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**WSOA3003 – MDA Analysis on Journey**

## Introduction

The aim of this analysis is to discuss the game *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) using the MDA Framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, Zubek, 2004) as well as discuss how level design plays a role in the three different areas in the MDA Framework and how it is implemented in *Journey*. *Journey* is an adventure game that is centred around a character and their journey to the mountain and their purpose in the game which is revealed through small snippets of a backstory after each check point in the game.

The MDA Framework (Hunicke *et all*, 2004) is a framework which focusses and suggests a way for game designers to create as well as analyse games in a iterative nature. The framework suggests that there are three categories that game elements can fall into, these categories include Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics. This framework was created to help a designer understand the iterative design process better as well as suggests all these elements rely on each other and the player.

Level design is shown through multiple elements within game systems, which show the player changes in the system. This includes elements such as when the system progresses from one stage to another as well as how the elements are laid out within a specific level.

## Mechanics

Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004) define mechanics as different actions that the player-character can do, aided by the player, and are implemented by the game's designer.

There are different mechanics in *Journey*, excluding basic movement. One of these mechanics is activating. When the **O** button is pressed or held down on the gamepad, a magic symbol appears and radiates outwards (See **Figure 1**). This activates the neighbouring elements, which include ribbon creatures and checkpoint beacons. This mechanic is used when the player reached the checkpoint at the near the end of each area, where the player must activate the beacons. This, in turn, starts the small cinematic that plays after each area and then the player is introduced and guided to the next area in the game. Another action that they player can do with this mechanic is when the player is surrounded by small ribbon creatures and the activation attracts the creatures, thus transferring some of their power to the player's scarf which gives the player the ability to fly. The way each area is laid out, indicates where the player could go if they need power or need to help the ribbon creatures escape.

Another mechanic that is in *Journey* is flying, which is done by holding down the **X** button. The player must use this action in certain level, because of the structure and layout of the level, when they need reach places that are higher up. A player can fly when their scarf is lit up, as mentioned previously. The layout of the area explicitly shows the player that they will have to fly to reach the next checkpoint as well as there will be ribbon creatures that they player will need or must release first. This also contributes to another design elements that the designer implements, which focusses on the layout of the each area and how the buildings and the position of the ribbon creatures guide the player as to where they have to go, which is directly linked to level design (See **Figure 2**). The player's goals are shown through the layout of the areas as well as shown through the centralisation of the mountain in each area (See **Figure 2**).

## Dynamics

Dynamics can be defined as the actions that happen during gameplay because of the player's actions as well as the output of the system. This also means that dynamics are a result of mechanics as well as the player's choices and actions (Hunicke *et all*, 2004).

One of the dynamics in *Journey* is sliding down sand dunes. Most of the game takes place in the middle of desert thus there are many opportunities for the player to slide down the dunes if they would like to. If the player climbs up a dune, the system automatically makes the player slide down, but it is the player's choice to walk up the dune. Sliding down the dunes add more speed to player thus it becomes useful when the white flying monsters are chasing the player.

Another dynamic that is present in the game is collection of the magic symbols that are scattered throughout the game. These symbols elongate the player's scarf that they use to fly, which is useful when because the player reach greater heights and distances. These symbols are places in areas that are accessible to the player which in turn encourages the player to explore the areas more as well as challenges the player to collect all of symbols. The layout of the area dictates where these symbols are as well as ribbon creatures show where the player can venture.

## Aesthetics

Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004) define aesthetics as the emotion that a player feels during gameplay which are usually the result of the game system and how the player interacts with that system.

The MDA Framework states that there are common core aesthetics that are present in games. One of these aesthetics is Sensation, which defines games as sense-pleasure. This means that the game affects the player through the other senses. This is shown through the fact they there is no dialogue in the game, so the game is reliant on other audio devices to portray certain messages to the player as well as visuals. The music changes depending on the intensity of the area and the different areas. The ribbon creatures also make sound effect which communicates to the player where they are as well as where they can go. Another element that contributes to sensation is the vibrations from the gamepad. The vibrations are normally felt towards the end of the game when the player is trekking through the snow and the character feels the large gusts of wind as well as when the white monster attacks the player.

The other core aesthetic that is present in *Journey* is Narrative. As mentioned above, the game does not have any dialogue thus most of the backstories that the player is shown is purely through visuals. The cinematics at each checkpoint, shows the player a snippet of what has happened in the past and eventually shows the player the future. There is a limited amount of characters in the game and the game is shown in a first person's perspective. Most of the elements are shown throughout the entire game, thus making it a macro level design aspect.

## Conclusion

*Journey* is a game that shows level design in a way that is different to what designer's would initially think level design is. The level design is done in a subtle way which does not disrupt the flow of the game or break the player's immersion in the game. By analysing the game using the MDA Framework,

it opens up the mind of other designer’s in the different way that level design can be implemented in every single aspect of a game without it being obvious the player.

## Appendix

***Figure 1**: Screenshot from Journey (thatgamecompany, 2012). Taken from: https://www.newgamenetwork.com/media/8127/journey/*

***Figure 2**: Screenshot from Journey(thatgamecompany, 2012) Taken from: https://www.gamespew.com/2015/09/journey-review/*

## References

thatgamecompany. (2012). *Journey*. [Video Game]. PlayStation 4. Sony Computer Entertainment

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R., (2004*). MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research*. In Proceedings of the AAAP Workshop on Challenged in Game AI. Available from: https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf