

Final Project - research paper

This project is about letting go.

It didn't start that way. I fell in love with a video game and decided to make a spoof of the concept, to see if I could duplicate the mechanics and to spend a little more time in the world to which I'd grown so attached. If I recognized at the root of this impulse a powerful reluctance to be done, I did not consider that to be the focus. Love of the creation, not catharsis, was my impetus. However, as I began to flesh the idea out, I found my way into headier and heavier themes. Ultimately the project has shifted from spoof with the same mechanics to something that, while preserving aspects of the source material, is entirely different. The themes include: examining life after death, purgatory, the divesting of earthly ties, ascent to heaven and a meeting with the divine (all from an embedded narrative standpoint), plus meta-level concepts about the nature of stories, the energy driving them, the persistence of imagination beyond an initial scope, and the emotional attachments we make to the stories and experiences we love.

Underneath it all runs the thread of letting go, and I approach this from three perspectives:

- * The process of creation ("Birth")
- * The process of maturation and presentation ("Life")
- * The process of cessation ("Death")

I. Birth

Let me describe the game that inspired all this. The game is called *Super Hexagon*. It is very simple to play *Super Hexagon* - mechanically, anyway. The player controls a small triangle orbiting the outer perimeter of a hexagon in the center of the screen. Pressing right makes the triangle spin clockwise while pressing left spins it counterclockwise. These are all the controls. Meanwhile walls appear from offscreen at different radii from the center, forming a variety of patterns. As the radius of each pattern shrinks, the walls close in. If the triangle collides with a wall, it is Game Over. But there is always a gap in the pattern. The player must spin the triangle back and forth to maneuver it through the gaps in the patterns at a relentless and increasing pace.

The game is completely abstract. There is no narrative provided whatsoever, and the use of geometric shapes precludes even using the graphics as clues. Indeed it is only by analogy that I label the obstacles "walls" at all. Nevertheless that very abstraction invites imagination. There is something about the experience that demands interpretation - the triangle is a spaceship perhaps, or a test subject in a cruel experiment. I must conclude that the gameplay has much to do with this, for I don't feel the same demand elsewhere. *Tetris* - the game about fitting falling puzzle piece-esque blocks together - is similarly abstract and I'm content to leave it there. Furthermore the fact that *Super Hexagon* is so abstract means people can take what they want from the experience, without having a particular interpretation forced upon them.

Originally I meant to spoof *Super Hexagon*. I decided that the characters from an altogether separate creation would stumble into this game's world and repurpose it for their own needs. The metaphor of the patterns as a deadly maze to be navigated was too rich to ignore, and easily converted into a separate story framework. However, I quickly found that while the joke I had in mind was weightless, I myself had stumbled onto a much more interesting idea than the spoof itself: the concept of the game's world persisting beyond the scope of the game and being used for different ends than its creator intended. This made me think about the persistence of worlds, the process of creation, and what happens after the game ends...but why limit it to a game? What happens after any story ends?

I find this last idea to be especially fascinating, and it's rather difficult to elucidate, so let me give a classical example, which is the foundational text of modern fantasy, The Lord of the Rings¹. The books present a fictional world of almost unimaginable richness, consistency and weightiness, with a real sense of history. This is not accidental. The author, J.R.R. Tolkien, spent years crafting such a history for his Middle Earth, including inventing not one but several complete languages, before he set pen to paper to tell a tale about a hobbit in a hole in a hill. The concept of verisimilitude - that a world is consistent with itself - is crucial to maintaining the suspension of disbelief, and there may never have been or be another comparable example of writing the backstory before the main event.

The amount of content Tolkien must have created for Middle Earth defies the imagination. Does the reader of The Lord of the Rings see all this content? No. The reader sees a selection of the content, that which is relevant to the story. It feels much more believable because of all that other content, but the fact remains that Tolkien invented a great deal of material that has no tangible existence in his published work. In other words, he created an entire world, living and breathing and full of mystery, but gave us only a partial view.

What am I getting at? I am a big believer of the conservation of energy -- and I beg the reader's indulgence, because this is something of waxing philosophical, but bear with me. As anyone creative knows, it is not easy to create something. The process is like giving birth - it takes a great deal of energy to form something out of one's own body and project it into the world. That energy has to go somewhere. It seems pretty clear that it exists in the creation. When we read The Lord of the Rings, we feel the energy Tolkien poured into the work - it radiates from every page. At some point, though, we finish the story and close the book, and then what happens? The book doesn't vanish in a puff of smoke, of course - other people could read it and feel its life, or we could decide to pick it up again and relive the adventures. But if the experience - and I must not limit this to books; it is true of any creation - resonates with us, it imparts some of its energy to us. It is this seed of energy that causes the experience to linger in our minds after it ends, to make us reflect on it, to make it more significant than a mere way to pass the time. It makes us want to spend more time in the imagined world...and if the world has been masterfully crafted, it will, like Middle Earth, communicate to us that there are other stories, if only we could seek them out. The desire to explore is mighty.

