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Citizen Sleeper: An Eye Towards Abstraction

Citizen Sleeper by Jump Over the Age is a text-heavy roleplaying game that combines gameplay structures common in table-top RPGs with dialogue reminiscent of visual novels. Although *Citizen Sleeper* does not strive to be a complex simulation, the game is a shining example of the particular potential of games as tools for argumentation and social commentary, winning the Social Impact Award for the 23rd Game Developers Choice Awards (Game Developers Award). In the game, the player inhabits the body of a Sleeper who narrowly escaped an existence of corporate slavery and has now found themselves on a corporately derelict but populated space station. It is a high concept premise, but *Citizen Sleeper* does not mask its systems with its story in order to provide a compelling narrative experience or land its commentary. It is instead through an emphasis on player expression and agency in its “system space” over its “story space”, terms from Thomas Grip’s SSM framework of game design, that the game showcases the potential depth to be found in highly abstracted forms of “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost 125).

To understand *Citizen Sleeper*’s potential to affect and provide commentary for its players, it’s necessary to establish a framework for how the design of its systems and story determine player experience. The SSM model of game design helps shed light on how *Citizen Sleeper* creates the conditions for its players to have a deeply involved and affecting personal experience through its abstract but resonant systems and thoughtfully constrained but evocative

stories. Thomas Grip's SSM framework outlines three spaces: System, Story, and Mental Model. The System space deals with mechanics and dynamics on a functional level that does not factor in any outside context the player may have. The story space gives context to the system space, turning an object that raises a number into a life-saving stabilizer. The Mental Model space is essentially "the player's personal experience" in engaging with the aforementioned spaces. Crucially, the System space and the Story space can overlap with each other and the Mental Model in any variety of ways to create a different experience (The SSM Framework of Game Design).

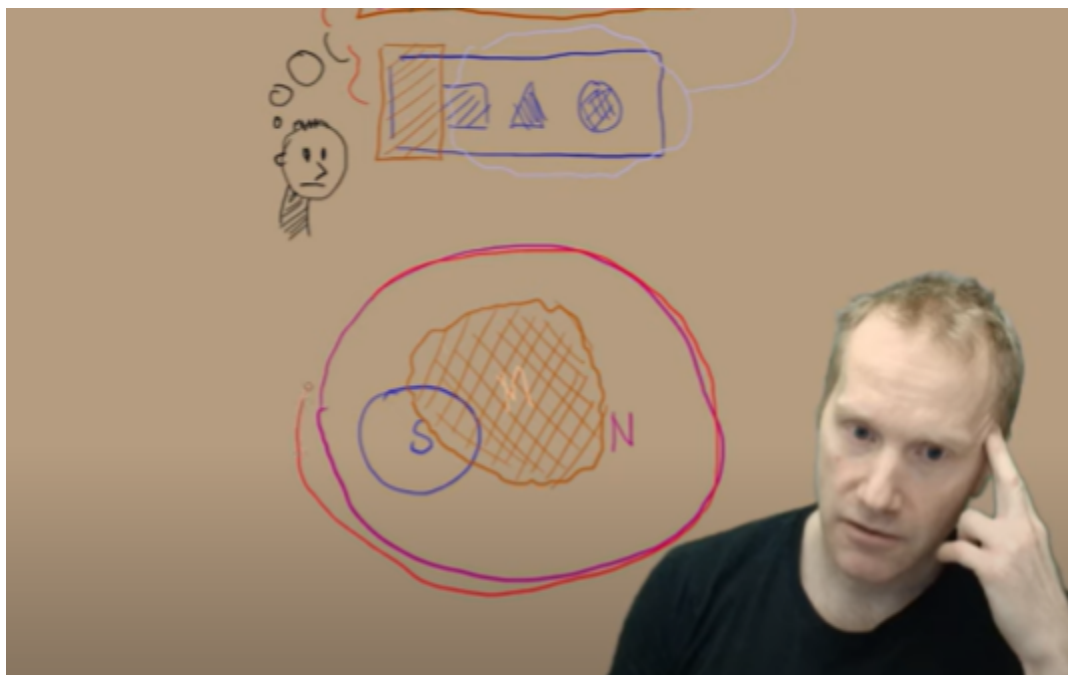


Figure 1: A visualization of the SSM model, where the zones of a game's system (blue) and narrative (magenta) overlap/encompass the mental model (orange) to form the player's experience while playing a game. What's seen by the player in gameplay (the mental model) is what determines the placement and sizing of the other zones. (How to Utilize the Player's Imagination in Game Design)

A game can hide its systems from its players, invisibly tracking variables and creating a further distance between the System space and the Mental Model space. A game can have deep lore that isn't readily apparent on a first time playthrough, creating Story space beyond a first time player's Mental Model space. As will be shown below, *Citizen Sleeper's* overlaps its System space, its Story space, and the player's Mental Model tightly with one another, putting

forward all of its abstract mechanics and systems for the player to see and ensuring that its Story space is always tied to mechanics or unlocking immediate opportunities for its player and their Mental Model space.

