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The Designer's Notebook: The Bill of Players' Rights

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Over the years there have been various efforts to create a Bill of Rights for game players. Someone named PeterB, in a blog called Tea Leaves, wrote a [PC Gamer's Bill of Rights](#) about a year ago. Noah Falstein's [400 Project](#) is an excellent ongoing effort to find 400 rules about game design, and even better, to document how those rules relate to one another. Then there's someone named [MC]Daschande, whose [Gamer's Bill of Rights](#) actually demands that the publishers provide access to a game's source code. (Yeah, right.) And of course, there's enormous ongoing debate about the rights of players in persistent worlds—do they have freedom of speech, can they sell game-world objects, is automated gameplay cheating, and so on and so forth.

Few of these efforts, however, have been directly on point for game *design*, in the sense of creating entertainment for players. The PC Gamer's Bill of Rights mostly concentrates on technological issues such as installation, frame rates, and switching monitor resolutions. Many of the 400 Project Rules are about design, but some are actually about development ("localize narrative in a two-step process") and others I would characterize more as good ideas than rules ("distribute game assets asymmetrically"). The so-called Gamer's Bill of Rights would be better described as a "gamer's Communist Manifesto," since it mostly seems to be a demand that publishers hand all control of their intellectual property over to the players. The debate about online gaming is chiefly concerned with player behavior and community order.

So, not satisfied with what I've found on the Web, I thought I'd put together my own Bill of Players' Rights just for the fun of it. Because my approach to game design is based on empathy with the player, these are features that I demand *as a player*, and that I believe every player has a right to expect. My list concentrates specifically on the experience itself rather than on things like The Right Not to Crash or The Right to Take the CD Out of the Drive. I'm restricting my list to things that I consider to be an *absolute* right, not just a good idea or a useful design principle. Finally—an important qualification, here—my list is really intended for single-player games. A number of these items don't make sense in a multi-player context.

Before I go on I should say in fairness that some of these overlap with PeterB's Bill from Tea Leaves; some overlap with Noah's project; and some are derived from my own Twinkie Denial Conditions.

So, with all that said, I present:

The Bill of Players' Rights

The Right to Play. The majority of the time a player spends in a game, he should be making decisions, exploring, creating, overcoming challenges, or otherwise acting upon the game world in some way. Players come to play, not to watch cut-scenes. Notice that I say the *majority* of the time. Non-interactive elements are not forbidden, but they should not take up more than 50% of the playing time of the game. (This is the absolute maximum; many

gamers would contend that non-interactive elements should take up no more than 1% of the playing time of the game, if that.)

The Right to Win. If a game's marketing, manual, mission briefings, or other introductory material tells the player that a game is possible to win, the game must be possible to win. It doesn't have to be easy, but it does have to be possible. Anything else is cheating the player. This right doesn't guarantee that every player *will* win, only that every player *can* win.

The Right to Instructions. Absolutely required. Games that dump you into a situation and force you to figure it out by trial and error—even down to which button does what on the controller—are bad games, period. A tiny minority of players might like this sort of thing, but the rest find it frustrating and no fun. The instructions don't have to reveal everything about the game, but they *must* tell the player which buttons, commands, or menu items do what. If you don't feel like writing it all down, give the player a tutorial.

The Right to Feedback. The player has a right to know how she's doing, and in particular, to some means of determining if she's in danger of losing the game. If the player doesn't get feedback, she can't adjust her strategy, and the outcome will feel random. Players need to know whether their approach is working or not.

The Right To Motivation. A game must not only give a player things to do, but also give him a reason for doing them. Just plunking the player down in a sandbox and saying, "have fun" isn't good enough. Especially at the beginning of a game, the player should have a clear sense of what to do next and, in particular, *why*. Players need a reason to spend their time on a game, and the game must provide one.

The Right to Make Decisions. There's a carnival game called "Whack-a-Mole." You stand in front of a table with a lot of round holes in it, and at irregular intervals a mechanical mole pops up at random from one of the holes. You have to hit it with a big rubber mallet before it disappears again. You get points for every mole you hit, and the game ends when you have missed a certain number of them. There's no decision-making at all. That might be OK as a three-minute, one-dollar game for little kids, but as a video game, it won't do.

