

LET' S PUT THE PLAY BACK IN GAMES

Gameplay. Gameplay. Gameplay. Provide gameplay so that the gameplayer can play the game. Am I going too fast for anyone? Gameplay comes first. You would think that a rule this simple would be easy to follow and difficult to forget. So why is it that so few designers today appear to have ever heard of it?

Okay, graphic glitz will sell some games. Everybody wants to show off their hot new processors, full motion video-capable graphic: cards, and their wave table sound cards. So they buy the latest multimedia extravaganza, show it to their friends, and then discuss the Internet while they play chess.

They play chess because it is game of considerable depth, with numerous difficult puzzles to solve. Adventure games used to be the same way. Occasionally you can find one that still provides the scope and challenge of an early Infocom game. But they are few and far between.

What happened? Games are finally succeeding, and that is what is killing them. I've heard the total sales of one popular graphic adventure now tops 2 million worldwide. I've also heard: that barely 15% of the people who own the game have completed it. Which figure is the scariest?

In the rush to tap the "mass market," we see "interactive movies," where both words are an insult to their origins. Interactive? Barely. Movies? Maybe, but they are movies that would flop at the box office. It's a great trend for Hollywood that arguably has more unemployed and unemployable auteurs than anywhere else in creation. Suddenly writers and directors who can't get movies or TV made, are making games. Why don't I hear any garnerers exclaiming "Lucky us!"?

The other trend is toward simplification. The mass market can't figure out how to set the timers on their VCR's, the thinking goes, we can't expect them to solve puzzles! So game companies once known for pretty decent adventure games are turning their backs on the gamers who made them what they are today.

As an aside I'll suggest that the puzzles need not only be the traditional mechanical or logic based puzzles, but can also be puzzles of character and conflict. Although I will always enjoy mechanical manipulation puzzles, if they're properly integrated into the story, and not just slapped on with bandaids.

As in any good story, puzzles can be viewed as organic to the story, more like dramatic obstacles. They can force the player to confront demons either external or internal, to

overcome and resolve issues rooted in humanity as well as engineering. Just as stories have wrestled with these issues since they were first told around the fire by earliest man.

Both of the trends toward interactive movies and simpler traditional adventure games are indeed selling more games than have ever been sold before, so an argument can be made that the philosophy is right on track. It isn't of course, but short term thinking is what makes corporations and bureaucracies the towers of logic and efficiency they are today.

Once every game has pretty pictures, and lifelike CD-quality (Well, of course it's CD-quality. It's on a CD for Heaven's sake!), how will any game stand out from the pack? Content. Content. Content. Provide content that is superior to all the other products that look just like it.

If all the game has going for it, is that it is supposed to be an interactive movie, it had better be every bit as good as what the consumer can find at the theatre, or at least on a TV screen. Yet it can't compete at the budget level. It can't compete with its limited resolution and colors and bandwidth. It can't compete in scope.

So what remains? Story. Character. Gameplay. To reach a mass market that soon becomes jaded by gee-whiz technological advances, to survive, a game will simply have to entertain. That is the key word. Entertain.

The adventure game must provide a more interesting story than its competitors (not just other games, but ALL forms of entertainment). It must provide characters that the player may want to spend time with however difficult the puzzles may be.

And finally it must provide one more essential ingredient that is becoming lost in all the multimedia hype and market planning.

Gameplay. Gameplay. Gameplay. Provide the customers with value for the money they've spent. They must feel satisfied and entertained. Is that too much to ask?

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