Design Notes Episode 07 - Bennett Foddy

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Liam: Design notes is a show from Google design, about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host Liam Spradlin. Each episode we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.

Bennett: One of the core goals, as a designer of games, is you want that whole layer of computer-y-ness to go away, and every floating element you have on the screen, every item you have in a menu is eroding that in some way.

Liam: That was Bennett Foddy, the philosopher, professor, and game designer behind famously frustrating games like QWOP and Getting Over It, in which he uses frustration as a design principle, drawing from what he calls "the full palette of human experience." In the interview we discuss the position of games at the intersection of art and software, how games can be disobedient, and the impact of controls and hardware on artistic expression. Let's get started.

Bennett welcome to Design Notes.

Bennett: Thanks for having me.

Liam: So, to start out with I want to ask what you do now and what the journey has been like to get where you are.

Bennett: I think of myself as an indie game designer, and also a professor that teaches game design at NYU. At college I trained in physics and philosophy, and I headed off to grad school in philosophy, and, uh, I was convinced I was going to be a philosopher, but I, somewhere along the line I started being a musician. Fell into a band with some friends called Cut Copy. Uh, Cut Copy is an Australian ... It's an electro band. We toured around doing that for a while, put out an album, and it started to take off too much for grad school, can't do both of those things at the same time, so I quit that, and I went and got a job as a philosopher at Princeton uh, post doctoral fellowship, and that was philosophy of

medicine, philosophy of applied ethics, and after three years of that I went to Oxford to continue to be a philosopher, and eventually after ten years I guess - from everybody else's point of view - I suddenly made a left turn, and uh, went and got a job teaching video game design. But, what was happening was along the way I was sort of gradually moonlighting as a game designer.

You know, I would do my philosophy work during the day, and then uh, stay up til 4AM making video games. That's what I really wanted to be doing, and by 2008 I made a video game ... flash game for the internet called QWOP, which didn't really make that much of a splash when I made it, but in 2010 roundabout Christmas time suddenly I guess conditions were right on the internet for that to kind of explode, and go viral, and just instantly that kind of changed my kind of order of priorities, and I started thinking about, "Well, is there a way that I can be doing this full time?" So uh that brings me to New York, and, and basically up to the current day.

Liam: So, do you think that your work in philosophy fed into game design at all, or do you think that was kind of a separate direction?

Bennett: I mean in one way it feeds in in a kind of negative way. Right? I think in philosophy you're concerned with logic, and fact seeking, and truth, and you're reading books, (laughs) which you never do as a game designer. And, in a way, uh, having to create the art that I did at night was kind of a classic, uh, pressure release hobby that I had at night. I'd be stuck in, in dry reading, and books, and talks during the day that I would get to the end of the day, and just want to do something that was creative. For me it was kind of anti-philosophy, and I think gradually my sort of philosophical upbringing has kind of bled into my game design work, but I don't think that stops it from being a creative art.

Liam: Um, one of the things that I think is prevalent in your work, and that really struck me, even playing QWOP back in the day before I knew who made it, is that you use frustration as a design tool, or almost like a pattern.

Bennett: Right.

Liam: And I think coming from interface design that's a really foreign idea.

Bennett: Right.

Liam: Because we're taught to build interfaces that avoid frustration at all costs.

Bennett: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Liam: And maybe that's because our interfaces are made to get someone to a goal that isn't using the interface itself, but either way I'm interested to hear how that works and how you use frustration.

Bennett: Yeah I think this is a really interesting problem. My most recent game, Getting Over It, was kind of inspired by this question a little bit. Games are caught on the horns of a dilemma. With software it, it's straightforward, software is something that has a use. It's meant to produce a particular effect, uh, or do a certain thing for you, and you can measure how good software is by how effective it is at doing what it's mainly meant to do, and how little it gets in your way. Right? So, frustration is just straightforwardly bad for software. I think that's sort of a reasonable point of view to take as a software designer, but games are a little bit like software, and a little bit like art.

