

# DISCOMFORT DESIGN: CRITICAL REFLECTION THROUGH UNCOMFORTABLE PLAY

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Consider that uncomfortable moment in life when people discover a playful experience ceases to be worth playing. Just as an arm is broken on the playground, or a relationship can no longer be mended, there are explicit moments when art transgresses some unforeseen territory leaving us with fear of its potential. This paper explores the potential of taboo game design.



*© Lindsay Grace 2011. Characters from Match, a Critical Gameplay computer game about matching races.*

## Introduction

Taboo is a construct that defines borders. It tells us where we can and cannot go. The social more is as much a looking glass to reflect on our values as it is a place to test our mettle. This paper seeks to explore how games offer unique critical experience through socially prohibited play. It simply seeks to discuss how play through taboo gameplay exposes that which we may not want to discuss. Taboo game experiences are more than just uncomfortable situations, they are opportunities in rhetoric. They punctuate an experience and offer opportunities for thoughtful reflection on social values.

Games are structured play, and it is their structure that reflects social value. The game of tag gives players two options, hunt or be hunted. So too, when designers of games construct play, they are defining a world and its options.

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## DEFINING TABOO AND THE MOMENT OF DISCOMFORT

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Taboo is at its simplest, a strong social prohibition. It ranges from the distasteful to the unfathomable. The borders of the taboo are defined by social values which inevitably overlap, wax, wane and contradict themselves and the borders of those around them. They are somewhat like human emotion, as something clear to sense, but difficult to articulate beyond the tension of shame or ridicule (Browne 1984). It is as the old saying goes, people may not be able to define it, but they know it when they see

it. It is then appropriate that some of the most clear discussion of the taboo and its inherent ambiguity is provided by a text which declares itself as non-academic (Thody 1997), although written by an academic.

While taboo may not have a clear and fixed demarcation in cultural space, it is best defined by its attributes. Taboo is often ostracized and discomfiting. When something is taboo, it is often put away, absconded with, or otherwise removed from a general experience. Almost upon release, taboo becomes fetishized or ridiculed (Browne 1984). As a result, taboo play is a very tricky area of research. While many people may have heard of the famed Custer's Revenge Atari 2600 Game (Hernández-Avila 2005), how many have played it? What prevents them from playing it? Is it the shame of seeking it, the fear of enjoyment or something even more dark?

The question of experience is exceedingly important. To know that something is taboo is to have taboo prescribed. To experience something taboo is to understand it. Designers of experience must understand, not merely be told. Likewise the power of taboo experiences are greatly reduced once they are reported instead of experienced. Returning to the example of Custer's Revenge, few people know much about the game's other experiences, only its taboo penultimate experience. This reduces the game from a complete experience to a caricature. One or two traits obscure all else. In so doing, we may even miss the most important element of the design – the moment of discomfort.

The moment of discomfort is the point at which play no longer feels right. It is like the rhetoric of speech. Players are lead down a path and follow intently when the experience is good. The moment of exceptionally high impact is when the player wants to follow, but fears what follows. It is even more impressive when that moment is of great conflict. Like the rhetoric of a powerful orator seeking to change your mind, the game may lead you in, have you nodding, and ultimately encourage you to agree to things you had not planned.

The moment of discomfort is the critical moment. It is the point where all things human meet. Players are at odds with their emotions, their social norms, their identity, and their understanding of what they believe is truth. Even the staunchest defendants of games as something outside of the everyday can reveal a moment when they have asked themselves if they should or should not be playing a certain way. This is the moment of discomfort. It is the moment when the player is brought back to the cerebral tension of reflection. It is the *wait a moment*, moment.

It is important to contextualize taboo and its moment of discomfort in a critical sense. It is not enough to ask why something is taboo. Instead, the important question is what about the moment of discomfort in taboo play makes it uncomfortable. Why does playing mean more than thinking? What actions in play drive the moment of discomfort and what borders of social appropriateness have been transgressed? It is also important to understand that the moment of discomfort is more than its moment. Just as a theatrical production or a political movement are more than just the few minutes of highlights, the moment of discomfort is a result of all game experiences within the subject game and the games that preceded it.

