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# I HEART LocoRoco – a reading of a gameplay experience

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In the diverse landscape of modern gaming it is rare to find specific games that are universally described in affectionate terms. Allegiances to form and genre identify the various tribes and often the divide between gaming sub-cultures runs deep. Passionate players pride themselves both by the longevity of their status and via signifiers of skill acquired. These traits typify what has become known as the “hardcore” player; in popular gaming culture the hardcore is often positioned contra the “casual” player with hours and type of game played as the main criteria for qualification. However these terms are ludicrous at best and fall short in describing the multitude of people who play digital games. The following is focussed on one particular Sony PSP game franchise that has received widespread critical acclaim, LocoRoco. This is a 2D platform game initially released in Europe in Summer 2006 and although it has not gone platinum<sup>1</sup> this title got to No 5 in the UK Charts and has won 2 BAFTA’s for character design and children’s game in 2006. LocoRoco 2 was released in the U.K. in November 2008. Sony’s Tsutomu Kouno, the Director of LocoRoco, has stated that one of his design intentions was to make a game that appealed to those who didn’t normally play games (Kouno, 2006). This statement is key in my selection of this game. As a hugely lucrative yet nascent industry, it is of interest to study the ways in which commercial developers attempt to attract new players to part with their hard-earned entertainment dollar. My investigation looks to explicate game design decisions that entice a player into dialogue with the ongoing game experience. I will look at issues including pleasure and seduction within the action and reward cycle inherent to gameplay.

## Game Design

Modern digital games development falls within the canon of software design. As a design discipline, the construction of games can be seen as being concerned with the form and the function of a games system. Games can be regarded as dynamic systems that build an ongoing dialogue between the game designer and the game player within the context of the game experience. Historically games designers have had the luxury of designing for their own taste, by making games that they would be interested in playing or by re-making games that have commercially succeeded in the past. As game form evolves there is an increasing need to formalise as well as celebrate the game design process. Effective design operates within set constraints; the basic design criteria of digital game form provide a starting point to the game design process i.e. what is the point of the game? How do you play? How does the game play feel?

For some years now industry has been looking to expand game form into new areas. The traditional model of game value measured in terms of play duration (similar to

film scripts being measured in inches) is being superseded by a wider commercial perspective. Most new media forms follow a particular path into wide cultural acceptance, from loyal early adopters to mainstream exposure. One example can be seen in the development of games more like television, as shorter experiences (4-6 hours rather than 80-100) delivered episodically. Other trends include the creation of games that are closer to traditional media contexts, for example the hugely successful karaoke games (Singstar, RockBand, etc.) A third development is by making games “easier” to play and therefore making them more accessible to more players. Amidst this design evolution 2006 brought a radical move from Nintendo with the offer of the Wii. The Wii re-imagines games back to a 1980’s social family context. Through integration and commercialisation of research technology built around motion tracking the Wii baton has ushered in a new frame for interaction (see Westcott, 2008). As a result digital gaming has truly opened up as a mainstream and hugely lucrative consumer phenomenon.

A core challenge in appealing to new audiences in the wider technological context is ease of use. LocoRoco was designed specifically for the Sony PSP, a handheld portable gaming device. Regardless of how LocoRoco grows as a franchise this initial design decision bucks a trend within the industry for games that are expected to traverse platforms (by being released over time on a range of devices) or that aim to cross media (by creating IP that can be extended across media including games, television, film, mobile and web). The PSP is held in a landscape orientation and uniquely has two game paddles placed on top of the device in addition to the standard Sony directional controller and other device specific buttons. It is Kouno’s use of the PSP’s game paddles as core controllers for LocoRoco that builds a simple interface to the game mechanic. In ergonomic terms this design choice allows the player to hold the PSP in both hands with forefingers ready to interact with the PSP paddles on the top of the console, allowing full and unimpeded view of the central game screen. The central game design conceit for LocoRoco is the manipulation of the world as opposed to the physical control of the main character itself. I use my L and R paddles to tilt the ground under my LocoRoco’s body in order to propel them through a level. I don’t see myself in game just the result of my action. As a design strategy this use of indirect interaction affects the player’s expectation of causality within the game, the player is made aware that the mechanic enables her to act then to pause to watch what happens. The only other in-game movement control I have is the ability to bounce the LocoRoco by pressing both paddles simultaneously. Together with the split/recombine key combination this consists the entirety of how I move in a LocoRoco game level. The close mapping of the physical device to the game controls is an important design decision in the way it supports cognition of functional control knowledge. I rapidly orient myself to game action, and quickly discover the pleasures of the game. In an age where the complexity of much game design generates the need for bloated and ornate interfaces the design of LocoRoco offers a simple and intuitive experience. This is central to its accessibility.

