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CREATING A VISUAL STYLE FOR A COMPUTER GAME

Thesis
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Title
Creating a Visual Style for a Computer Game

Abstract

The subject of this thesis is to create a visual style for a new low-budget computer game. The goal is to develop a fitting look for the game that can be utilized in the later parts of creating the game and to follow the concept design phase of the game. The goal is to attempt to create an interesting and functional style that utilizes the illustrator's strengths and makes the game more compelling in its entirety. The process is followed and documented, and the tasks are solved in a way that is hopefully useful in solving similar problems in the future.

The beginning of the thesis is concerned with analyzing successful low-budget games and what makes them visually strong. This is an attempt to figure out ways to create a style that is strong in the same areas but with new and interesting solutions instead of copying the ones evaluated. Illustrations show off the desired style and in the end feedback was gathered and analyzed to figure out how to proceed with the project in the future. Although the creation of the game still continues, the thesis consists of the early concept design phases of the process and the problem solving and processes involved in it.

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Tekijä
Taneli Pohjola

Nimeke
Tietokonepelin visuaalisen tyylin kehitys

Tiivistelmä

Tämän opinnäytetyön aiheena on uuden pienibudjettisen pelin visuaalisen tyylin luomisprosessi. Tavoitteena on kehittää kyseiseen peliin sopiva ulkoasu jota voidaan hyödyntää pelin luonnin myöhäisemmissä vaiheissa ja seurata tyylin luonnin alkuvaiheita. Yritän luoda mielenkiintoisen ja käytännöllisen tyylin joka hyödyntää henkilökohtaisia vahvuuksiani ja tekee koko pelistä houkuttelevamman. Prosessin vaiheita seurataan ja sen aikana vastaan tuleville tehtäville pyritään luomaan ratkaisuja, jotka toivon mukaan ovat tehokkaita tapoja ratkaista vastaavanalaisia ongelmia myös tulevaisuudessa.

Aluksi tietoa kerätään tutkimalla menestyksekkäitä pienen budjetin pelejä ja analysoimalla niiden vahvuuksia visuaalisesta näkökulmasta. Samalla tavoitteena on löytää uusia tapoja, joilla pelistä voi luoda vahvan samoilla alueilla kuitenkaan kopioimatta tutkittavien pelien olemassaolevia ratkaisuja. Sitä seuraa kuvitusten luominen kyseistä peliä varten, ja loppujen lopuksi kerätään palautetta tehdyistä kuvituksista ja se analysoidaan. Kyseisen pelin luominen on edelleen jatkuva prosessi, mutta tämän opinnäytetyön tulos on kuvaus visuaalisen tyylin luomisen ensi askelista ja siihen liittyvistä prosesseista ja ongelmanratkaisusta.

Kieli englanti	Sivuja 39 Liitteet 2 Liitesivumäärä 14

Asiasanat
kuvitus, pelit, kehitys

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1   INTRODUCTION

"A stealth game about a gentleman thief set in London a few centuries back" is how Joni Lähdesluoma, a programmer and a game designer described a game he was working on a while back. He was looking for an artist for his game and I was looking for a subject for my thesis. The concept sounded extremely exciting to me both as a designer and a gamer, and soon after we started collaborating on creating a game.

My thesis will be about the preproduction phase of this project and how I went about the process. Erik Bethke defines preproduction quite simply as "figuring out what you are doing … before you do it" (2003, 26). The visual side of the preproduction is often times called concept design and often includes a large amount of art that is never even intended to make it to the general public or into the game. Instead it is used to communicate ideas between developers and find a common ground concerning design decisions. As a concept artist I will be figuring out the visual appearance of the game and the most important assets such as the main character. At the same time on the programming and game design side the most important features are being decided on by Joni.

The reason I chose this as my thesis subject was twofold: First, I have always been interested in what goes on behind the scenes when creating a game and especially the concept art portion of it. This project gave me a chance to delve deeper into the subject I already found interesting, meaning that the whole thesis process would be more pleasant than doing something I was only marginally interested in. Secondly, I think that having experience in several different fields of design makes looking for and starting new projects much easier, and since my experience in the field of illustration and game art has been mostly just a hobby, it was a pleasure to get to work on something more serious while utilizing the same skill set.

As we both have only a limited amount of experience in game production, it was clear from the beginning that this would be a challenging project. That is why we set

ourselves a two-part goal. Although the goal of the project itself was to create a working demo version of an interesting game, the goal of the process would be to learn by doing. That way even if our ambitious goal of having something to publish would not happen, we would not walk away from the experience empty handed.

2   KNOWLEDGE BASE

2.1   Framework

Computer games and their graphical styles are a part of a long-standing culture of games and visually representing the imaginary worlds they consist of. Everyone has an idea in their mind of what a king of spades looks like and what it means, and rolling two dice and them turning up those six little dots can have a huge emotional response. In today's pop culture a small, Italian plumber eating mushrooms does not always mean dinner and seeing a blue hedgehog creates associations with golden rings and incredible speed.

When working on games one has to be aware of the common associations the average consumer will most likely have. There are univeral rules of design such as bright red meaning danger and high contrast implying importance as well as things more closely connected to games like pressing the space bar meaning jump or the fact that a person with an exclamation mark over their head will almost always want something. Breaking these rules can be used as a tool, but will easily leave the player confused. At the same time following all of the old traditions can easily leave the experience forgettable and unoriginal.

The final gaming experience will be a combination of the realities of the game, the designer's personal experience and choices as well as the player's personal frame of reference. In Picture 1 the outmost circle is the environment in which the game is experienced and which affects the way it is seen, while the inner circles are the ones we

as creators can directly affect. Especially in today's global world where digital content is consumed all over the world it is difficult to predict the context in which the game will be played, which is why clarity of design and clear communication are of utmost importance. That is why the visual design of this project will be done in co-operation with the game designer, and feedback from members of the target group will be asked for.
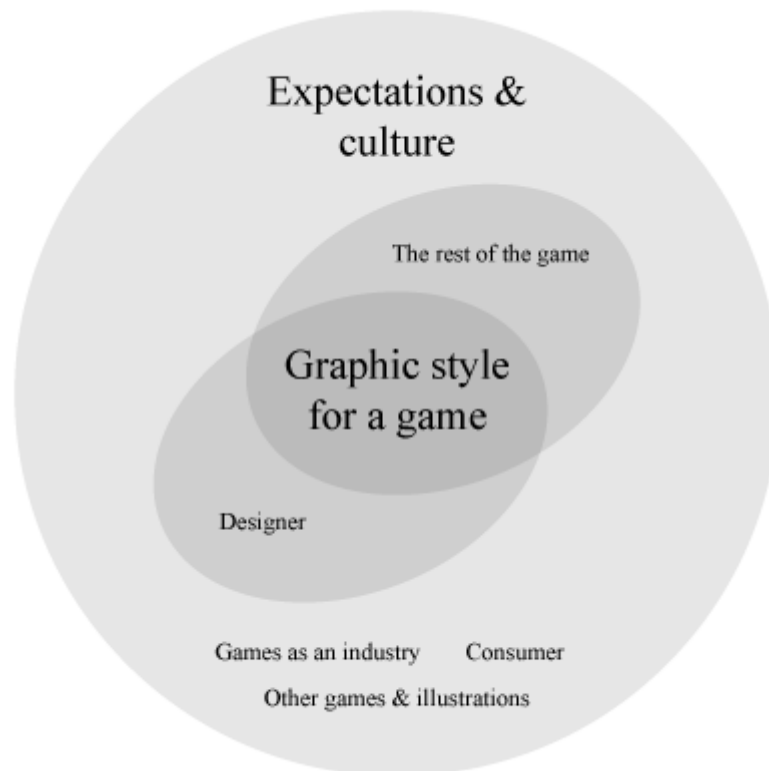
Picture 1. Visual framework.

