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NorthPoint Courtesy Services Development and Design Summary

The videogame discussed in this essay is freely available at <http://northpointcourtesyservices.com/downloads/>

INTRODUCTION

As we address the topic of games on games, we turned our focus towards *first-person shooters* (FPS), one of the most popular genres of computer game at the moment. Contemporary FPS games populate the genre continuum from “realistic” (*Rainbow Six Siege*, *ARMA*, *Insurgency*) to fantastic (*Halo*, *Bioshock*, *Destiny*). However, no matter the setting or context, a constant of the FPS genre is the horde of nameless *non-player characters* (NPCs) that make up the waves of grunts and cannon fodder for the player character to enact their will against through the affordances provided by the designers. This melding of player will and designer limitations, in the vast majority of instances, results in NPCs being shot and killed with some form of weaponry, thus allowing the player to progress through the game.

As frequent players of FPS games, we sought to critique the relationship between player and NPCs in our *NorthPoint Courtesy Services*. Our original aim was to create a game where the player would play as an NPC in an FPS, but we felt that in the conflation of the two roles would result in a game that only reinforces the very element we were attempting to critique. Instead, we chose to put the player in the role of a job applicant to be an NPC in an FPS game. We felt that this absurd premise would enable us to comment and reflect on a number of elements: the relationship in FPS games between player and NPCs, and between player and game designer, the process of writing an algorithm with the purpose of “dying”, and finally the ethical frameworks that these relationships and actions operate through and within. We agree with Miguel Sicart (2009) in his statement that “we become players not only by learning to play games, but by developing a sense of computer game ethics and values that gives us the tools to ethically experience games” (p. 9). Furthermore, our design of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* pays credence to Sicart’s central thesis regarding the relationship between players, computer games, and ethics:

As designed objects, computer games create practices that could be considered unethical. Yet these practices are voluntarily undertaken by a moral agent who not only has the capacity, but also the duty to develop herself as an ethical being by means of practicing her own player-centric ethical thinking while preserving the pleasures and balances of the game experience. The player is a moral user capable of reflecting ethically about her presence in the game, and aware of how that experience configures her values both inside the game world and in relation to the world outside the game. (Sicart, 2009, p. 17)

Specifically, it is the “player-centric ethical thinking” and “preserving the pleasures and balances of the game experience” that we were most interested in exploring in the development of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services*. Our game was designed to challenge the collective ethics that we as players assume while playing and enjoying FPS games. We asked ourselves what are the ethical choices being practiced by the game developer when he permits or disallows the player to perform specific actions upon an NPC? And how does the player maintain ethical autonomy while being complicit in gameplay that may run contrary to their own morality? *Can* they maintain ethical autonomy? It was through these questions that the design of our game began to take shape.

DESIGN PERSPECTIVES

NorthPoint Courtesy Services puts the player in the role of a job applicant applying for a position at the titular company. The player must complete forms asking about personal information and medical history. The player also must pass several reaction and accuracy tests to evaluate their hand/eye coordination. What is slowly revealed over the course of the game, however, is that the player is actually an NPC in another “player’s” game. The game ends with our player being placed into a room where they wait for the game’s player to arrive. Immediately upon the player’s arrival, our player is kicked back to the title screen where they are informed that “they have died”.

As the player plays *NorthPoint Courtesy Services*, she slowly realizes that her choices are already predetermined and that external input that has any lasting effect on the game state is incredibly limited. Our choice to limit player input to such a degree reflects our goal of replicating the development of an algorithm as a player-character. Because the player acts as a specific type of NPC in an FPS, complete with the limited agency of a computer algorithm, the choices that she makes throughout the game are ultimately meaningless. The way that the personal information and medical forms accept the player’s input (altering it so that it fits the parameters specified by the hypothetical game inside of our game) points to the regulated and scripted behaviors of artificial intelligence systems as they are regulated by algorithmically defined parameters. By the end of the game, when the player’s NPC is shot by the in-game “player”, our hope

is that our player will take a moment to consider how the algorithms of NPCs in FPS games are built into service for a player's ego.

We looked to games such as *Frog Fractions* (Twinbeard Studio, 2012), *dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012), and *Dr. Langeskov, the Tiger, and the Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist* (Crows Crows Crows, 2015) for design inspiration and approaches on how to create engaging games while using a mechanic to limit player input. We also drew from the countless FPS games that we have played, although *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and its introduction of “monster closets” was especially important for our game design. We assume that many of our players will be familiar with walking into a room in an FPS with a low-level NPC grunt and shooting it dead. The aesthetic of the game is based on the job-application kiosks one might find at a Wal-Mart or Target in order to reinforce the notion that the player is applying for a low-level, entry job with the shadowy NorthPoint Courtesy Services company. The name of our game was also carefully selected: astute readers will notice that *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* is an acronym for NPCs. While NorthPoint acts merely as a descriptor, Courtesy Services alludes to the fact that NPCs in FPS games are designed to be easily conquered foils for the player to overcome, succumbing to the player's dominance in an act of generous deference.

The interface for the questionnaires needed to be engaging without being overly playful. In their design, we considered the experience and expectations of using a series of forms online and providing appropriate feedback about the active input field and those already filled in by the player. The way which the game changes the player's input for a number of the questions is meant to demonstrate how they are, as the algorithm, at the mercy of the system and have only the agency that the system permits them. Each of the mini-games needed to present the initial premise of an achievable goal before the inevitable reveal that “failure” was the way to finish the segment, purposely presenting easy scenarios before making them intentionally impossible to mirror the tutorial sections of games. However, the difference is that rather than teaching the player how to play the game (as a traditional tutorial would), our mini-games are teaching them how to consider their “failure” as success. The process of failing to succeed is meant to reflect the algorithmic purpose of NPCs: their “failure” (dying) generates success for the game's player.

