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ENGL 3500 Literary Games

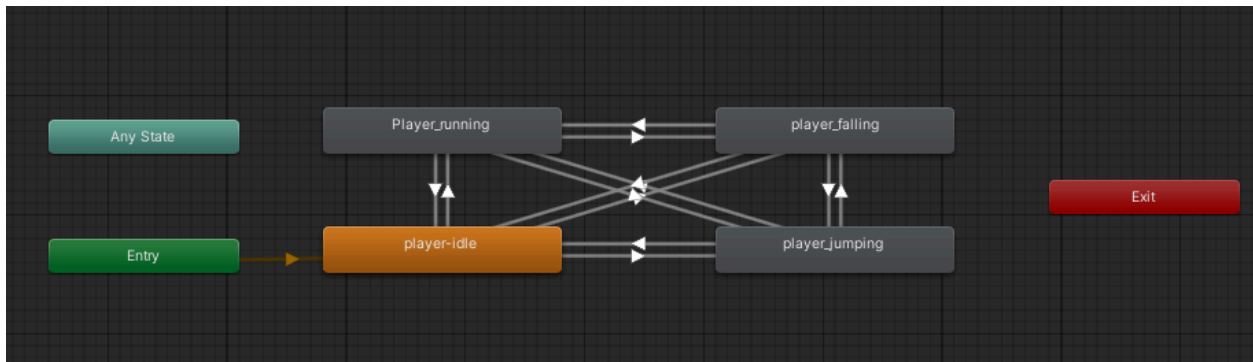
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### Hamster Run

The game “Hamster Run” was derived from two things: Jonathan Blow’s *Braid* and the fascination for hamsters. When we were told about the final project at the beginning of the semester, I had always wanted to create a game based on a hamster. I have never owned a hamster myself, but hearing stories about hamsters and seeing them all around made me feel inspired to try and create a game based on the particular animal. When brainstorming the game, I wanted to proceed with the route of creating a 2D platformer as a starting point. Platforming games are widely popular within the game industry as they are easy to implement, but allow access for creativity within the story, mechanics, and level design. I wanted to focus on all three of those aspects when approaching and tackling the game.

Initially, beginning the process of the game was the hardest part for the final project. I am someone who struggles with beginning assignments, let alone beginning large scale projects such as this. However, knowing that I signed up early to present to the class along with the lab session during class, I felt as though my passion for the project became easier due to the resources provided to us. I wanted to first do research on my own by finding useful tutorials in game design. I had prior experience before signing up for the class, but it was not enough for me to create the game I envisioned in my mind. The first tutorial I began to look up was modularity,

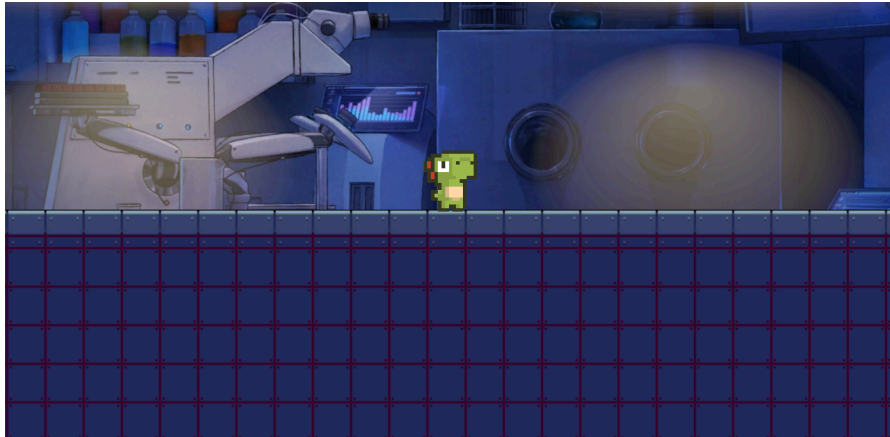
how to properly organize and collect my own thoughts and my assets within the project without having issues later on when increasing the scale of the project. After the initial tutorials, I began to veer away from organization and focused more on mechanics, trying to create a working player with animation. It was difficult to find a hamster asset, therefore, I resulted in using a dinosaur asset that I have previously used in another side project as a way to fill in the gap. Player animation and player movement was difficult as all games are different, meaning a tutorial that I watched may not work the same for me as games and code are drastically different. Every movement, action, and interaction has certain animations that correlate with those actions, therefore, the graph that connected all the interactions were all interconnected with one another to show which action will trigger which action. Understanding how this works and how



