Tham Jit 21049682

ENGL 294 Introduction to Critical Game Studies

Marcel O’Gorman

5 October 2022

**It Rose above the crowd: The values at play in "*Flower*"**

“I can show you the world. Shining, shimmering, splendid”. (A Whole New World Lyrics From Aladdin, n.d.) This verse from the popular Disney movie *Aladdin* ran through my mind. Throughout the game, one plays as a flower petal floating through the air, collecting more petals as they come in contact with flowers while filling the surroundings with colour. The relaxing visuals and use of motion controls provide a sense of flying freely through the air, just like how Aladdin had flown with Princess Jasmine on that iconic carpet ride. However, just like Aladdin (and some other movies), *Flower* hides a myriad of values within its short one-hour average completion time. These range from more obvious and values such as Environmental Health, to more subtle ones, such as Competition. Each aspect of *Flower* guides the formation of such values, whether consciously or unconsciously. In this essay, I will examine its value system by applying the values at play heuristic created by Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum in their book *Values at Play in Digital Games*. In it, they provided a framework for the different aspects of where values at play can be found.

The first aspect where values at play are located is in the key actors, such as the developers and publishers. Thatgamecompany, the American game company behind *Flower*, was a team of six to nine people during its development period. This small team, however, had the backing of giant game publisher Sony Computer Entertainment. In fact, this was the second game out of a three-game contract. As a result, values of equality and accessibility would have to be considered, as in order for Sony Computer Entertainment to achieve its return on investment when publishing a short game with no microtransactions, it would have to appeal to a wide range of audiences. This can be seen in *Flower* from the lack of instructions or complex controls, instead using more intuitive motion controls to guide the flower petals along. In addition, *Flower* is not time sensitive, which provides players who are unfamiliar to the controls, or not as mechanically inclined, time and freedom to access the game at their own pace. As in *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* by Juul and Jesper, “to play a videogame is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world.” (Juul, 2011). This is greatly exampled above in *Flower*’s simplistic motion controls (in addition to its visual aesthetic, which I will be providing analysis later), where it draws me into its world regardless of my background, culture or body type. This push for accessibility, however, would have contrasted with the small team working on the game. With a limited timeframe and development budget, targets would have to prioritised, which likely would be why *Flower* was only released originally on the Sony PlayStation 3 (Santiago et al., 2010), with other platforms being released after.

In addition, the small team of developers would have led to a faster development cycle, whereby many ideas could be shared, prototyped and analysed quickly. This would have provided the testbed for a prominent core value, simplicity. By being able to iterate quickly, any aspect of the game which was not integral to the core design of feeling emotions could be found and cut from the game. This resulted in an experience which achieves their goals arousing positive and relaxed emotions. Simplicity can be also be seen from *Flower*’s low fidelity visuals and choice of music, where the music is largely composed of single and simple melodies, instead of more common layered or orchestral music.

Apart from the key actors, one can also find values at play from its functional description. *Flower*’s functional description is: “Flower lets you take control of the wind as you explore and navigate beautiful, lush environments using the SIXAXIS motion controls. Journey through varied landscapes at your own pace, interacting with and changing the environment as you go, and find balance and harmony in your surroundings. This is an interactive escape that takes you on an emotional journey like no other game you’ve ever experienced.” (*Flower*, n.d.). From the functional description, one can find values of environmental consciousness, introspection and emotional wellbeing. These values are also very prominent within the game themselves. Environmental consciousness can be felt throughout the game, from the clashing of nature and manmade objects to the fact that the player controls a flower which brings colour (and in the final chapter, a massive tree) back to the city. Playing *Flower* provides an appreciation for nature and how human civilisation has impacted it that one will be pained to find from other mediums. In *Homo Ludens: A study in the play-element in culture*, Huizinga writes: “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course”. (APA). In this case, the act of playing *Flower*, while limited physically to the PlayStation 3, mentally brought me into the real world, expanding my horizons to how beautiful nature can be.

