

Design Reboot

Jonathan Blow

27 November 2007

"The formula followed by virtually all games
is a steady progression toward victory:
you accomplish tasks until you win."

"Like cinema, games will need to embrace the dynamics
of failure, tragedy, comedy and romance.
They will need to stop pandering
to the player's desire for mastery
in favor of enhancing
the player's emotional and intellectual life."

Daniel Radosh, *The New York Times*, 28 September 2007

“The first 35 years of motion pictures, from 1895 to 1930, yielded a handful of films that are considered masterpieces for their technical innovations, but the following decade was when cinema first became the art form that we know today. As cinema matured, films developed the power to transform as well as to entertain.

Video games are poised to enter a similar golden age.
But the first step isn't Halo 3.”

My thinking about game design
has recently changed
discontinuously.

Deciding what project to do next.
(3 more years!)

Breaking away from long-held assumptions.

What are Games?

What Are Games?

(For our purposes, software running on computers.)

Trying to achieve a goal,
with some rules governing your actions
and the game-world's response.

Games create a meaning of life
in a temporary, low-stakes subdomain.

Games make goals achievable by training the player.

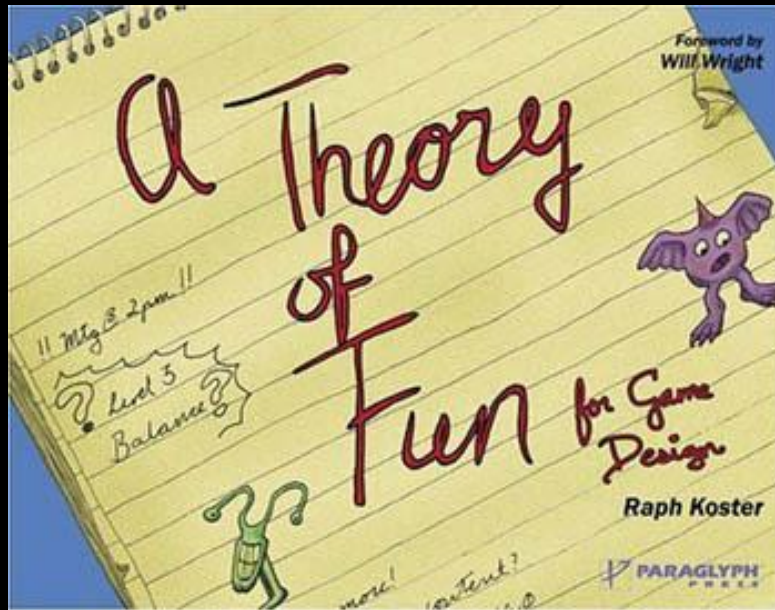
The player builds a mental model of the game.



Formal Abstract Design Tools' “Perceivable Consequence”

That is to say, all games actively teach.

This teaching can happen at many different levels (not just the core game rules).



See these books for varying perspectives on games-as-teaching.

What Games Can Provide

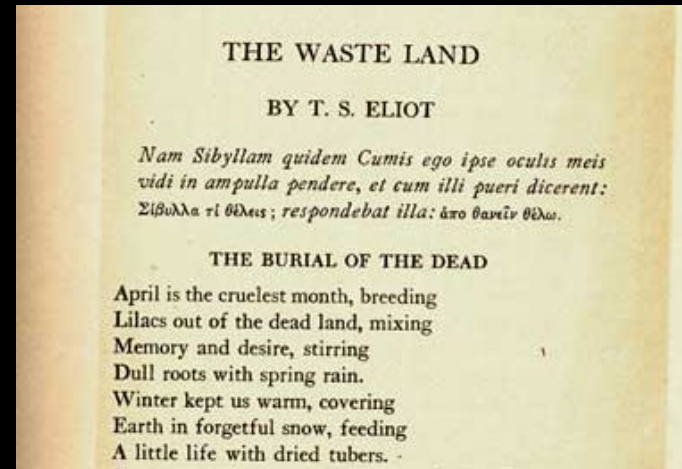
1. Entertainment / Fantasy / Escapism

I am not satisfied with only this.
(Nor are many others.)

