

IGDA SAN FRANCISCO PECHA KUCHA NIGHT

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Note to the reader: These are the slides for my IGDA San Francisco talk. The format was Pecha Kucha – chit-chatting/ranting over 20 images that auto-advance every 20 seconds. What I said during the session and what’s in the speaker notes might not match 100%.



I'm Matthias Worch, a lead designer at LucasArts, working on an awesome new project with Clint Hocking and Kent Hudson. I've been a professional game developer since 1998, working in various capacities during my time in the industry. But I've always been a level designer at heart – something I can trace back all the way to the 3D Construction Kit.



After that I moved on to Doom and Quake levels. And I vividly remember sitting in my room – this must have been 1995 or so – working on my Doom levels, and trying to explain to my dad what it was that I was doing there and why I wasn't getting ready for college instead. I didn't have a satisfactory answer for him back then. What exactly does a level designer do?



Our industry has the same problem. Ed Byrne did a talk on this topic at our GDC level designer workshop this year, which he called "Unscaping The Goat." Because level design is where the game comes together, the discipline is often blamed for all sorts of unrelated development problems. So... if level designers can't even express what they do, how do we expect the rest of the development team to work with and accommodate us?



So I've been looking for analogies, and the one I've been using a lot recently is that of the game as a series of paintings. A series of paintings of a specific subject (which represents the genre). Like these cats, which get increasingly more badass as the game ramps up its gameplay systems. In this painting analogy the engine is the canvas and the game mechanics are the colors.



The systems (gameplay) designer creates the paint – the gameplay systems. He makes sure that the colors actually work with the canvas – our engine. Just like water colors aren't going to work well on masonite, creating a sniping game with an engine that is specialized on tight indoor spaces is probably not a good idea.



These colors work together, and we could probably paint *a* cat with them, but systems designers aren't hired to be painters. The cat they come up probably looks a bit weird and... whiteboxy, which isn't helped by the fact that the systems designer has only created primary colors. He hasn't created the full palette.



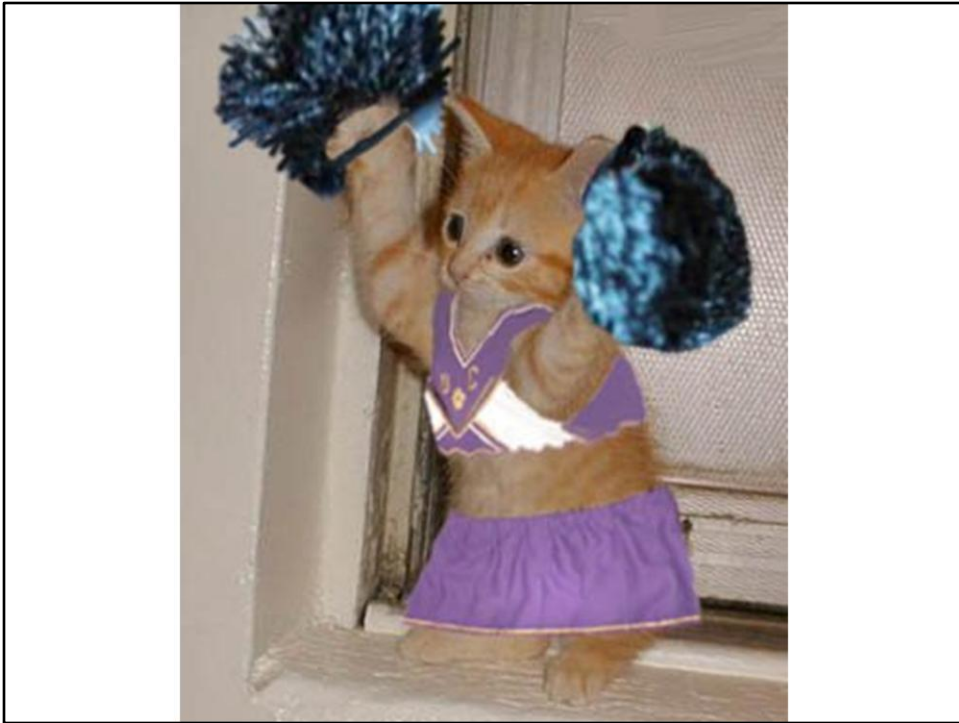
That's the level designer's job. The LD creates the actual paintings. He might start by painting the American cat, but really – it's his job to be a painter, mix those colors together to create complementary colors and to create paintings that use the palette to its full effect. So that's the analogy: systems designers create paint, level designers create the paintings.



