

What's Zen about Zen Modes? Prajna Knowledge versus Mindfulness in Game Design

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Introduction

What is Zen? Scholars, philosophers and even Zen practitioners do not seem to agree on an answer, even going as far as stating that it resists definition (“Zen cannot be locked into a concept nor understood by thought”, Taishen Deshimaru, 1982: 6). In spite of that, several recent games, such as *Bejeweled 3* (PopCap Games, 2010), *Mini Metro* (Dinosaur Polo Club, 2015), *Alto's Adventure* (Snowman, 2015), *Plants vs Zombies* (PopCap Games, 2009) and even *Fruit Ninja* (Halfbrick Studios, 2010), have featured a so-called “Zen Mode”, an alternative ruleset for gameplay that complements and offers an alternative to the main design of the game. A close analysis of these modes reveals that they do not, as one can suspect, follow any Zen practice or theory, but seem to adhere to Western popular trends that present relaxation and one's own well-being as their ultimate goals: the Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) that have gained relevance in our culture recently (Hyland, 2015) and that some have labelled as “McMindfulness” (Purser & Loy, 2013).

In this paper, I analyse the design patterns of these Zen Modes, and compare the traits of Zen as a philosophy and of its form of knowledge, prajna, with the popular idea of Zen in the West in the form of MBIs, colouring books, and the likes, to answer what is Zen in these Zen Modes but also how can Zen help us understand knowledge in games. Zen and prajna problematize our relationship with reality in a way that could help us understand the performance of players and the way they learn, interpret and analyze the game system; a problematization that is, again, thoroughly absent from so-called Zen Modes.

McMindfulness and Zen Modes

The Zen Modes in the aforementioned games are defined by minimalistic aesthetics and a lack of goals and punishments, similar to the casual juiciness described by Juul (2009) and the absence of playability theorized by Leino (2013). Zen Modes offer the player a pleasurable,

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individualistic and relaxing experience, built around an almost complete absence of stress factors and effort demand.

The Zen Mode of *Fruit Ninja* just removes some obstacles without eliminating the game's goal. The creators of *Mini Metro* describe its Zen Mode as “much like the traditional scored game, but with the absence of a loss condition”. The Zen Garden of *Plants vs. Zombies* is a separate space where the player can nurture collectible plants, watering and feeding them following some time bars in the fashion of “clicker” or “idle clicker” games like *AbyssRium* (IDLE Idea Factory, 2016), an app advertised as “a game that helps relax your nerve”. The press release of *Alto's Adventure* Zen Mode, titled “Relax with Zen Mode”, explicitly says that it offers “all the pleasure of play, with no consequences”. The mode also features a new soundtrack, described as “more serene, calming and immersive”. *Bejeweled 3* goes one step further by including breathing instructions and calming aural tones.

Relaxation seems to be at the core of these modes but Zen, as I will detail later, is not a practice of relaxation or even self-reflection, but of moving beyond the self, inevitably linked to a whole moral philosophy. Not only do these modes fail to reproduce the actual meditation practices of Zen, but they also lack its problematization of knowledge and experience, which lays at its very foundations and sustains the possibility of a philosophy about and also with Zen (Byung-Chul, 2015). Zen Modes appear to be reductions, misinterpretations or, in the worst case, commodifications of Zen ideas, practices and iconography. They adhere to popular trends in the West that present relaxation and well-being as their ultimate goals: the Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) that have gained relevance in our culture recently (Hyland, 2015) and that some have labelled as “McMindfulness” (Purser & Loy, 2013).

As Husgafvel (2016) explains, the current use of non-religious mindfulness practices for practical health benefits dates to 1979, when Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) as a treatment method for chronic pain and stress. MBIs, by focusing on reducing stress, show a conceptual slippage (Baer in Hyland, 2015, 11-17) and a reductionist instrumentalism (Hyland, 2015) that push for short-term commercialised mindfulness strategies and offer “a quick fix, a band-aid or panacea for all the current ills and anguish of contemporary life”.

