

THE FIVE GAME DESIGN MISTAKES EVERYONE MAKES

MIT BIG

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INTRODUCTION

- I WAS VERY **EXCITED** WHEN I WAS ASKED TO GIVE THIS KEYNOTE
- THE ORGANISERS WERE **ALSO** VERY EXCITED
- WE ALL WERE **SO** EXCITED, IN FACT, THAT IT DIDN'T OCCUR TO **ANY** OF US THAT MY TALK WOULD HAVE TO BE **ABOUT** SOMETHING
- WHEN I FINALLY **REALISED** THAT I HAD NOTHING TO PUT IN MY SLIDES, I **ASKED**
- IN **DESPERATION**, I WAS TOLD: "THE FIVE GAME DESIGN MISTAKES EVERYONE MAKES"
 - NOT "BUSINESS IN GAMING", BUT FAIR ENOUGH!

EVERYONE

- SUPERFICIALLY, THIS IS JUST AN INVITATION FOR ME TO **RANT** ABOUT FIVE **RANDOM** THINGS DESIGNERS DO THAT **ANNOY** ME
- YET IT'S A LOT MORE **INTERESTING** THAN THAT, BECAUSE OF THE WORD "**EVERYONE**"
- OK, SO NOT "**EVERYONE**" **DESIGNS** GAMES
 - IT SHOULD BE "THE FIVE GAME DESIGN MISTAKES EVERYONE **WHO MAKES GAMES** MAKES"
- BUT **ARE** THERE FIVE GAME DESIGN MISTAKES EVERYONE WHO DESIGNS GAMES **MAKES?**

CHALLENGE

- THIS AMOUNTS TO THE THROWING DOWN OF A **GAUNTLET!**
- WHAT FIVE MISTAKES ARE THERE THAT **EVERY** GAME DESIGNER MAKES WHEN DESIGNING GAMES?
- MISTAKES THAT EVEN **I MYSELF** MAKE?
 - WELL, I GUESS GAME DESIGN **IS** FULL OF **CONTRADICTIONS...**
- SO LET'S SEE WHAT I **CAME UP** WITH...

BUT FIRST..!

- HERE IS A **BADLY-DRESSED MAN**
- MICHAEL FISH, 1980
BBC/MET OFFICE
 - WINNER OF **AWARDS** FOR BEING BADLY DRESSED
- **I** USED TO HAVE A JACKET **JUST LIKE** THAT ONE



MISTAKE #1

- DESIGNERS **FALL FOR THE HYPE**
- THEY JUDGE GAMES BY THEIR SUCCESS IN THE **MARKET**, NOT BY THEIR **GAMEPLAY**
- GAMES CAN SUCCEED FOR **MANY** REASONS, OF WHICH GOOD DESIGN IS **BUT ONE**
 - MARKETING – *BLACK & WHITE*, SOLD 2M COPIES
 - NAIVE AUDIENCE – *MONOPOLY, FARMVILLE*
 - RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME – *MUD*
- GAMES CAN **LOOK** SUCCESSFUL BUT **NOT** BE
 - *EQ V WOW*

HYPED DESIGNERS

- DESIGNERS ALSO JUDGE **FELLOW** DESIGNERS BY THEIR SUCCESS, RATHER THAN BY THEIR DESIGNS
- BIG SECRET: **MOST** BIG-NAME DESIGNERS ARE **NOT ALL THAT GREAT** AT GAME DESIGN
- BEFORE YOU GET TOO **SMUG** ABOUT THAT, MOST OF THE **REST** ARE EVEN **WORSE!**
- A **MEDIOCRE** DESIGNER CAN'T TELL A **GOOD** DESIGNER FROM A **WORLD-CLASS** ONE
- A WORLD-CLASS ONE **CAN** TELL THE DIFFERENCE BUT WILL **OVERLOOK** BRILLIANT UNKNOWNNS

