

INTERVIEW BY STEVEN HELLER

Eric Zimmerman, founder and CEO of gameLab in New York, an alternative digital-game design studio, has channeled his lifelong passion for gaming into developing smart interactive environments that raise challenges rather than numb senses. For the past ten years Zimmerman, 33, has immersed himself in the gaming industry and has taught the art, sport, and psychology of games—what he calls “game culture”—with a missionary fervor to MFA students at Parsons School of Design, New York University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the School of Visual Arts. Before founding gameLab (gmlb.com) in 2000 with Peter Lee, he collaborated with Word.com on the underground online phenom, SiSSYFiGHT 2000 (sissyfight.com), an intense war between groups of schoolgirls intent on ruining each other’s popularity. Some of his other early titles include the CD-ROM

games Gearheads (1996) and The Robot Club (1998).

Zimmerman has also developed games that push convention. In addition to creating commercial works, Zimmerman has exhibited analog game projects at galleries and museums in the U.S. and abroad (ericzimmerman.com). This fall, MIT Press will publish Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals, a textbook co-authored with gameLab designer Katie Salen. In this interview, Zimmerman discusses the integration of design and play and the role of interactive games in our culture.

HELLER: The word “game” has many implications. What is your definition of a game?

ZIMMERMAN: A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. This definition is useful because it helps separate games from less formal kinds of play (like narrative play with dolls or playing catch with a Frisbee) that don’t have a definite outcome or endpoint. Definitions are important. Game design is such a new field (though games themselves are ancient) and it is important to be able to define its domain of study.

HELLER: A game is also about play. So what is play? And what is the purpose of a game?

ZIMMERMAN: Games are about play, but many other things are, too. I put play into three kinds of categories: Game play is the formal play of a game that occurs when players follow rules and take part in the kind of game I [just] defined. Ludic activities are other kinds of activities that we would recognize as play (two dogs chasing each other, two kids rough-housing, someone casually tossing and catching a ball).

Being playful is also a more general kind of play. [There are instances where] the spirit of play is injected into other activities or perceptions, such as giving a playful lecture, sex play, or even the play of light on a wall.

HELLER: What is common to all of these?

ZIMMERMAN: Common to all of these things is a more abstract notion of play, which I define as free movement within a more rigid structure.

This definition applies to all three categories of play phenomena. For example, when we play a game, we enter the rigid structure of rules, but dance in and about them through the process of play. The person tossing the ball is playing with gravity, the material qualities of the ball, and his or her own physical and perceptual skills. And “being playful” means that we are taking some usually more rigid activity (like giving a lecture) and finding the interstitial spaces where playfulness can arise.

HELLER: I suppose game designers must be aware of this complexity—and here I thought game design was just supposed to be fun.

ZIMMERMAN: Game design *is* fun. But it's really a lot like other forms of design. Game designers create the rigid structures of rules from which play will emerge. Other kinds of designers have a similar process: The designer creates a system—a typographic system, an architectural system—and the audience engenders play through participation, use, and engagement. Games just make this process particularly explicit.

HELLER: Before the computer, people played all sorts of simple interpersonal/interactive games like Monopoly mostly as diversions. What has changed about games now that they are played in digital environments?

ZIMMERMAN: Very little has changed. For a game designer, the principles of creating meaningful play still hold. The fundamentals of game design, such as the relationship between rules and play, hold true no matter what the medium. On the other hand, digital platforms allow for new kinds of experiences. They can network remote locations, manipulate large amounts of information, automate complex processes, and provide immediate feedback for actions a player takes. As a new form of media and pop culture, computer and video games also participate in global cultural trends in a way that board games do not.

HELLER: Buckminster Fuller's World Games were developed to enhance the cooperative spirit among different people in large groups—clearly a means of socialization that would benefit the planet. What is your goal in creating interactive games? Is it cultural, social, political, or simply entertainment?

ZIMMERMAN: gameLab takes on a variety of work that has a variety of goals. Sometimes we are asked to help sell a product or brand through a game (as with Lego.com).

We also do original work [that] tries to explore new kinds of visual esthetics, narrative and cultural content, and—especially—game play. Right now, we're collaborating with a non-profit organization called Global Kids to develop a game based on social issues, with high school kids. In this case, we are trying to bring new kinds of political and social content into gaming. Overall, gameLab's mission is to expand the boundaries of this new medium however we can, through the creation of experimental and innovative work.

HELLER: How do you work with these kids? Do they engage in the concept alone or the overall design?

ZIMMERMAN: We bring the kids into the design process as much as possible, but we can't expect them to be game designers and know how to make design and production decisions.

In essence, we engage the kids in order to determine the content of the game—the social issue that is deeply relevant to them. They do content research on the issue, visual design research, and also think about how to simulate or represent the issue in game form. Most high school students play computer games, and so they have a lot of experience to draw from. At the same time, making games about social content is very much experimental territory, and so we don't expect the kids to solve those game design problems—that's where we come in.

