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Understanding through games
Life Philosophies and Socratic Dialogue in an unusual Medium

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Abstract

English
Games as a medium is about to change, and with this change comes a search for themes outside the normal range of what is seen as acceptable in the medium. In this paper we, Michael Levall and Carl Boström, use debate and Socratic dialogue to portray the value of looking at a topic from several different angles, with the topic of choice for this project being life philosophies. During production, we create a game which sets out to affect its player even after he or she has finished playing it, possibly teaching the player the value of looking at a problem from different perspectives. Playtests conclude that in order to affect the player, the game should be catered to the player’s skill in interpreting games, and interpretable design can be used to affect how influenced the player is by the game.

Keywords: game development, dialogue, debate, life philosophies, affect, interpretable design

Svenska

Nyckelord: spelutveckling, dialog, debatt, livsåskådningar, påverka, tolkningsbar design
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1 Introduction

This paper is the Bachelor’s Thesis for Carl Boström and Michael Levall, game development students at the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden. In this paper, we try to find ways for games to reach outside of its own medium to influence the user in his/hers everyday life. We had both spotted a beginning trend in games over the past year, namely games that try to address issues more relatable to the ordinary person’s life than headshots and frags. It is in our conviction that games can be used for something more than mindless entertainment and just as movies and books address several different themes, so too should games.

When we started this project, we knew that we wanted to make a game that was both relatable to the player and which could also influence the player’s real-life actions in a positive way. When deciding on which theme the game would address, we stumbled over the topic of life philosophies. It is easy for anyone to find clashes between religious and secular groups online, be it in a heated discussion on Facebook or in the comments of an unrelated video on YouTube. Our thoughts for the aim of the game was formed; Is it possible to equip a religious or secular person with tools to help him/her to understand and accept another religious or non-religious person’s viewpoint?

The aim of the game is not to convert anyone from one life philosophy to another, but to help mitigate the hate that boils out of discussions based on nothing but preconceptions and misunderstandings. To limit ourselves, we decided to go for the two life philosophies we both had the most prior experience with. Being raised in a western culture, those were Christianity and Secular Humanism. Our hopes are that the game we create during this project can help its players realize the similarities between the cores of Christian and Secular values, enabling them to see past their differences.
2 Problem area
2.1 Background

We discuss how game developers are starting to reach outside the usual comfort zone of games to affect the player, and how we as developers can invite the player to be the co-creator of the game.

Game developers continuously seek new ways of affecting their players through the design of their games. We have now come to a point where games have matured enough to start exploring areas outside of its own culture, and thusly help our players to understand a little more of what it’s like being human. How games can be used to, for instance, explore the Human Condition has been discussed by famous designers such as Jonathan Blow (2011) and it has become progressively more popular to portray everyday events and stories through games as a medium. Gone Home (The Fullbright Company, 2013) is a recent example that tells the story of what it was like being a lesbian teenager in the 90s USA. This topic is so far outside games’ usual comfort zone it would have been an unthinkable theme to explore with games just ten years ago. The theme we want to portray, which is just as far away from traditional games as lesbianism, is life philosophies.

In order to understand how to best use games to attempt to portray something as far outside games’ own culture as life philosophies, we feel it is important to draw inspiration from other areas that have more documented knowledge on the matter. We want the arguments presented in the game to not only exist and have meaning within the game, but should invoke thought in the player outside of the game as well. In this paper, when we write that we wish to affect the player, we mean that we want to invite them as co-creators to the experience the game has to offer. This invitation will let the player create their own opinions on the arguments we put forward, and should work as a bridge between the game and the real world. In order to understand how we could make the player a co-creator, as well as inviting him/her to actively value and consider our arguments, we have decided to look at the works of someone who have done just that, but by using conversations. Let’s take a brief look at what we can learn from Socrates.

2.1.1 Understanding through Dialogue

In the following section we give a brief introduction to Socrates and his works, and what parts of it we will be focusing on.

Roughly 2400 years ago the Greek philosopher Socrates broke new ground with his dialogue techniques, later written down by his student, Plato (Chesters, 2012). In Plato’s texts, Socrates used
dialogue to help people he encountered to reach true knowledge through conversation, often aiming for a universal truth tried against several different viewpoints. In Plato’s *Theaitetos*, Socrates challenges the student Theaitetos to explain what knowledge is. Socrates claims that he himself holds no answers, but is merely able to help Theaitetos determine the truth of his own words by asking the right questions. Socrates’ method of asking well thought-out questions instead of readily giving an answer is being used in therapy sessions by therapists trying to help a client come to a conclusion on their own (Overholser, 1993) but is also used by some teachers when facilitating classroom discussions (Chesters, 2012). We will dive deeper into the differences between dialogue, debates and ordinary conversations in our Previous Research, our hopes are that we will be able to use this knowledge in our game to affect our players.

### 2.1.2 Games and life philosophies

*Below we briefly discuss the contradicting sides of life philosophies, and raise the question whether or not life philosophies can be used in games to teach the player the value of seeing a topic from different perspectives.*

Life philosophies have existed nearly as long as humanity, offering different explanations to existential questions. To clarify, life philosophies comprises both religious beliefs, such as Christianity, but also non-religious beliefs such as Secular Humanism. These different philosophies often contradict each other, creating tension between the groups. This tension can result in a wide array of problems, ranging from full scale war to lengthy discussions to try and find a common ground where there is only a wide abyss (Dawkins, 2013).

According to Koster, game designer and author of the book *A Theory of Fun* (2005), games can be seen as a medium of teaching which presents puzzles for our brains to solve and learn from. If life philosophies could be the subject of a game, could the game then teach the player the value of trying to understand the opposition’s perspective?

### 2.2 Research Question

*How can game developers create entertaining experiences that have the potential to affect the player outside of the game?*

### 2.3 Aim

*We discuss how games can be used for the betterment of society, and the responsibilities we have as game developers.*

In his book *A Theory of Fun* (2005), Koster explains that every medium influences its user, and games is not an exception. Even so, he argues that games right now seem to have a very limited palette of expression, which is something worth expanding on. He reasons that games (and media in general)
has a social responsibility, meaning that its developers need to be responsible with their creations and to work towards the betterment of society. Whether this is true or not, it is a goal that we as developers would like to pursue as we see it as an important step for games to take, in order to be accepted by those that stand outside the gaming culture. We believe that games as a medium can handle mature and important topics relevant to society and the people living in it.

Just like Jonathan Blow made the well debated game Braid (2008), which we would claim to be about forgiveness, we would like to tackle a theme that is important to people in our current society. One could argue that for every human, there is a unique way of perceiving the world. With life philosophies being a subjective matter at its core, is it possible for humans with different backgrounds to truly understand and accept one another? If games could be used to help humans understand the value of acceptance, the next generation of humanity (i.e. those born in the 90s) who have games as one of their primary mediums of entertainment could be positively influenced. Jesse Schell, a famous game design teacher at Carnegie Mellon University, argues that every designer has a responsibility with his creations (2008). Schell explains that this responsibility is as simple as asking yourself the question; “Does my game help people?” He visions this responsibility as a ring to be carried on our pinky fingers, so that every time our hands touch something we are reminded of that responsibility towards our players. After two years of studying game design and art, it is time for us to put on that ring.

2.4 Writing process

Below is a short summary of how the writing for this paper was conducted, and who wrote what.

We are two persons writing this paper, and have thus split up the work on its different chapters. Michael Levall, being a designer, researched Socratic Dialogue and what dialogue and debate is to find inspiration for the gameplay. He also put a lot of effort in to writing and researching the different life philosophies, which are to be present in the games story. The projects artist, Calle Boström, looked at propaganda and how its symbolic properties may influence the games art. He put further work into writing about the technology chosen for the project, and how the playtests were made and what they could give the project.

