

Crafting Meaningful Play: Care and Meaning Making in/as/of/through Games

INTRODUCTION

Meaningful play has served as a useful analytic category for game design researchers. Drawing on Huizinga, who asserted that, "[a]ll play means something," (Huizinga, 1955, p. 1) Salen and Zimmerman set out to construct a productive framework for what they deemed, "meaningful play" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 31-36). In their mobilization of meaningful play, Salen and Zimmerman outline a framework for evaluating "successful game design [as] the creation of meaningful play" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 33). The framework advanced includes two vectors for thinking about meaningful play. The first, they define as "discernible," meaning that a player's actions result in an identifiable shift in the underlying systems of a game. Players need to be able to recognize that their actions have identifiable effects. The second is "integration," meaning that actions ought to be larger than simple action/reaction. Put another way, actions should also "affect[s] the play experience at a later point in the game" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 35). They also recognize that meaningful play will undoubtedly exceed even the formal systems of a game, that often meaningful play occurs in and around games.

From this foundation, the authors then elaborate on three core concepts, "design, systems and interactivity," (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 36) as the kind of Legos through which meaningful play is constructed. This perspective is particularly focused on players making sense of games and the world through their experiences of play, which is logical, considering the text is about making games. What I am arguing here, however, is that meaningful play, analytically, is a two-way street. Players do experience meaningful play. At the same time, developers actively constructing playful experiences by making meaning out of the world around them.

Because meaningful play is crafted by a designer through the articulation and construction of various systems, which players interact with, the designer's interpretation of meaning is always at play. Meaningful play is a dance, mangle or assemblage of meaning making (Pickering, 1995) between the designer and imagined and actual players. No one is "in control" of the situation. Put another way, all game designers craft systems that pick apart the world and turn them into systems that imagined and actual users then interact with. However, this is not a one-way street. Those same players then interpret and read back their experiences with these systems in highly subjective ways. Many game designers recognize this.

This essay draws on a variety of personal and ethnographic material from across a range of ethnographic projects. It would be simplistic to say that it is based solely on ethnographic material collected over the last nine years, in part because I have not always occupied a "proper" participant observer role during those times. I've come to reflect on my positionality during that time as more of a feral observer than a participant observer. As such, I'm neither really properly distant or properly part of whatever imagined community "game development" or "game players" might be viewed. I acknowledge this complicity and situatedness. As such, the analysis is more hermeneutic. It is an exploration of a conceptual object informed by the play and analysis of games as well as conversations with their developers and players.

2006 and 2007 marked the release of two games, *Passage* (Rohrer, 2007) and *The Marriage*

(Humble, 2007). Neither of these games marks a beginning or origin of the "art games" movement (if such a thing exists). These games represented an important new core category in my work on games as reflections on and means by which developers come to make sense of the world around themselves. The emergence of these games, and those that I encountered subsequently, further cemented my sense that games were something other than just "software," a statement that occasionally must be defend (O'Donnell, 2012). That realization was only one step down a rather long journey coming to games in/as/of culture, which is a different conceptual move than this one.

An important caveat, before I continue: the works discussed below are games. They are meant to be played. My accounting of the games in what follows could be considered a "spoiler," and any other player's portrayal may differ significantly. Such is precisely the tension I hope to explore in expanding the concept of meaningful play.

A NEW CORE CATEGORY

Passage was the first game I ever played that made me cry. Passage is a game about life and death. As a player, you are given five minutes to play the game. You can explore, or not. You can seek out treasure chests, or not. Eventually in your movement in the game, your male-looking avatar may find a female-looking avatar. If the two touch, they travel the world together, which also means that some paths are no longer accessible. Irreversibly, throughout the game, the clock ticks down. At the beginning of the game your character appears to the left of the screen, the right of the screen appears blurry and difficult to see. As time ticks away, your characters position shifts to the right. By the end of the game, which inevitably comes, the past is blurry and there is very little to look forward to. If you have found a partner, at some point, they will die. Your small character stands next to a tombstone, with only one question left in the players mind, "What do I do now?" Just like life.

Now, it would be possible to talk about heteronormativity and lots of other important things. There are important elements that shape the possible subjective readings players can have, and that is crucial reading. At the same time, Passage is how its designer came to make sense of life's journey, the death of friends and loved ones and ultimately his own inevitable death. I read in Passage, "treasure this journey, because its the only one you know you'll have and your choices matter." What is perhaps most beautiful about Passage is that it puts to the lie any account of "games" that attempts to circumscribe out mechanics, players, context, narrative, platforms or any other element.

