Labour and Love: Play-centrism and Procedurality in Spiritfarer

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Abstract

Extrapolating out from the pioneering work of Bogost (2007) and Sicart (2011) this essay aims to re-explore the perspectives of procedurality and play-centrism, interrogate their relationship and show how potential player subjectivities can emerge from that tension. Utilising Thunder Lotus Games' 2020 release *Spiritfarer*, the authors aim to demonstrate the complex way that meaning emerges because of, but beyond a game's rules, and how game imperatives are transformed through tensions between the rule set and a game's semantic layer. Furthermore, this illustrates the same tension in life where labour can be used to limit or create an individual's selfhood.

Keywords: video game, procedurality, play-centrism, indie, narrative

Introduction

The way that video games and players interact is often understood as a "conversation" where each participant listens, thinks and acts based on the statements of the other participant (Swink, 2009; J. Tanenbaum, 2013). However, in many cases, this situation relies on a hiding or suppressing of inherent complexity; where the video game hides its more complicated processes (such as its computational logic) and represents them as simple ones (Arsenault & Perron, 2009; Laurel, 2014). While a player is forced to commit to the gameworld's limitations, which are far more linear than reality (K. Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2010). This mediated process has the potential to diminish or focus any complex arguments that the game as text may want, or be able, to create (Flanagan, 2009; Tulloch, 2014). The authority of rules can be restrictive or constructive (Mukherjee, 2018; Smethurst & Craps, 2015); while the game can lead a player with imperatives, it also has the potential to stimulate personal responses to its premises (Garite, 2003).

Since the publication of Bogost's book *Persausive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (2007) the term "procedural rhetoric" has been an important part of the language used in video game discourse. The "art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (Bogost, 2007, p. ix), procedural rhetoric is a compelling way to read games that is unique to the medium and tied to its most fundamental aspects; its rules and processes. However, despite the terms substantial impact there have been many who are critical of its apparent reductionism. One notable example is Sicart's *Against Procedurality* (2011) which contains criticisms that range from the mechanical to the philosophical, but largely pivot on procedural rhetoric's exclusion of the meaning making potential of the individual player. If the rules essentially are the meaning, as proceduralists claim, then the player has little else to do then activate that meaning through interaction. In contrast, Sicart elevates what he refers to as "play" (prompting the term "play-centrism") as a subjective interactivity where the player creates meaning - rather than just being exposed to it.

While these may seem like two irreconcilable positions, we posit here that, in a thematically complex title, they actually articulate a single process where a player is created by becoming

a subject of the rules but then, through the process of play, elevate themselves beyond (but shaped by) that simple meaning. In this way procedurality is indeed a limiting perspective (since the rules can only depict process with some allusions to perspective) but it is at the very limit of the rules meaning that players need to reflect and create their own subjective point of view, which they expose and enact through play. While on the macro level this is not too distant from the position that Sicart takes in his essay, the assertion that the meaning emerges through proceduralist devices, before potentially being transformed by the player, is an under articulated process worth investigating further and particularly in the way it mirrors and simulates similar processes in life. This is articulated here through the notion of "work" and its relationship to player effort. This paper looks at the way that work can be translated from a restrictive imposition to a transformative one through the application of player subjectivities. Games can be designed to stimulate a player to go beyond the "base" meaning prompted by the rules, but this will still be grounded in that base meaning. Furthermore, these different readings must be negotiated actively by the player, which implies that both readings exist in tandem and can even structure each other. We will aim to show this process in motion, and how it goes beyond the boundary of the gameworld, via Thunder Lotus Games' *Spiritfarer* (2020) whose thematic focus makes it a compelling text to explore how meaning emerges and is transformed by the player.

