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Lost and Hound: The Dream, Design, and Deficiencies

The Dream

The Initial Idea

I love to play video games, and one genre that has always been very engaging for me to play has been platformers. While many of them have been relatively light on the story/literary aspects, such as *Super Mario Bros*, several others, such as *Celeste* and *Hollow Knight*, have had much more to offer in the form of narratives and hidden imagery. Games like those, as well as some that we played in class, like *Thomas Was Alone* and *Braid*, were also really fun for me to play, and had creative ways of telling a narrative without explicit narration. *Braid* was a particularly good example of this, with the plot twist in the last level being a great example about how on-screen cues can allow the player to realize the true narrative on their own, without it being spoon fed to them. Historically, the games I've mentioned have been very well received by critics, with *Celeste* and *Hollow Knight* being especially great examples, as they boast some of the best reviews of all time on Steam. *Celeste* has the more explicitly narrated story, with all of the characters being fleshed out through several dialogue exchanges with each other, and both games are renowned for their innovative gameplay mechanics. With these games in mind, I decided I wanted to try to both capture the charming, engaging nature of platformers and employ subtle yet powerful storytelling through visual cues both in the environment and the player character.

In terms of the gameplay, I decided somewhat arbitrarily to do a game where the player is a dog, as I thought it would be a fresh take on a genre that frequently features human or humanoid characters (and I'm also just a big fan of dogs). I like to think that dogs experience the

world in a very sunshine-and-rainbows way for the most part, so I wanted the first impression of my game to be very whimsical, and lighthearted. For this reason, I wasn't trying to design a technically-difficult platformer like *Celeste*, nor one that would have confusing level design that left players struggling to figure out how to progress, as can be found in games such as *Thomas Was Alone* and games that are more focused on puzzles themselves, like *Baba Is You*. I wanted my game to be more of a journey in which the player walks through a story that unfolds in the world around them. For examples of how this is done, I looked at *Unpacking*, *Gone Home*, and *Firewatch*, all of which require the player to interpret the story for themselves through items or details they find while exploring the map. I decided initially to try and tell the story through various items that the dog would interact with throughout the story, but I realized that I didn't really have the time to design enough items for this to be an interesting mechanic. Instead, with the help of some ideas from the class and Jason, I ended up creating emote boxes that feature items or images that the dog in the story would associate with certain emotions. The player will have to determine for themselves what each box represents, which to me felt kind of like how certain recurring items in *Unpacking* began to take on meaning when they are used repeatedly, such as the teddy bear or diploma. I think this adds a cool layer to the storytelling of the game, as it is not only a mechanic used to tell how the dog is feeling, but also what it associates with those feelings. For example, a thunderstorm image denotes fear, since many dogs are afraid of storms and loud noises.

Creating The Narrative

The first major obstacle in my game development process was coming up with an actual story to tell. Given that the whole purpose of the project is to create a *literary* game, I was troubled to realize that, despite coming up with an idea of a game that I believed would be fun to

play, I actually hadn't created any sort of story or narrative for the game at this point. While I figured it would be easy to do something like "Super Dog Saves the Day," that idea ended up sounding too much like *Super Mario Bros* with a small visual change. I wanted to do something that felt organic and immersive, so I decided to try and keep the game largely "realistic," omitting any superpowers and having the story take place in a world similar to our own.

For the thematic elements, I drew some inspiration from several movies that feature dogs, such as *Bolt* and *A Dog's Journey*. Both of these movies see dogs, which are the main characters, separated from their family and previous lives, and in both movies they are trying to find their way back home. I thought the themes of isolation and alienation in new settings were very compelling, so I decided to try and develop a story in which the player/dog is experiencing those things as they progress through the story. However, I wanted the story to evolve these themes as the player traversed through several different levels. In the movies, these themes are made evident as soon as the dog is separated from its old life, and they are slowly resolved throughout the story. In order to avoid this sharp shift, I decided to have the dog in my game experience almost an inverse journey compared to that of *Bolt*. Bolt begins his story happy with where he is and is thrust into an unfamiliar and lonely world, and ultimately through exploration finds something better than he started with. Like this story, the dog in my game (whom I've been referring to unofficially as "Shark") will begin in a situation where he's happy, but that is about where the similarities end. Whereas Bolt desired to stay in his current situation and was forced out, Shark will be eager to explore outside of his normal home, and will willingly leave it behind. With this change in story, I think there are new themes that are open to be explored. For example, the idea that "the grass is (or maybe isn't?) always greener on the other side" is one that I found interesting to play with. The player is told through in-game cues that the dog is happy in its

original place, but also that it is excited to leave. I decided to have the narrative be that the farther the dog gets away from home, the less appealing the environments seem to be. This effect could be compounded by reminiscing the life left behind, which could convey a sense of regret at leaving a good thing.

The Design

Genre Affordances

The 2D platformer genre has a very defined style: players move on a 2D plane, with the typical game mechanics involving moving left and right, jumping, and occasionally additional actions such as dashing or crouching. This simple standard set of actions, coupled with only having to deal with two dimensions when designing the visuals and the physics, makes 2D platformers fairly easy to develop while still being engaging to play, but run the risk of being too generalized and not standing out among other games of the same genre.

Designing the artwork for a 2D game can be as simple as any genre, allowing creators to very easily create an environment and items that fit the desired aesthetic, and it is relatively easy to design custom characters and assets for specific instances. In the case of more pixelated games, it is especially easy to create original designs, even without art experience. This lends itself to telling a story through specific visual cues, as well as just getting started creating a visual landscape to realize a game's vision, as a new developer can quickly produce the assets required to take a scene from their imagination to their computer screen. In my own game development process, I used *Pixelorama*, which is both free and easy to learn how to use. Using pixel graphics as my art medium allowed me to create the most important aspects of the game exactly as I wanted them to be, which was especially important when designing things such as character emotes, which were used to convey how Shark was feeling at different points in the game.

