

**EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW
I LEARNED FROM VIDEO GAMES**

Pseudo-Random Bits of Video Game Wisdom

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Thanks

Thanks goes first to my family. Thanks also to my teachers and advisors, from preschool up through college. Thanks to Shigeru Miyamoto, Eugene Jarvis, John Salwitz, John Carmack, Koichi Ishii, Martin Hollis, David Perry, and the countless others who are indirectly responsible for my being hell-bent on saving the entire universe.

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Preface

I've been bored with the real world since I was 3. Why should I be going to school, playing sports, or taking walks when I could be saving the president, or defending the earth from evil aliens?

I learned the answer as I grew: I needed to be going to school, playing sports, and consuming everything else life offered up because that breadth of experience and understanding would make me a better video game maker.

And yet, in my mission to learn from the real world and apply it to games, more often than not I have found myself doing the total opposite. Games provided me with a harmless playground, constant attention, and isolated lessons in trial and error. If only life were so well planned!

Every game requires the player to learn. The games that fare best in the market, I believe, are those that teach and train the skills that lead to success in the real world.

I find those games ‘ring true.’ And I’ve been devoting my life to this stuff since I could push a button.

Old School

A champion is someone that doesn't let something simple – like getting off to a rough start – get in the way of setting the new high score.

He who acts last, loses. He who acts first, still had better be well prepared.

Emotions cloud the mind and inhibit performance.

Confidence is quiet inside and out, and leads to victory. Ego is loud inside or out, and is the surest way to spoil a winning streak.

With enough patience, practice, determination, and quarters, anyone can save the world. Money unlocks opportunities, but patience, practice, and determination are still needed to take advantage of them.

“The Boss” is something that must be overcome to make it to the next level. Expect to run into plenty of Mini-Bosses along the way.

Hidden in the words of everyone is advice related to where the player is headed next. Only the player can pick apart those messages and do something with them.

It's the enemy outside the player's attention that will inevitably catch up and bag a Game Over.

There's a world of difference between getting the high score at the corner arcade in a tiny town, and breaking the record on a machine in a major city.

It's easier in Co-op.

Pay attention to details. They are frequently the most important part of the scene, and the answer to the most important questions.

Take the time to level up characters and inventory before moving forward.

Always have plenty of food and medicine available in inventory.

When enemies get the best of a character, everything carried is lost. Invest.

Don't give the best items to the weakest character in the party – give them to the strongest. The sooner the badguy falls, the less damage anyone on the team will sustain.

Upon losing, jump right back into the fray as if the loss never happened. It's the only way to get any better.

The protagonist can do things that no one else can.

*The racer in last place often gets the best items.
Every position has different advantages; learn the
moment's advantages, and capitalize on them.*

*Rewards come for getting the job done. Exceptional
rewards come for getting the job done exceptionally well.
People in positions to provide more missions and resources
have a way of knowing and seeing everything.*

*If the main character doesn't complete the quest
and save the kingdom, no one else in the world will, either.*

*Once the big goals are completed, the small goals
are soon forgotten.*

*Playing for the ending always and only leads to
disappointment; play for the playing.*

Current Gen

That people do the same thing does not mean they do it for the same reason. Some are in it for the challenge. Some are in it for exploration. Some are looking for stimulation to pass the time.

There's more to a game than the sum of its ingredients. The game, in the abstract sense, is that which indescribably goes beyond the sum of its ingredients.

Give the brain more than it can handle, and give the brain too much pressure and too little time in which to handle it. Anything less, and it's just wasting time.

Only the practice done when no one's looking can set anyone apart from the crowd.

Prepare while alone. When surrounded, trust the instincts and move, move, move.

AI either trains the player to improve, or puts up a good fight only to lose. Either way, challenge is designed to be defeated.

At the end of the day, the creator of the environment exercises control over everything.

Save progress frequently.

Fear comes from one of two things: the undesirable but inevitable, and the unpredictable. Worrying about the former is a misuse of mental energy; doing something about the latter can mitigate all remaining fears.

Some people have better controllers. Some people have worse. Some people have more time to play. Some have less. No more can be done than to make the most of the interface and time available.

Help others. Sometimes they'll come back to return the favor. Sometimes they'll even permanently join the group. Sometimes they'll never be heard from again. With no way of knowing which is which in advance, it's only wise to help everyone that asks for it.

Don't assume a game is bad just because someone don't like it. And don't assume someone won't like a game just because it's bad.

Concentrate efforts. Points aren't awarded for doing damage to hundreds of enemies; points are awarded for completely defeating one.

Upon mastered something, move on and master something more challenging. A Level 60 character has no business hacking apart Level 1 slimes.

Making the wrong move is sometimes better than making no move at all.

Any time a goal can be identified with little or no harm in failure, a valiant attempt should be made for it.

Some enemies are invincible until their henchmen or defenses are down. Save ammunition for when it counts.

