Now It's Personal: On Abusive Game Design

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we introduce the concept of abusive game design as an attitude towards creating games – an aesthetic practice that operates as a critique of certain conventionalisms in popular game design wisdom. We emphasize that abusive game design is, at its core, about spotlighting the dialogic relation between player and designer.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J5 [**Arts and Humanities**]: Fine Arts

General Terms

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Game Design, Abusive Game Design, Indie Games

1. INTRODUCTION

A simple swing of the wiimote, and the moaning sounds kick in. Suddenly, two young men find themselves having virtual gay sex – in front of a crowd, no less.

Surprise! This isn't your typical Wii game.

In 2008, Doug and the Copenhagen Game Collective prototyped a no-graphics, collaborative sex rhythm game played with wiimotes. We called it *Dark Room Sex Game* [13]. The project was intended as a stupid but subversive party game – something that would get some laughs.

But the game was *also* a twisted design experiment, developed around a particular idea: by playing on cultural taboos that surround sex and eroticism, we could design a game that not only aroused players, but also *embarrassed* them. Whether the game actually arouses remains unclear. The embarrassment, however, is pretty much guaranteed.

There are several particular features that make *Dark Room Sex Game* such a potentially uncomfortable experience. First and

foremost, the game is (primarily) multiplayer; it's not only played in front of other people, but *with* other people. Second, because the game is audio-only, the visual imagery only exists in the players' imaginations. Deprived of the catharsis of over-the-top, computer-rendered sex organs, players are left on their own to fill in the gaps. Finally, the nature of the game requires partners to coordinate closely. Without any graphics to guide them, players are coaxed into looking at *each other*. This eye contact – or conspicuous avoidance of eye contact, as the case might be – drives home the social awareness that your partner might think that you're having dirty thoughts, and visa versa. In short, *Dark Room Sex Game* is an experience optimized for maximum awkwardness.

From a design perspective, how might we conceptualize embarrassing games like *Dark Room Sex Game*? Mischievousness aside, what could possibly be gained from designing such a game?

This paper explores the concept of abusive game design – an alternative design practice that challenges conventions of normative game design. Specifically, abusive game design challenges the notion of "player advocacy" – an ideology that inevitably allows the language of consumerism to outshine the particular human beings who design and play games.

We define abusive game design as an *attitude* – one that focuses on creating a dialogue between designer and player. Despite the harsh imagery surrounding the term "abuse," abusive game design, perhaps counter-intuitively, aims to forefront the particular human beings behind gameplay, both player and designer. For the abusive game designer, the hope is that players are forced out of their expectations and into an experience in which the importance of understanding the game system is eclipsed by that of understanding the designer behind the system.

Thus, abusive game design reframes gameplay as a dialogic relation between player and designer – a kind of conversation that presents itself in the form of a dare. In this sense, the theory of abusive game design is equally as incompatible with author-centric design approaches as it is with heavily player-centric approaches. Ultimately, abusive game design is neither about the player nor the designer, but rather the dance between them.

2. CONSERVATISM IN CURRENT GAME DESIGN THEORY

Examining the current game design literature, we can identify a red thread regarding the "best practices" of creating games. By and large, game design theorists have positioned game design as the craft of satisfying players' desires [8, 17, 23, 24, 35]: "It may seem too simple a question to even ask, but determining what players want out of a game is a question all game designers must contemplate if they want to make great games" [35, p. 1].

One way to describe the role of the designer in this perspective is as "an advocate for the player," as Tracy Fullerton phrases it [17, p. 2]. As a design philosophy, player advocacy focuses on how to satisfy player desires by crafting systems tailored to those desires. Player advocacy is a systems-centric approach to game design ("If you want to be a game designer, try looking at the world in terms of its underlying systems" [17, p. 8]) – one which privileges the relationship between system and player above all else, even if that means minimizing the presence of the designer. As Fullerton writes, "We tell our game students to always keep in mind that 'you don't come in the box,' meaning that when the game goes out to the public, you won't be there to explain it to each and every player" [17, p. 252]. While this wisdom is certainly true in a literal sense, the rhetoric betrays a certain effacement of the human being behind the design. Chris Bateman and Richard Boon are considerably more direct in their textbook, stressing that "Game design must be egoless" [8, p. 8].

