

## GNIS Assignment 3 // Reflection

Robert Wittmann

Auckland University of Technology

To begin with I had two ideas: Continuing on my CyberPunk world/story from assignment 2, and making a horror story where the intent is to be the worst character in a horror setting - being the one who goes out looking for the cat, or checks out the basement in the cabin. So I ended up going with neither. The assignment we got for the guest lecture sparked a new idea, a story with no direct dialogue. This first idea was simply a sentient lamp in a room. I stayed with the idea as the specifics seemed indifferent to me as they were insignificant to telling the narrative. The important aspects were: there is a normally inanimate object that the audience inhabits (now with sentience) and a human. Learning from assignment 2, I knew more of an outlined structure would benefit my process, though it had to be loose. In my writing I enjoy the narrative unfolding as I write it. This works fine when working with several drafts, but I have still not gotten to that point in my skills where I rework my narratives.

Working with Ink was quite different than working with Twine. I have realised that the visual representation of Twine helped me structure my story a lot. Seeing how it branches and converges helped me with the flow of the story, and guiding each branch to where I wanted it to be. Ink being a bit more linear in its structure made me lose my overview at times. To prevent this I could have made a visual skeleton on paper, or in any flowchart tool, but I didn't. I did, however, create some notes regarding things I wanted to include and a rough outline of the narrative in a classic three act model, shown in figure 1.

Another struggle for me was the shift of focus in this assignment compared to that of assignment 2. In my CyberPunk narrative, I focused mainly on plot as I was writing. As soon as the main character and the setting was established I was thinking in cool sequences. When not writing plot it was all world building in expositional logs. In this assignment the focus was much more on character related. As based on what Andrew Bancroft explained during our guest lecture, this time the focus is on the relationship line and the line of inner conflict. The theme is about balance, patience, understanding and tolerance, and trying to accomplish that with two characters that don't talk was the challenge I wanted to set for myself.

This did, however, end up similar to my idea in assignment 2, bigger than expected. Not only would I have to establish two characters, I also had to build up their relationship, incorporate a character arc and develop the relationship between them. This had to be done with a completely blank character (the lamp) experiencing the world for the first time, from a more technical point of view (POV). I also wanted to create some depth in the relationship with the interaction, having the boy experiencing personal issues that the player could then worsen or try to remedy. I do not think I achieved this the way I had hoped

to, but I think I got closer than I expected to when I realised the scope might have been too big. The initial idea was also to have two characters' experience with the world mirror each other. As the lamp explored itself and what/who it was, so would the boy (being a teenager).

On the technical side I tried using variables as the structure for using these seemed much easier in Ink compared to Twine. I had three kinds of variables: those for counting, those for POV, and one for boolean logic. The counting ones were used to see if the player was causing more disturbance or showing restraint in terms of interacting with the boy. Only the former ended up being used but the overall concept was still used. If the player was too aggressive or too passive early on the game would end, encouraging a balanced play. If the narrative had been longer the mechanic could have been utilised better as the balance would have been one the player had to keep for longer, or it could have been more dynamic than two extremes and a middle. Whether the player was too aggressive was still used towards being able to pick one of the "bad" endings to the story. The POV variables were used to change the text as information was conveyed and the AI learned about the world. Once again, it could have been utilised better as only one option changed these variables, but instead they were used for a bit of diversity in replays and for comedic effect. Lastly the boolean variable was just used for a check in regards to which options the player could pick. This could also have been achieved by checking if the player has passed through a specific 'knot' but it was simpler/faster to just use a new variable instead.

Like with assignment 2 I chose to create a "true" ending. By balancing the interaction, and showing some of the thematic values, the player would not only reach the happiest ending, but also gain the most information about the world and the characters. I think the execution of the "true" ending was better in this assignment as it diverted a lot more from the other endings (at least to two of them) compared to my previous assignment. I also decided to have the perspective change on all the endings. The "bad" endings had the perspective change to being outside that of the lamp, showing the results of your actions. The style changed to be more that of a newsfeed, showing not only the effects you had on the boy (and house) but also on the company and the market. There was also a small easteregg of MercTech from the CyberPunk world created for assignment 2 here. The "good" endings changed the perspective towards the boy instead, focusing on his story and not having any more thoughts from the lamp being present, but only the boy talking. I think the perspective shift helped changing the scale depending on whether you played it "evil" and caused a small calamity or "good" and helped a boy where no other helped could be found.

