simulation of life

Rachel Li discusses the trials of raising virtual plants, how real life makes its way into game design, and discovering the desirable trappings of works of art.

by Natasha Chuk

Fascinated by the ways that nuance and subtlety can be explored in video games, I sat down with Brooklyn-based video game designer and new media artist Rachel Li to learn more about how she approaches recreating real-life experiences in her games. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

NC: Tell me about your background and when you decided you wanted to start making video games.

RL: I actually didn't start out making video games. I was a painter, and I studied studio art at NYU for undergrad. I think it was [in my] third year that I started taking classes in game design because I had a few extra credits [available] as electives. So, [I thought] these video game classes sound cool. There was one class called Game Studies where we read articles on game design principles and [discussed] what is a game? …the definitions. I remember there was one historian called Johan Huizinga[1] who introduced the term magic circle, which was later used to describe how people's behaviors are temporarily affected by a game's rules, goals, and the fictional role they are put in. I thought that was a very interesting concept, and I started to apply it to my artwork. I started making interactive installations. In my work Hit & Run, I turned my paintings into controllers and asked people to repeatedly press down on the surface of the canvas to play a competitive racing game. It was really interesting to see my professors play because they are usually intimidated by technology, and they would refuse to critique my work because of that. It was definitely satisfying to see them trying their best to win a racing game and destroying their student's painting.

NC: Your games seem to center on the expression of a particular idea. Double R. deals with introversion and social anxiety, and your in-progress plant sim focuses on the subtleties of properly raising actual plants. How do you arrive at an idea to build a game around, and how would you describe the way this medium effectively achieves these aims? In other words, what makes a good idea and how do you construct a game world around that, and which mechanics will be used?

RL: I feel like, for me, each game is different. I have a game called Hot Pot for One, which is the experience of someone eating hot pot[2] by themself. Usually, hot pot is a family dish or for social gatherings, so eating hot pot alone carries a different emotion. That game started with just an image of a single pot boiling in a dimly lit kitchen. [Thinking about that] gave me both a peaceful and lonely feeling, so I wondered how I would capture that nuanced and complex emotion in the game. All of the interactions and mechanics were designed around that bittersweet feeling, a mix of coziness and peacefulness. Double R. was about my own experience as an introvert. I would avoid eye contact with people and also, because I'm an international student — I came from China, so English is my second language — when I first came here, people [couldn't] always understand what I was talking about, so there were a lot of awkward situations that I preferred to avoid. That project was a collaboration between four of us, and [we all] had a similar experience. We thought of this mechanic that limited the camera angle to only the lower half of the body so the player [couldn't make eye contact with others], which naturally inspired all the challenges in the game.

"It was definitely satisfying to see them trying their best to win a racing game and destroying their student's painting."

Hot Pot For One
adventure/simulation

[1]Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) was a Dutch historian and founder of modern cultural history. His work Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture, published in 1938, has made a significant contribution to video game studies, leading to the term magic circle, later coined and applied specifically to digital games in Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's Rules of Play (2003): "In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins. The magic circle of a game might have a physical component, like the board of a board game or the playing field of an athletic contest. But many games have no physical boundaries – arm wrestling, for example, does not require much in the way of special spaces or material. The game simply begins when one or more players decide to play" (Salen/Zimmerman 2004:95-96).

