

Chapter 1:

What Players Want



"But when I come to think more on it, the biggest reason it has become that popular is Mr. Tajiri, the main developer and creator of *Pokemon*, didn't start this project with a business sense. In other words, he was not intending to make something that would become very popular. He just wanted to make something he wanted to play. There was no business sense included, only his love involved in the creation. Somehow, what he wanted to create for himself was appreciated by others in this country and is shared by people in other countries. . . . And that's the point: not to make something sell, something very popular, but to love something, and make something that we creators can love. It's the very core feeling we should have in making games."

— Shigeru Miyamoto, talking about the creation of *Pokemon*



Game designers spend a lot of time concerning themselves with what game players are looking for in a computer game. What can they put in their computer games that has not been done before and will excite players? Often game designers are so bereft of an idea of what gamers want that they instead only include gameplay ideas that have been tried before, rehashing what was popular with game players last year. Surely if players liked it last year, they will like it this year. But therein lies the rub. Gamers generally do not want to buy a game that is only a clone of another game, a “new” game that only offers old ideas and brings nothing original to the table. Nonetheless, successful games can be useful, not for cloning, but for analysis. As game designers, we can look at the games that have come out previously, that we have enjoyed in years past, and try to determine a set of directives that explain what compelled us to try those games in the first place, and why they held our interest once we started playing them.

Why Do Players Play?

The first question we should consider is: why do players play games in the first place? Why do they choose to turn on their computer and run *Doom* instead of visiting the art museum or going to see a movie? What is unique about computer games versus other human entertainment pursuits? What do games offer that other activities do not? It is by understanding what is attractive about games that other media do not offer that we can try to emphasize the differences, to differentiate our art form from others. To be successful, our games need to take these differences and play them up, exploit them to make the best gameplay experience possible.

Players Want a Challenge

Many players enjoy playing games since they provide them with a challenge. This provides one of the primary motivating factors for single-player home games, where social or bragging rights motivations are less of an issue. Games can entertain players over time, differently each time they play, while engaging their minds in an entirely different way than a book, movie, or other form of art. In somewhat the same way someone might fiddle with a *Rubik's Cube* or a steel “remove the ring” puzzle, games force players to think actively, to try out different solutions to problems, to understand a given game mechanism.

When a person faces a challenge and then overcomes it, that person has learned something. It does not matter if that challenge is in a math textbook or in a computer game. So, challenging games can be learning experiences. Players will learn from games, even if that learning is limited to the context of the game, such as how to get by level eight, and so forth. In the best games, players will learn lessons through gameplay that can be applied to other aspects of their life, even if they do



not realize it. This may mean that they can apply problem solving methods to their work, use their improved spatial skills to better arrange their furniture, or perhaps even learn greater empathy through game role-playing. Many players thrive on and long for the challenges games provide, and are enriched by the learning that follows.

Players Want to Socialize

I have a friend who maintains that games are antisocial. This is, of course, absurd, as nearly all non-computer games require a social group in order to function. Games arose as a communal activity many millennia ago out of a desire to have a challenging activity in which a group of friends and family could engage in. Computer game designers need to remember that the roots of gaming, and an important part of its appeal, are in its social nature.

For most people, the primary reason they play games is to have a social experience with their friends or family. I am not talking about computer games here, but rather board and card games like chess, *Monopoly*, bridge, *Scrabble*, *Diplomacy*, or *The Settlers of Catan*. People like to play these games because they like being with their friends and want to engage in a shared activity that is more social than going to a movie or watching TV. It is true that lots of people enjoy playing solitaire card games as well, but there are many more multi-player games than there are single-player. This is because people enjoy a social gameplaying experience.

But how does this apply to computer games? If one considers all the computer games ever created, the majority of them are single-player only experiences. But of course there are plenty of multi-player games, ranging from the “death-matches” found in *Doom* and its imitators, to the classic *M.U.L.E.* game of wheeling and dealing, to the persistent worlds found in MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) or their commercial equivalent, *Ultima Online*.

