Game Dev Dialogs episode 1: Game Design for Friendship

Lisa: Welcome to episode 1 of Game Dev Dialogs, a new podcast from Google for Games.

Lisa: Today's guest is game designer Daniel Cook. He's the chief creative officer at Spry Fox, a company focused on making games that make the world a better place. He's been making games and software for over 25 years at companies like Microsoft and Epic Games, as well as a variety of visionary startups.

Lisa: I'm Lisa Takehana, and I am a game designer on the Google Assistant.

Lisa: Dan, thank you so much for being here today.

Dan: Happy to be here.

Lisa: We're really excited to have you here. I'm a huge fan of your work, particularly around game design philosophy, and I was hoping you can start us off by telling us how you got into game design.

Dan: I got into game design through art. There was this thing called the demo scene back in the day, where people were trying to make beautiful art -- pixel graphics usually, and music, and coding -- just push the boundaries as far as you could go. They'd pack everything onto a single floppy disk. When I got to Bowdoin College in Maine, they had this crazy thing called the internet. So people could participate in the demo scene from all over the world. And I had been basically noodling on pixel art in my spare time on the old Amiga machines back in the day, so I had all this pent-up desire to make pixel art.

And so I met these people. And there's this thing called IRC, which still exists, thankfully, where people could chat online. And so that was sort of my first online community. And then someone, kind of out of the blue, said, "Hey, look, you're wasted doing this. I'm going to send in all your art to this company" -- it was a company called Epic Megagames back in the day -- and they said, "You can either work at at the gas station" – which was my summer job – "or you can make art for this game called *Tyrion*."

And then along the way, they're like, "Well, we don't know what we're supposed to actually be making" – was sort of the big unknown. "Could you draw UI for us, because we know we need a UI. So could you just draw UI?" And I'm like, "Okay I'll draw a UI." And it turns out that in order to draw a UI, you have to actually design the UI.

And then they're like, "You're kind of good at figuring out what we need to do, so for our next game could you do that role? No one else wants to do that, so could you figure out what we need to do?" I realized eventually that was called *game design*.

Lisa: Dan, I was first introduced to your work when you presented at the Game Developers Conference in 2017 on designing for friendship patterns, and I really love this talk. I thought it

was really wholesome. It inspired me to think about our responsibility as designers to build multiplayer systems that encourage positive behaviors. And since then you've been continuing to explore adjacent topics around building healthy player relationships and positive social interactions in games in general, which you call pro-social game design. Can you tell us what friendship and prosocial game design mean to you?

Dan: Ultimately, we're designing systems for people, right? That's sort of a fundamental aspect of making games. Games are, you know, the psychology of play within a mediated system of computer code and graphics and all that wonderful stuff. We're always building games for people. And then a fundamental aspect of humans is, we are social creatures. We are a social animal. And so then how do you design systems for people that help them build relationships with other people?

How do you do it in a positive way, such that you're increasing relationships, improving your connections with others? And that's sort of the prosocial aspect of it. It's not a zero-sum thing to build relationships. Like, by building a relationship with you, you build a relationship with me, and we end up better off than we were before.

Lisa: It's really such a breath of fresh air to prioritize something like this. You're clearly super passionate about this and I was wondering why this is something that matters to you so much.

Dan: I suspect I'm inherently bad at building friendships, and so -- [laughter] I think a lot of us are awkward people and I'm an especially awkward person, so the idea of, like, trying to figure out how people work is something that awkward people do. So I think that's probably the deep answer for why I'm interested in it. The other piece that sort of makes me get up each day and be happy about my life is: I like the idea of doing good in the world. I had a sort of crisis of faith, if you will, about game design at one point. I made a game called Triple Town which is a lovely little evergreen puzzle game.

It's very relaxing, and it does, you know, add relaxing to people's lives, but I found that people were playing it for, you know, thousands upon thousands of hours. And I was raised in one of those anti-television families. And I'm like, "Am I really am I really adding as much to this universe as I possibly could by designing these little single-player puzzle games?" And so I kind of went on a journey there, when I was trying to figure out, like, what good can games do? One of the goods is – throughout all the research -- is that games actually seem to, they alleviate social pain -- that's loneliness -- and they build relationships. So they connect people with other people. And when they're doing that, they seem to have immense positives for the world.

Lisa: Can you tell us what you learned about what goes into forming a friendship and some of those prosocial behaviors that you mentioned earlier?

Dan: I think of it as the fundamentals. These are the logistical things that need to be in place, and the behaviors that need to be in place, in order for a friendship to form.

One of them is this thing called proximity. Are you bumping into other people on a regular basis? If you meet another person and you never see that other person again, you're not going to become friends with them.

