AA4S12: Prototyping, Playtesting and Evaluation

Narrative Design - The Longest Journey

Cole Underwood

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MODULE INTRODUCTION

1. This module allows the student to explore the purpose of iterative design towards a focused brief. Cognisant of the tensions inherent within a contemporary market.
2. Students will produce design documentation, play guides and other material, including evaluative documentation.
3. The self-directed project should provide ample opportunity to critically evaluate and iterate upon an existing 'vertical slice' prototype or work towards critically evaluating a new artefact.

1. Research & Production Journal (Individual)

Individual **Development Journal/Slides** that describes your personal contributions to the project.

Page one of your journal should outline your proposed project and who you will be working with (both within and outside the course). If it is a group project you should include an outline of your role.

This document should also cover the **research** undertaken into the project and into designing an appropriate testing strategy or an evaluation framework for your project.

2. Project Output (Individual or Group)

If you are building a game...

- **Prototype game(s)** - To be demonstrated throughout the module (video play throughs for each major prototype version should be submitted for prosperity).
- Evidence of playtesting ongoing throughout the module (e.g. playtesting sheets, spreadsheets, summaries etc.) You should include a **summary of the playtesting** results, changes made to the game's design following testing, and a reflection upon the overall success of the prototype(s) and potential future direction of the game. This may be submitted as a co-authored report; however, each team member should contribute fairly and have their name included as an author on the cover page. (where there is disagreement individual reports must be submitted).
- design iteration based on **feedback**. (e.g. a summary/list of key changes made).

If you are producing a set of assets...

- Document describing the **technical and artistic development** of the work. Typically, the different 'passes' undertaken.
- **Evidence of expert critique** regarding technical suitability and aesthetic integrity. (e.g. meeting notes, forum posts, annotated images etc.). **Report critiquing the work produced** both from a technical and aesthetic perspective. This should relate back to the original self-declared brief and include a commentary upon the expert feedback received, and your adherence to contemporary professional standards.
- Evidence of **in-engine testing.**
- Final and wire-frame renders.

There can be room for your involvement in multiple projects, but this **must** be limited to two projects. This can take the form of one's own personal project and involvement in a group project, or participation in two different group projects.

3. Reflective Post-mortem (Individual)

An **individual written post-mortem** evaluation (approx. 1000 words), which evaluates strengths and weaknesses of the project. This should bear in mind the fact that this is mid project - outlining successful features that will be taken forward and weaker features that will be removed. You should also justify your actions, decisions, and personal contributions in support of your project. You should include discussion of a conflicting points of view from yourself and those giving feedback on your project and your teammates (if you are working in a group).

Module Aims

- To complement and build on the students existing evaluative skills as designers and makers of digital games
- To support and encourage the student's continuing exploration of game design towards industry and enterprise relevant briefs.
- To enable the student to evaluate an ongoing process of production confidently and coherently critically, which will result in the development of a coherent design document.

The Longest Journey - Module Introduction

My goal for this module is to take this prototype which was a project in the design & aesthetics module and produce a finished project which can be published to the public. The project was created in storyformer in which I will discuss below the research and development into that from the previous module.

The reasons why I want to publish this as a piece of work?

- I am interested in pursuing a career in the narrative design field and having released a project that is published in the field would help tremendously for my portfolio work.
- The module is focused on feedback and iterating, this will help me improve my skills in the narrative design area by getting feedback and learning from previous mistakes which I can consider for this project and any future work.
- Having another game that is published will help for starting a business and able to backup work for publishers and investors to says I released two published titles one from AAA and one from a personal project, which will help my credibility.

I plan to use 25% of this module as my grade for the Prototyping, Playtesting and Evaluation module.

RESEARCH

Overview

As my focus was narrative design, I wanted to explore storytelling and branching narrative. I investigated games books and films that have branching specifically. As I worked in a games studio that specialised in branching narrative, even though I did not write the narrative in the studio I had the advantage of understanding the fundamentals. I spoke to a narrative designer and Co-worker "Andi Ewington" who worked in Supermassive Games that gave me advice –

Andi suggested that I "Beats everything out - start at the end first - have a cool idea for a story and work out that end scene then work towards it and Create posts in your beats (like anchor hooks) that you work towards - like rock climbing and don't edit till the end"

Andi suggested a few books to look at Screenplay The foundation of screenwriting by Syd Field, Save The Cat by Blake Snyder and Into the Woods by John Yorke.
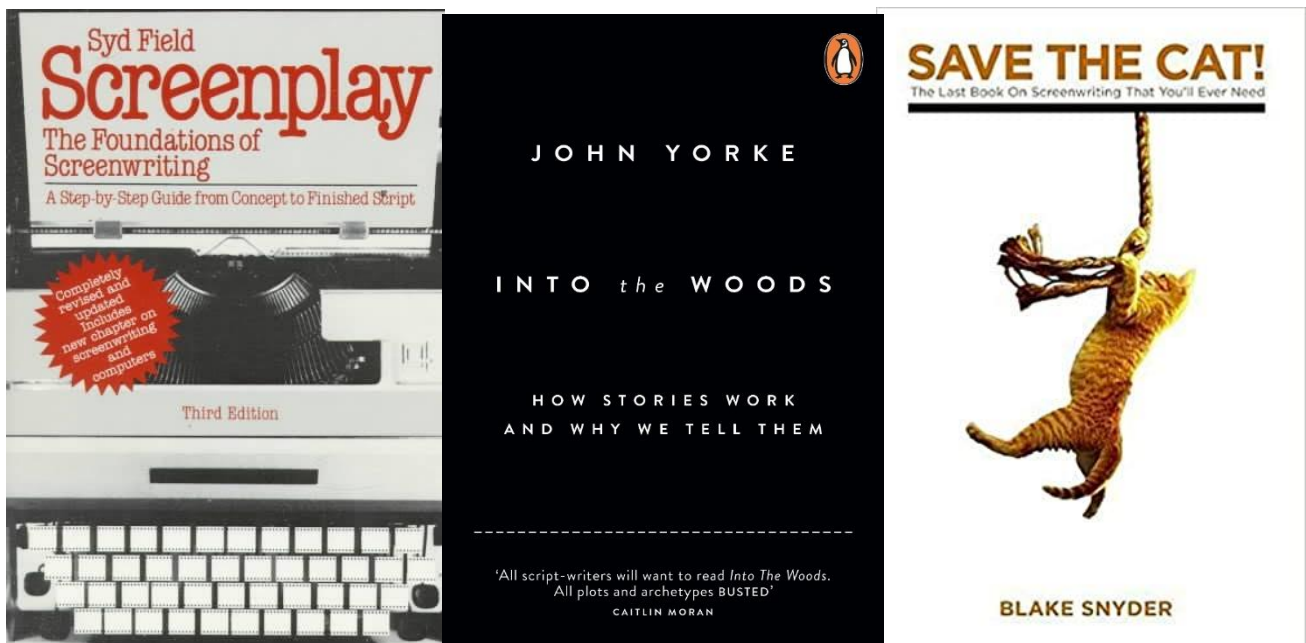
The Story Engine

Andi highly recommend that I get a product called "The Story Engine"

The Story Engine is a deck of 180 cards that offer endless storytelling prompts for writers.

It runs on a simple, fast, open-ended system of drawing and arranging cards to create prompts for:

- Story ideas
- Character concepts
- Encounter premises
- Magical items
- Campaign hooks

The Story Engine deck works in any setting or genre using cards. You can use recommended patterns for generating prompts for specific writing goals or come up with your systems.

The Story Engine deck is made up of five types of cards that each tap into an element of what makes a powerful, interesting, and unique story.

AGENT CARDS	ENGINE CARDS	ANCHOR CARDS	OBSTACLE CARDS	ASPECT CARDS
represent characters who have agency in the story	represent motivations and relationships that propel or connect cards	represent objects and locations of importance	represent barriers that must be overcome	are descriptors and qualities that add detail and specificity

- Agent is your character
- Engine to give them a motivation
- Anchor to focus the Engine on an object, event or location
- Obstacle to create the central conflict of the story
- Aspect (place it under the Agent or Anchor, your choice) to add more detail

Using this concept, the story engine provides would provide keep components to storytelling I will be using this concept to create a strong and compelling story narrative. I will be using these techniques with what Andi suggested by bullet pointing using Agents, Engines, Anchors, Obstacles and Aspects to break down the story and begin the writing process.

Courses

I took it upon myself to learn from online courses to improve my narrative and screenwriting skills by learning from industry experts in the field. I decided to purchase two courses online which was both highly desirable and relevant to learn and improve my key skills in narrative.

