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Art piece: Beautiful Life
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Download Link of the game:
https://drive.google.com/open?id=1KrscnH2bpXzPDy55yG7rmes4JWBdAe3z

Video:

Quick Walkthrough + explain: https://youtu.be/HpCPVmYvk98

Trailer: https://youtu.be/pDTLnP3Aqws

Complete Walkthrough: https://youtu.be/MslGizc5cCc

Introduction:

Beautiful Life is a massive game project that I have been working on for over a year. It can be considered as an art game or an abusive game. Different from traditional games, Beautiful Life does not aim to provide a satisfying, pleasurable and immersive user experience for players. Instead, the "hope destroying mechanism" plays an essential role in Beautiful Life.

The motive behind creating such a game is complicated. It can be considered as self-expression towards the desperation of Hong Kong. More than that, it is an attempt to turn gaming into a medium to communicate messages, in which it can be classified as an "art game".

The game is completed. Multiple game tests have been performed and the result is mostly satisfying. Throughout the year, I have read numerous papers and produced different versions of the game. The first part of the text will discuss the work process of Beautiful Life. And the second part of the text will be a summary of different concepts that have been applied to the final version of the game.

Work Process:

I have been planning on creating a game related to depression for a long time. Last year summer, I first came up with an idea of creating a walking-simulator in which the player walks around in a virtual game world and explore the internal darkness of a depressed patient. Yet, similar games have been created already. My advisor also worried that the game will turn out to be a personal expression on depression without much persuasiveness.

After that, I started reading different papers about game design and depression. Moreover, I have played a couple of games which tries to express or discuss similar topics. Examples include Emporium, Depression the Game, Static Speaks My Name and Drowning. In the end, I was wondering if it is possible to create a depressed version of SIMS. Can I make a game which consists of not only simulation game's mechanics but also a mirroring effect on the desperation of the reality?

For the first few months (2018, August – 2019, February), I started gathering 3D-models and built up little parts of the game. By the end of November, most of the scenes were well decorated and I began to work on the AI of pedestrians. The idea of

turning the game world (future Hong Kong) into a city with "Chinese style" came along when I was travelling to China during Chinese New Year (2019, February). I read a paper about abusive gaming as well and decided to implement the idea.

After Chinese New Year, all the scenes were created, and the mechanics were well-implemented. I started to link up everything and turn Beautiful Life into a complete game. The tutorial was made in early March. I have also composed a list of background music and gathered suitable sound effects for the game. By the end of March, the first prototype came out and I started to perform numerous game tests with different people.

First Game test (28/3/2019):

The first version of the game consisted of 14 virtual days. The tutorial alone consisted of 4 virtual days. The mother of the main character died on the 10th day. There were no clear instructions for players to commit suicide, but they can perform such action starting from day 13.

I have invited a current SCM student, Lau Wing Lam to perform the very first game test. Lau has spent more than three hours to finish the whole game. The result was a disaster. Lau described the gameplay as a super boring experience. She criticized that there were not enough contents to support the super long gameplay. She understood that the game was intended to demonstrate the meaningless and repetitive life of an urban citizen. Yet, how to motivate players to keep playing before they can digest the message remained fundamental. According to Lau, normal players would simply give up before they could understand anything.

During April, I worked on changing the structure of the game. For instance, the length of the tutorial was shortened from 4 virtual days to 2 virtual days, achievement system was implemented, and convenience system such as taxi was added. The goal is not only to increase the pace of the game but to enrich the overall content.

Second Game Test (15/4/2018):

In the second game test, a current SCM student, Yip Wing Yan, Carrie and an SCM alumni Yuen Yik Kin, Demine, were invited. The result was relatively satisfying. Players described the length of the game as "just perfect". According to Yuen, "Although the tutorial of the game is a bit frustrating and annoying, it is essential for setting off the ending of the game. Overall speaking, the game does very well in narrating the feeling of powerlessness as a Hong Kong citizen."

After the second game test, most of the decisions were set. There were no further big changes made for the game except some minor bugs fixed.

Game Test with the advisor:

My advisor has tested the game a couple of times. There wasn't a formal date in which my advisor performs a complete game test. Yet, there were serval important changes I have made according to my advisor's suggestions:

The deteriorating interface was a major change I have made in the end-game. As the tutorial of the game is about masking a tragedy with nice user interface and game mechanics, it is a nice idea to destroy all those system and mechanics in the late game. In that sense, the game becomes more ironic and depressing for players.