Procedurality

When decoding a text for its meaning there is a tendency to understand them as "proverbs writ large" (Brummet in Voorhees, 2009, para. 15), a definitive statement on or about universal truth in the human condition. The telling of the story, it's mode and devices, are largely just the mechanism of explanation (Arjoranta, 2017). These proverbs (often packaged as a form of moral education) may be explicit in the likes of *Aesop's Fables*, but the enshrining of a message, made digestible by symbols, archetypes and the mode of telling, is just as clear in a modern video game like Pillow Castle's first-person, mind-bending puzzle adventurer *Superliminal* (2019). A game that asks the player to find a new perspective on problems and "think outside the box". In both cases the narrative unfurls the message via its causality, exposing the "reader" to a series of events that should ultimately lead them to a new understating of the way the world works (Fornaro, 2016; Kincade, 2019). The expressions used to articulate their message may be different but, as Voorhees states, they always seek to "discern the general behind the particular" (2009, para. 17). That is, the way they tell their story only exists to communicate the underlining generalities that the narrative has been formed to expose. However, an important aspect to this is the way that a reader unearths the meaning. For Bordwell all stories are interactive as the player experiences and investigates the narrative, drawing conclusions from the texts causality but also from their own subjectivity (1997). This understanding of the unfurling of meaning is part of the humanistic, hermeneutic tradition in game studies. However, it is likely that video games, with their enhanced and varied forms of interactivity, can offer new forms of discovering, inhabiting and even constructing these messages. Video games offer problems and elicit solutions from player's that emerge from the player's own ingenuity and the toolset on offer in the form of agency (Thi Nguyen, 2020).

In video games one way to articulate this implied connection between message and its mode of communication is *procedurality.* It is important to note that procedurality is not

specific to video games, rather "[p]rocedurality refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work"(Bogost, 2007, p. 2). For this reason procedurality can be used to discuss anything from sports to religion (Bogost, 2007, p. 55). However, when the term is used in video game discourse it refers to the position that meaning in games emerges explicitly from its rules. The rules delineate the play space and message potential in such a way that they can expose and dictate ideologies present in those processes (Wright, 2019). The rules in motion create a locked process that can transmit messages directly to the player involved in this process. For Bogost this not only offers a way to capitalise on work by scholars like Bernard Suits (1978) and Janet Murray (2016) but also a compelling way to ensnare representation, rhetoric and persuasion into one process; "Computation is representation, and procedurality in the computational sense is a means to produce that expression" (Bogost, 2007, p. 5). It does this while also displaying a tantalising symmetry, "only procedural systems like computer software actually represent process with process" (Bogost, 2007, p. 14).

For proceduralists, the proverbs writ large are communicated almost exclusively through procedural rhetoric, that, at their most effective persuade an audience about how things "do, could, or should work" (Bogost, 2007, p. 57). The player as interactor completes the text's procedural claims and absorbs the message through that interaction (Bogost, 2007, p. 43). For Bogost procedural rhetoric can create "possibility spaces"(Mawhorter et al., 2014), distinct ways of seeing or interacting, that can actively emulate and rebel against elements of real-world processes and persuade the player to see that process in a new light (McGonigal, 2011). For all of this there must be rules that delineate the playspace and potential of the game and give it meaning (Kway & Mitchell, 2018). However, there is a question about how much possibility exists in these spaces if they are so ideologically prescribed. If, as Sicart puts it, "the game *is* the rules, both in terms of its ontological definition (the *what* in what is a game), and in its function as an object that creates meaning in the contexts in which specific users *use* it" (Sicart, 2011, para. 22). Then we must wonder how much capacity the player has to learn through investigation, or even construction, rather than being *told* experientially.

Tension and Arguments

There have been many criticisms of procedurality, especially in its most definitive form. However, for the sake of presenting a consistent argument we will focus on Sicart's essay *Against Procedurality* (2011). In the essay he makes several important rebuttals to proceduralist claims, most of which can be typified as a resistance to proceduralist reductionism. By claiming that meaning only emerges from one facet of the video game, no matter how essential that facet may be, proceduralists erase entire swaths of the meaning making experience. Most egregiously, for Sicart, is the erasure of player subjectivities and creation through play.

