Metaphorical Game Design – A Post Mortem of Akrasia

Doris C. Rusch

Wouldn’t it be great to have more profound, thought-provoking and insightful games that teach us something about ourselves and that foster reflection and interpretation? The paper Games about LOVE and TRUST? Harnessing the Power of Metaphors for Experience Design, which was presented at this year’s Sandbox conference, suggested a design approach that facilitates the creation of such games. It argues that basing more games on abstract concepts such as truth, honor and trust, and making these concepts tangible via procedural metaphors, could expand the experiential palette of games and open them up to a wider range of meaningful and emotionally rich game-play experiences. That’s the theory. Over the course of the annual eight-week summer programme at the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab, seven students put the theory to the test. The result is a game called Akrasia. It’s based on the abstract concept of addiction and made tangible via procedural metaphors.

This presentation provides valuable lessons learnt from the design process of Akrasia. It specifically addresses the following points:

- Getting a grip on the concept
- Finding a design: procedural representation vs. experience
- The importance of a “vision guy”
- Meaning first, mechanics second
- How to ensure one coherent reading and interpretative richness at the same time?!
- What if players just don’t get it?

Doris C. Rusch holds a postdoctoral position with the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab in the Programme at Comparative Media Studies at MIT. Before that she did postdoctoral work at the Institute for Design and Assessment of Technology at Vienna University of Technology. Her main research focus is on the metaphorical potential of games and how it can be used to produce a wide range of emotionally satisfying, thought-provoking and insightful experiences. Her work is theory driven, but aimed at applicability to concrete game design with the goal of pushing the boundaries of games as expressive media. Rusch has an eclectic background, having completed studies in German Literature, Philosophy, English and Comparative Media at the University of Vienna, where she also received her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics.