

Handle with Care:
a first person video game about gay divorce.

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SUMMARY

“Handle with Care” is a non-violent first person video game about theater, memory, and LGBTQ identity, intended for hardcore video game players – typically thought to be 14-34 year old heterosexual men.¹ The goal was to engage an audience traditionally resistant to almost every other vector of LGBTQ-themed advocacy or programming, and engage them on terms that they could respect, find authentic to their identities as gamers, and also enjoy formally as a puzzle game. In this way, I believe it is one of the few so-called “serious games” that works somewhat successfully, though I also believe that few players would readily classify it as a “serious game,” which may certainly be telling.²



Figure 1: screenshot of therapist in office, the beginning of the game

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- 1 There currently exists no reliable dataset for who “hardcore gamers” are. Most studies are commissioned by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), an industry lobbying group that has a vested interest in portraying the “gamer” demographic as diverse and mature consumers. One need not rely on stereotypes to disprove their figures; simply play an online FPS and listen to the voices.
 - 2 Everyone infers different meanings of what a “serious game” entails. I use it in a pejorative sense, as I believe that any game that calls itself a “serious game” has compromised itself as overt propaganda. If I possessed a greater command of the material, I would invoke a reference to some sort of Neo-Marxist aesthetics. Instead, I shall simply state that I believe existing “normal” games can already do the work intended for serious games, and furthermore they do it better.

THE PROJECT

In-game, the player acts as James, one half of a same-sex couple seeking marriage counseling with his partner, Dylan. During this time, the player must also repress memories that appear in his mind – here, manifested as crates delivered in a psychological warehouse – and successful repression or release influences the game narrative and progress through the counseling session. Most importantly, the nature and consequences of this central binary are purposely obfuscated to promote dialogue and conversation among player communities after they finish the game. (That is, “repression” is not necessarily portrayed as good nor bad, though the path of “release” is definitely easier to achieve.)

Many players quickly identify this interaction binary (repress vs. release) as an input for a branching narrative, perhaps resulting in a “good” or “bad” ending as in many video games.³ I went to great lengths to subvert this implied dynamic, providing counter-intuitive feedback to confuse players: the therapist ostensibly scolds you for solving the puzzle but praises you for failing, thus suggesting the player and player character's goals are in tension or perhaps even diametrically opposed. I did not want to simply say, “repression is bad.” I wanted the player to reflect on their personal experience of repression, whatever that happened to be.

³ If you don't believe me, you'll just have to take my word for it, that this is a commonly observed effect that hardcore gamers are familiar with. I wish I could cite some research on the topic, but the fact of the matter is simply that no one in games studies does basic research and surveys for video games. A colleague, Dan Pinchbeck at University of Portsmouth, conducted one of the few projects ever attempted in that vein, “Story as a function of gameplay in First Person Shooters: an analysis of FPS diegetic content 1998-2007.” In it, he cataloged and surveyed instances of diegetic affordances in nearly a decade's worth of FPS games. Unfortunately, the state of game design moves so quickly: it took him years to compile all that data, but by publication time his model had already been violated and somewhat disproven by various games released in 2010. In short, I am making excuses for the lack of academic rigor in game studies – not for our lack of trying, but it is just extremely difficult to do such research, and the field is still developing a decent research methodology.

To repress a memory, the player must place a crate in the correct slot of a very tall, very large wall shelf. With each successful repression, the player proves they have mastered a skill and progresses to a more demanding challenge. The first challenge requires the player to place a crate in a target slot at the bottom of the shelf, near the floor, and it is easily solved – however, the target slot for the eighth crate is near the top of the shelf, prompting the player to climb and crawl throughout the entire room to reach it. Seasoned first person shooter (FPS) players quickly understand this gradual ramp in difficulty as the archetypal flow of puzzle in a video game. The crates holding these repressed memories are extremely fragile, and the increasingly taller goals tend to encourage players to accidentally drop and break these crates.



Figure 2: screenshot of the “Internal Repression Service” inside Dylan's brain.

There are also many player strategies to solve each puzzle; some players plan ahead and move other crates out of the way beforehand, while other players might stack barrels to climb and bypass crawling through the shelf entirely. Since the game narrative

already symbolically encodes the fragile crates as “memories” to be repressed or released, players learn to interpret their own puzzle-solving strategies as metaphors for repression and personal attitudes towards memory.

