

- * -

NOTES FROM THE OTHERGROUND

2 – “A WINNER IS YOU”

When trying to understand the appeal and the pleasure of playing, the most humanistic branch of game-studies, ludology, focuses on three qualities of games:

- Their offering a safe environment in which an agent (player) can learn to recognize and master logical patterns
- Their encouraging involvement and attachment via systems of reward and punishment
- Their granting access to worlds, possibilities and more generally experiences that transcend the player’s everyday life

Canadian game-designer Sid Meier, one of the founding fathers of our industry and legendary creator of the *Civilization* and the *Pirates!* series, has a very similar vision when it comes to understanding games. Expanding on his famed definition of games as “series of interesting choices” (Rollings & Morris 2000, p. 38), in his GDC10 Keynote “The Psychology of Game Design”, Meier described them as epic journeys from which players expect a satisfactory conclusion.

Meier also pointed out that an important and emergent feature of modern gaming is the systematic attempt to respond to the players’ need to feel unique and “above average”. Such a quality clearly pivots on advancements in the understanding of player psychology. In the industry, this specific kind of player satisfaction is typically pursued both granting the possibility for personalization in gameplay and by making the players feel good about themselves and their playing experience via positive rewarding systems. Most of the conflicts that take place in *Civilization Revolution* (Firaxis, 2008) are battles in which one side overpowers the other, either with technology or the sheer number of soldiers. The chances of losing a streak of battles in which the player’s army overpowered the computer’s is artificially limited. The possibility for player’s army to win a series of disadvantaged battles is, instead, not limited. Those two design decisions are consistent towards the objective of trying to keep the players happy, engaged and not to break their illusion of being special, being above average, being winners

This approach to contemporary game design also stood out in Rob Pardo’s GDC10 speech, where the executive-vice president of Blizzard Entertainment’s game-design also recognized the need for positive psychological reinforcements to keep the players engaged and satisfied. Curiously, he also mentioned that there is a system in place in *Warcraft III* to correct statistics in disadvantaged conflicts in order to maximize the player’s engagement and satisfaction. Pardo strengthened his point with the example of *World of Warcraft*’s rest system where, initially, players were punished for playing too long by having their experience-gain percentage drop to 50% after a couple of hours of play. “Beta players universally hated this idea and were screaming bloody murder,” confessed Pardo. He decided, then, to turn this punishing mechanic into a bonus one instead: they let players start at 200% experience-gain and drop down to 100% after two hours of play. It was the exact same mechanic, but in this case the reduction was perceived as the loss of a positive bonus rather than a punishment.

It might be interesting to notice how, with the industry becoming more business-focused and prone to please and pamper their clientele, game designers are progressively less identifiable with the detachment and geometrical perfection of Plato's Demiurge (the divine incarnation of the Good) and more similar to the deceitful and earthly Evil Genius imagined by Descartes. Curious choice of adjectives, there.