

Downstairs

Daniel Jiang // dj286 // Spring 2018

Abstract

Downstairs is a 2D exploration and platformer game that is meant to mirror the process of overcoming hate. The player controls a spider who lives in an abandoned home that is exiled after being accused of killing another animal in the attic. The spider must go through the different floors of the home to find a place where he is accepted, and along the way find clues of the life of the human child who used to live in the house. *Downstairs* should be a game that everyone can enjoy and play through, but multilayered for those who want to invest time into exploring every nook and cranny of the game's world. It's meant to be a deconstruction of human society in terms of classism, religion, and social acceptance in the context of animal colonies. The final form of the project is three levels, representing different floors of a standard American-style home, each different aesthetically, thematically, and gameplay wise.

Introduction

I wanted to make a game because I am an aspiring game designer and want to tell a story that can use the medium's interactivity to communicate information that would not be otherwise possible in other forms. This project is a game because the interactivity that games provide is essential to the themes of the narrative of *Downstairs*. Because the message of the game revolved around the players experiencing firsthand how it feels to have the people around their avatar being ostracized. The game was inspired by the retro graphics of many successful titles in the recent past such as 2015's *Undertale*, and how many games are starting to break the boundaries of what is considered to be normal in a game, as in 2017's *Doki Doki Literature Club* as well as *Undertale*. The game was also inspired by the research presented by Ben Whaley and Chris Alton in regards to the societal-dependent impact of certain titles and the impact of the bond a player shares with his or her avatar, respectively. The goal of this report is to describe the motivating forces behind the development of *Downstairs*, the process of developing the game itself, and the types of motifs and themes the game was attempting to invoke in the player.

Project Statement and Goals

The goal of the game is to be accessible to a wide variety of audiences in its low difficulty as well as its narrative themes. To do this, there were some guidelines that behind the game's overall design:

- Easy gameplay that still provided a challenge and switched up the pace of the game to keep it interesting
- Narrative that was independent of time period and geographical location
- Narrative that is easy to understand and follow
- Narrative that is interesting and engaging to follow

Some of the initial questions that motivated my work include:

- How does a powerful party of people (in this case humans) affect the lifestyle and physical surroundings of those that are less powerful (in this case animals)?
- How does the absence of this powerful party and the things it leaves behind affect the less powerful party?
- How can we find parallels in the narratives of two seemingly unrelated parties?

Contextual Review

The same type of similar somber mood and mysterious world building has been done before in successful projects, namely *Shadow of the Colossus*. However, work like that is intended for more mature audiences and thus carries a limitation of what types of people can access those narratives, whether it be through the gameplay itself or through the narrative's nuance or depth. Games like *Pokemon Mystery Dungeon* do a good job of balancing the accessibility of the narrative while keeping it very engaging through its relatively easy-to-follow structure and constantly changing the pace of the narrative. However, games like *Mystery Dungeon* lack the societal context that can bind people to narrative experience.

One of the articles I read was Ben Whaley's "Who Will Play Terebi Gemu When No Japanese Children Remain? Distanced Engagement in Atlus' Catherine." The article uses Japan's dwindling population and the speculation behind it to contextualize Atlus's Catherine in Japan's society. Whaley uses the term "distanced engagement" to illustrate the idea that players would constantly be reminded that they are playing a game rather than being fully immersed, and a lot of the social implications of a game like Catherine is through the players' distant engagement and how they contextualize it in their own lives, whether it be through setting or narrative scenarios. The article takes pieces of Catherine and shows how it can be recontextualized in Japanese culture today. Rather than a traditional conclusion to the paper, Whaley instead presents his information as a launchpad for new questions and ideas. He noted two types of masculinity in Japanese culture that would most correspond to the extremes of the game's romantic endings, but also poses the question of how Japanese players would identify with the freedom endings and the type of masculinity presented there.

Another article was Chris Alton's "Going Beyond the Game: Development of Gamer Identities Within Societal Discourse and Virtual Spaces," which establishes the idea of a player avatar as a narrative character, cybernetic embodiment, and a vehicle, and wants to explore where these areas overlap. Typically avatars are only considered as vehicles, but as hardware progressed, more and more games added details that built on the narrative of the characters, such as idle animations and narrative elements. The paper addresses other basics of game design such as flow and player expression and draws a similarity between those mechanics and the player avatar. The last examples the paper ends on are the characters of *Assassin's Creed* where Desmond and his ancestors are both controllable and how *Fez* uses the avatar in its core mechanics. I wanted to make a link between the player and the spider so that the player could share some of the pain that the spider was feeling, which would motivate him or her to finish the game to find a happy ending for the spider. Although many of the things that this paper touched on were not implemented due to time constraints such as idle animations, this link was successful because of the unique circumstances of the spider and how the impact of humans on its world plays into it.

