

# You Are Too Fat To Wear This Dress

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The idea of games being simulations of critical decision-making (moral or otherwise) has been thrown around ever since Bioware started including them in their early RPGs. This in turn has sparked debate as to whether or not video games can truly simulate the freedom, context, and agency necessary for meaningful choice with their binary nature. While perhaps not in the immediate future, games can find creative ways of imitating choice, not just with narrative design, but with clever use of mechanics and presentation. As a method to explore the ways games can do this, for an example I will be using *Princess Maker 2*, a Japanese life-sim released in 1993 for the PC Engine.

Before we can talk about *Princess Maker 2*, and why relevance to player choice is so fascinating, we should define our terms clearly. “Choice” is a nebulous term. You can “choose” to wear either white socks or black socks, and you can “choose” to unplug grandpa from life support. Typically, whenever the idea of choice arises when it pertains to video games, it is usually shown as a moral or narrative issue, as these are the easiest to identify. The player is presented with two options, sometimes, but not always, in the form of two or more selectable text boxes. You have the power of attorney, and must decide whether or not to unplug grandpa. Here, passivity is not an option. If the player abstains from choice, the game does not progress, or ends in a game over if there is a time limit. One of these options must be selected, and depending on which one, the immediate future of the game is altered. A common trait in instances such as this is the equality of outcome as a result of either or any choice made. Standards of game balance will not intentionally put the player at a significant disadvantage for making one choice as opposed to another. (Heron & Belford, 5)

Often times, games will link these moral choices to an in-game reward. This can be extra money, an exclusive item, a +5% increase to your capital city’s quarterly tax income. Just about anything, as long as the outcome presents itself within the mechanics of the game. Depending on the reward offered, the player may be inclined to shirk morality, and pick whichever option suits their needs the most at the time. This is an attempt to tell story via gameplay, by having in

game events reflect themselves mechanically. However, just like before, the outcome is almost always equal in the sense of game balance.

Some games may hide or disguise their moments of choice behind innocuity, or merely not divulging the final result of the choice until further down the line. Though often times it may be designed unintentionally, choices made building your abilities the early game of a campaign may render your avatar ineffective at a later point in the game. You may be forced to take a lengthy break from the story to readjust your build, or restart the game.

What is sometimes overlooked however, is the concept of choice that is purely mechanical. Again, it is important to define terms here. You can boot up a game of Zelda, and “choose” to walk around in circles for five minutes before leaving your room. This is not really a choice, as nothing has been affected. Nothing has been gained or lost (save for time) by performing this superficial action. The effort to achieve this feat of circular walking is trivial, and the outcome inconsequential. For a mechanical choice to exist, the player must face consequence and/or reward either on the path to, or as a result of their decision. Just as ergodic text takes non-trivial effort to traverse, so too does a mechanical choice take non-trivial effort to complete. (Aarseth, 2)

Mechanical choices are not always enforced the same way narrative choices are. In this case, failure via game over is a valid outcome, because it was your poor decision making that led to your demise. In a game of Street Fighter for example, you may see an opportunity to end the bout with a special move. You perform a rising uppercut, your opponent jumps into it, and they are K.O'd. Alternatively, if you perform your fireball move, and once again, the opponent jumps, but now they fly over your projectile and kick you in the face, rendering you K.O'd. Nobody told you those were your only two options. Your choice between the two moves was imposed by your own judgement. You have an entire arsenal of moves to choose from, any of which could have won or lost you the game. This may not necessarily be compelling from a narrative standpoint, but when the player is put in direct control of their choices via the already established gameplay, a more emotional reaction is provoked.