OBJECTIVITY

- IDEALLY, DESIGNERS SHOULD BE **OBJECTIVE**
- **LOOK** AT BEST-SELLING GAMES FROM FAMOUS NAMES, BECAUSE THEY COULD **BE GREAT**
- IF YOU CAN'T **SEE** ANYTHING GREAT ABOUT THEM, LOOK **AGAIN**
 - THE BEAUTY OF THE DESIGN MAY BE TOO **SUBTLE** FOR THE UNATTUNED EYE TO SPOT STRAIGHT AWAY
- IF YOU **STILL** THINK THE GAMEPLAY SUCKS, THOUGH, **TRUST** YOURSELF - IT **DOES**
- **DON'T** FALL FOR THE HYPE!

META

- OK, WELL FALLING FOR THE HYPE IS **INDEED** A MISTAKE MADE BY **EVERY** GAME DESIGNER
 - BUT THEN SO IS **DRESSING BADLY**
- IS IT A **GAME DESIGN** MISTAKE, THOUGH?
- WELL YES, IT'S **IMPERATIVE** THAT GAME DESIGNERS **UNDERSTAND** GAME DESIGNS
 - KNOWING **THAT** A GAME IS GOOD ISN'T **ENOUGH**
 - A DESIGNER NEEDS TO KNOW **WHY** IT'S GOOD
- OTHERWISE, HOW ARE YOU EVER GOING TO MAKE GAMES THAT ARE IN **ANY** SENSE **BETTER**?
- NOTE THAT BELIEVING THE HYPE IS ALSO A MISTAKE EVERY **NON-DESIGNER** IN THE INDUSTRY MAKES

BEAR KOMBAT

- HERE'S A PICTURE OF TWO **BEAR CUBS** FIGHTING



- **RAWR!**

MISTAKE #2

- DESIGNERS DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND THE **POWER** THEY HAVE
- GAMES **CAN** AND **DO TRANSFORM** PEOPLE'S LIVES
- I **DON'T** MEAN THEY TURN QUIET SCHOOLKIDS INTO **COLD-BLOODED KILLERS**
 - THAT'S THE JOB OF **OPERA...**
- I MEAN THEY **LIBERATE** THE IMAGINATION, **FREE** THE SOUL, AND ALLOW PEOPLE TO **BE**
 - DESIGNERS ARE HESITANT TO **BELIEVE** THIS

CULTURE

- **ONE** REASON FOR THIS IS THAT GAMES ARE REGARDED AS **LOW-BROW** CULTURE
 - MUCH AS **MOVIES** WERE IN THE 1930S
- HOW **PRESUMPTUOUS** THAT A **BASE** FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT **ASPIRES** TO COMPETE WITH **MILLENNIA**-OLD ESTABLISHED **ART** FORMS SUCH AS **LITERATURE**, THEATRE, MUSIC, BLAH BLAH BLAH
- EXCEPT GAMES **PREDATE** ALL THESE!
- ANIMALS, SUCH AS **BEARS**, PLAY GAMES!
 - EAT **THAT**, LITERATURE!

SELF-CENSORSHIP

- YOU CAN DO **AMAZING** THINGS WITH GAMES THAT YOU **CAN'T** DO WITH **ANYTHING** ELSE
 - PEOPLE WILL **DO** THINGS THEY WOULD ORDINARILY **AVOID**
- GAMES HAVE **POWER**
- GOOD DESIGNERS **SUSPECT** THIS, BUT THEY FIGURE THEY MUST BE **WRONG**
 - BECAUSE IF THEY WERE **RIGHT**, WHY WOULDN'T GAMES BE **UBIQUITOUS**?
- CONSEQUENTLY, THEY **HOLD THEIR FIRE**
 - NOT-SO-GOOD DESIGNERS DON'T EVEN REALISE THEY **HAVE** FIRE TO **HOLD**

FREEDOM TO DESIGN

- GAME DESIGNERS NEED TO **WISE UP** TO THE FACT THEY HAVE **FREEDOM TO DESIGN**
- THEY CAN DO **ANYTHING** WITH GAMES!
- *Anything!*
- THE ONLY **SHACKLES** YOU WEAR ARE THE ONES YOU PUT ON **YOURSELF**
- DON'T LEAVE GAME DESIGN TO NON-DESIGNERS
 - THAT WAY LEADS TO **SKINNER BOX WORLD**
- YOU **HAVE** THE POWER, SO **USE** IT!

