Postmortem Report

Mark Graven

Southern New Hampshire University

**Contents:**

**What went right --------------------------------------------------------------- [**[**Page 3**](#WhatwentRight)**]**

**What went wrong --------------------------------------------------------------- [**[**Page 6**](#WhatWentWrong)**]**

**Lessons Learned --------------------------------------------------------------- [**[**Page 8**](#LessonsLearned)**]**

**Refactoring --------------------------------------------------------------- [**[**Page 8]**](#Refactoring)

**Balanced Approach --------------------------------------------------------------- [**[**Page**](#BalancingTheApproach) **9]**

**What went right**

1: **Simple but identifiable “Fuzzies”**

While the fuzzies aren’t exactly fuzzy, in the strictest sense, the two models chosen to represent fuzzies were custom made and are clearly identifiable to virtually all players. This becomes particularly evident when the player initiates the objective/quest at the farm and they are prompted to pick up X amount of Giraffe fuzzies, and Y amount of Pig fuzzies. With that information on the screen, the user can clearly identify which is which, and is able to make the decisions to chase the right fuzzy down.



They also have personality, albeit simple, that has them roam around within their paddock/fenced area, which adds to the randomness of where you’ll find each individual fuzzy. Even if they initially spawn near each other, each one will choose a random place within their fenced area, and it was uncommon that two were right by each other.

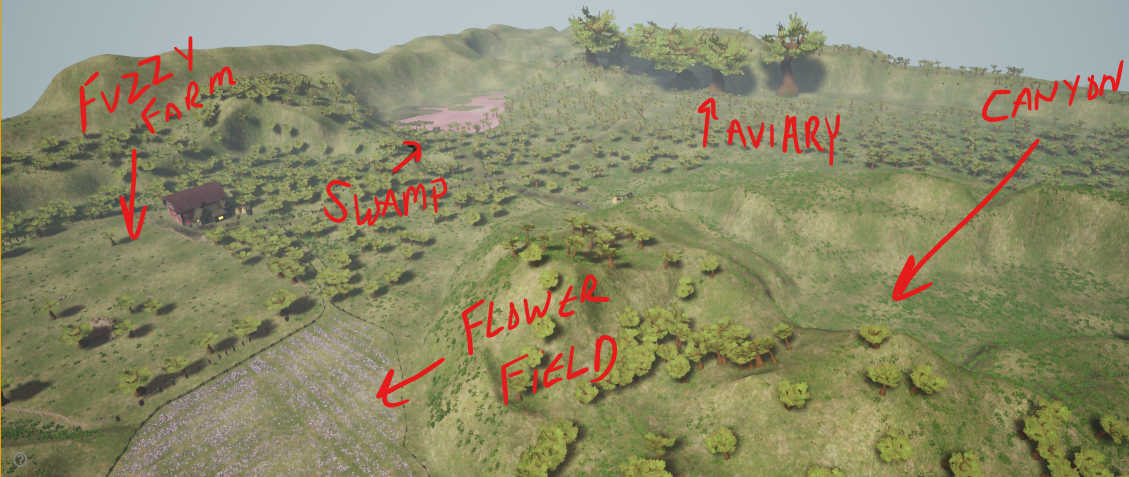
Also included was a random spawn feature that’s zones were used to ensure they wouldn’t spawn in/on trees, or high up on rocks, or outside of the fenced level. When you combined the random spawn and random roam, it truly made for a unique play experience every time.

**2: The Landscape**

The original concept of the gameplay field was simple enough and was done by creating a large enough navigable area for the player to chase down the fuzzies. Because (aesthetically) just having the single navigable field to explore is unpleasing, I added some rolling hills outside of the fenced playfield, as well as other mini bio zones like a swamp w/water, an aviary with huge trees, and a canyon area. All of this came together smoothly and was easy to accomplish using one asset pack from the store (Advanced Village Pack (AVP)) that kept the footprint of the project small and manageable.

I also created a simple but effective landscape texture so that most of the playfield was on top of a grassy surface. Adding in the various grass foliage from the AVP, with a dusting of trees, it made for a relatively pleasant combination of forests and fields. The swamp area utilized much of the same assets and was easy to create using a water texture that I had for a different project. I just had to apply that texture to a plane that was large enough to cover the swamp area I wanted it for and boom, instant swamp!

The aviary came together easily because I was able to use the same assets from the AVP which I scaled up and out to give an awe inspiring sensation to the habitat for the flying fuzzies (not implemented for this prototype). Additionally, the canyon was simple to create by using the basic landscaping tools provided within unreal.

