

Nina Freeman
Independent Games Summit GDC 2016
How Game Mechanics Helped Players Embody 19 Year Old Nina

Note: Each dash indicates a new slide.

My name is Nina Freeman. I am a level designer at Fullbright working on Tacoma. I was also the designer for the games “how do you Do It?” and Cibebe, among other things. Today, I'll be talking to you about Cibebe, which I made alongside my team, Star Maid Games.

Cibebe is a game about a girl who has a relationship with a boy in an online game. The player plays as Nina as she becomes closer with her lover until they eventually decide to meet up in real life to have sex. The game is based on a true story drawn from things that I actually experienced.

Now, I'll show you the trailer to give you a sense of what the game looks like, and how it plays.

-

So, as you can see, the player plays as Nina, using her computer and playing the online game with her lover as their relationship unfolds.

And, just a few things for clarification... the game is called Cibebe, which is the name of the main character Nina's avatar in her online game. However, I will be referring to the character by her real life name, Nina. That might be confusing, seeing as that's my real name and this game is based on a personal story....but, I'm not really talking in third person. Just think of Nina as a character. That's how I think of her. Also, her lovers avatar name is Ichi, which is how I'll be referring to him in this talk. His real life name in the game is Blake.

-

I made the prototype for Cibebe in Bennett Foddy's prototype studio class in 2013 at NYU while I was working on my Masters. The theme that week was sex. I'd already thought a bit about my childhood sexuality through a game called HDYDI, which I'd worked on with some friends at the GGJ that year.

HDYDI is a game about a kid who tries to figure out how sex works by mashing her barbie dolls together. So, this time, I wanted to try and approach sex as a topic from the

perspective of myself at a slightly older age. Given this self-imposed constraint, I thought back to my teenage years.

-

When I try to come up with a story for a game, I often try and draw from my own life. I specifically look for memories that really stuck with me—that I like to share with friends over a drink, for example. So, of course, reflecting on my teenage years within the context of sex... well, there was a lot there, obviously. I think we all know that our teen years are spent thinking about, or at the very least agonizing, over sex.

In any case, as I was reflecting, I came to the story that Cibebe is based on. In real life, at around 18, I really did meet up with a guy I met in Final Fantasy Online, and we had sex. Not only was this a story I liked sharing over drinks, but it was a story that people always seemed curious about and engaged with when I told it. So, I decided to run with it. Honestly, I thought this story was pretty unique at the time, but I've since learned that it's quite a common occurrence.

Trust me, my inbox is full of people who reached out after playing Cibebe to tell me that similar things happened to them. I think the fact that it's something other people can relate to makes it an even more interesting story to tell for me, because I'm really interested in making games about ordinary life experiences and people. So I'm really glad I decided to go with it, in retrospect.

-

Ok, back to prototype class! I had my idea for a story. I asked myself how I could best tell that story through a game. How could I help players understand what my experience was like, falling in love online and meeting up with this person.

In the original prototype, I focused on making a tiny game where the player could play as Nina, and experience a flirtatious conversation between herself and her crush.

(SHOW PROTOTYPE OR READ THE FOLLOWING)

The player controls the character Nina's MMO avatar, and fights ghosts in this online world--a world modeled after online games like World of Warcraft or Final Fantasy Online. The player hears a conversation between Nina and a boy she knows while they are playing together. I basically wanted the player to do what I did when I was having this experience, and at its most basic level, I was doing exactly this—playing an online game while chatting with this guy.

(START READING HERE IF SKIPPED)

I'll show you a small snippet of dialogue from this initial prototype, that will give you a taste of the kind of conversational tone I tried to build through their banter.

-

Through this initial prototype, I wanted to give the player a structure within which to understand Nina's experience, so it was important to me that she use her own words. Cibebe is not about the player, it's about the player understanding Nina, and what she's thinking and feeling.

It's a sort of theatrical experience, in that the player is really performing as Nina when they play, using her hands and eyes via her avatar in the fictional online game space. However, this initial prototype was too passive—players were listening and reacting to the conversation, and learning things about the characters through that... but they weren't coming away with anything more than a surface level understanding of the fact that two teens were chatting and flirting online. I wanted the player to come away with more than that, so I asked myself how I could help the player do more than passively perform this character—I wanted to urge them to read between the lines, and start thinking from Nina's perspective.

