

The core aesthetic of *Cards Against Humanity (CAH)* is to provide sensation for the player, as the aim of the card game is to make the funniest play, or rather, card combination as possible, which can give the player sensation. Laughter can be caused by a feeling of joy or humour. This means that for *CAH* to provoke sensation from its players, it needs to evoke joy or a sense of humour from its cards, which it can do very well. Many game-design fundamentals and concepts blend to create the intended emotional response the designers were hoping to provide players. Whether it be the use of MDA, contingency, or even magic circles, *CAH* cleverly uses many well-known game-concepts in its core design.

To start with, let us look at MDA (Hunicke, R, LeBlanc, M, & Zubek, R, 2004). The concept of MDA¹ (or 'Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics') is the most important concept for evoking a sense of pleasure in *CAH*. If players can understand the rules, interact with the game system, and enjoy playing the game, then the game is very likely to provoke its intended response. The mechanics of *CAH* are simply the game's rules (Choosing a Card Czar, drawing ten cards at the start of the game, choosing a winner each round, et cetera). Mechanics can also be interactions such as shuffling cards; other play modes ('House Rules' in *CAH*'s case); or even gambling cards in an attempt to win. Mechanics are the hidden parts of the game, which the player cannot see. These mechanics help to support the overall gameplay dynamics, which for *CAH* are the feedback from the Card Czar (their emotional response to the cards / final decision) and the collection of 'Awesome Points', from having the funniest card in the group. It is crucial to mention that there is no specified rule in *CAH* on how many 'Awesome Points' are needed to win. Still, it has become socially accepted that the person with the most points at the end of a session is declared the winner. The dynamics and mechanics work together to create the intended aesthetic of sensation. Without mechanics and dynamics, *CAH* would not provoke laughter or joy from a player's card and would therefore not be enjoyable to play and would not provide the intended experience for the player.

Another design concept that *CAH* implements well is the Benign Violation Theory² (A. P. McGraw, C. Warren, 2010). This theory believes that humour can only occur when three conditions are met: a situation is a violation, the situation is benign, and both perceptions coincide³. A violation can be any inducement that seems harmful, threatening, or wrong. Looking back at *CAH*, there are many cards in the game that can potentially be insensitive to use for humour purposes outside of play. However, the use of the previously mentioned theory allows cards such as 'Seeing things from Hitler's perspective', 'a miscarriage' and 'September 11 2001' to be used within the game's mechanics and still produce laughter and joy, without being a direct violation towards someone. There is an extent to this where this theory applies, as these often-offensive cards could be insensitive to some people. Whether due to past experience or cultural heritage, the game could potentially cause a violation towards someone. If this occurs, the hope of providing sensation to the player would be gone, and the game's experience would not be the intended one. However, given the context that *CAH* was built on words and phrases that are considered offensive, 'edgy', or politically incorrect, it would appear unlikely for cards to cross the line for most players and be more of a subjective manner. Therefore, *CAH*'s implementation of the

¹ Hunicke, R, LeBlanc, M, & Zubek, R, (2004), *MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research*. In *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*

² McGraw, A. P, & Warren, C, (2010). *Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny*. *Psychological Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610376073>, University of Colorado Boulder, Colorado, Viewed May 28, 2020.

³ ColoradoLeeds, (2010), *The Benign Violation Theory of Humor*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=-GNy4c1RX5I>

Benign Violation Theory makes it easier for the game to provide sensation to the player by allowing the crude context of the white cards and still create joy and excitement to the player.

Contingency is a concept that should always be acknowledged when designing games to provide unpredictability to the overall experience. *CAH* is very smart with its use of contingency by satisfying each type of contingency⁴ in its design. Stochastically, the game's rules, pieces (black and white cards), and dynamics of collection and feedback provide randomness to the game process. The motivations of making the funniest combination possible and making the Card Czar laugh are the game's social aspects of contingency. The uncertainty of performing well in the game (i.e. making funny phrases which win the round) is the game's implementation of the performance aspect. Lastly, the uncertainty of how others will react to the chosen card/s is the game's semiotic approach to contingency. One of *CAH*'s best features is its element of surprise from the cards that are used, particularly from who uses them, the Card Czar will not know who played which card until the end of the round. The typically quiet kid or innocent friend could shock everyone and come out on top with winning cards, creating a lot of joy/laughter. If there was no contingency in *CAH*, this element of surprise would be gone entirely, and not provide the player with the intended sensation from the game's design.

Hot and Cold (M. McLuhan, 1964), which is a spectrum of a game's pace⁵, is another concept that is cleverly applied in *CAH* to get its intended aesthetic by providing a steady pace for players. When the player is choosing the best card from their deck and anticipating the audience's response, the game is displaying low fidelity and signifying the cooling stages of the game. When the cards are revealed, and people react to the responses, this is the game's use of high fidelity and the hot side of the spectrum, as there are usually feelings of shock, excitement, and laughter. This concept allows *CAH* to remain somewhat short each round, regardless of the number of players. The game keeps a steady pace, not having too many rapid emotions at a time, but still enough time for the game to heat up, while also having enough moments for high participation and even enough time to cool down the game. As a result of the balanced application of Hot and Cold, *CAH* allows for a consistent flow for the game, which helps to allow players to feel sensation from playing the game.

