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VISUAL DEVELOPMENT OF A VISUAL NOVEL

Visual Storytelling in an Interactive Game

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Abstract		
<p>The visual novel is an interactive video game genre that is based on heavy narrative style gameplay. Gameplay mainly involves the reading of a fictional story that is delivered through a text box, with static character sprites in the background. What separates visual novels from other game genres is an emphasis on storytelling.</p> <p>The objective of this thesis was to explore and research the visual development process in the production of a visual novel. It mainly focused on the fundamental visual elements that are used to deliver a story for this genre; this included the creation of character art, background art, user interface, necessary in-game assets, full-screen images and overall layout of the game. The thesis delved into the theories behind how these elements are used to tell a story within the genre.</p> <p>The product of this thesis is a game made in collaboration with two other game designers. The author of this thesis was responsible for the creation of all the artworks, while the others developed the gameplay, story and user-interface. The primary objective of the designers was to produce a game that is entertaining and immersive in its storytelling. The process of collaboration was documented, and the process of designing visual elements that is based on a script was also explored. The theories and techniques used in visual storytelling media that were researched are then applied to the game. The success of the game was then judged by the performance of the gameplay and how well the storyline played out.</p> <p>Due to the time constraints, other possible techniques such as animation effects could not be included in the game, despite being researched.</p>		
Keywords		
Visual novels, character and environmental art, visual development, visual storytelling		

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1 INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is a tool often used by game designers. A story can serve as the foundation of a game by giving it a clear start and end. Given the diverse range of genres in video games, the activity of storytelling can be approached from various angles. One of the genres that relies most on storytelling is the visual novel. Its primary form of gameplay involves the reading of a story through a text box while interacting with characters in the background. This thesis explores the different visual elements that make a visual novel and attempts to apply that knowledge to produce a game.

This thesis is primarily a product-oriented thesis and the goal behind it is to create a playable visual novel game. It begins by researching the fundamental visual elements that make up the genre and covers the basics of character and sprite design, environment design, user interface, and overall layout. As visual literacy is essential when conveying messages, directing a player's attention or being a form of appeal, it is one of the core design aspects this thesis explores during the visual development phase.

Other crafts such as special effects in animation and framing of a composition are also explored. It is important to note that only techniques and theories relevant to this game genre are researched.

After the research phase, the author begins his work on the thesis project – the visual novel game 'All Equal'. The product of this thesis is made in collaboration with two other designers, one responsible for the lead development and story, and the other for user-interface design. As such, the collaborative work process is documented. The thesis will continue to explore how the different components come together to form a functioning game as the author applies what was previously researched. This includes how compelling characterization is visually conveyed through the proper usage of learned techniques.

Finally, the success of the game is gauged based on performance and discussed in the conclusion.

1.1 Visual Novels

The visual novel is a video game genre that originated in Japan. Its main features are text-based storytelling and interactive gameplay, often accompanied by static images of characters in the background. What separates this genre from the others is minimal gameplay and an emphasis on plot and character development. As such, visual novels can often be as long as physical novels but still have the advantage of a video game by offering choice and multiple endings. Visual novels make use of images and sounds, which may range sound effects to voice acting, to deliver stories (Mai, K., 2014). Proper use of these elements is an artform that is derived from other video games and visual media.

As this game genre is usually rather simple and easy to produce, it makes up a large portion of all the games produced in Japan. Unfortunately, this genre is also largely ignored by the gaming demographic in both the US and Europe. This is mostly due to cultural reasons. Japan's gaming industry isolates itself from the rest of the world as it can thrive, simply due to sheer size, in a single country. Hence only a small portion of Japanese games make it to Western audiences. As such, Japanese people have slightly different preferences when it comes to video games. (Ishaan, 2011.)

Some acclaimed anime series are adaptations of visual novels. Such examples include Kanon, AIR, CLANNAD, Fate/stay night, and Steins;Gate. The reason these games are easily adapted into TV series is largely due to their narrative nature.

2 VISUAL DEVELOPMENT

Video games are an evolved form of art that branched out from traditional techniques through the digital age, while also incorporating other digital artforms such as UI design (user-interface), animation and more. This thesis primarily focuses on the art of visual novels and how digital art is used to develop the game.

As visual novels originated in Japan, characters are often drawn in anime or manga style (Ishaan, 2011). This is not a mandatory trait but simply one that is the result of Japanese culture. Being a stylistic choice, it has superficial implications and only serves as an appeal to taste.

What truly separates the two media from one another is a difference in the design philosophies. Design philosophy goes beyond just stylistic appeal, it can carve the medium in such a way to produce a completely different experience. As shown in Figure 1 below, Japanese anime artists and western cartoon artists approach their medium differently.

ANIME VERSUS CARTOON

<p>Anime is a style of Japanese film and television animation.</p>	<p>Cartoon is a film for the cinema or television which is made using sequential drawings.</p>
<p>Animes focus less on the animation of movement.</p>	<p>Cartoons focus more on the animation of movement.</p>
<p>Animes focus more on settings, background, and characters.</p>	<p>Cartoon focus less on settings, background, and characters.</p>
<p>Anime targets both children and adults.</p>	<p>Cartoon mainly targets children.</p>
<p>Anime often contains somewhat complex and mature subject matter.</p>	<p>Cartoon often contains humorous and adventurous themes.</p>
<p>PEDIAA.COM</p>	

Figure 1. Anime versus cartoon (Peddia 2016)

Despite being very similar, anime and cartoons are made for different audiences. Anime targets both children and adults, and contain subject matter ranging from simple to complex. There is a lot of focus on character and plot development, as opposed to cartoons in general. Knowing the difference allows artists to better adjust their work to suit the goal of the project. Whether an artist wants their audience to focus on the comedic appeal of certain actions or make an emotional connection with the character, making use of the right technique is fundamental in conveying the right message.

As visual novels use anime styled art to tell stories, characters and backgrounds are the focal points of design. Good characterization and story progression enable the audience to create an emotional connection with the characters.

In visual novels, actions and emotions can be visually conveyed through character sprites and thus eliminates the need for lengthy descriptions. As the games are a hybrid between screenplay and prose writing, characters can deliver lines without dialog tags (Kuiper, 2017). A character's attire, clothing accessories and emotional state can also tell of his or her personality and history. This same concept applies to backgrounds.

2.1 Designing for a Visual Novel

In order to design for a visual novel, basic components that make up this genre must be explored and researched. After these components are better understood, they can be assembled to create a game.

2.1.1 General layout

The general design of a visual novel consists of a text box in the foreground, character sprites in the mid ground, and a background. As the player plays through the game, he or she will interact with other characters through the text box. Below, Figure 2 depicts the basic components that make up the typical visual novel gameplay screen.



Figure 2. (Example of a visual novel, n.d.)

Within the frame of the screen, the text box rests in the foreground and is usually accompanied with a name tag to indicate the person speaking. The character or characters that being interacted with are in the mid ground while the background illustration sits in the back. The character sprite of the player may appear on the screen depending on the developer's choice. The decision to have the player's sprite appear is based on gameplay design. Nonetheless, visual novels are almost always played from the first-person perspective.

As most of the gameplay in a visual novel involves reading, a readable screen is necessary to clearly highlight important details as visual indigestion will jeopardize the experience.

2.2 Characters

Characters in visual novels are illustrated static images. Though in some cases they may be animated. Throughout the game, players will come across various characters. A character's design can affect visual performance just as their personality can affect the plot, which is why having a cast of characters that contrast and complement each other is important visually as it is story-wise. This is further discussed below when the difference between main and side characters are explored.

Designing characters for a visual novel is different than doing so for an animated television series. In the field of animation, poor design choices can hinder the fluidity of animated characters. Animators must consider how different elements affect the outcome of the product as certain visual stimuli are not applicable. Visual novel characters on the other hand, take a different route - designs can be more detailed and rigid as there is limited to no animation. This opens the possibility for more emphasis on qualities such as elegance or aggression. Characters may also be illustrated in a wide array of artistic styles.

To make a character distinguishable, the character can be built by customizing an established type (Besen, 2008, 58). In the world of anime, these established types are often referred to as anime archetypes – stereotypical character personalities and behaviours. While archetypes make a character predictable, they can also serve as a strong foundation to start off the design process. Developers can then customize certain traits to make the character more unique.

Figure 3 displays the four most common anime archetypes. Although these are mostly based on personality, the visual design of a character can still be built off these tropes. According to Besen (2008, 58), adding a twist can create a gap

between expectation and delivery, one which stirs up emotions and often sets things in motion.



Figure 3. Anime archetypes (japanloverme, 2014)

Initially, a tsundere character always comes off as aggressive and hostile but will slowly reveal their kinder side as the story progresses. Visually, these characters often have loud, dynamic and bright designs. The kuudere and dandere characters have more reserved personalities, hence those qualities are also reflected in their designs. They often dress conservatively and have muted colour palettes. A yandere character has a deranged personality that is usually masked by their outward appearance. Their designs may vary in ways that do not expose

their true nature; in order to create a contrast between personality and appearance.

It is important for characters to not only fit the environment, but also build up the theme of the story. Designs that contrast and complement each other well produce a coherent cast. This means that although each design may be different, they should all relatively balance each other out by filling different roles and niches. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

2.2.1 Main and supporting characters

Main character or characters should easily be identifiable as the story often revolves around them or are told from their perspective. Players may find it easiest to emotionally connect with main characters as they will often spend the most the time playing them.

The design of a main character often consists of at least one unique characteristic. At first glance, he or she should always stand out from the rest of the cast. If that is not the case, it could mean that his or her niche is not well established enough. Other possible reasons include the lack of thematic coherence, being too similar to one another, or simply being too generic. There may be exceptions in certain games where no character is supposed to stand out. But even then, they should all still follow a theme.



Figure 4. Cast of One Piece (Oda, 1997)

In One Piece (Figure 4), The boy with the straw hat has a face that is vastly different than his castmates' and it immediately draws the viewer's attention. A combination of the primary colours red, blue and yellow in his outfit creates a striking and energetic design commonly seen in main characters. In addition, his age can also be deduced– that of a high school boy, which is precisely the target audience's age group.

This example is just one of the possible routes a designer can take with a main character. Rather than only going for bright colours, what he or she should be aiming for is a concept that stands out from everyone else. This opens the possibility for the use of different palettes that may involve softer and muted colours. It does not necessarily have to be about colours either, a good concept or unique characteristic can go a long way.

Supporting characters that make up the main cast should be distinguishable as well, as shown in Figure 4. Though each member is designed to fill a different role, they still manage to flow well together since they all follow the theme of heroic pirates. Each one has enough of a difference to stand on their own but never take over the niche of main character.

Antagonists or villains that do not belong to the main cast follow the same design ideology as supporting characters – different enough to stand on their own but never take over the main character. Additionally, they should contrast the main cast. This may stem from a difference in beliefs, values and philosophies, but it can also reflect in their appearance. Characters are not always separated into good and bad; the main idea is that visual designs of characters should contrast and complement each other to create an interesting cast.

Finally, the least important side characters may have generic designs that do not interfere or overlap with the more important ones.

All of this applies to visual novels as much as it does any other storytelling medium.

2.2.2 Style

While the designs of characters bounce off each other, the style in which the characters are drawn in should also work with the backgrounds they sit on.

In animation, characters tend to have an art style that consists of block colours; making it easier to animate. Backgrounds, however, can afford to be more detailed. For example, in Figure 5, Cinderella and the prince are rather minimalistic while the background depicts light more intently with visible brush strokes; creating a painterly result.



Figure 5. Cinderella (Disney, 1950)

In visual novels, designers have the option to go for more intricate character designs due to the minimal animation.



Figure 6. Screenshot of Steins;Gate visual novel (5pb, 2009)

The art style of both the character and background in the Steins;Gate visual novel (Figure 6) have a rough and grungy texture to them. This style is based on the grunge style which started during the 1980s but can also be reminiscent of old television screens where static creates a similar texture. In video games and other entertainment media, this texture is indicative of mystery and time travel phenomena, hence making it a suitable choice for the time-traveling theme of Steins;Gate.