STORY! FOR LIVE ACTION & ANIMATION WITH CHUCK WILLIAMS

One of the courses is with Chuck Williams who is a film editor, producer, screenwriter and film executive on numerous studio and independent projects. Chuck has worked on Brother Bear, Pocahontas, The Lion Ling as he explains methods, tips, and techniques for good Storytelling!

The course link can be found here - https://creatureartteacher.com/product/story-course-film-and-animation/

The course covers –

• Story Structure & Screenplay Writing Tips

• The Story Boarding & "Beat Board" Process

• Elements of the story including:

• World

• Plot

• Character

• Theme

• How to develop well-rounded characters

• Writing an effective "logline"

• The differences in developing a story for live-action vs animation

• Filmmaking from a Producer's Point Of View:

• The "Producer's Curve"

• Budget Tips

• Independent vs. Studio Differences

COURSE BREAKDOWN

In this section I will break the course down into sections and points I learned to apply to creating the story narrative in production.

Story

Chuck explains that most good stories evolve around emotional experience using the human connection and people's experiences to influence the story. An explain is films use a medium of different emotional experience and with the short lives we live, we cannot experience everything, for example, in a war film the viewer or reader might have never been to war but having a narrative or/and visual experience through book or film lets the viewer or reader take the place of the main protagonist which lets them get a sense of that experience.

The diagram below is the six elements that go into film making which is –

- Storytelling
- Photography
- Performance
- Music
- Montage
- Design

All these mediums can serve and communicate the story through storytelling. These are great to put for research and practical usage –

Photography- Going out taking reference images that can be a link to **World** narrative and getting real-life primary research.

Performance- Through the stage of acting on screen but also taking the character and using storytelling to perform making a strong and rememberable character.

Music- Sound, having sound can add feel and another layer to the scene (Ever tried watching a horror film on mute)

Montage- A-frame of different storytelling technique of selecting, editing, and piecing together separate sections of the film to form a continuous whole

Using all these mediums all do one thing and that is tell a story through communication. Breaking that down into the four elements of storytelling which are –

- **Characters-** The characters in the narrative
- **Plot-** The events that happen
- **World-** When and where it takes place
- **Theme-** What is it about?