The reason I like this analogy is how nicely it describes the split responsibilities between systems and level design. It's hard to create a great painting when you're only given a palette with shades of brown – or when the type of paint isn't suited for the canvas that you're painting on. Things just never look right. Making sure that we have a good set of colors is the system designers' job.



But even when you've been given a palette with all the colors of the rainbow it's still easy to create bad paintings. The level designer has the responsibility to use those colors to full effect, creating paintings with good subject matters and good composition. He needs to know his colors - just like a good painting is anchored by a couple of primary and complementary colors, a level shouldn't degenerate into... well, a colorful, shapeless mess.

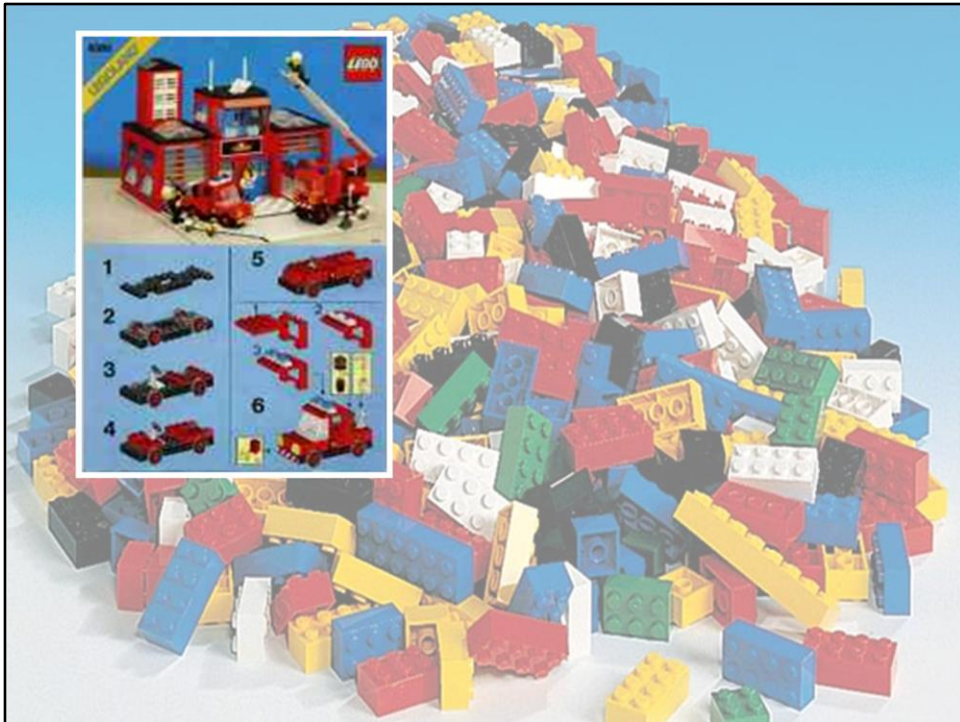


So, that's a pretty cool analogy, right? I can probably use "the painting" to explain to my dad what I was doing when I was making those Doom levels. And I can (and in fact have) take it to my development team to explain how the design department works.

There's just one problem: this painting analogy is a fallacy. It might even be an expression of what's wrong with level/game design in today's industry.