Almost all death-match style multi-player games are basically adaptations of single-player games into multi-player incarnations. Though there are exceptions, such as *Quake III* or *Unreal Tournament*, these games usually provide a single-player (SP) game in addition to the multi-player (MP) game. The SP and MP games are played with nearly the same set of rules and game mechanics. But even in these single-player-turned-multi-player games, players like to socialize while playing. Anyone who has ever played one of these games over a LAN in a room with a bunch of their friends can testify to this. These LAN-fests are usually rich with conversation as players shout back and forth to each other, bragging over their most recent “frag” or proclaiming how close they came to being killed. Games such as *Quake* can also be played over the Internet, where the experience is quite a bit less social, since players may be miles apart and are thus only able to communicate through the computer. And the high-intensity and fast-action nature of these games



Unreal Tournament is an example of a game which focuses primarily on providing a multi-player experience.



doesn't leave players much time to type messages to their opponents, if they hope to survive for long. But these games do still provide chat functionality, and players, when they are in a safe corner, after they have died, or between games, can send conversational messages to each other. At more hectic points in the gameplay the messages are short and typed on the fly, consisting of only a couple of letters. The fact that players still try to chat with each other in these high-velocity games is testament to the players' desire to socialize.

A separate category of multi-player games is what has come to be called "persistent universe" or "massively multi-player" games. These games tend to be more in the style of role-playing games, where players wander around "virtual worlds" and meet and interact with the other characters in these worlds, characters who are controlled by other players. These games tend to be played over large networks such as the Internet, instead of over LANs, and as a result players only socialize with each other through what they type into the computer. Since these games are considerably slower paced than death-match games, there is a much greater opportunity for the players to chat with each other while playing. MUDs were the first popular incarnation of this style of game, which were played primarily by college students from the late 1980s on. At the time, college students were the main group of people with free time who were hooked to the Internet. These games are text-only, and provide their players with quests to accomplish in mostly fantasy settings. The quests, however, take a backseat to the socialization and role-playing, with players spending the vast majority of their time chatting with other players. A lot of people are drawn into playing these games as a way to interact with their friends, despite the fact that these friends are people they met online and who they



have never seen in person. Indeed, the persistent worlds, MUDs in particular, draw in a legion of players who are not interested in playing any single-player computer games. These people play games in order to meet and talk to other people. The games are an activity these people can engage in together while socializing.

As multi-player games have become more and more common, many game developers have been quick to point out their advantages in terms of competitive AI. Human opponents are much more unpredictable and challenging than any AI that could be reasonably created for most games. This, they suggested, is why people are drawn to multi-player games. But the biggest advantage of these multi-player games is that they transform computer games into truly social experiences, which is one of the largest motivating factors for people to play games.

Players Want a Dynamic Solitaire Experience

Perhaps I have confused the reader by saying first that players want to socialize and then suggesting that players want a solitaire experience. Of course the two do not happen at the same time; some game players are looking for a social experience, and a different set are looking for something dynamic that they can engage in by themselves. Sometimes friends are not available, or a player is tired of his friends, or simply tired of having to talk to other people all the time. Similar to the difference between going to a movie theater with an audience versus renting a video alone at home, the antisocial nature of single-player games attracts a lot of people who have had enough of the other members of the human race.

But games are distinct from other solitaire experiences such as reading a book or watching a video since they provide the players with something to interact with, an experience that reacts to them as a human would, or at least in a manner resembling a human's reactions. But the players are always in control, and can start and stop playing at any time. Thus the computer game "fakes" the interesting part of human interaction without all of the potential annoyances. In this way, people are able to turn to computer games for a dynamic and interactive yet antisocial experience.

Players Want Bragging Rights

Particularly in multi-player gaming, players play games to win respect. Being able to frag all of your friends in *Doom* will force them to have a grudging respect for you: "Bob isn't very good in algebra class, but he can sure annihilate me in a death-match." Even in single-player games, players will talk with their friends about how they finished one game or about how good they are at another. Players will brag about how they played the whole game through on the hardest difficulty in only a few hours. If one looks at arcade games both old and new, the high-score table and the ability to enter one's name into the game, even if only three letters, provides a



tremendous incentive for people to play a game repeatedly. Players who may not have much to brag about in their ordinary lives, who may not be terribly physically coordinated at sports or bookish enough to do well in school, can go down to the arcade and point out to all their friends their initials in the *Centipede* game. Even without telling anyone, players can feel a tremendous sense of self-satisfaction when they beat a particular game. When players are victorious at a challenging game, they realize they can do something well, probably better than most people, which makes them feel better about themselves.

