Confusion

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Imagine that there are two students graduating from high school who want to pursue their dreams. One of these students is part of a family with the ability to be approved for a college loan. The other student comes from a family that does not have the resources to attain such a loan. The latter student can easily feel hopeless and therefore feel there is no reason to strive any higher than the bare minimum because their options are limited by their living situation. The first student, no matter what post-high school path they choose, will have just that: a choice, which can be a lot more mentally freeing. My game seeks to demonstrate the frustrations of only being able to mill around in life without ever “leveling up,” which generally will make someone tired of playing – in this case, tired of playing the game of life. Choices make experimentation more viable and feasible. Choices better allow for striving to do things like attending college, because there is more hope surrounding that “leveling up” process.

This game is set in an “elsewhere” in which a skewed interpretation of the “game of life” is contained. In that setting, as shown by my “container” for the game, it could be downloaded and played on phones, computers, or other devices in this other space. This existence is one where not only is the goal not simply to have the biggest house, or the most kids, but other than during basic character creation the player does not have complete control of their own actions. You are just trying to maintain all of your sanity, the “currency” in this game, which is actually only possible down one of the paths. You lose a set amount of sanity each time the computer’s decisions differ from the ones you chose. While this isn’t necessarily how life is thought of working in our world, simulates not just how actions can have unintended consequences, but what life would feel like if it were less goal-oriented. My central premise is essentially to frustrate the person playing the game enough for them to be roused to consciously think about the underlying themes of the game, such as what a world with no self-control, or what life is like for people in our world at various stages on the socioeconomic ladder. People in our world have access to different levels of opportunities based on a variety of factors, and while my game does not seek to point out all of these factors, it tries to guide the player to the acknowledgement of their existence.

In approaching the creation of this game, I decided that I wanted to use Java within the Eclipse IDE as the backdrop. The console output of the game is a simple black and white, providing a stark contrast to most of the graphics-driven games on the market today. Additionally, in our ever-increasingly non-binary world, the game’s world is a juxtaposition, giving only two-choices for each option. At one point, I wanted the game to be more turn-based, where the player was acted upon by non-player characters in the world. I decided against this because I wanted to keep the variables down to the players direct input-to-output so that the user would more quickly realize what they were deciding was not always matching the character’s actions. Along that train of thought, I felt that making the computer always reject user input felt a little too predictable, so I wanted to add a bit of unpredictability by using a randomized effect on each decision. Adding the animated “.” symbols was a bit challenging, but it was also a way to make the game somewhat dynamic, and it’s almost as if you can see the computer thinking on the other end of your input.

I want the game to make the player aware that there are people in the world who live with this sort of experience, by the hand they’ve been dealt for the game of life. Players and spectators of my game should walk away with a certain shortlist of questions tied to the play experience. “What would it be like to not be fully in control of how my life progresses?” and “How would I feel about this?” are just a few key questions that I would like my players to consider. In James Auger’s “Speculative design: crafting the speculation,” he discusses how,” In order to elicit audience engagement and contemplation on a subject it is sometimes helpful for a speculation to provoke” (Auger 14). For my project to stick out to a player in this regard, I wanted to make it evoke a sense of frustration to make the player consider just WHY the play experience is so frustrating.

I’ve find making to be an excellent way of cogitating material. I’ve learned through this process that not all of my initial ideas will make it to the finish line with the completed project, but because they participated, they have shaped the final result in at least some small way. In Mary Flanagan’s “Critical Play: Radical Game Design,” she mentions that, “…games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics. Artists using games as a medium of expression, then, manipulate elements common to games – representation systems and styles, rules of progress, codes of conduct, context or reception, winning and losing paradigms, ways of interacting in a game, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions” (Flanagan 4). I intentionally adjusted things like constraining “winning” or “leveling up” to a very small subset of the complete experience in my game to serve my underlying objectives. From that process, I learned that I can weave in both subtle and not-so-subtle points into my work, giving it deeper meaning. And, as was part of Debbie Chachra’s point in “Beyond Making,” I believe that the “making” involved in this project lies more heavily in the conveyance of my understanding of the world around me to the players of my game (Chachra 320). The game itself is pretty cool but knowing that someone would be able to walk away from it having broadened their perspective of the world around them is even cooler to me.

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