Exploring BotterHelp

Whenever I tell people my major, I'm always met with the same question "Aren't you scared AI is going to take your job?" With the rapid growth of artificial intelligence, automation, and machine learning, it's a fair question. Truthfully? A little. Cashiers, bank tellers, and even warehouse worker jobs have already been automated with machines and robots. With AI and technology seemingly already automating everything in our lives, it is both impressive and frightening to see how accessible and powerful artificial intelligence has become in the past few years. It seems like each year, technology just gets more and more advanced. However, this project reveals something deeper: the cracks in AI's abilities and the dangers of an overreliance on technology. While machines can mimic a human's capabilities, AI can't truly replicate true empathy, vulnerability, or complexity of being human.

In the second week of class, we had two assigned readings: Niesz and Holland's "Interactive Fiction" (1984) and Janet Murray's "From Additive to Expressive Form," from Hamlet on the Holodeck (1998). These texts emphasized that interactive fiction is not just about plot but about structure– how choice and interaction create meaning. Inspired by Murray's ideas about the expressive potential of digital narratives, I wanted my game to do more than just present a linear story. Consequently, I built in looping sequences and conditional logic that reflect a kind of psychological entrapment– mirroring the mental disorientation my character feels when stuck in an AI-controlled therapy session and ultimately leaving the player with a message. My primary inspiration from these readings was ELIZA– one of the earliest chatbots.

Programmed by Joseph Weizenbaum, this chatbot emulated a Rogerian psychotherapist. Users were able to ask the chatbot anything and receive a response programmed to make them

feel like they were talking to someone who understood them. For its time, ELIZA was groundbreaking. The program used natural language processing techniques such as pattern matching and keywords to mimic understanding. However, the program was limited and lacked genuine comprehension. This was my primary inspiration for the final draft of my game. Though AI and computer programs can mimic human interactions and emotions, they will only ever mimic them. As far as other inspirations, I took inspiration from dystopian science-fiction shows like Black Mirror. I really liked how this show explores the dark side of technology and the potential consequences of our reliance on it.

I went through several drafts of my game. However, I kept running into the same issue: the story was dull. Originally, I was going to center my game around mental health. While mental health is still a theme in my game (a tribute to ELIZA's roots) it is no longer the sole theme of my game. With my original idea, I struggled a lot with creating a meaningful and interesting plot. Centering my game around a topic we read about in class to promote the idea of accessing mental health services sounded like a great idea. However, I realized using an AI chatbot as the medium didn't really make sense– it seemed like my game was promoting the use of getting mental health services from AI, which was not my intention. However, after doing my presentation on my game, I got a lot of great feedback from the class. One piece of feedback I got from multiple people during class discussion was to focus more on the dystopian future of technology. I also liked the idea of an AI therapist because it has historically been a job deemed safe from automation, as it requires empathy and compassion– something AI can only ever replicate. Given that I freshly finished the newest season of Black Mirror, I was up for the challenge, leading me to create what is now my current game.

BotterHelp is a psychological science fiction narrative choice-based story that critiques artificial intelligence, technology, and explores the illusion of choice. In my game, the player is stuck in a looping digital therapy simulation, where every attempt to escape or resist leads back to the beginning– unless they break the screen. The game starts in a waiting room that changes and grows increasingly more unsettling upon repetition. You're taken to a therapy session with ELIZA, a cold, glitching AI therapist. The only way to truly "escape" is by breaking the screen. Passive options like staying silent, complying, or walking away all result in being reset. Only by disrupting the system manually do you reach an ending that suggests you are finally free.

In this game, many of the events and mechanics are intentional, holding much deeper meanings. In the beginning of the game you aren't given much context on the main character, it just starts in a waiting room where you find out you're getting therapy. This not only creates a sense of mystery and allows for self-insertion within the story, but it also symbolizes how although we have free will and can change events with our actions, it can arguably often not make much of an impact in changing society. You often have to go along with predetermined rules and expectations even if you don't necessarily believe in them. While recognizing the dangers of AI and technology advancing, many people still use these as tools. In computer science, many of the same people who worry about AI taking over use AI on a frequent basis. Even those who don't use tools like ChatGPT, unknowingly use it when they interact with AI wrapper chatbots on store sites and apps. In my own life, I remember when my friend, who was on a food delivery app, was more surprised that the person they talked to was a real person than receiving a full refund for a minor complaint. This says a lot about the world and our reliance on technology as a society. Why are we surprised when we get to talk to a real person? Similarly, when I was trying to get into contact with customer service on a clothing site, it took me over a

dozen pre-selected options, Google searches, and messages to get in contact with a human. It's shocking to see just how much of our daily lives have become automated.