This leads me to how the simplistic visuals and music, and relaxed atmosphere provide an opportunity and guide one to be more introspective. By making the music diegetic and reacting to things which happen in *Flower*, one is drawn into the game more easily. This, combined with the design of the game to relax the player, guides one to unwind and look towards their own thoughts. One can take their time to explore the fields of grass and see the trail of petals they collected, as the flutes and piano provide audio to support the relaxation, leading many, me included, to call it a ‘zen game’. This also provides a similar argument for mental well-being, as positive emotions were a core design theme for *Flower*.

While functional elements provide a narrative into the more conscious values at play, one cannot forget about the influence that society has on the development of the game. It was released in September two thousand and nine, when the wake of the financial crisis in two thousand and eight was still being felt. As a result, emotional wellbeing and accessibility would be a part of their mind, whether it be in the forefront or background. By providing a safe space of a game with no goal and win condition, one would be able to escape from the worries of life and the grind from working to pay off any bills, if even for an hour. This is also highlighted in its low price tag of under $10. If one was unable to purchase the game, one would be unable to relax from the game. Hence, accessibility would have been a part of the conversation, to improve the reach and potential good that *Flower* would do. In addition, with the media looking towards economics and work and how to be more productive*, Flower* would have been an attempt to buck the unhealthy trend and lofty goals of being productive twenty-four seven, and offer a brief respite from the stress.

Lastly, *Values at Play in Digital Games* posit that technical constraints would also provide an insight into values which appear in *Flower*. *Flower* was originally developed on the Sony PlayStation 3, where the developers would have had to deal with memory and processer limitations (as compared to more graphically intensive games). Hence, the value of simplicity is highlighted. By focusing on what is important to the game, and cutting out the rest, It ensured that the game’s three dimensional objects would be able to be interacted with at smooth framerates, without any hitches or stuttering. The results of the optimisation and simplicity can also be reflected in the port to iOS devices after, which has greatly inferior hardware and a completely different operating system architecture compared to the Sony PlayStation 3.

In addition, the Sony PlayStation 3’s lack of upgradability and modularity would have affected the development process in an unconscious way, leading to the value of completeness. This can be seen in *Flower*’s lack of any updates or downloadable content after launch, even though this process is popular in the majority of other games during that time.

In conclusion, the values of play of *Flower* can be seen from many aspects, as noted in *Values at Play in Digital Games.* By applying the values at play heuristic, one can learn more about the games that one plays, and what it stands for. In the case of *Flower*, I originally noted that it seemed to be about environmental consciousness and simplicity, but after applying the values at play heuristic, more subtler values of accessibility and introspection can be noticed. This has changed repeat playthroughs of the game, as I focus less on the game loop and trying to get every flower petal to join me, but relax and enjoy the simple visual and aesthetics and stunning music and drift off into unpacking my thoughts in this emotional experience.

**Citations:**

1. *A Whole New World Lyrics from Aladdin*. (n.d.). Disneyclips.com. Retrieved October 8, 2022, from https://www.disneyclips.com/lyrics/lyrics9.html
2. Flanagan, M., & Nissenbaum, H. (2016, September 2). *Values at Play in Digital Games (The MIT Press)* (Reprint). The MIT Press.
3. *Flower*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 5, 2022, from <https://store.playstation.com/en-ca/product/UP9000-CUSA00092_00-FLOWERPS4000FULL>
4. Juul, J. (2011, August 19). *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds (The MIT Press)*. The MIT Press.
5. Santiago, K., Correspondent, H. K. P. B., Correspondent, D. E. P. B., Developer, A. T. S. L., Nicolas Bécavin Lead Engine Programmer, Asobo Studio, & Cyril Doillon Lead Programmer, Asobo Studio. (2010, April 15). *Stop and Smell the Flower on PSN February 12th*. PlayStation.Blog. Retrieved October 8, 2022, from https://blog.playstation.com/2009/01/19/stop-and-smell-the-flower-on-psn-february-12th/