CREATING UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES: THE ESSENCE OF USER EXPERIENCE (UX) DESIGN IN GAMES

Nicoleta TICLENCO

Department of Industrial and Product Design, DJ-221, Faculty of Design,
Technical University of Moldova, Chisinau, Moldova

Corresponding author: Nicoleta Ticlenco, nicoleta.ticlenco@dip.utm.md

Scientific coordinator **Liliana Prozor-BARBALAT**, university lecturer,
Technical University of Moldova

Summary. *Video games have evolved from simple pixelated graphics to immersive, interactive experiences that captivate players and transport them to new worlds. Behind every successful game lies the art and science of game design, with a key focus on User Experience (UX) design. The essence of UX design is to craft unforgettable experiences that engage, entertain, and resonate with players on a deep and emotional level.*

Key words: *user experience, visual/audio design, user interface, narrative storytelling, gameplay mechanics.*

Introduction

The world of gaming is a domain of infinite possibilities, where players engage in epic quests, confront formidable enemies, and traverse breathtaking landscapes. Behind the magic and excitement of gaming, lies the intricate art of game design, with a central focus on User Experience (UX) design. The essence of UX design in games transcends more functionality: it encompasses the orchestration of visual aesthetics, immersive storytelling, engaging gameplay mechanics, and seamless user interface to craft unforgettable experiences for players. In this article, we explore the captivating domain of game design, investigating how User Experience (UX) design serves as the cornerstone for creating immersive, emotionally resonant, and memorable gaming experiences (Schell, 2014).

Understanding the User Experience

User Experience (UX) design in games embodies the overall experience that players undergo while interacting with the game. It involves the seamless integration of visual design, audio, storytelling, gameplay mechanics, and user interface to create a cohesive and engaging experience (Norman, 2013). UX design in games transcends simple functionality: it endeavors to stir emotions, provoke curiosity, and establish a meaningful connection between the player and the game world.

Immersion Through Visual and Audio Design

Visual and audio design is pivotal components of UX in games. The visual aesthetics, character designs, environment art, and special effects contribute to the visual immersion of players within the game world (Kirova, 2022). Similarly, audio design, encompassing background music, sound effects, and voice acting, plays a critical role in setting the tone, atmosphere, and emotional impact of the game. Through meticulous attention to visual and audio design, UX designers strive to envelop players in a captivating and immersive experience. Games like Red Dead Redemption 2, The Legend of Zelda, BioShock Infinite are renowned for their outstanding visual and audio design.

For example, in Red Dead Redemption 2 visuals feature incredibly detailed environments and character models, complemented by a dynamic weather system and realistic lighting, creating an immersive Wild West experience. At the same time, its meticulously crafted environmental sounds and dialogue, along with an adaptive score, elegantly enhance the drama of each moment.

Moreover, many games are criticized for their poor visuals and audio design, some of them are: Alone in the Dark: Illumination condemned because of the poor lighting, and lackluster animations that failed to deliver a horror atmosphere and generic and often repetitive soundtracks, also Duke Nukem Forever and Daikatana.

| **Image 1: Red Dead Redemption 2** | **Image 2: Alone in the Dark: Illumination** |

Crafting Engaging Gameplay Mechanics

Gameplay mechanics serve as the fundamental elements of player interaction within a game. UX designers meticulously fashion gameplay mechanics to ensure they are intuitive, rewarding, and engaging (Salvatore, 2020). From character movement and combat systems to puzzle-solving and decision-making, every facet of gameplay is crafted to provide a seamless and enjoyable experience. The objective is to empower players with agency and challenge them to explore, experiment, and overcome obstacles within the game world. Good gameplay mechanics are those that enhance the player's experience by being intuitive, engaging, and rewarding. Conversely, bad gameplay mechanics can frustrate players due to poor implementation, lack of responsiveness, or because they simply aren't fun.