Players Want an Emotional Experience

As with other forms of entertainment, players may be seeking some form of emotional payoff when they play a computer game. This can be as simple as the adrenaline rush and tension of a fast-action game like *Doom*. Or it can be considerably more complex, such as the player's feeling of loss when her friendly robot companion sacrifices himself for the player in Steve Meretzky's *Planetfall*. Sadly, many games' emotional ranges are limited to excitement/tension during a conflict, despair at repeated failure at a given task, and then elation and a sense of accomplishment when the player finally succeeds. It may seem strange that players would play a game in order to feel despair. But many people enjoy watching plays that are tragedies or movies that have sad endings, or listening to music that is out-and-out depressing. People want to feel something when they interact with art, and it does not necessarily need to be a positive, happy feeling. Perhaps the sense of catharsis people obtain from these works makes them worth experiencing. Many classic arcade games, such as *Centipede* or *Space Invaders*, are unwinnable. No matter what the player does, eventually the game will beat him. These games are, in a sense, lessons in defeat—tragedies every time the player plays them. Yet the player keeps pumping in his quarters. This is why a player's feeling of hopelessness as a game repeatedly bests him is not to be ignored. The player is feeling *something*, and some would say that is the goal of art.

Emotional range is not something computer games have explored as much as they could. The example from *Planetfall* I cited above is one of the very few examples in computer games of a player becoming attached to a character in a game, only to have him killed later on. Many developers are wary of making a game too sad. But in the case of *Planetfall*, the tragic story twist of that game was exploited for all the pathos it was worth by designer Steve Meretzky. It is a moment of tragedy that has stuck in many gamers' memories. Game designers would be wise to concentrate on expanding the emotional experience in games beyond excitement and accomplishment, into more unexplored and uncharted emotional territory.



Players Want to Fantasize

A major component of the popularity of storytelling art forms is the element of fantasy. Whether one considers novels, films, or comic books, many people experience these works to “get away” from their own “mundane” lives and escape to an altogether different world, one filled with characters who engage in exciting, interesting activities, travel to exotic locales, and meet other fascinating people.

Certainly not all storytelling works portray exciting and glamorous protagonists, but there is certainly a large segment of works that is labeled “escapist.” Some critics deride such escapist pieces of art, and indeed a lot of very good books, movies, and comics deal with more realistic settings and topics to great effect. The fact remains, however, that many people want to be transported to a world more glamorous than their own.

Computer games, then, have the potential to be an even more immersive form of escapism. In games, players get the chance to actually *be* someone more exciting, to control a pulp-fiction adventurer, daring swordsman, or space-opera hero. While in books or films the audience can merely watch as the characters lead exciting lives, in a well-designed computer game a player will actually get the chance to live those lives themselves. Even better, these fantasy lives are not weighed down with the mundane events of life. In most games, players do not have to worry about eating, needing to get some sleep, or going to the bathroom. Thus, a game can create a fantasy life without the tedious details. And, most importantly, the level of fantasy immersion is heightened from that of other art forms because of the interactive nature of gaming.

Another part of the fantasy fulfillment element of computer games is enabling the player to engage in socially unacceptable behavior in a safe environment. Many popular games have allowed players to pretend they are criminals or assassins. *Driver* is a good example of this. Though the back-story explains that the player is actually playing an undercover police officer, in *Driver* the player gets to pretend she is a criminal who must evade the police in elaborate car chases. There is a devilish thrill to outrunning police cars, especially for anyone who has ever been pulled over by one. Though most players would never consider driving in car chases in real life, there’s something tempting and enticing about engaging in taboo activities. Computer games provide a good medium for players to explore sides of their personality that they keep submerged in their daily lives.

Players may also fantasize about events in history. If the player could have been Napoleon, would Waterloo have turned out differently? If the player were a railroad baron in the twentieth century, would he be able to create a powerful financial empire? A whole line of historical games, from wargames to economic simulations, allow players to explore events in history, and see how making different choices than the historical figures involved made will result in wildly different outcomes.



While many people spend their time dwelling on the past, wondering how events could have transpired differently if alternate decisions had been made, games can give players a chance to find out how history might have been different.

Even without the elements of excitement and glamour, even if another person's life is not actually that exciting, it can be interesting to spend time as that person. Good computer games can provide players with the otherwise unavailable opportunity to see the world through someone else's eyes. As millions of gamers can attest, it is fun to role-play and it is fun to fantasize.

