A Close Playing: *Flight to Freedom*

*Flight to Freedom* is part of the series of educational games called *Mission US*, which includes titles about the American Revolution, immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, and the Dust Bowl. In *Flight to Freedom*, the student plays the character of Lucy King, a fourteen-year-old on the King Plantation in Kentucky, who must make decisions about whether to follow orders or resist authority. Throughout the game, Lucy earns badges for building alliances, knowing when to play it safe, and for resistance and sabotage, such as when she directly disobeys orders. (Badges can also be earned for focusing on family, earning the trust of someone, or even relying on prayer in difficult times.) In five parts, plus a prologue and epilogue, the game guides the player through a series of tasks.

On the home screen, where the player can choose to start a new game or continue a previous one, we see our heroine in silhouette overlooking the horizon with the plantation set against the background of an old map. “Long John,” an old chain gang work song recorded by Alan Lomax, whose lyrics tell of a man called “Long John” who runs off and is “long gone / like a turkey through the corn,” plays in the background, foreshadowing Lucy’s flight from the plantation.¹

In the prologue, we hear Lucy’s voice as she sets the scene of her daily life. We are told of the types of chores she must do, of the

mean overseer Mr. Otis, and of the various strategies that some slaves employ, like working slow, breaking things, or, alternatively, just trying to get along. In a poignant moment, Lucy tells the spectator—or “spect-actor,” to use Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal’s term—that her mother has warned her that having just turned fourteen, things will now become even more difficult for her. This may be an oblique reference to rape, but Lucy merely wonders how things can possibly get worse. At the end of the prologue, we see Lucy in the center of the frame, and the player is given instructions on how to play the game by collecting “Journey Badges” for the decisions made while playing as Lucy.

The game’s perspective is fluid. Although the home screen and prologue show Lucy, the game most often operates in the first person POV: the viewer sees close-ups of the people with whom Lucy converses, as if looking through her eyes, with text boxes at the bottom of the screen where a response must be selected. Sites from around the plantation, such as the laundry trough where she must wash clothes, are displayed at an angle that suggests her viewpoint. Details like birds and field hands singing offscreen lend to the game’s realism. Yet, at other points, we see Lucy in the frame in the third person perspective, sometimes with voice-over narration relaying her thoughts. And at other points, the narrative gives instructions using the second person pronoun “you” to address the player, putting him or her in Lucy’s place. The game thus toggles between the first person, second person, and third person perspective. The player’s ability to feel as if they embody Lucy’s role is restricted by this continual shifting of perspective.

Hampering the player’s control of Lucy, interactivity in the game is limited. In a few rare moments peppered throughout the game, Lucy is given a piece of information, but the player is only

2. This term has previously been applied to videogames in Holger Pötzsch, “Playing Games with Shklovsky, Brecht, and Boal: Ostranenie, V-Effect, and Spect-actors as Analytical Tools for Game Studies,” Game Studies 17, no. 2 (December 2017), http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/potzsch.
given one possible option to advance the narrative. This is first seen at the start of the game: “You wake up in your quarters. You hear your mother talking to another slave outside.” Only a single option is given to the player, to click a box marked “Okay.” This convention of highlighting the illusion of choice, wherein a button must be clicked but the player is only given one option, such as “Okay” or “Continue,” is employed a few times throughout gameplay, foreshadowing one of the most interesting moments in the game, which occurs at the climax. Sometimes in the dialog box, too, only a single option is given for how to respond, but more often, the player has three or four choices from which to select.

The first chapter opens on a shot of the interior of a slave cabin as two voices are heard discussing the punishment of a slave called Henry, who was recently whipped. Henry expresses his desire to escape. The other voice belongs to Lucy’s mother, and the player’s first choice in the game is whether to continue eavesdropping on their conversation or go outside to join them. Here we learn (provided that certain options are selected to continue the conversation) that Henry has been falsely accused of destroying the “hemp break,” a tool that he says was old and falling apart, and that he has been unfairly whipped for an act he didn’t commit. This gives the player insight into the overseer’s cruelty and the types of punishment that might be meted out to enslaved people.