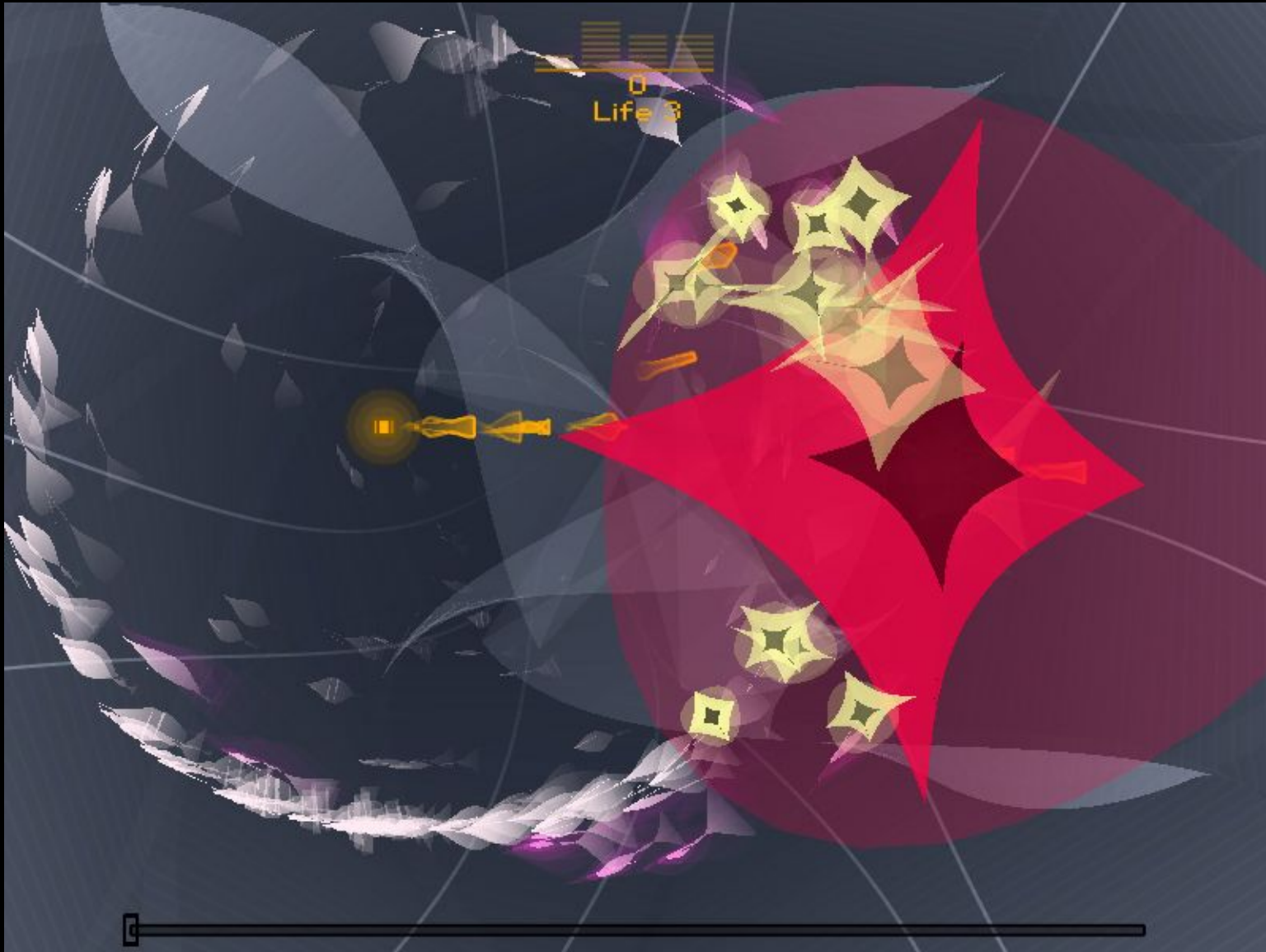
What Games Can Provide

2. Meaningful Artistic Expression (you care, audience cares).

Coming from a different angle than other media.



