Videogame Vignettes

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Abstract

Narrative is common element to all videogames, but traditionally, narrative in videogames have been shaped deeply by cinema's three act structure: beginning, middle, and end. The interactive nature of the medium is capable of producing a variety of narrative forms, so why limit the structure to a cinematic trope?

I aim to develop small videogames, appropriating the literary term 'vignette', in order to explore intertextuality and narrative in games, utilizing the a practice of rapidly creating games. These vignettes are poetic, narrative moments, able to be played and interpreted on their own, but when viewed as a multitude, diegetic relationships form a larger story — a narrative gestalt. By exploring intertextuality between multiple vignettes, new forms of narrative videogames are explored, reshaping traditional structures of story within games.

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Introduction/Description

//Rapid Game Design//

Rapid game design is a phrase that refers to the literal rapid production of games, be it on a regular timetable or on an organic timeline. This process has typically been used in game design as a way to prototype ideas and test experimental mechanics (the constructs or rules that allow gameplay). By prototype, I mean that this process is usually a means to an end — the games that are created as part of this process are incomplete tests that will later, if deemed successful, find their way into a developer's design document for a larger game. Eric Zimmerman, in his essay Play as Research: The Iterative Design Process, states,

> "Iterative design is a design methodology based on a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analyzing, and refining a work in progress. In iterative design, interaction with the designed system is used as a form of research for informing and evolving a project, as successive versions, or iterations of a design are implemented." [1]

Zimmerman refers to this process as a cyclical procedure consisting of "Test; analyze; refine; and repeat" [see figure].[2] It is clear that Zimmerman, at least within this essay, considers iterative design to used a research method to refine games. While I value this as a legitimate artistic practice, I wish to use a variation on this process, I plan on using this process to make singular games, in which each result of iterative design stands as its own piece. By allowing myself a short timetable to create games, I am experimenting the possibilities of what can be done in a short amount of time.
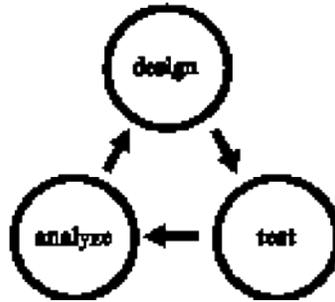
Eric Zimmerman – Iterative Design

I am exploring my own capacities as an artist, and through the thematic content of my work, as a storyteller. Through rapid creation, I will be able to explore more content, new design questions will arise more quickly, and my research and work will reflect that. As Zimmerman notes,

> Design is a way to ask questions. Design research, when it occurs through the practice of design itself, is a way to ask larger questions beyond the limited scope of a particular design problem. When design research is integrated into the design process, new and unexpected questions emerge directly from the act of design.[3]

Another important element to this process is failure. Samuel Beckett is often quoted as saying, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better".[4] By failing, people learn and because the work I will be practicing is experimental, there's always the chance that some projects won't be as successful as other projects — it's inevitable. One advantage rapid game design has in relation to this process is that I will, through sheer production, fail more often. Rami Ishmail, Chief of Executive Business & Development at Vlambeer, writes, "If you want to be a game developer, start making a lot of games. Make awful games, make games that disappoint you, make games that make you doubt your ability,

clone games that you like within a week and even fail at that".[5] When developer Adriel Wallick found her self in a "gamedev block" took up Ishmail's challenge. On her results, "Game a Week forced me to empty out all of "what if" ideas that were caught in there. Some were fun, some were not, but the most important part is that once I was able to empty out all of those ideas, I could finally see new and more exciting ones" .[6]

I am slightly modifying both Zimmerman and Ishmail's process to suit my own explorations of narrative. Instead of developing small games as prototypes, I intend on creating individual small games to build a story. The games I will develop will exist as their own games, but gain additional meaning when seen as part of a collection. The form these games will take will be of small form, poetic games, and I will be appropriating a term from literature to describe them: vignette.

In literature, a vignette is defined as "a brief evocative description, account, or episode".[7] Due to their succinctness, vignettes seek to balance the concrete and the abstract in order to illicit a strong response from the reader. A successful vignettes power lies in its evocativeness — its ability to get a reader to imagine the larger circumstances and potential reasons for the moment being described. Ian Bogost writes, "vignettes are usually meant to give a sense of character rather than to advance a narrative".[8] Vignettes are often written as parts of collections, for example Sandra Cisneros used the form to compose her book, The House on Mango Street.[9] They function, in Cisneros' case as stories that are independent in and of themselves, but dependent on one another to paint to the entire picture.

