Toys/Playgrounds, Simulations, and Emergence

Description

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The Playstates theory is defined primarily as as trait system. The five different Playstates are distinguished by their kind of Play so Puzzles differ from Sports, Role-Plays differ from Games, etc. But being distinct does not mean they are exclusive. Playstates can mix with each other to create new Play experiences.

When somebody is completing a crossword puzzle, they are participating in the Puzzle Playstate. It is the Play of Matching and crosswords share that essential core trait with Soduko, Find a Word, and Match-3 Video Games. Whether it is done electronically or with a pencil and paper, the core trait of Matching is unchanged.

The core trait of each Playstate is as follows:

1. Puzzles is the Play of Matching
2. Role-Play is the Play of Behavior
3. Toys/Playgrounds is the Play of Exploration
4. Games is the Play of Measurement
5. Sports is the Play of Competition

Each Playstate demonstrates a distinct type of play. When I test the model anecdotally, I find that so far it stands up to the testing. There is an inherent logic and wisdom that feels right. To demonstrate, letâ??s take a distinct Video Game genre, the Simulation, and see where it fits in the Playstates.

Iâ??ve always had the vague notion that Simulation were either complex strategy games or belonged to the vehicle simulation genre. With games like Lunar Lander, Hammurabi, Flight Simulator, Sim City, and Populous, we see all communicating an underlying system to the player. Not totally unlike an RPG or Strategy game, the player learns what the gameâ??s simulated world rules are and with practice eventually excels according to them. Its mostly for this reason why I saw Simulations as being a sub-

genre of Strategy.

But as I thought more about it, Simulations were more free form than many Strategy Games. The Game of Life by Conway, The Sims, Sim City, Flight Simulator, SimEarth, etc. are not about winning or overt success. The challenge was not an enemy as much as it was learning the underlying mechanics.

Freedom to Explore

Every Video Game entails learning and exploration but it is what you are learning about is what makes Simulations unique. A player learns how to fly a plane using the high fidelity controls in Flight Simulator. A player creates family dynamics with the Sims. A player sees variations of life in Conwayâ??s Game of Life. It is free-form learning, the Video Gameâ??s environment providing feedback to the player. Simulations communicate something elseâ?¦ and that something else is exploration.

Simulations is basically the Play of Exploration which makes it fall under the Playstate of Toys/Playgrounds. What is most validating is that Will Wright found no issue with seeing Simulations as Toys/Playgounds:

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> Although Super Mario, which dÃ©buted in the United States in 1985, had a goal (to rescue Princess Peach from a giant reptile named Bowser), it also encouraged exploration for its own sake; in this regard, it was less like a competitive game than a â??software toyâ?•â??a concept that influenced Will Wrightâ??s notion of possibility space. â??The breadth and the scope of the game really blew me away,â?• Wright told me. â??It was made out of these simple elements, and it worked according to simple rules, but it added up to this very complex design.â?• via NewYorker.com

It was Will Wright who coined the term â??software toyâ?• and refused to call his Video Games â??Gamesâ?•. I partially disagree with him as his most famous game, The Sims has various Play of Measurement elements, including character traits, time management, and accumulation. But Wright is also correct as as you donâ??t lose at The Sims because one of your Sims did not make it the bathroom. It was forgiving, playful, and allowed you to explore limits.

Playstates sees Toys and Playgrounds being free form tools for play and exploration and Video Game Simulations are the way this is communicated in a digital medium. While Populous borrowed some Simulation aspects it was primarily about using the mechanics to accomplish a goal and was more competitive (Game-like) and less playful (Toy/Playground-like).

Simulations tend to not have enemies because you donâ??t want an enemy obstructing in your exploration of an environment or system mechanics. This is why random encounters in CRPGs can be so off-putting. It is why there is no enemy in Sim City though you could throw a natural disaster at your city if you choose, just like acting like Godzilla destroying a sand castle you built.

Playing with a hula-hoop on a field without rules can be liberating and enjoyable, but you change the aesthetic experience immensely if this is done in the middle of a competitive football field. I am arguing that neither aesthetic is superior, but its important to know what you are signing up for.

Emergence Emerges

Whether the outcome is based on a competitive sports match or an exploration of a toy or space, this range of play does share a common trait: That of emergence. Emergence is a quality of experience that contains anticipation, of which it can be the unknown being revealed or the known being reinforced. It is Emergence that contains the emotional quality of meeting expectations.

Consider the following Video Games:

Adventure (Atari 2600)
Lemmings
System Shock
Grand Theft Auto
Incredible Machines
Elder Scrolls
Sim City
The Sims
Minecraft
Donâ??t Starve
Rouge-likes
eSports

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All contain â??software toy / software playgroundâ?• qualities. While some may be unforgiving (Donâ??t Starve and many Rouge-likes) they all task the player with figuring out how the game will emerge. There might be puzzle-like tasks, but there is a variety of ways to solve the puzzle as we see in Lemmings or Incredible Machines.

What is fascinating in this list, is that we see a diverse assortment of Video Game genres that are unrelated, now sharing an element; that of emergence. It allows us to see the shared traits between Lemmings, Grand Theft Auto, SimCity; whereas as previously we would just say that they were all Video Games. While an eSport will have an anticipated outcome (one team will win) it is the emergence of the outcome that makes sports in general so compelling for many.

What could be considered frivolous (Toys and Playgrounds) is actually the basis of simulations and its related qualities of exploration and emergence. How about that for a surprise!

An additional surprise for me is that this quality of emergence has me seeing that perhaps the number of Playstates may need to be expanded. I will need to ponder some more and post an update.

Category

1. Playstates Theory

Tags

1. Emergence

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Date Created
October 21, 2017
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