The Axiom of Player Development

Description

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I keep coming up with different interpretations of my play theory to analyze game design and development. It has evolved from GameStories to Playstates to Play Motifs to Video Game Elements. My Mechanics post on my Heropath blog inspired me to think further about what it takes to develop a player. So Iâ??ve created the Axiom of Player Development, which is based on **The Axiom of Maria,** a precept in alchemy. I love the concept of alchemy being related to player development since what occurs is almost magical given the passion that players commit to learning to play video games.

The **Axiom of Maria** is:

â??One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth.â?•

The fundamental concept is that by using alchemy, it is possible to transform elements into new states, which are different aspects of the original element. I see the process of player development being the same thing.

Following that format I would write:

THE AXIOM OF PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

The player encounters the video game
(*The One*)
The video game reveals symmetrical and asymmetrical mechanics
(The Two)
These mechanics challenge and develop the playerâ??s skills

(The Three)
The playerâ??s skills span across breadth discovery and depth mastery
(The Fourth)
The playerâ??s skills open up new encounters with the video game
(The New One)
Chris Billows (2023)

Lets go through this line by line:

The player encounters the video game by reading about it, watching videos about it, discussing it with friends, and ultimately playing it. This is the collectively known as the first encounter.

The player experiences how the video game arranges its mechanics from the symmetrical to the asymmetrical. A game that is symmetrical is played very differently from an asymmetrical game. In a symmetrical game, the computer game is an arena/referee that manages the competition between a player and the opponent(s) who are other players or artificial constructs. In an asymmetrical game, the computer game arrays a series of obstacles against the player and the player is tasked to overcome these obstacles.

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These obstacles challenges the player and the player uses the in-game tools to succeed. The outcome of this is that the player then develops new skills which range from the persistence of breadth discovery to the precision of depth mastery.

An asymmetrical game emphasizes skills in persistence, which is needed for breadth discovery by having the player explore the gameâ??s setting, story, mechanics, etc. A symmetrical game would emphasizes the skill of precision of depth mastery by having the player repetitively practicing with the in-game tools to get better. Thinking in terms of genres we would find asymmetry/breadth discovery in Adventure and Role-Playing Games which contrasts from eSports and Strategy games that have symmetrical/depth mastery.

The breadth of a game are those aspects known as narrative and spatial content. These are the levels, maps, items, dialogues, characters, and more that is arrayed for the player to discover. The depth of the game are those aspects known as mechanics and emergence. This is the logic, independent agent, tool complexity, and obstacle complexity that the player needs to master. Each comes with their shadow side with breadth discovery becoming rootless pleasure seeking while depth becomes myopic tunnel vision. A good game developer will know when to change up the playerâ??s experience to keep things from getting stale and keep the player learning.

The playerâ??s new skills then open new areas of discovery and mastery in the game and the process repeats itself, leading to greater discovery and mastery.

All successful games are a testimony of their ability to build their playersâ?? skills. The best designed games leverage skill building in a laddered approach by adding additional tools and obstacles that build on the players previous skills. So having a double-jump mechanic would only be introduced when the player already knows how to jump. A game that provides hours of depth mastery and breadth discover

will be loved by its players.

Every game starts off with breadth discovery including how to move and interact with the in-game tools. But if the video game keeps introducing more things to discover then this creates breadth of discovery and not the depth of mastery. Players do not master a story or setting, they discover it. In asymmetrical games discovery becomes an ongoing experience while in symmetrical games following the initial discovery, the player is forced to to adopt depth mastery. It is two different aspects of player development.

Some players love ongoing discovery and do not enjoy the crunch of mastery while other players want to be challenged in terms of skill depth to the point their mastery demonstrates such accomplishment that the game becomes like a toy or playground.

Hardcore gamers play completive games to demonstrate their mastery and they will level criticism about â??softerâ?? games like walking simulators because those games do not require the precision and mastery of the gameâ??s tools and obstacles in an intense environment. In contrast Interactive Fiction players would feel snooty and superior towards those players as not having the openness to be present with things that are subtle or more passive.

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This dichotomy is a testimony that video games have it all.

Depth Mastery and Breadth Discovery may represent a kind of dichotomy but in reality they are major ingredients that are added to taste by the game developers. They are not exclusive and most video games will add dashes of Depth Mastery and Breadth Discovery to their alchemical concoction. Even with each, there exists a broad spectrum of application such as:

- Limited Breadth leads to intensity as found in early arcade games (i.e. Pong, Breakout, etc.)
- Expansive Breadth leads to exploration as found in Adventure and Role-Playing Games
- Limited Depth leads to simpler precision of mastery as found in various games (i.e. Pong, Pac-man, Dear Esther, etc.)
- Expansive Depth leads to complexity and difficulty to master the precision as found in eSports, MOBA, 4X, etc.

Regardless of the nature of the game, all games needs to have obstacles be solvable by the playerâ??s skill level or you end up with problems. Below is a formula that captures this tension between the skill of the player and the challenge of the obstacle:

- If Player Skill > Obstacles
  Then Player Development = Bored / Too Easy
- If Player Skill = Obstacles
  Then Player Development = Flow / Balanced
- If Player Skill < Obstacles
  Then Player Development = Overwhelmed / Too Hard

Video games are unique from all other mediums like movies, books, and music because they are tools to skill development. This skill development appears to have helpful real-world application because computers and their offspring (consoles, mobile) are tools and video games are the tools of play. No amount of re-watching a movie, or re-reading a book leads to skills development because the movie/book/song is never a tool. This is why video games are not art or literature and must be treated as its own unique medium that not only entertains players but also develops them.

(This post is greatly influenced by Raph Kosterâ??s A Theory of Fun)

Category

1. Playstates Theory

Tags

1. Game Philosophy
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