“TRANSPLANTED”

A STOP-MOTION VIDEO GAME

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

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Abstract

The Creative Project Transplanted is a stop-motion video game that seeks to explore the benefits of taking care of another living thing, and the connection this has to healthy change in an individual’s life. Ben Fulcher, my fellow graduate student, and I have created a stop-motion video game that utilizes the application of the Transtheoretical model (or Stages of change). The game is focused on a woman who has just graduated college, and no longer has a goal or focus for her life. Because of this, she quickly becomes depressed and feels as though she no longer has any purpose. Her apartment has become a prison, littered with boxes she never unpacked. A plant is delivered to her house, with a note stating that the plant knows she has what it takes to take care of it. The plant serves as a catalyst for change in the woman’s life. The plant possesses magical properties, and as the woman takes care of it, it begins to help her take back control of her life. For the duration of the fifteen-minute game play, the player will be unpacking boxes and taking care of the plant. Eventually enough boxes will be unpacked and this will clean a room, allowing the player to move on to the next room. The game has four rooms, (a bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and living room) each of which is connected to a stage of change in the woman’s life. After all four rooms are cleared, the plant dies, transforming into a seed. This seed represents the knowledge that the woman has gained over the course of the game. The benefits of this game are its ability to showcase a model of change and to examine how healthy change can serves as a catalyst to accomplishing one’s goals in life.
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Statement of the Problem

More and more frequently, art has turned its attention to addressing mental health issues. In recent years there have been several different games that were developed to specifically address this issue; games such as *Celeste*, *Night in the Woods* and *HellBlade: Senua’s Sacrifice*, are all ones that focus on the unique challenges that people encounter when struggling with mental illness, whether chronic or acute. For *Celeste* and *Night in the Woods* the characters encounter and experience anxiety and depression. *HellBlade: Senua’s Sacrifice* showcases how mental abuse is often linked to other serious health issues. Games like the aforementioned (and others) reveal characters who model what good mental health is, as well as presenting other individuals who struggle to a far greater degree. This is a positive representation for the video game community, and for the art community, as it showcases the fact that mental health issues are normal, and shouldn’t be stigmatized or treated as though they are somehow abnormal.

However, one question remains unclear. What kinds of action should be taken in order to offer and provide support for those who live with mental illness? To carry it further, are video games even capable of helping people?

This question seems largely unaddressed, most likely because mental health is a difficult topic to discuss, and can be intimidating for that reason. Mental health illnesses are highly individualistic, affecting people who have a particular illness in multi-various ways. Symptoms can take years to develop, and are often mistaken for other health problems, thus making a course of action difficult to set into motion without considerable experimentation. Video games appear to suggest that people who have mental or emotional disabilities should never be ostracized because of their illness, and so they do not progress past that point in the narrative. The overwhelming majority of video games also show characters who mistake bouts of mental illness as individual quirks, which shows a complete lack of awareness that mental illness even
exists. This idea is a myth. Mental health, whether chronic or acute, is always treatable.

In addition, having a strong connection to nature, being active in your community, making good choices more consistently, and a strong support base of friends and family are often the key to stimulating healthy change in an individual, particularly those suffering from situationally-induced (stressful or harmful environments that cause acute symptoms) mental illness.

For my creative research project, Transplanted, I worked in tandem with Ben Fulcher, a fellow graduate student, to create a stop-motion video game that utilizes the application of the Transtheoretical Model (or Stages of Change). The Transtheoretical Model was developed around 1977, based on a study done by James O. Prochaska and Carlo Di Clemente. The Transtheoretical Model is based on many different theories of psychotherapy, and rests on the belief that in order for an individual to effect change, multiple factors have to come together in order for actual change to occur, and that those factors may vary from individual to individual.

