65] shown in figure 2.14. *Gears of War* does have a large amount of juicy game elements: guns flare, things blow up. These game elements react excessively to player actions, demonstrating that juiciness is not exclusive to casual game design.

What is the difference? Juiciness in hardcore game design tends to take place in the 3-D space of the game as in *Gears of War*, but juiciness in casual games generally addresses the player directly. In the *Peggle* example, the first bonus sign, the "EXTREME FEVER" sign, the rainbow, and the final score tally are all elements in screen space. In film terms, hardcore game design has diegetic juiciness, which is juiciness within the game world, but casual game design is characterized by nondiegetic juiciness, which is juiciness that takes place outside the game world. Hardcore juiciness takes place in the 3-D space of the game; casual juiciness takes place in screen space, but addresses the player in player space.

Games and Players

To sum up, casual game design has five components.[66]

1. *Fiction* The player is introduced to the game by way of a screenshot, a logo on a web page, or the physical game box. Casual games are generally set in pleasant environments. Casual game design has emotionally positive fictions as opposed to the mostly emotionally negative, "vampires and war" settings of traditional video games.
2. *Usability* The player tries to play the game, and may or may not have trouble understanding how to play. Casual games presuppose little knowledge of video game conventions. Casual game design is very usable.
3. *Interruptibility* A game demands a certain time commitment from the player. It is not that casual games can only be played for short periods of time, but that casual game design *allows* the player to play a game in brief bursts. Casual game design is very interruptible.
4. *Difficulty and punishment* A game challenges and punishes the player for failing. Casual games often become very difficult during the playing of a game, but they do not force the player to replay large parts of the game. Single-player casual game design has lenient punishments for failing. The experience of punishment in multiplayer casual game design depends on who plays.
5. *Juiciness* Though this was not predicted by the description of casual players, casual game design commonly features excessive positive feedback for every successful action the player performs. Casual game design is very juicy.

If the stereotype of the casual player is someone who only likes mainstream fictions, who has little knowledge of video game conventions, who is willing to invest little time in playing games, and who is averse to difficulty in games, then we must conclude that this stereotype has been thoroughly shattered on three of four counts. The downloadable casual game players of the study in appendix A exhibit much knowledge about the games they play and invest much time in playing. Many of the surveyed players report a preference for difficult games; more players consider it worse for a game to be too easy than for it to be too hard. These players are better illustrated in figure 2.15, as having acquired a large amount of knowledge about game conventions in casual games, being willing to invest large amounts of time in playing games, *and* having a surprisingly high tolerance for difficulty in games.

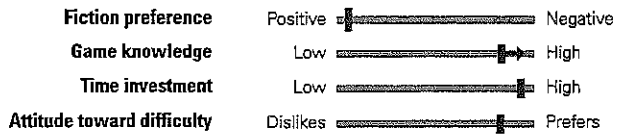

Figure 2.15
Interviewed casual players

Studies of players of downloadable casual games tend to foster surprising headlines such as "'Casual' Players Exhibit Heavy Game Usage."[67] My own survey has similar results. As discussed in appendix A, such headlines should be taken with a grain of salt: the interviewees volunteer to answer the surveys, so it is predictable that avid players are more likely to respond than other players. There may be players who are closer to the stereotypical casual player discussed earlier, but they will have little motivation for answering questionnaires about casual games.[68] Casual game design *does* lower the barriers to entry significantly for new players, and it does provide a range of possible experiences. This means that even if the stereotype of the casual player does not describe actual players very well, it is still valuable for understanding how game designs can help players integrate a game into their lives. Table 2.1 shows how the elements of casual game design each support the characteristics of the stereotypical casual player.

Casual game design is also valuable because stereotypical hardcore players are under threat. Not, perhaps, as a cultural group, but as individuals. A common complaint is that a life with children, jobs, and general adult responsibilities is not conducive to playing video games for long periods of time. The player that at one time was a stereotypical hardcore player may find him or herself in a new life situation: still wanting to play video games, but only able to play short sessions at a time. Many players of casual games are such ex-hardcore players as illustrated in figure 2.16: they probably still have the same taste in fiction, but are unable to invest large amounts of time in playing games. Consequently their knowledge of video game conventions becomes dated. Presumably they also have a lower tolerance for difficulty so as to be able to make progress in or complete a game within the time they have for playing games.

We can individually switch between being casual players and hardcore players. This can happen over a long period of time as you gain more

Table 2.1
Casual players and casual game design

Stereotypical casual player	How casual design supports the stereotypical casual player
Preference for positive fictions	**Positive fictions** support players with such taste.
Little knowledge of game conventions	**Usable design** supports players with little knowledge of game conventions. **Juiciness** gives players constant feedback about how well they are doing.
Low time investment	**Interruptibility** allows *both* playing in short bursts with little time investment *and* playing with large time investments. *In multiplayer games, this depends more on other players than on the game design as such.*
Low difficulty tolerance	**Lenient punishments** for failure: casual game design generally *does not support players who dislike difficulty entirely*, but supports players who dislike replaying large parts of a game over, and who dislike rote learning. *In multiplayer games, this depends on the social consequences of losing, as discussed in chapter 6.*

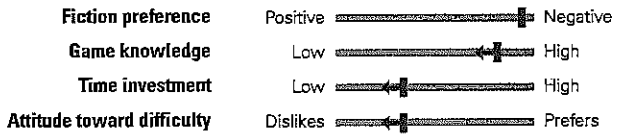

Figure 2.16
Ex-hardcore players

video game knowledge, or it can happen if you find yourself in changed life circumstances. We can also switch on daily basis: the fiction preferences that we express will surely change depending on who we play with. Our willingness to invest time depends on where we are playing and how busy we are. Our tolerance for difficulty depends on our mood. We each have certain dispositions toward games, but we also change.