In part one, Lucy navigates a day on the plantation, and she has options to commit acts of subterfuge and protect her fellows. The playable character (PC) is given a set of tasks, including both the chores she is given by the overseer, like feeding livestock and stocking the woodshed, and goals her mother gives her, including checking on her little brother in the yard and going to the creek to gather comfrey root to treat Henry’s wounds from his recent flogging. She must do the latter without arousing the suspicions of the overseer. When he confronts her, the player has to select from dialogue choices at the bottom of the screen. This is a convention that will be repeated throughout the game as Lucy is accosted by various authority figures. She is often given a choice of staying si-
lent, telling the truth, or lying, which is made clear to the player by the word “lie” in all caps and brackets prefacing the snippet of dialogue in the selection box. During this first level, which depicts Lucy’s day on the plantation, she must traverse various dangers, including avoiding the ire of the overseer and being deferential to Ms. Sarah, the master’s daughter, who clearly used to be Lucy’s playmate but who now draws a stark distinction in their relationship as mistress and slave. At the same time, Lucy must perform acts of solidarity, such as gathering herbs to treat Henry’s wounds, attending to the needs of her own family, advising her brother to continue his study of letters without getting caught, and passing information from the big house to those in the field.

Most fascinatingly, Lucy is given a choice between performing her tasks well and doing a shabby job, which illustrates that poor workmanship was one method of resistance employed by the enslaved, a fact that Lucy tells the player outright in the prologue. In these moments, the player must choose between options given, similar to how, when Lucy is engaged in dialogue, the player must select among a few possible responses. In these instances, however, the player selects Lucy’s choice for how to proceed by clicking through a range of options, including taking one’s time or rushing a task. My favorite moment from this first chapter occurs in Lucy’s encounter with the passive-aggressive Ms. Sarah. Lucy can earn a persuasion badge for convincing Ms. Sarah to tell the overseer to let her out of her afternoon chores so that she can alter a dress for her, but she can also earn a resistance badge by purposefully tailoring the dress to be too low cut!

In comparison to the other games I’ve presented thus far, Mission US: Flight to Freedom provides a more nuanced portrait of the dangers of resistance. Being too obstinate on the plantation in the first level results in punishment with direct consequences that affect the subsequent gameplay. Talking back to the overseer seems to have the most direct effect, and I found that it was even possible to fail; if Mr. Otis is too angered by Lucy’s retorts and slow working, she is sold South immediately, and the game ends.
Whether or not Lucy has played the opening chapter in a resistive manner, the PC is accused of purposefully setting the smokehouse on fire, and in part two she escapes in the company of Henry, the punished slave we met at the game’s opening and a habitual runaway, who we find out over the course of part one is going to be sold at auction. As the pair make the journey northward to cross the Ohio River in the next chapter, options allow them to accumulate forged road passes and steal food from gardens. They must use connections on other plantations and the supportive channels of the Underground Railroad, making choices regarding where to hide and who can be trusted. The player must keep an eye on the food supply and find safe locations to rest to safeguard the characters’ health.

The outcome here will differ depending on how the first level was played. On one playthrough, the overseer punishes Lucy’s family by revoking a weekend pass to see her father on a neighboring plantation, which has an adverse effect later, when a pass allows Lucy to elude detection as she makes her escape. During this encounter, the player can show the pass given to her by her mother to three white men who accost the fleeing slaves. As they themselves are illiterate, the ruse works, and Lucy is free to continue the journey—unless, of course, the player back-sassed the overseer so much that her pass was revoked, in which case she will not have it in her satchel. The player is therefore made to feel the consequences of acts of resistance that are too direct, even as they are rewarded with the accumulation of badges for others.