Hush by Jamie Antonisse and Devon Johnson

Ian Bogost writes, "as an aesthetic, the vignette is surely underused in video games".[10] This is partly, he argues, due to the lack of short form videogames, but also because of tensions between abstraction and sketching – games' tendency to abstract feeling and emotion into game mechanics is at odds with the vignette's sketch like nature. Using the game Hush as an example, Bogost points out how the structural elements of the game run counter to its message.[11] Hush, a small game based around a situation in 1990's civil war Rwanda, tries to implement lullabies and patience as the main concepts of interaction, but does so in a way counter the connotations of both. The concept of patience is turned into a methodical, timing mechanic, and lullabies lose their rhythm through what Bogost refers to as "Sesame Street letter incantation".[12] These lessons are design challenges I am taking to heart in the creation of my own vignettes.

Akin to Cisneros' The House on Mango Street, I intend for my vignettes to form a narrative as a through their connections to one another. The relationships between these pieces are examples of what is known as intertextuality, or the relationship between texts. By

examining qualities inherent to individual pieces, threads can be found between them, adding layers of meaning to each piece. The immediate connections of the vignettes I will create will be between themselves, but intertextuality also refers to relationships between my games other texts (texts as a liberal term for other pieces of media) than any participant of the work is capable of bringing to it, whether it is religious, literary, or other forms of media.

The vignettes I will make use very few game mechanics, and sometimes the mechanic might be so hidden that it would appear to be none at all, which may lead to questions of whether or not the vignettes are games at all. This is important because within videogame culture, there is a tendency to question whether or not certain works are actually games. This stifling question may not be relevant to me as a creator, but may come into discussion during dissemination of the work. There are many definitions of games to be found, but there are two that are useful for this discussion. First is Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's oft quoted definition, found in *Rules of Play,* "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome".[13] In game design, this definition is widely used. I personally take issue with some of the language – conflict and quantifiable – but Salen and Zimmerman offer one of the most well thought out definitions of games.

The second definition I use is found in Anna Antropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*: "A game is an experience created by rules".[14] Incredibly succinct yet maddeningly broad, this definition acknowledges that games are comprised of systems, yet leaves the nature of those systems incredibly broad. It allows for a variety of different experiences to be had, and allows for a wide range of experimentation. Where this definition may fall short, however, is in how it handles the notion of a player or players, though I'm not convinced that

games need players, in a literal sense. While my vignettes usually fall into Salen and Zimmerman's definition of game, these sometimes don't fall readily in line, dipping near Antropy's definition.

As an interesting parallel of the "what is a game?" discussion, Claire Hosking, an architect as well as game designer, writes:

> "architecture has long been moving away from a dichotomy of inside/outside, and it's only broadened the vocabulary of space and made for better buildings, buildings that take advantage of the landscape as much as shelter from it. Without giving up on having colloquially understood definitions of inside & outside, we've embraced spaces that are various amounts of both, or neither."[15]

While asking whether or not a game is in fact a game is not an interesting conversation, that threshold can give rise to interesting discussions on the nature of the medium, and ultimately expand the definition.

Literature Review

Videogames have been written about extensively in their relatively short history, but the majority of this writing has either been historical or focused on the mainstream market. Up until recently, writing on unconventional or experimental games has been limited. Brian Shank's *Avant—Garde Videogames* is one the recent books that has both analyzed experimental games as art, but also placed these games along side historical art movements, in this case a generalized European avant—garde.[16] Shank refers to the avant—garde in that it "opens up and redefines art mediums", and that avant—garde videogames are "videogames that are playing with technoculture".[17,18] He continues, "Avant—garde games crack open the patterns of the world in games and beyond so we may reengage in a radical kind of play with them".[19]

Shank is careful not to lump all avant—garde videogames into one category, in which they may wholly unrelated to one another, because he creates a map in order to understand the avant—garde is changing games. He divides his *Avant—garde Videogames* into six distinct sections,[20]

1. Radical Formal; opens up alternative ways to engage and play videogames, redefining their own definition of games.

2. Radical Political; challenges the definition of play, reminding us that "reality is in play and that play requires real risk."

3. Complicit Formal; does not advance the medium, but rather questions the uniqueness of videogames versus film, painting, etc as different mediums.

4. Complicit Political; blends life, art, play, and reality, using "inviting, populist methods."

5. Narrative Formal; "expands how narratives and language are structured as well as

engaged in both radical and complicit ways."

