

Objects of Desire

Improving Retention, Engagement, Monetization, and Virality Through Visual Design

Emmanuel Valdez

Game Director/Co-Founder Appy Entertainment Inc.



Monday, October 15, 12

Hello, thank you for taking the time to be here. My name is Emmanuel and my presentation is Objects of Desire: Improving Retention, Engagement, Monetization, and Virality Through Visual Design.

The focus of this presentation is Visual Design and the theory that a game developer (artist, game designer, creative director, a developer of any discipline) can use these principles to improve your games in the areas of user interfaces, controls, virtual goods design, gameplay, etc.

As a reminder, look out for email entitled GDCO 2012 Session Evaluation from the GDC Online Event Team and complete the evaluation for this and all the other sessions you've attended.

Takeaways

- Learn how visual design principles can improve your games
- •Improve how developers can communicate effectively and objectively using terminology based on universal design principles
- Learn an approach to use visual design principles to improve current and future games in development with an emphasis on free-to-play social mobile games
- See things differently

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- Learn how visual design principles can improve your games
- Improve how developers can communicate effectively and objectively using terminology based on visual design principles
- Learn an approach to use visual design principles to improve current and future games in development with an emphasis on free-to-play social mobile games
- See things differently- you will see the matrix code

Introduction

- •19 years of experience in games
- •SCEA San Diego, Midway Home Entertainment, Activision Blizzard
- Co-founder of Sammy Studios and High Moon Studios
- •Ready2Rumble Boxing series, Darkwatch, and The Bourne Conspiracy
- Co-founder and Game Director at Appy Entertainment Inc.



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My name is Emmanuel Valdez and I've been making games for nineteen years. I started out developing games on 16 bit consoles and through to the current generation of consoles and now mobile for the last 4 years.

I began my career as an artist, and later became a game designer and a game director working for companies such as Sony San Diego, Midway, and Activision Blizzard.

I was the one of the co-founders of Sammy Studios and High Moon Studios.

Some notable games I worked on include: Game Director of the R2R Boxings series for Midway,co- creator of Darkwatch developed by HMS along with The Bourne Conspiracy where I contributed as Game Director.

I currently work at Appy Entertainment, where I am the cofounder, a game director, and the animation director.



Here are some of the games we developed at Appy. Trucks and Skulls, SpellCraft, and Face Fighter and our soon to be released Animal Legends. We are a mobile development micropublisher focused in the development of free-to-play social mobile games, life, liberty, and pursuit of fun. Our games have all achieved Top Twenty status in their category and have all been featured by Apple. We are just about to hit the 20 million downloads milestone.



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Since we are on the topic of design I thought it would be important to note that I'm also a graduate of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Ca. A school known for excellence in design: Graphic, Industrial, Product, Transportation, and Illustration.

Graduates have gone on to design some of the most iconic cars in history, products, etc. Notable alumni include J Mays who designed the VW Beetle, Drew Struzan who turned movie posters into an art, Ralph McQaurrie concept artist on the original Str Wars Trilogy, and Syd Mead, visual futurist, and production designer on Tron and Blade Runner.

The first half of my career I was an artist and the second half to present I've been a game designer and director. So I have extensive experience in the industry, in both art and game design disciplines.



Why am I doing this presentation?

As a company, we looked at the competition. And there are a lot of great developers out there making great games.

How do we stand out among the thousands of games on the market? How do you survive in this ultra-competitive business?

What distinguishes games today?

Not budget. Not technology. Not great art. Not the platform.

The answer is better designs.

We as a company have to do a better in design to beat the competition.

This is the direction we chose to improve our games.

But Design is very broad so today we're going to focus on just one facet of design, visual design.

What is Visual Design?

Visual Design is the deliberate purposive plan to make something look and feel more appealing or easier to understand.

"More Than Just Pretty Pictures!"

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So What is Visual Design?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Visual as:

"something you look at (such as a picture, chart, or film) that is used to make something more appealing or easier to understand"

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Design as:

"the arrangement of elements in a product or work of art"

Visual Design is the deliberate purposive plan to make something look and feel more appealing or easier to understand.

Its the Science of Art and Game Design

Its "More than just pretty pictures"!

How it Works

Visual Design is the *deliberate purposive plan* to make something look and feel more appealing or easier to understand.

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So how does visual design work to improve our free-to-play social mobile games?

Let's look at that definition again and take these three words out of it: LOOK FEEL and UNDERSTAND

The Look is the Aesthetics but not just in the way it looks. It's what we as game developers are passionate about. Maybe we're passionate about Steam Punk or 70's Kung Fu movies, or Dadaism as the aesthetics and style of the game. This is where your creativity shines.

The Feel is Emotions. It's what we want our players to feel when they play our game.

To Understand is the Functionality. This is what we want our players to do while playing the game and know why they are doing it.

These are three filters we will use to determine if our ideas and concepts comply with visual design thinking and their effectiveness. So lets put these filters to the test. Lets look at some game controllers.

Power Glove



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Who remembers this? The Power Glove by Abrams Entertainment Group and made by Mattel. This was a controller designed to work with the NES.

Lets run the filters on the Power Glove.

Aesthetics— I think the designers were very passionate about this device. They work with Virtual Reality developers to make a futuristic looking device for its time around the late 80's. Back then lots of buttons meant futuristic.

Emotions – I remember when this came out everybody wanted it. A glove with built in NES controls that can also recreate your hand movements in a game! And it looked futuristic.

Functionality- Unfortunately this was the downfall of the controller. It didn't quite work well as advertised. It wasn't a very comfortable way to play games and the programmable buttons were an unnecessary feature.

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Wii Remote



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Lets look at the The Wii remote or Wiimote controller by Nintendo

Aesthetically the designers created a controller, simple and elegant, and looks similar to a device a lot of people are already familiar with, a television remote control. They successfully designed an approachable game controller.

Emotionally it excited a new wave of gamers of all ages. Mass appeal for a mass market of casual gamers.

Functionally its very easy to use. The motion and optical sensors were accurate and fun to use. The controller has only a few buttons and a single trigger.

How Do They Score?

(On a Scale 1-10)





7	Aesthetic	1
1	Emotion	1
1	Functionality	1

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How Do They Score?

I gave the Aesthetics a 7. Remember for the late 80's this looked hi-tech and futuristic. I would give the Wiimote a 10. It's clean, simple, and very approachable.

I give the Power Glove a 10 on Emotions. Man, I really wanted it especially after watching that commercial with the kid with the Power Glove battling the robot. I'd give the Wiimote the same. It excited a whole new demographic of gamers of all ages.

Functionality is where the Power glove failed and ultimately sealed its fate. The Wiimote is an intuitive controller, not complicated, easy to hold.

So as you can see, using these filters demonstrate how visual design can be applied to existing ideas to measure the potential success of your designs. So what happens when you want to improve existing or impending designs using visual design?

The Approach

Use logical and creative combinations of fundamental art elements to visually direct a player's experience.

The Principles of Visual Design

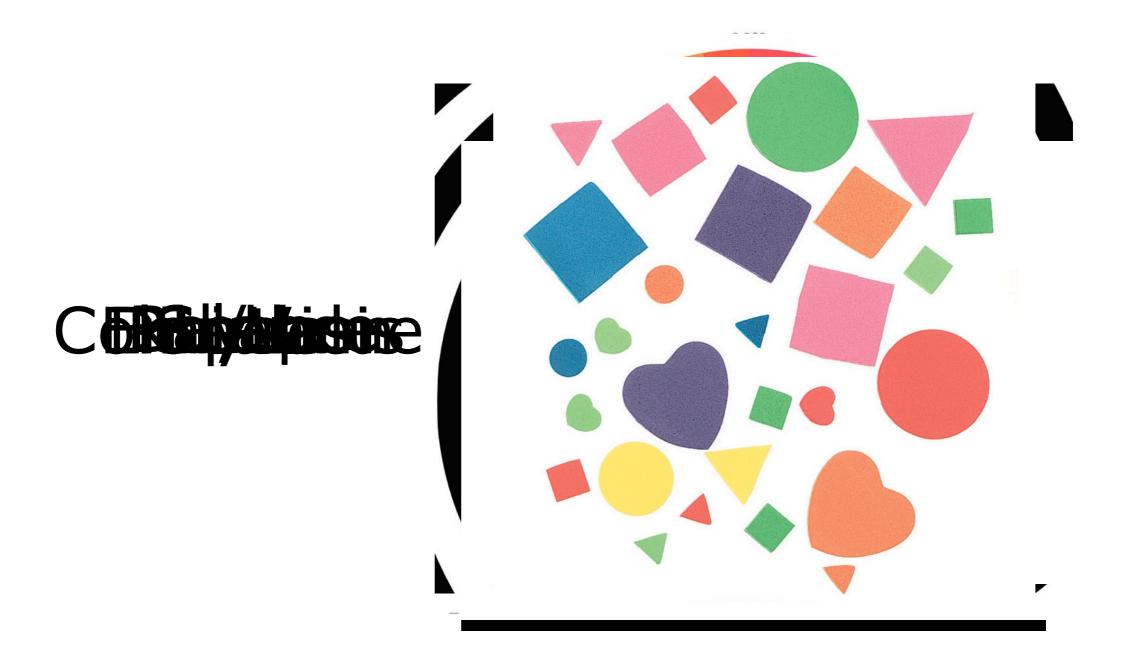
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The answer is in the approach.

Use a logical and creative combination of fundamental art elements to visually direct a player's experience.

The combination of fundamental art element are called the principles of visual design. By using these principles, we will be able to visually direct a player's experience, directing them to see the things you want them to see, feel the way you want them to feel, and interact with the things in your game you want them to interact with.

