

FM5507 – GAME DESIGN II – Assessment Three

“TRAIN BLADER” – Evaluation

The sublime trepidation of fast motion is a primitive delight that often is attempted in its capture in videogames – Sega’s *Sonic* mascot being the personification of speed. Travel without the real-life danger of such collision in such transport lends itself well to the vicarious excitement the medium can offer. As Bernstein (2001,163) notes:

“The fix of speed for the computer or videogame player is not from the visceral thrill of fastness, as with racing cars where the speed is physically felt. The computer ensnares with a Siren's song of time stopping, ceasing to be experienced, transcended. Speed is not an end in itself, a roller coaster ride, but a means to escape from the very sensation of speed or duration: an escape from history, waiting, embodied space”

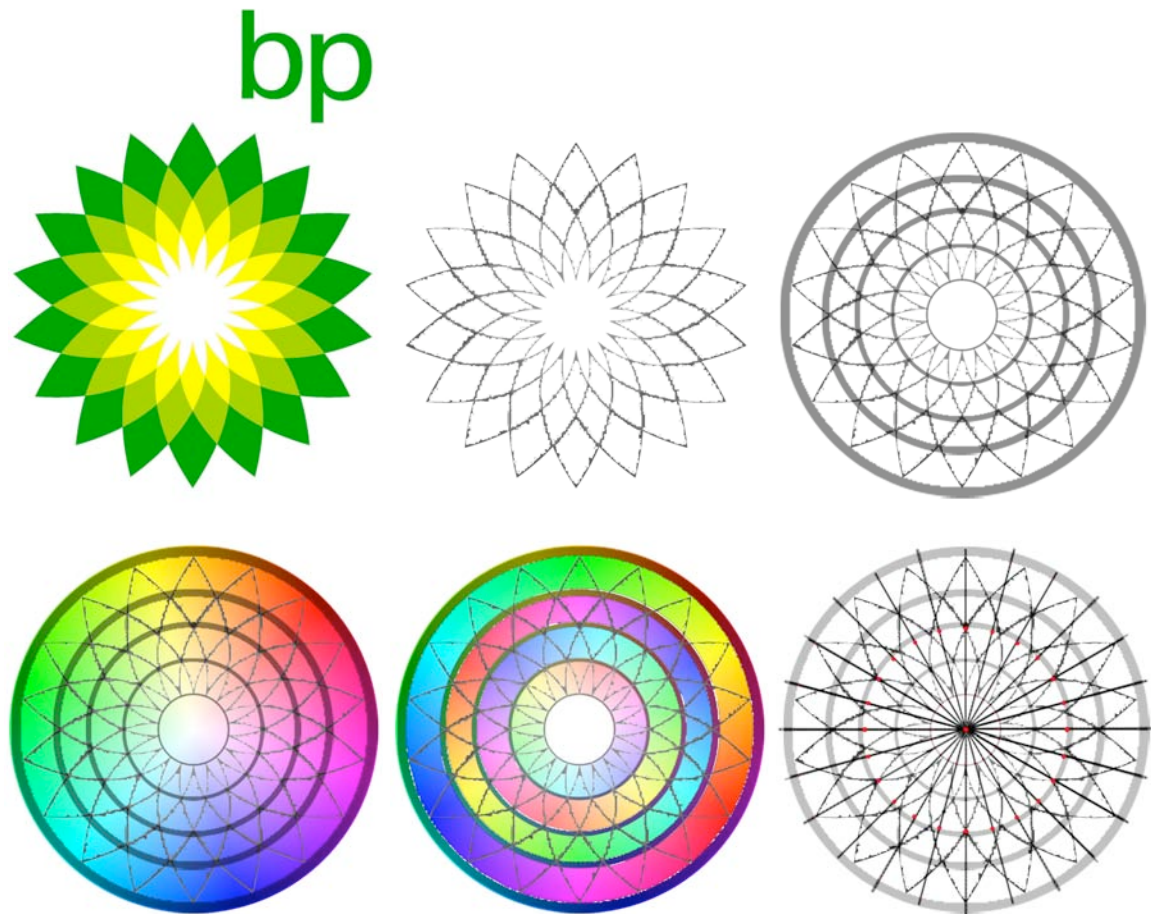
When a player is in motion it is easy to ensnare them within a flow state, as it requires constant concentration – *Rez* (Sega, 2001) is well known for its hypnotic power but this game draws its power from having a basic piece of music and allowing the player to trigger extra-diegetic sounds effects over the top by interaction within the diagesis. The *Train Blader* project allowed a focus on a personal dream to create an interactive music videogame that could be used to equally promote pieces of linear music. The soaring found in many pieces of music are often captured in promotional music videos, but by their nature are shamelessly non-linear to fit the nature of music. After a few viewings these promos soon lose their entertainment appeal so thoughts began forming as to how it is possible to grant open and expressive interactive legitimacy to what will have to remain a non-linear experience, bound the very authorship of what is music.

