"Proposal" An Artists Board Game

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ABSTRACT

In 2008 I created an artists board game *Proposal*. The first official playing of the game was in front of an invited audience and was billed as a performance piece at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester. *Proposal* visually references influences and inspiration behind my artwork and playing the game physically demonstrate the types of actions I undertake when generating new ideas for artwork. Through playing the game participants enter into discussions with fellow players and generate ideas for potential future artworks. These outcomes led me to investigate the potential of using board games as a teaching tool and I have since begun work with schools to look at ways of using board games to promote discussion and embed information.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

Coaching through Games and Simulation in the Arts and Sciences

General Terms

Performance, Game Design, Gamer Communities, Learner Evaluation

Keywords

Social interaction, Board Game, Performance, Reflection, Gaming Communities, Artwork, Narrative

1. Introduction

In 2008 whilst undertaking an MA in Contemporary Fine Art at The University of Salford I created a board game aimed at artists called Proposal. The game was initially created as a way of reflecting on the need to evidence background research when creating art within a Higher Education institution and was made in direct response to a Master of Arts modular brief. Whilst working within the established visual expectations of a board games appearance, I could introduce various concepts and themes running through my arts practice. These themes included perceptions of scale, multiples, appropriation of found objects and a love of 50's and 60's packaging.

Through the creation of the game the parameters of the rules I put in place to aid functionality, helped to shape the work and turn it from an artwork that had its references in board game

imagery to a working game that through playing would enable the players to generate their own art ideas.

2. Game components, imagery and structure of play

As the board game was built primarily as an artwork it is larger than a standard sized board, (150cm x80 cm) and contains handmade objects that are the same size as dolls house furniture (1:12 scale). The board is split into 5 zones each zone houses miniature props to identify distinct areas of the board;

Zone one, a Museum Souvenir Shop featuring a number of tourist destination post cards, and model props of a shop counter, till and postcards for sale. Zone two; A Second Hand Emporium featuring a series of object playing cards, and model props of a variety of objects including a stuffed fish, games, books and tools. Zone three; A Postcard Fair featuring Postcards to collect and model props of a trestle table with miniature postcards in boxes. Zone Four; A Pub. A place to discuss ideas with fellow players or change the rules featuring a model table, bar stools and assorted drinks Zone five; An Artists Studio featuring a model workspace. There is also a gallery pack of cards and a library pack of cards that can be collected and swapped during the game.

Figure1. Close up of The Second Hand Emporium

"Proposal" can be classified within board game conventions as combining Roll and Move, Story Telling, Set Collection and Trading Actions within the mechanics of the game. The aim of the game was to put forward a proposal, approved by the panel of fellow players as the winning submission. The game is played in two stages, Stage 1 involves players moving around the board collecting specific research and inspiration in the form of visual references (i.e. a postcard), quotes (i.e. "The idea of multiples is the distribution of ideas" Joseph Beuys) and objects (i.e. an old Ladybird Book). So a player may end up collecting a number of postcards to use as source material,

whilst a visit to the library and gallery packs of cards may give inspiration.

Players can move into different zones to collect or call fellow players together for discussion. Stage one allows the player to randomly generate source material on a topic – in this case " The influences of artist Sam Ingleson". However if you keep the board layout and game structure and replace the content with source material relating to a different topic, then you have a system for presenting alternate random source material as inspiration for creating artwork.

Stage 2 requires the players to reflect on gathered material and use this to respond to their artists brief (selected at the start of play). This system of using an artists brief to pose a task, i.e. " Propose an text based artwork based on the material collected" is a format that can generate artwork across topics and additional briefs can be suggested, either as a random artwork generator way of engaging learners currently studying art. Stage 2 ends with each player proposing an idea for a new artwork. All players must then discuss the merits of each proposal and as a curatorial panel come to a group consensus as to the 'best proposal. This should be based on the quality of the proposal as well as evidence that the collected research had fed into the final proposal. This is a fairly arbitury process, though one that echoes the tastes and judgments of any arts judging panel. The player with the best proposal is deemed the winner! This process could be extended into a third stage that would move away from the board game format and involve a physical studio based realisation of artworks. This is the stage where the game becomes more focused as a teaching tool and moves away from the recognised board game format.

