

SENTENCE is a short, role-playing game designed to illustrate through its mechanics the experience of a person suffering from *Dissociative Identity Disorder*. The gameplay is meant to reflect the development of the disorder in a metaphorical manner so that actual DID patients aren't triggered, while encouraging other players to inform themselves about the topic as they try to unveil the mystery.

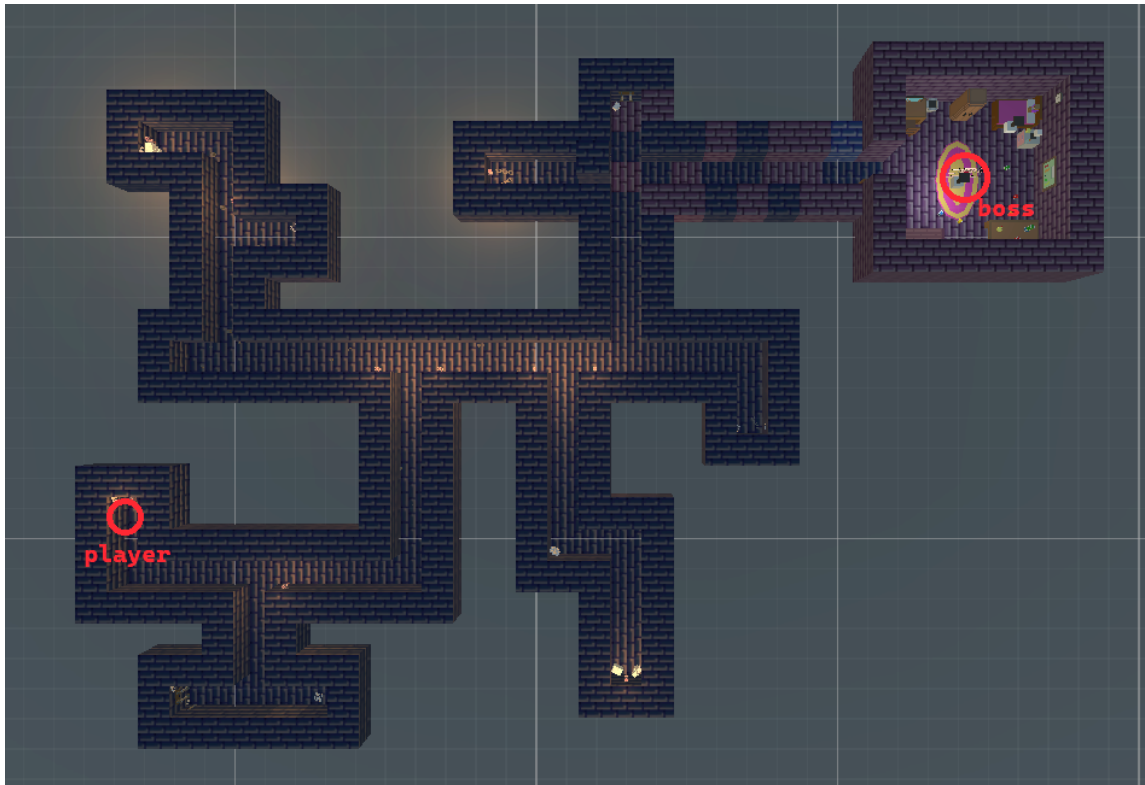
NARRATIVE

SENTENCE tells the story of a girl who is coping with the abuse of an unidentified relative. Similarly to how DID manifests itself because of childhood trauma (*Impact of childhood abuse: Dissociative identity disorder* | mclean 2022), an alternate personality (known as alter) emerges as a way to protect the girl's mind from the exposure to these traumatic events.

The more the player is defeated, the more alters appear to defend against this trauma, forming a "system" (collection of alters in the same body). However, unlike other party-based RPGs, these alters can't attack at the same time. They must share control of the body through a process known as "switching".

GAMEPLAY LOOP

The game involves a simple progression loop of exploration of a single level leading to a boss fight, in the fashion of an old-school dungeon crawler. The player starts in a specific point of the dungeon and they must explore until they find the pink path that leads to the “girl’s room”, where a fleshy monster is present.

