



QUBE 2: OBJECTIVE CLARITY

TOXIC GAMES: *Q.U.B.E. 2 (Xbox One version)*. [digital game].
Preston Park House : Trapped Nerve Games, 2018.

Peter C Britton

This review article will explore the application of Objective Clarity in the first-person puzzle game Q.U.B.E. 2. Objective Clarity will be defined as the effectiveness of communicating the game designers' intended goal for the player. Toxic Games summarizes their game as follows: "In Q.U.B.E. 2, players step into the shoes of Amelia Cross, a British archaeologist, who has awoken on a strange alien planet. With the help of fellow survivor, Emma, players must face the challenging puzzles of the Q.U.B.E. in order to try and find a way back home". Q.U.B.E. 2 is a first-person perspective puzzle game. The player's main objective is to navigate through confined geometric spaces to solve contrived puzzles in order to reach the main objective. The main objective is either a switch or an entrance to a new section. As the player progresses through the game, more levels of interactivity and abilities are unlocked which directly increases the puzzle complexity. The game enables the player with five core abilities: jumping, interacting, creating blue square; creating green squares and creating magenta squares. Jumping is limited to the height of an in-game cube. Interacting allows the player to interact with elements either remotely or within arm's reach. Blue squares push game entities in a specific direction with high initial velocity. Green squares generate a single instance of a cube. Magenta squares extrude the surface of the base square block to create a platform.

First person perspective games allow for players to navigate virtual 3D space from the first-person perspective, and relies on a combination of two core control mechanics. The left analog of the controller is used for movement on the X and Z axis, and the right analog of the controller for rotation along the X and Y axis for freelook. This makes up the basics for most first-person perspective games. The player is tasked to manage these two controlling mechanisms. Mastering these mechanisms are needed for successful 3D space navigation. To add a greater level of aiming precision, most first-person games rely on a reticle at the center of the screen for aiming. This perspective choice comes with a certain level of disorientation. For players new to this game type it, can be more disorienting. With Q.U.B.E. 2 being a first-person game that is solely hosted within a confined geometric space, disorientation can become more problematic. The concept of Objective Clarity is demonstrated within the game; the designer's intention are effective at communicating with the player. Q.U.B.E. 2 utilizes light, rectangular shapes, symbols, color and cables for Objective Clarity throughout the game. Many of these techniques are layered to enable stronger world building and overall design aesthetics.

Controlled light placement gives the player direction and enhances spatial awareness, as the light serves as an anchor point. Light used as an anchor point, allows the player to move relative to the light's location. This application of light serves as a landmark to which the player can rely on for better awareness of their placement in the world. Picture 1 shows an application in which light is used to guide the player forward. The scene relies on the opening of the space with god rays to direct the player forward. The light is also being

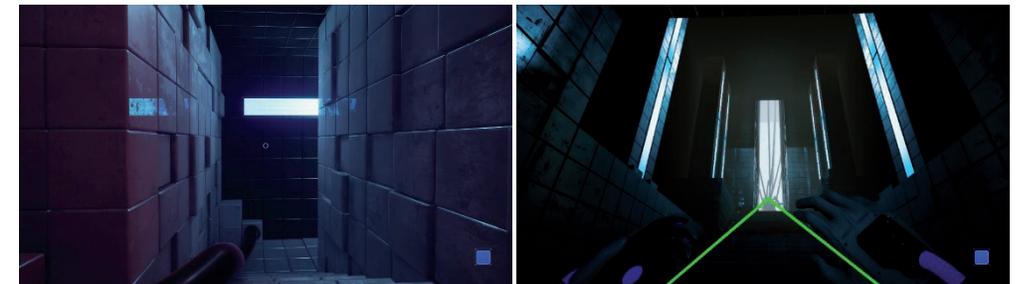
used as a focal point to which the player is drawn as an escape from the confined space. The use of light in both instances, relies on strong contrast to draw the player towards a specific direction without the need for explicit instructions.



Picture 1: Light as the guide of the player

Source: author's screenshots

The use of a horizontal rectangular light that is partially visibly shown in Picture 2, aids in directing the player. The portion of the light that is occluded by the wall gives the player a strong suggestion of continuation. This technique relies heavily on implication and works similarly to the function of a directional arrow, while maintaining the aesthetics of the game. The player's inability to see the entire shape subtly informs them, that there is more to see; the player then move towards and then along the rectangular lights. Another application urges the player forward and up the stairs. The vertical lights are placed in a natural ascending order that not only matches the flow of the level, but allows for implied instructions to the player. In this level composition, the lines are not occluded by any assets, but they are placed to amplify the perspective. The perspective conveys the illusion of a forward pointing arrow.



