Critical essay - The Unfinished Swan

"The Unfinished Swan" is a first-person adventure game made by Giant Sparrow, an independent game production company based in California. (www.giantsparrow.com) Development on the game began in 2008, when the company released an early tech demo showing off the game's principal mechanics and aesthetics. (https://vimeo.com/1807754) The finished game was released in 2013 on the Playstation Network as a download-only digital release, and is currently available on Playstation platforms PS3, PS4 and the hand-held Vita console. In this essay I will discuss "The Unfinished Swan" with reference the particular procedural mechanics employed in the game and how they produce particularly vivid rhetoric for the player during gameplay.

The opening section of the game outlines the setting and introduces the main character and player-controlled protagonist of the game, a young boy named Monroe. This non-interactive sequence is delivered in the form of an animation made from what appear to be hand-drawn illustrations, accompanied by the spoken narration of an actress. We learn that Monroe's mother has recently died and he is now to be cared for in an orphanage. His mother was an avid painter, but we are told she rarely finished any of her works. Monroe has been allowed by the orphanage to select just one of her paintings to bring with him to the orphanage, and he selects "The Unfinished Swan" of the game's title. One night he wakes up and discovers that the swan has left the painting, but a trace of it remains in the form of inky orange-coloured footprints. In an attempt to follow the swan Monroe stumbles upon a door he hadn't noticed before, and thus finds himself in the interactive game world. This opening forms a good introduction for the game to follow, succinctly providing just enough of the protagonist's biographical information to allow the player to identify and empathise with him. His age is unspecified but he appears to be very young, and through tragic circumstances has been recently placed in a very vulnerable position. This is communicated not only through the literal content of the narration, but more powerfully through the child-like style of the on-screen drawings, and the general fairy tale-style of presentation conjured up by the combination of the visuals, animation and audio. This standard of presentation and art design is excellent and remains consistent throughout the game. The narrator returns at key points to provide exposition, lending a narrative continuity to the player's experience.

In "Procedural Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames" Ian Bogost suggests adopting Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's definition of play as the "free space of movement within a more rigid structure" and further adds his own interpretation of play as the "possibility space created by processes themselves." (Bogost. S., 2010, Kindle location 948) In this context it would be useful to

describe the actual processes provided to the player by the developers of "The Unfinished Swan". Initially, within the interactive simulation that comprises the main playable portions of the game, the player is presented with an entirely white screen. The game's control system follows the conventions of most current first-person games, character movement assigned to the left thumbstick, camera control on the right. Moving around or looking in any direction yields no further detail or sense of orientation from the world, though the audible footsteps appear to indicate movement is occurring. It is only when pulling one of the controller's triggers that the player gets some visual feedback from within the simulation. Doing so causes a glob of black liquid, presumably paint, to shoot away from the player. When it lands, it splatters upon impact, partially revealing the topography of the small area onto which it lands. Using this technique, and an apparently unlimited supply of paint, the player is able to incrementally reveal the structure and detail present in the world around him. From an initial simple arrangement of linear corridors, a rich and detailed environment slowly emerges, populated by flora and fauna inhabiting an ecosystem consisting of gardens, bridges, and lakeside and wooded areas.

Within the game, the mechanics of the paint-shooting activity appears to be generated by a convincing simulation of real-world physics. The globs of paint are seen to be shot away from the player's point of view in accordance with the direction in which the camera is facing. Additionally, the PS4's controller-mounted touchpad allows the player to "swipe" the paint away in any direction, giving another, possibly more physically engaging alternative to the interaction. Blobs of paint appear to behave as they would in the real world, following an arcing trajectory through the air until succumbing to the forces of gravity and finding their targets, resulting in a convincing scattering effect, accompanied by a satisfying and suitably splashy set of sounds. As for the environment itself, the geometry of the levels that the designers have built, though initially invisible to the player, appears to be fully intact from the start, and apart from a few isolated incidents can't be manipulated or altered though gameplay. The "possibility space" which is allowed to the player therefore, really only consists of the choices to be made in the placement of the paint, and the quantities in which it is distributed through the levels. This would appear to provide the player with a rather limited set of terms upon which to approach playing the game, but the very economical nature of this approach turns out to provide a rich tool-set of possibilities with great potential for self-expression and discovery. In terms of discussing the rhetoric being produced by these coded systems, I can only describe my own response as a subject having played through the game.

On immediately entering the profoundly empty and featureless world of the game, and having been given a sense of the character's identity and likely emotional state by the preceding introductory

narrative, there is a strange combination of disorientation and apprehension. This lasts only as long as the ability to shoot the globs of paint is discovered, and then, after having effectively discovered a new toy, the affect changes to one of curiosity and the discovery and exploration of possibilities. Immediately, the accurate modeling of familiar real-world physics provides a reassuring point of comfort in this strange world. Then, there follows a period of exhilaration as you realise what fun it is to be able to spread as much paint as you wish around the environment, an activity for which a child (or adult) in the real world would likely be punished. Apart from simply being great fun, there are several positive consequences to performing this activity. Firstly, it is an essential mechanic through which the player may establish the boundaries and ultimately a sense of the geography of the world, which is essential to progression within the game. Secondly, it allows the player to literally "paint" their own unique picture within and of the game world. Despite providing very little colour other than the black of the paint and the default white of the world, the game's painting mechanic manages to provide for the creation of remarkably subtle and expressive imagery. As an incidental but significant aside, the PS4 operating system (on which I played the game) allows the user to stop the game at any point and record a screenshot to the hard drive or player's online storage account. I found myself doing this far more often in "The Unfinished Swan" than I have in any other game, such is the potential for producing aesthetically arresting imagery, and now have amassed a large stock of images which I intend to keep. I have included a few examples below.

There is also a gentle yet effective failure mechanic built into this system. If the player applies too much paint to the surrounding environment, it can be rendered in total blackness, taking away from the aesthetic quality of the visuals but also making navigation difficult (a completely black world is as featureless as a completely white one.) As a solution, the game allows the the player to collect balloons from around the world, which when enough are collected allows the purchase of several "toys" which provide further functionality, such as the ability to "erase" the paintwork from the

current level. This is not required to complete the game yet makes for a very engaging side activity. In this way, the game's systems provide the player with several distinct types of positive reinforcement to incentivise further play as they progress through the levels.

In addition, these mechanics form meaningful connections to the broader narrative, that of a young child attempting to come to terms with a traumatic life event and dramatic change in circumstances. The presence and use of paint connects Monroe to his mother's memory in a very direct way, as the her love of painting is highlighted from the very beginning of the story. It's particularly poignant that the act of painting not only provides a simple carefree joy to the player (and by extension to Monroe) but also acts as the only meaningful way to navigate and progress through the world, therefore becoming a metaphor for the support and guidance provided by a responsible parent. The entire process of the gradual and iterative learning of the simulation's systems in order to achieve further development and progress could be interpreted as an allegory for the developmental stages all children must go through in order to learn to get by in the real world as they grow older. To me this forms a good illustration of what Ian Bogost is referring to in "Persuasive Games", when he states that "Procedural representation models only some subset of a source system, in order to draw attention to that portion as the subject of the representation. Interactivity follows suit: the total number and credibility of user actions is not necessarily important; rather, the relevance of the interaction in the context of the representational goals of the system is paramount." (Bogost, I., 2010, Kindle location 1025)The pared down yet thoughtfully selected activities provided to the player in "The Unfinished Swan", coupled with the unusual characteristics of the environment and broader story-led narrative combine to make for a very vivid and meaningful player experience.

As the game progresses beyond the first of four "chapters", several related yet distinct gameplay approaches are introduced. In the second chapter, the stark white levels are replaced with a sprawling fantasy urban environment complete with dwellings, mazes and castles. Unlike before, the environment and architecture are immediately visible to the player, although the visuals are still rendered in a stylised, largely monochromatic manner. Instead of being armed with paint, pressing the appropriate trigger now shoots out a blob of water, which clings to the environment for a few brief seconds before evaporating. Initially, it appears as if the game will abandon its former highly distinctive mechanics and begins to resemble a more standard platform-based adventure, with a few less than taxing physics-based puzzles needing to be negotiated to facilitate progress. Soon however, a new game-play mechanic is introduced, as the player encounters a number of seemingly impassable walls and chasms. Having become accustomed to firing off the liquid projectiles as a means to navigate the world, it is only natural to attempt to do so again here, and soon the key to progress is

discovered. Shooting water onto a few innocuous looking vines on a wall causes them to erupt in a frenzied growth, soon covering the walls that need to be scaled and forming paths around the obstacles. It is possible to travel along the paths created by the vines, regardless of their orientation. During game-play this proves to be as engaging as the world-painting from the previous area, and in building directly on those mechanics introduces the additional element of verticality and a new approach to level traversal. In aesthetic terms the visuals generated by this interaction are of a radically different nature than those encountered before, but I found that the assured nature of the art design coupled with the environmentally specific adaptation of the already familiar central mechanic sold the idea convincingly.

