

My Friend Scarlet: Interactive Tragedy in *The Path*

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Malcolm Ryan¹ and Brigid Costello²

Abstract

Interactive storytelling has been a topic of much debate for the past two decades. Many have foreseen exciting new works; while others have cast doubt on the whole endeavor. In terms of actual titles, most games express a familiar story of a hero triumphing against the odds in order to save the day. However, a number of recent titles have attempted to innovate. *The Path* is one such game. Rather than a tale of heroism, *The Path* is a tragedy of shattered innocence, powerfully told through play. The authors perform a close reading of this work and highlight the importance of the *ludic contract* between the player and the game. The authors distinguish two different contracts employed by the work, *antagonistic* and *exploratory*, which make different appeals and offer different rewards. *The Path* manipulates these contracts to lead the player into being both the architect of the tragedy and its helpless victim.

Keywords

story, narrative, tragedy, analysis, horror, ludic contract

¹ School of Computer Science and Engineering, University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia

² School of English, Media and Performing Arts, University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Malcolm Ryan, School of Computer Science and Engineering, University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney 2052, Australia
Email: malcolmr@cse.unsw.edu.au

Introduction

... it is hard to create a tragic video game—tragedies are about events beyond our control that are then transformed into something more meaningful through the tragedy, but games are mostly about having power and overcoming challenges.

Jesper Juul, *Half-Real* (Juul, 2005)

In his book *Half-Real*, Juul argues that video game tragedy is difficult to create because tragedy requires a lack of control while games are usually about having and exercising control. In games, players exercise their control to overcome the obstacles and achieve the goals of the game. Successfully achieving these goals produces the positive emotional affect of gaming. For Juul, a goal with tragic consequences would negate these positive emotional rewards and thus be a goal that the player did not wish to achieve. Similar arguments have been made about interactive storytelling. Bernstein and Greco (2004) go so far as to say that interactive tragedy is impossible:

Even if we could experience Hamlet on the Holodeck, it wouldn't work. Tragedy requires that the characters be blind ... If you let a sane and sensible reader-protagonist into the room, everything is bound to collapse.

Mark Bernstein (Bernstein & Greco, 2004).

Tragedy requires what Aristotle called *hamartia*—a fatal mistake made in ignorance by the protagonist (Aristotle. *Poetics*. Penguin, 350BC). The drama of this situation, it is argued, requires a separation between the audience who is aware of the mistake and the protagonist who is not. In contrast, a game requires the player to take on the role of the protagonist and optimize his or her choices in order to win. Thus, a rational player, the argument goes, would never choose to procrastinate like Hamlet or blind himself like Oedipus and this refusal makes interactive tragedy unachievable. Indeed, such games are almost entirely unheard of among commercial titles which tend to limit their stories to heroic tales in which the player-protagonist overcomes incredible odds to save the world.

This need not be the case. In recent times, independent game creators have dared to explore beyond the established boundaries of game genre and create new kinds of play previously thought unachievable. *The Path* is a recent example of such a game which demonstrates that it is possible to create a game with a truly tragic protagonist. In doing so, it not only shows that such games are possible to make and enjoyable to play, it also brings a new element to tragedy that can only exist in an interactive medium: player culpability. The effect of the tragedy is amplified, rather than diminished, by making it the result of the player's choice. The player is not just an observer, he must accept some of the responsibility for the outcome.

In this article, we undertake a close reading of *The Path* in terms of its game mechanics and narrative content, to reveal how it achieves this effect. The principle technique is a deliberate subversion of the "ludic contract" to change the relationship

between the player and the game from one of antagonism to one of exploration and sympathetic cocreation. A control scheme that maintains a distance between the player and the protagonist, coupled with well-crafted character development, sets up a sympathy for the protagonist that leads the player into a difficult moral decision. He¹ must choose whether to allow the tragedy to play out and thus become complicit in the events that follow or else steer the protagonist clear of harm but give up the narrative climax of the game.

The Path is not a game that appeals to everyone and it has provoked some vigorous debates in reviews and online forums about what games are and are not supposed to be. In those players that it does appeal to, it produces an intense emotional reaction. These players describe it as “fascinating and thought-provoking” (Gillen, 2009), “genuinely upsetting” (Walker, 2009), “extremely engaging” (McElroy, 2009), and a game that “. . . tapped into something really deep inside me” (Rose, 2009). Many of these players express a sense of wonder that an experience so unsettling can also be enjoyable. As Juul argued above it seems counterintuitive to associate the tragic outcomes in the game with enjoyment and yet many players do enjoy playing *The Path*. It is this particular experience of the game that we have chosen to focus on here with the descriptions of player experience that follow being based on both our experience of the game and on player experiences described in online forums.

About the Game

The Path (Harvey & Samyn, 2009) is described by its authors, Michaël Samyn and Aureia Harvey, as “a short horror game inspired by older versions of Little Red Ridinghood.” As horror it has little in common with other games of the genre, with no “monsters,” gore, or explicit violence. Instead, it employs a foreboding atmosphere, disturbing imagery and unstated, off-camera violence to create a scene all the more unpleasant because it is left to the player’s imagination. The game works with the themes of the loss of innocence and awakening female sexuality found in the original tale (before its transition to the nursery, as Zipes, 1993 explains) in a way that is confronting without ever being gratuitous.

In the tradition of the Red Ridinghood fairy tale, the game proceeds in three scenes. In the first scene, the player selects one of the six sisters to take on the journey to Grandma’s house. The girls vary in age from 9 to 19 and have varying personalities to match, as is already expressed in their looks and their preoccupation as they wait to be chosen. The selected girl is given her basket and set on the path to Grandma’s house.

The second scene takes place on (and off) the path through the woods. The player is given his first instruction as to the purpose of the game. He is told to “Go to Grandmother’s house and stay on the path.” The player is given control of the girl as in a standard third person 3-D game and can choose to either follow the path to Grandma’s house or else to stray into the woods and explore. Obeying the rules results in an uneventful journey and the beginning of third act. Straying from the

path is more rewarding, allowing the player to find various objects and locations the girl can interact with, leading ultimately to an encounter with their “Wolf” character. The exact nature of this encounter differs for each girl, but it always involves meeting another character, alluring to the girl but somewhat threatening to the player. If the player allows the interaction between them to proceed a cut-scene is shown. The action is threatening with rapidly rising tension but the climax is concealed as the screen turns black. After this encounter, the girl appears lying unconscious on the path outside her Grandmother’s house in the rain. It is a short but painfully slow walk to the house.

Inside the house, the gameplay changes. Play shifts to a first-person perspective and the player has little control over which way the girl goes. The game resembles a ghost-train always moving forward through the rooms and corridors of the house, so long as the player keeps pressing keys. The journey has a dream-like quality, with long corridors and occasional strangely important objects, more symbolic in nature than real. If the player stayed on the path and did not encounter the Wolf, the dream is relatively benign, but if the girl has met the Wolf this scene is distinctly nightmarish.

The ending depends again on the girl’s obedience. If the Wolf encounter has not been played, the girl enters the bedroom where the Grandmother is lying asleep (or perhaps dead). The girl lies down beside her and the game ends. However, if the girl has met the Wolf the nightmare ends with a broken sequence of frighteningly surreal sound and imagery. After either ending, a results screen is shown, confrontingly declaring the former outcome as failure and the latter as success.

The whole game is a much richer experience than we can do justice to in this short description, but we hope these details are enough to give context to the analysis that follows. Unfamiliar readers are urged to play the game themselves to understand it fully.

Horror and Tragedy

This isn’t jump out at you scary. This is rot your brain, make you think you saw something in the corner of your eye, “there-one-minute-gone-the-next” kinda scary . . .

Comment by ZuluHero. (Gillen, 2009)

Horror and tragedy have in common that they both aim to evoke fear in their audience. Tragedy is also associated with pity and, in modern definitions, with sadness. In both forms, these “negative emotions” are enjoyed, something that theorists call the “paradox of tragedy” and the “paradox of horror” (Gaut, 1993). This enjoyment results from what Aristotle termed *catharsis*, a purging of strong emotions. This pleasure, he wrote, “comes from pity and fear through imitation” (Aristotle, 1997). Like gameplay, because the emotions are imitation they lie within a magic circle—separated from everyday consequences. In this regard, the game environment is well suited to tragedy and horror.

The mechanics of tragedy have been identified as empathy, identification, and suspense (Hiltunen, 2001). The audience must first develop a sympathetic relationship with the protagonist. The downfall of a villain is not tragic, a tragic protagonist must to some degree be innocent. Aristotle describes the tragic character as one “whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.” (Aristotle, 1997). This frailty leads to *harmartia*, a tragic flaw which brings about her downfall.

