

The Bad (and Ugly) Game

Prototyping for game designers [IDG5102] – 2013/14

Final Report

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Introduction

The Bad (and Ugly) Game is a prototype that explores the concepts of player experience in an experimental way. It wants to challenge the idea of playing for a goal, or for an achievement that sometimes is just “finishing” the game itself by completing it, like it was a maze with one (or multiple) exit(s), and just for the sake of curiosity or self-competition. In this labyrinth metaphor the player is a modern Theseus searching for a legendary Minotaur with a thread given him by Ariadne, the designer. Using a point-and-click adventure format, and a lot of irony that often breaks the fourth wall, the game leads the player through a maze impossible to escape, unless she actually (and literally) stops playing. In fact, the experimental goal of the game is to demonstrate that to finish a play session, sometimes is sufficient the *will* of finishing it; closing the game, turning off the computer, or doing something else. Basically, the question underneath it is: if the game gets boring, or impossible to be completed, will you stop playing or stubbornly keep trying?

Design

The concept behind this game matured during the Games and Literary Theory Conference 2013 in Valletta, Malta. Among the many interesting speeches given by distinguished scholars, some of them captured my attention and seeded an idea into my mind. A first talk was a case-study about (de)construction of authorship (Fuchs 2013), which considered the layouts of player involvement in the game narrative construction, and how designers can script a story in which the main character (and the player) is not only part of the story, but also the author – and he knows it. Bonello Rutter Giappone (2013) enlightened instead how certain games, especially adventures and other hybrid genres, build a sort of ironic discourse between them and the player; she showed how the break of the fourth wall through comic situations could help the player in being more involved into the game environment. To some extent, a similar topic was addressed by Brown (2013) too, with examples from games that voluntarily interrupt the *suspension of disbelief* (the feeling of being immerse in the fictional world portrayed) by speaking directly to the player, or require interaction outside the game environment itself.

Considering some of those concepts, I decided to create a graphic adventure game strongly based on (self)irony, that would address the player as both an author of the (short) story, and a part of the game environment. *The Bad (and Ugly) Game* is developed as branch of that idea-tree, being at the same time a form of experiment in the player-game interaction (and experience) through irony, and a conceptualization of the “finish the game / stop playing” idea. Its inspirations are mainly games like *Alan Wake* (2010), *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), *Hotline Miami* (2012), and Molleindustria’s works, but also movies such as the *Saw* (2004) saga.

In the early days of brainstorming and conceptualization, the game was designed to be a top-down looking platform adventure. Due to technical feasibility, and time given, but also some consideration about player involvement and experience, the project was adjusted to be a first-person point-and-click adventure with a very simplistic graphic appeal. Thus not giving up on the starting objective, yet reworking its shape to adapt it to a better and more appropriate scale.

The two main design issues I had to face during the whole prototyping were: 1) How could the player understand the meaning, and true objective of the game? 2) What could she do in the game, actually? Gameplay was oriented, in a really simple way, to answer both those questions. Players can do very few actions in the game, with the consequence of boredom and redundancy being around the corner. The few items of the poor environment they can interact with are thought to be both hints on the real way to finish the game, and distractions. In fact the player can collect three objects (a can, a fishbowl, and a ball) that have apparently no connection to each other, like what happens in many adventure games; with those three, she can reach the guardian and the last room. But after clicking on the pretentious exit (a desktop PC), the game restarts instead.

Why is it so bad (and ugly)?

The title is the very first suggestion given to the player on the auto-ironical nature of the iteration. This game doesn’t *seem* to take itself too seriously, ideally leading the player to think it will be an easy and entertaining experience. To some extent this may be true, but even if with a lot of

sarcasm and jokes, the experimental nature of the project emerges when the player runs out of possible actions, aside inspecting and interacting with static items in the environment.

The simplistic aesthetical appeal of the game has multiple reasons to be, one of them being the feeling – for the player – to play something unfinished, unworthy, not “fun” at all. Aside the objective stated at the game start, the overall experience verges towards a desertion of the player. Many interactive objects suggest that time fleeing is an important component of the game, or hint ironically that the user must stop clicking and using the mouse.

Why is it interesting, anyway?

