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**ESSAY TOPIC: MDA Analysis of the Level Design of the game Journey**

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**Date: 11 April 2021**



Screenshot of the welcome scene in *Journey* (Chen, Hunnicke et al, 2012)

The mechanics, dynamic and aesthetics (MDA) framework is a game development model that is simultaneously used to analyse games (Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek, 2004). It is used to recognise and ensure that all of the game elements are designed according to both the player and the developer of the game. This is important because developers are required to develop games to appeal to players, but the players do not recognise most of the elements of the game consciously, so in order to create a well designed game, the game needs to also be designed according to the developer.

This concept may be confusing, so the developers of the concept of the MDA framework, Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubek, explain the concept such that the players, or consumers, of the game follow the MDA framework in reverse, such as that they look at the aesthetics, dynamics and then the mechanics of the game in order of understanding and interest. However, the developer should create games according to the player, but also as the developer as they understand the mechanical part of the design of a game and therefore need to put focus first on the mechanics of the game, then the dynamics and lastly the aesthetics (see **Figure 1** in appendix).

*Journey* (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012) is a game which follows the MDA framework with its game elements and therefore will be used as a case study during this text in order to study the topic of level design in accordance to the MDA framework. *Journey* is an adventure game which follows the player using a single character to manoeuvre around a statically designed, and therefore not procedurally generated, world. The core mechanic of the game is to explore the world and collect pieces of a map of supposed world history, while simultaneously exploring the narrative plot of the game. However, the game is entirely sound and visually designed, and there is no dialogue used within the narrative at all, so the game lacks narrative aesthetics in this sense. The lack of an explicit commentary narrative encourages players to encompass their own narrative into the game, which drives players to continue exploring the mechanics of the world, as they are never told what they are allowed to do, in order to finish the game and see what the lack of narrative expects from the players.

Level design is the use of the game world to explain to the players how the different game elements work. Good level design promotes the players' understanding and engagement of the game through little text and actually telling the player what to do, and to accomplish this, developers use the level design to demonstrate the game.

Level design is the process of structuring the content in the game that gives the players the ability to recognise patterns, engage with those patterns and then overcome those patterns. This design has two distinguishable parts, the macro and the micro of level design. The micro level design is the individual level and everything internal in a single system, while the macro level design refers to the order of levels within the game. The difficulty of the game, therefore, progresses through the macro level design. Good level design also follows a complex system of design, such as that the game system provides a simple game experience and offers a lot of complex, rather than complicated, depth to the game.

Complexity, rather than complication, within games are influenced by the level design of the game and is primarily used to help keep the player stay within the flow zone of the game. The flow zone is the ultimate mindset of engagement between the player and the game, which means that the developers need to have a near perfect balance between skill and challenge or else the mindset of flow will be disrupted. If the skill in the game is too low but the challenge level is too hard or the challenge level is too low and the skill requirement is too great then the players will be out of the flow of the game and will feel frustration and anxiety respectively to these unbalanced units.

*Journey* follows this directory perfectly by slowly and progressively distinguishing the core mechanics of the game through micro levels, or challenges, within each macro level in the game. From the beginning of the game, the player is encouraged to start interacting with the basic movement mechanics towards darkened figures in the horizon (see **Figure 2**). Throughout the game, the concept of the darkened figures are used as a means to indicate to the player where the next macro level of the game is as the player is drawn to the darkened spots in the light coloured world. Besides the movement mechanics and other established core mechanics, the overall goal of the game is established as well through the image of a dark and large figure of a mountain which constantly appears in the horizon of every macro level (see **Figure 3**). This is good use of level design, as the player is told what the core mechanics and the goals of the game are without verbally preaching to the player about it, which encourages the player to engage and become interested with the game's elements on their own.

Slowly introducing mechanics to the player throughout level design allows them to understand and engage more with all the mechanics of the game, unlike if all the mechanics were given to the player at one time, which would lead them to not realise what they have or haven't engaged with. The grouping of specific mechanics is the macro level design that needs to be understood, while using micro level design in order to establish game elements.