There will also be instances where a moment of choice is hidden. This is usually one or more instances that a player passes by during gameplay, the result of which determines a path taken later. In *Fire Emblem: Fuuin no Tsurugi*, at a certain point in the story, if the combined total level of two minor characters (Shanna and Tate) is more than the total of two others (Sue and Sin), the next four chapters change, featuring different map layouts, and the introduction of a new character unique to that path, before reconverging. There are some slight narrative

differences, but the story's ending and the overall events are unchanged. This deviation in paths is never once alluded to in the text of the game. Should the player play the game without knowing this information, they would consider the route they took to be the only one present. It is only on subsequent playthroughs, or looking up a walkthrough, that this becomes a choice in the traditional sense. Now however, if a player has a preference between the two routes, instead of clicking one of two options on a text box, they must take care to manage the balance of levels between the four characters.

Then there are the moments that place both mechanical, and narrative weight on choices, each of which may bear different consequences on the player's journey. For example: The first main choice in the game *LISA* sees you held up by a powerful thug, who offers you an ultimatum. You can either sacrifice all the items currently in your inventory, or your only party member (Who is implied to have been murdered, should you choose to hand him over.) (Shiden, 16:22) This presents more of a conflict than choosing between murdering or sparing an orphan child on the side of the road, either option filling a meter of some kind. Whichever you choose, your items or your ally, how you play in the subsequent section of the game is fundamentally changed, as party allies and items fulfill truly different function in the core gameplay. Instead of a choice between two different but theoretically equal options, you are given two unequal options, and left to decide which is the greater of the two. This is where we can return to *Princess Maker*. In *Princess Maker 2*, everything the player does is a reflection of this type of decision making. The game is composed entirely of choices, and it is up to the player to decide what action will have the best chance of getting them to their desired ending.

In *Princess Maker 2*, you take the role of a warrior tasked with the care of a ten year old girl. She descends from heaven, the gods declare you to be her father for all intents and purposes, and you are told: "Your decisions will determine if she lives or dies, and how she moves through life." Though the events of the game are seen through her eyes, all the choices in the game are dictated by you, the player, acting as guardian.

The game is played entirely through menus. As the girl's father, you decide her food, clothing, who she makes connections with at the palace, and her schedule for the month. When deciding her schedule, you tell her where to work, what to study, and when she gets time off. All of these activities have negative and positive effects on your daughters myriad of statistics, each of which affects her behavior and capabilities. Its Elements of Representation and Simulation (Maliet, Table 1) are all light, which makes it difficult to approach in the same way you would the usual action adventure game. The only dynamic visuals present are your

daughters changing appearance on the home screen, and brief animations that play when she works, studies, and participates in combat, to reflect her performance (These cannot be interacted with). Everything else is a static image, occasionally accompanied by voice acting. You are never given explicit goals that are required to progress. The only true fail state occurs if you allow your daughter to die of sickness.

Your daughters statistics are divided into seven categories, and make for a total of thirty five individual ratings, each of which need to be managed on the route to the desired ending. Elegance and Glamour reflect how “ladylike” your daughter is, determining her mannerisms and physical attractiveness respectively. If they are high enough, more social options become open to her. Later in the game, a high rating can attract the attention of suitors. Stress is one of the most important statistics in the game. Working and studying raise this stat, and if its rating surpasses that of the Stamina stat, your daughter can contract illness. (FANDOM, *Statistics (PM2)*)

You can assign any combination of up to three activities each month. After eight years, your daughter turns eighteen, and the game is finished. The final spread of her stats determines her fate in one of seventy four endings, which describe what she does with her life after leaving home. These endings range from her becoming a queen, a street rat, or marrying the devil and subsequently overthrowing him to take his place as ruler of darkness. These endings too, have alternatives. For example, if the player achieves the Warrior Hero ending, the game runs an additional check on the daughter’s morality stat. If it is above or below a certain point, the ending changes to reflect her performance at this job. (FANDOM, *Hero Warrior Ending (PM2)*)

Like any game, certain challenges are thrown in along the way. Depending on certain factors, your daughter can become sick or delinquent, run away from home to skip a scheduled activity, or spend money without permission. This eats into your schedule time, as you have to readjust your plans going forward, to either make the money back or improve stats in a different area.