This paper has gone through a moderately dynamic writing process, meaning that we have jumped back and forth in writing the different chapters. One has started the writing of a chapter, a first draft, which then has been passed through iterations from the both of us.
3 Previous Research

We examine different ways of affecting a user through a medium, starting our search outside the culture of games to tap into a larger and deeper area of knowledge.

The core of our research question lies in the ability to affect players outside of the game itself. Many of the media which have come before digital games (for instance music, art and video) have been used with the sole purpose of changing the actions of the user after he/she has experienced the product. Commercials is a good example where the goal of the video (the commercial itself) is to alter the recipients actions after experiencing it (go out and buy the product).

This is a charged subject, since the power to alter the user’s actions simply through the experience of a product can be used for either altruistic or selfish reasons. We have chosen to take a look at some such cases, both to draw inspiration, but also to be able to distance ourselves from some of their techniques. We do not want to make a game that mind-controls the user into believing in whatever life philosophy we decide to talk about, but to just as Socrates help the player to come to a conclusion on his/her own.

The study of propaganda immediately comes to mind, as it has been used for centuries to sway the minds of entire states. Let us begin with an overlook of what propaganda can teach us about influencing a human being using a medium of choice, before we later move on to more altruistically oriented areas.

3.1 The use of Propaganda

In this section we talk about how propaganda and manipulation can and has been used on people. We show examples of how it has been used in media in times of war, and talk about why its methods and end goals are concerns to us when making a game that tries to affect the player.

Propaganda is an effective tool to manipulate people. It has been used to portray an opposing side in negative light while keeping a high morale, the Kuwait war as a relatively recent example, where the “civilized world” (Littlejohn, 1991) fought against the “butcher of Baghdad” (Kay, 1990). We want to affect the player, but are means of manipulation and propaganda the answer to opening up doors for the player to be a co-creator? We do not think so.

Phrasing is key. Through it, propaganda deliberately portrays the opposition as the instigator and the reason for conflict, basically creating a scapegoat (Willcox, 2005). With different phrasing, one could give the opposing sides neutral standpoints, letting the reader (or in our case, the player) make up
his/hers own mind about the situation. As part of our narrative will be in the form of text, we must stay cautious of not demonizing either side.

We must also be wary of the visual representation in the game, as we look to American psychologist Harold D. Lasswell’s (1927) description of propaganda:

“Propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols”. (p. 627)

He goes on to explain that by ‘collective attitudes’ he means a shared mindset between people, the public opinion. By ‘significant symbols’ Lasswell was referring to any number of relevant stimuli evoked to generate a reaction. These stimuli could include images, reference to historical prejudices, notions of racial superiority or any number of visual symbols invoked to create the desired response.

We have a desired response we want to invoke, one that could affect the player in a positive way, but what propaganda and manipulation does is the opposite of our definition of affecting. With the theme of life philosophies we bring two sides into the equation, but must not pit the one against the other to declare one the “victor”, or rather, portray the other as the problem. We could represent the holy cross in negative light, but just like propaganda that would give the player the answer, when we want him/her to find one.

As we said; propaganda is an effective tool to alter someone’s view, but it does not fall in line with the experience we want to create for the player. Propaganda has historically been used to create crevices of misunderstanding between people, which is the opposite of what we want to achieve. Let’s now instead look at some ideas on how conversation can be used to create either close-mindedness or understanding.

3.2 The use of Debate

In the following chapter we discuss what debate is and how we see it used today. We discuss its intentions and consequences, and why we see it as the opposite of what we as the developers would want to the player to experience in our game.

Debate is based around two or more parties facing off in a duel of arguments. The goal of a debate is not to come to an agreement, but to sway the opinion of a third party in your favor. In a debate, the two parties are not supposed (some would say allowed) to give in to the opposition’s opinions. Instead, participants in a debate are just as focused on undermining and tearing down the opposition’s arguments as building up their own. Another important aspect of debate is how its participants use rhetoric. It is not uncommon for more focus to lie on the speaker’s appearance and
tone of voice, rather than the logic of his/hers arguments. Chesters (2012) explains the drawbacks of debate with the following words:

“Debate encourages criticism of others, closed-mindedness to the ideas of others, and determination to be right. It creates a winner and a loser and is likely to discourage further discussion.” (p.16).

As we can see from the above, debate is an excellent way to win over voters with little knowledge on the subject being discussed, yet a terrible way of reaching a higher form of understanding through logical examination of different viewpoints. This moves us over to Socrates idea of the dialogue.

3.3 Dialogue

In this section we dig deep to find out what dialogue is according to Socrates. We look at the differences between dialogue and debate, and later dialogue and discussion. We discuss how dialogue can be a central part for a person to reach a true understanding of a subject, and how it must not necessarily contain more than one person.

The techniques of dialogue, as taught by Socrates, can be seen as the near opposite of debate. While debate aims to pull out the carpet from below the opposition’s feet, dialogue revolves around understanding. Not only the understanding of every discussion-members viewpoint, but the understanding of every conceivable viewpoint in order to fully grasp a problem (Chesters, 2012). To fully understand the differences between dialogues and everyday discussions, it is useful to quote Trevor Curnow (2001) as he explains it:

“In the fundamental sense, then, dialogue is a process of thinking or thinking through something. On the grounds of pure etymology, there is no requirement that there should be more than one person involved. Furthermore (and just as importantly), if the involvement of more than one person is not a necessary condition for dialogue, it is not a sufficient one either. Just because two people are talking to each other that does not of itself mean that there is a dialogue, in the strict sense, going on. Dialogue and discussion are not the same thing. Unfortunately, everyday use tends to undermine this distinction.” (p.234).

Dialogue is not held by chance, it must be actively sought after. It is the search of a definite, logical answer through the examination of several different viewpoints; this leads to understanding. In a dialogue, disagreement is valued as a catalyst for further inquiry (Chesters, 2012). Disagreement is never avoided, but challenged through the testing of assumptions made by the participants. Lipman (1991) argues that the difference between the two lies in the motivation for the conversation itself. An everyday conversation is intended to keep equilibrium between its participants, while a dialogue
aims towards disequilibrium to bring a deeper understanding to the participants regarding the discussed topic. At the end of the dialogue equilibrium might again be restored.

It is clear to us that dialogue, even a critical inner monologue as described by Curnow, can be used to reach a higher understanding through the examination of different viewpoints. This can in turn be used to widen the participants view on a topic to great effect. However, humans tend to be reluctant to change and most often do not like what is new or unfamiliar to them. This is so deeply rooted in us that it takes place in many of the stories we look to for entertainment. On this subject, it is important to understand the journey a person goes through when he/she is transformed; be it the physical body or the understanding of a certain topic through dialogue. Let’s look at The Hero’s Journey.

### 3.4 The Hero’s Journey

*Below we give a quick introduction to The Hero’s Journey and discuss why it seems necessary for us to look closer at narrative structure for the game.*

Christopher Vogler (2007) wrote the book *The Writer’s Journey* as a guide to the narrative structure found in tales throughout the world, both ancient and modern. The structure put forth in this book, called *The Hero’s Journey*, not only relates to the works by man but to man’s life itself. The Hero’s Journey relates to us as human beings on a fundamental level, and is thusly effective at delivering engaging experiences to the audience. As we are setting out to create an entertaining experience where the player undergoes a change, it is helpful to understand this storytelling structure in order to connect more firmly with our audience. As *The Hero’s Journey* encompasses a wide variety of archetype characters and steps stories might use, which are redundant for our work, we will settle for a summary of the parts that relate to our work the most. The summary is meant to give us an overview of how stories of change generally occur.

