Florence

A Playful Narrative Experience That Lingers in Your Heart and Mind

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About a year ago, I played *Florence* for the first time, and it deeply impressed me – not only because of its delicate sound design, the effectively reduced, carefully colored visuals (stills and very few animations), or the humble, almost sober story. First and foremost, *Florence* impressed me by the unique way in which game mechanics are applied for storytelling purposes: its game mechanics are, in every detail, narrative mechanics, serving the purpose of the story.

Florence is not a game as such, even though you still play it in some way. Game-wise, the player is, throughout the 20 chapters, confronted with a set of mini-games, many of which consist of visual puzzles or click-based actions. But those mini-games are not fun to play, in other words, you would not play them for entertainment purposes.

Florence is, in a certain sense, an interactive story. Yet, it is not one of those interactive stories or cybertexts that let the player choose between different paths and experience the same story from different perspectives. There is just one story – the life of a young woman named Florence and her first love relationship with Krish, a young musician. The reader cannot alter or influence the story, nor can they choose the perspective. Functionally and aesthetically, *Florence* resembles a comic in which the reader scrolls down or right, depending on the chapter. Sometimes one can interact within the frames, sometimes it is only possible to observe. But seeing *Florence* as partly storytelling, partly mini-games, does not explain its fascination.

FEEL – NOT TELL, SHOW OR PLAY

Florence is, as a story-*telling* piece, situated somewhere in the matrix of "show & play". "Show, don't tell" being a rule for drama writing, to make the plot more lively by showing/acting, not narrating it. Applying this strategy to the designing of stories for games, the new guideline proposes "Play, don't show", as a way to play around with narrative scenarios, to interact and to influence the plot (Fine 2011).

It skillfully *shows*, in six acts, a piece of Florence's life centered around the love story. It allows the player to *play* some parts of that life, lets them assist Florence eating sushi, drawing a painting, communicating with her mom, meeting Krish. None of them are extraordinary things per se. It is the specific framing inside the narrative setting which expands the "tell – show – play" line into the *feel* range. The player is not just told or shown the story, nor can they really play it. Instead, they are allowed to *feel* it: feel the essence of the story, feel empathy with the characters, the lightness and anxiety of falling in love, the sadness and anger when falling out of love, and, at last, to feel the sweet, distant memory of the first love, while life goes on with new perspectives, when Florence finally realizes her dreams on her own.

INTERTWINED GAME AND STORY

In its way of using game mechanics as narrative mechanics, *Florence* is as unique as the well-known *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) – which conveyed, in a humorous manner, the mechanics of sword fighting as a sparring match with words. Close to it comes *Heavy Rain*, an action-adventure game with a certain micro mechanic. In some narratively meaningful sequences, for example when trying to help a drowning child, the player rapidly has to push certain controller buttons displayed on the screen. This challenging game task results in a stressful feeling, especially since the player will often not succeed, which has consequences for the subsequent story. Therefore, the stressful feeling the player gets from playing – from engaging with the game mechanics – matches the narrative feeling the story wants to convey. This works well in *Heavy Rain*, even though the represented actions (pressing matching symbols on the screen with the game controller) that the players need to execute, have no connection to the content of the story.

The mechanics of pushing depicted buttons in a certain sequence has been used in other games, of course, such as *Fahrenheit*. Mostly it is not embedded

cleverly in the narrative scenes. In *Fahrenheit*, you have to push buttons to help a character climb a wall – there, the stressful player activity does not match the narrative, thus leaving the player strung out; this effect is heightened as this mini-game appears too often and is hard to master.

This narrative functionality of game mechanics is brought to a whole new level in *Florence*, where everything the player does in *play* has a meaning in terms of what is being *told* and *shown*.

NARRATIVE MECHANICS OFFER DIFFERENT ROLES

Since this is an interactive and playful piece, the reader/player does not just scroll and look, but participate, sometimes even against their will. This playful narrative experience comes with a variety of roles – that of spectator (even voyeur), observant participant, conspirator, helper, destructor. These roles change during the progression of the story.

