ROOT OF PLAY – GAME DESIGN FOR DIGITAL HUMANISTS

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

This exercise is a game development approach embedded within a card game called Root of Play (stylized as √play). Root of Play is a simple card game to generate game design ideas in a short period of time. This game is designed for students of various levels of experience with games. Our students included librarians, faculty members in the humanities, graduate students in the humanities, undergraduate students in the humanities, and academic administrators. Our larger pedagogical goals focus on combining theoretical discussions with practical applications, giving students a hands-on design experience. Root of Play is effective for helping students realize the complex theoretical concepts of games and gameplay through their own design process.

Root of Play is currently being used in the “Games for Digital Humanists” workshop held annually at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) at the University of Victoria (Victoria, B.C., Canada). The course is an intensive, five-day experience designed to teach humanities scholars at various stages of their career about games and applying games to their own research. Ideally, this game is suited for courses exploring topics around games, play, video games, or related design/art projects. The game is evocative, encouraging players to think creatively and develop playable prototypes.

We use Root of Play to provide a quick introduction to the problems of creating a playable game. The lectures in our course introduce theories of games and play to teach students how to critically analyze games. Root of Play neatly combines these two areas while encouraging players to challenge their own notions of what games are and why we play them. Further, Root of Play reminds players that games need not be glossy and costly by encouraging them to create a playable prototype using simple resources like paper, markers, and their own acting skills.

In addition to its advantages in connecting theory and practice, Root of Play is easy to implement. The deck can be printed from a downloadable PDF (or written by hand), rules can be explained in a few minutes, and actually playing the game takes between 75-90 minutes depending on the number of groups. Students responded positively to Root of Play, saying that
concepts that were abstract from lectures become clearer in the practice of game design. Our course evaluations indicated that several teams play-tested outside of the course and were considering producing their game. One group is currently working on a Kickstarter campaign to fund the development of their game, which focused on gender stereotypes and includes issues for transgendered people. Another group developed a story-telling game using dark humor to describe a family reunion (http://reunionthegame.com/) and will be moving into game production in late 2014.

As inspiration for Root of Play, we drew on other card-based game design projects including Garry Wong’s card game project developed at the University of Alberta, Gamegame (Järvinen 2005), and Oblique Strategies (Eno & Schmidt 1978). Each of these games follows the approach of creativity through constraint, which is essential to the Root of Play approach.

GAME DESIGN AS A CARD GAME

The purpose of Root of Play is to encourage prototype game design in a short time frame. This process helps students grasp the challenging aspects of game creation, namely framing an appropriate topic and making sure the game does not get too complicated. The challenge with game design is a constant narrowing process: reducing the scope to identify the core components of gameplay and creating simple rules to facilitate that gameplay. The short-term goal of this game is to encourage critical discussions on gameplay and game design. The long-term goal of this game is to create a simple-to-use classroom tool that teaches students about game design and game criticism.

Root of Play has five phases—brainstorming, pitch, design, playtest, iterate—and is played with three decks of cards. Each deck contains cards that describe a different aspect of your game: player cards (the audience for the game or personas for game characters), place cards (locations and times for play or fictional worlds where the game takes place), and constraint cards (more restrictive parameters like “texting” and “bluffing”). Players are divided into teams and are given:

- 2 player cards
- 2 place cards
- 1 constraint card

They get 20 minutes to generate two game ideas within the parameters of their cards and then pitch those two ideas to the larger group. The group helps each team decide which game to develop, followed by thirty minutes to make a playable prototype of the game, and thirty minutes to play-test the game.

The major takeaway for the students is the design process. By the end of the exercise, students have a playable game based on specific restraints. The maxim of creativity through constraint is the focal point of this design process, both in terms of the time provided and in terms of the restrictions of the cards.
INSTRUCTIONS, EVALUATION, AND CARDS

INSTRUCTIONS

These instructions are reproduced directly from the cards:

The hardest part of game design is coming up with an initial concept, for which we provide students the building blocks. This concept could be perfect, or it could be terrible. We just want you to start designing.

