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ENGL 3500

05 May 2024

Harmony Bridge: A Bridge Between Sicart and Bogost

Harmony Bridge is a literary prototype game inspired by the conflicting ideals of two game theorist scholars- Ian Bogost and Miguel Sicart. In this 2D platformer game, two factions are at war the Bogostian mechs and the Sicartian people. Each embodies two cultures and ways of life they believe to be superior. The Bogostian mechs reside in futuristic cities with geometrical structures. Above all, they value logic, order, and mechanical effectiveness. They believe the Sicartians, whom they once were at peace with, have grown too unpredictable, weak, and dependent on their networks. The Sicartians treasure art, intelligence, and empathy. Their greatest feat is being in sync with nature and with each other. As players enter this digital world, they discover a Bogostian named Blaze and a Sicartian named Arlo fleeing as refugees from bombing. They meet at an old site that both groups used to occupy but has now been destroyed. The player decides to unite them by venturing on a quest to find the Keys of Peace and end the war or return the characters to their home to join the war. Each branching path is a uniquely different game story and gameplay experience.

My process for the game development was very plan-driven as I was afraid to implement it before having a solid vision for the gameplay. The initial idea for the project was to have one character embark on an adventure with Bogost and Sicart representatives fighting back and forth on a voiceover like that of *Stanley's Parable*. Because it was more narratively driven, I designated Inky as my preferred engine. Each narrator was destined to guide the adventure,

functioning as both a guide and a nuisance to the player. Core themes I wanted to emphasize in the game include choices, rules, narratology vs ludology, and character agency. In the first iteration, found in Appendix A, I introduce a 2D platformer that malfunctions and sucks you as the player into ShapeWorld. You choose your character name, allowing you to enter your real name or a player name. Every character is a shape, including Sicart as a triangle and Bogost as a square. The game is still under construction resulting in two contrasting narrators that argue. This broken state of the game allows the player to explore alternative solutions to levels using critical thinking skills, in favor of Sicart. During this brainstorming session, I was given feedback that instead of using two distinct narrators to create a divide of ideologies, I could potentially incorporate it into characters, like the dynamic in *It Takes Two.* This suggestion solidified my decision to create two bickering characters representing Bogost and Sicart's ideals instead.

Following the throwaway prototype, my project plans were delayed from writer's block. I wasn't sure what direction to push my new idea. There were more ideas that I was attached to such as the previous idea of sucking in the character, a timed escape room dash, or a regular level-based puzzle game, like *Thomas Was Alone.* Pivoting from the shape idea, I imagined two characters, a robotic character and an insightful human. For inspiration, I joined an open office hours meeting, discussing the potential for two, distinct levels based on player choice or a single level that combined two levels tailored to each player. This suggestion gave me clarity on what direction to go with my project, focusing on a single level that combined the expertise of both characters through a character-switching mechanic. These two characters represent opposites, so I thought of tailoring the world to one or the other characters so that they would be forced to work together similar to the symbiotic dynamic of *Fireboy and Watergirl*.

My first digital prototype of the game was an online mech sprite found by a simple Google search. I found two sheets that included a set of actions such as crouching, flying, shooting, receiving damage, and more. I needed to use a background remover to create the sprite. I set up a new Godot project and added the actions I wanted to include into an animated sprite node. I quickly found that I was less fluent in Godot than I originally thought. I sought resources and found a tutorial online and starter code that I forked from YouTuber Chris' Tutorials. The starter code included the small island and background which can be seen in Appendix B. This starter code was immensely helpful in the setup of my prototyped game. The character scripts that existed for the original player sprite, which I decided to keep in as Arlo, helped me acclimate to the Godot game engine programming with the introduced mech character that I imported into the demo scene. I initially had many conflicts with the implementation of the character switcher. On my first attempt, I tried to brute force the switching of separate player nodes, which Godot didn't like. I stacked the two characters on top of each other in different collision layers but the characters still were able to push each other, visible or invisible. In response, I changed the approach from two switching nodes to two switching sprites. In familiarizing myself with Godot's game engine, I discovered that toggling booleans was the simplest way to accomplish actions without many errors. For the character switcher, I used the wider scope of the scene node script to guide the overarching scene logic and keep a cleaner interface for my specific additions to the code. Once I got the character switcher mechanic correctly functioning by pressing the "1" or "2" key, I focused on ensuring the two sprites were functionally different.