Adding small details to different characters in the game is a second important decision. In the final version of Beautiful Life, players are allowed to listen or talk with strangers such as the cashier or people in the gym. The players may even discover the death of a construction worker at some point in the game. These small details can turn the virtual world into an alive and immersive surrounding. It is an essential topic as well in terms of game design.

Theoretical part:

1) Abusive game design:

An important concept that was applied when designing Beautiful Life is the element of abusive gaming. It is a term that was introduced in the paper "Now It's Personal: On Abusive Game Design" by Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart.

"Abusive game design reframes gameplay as a dialogic relation between player and designer – a kind of conversation that presents itself in the form of a dare." (Sicart)

The main idea behind abusive gaming is that, instead of giving players what they 'want', we give players something weird and confrontational. Abusive games are often used as a tool to convey a message to the audience. It is a conversational tool between players and designers. Many forms of abusive game designs were introduced in this paper. Beautiful Life has adopted a few of them namely, lying to the players and aesthetic abuse.

Lying to Players:

This concept has been introduced by different games. A more successful commercial example is Silicon Knights' Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem. This game includes a sanity meter which will be depleted as the game progress. The character will begin to hallucinate, and effects including disturbing sounds and illusions will appear. At a later stage, the game will occasionally pretend that it is deleting instead of saving the player's progress.

Beautiful Life uses a similar mechanism. In the early stages of the game, players are given the false impression that they possess the freedom to perform and unlock achievements that they prefer. However, as the game progresses, players are given less and less options. They can hardly achieve or perform any other activities and are forced to follow a designed game path. For instance, the character is not able to play the piano at a later stage in the game due to complaints from his neighbors. Players cannot achieve a sociable virtual life as fewer characters are presented in the game. At one point, when the player's mother passes away, all sorts of activities are prohibited. Players are only allowed to follow the suggestions of the narrator and possess no further options. This is the first lie that has been told.

The second lie that has been told is in terms of the story and background. The 'liar' in this scenario is the user interface and background music. The framework of Beautiful Life is a tragedy. It is a story about a young graduate who has a very poor social life and a sick mother (which passes away in a later stage of the game). This character eventually commits suicide due to social pressure. This tragedy is presented as a game. Players are given the impression that Beautiful Life is a game which is simulating a fun and engaging virtual life. The background music, sound effects, trailer and the user interface (which exists in the early stages of the game) all suggest that this game is going to be a pleasant experience. The only hints of a darker agenda are the dark color tones of the background and the faceless characters. As the game progresses and the truth is revealed, the player's hopes are gradually beings destroyed. This kind of "hope destroying mechanism" is a fundamental element of Beautiful Life.

Aesthetic Abuse

Aesthetic abuse is perhaps a more difficult concept to understand. According to the paper, it can be considered as a way to assault the player's bodily senses. The examples include distorted perspectives and disturbing sound effects. There are two types of aesthetic abuse that were implied in Beautiful Life.

The street in Beautiful Life looks dirty and old. Moreover, the fact that the city in Beautiful Life looks extremely similar to China but is, in fact, Hong Kong can be very disturbing to some. Non-aesthetic posters, advertisements and political banners are found everywhere in Beautiful Life. Simplified Chinese and ugly fonts were used in the letters and documents in Beautiful Life. When these elements are combined with the political background of Hong Kong, the game may become irritating to some locals.

Apart from that, the late game of Beautiful Life adopts a deteriorating user interface. This is not only to suggest that the main character is mentally broken but also reveals that the user interface is simply a mask that hides the underlying tragedy of Beautiful Life. This is the second aesthetic abuse that was implied in Beautiful Life.

2) Hacktivism and Social Control

Beautiful Life is a game that is heavily inspired by the hacktivist idea of social control. The idea of social control described here is mainly referring to Gilles Deleuze's concept as quoted,

"We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure – prison, hospital, factory, school, family. The family is an "interior," in a crisis like all other interiors, scholarly, professional, etc. … It's only a matter of administering their last rites and keeping people employed in the installation of the new forces knocking at the door." (Deleuze, 1992)

Gilles Deleuze describes society as a closed system. The majority of people act according to the rules of the "administrators". People no longer possess the power to understand the "whole picture" of a social system but to choose from limited options. We act accordingly in order not to be 'eliminated' by society.

