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Intention

Through this game, we wanted to explore the theme of existential horror using morality in order to place the player in an uncomfortable situation. This will be done through a choice presented to the player, where they must engage with their own morality to choose between feeding their hungry sibling or feeding themselves. The emotions of a loss of control and helplessness will add to and highlight the discomfort. This will be created mechanically through the limited options a player is able to make within their environment. Due to the thematic nature of the game, the target audience would be teenagers and older who enjoy horror games.

Process

Inspiration

We namely drew our inspiration from a variety of games and films, including James Cameron's *Avatar*, and *SENTIENT*.

The *Avatar* film was used as inspiration for our first prototype, as we wanted to create a similar effect where the player becomes genetically modified through bio-engineering. This theme may still be seen in the first two scenes of our game before the concept of morality is focussed on. *Subnautica* was a game we originally examined as inspiration, as the fear of being submerged in water and facing the unknown was something we wanted to have in our game when we first conceptualised *MetaHuman*. Although we did not end up exploring these ideas in the same way *Subnautica* does, as exploration and encountering enemies is not part of our game, *Subnautica* greatly influenced the final visuals.

SENTIENT is a psychological horror game where the player is asked to perform a series of tasks in a small, enclosed room. Through it, we wanted to have somewhat of a similar experience where the player is asked questions that are simple, but in the plot, are harder than they look. With this effect, we wanted to make the player struggle to predict what the scientists will subject them to next, whether it's a mind-numbing choice that affects them or whether it'll be just a random command.

We decided not to go the route of *Five Nights at Freddy's* type of horror style where the player needs to constantly be on their toes and frightened. We avoided this because jump scares are somewhat of an easy technique in the horror genre and a lot of people have become desensitized through watching many horror films. In contrast to the fear one feels from jump scares, we wanted our game to have a long-lasting effect after playing it. Another one of our inspirations is the internet's SCP Foundation. The SCP Foundation is a collection of stories that are fan-made. These stories are based around the idea of otherworldly objects, monsters and the supernatural. The scientists maintain control over these anomalies and observe their behaviour while they are contained in secret laboratories, away from the public eye. In this way our game is similar, as the scientists observe your every move through the glass.

Mechanics

Several mechanics are given to the player, with the first two scenes serving as an introduction. The first scene focuses on the movement mechanic, which may be performed using the WASD keys on the keyboard. The player's vision is disorientating in this scene, which forces the player to use sound to complete the task assigned by the scientists. This is easier when using headphones. The movement task is assigned, instructing the player to move towards the source of a beeping sound. Once the player has successfully moved towards it, they may progress onto the next scene. In scene two, the player is instructed to place each coloured ball into its corresponding container, with the narrative suggesting that the scientists are testing the player's colour vision and motor control. This scene allows the player to interact with objects in the scene and teaches them how this pick up and drop mechanic works.

After completing the objective of the scene, it changes to scene three. In this scene, a bell rings, and text appears stating that it is "food time". Food appears in the centre of the water tank, which the player is prompted to eat using the "E" key. This eating mechanic and the pick up and drop mechanic are subsequently used in scene four, where the player is given a sibling to care for. In this scene they are given food, which they may either give to the baby, or feed themselves. After making this choice, they are taken to scene five, where the bell is rung and the "food time" text appears in the scene. However, instead of being given food, the sibling has been repositioned into the centre of the tank. This implies to the player that they are able to eat their sibling, which they may do using the "E" to eat control. After this they are taken to the

start menu. If they do not eat within ten seconds, the player loses consciousness, which is communicated by a return to the menu.

Conceptualisation

Our original idea included a climax where the player was asked a series of questions. These were inspired by moral questions which were used to understand moral decisions made by AI. The original scenarios involved decisions such as deciding whether to drive straight and kill two people in the car, or swerve and kill two pedestrians. Drawing from this, we asked the player questions such as “There is a high-ranking official who has had her eyes removed as a result of disease. She cannot serve the state without these and has the need of your own eyes. This would render you blind.” Thereafter, the player would have been able to select the option to give up their own eyes, or keep them. After four questions were asked, the player would be given a result stating what they would be used for, which was based on their level of subservience when answering questions. These results state whether the player will be used for organ harvesting, war, to perform general service tasks or factory work.