Vogler (2007) explains the Journey in twelve steps. These steps are not elemental to every story, but can be seen as individual pieces that can be used in any order the writer wishes. All steps are not always represented, and sometimes they only last for a few seconds. Using some of the steps from *The Hero’s Journey*, we have explained the journey we envision the player to make as he/she experiences our game. We have marked the steps from *The Hero’s Journey* in italic. It should be noted that even though we use the terms *he/him* in the following text, the game is aimed at both genders and the player can be either man or woman.
3.4.1 The Journey we envision for the Player

The following is how we envision the journey for the player throughout the game, following the 12 steps established in The Hero’s Journey. We show our vision of the experience starting and ending outside the actual game.

The player starts out in his Ordinary World, which is his normal everyday life. Through marketing or by suggestion from a friend he receives the Call to Adventure, which urges him to enter the world of our game.

In the early parts of the game we expect him to undergo a Refusal of the call, meaning that he will show dislike or be uninterested in the topics we present to him, he may even think about quitting the game. Through the meeting with a Mentor, which will be our story’s narrator, he will come to understand the importance of the questions that the game raises.

The player will undergo the phase of Tests, allies, and enemies with a focus on testing the player’s current view on how to handle arguments and issues of contradicting life philosophies. These tests are meant to prepare the player for the final ordeal, the Resurrection. In this final exam, the player will experience a near-death situation within the game, prompting him to use all of his previously acquired knowledge of how to view a problem from several different angles, and through these different viewpoint reach understanding.

After the player has survived the Resurrection and the final test is passed, it is our hope that he will have acquired new knowledge in how to solve disputes not only in arguments regarding life philosophies, but on other topics as well. He is now ready to Return with the Elixir, his new knowledge, to the ordinary world outside the game. Relative to our problem formulation, the Return is the most critical part. If the player can take the knowledge learned within the game and return with it to his ordinary life, we have succeeded.

In order for us to enable this journey for the player, it is not sufficient to only understand dialogue and the Journey itself. Since the topic to be discussed is life philosophies, we must venture into this area to see what opinions already exist there. Our goal is to find both differences and similarities between Christianity and Secular Humanism, in order to understand how we can bring these two viewpoints into coexistence.

3.5 Life Philosophies

In the following chapter we look at Secular Humanism and Christianity’s differences and likenesses. We talk about how similarities can be found in these seemingly opposite life philosophies, and how their views of ethics and morals might be the key to finding a common ground.
There are some fundamental differences between the way that Secular Humanists and Christians view the world, as well as some seldom discussed similarities. The main difference lies in the way these groups view the world order. Secular Humanists argues that the only things we should accept as real are those we can perceive through scientific methods (Kurtz, 1999), making the scientific eye the main way to perceive the world. A Christian, on the other hand, believes in the existence of one almighty deity as described in the Bible. Some Christians, such as the branch of Creationists, take this belief to a literal extreme where they argue that the Bible can be seen as true history. A contemporary example is the debate between Bill Nye and Ken Ham (2014), where Ham argues for the creation of the world during a period of six days. These beliefs can be seen as polar opposites; it is presumable that Secularists and Christians could never come to terms on how the world was created, unless scientific evidence were to indicate the existence of an almighty deity.

3.5.1 God and the cleansing of Destruction

This chapter contains a summary of Christian faith according to Swedish author Gustaf Wingren. Wingren argues that Jesus needed to come to earth to rid destruction from his creation, and that jealousy is the oldest of all sins.

In his book Credo (1995) Swedish author Gustaf Wingren summarizes Christian faith using the trinity of the Father, Son and the Spirit. A total explanation of Christian faith can be had used any single one of these, as they all tie into the central aspects of the faith. These three each give a different aspect of the entire Christian faith, Wingren argues. God is always explained used human characteristics in the bible; he wants, he regrets and he forgives. When the bible says that God has "become human" through Jesus, this does not mean that God has become something that is alien or contrary to himself. It must be read in context with the fact that when God wanted to create an image of himself, he created man.

Wingren writes that the human is God’s image, thusly she is created by God. The destruction in the human heart spoils the human and at the same time God’s plan. When a tempted human remains clean and goes against the will of destruction within her heart, God’s true will comes forward together with an untainted human. Being human is not foreign to God, having the human desire for destruction however, is. Every time Jesus stands up to the will of destruction within his human heart, finally triumphing on the cross, God expels the destruction from his image; humanity.

Wingren argues that the oldest sin of all is jealousy. Something as polar opposite to creation and giving as jealousy is hard to find. Even something as insidious as killing could be seen as positive and innocent in the face of jealousy. This is because, writes Wingren, someone could kill to protect another, thus saving life, while jealousy can never come from anything positive. Jealousy is, at its
core, a reaction of hate towards someone else’s fortune. Jealousy can’t be anything but destruction, a surge of hate towards the one that gives, an enemy of the Creator. From this, Wingren writes about the inherent power that the good (giving) has over evil (jealousy). The one who is driven by jealousy is dependent on the actions of the one who does good, as the jealous can only sit and wait for the other person to do something he can react negatively towards.

3.5.2 Virtues over Rulebooks

We discuss similarities in moral and ethics between Christianity and Secular Humanism, and how Christians can see a person’s character as more important than a fixed set of rules.

In spite of the different outlooks on our heritage and emergence residing in Christianity and Secular Humanism, there are similarities when it comes to morals and ethics. Darlene Weaver (2011) argues in her book Moral Traditions: Acting Person and Christian Moral Life that the character of a person is more important than a fixed set of rules. Rulebooks was earlier used within the Catholic Church, while focusing on the person’s character as an Acting Person is more in line with contemporary society’s norms and values. By referring to the Bible she makes the case that every act we perform towards another human being is in length also done towards God himself, and that God is the source of morality. She continues to claim that it is thusly more admirable to seek ethical virtues of a positive nature than to try and set up a list of rules on how to act in every given situation. The fact that such virtues are often open ended (such as equality) might very well be a strength as they can be applied to several different situations. This goes well with the comparison Wingren (Credo, 1995) makes between killing and jealousy. Jealousy could never come from God and is thusly not a virtue humans should try to attain, while the act of killing to protect others might very well be necessary in some dire situations. Another conclusion Weaver makes is that theology can provide a general moral orientation, but that the moral arguments themselves are not intrinsically theological.

3.5.3 The universally educated Humanist

The following text is from a speech made by Swedish Georg Henrik von Wright in 1946. He is the author of Humanismen som livshållning (Humanism as a philosophy of life, our translation) written in 1978. The speech explains the importance of a universal human in constant search for truth.

Wright (1978) says that Humanism has, as the name suggests, a deep respect for the human. The ultimate goal for the individual is to evolve into the perfect ideal. The ideal for the humanist is the educated and cultivated individual, who recognizes the value of truth above every authority. This is equally true both for the scientist and the artist, as well as the philosopher. Humanism gives knowledge and skill value as education only if they raise the human to use his mind and actions with the broad-minded, objective and just perspective that is a requirement for understanding truth. To
the humanist, the perfect human is therefore not the one-sided specialist, but the universally educated individual.

For this human to become a reality, there is a need for certain aspects of Liberalism. Specifically the need for freedom of speech and thought, for we can never be sure that the suppressed thought is false unless we try it against our currently known truth. Should we suppress it, and it would in fact be a true argument, we steal away the opportunity for every individual to correct and replace his view for the suppressed thought. On the other hand, should the argument be false, we would steal away every individual’s growth as they would become progressively more educated as they tackled this new false argument.