In the following chapter, the most radical shift of tone yet encountered occurs, as the player descends into a nightmarish twisting maze of dark and spooky tunnels. These are populated by large spider-like creatures, which will attack the player if approached. Again the only means of interaction, in this case in the form of offense, is to shoot blobs of water, but this does little to deter the monsters. Eventually the player learns that the key to progression is to locate and manipulate large glowing orbs, which can be knocked off their stalks and pushed around the level by continuously shooting them with jets of water. The orbs have a dual function, they both light the way for the player through the tunnels, which are otherwise too dark to navigate, and they also are a deterrent for the spiders, who cower away from the light they cast. This level is clearly designed to induce feelings of fear and claustrophobia in the player by drawing on well established conventions of the dark fairy tale and horror genres. In the context of the game's continually unfolding procedures I found it to be particularly affective because it represents an almost direct inversion of the first chapter's visual mechanics. Instead of the white, literal "blank canvas" of the first level, a place of possibility waiting to be explored and authored by the player as they wish with dark paint, we now encounter a profoundly black, foreboding world. The white in this case is provided by the light from the moveable orbs, which now represents not possibility but an urgent means of survival and protection, which must be clung to at all costs.

The final major game mechanic represents another shift in emphasis and function for the paint lobbing technique. We now find ourselves in an abstract, angular world made of blue geometric surfaces. Now firing blobs of water at any of these surfaces, horizontal or vertical, allows the player to demarcate the opposite corners of a rectangle. A third blob allows for the translation of this rectangle into the third dimension to form a cuboid shape. In order to navigate this new environment, the player must arrange series of these shapes to form stepping stones to traverse chasms, or the rungs of a ladder to ascend walls. They can even be lifted up and placed in water to form makeshift rafts. This marks the culmination of the increasingly sophisticated use of the liquid throwing interaction provided by the

game, the designers certainly having explored its use thoroughly and adapted it to multiple and varied uses.

"The Unfinished Swan" upon its release was met with generally positive reviews, the originality of its game-play mechanics and quality of its visuals and art direction being singled out for particular praise. However, one review which was less than complimentary appeared on the website Eurogamer. The reviewer, Dan Whitehead, while acknowledging the above qualities, states of the game's various visual styles and interactive systems "They're all interesting enough concepts on their own, but the relationship between them is awkward and apparently arbitrary. They're more like brainstormed ideas threaded together than a coherent vision, and while they mostly work in a gameplay sense, they lead to a fragmented and unsatisfying experience." (http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-15-the-unfinished-swan-review) I think this is an ill-considered criticism of this aspect of the game's mechanics, and would argue that the expressive rhetoric that they communicate gives a much more consistent and appropriate experience to the player than the review indicates, given the particular story they are intended to tell.

At the very start of the game, the initial sense of confusion and disorientation, followed by the extended period of earnest exploration and discovery, is suggestive of the emotional state of a very young child in the process of learning how to use its various senses and developing motor skills to learn about the world. This is made all the more poignant by the fact that the child has recently lost its only parent and is being forced to work through what must be a very difficult period of transition. Later, the child has learned to see the geographical and architectural details of his environment, and is now capable of performing more sophisticated actions within it. The discovery of the ability to water the vines, and the resulting advantage this provides in enriching the world's appearance and navigating through it, could indicate a growing awareness of it's natural resources. It also encourages an appreciation of the need to treat renewable resources responsibly and cultivate them in order to derive pleasure and support from them. The dark monster-filled tunnels could be a metaphor for the trials and dangers that one must inevitably encounter and learn to protect oneself from in life. The later chapter, its visual and interactive procedures reminiscent of technical blueprints, could be seen to represent further growth into later childhood and adolescence, requiring a more analytical and considered approach to problem-solving. It may also reference the eventual need to learn a trade and find employment upon reaching adulthood.

These are my particular impressions of what the procedural mechanics in "The Unfinished Swan" are communicating, and they may not necessarily correspond with the original intentions of the game's

developers or another subject who may encounter the game. The point of successful procedural rhetoric I believe is not to induce similar responses from all players, but to create a convincing and meaningful set of interactions which provide a range of interpretive possibilities for different individuals who may encounter it.

Bibliography

Bogost, Ian (2010-08-13). Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames (MIT Press) The MIT Press. Kindle Edition.