

# Making Deep Games

Designing Games with  
Meaning and Purpose



Doris C. Rusch



CRC Press  
Taylor & Francis Group

A FOCAL PRESS BOOK

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# Contents



List of Figures	<i>xi</i>
Preface	<i>xiii</i>
Author	<i>xv</i>
Introduction	<i>xvii</i>
<b>1</b>	
Diving for Deep Game Ideas	<i>1</i>
1.1    Becoming a Mind Reader	<i>1</i>
1.1.1    Morning Pages	<i>3</i>
1.1.2    Artist Date	<i>4</i>
1.1.3    Conversing with the Inner Game Designer	<i>5</i>
1.2    Tracing the Human Experience in Art—Finding the Theme	<i>10</i>
1.3    Become a Sucker for Other People’s Experiences	<i>14</i>
References	<i>18</i>
<b>2</b>	
Games as an Expressive Medium	<i>21</i>
2.1    Introduction	<i>21</i>
2.2    What Are Games?	<i>22</i>
2.3    How Can Games Be <i>about Something</i> ?	<i>23</i>
2.3.1    Representation, Abstraction, Fiction, and Rules	<i>24</i>
2.3.2    Representational Hierarchy in Games: Rules before Fiction	<i>29</i>
2.3.3    Games as Simulations	<i>31</i>
References	<i>44</i>



**3**

Modeling the Human Experience—Or the Art of Nailing a Pudding to the Wall	47
3.1 Introduction	47
3.2 Making Sense of Our Experiences	49
3.3 Making Sense of <i>Abstract</i> Experiences—The Role of Metaphors	53
3.3.1 Understanding Our Inner Lives through Structural Metaphors—Symbolic Modeling in Psychotherapy	56
3.4 Applying Theory to Practice: Case Study <i>Akrasia</i>	58
3.4.1 Case Study: <i>Akrasia</i>	58
3.4.2 Conception Phase	59
3.4.3 The Iterative Process of Modeling the Addiction Gestalt	60
3.4.4 Conclusion	65
References	69

**4**

Experiential Metaphors—Or What Breaking Up, Getting a Tattoo, and Playing <i>God of War</i> Have in Common	71
4.1 Gameplay as Embodied Experience	72
4.2 Experiential Metaphors—Modeling What It Feels Like	74
4.2.1 Case Study: <i>God of War II</i> , Grappling Hook Sequence—Enacting the Art of Letting Go	74
4.3 Modeling What It Feels Like versus How It Works	77
4.3.1 Case Study: <i>The Marriage</i>	77
4.4 Impact of Experiential Metaphors on Meaning Generation—Potentials and Pitfalls	80
4.4.1 Case Study: <i>Angry Birds</i> —Mechanics of Vengeance	81
4.4.2 Case Study: <i>American McGee's Grimm: Little Red Riding Hood</i> —Mechanics of Cleaning	83
4.4.3 Case Study: <i>Left Behind: Eternal Forces</i> —Mechanics of Cleaning Contextualized as Religious Purge	84
References	90

**5**

Allegorical Games—Or the Monster Isn't a Monster Isn't a Monster	91
5.1 Introduction	92
5.2 Potentials of Allegorical Games	93
5.2.1 Reason 1: Making Inner Processes Tangible	93

5.2.2	Reason 2: Creating a “Magic Door” to a Deeper Theme	96
5.2.3	Reason 3: The Theme and Nothing but the Theme	97
5.2.4	Reason 4: Allegories Make You Think	100
5.3	Metaphor as Mystery, Message, and Muse—Three Ways to Make You Think	101
5.3.1	Approach 1: Metaphor as Mystery—Stimulating Curiosity	101
5.3.2	Approach 2: Metaphor as Message—Achieving a Communicative Goal	102
5.3.3	Approach 3: Metaphor as Muse—What Does It Mean to “Me”?	102
5.4	Designing Allegorical Games	103
5.4.1	From Theme to Story	104
5.4.2	Define the Communicative Goal and Playtest to Achieve It	107
	References	112