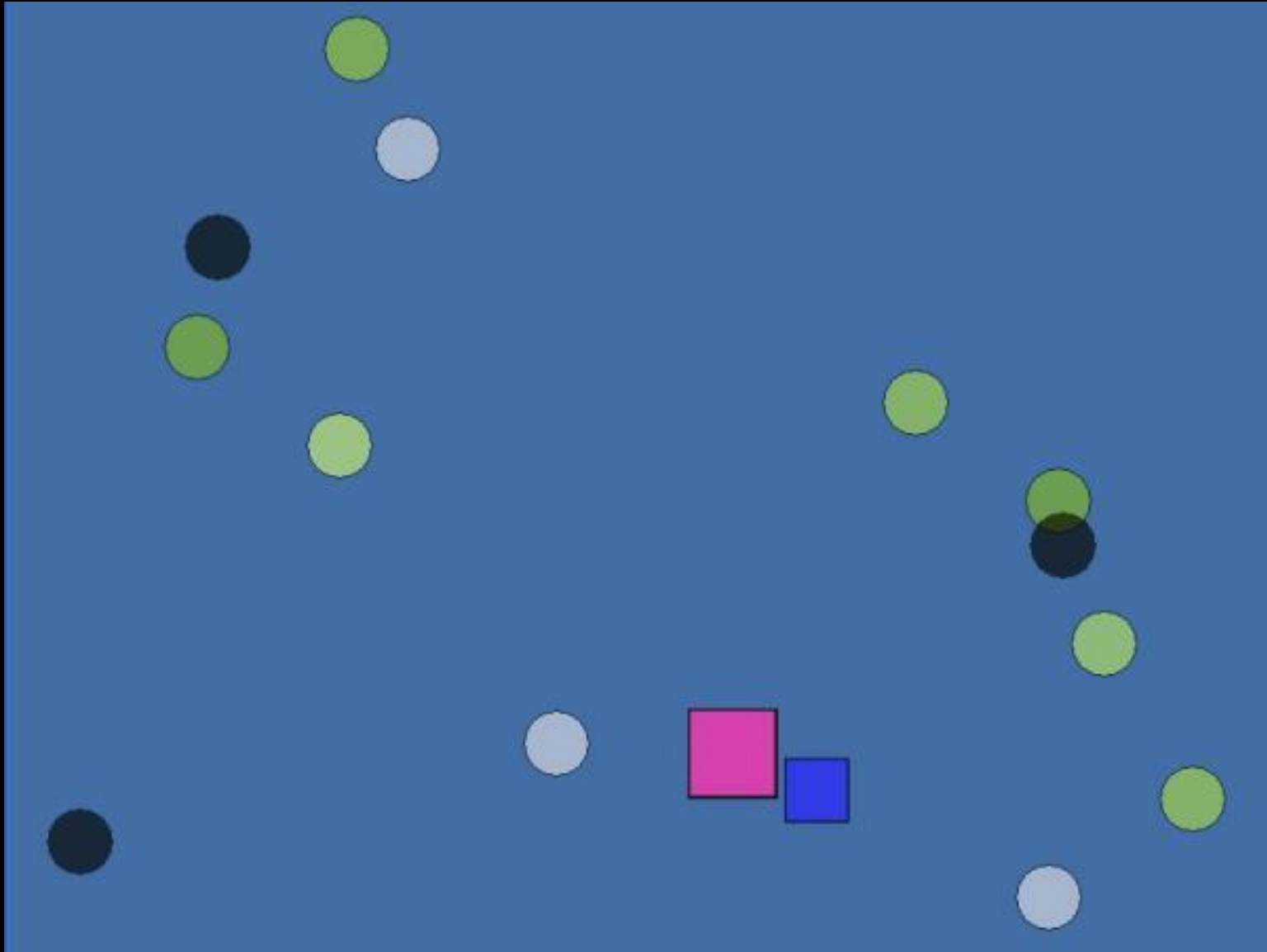
Everyday Shooter by Jonathan Mak



Expressing Audiovisuals and Gameplay

Downloadable from Playstation Network

The Marriage by Rod Humble

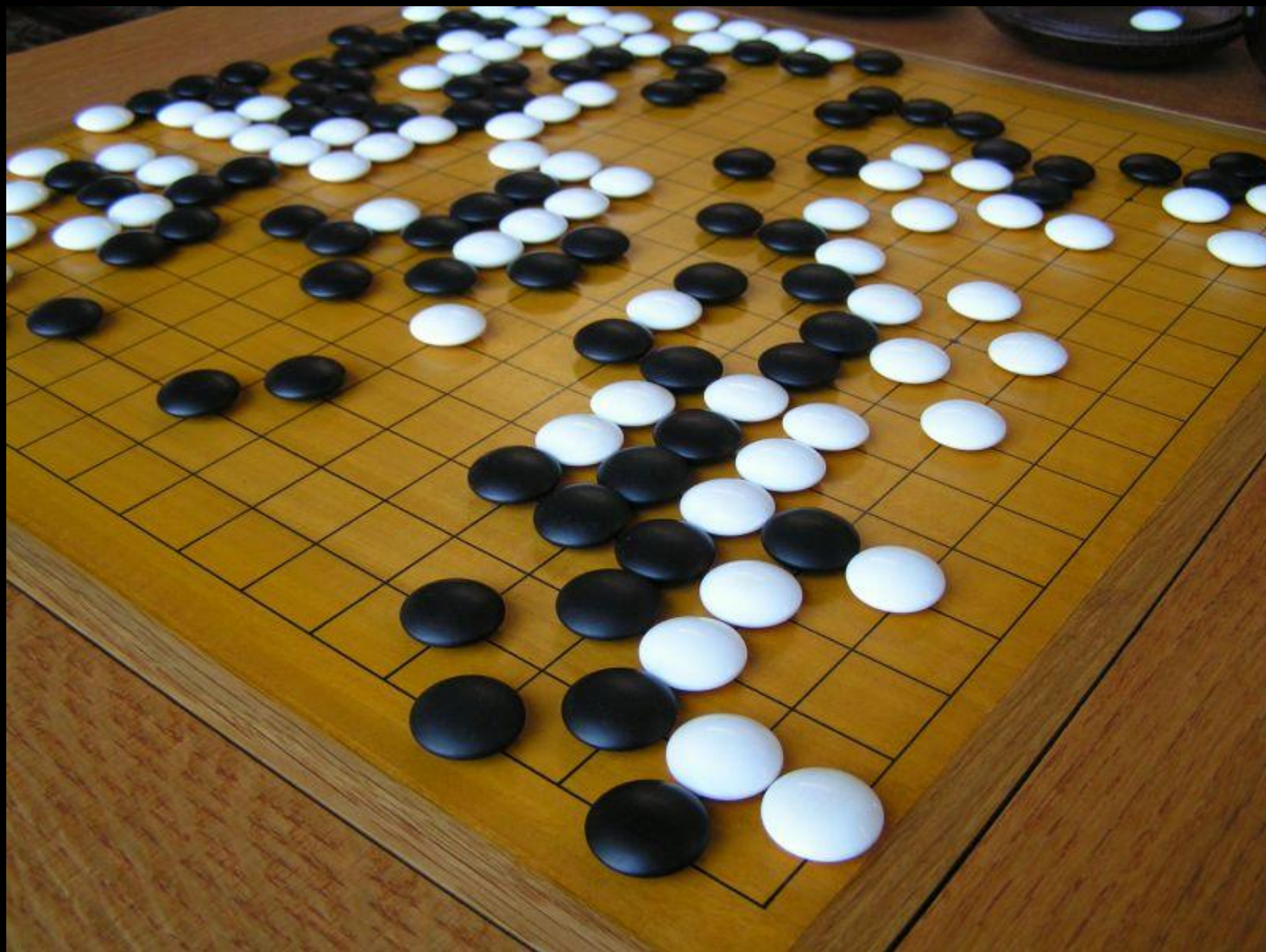


Expressing Real-Life Themes through Rules of Interaction

Free download on the Internet.

3. A means of exploring the universe
(for both the creators and the players).

Systems are biased toward producing truth
(or at least consistency).



Games are
Going to Be Huge.

Many people will be playing games...

Games will heavily impact patterns of
human thought, and thus
what it means to be human.
(as books and film already have.)

All games teach...

what will we be teaching all these people?

Game Designers Lack Discernment.

All we care about is whether
a lot of people want to play our game.

We don't care why they want to play.

We don't show concern
for our players' quality of life.

Scheduled Rewards:

Collectables, Unlockables,
Advancing Story, Achievements

MMOs have empty gameplay but keep players
hooked with constant fake rewards.
("The Treadmill").

There are many ways to make a game “fun”,
but we usually pick the easy one,
which involves sacrificing
the player's quality of life.

Keeping players hooked via rewards.

Often the gameplay is mindless.
So long as people play, it is the same to us.