[2] Hot pot is a staple of China and translates as "fire pot." I especially like the way Jennifer En describes it in "Everything You Need to Know About Hot Pot" for Mashed.com: "Whatever you call this meal, it remains one of my favorite ways to share food with friends and family. Whether you go out to a restaurant to enjoy hot pot or prepare It at home, the scene promises to be full of warmth, good food, and vibrant colors." (https://www.mashed.com/46684/everything-need-know-hot-pot/: accessed February 21, 2021.)
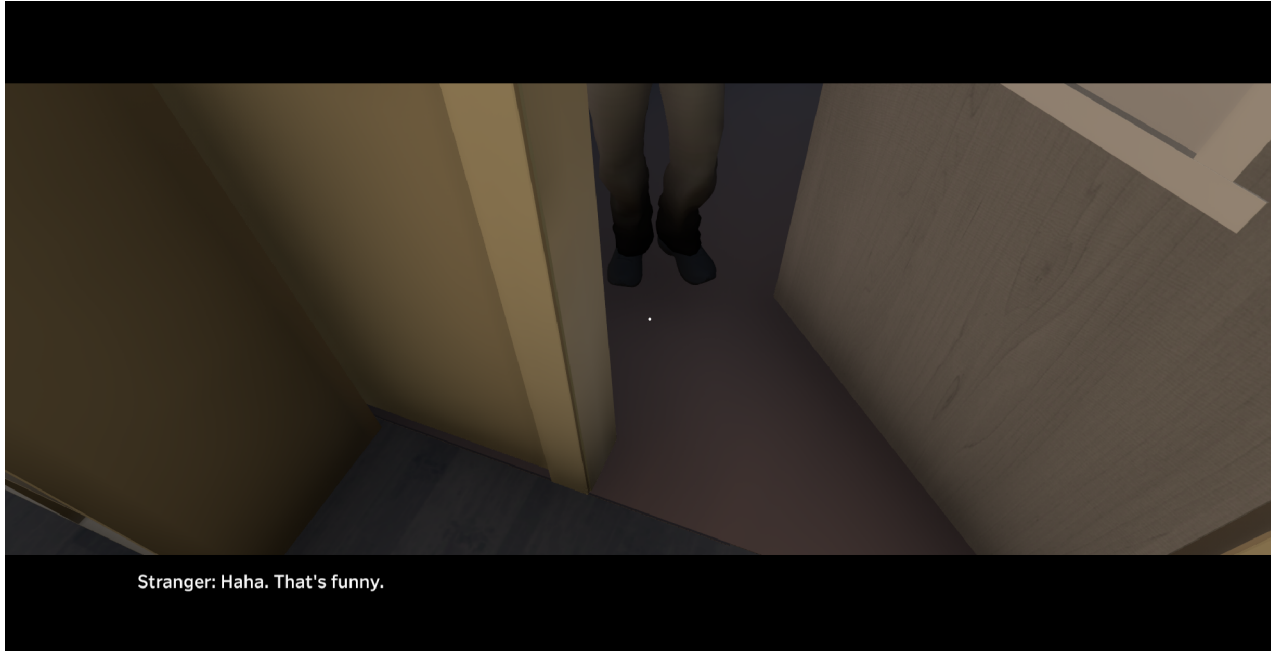
NC: Did you have any extroverts play the game and feel like they were taken out of their comfort zone?

RL: Surprisingly all the players who played the game felt that it's pretty relatable. Maybe because game designers are all introverts! We never really took this game public, but it would be interesting to see an extrovert who's never experienced that test the game. But it also helped to add dialogue and context for [players] so that they know that the camera limitation is not a technical issue but an intentional design.

NC: These two game examples, and others in your body of work, clearly draw on and reflect your real-life experiences. Where do you sit between video games as purely fictional and as having the potential for autobiographical storytelling? We don't really do autobiography in games.

RL: I'm also interested in that, too, because a lot of commercial games I've played were based on fictional stories. Most of my games are autobiographical because I think fictional stories are all about a great plot with drama and conflict. I don't think I have enough dramatic writing skills to put together a fictional story that is strong enough to appeal to an audience. To me, a fictional story allows the author to imagine and arrange a sequence of events in a way that is better received and more engaging for [players]. On the other hand, real life is more boring than fictional stories. So, autobiographies are more about a point of view or how you see things. In my games, the activities are just mundane. You go to class or you raise a plant, but what [makes them interesting] is how I invite [players] to experience those mundane moments from someone else's perspective. I enjoy playing games inspired by real-life experiences: knowing that they are real, and that I can [experience] another way of thinking by living in someone else's body for a short period of time.