The Fundamentals



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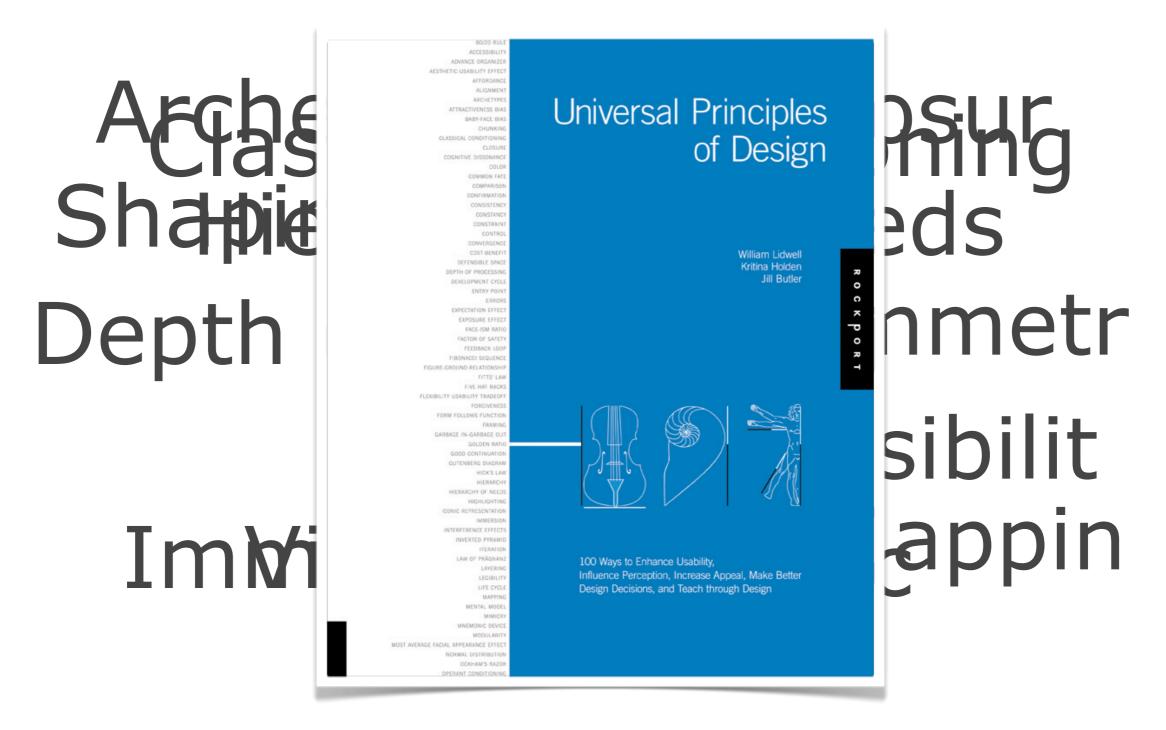
Its starts with the Fundamentals. I wont go into detail on each one, most of you are all familiar with them.

Line, Shape, Color, Scale/Value, Emphasis, Direction, Balance, Rhythm

Together they create many different principles of visual design.

THE PRINCIPLES WILL BE YOUR TOOLS TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS IN VISUAL DEISGN

Universal Principles of Design



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There's a great book called The Universal Design Principles and its about making science out of art. This presentation borrows heavily on the book. The Universal Design Principles are guidelines, concepts, laws, human biases, and general design considerations.

They have been observed and are effective across all demographics and cultures. And that's important to note. The Mobile and tablet market is a worldwide market. It explains why we as humans, perceive, feel, and behave in certain ways and how we can use visual designs to effectively target those behaviors, biases, and tendencies.

There are many but for the time allotted we will focus on the ones centered around Visual Design that have been observed and applied on successful games.

Visual Design Principles

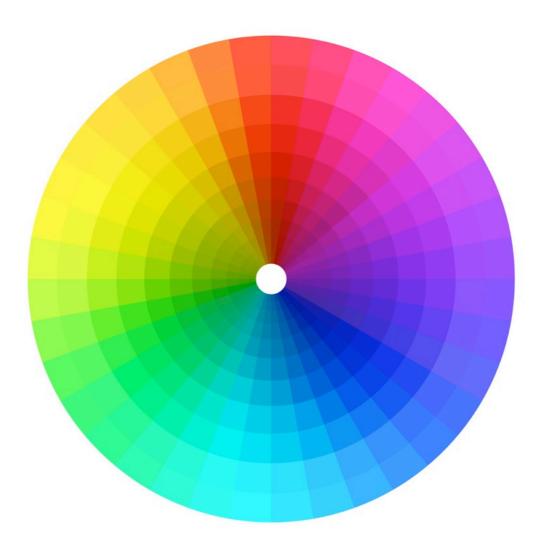
- Color
- Iconic Representation
- Aesthetic-Usability Effect
- Golden Ratio
- Baby Face Bias
- Picture Superiority Effect
- Serial Position Effects
- Gutenberg Diagram
- Top-Down Lighting Bias

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And here are some Visual Design Principles. I chose the ones that may benefit us mobile game developers. Color, Iconic Representation, Aesthetic-Usability Effect, Golden Ratio, Baby Face Bias, Picture Superiority Effect, Serial Position Effects, Gutenberg Diagram, and Top-Down Lighting Bias

Now lets see each visual design principle in detail followed by some examples

Color



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Color, as a visual design principle, is used to draw attention, group elements, strengthen aesthetics, and imply meaning.

There are universal rules of color such as how many colors can be processed at a glance (5) and best color combinations. Just be aware that different cultures attach different meanings to colors.

For example, Red may mean Danger to some cultures but in China and other cultures it means happiness.

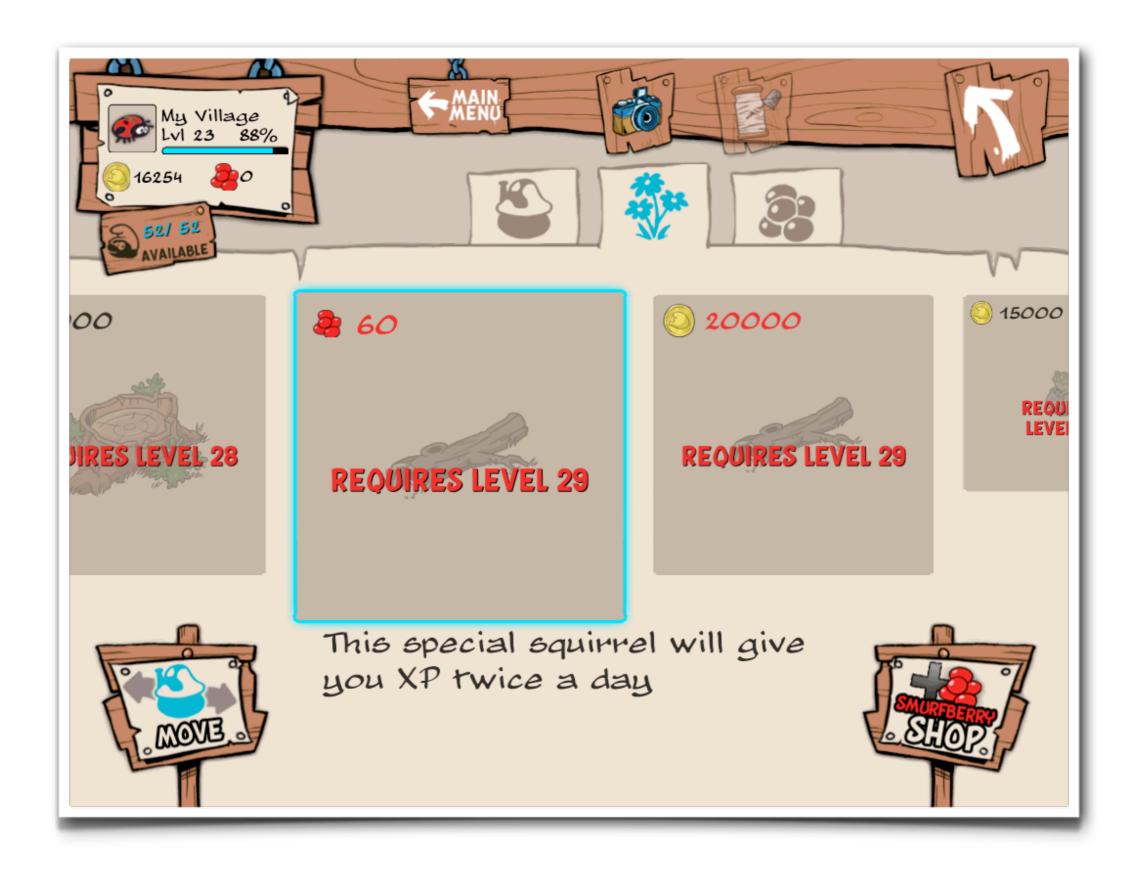


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Color can reinforce the organization and meaning of parts of your game and are effective in directing what your players should look and interact with as in this example from Backflip's Dragonvale game.



In this example, the Market button is colored and the two buttons next to it are not. Players view the Market as more important that Options and Friends, important features but not as an important as directing your players to go to the Market and buy a virtual good.



Color can quickly communicate what you can and can not do. A player can look at items in the Store quickly and see what they can buy and can't buy. Red is used to denote level requirements and insufficient funds without requiring the player to look up at the balance of their funds. The blue color of the Store tab is matched to the highlight color of selected item reinforcing the relationship.



Same here but color is totally removed. The light blue indicates the cap on availability of the virtual good. As you can clearly see Color can communicate a lot without clutter and explanation. Less they read the more they play, the more they stay.

Iconic Representation







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Simila

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Symboli

Arbitrar

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Iconic Representation is "The use of pictures to enhance the recollection of controls and signs." Icons can be used in UI and gameplay buttons and controllers.

