

Can you describe the process of integrating play with curricular elements in your LeapFrog games? How do you perceive those two imperatives competing and/or facilitating each other in terms of design space?

So, the things you have working for you in integrating play and curricula are novelty and learning. On a fundamental level, at its core, learning and play are the same. When we play, we learn. And, if we're doing it right, - that is, approaching the challenge ("Can I do this?") with the right skillset ("I know how to do this") and the right mindset ("I can do this") - then when we learn, we're in a state of play. To this point, don't think about the memorization and repetition, think about the moment when things 'click' as you learn, and you can suddenly apply this new knowledge. That's where the fun is; where our basic psychological needs begin to be met, and more importantly, our attention and effort toward the challenge begin to pay off as more productive thinking. This is the basis for gameplay balance and difficulty tuning, and in serious games for education and training, it is also the starting point for design. Because the curriculum is paramount, we get that right first, with instructional design from leaders in those fields. And as a game designer, the job is to become an expert in this, enough for things to 'click' and you can recognize where the satisfaction is. From that point, and as much as possible, the design for player action should aim in this direction, because the curricula serves as the theme in a way. You want your players to eventually exhibit best practices in this field of study, so the actions they take in the game should be in on that path. Now, for something like the LeapFrog games I did, we also had a high profile (and very expensive) brand / franchise / IP that had to be the star of the show; to the extent that the customer wasn't necessarily buying the game because their child loves math, say, but rather because they wanted to be a Jedi battling droids with force powers and a light saber. So, add to that mix, having to combine curricula and very specific kinds of play. "Competition" is a good way to think of it, because it can be dangerous to a cohesive design. Sometimes you end up with two separate games mashed together on the same cartridge.

Would you care to talk about your role in the development of STRIVE? What kinds of research and psychological models were involved in its production? What are your thoughts on the present and potential utility of serious games in general?

On STRIVE, I played multiple roles at different times in its development. By the time I was brought on board, it had been going for a short while, and was trying to solidify the first playable prototype to show at a conference. I was brought on to 'pull together many separate elements'; and those turned out to include everything from technical integration and game programming to animation direction and level design. Eventually, was given the title of Design Lead, and the core crew, as well as the other collaborating groups, turned over quite a bit before we (just this month) wrapped up the first six scenarios. The research core aim is to prove the validity of training for combat stress resilience; which is done with physiological data taken during exposure to emotionally stressful events simulated in this VR environment. Over multiple sessions, which include cognitive behavior training, multiple stressors serve as both the stimuli for

physiological recording and feedback, and as the point of the subsequent mentored discussions on how to deal with stress effectively.

Serious games, as we call them now, will dominate the way we learn in the future. The novelty that captures our attention about serious games at the moment, will give way. But, from these early efforts, we will learn how to teach using games. There is far too much potential in interactive, participatory, systematic learning for me to believe that this will just be a fad. I have to admit, at the moment, it sure looks 'early' for serious games in general. But, with a very critical design eye, one could also argue how 'early' it is for entertainment games, in terms of subject maturity and range of play (genres).

To what extent, if any, is Soul Trapper influenced by text adventures? What challenges were unique to the design and development of an audio game? Does the Los Angeles setting relate to "write what you know?"

(smile) Soul Trapper really is an auditory text adventure. It's the same feel; you can see anything, you have a space to explore, puzzles to solve and a story to unfold. One key difference is your agency. Text adventures pride in offering the illusion that 'you can do anything you can type', even if that's not actually the case under the hood; while Soul Trapper, as a casual adventure game, never gave that illusion, and instead, needed to be streamlined for ease of use; even to the extent that one could play with their eyes shut in key places. The extreme control simplicity proved to be one of the major challenges, in crafting audio-only puzzles and activities that supported the story.

Do you have a favorite text adventure? What's your favorite game and why?

How do you go about coping with and/or deterring feature creep?

Feature creep is fundamentally detrimental to development. It's a sign that the design is not under control, and in the extreme, it can be a team morale-killer. The balance on managing feature creep is this: the designer needs to accept all points of view, ideas and criticisms, but then make sense of that in a cohesive way that supports the main needs of the project. Sometimes that means the greatest judo skill a designer can employ in defense of feature creep is empathy. By understanding the spirit of the critique, or the feeling of the idea, or the focus of a point of view, the designer can turn apparent 'idea noise' into productive improvements to the design.

Can you speak to the challenges, restrictions and/or possibilities of incorporating narrative into games?

Narrative is short hand for 'the best way humans exchange thought and experience', and we've been doing it as long as we've been able to as a species. It is an ancient craft that we're all experts in. We recognize, process, remember and repeat story. Games and play are even older, and serve a different purpose: to explore possibility and take risk. While story tells us one specific thing, play only delineates the essential boundaries and leaves the rest to either chance or skill. That's the core problem of grafting story

onto play, or vice versa: if not actively supporting each other, the aims of story and play compete and can diminish each other as diversion. Active support for story from play comes down to the choice of player agency; how the player's apparent decisions and actions, in the context of the story, would lead to the next story beat. Active support for play from story is demonstrated as a logical, while unpredictable, response to the player's actions and decisions. When working together, the experience should be that the story could not go on without the player's involvement, and the available agency has deep meaning due to the context of the story.

Do you feel that there is an optimal strategy in Color 3. and if so what is it? I score 5 every time. The game tells me that's not bad, yet it also seems not great.

(smile) You're managing randomness, and so leaving open the possibility for the next tile to give you three in a row is one strategy. The tactics to support that start with using one color for each row or column. And, you also get points for threes-in-a-row by placing a fourth.

What kinds of skills and knowledge base do you feel is important in developing AI?

Game AI specifically requires that combination of presentation skills, like art, animation, audio and efx, with logical organization skills, like technical setup and coding. The end result of successful game AI, particularly in high fidelity story-based games, is an orchestration of many different efforts, but it can be boiled down to being able to develop a stable system that carries the illusion of intelligence.

AI is a field of exploration at this time. It's wide open and exciting, so in that way, better suited for those who can manage risk and handle uncertainty. While there may be plenty of ground already covered, even held up as standards, we haven't been in the field long enough to call it craft. For applicable skills and knowledge that support exploration long term, it seems being able to apply knowledge from other domains is key; balanced with a eye for practicality and a need to keep it simple.

What, if any, rules of thumb do you relate to creating fun experiences?

Get feedback and listen to it. Better yet, take feedback as if golden treasure; seek it out. There are two benefits to placing this kind of emphasis on learning the player's experience: you gain knowledge of how your game is perceived, and you gain knowledge of your audience. The designer can be off in either regard, to the detriment of the experience. This is not to say the designer is not present, or that the audience is in total control. As designer, create the fun you believe it to be, but then go find out how reliable your beliefs really are, as indicated by feedback, and adjust your beliefs. This is approach, if done right, is humbling, but always progressive.

Which aspects of your game career and the game industry have been most rewarding or frustrating? What size team do you prefer working with?

I came to the game industry as a second career, and the most frustrating part has been 'catching up' professionally to where I feel comfortable. But the switch to games itself has been the most rewarding, hands down. It's where I need to be, and doing the work provides daily satisfaction itself. I've worked in mid-size teams and small teams (and back in animation, very large teams), and I have to say, much more than the size of the team, it's all about the caliber of the team members. High powered teammates encourage the best of each other, and that typically leads to better results and higher job satisfaction.