No matter the genre, the art style of all visual elements should fit and enhance the theme of the story.

2.2.3 Sprites and expressions

Each character in a visual novel comes with several sprites, depending on their need. An expressive character may require more variations in facial expressions than one with a more reserved personality.



Figure 7. Sprites of Chihiro from Danganronpa (Spike Chunsoft, 2010)

Figure 7 displays examples of character sprites from a visual novel. Sprites are copies of each other but will vary in terms of facial expressions and poses. They can enhance the experience by conveying different emotions.

Similar emotions can belong to major groups (Figure 8). Each group consists of more specific feelings that different character sprites can express.

A List of Emotions

Go beyond the obvious to identify exactly what you're feeling.

Angry	Sad	Anxious	Hurt	Embarrassed	Happy
Grumpy	Disappointed	Afraid	Jealous	Isolated	Thankful
Frustrated	Mournful	Stressed	Betrayed	Self-conscious	Trusting
Annoyed	Regretful	Vulnerable	Isolated	Lonely	Comfortable
Defensive	Depressed	Confused	Shocked	Inferior	Content
Spiteful	Paralyzed	Bewildered	Deprived	Guilty	Excited
Impatient	Pessimistic	Skeptical	Victimized	Ashamed	Relaxed
Disgusted	Tearful	Worried	Aggrieved	Repugnant	Relieved
Offended	Dismayed	Cautious	Tormented	Pathetic	Elated
Irritated	Disillusioned	Nervous	Abandoned	Confused	Confident

SOURCE SUSAN DAVID

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Figure 8. A list of emotions (David, 2016)

According to Besen (2008, 69), overly realistic human characters can seem wooden while a subtle use of caricature can make realistic performance more natural and livelier. Anime characters, like cartoons, make use of exaggerated expressions. Facial expressions in anime often follow the same underlying designs regardless of style, as shown in Figure 9. It is a visual language unique to the medium. Adjustments can be made to accommodate different types of faces and exaggerations may be reduced for more serious or mature characters. A single sprite can cover a large range of different emotions, or just a select few. Depending on what is needed, the artist must create facial expressions that correctly convey the right emotions.



Figure 9. 25 expressions practice (loveariddle, 2012)

Figure 10 shows examples of how facial design can become chiselled due to an art style. The style is inspired by western comics and therefore the characters' expressions tend to be a mix between western comic book art and eastern anime. This example shows that although the style is quite unique, it shares the same anime tropes as the examples above in Figure 9, but with reduced exaggerations.



Figure 10. JoJo's Bizarre Adventures (Araki, 2012)

Each character should come with a collection of sprites that cover a broad range of emotions. Each expression may have multiple interpretations and therefore have multiple uses. It is often better to discuss with the other developers about what is necessary to conserve time and energy. On the other hand, having many different expressions may also provide the writers with more input and ideas on how to approach a character.

2.2.4 Special and animated effects for character sprites

Sometimes, in order to intensify certain emotions, special effects can be added to character sprites. Visual effects such as lightning, shaking and other movements

can accompany sound effects in creating the desired expression. As shown by the sequence of images (Figure 11) below, the character is enraged. The developers emphasize that by adding glowing effects and tremors.



Figure 11. Sakura from Danganronpa (Spike Chunsoft, 2010)

As special effects were born from the field of animation, the author investigated how special effects are used by animators. According to Besen (2008, pp. 188-189) all special effects, whether realistic or not, need a degree of stylization. In addition, it's usually better to match the style of effects to the overall style of the

project. A mismatch can undermine overall integrity. In the case of this thesis, only special effects that can be added to a character sprite are explored.

Some visual novels even make use of simple animations on their character sprites. In traditional animation, a character's design has restrictions on how it can be animated. As a design becomes increasingly complex, the amount of animation possible decreases. Nonetheless, even a little animation can add dimension to a character. But as static character sprites in visual novels tend to be more rigid and detailed, developers turn to tweening.

Tweening animation is a rising trend in the Asian mobile game market. A character can be digitally animated through the movement of individual limbs as opposed to the traditional frame by frame. The most popular program used to create that effect is Live2D cubism and has been used to develop mobile games such as *Destiny Child*, *City of Love: Paris*, *Luna Princess* and many more (Live2D Inc.). It functions similarly to the Adobe After Effects puppet tool but aims to be more intuitive and extensive in that it can grant 2D art almost 3D-like qualities. The developers refer to it as 2.5D. Similarly, to the puppet tool in Adobe After Effects, vertices can be added to an artwork to create a polygon art mesh (Figure 12).

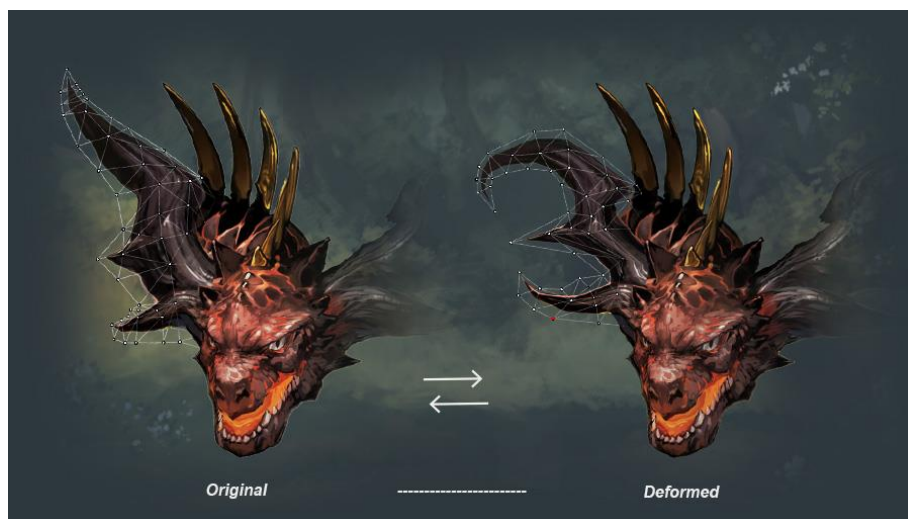


Figure 12. Example of live2D polygon art mesh (Takayama, 2017)

These vertices move a character's limbs and protrusions like that of a 3D model. Additionally, these character models can also be programmed to be responsive to touch-screen interactions.

2.3 Backgrounds

Backgrounds are more than just neutral spaces in which action is played out, settings affect everything from mood to plot. In visual novels, a contrast between character and background is necessary. Backgrounds must not overwhelm or obscure the characters, instead they must feel related to the characters. The key is then to arrive at a consistent strategy for a given production. (Besen, 2008, pp. 173-178.)

2.3.1 Mood

The way a background is presented determines the mood a player feels. The key to creating the desired mood is style. Cool formality, romantic elegance, edgy terror, homey warmth, etc. each have their own special characteristics. For example, Snow White incorporate details from carvings, artefacts and architectural elements traditionally found in actual German peasant cottages. These elements enhance the European fairy tale flavour of the story. (Besen, 2008, pp. 176.)

Visual novels emphasize both characters and backgrounds. To test whether a desired mood is created, both need to be present. If the result is not satisfactory, either one or both can be rendered in a different style.

2.3.2 Style, purpose and performance

The properties of backgrounds should be designed to support performance (Besen, 2008, pp.180). Colour palette, line quality, degree of detail, degree of realism versus stylization etc. must be considered when designing a background.

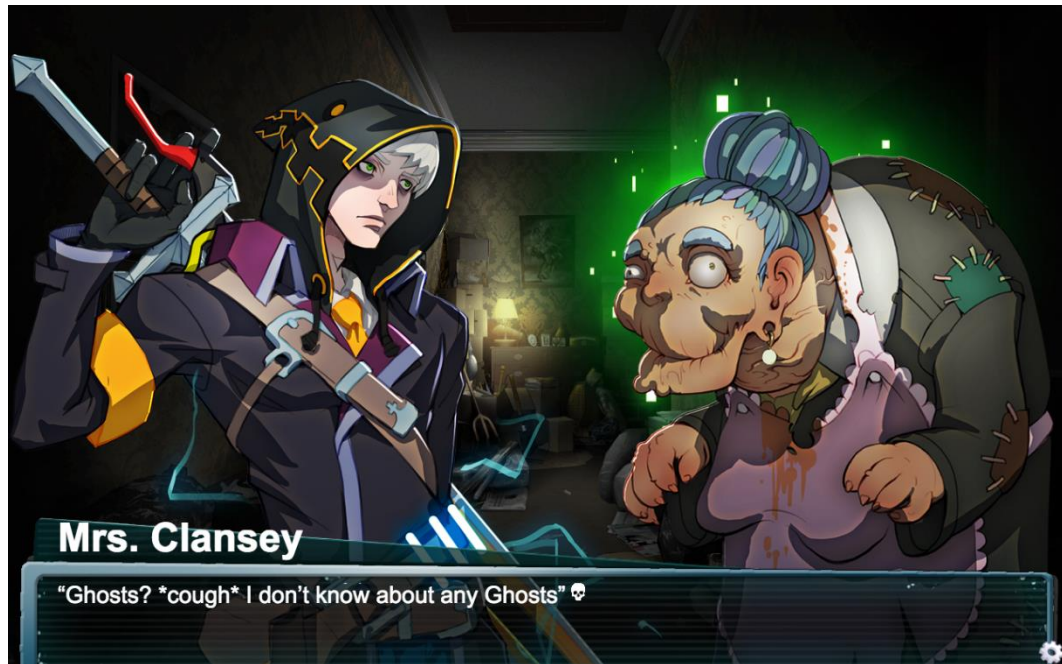
In strictly narrative visual novels, artists may choose to design characters and backgrounds in the same style as it creates a stronger sense of belonging with the world. Figure 13 is an example of how a background and its characters are identical in terms of art style. Such backgrounds need to be more picturesque in order to bring the characters forward.



Figure 13. Solstice (MoaCube, 2016)

It is also possible to have the backgrounds in a different style than the characters. The reason for that comes from having interactive elements. A background (Figure 13) that is only decorative makes it very difficult to identify interactive elements as such elements need to be clearly illustrated.

The examples of Figures 14A and 14B are from the game Paramedium: A Noise in the Attic. They demonstrate how easy it is to find interactive elements within the scene once the character sprites are out of the way.



Example 14A. Paramedium: A noise in the attic (AGL Studios, 2016)



Example 14B. Paramedium: A noise in the attic (AGL Studios, 2016)

The background is illustrated in a style that makes it easy to separate different objects, despite the dim lighting.

2.3.3 Floorplan

The floorplan (Figure 15) is the map of a level. It provides developers with a layout of how different elements within a scene are arranged. Subsequently, this allows the developers to select a good camera angle and set things up for gameplay.