## 6

	Designing with Purpose and Meaning—Nine Questions to Define Where You’re Going and Make Sure You Get There	115
6.1	Introduction	115
6.2	Question 1: What’s It About?	116
6.2.1	Based on Another Medium	116
6.2.2	Based on (Somebody’s) Personal Experience	118
6.2.3	For a Cause	119
6.3	Question 2: What Is the Purpose/Communicative Goal of Your Game?	119
6.3.1	Personal Games for Self-Expression	120
6.3.2	Raising Awareness	121
6.3.3	Object to Think With	122
6.3.4	Changing Behavior/Perception	123
6.3.5	What You Do Is What You Get	124
6.4	Question 3: Literal or Metaphorical Approach?	125
6.5	Question 4: The Right Metaphor for the Experiential Gestalt?	127
6.6	Question 5: How It Works versus What It Feels Like?	129
6.7	Question 6: <i>Zooming In</i> versus <i>Zooming Out</i> —How Much Shall Be Modeled?	130

6.8	Question 7: From Which Perspective Shall the Player Interact with the System?	131
6.9	Question 8: Do Core Mechanics Reinforce Meaning?	132
6.10	Question 9: Player–Avatar Alignment?	133
	References	137
<b>7</b>		
	It's Not Always about You!—Lessons Learned from Participatory Deep Game Design	139
7.1	Introduction	140
7.2	Participatory Game Design	141
7.3	Case Study: <i>For the Records</i> —Potentials and Pitfalls of Participatory Game Design	146
7.3.1	Game Synopses	147
7.3.2	Participatory Design with SMEs	152
7.3.3	Final Thoughts about Participatory Deep Game Design	164
	References	165
<b>8</b>		
	The Same New Kid in Yet Another Hood—Deep Game Design as Creative Arts Therapy?	167
	<i>Coauthored with Susan Imus</i>	
8.1	Introduction	168
8.2	An Introduction to Basic Concepts and Criteria of Creative Arts Therapies	168
8.2.1	Criteria for Consumer Safety and Optimal Health Outcomes in Creative Arts Therapies	170
8.2.2	Fundamental Mechanisms	177
8.3	Comparative Case Studies	177
8.3.1	Dance and Movement Therapy Case Study	177
8.3.2	Game Design Therapy Case Study	180
	References	191
	Index	193

# List of Figures



<b>Figure 1.1</b>	GAMBIT MIT's <i>The Bridge</i> —defeating the fear creates a bridge into a brighter future	9
<b>Figure 2.1</b>	Rod Humble's <i>The Marriage</i>	24
<b>Figure 2.2</b>	Minority Media's <i>Spirits of Spring</i>	33
<b>Figure 2.3</b>	Merritt Kopas' <i>Lim</i>	34
<b>Figure 2.4</b>	Jason Rohrer's <i>Passage</i>	38
<b>Figure 2.5</b>	Gonzalo Frasca's <i>September 12th</i>	41
<b>Figure 3.1</b>	<i>Akrasia</i> , MIT	59
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	<i>Akrasia</i> , MIT: Maze/mind in psychedelic state with life tree branch and life symbols	63
<b>Figure 5.1</b>	Minority Media's <i>Papo &amp; Yo</i>	95
<b>Figure 5.2</b>	Minority Media's <i>Spirits of Spring</i> —building bridges with a strong spirit	99
<b>Figure 6.1</b>	<i>Seer</i> , MIT	117
<b>Figure 6.2</b>	<i>Mainichi</i> , Mattie Brice	120
<b>Figure 6.3</b>	<i>Elude</i> , MIT	126
<b>Figure 7.1</b>	<i>Into Darkness</i> , Play 4 Change	148

<b>Figure 7.2</b>	<i>It's for the Best</i> , Play 4 Change	149
<b>Figure 7.3</b>	Manic phase in <i>FLUCTuation</i> , Play 4 Change	149
<b>Figure 7.4</b>	Depression phase, <i>FLUCTuation</i> , Play 4 Change	150
<b>Figure 7.5</b>	<i>Perfection</i> , Play 4 Change	151
<b>Figure 8.1</b>	<i>Creative arts practice continuum</i>	173

# Preface



Games can be used as a tool to convey and experience profound aspects of what it means to be human. *Making Deep Games* combines theoretical discussions about the expressive nature of games, the case studies of existing games, and hands-on design exercises. Grounded in cognitive linguistics, game studies, and a deep appreciation for metaphor, this book explores systematic approaches on how to tackle complex concepts, inner processes, emotions, and the human condition through game design. This book offers insight into how to make games that teach us something about ourselves, enable thought-provoking, emotionally rich experiences and promote personal and social change.



