

## **Working Title: Shrine in the Woods**

### **1. Intro/Concept**

This project is to use software, narrative design, and imagery to create an interactive narrative. The goal is to explore ways narrative design, presentation, and architecture of choice can make a person feel more immersed in the story. It is to make people develop empathy and feel ownership of a narrative by giving them the tools and guidance to have them construct it, in part, themselves.

In this piece, which manifests as a software application, the user (or reader) plays the part of a supernatural guardian overseeing a nearby village. They are approached by villagers with requests for help and offered a selection of responses to those requests. Through these interactions, the user sees a tale unfold about the growth of a village, and contextualizes their own place in that story. Through the combined work of visuals, narrative, and choice-based interaction, the piece presents a dichotomy between community involvement and abandonment, encouraging the user to promote growth and involvement with their constituents. The user pieces their story together through the decisions they make,

Shrine in the Woods builds on a tradition of exploring the possibilities of story experience through technology in games (and interactive narrative.) The methods by which designers have opted to make a story feel immersive can be accessed in many different narrative presentations and methods of interaction, and I have chosen to use a subset of these in this piece. Namely: through the “illusion of choice” made possible by a state-driven narrative, a story that requires the user to develop empathy to build and progress, a minimalistic premise, and audio/visuals that communicate the user’s progression and setting in the story.

## 2. Media & Methods

### 2a. Description:

This project is an interactive narrative piece about a supernatural guardian and their relationship with a nearby village. The story takes place at the guardian's shrine in the woods. The user plays the guardian, and views the world through their stationary, limited perspective. Throughout the narrative, the guardian is approached by their constituents with requests for help. The villagers' requests range from small personal requests to larger, community-scale problems.

The user is given a set of options with which to respond to these requests. Sometimes available responses contain direct, actionable advice; other times, they are more abstract. In both cases, the outcome of the responses is nondeterministic. Rather than operating as an established set of branching paths between choices, (as a "choose your own adventure" story,) the narrative is built around a set of state variables. These state variables are numbers that, in the program, represent a set of relationships between the guardian, the villagers, and the world around them. They are added to and subtracted from depending on choices the user makes. Villager interactions occur as individual story events, predicated by these numbers and pulled out of a virtual hat. Selecting the same response to the same event at different times may produce different outcomes, depending on the values of the variables at the time of choosing.

After the user responds to a villager's request, the villager departs, leaving behind an offering at the shrine. The nature of these offerings vary with the type of request given. Each type of offering is ascribed a musical sound, to play while it is onscreen. Through these, the user's choice is reflected to them visually and aurally. As more objects are placed onscreen, the scene gets brighter. The Guardian's goal is, through their interactions with the village, to influence the positive growth and survival of the community. If they make choices that have a negative impact, offerings are taken away, and the screen darkens and grows silent. Requests will slow in frequency, and eventually stop coming.

The story ends either when the guardian has had a sufficient impact on the community, or lost the faith of the people altogether. The scene brightens until it is no longer legible, or darkens until it is totally empty. Thematically, the story presents this as a contrast between liveliness and abandonment. As the user becomes more involved in the community, the setting becomes brighter, busier, and more musical. As they lose faith, it gets darker, emptier, and eventually stills. Without the faith of its constituents, guardian statue is rendered once again an inanimate object.

Through interactions as the guardian, the user communicates, learns, and grows with their people. Their understanding of and progression through the world is driven by their choices. They are guided, by this design, towards building a sense of empathy with the narrative and characters.

## 2b. Technical Structure:

Since this is a software application, there is a background system of variables that need to be defined, both operably and for further discussion in this proposal. The following defines a set of variables, along with their interactive qualities and relevance in the narrative:

**Relationships:** Narrative events (villagers approaching the Guardian with requests) affect and are affected by three world states:

1. *Relationship with outsiders:*

The villagers' relationship with other communities and foreigners.

2. *Relationships between members of the community:*

Interpersonal relationships between members of the village and their general emotional well-being.

3. *Relationship with their environment:*

Encompasses any "environmental" interactions that villagers may have; weather, foraging/farming, sickness, etc.

These states are altered in the background after the user responds to villager requests. Relationship metrics range (arbitrarily) as integers from 0 to 100. At the time of this proposal, these states are made to represent three sets of overarching interactions that the villagers can have with their world. They can, as needed, be made more granular in the future.

**Events:** Narrative events manifest as villager requests. They are produced by an event manager after every round of interaction (refer to section 2c for an example round.) Each event has a description, a set of prerequisites, and a set of response options. Each response option contains a set of effect values that will be applied to Relationships, should it be selected.