In McMindfulness, the original foundational principles of Zen meditation are marginalised and its ultimate aims and procedures are distorted. For Purser and Loy (2013 in Hyland, 2015), Zen mindfulness is a practice of liberation with strong ethical implications, indivisible from trying to cut the roots of greed, ill will and delusion, whereas McMindfulness refashions it “into a banal, therapeutic, self-help technique that can actually reinforce those roots”. Hyland cites the application of MBIs in the US army and in Google staff development programmes (Stone 2014; Eaton 2014) as troublesome cases.

Zen and mindfulness

Why are Zen Modes not Zen? And what is Zen? It is, before anything else, a practice or a set of practices. These include kinhin (or walking meditation), zazen (sitting meditation), and mon-do (or dialog based on questions and answers), exercises that involve a problematization of knowledge and experience and that aim to grant the practitioner satori or clear understanding.

Zen actively escapes conceptualization but even if there is no single, unifying definition, we can conclude from Zen corpora and scholarship that it originated from a combination of Chinese psychology and Hindu philosophy (Suzuki, 1981: 31), or of Buddhism and Taoism, that is skeptic of language and does not trust conceptual thought (Byung-Chul, 2015). While this skepticism may seem anti-philosophic, Zen offers a non-dogmatic set of methods of inquiry about reality and its direct observation (Warner, 2003) and values critical thought beyond (or before) language. The work of Zen philosophers such as Nishida has been compared to Heidegger as a post-Hegelian, post-Husserl attempt to establish a path “to the things themselves” (Feenberg, 1999). Philosopher Ueda Shizuteru warns that “we only consider real what can be understood through words” (2004), whereas he defends an “infinite openness” that cannot be expressed through language, where one lets go of the self without removing it, a way of accessing reality and the others through a deep, non-personal knowledge. And it is this kind of knowledge, and not calmness or relaxation, what makes Zen be Zen.

D.T. Suzuki (1981: 59) signals two vital parts in all of Buddhism, karuna or “the great compassion or love” and prajna or great wisdom, which are aspects of Reality and complement each other and of which Zen favours the second². Prajna is static while Karuna is dynamic, prajna is the unity of things while Karuna is the multitude of things. Mindfulness involves both, and even if we remove it from its religious context, it still needs them. For Hyland, Lee and Mills (2015), “mindfulness is the capacity to perceive our world clearly, without adulteration or manipulation”, but not only an attentional process: “It also has an attitudinal component, whereby mindfulness is imbued with an attitude of open-minded curiosity and an intention of kindness and compassion” (Gunaratana, 2002). Even if we ignore the more soteriological elements, such as satori, Zen mindfulness is a practice of (and opens access to) compassion and prajna, an outwards movement of the mind that aims to gain a non-conceptual and non-judgmental knowledge of reality.

Prajna, knowledge and wisdom

In his preface to Herrigel’s *Zen and the art of archery* (a text that has greatly contributed to exaggerate the more mystical side of Zen not only in the West, but also in Japan, as it has been noted by Yamada, 2001), Suzuki (in Herrigel, 2005: 12) translates Prajna as “intuition”, a “transcendental wisdom” that captures simultaneously the totality and individuality of all

² (I have inquired the applications of compassion in videogames elsewhere; Navarro-Remesal, 2016)

things and must be taken as a directly apprehensible experience. Prajna requires, then, the detachment of oneself, yielding without resistance (2005: 22).

Juan Arnau (2007, 43) defines Prajna as “discernment”, “liberating wisdom”, “penetrating vision” and “clear understanding” (106), and explains that it is “the unity of things” and involves both discursive and non-discursive dimensions. Prajna can defeat obfuscation, which is more confusion or bafflement than simple ignorance, the lack of correspondence between an action or thought and reality, or, in other words, the aimlessness of thought, feeling and actions.

