

Representing femicide through a video game: towards a socially responsible design practice

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1. INTRODUCTION

Video games typically fall in the category of entertainment media. However, their potential to provide commentary on real world events and issues is increasingly recognized and exploited. This paper is part of the development of *Sola*, a game that aims to represent the climate of tension, discomfort and anxiety that characterizes the daily life of women in parts of the world where women abuse is increasingly prevalent. In such places, violence against women is a pervasive and ongoing social problem that is found in the private as much as the public sphere. The ultimate link of this long chain of hate and violence perpetuated by a patriarchal and capitalist society where the female body is seen as exploitable and disposable is femicide: “Unspeakable and unrepresentable forms of degradation and violation, both to the body and the being of women and girl” (Rosa Linda Fregoso). Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, the team strives to achieve this effect without resorting to mundane video game tropes such as graphical depictions of violence or trite scare tactics, e.g. the jump-scare. In this paper, we will consider two fundamental game design concerns—namely goals and level design—and examine how they can be leveraged to convey latent anguish in players.

2. FEMICIDE IN VIDEO GAMES

According to ECLAC, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, at least 12 women from Latin-American and Caribbean die each day. A recent study done in 2016 showed that seven out of ten countries with the highest female murder rate in the world are located in South America. Countries such as El Salvador, Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and Brazil are amongst the first ten names in the list. femicide is an ongoing war against women: in Argentina, cases of femicide have increased in number over the last years. In 2015, a woman was victim of femicide every 31 hours.

2.1 Serious Games

In *Critical Play*, Mary Flanagan asks: “What if some games, and the more general concept of play, not only provide outlets for entertainment but also function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social

issues?” (p.1). Flanagan proposes to see games as artistic, political and social critiques or interventions to highlights larger cultural issues. *Sola* sits somewhere between what Ian Bogost describes as “artgames”, characterized by representing an experience, a way of experiencing the world through a particular lens, and the notion of “activist games”, focused on social issues and education (Flanagan, 13). *Sola* starts with a black and white short film showing a young woman on a train. While the train moves, the windows reveal the darkness of the night escorted by the city lights. The female character walks freely in a rainy city, while the dark streets are filled with an eerie and thick atmosphere. Throughout a low-key bluish almost black and white visual style and influenced by an aesthetic borrowed from film noir, the game evokes a climate of fear and tension. *Sola*’s ambition is to represent the climate of fear, menace and vulnerability experienced by a woman walking alone at night.

3. GOALS

According to the authors of game design anthology *Rules of Play*, “a game’s goal is a central feature of its formal system” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, The MIT Press). It thus follows that player goals are a good place to start when designing a video game since other game design components will converge to steer the player towards them. However, goal-setting turned out to be more problematic in the case of this project, mainly because of its socially relevant theme. The player (playing as a female protagonist) was first assumed to have to get home, since the notion of home usually holds a sense of safety and shelter. However, this is not the case for many women who are victims of domestic violence. *Sola* is a serious game project about experiencing a woman’s perspective walking alone in the streets at night. In *Sola*, an important design decision is the framing of the character’s destination: is the character heading home? Is home a safe place? Is the city environment a threat for a woman? The process of designing this game triggered a discussion about the design and experiential implications that reside in the seemingly unproblematic notion of a game’s “goal”.

3.1 Discussing home as the game’s objective: Is home safe?

Home has a deep emotional meaning, it is the place that we share with our families, a space that we nurture with love and in exchange it provides us with shelter and an illusion of safety. What happens if we remove the emotional aspect? Is it still a home or a merely physical structure? The meaning of home can easily vanish. What happens

when this shelter, our home, becomes an active agent associated with our own suffering and traumatic experiences? The warmth of home is lost when the walls become witnesses of torture. For many women, home is a space related to alienation and emotional turmoil. Victims of domestic violence may experience home as the scenario of their own nightmares. Nightmares that are lived on a daily basis, nightmares in which the protagonists can be partners, husbands, brothers or even fathers. Nightmares that will, without doubts, leave eternal scars on the victim's body and memory.

Socialist feminists claim that the domestic sphere is the space where patriarchy gains strength. Expanding on the Marxist research on home, they claim that: "capitalism produces inequality in tandem with patriarchal relations and ideologies that position women as inferior to men" (Blunt & Dowling, 16). Home can be a key site in the oppression of women: "As a symbolic representation, home "serves to remove women from the 'real' world of politics and business" (Blunt & Dowling, 15). Defining home as the final objective for the game would imply that home is a safe space for women, and this is far from the truth. Home can be the most lethal place for a woman: "The vast majority of incidents of violence against women take place in the home or other private and semi private spheres. An accurate map of urban rape would highlight far more bedrooms than alleyways and parks" (Pain 1997: 233, qtd. in Blunt & Dowling)

3.2 Depicting a South American City: The Risk of Trivializing Violence

Let us imagine that we use home as the game's destination. We would have point A and point B. Point A being the exit of the subway station and the beginning of the player's interaction with the city, and point B being home. Point A and B would be areas depicted as safe spaces, free from obstacles and unforeseeable dangers. According to this structure, everything in between point A and point B would be an unsafe and dangerous area. Ergo, street/city equals danger, or in other words, South American cities are dangerous. The purpose of this game is by no means, to instigate fear and to represent underdeveloped countries as threatening and unsafe places. I stand against the trivialization of this issue for sensationalist purposes. We cannot deny that these countries have an ongoing lack of public security, however, this is not the message that I want to convey with this game.

