

USING MULTIPLE DESIGN APPROACHES TOWARDS MEANINGFUL GAMES

INTRODUCTION

How can one design for a meaningful game, a game that provokes introspection, reflection and poignancy primarily through its use of gameplay mechanics? The mindful xp project spent 15 weeks exploring different approaches for developing meaningful games through rapid prototyping. By varying our approaches week to week, we could observe how approaches could affect mechanics and meaning in substantive ways.

PROCESS

The following results document the different approaches to the games we developed. With each game we explicitly started with one or more approaches. There is no "correct" way to develop for a meaningful game, but we hope these differing methods can provide some insight to developers who also want to create meaningful experiences for players.

CREATIVE INFLUENCES

Collaborative Vision

In a collaborative approach, the entire team agreed upon the overall tone and goals of the prototype and worked together to achieve the group vision. The advantages of this approach meant mechanics, messages, and themes could be larger in scope and ambition. However working together often muted the overall meaning of the end work.

CASE STUDY R-EVOLUTION

In R-EVOLUTION the collaborative approach allowed us to fine-tune a series of highly-polished meaningful moments while developing a multiplayer game.

Individual Vision

In the second half of our project we moved toward projects developed individually. Having a single developer meant personal idiosyncratic games could be developed without any filters. Games developed with this approach had to be smaller and sacrifice fidelity in certain areas.

CASE STUDY MARCH

The game MARCH highlights the advantages of individual vision by focusing on an intensely personal story about a former relationship. Working individually allowed the mechanics and meaning to stay direct and raw.

DESIGN FOCUSES

The Message

Building around a core message often entailed systemizing a concept and allowing the player to explore that system. Developing around a systemized message meant that willing players could naturally uncover the core meanings of the system.

CASE STUDY Connections

With Connections we wanted to look at maintaining relationships over time and space. By abstracting this system, players could discover which relationships were most important to them and how they made those difficult decisions.

The Moment

In response to a system, we also looked at designing for the "moment of revelation" people often have in meaningful media. We tried to build games which mechanically and narratively drove towards this pivotal point where the overall meaning would coalesce in a significant way.

CASE STUDY Scott Told Himself

The key moment of Scott Told Himself occurs at the end of the game when Scott is prompted to do a task unlike anything previous in the game. We looked at the reversal of mechanics and the rising tension of the scene as ways to achieve a poignant moment.

The Game Mechanic

Near the end of our project we looked at taking a single core mechanic and expanding the meaning of that mechanic as far as possible. Working with a single mechanic enabled us to explore all possible meanings in a highly-focused manner.

CASE STUDY Get Closer

The mechanic of Get Closer is about moving towards a central point as the player orbits around it. By looking at how this could be interpreted and what might make players move closer or further away, we could develop a series of levels exploring messages around this mechanic.

DEVELOPMENT TIMES

Fast with Gut Instinct

We experimented with very short development times to observe if shortening the time from conception to completion gave us greater insight into creating a more meaningful experience. We built with speed and delivery in mind and ignored polish.

CASE STUDY exhaust

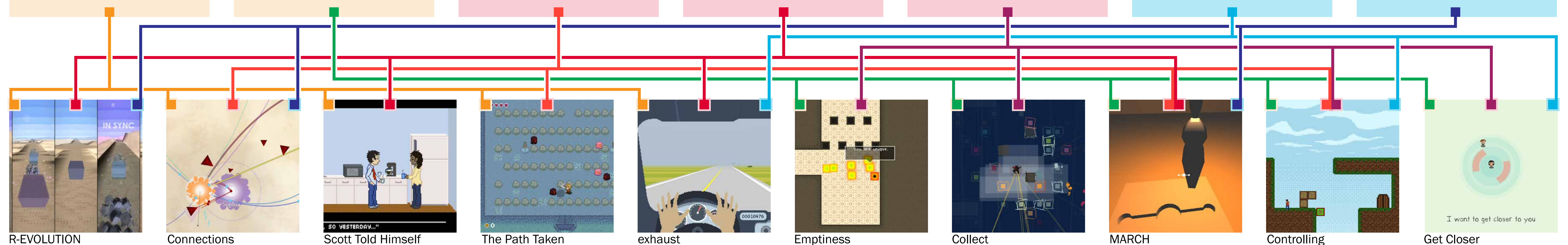
The game exhaust was developed in a little under 28 hours from the time we thought of the idea to when it was completed. We built the game around a single interaction and the message of "letting go" and developed the idea unchanged from the initial concept.

Focus on Polish

Alternatively we also looked at extending development times beyond our initial schedule to focus on creating a highly-polished experience. We looked at whether creating more playable game led to a greater meaning for players with the assumption they would be more open to gameplay.

CASE STUDY R-EVOLUTION

With R-EVOLUTION we spent over 3 weeks tweaking gameplay, visual feedback, and the overall tone of the game. By focusing on polish, we wanted as many players as possible to engage in the main game experience.



GAME PROTOTYPES DEVELOPED OVER 15 WEEKS

CONCLUSIONS

No matter how well the experience is designed, "meaningful" is ultimately up to the player and how they interpret the game. One man's meaning was another man's trash. Rapid prototyping can help develop your ideas in terms of what meaning you want to express and how to express it; however, it does not guarantee the end result will be meaningful to players.

We discovered that while approaches were important, what mattered most was the designer understanding their core meaning and finding the best way to express it. The clarity of the message was the most important factor in our experience with developing meaningful games. Games that started off with unclear goals and messages were unsuccessful regardless of approach and vice versa.

MOVING FOWARD

Near the end of our semester on the mindful xp project we found a potential new approach that warrants deeper investigation. We discovered that developing from specific personal issues tended to be help create experiences that resonated with people more strongly than ones developed from abstract ones.

With this in mind we would find it interesting to spend time rapid prototyping around very specific themes and issues that are closely personal to the designer. Developing around a specific truth in particular could create powerful meaningful experiences that connect with players.

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