Walsh and Reams (2015: 2) include Prajna in their list of world variants of a “deeper transrational wisdom sought in the world’s religious and contemplative traditions”, similar to the Greek “phronesis” or the ability to know the morally right path of action, but with an added soteriological dimension, “capable of bringing enlightenment, liberation, or salvation”. Conze (1975) also compares prajna with traditional Greek concepts, in this case “sophia”. He specifies that prajna has several stages that go from “analytical appreciative understanding” to “non-discriminative, non-dual, evincing the sameness of all”. For him, prajna grants a direct contact with actual reality in the same way of the “logos” of Parmenides or Spinoza’s “amor dei intellectualis”.

Prajna is a kind of immediate knowledge that implies a moral philosophy. It involves clarity not only of intellect but of emotions, and does so in an active manner.

The present moment and the senses

The work of Dignaga and Dharmakirti, 6th century thinkers that established the foundations of Indian epistemology and logics, can shed some light on prajna. Siderits (2007: 210) explains Dignaga’s epistemological system: “What we perceive are particulars. What we know through inference are objects-in-general. The particular is ultimately real. The object-in-general is a conceptual fiction”. There are two means of knowledge: perception and inference, and something is a means of knowledge only if it invariably leads to successful practice. For Dignaga, perception is “cognition that is free of conceptual construction”. (Siderits, 2007: 215) Perceptual cognition involves two stages, the non-conceptual and the conceptual; only the first reflects what exists outside the mind. Perceptual judgments are useful but they can make things that are different resemble one another (2007: 223).

This focus on perception and particulars clashes with Hegel’s epistemology of the mind. In it, Hegel writes about a very similar kind of knowledge, which he calls sense-certainty, limited to recording data received by our senses without making attempts to order or classify it (Singer, 1983). For Hegel, this consciousness could not create knowledge, since knowledge turns pure particulars into universals through language. Sense-certainty cannot be communicated, and thus “cannot possibly be knowledge”.

But for Zen, the incommunicable is the highest form of knowledge. Nagatomo (2016, Stanford) writes that in Zen, prajna or perfection of nondiscriminatory wisdom “designates practical, experiential knowledge, and secondarily and only derivatively theoretical, intellectual knowledge”. While Hegel thought of universals as an improvement over particulars, in Zen they are considered a form of “language game” that can further remove us from real knowledge.

This is what it means to focus in the present moment. Dōgen, founder of the Sōtō school of Zen, argued that in zazen one overcomes the perception of things in terms of past/present/future and experiences the phenomenon just as it is (Kasulis, 1981: 80). By receiving the unfolding of experience without reflectively categorizing it, one encounters a stream of ever-changing phenomena. “Pre-reflective consciousness itself involves change”, explains Kasulis. Zen is not a practice of quietude and stillness, but of sensing the present and its constant change.

Emptiness and without-thinking

Suzuki writes that both karuna and prajna refer to Sunyata or ku, an emptiness that is not negation but affirmation. Kasulis (1981) explains that emptiness is central to prajna, since prajna reinforces “the awareness that all ideas, their pragmatic usefulness notwithstanding, stand on emptiness (sunyata) a gap that conceptual thinking cannot span”. Without prajna, Kasulis adds, “we run the risk of becoming attached to our characterizations, of thinking of them as absolutes, rather than names convenient for a given purpose”.

Dōgen also highlighted the importance of emptiness in Zen. He distinguished three types of thought, presented in a dialectical fashion (Kasulis, 1981): shiryo (our traditional idea of “thinking”); fushiryo (“not-thinking”) or the negation or denial of shiryo, a positional state with thinking as its object; and finally hishiryo or “without-thinking”, which goes beyond thinking and not-thinking, “merely accepting the presence of ideation without either affirmation or denial”. This third state is emptiness, and is non-positional, neither affirming nor negating, an experience of “pure presence of things as they are”. This is the state in which we meet the pure particulars, not merely receiving raw data through the senses but gaining a deeper understanding of their nature.

Emptying one’s mind is not possible, but moving to a nonpositional contemplation of reality is. This idea was so important for Dōgen that he called it “genjokoan”, a term that implies an identification of practice with enlightenment, with comprehension. That is, practising Zen (and, more specifically, zazen) is accessing prajna in itself.