One of the things we would not say about art, is that it is supposed to, uh, produce a particular effect in you, and those two things are at odds I think in, in certain ways. I once went to a lecture about the definitions of pornography. It's like this long history of people discussing what's obscene, and what's not obscene, and trying to find legal definitions of, of pornography, and one of the definitions that I heard about in this lecture was, the idea that pornography is literature that's useful. Right? It's designed ... It's, it's successful to the extent that it produces in you a certain neurological effect, and everything else about pornography is sort of secondary.

And I think games ... Video games in particular are seen by many people as similar to that. Similar to pornography, except what they're supposed to produce is a feeling of fun, or excitement, or engagement, whatever it might be that the person is interested in. It's supposed to do this particular thing, and if it doesn't do it, then it's not a successful video game, and everything else is secondary to those people.

And then there's this community of game designers, it's not just independent game designers, it's not just art game designers, but, you know, throughout the industry, who see it as a creative art, and they don't, they don't think that producing fun is the primary goal. It’s something that you might worry about as a designer in order to keep people engaged with your work, it's like a tool of the trade, but it's not the kind of primary thing, and those two things are just deeply at odds with each other, but

they have to coexist in games. I mean it just, for one thing they're made out of software. Right? They just are.

The thing that really struck me before I went to work on my last game, is I was watching some review videos on YouTube, and I noticed that, the thing that's really different about those reviews is that they often boot up the game, and then the first thing they do is go to the settings menu, and they're like, "Uh, let's take a look at what settings are exposed to us." And it's like, "It's good, yes, we can change the refresh rate, I can change the vertical sync, and the resolution. I see some quality settings here, that's very good. I can change my audio output." And it was like this was primary to them, because what they want is to be able to produce this particular set of effects, and in order to do that it's powerful software if you have more control over it right? Like nobody really like a software or an app that has no configurability, because everybody's use case is different. I find that so alienating as a designer, because that to me in games is, uh, you know sometimes actually to be fair ... It's. it's sometimes what I want as a player, but as a designer it's the opposite of what I want to do. I want to ship a game with no settings menu. I want to decide everything for the player, and for that to be a complete artwork that I just give to them, and then they experience it as I intended, and nobody would think that was strange if I was writing a book, or, uh, producing installation art, or something like that, but it's culturally very strange to, you know, a very large chunk of the, kind of, game player audience.

And I think that's kind of led to a situation that we're in right now, where it's very orthodox for game designers to to be concerned with software design in the way that software designers are, and that has led to certain orthodoxies like frustration is always bad, confusion ... If people are confused about what to do in a game, that's always bad. Uh, if they get angry, or if they get bored. Any of these things that we would construct as sort of standing in the way of the function of a piece of software is deemed to be bad in game design, and as a way of railing against that kind of elimination of frustration, and confusion, I try to make games that just do that overtly. I'm letting you know that it's going to be frustrating right at the outset.

Liam: Right, so you're creating like a complete expression.

Bennett: Yeah, I mean I want to be able to express myself drawing from a full palette of, of human experience. I want to be able to use those feelings. I want to be able to explore what frustration is like. Maybe it's richer and more interesting than people have given it credit for.

Uh, there's another good example uh, that I think we see a lot of in video games now, and I've seen a lot of minimalistic indie games especially where there's like a menu that allows you to choose a different color scheme. They've put together, uh, 16 different but tasteful color schemes, and there's a menu you go to to choose which color scheme you want, and that to me is really strange. Right? It would never be the case that you would walk into an art gallery, and they'd be like, "Well, we've got all these different paintings, the the artist did ten various for you, we want you to pick the one that you want to see."

Liam: Sure, “I want to see Starry Night at dusk.”

Bennett: Right, right, right.

Liam: (Laughs)

Bennett: (Laughs) It's like, "Oh I don't like Starry Night that way, I wish it was bigger, and so I'm gonna go to the room that has the big Starry Night." That would be strange, right? I mean there, there's a, there's a kind of canonical fact about what Starry Night is that you're there to appreciate, as a lover of art, uh, and that includes the materials it was made with, all the decisions that were made. The colors, the shapes, everything there is part of the canonical fact about what Starry Night is, and would never ask the art patron to decide any of those things. Right? That would be, that would be crazy, and yet I go to these games which have like this menu, I, I now have to decide what color the game is, and immediately I think that changes my relationship to the game in a certain way.

