The biggest question is: under what lens do I want to analyze this game? What is the overarching question that I want to answer?

Analyze Catherine 🡪 What makes Catherine unique within the history of video games and why should more gamers endeavor to play it.

Catherine is unique because:

Narrative is about an ongoing relationship – specifically with a philosophical approach to gender in the context of relationships and asks the player to weigh in with their own opinion

Puzzle gameplay is unlike anything done before

The basics: platform, length, name of the game, platforms, genre, and number of players supported

Rules and mechanics:

Controls

Resources

Theme and narrative

Design critique: why did the designer makes the choices they made? How do these choices affect the game?

Narrative

Design

**Need some commentary here – can’t just state an opinion**

Most of the game is spent in the dream world as the majority of the moment-to-moment gameplay takes place within Vincent’s nightmares.

Gameplay

Catherine

Presentation

Description and commentary of the gameplay

Description and commentary on the narrative

Presentation – Symbols, Imagery, Art style (Anime as reference point)

Overall idea

The game ultimately asks the player what

# Review in Progress

The fact that there are only 2 playable locations in the game contributes to Catherine feeling as though it exists on a small scale. Yet this is a game whose ambition has lead it to telling a different and more mature story than is typically seen in video games through the lens of a conflicted man dealing with his anxiety over cheating on his girlfriend and deciding the direction his life should take. Despite a poorly implemented camera system and a difficult puzzle sections, it manages to be an exciting and engaging game yet it ultimately fails in the execution of its philosophical quandaries by implementing a binary moral choice system which creates a clear incentive for players to make consistent choices over the correct ones for them, thereby breaking the purpose of the system itself.

Catherine goes against the typical video game convention in that its central focus is on an ongoing relationship as opposed to the legions of the games that focus on the grandiosity of saving the world or preserving the status quo for some global organization or exacting vengeance on a powerful adversary. Yet despite a seemingly low-key plot, whose conflict really centers around 3 characters, it manages to find ambition within the mundanity of its subject matter using its puzzle sections and over-the-top anime art style to inject it with a greater sense of panache and scale than one would naively think could come from what amounts a domestic dispute.

The player steps into the shoes of Vincent Brooks, a 32 year old engineer who, at the start of the game, is in a long-term relationship with a woman named Katherine. Just as Vincent begins feeling pressured by his girlfriend when the prospects of marriage and fatherhood are presented to him, the woman of his dreams, named Catherine, comes barreling into his life to upset his established order. After a drunken night at his favorite bar Vincent wakes up to find Catherine in his bed, prompting his anxiety over the situation to boil over and his nightmares to begin.

In terms of game design Catherine is a puzzle game with some life simulator elements. The gameplay is split between the real world, in which Vincent frequents his favorite bar, and the dream world in which he climbs increasingly complex towers of blocks. Each nightmare that Vincent has contains multiple towers to escape from divided up into stages which must be completed by night’s end. In the real world the player can interact with both Catherine and Katherine through text messages as well as talking to his friends and other patrons at the bar.

**Life-simulator description**

The life simulator system of the game takes place in Vincent’s favorite bar the Stray Sheep. Here players can guide him to talking to the other patrons, texting one of his two ladies, drinking or playing a mini-game called Rapunzel. While some of Vincent’s friends may show up in his nightmares, engaging with them here can help see them through the trying times in their lives. This system does not have the depth other life simulators **–why not? What is it missing? –** it does, however, function well as down-time between the excitement of the nightmare stage even though players who are not interested in learning more about the supporting cast will be disappointed.

**In depth description of the puzzles** – what are the systems, what is the game trying to say? What makes these mechanics unique?

**Need to talk about the continue system and leverage commentary on it and the item system (though this has started already)**

In terms of the mechanics Catherine’s core gameplay centres around the nightmare stages in which the player controls Vincent as he attempts to climb new towers of blocks each night. Vincent starts on the bottom rung of a multi-level tower in which is made up of moveable blocks. The player’s role is to push and pull the blocks to form staircases and climb towards the exit at the top of the tower. Success will mean Vincent’s survival for the night. The basic mechanics are easy to grasp – **why are they easy to grasp?** – The game quickly presents complexity by introducing elements which affect player thought both directly and indirectly. Directly it introduces multiple block types and monsters at the end of each night which function as a kind of boss battle for the player to deal with. The monsters themselves are all horrific representations of Vincent’s foremost anxiety at the time and try to stop him from escaping the nightmare by knocking him off platforms, destroying blocks and trying to kill him directly.

In boss battles the fundamental rules set does not change but the player now has to account for an external entity who will attack them and alter the tower as they are climbing it. This can lead to moments when an intended path is destroyed or altered resulting in the player needing to dynamically alter their climbing strategy. Both the changing block types and bosses battles force the player to do this. **What’s the central point of this paragraph?**

As Catherine is a puzzle-game, changing the ruleset with which the player has to work will force them to calculate in a different way and while this isn’t intrinsically bad, in fact it will be necessary for the puzzles to evolve over time, it is a transition that must be handled with care. Having bosses change the stage with their attack patterns makes encountering them an intellectual mad dash where the player’s ability to avoid those attacks, adjust to the changes and still climb the tower are tested. When players are able to accomplish this Catherine can feel exhilarating …

It is the introduction of the indirect features that push Catherine’s gameplay into the territory of difficult and reveal more of the game’s expectations from the player. These include: the last level of blocks falling away at timed intervals, a score for each stage, an ever-decreasing combo meter -which resets when new level of blocks is reached- and items which help the player change the environment. The combo meter and score work together as the combo is multiplies the score, creating an incentive for the player to move to levels and to do it quickly. Adding to this the game grades the player after each tower based on their score. Together the timed elements and score imbue the game with a feeling of haste and contribute to the overarching sense that it wants the player to make decisions quickly and conclusively.

