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Command and Conker: Drunk Alert
Learning and Humor in *Conker's Bad Fur Day*

Introduction and Theory

"A drunken squirrel?...I have to control a drunken squirrel??" This was one of my first thoughts once I started playing *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. The premise behind this Nintendo 64 game is that Conker the Squirrel gets drunk and ends up lost on his way home. He begins his "bad fur day" (and hangover!) in a foreign location. Conker must overcome many obstacles on his trek back home, helping various characters along the way, and eventually defeat the Panther King to become "king of all the land" (Conker's Bad Fur Day, 2001). The game *Conker's Bad Fur Day* successfully promotes learning through a balance of movie scenes intertwined to develop the storyline, user gameplay that reinforces Gee's learning principles, and crude humor that keeps the user engaged and entertained. These techniques instill an effective learning environment that could be applied inside classrooms and less traditional educational settings.

Several learning principles evidenced in this video game stem from an article by James Gee entitled *Learning by Design: good video games as learning machines* (Gee, 2005). In this article, Gee offers 13 learning principles (in the categories of empowered learners, problem solving, and understanding) employed by video games to teach the user the game and to keep the user engaged during this learning. For purposes of this paper, I will focus on four of these principles: identity, system thinking, sandboxes, and pleasantly frustrating. Gee suggests that many of these learning principles could be incorporated into educational curricula throughout the country, if only people in charge of academics could see the value in this challenge of the status quo. Often times, good video games introduce users to very complicated scenarios and motivate them in this learning environment. Alternatively, school settings often alienate or confuse learners. Gee poses the question, "Why is a long, complex, and difficult video game

motivating?" (Gee, 2005). I think, in the case of *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, part of this answer comes from the game's humor and other mature content.

Methods

In determining the effectiveness of *Conker's Bad Fur Day* as a medium through which learning takes place, I analyzed the game in light of James Gee's learning principles (Gee, 2005). One of the major reasons I chose to examine learning in this game is due to its availability to me. *Conker's Bad Fur Day* is on my computer (through a Nintendo 64 emulator) so I have unlimited access to it. Additionally, I chose the game due to my positive expectations for it, because it has been described as an entertaining adventure game with some crude humor (expectations which were quickly realized). By videotaping the screen and thinking aloud while playing, I was able to capture my thoughts and reactions without being distracted. After playing, I took notes on my experience by watching the video. Because I was the one playing, I was the experimental subject for this paper. After just over an hour of gameplay on February 5th, 2013, I had enough data and experience with the game to recognize several learning techniques woven throughout the various levels.

Discussion and Analysis

Upon starting the game, I am shown a series of video clips. These scenes play an important role in learning throughout the game and offer the user a break from playing. The first set of videos introduces all of the major aspects of the game: the characters, the problems, and the setting. For instance, this is where I first learn of Conker's "bad fur day." I am shown a video of the end result, and the actual gameplay acts as a way to "flash back" to the past. This first video shows Conker sitting on a throne as "king of all the land." Furthermore, I can start to sense Conker's personality through his irritated, almost threatening facial expression.

Right away, the videos are crucial for developing a sense of what Gee calls *identity* (Gee, 2005). Ultimately, the idea behind this is to give sufficient background information on the character, which allows the user to buy in to the premise of the game by taking on the role of Conker. Even though I cannot *create* my own character from scratch, I am given a detailed overview of his life—I know his girlfriend, his drinking buddies, and that his drinking problem may lead to relationship problems. Also, because I recognize that Conker is drunk, I will be able to sympathize with his occasional drunken incompetence, whereas otherwise I may have become frustrated with the character. For instance, Conker starts the game stumbling around and is unable to swim, making my job as a video game player harder. But, because I know he is drunk I realize that I will just have to tolerate it. All of these make me a part of Conker, and I feel the need to continue playing, solving his problem, due to this sense of identity.

