DESIGN ROUTES

CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT
DESIGNS, PRODUCTS &
PRACTICES

Design Routes case study:
Strawberry Thief iPad game by Sophia George

by Amy Twigger Holroyd, May 2015

Summary

In October 2013 Sophia George became the first Games Designer in Residence at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London, in partnership with Abertay University and V&A Dundee.

Sophia developed an iPad game based on a well-known William Morris design, Strawberry Thief, which is on display in the museum's British Galleries. The non-competitive game enables players to explore this iconic pattern as it builds in three levels from pencil sketch to the final multi-coloured and textured design.

This case study is based on an interview with Sophia George and a number of secondary sources. Quotes are from this interview, and images are courtesy of Sophia George, unless otherwise attributed.

Strawberry Thief game, level 2.

Background: Sophia George and the residency

Sophia George studied BA Games Art and Design at Norwich University of the Arts, graduating in 2011. In the same year she collaborated with other students to create Tick Tock Toys, a prototype puzzle game for iPhone and iPad. The game won the 'Dare to be Digital' award in 2011 and the BAFTA 'Ones to Watch' award in 2012.

Sophia went on to study MProf in Games Development at Abertay University in Dundee, and subsequently launched a company with her Dare to be Digital collaborators, aided by the university's Prototype Fund. The company, Swallowtail Games, developed Tick Tock Toys into a full game. It was released in February 2013 and achieved over 100,000 downloads in its first week.[1]

In 2013 Sophia was selected from almost 100 applicants for the role of Games Designer in Residence at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A).[2] The project was a partnership between the V&A, the V&A at Dundee and the University of Abertay, and organised in collaboration with The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment. Sophia undertook research at the V&A from October 2013 to March 2014; she then moved to Abertay University, where she worked with a small team to develop the game for release.[3]

As the museum's curator of digital design, Louise Shannon, explained, Sophia was given free reign on the game she would develop during the residency: 'Sophia will look at the objects and talk to the curators to find things that resonate. It would be great if she made a game that relates to the V&A.'[4]

Background: the Strawberry Thief design by William Morris

William Morris (1834-96) was an English textile designer, artist, writer, and socialist; as a leader of the Arts & Crafts movement he was committed to the revitalisation of traditional crafts. Strawberry Thief is one of his best-known designs, originally produced as a printed cotton furnishing fabric using the indigo discharge method, a technique used for many centuries, mostly in the East. According to the V&A, 'Morris admired the depth of colour and crispness of detail that it produced'.[5] The pattern, created in 1883, was inspired by the thrushes which he saw stealing strawberries in the garden of his home, Kelmscott Manor.

Although the design was expensive to produce, it became popular; it is still available from Morris & Co. as a fabric and wallpaper today. Liberty sell a scaled-down version of the design printed on Tana lawn for dressmaking, while the pattern has also been used on Dr Martens boots and a range of products – from tea towels to notebooks – available from the V&A shop.

Left: Strawberry Thief (furnishing fabric), William Morris, 1883. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Right: Strawberry Thief patterned boot, courtesy of Dr Martens.

Development

Sophia explains that she wanted the game she developed 'to offer a new and exciting interpretation of the V&A collections, as well as encouraging visitor participation and learning from the Britain 1500-1900 galleries.'[6] She used these galleries as a starting point and quickly became interested in the William Morris textiles displayed there. As Sophia described, while spending time in the galleries she observed children visiting the museum and felt there was scope to engage them more directly with the works on display:

'I'd often be in the British Galleries and see really small children walking around, and their teachers saying, this is important design history. I think the kids just look up at it and don't really appreciate the work that went into it, and how amazing it looked. Because it wasn't… these young children, they grow up with interactive touch screens, and things bouncing around on their screens. When they just see a bit of wallpaper or fabric on a wall, they don't really appreciate it!'

As she went on to describe, the Strawberry Thief pattern caught her attention early on:

'I just thought that the Strawberry Thief pattern in particular had some game elements in there already – the title itself could easily be a title of a game, there's an action there, there are characters, there are items, like flowers and strawberries. And it was just so beautiful.'

Sophia created a rough prototype for a simple 'early arcade-style game' based on the design, in which the player guides the Strawberry Thief bird around the pattern, collecting strawberries.[7] She shared this prototype at an open studio session at the V&A Museum of Childhood in January 2014, which gave her valuable feedback from over 60 children. Although Sophia had been developing another game idea, in which the player would explore a 3-d world inhabited by animals from various William Morris designs, she chose to continue with the Strawberry Thief concept based on the positive response she had received.

Sophia George's sketches from the original Strawberry Thief design.