Since the Slithering Swamp, Critter Canyon, and Forrest of Flight weren’t part of the requested prototype, I ensured that they were only basically built as to not expend undue time on them, and created invisible blocking volumes to prevent players from navigating into the incomplete areas. Additionally, since pathing / exploring to these areas can take a few minutes, I added in a simple teleport/transport mechanic to move players back to the starting/load in position if they were in face in the “out of bounds” region of the prototype. 

**3: Sounds**

The sounds for this came together very quickly and had I had a lot of fun with them. To start with the main sound, the music, I found an artist that has a ton of music that is free to use (with attribution) and he had this quite enjoyable piece that I used that fit the profile for a fun farm game. It is called Banjos Unite, by Alexander Nakarada used under CC 4.0 license (<https://www.serpentsoundstudios.com/royalty-free-music/comedy>). For the basics of the level (as the player runs around) the music is perfect and very peaceful/fun, but it was too slow for the timed event! A simple fix for it was to speed it up! I used the same WAV file and created a new cue with a modulator and pumped the pitch up (which naturally increases the music speed) and bam, a hasty frenzy collection music was born, and it worked beautifully. Not only did the music match the intent, but it worked perfectly for the desired length of time when the player would run out of time. The music ends just after the user is prompted with the menu options to quit or retry and I don’t think I could have planned that out any better if I had tried. Even better, when the song begins it has a distinct 3 beat drum intro that replaced the need for a SFX used to signal the beginning of the round. It was a great find that really helped to bring my project some fun life!

Regarding the SFX I really felt like keeping it minimal, while also adding to the feel. The first SFX that came together nicely was a simple one from freesound.org that is a low to high tone change that I used to signify the pickup of the fuzzies. Since the footprint of this particular file was very small, I used audacity to create two variations of the sound to use on the two different fuzzies. Though the two were similar, they were distinctly different, so players will know that they’re picking up different fuzzies just from sound alone.

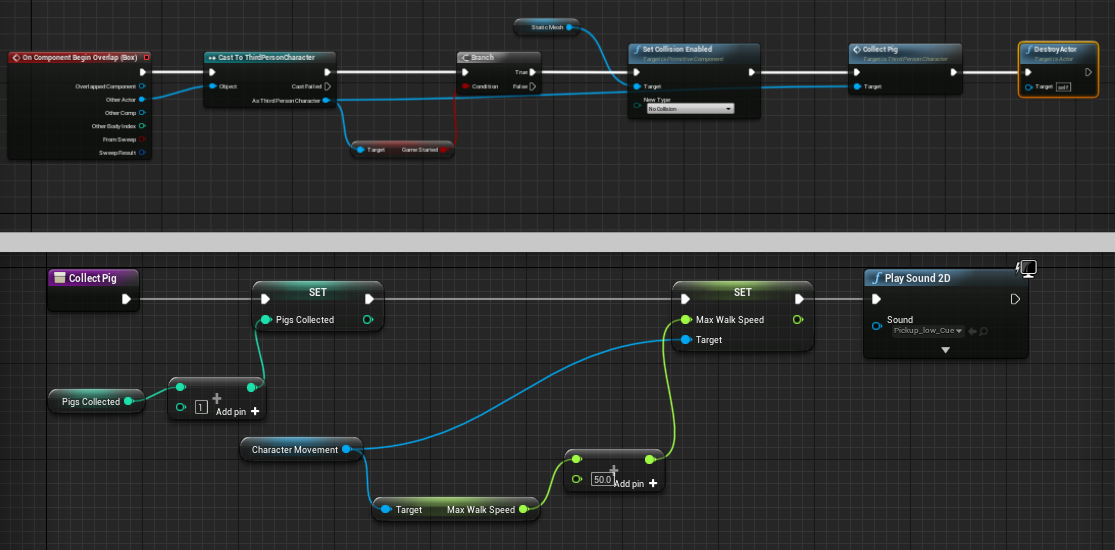
The next, and last, SFX that I added in was footsteps for the players character. A simple footstep timed well within the animation for running adds so much to the immersion the player will feel and is one of the first things I program in when I’m doing sound effects. Each footstep, no matter how fast the player is moving, will play the sound effect and is so simple to do it is essentially mandatory for me. I opted to not include a SFX for jumping as it isn’t an encouraged feature, more it was added to let the player feel more free in their controls/movement.