2.2 Definition of terms

Before continuing any further some of the most important concepts and vocabulary used in the thesis will be clarified to keep the text as clear as possible. There will be some lingo used by the gaming community as well as some game production terms. I will be using the terms 2D and 3D to differentiate between different methods of producing imagery for a game. A game will be a 2D game if the visuals consists mostly of two-dimensional images, often also referred to as 'sprites'. Even if the game allows

movement on three different axes, it will be considered a 2D game if the graphics are two-dimensional. Street Fighter III and Super Mario Bros. are examples of 2D games. 3D will be used to refer to games with visuals mostly created with three-dimensional, polygon-based objects. An easy way to compare two and three-dimensional graphics is looking at the differences between the 2D Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike and it's 3D successor, Super Street Fighter IV, which can be seen in Picture 2.
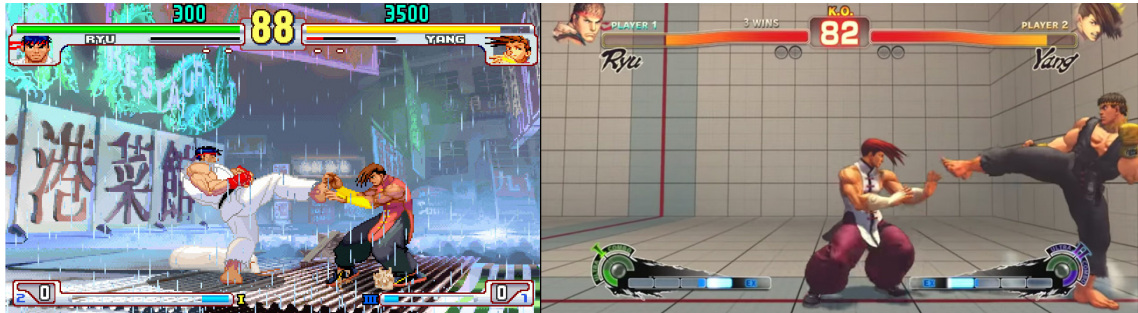
Picture 2. Comparing 2D and 3D.

Independent games are games that are distributed without the support of a publishing company such as Nintendo or Activision Blizzard and are instead created and marketed by a small team or even an individual person. They are commonly referred to as 'indie games', although the term has become a bit of an umbrella term used to refer to any games with budgets below the AAA games. AAA is a loose industry term used to imply that the game has huge production value, which in todays terms can mean hundreds of millions of euros (McLaughlin 2013). Indie games used to be funded by the creators of the game or traditional investors, but websites such as IndieGoGo and Kickstarter have made 'crowdfunding' a very popular method of funding development. Crowdfunding lets individuals invest small amounts of money into projects they find compelling. In exchange the developer promises to create the product and may add additional prices such as the product when it comes out, updates on how the project is progressing or anything else they wish to.

There are a variety of different terms used to quickly identify different genres of games. Most of the terms are quite self-explanatory, while some others might require a bit more explaining. Action games are like action movies, the core attraction is a lot of action. Sports games include sports, puzzle games require puzzle-solving and so on. On the more obscure side there are genres such as platformers, roleplaying games (RPG) and

stealth games. Platformers are games that usually have the player control one character around a difficult environment often times consisting of different platforms and obstructions the player has to overcome to reach the next point. A prime example of a platformer is the aforementioned Super Mario Bros. Roleplaying games usually include a variety of elements from other games, but have storytelling and character development as an important part of them. Anders Tychsen notes that RPGs "share a group of characteristics, which makes them identifiable from other types of games: storytelling with rules, control of fictional characters, a fictitious reality, usually the presence of a game master (or game engine), and at least one player" (Tychsen et al. 2006, 76). Games are considered stealth games when the gameplay consists largely of avoiding detection by the antagonists. Usually games are a mix of variety of different styles, but these terms are used to make describing them easier.

2.3   Project plan

It was clear from the beginning that we would not be aiming to create a full, working game. Instead we would try to make the demo version interesting and compelling enough show off the idea we had and learn about the process of making a working game. By lowering the goal we would be more likely to meet it, and if the product was good enough to keep developing, it would be a strong foundation to continue on. Also finding funding through investors or crowdfunding would be easier with a product to show off. Websites such as Kickstarter have popularized games funded by their future audience and made making small games a much more viable option. The current state of our project makes continuing it in such a way an unlikely thing to happen, but the viability of making a smaller version of the game still has its perks. As Bethke (2003, 71) notes in Game Development and Production, "Just like consumers of games, we do not want to have ten features shoddily executed. Instead we would rather see just three or four polished features that are shippable". A lot of emphasis will be placed on researching successful games and what makes them so, as well as trying to figure out ways to implement features that achieve similar results in a project with very limited resources. To achieve that a group of games that were made with a relatively small developement team but still did well were chosen and analyzed from the graphical standpoint. Of course even companies that are considered small in the gaming industry,

such as Klei that will be referenced later in the text, often times consist of tens of full-time employees and a budget that accounts for outsourcing work that they do not have expertise in. Nevertheless, the starting point was to learn from what we could and find simpler solutions in the areas we could not handle ourselves. That meant getting rid of expensive features such as fully animated cut-scenes, simplifying the looks to a point where a two person team could conceivably produce enough content to create a working test-version and cutting down the content and features to the bare minimum required to show off the idea of the game.

In the end of this design process feedback was gathered from young adults identifying hardcore gamers, our target group. A hardcore gamer is a term used by the gaming community to define a person who has gaming as one of their primary hobbies. This can mean spending a lot of time and/or money on games and related activities, and often times leads to proactively seeking new games to play. For a game with very limited visibility it is very beneficial to aim to please the few people that do see it, and in this case I think it would be a safe case to assume that the people looking for new games would be the ones to find it. After the feedback I will reflect on the entirety of the process and consider what is next.

3   GATHERING KNOWLEDGE

3.1   General idea

When planning this project, it was a bit of a struggle to find a good way to start gathering knowledge about it. Although there is a lot of literature about making games, the visual side of it was for a long time just something people who were good at drawing were asked to do. Sam Didier, one of the first artists in the now huge Blizzard Entertainment noted in a documentary about the company that he "saw an ad in a newspaper, it said 'Make art for video games.' and that was all it said. Really descriptive. I think a programmer wrote it" (Blizzard Entertainment 2011). The actual

design process aiming for an effective product seems to be becoming more and more important as the gaming industry is evolving, but a lot of it is still done behind closed doors and scientific literature about it is somewhat scarce.

Knowing the challenge of actually finding someone to tell me what to do, it felt like a natural way to instead utilize my experience in video games and try to learn from the actual products. The idea is to choose games that showcase traits in their visual design that would be beneficial to our project, and reverse engineer how they achieved it. Using similar production methods as a company that has experience in creating games similar to the one we are going for can cut down on the number of things one needs to learn from their mistakes, and implementing features and tricks that made other games better can be very beneficial. A very important part in this kind of learning process is to make a distinction between learning and stealing, and that is why the main goal is to see what was done well, and to find a way to do something that fulfills the same purpose without being a replica of the original solution.

The way I went about this research was to create a list of games that had attributes that would be both useful and achievable. After creating a list that seemed to cover most of the important aspects, I went on to analyze how the games worked as well as they did. For each game some or all of the following research methods were used. They included looking at in-game footage and related art, reading reviews and development documents as well as playing the games chosen. The main things searched for were how to create a game that would be visually pleasing, would communicate information intuitively as well as effectively and would have an art style that is simple yet unique.

In addition to studying successful games some time had to be used to study the setting of the game, which was a fictional world similar to 19th century London with some steampunk influence. The Oxford Dictionary defines steampunk as "A genre of science fiction that typically features steam-powered machinery rather than advanced technology". Fictional steampunk worlds often look quite Victorian but include a lot of steam powered machinery that did not exist at the time and possibly could not exist in the real world at all. Before beginning the ideation process, a small library of reference images about both post-industrial revolution England and steampunk was gathered.

While designing the game the references were used to keep the designs believable and to capture the general feel of those styles.
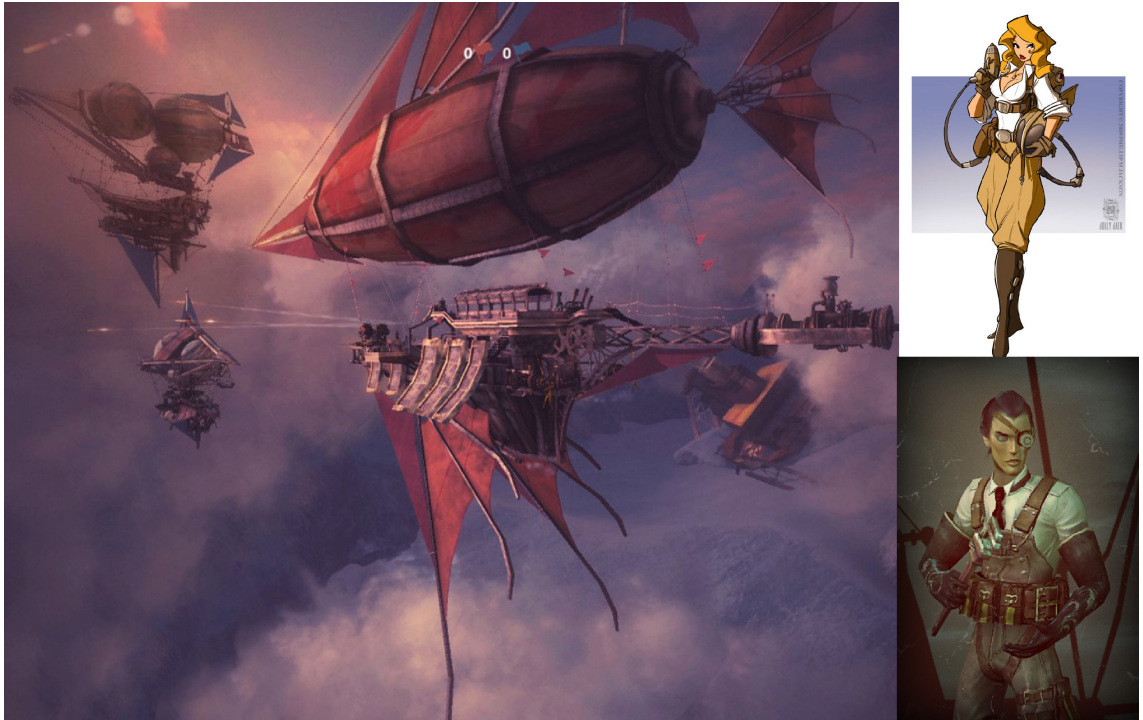
Picture 3. Examples of the steampunk style from the game Guns of Icarus and illustrator Phillip Jackson (2014).

