

THE GAME OF RULES

In November 2012, the artist Anna CRAYCROFT attended Practice: Game Design in Detail, a weekend-long conference on game design held at NYU and organized in part by game designer, academic, author, and entrepreneur Eric ZIMMERMAN.

CRAYCROFT met up with ZIMMERMAN at his office in NYU's Game Center, where he is a founding faculty member, to learn more about how gaming can change the way we understand ourselves, one another, and the future of our culture

Anna Craycroft: Can you talk a little about the art of game design?

Eric Zimmerman: What's interesting about looking at games from an art point of view is that game design has one foot in functional design but the other in being a more purely aesthetic or cultural activity. Design typically has some kind of extrinsic utility – every fork has to be able to pick up food – but games don't serve a function in that way. Their “function” is to tickle the pleasure of the players. Games in this sense are halfway between art-making and more utilitarian forms of design, such as industrial design or architecture.

AC: What about your background in fine art? Why did you make the switch to game design?

EZ: I've always wanted to create cultural works that broke new ground. That's part of what drew me from being an art student to becoming a game designer.

I remember reading a quote by Larry Rivers when I was a painting student. He said something like he loves paint so much – he loves putting pigment on a brush and applying it to a flat surface – that he could spend a whole day just painting a door a flat color. When I read that quote, I realized that I wasn't really a painter. I liked making images, but I did not love making studio artwork the way that Rivers described.

AC: Then there are artists like Marcel Duchamp, whose work is often about games and who think in game-like terms.

EZ: When I started getting more seriously into game design, I found what was, for me, the equivalent of Rivers's pigment and brush. It wasn't just making use of the concept of games, as Duchamp does, but the nuts and bolts of designing game systems. My equivalent of loading a brush with paint and applying it to a surface is creating a rule set, twiddling numbers and variables, and seeing what happens as a result. I love presenting games to players, seeing what people do with the structure, then modifying the structure and seeing how it plays out differently. This is the shit-shoveling work of game design, but to me it is delicious. The challenge is finding shit-shoveling work that feels like being in heaven.

AC: And for you that labor of love is working with rules?

EZ: Rules are the material that game designers work with directly. We create structures of possibility, which are instantiated materially and also in terms of behavioral guidelines – the rules that players follow in order to play a game.

In a classical sense, an artwork is an object or context for aesthetic, conceptual, or cultural contemplation – a more passive experience. But a game designer hands players a toolbox that they go and make stuff with. This “box” could be the box of a board game, but it could also be a website or an iPhone app, or a game that takes over an entire city. As a game designer, the only thing that I have direct control over is the rules – they are my starting point. So even if part of my game is about inventing your own rules, I still have to give players a starting point for that activity. I talk about making rules not because I think games are just about rules, but because that's the thing that you get your hands dirty manipulating. Rules are the pigment of games.

AC: So the rules in gaming are essentially rules of human behavior – physical, psychological, intellectual. Their materiality is the tangibility of human engagement.

EZ: When I say material, I'm describing the rock that I as the game designer can put my chisel on. It's the thing that the game designer manipulates.

AC: Which is human behavior, no?

EZ: Human behavior arises because people decide to follow the rules – or maybe resist them or change them. The human behavior that emerges in a game is an effect of the designed structures of rules colliding with existing social structures and human behavior.

If a game was a building, the rules would be the material of the building – the actual physical structures. But what is more important than what a building looks like is what happens in the building – what it means for people to *inhabit* the building. Human behavior emerges in response to the material structures. If an architect puts all of the restrooms in a central meeting area, the people in the building will all be forced to meet one another. Perhaps that will result in a more social experience of working or living in the building, an experience that emerges in part because of the design. Now maybe people modify the building once they start living there and do things that the architect didn't anticipate. They're still reacting against the initial structures.

AC: But the structure is designed with the knowledge of normative ways that a human body might navigate a space.

EZ: Absolutely. Games are designed with human bodies and social behaviors in mind, too.

AC: In relation to social behaviors, is the anticipation of a meaningful experience integral to game design?

EZ: Yes. But the process of making a game is that we don't anticipate as much as we keep on setting up experiments to see what happens.