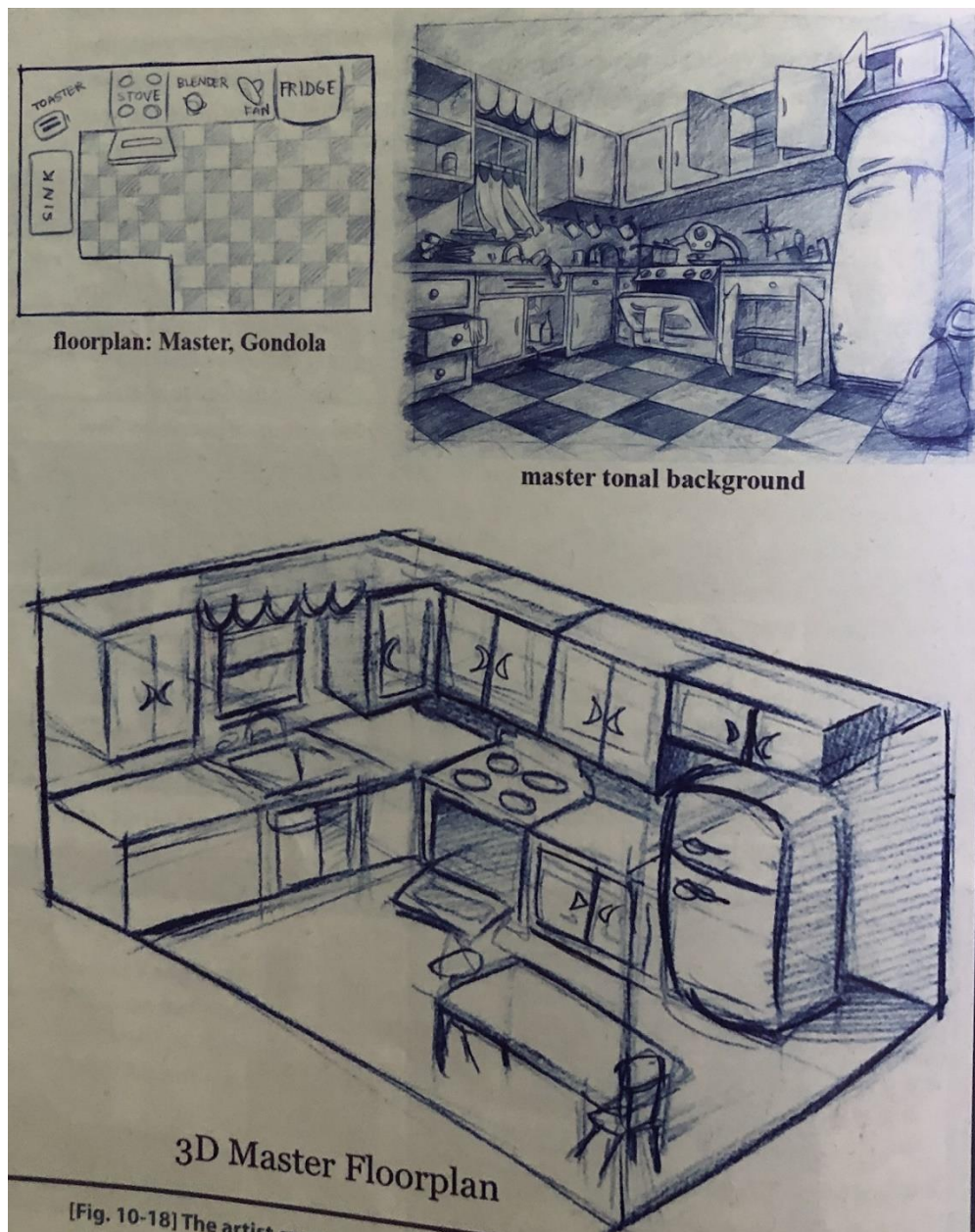


Figure 15. Floorplan. (Robinson, n.d. reproduced in Prepare to Board! Beiman, 2013, p. 128)

A top-down approach allows developers to plan how characters move about within a level while a three-dimensional sketch of the room can help stage major scenic elements as well as aid in 3D projects. The master tonal background is a sketch of what a background could look like if the game requires such illustrations.

Location, the arrangement of scenic elements, and the angle from which they are approached can affect how players experience the game. In the case of visual novels where there is little to no camera movement, the selection of the camera angle is based on compositional techniques.

2.3.4 Animated effects for backgrounds

Like character sprites, animated special effects can enhance a background. However, artists must take care not to obscure or overwhelm characters. Background effects must not distract players from the main gameplay. The goal of animated effects in backgrounds may differ, it can be for visual appeal, to draw attention to a certain area, or enhance a situation. For example, fire can be used to tell that a location was recently destroyed. Having a static image of a fire is silly, hence it must be animated.

2.4 User Interface

The user interface of a game is an essential part of the user experience. It must be intuitive, efficient and offer an experience that does not distract the player from the core gameplay (Every Interaction). According to the Interaction-Design Foundation, users are very swift to judge designs on usability and likeability.

In visual novels, the interface is often very simple, it mainly consists of a text box to deliver dialogues and storylines, and a button to advance the story. Other

necessary components may be present in the main interface while the less used ones are hidden away.

For maximum readability, the dialogue box should always remain completely opaque. Many designers may choose a translucent design to allow a larger range of vision. This might be necessary due to gameplay demanding a bigger screen or is simply an artistic choice. The font of choice depends on its readability and the style it represents. Different themes demand different fonts. For example, a sci-fi themed game would require a font that is futuristic.

The user interface should also complement the art style of the game. It does not necessarily have to be in the same style, but it should at least follow the same theme.

3 IMAGE COMPOSITION

The goal of a visual novel developer is to make players feel immersed in a good story. Similarly, to traditional art, video game art makes use of the same theories of visual design and composition.

As video games evolved alongside other visual media, it managed to incorporate some of their techniques for visual storytelling. Designers often find tools from other disciplines to enhance their games. As Caputo (2003, back cover) said, “The ability to capture and hold audiences is not dependent on the technology used or the medium in which a story is told; it is art.” The art of storytelling has remained fundamentally the same for centuries.

3.1 Framing and camera angle

Framing and camera angles not only affect the position of the viewer, but also create different emotional experiences depending on how they are used. (Solarski. 2012, 146.) In visual novels, the camera is usually angled from one of two positions.

The first position is the frontal view at eye level. Figure 16 is one such example. This type of angle places the most focus on the character as the background is pushed behind.

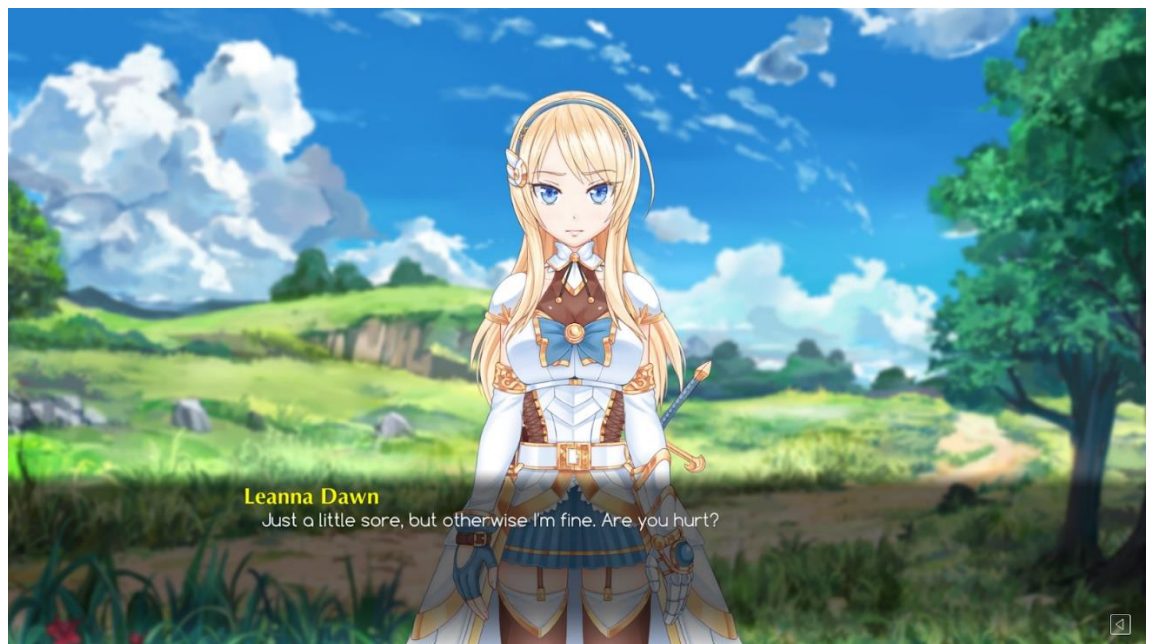


Figure 16. Crystalline (PixelFade Studio, 2017)

Drawing techniques such as vanishing points are fundamental in creating a dynamic environment (Ghertner, 2012, pp. 46). Figure 17 shows how vanishing points create a strong sense of depth.



Figure 17. Destiny Child (ShiftUp Co. 2017)

The second position is an angled view (Figure 18), still preferably at eye level.. An angled view produces a pleasing result like a composed painting, which can be effective in certain scenes.

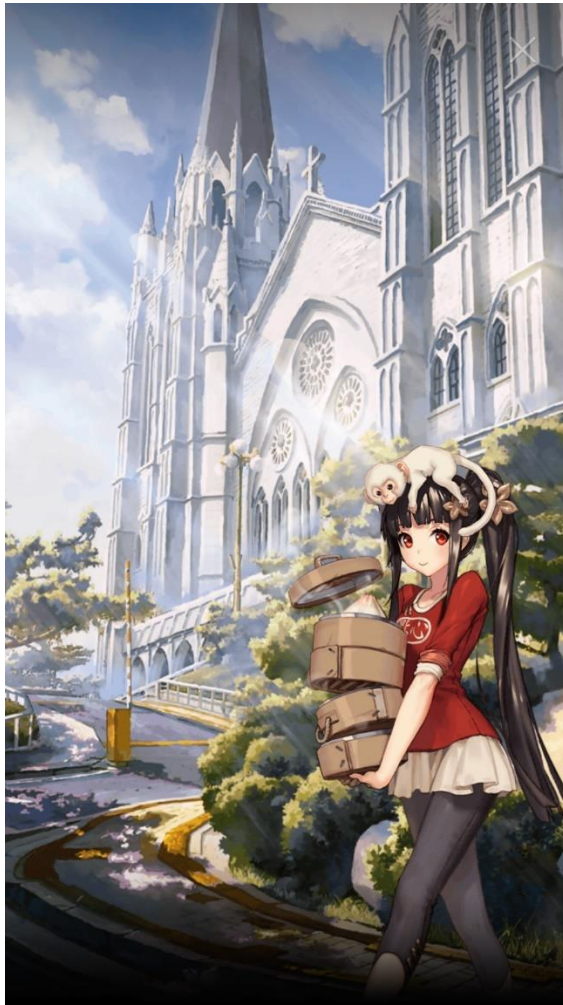


Figure 18. Destiny Child (ShiftUp Co. 2017)

Using both angled shots and perspective will create a stronger sense of depth and immerse the characters more within the environment. Whether the developers wish for that or more attention to the character sprite, can depend on personal preference or the desired mood for a scene.

In the chapter below, the use of framing techniques to compose an image is discussed.

3.2 Use of Full-Screen Images (Visual Novel CG's)

Often referred to as CG's; an abbreviation for computer graphics, full-screen images can be used to visualize events where using character sprites fail. By steering away from the typical combination of sprite and background, they enhance the gameplay experience by giving players a glimpse into the world from a different perspective. As they are seldom used, these images often mark a significant event in the game's progress. Proper compositional techniques in framing a painting must be applied to full-screen images.



Figure 19. Screenshot from Steins;Gate (5pb. 2009)

Figure 19 depicts a seemingly carefree day in the characters' lives, with everyone gathered around a table. The change in pacing from the usual gameplay refreshes the player's interest for the game and signifies a turn of event.

Full-screen images can also be used to deliberately intensify strong emotions, as shown in Figure 20. From the player's perspective, he or she is staring up at another person from a close distance while being pinned down. This combination of angle and lighting puts the viewer in a vulnerable position. Being in such

proximity to a stranger, emotions such as discomfort, vulnerability and awkwardness are brought out.



Figure 20. Screenshot from Danganronpa V3 (Spike Chunsoft, 2017)

Use of such images create tension and suspense in the story. They are extremely important as they often have a lasting effect on the player.

4 THESIS PROJECT

The game project this thesis produced was worked on by two other developers. The author of this thesis, Samneang Peo, is responsible for the artworks of all the characters, backgrounds, puzzle images and full-screen images. The second developer, Lauri Rinne, is the lead designer and is responsible for the story and script-writing, as well as the creation of the characters. The last developer, Nam-Anh Le aided in the creation of the user interface. The game the author and his collaborators are making is titled 'All Equal'. This chapter of the thesis documents the development process of all the visual elements of the game.

