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Group Report: What Moves a Player to Meaning in Their Play Experience

Participants: *A.K.A. "Rosebud"*
Kenny Shea-Dinkin, Making Fun
Katherine Isbister, NYU
Drew Murray, Insomniac Games
Daniel Tanguay, Vicarious Visions

Karen Schrier, Marist College/Play Innovation Lab
David Fox, Double Coconut
Vijay Thakkar, Curious, Inc.
Simon Strange, Sunstone Games

Facilitator: Linda Law, Project Horseshoe

ROSEBUD

Meaning. It is there for us in the works of the great symphonic composers, works of great literature, or the museum masterpieces of history's master painters. It abides in the *Iliad*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Maus*, and *Citizen Kane*.

These works reach into our hearts. They move us; they open us.

Apocryphally, we've heard the story of the scientist whose deep listen of a Tchaikovsky symphony inspires him to unlock the cure for a dreadful disease. The politician who visits the theatre and is so moved that the next day she issues a historic declaration of peace and reconciliation. Defining *meaning* as that which has a resonating impact on a deeply personal or global scale, we take it for granted that art can achieve the *sublime* -- that which inspires great awe -- and thereby be meaningful. But such assumptions about meaning are generally not afforded to games and game designers.

Why not?

What are the added components of game design and game play that confound player experiences to reach the sublime?

How can designers approach their work with enough intentionality and awareness, and the appropriate tools and collaborations, to create game experiences that offer players meaning and peek at the sublime?

Why Games Struggle with Meaning

Because of the multimedia aspect of games, in a way, integrating and layering on more and more possibilities to achieve the sublime is easier. Sweeping hyper-realistic background art, emotive characters, stirring music, and an epic narrative are tuned expertly to trigger specific emotions in the player based on her choices and input.

But we pinpointed several forces that counteract potential feelings of meaningfulness and achieving the sublime:

1. **Busyness.** There are often too many awe-inspiring components competing for the player's attention

at the same time. Research by psychologist Richard Mayer, for example, would suggest that there are cognitive deficits that occur when using visual and verbal materials that have differing or divergent content, as they compete for the same attention resources; visual and verbal materials that directly support each other, however, could have an edifying effect (Mayer, 2001; Mayer, 2003).

2. **Unpredictability**. Player agency and emergent behavior act idiosyncratically, obfuscating much that was painstakingly crafted.
3. **The lack of authorial voice.** Because games are played, not experienced, it is difficult to craft an explicit, standardized experience.
4. **Pacing.** Game designers often feel pressure to walk players through the "expensive art" in a game at an exciting pace, which oftentimes does not allow for moments of reflection. Players come to a game expecting adrenaline, excitement, and mayhem, and thus sometimes will not notice or experience the sublime, even when it is pervasive.
5. **Mediocrity**. Even though each of the components--narrative, art, characters--have the possibility to achieve the sublime, none of the components are individually at the top of its craft, nor does the sum of the parts achieve its potential.
6. **Expectations.** The public zeitgeist is that games are frivolous endeavors, at best. And often a player approaches a game as a means of having very escapist, mindless fun. This framing of games automatically leads people to expect something meaningless, rather than meaningful.

Catalog of Meaning

We worked from examples of our own meaningful experiences with games, generated from our reflections and memories, to create a "catalog of meaning" -- elements of games that resonated with many of us. The example games spanned big-budget, atmospheric action titles such *Final Fantasy*, *God of War*, *Bioshock*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, and *Ico*; narrative-focused titles such as *The Walking Dead, Last of Us,* and *Heavy Rain*; to more deliberately "artsy" games such as *Journey*, *Passage*, *Dear Esther*, *Papers, Please,* and *Gone Home*.

The following are three main categories of meaning-making in games, and a number of relevant sub-categories underneath each of them.

The Relatable - Meaning through relationships and relating to others.

1. Connection (+Loss). Getting deeply attached to a character, often feeling deep pangs at that character's death.
2. Similarity. Recognizing archetypes in the game world that relate to yourself or loved ones.
3. Interfacing. The game and the game play interweaves with real-world relationships, including family, loved ones, or new friends. This includes real-world connections through social play or couch play.