Liam: If we think about a game that doesn't have these menus, or it doesn't allow someone to kind of modulate the thing that you're expressing by creating the game, what would you say are like some of the building blocks of the ways that people interact with games? Like what makes the interface of the game absent of those menus?

Bennett: Sometimes it's just about making considered sort of authoritarian choices for the player. They can be choices about what your character is, and who you are. Every time I can take a button away that asks the player to change a setting or make a choice, I feel like I'm pushing them more into a realm of not noticing that they're using software to play a game. Right? One of the core goals as a designer of games is you want that whole layer of computer-y-ness to go away, and every floating element you have on the screen, every item you have in a menu is eroding that in some

way, but you know, you pay a pretty heavy price for not putting those things in as well. Right? I remember, uh, when Jonathan Blow shipped The Witness, there was no field of view slider in the menu, so he has this aesthetic too. Right? He takes his work very seriously as a piece of art, and he wanted to kind of remove as much friction as possible.

And there was this kind of colossal backlash in the community of players like, "I need to have this field of view slider. If I can't change the field of view of my 3D view, then I'm gonna feel motion sick, or I'm gonna have this problem, or this other problem." Just like, raw anger. So, I'm not completely unsympathetic to that anger as well, as a person who uses computers I definitely have felt that. You know, when you go to use a piece of software, even play a game, and you can't get it working the way you want you're annoyed, you paid money for a piece of software, and you're like, "Ah who does he think he is deciding my field of view for me."

I'm not sure how to reconcile that, except that I have the idea that the more that we can remind people that there are human beings behind video games, the, the less they will feel that way. Video games, I think partly because of their, their history as software, as part of the software industry have tended to kind of like suppress that.

Liam: So, speaking of reminding folks that there's a person behind the game.

Bennett: Mm.

Liam: I'm going to talk about a game where I feel like you had a pretty explicit role: Getting Over It. First of all, just tell me what is Getting Over It about?

Bennett: So Getting Over It is a game where you drag yourself up a mountain with a climbing hammer, and your body is in a metal cauldron, and, uh, that's it. I mean there's not really much more to the story of it than that, but I introduce it in the voiceover commentary of the whole thing as a exploration of feelings of frustration, and as a homage to a old B game Sexy Hiking, but this is the game that came out of this vein of thinking. I was interested in whether games can articulate themselves as not being software, whether they can be disobedient, whether we can use frustration as a component. This is like a position piece in a way. For me it's my most un-software-y, undesigned, uh, piece of game design.

Liam: I have to ask this. The kind of tagline for the game is that you made this game for a certain type of person, who is that person?

Bennett: Yeah, so I introduced the game by saying, "I made this game for a certain kind of person, to hurt them." This is what I'm talking about, I have a job to do when I'm introducing this game. Which is to let you know it's not going to follow established norms of software design. As I was making it I realized that what I wanted to commit to in the experience was this feeling of making a lot of progress, and then losing it. It's like getting a long way, and then losing all your progress was the particular flavor of frustration I was most interested in. I need to be able to give you a sense that this is intended and, that was one of the ways. So, one of the ways is just to say to people, just at the very outset, the first thing you hear about the game, is that I've made it to hurt you and, people are like, "That's a weird thing to say. You know, games are supposed to be fun, not for suffering." But you take a look at it, and you think, "Well this is the experience."

Now having said that, if I just put it out there with no framing whatsoever it would just be viewed as the most broken pathetic, badly designed piece of rubbish in video game history. So, you have to do a, a lot of framing. That's what I'm doing there. So, to answer your question, who is the person? It's really everyone, but I think most people don't realize that there is something to be enjoyed in frustrating experiences that you can derive pleasure, or interest, or at least a kind of memorable experience from something that is, uh, on its face just a negative sensation.

Liam: I want to talk about the commentary that you did as well, because I feel like that's part of the, the framing, and part of the context, and maybe something that helps players actually become introspective and think about that.