In Transplanted, we explore, from the perspective of the protagonist, how taking care of another living being, experiencing the benefits that result from interacting with nature, and the rewarding consequences of positive actions can all aid in the process of recovering from mental illness. The stages of change embodied in this model are normal processes that virtually all people experience when implementing modifications to their lives that result in better mental health. Many video games choose to progress through these stages in game play, but usually in a more subtle way than it appears in other kinds of media. Task-oriented games are more inclined to explore the progression through the phases, as that is the given nature of their game play. Video games offer a unique opportunity, however; a player can experience and apply the stages of the model through practical application in real time.
The Transtheoretical Model, also referred to as the Stages of Change, is organized as follows: Stage one is Precontemplation, where individuals do not intend to act on a problem they have, and in fact, are often unaware that a problem even exists; Stage two is Contemplation, during which individuals examine themselves to see if they are engaging in unhealthy habits, are able to recognize a certain behavior as problematic, and thus intend to begin some kind of healthy behavioral change in the foreseeable future; Stage three is Preparation (also called Determination), and during this phase individuals are ready to enact the change within the next thirty days, taking small steps toward their desired modification; Stage four is Action, and individuals are able to recognize the positive results of the behavior modification and intend to keep doing it so as to continue to reap benefits; Stage five is Maintenance, and here individuals have continued their behavior modification for an extended period of time, and plan to maintain the change in order to continue receiving benefits; And finally, Stage six is Termination: Individuals have no desire to return to previously unhealthy behaviors and are sure they will not relapse because the changes have been so beneficial.

Moving through these various periods, the game Transplanted examines and explores the benefits that can result from behavior modifications, for both oneself and another living thing as well. For example, in Precontemplation a player approaches a problem that they do not yet know how to solve. In Contemplation, the player decides how to deal with the problem, and during Preparation they are preparing to enact their plan of action and/or finding the right tools. Action and Maintenance are when the player acts and encounters the problem again, remembers that they had already successfully dealt with the problem, and so repeats (and keeps repeating) the necessary steps in order to proceed in the game. The Legend of Zelda is a very good example of how this pattern plays out in a game, because you can only progress in the game if you enter the
temples and solve the puzzles. As the game proceeds, the puzzles become increasingly more difficult to solve. This is the manner in which the game prepares the players for initiating and enacting action without frustrating them, and this kind of structure also helps to keep players engaged with the game since the difficulty of the puzzles only increases according to how quickly they acquire the necessary skills from solving the puzzles.

The Transtheoretical Model can be seen in the narrative structure of our game through the actions of the protagonist, a young adult named Elaine who has recently moved into a new apartment. She is a recent college graduate and so has expectations about what kind of life she will lead in the real world. However, due to various circumstances she puts her expectations about her life to the side, and as a result she quickly becomes depressed and downtrodden. A plant is delivered to her, and in the process of taking care of the plant, she is able to reclaim control of her life and realize the value of self-confidence and responsibility. We will be utilizing the stages of change more closely than seen in other games, with each one of the four rooms representing a particular period. We will also be exploring the benefits that result when people engage with nature, and how those interactions can play a critical role in the recovery of mental health. Some games that explore the importance of nature and its relation to sustaining good mental health are games such as Flower, The Town of Light, and Owlboy, which uses landscape as a means by which to reveal the mental state of a character.

We are building a miniature apartment consisting of four separate rooms, all decorated with props according to the function of the room; each room represents a stage in the Transtheoretical Model. These props will be made using various materials consisting of wood, metal, fabric, etc. This apartment is meant to simulate the quintessential “first apartment” that many college students move into upon graduating. The apartment setting is important because it
visually represents the struggle of trying to establish oneself after college, and the desire to become the sort of person you want to be, but are not yet. This aesthetic emphasizes the personal nature of game play because the story is set in the realm of the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary.