Picture 2: Horizontal and vertical use of lights aiding in directing the player

Source: author's screenshots

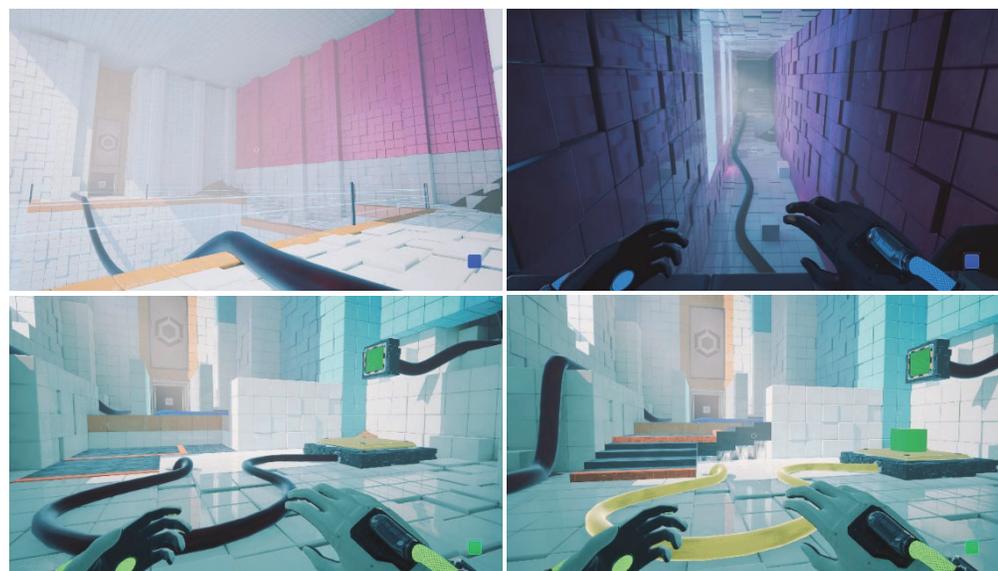
The placement and contrast of light source can also create a hard-focal point (see Picture 3). In this example, the red lights aid in directing the player's attention. The contrasting white vertical light source creates an artificial visual constraint. This method frames the scene despite the player's ability to freely look. Combining multiple techniques to achieve Objective Clarity, can create not only clear non-verbal instructions to the player, but aids in connecting spaces in the world. It also gives the player strong spatial awareness. Light, color, and lines are used to communicate direction, and spatial interest (see Picture 4). The cable creates a connection to the different spaces in addition to indicating the player's progress. When the player completes a designated area, the cable changes from black, to an energized color. The magenta color on the back wall to the right

separates the space, and strengthens the player's placement in the world. The cable is also used to communicate direction and show relationships between pressure pads, and the devices that are affected in the game.



Picture 3: Lights as hard-focal points aiding in directing the player's attention

