

How Do Games Mean?

Perspectives on the semiotics of games

Towards new player experiences

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How Do Games Mean?

Chris Hecker says this is “the fundamental question for the next ten years of game design”

“Not at all”

- Games as dumb entertainment
- Popcorn, junk food, crack
- Intellectual dead-end
- Boring idea

Message Model

- Game as medium
- Bring the meaning packets to the player
- Movie-inspired
- Almost totally irrelevant
 - Manipulative, authorial, dictatorial
 - Games aren't a medium at all!

Immersion Model

- Games as travel destination
- Place meaning packets in the environment
 - Let the player stumble on them
- Still quite autocratic
 - Developers decide what the meaning is

The developers decide what the meaning is, and the player's job is to uncover them

Interpretive Model

- Game as story-making tool
- Game as musical instrument
- Games for self-expression
- Meaning comes from *players*, not developers

Musical instrument -- not Rock Band, but Electroplankton. Or Far Cry 2.

Interpretive Model

- Developers have to abdicate authorship
 - Players will ignore you or break your stuff
- Games provide a feedback loop
- Consider theatre rather than film
 - Player as *performer*

Towards New Player Experiences

The Tyranny of Fun

- How else can players express themselves?
- How many other things can players feel?
 - Is *Schindler's List* “fun”? Is *Hamlet*?
 - Guilt

Fun is a narrow range of the breadth of human emotion. Many people want experiences that can't be considered fun.

Games can evoke guilt -- Execution, Wii Fit, Animal Crossing, Black & White. This is something unique to games!

The Tyranny of Fun

- “Fun” is an overloaded word
 - Perhaps “satisfaction” is more appropriate

“Fun” vs agency, satisfaction, competence

Save “fun” to mean wonderment, thrill, joy -- use other words for other meanings

Who Cares?

- We should.
- Games grow up slower than we do.
- Most people don't care about *Gears of War!*

Between an aging population of gamers and an expanding market, we have to explore more of our artistic options. Only a fraction of movies are dumb action flicks. Only a few books are thrillers. Most plays aren't about swashbuckling!

Army of Two -- Hutchinson's co-op mechanic example

Who Cares?

- Games can bring people together
 - *Monopoly* and *Army of Two*

Conversation Time

- As much heresy as you like
- Game industry may be like 1980's arcades
 - Are we on the verge of a crash?
 - Will indies start the next 20-year cycle?
- We ignore this stuff at our peril