At this point, it seems pertinent to ask the following question: *Which is it?* Am I saying that the casual revolution has everything to do with game design, or am I saying that it has everything to do with casual players? In

chapter 1 I discussed why it is tempting to try to understand the casual revolution by focusing on either games or players, but I also argued that it would be wrong to make such a choice. While video games have only become a major subject of serious study at universities within the last ten years, much of that time has been a tug of war between those who advocate looking at games and those who advocate looking at players. This has led to the problem that any examination of game design can be criticized for ignoring players: one theorist denounces any focus on games as "unsustainable formalism."[69] Conversely, any researcher who focuses on examining players is vulnerable to being criticized for spending too little time examining and, indeed, playing games.[70] This is a competition between *player-centric* and *game-centric* views of how games and players should be understood. Let me briefly demonstrate both why this is a genuine discussion and why it is important to get beyond it.

- *Player-centric view*[71] If I start with casual players and focus on the way they play, it seems that players can take a video game and use it in any way they want. Yet different players enjoy different games, and casual game design supports more different ways of playing than traditional video game design does, hence casting doubt on a purely player-centric view.
- *Game-centric view*[72] If I start with casual games and focus on their design, it seems clear that the casual revolution discussed here is first and foremost a question of new, more casual designs. Yet it turns out that many players of casual games play in ways that appear distinctly non-casual, hence casting doubt on a purely game-centric view.

The better solution is to see how a game can be *more or less* flexible toward being played in different ways, and a player can be more or less flexible toward what a game asks of the player. Hardcore game design provides an inflexible ultimatum toward the player, asking him or her to commit much time and many resources to playing, but casual game design asks for *small* commitments while flexibly allowing the player to spend more time with the game if desired. Whereas the stereotypical hardcore player is strongly interested in games and *flexible* toward investing time and resources into playing games, the stereotypical casual player is only opportunistically interested in games and *inflexible* toward investing time and resources into playing games. This way it becomes clear that *hardcore* and *casual* have opposite meanings for games and players, as illustrated in table 2.2.

Table 2.2
Casual games and hardcore players are flexible, while hardcore games and casual players are inflexible

	Casual	Hardcore
Games	Flexible	Inflexible
Players	Inflexible	Flexible

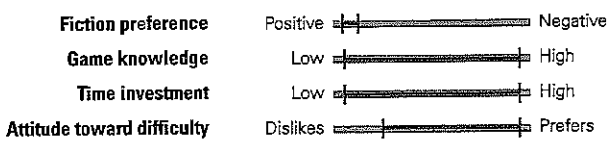

Figure 2.17
The affordances of casual game design: many types of game players are supported

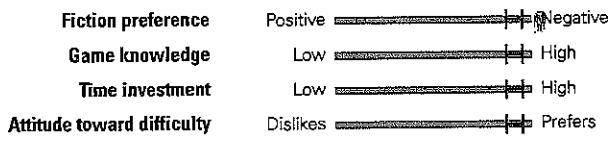

Figure 2.18
The affordances of hardcore game design: only one type of game player is supported

Figure 2.17 shows how the flexibility of casual game design opens video games to a range of players: the high usability, high interruptibility, and lenient difficulty/punishment structures of casual game design means that casual games do not ask that much of players in terms of resources, game knowledge, or time investment. Casual *games* are consequently flexible toward being played by many players in many ways, but the stereotypical casual *player* is inflexible toward accommodating the demands of a game. Even if the fiction of casual game design tends to be unapologetically positive, casual game design still opens the games to players with little or a lot of game knowledge, and for playing with little or a large time investment. Contrary to popular belief, casual games are only rarely open to players with no tolerance for difficulty.

Figure 2.18 shows how hardcore game design is inflexible in that it asks for many resources from the player, and requires much knowledge

of game conventions, much time investment, and a preference for difficulty. (Chapter 7 discusses the counterexample of hardcore games that allow players to not follow the game goal and thereby gives them the option of playing in more casual ways.) Conversely, a stereotypical hardcore player is flexible as to accommodating what a game asks for. Hence, as long as the game has sufficient depth it is not a problem for a stereotypical hardcore player to play a casual game since the game does not ask for something that the player will not deliver, but as a general rule it is a problem for a stereotypical casual player to play a hardcore game.

Is This a Casual Game?

With the elements of casual game design identified, it becomes easier to discuss specific games. It is rarely the case that a game is *either* casual or hardcore, but the design elements of a given game can pull it in either direction.

Chess

Let me start by discussing the traditional board game of chess. Chess is played in many different ways: it can be a somewhat relaxed game, or it can be a highly competitive game to which some players dedicate their entire life. In that case, does or doesn't chess embody the elements of casual design that I have discussed in this chapter?

- The fiction of chess is a conflict between two societies, but it is probably not the reason why people play the game. Still, this fiction has likely been more resonant with players historically than it is now.
- Chess is fairly complicated compared to, say, checkers, but it is a moderately usable game compared to more complicated video games.
- The interruptibility and time investment components of chess depend almost exclusively on who it is played with, and in what context: a game of speed chess is a short, intensive experience but chess played by mail takes a lot longer and is less intensive. The player who merely wants to play a game with friends or family on occasion has to invest only a little time; the player who wants to compete on a tournament level must dedicate major portions of his or her life.
- Difficulty and punishment for failure depends on the player's stake in the social situation the game is played in. Replay is never identical.
- While chess exists in many forms and implementations, neither analog nor digital versions of the game tend to have much juiciness.

Chess, then, is a moderately usable game for which the time investment and the difficulty depend almost exclusively on what the player is trying to achieve and who the player is playing against. I cannot answer the question of whether chess is a casual game, as that is determined by the context in which chess is played.

Guitar Hero

Guitar Hero is similar to chess in that it serves two very different functions: it can be played as a relaxed social game, and it can be played as an intensive game by players who wish to master the game on expert difficulty setting or to partake in competitions.

- The fiction of *Guitar Hero* refers to a well-known stereotype of over-the-top rock music styles and musician poses.
- The basic activity of playing guitar is well known by players, and the mimetic interface mimics that activity with a high degree of compatibility, making the game very usable.
- The time investment can be either low or high depending on what the player is trying to achieve. The game can technically be paused at any time, but in terms of fitting into a player's life, the moderate length of a game session is more important.
- Concerning difficulty, *Guitar Hero* sets a relatively low bar for completing a given song while presenting a range of measurements of how well the player performs. This means that if a player only is interested in playing a song on a low difficulty setting, he or she is not forced to replay that song. On the other hand, if the player wants to complete the game, play on higher difficulty levels, or achieve a high score, the game punishes failure very harshly by forcing the player to replay a song until it has been mastered.
- *Guitar Hero* is an extremely juicy game, featuring large amounts of positive feedback for everything from the isolated action of pressing a single button, to correctly hitting a long sequence of notes, to crowds cheering the superior performance.

In other words, *Guitar Hero* has basic similarities with chess in that it matches casual game design principles if the player is only trying to play a song or two without worrying about achieving a high score or completing the game. If the player tries to complete the game or achieve a high score, the time investment and difficulty tolerance required from the game become decidedly non-casual. Chapter 7 discusses this flexible quality of *Guitar Hero* and other games in more detail.

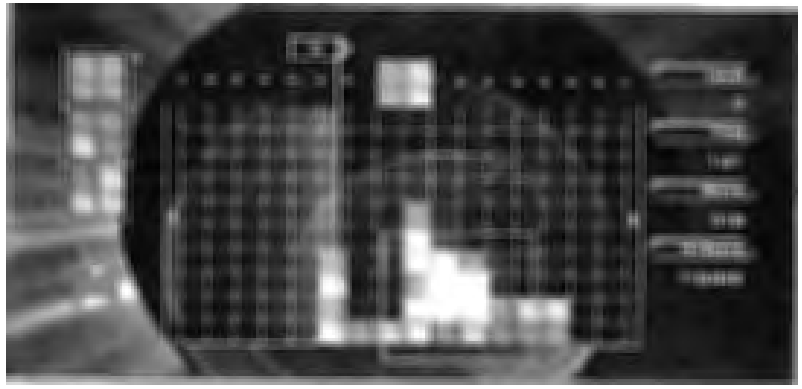

Figure 2.19
Lumines Live! (Q Entertainment 2006)

Lumines Live!

Lumines Live![73] (shown in figure 2.19) is the Xbox 360 version of the Sony PSP puzzle game *Lumines*.[74] The game has a certain *Tetris*-like simplicity in its basic structure: players manipulate the falling tiles so that tiles of the same color are aligned in a 2×2 grid. But is *Lumines Live!* a casual game? Consider these factors:

- *Lumines Live!* is an abstract game whose futuristic or technological style falls somewhat outside the positive/negative fiction scale.
- *Lumines Live!* is simple enough to be very usable, but there is a caveat: although neither *Lumines!* nor *Lumines Live!* is a downloadable casual game played on a personal computer, conventional wisdom in that distribution channel is to never make the player control a game with anything but the mouse.[75] Since *Lumines (Live!)* is played with the game controllers of either the Xbox 360 or the PSP, this is at odds with that conventional wisdom, possibly alienating many potential players. Furthermore, for reasons that escape us, *Tetris*-like games with falling blocks have rarely done well in the downloadable casual games channel.[76]
- In terms of time investment, the basic "challenge" game mode consists of only one level with no save function, often requiring a player to play for thirty minutes or more. Thereby the interruptibility factor becomes very low and the required time investment becomes very high.
- Failing in the game forces the player to start over from the very beginning, so *Lumines Live!* has a very harsh punishment for failure.

- Speaking for its status as a casual game, *Lumines Live!* is extremely juicy, with much positive feedback for the basic manipulation of the falling blocks as well as for both normal and special matches.

Though *Lumines Live!* on the surface appears to be a simple game, it has a surprising amount of depth, with the instructions including a range of tips for advanced playing strategies. This is the flip side of the question of time investment: a game can afford the player a meaningful experience with a short time investment, but does the game continue to be a meaningful experience with a *large* time investment? The depth of *Lumines Live!* affords exactly that, intensive playing with a large time investment by allowing players to continue to refine their skills at the game and to develop new strategies.

Is *Lumines Live!* a casual game? Though *Lumines*, the original Sony PSP handheld version of the game,[77] is almost identical, it is subtly different due to the constraints of the platform: where the Xbox 360 version forces the player into playing an entire game in one setting, the built-in pause function of the Sony PSP allows a player to pause the PSP and resume the game days or weeks later. The PSP version of the game is much more flexible, and interruptible, *but this is due to the design of the platform, not the design of the game.*

Lumines follows casual game design to the extent that it is a very simple and usable game, but it does not follow casual game design in that it is played with a standard game controller; requires a large, uninterrupted time investment when played on the Xbox 360, and has a harsh punishment structure. The move from the Sony PSP to the Xbox 360 made *Lumines* less casual.

Wii Sports

I have already singled out *Wii Sports* as an example of a casual game that has reached a broad audience. As of 2008, *Wii Sports* is the bestselling Wii game,[78] though it should be said that it came for free with Wii consoles purchased outside Japan. This is why I describe *Wii Sports* as a casual game:

- The fiction of *Wii Sports* is a cartoony and friendly version of the commonly known sports of tennis, bowling, golf, boxing, and baseball. In other words, the game occupies the very positive end of the fiction scale.
- Since players have seen these sports performed before, and since *Wii Sports* features a mimetic interface, the game is very usable.

- The required time investment of *Wii Sports* is quite short—down to the length of a few sets of tennis or a game of bowling.
- Since the individual games of *Wii Sports* are short games that you play many times against other players, the difficulty of the games and the consequences for failing are decided by dynamics of the group that is playing.
- *Wii Sports* is a fairly juicy game by way of feedback for individual actions such as hitting a ball. When completing player turns or entire games, the characters in the game provide a different kind of juiciness by expressing joy or dismay in responses to success or failure.

