Implied play styles: An analysis tool to understand player behavior and meta-game emergence

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Keywords

Implied playstyles, Mechanics, Implied Player, Metagame

INTRODUCTION

While the topic of metagames and theorycraft as higher strategies of play and their development has already caught scholarly attention (e.g. Carter et al. 2012; Donaldson 2017; Paul 2011; Wenz 2013), specific examination of games as objects and how they suggest such strategies to emerge are missing to this day. This paper seeks to close this gap with the concept of *Implied Playstyles*, which are particular ways to play a game, as suggested by and emerging from the attributes entities and object in the game possess. With the conceptualization of this relationship, it is possible to analyze games to explain why idiosyncratic strategies emerged, are more present than others, or to make predictions about how a certain game will be played.

Drawing from Iser (1974), Aarseth (2007) argues that games contain an *implied player*, which is a "role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to 'exercise its effect'" (p. 132). He further argues that including "[…] Gadamer's notion of the unfree player subject, we can start to see the implied player as a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation to the playing person's freedom of movement and choice" (ibid.). Aarseth's notion of the implied player encompasses all restrictions the game imposes on the player, from moral choices, over narrative ones, to choices of pathfinding. The implied play styles are part of, but more specific than this. They are 'a role made for the player by the game, a set of attributes and mechanics that lead the player towards a certain behavior'. The implied player is not necessary for the game to "exercise its effect" (ibid.), the implied playstyles are necessary for the game to be 'played well' or 'as the designer intended', on a merely strategical level.

Following Järvinen (2008, p.254), who describes mechanics as the designer's tool to guide the player towards a specific behavior, this paper argues that this playstyle is coded into the game by the designers, through combination of mechanics and attributes of in-game objects, characters and units. The combination with attributes is not only important but necessary, as the restricting nature of a game mechanic can lead to significantly different behavior when combined with a game object with different attributes.

After conceptualizing the implied playstyles, an exemplary analysis of units in *Starcraft 2: Legacy of the Void* (Blizzard Entertainment 2015) and *Sins of a Solar Empire* (Ironclad Games 2008) is conducted. The games were chosen as they are familiar to the authors and include three races each, which are distinct from each other in appearance and, especially in the case of *Starcraft 2*, playstyles. The application of the implied playstyles to *Starcraft 2*, for example, showed explanations of certain strategies that evolved in the electronic sports scene, such as walling in of *Protoss* players and the need for battles in open terrain by *Zerg* players.

The analysis of the implied playstyles in these specific examples, as well as in future endeavors into the subject, enables us to identify certain ways to play the game, as they are implied in the game objects and mechanic. These playstyles can be linked to emerging meta-games. Furthermore, as the game encourages certain ways of performing game characters, this affects the ways in which these characters are represented and suggests certain readings of them. As such, the 'insectness' of the Zerg race in Starcraft II is not only a quality of visual representation but pervades the ways players are encouraged to perform

OPTIONAL BIO
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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