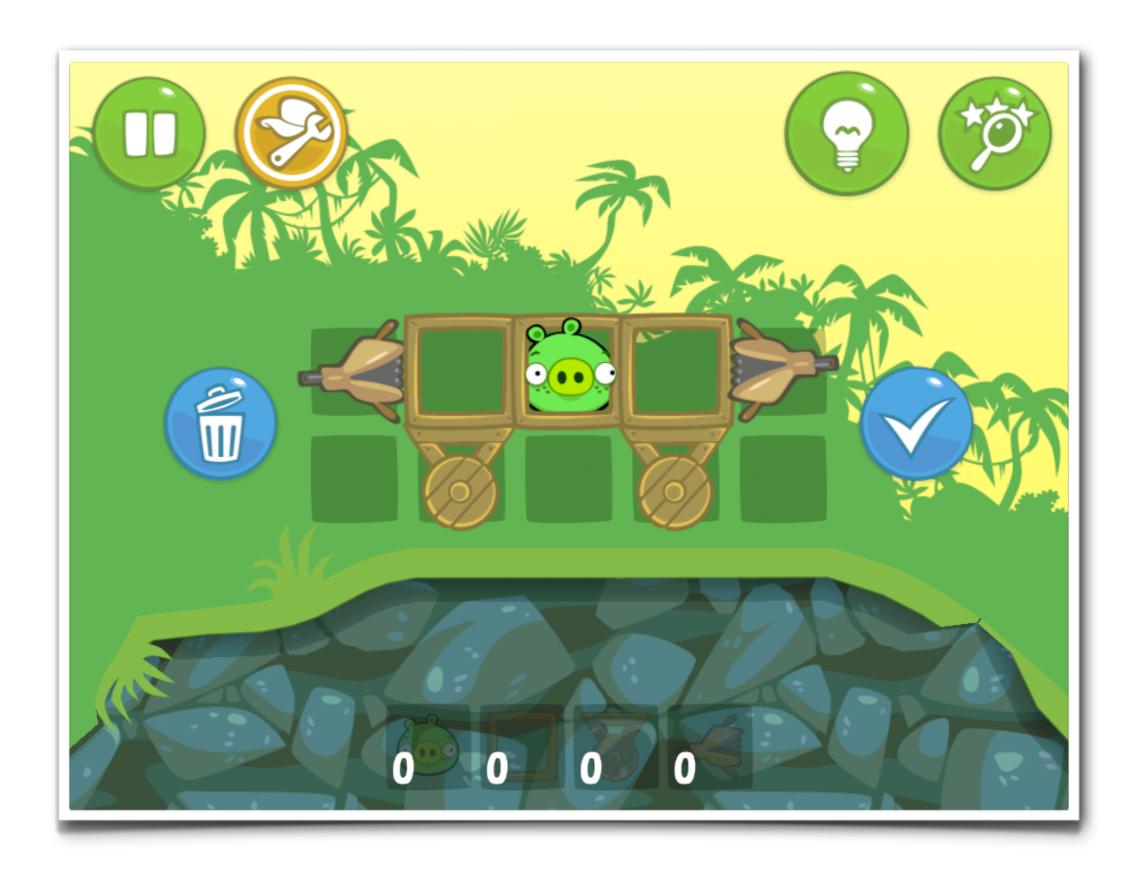
There are four types:

Similar icons use images that are visually equivalent: TAP such as a right turn street sign.

Example icons use images of things commonly associated with an action or object: TAP such as using an airplane as a sign representing Airport.

Symbolic icons use images that represent actions and objects at a higher level of abstraction: TAP such as this Electricity sign: Danger of Death

Arbitrary icons use images that look nothing like an action or object, but must be learned over time: TAP such as the Biohazard symbol.



Rovio's Bad Piggies uses a mix of different iconic representations for their UI buttons.

The Trashcan as a Delete button and a Light Bulb for Ideas are Example icons.

The "magnifying glass to search for bonus stars button" is a Symbolic icon.

The" Hire mechanic" is an example of an Arbitrary icon since there isn't a universal hire mechanic icon. Same with the pause button which over the years derived from early audio component and device controls and are accepted player controls today.

Rovio does a great job with their games making clear, universally appealing UI with the use of iconic representation.



An example of a Similar icon is the plus sign on the Builder, Shield, and Gems meters used for adding currency and resources. They are directing the player to tap on them to get more of those resources which takes them to the store. They cost real money to buy.

It's also important to see that designs for free-to-play games changes the way we use UI to direct players to spend real money. Very different than designs for traditional console games.

At the bottom of the screen is an example of a Symbolic icon. The Cancel Build icon is a broken version of a hammer. The opposite is Build which uses a hammer image and is an Example icon.



In this example from the Simpsons Tapped out game, Symbolic icons uses traditional and familiar objects or in this case colorful metaphors to label different donut packs. It fits the humor of the IP. It also uses recognizable imagery within the IP such as Donuts and characters from the TV show on their icons.



In our new game Animal Legends we used Arbitrary icons on these combat buttons representing complex magic and physical attacks. The Info button is also an example of an Arbitrary icon. Players over time will learn these icons.

Iconic Representation is beneficial in keeping players engaged in the game without the need for reading explanations and descriptions or cluttering the screen with too much information. Less localization work too.

Aesthetic-Usability Effect



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This is a simple but interesting visual design principle: Aesthetic-Usability Effect

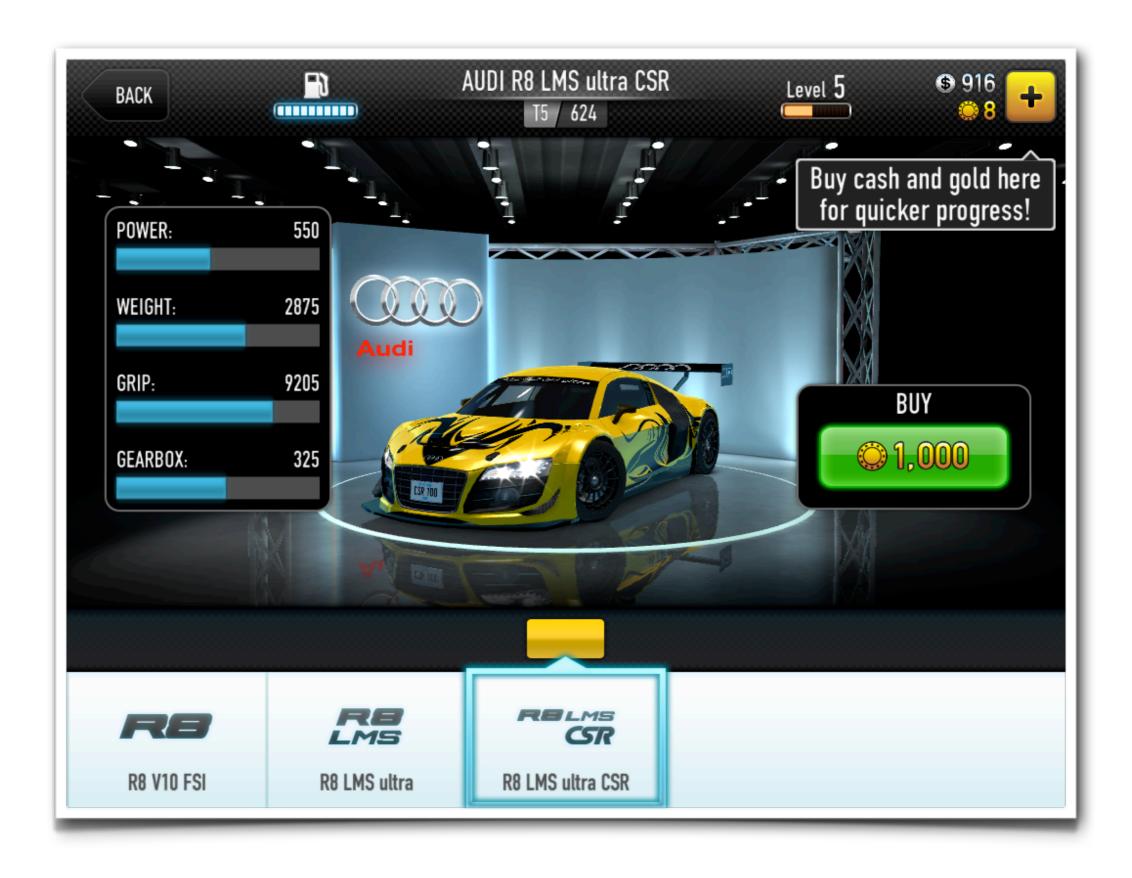
"Aesthetic designs are perceived as easier to use than less-aesthetic designs."

People regard that more-aesthetic designs are easier to use than less-aesthetic designs-whether they are or not as observed in several experiments.

Aesthetic designs look easier to use and have a better chance of being used, whether or not they are actually easier to use. They are more effective at fostering positive attitudes and make people more tolerant of design problems.

Aesthetic designs create feelings of loyalty, patience, and affection for your game. This all equals better retention, engagement, and overall success of your game.