Examples of games with good mechanics are The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt that combines robust combat systems with dynamic quest lines that adjust based on player decisions, offering a deeply immersive and interactive experience that rewards exploration and strategic thinking; Dark Souls series known for its challenging combat and meticulous level design. Each enemy encounter is a test of patience and skill, and the game's mechanics encourage learning and mastery, making victory rewarding. Doom Eternal enhances the fast-paced combat of its predecessors by incorporating a "push-forward" combat style that encourages aggressive play through mechanics like glory kills for health and chainsaw kills for ammo, keeping the action fluid and frantic.

Some of the games with bad gameplay mechanics are represented by: Aliens: Colonials Marines that received criticism for its AI, which failed to deliver the challenging and threatening behavior expected from the iconic xenomorphs, often resulting in predictable and not engaging combat scenarios and Ride to Hell: Retribution that is troubled by poor collision detection, unresponsive controls, and disjointed combat sequences, which combine to make the gameplay feel disconnected and frustrating.

Image 3: The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt   **Image 4: Aliens: Colonial Marines**

Seamless User Interface and Accessibility

A well-designed user interface (UI) is indispensable for facilitating smooth navigation, interaction, and information dissemination within the game. UX designers prioritize intuitive UI layouts, clear visual hierarchy, and easy-to-understand controls to enhance accessibility for players of all skill levels (J.Preece, 2015). Whether it involves managing inventory, customizing settings, or accessing in-game menus, the UI design aims to streamline the player's interaction with the game and minimize barriers to entry. Examples of games with good UI are The Last of Us Part II, Ghost of Tsushima, Doom Eternal.

For example, The Last of Us Part II is often praised for its intuitive controls and minimalist UI that keeps the screen uncluttered, allowing players to fully immerse themselves in the emotional and visually stunning narrative. The accessibility options are comprehensive, enabling a wide range of players to enjoy the game.

Here are some examples of games with bad UI, characterized by a confusing, overwhelming, and non-accessible design: Resident Evil 6, Fallout 76 and No Man's Sky. All these games suffered from UI and UX issues, including cluttered HUDs, confusing menus, and overwhelming interfaces. These design flaws, combined with other problems like inconsistent gameplay styles and bugs, contributed to frustrating and disorienting experiences for players.

Image 5: The Last of Us Part II

Embracing Narrative and Storytelling

Storytelling serves as a cornerstone of many games, and UX designers play a pivotal role in integrating narrative elements into the overall user experience. Through compelling storytelling, character development, and world-building, games can evoke a sense of emotional investment and empathy from players (Norman, 2013). The effective integration of gameplay and narrative enhances the overall UX, elevating the game from a simple diversion to an immersive storytelling experience. A wonderful example of good narrative storytelling integrated within the game is The

Last of Us Series because the narrative of the game elevates compelling characters, emotional depth and drives player attachment through dialogues and realistic scenarios.

On the other side, a game with bad narrative is Duke Nukem Forever. The game's narrative is often criticized for being outdated and overly reliant on juvenile humor that doesn't resonate well with modern audiences, resulting in an uninspired story that feels disjointed from the gameplay.

Conclusion

The essence of User Experience (UX) design in games lies in its capacity to create unforgettable experiences that resonate with players long after they have put down the controller. By harnessing the power of visual and audio design, crafting engaging gameplay mechanics, prioritizing user interface accessibility, and embracing narrative storytelling, UX designers contribute to the magic of game design. Their dedication to creating seamless, immersive, and emotionally impactful experiences ensures that players are transported to worlds where they can embark on unforgettable adventures, forge meaningful connections, and create cherished memories.

In conclusion, the essence of User Experience (UX) design in games is to create moments that transcend the digital field and leave an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of players.

References

[1] J. Schell, A book of lenses, 2014.

[2] D. A. Norman, The Design of Everyday things, New York: NY: Basic Books, 2013.

[3] K. a. A. Kirova, The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses, Boca Raton: FL: CRC Press, 2022.

[4] R. A. Salvatore, Crafting Engaging Gameplay Mechanics in Introduction to Game Design, Prototyping, and Development: From Concept to Playable Game with Unity and C#, Boston, 2020.

[5] Y. H. J.Preece, Interaction Design: Beyond Human-Computer Interaction, Wiley, 2015.