

SOLAR WIND

Narrative Game Design - By Meme Team

IAT 312 - Milestone 3

Team Members

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Current Iteration - Programming, Sound

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Current Iteration - Art Assets, UI , Writing

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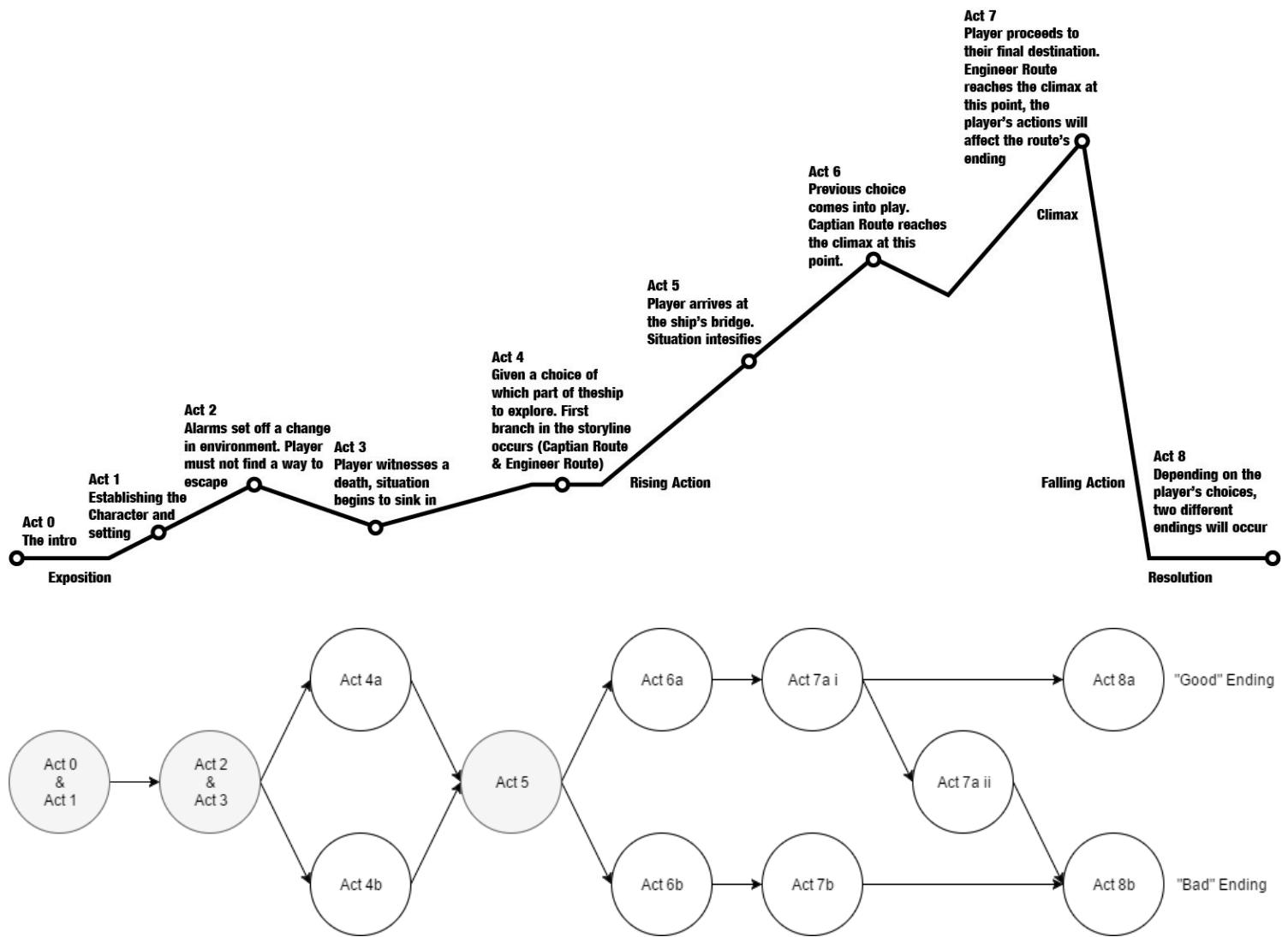
Summary of Narrative and Plot Structure

The player awakes with a start on the long haul starship *Solar Wind* in deep space. Alarms and klaxons alerts you of impending doom; the ship is damaged about to self destruct. You must make your way to the bridge. As you progress, you will pick up other members of the crew, all desperate to escape and survive. The journey is difficult, the crew of the ship can help you at a cost. All automated systems are down, anyone who helps you must be left behind to their fate. You reach the bridge in hopes of disabling the self destruct, but the disaster is worse than you imagined. With no way to avert the coming explosion, the player must turn around and make for the escape pods, knowing now that any who stay behind will be forever lost.

His path will take him to multiple sections of the ship, including the science sections, the crew's quarters, engineering and others. These sections pose many different challenges and opportunities to the player, and it's up to you to use your brains, wits and charms to make it out alive.

The plot is structured as a 9 act narrative. The player wakes up at the beginning, is introduced to some key characters and learns of their goal, they press on towards that goal, and then find out it was not the right goal all along and must make a dash towards the real goal. This plays out in our story within the levels. The player wakes up in level 0, learns of their goals in level 1, they progress towards those goals until level 4 where they learn that the emergency shutdown is impossible. Then through 5 and 6 they rush to the end of the game.