However, through further deliberation, we came to the conclusion that players will not feel a great moral impact or sense of horror from these questions. This is because they are given these questions by the game, and have no personal involvement in how they were created. This was further enforced when a comment was made stating that moral questions such as these often do not provide answers that the player would have personally chosen. In the context of our previous prototype, forcing the player to choose between one of two answers could have been excused as a further way to take control from the player. However, if the player does not feel like they themselves would make these choices, then they will feel little emotional connection to their answer, or the potential result. Therefore, our goal of causing discomfort using these broad moral questions would not have been reached.

In order to rectify this, a specific idea was focussed on. This allowed us to explore the idea of discomfort with one idea rather than with four separate issues as was attempted in our first prototype. The idea of cannibalism was chosen for this, as this is a concept which is almost universally considered disturbing and taboo.

Reference was made to Ivan Pavlov and his Dogs, which is an experiment which will be explained in greater detail on Page 8. This psychological experiment serves to demonstrate how something can be conditioned to react in a certain way if exposed to a specific stimulus over a period of time. This is shown to the player visually as the sibling's box is positioned in the centre of the room. Furthermore, the text "food time" appears and the bell rings, indicating the player should eat their sibling. This process symbolises the control that the scientists have over the player. However, this process simply simulates and represents real conditioning, as conditioning must be done over a long period of time. As this game is fairly short, it serves to communicate this message to the player, but does not enact the real process. In this way, the player is led to confront the moral decision of firstly deciding not to feed their sibling. Then, they are confronted with the idea of consuming their sibling. This would have the desired effect of a greater feeling of horror, as the player is allowed to come to the conclusion themselves, rather than being given moral questions in text form. Appendix A contains a flowchart showing the structure of the game.

Questions

Why does my vision change throughout the gameplay?

The game begins with the player having black and white vision. It is blurry and slightly distorted. This is intended to enhance the narrative. The player is introduced as a specimen that does not know where it is. Its eyesight and mobility is limited, intended to be primitive and to reference the start of an evolution.

As the game progresses, the player's vision is adjusted to colour perception. They can see things clearly and move around more easily. This is an indicator of the scientist's control and that they have created and can physically edit the player. Aesthetically, it visually shows progression when the player successfully completes a scene.

When the player reaches the morality stage of the game, their visual perception will only be altered when they choose to feed their sibling, meaning that they are in a state of starvation. Their vision will be blurry and distorted, indicating the negative effects and deterioration of starvation as a consequence of their choice.

Why is the idea of a tank of water (like a womb) horrifying?

The player is placed inside a confined space. It is a water tank, with prison-like bars on the top and transparent glass panels separating them from the outside world. The idea of a womb in this context is a dichotomy which contrasts the expected safety one would feel inside a womb to the loss of control in this game. There is a popular theme in horror where an idea which is comforting and represents safety is inverted. We can see this with the example of dolls and clowns, which originally perpetuated ideas of childhood fun but have since become recurring motifs in the horror genre.

The water in the context of a womb should make the player feel safe, however in this case it represents how isolated the player is from the outside world. Furthermore, the tank does not contain solid walls, but instead allows the player to see beyond the glass to the scientists studying the player, which perpetuates this feeling of being exposed. The fact that the number of scientists increases with each scene means that this feeling grows throughout the game.

What link does MetaHuman have with infantilisation?

With the comparison of the tank to a womb, the player will ideally experience a phenomenon called infantilization. This is when an adult is treated as an infant or juvenile, despite being an adult capable of making independent decisions.

This is felt as the player is ordered to follow simple instructions in the first two scenes, and if they do not, they are terminated or killed. More choice is given to the player in later scenes, such as whether to feed themselves or their sibling, however this may be considered a false sense of choice as they are still contained within a confined space with controlled conditions.

In what way is morality interrogated?

The game is central to the theme of hunger and starvation. When presented with a sibling, the player is introduced to a responsibility. When only one pellet of food is dropped, the player must decide to either be selfish and feed themselves or feed their sibling. This is the core mechanic of morality. It determines if the player will sacrifice themselves for the survival of another being, or to follow the idea of “every man for themselves”.