In this way, I chose to rig the game toward “failure.” The crates are fragile and frustrating to handle, frequently dropping to the ground and exploding. Upon explosion, the player experiences the memory that was trapped inside – which is, in reality, a randomized event – but the montage effect quickly imbues each vignette with additional resonance that was not specifically designed. If a player broke a crate that was on the shelf marked “Dad, Cancer,” the randomized vignette could be a graveyard scene, a playground scene or an ocean scene, prompting any number of potential narratives and emotional connections, or maybe none at all. I did not “waste my time” making specific connections and writing a specific linear narrative because the procedurality allowed much richer, unorthodox, seamless and emergent combinations uniquely afforded by working with video games.



Figure 3: screenshot of an orange "vignette" scene or memory that the player experiences upon breaking a crate / "releasing" a memory

METHODOLOGY

Because the game relies primarily on game rules and mechanics to say something about the relation between repression and identity, it falls squarely within proceduralist thought. What follows is a brief summary of “proceduralism”⁴ in the context of game studies (not to be confused with procedurality):

In general, proceduralists argue that games are essentially engineered systems that respond to user inputs; that game design is largely an unwieldy science, but a science nonetheless. A compelling game narrative can be important as a design goal, but only if it is systematized in this fashion as well. Here, video games are defined by their interactivity and ability to impose patterns of behavior on players -- and, in general, player psychology can be abstracted, understood and contextualized within this system. While they still enjoy heavy influence in academia and the industry, in the last few years they have been forced to look in the mirror: if one follows this doctrine to its natural conclusion, as the advertising world and NGOs have done, one unearths the rationales for “gamification” and the games for change / serious games movements.⁵ Neither element has acquired the cultural legitimacy they desperately seek, perhaps because they see game players as “human capital” to be commodified and processed for their own agendas, and players (consumers, students) have proven terrifically resistant. In short, I value the contributions of proceduralism to the field of game design, but believe that its models for narrative design and meaning-making is too limited.

4 For a good primer on proceduralist thought, technique, and canon, read chapter 1 of “How to Do Things with Video Games” by Ian Bogost, 2010.

5 I have no data to support these claims, that gamification and serious games have failed. Again, this is conjecture and opinion based on my personal experience as a game developer, academic and game journalist. However, I would argue that at the very least, it represents an informed opinion.

It is familiar proceduralist theory to think of games as playgrounds, as possibility spaces for simple things to interact and produce complex reactions. Unfortunately, game narratives are rarely designed in this way: everything must be explained, even if explained poorly. Irrational Games' game *System Shock 2* describes the presence of ghosts as “malfunctions in your cybernetic implants, rendering residual psychic emissions,” or something along those lines. This fixation on rationality is an infection, an overflow from the proceduralist focus on engineering elegant game systems with logic that can be understood by computers. What if interaction was irrational, inaccessible, and unusable? When does digital interaction take on poetic qualities? For this problem, I found the design theories of *Tale of Tales* to be invaluable, specifically their concept of a “notgame.”

A “notgame” is a playful, game-like construct with digital interaction, but the focus is on the audio-visual, the diegetic and the textual components instead of game mechanics and game systems. In this way, the notgame is a game that has very few rules of play and seeks to dislodge the influence of challenge and mastery. User interfaces in notgames tend to obfuscate meaning and deliberately contradict established usability principles and control schemes as practiced by the commercial game industry, such as a player character who walks extremely slowly,⁶ or player verbs that requires the player to do absolutely nothing.⁷ This philosophy inspired my use of low-interaction, highly figurative vignettes to deliver “narrative nuggets.” Combined with the very proceduralist wrapper of a puzzle game, this narrative delivery mechanism seems successful. In fact,

6 In *Tale of Tales*' “The Graveyard,” the player controls an old woman in a cemetery. She walks extremely slowly. The only “goal” to be gleaned is to guide her to the end to sit on a bench. After the player has done so, they must guide her back to the beginning of the level to exit the game.

7 In *Tale of Tales*' “The Path,” the only way to “interact” with certain landmarks or NPCs to stand still and do nothing. On the game's website, it proudly declares itself a “slow game.”

some playtesters remarked that it seemed like an additional “reward” for failing, for breaking a crate.⁸ By blending two seemingly opposed game design philosophies, that of proceduralist systems thinking and anti-proceduralist notgames, *Handle with Care* demonstrates how the seemingly discrete construct of a “game” is constantly in flux, akin to the tensions in personal identity that many individuals experience.

