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How a History of Racing Games Can Inform Contemporary Game Design Education

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Abstract

Racing games are one of the simplest genres of games that are used to teach fundamental game design to beginners. Contemporary examples of the genre can serve to model concepts of the systemic design of games, but are often poor examples of how games can embody values and meaning. However, an examination of the history of racing games reveals that these games were traditionally designed to address a wide array of humanistic, societal and cultural concepts. Rediscovering this history and applying the lessons learned to current exercises and curricula can help game design educators develop a more comprehensive experience for their students.

Introduction

One of the first exercises educators can employ to teach the fundamentals of game design is the modification of an existing game (Zimmerman, 2014). The games often selected for these exercises are characterized by their simple design. The rules, mechanics and goals are easy to understand, and player choice is limited, leaving little room for complex strategy. These types of games are good starting points because they present beginners with an opportunity to build upon a foundation rather than start from scratch. A good example of such a game is a racing game, in which players race against one another from point A to point B, in order to be declared the winner. Racing games are traditionally chance based, relying on the roll of dice to determine a player's movement on the board as well as their standing in the race. Educators may also use racing games because of the many genres of board games we play as young children, racing games are often among the first. It is likely that many of us have an experiential understanding of these types of games from our childhood experiences.

However, modern racing games are significantly different from their predecessors in regards to the values or meaning (or the lack thereof) they embody in their narrative content. Ancient racing games were designed to convey ideas about the human experience, particularly the journeys we take through life. As racing games evolved, they were modified for children with the intent of imparting facts, ideas or values – all within the narrative context of a journey. In fact, racing games have a rich history of being used in homes or school settings as educational supplements. By contrast, today's popular commercial

racing games, such as *Sorry!* (Hasbro, 1934), *Trouble* (Hasbro, 1965) and *Candyland* (Hasbro, 1949) are either purely systemic (no narrative design), or focus on commercial or fictional themes (e.g. Star Wars, Spongebob Squarepants, Pirates of the Caribbean, etc.) as a means to target and sell games to young children.

Through an examination of the history of the racing game, educators may be provided with a different perspective on the genre. They may be inspired to draw on this history to not only master game design fundamentals, but also to encourage learners to develop games that reflect current values and shared meaning.

The Origins of Racing Games

Racing games are one of the oldest genres of games. Evidence of these games has been found etched into floors of archeological sites in southern Europe, Syria, Persia, India and China. More elaborate examples of these games made from wood, stone or bone have been found in burial sites in Egypt. Over the centuries these games have evolved, resulting in regional varieties with different board configurations, distinct narratives, differing rules and game mechanics, and varying levels of choice and strategy. The one feature that rarely changes is the objective of the game: for players to race against one another from a designated start to a designated finish. This objective is reinforced by the design of the game, which requires players to always move forward, at a gradual pace, towards a clear and stated goal. Racing games also involve “implements of chance” (Murray, 1951), such as lots or dice, and are needed by players to move forward. The design of the game not only results in an experience that offers limited choice to the player, but also influences the meaning we assign to racing games. As racing games model the passage of time or movement through physical space by means of chance, they have often been designed to embody the unpredictable journeys we take through life.

Many games from ancient civilizations were designed to reflect the preoccupation with life, death, and the spiritual world. For example, *Mehen*, an ancient Egyptian game, was designed to model a journey through the underworld from death to afterlife. It is based upon the myth of a snake god of the same name, responsible for protecting souls travelling through the underworld. Although the specific rules of the game have been lost to time, a translation of a religious text, commonly known as the Pyramid Texts, mentions not only *Mehen* the game, as opposed to the god, but describes a soul that is required to travel around a game board (Tyldesley, 2007). The design of the board, a coiled snake, is a reference to the myth, but may also hint at the underlying theme of the game. In many ancient cultures snakes represent rebirth, cyclicity, eternity or immortality. *Mehen* attempts to address the uncertainty of a soul’s journey through the underworld, by providing a context in which a soul can be reborn.