The ideology of player advocacy has resulted in an "accessibility turn" in computer game design. Contemporary reflections and theories on game design stress the importance of making games accessible to their ever-widening target audiences [23, 24]. The driving values behind this accessibility turn encourage the creation of games that challenge players just enough so that they will feel satisfaction with their actions, yet simultaneously give more advanced players extra-hard modes and other in-game rewards that can used to showcase expert skills.

Casual games, riding the cultural wave of expanding digital games-based leisure to wider audiences, have been a particularly visible force in directing design innovation efforts towards the issue of accessibility: "The casual revolution is a reinvention of both games and players: casual game design is a genuine innovation in game design and a return to lessons long forgotten, while the idea of the less-dedicated, less-obsessed casual player helps us to move beyond the prejudice that video game player are nerdy and socially inept. This lets developers reconsider who will be playing their games, when and why. It also removes some of the stigma that has been attached to video games" [23, p. 63].

Even so-called "indie" developers, known for designing games with punishing challenges, frequently embrace notions like playability and replayability. *Mighty Jill Off* [3] and *VVVVVV* [10], for example, are 2D platformers of considerable difficulty, yet both games feature reward structures and usability conventions like save/reload points and fast respawn time. As such, both games are in close accordance with contemporary accessibility ideals; the games might be very challenging, but in another sense they remain "easy to play."

This accessibility turn is closely connected to a kind of "player narcissism," a perspective on gameplay in which players stand at the center of the gaming experience, ready and eager to be pleased within the bounds of their established tastes, interests, and skills. Player narcissism is an extreme but inevitable consequence of user-centered design practices that subordinate all design concerns to the satisfaction of an ideal player's desires and demands.

Our concern is that the accessibility turn is narrowing the type of play that "best practice" game design aspires to create. Player narcissism leads to what we call "monologic play" – a one-sided arrangement in which systems adapt to the ideal and potential performances of players in order to satisfy them in an instrumental fashion. Monologic play can be thought of as a conversation in which only the player speaks, while the designer merely nods

along – hardly a conversation at all. In the monologue of player narcissism, the player (the customer) is always right. Design becomes a rote catering to a user, devoid of any possibility of nurturing an open dialogue between creator and user. Players become mere customers, and designers become mere providers. In general, this type of monologic game design is not concerned about play as an activity, but about how games as systems can facilitate a form of play that is relatively constrained to formal, predictable outcomes that can be deduced from constrained, self-contained systems of rules [37].

It is our intension to point out that this current trend represents an intrinsic conservatism in the exploration of the medium and its aesthetic possibilities. According to the accessibility turn, games are supposed to challenge the player *within the limits* of what an *implied player model* suggests, always maintaining a desired and "positive" experience of the game. But where does this notion come from?

Play theorist Bernard Suits writes on the notion of "the lusory attitude" [42], an active state of mind in which players try to uphold both the rules of a game and the particular patterns of action needed to create a satisfactory play experience. The lusory attitude is an approach to gaming in which players voluntarily accept the constraints, goals and challenges posed by the game, granting the activity of play central importance while playing. Under the lusory attitude, players strive to find and sustain the experience they want to achieve through the game, be that "fun" or any other type of engagement. In short, the lusory attitude is an artifact of the players' desire to make their gaming experience worthwhile. To understand the importance of the lusory attitude in contemporary game design theory and practice, we need only consider the emphasis placed on popular notions like "seamless play" and "balance" [24].

We define conventional game design as the craft of building systems, interfaces, and interaction affordances that contribute to a successful experience of the lusory attitude, without breaking the relation between a player and a well-crafted game. The lusory attitude, at least in this understanding, is a driving force behind the monologic approach to game design. In this paper, we present a different take: abusive game design, as an aesthetic move made in the hopes of establishing a dialogue with the player, purposefully breaks conventions that try to formalize the lusory attitude around principles of system design.

3. DEFINING ABUSIVE GAME DESIGN

By arguing that game designers are first and foremost advocates for the player, contemporary game design theory has implicitly established that games-mediated play consists of the relation between a player and a system. The designer becomes the odd-one-out, pressured to efface their own presence in order to ensure that the game is optimally tailored to the player.

Not all game design practices need fit this model. In fact, we believe that the most provocative game design possibilities are found where this relation is disrupted. We are interested in what happens when players engage in a dialogue with the designer – when play becomes personal.