3.5.4 The Humanists and Moral Relativism

We discuss how Secular Humanists see morals and ethics, and what similarities we can find between them and Christians. We also find disagreement on the subject amongst the Secular Humanists.

Many similarities to Weaver’s work can be found in the morals put forward in the Humanist Manifesto 2000 written by Paul Kurtz (1999), which has been signed by many prominent Secularist figures. The Christian ethics surrounding the golden rule and to “accept the aliens within our midst”, which is taken directly from the Bible, are used as a part of the moral values put forward in the document. Kurtz writes that Humanists believe that the virtues of empathy and caring are essential for ethical conduct. To further explain these virtues, he writes that “[Humanists] ought to tell the truth, keep promises, be honest, sincere, beneficent, reliable, and dependable, show fidelity, appreciation, and gratitude ...” (p.12). Even so, there are other humanists who disagree with Kurtz, especially regarding the “ought” in the above statement (Noebel, 2006, p.138). For if there is no God, how can there be an absolute morality, and why should anyone pay it any heed if it lacks an enforcer? David A. Noebel (2006) describes the Humanists’ situation as Moral Relativism; if all morals come from inside the human (as opposed to an outside deity or natural law) then all ethics are relative to our interpretation of right and wrong in any given situation. This can be put in conjunction with what Wright (1978) says about freedom of speech and thought having a huge impact on the truth-seeking humanist. To find the truth, the humanist must be free to try and evaluate his morals.

3.5.5 Ethics as a line of Communication

In this final part on the subject we conclude what differences and similarities we have found between Christianity and Secular Humanism, and why it is important to the game.

While the source of morality differs between Secular Humanism and Christianity, the morals and ethics proclaimed by the two groups have large similarities. There are of course extremists within each group, but it is interesting to observe that the virtues put forth by Weaver are similar to those
used by Kurtz, and how these tie into the explanations of Christianity and Humanism as put forward by Wingren and Wright respectively. Theology and Secularity aside, it is not farfetched to believe that these two could come to an agreement regarding which moral and ethical standards would be beneficial to society as a whole. This intrigues us, as we are setting out to create a game which uses dialogue to create understanding between the groups that Kurtz and Weaver represent. To succeed, we must both understand their differences and similarities in order to find the narrower gaps which enables understanding. From what we have read, ethics has the potential to become the line of communication which enables understanding between Secular and Religious groups.

3.6 Previous Research Conclusion

We summarize the Previous Research chapter with what we have found, and take a look forward towards where we will be going with our production.

We have talked about games maturing and reaching outside of its comfort zone, and what responsibility we have come to understand we have as game developers. With this in mind, we dove in with the idea of having the player improve outside the game, and looked to Socrates for answers. With his thoughts on dialogue, put forth in a theme of life philosophies, we hope to create a game that the player can take part in and be affected by. To further spark the interest of the player, we have taken a look at The Hero’s Journey, hopefully making it easier for the player to enjoy a game outside his or her comfort zone.

We believe we will make something that’s not often seen in games, thus making us unsure of the final result. The question we ask ourselves is; will it work or will it fail? With this research in our backpack we have a vague idea, and feel confident in beginning our journey to answer that question.
4 Approach

This chapter explains how we approached our Research Question during production based on our findings in the chapter Previous Research. Our Approach is divided into the sub-categories we have mainly worked with, namely Art, Story, Gameplay and Technology.

The Approach chapter pertains to the production phase of this project, which was performed directly after the research phase (see 3 Previous Research). To clarify roles and responsibilities, Michael Levall was in charge of Story writing, gameplay (see Glossary) and programming. Carl Boström was in charge of all art assets in the game, including concept, 2D and 3D art. Going forward, Levall will be referred to as the designer and Boström as the artist.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the final product explaining the aspects that are recurrent throughout the Approach chapter.

During our production phase, we always tried to reconnect to the research we made during pre-production. We began by formulating the core of the game; the value of viewing a topic from several different viewpoints. The topic of course being life philosophies as discussed in previous chapters. This core felt in line with both what we had read about Socratic Dialogue, as well as what we wanted to do with the two life philosophies we had chosen. We decided to call the game we produced A Can of Soda (henceforth referred to as “the game”), the name will not be explained in this chapter aside from that it pertains to the game’s ending. The game is divided into two worlds, referred to as “World One” and “World Two”, and feature large differences in their design and art. We have decided to divide the Approach chapter into the four basic elements each game consist of (not counting sound); story, art, gameplay and technology. It is noteworthy that our production phase was nine weeks in total.

4.2 Story; Looking at Life Philosophies from different perspectives

This chapter explains how the designer worked with the story of A Can of Soda to try and explain the differences and similarities between the two chosen Life Philosophies; Christianity and Secular Humanism.

Three different versions were made for the story, with the first and third being discarded and the second one used in the final product. We will now explain the process that went into making the first and second versions, our reasoning behind the choices we made as well as the designer’s method of choice for writing the story in this production.
4.2.1 Method for writing the Story

We explain the method the designer used for writing the game’s story, as well as why it worked well considering his role as both a designer and programmer.

The designer spent about a day at a time on writing the story, then left it for two to three days while he worked on other more technical tasks, so that he could return to the story with a fresh perspective. This worked well as it let the designer come up with new ideas for improving the story while he worked on other tasks, which he could then implement in a quick reiteration of the story a few days later. The designer knew from experience that the first few versions he wrote would likely never be used, their purpose was merely to help him start moving in the right (or even any) direction. During the final three weeks of production, we organized playtests weekly which let the designer gain direct feedback on the changes he had made.

The story is divided into several smaller “story bits” which are presented to the player between levels. The designer reasoned that the player should get a smaller bit of the story and then let it sink in while he was actually playing the game. This choice came early in production as the designer didn’t want to steal focus from the player while he was experiencing the gameplay. Since the topic of life philosophies can be difficult for some to grasp the designer reasoned that short bursts of story, as not to overwhelm the player, was the right way to go.

4.2.2 The First Version

The first version of the story is explained together with why it was ultimately discarded. This version makes a non-personal take on the topic, debating as if it was the Life Philosophies themselves that argued with each other.

In the first version of the text, Christianity and Secular Humanism do a very direct face-off in a debate. Only the content for the first world was written for this version, and it was never implemented in-game. The reason for this was that the designer quickly felt that the story was going in the wrong direction; It was obvious who the two factions were and they only pointed out the same arguments that have been used countless of times before, not really captivating the designer’s attention as a reader. We have chosen a short excerpt to clarify:

“The reason we can live as conveniently as we can today is because of science. It’s the reason we can cure diseases that would have been fatal no more than one hundred years ago. When did your faith ever cure a life?

It is true that science can be made to heal the body, but what your antidotes cannot cure is a broken mind. Faith brings hope to millions, when no part of your science can give an adequate answer, faith is there to bring solace. What is a long life worth if you have nothing to fill it with?”
This type of writing gave no personality to the arguing sides which misses a critical point, since perspective is often subjective. The designer wanted to avoid this kind of story as it might alienate players who believe in any of these two viewpoints, as they might feel attacked by the game. This would counteract the core of the game, as a player who feels that his viewpoint is threatened by the game is far less likely to understand its intended morale of viewing a topic from several different viewpoints.

4.2.3 The second Version

The second version of the text gives the voice of the story to a person who has just changed between the two philosophies, who don’t feel like he/she belongs. This became the final version of the story that was used in the game.