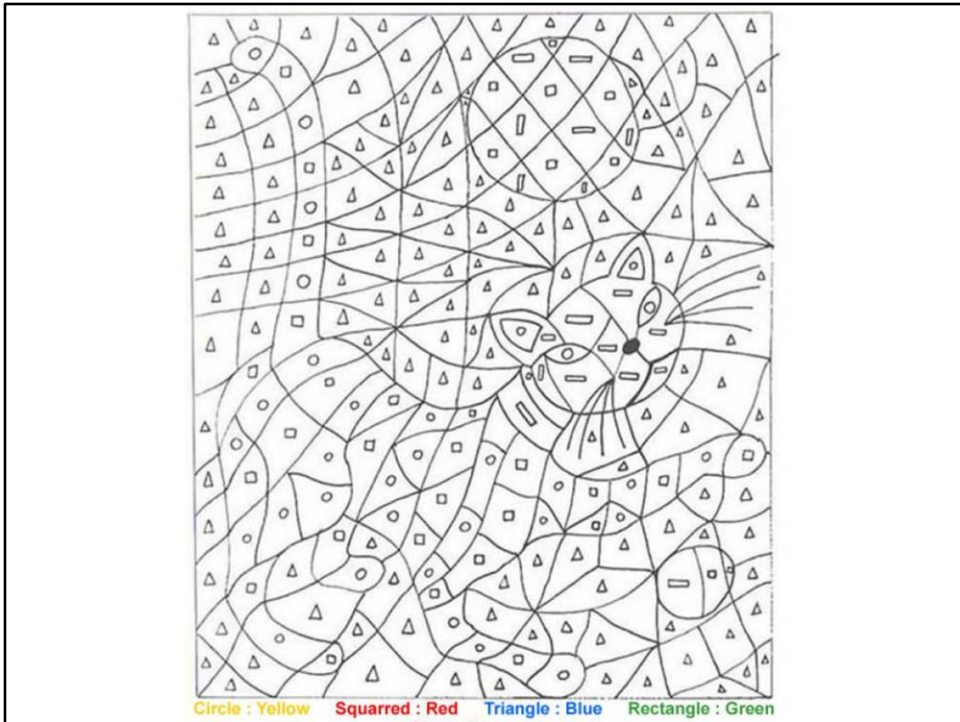
Because as fitting as that analogy might be for describing the systems/level designer distinction, it breaks down when we add the actual player to it. As a player, I don't want to be presented with a series of completed paintings that I simply unlock. I might as well watch a movie for that. I play games because I want to feel a sense of agency – and that happens when I'm actually creating the paintings myself!



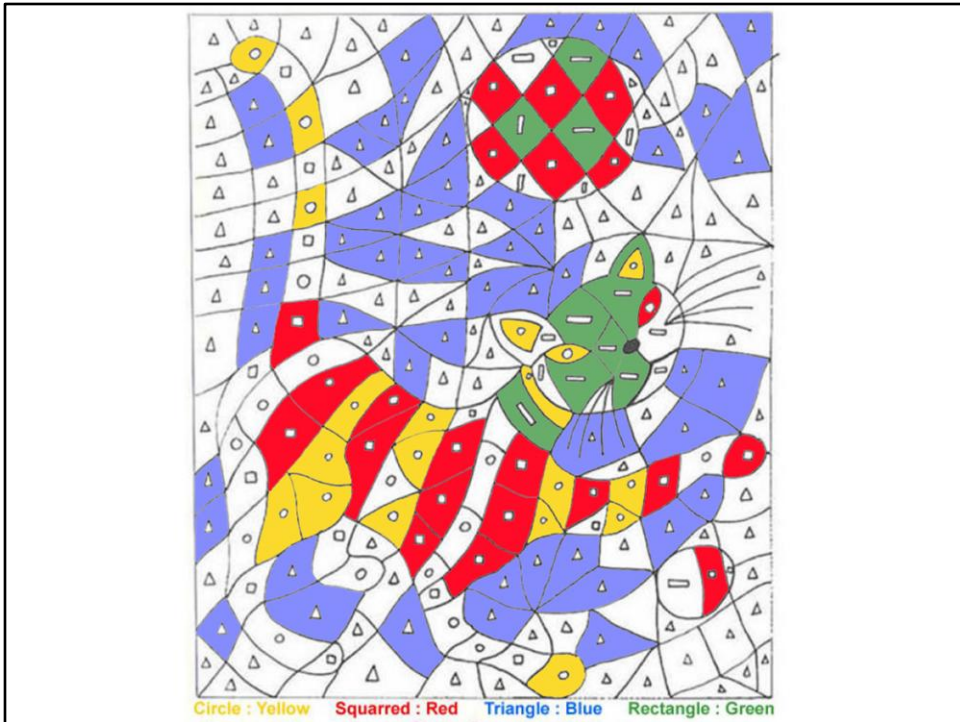
This is hardly a new idea. Clint Hocking talked about it in his 2007 “Exploration” talk at GDC, using LEGO as an example: we don’t give the player the finished fire house. We give him a pile of blocks, an instruction manual, and hope that by following these instructions he arrives at an experience that matches the fire house.



