Note: I am not taking on new projects while I develop the Tackle Box, an online school for building websites. Check it out!

lara schenck

design + develop + educate

A Template for Analyzing Game Design

Posted: November 16, 2012, filed under: Games, Research

A note about analyzing vs. reviewing a game: an analysis mainly consists of what is *actually present* in the game, not what you think should be. Pick it apart and see what choices the designer made and think about why. I figured it'd be helpful to have a template for guidance when critiquing a game. Hopefully this will also be a useful inventory of mechanics for game design itself.

Disclaimer: this is pretty long and prepare yourself for some lists. Also, appropriate use of the definition list HTML tag follows. Anyways:

Formal Elements

The Basics
> Name of the game, the platform, and time played. Note that you can get a good idea of the game from playing for 30 mins or so, it doesn't have to be a 20 hour endeavor.

Overview
> A paragraph summary of everything below.

Players
> How many players are supported? Does it need to be an exact number? How

does this affect play? Some types of player frameworks:

- **Single Player** – like Solitare.
- **Head-to-head** – 1 vs. 1, Chess.
- **PvE** – Player vs. Environment, or multiple players vs. the game. Common in MMOs like World of Warcraft.
- **One against Many** – Single player vs. multiple (obvy).
- **Free-for-all** – Every man for himself (1 vs. 1 vs. 1 vs. 1..). Most common for multiplayer games, from Monopoly to Modern Warfare.
- **Individuals Against the System** – Like Blackjack, where the Dealer is playing against multiple players, but those players have no effect on each other.
- **Team Competition** – Multiple vs. multiple, i.e. sports.

- **Predator-prey** – Players form a circle and everyone's goal is to attack the player on their left and defend themselves from the player on their right.
- **Five-pointed Star** – Eliminate both players who are not on either side of you.

Objectives/Goals

What are the players trying to do? Some common objectives include:

- **Capture/Destroy** – Eliminate all your opponents pieces (Chess).
- **Territorial Acquisition** – Control as much territory as you can, not necessarily harming other players (RISK).
- **Collection** – Collect a certain number of objects throughout the game (Pokemon).
- **Solve** – Solve a puzzle or crime (Clue).
- **Chase/race/escape** – Anything where you are running towards or away from something (playground game Tag).
- **Spatial Alignment** – Anything involving the positioning of elements (Tetris or Tic-Tac-Toe or that game at Cracker Barrel).
- **Build** – Advance your characters or build your resources to a certain point (The Sims).
- **Negation of another goal** – The game ends if you perform an act that is forbidden by the rules (Jenga or Twister).
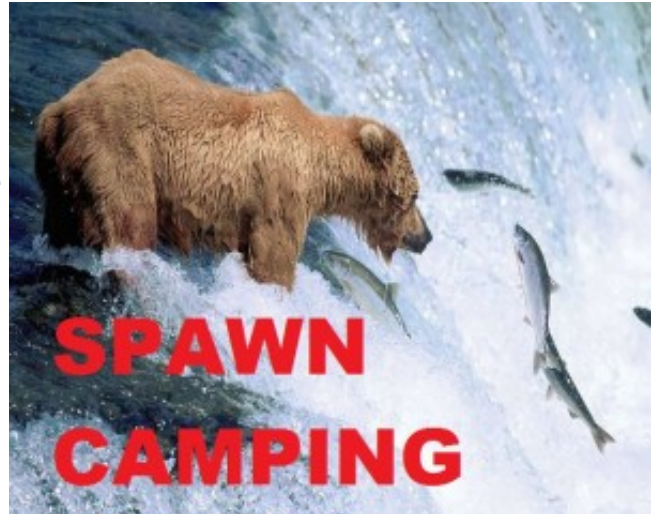
Rules/Mechanics

There are three categories of (what *Rules of Play* calls) **operational rules**:

1. **Setup** – the things you do at the beginning of a game.
2. **Progression of Play** – what happens during the game.
3. **Resolution** – How an outcome is determined based on the game state.

But there are more, the **implied rules**. For example, you aren't allowed to take an hour break between turns, but this wouldnt be articulated in a list of rules. Same as with "spawn-camping" in videogames. Implied rules are an unwritten social contract. Finally, in contrast to operational rules, **constitutive** rules are the abstract, underlying mathematical structure of the game. For example, the physics in Angry Birds. Or the fact that you begin with 0 points. They are logical relationships that aren't always evident to the player.

Not spawn-camping is an implied rule in videogames.