Sicart is quick to take aim at this particular side-lining that notions of procedurality necessitates; "Players are important, but only as *activators* of the process that sets the meanings contained in the game in motion" (2011, para. 31). In this representation of procedurality the player is demoted from creative participant to the clutch of a car engine, engaging the gears for the smooth continuation of the journey. Sicart characterises the

player in this paradigm as someone who follows a lead, submitting to the strict, pre-orchestrated messaging of the rules (2011). This is in sharp contrast to Sicart's perception of gameplay as "making a game object actual" (2009, p. 86). As he goes on to explain:

"Playing is interpreting our ontological situation as players within the borders established and agreed upon by the game as object; but playing is also a process of self-reflection and interpretation of our own being as players, within those parameters of the community or group of players, our culture, and those values and ideas that inform our real-life existence." (Sicart, 2009, p. 86)

It should be clear here that Sicart does not disavow the importance of rules, rather he sees them as the "ontological situation" of any given moment of gameplay. He also relates rules to a power structure, meant in the Foucauldian sense, as a force that creates "by delimiting, plotting, and relating the possibilities and the actions of [] agents" (2009, p. 67) . In this view power creates subjectivity by literally creating subjects, and in the case of video games this subject position is freely chosen (through the player's choice to interact with the text of the game) to explore that emergent subjectivity (Sicart, 2009, p. 68). For Sicart any meaning present within video games can only emerge through the experience, or in other words, through *play* (2009, p. 54). Where the ruleset holds a potential meaning it can only appear in motion. While this may sound similar to Bogost's procedures the difference is in the presence of a players subjectivity that can warp and shift this potential message. This extends to any ethical dimension of the game mechanic which does not exist inherently within the rules but only through the process of play. It is Sicart's focus on play as the defining process of unlocking meaning that often sees his perspective titled "play-centrism" (Wright, 2019).

Ideology

One of the most important distinctions between play-centrism and procedurality is the implication of the audience's relationship to ideology. As Voorhees states, a video game "is wrought with ideology" (2009, para. 9). One simplistic, but useful, way to start to identify the ideology of a game is to look at its rules and its win-loss states. Despite video game's potential complexity, many still rely on binary successes and failures where the former points to an "ideal state" (Larsen & Schoenau-Fog, 2016; Voorhees, 2009). A difference between a play-centric or prodeuralist approach seems to be on the definability, or explicitness, of this ideal state.

For proceduralists there is an inscribed meaning to be found and actualised. Sicart uses the example of game developer Jonathan Blow who states "it is not the activity what is important, but the system, since "systems answer questions" (in Sicart, 2011, para. 35). In this example Sicart is highlighting the proceduralist assumption that there is an answer embedded in the rules of the game to be found by the player through following the rules of the game. For this to be successful the behaviour of the player is completely subsumed by the design of the system to the point where, rather than the rules forming subjective behaviours, they simply make behaviour predictable (Sicart, 2011). In this view the player has no subjectivity, or play, only the work of accessing the indelible meaning.

This fixed point is not just limiting the player but also the message. This definitiveness obscures the complexity of a given situation or process and hinders the potential for a players critical reflection (Flanagan, 2009). As presented by Sicart, play is a large process that includes an exploration and conversation with the topic. Presumably this would make the "ideal state" encouraged by a games' win-loss binary a personal conclusion, or dynamic perspective on a complicated proposition. This is important when we consider that ideology is fraught and is in fact used to cover, hide and utilise contradictions (Althusser, 1970). Rules may translate to power as a neutral creative force in the mind of play centrists, but on application rules work by emphasising and hiding perspectives – for reasons that are both pragmatic and manipulative. This may be part of defining the play space but, where there is only rules and no play, this demarcation is only limitation.