In other words, while a world may be created for the sake of telling a story (or at least an experience), the best-crafted worlds give the feeling of persisting beyond its bounds. The world doesn't end when the credits roll or the book closes or the Game Over screen appears. This may be what makes a game like *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* so heart-wrenching². (I should probably insert the obligatory "SPOILER WARNING" here.) Protagonist Link adventures across a strange island and we become invested in its mysteries and endearing inhabitants, but at the end when Link prepares to wake the massive Wind Fish that sleeps atop the highest point, he discovers that the island, inhabitants and adventures are all nothing but a dream of the Wind Fish, bound to disappear forever when the creature wakes. To return to his homeland, Link must doom his newfound friends to oblivion...and if that weren't poignant enough, it leaves us as audience without an outlet because there can be no further adventures on this island, no history to delight in imagining. The world truly existed only for the duration of the adventure, and now it is gone for good. (Unless, of course, we replay the game.)

II. Life

While the previous section focused on the narrative underpinnings of a world's existence, and the implication of a greater history than what is shown, there is a meta-level aspect to how the author selects what to present to the audience, and that is putting the best face forward. As a general rule, we as audience do not see the entire history of a piece. To return to the birth analogy, there is mess and pain involved; that usually gets cleaned up before presentation to the outside world. Actors flub lines, sculptors cut too aggressively, cooks put in too much salt. This very paper I am now writing includes countless typos, rewrites, edits, and other changes that the reader will never see. Whether the reader would want to see them is debatable. Yet this essay is what it is as much because of those things as because of the content of the final draft. We cannot separate out the creation from the created. We choose to present

one version of our work, arguably the culmination, which presumably represents some level of perfection - but, insofar as it does not reveal its inner workings, it is a deception, too. Sometimes people want to see the inner workings. Sometimes they want to peer behind the curtain.

Just look at the quintessential example of this phenomenon (and the inspiration for the wording), *The Wizard of Oz*³. Dorothy and her friends are awestruck by the terrifying Wizard, who appears as a floating head amidst pillars of fire, until Dorothy's dog Toto drags open a curtain to reveal a small man operating controls to create the effects. "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" he says, but how can they? Their perception of reality has changed. Of course this is only one type of example, because in the Wizard's case there is a deliberate intent to deceive. But it illustrates perfectly the desire we have as creators to control what the world sees. The trouble - if I should call it that - is that people who get invested in the world want to peer into all the corners and find the chinks in the walls - to know how it works.

There are a number of notable pieces that poke at this issue. Some of them consider the narrative-level questions previously discussed as well, which is not surprising because the line is blurred. First and foremost is the *Toy Story* film franchise⁴, which asks what happens to toys when they're not being played with. It turns out they are fully sentient, with lives, relationships and troubles not unlike our own, except that they pretend to be inanimate every time there's a human present. We see here several of the aforementioned principles at work. While children create stories by playing with the toys - bestowing on them fluid personalities and actions - the toys have a persistent existence outside the play context. Their reality is not defined by the details of the play (indeed, the two are often in conflict, to humorous effect). They choose to present a certain reality to the human world, but it is not their entire truth. If they do ever allow humans to peek behind the curtain, it is only under extreme circumstances, such as to punish the bully Sid in the first movie. *Toy Story* also deals with themes of letting go of emotional attachment but I'll return to that topic later. Suffice to say it's a recurring theme.

Then there's the film *Wreck-It Ralph*⁵, which is sort of like *Toy Story* for video games. I like it as a separate example though because the separation between narratives is clearer. Each of the games featured in the movie has its own narrative, which the players experience and the characters in the game act out. However the characters have their own existence when the game is over, and the premise of the film is that title character Ralph decides he's tired of playing the villain in his own game, and runs away to another game to be a hero. Not only does each game world exist beyond the bounds of the player's experience, but the games themselves are part of a larger world that still exists within the game context, complete with its own mass transit to shuttle characters back and forth between games. Talk about imagining a greater existence for these stories!

