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4

Casual gaming: The changing role of the designer

Laureline Chiapello

The original goal of the research presented in this chapter was to clarify and enhance different definitions of the term ‘casual games’ by drawing on the knowledge and experience of several game designers. The recording of these game designers’ experience unveiled some noteworthy changes about their role in video game projects, their vision of game design practice and the difficulties they encounter in the industry. While results concerning the definition of ‘casual games’ have already been presented in a previous work (Chiapello 2013), this chapter offers the opportunity to further explore the changing role of game designers in the casual gaming era. The term ‘casual revolution’, originally coined by Jesper Juul to describe the ‘new way for players and games to engage’ (Juul 2009, 22), might also be relevant to describe the underlying transformations of practice experienced by game designers working on casual game projects.

The very nature of casual games remains unclear (IGDA 2006–13), though there have been several attempts at defining this type of game. A literature review explored the factors encompassing casual games, and this literature review revealed a clear evolution in the definition of casual games (Chiapello 2013). Early attempts were focused on specific aspects of the casual game phenomenon, namely games, players or playing (Kuittinen et al. 2007). However, definitions became progressively more complex. Specifically, the

focus shifted from a fragmented vision centred on gameplay, to a holistic one, including game culture and design values (Juul 2009; Kultima 2009; Kultima and Stenros 2010). The research presented in this chapter tries to expand on this latest development by including a new element in the equation: the knowledge of the casual game designers themselves. Some authors, such as Juul, did question game designers about the definition of casual games to enrich their work or confirm their analysis. But no study has considered game designers as the holders of a specific knowledge. To fill this gap, research for this chapter was designed to build knowledge *with practitioners*. Accordingly, it became possible to understand the world of casual game design from a new point of view. This chapter will present the findings related to the evolution of the designer's role in casual game projects.

First, this chapter will introduce the conceptual framework used: the epistemology of practice, as described by Donald Schön in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). After elaborating on the qualitative methodology, the results will be presented. They reveal that designers can frame their roles in two different ways: the designer–gamer and the designer–agent. The designer–agent role is a source of struggle for many designers and it indicates two major concerns for designers: first, that the designer's role is currently evolving, and second, that this change might signal a call for deeper reflection over the challenges faced by game designers in the video game industry.

An epistemology of practice: Designers as a source of knowledge

In his 1983 book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön advocates for a new epistemology of practice. He criticizes the positivist epistemology of practice and the model of 'applied science' and proposes a new approach, where professional actions are a source of knowledge. First, this chapter will elaborate on this epistemology and the central concept of reflection-in-action and subsequently, it will explain the concept of 'role frames' (Schön 1983, 270), which will be used to analyse the designers' experiences.

Professional knowledge and reflection-in-action

The positivist epistemology of practice was dominant until the 1980s. In this model, a profession is mainly defined by its capacity to resolve problems using scientific knowledge produced by researchers, in universities. Thus,

this model implies a strong hierarchy, wherein the researchers and their fundamental knowledge are at the top of the pyramid. Beneath them are the professionals, who apply the researchers' knowledge to solve their problems. Thus, the ability with which professionals resolve these problems during practice is not taken into consideration (Schön 1983).

In the 1970s, professionals in the applied science model were in a very uncomfortable situation. They needed to develop specific abilities to overcome complex and indeterminate problems, but these professional abilities were not significant in the applied science model. Therefore, Schön advocated for abandoning the positivist model, and proposed another epistemology of practice. According to him, wisdom is gained through practice, and professionals have knowledge that allows them to act adequately in complex and unclear situations. 'Know-how' therefore lies in professionals' actions.

This kind of knowledge is tacit: the practitioner acts without even thinking about it. This is the same kind of knowledge we use when we recognize a face or when children make sentences without having formally studied grammar. However, sometimes, this tacit knowledge becomes more evident and easy to observe. For example, when faced with an unexpected event, the practitioner questions his/her actions. This is where the process of 'reflection-in-action' starts: 'As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action' (Schön 1983, 50). The reflection-in-action model allows a new epistemology of practice, as the practitioner becomes a researcher: 'When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context' (Schön 1983, 68). To summarize, Schön's model of the reflective practitioner considers professionals as actors with an ability to reflect on their practice. From this emerges knowledge, which can be used to create new theories.