3.2   Game Analysis

For the game analysis I went through a lot of games, and surely even more affected the design process unconsciously. Out of those games I chose five that expertly showcase some of the traits that would be very beneficial for this project to analyze in writing. These games are Mark of the Ninja, Gunpoint, Thomas Was Alone, Guns of Icarus and Skullgirls. They represent different kinds of graphic styles and gameplay but all have something that relates to what I want our game to look like. Examples of other games worth noting include Klei products Shank and Invisible Inc as well as the visually stunning Transistor and This War of Mine.

For myself **Mark of the Ninja** was an obvious starting point for analysis and inspiration. It belongs in the same genre as ours and has a beautiful 2D handmade look. It is also a prime example of how to indicate information on the screen intuitively and without disturbing the beautiful setting of the game. As PC Gamer writer Craig Owens (2012) notes in his review, ”There's a cartoon crispness to the graphics ... but Mark of

the Ninja's real triumph is the way it conveys information through its art". Prime examples are visual cues on how far different sounds such as running or a breaking lamp can be heard and clear distinction between areas where the player character can and cannot be seen. The animations are very well balanced between stylizing them to make them look impressive and keeping them realistic and quick enough to not interrupt the flow of the game.

The most important of Mark of the Ninja's virtues I was hoping to implement in some way was effective communication and cutting unnecessary clutter to the minimum while still aiming for a beautiful game. Examples of such design choices I made are using a minimalistic foreground and communicating objects worth attention or situational data through colors in an otherwise very monochrome game. I am also hoping to create backgrounds reminiscent of Mark of the Ninja's beautiful painterly approach that looks gorgeous but does not take away from the simpler middle ground where the actual gameplay takes place.

When I contacted Klei, the company that made Mark of the Ninja for an interview, they pointed me towards some of their development documents. Although getting a full interview would have been nice, the documents were incredibly helpful in the process of creating something I had never created before. Below are some of the images that I found especially useful when trying to figure out a way to approach designing different parts of the game.

Especially helpful was to see that even games that are used as an example of a gorgeous game started off as quite simple to allow for testing, and the final outlook could be polished later on to fit the feeling the game was finally going for. Also seeing how they created characters iteratively instead of just making a lot of completely different versions and hoping one of them would hit the mark resonated with my design philosophy.

Picture 4. Comparison of Mark of the Ninja in development and the final product.

Picture 5. The development of the main character in Mark of the Ninja.

Gunpoint is a small indie game with a very specific viewpoint that we felt we could use to our advantage. Although Mark of the Ninja is a beautiful game with a very interesting look, the way the camera best serves it is by moving horizontally through long levels. However, when moving inside buildings that are often times several stories tall, it could become difficult to track one's movement. That is why a camera viewpoint similar to the one used in Gunpoint which is further away and allows for more information to fit on the screen would serve the purpose of our game better.

The levels in Gunpoint are created by combining premade parts, allowing for easy level-creation. It is not a new concept to gaming, since it has been done from the very beginning of game-making in games such as Mario Bros., but the way of layering a level of simple visual details on top of very basic building blocks brings Gunpoint to life in a way we are hoping to be able to imitate in some way.

We took some inspiration regarding guard AI when it comes to lights turning off or other suspicious activity, leading to a need of some sort way to show broken lights, light switches and other points of interest. This fit perfectly with the idea of implying the importance of certain objects with color.

Picture 6. Gunpoint level design.

Thomas Was Alone is an indie game that in my opinion embodies the strengths of creating a low budget game. It is very different in a brave way and embraces the fact that it cannot compete with AAA games in terms of realism. Instead all of the characters are rectangles in different colors and their personalities are shown in subtle mechanical differences and with the story telling of a compelling narrator. The short rectangle called Chris is insecure about the fact he cannot jump as high as the others but later on falls in love with a female rectangle called Laura whose ability is to help others jump higher to cross obstacles. Rationally empathizing with rectangles sounds odd, but the brilliant storytelling and interesting graphic design of the game make the mute single-colored blocks feel like real people. The part that Thomas Was Alone and many other indie games do very well and I am hoping to imitate is creating a style and story that is unique and compelling in its own way instead of trying to compete with high-budget productions.

Picture 7. The visual style of Thomas Was Alone.

Wings of Icarus is a game set in a very traditional steampunk universe where everything is steam powered and different cogs and bronze parts are sticking out of everywhere. I did not want to go quite as far into fictional worlds as Wings of Icarus does, but it is a very good example of how steampunk looks when done well. The fact that it has 3D graphics makes the visual style of the game quite different from what I am going for, but the general feel and exaggerated proportions are something that is easy to learn from. Also, the menu screens in the game are effective and add to the atmosphere of the game which is something I plan to follow once the menus are created.

Skullgirls is a 2D fighting game with hand drawn animations created very similarly to Mark of the Ninja, and since they are both beautiful games with slightly different styles I found them both very helpful. Studying the very cartoonish and exaggerated art of the game was helpful in trying to figure out what parts to simplify and what to keep more detailed, and the fluidity of the animation is definitely something to strive for. Much like in Wings of Icarus, the menus in Skullgirls create a wonderful atmosphere with glamorous Art Deco look that really helps date the world in which the game exists in. Although Art Deco does not exactly fit the Victorian era, I found it so appealing I am definitely looking for a chance to add subtle nods towards the style in the areas of the game where luxury and wealth is present.
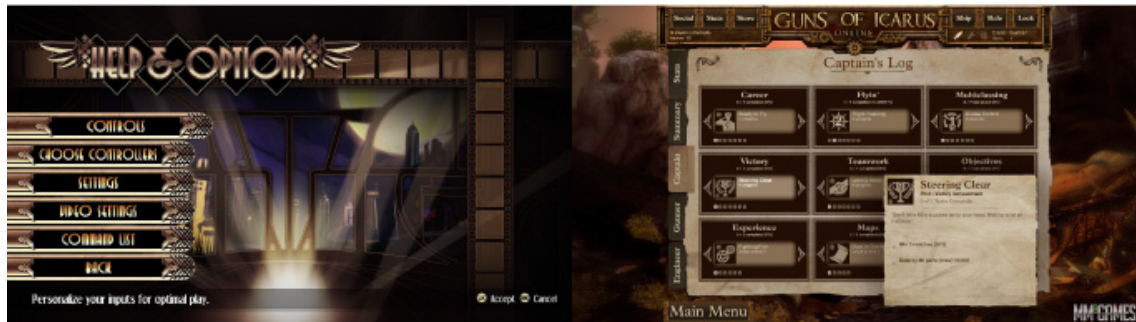
Picture 8. Menu screens of Skullgirls and Guns of Icarus.

3.3   Conclusions on the game-analysis

When analyzing different games I found out that the most enjoyable things were polished styles that stood out from the norm. The games had a strong sense of what they wanted to be and a clear way of communicating it. To follow that I tried to create some specific rules for the design of the world with a flat black foreground as well as characters that were much more cartoonlike than what I am used to creating. The color scheme of the world was also unusual, mostly using a limited amount of hues and dark values with carefully selected bright, high saturation parts to communicate importance. The latter of those rules was in hopes to create a distinct visual look, which was another thing I admired in the games studied. Limiting one's color pallette heavily turned out to be a creative challenge and it was an interesting to attempt creating impactful scenes within these boundaries.

All in all studying the different games and especially their production phases was incredibly helpful for the project. Some of the examples above were found only later in the process when trying to figure out a specific problem but ended up showing me ways I could have solved earlier tasks better too.

4   DESIGN PROCESS

4.1   Original idea

In the very beginning the idea for the game came from our game designer, Joni, and it was very simple but interesting. We would create a game where the player gets to be a gentleman thief, a masterful scoundrel who takes from the rich and gives to himself. The setting would be somewhere resembling post-industrial revolution London with some steampunk elements. Immediately I started making connections in my mind to characters like the Pink Panther or the crew from Ocean's Eleven pulling off delicate jewel heists. The original concept allows for a lot of room for creativity, so now it was just a question of if we could utilize all of that room. Steampunk allows for bringing almost any modern equipment into the 1800s game world, allowing for interesting interactions of old and new, while the older look of the world should be an interesting one to play around in.