In terms of the gameplay itself, designing a 2D platformer was relatively easy, as the process is well-documented due to the popularity of the genre, so all of the information about how to code the basic mechanics into Godot were readily available. Furthermore, the items in the script itself were very easy to understand, so I was able to tweak anything I wanted for my specific game, such as how high a character can jump and how much the player can control the jump by holding down the space bar. This allowed me to focus a little more on the visual design of the game, as I nailed down the basic mechanics pretty quickly.

Finally, 2D platformers allow for flexible methods of storytelling, especially compared to text-based games like those made with Inky. One could include a voiceover of an omniscient narrator, as is seen in *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, while another may take the same route as *Celeste* and *Hollow Knight*, which used text boxes to display written dialogue between characters. I personally decided to go another route, using emote boxes (like those seen in *Stardew Valley*) to display the dog's emotions/thoughts, and I even used the actual gameplay mechanics to add to the story, with aspects of the environment and player movement changing as the game progressed. This was done to mimic games like *The Final Station*, where a dying player slows down and pauses near the end of the game, serving as foreshadowing to their eventual succumbing to a disease. In my game, however, this was simply done to demonstrate the dog becoming tired and not having the same drive to continue its journey.

Designing the Game Assets

When designing the game assets, I began with the player character, which I felt was one of the most important pieces of the game, as it's the one sprite that will be on the screen for the entirety of the game. I used some reference photos of golden retriever puppies from the internet, as well as a couple pictures of dog sprites created by other people. I actually found this process

relatively easy, and I was pleased with the final product. In order to give the dog a little life, I made a simple animation for both jumping and walking, where all four legs are off the ground. While this was largely due to my lack of animation experience, I found that the simple animation made the dog seem much more lively than when it was just sliding around, and I even thought that it made it appear excited, which was great for establishing the early-game eagerness that the dog was intended to be feeling.

Aside from the dog itself, the only other game assets that I created myself were the emote boxes and the in-game items that are represented in the boxes. The emote boxes are, as I mentioned in an earlier section, created to display emotion, and they use items and images familiar to the dog to do so. I decided to use four separate images to cover four separate emotions: a toy carrot represents the dog being happy or liking something, a tennis ball represents excitement, a (hopefully) smug/evil-looking cat face represents anger or annoyance, and a thunderstorm represents fear. The in-game items were used to demonstrate that the items that the dog associates with emotions are things that he regularly interacts with in his environment, with the carrot being a favorite toy (this is also a small easter egg in reference to the carrot toy from *Bolt*), a tennis ball being found across the street, and the cat hiding behind the fence to the left of the start point of the game. The thunderstorm is the only emote that I didn't directly add, although that was largely due to my limited knowledge of how to do so and the limited time to make the game.

Godot and Coding

Overall, I found the coding part of Godot largely manageable, due in part to the wealth of Youtube videos and documentation available for things such as designing a player character and

its movement and animations. The only parts I found particularly difficult to code were the emote triggers, which I tried to do using a hidden box that, when the player was in contact with it, would trigger the emote animation. The animation itself was simply an emote that I designed in the same Pixelorama project as the dog itself, so I could just download the pdf without the player sprite and the emote would be in the perfect position. After tying that to the player sprite, all I had to do was code for the animation of the desired emote to trigger when overlapping with a trigger.

I think the most time-consuming part of the entire process for me was learning how to use Godot. There are many tiny details to pay attention to, and collision and tilemaps took me a while to get the hang of. In one embarrassing example, I added collision to a tree without thinking, and then I couldn't figure out how to take the collision off of it so the dog could walk through. I also struggled with the tilemaps, particularly with painting the tiles onto the scene itself. I had some tilesets that I downloaded that were 16x16, while others were 8x8, and I couldn't figure out why the 8x8 tiles were painted with spaces between them. It ended up being that the size of the tilemaplayer node itself can only be set to one of the two sizes, so the problem was solved by adding another tilemaplayer node. I was also somewhat confused with nodes themselves, and I was unsure how to progress from one scene to another, or from one level to another. Because of this, I only designed the first level for my game, but I would like to be able to add more levels to it in the future. There were several other issues like that which just arose because I was inexperienced with the interface, but overall I felt like I got much more efficient as time passed – it just took me so long to get efficient at it that I was unable to finish my game.

Deficiencies

Levels and Endings

I had hoped to have at least four levels, with the dog starting at his home, traveling through a forest, then a city, and then finally collapsing in a snowy level. However, since I couldn't really figure out how to transition between levels and I ran out of time due to struggles with the coding early-on, I only ended up making the first level to the game. I tried to at least implement the emotes and the character's change in speed for proof of concept, but the game as-is is just not nearly as polished as I would have hoped.

I had also hoped to have different endings to the game. I toyed with having one collectible item in each stage that would be carried back with you at the end of the game, with each one being hidden on the top floor of the house (which is another thing I didn't have time to make). I was hoping it could be a sort of achievement to get each item, and maybe each one would have an emote associated with it that could be seen if the player played through the game a second time. I also thought about having the option at each stage to turn around and go back home, with different endings based on how early a player decided to do so, such as possibly being somewhat bummed when they get back if they turn around really early.

Mechanics and Assets

I had hoped to have a digging and pushing mechanic to allow for puzzle solving in the platformer, but I never ended up getting far enough in level design to work on them. Additionally, the level I created is very barren because I didn't have time to make some assets that I hoped to make, such as a doghouse and house. Overall, I wish I had more time to make the game as enjoyable as I envisioned it, but it ended up being largely a graveyard of ideas, with a couple proof-of-concept implementations.