The idea of social control is very relatable in Beautiful Life. Players are given limited options in Beautiful Life in later stages of the game. Throughout the game, players are not able to do anything crazy such as killing pedestrians or destroying public facilities. In real life, similar phenomena can be easily observed. People go to work because they need money. Our consumptions are based on what is provided by the market. We are restricted by certain norms. If we understand our real-life action sequence as a result of social control, the player's actions in Beautiful Life is just a consequence of my design. As a game designer, I am trying to imitate the real-life situation of social control and redecorate it as a game. In the late stages of the game, revealing the truth that this game is a depressing tragedy can also be understood as an emphasis on the power of social control. Players are left with no options but to commit suicide.

3) Perception as a depressed patient

Apart from criticizing the power of social control, Beautiful Life is also narrating the personal story of a depressed individual (the main character). Having to see the doctor from time to time and the deteriorating late game states all suggest that the main character is suffering from a certain kind of mental illness. Therefore, the way to express the mindset of a depressed patient is fundamental when creating Beautiful Life. Besides personal experience, the majority of this knowledge comes from the book, Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology (Ratcliffe, 2015).

A Different World

This book introduces "the world of depression" in the very first chapter and expresses that the perception of a depressed individual somehow differs from a normal individual.

"I will argue that most experiences of depression involve a change in the overall structure of experience, in terms of which a variety of symptoms – including despair, bodily discomfort, inability to act, guild, worthlessness, anxiety, and estrangement from other people – are to be understood." (Ratcliffe, 2015)

Many games have attempted to express the feeling of depression. Famous examples include Depression, The Game, Emporium and Drowning. Drowning is specifically highlighted here as both Beautiful Life and Drowning put emphasis on the change of environment. In Beautiful Life, the character is presented as "normal" in the early stages of the game. Delightful music and bright lighting setups have been used to promote the message that this game is a pleasant simulation game. As the game progresses, however, the character experiences more and more limitations and tragic events. The volume of the background music gradually fades away while the ambience increases. The game becomes very dark as well. These effects are to show that the mentality of the main character is slowly dismantled by social pressure. In the end game, the user interface is completely deteriorated. In short, Beautiful Life has used sound, lighting and the user interface to present the change of perception as the character is gradually mentally broken.

Loss of Hope

Chapter 4 of the book specifically highlights hope as a determining factor of a depressed individual's risk of suicide. Yet, there are many kinds of hope. One may mistake the notion of giving up as a loss of hope.

"I draw a distinction between our 'intentional' hopes and a different kind of hope: 'pre-intentional' or 'existential' hope. I argue that the experiences of hopelessness associated with depression diagnoses are generally of this latter kind. Intentional and existential experiences of hopelessness can be described in similar ways and are therefore easily confused. As a result, loss of hope in depression is often misconstrued in intentional terms, and the profundity of the experience is not acknowledged."

The author of the book explained that the experience of existential depression is very different to the normal type of hopeless situation. For instance, if one hopes that a girl, Carrie, will become one's girlfriend and then one will eventually find out that Carrie already has a boyfriend. In this kind of situation, we consider it a hopeless situation (the later one). We hope for something to happen and possess a strong intention, yet, the probability of success is very narrow. However, as a depressed patient, even the intention to achieve something is missing in the first place. For a depressed individual, possessing hope is meaningless. The experience of existential depression refers to the fact that individuals have completely lost the hope to achieve anything and considers themselves worthless beings.

Beautiful Life produces a series of intentional hopes for players in the very beginning. Players are introduced to different kinds of activities and are given the ability to unlock different achievements early in the game. Yet, in the late game, the "hope destroying mechanism" is not only to stop players from progressing but also to convince them that their intentions are worthless. Warnings such as "You still believe in numbers and stats" or "You achieved nothing" were used to suggest that their intentions were wrong. What they have been trying to achieve is totally meaningless. In the late game, when the meaning of existence is missing, the main character does not possess further options but to commit suicide.

4) "Serious" Game

The last theory that has been considered seriously in making Beautiful Life is from a paper written by Genzel Frasca about the "seriousness" in a video game (Frasca, 2000). As mentioned in the introduction, traditional games are meant for fun. When the world's first computer game, Spacewar, was created in 1961, no one ever thought about using games to convey a message or to use it as a medium to express an artist's statement. Even in the 21st century, not many people are attempting to produce 'serious' games. In fact, there is an absolute lack of "seriousness" in the computer game industry.