What Do Players Expect?

Once a player has decided he wants to play a given game because of one motivating factor or another, he will have expectations for the game itself. Beyond the game not crashing and looking reasonably pretty, players have certain gameplay expectations, and if these are not met, the player will soon become frustrated and find another game to play. It is the game designer's job to make sure the game meets these expectations. So once they start playing, what do players want?

Players Expect a Consistent World

As players play a game, they come to understand what actions they are allowed to perform in the world, and what results those actions will produce. Few things are more frustrating than when the player comes to anticipate a certain result from an action and then the game, for no perceivable reason, produces a different result. Worse still is when the consequences of the player's actions are so unpredictable that a player cannot establish any sort of expectation. Having no expectation of what will happen if a certain maneuver is attempted will only frustrate and confuse players, who will soon find a different, more consistent game to play. It is the consistency of actions and their results that must be maintained, for an unpredictable world is a frustrating one to live in.

Fighting games are a particularly appropriate example of the importance of predictable outcomes from actions. Players do not want a maneuver to work sometimes and fail other times, without a readily apparent reason for the different outcomes. For instance, in *Tekken*, if the player misses a kick, it has to be because her opponent jumped, blocked, was too far away, or some other reason that the player can perceive. The player's perception of the reason for the move's failure is important to emphasize. It may be that the internal game logic, in this case the collision system, will know why the player's kick missed, but it is as bad as having no reason if the player cannot easily recognize why the maneuver failed. Furthermore, if only expert players can understand why their action failed, many novices will become frustrated as they are defeated for no reason they can understand. If a kick



fails in a situation that closely resembles another situation in which the same kick succeeded, players will throw their hands up in frustration.

Pinball games are another interesting example. Of course, a pinball game is a completely predictable game-world, since it is based on real-world physics. An expert pinball player knows this, and will use it to his advantage. But the problem comes with the novice. Inexperienced players will often fail to see what they “did wrong” when the ball goes straight down between their flippers, or rolls down one of the side gutters. These players will curse the pinball game as a “game of luck” and not want to play anymore. Of course, the fact that players of different skill levels will have radically different levels of success at a given pinball game shows that it is not just a game of luck. But only those players who stick with the game through numerous early failures will find this out. I am not suggesting that pinball games should be abandoned or radically simplified, but one of their shortcomings is that they alienate new players who cannot see the connections between their actions and the outcome of the game.

Players Expect to Understand the Game-World’s Bounds

When playing a game, a player wants to understand which actions are possible and which are not. He does not need to immediately see which actions are needed for a given situation, but he should understand which actions it is possible to perform and which are outside the scope of the game’s play-space.

In *Doom II*, the player will not expect to be able to start a conversation with the monsters he is attacking.



For instance, in *Doom*, a player will intuitively figure out that she is not going to be able to hold a discussion with the demons she is fighting. The player will not



even want to initiate a conversation with a demon during which she suggests surrender as the most logical course of action. The player understands that such interpersonal discussion is out of the scope of the game. Suppose that *Doom* had included a monster late in the game, a foe that could only be defeated if the player was friendly to it, winning it over with her witty conversation. Players would have been frustrated, since they came to understand, through playing the levels that led up to that level, that in *Doom* all that is needed for victory is to blast everything that moves, while avoiding getting hit. Talking is completely out of the scope of the game.

Of course, a chatty monster in *Doom* is an extreme example of a game having unpredictable bounds, but plenty of games break this design principle. These games have players performing actions and completing levels using a certain type of game mechanism, and then later on insert puzzles that can only be solved using an entirely new mechanism. The problem is that the player has been taught to play the game a certain way, and suddenly the game requires the player to do something else entirely. Once players come to understand all of the gameplay mechanisms that a game uses, they don't want new, unintuitive mechanisms to be randomly introduced.

Players Expect Reasonable Solutions to Work

Once a player has spent some time playing a game, he comes to understand the bounds of the game-world. He has solved numerous puzzles, and he has seen what sort of solutions will pay off. Later in the game, then, when faced with a new puzzle, the player will see what he regards as a perfectly reasonable solution. If he then tries that solution and it fails to work for no good reason, he will be frustrated, and he will feel cheated by the game.