Bennett: Right, yeah, if it's a piece of art, and I want them to understand that there is intent behind it, they need to know that there's a person behind it, and that's where I get this idea that, well maybe I should just be speaking through the whole thing. Maybe I can even explain some of the decisions that I've made, and then overtime as you get further and further in the game I assume that people will just stop playing as, as time goes on, and in fact my retention graph shows there's like a drop off in survivorship through the game as people get more and more frustrated, (laughs) and find it more difficult they stop playing. But the people who are left, I can guarantee understand what I'm trying to, or they're feeling the experience that I'm trying to make them feel, and I can speak to them then as people who understand that.

And so, as you get closer to the end there's more of a kind of an intimacy, there's more of a sense of being simpatico with the player, and I can

speak to them about that as well and, I thought, well, when you lose progress I should also say something, and so I started looking up things that people say as condolences, famous quotes, and sayings that people have used to comfort people who have suffered some kind of loss, or some misfortune, and it's a little tongue in cheek, because I know it's not real suffering as well. It's a video game. Right? You lost some progress in video game, you didn't die, nobody died, so I'm also like a little bit poking fun at the player, but I'm also there to support them in a, in a moment of frustration, and I think that that also kind of helps to frame the experience as something that is the intended outcome. I meant for you to fall here, that was the point.

Liam: It seems like this kind of inherent frustration in the game could actually invert at some point to become accomplishment, or like some more positive emotion, right?

Bennett: Yeah, I mean when you get to the end, when you, uh, finish you climb the mountain, it invites you into a live chatroom. The way I set it up to begin with is I would get an e-mail every time somebody finished the game. I thought it would be really rare, at least it was, uh, in the, in the first instance rare enough that I would always go along and congratulate people, and get to hear from them how they were feeling, and they would generally say, "My hands are shaking, you know I feel a kind of weird elation, and, and relief." Which uh, which was great, that was really what I wanted them to feel, but the other interesting thing that they said is that in the back half of the game, once they had fallen enough times, they stopped feeling frustration when they would lose hours of progress, and they started to feel a kind of a zen.

You often see that with people who play the game, is that they start out very angry and kind of seeing red when they lose progress, and then as time goes on they start to appreciate it, and it becomes a thing, and they're like, "Oh but that's actually what I'm here for." And they're feeling it, but it's like the bitterness that you taste when you drink a cup of coffee. When you're a baby you would cry if somebody gave you coffee, it's too bitter, it's like biologically we're, uh, set up to dislike that kind of flavor, but you acquire the taste, and then when you have it still it's like, ew, bitter, but then you're like, hmm, yeah I really like how bitter that is.

Liam: There's something underneath the pain.

Bennett: Right.

Liam: That makes it worth it.

Bennett: Yeah, or maybe pain is just worth it. Without wanting to advance like a weird theory of masochism or something like that, I think that a lot of the time these negative experiences or feelings that you associate with negative outcomes, when you experience them in a safe bounded way they're just flavors of experience that you can learn to appreciate, and they can have lots of contours, and nuance, uh, like a sad, you know, a sad movie. You feel sad. You're sad in that moment, but it's a safe kind of sadness, because you're not, you know it's not actually connected to any misfortune that you have suffered. Uh, in fact, it's good, you enjoy it, you enjoy crying at a sad movie. It's like, if a movie can make you cry, that's like one of the best things a movie can do. I think we all understand that, but I think it's sort of open for games to produce all kinds of experiences. I've definitely cried at a game, I've been angry at a game, I've laughed at a game, but games have more power to elicit frustration than just about any other creative medium, because of the interactive nature of them. I can bring more frustration than I can with a book, or with a piece of music, and that's exciting to me.

It's like you want, you want to gravitate towards the strong experiential flavors when you're designing something. At least I do. I want work to be affecting, uh, rather than just flat.

Liam: So, all of these strong emotions that typically we might not want to experience are actually happening in kind of like a safe container for us.

Bennett: Right, right. Yeah, I mean, there's this idea in, in game studies of the, uh, of the magic circle. It's like there's a sense of any experience that I have, or any behavior that I elicit in a game is not real, it's like contained within the kind of space of the game - and some people think that that's not real, and the behavior in games is real behavior, and, and experiences in games are real behavior - but you do know that it's bounded. It's a bounded experience. If I make you angry in a video game, we can say, "It's just a video game." I think people understand that.

