Chapter 2: Verbs and Objects

Written Assignments

1. Choose a single game to analyze. Have each student create and describe their own list of verbs, objects, and other rules that create this game's structure and experience, including their own description of how the verb, object, or rule operates. Other rules besides verbs and objects might involve how certain verbs or objects interact, or how the game is won or lost. After everyone is finished, discuss similarities and differences in how you each described the game.

2. Choose a game that you've played recently. Describe all the verbs in that game and how they work as part of the system. Which verbs are more central to the game's experience? Which are used more often, and which are more peripheral? Are some of these verbs orphaned, and if so, why? What kinds of objects are in the game, which verbs do they interact with or help develop, and how?

3. Find an example of a game with an orphaned verb—a verb that the game only develops for a single purpose. Describe how you might address this problem if you were redesigning the game. This could involve having another verb take on the responsibilities of the orphaned verb, as with the example about Janet Jumpjet using "shoot" to open doors in the Verb Relationships section of Chapter 2. Also think about and describe ways that the orphaned verb could be developed to have more relationships with other elements of the game. Compare and contrast these strategies: which would you choose?

Project Ideas

1. Divide the class into groups and have each group choose a game that at least two members of the group are familiar with, either from a list of games you've already discussed, or by brainstorming. Have each group identify the most important verbs in the game, and then redesign the core gameplay by substituting a different verb. What would happen if we replaced the verb "shoot" in a game about shooting with a different verb like "talk" or "dance?" A game where "jump" is a primary verb might be redesigned to be about a verb like "glide" instead: how would the game's rules, behavior and interaction have to change to make it feel like a game about gliding instead of jumping? What would this change mean for other aspects of the game: would the spaces of the game end up having to change? How about the narrative themes and story of the game?

   Groups should describe the redesigned version of their game in detail—more or less detail depending available time. Have groups present their redesigned game to the class, and take questions and feedback from members of other groups.

2. As a class, pick a single well-known genre of game, such as a non-digital strategy board game, a first-person shooter, or a side-scrolling platform game. Discuss what the central verbs of this genre are; make sure you've picked a genre where most of you can agree about what the central verbs are!

Split into groups and have each group brainstorm and describe the design of a new game that tries to develop the central verb in an interesting way. This development doesn't have to be an entirely new idea that's never been seen before: it could be similar to existing games, but with a slightly different spin, or based on the aspects of the genre that one or more members of a group find interesting or worth exploring.

Have groups use this list of methods to develop a verb as a starting point; pick one or more of these and explore it to see how a verb can be developed:

- Introduce a new verb alongside the central verb or verbs of the game, and create a design that develops the central verb by combining it with the new verb. For example, the game *Braid* uses verbs common to side-scrolling platform games ("move," "jump") but develops these verbs extensively by combining them with new verbs like "rewind time."
- Develop a verb by setting up new kinds of choices for the player: what scenarios can you come up with where the player has to make difficult or interesting choices about whether to use the verb, when to use it, and how? For an example, see Figure 2.12 and the accompanying discussion about shooting a "caged robot" in the Janet Jumpjet game.
- Come up with new kinds of objects that can be acted on or used with the verb: what kind of interesting choices do these objects create? Can they interact with other verbs in the game's system, so that other verbs can become more robust?
- Think about different ways of using the physical layer: if a game is normally played using a joystick, what might change if the player used a touchscreen instead of, or in addition to, the joystick? What kinds of new developments could come out of changing the physical layer?

3. As a class, brainstorm a list of potential verbs for games. Don't stick to familiar verbs that you know have been used a lot in games; come up with as many ideas as you can. Next, vote as a class on which verbs seem like they would be the most interesting to play with in a game; every participant can have multiple votes, not just one. As part of the process think about what kinds of situations could emerge from using that verb, and what sorts of objects could be used with each verb. Split into groups, and write the verbs with the most votes onto slips of paper. Have each group draw a slip at random, then work together to create an idea for a game that uses the verb they drew. For a short project, the goal can be to create a short presentation about the group's game idea. A longer project could involve more detailed documentation of the idea, rough sketches of what the game might look like, or even a prototype.