

Sid Meier Keynote

- Premise: gameplay and game design are psychological experiences
 - Overriding imperative: acknowledge what happens in the player's head--this should trump all other considerations
- What psychological experiences can define gameplay?
 - Egomania
 - Paranoia
 - Delusion
 - Self-destructive behavior
- The winner paradox
 - Players prefer to win--contravening reality
 - They don't complain about the frequency of winning as "unrealistic"
 - Reward v. Punishment
 - Players rarely question when they're rewarded in game and often question when they're punished
 - It's important for the player to understand why they're rewarded and punished and how to prepare for similar situations in the future--this is key to replayability
- The first 15 minutes
 - The first 15 minutes must be cool and rewarding, a microcosm of what's going to happen to later in the game
 - You almost can't reward the player too much in the first 15 minutes to get them invested in your game
- Difficulty levels
 - All of this doesn't negate the power of difficulty levels--one shouldn't create a difficulty curve that smoothly permits the player to always win
 - Progress and advancement is rewarding to the player--this is one of the central pleasures of gameplay, and the more one can suggest that there're many challenges they haven't conquered yet--but that they're doing well in the moment--the more compelling the experience
- Unholy alliance
 - An agreement between the player and the designer, a shared illusion developed by an implicit contract
 - Designer illusions
 - Player skill
 - The player is really good--he/she should feel good about their competence in the system and themselves (as a result)
 - Player illusions
 - Suspension of disbelief
 - Player needs to inhabit the character, the narrative, the world
 - Part of a designer's job is to help the player suspend his/her disbelief

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- Older designers may have an advantage in this--they worked with less convincing technology and may have granted more insight into how designers can get players to suspend their disbelief
- Moral clarity
 - Players complained in CivRev that AIs would remain aggressive and arrogant, even when they're down to one city
 - Making the AI submit would remove some of the satisfaction of winning--the player is more compelled to eliminate the dying civilization if the AI is aggressive and cranky
- MAD -- mutually-assured destruction
 - Similar to relationship between game designer and player
 - Both can destroy the mutual contract of suspended disbelief at any time
 - Don't allow designer's desire to achieve interesting design goals break this illusion
- Humor/style/mood/atmosphere
 - Make the narrative/skin match the mechanics
 - Make the narrative/skin internally consistent
- CivRev battles
 - Psychology has little to do with "rational thought"
 - Example
 - In CivRev, the initial design showed players the chance of winning a battle just before entering conflict--here, the player has a 3:1 chance of winning
 - Players don't intuitively understand probability
 - When they lost the 3:1 battle, despite having a larger chance of winning, they would complain that they shouldn't have lost because they had a "bigger number"
 - However, when players would win the battle, despite being on the wrong side of the 3:1 probability, they would assume that they deserved to win
 - From this, the designers concluded that there's a psychological tipping point around 3:1 or 4:1 where players expect to win/lose if the probability is outside that range
 - Players also have difficulty equating 20:10 odds to 2:1 odds--they think of them differently
 - Players also have problems with sequential probability--they'd win a 2:1 battle, then lose the following 2:1 battle and feel that the result was unfair
 - The conclusion from this testing: design to the players' intuitive understanding
 - Don't rely on the logic of your design, but balance for the player's understanding--however illogical
- Mistakes, poor design theories re psychology v. logic
 - Real-time civilization
 - This was an early design concept of Sid's
 - However, in prototyping, designers noticed that the player became an observer, rather than feeling like they were the central agent of the game
 - Rise and fall