The diagrams below show our plot structure in terms of a narrative arc and in terms of narrative branches and foldbacks. Some parts of the story are optional and not seen by the player unless they play through multiple times. Think of the game Witcher 2, which has 3 acts but act 2 is actually one of 2 separate acts, 2a or 2b. Depending on the player's choices they will either get 2a or 2b. This is the same in Solar Wind, whatever the player chooses to do they will end up in either 3a or 3b, but never both in one playthrough. This makes it so that the player's choices have some impact on how the story is played out, and the player experiences a part of the story that is tuned to their actions.



Main Character

Our main character isn't a hero in the traditional sense. He is in fact a prisoner on this vessel, crimes unknown. It is up to the player to interpret what he may have done to end up there, or even invent their own history for the character. He is a product of an advanced human civilisation, lean and with high intelligence. His capabilities include high jumping, long distance running, and a short gravity-boost to propel him long distances.



He is also capable of convincing others to help him in conversations through a multitude of means. He can convince, cajole, threaten, blackmail, or anything else it takes to ensure his survival. These are the skills that will help him make it through this ruined deathtrap of a ship, and they will (hopefully) ensure that he can return home.

The goal of the main character is to make it off the ship. To do this he needs to get through all the challenges and accomplish this goal in one of several ways. The story splits when the main character decides to have someone stay behind to help the player move forward. Their fate is now tied with the ship itself. The other option is that the player escapes with him and they continue onward, completing challenges and hopefully making it out alive. Other characters include the chef, the captain, the engineer, the scientist, etc

