Critical Gameplay: Black Like Me?

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Abstract

This paper describes the theory and implementation of a 2-tiered procedural rhetoric game. The game, Black Like Me, employs critical design to encourage players toward situational analysis instead of mere attribute matching. Players are presented with a color matching game at the surface, but the game is designed to reward players for holistically evaluating a scene and subverting the explicitly suggested game rules. The game is designed to train players toward perceiving ambiguity and employing alternative play strategies.

Introduction

The Critical Gameplay project is a 4 year ongoing project to create and embed critical design games. The games have been exhibited at a variety of academic showcases, creative exhibits and related events in Europe, North and South America. It is an effort to raise awareness around game design assumptions that permeate traditional play[1]. Since 2009 the games have been displayed at 25 venues.

Game designers are often reluctant to embrace alternative play within the systems they create. In reality some of the most successful play experiences are about designers merely providing a set of toys through which players can explore concepts. This is true of megahits like Minecraft and World of Warcraft to construction set franchises like Civilization, The Sims and Tycoon games. However, the fundamental distinction is that many of these games seek to impose specific ideologies about the way systems operate. The Sims for example, can be understood as a model of capitalist ideology [2]. This practice in games is as old as Monopoly itself, a game designed to impart Georgist economics [3]. The history of such games is largely tied to the implementation of political ideologies or game theory.

On the other end of the spectrum are contemporary, self-identified social impact games. These games attempt to provide overt messages that are similar in character to first generation educational films. The games are often literal and their messages direct. Such games frequently ostracize their experience, leaving it at the fringes of player preferred play and interest. The games may ultimately become popular among the niche that produces and champions it. This is appropriate for developing a community around the practice, but it fails to impact those who do not know about such play or the concepts it seeks to promote.

The goal of the third generation of Critical Gameplay practice is to bridge this dichotomy in what is commonly described as procedural rhetoric [4]. Instead of providing overt messaging on the game's agenda, it seeks to offer fundamentally basic and inviting gameplay based on new concepts in play. The gameplay continues to embed a message through mechanic, but the mechanic is subtle. The goal is to create games that can be popular of their own right. Yet, instead of revealing themselves as social impact, players do what they naturally do – look for the fastest way to win the game. The game's message is embedded not in the explicit rules of play, but in the resulting methodological framework players derive to win. The lesson is not in the winning or playing as instructed, but in the player's experience in discovering a better way to win.

The question the modern, digital designer must ask is how contemporary computer games utilize their larger player base to encourage players to think differently about the systems they assume on a daily basis. How can a game make people more aware of their own innate stereotypes? How can designer's help people practice becoming more open minded, or perhaps even adopt an entirely new mindset?

The Design

As a Critical Gameplay game, the game Black Like Me is designed around a simple premise - create games that identify the weakness in specific problem solving approaches. If games are understood as practice in problem solving, then the instruction sets and rules in games are the structure on which that practice is built. Popular games ask players to do fairly basic tasks like match similar colors, objects and patterns (e.g. match 3 games) . This type of practice is not inherently philosophical. Yet, its prescription is clear. Players should seek out likeness, finding things that belong together by appearance.

This assumption of the match interaction, of finding similarly colored objects or discerning objects by color provides a conceptual scaffold whether intended or not. The scaffold is one which supports an oversimplified image or attribution. Like colors must be grouped. All white tiles in one section, all black tiles in another. The question to ask is what happens when that oversimplification asks players to discern the shades of grey that are inevitably true to life? Isn't the understanding of such shades one milestone in maturation as a medium as an individual?

Black Like Me's first layer of play works to play upon this first question. Players are asked to match one tile to another tile of the same color in a grid. As they match correctly, the game's color range is reduced until the last matches in a round are narrowly different shades of black. Where once there were many heterogeneous tiles selected out, there are now fairly homogenous tiles left. At this level, the game is practice in ambiguity and selection.

Games are also generally prescriptive in their play. Players understand a right way and a wrong way to play. In digital play, the wrong way is enforced with punishing consequence (e.g. game over, round lost, or unsupported results). Too often games are accepted as simple rule sets and players are rarely supported in critical examinations of those rule sets. Playing a shooting game as a pacifist does not disarm your opponents, it simply leaves you prey to aggressors.

Black Like Me is designed for one simple execution of critical playing. Keeping with the expectations of games that comply with Google Play and Apple App store requirements the game presents itself as a standard matching game. The match is presumably based on color, as the games instructions imply.

In reality, the game becomes impossibly difficult when players discern by color. Instead players can examine the game screen more carefully. There is a trick. The match tile may have the same color, but it also behaves differently. The last tile to appear on the screen is the tile the player wants. The difference in timing is perceptible, but in milliseconds. When the player observes this, the challenge in the game is greatly simplified. If the player stairs at the whole screen, instead of discriminating for the one single, affirming color match, the pattern becomes apparent.

This game is then about more. It is not about affirming the game mechanic - find two things alike and match them – a constant practice in classification. Instead, the game is about asking more questions of the game system. This is more than a cheat, as it is explicitly designed into the game as the true way to play. Players are rewarded not for cheating the system, but for asking a single critical question about the gameplay experience – can I play this game another way?

Video Demonstration of Game:
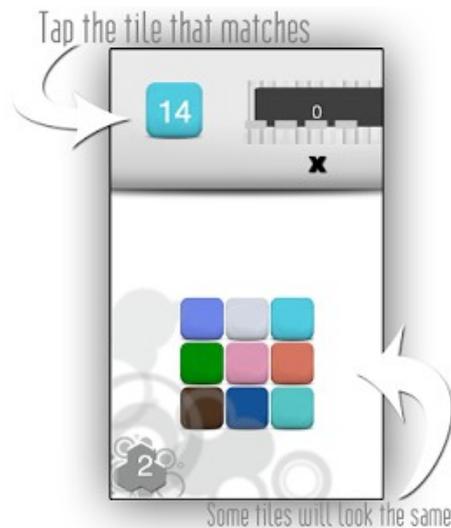https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO5882JTWGU

Image of Game

Image of the Installation:

Technical Requirements:

The artist will bring all materials:

- Apple iPAD or Android Tablet
- Wall or Table Mountable Enclosure
- Headphones (not required)

References

[1] Grace, L. D.. Critical gameplay: designing games to critique convention. In Proceedings of the 20th ACM international conference on Multimedia. ACM Press (2012), 1185-1188.

[2] Sicart, M. Family Values: Ideology, Computer Games & Sims. In 2003 DIGRA Conference, Digital Games Research Assoicaiton (2003).

[3] Orbanes, P. Monopoly: The World's Most Famous Game-and how it Got that Way. Da Capo Press, 2006.

[4] Bogost, I. 2010. Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames. The MIT Press.

[5] App Annie-App Ranking and Analytics, http://www.appannie.com/top/, last accessed September 18, 2013