

Casual Game Design

Designing Play for the Gamer in All of Us

Gregory Trefry



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For G & Y

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Introduction

This book doesn't offer a grand theory of game design. Rather, it encourages close playing and reading. Not of this book, but of the games it discusses. I am a firm believer that there are two ways to become a better game designer. First, make games and think about why they do or don't work. Second, play other people's games and think about why they do or don't work. Just as you can't become a writer without reading or a film director without watching movies, you can't become a game designer without playing games and trying to pick them apart.

In this book, we will establish some general principles for thinking about play and games. Then we will spend the rest of the time looking closely at a wide variety of games that I think offer interesting insights into casual gameplay. Some of these games are classics. Some aren't. But interesting lessons can be drawn out of all of them.

As we talk about each game, I highly encourage you to go find the game and play it. Explaining a game only does so much good. Games are experiential. You have to play a game—making the decisions and moves it demands—in order to understand it.

From this close reading of games and mechanics, we will begin to assemble some general ideas about how to approach casual game design.

Mechanics

You can think of mechanics multiple ways. First and foremost they are routines, procedures and methods. Mechanics cover everything from running an office to the play of baseball. Individual mechanics combine to create complex game systems.

Mechanics also describes the people who work with those systems, not just tinkering with the procedures and methods, but also designing how new systems fit together.

Mechanics hold the same dual meaning in games.

Game mechanics provide the core of game design. Each game is comprised of a series of game mechanics. These mechanics, from creating matches of three items in a game like *Bejeweled* to sequencing numbers in a game of *Sudoku*, dictate what players do when they play the game. At the heart of any great game is an elegant core mechanic, a mechanic that is both firm enough to provide clear gameplay yet flexible enough to allow players to develop strategies. Understanding the core mechanics of great games helps game designers create games by tweaking, modifying and combining successful mechanics into entirely new game systems. Through

this process of combination and modification, game designers can invent entirely new game mechanics.

And the game designer is herself a game mechanic, breaking out her conceptual toolbox of rules to craft player experience. Sometimes she reuses trusty old rules, like “The player with the most points wins.” Sometimes explaining and shaping the core mechanic of her game requires her to write entirely new rules like, “To score points, the player must combine colored gems into crosses comprised of five like-colored gems.”

The best way to build new games is to understand the games that already exist, why they work so well and why players can find hours of enjoyment interacting with them. This understanding stems from picking apart and piecing back to together the core mechanic or mechanics of the game. Designers must play the game. Then they must mentally model the system in their heads, modify it and see the results. From this, they will see why the mechanics of the game worked so well, and why with a few changes, the whole game system might have collapsed.

Looking at the mechanics of a game is like looking at the heart of the game. The mechanics are the pump that makes the rest of the game pulse with life.

This book examines an array of mechanics that make up games by looking at a set of well-known games—some classics, some not—and picking apart their core mechanics. It is not a comprehensive list of all mechanics in games, but rather a look at ones I feel hold interesting lessons for casual game designers. This is how I approach game design. This process also informs how many of the game designers I know approach game design. They look at mechanics that worked and ones that didn't. They look at games, toys, Web sites, tools, software—anything that demands interaction—for ideas. Then they figure out how to build a new system appropriate for the game they want to make out of the various mechanics they have seen.

I have divided this book into chapters covering very generalized mechanics. Within those chapters I look at particular games and how game designers used specific mechanics to construct those games.

In 1927, the English novelist and scholar E.M. Forster published *Aspects of the Novel*. The book was collection of lectures Forster delivered at Cambridge University on subjects like “People,” “The Plot” and “The Story.” In this slim but wonderful book, Forster lays out ways to approach reading the novel and ways to approach writing the novel. *Aspects of the Novel* is far from a how-to guide to writing a novel. Its value is far greater. Forster offers the reader key ways to understand the novel by looking at characters, plots, stories and sentences from a wide array of books. Through *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster helps you understand why certain plots are great while others fall flat. He gets you to start thinking about the essentials of novels that, as a writer, you will need to construct.

While I have no illusions that I can match Forster's level of crystalline wit and observation, I do want this book to serve a similar function. This book is not a how-to guide to making video games. Instead, it offers a way to approach the design of games, from casual video games to sports. It does this by undertaking a similar mission to the one Forster embarked on in *Aspects of the Novel*: it points aspiring

designers, practicing designers and interested players toward the key elements of games and says, “Look at that mechanic! What an ingenious idea! Let’s figure out why that mechanic worked so well so we can figure out how to use it ourselves.”

I am a casual game designer. This is both my profession and my mission. I like games that are quick to play and accessible. It is in this realm of casual gameplay that I think games have the greatest growth potential and the greatest ability to reach a wide audience. So this book will focus on game mechanics that I’ve explored in relation to my work in casual game design. These are by no means the only mechanics for casual games. Nor am I saying mechanics found in hardcore games can’t be casual. After all, hardcore first-person shooters like *Quake* have at their core the same basic mechanic found in seek-and-find games: pointing. It’s all a matter of how the mechanic is applied in the game.

The game designer Marc LeBlanc developed a methodology to examine games he called MDA. MDA stands for mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics. LeBlanc argues that mechanics are the basic elements of games. These mechanics combine to form dynamic systems which then lead to a certain aesthetic. The game designer selects or develops mechanics for the game and combines them into a system. As players interact with the system, they have an aesthetic experience. Mechanics that limit a player’s moves—like the swapping mechanic in *Bejeweled*—can engender a sense of claustrophobia. Mechanics that force a player to furiously click around the screen, tending to small emergencies—like the spinning plates mechanic in *Diner Dash*—can create a sense of harried frenzy in players. The game designer must pick out the proper mechanics and combine them in a way that creates the desired aesthetic and experience for the player.