Our intention with this project is to understand the types of practices that both lead to and are defined by these types of games. The first step is to propose a thesis, to establish a framework of definitions and concepts that allow us to articulate

this phenomenon. The framework consists of three assertions:

One: There are no "abusive games," only abusive game *design*. The type of phenomenon we are examining in this paper resists attempts at formal analysis. Ours is not an ontological claim about the nature of *some* games, but an examination of intentionality and design strategies, inspired by our own experiences analyzing and creating particular games. In other words, the theory is *prescriptive* rather than descriptive. Our claim is that there exist abusive game design practices that may lead to abusive gameplay experiences. The game, as designed object, is of secondary interest.

Two: Abusive game design should be understood as an *aesthetic* position or move by the designer.

Three: Abusive game design subverts the systems-centric design paradigm a5nd calls for an approach to game design that aims to establish a personal dialogue between player and designer, by means of a game. The game is only the mediator in this dialogue. As such, abusive game design understands games as a personal affair between individuals. Abusive games recast play as a dialogic interplay between player and designer.

4.   MODALITIES OF ABUSE

Even though only game design, and not games themselves, can be accurately labeled as "abusive," we need not allow the specter of intentional fallacy stop us from conjecturing about existing games. With an eye towards future design projects, an analysis of existing games can help illuminate and inspire techniques for abusing the player, regardless of what the game developers actually intended. To that end, we hereafter employ the term "abusive game" as convenient shorthand for any game that both: 1) *seems* like it was intended to abuse and 2) has something to teach us about how we might abuse the player.

In the following sections, we examine a number of abusive games that showcase a variety of different modalities for abusing the player. Again, our primary interest lies not in the games themselves, but rather in the design lessons that the examples have to offer.

4.1 Physical Abuse

The most literal approach to abusing the player is that of physical abuse. *PainStation* [28], an art installation qua arcade machine, stands as one especially prominent example.

PainStation pits two players against each other in a modified version of the classic arcade game *Pong*. Both players must keep one hand on the "Pain Execution Unit." When a player loses a point, that player is physically punished by burn, electric shock, or lash, depending on where the missed ball lands. If a player lifts their hand – "either out of painoverload or [blackout]" – they lose [29]. The playful but antagonistic spirit behind the game is nicely expressed by the designers' humorous admonishment: "The next time someone urges you politely to choose the weapon, choose the painstation."

Less outwardly aggressive but still markedly abusive is the infamous *Desert Bus*, a minigame from the unreleased *Penn & Teller's Smoke and Mirrors* Sega CD game [1].[1] In *Desert Bus*, the

player is tasked with driving a bus from Tucson to Las Vegas, without steering off the road. But like in the physical world, it takes a full *eight hours* to complete the drive. The game's desert scenery is extremely sparse, and the only animation is that of a bug that occasionally hits the windshield. According to Penn Jillette himself, the game was designed as a snarky retort to politicians who advocate censorship of violent videogames: "*Desert Bus* was a game we thought would really appeal to people who didn't like unrealistic games, and didn't like violence in their games. It was just like real, loving life" [11].

Most obnoxiously, the bus veers slightly to the right so that, as Jillette explains it, "you could not simply tape down the accelerator button on your Genesis pad and leave the game alone." Worse yet, the player earns only one measly point for successfully completing the drive. Jillette reminisces: "And then when you got in – and I love this – when you got into Vegas and pulled in and stopped, the counter – which was five zeros – went to 1." In short, *Desert Bus* is physically abusive because the player "had to man the wheel at all times," for an unreasonable duration. The player vs. designer mentality inherent to the game is evidenced by some of the ill-fated promotional material, which taunted: "We *dare* you to stay awake for an actual eight-hour bus drive from Tucson to Las Vegas!" (emphasis theirs). [2]

4.2 Unfair Design

Perhaps the most familiar modality of abuse is "unfair design" – games that are devilishly hard, to the point of absurdity. Many games, especially older games from the 8-bit age, are certainly challenging to the point of frustration. Abusively difficult games, however, visibly relish in the dementedness of their challenges, gleefully shoving it in the players' faces.

One particularly infamous such game is *Kaizo Mario*, a series of user-created levels for *Super Mario World* [30]. Also known as "Asshole Mario," the mod was popularized by a series of YouTube videos that show a player struggling through the levels' twisted traps and precision jumps [4]. Due to a language barrier, the origins of the mod remain elusive.[3] Popular legend holds that the levels were created by a designer with the specific intention of challenging his friend.

Kaizo Mario is so funny precisely because it seems so unfair and

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[1] *Penn & Teller's Smoke and Mirrors* was originally slated for release in 1995. The game was completed, and even marketed.