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# Author



**Doris C. Rusch, PhD**, is a game designer, a researcher, and a play aficionado and holds a position as a game design faculty member at DePaul University. Before that, she did postdoctoral work at GAMBIT Game Lab, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Vienna University of Technology (Austria). Rusch's work is focused on the theory and practice of game design, particularly in regard to games that model the *human experience*. She has won numerous awards for experimental, metaphorical games, many of which contribute to mental health awareness and activism, such as *Akrasia* (a game about substance abuse), *Elude* (a game about depression), *Zombie Yoga—Recovering the Inner Child* (a Kinect game in which the player does yoga poses to fight inner fears, represented by zombies), and *Soteria—Dreams as Currency* (a game for teens to learn how to overcome anxiety disorder). Having completed studies in literature, philosophy, comparative media studies, and English at the Vienna University of Technology, she earned her PhD in applied linguistics and interactive systems in 2004.





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# Introduction

## *Making Deep Games: Designing Games with Meaning and Purpose*



*Wherein:*

- *A definition of the term “deep games” is attempted.*
- *The background of the book is explained.*
- *A case is made on why we should care about deep games.*
- *A chapter overview is provided.*

To explain what *Making Deep Games: Designing Games with Meaning and Purpose* is all about, it is useful to start with a bit of personal history. This is fitting, since much of the notion of making *deep games*, as interpreted in this book, has to do with creating games about the whole spectrum of the human experience and making it tangible through gameplay. I am not going to attempt a comprehensive, unambiguous definition of what I mean by *human experience* or *human condition*. (And, yes, I will use both terms in all their glorious fuzziness interchangeably!) It is one of these concepts that everyone understands somehow, but, as soon as you try to pin it down, the quibbling begins. Here is as far as I will go: by human experience or human condition, I mean the intricate web of thoughts and feelings we find ourselves entangled in and are trying to navigate and make sense of. It’s the stuff of philosophy, TV series, movies, books, comics, poetry, art, and music, which all, in one way or another, explore what it means to be human—to love, to lose, to persevere, to grow, to die, to overcome, to avenge, to flourish, to dream, to hope, to have faith, to disappoint and be disappointed, and to deal with adversity. There. You will find more elaborations sprinkled throughout the following, and I

trust that your understanding of the human condition is as good as mine, being a fellow human after all, so you may just as well run with what makes sense to you. I suppose we will not be too far off.

When I was a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), designing and studying games at the Singapore–MIT GAMBIT Game Lab in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I underwent a crisis that forced me to ask some crucial questions about myself, my personal and professional life. I faced the end of a 12-year relationship; I dreaded my return to Austria, my home country; and I wasn't sure I wanted to be in academia anymore. To sort through that mess, I read a ton of self-help books, philosophy (a less-frowned-upon form of self-help literature), and poetry. I went to museums, flea markets, and concerts. I ran every morning along the Charles River. I tried everything in the book to regain direction. Most of all, I tried to *make sense*, to *find meaning* in what was happening. One useful tool in that regard, which I learned from Julia Cameron's fabulous book *The Artist's Way* (2002) and which I encourage all my students to use as well, were morning pages: writing three pages of stream of consciousness in longhand every day right after waking up. The other tool was game design. Every dilemma I faced and every underexplored feeling became the subject of a design exercise. It helped me structure the sense-making process by offering guiding questions: What is the goal here? What are the elements at play? What are their variables? What if I take this out/add this/tweak this? What exactly is the conflict? What is the lose state? Is there a win state? How can I fix this broken system so that there *is* a win state? It further taught me to go beyond commonsense understandings of abstract ideas such as *loyalty*, *faith*, and *love* and to really dig deep to figure out what they meant: e.g., what constitutes the feeling of sadness? There needs to be something you treasure and that you either had or hoped to obtain. This something becomes unobtainable. Sadness sets in once you explored every option to get it (back), and the realization has sunk in that there is nothing left that you can do. Sadness presupposes the death of hope. If you already find yourself arguing with this, that is a very good sign—it means you are thinking about the mechanics of the *inner life*, how things work, and how we humans *tick*. There is not one right answer, but some answers are more plausible and relatable than others.

Apart from Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, the other books that hugely influenced me at the time were Stuart Brown's work on *Play* (2009) and Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1997). They opened my eyes to the healing qualities of play as a state of mind that enables you to get your back off the wall and see new solutions to intricate problems. This was exactly what I was

trying to do with game design: playing through issues, finding solutions, and getting unstuck.