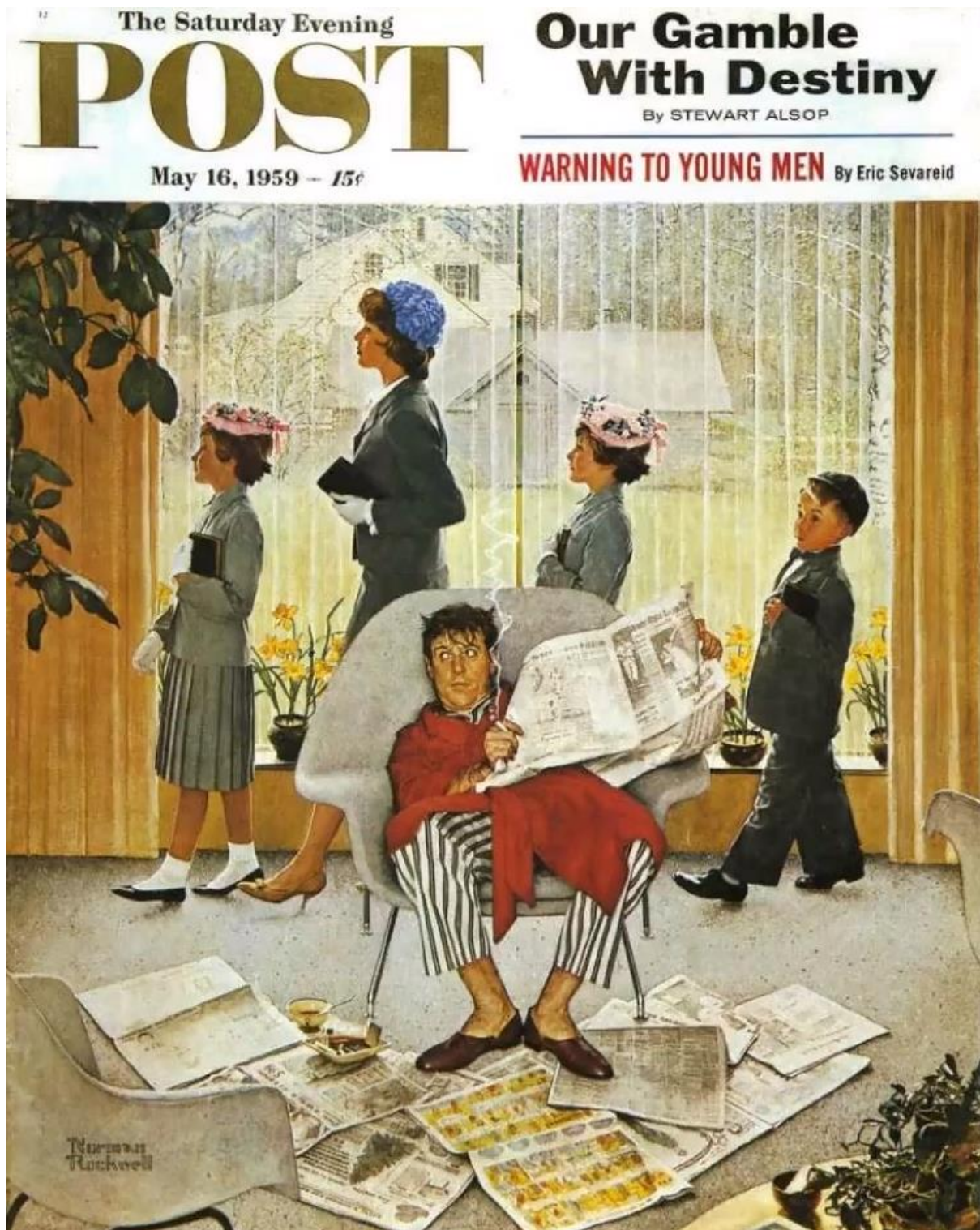THE ELEMENTS OF STORY

CHARACTERS
PLOT
WORLD
THEME
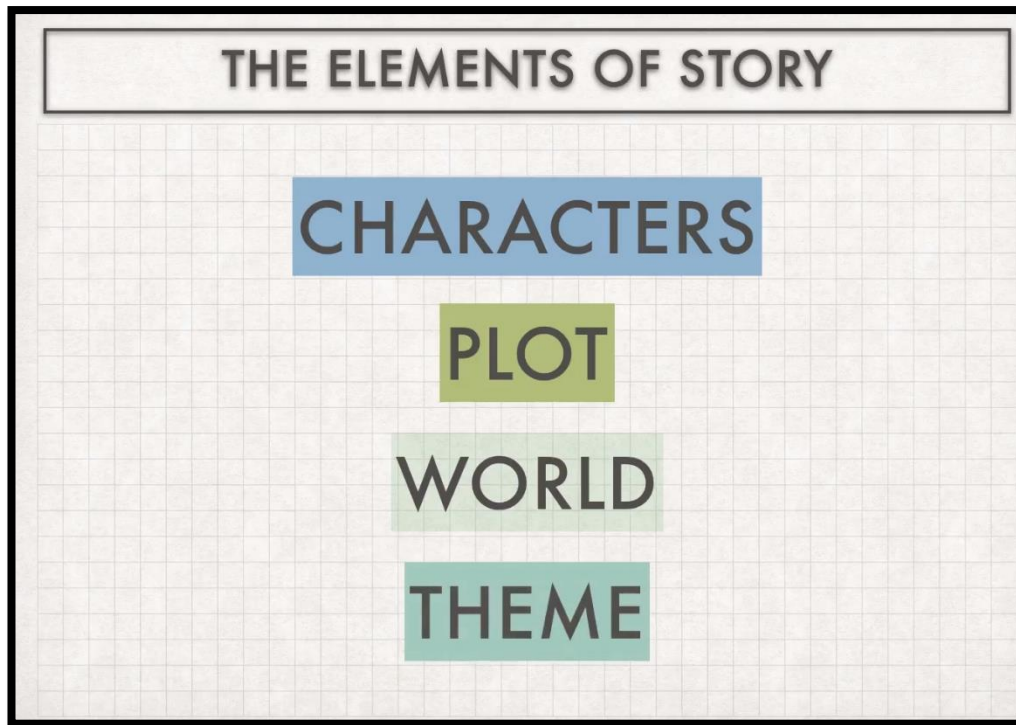
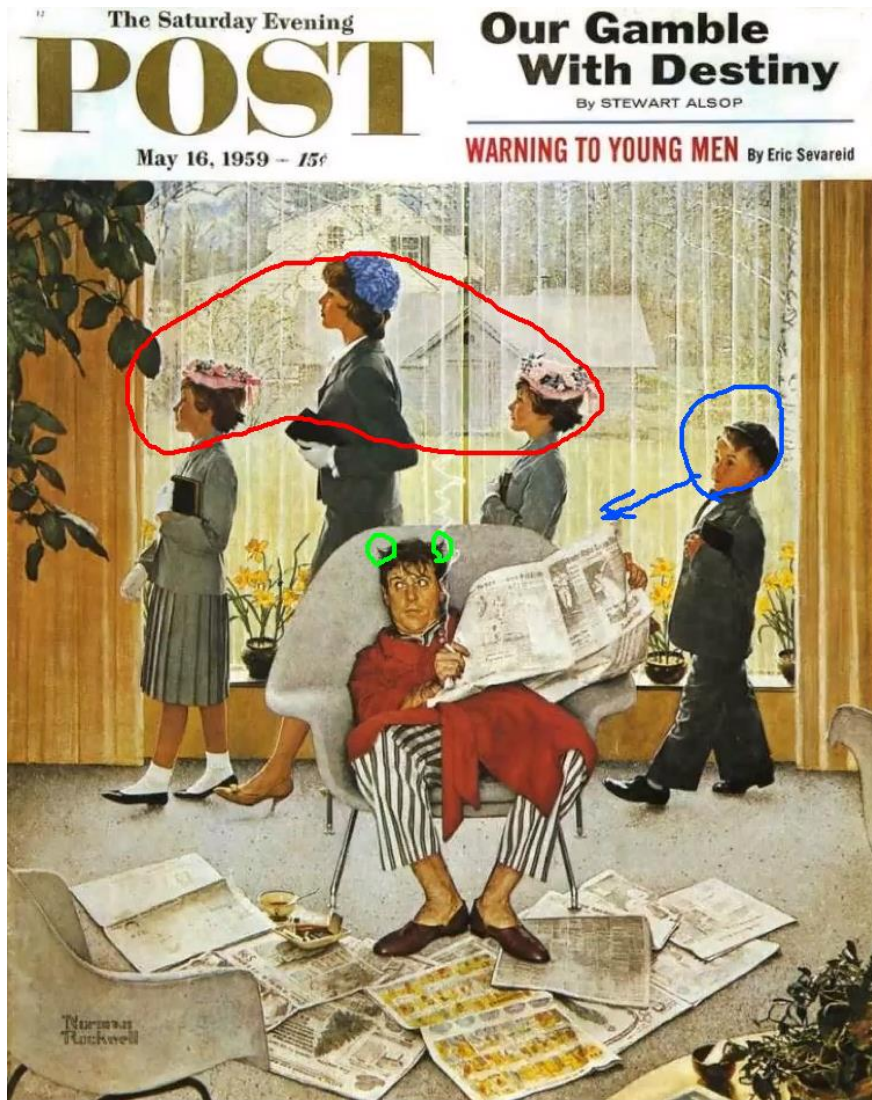Chuck explains that surprising character is the most important element –

> "The jungle book has very little plot and the characters are what make the movie" - Chuck Williams

This will certainly be a strong focus building strong meaningful characters and having a strong element of focus in the narrative. Breaking it down at this point I will be applying these four elements into the narrative design structure with strong characters being the main focal point, a simple yet effective plot that can be related in an emotional context, a world setting in a time of space relevant to the theme.

Visual Storytelling

The course breaks down the art of visual storytelling where this will be introduced in the storyformer as each section will require visual art by Sam. Having strong visuals help communicate the story by a single image. A known master of this is "Norman Rockwell" .. Rockwell used a single image in his artwork that tells a story.

The Saturday Evening POST
Our Gamble With Destiny By STEWART ALSOP
May 16, 1959 – 15¢
WARNING TO YOUNG MEN By Eric Sevareid

Breaking down the image by Norman Rockwell we can piece a story by a single image

Where? In a living room.

When? Sunday morning you can see through the window it's day and the family are heading to church.

Who? It's a family a father, mother, daughters, and son.

What? The father is skipping church.

As you can see the image tells a lot and communicates that story across with a single image, if you look deeper.

Red- Shows the animosity of the expression on the girls faces (Being unhappy with father/husband)

Blue- The son wants to be like his father

Green- The father has little devil horns also note the red dressing gown.

Using this method with Sam's art style we can portray a reference of storytelling using single images that the narrative can look deeper into telling more about that image to transition into the next scene.

Another example through short scenes and transitions is a clip from an advert cleverly done by "Raymond James" which simply says the word "Kevin" but each clip and transition tells a whole life story in 30 seconds.- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Di9BL-k9gvg

Applying this method through each section of the storytelling in the storyformer we can apply the same effect using single images and transitions through each narrative choice.

Movies

HOMEWARD BOUND – THE INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

As a group on the design and aesthetics module, we discussed the overall premise of the idea and Sam wanted to do a story about a lost dog. This reminded me of my favourite childhood movie "Homeward Bound – The Incredible Journey". The overall plot of the movie – Three pets Chance, a young dog unfamiliar with the world; Shadow, an ageing, wise dog; and Sassy, a snobby cat are left behind when their family goes on vacation and are forced to leave them in the temporary care of a friend who lives hundreds of miles away. Unsure of what happened, the animals escape and set out on a quest to find their family. On their incredible journey across the ruggedly beautiful Sierras, they encounter surprises from man, beast, and nature alike.

I find the plot of the movie a strong concept of being lost and focusing on an adventure which is what we are looking to portray as our premises. I like the character development in the film the Pitbull "Chance" is such a great character being naïve to the world and getting into all sort of mischief makes a great and interesting character developing in an unknown world to him.
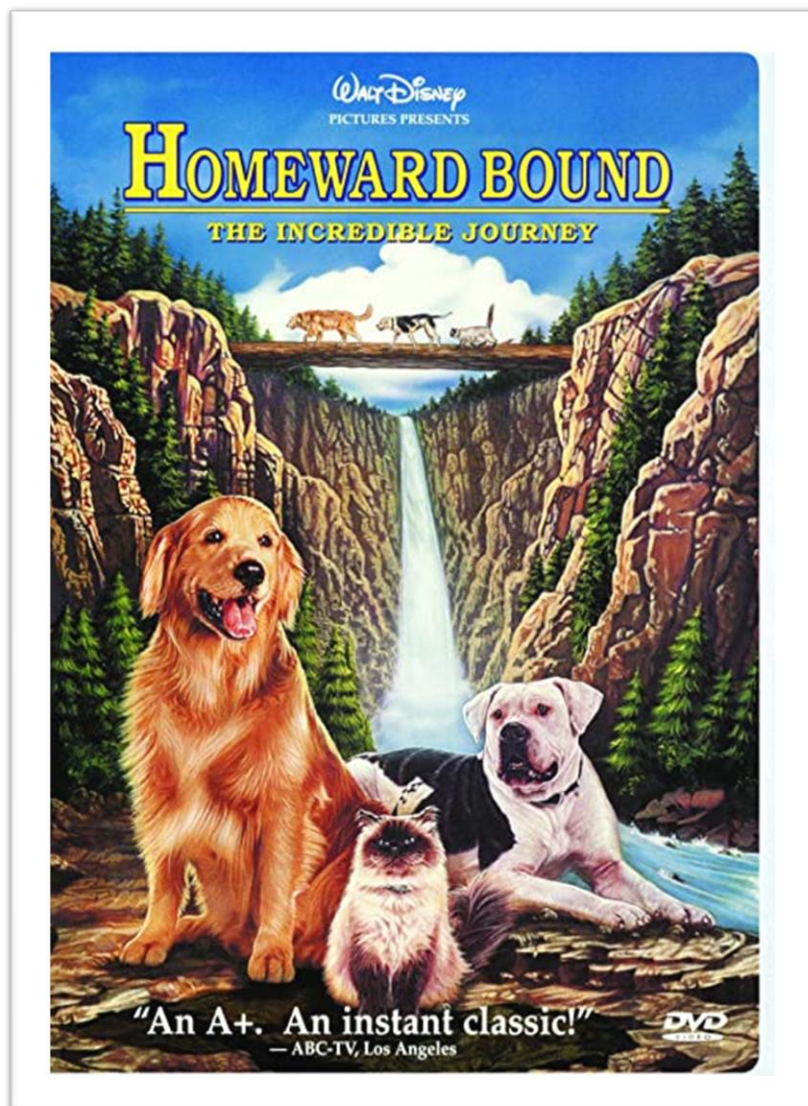
101 DALMATIANS