When "The Sims" first came out as a commercial success, people were discussing if it was ethical to let a Sim (virtual citizen in the game) starve to death, or if the designers were right in not allowing nudity in the game. Similar ethical issues are applicable to Beautiful Life. Is it ethical to convey the message that people are living in a dark world without any hope? Am I encouraging people to commit suicide?

Precaution

Warning people that Beautiful Life can induce serious depression was an interesting approach. It is not simply a disclaimer, but also tells people to "take this game seriously, but not too seriously". Beautiful Life is a game that narrates the tragic story of a young graduate whose mother dies, lost hope, and eventually commits suicide. To a certain extent, Beautiful Life encourages people to reflect on the quality of life as a citizen of Hong Kong as it is mirroring reality. Yet, the plot of the story is set in a futuristic (2035) Hong Kong. The future is unknown. The biggest underlying question in Beautiful Life is: "Is this the future we are seeking?"

Committing Suicide

There have been many discussions on whether to provide a second "happier" ending for Beautiful Life instead of a single inevitable tragic ending. To keep the game ironic, I insisted to provide only one ending to the players. Beautiful Life starts with an engaging and cheerful opening. Players are told that they possess the "freedom" to achieve anything. Yet, they end up getting fired, with a parent that passes on and eventually committing suicide. There is no way out for the players. Beautiful Life provided many fake possibilities in the beginning and the best way to shut down players' hope is by letting them end their virtual life. This is simply for better

narration and contrast effect. Beautiful Life does not encourage people to commit suicide in reality.

5) Controversy in Video Game:

There are numerous arguments about whether the content of video games changes the behaviour and attitudes of the players. Most of the discussions are surrounding the violent elements in computer games. Other topics include racism, sexist and homophobic themes. Depression and suicide, however, is a rare topic when coming to video games.

The book, The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial issues in playful environments, introduced the terms media panic and moral panic.

"When media are concerned, moral panics often revolve around the risks of exposing children and youth to undesirable content such as foul language, pornography or violence." (Jonas Linderoth, 2015; Fernández-Vara, 2015)

Another relatable example to look at is the debate around the game, Depression Quest. When it was coming out in 2014 on steam, there had been massive controversy. People on Steam criticized that a game with such a gloomy subject had no place being distributed on the marketplace. Other expressed that the game is just boring and is entirely all reading. On the other hand, some players described it as interesting and educational. Nonetheless, the game became a huge success.

Beautiful Life possesses a couple of sensitive topics. First of all, it is related to clinical depression and suicide. Secondly, it consisted of political elements (Hong Kong becomes a communist city in the future). Discussion and controversy are inevitable. Yet, it is also considered as an essential approach when creating an ideological game or what the book, Introducing to Game Analysis, called procedural rhetoric.

"Since the rule sets of games can reflect an ideology, we can also see how a game can make an ideological statement. The term that describes how different experiences. That means that the computational systems of games can make arguments as well as help us understand them." (Fernández-Vara, 2015)

The author of the book has given McDonald's Video Game as an example. Player has to run a large fast-food chain, from obtaining ingredients to marketing. Player also has to manage the factory, employees and facilities. It does not take long to realize how hard it is to coordinate all the aspects. In the end, the player is left with no choice but perform unethical action such as destroying the rainforest or feeding hormones to cows. We gain an insight into the complexity of a problem through the game mechanics and system rather than reading a critique about it. Although the game came out to be controversial, it is an inevitable side-effect for people to realize the underlying message.

Beautiful Life takes a similar approach. When players are playing as the main character, they understand the feeling of depressiveness and powerlessness through game mechanics. Their options are limited as the game progress. In the end, the player is left with no further option but to commit suicide. The game itself is a simulation of social control. Nothing players have done would make a difference. Adding a little political element is just to give players an impression that this may be the reality. Again, the main focus of Beautiful Life is not committing suicide. It is a demonstration of how the society of control can leave one with no further options.

Conclusion:

All in all, there are five important concepts that have been considered or implied in the making of Beautiful Life. They are namely abusive gaming, the idea of social control, perception as a depressed patient, serious game and controversy in gaming. Beautiful Life is a game that attempts to express social desperation and real-life hopelessness. It is neither a political statement nor an encouragement for players to commit suicide in reality. There are two main goals that I wish to achieve through Beautiful Life. The first one, as mentioned, is that players can reflect on numerous existing social problems and further contemplate about our future as citizens of Hong Kong. Moreover, promoting the idea of using games to convey messages (art game) is essential. I am looking forward to seeing more 'serious' games which can communicate interesting ideas and reflect on our reality in the coming future.

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