The next two examples, *The Unfinished Swan*⁶ and *Portal*⁷, focus more heavily on peeking behind the curtain. They do this from a narrative standpoint - it's not that they reveal secrets about how the game works - but their example is inspiring as a way to present something other than perfect polish (ironic since the experience is itself highly polished), at least within the narrative context. *The Unfinished Swan* asks the player to explore a kingdom that is literally unfinished, in a state of partial construction. Parts of the game involve navigating a completely white space, tossing globs of black paint to illuminate the edges of objects in a bizarre form of echolocation.

Portal, meanwhile, starts the player off in a highly manufactured, sterile and pristine environment, through which the protagonist navigates a series of tests. Partway through, though, the rat breaks out of the maze, and the rest of the game is a rush through the ugly underbelly - pipes, engines and confined spaces galore - of what turns out to be the factory manufacturing that highly manufactured, sterile and pristine environment. So players get to see a world of sorts (the lab), and then how that world works (thanks to the factory), to the extent of seeing it assembled before their very eyes.

Finally I want to give special mention to *Viewtiful Joe*⁸, a game series that not only features one of the best names and most stylish protagonists ever, but also does a great job of explaining why its world works the way it does. Joe is just a regular...Joe on a movie date with his girlfriend until the villain leaps off the screen and drags her into the movie. What can Joe do but follow? Happily, once inside the movie he gets the special watch that allows him to transform into stylish superhero Viewtiful Joe, with a variety of cinematic powers at his command, such as control over time, dodging attacks *ala The Matrix*, and

zooming the camera in for a closeup on some extra-powerful moves. Sure, the premise is firmly tongue in cheek, and the game doesn't try to explain how there is a connection between the real world and Movieland, but it makes sense that Viewtiful Joe should be able to do the things he does, because he's in a movie, and his powers are movie tropes.

III. Death

I mentioned before the idea that an effective creative work plants a seed in its audience, a residual energy that makes them care about the piece, even after the fact. This is certainly one explanation for why we care when something ends. I have known people who refuse to watch the last episode of a TV show because they don't want to terminate their relationship with the characters. As long as that last episode remains unwatched, the experience isn't really over.

This is strange behavior. It is a profound oddity that we should grow so attached to a fictional creation, and yet we do, on a regular basis. Things get a hold of us and then we grab onto them and don't want to let go, because the emotional investment is valuable. This can continue to an absurd degree, and the phenomenon itself has been dramatized, as in the case of *Infinite Jest*, which features a video so compelling that the viewer cannot stop watching but simply withers and dies.⁹

This may not be something to aspire to, but the truth is that things do come to an end whether we like it or not, and it is an ongoing challenge how to deal with the loss. The phenomenal game *Shadow of the Colossus*¹⁰ is a remarkable meditation on the topic. (I owe this analysis of the experience entirely to Narrative & Dynamic Systems professor Nick Fortugno.) The hero Wander makes his way to a forbidden land in the hopes of bringing his love back from the dead. The only way he can do that is by killing the colossi that wander the land. The beasts are massive and Wander must scale them like buildings to find their weak spots. Each battle becomes a puzzle, trying to figure out when to climb (using limited stamina) and when to hunker down on the colossus' massive body and recover stamina. His quest to defy death and restore his love to life doesn't end well. In other words, a game that is thematically about when to hold on and when to let go uses gameplay mechanics involving when to hold on and when to let go.

That's an in-game narrative example. Happily, when it comes to the cessation of a fictional experience, it is likely not a matter of life and death, but that doesn't mean that the fans take it lightly. This is especially true if the world invites further exploration. In his book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*¹¹, author Daniel Mackay writes about "Imaginary Entertainment Environments." These are universes that support multiple narratives and can grow and change independently of those narratives. Mackay may have been speaking of role playing games in particular but the principle applies to any fully-developed and interesting world. Maybe the author will supply those additional narratives, but if not, the fan community will take charge. "Fan fiction" is what happens when fans, unwilling to let go of a beloved world, create their own narratives using the same world and characters.

IV. What Lies Beyond

Ultimately I realized that my project is a form of fan fiction. *Super Hexagon* may not have characters in any traditional sense and its "world" is up for debate, but my eagerness to capture and repurpose some of the feeling it inspired in me springs from the same passion for the material. That is fitting. The idea of a world that exists beyond the bounds of a single story; the concept of peering behind the curtain to see how something works; the recycling of material - none of this would have any meaning were it not for the simple but powerful desire to imagine just a little longer. It's not possible to stay in the created world forever. These efforts only stave off the inevitable moment of goodbye. In their own way, they are a part of the process of letting go - a step on the way to catharsis.

