Think smooth!
The Challenges, Pleasures and Pitfalls of *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* – Part I

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I stand in the middle of a cheering crowd at my work place (isn't it great to be a game scholar?), holding my *wii* controller in the graceful stance of the sketch artist, and when I finally realize what I should have been doing, my chance to throw that "pen" at the dartboard has already passed. There goes another turtle, oh no!

The *Nintendo wii* game *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* belies its title in that it is a cognitive rather than a kinaesthetic challenge. Of course, from the perspective of the viewer, seeing your esteemed colleagues clumsily wagging an elephant's trunk in order to collect virtual apples has a certain appeal. But as a player, the main challenge lies in figuring out what action is required in a very limited amount of time. The following is an analysis of the sense-making challenges, pleasures and pitfalls that occur in the course of the "Evil Attacks Diamond Dojo" episode.

In the introductory video sequence, the Dojo is threatened by an evil demon. The fierce warriors Kat and Ana rush to the rescue. Before entering the Dojo, they turn into four turtles, symbolizing the four lives the player has at her disposal in the fight against evil. The goal is to advance through a corridor of minigames and to win the boss fight at the end of the episode. With every lost minigame, the player loses one precious turtle and rescuing the Dojo becomes more unlikely.

One main objective of *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* is to show off the many different ways to operate the Form Baton (i.e. the controller). The special attraction of these operation modes is the physical analogy between input method and on-screen action. These physical analogies make the interaction with the game world feel very intuitive and immediate. However the mapping, although seductive, ist not always consistent or representative of action.

Every new operation mode is introduced by a cut-scene which not only explains how the Form Baton has to be handled, but also puts the new input method in a fictional context, clearly labelling it for future ease of recollection in reference to this context. E.g. "the Chauffeur" cut-scene explains that one has to grab the Form Baton left and right like a steering wheel. In "The Samurai", the image of a hungry Samurai defending his lunch by vigorously drawing his sword from the hip is evoked, and in the "The Sketch-artist" cut scene, the situation of a pop quiz and an artist drawing an apple is called up.

How these cut-scenes are composed is interesting in itself and deserves some

analysis here. In the middle of the screen, written text slowly unfolds while it is read voiceover. The text/voiceover explain how the player has to hold the controller by comparing the stance to an easily recognizable fictional situation (see above). Additionally, the scene contains two illustrative clip-art images: in the foreground is the image of the Form Baton and how it has to be held, (e.g. two hands grabbing the controller at both sides) and in the background one sees the fictional reference to this operation mode (e.g. a man in the front of a car with both hands on the steering wheel).

The foregrounding/backgrounding of images implies a hierarchical order of their information content (i.e. it is more important to remember how to hold the controller than to remember the fictional setting) that is undermined by the labelling of the interaction method (e.g. "The Chauffeur", "The Sketch Artist") as well as the text/voiceover that also refers strongly to the fictional context e.g. in the case of "The Sketch-Artist": "Hold the Form Baton as you would a pencil during a pop quiz, delicately but defiantly. Mastery of this move can change a pop quizzee into a pop quizzer."

These elaborate introductions of new operation modes establish distinct metaphors that can be easily recalled at the beginning of each new minigame by only showing the foregrounded image of the initial cut-scene in combination with the label.

The introductory cut-scenes address not only one aspect of every operation mode, but three:

1. How the Form Baton is *held*
2. How it is *moved* and
3. What it *represents in the fictional setting* it has been introduced in (e.g. a steering wheel, or a pen.)

This threefold attribution of interaction techniques is a source of confusion in the "Diamond Dojo" episode and presents many, mostly pleasurable, sense-making challenges.

The most immediately graspable minigames are those that are consistent with all three aspects of a particular interaction technique, such as minigames that call up the "sketch artist" and command the player to "draw" or "the chauffeur" to "drive". But those are also the least exciting ones from a sense-making point of view.

More interesting are those minigames, which tap into the metaphorical nature of the various stances and use them in different fictional contexts. Thus, the player trustingly takes the stance of the "sketch artist" but is suddenly confronted with a dartboard, a paper plane, or, rather shockingly, with the gaping mouth of a toothless old lady. One would be at a loss of what to do were it not for the commands that appear on the screen at the beginning of each game telling the player to "throw", "fly" or "insert".

But it is not only the different fictional context that causes a moment's puzzlement. It is the fact that the change of context is also accompanied by a game-play enhancement. e.g. "The Sketch Artist" stance is transferred from a 2D environment (a paper to draw on) to a 3D environment (a paper plane that has to avoid a tree, or

false teeth that have to be inserted into a mouth) and one has to assess depth as a new factor of one's performance. In combination, these changes provide refreshing variations of the original metaphor.

Another intriguing sense-making challenge occurs when a certain input technique is not simply placed in a *different* fictional context, but in a *contrasting* one. There is one game, where "The Samurai" stance is required, but not to perform a martial action, but to hand out a love card. The game is still easily won, since "The Samurai" technique is one of the simplest operation modes in the "Diamond Dojo" episode and no additional physical challenge has to be met (such as aiming). The comic contrast evoked by this change of context also made me laugh.

However, total befuddlement befell me, when I was asked to take "The Chauffeur" stance and the following minigame opened with a scene of a smiling girl running towards me. On the screen appeared the command "push" and so I obeyed and pushed the girl to the ground. At the same time I asked myself how this was still coherent with the metaphor of "The Chauffeur"? In fact, it was not, and that makes this minigame problematic: while it can be highly rewarding to change the fictional context of an input technique – after all, that is what metaphors are all about – there is a problem in destroying the metaphor's structure. Every metaphor in *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* is established as a combination of stance *and* movement. One cannot change one part of this structure, without significantly weakening the metaphor. Inconsistencies like these make the player lose her trust in the metaphor to the point where the metaphor loses its meaning and becomes useless to quickly orient the player about what to do.

Although these words seem to bespeak a far too grown up player for this kind of game, I must admit that I cannot wait to play *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* again. And this time, I want to find out how to scan that darn banana. Who cares that the mapping of physical input and on-screen action seems to have gone astray in this minigame? I want to win it and I want to save the turtles.