

The Gamer's Brain

HOW NEUROSCIENCE AND UX CAN
IMPACT VIDEO GAME DESIGN

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CRC Press

Taylor & Francis Group

Boca Raton London New York

CRC Press is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group, an **informa** business

A FOCAL PRESS BOOK

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Foreword

“Oh, no way! Oh my god. Oh no...”

I looked up to see Felix, the lead tester on the alpha version of Wizardry 8, staring at his computer in absolute horror. It wasn't a crash or some terrible bug that had caused his reaction, but rather a character named Zant, a harsh leader of an even harsher group of insect-like creatures known as the T'Rang. He'd just ordered the extermination of Felix's entire party of six characters, but that wasn't the thing that upset Felix. Rather, he was horrified that Zant had discovered his treachery, and worse, Zant seemed genuinely hurt by it.

Only a few days before, I was watching Felix play. He was doing something I thought was impossible: playing for both sides of a bitter divide. Not only had Felix been working for the T'Rang, he'd also been working for their sworn enemy, the Umpani. Somehow, he had managed to make it quite far in the game oblivious to the fact that this wasn't something I intended (or even considered). However, his experience—and more importantly, his motivation to resolve the differences between the Umpani and the T'Rang—led me to create a path forward for him. As Felix told me a few days before, the Umpani and the T'Rang had a shared enemy, even stronger than the two. He felt sure that if he could just get the two together that their collective forces could defeat their common enemy. Felix was incredibly emotionally invested in an outcome that didn't even exist, and he was motivated to see his non-existent solution through. I didn't tell him it wasn't possible. Instead, I made it so.

Felix's surprise when Zant discovered his betrayal, the remorse he felt when he read Zant's words (“I have trusted in you the secrets of our empire. That trust is never easily earned.”) and his subsequent sadness when he was completely locked out of any future T'Rang involvement were sobering. It could have gone the other way, though. Replaying the game, he was indeed able to forge that alliance.

“I can't believe that happened,” he told me.

It remains one of my most vivid memories as a game designer, and certainly one of his most impactful moments of play. It came to be because of a player-centric

approach to game design. Then, fewer than 20 years into my career, it taught me that I had more to learn from players and how they played my games than they had to learn from me. I didn't have a book like this one then nor had I seen Celia's excellent lectures on UX, usability and engage-ability. I had Felix, but he taught me a lot.

During those years and in the years that followed, I have also seen players throw up their hands in frustration when they felt overloaded with information or couldn't figure out how to make a game do something they were sure it could actually do. I've seen players miss whole sections of gameplay because its clues were poorly telegraphed or watched them struggle with learning curves that were designed for designers who already knew how to do it and not the players who would have benefited from learning by doing, particularly those that might be new to playing such a game. Among these many memories, one specific memory stands out. Having served on a variety of "game of the year" award committees, I fought for a game I considered just beautiful—art, design, audio, story, code—a game loved by so, so many players. It was defeated by the committee not because of the things that its team had carefully crafted, but rather the quiriness of its controls. It was like putting a poor steering wheel on a Ferrari. It was incredible to look at and to experience if you could just control the damned thing. I still love that game, but its Game of the Year award is on someone else's shelf.

And that's the thing with games—they *are* their interface and intercept—that point at which the game meets the mind of the player and where the actual experience of play really happens. In my talks and with other designers, I often use the example of a beautiful meal. Sometimes, I am torturous and have an actual delectable edible present or an image of something I know the audience is sure to go for. Looking at the food, it's easy to compliment the chef, the plating, the quality of the ingredients and even the ambience of the restaurant. But in the end? It's all down to these little, bumpy taste buds. Without passing through our interface, there is no satisfaction, only frustration.

As an industry, we have learned much about the value of UX in our 40+ years. From our earliest origins of teaching through death. ("You have died. I hope that taught you a lesson.") to our experiments with different endless control schemes, the UX of games has undeniably evolved. Much of our evolution has been through our own trial and error, "doing what they did" and first-party codification. Prior to Celia's work, however, which by now is well known and regarded within the game industry, I have yet to find anything which seeks to explain how the gamer's brain works in such a profoundly deep, clear and helpful way as *The Gamer's Brain*. I am at work on a commercial game as I write this, and this book changed my thinking and improved my designs by offering insights into the brain, the player and their motivations, among many other things. *The Gamer's Brain* has tremendous potential to make us better designers and game developers. I hope it makes your game, your research and your play more meaningful, too.

Brenda Romero

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Galway, Ireland. May 29, 2017*