
You: A Poetic Game About Meaning Making and Absence

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Abstract

You is a game about play and the illusive pursuit of meaningful play. Each level of the game is about problem solving a space for You to meet objectives while making sense of the in-game content. Using the player character You, the player is both making meaning out of nonsense and finding meaning where it is absent. The game is designed as a light-hearted critical reflection on the intersection of narratology and ludology. Players must play with You, I and Them in the immutable structure of meaning making that forms the challenge of the game.

Author Keywords

Critical Design, Poetic Games, game narrative

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8 Games

Overview

You is the 10th game in the Critical Gameplay collection, a 5 year project to offer alternative ways to play. The Critical Gameplay games are implemented under rapid prototyping constraints. Each of the games is made by one designer-developer-artist in 5 days or less. The process affords for low investment, high impact games.

Previous Critical Gameplay games have been shown in academic venues such as ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (2010, 2013) and Advances in Computer Entertainment Conference (2009, 2013), and art exhibitions including File Electronic Life (2012), the Computer Art Congress (2012, 2014) and International Digital Media Art Association's IDEAS exhibit (2009, 2010, 2013). The games have won recognition from both the Games for Change Festival [1] as a Hall of Fame selection and ACM SIGGRAPH's Digital Arts Community [2] for the Aesthetics of Gameplay exhibit.

Design

The game You borrows from the rhetoric of research on narrative, play and the illusive pursuit of meaningful play. The subject of the game is You, a player character demonstrated in figure 1. The player character is backwards, if it not traveling forward. It is also permanently bound to the environment, a collection of words that need You to make sense.

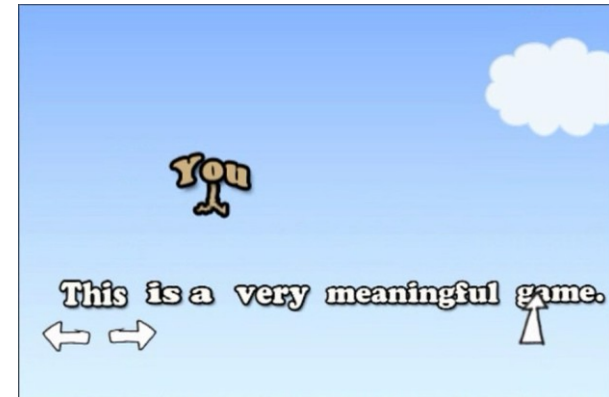


Figure 1. You Game screenshot featuring You character

The game uses the mechanics of a standard platform game, requiring players to run and jump by touching the appropriate arrows on their mobile device. But in the context of the game, players must do things like jump to conclusions, skip to the end and find a place to rest. These mechanics play out literally, allowing players to interact accordingly.

To progress between levels, the player must put You in its place. Each level is an opportunity to piece together meaning in the form of a poem. As the player navigates You, they find the place where the word *you* belongs. Some levels contain more than one place for you, although most simply offer the one appropriate place.



Figure 2. Jumping to Conclusions with You backward

Figure 2 illustrates the mechanic for jumping to conclusions, which converts the word conclusion to a spring.

As the game progresses, the player must manage You, I and Them characters. They are sometimes managed in opposition other times in cooperation. Figure 3 demonstrates a level where the player must manipulate I to complete the puzzle statement for I and You. As demonstrated each level of the game is about problem solving a space for You to meet objectives while making sense of the in-game content. Players cannot complete a level without reading it, but their goal remains the same. Despite the available play, completing the game means filling in a blank by finding the player's space within the game world. At the end of each level, the players sees more of the poem they have constructed, providing a summary of the supposed meaning they have constructed.

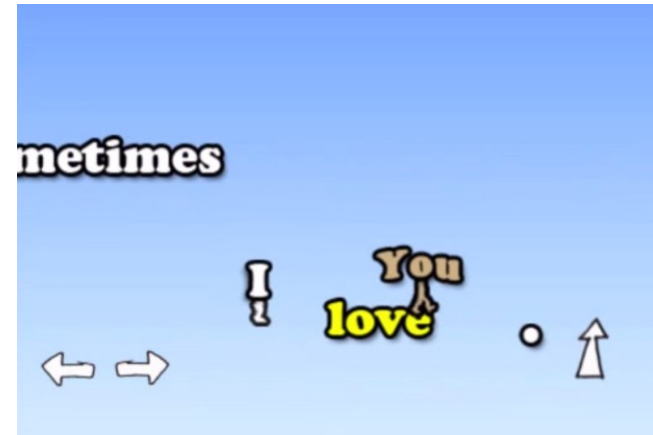


Figure 3. Manipulating the non-player character I and the player character You

Aesthetically, You is a character who is backwards, if not traveling forward. You is a character that moves playfully, although permanently bound to the awkward limitations of its unmasked pursuit of meaning and place. The awkwardness of describing You grammatically is part of the games intentioned tension.

Critique Through Game Design

Like the other games in the Critical Gameplay collection, You critiques conventions in contemporary digital play. In this case it seeks to create tension between the historical tendency to make meaningful play games based on platform mechanics. The literal representation of meaning through words on the screen and an over the top player surrogate self are offered as lampoon for a fairly non-playful standard in game design. The more literal the interpretation of game elements, the less compelling the experience becomes.

As such, the game is organized around the notion of a game poem [3], where rhetorical device is a combined application of narratology and ludology [4]. Ultimately there is little of either, as each costs the other. The play is limited by the constraints of the chosen representation (words on a page), while the story is limited by the one dimensional mechanics. The game is not designed as a serious experience, but instead as a critical design experience in meaning making in play. As with other Critical Gameplay games, it is designed with Critical Design [5] in mind. The game provides the expected accoutrement of a meaningful experience, the aesthetic of an independent game and the philosophical potency of something of either great artistic value, or no value at all.

The game has a second layer of meaning the player must seek, but players must ask if that is worthwhile. On each level there is a hidden word which the player can seek. The hidden item contains yet more meaning and more play. Often pursuing the hidden item means the player must fail to complete the level. However, collecting the hidden items provides another level of meaning, as each hidden item reveals a word that completes a secret phrase. If the player collects all of the hidden words they learn the hidden phrase. It also affords the player an unstructured play experience. Upon finding the hidden word or meaning at the end of each level, the player can use You to interact with an infinite array of falling, colorful bouncing balls.

The game is short, and ultimately pointless in the conventional sense. However the lure of meaning is meant to be absurdly tantalizing.

If players pursue the less explicit meaning do they win the game? Can they win such a game, or is the winning left only for the designer? What's the "point" in winning and does it remain a game if there is no point?

All these are questions players could ask in their endless pursuit of meaning, or they could simply play, accept it for what it is, and understand that even with it's complicated pursuit of meaning the game is yet another platformer. In short this game is an artistic exploration, meant to kick up dust on an already dusty debate.

References

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