break; is an allegorical and reflexive first person video-game that invites the player to reflect on escapism by offering a fragmented view of broken systems and abuse. In break; the player looks through the eyes of a boy who chooses to disconnect and to live in an isolated reality of his own making.

1. INTRODUCTION

Video games present a medium well-suited to reflect on how we interact with computers, and offer a personal lens of experience through which we can explore what it means to be digital natives in a world increasingly dominated by algorithms. Video games are a fusion of art forms, able to “signify in ways that other narrative forms have already established” (Zimmerman, 2004) but are also capable of making those narratives much more powerful and complex because of the player’s responsibility for the outcome. Video games also offer an opportunity for fusion on a more humanistic level through their inherently conversational quality; the player must decide how they will respond actively to any given situation presented by the designer. This means that in a game there is always the possibility for the player to invent a meaning for themselves, thus fusing their own creativity and vision with that which was intended. This active process of decision-making is the basis of play and experiencing “flow” (Chen, 2007).

However, when games “aspire, as designed objects, to funnel behaviours for reflection” (Sicart, 2011) as is the case with many story driven games (BioShock, Half-Life 2, Portal, SOMA, Mirror’s Edge), the player’s decisions often become correct or incorrect, as the designers deny them content if they are unable to succeed. This paradigm binds players into an implicit antagonistic contract and reduces player interaction to instrumental in an algorithm that progresses a pre-determined narrative that can only be observed. Luckily, the idea of overcoming the odds in order to succeed is a philosophy so deeply ingrained in western culture that it has permeated art and storytelling for thousands of years, a phenomena popularly referred to as “The Hero’s Journey” (Yorke, 2013). However, this kind of structure does not suit every kind of story or game, and proves particularly troublesome when the themes tackled in a game are undermined by its gameplay (BioShock Infinite, Tomb Raider). And the resulting Ludonarrative Dissonance (Hocking, 2007) can drastically reduce the emotional resonance of an otherwise well executed story.

Tale of Tales’ game The Path (2009), is a highly praised interactive tragedy that subverts the player’s expectations by presenting them with an antagonistic contract but preventing closure in the story if the game is completed in this conventional way. It is only by straying from the path and instructions that players are able to reach more satisfying conclusions, and this opens up a new paradigm: the exploratory contract. For a reflexive game that wants to hold a serious conversation with players on a given subject, it is the exploratory contract that must be engaged with. If handled well, it creates space for the player’s own creativity and imagination, and allows...
Figure 1: Jessie’s circumstances are evidenced in his room, and can only be learned through observation.

the subject matter to be explored in great depth, not with the player as a passive observer blindly moving forwards, having a story told to them, but as an active participant uncovering the truth, capable of making mistakes and shaping their own understanding.

2. OVERVIEW

break; is the proof-of-concept of a tragic video game dealing with themes of escapism and abuse. The game has a non-linear video game format, but it may take the players a while to realise this. In this proof-of-concept, players begin in the familiar reality of a bedroom belonging to a character called Jessie. The player is encouraged to identify with Jessie as the protagonist. Events cause the player to want to escape, and they dive into the unconventional, fantastical and surreal world of Jessie’s imagination.

As the player explores, a door keeps reappearing in the player's path. The door causes the game to glitch and break, interrupting the flow of the experience. These obstacles present a typical antagonistic video game contract to the player, which, if they are overcome, lead the player into an increasingly conventional antagonistic video game experience. If the player chooses to explore, and avoids engaging with the artificial challenge of removing the doors, then they will begin to uncover more facets of Jessie’s reality, subverting their assumption that they are him, and slowly revealing a complex and dark network of motivations and impulses in his personal life. break; aims to subvert orthodox video game design tropes and structure, using a critical approach to create entertainment that is reflexive and relatable to growing generations of digital natives and video game enthusiasts. It explores the formative role of video games, and their (mis)representation in society. break; aims to disengage players with the rhetoric surrounding video game addiction and violence, focusing instead on what might motivate an individual to disengage from the world around them, and reminding people that like any other object, video games can be abused.

3. TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

break; was built using Unreal Engine 4 and runs on Windows computers. Most of the game was programmed using Unreal Engine’s node-based interface Blueprint, with some performance-critical functionality implemented in C++ using Visual Studio 2015. Other tools used were Z-Brush, Substance Designer and Painter, Autodesk Maya, Mischief Infinite Canvas, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Premier Pro and Audacity.

3.1. Background

break; is a video game built by three undergraduate students who are part of the NCCA at Bournemouth University. Intended only to be a proof of concept for a full game, break; was completed over eight months alongside other coursework and exams.

REFERENCES


