Game Analysis 3: Experience

EECS 376 Fall 2018

MDA

- "Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics"
  - 2005 paper by Hunicke, et al.
  - Outlines a framework for reasoning about how games give people experiences
- We've covered mechanics and dynamics (which most call "gameplay")
- Today is aesthetics (which most call "experience")

Pre-lecture questions:

- How do we classify experience?
- How do we ensure that a player has a particular experience?
- Can a game be both good and bad?
- How does a designer's perspective on their game differ from a player's?

Experience (Aesthetics)

- The mental experience that a game creates for its player(s)
  - Not the "aesthetic," i.e., the flavoring or of the game (gothic, steampunk, etc.)
- The desirable emotional responses that a game evokes in a player when they interact with it
- There are so many things that contribute to the experience of playing a game

Gameplay (Dynamics)

- Mid- or long-term patterns of play
- Interactions among mechanics
- Interactions among players, vis-à-vis the game
- Interactions between the game and the player(s)
- Metagaming and strategizing

Examples:

- Tutorial levels to teach the "basics"
- Spawn-camping the other team
- "Quarterbacking" other players
- Exploring an open-world
- Grinding
- Maintaining a poker face

Mechanics

- The rules of a game
  - What happens on button presses
  - How resources are represented and presented to the player
  - Internal meta-structures (levels, etc.)
- Its internal "physics"
  - Figurative or literal
- Short-term patterns of play

Examples:

- Discard a card to gain a token
- Destroy enemies to earn points
- Spend actions to treat diseases
- Touch things to grow your Katamari
- Press square to use an item

The Importance of Aesthetics

Why do we care?

- Creating experiences is our sole purpose as designers
- Players only have experience to guide them on why a game is good
  - Everything is tinted through the lens of "how they experienced it"
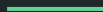- It's such a nebulous concept that it warrants extra effort

Thinking About Aesthetics

How do we reason about aesthetics?

What words describe fun?

Can a game be "good" *and* "bad"?

An Overloaded Word

- "Fun" is not a particularly descriptive word
  - *Dark Souls* and *Arkham Horror* and *Hanabi* and *Epic Spell Wars* are all games that I consider to be "fun," and while each shares commonalities with other on the list, each is quite distinct
- In fact, it seems to be contradictory at times
  - *Candy Crush* and *Yandere Simulator* are both, uhh, "fun"

More importantly, "fun" isn't a useful word for us as designers.

- What are the kinds of fun?
- How do identify something as being a certain kind of fun?
- How do we make sure that our game evokes a specific kind of fun?

Kinds of Fun

What do you think are the dimensions along which a game can be fun?

- Adjectives that might indicate fun:
  - "Challenging"
  - "Beautiful"
  - "Compelling"
- Nouns that might indicate fun:
  - "Challenge"
  - "Narrative"
  - "Abnegation"

Eight Kinds of Fun*

- Sensation   *games as sense-pleasure*

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- Discovery   *games as uncharted territory*
- Expression   *games as self-expression*
- Submission   *games as pastime*

The Good and Bad Spectrum

- We often talk about a game as being "good" or "bad"
- Yet there are plenty of games that I (personally) would argue are "bad," yet which I enjoy(ed) immensely:
  - *QWOP*
  - *Mottainai*
  - *Dark Souls 2*
  - *Overcooked!*
  - *Fluffy Bunny Tea Party*

A game being

- … buggy
- … or poorly constructed
- … or filled with outdated stereotypes
- … or terribly written (or acted)
- … or littered with UI/UX no-nos

… doesn't necessarily make it bad!

Skyrim: The Bad

- Buggy
- Badly written
- Sketchy voice acting
- The Elder Scrolls lore is kinda racist
- Weird inconsistencies
  - The Cloud District is right there! It's not even a district!

Skyrim: The Good

- Sprawling and epic
- Everyone has unique stories
  - Even if none of them are the actual in-game quests
- Modding
  - Which allows players to adjust game mechanics, changing their experience
- Immensely popular
  - Not a logical fallacy; commercial success is at least a part of a game's qualities

Aesthetic Goals

What kinds of experiences might we want to create?

How do we tell we've created them?