3. Board game as performance

Figure2. The performance

Through the act of devising the rules and functionality of the game, my focus moved away from the manipulation of the board game structure, to an interest in the social interaction between players. What happens once a game has been invented and is open to player's interpretation of the rules? How are the changes captured and how do rules become a shared knowledge within communities? I wanted a way to focus the interaction between players during the playing of "Proposal" and decided to invite a group of strangers (to each other and myself) to play the game in front of an invited audience. By inviting an audience, the playing of the game would become performative and each player's actions would be imbued with a sense of theatre. The players were selected through an application process after an advert was placed on an arts jobs website. The advert asked for participants with an interest in board games that would be willing to take part in a performance. Six players were selected via email, from forty applicants. They were sent the rules the week before, but had not seen the board, met myself or each other prior to commencement of the game. I had no idea whether the players would turn up to play the game, five out of the six players selected, attended and took part in the performance.

The event has parallels with the art group Blast Theory's enquiry into the nature of public participation within artworks and within electronic spaces. Both processes capture emergent behaviour and social dynamics as a means of structuring a live event. Whilst Blast Theory invites players to establish their own codes of behaviour and morality within a parallel world, the performative element of my board game focuses on the social interaction between strangers.

During the performance of *Proposal* the participants played for three hours and their actions were filmed whilst an audience of approximately 50 people over the course of the evening, looked on. The game was played in The 1830' s Warehouse, a listed building that forms part of The Museum of Science and Industry. The audience ascended a glass lift to an open plan darkened space, where the board game was set out on a table illuminated by stage lighting. The players were seated around the table, each wearing numbered bibs, their identities remaining anonymous to the audience. A camera was fitted above the board to film the actions taking place on the board and this footage was relayed live back to a TV Screen in the same room. The audience was able to walk around the players and study their actions. Audience members did not receive any instruction on how they should behave in the space, but none of them interfered with playing off the game or conversed directly with the players. The players ignored the audience and communicated only with each other.

Figure 3. Stage one of "Proposal"

In order for the audience to follow the progress of the game, players had to log their creative thoughts each time they collected a new piece of research or visual imagery. These thoughts were written on individual player blackboards placed around the edges of the gaming table, meaning the players had to leave the private space of the board to write on the blackboards. Comments logged ranged from appreciation of imagery to pinpointing parallels with their own arts practice.

As all the players were artists or poets they accepted and probably found this instruction easier to carry out than players without formal arts training may have. The blackboard comments were then used by the players in Stage 2 of the game to influence their written proposals.

Figure 4. Player 2 writing on her blackboard

The players had to contend with a number of different factors; understanding and responding to the rules of a new game, playing a game with strangers, taking part in a performance as opposed to playing the game within a private setting and giving input and commitment to a game where fellow players and audience could pry on their creative thought processes. Each player received £30 in expenses for playing the game and this may have been on factor in the level of commitment they all showed to progressing with the game. Being part of a Performance may have been more of a challenge to some of the players than others, though all knew it would be played live, before accepting the offer. One of the player's own artwork was also based around performance and audience engagement and she helped to focus the participation within the group of players.

Figure 5. Stage 2, writing the proposals

As an observer it was interesting seeing how each player interpreted the rules and how they came to a communal consensus on how they would interpret rules that they did not fully understand. I imagined that they would skip sections, or make up their own rules but they generally stuck to the constraints. As with other board games I am sure that with the assimilation of the rules and familiarity with the game would develop with a number of plays and at this stage players would be more likely to agree their communities version of the established rules. In terms of playing approach, All five players submitted a proposal, two collaborated producing a less serious/ considered list of responses to the artists brief, whilst the other 3 player produced something more like a convention proposal for an artwork and one player whose influences and approach was most similar to my own, produced a genuinely interesting proposal that could have been worked up to an artwork. Because of a similar background history in community engagement art projects, it is difficult to know if her proposal was genuinely the 'best' or if it was just more closely mapped something I may have suggested. All the players were using my imagery and frames of reference to build ideas from so there was bound to be some ideas that felt like my own.

Figure 6. The board after play has ended

4. Using a board game as a method of reflection and creation of new work

The game was designed for board game players with an interest in the creative arts. Making explicit my influences and established methods of working I created a template that allows arts students to understand the various stages of research collection, formation of ideas, rejection of ideas and re testing that occurs during a period of creativity and how it is a non linear process. The structure of the board game enables arts students to utilise the rules but adapt the visual content to provide a reflective tool to examine their working processes. I will be testing these methods out with Level Zero students on an undergraduate fine art course later this year. Starting with a standard undergraduate modular brief I will present the game structure to the students and work with them to create their own individual board games that can then be used as a catalyst for idea generation. As with the suggested Stage 3 of Proposal, having used the board to generate ideas, students need to then go back to the studio and carry those ideas out. Having the artwork the students can return to their individual boards and add more content and reflect on the process. This can all be used as evidence as submission for their modules.

Figure 7. Teacher's board game created during workshop

Taking the board game *Proposal* as inspiration, this model of reflective practice has been tested with Primary Head Teachers during a CPD training session focusing on Creativity & RE. The teachers were asked to use the zone structure to divide their board and create tasks (rather than artists briefs) for the players to undertake. In this instance teachers replaced my content with research related to QCA schemes of work. The teachers designed the look of the board and developed their own method of moving around the board. The teacher found that setting a task to collect various objects and pieces of information would help pupils reflect on a topic and was also a useful revision tool. The teacher also found nominating some cards as discussion questions would be useful in generating debate in class.

5. Games in development

Since developing this board game I have been working on two other board games, the first is a Big Cats in Britain game that has come out of an interest in the community of people across the country who collect evidence relating to Big Cat sighting. Having attended 2 annual conferences I am working with the groups Greater Manchester Representative to develop a board game. The aim of this game is to allow players to either play in the role of a tracker/ researcher or as a big cat eluding capture, whilst hopefully gaining an insight into some of the relationships within the Big Cat Community. Whilst Big Cats In Britain sees it as a fun game to be marketed to its members I hope it will also evidence real characters and their relationships, wildly differing theories and positions of hierarchy within the closed community. The game will have an educational element to it, using information direct from the members whose expertise include zoologists, scientists, professional trackers, authors and ecologists. Playing the game will enable people new to the subject to gain a lot of information and enter

discussions on the various theories. The game will also be structured to allow Big Cat specialists playing the game to use and build upon their existing knowledge to formulate more developed arguments.

Figure 8. BCIB conference 2009

The Nuclear Education Trust has commissioned a card game to be developed by myself in collaboration with young people in Greater Manchester. I had delivered educational workshops for young people in response to an exhibition at Salford Museum and Art Gallery exhibition "Movements for Peace Exhibition 2008". The aim of the workshops was for the young people to explore some of the issues raised in the exhibition. I created a simple card game 'Fallout' based in a time after a nuclear bomb had been dropped, with the aim of the game to build communities and collect provisions. By establishing a few rules and card types, i.e. shelters, people, provisions, the children started to build up the game deciding on characters and object cards. As well as identifying the cards they also became to reflect on the items they were suggesting and placing qualitative judgements on the cards for instance a nurse was seen as having more value in a post nuclear world than a bank manager. This allowed them to give numerical values to the cards and create another level of strategy to the game. Based on these workshops I have received a grant to go into school to work further with the young people to design the game to a standard that can be distributed as part of the CND's education pack for schools.