If the player chooses to feed their sibling, their own physical state will deteriorate in the way that their vision is blurry and distorted. This aims to make the player aware that their suffering is a sacrifice for another person to have the chance to live, however a consequence of being selfless. The player may choose this in order to demonstrate a sense of kindness.

The overall purpose of implementing morality into this game is to highlight the sense of being uncomfortable. No answer is a correct answer. Straying away from conventional horror game mechanics, such as jump scares, being chased and stalked by a monster or collecting batteries for a flashlight, this game is the product of a deeper examination of existential and psychological horror.

This is with the use of sounds, timing of events (such as the appearance of text) and the text itself. The text is the only link of communication between the scientists and the player. This communication is mostly just commands.

Psychological Tricks in *MetaHuman* - Ivan Pavlov and his Dogs

MetaHuman uses the idea of Classical Conditioning, introduced and constructed by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov. In Pavlov's experiment, he associated food with objects in order to get dogs to salivate. From the footsteps of the feeder to a bell, the dogs would learn to associate food with that, even without the presence of food.

With *MetaHuman*, the same Classical Conditioning technique is used in order for the player to associate a bell ringing with food. Whenever a pellet is dropped into the tank, the bell rings and the player interacts with the pellet (eats it or feeds it to the sibling). Thus, the player associates the bell ringing with the feeding mechanic.

This conditioning is vitally important for the final scene. The sibling's containment box is placed directly in front of the player, usually where the pellet is dropped. Then the bell is rung. There is no pellet dropped, however, food is now associated with the feeding bell. The aim of this is for the player to realise that their sibling can be considered to be food. This proves the significance of the bell, as the player must now associate their own sibling as food and make the choice to eat them or not. The bell proves as subtle but clear communication to the player, without using direct commands.

In this final prototype, the player chooses to either cannibalize or self-sacrifice their own life for another. The visual effects, along with a heartbeat sound effect, indicate the escalation of how the character in the game is reacting to starvation.

Reflection

Reflection on the game is not dependent on if the game was a success or failure. Rather, identifying what can be improved on in the future. Looking at the game, its scope is large and would require a lot more time for it to be completely finished and polished. Thus, this prototype is better described as a horizontal slice. It displays mechanics, visuals and components used, but is not a perfect slice of the final game.

However, through rapid prototyping and playtesting, there are key features that the game can be improved on. The table below explains further what mechanics must be tweaked in the future in order for the player to reach that experience that is aimed for.

Key Features	Why must it be changed in the future?
Text is converted into speech so that the player can hear instructions instead of read.	This would add a feel of polish. The text fills half the screen and has issues of overlapping each other at points.
Restricting the mouse cursor to the centre of the screen.	The mouse cursor flies around and feels awkward. The mouse is hard to control and immersion-breaking because the player is more focused on the mouse cursor than they should be.
Communicating how to pick up objects.	Players might get confused, as when walking up to objects there is no indicator whether to hold the LMB (Left Mouse Button) or click.
Timing of sequences.	A good horror game will have good timing. The game needs to go through trial and error to reach the perfect timing in which to: A: Teach the player mechanics that will be used later on.

	<p>B: Introduce the narrative.</p> <p>C: Escalate and de-escalate situations in which the player can feel stressed or relieved.</p>
Better communicating means that the player has the option to share food.	<p>Some players are not sure that the sibling is interactable.</p> <p>Therefore, it should be possible to interact in different ways with the sibling, instead of just feeding it. For example, to play with it using items in the tank. This would also build an emotional connection between the player and the sibling, which would make the ending of the game more impactful.</p>
Clear consequences of the choice to starve your sibling.	<p>If the player chooses to feed themselves, the consequence of that action is the sibling will begin to cry intensely. This aims to make the player feel uncomfortable and guilty for being selfish.</p>