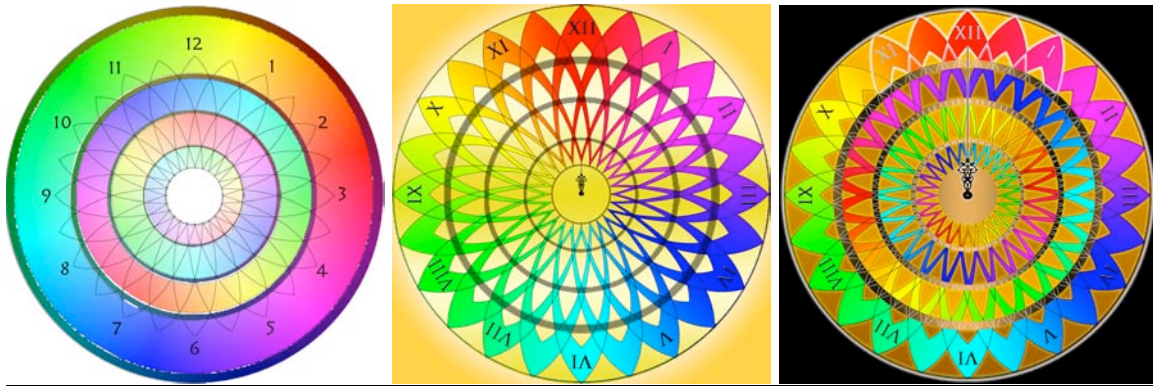
Theoretically, anything can be granted agency if it is broken down enough into its component elements (such as language consisting of words), and many pieces of modern electronic music would work well in having their tunes split up and visually allowed interaction on the screen. Certain sounds or melodies could become waves of enemies or obstacles to be dodged. What was immediately obvious was that capturing music was to require motion, and having two layers of locomotive propulsion as agency would allow further interesting elements to be experimented with diagesis design. If a player were to stop to destroy a parallel Blader within the narrative, the world would still be moving fast and thus still capturing the flowing motion of music.

Capturing speed works better ‘on-rails’ so the player can concentrate on other matters at hand, which in the case of *Train Blader* was felt should be a rewarding for engagement with the music, or rather good virtual dance. Rather than simply the popular game mechanic of many of today’s rhythm games (*Guitar Hero*, (Harmonix, 2005), *Rockband* (Harmonix, 2007)) it was felt that a better system to incorporate a haptic kinesthetic choreograph into a game was to split dancing into two potential methods of control – focusing on rhythm and gesture change. By both digital key/button/nunchuk and analogue mouse/stylus/Wiimote input it became clear that that a final product would need meticulous balancing to be successful, yet was deemed an original and fresh enough method for allowing players to transfer their dance into the game. Different types of digital presses (tapping or holding) would prove to be a useful way of further suturing the

play into the game, as would research into different analogue methods of control with tactile delusion.

The 'Rocket Pocketwatch' was the one of the first design elements to be considered as a way of allowing an illustration of a maps branching paths, while a player was engaging in a game. It was upon closer inspection of the BP logo that further research lead to study in the Fibonacci Sequence and the way nature shapes many of its creations (the seeds of a sunflower are typical of this structure). What followed was a working out of a new structure based on the pattern to accommodate enough branches so that it would mirror a pocketwatch, which was felt would fit in well with the Steampunk aesthetic that was already being thought of. This industrial imagery mirrors the clockwork and precision found in both dance, and the sublime trepidation of speed progression crossed with a time countdown, towards the inevitable end of a music track. Many hours were spent in Photoshop creating the Pocketwatch, and it was felt the colour-wheel nature would suit the notions of different environments for different routes in the inevitable Prototype to be built.





Above: Evolution of the Rocket Pocketwatch.

Much was personally analyzed from the pitch, and consequent presentations will be approached in a different manner rather than attempting to convey as much information as possible. Constructing the Prototype proved to be most fruitful as a project that relied so heavily on interactive motion really needed to be experienced to be fully understood, as became evident following the pitch presentation. The choice of musical track is use was of paramount importance for showcasing the technology, and what was originally to be a Psychedelic Trance track was changed for something slower, more structured in its composition and more metallic in its aural aesthetic. *'Blackout'* by UNKLE proved useful for illustrating how entering Zones changes gameplay speed as the song changes, and speeding up/slowing down the train/Blader/equalizer animations added to the illusion of relative speed that was in tune and on time. The heavier feel of the tune better suited the mechanical imagery of rollerblade on train, as well as well as the thrill of attempting to beat an ever-ticking down clock.