In our painting analogy, we want to give the player a series of empty canvases and provide guidance and instruction: this is a game about cats, here are your colors. We will teach you how to paint. But that's where the involvement of the level designer should end. And that's where the problems start. Because we usually don't trust our players to come up with a painting that's nearly as awesome as one we think we could have created for them.



And that's why we start overcompensating. We create gameplay experiences that are actually little more than "paint by numbers". We start creating quick-time events. We sprinkle in countless "epic moments". And we structure the experience so heavily that the designer story completely smothers the player story – and every player experiences the same game.



Maybe we give the player a limited sense of expression by telling him “hey, you get to pick which colors to use for each area of the blueprint!” But ultimately, the game is just a guided activity that unlocks pre-painted images - one pre-scripted story sequence after the next, with a very limited range of expression in-between.





Don't get me wrong, this approach can be valid with flawless execution. I don't want anybody to see this as a dig against heavily structured story experiences like Uncharted 2. If you watched (or read) my recent GDC talk on the identity bubble you know how much I like Uncharted 2 and how much I appreciate what it does for our psyche in the myth-recalling department.

Matthias Worch

Matthias Worch's Scores Games

Score distribution:

Positive:  3
Mixed:  1
Negative: 0

4 game reviews

Highest Metascore: **90** [Dead Space 2](#)
Lowest Metascore: **53** [Lair](#)

By date **By Metascore** By user score view 30 | 100 per page

Title:	Year:	Credit:	User score:
90 Dead Space 2 (X360)	Jan 25, 2011	Senior Level Designer	8.7
53 Lair (PS3)	Aug 30, 2007	Technical Art Director	6.3
75 Star Wars Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike (GC)	Oct 15, 2003	Mission Design Director	7.5
75 Unreal II: The Awakening (PC)	Feb 3, 2003	Game Design	6.0
tbd The Wheel of Time(1999) (PC)	Oct 31, 1999	Level Designer	tbd
tbd SIN (PC)	Oct 31, 1998	Level Design	9.0