Having completed her six months at the V&A in March 2014, Sophia spent the summer at Abertay University working on the development of the game in collaboration with Erin Michno from games company Quartic Llama, who programmed the game; Abertay students Ellen Brown and Cameron Moore, who worked on art and animation; and Neil Cullen from the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, who created the soundtrack.[8]

Left: Cotton Damask (design), William Morris, c. 1880s. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Right: Adding colour to the Strawberry Thief pattern.

Before starting work on the technical development, Sophia took the opportunity to refine the concept of the game, as she described on her blog:

'In the British Galleries at the V&A, there is a wonderful display showing a cutting of a William Morris wallpaper next to a sketch which has been partially coloured. I thought it would be a fun idea to have the player bring colour to Morris sketches by using the birds from the Strawberry Thief pattern. I feel this would make for a more creative and collaborative experience than my first Strawberry Thief iteration.'[9]

After months of development, the finished game was launched on 24 October 2014. In a blog post for the V&A website, Sophia described it as follows:

'In the game, you have to use the Strawberry Thief bird to collect strawberries which enable you to paint. First you start with a blank piece of paper where you sketch the pattern. Once the pattern is drawn out, you can start to add some basic colours to the piece. Finally, richer colours and texture are added to finish the design. To control the bird's movement, you simply draw lines on the touchscreen and the bird will follow your path.'[10]

The three levels of the Strawberry Thief game: sketching the pattern, then adding two layers of colour and texture.

Considerations

It is evident that Sophia gave a great deal of thought to the concept behind the Strawberry Thief game, and the ways in which it could link to the original design and the ideas of William Morris. Of course, the most obvious link is aesthetic: the game is entirely based on this single design, and allows the player to explore and enjoy the 'details and beauty of the original pattern'.[11] As Sophia explained, the pattern can be quite overwhelming at first viewing; she suggested that by building it up in stages, the game 'eases you into the complexity of it'. This development happens in terms of colour, but also scale, with the view zooming out at each stage to reveal more of the repeating pattern. These subtle factors, along with the animated elements of the design, help the player to see, and appreciate, the detail of the original pattern. 'I wanted to bring it to life – we had to work really hard to get a lot of the animations in, right at the end. I thought that would be important, to show the little birds looking around, and the flowers swaying in the wind.'

Sophia spoke about taking inspiration from the ethos of Morris' ideas: that art and design should be enjoyed by everyone, rather than a particular segment of society. She feels the same way about computer games: 'It's very important to me that families play games together, that games are designed for older people to engage with technology, and that girls and young women see game art, design and

programming as real career options for them.'[12] In order to appeal to these under-served groups, a different type of gameplay is appropriate: 'With Strawberry Thief I wanted to show that games are an incredibly artistic, creative medium that can excite, inspire and even relax the player, quite unlike the stereotype of games just involving fast-paced violence.'[13] Therefore, Sophia used Morris' thinking to influence the nature of the game, making it easy to play and relaxing, rather than competitive.

Start page and visual instructions.

Sophia also described being inspired by the ideas behind the V&A itself, including the aspiration to show how objects are made. This concept influenced another element of the gameplay: gradually building up the design, from sketch to full colour. As she explained, in the original prototype the game was 'sitting on top of' the pattern; the revised concept involves the player in the creation of the pattern itself. Interestingly, the game does not try to mimic the actual process by which a pattern such as Strawberry Thief would be printed – involving, as Sophia explained, as many as 30 different layers of colour. In the game, the concept is simplified and translated into just three stages in order to be communicated effectively.

Integrating all of these ideas into the development of the Strawberry Thief game required Sophia to take an unconventional approach to design. She explained that she usually starts with gameplay mechanics, and then develops visuals. In contrast, the visual for this game was already made; Sophia had to design ways to 'put "game-iness" into the pattern, to make it interactive'. This required her to design differently: to put the existing pattern, rather than her own ideas, first. Although this was a challenge, she found it to be a rewarding process. In doing so, she created a pleasingly unconventional type of game, based on creation rather than destruction: 'In a lot of games, you're more getting rid of things, destroying them … but this, you're building stuff, rather than getting rid of it.'

Feedback and future ideas

The Strawberry Thief game received positive feedback; Sophia reported receiving emails from fans of William Morris, saying that this was the first game they had ever played. It also gained a positive response from art and culture organisations and from the V&A itself, with the director of V&A Dundee commenting: 'It's wonderful to

see the way in which Sophia has responded to the V&A's historic design holdings in creating her Strawberry Thief game. Taking inspiration from design of the past to produce new innovative design is at the heart of the V&A.'[14]

Sophia explained that the experience had changed her approach to games: rather than designing what she described as 'competitive, traditional games', she intends to explore alternative ideas, creating games targeted at an older female audience. There is great scope for creating games based on pre-existing art and design imagery; Sophia could only think of one other example, a game based on the work of Kandinsky.[15] Professor Louis Natanson, Head of School of Arts, Media and Computer Games at Abertay University, suggests that 'Strawberry Thief gives us a glimpse of the potential for games to explore new ways of interpreting and exhibiting the work of famous artists'.[16] Sophia is already exploring ideas for a game based on the artwork of Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, which she suggested could be treated in a similar way to the Strawberry Thief design. As she explained, this approach could be applied to other patterns, such as traditional fabric designs: 'if there's a process involved, if there's a thing to make, I always think there can be a game in there'.