Another great and special childhood memory from "Disney" is 101 Dalmatians. The plot is about a dalmatian named Pongo who falls in love with a dalmatian named Perdita and begin a family. However, when their 15 puppies are kidnapped by two thieves hired by the greedy Cruella De Vil, who plans to make a fur coat with their skin with other puppies, Pongo and Perdita must rescue them before it's late

The plot gives what is referred to in the story engine an engine and anchor giving the character (The agent) a goal/something to work towards it also adds obstacles in the plotting and bad guys. I find the story compelling most Disney films nail and hit home with real-world emotions which reflects with good storytelling.
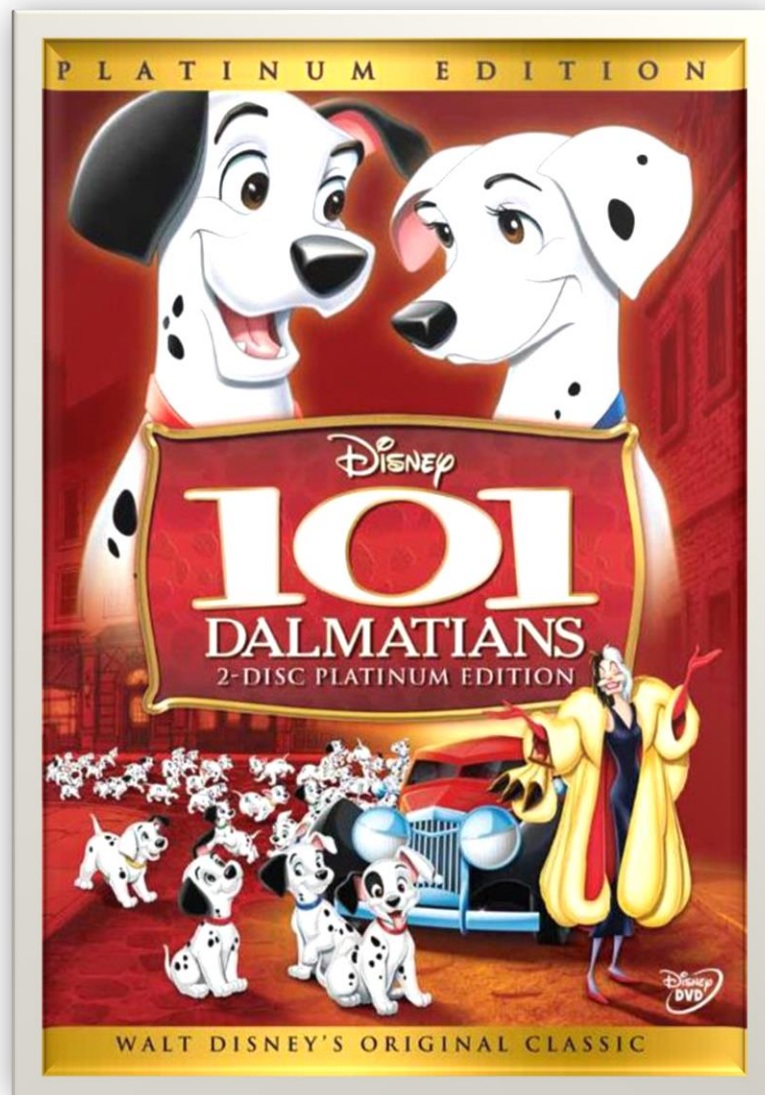
BANDERSNATCH

Bandersnatch is a great example of the interactive choice narrative in a film.

A Panel discussion from the Narrascope Conference video link here –

https://www.uswaudienceofthefuture.co.uk/reality-bytes/what-bander-snatch-got-right-and-got-wrong

Tackles some of the issue Bandersnatch had in the branching narrative design. Having mixed directional messages to the audience seemed a common theme as discussed in the panel, arguably there are many points during Bandersnatch where viewers can make the wrong choice. Audiences proceed directly into what seems to be the most important choice right from the start. The choice sequence - Should I work in the Office of Tucker soft games or should I work on this at home? And everything about the way the scene is constructed, says, work at the office, you're going to have all this support that you don't have as an independent game designer, and that's the wrong choice. It seems to be teaching the audiences that their choices don't matter. Because what seems obvious to you is wrong.

This was an example of having no direction or clue as to what is the right or wrong answer to pick from, would be very frustrating for players the way Bandersnatch did this was luring the user to think it was the correct choice to find out it was wrong with no clue or indication and the player had to start again.

Bandersnatch narrative structure
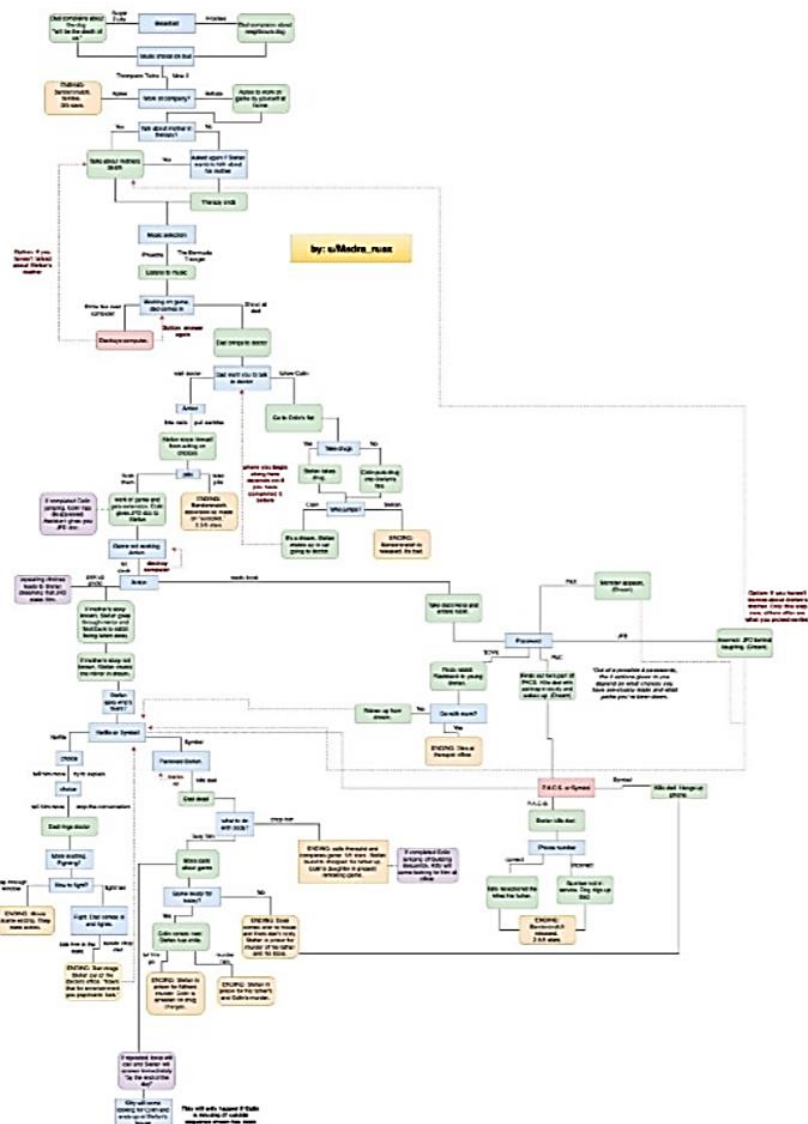
DEVOLVEMENT

Introduction

The story (The longest journey) was developed in a previous project with the BBC using the storyformer tool. I wanted to try and replicate the story using a different tool as the BBC storyformer could not be published into an HTML and only exports as a JSON file for their tool. This is very limiting currently as I know it's currently in development and still in beta.

I wanted to try Twine as narrative designers tend to use that tool as is highly recommended. An example when I spoke to Ian Thomas, he linked me an article about using Twine as a tool for portfolio work.

Link source can be found here - https://wildwinter.medium.com/getting-into-games-writing-64b23a41f51b

Early development

My design process started with beats and bullet pointing the story in a word document. I started from the end which was suggested by Andi from Supermassive Games and worked towards the ending. I also created a one-page GDD which helped put all the information on one page using a concept of putting the plot into one sentence- **You're a dog that gets kidnapped and are lost and tries to find his way home.**

Having a simple concept that I can describe in one sentence simplifies the writing process and being overly complex can cause issues down the line.

