

The Feel of It: Minimalism for Analogue Games

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Overview:

Taking inspiration from the 1960s minimalism art movement, we will strip away theme and illustrations, choice and randomness, winning and losing from analogue games to allow focus on material, action, experience and feel. Through discussion and practical experimentation, we will explore the physical texture of play and how it feels to pick up, manipulate and move objects as game components and as games in their own right.

Context:

In thinking about designing or playing an analogue game you could be tempted to focus on the systemic and interactive aspects; the choices made, the random events or the challenges and the strategies used to overcome them. However, consideration should also be given to examination of the moment-to-moment tactile experience, how the players physically enact these rules. Similar ideas have been explored in digital games as 'game feel' (Pichlmair and Johansen, 2021) but there is space for further exploration in analogue games through the lens of minimalism.

Salen and Zimmerman (2003, pp154-156) provide a distinction between constitutive and operational rules and give an example of tic-tac-toe and 3-to-15. Both games are representations of the same constitutive rules; in other words, they have identical game trees when mapping their possible game states. However, they have distinct operational rules because the components and actions which govern the travel through the game states are different. Therefore, the tactile experience of playing these games is also different.

However, even when games have the same operational rules the experience and feel of play can still be changed. Imagine different versions of chess, first where the pieces are flat cardboard tokens, then small wooden carvings, and finally large plastic sculptures filled with sand, as you would find played in a public space. Although the games operational and constitutive rules remain chess, the feel of playing each variation is different. The material properties of the components, their scale and their movement all impact how it feels to play.

In designing analogue games this tactile aspect of play is one consideration of many, one that is also restricted and influenced by manufacturing and shipping requirements. Another smaller scale approach is needed. Although minimalist games have been studied before, primarily in the digital game space, the goals are different to that of minimalism. Here the goals have been, to "distinguish among games, simulation and play" (Myers, 2009, p1) identifying the core characteristics of a digital game, or creating small, abstract games with minimal scope, such as single pixel (Lanzi, P.L., et al, 2022), but still with an eye to "being sufficiently deep and allowing for player exploration and performance" (Nealen et al, 2011, p1). The same design-by-subtraction approach could be taken with analogue games but by taking a step further, drawing influence from the

minimalism art movement, it would allow an even greater focus on the tactile experience of play.

Strickland (2000, p4) describes minimalism as “a style distinguished by severity of means, clarity of form, and simplicity of structure and texture.” It is a style that “removes any trace of emotion or intuitive decision-making, [...]. Minimal work does not allude to anything beyond its literal presence, or its existence in the physical world” (Meyer, 2000, p15). By stripping away many of the aspects of analogue games we see in commercial settings, illustrations, themes, and even removing what may be considered core aspects of games, choice, randomness, outcomes, goals we will be left with an austere form of game, perhaps as unrecognisable as games as minimalism was to the art world at the time. But it is in these minimalism inspired games we can focus purely on feel and physical experience, the movement of a token, the flipping of a card and other gestures of play, and recognise them as complete artefacts.

Objectives and outcomes:

- Distinguish between minimalist and minimalism in analogue games.
- Explore the boundaries and definitions of analogue minimalism games.
- Experience designing and playing analogue minimalism games.
- Identify future potential for discussions, research and exhibitions.

Format:

A three-hour facilitated workshop.

- The first part of the workshop will be a discussion on applying a minimalism approach to game feel in analogue games.
- The second part will be practical experimentation using game and non-game components to physically explore the feel of different materials, scales and approaches to manipulating those components.
- The final part will be a discussion of findings from the practical experimentation and an examination of future potential for this approach to games design in research, artistic and design settings.

Expression of Interest

Those interested in participating are invited to submit expressions of interest to d.king@lcc.arts.ac.uk (subject: Digra Minimalism Workshop) incorporating:

- A brief bio (maximum 300 words), incorporating an account of how the workshop's themes align to your practice/research and why you would like to attend the workshop.
- A question on the outlined themes that you would like to bring to the discussion.
- An object, item or prop that you would agree to bring to the workshop to use in the practical experimentation.

A maximum of 20 participants will be selected to participate.

Facilitator Biography

Dr David King is the course leader for MA Games Design at University of the Arts London, where he has taught for the last decade. His research interests include minimalism in games design, experimental games and analogue games which he has spoken about at the Board Game Studies Colloquium. He is one of the designers involved with creating the Wilmots Warehouse board game.

References

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