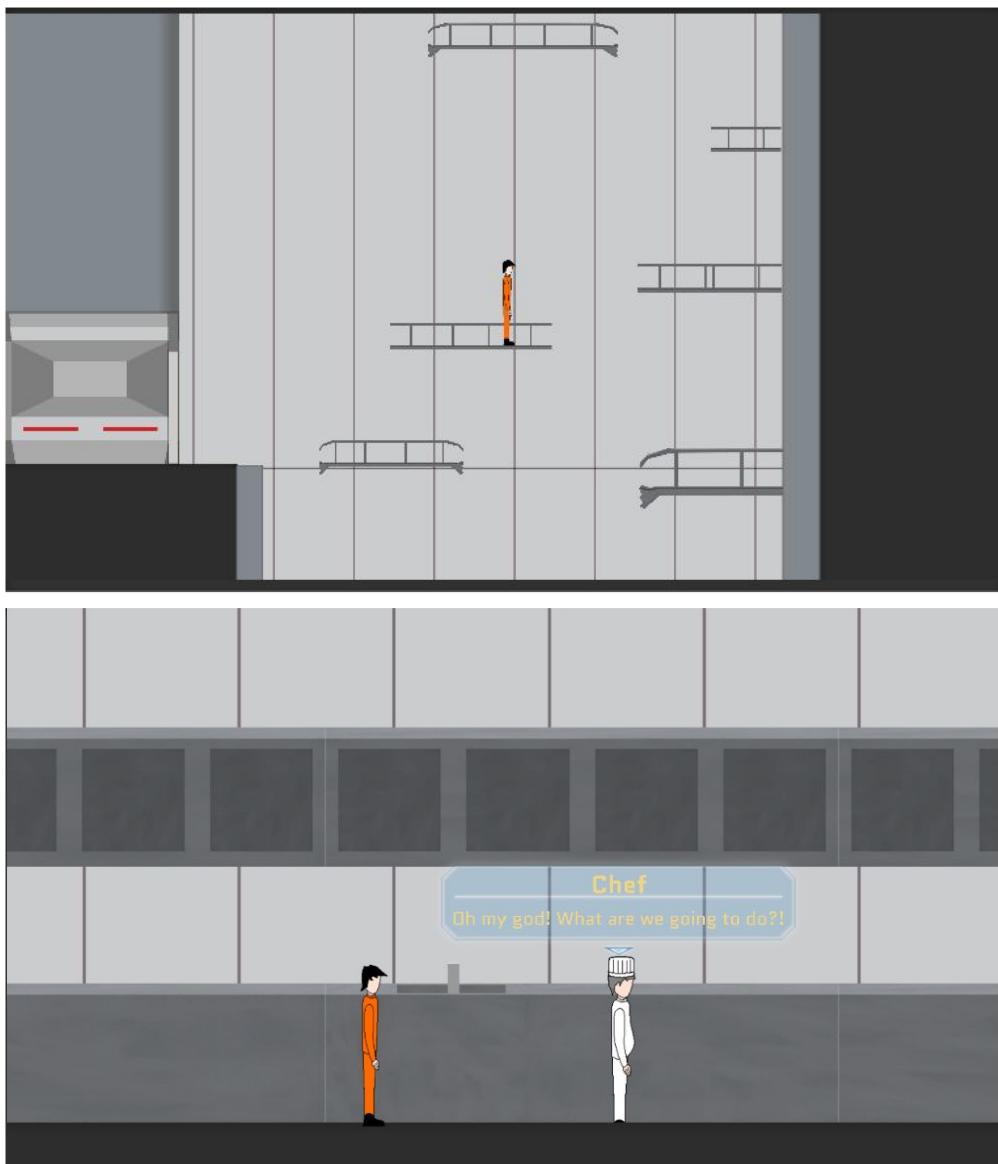


Level Design

Level Overview

Level 1

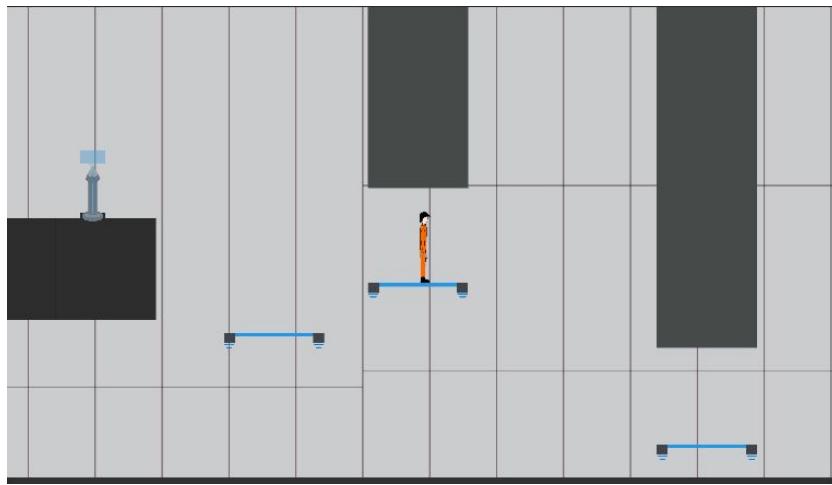
In level 1, the player plays through acts 2 and 3 of the story. They learn of their initial goal and meet some characters that inform them about the situation. The actual goal of the game is explained to the player by a semi-optional computer terminal scene. The level design heavily hints to the player that something is up there, so most players will check it out and learn of their goal. This informs the player that they have to head to the bridge, as well as being a subtle hint to the player that there is plenty of hidden story information in the levels that can be found through exploration.

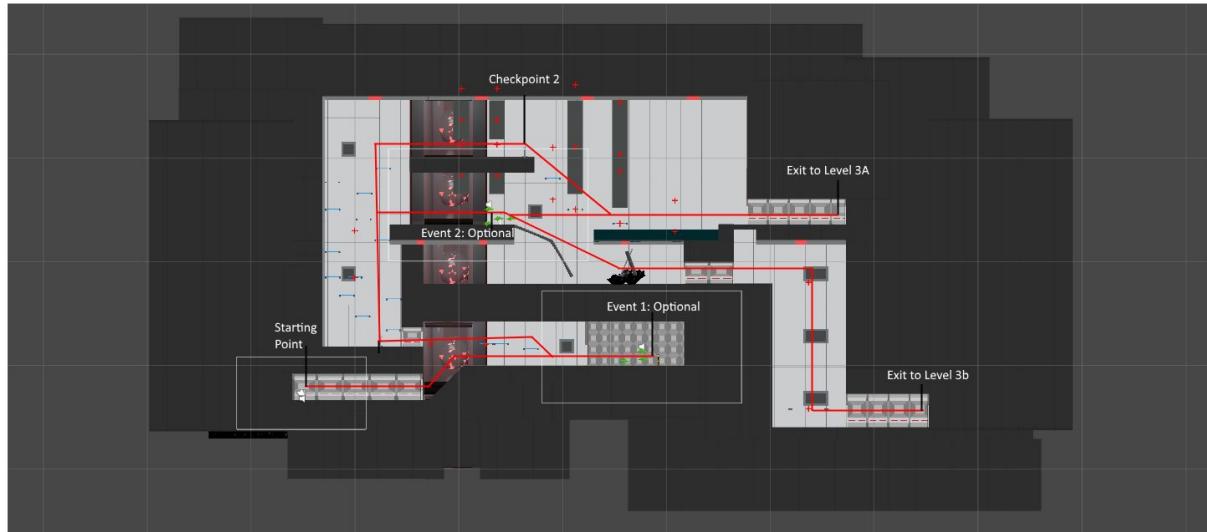




Level 2

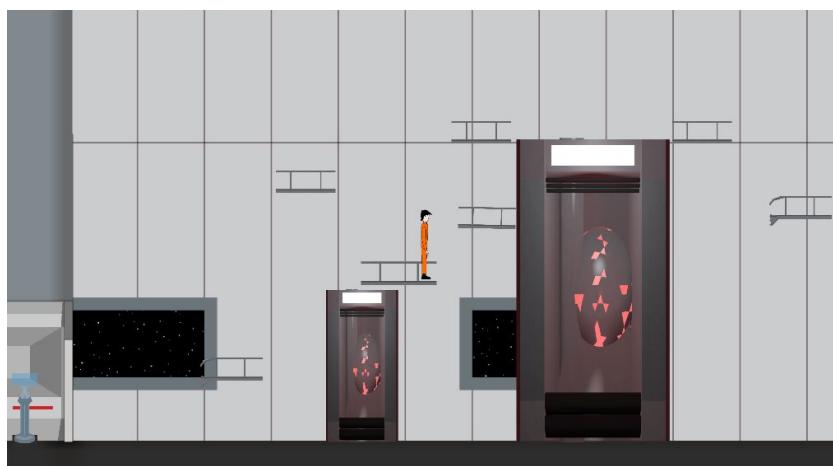
Level 2 is where the player meets some additional characters and is the first point at which the story branches off. Since it is the engineering section, the player finds many moving parts and platforms that they have to jump across. Alternatively, they can ask the engineer to activate the bridge to bypass the tricky platforming. This will lock out one of the story branches since it covers the part where you drop down into 3b. This part is where the level interplays with narrative and gameplay. As the level changes depending on which branch you choose when you meet the engineer.