To give the gamer a break in the action, the game intertwines movies that not only develop the story, but also apply another Gee principle, known as *system thinking* (Gee, 2005). System thinking helps give the user a holistic view of the game as a system, rather than a narrow focus on the individual, smaller components of the game. Intertwined videos give me a glimpse of the bigger picture and allow me to generate hypotheses about what to do in the future. For example, one video depicts a few wasps sneaking away a beehive through the rainy night. From this, I am able to picture one of my first goals in the game: returning the beehive to its owner. The game teaches the user, and allows him or her to prepare for, some of the challenges that are coming through video clips that foreshadow parts of the game.

Another example of system thinking in *Conker's Bad Fur Day* is through the use of occasional video clips portraying the game's main antagonist and ultimate objective: to dethrone the Panther King and take control of the land. In particular, the video clips depict the panther as, in video game terms, a "boss." Through the video series, the user realizes that Conker will soon

be confronted by the Panther King. Beating this boss will make Conker the new king, which is how the game first introduces Conker before the flashback. Thus, beating the Panther King means beating the game. In addition to answering the questions of where the Panther King fits into the puzzle and what the ultimate goal of the game is, these videos provide the user with a diversion from playing by invoking entertainment, relaxation, and comedy into the gaming experience.

Now, because *Conker's Bad Fur Day* is a game and not a motion picture, it requires some action on the user's part. Not only do the video clips reinforce some of Gee's learning principles, but the actual gameplay incorporates some of these principles as well. With little knowledge of the controls and skills, the first area provides the perfect *sandbox*. Gee views sandboxes as areas where a player can actually play the game, but where there are little to no consequences from wrong moves (Gee, 2005). In the first level, there is no health bar, so I do not have to preoccupy myself with dying or becoming injured. This allows me to get comfortable with the setting, the controls, and the overall game in a stress-free environment. At this point, the worst that can happen to me is that I can fall down a waterfall, in which case I just start back from the beginning. The significance of the first level acting as a sandbox is that the level entails minimal consequences for falling down the waterfall. By this, I simply mean that the user doesn't have to worry about seeing the ultimate sign of failure, "Game Over," or Conker losing a life.

However, it is still frustrating to have to restart the level. Thus, the game utilizes another of Gee's principles in that it is *pleasantly frustrating* (Gee, 2005). Part 2 of Understanding Games says, "The challenges of a game should match the skills of the player: Neither too easy (boring), nor too difficult (frustrating)" (Pixelate Environment, 2007). Part of me is annoyed with the fact that my drunken squirrel can't swim or walk in a straight line right away, but watching him maneuver in this "morning after" state is quite entertaining. Even if I make a mistake and a

task ends up taking longer than it should, I know that Conker fell due to *my* error. Once I can control him so he doesn't appear to be stumbling around, I will be able to progress through the game. I am also less aggravated because the videos have given me the identity of Conker, and now we share the same goal: we both want him to get home!

Gee's principle of pleasantly frustrating also notes that games should provide feedback for the player upon failure (Gee, 2005), and in *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, even death is entertaining. After the first area, the game loses its sandbox feel and introduces health bars and lives. With these concepts in play, the game has a way of giving users feedback on their progress. Rather than passive feedback (such as just having the player start over at the beginning of the level, as in the sandbox earlier in the game) or disheartening feedback (such as ending the game with a "Game Over" message that some games employ), the game provides comic relief in times of trouble. Shortly after dying, another video scene commences. This scene shows Conker waking up in a dungeon, where he is approached by Death. The grim reaper's voice echoes through the darkness, saying "Conker, Conker…you're dead" (Conker's Bad Fur Day, 2001). Not the most cheerful video, is it? However, it turns out that the grim reaper is a tiny guy named Gregg, who uses a voice changer to sound more intimidating. This, on the other hand, is hilarious. Being able to turn what would generally be a negative situation into a light-hearted tone helps to reduce some of the stress on the player and motivates him or her to continue the game.