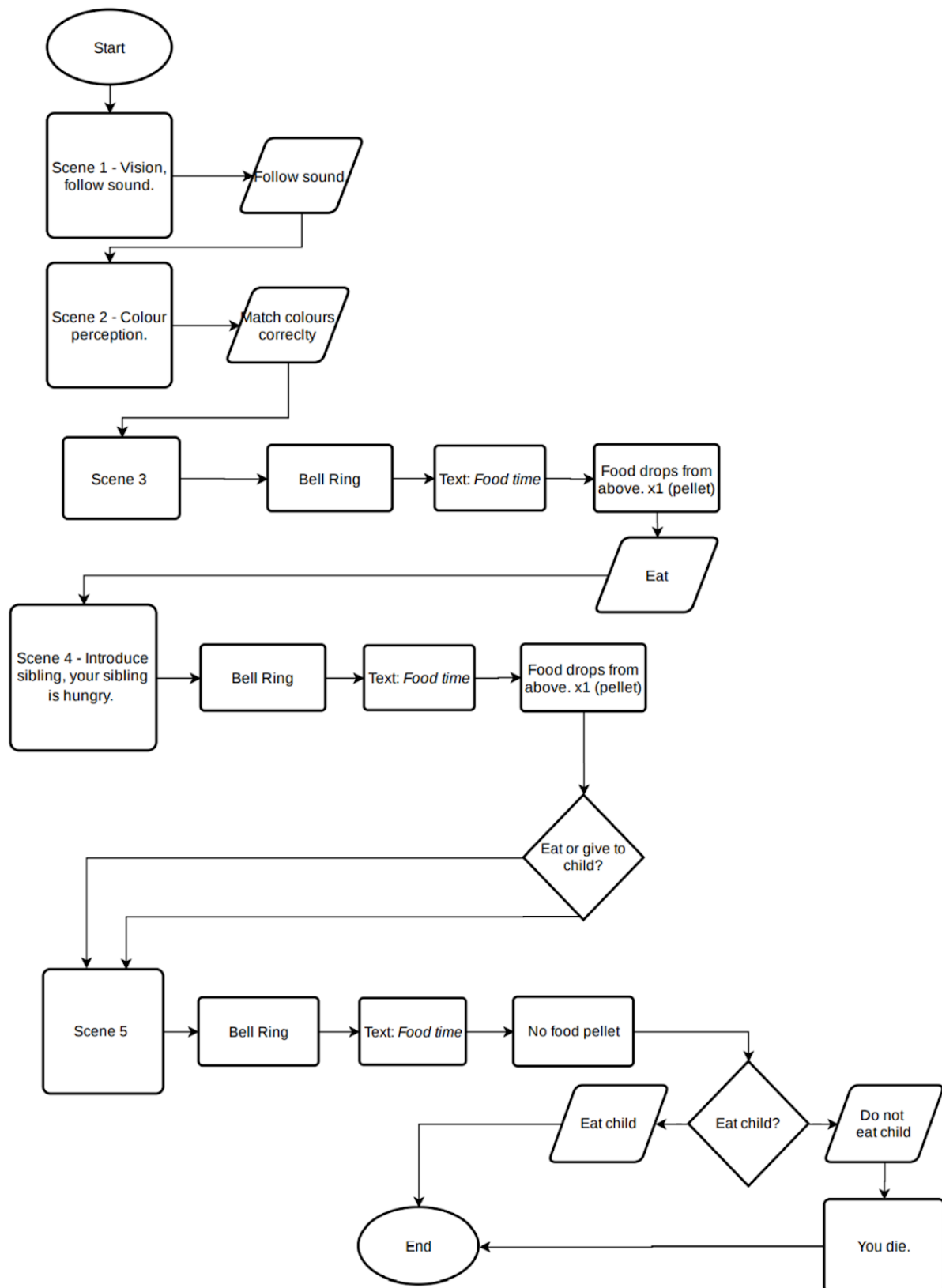
According to the playtesting results, the two scenes evidently show that they detracted from the morality stance of the game. Originally, the first two scenes functioned to teach the player the mechanics of the game. However, a gap appeared between the player performing tasks and the player being fed with the dinner bell as these two sections of the game do not link together well. This is because the first two scenes are structured very differently from the rest of the scenes as the sense of evolution and performing mindless tasks changes to morality. In hindsight, the game should be changed so that it will focus whole-heartedly on the feeding mechanic and sibling interaction system.

It is clear that the game needs more work to be done in order to reach the desired experience. However, having only two weeks to conceptualize and build a prototype of a game this size, as developers, the areas of improvement needed are clear. It was incredibly difficult to determine a clear road for the game, as the narrative was a deep dive into morality, a topic that

everyone has different opinions about. Human experience is only truly understood with personal experience, and no one can prepare for the challenges of life.

