

Graduation Lecture delivered Monday, November 9th

Introduction

Hello. Thank you all so much for coming. I'm Travis Megill and my lecture is titled, "*In the Meantime and Passage: Conveying Meaning through Game Dynamics*. We'll be focusing on an independent, experimental art game created by Jason Rohrer, called *Passage*, and using Robin Lippincott's novel *In the Meantime* to examine how video games express meaning differently from fiction.

In the Meantime

Passage and *In the Meantime* are thematically similar, they both explore how the passage of time and the way we experience it change over the course of our lives.

Robin's novel, which many of you have probably read, since it was the Faculty Book-in-Common last semester for Fiction, tells the story of Kathryn and her two closest friends, Starling and Luke. The story starts with each of the characters' first memories, and ends with Kathryn as an old woman, Luke dead and Starling missing.

Robin plays with time throughout the novel. The narrative often covers years in a single paragraph, but also slows down to give the reader entire scenes with more than one character's perspective, like the first time Kathryn, Starling, and Luke meet. The three friends decide early on that their dream is to move to New York City together, but like all childhood dreams, things don't go as planned. They arrive in New York, but their expectations for their lives are tempered by reality as they realize moving away from home isn't the solution to all of their problems. As the novel progresses, other techniques are used to show how the passage of time has affected the characters. Starling grows

distant from his friends, and an entire scene is told completely in his voice as he speaks to an unknown someone over the phone.

Several sections deal with characters other than Kathryn and her friends. One is told in first person, from the perspective of a man that survived the bombing of Hiroshima, and later, another character, Kathryn's lover, Peter, tells her about the loss of his parents to the Nazi's and his stay in a concentration camp. Both of these secondary stories give the central characters' lives context, showing the reader what's happening in other places while Kathryn, Luke, and Starling are growing up and pursuing their dream. They also reveal how limited the main characters' perspectives are, time passes for the world around them as they struggle to lead fulfilling lives.

Jason Rohrer's *Passage* has a much more limited scope. It's an independent art game developed completely by Rohrer, and it doesn't attempt to convey specific characters or settings. Instead, it works as a minimalist example of how video games convey meaning. Since I'm talking about video games and interactivity, it'd be so much nicer if all of you could play *Passage* before I picked apart the experience, but I do want to give everyone the chance to play at least 15 or 20 seconds of the game, so I'm going to pass around my iTouch. You'll see four directional arrows on the screen. All you have to do is press somewhere near one of the arrows to move in that direction. That's all you need to know!

Okay, as we look at *Passage* in more detail, I'll also be reading some quotes from *In the Meantime* that coincide with different elements of the game, but first, I want to talk about video games in a more general sense, and look at a few definitions from your handouts, so we can all approach video games from the same perspective.

Overview of Video Games

I'm sure there are a variety of opinions and levels of experience in the room regarding video games, so it's probably helpful to start out talking about the kind of game I'm interested in. Though games have been around longer than even the written word, we usually think of them as simply entertainment, but they have the ability to tell stories and express meaning to players in a unique fashion, through interaction with a system of rules. Let's try to forget any preconceived notions about games we may have and look at the definitions on your handout that will let us examine *Passage* alongside of *In the Meantime*. The first definition is game.

The Basics

“**Game** is a set of rules and/or conditions established by a community and intended as a bounded space for play.” This definition covers anything from ‘Hide and Seek’ to ‘Monopoly’ and ‘Grand Theft Auto’. This is a very inclusive definition for games, which is useful for our purposes, since we’re looking at a game that lies a bit outside of the mainstream.

So a game has rules, established by a community, which could be the developers at a massive video game company or your friends down the street who invited you to play tag. But we’ll also need the definition for “play,” to understand how the player interacts with the game.

“**Play** is any pastime with a primary goal of self-guided exploration of possibility within a bounded space.” Play can be as simple as twirling a piece of string around your

fingers. I have two cats at home, and they spend hours playing with anything they find on the floor of the bounded space that's my house. But when the bounded space is governed by rules, it becomes a game. Using that same piece of string, you may decide to create as many geometric shapes as possible with both ends touching. Since you've created boundaries for the play, it becomes a game.

Now we know why *Passage* is a "game," and that players interact with it by "playing," but we need two more terms to explain how the game works. Mechanics and dynamics. These terms are interrelated, much like a sentence's structure is related to the meaning it creates. We're all supposed to know what rules govern the creation of a sentence. Verbs, nouns, prepositional phrases, and all of that fun stuff, as well as the orders and combinations they're allowed to go in. Those are the mechanics of language. How those mechanics are combined to create meaning in a sentence is the dynamic. In our string game, the mechanic is creating geometric shapes. I could create a square, a triangle, maybe even an octagon. The dynamic formed by creating these shapes is challenge. The player is challenged to create shapes with a piece of string. What makes any game enjoyable or fun is learning the rules and exploring their limits.

