

# Beyond Fun: Setting Aesthetic Goals and Sticking to Them

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## The fun factor

*“The first and foremost question to be answered about any game ... is ‘Is it fun?’”*

*—The Levelord (Richard Bailey Gray)<sup>1</sup>*

It would seem to go without saying that a game has to be fun (or at least that it has to have some desirable aesthetic effect). How then is it considered wisdom for a respected designer to point out that games need “the fun factor?”<sup>2</sup> And it *is* wisdom. It’s just easy to miss where its wisdom lies.

As game developers, we’re not making fun. We’re making computer programs (or, to generalize to non-digital games, we’re making play objects). To say that games need to have “the fun factor” is not a statement about the games (which speak for themselves) as much as it is about the process of making them. The desirable aesthetic effect of the game is not part of the crafted object. It emerges from the play in which the player engages that object; it is an effect of that process on the object’s user. Naturally, we expect when we conceive of the object that a typical player’s process will deliver the effect we desire. But as soon as we develop a specification of the *play object*, and especially if we discard or never clearly formulate a specification of the *aesthetic value*, we risk losing sight of that fun factor.<sup>3</sup> We may produce a program that conforms to all functional specifications, but turns out not to be fun. So, we might clarify our process statement (perhaps less colorfully) as “the goal of a game project should be an aesthetic effect, not simply a play object.”

Such a statement, still, is hard to disagree with. So what does it illuminate? What is it useful for?

Consider the implications of having a goal. One does not leave the attainment of a goal to chance. It is, in a word, managed, or it is not a goal but simply a desire. A desirable aesthetic effect might emerge from a game, or not. An aesthetic *goal* is a desirable aesthetic effect which we mean to put there, plan to put there, and measure our own success in attaining. It is an aesthetic effect as a managed thing.

## On “aesthetic effect”

“Fun” is a potentially useful term to distinguish some types of aesthetic effect from others. Otherwise, it would be perfectly acceptable to use the more compact “fun” instead of “aesthetic effect.” However, not everyone would agree that every desirable aesthetic effect constitutes fun, so use of the term would be confusing. For example, in the game *Dark Age of Camelot*, some players spend a great deal of time in the crafting of useful items. This activity is essentially an exercise in operant conditioning<sup>4</sup>; the crafter need not invest very much attention

in the activity, nor even look at the screen. He or she just occasionally hits the key or keys set up for crafting, perhaps while reading a book, and receives an irregular stream of rewards for doing so.

Claiming that such a person is having fun would tend to lead us into a great deal of confusion and controversy. It is much easier to apply the more general criterion of there being a desirable aesthetic effect. Such simple, repetitive tasks can be a relaxing way to spend a few quiet moments. The player can take some satisfaction in the utility of the in-game items so produced, and gains prestige by his character's attainment of high levels of crafting skill.

Or, consider the narrative and fantasy elements of many games, and the relationship of fun to the categories of comedy and tragedy. Certainly, we can say that it is fun to laugh, or to rejoice at the success of a hero's quest. Is it fun to shriek in terror? Now, is it fun to weep openly with grief? If we want our term to be broad enough to include every payoff, it may be useful to define "fun" to be so broad. But the ordinary person would probably be perplexed at the claim that the weeping player was having fun, even if he were having a very affecting experience.

If all play-value in games is "fun," then, we have formed an unusually broad definition of the word, which *can* be recommended as a critical exercise. But it also follows that if all play-value is fun, then saying a game has to be fun does nothing to illuminate what kind of game it is compared to any other game. Alternately, if by "fun" you mean that the game's aesthetic effect is carefree or even comic, then you can usefully distinguish between such games between games that are serious or even tragic. However, you need some broader language to describe the fact that such other games still have value to their players.

## **Formulating Goals**

If one is to adopt a goal, it must (among other things) be specific. At the very least, it must be identifiably different from the outcomes that are not your goal. Formulating aesthetic goals, therefore, requires a means of distinguishing between different aesthetic effects that might all be considered "fun" for the player.

Note that there are other criteria that go into the formation of good goals beyond the ability to formulate the goal. Perhaps the most commonly used framework is the notion of the "SMART" goal, which says a goal should be:

- **Specific**
- **Measurable**
- **Attainable**
- **Realistic**
- **Time-bound** (sometimes "Trackable," which nevertheless implies the addition of a timeline to the measurement criterion).

The special problems most distinct to aesthetic goals, however, have to do with the indirect relationship between aesthetic goals and the functional specifications of the play object. In SMART terms, how can an aesthetic goal then be specific (setting the goal) and measurable (sticking to it)? It is in the absence of these conditions that games find themselves measured only in terms of the specified play object, shipping in a state that is (hopefully) feature complete, but still just not fun.

There are actually quite a few options available to the developer who's looking for a way to more specifically describe the aesthetic qualities of his game. Three notable typologies are those of Roger Caillois, Pierre-Alexandre Garneau, and Marc Leblanc.