6. Narrative Political; "uses popular entertainment to transform culture."

The subsection that I place my own work in is the narrative formal, and the final form of this project will play with notions of radical formal as well. Shank writes, "the narrative formal avant—garde does not merely resemble the world through games; it disturbs that resemblance to make it stand out in relief".[21] As my research had been primarily into experimental narrative games, many of my sources fall under this category.

> The proliferation of diverse, experimental games is a result of the avant—garde,
>
> Avant—garde games are distinguished from mainstream ones because they show how the medium manifest a greater diversity of gameplay and be creatively engaged in more kinds if ways by more kinds of people. They redefine the medium, breaking apart and expanding how we make, think, and play with games. The avant—garde democratizes games, and makes the medium more plastic and liquid."[22]

This democratization of games is a key point in Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters.* Anthropy argues that the barriers of game design being continually broken down (now longer does a developer need to become a proficient computer scientist) more voices from diverse and marginalized groups have been able to expand the medium. Artists have also been able to break into the medium, often using it for radically different purposes than the mainstream. The net art group JODI, for example, created a number of modified versions (in short, mods) for the game Quake(quake) which they called Untitled.[23,24] Quake was an early first person shooter games, and by modifying the system files, JODI was able to create strange and bizarre first person explorations.[25] The book, *Artists Re:thinking Games* offers a compilation of games made my practicing contemporary artists.[26]

As a call for more artistic videogames, Belgium based studio Tale of Tales released the

Notgames Manifesto in 2010.[27] Created as a response to rigid definitions of games, it is a call to expand the medium, stating that the structures of games only serve to limit what games are capable of. The conclusion of the manifesto reads,

> The question is not whether videogames are art. The question is how can we make good art with the medium of videogames. Notgames proposes that one direction of exploration may be to abandon the idea that what we make, should be a game. To approach the medium with an open mind.It's a question. An invitation. An exercise.[28]

Storytelling in games is done through what I have defined as three separate means,

1. Direct Narrative – dialogue and narration, when games explicitly tell you what is happening.
2. Environmental Storytelling – usually referred to in 3D projects, but found in 2D as well; when the setting and visuals convey narrative.
3. Gameplay – when story and meaning are abstracted into game mechanics.

The majority of narratives in games are conveyed through the first two, while the third generally is used to enhance storytelling.

The development of storytelling in games is a long history, but one with a predicable ending. As graphic fidelity increased in videogames, they became more cinematic by nature, and ended up taking a majority of storytelling techniques from cinema itself. Film is the most commonly compared medium to videogames, and mainstream game narratives reflect that. What I, as a creator, am more interested in is how games can utilize their own systems to tell stories. There is a lot of writing about experimental games and narratives, but unfortunately it is spread between blogposts, message boards, and the occasional article on a game focused

website, though there are many threads linking these scattered thoughts.

Robert Yang, a game designer, academic, and writer on how player agency, and sometimes lack of, can be used to form interesting choices with emotional weight in games.[29,30,31] Anthony Burch has written about how proceduralism can, by its nature, produce an overwhelming amount of stories.[32] Jake Elliot and Tamas Kemenczy, the team behind the studio Cardboard Computer, speak about games as mysteries versus games as puzzles – puzzles can be solved, mysteries interpreted.[33] Mary Flanagan and Vander Caballero have both written about, and designed, games whose purpose is to foster empathy in players.[34,35] Game critic Lana Polanski has recently published a couplet of articles which she entitles, *Approaching the Poetics of Play*, looking at how games might emulate experimental poetry in terms how how they are designed and what they are about.[36,37] Cara Ellison has a series at the game journalism website *Rockpapershotgun* about meaningful depictions of sexuality in games.[38]

The list of writings about narrative in games is extensively, and unwieldy to write about in terms of cohesiveness, but they are all factors in influencing how I approach designing my games and writing about them. Additional writers, critics, and developers I have read, but not written about here, include: Anita Sarkeesian, Jenn Frank, Dan Pinchbeck, Liz Ryerson, Greg Costikan, Jason Rohrer, Pippan Barr, Merritt Kopas, Brandon Chung and Maddy Myers.

