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Introduction

Sponsored by Curve Studios, a moderately sized developer, a broad design brief was agreed to allow for creative freedom, whilst ensuring that the game made sense from commercial point of view. The main focus was to design a game that somehow uses multiplayer functionality in a new or interesting way. In addition to this, the game must be of moderate size, in order for Curve to potentially commence production. Finally, the audience targeted should be as possible audience, and the game should therefore be as inclusive as possible of different player types.

In response to this brief I have spent the past few months designing the game titled *Thick as Thieves*, which as the title suggests, has a strong focus on player collaboration, but also betrayal. In this paper I shall be relating to some of the relevant concepts and debates surrounding the field of games studies, and discussing how these informed the design process. In particular, I shall explore whether it is possible to create an immersive local multiplayer game, and to what extent external 'banter' and other forms of metagaming have a detrimental effect on immersion. Finally, I will investigate what effect apparently negative elements such as violence, conflict, competition and backstabbing can have on a game, and whether a game's graphic style can have further impact on this.

Convergence

Thick as Thieves exploits the wireless capabilities of both the Wii and the DS systems, allowing the game to be played as a convergence of these two console formats. The primary reason for this is that it manages to combines the benefits of playing a multiplayer game on each system. The Wii provides a central focus for play, and acts as the game's hub and server. Each console has its own control system and graphics, yet they all interact together within the same virtual game world. The Wii only allows four remotes to be connected, limiting the number of players that can engage in a local multiplayer game. However, the local wireless network served by the Wii is capable of supporting six DSs, allowing more players to get involved simultaneously. This number can be further increased through pass-around play, as described in the

game design document. Global sales of the DS recently exceeded 80 million units world wide[1]. The sheer volume of units in circulation therefore makes it increasingly likely that the Wii owner, who makes the purchase, either has a DS themselves, or has friends with DSs. It is therefore a viable option from a business point of view that DSs could be used as additional controllers. *Thick as Thieves* uses the Wii as a hub and puts it at the centre of the game. It is a source of power in a number of ways; firstly, it acts as a server to which the DSs connect as clients and secondly, it provides the game's music. Secondly, it is also a reward for the most successful thief from the previous round and it puts the player under pressure by forcing them to defend the building's security systems and control the guards. *Thick as Thieves* is designed to present good value for money for the customer, which in turn should result in increased numbers of sales. This is partly due to the fact that the DS owners don't have to purchase a separate game, contributing to the game's self-promoting model. Piracy on the DS is becoming an increasing concern for the industry and is frequently blamed by the media for disappointing sales.[2] Since the WiiWare distribution medium is currently piracy-proof, this issue is avoided completely. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the additional screens allow the game to discriminate between private and public information.

Information Management

Thick as Thieves exploits the fact that the players on DS systems (playing as thieves) have private screens available to them by delivering information that only they can see via their DS. Like most games involving cards, these types of games are described as games of *imperfect information,* meaning that players only have partial knowledge of the game state. This is in contrast to games of *perfect information*, in which all players have complete knowledge of the game state at any given moment. (Jesper Juul, 2005: 59). This information management allows for a myriad of interesting situations to develop, including private communications between the thieves, and individual secret objectives. The system of imperfect information also

[1] http://www.vgchartz.com/ (accessed 29/08/08)
[2] http://www.mcvuk.com/news/31319/UK-trade-calls-for-total-ban-on-R4-cards, accessed (23/07/08)

allows for the thieves to move around the game world without being detected by the defender. The players playing as thieves can glance over to the main screen and occasionally catch glimpses of the defender's characters and traps. The reverse, on the other hand, is not true, creating a one-way flow of information. The defender only has visual access to their own screen, and must position their guards and camera devices strategically in order to see through the fog of war-like darkness. This system of imperfect information adds an element of mystery and uncertainty to the game, as well as inviting double crossing, backstabbing and misinformation. Mistrust amongst the players is encouraged through a number of design factors, including the secret communication systems. Players are also able to exclude any of their rivals from their secret discussions. Additionally, there is a range of ways the players can back-stab one another. One of the simplest examples being the deployment of a booby-trapped present. The secret objectives that are delivered at the beginning of the levels also ensure that the social roles playfully shift and transform as the game progresses.

Some areas of the game have intentionally been made public. This is done for various reasons such as the creation of alliances, increasing competition and heightening tensions. For example, the touch-screen on the DS displays the locations of fellow thieves, superimposed over a shared map. Each thief is constantly updated on their own position in relation to the level's structure, as well as their fellow thieves' positions. This information can be used for both friendly and hostile purposes, depending on the player's personal strategy. Public information such as relative scoring positions, indicated by the ordering of the thieves' names, on the other hand, serves only one purpose; to promote rivalry. By giving the player instant feedback on their progress, the player is given the opportunity to try to prevent their closest rivals from becoming even more powerful.

