

Spirit Snap (SS) - Analysis

ARIN3640 CGS - Spirit Snap (SS) - Analysis
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Introduction

In this analysis, we will take apart the game Spirit Snap (referred to in the text in some places as "SS") We will consider what is unique, what is effective for play and generally what is appealing in the game, using various theoretical methods of analysis on the dynamics, architecture and narrative aspects of Spirit Snap. Once we are armed with this knowledge, we can return to parts of the game that may require revision or removal; we may even revise the entire game. Regardless, this analysis will critically analyse and scrutinise aspects which are the core of this game.

Dynamics

Although we may play games and understand them as a form of entertainment, the debate behind why games are entertaining is still on its way to maturity. Games, regardless electronic or traditional, physical or mental, undoubtedly appeal to someone in some way; the problem being a game can only appeal to some rather than everyone. We must understand and utilise the language of a good game, the focus of LeBlanc's article "Tools for Creating Dramatic Game Dynamics", in which he discusses sound rules (but not universally accepted yet) to create a good game. As stated in the title of LeBlanc's article, he posits that drama creates dynamics between player, other players and the game itself. It is necessary however, that we also consider the mechanics and aesthetics of a game to properly determine what makes a game good. For purposes within this document, we will break apart the design nuances of Spirit Snap using LeBlanc's tools and definitions behind a good game to analyse critically if SS has the makings of a good game.

The mechanics of a game (as explained by LeBlanc in his presentation) involves the internal workings of a game; the code and the rules which comes together to define the game as system. With this definition, we must seek ways in which the game system of SS displays its mechanics. Taking more of LeBlanc's definitions, we understand that there are a select few tools, such as drama generating through inevitability/uncertainty.

A major mechanic behind SS is the GPS map system and objects. Encounters are both placed randomly as well as dynamically, in relation to certain real-life events. As morbid as it may sound, the game utilises news reports of deaths or other unfortunate news to generate locations for common encounters with spirits. Larger, more important battles (such as scripted narrative, or large bosses) take place in specific locations, depending on the circumstances. For example, a large boss may appear in a large public park - the game then uses the GPS map to find a park that is within a certain radius of the player and is a certain area for the possible boss to appear. Provided the player is within a populated and GPS mapped area, there can be no end to the events for the players to encounter. While players know that certain battles concerning the plot will occur in certain kinds of locations and that some spirit encounters are based off of real world news, there also exists the randomness (and therefore, uncertainty) of common encounters appearing nearby, keeping the locative aspect of the game fresh - not every battle will be in the same place.

The second major mechanic would be the Grimoire, or more specifically, the Spirit Record. Although the Grimoire menu has other integrated menus, it is the Spirit Record that facilitates our second game mechanic. It automatically keeps track of the player's encounter with certain spirit types, in a sense, unlocking information and images of the spirit in question. This allows players to research or at least know the statistics or weaknesses of a spirit, if they were to encounter the same type again. However, there is uncertainty as to how many entries in the Spirit Record you can write, creating suspense and drama to the sheer number of different spirit types you may encounter.

Finally, the Journal section of the Grimoire also serves a similar function in recording the player's progression. The Stats keep track of the player's various details, such as how long they have played, how many battles they have fought. Achievements give players a sense of accomplishment through certain tasks or feats (such as defeating a certain difficult boss) while finally, the Narrative Event Log notes the player's progression in the plot, as if the players themselves were writing it. This can build drama for the player to advance the plot or review their previous encounters with certain plot point or even receive hints of future plot events. This record of the plot also creates a display of the duality between

uncertainty and inevitability, as the player starts out knowing little of their narrative, while nearing the endgame, players can reflect on their experiences and encounters.