### **Caillois: Fundamental Categories**

Anthropologist Roger Caillois<sup>5</sup> developed what is probably the seminal classification of games, using four "fundamental categories," as follows:

- *Agôn*: contests of skill. Examples: Chess, Baseball.
- *Alea*: games of chance (or other factors over which the player has no control). Example: Roulette.
- *Mimicry*: games of make-believe, fantasy, and imitation. Example: Cops and Robbers.
- *Ilinx*: games of vertigo (or physical sensation generally). Example: Leapfrog.

While he initially presents them as a categorization of games themselves, Caillois' extends his fundamental categories into "basic attitudes governing play." This leap is required to account for games that could be said to fit in more than one of his categories.

Extending the notion from classifying games to play-values also allows Caillois to engage in some analysis of the implications of combining certain pairs of values. Games combining elements of skill and chance easily come to mind, for example, and Caillois gives extensive consideration to what they imply about the players' perception of the merit involved in winning.

This exercise can be interesting even in the abstract. Caillois examines various pairs, and also develops some arguments for why certain pairings are "forbidden." Games cannot combine *alea* and *mimicry*, posits Caillois, because chance is fundamentally an appeal to fate on the player's behalf, and "at the moment of entreaty, he would not wish to appear in the guise of a stranger, nor would he pretend or believe that he was anything other than himself."<sup>6</sup> It is left as an exercise to the reader to account for the existence of *Dungeons and Dragons*, where players regularly do exactly that. Possibly the anthropologist's perspective makes too much of chance as a form of divination, ignoring the mere thrill of uncertainty. Or perhaps the divinatory perspective is correct, but the laws of magical sympathy<sup>7</sup> confer the approval of fate from the character to the player when he rolls a "natural 20." Nevertheless, Caillois might have predicted *D&D* by 15 years or so if he had gone about his exercise just slightly differently.

Caillois also recognizes a variation among games independent of his fundamental categories, in terms of the degree of seriousness or tumult involved. He terms the quality of seriousness

*ludus*, and frivolousness (for lack of a better word, which is why Caillois coins his own) *paidia*. Unlike the fundamental categories, however, *ludus* and *paidia* are not distinct, but form a continuous axis of variation. A game is not either serious or non-serious, but rather more or less serious. It is important to note that these terms can apply not only to the presumed attitude of the player, but also to the structural freedom of the game. Free play such as make-believe, whirling and jumping about, or playful wrestling exemplifies *paidia*, while play more heavily bound by explicit rules and conventions (theater, sports) exemplifies *ludus*.<sup>8</sup>

### **Garneau: Fourteen Forms of Fun**

Perhaps the most widely circulated typology of fun in game development circles lately, Pierre-Alexandre Garneau's fourteen forms of fun<sup>9</sup> make no great claims to a theoretical framework. "By understanding these fourteen forms of fun," Garneau asserts, "it is possible to compare the features of a game with them and see which features contribute most to the fun of the game." Garneau thus treats the utility of this kind of survey as essentially self-evident, or at the very least simply offers it for what it is worth. Garneau's list is as follows:

- Beauty
- Immersion
- Intellectual Problem Solving
- Competition
- Social Interaction
- Comedy
- Thrill of Danger
- Physical Activity
- Love
- Creation
- Power
- Discovery
- Advancement and Completion
- Application of an Ability

As will be immediately apparent, Garneau takes a more pattern-based approach than Caillois. It is perhaps less analytically pure, in that Garneau's forms of fun are not all clearly distinct. Garneau also identifies his patterns variously by the activity involved and by the player's emotional experience, or both, as seems appropriate to the case. However, by not being constrained to abstract rigor in these regards, Garneau's list cleaves closer to ordinary ideas of game category, making it highly accessible in practical terms.

### **Leblanc: Pure Post-Caillois Aesthetics**

Game developer Marc Leblanc proposes a different set of "kinds of 'fun'."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Caillois (who initially set out to analyze types of games and progressed to "basic attitudes" when certain games could not be fit in a single category) or Garneau (using activities such as social interaction interchangeably with aesthetic qualities such as beauty and emotions such as love), Leblanc's categories are an attempt to focus exclusively on aesthetic qualities in the abstract:

- Sensation: *Game as sense-pleasure*

- Fantasy: *Game as make-believe*
- Narrative: *Game as drama*
- Challenge: *Game as obstacle course*
- Fellowship: *Game as social framework*
- Discovery: *Game as uncharted territory*
- Expression: *Game as self-discovery*
- Submission: *Game as masochism*

The meaning of most of these aesthetic values is straightforward enough; further analysis is generally outside of the present topic. That said, the notion of submission is potentially problematic. It is little recognized as a distinct play value (outside, perhaps, of sexual play), but will be recognizable in the experience of many simple but compelling games where the player surrenders his will to the prerogatives of the game.

In fact, it can be argued that the nature of rules and play make submission to the prerogatives of the game a component of all games, and of any play that is not (in Caillois' terms) completely given to *paidia*. Whether that makes submission an aesthetic value of all games, or whether both this value and the form that gives definition to play simply emerge from the same structures, is less clear.