Double R. walking simulator

"I enjoy playing games inspired by real-life experiences."

NC: What other games or sources of inspiration do you draw from?

RL: I like the game designer who designed The Stanley Parable[3], Davey Wreden, who just plays at the border of what defines a game and tries to subvert the medium. I like artists who use humor or saracasm in their work. I feel like my work is pretty playful. I don't want to say that a game should be this, and art in a gallery should be that. I feel like I'm always in between. I guess it is sometimes a good thing because that means I'm doing something different. I am also inspired by artists who tell stories in creative ways, such as the American painter Edward Hopper[4], whose paintings contain so much tension and unspoken energy, all in a limited compositional space.

NC: I also wonder how your painting background informs your work. I know there are some direct references out there between games and famous painters, but I'm curious about how your creative approach to painting compares to game-making, though not necessarily whether you seek to incorporate painterly qualities as an aesthetic in your games.

RL: That is a great question. Interestingly enough, I wouldn't say my paintings have been informing my game design practice that much, at least from the surface level. I would say painting was part of the process of finding the right language to express my ideas and interests. I've mostly been trained to paint realistic representations of real-life subjects, but I realized that as much as I enjoy honing my skills to nail the perfect color combinations or accurately capture the correct proportions on paper, I was more interested in how my painting could be interpreted and could carry different meanings for different groups of viewers. For example, a painting of a lion could be interpreted as "The artist loves lions", or "this person wants power". And I just love to look at them trying to come up with all kinds of stories based on their own knowledge and background. (Now that I think about it, it is exactly like designing rules for a game, and seeing how your players come up with creative ways to interact with them.)

In addition to Edward Hopper, I was inspired by artists like Pieter Bruegel[5], or photographer Gregory Crewdson[6], who create endless possibilities and tension by reorganizing familiar scenes and objects. In some of my earlier digital painting work, I created unusual compositions by juxtaposing visual elements with different cultural implications in unexpected or conflicting ways with the aim to draw visual interest.

NC: How do you manage or negotiate the object of control in the design of your games so that the core concepts are grasped but players also feel a sense of agency in exploring them, an aesthetic of control?

RL: I feel like a lot of games give players a sense of agency by providing more spaces to explore, like in open worlds or walking simulator games. For me, there are budget reasons for why I can't make open world games. But there can also be player agency in small games. Choices can [come in the form of] a series of tiny interactions and details that make the player feel a sense of presence and control of the character's body. For example, in Hot Pot for One, though players are restricted to the kitchen space, they can look around and explore by opening drawers and cabinets and toss food around the countertop. Even though the story is linear, and players can't control where to go, they still have plenty of space to express themselves and enjoy the experience at their own pace.

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3 This first-person exploration game was initially derived from a mod made by developer Davey Wreden for the popular game Half-Life 2 before blossoming into the fuller version released in 2011. One reviewer of this game for NPR touches on some of the things that inspired Wreden that Rachel and I also discuss further along in our interview: "[Wreden] says he was inspired to make a game based around narrative elements that were often part of some games but never the main focus. The quiet moments, between the shooting, are where he found a lot of enjoyment."
(https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2013/11/19/246213397/in-the-stanley-parable-finding-the-story-is-the-game: accessed February 20, 2021.)

4 Edward Hopper (1882-1967) is said to have defined 20th century realism through painting. His works feel quiet and focused, as contemplative and almost omniscient observations of people and objects. Nighthawks (1942), depicting an exterior of a restaurant from across the street, might be his most well-known. But my favorite is New York Movie (1939), which seems to channel an interest in the "quiet moments" — those located outside of the action — described by Wreden.

5 Pieter Bruegel the Elder was a Dutch Renaissance painter and engraver who focused on landscapes and everyday people as his subject matter. He, too, was a keen observer, creating busy compositions filled with minute details of daily life within richly allegorical tableaux.

