MASARYK UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF INFORMATICS

Review of Theory of Fun for Game Design by Raph Koster

Seminar Paper

DAVID HANINA

Brno, Fall 2023

Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

This is my review for the book *Theory of Fun for Game Design* by Koster. The book has been chosen solely based on the number of pages and a high number of images, as I am not much of a reader. Since I have no experience writing book reviews, I believe it is appropriate to explain my workflow. The book has multiple chapters, and after reading each I sat down and wrote the chapter's review. I also went back to the older chapters to make sure they were comprehensive. Since I already have knowledge of some topics, I also tried to add something. With either my words or an article that supports my or the author's view. The whole review is less academic and more personal, since this approach is hopefully more welcome. Lastly, in my review, I have decided to skip the foreword, prologue and epilogue as these parts are not educational.

1 Boring theory

This chapter summarises the first two chapters of the book. The chapter's name is just a joke as the first two chapters are more on the theoretical side.

I believe the first chapter tries to convey that the game has to be appropriately difficult for each individual to enjoy the game. The author explains this concept with himself, saying that he gets bored too easily if the game is either hard or too easy, as well as with his children. One day, they decided to pick up tic-tac-toe as they were finally able to understand its rules, but after many games, they simply started to understand the game too well and got bored as well.

This is a well-known phenomenon with multiple studies on the subject. I believe the most well-known academic article labels this fact as gameflow (2), another commonly known label is the flow theory, but this term is more broad and relates to learning (3). There is also an accompanying figure, which is probably better known, see figure 1.1. The designer's role is to simply keep the player in the flow zone, otherwise they will get bored and leave the game. There are also many other studies that deal with the similar such as "An investigation of the effects of game difficulty on player enjoyment."
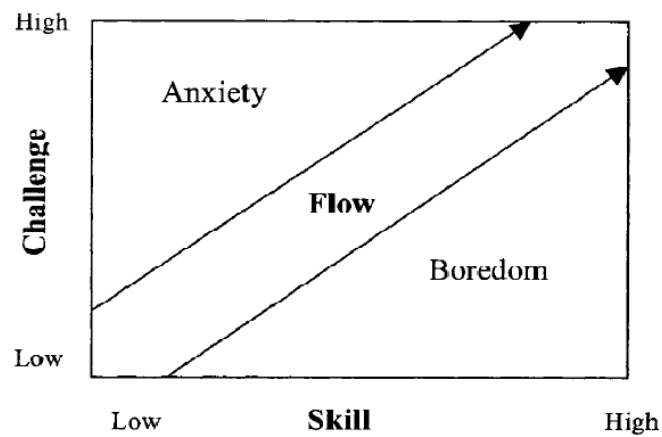
Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, 1991, 1993 cited in Hood, 2007

Figure 1.1: Flow theory aka gameflow

The next chapter begins with game theory. I understand the reasoning behind the author's explanation of game theory, "which has something to do with games, a lot to do with psychology, even more to do with math, and not a lot to do with game design." (1, p. 12), I agree with this statement, however, it can still be useful for designers, as it may provide an insight into how a player may behave. This is very hard to apply in complex games, especially when fueled with emotions. However when designing gambling games, applying game theory could be fun.

The author later explains that humans are very good at recognizing patterns, which I absolutely agree with. This fascinates me when looking at art. Just a few primitives composed properly, just a silhouette, yet the human brain is able to comprehend the image without any complications.

The author also suggests that people do not tend to notice unimportant details in the background. "We've learned that if you show someone a movie with a lot of basketball players in it and tell them in advance to count the basketballs, they will probably miss the large gorilla in the background" (1, p. 18). I have no real evidence, however, I believe the younger generations are much better at picking up those details than their predecessors, because of the much lower attention span introduced by the latest technologies (read TikTok). This has been supported by a class study in one of my other subjects, where the results of our class were surprisingly good.

The author mentions that it is usually very hard to draw what is in front of us. This is very true, lately I have been trying to improve my drawing skills and it is a skill that has to be learned like any other. The human brain is composed of two parts, one is logical and always trying to rationalise and explain what is in front of us. The other part is an emotional mess, the trick is to able to shut off our "smart" part and only focus on objects and colors and draw these. It is important to not think about lamp on the street, the trashcan, the cars, to draw them correctly, they have to be view as just a few primitives. HQ (5) explains these concepts in much greater detail. However all of this somewhat translates into the patterns mentioned earlier. The brain functions differently before discovering a pattern and after discovering a pattern or building muscle memory or "grok" as mentioned by the author. Lastly, the author explains levels of thinking, I am not delving too deep into the ideas presented as they have been covered in more detail by other subjects during my studies.