Although the setting of the story was interesting, there were more important design choices to make before going forward with the design. For a game to work, it has to have working mechanics and an underlying system that allows those mechanics to work. As described earlier in the game analysis, we decided to figure out a way to create the levels from a set amount of building blocks that would be easy to combine. That way level-creation could be done easily by hand and even procedurally assuming Joni could create a working level-creating algorithm. Everything would also have to work with the characters and their animations, and to make that side of things easier to execute all animation was decided to be done by me creating hand-drawn sprites that Joni were to animate inside the game engine. For all of this to work together, the style of the illustrations would need to be simple and compatible enough to work together almost regardless of how they were combined.

The third important defining factor was that from the beginning we wanted to create a style that stood out. Of course my personal illustration abilities and preferences would weigh in on the process, but in addition we wanted to have something specific to our

game. After some consideration and discussion, we decided to try a style of black-and-white illustration with single objects colored with strong colors to create a highlights. Neither of us had seen it utilized in games before even though photographers and movies such as Sin City had used such style to great effect in the past. After these defining design decisions, some of which would be altered along the way, it was time to begin the actual design process.

4.2   My personal style

Being the only person in charge of creating the visuals for the whole project, I had to take some time to analyze my style of illustration and the strengths and weaknesses of it. In previous game-related projects of mine I was in charge of creating small, individual illustrations or designs such as vehicles or buildings, so having a consistent style was not the main concern. I feel the same way about most smaller projects; it is more beneficial to choose a style that fits the subject matter rather than hold on to a specific style and try to force a design that works with it. However, now the style needed to be something I would be able to stick to for a long time and it needed to be able to serve all the possible needs the game would have for it. Such needs include being consistent and accommodating the gameplay. This rigidness of expression came as a surprisingly big challenge since I was very used to varying the work methods and styles in the past.
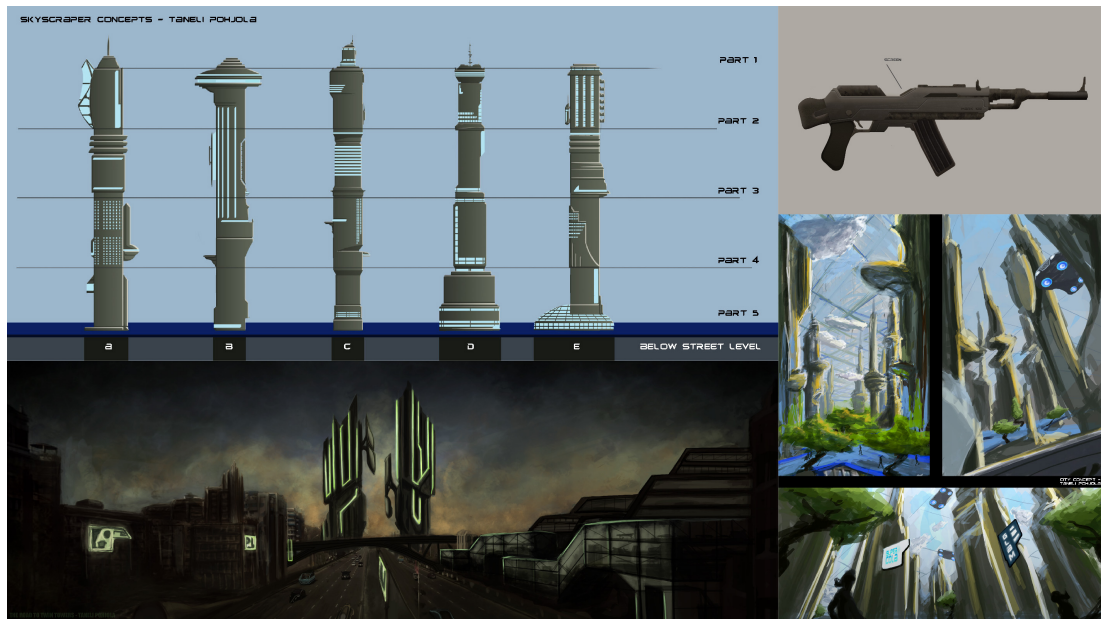
Picture 9. Examples of different styles I used within an earlier project where the look of the designs did not need to be consistent.

Although I enjoy trying out different styles, I have found that in the past I have been mostly drawn towards digital painting and so-called 'hard surface' design, meaning creating sceneries or lifeless objects over people or other creatures. Often times if characters show up in illustrations I do for my own entertainment, they are there to serve a compositional or narrative purpose instead of being there for their own sake. I knew that could pose a threat in a project where people were the focal point, but I decided to look at it as a chance to grow and try something new. Another consistent theme I noticed was that most of my work aimed to resemble a somewhat realistic, although a bit stylized version of the real world. However, to be able to create enough content in the allotted time I knew I would have to simplify the look I was going for, pushing me again a bit further away from my comfort zone.

Picture 10. Examples of realistic and stylized ways of portraying the steampunk aesthetic by illustrators Alex Broeckel (2015) and Viet-My Bui (2015).

Although the project was very quickly becoming a very challenging test of my ability to adapt, I was hopeful going in since I had been studying and following a variety of different artists and games that used styles similar to the one I was hoping to achieve during this project. As an additional plus, the color scheme that I chose fits my style well since I am used to working with generally dark images with low saturation, using attention colors to draw the viewer's eye to important focal points. Picture 11 shows some examples of earlier work of mine that I used to analyze my style and its attributes.

Picture 11. Some of my earlier works.

4.3 Deciding what to design and when

An important part of the process was also prioritizing the creation of certain assets. Clearly the general style needed to be decided on first to have a coherent look, so that was where the design process begun. We ended up using two different appearances for the actual in-game objects and the occasional illustrations that would take the story forward. The in-game content needed to be quite simple and rigid to make the game work, while the illustrations gave a bit more leeway for artistic freedom. To figure out the in-engine look we decided to create a small and simple mock-up of a game level. The other important piece to the puzzle was the main character since he would be on the screen most of the time, so deciding on his look was also a priority. As far as levels come, they are the basic building blocks of the game as an experience. "Some games have levels, others have missions, and quite a few have neither. Whatever game you have, it can almost always be broken down into a series of smaller challenges, puzzles, levels, or missions for the player to complete" (Bethke 2003, 40). Because of the importance of levels at least one was required to have a rough idea of the look as well as being able to test the game. As for the illustrations, I created some example pieces of how the style would look. The goal was to hone in on the desired look so it would be simple to create more of the same style once we knew what the game would require

content-wise. This was to make sure that the game would be a working package before trying to add a story or other complicating features. After creating a solid foundation the more specific assets can be created as the need arises.

4.4   The general visual style

The setting of the game was already decided on before the concept design phase because of the story of the game. The game would have an older 19th century feel to it with steampunk elements to be used to both create a more diverse visual look as well as justify game mechanics that would be impossible in a historically accurate depiction of the Victorian Era. However, knowing the setting was only half the battle since the actual visual look was still undecided. To be able to create a somewhat accurate depiction of the 1800s I searched for imagery of those times and tried to emulate a similar feel for the architecture and the world in general. In addition to trying to keep the shapes similar, I also figured that even though the world was not greyscale back then, making the color schemes of the game similar to the photos would help sell the feeling of past. After having a rough idea of how the world looked before, I started working while referencing photographs relating to the subject matter at hand while adding my personal touch and some steampunk elements.

Picture 12. Images of 19th century Europe. Photos shared by Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (2010), LEUSD (2013), Old UK Photos (2014) and Visit Sacadanga (2012).

As far as the matter of realism was concerned, the look of the game was going to be far from it from the very beginning. As noted in the research part, a strength of many indie games is that they can take a risk with a personal look that is different from the norms. In addition to that, creating simplified assets is much quicker and made the work load much easier to handle. As Carl Therrien notes in Visual Design in Video Games about the difference of movies and video games,

> **"The case of video games is clearly more complex; for all the interactivity offered by the medium, games can't claim superiority in terms of strict visual realism" (Therrien 2008, 244).**

The exact visual look of the game is still somewhat open since it can and will most likely change as the game develops, but it is clear that it will not be too complicated to make sure the assets are possible to create in the first place.

4.5   Main character

Creating the general look of the main character was one of the first things I started working on since he would be on the screen almost all of the time. That is why he needed to stand out, but also work well within the game world. Designing other characters could be then based on his appearance while making them notably different in some way. By definition the gentleman thief from the 1800s needed to look gentlemanlike, and there is a variety of older fashion that worked excellent to portray that. Now the goal was to create a character that was inspired by those historical gentlemen while still being stylized and different enough to work as the game's protagonist.