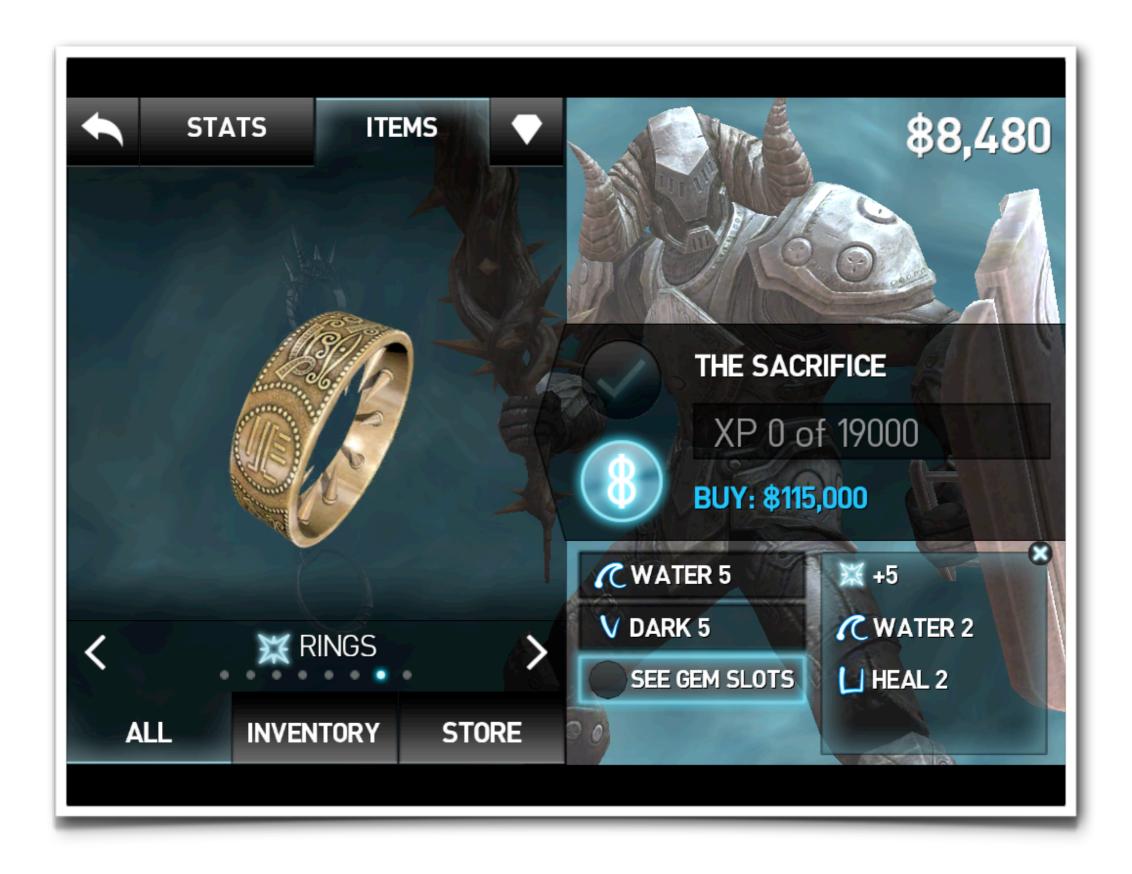
A good non-game example is Apple. From User Interface to Hardware designs, they have create a following that has achieved cult status.



CSR Racing has a beautiful interface and excellent gameplay graphics that has loads of on screen info and interactive controls. You can forgive them for any complexities and information overload because the visuals are so well done.



In the game Gun Brothers, the UI really fits the property, gritty, guns integrated in the UI, Metal accents, and animated FX. It just feels tough and futuristic. It's very busy, packed with a lot of information but is "cool looking" enough that most will overlook some of the complexities and gaudy visual choices.



Same with Infinity Blade 2. Lot's of info but beautifully executed and presented.

Golden Ratio



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The Golden ratio is "A ratio within the elements of a form, such as height to width, approximating 0.618."

Found throughout nature, architecture, and art, the golden ratio is believed to be a subconscious aesthetically pleasing preference.

Examples of it's appearance and use are the Parthenon, in Davinci's The Vitruvian Man, in nature in a Nautilus Shell, and the classic iPod.



In the DragonVale store, the items sold are displayed in a rectangle at roughly the Golden Ratio.



In the DragonVale store, the items sold are displayed in a rectangle at roughly the Golden Ratio. Intentional, probably not but it probably felt naturally appealing when they designed them.



Lets take a look at Gun Bros.



Gun Bros uses it to frame each virtual good item. Info on the button roughly hits all the main axis.

The goal is to make the ratio work in conjunction with other aspects of the design goals. In other words try using it sparingly in focal points and harmonious areas.

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Baby Face Bias



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This one seems pretty obvious but people tend to see things and people with baby-faced features as innocent, honest, helpless than those with more mature features. Baby face features include large eyes, small nose and mouth, large head in proportion to the body.

So for many nurturing themed social games this is an important design consideration.



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Arguably the biggest nurturing game right now is DragonVale. They use the baby-face bias on the app icon...

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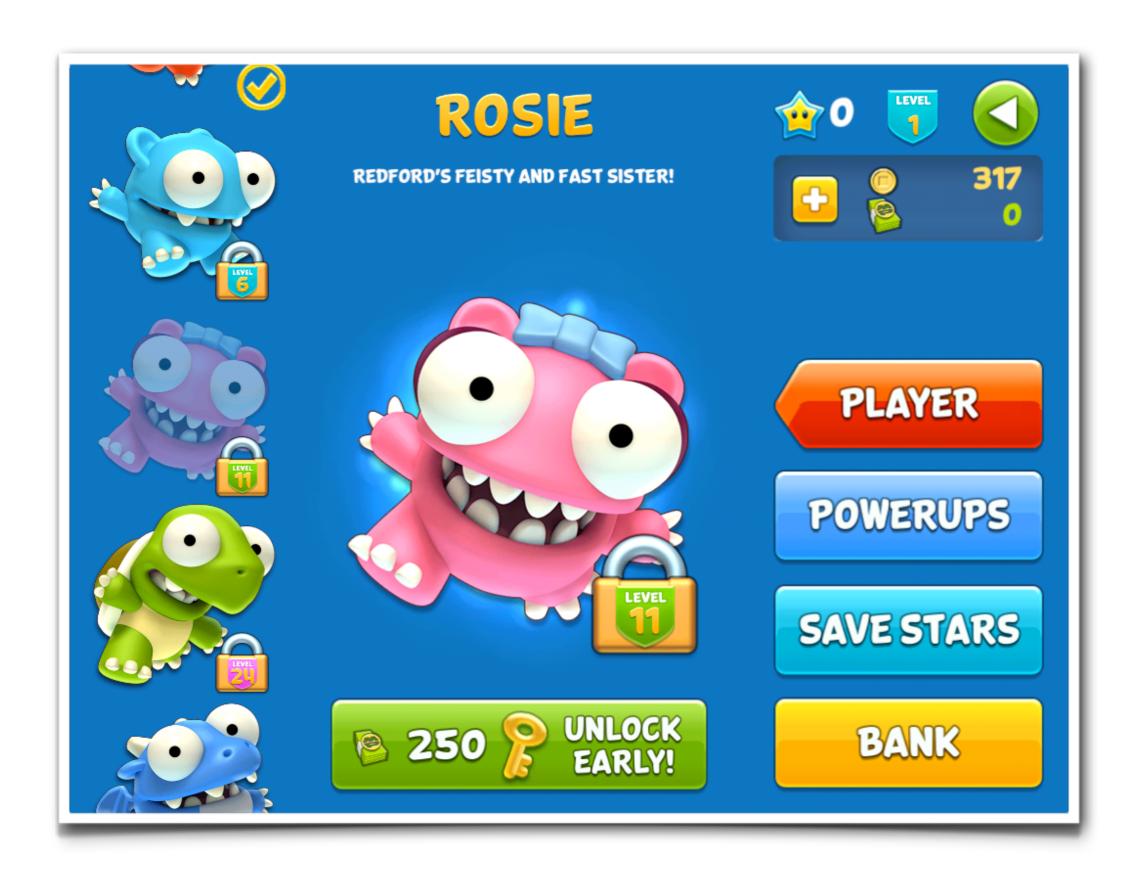
On the dragon on the splash screen...



And the images of dragons in their Market.



If you play the game you really only see them at the baby stage for a brief moment. They look like this most of the times, grown adult dragons. But the baby versions in their Market stimulate feelings of innocence and helplessness, beckoning for players to buy them, care for them, feed them lots of foods that costs a lot of money when you want to level them up to level 20.



Here's an example of how the principle is used in the character designs in Get Set's Mega Run.