6 Gregory Crewdson is an American photographer, born in 1962, who creates carefully staged, highly cinematic images that produce a kind of optical confusion that rests untidily between reality and fantasy. To be sure, his work recalls the beauty and sadness detectable in Edward Hopper's work. Crewdson's NY gallery (Gagosian) describes his photographs as having "entered the American visual lexicon, taking their place alongside the paintings of Edward Hopper and the films of Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch as indelible evocations of a silent psychological interzone between the everyday and the uncanny." (https://gagosian.com/artists/gregory-crewdson/: accessed February 24, 2021.)

NC: Building on this last question, walking simulators generally encourage a strong sense of freedom and discovery on the part of the player. In your experience, how does social anxiety from the material world transfer to the game world?

RL: For me, games are less about freedom than about limitations. Even though players seem to demand more freedom or control in games, it is the restrictive rules and challenges that make them special. When I think about how to turn a concept into a game, I think about what the goal or challenges or rules are in this game. So, if you want to create a game about social anxiety, then what are the challenges you would face as a socially anxious or introverted person? And I also think about why that is inconvenient for you. What obstacles are you facing as that person? Only when you recreate those challenges and limitations that the socially anxious person encounters can players feel that [in the game]. It is the restrictive rules that define what a game is about.

NC: I'm also wondering how this would work in a multiplayer situation. You would have to have some serious AI to pick up on your discomfort or something to connect what's being communicated [across players]. With this in mind, how do research and close study inform your practice?

RL: Research and testing are always important when it comes to games inspired by real-life experiences. If I really want to accurately simulate a socially awkward conversation or interaction, there is definitely more research and testing that can be done. It's also important to know your audience and how they would receive your games. I was encouraging one of my friends, who never plays games, to play Journey[7]. There isn't a very clear goal [in that game], and so they were confused and unsure what to do [in the game]. To them, this kind of storytelling doesn't work because it requires a lot of pre-existing knowledge of video games and their evolution. This observation also makes me question the effectiveness of video game controls and what makes a video game a game. I like to ask those questions in my games and think about how to invite more players who aren't familiar with this medium [and help them] understand it [better]. I'm just really fascinated by the definition of what makes a game.

NC: It makes sense that having more rules, restrictions, prescribed reasons for being there— more game-like qualities—would feel easier to manage for someone unfamiliar with the medium. There's also the possibility that the openness of the world and the lack of constraints, in terms of systems, rules, time limits, quests, and so on, might work, too. There's no pressure, no missions to complete, no final boss to defeat. There's a range of possibilities and thinking through what it takes to invite someone in who isn't accustomed to video games. It comes back to this question of what makes a game a game.

RL: Definitely. I think one of the reasons I keep doing simulations of real-life events is maybe it's a way of answering those questions. For example, turning a casual activity, like growing a plant, into a game with a definite goal and challenges changes how we see this activity. But the challenges in this game are different because you don't really get better at it, and all you do is come back every day and water the plant. I'm not sure what the challenge is in that, or how you grow as a player. I guess I need to complete the game to figure it out.

[7] This gorgeous indie adventure game was released in 2012. Gameplay feels intentionally simple — available mechanics include walking, jumping, and singing — and the overall experience is gentle and unrushed, relying on unobtrusive environmental storytelling to guide your path, which translates as being instinctively drawn in the right direction. All this to say the game thoughtfully avoids telling you what to do.

"For me, games are less about freedom than about limitations."

"Plants are actually really tricky. We are deceived by their innocent appearance."

Li's plant simulator

NC: It makes me think about things like status in video games, and of course the idea of leveling up, which gives you a sense of where you stand. But I also think you could just play. Chess can be like this. You could have the same game going for months and it might even end up being unwinnable because you might reach an impasse, which can be exciting, too. Often the goal is to achieve victory, but there's something to say for the pleasure of the experience itself. It's interesting to think about that experience in between, the liminal space in which you're not winning or losing, you're just enjoying being there. I sort of see the plant simulation game that way. You could win or lose, depending on whether or not the plant survives, but it's also about observing the plant, and this is what having plants [in real life] is like.

