Gaming for Fun (Part 1): The Eight Kinds of Fun

If you ask the average GM "what is the point of an RPG" or "how do you win" or "what's your job as a GM," I'm pretty certain you're going here the word "fun" in the answer. "The point is to have fun." "You win when everyone has fun." "Your job is to make sure everyone but you has fun." Right? And if you ARE the average GM (and chances are good you are an average GM if you are reading this), you probably think those are pretty good answers. Admit it. I won't hurt you. Just f$&%ing say it. SAY IT!!!

Believe it or not, I'm not going to tell you that you're wrong and swear at you. Well, I'm not going to tell you you're wrong. Not completely. This time. It is a fair thing to say. After all, the G in RPG stands for Game and a Game is a thing done for fun. So, the average GMs have it right. Statistically, it was bound to happen eventually. Good for you. Score one for Team Mediocrity.

But, here is where you screw up. You don't understand fun. Not really. You don't sit down to write a game and "add fun" or "make fun." You make things. You design encounters. You plan plot points. You build NPCs. And you also put together and run campaigns. You hope that somehow, out of the campaigns and the decisions and encounters and plot points and NPCs, fun is a thing that will happen. But you don't actually try to quantify fun. You don't think about why fun things are fun.

Until today.

Video Game Designers: Quantifying Fun Since 2001

Between 2001 and 2004, game designers Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, Robert Zubek gave a series of lectures discussing a formalized approach to video game design. As part of the lectures, they outlined a list of what they called "aesthetics of play." Basically, eight broad categories that describe the reasons why people engage with games. Put simply, they outlined eight basic types of fun. In 2004, they published MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research (http://www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf).

Since then, their framework has been republished, analyzed, expanded, explored, revised, tinkered with, futzed with, studied, and taught. But the thing is, the list of Eight Kinds of Fun (as I'm calling them) hasn't really been expanded or changed all that much, as near as I can tell. You can find the list all over the Internet with careful searching and Extra Credits did an episode about it some time ago.

It turned out that they were on to something. The framework was useful and fairly complete. In fact, looking at the list, it is hard to see what might be missing. I've read a few proposed ideas and I found one expansion of the list up to 21 items, but it seemed excessively nitpicky and seemed like it was mostly subdividing what was already there. There is just something about this particular lists that resonates with me, and seems to resonate with others as well.

And I'm going to share it with you because of the dirty little secret I'm about to reveal.

The Dirty Little Secret

The dirty little secret I am about to reveal comes in two parts.

First, you know all those RPGs you own? Dungeons and Dragons? Pathfinder? Savage Worlds? Dungeon World? Numanuma? FATE Accelerated Armored Core Advanced? Star Wars: West Edge of the Saga? OSR and Castles and Sorcery? Guess what. Those aren't games. And they weren't designed by game designers. Why? Because YOU (if you are a GM) are the game designer. Every GM is a game designer.

D&D is not a thing you can just pick up and play. At best, D&D is a set of rules and instructions and elements that can be assembled into a game. D&D is game engine. A game system. A development kit. A physics engine. A game console. D&D is a Playstation or an XBox. Legacy of the Crystal Shard? Rise of the Runelords? Keep on the Borderlands? Beyond the Rim? Those are closer to games. Just like the disc that has Last of Us or HALO on it, adventure modules have all the encounters and monsters and stories and things in them. Those are games. Sort of.

See, you're probably expecting me to point out now that if you write your own adventure, you are a game designer. Duh. That much is obvious. But I'm about to tell you that, even if you don't write your own adventure or campaign, you're still a f$&%ing game designer. Check that out.