Picture Superiority Effect

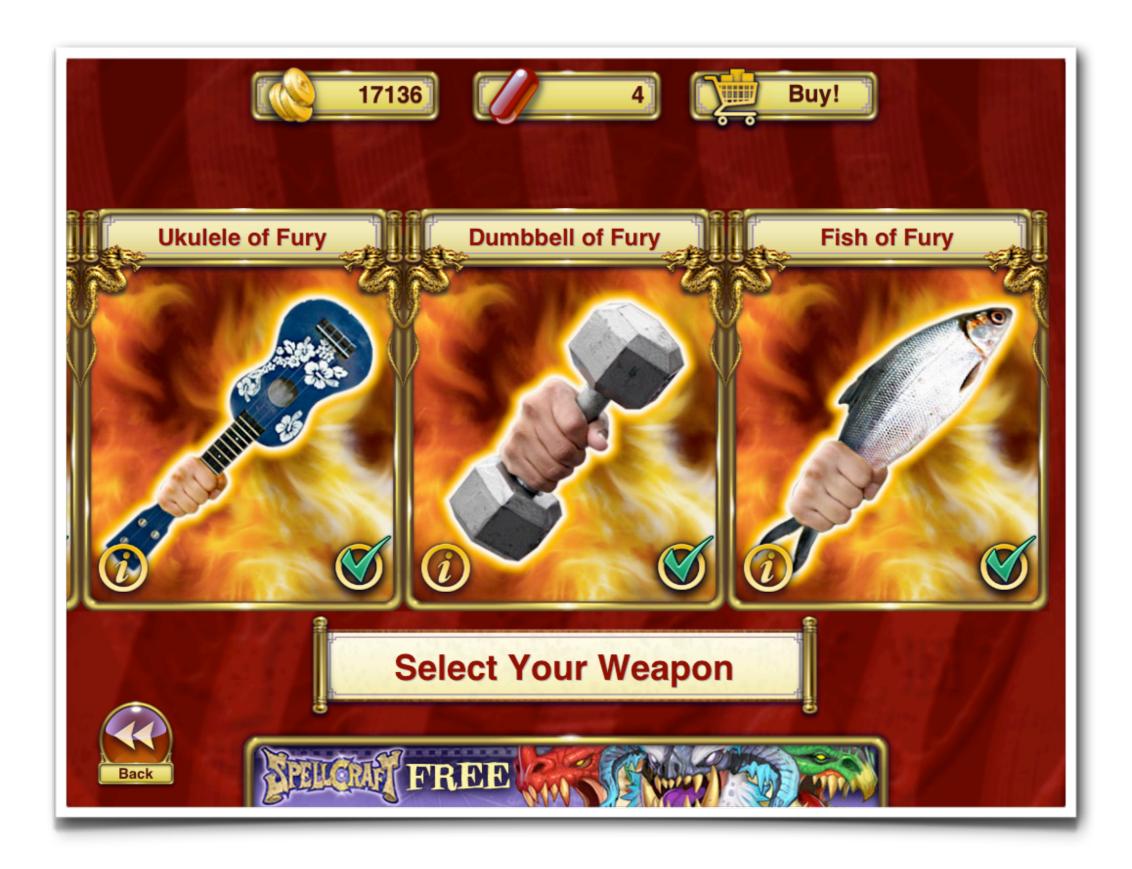


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Picture Superiority Effect is a simple visual design principle that says pictures are better than words.

Pictures are generally easier to understand, recognize and recall. Its most effectively used when people are asked to recall something after more than 30 seconds. Its also best to use pictures that are representational images than abstract ones to represent a concept, action, or object. Its great for improving recollection or reinforce an idea or purpose.

This spoof of an airline emergency information card was seen in Fight Club. Say a lot with little to no text.



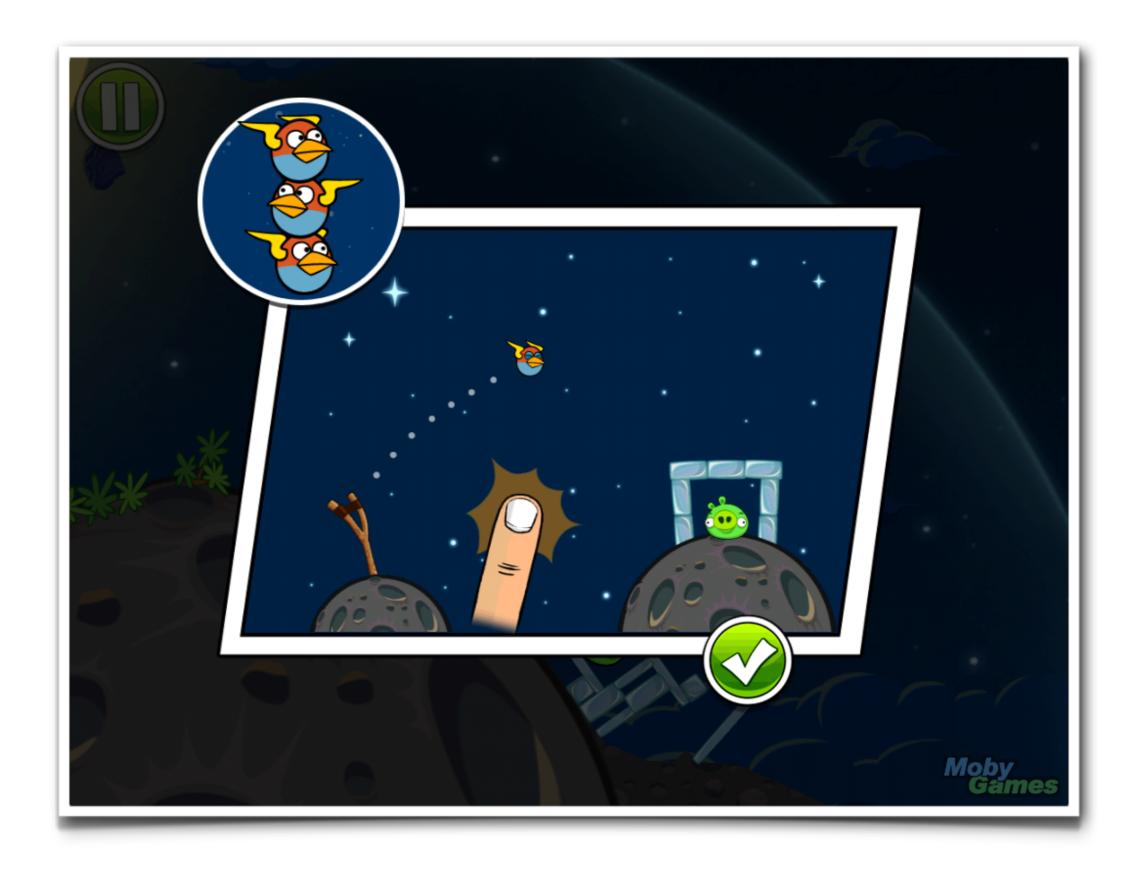
These virtual goods from our game, FaceFighter Ultimate depict weapons in the game as photos.



More importantly when you tap on the info button you get a nice picture of the benefits of using the weapon and a preview of the mayhem using a fish as a weapon can cause.



And for complicated virtual goods such as selling Immortal Judgements in FaceFighter Ultimate, pictures depicting very bad things you can do to your opponents can show much to describe the benefits, the humor, and the satisfaction you can impose on your victims without long winded descriptions and explanations.

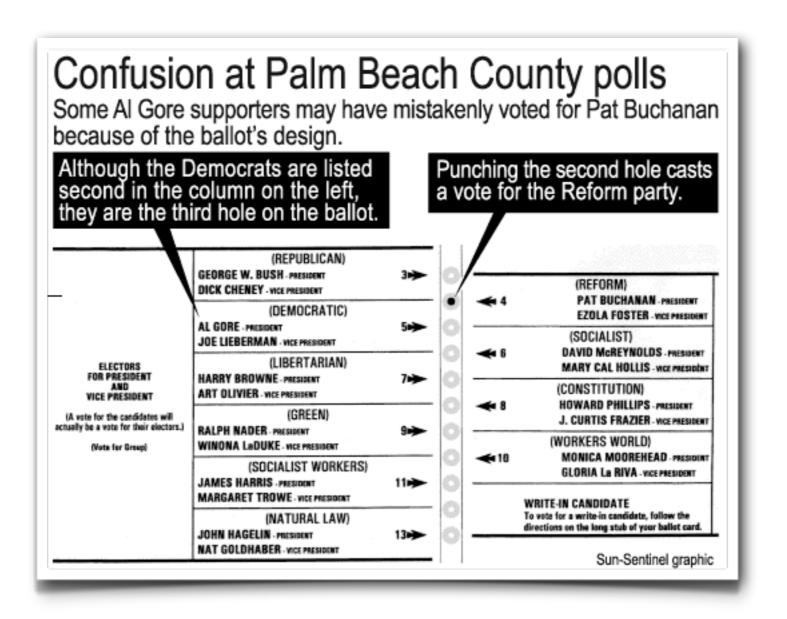


In Angry Birds: Space (and in all of their games), pictures are used in the tutorials when introducing new birds. It's quite effective and fun to look at.



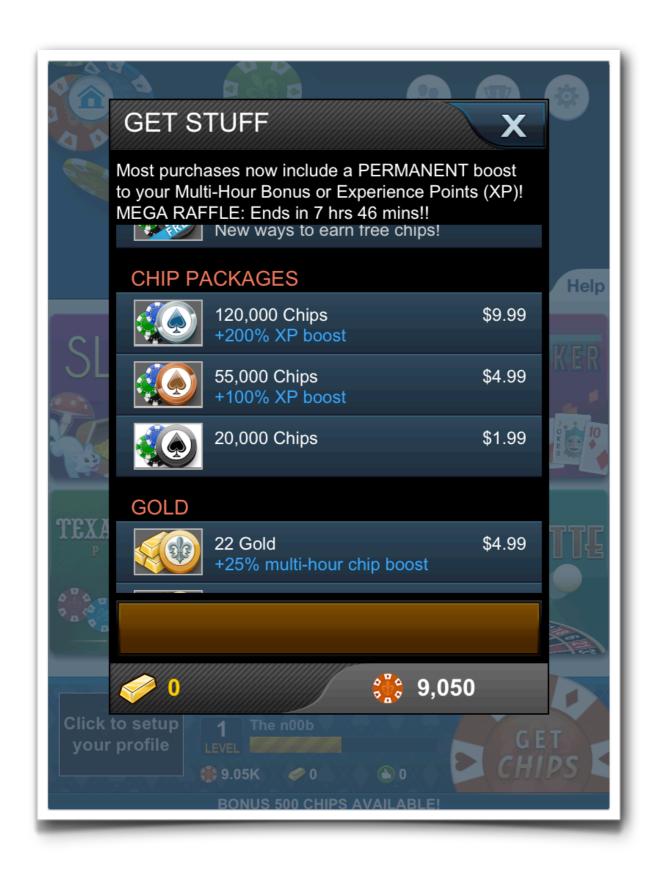
In Rovio's newest game, Bad Piggies, a picture book with no text, gives players hints and instructions in clear, stylistic illustrations.