Controls

What controls are used? Was there a clear introductory tutorial? Were they easy to understand or did you find yourself spamming the controller? This section is mainly relevant to videogames.

Resources & Resource Management

A resource is everything under the control of a single player. Could be the money in Monopoly or health in WoW. Other examples are:

- Territory in RISK
- The number of questions remaining in 20 Questions
- Objects picked up during videogames (guns, health packs, etc.)
- Time (game time, real time, or both)
- Known information (like suspects in Clue)

What kinds of resources do players control? How are they maintained during play? What is their role?

Game State

The snapshot of the game at a single point is the game state. The resources you have, the un-owned properties in Monopoly, your opponent's Archery skill all count towards the game state. More relevant to videogames, but good

to think about in general.

Information

How much informaton in the game state is visible to the player? Some example information structures are:

- **Total Information** – Nothing is hidden, like Chess.
- **Info per player** – Your hand of cards is only visible to you.
- **One player has priviledged info** – Like a Dungeon Master.
- **Game hides info from all players** – Like Clue, where no one knows the victory condition.
- **Fog of War** – In video games, where certain sections of the map are concealed if you do not have a unit in sight range of that area. You also cannot see other players screens, so each player is unaware of the other's information.

Sequencing

In what order do players take their actions? How does play flow from one action to another? Some structures include:

- **Turn-based** – Standard board game technique.
- **Turn-based with simulatneous play** – where everyone takes their turn at the same time (like writing something down, or putting a card down in War).
- **Real-time** – Actions happen as fast as players can make them. Action based video games.
- **Turn-based and time limits** – You have this long to take your turn.

Player Interaction

Some examples:

- **Direct Conflict** – I attack you.
- **Negotiation** – If you support me here, I'll help you there.
- **Trading** – I'll give you this for that.
- **Information Sharing** – If you go there, I'm warning you, a trap will go off.

Theme & Narrative

Does it have an actual story structure? Is it based on an historical event (or similar)? Does the theme or narrative help you know how to play? Does it have emotional impacts?

Also look for en media res (does it start in the middle of the game)? That's explained well in this Extra Credits episode.

The Elements in Motion

How do the different elements interact? What is the gameplay like? Is it effective? Are there any points where the design choices break down?

Design Critique

Why did the designer make these particular choices? Why this set of resources? What if they made different decisions? Does the design break down at any point?

Graphics & Sound

Does the game art pair well with the mechanics? Did you find any bugs or glitches? What about sound? Can you spot any technical shortcuts?

Questions to think about at various stages:

To wrap up, some things to keep in mind (as if there aren't enough already) as you play:

- What challenges do you face, and how do you overcome them?
- Is the game fair?
- Is it replayable? Are there multiple paths to victory or optional rules that can change the experience?
- What is the intended audience?
- What is the core, the one thing you do over and over, and is it fun?

A final note, this content is in huge part taken from Game Design Concepts Level 3, but I also referenced:

- Formal Abstract Design Tools, by Doug Church
- Playing Like a Designer (pt. 1), Penny Arcade's Extra Credits S2 E2
- http://penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/playing-like-a-designer-pt.-2, Extra Credits S2 E3
- Game Reviews, Extra Credits S2 E22
- The Art of Game Design, Jesse Schell

Tagged: analysis, critqiue, game design, template

PREVIOUS
What if Wes Anderson directed Star Wars?

0 Comments   **notlaura**   **1**   **Login** ⌄

♥ **Recommend**   ↪ **Share**   Sort by Best ⌄

> Start the discussion…

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON NOTLAURA   WHAT'S THIS?

Show a title when hovering over an image with jQuery or CSS

10 comments • 2 years ago

Anaïs — Thaanks!

I made a Codepen

2 comments • 2 years ago

Lara Schenck — Ah, right you are! Fixed, and thanks for reading!

MTNmeister.com: Timber + ACF for the Win

1 comment • a year ago

davidhellmann — Good read. I take a look into Timber and it looks interesting. I would start with Craft CMS but for now

I wrote a post for CSS-Tricks and people read it | Lara Schenck - I wrote

24 comments • 9 months ago

Steven Sanders — Keep in mind that you're looking at /r/programming, which consists of... programmers.

⌃

WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?

Teach me to fish.
Let's fish together!
Fish for me.

milk@honey.com

Sign up!

Sign up for helpful links and updates now and again.

© Lara Schenck, LLC. Powered by WordPress and Timber, hosted by WebFaction. Source on Github.