

Heavy Rain – How I Learned to Trust the Designer

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Heavy Rain is a videogame developed by Quantic Dream and originally released for the Playstation 3 platform in 2010. The game, the brainchild of its director David Cage, was described in promotional materials as an interactive drama. The game features four main playable characters who are all involved, in some way or another, in the mystery of the Origami killer: a serial killer whose modus operandi is to kidnap a child during the rainy season and trap them such that they'll drown due to the continued accumulation of rainfall. The children are later found in a remote location with an origami figure in their hands and an orchid on their chest.

Heavy Rain first came to my attention after hearing about how its technological breakthroughs, such as highly realistic facial animation and modeling, would be used to provide an "adult emotional thriller" told "not through cutscenes but directly through the character's actions: you don't watch the story, you actually play it" (David Cage as quoted in Edge 2008). According to Cage, in *Heavy Rain* you play "with a story almost in the physical sense, changing it, twisting it, discovering it, making it unique, making it yours" (David Cage as quoted in Chester 2009). I confess I was both excited and skeptical. The game industry is no stranger to marketing and hype, and Cage's earlier games, *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* and *Fahrenheit*,¹ only briefly caught my attention as they seemed to have received a mixture of praise and derision from the press. The idea of a fully realized interactive storyworld represents a sort of holy grail of gaming (e.g. Murray 1997; Crawford 2004) and it is something that David Cage, the game's director, has arguably been interested in for some time. *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream 2005), was noted "for its inventive storytelling and immersive techniques" (Sheffield 2008), and was an attempt to push the boundaries of the medium of videogames by "remaining true to its still-young traditions and sometimes by breaking away from them" (Cage 2006). *Fahrenheit* experimented with new directions for the integration of narratives and interaction previously explored in the now-infamous game genre referred to as interactive movies (Lessard 2009). *Fahrenheit* was a bold experiment hampered, in part, due to the immature implementation of its action sequences and poor story (Cage 2006). Would things be different this time around? Mateas and Stern's *Façade* (2005) had been released recently to much critical acclaim providing an example of what could be achieved on a shoestring budget. What could be done with a budget and team orders of magnitude greater? Could a fully realized interactive storyworld with mature themes and high production values finally be realized? *Heavy Rain* sounded like an answer to that question.

My nervousness, as I began playing, was unusual. I've certainly been excited, even thrilled, about playing a new game. Never before had I been nervous. Was I complicit in the hype, wanting to believe this game would "blow my mind"? Had I set myself up for an ultimate disappointment? Or, perhaps the worst outcome of them all, would I find the experience unremarkable?

As a games researcher, these are issues I've had to deal with before. What I think a particular game is, and what others seem to say when they talk about it, invariably shapes my understanding of a game. It also affects how I experience them. The questions I bring with me, together with preconceptions, and, of course, the social and cultural context in which the game is created all play a role. The question is what

¹ Released as *Indigo Prophecy* in the US

role is it, how do I articulate it, possibly disentangle it, and ensure that I come at the game from multiple angles and perspectives in order to really dig deeply?

Much has been written about the role of the player in creating an experience. Oftentimes that is how we describe games when comparing them to other media. Games are special because you, the audience, participate in the creation of an experience. Similarly, we talk about game design as 2nd order design (e.g. Fullerton, Swain et al. 2004; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). You do not design an interaction, rather you design a system so that someone else has an interaction. This rhetoric places the player in the center, largely disconnected from the designer. How you interact with the game, what you make of it, how it should be experienced, are all placed squarely in the hands of the player. We talk of empowering our audiences via games, of providing agency, personalizing their experiences, and so on. The magic circle, as it were, is only for the players. But is that really the case? In this day and age, we, the players, have an incredible amount of access to the thoughts, feelings, and ideas that game designers have. Their voices, in particular when they talk about their games, shape how we approach them, play them, and also understand them. *Heavy Rain* is no exception. As I will discuss later, *Heavy Rain* also complicates things.