I am interested in how gameplay mechanics can morph into narrative elements. Historically, such a shift can be found in an occult divination tool: the Tarot. The Tarot evolved from the standard deck of cards first seen around Europe in the 14th century. In 1440, the Duke of Milan commissioned a special set of cards for a game that later became known as

Triumph.[39] It comprised of a standard set of cards (four suits, labeled 1—10 with a queen, king, knight, and page) but included a set of 22 illustrated cards, of which 21 were 'trump cards': the Major Arcana. These twenty two cards have their roots in Christian imagery and Italian tropes, as Egypt Urnasi notes "Deep in the core of the Major Arcana is something central to old Christian views of the world: a parade of the States of Man, in ascending power".[40] According to Urnasi, the Arcana then develop as follows,

> "various Moral Virtues are dropped into the order, the Death trumps all the mortals, and we go into the celestial spheres: above Death we find the stars, the moon, the Sun around which all revolves. But even this is trumped, literally, by the trumpets of Judgement Day. And above all is the whole of creation, the World"[41]

Urnasi continues to discuss the origin of the Major Arcana, noting that in the process of copying the original decks, their symbolic meaning was lost over time, akin to the modern game Telephone, their meanings changed and became more and more distorted.[42] By the 1700's their cryptic nature drew the attention of occult groups in France and England, and they began to use the cards as a tool for divination, using the symbolic nature of the Major Arcana cards, coupled with the numerological and elemental significance of the remaining cards. Much of the modern philosophy on the Tarot is based on Antoine Court de Gébelin's 1781 manuscript, *Le Monde Primitif.*[43]

A Page From Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*[44]

The performance of a Tarot reading is in and of itself a form of interpretive storytelling. A Tarot reader, knowing, or rather being able to perceive, the meaning of each card builds a narrative depending on what cards are drawn. While each card has its own meaning, it has new meanings based on the cards it appears alongside — for example the Wheel of Fortune card has drastically different meanings when shown alongside The Devil compared to being seen next to The Lovers. The potential intertextuality between 78 cards leads to a deep and rich soil for raising narratives, a technique that has been used outside of Tarot readings to form stories. An example from literature is Italo Calvino's The Castle of Crossed Destinies. Within the novel, the narrator and various characters find themselves in a castle in the forest, and finding themselves unable to speak, begin to use Tarot cards to communicate their stories. The narrator acts as interpreter, but the reader is shown the final card layout for each character and is free to derive their own meanings. Another author to make use of the Tarot as a literary device is Neil Gaiman. In Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot, Gaiman uses the imagery on cards to create extremely short stories.[45] Here, Gaiman uses the imagery

of 15 different cards as narrative prompts for short stories.

Bringing the discussion back to games, Tarot's influence is negligible to date, infiltrating some small works such as the recently kickstarted *Hand of Fate* game but it is by no means a major point of interest.[46] One example that appropriates some of the themes of the Tarot is the board game *Dixit*.[47] In *Dixit*, players are given fully illustrated cards and must devise a story about that card (which they do not reveal to others). The twist is that every other player has to put one of their own cards that might match that story into a pot. The cards are then revealed and players vote on which card they think the storyteller picked. Dixit uses an interesting mechanic that has the potential to generate really interesting stories, unfortunately in practice (due to the voting system) the narratives are extremely limited in scope and the game ends up focusing on points scored rather than creativity — a pitfall also found in trading card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* and *Android: Netrunner*.[48, 49]

In order to combat this opposition between creativity and game mechanics, people have experimented with changing the rules of these games to reflect their rich worlds, often citing Tarot as major influence. For example, Mike Joffe, speaking on *Magic: The Gathering*,

> "A "deck" is supposed to represent an incredibly personal collection of memories and experiences, unique to each Planeswalker [player]. But in reality, what it is is a collection of cards chosen by the player to be most effective in defeating their opponent and winning the game."[50]

Joffe speculates about games becoming spaces for play, creation, and story, stating, "Games can be a vehicle for these spaces, and as we see in Tarot their use of systems and rules are what helps drive that play and discovery. But when we only allow one outcome for play, we limit the power these spaces can have".[51] Game critic Mattie Brice compares the act of narrative play in the Tarot to these types of card games, "This process is the qualitative side

of the coin opposite to the one card games typically take. Instead of rules, there's ritual; instead of winning, there is play".[52] Brice, attempting to bring these two sides together, modified the game *Android: Netrunner* using the Tarot. She sets up random scenarios within the game, similar to a chess puzzle, then uses Tarot cards as "as prompts to give the Netrunner cards narrative meaning beyond mechanistic use." Her intention is not to remove gameplay from the situation but to add "symbolic meaning past quantitative winning to the actions in the game", because in her opinion, this is far more immersive style of play.[53] Brice, in a later essay, describes how this process ultimately becomes a simple add on, concluding that part of Tarot's narrative quality is in its cryptic nature whereas games fall short "because of the canonized idea of games mostly being composed of rules that need to be fairly communicated to the player".[54]

There is a myriad of other literature, writings, and works that influence my work and how I am approaching this project, but are not expanded upon in this proposal. As an artist interested in games, I follow with other projects that people and teams are developing. In particular I look for offbeat and untraditional games, as they are generally more interesting to me than large scale projects from large studios. One game that has been a large inspiration to my work is Cardboard Computers *Kentucky Route Zero*.[55] It is a modern day point and click adventure inspired by the Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky, with a heavy dose of magical realism thrown in. Its a surreal and atmospheric game, less about challenges and more about creating a mystery. *Myst*, and its sequel *Riven*, are also big influences on my work.[56, 57] Both games uses simple interaction and puzzles to rich stories in highly developed fictional worlds.