However, the game was never released commercially because the development company, Absolute Entertainment, went bankrupt around the same time [12].

[2] An executable ROM of the game, along with a wealth of promotional material created before Absolute Entertainment's demise, enjoys widespread unofficial circulation over various bittorrent channels. For example, a torrent of the material was posted in 2006 by Andy Baio on his website, waxy.org [7].

[3] The videos and the mod itself can be traced back to a Japanese website, now defunct:

http://web.archive.org/web/20080224201125/http://pokoweb.com/pds/434451/kaizomario

Both the files on the website and the "Asshole Mario" YouTube videos are dated 2007, though it's unclear whether the levels were created even earlier. The video descriptions attribute the level design to "T. Takemoto," and suggest that the footage was recorded by the designer's friend, "R. Kiba."

user-unfriendly, breaking any and every unwritten rules about "good practice" level design. For instance, the levels are littered with invisible blocks – obstacles that only appear when it is too late to avoid them – placed exactly where the player is most likely to jump. As one YouTube commenter puts it: "The only person who really had lots of lols from this is proly the creator... laughing all the way to the end of creating each level imagining how people will suffer in the future playing it" [49].

Several traps creatively exploit strange quirks of the *Super Mario World* game system, to hilarious effect. In Stage 10, for example, the player finally completes the level, only to fall into a pit during the victory animation [6]. As it turns out, the player can only prevent the seemingly inevitable death by hitting a special switch before completing the level; we can almost hear the player cry out in frustration as we watch the video.

Kaizo Mario itself aside, the "Asshole Mario" videos are themselves valuable case studies. Edited to show the player's many failures in addition to his successes, the videos convey a compelling narrative of comic tragedy. Death after death makes the player's frustration palpable. In addition, the videos make visible the contest between player and designer that so fundamentally characterizes the abusive gaming experience. In Stage 6, for example, the player approaches a narrow passageway [5]. Halfway through the passage, the player halts; something feels wrong. The player turns around, realizing that he can instead swim underneath, below the bottom edge of the screen (another strange *Super Mario World* quirk). His instincts are proven prescient, as a bullet eventually streams down the suspicious passageway. As one YouTube commenter describes it: "The player pwned the creator so bad when he knew something was up with the killer plant hallway" [50]. In other words, the player didn't beat the obstacle as much as he did the human designer.

In the indie games community, this kind of unfair design has become so popular that it has earned its own subgenre name, "masocore" [2] Mike O'Reilly's *I Wanna Be The Guy* [32], another platformer game, stands out as one popular example. As O'Reilly explains it, the game is all about "getting into someone's head, and making everything that they do an act of paranoia" [33]. O'Reilly's central design inquiry – "how much can I piss my friend off, and have him still play the game?" [34] – is all about the struggle of player against designer.

4.3 Lying to the Player

Closely intertwined with unfair design is abuse by explicitly lying to the player. In *I Wanna Be The Guy*, for example, routinely sets false premises, only to break them in cruel and comical ways. At one point in the game, the music suddenly stops and a Windows error message pops up, as if the game had crashed; but moments later, the message box falls downwards, suddenly becoming a dangerous in-game obstacle. In an abusive game like *I Wanna Be The Guy*, players are quickly trained to distrust everything.

In the aforementioned *Penn & Teller's Smoke and Mirrors*, the designers lie in especially egregious fashion, teaming up with the owner of the game to scam a second player. The *Buzz Bombers*, minigame, for example, is a simple arcade shooter with secret controls designed to give the owner an insurmountable competitive advantage. The full practical joke, at least as envisioned, was elaborate: the colluding player would be able to change the disc's packaging to give the false illusion of a standalone *Buzz Bombers* game; then, the game disc could be

booted in a special mode so as to mask the game's true identity.

A more successfully commercial example of lying to the player is Silicon Knights' *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* [41], an acclaimed horror-action game for the Nintendo GameCube. The game is primarily remembered for its "sanity meter" mechanic: as the player character encounters more enemies, their sanity meter is depleted, and they begin to hallucinate. Some of these hallucinatory effects are relatively straightforward: disturbing sounds, off-kilter camera angles, and monsters that turn out to have been illusions. Other hallucinations, however, are decidedly non-diegetic, directed at the *player*, rather than at the character. For example, the game will occasionally pretend that it is *deleting* instead of saving the player's current progress, as if the player had mistakenly selected the wrong option.

