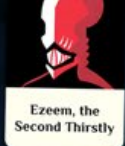


S. Cultist Simulator

*designing an experimental game
for commercial success*



ALEXIS KENNEDY, CEO
WEATHER FACTORY
@ALEXISKENNEDY, @FACTORYWEATHER



Alternative title:



“Art is important”

“Food is important”



Backstory!



Failbetter



10 years in tech

- *Fallen London*
- *Sunless Sea*
- client projects
- awards




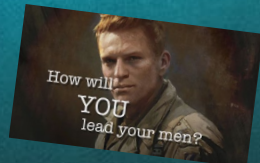
develop **SLANT**



Solo



- Paradox *STELLARIS*
- Bioware *DRAGON AGE*
- Telltale 
- *Burden of Command*



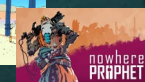
Weather Factory



- *Cultist Simulator*
- award(s)
- mentoring



BUY THIS!



Modus operandi

FALLEN LONDON:

- ★ content-heavy free-to-play browser game
- ★ designed for web not mobile
- ★ no genre
- ★ grindy, divisive
- ★ kinda shonky looking, 0 USD budget
- ★ cult hit, making c. 60K USD a month seven years after launch



Modus operandi

SUNLESS SEA:

- ★ the world's slowest RPG
 - ★ RPG with permadeath
 - ★ no genre
 - ★ divisive
-
- ★ *4.5m USD year 1 against a budget of 350K USD, very positive reviews*



Modus operandi

CULTIST SIMULATOR:

- ★ deliberately obscure occult solitaire
- ★ with no tutorial
- ★ or genre
- ★ divisive

- ★ looks like >2m USD revenue year 1 against a budget of 190K USD
- ★ 2 BAFTA nominations



"Experimental"?

I totally agree with this post.

The approach is great, the ideas are great and the setting and world building are interesting and refreshing.

But as a game-design student, if I would've handed this in at any point during the year they would've failed me instantly.

Like OP said, I get that the lack of guidance and help is supposed to be part of the game. And that's fine! Having your players experiment and try different things to test the boundaries and possibilities is a great way to design a game, but it falls short here for 3 reasons.

1. Information overload, no pamphlet.

You cannot have your players figure out everything themselves when your game consists of so many layers. The game dumps hordes of information on you. Books, lore, aspects, rites, followers, work, skills, stats, social effects, physical effects, mental effects. All of these are thrown at you, without explanation, at the same time.

"Experimental"?

It is an advantage to do things neone else is doing

*Often no-one is doing those things because they look
stupid*

Often, they are stupid

It's hard to tell until you do them

I wasn't lead on all these...

...but I signed off on every one and bear responsibility All were failures.

- ★ Black Crown Project (dumb commercial model)
- ★ Cabinet Noir (have you even heard of it?)
- ★ Machine Cares! (incoherent creative vision)
- ★ BELOW (not the Cappy one) (not distinctive enough)
- ★ Silver Tree (badly implemented)
- ★ Fallen London mobile (swollen budget, botched launch)
- ★ Storynexus (actually just a dumb idea in lots of ways)

What do the successes have in common?

How do we get to not-stupid?

- ★ Distinctive and divisive
- ★ Reasonably good
- ★ Small budgets and constrained timelines
- ★ Apophenian design



TO SUM UP

Use your *limitations*



The M577's chassis is made of bonded titanium and incorporates a 5 cm foam-packed floor cavity to protect against forged-fragmentation mines.

Ground clearance is normally only 22 cm, but the vehicle employs a hydro-pneumatic, fully active suspension to allow a clean ride over rough terrain. The suspension is capable of boosting clearance by a full 30 cm and allows the M577 to comfortably tackle vertical obstacles up to 0.5 m.

The hull is made from welded light alloys and is latched and bonded (rather than welded) to the chassis in order to prevent fatigue and failure from piezoelectric effects associated with an alloy-titanium interface.

The inside of the hull is lined with boron carbide ceramic tiles, each of which has been coated with a polymer resin to prevent cracks or shattering during normal travel; this resin is 2 mm thick on the outward-facing surface of the tile and is said to provide limited ablative protection against pulsed lasers. The tiles are backed with a thick layer of woven fire resistant polymer armor to limit spalling in the event of a



Newt is ten years old and
has a second grade
citizenship award.