While we hope that *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* will appeal to most players on some level, we recognize that there are limitations to the game. With more time, we would have included more another screen or two of documentation for the player to complete, as well as one more mini-games. We also recognize that the intentions behind our game may not connect with non-FPS players. There was also some discussion about whether we should put a description of the finale, or some sort of *denouement* text, that would drive the point of the game home for the player. However, we decided against it preferred that the gameplay shoulder the intent of the design. This may lead to uncertain or un-

intended conclusions by our players, but it allows our players to reach their own conclusions about the game, privileging the player's own opinions and experience with the game. The decision to leave the end somewhat vague and in the player's hands acts as a way to remind them that the experience exists because of them and, to paraphrase Sicart, keeps players at the center of the critique.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our overall intent in the development and design of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* was twofold: 1) to critique the embedded ethics of FPS design without using the FPS format to do so, and 2) to consider how algorithms both operate from and perpetuate states of boredom. FPS games are often hyper-violent with gameplay emphases on speed, power, control, and physical domination. We used non-FPS gameplay for the majority of our game as a way to resist this narrative of the genre, focusing instead on the idea of the computer algorithm that is created to wait. The mini-games and medical history forms are meant to act as metaphors for the development of the algorithm. Rather than a narrative of power and domination, the FPS NPC is about routine, a lack of agency, and subservience to the player.

Literature on FPS games has addressed the multitudes of subjectivities at work between the player and the game (Rehak, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Pinchbeck, 2008; Hitchens, 2011; Wolf, 2012; Klevjer, 2013; Therrien, 2015). Our game attempts to address one of those subjectivities through its presentation of the player as algorithm. Whereas FPS games typically privilege the subjectivity of a body-in-action, the default state of our algorithms is one of waiting and inaction. Although our player is interacting with our system, the choices they are making ultimately produce the same outcome. The game reinforces the *if/then processes* that define the AI's behaviors insist that the player activate certain requirements so that they can run. McKenzie Wark (2007) writes about this relationship in *Gamer Theory*:

As the gamer becomes attuned to the game, gamer and game become one event, one battle, one action; an oscillating between the line dividing self from other and the line connecting them as one substance. If the line dividing provides a moment of autonomous self, the line connecting provides a moment of selfless purpose. In games, action has its limits. It is an endless bit-flip targeting performs between targeter and target. ... Games are a repository for a certain atopian labor, which has the power to confront the necessity of its own choosing. Games do not offer a contemplative response to boredom. (p. 162)

As the player of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* moves further and further through the NPC application process in the game, they are subjugating themselves to the algorithmic expectations and requirements of the hypothetical game within our game. And those algorithmic expectations and requirements

for *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* are for the player to code themselves into existence, wait, and perish, just as they would be for an NPC in any mainstream FPS game. The algorithm on hold exemplifies what Alexander Galloway (2006) would call a diegetic machinic state, or an “ambience act” (pp. 10, 17). During the ambience act, “micromovements often come in the form of pseudorandom repetition of rote gamic action, or ordered collections of repetition that cycle with different periodicities to add complexity to the ambience act” (p. 10). By the end of our game, the player of *Northpoint Courtesy Services* has coalesced with the ambient act of the game-inside-of-a-game. There is nothing for them to do until the “player-character” arrives and gives the algorithm purpose. When the “player-character” enters our player’s space, the player is permitted to spring to life and the ambience act is transformed into Galloway’s “operator-diegetic” gamic moment, which is any moment of a game which propels the game’s central premise forward (p. 17).

We chose to focus *Northpoint Courtesy Services* on inaction in an attempt to resist the notion that FPS games are always about action. In fact, they are always about action when understood from the player’s perspective. However, the vast majority of most games is about code existing in a state of readiness, being prepared to alter itself as necessary when the player arrives based on conditional statements. In this way, we sought to create a game in which boredom was the expectant and desired result. Wark (2007) again: “The very action of overcoming boredom reproduces it, when gamer and game reach some impasse” (p. 166). In *Northpoint Courtesy Services*, that impasse is the end of the game, since a piece of NPC code in an FPS game that is bored is an NPC that is alive. The arrival of the player-character ends the algorithm’s state of waiting, activating and running its loops, but it also means the end of that instance of the algorithm (unless the player-character is a particularly bad shot, low on health, etc.). The player performs the binary switch from 1 to 0 on the NPC, and then moves on. When our player of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* finishes the application portion of the game and is given her own “monster closet” at the end of the game, they represent the binary switch set to 1, awaiting the arrival of the “player-character” to fulfill their purpose: ego and desire fulfillment for the non-existent “player-character”. In this regard, Sicart (2009) reminds us that, “The creators of games are then ethically responsible for the design of the rules and world, while players are responsible for their experience of the game—the ways they interpret and enact the embedded ethical values of a computer game” (p. 59). Our intent with the gameplay of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* is to give our player the experience of considering how these ethical systems are agreed upon, put into place, and activated by placing our player in the role of an algorithm which only has the ethical agency allotted by a piece of code which has been designed for a specific purpose. The ethics our players experience are, for the most part, the ethics of boredom and inaction. In other words, they are “the machine’s act. The user is on hold, but the machine keeps working” (Galloway, 2006, p. 10).

REVIEW EXCERPTS

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