The System space of *Citizen Sleeper* is characterized by its risk and its potential to compound consequences. The core gameplay loop of *Citizen Sleeper* is through the progression of cycles. At the start of each cycle, the player is given a set amount of d6 dice that are rolled, and the player is able to use those rolled dice on various nodes that output stat changes and resources contingent on success/failure. Higher value dice give a higher chance of success with a 6 being a guaranteed positive outcome (excluding any modifiers). The lowest rolls (1 or 2) give the worst odds of success, offering a 50% failure/50% neutral outcome. Since the dice are rolled at the start of a cycle, they are a known potential even before the first die is used, and so the player can make informed decisions to manage the randomness (Salen and Zimmerman 181). The dice offer risk through the known chance of failure and even guarantees through rolling a 6. The player is afforded control within fixed parameters, but in order to exert their agency, they must contend with risk (Salen and Zimmerman 175).

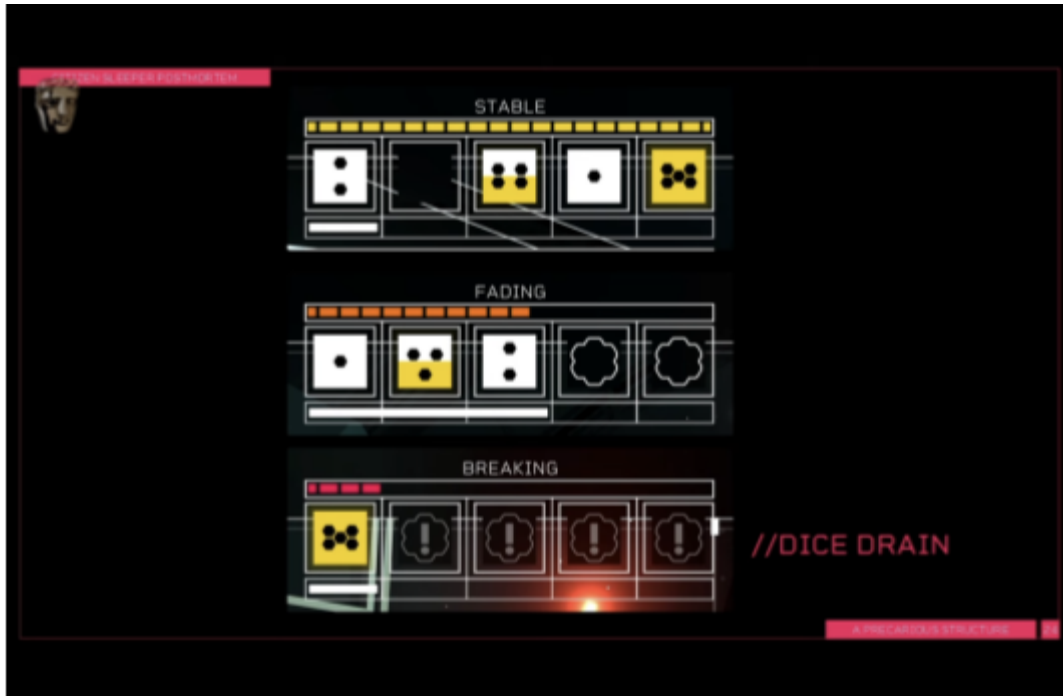


Figure 2: The Dice Drain mechanic at different stages(Citizen Sleeper: How precarity and minimum viable design created this dystopian RPG | BAFTA)

Combine that with the fact that less dice are allotted as the condition bar is lowered due to the Dice Drain mechanic. As condition is lowered, the amount of dice for subsequent cycles are limited. Potential actions are limited, which in turn lowers the potential resource gains of a given day which could raise the condition once more. The player is then invested in pushing to spend suboptimal actions in order to gain resources to maintain their ability to avoid falling into a “compounding cycle of problems” (Kay and Skittles 6:10). There is a constant tension on Erlin’s Eye, and a huge bulk of it isn’t even dependent on text-narrated events because the underlying system supports the same experience of precarity. Mechanically, the player feels the sense of helplessness as they fail a crucial low roll and miss out on the resource rewards, opportunities, or worsen their condition in pursuit of maintaining their condition.