In the brief outlines above we hope to have shown the general perspectives of procedurality and play-centrism and where they are in conflict. However, these views are not mutually exclusive. It has been shown before that both perspectives can be applied to the same text and highlight different, interesting elements (Wright, 2019). Our own perspective is that the positions of Bogost and Sicart exist both as a cline with an explicit tension between them, and as a two-step process where proceduralist rhetoric can set the stage for subjective play. The wrangling between rules and freedom, authored experience and emergent play is a common part of the discourse in games studies (Frasca, 2007; Smed et al., 2019; J. Tanenbaum, 2013). We would like to posit that this tension exists at multiple levels within certain games and is, in fact, a part of their semantic layer and cultural resonance. The division in thought between procedurality and play-centrism is actually an observation of what games can be; their *potentialities*, even at any given moment. Video Games, after all, are built on imperatives – actions we must do for the games to proceed (Garite, 2003). However, these imperatives that are initially distant to the audience can become more personally relevant which allows for emergent interpretations of their meaning.

This perspective is prompted by Sicart who takes procedurality and places it in an even greater context. Utilising language from Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), Sicart effectively places proceduralist rhetoric into late capitalism, expressing how "its disregard for expressive or ineffective play, turns the act of playing a game into a labor-like action, into work towards an externally decided, predetermined, and rational outcome designed by others than the players"(2011, para. 36). The act of play and exploration is replaced by work and the need to produce something pre-decided and definitive. This again leads to a simplification of what should be understood as complex processes; a post Enlightenment tendency to rationalise that which may be better understood as irrational (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Proceduralism, with its definitive answers presented through application to the rules creates empiricism where it may not exist. It does this by persuading the audience to a point of view that due to the delimitating power of the text seems plausible (Bogost, 2007).

This delimitation risks omitting translation. Video Games demand effort on the part of the player but this effort is usually utilised *for* something (cultivating agency or engaging the player as part of the rhetoric, for example (Frasca, 2007; Thi Nguyen, 2020)). The risk of procedural rhetoric is that it becomes work for work's sake; where effort is self-fulfilling just because it leads to further prescribed progress in the game. The subjectivity at the heart of

play-centrism (and neglected in procedural rhetoric) is the ability to translate (and to see translated) the effort that is put into the system – and for the player to find emergent meaning in that context (Kincade, 2019). This emergent meaning is distinct from "the emergent features" identified by Bogost that are still wholly authored by the game's designers (2007, p. 132). Procedural rhetoric risks turning effort into orchestrated and prescribed work, with no mechanism to transform that work into something meaningful for the player (Crogan, 2018). In this case video game's act as training, conforming a player to the singular outlook of the system (Althusser, 1970; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

However, there are also cases where proceduralist design philosophy simply fails – perhaps due to bad design, or the complexity of the topic "breaking through" and obscuring the simplified message. Both Sicart and Rusch (2009; 2011) refer to game developers who, far from letting the rules deliver the meaning, have to make explicit statements so that audiences will understand the message. In the cases where the rules are successful the explicit didacticism becomes the problem. In the words of Garite, "as the game unfolds, the player's body is silently inscribed with and encoded by the command lines of the program" (2003, p. 8). This inevitably shuts off any potential for the unknown, "in which human life interprets itself" (Fink in Sicart, 2011, para. 51).

Sicart's conclusion to this line of thought is that there must be an opportunity for exploration within the game's meaning. The meaning cannot be definitive, and therefore emerge out of something as rigid as a ruleset. In fact the rules will always be subject to play as the player appropriates the potential of the rules to interrogate the act of playing. The game's rules is just a possibility space whose structure makes this interrogation possible. Players bring their own experiences to bear on the potentials of the text and extrapolate out from there. To sum up, "Play is activity between rite and reason, between rationality and emotion - and as such, it cannot, and ought not to be instrumentalized" (Sicart, 2011, para. 68).