### Sex and Recent History:

In the recent controversies of violence and video games in the United States Supreme Court one taboo reveals itself grandly. In the recent and widely publicized case involving the banning of violent games

sales to children, the majority opinion voiced by Justice Scalia indicate the dichotomy of sex and violence that are integral to American social norms. He writes “There is a critical difference, however, between obscenity laws and laws regulating violence in entertainment . . . obscenity had long been prohibited, see Roth, 354 U. S., at 484–485, and this experience had helped to shape certain generally accepted norms concerning expression related to sex. There is no similar history regarding expression related to violence.” (Brown, Governor of California, et al. v. Entertainment Merchants Association et al. 2011)

The fact that prohibition rests not in the malevolent destruction of another simulated being, but in the revealing of their natural parts or by participating in the act that created them is beyond telling. A game franchise such as Grand Theft Auto (Rock Star Games 1997) is not taboo in its acts of malice, but in its acts of giving pleasure. The game is arguably objectionable for its killing, but unsalable for a single act of sexual play, as evidenced by the prohibited sales of the then shocking hot coffee mod (DeVane and Squire 2008). The versions of the game sold with this programmed trap door, allowed players to unlock a portion of the game that afforded players the ability to simulate sexual intimacies with a non-player character. When discovered, hot-coffee mod containing versions of the software were pulled from retailer shelves. This was an enormous effort of prohibition.

On the continuum of distasteful to unfathomable, another commercial release sits neatly for American audiences. As the subject of more ridicule than objection, BMX XXX (Acclaim 2002) is a game that reveals that the moment of discomfort is not as simple as haphazardly grinding through taboo. The game is a fairly traditional, collection oriented extreme-sports title for off-road trick bikes. It rewards players by allowing them to see full motion video from the Scores chain of adult entertainment clubs. One reviewer put it succinctly, “aside from making the 'groundbreaking' move of featuring a lot of cursing and strippers, BMX XXX doesn't do anything particularly well” (Gerstmann 2002).

What is most interesting here is that unlike Grand Theft Auto's hot coffee mod, BMX XXX is not prohibited. While both games contain nudity, one must modify Grand Theft Auto to experience it. It is more likely that the moment of discomfort for Grand Theft Auto comes from its simulation. BMX XXX provides full motion, high fidelity images of sexual content in plain sight. Grand Theft Auto provides relatively low quality simulation of sexual acts. The moment of discomfort must then derive not from depiction, but from any variant of simulation. This is a distinct trait of games, as play is about acting, not merely watching.

Yet, the significance of simulation may not be that simple. Consider the Dark Room Sex Game (Collective 2009), which requires players to simulate sexual intercourse by shaking Wii remotes back and forth to rhythm. The game has no images, merely sound and motion. It is also, not generally subject to the same taboo response as Grand Theft Auto.

Grand Theft Auto's moment of discomfort is largely about juxtaposition. Acts of violence repeatedly practiced, among a single sexual act is perhaps far more inciting than the act of simulation itself. This is important, as it indicates a much more complicated relationship to social discomfort. It is not merely that some Americans are uncomfortable with sexual simulations as play. It is that the juxtaposition of sex and violence is somehow taboo. Beyond that, it is the simulation of violence and the simulation of sex comingled that make taboo play. Other games that couple sexuality with violence, such as the Dead or Alive 3 (Team Ninja 2002) tread in a much less taboo area.

Juden Raus is an important historical game. It is not important for its mundane gameplay or mediocre design. It is important for its almost abysmal failure. It was an anti-Semitic game, so poorly designed that the Nazi SS audience purportedly rejected it (Morris-Friedman and Schädler 2003). It was considered too propagandist and in poor taste (Morris-Friedman and Schädler 2003).

The game, which roughly translates to Jew Out, requires players to move Jewish characters out of the city limits. For contemporary audiences, the entire scenario is taboo, yet for its audience, it was likewise dismissible. These types of games continue to illustrate the complications in constructing an effective moment of discomfort. It is not enough to be controversial. It is not enough to be bigoted. In the case of Juden Raus or BMX XXX, the designer does little to offer any type of rhetorical structure. Much of what needs to be known about the game is known in its first pitch. These games can be easily boiled down to moments of disrespect and cruel humor, while their experience is flatly structured. That is to say, the player learns nothing more from playing the game, than from hearing it. This is because if they play the game, they are not uncomfortable with its taboo. Or, if they are, there is also a part of them that wants to explore this taboo experience. Like fetish, they are lured by the experience and perhaps even seeking it.

