

Game Analysis: BookWorm

Group Spring – Sharon Ching

Concrete Games Category

When the first game of *BookWorm* loaded on my web browser, a grid-like mosaic of letter tiles appeared on the screen; and I immediately thought of the board game, *Scrabble*. As a fan of the board game, *BookWorm* seemed to offer a similar experience, involving deliberation to construct the best score-maximizing word arrangements. However, while the general objective of the games seemed similar – create words and score points – I found the structure, design, and the mode of playing to be somewhat different. Instead of playing against other players and trying to figure out a word formation based on another player's selected tiles and how he or she may have organized them on a board, *BookWorm* is a single-player game. This offers numerous points of interpretation, namely, that the decisions and choices the individual player makes at one turn affect their future decisions and choices in subsequent turns. In this sense, the player bears more responsibility and has more control over the game's scoring outcome. I found this to be a particularly important aspect of the game.

Furthermore, by displaying all the available letter tiles during a particular game, I had no choice but to spend a little more time thinking about what words to create. As there wasn't a restriction with using tiles in a specific formation (they didn't have to be in the same row or be perfectly diagonal, and so forth), this flexibility allowed some room to be a bit more creative. However, I found this to be paradoxical in certain respects, because whereas flexibility in the position of tiles was welcomed, it also added a degree of tension for me because I had to be a little more creative in seeing how words could be formed. This tension is also coupled with the game being played individually, as a player, you must depend on yourself solely in coming up with the words (although sometimes the game also offers hints, which I tried to ignore because I wanted to see what I could come up with on my own).

In a way, *BookWorm* also reminded me of the game, *Tetris* (which I vaguely recall playing on my graphing calculator). Similar to *Tetris*, the letter tiles (like the blocks of *Tetris*) shift downwards in order to introduce newer tiles when a submitted word was accepted. This shift in tiles allow for greater opportunity to create new words, but also highlights one fundamental relationship of this game – that a word arranged and submitted during a particular time, can affect one's opportunity and ability to create new words in the next level and even impact whether or not the player can continue playing the game. I think this was one of the most distinctive elements of the game, that when a player starts to create and arrange words, they have multiple objectives that contend with one another and they must figure out a way to negotiate those objectives – speed (while there isn't a timer, I learned after some initial games that there is a time limit before you are kicked out of the game and must restart because you have lingered too long in arranging a word), word arrangement (figuring out what words can be created, which tiles to use, and how complex the word can be as to maximum points earned), and ultimately, consideration of how a word created can affect the available tiles and what words one can create in future, more challenging levels. Moreover, during in the initial *BookWorm* games I played, I ended up locking myself in a rather precarious position with no available vowel tiles. Sometimes, there would also be a frequency of red tiles appearing, placing me in quite a predicament (and sometimes resulting in the grid's fiery demise)! So, in the end, one had to be particularly conscientious with every word arranged.

I think that *BookWorm* does exhibit educational potential and can offer multiple learning opportunities. On a general level, the game offers the opportunity to practice and use vocabulary. In order to progress through the levels of the game, the player has to arrange and create words, earning more points for more complex words. Furthermore, *BookWorm* also presents a platform for developing decision-making and strategy skills. The player begins to understand more of the game, how to create words, and where to create them on the grid of tiles as he or she progresses. Each subsequent level increases in difficulty – more red tiles appear in greater frequency and less commonly used letters fill the grid – and the player must carefully consider how to arrange the tiles. In a way, I perceive this as a way to think about short-term and long-term goals. Thinking in the short-term, my initial response was to quickly dispose myself of the red tile by creating a word immediately without really considering how that word arrangement could affect the rest of the grid.

One inspirational element of the game, *BookWorm*, is the sense of suspense despite the game involving a single player. While a player can select the mode that introduces the rules of the game, a player can gradually learn those rules without reading the rules as he or she progresses with the game. I appreciated how there was an increased level of tension within the game as I successfully moved into the next, more difficult level. When I first started playing the game, I approached it rather leisurely and would spend a long time conjuring up all sorts of possible tile arrangements. Every so often, I would run out of time and be required to restart the game. Since there wasn't an explicit time stamp or an obvious timer present, a player may go through the game without considering time constraints. However, it would soon become obvious that the player can't loiter around too long, and as the game proceeds, the time constraints increase.

In many ways, I regarded the game as offering multiple elements of urgency – an urgency of time, but more importantly, urgency towards developing a strategy. I feel that it demanded the player to hone and utilize numerous skills, from the more concrete skill (vocabulary) to skills involved in strategy and decision-making. It forced the player to come up with his or her own strategy based on the set of tiles displayed to them. In a way, this could be viewed as a mixed blessing. Without the constraints often placed when playing games with other players, the individual player in *BookWorm* could really take the time to think through where and how to arrange words, and not necessarily have to modify his or her strategy too often to accommodate the decisions made by another player. At the same time, while I found the game rather fun and even a bit addictive, I did miss the social interaction aspect that accompanies playing a game like *Scrabble*. I didn't have anyone to squabble over whether or not a certain word was indeed a real word!

Still, what I ultimately liked about the design of this game was that it requires you to think not only short-term but also long-term. While it may not necessarily be explicit that engagement of time with decision-making is a primary purpose of the game (to me, the underlying objective was to have fun), I think as one plays and becomes better at this game, their decision-making skills improve. For example, when confronted with a red tile, the immediate reaction would be to come up with a word rather quickly to rid oneself of this game-ending threat. However, this decision may result in a dilemma a few word arrangements later. As mentioned earlier, this again reflects a key aspect of this game, to balance short-term and long-term decisions and understand the consequences that one may have to encounter depending on which words tiles a player arranges and how they actually construct the arrangement. As I progressed through the game, I realized that more red tiles would appear and I had to seriously consider various possibilities and options in creating words – and overcoming the urge to immediately get rid of the red tiles. To

further the experience of decision-making, you are rewarded for the more complex word arrangements and are given bonus tiles (green, gold, so forth). In this regard, a concrete educational aspect would be to expand one's vocabulary list (should it be "can" or "cans" or "canned"?) and think about what longer or complex words to create for maximum points coupled with long-term strategizing. Overall, *BookWorm* is an enjoyable game, in which players can learn to develop strategies that not only help improve their score outcome, but perhaps, can provide a space to practice strategy and decision-making skills.