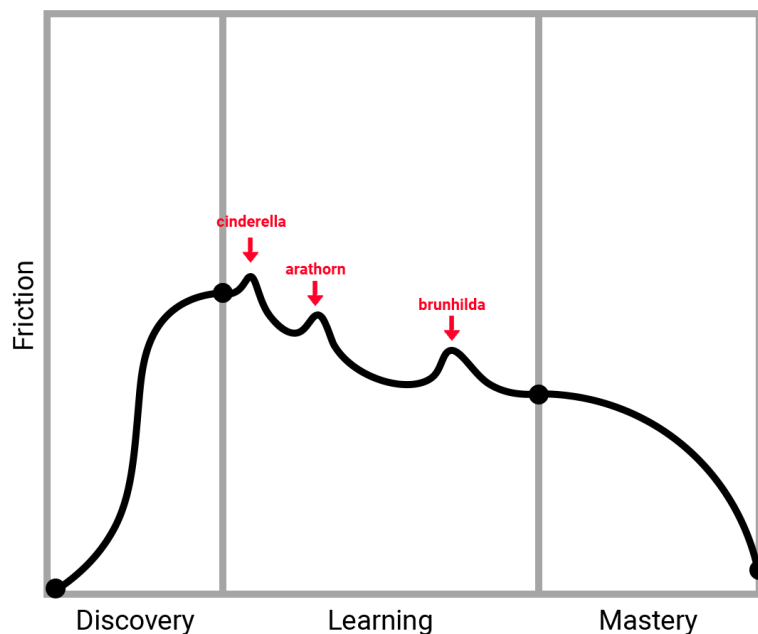


When they approach the monster, the game switches to a 2D turn-based combat stage. If they defeat the boss, the game ends. If they don't, the game restarts from the same point and the player has to remember their way back to the boss room (which is easy once they have explored it).

Every certain number of deaths (see following table), the player unlocks a new character in their party, up to four. They provide different stats and abilities for the player to try it out, giving them a better chance to defeat the monster. They also provide new pieces of lore in their descriptions, hinting at what they could be and why they are there.

Character	Number of Deaths
(Unnamed, default)	0
Cinderella	1
Arathorn	4
Brunhilda	8

The more the player fights, the greater their technical and tactical skills, and the greater their virtual power (in the form of more characters). Despite consisting of a single difficult challenge, the experience remains fresh as it involves an explicitly designed **progression curve**, from meeting the monster to defeating it.



Progression in any game requires the player to overcome some form of resistance for the experience to be engaging, known in game design as **friction** (Schreiber & Romero, *Game balance* 2022). We can visualize this friction over time on a graph, dividing the game experience in three phases. The **discovery** phase involves the process of finding the monster in the dungeon and understanding the nature of the problem (to defeat a boss in a RPG-like encounter). In the **learning** phase, the player invests time in experimenting and learning about the tools they have available to “solve” the boss fight. See how this phase isn’t monotonous. Every time they get a new character, friction spikes slightly because of the added difficulty of having to learn about their abilities and stats. However, once the new

character is understood, friction lowers considerably because now the player has a new tool at their disposal to defeat the boss. This makes what would otherwise be a monotonous fight an engaging experience where victory is always approaching.

In the **mastery** phase, the player has already acquired all possible characters and has developed enough tactical and technical skill to defeat the boss. Friction lowers drastically until, eventually, they beat the game.

SYSTEM

“System” is the name for the player’s RPG party in SENTENCE. It’s a widespread term given to the collection of alters a DID patient has within their mind (*Systems and subsystems* 2016). Similarly, the player’s system consists of up to four alters, which are the characters the player obtains throughout the game by losing against the boss fight.

The system has the following general attributes:

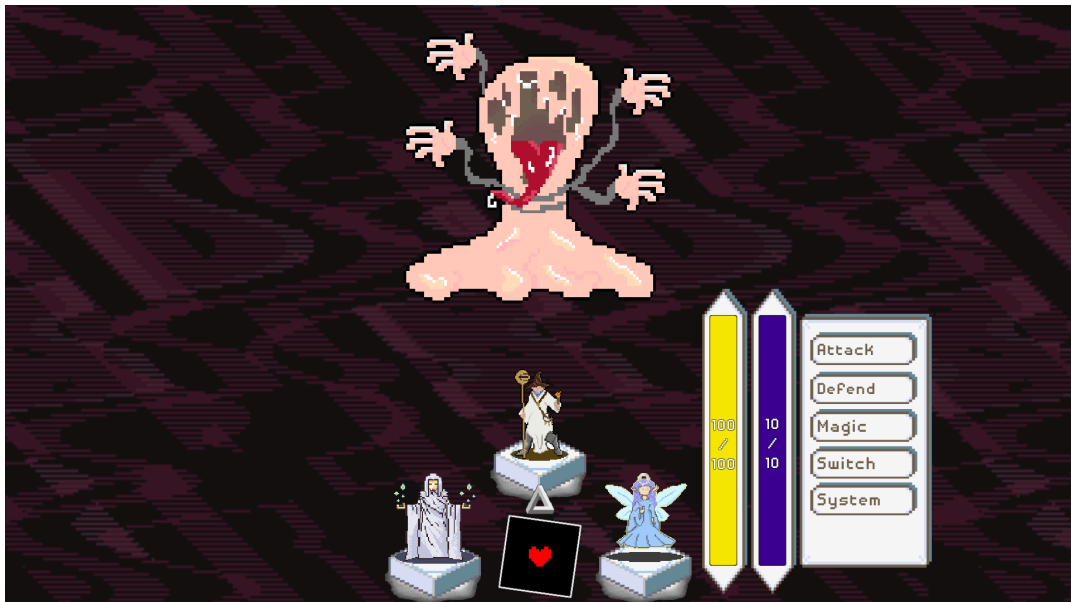
- **Sanity.** The player’s health bar. Contrary to most party-based RPGs, alters in SENTENCE do not have their own health bar. All alters share the same sanity meter. When the sanity meter reaches 0, the player is defeated.
- **Magic power.** Another meter shared between all alters, which is required to perform magic spells. It regenerates when defending.