Indeed, *Conker's Bad Fur Day* can be frustrating at times. Through dying or simply making mistakes with the controller, the user is likely to get angry with the drunken squirrel or may want to give up entirely. However, the game does a good job of making sure these irritations are worth it. How? Crude humor. The game is chock full of some subtle and some not so subtle pieces of humor which motivate the user to press on and uncover more of the game's surprises. According to Understanding Games Part 4, "The game theme has an impact on how

the game appeals to different kinds of people" (Pixelate Environment, 2007). The main theme for

this game is crude humor, which is why the game says it is "FOR MATURE AUDIENCES

ONLY" upon loading (Conker's Bad Fur Day, 2001). The game designers had a target audience,

and they cater to mature users frequently throughout the game. [As a side note, the game was

also supposed to include jokes about Pokémon and the Ku Klux Klan, but Nintendo censored

these (Totilo, 2012).]

Throughout this game, there are many examples of how the game uses comedy to add the

"pleasant" to the "frustrating." Adding to the strong foundation of identity built throughout the

game, the comical scenes with Conker ensure that, even in times of drunken incompetence, the

user will not get too frustrated. For starters, the main character is a drunken squirrel. This, in and

of itself, is humorous in my mind and probably in the minds of many others in the game's target

audience. Complementing this, Conker is often shown stumbling around with bloodshot eyes and

the hiccups. In addition, he vomits several times during the game. In one of the early video

scenes, Conker drunkenly leaves the bar and gets sick just outside the door, puking right at the

feet of a turtle-like character. Later, Conker vomits due to a gaseous mouse. These instances of

Conker vomiting provide a quick laugh to the user and reiterate the fact that the main character is

intoxicated. Lastly, Conker shows his true colors by making a witty, if not rude, comment to the

queen bee after he returns the beehive to her. She complains about how her husband left her for

another bee and Conker mutters, "Oh, really, that doesn't surprise me" (Conker's Bad Fur Day,

2001). All of these pieces of humor contribute to the sense of identity and pleasantness that the

user already feels with Conker. After all, how could the player possibly get annoyed by a

character that supplies him or her with laughs and smiles?

Similarly, some support characters, such as Birdy the scarecrow, show up periodically to

add a sprinkle of comedy to the game. Despite Birdy's role as Conker's tutor early in the game,

the user soon learns that Birdy also has a drinking problem. For starters, Conker's first interaction with Birdy consists of Birdy asking for a bottle of booze. One wouldn't normally expect the game's guide to be drunk, but with this game the designers have made some exceptions…rather, many exceptions. Moreover, the sign behind the scarecrow reads, "Feck off crows" (Conker's Bad Fur Day, 2001). Apparently, this scarecrow thinks it will make his job easier by creating a sign to do all the work, which will leave him more time for drinking! The only other time I interacted with Birdy during my gameplay was when I needed to get a manual from him. Here, the manual teaches Conker how to shoot a slingshot so that he can move on to the next part of his journey. However, Birdy tells Conker that he needs money to buy the manual for "10 dollar" and that Conker would "love manual long time" (Conker's Bad Fur Day, 2001). Through these lines, Birdy is emulating a Vietnamese prostitute from the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. Birdy's drunken nature and pop culture references make his short and infrequent, but comedic, visits memorable to the gamer. All instances of humor throughout *Conker's Bad Fur Day* encourage the player to endure periods of frustration, instead of quitting, in order to witness how far the game will push the boundaries of what is "appropriate" or "inappropriate," as well as fully see why the game begins with a "FOR MATURE AUDIENCES ONLY" warning.

Applications

In his paper *Learning by Design: good video games as learning machines* (Gee, 2005), James Gee makes an argument to incorporate some of the learning principles of video games into the classroom. I agree with this, but I would encourage an even more powerful approach. By infusing appropriate humor into everyday schooling, students would become more engaged and would be active learners. Also, studies have shown that arousing the mind enhances learning. In fact, multiple studies in marketing show that comedy in advertisements is the most effective way to make consumers recall the advertisements and the products (Friedman, Friedman, & Amoo,