Picture 13. Reference images for the main character of two anonymous late 1800's gentlemen shared by Laurent Letadic (2013) and Victorian Gentlemen (2014) as well as Charlie Chaplin from the 1915 movie The Tramp.

The first thing to make the character easy to identify on the screen was to make their silhouette recognizable. The character art guidelines for the popular Dota 2 note in the very beginning that the characters should have a silhouette that is recognizable, shows the character's orientation and reinforces its defining attributes (Valve 2013, 2). Giving the character defining facial features such as the large moustache and an interesting hat were simple ways to create both detail and value variation as well as defining the silhouette.

After these obvious tricks it was the next step to try and find proportions and a posture that would help. In keeping with the idea of a masterful and quietly sneaking thief, the character was given a tall and thin build almost to a comical proportion. It would also create contrast between the guards who could be made very muscular and intimidating, underlining the need to stay hidden and go around them. In the same way the rich victims of the thief could be pudgy and short, implying harmlessness and high standards of living. By creating this contrast in shape the player can differentiate characters simply by glancing at them.
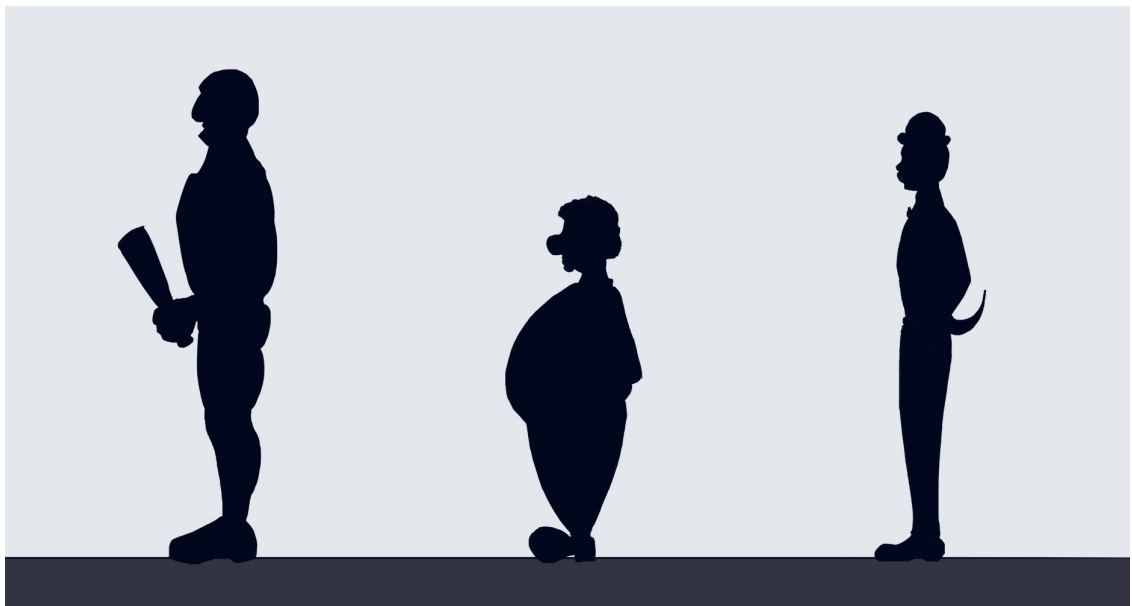
Picture 14. Character silhouettes.

Once the defining features of the character were defined, it was time to figure out the final look. Several different versions were tried, most of them too generic or similar to each other to ever leave the sketching paper. What changed mostly was the little details. Should he wear a cravat or a bowtie? When on a mission, is a mask necessary? Would the most fitting clothing be a tuxedo, suit or a vest? The gentleman thief should not be a young man, but should he have grey hair? At the same time questions of additional equipment arose; should the thief have a toolkit or maybe a weapon? As a general rule too much clutter would make the character look clumsy, but adding a walking stick might work nicely both to communicate the feel of the character and act as a tool or a weapon if needed. Eventually it was decided that the main character would follow the

gaming trope of just pulling everything he needs from nowhere. Picture 15 shows some examples of the design process of the main character.

Picture 15. Main character development.
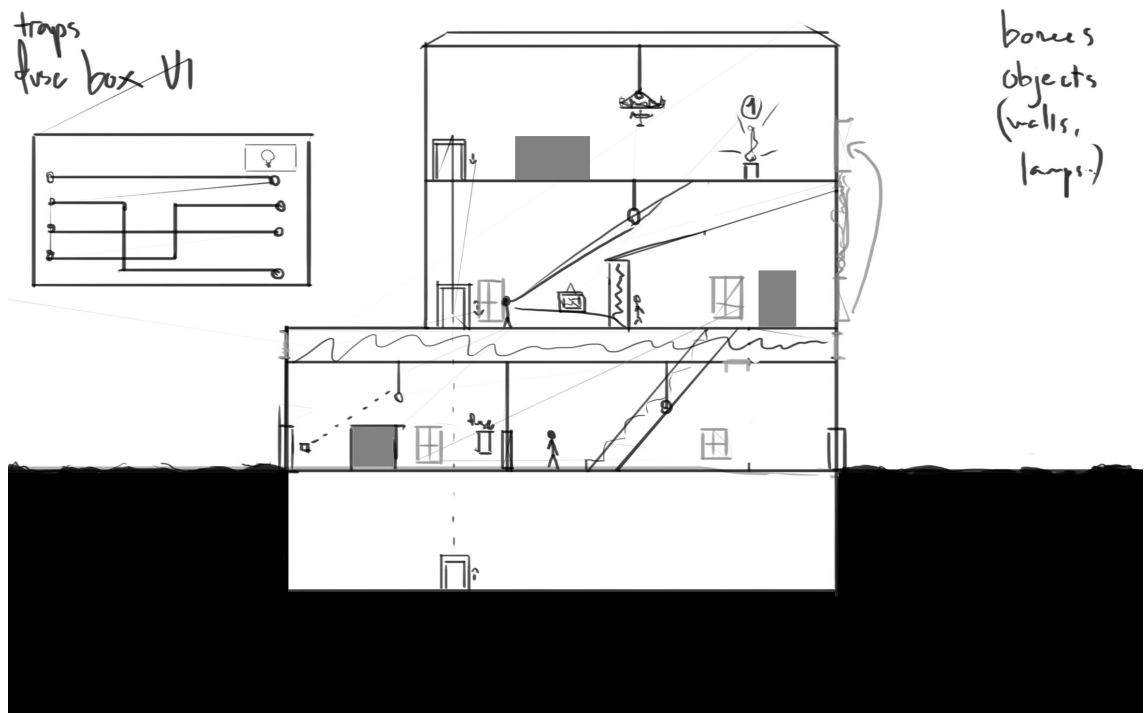
4.6   Test level design

When thinking of level design in any game the foundations for it must be in the game mechanic. Super Mario has deathly pits stopping the player from walking forward so that he has to jump over them. Shooting games have objects the player can take cover behind, and roleplaying games have other characters the player can interact with. For a 2D side scroller like our game the first thing to figure out was how the player would move in the game. Would there be movement on the third axis towards and away from the camera? The third dimension would allow for more options in designing the levels, but it could also make the game worse by complicating the movement without bringing enough additional value. The third dimension also brings with it the visual issue of communicating depth in a game that is essentially two-dimensional. After some thoughts about having three 'tracks' the player could move on, we decided to rather go on without the z-axis. The decision would bring with it a distinct set of challenges such as how to handle passing characters and objects, but that was something we felt more confident in tackling.

Picture 16. Early level design concepts.

After drawing some levels just to discuss the look of the game, we realized I could not really make a believable test look for the game without knowing the mechanics required in it. To remedy this, we sat down and started creating the first map example. Joni would describe the objects and mechanics we would need to see and test, and at the same time I drew a rough mock-up of a level that would be just big enough to fit all of the necessary things. After this mock-up it was easy to go forward and start creating building blocks to create that level from, and then assemble it. Apart from the background everything could be built from distinct parts and so bigger levels that have the same base mechanics could be easily built.

Picture 17. Mock-up level created in the meeting with Joni to be used as the base for the test level design.

Picture 18. Current test level design.

4.7   Illustrations

In addition to in-game objects game projects often utilize illustrations which have the sole purpose of communicating an idea without any in-game use. These paintings are what many people think of first when they think of concept art. Lately a lot of games such as Endless Legend and Skullgirls have begun utilizing those illustrations instead of animated clips for cutscenes to lower the production costs or create a certain aesthetic. Those still images can be manipulated a bit by moving certain layers to create an illusion of actual animation while keeping the production very simple.