Source: author's screenshot



Picture 4: Multiple techniques to give the player strong spatial awareness

Source: author's screenshots

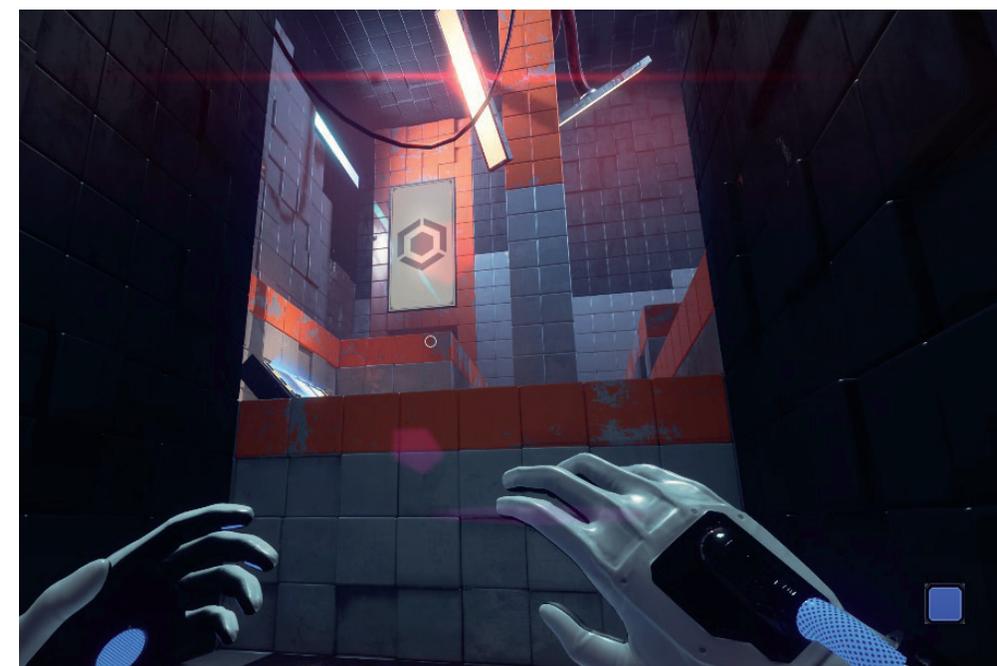
The final technique used is symbolism. This is a more explicit application that utilizes icons that are both game specific, and culturally familiar. For example, the square frame and cube symbols are used to communicate one of two messages: a lit square frame communicates the area is accessible, an unlit square communicates inaccessibility (see Picture 5).



Picture 5: Lights as symbols communicating messages

Source: author's screenshots

A reoccurring cube symbol communicates to the player the end goal of a section, and also a beacon of forward progression (Picture 6). The use of this symbol can be found in all puzzle segments. It indicates to the player where to go at the start of every puzzle room.



Picture 6: Lights as symbols communicating the end goal of a section

Source: author's screenshot

The use of common symbols, such as fire and target symbols, are also used to communicate game mechanics (see Picture 7). These symbols are never explained, but rely on pre-existing knowledge outside of the game world. For player's that are not acquainted with these symbols, the Objective Clarity would be lost, leading to player confusion. The game assumes acquaintance with these symbols, and for most players these symbols would be intuitive.

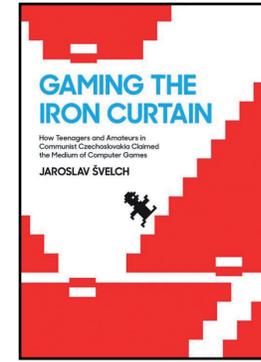


Picture 7: Lights as symbols communicating game mechanics
Source: author's screenshot

Q.U.B.E 2 excels at applying design fundamentals that aid in creating Objective Clarity, for the player. At each junction within the game, Objective Clarity is maintained, and relies on layering a variety of techniques to excel in this area. The player is guided through each experience without undermining the core puzzle mechanic. Q.U.B.E 2 is a very strong template for Objective Clarity in level designs for games.

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GAMING THE IRON CURTAIN. HOW TEENAGERS AND AMATEURS IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA CLAIMED THE MEDIUM OF COMPUTER GAMES

ŠVELCH, J.: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. Cambridge, London : The MIT Press, 2018. 400 p. ISBN 978-0-262-03884-3.

Silvester Buček

Gaming the Iron Curtain resonates in the era of postcolonial perspectives on culture histories. Even though the book does not mention it explicitly, the insight into the tactics of the first Czechoslovak players (and everything surrounding them) is in many ways exemplary work with the potential to shake the hegemonic view of the history of digital games. Studies such as the *Ultimate History of Video Games*¹ or *Replay: The History of Video Games*² try to shed some light on several of the important events in less dominant game markets, but their examples are more anecdotal, and they can hardly tell the whole story to readers not familiar with the contexts of the given markets. The late twentieth century was marked by many ideological divisions resulting in several different political, economical and cultural patterns for large groups of people around the globe. Naturally, the biggest differences appeared in the things that did not exist (or had virtually no cultural resonance) before the Cold War. One of those things was computers and everything that came with them, including digital games. *Gaming the Iron Curtain* maps the story of games in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in the broadest possible context, starting with the “setting” (computer technology in the country) and ending with the analysis of many games created by the local amateur scene.

