

Little Suzie: Exploring Game Mechanics as a Narrative Device

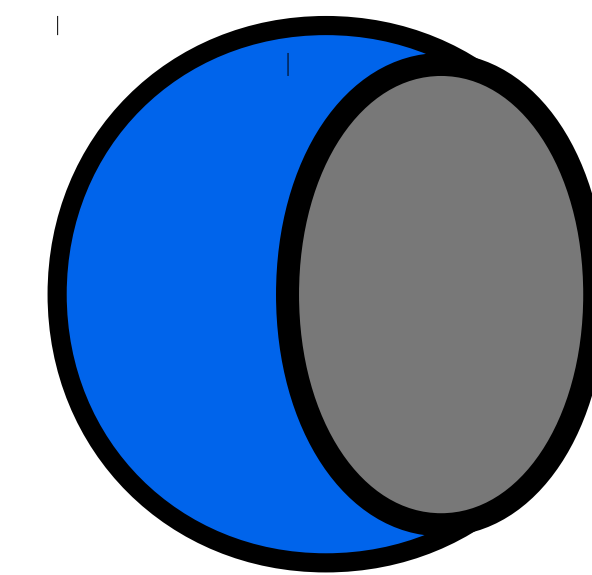
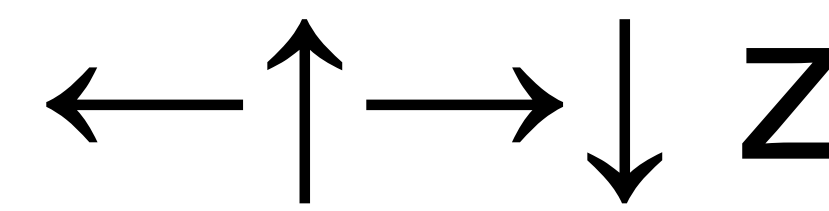
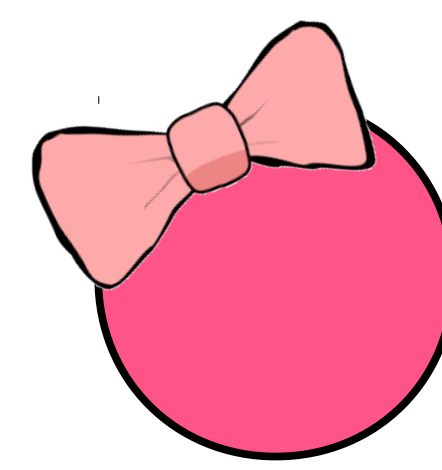
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Abstract

This poster shows Little Suzie, a game I made for an Honors Directed Study using the Unity game engine. Little Suzie is a top-down perspective action game in which the player's goal is to defend an avatar named Suzie from waves of oncoming enemies, and is aimed at conveying feelings of guilt and loss to the player. The goal is to present an anti-narrative so that the player will infer a narrative from the mechanics. Storytelling in games often remains separate from the mechanics, and is presented using methods which have been established in media such as film, novels, and music. Because of this, the use of mechanics as a narrative device has not been explored as thoroughly as elements from other media. The focus of this project has been to remove the storytelling aspect and provide a narrative through the mechanics alone. Much of the potential of video games as an artistic medium stems from their interactive nature, which is not taken advantage of when the mechanics are treated as being separate from the narrative.

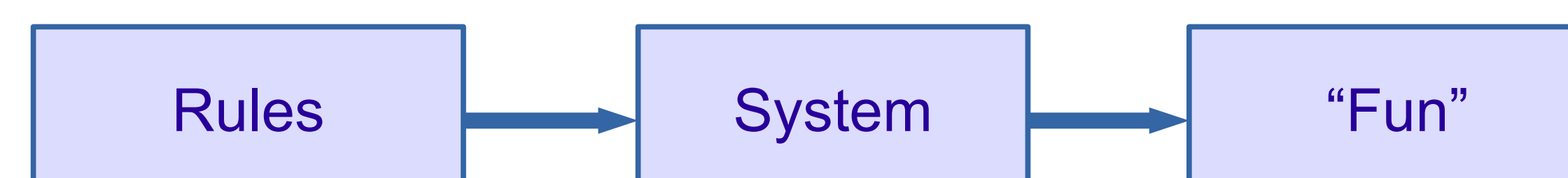
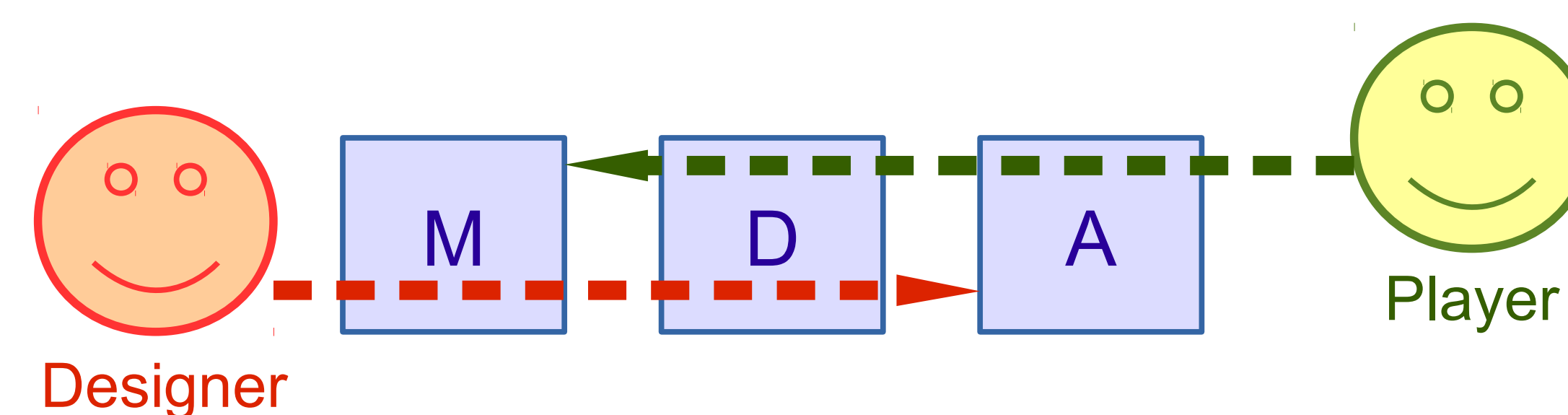
Designing for Narrative