How does that work? Well, unlike a game console, you can't just shove Rise of the Runelords into a Pathfinder book and have a game happen. To "run the game," a human being has to follow the Pathfinder instructions and the Rise of the Runelord instructions, just like the processor in the PS4 follows the instructions in the PS4 and on the Last of Us disc. Right? Except that the processor is not a computer. It is YOUR HUMAN F$&%ING BRAIN. And it makes a lot of decisions about how that game is going to be executed. It can ignore any of the instructions. Sometimes, the instructions don't tell it what to do and it has to make things up. Sometimes the players wander outside the playable area and the human brain running the game has to scramble to generate new content on the fly or to get the players on track. Some human brains adhere strictly to the instructions. Others use them as loose guidelines. Others throw them out altogether and start making s$&% up.

Beyond that, that human brain running the game also decides how to present that game? Does everyone make their own characters or will we use pregens? What classes, races, and resources are allowed? How will we start the story off? Will we use miniatures and dungeon terrain or just our imaginations? How will we handle PC's dying? What about when everyone dies? Will I fudge dice? How often will I even use the dice? When you look at it that way, the game that you have dropped hundreds of dollars on is woefully incomplete, huh?

Just the mere act of organizing and running the game experience has a great deal of influence over how the game feels. And that is assuming you are running someone else's module. If you also decide to run your own adventures, run your own campaign, and/or design your own setting, you define a lot more of the game than Jason Bulhman or Fred Hicks or Mike Mearls or Sage Latorra ever did. You have a lot more say over how your players feel about the game. And yet, you don't get a paycheck for running the game. Welcome to game mastering.

My point is, the question of fun is pretty damned central to the whole experience. We agree on that, right? And you, the GM, have a lot to say about whether the game is fun or not. More to say than any other so-called game designer who has dumped a lot of responsibility on you. So, you need to think like a designer. And when a group of game designers (admittedly in another field) say "hey, we discovered these sort of rules for how people have fun," don't you want to know what they are and how you can use them too? Does it make sense to let those damned game designers keep all the useful stuff from you?

The Eight Kinds of Fun

The MDA paper I linked to earlier (http://www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf) is a fascinating paper and there is a lot juicy meat in its scant five pages, but one of the places where it sadly doesn't go into much detail is where it talks about the "aesthetics of play," the Eight Kinds of Fun I've been banging on with. So, while you should eventually get around to reading the paper, I'm going to break down and expand on the important part right here. Let's look at the Eight Kinds of Fun. And I'm going to start with one that I have some strong personal anecdotes about just to show how this thing can have a drastic impact on the games you enjoy.

An Object Lesson: Sensory Pleasure

Sensory Pleasure is the pleasure that you get from having your various senses engaged, especially sight, hearing, and touch (because you shouldn't be licking things in an RPG). In video games, the pleasure we derive from seeing the graphics, hearing the music, and touching the controller are sensory pleasures. In RPGs, sensory pleasure comes from things you can see and touch: artwork, the layout of the book, miniatures, terrain, maps, handouts, diagrams, props, and even dice. If you like those things and can't imagine an RPG without them, you're a sensory pleasure seeker.

Now for that personal anecdote I promised you. I realized recently that I am a sensory pleasure seeker. I should have known it, honestly. I spend hours and hours with maps and handouts. I love miniatures and battlemats and terrain. I can't read a PDF or learn a game from a computer screen, I need a physical book. And I love rolling dice.

The thing you have to understand about these aesthetics, the 8 Kinds of Fun, is that everyone prioritizes them differently, but nobody is about just one of them. We all want different mixes. Some of them are very important to us, we can't live without them. Other ones do almost nothing for us and we don't care if they are present. Sometimes, our desired aesthetics vary

with our mood or with the medium. When I say I am a sensory pleasure seeker, that means that sensory pleasure is high on my list of preferences, not that it is the only thing I want. It also doesn't mean I can't have fun without sensory pleasure (though for some people and some aesthetics, that might be true).

You also have to understand that most people are unaware of the aesthetics of play and have a hard time explaining the reasons for their preferences. You might not realize that you want a thing called "abnegation" out of most of your video games. All you know is that Mass Effect was "too complicated" for you to enjoy.