In apparent contradiction to the stated design goal to attract those who don’t already game, gameplay keys in to nostalgia amongst existent players. LocoRoco builds on a familiar gaming genre to frame its structure. The lineage of the 2D platformer goes back to the early-1980’s with titles like Donkey Kong (Nintendo, 1981) setting the starting point for this largely superseded genre. This type of game offers a culturally familiar context for a play experience. In typical platformer tradition, the object of

each LocoRoco level is to find and eat as many “berries” as possible, which increases the size of the LocoRoco. The player must avoid enemies, both “Burrs” (spiky obstacles) and “Moja” (flying black creatures) that can cause them to lose LocoRoco’s and die if the last LocoRoco is lost. In addition to the central levels in LocoRoco the game offers a series of minigames that are accessible from the main menu screens, these include building, racing and shooting games. LocoRoco 2 continues the franchise by layering up the complexity and range of gameplay and graphics on offer in a number of ways whilst retaining core level themes. LocoRoco 2 adds additional game mechanics (the collection of music), scene characters, new levels (underwater), interaction methods (the ability to use a vehicle to move through levels, etc) and movement signatures to the game. The game is organised into levels within the LocoRoco world, each level is a stylised, naturalistic environment that reoccurs (with increased difficulty) as the game progresses. Most levels make reference to other cultural form; with the sand level paying tribute to the Lara Croft/Indiana Jones metaphors of moving blocks to progress. Other elements within levels reference pinball and those handheld puzzles involving a ball bearing and a maze in terms of the behaviour of the movement. Movement is a core element of the digital game experience as the central ground of player agency in game. One family of levels is the ice levels, where the player “slides” the LocoRoco across a slippery white world. Another acrobatic set throws the LocoRoco up to the stars, whilst a third bounces the Loco inside the belly of giant beasts. These themes offer a focus on particular types of game movement; the player has to adjust tilt strategies to respond to the unique aspects of each level signature. Material qualities of this movement correlate, albeit loosely, to real world physics that repeat across levels and exist within an internally consistent world. This correlation has more to do with the exaggeration found in cartoons than anything directly observable in reality. For example, the ice series of levels offer a movement signature that resembles that of sliding across slippery ice surfaces, although punctuated by softer “snow” segments to allow traction for jumping. The player gets used to compensating for the exaggerated movement and pace in progressing through the level, the pleasure in this series lies in the speed and smoothness of movement on screen. Each level can be played in short periods of time, with a typical play duration of between 5 and 20 minutes, accordingly the distance travelled is short although the game offers an active play mechanism (barrier, reward, hidden challenge) in most screens. The playable area in each level is restricted by game geography to small sections of screen space. This fixed spectrum for action limits interaction possibilities, yet the movement offered is always fluid and rhythmic. This points to a scopic pleasure in games as well as a pleasure in progression, the visual and kinaesthetic rewards offered on screen in LocoRoco bring the player regularly back to re-play favourite sections.