I also follow games criticism closely, and try to apply what I take from them, and also

explore questions that may arise from reading the work of critics. Leigh Alexander writes about games as cultural artifacts. She has a piece on using the board game *Android: Netrunner* to help her overcome fear of complicated systems, which I keep in the back of my mind as an example of how games can teach relatively complicated processes through play.[58] Mattie Brice is a designer and critic, who's work focuses on diversity of play and narrative. She has written a series of articles on interpretive play utilizing Tarot cards in other card games, as well as on the role of the player in games.[59] More writers I follow and often reference in my work are Ian Bogost, Aevee Bee (and her curated videogame zine *ZEAL*), Cara Ellison, and Lana Polanski.[60] These are not all my influences, only the ones I chose to mention.

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Project Scope & Timeline

I am estimating that I will be capable of finishing this project by the end of this academic year – May of 2015. The following discussion of project scope and timeline will reflect this projected deadline, with acknowledgement of certain variables that may cause this deadline to change. My process of creation follows a similar pattern to Eric Zimmerman's iterative design (see introduction): Research, Develop, Test; repeat. Each vignette will end up informing design and narrative decisions of the one(s) after it, and thus the content and aesthetics of the vignettes will constantly be informing future decisions on the project.

The scope of this project will be dependent on a variable that I have yet to nail down, the final number of videogame vignettes. This number could range as far between 20 and 100+. The variables at play include: scope of story, final dissemination possibilities (which will be discussed in the dissemination section of this proposal), and my own capacities as an artist. These variables ebb and flow directly with one another, and may end up impacting my final timeline, though the chances of me having to extend my deadline remain slim.

After my thesis proposal, my first act will be to go into full development mode for a while,
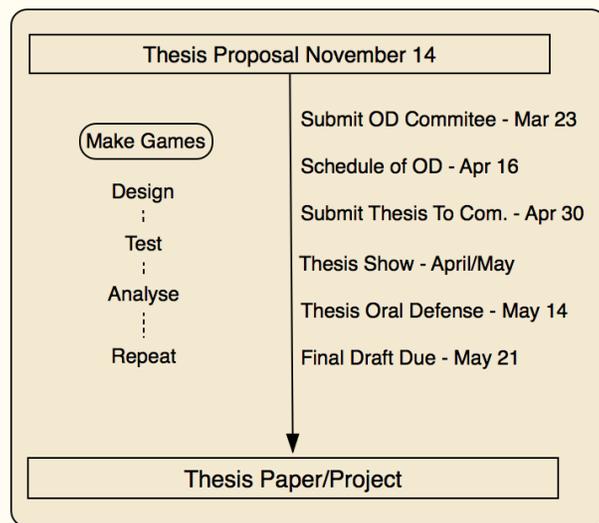
creating new vignettes as rapidly as I capable of doing. As I near the academic deadline, I

should have a substantial number of games, as well as a fully realized idea of potential

dissemination.

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Materials & Methods

Preliminary Studies

In Spring of 2014, while enrolled in Professor Rafael Fajardo's Making Critical Games class, I began development on a game that, in retrospect, really set the tone for how my work would continue, both aesthetically and thematically.[61] I created a narrative game based upon my own experiences suffering from insomnia for an extended period of time, which I called A Loss of Dream. In doing so, I experimented with varying levels of player agency, resulting in the experience of playing the game becoming a listening exercise rather than a game—like experience. A few of the major conceptual ideas I explored in the creation of A Loss of Dream carry into my current work, such as a deep focus on personal, and physiological, issues rather than crafting an enjoyable experience.

Crafting an atmospheric, and relatable, mood is more important to me than crafting a "fun" game experience. It is my belief that games are capable of more than being fun, enjoyable experiences – they can be crafted to illicit other emotions in players, as other mediums of are capable of doing. A Loss of Dream was a large step into turning this philosophy into a realized game, something I will continue to do with this project.