When I first played *Flight to Freedom* several years ago, I took a day to get past the second level of this simple game—I got caught by the slave catchers or died of starvation and exposure every time I tried to escape until I was, at last, willing to abandon my traveling companion and accept a wagon ride north alone. I still haven’t found a way for Henry and Lucy to remain together. On a subsequent playthrough, a forged pass obtained from Lucy’s uncle at a neighboring plantation was detected by slavecatchers, and Lucy and Henry separated in fleeing them. I was able to get passage
across the river by asking some men of color to hide me in their boat, stressing the important role that solidarity and cooperation played in slave resistance. The fact that Lucy and Henry must separate no matter how well the player navigates the escape challenge of part two demonstrates how the game sets insurmountable limits for the player. As these first two parts depict slavery and resistance in the most detail, I have focused on them, and I’ll just sketch out more briefly the other chapters before drawing some conclusions on how the game’s mechanics support its goals.

In part three, the player performs a series of tasks in Ohio, where Lucy is disguised as a relative of a free family of color that operates a laundry service. Although Lucy is purportedly free in Ohio, she still must evade recapture. Trying not to raise the suspicions of the many slavecatchers in the area is one of her objectives. She also becomes close to several people working on the cause of abolition and attempts to free her family members left behind on the King plantation. When picking up laundry from the local hotel, Lucy encounters a slavecatcher and accidentally comes away with an affidavit for the recapture of Henry. Discovering that he also has made it to Ohio, she can collaborate with abolitionists and free men to intercede when slavecatchers would attempt to recapture Henry and return him South. By picking up the affidavit along with the laundry, the player intervenes, ensuring that the slavecatchers are unable to make a legal arrest.

In part four, the player strengthens Lucy’s connection to abolitionists and other freedom fighters who help to facilitate the escape of her brother, Jonah, who was left behind on the King Plantation. A brief interlude provides Jonah’s narrative, as word is sent south to describe what action he should take, including garnering safe passage on a ship while dressed in the guise of a slave girl and accompanied by a white woman (presumably, one working with the Underground Railroad). But, Lucy’s reunion with her brother is bittersweet, as it comes with the knowledge that their mother has been sold further south, to New Orleans, and out of the range of their network’s allies.
In part five, the man posing as Lucy’s uncle is illegally kidnapped (à la Solomon Northrup) by slavecatchers, and Lucy and Jonah help to gather evidence to free him in a court of law. They go to the site of his arrest to pick up the fragments of his free papers, which the corrupt slavecatchers have torn to shreds, and enlist white witnesses to testify that Morgan was a free man. This part of the quest works subtly to educate the player about the limits and corruption of the legal system: no women can be put forward as potential witnesses, the player is instructed that the opinions of black men will be worthless in court, and the testimony of known abolitionists will also bear less weight at trial. In this last chapter, we see how pivotal a role was played by the Fugitive Slave Act, as some white people are unwilling to testify and even to intervene when they see wrongdoing occurring for fear that they might be arrested.

This game has been criticized for packaging slavery as fodder for educational entertainment, but I would emphasize two points here. First, following Lucy’s quest, lessons are imparted to the player about prohibitions on slave literacy, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the abolitionist movement, which is actually treated with some nuance. For example, the twenty-third president of the United States Benjamin Harrison makes a brief appearance at an abolitionist meeting to discuss “colonization” as an option (meaning, returning blacks to Africa), and he presents his political position that slavery must be stopped from spreading further but not abolished completely. The player is invited to draw conclusions about the inadequacy of such positions, just as he or she is encouraged to find fault with the legal system depicted in part five.

Second, I would assert that the game only becomes fun if the player chooses the most subversive options available to Lucy. The first level, in which Lucy merely does her chores on the plantation, with the player having to continually click through a series

of tasks if she doesn’t want to arouse the suspicions of the overseer, is fairly dull in its approximation of work. It’s only when the player chooses to steal eggs from the chicken coop, purposefully work slowly and sabotage chores, including leaving the smokehouse unlocked for it to be pilfered, that the game becomes exciting. Naturally, this brand of entertainment seems perverse, but the game is not without educational merits as it presents the player with difficult choices that will have in-game consequences.