- Video games are currently in a phase where they are largely emulating previous art forms, especially film.
- While the grand cinematic sequences of big-budget games can be useful for storytelling, they can also be counterproductive.
- The biggest characteristic that separates video games from film is the interaction, which provides a space for players to project their identities onto game avatars [3].
 - As opposed to empathizing with a character, which occurs when passively observing a narrative.
- It can be jarring for a player to suddenly switch between states of control and observation, since they also switch between projection and empathy.
- In the worst case, these sudden switches can cause a **ludonarrative dissonance**, where the themes presented in the story contrast with the actions encouraged by the mechanics [1].
 - An example of this might be a game whose story is about sharing or giving, but the game's mechanics encourage the player to hoard and collect items.
- These problems frequently occur when mechanics and storytelling are treated as separate components.
- A stronger narrative can be built when the mechanics are used as a frame over which the storytelling is layered.
- A useful approach to this is to remove any storytelling and construct a narrative using only the mechanics.



MDA Framework

- The MDA framework is a formal approach to understanding many aspects of games, including narrative [2].
 - MDA stands for mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics.
- **Mechanics** describe the rules of interaction and components.
 - Like axioms of a formal system.
- **Dynamics** describe the behavior of interaction between the player input and the mechanics.
- **Aesthetics** describe the emotional response that occurs in a player during interaction with the game system.
 - This is where perception of narrative largely occurs.
- To use this approach, one must understand how the mechanics give rise to the dynamics, how dynamics influence aesthetics, and how narrative is perceived from the aesthetics.
- One must consider the designer approach of building mechanics and the player perspective of experiencing the aesthetics.



A visual guide to the MDA Framework [2].

Design Summary

My intention in design was building the mechanics to have an aesthetic result of powerlessness and guilt in the player. I approached this by a process of building a connection with Suzie's avatar, building up a sense of power in the player, and quickly stripping down that sense of power at the climax.

- The game opens with only a blue dot in the center of the screen.
 - With arrows above it to communicate the controls.
- Once the player moves, a small pink dot, with a bow, moves quickly towards the player.
 - Players will project this dot as a little girl; the smaller size, color pink, and bow on top are associated with young girls.
 - The title of the game has also primed the player to expect a little girl.
- The pink dot follows the player as the player moves.
 - This builds a sense of connection with the pink dot.
- Enemies begin to appear on-screen and attack the player.
 - As they are defeated they get progressively more difficult.
 - This progression builds a sense of power in the player.
- The last enemy to appear is a wizard, which freezes Suzie and uses ranged attacks at the player.
 - This forces the player to move away from Suzie to defeat the wizard.
 - When the wizard is defeated, one of the weaker enemies defeats Suzie before the player has time to return.
 - This quickly strips the sense of power the player has built.

The climax is the most important, and most challenging, part of the design. Suzie must be attacked in such a way that the player sees it as a result of his decision, as opposed to it being a fluke in the mechanics, which will only cause frustration.

References

1. C. Hocking, 'Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock', *Click Nothing*, 2007.
2. R. Hunicke, M. LeBlanc and R. Zubek, 'MDA: a Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research', *Proc. AAAI Workshop Challenges in Game AI*. 2004
3. K. Scott, 'Projecting the Self into Virtual Worlds: Merging Identities with a Videogame Character', *Proc. Nat. Conf. Undergraduate Research 2014*. 2014