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Exploiting Players? Critical Reflections on Participation in Game Development

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Abstract

Player involvement in the process of game development has become a de-facto standard in both industry and academia. Participation is intended to empower players, while helping designers create better games. However, participation also introduces uncertainty regarding players' and designers' relative roles, and creates new concerns over the exploitation of players, marginalization of designers, and the quality of game design outcomes. In this workshop, we invite the games research community to critically reflect on methods used to facilitate player participation, with the goal of establishing dialogue around meaningful and constructive player involvement.

Author Keywords

Participatory Design; Games User Research; Game Analytics; Methodology; Game Design.

ACM Classification Keywords

D.2.10 [Software Engineering]: Design - Methodologies

Introduction and Background

Player involvement in game development has become a de-facto standard in industry and academia. Methods range from participatory design (PD), which directly involves a small number of players in ideation and development [5], to post-hoc evaluations in the context

Organizing Team

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of games user research (GUR) [6] and large-scale analysis of player behavior and implications for design from the perspective of game analytics (GA) [4]. While these approaches differ in underlying philosophy and scope, all subscribe to the ideology that player involvement leads to better games. Proponents from academia and industry alike often highlight the empowering nature of giving players a voice throughout the development process and the advantages that tailoring games to players' needs has for player experience. However, there is little reflection on negative implications that PD, GUR, and GA may have in the wider context of game development. For example, PD is often carried out in collaboration with participants who do not have any experience in designing high quality, well-balanced, interesting games. This configuration often leads to games that are essentially designed by the experts, with simply the narrative or artwork guided by the non-experts. In other words, expertise becomes a source of unchallenged power that marginalizes player perspectives. In contrast, GA directly feeds player behavior into the design process. However, the sheer quantity of metrics available through GA bears the risk that individual creativity is replaced by a 'design by numbers' [1,3], trying to engage everyone but ending up pleasing nobody. In terms of power relationships, GA places bigger emphasis on data in turn, requiring experience to infer the right insights [2] and bearing the risk of marginalizing the role of the designer.

In this workshop, we aim to foster critical reflection on user involvement in game development, starting conversation around limitations and risk associated with current trends, raising questions regarding perspectives on players and designers they suggest. We want to

hear from PD, GUR and GA communities and share instances in which chosen approaches led to conflict, negatively impacted outcomes for one or more groups of stakeholders, or simply resulted in less than enjoyable player experiences. Through reflection on instances of failure, and by bringing together different perspectives on player involvement in game development that spans industry and academia, we want to identify main challenges and develop new views on methods of involvement, refine our views on the role of players throughout development and beyond, and encourage player involvement that is appropriate, respects all stakeholders, and does in fact lead to creative and more engaging games.

Objectives and Outcomes

The objective of the workshop is to bring together researchers and practitioners who work with end-users in various capacities to critically reflect on and refine research approaches PD UCD, GUR, and GA. The main outcome of this workshop will be a white paper authored together with all workshop participants that outlines a roadmap for methods of user involvement in game development. The paper will further our understanding of ideologies and values behind player involvement, and identify instances of challenge in PD, GUR and GA that arise from the practical involvement of players. To this end, it will provide a structured, systematic analysis of case studies to outline where current approaches are prone to failure.

Workshop Activities

We will use Slack (<http://www.slack.com>) to facilitate communication among workshop participants at all stages. Generally, we aim to involve all authors and not just workshop attendees throughout our workshop, and

Detailed Schedule

Morning session. (1) Mini-symposium to introduce participants and give an opportunity to share individual perspectives on user participation. *Five minute presentations using a maximum of two slides, to be submitted prior to the event.* (2) Group work by research approach, reflect on goals and challenges based on previously solicited materials. *Produce poster with entire group that summarises challenges, summary of results to be uploaded to shared document on the day.*

Afternoon session. Mixed groups of participants will be invited to (3) work on case studies we will derive from their workshop submissions to encourage reflection on previously identified challenges and develop potential solutions. We will encourage (4) role-play to experience the views of players and designers. *Produce poster that refines core challenges based on individual case studies, and points toward mitigation strategies. Summary of results to be uploaded to shared document on the day.*

it is planned to use the tool to disseminate front-loaded activities, share thoughts on the day, and track outcomes to make results accessible and engage all authors in the development of the white paper.

Before the workshop. The proposed workshop includes a number of front-loaded activities, a mini-symposium and hands-on activities on the day of the workshop, and tangible strategies for encouraging collaboration beyond CHI PLAY 2017. Front-loaded activities include short questionnaires that we will send out to participants in the weeks leading up to CHI PLAY to gain insights into their perspectives on user participation and key challenges they encountered, feeding into activity (2) and the resulting white paper. **During the workshop.** On the day of the workshop, a mix of presentations, group work, and role-play will contribute to a closer examination of player participation in games research (see side bar for detailed schedule). Case studies to support activities (3) and (4) will focus on instances of problematic player involvement in game development (e.g., a participatory design project in which stakeholders made conflicting suggestions that were impossible for designers to reconcile) that lend themselves to further discussion with regards to methodological implications and ethical challenges. In the wrap-up session of the workshop, we will solicit participant collaboration beyond the event and develop a joint schedule to contribute to the joint white paper. **Beyond the workshop.** We will continue to use Slack to develop the previously described white paper. This step will draw from some of the front-loaded activities along with tangible outcomes of workshop activities (2), (3) and (4). To ensure accessibility of outcomes for the entire CHI PLAY community, it is planned to submit the white paper to a

related journal venue, for example, the International Journal of Human-Computer Studies (IJHCS).

Participation

This workshop aims to engage between 10 and 15 participants from academia and industry; the submission process is designed to facilitate this broad scope: Papers solicited from participants will focus on their personal, practical experience with game development and research methodologies that involve end-users, discussing instances where player involvement led to discouraging results.

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