CAT Analysis

In my 2nd written response, I touched on the themes and uses of time in interactive works and games like Lee Bessette’s *Adjunct Run*, Lydia Neon’s *Player2*, Momo Pixel’s *Hair Nah*, and, most notably, Kara Stone’s *Ritual of the Moon*. Discussing how time serves different and unique functions and roles in these examples inspired me to focus this artifact on time as a subject of a theme. I also took inspiration from Porpentine’s *With Those We Love Alive* and classic terminal-styled choose-your-own-adventure games. Finally, the interactive poem exercise (the one where I explored the tensions and relationships between man and machine) and storyboarding exercise inspired the aesthetic and form of this artifact.

The initial direction of this artifact also stemmed from my own musings and struggles with time, particularly with learning how to balance my time, how to choose what to prioritize, etc. In the past five years, I have often encountered these struggles, and it has led me to slowly realize just how finite my time really is. Sometimes, this realization is met with despair (ending 2: despair). Other times, anger (ending 4: inferno). Still others, indifference or complete ignorance (ending 1: ignorance). Sometimes, satisfaction or acceptance (ending 5: acceptance). Each person has their own way of spending their time, and each has their own reaction to the realization of its passing. There’s an adage that goes along the lines of “Live today like it’s your last day.” To that I ask: how would one know if it were one’s last day? How would one react, both in choice and in emotion, to such knowledge? What would be the significance of these choices? What if it weren’t only that individual’s last day, but the earth’s last day? These are the questions I wished to explore and pose to my audience—everyone—with this artifact. Though it may bring more questions than answers—these questions are unique to each person and don’t have definitive answers that I can offer—the hope is that through this artifact’s interactive story and its five endings, the audience can come to their own conclusions.

The nature of an interactive story brings about the opportunity of multiple branches and endings—multiple explorations of potential timelines. Sometimes, a certain choice may lead you no closer or further from a certain path. Sometimes, one decision will change your outcome drastically. As Mike Shapiro, the voice of the G-Man from the Half-Life series, famously said: “the right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world.” As you play through the game, you may discover what’s been going on these last few days. Or, you may remain totally oblivious, occupied solely by the work you pride yourself for and blissfully unaware of the events unfolding around you. The choice is yours. Each day that passes is time you’ve lost; time that you can never get back. It’s up to you to decide how you spend that time. And once your time is up, it’s gone. After all, “ultimo” is Latin for “finale.” Time marches on without you.

The artifact as a whole is almost an opposite of Kara Stone’s *Ritual of the Moon*. Instead of being an exiled witch stranded on the moon with the power to save the earth from a comet over the course of many (real life) days, you are a normal person named Alex who is (un)knowingly living out their last three (in-game) days with no power to stop the moon itself from crashing into the planet. Whereas *Ritual of the Moon* stretches time (5 minutes daily over the course of 28 real life days) towards a decision with multiple variables of deliberation, emotion, and consideration, *Ultimo* simultaneously compresses and stretches time. The decisions the player must make are fast and in the moment—one cannot take their sweet time to decide the course of their fate. The act of not deciding is in itself a decision—if the player does not consciously make a decision, Alex makes one for you. Depending on the state of the character(s), the text that appears to progress the story may appear more quickly or more drawn out you make have somewhat more or less time to call your shots and process the information that streams through Alex’s mind. But regardless, you only have seconds to make each decision. Each decision comes one after the other. There is no time to pause, no time for lengthy deliberation, no time for self-healing or second-guesses. In one’s last days, every second is precious. Time ticks onward. In *Ritual of the Moon*, the witch lives on, and the earth may survive. In *Ultima*, everyone’s fate is sealed and timestamped.

