German Valentine: Process Report

Sebastian Faust
Candidate Number: 700033
Oslo, Norway
sebastian.faust1997@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will outline the process of designing and building the mobile game "German Valentine". The project was created as a final give in for the module "WGD3SD Digital Design" at Høyskolen Kristiania.[1] I will also outline the reasoning for all major design decisions taken in the development process.

The paper is structured in the following way: I will explain the assignment in section 2. In section 3 I will showcase three ideas that I considered when starting this project. In section 4 I am going to showcase the design decisions taken before I started working on the project. The design and built process itself is described in section 5. Lastly, I will draw a conclusion in section 6.

2. ASSIGNMENT

The assignment this year was "Where I'm from". This meant that we were to design an app, website or web application that showcases some unique place, event or activity that we have a personal connection with. The assignment was very open ended and thusly gave us a good opportunity to show some creativity.

3. IDEAS

After some brainstorming I came up with three possible topics to focus my project on: The small village "Detmold", the even smaller village "Gummersbach", or my favorite German Tradition.

3.1 Detmold

Detmold is the small town in Germany in which I was born and in which I lived 18 years of my live. A project about Detmold would have focused on my change of perception of this town. When I was a little boy living in Detmold, I hated how tiny it was and how everyone knew each other. After moving away however, I grew to appreciate those exact attributes.

3.2 Gummersbach

Gummersbach is the town in Germany in which my University is located. A project about this place would have been a survival guide, showing new students some tips that I wish I would have known when moving there. It would have been very over the top and exaggerated.

3.3 The "Liebesmaien" Tradition

My third Idea was to showcase a rather unknown German tradition, the "Liebesmaien" tradition. On the night before the first of May, bachelors in west Germany head out into the forest to secretly cut down birch trees. These trees, the "Liebesmaien", are then dressed up with ribbons and carved out hearts. The bachelors then head to the houses of their respective crushes and place the trees on their roof or fix them to their fences or nearby posts. On the morning of the first of May, German bachelorettes look outside their houses to see if they received such a "Liebesmaie". The secret admirer stays secret for one month, then he comes back to the house to pick up the tree. He is normally greeted by the parents with cake or beer.

Figure 1 German "Liebesmaie" [2]

I settled on this idea because I love the weirdness of this tradition and I truly feel like more people should know about it. After Settling on it, I researched it some more and looked at the individual details in how different parts of Germany celebrate the tradition slightly different. I will not outline all my findings here but the ones I deemed most interesting ended up as facts on the loading screens outlined in section 5.4. [3] [4]

4. THE PROJECT

In This Section I will outline my goals for this project, which tools I used to build it and all the steps I took and the decisions I made before starting to work on developing it.

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[1] "Høyskolen Kristiania."

[2] Dr. K. Bauer, "May -Traditions."

[3] Henry Lai, "Spring Feeling: 'Liebsmaien.'"

[4] Dr. K. Bauer, "May -Traditions."

4.1 Aim

My main aim for this project is to introduce people to this tradition through a fun and interactive way. After brainstorming some ways to achieve this,

I settled on building a mobile game that takes the user through the individual stages of the tradition. I made this decision because I feel like the strangeness of the tradition would translate perfectly into an exenterated and "over the top" game. And by making it exaggerated and doubling down on the weirdness of the tradition, I felt like I could engage users of my game and maybe even spark some further interest in the original tradition.

Furthermore, I wanted to link the gameplay to some real-life consequences. I wanted to achieve this by linking the act of giving a tree to some sort of chat. A User could choose who he/she wants to give a tree to and this person would then receive an anonymous message that they have a secret admirer that gifted them a tree. How I ended up implementing this will be explained in 5.5.

Lastly, I decided to limit the times a user could give a tree to once a year, at the first of May. This way getting a tree would still feel special and it would be linked closer to the original tradition.

4.2 Target Group

My target group for this project are people unfamiliar or familiar with this tradition in the age range from 13 to 25. I feel like people in this range could be engaged by the exaggerated game I was aiming to build. This age range is also the exact age range of people in Germany taking part in this tradition, which is a very fitting parallel in my opinion.