Would they still want to play our game
if we removed the scheduled rewards?

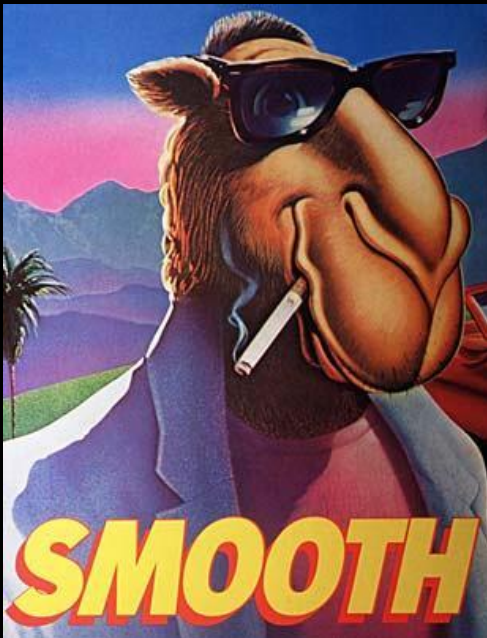
Rewards can be like food (naturally
beneficial)
or like drugs (artificial stimuli).

We over-use the drugs,
because we don't understand food.

Radosh is hungry, but we give him cheap drugs instead.

In pursuing ever-more players, the game industry exploits them in an unethical way.

We don't see it as unethical because we refuse to stop and think about what we are doing.



All games teach.
What does World of Warcraft teach?

World of Warcraft says:

You are a schlub who has nothing better to do than
sit around performing repetitive, mindless actions.

Skill and shrewdness do not count for much;
what matters is how much time
you sink in.

You don't need to do anything exceptional,
because to feel good
you just need to run the treadmill
like everyone else.

These things take root subtly, subconsciously.

Like advertising and brand identity.

People identify with their activities.
People are products of their origins,
and their environments.

Natural Rewards (reinforced by artificial rewards)

Manveer Heir on Clint Hocking's blog:

“The brilliance in Portal lies not only in its simplicity (and excellent humor), but also in the moments of realization when you figure out a puzzle.

No puzzle stumped me for more than five minutes in that game, yet I went from being COMPLETELY dumbfounded one moment to feeling like a genius the next, as I realized what I was supposed to do.”

The primary challenge for mankind in this century

global warming
ozone holes
air / water pollutants

light pollution
intellectual property
digital rights control

human rights
safety
leisure time

fast transportation
intellectual exchange
economic mobility

Our actions create the environment,
whether we intend this or not.

When millions of people buy our game,
we are **pumping a (mental) substance**
into the (mental) environment.

This is a public mental health issue.

We have the power to shape
humanity.

How will we use it?

as an industry
are we propagating
the intellectual and emotional versions
of *this*?



When millions of people buy our game,
think of the multiplier
that acts on any small improvement we make.

Architecting vs. Exploring

Presumption of Architecture

Architecting: top-down

Exploring: adaptive, unhierarchical

Explorational design helps find truth,
or at least naturally interesting things.