The way the information is presented or hidden can be differentiated further. Game designer Celia Pearce proposes four scenarios to make the distinction between information types; information known to all players, information known to only one player, information known to the game only, and randomly generated information (adapted from Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 204). In accordance with this model, *Thick as Thieves* has several elements known to all players; including the

basic level structure, the remaining time for each game phase, and the location of the getaway car. The present pickups are determined semi-randomly, since they are influenced both by the player's current position and random factors. As such, they can be described as a fusion between an element known to the game and randomly generated information. This is, of course, until the present is revealed to one of the thieves, at which point it would be considered as information known to only one player. Similarly, the nature of the secret objectives is known to the game only, until revealed to the player, at which point it becomes an element known to a single player. There are several other ways that information can be known to only one player including a thief deploying a booby-trapped present, or the defender's knowledge of the location of the ballistic safe.

At any stage of the game, any of the players may decide to share information only available to them with one or more of the other players. They can do so verbally, through the *picto-chat* system (thieves only), or through gameplay behaviour. This, however, relies on the recipient's willingness to actually believe the statement, since misleading opponents about the location of a booby-trapped pickup or safe is something that can be in the sender's favour. Since all players are aware of this, at least to a certain extent, this provides an ideal platform for bluffing, and indeed, double-bluffing. Salen and Zimmerman point out that in games, "emergence arises through the interaction of the formal game system and decisions made by players. A wonderful example of this kind of emergence is bluffing" (2008: 164).

Emergence

In his book *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul describes two main ways of structuring a game's rules to provide players with challenges; *games of progression*, and *games of emergence* (2005: 5). Juul defines *emergence* as, "the primordial game structure, where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations for which the players must design strategies to handle." (2005: 5). This is in contrast to games of progression, in which the player(s) must progress through the game linearly and performing pre-defined actions as they do

so. *Thick as Thieves* includes some elements of progression in the single player mode. In the big picture, the player starts the game in the first level (the palace), and must secure a pre-determined amount of loot in order to progress to the next level. How the player steals the money is up to them, and can be done several different ways depending on their strategy. Therefore, it can be said that overall *Thick as Thieves* is a game of progression. The simple rules interact with one another in a number of different ways, creating deep gameplay and emergent complexity. There is therefore an infinite number of different ways a game of *Thick as Thieves* can possibly be played out. Salen and Zimmerman point out that "more complex rules do not necessarily equal more complexity in the system" (2004: 165), meaning that sometimes a game with simpler and fewer rules can generate a higher degree of emergent complexity. As Juul contributes, "the enjoyment of a game depends on these easy-to-use rules presenting challenges that *cannot* be easily overcome" (Juul, 2005: 5).

According to Juul, the term *emergence* is itself open to debate in terms of its interpretation and use. He distinguishes between four different variations of emergence in games, "emergence as *variation*, as *patterns*, as *irreducibility*, and as *novelty* or surprise" (2005: 90). The term *emergence as variation*, describes the way the game rules intersect, to create a large number of possible game states. This seems to be the most common use for the term *emergence* as touched on before, and simply refers to the fact that a large number of different games can be played by having a relatively small number of simple rules. Juul states that "games of emergence exhibit a basic asymmetry between the relative simplicity of the game rules and the relative complexity of the actual playing of the game" (2005: 73). The simple rules of *Thick as Thieves'* make it a game that is easy for new and inexperienced players to understand and play, but the rules combine to create interesting and deep play, and act as a platform from which the tactical and strategic play takes place. This depth of gameplay ensures the game is interesting for more advanced players, as summed up by the old cliché *easy to learn, difficult to master*. *Thick as Thieves* is also designed to be played repeatedly. Salen and Zimmerman claim that "the infinite possibility that arises out of an emergent system is a key design strategy to encourage repeat play" (2004: 165). So it is the surprise and

variation in every new game that leads to different and fresh situations. This gives *Thick as Thieves* a strong replayability factor which allows for a virtually unlimited play-time, for a limited number of levels and assets. Since the file sizes are limited both by the WiiWare service for the Wii, and the amount that can realistically be streamed to the DS, this is an important consideration.

Juul's second variation, *Emergence as patterns,* relates to the patterns that are not made instantly apparent by the game's rules. Juul gives the example of game strategies, since they require "some kind of pattern in the gameplay of a game" (2005: 80). For *Thick as Thieves* this is relevant to the team play element of the game. Certain aspects of team play are desired at the design stage, but are not clearly outlined by the game's rules. It is up to the players to explore and discover the strategies available to them. Where players decide to use collaborative strategies, they may agree to apply specific tactics. For instance, two players playing as thieves may use the in-game communication system to form an alliance. One player may sacrifice themselves as a decoy, and distract a security guard. Their team-mate could then enter the same room through an alternate entrance in a bid to steal a particularly valuable item. Other examples of alliance encouragement are less subtle; certain doors require two thieves to stand on their pressure pads in order for them to open, and very heavy objects such as safes simply cannot normally be picked up by a single player. The player's don't *have* to collaborate, they can simply avoid these areas altogether in pursuit of personal glory. However players are likely to find collaboration a fruitful strategy, and it is therefore likely to become a feature of the game.