This sort of difficulty in game design is particularly true in games that try to model the real-world to some degree. In the real-world there are almost always multiple ways to accomplish a given objective. Therefore, so too must it be in a computer game set in the real-world. Of course, a designer always provides at least one solution to a puzzle, and granted that solution may be perfectly reasonable. But there may be other equally reasonable solutions, and unless the designer makes sure those solutions work as well, players will discover and attempt these non-functioning alternate solutions and will be irritated when they do not work. It is the game designer's task to anticipate what the player will try to do in the game-world, and then make sure that something reasonable happens when the player attempts that action.

Players Expect Direction

Good games are about letting the players do what they want, to a point. Players want to create their own success stories, their own methods for defeating the game,



something that is uniquely theirs. But at the same time, players need to have some idea of what they are supposed to accomplish in this game. Not having direction is a bit too much like real life, and players already have a real life. Many gamers are probably playing the game in order to get away from their real lives, to fantasize and escape. They usually do not play games in order to simulate real life on their computer.

Players want to have some idea of what their goal is and be given some suggestion of how they might achieve that goal. With a goal but no idea of how to achieve it, players will inevitably flail around, trying everything they can think of, and become frustrated when the maneuvers they attempt do not bring them any closer to their goal. Of course, without an idea of what their goal is, players are left to just wander aimlessly, perhaps enjoying the scenery, marveling at the immersive game-world. Yet without something to do in that game-world, it is pointless as a game. If the players do not know what their goal is, the goal might as well not exist.

SimCity 3000 is the third in a series of city simulation "software toys," which let users play without giving them a specific goal.



The classic example of the goal-less game is *SimCity*. In fact, Will Wright, the game's creator, calls it a "software toy" instead of a game. *SimCity* is like a toy in that the player can do whatever she wants with it, without ever explicitly being told that she has failed or succeeded. In some ways *SimCity* is like a set of Legos, where a player can build whatever she wants just for the thrill of creation. The trick, however, is that *SimCity* is a city simulator, wherein the player is allowed to set up a city however she wants. But since the game simulates reality (constructing and running a city), and the player knows what is considered "success" in reality (a booming city full of lovely stadiums, palatial libraries, and happy citizens), she will naturally tend to impose her own rules for success on the game. She will strive to



make her idea of the perfect city, and keep its citizens happy and its economy buoyant. In a subtle way, the player is directed by her own experience with reality. If *SimCity* had been a simulation of a system that players were completely unfamiliar with, it would certainly have been less popular. Though the game does not explicitly have a goal, the very nature of the game and its grounding in reality encourages players to come up with their own goals. And so, what starts out as a toy becomes a game, and thus the players are compelled to keep playing.

Players Expect to Accomplish a Task Incrementally

Given that players understand what their goal in the game-world is, players like to know that they are on the right track toward accomplishing that goal. The best way to do this is to provide numerous sub-goals along the way, which are communicated to the player just as is the main goal. Then, a player is rewarded for achieving these sub-goals just as he is for the main goal, but with a proportionally smaller reward. Of course one can take this down to any level of detail, with the sub-goals having sub-sub-goals, as much as is necessary to clue the player in that he is on the right track. Without providing feedback of this kind, and if the steps necessary to obtain a goal are particularly long and involved, a player may well be on the right track and not realize it. When there is no positive reinforcement to keep him on that track, a player is likely to try something else. And when he cannot figure out the solution to a particular obstacle, he will become frustrated, stop playing, and tell all his friends what a miserable time he had playing your game.

Players Expect to Be Immersed

A director of a musical I was once in would become incensed when actors waiting in the wings would bump into the curtains. She suggested that once the audience sees the curtains moving, their concentration is taken away from the actors on the stage. Their suspension of disbelief is shattered. They are reminded that it is only a play they are watching, not real at all, and that there are people jostling the curtains surrounding this whole charade. Perhaps exaggerating a bit, this director suggested that all of Broadway would collapse if the curtains were seen shaking.