The (non)self and pure experience

Prajna is a direct contemplation of reality that cannot be expressed with language. Philosopher Nishida, following a similar reasoning, defended an ontology of the “pure experience”: “what we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by pure I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination” (Nishida 1990: 3). Feenberg (1999) explains that Nishida shared this concept with D.T. Suzuki, who popularized the identification of enlightened consciousness with a kind of immediacy prior to all reflection.

As Dignaga, Nishida presents subject and object not as foundational categories but as constructions arisen from reflection “within an original unity, pre-reflective consciousness.” The pure experience of Nishida eliminates all possibilities of self-reflection, since experience is prior to the self that knows, which is just an object in experience, a perceptual judgment, a conceptual construction. This is what Zen means when it says there is no self. The self is not a spectator on the experienced world, but merely an aspect of it. Experience, not the self, is what is ultimately real. This difference between the McM mindfulness self-reflection and pure experience can be seen in Nishida’s use of the word “jikaku”, a self-consciousness that does not imply self-directed awareness but “the achievement of a deep realization or understanding of a matter, with the implication that such understanding affects and alters the self”.

Knowledge is action, and experience, as an ontological foundation, is “relative to an acting rather than a contemplative subject”: “Reflection is an event within the self by which the self adds something to itself, a self-knowledge which is also an operation of self-development” (Nishida 1987). We transform ourselves through experience and knowledge, because we are part of a unity of things that is constantly changing. For Nishida, as for Zen, “selfhood is not a thing but a process, a process that is not separate from the experienced world but is a reflexive dimension of it through which it obtains its unity.”

Zen action and intuition-act

So far, I have described prajna as wisdom (an ethical notion), conceptual-free cognition (an epistemological one), pure experience (an ontology) and emptiness (a psychological dimension). The last important concept for understanding Zen and prajna would be intuition, or more specifically “action-intuition”, a concept that Nishida used in an attempt to explain behaviour and the formation and working of the historical world.

Nakagawa (2006: 76) also writes about Herrigel’s essay on Zen and archery and compares it to one of the central ideas of Nishida’s late work, Koî-teki chokkan or “intuition-act”: “the intention that is conceived in the act itself” or “the act that is given in the intuition itself”. Nishida explained it like this: “If one tries to define intuition from the plane of the abstract concept, one would think only of a static state. In fact, it consists in apprehending reality using our body as an intermediary. That is why it should be called intuition-act” (in Nakagawa, 2006).

The body is, thus, of great importance in intuition-act, to the extent that Maraldo (2015, Stanford) calls it “the performance of an embodied individual who in turn is formed by the world”. Therefore, both body and world must be conceived as historical, situated. Our actions do not come from within, from an inner world we explore in mindfulness, but from the way we, through our bodies, filter reality. Experience and intuition are, for Nishida, an active process of seeing a thing by becoming it: “intuition happens only in the midst of the dialectical process of acting upon and in turn being acted upon by things”.

To put it simply, there is no action without context and the context is created by action. More importantly, cognition is also an action that affects all parts involved, because they are in actuality parts of the same unity. For Dignaga, we impose conceptual distinctions in the act of cognition, separating three aspects, agent, object and action, whereas in reality they are “a single unified thing” (Siderits, 2007: 226). In the act of cognition we shape the world and ourselves.

Nakagawa notes that in Europe it is traditional, since Aristotle, to distinguish with precision “contemplation” and “activity”, so much we find a contradiction in the notion of “intuition-act”. In East Asia, however, this “dichotomy of the contemplative and the active” has been solved not only by Nishida, but by earlier thinkers like Wang Yangming (15th century), for whom “knowledge and praxis are just one”.

Can there be Zen games?