Creating the Blader was relatively simple as his animation frames were used from an old website project, that used the software Poser to generate his run cycle. Sparks were added under his feet that grew bigger as they came closer to the screen to give a further sense of depth. Creating the train animation cycle proved to be much more problematic and was started by working out a mathematical method for procuring each frame that involved use of Photoshop's Perspective, Skew and Scale tools of six train carriages that were joined, that were to be looped. Everything was fine until the last few frames that required so much skewing and scaling that even when zoomed out at 0.5% still was not enough – this also had a habit of crashing a computer as the back end of the sprite had been pulled too big. Therefore the last few frames of the cycle had to be predicted, and is why the cycle is not as smooth as it should be. Similar editing terms of 'cloning' and 'duplicating' in Multimedia fusion had to be learnt as well, considering their difference in creating different types of elements in their respective reproduction. Labeling all elements at the beginning as ever proved rewarding, as projects quickly escalate in technicality and elements can get confused, as found out with the backgrounds generated when programming the Rocket Pocketwatch. All of these production issues highlight the need to set aside time specifically for trial and error periods when grasping new technology.

Many ideas were discarded in the process of creation. Originally the Prototype was to run on 'Mode 7' style technology for scaling of the sprites but proved to be tricky to implement in Multimedia Fusion. Building the Pocketwatch had too much time wasted on it, as originally the different switches operating different Zones mechanic was to be implemented – but proved too much animation and time synchronization. Similarly, programming the enemies attack waves was annoying as four different haptic patterns were worked out, then it dawned how difficult it would be to get each one working individually. Ideally the enemies were to slide across their matrixes from left and right diagonals, then get bigger with the perspective before flying off as they similarly got bigger again. This proved too difficult and a distinct loss of valuable time. Balancing time management in general proved to be an issue, especially with other parallel projects needing attention as well. Post-pitch the game was made more ludic by removing the 'song always completes' rule, and forces the player to engage more heavily to make sure the final Zone is entered at the correctly allocated time – effectively adding a Game Over condition. Originally there was to be a 'binary enemy' pattern preview area of the GUI that was not implemented in the prototype to aid the player in their analogue endeavours. The Rocket Pocketwatch map was cut back heavily as well, from 48 paths per Zone to 24, as an easier means of creating the Prototype. A static star denotation was used as a means of telling the player which Zone they were in on the map, as the path animation was too fast.

Multiplayer is certainly an area that would further benefit from research as players would know they were going to collide at a certain junction at a certain time, so would have to do the best they can in the game or face defeat from other players via self-destruction. Switching tracks as usual would prolong the collision of necessary but special maps would be designed so there would always be a collision at the end anyway; parallel trains of other players that have their own individual theme songs could be jumped on, and players could battle each other, sabotaging opponents trains in the process.

Such an ambitious project Prototype that relies so heavily on synchronization of elements would function much better in Flash, as motion tweens are useful for animation purposes and speeds of objects can be easier to work out with individual time-lines. Strange anomalies in Multimedia Fusion became apparent as well, where speeding up some animations over other objects caused a confusing and frustrating mixture of animation types to start playing.

In retrospect, much would be approached differently. For a game that so heavily relies on input control method, in industry it would be of paramount importance to have tested such vague and fuzzy design notions before giving a pitch on them. The initial wave of inspiration that sparked the project on branching narrative and interactive music video also started to fade as the project went on, as it dawned why music video promos are linear – they work better in many ways. That is not to suggest the project could still be a success without the interactive game elements; if the interactivity was removed and a satisfying visual narrative to a piece of music could be broken down into enough routes then the Rocket Pocketwatch could still be applied in generating 'non-linear' music videos.

As kinesthetic videogame technology continues to mature it will be testament to individual designers to generate fresh ways of interacting with the virtual via the haptic,

and as rhythm games continues to innovate there will be room in the future for games that focus primarily on the accumulation of score through movement. Combined, a new type of game will require capturing players' individual exhilaration of moving to music - their rhythm and gesture changes. As dancing and gaming are similar there may prove to be a strong convergence in the future, and as technology becomes more normalized, more forms of dance-gaming (dancing?) will grow and develop - to the point where it becomes usual at outdoor festivals perhaps to digitally interact with music via digital button pushes on the soles of feet, and analogue waving of remotes. Of course, this is all speculation but perhaps *Train Blader* marks one of the first infant steps in the direction of that convergence.

Bibliography:

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CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS GAME DESIGN?

CHAPTER 2: GAME CONCEPTS

Rouse, Richard III (2004) *Game Design Theory and Practice* - Plano, Texas

Rez (Sega, 2001)