Tick Tock: A review of Jason Rohrer's *Passage*

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There are few things in the world that I consider more romantic than the passage of time. Change, death and mortality go hand in hand with the loss of time and moment by moment it slips irrevocably into the past, never to be acquired again. Consequently my favorite time piece has always been the hour glass, because you can actually see the time that you've spent. In no game is this sentiment more beautifully explored than in Jason Rohrer's game *Passage*. It is admittedly a simple game, but despite its style and the fact that it was released in 2007, it is still considered a "must play" in indie game communities.

Passage is a simple, five minute maze game illustrated in an 8-bit, pixelated style. Navigating the maze is essentially the core game mechanic. The plot of this game is quite elementary. The player navigates their avatar deeper and deeper through a maze picking up treasure and eventually expires. However, all good games operate on a higher metaphoric level. *Passage* is far from the exception. This maze game is a rather effective metaphor for life. The aesthetics and design elements all support this over-arching exploration of what it means to be mortal.

The character of this piece is intrinsically linked to the visual design and game mechanic. The player experiences the game through a simply illustrated man comprised of about 27 pixels. Because there is no explicit plot apart from navigating the maze, the player has no specific clues as to who this man is. However, this is actually an asset. Because of the simple pixelated design and the vague, open-ended plot, the player very quickly feels as though they are the character. He quite effectively represents every man. Additionally, while the illustration is simple, it's also quite aesthetically pleasing and quite adorable. Thus, before the player is aware of it, they identify

with this character and develop an emotional bond.   The simplicity of the design allows the player to endow the pixels with life.   This could only be improved, and be made more personal, by allowing the player to choose their sex at the start of the game.

The visual design of this piece is also quite brilliant.   The entire game is played on a rather thin horizontal rectangle.   The rectangle is tall enough for the player to see all of the player character, but almost none of the maze can be seen above or below him.   At the start of the game, the player is placed completely on the left hand side of the viewable world.   The character can see quite a distance in front of him.   But all the images on the far right hand side of the screen are blurry and distorted.   Very gradually however, while the player is exploring the maze, the character's position on the rectangle changes. Very slowly he shifts toward the center and then by the end of the game he reaches the right hand side of the screen.   As he does this, the space behind him begins to blur and distort.   Before long, there is less and less space in front of him and much more space behind him. Also, the closer to the right the player gets, the slower he moves. When the player reaches the right hand side of the screen, he dies. This is illustrated by a grey, pixelated head stone.

One might think that because the nature of *Passage* is so simple that there aren't many meaningful choices that can be made throughout the game.   However, that would be untrue.   For example, very early in the game the player may choose to take a spouse.   This very simple act has a huge impact on the game.   Choosing to fall in love makes the score increase more quickly while progressing through the maze.   However, because the movement of the two characters must be accounted for, they can't maneuver as easily through the maze together and frequently the player will need to find an alternate route.   As the player negotiates the obstacles, they must decide whether they will spend time chasing treasure or moving forward. Additionally, not long before your character dies, your spouse will die. If, at the beginning of the game you choose to go alone, the score will not increase as quickly as it would if you had a partner.   However, the

maze is easier to maneuver, but feels longer, lonelier and is somewhat less challenging.

The immersion element in this game is somewhat astounding. The player can quickly get wrapped up in the lives of these two little characters and before they realize it, they are so intensely focused on the game that the mechanic begins to translate into a story. Through moving the character, the player is able to enact the story of his life. Every move that is made, and every obstacle that is encountered tells a portion of that story. For example, if a player chooses to fall in love and later in the maze gets stuck because there isn't room for his spouse, he must consider her, and retrace his steps to progress. Similarly in real life, one can't make decisions in a relationship unilaterally. You must consider your partner. These events that the player enacts tell a story that slowly becomes a touching, personal experience. When your spouse expires, the player actually feels loss. This is heightened by the fact that your avatar moves more and more slowly. You feel as if he's struggling to go on, but cannot live without her. Additionally, because all the story elements are conveyed through action and game mechanic, there isn't any moment when the player is not in control of the character. All the story elements and choices belong to the player.

The design for *Passage* is somewhat sparse. However, spectacle and extraneous sounds might not be necessary. It's quite a colorful game. The illustrations employ a variety of colors and use an efficient number of pixels to draw the obstacles and treasures the player encounters. Additionally, as the player moves through the maze, the background art shifts in gradients and patterns. Perhaps the strongest aspect of art lies in the blur and distortion special effect that helps to illustrate the character's uncertain future and hazy memory of the past. There are no particular sound effects. There is only a slightly dark but also sentimental melody played with minimal instrumentation in an 8-bit style, similar to that of the visuals. The sentimental melody is delightful and exquisitely sets the proper mood for the piece. Certainly more complicated music would feel out of place and wouldn't fit with the overall design.

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Passage is a very simple game with very minimalistic design elements. But the choices made for each design element contributes to the overall metaphor and culminates in an effective narrative experience. The story, mechanic, spectacle, music, all the moving parts help to reinforce the higher concept and tell a cohesive story. Admittedly, the replayability level of *Passage* is not very high. Once you understand the metaphor, the experience has served its purpose. *Passage* encourages the player to reflect on their own life through game play. It asks the player to maneuver the maze of life with its twists and turns, evaluate obstacles, sacrifice for loved ones, experience the passage of time, and ultimately to examine our mortality. If there is an antagonist in this game, it must be time. This is not a game that you can definitively win. Just as in real life, you cannot stop time. There is no pause button. In the end, *Passage* invites the player to make meaningful choices with regard to what to do with the time they are given before they inevitably lose the game.