The meat of the game play experience is undoubtedly the dynamics - the interactions between player and game mechanics creates satisfaction and appeal for players to continue playing. Cook speaks of illusion and feedback systems that are born out of necessity for players to continue playing, to both create illusions of progress and limiting or boosting player's abilities. A positive feedback system in place will be dynamic experience. To stop boosting levels in cooperative play (that is, a higher level player defeats enemies and gives that experience to a lower level player, provided the lower player joins the battle but does not fight), the dynamic experience awards players and their summoned spirit experience points based on how much damage was done to the enemy (rather than sharing and in some cases, leeching experience)

Another dynamic aspect of the game would be the losing a spirit battle and the risk involved. Players lose "synchronisation" with their spirit if they lose a spirit battle; this spirit cannot be summoned for several days and until then, the player must rely on other spirits to summon. This positive feedback system brings down what may be a strong player, but namely, creates drama and forces players to consider the risk they must take when they battle.

Finally, to provide players with temporary advantages, plot based or side missions may reward players with spells or items to use on their spirits to bolster their stats. This is a very simple example of negative feedback, just to give temporary boosts to players that may not have much in the way of abilities.

Finally, the aesthetic values of a game draws emotional engagement as well as satisfaction from the player, which can stem from either mechanics or dynamics of the game. The first and most simple example would be the visual style of the characters and spirits, using hand drawn sprites. This plays on nostalgic value, working off of what the audience already knows from their past. Jenkins terms this situation as an "embedded narrative", as the visual cues of the sprites are reminiscent of classic gaming from a more primitive graphical era. Augmented reality also plays a part of an aesthetic value, as this pervasive, locative based mode of play creates force (noted by LeBlanc) for players to deviate from mainstream sedentary gaming and involve travel and exploration of their local urban space. There exists one final aesthetic property which in reality, merely creates illusory advantage, which is that of the player avatars. These avatars (also presented in a hand drawn style) allow players to represent themselves in game, but serves no other purpose besides aesthetic and identifiable value between players.

In retrospect, there are so many more aspects of the game that can be discussed as to which category they would fall under. We can assume that there is a clear interdependence, as dynamics are created through mechanics, while mechanics must facilitate for aesthetics. Using these three definitions from LeBlanc as well as feedback systems from Danc, Spirit Snap is easily broken down into components. We can then begin to question the validity of SS being a good game. This can also help us to improve the game; to fix what may be broken or what may not work so well in practice. Using these tools and definitions, we can easily critically analyse and improve this game.

Architecture

The architecture of Spirit Snap (SS) breaks the walls that commonly enclose traditional games to create an appreciative view of the environment and the life within it. The space that SS occupies and generates, encourages progressive exploration whilst engaging the player with memorable and dramatic experiences.

Spirit Snap (SS) permeates common activities, blurring the boundaries of a game (the magic circle), opening up a new perspective to the environment.

The seemingly detailed integration of SS's architecture with the real environment, both in terms of game visuals (for example, with the augmented reality in it's 'Search Mode' (where players search for creatures using their camera)) and it's game mechanics which are based off data from the real environment, creates a sense of *"exploration that embeds a playful meaning to the game space."* (de Souza e Silva, Hjorth, 2009). This is generated in location based mobile games by *"ludic play - that is, frequently players navigate the city in unusual and unexpected ways as consequence of the game narrative/ players"* (de Souza e Silva, Hjorth, 2009). A potentially large audience is reachable through SS' episodic,

pick-and-play nature, this is in part due to the adaptive environments generated by SS's Artificial Intelligence (AI). The range of individual and multiplayer gameplay provides a space that allows for social, outdoor and optional activities, as well as the ability to observe such activities via the camera. *"Life between buildings comprises the entire spectrum of activities, which combine to make communal spaces in cities and residential areas meaningful and attractive"*, (Gehl, 2008) is appreciated through SS' permeation, and hence, delivery of first and third person view-points of such activities.