Shortly after encountering Passage, I was told by another developer about a game called, The Marriage, which was developed as a side project by a high-profile game industry veteran. The game is significantly more abstract and less polished than Passage. It was an experiment in thinking about the world in/of/as/through games. In The Marriage you are actually playing a game described by its developer as, "my expression of how a marriage feels. The blue and pink squares represent the masculine and feminine of a marriage. They have differing rules which must be balanced to keep the marriage going." Perhaps most importantly, for it's author, the games mechanics were designed, "such that the game is fragile. Its easy to break. This is deliberate as marriages are fragile and they feel fragile, I wanted to get this across" (Humble,

2007). What is, perhaps, the most vulnerable part of the game, is that the author has laid wide open to the world, how, as a game designer he has interpreted and turned the experience of marriage into a game.

Initially you have two squares a blue and a pink, on screen.

Soon different coloured circles will enter and leave the play space.

You have two controls.

- 1) When you mouse over the blue or pink square the blue square reduces in size and both squares move towards each other.
- 2) When you mouse over a circle it disappears and the pink square gets smaller.

When the edge of the blue square collides (or “kisses”) with the edge of the pink square (but not when they overlap): the blue square shrinks slightly and becomes more transparent. The pink square grows slightly and becomes less transparent.

When the blue square touches any coloured circle but black then the blue square becomes less transparent and grows in size to a significant degree.

When the pink square touches any coloured circle but black then the pink square grows in size slightly.

When the pink or blue square touch a black circle they shrink significantly.

As time passes the pink square becomes more transparent.

When squares collide with things then a white bar at the bottom of the screen increases in size.

When either the pink square or blue square shrink to nothing or become totally transparent then the game is over.

The general game flow will be balancing the need to have the pink & blue squares “kiss” to insure the pink square does not fade from the marriage versus the blue square needing to touch the circles to insure it does not fade. (Humble, 2007)

While it is easy to see this particular take on marriage as highly rooted in an interpretation of heterosexual marriage as duty for one player, at odds with the demands/desire of work. Indeed, even the game was created while stealing time away from a vacation weekend, “[The game] came out of a long weekend I took with my wife down to Carmel. It was created that evening on

my laptop as I listened to the waves of the pacific below" (Humble, 2007). Most readers are likely aware of how problematic this perspective on marriage is. It's centered around a one person (the "male" blue square) going out and doing things and the other (the "female" pink square) solely being defined by their interactions with the other. It certainly doesn't describe the system that I'd like to call my marriage. But that isn't the point in my analysis of meaningful play. It is how the designer came to understand his relationship with his wife. I don't know how she would feel to hear him describe that system so candidly.

These two games represented a rupture, for me as a former game developer and researcher of game developers. It was the first time I'd ever seen designers attempting to model systems that meant something important to themselves. Most game designers are interested in modeling economies or balancing attack and defense systems, which is basically a kind of economy too. This was my first encounter with game designers, taking very real systems in the world and coming to understand them in/through/as games.

CARE AND MEANING MAKING

It was in 2009 that I experienced a different side of meaningful play. I played two games, Train (Romero, 2009b) and Síochán Leat (Shee -a -cawn lat) (Romero, 2009a), also known as, "The Irish Game." The designer and developer, Brenda Brathwaite, now Brenda Romero, created these two games as part of a series of games part of her project, "The Mechanic is the Message." Both games need to be played, as the mechanic is the message, which is difficult, as each are non-digital games of which only one exists. Train is left as a pilgrimage to the readers of this essay (at the time of writing this essay. Though, for the purpose of further illuminating meaningful play, I will now ruin Síochán Leat for you. In The Irish Game, one player plays the side of the Irish and the other as Cromwellian British invaders. Orange boxes uproot those who previously lived on sites and must be relocated. The goal of the person playing as the Irish is to keep as many people as possible from being uprooted. Orange's goal is to simply place all of their blocks, but they must be done so adjacently.