Viewed as nuggets of abusive design, these tricks succeed because they so fittingly complement the *Eternal Darkness* narrative and atmosphere. Far from feeling forced or superfluous, the hallucinations – even the non-diegetic ones – manage to intensify the horror experience.

4.4 Aesthetic Abuse

Another way to abuse the player is to assault their bodily senses. This kind of aesthetic abuse most commonly targets visual perception. One recent exemplar is Jonatan "cactus" Söderström's *Tuning* [44], a trippy 3D platformer that employs brash colors, distorted perspectives, and other visual tricks in service of making the game challenging in an unsettling way. Particularly abusive are the nausea-inducing levels in which the view spins around and around, as if the player were on some demented virtual merry-go-round.

Aesthetically abusive games can also use sound and music to attack our sense of hearing. Mark "messhof" Essen's *Flywrench* [15], for example, features a soundtrack of discordant industrial noise. Already a very difficult game on its own, *Flywrench* dares the player to maintain focus amid a sonic maelstrom. The sound, despite how grating it is, feels appropriate because it perfectly embodies the frustration of dying repeatedly in rapid succession.

Though very rare, there do exist abusive games that target experience beyond the audiovisual. Al Lowe's *Leisure Suit Larry: Love for Sail!* [40], for example, manages to qualify as "olfactory abusive." Humorously, the game shipped with CyberSniff 2000, a scratch-and-sniff card with nine different odors designed to be smelled at specific moments throughout the game. In addition to innocuous odors like salt air and chocolate, the card also concealed – perhaps predictably – a fart smell [27]. In the irreverent world of the *Leisure Suit Larry* series, the gag feels right at home.

4.5 Social Abuse

Returning to our example from the introduction, *Dark Room Sex Game* does not fit so neatly into any of the modalities we have so far described. Instead, we choose to classify the game as "socially abusive" – one that aims to disrupt or disturb players' social relations.

Socially abusive games can certainly take the form of games geared towards solo performance; the infamous adolescent party game "Truth or Dare?" stands out as one obvious example. Nevertheless, as *Dark Room Sex Game* demonstrates, games that are more explicitly multiplayer allow for a qualitatively different type of abuse. The directness of performing *with* others, rather

than only *for* others, affords additional opportunities for manipulating interpersonal dynamics.

One particularly extreme (albeit non-digital) take on socially abusive "game" design can be found in "Jeepform," an experimental, uniquely Scandinavian approach to role-playing games. A central goal of the Jeepform agenda is creating "bleed" – the blurring of the border between character and player. As Frederik Berg Østergaard explains it, bleed happens when "something spills over into the player" or when "you get angry at a fellow player, and can't shake the feeling after the game" [51].

Jeepform games tend to be quite provocative; angering, shaming, or otherwise discomforting the players is often the point. Østergaard's *Fat Man Down* [51] stands out as one especially intense example. In *Fat Man Down*, the fattest male player in the room plays the Fat Man, while the other players act out a series of collectively improvised vignettes from the Fat Man's miserable life, ganging up on him to ridicule him about his weight. To further accentuate the tension between the Fat Man and the other players, both sides are fed different lies about how the game works. For instance, the Fat Man secretly works with the Game Master to "ensure that the premise of the game comes to fruition," mischievously playing up how taxing the experience is on him.

Like other Jeepform games, *Fat Man Down* is designed to "sting" the players. But as Østergaard explains, the main target of the game is not the Fat Man himself, but rather the players who are forced to torment him. Østergaard writes: "What happens in the scenes are sometimes just too much. To cope with this, [the players] will try to disarm their evil and react with a laugh to alleviate the stress [...] When players are disarming themselves, one of the game's objective has been reached, and the borders between game and player has been blurred" [51, p. 5].

4.6 Synergies of Abuse

As we have observed of games like *I Wanna Be The Guy* and *Fat Man Down*, abusive game design machinations are especially effective when they combine multiple modalities of abuse, synergistically.

One of the very first abusive console games, *Takeshi no Chousenjou* [45], provides another compelling example.[4] Designed by famous filmmaker Takeshi Kitano for the Japanese Famicom system, *Takeshi no Chousenjou* betrays Kitano's outright contempt for the player. First and foremost, the game is notoriously difficult, in deliberately irritating ways. For instance, one part of the game features a deceptively familiar side-scrolling shoot-em-up challenge in which the player can, frustratingly, only move downwards and not upwards.