This is an important aspect in constructing the moment of discomfort. While it is not wholly dependent on surprise, leading a player to a conclusion they did not expect is important. This is not a surprise, but it is an action in rhetoric. If properly constructed, a moment of discomfort is like well formed formal logic. If I as player enjoy A, and A implies B, why am I uncomfortable with B?

Ghettopoly (Chang 2003) is a game which touches a taboo topic in American culture. The game is a re-skinned Monopoly (Barbara 2007) based on the parodied experience of American ghettos. Railroads and community chests become gun shops and liquor stores. The game was sold in the popular Urban Outfitters chain, until political pressure removed it. It also resulted in an intellectual property lawsuit. Despite this chain of events, it's fundamentally unclear if the game really contains moments of discomfort. Players received much of what they expected. Simple attempts at humor at the expense of the misfortunes of ghetto life coupled with a pile of stereotype and racism.

The game and the ghetto it constructs are racial and economic. These are some of the United States' most sensitive topics. There are many spaces in race and economics that are fairly taboo for Americans. Yet, the game itself does not land squarely in social prohibition. Perhaps it is because Ghettopoly can be played at home, far away from the population it insults (Lardapide et al, 2010). The moment of discomfort for this game comes not from playing the game, but from where the game is played. Play the game on a city park bench in the middle of some of America's worst ghettos and the game is far more loaded with moments of discomfort. This is perhaps, why Juden Raus also failed. The moment of discomfort is as much about social space as it is designed experience.

Such claims are somewhat supported by the tension of Nazi paraphernalia for German audiences. As localization experts can attest, digital games for German audiences must remove Nazi allusion. This means turning the WWII Wolfenstein (Raven Software 2009) game into something other than a fight to kill Nazi soldiers. Here, the moment of discomfort is directly related to proximity - physical, historical, and social.

Social proximity is even more complicated when considering design source. While many players do not stop to ask who made the game they are playing, moments of discomfort, with their tension of reflection, drive players to these questions. Consider the board game *Life as a Blackman* (Sawyer, 1999). This game attempts to illustrate with a serious tone the complexities of achieving success as an African American male. The game was distributed by an independent publisher and developed by a young African American marketing professional. While it was never retailed at a chain like Urban Outfitters, it also never achieved the popularity of *Ghettopoly* nor the critical attention shared by similar games. Is it because a game by an African American, about African Americans lacks the tension of a game about African Americans by Taiwanese American, David Cheng (Ho and Mullen 2008)?

Given how infrequently players ask who designed a game, it may be that *Life as a Blackman* fails to be taboo enough to be fetishized? Unlike *Juden Raus*, *Life as a Blackman* had the support of some members of the African American community (Chadwick 2002). Unlike *Ghettopoly*, *Life as a Blackman* also did little to incite frustrations from insensitivity. Perhaps it is because the game was critical, but offered few moments of discomfort. The game instead, structures its rhetoric plainly and without tension. It does not say what is good or what is bad, it merely says what is. In doing so, it offers little opportunity for players to explore taboo around race. It is likely that *Life as a Blackman* is not uncomfortable because it asks players to explore no space we have not already explored. It asks players to think about many things, but it fails to create that jarring moment that forces critical thinking.

## Conclusion

This reflection merely reveals the patterns in moments of discomfort. The important question still remains. What does a moment of discomfort do for critical reflection? The answer depends on the situation. Just as juxtaposition is a harmonic device in composition, or a rhetorical device in poetics, the moment of discomfort offers designers a highly effective opportunity to remind players to think. It is most powerful in its ability to rip a player from the rhythm of play into to the laboratory of thought. Like a child who falls off a bike, or the recipient of a great gift, the player is likely to ask – what happened? Sometimes the moment of discomfort will lead to positive revelations, other times they will be negative. It is most important to understand that it is an opportunity to effect players. It is an opportunity to exploit the rhetoric of play.

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