2 About games

Chapter about games tries to summarise chapters 3-5. I really enjoyed chapter three, which explains what games are. It all goes back to game flow and, more importantly, flow theory. The author describes that all games are about education, but I believe this is sometimes a little more complicated. However, the "iconified representations of human experience that we can practice with and learn patterns from" (1, p. 36) is a very fitting description for most games, be it a sport, a puzzle board game or fast-paced shooting game. The author emphasizes that a great addition to make games long-lasting is to add a random or unknown variable. On the other hand, there are games that are not centered around gameplay and are more story-based trying to deliver a narrative. I believe the reason to return to these games is similar to rewatching a film or rereading a book, to relive the story; there is no need to improve in the gameplay.

I feel like the true point of the fourth chapter is to teach that being childish is sometimes fine. Although I agree, it is important to remember not everything is a competition and the lines should be well-known and respected. Another view I have seen is that games are just simplifications of the real world. This nicely fits with the author's view, where he describes that games usually try to prepare us for real life (what really even is real life, as humans no longer have to hunt for food?), even though humans do many things subconsciously. The whole process of just being alive is very complicated. For me, the dive into the genres was unnecessarily stretched out, however there I agree, it is very difficult to push the player out of their comfort zone, but not too much. At the end of the chapter, I disagree with the quote "in fact, when we design games we often start with a previous game and change just one element in it", as many games also attempt to merge parts of two games together or simply choose to tell a narrative. The mentioned quote might have worked in the past, but I do not think this process is sufficient in today's age.

Chapter five is strongly against my stance when it comes to games. I feel like the games mentioned by the author throughout the book are the games from the 80s, which were on a completely different level than today's games even from a technical point of view. I believe the coat around the game (graphics, music, story) is very important, and it would be unwise to dismiss everything and just look at the game mechanics when determining whether games are the same, why? Because when you change the coat and no longer feel enjoyment. On the other hand, I also believe that the game should be at least a little bit enjoyable even without the coat. Otherwise, there is nothing to build upon. Many games also have a good story. It is just a different experience from movies and books. Historically, I agree that the stories were not very enjoyable. However in the last decade, more professional writers have been employed in game design. I found the whole chapter confusing and was unsure of what it was trying to convey. The author's definition of fun seems awkward to me. For me, fun is enjoyment, releasing dopamine. I believe the author was trying to state the same, but used overly complicated wording. The main difference between my point of view and the author's is that, by my definition, one could consider drugs to be fun, which in my opinion is absolutely valid as it is the reason why they are addictive.

3 Is this even fun?

A necessary poke at this task to make the text at least a bit readable and organised. This chapter summarises the book's chapters 6-8, which are more focused on learning patterns and "fun" by the author's definition.

Chapter six focuses on various different learning methods employed by humans. The insight about gender and cultural differences is interesting, however I believe this is getting less noticeable because the whole world is becoming connected and the differences are becoming smaller. "Since different brains have different strengths and weaknesses, different people will have different ideal games" (1, p. 107). I really like this quote, as it sums up what many (not only game) designers struggle with, which is defining the target audience properly. This is one of the most important preconditions for whether the end product will be profitable.

I really like the gender differences described by the author on page 108 (1). As someone who grew up with many girlfriends this absolutely makes sense to me. The types of games I play have changed, not really because I got older but simply because now I am spending my time with males as well as alone. There are different types of games I play with my male friends and completely different types of games when I get together with my girlfriends. This does not mean that either is better, it is just that each's brain has different wants from the games and we settle down on different games. This can be well seen in the real world supporting author's words, with girls it is usually empathetic and teamwork-based games, such as parlour games. Meanwhile, males seek competition, usually in sports, gambling or really anything they can win at. By no means am I saying that either group never plays other games, it is just one group is more likely to play these types.

The next chapter captures all the problems with learning, cheating, exploitation and overall human laziness. Humans prefer a well-known environment and usually opt for the easiest way. Game designers usually try to break these habits. I am not sure about my stance on this topic, I believe it is fine to get comfortable in games; however, getting comfortable with life is a problem. People should strive for better jobs, education, and new relationships, even at the cost of the unknown. Even though this chapter is from game designer's perspective and highlights how important it is to limit cheating to avoid boredom and reward players for success, I feel that this is just as significant in education. Applying gamification can make the entire learning process more enjoyable.

