Design Notes: Designing for Different ‘Types of Fun’

Game designer Marc "MAHK" LeBlanc is credited with defining eight essential types of ‘fun’ within a game, ranging from sensation to discovery to submission. This seems common knowledge, but different gamers come to a tabletop RPG looking for different things: some people want power fantasies, some people enjoy putting together interesting combinations of class, racial, and other mechanics to create impressive effects, some people are there to roleplay or spend time with friends or explore an alien world. And all of the interest types are valid.

One of the difficulties of being a designer (and an aspect that strongly separates the professionals from the hobbyists I think) is that you yourself have your preferred ‘types’ of fun, but you (ideally) consider the other fun styles when you’re designing for Tabletop Rpgs. This is less true for the more limited modern story games which tend to focus on doing ‘one thing well’ and –as such- tend to be more consciously designed to maximize one or only a few types of fun. However, the legacy of the world’s oldest rpg is that good designers move forward under the assumption that grognards, simulationists, model makers and more will all gather around the same table (or at least the same rulebook) and so designers bake this knowledge into their design, make conscious design decisions about how they intend to satisfy these varied tastes.

It is a truism that you can’t please everyone. But good designers at least are cognizant of the ways in which they aren’t pleasing this or that group, this or that playstyle, and ty to make allowances for the types of fun that they themselves to not enjoy. When they make a mechanical decision that makes it easier for a power gamer to feel the thrill of their fantasy they understand and can articulate the tradeoffs they have made concerning the other fun styles.

Designing for yourself and for others (who come to game potentially for different reason) is difficult. But the ways this tension is navigated and resolved is part of what makes great art arresting.