META

- WHY IS NOT UNDERSTANDING THE **POWER** YOU HAVE A **GAME DESIGN** MISTAKE?
- BECAUSE IT **CONFINES** DESIGN
- IF YOU **LIMIT** YOUR HORIZONS, YOU NEVER **REACH** THOSE HORIZONS
 - YOU WORK **WITHIN** ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES THAT YOU SHOULD BE **BEYOND**
- HOW CAN YOU **SAY** SOMETHING IF YOU **FORBID** YOURSELF FROM USING THE **WORDS** THAT **SAY** IT?
- NOTE THAT NOT REALISING THE POWER OF GAMES IS ALSO A MISTAKE EVERY **NON-DESIGNER** MAKES

SPIDERMAN

- WE SHOULD ALWAYS **STRIVE** TO REMEMBER THE *SPIDERMAN* LESSON HERE:



- WITH GREAT **POWER** THERE MUST ALSO COME -- GREAT **RESPONSIBILITY**

MISTAKE #3

- DESIGNERS DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND THE **RESPONSIBILITY** THEY HAVE
- THERE IS A **MORAL** ASPECT TO GAME DESIGN
- THE MAIN WAY THIS OPERATES IS THROUGH THE **COVENANT** DESIGNERS HAVE WITH PLAYERS
- SEE, DESIGNERS CAN'T TELL PLAYERS **UP FRONT** WHAT THEIR EXPERIENCE WILL BE, BECAUSE THAT WOULD **SPOIL** THE GAME
- THIS MEANS PLAYERS HAVE TO **TRUST** DESIGNERS NOT TO CROSS ANY **LINES**

BETRAYAL

- SOMETIMES, DESIGNERS **BETRAY** THAT TRUST, EITHER THROUGH ACCIDENT, INCOMPETENCE, IGNORANCE OR **WICKEDNESS**
- FEW DESIGNERS ARE **CONSCIOUSLY** AWARE OF THE COVENANT
 - THEY UNDERSTAND IT **IMPLICITLY**
- **NO** DESIGNER GIVES IT ENOUGH THOUGHT
 - PLAYERS **MUST** BE GIVEN FAIR WARNING OF WHERE THE BOUNDARIES LIE **BEFORE** THEY'RE REACHED
 - DESIGNERS CAN – SHOULD! – CROSS **DESIGN** BOUNDARIES, BUT **PLAYERS** HAVE TO KNOW WHERE THEY **STAND**

PROSTITUTION

- AN AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY THAT'S IN THE SPOTLIGHT RIGHT NOW IS **SOCIAL** GAMING
- MOST SOCIAL GAMES ARE **EXPLOITATIVE GARBAGE**, AND DESIGNERS **KNOW** IT
 - BUT "WHERE THERE'S MUCK THERE'S BRASS"
- BIG-NAME DESIGNERS ARE BEING OFFERED **LARGE** SUMS TO DESIGN FACEBOOK GAMES
- THIS RAISES AN **AWKWARD** QUESTION
- HOW CAN YOU JUSTIFY CREATING GAMES THAT ARE **DELIBERATELY** INTENDED TO DECEIVE, TRAP AND **ADDICT** PEOPLE TO THEM?