Alters in the system have the following specific attributes:

- **Lore.** In the form of a brief description to the left of the character sheet and other minor pieces of information, such as the character’s name, age, gender and type of alter.
- **Attack.** The alter’s attack power. When the player presses “attack” during combat, damage dealt will depend on this attribute. The higher the attack, the more damage that alter deals.
- **Resilience.** Similarly to the attack attribute, when the player presses “defend” the amount of damage blocked will depend on this stat. The higher the resilience, the less damage to sanity the player receives when defending with that alter.
- **Magic spells.** Some alters have magic spells which provide utility for the player during the fight, but they don’t deal damage on their own. Each spell requires a specific amount of “magic power” to be performed.

COMBAT

The combat system mixes tactical skill (knowing the best action to take at each turn and planning ahead) and technical real-time skill for a well-rounded experience, allowing players lacking from one type of skill to compensate with the other type.



The tactical component comes from the nature of a turn-based system and the actions they have available at each turn. The player may perform any of the following actions during their turn:

- **Attack.** Deals damage directly to the boss. The damage depends on the alter's relative power. Ends turn when pressed.
- **Defend.** Protects from damage in case the player is hit by a projectile. Ends turn when pressed.
- **Magic.** If available, opens a submenu containing the magic spells the current alter can perform. If any of the given magic spells is pressed, the turn ends.
- **Switch.** Switch to the next alter. Doesn't end turn, but can only be done once per turn.
- **System.** Opens a submenu with all information relative to the alters in case the player wants to check their stats or spells.

When the turn ends, the monster attacks. Similarly to Undertale, instead of simply receiving direct damage from the boss, the player must control a small heart within a box to avoid projectiles. This is where the technical, real-time component comes into place.

The heart is controlled with the mouse. However, since moving at the actual speed of the mouse would make avoiding projectiles trivial, the heart is instead *dragged* by the mouse. It follows the cursor at a slightly slower speed, which gives it a kind of weight which makes it satisfying to dodge projectiles successfully.

The monster has three attack patterns, which are always triggered in the same order. This allows the player to plan ahead and consider which alter they want to be using when confronting each attack (since they can only switch once per turn).

- **Rain of tears.** Tears drop towards the last position of the heart.
- **Rain of faces.** Animated grotesque faces drop from random positions at the top of the box.
- **Beat up.** This attack can't be dodged, indicated by the red color of the sprites. Punches and kicks emerge randomly on the screen without dealing direct damage, going over the heart. When the animation ends, the player receives 30 points flat of damage to sanity.

The purpose of this attack is to ensure players don't neglect the tactical component of the game completely and make use of every tool they have available. Since the player knows they are going to receive 30 points of damage every three turns, they're forced to plan ahead and try different strategies to mitigate the damage, such as:

- ☐ Calculate when to switch to have a high-resilience alter in front to defend with when confronting this attack.
- ☐ Empower the *defend* action using Cinderella's *harden* spell, so that all characters can reasonably defend against the attack.
- ☐ Use Brunhilda's *heal* spell to ensure they always have enough sanity to survive the attack.
- ☐ Empower the *attack* action using Cinderella's *attack* spell and rush the fight, so they minimize the amount of times they have to endure the attack.

These strategies are most effective when paired together. For example, empowering the attack action is the way to go for a technical player, but they will most likely need to heal a few times before they can start dealing heavy damage. Also, switching to a high-resilience alter might not be possible if the player has all four characters (considering there are three attack patterns). They might want to empower defense a few times in case the alter they have to defend with isn't resilient enough.

Depending on the combat situation and the player's progress in the game, there will be different optimal options for the player to improve their situation, and it's up to them to figure them out. In the end, all the tools they have available are useful and unlocking new ones always improves their chances considerably.

REFERENCE LIST

1. *Impact of childhood abuse: Dissociative identity disorder* | mclean. Available at: <https://www.mcleanhospital.org/essential/early-childhood-abuse-dissociative-identity-disorder> (Accessed: 07 July 2024).
2. Schreiber, I. and Romero, B. (2022) *Game balance*. Boca Raton: CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group.
3. *Systems and subsystems* (2016) DID. Available at: <https://did-research.org/did/alters/systems> (Accessed: 08 July 2024).