Emergence as irreducibility refers to the unpredictable nature of emergent games, particularly when compared to linear, progressive games. There are many possible combinations of rules meaning that there are always a great many unknowns. For this reason, prototyping and play-testing is extremely valuable, in that it is likely to highlight any gameplay and balance issues. As game designer Bruce Shelly points out in Jesper Juul's book *Half-Real*, "there are always surprises when a game is first played, some good and some bad" (2005: 80). Since *Thick as Thieves* is a strongly emergent game, this is an aspect that this will be particularly relevant, and there are many facets to the game's rules that can intersect with one another in

unpredictable ways. The prototyping section of the game design document makes an attempt at predicting some of the issues that might crop up, and hence suggests a range of related fixes. Irreducibility also relates to Juul's final variation, *Emergence as novelty or surprise,* which simply refers to the fact that sometimes rules and objects can be combined in ways that were unexpected in the design phase. Nevertheless, some outcomes can still be pre-planned or at least made more likely. Juul points out that "some games tend to drift toward certain outcomes no matter what the players do" (2005: 90). He elaborates further, "the psychological effect is straightforward: Especially in multiplayer games, players tend to accept the rules and agree to pursue the game goal… they will search for a good strategy. If the game allows for a good strategy that leads to interesting interaction, it is a good game. If the optimal strategy for playing the game leads to dull game sessions, the game will be considered uninteresting" (Juul, 2005: 90). Juul points out that it is important that the game allows for a good strategy that leads to interesting interaction in order to avoid becoming uninteresting or boring. In the above quote, the terms good and interesting are not fully explained, and therefore the following section will explore the strategies available to the players of *Thick as Thieves*, how the game's design facilitates them, and how dull sessions can be avoided.

Strategy

Thick as Thieves allows the players to adopt a number of strategies, some of which may be more effective than others, however the play must be balanced in such a way that there is no dominant strategy. Juul defines a dominant strategy as "one that is always better than all other strategies, regardless of the actions of any opponent" (2005: 59). He points out that if players become aware of this dominant strategy, the game always becomes uninteresting. For this reason, such a dominant strategy must be avoided. Broadly speaking, players involved in a game of *Thick as Thieves* have two primary strategic choices; to collaborate with one or more other players, or to go at it alone. Further strategic choices include whether to focus on preventing another player from gaining more points, or to focus on gaining one's own points. It is possible to employ these strategies simultaneously. An example of a dominant strategy that a defender might use would be to deploy a guard deploy a

guard in front of the main entrance, thereby catching all invading thieves directly. Of course, this would lead to instant frustration on all players' behalves, and as such this situation needs to be avoided. In this case, all levels are designed with external areas that cannot be accessed by the guards. From here the thieves have access to several doorways and windows to enter the building.

Strategy is an inherent aspect of emergent games, and bluffing is a viable strategy that can be used in several ways in *Thick as Thieves*. For example, as touched on before, during the setup (-day) phase of each round, the defender partakes in a secret setup. They are linearly taken through three distinct locations containing safes. Each location has its own unique properties, in terms of ease of defence and distance to the thieves' getaway vehicle. At each stage of the secret setup, the defender has the option to place either an object of medium, high or negative value (explosive booby-trap) in the safe. This is done with a simple and discreet button-press which triggers an unrevealing sound effect to confirm the selection. There is no visual feedback to give away the defender's choices. As with poker, *Thick as Thieves* does not explicitly state in the rules that the player is to bluff during this phase, or any other part of the game. Without being a stated rule, this process allows the defender to bluff about which object is stored where. The defender can bluff verbally to his fellow players, by stating which safe contains the ballistic surprise, and which one contains the loot. They may even ask the thieves where they would like the booby-trap to go, and then pretend to reciprocate. Perhaps more interestingly, the defender can subsequently back up – or contradict – their explicit bluff with an implicit bluff through means of gameplay behaviour and strategic play. The ways in which this could manifest itself are numerous, for instance by heavily guarding the safe containing a booby-trap, and leaving a safe close to the thieves' getaway car unguarded. This game situation is further explored in the storyboard walk-though section of the game design document. Before discussing the strategies available to thieves in more detail, it is important to note that the game aims to be enjoyable for many different player types, and should therefore have a low barrier to entry and gentle learning curve. Paradoxically however, the game should also be challenging enough for more experienced players at the other end of the scale. There is a potential problem in the fact that these

players with different levels of skill should be able to play together, something that the concept of flow can be applied to.

Flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow may be useful to highlight the ways in which the game's difficulty and presented challenges relate to the player's skill level. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as occurring "within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and bound by rules… which could not be done without the appropriate skills" (2002: 49). The reason that game designers and the field of game studies in general are interested in the concept of flow is that this emotional and psychological state of mind is very much in line with the effect many games strive to achieve for its players. Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow can be sub-divided into a number of pre-requisites: challenging activity requiring skill; clear goals; clear feedback; and the paradox of having control in an uncertain situation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002:49). It is the first part, a challenging activity that requires skill, which describes the direct correlation between the amplitude of the challenge, and the player's ability, or skill. Csikszentmihalyi states that enjoyment can only occur when the player's skills closely match the current level of challenge, and only then are the conditions suitable for a flow experience to occur, as illustrated in the diagram below:

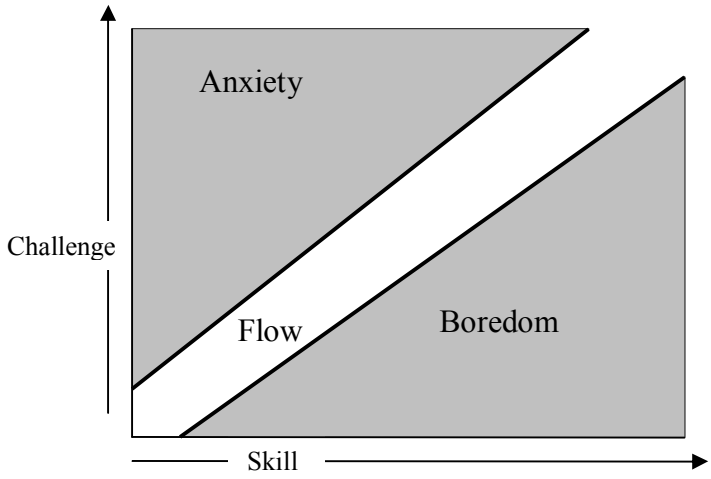

Diagram: (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002: 74)

This diagram of flow illustrates that it is only possible for a player to experience enjoyment (and ultimately a state of flow) if their skill level is in line with the presented challenge. In order for the player to remain in this band, the level of challenge must increase in line with their skills, or a state of boredom will result. If, on the other hand, the player's skills do not improve, and they are no match for the challenge at hand, the result will be nervousness, frustration, panic, loss of interest or anxiety as Csikszentmihalyi himself puts it. Since neither boredom nor anxiety are positive experiences, the player will strive to return to the channel where the flow experience is possible. In other words, if two unevenly matched players go head-to-head in pretty much any event, the unskilled player will be overwhelmed by a sense of anxiety, with an underdeveloped repertoire of skills and unable to deal with the situation. On the other hand, the skilled player will likely reside in a state of boredom, due to the lack of challenge. What this means for Thick as Thieves as a game targeted at players of different skill levels is that in order to prevent boredom or anxiety from creeping in, it must provide each player with the appropriate amount of challenge in line with their current level of skill.

Thick as Thieves is designed to provide the players with the appropriate amount of challenge in four ways; choice of strategy, pass-around of roles, pickup system and secret objectives. Firstly, as a strongly emergent game, the players have a multitude of different playing strategies available to them. Newer players may be more inclined to select low-risk, easy rewards, and be content with their comparatively moderate winnings. For instance, there is an inherent risk versus reward structure involved with the carrying system. The less the player carries, the faster they can move, so the less likely they are to get caught, although this will result in a lower amount of points being scored. More advanced players may choose to go for a deeper strategy involving a higher complexity and risk, but also, potentially a larger reward. Such players may strive to steal more valuable items. These items will tend to be more heavily guarded, and will therefore present a greater challenge but also a greater potential reward. In this respect, the players largely set their own level of challenge dynamically. Another of the game's self-balancing mechanisms is the way in which the role of the defender is passed

between players. The most successful (richest) thief of each round ‘wins’ the opportunity to take on the role of defender in the next, and therefore takes responsibility for the safety of their valuables. Thirdly, the game features a pseudo-random present pickup system. The game dynamically awards the lagging players more valuable pickups, which are more likely to help them to be successful in the game. One particularly blatant example involves the money-monkey, which acts as the game’s equivalent of the blue shell in Mario Kart Wii (Nintendo EAD, 2008). It is a relatively rare item, only available to a severely lagging player. The monkey’s master may target the richest (or least favourite) thief by unleashing the monkey in their direction, which in turn steals a finite amount of loot from their sack before returning to its master. Please also refer to the walkthrough section of the game design document for the monkey in action. The final example of the game’s dynamic balancing systems involves the game’s analysis of the player’s statistics in order to determine which players are weak and in need of assistance and which players are strong and confident. Wherever possible, the game will attempt to forge evenly matched sub-groups, through the means of the secret objectives. With strong players forming alliances with the weak they are now working towards a common goal with increased challenge for the skilled players, and added assistance for the less skilled players.

Frames

The environment and context in which a group of people interact with one another has a strong impact on their behaviour. For example, a group of people in a doctor's waiting room will behave very differently from a group of people socialising in a pub, or a group of people playing a game. This context is also referred to as the *frame* of a situation. Salen and Zimmerman describe the frame of a game as communicating "that those contained within it are 'playing' and that the space of play is separate in same way from that of the real world… in the play-state you experience a *protective frame* which stands between you and the 'real' world and its problems, creating an enchanted zone in which, in the end, you are confident that no harm can come. Although this frame is psychological, it often has a perceptible physical representation… but such a frame may also be abstract, such as the rules governing the game being played." (2004: 94). As such, players are constantly and subconsciously observing the circumstances and other players to get a feel for the game's frame, in order to determine whether the game is still in progress. Inspired by Johann Huizinga's work on play, Salen and Zimmerman describe this particular frame as the *magic circle.*