There can be games with Zen themes (even Zen as a theme) and Zen aesthetics, but the practices of Zen are too strictly defined to be turned into a play or game activity. For Dōgen, zazen is everything, and the only important element is a proper posture. The key to zazen is that it has no goals, not even relaxing. There is almost no process to turn into procedural rhetorics, no space for game design or gamification. An attempt to create a true Zen Mode would likely result in McM mindfulness. McM mindfulness uses meditation as a means to an end, a technique to reduce stress and produce a calm state of mind. Dōgen criticized this distinction between methods and goals, even when the goal was to achieve enlightenment: for him, zazen is enlightenment itself. That is why the core idea of Sōtō Zen is shikantaza, “just sitting” (Kasulis, 1981: 67). According to this, a literal Zen Mode would have the player just sitting in front of the screen, without any goals or interaction, while a simulation of Zen would consist of having the avatar just sitting, in an active non-positional state of mind, regardless of the visual and aural cues. We practice Zen insofar we sit properly and do nothing but notice everything, every process in the present moment.

But let’s imagine a mode that recreated the game as a Zen-like activity. Leaving compassion and liberation aside (which would, in fact, be impossible in a Zen philosophy), a Zen Mode should take into account a form of spontaneous wisdom, a conceptual-free cognition, a pure

experience beyond the self and a without-thinking state of mind: almost insurmountable obstacles for game design. But we can have aspects of Zen in games, the same way Herrigel found Zen in archery, and we can design simulations and representations of para-Zen activities, like arts and rituals.

Bogost (2007), for instance, identifies gardening and wandering as typical Zen activities that can be performed in games like *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001) or *Shenmue* (Sega AM2, 1999). For him, abstraction and repetition favour Zen-like states of mind: “*Harvest Moon* emphasizes the repetition of simple tasks as much as, if not more than, their outcomes. *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon* are games that invite the player to complete these tasks independent of the long-term goals they facilitate. Both are games one might boot up late at night, before bed, to wind down.” But he has seen that Zen favours immediacy and pure particulars and rejects abstraction. Furthermore, here we find once more an association of Zen with relaxation, with “winding down”, which, as we have seen, is reductionist at best.

Bogost attempted to create “a real meditation game” with *Guru Meditation* (Ian Bogost, 2008), a game for the Atari 2600 that rejected “graphical sensuality in favor of simplicity and austerity” and is played by sitting cross-legged on a peripheral without moving. And while the action itself looks very much like zazen, its commitment to “withdrawal and placidity” moves the focus away from prajna: “*Guru Meditation* takes advantage of the Atari's more primitive graphics to deemphasize a sensation of the outside world, in favor of an inner one.” There is no “inner world” in Zen, just the realization that the self is a construction, a process that depends on and is one with the whole of reality. And while there are certain artistic movements related to Zen, visuals alone do not make an experience Zen per se. *Guru meditation* produces a practice that is very similar to zazen, but is not zazen. In this regard, it is similar to the meditation “minigame” of the Mind and Body Zone in *Eye Toy: Kinetic* (SCE London Studio, 2005) or the Meditation Balance Game in *Wii Fit* (Nintendo, 2007), which offer a set of instruction for meditation focused on relaxing and clearing one’s mind that can serve as a gateway to actual zazen at best.

Prajna and flow in videogames

What we can learn from Zen and prajna in game design and analysis is the importance of immediacy, or the encounter with the particular before the abstraction, of the body as situated in the world and time, the unity and dependence of all things in the virtual world but also of the player, her space and the gaming technology, which come together to create play, the often aimless and egoless player position of pure experience (almost like a Deleuzian “fourth person”), intuition as an active element, the way every action is conformed by space and history, and the spontaneous kind of wisdom the player often applies in ethical game situations. I propose to consider these elements as fragments of a potential “prajna-in-play” or “play-prajna” type of engagement and involvement in play and games, a mode of thinking-doing that can help us in game design and analysis. This play-prajna is not a

proposed change in the way we play, but a reframing of the already existing dynamics and attitudes in play and games.

