

The Cinekid Seminar: Make Way for Play

Play in real and virtual spaces: happy hearts, hands, minds and faces?

Gaming and playing are irresistibly attractive to children. In particular the world of digital play, with its computers and game consoles, seems to provide hours of fun. At the Cinekid Expert Meeting ‘Make Way for Play’, four game designers share their opinions and experiences in different projects, each related to the question of how creativity, engagement and invention can successfully be brought together in game design for children.

The social context of digital play

The image of a child behind a screen playing computer games for hours and hours doesn't seem to be a good illustration of an environment where creativity, invention and learning could go hand in hand. 'These are adults who believe that technology is the cause of all problems surrounding today's children, from obesity to lack of communication skills, from violence to lack of creativity' says David Kleeman, president of the American Centre for Children and Media and chairman of today's expert meeting.

It is therefore down to the same adults, and especially media professionals, makers and artists, to show the other side of the argument. For Kleeman, the best argument against a pessimistic view of children and media, is for media professionals, game makers and artists to design 'thoughtful, engaging media that the kids love, but also that their parents respect'.

Ed Burton

The favourite plaything of the meeting's first speaker, Ed Burton, was a 48K Sinclair Spectrum home computer. Burton, Director of R & D at Soda UK, was fascinated by this 'glorified calculator'. "It was", he says, "the gift that kept on giving 'like a magical construction kit with more parts than I could count". Years later this fascination has resulted in a whole range of successful online computer projects for children that include the Soda Constructor, Moovl and Newton.

Soda Constructor is a construction kit based on the laws of physics. It enables children to build interactive creations using masses and springs which are bound to physical properties like friction, gravity and speed. The tool was a huge success, but Burton wanted to make something more accessible.

Inspired by the playful character of drawing, Burton came up with Moovl, a digital tool for children aged between 5 and 7. Moovl combines laws of physics with freehand drawings and animation, enabling children to explore the laws through drawing.

For Burton, game design is increasingly about stepping back from authorship and leaving an empty frame in which people can create games and content by themselves. In the near future, he sees users reconfiguring the software itself. Burton realises that there are risks involved in giving people a space which is open and in which they can fail, in which they can also express inappropriate things. However, he believes that: 'If people are going to be good, you've got to give them the freedom to be bad,'.

Jana Riedel

Jana Riedel is a film maker and digital artist who works part-time for the SMARTlab Digital Media Institute in London. As a project manager she is involved with TRUST, a research project that explores the ways in which physically disabled children in and out of hospitals can interact with each other using theatre, games and digital technology.

In 2005 SMARTlab was invited to a children's hospital in Singapore. Before actually creating a digital environment, the team started to give creative workshops with the children, in

storytelling and art, dance and drama. The technical team then combined data from the workshops to build an interactive story-telling environment involving two in-game characters called Hope and Trust. By moving these characters children can play with each other and create their own storylines.

Creating games for disabled children in hospitals is an inherently interdisciplinary encounter, Riedel explains. And the TRUST project is a combination of research into human computer interaction, performance technology, the development of different interfaces and the implementation of artistic aspects such as theatre, the visual arts and dance exercises. As an ongoing research project, Riedel explains, the aim of the TRUST project is to make an online digital environment that is as flexible and accessible in as many hospital centres as possible, 'so that kids can interact with each other and heal with each other'.

Ronald Mannek

An executive of a major toy company once told Ronald Mannak that the problem with today's children is that they no longer play with traditional toys like dolls, and that his company was looking for a toy that would keep the children away from the internet and video games. Mannak: 'We were thinking: to make sure kids don't use computers or the internet, they are going to have to build either a kind of monster or a police officer'.

It was not the kind of approach to play that Ronald Mannak, from the Dutch game company *Iuptoys*, believed in. Mannak, in his own words a 'serial toy lover', recently developed the V-beat air guitar and V-beat air drums, which will be introduced to the market in the spring of 2008. The air guitar consists of two separate parts, a body and a neck, which together produce music when moved at a distance from one another. With the air drums you can play on a virtual drum kit by moving two electronically-connected drumsticks.

According to Mannek, the V-beat air drums and guitar are the first toys to use motion sensors connected to the internet. This allows the air guitar and air-drum to be connected to a computer so that songs can be recorded and then converted into an mp3 or sing-tone, which can then be shared online. The air guitar and air drums are made for children, and they will be sold in conventional toy shops. But not only children will be interested: 'When we tested prototypes at our office, it turned out that the fathers who came with the children liked the toys even more than the children did', Mannak says.

Mary Flanagan

Mary Flanagan is a designer and artist from New York. She has a background in educational software, but is now working primarily in an activist context. Flanagan's main concern is the way values are embodied in games. Take for example the notion of what a reward is. There a lot of tools right now where children can make their own games, Flanagan says, 'but the rewards often come down to a choice: you can collect coins or you can kill everybody'. It is therefore all the more important to ensure that game characteristics actually reinforce the standard idea of what a game is.