They also allow the game to conform to the ‘action-puzzle’ game standard outlined by puzzle expert Scott Kim in that Catherine gives the player a puzzle to solve under time pressure and also provides a means of relieving that pressure.The game relieves said time pressure by implementing an ‘undo’ feature which allows players to undo their previous block move and reset all timed elements to then as well. This can lend more of a trial-and-error feel to the interaction but will provide help for players who are struggling with the game’s puzzles and manages to boost the accessibility of the gameplay.

Overall the gameplay system can be difficult, especially when required to think under pressure, yet when it works the excitement of completing the challenges it presents is worth experiencing for any fan of puzzle games.

**This could be taken as a climb to maturity or an ascent out of hell.**

The fundamental ideas Catherine concerns itself with are: its protagonist’s journey to maturity and the question of whether men and women can truly be happy together. It addresses these through the narrative and the choice system.

In terms of narrative structure Catherine’s closest contemporary is found outside the medium of video games in the movie Scott Pilgrim vs. the World. Both film and game focus on the plight of a young man, forced to grow up quickly as he faces a series of trials brought on as a result of being in a relationship while borrowing an aesthetic from another medium. For Scott it means doing battle against Romana’s seven evil exes in the context of a film whose city seems to be running of video-game logic, borrowing heavily from classic games such as Super Mario Brothers, Final Fight and Megaman. For Catherine’s Vincent Brooks, however, it means dealing with deadly nightmares in which he must climb a never-ending staircase of blocks where failure to reach the exit means death in reality. The game presents itself as an episode of an over-the-top Japanese anime.

Although both protagonists are taught a lesson in maturity from their trials, this is where the similarities end and Catherine’s ambitions begin. The game is less interested in physically beating life-lessons into Vincent and more interested in torturing his psyche while also being a meditation on whether men and women can or cannot coexist in relationships with each other. In order to accomplish this it tasks the player with making decisions for Vincent regarding his love life and answering questions on their own philosophy towards relationships.

The questions are good idea in theory: getting the player to render their opinion on the subject of relationships and tracking that to have it influence the way the story unfolds conforms well to a choice-based design and utilizes the medium of video games very well by linking gameplay and narrative together. In this way the game leverages off of the advantages afforded to it by the medium it occupies namely: player choice. By giving the player an opportunity to weigh in on its central conundrum of gender politics through the choice system which boils down to answering questions for Vincent during the day when talking to people or texting one of his two ladies. Moreover in each nightmare the player will help him answer questions in a confessional. **Answers to questions and decisions fall into the categories of either order or chaos. Each player decision is tracked on a morality meter with order and chaos on opposite ends of the spectrum.**

There is a problem with the questions that the game asks the player in that the questions themselves have an inconsistent quality to them. For example the question “Which is more cheating: an emotional affair or a [physical] fling?” is considered equivalent to “**[insert the alien/corpse one here]**”. This kind of thematic and logical inconsistency drags the value of the game down

Like Mass Effect and Infamous before it, Catherine’s use of a binary moral choice system, where the player is able to make decisions which affect a morality meter which acts as a scale veering between ‘Order’ on the one side to ‘Chaos’ on the other extreme, is both game-lengthening and fundamentally problematic. Typically in games the binary moral choice system rewards players who make decisions which are thematically consistent with one of its two extremes. In this regard Catherine fairs no differently as almost every decision the player makes outside of the tower-climbing gameplay is evaluated and influences the morality meter.

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Taking into account the game’s 8 endings, the most positive end states for Vincent are the ones in which the morality meter is further towards the extremes. This creates a clear incentive for players to make consistent decisions over those which are right for them at every instance, removing ambiguity and judging said players in the same breath. In a game which wants to be about philosophical quandaries and players making up their own minds about a specific issue, the system becomes problematic and begins to undermine the point of having a philosophical tone in the first place.

While the implementation is poor, the binary moral choice system does reveal is that the game actually wants the player to make consistent decisions. It reserves the most positive endings for those who decide what they want and take steps towards reaching that. Coupled with the emphasis on speed and conclusive decision making from the gameplay it becomes clear that Catherine just wants players to make a decision about the direction they want to take in life and to do it quickly. The one thing it despises is what Vincent is in the opening, pusillanimous and immature. It doesn’t care for people who waste time in indecision and half-hearted effort and as such it punishes them for only going half-way towards their goals. Whether the player chooses Catherine (Chaos), Katherine (Order) or neither, the game just wants the player to choose and go at it with everything they have. This is what it posits is true maturity and ultimately what it expects the player, through Vincent, to learn.

Though the idea does form an interesting meta-narrative of designers ‘gaming the gamers’ it doesn’t redeem the game from judging its players and shifting the player away from the thought which is at the heart of the choice-based approach it attempts to take.

**How the player answers certain questions for Vincent will affect this scale and, consequentially, affect how Vincent responds in the future.**

This, however, is where Catherine’s problems begin to set in.

**Talk about what doesn’t work**

* **Controls**
  + **Camera controls are awful (reversing the controls on the otherside of the level is a horrible decision – changing the method of interaction midgame is confusing and impedes player progress)**
* **Narrative wants Vincent to make a choice and doesn’t really care which of the endings the player is interested in as long as they make a choice**
  + **The ending scenes get progressively better as the player commits more to each ideal**
  + **Consistent with the gameplay which is all about fast decision making and moving forward quickly.**

Problems:

Binary moral choice

Questions themselves aren’t always good

Other topics:

Multiple endings – linking that to binary moral choice (just go for consistency)

Quest for maturity

Thorough weirdness in the imagery around