Co-Creating Transformative Futures through the Lens of Deep Game Design

What needs to be in place for people and the planet to flourish, to thrive, to co-exist in ways that benefit all, allow fulfillment of potential, and ensure social justice, safety, dignity and belonging for all? Spaces of creative play and possibility. Possibility spaces into which we carry our most complex and challenging questions, approach them systemically, co-creatively, "response-ably," and with the help of many different ways of knowing that go beyond our traditional Western, rational, intellectual understanding.

But how do we do that?

The first thing we need to acknowledge is there is no "default" or "neutral" way of being. It's all informed by our values and beliefs. In other words, our values and beliefs shape our possibility spaces. As game designers, we are very aware that the possibility spaces we create require our intentional design. Yet, if we do not question the rules of our socio-cultural spaces, we may blindly reproduce them in our games, because this is just how things are: women just aren't as "strong" as men. It is "us vs. them." Animals are resources. The natural world is there to be exploited. Etc. etc.

Designing our way out of oppressive ways of being requires *constructive curiosity*—the willingness and commitment to ask open, unbiased questions rather than impose or anticipate answers. Constructive curiosity is the antidote to judgment. Judgment sends people into their fear. Fear kills playfulness. The lack of playfulness creates rigidity. It keeps us stuck, focused on the problems, limiting our willingness to explore and experiment.

Constructive curiosity is closely connected to *consent*. It might feel counterintuitive that in order to co-create transformative futures in which we can all thrive, we must not FORCE anything. Force—power over—is the reason the world is fucked. Having a hard time envisioning an alternative is symptomatic for that. We could try this out in the liminal possibility space of games: let's create some world building games in which the core mechanics are informed by the values of constructive curiosity, inquiry, exploration, creativity, and consent. What outcomes and experiences may such a system produce?

Ian McGilchrist wrote a seminal book called *The Master and His Emissary* and it describes how—while interconnected and in need of each other—our two brain hemispheres have different functions. The left hemisphere is busy judging, discerning, categorizing, abstracting, and forming concepts to manipulate the world (including speech). Its job is to create a map of the territory, with the "territory" being the actual experience. The right hemisphere is busy with actually "being in the territory," with experiencing the moment. The way it attends to the world is holistic, experiential, and with an open focus, rather than zooming in on goals and problems that need to be solved. It is the right hemisphere with its wordlessness that allows us to feel connected, empathetic, to have an experience of oneness.

In the West in particular, we tend to favor the left hemisphere, because it provides answers and it does so with confidence, whereas the right hemisphere stays curious, vague, and open. Game designers, whose bread and butter is to abstract systems into discernable elements and nail down their rules—to create maps, if you will, of the actual territories of lived experience—have their basecamp firmly established in the left hemisphere. Don't get me wrong, without the left hemisphere and its discerning, abstracting capabilities, we would not be able to function in the world. But neither are we able to thrive without the right hemisphere and its connecting capacities.

Returning to the conversation of how our values shape the possibility spaces we can create, my recommendation is to pay the right hemisphere its due—to acknowledge that we need to practice being in the moment, paying open-focus attention to our sensations and lived experiences while they happen. This is how we cultivate our sense of oneness and connection and empathy, and without them, the systems we design will perpetuate "us vs. them" rules, and favor oppressive, exploitative relationships.

In games, we practice core mechanics. Core mechanics—what you do moment-by-moment and the experiences this gives rise to—ultimately determine what the game is about. If we say shooter games are about killing enemies, we are stuck on the fictional level: the game's audio-visual representation. Beyond that level, shooter games are really about aiming and timing. IRL, we can say we value being of service, but if we do not act in helpful ways, the only service at play is lip service.

But what if we took a deep game design perspective and asked: what core mechanics help manifest the values we want to infuse our possibility spaces with? What shall our players practice?

I am not advocating for gamifying our lives and having rules for everything we do. I am advocating for increasing our awareness for whether we walk our talk—to make a study of how we organize ourselves in moments of pressure: are we true to what we say we value? We need to practice this when the stakes are low, so we have it ready, and in our bodies as automatic responses, when things go wrong—when we encounter a real-life BOSS FIGHT.

If we want to rethink, rebuild, and co-create transformative futures in which our children and children's children as well as the living world can thrive, we need a profound shift in how we approach the design of our playful spaces of possibility. We need to design our way forward with intent informed by our values and our vision through a holistic being in the world—grounded, present, open, and connected, showing up with our mind, body, and spirit all online, and our whole brain engaged. We need to be thoughtful and conscious about the core mechanics we put in place and enact on a moment-to-moment basis so that we practice the things that are aligned with our values and our vision and don't betray them the moment things get rough. And perhaps most importantly, we need to spread these thoughts in the realm of game design and beyond: in our families, relationships, educational institutions, organizations, and in our governments as well as the local pub.

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