The concept of intuition-act can be seen as an encapsulation of all the aspects of play-prajna detailed above. It brings together thinking and doing in what may appear as almost an automated, individual way, similar to Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory, which has an "almost paradigmatic power in game studies" (Mortensen, 2003). But their differences illuminate two almost opposing conceptualizations of play and games.

For Seger and Potts (2012: 103-121), flow is defined as "a pleasurable, immersive state experienced when engaged in a challenging task for which one has requisite skills, and has been suggested as the primary reward of videogame play". Flow is usually associated with performance and production, as its neighbour concept "comfort zone", proposed by psychologist and self-help guru Judith M. Bardwick (1991), who defined it as the behaviour state in which a person operates on a neutral and optimal level of anxiety.

Mortensen (2003) has criticized flow theory, explaining that Csikszentmihalyi's work on happiness and pleasure promotes happiness as an achievement, a sum of mastery, challenge and control, either in games of the body or the mind and that flow turns happiness into the result of hard work, discipline and a continuous battle for self improvement. This view ignores the structures of society and their power to influence the quality of life. "If we keep measuring the pleasure of computer games by this functionalistic measuring stick", warns Mortensen, "we will play into a view of the ludic, play as function, aimed not at chaotic experience, but at productive goals", which can create "a society where delight is used to reach goals, a world where the autotelic experience itself will be totally missing in the productive use of the flow experience".

Prajna and flow share a sense of pre-conscious engagement and of intuition-based performance, but prajna gives the subject a more active, critical and non-productive role. Unlike flow, play-prajna is not related to stress or optimal anxiety nor does it depend on the challenge level, needs to take others and context into account, cannot be "broken" or "halted" by sudden stops and is not reduced to productivity: once we gain prajna through Zen practice we do not need to concentrate on it, we do not need our actions to be fluid or uninterrupted, and we do not need to be "doing" in a traditional sense. Once we access a play-prajna state, we do not need a constant and smooth performance to remain in it. Moreover, play-prajna does not need to be understood in terms of happiness, joy or bliss, but as a deeper understanding of the game in action that combines performance and thinking.

Instances of play-prajna

This play-prajna could be found, first and foremost, mainly in the paidia elements of the game, and less in the ludus. Play-prajna starts in the spontaneous, in the contextual, in the

immediate engagement with the particulars that surround us in play. Dance arcades like the *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 1998-2016) or *Pump It Up* (Andamiro, 1999-2016) series pose clearly defined challenges, but their activities are deeply contextual and immediate. The whole machine is needed to play, whereas the arcade room and the usual crowds that watch a game define an environment that invariably affects the player. The body is situated and its filtering of its own history and the surroundings create intuition-act.

Play-prajna can help us understand social dynamics of collaboration, competition and seduction. Both social games and e-sports require a thorough reading of the other players, an anticipation not only of their actions but of their emotions and mind states. Specially when we play local multiplayer games, the others are never abstractions, but immediate presences to which we react first in immediate ways. Coordination within teams is also a dynamic that demands reading and understanding and that can feel automated, but goes beyond the dependence on challenge level and productivity. Every social interaction can be understood to imply a pre-conscious kind of moral knowledge (how we perceive the others before conceptualizing them, how we decide to interact with them) not unlike the main meaning of prajna.

In these situations, the self is not only an individual, but a part of a greater sum, like waves of the same ocean (a recurrent metaphor in Zen). It is my belief that when we often say that we “lose ourselves in games”, be it in the immersive fictions or in the act of playing, we mean much more than being entranced by the activity or the aesthetics. We feel that way because our sense of self becomes scattered and spread among many elements: the input devices, the screen, other players in our teams, the avatars, every representational element like cursors, crosshairs or HUDs, and even the whole gameworld. Multi-focus games, like RTS and graphic adventures, are good examples of that: we do not have a visual center of attention but consider everything at the same time, often interiorizing time-based events and considering the screen not as real state to be occupied but as a vast array of affordances through which we can express ourselves. Fourth-wall breaks, changes in player-characters midst game and non-character dependent mechanics (like an “undo” button) are more instances of this metaphorical fourth person, of this virtual pure experience beyond and before the sense of self.

