Prescriptivism vs Descriptivism in Game Design Methodologies

Should Game Design theory tell devs what to do or just describe what they do?

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Abstract & Project Prototyping

Abstract: In the field of linguistics, scholars draw a distinction between materials and theories which *prescribe* a particular set of rules for 'correct' language use and those which merely *describe* how a language is used across multiple communities of speakers. Because design theories can likewise prescribe and describe the methodologies of designers, it follows that this distinction between prescriptivism and descriptivism can be applied to them as well. This paper will discuss the merits and usefulness of either approach within Game Design theory by analyzing and comparing examples of materials that employ either one of them.

Project Prototyping: In the project's current phase of prototyping and experimentation, I have a small number of design ideas in consideration:

1. An emphasis on puzzle/strategy gameplay (with a particular focus on spatial reasoning)
2. Fluid and satisfying movement and/or a responsive input system
3. A possible inclusion of a rhythmic aspect to the game (i.e. events in the game conform to a regular beat)

The current challenge of the project is finding specific mechanics that lend themselves to these ideas (see Moodboard, below)

Personal Reflection

Thesis

- I always really disliked theoretical approaches to design (mostly from my background in music and writing). The exposure I had to game design theory so far has further reinforced this dislike. My hypothesis is that much of Game Design theory is prescriptive in nature
- Essentially, I believe that prescriptivist approaches have a relatively narrow application and a limited effectiveness outside of the context in which they were developed

Project (Moodboard)

Changed Radial Angles (again x2) - each color on all tiles connects with at least 2 other tiles
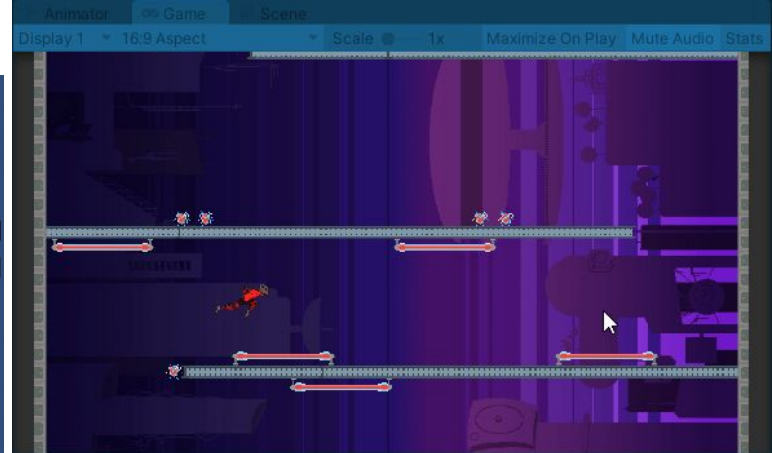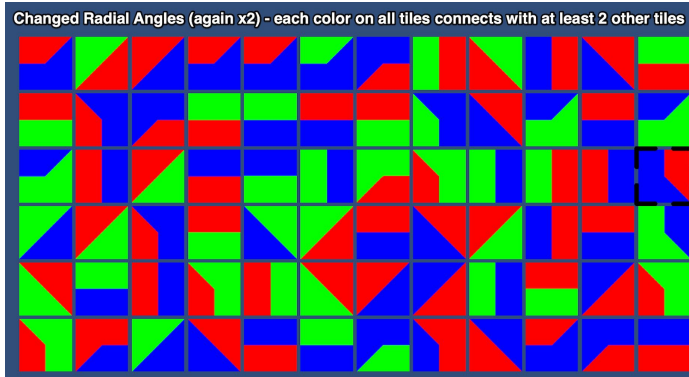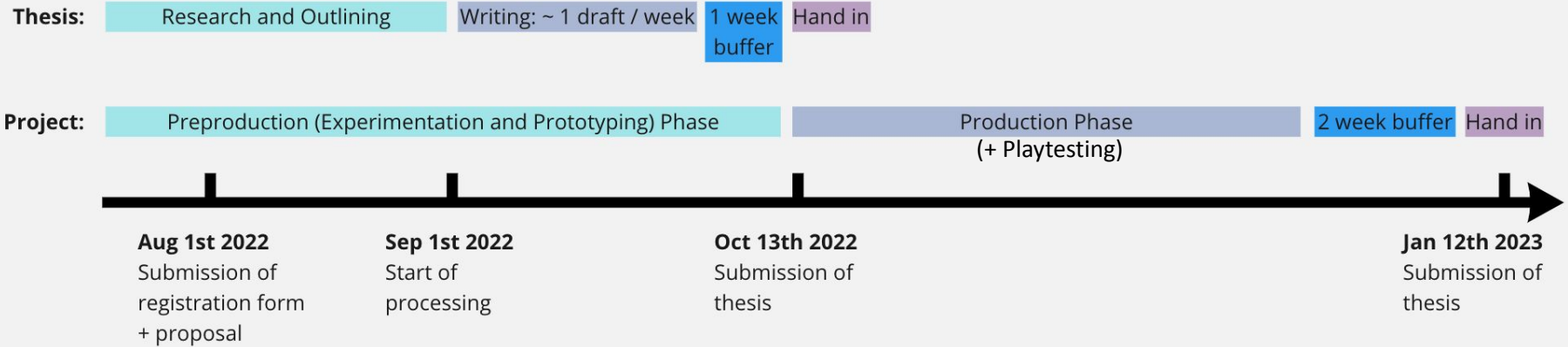
Methodology

Thesis: Table of Contents

1. "Introduction, Definitions, and Goals" (see Abstract)
2. "Analysis of Prescriptive Material" (probably on the MDA Framework by Hunicke, Robin, Marc LeBlanc, and Zubek)
3. "Analysis of Descriptive Material" (TBD)
4. "Comparison of Approaches: Merits, Challenges, and General Evaluations"
5. "Conclusion"

Project

- Agile approach
- Modular code and design for quick iteration
- Planned implementation (using design and planning tools; see Required Resources, below)
- Formal scheduling (with dedicated time slots for each task / aspect of project, e.g. music, art, code, planning, design, etc)
- Frequent playtesting throughout the production phase

Timetable

Thesis: Research and Outlining | Writing: ~ 1 draft / week | 1 week buffer | Hand in

Project: Preproduction (Experimentation and Prototyping) Phase | Production Phase (+ Playtesting) | 2 week buffer | Hand in

Aug 1st 2022
Submission of registration form + proposal

Sep 1st 2022
Start of processing

Oct 13th 2022
Submission of thesis

Jan 12th 2023
Submission of thesis

Required resources

- **Thesis:** texts, videos, planning tools (Miro, Trello, Google Docs), feedback

- **Project:** Unity, Photoshop, Ableton Live (digital audio workstation), possibly Blender, planning / design tools (Miro, Trello, Google Docs, Excel), feedback / playtesting

Preliminary Literature

- Adams, Ernest, and Joris Dormans. *Game mechanics: advanced game design*. New Riders, 2012.
- Crawford, Chris. "The art of computer game design." (1984): 194-197.
- Djafarova et al. (2018). *The Art of Serious Game Design* (pamphlet).
- Hinkel, Eli. "Descriptive versus prescriptive grammar." *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching* 1 (2018): 1-6.
- Hunicke, Robin, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek. "MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research." *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*. Vol. 4. No. 1. 2004.
- Winn, B. M. (2009). The Design, Play, and Experience Framework. In R. E. Ferdig (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education* (Vol. 3, pp. 1010–1024). essay, Information Science Resource.