

Movmote: A Game for Studying Interpretation

Jason Begy
Ph.D. Student, Concordia University
7141 Sherbrooke St West
CJ 3.230
Montreal, QC H4B 1R6, Canada
jsbegy@alum.mit.edu

Steven Schirra
Research Assistant, MIT Game Lab
77 Massachusetts Ave
Room 26-153
Cambridge, MA 02142, United States
schirra@mit.edu

ABSTRACT

This abstract describes *MovMote*, a game made by the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab as an experimental device for studying how players interpret video games.

General Terms

Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Simulation, Interpretation, Semiotics

1. GAME LINK

<http://gambit.mit.edu/loadgame/movmote.php>

Flash

2. ABOUT *MovMote*

MovMote was made during the 2012 Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab summer session by a group of undergraduate students under Jason Begy's direction. The goal of the project was to create a game that could be used to study how players interpret games. In particular, it will be used to study if there is a meaningful difference between the extent to which rules and fiction [4] influence player interpretation. The question of how users form interpretations of games is of critical importance to game studies and has been a topic of much debate in recent years [6].

To accomplish this, the game had to be a non-representational (some would say "abstract") simulation. The term 'simulation' is somewhat contested in game studies. Some scholars, such as Gonzalo Frasca, maintain that a simulation does not need a source system [3], whereas I have elsewhere argued for the value of retaining a source system in the concept of simulation [1], as does

Bogost [2]. For my purposes with *MovMote*, the game had to model a real-world system, but the audio and visual elements had to be symbols in the semiotic sense[5]; the game could not look or sound like what it was modeling. The development team was further told that any design decisions pertaining to the rules had to be explainable in terms of the source system. Game rules or mechanics that would be inconsistent with the source system were not allowable.

Having the game simulate a real-world system is essential because it gives me something to compare player interpretations to. If players are relying primarily on the rules of the game to form an interpretation, then their interpretations should approximate the source system. The aim of course was not to test players on whether they correctly identified the source system, but to have a base to compare their interpretations to. The symbolic audio-visual elements mean that the fiction of the game is not providing hints or suggestions of what the source system was.

The game was finished in August 2012. The chosen source system was driving a train and picking-up passengers. In the game the player is presented with a 'train' that moves about a 'track' on its own. The player has two methods of interaction. First, he or she can slow the train by clicking and holding the left mouse button, which will eventually bring the train to a halt. Releasing the mouse button causes the train to accelerate until it reaches its maximum speed. The goal is to stop the 'train' at 'stations' thereby allowing 'passengers' (the red dots) to board, at which point they are represented by the teal dots trailing behind the train (Figure 1). Passengers accumulate at the stations over time, but if the player does not pick them up soon enough they will abandon the station. This aspect models traveler impatience: people will only tolerate so much delay before seeking an alternate mode of transport.

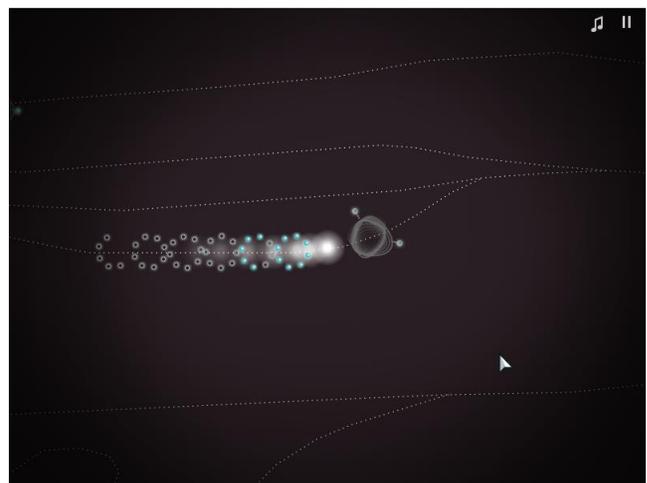


Figure 1: A "train" approaching an empty "station."

The other mode of interaction is track-switching. At various points in the game the track branches, and the player can direct the train by moving the cursor in the desired direction. Sometimes this is done to service stations, and sometimes it is done to avoid other 'trains,' which are represented by red circles. These NPC trains sometimes use their own track, and sometimes run on the same track as the player's train (Figure 2).

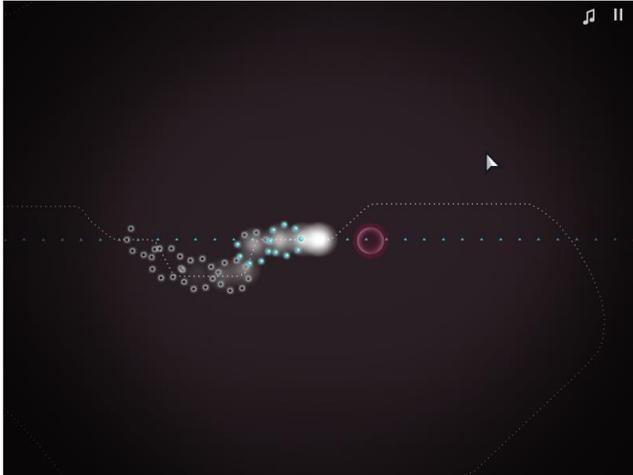


Figure 2: The red circle represents an oncoming train.

While the primary study is still in the planning phases, I do have preliminary results from a late summer public playtest where players were asked to describe what they thought the game was about in three words. Some respondents interpreted this as "give three words" and others as "write a three-word sentence." I treated individual words and three-word sentences as individual responses, resulting in 151 total responses. Of these, 64 were descriptions of how the game is played or what players do during the game. References to collection and movement were common. A further 69 responses described the audio-visual aspects of the game.

These range from the literal, such as "red twirly balls," to the more interpretive, such as "biology" and "symphonic." Another 18 responses did not easily fit into either of the previous categories and include items such as "scientific" and "anxious."

Only five responses made any reference to the source system. Two respondents wrote "train," one "tracks," one "travel" and one "traveling." These early results suggest that neither the rules nor the fiction was definitively the source for interpretation. However, a brief playtest survey is admittedly not the ideal experimental method.

As of Spring 2013 the project is entering its second phase where subjects will be playing a slightly modified version that lacks splash screens, a title, and credits. This is to remove any potential impact these paragamic elements might have on player interpretation. After subjects have played the game for fifteen minutes they will be interviewed about their impressions and interpretations of the game, such as what they think the game is about, what moods and idea it evokes, and so on. This phase of the project will be completed during the 2013-2014 academic year.

3. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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