A concept that should never be overlooked when designing games is Johan Huizinga's 'Magic Circle' theory⁶, where boundaries exist "within which special rules obtain" and becomes its own "temporary world" (J. Huizinga, 1949, [1938]). In the case of *CAH*, the use of the magic circle allows for a stronger emphasis on socialization and bonding with others. It may even be a sense of escapism for some to express themselves to others. While this focuses more on aesthetics such as fellowship and expression (which are both secondary aesthetics embedded in the game's structure), it still has an importance on the core aesthetic of sensation. The magic circle is shown from little things like shared reactions of people's answers to hints of chatter like "You are going to love my card, Jason!". This act of the magic circle can also offer consequences from potential spoilsports that can "[rob] play of its illusion" (J. Huizinga, 1949, [1938]), destroying the magic circle entirely. Spoilsports could be anyone blurting what their card said before it is revealed, to the Card Czar knowing which card belongs to who before even reading them. While there is potential for spoilsports to interfere with the overall experience, these occurrences can be quite rare and quickly resolved within the realm of *CAH*, by asking the said player to choose a new card or shuffling all the answers given to the Card Czar at random. With the magic circle at play, the player feels more embraced in the idea that they are enjoying the game and

⁴ Cannon-Bowers, J, (Ed.). (2010), *Serious Game Design and Development: technologies for training and learning*, IGI Global, Pennsylvania

⁵ McLuhan, M, (1994), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

⁶ Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

feel a sense of joy from playing the game, which creates the sensation that designers were hoping to achieve.

In relation to Johan Huizinga's magic circle theory, Roger Caillois builds on Huizinga's theories and breaks down the forms of play into four distinct categories; Agon, Alea, Mimicry, and Illinx (Caillois, 1961), which are all placed on a spectrum between Paidia (improvisation) and Ludus (skill-based)⁷. *CAH* is smart when applying Caillois' forms of play, as the game tends to mix a few of the categories in the game experience. The primary type of progression, aka collecting Awesome Cards, falls into Agon (competition), which would explain why the game was built as a free-for-all style game, where it is every man for himself. The shuffling of cards allows a sense of chance and randomness, where players will never know what cards they will receive, adding the use of Alea. Additionally, the idea of making up unexpected and sometimes ludicrous phrases can provide a sense of role-playing or Mimicry. In terms of where *CAH* lands on Caillois' spectrum, it would fall more towards Paidia with a hint of Ludus. There is an enormous sense of improvisation from the cards being chosen at random and creating scenarios for phrases out of the bloom. With that said, players may want to play skillfully with their cards, whether this means choosing to save a card for a later round or use it right away, or figuring out the sense of humour of the Card Czar to try and make them laugh. If the game embraces the forms of play, it allows the player to take different strategies every time they play; whether they play with improvisation or go for a more skilful approach. Every time, however, the player will feel sensation from the outcome of the game, which allows Caillois' fundamental categories to help designers bring their full intents to the game.

Last but not least, *CAH* implements the concept of Procedurality⁸. This is a concept devised by Ian Bogost, where games can promote specific ways of understanding the world; they have an ideology embedded into the code (Bogost, 2010), which in the case of *CAH* is the black and white cards. The game's implementation of procedurality allows players to think in dark, twisted ways when it comes to the sense of humour they provide to the game. This is because the words/phrases supplied by the game give the player ideas on the dark humour the game wishes to imply. This concept also helps to strengthen the effects of the Benign Violation Theory (A. P. McGraw, C. Warren, 2010) as well as Huizinga's magic circle. Procedurality does this as the particular way of thinking will allow for the two theories to implement the dark, twisted way of thinking into their concepts, allowing for the goal of creating a sensation for the player much more obtainable.

In conclusion, the core aesthetic of *CAH* to provide sensation is well accomplished through the many concepts it blends. The game ensures that the player will find things easy to set up and ready to play and produce humour out of ideas and events that would not typically be accepted outside of play. *CAH* can also provide a sense of unpredictability in the game to make players feel the element of surprise from the game's outcomes. Additionally, players will undergo a steady pace of tension as well as analytical thinking and be able to embrace the game as its own world and play its special rules without anyone saying otherwise. Finally, *CAH* allows different ways of thinking of gameplay for the player's overall experience. Overall, *CAH* does a masterful job of providing its players with sensational moments filled with joy and laughter while providing enough structure and skill to make players enjoy the core game design

⁷ Caillois, R, (1961), *Man, Play, and Games*. New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe

⁸ Bogost, I, (2010), *Persuasive Games: The expressive power of videogames*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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