The Issue of “Fun”

This book will generally focus on fun. Fun is a loaded word. My idea of fun may be your idea of torture. Fun is almost as slippery and subjective as pornography. But like pornography, you generally know it when you see it. And as a game designer, a big part of your job is learning to recognize the potential for fun and amplify it. Some people derive immense pleasure from sorting their sock drawer. What’s to be done with them? Well, for starters you could make a game that replicates the pleasure of progressively organizing objects, be they socks or gems, and give those people something even more fun than their sock drawer.

And while I believe games can exist without fun, this is not a book about making those games. I have played and greatly admired games that provoked in me more anger, sadness and frustration than joy. Art games like Jason Rohrer’s *Passage* have beautiful concepts, though I think they lack a general accessibility that making popular casual games demands. They are experimental. And while casual games often experiment with innovative mechanics, their focus is to entertain a broad audience. In this book, I focus on games that offer short, but intense blasts of fun. Sometimes that fun will be sustainable. Sometimes that joy will quickly fade. But I believe casual games need to strive to deliver some element of fun.

The following are some general strategies for casual game design. We will touch on these issues again as we look at specific games.

Know Your Audience

As with any product you want to sell, you must know your audience. A fantasy game about elves and orcs presents a harder sell to middle-aged women than a game about cooking. We don't want to stereotype, but you do need to develop a sense of your audience's interests, because a lot of successful casual games build off of an established interest.

Piggyback on Neuroses

Sometimes nothing makes a better game mechanic than an established obsessive-compulsive behavior. Often these behaviors, like not stepping on cracks, organizing record collections or cleaning up kitchens, already have play-like qualities. When we engage in these behaviors we generally follow certain rules we lay out for ourselves: don't step on cracks, organize your music collection by mood, or clean all the dishes in less than 15 minutes. With a little bit of work, these simple activities can be given goals that make them into full-blown games. Sometimes these games can then be transferred into video games.

Delivery Is Everything

Knowing your audience also means knowing where they want to play games. Do they want to play games on their computer during a coffee break at work? Do they want to stand in front of their television and pretend to play tennis? Are they more likely to play games on their cell phone during their commute? Games can take so many forms, and can be played in so many places, that it's almost mind-boggling. Games are no longer limited to PCs and game consoles. Cell phones, iPhones, and handhelds like the Nintendo DS and Sony PSP make games portable. They also enable games to fit into new interstices of our days. Different audiences have unique moments of free time. Tailor your games to these moments and you can break through the competition for attention.

Conceiving and Iterating

Generating concepts trips up a lot of people. To some, generating ideas comes easily, while the birthing process is much harder for others. Fortunately, there are a number of smart tools we can use to help us brainstorm game ideas, approaching the game from different angles, from story to audience to theme. We must also learn

to tackle the hardest game brainstorming task: conceiving new game mechanics. Fortunately, many of the best mechanics grow out of established ones. Sometimes it's an unlikely combination of two mechanics, as when *Puzzle Quest* married RPG leveling up to *Bejeweled*-like gem swapping. By looking in depth at a number of game types and mechanics, we'll hopefully be able to see new possibilities emerge.

While coming up with a new and unique game idea is certainly important, too many people think the hard work stops there. In fact, that's just where it starts. We all have loads of game ideas rattling around the back of our heads. Many of them might make great games. That is, if they're well-implemented. Ideas are easy. Implementation is hard.

Most likely, your first attempt to turn your idea into a game will go poorly. Few games are fun right off the bat. If it is easy, you're probably just re-skinning an existing mechanic. In fact, I would argue that making a first-person shooter fun is a lot easier than inventing a whole new casual game mechanic at this point. The first-person shooter mechanic has been polished to a sheen by hundreds of designers working on hundreds of different games.

Making a game requires moving an idea from paper prototype to digital prototype to full production. Each step along this path requires the designer to constantly revisit and analyze the state of the game, to see if the actual player experience is getting close to what they envision.

To do this, the designer will no doubt add features to the game in an attempt to make it more robust. At some point, designers must step back from their games and think about what they can strip away. We are talking about casual games, after all. It is imperative that the experience be clean and streamlined.

The Promise of Casual Games

Finally, this book will be about the promise and potential of casual game design. Casual games radically changed the landscape of games. Now anyone can make a game. Unlike hardcore console games, you don't need a team of hundreds to develop a small casual game. A team of three or four can churn out a casual downloadable title. And one industrious individual can put together a Web-based Flash game all on their own.

The Internet enables you to find an audience and distribute your game. You may have to fund the development yourself, but the generally modest scale of most casual games (compared with a console title) makes this possible. From casual downloadable portals like Real Arcade and Shockwave to Flash game sites like Addicting Games and Kongregate, there are multiple venues for your game that can even help you monetize your game.

But best of all, there are millions of players for your game. This makes designing casual games exciting. They've not only opened up the audience and reach of games, they've democratized the development playing field. As it becomes easier to develop and distribute games, we'll hear from an ever-wider range of voices. This

will lead to a wealth of innovative new games and mechanics for designers and players to explore.

The Value of Thinking Casual

The value of thinking like a casual game extends beyond designing casual games. The same lessons about clear and concise goals and guiding players apply to all game design, whether you're making a casual downloadable, creating a new sport or designing levels for new console game.

The lessons of casual game design can also be applied outside of games, to general user experience design. Social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn already rely on game-like experiences, from building a profile (i.e., character) to collecting friends (i.e., leveling up). As sites like these continue to compete for attention, many are relying on game like experiences to draw in users. Casual game design offers valuable lessons on how to craft those experiences from getting users on achiever cycles to quickly drawing in users with gentle learning curves.

Casual game design has the potential to radically influence both games and software. But first we need to look at how casual games engage players. That means starting with their mechanics.