**4: Unreal Engine**

My proficiency in UE4 made this a very effective, and very fun, engine to use for this project. No direct coding was required as the entirety of the gameplay was handled utilizing the blueprints provided which allowed an exceptionally fast creation time for the game. Though it may have technically taken several weeks to create, that was because I opted to improve/change the game as the lessons progressed so that I could take from the lessons and add them in. I often found that what I had already programmed in was utilized in lessons learned later in the course. This was a pleasant and exceptionally welcome surprise as I was able to do things that I was familiar with, while also having the time to experiment and do things in ways I hadn’t done before, while not feeling any sensations of being overwhelmed with lack of time.

**5: Improved efficiency**

The GDD requirements made it so that I ensured I learned how to do things right, so that they were done correctly to meet the rubrics. With that in mind, the methods I used improved the efficiency of my game so that I wasn’t continuously re-programming over and over the same basic functions. The primary examples in this game was that I built the functions for the players score to increase inside of the player BP, and whenever the player overlapped with the fuzzy, it would call the function from within the players BP instead of externally pulling and modifying variables. This also allowed me to have more fun with what happens when the player collects an item. The following image shows the current state of the Pig and function built into the character BP named Collect Pig. Instead of rewriting the code from the function into the pig and every other variant of the fuzzy, I just had to call the function and modify which variable was being changed. I also added a movement speed enhancement on each fuzzy collected as well as their respective sound cue when they are picked up. If all of that was in the pig BP it would have cluttered it and made it harder to understand, and potentially impacted performance (not on this scale, but larger projects).



In hindsight this wasn’t needed for this particular project, but getting more comfortable with it and working within functions on the character blueprint has given me a stronger skillset when it comes to other, larger, projects, and has been an invaluable lesson from this project.

**What went wrong:**

**1: User Error**

The first thing I experienced difficulty with was my landscaping tools. I was suffering a problem where it seemed like only a single pixel was changing when I would attempt to sculpt my landscape, and I couldn’t find an answer anywhere through Unreal/Epic or any of my Google searches. I felt like I was at a loss and I was just about to submit a ticket to Unreal when I realized my error. I had my landscape gizmo size set to 1, which I thought was max (scale of 0-1), but in reality it was at it’s minimum, maximum size being over 8,000.

Luckily, this oversight was found early and was resolved with plenty of time to properly model my landscape, but it had potential to be devastating to my level design process and could have cost me not only time, but cost me the successes I saw in the creation of the levels.

**2: Bugs**

Early on we learned about destructible meshes, which I was excited for because it is something I enjoy working with in my projects. The physics within UE4 are great and provide a sense of realism when an item is destroyed and crumbles to the ground. However, some meshes caused the engine to bug and not correctly “explode” / shatter an object. Furthermore, once this bug occurred, all future meshes attempted to be shattered would revert to the first defective mesh, regardless if the mesh was in that project or not. Originally this occurred when I was working on the Space\_Race\_Prototype, but it caused issues with Fuzzy Farmer because the mesh that bugged in Space Race was causing all meshes in Fuzzy Farmer to exhibit the same mesh and error.

The problem was resolved with the launch of UE4 Version 4.24.2, but had already caused me to deviate from using destructible meshes (which aren’t a requisite of this particular game per GDD), but it was something that I was going to have some fun with originally. I feel like the delayed functionality of the destructible meshes prevented me from realizing an additional fun aspect in the game, but ultimately didn’t cause me any problems with the design.

I did, however, include destructible meshes that activated when the fuzzy was collected that caused the fuzzy to explode into the air. This caused another headache as shortly after adding the functionality and updating the source code, I found extreme FPS issues happening as soon as the fuzzies spawned from the signpost event. I noticed that the pig fuzzies were all spawning on top of each other underground. While debugging, it appeared the video lag was caused from the game attempting to adjust their location as per the blueprint request. Regardless of what collision settings I placed, or where I placed the spawn locations, they all spawned on top of each other.

After reverting to a prior commit, I started to rebuild the DM functionality from a game state that didn’t cause the FPS drop. I tested the game mechanism after each change until about the 5th test when I found that, for whatever reason, the despawning of my DM’s debris bugged after I saved it and it’s level I had set to 1 had reverted and was now set to level -1. Had I not had the ability to revert my changes via source control I likely wouldn’t have found it quickly and would have delayed me.

**3: Feature Creep**

While level designing I had designed the basics of the requisite field themed play level. Initial character load in was straight in front of the fenced field and the remainder of the map was basically a valley encompassing the game field. I decided I wanted to make it feel a bit more warm/friendly, so I started expanding the (non playable) level to improve the look. I added swamps, an aviary, a canyon, fenced paths, rocky pathing in the fenced paths, a field of flowers, and more. I realized I had started adding features that weren’t requested of the prototype, and that there wouldn’t be enough time to complete each aspect that I had begun creating.

