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for|rest

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for|rest

BY
JES KLASS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF DESIGN, COLLEGE OF COMPUTING AND
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DEPAUL UNIVERSITY
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2021

DePaul University
College of Computing and Digital Media

MFA Thesis Verification Form

This thesis has been read and approved by the thesis committee below according to the requirements of the School of Design graduate program and DePaul University.

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Title of dissertation: for|rest

Date of Dissertation Defense: 3/11/2021

Michael De Anda [Chair]

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ABSTRACT

In *for/rest*, players navigate a world built around an interpretation of the liminal space of grief. Glitching, blinking roots are all around an otherwise grey, empty space and as players destroy these roots they gradually resaturate the landscape. Each time a root is destroyed, the player will watch it disintegrate in front of them while some form of animal or plant spawns in the root's stead. On rare occasions, instead of a plant or animal, a human will phase into the world as a root disintegrates. This human, Charlie, roams around the forest and offers the player a chance to engage with her story. Charlie's storyline is one of grief, loss, and resolution. If the player chooses to follow Charlie they will find out what Charlie is doing in this space and what their relationship to Charlie is.

for/rest explores themes of grief, catharsis, lack of predictability, and cognitive interference. The space itself is an interpretation of the liminal space of grief, while offering the player a cathartic experience in the restoration of this space. This is meant to exhibit some of the experiential qualities of healing and resolution. The glitching roots demonstrate cognitive interference within the grieving process. As these roots stand visually as a sign of interference, they also obstruct the player's space and complicate their journey. The lack of predictability in the outcome of destroying each roots is used to demonstrate a non-linear or predictable journey through grief.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Through the process of creating *for/rest* I have received an incredible amount of support, care, and assistance.

First, I would like to thank my thesis advisors: Michael DeAnda, Anna Anthropy, and Peter McDonald. Mike, thank you so much for guiding me towards the finish line, giving me the confidence (and knowledge) to foray into games scholarship, and for always being willing to help me improve my writing. Your camaraderie and mentorship have helped me grow immensely and I hope to get a chance to make you proud at SWPACA again someday. Anna, any student who takes a class with you leaves that class a better game designer. I feel extremely lucky to have gotten to work with you 1-on-1 and to have had your design perspective during this project. Peter, saying, “thank you for everything” feels so brief and flippant, but if I were to list everything you have helped me with, this section would be 15 pages long. Thank you for your patience, guidance, design perspective, support, and thank you for sticking this last year out with us. Our cohort is extremely lucky to have gotten so much time with you and I know we’re all better designers and scholars because of it.

Next, I would like to thank a few fellow MFA students who I would not have gotten through this experience without. Annelise, it seems ridiculous that we never got a chance to work on a game together, but I’m certain we will sometime in the future. I am so lucky to have met such a genuine, caring, thoughtful friend and would have crashed and burned without you. Dave, your eagerness to help is second-to-none. Any time we talked about this project you had incredible ideas not only with design, but for production. I owe you one (or 1,000) and cannot wait for our next project together. Jake, a lot of the final vision for this game came from your suggestions, insight, and care. Thank you for being so thoughtful in your design choices and always being willing to listen. Michelle, thank you for leading the way. Watching you work on *Homing* was legitimately inspirational and I’m not at all surprised at how successful it has been. I can’t wait to make cool stuff with you on the other side.

I have never felt more cared about and supported in my professional life than I have in my role at the Center for Teaching and Learning. Sarah, thank you so much for your constant support, wisdom, and encouragement. I appreciate your willingness to talk about some of the harder moments in life and how much you genuinely care. Amanda, thank you for always listening and being so earnest. You always try to make things work better, feel better, or go better, and I’m so grateful to get to work with you. Melissa, thank you for being so patient and supportive. I always feel like I can go to you for help and am so grateful for all of the opportunities you’ve given me and supported me through. Erin S., thank you for being such a great role model and huge advocate. I hope that someday I can make a coworker or friend feel as

valued as you have made me feel. Erin K., in the short time that we've been working together I have learned and grown a lot from you. Thank you for being there to talk, being there for advice, and for always being willing to help cheer me up. Daniel, I think back often on my first weeks at DePaul and I'm so grateful you chose to believe in me. Thank you for taking a chance on me and thank you for helping me grow as a designer and person.

To my wonderful parents, thank you both for your unending love and support. Dad, it makes me feel prouder and happier than anything in the world that you care about my game and want to play it. It's largely your doing that I care so much about games and I hope I make you proud. Mom, you've done so much for me my whole life that it feels strange to be saying thank you here, but thank you for being such a strong person and showing me the way. You've been so supportive throughout this journey and I'm very lucky.