In this approach—using game design as a vehicle for personal inquiry—the designer gets to have all the *fun*, and, while the process of design can be insightful to the creator, the product may be meaningless to the player. A lot of the little design experiments I did to map out my inner swampland did not translate to others (and neither was it their purpose). There is something to be said about making radically personal games whose sole intent is self-exploration and self-expression, but, most of us, most of the time, want to make games for players, including me. Over the past seven years, I thus experimented with and researched systematic approaches to create games that make salient aspects of the human experience tangible to players; that enable insightful aha moments and make players see themselves, others, and life with fresh eyes; and that have transformative potential—deep games, if you so will. These experiments resulted in a bunch of award-winning projects, journal articles, conference presentations, workshops, and a course called *Making Deep Games*, which I have been teaching since 2009 at the MIT, the Vienna University of Technology (Austria), and DePaul University in Chicago and which is the basis of this book.

*Making Deep Games* aims to tie all of that previous piecework together into a coherent approach—a guide to designing games with meaning and purpose. It looks carefully at both sides of the process: (1) how to dig deep and analyze in a structured and systematic way the aspects of the human experience and (2) how to translate these experiences into a design that becomes comprehensible and emotionally intelligible to others, potentially increasing their understanding of the human experience as well. A profound self-knowledge (or the knowledge of complex, abstract ideas such as emotional concepts) needs to be complemented by a solid grasp of how games work as communicative medium capable of conveying ideas, messages, and experiences. This book presents tools and techniques for self-exploration, as well as the notion of *experiential gestalts* and ways to identify them systematically. It further discusses the process of turning experiences, personal themes, and complex abstract concepts into games by taking games' medium-specific characteristics into account and leveraging their unique strengths. It is complemented by hands-on exercises for instructors or (aspiring) game designers to use as starting points for deep games; in-depth analyses of existing games with profound messages; and postmortems of the games I have made, their iterative design evolutions, and the lessons learned from that.

Before we jump right in, maybe a case needs to be made on why anyone should make deep games. The simple answer is because we can! Games can

communicate deep messages; they can make us think and feel deeply; and they can move us in a way no other medium can because games enable embodied experiences—meaning that, in a game, we learn by doing and by acting upon the gameworld and seeing the consequences of our actions just like in real life (see Gee 2003). They are thus particularly well suited to evoke empathy, and to engage in perspective taking, because they do not just *show* aspects of someone else's life; they also allow the player to walk in someone else's shoes, *experiencing* life from their perspective. Games can tackle the human experience in their own way, and make it tangible through gameplay, and it would be a waste to not tap this potential. We long for media that helps us make sense of that funny, old thing called life, our role within it, and what it all means. From the dawn of time, our favorite tool to do so has been narrative. The worth and social acceptability of each new storytelling medium have been measured by its capability to provide insights into how humans tick, why we do the things we do, what we fear and desire, and how we deal with adversity and relate to each other. Over the centuries, a canon of forms has been developed that is broadly recognized as having the potential to capture and illuminate the human experience. We love this canon. Each of its members had to learn its unique language and has fought hard for acceptance. Now, there is a new kid in the hood. It has been lurking around for a good while now, but nobody noticed it. It looked and behaved so differently from traditional media that only very few people paid any attention to it or considered it a serious candidate for the canon of media that could move us profoundly, make us think, and provide meaningful insights into ourselves. I am, of course, talking about video games. In the early 1980s, US courts decided that video games were insufficiently expressive to even qualify for First Amendment protection (i.e., freedom of speech):

[The plaintiff] has failed to demonstrate that video games import sufficient communicative, expressive or informative elements to constitute expression protected under the First Amendment... [I]t appears that any communication or expression of ideas that occurs during the playing of a video game is purely inconsequential. [The plaintiff] has succeeded in establishing only that video games are more technologically advanced games than pinball or chess. That technological advancement alone, however, does not impart First Amendment status to what is an otherwise unprotected game. *Caswell v. Licensing Commission for Brockton*, 444 N.E.2d 922, 926-927. (Mass 1982)

Video games continued to stick around. They continued to be seen largely as the leering, rowdy, smelly neighbors who may be fun to hang out with at a

barbecue but no one would invite over for a serious, heart-to-heart conversation. And yet, video games were here to stay. To stretch the metaphor further, they made themselves at home, wore shorter skirts, carried heavier weapons, bought bigger, flashier cars, and became harder and harder to ignore—but not necessarily for reasons that endeared them to a philosophical audience. Over the following 20 years, their technological progress was enormous. A video game's fictional worlds and characters have become more and more elaborate and gained previously unimaginable graphical richness and detail. None of this brought them any closer to acceptance into the canon reserved for media that successfully tackled the human experience.