Early in the planning of the project we decided that we would want to follow a similar path and create some concept art that could double as both an in-game storytelling device as well as to sell a point in the production phase. These images could be used to get a grasp of how the world would look, show the personality of the main character as well as just work as something pleasing to show people who are interested in the project. Thus far the subject matters have been quite generic since the story has not been decided on, but the image below shows the general style of illustration I am going for in

the cut scenes. An image like this could also be used as the background for menu screens with the menu bars on the left.

Picture 19. Cityscape illustration.

5   FEEDBACK

To gain a better understanding of how to develop the project onward I created a small, qualitative survey of the work done and asked people that belong in our target group to answer it. The target group is hardcore gamers in their twenties, and for this survey hardcore gamers were defined as people who themselves identify as one. The questionnaire consisted of some pictures and open-ended questions, and was answered by nine people. Although at the beginning nine people did not seem like many, I found that it was easy to find shared trends among the answers, which was exactly what I was looking for. The questionnaire and the answers can be found in Appendix 1. When giving out the questionnaire I specified that it is not important to answer all the questions, but instead give out honest opinions on whatever the person answering thought was important. This led to a lot of different kinds of feedback and opinions that were quite eye-opening.

Regarding the development of the main character in Picture 15, the majority preferred pictures from early on in the development, and especially the second one from the left. The later versions were considered to look too friendly, helpless or lack personality. The most popular character was perceived as confident, interesting and to have a look that stood out. The only critique was that he seemed "too fiendish" and lacked the detail of the later versions. The popularity of number two came to me as quite a surprise since I personally had pretty much written the character off as just an early version leading to something better, but for future development I will have to revisit at least the positive sides of the character.

As far as the test level, which can be seen in Picture 18, was considered, the feedback was quite simple. The colors were perceived as pleasing but a bit too simple and lacking in contrast. All the comments on the area underground were negative, as it was seen to be confusing, uninteresting and to not fit in with the rest of the image, so it would need to be redesigned or removed. A general note was that some wanted the level to have more steampunk elements. As a positive side the picture already created some mental images such as "a steampunk manor house would be perfect for this, the home of some lord or baron who entertains guests, has servants quarters, ballrooms etc.". The level was also considered to be a bit too small, which was understandable since it was originally created to be just large enough to fit all of the base game mechanics we wanted to test.

As far as character design apart from the main character was considered, the questionnaire involved a few pictures of alternative designs (Picture 24) and silhouettes to check if the shapes were strong enough to differentiate between. In the answers the images communicated quite accurately what I wanted them to communicate, although there were no strong favorites among the different options. This can mean that either they are all usable or all not worth including in the game, which is a problem with the questionnaire which could have been avoided with wording the questions better.

The questionnaire also included two illustrations which were the most liked of the images in the questionnaire, which is understandable since they are also the ones that are supposed to be showcased while the rest are just development material for the game. The most commented parts were the color schemes, the foggy atmosphere and small

details like the chimneys and the blimp in the sky for the image of the city. However, some of the feedback asked for more steampunk elements and suggested some fixes to the image of the car regarding to the details and realism of it.

In general the feedback was quite positive and most of the critiques were very useful and constructive. The lack of definite favorites or consensus among the answers was somewhat confusing in the beginning, but after some analysis the conclusion was that it just means the visuals need to be developed further. The feedback can be utilized to keep the positive sides people like and get rid of the cons until excellent designs can be achieved. Some of the positivity of the feedback can also most likely be attributed to the fact that all of the people who gave me feedback were complete strangers, and for future info gathering it would be interesting to try and find a completely impartial test group. However, I do think that the criticism in the feedback is still valid and valuable and I will keep it in mind when continuing to develop the project.

6   CONCLUSION

6.1   What I learned

In the beginning of this project it seemed like a very confusing, unknown mess of work, unexpected complications and learning. Now that I have gotten started, it feels very much the same way. The important difference is that now I have an angle in which to start working on the unknown, and it feels much less intimidating to work towards something instead of just flailing around, hoping for the best. I feel like the biggest thing that I had to learn was about time management and setting reasonable short term goals. As a person who is used to working with very short deadlines, having an open-ended project caused a lot of time to be lost. It is difficult to get moving when one is used to being motivated by an achievable goal very close in the future and suddenly the goal is just this esoteric idea of a cool project being finished. However, after spending a lot of time doing nothing or getting distracted by other work I started giving myself short deadlines for smaller parts of the project to force results out of my work. Having

the whole project ready and thesis written somewhere in the future was easy to blow off, but having to have ten sketches by the end of the day or a certain part of the thesis written by the end of the week caused a very helpful feeling of immediacy. By creating this kind of familiar environment the actual project started moving forward a lot faster, and I am sure I will use similar methods in the future to solve bigger problems.

As far as the research part of the thesis is concerned, I did not find it overly challenging. However, it took a while to figure out a way to find relevant results instead of just getting stuck with interesting information, and there were some positive surprises along the way. To my surprise I noticed that people such as authors of scientific papers or game companies were happy to help with information if I just contacted them, and this kind of social research led to relevant information much faster than just randomly going through libraries and search engines in the hunt for search words.

6.2 Future of the project

Now that the preproduction is starting to be at its final phases, the future will mean starting to work with actual assets going into the game. Once the game engine is at a point that it can be started to be used we will get to see the parts of the game become alive and see how they work in that context. I have already started creating sprites for the actual animation of the game, which in the end was decided to be done in within the game engine Unity. There will be things such as the menu screens and the user interface for the game to be worked on, as well as a lot of in-game content such as missions, visual assets and characters to be created. However, with an okay idea of what we want the game to look like we can start putting the parts in place. Once the game starts being in a shape that it can be tested and showed to other people, it will be time for more feedback, and in case the product ends up being good, finding funding.

In the past the main way of creating games was paying for them out of one's own pocket or finding a publisher that would fund and market the project. However, in the past few years crowdfunding has created a new way of funding projects that might not be attractive to traditional investors. Crowdfunding is on the rise, and it can be clearly seen from the statistics published by a popular crowd funding website Kickstarter. The

amount of money pledged towards projects in Kickstarter has risen from 27 million dollars in 2010 to 529 million in 2014. Out of that 529 million, 89 million went into games last year, making games the third most backed category after technology and design. (Kickstarter 2015.) Of course this does not mean that crowdfunding a game is an easy way of funding a project, but instead " 'the *last* step, not the first one.' Kickstarter is not a way for you to attract attention to your project. It is a way to 'organize and activate [the people interested in your project]' " (Pi 2015). It is still worth keeping in mind that if the project turns out to be something people are interested in, it could be possible to continue the production with funding from a website like Kickstarter.

6.3   Final thoughts

My thesis was a long process that had its ups and downs, but now that it is pretty much done, I am quite happy with the way everything turned out. It could have been faster and I can see many things I could have done better, but I am taking that as a mark of progress. Now that I have seen how things can go wrong, I will be more prepared to avoid the same mistakes again, and improving work is much easier once one has got a little time between creating it and analyzing it. I am not too confident in the project going that far in the end, but it has been an interesting learning experience, and will most likely continue being so. Also now that I have some experience in the field, I can imagine being a part of another project of similar needs in the future and being able to contribute a lot more than I could have before.

I feel like with every new project a beginner such as myself takes on, it becomes a lot easier to start a new one, and the more work one does it gets easier to apply for a job or a project and actually expect to be hired. Right now I am quite tired of drawing top hats and moustaches, but I think that in my next interview with a potential client, the list of my previous projects will most likely include working as the concept artist for a game project. Even though I would love to see our game get somewhere further than where it is right now, I think that feeling of actually having done something interesting is reward enough in itself.

6.4.   Finished Illustrations
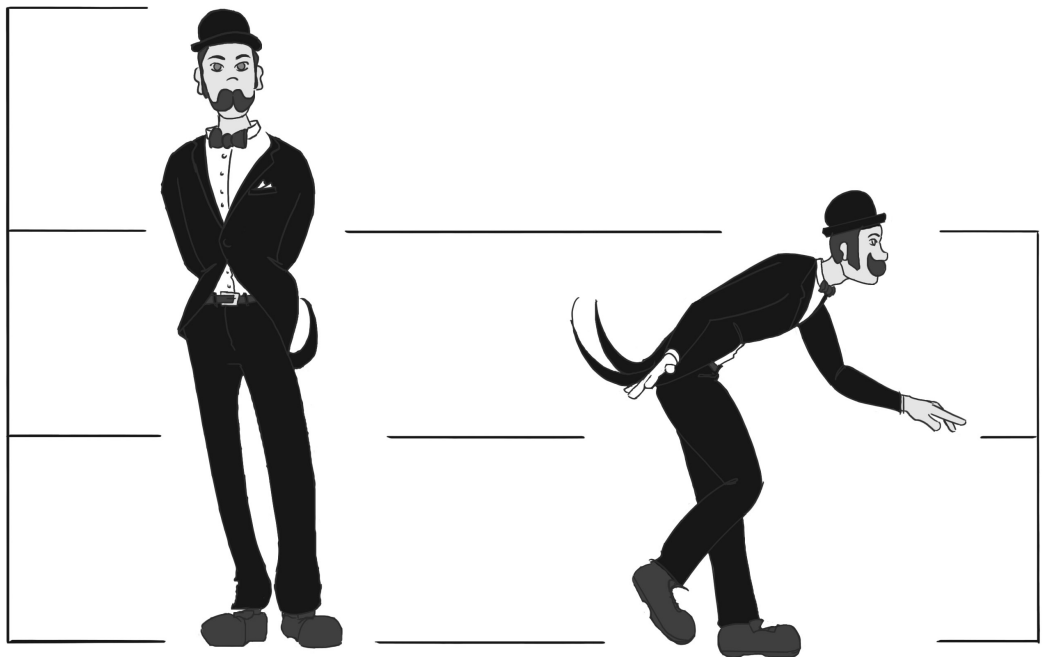
Picture 20. Current main character design.

Picture 21. Cityscape illustration.