Reflections

Although the majority of the designs we are focusing on within the Design Routes project are linked to communities, rather than named individuals, William Morris' designs are arguably sufficiently well known and enduring to be considered 'culturally significant'. Thus, Sophia George's Strawberry Thief game can be seen as an example of a culturally significant pattern being revitalised through design. This approach is widespread within the field of textile design, where traditional patterns and motifs are commonly adapted for use within contemporary fashion and interior fabrics.

The translation of such a pattern into an entirely new sphere – a computer game – represents an unusual and innovative version of this category of revitalisation. The Strawberry Thief example suggests an option for future revitalisation initiatives: that traditional patterns could be translated into what is, after all, an incredibly popular contemporary medium. Without further examples to draw on, we can only wonder whether 'game-ification' might be a transferable and productive strategy for increasing awareness and appreciation of traditional and place-related patterns, and the processes which are used to create them. Sophia clearly took great care over the look and feel over the game, so that playing it is a relaxing and pleasurable (rather than dutifully educational) experience; the success of the revitalisation hinges on the sensitivity of her design, and – as with all strategies – it is easy to imagine much less successful versions of the same basic concept. However, the translation of a pattern into a game certainly seems to be a more dynamic and interactive approach than, for example, simply applying the design onto the surfaces of more and more product types.

Meanwhile, the case study may help us to reflect on the significance of more familiar uses of culturally significant designs, such as within the textile industry. When examining work in this area, it can be difficult to draw a line between initiatives which revitalise traditional patterns, those which take inspiration from them, and those which could be criticised for cultural appropriation. In this project, we can see Sophia considering two alternative concepts: the 3-d game, in which the player would explore a world populated by animals lifted from William Morris designs, and the Strawberry Thief game, in which the player experiences the development of the pattern itself. The first of these concepts takes inspiration from Morris' work; the second revitalises it. The distinction between these strategies – and the differences in the attitude of the designer required for each one – may be useful in examining, and categorising, other initiatives within this field.

[1] George, S. (undated). *Bio* [online]. Available: http://www.sophiageorge.com/bio.html (accessed 21 May 2015)

[2] Clark, N. (2013). 'V&A museum appoints first ever 'game designer in residence' to add virtual dimension to its collection', *The Independent*, 30 May. Available:

[2] Clark, N. (2013). 'V&A museum appoints first ever 'game designer in residence' to add virtual dimension to its collection', *The Independent*, 30 May. Available: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/va-museum-appoints-first-ever-game-designer-in-residence-to-add-virtual-dimension-to-its-collection-8638393.html (accessed 21 May 2015)

[3] Victoria & Albert Museum (2014). *Games designer in residence: Sophia George* [online]. Available: http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/game-designer-resident-sophia-george/ (accessed 21 May 2015)

[4] Clark, op cit.

[5] Victoria & Albert Museum (undated). *Strawberry Thief* [online]. Available: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78889/strawberry-thief-furnishing-fabric-morris-william/ (accessed 21 May 2015)

[6] Victoria & Albert Museum, *Games designer in residence,* op cit.

[7] George, S. (2013). *Strawberry Thief game development progress,* 22 November [online]. Available: http://www.sophiageorge.com/home/strawberry-thief-game-development-progress (accessed 21 May 2015)

[8] George, S. (2014). *The Strawberry Thief iPad game,* 24 October [online]. Available: http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/artists-residence-va/the-strawberry-thief-ipad-game (accessed 21 May 2015)

[9] George, S. (2014). *Game production at Abertay University,* 20 May [online]. Available: http://www.sophiageorge.com/home/game-production-at-abertay-univeristy (accessed 21 May 2015)

[10] George, *The Strawberry Thief iPad game,* op cit.

[11] ibid.

[12] Sherwin, A. (2014). 'V&A's game designer in residence releases game based on William Morris' Strawberry Thief', *The Independent*, 24 October. Available:

http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/vas-game-designer-in-residence-releases-game-based-on-william-morris-strawberry-thief-9814456.html (accessed 21 May 2015)

[13] ibid.

[14] ibid.

[15] The game, 'The Cat That Got The Milk', is available to download at http://www.thebuttonexperiment.com/TheCatThatGotTheMilk/

[16] Abertay University (2014). *V&A game designer launches William Morris game for iPad,* 24 October [online]. Available: http://www.abertay.ac.uk/about/news/newsarchive/2014/name,18851,en.html (accessed 21 May 2015)