4.1 Collaborative Work

As the game is being developed with other two other persons, an online drive was created to store all the finished artworks. Everyone working on the project had access to the all pieces produced.

Communication is an important part of any collaborative work and it was decided that Discord will be used as a means of communication. Discord is an application used for messaging between gamers as it has features that are compatible with modern games.

It was also decided that the process of visual development would follow this format: the artist would first present sketches and ideas to the lead developer, then the most interesting and suitable ones are selected and further developed. The artworks are then tested in the game and may go through several iterations before they are finalized. Rinne provided a list of assets needed for the game (Appendix 2).

Communication that is back-and-forth was ideal to keep everyone updated on the progress. The author and the lead designer would exchange ideas on how to approach certain designs to alleviate the occasional art blocks. It should be noted that certain character design concepts also affected the way the script was written. Sometimes a visualized design can help a writer find a good addition their story, and sometimes it can affect the way the writer approaches a new character.

4.2 Designing Based on a Script

At the beginning, the developers decided that artworks are to be created based on the story and script (Appendices 3 and 5) written by Lauri Rinne, the lead designer and writer.

Story and gameplay always have priority over artworks. A game that has good visuals will never succeed if its gameplay and story fail. Every visual element must adhere to the script, and never the other way around.

After reading through the script and story synopsis, the author had a better sense of who the characters were. This allowed him to produce character sprites that would properly express their personalities.

Backgrounds are also designed based on the script and floorplan, as discussed in several chapters below. The way a character perceives a background is also taken into consideration when deciding the design and mood of a set. A background that is perceived to be gloomy would require dark and muddy colours to create the sensation.

Though the artworks are created based on the author's interpretation of the world, the other developers also have a say on what goes through during the conceptualization phase.

4.3 Core Gameplay

The game design document (Appendix 1) describes the game as an adventure/visual game. The event is set in a tower called the Great South, where they characters find themselves in. The tower consists of ninety-nine storeys with rooms that are all interconnected. Players would play through the story by solving puzzles in each room. Each room is rather simple and quick to play through, and as the player progresses through the game, the mystery behind their situation is slowly revealed.

4.3.1 Setting the Scene

The typical visual novel arrangement is rather straightforward, the characters are on top of the backgrounds and the game is played by reading the text box in the

foreground. Occasionally, other forms of gameplay are implemented, and the screen would switch to incorporate them. In this game, interactive puzzles are brought out to clear the stages.

When there is an important event, full-screen images may be used. This is decided beforehand in the script. The writer decides when these images are appropriate as he is the one whose vision this game is built upon.

Although sound files cannot be attached to this thesis, music also played a role in the designing of the scenes. The author listened to the tracks provided by the lead designer to further immerse himself in the world. Based on the game design document, the lead designer and writer, Lauri Rinne, describes the setting as grimdark, like *Saw* but with less grit.

It can be concluded that the author interpreted the Great South tower as a dark, sci-fi, horror, setting from the music and documents provided, with elements of modern day etched into different stages. This subsequently laid out the art direction for the different stages of the game. The lead developer designed each stage to be simple and quick to play through, with stories and puzzles in between. Therefore, the author decided that each stage should have something special and different. Rooms should not feel related to one another to create the feeling of warped space and time.

4.3.2 Designing main characters

All the characters in this game are designed to be eccentric and unique in their own way. While the profiles (Appendix 4) gave a brief description on who each character is, the script fleshed out their identities. This aided in their designs. The author also decided that a cast of characters unbound by nationalities would enhance the eccentric thematic. Therefore, although not explicitly stated, characters may have designs inspired by different cultures. As each character is

unique in their own way, their designs found themes from different occupations, such as doctor, policeman, samurai etc. Though it may seem unfitting at first glance, having different occupations as an inspiration meant that the theme of the cast is working professionals. Each person excels at what they do. The source of this design inspiration is the game Danganronpa, where each student has a unique talent.

Zoe

Outfit: Winter/ School girl
 Symbol: Bunny
 Height:



Figure 21. Zoe's concept art (Peo, 2019)

Zoe (Figure 21) is the main character and the game is played from her perspective. Though she is not always on screen, she has a design that reflects her persona. As the game consists of rather eccentric individuals, her normal nature makes her stand out the most and is visually conveyed through her simplistic design.

From the very beginning, Zoe was destined to be a high school girl. She is a calm, solicitous, mindful and level-headed character that the game revolves around. The author of this thesis decided to dress her in a winter jacket, winter

boots, sleeveless gloves, accompanied by a school bag, to express her down-to-earth personality. The use of a jacket and sleeveless gloves is rather common with main characters as it symbolizes an adventurous heart, while the school bag tells the viewer that she is still a young person. Her hair is tied up into a ponytail using a hair band that resembles a rabbit's ears.

Though not significant, the author decided to assign each character in the game with a symbol, usually an animal, to help smooth the design process. In Zoe's case, her symbol is a rabbit. By having a symbol to work with, the theme of the design can have a different outlook, which may add a unique appeal to a character. A white rabbit was the symbol of choice as it adds a feminine charm to the character while maintaining a smart and spontaneous nature. Based on an article on The Astrology Web webpage (Sanders n.d.), rabbits can represent different things in certain cultures. A white rabbit can represent cleverness, intuition and tenderness, all of which are traits Zoe embodies.

Zoe's colour scheme is made up of light violets and indigos. Both are cool colours that carry meanings of intelligence, caution, and dignity. The decision to go with this palette is based on her personality and gameplay. The character has a grounded mind and is rarely impulsive. Violet being a signifier of intelligence is ideal for someone who solves the puzzles through careful assessment.

Visually, the Zoe's monochromatic colour palette speaks of self-restraint as well as neutrality. She does not stand out by having a dynamic palette, instead she makes a presence by being grounded. The author also felt that the colours conveyed sensibility and compassion, as Zoe is the least likely to get into an argument. Players will find comfort in such a character to get through difficult situations.



Figure 22. The meaning of colors (Padilla, 2016)

Figure 22 above was used to aid in the design of the characters. Colours have different connotations embedded in culture and proper usage strengthens a design.

The character Fae is the secondary main character in the game. She is the character Zoe interacts with the most and plays a major role in the story. As Fae appears to be Zoe's original persona, both are played out as a duo. Design-wise, the author took special care when designing both characters to ensure that they properly contrast and complement each other.

Fae is based on the tsundere archetype (See chapter Characters.) A tsundere character harbours an aggressive public facade that often masks their kind-

heartedness. As Fae is impulsive and outspoken, her personality contrasts Zoe's calm and solicitous nature. This is evident in her visual design (Figure 23).

Fae

Outfit: Children Hanbok
Symbol: Panda
Height:



Figure 23. Fae's concept art (Peo, 2019)

Design-wise, Fae dons a child's hanbok. A hanbok is a traditional Korean attire that is worn on special occasions such as festivals, celebrations and ceremonies. The children's version differs from an adult's and its main features are the bands of colours that ring the sleeves. (OneDayKorea, n.d.) These brightly coloured bands exemplify youthful energy, which is the niche occupied by Fae. The author decided to give Fae this outfit as it is not a design commonly seen in video games and it expresses her playful nature.

Fae's hair is twirled into two little horns on the sides of her head. This was specifically designed to be somewhat like Zoe's rabbit-like hair band. The resemblance hints that those two are somehow connected to one another.

In terms of colour scheme, the author chose a bright and warm scheme that consists of mainly reds and pinks, with accents of light purple, blue, yellow, green and white. The colour red is associated with passion, confidence, youthful and bold energy, and expresses Fae's bright personality. It also serves to contrast Zoe's colour scheme of violets and blues. The difference in their personalities, energetic and impulsive versus calm and solicitous, are visually conveyed with these colour choices. In addition, their colours are also analogous to one another. While Fae's are in the warmer half, Zoe's are in the cooler half. This analogous property was also explicitly chosen by the author to ensure that their designs complement each other. The gradual transition from warm to cool mean that their colours, and metaphorically their personas, are connected.

4.3.3 Designing supporting characters

As the supporting characters aim to be as unique as possible, each of them required a design that vastly differed from the others. Following the theme of different occupations, the author could find ideas in the working world to use in their designs. During the concept art phase, the author noticed that the shape of the face, silhouette, hair style, and facial features were some of the most important factors in creating a character with personality. Hence, a large amount of time was spent into looking for ideas from different media.

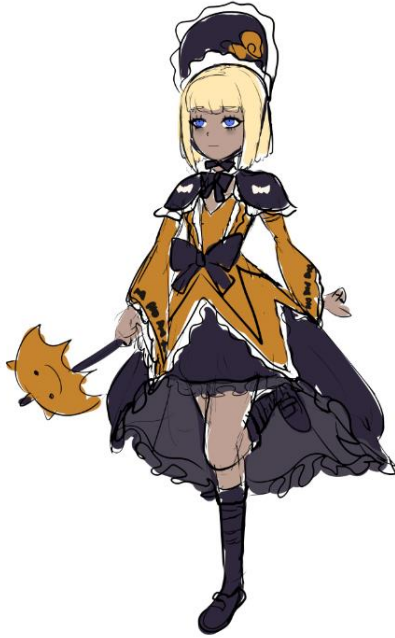


Figure 24. Jenny's concept art (Peo, 2019)

The third character to be introduced into the story is Jenny (Figure 24). Jenny is a rather oblivious individual who is often drifting in her own world, or so she seems. The lead developer, Lauri Rinne, requested for her design to be based on the Gyaruru culture of Japan. The culture features tanned Japanese girls dressed in neon outfits and accessories (YabaiWriters, 2017). When the author noticed that the use of colours from the culture would clash with Fae's existing design, he suggested a Lolita design as it wasn't a role already taken. Rinne describes Jenny as a curious individual whose situational awareness is lacking and her observation to all things happening around do not contribute very much. To convey her nonchalant personality, the author gave Jenny a neutral, half-lid stare.

Jenny's hair is a blonde bob, and her outfit is a gothic Lolita dress accompanied by a bat umbrella. Her headpiece contains her symbol, a rose. The author also incorporated the popular tan from the Gyaruru culture into Jenny's design. Finally, Jenny has mascara smeared eyes as an accent to the ludicrously tragic persona

often associated with the gothic Lolita culture (Grinnell College, n.d.). Her colour palette is based on the colours of autumn and Halloween. The dark and earthy feel of her design matches her soft-spoken personality.



Figure 25. Other supporting characters (Peo, 2019)

The second and third characters from the left are designs for Taro and Solomon (Figure 25). The author won't be going into detail about these designs as they haven't been finalized. The last three characters are other designs the author came up with in case the writer needed new ideas.

The author placed a lot of thought and care into the design of the characters. As stated earlier in the Visual Development chapter, anime type games emphasize characterization and plot development. Each character aims to have a lasting effect on the player, some more than others. A significant amount of time was dedicated to the designing of the characters to ensure that they are properly characterized in terms of outward appearance. Character concept, colour palette, different niches all play a role in this game.

4.3.4 Sprites

Character sprites are drawn in a style that is much simpler than the background. This makes them easier to produce and duplicate. Being easy to duplicate gave the author the advantage of truly capturing their essence by using many different sprites.



Figure 26A. Fae's sprites (Peo, 2019)

Figure 26A depicts a few of the character sprites for Fae. The author duplicated the original model and adjusted the pose and face to express different emotions. In Figure 26B, more exaggerated expressions are depicted.