In the Foreword to Eric Zimmerman's and Katie Salen's seminal book *Rules of Play* (2004), Frank Lanz addresses the authors' impatience with the reality of the game store, "the endless racks of adolescent power fantasies, witless cartoon characters, and literal minded sports simulations" (p. x). While games' fictional components have evolved, their continuing lack of thematic and experiential range can still not be denied. In the same year, however, Steven Spielberg made a legendary declaration: "I think the real indicator that games have become a storytelling art form will be when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17." Spielberg did not say this with skepticism. He said it with confidence that this would happen. Someone, a famous, well-accepted member of the community, had stretched out a hand to the unshaven, unrefined, unwanted neighbor. While it is arguable whether video games should become a *storytelling* art form or an art form all of their own, Spielberg's statement contributed greatly to changing the public discourse around the interactive medium forever. While respectable citizens still might have loathed the very idea of video games in the hood (and many still do), there was now a debate on whether they could maybe be *educated* and *integrated* into the finer society. Only one year after Spielberg wondered whether games could make us cry, legendary game developer Raph Koster (2005) calls for games that capture and illuminate the human condition.

Games thus far have not really worked to extend our understanding of ourselves. Instead, games have primarily been an arena where human behavior – often in its crudest, most primitive form – is put on display. There is a crucial difference between games portraying the human condition and the human condition merely existing within games. The latter is interesting in an academic sense, but it is unsurprising. The human condition manifests anywhere. We may come to [sic!] better understanding of ourselves by examining our *relationship* to games, as this book attempts to do, but for games to truly step up to the plate, they need to provide us with insights into ourselves. (p. 174)

In his brilliant rant at the Game Developers Conference in 2008, Clint Hocking, at that time, still the creative director of Ubisoft, draws attention to games' bias toward physical concepts (weapons, running, jumping) and wonders passionately why they are not about "things that real human beings give a shit about. (...) Why don't we make games that challenge people? We make all kinds of movies and books and paintings and songs that challenge people. Why can't we make a game that means something? A game that matters. We wonder all the time if games are art, if computers can make you cry. Well, stop wondering. The answer is 'yes' to both." To support his point, he brings examples from two small indie games—Rod Humble's *The Marriage* and Jason Rohrer's *Passage*. Both games tackle aspects of human relationships in deeply personal ways. He goes on to ask, "Why isn't *Call of Duty* actually about duty? Or why isn't *Medal of Honor* actually about honor?"

Citing *The Lord of the Rings*, Hocking points out that what touched the readers and moviegoers were the relationship between Sam and Frodo, their mutual trust, and Gollum's redemption. Yet the games focus on glowing swords, armor, and ropes that give you a +5 power up. He ends his rant by claiming that it is not the lack of creativity that stops the games industry from reaching the next level and helping games take their place as the dominant cultural medium of the twenty-first century:

What we lack is the **courage** to back up all of our creativity by making games that challenge something in us besides our reflexes. We lack the courage to show that we care about real things. We lack the courage to be seen crying in the movie theatre when **Frodo says thank-you to Sam**. We lack the courage to risk ourselves for our art and the reality is that is the **ONLY** difference between being the basically juvenile medium we are, and the mature medium we will inevitably become.

Every time any one of us makes a game that fails to be about something that people give a shit about, we're letting ourselves down and dragging out the inevitable. We have the fucking pieces of the puzzle in our hands. We have the creativity. We have the money. The demand is there.

And fuck – **it's code – we can do anything.**

For games to mature as an art form, and to reach a broader audience and fulfill their potential as communicative and expressive media, they need to tackle more personal themes and to model salient aspects of the human experience. Does that mean all games need to be deep in that sense? Not at all. In literature, *Remembrance of Things Past* can coexist with *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Games like Minority Media's *Papo & Yo*, which deals with a little boy's