Finally, Heather: thank you for putting up with me. All jokes aside, you have *really* gotten me through this whole experience. From the "first day of graduate school" cake to falling asleep on the couch while I stayed up all night finishing my first game: your care and love are what has gotten me through. The past two months have been some of the hardest of my entire life and I really do not know how I would have gotten through them without you. Thank you for loving me, thank you for taking care of me, thank you for making me laugh, and thank you for being my person.

Even though you can't read: thank you to Moose, Rhia, Ghost, and Judy. There have been a lot of hard moments where one (or more) of you came to my aid and comforted me. Ghost and Judy, thank you for spending countless hours by my side while I worked on this game.

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CHAPTER 1

Description of Game

As the player begins to play *for|rest*, they are put in a grey, lifeless world full of exaggerated, intrusive roots that create a visual disruption for the player and signify cognitive interference. Destroying these roots spawns new life, gradually resaturates the space around them, and will sometimes trigger an encounter with Charlie, a human who is walking through the forest. When Charlie spawns the player must choose whether they want to follow Charlie to learn her story or focus on the cathartic relief of restoring the forest.

Charlie's story stands within *for|rest* as a depiction of the lack of predictability in the process of grieving. Some iterations of Charlie appear and have a distinct bit of story for the player, and some have randomized lines of text to indicate her disorientation. The random Charlies are important for the player to fully grasp the weight of their absence in Charlie's life when Charlie reveals that they used to come here a lot together and she never needed to know the way because the Player (Sam) did.

I designed the option for the player to fully ignore the narrative and let the story walk away to parallel our own need to sometimes ignore the pain of loss while grieving. In this space the player chooses whether they want to engage with the feeling of loss or focus on the cathartic restoration of the forest as a mirror to that need.

CHAPTER 2

Statement of Intent

for|rest is a first-person exploration game through which I juxtapose grief and catharsis while magnifying the complicated relationship between the two. The core play experience involves destroying glitched, clearly unnatural roots that disrupt the player's path and vision. Once a root is destroyed, the player will see it fracture and dissolve in front of them while some form of life spawns nearby. This is meant to signify the idea that energy cannot be created nor destroyed. As the vine disintegrates something new takes its place.

I created this space to act as a metaphor for the liminal space of grief. Many depictions of grief are linear, but I find it to be messy and unpredictable. Ultimately, I decided through this design process, to examine grief through moments of beauty and resolution interrupted by hard, thoughtful disruptions. I also wanted to give the player an opportunity to literally walk away from pain and loss in this space if that is what they need. Grieving is a long, uncertain process and sometimes when we're confronted with pain it isn't the right time, so we cannot engage with it. In these moments we look away until we're ready, whether we acknowledge it or not.

The game begins in a stagnant, lifeless, grayscale space that lacks a definite path forward. Each time the player destroys a root it contributes to slowly resaturating the palette, revealing flora, and spawning fauna. While traversing this root-infested landscape, the player encounters fleeting moments of a human being, Charlie, who is quietly walking through the forest and talking to herself. In some instances, Charlie spawns and walks around while delivering some exposition, giving the player the opportunity to follow her. In other moments, Charlie will spawn, choose a random direction to turn, and walk off while expressing frustration. Charlie's random appearances when the player is expecting a plant or animal is meant to signify the cognitive interference of grief. In these moments, the player has the option to decide whether they want to engage with Charlie or let her walk away.

If the player chooses to follow Charlie and engage with the narrative, they will find out what Charlie is doing in the forest, what their relationship to Charlie is, and what the space around them is significant of. The last root available for the player to smash will trigger an ascent up the side of a mountain while Charlie exposites the events that imbricate these characters through her grieving. In the final moments of the game, the player follows Charlie to an overlook where they can see the impact their actions have had: the desolate greyness of the beginning of the game is now a vibrant, lush forest full of life.

