Dadaism and Game Design
by
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This is the written version of my NarraScope 2023 presentation that I gave virtually. Now that the presentation is done, I want to expand further on some of the ideas I had here, like how the Dadaist 'somewhat' naturally came across game design, their marketing tactics, the life stories of Dadaist collaborators, as well as further research into the other Avant-garde art movements of the time—I feel as if there are lessons to be learned from these 20th century artists that game developers can benefit from.

This is an overview of my research so far into Dadaism and Game Design. Right now this talk is mostly anecdotes from early Dada history as well as some connections to game design sprinkled throughout. My hope is that this talk inspires you to see 'invention' as 'fun', and 'nothing' as 'serious.'

Hello, my name is Alejandro Ruiz del Sol. This presentation is about the historical art movement called Dada, and I will be relating the history of that movement to the game development process. I use any pronoun. I'm a poet, independent game dev, and educator – currently looking for work as a writer, academic, or teacher in the games sphere. This will be my first NarraScope talk, and I'm glad for the opportunity to share my thoughts and learn from everyone else here during this conference.

Although I haven't prepared to share any recent games that can be called Dadaist or even Dada-esque, my hope is to spark a conversation and for others to create games or highlight already released games that are inspired by Dada. This talk is mostly theoretical and historical.

Dadaism is one of the well-known Avant-garde and Anti-art movements from the 20th century. Their art rejected definition, yet it was political, spontaneous, and contradictory. Dadaism inspired artists like Andy Warhol, the band Talking Heads, and even Pablo Picasso (who was also involved with the early Dadaists). One could argue that Dadaism has even inspired video game production. I believe that the philosophies and practices that the Dadaists coveted can inspire us to move and challenge our chosen art form.

The Cabaret in Zurich

The story of the Dadaists starts in 1916 during World War 1 in Zurich at this short-lived cabaret called Cabaret Voltaire. Hugo Ball and Emmy Henning were the founders of this cabaret, and, without going too deep into their specific story, they founded it so that they could become financially independent (Ball). Zurich at the time was a very international city because of the refugees from World War 1. Cabarets were a popular form of entertainment at the time, and this cabaret served an international audience of painters, students, revolutionaries, tourists, crooks, and many others of varying social respectability (Ball). For this audience, the cabaret held performances spoken in many languages and voiced by many cultures. Like the Romanian artist Tristen Tzara, who was a pivotal character in the cabaret's success. Tzara did everything he possibly could to see Cabaret Voltaire succeed, from performing on stage to organizing aspects of the events himself (Hentea).

With interest in Zurich Dada waning, Tristan Tzara moved to Paris to join the Dadaists over there, who were all inspired by the work of the original Cabaret. It was here where Tristan Tzara, who witnessed the birth of Zurich Dada, would witness the death of Paris Dada.

Side note: In 1922 during a Mardi Gras party for the Queer community in Paris, Tzara was painted like a Roman matron honoring femininity. He is quoted as saying "Ah, I know what you are thinking about me. … But you are quite wrong. No one knows the secret of Tristan Tzara's sex!" (Hentea)

<p align="center">The trial of Paris Dada (Finding your team)</p>

Sometimes you might have an ideological rift within your development team. This can look like a lot of different things, like different directions in tone, aesthetic, speed of development, which at worst can lead to ultimatums or finger-pointing, at best can lead to internal restructuring. It doesn't always lead to a grim ending, but for Dadaism this rift did lead to the end of the era of Dada. This rift that I'm talking about was a period of time in 1921 when the Paris Dadaists were obsessed with bureaucratic procedure, and in search of art that would transcend the literary label (Breton and Tzara)

What principles do you as an artist stand for? Are you willing to defend, and double-down on, your beliefs about art? One of those faux-bureaucratic events was the trial of Maurice Barrés (Breton and Tzara). Barres was a popular French writer who was liked by some of the Dadaists, but had quickly lost popularity due to being nationalistic. The Dadaists decided to put Barres on trial for the crime of "attacking the integrity of the mind." For the Dadaists this was obviously a serious crime that would benefit from a fake trial, but there were also Dadaists who felt that Dadaism was beyond trials, bureaucracy, and any definition.

This anti-establishment rhetoric was likely on Tzara's mind as he ended his turn on the witness stand, saying, "Eat some chocolate. Wash your brain. Dada. Dada. Drink some water." (165-166 Hentea)

It's important that we, as game designers, independently and with larger teams, have philosophies, intentions, expectations, and principles that we adhere to throughout our games development process. One important philosphical question you may ask is: what role, if any, would monetization play in the game?

Some more questions might be: What are your goals as a group? Is it purely an artistic pursuit? Do you make art that sells? Is it about entertainment? What labels will you ascribe to this project? What game principles?

