

Chapter 14

Serious Lessons from the Commercial Games Industry

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to find the common ground between the business oriented design practices of the commercial video game industry and the scholarship based design practices of the serious games segment of the video game industry. The examination of commercial design principles allows the serious game designer to maintain an internal catalog of effective game design tools and the ability to establish a historical perspective on the effectiveness of game mechanics as they have evolved over time. Developers can utilize this perspective to determine game design methods that are likely to establish flow and subsequently improve the conveyance of information to the player.

INTRODUCTION

There is an obvious divide between the serious and commercial sections of the video games industry. This divide is characterized by a number of differences in approach, methodology, and funding. While the significance of the divide varies between sub-sections of the industry, in most cases common causes can be determined. This paper seeks to make the reader aware of the driving forces behind the differing approaches and increase the game designers ability to leverage methodology from each side of the industry to better address the changing needs of a diverse games industry.

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BACKGROUND

There is a lack of primary research on the distinctions between the serious and commercial sides of the video game industry. This lack stems from the basic differences between the approach of the commercial and serious branches of game design to the process of design itself. When examined technically, the commercial design studio relies on individual historical knowledge and game playing experience to develop new game types or adapt existing mechanics into new games. Because the goal of commercial games are primarily to entertain, results are measured via community or consumer reaction and revenues. The subjective nature of entertainment and the for-profit nature of

the commercial industry necessitate this approach to quantification of results. Serious games, on the other hand, rely on quantifiable design practices and peer reviewed methodology. This is required, in part, due to the nature of the funding models for serious games, which tend to rely more heavily on grant funding, public funding, or non-profit models. Notable exceptions to this model exist, primarily in the games for health and advergaming sections of the industry, but it is also within those segments where the design process is closer to that of the commercial industry.

Additionally, the gulf between the two sides of the industry is such that the serious games approach is seen as both slow and reactive by the commercial segments of the industry. For example, within a few weeks a designer can tell if their game is well designed based on player response and fiscal returns. To arise at the same conclusion via a peer reviewed methodology, using quantifiable data would take significantly longer. The peer review process, which can take up to a year, is roughly one quarter the full life cycle of a modern console game system. The market life cycle of individual games is often measured in weeks or months; taking the time to go through a rigorous peer review process negatively effects competitive advantage in a quickly evolving market. As a result, most formal research on game design is done well after the value of the game design decisions are proven in the marketplace. By the time research is published commercial developers not only understand the value of the game design choices that have been made (both philosophically and monetarily) but they are also working on the next advancement. This time lag ultimately casts serious games research in a poor light in the eyes of professional game developers, further widening the extant gulf between the two similar yet different factions of the industry.

The Responsibility of the Designer

The video game industry is one of the fastest growing entertainment industries on the planet. The time consuming process of research based game design is constantly threatened by evolving tastes, game mechanics, and technology in the fast paced world of game design. The designer must not only be aware of current commercial trends, but also social sciences research and pedagogical (instructional design) practices. This awareness allows designers to maintain the agile base necessary from which to design compelling, thought provoking games; games which fully leverage the power of the medium to illicit a change, garner a response, or teach a lesson.

Good video game designers have a responsibility to understand games.

The impact of that seemingly obvious statement far outweighs its simplicity for several key reasons. Breaking down that statement into its constituent parts in order to understand the potential of the game designer allows us to establish what it means to design games.

The first assumption of the above statement is that your goal is to be a video game designer. Teachers, content experts, and marketers all desire to harness the power video games can hold over an audience but few of these individuals commit themselves to making the changes in perspective necessary to become true designers. Pedagogical approaches, deep factual information, and savvy marketing are all part of the overall success of a serious game but have little to do with the power of the game itself as an agent of change. The power of games lies in the ability of the designer to help the player achieve the improved state of awareness often referred to as Flow, in which improved uptake of information and ideas occurs more readily than in non-Flow states. Creating a compelling game framework upon which to build specific context as determined through pedagogical examination of the intended meaning of the player experience can be accomplished with only

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