So, I am a sense pleasure seeker. I like physical things I can touch and maps and diagrams I can look at. I like dice and miniatures and props and feelie bits. Well, recently, I ran a few sessions of Dungeon World. I didn't bother with a map and miniatures. I could have, but they weren't necessary and didn't add anything. DW doesn't care about exact positions and narrative descriptions provide all you need. But DW is also written such that the GM doesn't roll dice. Basically, I was running my entire game with a book with some simple art and two pieces of paper.

Needless to say, I didn't have as much fun as I do with other RPGs. It wasn't a bad game. It was fun. And it did some neat mechanical things. But I still walked away feeling vaguely unsatisfied with the whole affair. It wasn't until I started doing the research for this article that it suddenly occurred to me why. But the reason is, it wasn't satisfying my strong desire for sense pleasure.

Now, do not misunderstand me. I'm not saying that DW is a bad game. It is a fine game. It works well. But it isn't fun for me. And the reason it isn't fun for me is because I don't have any dice and it doesn't put minis and maps to any really good use. Now, that sounds crazypants to the average GM, right? Of all the stupid reasons to hate a game, that is about the worst, right? But it is just the way I am wired. I need to engage my senses. DW doesn't do that.

Now, let's look at the other side. Some people out there are absolutely bats$&% insane and don't care at all about sensory pleasure. RPGs are games of imagination and they don't need diagrams and maps and miniatures and tokens to have fun, right? They don't hate those things, they don't hurt the game, but they don't need them. They are vestigial. Like an appendix.

But the thing is, all of those things that increase sensory pleasure require a lot of effort or money to add to the game. Maps have to be drawn or sought out, handouts need to be designed, miniatures are expensive, tokens need to be made or bought, grids need to be acquired, tactical maps need to be designed, and so on. These things make game prep more expensive and more complicated.

Now, if you care about sensory pleasure (like me), the expense and the complication has a payoff. It makes the game more fun. If you don't care about sensory pleasure (and you're wrong), it is just a needless waste of time, money, and effort. Right? You can see that, right?

Now, imagine a game you have loved for many years that used to treat the sensory components as optional suddenly makes a push toward requiring them as D&D 3E started to do and 4E, for all practical purposes, cemented. And before you fly down into the comment section in an irrational rage to start an edition war, just consider what I am saying rationally. With 3E and 4E, it became more difficult to ignore the tokens and grids. They were always useful, always an option, but by 4E, they were baked pretty heavily into the game. The game experience suffered if you removed them. Exact positions were a vital part of the game.

So, if you were one of those people who always opted out of sensory components, or even if you only used them occasionally, in really complicated encounters, suddenly, you had to deal with this extra complication all the time for no pay off. And that is why some people went batshit insane when 3E and 4E were rolled out about how "now you had to use miniatures all the time."

If you are not a sensory pleasure seeker, you cannot understand how miniatures and terrain make the game feel more fun. It just doesn't register for you. It is like a sound that is beyond the range of your hearing. If you are a sensory pleasure seeker, you can't figure out why no one else can hear that strange whistling noise. And if you try to debate the merits of something that only serves to add or reduce the sensory pleasure in the game, you will only talk past each other because you are going in with different core assumptions.

Edition wars and style arguments are two places where the lack of understanding of gameplay aesthetics - of the Eight Kinds of Fun - becomes most obvious. At least, it does once YOU understand them. You begin to understand why these arguments happen, why they can't be resolved, and why the people on either side aren't irrational, they just lack the language to express their feelings and the introspection to understand them.

That is part of why I'm wasting so many words on this article. I'm hoping it will help you respect the preferences of others and recognize that some game elements are wrapped up in values and preferences that are beyond the range of your hearing.

So, let's discuss and define the Eight Kinds of Fun in detail and then see if we can put them to good use. Here we go.

The Eight Kinds of Fun (For Reals This Time)

Now, just a quick word of warning. I normally don't do this sort of warning, but here it is kind of important. A bunch of different people have written about, expanded on, interpreted, and rehashed these eight kinds of fun in terms of video games. I've read a bunch of different analyses. But the thing is, I'm now taking all of that together with my own personal experiences with gaming and smashing it into what I personally think will be a useful framework for us GMs. And I'm not going to try to draw the lines where various other writings end and where I begin.