Utilizing video games as a teaching tool is one of the project’s goals. One of the ways this can be accomplished is by giving the player information throughout the narrative, and then allowing the player to choose what to do with that information. Though the project seeks to demonstrate that all mental illnesses are able to be successfully managed, we also want to respect that personal experiences are unique to the individual, and that each player processes information differently. By emphasizing the personal experience of the player, in that the game allows the player to create the narrative and move it forward, the game offers a plan for how a player can make actual and tangible changes to their lives.
Review of the Literature

Growing up, I did not have access to much mass media because unlike many children, I did not watch cartoons or cable TV. Mostly I either read books (or books were read to us), which stimulated a deep interest in such topics as philosophy and ethics. I was homeschooled, so much of my learning took place outside of buildings, experiencing nature and learning about the natural world around us. At age ten, my siblings and I saved up enough money to purchase a Nintendo GameCube, and this became the dominant media influence on me. I played games such as Animal Crossing, Harvest Moon, and Pikmin, which were all set within a whimsical puzzle-based ideal of nature. These three games were all task-oriented, and emphasized problem-solving skills and the perfection of those skills in contrast to violence, in order to achieve the game’s purpose. Games like this encouraged me to test out my skills, while also welcoming me to a world beyond my own. In the book Philosophy Through Video Games, the author discusses how those who play video games often begin to embody the character avatars they play. This idea, of immersing oneself completely into a character, sets up an intriguing philosophical discussion.

What exactly does it mean when we say “I” in relation to a virtual reality? As stated in the book, “the strange use of the word “I” by participants in role-playing games, from tabletop Dungeons & Dragons all the way to Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games… not only add a new level of complexity… but also end up providing support for some fascinating philosophical theses concerning the nature of the self.”1 stating that we use “I” in referencing our playable avatars. This idea of “I” as in “I completed the quest” or “I killed this monster” presents an intriguing puzzle because it was not really you who completed the quest, it was your avatar. Regardless if it was truly “you” or merely an extension of yourself, for a video game player, the

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1 Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox. Philosophy through Video Games (London: Routledge, 2009), 2.
sense of immersion and accomplishment are often both equally real in virtual reality as they are in actual reality.

This idea of immersion through role-play is hardly new, in fact, it could be claimed that this idea is as old as human kind. “There is a sense in which role-playing games are as old as the impulse that we’ve all felt as children to say to one another “‘Let’s pretend…”” \(^2\) It would seem that this desire is an innate one. This is why many find video games so attractive, because they offer the opportunity of a personal connection with their players. Unlike movies, or even books, video games offer us the chance to participate in a pretend world, and in turn make decisions that affect the world around us.

Unlike watching a movie, the player can often choose both when and how to respond to a situation in modern gaming because “…the player herself partially determines the story that gets told based on the decision she makes, such as what sort of character to play… or whether to risk going into the crypt without a magic lantern.” \(^3\) These choices allow for faster player immersion, and by extension, give video games an active role in forming and maintaining connections for those who play them.

As a teenager, I continued to play video games, and soon was able to acquire an Xbox. One of the most influential games I have ever played is called BioShock. *BioShock* was released in 2013, and was the first time I ever considered the power that a video game can possess. *BioShock* allowed me to interact with a created world, and play out a philosophy I had never before considered. *BioShock* follows the story of a man named Jack, who enters an underwater city named Rapture. The city Rapture was built by the idealist Andrew Ryan, and is now a city that has crumbled due to its citizens’ power-hungry habits. When Jack finally comes face to face

\(^3\) Ibid., 3
with Ryan, Ryan says one of the most iconic lines of the game, “We all make choices in life, but in the end our choices make us.” 4 Here the player realizes that they are in control of their own destiny. This idea had such a strong resonance with me and it was not until the game was almost over that I realized what I had learned. Because of the game’s immersion, and the choices I was able to make, I felt as though I learned about how to play it out in real time.

_Bioshock’s_ ability to take something that I had only ever read about, and make it a reality through gameplay, was incredibly inspiring to me. For the first time, I realized that the video games I had played as a child and as a teenager, had taught me something through the manner in which they structured and presented the narrative. I was already familiar with the idea of choice and consequence, having read books like _Crime and Punishment_ and _Animal Farm_, but seeing the impact of choices played out in an imaginary world had a lasting impact on me. I believe video games offer a mode of interactive media that can share complex topics and ideas in a way that books and film cannot.