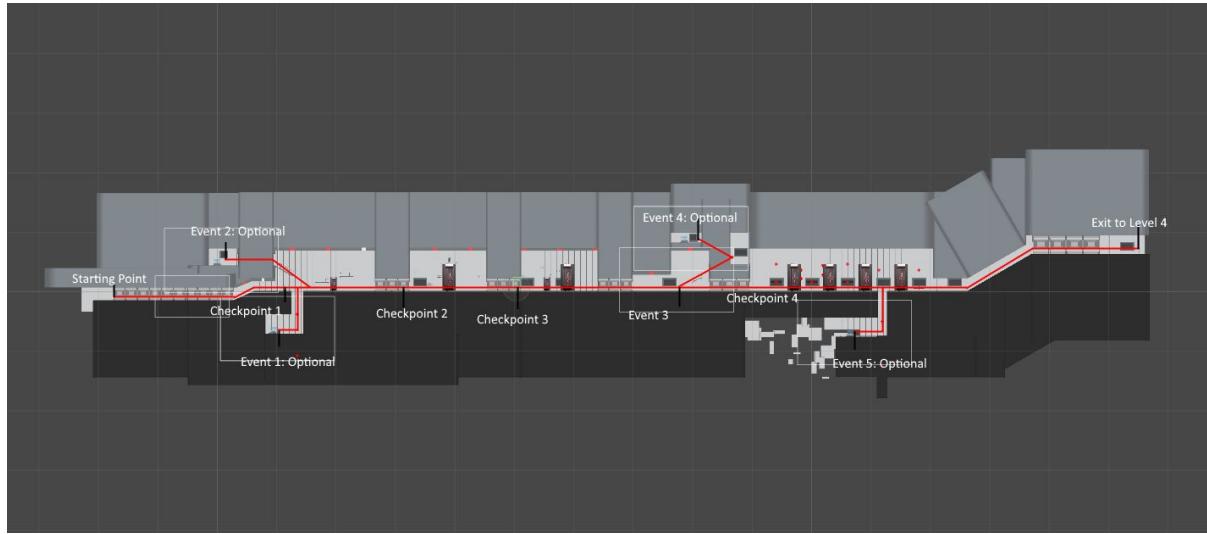




Level 3a

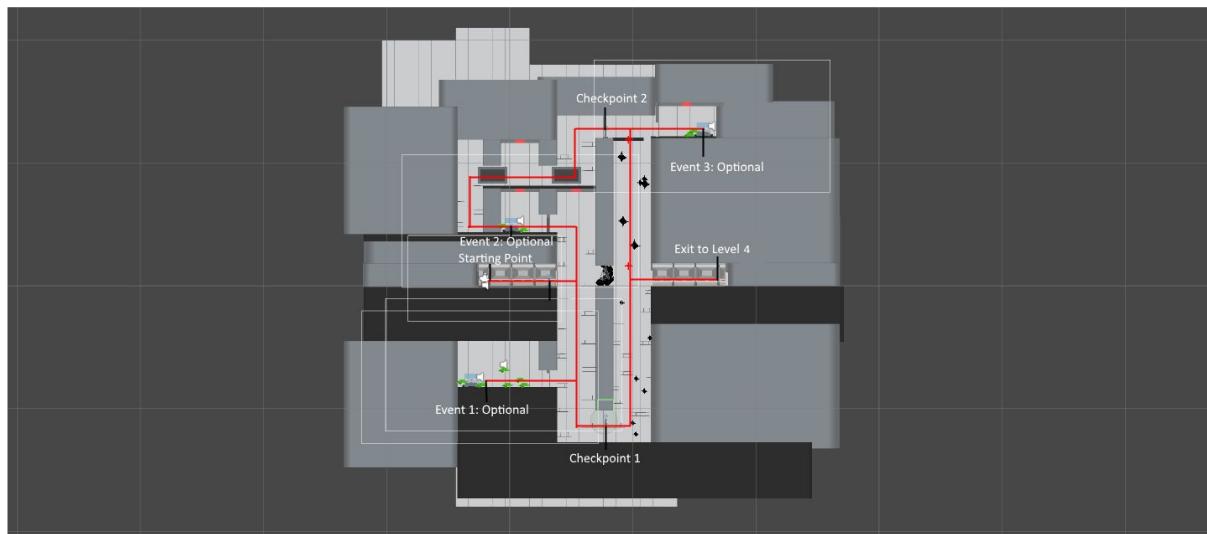
Level 3a is the science section of the ship. It is a straight shot, no branching paths whatsoever, but there are some hidden computer terminals throughout the level that give some backstory into what happened on the ship. There is a scientist here that can “deactivate” the tesla coils that kill the player on impact, making one of the more tricky platforming sections quite trivial.





Level 3b

In this level the player has to get to the other side through either the upper path or the lower path. The upper path is significantly easier, but is only accessible if the player kills the guy who threatens him in one of the lower rooms. This gives the player a moral choice between doing things the hard way, or compromising their morals and killing the guy for an easy out. There is an optional story terminal here as well that gives some more character to the location and an indication of what happened on the ship.



Game Design Revisions

We tweaked a few things in game design for this milestone. Firstly, we smoothed out cutscenes significantly. The previous version had problems like moving the player during cutscenes, not being able to skip dialogue, dialogue running off the screen preventing reading, low text resolution et cetera. Now we have improved it to be skippable, lock the player in place so they can't break sequence, and the text is now more readable and doesn't trail off the screen. Additionally, we improved the platforming throughout the levels to be more fair in the early levels, but trickier in the later ones. We also improved the feature of NPC conversations affecting the environment, adding more NPCs to the levels such that the dialogue has a direct impact on level design.

Target Player

Mid-core gamers, all genders. 20-30 years old.

