

MDA Analysis of Signs of the Sojourner

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Signs of the Sojourner, created by the Los Angeles based company Echo Dog Games, is a card game that turns the act of conversing with people into the central game mechanic. Production of the game started in 2018 with the original pitch statement of “the deck is your character” leading the process of development, with later iterations narrowing the focus to communications the player has with people as they travel through the world (Kattan-Wright 2021). From the beginning *Signs of the Sojourner* tried to use the card mechanics in a way that instead of fostering hostility between the player and the other characters they talk to, it would try to create a sense of trying, and possibly failing to, make connections with people. Using the framework of Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics(MDA) this essay will analyse how the mechanics of *Signs of the Sojourner* and the dynamics that arise through gameplay, attempt to create the aesthetics of connection and discovery.

In its most basic form, *Signs of the Sojourner* is a game about matching symbols to complete sets, with every card having a start and end with its own symbol that connects with the previous and following cards put down. The player and the NPC take turns placing these cards from their hands and must attempt to make sure all the cards match, with the fail state being when there is a mismatch of symbols. The reward for matching cards is to progress in the conversation and the response to failure is simply a change in the dialogue, or if failed multiple times then the conversation ends early without the player making a connection. There are more complicated cards that introduce rules such as symbol swapping or duplicating previous cards, but these don't stop the majority of player actions just being straightforward symbol matching.

In a game, the aesthetics come from the interaction of rules and design to create particular experiences for the player during play (Hunicke, Leblanc & Zubek 2004). In this game the mechanics of matching symbols combined with the dynamic of the non-punishing system of conversation progression work together to create aesthetics of

discovery and connection, with the player encouraged to try to talk to all characters they meet and build associations and networks. But this aesthetic really works because the inclusion of an important mechanic, that being the earning of new cards. At the end of every dialogue, whether the player was successful or not, they gain access to a few cards used by the character they talked with, and have to replace one of their current cards with a new one. This leads to a dynamic of deck building via replacement with the player always gaining new cards every time they talk, changing all future encounters based on their past. This reinforces the fact that even if they fail, players grow from every interaction and are pushed to discover and interact with the world more, and not treat every dialogue as a hostile challenge.

While starting simple with only a few possible combinations, *Signs of the Sojourner* quickly get complicated with new sets of symbols introduced as well as cards with special abilities, creating a trend of growing complexity that means the player is usually always dealing with new elements but also getting new types of cards. Along with the swapping of cards after every encounter it means that player is forced to adopt new cards which opens up or closes off some interactions with characters who have specific sets of symbols the player might not have access too, and that the choices the player makes in selecting cards determines their trajectory through the game. As players learn the mechanics and balance their selection of cards out, they gain a sense of mastery and accomplishment as they can be more strategic as they proceed through the game.

Despite the simplicity of its mechanics, and the few choices given to the player at the start, *Signs of the Sojourner* is a game that grows in depth and really tries to give players a true sense of discovery and connection as they get to know its world and interact with its varied characters.

References

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