## Visual Style

LocoRoco presents a flat coloured, simplified and two-dimensional visual style that represents a highly stylised “land of blowing flowers, lively creatures and pastel scenery” (excerpt from online game description). The player is the peaceful planet that the LocoRoco inhabits and is only represented within the FMV at the end of each world level. The game’s dynamic camera follows the LocoRoco/s through their

assisted journey and automatically zooms and pans to follow and frame the character's movement. During play there is no visible interface and the points system is represented graphically (the LocoRoco gets bigger), thereby removing the barrier of interface between player and game. LocoRoco's visual style draws heavily on three modern dominant themes; that of the cartoon, that of cute as well as that of the Flash aesthetic. As a means of communication between game and player these visual themes offer a shorthand for the cultural context of their consumption. The aesthetic familiarity of LocoRoco enables effective movement between visual and interactive pleasure. In his core text "Understanding Comics" Scott McCloud (1993) talks of cartoons as "a form of amplification through simplification", this form of visual representation allows for the widest possibility of identification and hence universality of appeal. The connection between games and cartoons as a visual art form have long been acknowledged and are clear to see. As Toby Gard wrote in his 2000 Gamasutra.com article, "Cartoons are a deliberately simplified representation of reality.. Through exaggeration, cartoons are able to elicit very powerful emotional responses from an audience, because cartoon acting is a concentrated version of live acting." Game visual artists, in the expression of their craft successfully apply some of the lessons of exaggeration and caricature, especially as regards character design, both in terms of image and movement. LocoRoco's world physics presents cartoon-like movement, characterised by stylized and exaggerated postures and movements. My LocoRoco bounces like a cartoon ball in terms of how it squashes and stretches when it is bounced, this creates expressive and rhythmic feedback and is core to the pleasure of this game. Each different level signature typifies a different form of this type of exaggeration in the ways in which I can move the LocoRoco. Our action within videogames is amplified, a single movement with the controller causes a sequence of events in the game that embellish the action-reward cycle hard coded to game form. As Manovich (2002) points out "The computer program amplifies our single action, expanding it into a narrative sequence". This amplification of affects features heavily in LocoRoco.

Cuteness is a cultural style that is seen to have emerged in Japan as a commercially appropriated form of rebellion from the responsibilities of growing up. Initially incorporating western style for a Japanese market, this style has grown as a dialogue between the East and West. The cute aesthetic communicates difference and shared identity internationally. Cute represents an accessible "other". This childlike style has been adopted by commerce as a strategy to tap in to the affection and attachment romanticised by this cultural form. Larissa Hjorth's (2007) analysis of gaming and cute culture in Korea points to the function of this aesthetic as relates to character design as helping "facilitate traditional forms of intimacy". This trend has developed in examples such as the Japanese Superflat art movement, led by the master Murakami, which remixes and reflects the cultural contact, fascination and antipathy between the East and the West. In past years, flat two-dimensional design has become a popular visual style for digital media. Due to initial technical constraints web designers worked with vectors to keep image size down. This was factored into the design of graphic authoring environments and a whole generation of flat colour websites were animated. As this aesthetic has evolved it has turned to more biological references to colour and setting. This Flash aesthetic is codified in the history of the Internet and whether acknowledged or not can be seen in the screen designs and coding implementation<sup>2</sup> of LocoRoco. In the context of LocoRoco the adoption of a very particular visual cute style, one that is graphically simplified as a

move towards a global aesthetic, has been a specific strategy to internationalise the appeal of the game. In the game's ongoing development additional layers of visual detail have been built up with the inclusion of more creatures and background. However the game technically performs faster and more reliably than any experience crafted in Flash. The player accepts the fictive conceit of a game world through the craft of its expression. The game's internal believability and consistency to itself, and associated cues, allows us to relax into our play.

