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Spring 6-10-2021

Playfair Axiom

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PLAYFAIR AXIOM

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF DESIGN, COLLEGE OF COMPUTING AND
DIGITAL MEDIA OF DEPAUL UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN GAME DESIGN

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
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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ABSTRACT

This game seeks to bridge nuanced gameplay with more expansive themes of existentialism, life, and death. I attempt to bridge these concepts together through the mechanics and visuals, both of which play an integral role to one another. Through consistently evolving imagery that increases in complexity from a gameplay perspective I seek to elicit a reflective and emotional response from the player. My attempts with the project are to allow players to draw their own conclusions on what the greater meaning of the game is as well as what each individual component in the game could represent. Oftentimes, the subtleties of imagery and of motion can be enough to entice reflection or think about how something subtle can surface overarching philosophical questions.

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CHAPTER 1

Description of Game

Playfair Axiom is founded on many of the conventions of 2D platformers, but it takes apart the genre at the seams and attempts to reconstruct it into a bittersweet interaction. The player is an ink dot that is brought into creation by a giant hand that spills the playable character onto the screen from a feather quill. The player jumps, floats, and climbs through nine levels that are representative of each stage of a person's understanding of life and death from childhood to adulthood. Inverting expectations, the player can only land on and jump off gaps intentionally left within the line art. With this mechanic I introduce new additions to the formula through animated vignettes that cycle on the screen. These vignettes are composed of different shapes, animals, and existential imagery that the player must visually decipher to fluidly move from one piece of art to the other.

CHAPTER 2

Statement of Intent

My goal with *Playfair Axiom* was to create a game that is reflective of my life experiences and of what I have learned as a designer. The passage of time and the experience of life are universal, and what I decided would be the connection between any player and the game. Making something relatable was very valuable to me. The process of arriving to where the game currently is, visually and mechanically, was about finding the right framework to work through. The minimalism and diversity of a line art drawing style served as the best medium for combining game mechanics, visuals, and metaphors. The line art itself is entirely black and placed against a white background, allowing for easier communication of the rules within the game. From there I could iterate, as the collage-like nature of the level design allowed me to regularly experiment. The gameplay concept is centered around moving through and jumping inside of gaps in the artwork. This is to represent the existential philosophy of interpreting what is to be perceived with a different set of eyes. With the flexibility of line art, weaving the player into the experience became easier as I honed in on aesthetics and the style best suited for delivering on the gameplay. What had to follow was structure. This took some time to focus, the existentialist motifs needed to properly guide the player from one moment to the next.

Themes of perseverance and being radiate from the start. I decided to use *line art men* as a key signifier in the game for boundaries, walls containing the player within a level. In every level, these drawings are animated to be pushing against invisible surfaces, with men on opposite sides of the screen and below the player. The *line art men* are representative of eternal struggle, forever performing the same action. Imagery of *birds and plants* fill the screen in the first few levels, attempting to create a meditative aura. The contradiction of struggling *line art men* and free *birds and plants* are to encourage initial questions from the player. Nature, acting as the gateway into the game, is something I personally correlate with youth. The struggle of the *line art men* counter what should seemingly be the implied freedom of nature. With the passage of time comes a greater understanding of how things are. After the first four levels the player then passes through a sequence of *falling birds*. It is here that the game moves away from serenity, and an abstraction of existentialism takes shape. The death of the birds marks a turning point. In the following level, *simple line shapes* (a figure eight, a square, a squiggly line, etc.) fill the

screen. The chaotic and deconstructed forms of lines are meant to illustrate the chaos of death, and the abrasiveness of existential realization. These ***simple line shapes*** are animated such as to evoke imagery of cosmic objects and occurrences, including shooting stars and constellations. The realization of how death impacts life is a monumental occurrence, no clearer than the answers to questions we have about our own place in the universe. The ***fate level*** follows, and returns the game to a state of tranquility. Numerous sets of hands holding strings move in such a way as to carve a path for the player. The strings represent the flow of life, drawing heavily from Greek mythos. The strings, very closely resembling singular lines, are created and then cut. The game concludes with the ***struggle of sisyphus,*** a level that culminates in one final test to persevere through. The player must follow a series of ***line art men***, this time animated to roll a boulder upwards, a much more direct illustration of the meaning of the game. It is challenging to keep up with these animations, a direct statement that even in the end there is.

I strived to blend all of the above elements together, each level carrying a varying weight in the overall experience. The result can feel twisting, and sometimes sudden, but I hope the repeating threads in the game keeps things coordinated. The sharp transitioning from one level to the other is not meant to confuse, but to keep things focused and direct. The conclusions the player draws are subjective, it was always my intention to leave the interpretation of the game open. I tested myself with this project in ways that I never have before, and tried to push my limits as a designer at every turn that I could. Trying constantly to move away from what I expected myself to do, and instead doing what I felt like I needed too. The result is a game that I am very proud of, and hope that others can draw some form of reflection from and connection with as well.

CHAPTER 3

Instructions and Rules

W - Jump
S - Move downwards
A - Move left
D - Move right

Stationary art with a gap in it's design indicates a solid platform to land on.

Moving animations with a gap in the design can be jumped inside of continuously.

Jumping a set distance underneath every gap will give another jump.

Touching the colorful orb at the end of levels will transition the level to the next.

Escape to quit.