-

I wanted to design a game that could support player-character embodiment. Before I get into the design decisions I made to support this, I want to contextualize this idea a bit. Anna Anthropy explains this kind of role enactment in terms of theatre. She says in her book, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, that “Games are a kind of theater in which the audience is an actor and takes on a role—and experiences the circumstances and consequences of that role” (20). In other words, in a theatrical performance, the actress uses her body as a mechanism for exploring and embodying characters feelings, motivations and goals—this same kind of embodiment is possible in video games. I tried to do this in Cibebe. I wanted to design Cibebe as the stage upon which the player embodies Nina as she engages in her relationship online.

-

Of course, before I had time to figure out how to support player-character embodiment in Cibebe, I started to design around it because it was a hard question to answer, and I came up with a baroque fake MMO for the alpha version of the game. I thought it'd have five large maps full of other characters, like a real MMO. And that you could talk to them and do group fights and stuff like that. However, this ended up being way too complicated and full of awful maps and extra characters that didn't matter.

Part of the iterative process of making Cibebe, was making a design and initial prototype that was way too big, and learning from that mistake. This first version was more about simulating an MMO than about embodying the love story at the core of the game. Basically, I was giving too much emphasis to the game's stage, and not enough to the performance.

I quickly realized that I needed to cut all of the cruft that had made its way into the design—really simulating an online game to a full-scale was just too much for a team of four working on weekends, with no budget to speak of.

Cibebe needed to go back to being a focused vignette—a brief evocative account of an online relationship, rather than focusing too much on the online world itself. This wildly large scoped design would really only serve to distract the player from the story.

So, instead of creating a fully fleshed out online game simulation as the stage for the story, I decided to focus on developing a core flow and mechanic that would encourage the player's embodiment of Nina as an individual, on a smaller, more concise scale, so that they could focus on the love story at the core of the game.

-

Nailing down the flow and key points of the story was really important, given this new direction. I asked myself what the player needed to know about these two characters in order to understand their relationship, and why they met up for sex. I whittled this larger relationship down to three key conversations between Nina and her lover that illustrated why they wanted to meet up at all. I won't get into too much detail about the three conversations, but basically each one represents a phase in their relationship. The first is the light flirting phase, the second is whatever the conversational version of heavy petting is, and finally the last conversation is about their decision to meet up.

These are obviously not representative of every nuance of their relationship, but they served the purpose of explaining why the two decided to meet up for sex, which is the focus of the story. I wasn't trying to tell the story of an entire relationship. I was trying to tell the story of a particular moment during a larger relationship. If I tried to tell the story of this relationship from beginning to end... well, that scope was too large given our development constraints... and I think vignettes are more interesting to me as a designer anyways.

So, as I worked on focusing the flow of the story through these three conversations, the mechanics still needed to fall into place. There was no longer room for heavy handed MMO simulation to use as a crutch, so I had to figure out what mechanics would support the players embodiment of Nina and their understanding of these core conversations she engages in.

-

In “Video Games and Embodiment,” James Paul Gee uses *Thief* as an example of how players embody characters in video games. He says that “At one point in *Thief*, Garrett needs to break into a museum to get an important object. This is Garrett’s goal and you need to inhabit him and see the game world from the perspective of his affordances in this particular virtual world if you are to play this part of the game successfully” (259).

In *Thief*, the constraint of the museum contextualizes how the player is meant to use the mechanics in order to perform as Garret and achieve the goal of breaking into the museum.

Narratively contextualized mechanics and goals teach players to embody characters by giving the player the tools to perform and thus embody the role. So, I asked myself what mechanics and goals could the specific narrative of Cibebe contextualize?

-

The core mechanic that I came up with to help support player-character embodiment in Cibebe is intimately tied to the environment of the story—interact with and click on stuff in Nina's computer.

So, how does this work? Let's start from the beginning of the game. First, the player is shown a short clip of Nina sitting at her computer, which I'll talk more about later. Then, the perspective switches to first person and they are seeing her desktop. There, they may interact with her desktop, just like one would on a normal computer. The player can explore any of her files, emails and whatever else is on her computer. Eventually, they click on the crystal icon and log into the online game, Valtameri. To be clear, all these actions are available to the player because they're things that Nina herself would be doing. They're playing as Nina, in first person. So, once they log in to Valtameri, Nina's online game, they get their first voice chat from Ichi. Then, the conversation between him and Nina ensues. But, the conversation is integrated in the mechanic as well.