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- If one includes a mechanic that automates a civilization's rise and fall, designers discovered that players would reload a save just before the inevitable fall of their civilization
- Black box technology development -- the "Covert Action Rule"
 - Wanted to randomize the tech tree, thought it seemed silly for stone age civs to develop towards gunpowder
 - However, players wanted to have a set way to develop towards gunpowder-- players wanted to be in control
 - Any randomness needs to be treated with a lot of care--it risks alienating the player from their control fantasy
 - Players feel as if randomness robs them of agency--they will find the worst and most paranoid explanation when randomness creates undesirable results
- Dinosaur game
 - Game that Sid thought would be really cool, tried to design strategy, RTS, card games for it
 - However, despite giving up on it, it's the second most asked-about game of Sid's-- Sid regrets abandoning it and may go back to it
- Civilization network
 - Imagined an economy for gold exchange over a network
 - Theorized that people would be willing to gift gold to other players, no one did it
- AAA Games on a shoestring
 - Use the player's imagination as a key tool
 - The player can always visualize something more dynamic than what you're showing them
 - If you can suggest a deep, compelling world with limited resources, the player will fill in the gaps
 - Make sure you reinforce player expectations
 - Example
 - CivRev AI periodically offers you "dancing bears" to win your favor as a ruler
 - However, they never modeled the dancing bears, it's just text
 - Players imagined the dancing bears and found them compelling--they didn't need to render them--everybody wins
 - Tap into what the player already knows
 - Draw on cultural knowledge, experience
 - For example, in a pirate game, give the villain a black, curly mustache and one doesn't have to expend resources explaining the motivations of the villain (or the fact that he/she is a villain)
- The Role of AI
 - AI is integrated into the psychological experience of a game--players project a lot onto an AI opponent and imagine a narrative for that AI
 - AI is one element of creating an integrated experience for the player, but it's not a person
 - Doesn't believe that AI should act like another person--if an AI has human characteristics, it seems dumb

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- Players claim that they want tricky, clever tactics from their AI--but these tactics often fail and seem to have been silly in retrospect
 - However, when the AI succeeds in its tricky tactic, players become frustrated and believe that the AI is cheating
- Sid approaches AI as a metric--one should be able to measure one's progress against an improvement metric (the AI)
 - The AI should acknowledge the player and react to player actions
 - Validation in a single-player experience is very important, don't want the player to feel isolated (even though they're playing alone)--player should have a presence in the game that the AI reacts to often
- Protecting the player from themselves
 - Load/Save issues
 - Providing players with too many opportunities to load and save removes risk and doesn't force players to strategize--this can diminish the experience for the player
 - One can solve this by limiting the in-world locations for saving--one should try to build this into the narrative fantasy of the game to avoid making the designer control glaring
 - Choices, options, settings
 - There are certain settings that are crucial--left/right handed layout, gamma, graphics, etc.
 - However, game mechanics should not be opened to the player
 - Cheats
 - Players can damage the experience for themselves by cheating
 - Don't make it too easy to cheat--players should experiment with the system, but only after they've had the chance to experience and understand it a bit
 - Sid notes that there's a careful balance to be struck here--sees valuable practices such as mods as a similar experience to cheating
- Listen to the player
 - Listen to what they're really saying--don't take what they're saying literally
 - Players will react to the game in several ways
 - Provide solutions
 - Occasionally useful, but rare, because it doesn't account for mechanic balance
 - Real value is to find what's wrong, what's leading the player to suggest the solution
 - Emotions
 - What causes a particular emotion in a player--what's the gameplay source, find the mechanic's knob/controls, tweak to enhance desirable emotions and limit undesirable
 - Personality
 - One needs to know the personality of the player to decipher what they're really trying to tell you--know your testers and understand their approach to the game
- The Epic Journey
 - Play experience should strive to embody an epic journey

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- Interesting decisions
 - The player journey is one of discovering new and interesting choices, deriving paths that they haven't taken yet, ones that they might take on the next playthrough
- Learning/progress
 - The player should be constantly progressing--one should be constantly developing a feeling of power and mastery within and over the system
 - WoW does this well by including a ton of specific metrics for progress that appear often and reinforce the player's progress
- One More Turn
 - Player's are constantly anticipating the near future--designers should play on this and entice the player by foreshadowing cool things to come in the near future
- Replayability
 - Imply that the game is not limited to just one epic journey--that the player should replay the game to experience other decisions, consequences