The *Game of Goose*, a game introduced to Europe in the mid to late 16th century, resembles *Mehen*, in that the board is arranged in a spiral formation, but rather than model a journey through the afterlife, the game models the journey through life. The decoration of the board uses botanical patterns and other images of daily life to establish an earthly setting for the player (see Figure 1). The *Game of Goose* is often considered one of the first racing games to use an illustrative visual style as opposed to a purely symbolic one (Parlett, 1999). The game also features event spaces that either reward or punish players. The name of the game itself is based on event spaces depicting a goose. Landing on a goose space rewards players by allowing them to move forwards on the board, whereas landing on other squares, such as a well, a tavern, or a prison requires players to lose a turn or to move backwards. These event spaces are included in order to balance the competition between players, and to prevent any one player

from pulling too far ahead or falling too far behind. However, these event spaces also bring meaning to the game in the context of the journey. They are intended to represent real life experiences, and the good luck and bad luck that fate deals us. They evoke feelings of anticipation, tension or frustration adding a sense of excitement to the game.

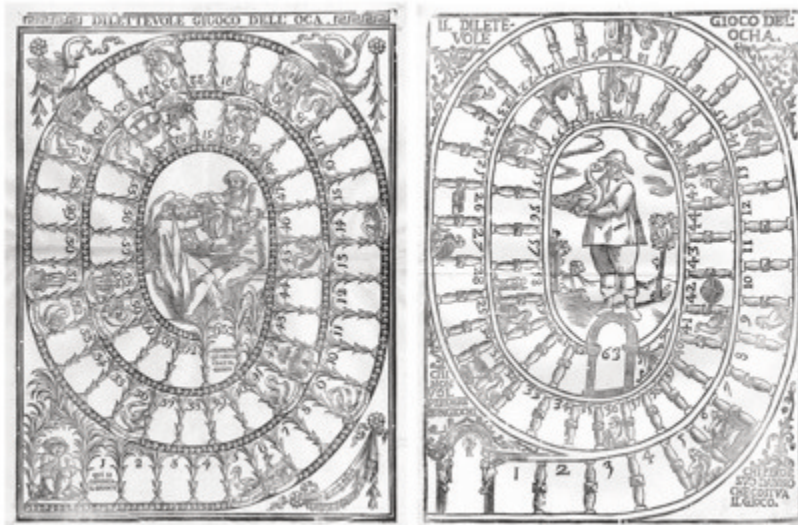


Figure 1. Examples of the game of goose.

Racing Games for Children

Ancient racing games like *Mehen* and the *Game of Goose* were usually designed for and played by adults. In fact, the *Game of Goose* is believed to have included a gambling component wherein players placed stakes at the start of the game (Parlett, 1999). However, between the end of the 18th century and start of the 19th century, there was a shift to design and publish racing games for children. This shift was due in part to the growing middle class who had the means to afford these games and the leisure time to play them at home (Flanagan, 2007). Educational movements in Europe also promoted the idea that visual aids, including games, could make learning attractive to young children (Shefrin, 2009). As a result of these shifting norms, racing games began to move away from themes of life and death to take on topics of history, geography and science. A number of these games are referred to as *Game of Goose* variants, since the games are structurally and systemically similar to the *Game of Goose*. The French were among the first to publish and popularize these variants including a geographical game entitled *Jeu du Monde* (DuValle, 1645). The game requires players to travel the world starting at an unnamed artic pole, through North and South America, Africa and Europe, finally reaching France. Each space on the board features an illustration of a state or country with the continents represented in the four corners of the game board (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Jeu du Monde*.