Florence is divided into six acts (and 20 chapters), which mostly relate to the Shakespearian five-act structure (*exposition*, *rising action*, *climax*, *falling action*, *resolution)* (cf. King 2004), with Acts 3 and 4 falling in the *climax* category. According to these six acts, the mini-games proceed and the game mechanics change or assume new narrative meanings. They all work, with a few exceptions, with one button or, respectively, one touch (being an iOS and Android game). At the beginning, the player starts with Act 1, Chapter 1. After having read and played it through, the next chapter unfolds for the player, and so on. In the following section, the main mechanics and their narrative function will be explained.

## "SIMULATION" OF THE ORDINARY MECHANIC

The exposition of the first act focuses on the everyday life of Florence. The player has to carry out a set of ordinary activities to get to the next chapter: Put sushi in Florence's mouth. Wiggle her toothbrush back and forth. Choose Florence's evasive answers in awkward phone conversations with her mother. Like the social media posts of her friends. The gaming activities all seem quite dull, simulating Florence's everyday, uninspired life, and the monochrome colors (white, gray/black) and sound design support that message. The first time that color (in the visual, and also the narrative sense) pops up, is in the second chap-

ter "Memories", when Florence remembers how she loved to draw in as a child, and the player gets to color a butterfly painting.

A few chapters later (in "Dreams"), Florence finds that very drawing in an old memory box in her storage closet, and her wish to apply her artistic skills returns – a key element in her personal development. It is brought about through a small detail, but makes the story coherent, and emphasizes the agency of the player: her or his actions matter.

PUZZLE MECHANIC

Figure 1: To begin with, it takes a while to get the conversation going for Florence (left). Later, during their argument, the puzzle pieces become angular and fast-paced (right).
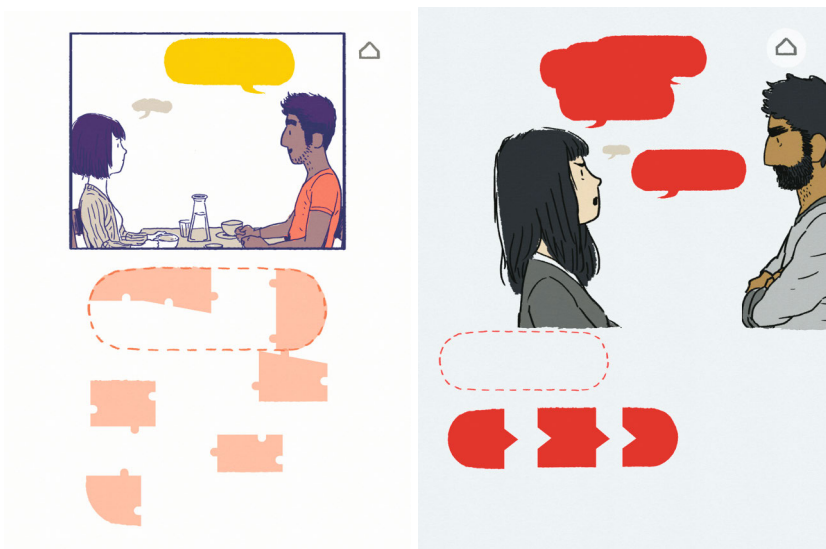
Source: screenshots (Kocher)

In the second act, after Florence has met Krish – drawn to him by his spherical cello playing on the street – the player becomes Florence's collaborator in helping her get closer to him through conversation (Chapter 5, "First Dates"). This is cleverly done through a very simple gameplay: In comic-style animation, Krish's speech bubbles appear fast. Florence's bubbles have to be put together first. At the beginning, her conversation bubble consists of eight puzzle pieces which the

player needs to drag and drop into the speech bubble. Therefore, it takes a while until Florence can respond to Krish. Soon, the puzzle pieces become fewer, and their conversation flows more smoothly. Florence and Kish move closer to each other, and when there is only one piece to put into her speech bubble, they kiss.