In *Princess Maker 2*, every significant gameplay action moves the loose narrative forward. There is no putting the story on hold to grind for stats or money. Every minor action in the game must be carefully considered on the path to the preferred ending. Resources are truly finite, and the time you have to obtain them is fleeting. If the player is not equipped enough to achieve an outcome, then their only option is to reload a save file. Victory, however that may be defined by the player, must be obtained in no more or less than 288 irreversible moves.

When we think of a “difficult choice” it is usually in reference to an emotionally taxing burden, or a moral quandary. In video games however, a player can make a choice that is difficult in the traditional sense, that the desired outcome requires more effort to achieve than another option. We can choose to play *New Super Mario Bros.* without collecting any coins, a task which is in itself, tremendously difficult. However that choice is imposed by the player, who is never reciprocated or rewarded by the game for accomplishing such a task. *Princess Maker 2* facilitates player choice in this way with its multiple endings that change depending on playstyle, rather than specific decisions made. On the route to become Queen, a player may make a mistake in the daughter’s upbringing. Instead of getting a Game Over or a “bad ending” they may instead achieve an inferior ending, such as the Countess, or downright undesirable ending, like Divorcee. (FANDOM, *Endings Overview (PM 2)*) If the player is not on the right track to becoming Queen in a certain segment, you are not sent back to a recent checkpoint to try again. The game moves forward whether or not you are satisfied with your own performance. Instead of having a story with branches, and multiple endings, *Princess Maker 2* provides a campaign that is simultaneously fluid and linear, and grants branching endings determined solely by gameplay performance, rather than explicit choice.

Due to the vast and fluid nature of *Princess Maker 2*, it tricks the player into taking its mechanics at face value. None of the stats or their effects and interactions are explained. They only have names to go on. If at any point in the game, Morality is the daughter’s highest stat, a demon will appear on the front door, and offer the player money in exchange for all her morality points. (FANDOM, *P.D. Karl*) Whether or not this is a desirable option is left up to the player. The player has no idea what “Morality” actually affects. All they can assume is that with zero morality, their daughter may face consequence for an immoral action. However, by accepting the demon’s offer. No one event is explicitly triggered. The player may choose to take actions that can be affected by a low morality stat, but the player can easily earn those morality points back before undertaking those actions. Or they can simply choose not to partake in activities that rely on Morality. Being an immoral person is not inherently inviting of conflict. Rather, action taken with immorality is.

Another example of this kind of gameplay can occur later in the game. As your daughter ages, she gains access to a selection of dresses, some of which can be bought at the store, while others must be earned through various means. Most dresses give a high boost to your daughter’s charisma and beauty related stats. However, what the game does not tell you, is that these dresses have a weight restriction on them. If after trying to equip the dress, your daughter

does not meet that weight requirement, you are treated to the poignant message which reads: “Your daughter is too fat to fit in this dress.” Wanting your daughter to fit in the dress is not a motivation born of voyeurism. The stats bestowed by them are a boon to higher requirement social endings. It is in your and your daughters’ best interest to get her in one of these dresses. From here, you have two options. Find a way to decrease your daughter’s weight, or move on sans dress. Decreasing your daughters’ weight can be done in several ways, but the two easiest ways of doing this are changing her diet, or going on vacation. These options are not without their drawbacks. Putting your daughter on a restrictive diet can have negative effects on her health, and the vacation required to decrease weight is only available for half the year, takes up schedule time, and is expensive. In either case, because you did not manage your daughter’s weight appropriately, you now face consequence.

It is this approach to player accountability that makes *Princess Maker* such an excellent example of how player choice can be handled in video games. Whereas some games use choice as a narrative function, with the assurance that the player can only truly fail or succeed in the midst of proper gameplay, *Princess Maker* turns choice into a mechanic, and lets the player become the architect of their own destruction. (Juul) The game does not consider any set of decisions as proper, only that some outcomes are preferable to others.

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## Intro paragraph

Mechanical choice

Player must be held accountable

Must follow through on decisions

Choice must be irreversible

Significant action/non trivial effort aarseth.

Games promise.

Art of failure, Jesper juul

Ludology school game studies

Games as decisions

A series of interesting decisions