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The robot on the hill

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The Robot on the Hill

BY

James Ryan

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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

"The Robot on the Hill" is a rogue-like autobattler that procedurally models the state of the individual in the information age. The game abruptly transitions between diverse framings - a hill, a bedroom, a pond, a chessboard, the void - in order to highlight the disjointedness that is present in the informationalizing of self and reality. It dialogues with Byung Chul Han and Heidegger to portray what Han describes as a 'narrative crisis' in modernity and the devaluation of experience. When the value of experience diminishes and disintegrates, "all that is left is *bare life,* a kind of *survival*." (Han) This *survival* state lives from moment to moment - "*from one crisis to the next, from one problem to the next…*" (Han) Life becomes a series of problems to solve.

Throughout the game, players encounter "axioms", which are abstract representations of states and ideas such as "anxiety", "spite", "ideology", or "pride". Each of these axioms serve as a resource to manage or an enemy to confront. Progressing in the game requires players to arrange these axioms on a chess-like board in a strategic way. This strategizing is called "Ordering your Being" within the game, and serves as an ironic misreading of Heidegger's concept of being where being itself is made out to be manipulable or exploitable.

The journey explores a drama depicting the resulting deterioration from this internal rational game set forth by the propositions of the information age and the poverty of experience flowing from it. It is a projection of the deteriorated individual in the information age, wherein the technic itself invades on the understanding of being.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

Description of Game

'The Robot on the Hill' is an existential rogue-like autobattler. The player positions units called 'axioms' on a grid-like board in a strategic way in order to defeat the enemies such as the player character's bed, door, or other objects. They also walk around in a room, and on a hill, using WASD controls. The game features a retro art-style using a pixel shader and mild post-processing effects, going for a stark and surreal style.

CHAPTER 2

Statement of Intent

The base intent of the game is to model phenomenological states in an artistically receptive way, and to dialogue with relevant philosophical texts in game-dependent rhetoric. It leverages procedurality to "craft representations through rules, which in turn create possibility spaces that can be explored through play." (Bogost, Ecology of Games, 122) Normally, Bogost notes, "when we build models, we… attempt to describe the function of some material system accurately… But since procedurality is a symbolic medium rather than a material one, procedural rhetorics can make arguments about conceptual systems." (Bogost, 126) This is the case with this thesis - to tell a story and make an argument regarding the state of the individual in the information age through the critical lens of Heidegger and Byung Chul Han.

The game is meant to dialogue mainly with Heidegger's idea of the 'exposure' and Byung Chul Han's 'violence of positivity'. Axioms represent a kind of conceptual technic – a way of quantifying and representing an idea or experience. For example, the player needs to battle their bed to get up and progress the game – the enemies they confront are axioms called 'lethargy' and 'comfort'. Instead of the object itself invading on Dasein it is the ideas that define the object for the player character that invade. This is meant to imply the player's being is exposed to technicity. By ordering axioms, which represent mostly negative states of being, and employing them on the chessboard of being, the player character is 'repressing to the positive', which embodies Han's idea of the violence of positivity. Negative states of being become nothing in their own right, except tools to overcome obstacles, which in turn results in violence to one's being.

As the player moves through the game, the character they are controlling becomes more unwell. This is explored in journal excerpts and dream sequences after the player loses a run. Narratively this is meant to convey that they are trapped in a neurotic mind game without the experience or narrative tradition to escape it. They are trapped by the presuppositions they are given, and the poverty of their experience. If they want to leave their apartment they must play through the game - which is grueling, frustrating, and left unexplained. The consolation of the game is that there is an escape, the concession is that it is only 'through' the game that the player can escape the trappings of their world. This is intended to demonstrate Heidegger's conception of world and history, stating: "Being-in-the-world is [the] originary playing of the game that each factical Dasein must play itself into so as to be able to play itself out…" (Heidegger, 346)

CHAPTER 3

Link to the Game and Inputs

Download will be made available here: https://jcreeno77.itch.io/

CHAPTER 4

Development Notes

There have been many technical feats accomplished while working on this game alongside the artistic and philosophical. In RotH, all code was written by myself with minimal use of plugins, tutorials, and outside help. And all C# Unity code was architected and written solely by myself. In Jazz Vs Waffles, the code base was written in tandem with my partner Tyler Sanders. Many tooling and design patterns were implemented across both projects including multithreading and coroutines, C# interfaces and polymorphic functions, procedural animation, REST api deployment via AWS's API Gateway, api and json data transferring, using serverless lambda proxy scripts in AWS to protect sensitive api key data, UGS data analytics and version control, shaders both in HLSL and in Unity's shadergraph, Event-based design patters, the factory design pattern, backend and database management alongside cost management via storage and web deployment on AWS s3, in depth mastery of Unity's particle system, and a regular privileging of composition over inheritance based schemes.

All that said, the real value of generating and maintaining a broad code base using various techniques across both The Robot on the Hill and Jazz Vs Waffles has been the accumulation of experience, which has given me great personal appreciation for things like 'clean code' and SOLID design principles. Breaking down and encapsulating complex tasks into simple, well-named functions has no match when trying to use and re-use code written over many months at a time.

All 3D models were created in blender, using a variety of techniques including greebling, sculpting and texturing. UI was created in Figma**.**

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