JUSTIFICATION

- I'VE SPOKEN WITH **PAINED** DESIGNERS WHO ARE **WRESTLING** WITH THIS PROBLEM
- SOME JUSTIFY IT BECAUSE THEY FEEL THEY CAN MAKE CHANGES FROM **WITHIN**
 - THEY'RE PRO-GAME **FIFTH COLUMNISTS**
- SOME JUSTIFY IT BECAUSE THEY SEE IT AS MERELY A **PASSING PHASE**
 - THE START OF THE **EDUCATION** OF CASUAL PLAYERS
- SOME JUSTIFY IT IN TERMS OF "IT'S WHAT THE PLAYERS **WANT**"
 - DRUG-DEALERS USE THAT **SAME** ARGUMENT
- **NONE** ARE ENTIRELY PERSUASIVE NOR **PERSUADED**

META

- WHY IS ABROGATING RESPONSIBILITY A **GAME DESIGN** MISTAKE?
- WELL, GAMES ARE FOR **PLAYERS** AND PLAYERS ARE **PEOPLE**
- IF YOU DON'T TREAT PLAYERS **AS** PEOPLE, YOU WON'T MAKE GAMES **FOR** PEOPLE
- THEREFORE, YOUR DESIGNS WILL BE LACKING IN **HUMANITY**
- THEREFORE, THEY WILL BE LACKING AS **DESIGNS**
- NOTE THAT SHIRKING RESPONSIBILITIES IS ALSO A MISTAKE EVERY **NON-DESIGNER** IN GAMES MAKES

A TASTY TREAT

- HERE'S A PICTURE OF **ICE CREAM & BACON**



MISTAKE #4

- DESIGNERS DON'T THINK ENOUGH ABOUT **WHO** WILL PLAY THE GAMES THEY DESIGN
 - MOST OFTEN, THE IMPLICIT ANSWER IS "**ME**"
- THE MORE **ART**-THEORY **AWARE** DESIGNERS MIGHT ARGUE THAT "IT'S FOR ME TO **DESIGN**, FOR OTHERS TO **INTERPRET**"
 - IF THOSE OTHERS HAVE A **DESIGNER** AESTHETIC, **YES**; IF THEY HAVE A **PLAYER** AESTHETIC, **NO**
- PLAYERS ARE AN INTRINSIC **PART** OF A GAME'S DESIGN!

TYPES

- I HAVE A PARTICULAR **INTEREST** HERE OWING TO MY FAMOUS (!) **PLAYER TYPES** MODEL
- WANNABE DESIGNERS **SEE** IT AND THINK IT MEANS THEY SHOULD ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF **MULTIPLE** TYPES OF PLAYER
 - WHICH IS **TRUE**, THEY **DO**
 - IN VIRTUAL WORLDS, AT LEAST...
- HOWEVER, THEY SHOULD ADDRESS THOSE NEEDS IN TERMS **MEANINGFUL** TO THOSE PLAYERS
- THIS MEANS YOU DO **NOT** GIVE PEOPLE **XP** REWARDS FOR **SOCIALISING..!**

SET THEORY

- TOO FEW DESIGNERS REALLY **GET** WHO THEIR PLAYERS ARE
- EVEN THE **BEST** WILL SOMETIMES REASON:
"SOME LIKE **X**, SOME LIKE **Y**, SO I'LL GIVE THEM BOTH AND GET PEOPLE WHO LIKE X **OR** Y"
- UNLESS THEY **KNOW** THEIR PLAYERS, THEY'LL OFTEN ONLY GET THOSE WHO LIKE X **AND** Y
- **INTERSECTION** RATHER THAN **UNION**
- KIDS LIKE ICE CREAM, KIDS LIKE BACON, BUT KIDS ONLY TRY ICE CREAM AND BACON **ONCE...**

META

- WHY IS **NOT** THINKING ABOUT WHO WILL PLAY YOUR GAME A **DESIGN** MISTAKE?
- WELL, LET'S PUT IT THIS WAY: IF YOU **DON'T KNOW**, YOU HAVE **NO** BUSINESS DESIGNING GAMES...
- ...OR, FOR **NON-DESIGNERS**, NO BUSINESS EVEN BEING A **PART** OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY

MEANWHILE, IN 1846

- HEY, IT'S **EMILY DICKINSON!**

- FAMOUS FOR BEING A
GREAT FEMALE POET

- WHEN SHE **SHOULD**
MERELY BE FAMOUS FOR
BEING A **GREAT POET**

- “ARE YOU TOO **DEEPLY**
OCCUPIED TO SAY IF MY
VERSE IS ALIVE?”