However, Sicart's criticisms of proceduralist rhetoric does not make proceduralism ineffective. Bogost makes clear and conscious arguments for games that can, at least, be read procedurally and there is no doubt that many games are built inspired by or adjacent to proceduralist claims. While Sicart may typify these games as player limiting and shackling the human spirit (if and when they succeed), there is an alternative perspective that sees proceduralist rhetoric as effective communication. While it may not offer the same player freedoms for cognitive reflection, where there is a core lesson to be learnt, such as in education or the workplace, proceduralist rhetoric has clear advantages. Applied or Serious games are usually focused on brevity and often do want to deliver a definitive, objective message (Marsh, 2016; Squire, 2006). Moreover, while proceduralist rhetoric may provide more narrow answers to the social, cultural and political problems it depicts, this does not invalidate that perspective. In fact, this limited perspective may be the starting point where a player transforms the imperatives of the ruleset into something more subjectively relevant.

The Spiritfarer

To further inspect the tension alluded to above we turn to our example text. Thunder Lotus Games' *Spiritfarer* (2020) is a 2D, resource management game where the player takes control of Stella (and her cat Daffodil) after they have been appointed as the worlds new Spiritfarer, whose job it is to ferry the spirits of the dead. Whimsical rather than macabre, the Spiritfarer does not just ferry spirits but, in what is a crucial detail, also cares for them until they are ready to depart. The spirits will live with you for some time before they move on. In that time they need shelter, food, pastimes and emotional support as they grapple with their previous lives. The world of Spiritfarer is beautiful, stylised and magical but it is made very clear that it is connected to, and reflects, a world that either is our own or is extremely similar.

The macro rules then of Spiritfarer are; you have a boat to explore an expansive world, you gather resources and finances with which you can build workshops, workshops allow you to make new resources, you gather spirits on your ship and use your resources to provide what they need. This is the ruleset of the game but also its imperative, the things you must do to be playing the game. The role that the player accepts in this case is largely an acceptance of the ruleset and the imperative. That is, the player accepts a constructive imposition. Similar to Sicart, Tulloch sees power as a creative and cultivating process rather than "an outside force operating on the player to restrict and deny their freedoms" (2014, p. 345). Moreover, Tulloch questions the idea that there even is such a thing as freedom. Channelling arguments made by Juul (2005), he questions the implication that games, with their rules, are usually compared to a "free activity" (2014, p. 339), prompting the question: what *is* a free activity? Accepting that an activity is not free is not to presume that subjectivity is shackled. Instead the subject is embedded in the meaning making process, restricted *as part* of the system rather than by it. As Mateas states, "The players' intentions become a new source of formal causation… [b]ut this ability to take action is not completely free; it is constrained from below by material resources and from above by formal authorial causation from the level of plot" (2001, p. 144).

What makes Spiritfarer an interesting text is the way that it cultivates its theme through this restrictive/creative paradigm where "The player is at the same time active agent and prisoner of the system, author of events, and slave to the game's authority" (Tulloch, 2014, p. 336). The game verbs (the possible actions in the gameworld (Browne, 2018; Karhulahti, 2015)) that the player has at their disposal can almost all be distilled into one word; work. You can mine, harvest, cook, smelt, forge and a myriad of other labour activities. These are all hard coded into the rules of the game; you will need 10 pieces of coal and 10 oak planks to build a foundry (gathered largely from mining and felling trees before working them at the sawmill, respectively), which is necessary to smelt ore for further progression in quests. However, what differentiates Spiritfarer from other resource management games, is the way that work is transformed, through the semantic layer and the subjectivities of the player, into *care.*

This is certainly seeded by the design of the game. In an early interaction with the spirit Gwen (who is also Stella's long-time friend) she states pointedly, "You've always cared so damn much about others" (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020). This is perhaps the most stark characterisation that we get of the player character who, in time honoured tradition, is a silent protagonist. Yet it is characterisation that only comes alive through play and its

subjectivity. For a brief example of this we can return to the "ideal state" noted above by a successful traversal of the game's rules. The end state for each spirit collected in the world is their absence – you manage your relationship with the spirit through resources and activities and at a certain point the character will either ask to leave, or just disappear. The successful state of play therefore is to say goodbye to a character that you have come to care for. This absence is necessary for the progression of the game, but it is in conflict with a player's desire. Therefore the player is forced to reconcile these facts and effectively create a meaning the rules fail to offer. In this sense the player dispels their own disorientation that emerges from the process (Golden, 1976).