In addition to imparting factual information, racing games also began to address issues concerning morals, ethics and religion. Like traditional racing games, these games modeled the ups and downs of life, but also noted the characteristics or behaviors that might lead persons to succeed or fail in life. For example, in the late 1800s many American board game publishers were designing games based on the theme of “rags to riches.” These games reflected the contemporary idea that anyone could find success through hard work and merit (Hofer, 2003). Many racing games published during this time designed the experience of the game around the structure of organizations, including the roles or levels of promotions that a player could achieve. In *The Game of Telegraph Boy, or Merit Rewarded* (McLoughlin Brothers, 1888), for example, players were challenged to move up the ranks of a telegraph company starting as a messenger boy with the goal of becoming its president (see Figure 3). This journey through the organization reveals to the player not only the different roles that are required for a telegraph company to function properly, but also the qualities deemed valuable for promotion. Such games included event spaces such as integrity, ambition and intelligence that allow for promotion or for the player to move forward on the board, as well as event spaces such as inattention, impertinence and stupidity that result in demotion or moving backward on the board.



Figure 3. *The Game of Telegraph Boy, or Merit Rewarded.*

While many games of moral instruction are *Game of Goose* variants, games of moral instruction and professional promotion were also a mainstay of Asian cultures. In fact, one of the most recognized American children's games, *Candyland*, is a game that is based on an Indian promotion game known as *Moksha Patam* or *Snakes & Ladders*. This game is one of spiritual promotion, in which players rise and fall based on whether they land on an event square containing a ladder (virtue) or a snake (vice). As is the case with *The Game of Telegraph Boy, or Merit Rewarded*, *Moksha Patam* also notes the characteristics or behaviors that are considered virtuous or immoral. The Japanese designed similar games referred to as *Sugoroku*. These games addressed tenets of Buddhist doctrine, or themes involving service to the government.

Beyond Narrative

In 2009, veteran game designer Brenda Romero designed a one-off game called *Train* (Romero, 2009), part of a larger series of non-digital games entitled "The Mechanic is the Message." *Train* is a racing game in which players move train cars down a set of tracks, with the goal of reaching the end of their track first. The tracks are set upon a large window frame with broken glass, and the rules of the game appear on a sheet of paper, spooled onto an old typewriter. Players roll dice to determine either the amount of spaces they move forward or the number of passengers they add to their train car. Players also have the option of using event cards that allow them to move more quickly down the track, switch tracks, block other players' progress or derail another players' train car. Once a player reaches the end of their track they flip a card labeled "terminus", revealing the destination of their train car and the passengers

inside. To the surprise of many players, the destinations of the trains are concentration camps. This moment, in which the journey of the game becomes clear, instantly changes the experience and meaning of the game for the players. Upon discovering the destination, players understand the specific context of their actions, which in turn leads them to question their complicity in these actions. Furthermore, the experience of *Train* challenges our assumptions about games. *Train* raises questions about the emotional capacity of games and whether games need to be “fun” experiences.

Applying Historical Models to Game Design

For those who intend to develop and teach a well-rounded game design curriculum, it is important not only to encourage learners to examine how to design games systemically, but also to understand that games can be designed to embody current values and shared meaning. As the design or modification of racing games is often one of the entry points into game design, reflecting on the history of racing games and how they have evolved over time to reflect contemporary themes may be a useful learning aid for educators with their students. The historical examples presented in this paper touch on a small sample of themes, yet point to a rich history of racing games designed to address humanistic, societal and cultural concepts. Educators might do well to incorporate this history into their exercises by selecting examples to review, alluding to popular themes of the past or developing exercises that identify and reflect current values. At the same time, it is important for learners to understand that value and meaning can be embodied not only in the narrative experience, but also in the actions or choices of the player. As opposed to other forms of media, games not only invite players to step into different narratives and roles, but can also invite them to make choices and consider the implications of those choices.

Designing games with values or meaning embodied in the narrative or mechanics of the game can be challenging, but the process can also be illuminating and rewarding. In designing values-based games, learners are encouraged to think outside the context of commercial or mainstream games and develop new means for engagement (Belman, 2009). Learners also reflect upon their own values and understand how those values correspond to what is societally or culturally accepted. In doing so, they must consider how to design an experience that allows players to explore the extremes of what is right and what is wrong (Brathwaite, 2010). Designing games in this manner may result in experiences and discussions that change a learner’s attitudes about games, as well as the way they think about the embedded values or meaning that can be conveyed through game play. It is likely that this reflexive process may result in a more engaging game education and more culturally relevant and meaningful games.

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