Worse yet, the game seems maddeningly arbitrary. Early on in the game, the player is forced to sing the same karaoke song into the controller, repeatedly.[5] The criteria for success is never explained;

in fact, it isn't clear whether the player's input even matters, or whether the game only passes the player after a predetermined lengthy period of continuous activity. This karaoke challenge could also be construed as socially abusive; forcing the player to sing the same, cheesy karaoke song again and again is an effective way to make them look like a clown.

Adding insult to injury, the game's ending goes as far as to mock the player for bothering to complete the game. On the final screen, a pixilated image of Kitano's head appears, taunting: "Why're ya taking this game so seriously?" Players versus designer indeed.

Takeshi no Chousenjou stands out as an especially outrageous example of abusive game design because Kitano leveraged his fame to sucker players into buying the game; Egawa Tetsuo, a salesperson who supposedly took part in the development of the game, recounts that around 80,000 copies of the game were sold [18].[6] Notably, the majority of these players were children – the very audience least equipped to understand Kitano's cruel humor.

5. PRODUCTIVE ABUSE

5.1 Power Play: Foucault and Abusive Game Design

If games are about challenges, they are also about power: the power we players concede to game systems in order to organize our behaviors, structure our needs, and reward our actions. Conventional, monologic game design understands the act of playing a game as engaging with a structure of processes designed to maintain the lusory attitude. Games, in this view, can be understood as feedback systems that reward players for staying within the boundaries of the lusory attitude, challenge their skills in order to teach them new abilities. Games are designed to keep this loop active by means of rewards, from extra lives to the laurel in the heads of the champions.

In this context, it is relevant to think about computer games as power structures. Let us define games as systems of power in which subjects become voluntarily subordinate to a network of processes, actions, rewards, and values that define what actions are valid, valuable and socially recognized. This power theory approach will explain why, in abusive game design, the game system is a secondary element in a personal dialogue between players and designers.

Power, here, should be understood in a Foucaultian perspective, as a productive notion. Power, according to Foucault, organizes humans and institutions in productive relations – it creates subjects, it creates knowledge, it *creates* [16, p. 59]. Power is only productive if social; hence, power is productive in a dialogic situation. In fact, the dialogue and its productivity are an outcome of the accepted power structure. Power is between employers and employees, between tyrants and the oppressed, but also between lovers, between mentor and student, and between designers and players.

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[4] The title translates to "Takeshi's Challenge." As with *Kaizo Mario*, the language barrier makes it difficult to find verifiable information about the game. The game has been discussed extensively in the online gaming world, but surprisingly little of the information is sourced reliably. The information in this paper has primarily been gathered from a fan-translated episode of Fuji TV's "GameCenter CX" [18].

[5] The Japanese Famicom, unlike its North American counterpart,

shipped with a second controller that featured an inbuilt microphone [31].

[6] Tetsuo reminisces that Kitano sometimes designed the game while drinking sake: "Back then, our developers wrote down everything he said, even the stuff he said when drunk" [18].

If we understand play as productive [42], then games become the systems with which this productive experience is generated, engaged, and controlled. Games are "technologies of play," systems that produce productive engagement by promoting the lusory attitude in their players. For Foucault, power "needs to be considered a productive network which runs through the whole social body (…)" [16, p. 119]. Therefore, one could argue that technologies of play are power structures, productive networks of relationships between systems and agents that generate subjectivities and knowledge

Our interpretation of Foucault, however, goes further than other interpretations of Foucault within game studies [40]. In *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Foucault is used to understand how games produce a subjectivity. However, this understanding of Foucault is limited. It is only those games that establish a dialogic relation between players and designers that take full advantage of the productive capacities of power in the social context. Power is only productive in a dialogue.

In the logic of conservative game design, the designer advocates for the player by creating a tool for predicted pleasures. That is, players engage with the game system, and are encouraged to instrumentalize their play by means of system procedures that reinforce the intended experience. In this view, the power structure is between a player and a system, with the designer vanishing into the background. The lusory attitude is interpreted as an instrumental good, a measure of the success of a design in terms of a player's engagement with a system.

Abusive game design operates in a different manner: it uses the productive capacities of play as a power relation to override the instrumental perspectives that deem the game system as central to the play experience, and instead encourages players to focus on the human designer. The game system, rather than take on a generative position within the network, simply *mediates* the interactions between players and designers. Abusive game design is designed to break the "toolness" of conventional game systems and, instead, create instruments that support a personal relation between designer and player. The game object becomes a means for a dialogue, rather than an isolated tool for play.