The author, Jaroslav Švelch, is a game scientist born in Czechoslovakia who has been working on this topic for over ten years, having done more than thirty interviews and gone through most of the available documents including magazines, fanzines, books, statistics and other relevant sources. But as the author himself mentions, his inspiration lies in A. Keer's call for “social and cultural histories of games”,³ so the book is merely a collection of facts. *Gaming the Iron Curtain* tells a story of a small (even niche, as the author sometimes calls it) section of people's everyday life. It shows that their experience with digital games was very different from the experience we usually read about in global game studies discourse. The difference is based on the very setting of the socialist country. The economy was more closed than open, five years plans were not able to fulfil many basic needs, and the idea of owning software was strongly lacking behind the British, American or Japanese markets.

However, socialist Czechoslovakia was not in total isolation, and goods were being moved through the borders (more in than out, of course). Also, institutions such as the army or technical universities used the first computers early, so people knew about the technology, and everyone who was willing to go through some discomfort could get their

1 For more information, see: KENT, S. L.: *The ultimate history of video games: from Pong to Pokémon and beyond: the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. Roseville : Prima Pub, 2001.

2 See also: DONOVAN, T.: *Replay: The history of video games*. Lewes : Yellow Ant, 2010.

3 KEER, A: *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay*. London : Sage Publications, 2006, p. 1.

hands on computers and digital games and even own some. The different and complicated environment required adapting different (and often complicated) tactics by Czechoslovak citizens. One of the best illustrations of the need to explore locally via social and cultural perspectives is the story of the people waiting in a queue the night before the shipping of Didactic Gama (a local ZX Spectrum clone) to an electronics store. The phenomenon was well known from capitalist countries where people usually waited to have the newest product first. But in socialist Czechoslovakia, waiting in queues was not the matter of being first, it often was the matter of having even a chance to buy things, as there was a great lack of computer products. These seemingly similar tactics have very different cultural and economical roots. Similarly, other tactics can sometimes look alike, and the book goes deep to explore why they were adapted.

For example, it is obvious that digital games were played in Czechoslovakia, but since most of the copies of Western and Japanese games were pirated versions copied many times, the way Czechoslovaks played was much more exploratory, since they did not have the manuals and other physical materials usually coming with games. Švelch identifies these tactics through the concepts of "Vnye", "Bricolage" and "Coding acts". The first concept proposed by A. Yurchak⁴ is a way of being in and out the totalitarian regime at the same time. Activities of Czechoslovak players fit this concept very well, as they were concentrating mostly in state-controlled clubs or institutions, but the conservative regime of normalisation (the period of Czechoslovak history after the Prague Spring) did not understand this novelty and all the consequences that came with it. This situation meant that Czechoslovakia was probably one of the first countries in which political (and strongly antiregime) games appeared.

The second concept "Bricolage"⁵ is also characteristic for many countries facing limited imports. To say it simply, Bricolage is engineering with limited resources. This resulted in many self-made hardware and software solutions. Consequently, it meant that Czechoslovak players were much craftier than their Western or Japanese counterparts. Lastly, as mentioned before, "Coding acts" were the results of games being cracked, hacked or reprogrammed from scratch. Gaming the Iron Curtain follows many of these games, but games themselves are only a vehicle to tell a compelling story about life in one peripheral socialist country. There is little to reproach, the text is easy to read, and the reader will not get lost in an overloading of resources (bibliography and ludography stretches through more than 30 pages). At some moments, mostly in the early part of the book, the author sometimes could have given more insight (or sources) to the context, as foreign readers might not be so familiar with all the nuances of socialist Czechoslovakia. But for the most part, this is not a big deal, as most necessary contextual information is provided. On the other hand, what a reader may miss in the ludography, are the countries of origin of the mentioned games. This detail makes it harder for further researchers to quickly identify where the game was created. Otherwise, the appendix part of the book is full of useful lists including a timetable of important dates and a glossary.

Gaming the Iron Curtain is a necessity for every game historian, and also for historians of technology and pop culture, as it brings a new local perspective of a formerly colonized state to the well-known (and many times repeated) discourse.

4 YURCHAK, A.: *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 141.

5 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *The savage mind*. London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 17.

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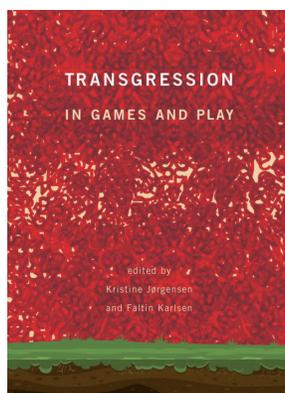
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TRANSGRESSION IN GAMES AND PLAY

JORGENSEN, K., KARLSEN, F.: *Transgression in Games and Play*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2018. 318 p. ISBN 978-0-262-03865-2.