Picture 22. Vehicle illustration.

Picture 23. Test level design.

Picture 24. Side character designs.

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Feedback questionnaire

Critique form

I am creating the graphics for a 2D stealth platformer that is designed to be played on a computer. It is set in steampunk inspired world similar to Victorian England where you play a gentleman thief. Here are some concept art from the project I would like some critique on.

If you can, getting some comments on each page would be helpful, as well as the entirety of the project.
The answers can be as long or short as you want, and you can leave parts empty if you are unable to answer them.
Some pages will have spesific questions which are in addition to the open feedback.

The feedback can be anything, but here are some possible questions to help with the process:

What could be improved and how?

What is good and why?

What does the image remind you of?

Does the image spark interest in you?

Would you be interested in a game with an aesthetic similar to this?

If yes, why? If not, how could it become so?

The feedback can be sent back to me at taneli.pohjola@gmail.com. It can be a Word-file or you can just write your answers in the e-mail.
When answering the questions, please specify each page by their number or title so I can easily figure out what the feedback is about.

1. Main Character

Here are different versions of the main character,
going from older to newer during the design process.

Which one is your favourite? Why? If you could combine or change characteristics from different
designs, how would you make them better?

2. Character Silhouettes

Are the different silhouettes recognizable?

What kind of character do they look like?

How would you interact with them as a player?

3. Test level design

4. Side characters

Which of the characters seems the most interesting?

Which one is the least interesting?

Why?

5. Illustration

6. Illustration

Questionnaire answers.

Person 1.

1. Main character

I like the third iteration the most. In my mind a gentleman thief is either a very charming, slick and relatively young guy or a an older, wrinkled, reliable and gentle looking grandpa type of figure.

2. Character silhouettes

The first guy looks like a butcher or a baker. I would most likely try to buy food off that guy. Second one looks like the guy who is employing you. I would hope he could hook me up with a gig. The third one look like the main character, I don't trust him.

3. Test level design.

Not much to comment here. It looks like a bunch of rooms with no explanation of possible player interactions. I'm surprised the building doesn't collapse under it's own weight tho, the what I think is a vent going between the floors seems like a very odd decision from the engineers.

4. Side characters

Most interesting: The old man. He looks like he's so eager to tell you a story that he's willing to shoot the roof to get your attention. He knows his shit and doesn't care what you think.

Least interesting: The tinkerer. Looks pretty standard engineer chick.

Honorable mention: diversity

5. Illustrations

Illustration 1: The area looks kinda sketchy. I feel like I'm entering a brothel and the guy is a pimp. Illustration 2: It looks like a car I would like to own but not to drive. The small windows make the car look massive and it doesn't look like the front tires have enough space to properly turn. I don't think the car would handle very well. I would buy it regardless as it looks awesome.

Person 2.

1. Main character

First one looks like monopoly man, second one looks too fiendish, third one looks too gay, last one looks like a video game character and I favor it over the others. I like the relaxed yet still stylish attitude of his. He looks like the guy, who have fallen to the ways of thieving, but will still do the right thing in the end.

2. Character Silhouettes

Yes, the different silhouettes are recognizable.
The first character looks like the guy you will run into in a dark alley and he will kick your ass and take your wallet... and a few teeth. I'd probably try to outsmart him, since he looks like a guy who can take a beating.

The guy in the middle looks like a nice chubby fellow who acts nice and is the "good" guy before he stabs you in the belly... 20 times with a evil grin in his face. I'd probably try to knock this guy out.

The last one is probably the main character. He looks nice, dresses nice and looks like a character you can relate to. Although he probably steals your watch while shaking your hand with a smile on his face.

3. Test level design

Current state of level design looks too dull. I think the artist could make more use of different shades of grey and add more stuff to the level. Maybe some furniture? Make the lights look different than just plain light bulbs. And even if the game is made in greyish style, everything doesnt have to look like metal. But since its a test level picture that I'm staring at, I wont judge the whole game based on this one.

4. Side characters

The most interesting:
I'd say the Tinkerer looks the most interesting character out of those side characters. She looks like a stubborn mechanic, who doesn't approve everything you do, but will still help you out since you are her friend and you have saved her life in the past.

The least interesting:
The sailor looks like the least interesting character. Or maybe not the least interesting, but I can't figure out how could she fit in to the thief theme of this game.
The old man looks kinda dull. I don't know why, but he just does. Clearly needs remodeling. Maybe it's the cowboy theme that bothers me.

Rest of the side characters:
They look pretty typical. There's the rich Collector woman, who uses only the finest clothes and uses always high heels. Will probably betray you at some point of the game.
Then there's The Muscle. A huge woman who could kick your ass at any given time. I think she fits the role of the muscle well. Except I'm terrified of what lays under that

skirt of hers.

And the last one is the Smuggler. Cute looking redhead, who should compete with the main character in the game. She looks like a character who will also create some sexual tension during the game.

5. Illustration 1

I like the background. It looks super awesome and fits perfectly to the theme. Especially the foggy weather fits the picture well. And I like the idea of blimps in this game. The main character looks... meh... too womanly in this one. He needs more characteristics from the cool looking guy in the main character section. And the costume should definitely be black, not blue.

6. Illustration 2

Yet again, there's the foggy atmosphere. World looks super secretive. The car in the front has to belong to either the main character or the main villain, if there is one

Person 3.

1. Main character

- 2. vasemmalta. Kaksi oikean puoleista hieman liian kiltin näköisiä. Tarpeeksi herrasmies toki.
 - sopisiko silinteri ehkä paremmin?

2. Character Silhouettes
- ensimmäisestä siluetista vasemmalta saa selvän kuvan, mitä hahmo edustaa.
- Alemmasta kuvasta keskimmäisenkin hahmon tehtävä selvenee, mutta oikean puolimmainen jää hieman epäselväksi.
1. Voimanpesä, 2. ?? , 3. "the brain"

3. Test level design
- alin taso on ilmeisesti kellari, mutta sitä on aluksi hankala hahmottaa. Tasojen erot muutenkin hieman häilyviä ainakin äkkiseltään katsottuna.

4. Tinkerer vaikuttaa mielenkiintoisimmalle nimensä perusteella. Hahmot kaikki vaikuttavat omanlaisiltaan ja kaikilla on luultavasti jotain omaa tarjottavaa.

5. Värimaailma on miellyttävä. Hahmo sopii hyvin taustaansa. Verhot ikkunoissa käyvät hyvin aikakauteen, johon hahmokin ilmeisesti sijoittuu

6. Auto sopii hyvin aikakauteen ja vaikuttaisi hyvälle. Auto voisi olla tyylikkään varkaan menopeli, joka ei välttämättä kuitenkaan ole "tiedetty" varas

Person 4.

1. Imo first is best, dunno why others look lamer than it, maybe culd add that walking staff to him. I like that red color too, not only b&w.

2. First one looks hostile, second maybe merchant npc dunno, third is man with pointy tail, who has no hands. (last one goes only for upper image silhouette)

3.is nice

4. Most intresting is tinkerer, bcus she looks strong independed woman and that kinda characters are pretty cool, manly womans ftw, least intresting is collector im getting annoyed just by looking at it.

I would not be intrested in this kinda game bcus i just dont play this kinda games anymore maybe when i was younger it could have been intresting, now only 2d games i play are my nintendo 8bit games for nostalgic feelings. I think illustration 1 where is man with pipe is pretty nice, i like the art! Dunno how much more stuff u gonna add to level design, but to my eye it seems there should be something more to it, looks pretty blank.

Person 5.

1. toinen vasemmalta on hiano ja vekkulin näköinen, 2. hyvin erottuu, iso vartija mies; pullukka pankkiiri ja kolmas varmaan varas 3. bra 4. the muscle on aika erilainen ja mielenkiintoinen :D old man toimii myös.
ja 4. jatkoa: tinkerer ja collector oli vähän nahh

lähinnä sen takia että muut oli muuten vaan hauskoja
(oldman ja muscle) = hauskoja

Person 6.