And, a huge part of what art is, is a container to experience and express emotions that you don't want infecting your everyday life. Most people want their kind of day to day life to be low amplitude, low drama, and then when they're at leisure, when they're in this kind of environment for experiencing art, or whatever it might be, entertainment. That's when you can feel a high-amplitude emotion safely, and they can be as high as you want, it can be as intense as you want.

Liam: I want to switch back to the more tactical side of things.

Bennett: Mm-hmm.

Liam: And talk about the role that controls play, and what affect that has on the design.

Bennett: The first thing that I start thinking about when I'm designing a game, when I'm concepting a game is what ... First of all what the hardware will be, and then secondly what the person will be doing with the hardware, and in this case this was a game that was commissioned by, uh, Humble Monthly Bundle, and I asked them, you know, "Who is your typical player?" And they said it's a single person, by themselves on a Windows computer with a mouse and a keyboard, and I'm not interested in using control schemes that everybody else uses. I think there's lots of interesting game design work to be done in those places.

So, I had a mouse and keyboard, uh, and I thought, "Well, I've done a bunch of keyboard games. Let's do a game that is just mouse." And I had in the back of my mind already that I wanted to, uh, do this homage to, to Sexy Hiking, and it just seemed like this was a good opportunity to, to do this. It's a game where you, you just purely move the mouse. So, I set about building it, and of course I, I do most of my, uh, development, all my computing on a laptop. I have a MacBook Pro, just this giant trackpad, and I just prefer it to a mouse, I just prefer it.

You know, so, I was aware in the back of my mind I had to do some testing with a mouse, I had to make sure that the experience was sort of the same. But I, I was really just playing it everyday with a trackpad, and that, you know is really kind of interestingly different, uh, especially for a game where all you're doing is moving a, a mouse around. The trackpad feels very different, but by the time I got to the end it was really good, uh, on a track pad, and pretty bad on a mouse, so my play testers who were all using mice kept on telling me their hands were getting cramped. I'm like, "What? How can your hand be getting cramped?" Right? “All I'm asking you to do is move the mouse around, you're getting cramped from like moving your wrist a tiny little bit?” Uh, but, I was watching them, and sure enough like they're gripping the mouse, because the game is stressful, they're gripping the mouse really, really tightly, and I realized the touch pad, if I don't want to move it, or if I want to move very, very slowly I just push harder with my finger and friction slows it down for me.

With a mouse generally that does not work. If I try to push it straight down it's going to just slide, so you need to come up with another solution for that. I wound up having to experiment with kind of acceleration curves, and all these different sorts of technical things just to try to get the touchpad experience very close to the, to the mouse experience, and same again, to get the, to get the touchscreen experience similar to the touchpad experience. I still think the game is like ... The canonical experience is a touch pad, because that's what I wrote it with, but this is just one of those areas where reality of writing PC games is that not everyone has the same hardware.

But, yeah I think the experiences that I grew up with as a child coming up and playing video games for the first time. You know, I was born in '78, when I, when I would play video games a lot of the times it was in, uh, arcades where through that period of time a lot of the games had bespoke hardware, so the designer got to say exactly what the hardware was going to be, and often they got to design things that nobody else had. Those games I think are in some way amplified by the fact that the game can be designed to match the physical embodiment of the controls.

Liam: Right, you're kind of controlling how people access the thing that you've expressed.

Bennett: Right, right and you're controlling how it feels in their hand. I mean this is just like, this is an interface, just as much as, uh, any kind of like on screen button, or switch is a part of the interface. Of course the hardware is part of the interface, and if you can design that, you, of course you want to. So, you know ideally you have perfect hardware for the game. Now, of course the reality of computing is you can't always dictate what the hardware will be. More often than not you're given standardized hardware, and then it becomes a kind of thing where you have to design the game around the hardware. What's going to be in the game is designed around what it's going to feel like in the hand rather than the other way around. Having said that, you can make certain kinds of decisions. You know QWOP is a game that is named after the keys that are used on the keyboard.