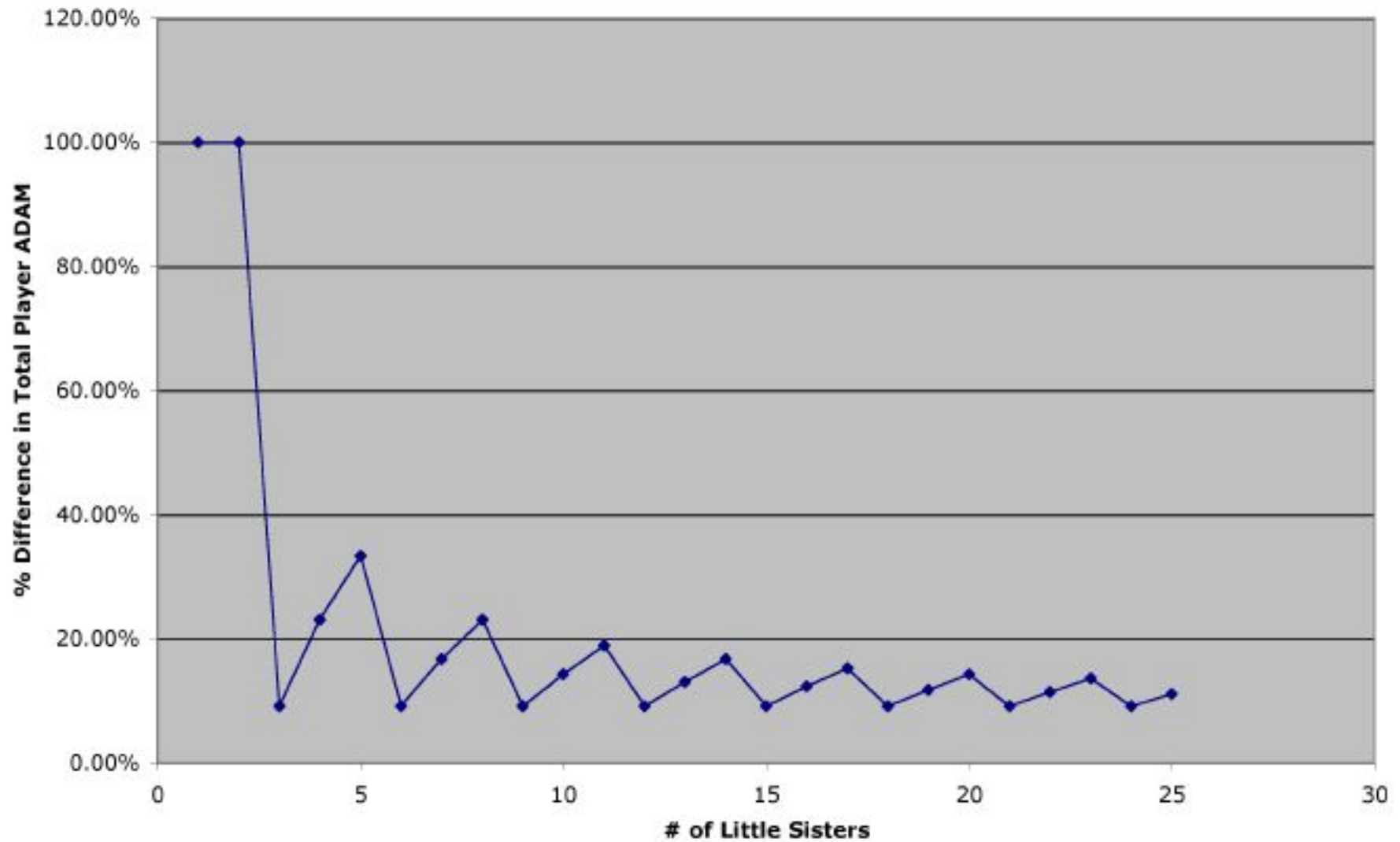
Poorly-Architected Design: Bioshock



Big Daddy and Little Sister

The Meaning of Life in Bioshock?

Rescuing versus Harvesting Little Sisters



Plus health, ammo, mana, and Hypnotize Big Daddy spells.

“A shooter must be well-balanced”
(a very Architected idea).

This conflicts badly with the supposed moral choice.

The message delivered is:

*The designers of this game are
trying to manipulate your emotions
in a clumsy way.*