The right to make decisions is related to Sid Meier's definition of gameplay as "a series of interesting choices." Personally I think his definition is a bit too vague, but if a game is nothing but a series of physical challenges with no decision-making, it's lame. It takes almost no design effort to incorporate some decision-making into a game. With "Whack-a-Mole," all you have to do is make some moles worth more points than others; then the player has to decide whether the optimal strategy is to wait for the high-value moles to be sure of getting one, or whack away at everything and risk missing the valuable ones.

The Right to a Swift Death. If the player has made a decision, or failed at a challenge, that will inevitably lead to losing the game, then he should lose it promptly. The game must not keep his hopes up, stringing him along for minutes or hours, before revealing that he has lost. This only applies if there's no way out, of course. If there's still a way to come back from the brink, then obviously he should be given the chance to do so.

The Right To Control Cut-Scenes. This means the right to pause them, to interrupt them, and to replay them again later. The replay option is essential if the cut-scene contains information important to the player's success. Some people want a full set of VCR controls in the game, but I think that's overkill, and besides it would destroy immersion on the first playing—the right to replay is good enough. This right also applies to long monologues by mentor characters, mission briefings, scrolling text, and any other period in the game when the player can only sit and watch.

The Right to Quit, Pause, Save and Resume the Game. In a single-player game, the

player has the right to start and stop the action at will, including switching the machine off and coming back to the game later, i.e. saving and reloading. The player has a right to do this an indefinite number of separate times until the save-device's memory fills up. I will make *one* exception about saving, for games that last 30 minutes or less. Other than that, you must allow him to save. I've been over this ground before, so I'm not going to list all the arguments again. The player's right to save and quit is absolute, and it trumps your right to make the game harder by not letting him do so, and any other excuse you may have. No, I don't care what you think. Shut up and do it.

The Right to Choose Not to Save the Game. Some games give the player only one save point, and the game saves to it automatically. Occasionally, the game does this beyond a point at which the player will inevitably lose the game—which means the previous save is lost and the current one is worthless. This is evil, bad, and wrong. Besides, a good many players like to establish an extra challenge for themselves of making it through a tough spot without saving. Players should be able to save *when* they want, and should not have to save *until* they want.

The Right to Reconfigure the Input Device. A little leeway is required here for very small games on things like a Tamagotchi or a handheld. But on a PC or a console, the player should be able to adjust which button does what in the primary gameplay mode so that the game is most convenient to use. We're not all right-handed and we don't all speak English. Mnemonics like "C for crouch" mean nothing in other languages. How far you go in supporting this right is up to you, but you should do it if your device supports it.

The Right Not To Be Insulted. I downloaded somebody's version of *Minesweeper* for my cell phone the other day. *Minesweeper* is one of those games that you can lose instantly, by pure bad luck. It's a short game, so that's OK. But in this particular version, if you accidentally trigger a mine, the game puts up a message saying, "Better learn the RULES," and that's simply insulting. Of course I know the rules. This need to taunt the player for making a mistake, or losing the game, seems to be a weakness of young male game designers, and it's a bad practice. With a lot of games, the only way to win is by repeatedly losing until you know your way through them. If I'm going to be subjected to snide remarks every time this happens, a lot of the fun goes out of the game. It's a sure sign that the designer is designing for himself, not for the player.

Notice that I said "insulted," not "offended." People can be offended by a lot of things, often without the designer intending it. But an insult is deliberate and personal, and there's no excuse for it.

So that's my Bill of Players' Rights: a dozen fundamental rights that every game must respect. You might wonder why I don't include a "Right to Have Fun." The reason is that no game can guarantee that to every player. Fun is an emotional response to playing, it's not something that you can build into a game and know for sure it's there for all players. Whether the player has fun or not depends in part on whether she likes the kind of game you made, and that's something you have no control over. Besides, some games are used for research or study; they're not necessarily designed to be fun at all.

My Bill of Players' Rights is by no means complete, and I welcome suggestions for additions. Remember, though, a "right" should be something that is general enough to apply across the whole spectrum of gaming, not just to one genre of game or one type of device.

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