



What I was trying to do with *Passage*

Your interpretation of the game is more important than my intentions. **Please** play the game before you read this.

A tiny bit of background about me: I turn 30 tomorrow. A close friend from our neighborhood died last month. Yep, I've been thinking about life and death a lot lately. This game is an expression of my recent thoughts and feelings.

Passage is meant to be a [memento mori](#) game. It presents an entire life, from young adulthood through old age and death, in the span of five minutes. Of course, it's a *game*, not a painting or a film, so the choices that you make as the player are crucial. There's no "right" way to play *Passage*, just as there's no right way to interpret it. However, I had specific intentions for the various mechanics and features that I included. You've probably figured most of these out already, but I wanted to put forth a few explanations for anyone who is interested.

The "long" screen, of course, represents a lifetime. As you age in the game, your character moves closer and closer to the right edge of the screen. Upon reaching that edge, your character dies.

The early stages of life seem to be all about the future: what you're going to do when you grow up, who you're going to marry, and all the things you're going to do someday. At the beginning of the game, you can see your entire life out in front of you, albeit in rather hazy form, but you can't see anything that's behind you, because you have no past to speak of. As you approach middle age, you can still see quite a bit out in front of you, but you can also see what you've left behind---a kind of store of memories that builds up. At its midpoint, life is really about both the future (what you're going to do when you retire) and the past (telling stories about your youth). Toward the end of life, there really is no future left, so life is more about the past, and you can see a lifetime of memories behind you.

So what can you do with your life? In *Passage*, one possibility is to search for and open treasure chests. Of course, not every pursuit leads to a reward---most of them are empty. Over time, though, you can learn which pursuits are likely to

be rewarding. Each treasure chest is marked with a sequence of gems on its front, and this sequence indicates whether the chest contains a reward. During your lifetime, you can learn to read these sequences and only spend your precious time opening worthwhile treasure chests.

Passage represents life's challenges with a maze. The screen geometry only allows you to view a narrow slice of this maze at any given moment. You can see quite a distance out in front of you (and, later in life, behind you), but you can't see anything to the north or south. You may see a reward up ahead but not be able to see a clear path to it. In fact, after a bit of exploration, you may discover that a seemingly-nearby reward is in fact unreachable. As you go deeper into the maze to the south, the path becomes more convoluted, though an obstacle-free route is always available to the north. However, treasure chests are more and more common as you go deeper into the maze. You can spend your time in pursuit of these hard-to-reach rewards, or you can explore and enjoy the scenery that unfolds before you to the east. As you grow older, your view of the territory in front of you shrinks, and navigating new areas in life's maze becomes more difficult.

The world in *Passage* is infinite. As you head east, you'll find an endless expanse of constantly-changing landscape, and you are rewarded for your exploration. However, even if you spent your entire lifetime exploring, you'd never have a chance to see everything that there is to see. If you spend your time plumbing the depths of the maze, however, you will only see a tiny fraction of the scenery.

You have the option of joining up with a spouse on your journey (if you missed her, she's in the far north near your original starting point). Once you team up with her, however, you must travel together, and you are not as agile as you were when you were single. Some rewards deep in the maze will no longer be reachable if you're with your spouse. You simply cannot fit through narrow paths when you are walking side-by-side. In fact, you will sometimes find yourself standing right next to a treasure chest, yet unable to open it, and the only thing standing in your way will be your spouse. On the other hand, exploring the world is more enjoyable with a companion, and you'll reap a larger reward from exploration if she's along. When she dies, though, your grief will slow you down considerably.

As I said before, there's no right way to play this game. Part of the goal, in fact, is to get you to reflect on the choices that you make while playing. The rewards in *Passage* come in the form of points added to your score, and you have two options for scoring points: treasure chests, which give 100 points for each hit, and exploration, which gives double-points if you walk with your spouse. There's a pretty tight balance between these two options---there's no optimal choice between the two.

Yes, you could spend your five minutes trying to accumulate as many points as possible, but in the end, death is still coming for you. Your score looks pretty meaningless hovering there above your little tombstone. This treatment of character

death stands in stark contrast with the way death is commonly used in video games (where you die countless times during a given game and emerge victorious---and still alive---in the end). *Passage* is a game in which you die only once, at the very end, and you are powerless to stave off this inevitable loss.

Speaking of that little, pixelated tombstone: that's the one game reference that I slipped in there. A few weeks before I started working on *Passage*, I played a fair bit of the super-addictive (and super-pixelated) [Crypts Of Despair](#). I was struck by the little tombstone that appears when your character dies:



It's so shocking when it happens---snap!---you instantly turn into a tombstone. Here one minute, gone the next, as they say.

And if you're wondering, I do have light hair and blue eyes, and my spouse does have red hair and green eyes. When I was younger, I wore a green shirt, blue pants, and black shoes. Now my favorite outfit involves white shoes, brown pants, and a black shirt. My spouse used to have a light-green dress that was her favorite. And yes, my hair line is starting to creep back. That's me and my spouse in there, distilled down to 8x8 pixels each.

And no, I haven't shown the game to her yet. I'm still waiting for the right moment.



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