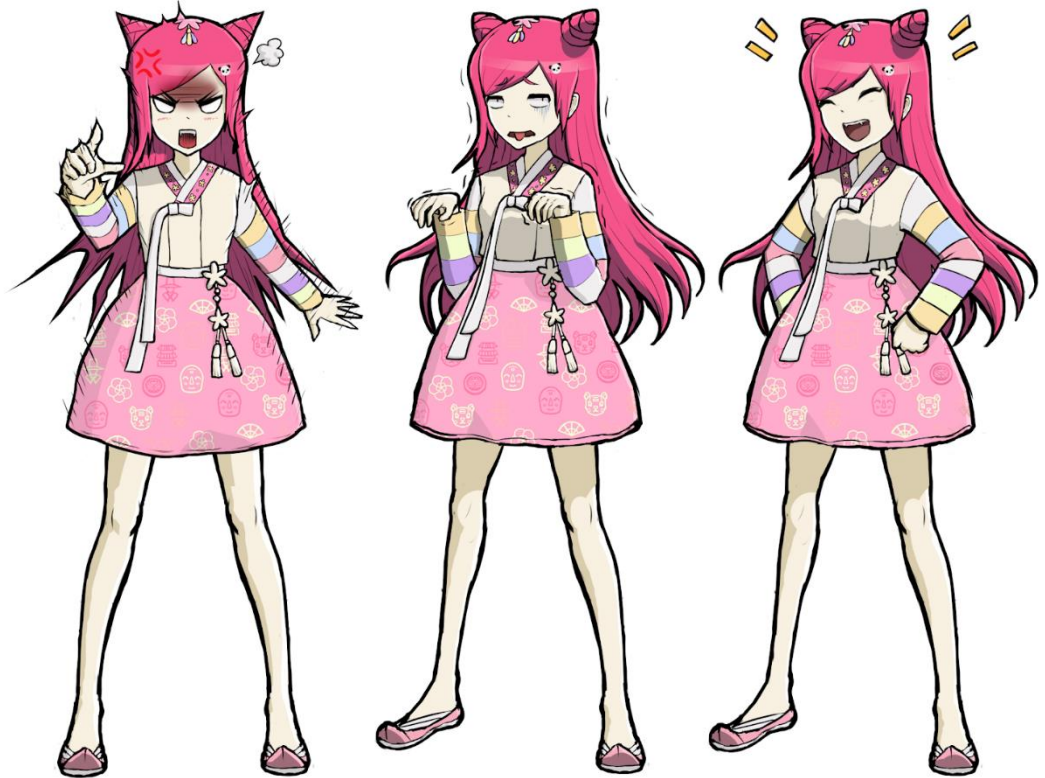


Figure 26B. Fae's sprites (Peo, 2019)

From the left, they express comical anger, disgust, and condescending laughter. As a tsundere character, Fae is very expressive and emotional. Her character sprites cover a wide range of emotions and serve to provide comic relief. The total number of sprites created for her is thirty-five, more than any other planned character. The remaining sprites are attached in Appendix 6.

4.3.5 Designing Backgrounds

The backgrounds are illustrated in a semi-realistic style inspired by the game *Steins;Gate*. The author felt that a similar art style could capture the grimdark atmosphere better than a cartoonish one like the characters' can.

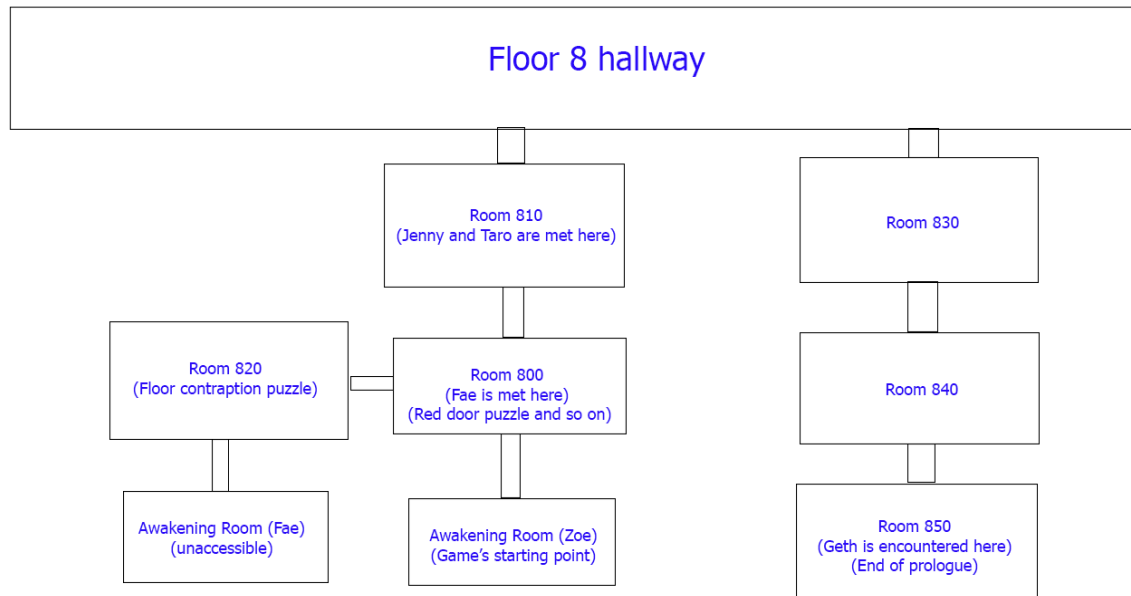


Figure 27. Map of floor (Rinne, 2019)

A map (Figure 27) of the early stages of the game was created by the lead developer, Lauri Rinne. The map shows how the simple rooms that are interconnected within the Great South tower. Each room is in the shape of a cube or cuboid and the player moves in and out by clicking on doors.

Due to the simplicity of the rooms, the author decided to have each of them be as unique and interesting as possible. It would make the place feel illogical and tell the player that something was interfering with space and time. Next, the author had to decide the camera angle. Although it is ideal to shoot from an angle three quarters from the side, the gameplay would feel very unnatural because of the way the rooms are arranged - straight rows and columns. They are also quick to

play through and it would disrupt a player's sense of direction if they saw at every room from a different angle. Therefore, the author decided that it was best to have the cameras be angled from the front at eye level, showing all visible sides equally, at least until newer rooms that are connected differently show up.



Figure 28. Awakening room (Peo, 2019)

The Awakening room (Figure 28) is the first room the main character Zoe finds herself in. In the script, it is described as a spaceship-like room with strange patterns on the walls. The author made the room into a dome, and gave the walls patterns that somewhat resemble, though not exactly, art deco. The room is lit using simple spotlights and all the sides are extended to allow the developers to zoom in and frame the room for the game.



Figure 29. Room 800 (Peo, 2019)

The next room Zoe enters after solving the puzzle in the Awakening room is Room 800 (Figure 29). This is described as a depressing office that hadn't been used in a long time. The author took inspiration from wooden floors in Japanese classrooms for the design and gave it an almost haunted look. Murky colours and a dim lighting were chosen to convey this feeling.

Although the author had limited experience painting in a semi-realistic style, he feels that the rooms have been successfully executed. They correctly convey the mood as described in the script.

These rooms are suitable with the character sprites despite being in a different style. It is a useable combination as the attention of the player will be on the colourful characters. The rooms are also illustrated in a way to help players identify interactive background elements more easily.

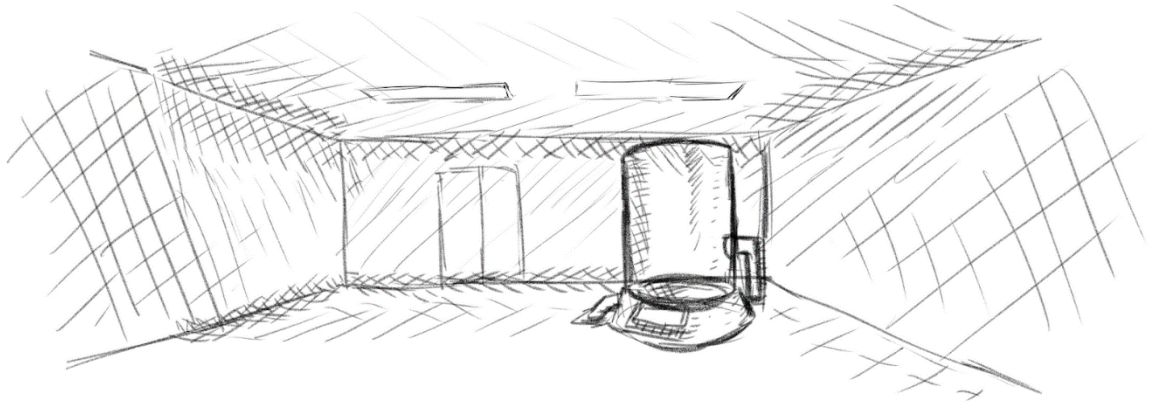


Figure 30. Sketch of room 810 (Peo, 2019)

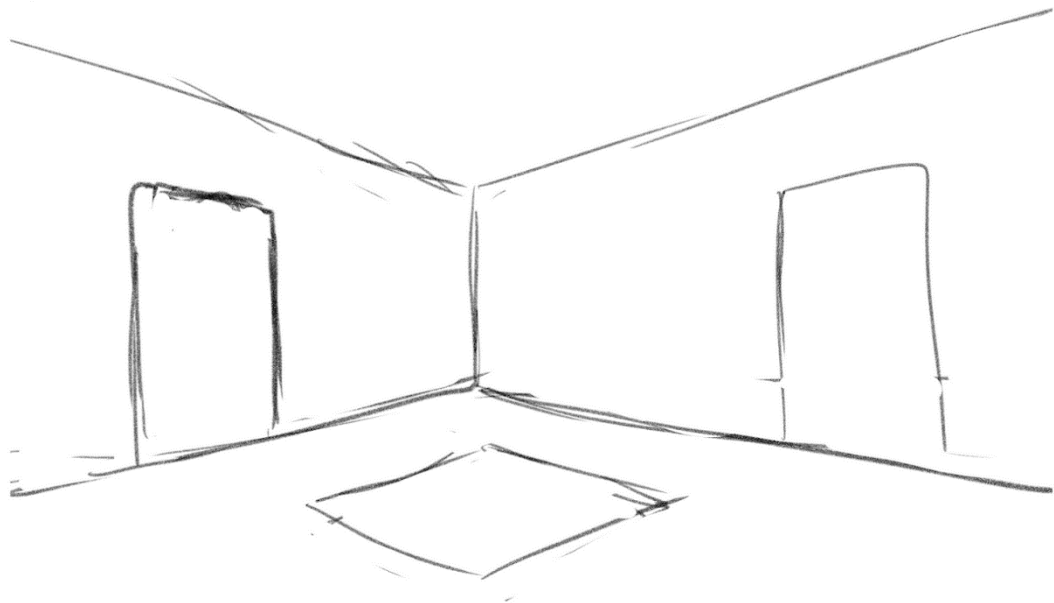


Figure 31. Sketch of room 820 (Peo, 2019)

The author did not have enough time to finish more than two rooms. Figures 30 and 31 are sketches of rooms 810 and 820 respectively. For Room 820, the

camera is angled from the corner of the room instead of the usual front. This is due to the way the rooms are interconnected to one another. Gameplay demands that players have access in and out of all three rooms and based on the floorplan it was the only logical position for the camera.

4.4 Designing User Interface

Since the game is a sci-fi fantasy game, the developers decided to create an interface inspired by the Steins;Gate visual novel. The user interface (Figure 32) was designed by the developer, Nam-Anh Le. The font that he selected for the main text box is 'Share' from Google. It is readable and has a sci-fi vibe, perfect for a mystery game.

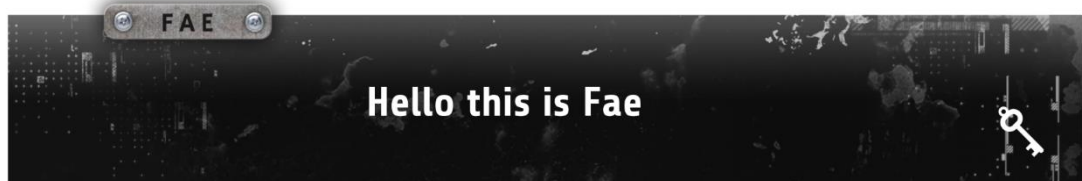


Figure 32. User interface for the game (Le, 2019)

Unfortunately, the game's development did not make it far enough for the user interface to contain more complex elements. Only the text box, the button for text progression, and name tag were created. The designs of these elements are based on the grunge style; they have a dirty and rusty metallic texture that is common in sci-fi games.

