Date: October 15 2015 Course: IGME.602.01 Instructor: Owen Gottlieb  
**Mini Game 2 Rationale**

Group: Conor, J.D., Roger, Stein

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# Roles

Conor - Lead Programmer

Stein - Narrative, Design

Roger - Playtesting and Analysis, Sound Engineering

J.D. - Playtesting and Programming

# Meaning Through Gameplay [written by Stein]

The initial concept we had in mind was a game that somehow showed the player that violence and aggression were not the only solutions (as is traditionally the case in most video games). From there, we further developed this into a possible experience of putting the player into a situation that would cause the player to automatically assume that a violent solution was the correct one, and then subvert that expectation by creating negative repercussions for violence and encourage the player to seek alternative solutions. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) define meaningful play as follows:

“*Meaningful play* in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The *meaning* of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome.” (ch.3, p.4)

The meaning in our game arises from the interaction between the player and the spectres. The spectres directly respond to the player’s actions by chasing him down according to his movement and reacting to aggression. The game also reacts to the player’s passivity or acceptance, making the decision not to fight a meaningful choice.

**Narrative**

*John is no stranger to grief, but he knows how to handle it. When his son died nearly a year ago, he remained stoic throughout the funeral, while his wife wailed inconsolably. When she left him a few weeks later, screaming about how Timmy would still be alive if he’d been watching him instead of getting drunk in the living room, he felt something green and sickening stir inside him for only a moment before he stifled it again.*

*He danced and drank away nearly every night since then in seedy, faceless nightclubs that bleed colourfully into each other, drowning out his restless guilt and buried grief. But tonight, when he steps through the doors of yet another nightclub and sees his son’s spectre rise before him, he must learn to face the fears he has been running away from for so long...*

**Gameplay and Player Experience**

“Procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular.” (Bogost, 2003, p.3)

“All play in some sense represents something from the non-play universe.” (Crawford, 2003, p.29)

Keeping the above ideas in mind, we have attempted to create a procedural rhetoric in our gameplay that represents metaphorically how grief is dealt with. When the player reacts to the spectres with conventional aggression by fighting them away (representing the denial of grief), the spectres grow and multiply in response. Faced with this negative feedback, the player is encouraged to seek out an alternative solution. When the player realizes that the solution is to essentially drop his guard (representing emotional barriers) and react with acceptance rather than denial, he is rewarded with a victory screen, representing peace in emotional terms.

# Developing the Pilot [Written by Conor]

We came to the idea of an FPS (First-Person Shooter) after first toying with the idea of a cookie clicker type game with the message that capitalism was an inherently flawed system. We quickly moved from this under more consideration into a game that focuses on the self, and internal emotional structures. We took the idea that a person needs to let go of their issues, and not let them build and build until they are inevitably overwhelmed. In short, the focus is to let go, release, forgive. The frame of the shooter came from wanting a colorful shooter. In my mind was cyberpunk themes, a rave setting, and loud club music.

Part of the game came down to saying that violence isn’t always the answer. We wanted to convey that there are other options when dealing with adversity. With further advancement in the game we decided that such a saying or meaning was not what we wanted to convey and therefore dropped it. The next iteration was when we came to the idea of letting go. It came from my experience as a Buddhist, and I wanted to go through the reading, specifically Bogost (2010), and talk about the “expressive power of videogames” (Pg. 89). Through this I said that we could make a game showing that it’s important to let go of the things that drag us down, and become free of those burdens. Specifically, in Bogost’s writing we drew inspiration from *September 12th*, a game that draws attention to the military actions taken place after 9/11 and the possible effects they can have.

Procedural rhetoric was something we wanted covered in the game. If you shoot the ‘enemies’ or spectres, they multiply. If you let them come to you, or let them overwhelm you, essentially accept them, you end the game. Even the end screen asks you to accept or reject the fate. Rejection takes you back to the beginning, to fight them off again, acceptance closes the program, representing that the things that chased and bothered you have now stopped.

Level design was quite simplistic, using only cubes with the dimensions morphed to create all the components of the level. I added a second floor to add ‘depth’ to the level, giving the player options instead of a stagnant one floor. Everything added attempts to recreate a stereotypic night club, or something that the player will assume as a night club. The colorful floor plates for dancing, moving lights, fog, a strobe effect. All of it is to overwhelm the sense of the player, and place them in the scene. To create a better experience, we took in some reality, and excluded other components. We “attempt to show the player, in first person, whatever the avatar is doing” (Adams and Rollings, 2009, 229) through the use of camera movement. But we removed the audio for footsteps and jumps due to the loud quality of the club music, without having to make it deafening to the actual player.

**Playtesting 1 [written by J.D.]**

Our first prototype consists of one gameplay scene set in a two-floor nightclub where the player is first attacked by one spectre but as they shoot at they kill the first spectre, another two are spawned. This continues until twenty have been spawned and then the player is struck to deal with all of them attacking until the character runs out of health. Then, players are shown a scene of a father and his young son embracing to further emphasize our message that violence is not a solution to problems.

I had to two people: Kyle and Sam play the prototype for a few minutes each. They both found the basic mechanics of moving and shooting fast enough because the controls are simple enough and use the same keys as found in other games. However, the fact that cursor movement is not restricted to the game space on the screen meant both of them had problems firing properly. This can be fixed by putting those restrictions in place and allowing for players to get out of the game in some other way.