The game has 5 phases:
1. Brainstorming
2. Pitch
3. Design
4. Playtest
5. Iterate

The game can take anywhere from thirty to ninety minutes to play depending on the students’ design process. We recommend that the instructor make something simple to test your game concept. The difficult part is coming up with an engaging core concept for a game.

THE CARDS

The deck is made up of 3 smaller decks, which provide the framework for a game.

1. **Player** [yellow deck]: Who will play this game or who is in the game? This can refer to imagined players of the game or the imagined players in the game. Players receive two of these cards.
2. **Place** [blue deck]: Where does the game take place or where you play the game? This can be where you play the game (in the car) or the fictional world (alternate ending to a major war). Or both! Players receive two of these cards.
3. **Constraint** (“I hate this deck”) [red deck]: How the cards restrict game design. Players only receive one of these cards. These are the actions your player will take in the game. Also known as the game mechanic. We have nicknamed this deck “I hate this deck” because it forces the most constraint on the design process. This is an evil card.
HOW TO PLAY

These are suggestions for our favorite play type. Please experiment for your group and your needs.

Phase 0: The Setup

1. Form small groups. Three-person groups are ideal.
2. Separate the cards into the 3 decks. They’re color coded for your convenience!
3. Each team gets: 2 Player cards, 2 Place cards, and 1 Constraint card.

Phase 1: Brainstorming

Use your cards to come up with a game concept. Develop 2 different game ideas. Use the cards in any combination you want—use just 1, combine them all, or whatever works best for you.

Phase 2: Pitch

Pitch your 2 games to the larger group. They will help you decide which one to develop.

Phase 3: Design

6. Create a version of the game selected by the group. Use anything you want. We recommend paper, pens, and scissors. People will play this game. Make it simple.

Phase 4: Playtest

7. Try out a version of the game. The simpler the better. Make sure your rules are clear.

Phase 5: Iterate

8. Keep tinkering. Or stop. It’s all up to you.

Experiment with this game! Change the rules. Add new cards. Use them in any way you see fit. Hopefully this deck helps you design interesting games or challenges your perception of games and play.

EVALUATION

The response from students in our class was encouraging. Feedback we received on evaluation forms emphasized how Root of Play helped students combine the theoretical discussions of games and play with a practical design component. We have included some sample statements from our students:

“Pleasantly surprised by the effectiveness of the game design activity portion of the class, which yielded interesting results that gave us all an excellent opportunity to put into practice the theoretical portions of the course material”
“I thought it was a very good exercise. Forced us to be creative, within constraints”

“That game to get us thinking about games is a great idea. The best part about it is that it encourages lots of different conceptualizing of games: from social apps to card-based games, to role playing games, to board games, it's all there.”

CARDS

The cards for this game are designed to be evocative. We created the cards with multiple interpretations in mind. In play testing and implementation, some players have questions about how to interpret the cards. We encourage players to be flexible and imaginative, using the cards as prompts to encourage creativity.

Player

Player cards give a sense of who is involved in the game. This includes characters in the game and the kinds of people who might play the game. Examples include demographic groups (teenagers, seniors), typical narrative groups (rebels, pirates), situational people (first date, campers), and fun ones (people who are wrong, your most boring relative).

Place

Place cards give the game its location, again both in and out of the game. These cards can tell you where the game should be played (outside the game) and where the characters of the game find themselves (inside the game). Examples include physical places (in a car, at night), more metaphysical/emotional places (bad dream, homecoming), situations (first day of school, bomb scare), and statements evocative of places/situations (surveillance state, alternate ending to a major war).

Constraints

Constraint cards offer further restrictions that are less thematic and center on game mechanics – the player’s actions in the game. Using gerunds, these cards describe the in-game actions of the players or the overall actions used in the game. Examples include bluffing, drawing, telling stories, memorizing, educating, texting, and sharing secrets.

References