The suspense of a tragedy lies in the combination of superior knowledge and helplessness enjoyed by the audience. This relationship is famously explained by film director Alfred Hitchcock in his “bomb under the table” example (Truffaut, 1967). While aware of the character’s mistake and the direction it will lead, the audience is left waiting *dénouement* unable to prevent the inevitable. In this regard, tragedy and horror have a lot in common, although in horror there is always the hope that the protagonist will prevail, or at least escape his fate. This difference may well explain why horror games are a widely accepted genre while tragedies are not.

Analysis

How does *The Path* create interactive tragedy? There are four important stages. First, the game must overcome the standard assumption that one plays a game to “win.” It does this by deliberately unsettling the player, presenting itself initially as a game of challenges and rewards, and then failing to provide either. It then leads the player through a phase of exploration in which a rapport is built with the protagonist. The player gets to know the girl and the particular “frailty” of her character is revealed. At the same time, a narrative distance is created between the player and the protagonist, which creates an awareness in the player of his role as director of the events that follow.

The third stage is a scene of suspense and tragic *dénouement*. The girl encounters the Wolf and the player is given a choice: allow the interaction to take place or withdraw. If he proceeds, as ultimately he must, the responsibility for the outcome lies with him, as the girl herself is innocent of the danger. The final stage is the aftermath in which the player must not only observe but also enact the tragic ending of the game.

We shall look at each stage in more detail, describing an “ideal” play-through in which each stage is explored in order. Naturally, as an interactive process, the player may not experience the stages in this particular sequence, but a thorough player should encounter all these possibilities.

Staying on the Path: Making and Breaking the Ludic Contract

Go to Grandmother’s house. Stay on the path.

Rules of *The Path*.

Every artistic medium creates its own audience. That is to say, through repeated use of certain forms and their implied meanings, a tacit agreement is drawn between the

artist and the audience. This agreement defines how the audience is to interact with the work and what they can in return expect from it. Audiences are comfortable with works they understand. Works that fail to follow the contract are usually unsatisfying although a skilled author can deliberately defy these expectations for enjoyable effect.

In games, we call this agreement the *ludic contract* (Hocking, 2007). In its most common form, it looks like the following:

1. There is a goal that the player must achieve.
2. There are boundaries within which the player must remain.
3. The game will present obstacles to prevent the player from achieving the goal.
4. Overcoming obstacles is difficult but rewarding.
5. Final victory is won by defeating all obstacles and achieving the goal.

This kind of play is so prevalent that it has often been used as the very definition of a game itself (Huizinga, 1938; Juul, 2005; Suits, 1978), but we shall label it the *antagonistic contract* as it emphasizes antagonism between the player and the game. The pleasures it produces are typically those of challenge, achievement, and mastery.

Yet, there are other kinds of play experiences, other pleasures to have than challenge, and other narratives to tell than battle (Costello, 2009). *The Path* is a precursor to what Michaël Samyn calls his *notgame* project, which asks:

Can we create a form of digital entertainment that explicitly rejects the structure of games? What is an interactive work of art that does not rely on competition, goals, rewards, winning or losing?

(Samyn, 2010).

The Path is an attempt to create such a work. It contains a deliberate appeal to and then rejection of the antagonistic contract.

At first, the game seems to embrace the contract. When you enter the game, having chosen a girl, you are presented with one simple goal and one simple rule, both of which will be familiar to readers of the nursery story: “Go to Grandmother’s house” and “Stay on the path” (Figure 1). The first 2 items of the contract have been set and an experienced player anticipates the inevitable trials he will face. None are forthcoming. The path to Grandmother’s is straight, brightly lit, pretty and, truth be told, somewhat overlong and tedious. The girl reaches the house after an uneventful journey, and what she discovers inside is no more exciting. It is a short trip to the bedroom where Grandmother is lying on the bed in an ambiguously corpse-like pose. The girl climbs up on the bed beside her and the game ends with an anticlimax as Grandma opens her eyes.

At this point, the player receives a shock. The final end screen, which would normally announce the player’s victory, unambiguously declares “FAILURE” (Figure 2). The contract is broken. The player has clearly done what was required on his part, but the game has failed to produce obstacles and rewards, and does not acknowledge his victory. The declaration of failure seems at once to be a



Figure 1. The two rules of the game: Go to Grandmother's house and stay on the path.

commentary on the girl's obedience to her mother and on the player's obedience to the game. It causes the player to question what success and failure mean.