Role framing as a factor in reflection-in-action

This study embraced Schön's epistemology of practice. More specifically, this chapter is focused on the designers' way of 'framing their role' (Schön 1983, 270). According to Schön, each profession has some 'constants'. Constants can be understood as the steady fundamental principles of a profession, and these might include the practitioner's favourite solutions, his/her value system or the theories he/she uses to conduct a reflective practice (Schön 1983). One of these constants are 'role frames', which refer to the fact that each professional has a way of defining (framing) his/her own role in an organization. The 'frame' thus impacts a practitioner's actions: 'Differences in role frame help to determine what knowledge is seen as useful in practice and what kinds of reflection are undertaken in action' (Schön 1983, 274). For

example, any profession sits within an institutional context, but the relationship with this context is not always clearly established. Schön gives the case of an engineer: does this professional only have to consider technical issues or does he/she have to take care of relationships with clients too? As Schön asks, what does the frame encompass?

'Role framing' might be a limiting factor to the reflection-in-action model. In Chapter 7, 'Town Planning: Limits to Reflection-in-action' (Schön 1983, 204), Schön describes the case of a town planner trapped in a self-inflicted role that is harmful for his reflection-in-action. Schön attributes the number '1' to this model. In Model I, the practitioner wants to succeed in what he thinks are his tasks, no matter what, and is afraid of being 'punished' if he fails. Thus, he sees himself in a binary situation where he can only win or lose, and he obviously wants to avoid losing. His strategy to win consists of ignoring his feelings and motivations and trying to be remarkably rational. More generally, this model describes a situation in which the practitioner tries to control the task unilaterally and to 'protect' himself and other parties from possible harmful consequences, whether or not they actually exist. The practitioner is elusive about his decisions and decision-making processes, which he justifies under the guise of mastery.

On the contrary, Model II insists on information circulation, exposing personal motivations and having a globally open attitude. The practitioner tries to keep the other teammates in the loop so they can make informed decisions. As Schön explains, Model I might lead to misinterpreting the situation, while Model II is about revealing problems and dilemmas to enhance information circulation and favour reflection-in-action.

In the conclusion of his chapter, Schön claims that practitioners are often in intermediary roles 'between those who propose and those who dispose' (Schön 1983, 234), and these roles often lead to conflicting situations. By adopting Model II, the practitioner can prevent himself from adopting a restrictive role. But this is not an easy task, and Schön insists on the necessity of external help to 'help him see what he has worked to avoid seeing' (Schön 1983, 283).

Methodology

In analysing the role of game designers, one should acknowledge that the researcher 'must somehow gain an inside view of the experience of practice' (Schön 1983, 323). In order to understand the changing roles of game designers, a two-phased methodology was used in this study. Eight game designers from five different companies in the Montreal area participated. To

make their knowledge more explicit, a qualitative methodology inspired by phenomenology was used (Creswell 2007).

First, designers completed a sensitization booklet (an interactive PDF form). The notion of professional knowledge was introduced to participants. The booklet is an application of 'sensitization theory' and is considered a sensitizing tool, whose main objective 'is to establish self-reflection on the part of the participants, which is harvested during the generative sessions' (Visser et al. 2005). The booklet informed the participants of existing theory on casual games and provoked questions and reactions concerning their own experience.

Second, full-length semi-structured interviews (at least an hour each) were conducted with each participant. Interviews were focused on a casual game project where the participant was the main designer, and here they provided a post-mortem of their project (Goodman, Stolterman and Wakkary 2011). They were free to talk about any experience or aspect of the project that they judged relevant. They were prompted to remember unexpected situations or problems, and provide a detailed narrative of events.

Participants were chosen on the basis of having a high level of diversity inside the sample (Pires 1997). The participants had worked on projects for Nintendo Wii, Nintendo DS, Microsoft Kinect, Facebook, desktop games and browser games in Flash. Some were from large firms with publishing departments, while others came from medium-sized and small independent companies.

All interviews were fully transcribed and analysed. To ensure the reliability of interpretations, results were submitted to participants. Participants commented on the results, and their feedback was subsequently used to discard any misconceptions or misinterpretations of the data.