Gamer Types:

- Survivor
- Daredevil
- Mastermind
- Seeker
- Conqueror

Play Styles:

- Role-Playing
- Advancement
- Discovery

Fun Keys:

- Hard Fun

Core Mechanics

Our core mechanics are

- Moving
- Jumping
- Mid-Air Dash

We moved the sacrifice mechanic into secondary mechanics because we only use them at certain points in the game.

Secondary Mechanics

Our secondary mechanics are

- Sacrifice Mechanic: At certain points of the game, the player has a choice to make to sacrifice an ally to make the platforming challenge easier.

Level Features

Each level features

- Platforms
- Moving Platforms
- Respawn / Check Points
- Events That Trigger Cutscenes and Dialogue

For some levels we added

- Traps that kill player on contact
- Large blocks that move up and down blocking the player
- Branching paths that alter the level depending on the player's choice

Playtesting

Design Questions

Aesthetics

Do the art assets convey the theme of the game?

Does the art assets convey the sense of urgency?

Is each object clear in what they are supposed to represent?

Narrative

Is our story and plot clear and understandable?

Does our narrative evoke emotion and interest in the player?

Does our narrative drive the player forward to keep playing?

Are our cutscenes clear and explain the plot of our narrative?

Level Design

Does our level design guide the player forward to complete the game?

Do our levels have variety, and a clear difficulty curve as they progress?

Can our levels be cleared by the players?

Does our level design make sense to the player?

Do our levels have a consistent flow through them?

Gameplay

Does the narrative and level design complement each other?

Do the mechanics work with each level?

Does the gameplay incite the player to proceed forward?

Mechanics

Do the mechanics of the game work with the levels?

Are our mechanics easy for the player to learn and master?

Is there a steady learning curve for the mechanics of the game?

Is our dialogue mechanics clear and engaging?

Controls

Are the controls easy to understand?

Fun

Are the levels and gameplay challenging enough to incite hard fun for the players?

Are the platforming challenges difficult but still clearable?

Other

Does our narrative and gameplay work together?

Playtesting

Playtest Setup

We set up 3 different playtest sessions with 3 different players each. In the first session, we had the players take the first options for each dialogue chain, to lead them to each A-section. The second playtest section was focused on each second dialog option, leading the players to each B-section. We allowed the players to choose their own paths in the third section.

Playtest Session 1

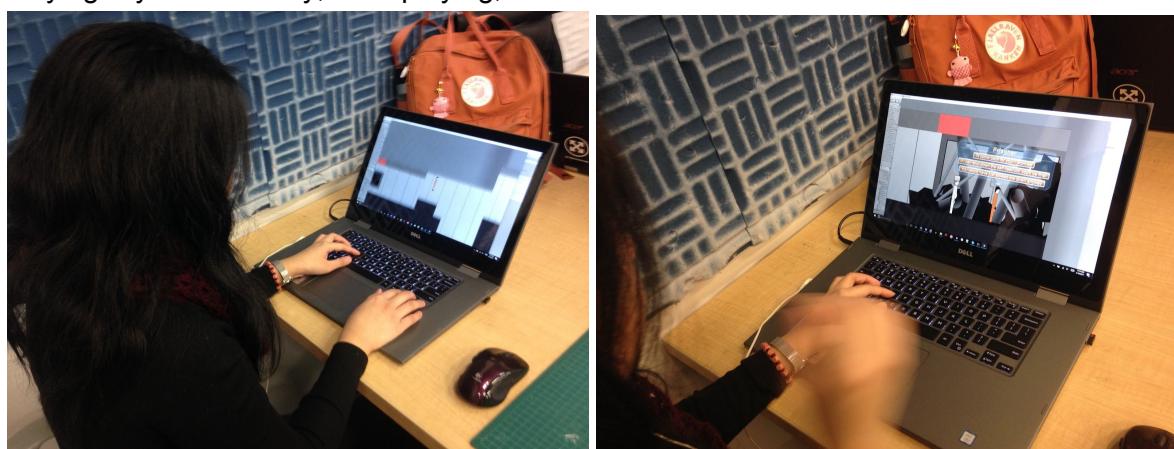
1. Name: Patricia

Age: 21

Gender: Female

Gamer Type: Mastermind Seeker

Playing Style: Discovery, Role playing, Customization



Observation Notes: She paid attention to and was engaged in the story to a certain extent, and had a hard time choosing each dialogue path because of the choices' implications.