In *Journey*, the player is implicitly told that they will need the ability to fly throughout the game, as soon as they are given the ability to fly. The player, however, is unable to fly until they have successfully engaged with supporting characters, or game elements, presented in the shape of flying ribbon emblems (see **Figure 4**) and which are found in the first macro level of the game, and successfully engaged with the 'activation' mechanic in the game. The activation mechanic (see **Figure 5, 6, 7 and 8**) allows the player numerous different abilities, but each of these abilities are also only shown to the player slowly through micro level challenges. Once the player is able to fly, they use this mechanic to progress through the next levels as the terrain of the game changes dramatically with less flat surfaces as the game progresses, which in turn forces the player to engage with the mechanic through effective level design purposes. Furthermore, the level design indicates to the player when they will be required to collect more flying ability as the supporting ribbon characters, that

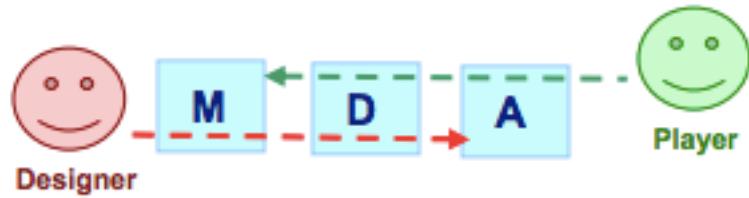
provide the player with the ability of flight, fly around in the distance and attract the players attention.

*Journey* also follows the concept of dynamics and aesthetics through the development of the game. Dynamics, the reactions provided to the player according to what mechanics the player has interacted with, such as the sliding ability when the player is going down hill on a sand dune are forced reactions that are a part of the levels design. This dynamic helps the player establish where they want to go and how they would like to get there as the dunes sometimes help the player with movement more than their normal abilities would. The gliding ability is sometimes forced on the player in order to progress a level, such as when the player is forced to glide down a long hill towards the end of the level, with two giant enemy creatures chasing the player (see **Figure 9 and 10**). If the level had not forced the player to glide down the hill, the player would not have been fast enough, and might have evened panicked into stillness while being chased, to outrun the enemies. Furthermore, this dynamic also refers to the flying mechanic, when the player lands after flying, the character uses the sand in the dunes to glide or roll on a little in order to stop the player from tumbling or losing control of their avatar.

This use of the dynamic, in order to bring easy and control to the players character, is a manner of establishing aesthetic within the game. The aesthetics are the sense of smoothness provided by the game in accordance to the genre. This is mainly done through visual design elements, and concerning *Journey*, the game uses its aesthetics of sensation and narration to primarily immerse the player into the game's genre. The aesthetics are what the players focus on the most within games, so this is the section the regards the players feelings the most in order to appeal to the players sense of fun for the game. The aesthetics of sensation provides a sense of immersion to the players with the games world, and *Journey* does this well with its musical variations and visual elements as the game's music and scenery changes drastically along with the narration of the game such as when the games is about to end or when the player uses it's mechanics. The vibrations of the controllers and screenshake elements further bring a sense of immersion to the aesthetics of the game such as when the player is shivering from the cold, which is an important part of the game's narration as the player is required to freeze to death before the game ends.

This game encourages the use of the MDA framework model to create, as well as analyse games as demonstrated in this text, games as *Journey* expertly proves itself as a well designed game regarding its macro and micro level design because it balances its complexity and difficulty of the game through it's levels and game progression.

## Appendix



The designer and player each have a different perspective.



The production and consumption of game artifacts.

**Figure 1** Screenshot of the diagram of consumer versus developer outlook of game design in *MDA Framework* (Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek, 2014)



**Figure 2** Screenshot of the beginning scene of *Journey*, where the player is taught how to navigate the camera, move the character and identify where they need to go by the dark figures in the horizon (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 3** Screenshot of the Mountain which represents the final goal point of the *Journey* (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 4** Screenshot of the ribbon emblems which, when walked through, give the player the temporary ability to fly in *Journey* (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 5** Screenshot of how to use the activation mechanic in order to progress with the game and attract ribbon emblems towards you in *Journey* (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 6** Screenshot of how to use the activation mechanic in order to progress with the game by activation the podium like figure in *Journey* (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 7** Screenshot of how to use the activation mechanic in order to release ribbon emblems from confinement and create want bridges leading the end level podium like figures as seen in figure 5 and 7  
(Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 8** Screenshot of the dynamic of the player reacting with the activation mechanic in certain ways to revive ribbon emblems, which creates bridges the player can use to reach end level areas (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 9** Screenshot of the dynamic of the player gliding on sand involuntarily when the player goes down sand dunes to steep for them to walk down (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)



**Figure 10** Screenshot of the dynamic of the player gliding on sand involuntarily as they reach the end of a macro level, and also being chased by giant flying enemies (Chen, Hunicke et al, 2012)

## References

- Chen. J, Hunicke. R, Clark. N, Bell. C, Singh. B. (13 March 2012). *Journey*. [Online]. PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, Microsoft Windows. Developer: Thatgamecompany, Santa Monica Studio, Tricky Pixels. Publishers: Annapurna Interactive, Sony Interactive Entertainment
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