Frame analysis results: Two roles, the designer–gamer and the designer–agent

Schön's concept of role framing allows for categorizing participants' experiences working on a casual game project into two groups. One group is composed of designers who think that they have to create a high quality game that satisfies them and meets their own personal standards. If they like the game, then they expect that their audience will like it too. Thus, these practitioners are called 'designer-gamers'. They use their own value systems to evaluate game quality. The second group is composed of designers who see themselves as a 'proxy' or 'agent' that completes the request of a

principal, a commander (a producer, a client, etc.). They do not use their own value systems to evaluate the game, but the one that has been given to them by the commander.

Table 4.1 summarizes the two profiles (designer–gamer and designer–agent). A representative participant was chosen for each group and some of their quotes are used to point out the similarities and differences between the profiles.

Both types of designers have a common understanding of what makes a good game: something fun, entertaining. However, their *vision* of the project is different. The designer–agent is the representative who acts on behalf of the players and not himself. For example, Participant 3 said that he is the ‘agent of fun’, and that he has to ‘reach an audience’. When each type of designer evaluates his/her work, the difference is significant: the designer–gamer seems totally satisfied, while the designer–agent feels a tension between his own values and those of the commander. He does meet the external imposed criteria, but he is not entirely pleased, because his own value system is not reflected in the game he made. Participant 3 added that his team was not suited for the job; they needed to be more skilled in the casual game domain. Perhaps the fact that he sees himself as an agent ‘clipped his wings’ so to speak.

The restricted worldview of the designer–agent seems to be associated with the casual gaming revolution. The designer does not make a game for himself anymore or for an audience with similar taste to his, but rather for a heterogeneous group of players. When asked if they liked the game they made, designers of the second group were prompted to explain this dichotomy

Table 4.1 Two designer roles

	Designer–gamer (Participant 5)	Designer–agent (Participant 3)
Values, appreciative system	‘A good game is fun’	‘The main goal of a game is to be entertaining’
Goal of the project	‘Make a new game, as the previous game project is complete.’	‘Complete the objective, the order.’ ‘Make a game for an audience.’
Evaluation of the project	‘We choose casual games because they fit well with the team. We stop only when we are satisfied with the game.’	‘We met the objective, but we could have done so much better. We need more expertise.’

between the designer–agent and his/her audience. Participant 8 explains: ‘Do I like the game I made? Of course! But, well, as a gamer, I will never play it. But I am proud of the result’. Participants 1 and 3 concurred on the existence of this gap. This ‘lost link’ between designers and gamers has been underlined by Juul (2009): ‘Hardcore developers make games for themselves (“I like that – let’s put it in”), whereas casual developers make games for themselves and everybody else (“I like that but let’s make sure it works for my dad/sister/receptionist too”)’ (Juul 2009, 76). Our results complement Juul’s: first, some casual game designers continue to develop games for themselves – designer–gamers still exist and this fact should not be ignored. Second, with regards to the designer–agent role, Juul did not point out the consequences that this lost connection with the audience could have on design practice.

A role often overlooked

The first dimension of the role of casual game designers that is worth highlighting is the negative perception that often persists among the designers. The negative dimensions of casual game design have not been adequately addressed in the video game literature. However, it may be argued that a slightly negative view of this type of game emanates from the lack of extensive research on casual game culture (Consalvo 2009) in favour of economic studies (Kuittinen et al. 2007), which reduce the game to a simple commodity. My participants, however, were emphatic about this negative dimension of casual game projects in the industry. Participant 3 stated: ‘I don’t have much experience in the field, and casual games were a way to make money. A small game, some little but fun mechanics, you put it in a box . . . PROFIT!’ In this participant’s initial vision, making casual games did not seem to require any particular abilities. Participant 8 went even further, explaining that working on a casual game project could have some negative effects inside his company, where casual project designers were denigrated by their colleagues, who were working on more ‘hardcore’ assignments.

It is important to note, however, that the initial simplistic vision of those two participants was challenged while working on the game. Each explained that making casual games was difficult, and required true expertise. As Participant 3 stressed: ‘You need to do it seriously, you need reflection, you cannot proclaim yourself a casual game designer that easily.’ Participant 8 showed that the designers who first thought that it was easy soon realized that it was not as ‘stupid’ as it sounded. This devaluation of the designer’s role in casual game design can greatly influence design practice. Indeed, it can provoke self-restraining practices, which will be described as a ‘restrictive role’.