Despite its overall look, and the counter-entertainment objective of the experiment, the game has – as stated above – some good reasons to be played once. Many games nowadays require some interaction with the player that is, to some extent, “unconventional”: unplugging and plugging back in a control pad (*Metal Gear Solid 3*), having only an action to spend each day (*Vesper5*), even if sometimes only showing the character as bored when inactive for long time. This kind of break of the fourth wall is not new to games, then; neither is the possibility for them to play with time: as given examples show, inserting some script that will make the character (or an object in the game environment) react to real time it is a common “Easter egg”, or a major gameplay element these days. But what about the combination of the two things - a game that interacts with the player, and it is based on a real-time timer? An experience that make the user wonder how she is approaching the game experience, or how sometimes the urge of finishing a game (accomplishing something) is just for the sake of having an achievement in her own, constructed, mental showcase.

This game tries, with irony, to break the *suspension of disbelief* (Brown 2013) given by a simulative environment. To do so, it establishes a sarcastic, yet useful to gameplay, dialogue with the player making her feeling both the main character *and* the player herself. In fact, there is no avatar, nor character in this game that represents the presence of the player in the game environment; is the player herself to be “trapped”, as claimed in the game, into such a maze.

Technical Considerations

The very first technical challenge encountered during the design process was to answer the question: “*How to make the game impossible to escape without the only, proper (and legitimate) way?*” It was self-evident that a good response to that problem would have been forcing full-screen play, and letting no escape within the game responses. In fact, even if the application can be closed with certain methods (for example, Alt + F4), there is no other way in the script that allows the player to finish the game without leaving it alone. On the other hand, those consideration led also to a shift in the overall style: in the early prototyping phase, rooms were supposed to be shady, dark, and oppressive; but the necessity of the game to be playable in full-screen required very larger sprites and backgrounds and those already included in the prototype were too small. Choosing then objects to be cartoonish-like, and rooms (ready for full-screen mode) having a really simplistic and cold style helped in making the game the combination of irony and serious thoughts that it was supposed to be in the beginning.

Another problem that I managed to solve was related to Draw events: my intention was, since the beginning of the project, to allow the player interact with objects by clicking on them. Some items should have reacted to interaction, some others should have showed messages on screen. To achieve such a goal, I set up a variable in the parent object (`can_draw`) to be initially set on `false`. Whenever the player clicks on the object, the variable is turned on/off, and the Draw event triggers only when `can_draw` is `true`. This happens individually for every object in the game, but to prevent drawings to overlap one over another, even the Controller object checks (and changes eventually) the value of `can_draw`, by verifying that the player clicked on an empty random part of the game environment.

Global variables were the best help I could get from Game Maker itself to create this project. Using them I solved almost every problem emerged within the design process, such as checking objects status when entering rooms, or verifying if the player already collected every item necessary to (apparently) go through the game. The very best use of global variables that appears in this project is, probably, the `global.supercontroller`. Thanks to that, when the player thinks she escaped (or finished) the game, everything restarts and resets: the title screen is showed again, and

apparently the game simply begins again. What happens instead is that the said supercontroller takes count of how many times the player “finished” the game, showing different introductions that give her new little hints on how to properly accomplish the secret objective of the game.

Last but not least, some words must be spent about the hidden timer. When first facing the idea of creating a game that was supposed to not be played, this specific functionality of Game Maker came to a great help. It works as follows: the permanent controller checks for the left mouse button to be pressed globally into every room, so that if the game is left idle for one minute and thirty seconds (1’30”), a message pops up, closing the application and greeting the player. This expedient was repeated within the plant category of objects, that include a timer of forty-five seconds (45”) in order to make the player aware of how time passing by in idle conditions is important for the progression of the game.

Evaluation

Playtests included a brief playthrough, with “think aloud” protocol, and were followed by a small interview with questions that depended on each player specific experience. As testers played my game, the first thing I noticed was that the hidden objective was *too hidden*: there were not enough instructions, nor hints, in the game that could help them understand on their own how to properly “escape” the iteration. Moreover, the timer that was supposed to end the experience after leaving the mouse idle was set to be five minutes long: clearly, a too big time span for players to wait for. Another important feedback I got from playtests was about the game overall experience. After each test, I asked players “*Do you think that the message is clear? Does the game give you that sense of understanding that is supposed to give?*” Their answers were overall positive, with a couple of useful suggestions that helped me to allow that realization moment required in this kind of ludic experience: add more hints, make them understandable but not obvious, and state clearly what the game was about after the player reaches the proper ending.

References

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