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Essay 2

What are Games Without Puzzles?

In searching out about a topic for this paper, I asked a friend, Laura, what she was writing on. She said that she was arguing that there cannot be games without puzzles. Given the definition of ‘game’ in class, “a game is a problem solving activity approached with a spirit of playfulness,” I completely agree with her. But in talking to Laura about her paper topic, I kept thinking of a counterexample, of an experience that I would call a “game” that doesn’t have puzzles or problems to solve, and therefore does not fit in with the definition laid out in class. While it is the sole counterexample I can think of to the definition laid out in class, a game like *The Manhole* should not be brushed aside as a virtual toy, or an interactive experience. While it completely deemphasizes the sort of problem solving that most people expect from a game experience, it also points to a type of gaming that may exist solely in video games, as something they alone are capable of. Instead of focusing on logic, learning, and problem solving, *The Manhole* emphasizes experimentation, puns, and most importantly, exploration.

When I play a game like *The Manhole*, I don’t have to display any particular talent. There are no questions asked, no puzzles to solve, and no need to be careful where I click. In designing *The Manhole*, the Miller brothers created an experience that is only possible through interaction. The game’s structures explored the possibilities of an entirely new medium, and it is one of the first games to demonstrate the possibilities of turning the act of exploration into a self-justifying, worthwhile experience. When I think

about *The Manhole* from an educational standpoint, I'm surprised I first played it in school. It's easy to suppose that a game with no logic, no real substance, and no goal is not worthwhile, but as a counterexample it begs the question: what does *The Manhole* point out as missing in our definition of "game?"

In order to think about how *The Manhole* creates an experiential form of gaming, it is necessary to describe a typical series of interactions a player has in the game. In one part of the game, the player can click to move up or down a beanstalk. If she clicks up, she reaches the top and sees a castle in the distance on the right and the moon on the left. She can click on the moon, and when she does, the moon sends out a beam of light, and a door appears off into the forest. When she clicks her way closer to the door, she can see mirrored text. If she clicks again she ends up on the other side of the text, and is looking at a book.



One of the primary characteristics of *The Manhole* is illustrated here. The locations in the game are held together with a strange dream logic, and even the spatial relationship between them is internally inconsistent. The entire structure of the game follows in this pattern, and so a linear navigation of *The Manhole* is impossible. While a classic plot usually allows the player to predict, within reason, what happens with each

click, this game resists that convention. The game is purposely constructed to give the player a feeling of constant expectation and discovery. Problem solving skills are completely irrelevant to navigating the game, but the act of clicking through it feels like playing a game. Instead of the pleasure of realism and fulfilled expectations, *The Manhole* offers an experience of surrealism, defiance of conventions, and exploration.

This defiance of the expected is reinforced in the way the game handles the issue of readability. In every image a player can perceive infinite places to click on, and usually this creates a huge problem for a designer. The designer needs to find ways to rope in the possibilities of the image, to highlight some things and deemphasize others, ensuring the player feels free to click anywhere, while understanding exactly where to click next. *The Manhole* makes full use of the potential of losing a player in the infinite space of an image. Every click in the game can whisk the player off to an entirely new part of its world, whether or not she entirely intends to go there. While in most games this would be frustrating, in *The Manhole* these interactions only make the experience exhilarating and even hilarious. Again, a player is presented with a game experience that hijacks their expectations. Almost everything is interactive to some degree—clicking on the moon opens a door to a new area of the game, and clicking on a shell causes two tiny blinking eyes to appear.

Again, the game here is in the exploration. The Miller brothers designed a place that responds completely to the player, and that yields responses to every nonsensical click. There is no guiding, leading hand through the space of the game, and because nothing makes sense, everything feels possible.

Part of the joy in these breaks with the expected is that the leap from one area of the world to the next is made with a visual link. For example, if the player clicks on a bottle of ink underwater, the cap comes off, the ink spreads into a cloud, and the screen is covered in black. Then stars appear, and then a moonscape, and suddenly the player finds herself in outer space. The transformation is experienced as a visual metaphor, a pun.

The near-randomness of these moments in the game also serves to create a feeling of play and discovery. The player never knows whether she has thoroughly explored an area. Every part of the world is always ready for clicking and exploration, and because every area is equally fertile for surprise, she never feels a loss to leave one area for another. Also, the world of the game is a manageable size, and the unexpected links limited enough so that a player can remember what her actions did before and can choose a different path when faced with the same scene. No location in the game ever feels finished. While the lack of a sense of 'finishing' would be frustrating in other games, because of this quality *The Manhole* feels infinite in the same way a simple toy does. A child will not ever truly finish playing with a ball. Every time she picks it up there is always the promise of new ways that it can function and new experiences to be had.

But at the same time, the experience of playing *The Manhole* does not feel like playing with a toy. A toy is simpler than this, less complex and less designed. The difference between *The Manhole* and a rubber ball is that the presence of a designer is not felt in a rubber ball. When a child is playing with a teddy bear, there is seldom a sense of authoring, of the intentions and whimsy of the designer. Generally toys are meant to be a palette and an inspiration for a child's own creative ideas, not for the ideas of the

designer. What *The Manhole* offers, then, is delight at the crazy workings of the Miller brothers' creative minds. The point of the game has little to do with problem solving, but much to do with exploring the fruits of another person's creative impulses. Perhaps the point is not in puzzles, but in the engaging of the mind of the designer with the minds of the intended audience.

So what does this example do to our definition of game? *A game is a problem solving activity approached with a spirit of playfulness.* Perhaps, instead: *A game is an activity designed to be approached with a spirit of playfulness.* A definition like this allows for a much broader understanding of gaming. The puzzle aspect of most games still falls into this definition, but it also allows for games that are scant on problem solving and instead focus on communication, exploration, and on a simpler, less teleological meeting of minds—the minds of the designer with the mind of the player.