SS provides a new perspective, not only to activities, but also to the spaces within itself, and hence, the real environment that encompasses the player. This is achieved as augmented creatures, and visually modified backgrounds repurposed for the game-environment, as *"an existing space may outlive its original purpose...may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated"*, Spirit Snap, like *"the reappropriation of the Halles Centrales,... in 1969-71... (which was transformed) into a centre of play rather than of work"* (Lefebvre, 1991). The use of augmentation during 'Search Mode' in itself adds new purpose and meaning to the environment, supplemented by a narrative which provides both the modern and historical relevance to local buildings. The act of photography as a game mechanic creates an appreciation of the environment along with emotional ties to creatures and structures, for *"it is really not the photographs themselves that provoke us; rather...it is the memory of close personal encounters with the subject(s) of the photographs."* (Rudolph, 2009).

The architecture of Spirit Snap (SS) encourages player movement through rewards, maps and curiosity. The space also generates an emotive response within the player with the environment.

The progression of level designs in SS, with new characters, and game elements being introduced after the completion of tasks, act as a form of reward system. This system allows for an obvious alteration of the in-game landscape, and, coupled with the player-induced progression of a creature's characteristics, invokes a desire within the player for *"Mastery, our urge to become better ... leading to a better (game) world"* (Pink, 2010), this generates "fun ... derived from the act of mastering knowledge" (Cook, 2007). On the Map Screen of SS, the various, approximate, outlines of creature areas, detailed only to certain characteristics like creature-type, acts as abstract representations of events, encouraging the player to explore, choose, and engage with the game, these mapped elements *"whet the players appetite"* and *"get the player excited about their options"* (Roger, 2009).

Throughout SS, the player interacts with the real and in-game environment through a unique perspective provided by camera and photography, along with recent and historic narrative relevance to real-world spaces. These interactions to the space of SS greatly augments the play experience, creating emotional ties with in-game creatures and environment which are influenced by the player's actions, leading to an appreciation and emotive connection to the real environment as the virtual space is *"intrinsically and inseparably connected to our physical spaces and to our daily lives"* (de Souza e Silva, Sutko, 2008). *"Players love to feel in danger while knowing they are safe/in control"* (Roger, 2009), this concept is further augmented by the juxtaposition of safety and danger in SS, acts that are the *fundamental constructs of dramatic tension* (Aristotle, 335BC). Danger and safety are presented in SS in Map Mode through the presence of moving creatures and their limited, but mysterious movements, the knowledge of their locations and your own induces a sense of security through knowledge. Visual devices such as manipulations of the environment with filters and depiction of passive, or aggressive creatures also contribute to this balance. Foreshadowing is an effective tool that amplifies a player's emotive response as *"surprise is more effective when the player is 'expecting' it"* (Roger, 2009), this is represented within narrative arcs, but more immediately through the tension experienced when a player is scouting the landscape for a creature in 'Search Mode', able to hear it's cries and knowing the creature is within the vicinity but have yet to locate exactly where.

The space of Spirit Snap, through augmented reality, and, new and changing perspectives, blurs the boundaries of the virtual environment for a greater appreciation of the physical space whilst engaging the player through curious and dramatic constructs.

Narrative

Spatial stories and environmental storytelling are shown through the created spaces and designed world in Spirit snap. "*(narrative) isn't scripted in advance, but rather emerges from the events of the game*" (LeBlanc, 1999). The game world is formed by the embedded histories and events happening in real life as well as the constructed fictitious world of the exorcist organisation with other game elements supporting it. Game elements include the hierarchy of spirits and bound rules imposed on them, for example boss spirits would have to be more powerful than the minor spirits. The immersive narrative experience drawn by the environmental storytelling are evoked through "pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives" (Jenkins, 2004). The designed world is rich in immersive game elements, drawing upon relevant events happening all around the players and constantly reminding them that they are dealing with the supernatural through in-game prompts that screams of spirits existing all around. The drawback of having such a pervasive game which the narrative and interactivity being centred around current and past events are the sheer amount of data needed to be mined and translated into in-game environment. To have the game flow well and be connected with the real world providing a pervasive environment, spirit snap must contain the latest reactions to the current environment's state.