The eighth chapter seems fascinating to me. I am not the type of player who sticks to what works. I am tryout new things and hardly ever play the same character. "Going back through defeated challenges in order to pass time isn't a productive exercise of your brain's abilities" (1, p. 136), even though this is true, the same principle can be applied in a gym. You don't always aim for a new record, sometimes you aim lower, it feels good and you may still be making progress. The last page of this chapter is not limited only to games, many musicians also do not really listen to music, because they always end up analysing.

4 Designing games

Chapter "Games in Context" tries to pin down what games exactly are and how they relate to other forms of art. The author presumably wants to say that games are an art, but never really does so. I believe everyone in their lives has seen, read or listened to creations that are supposedly an art, but you could hardly consider them that way. For me, to consider something as art, it has to be a creative process. I am a programmer by profession, so even the code, the application and the software engineering behind it are a form of art. So, are replications an art? If there is nothing original or new, then no.

The next chapter focuses on ethics. The author returns to chapter five and states that the coat and dress of a game do matter, which is a little misleading. I feel like the author should have mentioned this already in the previous chapters. I believe the coating can even be used as a selling point of a game. The quality can be significantly lower, if you allow people to fulfil their nasty dreams. I believe this is fine. It is much better to let people fulfil their bad thoughts in games instead of in real life.

5 Sweet end

The chapter "Where Games Should Go", hardly answers the question presented in the title. The author is trying to explain the lack of maturity of the field, he settles down with the lack of formal words that explain the experience. "When we look at the great works of art, however, they are shaped in special ways" (1, p. 182), I have very mixed feelings about this statement. I usually dismiss everything that is popular since it is aimed at mass consumption rather than creating a unique experience. It is great to know the underlying patterns of how to create good art. However, it is boring to use these patterns for anyone with little interest in the field. I believe the true reason why games are not mature is, because it is a collection of all other arts together. In my eyes, it is currently the most complex form of "art" known to humankind.

Lastly, the author is explaining what games can and should do and what they are incapable of delivering. I absolutely agree that they should not substitute other forms of art, but they truly have their own special place on the shelf. The author also acknowledges that art and entertainment are very similar. I believe this is true. Any form of art is capable of pressing the correct buttons to question things, and that is what creates the entertainment. "We gravitate towards the music we already like, the morals we already know, and the characters who behave predictably" (1, p. 198), this depends. I am very open to some new experiences and specifically opt out to search for them, such as new music.

I totally agree with the author's epilogue to his grandpa "Last, it means that everyone else—the people like my grandfather—needs to come to understand the valuable role we play in society. We are not nerds in the basement rolling funny-shaped dice." (1, p. 220), it has always pained me that for most of my life, I have been looked down on for liking computers and video games. Luckily this has changed and people have realised that one of my interests does not make me any less human than anyone else.

Conclusion

Even though I have enjoyed reading the book and thinking about the principles, I feel like many aspects discussed in the book are nothing new and revolutionary. I have usually learnt something new or found other accompanying materials that deepened my knowledge. The text is well written with funny accompanying illustrations, anyway I am not picking up a new hobby anytime soon, as reading both at school and work is exhausting enough. The appendix format was really difficult for me to read and I skipped most of it, simply because it was such an obstacle. Footnotes are the way to go in this case for me. Lastly, no AI usage for you, only for grammar. Hopefully, it has been more enjoyable!

Bibliography

1. KOSTER, Raph. *Theory of Fun for Game Design*. 2nd edition. Sebastopol, Calif: O'Reilly Media, 2013. ISBN 978-1-4493-6321-5.

2. SWEETSER, Penelope; WYETH, Peta. GameFlow: a model for evaluating player enjoyment in games. *Computers in Entertainment* [online]. 2005, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 3–3 [visited on 2024-01-27]. ISSN 1544-3574. Available from DOI: 10.1145/1077246.1077253.

3. CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, Mihaly. The flow experience and its significance for human psychology. In: CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, Isabella Selega; CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, Mihaly (eds.). *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* [online]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 15–35 [visited on 2024-01-27]. ISBN 978-0-521-43809-4. Available from DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511621956.002.

4. ALEXANDER, Justin T.; SEAR, John; OIKONOMOU, Andreas. An investigation of the effects of game difficulty on player enjoyment. *Entertainment Computing* [online]. 2013, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 53–62 [visited on 2024-01-27]. ISSN 1875-9521. Available from DOI: 10.1016/j.entcom.2012.09.001.

5. HQ, Psychology Notes. *The Two Hemispheres of Our Brain* [The Psychology Notes Headquarters] [online]. 2011-11-18. [visited on 2024-01-27]. Available from: https://www.psychologynoteshq.com/brainhemispheres/.