Exploring the Influence of Game Designers' Values and Thought-Processes in Practice

Mifrah Ahmad
Torrens University[1], Deakin University[2]
Flinders Campus, Melbourne, Australia[1]
221 Burwood Hwy, Melbourne, Australia[2]
mifrah.ahmad@torrens.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION
The game design process varies in complexity across different genres, and the creative abilities of game designers in approaching such complexity are intriguing. Australian Game Development report demands for highly skilled employees have sufficiently increased, including programmers, artists, and game designers (Williams 2021; Curry 2021). Previously published research indicated that the Australian video game field has relied purely on economic and industrial metrics, often overlooking the interrelation of lived experiences of those within the field or the prior experiences of experts (Keogh 2021; Sotamaa and Svelch 2021). The emphasis on game designers (GDs) is to ensure that the *balance* is maintained in the system between the realistic and imaginative context of design (Kalmpourtzis 2018; Schell 2008). The need to conduct more empirical research that involves GDs' lived experiences, practices, and reflective thought-processes is essential for a growing industry. Still, there is niche research on GDs' thought-processes for their designing games: *What factors influence their decision-making process? Do they rely on their iterative and reflective design experience to guide their practice? Do they refer to any existing models, theories/framework, or game definitions to guide their practice?*

GDs are the artists, who direct and conceive game-making processes across various fields as discussed above (Koster 2013; Darchen 2017). GD roles, their skills, and the education that is needed to 'design the designer' suggested that there is an expectation and a particular skill level that is required within the gaming industry (Potanin and Davies 2011). GDs take on multiple personalities to visualize what a game design should have and strive to create interactive narratives with meaningful experiences as they are play-testing to address the boundaries between imagination and reality (Garner 2013; Kalmpourtzis 2018; Schell 2008). As Kalmpourtzis (2018, p.44) states, "*They challenge our way of thinking and help us grow. In this aspect, games are only limited to their designers' imagination*". GDs also experience a continuous play experience across various genres to adapt to a new and playable game with meaningful play.

Concerns addressed above are briefly discussed to examine the roles and perspectives of GDs in the designing process of games. Based in Australia, a phenomenological approach to conduct semi-structured interviews to gather the *essence* of their experiences. The *essence* should not be viewed as a vague idea but rather the ability

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to identify the meaning embodied in the lived experience (Merleau-Ponty and Smith 1979; Van Manen 2016). Seventeen GDs participants attended two-hour interview sessions (February – September 2020) (via Zoom). Interpretive thematic analysis was adopted to code emerging themes until saturation was achieved (Braun and Clarke 2012). The analysis was concurrently interpreted through the concepts of the *theory of experience*, including *continuity*, *interaction*, *situation*, *freedom*, *intelligence*, and *desire* drives the purpose to apply and contextualize the *growth* of experience (Dewey 1938). Interpretive data analysis of GD's perspectives established six main themes and the *theory of experience,* and its concepts are deeply embedded within contexts where games are centered. Additionally, GDs demonstrated their preferences, attitudes, beliefs, desires, and purpose in using and designing games. By contextualizing the perspectives of GDs as '*designer's philosophies'* corresponding to their beliefs, shows potential expansion towards an understanding of what are the essential values or factors that are considered.

As a result, the synthesized analysis enabled the categorization of philosophies and beliefs, *prior* experiences, and considerations into five (5) specific concepts that represent their *inner* desires and experiential knowledge, considered as essential for the thought-processes in practice, Figure 1. Interestingly, the data revealed that '*Designer philosophies'* imitate their principles of verifying their knowledge of "*whether the game design is what they initially wanted it to be?" (participant quote).* The term 'design philosophy' was observed with relevance to game design values as forms of design, which is prescriptive in its nature. Therefore, 'subject to value-based decision making', catering to wide range of benefits and multiple roles in gaming culture (Kultima 2009; Kultima and Sandovar 2016). Kultima et al. (2016) discussed the importance of recognizing underlying values in design and their connection to design thinking and value propositions, which can impact a designer's work dynamics, while asserting an emphasis on designers to be aware of these values and philosophies[1]. The five concepts of Game designers' Powers could also relate to 'the inner self' and 'filter of ethos' from the Designers' Magical Triangle (Kalmpourtzis 2018); however, it needs further evaluation.