Wii Sports is similar to *Guitar Hero* in being a relaxed social game, but unlike *Guitar Hero* it does not work very well as a time-intensive game. Critical reviews of *Wii Sports* have focused particularly on the perceived lack of depth,[79] implying that intensive playing of the game is not rewarded by improved skills. Yet this is exactly what makes it a relaxed social game: popular social games like *Parcheesi* or *Monopoly* generally have large amounts of chance and moderate amounts of depth, making sure the same player does not win every time.

World of Warcraft

As of 2009, *World of Warcraft*[80] (figure 2.20) is the most popular massively multiplayer role-playing game in the Western world. *World of Warcraft* is famous for its time intensity, where reaching the initial maximum level sixty in the game takes an average of the equivalent of two full work months.[81] Here are the key characteristics of the game:

- The fiction of *World of Warcraft* is a somewhat generic fantasy world following role-playing game and fantasy conventions.
- While *World of Warcraft* is by no means a simple game, it is relatively usable compared to other games in the genre.[82]
- As noted, the required time investment to play *World of Warcraft* is immense, and the interruptibility of the game is minimal especially when playing in groups. *World of Warcraft* does mitigate this somewhat by allowing players to solo and play part of the game alone.
- Death in *World of Warcraft* is less punishing than in other and earlier games in the genre, but a player trying to complete a given quest in the game is still forced to replay that quest. However, the replay of a given quest is rarely identical.

Figure 2.20
World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004)

- Though nowhere on the level of *Guitar Hero* or *Lumines Live!*, *World of Warcraft* is moderately juicy, giving much positive feedback for fundamental actions such as casting spells and attacking.

World of Warcraft is a game that requires a decidedly non-casual time investment to play, but at the same time the game's popularity is partially due to it being slightly more usable and interruptible than other games in the genre. *World of Warcraft* is not a casual game, but it borrows some design principles from casual games.

Super Mario Galaxy

The 2007 *Super Mario Galaxy*[83] (figure 2.21) is an example of a Nintendo Wii game that cannot be described as a casual game for the following reasons:

- The fiction of *Super Mario Galaxy* has a colorful cartoony look, but also involves emotionally negative fiction and events such as monsters and the kidnapping of a friend (Princess Peach).

Figure 2.21
Super Mario Galaxy (Nintendo EAD Tokyo 2007), image courtesy of Nintendo America

- *Super Mario Galaxy* is primarily controlled via the control stick of the "nunchuck" controller, and the game takes places in 3-D space. This makes the game somewhat inaccessible to players who are not comfortable with this control method or with three-dimensional games as such.
- Completing the game takes ten to twenty hours, making it moderately time intensive.
- The difficulty and punishment structure of the game has three aspects: First, the game is structured around a number of smaller levels where the player who loses a life has to replay the *level* from its beginning, which is a harsh punishment structure. Second, the game is somewhat lenient in that the overall game gives the option of skipping a few levels if the player dislikes them or finds them hard. Third, though the player has a limited number of lives, losing all of his or her lives still only forces the player to replay the last level, rather than the entire game.
- While the difficulty and punishment structure of *Super Mario Galaxy* speaks against its status as a casual game, it has high levels of juiciness, with many small elements of positive feedback for basic actions as well as for completing levels in the game.

Regardless of being a game for the Nintendo Wii, *Super Mario Galaxy* is quite removed from the principles of casual game design I have

outlined previously: its low usability, large time requirement, and generally harsh punishment structure make for a game that is not very casual, regardless of the platform it is made for.

Who Is Casual?

Wrote one hardcore reader to *PC Game Magazine*: "I read your 'Top 8 of 2008' feature in the January issue, and I was shocked and disappointed to find Peggle in there. Now, I know it is addictive, just like a ton of other low-rent Flash games. But to name it one of the best PC games of 2008 means you've either given up on the PC as a real gaming platform, or you've lost your sanity and can no longer be trusted to review videogames. So, which is it?"[84]

This hardcore player was unhappy to see his game magazine name *Peggle* as a top game of 2008. So far I have been telling the happy story about how video games reach new players. The other story is that of traditional hardcore players who fear their medium of choice will lose the qualities they enjoy. The two stories position casual games as either the salvation or the dumbing down of video games. Some elements of casual game design are certainly at odds with what we can call the hardcore ethic discussed earlier: that a game should be as challenging *as possible*, and that there is honor involved in spending as much time as possible with a game.

Conversely, some players describe themselves as casual players in order to distance themselves from the hardcore players assumed to spend excessive amounts of time on playing. For example:

> When I call myself a "casual gamer," I mean someone who just plays for leisure, who doesn't devote a tremendous amount of time to playing. I knew people in college for whom gaming was a way of life: they would miss sleep to play, they would skip classes to play, and some of them would rather play games online than hang out with people in real life. Those are "hardcore" gamers, to me.... I consider my own habits casual because, among other things, my sense of identity isn't at all tied to my gaming ability (which is a good thing—I'm not very good at these games). I just play to amuse myself from time to time, and honestly if a game gets too hard I lose interest—I play to relax, not to be frustrated.[85]

As this chapter has demonstrated, casual game design gives a game a flexibility that allows players to use it in different ways. A well-designed casual game with sufficient depth can be enjoyed with both small and large time investments. For some players, casual game design can be a way *in* to video games, giving an opportunity to play video games in short sessions, while still allowing players to subsequently invest more time into playing. For formerly hardcore players with less time on their hands, casual game design grants them the opportunity to keep playing video games, even under changed life circumstances.

The casual revolution is a reinvention of both games and players: casual game design is a genuine innovation in game design and a return to lessons long forgotten, while the idea of the less-dedicated, less-obsessed casual player helps us to move beyond the prejudice that video game player are nerdy and socially inept. This lets developers reconsider who will be playing their games, when and why. It also removes some of the stigma that has been attached to video games, making it easier for us all to say that, "yes, I play video games."

three different frames: David emphasized social management ("these are my friends") and game experience ("games are supposed to be fun"), but his friends emphasized goal orientation, the desire to win or get further in the game. David's friends had a stereotypical hardcore attitude toward the game: performing well in the game was more important than friendship; David asserted a casual attitude: friendship and fun were more important than performance.