Salen and Zimmerman compare the magic circle to a clock, claiming that it "simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short a finite space with infinite possibility" (2004: 95). In terms of '*Thick as Thieves*', the magic circle is made up of both physical and abstract components. The physical components include the hardware systems, with the game's rules forming the game's abstract components. Salen & Zimmerman state that within the magic circle, "special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviours. In effect a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players" (2004: 96). In *Thick as Thieves,* the hardware peripherals – the Wii Remote in particular – signify power. At the end of the round, the defender has to physically hand over the Wii Remote to the most successful thief of the previous round. It is a powerful moment, in which the defender stands down and passes the control over to their successor. Much like a major reluctantly passing on

their reign to their rival, they will strive to regain the power in the next round. The DS consoles and the Wii remote both represent controlling devices, which almost take on the roles of portals, allowing the players access into the game world and control of their character. Salen & Zimmerman point out that play is a "double-consciousness in which the player is well aware of the artificiality of the play situation" (2004: 451). This refers to the fact that the player is always aware that they are playing a game, in which they have limited control over a character.

Building on this model, Salen and Zimmerman refer to psychologist Gary Alan Fine, who in turn references the work of Erving Goffman's theories of frame analysis, "First, gaming is grounded in the 'primary framework', the commonsense understandings that people have of the real world… It is a framework that does not depend on other frameworks but on the ultimate reality of events. Second, players must deal with the game context; they are players whose actions are governed by a complicated set of rules and constraints. They manipulate their characters, having knowledge of the structure of the game, and having approximately the same knowledge that other players have. Finally, this gaming world is keyed in that the players not only manipulate characters; they *are* characters. The *character* is separate from the *player* identity" (2004: 454). This divides the player's consciousness into three categories, their consciousness-as a character in a simulated world, as a player in a game, and as a person in a larger social setting. Salen and Zimmerman explain that "the player and character frames both take place within the magic circle, whereas the person frame gains its primary meaning from the cultural context outside the immediate space of play… movement along these frames is fluid and constant, … it is possible to switch between them several times in the course of a single verbal statement or game action." (2004: 454). In other words, the players know they are playing, and are free to move among the roles of person, player, and character. Players of a game freely embrace the flexibility of this movement, coming in and out of moments of immersion, breaking the player and character frames, whilst at the same time maintaining the magic circle. *Thick as Thieves* is designed for players to take advantages of these various frames in playful ways. As a person they can physically interact with the environment in which the game takes place and communicate with other people. Within the magic circle itself,

as a player, they interact at a level that involves the game. For instance negotiating tactics, forming alliances and potentially misinforming opponents about where a booby-trap might be placed. In the simulated world in which the heist takes place, it is the actual character that ultimately represents the player. It therefore focuses on both the relationship between the individual player and the game, and the social interaction that happens between all players involved in the game. There are other prerequisites for players to enter the magic circle. Salen and Zimmerman point out that "it is only when a player feels the safety and trust of a familiar social framework that he or she will be comfortable entering into the magic circle" (2004: 478). In other words, it will be hard for players to 'let themselves go' and become immersed in the moment if they are uncomfortable with the company in which they are playing.

Immersion

As gaming hardware evolves, including processing power, storage mediums, RAM, and particularly graphical capabilities, it stands to reason that games would become more graphically advanced. Crystal-clear digital outputs provide Dolby 5.1 (6 channel) surround sound audio, are designed to contribute to the enhancement of the player's immersive experience. It is often believed that increasing the game's graphical and aural capabilities automatically bring with it a greater sense of immersion, and therefore a greater sense of pleasure. For example, Marie-Laure Ryan, states in her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* that "through the increasing attention devoted to the sensorial representation of the game-world, the pleasure of modern games is as much a matter of 'being there' as a matter of 'doing things'. From a strategic point of view the newer games (Doom , Myst, or Quake) are not superior to the old ones (PacMan or Tetris), but they are infinitely more immersive." (2001, 309). There are two issues with this; firstly, I believe that immersion is something that can exist outside of the screen, as if the player is engrossed in the game's rules and the magic circle itself. Secondly, I do not consider immersion to be the *raison d'être* of a game in the first place, but rather that it can contribute to a game's overall pleasure as part of a vast spectrum of game playing pleasures. Ryan's view of immersion, however, seems to be in-line with that of François Dominic

Laramée, “All forms of entertainment strive to create suspension of disbelief, a state in which the player’s mind forgets that it is being subjected to entertainment and instead accepts what it perceives as reality” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 450). In other words, he seems to believe that games should aim to provide an experience in which players forget they are playing a game, allowing them to experience a new reality firsthand. Salen and Zimmerman also seem unconvinced by this commonly held point of view, and describe this as the immersive fallacy. They describe the immersive fallacy as “the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality. According to this immersive fallacy, this reality is so complete that ideally the frame falls away so that the player truly believes that he or she is part of an imaginary world.” (2004: 450). *Thick as Thieves* is not a simulation, nor does not it attempt to represent a realistic graphically detailed world. There are also elements in a game that take the player out of this supposed immersion; text chat, head-up display, unreliable connections and so forth. There is a possible contradiction between the belief that immersion is a state of mind in which the player believes they are part of another world, outside of their ‘regular’ reality. Yet it is seems completely plausible that players will be immersed by the experience, despite the external banter and distractions. In a way this should be akin to a group of players becoming immersed in a game of poker. Salen and Zimmerman point out, “it is an engagement that occurs through play itself. As we know, play is a process of metacommunication, a double-consciousness in which the player is well aware of the artificiality of the play situation” (2004: 451). This can be seen clearly in non-electronic games where players can be totally immersed and focused on the game.