Serial Position Effects

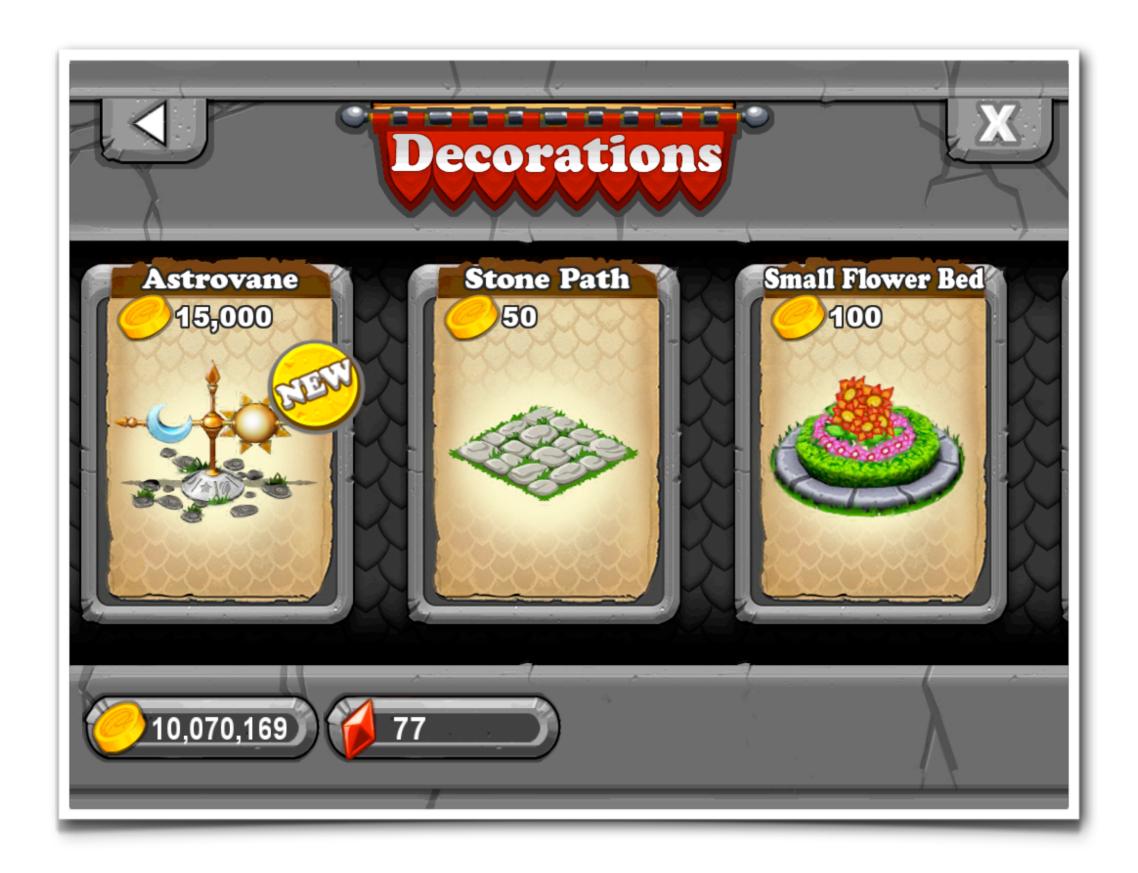


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Serial Position Effects is "A phenomenon of memory in which items at the beginning and end of a list are more likely to be recalled than the ones in the middle." Some of us may remember the 2000 Presidential elections and the voting ballot scandal at the Palm Beach County polls. Having President Bush's name at the top helped because the candidates on both sides of the ballot aligned with the punch holes in the middle of the ballot book. Voters that would have voted for Al Gore punched holes in the second position because he was listed as the second presidential candidate. But, it was Pat Buchanan who was aligned to the second punch hole therefore inadvertently receiving some votes.

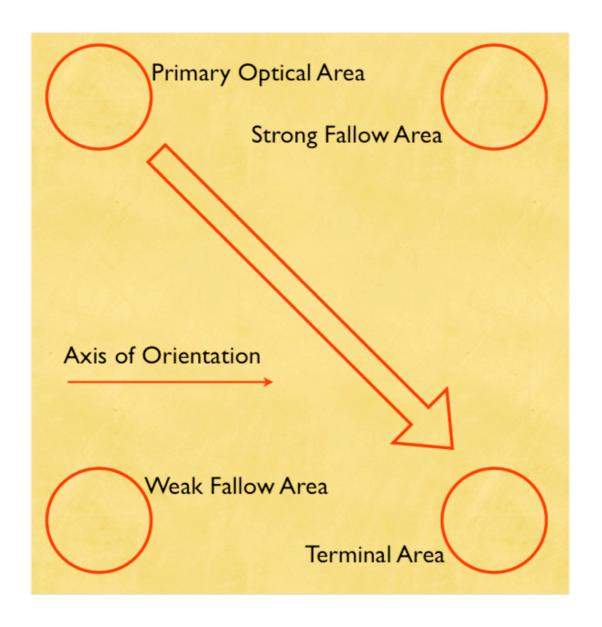


The improved recall of items at the beginning of a list is called a Primacy Effect. For virtual goods, listing the highest price items first will maximize the chance of recall when they leave the store.



In DragonVale, new items are made available in their Market with new updates. Players receive update notifications but we sometimes forget that new items are available. Instead of placing the new items in their respective places in the Market, they are strategically placed at the beginning of the list reminding players that there is a new item available.

Gutenberg Diagram



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The Gutenberg Diagram is "A diagram that illustrates the general pattern followed by the eyes when looking at evenly distributed, homogenous information".

Take a game screen and divide it into four quadrants: It begins at The Primary Optical Area at the top left and ends at the Terminal Area at the bottom right. Western readers naturally begin at the Primary Optical Area and move across and down the display in a series of sweeps to the Terminal Area. Each sweep begins along an axis of orientation made up of aligned elements or explicit segments, and advances in a left-to-right direction. This happens because of reading gravity, the left-right, top-bottom habit created from reading. The strong and fallow areas outside this path received minimal attention.



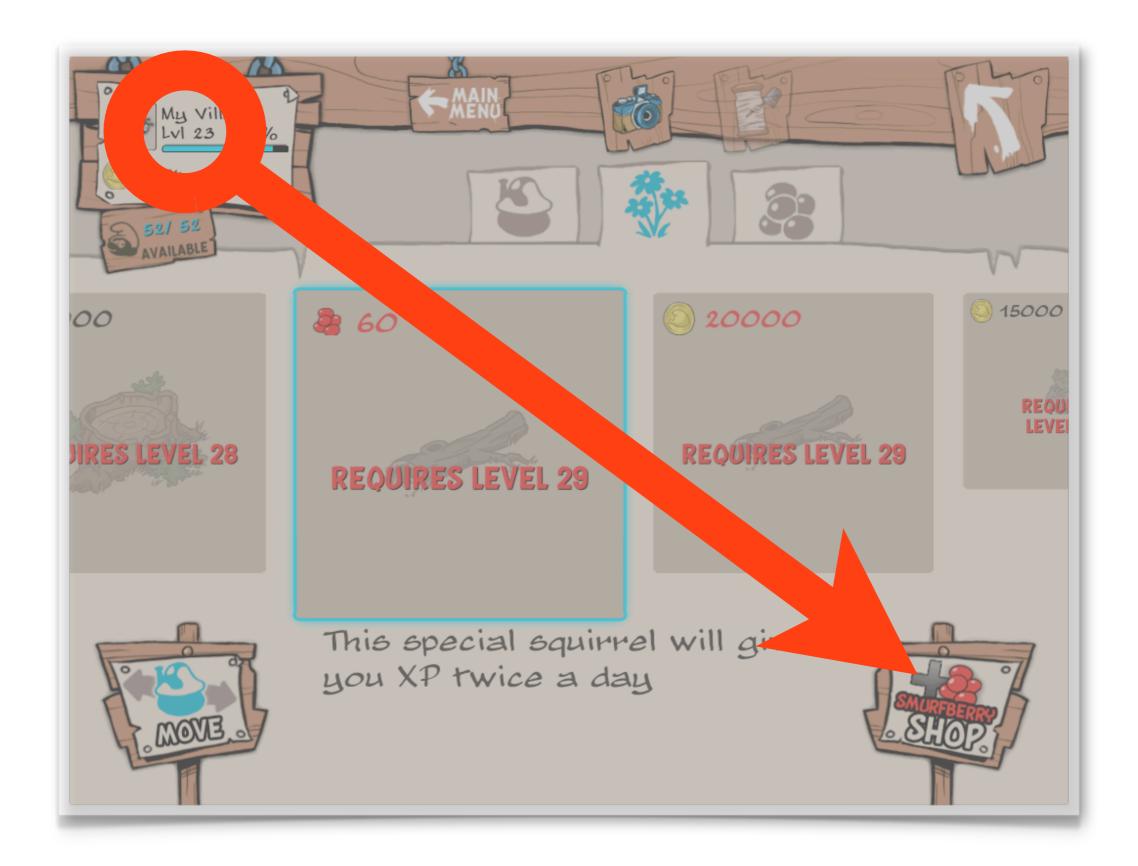
Important elements should be situated at the top left, middle, and bottom right. The weight and composition of elements lead the eye and can effectively direct players to the most important piece on screen.



In Animal Legend's main hub, player eye's travel from player level down to the Store. Players will next survey the other currency meters. The Goals and Settings buttons are not the focus during gameplay.