There are many games, both electronic and traditional, that exist purely to provide players with a bounded space to have fun, but what happens when the rules created convey meaning beyond fun? Hopefully that's a question I can at least begin to answer as we look at *Passage*, a game that's not terribly fun to play.

Passage

Let me start the video here. If you'll just pretend that what I'm saying corresponds to what's happening on the screen behind me, that would be great. If I mention something you haven't seen yet, be patient, it'll come, and if it's already gone by, just pretend you're still watching it.

I'll start by explaining the mechanics of the game. As you can see on the screen here, *Passage* is played in a passage of sorts. The top and bottom of the screen are cut off, leaving only a strip down the middle for the game. Your character is a man, and he starts off on the far left side of the screen. The only way to interact with the game is movement. If you move to the right, your path is unobstructed, but if you move downward, a maze begins to form, eventually blocking your way entirely with dead ends.

The score is kept in the upper right, and there are several ways to increase it. Just moving the character slowly increases the score, but if you find a treasure chest you gain 100 points all at once. Some of the chests are empty, but the combination of colored pixels on each chest allows the player to learn which are likely to contain points.

There's also a woman near the beginning that will join you if you choose, simply by moving the character toward her. This doubles the rate you accumulate points as you move, but she also makes it harder to access areas below the main path, so treasure chests are harder to reach.

The game ends in five minutes, whether you've moved the man or not. As time passes, the man's position on the screen shifts from left to right, and the landscapes he passes through are pushed to the left, eventually compressed into layered strips of color. When the man reaches the end of his time, he's replaced by a gravestone and the game ends.

So *Passage* has all these various mechanics, but there's no challenge to the game. Though there's a score, it doesn't get added to a high score list at the end of the game. There isn't really much incentive to play the game over and over to improve your score either. From a purely mechanical perspective, the game's simplistic and probably a bit boring. Good thing it only lasts 5 minutes.

What makes the game interesting, however, is a certain type of dynamics called "**Expositional Dynamics**," the third definition on your handout. Expositional dynamics are game mechanics included specifically and solely to communicate meaning, or describe a relationship within the gameworld.

All of the dynamics in *Passage* are trying to say something to the player about the passage of time in a person's life. Even the score functions differently than it might in a more traditional game. Since *Passage* isn't particularly fun to play, like I said before, you probably wouldn't sit around with your friends trying to beat each other's high scores. Instead, the score reflects the experience the man accumulates as he passes through life. If he sits still, he gains nothing, but if he explores the difficult area below his starting position, he will be rewarded. Falling in love and spending the rest of his life with a partner increases the amount of experience he gains twofold, but he can't fit into the increasingly narrow paths that hide the treasure. My wife, Anne, isn't a big fan of that particular dynamic.

Another dynamic is the character's position on the screen. As the game begins, the man is young, so he spends most of the time thinking about his future. A quote from *In the Meantime* describes Kathryn and her friends at a similar place in their lives, "At

that age, their memories were still relatively few and unpacked, but their imaginations were boundless.” (17) *Passage* conveys this by leaving nothing behind the character. The entire length of the screen lies in front of him: his future.

As the game progresses the present dominates as the future and past are pressed to either side, but at the end of the game, the man has almost reached the right side of the screen and his past lies behind him, his memories represented by the layered colors. There’s a wonderful paragraph from *In the Meantime* that describes this dynamic perfectly, “She was thinking about the past and the present and the future, and about how, as children, we live mostly in the future—though sometimes also in the present—when we are playing imaginatively, intensely engaged in the moment; we live mostly in the future as children because we long to leap from the powerlessness of childhood into the power and autonomy of adulthood. And in old age, we live mostly in the past, not only because we see that the future is finite, and that death looms, but also because, in many if not most cases, the present is diminished—by illness, infirmity, the death of so many friends, et cetera. And so it is in middle age that we have the greatest opportunity to live most fully in the present, in the moment; whether or not one chooses or is able to do so is up to the individual.” (138) You can see how the game illustrates those points using dynamics, as your character moves from left to right, the emphasis shifts from the future to the past.

Even restricting the game to a centered strip conveys meaning, suggesting the entire span of a person’s life at once. *Passage*’s world is vast, so within the five minute span your character has, only a fraction of it can be traversed. You have to choose whether the character will spend most of his life exploring the challenges that lie below

him or cover more ground by staying on the unobstructed path. Will the character fall in love or live and die alone? Will he lead a fulfilling life or accomplish nothing?

