The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning Game

Lindsay D. Grace
University of Miami
Coral Gables, Florida, United States of America
LGrace@Miami.edu

Abstract

This is a brief summary of a creative electronic artwork called the Unbearable Lightness of Meaning. The game is a playable adaption of Kundera's literary work, The Unbearable Lightness of Being. The game attempts to explore heuristically the ambiguity of meaning presented in making a playful experience through abstraction of meaning and representation. This brief summary explores the motivations, philosophical underpinnings, and resulting work as a first exploration into how such themes can be manifest in a creative electronic work. It is offered as a case study in meaning, perceived meaning and the translation of literary works into non-conventional play experiences.

Keywords

Recursive design, game design, social impact games, meaningful play

Motivation

The work is motived from a set of philosophical evaluations of the contemporary experience of being a designer of meaningful play. It plays on the notion that there is an unbearable lightness of being social impact games. The philosophical dichotomy of social impact games is much like other media. It is that either all games have social impact potentials, or they do not. As a creative medium, they might be considered to have at least the same potential for effect as all other media.

In this spirit it is also reasonable to claim that whether or not a game intends to be a social impact game, it may still have the same effect, in much the way a song that is not used as a rally cry for war might become one if used for such intention. On the other hand, it may also be claimed that only games that intend to have specific social impact can have it. This view biases toward intention, recognizes that intention is the difference between happenstance and art.

If all games have meaning, what does it mean to be a social impact game? While we have in the past decade championed a variety of terms that orbit this concept of social impact, how do we, as researchers, designers, and players understand the edges of a social impact game and other types of playful design? How does intention and the reality of play intersect to support or detract from this concept of a social impact game? Whether it is a newsgame [1] developed by a major news organization, an advergame [2] designed by a marketing group, or a game with strong political implications made by a single independent artist [3] it's useful to examine what is meant by social impact and how meaning is both produced and interpreted. While these questions are asked commonly in digital games studies, it is also useful to construct works that aim at providing case study for such questions.

Having previously used empirical foundations to research the way games scaffold information and reward exploratory play, the artistic motivation of this work was to explore how meaning is both created and obscured in playful experiences. It integrates prior writing and research on the notion of taboo play [5], which asks the comically important question – if a game is so taboo no one ever plays it, does it continue to create social impact? It also critically analyses the dominant rhetoric about procedural rhetoric in games [6], drawing on the conventions games researchers contribute to the ambiguity of social impact play design. If a game employs the tricks of it's novel predecessors, invoking the specter of significant works while integrating novel mechanics, does it offer more or less meaning and critique.

These questions are not the mere product of diegetic examination. Instead, they are drawn from the daily operations of directing a variety of purpose-driven games projects for the Smithsonian Museums, the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), Education Testing Services (ETS), the US National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH), several radio, television and news organizations. They are also the product of past explorations in translating literary works into playful experiences that move beyond mere representation of plot. The prior work, The Tell-Tale Heart, completed as a collaboration by the designer and their students, endeavored to combine the core plot points, and themes of Edgar Allen Poe's Tell-Tale Heart into a playable experience that was language agnostic[7]. In that creative exploration players had to employ the key game verbs of the narrative, through accelerometer-based movements of a. Mobile device. The player's actions were meant to follow the erratic breakdown of the short story's protagonist, as players moved from methodical controlled actions to wild, uncontrolled ones.

This creative research examines the unique characteristics of meaning in games, as a medium mid-migration from a disposable commercial product to a meaningful, artistic, political, and experiential communications medium in both analog and digital form. It is built to provide an heuristic, recursive specter of play as a medium who's meaning is cast from the penumbra of traditional, more widely recognized works in literature.

The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning, Game

The work, the Unbearable Lightness of Meaning t (http://lgrace.com/lightness/), translates Kundera's novel, the Unbearable Lightness of Meaning [8] into a text-messaging based interactive narrative driven largely by emoji. The game explores several key questions that relate to meaning in games, particularly social impact games. These include, how meaning is obscured or improved by abstract actions in play? How does such work illuminate contemporary tensions in meaningful play or overly simplify the meaning of prior narratives? In what ways are the electronic explorations in games becoming self-referential iterations on themselves?

The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning is a playful adaption of Kundera's work, playing with the ambiguity of emoji as a unit of meaning and operation. While a playful unit, emoji function as a less robust means of communicating action. They are seemingly fast to translate to meaning and somewhat easily translated across languages. In theory, speakers of Japanese, English, and Spanish, for example, can communicate through emoji.

Figure 1. The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning game start

This makes it a bit of a universal unit of communication, achieving what languages like Esperanto could not. These same claims, about the universality of play abound. What then happens when a work is translated into emoji? Better yet, what happens when the player not only interprets, but acts through those emoji. What elements of meaning are lost? What elements are improved by the experience of having their meaning obscured? Does the work become more or less poetic, when constrained to the language of a pictographic system? These questions can sometimes be best addressed by making something playable, that moves the experience from a hypothetical to the real.

