Through the Looking Glass

Early Development and Conception

Initial Brainstorming

My development process started with brainstorming on story beats and gameplay ideas I wanted to have. I decided I wanted a narrative-driven game, where the story would take precedence and the game, while ideally still fun and with interesting game mechanics, would have its main purpose be a medium to tell a story. I then pivoted to thinking about what advantages games have over other story-telling mediums that I ought to take advantage of. The idea that games have a player, and that it acts as a way for the consumer of the game to directly interact with the media, as opposed to music, literature or film. The idea of choices and agency that a player has is a big part of why I find games so fascinating, including when compared to other forms of media.
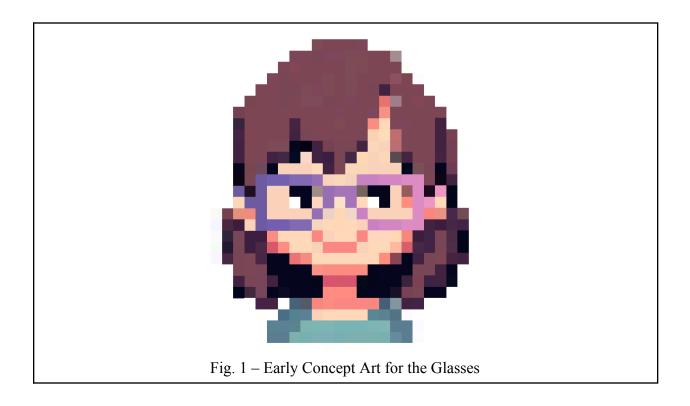
Inspirations

Naturally my thoughts also quickly went to games I have previously played and enjoyed. One game stood out in particular: *Omori*. *Omori* is a 2D RPG where you play as a child, Sunny, who has a past with traumatic events, and a complicated relationship with his friends. The main gameplay loop is to play as Sunny during the day, and as *Omori* – his alter ego in his "headspace" – while Sunny sleeps. It features two very different worlds to explore and learn about the characters from: the real world, and "headspace". Since I generally consider *Omori* to be my favourite game, mostly due to the way it tells its story, naturally I would draw inspiration

from it. I began with wanting a similar feature of having two worlds to explore, with one of them being based on a character's inner thoughts, perspective and personality. Another inspiration I had was a mobile game I played when I was younger, *A Silent Age*. It was a 2D side scrolling puzzle game where you play as a janitor-turned-world-saviour when you get given a time machine and a near future where humanity goes extinct from an illness carried from the future. *A Silent Age* also featured two different worlds to explore, and is a lot closer to what I ended up doing with my game than *Omori*, where you go between future, present and past at the push of a button to solve puzzles and progress through the story. Finally, I also drew some narrative inspiration from *It Takes Two*, as I'll explain later, both *Omori* had a story that was far darker than what I wanted to pursue, and any early attempts I made to make a story that was similar would turn out more like a creatively-bankrupt short story where the plot twist is a dead child. This is where I pivoted to a story focused about a parent and their child, where you aim to redeem yourself as a parent. While not notably close to *It Takes Two* (which is a two player game), it is a game I was playing around the time and thought I ought to mention as I drew some inspiration for my story from it. (Check Appendix 1 and 2 for images of *Omori* and *A Silent Age*)

Core Game Ideas

After some brainstorming I decided on a magical pair of glasses that would allow the wearer to see the world in a completely new light, an entirely new over-exaggerated perspective that represented how the glasses' owner sees the world. With this idea, it was only natural that this mechanic would be best utilised in a puzzle game, where putting on and taking off the glasses to change worldview would be a main mechanic behind solving puzzles. With a theme of seeing the world through someone else's perspective, it would make the most sense to make it a

3D first-person game. However, due to the limitations of my ability and knowledge, time constraints, as well as available resources (mainly assets), I ended up deciding on a 2D game.

Fig. 1 – Early Concept Art for the Glasses

Understanding by Game Critics

      2D side scroller puzzle games are not uncommon, but not exactly common either. One limitation of making it a side scroller is that it generally limits the puzzle-creation opportunities due to the lack of range and movement from the player. This is mostly true as my game will not be a platformer. Unlike 2D platformers, which feature a small player character relative to the screen size and an empowering moveset for movement, my game will feature a relatively large player character who can only move left and right in a smaller setting. This means that making puzzles will be more limiting, rather than being able to use movement and mechanics surrounding movement to make puzzles. However, games more like this tend to be more story-driven, as without fun and interesting movement mechanics, more focus and attention is

placed on the story and narrative, and how it is integrated into the gameplay and few mechanics there are. This matches my goal with this game. While I definitely will not be able to integrate a full story into the game, I would like to write a complete story, and have ideas of how I would integrate certain story beats into the game, and hopefully give a small look into what that story and game would be.

The Literary Aspect

Making the game "Literary"

After coming up with the core ideas behind the game, I next needed to decide on a story, and how to tie in the game with the things I was learning about games in the course. I wanted to incorporate a story into my game that would have the player reflect on their own experiences and life afterwards, tying into the ideas of diegetic and non diegetic acts, machine and operator acts, where my goal is to have very little non-diegetics acts and moments, where my goal is a larger sense of immersion and narrative storytelling, minimising non-diegetic operator acts such as menu usage, as well as non-diegetic machine acts such as ui and interface elements that are not integrated to the game's world. Speaking of narrative, my idea here also follows the philosophy of narratology rather than ludology. From what I have gathered when we were discussing ludology and narratology, the general idea of ludology is an emphasis on gameplay and mechanics, whereas the general idea of narratology is an emphasis on storytelling similar to other media like literature and film. Naturally my game would be more focused around narratology, with a larger emphasis on telling a story rather than gameplay and certain mechanics, but that doesn't mean I didn't think about mechanics at all, the mechanic of putting on and taking off the glasses being the main mechanic for puzzle solving.