Furthermore, only three GD participants mentioned their preference for using specific definitions that help calibrate their ideas throughout the designing process (Suits 1967; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Schell 2008). With only 3 participants explicitly identifying a definition, it can be assumed that there is a lack of:

a. Familiarity with existing models/frameworks that initiates comparative and contrasting thought processes.

b. Awareness amongst game designers to why definitions, elements, factors, or published research may assist them.

c. A definition that suits their philosophical take on what a game is (e.g., it's fun, promotes playability (social vs competitive games etc.).

While they have *educative* experiences (related to their education and game design courses/certification), it can be presumed that GDs tend to be *intuitive* and constantly position themselves within their players' point-of-view, hence, the need to iteratively connect with their *prior* play experiences is natural. Figure 1 shows the need to play

[1] This is further elucidated in recently published work in terms of game designing approaches (Ahmad 2023).

and experience on multi-platform seems essential for their intuitive learning. As that influences their continuous play, enables them to interact with a game that is situated differently based on its platform, it than assists them to understand the rules of playing. Hence, empowering to make decisions, and break the rules with freedom of unlimited choices. GD participants mentioned that their purpose is formed to help play experience growth and enable them to comprehend the possibilities of mix-matching their play experience intuitively. Intuitive self seems to actively engage in their decision-making process of designing games and it echoes with their inspirations, beliefs, designers' philosophies, and reflective learning that transforms with their playtesting and creating games. Lastly, GDs contextualize players' experiences through their gameplay which strengthens their intuition. In addition, it seemed to strongly underpin various ways in which GD participants intend to initiate their approach to designing games i.e. the initiation tool that discusses formal and experience-based methods used by GD participants (Ahmad 2022, 2023).

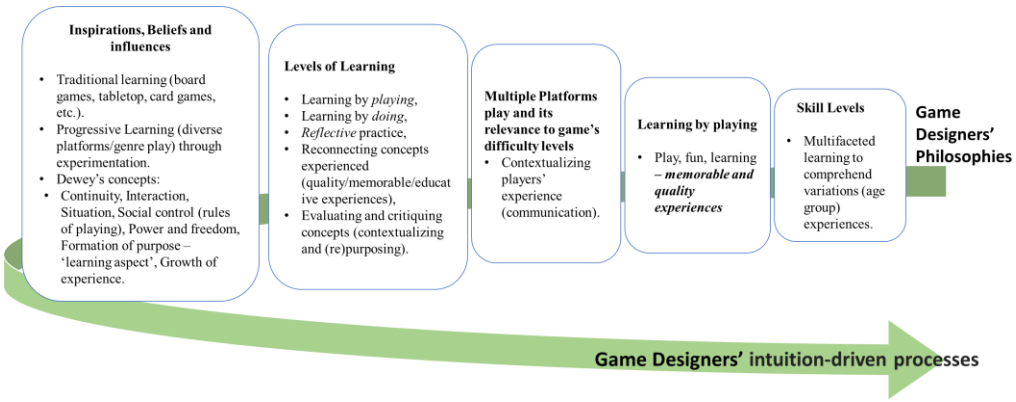

Figure 1. *Game-designers' Powers: Proposing Game Designers' philosophies and intuition-driven processes in their game designing practices*

The recommendation suggests that game designers and researchers in the field should view Game Designers' Powers as a subjective perspective influenced by various factors. This intuitive-driven process can be incorporated into gaming courses to help aspiring young game designers develop their skills and explore different genres through iterative and reflective design processes. While these ideas are based on the Australian gaming industry, researchers should consider applying them in different contexts to understand how game designers' experiences vary. To enhance the research, it is advisable to have a larger number of participants for interviews, despite pandemic-related limitations, to gain a comprehensive understanding of current game designing practices.

BIO

Mifrah Ahmad has a Doctorate in Philosophy in Education from Deakin where this paper's research was conducted. Currently, she is working as a senior lecture/learning facilitator at Torrens University Melbourne. Her primary research examines the roles and perspectives of educational games design (digital games, primary and tertiary level), virtual reality and interaction design, exploring the possibilities of diverging and converging knowledge of designing process between education and the gaming industry.

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