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Aricallo: Lost in a Spiraling Arc

Aricallo, is the dream that dares to wake, both for its author and its tormented characters. The idea was not dreamt of as a result of needing a literary-driven game for a student's college English class. No, instead it was the dream of a child from six years ago. Six years ago, I was somewhat thrown into the shoes of *Aricallo*'s main character, who is stuck in a dream-like state; in the dream state that I was in, I had dreamt of a young boy on the verge of life and death. His apathy to life led him to a place that neither encompassed life nor death. As he struggled to learn more about his surroundings, he spiraled downwards in an arc of emotions, reminiscences, and grief. Just as he was nearing the conclusion of his emotional journey, I had awoken. Childhood me had not seen the ending to the dream. Frustrated, I wrote all that I could remember, the characters that joined him, the battles he fought, and the memories and peculiar scenarios he encountered flooded my notebook. His face, and the prominent locations in the dream, were jotted down in my sketchbook, with those pages still intact today.

Over the years, I had obsessively drawn the locations and characters in various mediums and loose papers in hopes of inducing a continuation of the dream. Though the dream had taken form in the physical world, it never reappeared in my dreams, preventing me from witnessing the conclusive lesson our hero had learnt. This continuous denial of a coherent ending led me to

think: what if our character had multiple fates? It was possible that there were many things he could have concluded, such as his wish to return to life or maybe to pass on. Thus began my childhood journey of documenting and drafting his story. Our character would face many hardships as he, and his consciousness (the player), battled fate to reach the desired ending.

STORY

The story revolves around a young, angsty teenaged boy named Leair, nicknamed Le by his mother. Though he is reluctant to take on this nickname at first, after his mother's passing and his father's sudden change in nature, he clings onto the name as the only valuable thing in his life. Le was simply a typical boy in his childhood; being the only son at the time, he would be spoiled with love by his parents, taken out on trips to the park, and spent time with his friends growing up. He was not always the quiet, unassuming person we know him as. Right as he entered middle school, a freak incident occurred that forever changed his life. His mother, who had been pregnant with her soon-to-be second child at the time, was murdered in a serial killer incident occurring in his town. The loss of his mother and future sibling affected him deeply, with him trying to battle his grief, denial, and situation with others. Moreover, his father could not come to terms with what had happened. He resorted to alcohol, smoking, and violence to cope with the situation. He gave less care and attention to his son, only looking at him when he needed to release tensions and pent up rage.

With no stable foundation at home, Le felt estranged from the world. He had lost everything- his mother, father, and picture-perfect life had all just seemed like a dream. Though he frequently came to school with bruises and cuts all over him, his teachers did nothing to help him. The students he had called his friends before turned on him, tormenting him and further

worsening his wounds. Le no longer felt as though he had a reason to live, but he continued to “live” this life for the next six years. Nearing the time of high school graduation, he concluded that he truly did not have a reason to keep living. He was stuck to his father, who only spoke to him for money, and had no plans for the future. His only dream was to escape. And so he did.

Sou could say the opposite. He dreamt to live longer than fate decided for him. He lived the same life as any: he went to school, hung out with friends, and looked forward to the next day. He was a very social and amiable person, always making friendly conversation with strangers and seemingly knew everyone around. He enjoyed the time he knew he had left to the fullest, as when he was little, he was told that he would not live for long. His body was fragile and deteriorated as he aged. Sou frequently made trips to the hospital, requiring multiple surgeries and organ transplants. He did not mind the pain he felt coursing through his body with each breath he took. Instead, he focused on the smiles of his friends and family around him; they were the smiles that hid concern and pity behind them, but it did not bother him. What did bother him, however, was the slow decay of the smiles of the people he loved.

He began to notice that his friends gave troubled smiles and spoke behind his back. His parents reflected the same manner. The realization hit him: the cost of his living was too much of a burden for his parents, who then began asking his friends’ parents for money. His friends attempted to hide the sad reality that faced him and so did his parents. So, when he required a surgery that was risky, complicated, and expensive he decided it was not worth living if it meant destroying what he lived for. Sou refuses to undergo the transplant, disregarding his wary parents’ pleas, and accepts his fate.

Leair, after his failed suicide attempt, wakes up in the Arc, a familiar yet unfamiliar world. At first glance, it looks at works the same as the real world does, with the various

locations around him resembling his town. However, he quickly realizes the peculiar differences, such as the floating upside-down objects, mysterious creatures, and convoluted and mixed-up layout of the town he thought he had known. After a series of events, he meets Sou. Sou quickly befriends him and introduces him to the Arc. Having been there for longer, Sou acts as a guide for Le, telling him what he needs to know and how to escape. Unbeknownst to Le, Sou is not guiding him for his own good and instead wants to entrap him. Sou urges Le to descend deeper into the Arc, which is split based on levels that spiral downward. However, the deeper the two go, the harder it is to return to reality as their souls begin to detach from their bodies.