As we develop the prototype, the kids give us feedback, which we incorporate into the design. This fits neatly into our development process, which is already highly iterative.

HELLER: Is there a particular "language" that you employ in your

game design, one that is accessible yet unique to your methods? If so, what does this entail? If not, is there a universal gaming language?

ZIMMERMAN: If by "language" you mean design discourse, there is definitely not yet a common language for how game designers talk about what it is that they do. Most of my academic research over the last several years has involved thinking about the discourse of game design and what that design language might be like. If by "language" you mean a universal set of principles, I'm not sure. Katie Salen and I have developed ideas about what these "fundamentals" might be, but my hope is that game design, like other design fields, will have rich debates and disagreements about what games are, how they work, and how best to design them.

HELLER: What differentiates your approach from those companies behind first-person shooter games like Doom?

ZIMMERMAN: These games, and other established genres, such as adventure games, simulation games, driving games, team sports games, etc., represent the existing tropes of the game industry. gameLab doesn't design for the so-called "hardcore gamer" but for a wider audience, perhaps for people who might not normally play a computer game. Also, it is our explicit intention not to work in established genres but instead invent new gameplay structures, new forms of interactivity, new ways for people to play.

HELLER: How do you engage people who don't ordinarily play games? My son has many video games, but I never had the desire to play them. Isn't it a cultural thing?

ZIMMERMAN: Partially, yes. I grew up playing Pong and Atari in elementary school, arcade games in junior high school, and computer games on the Apple II Plus I got for my bar mitzvah. I was perhaps the first generation raised on video games, a generation that expects their entertainment to be participatory. This trend is only increasing. It's mind-boggling and inspiring to see three-year-olds operating a Windows environment with a mouse. Nevertheless, games still have a long way to go in shedding their well-deserved stigma as adolescent male-power fantasies.

HELLER: Why is violence so popular in interactive games?

ZIMMERMAN: Games on some level are about conflict. All games model or simulate conflict of a particular kind. Even chess can be thought of as a stylized war simulation, in which pieces advance over a grid-based territory and capture each other. Over the millennia, games have tended to focus on military and economic conflict, so that's one reason why games have ended up having an emphasis on violence. A clear lineage can be traced from Go and chess through Kriegspiel and early war games, through Dungeons & Dragons, through to first-person shooters, fighting games, and real-time strategy games. There is also a transgressive element to play, and it makes sense that play which permits taboo behaviors would be popular.

Finding new forms of conflict to model—new kinds of content that go beyond the typical genres—is a major challenge for commercial game design. Part of it has to do with games shedding their cultural stigma as geeky boys' culture to find new audiences, and part of it has to do with *Continued on page 186*

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solving the design challenges that will make new kinds of games possible. There are certainly other kinds of conflicts—psychological, interpersonal, social, cultural—games might model. The project we're doing with Global Kids is one way of addressing these design challenges.

HELLER: But isn't it true that geeky boys are the key audience for these games?

ZIMMERMAN: Geeky boys are

part of the demographic that spends the most money on games: The "hardcore gamer" is a twentysomething white male buying several games over a year. These consumers drive the industry. On the other hand, if you look at who is playing computer and video games, and you include so-called "casual games" like solitaire and online Bingo, the audience age goes way up and gender is split about equally. Many of the online gaming sites that gameLab works with, such as Shockwave.com, have a primarily female audience. The audiences are definitely out there; we just need to design more interesting games for them.

HELLER: How would you de-

scribe a well-designed game? Obviously it entails more than just graphics and typography. What are some of the key attributes?

ZIMMERMAN: First, I'll tell you what you can't describe, which is the experience of a well-designed game. The pleasures of game play come in a huge cornucopia of forms, from the intellectual dueling of chess and Starcraft to the athletic balletics of tennis and Quake to the social maneuvering of SiSSYFiGHT 2000. Games, like any complex cultural form, provide a dizzying myriad of experiences.

However, there is one design concept underlying successful experience in any game, and Katie Salen and I

call it "meaningful play." Meaningful play is a simple but powerful concept, and it refers to the ability of a player to make clear choices in a game—choices that have understandable and significant outcomes.

It all goes back to that core idea of play I mentioned earlier: free movement within a more rigid structure. Game designers provide players with the ability to make strategic, social, and esthetic choices. The meaning of those choices, the outcomes of those choices, emerge through the process of play.

The trick is that, like any designer, game designers don't directly design experience. They only design the

structures that give rise to experience. I can design a font, but not the sentences you are going to write with it. Game designers design rules, but play is something that happens when players take those rules and run with them.

HELLER: So play is about breaking rules and structures?

ZIMMERMAN: For me, these are incredibly exciting ideas. A game is less a fixed object and more a set of possibilities. The sweetest pleasure a game designer can experience is seeing your game played in ways you never anticipated. Someone else is using the language you designed to say things you never could have imagined. As designers, we should all be so lucky.