Flanagan and her team developed a dance game for girls to learn programming, called PEEPS, that was designed to highlight the value of creativity and collaboration. In the game, girls can programme the dance movements of their character by controlling not the *body* of the character but it's *clothes*. There are different patterns of clothes and they are all coded. By swapping the clothes, you're actually swapping the code, Flanagan says. 'Which is a way of getting into the idea of collaboration, because your friend may have a really good dance move, and you can borrow her move by borrowing her outfit. But there is also the idea of creativity: every outfit links back to its maker. If you use a maker's outfit in a dance competition, she receives the game-credits'.

To incorporate values in games it is important to work with a good design model. In a traditional design model you set your design goal, you build your prototypes, you test them and you repeating this as you develop the game. But keeping idealistic goals up front requires a constant process of translation and verification: 'You must set your value goals and introduce them throughout the whole design process' says Flanagan.

Game goals and collaboration

Most game designers, especially the ones creating digital environments, have to find a balance between allowing for traditional play - with its free and open characteristics which enables creativity - and creating a more structured environment with explicit game goals. In a less structured game environment, children are extremely adept at inventing goals by themselves, Burton experienced. 'In Soda Constructor, there was nothing built into it as a game goal, but in the forum on the website children work together to construct very elaborate goals'.

For Riedel the concept of free play is a basic characteristic of the TRUST project. TRUST is not about losing or winning, and teamwork is rewarded more than competition. 'If the two characters, Trust and Hope, are moved in tandem, they enrich the game world with sound, images and other characters. Only when this is done with attention, care and creativity does the game world move forward. The more participants enter the world, the richer it becomes'. For most children the competitive element of winning or losing is an important aspect of gaming. This raises the question of how to design for things that don't necessarily go together, like collaboration and competition. In order to do so, Flanagan made a multiplayer Tetris game in which players compete against each other but also have to contribute pieces to a shared shape in the middle. One side can't win if the group goal isn't met as well.

Space for subversion

Burton stresses that because of children's ability to invent their own game goals, it is important to leave space for this in game design. According to Burton, this is what is lacking in today's educational media: 'Children are being told that they are going to have the opportunity to create, but usually they have to choose from a set of given options'. His latest project is Newtoon, a physics-based series of arcade games for the mobile phone. It emerged from a desire to incorporate and make accessible a more free, exploration-based approach to learning into science lessons at school.

With Newtoon children are allowed to create games by themselves. By giving children the fragments of game grammar they are able to make games that maybe do or don't work, but for Burton the most exciting thing is that they can subvert the grammar. Burton: 'One girl made a game that was called 'Stop and be patient'. Normally in gaming you have to do something, but this child subverted the logic, and with this game you have to do nothing other than wait until the ball hits the target'.

Conflicts of representation

In contrast with abstract games like Constructor or interactive toys like the V-beat air guitar, the work of Riedel and Flanagan is more specifically concerned with recreating representations of 'real world' people, practices and places in the virtual world of digital play. Sometimes the intentions of game designers conflicts with the expectations of the outer world. For Flanagan the main question was how to design non-stereotyped game characters. One designer advises keeping everything simple: 'Lets make little cubes and little things to walk around with'. Flanagan: 'They are actually very charming, but kids hate them. They want more lifelike, human characters.'

Even the imaginative and digital worlds built during the TRUST project still have a strong and sometimes problematic link with reality. The characters in the TRUST project are conceived as non-human and non-gender, Riedel says. But during the project the designers chose to replace the legs of only one of the characters with wheels. Riedel: 'You want to be as true as possible, so you don't want to give them the assumption that they can walk'.

Children's play in a digital age

What can be learned from this expert meeting on digital play for children? For the four participants it is clear that digital play does enhance and enrich the world of the children.

The design of games for children should therefore not focus on restriction and closed structures, but rather on the provision of space for alternative use: for children to set their own game goals and to play with new concepts. This asks of game designers the same qualities most children already have: curiosity, invention and creativity.

At the end of the expert meeting Chairman David Kleeman tells the participants that during the preparation of the meeting he came across one of the articles with a more pessimist view on digital technologies and kids play. In the article the authors quoted a short poem from Robert Louis Stevenson: *Happy hearts and happy faces/ Happy play in grassy places/ That is how, in ancient ages/ Children grew to kings and sages*. But based on what he has had heard today, Kleeman proposes a little rewrite of Stevenson's poem:

'Happy hearts, hands, minds and faces
Play in real AND virtual spaces
That's how, in this digital age,
Children are creative, worldly and sage'.