The uncertain interrelation between these considerations have been known to end both parties and relationships. Some players believe (at opportune times) that a friend has the obligation to help them in a game. And then again, while helping another player in a game *may* be taken to be a friendly gesture, it can also be perceived as rude and condescending. Going against someone's goals can be an affirmation that you want to be part of the social event with that person. In multiplayer games, every action has many meanings.

7 Casual Play in a Hardcore Game

Guitar Hero and *Rock Band* are often played in ways that would be hard to describe as casual, with competitions and with players putting in much effort to document their perfect performances on the "expert" difficulty setting.[1] Yet, if the player decides to play in a different way, *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* can also be prime examples of casual games because they are easy to pick up and play in a social situation, serving the same function as traditional social games. In this case, both games correspond well to the casual game design principles described in chapter 2: positive, pleasant fictions; easy to learn; interruptible, since a game session only lasts the length of a song; juicy, with much positive graphical feedback; and lenient punishments for failure, in that players who are *not* trying to complete or master the game can *choose* to play a different song when failing, rather than have to play the same song over and over.

In other words, these games are very different depending on what players are trying to achieve. For players who want to relax playing a song they like, the games fulfill the role of casual games where even an imperfect performance of a song on an easy level of difficulty can be a satisfying experience. However, for players who want to master the games or win a competition, the games' punishment structures match traditional hardcore design. In this case, the player must keep replaying a given song in order to perfect his or her skills. *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* support large time investments and reward practice with difficulty levels that scale from very easy to near impossible, providing depth as discussed in chapter 2. *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* are therefore not simply "casual," "hardcore," or somewhere on a scale between the two, but represent a kind of flexible design that lets players decide what type of game to play.

Figure 7.1
Sims 2 (Electronic Arts 2004)

In addition to *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, in this chapter I will discuss *Sims 2*[2] (figure 7.1) and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*[3] (figure 7.2). Though these four games appear very different, they are similar in that goals are less imperative than in traditional video game design. All four games are hugely popular, and even the often controversial *Grand Theft Auto* series is one of the most popular game series across age and gender.[4]

These are, on the surface, *big* games that seem to require large time investments, but they can reach a broad audience because they do not force the player into working toward an official game goal. Hardcore game design is generally inflexible toward different uses, but this inflexibility hinges in part on the convention that *players are punished if they do not work toward the game goal.* When players are free to follow personal goals, these games become flexible in terms of being played in different ways.

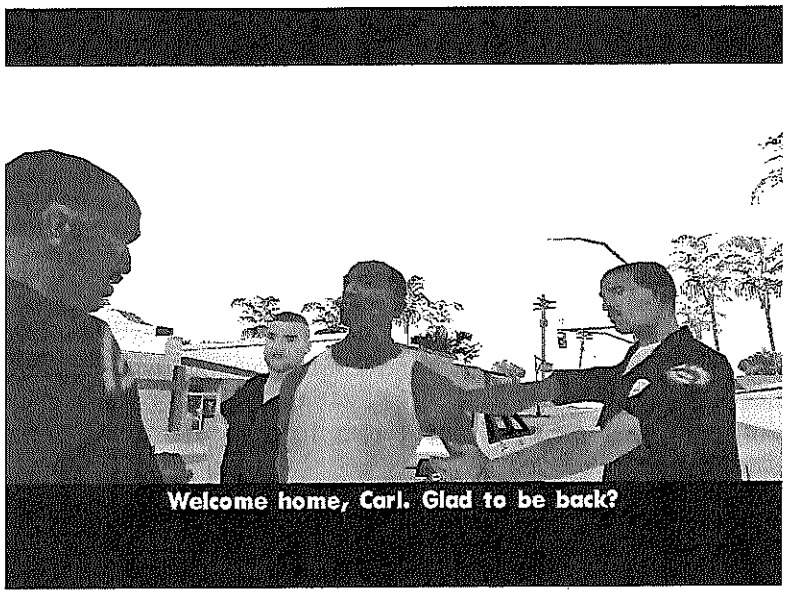

Figure 7.2
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar Games North 2005)

Games without Enforced Goals

The last few decades have seen many innovations concerning goals in games: *Sims 2* has no stated goals, but is nevertheless extremely popular. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is superficially a goal-oriented game, yet it allows the player to perform a wide range of actions while ignoring the game goal. While goals provide a sense of direction and a challenge in games, they can also limit the player.

Do all games have goals? Games have changed over time, but the five-thousand-year-old Egyptian board game Senet is also recognizable as a game today.[5] Through thousands of years, games have followed what I call the *classic game model* illustrated in figure 7.3.[6] The inner circle shows the core features of games; the middle circle area contains borderline things we may argue over whether to describe as "games"; and outside the circle are things that are not considered games. Games without goals, such as *Sims 2* or *SimCity*,[7] are borderline cases because they do not have goals in a traditional sense.