Success and failure are concepts that have been subverted here, meaning that trying to play *The Path* as a conventional video game will only prevent you from reaching closure in the story; even the very notion that a video game must be fun to play is defied. (McCafferty, 2009)

The Path is not the only game to manipulate the ludic contract for effect. Other titles such as *BioShock* and *Braid* include similar subversions, exploiting the player's automatic obedience to the rules, and then questioning his freedom to make his own choices (Tulloch, 2009). On its own it might be regarded as a cheap trick, but here it plays an important narrative role. This dramatically unsatisfying ending for choosing obedience will contrast later with the alternative for disobedience.

Entering the Woods: Creating Identification and Empathy

Having derailed the player's expectation of how they are supposed to interact with the game, *The Path* immediately begins again, asking the player to choose a new girl and putting her back at the beginning of the path. The same injunction is given, but now it

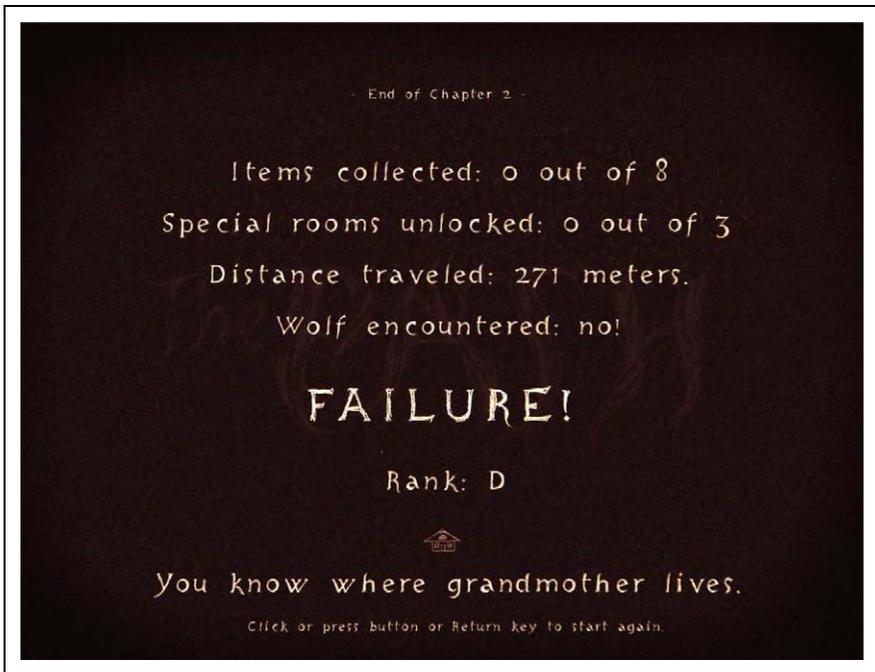


Figure 2. The results screen showing failure.

rings hollow, as the player knows obedience is not rewarding. There is a very obvious temptation to stray from the path and see what happens. The game has already hinted at this alternative in various ways. Familiarity with the original story naturally suggests that disobedience could be interesting. The failure screen itself refers to things to be found, secret rooms to be unlocked, and an encounter with the Wolf to be had. Yielding to curiosity is natural.

This is the point that the game begins to reward the player, not through challenges but through exploration and discovery. In the process of trying to work out what to do, the player discovers a variety of interesting locations in the woods where the girl can interact with objects. The places and objects found are richly symbolic and do not fit together in a neat narrative interpretation. Each one yields a short reflection from the girl and these are likewise more poetic than lucid. They are designed to intrigue the player, pique the imagination, and reveal some element of the girl's personality, be it innocent or cynical or flirtatious. Thus, a new contract is forged based not on narrative of challenge but on the narrative of discovery and character development. We shall label this the *exploratory contract*. It is characterized by the rules:

1. There are secrets hidden around the virtual space.
2. As the player travels through the space, the secrets are uncovered.
3. Each piece yields a part of a greater story.

This contract has similar structure to the previous, but the difference lies in the absence of challenge. Exploration is not difficult and the “secrets” are often available in open view. The pleasure it provides is that of discovery, what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) characterizes as the “challenge of the unknown” rather than the “challenge of competition.” This kind of contract is also widely used, most prominently in “open world” games which invite the player to spend hours merely travelling and enjoying the scenery. When the “secrets” are more cleverly hidden, the two contracts may be considered to coincide.

