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Interactive Storytelling

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“Starbucks Order from Hell” Post-Mortem

Building this game was a lot of work, but it was also a lot of fun. When we came to a consensus on our final idea, we all fell in love with the fantasy and lore elements of it. To put it shortly, we wanted to take Chicago and mix it with the pop culture portrayal of Hell to make an urban metropolis-underworld filled with both fantasy creatures and urban culture. This overlap worked very well because it made bleak topics like death seem less scary, which overall added to the silly tone our team was aiming at with this story. For example, we mixed fantasy and urban tropes humorously when we combined a demon and a bodyguard in the next encounter. At the end of the game, the player meets Biscuit and Gravy, Satan’s two bodyguards. Despite having the appearance of two giant demons, they are strapped tight in a suit and tie, much like a bodyguard. Their presence would be more intimidating without the outfit, which makes the scene funny. This concept describes how much of the setting molded the game’s atmosphere.

Another part of the game that worked well was the secret ending. It was a particularly exciting mechanic caused by the shape of the game tree. We noticed players could end the game in several unplanned and unique ways. In the game, there is a branch that takes you to a pet shop where the owner, a skeleton, will give you his arm. The intended use of the arm was to distract Cerberus, the guard dog, in front of the Tower. However, behind the Tower was an alternative entrance where the player doesn’t get rid of the skeleton arm. This path allowed the player to bring the skeleton’s arm into the building. Late in our development, we realized that the player could carry the arm to the end of the game. Thankfully this didn’t break anything, and we figured we could add in a secret ending if we had time. In the end, we found the time and decided to create a secret ending where you can give the arm bone to your dog at home. This mechanic creates replayability and rewards players who realize they can make it to the end with the arm.

Perhaps the best part of this group was meeting together regularly and often. We met nearly every Tuesday and Thursday until our presentation. The first advantage of this was the ability to share ideas with other members of the group. For example, during writing, a tree was drafted for what each text box would have in it. Everyone knew fairly well what was going to happen because we created the tree during one of the weekly group meetings. Our writers could begin writing a script for each box, and our computer coders could start building the game at the same time. After we finished that part, coders could provide input to writers about changes that we might need. Changes included writing that did not flow well and the digital twine pages that needed to be reformatted and connected in different ways. Additionally, writers could provide feedback to coders when parts of their work broke the story. This dynamic allowed everyone to work together to create the best game possible.

Some parts of our game-making process worked well but could be improved. One of these was working on the characters first. When we were making the tree, we thought about what elements of the tree are necessary to the story, and we built characters around these plot elements. Our characters solidified before our story, which had some good and bad results. When we finished the tree, some plot elements went unused because they were weaker and built specifically for a character, not the plot. Some characters created for a specific encounter had to be changed entirely. Some characters were portrayed incorrectly in the game due to a lack of communication. However, the problems were not unfixable. Near the end of the tree design, we started identifying key characters that we designed to fit the plot points as they came up. An advantage of having some characters was that we had some direction to build our story. However, if we used the strategy of building a tree first, all the characters would have been perfect the first time, and no edits or communication errors would have cause problems. We do not know if designing characters first helped or hurt our story’s creativity. Additionally, the character design could go a lot worse if it was done purely to fit the story.

Another early decision that worked well was assigning roles to different people to do various tasks. Our two technically oriented team members worked on coding the game, while the other two worked on script and text. This dynamic worked exceptionally well because maintaining a consistent game tone is easier to do with two people, rather than four. With only a few writers, all the characters stayed consistent, despite the character communication problem expressed above. The technical team did a fantastic job learning how to write the code for the game, as well as organizing the flowchart in a way everyone understood. If we did the game over again, however, the work might need to be separated a bit differently. It seemed like the writers were very busy during the first half of the development process, but the coders were very busy during the second half of the process. In the future, we should consider looking for a way to keep all team members moderately active throughout the entire project.

One mechanic in the game is a knowledge quiz mechanic. By reading the text in the game, you learn information about the world you are in, and you need to use that knowledge to answer questions that NPCs ask you. We believe this mechanic is fun, and while there were some bugs in playtesting, the final result is very satisfactory. However, there are many potential problems with this mechanic that we had to consider when designing the game. If a player finds a way to skip parts of the game where they were supposed to get the solution for a future quiz, they will not have a fair shot at answering the quiz correctly. This issue resulted in the players have an abysmal time trying to get the right answers. To solve this, we put in information on pages that we knew players were all going to pass through. Additionally, we highlighted the keywords that players would need to know for quizzes to indicate that these details were different and might be relevant later. If we were to make a new game, we would put highlights over crucial information, and we would be careful around the points where a player could skip vital details.

Backgrounds were a very cool addition to our game. When working in urban-fantasy, it’s crucial that the setting is clear to the player because it’s not like anything they’ve ever seen before; it’s entirely fictional. Backgrounds were beneficial for setting the mood of our game, and for the most part, they worked. Some images, however, cannot fit a website background very well. Instead, we included the picture as an image below the text to avoid stretching the image into an unappealing background. In the future, we could fix this by finding better-sized photos, or maybe even getting someone to illustrate them for us.

Some ideas we had did not work at all. The most challenging part of our game design process was getting started. We had plans that we worked hard on that had no direction at all. During our meetings, we struggled to figure out how the player would fit into the world we were building. When we proposed the idea, it seemed poorly structured because we were not sure what the player would be doing. Our next plan was better because we focused on creating a story arc we liked that the player would enjoy. We wanted our player to go to Hell and back while meeting many demons and creatures, possibly getting into a battle or a devilish deal. Next, we specified our objective. Originally we wanted our story to be grim and serious, but upon revisiting it, we thought making a humorous story might be more fun. So, we decided to make the objective very mundane and simple as a goofy juxtaposition to the epic setting. Food delivery was simple, so our player became a GrubHub driver. We learned that the objective of the game is an essential part of the game development process. Initially, we originally were worldbuilding first, and no objective wove all our ideas into a cohesive whole.

Another issue was clarity in writing. This problem was very apparent in the casino scene. We had an idea to have a drunk demon preventing you from passing to the elevator, but removed the encounter due to it being offensive to a common demographic. Instead of a drunken demon confronting the player, we replaced it with a shapeshifter who would offer a reward that the player needs to progress. We attempted to make it humorous by making the shapeshifter look like a character from earlier in the game. Unfortunately, everyone who played through the encounter got very confused because they thought the shapeshifter was the character from before. It was challenging to get people to understand that it was a different person. To fix this, we carefully reworded the encounter over and over again to try to make it clear. In the future, perhaps a separate meeting would have made for a stronger game. We learned that characters should be distinct when telling a story, especially in text. In an animated cinematic, for example, the shapeshifter might transform right in front of you. However, in the text, the scene became very difficult to explain.

To conclude, what set our game development apart from other teams was our game genre. Instead of focusing on finding history, our main challenge was creating a world out of fiction. We feel that our story’s characters and humor flourished in such a creative and free genre. Some caveats with working in urban-fantasy, however, should be to watch its scope and to make fictional characters as clear as if they were fact. Overall, making a game was a fun experience that many people should attempt at some time in their life.