Constructing the Bogostian character was an immersive experience. Because Bogost emphasizes the mechanical nature of games, my final mech character represents Bogost's ideals

physically with two corresponding mechanics. These character-unique mechanics include flight and shooting. During the addition of these features, I had the opportunity to play around with scripting in Godot which inspired me to later add triggered text to the scene. The most difficult of the two features was the shooting ability. For the flight ability, I had to adjust the jump function to allow repeated inputs because holding down the spacebar to fly would be too easy. The flight input and jump function was already implemented and I only had to manipulate the existing function. For the shooting, I had to create a new input, and sprite, and also navigate the existing sprite update functions. I decided on the name Blaze because it communicates the firepower of the Bogostian view. In a physical sense, Bogost's character seems dominating and could easily just use the given abilities to fly to every destination, ignoring the story. To prevent this, I added game constraints in which the mech/player discovers the abilities are not a sufficient solution. With the mech, I had a clear vision of what the expected design should look like. I feel that Bogost's ideals are a bit too rigid and that depending on the procedural rhetoric is limiting, therefore this character is less insightful and functionally driven.

Indeed, storyboarding was the most challenging aspect of this project. I am accustomed to the frustrations of coding and iterative development on a project, however, I am not familiar with how to address writer's block as I sometimes get with creative projects. I knew what ideals I wanted to incorporate into the game but not how to communicate my message through a narrative. For the Sicartian character, I felt that reflection was necessary to attach a narrative to him and create a Sicart-focused ability. I considered a scavenging ability to look for clues and interact with the world more than the mech and give hints to the player to encourage critical thinking but ultimately decided this was not the right direction. After bouncing ideas off of others, I realized that war is the best way to narratively create an inherent divide between the

characters. This adds an extra layer to the choice-based narrative of the game. The first game decision they must make decides the entire plotline and they suit different styles of play and even the two types of characters presented.

The character ability I chose for the Sicartian, Arlo is a ‘charm’ or ‘friend’ ability. This was not difficult to render using more conditional toggles and a simple image. Arlo also has valuable insight and suggestions of how the gameplay should be driven, as Blaze and Arlo tend to intersect. The culture of the Sicartian people demonstrates that experiences, emotions, and empathy take priority over efficiency and logic. Arlo’s skills are necessary to use in the first level, as the player is unable to pass to either game portal until he speaks to the bee guard. In this way, I force the player to use both characters. In a way this does align with Bogost's rule-based gameplay, as technically, the mech should be able to just fly over to the portal. To represent this initial interaction, an area-triggered dialogue occurs between the two characters where they peacefully disagree about how to reach the portals. Arlo has the correct insight to the solution giving one point to Sicartian favored gameplay. Inherently, this is the player's first defining character choice. They could attempt to fly over with Blaze, though they will promptly discover that the area has been locked until Arlo befriends the bee. This shift in the narrative points back to my original desire to utilize Inky in combination with Godot to drive the narrative, because I like the branching gameplay. I did discover a way to integrate the choice-driven gameplay without using Inky specifically to statically allow player decisions. For example in the demo, they can try both abilities and utilize whichever works and make narrative decisions in a physical space.

Some game theorists I hypothesize would have commentary on this game include Janet Murray and Nyguen. Murray’s suggestions that digital environments are contrived of spatial,

participatory, procedural, and encyclopedic elements certainly pertain to the digital world established in this game prototype, offering a balance of immersive and interactive gameplay. Furthermore, I believe she would comment on the realization of character agency to choose between narratologist gameplay or ludologist gameplay. Murray seems to recognize and appreciate that both are necessary with the four elements in her book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, as well as a section commenting on another game, "[it] allows multiple strategies of play and can accommodate the idealistic seeker of social harmony as well as the warrior player. The narrative interest of the game consists of creating multiple possible versions of an Earth-like history (Murray 89)." Here, she reflects that games effectively tell stories through these digital environments and allow players to experience them differently based on their own desired style of play makes for effective implementation. *Harmony Bridge's* inclusion of two player styles and agency also aligns with Nyguen's vision of how characters or gameplay allow such player autonomy in *Agency as Art:*

> In the simplest terms, having a wider variety of agential modes ready and at hand gives you options about which agential modes to occupy. … If I am familiar both with an empathetic helpful mode and a Machiavellian manipulative mode, I now have the possibility of switching between them. That, by itself, gives me more internal degrees of freedom. … This is because it gives me more options to plan about how I will cope with the world. (Ngyuen 84)

This ability to character switch not only offers players their own agency but also the game personas to have agency in their unique talents and the option to explore and interact with the digital world as they choose.