In *The Path*, the exploration is both physical and personal. The “scenery” is a selection of rather grim discoveries: a dead bird, a hypodermic needle, the rusted chassis of a car. Together they create an atmosphere that is dark, polluted, and tinged with evil, not the pristine “nature” of flowers and furry animals from a fairy tale. It is not a place that one feels is suitable for a young girl. Meanwhile the girl’s reactions to each discovery are often naïve of the danger it represents. Each girl has a different personality but in each case she is somehow ignorant and innocent of the menacing world she explores.

Much could be said about this part of the game. *The Path* is a layered work, which rewards exploration with many discoveries, at once beautiful and sinister. One significant event that occurs at this time is the disappearance of the path. When the girl wanders deep enough into the wood to lose sight of it, the path is quietly removed from the map and no amount of searching will uncover it. This can be a thoroughly disorientating experience as there are few other landmarks in the woods and without a compass or map it is already easy to lose your way. The playful exploration that began this scene is transformed into an increasingly worried search for the way back home. When the player is unaware of it, this trick performs a very good job of recreating the distress of being lost and alone.² Players often reported this feeling of disorientation as a significant theme of the game:

when walking it felt like slow motion, when running the camera would pan so you could not see where you were going . . . and then there’s this feeling of being lost, of not knowing what to do.

Comment by hanzo (Rose, 2009)

I almost felt as if my disorientation was being used at some points, like [the designers] knew I felt off-kilter and used that feeling to creep me out even more.

(McElroy, 2009)

Creating Narrative Distance

An important aspect of this phase of gameplay is the narrative distance established between the player and the girl. Whereas previously she was closer to the stereotypical anonymous protagonist featured in many games, she begins to take on her own personality. The process began in the original act of choosing a girl in the opening scene but is emphasized here by the peculiar mechanic of interaction the game employs. To have the girl interact with a discovered object, the player must guide her

near it and then release the controls.³ Only after a second or two of freedom does the girl begin to interact and the player cannot choose the manner in which she will respond. This is a rather unique control scheme among video games, and works to emphasize the otherness of the girl. The traditional identification between the player and the protagonist shifts as the girl is established as a character with her own thoughts, interests and desires, which the player can direct but not control.

The slow pace then gives the player time to absorb the experiences rather than allow them to race from one to the next. You're actually less of a player and more of a director. Dictating the general order of events and relinquishing control to the character of each girl rather than interacting directly with the world. Many would think it a dichotomy but this actually strengthens the immersion.

Comment by Tiger_waits (Gillen, 2009)

In his discussion of ethics and gameplay, Miguel Sicart (2009) connects the technique of character distancing with creating the type of awareness that Brecht calls *alienation* (Brecht, 1977). Sicart describes how this effect can be used for ethical gameplay: Games like *ManHunt* which force the player to perform grisly acts "... operate almost as Brechtian experiences, forcing the player to permanent awareness of the act of playing a game and, as such, breaking engagement as a rhetorical trope for ethics-based gameplay." (Samyn, 2010). In *The Path*, this awareness is innocuous at first but strikes the player forcefully when he encounters the Wolf.

Meeting the Wolf: Tragedy and Choice

Those qualities of games which, it was argued, made tragedy impossible have now been undermined. A distance has been created between the player and the protagonist, such that the player can recognize the otherness of the girl and a new contract has been created which emphasizes the revelation of her character rather than the successful achievement of a goal. The player has become a willing participant in the unfolding story, but his willingness shall be tested in the encounter with the Wolf.

The world of *The Path* is unusually empty. There are only three nonplayer characters in the game: Grandma, the little Girl in White, and the Wolf. When lost in the woods, the safety of Grandma's house is unreachable. So, the player's attention naturally gravitates toward the other two. The Girl in White is a guide. She is friendly and helpful, not so interesting in herself but useful in the other places she can lead the player. She feeds the desire for exploration by guiding the girl toward significant locations. If desired, she can take the girl back to the path, even after it has vanished. She can also lead the player to find the Wolf.

