

The Suicide Game: Player Perception of Self-destruction in a Game

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Introduction

Video games do not necessarily present the player with a positive role to play: The player character may be a villain, be morally corrupt. Yet it is *almost* universally the case that video games make *players fight for the survival of their character*. In a discussion of tragedy in interactive media, Marie-Laure Ryan has noted the seeming impossibility of an *Anne Karenina* game, a game where the player's ultimate goal is to commit suicide by throwing herself in front of a train:

Interactors would have to be out of their mind—literally and metaphorically—to want to submit themselves to the fate of a heroine who commits suicide as the result of a love affair turned bad, like Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina. Any attempt to turn empathy, which relies on mental simulation, into first-person, genuinely felt emotion would in the vast majority of cases trespass the fragile boundary that separates pleasure from pain. (Ryan 2001)

While Ryan identifies a clear game convention of players fighting for the survival of their character, we know little about what would happen were this convention to be broken: How would players perceive the controversial or uncomfortable game content in a game where the player had to seek self-destruction?

This poster documents a game experiment conducted at Parsons School of Design in the autumn of 2006. The goal of the experiment was to explore the ramifications of making the player work towards the destruction of his/her character, and to explore how players interpret a game with uncomfortable subject matter.

The Suicide Game

The game was developed in Macromedia Flash by Albert Dang and Kan Yang Li.



Fig. 1.: The suicide game.



Fig. 2: Typing a code word to drink poison.

The game is a two-player game, where the two players must collaborate in order to move the character around a single room (figure 1). Each player has four directional keys, AWSD for player one, and the arrow keys for player two. To move the player forward, the players must take turns pressing their forward key.

To successfully commit suicide, the players must drink poison twice and stab themselves twice with the objects distributed throughout the room. Drinking poison or stabbing is performed by going to the object and typing in the text string the game presents (figure 2). Failing to complete the game goal within the allocated time frame leads to the message that the player has survived (figure 3).



Fig.3: Failure is surviving.



Fig. 4: Success is dying.

Conversely, completing the game leads to the death of the player character (figure 4).

Test setup

Six volunteers were asked to play the game, all students at the Parsons School of Design, for a total of three teams. Players were given a brief initial introduction to the game. Players were observed during playing, and a post-playing interview session was held, where players were solicited comments about their experience of playing the game, and their interpretation of the game.

Test results

The teams performed very differently, with some collaborating after a short period of time, and some having problems collaborating. All teams were observed to follow a phase of initially expressing surprise at the goal of the game, to being focused on the task itself, to again discussing the goal of the game once the game had been completed or the team reached game over.

In the interview session, responses were solicited concerning the experience and interpretation of the game. We have selected some of the interesting responses in the following.

How did it feel, having to kill yourself in the game? Did it make the game exciting? Uncomfortable? In a good way / in a bad way?

- "Satisfying. Not uncomfortable because it was so cartoony, perhaps if it was more "realistic", perhaps if disgusting pictures were added."
- "Shocking. Weird."

What is the moral of this game? Is the game immoral?

- "Some people might take offense."
- "Immoral in the sense that you have to reach a goal to kill yourself."

Informally, one player volunteered the information that a friend of hers had killed herself. The player stressed that "this is just a game". We interpret this as meaning both that the game had made the player associate to the personal experience, and that the player believes it customary not to "take games seriously".

One player expressed what we interpret as a joyful experience from the transgression subject matter of the game. "This is awesome. You guys are sick."

Test interpretation

All players reacted to the suicide game as a departure from the games they were aware of. As such, all players were at least tacitly aware of the fact that games generally involve the player protecting the well-being of the player character, and that this game was a deviation from the standard conventions.

When players focused on the concrete task of coordinating their movement to navigate the playfield, the "content" of the game seemed to fall into the background compared to the task of simply performing well in the game. When players either failed because the ambulance arrived or succeeded by killing themselves, the players seemed to again become aware of the overall goal of the game, and commented on the irony of reaching game over by surviving, and completing the game by killing themselves.

Overall, players expressed varying levels of discomfort with the subject matter of the game. Having to kill the player character was somewhat uncomfortable, but also a source of interest due to its transgressive nature.

The players' interpretation of the game was less clear, with players either referring to "others" as being potentially offended, or noting that the game *was* in a sense immoral.

Conclusion

Contrary to Ryan's claim, it is possible to create a game in which the player must seek self-destruction, and players can enjoy this type of game. Some players do experience such a game to be uncomfortable or controversial, but the ability to create uncomfortable experiences or controversial subject matter is arguably an important step in the development of any medium.

Further work

Further work would include:

- Creating a single-player version of the game to understand whether the shared experience of playing the game as multiplayer mitigates the discomfort of the subject matter.
- Exploring if increased characterization of the player character will make players experience the game as more or less comfortable. There are arguments for both cases: The deeper the characterization of the player character, the stronger the emotional identification. On the other hand, a more developed player character may make the players less likely to experience the self-destruction of the game as their *own* self-destruction.
- Exploring what role graphical style has for the interpretation of the game. Does cartoony graphical style make the game seem harmless to some players?
- Testing the game on other audiences: Perhaps audiences less used to playful use of games and multimedia will interpret the game differently.
- Testing the game in different cultures.

Links

The game can be found at the following location:
<http://a.parsons.edu/~kli/suicide.html>

Bibliography

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media." *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001).
<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>