- LETTER TO THOMAS
WENTWORTH HIGGINSON



MISTAKE #5

- DESIGNERS THINK THEY **KNOW** WHAT THEY'RE **DOING**
- THEY **THINK** THEY'RE DESIGNING **GAMES**
 - THEY'RE **NOT**: THEY'RE CREATING **ART**
- SOME FEW **DO** THINK THEY'RE CREATING ART
- THEY **ARE**, BUT THAT'S **INCIDENTAL**
- THEY'RE ACTUALLY TRYING TO **SAY** SOMETHING
- AS FOR **WHAT** THEY'RE TRYING TO SAY, THEY **DON'T KNOW**
 - IF THEY **DID**, THEY WOULD JUST **SAY** IT

MEDIUM

- COMPUTER GAMES ARE A **MEDIUM** OF **EXPRESSION** FOR THEIR DESIGNERS
- IF THEY COULD EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN SOME **OTHER** MEDIUM, WELL THEY **WOULD**
 - INDEED, SOME **DO**
- GAMES ALLOW DESIGNERS TO EXPRESS THINGS THEY **CAN'T** EXPRESS OTHERWISE
- TO **UNDERSTAND** WHAT THEY'RE SAYING, YOU HAVE TO **PLAY THE GAME**
 - THAT'S **LITERALLY**, NOT METAPHORICALLY...

META

- WHY IS A MISGUIDED BELIEF IN **WHY** YOU'RE DESIGNING GAMES A DESIGN **MISTAKE**?
- BECAUSE IF YOU'RE NOT TRUE TO **YOURSELF**, YOU CAN'T BE TRUE TO YOUR **PLAYERS**
- UNFORTUNATELY, THERE'S A **PROBLEM** HERE
- IF YOU **KNOW** WHAT YOU'RE SAYING, YOU NO LONGER HAVE THE **NEED** TO **SAY** IT
 - YOU'VE NO **REASON** TO DESIGN GAMES ANY MORE
- YOU CAN ONLY TELL YOUR PLAYERS THE **TRUTH** WHEN YOU HAVE **NOTHING** TO SAY!

PARADOX

- IT'S A MISTAKE FOR DESIGNERS **NOT** TO KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING, BUT IT'S **ALSO** A MISTAKE IF THEY **DO** KNOW IT
- I KINDA WIN **WHATEVER** I SAY WITH THIS ONE, THEN
 - OR **LOSE** WHATEVER I SAY...
- THIS IS THE **PARADOX** BEHIND **ALL** ART
 - THE BETTER THE WORK OF ART, THE CLOSER THE ARTIST IS TO **NOT** BEING AN ARTIST
 - DICKINSON'S **QUESTION** IS ITS **OWN** ANSWER

AND YET AGAIN...

- NOTE THAT ONLY DOING THINGS UNTIL YOU KNOW HOW TO DO THEM IS ALSO A MISTAKE EVERY **NON-DESIGNER** IN THE INDUSTRY MAKES
- ONCE YOU'VE **GROKked** WHAT YOU DO, IT'S NO LONGER **INTERESTING**
- AT **BEST**, IT'S A MEANS TO AN END
 - MONEY IS OFTEN USEFUL TO HAVE
- AT **WORST**, IT'S A SOUL TRAP

DONE!