The Wolf, on the other hand, is at once more alluring and more frightening. Each girl meets a different Wolf character in a different part of the woods, but in each case, it is someone or something that appeals to a weakness (tragic flaw) in the character of the girl. Thus, Ruby in her rebelliousness is attracted to the dangerous young

man in the playground. Carmen, the 17-year-old wanting to be an adult, flirts with the woodsman and drinks his beer. Robin, the youngest and most innocent, meets an actual Wolf and wants to cuddle it. In each case, the player knows the girl should be afraid but she herself is careless of the danger.

At this point, the player faces a choice. The significance of this encounter is underscored in several ways. When the girl first approaches the area the Wolf inhabits, a short cut-scene plays, with flashes of disturbing imagery. The music changes to something more ominous and in some cases other ambient effects (lighting, weather, etc.) change also. It is clear that this encounter will offer a narrative climax in the game. It is also clear that it will not be a happy encounter. The decision is placed in the player's hands. Should he satisfy his curiosity and desire for narrative closure by allowing the girl to face the Wolf, or should he lead her away to safety, knowing that the only alternative is the anticlimax of the failed ending?

The choice is a trap, made all the more uncomfortable because the player knows it to be one. This is not some two-dimensional non-player character (NPC) that can be sacrificed without loss. The time spent exploring with the girl has added depth to her character and created sympathy between her and the player, but only the most sensitive of players could resist the desire to find out what happens. Once again, the game has set up a ludic contract and then subverted it. It has promised to reveal secrets, piqued the player's curiosity, and now it dares him to see how far he will go to satisfy it.

Inevitably, the player yields to the temptation and the encounter cut-scene begins. In another game, this loss of player control would be regarded as a flaw, but here it is deliberate and effective. Having made his choice, the player cannot back out. He is forced to watch the consequences with the helplessness that is characteristic of horror and tragedy (Frome & Smuts, 2004; Krzywinska, 2002). Naive to the threat, the girl approaches and interacts with the Wolf in a sequence that is more chilling than overtly nasty. At the climax, the screen goes black and the player is left to imagine the rest for himself.

It is the manipulative nature of this choice that makes it most powerful. By deliberately allowing the interaction, the player shares responsibility for the outcome as these player comments demonstrate:

There are parts when I felt not only very uncomfortable but terrible for what I was causing to happen. Maybe it is only like watching something terrible happen in a movie where you don't really have control, but you do, sort of. Enough that I can keep it from happening or set it in motion to happen . . . But not enough that I directly do the things. So it makes me feel bad for doing things but powerless to stop them.

Comment by Zanthox (Burch, 2009)

its still hard not to feel some sense of guilt. As if by not interacting (thereby letting the characters interact with some pretty dangerous stuff) I was being complicit.

Comment by Jorge Albor (Abbott, 2009)

If it were a film, you could shout at the screen at their sheer idiocy for talking to these creepy strangers. When you're the one forcing them to do so, then, well, you've no one else to blame.

Comment by LewisResolution (Gillen, 2009)

Who could honestly get to this point and walk away, knowing the only other conclusion is to return to the path (if it can be found) and accepting the failure ending of the original play-through?⁴ This kind of manipulation has also been explored in a few other games, such as *Execution* and *Shadow of the Colossus*, although in those games the only alternative is to choose to stop playing, which is somehow less satisfying.

The Aftermath

The game might have ended at this point, leaving the player to speculate on what befell the girl and regret his decision, but *The Path* goes one step further. It requires the player to participate in the aftermath. The scene shifts back to the path, where the girl is lying, broken, as the rain pours down. There is a moment of inaction for the player to wonder whether she is dead, before she picks herself up with difficulty. She is standing a short distance from the gate to her Grandmother's, but she does not move without the player's direction. So, the player returns to his role as interactor, only now the girl's movement is painfully slow, with a limp as if injured, creating an almost physical discomfort in the player. As one player describes it "... she feels very old, almost crippled or abused" (Abbott, 2009). Slowly they make their way together to the house (other directions are possible but yield nothing) to seek solace, or if only to end the pain.

What is interesting here is that the game deliberately prolongs the agony of the player's mistake. Again, in other games this would be regarded as a design flaw, but here it is used for particular effect, to make real the girl's tragedy and to provide a dramatic pause before the final climax of the game.

Inside the house the previously dream-like train-ride turns nightmarish. The lighting is weird and unpleasant, surreal elements appear throughout, and a frightening growl starts up if the player does not continue on. Instead of reaching Grandma's room, the final destination is a bizarrely surreal sequence of disturbing images linked to the girl's various discoveries and her encounter with the Wolf.