Thick as Thieves allows the players to become immersed in an intellectual and emotional way, relating to the games rules and strategies. Salen and Zimmerman point out that to understand the subtleties of immersion, ”we need to look not just at the attributes of games (such as how detailed the graphics are), but at the way games function in relation to the experience of the player.” They continue, “the very thing that makes their activity play is that they also know they are participating within a constructed reality, and are consciously taking on the artificial meanings of the magic circle. It is possible to say that the players of a game

are 'immersed'-*immersed in meaning.* To play a game is to take part in a complex interplay of meaning. But this kind of immersion is quite different from the sensory transport promised by the immersive fallacy" (2004: 452). Therefore, it can be determined that players can indeed be immersed in the rules of the game rather than in an alternate reality or simulation produced by an authentic reproduction of the world. In other words, the players of *Thick as Thieves* become immersed in the play itself rather than in the world of the game.

Social Play

Thick as Thieves is social on a number of levels. Firstly, the social interaction occurs within the magic circle, "as a product of the formal system of the game" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 462). The player on the Wii takes on the role of defender, and must prevent their valuables from being looted by the thieves. Salen and Zimmerman describe this type of social interaction as *internal,* as it emerges from the game's rules. On a second level, the *external* interactions emerge from outside of the magic circle, for example pre-existing friendships and rivalries that have influence on in-game strategies. Juul states that "a game for multiple players is nominally a *limitation* for what the players are allowed to do, but it is a limitation that provides an occasion for interesting social interaction" (2005: 19). *Thick as Thieves* attempts to shift the emphasis from simply manipulating objects in the virtual environment to give them actual meaning in a social context. It strives to address more complex interactions between the players, such as friendship, alliance, and betrayal/deceit. A social context is introduced, that is strictly forbidden in every society and culture, namely, stealing other's possessions. In addition to this, the game allows and even encourages the players to backstab their friends when they least expect it. Salen and Zimmerman have coined this kind of taboo behaviour *forbidden play*, and describe it as play that "embodies behaviours not normally permitted between players" (2004: 479). *Thick as Thieves* justifies this behaviour that would otherwise be considered taboo, and teaches the player it is acceptable within the confines of the magic circle. "The social contract of the game ensures that play spaces are 'safe' spaces in which risks have fewer consequences that in the outside world… In forbidden play, the sense of pleasurable restriction continues through the

entire play experience, the player always in danger of overstepping the social boundaries of play, jumping the gun, and breaking the magic circle." (Salen& Zimmerman, 2004: 479). In other words, because the game allows and encourages this behaviour it essentially offers the opportunity of breaking social taboos within a safe context; the backstabbing players are protected by the magic circle. It therefore simultaneously challenges and reinforces the rules of society.

Another way to look at the interaction that happens outside of the screens is the concept of metagaming. This is a term used to describe activities that link the game to contexts outside of the game's rules. Salen and Zimmerman elaborate on the concept "metagaming refers to the relationship between the game and outside elements, including everything from player attitudes and play styles to social reputations and social contexts in which the game is played" (2004: 481). Game designer Richard Garfield has developed a model that can be applied to explore the way Thick as Thieves uses metagaming. He has divided metagaming's manifestations into four categories: what a player brings to a game, what a player takes away from a game, what happens between games, what happens during a game other than the game itself.[3] In *Thick as Thieves*, the player takes their DS *to* the game. The exception to this is the host, who downloads the game in the first place. Other, more abstract recourses are taken to the game, including strategies and players' reputations. For instance, a player may be known to bluff about where the valuables are hidden, and put all their eggs in one basket in terms of booby-trap deployment. These are factors that are considered even before the game has started.

The second category, what the player takes *away* from a game, is also relatively intangible, yet powerful. Even though *Thick as Thieves* is meant to be played for fun, without any stakes the players do take something valuable *away* from the game; gloating rights and social status among a group of friends. Salen and Zimmerman point out that the seriousness with which players take a game "is affected by how much the current game affects another game" (2004: 482). In *Thick as Thieves*, each round can be considered a game in itself. In this case, each game is directly affected by the previous game, and has a direct affect on the next game.