4.5 Puzzle CG's

The designs of the puzzles are rather straightforward. They are an interactive part of the map and will pop up when clicked on.



Figure 33. Note found on floor (Peo, 2019)

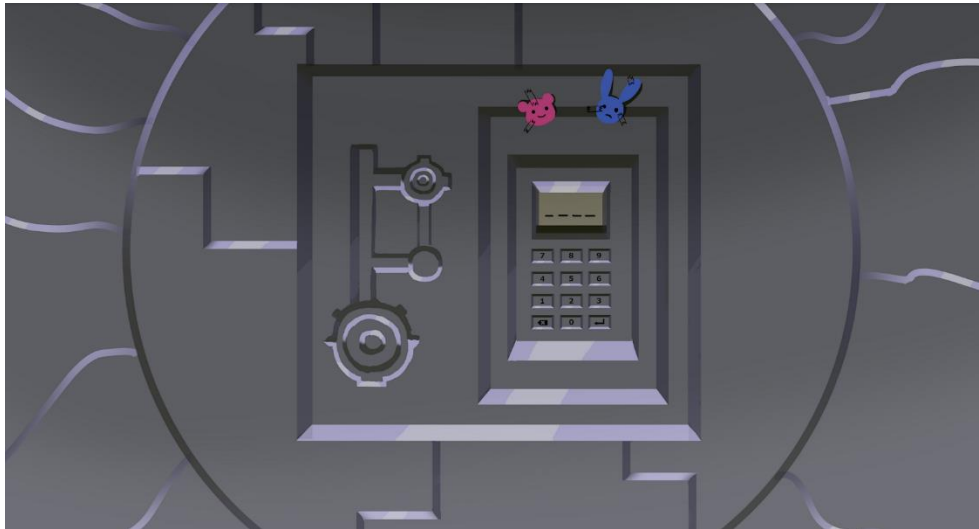


Figure 34. Padlock puzzle (Peo, 2019)

The padlock puzzle (Figure 34) requires the player to type the number of bears and rabbits on the paper (Figure 33) in order to unlock the door. The red door puzzle (Figure 35) demands a secret code deciphered by clues in the room.

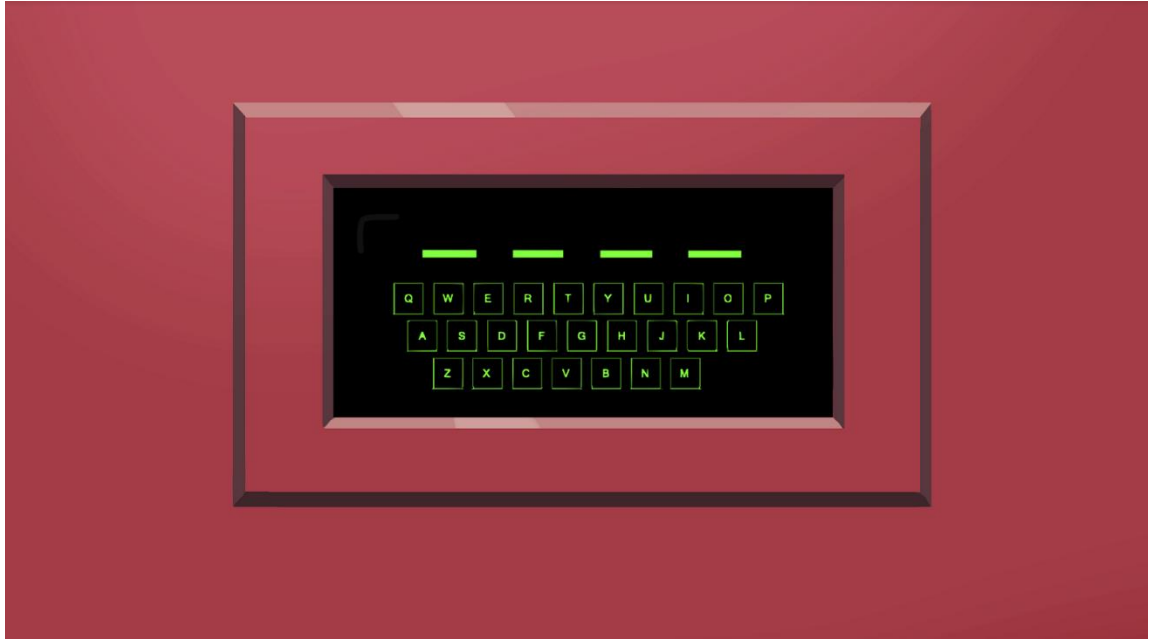


Figure 35. Red door puzzle (Peo, 2019)

After these puzzle images had been created, the author realized they did not match the style of the game. It would have been preferable if they were in the same style as the backgrounds or the characters. Having too many different art styles creates visual dissonance in a negative way.

4.6 Full-screen images (CG's)

Due to the limited amount of time, the author was not able to complete the full-screen images either. However, he feels that the sketches below are enough to tell the story.

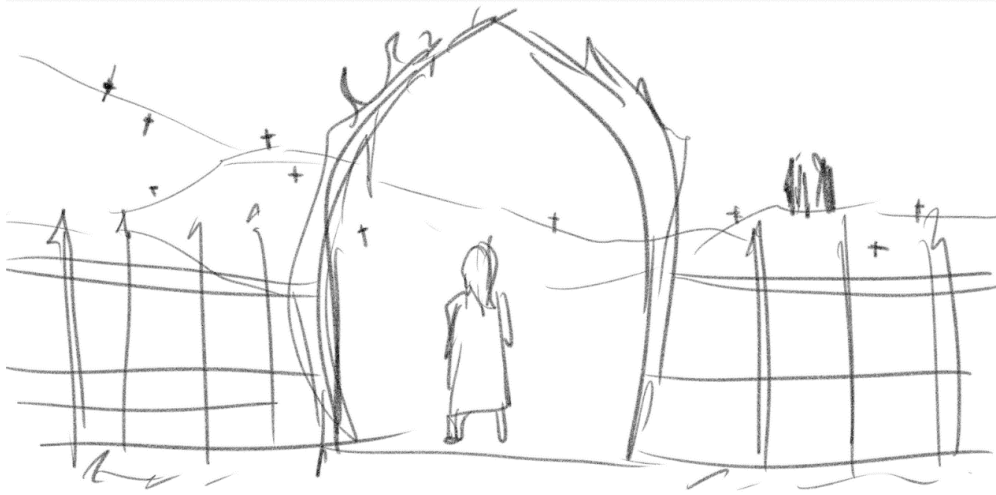


Figure 36. CG1 (Peo, 2019)

The first sketch is for Zoe's vision of her in a graveyard (Appendix). The hills are littered with crucifixes to indicate that it is a graveyard. Zoe is framed beneath an arched entrance and the hills slanting to the right with the hut in the distance balances the composition. This picture is an establishing shot and it tells the viewer that Zoe has just entered a strange area and is looking around to make sense of it all.



Figure 37. CG2 (Peo, 2019)

Figure 37 is a shot of Zoe from the torso up. Here, she is waking up in a place she does not recognise and is trying to focus her vision. The angle sets the mood for confusion and distraught and is located above her to clearly show her face based on the lighting in the awakening room.



Figure 38. CG3 (Peo, 2019)

Figure 38 is close shot of Zoe's face. Here she has just realized something grim and is focusing her thoughts on the outcome. This angle is used to create a feeling of suspense in film.

4.7 Performance

After all the important artworks had been created, they are assembled to make the game. The screenshots (Figures 39A-D) below are of the character sprites, backgrounds and user interface being tested in the game.



Figure 39A. In-game screenshot. (Peo, 2019)



Figure 39B. In-game screenshot. (Peo, 2019)



Figure 39C. In-game screenshot. (Peo, 2019)

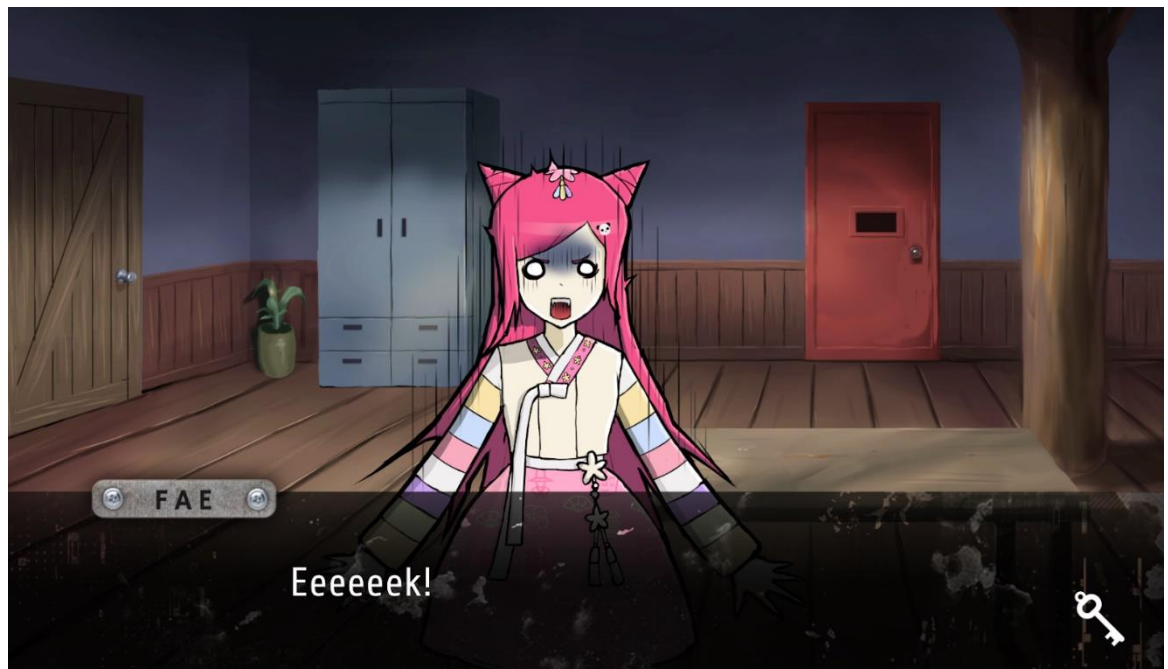


Figure 39D. In-game screenshot. (Peo, 2019)

All the visual elements created are performing as they were intended to. Initially, the author was sceptical due to the difference in art style between the character

and background but ultimately feels that they do work well together. The characters need this style to be comedic just as the backgrounds need their style to be dark and grim. Together, they create an adventure that is a mix of fun and terror.

5 CONCLUSION

Overall, it is evident that more care was put into the designs of the characters. This caused the quality of some of the other artworks to suffer. Nonetheless, the author feels that it was a reasonable pay off as the characters are the backbone of the game and were correctly prioritized.

The character Fae was successfully executed through her design and sprites as they fleshed out everything that made the character. And although some of the other characters' sprites could not be completed due to the time constraint, the author still considers their designs to be a success will add them to the game in the future.

As for the backgrounds, the author struggled with the realistic style because of his limited experience. Nevertheless, he feels that it was the appropriate art direction to take. It tells the story the way the writer wanted it to be told. A dark, sci-fi, semi-realistic environment with colourful characters to contrast can offer quite a different experience.

In terms of performance, the author feels that the visual characterization of the cast and environment was a success. However, there is not enough gameplay content for a fair assessment. More pieces need to be added to the game and tested. Ultimately, the success of the game is reliant on the writer's skills as a developer and storyteller.

With the puzzles, the author feels that their execution was a failure. They should have been in the same semi-realistic style as the backgrounds in order to integrate better. This can be remedied by rendering them further in the future.

