

An analogy between a board game and forum theatre to increase the reflective approach upon design processes

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ABSTRACT

Complete me is a board game about drawing, environment exploration and appropriation of everyday objects. Since the game revolves around two roles, Critic and Artist, in this paper I will talk about the similarities that exists between these roles and improvisational theatre and performance. The aim is to emphasize the connection between art and play, and strengthen the social aspects of performance in games. Also, to encourage the reflective approach upon design process using analogy between interdisciplinary fields.

Author Keywords

Interaction design; performance; appropriation; improvisation; play; social interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Concept

Complete me is a party game for 4 – 6 players, a drawing game about appropriation allowing the players to satisfy their curiosity by snooping around people's homes. The game has 144 drawing cards, 1 blindfold, 6 white boards A4 size, 6 dry pens, 6 erasers, 32 tokens for keeping up the score (Figure 1). The drawing cards are images with a QR code, representing topics such as *actions, animals, buildings, food, professions, vehicles and objects*.

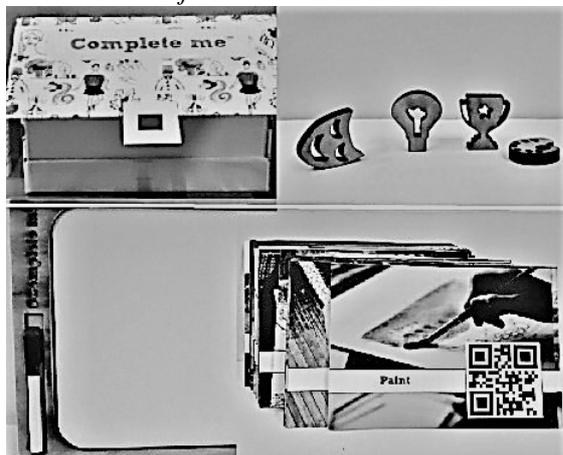


Figure 1. The game props: the box, the tokens, the whiteboard with the pen, the drawing cards

The companion app (Figure 2), allows the players to set up a timer and search on Google Images more representative versions of the chosen card, by scanning the QR code.

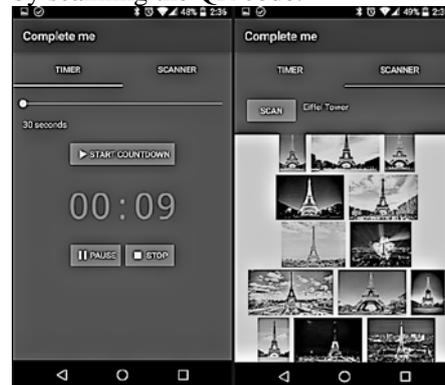


Figure 2. 1st screen - Timer. 2nd screen – Google Images of the drawing card.

The timer, starts by default at 3 minutes, although its range is between 30 secs and 10 min. The last 10 secs produce a sound signal letting the user know the time is up. For more inspiration, we introduced the scanning element so that the player who does not know how a specific object looks like, can still have the chance to play. Also, it can give the player more flexibility to appropriate by appealing to details, perspectives (Figure 3), angles.

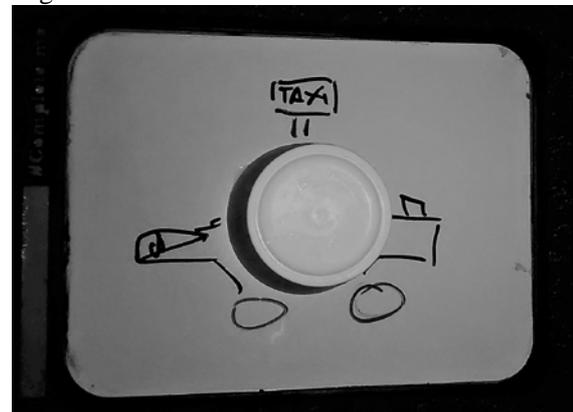


Figure 3. Drawing from a top-down perspective, playtesting with the companion app

Rules

One player is the Critic, while the others are the Artists. At the start of the round, the Critic draws 3 cards and decides which card he would like the Artists to draw. Then he places the other two cards back in the deck, randomly. Once the card has been selected and the timer set, the Critic puts on the blindfold. Since they know what they are supposed to draw, the Artists have to search for an object to appropriate and complete their drawing. When the timer expires, or all the Artists have stopped drawing, the artworks are to be evaluated by the Critic – the best overall artwork (Trophy token), the best idea (Light-Bulb token), the best drawing (Artists Paint Palette token), the funniest (Laughing Mask token). The game should have as many rounds as the number of players, so that each one could experience the role of the Critic.



