

Playing for Fun (Part 2): Getting Engaged

To Recap...

Look, my word count is high enough and the first part of this two part extravaganza hasn't gone anywhere. If you haven't read it, READ IT. If you've forgotten it, READ IT AGAIN. Seriously, put in some f\$&%ing effort.

You should see how I recap my D&D sessions.

However, I will (grudgingly admit) a quick reference might be helpful. So, here it is. If it doesn't make sense to you, I TOLD YOU TO READ THE FIRST PART, JAC\$&%!!!

- Sensation: The fun of having your senses stimulated.
- Fantasy: The fun of losing yourself in an imaginary world and being something you're not.
- Narrative: The fun of experiencing a well-told story.
- Challenge: The fun of overcoming obstacles.
- Fellowship: The fun of interacting with others and working together.
- Discovery: The fun of exploring and uncovering things.
- Expression: The fun of leaving your personal mark on the world.
- Submission: The fun of turning your brain off and doing effortless things.

Got it? Good. Time for a deluge of new information. Buckle up, we're going to cover a lot of ideas. Try to keep up.

Six Thousand Ways to Say "Enjoy" and All of them Are Stupid

When it comes to participation in RPGs, GMs tend to throw a lot of words around. Fun, enjoyment, satisfaction, immersion, engagement, involvement, participation, buy-in, emotional f\$&%ing investment, and on and on and on. And they will pretend all of those words mean different things. Hell, even I've done it. But those words all mean the same thing: the players are interested in the game and they are coming back next week. So, in the interest of keeping things simple, we're going to use the word Engagement. It is my favorite. Got it?

And so help me, if you try to explain the difference between buy-in and immersion and engagement in my comment space, I will find you and I will kill you.

Core Engagements: I'm Talking About Video Games Again! What a F\$&%ing Surprise

Allow me to blow your f\$&%ing socks off with this stunning revelation: people get engaged with things that satisfy their desired aesthetics. I'll bet you did not see that coming, did you. It certainly isn't what I've been building toward this whole time, right? Well, drop the sarcasm. It is more complicated than that.

Now, most people get Engaged by most Aesthetics, but everyone has some Aesthetics that excite them more than others and some people are mostly unaffected by some Aesthetics. To make matters more complicated, people seek different Aesthetics at different times and from different media, but we don't

Gaming for Fun (Part 2): Getting Engaged

Copyright (c) 2014 by The Angry DM. All Rights Reserved.

Get more D&D Advice with Attitude at <http://angrydm.com> or Follow @TheAngryDM on Twitter

need to worry about that. We're only talking about one medium here: video games.

Yeah. I'm going to back to those to explain the concept of Core Engagements.

Games are a lot like people. They often satisfy multiple Aesthetics. Let's take Super Mario Brothers (the old sidescrollers) as an example. They have a story with a beginning, middle, and end, right? Plumber from Brooklyn lost in a fantasy world held captive by an evil monster must utilize previously unknown powers to defeat evil monster and save kingdom he is forced to adopt as his own due to being stranded away from home. There's a Narrative. And, hell, you could sit there and lose yourself in the role of a blue-collar nobody sucked into another universe and forced to become a hero to a group of fungi in diapers. So, there's Fantasy. But is SMB1 really ABOUT those things? Is there anything in the game play that reinforces those ideas?

No. SMB1 is an obstacle course. Pure and simple. Move to the right, get past every enemy, bottomless pit, and spinning fire trap, then get past Bowser and win the game. Even though there are a couple of ways to engage with SMB1, Challenge is the only Aesthetic that really matters in the game. We call that the Core Engagement. That is the reason you play SMB1.

Core Engagements are not just Aesthetics the game satisfies, but they are the Aesthetics the game was DESIGNED to satisfy. They are the reasons people play them. The defining Aesthetics.

Dark Souls is all about Challenge and Discovery. There's a story (Narrative) in there, but it is discovered mostly through game-play and actually serves as a reward for exploration, not as a satisfying story in its own right. Same with the Metroid: Prime story. But Metroid Fusion was more strongly about Narrative than Discovery, which is why some Metroid fans didn't like it as much. Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is also about Discovery, but with its rich and detailed, living, breathing world, it also delivers on Fantasy. Sure, there's a Narrative in there as well, but it is easily ignored. The game is really ABOUT exploring and immersing yourself in the world. If you want a game that is solidly about Narrative, try one of the Final Fantasy games. You get to experience a deep, well-structured story and the games are usually beautiful to boot, so if you like Sensation, you're happy. The actual gameplay in Final Fantasy, though, is pretty repetitive and grindy, and it is great for turning off your brain and Submitting to the game.