In abusive game design, the technology of play is reframed as an element in a more complex, interpersonal relation between players and creators. The "true" game, as exemplified by games like *Kaizo Mario* as described above, is not about mastering the system, but about knowing the designer. Therefore, the activity of play is not instrumental or tool-oriented, but productive and oriented towards the intersubjective. Play, in our view, is only productive in dialogue.

It is in this sense that we affirm that abusive game design is not a functional approach to design, but an aesthetic one: abusive game design de-instrumentalizes a technology of play in order to enhance the interpersonal, human relation established in the gameplay experience. Abusive game design builds on moments of hesitation, cracks in the seamless experience of play, in which the player needs to establish a personal connection with a designer in order to understand the activity of play. The key insight here is that the lusory attitude is not generated or upheld by a system, but rather arises as a product of realizing the deeply personal nature of gameplay.

5.2 User-Unfriendliness and Critical Design

The Faraday Chair is not really a chair. The Faraday Chair is more like a small bed encased in a glass box, in which users lie down in a fetal position. A snorkel provides fresh air. There is not much else to do. The Faraday Chair was created with the intention of highlighting "the difference between visual and radio transparency" [14, p. 143], as a way of imagining a space where humans could be isolated from electromagnetic space. Of course, the "chair" is not actually intended for practical use. But it does aim to establish a dialogue between design, user, and designer, by means of an evocative yet low-technology object.

The Faraday Chair, a design proposal by Anthony Dunne [14], is a kindred spirit of the abusive game design examples described above. By its very nature, abusive game design is closely related to Dunne's concept of "critical design." In his *Hertzian Tales*, Dunne urges designers to design for user reflection: "By poeticizing the distance between people and electronic objects, sensitive skepticism might be encouraged, rather than unthinking assimilation of the values and conceptual models embedded in electronic objects" [14, p. 22].

Design, in Dunne's work, is an aesthetic practice that challenges standard usability paradigms, in ways that reveal the poetic beauty of our interactions with an object: "In a world where practicality and functionality can be taken for granted, the aesthetics of the post-optimal object could provide new experiences of everyday life, new poetic dimensions" [14, p. 20]. The "post-optimal" object is intended to introduce strangeness into our world of electronics, to call for new experiences by means of objects that do not function as expected, but that break order and convention so that "something else becomes visible, unnamable, unable to find a correspondence in the material world" [14, p. 73].

For our purposes, the most relevant facet of Dunne's theory of the post-optimal object is his notion of "user-*un*friendliness." Dunne argues that post-optimal objects can act as poetic breaches in the conventionalisms of de-ideologized design: "[…] design is always ideological. User-friendliness helps conceal this fact" [14, p. 22]. Dunne continues that design, at least as commonly theorized, "holds back the potential of electronics to provide new aesthetic meanings" [14, p. 30]. As a reaction against this conventionalism, Dunne proposes that we push design practices towards the user-*un*friendly, "a form of gentle provocation [that] could characterize the post-optimal object" [14, p. xviii]. This viewpoint shifts the focus from the user to the object, to "providing aesthetic experiences through the electronic objects themselves" [14, p. 35].

Abusive game design, as an aesthetic provocation of the ideology of player advocacy, is certainly an example of user-unfriendly design. However, we believe that our understanding of abusive game design takes this agenda one step further. In Dunne's work there is still a certain appreciation of the direct interaction between object and user as the source of the provocation; it is the *object* that creates the aesthetic experience. Abusive game design, however, intends to create objects that appeal the player to face and understand the designer. In other words, abusive game design, as an aesthetic position, is justified by the dialogue between player and designer, beyond the object designed; the object in itself is just a vehicle for a form of interpersonal interaction. As such, abusive game design differs from the object-centric approach of Dunne. It overcomes the instrumentality of the game-as-system paradigm by framing play as a personal affair.

6. EVALUATING ABUSIVE DESIGN

From a design perspective, we might reasonably ask how to go about evaluating abusive game designs. Are all abusive designs equally productive? And if antagonizing the player is the whole point, is there a way to distinguish between "good" and "bad" antagonism, without resorting to conventional design principles that ultimately depersonalize the designer?