1. Ekan tyyli on hienoin. Laittaisin varmaan neljännen yksityiskohtien tarkkuuden ekaan hahmoon.

2. Kyllä on. Eka näyttää joltain vartijalta, jonka ohi sneakkaisin. Toka hahmo joltain mehevältä uhrilta. Kolmas näyttäis kakkospelaajan hahmolta.

3. Näyttää hienolta. Taustalla vois olla joku hieno iso steampunk-vekotin tonguehymiö

4. The Smuggler ku se on hotein. The Sailoril vois olla joku päähine.

5. Näyttää kyl hienolta. Joku vyö ois hyvä tolle jäbälle viel. Sit taustalle vois lisätä jonkun ison steampunk-vekottimen xD

6. Tohon isoon rakennukseen vois lisätä lisää yksityiskohtia.

Person 7.

General feedback:
I understand that at this point it is just a bunch of pictures (concept art) but I would be nice to see how the characters would look inside that test level etc.

Style of the pictures suits very well to the theme of the game.

1. Main Character
-> Favourite one is second from the left
-> Not too detailed and simple style, good!
-> Can be associated to a classic "detective character"
-> Head color could be changed, for example just white with black eyes / moustache and black outlines. Now it blends too much to the body

2. Character Silhouettes
-> Can be easily recognized from each other
-> Atleast 2 first from the left look tiny bit like crooks, from the third I am not so sure
-> Good variation, different from each other
-> Interraction with the characters would depend a lot about the main character, story, mission etc.

3. Test level design
-> It would be nice to see how the characters fit into the level

4. Side characters
-> Again, good variation with different kinds of characters
-> Interesting names / looks
-> In my opinion The Collector seems to be the least interesting, what does she collect? Its difficult to tell. Diamonds?

5. Illustrations
-> Suits very well to the theme of the game (steampunk, England etc)

Person 8.

1. Main Character

Pidän toisen hahmon yksinkertaistetusta ja salaperäisestä olemuksesta. Hahmo vaikuttaa jollain tapaa itsevarmemmalta ja enemmän tilanteen tasalla olevalta kuin muut vaihtoehdot. Varsinkin viimeinen hahmo sen sijaan vaikuttaa olevan hieman "kujalla." Riippuu tietenkin juonesta ja tarinan taustasta, mitä haetaan.
Voisi olla ihan jännä idea, että päähahmo olisikin tuollainen "varjo" vaikka muut hahmot olisivatkin tunnettavampia ihmisiä.

2. Character Silhouettes

Profiileista saa hyvän kuvan hahmojen erilaisuudesta. Hahmojen erilaisuus erottuu helposti myös ylemmästä kuvasta.
Ensimmäisestä hahmosta tulee mieleen perinteinen katurosvo, joku josta syntyy vaikeuksia päähahmolle.
Toinen hahmo vaikuttaa jonkin sortin kauppiaalta/siviililtä tai muulta harmittomalta, mutta mahdollisesti hyödylliseltä hahmolta.
Kolmas vaikuttaa päähenkilöltä taikka kenties kollegalta.

3. Test Level Design

Kenttä on selkeä ja hyvännäköinen. Talon sijaitseminen maatason alapuolella iskee kuitenkin jollain tapaa silmään melko jyrkästi. Johtuneeko suuresta kontrastierosta. Värimaailma on miellyttävä ja voi hyvin kuvitella sen tukevan pelin teemaa.

4. Side Characters

Seilori tulee ehkä äkkiseltään teeman ulkopuolelta, mutta idea vaikuttaa hyvältä ja toimivalta. Ehdottoman mielenkiintoinen hahmo, tuo hieman twistiä kokonaisuuteen.
Vanha mies vaikuttaa sinänsä mielenkiintoista, mutta ehkä astetta liian länkkäri. Ehkäpä hatun, vyön ja aseen tai jonkun niistä vaihtaminen toisenlaiseen voisi toimia.
Tinkerer hyvä idea ja jakoavain on mielenkiintoinen. Tulee kuitenkin väistämättä WoW:n Gnome mieleen. Varmaankin juuri nimen ja jakarin takia.

5. Illustration 1

Verrattuna päähenkilösivun viimeiseen hahmoon, kuvan mies vaikuttaa mukavan ylimieliseltä ja itsevarmemmalta. Mielestäni sopii hyvin tyyliin. Yleisteemaon varsin mukava. Ehkäpä vielä suurempi hämäryys ja pimeys voisi toimia.
6. Illustration 2

Tässä hämäryysaste on suurempi, mikä on mielestäni teemaan sopivaa. Kuitenkin värimaailma oli edellisessä silmää hivelevämpi. En osaa sanoa ovatko sitten toisensa poissulkevia, mutta jonkinlainen yhdistelmä tuntuisi äkkiseltään hyvältä idealta.

Person 8.

1. Main character

......Character 3 is my favourite with the 4th coming second. It fits the bill perfectly for the setting it will be in but adds some .panache and style to the character which I feel 4 is lacking(not overly so). His smaller upper body lends itself to the stealth aspect of the game, he seems less of a fighter and more of a ......sneaky and extravagant conman. That said it's a close run thing between them and the fourth works as well.
My criticism of 4 is only due to how I perceive the characters skillset to be. If he's a middle of the road type character good at both fighting and sneaking I would choose the fourth as my preference. He seems more of a badass detective type in ......the same vein as sherlock holmes than the 3rd who seems more of a smooth talker.
The character aesthetic interests me as it's easily recognizable, I can see how those characters would act, which makes immersion in any game a lot quicker and easier to come by. I could definitely see it being an interesting indie platformer if the art and music merge well with the gameplay.
As far as improving the characters, I couldn't without knowing the context of the character and whether there are skill trees or other things that could effect design.

2. Character Silhouettes

Yes they are recognizable. As for their roles, the first one looks like a bruiser who attacks anything that moves, the little fat guy seems like a merchant but I can see him being a stealth character and I'd assume the money pouch is for throwing coins to distract his enemies. The fourth does look like a middle of the road/jack of all trades character, as mentioned before if that's the case I feel like it's the best design decision.
If the bruiser character was an npc I'd try to avoid him/sneak past him, unless I had something, a weapon or trick that I know would kill him.
If the merchant character was an npc I wouldn't worry about dying to him, I'd be more worried about leaving him behind me incase I got into some proper trouble .....later on and needed to retreat.
This is the main character, with this character design choice he seems to be in the middle of the road, someone who can be sneaky but is also handy in a fight. A talent tree which helps customize his role would be great for this guy. In terms of …interaction, as the premise of the game is stealth I would attempt to utilize any ....tricks or abilities he has in order to do that. However if fighting through levels is made too easy or unrewarding I would begin to use combat more often, it's good to have the option of both though, it makes your playstyle more personable and it's more immersive!

3. Test level Design

 The aesthetic is simplistic and it shows its futuristic vibe, it works as a level. However I feel like it's missing the steampunk, more carpets and splendour and .some steam pipes or pressure valves would positively add to the environment. The background seems like a plain field with just some trees and lots of land around it, a steampunk manor house would be perfect for this, the home of some lord or baron who entertains guests, has servants quarters, ballrooms etc.

4. Side Characters

The old man seems the most interesting, I can see him being a deadshot and a badass character who has to walk slowly due to his gout or something which he tells everyone is a war injury. Definitely a character with potential flavour. The Smuggler and Tinkerer stand out as cool characters as well.
 The least interesting to me would be The Muscle, she's a bit of a lump, I'd feel bad if she was better than me at hitting things. She could probably only swing that thing a couple of times before she had to eat a cheesecake, what a lardass.

5. Illustration 1

This illustration is great, it shows the genre and setting in all its glory, dark, industrial but with the curtain drapes and the extravagant style that victorian england had. There should absolutely be a blimp level. There's not much I would add, the london skyline has a lot of chimney tops in current times and in this era/setting there would be a hundred to one. The detail on the background is fantastic.

6. Illustration 2

..............One of the most dangerous designs for a car but it's definitely a cool one. It'd be nice to see something a bit less clean, more tubes sticking out etc but it's not wholly a steampunk universe, I can imagine this being made in a more futuristic society and it merges well with the aesthetic, but I think more steampunk would be way cooler!

In summary I find the main character interesting and easily indentifiable, and I think the english "gentleman" is a well liked character trope that is normally explored in the form of an antagonist so it'd be nice to see it as the protagonist. He is undeniably comparable to sherlock holmes. It'd be interesting to see how he would be set apart, I would try and research holmes and other similar characters in order to understand their quirks so you could make him unique in his own way.
I'd have to learn more about the mechanics to judge the game but on a purely aesthetic level it's promising and could entice me as a customer, the right gameplay and music would make it a definite purchase.