AC: What about games that enable players to change the shape of the game itself?

EZ: That happens in traditional games, such as when people make their own “home rules” for Monopoly. In the New Games movement of the 1970s there was an effort to blur the line between players and designers. There's a wonderful book by Bernie DeKoven from 1978 called *The Well-Played Game*, in which he makes an argument that players should be free to change the game they are playing at any time. This was before computer games, so he's talking about sports and physical games and board games. There's a sense in which he's trying to overthrow the authority of the designer of a game and hand the reins back to players.

AC: What about waywardness – the player's impulse to defy, or take an unexpected path?

EZ: The sweetest pleasure of being a game designer is seeing your players do things that you never thought could ever happen in your game – to see players totally surprise you by their play. That kind of weird emergence is what games are all about. Now, in the case of a game that is designed for players to refashion as part of the gameplay, you're squaring that possible complexity.

AC: So the game is like a dialogue between the designer and the player?

EZ: The more deeply you play a game the more you have to think like a designer. I don't think that other cultural forms work in quite the same way. At an expert level of play, for people who play the game deeply, it's about how they express themselves through their style of play. A fighting game is less about what character you choose than about your style of play itself. Do you play defensively? Do you play in a wild style where you're very unpredictable? Are you an aggressive risk taker? It takes a higher level of literacy to appreciate this – just as it does when spectating professional sports. When you're less of a gamer and looking over someone's shoulder,

you may see the visual identity and focus on, “Isn't it interesting that this geeky white dude is playing a little Japanese girl...?” I do think that image representation is interesting, but what's less often discussed in art contexts is how players engage with the system.

AC: This direct engagement of player and designer through the game reminds me of how an artwork can serve as a communication medium between the artist and the viewer. I'm thinking of this specifically in relation to a conversation I had with Frank Lantz before the conference, in which he was describing game design as being a new avant-garde art movement.

EZ: Frank is a brilliant game designer. He uses the phrase “the communication model of meaning” to describe the traditional idea of an author who communicates an idea or a message or a point of view through a cultural work that is received by someone. So a lot of people tend to ask, “Where is the *Citizen Kane* of games? Where is the great masterwork?” Frank's answer is that the communication model of meaning doesn't apply to games. Maybe games are not about a genius communicating an idea or a message through a masterpiece. Instead, games are more about designing a context where people create their own meanings.

In great games – games like chess, basketball, tennis – there is something, let's call it soulful play. These are games where the soulfulness arises from the player's engagement with the system. I talked about the fact that games distance you because they make you aware that what you're interacting with is a constructed system. But when the player gets so familiar with a game they get to a kind of Zen idea of acting without acting, like a virtuosic basketball player who plays without thinking.

It's a question I've been thinking about a lot. Why aren't games more soulful? They're oddly analytic and nerdy, but perhaps the question is not about games as much as about how they are played – the culture and community of players around a game. So maybe soulfulness is also a matter of literacy.

AC: On the subject of literacy, what does the term “gamification” mean?

EZ: Gamification is the idea that we can use superficial aspects of games, like points and levels, rewards and punishments, to guide and direct human behavior. Some people use “gamification” in a more philosophical sense – to identify how our lives are becoming more like games every day, more goal oriented and task oriented. But in practice, gamification really means marketers using game techniques. Frequent-flyer miles is a gamification by airlines. They're using points and levels to shape behavior. A teacher telling students that they're earning points going through different levels as they do their assignments is a gamification of the classroom. By the way, I'm not an advocate for any of that.

AC: Could another example be the family package of your cell-phone service provider, employing strategies of partnering and team building? In this case gamification is not only about earning points but also encouraging “players” to strategize teamwork as a method of accomplishing a goal.

EZ: You could say any market economy is a gamification. My point is that I think that games are becoming a central way of thinking about and understanding how people spend their cultural time. That's also what I am talking about when I use the term “ludic century” – it's this idea that the next hundred years are going to be defined by games. I think there's a renewed relevance of games and game design in the times in which we're living. We live in a time of systems, due to the rise of digital computers. Many aspects of our lives are mediated by networks of information, such as the way we work every day, the way we communicate with people – study, learn, socialize, research – and the way we engage with our governments and manage our finances. All these key aspects of our lives are mediated by digital networks. We are more and more creatures of systems, so being literate doesn't just mean written literacy, or even visual literacy, but understanding how systems work.