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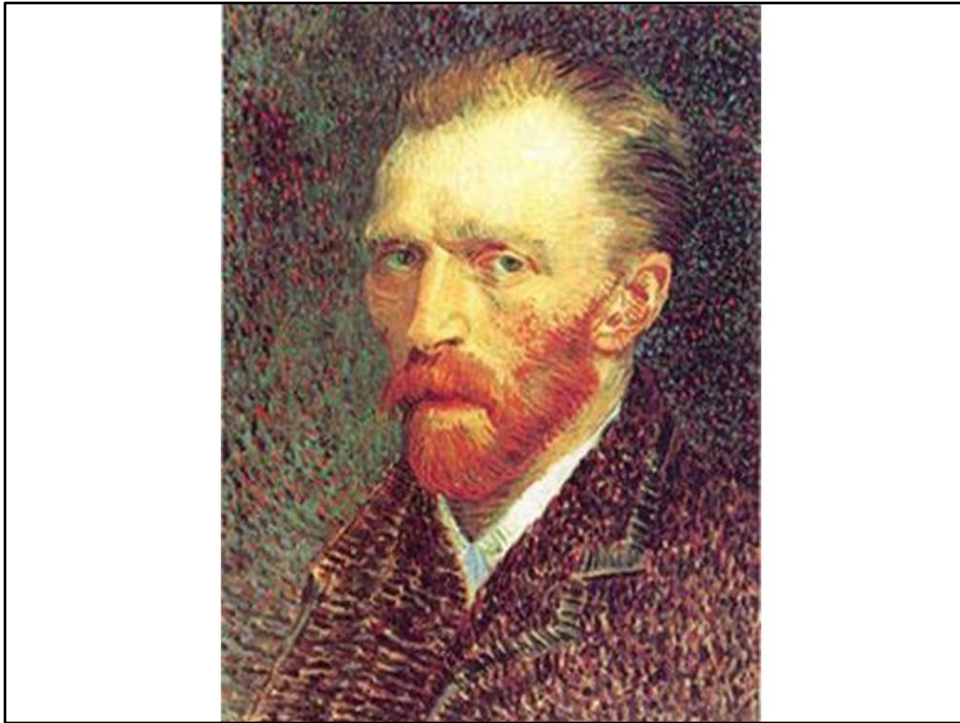
But on a personal level, I look back at the titles I have worked on and encounter game after game that had strong tendencies towards “paint-by-numbers”. And that’s not where the strength of our medium lies, and what a level designer should do. To my dad, I shouldn’t describe my job as that of a painter.



I should compare myself to this guy, Bob Ross: somebody who wants to empower other people to paint for themselves. It's my job to teach. To facilitate, and to create a sufficiently comprehensive instruction manual. I will still provide plenty of guidance – "this is a game about cats, and I'll show you how to paint some awesome examples of the species."



But I shouldn't be concerned about the final outcome. If I teach the player how to paint a lion – and he comes up with an awesome family of Metal KISS Siberian tigers instead (who are probably shooting lasers from their eyes!) that's something to be embraced and celebrated, not feared. Because that act makes the player feel like he actually painted the painting. Rather than being treated like a child who is only allowed to paint by numbers, it affords him agency.



It makes him feel like this guy. And while all this this has just been a stupid analogy, I have a feeling that not a lot of people today feel like they are Vincent van Gogh. And Bob Ross isn't around to teach us how to paint anymore. So maybe – just maybe – game designers can step in. Because if we embrace our medium, and if we embrace what makes it unique, we give players agency experiences that they don't get anywhere else. They're going to feel like they can paint, and that's a pretty cool feeling to have.

Thanks.

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Postscript: The Missing 21st Slide.

This rant was meant to entertain while having a point of view, and there's a some hyperbole in the opinions expressed. I was asked after the meeting if I was actually advocating entirely empty canvases – in other words, if I was advocating titles that are completely open-ended sandbox game with 100% player-derived goals and player narrative. My answer is “of course not”. Games without structure and simulation boundaries feel flat and aimless because they don't sufficiently focus the experience. I believe in games that provide a designer-authored framework and that have a point of view.

But within that framework, we need to teach players how to paint, rather than creating experiences for them. A great example of what I mean are Bioshock's Big Daddy fights: these are climactic battles, but rather than being pushed onto the player as a predetermined boss fight (in which the designer is basically “testing” the player on every mechanic that he's learned so far), Big Daddy fights are player-initiated and can be fought however – and wherever – the player likes. The arena is chosen by the player, as are the game mechanics that the player wants to use to defeat his enemy. It's up to the player if he wants to throw all his weapon might at the Big Daddy or if he wants to set up an elaborate series of traps to lure the BD into.

This is the happy medium of the painting analogy: the systems designer has created the colors, the level designer has created some rough outlines to focus the painting, both systems and level designers have taught the player how to use the colors available to him. Now the player gets to use all of that knowledge in whatever way he sees fit. He is painting.