A few months prior to the release of *Heavy Rain*, Cage wrote for a weblog hosted by IGN². His blog covered a variety of topics providing insight into the development process of the game and his fears and concerns regarding the games' reception. More importantly, his blog (together with interviews and articles in other venues and publications) served to craft a contract between the designer and myself, the player. Cage was, sometimes explicitly and other times indirectly, asking me to trust him. Asking me, the player, to let go of my fears, to play along, to suspend my disbelief. To stop being a typical gamer. In return, he would offer an experience unlike any I've had before. Something new, something different.

We often talk about the language of games, about the difficulty of developing this language, of the challenges that people who don't play games face when first playing them, and so on. If we believe the hypothesis that the language we know shapes how we act, understand and think about the world³, it should hold that being games literate does the same. Games literacy shapes how we think (Gee 2003). In order for this game to work, Cage was asking me to undo that. He seemed to ask that I become games illiterate. What follows is a reflection of the issues I dealt with as a player. These issues highlight some of the things we take for granted about games, and illustrates how *Heavy Rain* challenges them in interesting ways.

Meaningful Choices

As a player, the phrase "meaningful choices" is either a tired cliché or a conundrum. When is a choice in a game meaningful? As players we have become incredibly adept at recognizing the kinds of choices we make in games and the impact we expect these to have on our overall experience. We are well-versed in discriminating and categorizing the choices we are presented with, and then deciding, which choices we want to make, when and how. Thanks to increasingly more effective signposting by game designers, we distinguish between those choices that matter, and those that do not.

As players, we know that not all choices matter in the same way. That is why we distinguish between side-quests and missions that are required for making progress in a game. Similarly, in games in which we collect things, we discriminate between collecting items that are essential (I need the key to open the door), those that are useful (I found some healing potions), and those that are not (I found a collectable sticker, now I just need 4 more to have them all). We understand how some choices may affect gameplay, some may affect a game's narrative, and also how the choices we might make now, imply a different set

² http://blogs.ign.com/SCE_HeavyRain/2010/02/24/138347/

³ Sapir-Whorck hypothesis

of choices available later on. Thanks in part to how gameplay is segmented, we even understand which things can be “undone” and which cannot. When we can go back and redo, and when we can’t. Sometimes we know this explicitly: *Starcraft II*’s campaign mode warns the player when deciding how to spend research points investigating new technologies, that choosing one option will make the other unavailable (Blizzard Entertainment 2010). In other games, such as *Jedi Knight*, the narrative context of the game helps players understand that choosing to join the Dark side of the Force closes the doors to using the Light side powers of the force (LucasArts 1997).

Heavy Rain’s premise is that all choices matter because they affect how the narrative develops and unfolds. As a gamer, surely this cannot be true, but how do I know? Most (if not all), story-driven games are just that, driven by their narratives. The player understands that certain things must occur in order for the story to advance, and that others may or may not occur, because they’re not relevant. *Heavy Rain* upends that, and as a player, I found myself continually second-guessing myself, wondering if I had missed something important or if a seemingly innocuous decision would have far-reaching effects. In the opening scene of the game, does it matter if I don’t look at the bird in its cage or if I choose not to work in my office and goof-off instead?

While the pressure of the uncertainty was initially overwhelming, it ultimately became liberating. I began to assume that everything mattered, somehow, and that I should take care with everything I did in the game, focusing on what I felt was right over what I felt the game’s designer may have chosen to be “right”. I had to trust the designer. Cage promised that regardless of what I did, the game would move on and provide a coherent, and hopefully compelling, experience.

Action as the driving force

Try as we might to think about games in terms of stories, worlds, and choices, in the end we always end up talking about action. As Crawford has noted, verbs are the vehicle of choice in games. “Whenever we make a choice, we are choosing between verbs. We don’t choose between Door #1, Door #2, and Door #3; we choose between *going through* Door #1, *going through* Door #2, and *going through* Door #3” (Crawford 2003). Perhaps more importantly, for the player, one of the pleasures of playing videogames comes from witnessing the tangible results of the actions taken based on the choices we’ve made. As Murray describes, “agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (pg. 126, Murray 1997). As players, we are keenly aware of the importance of action. Nowadays, we expect to learn how to play a game by experimenting with it directly. We are no longer content to read the manual in order to learn how to play, rather we wonder what each of the buttons does, and what happens when we press them.