RECEPTION / ARTIST'S STATEMENT

As of today, all download mirrors report a conservative estimate of about 15,000-20,000 total downloads. It has been featured in various new media exhibitions in both Spain and California, and has garnered widespread coverage from mainstream games journalism outlets like *Destructoid*, *Rock Paper Shotgun*, and *Eurogamer*. However, by far the most poignant reactions have been from individuals who have chosen to share their deepest anxieties with me, a relative stranger over the internet. While it is tempting to rationalize the game as the result of carefully considered artistic intention and design, such a narrative would have been merely a beautiful and convenient lie.

Rather, I made *Handle with Care* to “help me get over a boy.”

In this sense, the game follows a long tradition of art as a method of therapy and introspection. It is intensely personal in ways that would probably disappoint most players. However, as a designer, I am also a firm believer of the intentional fallacy, that artistic intention is merely a seed for creation, not consumption. My personal goals are largely irrelevant because ultimately the player will generate their own meaning from the

⁸ At GDC 2010, I had Robin Walker (lead designer for *Team Fortress 2*, at Valve Software) playtest the game and give me his feedback. A lot of the player response and psychology, as explicated here, is offered in great debt to his insight and powers of explanation.

procedural systems I embedded within the game. Based on some of the early response, it was clear that players took on this responsibility with gusto.

Several players were surprised that everyone thought my game was about gay people – according to them, the player character was actually female, and I had misstated her gender multiple times throughout the game. One player had an openly homophobic reaction, and wrote in the very first reply of a forum thread on the game, “Re release [sic] the game without the GAY!”⁹ It is, however, one of the surprisingly few instances of outright homophobia in response to the game. There was generally more dialogue about how I chose to represent human relationships in the game: that if emotional release and “winning” the game results in the player character getting a divorce, then I have made an immoral or inaccurate simulation of relationships, and all of my personal relationships have been dysfunctional while theirs were healthy and mature, etc. For these criticisms, I typically responded with mocking incredulity, questioning these critics; if you have never considered lying (even briefly) to a romantic partner about something, then I would have to question whether that honesty really mattered... But now I editorialize. The point is, this game generated discussion about life among an audience traditionally suspicious and skeptical of games that attempt to do so, and I regard myself as incredibly lucky to have accomplished such work.

THE “GAY GAME”

Regarding the “gay divorce” premise – I wanted to mirror a contemporary issue, but not be “preachy” and insist on casting an “other” as a dehumanized mob of

⁹ I kid you not. It was the first piece of feedback I got, upon releasing the game. See the post yourself at: <http://www.blendogames.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=80#p155>

oppressors. The joke is, perhaps, that there are virtually no first person shooters about gay marriage, so a game about gay divorce seems awfully presumptuous, a response to a game about gay marriage that no one ever made. I believe the humor inherent in this premise is disarming and has helped it become one of the more influential “gay games” made.¹⁰ This approach, in part, emerges from some sense of responsibility I feel, as part of a small circle of LGBTQ game developers (including Stephen Lavelle, Christine Love, and Anna Anthropy) who have been legitimized by video game journalists and scholars. Notably, none of us make games exclusively concerning LGBTQ issues, and if I may presume to speak for the group, we would find such a transparent ploy at a “gay game” to be distasteful and a poor use of the medium of video games – we believe all games should be interesting in a formal way, and no amount of skinning can hide poorly considered interaction. A “gay game” would indulge in the worse excesses of today’s “queer cinema,” a barren wasteland farmed to exhaustion, to the point that when a decently made LGBTQ-themed film emerges (such as Andrew Haigh’s critically acclaimed 2011 gay romance “Weekend”) we all pat ourselves on the back for being able to transcend our identities as victims of bullying and prejudice.

While it might look like ranting and indeed it certainly might be ranting, that is the discourse that went into this project: a dissatisfaction with the current state of the world, and a struggle to channel that dissatisfaction in a way that hopefully would not be terribly boring. I also believe the project has helped expand the audience, as I continually receive threats on a daily basis, to continue this series of games “or else” – but as the player quickly learns in my game, complaint might just be another form of love.

¹⁰ I will not attempt to dissect the concepts of “genre” and “gay,” as I see that enterprise as laying outside the scope of this project brief, and frankly, I’m already straining the reader’s good will as it is.