I would argue that games are *the* cultural form of systems. Of course, every poem is a system, every building is a system, every piece of music is a system, but games are a system in a more literal sense, because to play a game of chess you're literally pushing and pulling at the inputs and outputs of the system. You're manipulating the system to see what it can do. So you can interact with a visual work in an interpretive and contemplative sense, but you interact with a game in a much more literal sense.

In the 20th century, which was the century of information, the linear media of the moving image was the dominant cultural form. In this century – the ludic century – it seems to me that games are going to become the dominant cultural form. Or at least a model for how people expect to consume their culture and spend their leisure time – in a way that is modular, customizable, and highly interactive. Perhaps gamification is just a symptom of this idea. The way people are thinking about meaning in their daily lives increasingly resembles games.

AC: One of the eye-opening moments of the conference for me was when you pointed out the social potential of games – how gaming is becoming way more interactive, way more multiplayer. I still held the outdated notion that games are things that players do alone, or maybe with their best friend, nerding out together in a basement somewhere.

EZ: Which is still the case to some extent. But the games that are played by a single person sitting in front of a TV are very much in the minority now. Multiplayer games – on the web, on cell phones, on Facebook – are the dominant form of digital gaming. On the other hand, it's arguable whether video games were ever really a solitary phenomenon.

Henry Jenkins, who comes from comparative media studies, argued many years ago that games are not an isolating phenomenon, even though they seem that way on the surface. Even with traditional video games, you are often playing with a friend. And when it's a single-person game you're alternating play, you're helping someone out or sharing tips and strategies; you're talking about games in the playground or in the office or on the Internet with your friends and comparing your exploits.

AC: I think there's also something about the virtuality of games that is not isolating, in the sense of isolation as a total retreat, because the player is asked to become an active agent in this alternate reality.

EZ: I would argue that games are one of the least immersive cultural forms, if immersion means a trompe l'oeil-style sensory engagement. Games are the opposite of immersive. Animal behaviorists studying monkeys or dogs point out that when the animals play fight, they constantly signal the fact that they're playing through facial expression and gesture and body language. Part of playing is to constantly send a stream of communication saying, “I'm playing with you.” With dogs, the nip – the play bite – as a sign, signifies, “I'm biting you now.” But it also signifies the opposite of a bite; it also means, “I'm not biting you, I'm playing with you.” It is pretty amazing to think that animals can have this fairly sophisticated double consciousness around play.

I consider that kind of double consciousness to be part of video-game play, too. If you're playing Lara Croft on a video-game screen, in part there's a narrative engagement or immersion in which you are exerting yourself in the fictional world of the video game. On the other hand, Lara Croft is also just a cursor. She's like a puppet that you're self-consciously controlling to score points and complete levels and overcome challenges. If the character is just a cursor, you are distanced from the so-called immersive virtual world.

AC: From what you've said, it sounds like the unpredictable journey of play takes place when a player actually follows the rules rather than breaking them, and it is through a kind of obedient self-awareness that they can repossess and manipulate the system.

EZ: The more you play a game the more you get to know how it is constructed as a system. And to get better at it you have to reverse engineer the system from the point of view of the designer. And that is a non-immersive kind of relationship to take with a media experience. To play a game is to understand that you're interacting with a constructed, artificial work of culture.

To give another example, the folklorist Gary Alan Fine studies tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons. He says that, at any given moment of the game, you are a character in the world, you're a player of the game, and you're a person in the real world. So you're occupying those three identities simultaneously, and what's playful about it is the occupation of multiple identities. The traditional idea of immersion focuses on the character level, as if people really believe they're the character in the game world, whereas in fact the character is one of several layers. I think the participatory nature of play actually puts you back in your body.

AC: Because you're aware of existing in three different states at once.

EZ: Yes! To me, that's what play is. Play is multiple states of mind.