Crawford argues that videogames (and interactive storytelling more specifically) are hamstrung by the limited diversity of verbs (actions) used. *Heavy Rain*’s director notes how “when you look at most of the games you see today, they are based on patterns, on loops; you always do the same things, whether you shoot, drive, or jump on platforms. They’ve been based on the same rules for 25 years” (David Cage as quoted in MacDonald 2010). *Heavy Rain* is unusual because, although at any given moment there may be only three or four possible actions available, over the course of the entire game the player can perform hundreds of different actions. Players can “toss a boomerang, rock a baby or stove in heads with a wide selection of electrical appliances. *Heavy Rain* is a point and-click adventure with a massive verb sheet; new actions are as much a twist as the narrative reveals they prompt.” (Edge 2010) “Rather than making large choices every hour or so, the game has you constantly choosing every minute detail of these people’s lives. Every action, every step is entirely up to you. Of course, there has to be a finite number of options, but the way Quantic Dream presents them, they can often feel limitless.” (Orca 2010)

The combination of the sheer variety of actions and the certainty that, in some way or another, all of them matter, results in an experience that is not only intensely personal, but also meaningful. While it may not matter in the grand scheme of things whether I turned on the radio or not, it matters to me because I made that deliberate choice.

In addition to providing a wide spectrum of actions, *Heavy Rain* does something perhaps more interesting: it highlights how action (or acting) isn't the only driving force or motivator for gameplay. In other words, it creates agency from inaction or non-action. *Heavy Rain* features moments when inaction or passivity, perhaps the anti-thesis of gameplay, is not only a valid choice, but may even be the preferred one. For example, towards the end of the prologue, Ethan can play with his kids out in the yard. One of the activities is a mock fight with toy swords. Success at this fight requires that the player match a series of timed-button presses to prompts that appear on-screen. Doing so correctly results in Ethan either gently hitting his son or successfully blocking his son's attack. In this case, should the player try to do her best and not miss any of the cues, yet soundly defeat the child or, should she purposefully miss some of the cues in order to let Ethan's son win? Sicart, in his description of the virtuous player, describes *achieving* as a virtue "present in those players who compete fairly against the challenges of the game and against other players, respecting social norms and rules, and for whom victory is a desirable state in the game but not the most desirable- for that would be enjoying the game, alone or with others" (Sicart 2009). By Sicart's definition, the virtuous player (and father) should let the son win. However, in order to do so the player must resist the temptation to follow the game's on-screen's directions. The player must decide not to act instead of reacting.

The meaning and agency that results from these non-actions isn't necessarily acknowledged by the game. Rather, it results from the player's interpretation and understanding of who the characters are, and what they should be doing. The third chapter of the game, "Father and Son", takes place two years after the prologue. Jason, Ethan's eldest son, died in a car accident (played earlier). The tragedy has had serious consequences on Ethan's life. Ethan no longer lives in a beautiful house, his marriage has apparently disintegrated, and Ethan, now shabby and unkempt, has failed to deal with his role in his oldest son's death. As its title implies, this chapter focuses on Ethan's current relationship with his surviving son, Shaun. After picking up Shaun at school, Ethan takes him home. A detailed schedule posted on the wall provides a framework for what Ethan should do next: snack, homework, dinner, and bed. Although there is no need to rush through each of the tasks, there really isn't enough time to look around or explore. Bogost describes the sequence in which Ethan makes dinner for Shaun, "Ethan sits as Shaun eats, his pallid face staring at nothing. Time seems to pass, but the player must end the task by pressing up on the controller to raise Ethan from his chair. The silent time between sitting and standing offers one of the only emotionally powerful moments in the entire game." (Bogost 2010) This moment of silent contemplation only occurs because the player chooses not to act, to ignore the prompt that appears on the screen. It is a powerful and meaningful moment because of all that is left unsaid. Sticking to Shaun's schedule is simply going through the motions, what the player wants is for Ethan to somehow repair their relationship. To try something. Shaun's relationship with Ethan is so awkward and strained that the player desperately seeks a father-and-son moment that provides some hope for the future. "The game would clearly like the player to believe that this chapter will allow the player to alter the game's narrative based on decisions made on behalf of Ethan." (Bogost 2010) Perhaps Shaun will warm up to Ethan if he simply accompanies him? Maybe if they both sit on the couch together watching TV? Perhaps if Ethan cuts Shaun some slack with the strict schedule letting him stay up later than usual? All of these moments are examples of consciously choosing to ignore the prompts and instructions on the screen, in order to create meaning for the player from the character's circumstances. What would a good parent do? Efficiently shuffle his child through a schedule, or try to create time together hoping to recover a relationship that was once close and loving? Inaction in *Heavy Rain* shifts the player's responsibility from simply choosing the right action from a pre-determined set to one in which the player must additionally contemplate whether or not the set of actions makes sense.

Discomfort and Ambiguity

I felt uncomfortable playing *Heavy Rain*. In and of itself, this isn't a new thing for me (Zagal 2010). *Heavy Rain* has a fair share of intense and dramatic moments. It features scenes in which the characters are under an incredible amount of stress and tension because of the situation they're in. It's hard not to be affected hearing characters sob, cry, moan, or doubt themselves. It's perhaps harder to understand how, thanks to the game's novel interface, the discomfort the character's face is projected upon the player.

In terms of gameplay, the player can interact with the game in several ways⁴. These include:

- moving the main character around the environment;
- pressing a button to select different camera viewing angles;
- responding to onscreen cues. Some cues appear suddenly, while others are triggered contextually based on the character's location or current situation. Responding to these cues usually involves pressing buttons, moving the Dualshock controller's right analog stick in a specific manner, or moving the entire motion-sensitive controller in a certain way, or;
- pressing a button to see what thoughts the character is currently having on certain topics or issues (these constantly change throughout the game). Pressing an additional button (depending on the thought selected) allows the player to hear an internal monologue on that thought.

Additionally, some actions may lead to additional actions that also need to be completed. These additional cues are "chained"; they must all be accomplished in order to fully complete the action. The additional onscreen cues appear alongside the earlier ones in the chain. Also, some actions must be executed slowly while others must be completed in a certain time limit. The cues for which buttons must be pressed, which controller actions must be taken, and what thoughts the character currently has, all appear in different places onscreen (e.g floating around the characters' head, next to an item in the scene).

The interface also provides insight on, and takes account of, the character's emotional state. Having access to the character's thoughts allows the player to better understand what the character is going through, as well as understand what potential options are available. For example, towards the end of the chapter called "Jayden Blues"⁵, FBI agent Norman Jayden has a panic attack. He mumbles, "Triptocaine... The tube is on the bedside table... All I need is... to take some... and the pain will go away." He continues, "I should resist. This is going to kill me. I know I can resist. I just need to stay in control and do something until it goes away." Four icons float around his head: *Tripto*, *Withdrawal*, *Temptation*, and *Calm down*. From the player's perspective, it is not entirely clear what Jayden will do (or think) if *Temptation* is selected. Will Jayden give in and consume the drug on the bedside table? Will he think something about how hard it is to resist the temptation? Similarly with the environment cues, "the cues make clear what can be interacted with, but not necessarily how". (Edge 2010) If you were an addicted drug addict experiencing withdrawal symptoms, are you sure you'd be able to control your impulses and not give in to the temptation? Furthermore, there is additional pressure on the player because he's not sure what happens if no action is selected, does Jayden break down and consume the drug? Is this something that will happen if the player does not intervene? If so, how much time is there before that happens?

There is an additional complication, when a character is stressed or emotionally affected in some way (e.g. angry, scared, etc.), the floating icons shake, shift, and move around. The effect is unsettling because it makes the icons hard to read and figure out. The challenge the character faces (I'm stressed and I can't think clearly, what should I do?) is passed on to the player who can't easily figure out what the available options are, making it more likely that she will make a mistake or do something she'll later regret. It makes it harder to make a choice, it is uncomfortable to watch, and because of these things, is ultimately effective in creating meaningful experiences.

⁴ This analysis considers the Playstation 3 version of the game that does not have Playstation Move support.

⁵ The scene I will describe may or may not occur depending on earlier events in the game.