Alternatively, for the player who has only followed the rule set and not transformed the verb *work* into *care*, it is unlikely that they will see much benefit in the non-playable character's at all. The game is merely a labour simulator where numbers are attached to progression. The personalities of the characters is in no way shaped by or emerging from the ruleset. The rules only say "gathering resources is good". In this way the semantic or story layer of the text is in contrast to the rule based layer. Progression, in many ways, leads to a negative outcome meaning that the verb offered by the ruleset is insufficient. Again, this is a complication that should prompt reflection in the player.

This reflection is an opportunity for personal development and growth (Bordwell, 1997; Ryan, 2008; Voorhees, 2009) . This is because the text offers "dynamic tools and affordances for the construction of their identities and negotiating affective experiences" (Stenros & Shivonen, 2020, para. 17). Again, these emerge from a limited state that can create new subjectivities. This is because they function less around *who* the player character is in particular, and more around their role (Figueiredo & Paiva, 2010). According to Stenros and Shivonen, "[role] usually refers to a socially and culturally situated subject position with expectations of others relating to one's behaviour and attitudes. The same person can occupy the roles of, say, a customer, doctor, and mother at different moments, involving different expectations" (2020, para. 17). In this case the player character can oscillate between worker and carer, and importantly, be both at the same time. This dual role, conforming to a proceduralist enacting the rules and a play-centrist using them subjectively, is made within the game by the revelation that Stella, the player character, was a palliative care nurse. Not only does this make it Stella's job to care, but it also means that her ability to care emerges out of having that role.

So despite the limited number of available verbs that a player has (the macro verbs: work and platform, as well as the context specific outlier: hug) they have also been given a big enough *role* to facilitate subjectivity. This includes the hidden part of gameplay the "plans, hopes, fear, strategy, all may never be visible for anyone but the player themselves" (Stenros & Shivonen, 2020, para. 37). Similarly, relationships with in game characters help to manage and characterise the role for the player but without explicitly telling them (Stenros & Shivonen, 2020). For example, is caring something that you have to do (because it's your job) or something you use your job to do?

The characters contain and embody the goals of the world and these can be viewed instrumentally or expressively. Player intention is guided by the ruleset (resources = progression) but can quickly become self-fulfilling if the player chooses to believe in the

fiction of the text and look beyond the rules. If these are characters that need care, and whom the player cares for, then progression is built not around how many resources you need but what care you need to give. It is this way that progression stops being "coercive" and transforms into agency (Mateas, 2001). This culminates in what Mateas calls "the total experience" that supports "both first-person engagement and third-person reflection; it must provide both agency and transformation as variety" (2001, p. 147). Because of this involvement and subjectivity the plot can proceed "as planned" but without the proceduralist inevitability and didacticism.

Labour and Love

Spiritfarer's play-centrism emerges out of its proceduralist rhetoric. For this reason it engages with the way subjectivity emerges out of power as a defining force. This becomes one of the crucial themes of the text and is seen in the same work-care paradigm that we have seen above.

Many of the spirits who board the player's ship have had lives defined by the way their labour is transformed by their love. In life the spirit Summer was an agronomic engineer working for a mega corporation. Her use of heavy chemicals eventually led to her cancer. Though she eventually recovered, the illness led to her leaving the company. During her convalescence she realised not only how much harm she had been doing but that forcing a yield, in the absence of love and care, was an inherently immoral activity. Another character is Alice, a stay at home mother (inspired by a Thunder Lotus team member's grandmother) with "a willingness to erase yourself for the benefit of someone else" (Lévesque in Gameumentary, 2021). The labour of the home is presented alongside teaching, construction, curation and trade. However, it more than any other, shows how work can be translated directly to care for others in the form of material chores as well as "affection, consolation, psychological support, sex and communication," or, in short, "care labor" (Fortunati in Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 19).