The second phase was to write up the branch choices using a flowchart system. I found storyformer more of an implementation tool and I wanted something that gave a fast workflow that could be easily transferable. I investigated Lucidcharts but needed a membership to access all its features, so I needed to look for a free alternative and found a flowchart editor called "Branchtrack" which I found very easy and fast to you.

I began to write up the narrative design structure using three different pathways and looping to each path in the story.

Branchtrack

BranchTrack is a cloud-based learning management system (LMS) built for sales training in a variety of industries. Key features include a drag-and-drop editor, asset gallery, instant preview, and built-in gamification. Although it is used in an area for sales, I found it to work perfect for narrative design, it is very easy to use and requires little effort to create something quick and straight to the point. Unfortunately, it has limited uses and requires a paid subscription model - https://www.branchtrack.com/pricing

Features can be found here - https://www.branchtrack.com/features
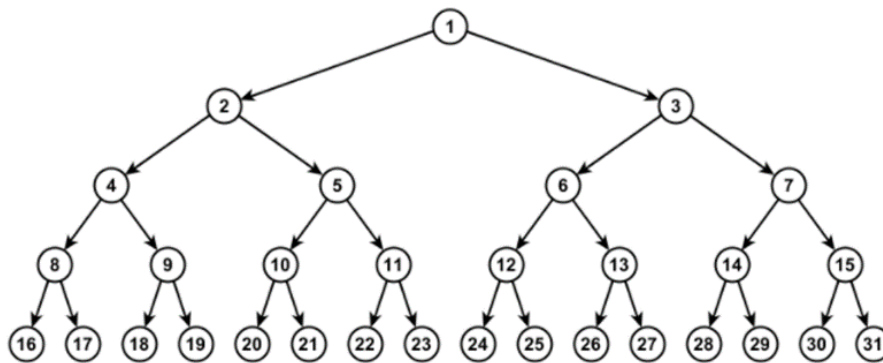
First draft

I created a first story draft and layout for the Design & Aesthetic module in branchtrack which I can then implement into stroyformer. I found I was making a lot of fundamental mistakes in my first draft-

- It was too confusing I had 3 pathways leading to different areas all looping around I was going away from the simplistic design I initially planned on doing.

- It was too much, meaning that the rest of the time would have to do more work which could fundamentally lower the quality of the artwork and the storytelling.

- I added a morality system that would be difficult to code into storyformer having never used it and taking away the fundamentals of what I was focusing on which was a strong story.

- I had choices that had no meaningful decisions for example – left or right if you chose the wrong path game over. There was no clue or indication.

- There were too many endings most where the game over start again.

Second draft

After the mistakes, I learnt from my research and practically I decided to re-write the whole story again from scratch. I designed to do some more research and digging into branching narrative and came across this website - https://thestoryelement.wordpress.com/2015/02/11/designing-branching-narrative/

Which has some fantastic advice on how to structure your branching tree's as suggested -   The simplest nonlinear stories use a branching structure; you start at the beginning, are given several options, and those options lead to new choices, which each lead to new choices…this can go on forever, but there is a point where all of these branches become too expensive. If you are writing a branching narrative, as one of the old Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, your story structure might look something like this:


This was how my first draft was beginning to look like and I decided to use a more linear root but to branch with more meaningful decisions. Even though it had a more linear route to the overall storytelling it also had different routes that you could have a difference in the story after 3-4 playthroughs. I decided to use the diamond shape as it keeps the number of branches to manage better for the story and the team, but it cheats the player out of making meaningful decisions. What is the point of choosing one path over another, if they both eventually lead to the same conclusion?
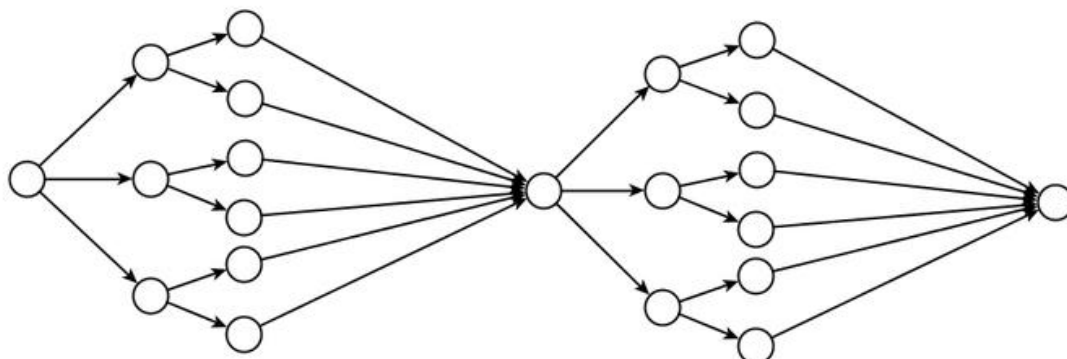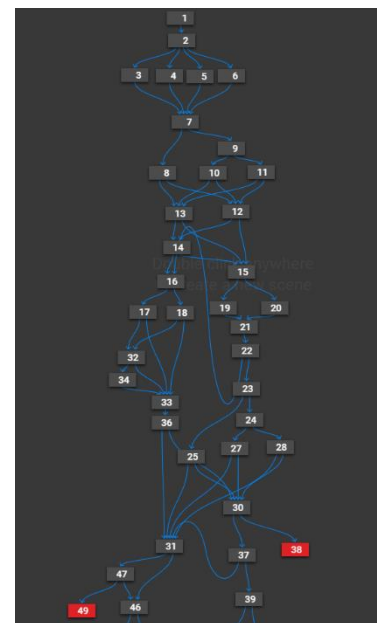
I thought this is true I need to break the story near the end where something different happens using separate pathways but also using a simple solution of cheating the user and making it less expensive. So, I used this style of branching and used a mixture of linear and a few separate pathways when needed.
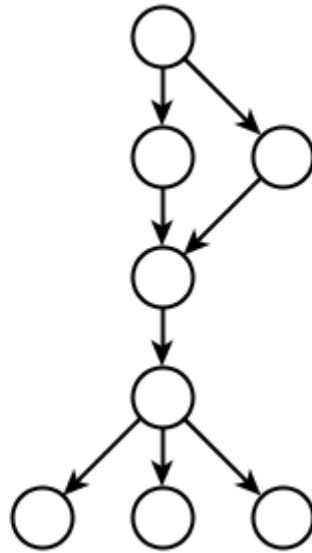

First draft
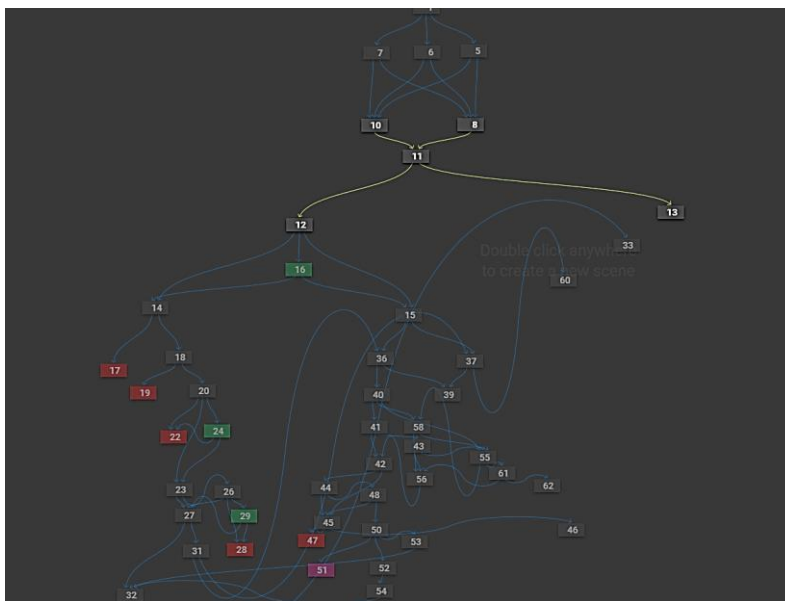
Second draft

Storyformer

StoryFormer is a BBC R&D tool for creating flexible, responsive stories. Using StoryFormer, the flow of a story and the media used to tell it can change dynamically, responding to the viewer's input, preferences, or context. This can happen either before the story starts, or while it's underway. The same story can be told differently to every viewer. Different parts of a story can be explored at will, expanded in-depth, or avoided entirely.

StoryFormer also allows the media for any particular bit of narrative to be varied: perhaps audiences would rather listen to an audio version of a story, rather than watch it. Or skim through it as a graphic novel. All of this flexibility is under the producer's control within StoryFormer's simple user interface.