[3] Salen & Zimmerman, 482 – referenced from Richard Garfiled, "Metagames." In *Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Essays on Roleplaying* (London: Jolly Roger Games, 2000), p.16

These affects range from the score that is rolled over, to the rights of taking on the role of defender, to the intricacies of the changing landscapes of alliances and rivalries. The player also takes away the experience of the game itself, in particular highlights of the game. For example, the player might reflect on a situation in which a long-shot gamble paid off. They might have double-bluffed about the fact that a heavily guarded safe was loaded with dynamite, only for the other players to spend the entire game attempting to steal it. Finally they might have succeeded, resulting in the safe blowing up in their faces. In this case, the *retelling play* becomes an explicit part of the game and its experience. Further intangible elements are taken away from the game, including knowledge on how the game works, new tactical ideas and other players' playing styles. The game seeks to encourage this behaviour, by assigning each player an award at the end of a game, based on their playing style. The game will try to identify which player is the most cowardly, the most vengeful, the most honourable and so on, in order to spark further discussions and reflections.

What happens *between* games is described by Salen and Zimmerman as a "rich palette of metagame activities that can add value to the core play experience" (2004: 483). Although this element of metagaming primarily focuses on what happens when the game itself is over, this is very relevant to what takes place in between game rounds in *Thick as Thieves*. Firstly, there is the ritual of passing the Wii Remote to the most successful *thief*. The defender must symbolically give up their power and hand it over to the person who just robbed the largest amount of valuables from them. This is in itself a powerful moment, which lends itself well to gloating, taunting and promises of vengeance. Then there is the discussion of how that round went; strategies and tactics can be discussed, as well as planning for the next game. When the new defender enters the setup phase they are allowed to distribute their valuables between a number of safes. This is done on the main screen, but is completed secretly so that the thieves do not know which safe contains valuables, and which safe contains an explosive booby-trap. This sets up an opportunity for the player to bluff about what they are doing, for example they might say something like "if I was you guys, I'd stay away from safe 2 – that's where I put the dynamite". Whilst the defender is distributing their wealth and booby-traps,

the thieves will be busy customising their taunts or even recording their own taunts – just one more way that *Thick as Thieves* encourages player banter.

The final part of Garfield's model refers to what happens *during* the game, other than the game itself. This metagaming category refers to "the influence of real life on a game in play" (2004: 483), and is essentially about the factors that come from outside of the magic circle, and make their way into the gameplay experience. Again, *Thick as Thieves* incorporates this category. Examples of this include trash talking, players negotiating tactics, taunting one another and even sneaking glances at the big screen, all of which are encouraged through certain design features, or their omission. For example, the DS screens do not contain a clock, encouraging and even 'legitimising' glances at the main screen.

Conflict

Thick as Thieves can be played with up to 7 people, each battling to win the largest amount of money. Paradoxically, the most successful player will end up as the defender in the next round, actually being robbed by their previous comrades. The players are striving to reach this goal simultaneously, and are therefore in competition. Another paradox arises from the fact that although the players are competing against each other, they have to collaborate with other players in order to be successful. For instance, the thieves must collaborate to open certain doors, and carry heavy items together. Players can collaborate in more strategic ways too. There are many ways in which a thief can distract a guard, to allow their fellow thieves safe access to a room containing valuables. With plenty of ways to back-stab each other and conflicting objectives, these alliances are unlikely to last long. There are more in which conflict and competition are encouraged. For example, each player receives constant feedback on their own score and their position in relation to other players' scores. If one player overtakes another player's score and passes them on the rankings, this is displayed in real-time on the touch-screen of the DS. The game is also fundamentally structured in such a way that the players are competing for resources, in the form of valuables. The thieves are trying to steal the defender's valuables, and the defender is trying to stop them using their security guards and

traps. The thieves themselves can also attack each other indirectly, by body-checking them into a wall, or through head-on collisions. This helps to give the game structure and a tangible goal. As Salen and Zimmerman put it, “the competitive striving toward a goal is fundamental in giving shape to the structure of a game and the way that the game creates meaning.” (2004: 255). In Thick as Thieves the players have a tangible goal to work towards on each level as they strive to be the first player to steal the required amount of valuables. The players can constantly measure their progress and receive feedback on the meaning of their decisions. Conflict in games is “an elaborately staged competitive artifice, enjoyed in part because of its artificiality” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 456). Essentially, *Thick as Thieves* teaches its players that this behaviour is acceptable, within the context of the game – within its magic circle. However, this doesn’t justify its violence.

Thick as Thieves could be perceived as a negative game for various reasons. For example, players are rewarded for acting out crimes, and can benefit from violent behaviour toward one another. Also, although at times the players will be as thick as thieves, alliances are designed not to last due to the many backstabbing opportunities involved. Players are even able to blow things up using dynamite. All in all, the anti-game violence campaigners would surely not have a great deal of positive things to say about the game. An extract from a recent article in the Daily Mail, alarmingly entitled *Violent videogames make children lose self control*, stated that “playing violent video games 'trains' the mind to react aggressively in real-life situations. This is because players treat the situation as if it is real and react violently and unemotionally to threats.” (Sarah Harris, 2006). Despite the fact that the article is poorly written and referenced, and contains negatively loaded language towards video games in general, this type of statement seems to hit a note with a certain core in our society. If taken at face value, this could be considered by some to be plausible; violence in a game causes aggression because the players treat games as real. One of the main problems with this statement is that it assumes players real treat the games as real life, which does not appear to be true. Erving Goffman’s quote on frame analysis goes a long way to explaining that the in-game character is separate from the player’s identity. In addition to this, Bob Hodge and David Tripp use the concept of modality to shed light on why images of violence need not

necessarily be a negative thing in their book *Children and Television.* It highlights how violence is perceived in relation to what is understood to be the real world, and that good things can be experienced as negative and vice versa.