As a conclusion, the author would consider his part of the project to be a success. Despite a few bumps along the way, he achieved the goals he set—good visual characterization and environment design.

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Figure 18. Destiny Child. Copyright Shift Up Co. 2017.

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Figure 39A. In-game screenshot. Peo, S. 2019.

Figure 39B. In-game screenshot. Peo, S. 2019.

Figure 39C. In-game screenshot. Peo, S. 2019.

Figure 39D. In-game screenshot. Peo, S. 2019.

ALL EQUAL

Overview

All Equal is an adventure game / visual novel with a plotline shrouded in mystery and features several characters that the player interacts with as well as puzzles which are necessary to solve for progress.

Genre

All Equal is mainly a visual novel, meaning that the majority of the game consists of storytelling as well as character interaction but mixed in with riddles and puzzles.

Gameplay

Being a visual novel, adventure game and a puzzle game at the same time, All Equal consists mostly of static background images that the player must inspect in order to trigger new interactions, find clues as well as solve actual puzzles that they may find in the environment. The story is linear, meaning that the narrative does not branch at any point and has only one set goal as the endgame.

Look and Feel

The overall premise and setting is fairly grimdark, with a feeling similar to that of something such as Saw, but with less grit. The characters are much more colorful and have loud personalities to give it a slightly silly contrast, but the fates of the characters and how the story treats them does not waver despite that.

Story and Narrative

All Equal starts off without giving out too much of its story, only revealing it gradually to the player. The full image is as such: the story takes place in a location known as The Great South, which is treated as sort of an error in existence itself, existing approximately between life and death.

The Great South is not created for any meaningful purpose, although it does work as a multi-dimensional station between the deceased and the lifeforms that they are going to be reborn as, effectively meaning that half of the souls trapped in it are recently

deceased and the other half are respectively who they are reborn as later on. The Great South takes the form of an apartment block consisting of 10 numbered floors as well as a bottom floor, with the front door in the bottom leading into a black void of nothingness

without an edge and a huge, red door at floor number 10 leading into a chamber that lets the living souls be reborn and the deceased to finally pass on.

The story is told from the perspective of a young lady named Zoe, who awakens in the Great South without any idea on where she is at and what has happened to her. She soon meets another girl her age named Fae, whom she teams up with. Zoe and Fae then go on a journey to discovering the truth about The Great South, eventually finding out that Fae has died in real life and that Zoe is her reincarnation. They eventually make it to the end, letting Zoe be reborn as a baby while Fae peacefully passes on to the afterlife.

Platform

The game will be developed for PC.

Platform

Lauri Rinne - Writer, programmer, game designer, director
Sam Peo - Artist, character designer
Nam-Anh Lê - UI Artist

BACKGROUNDS

Zoe's awakening room

This one's done.

Room 800

Two doors, the other being red. Necessary props: A cupboard, and a houseplant.

Room 810

Room with a human-sized incubator-looking machine in the corner, but large enough to be an obvious point of interest. Only one door visible (the player won't be able to return to room 800 from here anymore.)

Room 820

Weird-looking contraption on the floor with a small green monitor on it. There is a big engraving on one of the walls stating "I am a five when alone, but in the company of somebody who can sympathize with me, we become a full ten."

Room 830

To be specified

Room 840

To be specified

Room 850

To be specified

CG'S

An image of Zoe standing in a graveyard with her back facing the camera

A closeup of Zoe in her Awakening Room with her eyes closed, focusing.

An image of Zoe and Jenny in a dark-ish room, with Zoe speaking into an oldish-looking microphone, looking slightly worried/nervous while Jenny is just neutrally airheaded in the background.

A closeup of Zoe in the exact same situation, with a very shocked/anxious face, sweat dripping from it, like she just learned something that she can't quite process.

PUZZLE CG'S

The bunny-bear note that you already know about.

Closeup of the padlock where the puzzle is done - from a straight angle as the player will do their input here.

Two halves of a note separately that only reads thick morse code - I will specify this thing later, so don't start working on it quite yet.

Closeup of a square monitor (res 680x680) (the floor contraption one). It needs three very simple square images to go along with it (res 680x680) - 1) green background with a sketch of a hand on it, 2) red background with a sketch of a rat on it and 3) blue background with a sketch of human dna on it. All of them are the same size and will be part of a puzzle where they're all on top of each other in this sort of 3x3 grid puzzle where the player must work the right images together correctly - I'll make a picture depicting it. [EXAMPLE HERE](#)

Closeup of the red door puzzle - a simple monitor that can fit a 4-letter word.

Close up of a monitor in the incubator machine of room 810 - don't bother having anything ON the monitor, I will handle that.

CHARACTER SPRITES

Fae - Neutral. Mouth open. Looks maybe a bit pissed off neutrally but not too much. Don't make her too airheaded-looking in this one because it's used in a lot of her dialogue and needs to fit.

Fae - Neutral, exact copy of above but with mouth closed, copy and paste most

Fae - Neutral. exact copy of the first neutral but with a bratty, wicked smile, like she's up to something.

Fae - Angry, arms in some sort of position while angry. Mouth open.

Fae - Angry, exact copy of above but with mouth closed, copy and paste most

Fae - Dismissive. Looks kinda disappointed and to the side a bit maybe. Maybe pouting.

Fae - Questioning. Mouth open, looks like she doesn't quite believe/understand what you're saying and is questioning your believability in a condescending way.

Fae - Bored. A bit of a goofy bored sprite, maybe eyes drawn in a slightly off-model one punch man kinda way.

Fae - Laughing. Laughing mockingly, like she just made a joke on your expense and doesn't regret it one bit. Bratty

Jenny - Neutral. Looks straight forward at you with a very airheaded expression. Mouth closed.

Jenny - Neutral. Exact copy of above but with mouth slightly open, copy and paste most.

Jenny - Neutral. Exact copy of above but her head looks to the side. Mouth open.

Taro - Neutral. Simply looking forward.

Taro - Neutral. Same as above, but with slightly more serious eyes.

Taro - Neutral. Same as first neutral, but head and eyes looking a bit to the side.

Taro - Friendly. Some sort of very friendly and approachable pose, eyes closed.

Taro - Laughing proudly. Not mockingly, but as if you said something really funny. Usually associated with his loud "ha-ha!" manner of speech. Maybe arms in some sort of "superman" pose (fists on his hips) while doing this, and leaning backwards a bit, that kind of laugh.

STORY SYNOPSIS - PROJECT NAME “ALL EQUAL”

Chapter 1: In The Beginning

Chapter 2: Set You Free

Chapter 3: In Bodily Form

Chapter 4: Do Not Be Afraid

Chapter 5: The Great Equalizer

[CHAPTER 1 BEGINS HERE.] The story is focused around the female main character (C1) and a slightly younger female supporting character (C2) who team up to survive a mysterious cement labyrinth filled with puzzles, riddles, obstacles and dangerous traps. Neither of them remember anything about the day before them waking up in the odd complex. Before long, they manage to find a huge screen where a highly intelligent A.I. greets them and informs them about their current location, which is the top floor of a 99-story building known as The Great South. The A.I. introduces itself as “Geth”, an immature artificial intelligence that recognizes itself as the sole controller of the building, yet has no recollection on why humans are being gathered there. Geth decides to help the two for the time being to it’s best ability, and requests that they’d turn on power in several sections of the building so that Geth can gain access to more information. **[CHAPTER 1 ENDS HERE. CHAPTER 2 BEGINS HERE.]**

As they move forward, meet new people trapped in different rooms of the building, witness some of their allies lose their lives and find out more about the building through Geth, C1 and C2 finally make it to the bottom floor of the building. To their surprise, the front door is not locked - to their slightly bigger surprise, there is absolutely nothing beyond the door. Nothing but a black abyss lacking any substance that leads nowhere and that seemingly has no beginning or end. Along with this revelation, Geth reveals that it had been feeding C1 and C2 false information about the outside ever since a certain point after extending it’s knowledge. While the main characters assume that this actually makes Geth their enemy, it defends itself by claiming that their journey is not yet over, and that they still don’t know as much as it does, which is apparently best for them. **[CHAPTER 2 ENDS HERE. CHAPTER 3 BEGINS HERE.]**

The only thing Geth knows that C1 and C2 should do from now on is to gain access to “Two”, a weapon that would serve as their key to the gigantic closed door in the 99th floor’s main hall. After many complications, they find Two and find that it’s a mechanical puppet lacking an artificial intelligence. Geth requests that they install it’s data into Two, as exporting all of it into Two’s system would

be enough to run the puppet, giving it motion. Geth gains access to Two and becomes Geth Two, which is then capable of opening the huge door for C1 and C2 - but before it does that, Geth Two kills C2 in front of C1's eyes out of the blue. **[CHAPTER 3 ENDS HERE. CHAPTER 4 BEGINS HERE.]**

Geth Two explains to C1 that it falsely believed itself to be a controller in The Great South, but during its gathering of knowledge, this turned out to not be true. Geth Two instead reveals that both itself, C1, C2 and everyone they've met so far have in one way or another lost their lives in the real world and ended up here. It still doesn't understand whether that is to test if they're eligible for heaven or hell, or if their simply lost souls that couldn't end up in either, but the only thing Geth Two knows for good is that the huge door is the way out and that only one can do so.

[To here, a momentary blank. Geth Two dies in the hands of a new male ally, C3]. C3 is highly intelligent and requests help from C1 in exchange for a shocking promise - that C2 is actually still alive, as long as they go back to where they first found her, a room which is now much more difficult to reach than before.

But they do eventually reach the room, and find her alive, although traumatized, and with seemingly no memories of her former friend, C1. They take her with her while wondering if there is any way to open the huge door anymore, and that if they can confirm that Geth Two's words were even true. C3 claims that after researching writings found throughout the building, he could make the assumption that only half of the people in the building are truly dead, and half of them are actually alive. He claims that the people who are "dead" can not die for good inside the complex, but will instead be reborn where they started, but with their memories erased, their mental well-being being more and more deranged over time, and the dark circles in their eyes growing thicker each time they die. He could tell from C2's corpse's eyes in the 99th floor that she had died multiple times without knowing. **[CHAPTER 4 ENDS HERE. CHAPTER 5 BEGINS HERE.]**

After some time exploring new rooms in some of the floors, the gang finds the final clue to the building's true identity. The Great South is a special abstract level between life and death, dedicated to people who are eligible for reincarnation instead of being sent to the afterlife, and that it is where deceased beings and their upcoming reincarnations meet. The Great South is merely the final step to test whether their wills to live are fierce enough to warrant a new life, which is why reincarnations inside the building are capable of permanent death, while their original dead forms will keep reviving and will only perish as soon as the reincarnation is complete. What Geth had understood as "only one can leave" actually meant "only one of you two can leave". C3 is now capable of decrypting

a piece of code that has them gain access to the huge door in the 99th floor's hall, which leads into the 100th floor called "Garden", the final step before a reincarnation can take place. It's a lengthy maze full of some of the most complicated and difficult puzzles that the characters have faced so far.

After clearing the last floor, the characters arrive into a small room with a small cube emitting light. C2 explains that while she is still very confused about her situation, as much as she understands, she had made more friends in The Great South than she did while she was alive, which is why she regrets losing her

memories so many times in a row. She also states that she can feel the cube's energy rejecting her due to her being a dead person, which C1 finds to be words of confirmation of her state, as she herself feels the cube luring her towards it. C3, all the while, finds himself to be highly depressed, as he wasn't too sure if he was a dead person or a reincarnation - he can feel the cube rejecting himself, as well.