Additionally, the shaky icons nicely simulate how, in the heat of the moment, things oftentimes can, and do, go wrong. It also facilitates role-taking by literally forcing the player to suffer as the character is suffering. There is a scene where Norman Jayden and a detective are interrogating a suspect. Things quickly get out of hand and the suspect draws a gun on the detective who in turn yells at Norman to shoot the suspect. Almost immediately, multiple icons appear and begin rapidly circling Norman's head. All of them, except for the one labeled R1 (with no accompanying text) flit in and out of view. This last one simply wobbles next to Jayden's head. It is hard to read what the icons that circle around Jayden's head say. While this happens, the detective continues yell and insist that Jayden shoot the suspect. Under this pressure, it is easy to simply press R1 (e.g. Short 2010). Dawdling while trying to figure out the other options might take too long and the suspect, clearly emotional, might shoot the detective. Pressing R1 results in Jayden firing his weapon, instantly killing the suspect. It is obviously the wrong choice, but it's understandable, perhaps even forgivable, given the dramatic tension of the moment.

I was surprised when I shot the suspect. It wasn't something I wanted to do. It wasn't something I intended to do. It just, happened. It was a mistake. However, by this point in the game I realized that it was a mistake I was willing to live with. Not willing in the sense of, "oh, it doesn't really matter, just move on". I was willing to live with it because it stood for my experience. I had to trust the designer that, yes, it is ok to make a mistake. Don't worry, the game moves on. When I realized that I could trust the designer, I was able to come to terms with my mistake. It made me uncomfortable and I regretted having shot the suspect, but it was meaningful.

Shaky icons aren't the only interesting thing about the game's interface. "During some of the more strenuous tasks, [the player] may need to hold down four or five [buttons] at once, twisting [their] fingers into a knot. It is hard to describe how much more immersive this technique is than a flashing icon in the middle of the screen, or a black bar at the top of the frame listing all your possible choices." (Orca 2010) In this case, an extended action consisting of multiple button presses is chained together in such a way as to physically strain the player who must maintain an awkward and uncomfortable hand position that in some way reflects the discomfort the character is experiencing on the screen.

The idea that a game's designer might choose to intentionally abuse its players has been explored as a way of spotlighting the relation between the player and its designer (Wilson and Sicart 2010). In the case of *Heavy Rain*, however, I argue that it is done to create meaningful experiences. It brings out the difficulty of the actions in the game into the player's realm of experience, thus resulting in a greater sense of personal investment in the game.

Conclusions

Can you have a deep reading after only one play through? In his introduction to this series, Davidson notes how this series consists of multiple "in-depth close readings of video games that parse out the various meanings to be found in the experience of playing a game (Davidson 2009)." The series' title, *Well Played*, means two things: looking closely at the experience of playing a game and looking at a game in terms of how well it is designed and developed. I feel that these are both things that I have done in this chapter. However, I cannot ignore whether or not I should have played the game again.

I don't want to play the game again. It's not just about "spoiling the experience" as we understand it when we nostalgically talk about certain games we may have played. I don't want to play the game again because I feel that I will diminish the meaning and value of the game I played. It will make my experience less personal, less unique. Less special. All those things I saw, those things I did, the things that went wrong, my mistakes as well as my triumphs, all of that will mean less to me if I play the game again. I won't be able to ignore the alternatives. I won't be able to avoid peeking behind the curtain to see which choices mattered, how things could have turned out differently, or not. I don't want MY experience

to compete with all the other possible experiences I could have had. I don't want to regret how I played, or second guess myself.

This is perhaps *Heavy Rain*'s greatest contribution to the medium. As a player, I've been given the choice of replayability: there are probably millions of possible playthroughs. As a player, however, I choose to reject the game's replayability not because the game isn't worth playing, rather because it IS. "I would like people to play it once ... because that's life. Life you can only play once ... I would like people to have this experience that way," explains Cage. "I'm fine with [people reloading saves to avoid bad endings], but the right way to enjoy Heavy Rain is really to make one thing because it's going to be your story. It's going to be unique to you. It's really the story you decided to write ... I think playing it several times is also a way to kill the magic of it" (Cage, as quoted in Berghammer 2009).

Once again, the designer was right.

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