Having the foundation from branchtrack was an easy transition to storyformer and just required programming the narrative and illustrations into the system.
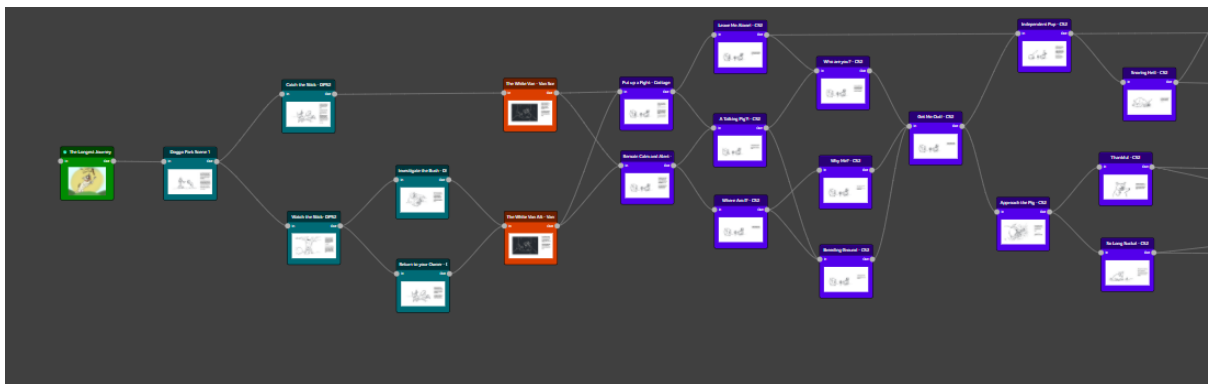
Tutor feedback

Looking at the feedback on the Design & Aesthetic module I will be iterating on this when transitioning from storyformer into twine.

Richard Hurford - Feedback

• Quick introduction to the story: Play as a dog on a journey

• Have created 1 chapter to demonstrate, there would be more in the full experience.

• There is a lot of text on the first few screens, it might be better to break it down a little more and use a few more image variations (or very simple animatic type animation).

• There could be more thought about how the loops around works for the fail paths, taking the player back to the beginning of the chapter (back to the van).

• Good discussion of the development process, using BranchTrack, procreate and then transferring into StoryFormer.

Lloyd Jones - Feedback

• Illustrations are lovely, and the playful use of the screen space and negative space is very well executed.

• A bit wordy to begin.

• Really enjoyed the use of embedding information for the reader to pick out to help them progress.

• There are good moments of changes in tension and emotion where images slightly change to show a heightening of emotion or intensity.

• Good use of audio.

• The story doesn't loop (the farmhouse section could've done with some looping for players to fail and try a different tactic), but the convergence of multiple threads of story allow for a wider portrayal of events which is nice to see upon multiple playthroughs.

Key points I will be using on the feedback from the tutors to implement into twine –

- Cutdown text on the first few screens, I will be either get more illustrations and breaking it down into more sections or editing text narrative

- Loop the story back to the van on fail path, rather than start from the start of the story.

Twine

Twine is an open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories. You don't need to write any code to create a simple story with Twine, but you can extend your stories with variables, conditional logic, images, CSS, and JavaScript when you're ready.

Twine publishes directly to HTML, so you can post your work nearly anywhere. Anything you create with it is completely free to use any way you like, including for commercial purposes.

Twine seems to be the industry standard when it comes to narrative design implementation, Rhianna Pratchett and Ian Thomas both recommended I use twine for my portfolio work and narrative design implementation.

My breakdown reasons for using twine —

- For portfolio work to show I have used multiple platforms and uses the industry standard.
- Because of recommendations from professional narrative designers in the industry.
- Twine has a publisher direct from HTML which is easy to put on platforms such as Itch.io
- BBC storyformer does not have an HTML direct publisher and uses JSON files which can only seem to work directly with their own BBC storyformer software client, which I cannot show people public for feedback and playtesting.
- Twine software should be more robust being industry standard and out for many years. While the storyformer is early access and branchtrack has a paid wall.
- More flexibility due to HTML coding built in the system.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing the story from storyformer to twine was not an easy process, I was quite disappointed with the system and how bad it was. This came to a shock as it was heavily the highest recommended platform next to ink engine to use as a narrative designer choice system.

A list of problems that occurred are the following —

There was no image uploader, I needed to add an image manually (Which was not too bad from a link on the internet) but uploading your images from a file from your computer from desktop required me to put all images in a folder along with the published project in the same folder so it could read the information. I then needed to implement the source code for example

- <img src="Images/Screen1.jpg" /img src="images/intro.jpg"

All this on each node plus adjusting image sizes was a tedious task especially in 2021 where they could have implemented an image uploader like Branchtrack and Storyformer.

Another big issue was that the system UI was buggy, if I use alt and scroll to zoom out or in like most software the system losses all its nodes and the work vanishes, I lost over 5 hours of work twice! Because of a ridiculous software problem.

The UI is also very messy and clunky, I was shocked to think this was industry standard when other platforms I used were so much better. The image below shows how messy it is compared to both the other systems which are branchtrack and storyformer, I thought maybe it was something I was doing wrong but after looking through tutorials it looks like this is just what the system is like.
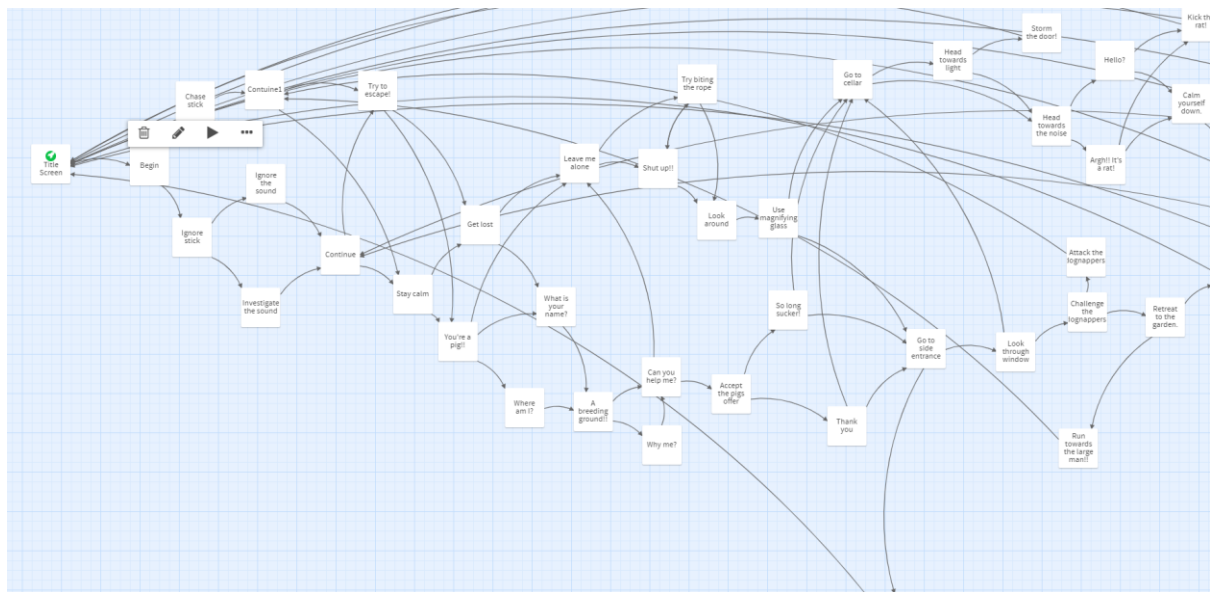
The UI is also very messy and clunky, I was shocked to think this was industry standard when other platforms I used were so much better. The image below shows how messy it is compared to both the other systems which are branchtrack and storyformer, I thought maybe it was something I was doing wrong but after looking through tutorials it looks like this is just what the system is like.

When playtesting it even has issues, if I upload an image from HTML to my computer you need to publish it and play it from the source HTML browser because it does not work in the test or play mode in the editor.

What I did like about Twine was how I could publish a file straight away with no messing around and could have a file running in seconds, I also liked it was free software and no paywalls.

