Guest Lecture:

Game Design: Players & Expression
Today’s Lecture

- Usually give a talk about game design
  - Not the same as designing for usability
  - Some challenges are meant to be hard!

- Hard to compress into a single lecture
  - There is no one true good design for games
  - Often depends upon the ultimate design goals

- Today’s talk will have narrower focus…
Games and Self-Expression

- Computer games are increasingly social
- Online play
  - Play with friends
- But single player too
  - Achievements
  - Game Forums
  - YouTube videos
Expression: Comparison
Play Experiences

- Sharing unique experiences
  - Look at what happened!

- What makes play unique?
  - Game difficulty
  - Personal customization

- Customization is preferable
  - Accessible to everyone
  - Supports replayability
Customization in RPGs

- Popular feature in RPGs
  - Role-Playing Games
  - Play a character or role
  - Personality is undefined

- Support unique play
  - Different character classes
  - Nonlinear story telling
  - Lot and lots of items

- What about other games?
What the Hell are Classes?
Expression: Play-Style

• I **play** the game in a different way
  • My way requires more skill
  • My way is more fun
  • My way tells a better story

• Games support in different ways
  • Explicit: Classes and play styles
  • Implicit: Many ways to overcome challenge
Play-Style: Advantages

- Most game-like form of expression
  - Still accomplishing goals (e.g. “winning”)
  - Just accomplishing them in different ways

- Fits nicely with achievements
  - Quick way to share your play-style

- Enhances replayability
  - This time I want to play as…
Play-Style: Disadvantages

- Game balance
  - Different styles, same challenges
  - Style affects difficulty
  - Do not want to favor a particular style

- Balancing challenges
  - Solution for each style
  - Is this possible?
Design Choice: Classes

- Contract with the player:
  - Officially supported style
  - Challenges support style

- Capture major archetypes
  - Fantasy: warrior, wizard, thief
  - Sci-Fi: space marine, star pilot
  - Western: gun slinger, sheriff, rancher
Play-Style in Other Games

- Collectable card games (e.g. Magic)
  - Create a deck of 60 cards
  - Hundreds of options
  - Deck = play style

- House rules in board games
  - Free parking in Monopoly
  - How to do this in a computer game?
Non-Linear Storytelling
Expression: Story-Telling

- I play the game for a different story
  - My story is funnier
  - My story has more emotion
  - Look at what I made them do!

- Different ways to customize story
  - Dialog choices: Control what character says
  - Open world: Story can progress in many orders
Story-Telling: Advantages

- Can add on top of any type of game
  - Progress in the game = progress in story
  - But must have choice (no cut-scenes)

- Appeals to the non-gamer
  - Story choices do not require skill
  - Some people play just for story

- Artistic vision not compromised by balance
Story-Telling: Disadvantages

- Designing for choice is difficult
  - Game should recognize previous choices
  - Open worlds must prepare for any order
  - Story grows exponentially in size
- Have to keep the number of choices small
  - Less option for replayability
- Artistic vision compromised by choices
Design Choice: Modularity

- Quests!
  - Self-contained story
  - Limited in scope

- Faction design
  - Story focuses on faction
    - e.g. Governments
  - Gain faction approval
  - Affects other factions
Design Choice: Implicit Linearity

- Loosely herd player
  - Player can go anywhere
  - But intended way is easiest
  - Less desirable ways, harder

- “Leveling” as story control
  - Player gains new abilities
    - New weapons
    - New forms of movement
  - Hard areas become easier
  - Implicitly closes/opens areas
Impromptu Story-Telling

- Explicit choice is hard
  - Not well-understood
  - Area of academic study
  - Drama management

- Players can make stories
  - Forum fiction!
  - Play-style and stories?
  - Supporting these stories?
Items: Dress-Up for Gamers
Expression: Appearance

• I play the game with a different look
  • My character looks like me
  • My character reflects my mood
  • My character looks cool

• How does appearance affect the game?
  • Purely cosmetic (skinning)?
  • Or does appearance reflect play-style?
Appearance in Other Games

- “Skinning” in board games
  - The Collegeopoly variants
  - Custom chess boards
  - Some types of Magic cards

- Building-style games
  - FarmVille
  - MineCraft
  - Game as player art
Appearance: Advantages

- Computers are good at this
  - Forget items, can do bodies!
  - Define look modularly
    - Shirt, pants, hat, etc..
    - Many, many combinations
- Can share with friends
  - Even friends that don’t play
  - Facebook and games
- Easy to monetize!
  - Visit our clothing store…
Appearance: Disadvantages

- Cosmetic look feels shallow
  - Does not effect story or play
  - Is the choice meaningful?
  - Is looking cool enough?

- Limiting if affects play
  - Players want to do well
  - Will pick best appearance
  - e.g. character armor

- All games do it
  - What makes yours different?
Design Choice: Loose Gameplay Coupling

- Appearance affects play
  - Armor makes harder to hit
  - Guns do different damage
  - Some crops grow faster

- But not so much play style
  - All crops grow same way
  - Revolvers all work the same

- No appearance is optimal
  - Armors have trade-offs
  - Good selling crops cost a lot
User Created-Content
User Content: Advantages

- Very game-focused
  - Challenge your friends!
  - Show your skill

- Content is viral
  - Here, have my level
  - What game is this for?

- Game longevity
  - New content draws players
  - Get content for free!
User Content: Disadvantages

- Tools are not easy
  - Best for simple 2D games
  - How to handle 3D game?
  - User support nightmare

- Lot of content is crap
  - Users are rarely designers
  - Do you want bad levels?
  - Needs community management
Overview

- Forms of personal expression in games
  - Play-style (can include achievements)
  - Story-telling (may be impromptu)
  - Appearance (cosmetic or otherwise)
  - User Content

- Are there any more?
Exercise Time!

- Pick a familiar game
  - Form into small groups
  - Try not to duplicate

- Add some customization
  - Can be a type we discussed
  - Or can be another type

- How does this affect game?