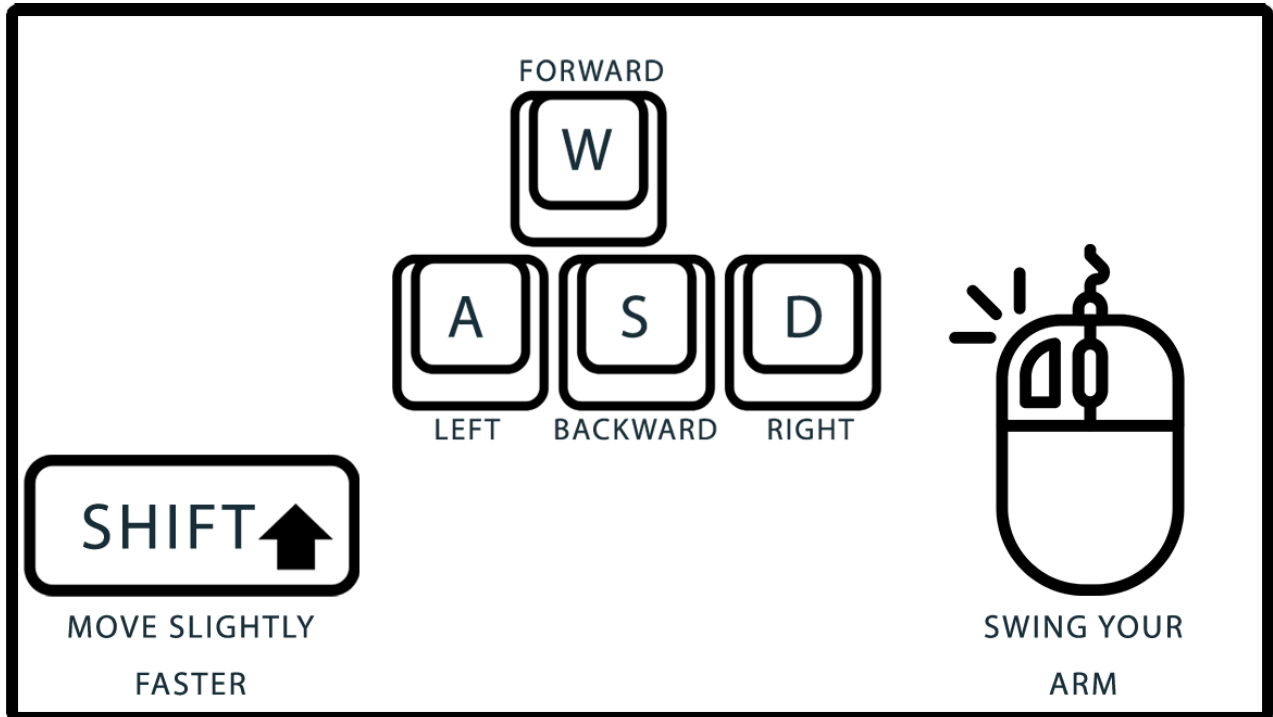
CHAPTER 3

3.1 Link to the Game

Game Download Link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1zEklnipfRrjSvr4eu60GJXepPMRDjs-?usp=sharing>

3.2 Inputs



APPENDIX 1

Paratext Narrative Draft

<https://jesklash.itch.io/forrest-narrative>

APPENDIX 2

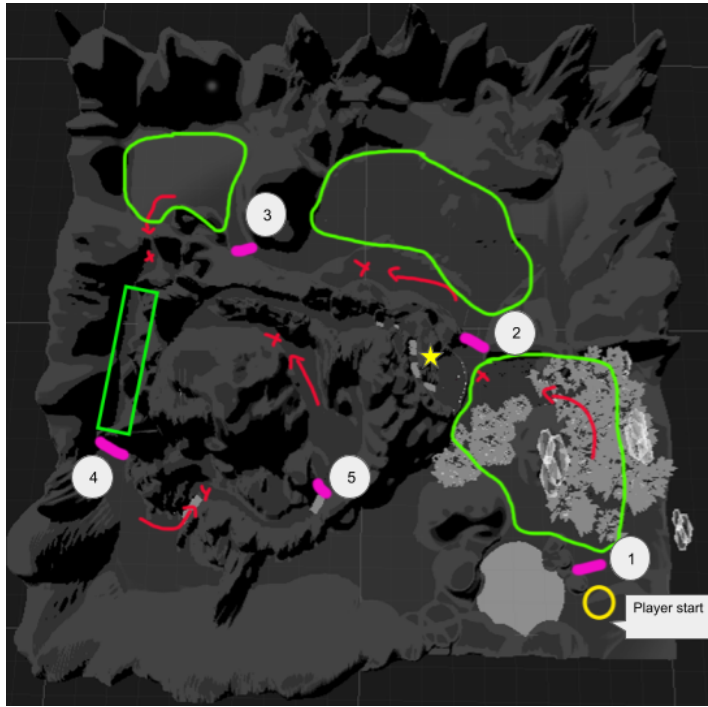
Character Descriptions

Charlie, NPC, she/her: 27, neutral good. Hopeful, naive, wants to move on with her life but can't seem to find her way without her best friend, Sam.

Sam, Player, they/them: 28, chaotic neutral. Surly, accomplished, confident, loving. Died tragically young in a hiking accident.