Throughout the game, the loop of ending back in the waiting room is a huge part of the experience and meaning. At first, you may be confused as to why all of your choices take you back to the beginning, seemingly keeping you in the same place forever. However, this is intentional as the only option that allows you to escape is breaking the screen. All of the other options in the game are passive, compliant, or an attempt to flee. This represents how many of us just accept and even welcome automation in society, making tasks more convenient and simple in our everyday lives or don't feel the need to change it. Even for me, I find myself choosing the self-checkout over a real cashier to avoid human interaction– many of us do it. However, even if we aren't necessarily the people creating these new technologies automating and decreasing the demand for people's jobs, we are unknowingly supporting the very thing many of us are scared of. This is the reason why breaking the screen is the only way of making it out of the game. The only way to put a stop to this potential dystopian world is actively creating rules and regulations to make sure technology doesn't ever exceed the power that it should have. Being passive and compliant will never help in a situation like this. As far as systems in my game that reinforce this idea, I added a waiting room loop in my game with an Ink conditional statement that changes based on whether or not it is your first time playing the game. This gives the illusion of not being able to escape and a sense of eeriness to the game that helps convey the "trapped" feeling in my game. However, although free, the ending does not really tell you where you are or if you're really safe. This represents how many of us don't realize how much technology we actually use in our lives and if you were to eliminate technology from your life, you wouldn't realize until then just how much of your old life would be missing. This ending also represents how

eliminating technology is not only unrealistic due to our heavy reliance on it but also isolating due to the amount of people you may know who use it. The other attempts of escaping (not breaking the screen) don't work because you are not actively eliminating it from your life, and escaping from a world in which you are compliant will never be fruitful. Although this may be an unsatisfying ending for some, I took inspiration from the game *Getting Over It.* This game doesn't really revolve around winning, but emphasizes the idea of frustration, failure, and conveying a message. My game– although much easier– also does not emphasize the idea of winning, but rather uses the frustration of always ending back in the waiting room to convey how choosing the "safe" options will not always be the best choice in life, but actively acting can make more of an impact– although not guaranteed to be great, given the ending. In class discussion, we explored a quote that declared that "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering," which fit perfectly with the theme and mechanics of my game. I gained a significant amount of inspiration from the readings Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) by Sigmund Freud and The Art of Failure (2016) by Jesper Juul. I wanted to focus less on "winning" the game but more on what you learn as you play and almost inevitably fail.

Apart from the dystopian-esque pitches my peers gave, I was also given the suggestion of changing colors and adding pictures. A few of my classmates already mentioned adding pictures and UI elements to their Ink-based games. Although I liked the choice-based nature of Ink, I wanted to add more life to my game and thought this would be the perfect way to do so. Little did I know, this choice would be the cause of hours of debugging.During the creation of my game, I ran into a lot of issues. I already struggled significantly with the literary part of my game, but now the technical parts were an issue. When I first started creating my game, I had to relearn Ink syntax. Although I am a computer science major, I had never learned about or even

heard about the language prior to taking this class. While similar to other high-level coding languages I have used, I think learning any language has a bit of a learning curve in the beginning and I definitely felt it. However, after watching some videos on Ink/Inky and reviewing old assignments, I was able to get to coding fairly quickly. The hardest part was relearning gathering and branching rules. It's fairly similar to creating and calling functions in other coding languages, but once again, the syntax took a bit to get used to– leaving me to debug quite a bit throughout its creation. To make matters worse, my computer did *not* like Inky. Every time I opened the application on my computer, I had to make sure to close every window and stalk my activity monitor to stop it from overheating and freezing. As I'm writing this, the fan in my computer is blasting, trying to handle the singular Inky window I have open. Although I wasn't able to fix it, I found small temporary fixes here and there (that would sometimes work) that made it possible to complete my game.

As far as UI elements, I had a lot of fun adding life to my game. I think Ink has the same strength and weakness: it's very simple. I chose Ink because I believed it would be the best medium for my game. My game's main purpose is to be a societal-commentary, so using GoDot to create high-quality action and graphics did not seem the most necessary or fitting for my game. I was inspired by narrative choice-based games like *Life is Strange*, where player choice impacts the world in subtle but meaningful ways. Critics often praise narrative-choice games for their emotional depth and ability to humanize abstract issues. Their affordances are allowing players to shape the story through interaction. I did this by creating narrative branches prior to creating the game, making the way for many potential choices for the user. I also changed my writing style to fit the look of these games (shorter sentences and more dialogue) to match mine. However, while I was able to now tell an easy-to-navigate story pretty clearly with choices and

text, my UI and visuals had the same issue as my original story: it was dull. Although I didn't add action-packed fighting cutscenes or edge-of-your-seat visuals, I was able to add a bit more life into my project with CSS, JavaScript, Inky tags, and images.

While I was brushing up on the syntax of Ink, I came across a YouTuber called Dan Cox, a guy who makes various Ink/Inky based videos and tutorials. In addition to the syntax basics, this man would go on to teach me how to export Ink-based games to the web, add images via tags, and expose me to just how much control you have over Ink's visuals. When I exported my game, I was surprised to see how much freedom Ink gave you with personalizing your game. I used VSCode to access the folder containing the HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and JSON from Inky. From here I was able to change colors such as the background, hover colors, navigation bar, and main text. I also added a typewriter effect to the name of my game to fit the theme of automation and technology with a couple functions. Then, I added images to my game and slowly watched my simple text-based game come to life. Although I don't have cutting edge visuals and most of my images may have come from a Google search or two, I was surprised to see how what may have seemed like small changes really helped to liven up the game. My color theme was inspired by BetterHelp– the real digital-based (although with real people as therapists) therapy platform.