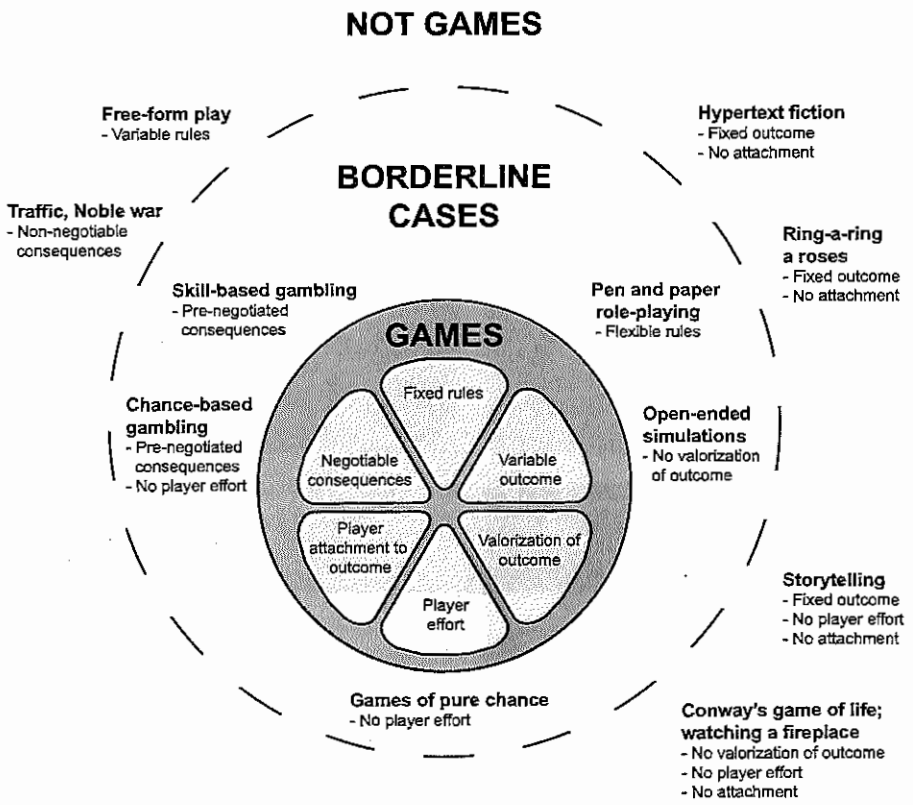

Figure 7.3
The classic game model

That a game has a goal means it is an *activity* for which some of the possible outcomes are assigned positive values; an activity with the imperative that players *should* work toward these positive outcomes.[8] This means that a game has to communicate its goal in some way. It also means that soccer fields or soccer balls do not have goals, for in themselves they are not activities. The game of soccer has a goal—we use the term *soccer* to mean a specific activity with goals. That *Sims 2* does not have a goal means it does not tell us what we should try to achieve. Players of *Sims 2* set their own personal goals as they wish, but "*Sims 2*" refers to a game without goals: *Sims 2* is like a soccer ball that can be used for a variety of both goal-oriented and goal-less activities.

Scramble: Obligatory Goals

Guitar Hero, Rock Band, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, and *Sims 2* are unusual in the history of video games. Compare them to the 1981 arcade game *Scramble*,[9] a game that is representative of a more traditional way of constructing and communicating goals. The *Scramble* cabinet states the following:

- Object of game is to invade five SCRAMBLE defense systems to destroy THE BASE.
- Use joystick to move up, down, accelerate, and decelerate.
- Use Laser and bombs to destroy rockets, fuel tanks, mystery targets and UFOs.
- Hit fuel tanks for extra fuel for AIRCRAFT.
- Bonus AIRCRAFT at 10,000 points.[10]

The goal of *Scramble* is also indicated by way of a taunting text on the main screen: "How far can you invade our scramble system?" The explicit goal of the game is to get as *far* as possible, but there is a second implicit goal: to get as high a score as possible.

To what extent is it possible to ignore the goal of the game when playing? As a first experiment, I tried invading the *Scramble* system not as far but at as short a distance as possible. This proved very easy but not terribly satisfying: the game allowed me to simply drive the aircraft into the ground immediately three times, yielding a total score of 110 points (figure 7.4).

Since *Scramble* scrolls the screen right to left at a steady pace, the player has no option but to "invade the scramble system"—otherwise the game will end.[11] As an alternative strategy, I tried to see whether *Scramble* accommodates a pacifist playing style, when I played without attacking anything. This was impossible because the aircraft continually loses fuel, which must be replenished by attacking the fuel tanks stationed on the bottom of the screen. Failing to do so renders the aircraft uncontrollable and leads to a crash (figure 7.5).

In any prolonged playing of *Scramble*, the player is forced to work toward the goal, and to some extent to use a specific playing style. This is characteristic of how goals work in the traditional arcade game:

1. Goals are explicitly communicated.
2. There are dual goals of progressing in the game and getting a high score.

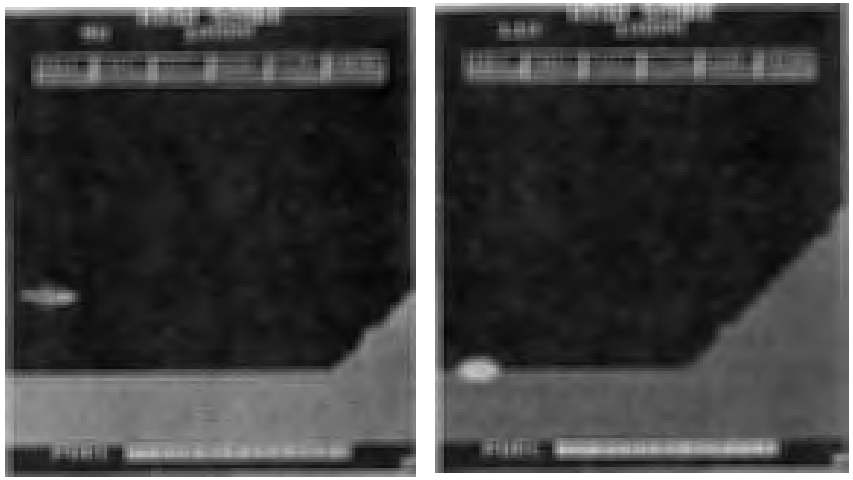

Figure 7.4
Scramble: avoiding the game goal by driving the aircraft into the ground immediately (Konami 1981)

3. The game strongly punishes players who do not try to achieve the goal.
4. The enforced goal allows the player only a narrow range of playing styles.

San Andreas: Optional Goals

The *Grand Theft Auto* games describe themselves as having goals, like the arcade game, but in actual play are very different experiences. The back cover of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* states: "Now, it's the early 90s. Carl's got to go home. His mother has been murdered, his family has fallen apart and his childhood friends are all heading towards disaster. On his return to the neighborhood, a couple of corrupt cops frame him for homicide. CJ is forced on a journey that takes him across the entire state of San Andreas, to save his family and to take control of the streets."[12] The text sets up a goal not entirely unlike that of *Scramble*: the player should not "invade the scramble system," but "save" Carl's family and "take control of the streets."