4.3 Art style

I was considering two art styles for this project: Flat Vector and Pixel art. I chose these two options because they conveyed the fun, playful and cute aesthetic I was aiming to achieve. I made a mood board for both art styles to help me settle on one of the two. After some consideration I settled on pixel art, because I liked the idea of giving the game an old-school, arcade aesthetic to spark some nostalgia in the older half of my target group. Pixel art also made animating characters very easy and at this point I already knew that animating assets would be the part of the project I wanted to invest most of my time in.

Figure 2 Example for flat vector characters [5]

Figure 3 Example for pixel art characters [6]

[5] ShutterStock, "Game Character Vector Art."

[6] Beeglebug, "2D Platformer (Learning Unity)."

4.4 Platform

I considered the following options as platforms for my project: Standalone app, web app, hypothetical Tinder plugin, Facebook[7] messenger game. I summed up the pros and cons of my options in Table 1.

Platform	Pro	Con
Standalone	Use of phone contacts. Can send anonymous messages.	Receiver and sender need to download app.
Web app	No download necessary.	Contacts not available. Cannot send anonymous messages.
Tinder	Users are already in the mindset of dating. Chats already implemented.	Completely theoretical. Very different art style.
Messenger	FB contacts available. No download necessary. Chats already implemented. Big userbase.	Cannot send anonymous messages if not authorized by user.

Table 1 Comparing Platforms

I ended up settling on messenger. Needing both parties to download my game would probably lead to it not being used. It could only be used once a year and only within a very select group of people. A Hypothetical Tinder plugin sounded like a perfect platform, but after looking at Tinder's flat and clean art style, I quickly realized that it would clash with my pixel art aesthetic (Figure 4).

Finally, Messenger already had a chat function implemented, which meant that I could put my soul focus on the design of the game. The only assumption that I have to make for this project to work, is that Facebook gives me the permission to open a temporary anonymous chat in messenger, which is a limitation I am happy to accept.

4.5 Tools

In this section I will briefly list all the tools I used for this project and what I used them for.

Unity2D [8]
As the main Game engine and development environment.

Visual Studio + C# [9]
Scripting the logic of the game.

Piskel [10]
Most of the pixel art, animation and icons.

Gimp [11]
Larger background assets, tile sets and editing the messenger screens.

Git + GitHub [12]
Version control and hosting a website to showcase the project.

Bfxr [13]
To create all 8-Bit sound effects used in the game.

Tiled [14]
To create larger, tile-based images out of the tile sets I created.

Figure 4 Tinder screenshot

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[7] Mark Zuckerberg, "Facebook."

[8] Unity Technologies, "Unity2D."

[9] Microsoft, "Visual Studio-IDE."

[10] Benoit Charbonnier, "Piskel - Free Online Sprite Editor."

[11] The GIMP-Team, "GIMP."

[12] Microsoft, "Github."

[13] Stephen Lavelle, "Bfxr."

[14] Thorbjørn Lindeijer, "Tiled."

Figure 5 Player Character Animations

5. THE WORK PROCESS

Here I will describe my work process and all design decisions I took to get my final project as close to fulfilling the aim I outlined in the last section. The main game consists of three stages: Getting the tree, dressing it up and placing it. In addition to this I have built a main menu and some fact cards for the loading screens. Finally, I created some mockups for the messenger screens leading into the game and the resulting messenger chat after the game is completed.

Here I would also like to point out that I published the entire built process in a public GitHub repository[15], for those that wan to see every individual step of this project.

5.1 Getting the tree

In this stage the player is supposed to pick up a birch tree, while avoiding the detection of the rangers walking around the forest. I started by designing the player character and its various animation states (Figure 5). I wanted to make the fact that he was German as obvious as possible, so I based my design on the cliché image a foreigner might have of Germans.

After this I created the basic layout of the level. I used a tile map I created to build the forest ground the player would walk on. Then I populated the scene with some objects that where Important for the gameplay, such has trees to cut down and bushes to hide behind.

Figure 6 First Stage: Player, objects and tiles

I continued by creating the ranger assets and animations and placing them into the scene. I also added some lighting effects to make the scene look more like it took place at night.

