

Abusing the Player, and Making Them Like it Too!

Douglas Wilson
IT University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen Game Collective
dewilson@itu.dk

Miguel Sicart
IT University of Copenhagen
miguel@itu.dk

ABSTRACT

If there is one uncontested assumption transversal to the game studies and game design literature, it is that games should be designed for the player. Common game design wisdom dictates that players must be challenged, but never beyond the so-called “balance” of the game [1; 9], the careful equilibrium between frustration and pleasure [8]. Furthermore, the growing popularity of casual games and systems like the Nintendo Wii has inscribed this implicit design assumption into popular conceptualizations of game design as a practice: game design as the art of pleasing players [7; 10].

In this paper we suggest an alternative perspective: game design as abusing the player. Inspired by a number of independent and experimental games, we propose the notion of abusing the player as a creative, aesthetic position taken by the game designer. Abusing players means forcing them into adopting the arbitrary or intentionally antagonistic elements of a game. The metaphor of abuse implies that players are pushed outside of their comfort zone and into the realm of an abusive power relation [5; 6] in which they are punished by the game and its designer.

We argue that abusive games are those in which the game designer intentionally disrespects the player. In an abusive game, the player is forced to understand more than just the logic behind the system, but also the designer as implied author, present in each design choice [3; 4]. In this sense, an abusive game *is* the designer - or rather, the battle of wits and willpower, the contest between player and designer. Regardless of their needs or desires, players of abusive games must submit themselves to the will of the ever looming presence of the designer.

This paper explores a number of different techniques for abusing the player, including physical abuse (*Painstation*, *Penn & Teller's Smoke and Mirrors*), aesthetic abuse (*Flywrench*), lying to the player (*Eternal Darkness*), embarrassing the player (*Dark Room Sex Game*), and arbitrary design (*Kaizo Mario*, *I Wanna Be The Guy*). We illustrate these techniques (and others) not only with existing games, but also with hypothetical game

designs devised as thought experiments. We also explain how these various modalities of abuse can be combined synergistically.

Our intent is to challenge a number of assumptions regarding game design and game analysis. First, we question the dominant discourse of designing computer games in order to please or empower the player. Second, we challenge the understanding of game design as a primarily formal practice, rather than as an aesthetic craft in which the designer takes a specific aesthetic stance. Finally, we advocate the aesthetics of abuse as a specific, under-explored practice that can potentially enrich the design of political and ethical gameplay.

REFERENCES

1. Crawford, C. (1982) *The Art of Computer Game Design*. At <http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/peabody/game-book/Coverpage.html> (accessed March 5, 2009).
2. Dunne, A. (2005) *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
3. Eco, U. (1978) *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
4. Eco, U. (1989) *The Open Work*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
5. Foucault, Michel (1975) *Discipline and Punish*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1991.
6. Foucault, Michel (2000) *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. Edited by James D. Faubion. London: Penguin, 2000.
7. Fullerton, T. (2005) *Game Design Workshop. Designing, Prototyping, and Playtesting Games*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
8. Koster, R. (2005) *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Scottsdale: Paraglyph Press.
9. Rollings, A. and Adams, E. (2003) *On Game Design*. Indianapolis: New Riders.
10. Schell, J. (2008) *The Art of Game Design. A Book of Lenses*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009

© 2009 Authors & Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA). Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.