Keeping the Player Smart

By Sue Baechler for Ludogogy Magazine, 2021

"Your game should be a journey full of thinking of solutions and keeping the player smart." Tim Eckert, *How Games Motivate Players*

'Keeping the player smart' is a great way to think about learning as a core motivator in game play. I had this in mind a few nights ago when I turned on the fireplace, cleared the round table and put the *Whoonu* game tin in the middle to play with guests. *Whoonu,* from *Cranium*, is described as "the fun-filled 'what's your favorite thing?' game." It lives up to its claim and much more, as some of you may know. *How?* By keeping players smart. Even in a party game where your

slightly silly task is to rank your most-to-least favorite things from six random cards chosen by other players like doing laundry, popsicles, road trips, little dogs, getting up early, cuddling.

To me, 'keeping the player' smart in *Whoonu* breaks down like this:

- Feeling smart at the start. *'I know he's a night owl so 'getting up early' won't be his favorite thing.'*
- Getting smarter as you go. *'She said she loved big dogs when someone else got that card earlier.'*
- Being smarter at the end. *'Whoonu she liked doing laundry more than taking road trips.'*

Every moment of *Whoonu* is engineered to keep players smart.

- Smart about playing. *Learning why players favor one thing over another gives you clues to earn points.*
- Smart about scoring. *Learning that a 'he won't like any of these' or 'she will love these' hand of cards doesn't always result in earning points.*
- Smart about winning. *Learning more and more about each player to steadily earn points or surge ahead to win.*

In *Whoonu*, no matter how surprising and revealing people's favorite things are, the game environment is positive and accepting. Whoonu?, everyone says. (Even when

someone's partner admits favoring 'little dogs' over 'cuddling'.) Fortunately, it's just a party game. Or, is it?

"In games, learning is the drug." Ralph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*

"Everyone likes learning," Tim Eckert points out. "No, wait. It's not the process of learning we love, but the feeling of being smarter now than we were just a few moments ago." For those of us who design games to help people do new things and behave in new ways, 'keeping the player smart' encompasses all the elements needed to motivate individuals. Elements like competition, achievement, relatedness, competence and significance.

Next time you play a game, consider how learning keeps you smart from start to finish. And, when you're making a game, 'keeping the player smart' is a great way to consider learning as the motivating force.

"Play is the highest form of research." Albert Einstein

Back to the game *Whoonu,* and the fire and our guests. To our surprise, they asked if we could play again the next night. Even though it was late and we'd been out all day. Why? Because they were learning interesting things about each other and they wanted to play a little smarter than they did the night before.

So, there you have it. *Keeping the player smart.*

- Feeling smart at the start.
- Getting smarter as you go.
- Being smarter at the end.

And, for fun, here's how I ranked that random little group of *Whoonu* things with #6 being my *most* favorite.

6 Getting up early

5 Road trips

4 Doing laundry

3 Cuddling

2 Little dogs

1 Popsicles

Whoonu!