Still from *A Loss of Dream*

Aesthetically, A Loss of Dream was an pivotal moment in my artistic practice. Previously, I had been interested in creating 3D environments as the setting of my games, as I had been heavily inspired by non—traditional first person perspective games such as The Chinese Room's Dear Esther and Ed Key and David Kanaga's Proteus.[62, 63] A Loss of Dream uses a minimalistic, 16—bit style pixel art. This aesthetic has experienced a revival, influenced by the independent game development scene, drawing upon nostalgia towards the era of Super Nintendo and other early game consoles. This relatable aesthetic is one of the reason's I chose this style of art, but the abstraction offered by it allows for players to experience the characters as more than they are. Scott McCloud, in his meta—comic entitled Understanding Comics, writes that this abstraction allows readers to see themselves in the characters, whereas it is harder for a viewer to put themselves in the shoes of a hyper— realistic character.[64]

As part of this project, I have already created seven vignettes that will be included as part of the final work. All of these vignettes have featured the same character in a different situations, already building elements of that character and slowly revealing larger circumstances in which that character's events revolve around. Part of my process of creation involves writing about these projects after I create each one, and the results of this form of reflective writing has led to new ideas being developed and expanded upon in future iterations. I was lucky enough to receive a small bit of international press on these games from the website Killscreen.

Still from *Poohsticks* (Vignette 2)

Tools

      Unity is a cross platform game creation engine developed by Unity Industries.[65] There is a free version and a "pro" paid version, differing in the tools available for developers. Many of the tools unlocked by purchasing the pro version are intended for three dimensional games, and since I am focusing on 2d games I have opted to stick with the free version. Unity's ease of use allows me to streamline the game development process in order to maintain my schedule of rapid game development. One of the ways Unity allows for this is the fact that it is a game 'engine.' A game engine is prebuilt framework for the design and creation of games. It provides an underlying code which allows users to focus on the creation of games without the experience necessary to program everything required to make a game. Unity has a built in set of constructs such as object collision that streamline development by not requiring users to program the, in this case, mathematics behind collision. A useful feature for my process is that a user can program their own tools and resources to work with in Unity. One manifestation of this is my protagonist character. Instead of rebuilding her in every new project, I was able to create what Unity refers to as a package, which then can be imported into any project, complete with input scripts and animations. This package is also easily modifiable once in a new project, allowing simple adjustments to suit the project at hand.

      Finally, one of Unity's main draws for me is in deployment of projects. Unity exports to a large number of platforms, including PC, Mac, Linux, IOS, Android, and Web. Currently I focus on exporting for web, allowing for easy dissemination of my work. I have considered deploying to IOS and Android through the App Store and Google Play, but have not explored those options yet. One limitation of Unity's deployment is ease of use with microcomputers

such as Raspberry Pi, for I would like to create standalone hardware "art objects" in which to play these games on, and have yet to figure out an easy solution for that.

Unity is my main creation tool, but I considered two other pieces of software for use in this project — Processing and SpriteBuilder.[66, 67] Processing, developed by Casey Reas and Ben Fry is an open source programming environment made for artists. Its a very powerful bit of software, and allows for easy deployment to microcomputers, but requires a little more backend programming on my part than Unity does. SpriteBuilder is an open source new game engine focusing on 2D games for mobile markets. What first drew me to SpriteBuilder was its incredibly powerful shaders for 2D art, it makes making beautiful 2D art relatively easy, and also allows for the modular capacities I chose Unity for. However, SpriteBuilder currently only exports games to Android and IOS, limiting my choices of dissemination. One large draw to both these softwares is that they are open source, a trait I value and respect, but Unity, as a powerful creative tool, really fits in with my process.

In addition to Unity, I utilize a few programs to either create or edit content. Only second to Unity in importance is Sprite Something, developed by Terrible Games for IOS. Sprite Something is a drawing and animation editor for pixel art.[68] I use this program to create all the sprites and all of the backgrounds in my games. I prefer it over computer based tools for a number of reasons. First, it allows me to use a stylus to draw, which is tenfold better than using a mouse (and I don't possess a working graphic tablet). This gives a good amount of control and speed for drawing both sprites and backgrounds. It also is able to test and quickly edit animations without exiting the app, allowing easy adjustments of pixel placement for convincing animations. And third, because it is an Ipad app, it is incredibly mobile — I can