Figure 4. Example of appropriation, drawing from the 3rd lo-fi prototype playtesting

The players are empowered to snoop around and explore. The mechanics, searching, drawing, appropriating (Hunnicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004) are flexible. The players can choose their own pace, tactics or characteristics to bring into their play. Some can choose to search for the object first, while others may start with the drawing. For some, colors or other characteristic may have an implied meaning (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Example of appropriation, using Tabasco sauce to express the passion of a flamenco dancer

The game experience is not diminished if the players do not have drawing skills. The entire game concept is built upon appropriation.

Appropriation

In our context, appropriation means to use an object in a way, other than the one that it was created or intended for (Sicart, 2014, pp. 26-28). Appropriation is “the use of pre-existing objects or images with little or no transformation applied to them” (Chilvers, Graves-Smith, & Chilvers, 2009, p. 27). Using the everyday objects in their original form and not changing them, adds an extra challenge to the gameplay. The players are constrained to see the object as a whole and reinterpret it so that it fits on the drawing board without cutting it or modifying it (Figure 6).

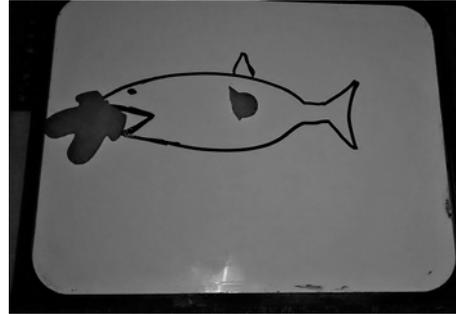


Figure 6. Cheating, modifying the appropriated object - broken biscuit

Appropriation requires imagination, creativity, improvisation. From the moment of searching until all the Artists have stopped drawing, the players embrace different roles: improviser, performer and spectator.

PLAYER'S ROLES

Improvisation - improviser

Improvisation is a form of live theatre in which the plot, characters and dialogue of a game, scene or story are made up in the moment (“What is Improv? « Austin Improv Comedy Shows, Classes – The Hideout Theatre”, n.d.) The improvisation in *Complete me* is about actions, imagination, creativity, and reaction speed. Since the round is against time, the Artists need to adapt to the environment to find the right object and finish their drawing. Sometimes it can be a race between the Artist and his capabilities, or between him and the other players that chose the same object, the only difference being their personal interpretation. The Artist becomes an improviser as well as a performer.

Performance - performer

Performance according to Schechner (2013) is defined as “any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed” (p. 16-17). The Artists perform among themselves while the Critic is and is not blindfolded when he/she critiques the artworks.



Figure 7. The Critic blindfolded while waiting for the Artists to finish their drawings

The analogy that I am going to make between *Complete me* and *performance* is linked to Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed. In forum theatre, the spectators are encouraged to participate, becoming at some point actors in the play, by a Joker. The Joker is the facilitator, the one who instigates to discussion, to participation, a mediator between actors and spectators (Lee, 2015, pp. 156-169). The Joker could be represented by the Critic who facilitates the game, by choosing the card at the beginning of the game and by evaluating the artworks at last. The fact that the Critic behavior becomes more prominent at the beginning and at the end, can also be a similarity. During the game, the emphasis is on the Artists, as well as on the actors in forum theatre. Theatre of the oppressed is about power, equilibrium, and democracy and *Complete me* is about drawings, appropriation, reinterpretation, and exploration. The design process behind the board game ensures there is power balance between Artists and Critic. Also, because it has more rounds and at every round the Critic changes, everyone experiences both roles.