Playing the game, particularly as someone of Irish heritage, was a moving experience. As I attempted to relocate my displaced families, I was forced to break them apart. As the pegs began knocking one another over in my attempt to squeeze them into increasingly crowded quarters, I imagined bar brawls or neighbors fighting with one another as space was used. Eventually, assuredly, pegs began to fall from the board. As revealed to players at the end of the game, these became two separate groups, those that perished and those that were forcibly relocated to Barbados as indentured slaves. I thought about my family's flight from Galway and eventual relocation to the United States and Boston in particular. Those systems of dominance and oppression had an effect on those that eventually emigrated away from Ireland. I thought a great deal about those checks that my grandmother may or may not have written to the IRA. I was hurt and mad in a different way than I'd ever been previously thinking about occupation in Ireland. Next I played as the invading force, which was possibly even more difficult. Did I take a "sensitive" approach and try to "nicely" dislocate people? Suddenly I felt complicit. Shouldn't I just place the pieces like I don't care, because I could be refusing to take part, but that felt even less human.

These two games signaled to me that meaningful play makes meaning in multiple directions. Careware, games in this case, started as meaning making systems for their developers. But they have become systems crafted with care in hope that those playing would make sense and care for the very same systems. Games provide meaningful feedback to players in ways that are recognizable. By rendering the rules opaque, within the black-boxed rules of a game, the player must on their own make sense of how to play within those rules. That is the foundation of meaningful play.

RETURNING TO MEANINGFUL PLAY

What makes the link between Meaningful Play as both design and play so compelling, I think, in the case of games is that through constructing objectifying systems, designers simultaneously enable new subjective accountings of these very systems. It isn't really that the world is divided into "Irish and Cromwellian," but what might such a rigid binary distinction allow us to understand? Marriage isn't really the system described here, but what does such a telling allow us to understand differently? The passage of life and time aren't really a blurring forced death-march, but it can kind of feel that way if that's the story you come away with. It is the oscillation between objectification (putting down words to structure) and subjectification (telling a story about the experience of structure) that, carefully done, can be quite productive in making sense of the world.

Crafting, or designing, meaningful play is kind of the flip-side to what what I have previously explored as "playing well," exploring the idea that when playing a game well, the player is actively engaged in a deconstructive activity. They are exploring it in ways that attempt to pull apart the underlying systems of the game. In some ways it is kind of the ultimate form of (dis)respect, closely exploring and attempting to understand, care for and make sense of diverse complicated system (O'Donnell, 2013). At the same time, I think meaningful play runs in both directions, it encapsulates playing well. To find and construct meaning in the game is to be playing well.

It would be disingenuous if I were to thus claim that "games are the one true medium of expression that allows for new understandings of complicated issues." That isn't my claim. Rather, that much like many other forms of media that attempt to grapple well with complex issues, games can and do contribute to this dialog. Meaningful play is the core conceptual element of this grappling or dance. The dance of agency between the designer and player is part of what other authors have offered in games as assemblage (Taylor, 2009), which is part of what I'm getting at here. But what I think is missing from the assemblage is the emergent component that is larger than the exploration of those assemblages. It is the stories and care that emerge from the dance that matters. That is care and meaning making in/as/of/through games.

CAREFUL CRAFT

Games, game design and meaningful play are deeply rooted in systems that simultaneously objectify the world around them, in order to mobilize them as systems. The discrete computational logics of games and computers - this bucket; not that bucket - clearly demarcate meaningful disconnects. Yet, at the same time, these objectifying moves, when done carefully,

are done in order to construct systems that are played. The stories players tell, on the other hand, subjectively regenerate new narratives. I can tell a story about playing *Passage*, *The Marriage*, *The Irish Game*, that exceed its rules and systems. Yet, without the objectifying moves, such subjective understandings and care would not otherwise have been possible. Simultaneously, the stories that players tell when they talk about their experiences playing games are stories about making meaning and care.

Games, whether being made or being played, for better or worse, remain meaning making systems. Increasingly, I would argue that they are important systems of meaning making because they respond to the player. It is precisely the oscillation between objectification and subjective sense-making that lend them their interpretive and deconstructive demeanor. The systems of the world around us, just as opaque as those of a game seem nonsensical. Games, on the other hand, must have discrete systems that can be teased out. Yet, the fact that they are clearly constructed systems make them open to criticism and refactoring in a way that the systems of the world around do not.

Eric Zimmerman, a game designer, recently said that this would be the "ludic century" (Zimmerman & Chaplin, 2013). What at first blush sounds self-congratulatory is actually more subversive. Eric believes that the world needs more game designers. In an increasingly algorithmic and mediated and constructed world, seeing those systems as open to revision and redesign less, "games are everywhere!" Put another way, the world needs more people interested enough, care-full enough and hoping to make sense of what is increasingly a mess.

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