-

The conversation between Nina and Ichi is held in chunks, with each chunk of dialogue being triggered by a player interaction with a user-interface element. The dialogue moves forward when the player, for example, gets a notification from her photo app, and opens it to see a picture of Nina just posted by a friend. In one part, Nina reacts to the sight of this picture by exclaiming that she hates pictures of herself. So, as the player fights enemies in Valtameri alongside Ichi, the computer goes about its business and Nina gets lms, emails, and other notifications that the player may interact with in via these icons I highlighted in order to spark conversation.

In *Cibele*, the player embodies Nina by playing within the constraints of Nina's computer, and her online game *Valtameri*. The player must navigate Nina's desktop and play her online game in order to perform as Nina as she engages in an online relationship with Ichi. The story can only move forward if the player performs as Nina, interacting with her computer and logging on to play with Ichi. The mechanics are closely tied to the way in which Nina is engaging in this relationship within the narrative context. The narrative is about their online relationship that unfolds on the computer, so the player engages with a computer in the game in order to perform in such a way that brings them as close to Nina's lived experience as possible.

-

The user-interface of the character's computer allows the player to be an active participant in the narrative without spelling out what actions they should take explicitly. *Cibele* strikes a balance between player autonomy and linear narrative by giving the player these mechanics—by giving the player the ability to move the dialogue forward in a way that directly relates to the natural way in which that conversation is flowing in the narrative context.

Nina does not respond to Ichi with her comment about her own picture until the player opens that picture, for example.

-

So, of course, none of these mechanics would make sense outside of the environment of the game, since they're designed around the ways we interact with our computers. Nina's computer, the main environment of the game, contextualizes these mechanics. Environment is key to building a space within which a player can embody a character, because it serves as a constraint, like the museum Gee mentioned in his bit about Thief.

-

It's also important to note that the player is exploring the environment of Nina's computer in first person, from her perspective. In the beginning of the game, you see a short film clip of Nina sitting at her computer. Then, it cuts to a first person view of her computer screen. This is meant to emphasize that this is the character, and now you are playing as her, sitting in her chair, looking at her computer. That perspective switch right at the start helps situate the player as the performer within the game.

So, to sum all that up, after cutting away the cruft, I came up with mechanics that are contextualized by the narrative, and thus enable the player's performance and embodiment of Nina. They learn how to use her computer and how to play her game, as if they are the Nina in the story.

The space within which the player controls Nina's avatar and cursor in each level serves as the stage upon which the player embodies Nina, similar to the stage in a theatrical performance, in which the actress uses her body as a mechanism for exploring and embodying a character's feelings, motivations and goals.

However, interacting with Nina's computer does not only move the story forward. It also provides the context through which the player comes to understand Nina and her relationship with Ichi. In other words, the stage that is Nina's computer is full of props that help flesh out the characters and story by giving the player enough context to understand the goals and motivations of the characters.

-

Gone Home, another story-focused game, was influential in the use of environment and context building in *Cibele*. I know, I work at Fullbright now but... I didn't work on *Gone Home*. It was a really big influence on *Cibele*, which I started working on before I came to Fullbright.

So, anyways, *Gone Home* tells the story of a young woman coming home from college to an empty house, who the player embodies as they search through the house, finding ephemera that helps them better understand the family, and what they've been up to. In *Gone Home*, the environment of the house itself is the means through which the character understands the story.

The character's motivations and goals are revealed and enabled by this mechanic of searching through this house environment.

The player in *Gone Home* embodies the main character by engaging with the narrative directly through the mechanic—they search, and as they search, they better understand the story of the character's missing family.

Cibele is modelled after this--the player searches through Nina's computer for digital ephemera, embodying Nina by prompting the conversations that unravel her relationship with Ichi. In *Gone Home*, the player embodies by picking up notepads and mix-tapes, whereas in *Cibele*, the player embodies by opening pop-ups and folders.

-

This core mechanic helps the player embody Nina by creating a mental link between the player and Nina's hands, controlling the cursor on the screen, but it also helps the

player understand Nina throughout the game, as her relationship with Ichi grows and changes.

The mechanic helps the player understand Nina on a few different levels. Firstly, through finding ephemera such as blog posts or pictures, as I just mentioned. Secondly, they learn about Nina through her reactions to some of these things in her computer.

-

Each popup event is designed to relate directly to the ensuing conversation that it triggers, reinforcing embodiment through the discernible link between player action and narrative outcome.