Uh, when you're designing with a keyboard you have a lot of decisions that you can make. You know, there's a lot of feel that you can decide on. Space bar is a really loud, clattery button, uh, whereas the letter keys are kind of quiet, and, and small. You can, you can decide where they're oriented next to each other. I think one of the things that makes people think QWOP is a strange game is that most games don't use those keys.

Wasn't so strange for me though, I grew up playing games on the ZX Spectrum, the old Sinclair computer, British computer that most people did not have a joystick, or any other controller for ... so the games that come out on that, it's always keys, and there was just no standardization of which keys either. It's always a random thing.

I was just playing, uh, Horace Goes Skiing the other day, which is one of the oldest Australian games. It's Q, Z, I, P. These keys are, are not, they're near each other. You're like, "Oh this is weird." That's got its own feeling as well. That's not good design I don't think, I think that's just naïve design, but it sort of opens up the ways that we can iterate on those things, and design around them.

Liam: Until you get to a point where you're actually mapping keys to like, human muscle groups to control a runner.

Bennett: Right, right if I'm going to have two buttons for your thigh muscles, and two buttons for your calf muscles, you know, they can be any keys. I can't tell you why I picked QW and OP, except that I knew it had to be different than uh, arrow keys, or WASD, right, because those carry a kind of cultural loading and literacy. If I give you the arrow keys, you expect directionality, and so I needed to choose keys that were not those things.

Liam: Yeah. I want to wrap up as I usually do by asking about the future. So, where do you see I guess your personal practice, and like design sensibilities evolving in the future, and also just games in general?

Bennett: Yeah, I'm not really sure what I want to do next except that I remain interested in same sorts of flavors of experience. I've been messing around with a lot of golf games. Golf, for me, is a fantastic video game sport, because it has this kind of characteristic of building stakes, and then smashing you down, and you get like ... Just like you're on the 17th hole, you're five under par, and then you blow it out, and it's just a terrible score, and for me what I want my video games to have ... What I think all video games are concerned with is having an experience that feels like it matters whether you did well or poorly, should matter in some sort of way.

And so you have to build stakes up from nothing, because they're video games, and nothing that happens in them matters at all. I feel like I've done my position piece for kind of author insertion in a game. I feel like people at least for a little while should know that I'm, when they're playing my games that I'm sort of there in the background, so I don't think that I need to do that explicitly again, at least not for a while. I think where

things are interesting right now in games is there's this sort of network multiplayer stuff. Not just big colossal popular games like League of Legends, or Player Unknown's Battlegrounds, which are the big multiplayer triple A games, but also on the kind of the cheap end, on the IO games, Agar.io, Slither.io, I think it's kind of fascinating ground as well.

Since I used to work on flash games I still believe that some of the most exciting opportunities for designers are on the web. Partly because it's the only space where you can publish games without the involvement of a platform holder, or a publisher, or any of those other sorts of things, and that opens up creative opportunities that don't exist otherwise. You know, I think QWOP is an example of a game where if it was published by somebody, or if it was on Newgrounds, or Kongregate, it couldn't have been popular. What makes QWOP interesting to people is they think they've discovered something strange that doesn't belong, that everybody who encounters it tells their friends, because they think they've found like some corner of the internet that is neglected, and that kind of experience can't be had on a commercial platform. So, I'm really interested in, in web technologies as well.

Liam: Definitely, and I think that's an interesting point that it allows you to create your own context, and like frame things.

Bennett: Right, which is what I want. I want to be able to control the experience as much as possible. When you give a game away for free that's played in a browser you don't owe people that settings menu. Right? You don't owe them anything. They didn't pay, and that gives you a full palette of creative expression of the kinds of experiences that you, that you create. I find that super exciting.

Liam: Alright, well thank you again for joining me on Design Notes.

Bennett: And thanks for having me.

Liam: Keep an eye on design.google/podcasts so you don't miss our next episode, recorded at SPAN 2017 in Pittsburgh. In the episode guest host Aaron Lammer speaks with Deeplocal CEO Nathan Martin about what an innovation studio does, how his experiences in punk rock influence his current work, and being authentic in process and product. You can subscribe to Design Notes on Google Play, iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Until next time.