Most games are experienced through a player character, which represents player action in game. The player character is the centre of the player's attention for the duration of the game. The game body offers many guises; amongst which are game puppets (characters that are distinct from the player in the tradition of Lara Croft), avatars (masks of ourselves represented on screen, as seen with *Second Life* creations), or iconic characters (a performance object that allows play, in games like *Super Monkey Ball*) (Tosca, 2003). The types of LocoRoco do not affect the gameplay in different ways but do provide the player with a different audio-visual experience. LocoRoco offers a refined type of iconic character that the player affects and travels with but does not directly control, this distancing supports smooth switching between player generated and level generated movement, reinforcing the kinaesthetic pleasure of moving through this game. All of the characters are highly simplified, one would be hard pushed to find a more basic representation of a face than a circle, two eyes and a mouth. Yet the seven travelling companions offer highly characterised expressive traits. The first yellow LocoRoco is the simplest. As the game progresses, the player encounters five new types of LocoRoco, each colour-coded and with its own personality, voice and theme songs<sup>3</sup>. These new identities are introduced at the beginning of each world before the new travelling companion continues with the level. As the game progresses the player has a choice of which one to journey with. LocoRoco 2 presents new bit non-player characters, some involved in more detailed game mechanics. All the LocoRoco's come together in the final theme. As the player joins more LocoRoco's during play the LocoRoco grows in physical size. This size change affects game play in terms of movement and health; different game elements have a requirement for a specific number of acquisitions. At key points the LocoRoco splits into individuals to navigate a tight spot or to charm other characters into revealing their secrets through song. Audio is extremely important in LocoRoco and functions on a multitude of levels. Audio signatures typify aspects of the game. Soundtracks in levels match visual style and player character whilst music is used to narrate the journey by warning of impending threat and opportunity. Music is written into the game narrative through its ability to create harmony or discord within the LocoRoco world. The use of audio is extended in LocoRoco 2 with the addition of a basic rhythm action interaction at key reward points. The audio signatures of the player characters punctuate the play experience as they chatter in their own unintelligible specifically designed language, creation of which avoids any extended need for internationalisation.

## Gameplay

I chose World 2 Level 7 in the first LocoRoco for my close reading partly due to its reference to the 1966 science fiction film "Fantastic Voyage" in which a rescue team

is miniaturised and injected into the body of a cold war scientist in order to save his life. This brief segment outlines a typical pattern of play in the central levels of LocoRoco. On selection of this level I am presented with a cut scene showing the tiny LocoRoco being swallowed by a giant snake then fall down into the soft pink world of the snake's intestine. As I take in my game surrounds my LocoRoco bounces impatiently in an idle state and paying closer attention I can see that the LocoRoco is signalling the direction for movement. If I am cruel enough to continue watching the game camera zooms in to emphasis the frustration of my travelling companion. Pausing for a moment proves productive however and I notice an extra ledge above the LocoRoco that indicates a hidden level. I bounce my LocoRoco up on to the ledge and she is sucked into a ride through a narrow loop to a hidden cave where we discover two large red berries and a house part. Thereby rewarded for my observational skills, I re-join my Locos and shoot them out back to the start of the level. My identity as a player becomes extended through play into the game and the original control conceit that I was playing the world has become blurred. By this point in the game I feel less concerned about what or who I am and more focussed on the specificity of controlling the level specific movement. In games there is always a tension between cognitive acquisition of skill and ongoing challenge, the challenge is LocoRoco is very forgiving in terms of beating the game but the rhythmic charm of engagement and visual style extend the play moment by encouraging re-play. This forgiving pacing of game mechanic allows the player a certain space for pause that makes it easier to disengage and then return to the play experience.