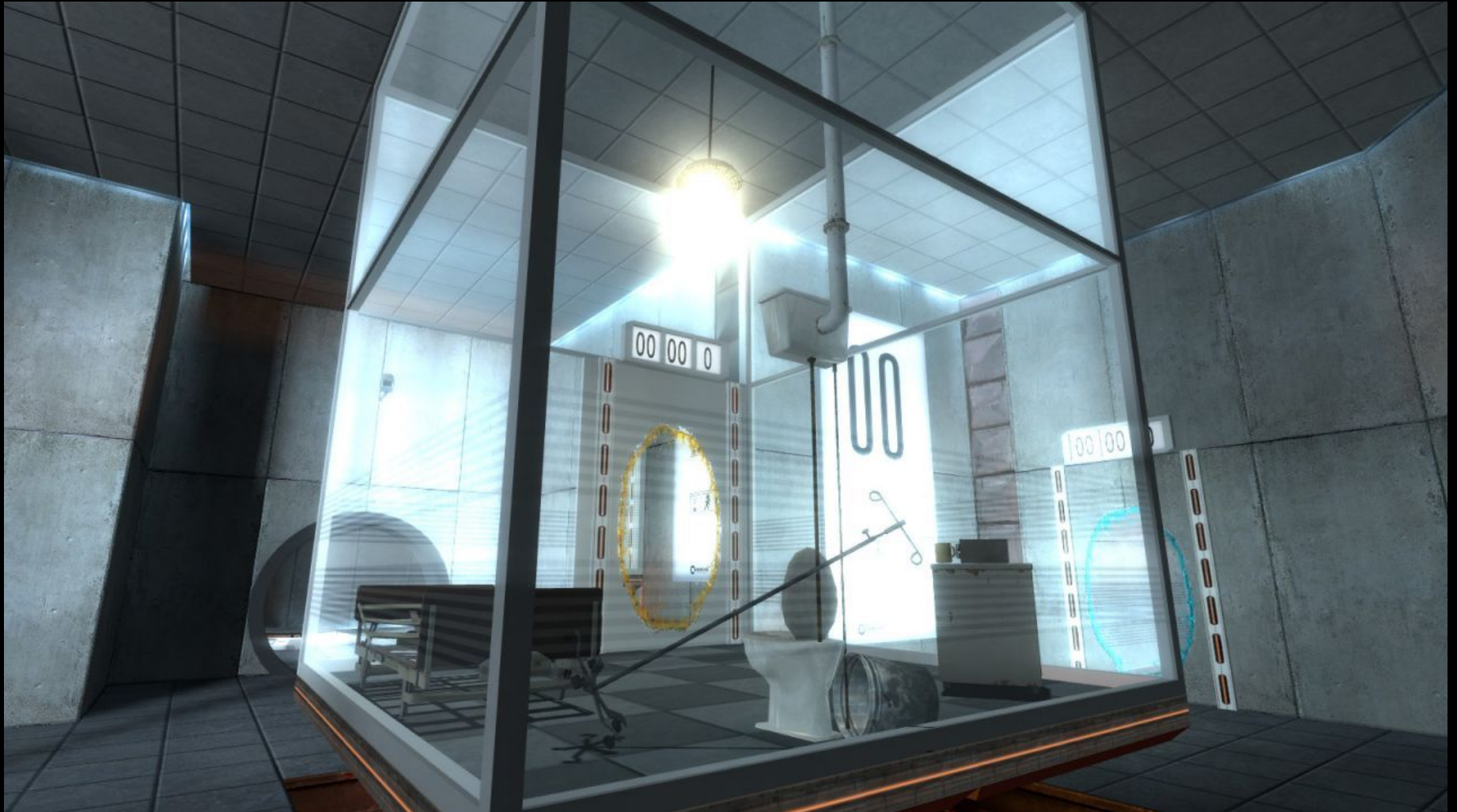
Bioshock claims to be about altruism and humanity,
but here is what it really teaches:

Shoot everyone you see without warning,
from as far away as possible.

Only care for women and pre-teen girls.

It's a very weird game that we
couldn't proffer as an example
to normal humans.

Good Explorational Design (augmented by architecture): Portal



Little Sister



Architected

Save or Kill?

Weighted Companion Cube



Explored

(with supplemental
architecting)

MUST MURDER!

mkozlows on the Quarter to Three forums:

“It's a measure of Bioshock's quality that killing little girls actually made me, a jaded and manipulative gamer, feel guilty and slightly uncomfortable.

But Portal actually made me feel guilty and slightly uncomfortable about throwing a crate into a pit.

That's pretty damn impressive.”

Listening Skills

Listening Skills

a.k.a. How do you merge architecture
with exploration?

It's hard to listen
if you are shouting all the time.

If you are constantly reinforcing your
architected design,
you blind yourself to the possibilities
being revealed.