At the end of part five, however, no matter how successful Lucy was in facilitating a successful trial for her adoptive uncle and encouraging others to flee to Canada, she is caught by a slavecatcher and sold at auction. This is the official end of the game, although there is an epilogue in which the player’s accumulated badges determine the outcome of the sale and the character’s future. Although the game officially ends on a tragic note, with Lucy being sold, there are a range of positive outcomes that can be attained by playing the earned badges in the epilogue to construct a conclusion for Lucy’s story. In one version, Lucy is sold south and lives out the rest of her days hoping to reunite with her mother. In another, she is sold west and finds solace by starting a family with a man called Joseph. Some badges allow her to escape to Canada and rejoin old friends. In one option, the player can use a badge based on the relationship built with Henry and marry him in Canada. Or, if the player has continued to learn to read throughout the quest, they can play the earned literacy badge to allow Lucy to find employment as a white abolitionist’s assistant and eventually meet Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. A resistance badge, if attained by performing direct acts of subterfuge throughout the game, can be played to join with Harriet Tubman and return to Maryland as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. But despite the options available in the epilogue, the game’s official ending on the auction block performs its most pivotal work.

As previously stated, the game’s oscillation between the third, second, and first person may interrupt the player’s full absorption
in the narrative. As Lucy stands on the auction block, we plainly see her full figure, from a three-fourths angle, in the frame. Just before this, however, the player saw through her eyes as she was sitting with others, awaiting auction in a kind of pen or corral. The transition in this moment from the first person to third person as Lucy steps on to the auction block might serve to peel the player back to reality, to remind the child of his or her separation from the historical character of this fugitive slave. But the mechanics of the game had already begun to do this work before the perspective shift by defying expectations of how a game should work.

Whereas, for most of the game, the player is given choices to determine the course of action that Lucy will take, clicking from a pair or a set of options to designate a selection, such as “steal vegetables from a garden” or “go hungry,” in this penultimate sequence where Lucy awaits her auction, only one button is provided, and clicking it merely brings up more text with the same button, which reads, “Okay.” The same image is shown, from Lucy’s point of view, of the other enslaved people waiting in the corral with her, as different descriptions appear in succession. For each new text block superimposed over the static image of a family embracing, the player has but one option: to click “Okay.” This part of the narrative reads as such:

You are put into the pen where the slaves wait to be sold. [Okay]

There are guards everywhere. [Okay]

Across from you a woman sobs softly. [Okay]

Outside the auctioneer does his job. [Okay]

You never dreamed that you would be a slave again. [Okay]

As the player clicks the only available option, he or she hears the auctioneer splitting up a family. Despite the flatness of the animation, the game’s architecture is profoundly affecting. While it may seem strange material for a game, or an odd medium in which to discuss a subject as serious as slavery, this educational instrument
earns its badge as an interactive learning experience that handles the subject matter fairly delicately. However, somewhat ironically, this is achieved by the limits set on its own interactivity, especially in this moment, when it is mandated that the player click the only available option.

To my mind, the resistive potential of such “games” exists in moments like these, when they are less like games and more like an experience in line with the subject matter: when they exclude options, when they restrict the player’s access, or—as in these frames where the player’s only available option is to keep clicking “Okay”—when they give an illusion of choice that is not a choice at all. These are the moments when the game may seem to approximate the experience of slavery in digital form, but, more importantly, the game’s mechanisms reinforce the separation of the player and the historical enslaved person, foreclosing the possibility that the historical slave can be occupied as an entertainment commodity.

In the next few sections, we will look at mainstream console videogames that aim at an older demographic and therefore incorporate more violent modes of resistance into the playable character’s arsenal.