

Parabolic Emotion

An anthology of poetic games employing ludonarrative techniques in exploring alienation.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This piece is an anthology titled “Wherein She Completely Cuts Herself Off from Reality; A Parabolic Emotion from Recovery into Despair”¹, containing three short, “poetic games”, originally created in the Unity engine. These games are compiled into one executable and accessed through an interactive title screen that also features some short, written poetry.

The term “ludonarrative” was coined in a blog post critiquing Bioshock, alleging an undermining of the mechanical structure of the game through its narrative [4], an effect labelled “ludonarrative dissonance. Discourse around the subject subsequently evolved from treating it purely as a negative within games [1] to ways it can be intentionally invoked for effect in games’ design [3, 10] and as a part of Hypertextual storytelling [5]. Ludonarrative techniques can be utilized as devices to create an alienating effect within the audience, achieving poetic qualities [9] and prompting reflection [6].

Each game within the anthology (as depicted in [Figure 1](#)) aims to explore themes of alienation through different ludonarrative techniques, aiming to achieve poetic effect within the audience. The primary mechanical throughline of the anthology is repetition – the games do not end in a conclusive or satisfying way. While the state of the game may change over time, it is never in a way that allows progress to be tracked or inferred, such as a rising score or lowering lives count. This unites all three games in a communication of ennui, reinforcing the primary theme of alienation.

[1] ¹ Available on June 13, 2024 from <https://kim-royal.itch.io/parabolic-emotion>

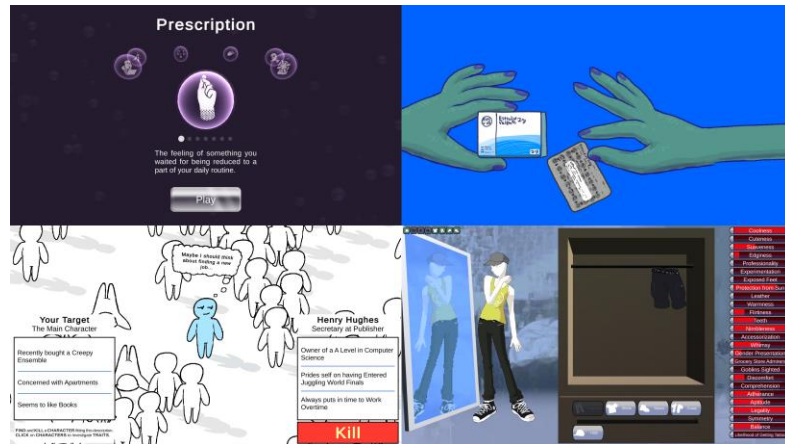


Figure 1: Screenshots of Parabolic Emotion

2 PRESCRIPTION

The first game on the anthology, “Prescription”, explores alienation towards work, routine, and the experience of a prescription taken daily going from being exciting to a part of daily life. This is achieved by representing the day through brief, playful interactions performed with the mouse, performed in an endless loop. As the player goes through the daily loop, they see their prescription run low. When the player’s prescription runs empty, the player’s expectations are undermined, and the cycle broken as they wait in a plain room for 30 seconds for their pills to be refilled.

This game communicates a creative and playful approach to the mundanity of daily life. Every scene within the game has a different style, both aesthetically and in the form of interaction between the player and the game. The first scene features cartoonish arms with saturated, unnatural skin tones, the second uses pixelated photographs with limited palettes, the third uses cutouts of drawings from a lined notebook, and so on. These creative decisions cause the game to play out as a conversation between the audience and developer, gaining meaning both from the choices put in during development along with the audience’s interpretations during play.

3 FIND THE MAIN CHARACTER

The anthology’s second game, “Find the Main Character”, is a hidden person game where the player is given a set of vague and/or subjective traits and told to find a character who matches those traits from an infinitely generated crowd. Once the player has found a character who matches these traits, the player is instructed to kill them. This game explores alienation towards others, intending to function as a critique of solipsism. This is partially achieved through imperfect information, as the traits the player looks for are not useful for narrowing down a target (who doesn’t exist to begin with).

The game makes heavy use of contrast within its design. The player is given a clear goal but an endless number of possible targets and vague, unhelpful guidance. The subject matter of the game is heavy, focusing specifically on killing a target, but is contrasted against a simple cartoon art style and whimsical sentences which are clearly strung together using a list of key words in a way similar to the game “Mad Libs” [8]. This contrast between the game’s various systems serves as an alienating device that is employed purposefully within its design.

4 DRESSUP

“Dressup”, the final game of the anthology, explores alienation towards one’s appearance, sense of self, and presentation style through subversions of the dress-up game genre. This genre has seen frequent popularity, such as with the Kisekae Set System standard originating in the 1990’s [7], various browser games using Adobe Flash around the early 2010’s, and games such as Dress to Impress on the Roblox digital game creation platform [2]. While this genre typically encourages free player expression, this game introduces a number of functionally meaningless stat bars within its UI that aim explicitly to pollute the player’s reasoning.

Aesthetically, this game aims to evoke 2010’s Adobe Flash dress-up games through a number of aesthetic and design elements that were common to the era. The music is a heavily compressed mp3 file without a smooth loop, the art style takes inspiration from the predominantly young-adult woman targeted “shoujo” category of Japanese comic, and the mechanics of the game focus around dragging clothes onto a static paper doll-type character, rather than operating sliders and buttons, or exploring a location in-game. These aesthetic sensibilities are chosen intentionally, to provide players who have familiarity with the genre a direct point of reference for what to expect, which is subverted through the systems present within the game. Some aesthetic choices subvert this grounding as well, such as the functional 3D mirror, or the strange background made up of edited photos of a real bedroom.

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