I designed the artifact to appear and operate as though it were a terminal text-based game for a number of reasons. The first was that it would be a simple-to-operate and interesting aesthetic to use for an interactive story. The second was that its black and white, cut and dry, cold and calculated appearance would juxtapose the simulated scenario and its computerized, digitized, and simplified nature with the organic, flowing, and humanly complex aspects of the story and conceptual inquiry. The darkness of the terminal background reflects (or should I say, absorbs) the dark, mysterious, and deeply contemplative nature of the theme and may be likened to only having access to one’s thoughts—a stream of ones’ words, one’s consciousness. The predominant use of the white monospaced font compliments this style, with only the occasional bold and yellow colored text (which is symbolic for a full moon) to point to the player’s active choices (active being those that the player may enter into the console as a command as compared to letting Alex choose for them) and the gray text for echoing the player’s input in classic terminal style. Additionally, I utilize lowercase text for nearly all of Alex’s internal thoughts (and the general I/O – all internal to the player and by extension, Alex) in contrast to the normally capitalized external information (sound, external dialogue, names, etc.). The use of the “t-72:00:00” timers at the beginning of each day, which mimic the countdown style of space-flight launches, appear technical and allude to some meaning or importance that isn’t made immediately clear but fits in with the computer-terminal aesthetic of the piece overall. Their repeated appearance and progressive countdown as the days pass aim to instill an increasing sense of urgency and foreboding until the clock hits 0 at the end, which later begins to count upward as time continues its forward path indefinitely. The selection of the moon being the doomsday event in combination with the countdown at the beginning of each day also mirrors the approaching doomsday event in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*; those who see this resemblance may be quicker to piece together the situation. There is also a series of asterisks that appear at the top of the window that shrink in length as time passes—a visual queue for the player’s limited time. Additionally, the terminal-aesthetic allows me to pace the appearance of each line, word, and character, which lends me the ability to create effects of tension, eeriness, sadness, boredom, etc. through non-verbal means. The pitch black background lends the piece overall a dark and foreboding mood as the monospaced white font pierces through to relay information in the cold, digitized way that a computer would. The written text takes the front row, but there is more that is left unsaid for the player to ponder. The paths you take leave others unexplored and inaccessible—an affordance that this electronic medium makes possible. Time and choice are inexplicably bound.

To make the interactive text more accessible and smaller in size, the artifact was built entirely out of pure HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, enabling it to be played across multiple platforms that support modern browsers. All the code for the artifact is contained in one JavaScript file, which took many iterations to get to its current state. Outwardly, the artifact appears simple: a solid black background with white text overlaid atop it using the monospace “Inconsolata” font to recreate the old DOS/Command Prompt look. Internally, the code is divided into two main sections, which can be divided further. The first main section is the underlying mechanism that makes it all possible. This section can be divided into three main components: the Dialog system, which handles the creation, display, and deletion of the text that gets rendered to the screen; the Command system, which handles the player’s input and processes it to run various other functions to progress the story; and the GameTimer system, which provides the artifact with variable-length decision-making windows that are triggered when the last line of dialog for a particular scene is displayed. These three systems are heavily tied to each other and are the driving force behind the game’s functionality. For example, the Dialog system prints out an “echo” of the player’s input and other command-related info should the player mistype something. It also allows me to automatically start the GameTimer when the last dialog has been output (so that the time doesn’t start as soon as the dialog begins to be printed, which would be an accessibility concern and would give players who skipped the paced dialog printing by hitting enter without any commands an unfair advantage). The second main section of the code is dedicated to the story and contains dedicated story functions, which define which commands are available, how much time after the printed dialog the player has, which commands lead to which parts of the story, etc. Most notably, the final scene (labeled “story\_end” in the code) is the final destination in the story. How one gets there, however, changes the progression of the story to get there (including the ending of day 3 prior to this final scene), and this path determines what ending is displayed to the player. All of these parts are tied together with JavaScript’s setInterval and setTimeout functions, which is quite fitting for the subjects and themes of this artifact. I won’t get too detailed with the inner mechanisms, but if you are curious to explore the code, feel free to explore the attached source files.

When I first started brainstorming for this artifact, I knew I wanted to bring the subject of time to the forefront through a doomsday scenario. I wasn’t quite sure how I wanted to do it—at one point I was thinking about having a low-resolution 3D game to play with, but I later decided to make a text-based game since I figured that it would be simplest to do. However, as I quickly found out, doing something as seemingly simple as creating a system for emulating console output (whose line output speed could be variable, whose characters could have delay between them for a typewriter effect, and whose queue could be forced out and still trigger some timer function) proved to be a large challenge. By the time I had gotten a solid groundwork for this Dialog system, I was, incidentally, running low on time. Additionally, I had initially designed my storyboard draft using Paint.NET, but it was incomplete as I was unsure of the direction I wanted to take the other paths. After some time, however, I completed the branches and began working on implementing/reworking the Command system (the first iteration wasn’t very flexible and did not support arguments). I also added some debug/developer commands to help speed up testing (try typing “debug” or “list” and see what happens), and once I had completed these systems (at this point I had created the first few scenes but did not have the capacity for a reliable scene countdown system), I worked on developing some more scenes and later introduced the GameTimer system after receiving some feedback from my peer reviewer. I then completed the story in full and spent a few hours playtesting, fixing small mistakes, and checking for and fixing bugs. As a whole, I believe the end product accomplishes what I set out to do and more (maybe too much more). In hindsight, a simpler solution would have sufficed, but this was a labor of love, and I hope it prompts as much reflection in players as it did for me.