## **Process Translation**

The three frameworks previously mentioned will give you an example of some of the ways you may formulate your aesthetic goals, but once you have decided upon which goals to base your game, you must be able to effectively communicate them to those that will be responsible for creating the game. As a Game Designer it is your role to make the choices and rules your game is based upon, but with the help of a Project Manager you will need to follow certain guidelines and processes to turn your aesthetic goals into, ultimately, functional tasks and specifications.

The first step in translating your aesthetic goals to functional specifications is narrowing down your concept and communicating it through a vision statement. A vision statement is a way of communicating the ideas and purposes of your game in an easily understood manner to encourage and inspire the team to achieve and meet the goals of creating the game.

Once you have your vision for the game outlined and everyone is on board, the next step is to develop a project charter. A project charter is generally a one or two page document that outlines the purpose, expectations, and challenges that you have identified early on for your project. You and your fellow game developers are travelers on a journey to create a game. You're likely to get lost...often, but with a well thought out Charter in hand, you may just be able to guide yourself back to the original goals of the project. Some examples headings for your Project Charter include:

- Customer Expectations
- Key Documents / Assets
- Internal Objectives for Title
- Critical Selling Features
- Known Development Challenges

You've likely been hanging onto your thoughts and ideas for your game design for some time. You have no doubt been inspired by games that you have played previously and those designers and visionaries that have come before you. While the process of adapting your aesthetic goals is mostly an introspective one, it is necessary to take the time prior to developing a Game Design Document (GDD) to look externally at previously released games that may share key features to your own design or upcoming titles that may be considered competitive products. A competitive analysis of current games on the market may yield insight into what differentiates your game from those currently available and how your title will differ from an aesthetic and functional point of view. Areas to focus on for developing a competitive analysis are:

- Feature set
- NPD Sales data
- Platform
- Demographic
- License / Tie-In
- Reviews

By this point you've begun the process of thinking of your aesthetic goals and ideas as very real tasks, but this process has only just begun. You must now take on the bulk of your initial work and begin writing your first draft game design document. There are plenty of resources available for creating this, which we won't detail here, but this process will definitely involve more thought towards what your true goals for your game are and what your game will ultimately become. This process is often a solitary one, but equipped with some of the documentation you have already created you will fortunately not be staring at a blank page.

Also, since the game design document treats such a broad range of topics, it can be a difficult vehicle for getting across the vision of the game. So while that vision remains a key component of the GDD, with your supporting documents in hand you will not feel the sense of trying to sell your idea through one, thick piece of documentation. By using your competitive analysis data to refer to other similar games you will likely have a better chance of communicating the goals of your game to your fellow developers (and Publishers!) in a form that's most familiar to them and by consulting your project charter often throughout the production of your game you can verify that you're staying on course and fulfilling the goals that you and your team set forth from the very beginning of your project.

## Managing the Creative Process

The very notion of managing aesthetic effects is undoubtedly shocking to some. It might seem to imply that you can reduce aesthetic effect to a formula, which would be an assault on the artistic person's view of the special nature of creativity. That, however, would assume too much of the power of management. We must recognize that even a well-managed goal can fail (or succeed serendipitously beyond our plans). Therefore management does not imply an elimination of intangible qualities. Management is not automation. Art does involve intangibles, but one doesn't have to make intangibles out of certain things, like what the purpose of the created object is in the first place. To do so is to make "art for art's sake," which, whatever you think of it, is not the only option. The other option, broadly speaking, is craft. Craft is creative but purposeful. Its created objects are intended to be used for generally well-understood purposes, and objects that do not succeed in those purposes are not completed objects.

The call for a terminology in which to set aesthetic goals – and a process by which to help ensure their completion – is thus the call of a craftsman, or at least of the creative soul who wishes his work to be a "craft." Much as rules create and define play, the tools and process of a developed craft enable and serve creativity. The setting of clear aesthetic goals is the key to even knowing how to approach the first and foremost question — "is it fun?"

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<sup>1</sup> *Game Design: Secrets of the Sages*. Marc Saltzman, ed.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Levelord's subsequent comments (ibid.) can be seen as touching on these same issues: objective specifications in terms of the program capabilities, rather than subjective analysis of the play effect. E.g. "The Fun Factor is often forsaken for cutting-edge flash, and much effort is taken away from the game itself ... There are no defined rules for fun and the only way to ensure the Fun Factor is to play test."

<sup>4</sup> For more on operant conditioning in games, see John Hopson, "Behavioral Game Design," <[www.gamasutra.com](http://www.gamasutra.com)> April 27, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Note that Caillois introduces his fundamental categories as a partition of games themselves, but extends this critical frame to the "attitudes" involved in play later in the same work.

<sup>6</sup> Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the seminal work on magical sympathy (and much of comparative folklore, magic, and religion in general) is Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

<sup>8</sup> The whole realm of *ludus* vs. *paidia* deserves (and has received) papers and papers of its own. For an excellent discussion of this yin-yang, in which rules are defined by play in the process of limiting its possibility space, see Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre-Alexandre Garneau, "Fourteen Forms of Fun," <[www.gamasutra.com](http://www.gamasutra.com)> October 12, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Leblanc, 2003 Game Design and Tuning Workshop, <[www.algorithmancy.org](http://www.algorithmancy.org)>. Also in Salen and Zimmerman.