A restrictive role

When a designer is in the designer–agent role, he/she can feel torn between his/her own values and the project values, and ethical problems may arise. In Table 4.1, we saw that Participant 3's values conflicted with the project's criteria. The fact that the designer admitted that he met the objectives, but was not satisfied with its results, shows that he possesses design abilities, but was limited by his 'agent' position. He did not ask for more time to develop his skills or for more money, because these demands did not seem within reach. Participant 7, who has also played the designer–agent role, exposed a similar situation where his abilities were hindered by his intermediary position at his company. All the people on his team were men, but they were making a game specifically aimed at women. They made the game with their 'gut feelings' because they were not given the chance to work with their audience. This made Participant 7 feel uncomfortable, because he thought that his team should have tried to understand its audience, in order to best create a kind of game experience for women, instead of copying mechanics that worked in other games. In his view, this is not only unethical, but also very risky. The game might be a total failure. What is more, Participant 7 explained that he was not given enough time or money to do his casual game project, and he could not ask for more because this would fall outside his 'frame'.

As Schön states, practitioners often play intermediary roles. If game designers have to be in an intermediary position between clients and players, not giving them the means to fulfil their role may lead to a negative perception of the designer–agent role. And if this role becomes more common with the casual game revolution, then game design as a whole might be threatened or discredited, as the designer is no longer considered an expert. We can see how the external factors can influence the designer's role, and how they can create internal conflicts, which jeopardize reflection-in-action. However, this situation might be overcome, as designers start to identify difficult situations and plan new solutions to prevent these situations.

Towards reflection-in-action: An expansion of the designer–agent profile

While the game designer can easily be trapped in a restrictive role, the participants interviewed in this study nevertheless demonstrated their capacity to find solutions to move from Model I, where information is defensively withheld by the actors, to Model II, where reflection-in-action is made possible by openness to information, and where the designer can learn from the others and from himself. Two examples help illustrate this transition:

first, the presentation of a casual game's first playable version shows that designers are conscious of the limits of a defensive mode of practice. Second, an analysis of how the game design document (which will be explained below) is used shows how designers can adapt and find new ways of approximating Model II, where the openness of the actors permits a better reflection.

The first playable version: Revealing preconceived ideas about casual games

The first time one presents one's game to the world is a milestone, though often a delicate one. Participants 1 and 8 had some fairly painful experiences with their respective first casual game projects. Participant 1 presented a first playable version of his game the same way he would for 'hardcore' games: '[the first playable is] a level of the game where all the ingredients are present, all the complexity'. Unfortunately, this complex level was not received well by his peers. When his colleagues tried it, including the company CEO, they felt the experience was too difficult: 'It was frightening for them' (Participant 1). According to the participant, his colleagues expected to play the first level of the game, a level with a slow learning curve, without any difficulties, as this is what the word 'casual' meant for them. After this experience, this designer felt he lost the confidence of his teammates because 'they had the feeling that we were not doing a casual game anymore'.

Participant 8 encountered a similar situation. While working on a dancing game, he asked his team leader to play an advanced dancing class. Confronted with the level's demanding moves, the team leader was overwhelmed and decided that the level was too difficult. When the designer reminded him that he could play the easier levels, the leader appeared offended. Participant 8 explained that this situation was illustrative of some of the preconceived ideas behind casual games – that the players are not very involved and they do not play enough to progress.

In both these examples, when a presentation of the first playable version of a casual game is given, everybody on the team is guarded. The slightest misunderstanding can lead to dramatic consequences, like a loss of confidence in the designer. Participants 1 and 8 felt they needed to change their habits. Participant 1 now starts the first playable version presentation to the team with the first level basics, in order to meet the team's expectations. However, he has not found a way to make the information about casual games and their preconceptions more evident. This situation is close to Model I, where the designer, the team leader or the CEO exercises unilateral control, keeping their motivations and preconceived ideas to themselves.

All the designer can do is adjust his behaviour to avoid ‘punishment’. As explained earlier in this paper, this model cannot allow the reflection-in-action to flourish. However, our second example shows some beneficial changes in design practices.