Smash TV



Ambient Danger Gradient

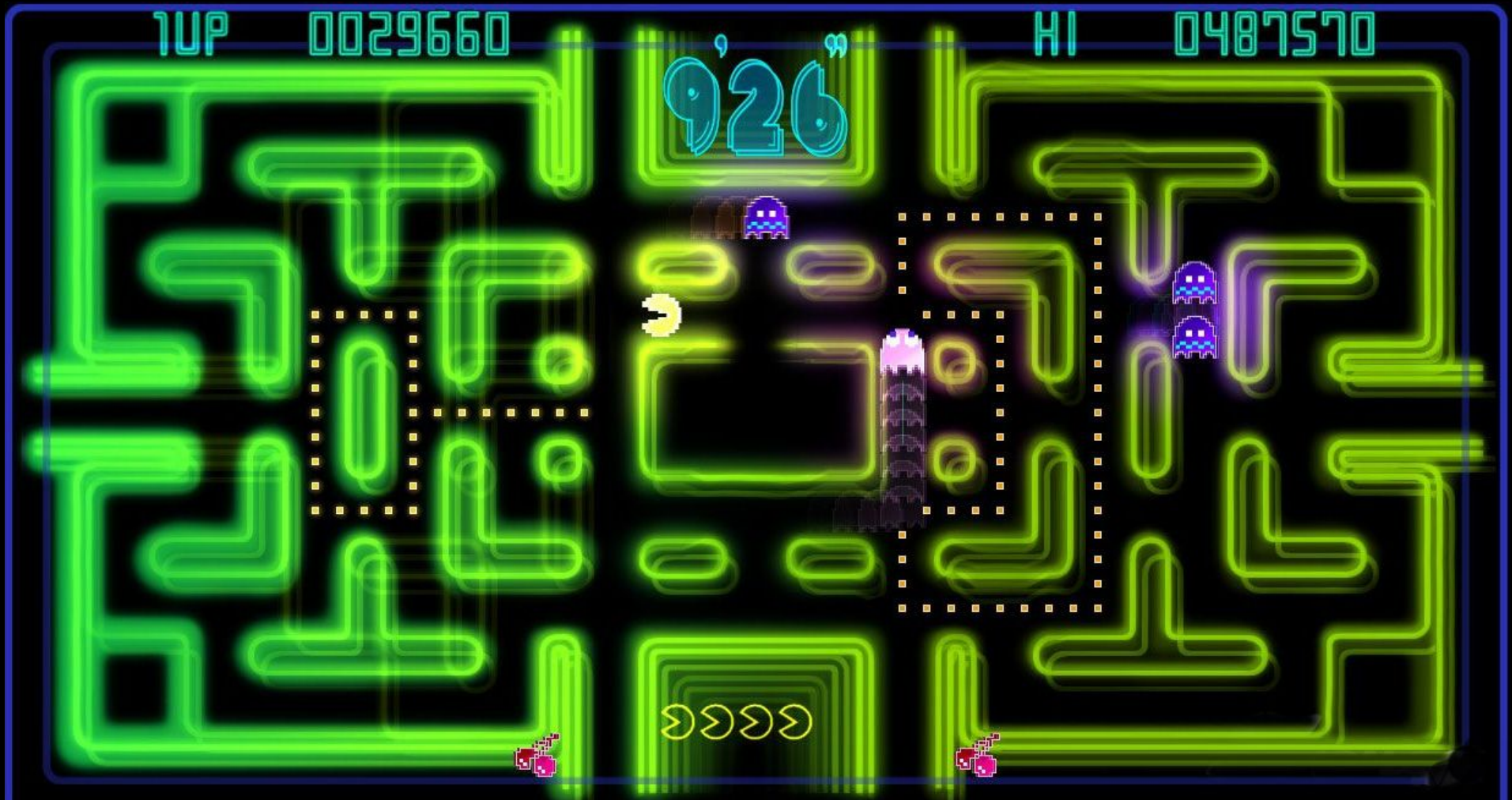


Total Carnage



Mines hidden behind trees, walls
crossed the line
between emergent circumstances
and deliberate sadism.

Pac-Man Championship Edition



Ghosts are edible safety timers.

*If you look for little design ripples like these,
you will see them all over.*

*If you're on a big story-based game,
precluding much exploration,
you could just notice when you squash
these things,
and build the listening skill.*

Conclusion

(inasmuch as there is one)

“As cinema matured, films developed the power to transform
as well as to entertain.

Video games are poised to enter a similar golden age.”

As a designer, I want to see us harness
that power to transform.

As a player, I desire to be transformed.

I am not getting that, most of the time.

I am frustrated by games.

What is worthwhile, or deep, or interesting?

It is very subjective.

Your ideas are different from mine.

But as designers,
we can hold the intention
to be worthwhile, or deep, or interesting,
whatever that means to each of us,
and to respect the player's potential
to live a high-quality life.

The Next Step