**Offerings:** Images drawn onscreen after the user selects an Event response option. At set intervals as relationship values decrease, they may disappear (or fade/decay.) Should the narrative involve sound, each may be assigned a sound to play at placement, or set intervals as relationship values increase.

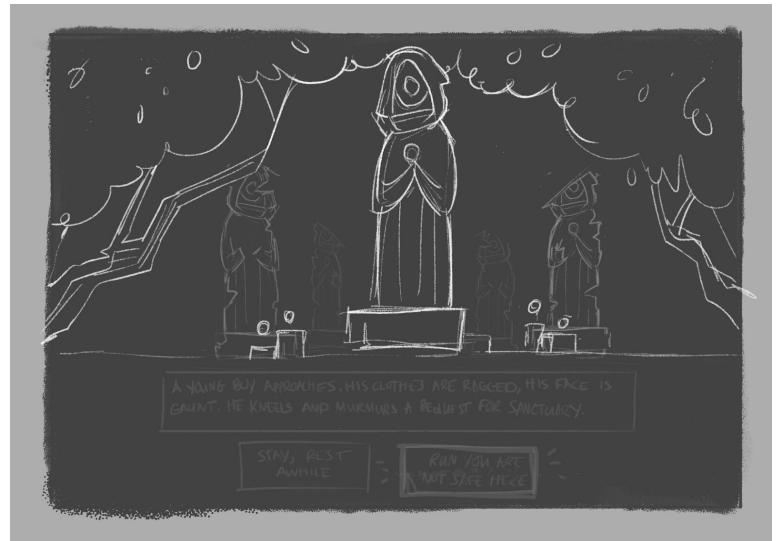
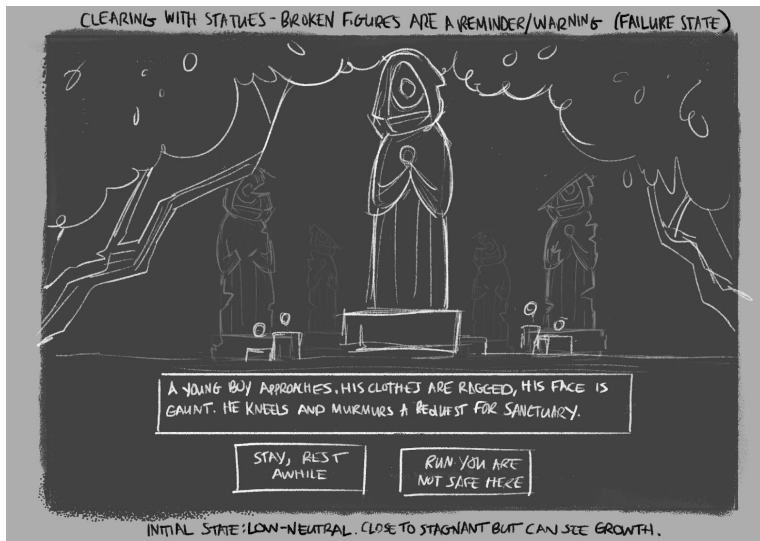
**End State, Growth:** Once some subset of Relationships reaches a high enough value, the user loses their ability to interact any further. The screen has brightened so as to fully obscure the text, (representing ascension or enlightenment?)

**End State, Stagnation:** Once some subset of Relationships reaches a low enough value, the user loses their ability to interact further, having lost the trust of their constituents. Offerings will have disappeared, leaving the screen empty, still, and silent.

### 2c. Example Interaction:

The following is a mockup for a single round of interaction between the user and the narrative:

- (1) User is presented with an Event and corresponding response options.
- (2) User selects an option. World states update behind-the-scenes, and the event fades from view.



- (3) Offering displayed onscreen.
- (4) Scene brightness updates to match the state sum, by a scaled factor.



- (5) Event manager pulls and displays another event that meets prerequisites. Repeat from (1).

As the user progresses through the story and positively influences relationships, offerings aggregate and eventually brighten/obscure the screen.



## 2d. Design:

My design goal with this project is to present a story in such a way that it minimalistically facilitates a sense of immersion for the end user. There are a few ways this is being accomplished: in the structure of the narrative, in the structure of the interactions the user has with the software, and in the design of the audio and visual feedback.

**Narrative:** Immersion will be achieved in the narrative through the user's interactions with villagers. They will be approached by people whose lives they initially know nothing about, but that will be established over time through fragments of intimate, vulnerable interaction. With the state variable system, their choices will seem to dynamically influence the lives they touch, adding a layer of "realism" and responsibility to their interactions.