everything proceeds was the challenging part. Once everything was put together the player animation began to look the way I wanted to, with the exception of the hamster being a dinosaur.

After player animation, I was able to focus on level design. This was the main focus of my project as it was something I wanted to do from the very beginning. I wanted to tell a story within the game through the level background and its surroundings. It was difficult at first as I had to take into account the fact that the hamster will be small in size compared to a normal human running around a science lab. Understanding the size, distance, and perception that the

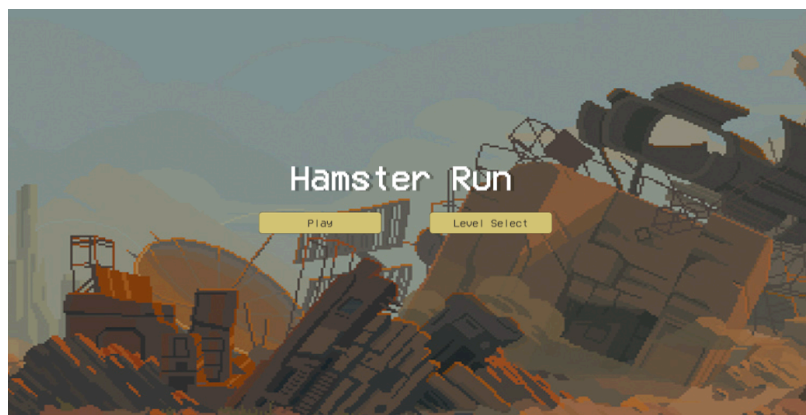
hamster would be seeing was another process of research along with trial and error. I began adjusting the background, tilesets, and player size to capture the essence of the hamster's small but big world. After multiple trials, I was able to capture the proper background and size of the



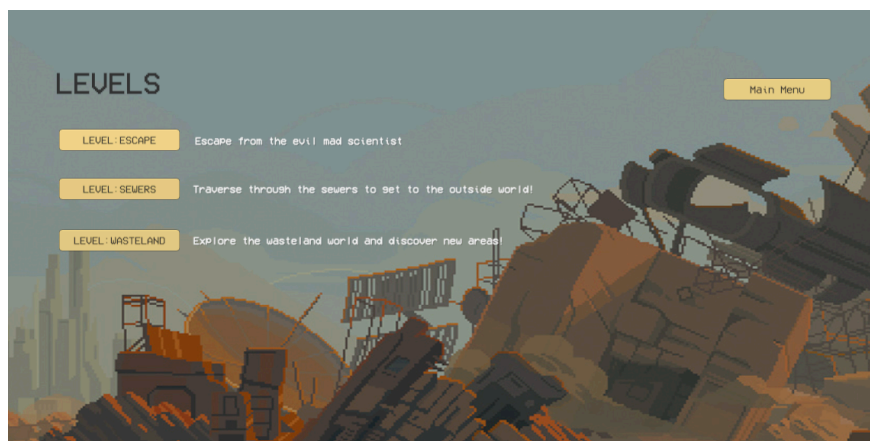
“hamster” in a lab. The only downside was that I had to repeat the process for different levels in order to create the world that I wanted to create. I continued the process for

two levels before the initial presentation, a science lab in which the “hamster” escapes and a sewer level where the “hamster” uses it to traverse to escape to the outside world. Level design was extremely fun to focus on as it gave me creative freedom to create a world that I wanted to make for the game.

