Taboo and Game Design

Lindsay D. Grace
C. Michael Armstrong Professor of Fine Arts
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio

Taboo Games

• Create a permanent, nefarious place in history
• Potential to demolish careers or the publisher’s brand
• May never see daylight, locked behind some no-peeking curtain as mere concept
• Are the domain of meaningful play

No Meaning – No Taboo
(but can you have no meaning in play?)

Taboo Heuristics

1. Taboo play is most easily created by applying your game mechanics to your politics.
The Old Taboos: General

Race
Sex
Earnings

Chuck Sawyer

Which is actually the Taboo Game?

Dark Room Sex Game
Which is Taboo?

1. Amount of credit card debt (earnings)
2. Your love life (sex)
3. Your salary (earnings)
4. Your mortgage, rent payment (earnings)
5. Your health (sex?)*

(In case you want to make a new Taboo game)

*List compiled from CreditCard.com – not terribly scientific

Heuristic 2

Taboo is dismissed if you are merely applying a taboo environment in an “innocuous” way

Heuristic 2 (example)

• It is okay to have a game take place in a ghetto (environment), but it is not okay to relate the politics of ghettos to a game’s environment and rules
The general public understands games to be about creating fun, and there are certain human conditions for which we do not want to attribute fun:

- You can’t:
  - continue the problem through practice in game

These include:
- The permanent destruction of others
- The continuance of negative cycles
- Etc.
Heuristic 3

The Shame and Modesty Principle

- We generally don’t want to expose some attributes about ourselves that shame us?

A few questions to consider:

- Is it easier to be taboo in non-digital spaces, because these spaces are assumed to be more child friendly?
- We continuously bump up against the complication of digital game simulations and meaning. Why have so many seemingly taboo game mechanics gone uncriticized in digital games (shoot, kill, etc) – is there more expectation for fiction?

Yet, the environment and representational affinity dictates our interpretation of meaning

Don’t we play genocidal games all the time?

10/25/2010