**Interactivity:** The mechanical repetition of selecting response options breeds familiarity and establishes the guardian's actionable relationship with the community. The story's state system additionally allows for choices and interactions to feel organic instead of "railroaded" in the way a traditional branching narrative would. It also ideally makes them feel more meaningful, and encourages the user to put more active consideration into their actions and narrative responsibility.

**Audio/Visual:** The story will be accompanied by poetic visuals that provide feedback to interactions and allow a kind of "interactive readership". Offerings are added to or subtracted from the scene to hint at changes in hidden state relationships. They exist as clues toward the well being of a community that remains otherwise unseen. They create a "conversation" between the user and content - something that, in tandem with the other elements of this piece and their own personal experiences, the user will be encouraged to piece together and understand,

establishing a sense of ownership of and immersion in the story. See section 2e and 2f/5b. for detailed information on sound and linguistics.

## 2e. Sound

There will be ambient sound added to the piece, linked to the offerings left by villagers. Each offering type will be assigned a distinct sound (rattles, bells, chimes, woodblock, etc.) that will play intermittently as long as the object is present on screen. A collection of objects will create a small bustling chorus, and draw increased contrast to the absence/stillness of an abandoned guardian.

## 2f. Language

Visual elements of the background screen and offerings left by villagers will contain references to an invented language. This language abstracts some of the core themes of the story (state relationships, and ideals of the community) and provides a shared visual motif that grants another layer of poetic meaning to the imagery.



The language is inspired by the semantic properties of leaf structures. It is designed with an emphasis on the contextual meaning of symbols and potential scalability of information. It is also the start of development of some worldbuilding details for the village, to be written and drawn into the piece.

For example, different stories and ideas can be encoded into offerings left behind. The idea of trees and plants as natural providers of narrative also grants importance to those plants and influences, for example, the ideological significance of cutting them down for fuel, shelter, etc.

A more detailed walkthrough of the language can be found in section 5b.



## 2f. Technical Implementation:

This project will be written as a Python desktop application with Kivy. Kivy is an open source, cross-platform framework designed for building interactive UI. It has all of the functionality needed for this project: it is event-driven, it has built-in functionality for animation and sound, and even offers high extensibility in the form of OpenGL wrapping. All this allows for both straightforward implementation of all defined project elements and a “safety net” for coding things, should Kivy by itself prove insufficient.

A code demo (shown as the First Steps for the project) can be accessed in [this folder](#). It can be run on a machine with Python installed by downloading the folder and running the Python file from that directory.

## **3. Production Schedule**

Winter break (Dec 17 - Jan 17):

- Finish technical implementation.
  - Create module for events
    - text, prerequisites, affected states
    - Response text/dynamic button creation?
  - Add textbox with dynamic content
    - Timer for how quickly new events appear, based on state variables
  - Add dynamic button placement (based on events)
- Create visual assets
  - Background
  - Buttons
  - Offerings
- Encode visual assets
  - Encapsulate image + sound, make placement dependent on event
- GOAL: Finish technical implementation and have a working base so next semester can focus on the actual narrative.

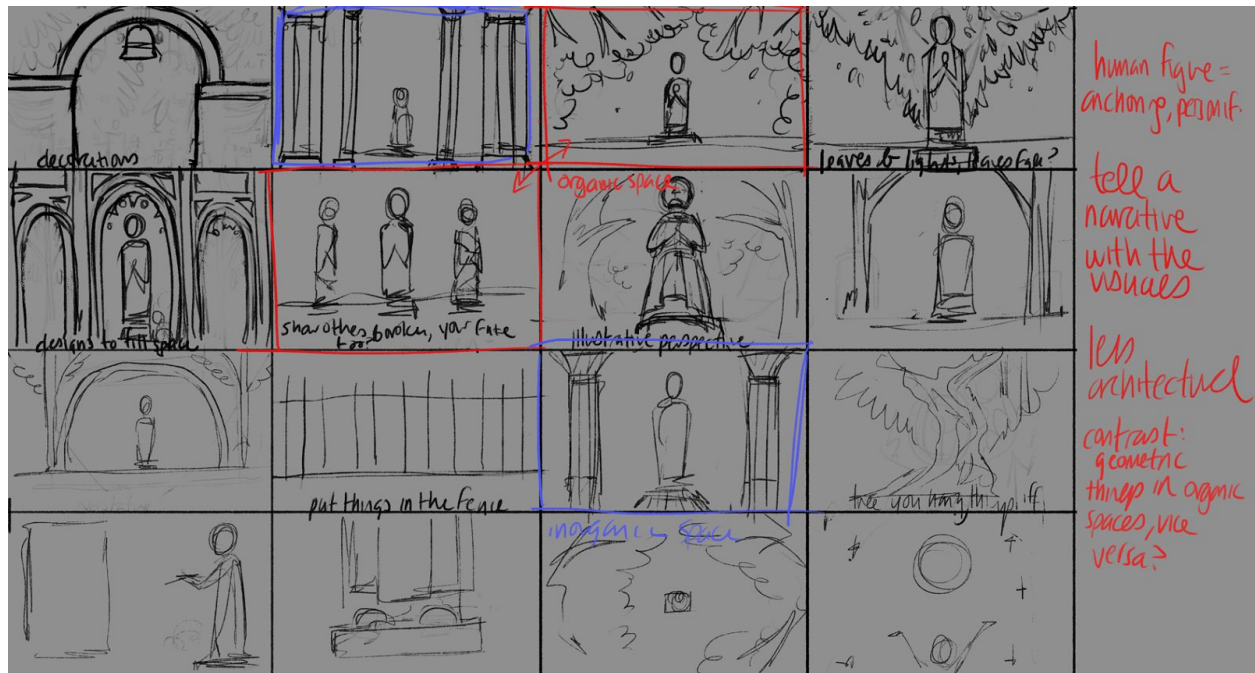
Semester II (Jan 17 - April ?):