Creative Methodology

A lot of the devices in *Downstairs* comes from the parallels that exist in modern human culture, such as religion. The primary feature of any game is how it uses its element of interactivity to support the work, and in this case is used to highlight the potential differences between the player-controlled character and the players themselves as well as draw a parallel between the players and the unnamed child whose diary entries they find scattered throughout the house. The goal of the spider's character is to be made as undesirable as possible to emphasize how alone it is from the other animals in the house. Players should be driven by the desire to find out more about the mysterious child and would want to chase after the narrative conclusion of the child's story through the lens of something undesirable like the spider.

A theme of the project is how things in the world are scaled up massively, and that includes the narrative themes within the world. The animals worship the humans like gods when they are in fact people that aren't as well off, and the overall structure of the story is meant to mirror that of *Inferno* and the works it inspires in that the main character dives deeper and deeper into chaos in search of something.

The game is not meant to be mechanically challenging and acts as more of a narrative with the gameplay supporting it. Moving forward, it could be a possibility of adding mechanics that emphasize a spider's mobility and the platforming sections of the game.

Downstairs is built in Gamemaker Studio 2 and written in its native language, GML. A shader for the glitch effect is used called BktGlitch. Changes were backed up to GitHub at <https://github.com/SenSaiyan/downstairs>.

Project Evaluation

The first level of *Downstairs* that was developed was the second level, which at the start was a top-down style, similar to retro RPGs. The next cycles were the first iterations of the first and third levels, which were more similar to their final iterations. There were only essential assets and functionality such as the player's movement and only a few NPCs that were vital to the game's progression.

After initial level creation, the next step was to create the diary entries and implementing the glitch shader. The game had bugs at the time involving player character interactions with walls that would cause the player to get trapped in certain instances, so much of development afterwards was dedicated to fixing bugs and problems that would arise. Initial playtests were pleased by the retro and glitch aesthetics, but were not immersed in the narrative or the gameplay as much, so future iterations were focused on bringing the NPC dialogues and diary entries as well as more intense platform sections to the player earlier in the game. While many of the placeholder sprites were not replaced in the final version of the game, some were so that it would reflect the information being presented more effectively than whatever their initial sprites were so that the player would not be confused by the appearance of a certain character or object.

Playtesters were told to play the game to its conclusion and were asked about how the aesthetic made them feel, if certain aspects of the gameplay or narrative were confusing, and were observed in the way they chose to interact with certain objects. The next cycle involved the overhaul of the second level, as playtesters thought this was the weakest section and most out of place. It was remade into the same sidescrolling perspective of the first and third levels and was given a lot more characters, areas to explore, and platforming sequences that playtesters enjoyed.

More bugs were fixed, but a lot of them were in the old level two that was overhauled, so they did not need to be fixed anymore.

The strongest parts of the project were the narrative, and more specifically its presentation throughout the game and how it was concluded in the end of the third level. Many players enjoyed the dialogue of the characters in the game and thought there was a lot of content to consume, but not in an overwhelming way. The least successful is the somewhat inconsistent nature of some of the levels, which paths often looping back on each other redundantly and the difficulty that some players expressed over the platformer sequences.

Looking back, some changes that would have been beneficial from the start would be to invest more heavily into the game's assets so that it would have a stronger visual identity, and to purchase the Gamemaker licenses for exporting to multiple platforms so that many different machines and players can run the game. There should also have been a stricter adherence to the planned schedule so that more playtesting could have been done for further development cycles. The spider character was meant more for narrative value rather than gameplay, so implementing web abilities for platforming would be very valuable for the game.

Moving forward, it would be valuable to implement these changes in the future as well as research other games that use the movement of spiders or grappling mechanics well. There could also be more polish done to the game, such as animations, cleaner transitions, and implementation of features such as start and pause screens.

Bibliography

Whaley, B. (2015). Who Will Play Terebi Gemu When No Japanese Children Remain?

Distanced Engagement in Atlus' Catherine. *Games and Culture*, 92-114.

Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Red Rescue Team [Computer software]. (2006). Tokyo: The

Pokémon Company.

Fox, Toby (2015). Undertale [Computer software]. United States: Toby Fox.

Alton, Chris. "Going Beyond the Game: Development of Gamer Identities Within Societal

Discourse and Virtual Spaces." *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies*

Association, vol. 10, no. 16, 2017, pp. 214–227.