Information circulation: From a game design document to a constant reflection

A casual game project difficulty is an opportunity to understand how role framing can evolve by changing design practices. In a traditional game project, the game design document is like a Bible. It is a massive document containing text, images, diagrams and tables that are used to describe every aspect of the game, from target audience to character, artificial intelligence, objectives or achievements. Participant 1 showed that this approach to game design is outdated, especially with respect to casual games. In his view, leaving a designer alone in a room for two weeks to produce a gigantic document is hindering the spread of information. ‘It’s a time waster’, explains Participant 1, ‘because the designer’s reflection is limited, and once the designer reaches this limit, he just goes around in circles’. Then, when the game design document was presented to the team (approximately fifteen people) during an eight-hour long assembly, the team had difficulty debating the content of such a large document. Participant 1’s vision corresponds to Model I: the designer is put in a defensive position, as the information is released suddenly and the time to discuss it is short.

However, Participant 1 adapted to these difficult conditions and changed his strategy. He now writes one-page documents and then organizes a small meeting. He explains: ‘The ideal formula for me is 30 minutes with two or three propositions . . . I usually do that with three people . . . Then I elaborate new propositions from their suggestions and I go to see another group of people.’ For this participant, this is ‘the easiest way to transform a large set of possibilities into something solid’. This process is closer to Model II, where information is shared. As with Model II, the designer spreads information and can quickly make changes and explore inventive ideas.

Participant 5 and 6, who fit the designer–gamer role, both used a similar method. Instead of producing documentation, they produce very small prototypes, and produce iterations of the prototypes for as long as necessary. These design practices promote reflection-in-action, open discussion, and value the work of the game designer. These changes in practices appear to be an efficient way of reorienting the practitioners towards reflection-in-action, and show that such a reorientation is possible inside the casual game projects.

Conclusion

This chapter showed the results of what Schön called a 'reflective research' – a kind of research 'which can be undertaken outside the immediate context of practice in order to enhance the practitioner's capacity for reflection-in-action' (Schön 1983, 309). Conceiving of two different roles, the designer–gamer and the designer–agent, allowed for analysing some of the current industry dilemmas from a new perspective. For example, the lack of money or time devoted to casual game design can be seen as consequences of the restrictive role allotted to casual game designers, but these constraints can be overridden as the role of designer–agent is better understood and considered.

Moreover, 'role frame analysis' is an effective method for explaining evolution in the video game industry. As explained earlier in this chapter, the first negative impression of the participants with regards to their job was rapidly overcome by a feeling of meaningfulness. The participants interviewed in this chapter realized that not being a designer–gamer could be a valuable experience, where they could acquire new design skills. One could argue that the 'casual game design revolution' is the opportunity to rethink what design thinking is in the video game industry.

With the rise of casual, social or mobile games, the role of designer–gamer might become rare, while the one of designer–agent might become more common. While this chapter presented the difficulties encountered by designer–agents, this evolution of the designer's role might also be worth celebrating. In the last few years, more and more critics have attacked the video game industry. Many researchers (Roch 2004; Dobson 2006; Tschang 2007; Wesley and Barczak 2012), as well as designers, pointed to a lack of innovation in the industry (Stevenson and Berkowitz 2004). Casual games, with their new players, might be a source of innovation. But above all, they might be a way to rethink what game design is.

The casual game revolution has opened up a new perspective on the video game world, and a need for change in game design practices. A desire to create a more inclusive community around games has emerged, reaching new players, but also new designers. While this opening up of the game industry is excellent progress, the evolution of the game designer's role suggests that it might be wise not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Existing game designers are facing an evolution of their own roles, and some interesting solutions have emerged from within the current game industry context.

Before completely changing the actors involved in the game industry, it might be prudent to reflect about what game design was, is and will be. These

questions are surprisingly not given enough attention, as the authors Kuittinen and Holopainen note: 'The activity called design, is left to too little attention' (Kuittinen and Holopainen 2009, 7). The changes in the game industry itself as well as changes in the roles of game designers, suggest that this might be the time to dive into research on game design, and more specifically, to consider the issues raised by casual games. Understanding how game designers think and operate might lead to new knowledge, and, maybe, to a more innovative and inclusive industry.

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