Long story short? Like every other f$&%ing thing on this site, this stuff is MY opinion and MY interpretation and MY conjecture. It is informed opinion/interpretation/conjecture, but it is still MINE and I am not claiming there is any authority on it. The definitive first work on this stuff is that MDA paper I already linked. So go check that out. Otherwise, this is me talking and I'm flat-out admitting I'm trying to expand this framework into something specifically useful for RPGs and I might just be talking out of my incredibly brilliant, handsome, and well-sculpted ass.

Now, I'm right, because it is me. But this is still just me talking. Okay? Clear? Good.

1. Sensory Pleasure

We already talked about this one at length. It provides a good framework for understanding what the aesthetics are really about. This is the pleasure you get from things you can see, hear, and touch. Physical books, art, dice, music, maps, diagrams, miniatures, terrain, and props all bring a tingle of joy to the sensory pleasure seeker.

2. Fantasy

Fantasy is the pleasure you get from losing yourself in an imaginary world and pretending you are someone you are not. It is escapism. It is immersion. The fantasy seeker wants to feel as if their character could be a real character in a world that could be real. They want to be allowed to BE their character.

Fantasy can be very delicate. A lot of things can break someone out of the fantasy. Asking a player to make a decision outside of the scope of their own character can sometimes break the illusion. High levels of abstraction can also break the fantasy. Broken suspension of disbelief is a killer. Inconsistency and contradictions also break immersion.

Now, it is easy to look at fantasy and say "here is the definition of role-playing games" because this is, essentially what roleplaying is about, right? But you have to be careful with that attitude. Fantasy is still just one of the eight potential reasons why anyone might sit down at your table. Some people don't care about it at all. For others, it is everything.

3. Narrative

Narrative seekers take pleasure from experiencing a well-told story as it unfolds. But this one has a lot of complicated baggage in table-top role-playing games. The thing is, it is existence of the story that satisfies the narrative seeker. The better put-together the story is, the happier the narrative seeker is. We have been trained for ages to expect stories to have a certain shape: beginning, middle, ending, incitement, conflict, climax, resolution, the whole shebang. There is a lot of structure to a good story and a narrative-seeker is most satisfied when the game matches that structure.

It is easy to imagine that a narrative seeker wants to TELL a story, but that is where we cross the line into expression, which we will get to below. And misunderstanding that can cause trouble. A strong narrative seeker might actually be happy playing the quest of a pregenerated character or playing through a fairly linear adventure because it helps provide the structures they crave. A satisfying game presents a solid goal and builds toward a satisfying ending and everything fits tightly together.

I have a player in my game that strongly seeks narrative. And I have discovered the perfect way to torture her: don't finish the campaign. If a campaign peters out or we start playing a new game, she feels unsatisfied and unhappy. If the campaign ends with a TPK, though, she is better able to cope, especially if I tell her what happens after. The reason is she craves the sense of closure and resolution. The beginning of the game makes a promise to the narrative seeker that there will be a proper ending.

4. Challenge

Challenge seekers see the game as a series of obstacles to overcome and foes to be defeated. They want to test themselves and win. If they fail, they want to know the failure was fair and next time they will do better. Just keep in mind that challenge seekers aren't solely about winning combat. They like overcoming obstacles, they like accomplishing goals, and they like to win. Investigations, puzzles, negotiations, chases, hunts, and obstacles are all valid challenges.

It is popular to scoff at challenge seekers. These are the people trying to win. Power gamers. Munchkins. Optimizers. They don't want to role-play, they want to roll-play. And that is a stupid, s$&%y, harmful view. Remember, most people combine multiple aesthetics and this is just one possible reason to play. It is no less valid than any other. If you snort with derision at the challenge seeker, you might be cutting out a lot more gamers than you realize.