Most games have one or two Core Engagements. Some have three or four. More than that starts to feel unfocused and unsatisfying. And the games that do try to deliver on more, generally have to do something to focus their efforts. Take Minecraft, for example. You can play for Discovery (exploring and crafting), Challenge (survival and beating the bosses), Expression (build whatever you want), Fellowship (team up with friends), and Submission (mining, mining, mining), but those things are divided between different gameplay modes. Starting up a server and playing in creative mode with your friends (Fellowship, Expression) is very different than playing solo survival mode for the first time (Discovery, Challenge).

The point is that, every game has a few Aesthetics that crop up over and over again, a few Aesthetics that the game's design supports most heavily. And those Aesthetics are the games Core Aesthetics.

What the System Says

Back to RPGs. Remember how I told you that RPGs aren't really games by themselves? Well, that makes this whole discussion just a little bit trickier. And what makes this discussion even trickier is that people

Gaming for Fun (Part 2): Getting Engaged

Copyright (c) 2014 by The Angry DM. All Rights Reserved.

Get more D&D Advice with Attitude at <http://angrydm.com> or Follow @TheAngryDM on Twitter

can't just calm the f\$&% down and act rationally about it. So, in this section, if I say something that pisses you off a little because I am badmouthing a game you like, I need you to calm down and keep reading. Okay? Hear me out.

Let's take Dungeons and Dragons as an example here. Does the system itself have Core Engagements? You bet your sweet bippy it does. For example, you could make a case that one of the Core Engagements of D&D (at least 3E, Pathfinder, and 4E) is Challenge. The game is designed to support an "obstacle course" style of play.

BUT...

Remember that D&D isn't a game. It is up to you, the DM, to turn the game system into a game, either by running a module or writing your adventures and campaigns. And YOU, the DM, can easily just ignore that "obstacle course" style of play. You don't HAVE TO build adventures that way. It is just that D&D makes it easy to build that way and it gives you advice to make that satisfying.

So, while D&D has some Core Engagements, they don't HAVE TO carry over into your game. Just like a game system or game engine has tools to support certain styles of play, but you don't HAVE TO use them.

Now, some Aesthetics are harder to ignore than others. Take Sensation in D&D 4E. You really do need to bring some form of visual aid, like a grid and tokens, to 4E combat. You can choose not to, but the game definitely does not make that easy.

Now, consider the Aesthetic of Narrative. Nothing in D&D (any edition) really supports a well-structured story, but there is also nothing that detracts from it. If you want that to be a part of your game, you can do it easily enough.

In point of fact, D&D is fairly generic in terms of the Aesthetics of Play. It is like Minecraft in that respect, which may be one of the reasons for its enduring popularity. That's why people say things like "D&D is all things to all people" and why it is so hard to pin down the "feel" of D&D.

But not all RPGs are cast from the same mold as D&D. Some RPGs are designed (usually purposely) to provide more specific play experiences. And those games generally do push Core Engagements that are harder to remove or de-emphasize. In trying to create specific experiences, they also sometimes make it difficult to add certain Aesthetics as Core Engagements. This is all a very touchy subject and a lot of folks tend to get very offended when you suggest a game might support or enforce a certain playstyle, believe it or not. People are f\$&%ed up.

The point is this, though. Most systems come prepackaged with Core Engagements which can easily become the Core Engagements of your game. But that doesn't mean that playing a system automatically means you have to accept those Core Engagements. In most cases, you can add to or subtract from the list fairly easily, though some systems can make this easier or harder. Long story short, the system matters both more and less than you want to think it does.

Your Core Engagements

But enough about the system. After all, the system is incomplete and it requires you to complete it. Every

Gaming for Fun (Part 2): Getting Engaged

Copyright (c) 2014 by The Angry DM. All Rights Reserved.

Get more D&D Advice with Attitude at <http://angrydm.com> or Follow @TheAngryDM on Twitter

decision you make about how to run your game (including what system to use) is going to emphasize some Aesthetics and de-emphasize others. The ones you emphasize the most strongly and most frequently become your Core Engagements. The others are just there.

For example, my campaigns tend to support Challenge, Discovery, Fantasy, and Narrative most strongly. That isn't to say there aren't elements of the other Aesthetics in there too. It is just that, when all is said and done, those are the things that happen most. I have well-developed, detailed world with lots of NPCs (Fantasy) and secret histories, lore, mythologies, and plots that are gradually being uncovered through play (Discovery). Most of my adventures require the players to overcome a variety of encounter types which they are free to deal with in a variety of ways (Challenge). And I have an innate sense of story structure and use strong goals which the PCs are constantly building towards (Narrative).