Figure 7 First stage: Ranger and lighting effects

I was able to achieve a parallax effect with some objects in the back- and for-ground, by placing multiple two-dimensional images in a three-dimensional scene.
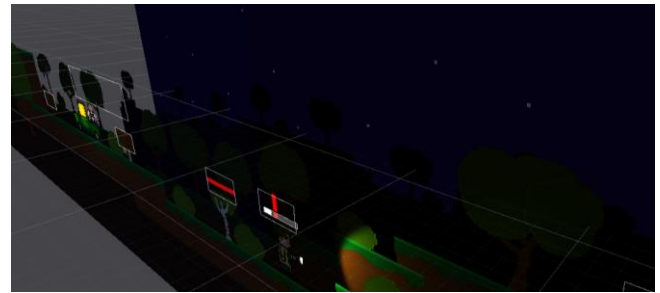

Figure 8 First stage: Parallax effect

Finally, I created some pixel art UI-elements, some decorative objects and some sound effects for jumping, landing and various other parts of this stage. Little things like sounds and particle effects really helped tying the gameplay experience together and I am very happy with the result.

Figure 9 First stage: Decorative objects and UI

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[15] Sebastian Faust, "GitHub: GermanValentine."

Figure 10 Pickup Animations

5.2 Dressing up the tree

In This stage the player would be able to create their own personalized heart that the receiver of the tree would then be able to see. Due to time constraint I was unable to fully implement this feature, thusly I only have a mockup of how this stage would look like.

Figure 11 Second stage: Carving out a heart

5.3 Placing the tree

Here the player would drive to their crushes house while dodging traffic to finally bring the "Liebesmaie" to its destination. I again started by creating the player animations (Figure 10). I used three sprites of the first scene as a base and then continued from there, this way I could keep a sense of consistency throughout the entire playthrough.

I continued by placing the player asset in the scene and building the road using a new tile set I created.

Figure 12 Third stage: Player and road

After that, I created some houses the player would drive past and eventually throw his tree onto. I used the German "Fachwerkhaus"[16] architectural style as a base, to again, make the game feel as German as possible.

Figure 13 Pixel Art "Fachwerkhaus"

I added lighting effect and used the same technic as in scene one to achieve a parallax effect. Then I created some very German obstacles for the player to dodge. I also tried to add some storytelling by placing other "Liebesmaien" in the background of the scene.

Figure 14 Third stage: Obstacles, Lighting and Parallax

Finally, I added some arcade-style controls to fit with the pixel art aesthetic.

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[16] Voba Immobilien Service, "Fachwerhaus."

Figure 15 Third stage: UI elements

Figure 17 Fact Card

5.4 Main menu and fact cards

The Main menu is the screen a user sees when opening the game in messenger. Because games in messenger are opened from within chats, we can assume that the game already knows which person the tree is supposed to be given to. I decided to keep this screen very simple: just one button with an obvious "call to action", a count down to the one day this game can be used on, a header and some minimal background animations.

Figure 16 Main Menu

I was able to find a font that combined the very old-timey look of "fraktur" and pixel art.[17] Fraktur fonts are originally from Germany and have a heavy association with the country, thusly I found them to be very appropriate here[18]. And the pixel art aesthetic makes them blend in with the game beautifully.

To make the loading screens more entertaining, I added some facts about the tradition that I thought where interesting.
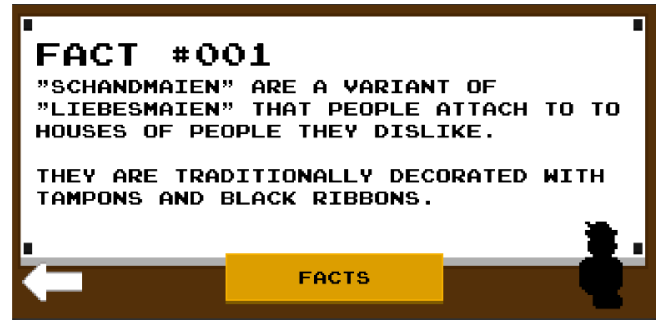
5.5 Messenger Mockup