My overall thought of the software was it was buggy, clunky and messy and needs a lot of work I would rather pay for software like branchtrack than use that system again. It needs a lot of work and bug fixes before I return to it, I would like to explore Ink engine next at some point and Articy draft and see how they compare for implementation. As I want to look into becoming a narrative design in a game studio, I think learning different software implementations is a great way to show your technical skills and finding something I am also comfortable using will be key to focus purely on the writing and story rather than messing around with technical issues.
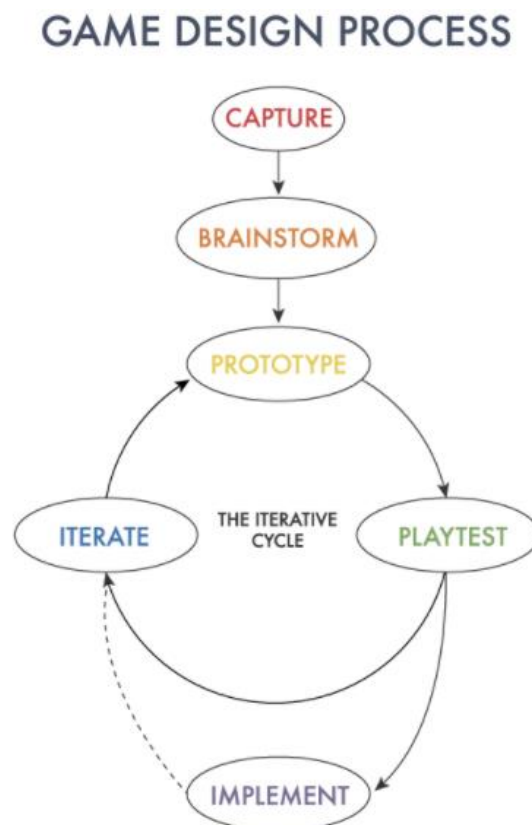
FEEDBACK

Introduction

Once I finished implemented the project in Twine, I put out a post of forums and contacted a few people I knew to review the work. Any feedback would be beneficial to help me progress as a writer and designer for future content and allows me to iterate on the current project at hand.

Feedback and iteration

This section in the documentation will go over the feedback and how I will iterate the constructive feedback to improve my quality of work and key features to keep in mind for future development as a narrative designer. I sent feedback from a different range of people with experience from students to industry professionals, I believe having a broad range would be beneficial to look at feedback from different points of views and experience levels.

Using the iterative cycle I plan on executing the prototype into productions, send the prototype for playtesting gather feedback and iteration on the process and continue the circle until the project has reached its full potential for publishing.

GAME DESIGN PROCESS

Feedback from Andi Ewington

Andi Ewington is an ex-colleague of mine who work in Supermassive Games, Andi is a well-known author and narrative designer in the industry. Andi has worked on big titles the link to his work can be found here - https://www.imdb.com/name/nm8086288/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

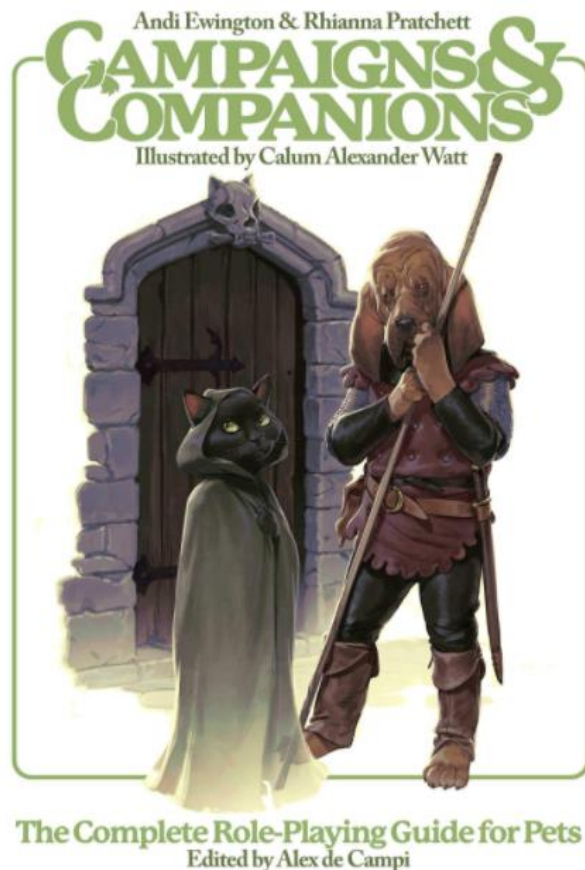Andi has also released a new book with Rhianna Pratchett who I spoke to prior about using twine as a narrative design tool.

Conversation screenshot

Andi Ewington
Active 8 h ago

7 Apr 2021, 20:53

8 Apr 2021, 22:57

hello mate - had a chance to review it

so questions - what's the age group this is aimed at?

what's the purpose of the work?

> Hey Andi, thank you for looking through it, the age group is tailored towards children although I think parents could possibly have fun with it too.
>
> The work is from my uni work and also a portfolio piece to add to my work and hoping to get into the narrative design field.

okay - a couple of things to consider for your age group.

Watch your illustrations - in some places they may actually scare the kids - especially the rat and pig when it bites the rope

I'd also probably change up the breeding farm angle, do something else as it's suddenly getting into big stuff like birds / bees and it will possibly go over there head.

There's also a lot of anger in these exchanges - try and keep it light - some of it is a little dark for kids - so keep that in mind

watch repetition words - having Van in one sentence, then having it again in the second sentence is a no-no, it interrupts flow - the whole thing could do with a good edit to really iron out the repeating phrases

remember to keep a flow going through it - if you stumble over the words, it's probably wrong - and if you are stumbling, then a kid will too

also think about the age and words they'd use

and make sure they are in the right context - for example the dog in the van isn't encumbered - it's entangled

(encumbered is to suggest it's carrying a heavy weight)

also describing the words like the engine being rambunctious is a little beyond the age group - they may struggle - it also looks like you're injecting a word to appear smart - keep it simple and clear

this is the kind of thing you need to aim for in both tone and text level:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bM1gJtnkIAw

> That is fantastic points and once I never really thought off. Thank you very much Andi that is a huge help and I will be sure to iterate and put these in points in place 😊

Cool - also try rhyming your phrases - kids love the way poems trip off the tongue - it engages them more when it's little rhymes...

this is one of my fave books: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZwY5BeYcyo

this is my other:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hipx6HJs4XQ

> Oh yes that is very clever, I like that idea. Thank you again 😊

no worries!

good luck — always remember 'who' you're writing this for, if you miss them, doesn't matter what you write - it'll be too late

> I will certainly try and go more lighthearted for that sort of thing.

don't scare them - kids don't want nightmares, they want a funny story before bed

'Stuck' just makes me laugh so much that it was a favourite when I read it to my kids - I don't read to them anymore which is a shame - it suddenly stops and you don't realise it, so these stories need to be something they ask for again and again

> I have not heard of "stuck" I will have to check that one out!

It's on that link I posted - anything by Oliver Jeffers is awesome

Conversation breakdown

Breaking down the feedback from Andi and the conversation we had. Andi wanted to know the reason for the work and what age group it was aimed for? I explained the reason being I wanted to get into the narrative design line of work and was related to a module for my masters I also mentioned the age group of this project was tailored to children.

Feedback points –

- Watch your illustrations - in some places they may scare the kids - especially the rat and pig when it bites the rope

- I'd also probably change up the breeding farm angle, do something else as it's suddenly getting into big stuff like birds/bees and it will possibly go over their head.

- There's also a lot of anger in these exchanges - try and keep it light - some of it is a little dark for kids - so keep that in mind.

- watch repetition words - having Van in one sentence, then having it again in the second sentence is a no-no, it interrupts flow - the whole thing could do with a good edit to iron out the repeating phrases.

- remember to keep a flow going through it - if you stumble over the words, it's probably wrong - and if you are stumbling, then a kid will too.

- also, think about the age and words they'd use and make sure they are in the right context - for example, the dog in the van isn't encumbered - it's entangled (encumbered is to suggest it's carrying a heavyweight)

- also describing the words like the engine being rambunctious is a little beyond the age group - they may struggle - it also looks like you're injecting a word to appear smart - keep it simple and clear

- this is the kind of thing you need to aim for in both tone and text level:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bM1gJtnklAw

- also, try rhyming your phrases - kids love the way poems trip off the tongue - it engages them more when it's little rhymes...

Feedback from Jan Pałka

This was feedback from an unknown source, I put the playtesting out to lots of forums and I received a message from "Jan Palka and sent over the demo by email.

The feedback provided from Jan Palka-

"I like the narration and stylized language for the characters.