But that makes it sound a lot more formulaic than it is. The truth is, no one REALLY sits down and says "these will be my Core Engagements." I didn't DECIDE that Challenge was one of my game's things. It emerged from my various decisions. For example:

I run D&D and D&D-like games. And I tend to build adventures as a series of encounters and see encounters in terms of goals and conflicts. Victory is never assured and has to be earned, but I am very open to allowing the players to deal with encounters in a wide variety of ways. I never assume one path through an encounter to victory. I do not fudge dice. I apply the rules fairly and consistently. I focus on action scenes. All of those things, together, mean that my game emphasizes Challenge - the game as a series of obstacles to be defeated.

So, if you have been reading this whole thing waiting for the list of "do this thing to add this Aesthetic," you're going to be disappointed. So, what good is all of this then. Right?

What Good is All of This, Then?

Let's stop talking theory and start talking reality. The reality is, by the time you are at the point where you are thinking about Aesthetics and Core Engagements and trying to analyze yourself and your players, you've been running games for a while. This isn't newbie advice here. And that means you've developed a "style." A GMing Style is just a fancy way of saying "the Core Engagements you tend to emphasize in your games and how you do it."

You've also probably figured out how to get your players to come back every week or two and keep playing. Which means your players are probably mostly happy with your Core Engagements. You're probably okay and not looking to make any gigantic, sweeping changes. If you are, good luck with that. Let me know how it turns out.

So, the Aesthetics/Core Engagement model are mostly useful for making smaller decisions and for giving and receiving advice. The point isn't so much to say "I want to offer my players a lot of Discovery," but rather to say "I offer a lot of Discovery. In light of that, should I try to bring in more opportunities for player authorship and creativity?" And to realize the answer is "probably not."

The whole Aesthetics/Core Engagement thing is not about becoming a slave to the aesthetics, but about empowering you to think about your game, the people playing it, and the reasons you do things so that you can streamline. Or to recognize when a player is becoming unsatisfied and give a little dose of something to keep that player happy.

Gaming for Fun (Part 2): Getting Engaged

Copyright (c) 2014 by The Angry DM. All Rights Reserved.

Get more D&D Advice with Attitude at <http://angrydm.com> or Follow @TheAngryDM on Twitter

I'm not saying you CAN'T build a game based around delivering a specific set of Core Engagements. You can totally do that. Some people are style chameleons and can run any kind of game any way. Other people aren't. No matter what game they are running, those games all have the same feel. That is just another thing you have to learn about yourself.

All I'm doing here is giving you a tool. It is up to you to decide how to apply this crap.

How to Apply This Crap

Okay, caveats delivered: be careful how you use this crap. Good. Now let's talk about how to use it. You've got all the background you need. You know what the Aesthetics are. You know what Core Engagements are. It is time to get practical: how do you figure out your Core Engagements, how do you figure out your players' Aesthetics, and how do your decisions affect the game.

Figuring Yourself Out

There is an easy way to figure out the Core Engagements that tend to dominate your game. What you need to do is somehow write down a list of the things that shape the way you run your games, read over it, and see what Core Engagements seem to be bobbing to the surface. If only you had a such a list. Some sort of GMing Credo like the one I told you to write down three f\$&%ing weeks ago. You did do that, right?!

Seriously. The best way to figure out your game's Core Engagements is to figure out what sort of game you run and why you run it that way. If you reread your GMing Credo with an understanding of the Aesthetics of Play, you should see some patterns emerge.

For fun, check out my Credo and see if you can spot the signs of Challenge, Discovery, Fantasy, and Narrative.

Figuring Your Players Out

This is a lot trickier. Look, you could just ask your players. You could do a clever survey like some folks have already told me they've done. And that works okay as long as you don't assume those will be totally accurate. Remember, most people are bad at introspection and articulation. Most people tend to decide what they like and don't like FIRST and then come up with reasons to explain those decisions afterward, which means they are usually wrong.

You are a lot better off trying to see what your players like and don't like directly. Watch how they play, watch what they react to, watch what gets them excited and what gets them bored. You can also experiment with them a bit. Try assigning a task or creating an opportunity to fulfil one of the Play Aesthetics and see who responds. Ask the players to create an NPC between sessions that you will use for the next adventure. Those that jump at that are probably Expression seekers. Offer them the chance to play a one-off adventure using pregens that tells some secret story from the campaign's history. Narrative seekers and Discovery seekers will probably get excited. Ask how they would feel about removing death from the game. Those who worry that it is unrealistic or silly to have invulnerable heroes are probably Fantasy seekers. Those who worry that the game will be pointless without the risk of death

Gaming for Fun (Part 2): Getting Engaged

Copyright (c) 2014 by The Angry DM. All Rights Reserved.