In the game, the player traverses one of two narratives, one about war and the other about love, dissecting the book into thematic tracks of the game's experience. Each track is designed as an adaption of Kundera's own themes. They attempt to turn a body of literature into a traversable collection of key quotes and events, that must be explored. To complete the game, the player must solve its riddles and accept the terms of communication.

The ambiguity of meaning resulting from abstracting the depth of Kundera's work to simple, 140 character or less messages is designed to remind players of the impoverished ways that we can communicate via technology. The death of a lover is minimized to a knife, coffin and skull. The poetry of the novel, which is embedded in the game as quotes through emoji, is diminished into vagaries that have a certain lightness to them. Once the player accepts this lightness, lack of ultimate meaning as a thematic element in the novel, the Lightness of Meaning emoji become a more natural experience. It is when we try to determine exactly what they mean, that the tensions in efficacy and action become strongest. It's a bit like chasing shadows, that seem to have substance but as we aim to grasp them that impression dissipates.

In concert with a theme in the book, there are several paths to be traversed but they function less as a rehearsal and more as an expense. There are, as the first lines of the book allude, "moments eternal return which like an infinite loop ad infinitum." There are moments, as well, when such return seems recursive, only to reveal that the pattern is the only way to move forward. Players experience moments when they must do the same thing over and over again, with what seems like only minimally perceptible differences upon each iteration. Instead, it is in the aggregate of those small iterations that there is a path forward. Much like the focusing of light from wide bands to narrow, to create impression and, the player must move forward by recursively iterating on a slightly narrow set of repeated actions.

As the player is successful at moving the path forward, the emoji retreat to the clearer meaning of the language itself (at least for English speakers). But, rewarding players for the lightness of being, the emoji are the only way to take action in this small, narrative game. In the end the game is an effort in thematic reference to a deeply philosophical novel, designed as a text-messaging game who's adventures
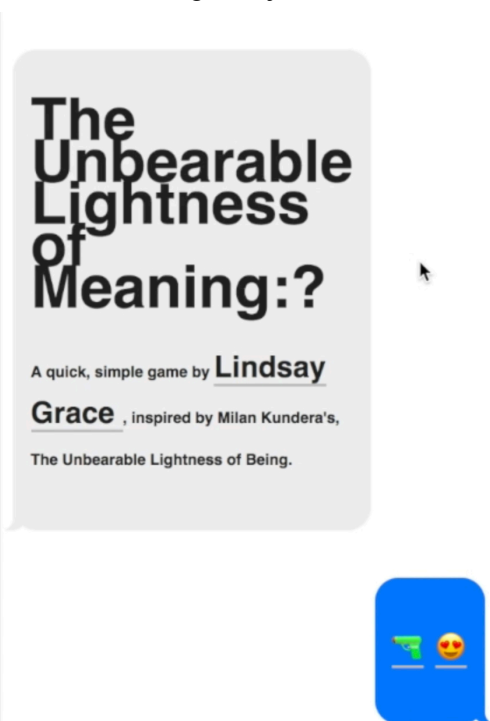
orbit finding a way to philosophize in times of war (hint: stay in the hole), balancing the needs of lovers, and managing the unbearable lightness of being.
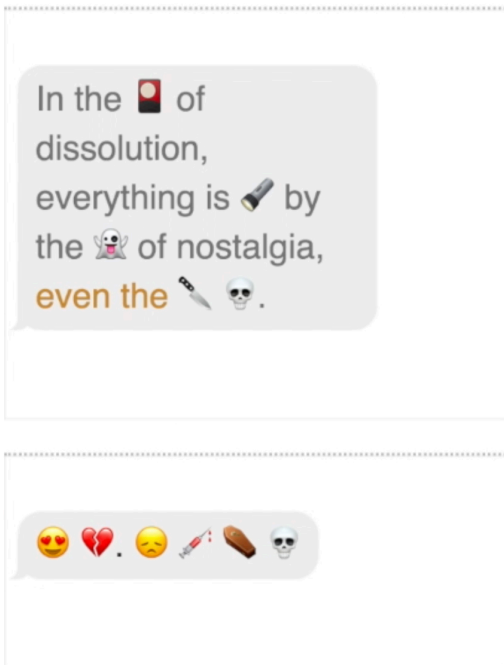

Figure 2. The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning game play, ending in player death and quoting directly from the novel

This recently completed work intersects with the 2019 ISEA theme in its pursuit of the "versatility in which various interpretations" can occur. Instead of interpreting the physical or computer rendered light, the game shines a new light on the ways in which the historical fiction of Kundera's Unbearable Lightness of Being can be interpreted through modern forms of communication.