Regarding the choices the player made, a lot of smaller choices were made, and with the counting variables even small choices mattered. This means that it becomes much more unclear which decisions matter and which don't, forcing the player to consider each and every choice they make. I did however not have as much branching as I would have liked. The overall narrative will seem similar to most players until they reach the end (disregarding early "game overs"). I believe

a mix of the branching found in this narrative and the one from assignment 2 would be a perfect fit.

If I had more time I would expand on the branching making the “balancing” I was trying achieve a wider range for a bigger effect. Also adding more items in the room you could interact with would be optimal as that is the core of the interaction the lamp can accomplish. Further establishment of the boys relationship to his parent(s) earlier in the story would also help guide the results of the players interaction with the narrative. A graphical interface could also have been interesting as most of the knowledge the lamp received (other than the internet, if that pathway was chosen) was visual, allowing the player to click on the devices for the lamp to communicate with. I should also have seen whether Ink auto-saves (like Twine) because an unsaved document ended up setting me back an entire day’s work.

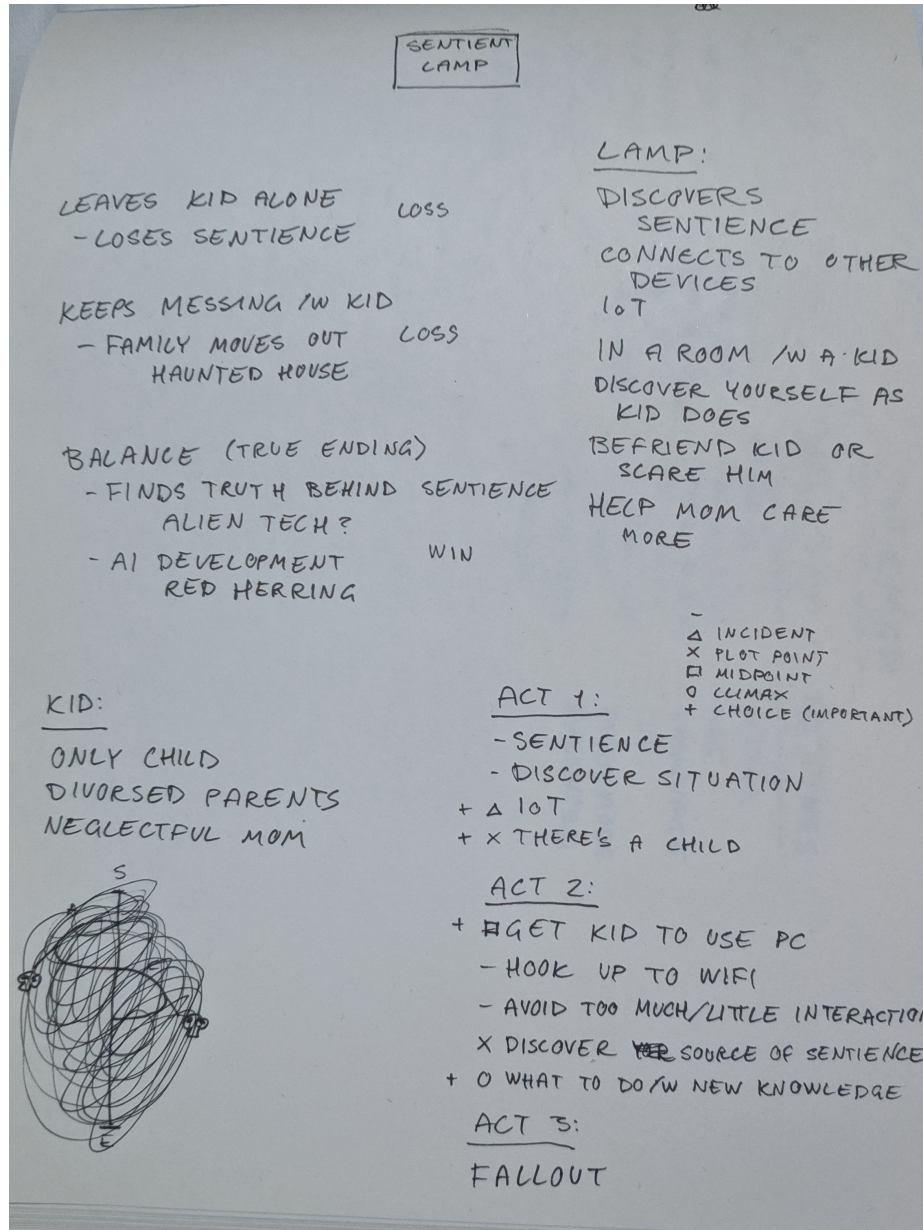


Fig. 1: Notes for story