SIGNS OF THE SOJOURNER

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MDA GAME ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The Signs of the Sojourner is a narrative based card game which is about creating relationships and communicating with characters which will help with navigating through a colourful world (Signs of the Sojourner, 2020). This game is about a character taking over her mother's shop after she has passed away, she is tasked to collect objects for the shop and on the different locations she travels, she meets characters and encounters stories that will help achieve the objective of the game.

This game was developed and published by Echodog Games in May 2020 (Signs of the Sojourner, 2020). This essay is going to analyse data design in this game using Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, Robert Zubek's MDA framework which is "a formal approach to game design and game research" (Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R, 2004). *Signs of the Sojourner* shows a unique way of designing their data and this will be seen through its mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics.

The 7 formal components for game analysis can also be identified in bold text during the analysis: player, objective, challenge, mechanics, rules, gameplay and outcome.

MDA?

To start off, MDA is a formal approach to the analysis of games. The analysis is going to be based on the player perspective. Aesthetics are the desired emotional response that are raised from the players when they are interacting with the game (Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R, 2004). Dynamics are the "responses" or effects of the mechanics in reaction to the inputs the player makes during gameplay (Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R, 2004). Mechanics are the actions and control mechanisms that are in the game which are presented to the player and these make the game 'function' (Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R, 2004).

Aesthetics

This narrative game tells its story also through the visuals and not just through text. The **player** must travel between different locations and these different travels can be identified when the background of each character changes. For example, look at figure 1.1 which is a different setting to figure 1.2. These visual settings also tell the player a bit about the different characters' personality traits during their journey. There are a number of aesthetically pleasing elements in the story such as the colourful choice of colour schemes, the design of the cards, the design of the random speech bubbles, and the different soundtracks that occur for different locations.

Figure 1.1 (Courtesy of https://i1.wp.com/images.gog-statics.com/25dfc3161cc15a606081b0c3e967596bed1cd82c05b713d139c97aa4f4eda381.jpg?resize=678%2C381&ssl=1)
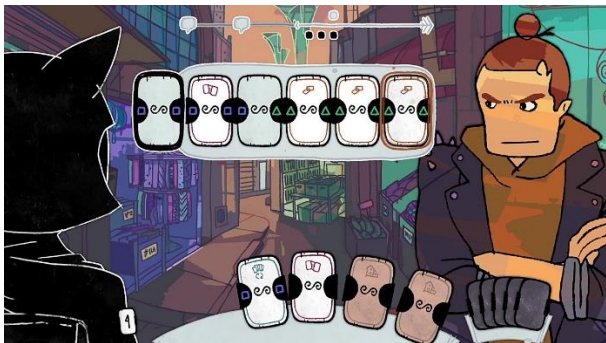

Figure 1.2 (Courtesy of https://i.ytimg.com/vi/IwdPYEbsSp4/maxresdefault.jpg)

Data design within the aesthetics of the game is mainly seen through the visual communication of data. This is seen when a player matches symbols on the cards to the previous card and if there is a successful match, a white speech bubble on the top of the screen pops up and new information is revealed, this indicates a good flow of conversation and progress in the **gameplay**. If the match not successful, a black speech bubble will pop up which shows disagreements between the two parties and that will result in no progression in the flow of communication.

Dynamics and overall gameplay

Exploration is an element that is clear in the game as the player needs to travel to 5 locations in order to discover objects which will lead players into a desired outcome.

The game provides different **outcomes** which cannot all be experienced during one game session. This creates curiosity in the player as they wonder about the different ways in which, for example unsuccessful conversations could have revealed certain information which would have led them to different locations and had different outcomes. This instilled curiosity which encourages players to keep on playing the game and discover new interactions. However, discovering new interactions will also result in the player

encountering new **challenges**. For example, players might receive fatigue cards which are cards that consist of no symbols and cannot be matched to any cards, when played they cause communication failure and with that, new information cannot be revealed (Hancock, 2020).

Through the game's data design of symbol matching through deckbuilding, communication failure makes the player feel bad for not being able to hold a 'simple conversation'. This mechanic may cause player to feel demotivated if conversation failure is consistent. The game does not provide a **ruleset** from the beginning of the game; however, gameplay is quite easy to grasp and rules are explained when each new mechanic has been discovered

Mechanics

Moreover, **mechanics** are the things the player can do during the game. (Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R, 2004). The main mechanic in this game is communication. However, the way this mechanic has been executed is unique. A player must communicate with characters by building decks of cards. These cards have one symbol on each side of the card and each symbol represent a personality trait. Player then must place a card, whenever it's their turn, to match with the previous card in order to have a successful flow of conversation.

 Data, in the mechanics, is identified when symbols are successfully matched, there is a successful deckbuilding which on each turn, new information is revealed which will help to find new destinations to go to (Hancock, 2020). The design of data is also seen in the different powerups such as, if you have four of the same symbols matched in a row then you get a chance to place a card which does not have the same symbol as the previous card and this is called Accord, then there is Observe and Clarify (Signs of the Sojourner, 2020).

This data design is not strategic, unless you have a power-up that reveals your opponent's cards and players do not have a range of choices when they are playing, you need to play a card that matches the previous symbol, which creates a repeated expectation how data in the game flow. (Signs of the Sojourner, 2020).

Conclusion & Evaluation

Data design is seen through the game's aesthetics, dynamic and use of mechanics. This game has applied the use of data quite uniquely in their deckbuilding use of symbols to create communication between the NPC and the player. The storyline is revealed gradually and a simple pace where mechanics can be discovered and used effective while following the narrative successfully.

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