How do we measure success?
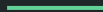
Aesthetic Goals

- Provide a particular kind of fun
- Trigger an emotional response
- Register an association
- Embody a theme
- Replicate another experience

and so on…

Aesthetic Goal: Existential Dread

Definition: a game is *existentially dreadful* if it makes the player feel awful for experiencing freedom of choice or responsibility for their fate

Success: analysis paralysis, second-guessing, FOMO, etc.

Failure: comfort and safety, ease of living, emotional security

Aesthetic Goal: Pirates!

Definition: a game is *piratey* if it embodies the feeling of open seas, lawless swashbuckling

Success: role play, empowerment, treachery, preying on the weak, etc.

Failure: generosity, vulnerability, compassion

Aesthetic Goal: Spoopy

Definition: a game is *spoopy* if it makes the player frightened, either specifically or generally

Success: goosebumps, jumpiness, turning on all the lights in the house, not wanting any limbs sticking out of the blanket, etc.

Failure: comfort, pleasant dreams, ability to ignore unexplained sounds

Copying a Game

If it's not clear by now, I like *Dark Souls.* How would I make a game like it?

- That depends what I mean by "like"
- What part(s) of the experience am I trying to replicate?
- What parts even are there…?

- Control scheme
- Soundscape and score
- Lore elements—the Estus Flask, the Dark Sign
- Mechanics (general)—dodge rolling, stamina management
- Mechanics (specific)—humanity, fog doors
- Strategies—shield flashing, item duping

Copying a Game

- Borrowing some of these elements, and you get a rip-off
- Borrow others: a love letter
- Still others: a new genre

Food for thought: how do we take an experience that we had in one game and create it again for someone else?

- Control scheme
- Soundscape and score
- Lore elements—the Estus Flask, the Dark Sign
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Measuring Success: Playtesting

- Game designers don't tend to do studies, qualitative or otherwise
  - Not in the formal, empirical sense
- We do do a lot of playtesting
  - Putting our games in front of people
  - Asking for feedback
  - Taking notes
  - Asking probing questions
- Repeat: Develop ➔ Test ➔ Evaluate

- Playtesting is a chance to put our game in front of other people
- Designers tend to be blind to certain limitations in their own games
  - Unclear rules
  - Weird button mappings
    - If "pause" isn't either "P" or "escape," I swear...
  - Ambiguous goals

Measuring Success: Playtesting—Cont.

- The point of playtesting is to see how players will experience you game *as it is*
  - You don't come with the game; zip it!
- Ask players to externalize their cognition
  - But take notes on everything
- Explicit suggestions aren't always good ideas
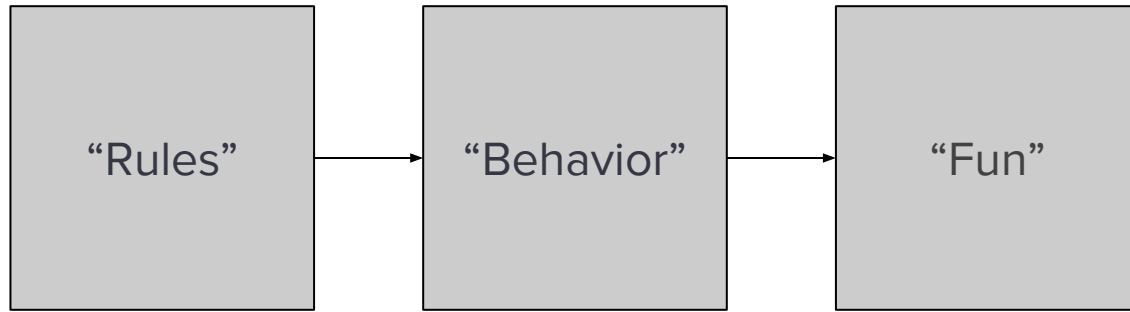 - But they can be inspirational

So, some rules:

1. You may speak on three occasions:
   a. To say, "thank you"
   b. To answer *explicit* questions from the player ("what is the button to jump?")
   c. To ask clarifying questions of the player ("what do you mean by 'ugly?'")
2. Write everything down as you interpret it
3. Reserve the right to disregard feedback, but note any patterns
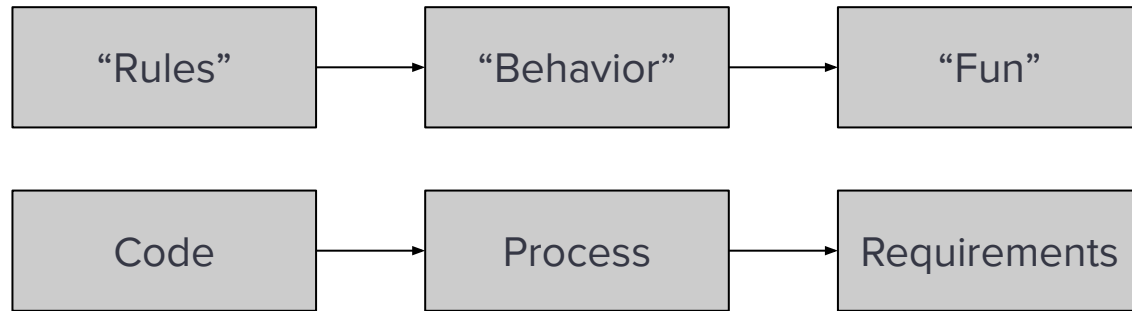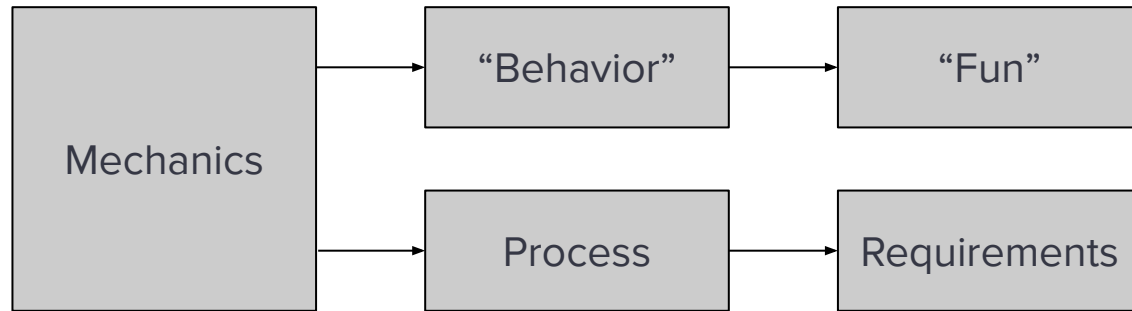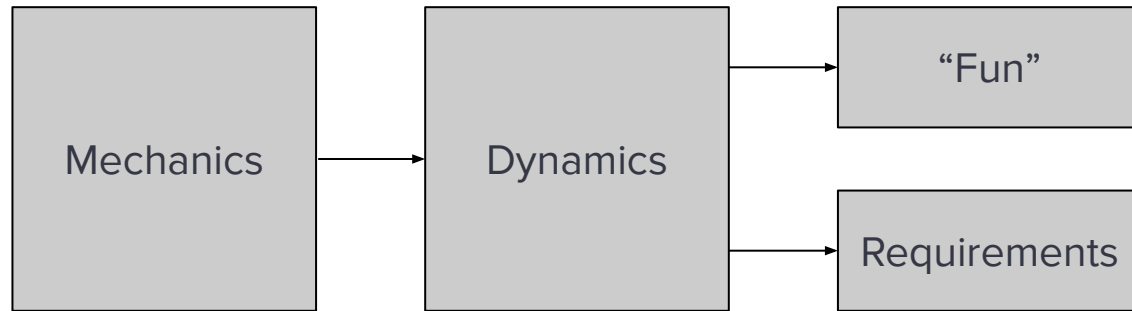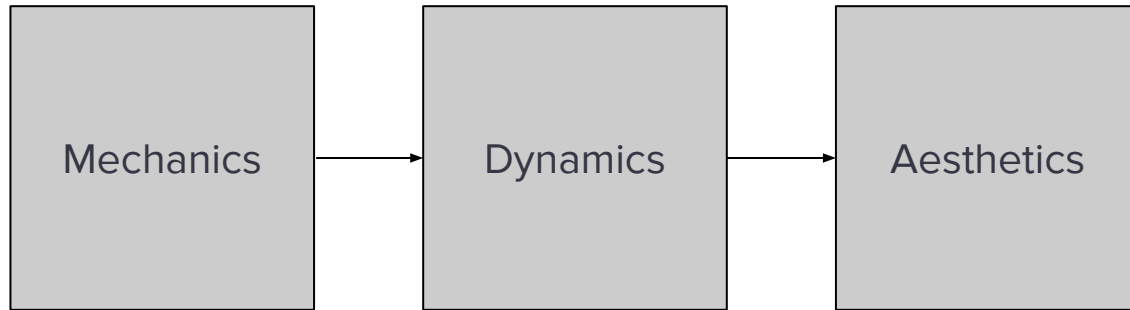
Wrap-up