Several dynamics can work together to create complex meanings as well. In Rohrer's statement of intent for the game, he describes a couple of situations the player can experience. While exploring the maze, you may discover a treasure chest, but eventually realize there is no path that leads to it, for me this could represent the possibility of becoming a ballet dancer, or a pirate. *Or*...you may find that the only thing blocking your way is your partner, the love of your life. I've always wanted to become a bounty hunter, but Anne doesn't approve.

As you get closer and closer to the edge of the screen and death, the paths become increasingly difficult to navigate, so most of the treasure will be unreachable.

When I played *Passage* for the first time, the dynamics at the end of the game had the greatest effect on me. As the man and woman made their way across the screen, their bodies bent and their hair darkened and then turned white. They began to move slower and slower, and then suddenly the wife is replaced by a gravestone with no warning. The man hunches over, moving at a crawl, and shortly after, turns into a gravestone as well. The game is over.

The next passage from *In the Meantime* describes death, "The only juncture at which time seems to stop is when one dies, but even then, it is not time that has stopped (it will go on and on), one has merely ceased to observe it. In fact, any means of making time seem other than what it is—that is, incessant and inexorable; sixty seconds in a minute (each second standing heir to the first), sixty minutes in an hour, twenty-four

hours in a day, three-hundred sixty-five and one-fourth days per year, et cetera—is merely illusory” (135).

The quote at the top of your handout explains Rohrer’s intent for the ending of *Passage*: “This treatment of character death stands in stark contrast with the way death is commonly used in video games (where you die countless times during a given game and emerge victorious---and still alive---in the end). *Passage* is a game in which you die only once, at the very end, and you are powerless to stave off this inevitable loss.”

The way the game handles death is important not only because it subverts the idea of death in video games, but also because it switches the dynamic of death from a traditional challenge-based game into an expositional dynamic that conveys something about the inevitability of death instead of simply being a failure state.

I read a comment on one of *Passage*’s reviews that really struck me, and demonstrates how effective game dynamics can be. The commentor, “golf153,” shared his experience with *Passage*: “After my wife died I refused to move my character. I guess playing [a] game about life a few feet from my real world wife made me sad. I waited until my character died right next to hers.”

That’s something I had never considered doing. Sorry about that, Anne. I always kept moving, but video games offer choices for players that allow them to construct their own narrative within the gameworld. Everyone that plays *Passage* could potentially come away with a different experience because of how they chose to interact with the game.

Novel vs. Game

In the Meantime has a much broader narrative than *Passage*. It has multiple detailed main characters along with several side characters that expand the scope of the novel and give the reader context for the main character's lives. *Passage* has only one, almost completely featureless, main character, and requires the player to add their own meaning to its narrative. The details of the character's life are metaphoric instead of specific, but I think both the novel and the game encourage their audience to step back and reflect on their own lives, and of course, the inevitable end of those lives.

Conclusion

The main characteristic of games, however, is the interactivity itself. Playing a role in a game is very different from reading about that role in a book. To step away from *Passage* for a moment, I'd like to share another example of a recent game that used its dynamics to express meaning and make an emotionally effective point. Brenda Brathwaite, a game designer that's been in the industry for over 25 years, created a boardgame called *Train*. As you can see in this picture, the "board" is three train tracks placed over a window with broken panes. The players are instructed to load their pieces into their train cars and move to the end of their track. They draw cards that can be used against other players to slow them down, or to increase the speed of their own train. When one of the players reaches the end of their track, the game is over and the destination is revealed to be Auschwitz.

There obviously aren't any winners in *Train*. It's designed to have an emotional impact on the players, triggered by interaction. Playing an active role, unwittingly or not, is a different experience from learning about the atrocity in a history book or a movie.

In an interview, Brathwaite said, “I’ve created an experience through interactivity, much like museums have created an experience through the use of image and sound and space. I think games are a good medium for approaching any subject, particularly difficult ones, because by their very nature, they are abstract, invite interaction and allow us to confront and question things... particularly rules that we may blindly follow.”

Okay, now let me spend a few minutes on the handout. In case there’s anyone that’s interested in looking into this whole games business, I put together some online resources. Instead of throwing a bunch of links onto the page that you’d have to type into your web browser manually one at a time, I just put all the links onto a webpage on my domain and gave you the address (theautumnalcity.com/mfa). The page I set up has three sections. The first contains links relating directing to the lecture. Jason Rohrer’s full statement of intent for Passage is there, along with a New York Times Magazine article published this past Friday about the indie games movement, featuring an interview with Rohrer and some information about Passage. The second set of links leads to some informal games criticism. Two links are weekly round-ups of the latest writing on video games, but I’ve also included a couple of blogs. The third section of links are other indie games that are experimenting with game dynamics in similar ways. Many can be played in a web browser, though some need to be downloaded. Of course, the important part is that they’re all free! Okay, thanks for listening to me talk about video games! Does anyone have any questions?