In this version, the designer placed the main character in a world where religion and science are seen as two opposites with almost no one trusting a person from the other faction. This version let the player hear the monologue of a lone person (the main character) who wonders over the differences and similarities between religious and secular groups. To make the text more relatable, the designer let the story bits in the first half of the game incorporate several references to the main character’s past life and his/her dislike towards both factions.

The first world of the game is about debate, while the second is about dialogue. The core of the second world was largely inspired by Socratic Dialogue, were a discussion and thorough evaluation of different viewpoints are used to acquire knowledge (Chesters, 2008). The information gathered in our Previous Research was used extensively during the writing of the story for the second world, as that was where the common ground between the two factions was explored. For example, the main similarity between Christianity and Secular Humanism that we found is that both can argue for the same ethical virtues, even though their arguments may vary (see 3 Previous Research). The designer tried to explain this in the first half of one of the story bits, see the example below:

“Even though several of their thoughts and virtues resemble each other, I realize that their origins sometimes differ. He would agree to many of the virtues she stood for, but his reasons for following them wasn’t his own educated mind, but the will of the One above us.”

4.3 Gameplay; Going from Debate to Dialogue

This chapter explains the method and process behind the gameplay of the game A Can of Soda, as well as an overview of the final mechanics of the game.

As with the other elements in the game, the gameplay is divided between the first and second world with its mechanics (see Glossary) aimed towards Debate and Dialogue respectively. This was done to
emphasis what happened in the story so that when the story moves from debate to dialogue, the gameplay does as well.

4.3.1 Gameplay overview

This chapter gives a short explanation of the game’s final gameplay rules in order to make explanations and examples in upcoming chapters more clear.

In our game A Can of Soda, players move pieces across a chess-like board with the objective of removing every piece until he/she only have one left. Pieces are removed by colliding them with one another, either destruction or combination rules apply depending on the world the player is in. The final piece must then be placed on the golden “win” square in order to successfully beat the level. See figure 1 below for an example level in the first world.

![Figure 1. The player has selected the blue piece and is ready to make a move. When the blue and red piece collide, only the red piece will remain which will then need to be placed on the golden space.](image)

4.3.2 Method for creating gameplay based on Debate and Dialogue

This chapter explains the method used for creating the gameplay during this project. The designer used inspiration from debate and Socratic Dialogue together with early playtests to decide on which mechanics to use.

The designer used analogue prototypes early on in development to try and decide the fun-factor of the gameplay he was trying out. The designer used analogue prototypes as they are quicker to put together and try out than their digital counterparts, see figure 2 below for an example. The designer did this during our research phase and took inspiration from the texts we read about debate and
Socratic Dialogue. The designer tried to visualize the different mechanics that take place during a discussion and implement them in their simplest form with gameplay. During the very first weeks of producing analogue prototypes, the designer had playtesters come in and try out the mechanics. When we performed playtests, we took inspiration from Schell’s explanations as put forward in his book *The Art of Game Design: A book of Lenses* (2008). This helped the designer pin-point potential problems with the rules as well as how advanced he could make the puzzles before they became too hard for beginners, i.e. making them give up before finishing the game. We paused the playtests during the middle of production to get more time to implement features, and then resumed testing the mechanics during the last three weeks.

Figure 2. Pieces (colored), walls (white) and the goal (white with text) are placed on the board. The board is marked with different sizes so that the same board can be reused for early- and late-game levels.

4.3.3 The process of creating the Gameplay

This chapter explains how the designer took inspiration from the texts we read during our research phase to create the game’s mechanics.

During production the core of the gameplay always remained intact; the first world was about destroying pieces, the second was about combining them. This related to debate (destroying the opponent’s arguments) and dialogue (combining knowledge with the aim of finding a universal truth). The designer used the explanation of debate as put forward by Chesters (2012) and explained in our Previous Research. In short, debate creates a winner and a loser as well as discourages further discussion. This led the designer to use a “rock-paper-scissors” system for the basic pieces in the first
world. The designer’s thoughts were that, since the pieces represent different arguments in a debate, they always destroy each other and only one can be left standing.

As explained by Chesters (2012) dialogue means actively searching for and trying to grasp every possible viewpoint in order to fully understand a topic. The designer tried to visualize this with the combo-mechanic in world two. The basic pieces do not destroy each other, but combine into a new piece with a more advanced movement-set. The combination represents the fact that an argument or viewpoint is never destroyed or removed from a dialogue, since the information the player gathers from examining each viewpoint is kept with the player as he/she continue to investigate the topic. The designer made the movement of the combined piece to be a combination of the movement from the basic pieces used to create it. At first, the movement for the combined pieces was too advanced and restricted to be of any real use in the game's puzzles. After playtesting the mechanic, the designer made the combined pieces stronger by giving them additional move-routes. This enabled the player to solve more advanced puzzles with the combined pieces than he could with the basic ones, further underlining the value of dialogue over debate.

4.4 Technology; Picking a Game Engine

In this chapter we discuss what engine we decided to make the game in, why, and what problems arose from using that engine.

We chose to work in Unity 4.2, as we have experience working with Unity 3D and read about the updates in Unity 4 (2013) which streamlines the work with 2D. It contains user-friendly 2D tools which optimized our production, but also brings potential for 3D use. Deciding to use a flexible game engine with a wide array of tools such as Unity eased the production of the game.

Knowing the game’s core gameplay also helped us decide on the game engine, as Unity exports to mobile devices with minimal effort. As the game is a digital board game we believe it would fit well for tablets and similar devices. On top of this, the engine is free. There are extra features available for the paid pro-version, but those will not be needed for this product.

4.5 Art; Thematic interpretations

Below the artist discuss his method to making the game’s art, how a thematic approach was taken to the game’s art and how it connects to the game’s story and gameplay.

In the game, a few things are present; a game board with pieces which will be present in two separate worlds. On top of this is a story which, at first glance, seems disconnected from the rest of the game. The goal of the game’s art is to tie these and the rest of the game’s ideas together, while
pushing the game’s core forward. Below the artist talks about the different choices he made and the process of making the art for the game.

4.5.1 Method for the game’s art

In this chapter the artist explains the process and method for making the art of the game.

Before the final art was made, concepts and ideas were drawn. Together the artist and the designer discussed the art’s design and how it would tie in with the game’s story and gameplay. Following this, rough sketches were made for the backgrounds to try out different ideas, and thumbnails were made for the pieces (see figure 3). The artist continued iterating until a cohesive meaning was reached, a common thread, for the game’s art, which then could be made final.

![Figure 3. Concepts for different backgrounds together with thumbnails for the game pieces.](image)

When the artist worked on the art he focused on one major part or aspect of it, and finished it. When the game first was playable, all the game’s art was temporary. As production went on certain art assets were made and put in to the playable game, patching the game up to a final version. Around this time playtesting began, and feedback could be given on the new art assets. For example; the background art for World One was complete, but everything else was temporary. The playtesters then gave feedback on the background, which could be adjusted accordingly.

Feedback was given on how the animations for the world were too slow, through this process. However, the drawback to this method was that the whole picture of the art was left out. In the later stages of development, when nearly all graphical assets were in place, feedback could be given not
4.5.2 Art for the different worlds

Below the artist discuss how a thematic approach was taken to the art for the different worlds, and how he reached that conclusion.

As has been told before, there are two worlds in the game. What these worlds would be, however, was another question. The game tackles different views of life, namely Christianity and Secular Humanism. The artist made concepts for a world that took this direction, but how one expresses Christianity and Secular Humanism became another problem. How do you not represent them as good versus evil, as it could turn into propaganda? The conclusion was made that this direction did not stick to the core of the game, which is debate versus dialogue. The different views of life is the subject of debate versus dialogue, thus debate versus dialogue should be the main theme of the game’s art.