APPENDIX 3

Narrative Design Draft Blocking Map



█ Vine area
 █ Charlie spawn vine
 → Charlie path
 ✗ Charlie disappears
 ★ Final scene

Vine	Beat	Emotion
1	Charlie walks away, sad, vague text communicating that she's sad and "lost"	Mystery/intrigue
2	Charlie ponders if this was her fault, if everything was her fault, mentions Sam's bar going under and becomes frustrated	Incredulous, frustrated
3	Charlie expresses frustration about how hard the last year was, what is happening in her life, and delivers a small bit of backstory	Anger
4	Charlie mentions childhood, vaguely mentions when "we" came here as kids and openly mourns Sam as she approaches the stairs	Sad, depressed, grieving
5	Something that creates tension	????? Tense
Final Scene		Emotion
As the player walks up they are put "on rails" as Charlie begins the final exposition. This will be roughly 2.5 minutes and will include the resolution of the aforementioned tension, including Charlie explaining that she forgives Sam for the argument they had and wishes none of this had ever happened, etc.		Acceptance, reminiscence, nostalgia, forgiveness

APPENDIX 4

Demo Reel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQxfgdsWFE0>

APPENDIX 5

Defense Slide Deck



Overview



Goals

- Make a game that engages critically with grief as a theme and backdrop
- Create a game that is calming, cathartic, and also offers the opportunity for reflection and resolution
- Process my own grief
- Explore meaningful use of randomness
- Become a better game designer



Game Overview

- First-person 3D Unity Game
- Story centers around Sam (player) and Charlie (NPC)
- Gameplay centered around experiential grief and catharsis
- Solo development project