2002). Similar concepts can be applied by adding comedy to coursework. If nothing else, humor would add "pleasant" to "frustrating" so that students would feel the need to continue playing the "game" of school in order to uncover more surprises. A "growing body of research suggests that, when used effectively, classroom comedy can improve student performance by reducing anxiety, boosting participation and increasing students' motivation to focus on the material" (Stambor, 2006). I can attest to this through my experience with *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. Throughout the game, I felt more engaged and enthused due to the humorous gameplay, such as when Gregg the grim reaper appeared or when Conker vomited due to alcohol. Likewise, educators can transform the negative connotations of school into a positive experience for all through the careful use of wit. According to Ohio University-Zanesville psychology professor Mark Shatz, PhD, "Professors' jobs are to educate, not to entertain. But if humor can make the learning process more enjoyable, then I think everybody benefits as a result" (Stambor, 2006). Integrating humor into the classroom will cause students to view school more as an opportunity and less as a burden.

In addition to humor, it is crucial for educators to provide a different medium to motivate students to learn without consciously realizing they are learning. Gee emphasizes that the learning principles can be used to accomplish this (Gee, 2005). Incorporating his ideas in a classroom setting could allow teachers to get students to be engaged in the lessons, similar to how games invoke gamers with a passion to play for hours at a time. An example of one of these principles already being used by actuarial students is Coaching Actuaries ADAPT software. According to their website, ADAPT is "designed to adapt to the student's current level" while providing "questions that are not too difficult and not too easy" (Coaching Actuaries, 2013). Learning software such as this utilizes Gee's concept of pleasantly frustrating in order to prepare aspiring actuaries for their professional exams. ADAPT employs a systematic technique of

maintaining a difficulty level that challenges the user without overwhelming him or her, just as a video game like *Conker's Bad Fur Day* presents problems to the user that are at an appropriate difficulty level. This way, the gamer does not get irritated to the point where he or she will decide to quit the game altogether. Using a similar mechanism in formal learning environments could prevent students from becoming aggravated during learning. Teachers should attempt to devise a methodical way of progressing through their lesson plans in such a way that the difficulty level is challenging, but not distressing, for each student.

Conclusion

Through playing the game *Conker's Bad Fur Day* and analyzing the experience in light of Gee's principles, both the gameplay and the accompanying video clips enhance learning in several ways. During the game, the user gameplay and the clips incorporate concepts found in Gee's research, such as identity, system thinking, the use of sandboxes, and gameplay that is pleasantly frustrating. Introducing the main character as a drunken squirrel creates a whimsical atmosphere and creates an identity to help the user connect with, rather than be annoyed by, a character such as Conker. Early on, video clips give a detailed background of Conker's life and personality. Also through the use of movie clips, system thinking guides the user to see the bigger picture so that he or she may start to create a plan of attack well before problems are presented in the game. For instance, the game foreshadows the importance of the Panther King to help the user later. Sandboxes help the player become comfortable with the game (i.e. the first level has no health bars or lives), and pleasantly frustrating gameplay prevents the user from becoming overwhelmed (i.e. even in death, the game adds humor by how it portrays the grim reaper).

Infusing tidbits of comedy among these learning principles further augments the learning experience. Employing a drunken squirrel as the main character in this game sets the stage for a

gratifying playing experience. Conker's wit, albeit crude, also entertains in scenes including one when the queen bee was irritated when her husband left her for another bee. Secondary characters such as Birdy also elicit humor, not only as a drunk, but in his reference to pop culture when he imitates a Vietnamese prostitute from a 1980's movie. Instances like these create a learning environment that is truly motivating and is something that could be utilized in future educational settings.

After playing the video game *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, it became evident that applying Gee's principles and embracing humor can create a powerful learning experience. If a video game can instill in the gamer a desire to learn the game and play it for long periods of time, at the same time as enhancing the gamer's mood, then educators should tap into this knowledge and alter the "traditional" classroom setting. This could range from something simple like having a professor crack occasional jokes related to the lecture content (There are numerous jokes related to statistics, biology, physics, etc.) to a more complex strategy such as starting each lecture off with a funny video clip and finding a way to link the video to that day's lecture. Doing so could create a very powerful learning environment with a boost in morale and a higher success rate among students.

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