It seems right to let the inspiration inform the product. I struggled long with the question of how to frame the interaction I was designing. Would this be simply a museum-style repository of the mechanisms of *Super Hexagon*, now rendered static or nearly so by the passage of time and the conclusion of the game? Or would I try to implement some kind of game play? I liked the idea of imagining how the player might see behind the scenes of *Super Hexagon*.

I really wanted to implement some kind of embedded narrative¹², such as the game *Silent Hill 2*¹³ uses, creating a story through clues scattered about the environment. I was also attracted to the idea of using the architecture itself as a narrative conveyor.¹⁴ But I was reluctant to commit to a fixed interpretation. By ascribing meaning to the game's elements I might conflict with someone else's interpretation, and that didn't seem right when I so valued the imagination-inspiring power of the abstraction.

A solution presented itself when I received the suggestion to make the player's avatar a triangle that has died during the course of regular *Super Hexagon* gameplay. From this premise I developed how the narrative could proceed. The player would take control of the triangle in an environment visually similar to that of *Super Hexagon*, except that everything is static. Eventually the player would break out of the triangle's typical orbit and discover the ability to move freely about the environment.

Suddenly those unbounded edges of the screen would be cast in a whole new light - what might lie beyond? Venturing beyond the limits of the screen would reveal to the player other screens, containing the aspects of *Super Hexagon* the player was never meant to see. For example a generator that produces the walls, a conveyor belt of extra triangles, etc. The player can interact with them to a limited extent but not the same way as in the original game.

There is one room with a blockade preventing further movement. As the player explores and interacts with the elements in the other rooms, the triangle gradually becomes more and more ethereal, until at last it is able to pass through the blockade. On the other side the triangle meets the voice that has been issuing the "Begin" and "Game Over" statements that characterize the beginning and ending of a regular *Super Hexagon* play session. The game ends.

The implication is that the player, having died, now enters a state of purgatory, in which the world of life is still present but not functioning the same way as before (the world persists). By moving through this purgatorial landscape, the player can see the mechanisms behind life (peering behind the curtain). In doing so, the player bids farewell to earthly ties, before finally giving up the corporeal plane and ascending to meet the Supreme Being (letting go).

The key here is that none of this is explicitly stated. There is no text or speech to convey the narrative. Everything is embedded through environmental clues, such as the appearance of the triangle (which mimics the visual effect upon death in *Super Hexagon*). While certain elements (such as a generator to create walls) do impose a kind of interpretation upon the experience, the overall narrative of life after death and ascension is implied with sufficient abstraction that, with any luck, people don't have to read it that way. Indeed, tells like the appearance of the triangle might only have significance for those who have played the original game.

In fact, I am not sure what someone unfamiliar with *Super Hexagon* would make of this project. That is OK. My driving force is a personal desire to say goodbye to this important experience on my own terms. Furthermore it is a chance to do so while experimenting with repurposing aesthetic and gameplay mechanics plus embedded narrative to tell a story that is a metaphysical reflection on the project and the driving force themselves. If it has resonance for others, whether they have played the original game or not, that is icing on the cake. I at least will be able to uninstall *Super Hexagon* in peace.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (England: George Allen & Unwin, 1954) (book)
- ² Nintendo EAD, *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* (Game Boy: Nintendo, 1993) (video game)
- ³ Victor Fleming, *The Wizard of Oz* (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939) (movie)
- ⁴ John Lasseter, *Toy Story* (USA: Pixar, 1995) (movie)
- ⁵ Rich Moore, *Wreck-It Ralph* (USA: Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012) (movie)
- ⁶ Giant Sparrow, *The Unfinished Swan* (PS3: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2012) (game)
- ⁷ Valve Corporation, *Portal* (Windows: Valve Corporation, 2007) (game)
- ⁸ Capcom Production Studio 4, *Viewtiful Joe* (GameCube: Capcom, 2003) (game)
- ⁹ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (USA: Little, Brown, 1996) (book)
- ¹⁰ Team Ico, *Shadow of the Colossus* (PS2: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005) (game)
- ¹¹ Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (USA: McFarland & Company, 2001), 26-33 (book)
- ¹² Daniel Vella, *Spatialised Memory: The Gameworld As Embedded Narrative* (The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2011) (essay)
- ¹³ Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, *Silent Hill 2* (PS2: Konami, 2001) (game)
- ¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Narrative Spaces* (essay)