work on art assets at almost any time. The export process to Unity is a bit clunky, but that is my only concern with Sprite Something. I will also use Adobe Photoshop to make slight edits once the assets are on the computer and linked to Unity, though I am open to exploring open source alternatives to Adobe.[69] Another Adobe product I will use is Audition, their sound editor.[70] Though the rapid production of games doesn't always allow for sound to be integrated as much as I would like, it can add a lot to a project, and if I am able to, I use a combination of my own recorded sounds, and Creative Commons licensed sounds from freesound.org to add sonic elements to my work.[71]
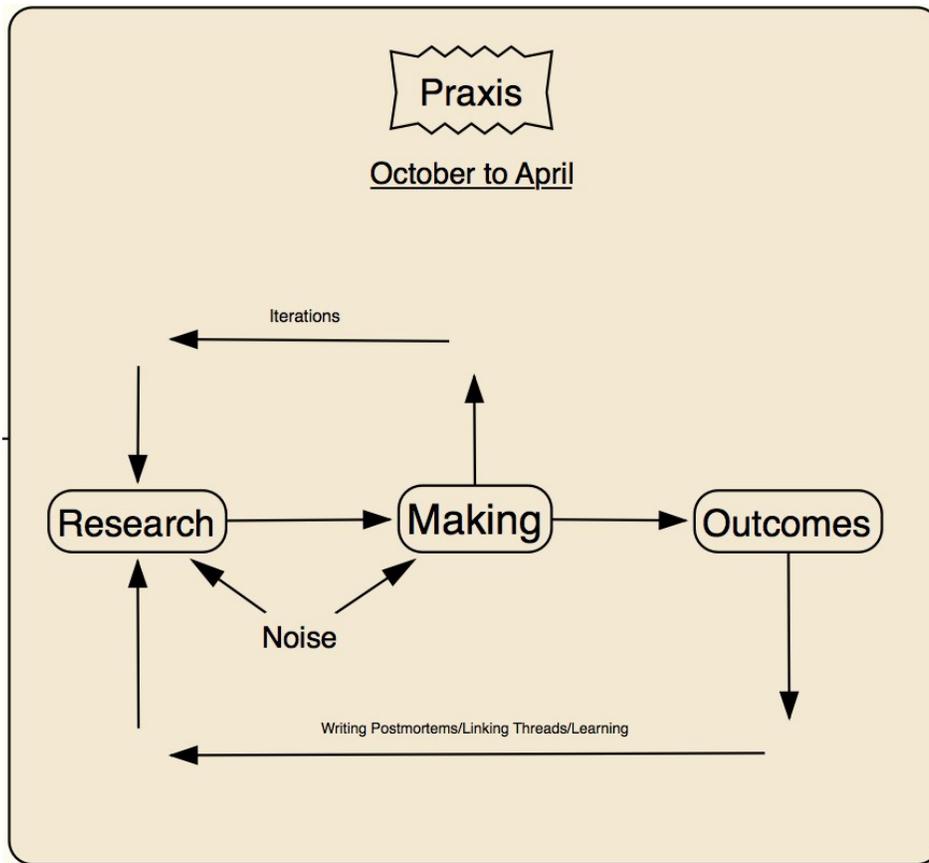
Process

Now that I have introduced my tools, I will go into detail on the process of developing my work. My process is a modification of Eric Zimmerman's Iterative Design practice, with influences from Rami Ishmail, Adriel Wallick, and Claude Shannon. Eric Zimmerman defines his iterative design as

> "a design methodology based on a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analyzing, and refining a work in progress. In iterative design, interaction with the designed system is used as a form of research for informing and evolving a project, as successive versions, or iterations of a design are implemented."[72]

Zimmerman notes that this is a radical departure from traditional game design, but I want to depart from his process a bit farther. Zimmerman uses this cycle to test and further prototype games in development. Where I depart, is that I want to utilize this cyclical structure to build intertextual narrative through small games. Zimmerman states, "Through the iterative play of design itself, entirely new questions can come into being."[73] He is referring to questions of design, but I am interested in exploring these questions as they relate to a story. In order to

this, every cycle of development will end with a finished game, adding a new node in network of narrative, each instance a standalone poetic moment — a videogame vignette.

The process of making individual games on a rapid development cycle is idea developed by Rami Ishmail and Adriel Wallick. Wallick, finding herself in perpetual state of what she referred to as "game developers block" was challenged by Ishmail to create a game a week, for an entire year. The idea was to create new ideas, push different types of games, and ultimately learn a lot more about game development in the process. Ismail refers to this process as a way of "getting experienced with failure."[74] While ultimately some of their design goals differ from mine, the act of quickly developing small games stuck with me as a worthwhile method of praxis. Claude Shannon also provides a useful model from his communication diagrams. In describing how information gets from a transmission source to its destination, he refers to any outside effect on that signal as noise, and that this noise ultimately changes how the signal is received.[76] Shannon's model provides me language for moments of where unintentional signals come through to change or influence both the making and research of my work. I refer to noise as the unintentional, as this can refer to moments of whim, of errors and of things breaking, but it in a meaningful way — where Zimmerman's entirely new questions come from.

