CAT Analysis

Conceptually, I wanted to touch on a subject that could apply to many of us students and even those outside of this group. Such a subject would be difficult to pinpoint, so I took that in stride as I began questioning decisions, the passage of time, and the duality of progress and failure. I wondered if I was making the same mistakes again and again. I wondered about the possibility of timelines splitting and converging solely based on the choices I make. I thought about climbing ladders and stumbling down them, and asked myself: How far back do I stumble? Am I actually making progress? How do I break out of the loop? These questions bring the famous quote from the 1983 film *Wargame*: “The only winning move is not to play.” But is it? The choice is yours.

These ideas are conveyed through the various GIFs, mainly visually through the images they show. Each GIF also has a text caption within it, which helps to convey these ideas through a somewhat subtle written mode. The endless staircase GIF from Mario 64 could showcase life as it feels when you are making infinite progress, but it could also signify when you’re putting in infinite work without actually progressing anywhere. The inevitable failure, despite one’s hard work, is brought forth to blinding light, as depicted in the GIF from the Breath of the Wild. Sometimes, as the Portal 2 GIF shows, life seems to taking a spiraling nosedive with seemingly no end. When you do finally hit rock-bottom, sometimes you feel like it is too late to do anything more; your actions don’t seem to have any impact on the world around you, and as the Minecraft GIF says, 20 minutes (a full Minecraft day, which at first may feel like forever but seems so short as you progress) can fly by so fast. The following GIF, with its sinister image and message of the G-Man from Half-Life: Alyx, echoes the sentiment that it may be easy to fall into the temptation of giving in, losing hope, and never picking yourself back up when it seems everything is working against you. But as the button panel GIF from the Stanley Parable Demo reminds us, “choices carry tremendous meaning and consequence.” Simply giving up is in itself a choice, and that choice would mean that everything you were working toward would be for nothing. You would, in choosing to give in, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Does that count as winning? It is up for you to decide: “time to choose.”

Choice is such a key element in video games. One of the defining characteristics of them compared to other forms of entertainment is that one’s interactions with it change how it is played out. Some games allow for more interaction than others; some interactions in games are more impactful than others. In this way, once could argue that video games are quite similar to real life. This is the primary reason behind my choice of featuring GIFs from various video games as it reflects this decision-demanding aspect of life. Additionally, the nature of these GIFs referencing video games (many coming from “brighter” titles either in terms of themes or in visual appearance) leans itself to a slight playfulness, adding to the façade that this sequence is nothing but a playful showcase. In doing so, the deeper meaning is kept less obvious, much like a young teen would keep their problems to themselves and show the rest of the world a happier mask. However, the darker and less saturated colors throughout the page contrast against this implied brightness, which begs the question of a deeper message or purpose.

Many of these GIFs were found after digging around on the Google Images to find them. Others had to be recorded myself or taken from videos online and converted into GIFs. For the GIFs without captions included, I used Tenor’s GIF editing tools to add my own. For these GIFs, the captions I chose were picked specifically for double meaning; the surface-level meaning referring to what is being observed in the GIF itself (e.g. endless staircase, the sped up Minecraft day-night cycle and its relative length for more experienced players), and also its more obscured meaning as it relates to the subject of life, progress, failure, time, and choice. Additionally, I wanted to make the user scroll through the page much like Dennis Cooper’s “Zac’s Haunted House” as it would add to the interactive part of the work and emphasize the theme of choice—the viewer must choose to see the progression of the sequence. In this way, the subject of this artifact can be partially conveyed by a nonverbal mode. The use of GIFs (and by extension the length of time the viewer spends looking at them) emphasizes the concepts of time and the paradox of both continuous progress and no progress at all—yet another nonverbal means of communication. Finally, I embedded these images in a website I built to make the page scroll indefinitely as though the user were stuck in a loop itself. I found an example of this implemented through JavaScript, and I felt this would mirror the cycle of life and its loop of ups and downs and decision points—a method of communication that would be difficult or lengthy outside of electronic means. I also felt it would give more weight to the “final” GIF’s message: “It’s time to choose.” Do you let the cycle “Continue?” and fight your way to the top no matter what it takes? Do you take the risk of running up a staircase that might never end? Or do you give in, quit, and never live the same way again? How do you win the game of life?

When I drafted this artifact, my primary audience would be comprised of younger individuals who have a history with video games and who have played or at least heard about many of the games showcased. I believed that these would be the people that would see the GIFs and their corresponding games, captions, and contents, and piece the dots of the overall mood of the artifact relatively quickly before reflecting on the multilayered possibilities and implications of the work. However, I wanted the work to also be understandable by a more general audience of young people, so I deliberately designed my GIFs to come from largely recognizable titles and franchises, most of which would showcase an easy-to-understand action/event and/or display a relevant caption. In doing so, both the larger audience, who would ideally connect the captions and the animated images with the ingrained commentary of life, and the primary audience, who would appreciate the subtlety of the infamous endless staircase from Mario 64, the 20-minute long Minecraft day, and other key details, quirks, or events of each video game shown in the GIFs contributing to said commentary, could understand and reflect upon their own life.

As I built the artifact, only the fine details truly changed. My peers had little to suggest to add conceptually, leaving me to make the decisions on how exactly the final version would look. Truth be told, the title “Continue?” (a reference to many game-over/title screens) came to be shortly after I published the GitHub repo for the artifact under the vague moniker “gif-sequence.” During revision, I decided to give each GIF a background that was made of a blurred version of its first frame. This way, each background fit nicely with each GIF. It just so happened that each GIF had somewhat darker colors to them, which translated into backgrounds that I could stack on top of each other without much visual noise or sudden disruption. I later added a solid black background (visible only from a widescreen display as I didn’t want the GIFs to get too large on these displays), which, when combined with the colors of the backgrounds and the GIFs, lend more toward the darker themes/ideas presented overall. I also added two additional GIFs representing blue and orange portals (also from Portal 2 as a reference to the “forever falling” GIF and the fact that the page loops as though it were moving between vertically-stacked portals) at the top and bottom of the page respectively. I had intended on adding these from the get-go (though initially I had excluded them as I was figuring out the spacing of the GIFs and getting the infinite scroll feature to work) as depicted in the rough storyboard, but the details on how were murky. After much trial and error, many hours of head scratching, and many renders later, I finally decided to use a side-view of the portals as shown on the page currently. With all of these elements, I aimed to provoke reflection on one’s life challenges, its ups and downs, and its points of decision, and propose to the audience—many of whom may be at one of these critical points of doubt, struggle, and progressless-progress—a choice. In any case, time moves on. Life moves on. Whether or not you decide on something is a decision, and every decision has an effect even if it isn’t visible or instantly observable. And when it comes down to the tough decision of whether to stay the course or to hang up the hat and coat, it is up to you to decide. Life is a finite endless paradox.