Michal Smrkal

The word “toxic”, or rather “toxicity” is nowadays often used, especially in connection with games and gaming communities. League of Legends, World of Warcraft, or Rust, are just a few of many examples that even a less experienced player can name. As games emerge as the new champion of a new perspective for both entertainment and storytelling, another, much darker side becomes more visible. But, what does it actually mean to be toxic? This volume, *Transgression in games and play*, tries not only to answer this particular question, but rather create new ones along with a set of several possible directions where answers can be found. The book was written as part of the Games and Transgressive Aesthetics research project in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen, and was financed by the Research Council of Norway. As such, its perspective is broad and ranges from discourses in sociology, philosophy, to cases directly rooted in media and game studies. This is certainly not a limiting approach.

The topic of transgression is split into five parts – concepts, practices, emotions, content and society. Each of these parts contains several contributions to this topic from various angles. Specific contributions offer case studies of transgressive play, how gameplay practices can be at once playful and violate social etiquette at the same time; investigate players’ emotional responses to game content; or simply examine the aesthetics of transgression in gameplay. The context of societal gameplay is emphasized very heavily, as it is beyond any doubt one of the most important aspects of modern game design. Yet, the actual and personal player experience is not forgotten. The book offers several cases of the contextual understanding of content and practises usually framed as simply problematic. Each of these contributions presents a case, that the games themselves are boundary-crossing, which means that to consider them as only “play” or “fun” can be hazardous. Games, as any other form of art, can include transgressive or upsetting content, the most visible being excessive violence and nudity, actions still experienced as socially and personally taboo.

What can be seen as positive is the overall agreement that the games and game makers themselves are often not directly responsible for solving these ethical and aesthetic conundrums. As other types of art makers, they are even somewhat expected to be, at least, partially transgressive. Yet there is also a certain level of expectation to provide boundaries within them. Even if the transgressions demand the lack of any of these boundaries. This is the paradox, one of many, presented inside the book. What is to consider, is that this norm-breaking can have a positive influence on the player. A victim of griefing (a concentrated effort to sabotage the gameplay experience of other players) can decide to behave in a different manner and become a helpful member of the community. On the other hand, he can embrace this type of behaviour and align his gameplay goals with those of his griefer or ganker (player who intentionally kills other players, who are in a

disadvantageous position, i.e. engaged in a fight with an NPC). Which one will prevail? This is where the developer could, or maybe should, step into the play (pun intended). To set at least basic boundaries for such behaviour and encourage the player to “take the high road”, can be more beneficial for the game system in the long run, than the easier road of imminent transgressive behaviour.

Yet, it is not as easy as it may look. The transgressive experience in games is much more than that. It is not only influenced by the choices allowed by the game systems, but more often inside the human experience which is brought by the player from outside. How can a game developer influence that? For this, each of the 15 contributions offers a personal, special look at this problem. The result? By its nature, the transgression in its artistic, or even if you like, its business, form is polarising. As these aspects can and certainly will scare away players, distributors and even developers themselves, there are others which will happily engage in this type of activity. Transgression can be a seductive marketing tool in an oversaturated market.

One of the most important approaches to this problem lies in the basic understanding of what transgressions are. Transgressions act as an expanding barrier, a paradox of repulsion and attraction. The overstepping of boundaries becomes a chore and a relaxing enjoyment at the same time. It often starts to exist, brought by the players themselves from the outside world, where the mundane experience begs acting, not thinking, about the consequences. The choice appears to be nesting inside the rules sets and game mechanics, yet the expanding fractal of the transgression itself is always centred around the player himself. And this is probably the most important part of the whole project. The personal experience brought into the book by each of its contributors, not only as scientists and academics, but also as players, the followers and breakers of norms, transgressors themselves, frightened and amazed at this artistic experience acting as a mirror. Are the other players any different?

There are no final answers in the book, and this is what makes it interesting and a worthwhile read. The shared experience makes it more approachable, to think and to talk about the experience inside the game systems and how it changes us. Or is it the other way around? If there is any final thought of this book, it is most probably this – Am I playing the game, or is the game playing me? And the answer? Yet to be found.

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