The Arc acts as the delicate barrier between life and death where souls linger. Those who face near death experiences are thrown into the Arc in a last ditch effort to cling to their life and humanity. It is possible to return to the living world under two main conditions. Firstly, the person must have the will to survive. And secondly, they must not have prolonged their stay in the Arc, as the longer they stay the more their body deteriorates, making it impossible to live without a vessel. Yet, there is a way to return to the living world without one's vessel- that is to take the body of another.

The body of Sou seen in-game is not his original body. After spending too long in the Arc after his near death experience, he lost his body. His determination to live, however, pushed him to steal the body of the boy who came before Le. Sou pushed the boy down into the depths of the Arc. Stuck in an endless spiral of descent, he reluctantly forfeited his body to Sou. Though under normal conditions this would have been enough to bring Sou back to life in the other boy's body, he could not due to the weakened state of his soul. Thus, he was forced to slowly recover in his new vessel. Conveniently, Le appeared in time for him to make his recovery which led Sou to pursue his new vessel in hopes of returning home.

As the two explore the Arc, Le reminisces of his past life. The locations that appear in front of the two mirror Le's memories, with the occasional look into Sou's life. Through this, Le reflects on the life he had and could have had if he were living. He battles the struggles of his trauma, his poor relationship with his father, and his *raison d'être*. As he descends deeper into the Arc, he realizes that he missed out on many things, such as the various people who reached out to help him who he shunned and the signs of his loving father in the dad he knows today. The journey follows Le as he learns from the hardships he faced, overcomes his emotional trauma, and dares to dream to change his fate.

MECHANICS

The game, when fully realized, will be split into a visual novel and puzzle segment. In the visual novel, the player will play as Le, being given the opportunity to make choices that may change his fate. The visual novel segment hopes to embrace Jagoda's ideas of affective immersion as well as embodied play as the player's ability to affect the narrative between the characters evokes feelings of excitement, tension, and anticipation within the player. The form of play is seen through the usage of player choice, in which the player may shape the outcome of the story. This will be realized through a branching timeline system; though currently not implemented in the prototyped game, the game hopes to utilize a timeline to incorporate the various endings obtainable after selecting differing choices. Though not all choices will cause the story to branch, there will be major events that affect the timeline the player is currently on. Depending on the series of events, the player may end on a timeline that has a recurring ending, such that it appears when going down a different route. Effectively, the choices and timeline would reflect a map such as the one seen in *The Stanley Parable*. For example, after jumping to

the catwalk from the platform, Stanley may choose the red or blue door. Choosing the blue door once again prompts the player to choose between the two doors; choosing the red door merges the branches back together, which is what I hope to include in my game when noting choices that do not have a major impact on the story.

Once fully developed, the game will include multiple endings, all of which will be a direct result of the player's actions. Some of which are Le returning to life, Le and Sou dying in the Arc, Sou returning to life in Le's vessel, and the two remaining in the Arc. Through this, I hope to recount Juul's take on video game failures. He notes that failures in games are taken to a much more personal level such that the character's failure is that of your own. He argues that the failure is not the fault or emotions felt by the character, but instead by the player themselves. Initially, I had envisioned the game to not show the main character on the screen, essentially creating a self-insert character. This would further push for the fact that the failure of making a wrong choice was that of the player and not the character. Though Le does show up on the screen now, I hope to invoke the same strength of emotion, not just failure, the player will incur.

The second major mechanic in *Aricallo* is the puzzle segment. Though not created in the prototype build, with its setbacks being discussed in a later section, the full game will include a puzzle segment. This acts as both a 2D overworld and escape-esque puzzle portion of the game. To begin, the player will be cast into a tutorial-eque puzzle in which Le must escape his motel. The player can navigate around the screen by clicking the on-screen arrows to move to different rooms throughout the house. During the puzzle segment, the player may click on items, often prompting dialogue or the option to take the item with you. The player must solve the puzzle and escape the motel room to complete the beginning puzzle. To summarize the puzzle, the player must obtain the candle that sits in the living room and melt it using the oven. This then reveals

that the candlestand was shaped as a key which can be used to unlock the door. After completing the first puzzle, some dialogue will appear but then allow Leair to move around outside the motel room. Though there would not be a major puzzle to solve in this segment, it will act similarly to that of the puzzle segment, thus being referred to under the same umbrella term. This portion allows for navigation of the 2D overworld, once again utilizing a point-and-click feature to change the “room” that the player is currently viewing.