Get more D&D Advice with Attitude at <http://angrydm.com> or Follow @TheAngryDM on Twitter

probably like the Challenge.

BUT...

Like I said, you can go too far with this. The fact that your players are already showing up to your game week after week already tells you a lot. That tells you your Core Engagements are probably a good match for them, whatever they might claim. Of course, some people may be less enthusiastic. They might show up grudgingly, they might not really be invested in the game. Those are the folks you have to look out for.

Of course, it is up to you how much stock to put in this. If you're running a game that isn't a good match for any of your players, you're eventually going to run into trouble. You have to decide whether you need to adjust your style or find a new batch of players. That is up to you. Remember, the game has to be satisfying for you too. If you have one player who is left out a little bit and you can find ways to bring that player in by playing up one of the Aesthetics, do that. And when you read about some new GMing and need to decide whether it is a fit for your game, think about how your players will react and whether it fits with the game you are already running. Once again, use these tools the way you think is best!

How Your Decisions Become Aesthetics

If you read that MDA paper I linked to (don't worry, it wasn't required), you might have noticed that it wasn't really ABOUT the Aesthetics of Play. They were sort of an afterthought. The Aesthetics weren't the Core Engagement (see what I did there?). Instead, the paper was about something called the MDA framework. Here is how it works in a nutshell.

The game designer (that is you), creates some sort of game element which we call a Mechanic. The players interact with that Mechanic while playing the game. That interaction is called the game Dynamic. As a result of the Dynamic game, they experience certain Aesthetics. It is as simple as that.

But, don't get hung up on that M word. In RPGs, we tend to use the word Mechanic to refer specifically to rules and statistics. But, in the MDA Framework, any game element can be a Mechanic: rules, story elements, house rules, guidelines for table conduct, and even GM advice. And, once the players run into that Mechanic in some way, it can give rise to a play Aesthetic. An example is in order, I think.

So, I tend to be a bit strict on racial flavor text. I often rewrite, or at least expand, the racial story elements. I push players to stick to it pretty firmly, reminding them that if they choose to play an elf, that means something not just about their stats, but also about their biology, psychology, and culture. That "rule" is a Mechanic. In play, it means that members of various races (PCs and NPCs) are consistent with each other. The idea of what it means to be an elf is a part of the game and it makes the world feel more real, more consistent. Elvishness means something. The players can even use that information. When negotiating with elves, they can use their knowledge of elven values to their benefit. The end result is that my world has a sense of consistent verisimilitude. Hence, that supports the Fantasy Aesthetic in my games.

Every decision you make, as a GM, when designing your campaign (Mechanics) and running your games (Dynamics) ultimately support some combination of Aesthetics of Play. The ones that you end up supporting over and over, the ones that you push with your decisions, those become your Core Engagements. A lot of my decisions, when designing and running my campaign, are focussed on creating a consistent, richly detailed world that "feels real." That is just how I roll. And that is what makes Fantasy

Gaming for Fun (Part 2): Getting Engaged

Copyright (c) 2014 by The Angry DM. All Rights Reserved.

Get more D&D Advice with Attitude at <http://angrydm.com> or Follow @TheAngryDM on Twitter

one of my Core Aesthetics.

Getting from M to A

Now, I already said there isn't a list of "do this to add that" sort of rules. But, if you gain a keen understanding of the Aesthetics, you'll start to develop a sense for what sorts of Mechanics lead to which of Aesthetics. So, while I won't offer you an exhaustive list, I'm going to leave off with a quick sort of blitzkrieg and revisit each of the Aesthetics in terms of what sorts of things emphasize them. Hopefully it will help get you thinking about them the right way.

Sensation: Engage the senses! Sensation seekers love handouts, maps, props, music, terrain, miniatures, and fancy character sheets! Just be careful that you don't overdo it and distract others from the game. The tactical grid and miniatures in D&D 4E are great examples.

Fantasy: Fantasy seekers want the world to feel like a living, breathing thing. Anything that helps the world feel like an alternate reality helps. Consistency, internal logic, and suspension of disbelief are important. Having lots of little details at your fingertips is always helpful. If your Fantasy seeker wants to take a few minutes playing out a shopping trip or hanging out in a pub, let them. Within reason. Detailed settings, canon, rich history, and mythology make your Fantasy seekers happy. Examples from games include setting canon like the stuff from Forgotten Realms. But also, check out the way 3.5 explained magic and the creation of magic items. Those sorts of explanations make the game world feel real.