Discussions about two persons debating in the background were had, but it felt too obvious. It would be a literal interpretation which leaves little room for the player to be part of. A direction that had a better chance at immersing the player was sought after, leaving parts of it open for interpretation for the player to fill. A thematic approach was taken; affecting the player by allowing him/her to be a part of the experience. This was inspired by David Hellman as he explains how he tackled the art of the game Braid in *Indie Game: The Movie* (2012). Braids art is not literally interpreted, but rather thematically. Just like Braid, *A Can of Soda* tries to bind the gameplay, art and story, and a thematic approach to the art felt like the way to go.

4.5.3 Details and Pieces

The artist explains how subtle movement gives a sense of polish, why he tried to make the game look like a painting and how the pieces were made.

A detail kept throughout the game’s art is how nothing is static. All art assets in the game are constantly shifting ever so slightly, which gives the game a sense of polish which helps immerse the player. The shifting art gives it a hand-made feel, with brush strokes fading in and out, whilst not hiding that it is a digital game. A key point to the game’s art is that it should look like a painting, where artists such as Cézanne were used as inspiration. The game deals with mature subjects, like life philosophies, and the art had to hold to that level of maturity. The game’s art is an attempt to show that just like a traditional painting; a game can be taken just as seriously.

The pieces the player controls represent different types of arguments, or different meanings of the arguments. One piece is a tree (see figure 4), which could mean life or the natural. Another is a star
which could indicate the scientific or astronomy. Even though there is an original interpretation from
the artist of the piece, it is still left up for interpretation for the player. The artist felt that it was
important that the pieces were kept quite abstract, so that the player may be a co-creator and reflect
his/her own views on the pieces, but that the artist himself start the player off with a hint.

Figure 4. Each of the six pieces were made to be interpretable by the player. The three advanced pieces (to the right) are
combinations from two of their basic counterparts.

The choice to make the pieces in 3D was made when the artist looked at his options. Unity provides
neat frame-by-frame 2D functionality, but the problem was not the game engine itself but the
method. Frame-by-frame, which is a series of pictures drawn to simulate animation, often results in
choppier animation than tweened animation (see Glossary) which did not fall in line with the game’s
art. The artist had tried making frame-by-frame work for the background to World One, but
concluded that tweened animation gave the smoother result. The chopping attracts attention and
distracts from the otherwise subtle movement in the game’s art, which is not suitable with the rest of
the game’s art.

5 Results and Discussion
In this chapter we present the results of this project, we break down the product that was created
into the basic elements of art, gameplay and story. We explain the playtests we had near the end of
production, and we discuss the different lessons we’ve learnt from this project.

5.1 The Product
In this chapter we give an overview of the final product, explaining its core features.

With the research made during the first part of this bachelor’s thesis, and the production during the
second, we have been able to create this game with its aim to affect the player. By having a clear goal
in mind from day one, the game shows its morals and ideas through gameplay, story and art. We will
now break down what the game consists of, and what it means.

5.1.1 Gameplay
The game’s final gameplay is explained as well as how it all relates to debate and dialogue.
As stated in an earlier chapter, the gameplay in A Can of Soda is played out on a two-dimensional board with chess-like pieces. There are three basic- and three combined pieces, with the combined pieces only being accessible in the second world of the game. Every piece has its own set of movement, this combined with the use of walls meant that some levels can only be completed if the player manages to have a certain piece left at the end. In order to beat a level and move on to the next, the player must combine or destroy pieces until there is only one left, then place the final piece on the “win” space.

In the first world, a debate is held between two opposing sides, with the goal of undermining the opposition’s arguments to set one’s own as the triumphant. In the first part of the game, World One, pieces destroy each other in a rock-paper-scissor manner upon collision. This shows how one piece, or argument, may destroy the other until only one remains, which then is the victor.

In the second part, World Two, the pieces instead combine when touched. Here the game shifts to dialogue, which can be described as the examination of different viewpoints to bring understanding (Chesters, 2012). At this point, the different arguments do not look to undermine or destroy each other, but rather to bring a higher understanding as is the core of Socratic Dialogue. These combined pieces are thus stronger than the individual ones, gameplay wise.

The three basic pieces have simpler and more restricted movement systems than the three combined ones. This enabled us to create more advanced levels the further into the game the player gets, as more pieces and larger levels increase difficulty. Throughout the game, we introduce the player to two special spaces, one being the aforementioned wall and the second being a turn-space. The wall can be jumped over by the combined pieces, increasing their versatility even further. The turn-space switches any basic piece placed on it to the next in the rock-paper-scissor circle. For example, since green beats red, if a green piece is placed on a turn-space it is automatically turned into a red piece.

5.1.2 Story
We give an overview of the story that is used in the final version of the game.

The story in A Can of Soda is told through the monologue of a person (the main character) who is looking back on some of the events in his/her life. The player gets to hear the main character’s thoughts on his/her life as a religious activist and then later a corporate scientist. The main character ponders the differences and later on the similarities between the two factions, ending with a realization that in order to understand life we must be willing to look at it from several different perspectives.
The story is spread out as small snippets, which are highly condensed and interpretable. In these smaller stories, the main character reveal that he has met one person from each faction that seem to resemble each other in that they look at what it means to live a good life in the same way. These two persons, one representing Christianity and the other Secular Humanism, both agree to the same ethical values but disagree on where these values come from. Even though they come from different places, the main character draws the conclusion that these two would likely get along well, as the virtues they both wish to live their lives by are nearly the same.

5.1.3 Art

Below is an overview of what the player will see when playing the game, and the artist’s meaning behind it.

The game takes place in two fictional worlds. The first one, World One, displays a rather odd planet covered in fire and ice, divided by the planets center (see figure 5, top left). As the player progresses through the game, the world changes with the fire and ice clashing. An ocean is created through the clashing in-between the two sides, and when the time has come for the player to leave the world he/she does so by diving in to that ocean. The screen fades to black, and the player is introduced to World Two. In this new world, a starry sky shines while rays in different colors move in a soothing fashion (see figure 5, bottom right). As more and more levels are completed, smaller stars gather in the center; creating one giant star. This is by the end of the game, which finishes with the final star being revealed as a can of soda.

Figure 5. Upper left corner: World One. Bottom right corner: World Two.

The two different worlds represent debate and dialogue, the first one debate and the second one dialogue. In the first world, the debate world, the player sees the fire and ice. The fire and ice represent two opposite sides, going head to head against each other in a debate. This forms the
ocean, which are their ideas and arguments combined. The player then dives into this ocean, as a transition from debate to dialogue, or World One to World Two. In this new world, with a starry sky and a star in the center which shines brightly, debate is represented. Smaller stars gather in the center, representing different ideas and thoughts which then combine into a big star; a greater understanding. Metaphors in the game’s story hint to this, and it manages to tie in to the gameplay through this thematic manner, with the can of soda being the final metaphor for the game.

It is intentionally abstract, so that it may be interpreted by the player. The board which the game is played upon however brings more so-called game logic than the worlds’ art. Certain parts of the board are made in way so that they are easy to understand, specifically for the player to have an enjoyable experience. The pieces the player move lean more towards the interpretable. The three basic ones show a book, a tree and some sort of star. What they represent are bases of arguments, and how they are used. The book may point towards history, the tree to the natural and life and the star to science and the astronomical. The decision to make them interpretable was made to allow the player to put him/herself in the game and be affected by it.

