Homework

1. Word Formation

Due date: 24th of Esfand

This week’s assignment is about word formation. In the following text (an excerpt from the book “Postmortems from GameDeveloper”), find all the words that either have a suffix or a prefix you know. Then find its meaning in your dictionary, and describe how the word comes to mean the way it does. For example, a word formed through adding a prefix can be described like this:

recall (remember something):
re- (prefix meaning again or back) + call (say something loudly)

And your way of analyzing a suffix will be pretty much on the same line:

activate (making capable of action)
act ([v] do something) + -ive ([adj] tending to do) + -ate ([n] give characterization)

There are no limitations on the number of words you may find; however, try to do your best at finding all the obvious ones. Also, try to be precise and do not compensate your hasty remarks with the sheer number of the cases you have found. Find at least 20 words with prefixes and 30 with suffixes.

Note: You may hand in your assignment as a digital file or on paper, in the first case use your student number as the filename. Do not send me scans or photos of your homework done on a paper. Late deliveries will be given 25% less credit within the first 24 hours, and 50% less within the next 24. Nothing will be accepted after 48 hours of the initial deadline. Needless to say, the deadline will not be extended.
By now it’s a commonplace observation that the game industry has become more conservative, that games have become less interesting, more stereotyped, less original, less willing to take risks. This development coincides with a trend towards consolidation: large publishing conglomerates have bought out many of the small independent developers. These conglomerates make money by cranking out sequels and copycat products rather than truly interesting and innovative creations. As a result, each year E3 is crammed with the same old games with new names and the latest graphical bells and whistles.

One response has been to look for freshness and inspiration outside the corporate environment, from independent game developers, hobbyists, students, and mavericks who can try out new ideas without focus groups or corporate bureaucracy. A clear analogy exists to the resurgence of independent filmmaking in the 90s that popularized the Sundance Festival and created a sense of an independent movement, a rough, edgy, original style to counteract the big-budget slickness and comfortable predictability of mainstream Hollywood productions. This style then filtered back into mainstream moviemaking and helped revitalize the medium. It’s one of the venerable Romantic myths of art—Outsiders vs. The Man, creative renewal from the margins — and additionally it’s often true. We’ve seen it in music (think of the punk, DIY, and grunge movements) to painting (salon des refusés) to literature (the Beats).

Can independent game development do the same? No reason why not—the video games industry is still in pretty close touch with its hobbyist roots. Independent game development is proceeding on any number of fronts. Indie game development happens all the time, although it doesn’t always get the attention it deserves. Alone or in groups, students, hobbyists, and coders crank out shareware and freeware games, either for money or in response to...
some burning interior impetus. Some games, such as NETHACK (http://www.nethack.org), have existed for decades. NETHACK was born in the age of university-based mainframes and has grown by accretion over the years, as people add new features to this sprawling, rich dungeon game. Most exist virtually unknown or with underground fan bases. A few games, such as PONTIFEX (http://www.chroniclogic.com), have won cult followings, even within the game industry itself, but cannot be said to have had a widespread influence.

One problem for the indie scene is that with rising standards in production values, indie games can’t match the lavish graphics and sound and programming finesse of mainstream games. Even when they have solid, original game mechanics, they can look clunky next to the latest multimillion-dollar fantasy epic. Tools such as game editors, Shockwave, and Director have made it possible to produce professional-level work on a relatively independent basis, but it remains to be seen whether digital gaming will become a medium too expensive to support an indie sector.

A prominent sector of indie game development that has undoubtedly influenced the mainstream is the mod community—game fans who tinker with existing games, creating new levels, objects, characters, and rules, downloading editing tools or writing their own. This phenomenon began in the first days of computer gaming and took root in the fertile soil of the Internet, especially for games such as DOOM where the multiplayer component encouraged community and peer-to-peer exchange rather than solitary play. Industry powerhouses, such as id Software, led the way in providing tools for the mod community to change and expand the games they wrote, while websites, such as Blue’s News and Planet Quake, became gathering places for fans to trade tools and new game levels. Plenty of ideas, such as Capture the Flag and other team-based games, have made their way from mod community web sites into shipping products. Likewise, fans who began by making their own levels for their favorite games have ended up with game-industry jobs.

The Interactive Fiction movement has taken the text-adventure, which is now extinct commercially, and made it a thriving amateur concern. Text adventures aren’t competitive in the market because they don’t display any pretty moving pictures, but this doesn’t mean they aren’t artistically powerful or outmoded. Dozens of new text adventures appear every year. The medium has numerous advantages for indie development—it’s a stable technology, costs little to produce, and new works can be written, revised, and released in relatively little time by a single author. As a result, the IF movement has a thriving avant-garde that puts the mainstream industry to shame.

The game industry has begun to reach out actively to the independents. The annual Game Developers Conference now showcases the finalists of the Independent Games Festival (http://www.igf.com), an annual Sundance-like event for games developed outside the ranks of the major publishers, with a separate category for student work. The results are typically low-budget affairs but based around a solid original
conception, and the event is getting bigger every year. Another sign of interest is the Indie Game Jam (http://www.indiegamejam.com), an annual event begun in 2002 that brought 14 professional developers together for four days to hack together as many different games as possible based on a single piece of technology, the idea being to encourage originality and brainstorming outside the usual corporate production process. The first Jam was a success—12 wildly different games resulted and were displayed the following week at GDC as part of the Experimental Games Workshop. As a movement and an ethos, independent game development is beginning to exist.

That having been said, it would be premature to abandon hope for mainstream game production—to point to an independent scene as the only source of creative renewal is too simple an idea. The line between indie and corporate is blurrier than the romantic myth would make it. Like a shape-shifting alien on *Star Trek*, the game industry has two sets of cultural DNA, partly corporate, partly devoted amateur, which is one of our great strengths. Our medium had its genesis among amateurs and entrepreneurs, and that generation is still part our industry, making it hard to tell who is definitively indie and who isn’t. The industry has only very recently become big and static enough to make people worried—until a few years ago, there wasn’t enough of a mainstream to warrant an idea of an independent scene.

The medium is still changing too rapidly to declare the death of all originality. We’re constantly adjusting to a dozen new ideas at once. The Internet, the trend toward licensed middleware, massively multiplayer gaming, and the overall breakneck pace of technological change are still transforming gaming faster than we can follow. We can’t tell if we’re in a downward spiral or just a temporary retrenching.

The independent scene is a place from which to draw inspiration and ideas to reform our work and our production processes, a source of ideas rather than a magic bullet. It’s important to remember that great work can come from anywhere—we have only to look at classic Warner Brothers cartoons and Golden-Age Hollywood film (to say nothing of Shigeru Miyamoto’s oeuvre) to find examples of brilliant work that came from the mainstream. They came from people who loved their work and also understood their art form and how to work together to produce it. Like them, we’re in the incredibly fortunate position of being part of the next great entertainment medium. By learning from one another, examining our successes and failures, and never being satisfied with the status quo, we have the opportunity to do as well.