As of now, I would declare my game as complete technically, but not narratively. My choices and branching work, but I do want to have the dialogue and story to be more thorough, more so matching the length of *Life is Strange.* Given the time frame and having to change my story quite late, I did not have the means to create a game that is hours long. However, if I had more time, I would have more endings and longer gameplay. I would keep the idea of having the majority of the endings lead back to the beginning, but I would want some to happen far later in the game, creating a sense of frustration. I also wanted to have an ending that "breaks the fourth

wall," where either the player realizes there is actually a person within the game, or they overhear a developer working on Eliza. I would want this to be my "true ending," because it emphasizes how no matter how complex technology will become, a human will always be behind it. I also think that I would add some comedic elements to this route, given the seriousness of the other routes. This route would start by the player seeing the silhouette of another face on the TV if it was a person inside or overhearing the conversation if they were overhearing the developer. In the person in the TV ending, I would make the context be that the AI became so advanced or it caught someone escaping so it replaced their presence with a real person. The person wouldn't be necessarily stuck in the TV, but rather a digital realm within the TV. Alternatively, that person could also be a serial killer that was just pretending to be ELIZA, and there was never an AI therapist in the first place. In the developer ending, I would reveal that the user is actually in a digital world and that the developer now has to save them. Another ending I was thinking of was that this person put their conscience in a digital world after an accident, completely unaware that their real self is in the real world, and that the computer they are talking to is a program designed to talk to that person in an attempt to bring their outside self's conscience back to life. All of these have the theme of the potential future of technology. Although I liked the idea of these endings, I knew it would be unrealistic to write out an engaging, complex story for these with an interesting dialogue without the story being too lengthy. However, if I had more time, I would want to have many different routes.

Overall, creating this game was a lot of fun. Although I struggled quite a bit in the beginning, I really enjoyed the creation process and learned so much about narrative elements, games elements, and coding. I wish I had more time to give the story more depth and emotion, but I plan to do so soon. However, this was a great way to end the class– I had a great time!

Appendix & Works Cited:

Niesz, Anthony, and Norman N. Holland. “Interactive Fiction.” Critical Inquiry, vol. 11, no. 1, 1984, pp. 110–129. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343435.

Murray, Janet H. “From Additive to Expressive Form.” Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace, MIT Press, 1998, pp. 68–91.

Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." 1920. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated and edited by James Strachey, vol. 18, Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 1–64.

Juul, Jesper. The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games. MIT Press, 2013.

Planning Document (complete one in GitHub repository):

```
Initialize:
   wake_count = 0      // loop not working may 1st, FIXED
   broken_loop = false // var used to track breakout

Start:
   -> waiting_room
Scene: waiting_room
   ~ wake_count += 1

   text: "you sit in the waiting room. the hum of the fluorescent lights is louder than you'd like."

   if wake_count == 1:
      "something feels... wrong. haven't you been here before?"
   else if wake_count == 2:
      "where am i? why does this place look so familiar?"
   else if wake_count > 2:
      "i feel like i've been here before."  // this part could loop forever maybe

   [IMG: receptionist + hallway]
   receptionist: "ready for your session? right this way."

   -> follow
---
New scene
Scene: follow
 player choice:
  1.   follow her
 -> room
     2.refuse to go
       receptionist: "it's important that you attend." (but she doesn't stop you)

       player chooses:

     3.   *walk outside
          text: "you walk out the door—and fall. fall—fal—"
          [IMG: blurry falling]
          -> reset_loop

      4 stay seated
          "you stay seated. time stops moving. eventually, you're led away anyway."
          -> room


Scene: room
```

Original Ink Game Code:

```
//inspired by Eliza in Niesz's Interactive Fiction
You are in the waiting room for your therapy session. You tap your feet as you
    wait for your name to be called.
After what feels like forever, you hear your name.
 * Walk up to the counter
    The lady at the counter greets you and asks you to follow her down a small
        hallway.
    She leads you into a small room with a couch, giving you permission to lie
        down.
    "Eliza will be right with you," she assures.
    **Lie down on the couch
    You get comfortable on the couch. You're a little nervous but you're proud of
        yourself for coming.
    ***The screen in front of you flickers. You read the words as they appear one
        by one.
    "Hey! I'm Eliza," they read. "I will be your therapist for today." My
        therapist is a computer...

    **Explore the room
    You're get bored of waiting so you start exploring. It's a pretty small room
        but you notice a lot of small items and decor.

    Your eyes are most attracted to...
    ***The office desk drawers
    There's a pen. A singular pen. You're really disappointed.

    ***The computer
    You notice that the computer is unlocked. You notice an app that has recently
        been opened and click on it.
    Surveilance videos of you from different times of the year fill the screen.

 * Turn the other way and go back home.
    You go back home and never get therapy. You start a podcast, develop a
        moderate gambling addiction, and get ab implants.
    **Drunk-text your ex
    | You text them and find out you're already blocked

    **Fight the urge
    You text their mom instead. You get blocked by both them and their entire
        family.
```

Original Character (left) and Story Map (right):