Give a challenge seeker a fair obstacle and the tools to overcome it, and the challenge seeker will be happy. Those sessions where it is all just personal interaction and exploration? The ones where "it was all role-playing and nobody touched dice?" Challenge seekers might end up bored to tears. Fudging dice? Applying the rules unfairly? An "everybody wins" mentality? Anathema to challenge seekers.

5. Fellowship

Those in search of fellowship view the game as a framework for social interaction and cooperation. They enjoy camaraderie and social interaction and working together with a team. At the extreme, fellowship seekers don't really care about the game except insofar as it gives them something to do with other people and a way to contribute to a group.

Fellowship seekers can have their games absolutely ruined by group drama, antisocial behavior, and lack of teamwork. When a group includes "that one evil character," the fellowship seeker's sense of fun is probably going to be the first casualty.

6. Discovery

Discovery seekers like to explore and learn new things. They like to uncover things. They view the game as uncharted territory and get a thrill every time they fill in another blank on the map. Of course, the map is a metaphoric map in this sense. They are just as happy discovering the history of the world, the nature of the gods, the answers to mysteries and puzzles, and the reasons why things work. They simply want to learn and understand everything.

Oddly, discovery seekers also seem to be drawn to self-discovery. The same players who get excited just discovering the secret history of Orcus that no one knows also get a thrill from confronting a difficult moral issue and learning about what they, themselves, believe. Moral dilemmas and social quandaries can fill in for exposition and backstory. I am actually watching this overlap happen in one of my own games right now. The group is very heavily stilted toward discovery seeking and they seem to be drawn in to ethical dilemmas with the same fervor.

I recently had a conversation with a few other GMs about discovery and exploration and the difference between expression and discovery. The two seem to get conflated sometimes. The theory runs that if the players find a new location, it is just as satisfying to ask them to describe what they find as to tell them what they find. But it isn't. This conflates two different types of fun. Discovery seekers need the feeling that there was a secret waiting for them to stumble across and they found it. There is an element of conquest to it. If you ask them to make up their answer, you're trading creative expression for discovery. And discovery-seekers will ultimately be unsatisfied.

7. Expression

This is a big one. The 600-pound gorilla in the room. I've mentioned it a couple of times already. This is what I would call the "trending aesthetic." It is the thing everyone is talking about in the RPG community (at least, online, where I can hear it) and people are starting to view it as the be-all and end-all of role-playing games.

Expression is the pleasure you get from expressing yourself creatively. This is the desire to create something that is unique to you, to say something about who you are and what you believe, or simply to impose your creative will on the world around you. And to some people, this is the primary reason to play role-playing games.

Honestly, that's not terribly unfair. After all, role-playing games are unique in that they are being run by a human brain in real time that can respond to anything the players think of. The players are free to try anything. They can create any character. Describe their character's actions any way. In some games, they are free to create parts of the world or even shape the entire story. RPGs are unique in their ability to provide that level of creative freedom to all participants.

But expression can get us into trouble. Just like every other aesthetic, it is not something everyone is after in equal measure. It is not even something that satisfies everyone. The act of

creation is not easy and it also involves a component of bravery. Creating something that expresses an idea unique to you opens you to judgment and criticism. It is scary. It is risky. And not everyone wants it.

In certain areas of the game, expression can also squash other aesthetics. I've already noted that, in some ways, creative expression can hinder discovery. Player authorship of certain world details can also disrupt some players' sense of fantasy. For the same reason, it can also wreak havoc on a good narrative structure.

I am not down on expression. Far from it. Part of the reason I became a DM is out of strong expression seeking behavior. I think a lot of people who become DMs do so because they are driven by expression-seeking behavior. But I am worried about the loud voices in the community touting it as a panacea through ignorant assumptions. Like any other aesthetic, it is important to the people it is important to and not important to anyone it isn't. It is just one factor.

Most specifically, I have heard a few DMs say "asking players to create the world always makes them more engaged." The fact is, asking the players to create the world will excite the expression seekers, but the submission seekers and discovery seekers want nothing to do with that. A fantasy seeker might or might not, but someone else's careless creation might wreck the fantasy seeker's immersion.