Labour, in the neoliberal defined view, is often shown as an end in itself (Gagnier, 1997; Hong, 2013). Spiritfarer offers opportunities to enact this perspective through the proceduralist rhetoric of the game. Labour produces a literal result; that of the resources needed to progress the game. However, from a play-centrist approach the labour enabled by the rules is only a way to enact a form of care. Labour is literally liberated by the play subjectivity.

This is paralleled further in the game's semantic layer. Several of the characters are trade unionists that spend their time trying to emancipate work for the worker, so that it can supplement life rather than rule it. That this is a *conflict* is explicit as, in the world of Spiritfarer, there are several worker's disputes happening and several character's dealing directly with power relations. Often these power relations play out as ideological perspectives where a worker's subjectivity is directly affected. One miner recounts "when you can't see the sun you can imagine it's always noon. That's what my boss says at meetings" (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020). The player also meets workers who pride themselves on working long hours, conforming to a proceduralist reading of the rules (more resources = good), becoming a "willing dupe, happy to surrender their freedom for the

duration of play" (Tulloch, 2014, p. 348). If the rule says to do something and we do it without incorporating the rule into personal meaning then we are slaves to the rule – that we are a willing subject, in this context, is a false definition (Garite, 2003). In this case what Bogost may term persuasive can become Althusser's "interpretation or hailing" that transforms the player into a subject shackled by the rules rather than created by them (Althusser, 1970; Garite, 2003).

A Life in Games

Though the subjectivity of the player may be constructed by the power of the rules, it is always referring to the subject who exists in reality (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Mateas' "total experience" then includes an application (or verification) of the concepts of the text to a world external to it. In fact the ethical value of the game only exists because the text is "immersed in specific cultural situations and times" (Sicart, 2009, p. 41). While the delineation of games by rules is only one factor denoting their artificiality, in the case of Spiritfarer, this can be used to mimic life. As Mitchell states, "Lines and rules, then, are inescapable -- "artificial" but utterly unavoidable" (2020, para. 35). All actions in life are limited and constructed by a rule, and as these rules are inescapable we must work within them.

Of course there are different types of rules. The rules of play in sports, for example, are a restriction because the participant has many other possible actions available to them that would make the game void. However, in a video game the options are "full" in that (save for modifying the game's code) a player can only do the programmed actions in game (Tulloch, 2014). This then perfectly emulates the inescapability of the rule of work. In a game of basketball we can certainly choose to kick the ball rather than use our hands; this would ruin the game but probably not affect our lives. However, for most of us, work is inescapable. We may procrastinate, hesitate and dither but it is a strong enough rule that it severely limits our actions. In this case the inescapability is apparent and we exist within the rule. The options then become to submit to the rule or, to apply your subjectivity, and find meaning through it.

Another way that Spiritfarer expands the borders of its world out into our own is by replicating the limited perspective that any individual has. Stella, as a palliative nurse, has a view of death that often includes people fading away; some patients may have come to terms with their traumas or fears while many others have not. This is played out in the process of the game where characters slip into dementia, find themselves tired of life or clinging onto it. Very few have answers to the questions prompted by the text, they have perspectives, but nothing definitive that the player can use as closure. This is particularly crucial in one key moment where the character Atul, Stella's uncle, simply disappears from the ship. This mirrors the 'real life' event where he similarly disappeared. In this case we see that the limits of Stella's knowledge cannot simply be overcome here. Again, the complexities of the situation cannot always be rationally understood – to impose closure onto the situation would only be to limit it negatively.

However, Stella and the player still have the ability to learn by listening to the life experiences of those around her, even in the absence of definitive answers. These can be elusive, combative and contradictory as well as encouraging and illuminating. That is, the text is riddled with these productive ambiguities that simply could not be held or taught by the rules alone. This is neatly encapsulated by the character Elena, previously a school teacher, who tests the character but refuses to offer a significant reward, subverting the typical gaming trope. Elena's purpose in the game is to show the player that they can only truly learn by living, through actively experiencing life.