The question of how to reconcile deliberately provocative design practices with notions of "success" and "failure" continues to vex the design research and HCI literature [9, 14, 19, 20, 22, 25, 38]. As William Gaver and his colleagues explain, the "open-endedness" of various alternative design approaches "raises challenges for how systems should be evaluated, because what it means to succeed, and indeed the dimensions relevant for success, may vary widely depending on how people achieve a meaningful relationship with a given design" [19, p. 2213].

Despite these challenges, Gaver et al. maintain that such designs are nonetheless compatible with definitive assessments of success or failure. They argue that continued voluntary engagement with a design prototype over time, "beyond any explicit declaration of liking," provides one fundamental metric of success. They define successful systems as "those which continue to occasion new surprises and new insights over the course of encounters with them" [19, p. 2219-2220].

This notion of "new surprises" certainly rings true in the aforementioned "masocore" school of abusive game design. Mike O'Reilly, writing about the process of designing *I Wanna Be The Guy*, emphasizes the importance of using a wide variety of challenges, and placing them in an appropriate rhythm: "I must keep the game difficult, but balanced. I must keep the player on their toes and yet still have to surprise them when they're most alert. If I randomly kill the player to much he loses interest. If I'm too kind he grows weak and loses his fearfulness" [33].

The wisdom here is that abusive game design requires the designer to walk a thin line. The trick is to push players right up to the breaking point, but not beyond; after all, you can't abuse your players if they stop playing your game. In this sense, an abusive game designer is like a virus – one which avoids killing the host in order to better propagate throughout the population.

This advice also explains why *Kaizo Mario* to stand out from the crowd, despite a recent flood of sadistic *Super Mario World* mods that have tried to take the abusiveness even further. As one YouTube commenter remarks of the *Super Kusottare World* mod [36]: "This is weak sauce compared to Kaizo. Any dork can make something impossible to the point of being unplayable, but Kaizo is more imaginative and has that glimmer of hope that it is possible" [48].

That a legion of imitators failed to duplicate the *je ne sais quoi* of *Kaizo Mario* is not so unexpected. If abusive game design thrives on the element of surprise, then originality is essential. For this reason, aspiring abusive game designers would do well to explore some of the more under-used modalities of abuse, like social abuse. Revisiting our *Dark Room Sex Game* example, we would argue that the game is effective precisely because it plays off Nintendo's family-friendly image; many players just aren't prepared to deal with emotions like embarrassment, especially in the cultural context of the wiimote controller.

This example also reminds us that we cannot judge an abusive game design based on the game system alone; audience and context are an indispensible part of the equation. Consequently, it can be difficult to predict which designs will succeed. *Desert Bus*, for example, is hardly an innovative or surprising game, at least on the surface of things. But the game, rediscovered years after its creation, happened to strike the right cord at the right time, inspiring an annual "Desert Bus for Hope" charity event that has since cemented the game's place in the abusive game canon [26].

For some abusive game designers, audience and context even trump the game itself. Jeepform co-founder Tobias Wrigstad stresses that "the meta play is as important to the game as the actual play" [47]. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter that Wrigstad sometimes tackles in his games, it is of the utmost importance to him that players are prepared to treat the game scenario appropriately.[7] For Wrigstad, "success" is heavily dependent on the people playing – their expectations and attitudes, as well as the life experiences they bring with them to the game.

All that said, perhaps the clearest indicator of a successful abusive game design is that the player feels like they are playing against a particular person (or team of persons), and not just a system. As long as the player takes the abuse personally, so to speak, the true spirit of abusive game design is alive and well.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have outlined the concept of abusive game design. We have introduced its theoretical origins, as well as some design practices that articulate it. It is our intention for this paper to be read as an academic manifesto. We live in an era of usable games, wide audiences, and pleasing designs. More and more, our games are designed to please us, becoming the perfect tools for our leisure.

In spite of this trend, we believe that gameplay can be a deeply *personal* experience. It involves an other, the one you play *with*, the one you play *for*. Abusive game design creates these games: it aims to break the instrumentality, the isolated "toolness" of games. Rather than give players what they "want" or what they supposedly "need," abusive game designers give players something idiosyncratic, weird, and confrontational – something that will trigger a more conversational relation. Abusive game design is about getting the player to understand how the designer works, and visa versa. It's not a monologue, but a dialogue, an open invitation to explore the extremes of gameplay experiences, together. Abusive game design confronts the conventional and reminds us that play is, above all, something personal.

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