- SO THOSE ARE MY **FIVE** MISTAKES
- I REALISE THEY'RE SOMEWHAT **ABSTRACT**
- SO WHY DIDN'T I TAKE THE WORD "EVERYONE"
FIGURATIVELY AND SIMPLY LIST
CONCRETE MISTAKES?
 - IN BALANCE, INTERFACE, GAMEPLAY, IMMERSIVENESS,
NARRATIVE, COHERENCE, CRUFT, ... AND SO ON
- WELL WHERE'S THE **FUN** IN THAT?!

A CONFESSION

- THE WORD "EVERYONE" MADE **NO DIFFERENCE**
- SUPPOSE INSTEAD OF BEING ASKED TO GIVE FIVE MISTAKES **EVERY** DESIGNER MAKES, I'D BEEN ASKED TO GIVE FIVE THAT **MOST** MAKE
 - **THAT** WOULD HAVE MEANT I **COULD** LIST MORE PRACTICAL, **CONCRETE** MISTAKES, RIGHT?
- **RIGHT**, BUT I **WOULDN'T** HAVE DONE THAT
- THE FIVE MISTAKES I'VE JUST DESCRIBED ARE THE **SAME** FIVE I'D HAVE DESCRIBED EVEN IF ASKED FOR COMMON **NEWBIE** DESIGNER ERRORS
- THIS IS JUST HOW GAME DESIGNERS **THINK**

A CONFESION+

- REALLY, THAT WORD "EVERYONE" MADE **NO DIFFERENCE**
- THOSE ARE **GAME DESIGN** MISTAKES, SURE, BUT THEY'RE ONES **EVERYONE** IN THE INDUSTRY MAKES – GAME DESIGNER OR **NOT**
- WHICH IS WHY I DON'T FEEL **TOO** BAD STATING THEM AT A MAJOR **BUSINESS IN GAMES** CONFERENCE...
- I **DID** SAY EARLIER THAT GAME DESIGN WAS FULL OF **CONTRADICTIONS**

SPEAKING OF WHICH

- THE **SAME** YEAR MICHAEL FISH WON HIS AWARD FOR BEING THE **WORST**-DRESSED MAN ON UK TV, HE WON THE AWARD FOR BEING THE **BEST**-DRESSED MAN ON UK TV
- HOW DO **WE** KNOW **WHAT** BEARS THINK?
- **HANSARD, 1817**: He should, however, beg leave to remind the conductors of the press of their duty to apply to themselves a maxim which they never neglected to urge on the consideration of government — “that the possession of great power necessarily implies great responsibility.”
 - *SPIDERMAN* HAS THE POWER TO **QUOTE**, BUT NOT THE RESPONSIBILITY TO **CITE**?

CONTRADICTIONS

- **BACON ICE CREAM** WAS ON THE MENU WHEN "THE FAT DUCK" WON **BEST RESTAURANT IN THE WORLD** IN 2005
- EMILY DICKINSON ONLY BECAME FAMOUS **AFTER** SHE DIED
 - ONLY 7 (FROM 1,800) OF HER POEMS WERE PUBLISHED IN HER LIFETIME, AND **THOSE** WERE BADLY-EDITED
 - I HAVEN'T **READ** A SINGLE **ONE** OF THEM – SHE'S NOT BIG IN ENGLAND...

CONCLUSION

- WE **ALL** MAKE MISTAKES
- WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES BECAUSE WE **HAVE** TO MAKE MISTAKES
 - WHERE'S THE **FUN** OTHERWISE?
- GAME DESIGNERS WHO **DON'T** MAKE MISTAKES **AREN'T** GAME DESIGNERS
 - THEY'RE **FORMER** GAME DESIGNERS
- THE **BEST** DESIGNERS JUST MAKE SLIGHTLY **DIFFERENT** MISTAKES...
- AND I GUESS THAT APPLIES TO EVERYONE **ELSE** IN THE BUSINESS OF GAMES, TOO!