RL: I'm currently reading the book Flow[8], and the author shares his observation of how people usually get into a state of flow, or "in the zone", and why they enjoy it. He says in order to be in the state of flow, you first have to work toward a goal. Then, as you start to focus and spend more time engaging with that activity, you start to learn new skills and enjoy the activity itself. You enter the state of flow when the goal becomes less important. As you get better at chess, for example, the experience of playing, rather than the goal of winning, becomes more enjoyable. As you spend more time observing the plant you're growing, and possibly fail multiple times, you understand that plants are actually really tricky. We are deceived by their innocent appearance.

NC: I want to transition to something we touched on earlier in terms of art and commercial video games. The world is done arguing whether or not video games are an art form: they are! But there is a difference between the artistry of game-making and artists who make games, or so-called "art games". There isn't a perfect definition for the latter, but there are many creators, like you, who identify as game-makers and artists. How would you characterize this difference in terms of your own practice?

RL: I think about that question when I [think of] the Chinese artist Xu Bing[9], who makes large-scale installations. He said: I would describe my art as a trap. It comes in two parts. You want your [work] to have a "deceiving" appearance to lure your viewer in. When they step into your trap, they find out the trap itself isn't bad. [Your viewer] will walk out with a brand-new experience and perspective on things, and knowledge. I totally agree with that description. You want your work to be what lures the viewer in. What is in the trap determines whether or not it's art. A core difference between art games and commercial games is exactly what [creates] the trap. Popular commercial games, such as PUBG[10], are great at luring players through cool visual aesthetics and fun game mechanics. As you fall into the trap and play more, you get better response time and hand-eye coordination. This makes these games feel more like sports. Whereas in art games, the takeaway is usually an idea the artist is trying to express or an emotion they are trying to evoke. Maybe on the outside both kinds of games look visually appealing and are fun to interact with, but on the inside, they are trying to serve a different purpose.

NC: This discussion also makes me wonder what you think is the single most important aspect of your approach to making video games? What is the driving force for you? Especially because you began working in a different medium, having started as a painter.

"You have no idea what players will do in your game. They will try to break it!"

[8] Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (1990) was written by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Video game scholars have invoked this term "flow" to refer, along with immersion and presence, to the experience of concentrated play and enjoyment in games.

[9] The mixed-media installation artist Xu Bing, born in 1955, received international acclaim following his installation Book from the Sky (1987-1991), in which, according to Art21, he "carved and altered more than four thousand Chinese-character printing blocks in order to render nonsensical texts on sprawling, epic-scale scrolls" (https://art21.org/artist/xu-bing/: accessed February 24, 2021).

[10] This acronym stands for PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, a free-to-play, online multiplayer, last-man standing, battle royale game first released in 2017. Like many games of this type, its impetus is circuitously tied to numerous mods and a loose interpretation of the Japanese film Battle Royale (2000).

RL: My first reaction is to say interaction, but that's not the whole picture. I feel like I want to add rules as well as interaction. You have to somehow limit or direct how the players interact with the game. Also, from the experience of playtesting my games, you have no idea what players will do in your game. They will try to break it!

NC: Do you have a signature that's emerging or feel that there's something other people have picked up on that's emblematic of your work?

RL: My friends would describe my games as photorealistic simulators. The reason I'm making them realistic is there are so many 3D assets out there that look great, and so why not use them? And as for simulations, I just look at something I find interesting from my life and ask if it can become a game.

NC: I know you have plans to continue developing your plant simulation game. What else is in the works? Do you have a "dream game" you'd like to make?

RL: I'm trying to get Hot Pot for One published on Steam, finish my plant game, and maybe make a meditative dishwashing game.

NC: That's great. You could develop a series of games featuring household items.

RL: Yeah, that sort of answers your "dream game" question. I could put all of these household simulation games together into one big simulation game. ✳