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| Nathan Chapman |
| SDD Major Project |
| Part I: The Defining, Planning & Designing of S-kuru |

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| Nathan Chapman  [Pick the date] |

Table of Contents

[Defining the Problem and Its Solution 2](#_Toc286768293)

[Initial Ideas 2](#_Toc286768294)

[Investigate 3](#_Toc286768295)

[Needs of Users 3](#_Toc286768296)

[Objectives of the Software Solution 5](#_Toc286768297)

# Defining the Problem and Its Solution

## Initial Ideas

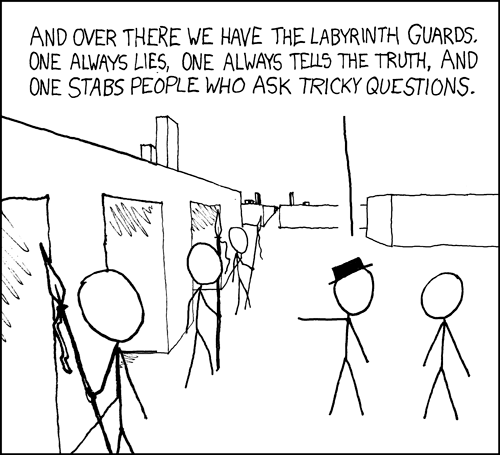
In starting this project I knew fairly early on the genre (or type) of game that I wanted to create: a puzzle game. This would satisfy the 'educational' criteria for the solution as a game requiring logic and specific thinking processes would be stimulating for all ages, including our target market, which is High School Students.

Figure 1: "Labyrinth Puzzle", from XKCD (http://xkcd.com/246/)

In the discussion amongst the class, we went through a variety of games that we could make. Many of these suggestions, however, did not appeal to me as they were merely remakes of existing games. Some of those mentioned were Minesweeper, a game bundled with Windows since 1989[[1]](#footnote-1); Tic-Tac-Toe, a well-known game played on paper and computers, and featured in the film War Games; or Solitaire, another game bundled with Windows.

What I was looking for was an original concept that would challenge the user into actually thinking about their next move. S-kuru was in a few parts inspired by World of Goo, a puzzle game concerning the building of towers using goo balls that stick together. Some of the aspects I liked about this game were the lack of a time limit. Many puzzle games are only difficult because they feature by an overly restrictive time limit which creates pressure on the user. This pressure makes the game in question far less enjoyable than one that is difficult purely because of its puzzles or an ungainly core mechanic.

Throughout this report I am likely to refer to the term \*core mechanic\*, so I will define it now. A game's core mechanic is its major premise and way of working. For example, Minesweeper's core mechanic is the number in each cell that reveals the number of surrounding mines. The term comes from Dungeons & Dragons, where the core mechanic simply refers to its use of a d20 (a twenty-sided die) to determine success or failure of an action. Because of the importance of the core mechanic to any game, but particularly a puzzle game, I spent some time brainstorming it and getting it just right. Actually brainstorming on paper, here is the \*core mechanic\* that I finally came up with:

The aim of Sākuru is to get every ball on the screen to its exit. There are multiple coloured balls and exits; blue ball will only use the blue exit. Circles placed on the screen by the user can be travelled through by balls, and thereby get to their designated exit.

This is Sākuru's core mechanic, and I feel that it is simple enough to grasp fully after a single tutorial level or README file, yet it is complex enough to provide flexibility for the creation of difficult levels. The introduction of different coloured balls and circles was not made until fairly late in the process, but it adds much to the game that will prevent any repetition in levels. Another reason that this game appeals to me is because I would play this myself. The concept intrigues me and the name Sākuru would pique my curiosity (by the way, Sākuru is Japanese for "Circles". Using a Japanese word for the name of a project is commonplace within Ruby programming circles; however I thought it could be spread to Python without much trouble from the community).

## Investigate

### Needs of Users

I conducted a survey amongst both specifically chosen participants that were spread across several age groups (respondents were grouped into age brackets between 12 and 20 years old) and an open invitation to participate. Differentiating between these two sets of data, it becomes evident the differing requirements of a game for both High School students and adults. The survey received a total of 18 respondents over a three-week period.

For a copy of the survey questions and full results without interpretation, see [Appendix I].

The survey was in three sections as follows:

#### General Gaming Statistics

The survey asked how do users play games, and for how many hours each week. This would help to determine how the game should progress and the difficulty curve.