As developers, we wanted to challenge ourselves to attempt to deliver an experience. With deep conversations and reflection on what it truly means to be human, the game is a clear indication of human expression. Horror is only an expression of human insecurity, which induces fear. This makes horror a reflection of ourselves. Choosing starvation as the central theme, it comments on the real world as well. How far will you go if you're starving for it?

Appendix A - Flowchart of the structure of the game.



Appendix B – Playtesting Results

Questions:

1. What emotions did you feel when playing this game and why?
2. Did you encounter any bugs and what were they?
3. Did you understand the narrative?
4. Was your morality challenged during this experience? Why or why not?
5. Please rate the game out of 10.

#1 Playtester A	Answer
1.What emotions did you feel when playing this game and why?	Confusion and slight panic
2.Did you encounter any bugs and what were they?	Yes - Did not know how to pick up balls and I lost them in the ground bc I just clicked them instead of dragging. - No quit function, had to ctrl alt delete out - The mouse controls feel clunky and unnatural.
3.Did you understand the narrative?	Slightly, you are a test subject doing tasks and you end up being asked to eat your sibling.
4.Was your morality challenged during this experience? Why or why not?	No, I just didn't eat my sibling, there was nothing that really pushed me to do it - I suggest having the player forcibly be moved closer and closer to the block, and maybe "E to eat" grow larger and larger in the centre of the screen while flashing red - sound design worked well in attempting to challenge morals but not enough.
5.Please rate the game out of 10.	5/10 I felt too confused for most of the time to enjoy the narrative. The text sometimes went too fast and continued without me clicking continue. The camera movement and selection that were both assigned to the mouse felt very clunky (I suggest changing it to ENTER). Visuals were very well done as well as audio - the subject rooms were atmospheric and the particle work was well done!

#2 Playtester B	Answer
1.What emotions did you feel when playing this game and why?	Confusion. I was not entirely sure what I was doing.
2.Did you encounter any bugs and what were they?	No bugs.
3.Did you understand the narrative?	Not really. Feels like more needs to be done for me to understand.

4. Was your morality challenged during this experience? Why or why not?	Not too much.
5. Please rate the game out of 10.	6/10.

#3 Playtester C	Answer
1. What emotions did you feel when playing this game and why?	Plenty of confusion. I also did not know that if I did not move they would kill me. The continue button does not work well with the game. Pressing Space would've been the preferred option.
2. Did you encounter any bugs and what were they?	Yes. Second level gets skipped sometimes.
3. Did you understand the narrative?	I am a test subject in the game. That's all I know.
4. Was your morality challenged during this experience? Why or why not?	A little bit when it came to the sibling part. Did not know whether to share food or take it myself.
5. Please rate the game out of 10.	4/10

#4 Playtester D	Answer
1. What emotions did you feel when playing this game and why?	Okay so initially, a lot of it was curiosity, like who the fuck am I, who the fuck are all these people? And when it got to the water room, I was mainly: ahhh, very very pretty. Importantly then, you guys did really well in communicating hunger with that red flashing haze. Well done Well done!
2. Did you encounter any bugs and what were they?	So first time through, no bugs. second time, the game got stuck on the grey room. I am assuming maybe i clicked the continue button too fast, or too much. It ended up staying there with no further prompts or requests for action.
3. Did you understand the narrative?	Okay, so i ended up sacrificing myself so my "sibling" wouldn't die. I am not sure if that is the actual end, since i tried playing again, and that's when i got the bug. My general take of the narrative is that i for some reason am being experimented on? And they are observing my actions and decision - e.g. presenting me with a "sibling" and enticing me with food, then leaving me starving and dying if i choose not to eat my sibling.

4. Was your morality challenged during this experience? Why or why not?	It was indeed! Though it was mostly only challenged in experiment with the sibling. Good on you guys to have coded the game to respond to our actions, regardless of what they were. I felt i had a choice, and those choices had tangible consequences ;))
5. Please rate the game out of 10.	For concept alone, I would give it an 8/10 Though hmm..... the controls and UI and such could definitely use some work... there was a strange funky effect by having both the 3d first person perspective... yet also a mouse on the screen that could interact with the button for Continue. As a whole package, i give it was 7/10.

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