The System space, with minimal narrative framing, already captures the choice-based, calculated management of risk in order to continue playing with any reasonable degree of agency. Applying the context of the game’s Story space, the system illustrates the merciless,

cyclical nature of working without network or support in a capitalist system. Condition, once an abstract term, is now associated with the Sleeper's body. The amount of dice allotted is dependent on the condition of that body, the pool diminishing as it deteriorates cycle by cycle. This can only be remedied by an expensive Stabilizer item for the bulk of the game, and there is an additional deteriorating condition to manage in hunger. A cycle is the time between resting to recoup energy to exert on different tasks, represented by the dice. As condition is constantly going down and needs to be regularly remedied by a purchased good, and the odds of success for tasks are set and are known to the player, consequently throughout the course of the game, the player has to grapple with being forced to work with a set of bad rolls even as the financial and lifestyle strains that have to be managed stay constant and overbearing. The Sleeper already starts in a bad spot with no money and no resources, and as Kay and Skittles observes, "the harder you have to work and the less care you receive, the less you will be able to do" which results in a "compounding cycle of problems" that drags the player down (6:41). Having less dice at the start of the day is a bad day, but like in real life, the player has to do what they can, knowing it's not their best. In framing progression through cycles now, and having dice represent chances of success in any kind of effort, the System space and Story space naturally combine to create a procedural flow as the Sleeper hops from one task to the other for bits of chit so they can afford to live.

A potential pitfall of creating an abstract system, especially one that is conceptually deficient or misaligned with the goals of its narrative, is that it can fail to elucidate any meaningful associations and it therefore does not provide the space for players to interpret any deeper commentary. A mechanically simple system holds an appeal, but if complexity or potential for expression is limiting to the game's maker or its players, the resulting system only

“[creates] scenarios in which a whole universe of possibilities is foreclosed upon, by virtue of the structure which continually reinforces and urges the player to rehearse its values” (Murray 150).

Citizen Sleeper avoids that not only through the elegance of its dice system and node-based interactive system, but through the inclusion of its character-driven stories which broaden its possibility space and introduce true uncertainty.

Citizen Sleeper can be viewed as a collection of short stories in an anthology (To Games it May Concern), featuring discrete storylines that do not ever interact with one another even if there is a good deal of “thematic crosstalk” (Martin). These short stories are connected to characters that can be spoken with at various locations and at various points throughout the cycles to create storylines. These storylines provide the necessary interactions to propel the gameplay through its Drive system as well as let the game make its larger points about relationships and community, serving functions for both the System space and the Story space.

As defined by Katie and Zimmerman, “Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure” (304). Erlin’s Eye is the one location in the game, a diverse hub of different factions with different systems and tasks. The Sleeper is allowed to move to whatever nodes are unlocked and available, where they are then able to engage in tasks. The nature of these tasks deal with manual labor, undermining systems of exploitation, dealing with organized crimes, contributing to a commune, and more. These different themes are explored through text all through engagement with that flexible dice pool system, resulting in “possibility spaces for exploring [real world] topics” (Bogost 121).

There is a point in the game where you, the player, are situated on the Eye. You have made connections with other characters and can reliably stabilize your body,. That is the point where “you can start to be proactive” (Kay and Skittles 7:33). When the immediacy of the

Sleeper's dire straits is broken, there is a joy in threading through Erlin's Eye and the player now has the resources to be able to choose their options with additional considerations that trace back to a need to survive. The player is able to express themselves through action. This is where narrative possibilities open up.

If the System space constrains the player's possibility of play, but offers rich and resonant dynamics, then the Story space has less of a burden to bear on carrying the theme across to the player. *Citizen Sleeper*, in having a robust system to lean on, then ensures that its Story Space is always aligned with its System Space whenever possible. The game's dialogue, just one small facet of the Story space, provides context for the locations and characters to frame the player's environment, but it does not set up any meaningful choices that interact with the game's System space. No variables are tracking what dialogue options the player is making. The agency is not tied to that, although expression is. As Martin points out in a CSI Skilltree talk, dialogue is not what defines your character. There are choices made in these scenes as they play out, but the bulk of the options given to the player, particularly when it concerns what comes out of the Sleeper's mouth, do not factor into the events of the story. This deemphasis of narrative weight through a reliance on decision-making through dialogue distinguishes *Citizen Sleeper* from many other text-based games, which rely on dialogue to define characters. Here, the player defines their Sleeper's identity based on the stories that they choose to engage with.