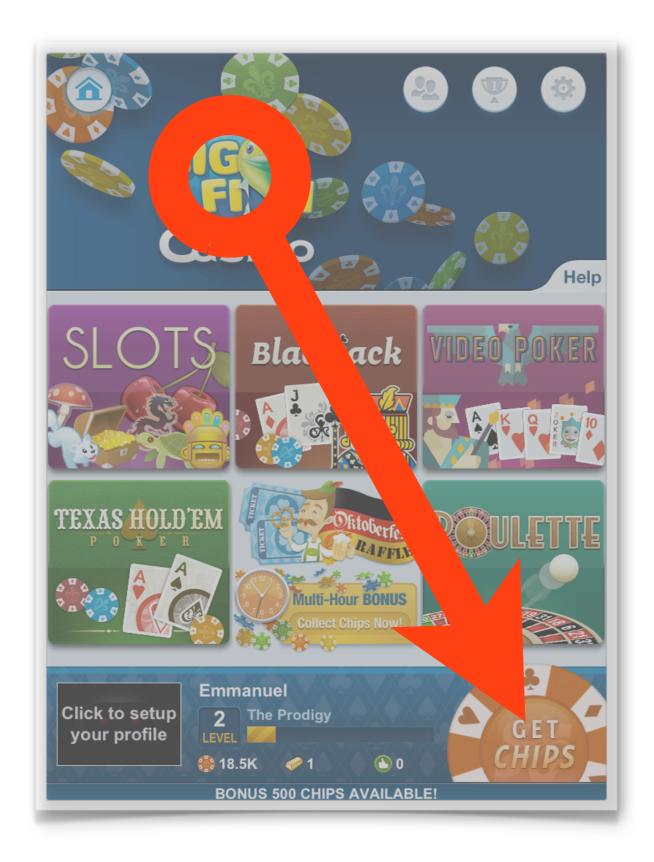
Same thing with Smurf's Village.



The players will first look at their level and currency status and down to the Shop for Smurf Berries button. Most of us, and their kids, know this is where they make their money.



In Big Fish's Casino game's Main Menu screen the first read is the name of the app (with the name of the company) leading the eye to the lower right where players enter the offer wall, another source of revenue.



In Big Fish's Casino game's Main Menu screen the first read is the name of the app (with the name of the company) leading the eye to the lower right where players enter the offer wall, another source of revenue.

Top-Down Lighting Bias



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Top-Down Lighting Bias is "A tendency to light objects from above."

Humans are biased to interpret objects being lit from a single light source from above (the sun). This bias is true across all cultures and age ranges. Its probably because we evolved in a solar system with one sun. I guess on Tatooine it would be two. People perceive that objects depicted with the top down lighting look natural. As in Apple's iOS app icons.

Bottom-up looks unnatural which is why it is used to make things look scary.



Top down lighting makes the buttons in this game look natural and functional, implies dimensionality and depth.



This is a screenshot from our game Spellcraft. The materials in the frame of the meters and the meter indicators have top down lighting. The virtual goods too are lit in the same manner. They say that right handers prefer the light source placed on the upper left while left handers prefer the opposite.

Visual Design Breakdown







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That was a sample of some visual design principles that you can use as tools to direct and focus your players to see the things you want them to see, to feel the way you want them to feel, and interact with things the way you want to.

Let's take a look at some of the most successful games on the App Store and see if they are using any visual design principles. DragonVale, Smurf's Village, and Clash of Clans. This exercise will help illustrate what I've been talking about and put in practice. I concentrated mostly on Free-To-Play Games because these are the games where every second of a player's attention counts, and where visual design principles are crucial in holding their attention, keeping them engaged, and hopefully willing to buy something in the game.



Lets look at DragonVale



Let's take a closer look at Dragonvale and the combination of visual design principles applied to their main hub.

I already mentioned the color in the Market and grey buttons next to it emphasizes players to Buy. TAP



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The Gutenberg Digram makes an appearance in DragonVale's main hub. Player's eyes travel from player level down to the Market. The Goals and Visitor info buttons are not the focus during gameplay.



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They use the principle of Proximity on these two sets of buttons, the Goal/Visitors set, and the Options/Friends/Market set.

The closer the elements such as these buttons are together are perceived to be more related than the ones further away.

The grouping of buttons on bottom right function as gameplay activities. The two to the upper right do not directly affect gameplay.



Dragonvale also uses the design principle known as Figure-Ground Relationship

Because the main gameplay buttons are located in the lower right corner, they are perceived as "Figures"

Figures are the clear, focused, and emphasize points of the display area as if they were objects that are closest to the viewer in depth.

The meters, other buttons, and gameplay field are "Ground" points, secondary reads like a background.



Smurf's Village



Let's evaluate Smurf's Village

The Gutenberg Diagram direct players see their level and currency status and number of available Smurfs, all the Primary Optical Area and all the most important information a player needs to succeed in the game. The terminal Area is the Build button which leads players to the Store to buy more things to build and place in the world. That's where they make there money.



Smurf's Village

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Smurf's Village

They used Iconic Representation for visiting friend's villages suing the images of a Map and a Smurf building and a Hammer for the Build button, both designed without text. These are Example icons. Throughout the village you will see other examples of icons for gameplay.



Smurf's Village

They also use the principle known as Hick's Law which says that the time it takes to a make a decision increases as the number of alternative increases.

They designed the UI taking the Hick's Law in consideration by limiting the number of buttons, choices and decisions in the village (the main playing area) and focusing on the activity of building and creating more buying opportunities.

The only other option is to visit your friend's village to become envious with all the things they have so you will go and buy more stuff....

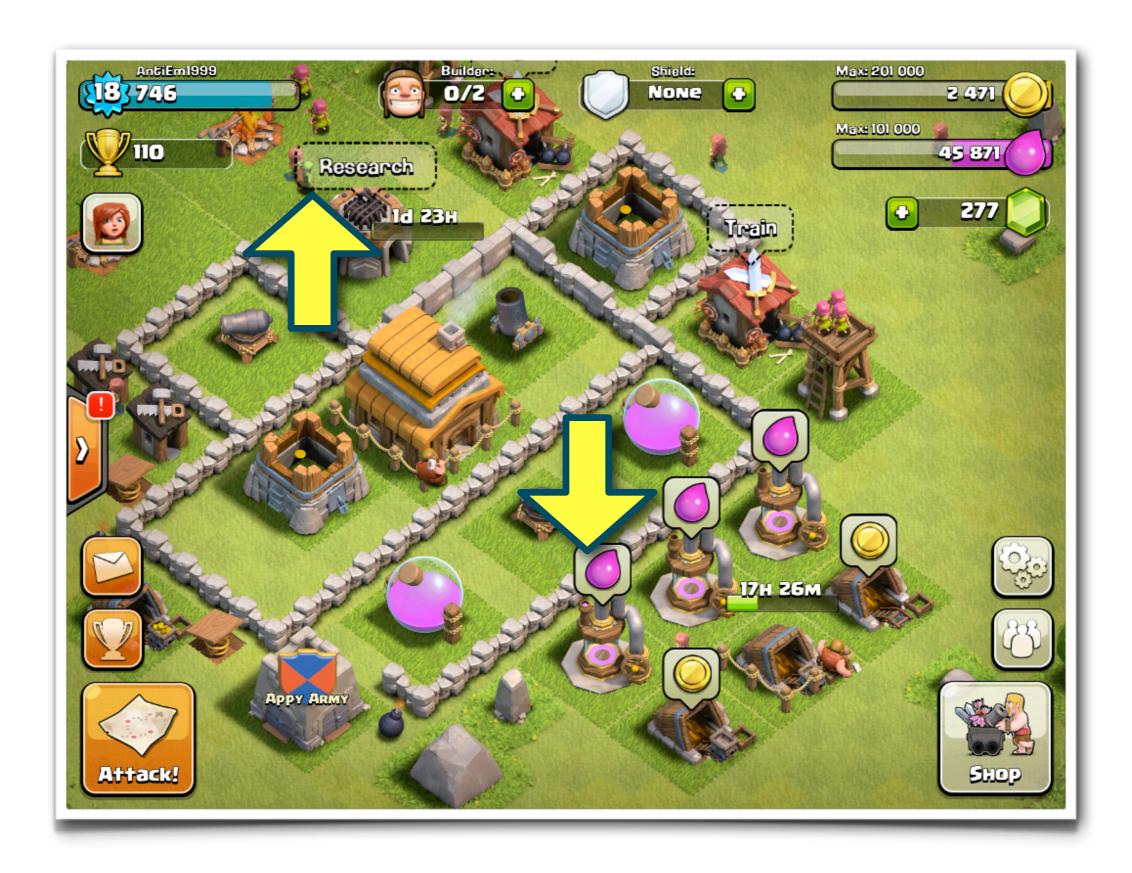


Smurf's Village

They cleverly placed the other buttons in the Splash Screen such as The Options menu and Help button, keeping the main gameplay screen uncluttered giving players more display area to play, stay engaged.



And finally there's Clash of Clans by Supercell.