The next thing that has to happen is reciprocity. And reciprocity is, I interact with another person that I bumped into, and I make some sort of overture. The overtures are so subtle. I look at their face. Just by looking at somebody's face, and having them look back, and how we meet their eyes is a form of reciprocation.

There's always two beats to reciprocation: an offer and then a response. And the response can be negative, right? The response can be: no I don't want to engage in this friendship. I'm going to look away, I'm going to pull up my hoodie, I'm going to turn up the volume on my earphones. There's a secret lesson in that, which is, every step of friendship formation is opt-in. There have to be two parties mutually agreeing that they want to take the relationship to the next level. So that's sort of built into that idea of these reciprocation loops.

When I hear "reciprocation loop," I get so excited. "Loop" is what game designers do. We design these interactions of cause and effect and feedback. And by turning social design into interaction loops, it's like I'm right at home as a game designer.

So then you've started to build a relationship, and it's almost like you're leveling up this relationship. You're willing to make stronger overtures, and you're willing to respond back in a stronger fashion, and you're slowly building up trust as this happens. However, for that friendship to get to sort of each next level, you need disclosure. You need to show your belly.

When you show your belly, when you perform a disclosure action, what you're doing is, you're kind of testing: is this person going to treat this relationship in a zero-sum exploitative fashion, where they're going to take advantage of that trust that I've shown them? Or, are they actually going to look for a long-term support, and they're going to support me?

If you don't have these things, friendship isn't going to happen at all. If you don't bump into people, if you don't have mechanisms for reciprocating between people, if you don't have the ability to have disclosure, you won't have friendship at all.

You see these patterns being broken in games all the time. Quick matches, the matchmaking system behind the majority of multiplayer games, well what does that do? It throws strangers together and then never has them see one another ever again. Another one is disclosure. If your game doesn't have chat, which a lot of games do[n't], because there's a lot of toxicity in chat, then the close friendships will never actually reach a state of intense disclosure to one another. They'll never be able to connect with each other at an emotional level. And so deep friendships won't show up on your system.

Then there's two other things that are worth talking about, and these are accelerants to friendship. There's one called similarity, which is this crazy double-edged sword. Similarity is, we tend to make friends with people who look and act like us.

A lot of racism comes out of it, a lot of biases come out of it. Like, if you have two people you can make friends with, you are almost always going to pick the person who looks more like you.

One of the things you can do with similarity, is you can create artificial similarity inside a game. The Horde, for example. If you're the Horde in World of Warcraft, you have this affiliation with the rest of the Horde, even though the other members of The Horde may be absolutely nothing like you in real life.

And then the last one is intensity. If you have a lot of time pressure, if you have a lot of stakes that are on the line, then groups bond much more quickly. Intense situations can also damage the opt-in nature of friendships. So you can end up damaging trust as if you build it too quickly. There's a trade-off there with intensity.

Intensity, it's almost like a forced legal contract under time pressure. You're like, hey, I think this is the social norm, and the other person's like, I don't have a lot of time to decide, so whatever I'm thinking in my mind, I think I'm going to agree to it too, and we both agree. And it turns out, 3 months down the road, that you actually had different understandings of what the sort of shared contract was.

Lisa: what was fascinating about your paper on prosocial economics for game design: you do the same, where you're trying to measure how can we figure out how much trust there is between -- in a relationship either in the real world or in the game world and I was wondering how you would measure something like that and how those things can differ.

Dan: It's honestly really hard. There are instruments that exist. one of the most common ones in real-world research is: who are your friends? But you can also ask stuff about the depth of the friendship. Like, if you were in trouble, for whatever reason it may be, who would you reach out to for support? There's different layers of friendship. For example, there's mateship which is usually one other person. There's one other person you have a deep, deep bond with. There's another group of friendship which is the support network. And the support network is usually around five people. These are the people you rely on, and you know that they'll be there mostly unconditionally, Maybe not as unconditionally as the mateship level, but pretty unconditionally.

One layer out from that is this thing called the sympathy network. And the sympathy network are the people that you will complain to if you're having issues. You don't necessarily expect support from them but you can complain to them. And that's an additional 10 people, so now we're up to 15 people in your friendship network. Those are the core deep friendships, and you can measure those things. You can ask, list those that you would complain to. These are called Dunbar layers, and they actually go all the way up to -- around 2000, you are not able to

recognize faces, and you're not able to recognize names, and your brain seems incapable of, like, seeing another person as a human being beyond around 2000 people.

In games we have more behavioral analytics. Like we can actually track chat time, we can track time together, but those are all non-validated metrics. They probably correlate to some of the Dunbar layers and some of the more official metrics, but we don't quite know the relationship yet.

Turns out a lot of studies in the space are not super old. When we're digging up papers, we're finding stuff from, like, three years ago. So it's still very, very much a newish field that's constantly having new insights and being changed due to data, and it's even newer on the game development side.