- Write, edit, test narrative/event content
  - Work with / reference Interactive Narrative class
- Edit assets, based on feedback
- Negative end-state animation



## 5. Misc. Development Items

### 5a. Visual Concept Work



Thumbnails for the setting image. Things I thought were important:

1. A humanoid central figure (anchoring, self-insert, personification)
2. A setting that was in the woods. (peaceful, natural scenery)
3. Space for added imagery, a feeling of initial emptiness to fill.

I considered experimenting with visual contrast with organic/inorganic forms in the setting and offerings that would accumulate there. I am particularly drawn to the clearing of broken statues in the woods, as it hits the key design points I wanted and also provides some narrative content. It implies that the Guardian is not a singular omniscient being, but perhaps an inanimate object that has been granted life and agency through its involvement in the community. It also hints at the abandonment end state, while providing space to build and grow in.



Some ideas for showing seasonal variations in imagery, to show passage of time.

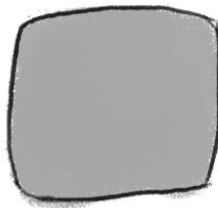
## 5b. Language Creation

### Page Shapes

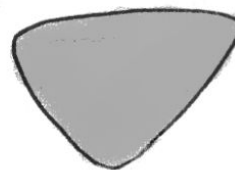
#### ① LEAF STRUCTURE



ENVIRONMENT/NATURE,  
SENSE OF PLACE



COMMUNITY,  
TOGETHERNESS



OUTSIDERS, MYSTERY,  
THE UNKNOWN

There are three base page shapes. Each represents a cultural idea (and, roughly, one of the state variables in the program.)

## Page Shapes (cont.)

### ①a COMPOUND STRUCTURES



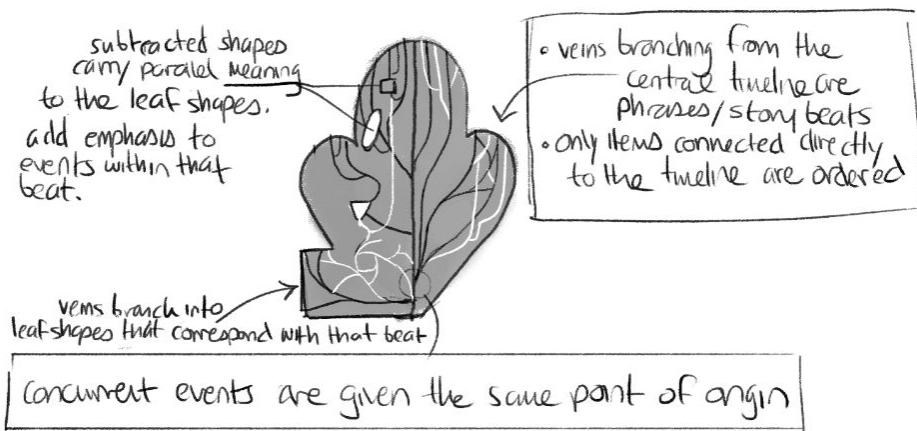
ENVIRONMENT+COMMUNITY  
EX: HARVEST RECORDS



ENVIRONMENT+COMMUNITY  
+ UNKNOWN  
EX: FARMER'S ALMANAC

Basic shapes can be compounded in different positions, with different frequencies for emphasis. Each lends contextual meaning to contained script.