Jagoda’s idea of embodied play is also reflected in the puzzle segment in that the player must actively participate in the puzzles to collect items, find clues, and piece together hidden narratives in an immersive environment. Additionally, it mirrors his hope that video game sensorium utilizes a cognitive and systematic thinking system, challenging players to engage with complex systems. These systems take the place of puzzles; by solving such puzzles the player may then recognize small patterns or details that shape their decision making in the novel segment.

In summary, *Aricallo* hopes to see the implementation of a visual novel and puzzle segments of the game which utilizes the SPACE key to advance the text and a point-and-click system to interact with items or characters in the 2D overworld. In Clune’s viewpoint, *Aricallo* wishes to provide a sense of exploration and purpose that real life may tend to lack. I hope to create an exploration not only into the world that is the Arc, but also the meaning of humanity, one’s reason for living, and the struggle of choosing between life or death. Clune’s ideas of open-ended guidance can be seen in both portions of the game, with the choice selection being open-ended yet leading to a predictably enough outcome. Moreover, the puzzles will be challenging yet manageable with some puzzles being of varying difficulty from others. Some will employ straight-forward answers, while others require the player to adventurously search for

the solution. This open-guidance is yet again reflected in the idea that some puzzles may have multiple solutions, causing various degrees of guidance and freedom to work in favor of the player. Through the interactions between the player, mechanics, and story I hope to create a “game of making a life” in that the possible narratives Le discovers unfolds at the hands of the player.

UNITY & DESIGN

Arguably the hardest part of this journey was not making the story, it was instead attempting an overambitious, cocky feat to develop the game in Unity. My sibling, who is very devout at making video games, often shows me their work in Unity. At a glance it seems very intuitive and easy to use. I had chosen it as I wanted to complete the game sometime this summer, and knew a point-and-click game could be made through Unity compared to Inky. I had thought how hard could it be to create a dialogue system and a short point-and-click minigame. Unfortunately, I was very wrong. I began by following along with a visual novel tutorial, which played in a similar style to what I envisioned for my game. However, after around three hours into the tutorial, I realized the system used was incredibly inefficient, with game objects being created and used every time the character sprite changed emotions. Moreover, the dialogue system, the main functional component to the game, was buggy and did not work properly. Thus, I scraped what I had and reluctantly started anew.

I knew I could quickly finish the first puzzle and some additional dialogue from the starting sequence of the game in Inky, but I still hoped to challenge myself. In the long run, using Unity now would be more beneficial than Inky, which would be awkward to implement the visuals I had already created and the point-and-click aspect I wanted to see in the finished game.

I decided it would be best to focus on constructing a dialogue system in Unity from scratch and plan to implement the puzzle portion sometime this summer.

Upon loading the game, it may seem that not much work has been done to create the game, but when viewing the code and various scripts created just to have a simple dialogue feature is astounding. Initially, I thought the dialogue would only need one code file and I would simply be able to attach it to a Unity game object. However, this was a big misunderstanding as there had to be a dialogue manager, a dialogue system, an enum for character names, an enum for sprites, and an enum for backgrounds to name a few things. After many bugs and errors, I was finally able to display some text, the changing character sprites, and various backgrounds in a much more efficient way than what I had started with. Though what I had initially was somewhat functional, this was tremendously better as it would be easy to build off of it once I continued the work in the summer. Content with what I had, I began writing the dialogue in a separate file, only to realize I did not create a choice script. Once again, I was cast into a frenzy as I battled Unity, bugs, and errors to create two choice boxes which lead down different paths to eventually converge back into one. With more time, I hoped to create a script file to include various dialogue scenes to increase efficiency, as currently it is written through Unity (I would prefer it to be written through a code editor). Though there is much room for growth, *Aricallo* can finally be more than a dream that has yet to be dreamt again.

END OF A DREAM

Aricallo hopes to push the boundaries of what it means to be a game and go beyond it; it is a culmination of memory, grief, and hope, brought to life through years of reflection and exploration. What began as a childhood dream has transformed into an emotional journey that

challenges both character and player to confront the limits of life, the weight of trauma, and the possibility of redemption. Through the intertwining fates of Le and Sou, Aricallo explores choice and the reason for living. Through a combination of a visual novel and puzzle segments, the game hopes to create an immersive environment for the player to shape the two's journey as they attempt to change their fate and spiral down into the Arc.

Appendix

Name	Details
Rough playthrough of Puzzle 0 (text-based code Google Doc, runs properly on java IDEs)	ArcPart0
Rough (unfinished) playthrough of Part 1 (text-based code in Google Doc, runs properly on java IDEs)	ArcPart1
Rough puzzle text	00_scenes.arc
Leair Sprites	  

Sou Sprites