Intuition-act and without-thinking can be found also in games that do not use clear-cut tutorials but teach the player “on the go”. A well known example of this is the kishōtenketsu design strategy in Mario games like *Super Mario 3D Land* (Nintendo, 2011) that director Hayashida Koichi has explained in interviews (Nutt, 2012), where the design allows the player to experiment and learn in intuitive ways, through immediate encounters and not abstract explanations: an element is first introduced in a safe environment, then developed as an obstacle, then twisted through new circumstances and finally brought to a conclusion. The player builds conceptual constructions to learn how to overcome these obstacles, but the twists bring her back to the immediate.

Finally, an important instance of play-prajna that can be found in games is the one related to the main meaning of prajna, as knowledge plus wisdom: facing ethical choices. Every time an open ethical system is expressed through metrics like karma bars or affinity systems, ethics become systemic, abstract, a ludic set of conceptual constructions that often end up being “meta-played”. But some encounters are more immediate, visceral, underplayed, like shooting civilians or meleeing them in *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) or accepting a mission from an NPC in exchange of a vital item or kill him to get the item directly and save time in *Dead Rising 2: Case Zero* (Blue Castle Games, 2010). In this, we manifest a prajna-like knowledge of the game: not only do we know of to perform, interpret the ruleset and game systems and chase goals, but we put knowledge to the service of our own moral instincts and developments.

Conclusions

Zen is, before anything else, a practice, and a very specific one. It can be best summarized with Dōgen’s shikantaza, just sitting. Around it, a wide set of aesthetics, of schools of thoughts and debates have flourished, sometimes trying to define its main ideas and other times simplifying them for consumption. The Zen Modes in the games discussed here fall into the latter, and can be placed within the McMindfulness trend that transforms Zen into consumable doses of relaxation, isolation, placidity and well-being.

A true Zen game should affect our relationship with reality, changing the way we see the world and ourselves after we stop playing, illuminating the dependent nature of everything. Moreover, it should connect with Zen practices like zazen, kinhin or mondo. These lofty goals, needless to say, are quite hard to fit into an actual game design, perhaps even unnecessary.

What we can learn from Zen is its main idea of knowledge, the apprehension of the immediate, of reality as it is in front of us in the present moment, and what it says about the many ways we engage with play and games. We enter into a game with a sense of our body and space, with a pre-conscious engagement that depends on intuition and the relation with all the pieces that conform the play scenario, and with a (however tenuous) moral sense of our actions. Like Herrigel practising archery, we connect with something else beyond us when we play (something that does not need to be spiritual, but immediate), we let our own body interiorize the practice and manifest it in an intuition-act that transforms the game and ourselves, and we enter a state very similar to flow but not limited by challenge, performance and production. This is the Zen Mode of the very act of playing.

Games

AbyssRium, IDLE Idea Factory, Android, 2016.

Alto's Adventure, Snowman, iOS/Android, 2015.
 Animal Crossing, Nintendo, Nintendo64/GameCube, 2001.
 Bejeweled 3, PopCap Games, multiplatform, 2010.
 Dance Dance Revolution, Konami, arcade, 1998-2016.
 Dead Rising 2: Case Zero, Blue Castle Games, Xbox 360, 2010.
 EyeToy Kinetic, SCE London Studio, PlayStation 2, 2005.
 Fruit Ninja, Halfbrick Studios, 2010.
 Guru Meditation, Ian Bogost, Atari 2600, 2008.
 Mini Metro, Dinosaur Polo Club, PC/Mac, 2015.
 Plants vs Zombies, PopCap Games, multiplatform, 2009.
 Pump It Up, Andamiro, arcade, 1999-2016.
 ShenMue, Sega AM2, Dreamcast, 1999.
 Spec Ops: The Line, Yager Development, multiplatform, 2012.
 Super Mario 3D Land, Nintendo, Nintendo 3DS, 2011.
 WiiFit, Nintendo, Wii, 2007.

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