Audience – spectator

In both *improv* and *performance* there is an audience, somebody is watching and reacting to what is shown. Dalsgaard and Hansen (2008) argues that a user/player becomes a performer when there is an awareness of spectator (p. 13:6). The Critic becomes a spectator when the Artists are drawing, he is enjoying the player's performance through hearing. Further, the Artists themselves represent a bigger group of spectators, an audience, when the Critic evaluates their artworks.

DISCUSSION

Design process

As we have seen so far, *Complete me* evolves around improvisation, appropriation and play. To be able to create this kind of roles exchange and social interaction between players, we had a user-centred approach based on testing, analyzing, refining and iteration.

After playing *Pandemic* and *Cards against humanity* and analyzing similar games, such as *Charade*, *Pictionary*, *Pix*, *Cranium*, we decided to go with simple and flexible rules, multiple rounds and time limitation. As for the aesthetics, we wanted the players to enjoy regardless their drawing skills level. Our testers confirmed later that contrary to other drawing games, e.g. *Pictionary*, they did not feel pressure when drawing. Even so, a few of them expressed the desire to learn how to draw.

Playtesting

The playtesting involved international students (Figure 8) and adults of different ages. They played different versions of the game and made their own comments. We also made our own observations. Six playtesting sessions were done remotely and for which one of them we created a format document requesting information about the host, the numbers of players and their thoughts on the Artist and Critic's role.



Figure 8. Playtesting the lo-fi prototype: paper cards, colored pencils, A4 paper and 3 object at choice

Players input

The players expressed the wish to keep the Critic blindfolded, because their other senses, like hearing become enhanced. "Hmm, I was just waiting but I was excited to see what will come out", one Critic said. "I could hear you coloring", another one said. In the first playtesting, we did not set a time constraint, because we wanted to observe how long will it take for the players to complete a round. At some point, they decided to have a timer and the Critic started counting out

loud so the Artists knew when to stop drawing (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Counting out loud

Some players, did go beyond appropriating an object by adding story elements, like a background. Even if they drew a story to hide their drawing skills and make the artwork more explanatory, they brought the game experience to a new level. The story aspect it is something that we would like to explore further and see how it is influenced by the drawing cards topics and the formulation of the rules.

Social interaction

People enjoyed playing *Complete me*, even if in the beginning were a bit skeptical about their drawing skills. They realized that each Critic is subjective and that leads to unexpected outcomes. Some experiences are intriguing and questionable, like “how come you always win?”. Barbara (2015), explains so well the valuable characteristic of board games, which is bringing people together (pp. 5-7). The players do not face screens, however they face each other as they sit around a table or a board. Interacting with tokens, with surfaces, the tangible nature of the board game facilitates social interaction.

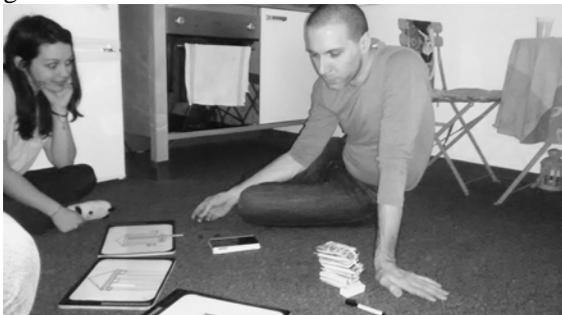


Figure 10. Playtesting the hi-fi prototype. Waiting with curiosity the Critic decisions.

CONCLUSION

“We play to explore, to learn about ourselves and the world around us. We can learn so much about a community by studying the way that its members play as we can by studying rituals“ (Bial & Brady, 2016, p. 115).

And this is what I would like to emphasize, analyzing the design process with different lenses – the lenses of art and performance, making analogies between interdisciplinary fields as part of a reflective stage in the design process, it can bring new understandings over social interaction. The relationships between players, between actors, between the members of a community while they mingle in the magic circle bring out different roles such as improviser, performer, spectator. *Complete me* is a game that changes with the environment, it can be easily played outside with stones, grass and other natural props. And contrary to other similar games like, *Charade* or even the improv TV show “*Whose line it is?*” with props, it is not about word guessing, it is about externalization of an internal process of appropriation.

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