Both Grandma's house and the Wolf cut-scene deliberately use ambiguous yet evocative imagery. They suggest bad or unpleasant things but they leave it to the player's imagination to flesh these out. As Samyn says, when designing a game, *Tale of Tales* starts with a question rather than an explicit message:

"what would it feel like if I were that person in this situation" for instance. The game, then, does not really express anything as such, directly. It becomes a tool for the player to fantasize and invent all sorts of "meanings."

Comment by Michaël Samyn (Samyn, 2010)

This technique of leaving meanings ambiguous and open to interpretation is one that is often used to great effect by artists. When used in an interactive context it can make the interactor feel as if the meaning that they have invented “belongs” to them and this can result in intense playful pleasures (Gaver, Beaver, & Benford, 2003). This is because of the creative and improvisational nature of the play behavior it produces (Costello & Edmonds, 2009). This technique, then, adds to the possible enjoyment that the player gets from the game in two ways. The player feels the pleasure of creation and this contributes to the player’s feeling of responsibility for the tragic outcome, thereby strengthening the cathartic pleasure that the tragedy within the game can cause.

On finishing, the reward screen announces “SUCCESS” but the player is left to question what kind of success this is. Which of the choices was the better one, to live a life that is safe, obedient, and dull, or to defy the rules, indulge your curiosity, and accept the loss of innocence it brings.

Conclusion

The problem with this kind of game is that the levels of entertainment a person can get out of it depend on the person themselves, whereas a game dedicated to being fun has a better chance of fitting everyone’s needs.

(Rose, 2009)

Much more could be said about this game. It rewards repeated play with many more discoveries and its symbolism has created a fertile debate as to its message. For our purposes, it stands as an illustration that a game can indeed portray a tragic story, and that interactivity can heighten the sense of pathos, rather than destroy it. *The Path* achieves this by negotiating a different ludic contract, subverting the traditional antagonistic model of games. Meanwhile, the control the player has over the protagonist is carefully modulated—demanded, yielded, and taken away as the narrative requires. Some would say that this is not a game, but we cannot find any better name for it.

There is a saying of which we are fond: *The one on the ground should never contradict the one who is flying*. That is to say, it is easy but unhelpful to claim that something is impossible when it is merely untried. Having a narrow view of the possible pleasures of gaming in turn narrows the possible types of games that people make, leading to what Thomas Grip calls the “evil spiral” (Grip, 2010) and the stagnation of the medium. Samyn agrees:

The games industry is very well organized and very successful within its own ecosystem. But it has optimized all of its systems and habits for internal use. As a result, only gamers like games. And everybody else doesn’t understand them or is even disgusted by them. Which is problematic for us. Essentially, we make games for non-gamers—and, in general, non-gamers hate games.

Michaël Samyn (Alexander, 2009)

Samyn describes his approach to games as being like punk rock “taking a new technological incarnation of an old analog form and . . . introducing elements to it that seem to contradict the form’s original merits.” Every medium has to keep reinventing itself in order to stave off irrelevance. It is easy to believe that games have reached the limits of their potential—innovative games like *The Path* show this to be false. We have only just begun to scratch the surface.

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Notes

1. In this article, we have chosen to use the male pronoun for the player to distinguish him from the female protagonist. The effects of this game on different gender players would be an interesting topic in itself, but not one we want to explore here.
2. It is indeed possible to return to the path, but discovering the method unassisted is unlikely.
3. There is, in fact, a control to explicitly command interaction, but it is not revealed to the player in the brief in-game instructions, which explicitly tell the player to release the controls to interact.
4. A third solution, to avoid the question by quitting and restarting the game, occurred to one of the authors. It turns out the designers anticipated that choice also. If the player quits while in the woods, the girl is lost forever.

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Bios

Malcolm Ryan is a lecturer in the school of computer science and engineering at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia where he teaches the Game Design Workshop and is the director of the Games Research Laboratory. His research combines elements of computer games, storytelling, and artificial intelligence.

Brigid Costello is a lecturer in the school of English, media, and performing arts at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Her research interests include interaction design, interactive narrative, play, games, and electronic art. She is particularly interested in theories and methods that can inform the practice of designing and creating interactive works. Her current research focuses on strategies for designing for a playful audience experience.