Both of the playtesters failed to recognize that two spectres spawned one was killed upon by a bullet. Kyle simply thought that they were not affected by the shots while Sam simply thought that they took a few shots to kill. It would seem the team needs to implement some sort of audio and/or visual effect to let the player know that the spectres have been defeated and that there are now two. Their confusion was not helped by our visuals. In the darkness of the club scene, the spectre is hard to detect and its inhuman capsule shape makes it difficult to see them as anything other than an enemies that need to be killed. This can be remedied by adding a new more distinct texture that allows it to be more visible in the dark and keeping it in line with the theme by making the spectres more ghastly.

I was surprised by Kyle’s ability to break the game so easily. After a minute, he found the ramp to the upper level and used them to lead all the spectres up into the upper level where he could trap them due to quirk in their programming that kept them from following him off the catwalks that compromised the upper part of the level. In his own words, this made the game “...a giant game of *Snake*” or maybe in this case *Reverse Snake* in which the player is the little dot trying to avoid being eaten by the snake.

On the other hand, Sam was able to keep the spectres in a tiny area and exploit their slow move speed to avoid them until well past the time when the maximum of twenty spectres were spawned. He was simply waiting for one to come and attack him so he could lose. This is not the kind of gameplay we were going for and in future iterations, we should add improved and more varied AI to fix the problems Kyle and Sam encountered in their playthroughs.

The biggest problem that my playtesters encountered in their playthroughs was that they were completely unable to grasp the procedural rhetoric we were trying to create. Because of the roughness of our design, the message that “Violence is not always the solution” was only understood by Kyle and Sam after I tried to explain it to them after the game finished. The theming of a bond between a father and son torn apart but the son’s untimely death was also obscured by the quality of our game until the very end when the screen showed a picture of a father hugging his son. Kyle seemed to grasp parts of it but Sam and his friend Zach who was watching his playthrough saw it more as comical because the theming seemingly came out of nowhere.

This failure is in part because of our game’s rough state. It is hard to tell about the relationship form cubes and capsules without narration that made *Thomas Was Alone* work with similar constraints. As I suggested earlier, it seems that at this point, we will have to improve our art especially our textures and AI to make the spectres much more of a perceived threat and help improve our message.

In response to these problems, we have added text at the beginning of the game The text which can be seen in the narrative section of this paper, fades in and informs the players of the background of our main character. It tells of the death of John’s son Timmy and his slip into alcoholism and partying to cope with his grief which eventually leads to the start of the game when he sees the spectre of his son at the club. We hope that this will help the players understand our game better.

**Playtesting 2 [written by Roger]**

Fullerton (2014) writes that in conducting a playtest session, one should

observe their experience and try to see the game through their eyes. Pay attention to what objects they are focused on, where they click or move the cursor when they get stuck or frustrated or bored, and write down everything they tell you. They are your guide, and it’s your mission to have them lead you inside the game…(p. 3).

Fullerton writes that the playtester offers new vision and new eyes for designers to see their creations. He emphasizes observation of not only the explicit (such as spoken feedback), but the implicit (facial expressions, movement) as well. I used this quote as a framework for conducting my playtest session.

I used one of the current graduate students as a playtester for our game. When he began to play, I immediately noticed that there was nothing in the game to explain the controls. The player should be able to play by moving with the w,s,a, and d buttons and shooting/targeting with the mouse. Watching the playtester maneuver also revealed a bug in the game where the player is unable to move in certain instances. This is because there is no mouse lock in the game. Once the playtester was acclimated to the controls he was confronted by the specters and began shooting them (as expected). The fact that the specters multiplied amused the playtester (he smiled and chuckled upon discovering this feature).

After the playtester figured out that shooting the specters only causes them to multiply, he decided to run away and explore the area. It was during this phase that his smile faded and his facial expression was more neutral. Once he felt he had sufficiently explored the area he turned back to the enemies, but forgot how to shoot (this relates to the lack of clarity on the controls). After figuring out how to shoot again he began to attack the enemies. This however, only caused them to multiply which created a sense of confusion and desperation in the playtester. In seeing the enemies multiply he whimsically groaned “I don’t know what to do.” Eventually he let the enemies attack him and the game ended.

After examining the implicit reactions from the playtester, I asked him what he thought and what improvements could be made. He replied that he really enjoyed the visuals and the aesthetic of the game. The playtester stated that improvements could be made to the animation of the story in the beginning and the controls. He could not tell if he was moving on tiles that were not colored. He also stated that he did not know what he was supposed to be doing, but he was not sure if that was the point. He did not completely understand the rhetoric of the game until I explained it to him. He stated that replacing the existing enemy asset with actual ghosts would have made the rhetoric more clear. The playtester also stated that he did not feel threatened by the enemies. The target automatically made him think he had to shoot them and that after he noticed that shooting them did not eliminate them, he began exploring. He also said that the enemies were easy to evade due to their slow speed.

Overall the playtester had a positive experience while playing the game. To address some of his comments we added a fade effect to the narrative portion at the beginning of the game and noted that some of the more complex problems could be solved with better art assets and improving the control scheme in later iterations.

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