Having that in mind, I wanted to create a start screen and a level select screen that captures the same vibe and storytelling that the levels would show. I searched backgrounds that would capture the game's whole premise while also serving its own purpose. I ended up finding a post-apocalyptic background that I could use for both the start and level select scene along with a background for an actual level. I wanted to be creative and



incorporate buttons within the game, but doing so in game would be difficult, so I decided to add



them into the start screen

as a way to show

interaction from a static

scene to a dynamic scene.

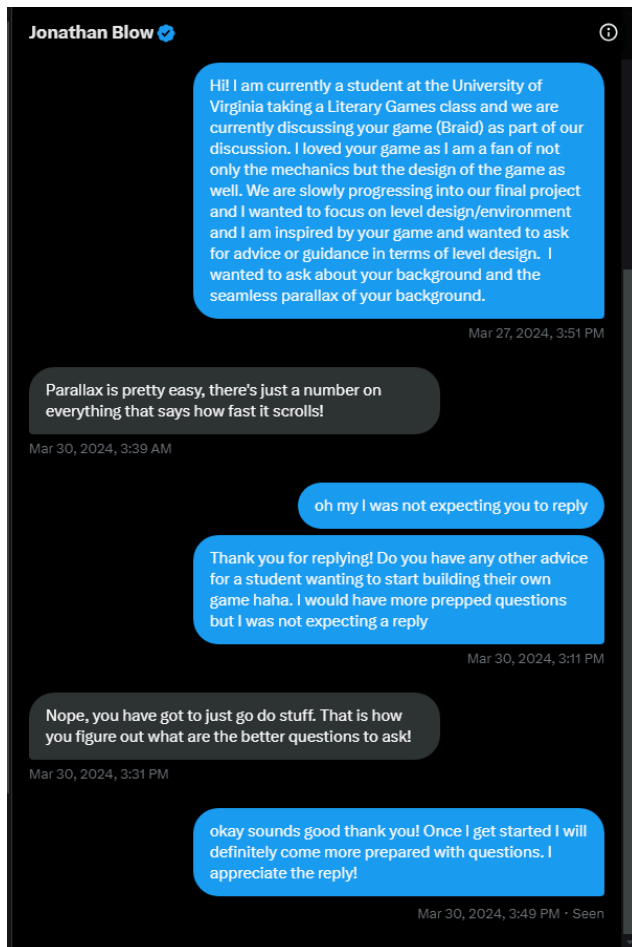
This was something I was

particularly proud of

during the process because

it was something I already knew how to do beforehand and felt as though I could implement an original idea onto my game without any guides for tutorials on how to change scenes or make a button work. Creating these two scenes also flowed more ideas for the game and how I could improve the game for my own practice and for the final product.

After the presentation for the game, I received the feedback for the game in which I felt needed its own section when reflecting on what to improve. Rather than coding, editing assets, or even changing the dinosaurs to an actual hamster to fit the game, I wanted to focus on the narrative and theme of the game and what I want to convey as a game developed. As I said before, Jonathan Blow's *Braid* was a massive inspiration for the game as it caught my attention not only for its mechanics but for its level design. I wanted to incorporate aspects of his game to mine, but as a beginner I obviously could not replicate a veteran game developer. In order to try and see what I could do with the game, I decided to do what was best for myself and for the final project: messaging Jonathan Blow on Twitter in hopes that I could gain some advice. I gained this idea during class when discussing Blow's reaction to criticism of his game and his own



personality. I was fascinated by the different responses that we talked about so I decided to message him on Twitter. Initially, when I directly messaged Jonathan Blow, I was nervous that I was not going to receive a response or would be left on read. Few days passed by and my hopes for a response began to dwindle and that is when I decided to start my game. However, I received a notification on Twitter that he responded and I was ecstatic for the response. I replied to his message and instantly received feedback for any advice, and from what I have seen, the responses people had about Jonathan Blow

were correct as I received no help but a vague message and advice. With that in mind, I felt motivated to continue my work and eventually come back to the messages in hopes that I could formulate better questions for advice. However, with how the final project was going it seemed unlikely that I could come up with better questions.