Evocative spaces "*build upon stories or genre traditions already well known to visitors, allowing them to enter physically into spaces they have visited many times before in their fantasies*" (Jenkins, 2004). Spirit snap incorporates these familiar stories or genre traditions through association with known superstitions and beliefs. However if the superstition is unknown, game elements educate and evoke curiosity of the mysterious. Spirit snap relies a lot on the history and past events, drawing the player's reminiscence into play. An example of this is the burning down of a school building, fire spirits still linger about the area drawing attention to past events that have happened. Thorough research into the events and the superstitions that arise from the surrounding area's state or the superstition itself are needed to continuously generate the immersive environment.

Enacting stories require the players to "*perform or witness narrative events*" (Jenkins, 2004). By using drama, which is defined as "*the quality of being interesting and exciting which a situation had*" (Collins ELT, 1991), tension is created through conflict and the eventual resolution. It is by using this dramatic arc that it propels the narrative forward. Spirit snap creates the tension through buildup of anticipation of what is causing the unrest in the area. Through conflict with the opposing organisation or other spirits, uncertainty about the situation and inevitability of the outcome fuel the dramatic tension. "*Narrative enters such games on two levels - in terms of broadly defined goals or conflicts and on the level of localised incidents.*" (Jenkins, 2004), Spirit snap utilises both levels. The 'broadly defined goal or conflicts' are the player's mission to maintain peace and monitor the spirit activities. Localised incidents are to quell the unrest in the specific area caused by the rival organisation or opposing spirits. Through game play, players experience the dramatic arc numerous times each battle. With the varying difficulty rating of missions and special events happening all year round, the players are drawn into the world of Spirit snap as the narrative takes them on a rollercoaster ride. In a vast world where new content is constantly being added every minute, Spirit snap offers players choice and keeps them wanting to see what is around the block.

Embedded narratives come about as "*an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypothesis about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues*" (Jenkins, 2004). Spirit snap does this through ambience created by music and visual cues such as lighting or lack of clarity in the images to emphasise or distort the player's perception. Through in-game visualisation and music, Spirit snap can lead the players to draw conclusions on the situation. For example a tense, scary tone in the music accompanied by lack of clear, bright images alerts the player to the unsettling situation at hand which might mean danger is lurking around. Manipulation of the players' senses to have the narrative being concluded upon requires coordinated efforts in creating the atmosphere of the setting through music and visuals. In creating a unique experience for the players without outright telling them what is happening, immersive gameplay is achieved.

Emergent narratives come from *"made choices about what kinds of actions are and are not possible in this world"* (Jenkins, 2004). By restricting the actions of players and creation of game world rules, the game world would become more believable and consistent. For example some special types of spirits would be able to manipulate and control other spirits or there are spirits of certain types appearing in specific locations. All serve to create a concrete idea of what can and will happen in certain areas.

"Interactivity provides a variety of narrative possibilities... Players can shape the way in which a story line is constructed by freely interacting with environments and agents in the game." (Vorderer, Byrant, 2006). Defining the way players can interact with the environment opens up interesting possibilities for new ways of playing. Choices allow for the players to interact throughout the game world in different ways, there is no one definite possible path that the player must move along else be unable to complete the missions. In Spirit snap the players have choices on what spirits they will be summoning, how and when they will encounter spirits, choices in items and customisable elements, and more. With these numerous possibilities, Spirit snap allows for variant ways of playing and nurtures the players' preferences and style.

Conclusion

In the areas of dynamics, narrative and architecture, we can see that Spirit Snap brings much to discuss and employ as player appeal. The dynamics of player - mechanical interactions create emotional aesthetics to the player; this in turn relates to the emotional appeal and aesthetics of a narrative plot. This narrative is expressed through various means within the game, not only limited to a literal story being told. Narratives can even stem from the game spaces and architecture to evoke certain emotions and aesthetics from players, whether it be memories of previous similar scenarios or the satisfaction from exploring their urban space with an augmented reality video game. With these aspects of dynamics, narrative and architecture working in unison, Spirit Snap is undoubtedly well equipped to be an effective game, to appeal well to a large audience and play superbly without flaws.

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