By pointing to a world beyond the borders of what we immediately see in Spiritfarer, the text refers to what Lobo calls, "an aspect of reality – excess" (2019, para. 29). That is, the storyworld of Spiritfarer contains more than is necessary for the basic message of the text. This is particularly true if we undertake a proceduralist reading where the rules embody the meaning. In this case, the aspects of workers' rights and unionisation are erased, as this only emerges on the level of representation. The game would also lose its commentary on life, as the spirit's rich back stories become irrelevant to their instrumentality; they are packages to be stuffed and delivered. The lives of others, in this case, is the excess that refers to reality. This is not just because these characters are implied to have lived in our world, but because their lives are too big to be truly known; "[f]or the solitary individual, the real world is infinite insofar as it is inexhaustible by any singular mortal experience" (Lobo, 2019, para. 30). In Spiritfarer this unknowable-ness is text and can only begin to be reconciled through play invoked subjectivity. As Sicart states;

"there is a connection between the player-subject and the other subjectivities present in our daily life. Being a player is just a subset of our being as multiple subjects, and what I am describing here are the necessary conditions for this specific subjectivity, the player, to arise. In this sense, the player-subject is not an isolated moral agent but an agent in constant dialogue, evaluation, and interpretation within the experience of the game situated in a world and in a culture." (2009, p. 73)

The ruleset in Spiritfarer, and its procedural rhetoric, sets the stage for the types of reflection and concepts that the game is primed to stimulate. However, while a necessary element of the discourse, the rules can be subverted and transcended all while remaining firmly in place. The rules allow for action but not answers and can only provide the external element of creating a subject rather than cultivating subjectivity. While this subjectivity can still be planned for, as we see in the design of Spiritfarer, it is a conversation where definitive perspectives only contribute to a broader more ambiguous investigation. Here each player is not simply taught about the process but is able to interpret the process and ultimately make it part of themselves.

Conclusion

From this we can see why Sicart's arguments in *Against Procedurality* often slip outside the perimeters of strict video game academic discourse. Both play-centrism and proceduralism, though concerned with video game rhetoric, are about unearthing and conveying meaning. More importantly they both claim to be modes of understanding how video games discuss and represent the real world. For proceduralists the rules can enact and describe the chosen

process. For those like Sicart the rules of the game are only a possibility space that make the experience of play possible.

While we largely agree with this statement we hope we have shown how, in Spiritfarer at least, the procedural reading is both present and necessary. However, it is only the launching pad for further subjective evaluation. Not only do the rules create the subject but by being in discordance with the theming of the game they force the subject to eventually look beyond them. This is how play-centrism can go beyond the rules while still existing within them. It is possible to only stay within the rules and accept the proceduralist reading but this is to miss out on the potential individual experience, or, as Stenros and Shivonen state "If the player does not reach outside of the system, the reflection is not of the player, only that of the system"(2020, para. 39).

As Bogost makes clear video games are primed to depict and explore processes, but by only understanding their meaning via the rules we miss out on the complexity that games are also able to convey (Flanagan, 2009). Here detail is shorn for pragmatic reasons but also to offer a narrowed perspective, not to make the answer simple, but so that the player has the space to engage with the particular complexity on display (Golden, 1976; Rusch, 2019). This is particularly important when the text deals directly with lived experiences that ultimately only have subjective answers.

Rules as understood by the likes of Foucault and Althusser create subjects and therefore subjectivity. However, it is still possible to be trapped as a subject, with a shallow understanding and deployment of the role you've inherited (Althusser, 1970). Both Sicart's formulation of play and the mode of Spiritfarer explore this position, where progression is encoded into the rules but the meaning of that progression is not. Moreover because Spiritfarer parallels people's lived experiences the play is able to make commentary on life while still maintaining a players subjectivity cultivating the meaning internally rather than imposing it externally. This is not to imply that people can simply think their way beyond toxic or enforced environments, but rather if there is value to be found, it must be personally relevant.

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