

# Making Fun in the Online Realm

(Integrative Project Thesis: 2012)

*Chris Parker*

What is play? We all have an experiential sense of play, if not an objective one. While we may not be able to define it with language, we can certainly recognize it in front of us (Pellegrini 8). In a similar vein, what is fun? For the purposes of my work, I put forward that fun is the objective of play. The realization of my work is a playable game.

The three goal words I established before beginning this work were *fun*, *interactive*, and *online*. The first word, *fun*, is vast. It does not denote a medium or creative process, although it connotes that the final experience will be *play*. The second word, *interactive*, is more specific. To some extent, all art can be considered *interactive* via the observer's interpretation of the art. I sought a more evident interaction; I want the observer (at this point, a user) to be able to transform the literal, formal aspects of the work. The goal is to create feedback: a change in the user's interaction subsequently changes the work, and so on. Doing so gives the user control, a vital part of *play*. The final goal word, *online*, is the most straightforward, but equally important in determining the result of my process. By placing my work *online*, I achieve visibility and accessibility. Visibility relates to myself and my personal goals, while accessibility relates to the goals of the work and the desires of the user.

All of my goals oppose the traditional goals of "high-art" destined for the gallery. I chose *fun* over the rigid austerity of a framed work, *interactivity* over the finality of a dried painting, and *online* over the geological lock of any physical art. I do not find this surprising, though it was never an explicit goal of the work. However, it offers a lens for understanding my motivations and contextual decisions in producing the work.

## Creating a Game

Publishing content to the internet poses strict limitations. In terms of process, the foremost limitation is the selection of tools. In the gallery, only certain work can be understood with the senses; ultrasonic or ultraviolet work, while conceptually interesting, could only be imagined by humans. Likewise, the entirety of the web is interpreted by *browsers*, which can only understand a discrete number of tools and languages.

To say this is a limitation, while correct, is somewhat misleading. In the past year, web browsers have begun to understand languages an order of magnitude more powerful than in the past. Creators working on the web are therefore liberated from their prior process. Specifically, the web browser can now render three dimensions without stuttering. Working on the new side of this technical watershed is exciting in its own right. Designing for the feasible frontier of the web feels more like exploration than limitation.

Because of my newly available access to a third dimension, the early stylistic decisions I made about the look of my game would determine much of the gameplay. The style of the game is derived mainly from the isometric cube. The cube is the formative element of the third dimension, and the basic element from which I have built the game. It shows depth with the bare minimum of complexity. It can be covered with an image without sophisticated techniques. It is easily processed and rendered. While I am working with brand new technology, complexity always runs opposite to a smooth experience. All of these factors contribute to its role in my work.



*The starting point of my work.*

The set of rules (facilitation of play) in my work is a product of choosing this shape as the core of my style. The game takes place on a cube-shaped world. The player can see (and interact with) five faces of the cube by rotating his view around the cube. The player must protect a piece at the center of the world while it floats up off the screen. Meanwhile, enemy worms crawl towards this central piece from every side of the cube. The player must use his mouse to pick and flick the worms off the cube before they reach the center.



*Worms encroaching on the player.*

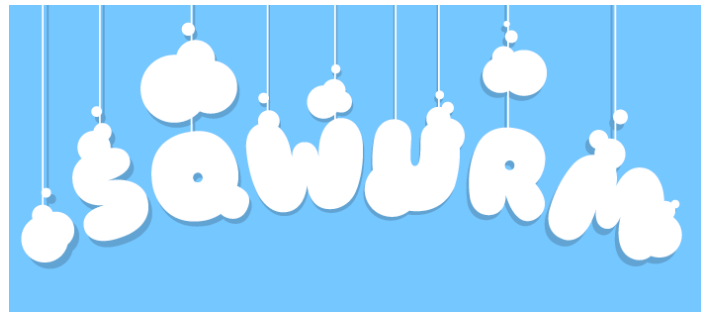
The flow of the game is therefore defined by two opposite pressures. The threat of failure approaches from the

bottom. The opportunity for success is available from the top. The player controls the balance between these two elements, and is punished for letting it get out of control.

### **Creating a World**

There are a number of examples of abstract games without a driving narrative. Familiar examples might be Tic-Tac-Toe or Tetris. They simply propose an initial state, a set of rules, and an end state; this is enough to drive play. However, these are an exception to the rule: almost all play contains an element of *role-playing*, where the players assume roles within the guidelines of the game. Consider Cops and Robbers, Doctor, or The Sims. The roles, like the rules, facilitate play and give momentum to the play of the game. I am not confident enough to propose that my game has enough momentum to work abstractly; creating a narrative will fill gaps in this momentum and serve to drive the visual style to more detailed and unique places.

The player assumes the role of a stranded astronaut who is set upon by large, crawling worms. He must defend himself, and survive, for as long as possible. After the first thirty seconds, the story is finished; it simply provides an initial condition for the game and context for the visuals. The work is not driven by a story, but assisted by it.



*The styled title of the game.*

This narrative was created specifically to justify the gameplay. There were two key elements that needed a visual representation: the piece the player is protecting, and the pieces that are encroaching the player. A crashed rocket ship fit the first glove, and so the player would be an astronaut. The pieces encroaching upon the player had to move at a regular pace and be able to climb the walls of the cube environment. Any kind of insect would do, but an inchworm has only a few moving parts and a readable shape. Both of these, in conjunction with the strict geometry of the cube, add to an attractive *silliness* that suits the rapid nature of the game.

## Creating an Application

The game was created for Flash Player 11, a recently released update to a nearly universal web environment. It was chosen because of its new ability to render content in three dimensions. The game was programmed using ActionScript 3, the language defined for the Flash Player. A combination of helpful code libraries and logic written by myself drives the flow and state of the game.

The visual content was created in Autodesk 3D Studio Max, which is a user interface for editing three-dimensional models. The visual style is full of bold colors and simple shadows; I shied away from complex textures and details to prioritize my time and increase the readability of the game. In addition, the minimal visual style sits well with the shallow interaction offered by the game.

## Web as Gallery

*The medium is the message.*  
—Marshall McLuhan

The context of my work is inseparable from its presentation. The first reason to publish my work to the web is to create accessibility. Games exist within their own framework and imaginary boundaries, and are not tied to any one place. It would be absurd to subject my game to being played by only one person in only one gallery (barring a conceptual rationale). When the web supplants the gallery, my work can become free and available. This lack of barrier constitutes the message more than any specifics within the game.

The second reason to publish my work to the web is to create visibility. Presenting my work in a physical gallery has always taken a back seat to the vast platform of the web. The gallery has its own strengths; curation adds weight to the work, and the presenting on the internet will inevitably let it be lost in noise. However, this is an acceptable risk considering the size of my audience. A gallery might let hundreds of people see my work, but the internet lifts any restrictions on time or place.

## Conclusion

It has not been my intention to break any ground but my own. Rather, I wish to announce myself within the modern web culture and create a capstone of my personal technical experience. In this measure it is successful. Beyond this measure, where does it lie? The work is among sparse company at the time of its publication; only few programs have been developed with Flash Player 11. It adds to a brand new body of technical work without disregarding the approachability demanded by the web.

---

## References

Pellegrini, Anthony D. *The Role of Play in Human Development*. Oxford, U.K. : Oxford University Press, 2009.