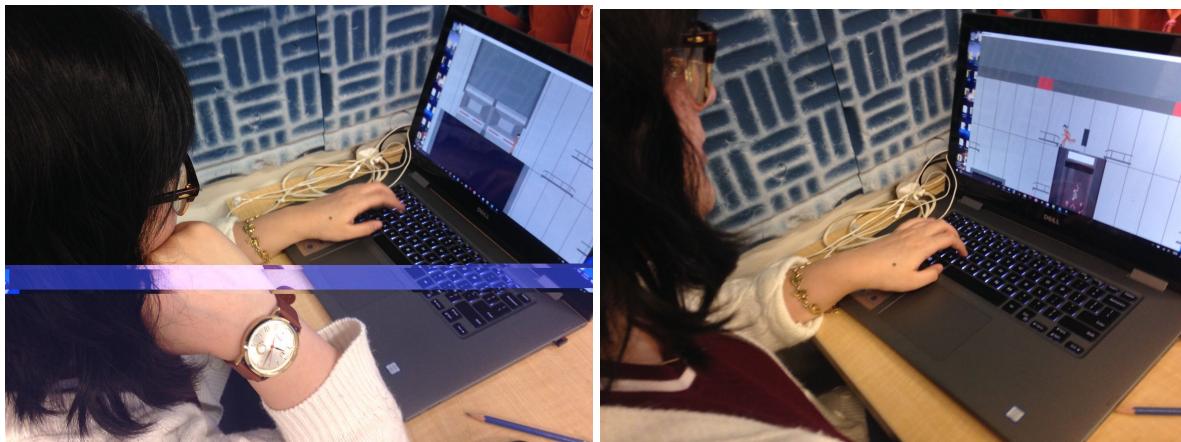
2. Name: Michelle

Age: 21

Gender: Female

Gamer Type: Seeker, Achiever

Playing Style: Discovery, Role playing, Mechanics



Observation Notes: There were certain platforming sections that she found were too difficult, but overall it was a competent game.

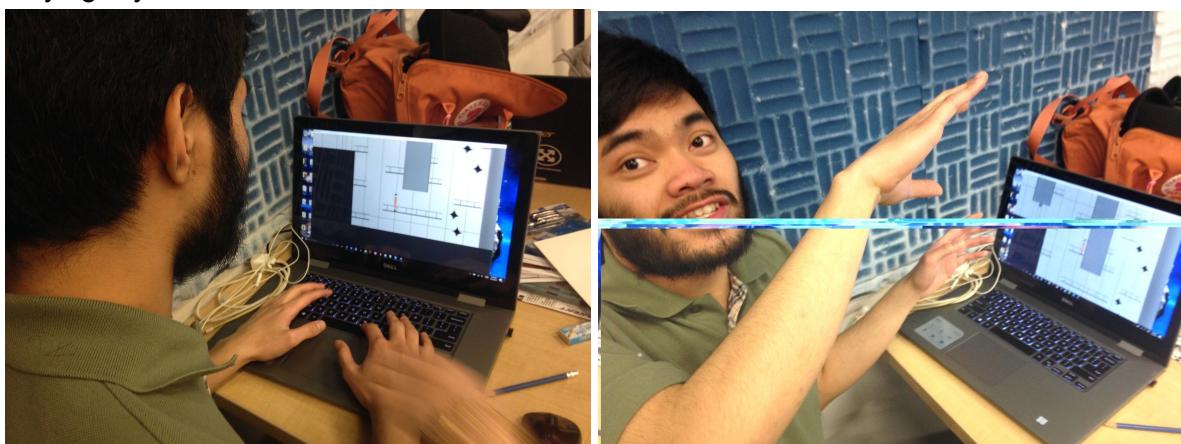
3. Name: Tamiko

Age: 22

Gender: Male

Gamer Type: Mastermind

Playing Style: Survivor



Observation Notes:

He got really frustrated at the difficulty of the platforming due to the awkward control scheme.

Playtest Session 2

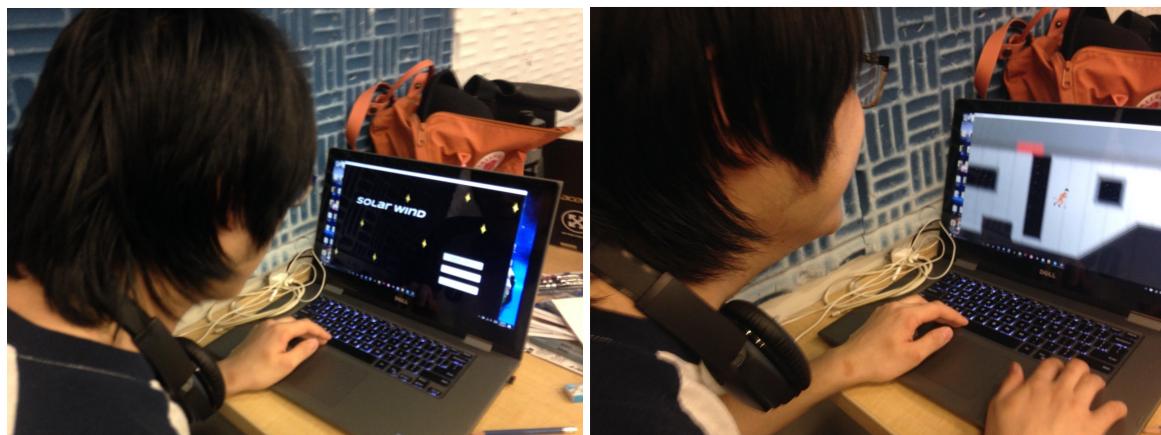
4. Name: Chris

Age: 25

Gender: Male

Gamer Type: Mastermind

Playing Style: Survivor



Observation Notes: He was fairly impressed by the new art and mechanics implemented into the game from last time. He was glad that the narrative was speeded up, making it easier to skip through.