Lastly, I made some mockups of the messenger screens that would lead into and out of the game. I also designed a Pixel art icon for the game. It combines a heart with the central object of the tradition: The "Liebesmaie". (Figure 18)
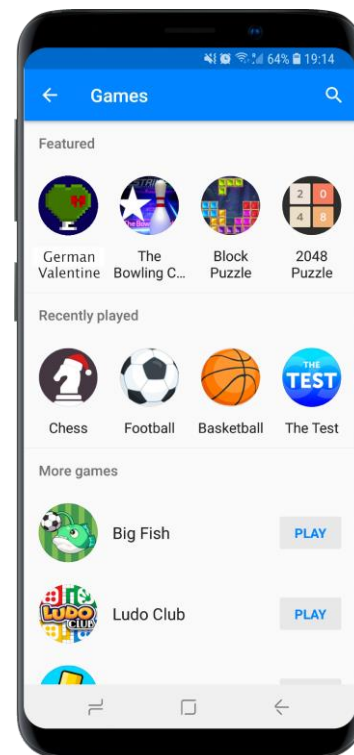

Figure 18 Messenger Mockup: Game menu

I tried to keep the messenger mockups as close to the look of the original Facebook messenger. I looked at the font Facebook used and at the font size and coloring. Figure 19 shows the message that a recipient of a tree would receive. It has a little explanation text and a link to an external information page that would give a detailed explanation of the app and the tradition.

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[17] HK Sarsfield, "Berlin Fraktur Pixel Typeface."

[18] "Fraktur Font Origin."
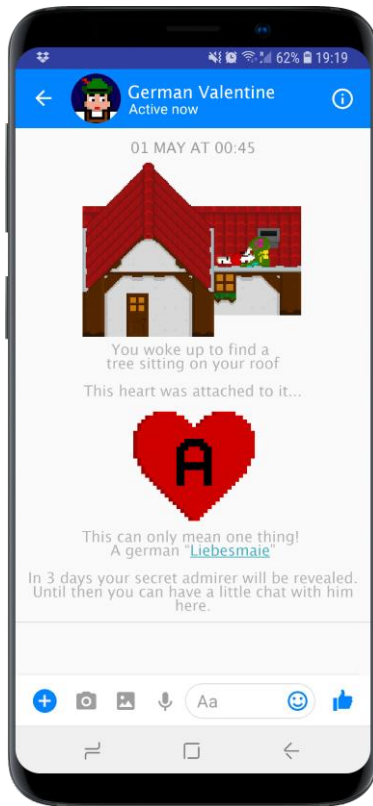
Figure 19 Messenger Mockup: Chat opening

Figure 20 Messenger Mockup: Chat end

The two users would then be able to talk for three days in this anonymous chat. After that time period, the prompt shown in Figure 20 would show up and the recipient could choose how to "greet" their admirer. After this, the chat would be shut down.
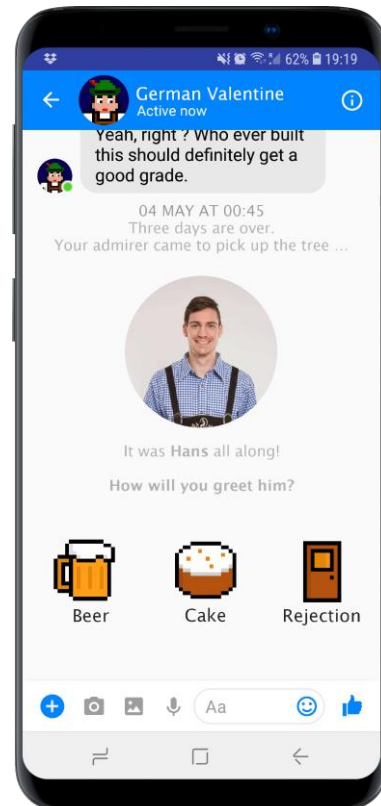
6. CONCLUSION

Half a semester of work later, these are my final thoughts: The code is by far not the most efficient, but because this was a design focused course, I am not to worried about that. The feedback I got from my professor and my tutors during the design process was a great help and many of their ideas made it into the final project as well. If I had more time, I would have liked to fully implement the "heart carving" – stage because this is now the only part of the gameplay loop that does not fully work. Besides that, I still think that I was able to fulfill the aim I set out for myself. I can proudly say that the final game turned out as cute, exaggerated and weird as I hoped it would.

All in all, this was a great opportunity to improve my animation skills and a good excuse to finally teach myself how to build a complete game in unity.

I have invested quite a bit of time into this project, but when I see my friends playing the game and giggling at the animations I made and the tiny jokes that I built into the game, I know it was absolutely worth it.

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