But she had a point, and it is a point that can be directly applied to computer games. Once a player is into a game, she is in a level, she has a good understanding of the game's controls, she is excited, and she is role-playing a fantasy; she does not want to be snapped out of her experience. Certainly the game should not crash. That would be the most jarring experience possible. Beyond that, the player does not want to think about the game's GUI. If the GUI is not designed to be transparent and to fit in with the rest of the game-world art, it will stick out and ruin her immersion. If a character that is supposed to be walking on the ground starts walking into the air for no recognizable reason, the player will realize it is a bug and her



suspension of disbelief will be shattered. If the player comes to a puzzle, figures out a perfectly reasonable solution to it, and that solution does not work, the player will again be reminded that she is “only” playing a computer game. All of these pitfalls and many others detract from the player’s feeling of immersion, and each time the player is rudely awakened from her game-world fantasy, the harder it is to reimmerge herself in the game-world. Remember that many players want to play games in order to fulfill fantasies. And it is very hard to fulfill a fantasy when the game’s idiosyncrasies keep reminding the player that it is just a game.

Despite all his fame, Mario does not have a very distinct personality. He is pictured here in *Super Mario 64*.



Another important aspect of player immersion is the character the player is controlling in the game. Most all games are about role-playing to some extent. And if the character the player is controlling, his surrogate in the game-world, is not someone the player likes or can see himself as being, the player’s immersion will be disrupted. For instance, in the third-person action/adventure game *Super Mario 64*, the player is presented with a character to control, Mario, who does not have a very distinct personality. Mario has a fairly unique look in his pseudo-plumber getup, but he never really says much, and acts as something of a blank slate on which the player can impose his own personality. On the other hand, some adventure games have starred characters who acted like spoiled brats, and the player has to watch as his character says annoying, idiotic things over and over again. Each time the character says something that the player would never say if he had the choice, the player is reminded that he is playing a game, that he is not really in control of his character as much as he would like to be. In order for the player to become truly immersed, he must come to see himself as his game-world surrogate.



Players Expect to Fail

Players tend not to enjoy games which can be played all the way through the first time they try it out. For if the game is so unchallenging that they can storm right through it on their first attempt, it might as well not be a game. If they wanted something that simple they might as well have watched a movie. Remember that gamers are drawn to playing games because they want a challenge. And a challenge necessarily implies that the players will not succeed at first, that many attempts must be made to overcome obstacles before they are finally successful. A victory that is too easily achieved is a hollow victory. It is not unlike winning a fistfight with someone half your size.

It is important to understand that players want to fail because of their own shortcomings, not because of the idiosyncrasies of the game they are playing. When a player fails, she should see what she should have done instead and she should instantly recognize why what she was attempting failed to work out. If the player feels that the game defeated her through some “trick” or “cheap shot,” she will become frustrated with the game. Players need to blame only themselves for not succeeding, but at the same time the game must be challenging enough that they do not succeed right away.

It is also a good idea to let players win a bit at the beginning of the game. This will suck the player into the game, making them think, “this isn’t so hard.” Players may even develop a feeling of superiority to the game. Then the difficulty must increase or “ramp up” so that the player fails. By this time the player is already involved in the game, he has time invested in it, and he wants to keep playing, to overcome the obstacle that has now defeated him. If a player is defeated too early on in the game, he may decide it is too hard for him, or not understand what sort of rewards he will get if he keeps playing. By allowing the player to win at first, a player will know that success is possible, and will try extra hard to overcome what has bested him.

Players Expect a Fair Chance

Players do not want to be presented with an obstacle where their only chance of surmounting the obstacle is through trial and error, where an error results in their character’s death or the end of their game. A player may be able to figure out the proper way to overcome the obstacle through trial and error, but there should be some way the player could figure out a successful path on his first try. So, extending this rule to the whole game, without ever having played the game before the player should be able to progress through the entire game without dying, assuming that the player is extremely observant and skilled. It may be that no player will ever be this skilled on his first time playing, and, as we discussed, ideally the designer wants the player to fail many times before completing the game. However, it must be



theoretically possible for the player to make it through on his first try without dying. Players will quickly realize when the only way around an obstacle is to try each different possible solution until one works. And as players keep dying from each shot-in-the-dark attempt they make, they will realize that due to short-sighted design, there was no real way to avoid all of these deaths. They will be frustrated, and they will curse the game, and soon they will not waste their time with it any longer.

Players Expect to Not Need to Repeat Themselves

Once a player has accomplished a goal in a game, she does not want to have to accomplish it again. If the designer has created an extremely challenging puzzle, one that is still difficult to complete even after the player has solved it once, it should not be overused in the game. For instance, the same painfully difficult puzzle should not appear in identical or even slightly different form in different levels of a 3D action/adventure, unless the defeating of the difficult puzzle is a lot of fun and the rewards are significantly different each time the puzzle is completed. If it is not a lot of fun to do, and the player has to keep solving it throughout the game, she will become frustrated and will hate the game designer for his lack of creativity in failing to come up with new challenges.