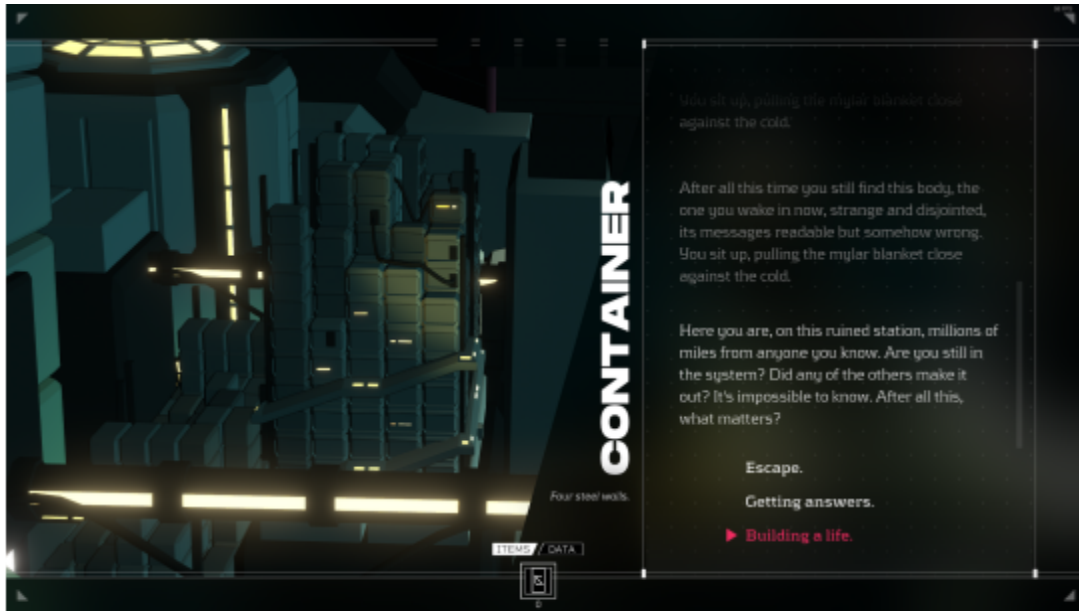


Figure 3. (In-game) From the opening passages, the player is engaged with the question of purpose. From the set of choices offered, the player is asked about their priorities (Citizen Sleeper)

The possibility of play is then contingent on the connections that the Sleeper has, but as the possibility spaces open up, the amount of time the player has, or the amount of actions they can engage in, stay fixed. In being so entrenched in the dependencies of the System space, with the time-sensitive nature of many of these tasks which require spending dice from the action economy that needs dice to procure resources to maintain condition and hunger, it results in there being a real sense of meaning when the Sleeper is able to pull through and show up for them.

These side-stories will stall or fall into a more precarious state if the Sleeper does not interact with them, and that is less a statement about how Sleeper is a font of meaningful change on Erlin's Eye, but moreso a model on how there is a need to band together for anything to happen. The characters in the game also don't have great situations going on usually, and this game illustrates how precarity can play a part in forming a community. It's when, after being given an opportunity by them, the Sleeper exerts enough actions over the course of many cycles that great things can occur. The Sleeper also gets vital resources and currency through the completion of these tasks, but the story threads like helping a fellow worker by watching over his

adoptive daughter as he takes extra shifts, is simply a demonstration of generosity. It is true generosity, giving up time knowing that it can be spent elsewhere, a rare instance of the Story space extending past the System space. It is a wasteful choice, a meaningful one.

Citizen Sleeper procedurally presents the player a reflection on what it's like navigating the "ruins of interplanetary capitalism" in the words of its creator, Gareth Damian Martin. In requiring continuous meaningful engagement with a System space that is completely aligned with the game's Story space, the player comes out of their experience of the game with a focused Mental Model that intimately understands the game's world, how it works, how it is to live in it, and they can draw greater takeaways in comparing it with our own world. A design philosophy that ensured that all three spaces overlapped as much as possible is how *Citizen Sleeper* is able to deliver commentary that resonates profoundly to its players.

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