The concept of modality is used to explain that the context in which violence is portrayed has great influence on the outcome of the audience's tendency to be aggressive as a result. They describe modality as "ways of situating messages in relation to an ostensible reality… Two speakers with different 'grammars' (ways of coding/decoding a message) will fail to understand each other." (1986: 43). They elaborate further, stating that modality "concerns the reality attributed to a message" (1986: 104). So essentially, modality is related to communication gaps, and the closeness of a message to reality and certainty. Modality judgement, then, is something that is gradually built up and learnt as we interact with the world around us, including the media. For instance, Hodge and Tripp compare weak modality to fantasy, and describe this as "a kind of negative". They further state that, "to call something 'fantastic' is to recognize that it is probably untrue, that the world really is not like that." (1986: 105).

Thick as Thieves concept art, by Graham Denney

Hodge and Tripp back this theory up by referencing the researcher S. Feshbach, who conducted a series of experiments involving showing violent content to three different groups. One group was told the violence was real, one group was told the

violence was acted, and one group was not shown the violence at all. Interestingly, the results indicated that the audience who believed the violence they were shown was real, turned out to have aggression scores twice as high as those who believed it was drama. The control groups results fell somewhere in the middle (Hodge and Tripp, 1986: 103). The reason this is significant, is that although it may seem unlikely to many, one of their findings is that "when it [violence] is believed to be unreal, even when this is indicated only verbally, this reduces aggression. The fantasy effect can, it seems, actually reverse the effect of specific media content" (Hodge and Tripp, 1986: 103). The concept of modality can also help to explain why cartoon violence is seen as funny rather than dramatic. "Modality has an almost magical power: able to transform a message or an experience into its opposite, truth or fiction, fiction to truth, pain to pleasure, enjoyment to distress" (Hodge and Tripp, 1986: 130). The strongest marker of modality is the game's cartoony graphic style and the slapstick nature of the violence, which serve to further distance *Thick as Thieves* from reality. In Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska's compilation *Videogame, Player, Text*, Geoff King points out that "A number of modality markers exist in the case of videogames, starting with the fact that we call them 'games' (rather than 'simulations') and buy them in games stores… In some case dimensions such as cover artwork and interface design clearly establish non-real-world or fantasy frameworks that underline the status of the experience on offer." (Atkins & Krzywinska, 2007: 53). So in the case of *Thick as Thieves*, there are several formal modality markers that underline its distance from reality; it is downloaded as a game, and played on a games system with a head-up display. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska provide further relevant examples in their book *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders,* "actions required by the player-character to survive are arbitrary and limited. Some map reasonably well onto what might be required in a real-world equivalent… but the moves to be performed, and the manner in which this is achieved through the interface, are limited and course-grained" (2006: 21). Even though this text was written with reference to a first-person shooter, it is very relevant to *Thick as Thieves*. The limitations of the player's actions add to the distancing, and place the game firmly within its own context-defining frame. As King & Krzywinska put it,

"players do not usually confuse the playing of videogames with activity outside the game" (2006: 20).

Thick as Thieves concept art, by Graham Denney

Conclusion

Thick as Thieves' innovative use of convergence between the Wii and DS consoles not only allows for additional players to get involved in the game, but also for private information to be sent to the individual players. Players are in conflict with one another, yet paradoxically rewarded for playing together and forming alliances at a number of different levels. The alliances can be cut short at any stage in the game by a range of betrayals to keep an added element of mystery and excitement. These basic contradictions are the basis which leads to a large amount of interesting situations, and leads to the game's strong metagaming element. There is a large focus on what takes place outside of the game screens themselves. As such, the game plays with the player's sense of immersion, taking them to the very edge of the magic circle itself and back in again.

When it comes to conflict and violence in games, all is not what it first appears when glancing in at the world of games from the outside. Thick as Thieves'

conflict is not anti-social, in fact it is the opposite. It provides the foundation for the human interaction to take place. Modality helps to explain why the game's cartoony style adds further modality markers to distance the game from reality, and allowing the violence to be experienced as slapstick and humorous.

The concept of flow is referenced to help hit the sweet spot between accessibility and depth, thereby maximising its potential target market. The game's emergent nature, and range of strategies available to the player ensure that no two games will be played out in the same way giving the game an infinite replayability factor. With careful balancing still to take place, the frame is set to allow a great range of player types to play together and have fun both on and off the screen.

Word Count

The word count excluding direct references, bibliography, gameography and this section of text is: 7315.

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