5.2 The Trial of Playtests

In this chapter we discuss the playtests we had during the final stages of production, how the players responded to the game and what their thoughts were after they finished playing.

By the end of the production, our focus shifted to playtesting. We used the five questions as explained by Schell (2008); Why, Who, Where, What and How. To answer the Why, we wanted to test if A Can of Soda could be used to facilitate discussion outside of the game. This relates directly to our Research Question since a game that can create a discussion also directly affects a player outside of the game itself. To answer this we used playtesters who are familiar with games as they would have an easier time interpreting the game’s elements. We decided to hold the playtests in our project room (where), which let us set up the computers beforehand and it was easier to get testers since they didn’t have to do anything else than show up and play/talk to us for 30 minutes. The What in Schell’s method stands for “What will we look for?” The How stands for “How will we get the information?” We decided to do interviews as we did not want to interrupt the player as he/she was playing, what we were looking for is summarized by the three questions explained in the following chapter.

5.2.1 Questions that were asked

The different questions we asked the playtesters, in what order and why.
Before starting the playtests, we decided on three questions we would ask all the testers in a specific order. Other questions could be asked in-between these three, if other questions or discussions arose. The three questions were:

1. What morals can you derive from the game?
2. What was the game about?
3. Could you see a connection between the game’s gameplay/graphics/story?

The further we get into a discussion like this, the clearer things will be for the player. Once the player has thought about and answered one question, the next one will often times be easier. Therefore, asking the questions in this order felt important, as we would get the initial thought from the player about the game’s core (the game’s moral and what it is trying to teach). The questions themselves focus on the things we have worked towards accomplishing, like the game’s gameplay, art and story being in synch. They are also open enough for other discussions to arise.

The playtests were kept one and one, meaning that one playtester played the game while one of us, the developers, quietly sat behind him/her taking notes on problems that arose. Even though two playtests were held at a time, we kept them in separate rooms to assure that the distraction levels were kept to a minimum. When the playtester had played through the game, we asked them the questions above and tried to bring forth a discussion.

5.2.2 The moral of the game
What we gathered from the question “What morals can you derive from the game?”

With a modified version of the story, players found the moral of the game to be clear. All spoke about how the game’s moral were how one should look at things from different perspectives. Some said, in a conflict, one should combine the different sides’ opinions to reach a conclusion, and share this conclusion, which hits very close to home to what we are trying to tell with *A Can of Soda*.

The game’s moral was obvious even, some argued. The final scene in particular which says and shows that one should look at things from different perspectives (relating to the can of soda), some found bothersome. They meant it was too much on the nose, in contrast to the otherwise subtle and abstract feel of the game. On the other hand, some did not find it bothersome as it made sense of the whole situation.

5.2.3 What the game was about
Answers to the question “What was the game about?”
When asked what the game was about, most looked back at the game’s story. They talked about the two persons (the Christian and the Secular Humanist) who represented two opposing sides, and how the player’s character was someone neutral in between the two. There were no specific mentions of an inner dialogue or monologue, but that is in essence what most testers were explaining.

When not talking about the story, the description of the game was close to the first answer; how it is about looking at things from different perspectives. Some spoke about how one of the sides in the conflict was religious, but could not specify the other side. Others made connections to debate versus dialogue in the different worlds, how the first show debate and the second dialogue.

5.2.4 How the game’s components connect
*What the playtesters said when asked “Could you see a connection between the game’s gameplay/graphics/story?”*

There were mixed reactions to our third question. Some thought all three parts worked well together, and understood what they all meant in both worlds. How the first world showed two clashing sides with fire and ice, with pieces destroying one another in gameplay, and how the story describes the two differentiating sides. Same goes for World Two, where they start to combine.

Some, on the other hand, were too focused on the actual gameplay with solving puzzles to think about the parts around it. They noticed, but made no further attempt to understand the background and the text and the meaning of the gameplay. This was especially true for World Two, when the difficulty starts to ramp up. Others realized some connections, like the art and the story in World One, and the connection between story and gameplay in World Two, but could not see any other.

5.2.5 Problems and misunderstandings
*In this chapter we talk about problems the playtesters faced when playing the game, and misunderstandings that surfaced after they had finished it.*

Some problems arose during the early parts of the game, were some players found the game’s logic to be quite difficult to grasp. When being faced with two different pieces, one destroying the other when touched, misunderstandings arose. One of the pieces is a blue ball with stars, which some described as a black hole. Some of these players thought this piece “sucked up” the other pieces, carrying them along. This later resulted in confusion when these players tried to understand the gameplay. Some thought this piece could not be moved, as they only had past experience with another piece. This problem was however quite minor, as they realized how the game worked in the upcoming level(s).
Something worth noting is what the players thought the pieces represent. Most did not see them as arguments, but rather as different views of life such as Religion or Secular. The reason is probably that they realized the story is partly about religion, and made the connection from there on. Some saw them, the three basic pieces, as the three characters in the game; two showing the two different sides represented in the story, and the other the main character’s neutral view. They had a hard time seeing a connection to this and the rest of the game, but it was the most logical one when they did not see the game as debate versus dialogue. This is not necessarily a problem, as it still manages to bring up a discussion.

Very few also noticed the game’s Head-Up Display (HUD, see Glossary), which showed what will happen when two pieces collide. Most found it confusing at first, and then ignored it. They instead stuck to memorizing what piece destroys which and which combination does what. When the HUD was used by a meticulous player, however, it filled its purpose. We were doubtful of using a help menu, as it would disconnect from the rest of the game and slow down the pace, there is however obviously room for improvement.

5.3 A game to facilitate discussion

How can we design a game to be used as the basis for a group discussion? We discuss this topic as well as our thoughts on the interpretable design of A Can of Soda.

In order to successfully create a game that holds the potential to affect the player outside of the game itself, we aimed for a design that could be interpreted in several different ways by the player. We reasoned that a game that only has one clear and direct interpretation, no matter what that might be, won’t be able to affect the player as well as a design which enables several different interpretations. This is because a game that can be interpreted in more ways than one also invites the interpreter to invest a part of him- or herself in the interpretation. Our aim was to make a game that would invite the player to insert a part of his/her own identity into the game, and thusly get an experience unique for that individual.

5.3.1 The third version of the story

We explain the third and unused version of the game’s story, as well as how it was too on the nose for it to be effective in the kind of game we wanted to make.

We worked in several different areas to try and make the game as interpretable as possible, while still keeping in line with the game’s core. One clear example is the game’s story. We realized that there is a fine line between not saying enough, and saying too much. The designer created the third version of the story to be clearer and more to the point than the second version. The designer did this because we had gotten feedback from some of our playtesters half-way through production that they
didn’t quite get the story (version two), and that they had a hard time keeping up with what was going on. In the third version, the designer tried a different approach with the story being told through the diary of a young girl. The two sides of Christianity and Secular Humanism was represented by the girl’s parents, and their arguing was explained and interpreted by the girl’s school teacher who helped her deal with and understand the argument.

This version turned out to be too on the nose, as it left little to no room for player interpretation. The game’s core and message was explained too clearly, thusly leaving the player without any feeling of agency (see Glossary). We decided to revert back to the second version of the story, revising it by removing an unnecessary part of the final scene. The last playtesters all responded well to the revised second version of the story, with most understanding its theme and core. This might seem odd as the second version didn’t work at first, but then seemed to magically convey its theme once we gave it another try with almost the same version. What is notable is that we used different playtesters on all occasions. This leads us into thinking that, in a game like *A Can of Soda*, the final experience depends strongly on the player’s ability to interpret the different aspects of the game he/she is playing.

