

Ghost Stories from Learning Game Design: Surprises: Good outcomes we weren't expecting and things we'll know to worry about next time.

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A Spirited Discussion among Practitioners

The aim of this Fireside Chat proposal is to spark a lively discussion among the many wizened (and scarred) designers of learning-games who will be at the conference. The intent is to focus the discussion interesting discoveries that occur in the design process: both serendipitous and things that the designers wish they had foreseen and possibly avoided. . The goal is to talk about the experience and the lessons of the work itself, the surprises and what we've learned from them

Given this focus, this proposal will not include references to learning research, design theory, or specific processes, though the authors and other participants certainly work with all of these.

The Authors (Ghost story tellers..)

The authors are designers who between them have many years and many games on their resumes, and in particular a lot of work and thinking about learning games. While we generally share an interest in working forward from core learning or practice objectives, our work and approaches have tended to vary quite widely.

The authors' work has ranged from ingenious puzzles to complex strategy games to open games-as game-building-systems to radical MMOs and mobile collaborations, language-learning-through games, and much more.

In addition to learning-game design and development, the author variously have written extensively on game design and learning, have helped invent game genres, and have worked with educators in many different disciplines.

We don't expect to always agree – and hope for several good arguments and also to draw out experiences and ideas from everybody who joins us.

The Focus

Playing a game involves attention to the goal a player is trying to reach, the role being played, and to the tools, actions, and strategies the player can use to reach the goal. To succeed, the player must learn about all of these elements – what tools make sense when, what strategies worked – and didn't, what the responsibilities of a role really mean.

To design a game with the ambition of inspiring learning in a particular area, it can make sense to look for goals, tools, actions, and strategies that relate to that area – that are intrinsic to it. Hopefully then, play will naturally lead the player to engage with and learn about those elements – and the topic area itself.

To accomplish this, the authors have different processes and favored approaches that we start with...but in game design things don't usually go as planned – and that's what we want to focus on – how the curves and lessons of design and development inform and change the starting point – and how to take advantage of the creative opportunities in the process while not losing our way.

Some Questions to fuel the Discussion

We will bring to the discussion a set of questions to fuel the Chat. Below is an initial list, which will be added to and refined over the course of the spring. We don't expect to include all of these questions, but hopefully many.

- What are some things that you worried about at the start of a design project – and later found you didn't need to have worried?

- What are examples of things that you didn't worry about but later found you should have? Has that experience affected how you approach things now? How?
- Do you have an example of a surprise that led you to change the game design in a fundamental way? Why did you make that change?
- The development process often pushes the design off of its presumed track: Was it a surprise that gave the push, or something subtler?
- How do you take advantage of surprises?
- What elements of a design are most liable providing surprises?
- How can we prepare to respond to surprises, both good and bad?" Often our design is pretty well advanced when the surprise comes up, and it can be hard to change direction in response.

Including the Audience

We intend to make this an interactive discussion – not a panel talk. The questions will be batted around to all attendees, with an aim of bringing to light interesting experiences and lessons from the rich group of designers who will be at GLS. Within the session we will ask questions, and seek answers and examples from the audience as well as from each other.

Designing Game Elements into the Chat Itself

In the spirit of our topic, we will look for a few ways in which we might find inspiration for the mechanics of the Fireside Chat in our objectives, our objectives roughly being:

- To draw interested and interesting designers (with tales to tell) to the Fireside Chat
- To create a spirited discussion amongst all, as if gathered around a fire
- To avoid having the chat dominated by one or a few – to hear many experiences.
- To reward the telling of especially interesting (but hopefully true) tales – of heroic success or defeat.

In advance of the conference, the authors will work out roles, actions, and mechanics based on these objectives, and will put a select set into practice as part of the Fireside Chat.

Conclusion and Post-mortem

Although the tone of this proposal is light-hearted, and we aim to have a lively and entertaining discussion, our true aim is serious. A discussion of these aspects of learning-game design, with the authors and the GLS audience, should bring out ideas and strategies that will be of benefit to many of those involved in creating learning through games.

The session was full and lively, with discussions ranging from design and production roles to a number of spirited discussions about differences between game and “real-world” models. We were able to record all of the stories told by the audience (in addition to the stories told by our core group. We will be transcribing the stories and will create a way to share them. If you would like more information on that please email Bert Snow (bert@muzzylane.com)