3.3 Moving forward

When discussing what 'home' should be replaced by, we asked ourselves how the player's goal could best contribute to the aesthetic that we had in mind. This is where our approach differs from other attempts at putting values into play such as Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007). Our game is less about having the player decipher the message that is encoded in the game's operations and more about having them experience a *climate of fear* where otherwise mundane occurrences take on a sinister dimension. Here, player action matters less than the context

in which it is held. Similarly, this game does not strive to have players experience a sense of agency over the game world. In fact, it strives to do the opposite. Thus, player goals are not as essential to the player experience as they would be in another game.

While we were aware that most players would be looking for directions as to what they were supposed to do, we eventually realized that not giving them that would create a malaise which we could leverage as a source of meaning: there is in fact nothing that the player can do to resolve or remove themselves from the situation they find themselves in. They can only keep walking and sample the range of fears that the threat of abject violence can inflict on the mind. The lack of a clear direction might prove frustrating to some players, but we hope that this effect will be dampened by the game's low interaction cost—player cannot fail or lose the game. Plus, the game will be played in the context of an exhibit denouncing women abuse, which should inform the player's reading of the game. After all, even Salen and Zimmerman acknowledge that "goals are not the only reason people play games."

4. LEVEL DESIGN

Level design is a critically important area of video game design since it is where all of the individual parts that make up a video game are brought together in a cohesive whole. However, its contribution to the player's experience is not limited a harmonious integration of disparate elements. The space that hosts play has expressive properties of its own. When deciding on how to best convey a feeling of latent tension and anguish while staying true to the ethos of our project, we realized that the expressivity of the space was something that we could leverage to our ends. In keeping with our refusal to provide the player with explicit directions, we opted to make the level open and non-linear. We also chose to have the game take place at night during downpour so their vision and their hearing would be impaired, furthering their sense of helplessness and dread.

4.1. Architecture and Human Psychology

In an article published on game industry website Gamasutra, architect Christopher Totten highlights the connection between human survival instincts and the way human beings relate to different kinds of spaces. Borrowing from fellow architect Grant Hildebrand's work on the aesthetics of architecture, Totten discusses three categories of spaces. Narrow spaces where our senses are impaired and where we are unable to move properly make us feel vulnerable (Totten, 2011). In the context of level design, we feel that the previous statement can be generalized into the following: spaces that make using the game's controls and mechanics difficult or awkward will increase discomfort in the player. Although one must be careful not to overstep the line between discomfort and immersion-breaking antagonism, incorporating narrow spaces in the layout of a level is one of the ways level design can introduce a sense of tension in the player's experience. Conversely, a space that is too wide and open may also induce discomfort in players because it will make them feel

exposed to potential threats. Hildebrand and Totten call this kind of space a prospect space and the latter suggests that such a space may evoke a feeling akin to agoraphobia (Totten, 2011). Intimate spaces are “neither confining nor overly large” and are meant to make the player feel in control (Totten, 2011). In level design terms, these spaces should fully support the game’s mechanics and afford courses of actions that the player is able to recognize and act out. In a more general sense, these spaces should be imbued with the aesthetic qualities that the game employs to serve as counterweights to vulnerability, threat and tension. Since our game is meant to make the player feel uncomfortable, we designed the level so that it only consists of spaces that are little too narrow or a little too wide. There is nowhere for the player to feel a sense of safety or control. The images below show a prospect space and a narrow space within the city.

5. CONCLUSION

Sola aims to create an atmosphere of tension, discomfort and anxiety, those feelings that many women carry with them while walking the streets at night. The dense and thick atmosphere and the ambiguity of the game’s goal goes in hand with the uncertainty felt by the player while walking the streets of this eerie city. In *Sola*, the doubt of not knowing what could happen is felt as an almost tangible burden, the burden of being continuously alert while doing something as simple as walking. Walking the streets of this city becomes a matter of how do we want to experience our fear. Violence against women is supported by patriarchal and capitalist structures that are reproduced and perpetuated in everyday actions and naturalized preconceptions. As designers and artists in the process of designing a game dealing with delicate subjects, such as violence against women and femicide, we must be aware and responsible for the meaning and implications embedded in our work.

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