I like multiple choices, although some of them seem to be more 'cosmetic' addons rather than having a serious impact on the story. For example, the rat part where we can use his help to escape or just ignore him and run away as well. I don't know what is your objective here of course and what have you planned for the next chapters, but it would be interesting if some of the choices could have an impact on the next chapters, so for example, using a magnifying glass could cause some burns on the skin and that could cause some sort of a minor injury that will be inconvenient in the future.

Sometimes I had difficulty with the font, especially with the punctuation.

I have found two possible issues with the drawings."

Feedback from Miles

This was feedback from miles who I believe to be a student on the design course from the USW. Miles provided feedback on his playthrough.

Email message from Miles -

"Ok, just played through it and here's what I've got. I like everything that is happening, and I wouldn't remove a single event, however, the number of adjectives used for each thing slows down the pacing. For example, Rambunctious and Rumbling might be too much to simply describe the sound of an engine. Plus, it's a very jolly description, which might not be what you intend in this scene. I assume your target audience is children, and I think if that's the case they might get fatigued by the word count.

The art is great, the looseness of the strokes and the expressiveness of it all is fun and makes this really feel like a children's storybook experience.

The interaction of the player with the story is better than a lot of people do with this kind of thing, especially the section where the rat makes you memorize the meaning of squeaks. It was also good to see that the pig really would not help you out if you were hostile, that feels meaningful. I would suggest that if you get caught in the cellar and are sent back to the pig there could be new dialogue, currently, it all repeats as if this is your first meeting all over again.

Overall good stuff, I hope the rest of this project goes well for you."

Feedback from Blackajack

This was feedback from Blackajack (Discord name) who I believe to be a student on the design or art course from the USW.

Blackajack provided feedback of his playthroughs -

"Alright, so I played 3 endings. The only issue I encountered was:

When introduced to the rat, the image size is too big, and I can't see the text.

As for the story, I think it's very simple but effective and I love the characters, especially the rat.

I think my actions could be punished a little more, but also, I don't know whether there's an ending that accomplishes that. Sad endings need to be balanced with the happy ones.

Finally, some kind of path system that allows you to see a branch of your choices could allow you to quickly navigate the story. Understandably frustrating to make but would allow restarts/path exploration to be easier and more enticing."

ITERATION

Overview

The information provided from the gathered feedback; I made current changes and fix issues that were spotted. I will break down the changes made and what has been done, could be done for future changes and ones I thought were not relevant.

THE CHANGES THAT WERE MADE

When introduced to the rat, the image size is too big, and I can't see the text.

I fixed the issue and set the correct image size.

Finally, some kind of path system that allows you to see a branch of your choices could allow you to quickly navigate the story. Understandably frustrating to make but would allow restarts/path exploration to be easier and more enticing.

I implemented a back and forward system that can be used in the story to change the decision made.

THE CHANGES I PLAN TO MAKE

I have found two possible issues with the drawings.

These are cosmic and will require changing but now with time priorities, I will do these are a later date.
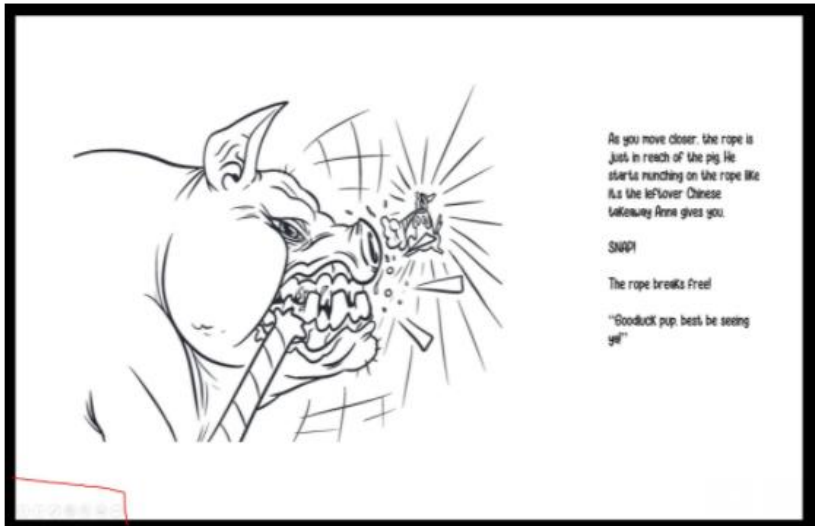

You make a break for the nearby door. The alarm was disabled!

You see an open door on the left and plough through it. The door leads out towards the road at the front of the house.

You are free!

You continue to run into the distance, grateful for the help from the rat. Your journey back home has only just begun.

End of Chapter 1

As you move closer, the rope is just in reach of the pig. He starts munching on the rope like its the leftover Chinese takeaway Anna gives you.

SNAP!

The rope breaks free!

"Goodluck pup, best be seeing ya!"

Rambunctious and Rumbling might be too much to simply describe the sound of an engine. Plus, it's a very jolly description, which might not be what you intend in this scene. I assume your target audience is children

describing the words like the engine being rambunctious is a little beyond the age group - they may struggle - it also looks like you're injecting a word to appear smart - keep it simple and clear

Editing will need to be done at some point, I will be looking over the narrative and focus on editing parts throughout the story.

however, the number of adjectives used for each thing slows down the pacing. . I assume your target audience is children, and I think if that's the case they might get fatigued by the word count.

This is again linked to editing which I need to emphasize.

I'd also probably change up the breeding farm angle, do something else as it's suddenly getting into big stuff like birds/bees and it will possibly go over their head.

That was a good point and something I need to change and think more about who I am marketing to.

watch repetition words - having Van in one sentence, then having it again in the second sentence is a no-no, it interrupts flow - the whole thing could do with a good edit to really iron out the repeating phrases. remember to keep a flow going through it - if you stumble over the words, it's probably wrong - and if you are stumbling, then a kid will too.

This is also, something important I need to look out for and keep in mind for future reference. I plan on doing a large edit which I can get more feedback on or even ask someone who works as an editor to edit the work.

PARTS DID NOT CHANGE

I think my actions could be punished a little more, but also, I don't know whether there's an ending that accomplishes that. Sad endings need to be balanced with the happy ones

As it's a story in chapters in chapter one I think the flow of pushing forward to the next chapter is more important personal, although with more playtesting and chapters I can see if this is true and might need changing at that point.

Sometimes I had difficulty with the font, especially with the punctuation.

Currently, that is only one case if I have more feedback from others and the data adds up this is something I will change.

I like multiple choices, although some of them seem to be more 'cosmetic' addons rather than having a serious impact on the story. For example, the rat part where we can use his help to escape or just ignore him and run away as well. I don't know what is your objective here of course and what have you planned for the next chapters, but it would be interesting if some of the choices could have an impact on the next chapters, so for example, using a magnifying glass could cause some burns on the skin and that could cause some sort of a minor injury that will be inconvenient in the future.

This will impact the story at a later stage other chapters, the changes will impact the story. The plan for the project - the kidnapers will see you escape meaning they will follow you sooner rather than later which will have an impact on your capture.

Watch your illustrations - in some places they may scare the kids - especially the rat and pig when it bites the rope.

also, try rhyming your phrases - kids love the way poems trip off the tongue - it engages them more when it's little rhymes...

There's also a lot of anger in these exchanges - try and keep it light - some of it is a little dark for kids - so keep that in mind.

I would agree if it was a child's book from a young age, but this was tailored to Children for a higher age around the age of 12. (I should have been more specific to the age.)

PUBLISHED

Once I did the edits based on the feedback I decided to package the project and release it on Itch.IO link can be found here - https://darkorigin486.itch.io/thelongestjourney

Having a product that is now published and playable to the audience I can now gather more feedback and construct chapter 2. I plan on working and developing further as either a main project or something to do as a side project and increase my skills in narrative design.

I set up a free download from the site and also donations which could help fund for further productions although I know realistically it won't help cover much and certainly will not fund a full-time dev position, It will give me confidence and extra support which goes a long way and certainly will help development in chapter 2.

END OF CHAPTER

Final thoughts

I am pleased with the progress made and learning a new tool for my arsenal in narrative design. I have learned a lot from this experience and using different programmes such as Twine, Storyformer, Branchtrack and I will be using some of the tools no doubt in future projects and will be looking to explore more narrative tools to see which I think is the right fit for myself.

The feedback on this project really helped me push myself and learn and think about the way I write, the pacing of storytelling and my target audience when writing. I also learned different tips along the way from the way sentences are structure and the flow of the narrative.

This project will really help me move forward and apply for narrative design roles in the game industry having work to show in my portfolio which was lacklustre, I can now show them a published and playable experience which will give me an edge for my future in the narrative design.