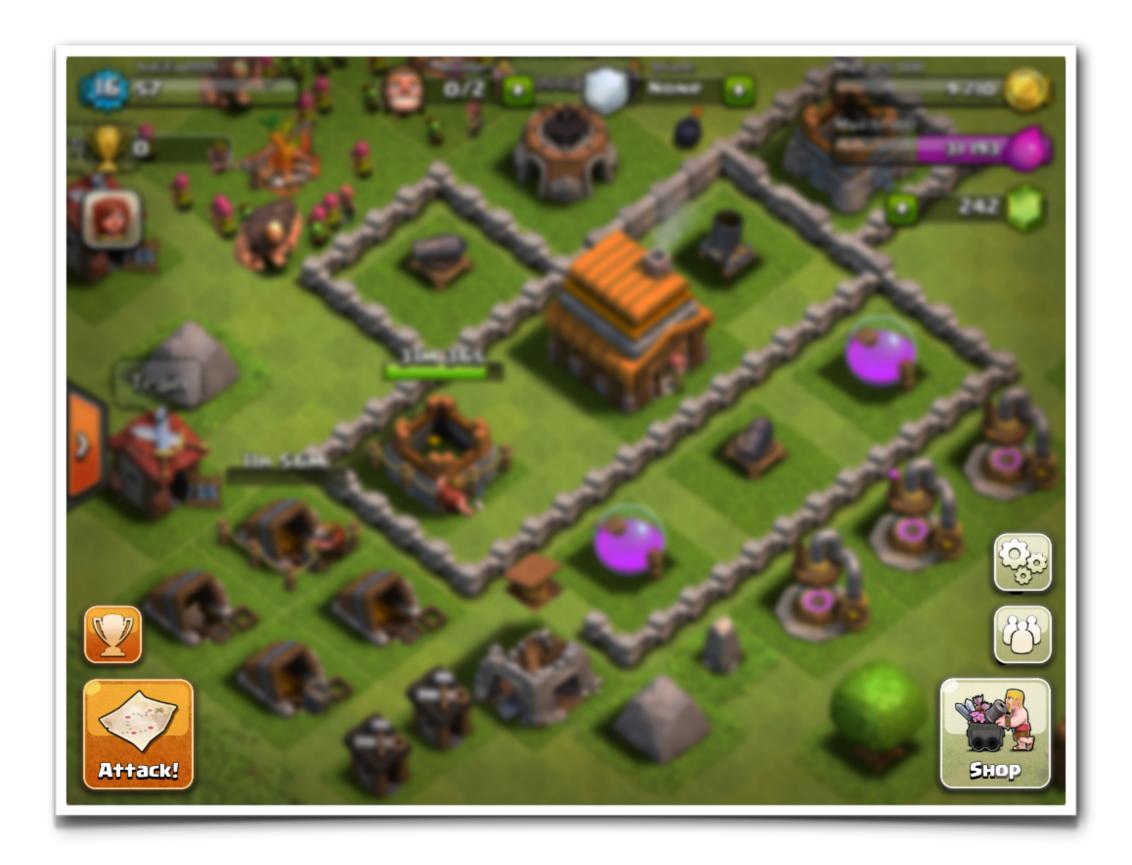


They used the visual design principle of Visibility which states that the usability of a system is improved when its status and methods of use are clearly visible.

Each meter is clearly visible and does not overpower the gameplay area with the use of transparent meters.

All the possible actions are cleverly defined by transparent speech bubbles and do not conflict with items needing collection which have solid speech bubbles.

They avoided what's called the "kitchen-sink visibility", where everything on screen has equal visibility which was a challenge here because of all the information that needed to be displayed and communicated to the player.

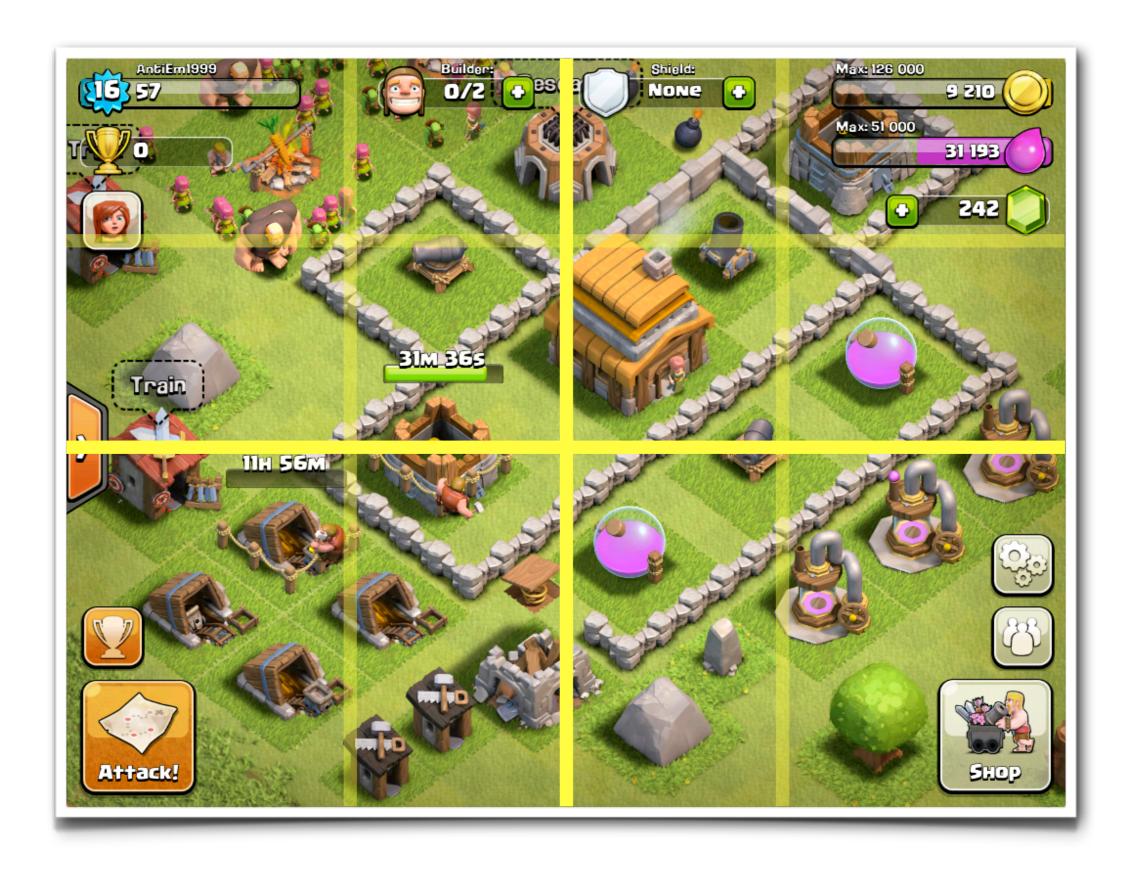


Clash of Clans

They also use the Visual design principle: Similarity which says "Elements that are similar are perceived to be more related than elements that are dissimilar"

Although the buttons in the lower right and left are similar shaped, the large buttons creates an emphasis on the Attack and Shop buttons

Like DragonVale, the SHOP button is colored on top of a grey button creating a focal point. By greying out the friends and settings buttons further directs players to SHOP. The Attack and Tournament button are linked by color and gameplay. This is another design principle called Uniform Connectedness.



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Symmetry creates balance, harmony, and stability despite the abundance of information displayed on screen.

Conclusion

- Use Visual Design to direct and focus your players
- Aesthetics, Emotions, and Functionality
- Learn more about the other design principles
- Find effective combinations of principles
- Apply and experiment

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I hope that gives you all insight into what visual design can do for you to improve almost every facet of your game. I think you will see things differently.

The goal is to use visual design to direct and focus your players to see the things you want them to see, to feel they way you want to feel, and play the game the way you want them to play.

Use the filters of Aesthetics, Emotions, and Functionality to measure your goals.

I only presented a few of the principles. There are over a hundred and more to be discovered.

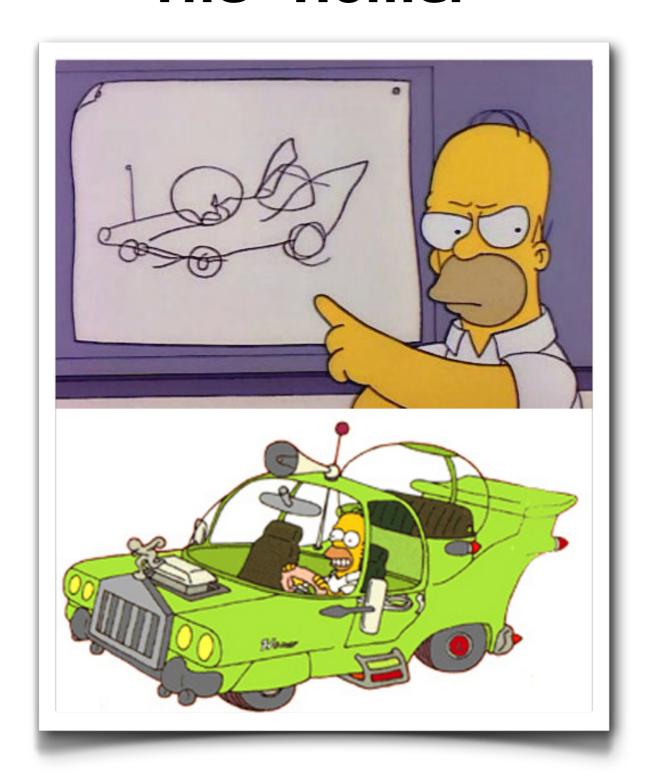
Use one to several of these principles as tools to guide, direct, and improve your games on applicable features. Let these principles empower you to be able to understand what would make for a successful design, approach, and plan for an idea or concept.

Artist and designers can use this theory to help make them stronger designers and support their ideas and decisions to produce better content, clarify direction, and focus efforts.

You will learn how to solve problems with your teammates from other disciplines more coherently and effectively because you will be using the language of design principles.

And remember...

The "Homer"



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With everyone's input and no one using visual design as a way of focusing your game, you get everyone's favorite sandwich or the "Homer". You get a game that has no focus and designed to appeal to a small audience.

You don't want to design the Homer.

Q&A

- www.appyentertainment.com
- www.appygamesblog.com
- em@appyentertainment.com
- Recommended Reading
 - Universal Principles of Design by William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, and Jill Butler
 - The Design of Everyday Things by Donald A. Norman

Thank you!

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Thank you! Please check out Appy's website and read our blog. Feel free to email me if you have any questions.