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The Game (is a) Life Reflection

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Michael Clune's Gamelife presents a thought-provoking exploration of how video games shape not only how we experience digital worlds but also how we construct meaning in life. His reflections on games as devices that give people things to want from computers resonate deeply with the process of designing a game. A key takeaway from Clune's work is how map-based games separate action from ego, allowing players to immerse themselves in a structured world that has its own rules, patterns, and logic. This perspective aligns with my own design philosophy in creating my game Open, where the player's journey is not just about achieving an end goal but about engaging with an experience that shifts their perception of agency and reality.

One of Clune's most interesting discussions revolves around the difference between 2D and 3D in games. He highlights how 2D games often emphasize clarity and structure, making them well-suited for strategy-based experiences where the player needs a comprehensive view of their environment. This perspective is evident in Ultima III: Exodus, a top-down perspective game with flat map that Clune argues provides an omniscient understanding of the world, reinforcing the idea that the player is manipulating a system rather than inhabiting a character's mind. Similarly, The Bard's Tale II, another game Clune discusses, relies on numerical abstractions and turn-based decision-making, further distancing the player from the immediacy of real-time interaction. In contrast, 3D environments encourage immersion and exploration, often requiring players to navigate an unfamiliar world in a way that feels intuitive and immediate.

However, I think of The Stanley Parable as a great example of a game that thrives in a 3D space. The game's use of first-person perspective is essential to its narrative goals, allowing players to directly engage with the world without an avatar disrupting their sense of identification. The ambiguity of whether the narrator is speaking to Stanley or the player hinges on this lack of visible separation between character and participant. If The Stanley Parable were a 2D game, it would fundamentally change how the player processes the game's themes. In a 2D space, Stanley's position in the world would be externalized and mapped in a way that distances the player from his perspective. The sense of being inside the game, of navigating a surreal office space where choices feel personal and

immediate, would be diminished. Without the first-person experience, the tension between agency and control, which is the very heart of The Stanley Parable, would not land in the same way. The game's unsettling feeling of being observed and manipulated by an omnipresent narrator requires the immersive qualities of a 3D space, where the player's field of vision is constrained, and they are forced to experience the game moment to moment rather than from a detached vantage point.

Clune's reading also presents the idea that while 3D games claim to provide depth and realism, they can, in some ways, be more restrictive than 2D games. He describes how 3D space in games is often functionally one-dimensional. In Ultima III, the 2D map allows players to see multiple paths at once, creating the illusion of an expansive world filled with choices. In contrast, a 3D game like The Stanley Parable directs the player down narrow corridors and structured pathways. The illusion of openness in a first-person perspective is often just that illusion, because the game carefully dictates which areas are explorable and which are not. Even though I would argue the game's meta-commentary on free will and predestination is enhanced by this constraint. The 3D perspective tricks players into feeling as though they are making choices, but in reality, they are following a preordained route, reinforcing Clune's argument that 3D game design can paradoxically create a more linear experience than its 2D counterparts.

In contrast, Clune's observations about strategy games reinforce why my game Open is designed as a 2D game. Since the experience is rooted in uncovering a fragmented narrative, a 2D perspective allows for greater environmental awareness and interaction. The clarity of a top-down or side-scrolling perspective ensures that players can track crucial objects and narrative cues without the limitations of a restricted first-person view.

In class, the discussion around Super Mario and its blending of 2D and 3D mechanics made me think about how spatial design impacts user experience. The layering of different visual and interactive elements adds depth to a game's world, a concept I have kept in mind while structuring Open's environment. Overall, I believe that both 2D and 3D have their own strengths and limitations, and it is crucial for designers to carefully consider these factors when making decisions, ensuring that the chosen format aligns with the game's mechanics, aesthetics, and overall thematic goals.

The development process of my game so far has involved a deep dive into asset collection and world-building. I have sourced a variety of free assets to construct the game's setting, including animated doors that open and close, which are crucial for creating interactive elements that reinforce the game's themes of restriction and access. I have also gathered locks and keys that serve dual purposes, functioning both as part of the player's inventory and as environmental objects that contribute to puzzle-solving mechanics. Kitchenware,

such as knives and a stove, plays a vital role in the storyline, while food items serve as narrative tools to reinforce the themes of care and control. Additionally, I have included interior decorations like beds and tables to make the world feel lived-in, along with phones and notebooks that provide cues and hidden information for the player to uncover. Icons for the in-game menu, as well as tiles and walls to build the room structure and map, all contribute to creating an immersive environment.

Each of the six rooms in the game (the kitchen, Minty's room, Wally's room, Dad's room, the bathroom, and Ed's locked room) serves a distinct narrative function. The sketches of the map with each room's drawings is included in this: https://www.canva.com/design/DAGgcBDtD4c/0DJTwcIfBIasQv0E15vO8Q/edit.

The placement of objects within these spaces is intentional, ensuring that every item tells part of the story. For example, Minty's phone is not just a background detail but an essential storytelling device. As the story unfolds in a modern-day setting with Minty at home, it makes sense for her phone to be present. However, its role extends beyond decoration. It contains text messages that reveal the family's tensions, including the mother's passing, the father's absence due to work, and Wally's growing hostility toward Ed as he takes on responsibilities at their father's company. Meanwhile, Minty struggles with her lack of influence in the family, wishing for a more compassionate approach toward Ed. The phone is placed in her bedroom, a location the player must enter during gameplay, ensuring that its significance is neither overlooked nor feels artificially inserted into the experience.

Clune's exploration of games as a way of seeing rather than just being seen resonates strongly with how I approach game design. The idea that games provide a lens through which players interpret meaning is central to Open. The game's mechanics, from its locked doors to its fragmented clues, are not merely obstacles but storytelling tools that reshape the player's understanding of their role. This aligns with Nguyen's theory of motivational inversion, where engaging with constraints becomes more meaningful than reaching a final objective. At the start, players believe they are Minty, following a structured goal. However, as they progress, they realize that their agency is not what they initially assumed, culminating in the revelation that they were Ed all along. This deliberate subversion of expectations mirrors the way Clune describes video games as a medium that continuously reshapes perception.

To me, the life of making a game with a designer mindset is deeply connected to thinking about how to design the game of making a life. In Open, every decision I make, such as where to place objects, how to structure narrative twists, and how to guide the player without forcing them, all shapes the experience of the character's life within the game,

making the game world feel believable and their choices meaningful. The world of Open is meant to feel real, not just because of its art or mechanics, but because it captures the complexity of perception, belief, and hidden truths. Just as Clune describes how video games make repeated experiences meaningful, game design itself is an iterative process of refinement, reflection, and discovery. Throughout the development process, I continuously put myself in the player's shoes, thinking critically about what I can do to make them believe the game world is inhabited by real, living characters.

Ultimately, reflecting on both Clune's work and my work on Open, it highlights to me that whether through a 3D first-person immersive narrative or a carefully crafted 2D puzzle, games can be more than just interactive experiences. They are ways of looking at the world, and in creating them, we gain insight not just into digital landscapes but into the very act of constructing meaning in our own lives.