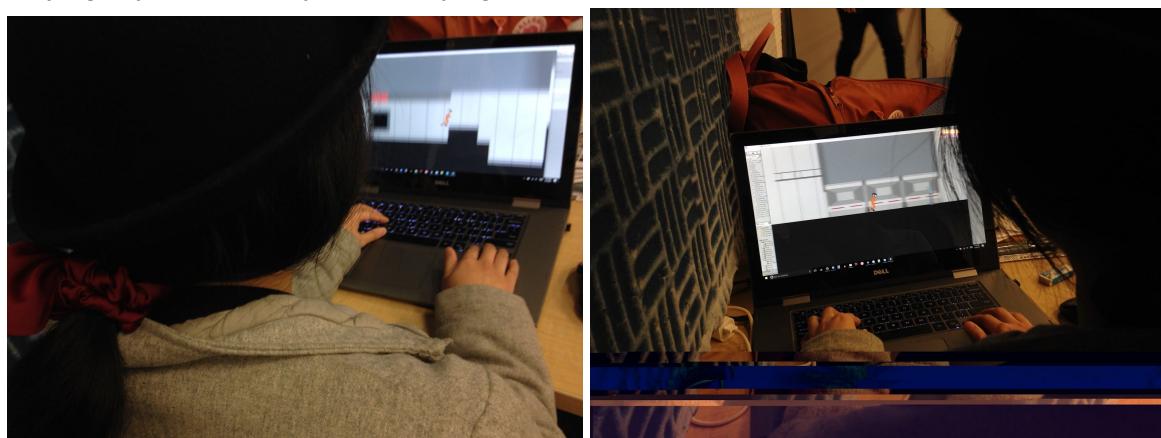
5. Name: Marie

Age: 19

Gender: Female

Gamer Type: Mastermind Seeker

Playing Style: Discovery, Role playing, Customization



Observation Notes: Level 3b in particular really annoyed her due to the placement of the death traps, making it hard to progress.

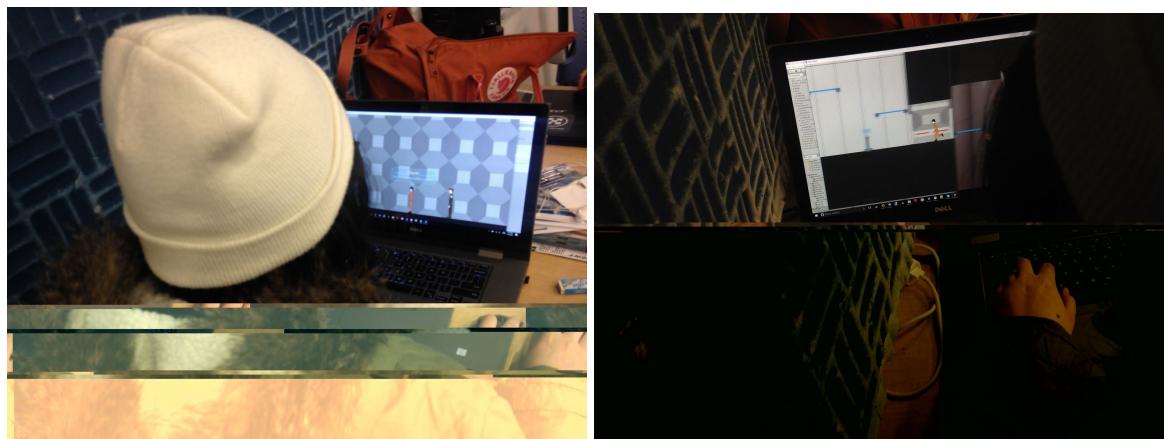
6. Name: Sophie

Age: 19

Gender: Female

Gamer Type: Mastermind Seeker

Playing Style: Discovery, Role playing, Customization



Observation Notes: She kept on trying to find bugs within the game, but found barely any due to her finding most of them in a previous iteration and us patching them up. However, the dash mechanic was still an annoyance.

Playtest Session 3

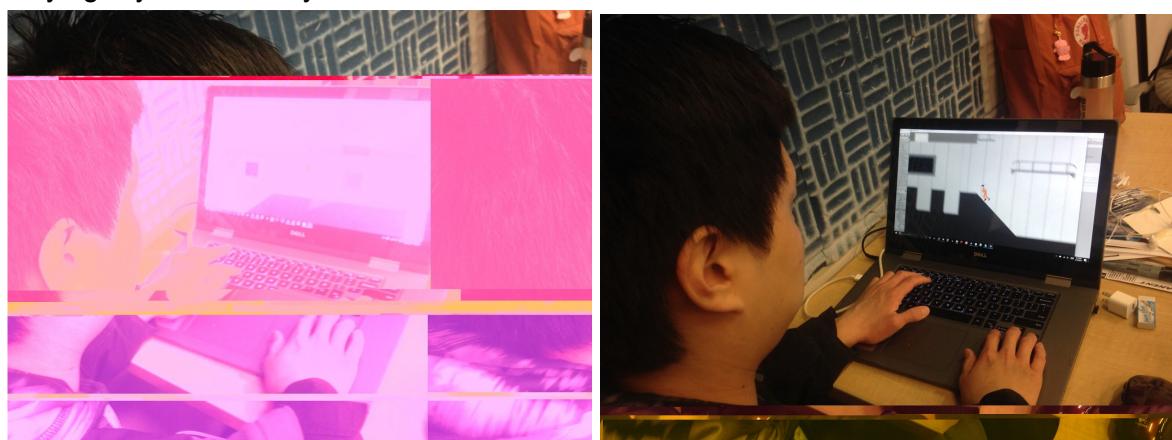
7. Name: Jacky

Age: 20

Gender: Male

Gamer Type: Socializer Seeker

Playing Style: Discovery, Social



Observation Notes: While not really engaged in the story, he was enthralled by the environment and wanted to progress due to just seeing more of the levels.