Above is a visualization of my praxis. It is a cyclical process, both in the entirety of the structure but also internally. The research and making determine the outcomes, and the outcomes, alongside new research, determine the next cycle.

Initially this process was happening biweekly and as I move forward I plan on refining this process so that I am creating games far more rapidly, perhaps upwards of three a week, depending on what my final goal for the number of games is.

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Potential Outcomes & Dissemination

Currently I disseminate my work on a website called itch.io.[76] Itch.io is a free game hosting community with built in support for Unity's web player. The reason I use this platform versus say my own website is mostly due to the relative ease in which games can be viewed and discovered. Itch.io has convenient search features and a browsable catalog that can filter by newest games and other contexts. Itch.io is probably the easiest way for me get my games seen by those outside my social media. Through the website, Chris Priestman, a writer for Killscreen found my work and wrote an in—depth article on my vignettes, leading to nice bump in exposure for my work.[77] I will continue to use Itch.io to release my games as they are created, but I will note that the final version of my project will be released in a different context, comprised of every vignette I develop.

I have not finalized what the final work of this thesis proposal may look like, but have a few factors at play which will directly influence its manifestation. In thinking about dissemination of the finalized version of the project, a important consideration I have to make is in the final number of vignettes in the series. With the intention that these pieces function as a collection, I believe that any final number will be considered significant in meaning, but certain numbers are culturally more symbolic than others and perhaps I can harness the relevance of a specific number as part of the work. The perceived importance of a 100 game project would have far different connotations that a 66 game project, for instance. How would my project change when it consists of 100, a number with numerous cultural meanings, especially with regards to sport, versus 66, a number most commonly associated with the devil? The number of pieces that make up this project might also influence the final form the

project manifests itself in. For example, I could consider the number 52, which is the number of cards in a standard deck of cards. However, if I am going to consider a deck of cards, based on its influence on this project it would be more appropriate to use the Tarot deck, which contains, most commonly, 78 cards. Part of experiencing the final piece could consist of a Tarot—like storytelling experience, using a deck of RFID chipped playing cards, each with a different game encoded. Connect these with a computer reading the RFID signal and I could offer each player their own unique experience of the project. These numbers and forms are only speculative, and I also have to consider the meaning of aiming for a specific number against the intuitive knowledge that a project is done when it is done.

Another potential form of presentation for the final project I have considered is to have each vignette placed within a larger game experience, where the order of experiencing each vignette is largely up to the individual player. Super Mario 64 provides a similar gameplay mechanic to illustrate what I mean.[78] within Super Mario 64, there are a series of sub—worlds hidden within the main world. The main world, a large castle estate, contains portals to these sub—worlds, usually through the form of paintings. To enter a sub—world, a player jumps into the painting and is magically transported to these sub—worlds; their theme illustrated by the painting itself. I do like the idea of a player experiencing the vignettes while simultaneously having to pick and choose what they experience through an outer (spatially and temporally) layer of gameplay, though I have my concerns about how that level of player agency might affect the narrative of the vignettes.

The work I do during this project will go on after I graduate from the University of Denver, and I already have in mind a number of options for this work to potentially go beyond

the scope of my graduate thesis project. In my most immediate opportunity, I have submitted a slightly modified version of my thesis as a talk for Indiecade East.[79] One of the subjects of Indiecade East's call for submissions was on storytelling in indie games, and I submitted a proposal on vignette games. If accepted, I will have the opportunity to give a 20 minute talk about my work at the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, New York for Indiecade East. Along with possible networking opportunities at the conference itself, I would also be sure to visit Babycastles, a gallery specializing in games, as well as NYU Game Center. Additionally, I plan on submitting the finished work, possibly packaged as one game, to yearly festivals such as Indiecade, Independent Games Festival, Currents 2015, DiGRA as well as any of the multitude of game festivals around the world.[80,81,82,83]

As mentioned earlier, this project will result in a specific number of games, arbitrary or otherwise, and then this experiment in rapid game prototyping will come to its conclusion. It is important to consider the future of this conceptual practice, and how I might continue it in the future. All that follows is of course, speculative, but I imagine that this is a process that I will be quick to utilize, even though I do have plans for larger, long term projects. The benefit of this process are is proliferation— more projects obviously means more chances to strike big. On the other hand, the process of rapid game design limits scope, and I have projects in mind and projects already on the back—burner that will require a different form of self discipline.

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