

Final Project write-up:
What Lies Beyond, by me!

What Lies Beyond is an interactive art piece and a spiritual follow-up of sorts to the game *Super Hexagon*. The piece sprung out of an idea I came up with in Major Studio 2 (for which class I also used this project), which is the persistence of fictional worlds outside the bounds of any specific story, especially the story that prompted the world's creation. I also became preoccupied with the concept of peering behind the curtain - looking past a polished outer surface to see the inner workings, for which content such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Portal* (among many others) served as examples. Creation involves a great deal of content generation and then a ruthless editing process to present to the world only a particular facet of that content, which is supposed to represent the entire created work in a perfect state. But what about the content that was edited away or otherwise hidden from view? Despite its "imperfection" or lack of relevance it remains part of the history and essence of the creation. These questions are applicable to any kind of created work but at the time I was entranced by *Super Hexagon* and could not put it out of my mind, even once I finished the game. This project, then, would serve as a sort of fan fiction-driven catharsis and closure.

What unites all of these ideas and provides the narrative hook is death, clearly a major part of the *Super Hexagon* experience. During a class presentation someone suggested that the protagonist in my project should be a *Super Hexagon* triangle that has died in-game, and I began to conceive of this narrative as focusing on life after

death. The world I would create would be a sort of Hexagon-infused Purgatory, in which the player could discover elements familiar from the original game but behaving differently than expected. This would tie into the concept of peering behind the curtain. Thus the player finds on one screen an enormous phonograph that generates the *Super Hexagon* music; on another, a set of shelves filled with surplus triangles, ready to spring into action; on another, walls that assemble themselves into a hexagon before the player's eyes, etc. None of these have a physical correlation to objects in *Super Hexagon* but *functionally* they relate, as explanations - or at least causes - for the phenomena that occurred during gameplay, i.e. the triangle's previous existence. By gaining this understanding the player/triangle is able to leave behind ties to the past life and ascend to a higher plane.

None of this narrative is made explicit. After playing through *Silent Hill 2* I was very gung-ho to use embedded narrative in this project, with the result that the player is intended to realize the meaning of the experience through observation and interaction. The piece opens with an introductory sequence, which I did not have time to add until after I presented this in MS2 - bonus content! The instant use of the familiar "Game Over" sound effect and vocal sample provides an immediate clue to anyone familiar with the source material that a death has just occurred, and the blank white background is a standard after-life trope. Quickly a black vortex opens up and grows towards the player, conveying menace. The player can move at this point (although it isn't necessary) but there's nowhere to go - as with the black soul erupting from the dying beast in *Shadow of the Colossus*, fleeing is enabled but ultimately futile. Upon contact with the vortex the triangle appears at a great size and gradually diminishes to nothing. This represents

descent - I thought about including a hexagon-based background to give a tunnel-like effect but ultimately decided the visual worked well against the simple black.

After a couple of seconds, the lights go back up - so to speak - on a screen that looks very familiar to a typical pattern in *Super Hexagon*. The player discovers movement is possible but only in orbit around the central hexagon. This combination of movement and backdrop from the original game suggests a return to familiarity, except that the walls are static and the orbiting is pointless. Eventually the player discovers that it is possible to break out of the orbit and move around freely. At this point the entire significance of the level layout - so familiar to SH fans - changes because the walls no longer represent a threat, and much more importantly, the spatial shift means that the boundaries of the screen may be permeable. When the player wanders offscreen, a whole small world of hidden mechanisms pops into view.

The experience now is non-linear. Each screen presents a specific mechanism with a direct relation to the *Super Hexagon* experience, as described previously. The interactions themselves are simple but are intended to provide clues and explanation. The music and wall generators indicate whence gameplay components sprung, with buttons that trigger the generation. A break in one wall provides access to a “demo” room where the walls close in and move back out if the player gets close enough. A time station allows the triangle to lock into orbit again and dodge incoming walls, but also to adjust the pace of the walls’ movement (this reflects not only how the original game gets faster but also how the player’s perception of time changes as skill improves).

Of special note to the narrative motif are two sets of rooms. The first set includes a room that is initially empty, and another room with the aforementioned shelves of

surplus triangles. In the latter room is a button which, when pressed, cues the “game over” sound effect and voice sample, and the triangles on the shelves shift on conveyor belts, as one moves offscreen and another slides onscreen to take its place. If the player returns to the formerly empty room, there is now a triangle dropped randomly somewhere in the space. While it is not stated as such, the player may figure out that every time the button in the other room is pressed (with the resultant game over sounds and the triangle procession), a new triangle appears in the other room.

Furthermore, those scattered triangles look like the player. The design of the player triangle includes a second triangle that pulses in and out from the first triangle’s periphery. This mirrors what happens in the moment when a triangle dies in *Super Hexagon*. The scattered non-player triangles have this pulsing second triangle too, whereas the ones on the shelves do not. These are all clues to what is going on. Someone very familiar with *Super Hexagon* may recognize the appearance of a dead triangle, but for those who don’t, the correlation between the game over and the newly appearing triangles should provide a clue that the player triangle itself is dead. There is also an implied ethics quandary. Did pressing the button “kill” a fellow triangle? What relation do these mysterious mechanisms have to the “real” world? This is left unresolved.

The second set of rooms leads with a big blockade. There is no apparent way through to the big gap on the other side leading offscreen. However the player may notice a nearly-translucent triangle that appears across the blockade. This other triangle mirrors the player’s movement and can be seen to move through that mysterious gap. This makes the player want to get through the blockade and go through that gap too.

This room is important because on the whole the piece provides very little guidance on what, if anything, the player is supposed to do. There is no onscreen feedback about goals to achieve or items to collect. However this room prevents a clear obstacle and a suggestion that the obstacle may be overcome. Indeed, once the player interacts with all the rooms, the player becomes translucent too, just like the other triangle. Returning to the blockaded room, the player discovers that the other triangle is gone, and the player may now pass through the blockade.

[Note: originally I planned to make the transformation into non-corporeal being gradual, so that the triangle becomes ghost-like every once in a while, and the frequency increases as the player completes interactions. This may still be a good way to go.]

Continuing on to the next room, everything goes white again, and the player triangle gradually fades out completely. At this moment the “wonderful!” voice sample plays, designating victory here as it did in *Super Hexagon*. The implication is that the triangle has shed its corporeal ties and ascended to meet God, who is of course the source of the voice. As a bonus, the piece resets to the beginning, which plays the “game over” sample as before (fitting for a different reason this time), and also suggests a circular path through the afterlife, for better or for worse. So ends the experience.