The creative project _Transplanted_ is very much inspired by the idea of creating your own destiny, and sharing a particular point of view by allowing players to experience it. I believe that the only way to test out an idea is to live it, and that is one of the goals of _Transplanted_. The ability to showcase an idea in real time is why _Transplanted_ utilizes the Transtheoretical Model. It allows players to test a way of handling one facet of mental illness in a consequence-free environment. As previously stated, I do not want to create a game dealing with mental illness that has no solution, but instead, use the power that video games have to suggest a possible course of action.

One of the themes of *Bioshock* that I connected to so strongly is that ultimately you learn that your fate is in your own hands. In a similar fashion, *Transplanted* is designed to provide some knowledge about successful mental health practices, but not explicitly state on what to do with it. How people experience mental illness is different for everyone, and what works for one person may not work for another. I want *Transplanted* to take advantage of the opportunity to help people learn how to make good choices based on the knowledge they have gained, knowing that the choices belong to the players themselves. Another important concept in *Transplanted* is an emphasis on communication. As an artist, one of my key desires in making art is to communicate. Considering the interactive nature of video games and how they structure the narrative based on particular choices, games are a prime candidate for communicating ideas about all sorts of things. *Animal Crossing* is one of these “communication games”.

*Animal Crossing* first captured my attention because of its adorable artistic style, and because the aesthetics of the game matched my own interests. *Animal Crossing* presents and builds a strong sense of community and respect by utilizing the backdrop of nature. In the game you play as a young protagonist who has left home for the first time. In fact, the town you move into is randomly generated, making everyone’s town slightly different than those of other players. It is similar to *Transplanted* because it shares the goal of trying to create a dialogue between the player and the game. As a day simulator, it operates in a unique format of being able to create a friendly, unassuming environment in which the player can experiment with different kinds of communication.

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5 Eguchi, Katsuya and Nogami, Hisashi. “Animal Crossing – Developer Interviews with directors Katsuya Eguchi and Hisashi Nogami”
In an interview about the game, the creators were asked to discuss why they first began calling it a “communication game”. They referenced several game mechanics, and mentioned that even the fact that the player can change their furniture could be a conversation starter between players. The creators further stated that communication is often marked by difficult conversations:

For instance, the seagull…makes all these dark jokes. I’m sure a kid won’t understand them. I imagined he would have to go to his Mom and ask her what the seagull was talking about, and the Mom would then have a hard time answering. That’s actually why we mixed in difficult sections like that…Communication is what we ultimately want people to take away from Animal Crossing—and there’s no better example of it than that.6

Playing this game as a child really made me think about the impact having conversations can have. Furthermore, it made me consider what video games could be, and what art could be, by extension. This heavily inspired the direction of Transplanted in that both my partner & myself want the game to be a conversation stimulus.

In the book, Lost Connection, the author discusses how conversations play a role in depression.

Loneliness isn’t the physical absence of other people, he said—it’s the sense that you’re not sharing anything that matters with anyone else. If you have lots of people around you—perhaps even a husband or wife, or a family, or a busy workplace—but you do not share anything that matters with them, then you’ll still be lonely.7

Just like the Seagull in Animal Crossing, conversations that are worth having are often very difficult to initiate. It goes far beyond the simple niceties of day-to-day life in order to achieve a

6 5. Eguchi, Katsuya, Nogami, Hisashi. “Animal Crossing – Developer Interviews with directors Katsuya Eguchi and Hisashi Nogami”
7 Hari, Johann. Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression and the Unexpected Solutions. (BLOOMSBURY, 2019), 83
meaningful connection with someone. For this reason, *Transplanted* seeks to inspire these conversations, by having the protagonist confront the reasons of her depression, and find a solution through communicating with herself and her newly acquired plant.