As a purely voluntary activity (Huizinga, 1955) pleasure is a core criterion of most play experiences and an important part of any study into the field. The desire to play is directly related to the pleasure gained from the experience. As Victor Turner outlines in his essay "Liminal to Liminoid" (Turner, 1982: 37) "...since they [sports] are optional, they are part of an individual's freedom, of his growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence. Hence, they are imbued more thoroughly with pleasure...". Much work in games studies has looked to understand the pleasure of play, however the experience of gameplay is a multidimensional phenomenon that is personal and wholly dependent on the situated context of the player. The pleasure of gameplay is not just about skill acquisition but also keys into notions of control and affect. One of the most influential theories of fun in games studies is flow theory by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991); this theory offers a model to understand the balance of challenge and skill involved in attaining flow. Games offer an effective environment for flow in that they provide ever-increasing levels of challenge together with immediate feedback. The pleasure of LocoRoco is connected to craft of the overall visual design of the game together with the micro-level of play, in which the moment-by-moment movement in game offers a fertile ground for kinaesthetic delight.

Part of the seduction of LocoRoco lies in its physical staging, left and right flippers and a centrally located screen, the movement in game maps to the player finger actions. This is achieved through careful integration of functionality and visual design as I have explained above. Product designers adopt a simplified model of seduction as process in order to more closely understand, and re-produce, the appeal of one particular product over another. This process of engagement has a beginning, middle and end. The work of Khaslavsky and Shedroff (1999) offers a model of product seduction that includes enticement (grabbing attention and making an emotional promise), relationship (progressing with small fulfilments and more promises) and

fulfilment (fulfil the final promise and end the experience memorably). This is exactly how gameplay functions, gameplay is inherently a seductive form, however not all games succeed in creating an emotional bond with their players. LocoRoco fulfils its promise to be a fun, friendly and engaging play experience on the PSP and I argue consists an extraordinary product. However the current challenge for the franchise is how to spin out of the PSP design specificity to create a highly crafted experience on other platforms. The marketing games available online play too unreliably to offer a smooth game experience on desktop machines over the Internet. The PS3 release LocoRoco Cocoreccho was partial, presented as a screensaver rather than full game and it remains to be seen what the mobile phone version LocoRoco Hi plays like. LocoRoco has undoubtedly inspired other game designers, most visibly in 2008's iPhone game Rolando from Ngmoco. In design terms Rolando is very similar to the LocoRoco franchise but uses the iPhone's touch screen and tilt technology as game controls. Rolando design differs by offering direct control of player characters through finger interaction on screen, however adult size fingers tend to obscure game action which breaks up the visual rewards on offer.

The design decisions explored in the above analysis combine in play to create an intimate game experience that fits the personal frame of the particular PSP device. A central observation of this work is that quick access to the play experience is key to engaging time poor players in a game. My premise is that aesthetic familiarity, both of genre and of visual reference, expressed within a highly crafted game design context constructs an experience that is both enjoyable and immediate.

Let us hope that the spread of the LocoRoco franchise across platforms proves lucrative enough for Sony to continue its investment in this experimental title, as it is only in the ongoing experimentation in form that players will continue to see the full range of possibilities for digital games.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Industry term for selling a million release titles and used to indicate commercial success.

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- 2 LocoRoco game character movement is achieved through programmatic control of vectors allowing variation and complexity of responsive effect.
  - 3 The Yellow LocoRoco vaguely resembles a Smiley and has a happy attitude; its voice is deliberately child-like (Kulche, Energetic Youngster). In the second world the Pink LocoRoco (Priffy, Style Princess) is, at least in appearance, the only female, coloured pink and complete with lips. She is voiced with a French accent. Then the Blue LocoRoco (Tupley, Voracious Fella) is the baritone of the game and the Red LocoRoco (Pekerone, Exuberant Geek) has distinctive eyes and mouth, a neutral accent and lots of highs and lows when singing. The Black LocoRoco (Budzi, Loose Cannon) is the fifth LocoRoco from the game. It has two fangs and a round and brown nose and a bass voice. The last LocoRoco you encounter is the Green LocoRoco (Chavez, Cool Speed Freak), who has a sleepy and yawning appearance and a very strong Italian accent. LocoRoco 2 adds a second female, a purple LocoRoco (Viole, Confident Tomboy)