With the feedback given, I look back to *Braid* and think of its theme and narrative within the game. I also look back into the reading of Patrick Jagoda's *Experimental Games* of how mechanics, visuals, and sound create an immersive experience for the players within the game. *Braid* was able to do that through its catching visuals of the levels, enemies, and character

design. We can see how these characteristics help create the game Blow envisioned for his game and how the narrative is easily identifiable through this. As learned in lecture, *Braid* was widely spread for its narrative and players theorizing different narratives for the game, causing strong opinions from Blow, earning his reputation as a “jerk”. I wanted to explore what *Braid* does as a game by creating something similar. I wanted to dive into the idea of exploration, and experiencing new things in the world, conveying that through the hamster. Even with the game not being fully finished, I wanted to include interactions where the hamster encounters objects that will help the hamster learn and develop an intelligence in order to escape from the scientists that are trying to capture the hamster. Each time the hamster interacts with an object it will increase its knowledge similar to how humans learn through interactions and adapting to the world. With nothing left in society, the hamster would have to adapt to the current state of the world. Exploration and discovery is what I wanted the game to be about and conveying the narrative through the game mechanics similar to *Braid* and the characteristics of the game exploring the narrative of the game.

Another inspiration and help to the development of the theme includes Patrick Jagoda’s *Experimental Games*. Jagoda dives into the idea of experimentation within games and how they are able to convey the narrative and promote critical thinking within games. I believe that games must challenge norms and try to experiment in order to capture player attention within the gaming industry. This is prevalent within games that have been released at the time as players are challenging developers to create games that are out of the ordinary, or games that have a long-term goal with emphasis on the players. Taking account of the idea of game development, I wanted to implement a mechanic that would fit within Jagoda’s ideals of experimental games,

however, I never got the chance to fully develop and flesh out the idea. If I were to implement, I wanted to include a leveling system that would implement the knowledge base system of the interaction of objects that tie into the narrative of exploration and discovery. This would combine the aspects seen in *Braid* and also the details that Jagoda emphasized within game development. Both Blow and Jagoda were massive inspirations towards Hamster Run and the development of the theme and narrative of the story.

With all the ideas combined, when continuing to develop the game I managed to have a clear goal and theme for the game. Unlike before, I was able to continue the game with a better understanding of what I wanted to create and develop. Feedback from the presentation helped immensely trying to develop a theme for the game. While I was unable to continue developing the assets and game mechanics, I was able to dive more into the theme of the game which is also a pivotal aspect of game development. Reflecting on the final project, I underestimated the importance of narrative and theme development within games. Not only did the final project make me realize that, but also the class itself opened a new perspective within games that I have been ignoring. Games can have new fancy graphics and mechanics that are cool, but are overlooked due to their fanciness within the game. Playing games such as *Braid*, *Unpacking*, and *The Stanley Parable* are all different from modern games. They don't include fancy graphics or ground-breaking mechanics, but they utilize their environment and mechanics to tell a narrative within the game. Understanding how everything is connected allows me to approach new games differently, how does the level tell the story, how do the mechanics inform us of the narrative, and how does dialogue correlate to the overall theme. Not only is this important when playing new games, but for game developers as well. Having to process and plan the connection between

all actions and interactions within the game is something that I did not expect to be difficult but also interesting to develop and dive into. With that being said, the final project was something that I believe was beneficial for me to understand the readings more in-depth and also trying to develop the theme and development of my game and future games I plan to create if I begin to follow that path.



## Works Cited

Jagoda, Patrick. *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*. The University of Chicago Press, 2020.