In Act 4, Chapter 9 ("Groceries"), the couple fight for the first time. The puzzle pieces change shape now. The connecting shapes are still round at first, but become angular as the conversation turns into an argument. The conflict is also visible in the screen design: Krish and Florence do not fit on the same screen anymore, but the player has to scroll a little sideways, to get from one to the other. The dynamic of the conversation also changes: it is not really turn-based anymore as Krish's bubbles become faster. He does not wait for (or listen to) what Florence says, and leans forward, while she leans back at every bubble emerging from him. The player cannot help Florence fast enough with her conversation anymore.

In Act 5, Chapter 14 ("Fight"), the couple fights again, this time in a much fiercer manner. This is visible at the level of the game mechanics: there seems no end to the angular puzzle pieces the player has to put together. While the color of the puzzle pieces – during the couple's first argument – used to be bright turquoise and pink, they are all red now. And, to bring the puzzle mechanic to a new level, the following chapter presents a picture of the couple sleeping in bed at night, facing away from each other, both disassembled into puzzle pieces. The player can only put each person together as a whole, but there are no connecting pieces that match. The couple cannot be made whole again.

And in the last act, after their breakup, in Chapter 17 ("Fragments"), Krish has to literally be removed from the picture, puzzle piece by piece. At the end, just Florence is left in the picture, looking at an empty spot next to her.

RUB MECHANIC

Rubbing a spot on the screen is used several times during the game, in order to literally and figuratively bring something to the surface. For example, the player has to rub a gray picture, and the underlying dream of Krish becoming a famous musician, or of Florence becoming a joyous artist, are then visible in full color. Alternately, in other mini-games, the player rubbing on the screen represents the waving of polaroid photos. Waving makes the photos become colorful and sharp; in doing so, the player discovers the activities the young couple has been enjoying, such as skating, hiking or going to art galleries.

The rubbing goes both ways, from reality to dreams, and back to reality: In Act 5, Chapter 13 ("Erosion"), the player has to rub on a picture of Krish proudly playing the cello, where everything glows in bright yellow. Gradually, reality's surface is exposed, toned in gray as Krish plays with hanging shoulders.

TURN THE WHEEL OF TIME MECHANIC

In the "Erosion" chapter, the player has to turn the minute hand of a clock to fast-forward through the relationship of Florence and Krish. This makes it possible to observe how each of them will behave in the next months: from hugging each other and standing close, to her looking at her smartphone and him eating a sandwich, closing his eyes. By turning the wheel of time with the focus on Florence's desk, the player discovers that the watercolors which Krish gave to Florence as a gift are now buried under a pile of papers.

IDLE MECHANIC

Probably the most difficult interactive game task in *Florence* is presented in the last act, Chapter 18 ("Let Go"). Florence and Krish are walking. He then lags behind more and more, his silhouette slowly fading out. When the player taps Krish, Florence stops until Krish is catches up, his outline being black and clear again. The two of them keep walking, and again, Krish is falling back. The chapter does not close until the player remains idle and lets Krish fall back forever, out of Florence's life. This mechanic shows how difficult it can be to let go, and how tempting – yet futile – it sometimes is to hold on. Also, it forces the agency of the player – now taking an active part in their breakup.

CONCLUSION

The game mechanics of *Florence* do not create an exciting gameplay at all. On the contrary, they are repetitive, do not challenge the player, and are simple and short. Nevertheless, the way they work as a narrative driver is unique: the literal actions that the player has to carry out match exactly what they figuratively represent in the unfolding narrative. Sometimes the same game mechanics, especially in the puzzle mini-games, convey different messages depending on their col-

oring and sound design, their pace and narrative meaning. In this way, the mechanics also define the changing roles of the player, from helping the couple get closer to playing an active role in ending their relationship. The result is a compelling, close, unforgettable emotional experience that indeed, as the developer's website states, "lingers in hearts and minds" (Mountains 2018).

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