I have presented how Bogost and Sicart's ideologies have come to light in the design of this game. Bogost would appreciate the reliance "on unit operation as their primary mode of representation," arguing that the engine-oriented game design dictates the play of the game, which in relevance to my game is technically true (Bogost 65). However, as Sicart argues, this definition of gameplay is too strict: "play is the experience of a game by the player" and "play … is a balance between reason and ritual" (Sicart 9, 13). These two ideals are defined in *Harmony Bridge* by the nature and dynamic of the two characters, as well as the level design. Because the world has been bombed, the scenery plays a part in bringing the two characters together in what I interpret as a sort of abandoned wasteland that once possessed greatness. The character adventure has the potential to paint a valuable experience for the player in their chosen character's development of leadership, empathy, critical thinking, and more.

In this paper, I have discussed the iterative process of development of my prototyped game, *Harmony Bridge*. My game proposal seeks to place an emphasis on the importance of both a ludological and narratological approach to game design. This is achieved primarily through a creative narrative and symbolic characters to represent conflicting game theories and how they can unite. This type of gameplay invites a variety of player types to experience the game in different facets. The branching "choose your own adventure" style of the game encourages player agency and exploration of the self through ethical, physical, or social dilemmas. By embracing the Sicartian and Bogostian adventure, players have the opportunity to leverage the best styles of gameplay for a unique and rewarding experience.

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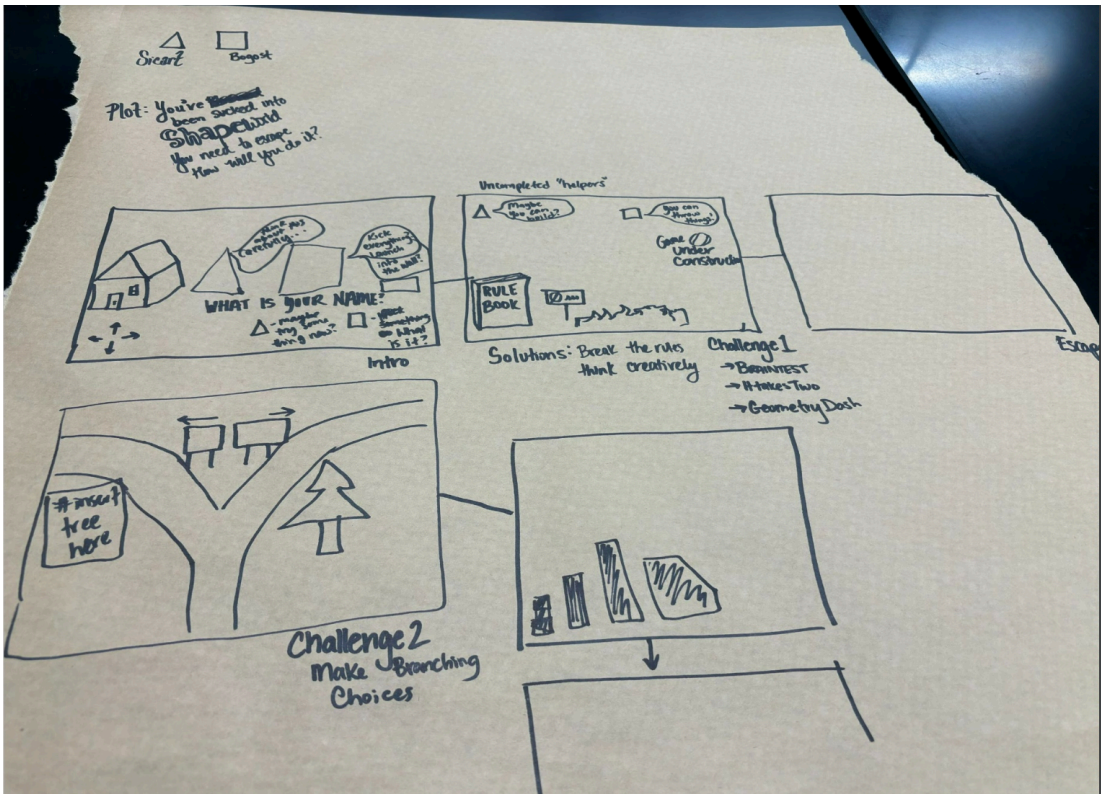
Appendix A



Appendix B