An important influence for me is nature. Having grown up in the country, nature was never far out of reach, which made it an integral part of my childhood and teen years. Nature is something that shows up in my work almost unconsciously, due to it being such an essential component of my identity. Studio Ghibli films deeply inspired me during my adolescence; movies such as *Nausicaa and the Valley of the Wind* and *Spirited Away*, were two that I loved to watch, and both narratives instilled in me how important it is to be dedicated to your craft, as well as a strong appreciation of and respect for nature. I did not realize how important nature was until leaving it behind when I went to college. I purchased a plant during my sophomore year and quickly purchased more because of the positive effect it had on me. In many ways, that is where the idea for *Transplanted* began. Nature and *Transplanted* have always been closely linked for me, in that nature has been shown to have a positive effect on those suffering from mental illnesses. In my personal experience, experiencing nature on a regular basis also helped me overcome depression, and feel more connected to the world around me. This is a feeling that inspired the origins of *Transplanted* and was implemented into game play.

As I have continued in my artistic journey, I have also come across many other media influences. Comics offered complex story lines and I eagerly picked up titles such as *V for Vendetta*, *Watchman*, *Death Note*, and *Bone*. I loved all of these books not just for their beautiful imagery, but primarily because of the questions they made me ask. A specific comic influence was Thomas O’Malley’s *Seconds*, a comic book dedicated to the discussion of choice. In it, the character has the ability to fix her mistakes, but at the cost of losing the reality in which that
mistake occurred. I have found that many of the graphic novels I have enjoyed have engaged with such difficult topics as choice and communication, and this has influenced the ideas present in *Transplanted*.

Science Fiction and Fantasy have both played an important role in the creation of *Transplanted*. Since I was a teenager, I have loved old science fiction series and movies such as *Star Trek*, *Silent Running*, and *Stargate*. All of these things made me consider and contemplate questions such as, “What does communication mean?” “What does love mean?” “What does being human mean?” These movies inspired the impetus for the creation of a fictive world as a means in order to explore different ways of thinking. Sometimes the best way to truly see the real versions of ourselves is through the fantastical or abstract. This relates back to the idea of connection to those around us. Stories offer some of the fastest ways for us to see ourselves in a new light, and they can also facilitate a deeper empathy and understanding for people who are different than us. Stories ultimately offer us a chance to be the best version of ourselves that we can be.
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Ultimately, this idea of the fantastical and abstract is why Ben Fulcher and I chose a video game format for *Transplanted*, because of its unique ability to immerse oneself in a fictive environment in real time. Thus, we felt that structuring the narrative around the Transtheoretical Model would allow players to experience the consequences of the choices they make, but with consequence-free results. Conversations about mental illness are finally beginning to occur among various sectors of society and we participate in them far more often than we used because of the stigma attached to mental illness. Ben Fulcher and I have created *Transplanted* to showcase the necessity of nature and important conversations, while allowing the player to play out the philosophical heart of the game, and decide for themselves what to do with the information given to them pertaining to mental health.
Exhibition Statement

The Creative Project *Transplanted* is a stop-motion video game developed by myself and fellow graduate student Ben Fulcher, and is examines and explores the process of change. We utilize the Transtheoretical Model (also called the Stages of Change), to show the effect that modifying behavior with positive actions can have on a person’s life.

The Transtheoretical Model is defined as follows. Stage one is Precontemplation, where individuals do not intend to act on a problem. Stage two is Contemplation, where individuals intend to start the healthy behavior. Stage three is Preparation, during which individuals make a decision to act. Stage four is Action, and during this phase individuals have changed their behavior. And stage five is Maintenance, where individuals have sustained their behavior modification for an extended amount of time and plan to continue doing so.

The game itself is set in an apartment where we focus on the life of one woman, Elaine, trying to change her life. A plant is delivered to her house and stimulates the cathartic process of change for Elaine. The game has a ten to fifteen-minute time line, during which the player will unpack boxes and be tasked to take care of the plant.

The work is a stop-motion video game, utilizing found materials and hand-made objects in order to make the set. All objects in the set have been created by us, and made to match the aesthetics of the apartment. The woman and plant will be created as puppets using fabric and silicon. The woman was created with silicon and rubber through a mold-making process and the plant was created with wire and hand-sewn leaves.
Bibliography

   http://www.bioshockgame.com/site/us/.