## Venation



Venation on the leaf represents scripts. The central "stem" forms a timeline with phrases, story events, etc. branching from it.

## Venation (cont.)

EX: SINGLE LENGTH TERMS:  
(LENGTH: 1ST SEGMENT OF PINKY FINGER)

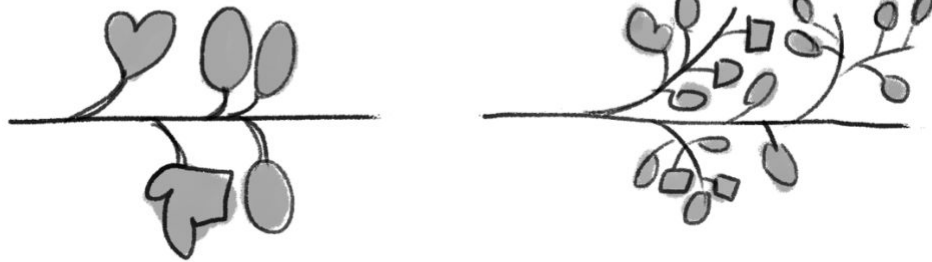
MOVE	MANY	ABOVE	SELF
—		⌋	⌋
ALONE	BELDN	OTHER	

EX: COMPOUND TERMS:

SELF + MANY VILLAGE	OTHER + ABOVE SPIRIT	ABOVE + ABOVE SKY

Veins are read from bottom to top, inward -> outward, left -> right. Different lengths and curves of veins have ideographic meaning, influenced by their placement in a page.

## Branches



Branches can be used as another layer of narrative/logical ordering. They collect and order leaves as chapters of a story, entries in a log, categories of scripture, etc.

They can mimic a leaf's timeline/venation structure, and grant scaling complexity to the system.

## 6. Bibliography

### 6a. Narrative Influences and Resources:

Alexander, Bryan. *The New Digital Storytelling: Creating Narratives with New Media*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011. Print.

Diamond, Jared M. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997. Print.

*Extra Credits: Choice in Games*. By James Portnow. Perf. Daniel Floyd. *Youtube*. N.p., 24 Mar. 2012. Web. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg8fVtKyYxY&list=PLL\\_m9qdrw0GEhuV2T9JZADFwa2T1uwBld](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg8fVtKyYxY&list=PLL_m9qdrw0GEhuV2T9JZADFwa2T1uwBld)>.

Holowka, Alec, et al. *Longest Night: Lost Constellation*. Windows, OS X, and Linux. <https://finji.itch.io/lost-constellation>

McCaughrean, Geraldine, and Sophy Williams. *Treasury of Fairy Tales*. Barnes and Noble Books, 2003. Print.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. Print.

Miller, C.H. *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2014. Print.

Townsend, Michael. *A Dark Room*. 2013. Doublespeak Games. Web. <http://adarkroom.doublespeakgames.com/>

### Possible Narrative Stylistic Influences:

Kerren McAdden - specific details and mood of her poetry (*Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes*)

Margaret Atwood - specific details and flow of her writing. *Year of the Flood* also has parables from an authored religion that mimic a more folkloric style of storytelling, for reference. (*Year of the Flood*, *Handmaid's Tale*, etc.)

### 6b. Visual Influences and Resources:

@digitalsqand. "About @ebooks\_goetia Glyphs." *Dracula City*. N.p., 17 Sept. 2016. Web.

<<http://dracula.city/about-goetia/>>.

Gardner, Helen, and Richard G. Tansey. *Gardner's Art through the Ages*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College, 1996. Print.

Hill, Crag, and Nico Vassilakis. *The Last Vispo Anthology: Visual Poetry, 1988-2008*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

Piringer, Jorg. Visual Poetry Gifs. Digital image. Jorg Piringer - Digital Sound, Interactive Poetry, Etc.

N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://joerg.piringer.net/index.php?href=visual/gifs.xml>>.

Skinner, Stephen. *Sacred Geometry: Deciphering the Code*. New York: Sterling, 2009. Print.

#### 6c. Human Resources

There are three grad students I've gotten in contact with that have work or are doing work that relates to choice/interactive narrative. Should I be able to meet and discuss with them, it is likely they will influence design choices in this project. I have reached out to Jason Coley, Lorelei Wagner, and Eric Walsh. My faculty mentor is Patricia Search.