Players achieve the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* goal by completing the long series of missions that the game presents (figure 7.6) Again, this is quite similar to how *Scramble* works. What is not similar is that *Grand Theft Auto* does not force you into pursuing the stated goal. Right from the beginning of the game, rather than go to CJ's old neighborhood

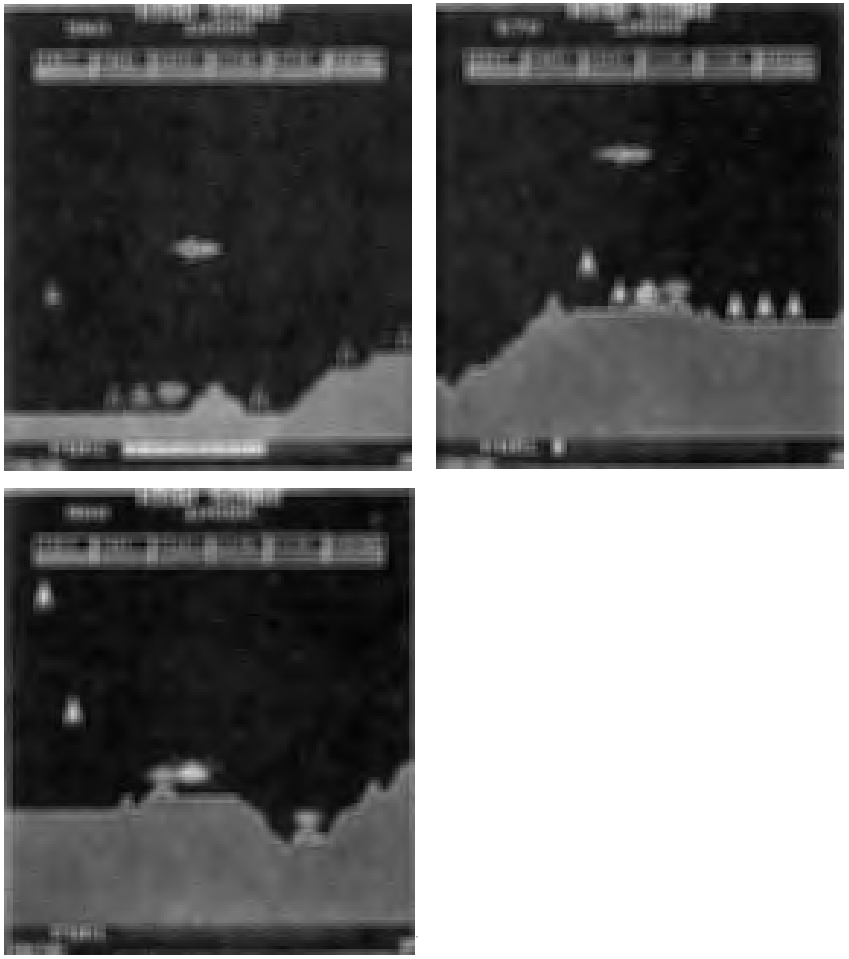

Figure 7.5
Scramble: refusing to fire any shots leads to the aircraft running out of fuel

Figure 7.6
The player is instructed to get on a bike and follow the radar to return to Carl's old neighborhood.

you can choose to bicycle around town, practice stunts, or simply explore the game world (figure 7.7).

This makes *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* another type of game, in which you are free to deviate from the official goal of the game and to make up personal goals such as improving cycling skills, modifying the looks of your character, or simply visiting as much of the game world as possible. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a game with a goal, but the goal is optional.

Sims 2: Without a Goal

The back cover of *Sims 2* packaging states:

The Next Generation People Simulator
They're born. They die. What happens in between is up to you. In this sequel to the bestselling PC game of all time, you now take your Sims from cradle to grave through life's greatest moments.

Figure 7.7
Instead of undertaking missions, players can choose to explore the game world.

Create your Sims.
Push them to extremes.
Realise their fears.
Fulfill their life dreams.[13]

Sims 2 has no specific goal, but tells you that you have something akin to complete freedom—"what happens in between is up to you." In actuality, the game consists of choosing a town, creating a family or using a predefined one, making money, building family members a house, and trying to deal with their wants and desires and to make them do what you want them to. *Sims 2* does not yield full control over its characters, known as *Sims*; rather, the Sims may refuse to do what you ask them to, couples may dislike each other, and so on. *Sims 2* then pulls in several different directions: the game has no imperative and does not tell you what you *should* do, yet the Sims become miserable if you do nothing. The game is open to being played in different ways, but it also sets up a path of least resistance: purchasing more items for the Sims makes them happier,

which in turn makes it easier to earn money to provide for them. Yet, a large part of the home decoration in the game is not functional but aesthetic. Sims enjoy having chairs and tables, but players can choose between a wide range of chairs and tables, many of which will be functionally identical. *Sims 2* allows the player to play for aesthetic goals. The player does not have to choose an *optimal* chair, but can choose a *beautiful* chair.

Still, you cannot do what the *Sims 2* packaging promises because much of what happens is *not* up to you: *Sims 2* is *not* a dollhouse. During my playing of the game, I instructed a character named Cornwall to eat snacks and lunch seven times in a row. I intended Cornwall to eat all the food I had instructed him to eat, yet this was not what happened. Instead, a fire broke out in the kitchen, which led to Cornwall having a nervous breakdown, and then receiving a visit from a doctor (figure 7.8).

The events in *Sims 2* are not simply up to you, but result from the interaction between the player and the game's objects, characters, and financial constraints. As such, *Sims 2* is the mirror image of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*: *Sims 2* promises absolute freedom but sets up many constraints and resistances to the player's plans; *San Andreas* promises a clear goal but allows the player to ignore it entirely.