Bryan Katuari – prr4as

The Theoretical Full Story and Game

      Finally, I had to write out the story, which is as follows: In Through the Looking Glass,

you play as a single mother whose relationship with their child has become strained and difficult.

This relationship reaches its boiling point after an argument in the car on the drive home after

buying your child a new pair of glasses about academic performance. As a result, your child has

run away from home, and after reporting the case to the local police, you search the house for

clues as to where he might have gone. While searching, you find his old pair of glasses, glasses

which, when you put them on, let you look into an alternate reality, one that represents how your

child sees the world. This even brings objects to life, allowing you to talk to toys and objects

that help guide you through the game and this new world. As you progress using the glasses to

gain information and solve puzzles, you learn more about your child, ultimately aiming to work

towards redeeming yourself as a parent. Initially you can only use the glasses to any effect in

your child's bedroom, and his study room, but as you solve more puzzles and learn more about

how your child views his life, the world, and you yourself as a parent, you unlock new rooms

that the glasses can be used in, reflecting your greater understanding of your child. By the end of

the game, you would have seen the entire house through the glasses. When you do, the police

find your child and he returns home. Feeling awkward and upset, they go to their room, setting

down their glasses. Here the player is given a choice, try on the new glasses or not. In not trying

on the new glasses, you confront your child and scold them for being irresponsible and reckless,

this (obviously) doesn't fix your relationship with your child, resulting in the "bad ending". In

trying on the glasses, you decide to learn from your experiences and try to further understand

your child. Through these new glasses it is revealed through looking at test results and diary

photos that your child doesn't actually harbour any particularly strong sense of hatred or anger

towards you, but disappointment at themselves for not meeting your expectations. With this newfound revelation among other things you learn, you confront your child and among scolding them, apologise and come to a resolution, resulting in the "good ending".

More Literary Ties

I just mentioned the two endings for my game if it were fully realised. This ties into what we discussed in class about agency and choice. I believe that this choice falls under what Nguyen discussed concerning agency and autonomy, where players will be forced to make a choice, of which they are immediately met with the consequence and result of that choice, shaping the narrative. While for a lot of games (such as *The Stanley Parable*) there is no "winning", my game has a fairly clear win and loss. I would say winning is getting the good ending where you resolve the issues with your child, and I would say losing is either giving up on the puzzles or getting the bad ending. However, it could be argued that neither ending is winning or losing, as the game ends either way, and there is no reward or obstacle between the two endings. Despite this, if we are defining winning as under prelusory goals, I would say the goal from the start was to resolve the problems with your child.

The Development Process

Challenges in Development

The first challenge I faced in development were design choices. From the idea generation at the very beginning, all the way to deciding the scope of the game, whether it would be a point and click or just a simple press-space-bar-to-interact system. The second challenge I faced in development was art and assets. I initially tried to make my own art and assets, but if I were to

make a few rooms in a house, as well as an alternate reality, given my skills in art and time constraints, it was simply impossible. As a result I resorted to finding assets online, which came with a new challenge: where do I find assets to take, and which ones do I take? Fortunately, I found a series of public use assets under a creator that has several packs that work well together (a cohesive art style). The third challenge I faced were godot problems. Problems with code, problems with implementing game-specific mechanics, problems with general game mechanics. From swapping scenes, to making dialogue to implementing the glasses mechanic, I found that at every turn I got stuck for a decent time. While I do have experience with Python as a language (which is similar to GD Script), the specifics of what Godot allows and how the files relate (I could not figure out global variables and such for example) were a learning curve. I found that everytime I wanted to add something to the game (which was very easy because I had a lot of ideas and having a better game was very appealing to me), I ended up spending too much time on something that wasn't necessary for my ultimate goal for this specific game and its scope. Combining this with tutorials online being under different assumptions, settings and prep work, using them all together and implementing them into my game proved challenging when they all felt like tutorials for different systems.

Game Systems and Ideas

To conclude this paper/write-up, I would like to just quickly go over again how different game systems, mechanics and decisions from me shape how ideas are reinforced. Firstly, the glasses mechanic enforces the message of the game, the importance of empathy and how miscommunication can be an underestimated barrier in maintaining relationships. The

side-scrolling and generally small-space-feel of the game creates an emphasis less on gameplay and more on narrative and story.

Appendix

Appendix 1 – Screenshots of *A Silent Age*; going between the future and present

The scene on the left is the future, where the illness kills everyone, and the scene on the right is the present, before that man on the table turns into a skeleton

Appendix 2 – Screenshots of *Omori*; reality and "headspace"

The scene on the left is the real world, at a park with more realistic colours, objects and people. The scene on the right is Sunny's "headspace", where the colours are a lot more playful and pastelle, with imaginative people designs and objects, representing his child-like view and escapism to a more fun world resembling his time when he was younger.