Expression does have many forms though. In some ways, 3rd Edition D&D and Pathfinder allowed for an unprecedented degree of expression through character creation. FATE's Dresden Files has an extensive set of instructions for inviting the players to help create the setting for the campaign, allowing for players to get in on the world design expression. Other games invite players to express themselves in a variety of other ways as well.

As a final, interesting side note regarding expression, let's look at another 4E edition wars incident. When 4E came out, one of the touted features was a reduced and simplified skill list. Many skills were dropped from the game altogether, including crafting and professional skills. Some members of the gaming community went berserk. Do you know why? Right. An apparent reduction of expression.

The thing is, you can say that your character is a blacksmith or a tailor or whatever in any edition. You don't need rules or skills to back you up, right? So who cares. It is not as if anyone actually used those skills. So what was the harm. Well, the thing that expression seekers understand is that anyone can say anything, but when you choose to expend resources on something, that makes a much stronger statement. That says "this is important, this is central." When you give up a useful skill like Diplomacy or Athletics in favor of a skill you might never use like Tailoring, that sacrifice says something about what you think is important about your character. It is a strong expression. And people who value the the ability to make those strong statements were upset that that ability had been reduced.

Again, people are bad at introspection and articulation. No one could quite explain it that way. And even if they could explain, the listeners would have to understand how important expression was to the speakers. And so we have another skirmish of an edition war with people uselessly talking past each other about utterly rational, reasonable things.

8. Submission

The final aesthetic is called submission, though I prefer the term that the Extra Credits' team use: abnegation. It just sounds cooler and more complicated. Submission is the pleasure you get from turning off your brain and losing yourself in a task you don't have to think too hard about. Grinding levels in World of Warcraft. Mining minerals in Minecraft. Farming item drops in Diablo III.

Now, submission is an odd one to discuss in tabletop RPGs because it is one that tabletop RPGs doesn't handle so well. The thing is, even the simplest tasks in an RPG require a high cognitive load. You have to think things through. But still, the concept of "beer and pretzels" play exists for a reason. Go down into a dungeon, kick down doors, kill orcs, take their loot, go back to town. Lather, rinse, repeat. That is submission or abnegation.

And there are people who want exactly that. They look like challenge seekers sometimes, but they don't want to work too hard or think too hard. They just want to goof around and enjoy a simple game with clear, straightforward goals.

I actually lost a player not too long ago because, if there is one aesthetic my game does not offer, it is submission. I'm bad at it. My game is serious business. The player was pretty savvy. He said, flat-out that he was looking to relax, unwind, and goof around and I agreed with him that my game table wasn't going to give him that chance. It happens.

And Now You Know All You Need to Know…

And there you have it. Eight aesthetics of play. Eight kinds of fun. And every gamer brings with them a mix of preferences for some, many, or most of those. Even you, the GM. And once you're aware of them, you're in a better position to run less worse games for the players who show up at your table.

So thanks for reading and…

What? What do you mean, "what do I do with them?" Figure out what you want, figure out what your players want, and then do the things that make you all happy. This isn't f$&%ing rocket science.

Okay, okay. I hear you, dammit. This is a hefty topic. And I don't want to overwhelm anyone here. So, I will be back one week from today with the second part of this article, where we will

discuss how you - the Game Designer GM - can use this information to help you make decisions about how to build and run better games for your particular peanut gallery.

But, between now and then, start thinking about these eight aesthetics of play and think about how you, personally, experience role-playing games. Or any games really. Board games. Stupid card games. Video games. Anything .Do any of the aesthetics resonate particularly strongly with you? Do any of your preferences and habits reveal anything about which aesthetics you value most? About which ones you could live without?

And what about the players who share your table? Can you start to make any guesses about where they are coming from? Think about it. I'm not kidding. If you don't do your f$&%ing homework, I'm going to know about it next week.