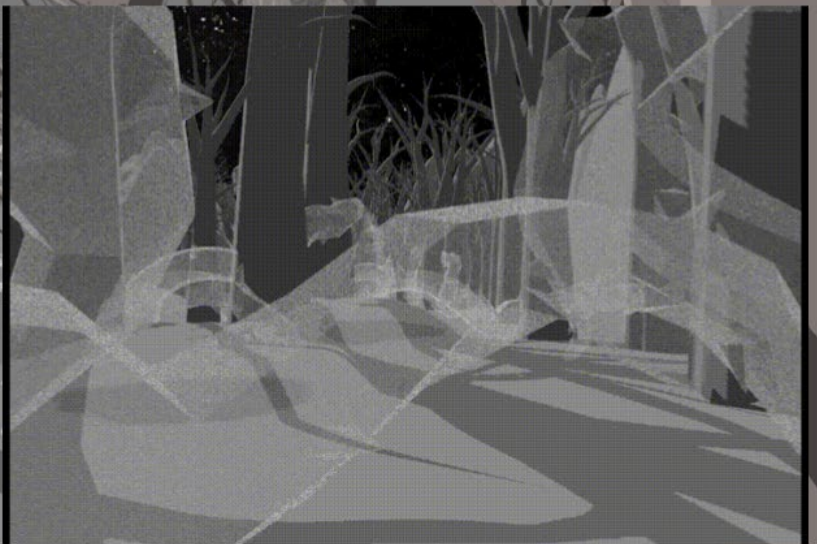
Themes Explored

- Grief
- Interference
- Lack of predictability
- Catharsis



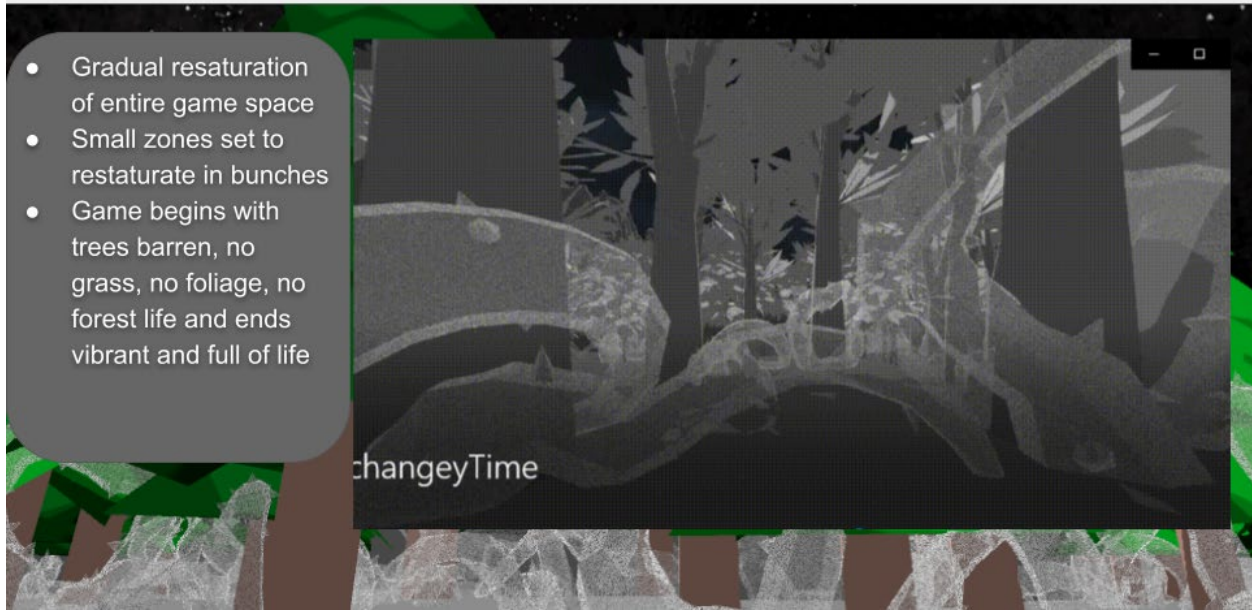
Primary Mechanic: Root Smashing

- Player swings their arm (click) to destroy roots that are a visual and physical interruption in the space around them
- Spawn randomly chosen plant, animal, and other foliage
- Symbolic of cognitive interference, small obsessive bits of grief



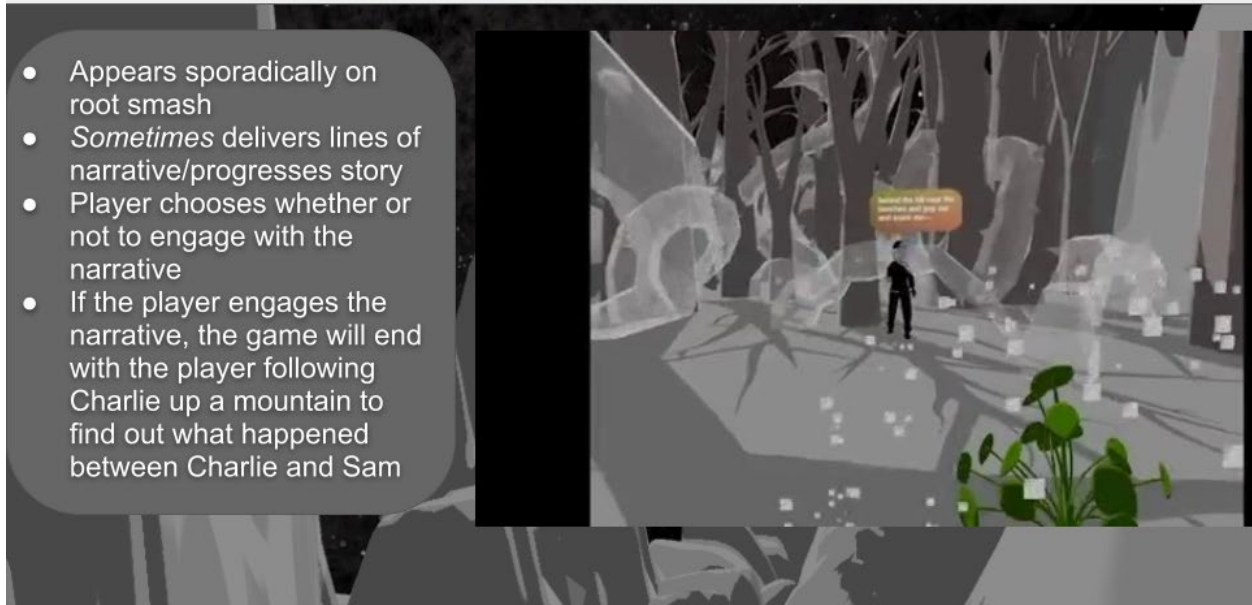
Primary Mechanic: Saturation

- Gradual resaturation of entire game space
- Small zones set to restatuate in bunches
- Game begins with trees barren, no grass, no foliage, no forest life and ends vibrant and full of life



Charlie (NPC)

- Appears sporadically on root smash
- *Sometimes* delivers lines of narrative/progresses story
- Player chooses whether or not to engage with the narrative
- If the player engages the narrative, the game will end with the player following Charlie up a mountain to find out what happened between Charlie and Sam



Closing Thoughts

Thank you all for joining me today!



REFERENCES/INSPIRATION

Most of the thematic inspiration for this project came from my personal experience and conversations with my therapist, but I will post some images below of some of the visual inspirations.