Narrative: The Narrative seekers will always appreciate a well-structured game. Structured in terms of the Narrative, that is. Anything that adds clear goals and a direction to the game are a plus. Characters - both PCs and NPCs - need logical motivations and Narrative seekers need to be able to understand them. The Narrative seeker also wants a sense of building toward climaxes, of clear arcs and a good plot structure. Finally, anything that adds elements of human drama - human emotions - will engage your Narrative seeker. Fronts from Dungeon World are a great example of a Mechanic that adds a Narrative structure. As is the Three-Act Encounter Structure in Warhammer Fantasy RPG 3rd Edition and the XP system in the Marvel Heroic RPG. Obligations in Star Wars: Edge of the Empire also lend a Narrative structure to the game.

Challenge: Remember that Challenge is not the same as difficulty. Challenge just means that victory isn't assured. The Challenge seeker wants to know that their actions, skills, choices, and decisions turned defeat into victory. Too much random chance with no ability to change the outcome will drive the Challenge seeker crazy. The Challenge seeker likes the freedom to engage with problems in different ways and wants to feel like every victory is earned. Most of all, when they aren't facing adversity and risking loss, the Challenge seeker is not engaged. The entirety the encounter building rules from D&D 3.5 and 4E are solid examples of Mechanics designed with a focus on Challenge.

Fellowship: Fellowship seekers need to feel attached to the group. They need to feel like everyone is on the same team, working together to accomplish something. They also need to feel like they are surrounded by friends. Paranoia, secrets, evil characters, and intraparty treachery are anathema to them. Mechanics that create relationships between the characters or allow characters to work together and synergize make them happy. Bonds in Dungeon World emphasize Fellowship. So does the Party system in Warhammer Fantasy RPG 3E. The Crossing Paths steps in FATE Core character generation also bring Fellowship into the game.

Discovery: Discovery seekers like to feel as if the world is full of things to find. And not just hidden treasures. Anything that was hidden or that could have been overlooked is a discovery. Likewise, any secret they didn't know at the start of the game is a discovery. The trick to making the Discovery seeker happy is to create a lot of little optional things to explore and hide away little nuggets of discovery. Fill your world with secrets, strange locations, minor treasures, and hidden lore and scatter it all over the map. Most importantly, MAKE IT MISSABLE. This is anathema to the modern GM, the idea that something might be overlooked, but the Discovery seeker NEEDS that feeling to feel satisfied.

Expression: The Expression seeker wants to create and to customize. First and foremost, they need options and they need the sense that they are making things their own. They will often run against the grain just to feel as if they are staking a claim. They will play the one elf that is not like other elves. Watch out because these folks and Fantasy seekers will often clash for those reasons. They like to have seemingly meaningless options to add precisely because they are the sorts of things most people won't add. The feeling of being unique is important to them. After that, the Expression seeker loves to leave their mark on the world and anything that allows them to add details to the world beyond their characters will make them feel happy. The wide-open character generation of D&D 3.5 leaves a lot of room for Expression, believe it or not. But for specific Expression Mechanics, 13th Age's One Unique Thing provides the Ur Example. The Campaign Creation mechanics in FATE Core and Dresden Files are also fantastic examples that let the players extend their creativity beyond their characters.

Submission: Submission is a tricky one. Anything that allows players to easily, casually slip into the game and handle situations with ease will help the Submission seekers. Check out the character generation system and power structure in D&D Gamma World (7th Edition, the one based on D&D 4E). For that matter, a case could be made for the Class/Power structure of 4E being excellent for the Submission seeker. Any game with easy entry and casual play are also great for Submission seekers. Check out Kobolds Ate My Baby for a great example.

In Conclusion...

In the end, all of this is just a framework. It is just a way of looking at games and players. It isn't a formula or a set of laws. It is just a way of thinking. It is a useful tool, but nothing more. Don't try to be a slave to it. Just use it to make more informed decisions about your games. And that is probably the most important message in all of this: think critically, question everything, dismiss nothing. When someone says "always let your players build the world" or "never fudge dice ever," ask yourself why. Ask yourself if that advice is right for you. And for your players. And for your game. Don't just listen to aphorisms. Don't dismiss anything outright. Treat everything as a valid idea and then challenge it. Even the stuff in this very blog.

Think Critically, Question Everything, Dismiss Nothing.

To all of my readers: Happy New Year. Keep coming back. I look forward to helping you run less worse in the coming year. Now, enough of this high-concept crap about fun and ideals. Next week, we'll do something useful like social encounters or building combats or something. Until then, get the hell out of here and leave me the f\$&% alone.