### 5.3.2 Respecting the Experienced Player

We discuss the importance of designing games with the player’s experience level in mind. We aimed to design *A Can of Soda* to offer an entertaining experience for a player inexperienced in interpreting games, while at the same time offering a game that could be dived into and deeply interpreted by the experienced player.

As stated in the previous chapter, the experience in *A Can of Soda* is largely dependent on the player’s ability to interpret the events that unfold in the game. For a person who is inexperienced with our medium, such a game might not be the right choice as it runs the risk of being too far above the level of comprehension the player is capable of, thusly alienating the player. That said, there is a strength in creating interpretable experiences and viewing the player as an active interpreter of the medium. We aimed to create a game that would still grant the player inexperienced in interpreting games a satisfying playthrough, even though he/she might not be able to understand every subtlety the game has to offer.

With this in mind, we still wanted to create an experience that could be used as a foundation for a discussion, be it within the player’s mind just after he/she finished playing or in a group setting a week later. To do this, we had to accept the fact that not everyone was going to understand our intentions with everything the game had to offer. We had to walk a thin line by not revealing too much about the subject we wanted to discuss with the player, but at the same time give the player enough information to go on to make possible his/her own interpretation. By leaving the ultimate
interpretation of the game up to the player, we hoped to strengthen the ownership the player would feel for the experience created between him/her and the game. By trusting the player’s ability to interpret what he experiences, it is possible to create a game well suited for group discussions that revolve around a certain topic. For a group discussion to be possible, the product/topic/theme that is the basis for the discussion must be able to offer several different viewpoints, which enables discussion to take place.

This idea came from our playtests, where one party was unable to discuss the interpretable parts of the game, like the story and the thematic art. They did not know themselves why this was when asked about it, although our take is that inexperience within the medium is a factor. They did however enjoy playing the game, but no discussion like one that was held by experienced players from another playtest was held.

5.4 Gameplay inspired by Non-traditional systems

In this chapter, we discuss how a designer can take inspiration from systems that are not typically considered fit for games. We explain how this relates to the gameplay in A Can of Soda, which is inspired by the systems present in debate and dialogue.

We should start by clarifying that in the title of this chapter, “non-traditional” refers to a system that is not traditionally considered to be fit for a digital gameplay scenario. It is important to make this distinction as the system present in a dialogue is, due to the age of voice and talk, far more traditional than digital games. By system, we simply mean a set of individual rules which are applied in relation to one another. In digital games, there are several systems that are considered standard for their genre, with the health-system present in most First Person Shooter titles being one clear example. One of our goals with A Can of Soda was to draw inspiration from a system far outside the normal realm of digital games, and to then apply it in a digital game setting.

We learned two main things while working on implementing gameplay based on verbal discussion. First, try to grasp the chosen theme as much as possible. By reading literature that has nothing to do with games, but everything to do with dialogue and debate, the designer could get a clear view on the subject before he started working on translating it into gameplay rules. Second, rarely did the designer let the topic make him feel restricted. The designer always aimed to make the gameplay work in line with debate and dialogue as much as possible, but if he found a gameplay rule that we felt enhanced the game it was never discarded with the reason that we couldn’t argue for its existence with the systems in debate and/or dialogue.

By working with systems that are not traditionally used in games, we believe that new innovative solutions for connecting gameplay and story can be found. To us, it was important to realize that just
because our game was about a discussion, the gameplay didn’t necessarily need to feature two physical persons and a dialogue-tree such as the ones already used in many Role Playing Games. Instead, our gameplay has a chess-like resemblance at first glance, but with its core rule set being clearly in sync with the game’s story.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter we give our final thoughts on this project together with a summary of what we have done and learned.

The playtesting was not in a scale that is comfortable enough to conclude facts, which is also why we chose not to include number of testers in previous chapters, but with a pressured time schedule it was perhaps bigger than expected. Overall the game’s experience was given a positive response. Players learned the game’s morals and understood them, which lies in the game’s core. Whether or not they apply them in real life is another question, which could only be answered had we gotten the opportunity to perform follow-up tests somewhere down the line. We cannot and should not control how the player acts in real life, but knowing is half the battle, and the game does a good job of teaching the player of its morals.

From what we could gather, the game does a good job of letting the player be a co-creator. With interpretable design throughout the game’s art, story and gameplay, it lets the player put him/herself in the game. As understood through the various answers given during playtesting, players could find different interpretations on the same subject but still agree on the core of the subject being discussed. It would have been fruitful to organize group discussions with players just after they had finished the game, but unfortunately this was never done due to time constraints after the final build had been created.

The issues with how the gameplay was difficult for some to understand was unfortunate, but is something which can be further tested and worked upon. The problems were quite minor, but may make the experience a bit too bumpy when it aims to be a rather smooth one (i.e. easy to learn). Not smooth as in a breeze to play through, as the subjects brought up are unusual even for the veteran gamer, but smooth as in the overall game experience. Once again however, with a development time of 6 weeks this was hard to avoid, and is something that can be smoothened with further development.

We came to the conclusion that the use of non-traditional systems, such as the systems present in dialogue and debate, can be used to create new and fresh gameplay experiences. The chasm between story and gameplay, which is often present in games that try to convey themes that revolve around passive verbs (such as talking) can be overcome by looking beyond the initial activity and
instead look to the fundamental rule set of the action. In *A Can of Soda*, this meant learning the core of debate and dialogue, which could later be translated into the gameplay rules of destruction and combination.

The way the art, story and gameplay cooperate creates a surreal and abstract tone to the game, which we felt was important for the game to be able to affect the player. By doing this, we invite the player to be a co-creator and thus be affected by the game. The player may invest him/herself in the game, and take it to heart. Thus it is our hope that the player will take this experience and what he/she learned inside the game and apply it in the real world. By focusing on interpretable design, and tying art, story and gameplay together in such a way, the player may be affected by the game while the product itself does not sacrifice any value of entertainment, which is instead perhaps enhanced.
Glossary

**Affect:** Inviting the player to become a co-creator of the experience by encouraging him/her to consider and critically value the ideas put forth within the game.

**Agency:** A measure of the player’s ability to influence the game world through his/her actions.

**Altruism:** Unselfish concerns for the welfare of others.

**Christianity:** The belief in God as described in the bible, with Jesus as his son.

**Etymology:** The history of words, as in their origin and how their meaning have changed over time.

**Game developer:** People developing games as a hobby or job, including (but not limited to) digital games.

**Gameplay:** Comprises what the player actually does in the game. Gameplay is created when the player interacts with a game’s mechanics.

**Head-Up Display:** Called HUD for short, usually represented by 2D objects on screen and is used to relay important information about the game’s current state to the player.

**Interpretable design:** Design that can be interpreted in several different ways by different players. This relates to every element the game consists of including art, story and gameplay.

**Life philosophies:** Views of life, such as religion or secularity.

**Manipulation:** Way of changing or creating another human’s view on a subject.

**Mechanics:** The rules that dictate how the player may interact with the game, and how the game is to respond to those interactions. It also encompasses rules that don’t necessarily have an impact on player interaction, but that dictate how things work in relation to each other within the game.

**Methodology:** A systematic way of exercising a procedure.

**Propaganda:** Means to manipulate others for one’s own well-being.

**Secular Humanism:** Life stance that embraces human reason as the basis for morality.

**The Human Condition:** The unalterable nature of humanity, common to all regardless of gender or nationality.

**Tweened animation:** An animation method that mathematically calculates the position of the graphical object between every frame, which makes the animation appear smoother.
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