Of course, many games are built on the principle of the player repeating himself, or at least repeating his actions in subtly varied ways. Sports games such as *NFL Blitz* and racing games such as *San Francisco Rush* are all about covering the same ground over and over again, though the challenges presented in any one playing of those games are unique to that playing. Classic arcade games like *Centipede* and *Defender* offer roughly the same amount of repetition. *Tetris* is perhaps the king of repetitive gameplay, yet players never seem to grow tired of its challenge. The games in which players do not want to repeat themselves are the games in which exploration is a key part of the player's enjoyment and in which the challenges presented in any specific playing are fairly static and unchanging. After exploring a game-world once, subsequent explorations are significantly less interesting. While every time the player engages in a game of *Defender*, *San Francisco Rush*, or *NFL Blitz* the game is unique, every time the player plays *Tomb Raider*, *Doom*, or *Fallout* the challenges presented are roughly the same. Therefore, players do not mind the repetition in the former games while they will become quickly frustrated when forced to repeat themselves in the latter.

Game players' lack of desire to repeat themselves is why save-games were created. With save-games, once a player has completed a particularly arduous task she can back up her progress so she can restore to that position when she dies later. When a game presents a player with a huge, tricky challenge and, after many attempts, she finally overcomes it, the player must be given the opportunity to save



her work. Allowing the player to save her game prevents her from having to repeat herself.

Some games will even automatically save the player's game at this newly achieved position, a process sometimes known as checkpoint saving. This method is somewhat superior since often a player, having succeeded at an arduous task, will be granted access to a new and exciting area of gameplay, one which she will immediately want to explore and interact with. Often, in her excitement, she will forget to save. Then, when she is defeated in the new area, the game will throw her back to her last save-game, which she had made prior to the challenging obstacle. Now the player has to make it through the challenging obstacle once again. However, if the game designer recognizes that the obstacle is a difficult one to pass, he can make the game automatically save the player's position, so that when the player dies in the new area, she is able to start playing in the new area right away. However, automatic saves should not be used as a replacement for player-requested saves, but should instead work in conjunction with them. This way players who are accustomed to saving their games will be able to do it whenever they deem it appropriate, while gamers who often forget to save will be allowed to play all the way through the game without ever needing to hit the save key. Indeed, automatic saving provides the player with a more immersive experience: every time the player accesses a save-game screen or menu, she is reminded that she is playing a game. If a player can play through a game without ever having to save her game, her experience will be that much more transparent and immersive.

Players Expect to Not Get Hopelessly Stuck

There should be no time while playing a game that the player is incapable of somehow winning, regardless of how unlikely it may actually be. Many older adventure games enjoyed breaking this cardinal rule. Often in these games, if the player failed to do a particular action at a specific time, or failed to retrieve a small item from a location early in the game, the player would be unable to complete the game. The problem was that the player would not necessarily realize this until many hours of fruitless gameplay had passed. The player's game was essentially over, but he was still playing. Nothing is more frustrating than playing a game that cannot be won.

As an example, modern 3D world exploration games, whether *Unreal* or *Super Mario 64*, need to concern themselves with the possibility that the player can get hopelessly stuck in the 3D world. Often this style of game provides pits or chasms that the player can fall down into without dying. It is vital to always provide ways out of these chasms, such as escape ladders or platforms which allow the player to get back to his game. The method of getting out of the pit can be extremely difficult, which is fine, but it must be possible. For what is the point of having the



Level designers for 3D action/adventure games, such as *Unreal*, need to create maps which prevent the player from ever getting permanently stuck behind a piece of architecture.



player fall into a pit from which he cannot escape? If he is incapable of escape, the player's game-world surrogate needs to be killed by something in the pit, either instantly on impact (say the floor of the pit is electrified) or fairly soon (the pit is flooding with lava, which kills the player within ten seconds of his falling in). Under no circumstances should the player be left alive, stuck in a situation from which he cannot continue on with his game.