Producing Fun

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┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
│              │      │              │      │              │
│   "Rules"    │─────▶│  "Behavior"  │─────▶│    "Fun"     │
│              │      │              │      │              │
└──────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
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Producing Fun

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Mechanics → Dynamics → Aesthetics
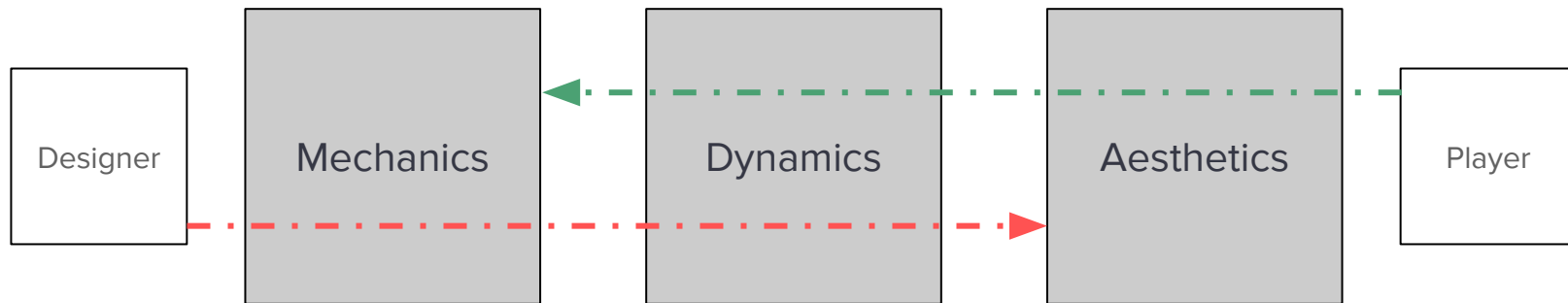
Producing Fun: Differing Perspectives

Producing Fun: Differing Perspectives

- Designers want an aesthetic
    - But can only tweak mechanics
    - Can't just make someone have a particular emotional reaction
- Players want an aesthetic
    - But are bad at describing their wants
    - Are generally not equipped to link experiences to their cause

| Designer | Mechanics | Dynamics | Aesthetics | Player |
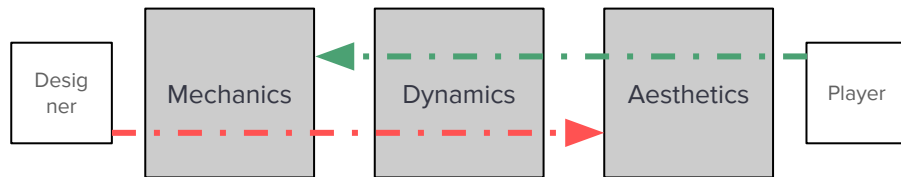
Quiz*

1. What does MDA stand for? (Slide 2)
2. Why is "fun" a lame word? (Slide 8)
3. List the playtesting rules. (Slide 29)
4. Why are mods important? (Slide 20)
5. What are the eight kinds of fun, according to the authors of the MDA paper? (Slide 17)

*Research suggest that forcing retrieval drastically improves retention.

Correcting wrong answers is better than "cheating." Try the questions and then verify.

Try to answer the questions in your own words, to practice the concept instead of the syntax.

(This won't be graded.)

Questions