

From Breaking To Making

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ABSTRACT

When I started making games four years ago, I didn't quite envisage I'd be still at it four years later. It was meant to be a one-time experiment to get a maker's perspective on the objects I've dedicated my life to researching. Many game designer colleagues had suggested engaging in a shift of lenses, promising a world of back-stage insight that my analytical gaze was unable to penetrate. After years of resistance I plucked up the courage to embark on the process of making a game.

Up until recently I made an effort to keep my research and design work separate. Although I came up with a solid excuse to justify that split, the truth is I didn't have enough belief in my design-self not to embarrass my research-self publically. Now I'm at a point where the cross-pollination of these two sides of my working life is so pervasive that the pretense of separation is untenable.

This paper is an academic post-mortem on the two games I have worked on to date. Post-mortems tend to communicate the design and production choices made during the development process and how these panned out when the game made it to market. This paper will instead outline the theoretical questions and agendas that informed the creation of the game in question, how these were reflected in the process of design, followed by a reflection on the utility of the design process of that particular game for my research work. While sharing qualities with Gaver's concept of research through design, here the theory that is generated does not stem primarily from the artifact in question, but rather it is the theory that acts as the seed out of which the artifact grows, and in turn informs the theory that gave it birth. I'll give an overview of each of these sections below.

The first game I made was Will Love Tear Us Apart. WLTUA is an attempt at making a game adaptation of a song. The game was sparked by my interest in the relationship between poetry and games, particularly in relation to metaphor and simulation. It also dealt with the commonly held assumption that games are, or at least should be, fun. This section will thus discuss the difficulties in translating lyrics to game mechanics, dealing with ephemeral concepts such as love through a cybermedia object that resists ambiguity and the challenges of creating a purposely frustrating experience to fit the essence of the song in question.

We then shift focus to the physical medium of board games for the second mini post-mortem. Posthuman was born out of a series of papers I wrote (Calleja 2015, 2013,

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2011a, 2011b, 2009, 2007) that argued for a reconceptualization of game narrative. A big part of this argument is the acknowledgement of the need for a re-conceptualization of classic notions of narrative derived from literature (Chatman 1978, Genette 1980, Prince 1982) and film (Metz, 1974) along with a separation between two broad forms of game narrative: story which is designed into the game and communicated to the player and story which is generated in the player's mind through gameplay. The elusive nature of the latter has made it challenging to theorize satisfactorily. This is where Posthuman came in. While not intending to make a game that proves an argument I have made theoretically, it was incredibly helpful to design an object that follows the theory of experiential narrative I was developing and observe how the game's components structured player-generated story, if at all, during the various rounds of testing, previews, reviews and now that the game has hit the shelves, the response from players of the game on forums. Like the previous section this one ends with a reflection on the impact of the design process on my research and lecturing work, both in terms of the intended goal of the project, as well as the unintended lessons learnt.

The Posthuman post-mortem is followed by a brief section describing the transition of the board game to a video game, which is still a work in progress at the time of writing. The Posthuman video game follows the theoretical inquiry embarked upon in the board game version, albeit in a more systemically complex fashion. By this I mean that the translation of the narrative theory I have been working on into game form is able to have a more elaborate design since it is being upheld by a machine. This section will thus discuss the theoretical constraints that guided the design of the video game version with practical examples thereof. It ends with a reflection on the effect of the current state of this model on player experience gathered from test data.

The paper ends with a consideration of the utility of design and development to the academic theory and analysis of games and vice versa. I will here give an overview of the pitfalls, epiphanies and major challenges faced, ending with an appeal to game academics, particularly theoreticians and analysts to engage with the design process, if not in digital than in board game form.

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