To Play without Goals

The problem with goals is that they may force us ito optimize our strategy in order to win rather than do something else that we would prefer. The last few decades have seen much experimentation with goals in games. There is a whole class of goal-less games such as *Sims 2*, *SimCity*,[14] and many role-playing games. In addition, many games *with* goals put no strong pressure on the player to pursue them. Prior to *Grand Theft Auto III*,[15] games such as *Elite*,[16] *Pirates!*,[17] and *Super Mario 64*[18] were among the more prominent games with nonenforced goals.

Games without goals or with optional goals are more *flexible:* they accommodate more playing styles and player types, in effect letting you choose what kind of game you want to play. When you are not under pressure to optimize your strategy, you have room to play for other purposes than simply winning or completing the game. Chapter 6 discussed how in multiplayer games we can choose to emphasize different considerations: we can try to win; we can aim to keep the game interesting by playing badly; we can aim to manage the social situation in which we play. If we have high social stakes in a game, we may actively try to lose if that seems advantageous. If we, for example, have bet a large sum of money on a game, we may focus on winning to the detriment of the two other considerations discussed in the chapter. It is only when we are not under strong pressure to win that we can play without pursuing the game goal.

In *Sims 2* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the freedom to play without following a game goal allows us to use the games for personal expression. Many players find great enjoyment in creating (and showing off) families and houses in *Sims 2*, exploring and perfecting their clever maneuvers in the *Grand Theft Auto* series.[19] One way to look at this is to think of a game as a *language*: a language contains a *lexicon* (the words) and a *syntax* (that controls the arrangement of the words).[20] *Scramble* is not an expressive game because the range of things we can do (the lexicon) is very small, and because the game forces us into playing for the goal (a very rigid syntax). *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and *Sims 2* feature a wide range of things we can do (a large lexicon), while accommodating a wide range of playing styles (a flexible syntax). As such, the two games are flexible systems for expressing ourselves. In *Sims 2*, we can create houses and families that reflect who we are. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, we can perform stunts and solve problems in ways that are unique to us. The expressivity of *Sims 2* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* also comes from the fact that these games contain elements that are already meaningful: social interaction, life and death, violence, exploration, social status, skilled performances.

The expressive power of *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* is quite different in that it is not visible on the screen of the game, but takes place in the space where we play. Because these games allow us to play single songs rather than try to complete the entire game, they allow us to shift our focus away from the goal of completing the entire game, to the people with whom we play, to the music itself, and to expressing ourselves by pretending to be rock stars, performing for friends and family in *player space*, outside the game screen.

The Curious Case of the Hardcore Games That Could Be Played Casually

The stereotypical casual player has a taste for positive settings, has little knowledge of game conventions, little willingness to invest time in playing, and a low tolerance for difficulty. In practice, it turns out that many

Figure 7.8
Cornwall eats snacks, prepares food

Figure 7.8
(continued)

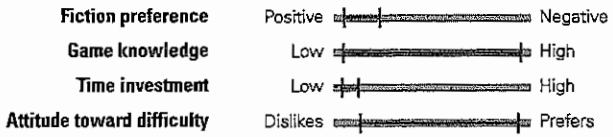

Figure 7.9
Guitar Hero and *Rock Band* as social events

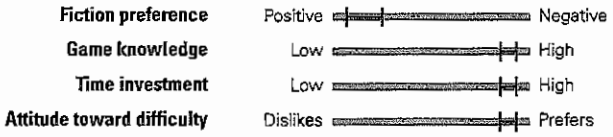

Figure 7.10
Guitar Hero and *Rock Band* as games to master

players of downloadable casual games are not like that at all, but the stereotype is useful to describe a person reluctant to play video games. Casual game design is generally flexible, affording both stereotypical casual and hardcore styles of playing, but hardcore game design typically only affords hardcore playing styles. So how do *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* work?

The simple answer is illustrated in figures 7.9 and 7.10: these games are different depending on the goal you set as a player. If you seek to play the game as a social event, you can play one song at a time. In this case, the game requires only marginal time investment, making it closer to casual game design principles. If, on the other hand, you play the game with the goal of mastering it, you *will* be replaying the same song over and over, and you will be memorizing the specific button presses needed to complete a song. In this case, the game is closer to traditional hardcore game design principles. The flexibility comes from the fact that the game does *not* force players to play for the goal of completing it.

That these games can be played in two ways puts pressure on the developers to cater to several different audiences at the same time. I asked Sean Baptiste of Harmonix, developer of *Rock Band*, about why they had included a "no-fail mode" in *Rock Band 2*,[21] whereby players can complete a song no matter how many mistakes they make. Though this seems like an innocuous design decision, a group of players were dissatisfied, as noted in this exchange I had with Baptiste:

JJ: Some people feel humiliated when they fail as it stops the songs and ruins it for the entire band. Is that why you have added the new no-fail mode in Rock Band *2?*
SB: If you are somebody like me, who has played video games your entire life, for whom it has always been a hobby, then you have always been excited about showing video games to people. But the failure barrier has always been so high. The ability to demonstrate your game to people who have never played before and eliminate that barrier is a very big deal.

At the same time, we have also received some burn back from some of our more hardcore players, who were telling us, "that is not fair, they should learn how to play, life is all about failure! and so on. And we tell them "guys come on, it is a video game, it is a music video game."
JJ: There is a certain hardcore ethic saying that "this is the way a game should be played"?
SB: They don't want their efforts at besting the game to feel diminished by having somebody who has never played it come in and finish a song.[22]

This shows the limit of what can be achieved with game design: including a no-fail mode lowers the barrier to entry for playing a game, and makes the game more flexible, but players who believe that games should be *inflexible* and *exclusive* will not be amused. New game designs can reach a broader audience, but a given game cannot make everybody happy.

Games without enforced goals do not replace the classic goal-oriented game, but they open a wide range of new player experiences as seen in *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band*, *Sims 2*, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. This illustrates another strategy for reaching a broad range of players. These games are flexible in that they allow players to choose what type of engagement they want with a game. Games without enforced goals are a movement in game design that adds flexibility to large-scale video games designs.