She can fit through
ventilation ducts.

What do the successes have in common?

- ★ Distinctive and divisive
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- ★ Small budgets and constrained timelines
- ★ Apophenian design

Distinctive

...

IT'S REALLY HARD TO BE SPECIFIC HERE

BUT OK AN EXAMPLE:

Distinctive



(to my annoyance)

Distinctive



Distinctive doesn't
always mean
expensive

Distinctive

Do you need a genre?

Do you want a genre?

Divisive

...and when I say 'divisive'...



Seize forbidden treasures. Summon alien gods. Feed on your disciples. Cultist Simulator is a game of apocalypse and yearning from Alexis Kennedy, creator of *Fallen London* and *Sunless Sea*. Play as a seeker after unholy mysteries, in a 1920s-themed setting of hidden gods and secret histories.

RECENT REVIEWS: [Mixed](#) (85)

ALL REVIEWS: [Mostly Positive](#) (1,208)

RELEASE DATE: 31 May, 2018

Divisive

...and when I say 'divisive'...



Not Recommended

56.8 hrs on record

Cultist Simulator is almost a good game. Infact, it's almost a great game. I want to recommend it to my friends, but when i envision that conversation, my recommendation comes with a "but..." followed by a far too long list of flaws and complaints.

Divisive



Divisive

Communities are essential for indies

Communities are defined by their boundaries

...you must only use this power for good

What do the successes have in common?

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- ★ Reasonably good
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Advice...

MAKE YOUR GAME REASONABLY GOOD!

Thank you for coming to my talk

any questions?

Advice...

MAKE YOUR GAME REASONABLY GOOD!

"It's art, it doesn't need to be *good*"

has limited effectiveness (not *no* effectiveness)

Advice...

MAKE YOUR GAME REASONABLY GOOD!

Design your game in a way that lets you be a feedback sponge

Being a feedback sponge

- ★ simple core loop playable from day -1super important for iteration
- ★ constant community QA and iteration
- ★ **OPEN PRODUCTION**
- ★ educated community gives better feedback
- ★ deliberately roguelike for feedback

YOU CAN DESIGN YOUR GAME TO
MAKE YOUR GAME EASIER TO DESIGN

Being a feedback sponge

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"Don't spend too much on experiments"

Let me hammer that point home...

Jake Birkett, “You’re Spending Too Long Making Your Game”

Your
video inside.

How long have you been working on your commercial game so far?

41% <1 year

19% 1+ years

13% 2+ years

27% 3+ years

380 votes • 49 minutes left

Jake Birkett, “You’re Spending Too Long Making Your Game”

YouTube
video inside.

Dev Time vs Hourly Wage

- Game grosses \$100K on Steam
- Steam+taxes take 35%
- Game has \$35K costs to recoup
- \$30K net profit remains
- 1 year dev time = \$14 an hour



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Regular Frog
@FrogCroakley

Following



HOLY SHIT WE'RE OLD BRICK BUILDINGS

NO FUCKING WAY MATE



4:40 PM - 14 Oct 2017

15,844 Retweets 57,711 Likes



Use your limitations



The M577's chassis is made of bonded titanium and incorporates a 5 cm foam-packed floor cavity to protect against forged-fragmentation mines.

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Apophenian design

1. Don't simulate where you can imply
2. Make mechanics visible to players
3. Embrace the limitations of production. You can't do everything

Apophenian design

1. Don't simulate where you can imply - draw lessons from other disciplines besides game design

Apophenian design

1. Don't simulate where you can imply - e.g. visually

Kuleshov Effect



THE GLORY

THE PEACOCK DOOR

THE TRICUPID GATE

THE WORM MUSEUM

THE STAG DOOR

THE CHAMBER OF WAYS

THE RED CHURCH

THE MALLEARY

THE SPIDER DOOR

THE WHITE DOOR

THE PAINTED RIVER

THE ORCHARD OF LIGHTS

THE LODGE OF THE SAGE KNIGHT

THE TEMPLE OF THE WHEEL

THE WELL

THE WOOD

MANUS

BOUNDS

THE WORLD
MUSEUM

THE PEACOCK

THE TRISCUPID GATE

THE CHAMBER
OF WAYS

THE MALLEARY

THE STAG DOOR

THE SPIDER
DOOR



THE WELL

THE TEMPLE OF THE WHEEL

THE WHITE
DOOR

THE WOOD

Apophenian design

1. Don't simulate where you can imply - e.g. textually

Apophenian design



Junior Work at Glover & Glover

The scratching of pens, the sourness of dust, the sighing of the younger Glover, the greedy gurgling of the elder.