An example of a player action with a narrative outcome would be when the player opens an email containing some information about a flight to LA. The player opens the email, and Nina's next question to Ichi is about how he'd feel if they met up.

This changes the player's perception of what Nina said, because the player knows that she just saw the email, and they can infer what she thought about it based on her mention of meeting up with Ichi in their ensuing conversation. The connection is not direct, because she doesn't mention the email explicitly, but there's an implied connection that helps the player understand how important meeting up with Ichi is to Nina. This is a perception that carries throughout the play experience, and that is reinforced and further explored in later conversations where she continues to make notes about flights, and asks Ichi about meeting up.

The standalone ephemera, and the ephemera she reacts to, support each other in order to help the player have a longer-term understanding of Nina as a character as they make connections and sort out what she's thinking based on what they find, and what she says.

Basically, there's a whole different part of the game playing out in the player's head, as they make connections between selfies, emails, and things Nina says to Ichi.

-

The core mechanic is designed to help the player perform as, understand and thus embody Nina in her online relationship with Ichi in an online space; however, this relationship is not constrained to the digital space within which these mechanics function. The game is engaged with both sides of their relationship in mind—the digital, and the physical.

The physical aspect of Nina and Ichi's relationship is shown using short-film segments that bookend each level. The game starts out with the short-film I mentioned earlier, which shows the player who the character is, what she looks like, and then switches into

the first person view of her desktop. After that, each level is opened and closed with similar short-films, that are meant to give some insight into how human bodies play into this story.

With each short-film, the pair get closer to meeting, physically—at the end of act one, Nina sends Ichi a photo of her body, then at the end of act two they're on the phone, as you can see in this screenshot, and finally at the end of act three, they are in the room together in person. Slowly, the barrier between their digital and physical relationship is broken down.

-

While the short-films help the player understand the evolution of Nina and Ichi's physical relationship, they also disrupt player embodiment in order to remind the player of Nina's personhood. It is essential to *Cibele* that the player embody Nina—not control her.

The player always has a sense of self, but they hopefully suspend that sense of self when playing a video game as a character—it is the extent to which they suspend their personhood that must be managed during gameplay. The player will always project their own goals and motivations onto the character to a certain extent, but as a designer, it's my job to remind them of the goals and motivations of the character that they're meant to perform as.

The player needs a limited amount of power over the system in order to embody a character, because embodiment is not passive, it is active, but they also need to be reminded that they are not telling Nina's story—they are simply experiencing it from her perspective.

Therefore, the short-films break agency as a way of reminding the player that they are not Nina, but are playing as her. The player spends most of their play time in first-person, looking at Nina's computer and using it as if they are her. However, it's important that they remember that it's not first-person from their perspective—they're meant to see all this through Nina's eyes. So, showing her human body and presence is an important reminder of that, and of the performative aspect of their play.

-

If the player had power over Nina's choices in her relationship with Ichi, then her individuality as a character would be compromised. *Cibele* is a game meant to help player's perform as one, singular character, and is therefore more concerned with the specificity of the account it relates than it is with giving the player agency over the

narrative. It is more important for the player to walk away with a sense of who Nina is, rather than what they accomplished as a player.

-

Cibele is a vignette of a girl who has a relationship with a boy in an online game—it's not meant to be representative of every player's experience.

The player is not meant to tell their own story, or see themselves in or through *Cibele*; the mechanics are there to help the player embody Nina.

Cibele's goal is to help the player experience a relationship outside of their life experience using game mechanics as a form of embodiment. Of course, I recognize that *Cibele* may help player's explore their own stories, and they may see themselves in the game... that's pretty natural, given the ordinary life story depicted in the game.

People like to try and contextualize the media they consume within their own life experience. But, that's not what the mechanics are designed to support. The mechanics are designed to link the player's hands to her hands, their ears to her ears, and their eyes to her eyes

This is achieved by giving the player an environment within which they embody Nina through listening to her conversation actively, moving it forward by interacting with her computer's user-interface, as if their clicks are Nina's clicks.

In short, I hope that this overview of my design approach to *Cibele* helps you think more about player-character embodiment, and the ability for games to help players see stories from new perspectives. Narratively contextualized mechanics that communicate clear goals and actions are the key.

I hope that it shows you that games have incredible potential to help players perform as characters, and perform stories, that may be very different from anything they've experienced before.