One of the primary criticisms leveled against *Civilization*, an otherwise excellent game, is that its end-games can go on for too long. When two countries remain and one is hopelessly far behind the other, the game can tend to stretch on past the point of interest while the dominant power tracks down and slaughters the opposition. Indeed, the less advanced country is not technically without hope. That player can still come from behind and win the game; it is not completely impossible. That player is not stuck to the same degree as the player trapped in the pit with no exit, but the player is so far behind that it might as well be impossible; the luck they would need to have and the mistakes the dominant power would have to make are quite staggering. The solution to this is perhaps to allow the AI to figure out when it is hopelessly overpowered and surrender, just as a player who is hopelessly far behind will do the same by quitting and starting a new game.

Players Expect to Do, Not to Watch

For a time the industry was very excited about the prospect of “interactive movies.” During this period computer game cut-scenes got longer and longer. Slightly famous film actors started starring in the cut-scenes. Games became less and less



interactive, less, in fact, like games. And the budgets ballooned. Then, surprise surprise, gamers did not like these types of games. They failed to buy them. Companies collapsed, and everyone in the industry scratched their heads wondering what had gone wrong. Of course the gamers knew, and the game designers were soon able to figure out what was amiss. The problem was that players wanted to do, they did not want to watch. And they still feel the same way.

I am not completely against cut-scenes; they can be a very useful tool for communicating a game's story, or for passing along to the player information she will need in order to succeed at the next piece of gameplay. That said, I do believe that cut-scenes should be stripped down and minimized to the absolute shortest length that is necessary to give some idea of the game's narrative, if any, and set up the next sequence of gameplay. Cut-scenes over one minute in length, especially those that fail to provide information essential for completing the next gameplay sequence, should be avoided. It does not matter if the cut-scene is text scrolling along the back of the screen, full-motion video with live actors, cell animation, or done using the game-engine, the entirety of this break in the gameplay should not take longer than a minute. If there is gameplay involved in some way, such as the player planning out troop placement for the next mission, then it is not really a cut-scene and can be as long as is necessary. And certainly, if the cut-scene contains information critical to the gameplay, the designer will want to let the player replay the cut-scene as many times as he desires.

The quality of the cut-scene really does not matter either. There have been many games with the most atrocious "acting" ever witnessed, usually as performed by the assistant producer and the lead tester. There have been games with Hollywood-quality production and content, some with even better. But in the end, if the game is any good, gamers are going to want to get back to it, and they are going to want to skip the cut-scene.

In short, the reason people play games is because they want something different from what a movie, book, radio show, or comic can provide. I did not include among the reasons why people play games "because the library is closed" or "because the TV is on the blink." Gamers want a game, and game designers should give it to them.

Players Do Not Know What They Want, But They Know It When They See It

One could see this as an argument against focus groups, but that is not quite it. Having playtesters is a very important part of game development. By playtesters, I mean people looking not for bugs in your game, but rather analyzing the gameplay and providing constructive feedback about it. A designer should have lots of people



playing her game once it is at a stage in development where a majority of the gameplay can be judged.

On the other hand, having a focus group of gamers before a game has been created just to “bounce ideas around” is pretty much useless. Gamers are good, of course, at judging whether a game they are playing is any fun or not. They may not be able to explain in a useful way what exactly they like or dislike about a particular game, but they certainly know when they are having a good time, whether they are having their fantasies fulfilled, whether they are being appropriately challenged, or if a game gets them excited. But just because they enjoy a wide range of finished games does not mean they are qualified to critique raw game ideas. Similarly, game ideas they come up with are not certain to be good ones. It is the rare person who can discuss the idea of a computer game and determine if it is likely the final game will be fun or not. People with these skills are those best suited to become game designers. Not all game players have these skills, so when asked what sort of game they might be interested in playing, gamers may not really know what they want. But, as I say, they will know it when they see it.

A Never-Ending List

Of course, this exploration of what players want could fill a whole book and could continue indefinitely. I encourage readers, whether aspiring game designers or those who have already had a number of games published, to create their own list of what they think gamers want. Think of what frustrates you while you play a game and what portions of a game deliver to you the greatest satisfaction. Then try to determine why you react to a game mechanic as you do. What did it do right and what did it do wrong? This will allow you to establish your own list of rules, which you can then apply to your own designs. Without feedback from playtesters it is often hard to determine whether your game is entertaining and compelling or not. But with a set of rules you can systematically apply to your design, you may just figure out whether anyone will like your game.