Question 1, which asked about the gaming habits of respondents, gave a clear answer to this (See Figure 2). From the results 71% of people play less than 6 hours per week (which I would classify as a 'casual' gamer), so the game has to have easy save/load points, to enable users to put down the game and come back at a later date/time.

Figure 2: Hours spent gaming per week

The next two questions were to gauge the possible audience for Sākuru: the first was to find popularity for various 'genres' of gaming, and the second asked specifically regarding puzzle games.

Diving the gaming world into genres is a difficult task, as it poses problems similar to literature, where the previously separate genres of Sci-Fi and Fantasy have merged now to such a degree[[2]](#footnote-2) where they are indistinguishable and have warranted the creation of an ‘umbrella genre’: Speculative Fiction[[3]](#footnote-3). In the same way, game genres vary; however for this survey I labelled games according to their gameplay style as opposed to their content. In this way, I came up with nine major categories that I felt were sufficient to categorise most games. This question was structured as a ‘matrix’, meaning that each option could be given a rating out of 5 according to how much the respondent plays or enjoys that genre of games.

From this matrix I have assigned each possible answer from 5 (“I live for these games “) to 1 (“I don’t play this type of game”) a score between 4 and 0. This creates their rankings as presented in the graph below. From the results (See Figure 3) it becomes plain that although the long-form RPG game is the most popular game (although only by two points, scoring 23 and beating Puzzle and FPS on 21). That Puzzle games ranked the second highest in this question is promising as it shows that the target audience for my Major Project will actually be interested in playing the game.

Figure 3: Ranked scores of popular game genres

The last question in this section asked specifically whether they liked and played puzzle games. This question also allowed for a long-response answer to justify or explain their response.

From the closed-answer part of this question (See Figure 4) it is very obvious that respondents enjoy this form of gameplay. The individual responses that accompany this question also tell a similar tale. Almost all of the open responses were positive along the lines of this one:

I like that feeling of accomplishment you get from solving a well-made puzzle. That and I like seeing the clever things people can do based on what are fairly simple mechanics. For example Braid would take something simple like mapping the passage of time to the player's position on the horizontal plane (you walk forwards, time goes forwards, you go backwards and time, well you get the point) and build all these elaborate puzzles around it that you really had to think to solve. So keep a minimal amount of mechanics and do something cool with them.

Figure 4: Do you play or enjoy puzzle games?

Most of the responses, in fact, all commented on how puzzle games are played differently to any other genre. For example, one respondent described first-person shooters as “HEY LOOK I SHOOT YOU NOW BANG BANG BANG”. The only negative open response that I received was this:

requires too much thought...

This response was in direct contrast to the rest of the open answers. With both questions 2 and 3 showing such a positive reaction and appreciation of puzzle games, it was a logical step to further plan and to finally begin creating S-kuru.

#### Aspects of Effective Game Design

This section had several questions that asked the impressions potential users got from some Photoshop mockups of the user interface during the game. These questions were just for my reference, I didn’t plan to get any statistical data from them. Question 4, however, was important in working out what appealed most to users when playing a game.

Another matrix-style question, the ranked scores are as in Figure 5. From this we can see that the most important thing to consider when creating a game (and specifically a puzzle game) is the Gameplay (or ‘core mechanic’, as I’ve called it above). The visual style of the game came as a close second concern for users, and I have spent much time developing a coherent and intuitive visual style for the game that helps to convey the purpose of each element whilst retaining a comprehensible feel.

Figure 5: Importance of aspects of a game

### Objectives of the Software Solution

From the results given during the survey I am able to formulate some measureable objectives that I was S-kuru to achieve. I do not feel that these are easily obtainable (otherwise all software solutions would implement them), however it is not outside my reach by any means.

1. **Simplicity of Use** – the game must flow and play smoothly, and the controls must be intuitive. Not only in which button does what, but in (for example) how fast a circle grows as the user holds their mouse down. More measureable aspects of this include:
   1. Simple feedback about progress of a level. Clear feedback about progress through the game.
2. **Complexity of Thought** – the game should provoke thought within the use and force the user to consider each move and its implications within the game.
   1. Puzzles (i.e. individual levels) should provide a differing experience as they progress. They should not be repetitive.
   2. There should be multiple solutions to puzzles, even if some of these were not originally considered by the level designer.

1. http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2007/02/column\_beyond\_tetris\_minesweep.php [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review\_essays/elkins22.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.writepop.com/writing/naming-a-genre [↑](#footnote-ref-3)