Work



80.2s

Junior Position
at Glover &
Glover



Work at Glover & Glover

Curl my hands into the correct shapes, and begin.

29.7s

Acceptance



Reason

Mental
Employment

Apophenian design



EVENING FALLS

I have my fire, my books, my clock, my window on the world where they do other things. I could have been unhappy. I'm not unhappy. This was a successful life, and when it is over the sweet earth will fill my mouth, softer than splinters. [This might be considered a victory.]

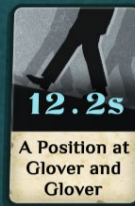
MAIN MENU

BEGIN ANOTHER DESCENT

Apophenian design

1. Don't simulate where you can imply - e.g. mechanically

Apophenian design



Apophenian design

Heretic Operative, C Prompt Games



'Curious'

'Open-minded'

Apophenian design

1. Don't simulate where you can imply

• STEER THE PLAYER

*Don't simulate when you can **imply***

THEME FIRST: YEARNING, APOCALYPSE, EXPERIMENTATION

- ★ lore serves theme
- ★ mechanics serves theme
- ★ narrative serves theme
- ★ art serves theme
- ★ music serves theme
- ★ ...NB if a player doesn't like the theme, you're f*cked, but that's same as it ever was

Apophenian design

2. Make design visible to players

Apophenian design

Make design visible to players!



Apophenian design

2. Make design visible to players



Apophenian design

3. Embrace the limitations of production. You can't do everything

Cutting

- ★ cutting helps focus on what is necessary
- ★ super useful for an experimental game
- ★ the designer 'grieving period' for losing a feature or content - be conscious of it, negotiate it

What do the successes have in common?

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What we'd do differently: **design**

"Ever tried; ever failed. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

- *Beckett*

"Any fool can learn from their mistakes. The trick is to learn from someone else's."

- *Bismarck (approximately)*

What we'd do differently: *design*

THE FAULT LINE

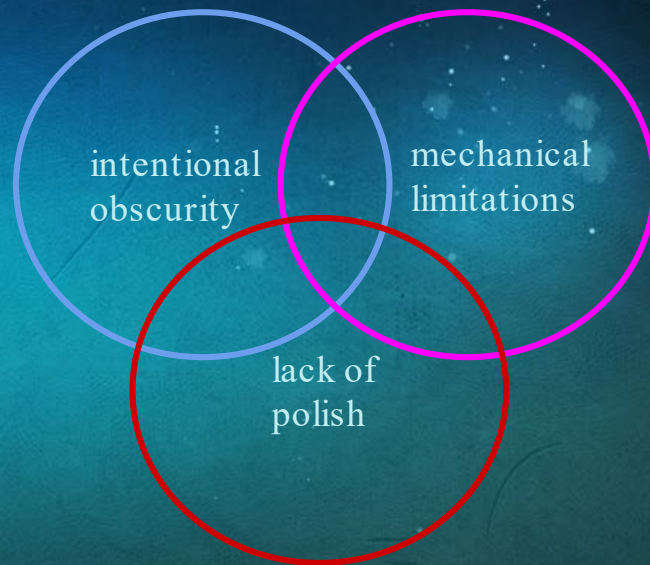
Nothing is 100% original! No 'genre' inevitably means borrowing from multiple genres. Each of those comes with assumptions, expectations, solutions: Some are more compatible than others

- ★ *Sunless Sea* RPG vs roguelike
- ★ *Cultist Simulator* fault line: game of exploration vs RNG clicker progress?

What we'd do differently: UI

The GDC board actually asked:

"It seems a bunch of the criticism of the game lay in the UX of the game. Is this something you felt was as designed, or was this a fall out from the process and decisions you made?"



What we'd do differently: UI

In experimental games it's arguably even more important to get the UI & UX right

- ★ give players hand-rails to hang on to while they're dealing with your experiment
- ★ prevent your intentions getting lost in the fog
- ★ helps keep the designer honest



Thank you!



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art: @ungapants

UI: @mnerurkar