The Reflective - Meaning through reflection or reflective states.

1. The Pause. Often in games you go through a very difficult stage of a challenge and may even die many times. Then you succeed. And in that calm and release of tension, there is transcendence. Players are also often *accidentally* struck by the sublimity of scenery, audio, or writing while taking a break from the regular gameplay.
2. Meditative States. Making order out of chaos can be a path toward inner peace. Games also achieve this via rhythm or repetition. Games also allow "zoning out," allowing the player to indulge and wallow in his boredom.
3. Subverting Expectations. By playing with contrast and cadence, reversing expectations, games can surprise the player and trigger meaningful emotion and memories.

The Explorative - Meaning through exploration and experimentation.

1. Role Playing. Enabling people to try on new identities or play with alternate versions of themselves. This includes darker feelings of rage or sexuality and playing violent games to blow off steam or delve into that darkness. This involves meaningfully exploring personas that aren't available in society.
2. Choice and Consequence. This involves providing a narrative and deep moral choices that one normally does not have to make as a way to bring reflecting and meaning.
3. Aesthetic/Sensory Environments. Entering new, lush worlds, similar to the awe and disorientation one feels with foreign travel.

The Take-Away: Meaningful Game Design Devices

After cataloging some of the types of meaning, we came up with some preliminary notes on devices that designers can use, in practice, to generate meaningfulness. Many of these techniques are known "obvious" tropes of good game design, and all of them are easier said than done, but we believe that if game-crafters intentionally add the achievement of sublimity as a design goal, more video game meaning will be surfaced, experienced by players, and celebrated.

1. Stillness
   a. Allow the player to take moments for reflection. Give the players the potential to break the action and appreciate the world outside of the guided rails.
   b. Take the time to build and cultivate deep beauty, even if it seems like a waste of production focus, and trust players to slow down. Games often guide players away from meaning and toward visceral action, but players can and will find their own moments of meaning.
2. Subtlety
   a. The more you try to explicitly or heavy-handedly push meaningful, the more you may fail. Some "art games" actually achieve less mass meaningfulness because of this.
   b. Play with expectations as a way of pushing players off guard and changing their perspective.
   c. Don't force players to "see" a crafted beauty at the expense of a sub-par game experience.
   d. Use silence. Often meaning comes from moments when characters don't speak. There's a shriek, a cry, or a whistle.
3. Patterns
   a. Make use of repetition.
   b. Make use of randomness and constellating.
   c. Art that feels meaningful is often abstract, simple, or reductionist. There is an amplification and personalization that occurs through simplification.
4. Archetypical relationships
   a. Mimic real life connections, without being cliche, and it will resonate with large numbers of players.
5. Investment
   a. Ramp up the challenge forcing effort, time, or money spend prior to key moments in the game.
   b. Don't shy away from pushing players to face some of their more buried, darker emotions.

Conclusion

Clearly there are *already* moments of tremendous personal and societal meaning that arise for players as a result of games. The aim of this report is to call out meaningful player experience as something to strive for, and to develop more systematic techniques and principles that can lead to more sublimity being derived from and attributed to our chosen art form. We love and embrace inherently "meaningless" games -- games are magical when they are light, distracting, and mindless -- but we also think the creation of more meaningful moments in games could be beneficial for us, our players, and the culture at large.

Rosebud was a sled that the titular character in Citizen Kane remembered fondly as the symbol of his

vanished childhood, and was the last word Kane uttered on his deathbed. No one around him knew what he meant by "Rosebud," because the meaning was inherent to his own personal experience. A unique challenge of game design in contrast to other media is the tremendous extent to which games are by their nature personal experiences, different for every player. As such, we believe that games will ultimately triumph over other media as a means to allow players to cultivate their own "garden of rosebuds," seeding memories more artfully and consciously without taking away the tremendous power of player agency.

Example Games and other Media

Final Fantasy
God of War
Bioshock
Red Dead Redemption
Shadow of the Colossus
Ico
Fallout series
Fable
The Walking Dead
Last of Us
Heavy Rain
Journey
Passage
Dear Esther,
Papers, Please
Gone Home
The Stanley Parable