With every moment passed sitting around, the enemies are continuing to stock resources and build their bases.

In a world where the importance of fundamental understanding has bypassed the importance of knowledge, rank, and strength, it's to be expected that the young will dramatically outperform the old.

Neutral territory begins with the player that first claims it, but it stays with the player that first defends it.

Be weary of casual alliances.

Next Gen

More sounds, more models, more levels, more buttons, and more special effects don't make a better game – they only serve to dilute or disguise what game is already there.

For game programmers: Hacking used to cut it. Hacking no longer cuts it.

Enemy disorder is allied opportunity in disguise.

Always be ready for the rules to be broken. Always be ready to break the rules, in case there comes a time when doing so is the only way to survive.

Others are struggling through – or have struggled through – similar experiences. When all else fails, seek advice.

All the strategy and skill in the world can't make up for failing to complete the right sub-quests or gather the right equipment for the task ahead.

Cheating does more than ruin the experience; it rapidly decays well-trained skills.

Complaining doesn't fix problems; taking action fixes problems.

It is impossible to have all of the information desired to make a decision. All of the consequences that will arise from a decision will never be understood in advance. Seek a reasonable amount of information, make some educated assumptions, and move forward.

There are many more ways to win a war besides violence. Every single one of those alternative means is preferable, but if either side is unable to defend itself, violence will be the answer.

Epilogue

Our young industry is growing at an unprecedented rate, but that doesn't make it any less green. It actually makes us even more vulnerable to novice mistakes. More importantly, it also makes us more even likely to be misunderstood.

Video games are not movies. Video games are not stories. Video games are not rock and roll. Video games sure as heck aren't television. What are they?

Video games are a medium for improving reactions, improving resource management skills, improving the ability to anticipate, improving risk/reward assessment, and feeding the imagination. In short, video games are a mechanism to exercise a person's ability to develop, adapt, and execute heuristics, with a little inspiration on the side.

Throwing in a movie script, licensed characters, a literary lesson, a viscerally accurate 'virtual experience,' pop-culture music, 32-bit color explosions, 5.1 surround sound, 60 frames per second rendering, dual-wield slow-

motion action, and nude codes doesn't somehow change that.

All that just piles a bunch of stuff on top of it. And that's all fine and dandy, if that's what the consumer wants to pay for. Just don't go confusing that mess for the game itself. I could replace *Pac-Man* ghosts with police, pellets with moneybags, and call it cops and robbers. As long as the player immediately understands what to run from and what to run towards, it's the same game with a different façade.

Whether it's the next chapter of a story or huge flashing score displays, all rewards are there to compel the player to keep pushing the limit. And whether an entity is an enraged policeman, a pink ghost, or a flashing insect, it's just a way of communicating functionality to the player.

Players don't learn from the fiction that gets plastered on top of video games – they learn from the underlying game dynamics. *Grand Theft Auto* doesn't make me want to shoot police officers any more than *Galaga* makes me want to blowup insects in outer-space.

Grand Theft Auto is a game about driving freedom and stirring up a hornet's nest while you're inside it; *Galaga* is a game about timing, misleading your enemy, and focusing on several concerns at once.

The chosen symbols may stir up the imagination, but delivering content through a game does not dramatically change the content. Images are still images, sounds are still sounds, and what the player is "doing" goes beyond (beneath? between?) these things.

Yet our industry is under attack from people that don't understand games or gamers. The attackers aren't like us, and they misunderstand how we use our imaginations. They don't see clear visual distinction for moving powerups, enemies armed with projectiles, or high-mass transportation options. They see the interface through which it's whimsically portrayed on screen: hookers, police, and stolen cars. The truth, of course, is that most of us don't give two flips if we're playing as the good guy or

the bad guy. We only care what the *game* is, and if the game is any good¹.

If these people attacking our industry read books, they would be pushing to re-institute bans on *Lolita*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. They would

¹ We certainly appreciate it when the characters, environments, and effects are interesting, inspired, and entertaining in their own right. But these things are digested separately from the gameplay!

miss the literary message that exists beneath the diction and circumstances selected by the authors for conveyance.

Little can come from the arguing with those that have no interest in understanding; don't let their squabbles prevent you or anyone you love from learning, playing, and growing. The dinosaurs will inevitably go extinct.

Games require decision making; decision making requires thinking. It's no coincidence that the smartest animals in nature – humans certainly among them – are *extremely* playful. Embrace that.

Keep learning, keep playing. If you're a fellow game developer, keep teaching.

But NEVER believe anyone that tries to discredit video games as a valid medium, or makes fallacious claims that we're somehow misguiding the youth. I am eager to see the adulthood of this generation, which by age 10 has already had experience evaluating complex risk/reward scenarios, allocating resources, assessing threats...

-C.L.D.

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(PLAY FOR THE PLAYING)

GAME OVER

PLEASE PLAY AGAIN