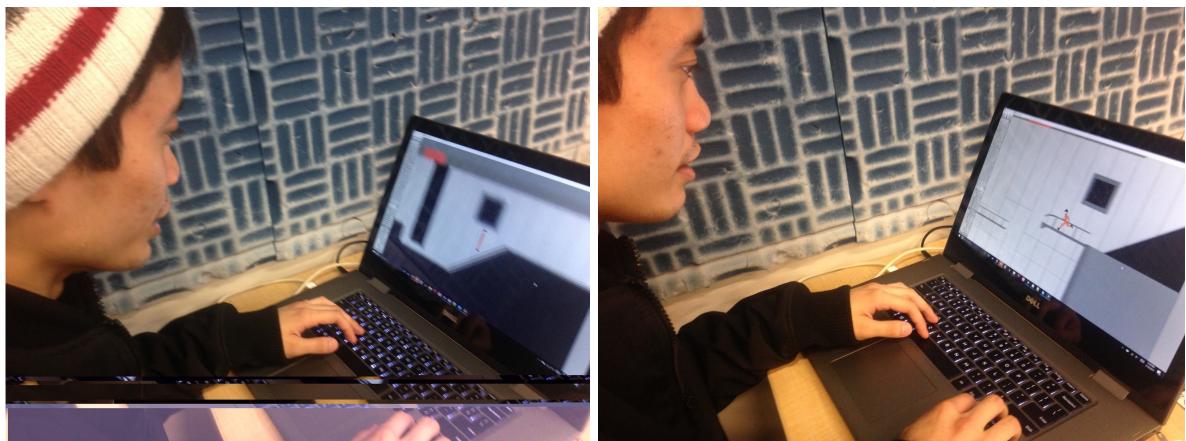
8. Name: Darren

Age: 21

Gender: Male

Gamer Type: Socializer Seeker

Playing Style: Discovery, Social



Observation Notes: He tried to find all the secret areas for more dialogue, not for the sake of the story, but for the sake of finding them. He seemed to enjoy the fact that there were hidden optional areas.

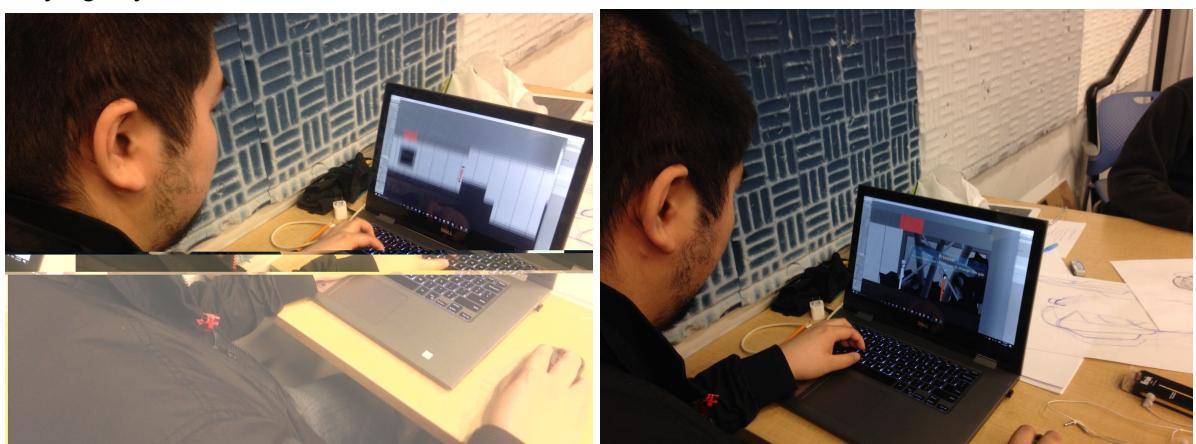
9. Name: Daniel

Age: 22

Gender: Male

Gamer Type: Mastermind Conquerer

Playing Style: Achievement, Customization



Observation Notes: He hated the controls, and found the dialogue boring. He did find the difficulty of the platforming to be fine, but overall he did not have an enjoyable experience.

Reflections

For level design we learned a lot about pacing and having a good flow of difficulty for the player. If the level is too difficult the player will get frustrated and quit, and if it was too easy the player would get bored and quit. So a good level will have a curve of difficulty that can pace the player to stay interested and keep on playing. We also tended to make our levels more difficult to accommodate more hardcore players, but that caused the hardcore players to get annoyed with the controls as opposed to the level design. On the other hand, the more casual players were frustrated more with the level designs.

We also learned that the controls are a large part of that makes a game fun. The controls have been a consistent complaint from testers throughout this project and we never found a good way of improving them. We also learned that forcing the story on the player is not a good idea. Also, since this is a platforming game and not a big RPG, the story must be emphasized all the more so that the player knows that this is a narrative game and not some Mario-style platformer where the story doesn't matter.

We would have done the process slightly differently in retrospect. We focused on building content for this game and trying to make an engaging story, and some of the gameplay tweaks we could have made never got made due to scheduling. Because we focused so much on content and story, we didn't manage to get platforms that can be jumped through from the bottom, a death animation, particle effects to indicate electrical surfaces, or additional computer terminals to give some information about the level (we only have this in 3a and 3b). If we had reigned in our expectations for the story from the beginning, we would probably have a tighter game experience at the expense of content, and since this project only required 3 levels that may have been the better option.

Overall however, players were fairly impressed by the competence of our game, as it was actually functionally playable with little to no bugs, and the annoyances of the players were mostly derived from the above stated. There was a lot of potential for our game to actually entice the players into enjoying themselves while playing, we just needed to tap into it. If we were to improve, we would try and tighten up the controls, change the scope of our story and try and make more levels that accommodate all types of players.

References

All art assets were created by our team.

Assisted by a tutorial for raycast collisions and moving platforms

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbWK8bCAU2w>