There were many factors that led to the success of the cabaret, such as their international inclusiveness and unique philosophies. These factors led to the longevity of the movement, and could be mirrored within game development. These stories about Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, and especially Tristan Tzara could inspire game studios who want to gain an international audience. Ball and Henning had hoped that they could achieve financial independence through their art, and Tzara had hoped that he could be one of the leaders of a cultural movement. Thankfully, there was an international audience and international artists who admired the Dadaists.

How can these historical stories help us further develop our craft? Brian Schrank defines Avant-garde games as "…present[ing] [their] own definition of the medium that challenges the status quo." I think this is a useful definition because of its emphasis on breakthroughs made by each individual game. It is also a good definition because it can be used as an umbrella term that can house Dada games and other Avant-garde games as well. I believe that games can share philosophies and genres as a part of a collective effort to challenge the status quo.

Tristan Tzara wrote a lot of interesting manifestos with philosophies that can be used to inspire our games. One of those manifestos was called "On Feeble Love and Bitter Love." It contains some amazing lines like "We have always made mistakes, but the greatest mistakes are the poems we have written." and "Pride is the star that yawns and penetrates through the eyes and the mouth." It was in this manifesto that Tzara wrote his famous instructions, "To make a Dadaist poem". These instructions can be viewed as Tzara's attempt at a narrative driven game (or interactive fiction). The rules of the game are simple: you take a print news article, cut out all the words, randomize the clippings, and glue them onto a new sheet of paper, this creates a Dadaist poem that rewards the player with a poem upon completion. I wonder how this game can be renewed by today's game developers. One possible game example is *Baba Is You*, where the player moves predetermined words around to create new rules and solve puzzles (Although the predetermined words and puzzle answers differ from what a Dadaist would ask for.) You can also look at the other Dadaist techniques and imagine the possibility of future games: sound poems, manifestos, collage, photomontage, assemblage, and ready-mades – all these processes can find parallels in game design.

Even marketing can be seen in Dada (There is a larger discussion to be had about how the Dadaists, especially Tristan Tzara, marketed their work to a general audience, but that discussion would have to wait for a different talk). Here is a story of Dadaist marketing relayed by Marius Hentea that I think is remarkably similar to the marketing campaign behind Metal Gear Solid 2. In 1920, Tzara and the Paris Dadaists hosted an event at The Grand Palais in Paris. On the poster for the event, the Dadaists announced that Charlie Chaplin would perform with them (this was a lie, Chaplin was not in attendance). Because of the popularity of the Dadaists at the time, all the newspapers ran with this dis-information, that this super famous American artist would be there, at a free event, open to the public. This dis-information led to what was called a "considerable crowd" on the night of the performance.

The crowd was ultimately disappointed that Charlie Chaplin did not show up. Although the crowd didn't get exactly what they were expecting, having experienced Dada, the crowd was left entertained and satisfied. The ruse was successful. By this time in history, the Dadaists had built up a contradictory reputation, the general public never knew what to expect. An important goal of this dis-information play, I feel, is that the audience leaves the experience with a sense of fulfillment. (Note: this isn't an open invitation to lie to your players)

One of my favorite Dadaist techniques is sound poetry because it takes performance poetry and essentializes it into tone, voice, and shape. You can find a great version of the first Dadaist sound poem "Karawane" by Hugo Ball on YouTube by the flutist Janice Misurell-Mitchell. For those of us out there interested in performance poetry, I do recommend you listen to that version, but also I want to invite you to make a game out of sound poetry that is akin to Tzara's cut-up poem. Start by taking a poem that's already been written and cutting it into individual syllables, take those syllables and choose which ones you want to use to create a new poem that emphasizes sound but doesn't include any real words. A technique like this may not directly connect with game design, but poetry is an excellent catalyst for developing creativity and ingenuity.

My definition of a Dadaist game is still a work-in-progress, but it emphasizes the importance of the collective. Although the Dadaists created work that was as unique as the individual, they formed together to create a stronger whole, which was reflected back into the strength of their work. I expect that, as I learn more about the history of Dadaism and the Avant-garde, my definition will change, my definition might even disappear, or become a question mark. I define a Dadaist game like this: It is a game that sources its materials (words/story structures) from everyday life, removing them from their

context, and transforming them into art expression that is shrill, entertaining, contrary, political, and yet ultimately meaningless.

So today, we talked about the origins of Dada. I shared with you a game that they created over a century ago, and I've hopefully inspired you to invite experimentation into your game development process. Although I feel as if I've barely scratched the surface of this particular playground, my hope is to find the time to dig deeper. If you head over to my website you can also find a written version of this presentation, as well as links and pdfs for all of my references.

If you have any questions or comments about my presentation, or want to discuss any opportunities to work together, please find me online through email, Twitter, LinkedIn and on my website.

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