Lisa: Can you give us any examples of games that implement friendship and trust well?

Dan: One of the ones that I love is *Puzzle Pirates*. It's a puzzle based MMO. They do a really good job of having separate roles for different people. You know, one person's steering the ship, one person is firing the cannons. They do a really good job with the coordination problem of like, how do you get groups together, working together and trusting one another? And everyone's on this tight little ship so you can't really go very many places.

You start to see that same pattern in things like *Sea of Thieves*, *Artemis* – so you kind of see that pattern show up again and again. Put people together with different roles and different skill sets in a coordination activity and have them engage with one another, and really, really deep friendships come out of that.

Lisa: As a game designer, I'm really cognizant about the time players are spending in our products, so I wanted to ask how we as game designers know if our designs are leading to positive social behaviors, and if there are concrete tools or techniques you recommend in order to implement that.

Dan: You need to design for pro-social behavior. Kind of an obvious statement. But if you design naively and you ignore the sort of social constraints about how people form friendships, or what makes people happy in the context of relationships, you'll get bad behaviors. First off, be intentional. List your values upfront. Like, what do you care about, what are your values, what are your anti-values – do that exercise. Even if you're not doing it for the whole team, you should do it for yourself. By doing that, it's going to shape everything that you produce.

The other thing to do is to measure it. And this is sort of more the community management side of it. If you kind of know what your values are, and you kind of know what you're going towards, you can judge whether or not people are making bad decisions, or players are exhibiting bad behaviors. The community management side of it is sort of the live gardening where you're saying I'm going to kick out this person. But I'm a big believer in tuning the social systems that are causing the behavior in the first place.

So they are generating toxicity. So you can actually say, what if we turn off chat for new users or mute certain people who are toxic? Maybe they can talk to their friends, but they can't talk to new users right. You can start tuning the systemic level of it, and prevent some of those interactions from happening. I think about it as gardening, and it usually happens with a live community, but it's very effective.

Lisa: As game designers, we have a responsibility for the work that we put out there, and I get the sense that you believe that we should be responsible for these things too.

Dan: Yes. How do you help others? How do you support others? How do you, like, make their lives better? And as designers, we have leverage on our giving efforts, right? And it's not that big of a deal for us to make a decision that says, this system is going to be structured in a way that helps people build friendships, versus saying, I'm just going to ignore that 'cause I don't care. In terms of effort that I'm expending, to do either one of those is not that different. But I can cause all sorts of improvements to people's lives if I make that choice.

The other thing that's fascinating about game design is we're at this fulcrum point where our systems impact millions of people in a very particular way. There's this metric called share of social time. If you look at time studies, which where do various countries and people put their time each day? There's a certain amount of sleeping, a certain amount that goes to eating, a certain amount that goes to work, and then there's a shocking amount that goes to television, because what it does is it allows you to form what's called one-way or parasocial relationships with the actors and celebrities. But it doesn't ever have a reciprocation loop so you're never actually building history with those those deep ties, those deep support structures. And then you're left over with this incredibly tiny slice of time where you can actually interact with other human beings and form relationships. And it turns out that people play a lot of games during that time. If you buy into the idea that we are social creatures and we need positive relationships in order to thrive as social creatures, here's this thing that's eating up 50% of our time, wouldn't it be nice if the people designing that cared about positive outcomes? And so that's where the abstract ethics get into real-world impact. When it's put in those terms, I feel like I just have an immense responsibility to make this better for people.

Lisa: To close us off, if there's one thing you wish you could see in games or in a game, what would it be?

Dan: Just the general idea of games connecting others and building a positive world together. I think that's a big dream, and I think if we work at it, we can achieve it. The other thing, which is more of a – this is the geeky side of me – is because social game design and social systems design is so new, even though we've been doing it for 20 or 30 years, it's just starting to burst up to the surface, and people are saying, "Oh yeah, that's a thing!" I remember when UX became a thing. People have been building UIs forever, but then UX became an official discipline, where people were talking to each other, and studying the idea, and making advancements. I think that's happening *right now* for social game design. I would love to see that become one of these

official sub-disciplines of game design, just like systems design or combat design, or anything like that.

Lisa: Well Dan, this has been a really inspiring conversation. Thank you so much for the work you do in advocating for pro-social design and for giving us a perspective on how our work can make an impact on real people. Where can people go to learn more about your work?

Dan: I have a website that has a lot of these things. It's lostgarden.com. I'm also on Twitter, which is a danctheduck@, and I post long – overly long -- rants on Twitter about silly things like governance.

Lisa: Thank you so much, Dan. This has been episode 1 of Game Dev Dialogs. Thank you for listening, and see you next time.