The obvious reference in the book and game to the "lightness" of being/meaning is most related to the notions of Penumbra and Aeternitas in that both the book and the game reference a longing to repeat, perhaps even recursively the rays that cast from one decision to the next. In the end, there is but one ray, the path that we choose, but there is a perpetually longing to know the innumerable possibilities that emirate from one. This is part of the unbearable lightness of being, the balance of shadow and penetrating light that is at once long ranging but seemingly insubstantial. It is an eternal struggle, one which shows itself in the human struggle to imagine, repeatedly, the other ways in which events can cast their shadows and the projections of our choices that spread across life. The first line of the book illuminates this for the reader – "The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything occurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum!"

The game plays with these themes but by balancing the old illusion of control with patterns that seem repetitive, and at times even recursive, as the solution that lets the player bring to light the inevitable truth – an unbearable lightness of meaning that is part of our unbearable lightness of being.
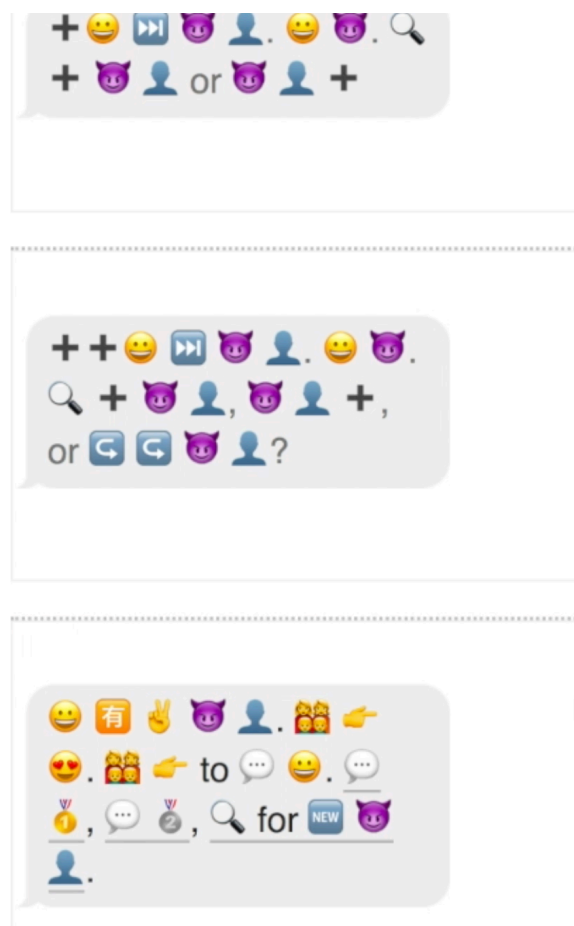

Figure 3. Two levels of the game's recursive selections and the pattern being broken.

Acknowledgements

References

[1] Sicart, Miguel. "Newsgames: Theory and design." *International Conference on Entertainment Computing*. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2008.

[2] Cauberghe, Verolien, and Patrick De Pelsmacker. "Advergames." *Journal of advertising* 39.1 (2010): 5-18.

[3] Paper's Please, Lucas Pope. 2013. http://paper-splea.se/

[4] Grace, Lindsay D. "A topographical study of persuasive play in digital games." *Proceeding of the 16th International Academic MindTrek Conference*. ACM, 2012

[5] Grace, L. "Discomfort design: Critical reflection through uncomfortable play, in proc 17th International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA2011)." *Istanbul Turkey* (2011).

[6] Bogost, Ian. "The rhetoric of video games." *The ecology of games: Connecting youth, games, and learning* (2008): 117-140.

[7] Grace, Lindsay. "Adapting games from literature: game verbs for player behavior." In *CHI'14 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 423-426. ACM, 2014.

[8] Kundera, Milan. "The Unbearable Lightness of Being, trans." *Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1984)* 223 (1984).

Author Biography

Lindsay is Knight Chair of Interactive Media and an associate professor at the University of Miami School of Communication. He is Vice President for the Global Game Jam™ and Vice President of the Higher Education Video Game Alliance.

His work has received awards and recognition from the Games for Change Festival, the Digital Diversity Network, the Association of Computing Machinery's digital arts community, Black Enterprise and others. He authored or co-authored more than 50 papers, articles and book chapters on games since 2009. His creative work has been selected for showcase internationally including New York, Paris, Sao Paolo, Singapore, Chicago, Vancouver, Istanbul, and others. Lindsay curated or co-curated Blank Arcade, Smithsonian American Art Museum's SAAM Arcade, the Games for Change Civic and Social Impact program and others.

He has given talks at SXSW, the Game Developers Conference, Games for Change Festival, the Online News Association, the Society for News Design, and many other industry events.

Between 2013 and 2018 he was the founding director of the American University Game Lab and Studio in Washington, DC. From 2009 to 2013 he was the Armstrong Professor at Miami University's School of Art. Lindsay also served on the board for the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) between 2013-2015.