In lieu of removing what I had already created, I had to design something to prevent the player from exiting the developed playfield. This came in the form of an invisible blocking volume. This was enough to keep the player in the playable area, however, there was no explanation provided as to why the character all of the sudden couldn’t progress down the [seemingly intended] paths. This forced me to create a widget to inform the player the area wasn’t developed, and that they needed to return to the fuzzy farm portion of the game. This created the second problem, as the paths weren’t terribly short, and it was possible for a player to get somewhat lost if they were to try to navigate back to the farm, so I had to add a transport option to players to ensure even the youngest kids could find their way out.

**Lessons Learned:**

**Organize documentation first**

My biggest headache was going back (multiple times) and identifying parts of the game design document that my prototype didn’t necessarily conform to. The first of these was the concept of the field themed level. As mentioned earlier only the fenced playfield was a field, and the rest was a rocky canyon. After a couple of weeks I was reviewing the GDD and realized that it didn’t specify the playfield, but that it might have wanted the level to be a field theme. This required me to rework my concept for the base level of the game and took me a few hours to rectify. Then I had to find assets to fill the new landscape that fit what I felt matched the field theme.

Another time I had to rework something was adding the roaming ability to my fuzzies. Initially I had them set to randomly spawn within a volume with no AI included. After reading the GDD again, it stated it wanted “the character [to search] for **roaming** ‘wild fuzzies’”, which again required me to rework them. Adding AI to a character wasn’t that hard, but getting the AI to work after they were spawned took several hours of figuring out to get to work and ultimately required me to build an AI tree just to get the roaming to work.

Another simple oversight, that cost me time to rework, was the wording in the screens that informed the player if they were successful or not in the quest. Initially, I had Congratulations and Times Up! But after reviewing the GDD it explicitly states Successful or Unsuccessful as the ratings. This was an easy rework, but it should have never needed to be reworked and was ultimately a loss of time.

**Task Log**

**Refactoring/Reworking**

The first refactor came when I realized I needed to make it so the fuzzies would roam after being spawned in the level. Refer to commit 4c280ec in bitbucket. This was when I realized I had missed the mark in the GDD that stated the fuzzies would roam. This required me to build a basic AI tree and implement a different spawning mechanic for it to properly work. In this spawning mechanic still provided the random spawn, in addition to the roaming fuzzies, providing a completely unique location for each fuzzy by the time the player got to them. The real refactor was the change of randomization of the fuzzies.

The next refactor I hit on was when I changed the way the fuzzies and the player character interacted. Initially I had the fuzzies casting to the player, pulling variables, and then adding to/setting variables from within the fuzzy BP on character overlap. I changed it so that the code was written as a function within the character BP so that it wasn’t running the code before the model was destroyed. This caused the same basic functionality while also removing delays for despawn of the models. This can be viewed in commit 678040a.

Similarly, another refactor was making it so that each instance of the fuzzy meshes could only increment the players collected numbers once. This was added very recently, as was overlooked until I started experiencing late design FPS drops and it became obvious because the meshes weren’t immediately destroying. This was resolved by utilizing a doonce node, and can be seen at commit e8e8d5c.

Another rework/refactor was when I rebuilt my level to conform appropriately to the GDD’s requirement that it be a field themed level. This took only a little bit of time, but was important because it was what the GDD/Client specified. This can be viewed on commit 57d9834.

**Balancing the approach**

The first thing I did was laid out the foundation/framework for everything I saw as being required by the GDD. From the level, to the basic fuzzies to collect (shapes at first), to the fenced surroundings, to the UI, it was all simple and basic to get functionality determined. Once that was done I started reworking elements that needed attention to the next level. It was at about this time that I really worked on getting the RTM set up and getting requirements from the GDD all laid out on paper. Once I did that, I noticed areas that I had overlooked, so I stopped all work on updating mechanics and transitioned to implementing missed items. Like overhauling my levels design, adding roaming features to pets, updating success/unsuccessful ratings on widgets.

From that point I tried to spread myself around the entirety of the project to ensure the game felt whole in all aspects (to the point it could be within the rapid prototype). I did find myself (initially) overworking individual components (like adding rows into the flower field, completely unnecessary, not part of the playable level), but the rest of the prototype saw levels of revision until I felt the individual aspects were right, and they were taken out of future updates. Like the Success and Unsuccessful screens, which ended revisions very early on because I felt they were complete. That is, until I realized the screens didn’t contain the appropriate verbiage/rating (Success / Unsuccessful, vs Congratulations / Time’s UP!), at which time I made them my next priority to bring back up to speed as can be seen in the c89202a commit, amongst others.