Right before C1 has to part her two remaining friends with tears in her eyes, the energy in the room starts to give her and her companions euphoric images that open their eyes fully to the situation - she realizes that she is the reincarnation of C2, something that she had slightly suspected before. C3, in the meanwhile, realizes that he had killed his own reincarnation, which turns out to be the artificial intelligence that called itself Geth. However, he finishes by stating that he'll have an easier time living in The Great South knowing that he wouldn't be reborn as malicious data. The reason why he never passed on is most likely because Geth can't truly "die" since his artificial intelligence is still possible to salvage from Geth Two's remains, but C3 figures that it's better for things to be like this and for him to stay in The Great South forever instead of ever letting Geth reincarnate.

The main character shares a final moment with her friends, touches the cube, and proceeds towards reincarnation as a human baby. **[CHAPTER 5 ENDS HERE. THE END.]**

CHARACTER PROFILES

The Main Character - Zoe

Full Name: -

Sex: Female

Appearance: Pale skin, winter jacket, hair in a ponytail. Her facial features look quite sharp and serious, although not overly dominating or condescending.

-

The Secondary Main Character - Fae

Full Name: -

Sex: Female

-

Personality: Energetic, loud, speaks everything that pops into her mind. Enjoys making fun of Zoe

Minor Characters

Solomon

Solomon is a cold and calculating person of a dubious background. He seems to be much more experienced in traversing and understanding The Great South compared to Fae and Zoe and has a natural leader aura to him. Sometimes he likes to specify to other characters that he is not a hero and could not care less how many survive as long as he is alive, and while this makes a lot of the other characters hate him, he is simply striking fear onto others out of his own insecurities. He lacks sympathy for others to a point where you could almost call it a mental disorder and often times his horrible socialization skills hinder him down a lot. He is one of the only people who talks back to Fae's insults due to his thin skin.

Taro

A Japanese tourist who has found himself in The Great South, much like everyone else. However, he seems very happy and optimistic about the situation compared to the others. Sometimes it seems like his optimism is pretty much just

plain stupidity, as he laughs Fae's remarks off whenever she tries to insult her and sometimes even laughingly agrees. He is very easygoing and relaxed.

His appearance is burlier and larger than the other characters. He's tall and muscular and in very good shape, and probably has little to no hair. Most likely wears suspenders.

Jenny

She is a girl whose entire image is based around the "gyaru" archetype. Jenny's situational awareness is very lacking and her observations to all things happening around her do not contribute very much. Despite that, she isn't evil or bad, but rather very nice but just simple-minded and curious. She has a fondness towards Taro because of how willing he is to explain things to her.

Her appearance is similar to the "gyaru" trend in Japan, and she is relatively short, although not as short as Fae.

Lavender

A girl who has a striking resemblance to Solomon in terms of personality. She showcases natural leadership skills but is much more outspoken and actually tries to understand people as well. Despite her cold straightforwardness and loud voice, she is very comfortable to be around and is constantly trying to find ways to help other people, taking it very roughly upon herself as she ends up being useless in any regard. This aspect of her personality also makes her a bit naive, which ends up sealing her fate as well. Some time after her death it is revealed that she was supposed to be the reincarnation of Solomon.

Damaged Coward With An Off-model Design

A man whose other eye is damaged and thus covered with some type of cloth. He speaks in a very simple way and is very overly polite and sometimes even seen as a coward. Sometimes he tries very hard to be dependable but falls short every time due to Zoe and Fae making more progress at a better pace, as well as Solomon's party doing the same thing elsewhere while he fails to prove himself each time. Fae eventually confronts him about it, explaining that he's never going to get things done if he tries to play a hero instead of agreeing to work as a group with somebody.

ALL EQUAL

L.R.

Prologue: South

Image: Zoe is shown standing in a graveyard, with her back against the camera.

???

(I can't remember what lured me here.)

(One moment I was walking home from school... And then suddenly I just found myself in this place.)

Effect: There is a brief, gentle flash on the screen.

(I felt it again.)

(A familiar life force is calling my name. Something that feels tied to me.)

(But what? Who?)

(My father is not buried anywhere close to this town...)

(Why am I here?)

(What am I looking **for**?)

Image: All white

(...Who?...)

Image: Darkness.

???

(In that moment, it crossed my mind.)

(That in which we are all equal.)

(Without question, that was **it**.)

Image: A bright light enveloping in the darkness.

???

(I felt the weight of the darkness pressing on my entire body. I couldn't tell what direction I was facing or if what I was experiencing was even real.)

(My voice was gone and my eardrums felt like they were about to rupture even though I could barely hear anything in the first place.)

(There's only so long that I can lie down senseless without feeling a massive influx of despair crawl up on me...)

(And then, it finally got to me.)

Help...

Somebody, please...

(As if sent from above as a gift from God, I started to regain some of my senses, slowly but surely.)

(My eyes felt like they were ready to open. And thus, I embraced myself for...)

Image: Darkness.

???

(There they are.)

(These are definitely my senses. There's no mistaking it.)
(I can feel... The cold floor pressing against my shoulder blades.)
(I can hear... Surprisingly little, but there's definitely an atmosphere in here.)
(I can see... The roof. Or rather, a roof that I have never seen before in my life.)
Well, no use just staying on my back. Let's get up.

Location: Zoe's starting room.

???

(What is this?)
(It definitely is a room, but I've never seen one like this.)
(The patterns on the walls... No, on the ceiling and the floor as well reminded me of, I don't know, some sort of space shuttle.)
(Or is that what you call 'em?)
(Whatever, it definitely wasn't somewhere I would imagine getting myself lost in on a regular basis.)
Speaking of which, I find it odd how relaxed I feel despite the circumstances.
...
(I spoke out loud to confirm that my voice was indeed not shaking. I found myself totally lost in the creepiest situation I had ever been in...)
(...And yet, I felt entirely stress-free.)
Aaaaaah!
(I smacked my palms against my cheeks, as if that would solve anything.)
Whether this is a dream or not, I won't achieve anything by just standing in place like a tree!
Let's see... My name is Zoe, I'm 20 years old, and I have a puppy named Dax.
Everything seems to add up - I definitely don't have amnesia, at least. So far so good.

Yesterday, while making rice with béarnaise sauce for dinner, when my mother chimed in with a lame bear pun.

I called it stupid but still giggled at it before falling asleep later that night.

I woke up to greet this day, went to school, and...

...

(Huh. It's definitely getting hazy at this point.)

(I felt dread going down my spine as I realized that it might have not been "today" anymore...)

(Did I get kidnapped? I wonder how many days have passed since then.)

(My skin doesn't show any signs of assault or resistance and I don't feel like I've been drugged.)

(I stood up and touched some of the walls to confirm that they were actually there as my mind was trying to wrap itself around the moment.)

(Before I knew it, I was exploring the entire room thoroughly like a curious cat.)

Interaction: Note on the floor

Zoe

It's a piece of paper. Is it mine? Definitely doesn't seem like anything out of my notebooks...

Not that I have any of my school supplies with me in the first place, for some reason.

(I carefully picked it up while staring at the back of it, and then flipped it over.)

(The contents surprised me a little bit. It was a large image consisting of bears and bunnies.)

What is this?

A riddle?

(There's definitely a good chance that this will make sense somehow, I think.)

Interaction: Window in the middle of the wall

Zoe

(It's the only window in the room, but I'm not sure if there's even anything on the other side.)

(The design is wild and I can't see anything beyond. Perhaps I'll try knocking on it.)

SOUND EFFECT

KNOCK *KNOCK*

Zoe

Huh?

I can absolutely tell from the knock that there's some space behind it!

But how am I supposed to crack this thing open - that's the real question.

(As I said that, I came to realize that the assumed window was full of odd contraptions of some kind.)

(Some of them resembled knobs. I tried turning them, but to no avail. They were more or less stuck in place.)

(I'm guessing some of these parts were simply used to force the window shut.)

(But what about the rest? This thing in the middle is like, one of those things you use to pay at the supermarket.)

(That means there's definitely a way to get out from inside!)

Surely it won't hurt to try, right?

4 numbers... How many possible combinations was that again?

Wait, no. There should definitely be a solution here somewhere.

Upon completion of Puzzle 1

Yeesss! Victory!

(I shouted with adrenaline flowing through my veins, and yet I had no idea what I would be meeting on the other side.)

Whatever I'll see next can't be any worse than sitting inside a claustrophobic little box, right?

Right. Deep breaths. After that, I'll dwell inside.

Oh man... I really wish I was home petting Dax right now.

(I followed my own instructions and dived right in.)

Location: Room 800

(The room beyond the window - this is it.)

(This one looked much more manmade compared to the cube I had just come from.)

(It looked like a combination between some sort of basement and a boring office space.)

Not especially filthy, but it could use a housekeeper. Has that plant in the corner even been watered in a while?

(Now, regarding any new signs of life...)

(After standing in total silence for way too long, I was expecting to hear at least something else other than ambience for a change.)

(But what ended up greeting me right away was only something that I could call a... ball of lightning.)

Zoe

Oh!

Hey, are you also-

???

Eeeeeek!

Zoe

H-Huh!?

(Try as I might, I could not believe I had run into another person in a situation like this.)

(And she didn't look very hostile either - if captors were involved in the case, she definitely wouldn't be one of them. Not at that age.)

???

W-What the hell!? Are you into startling people for no reason or something!?
What are you staring into space for? I asked you a question, ribbon head!

Zoe

R-Ribbon head?

(She was obviously trying to insult me, but coming from her it was just sort of cute.)

Zoe

Hey, listen. I, I just sort of haven't talked to another person in a while, so I was preparing myself to... Well, you see...

???

Ugh, speak clearly! You're not the only one who's totally lost right now, you know?

And does this look like a god damn social situation to you?

Zoe

(I sure wanted it to be one - but my momentary joy of having found somebody else was just now overshadowed by this kid's foul mouth and non-existent manners.)

(You're the senior here, Zoe! Show her who should be calling the shots!)

Zoe

Listen here, little lady. I'm n-

???

L-L-Little lady!? Shut your trap!

I'm twenty years old! Geez, you're no different from the rest! Dumbass!

That's it! Don't move a muscle.

Eat dirt!!

Zoe

Twenty!? No wait, that's-

(Her words were not a mere threat. She spun around and I felt her heel hit the back of my knee like a missile.)

Yowch!!

???

Be more selective with your words from now on.

You finally started using your voice, at least, so I'll forgive you for now.

Zoe

Fro... Ouch... From now on? Does that mean you want me to keep you company?

Aren't you scared of what's happening around us? Shouldn't you be more wary of older p- I mean, other people right now?

???

Careful!

Pfft. As if I'd have to be wary of a wuss like you.

You give me an impression of the kind of loser who would cry over stepping on an ant colony by accident.

Zoe

...

(She's totally right, too.)

(I stood up as soon as my left knee could bend again.)

I feel like we need to start over. With, you know, an introduction.

???

Whatever. Just spit it out.

Zoe

My name's Zoe. What's yours?

Fae

Fae.

Just call me that. No funny nicknames.

Zoe

I hope we get to know each other better then, Fae.

But, uhh, you're twenty years old, huh? We're the same age then.

Fae

Don't "same age" me, ribbonhead. What month?

Zoe

Huh?

Fae

There's kinda these twelve things that the year's divided into. Which one were you born in?

Zoe

Oh, uhh... December 13th.

Fae

Ohohohoho! I kinda feel bad for bullying a toddler now! What should I even do with myself?

Zoe

S-So what? What month were you born in, then!?

Fae

December 5th.

Zoe

(She's overjoyed by such a marginal difference, huh. I'll let her bask in it for the time being.)

Listen, should we really be bickering like this right now? There's so much we're both curious about, I'm sure.

Fae

Yeah, you're right about that. Like where in the world we are, for starters.

Hey, be useful for once. The hell was beyond that shaft you came in from?

Zoe

Oh, that? It was an odd cubicle-like room, nothing like I'd ever seen before! And then there was this note, and you wouldn't bel-

Fae

Geez, shut your mouth. I now know that it's no different from my side of the story, anyways.

See that door on the left? Beyond it lies another room. In that room, you can find a vault-looking thingie that leads to the room where I woke up.

My room was also filled to the brim with weird images on the walls, as well as valves, and all of this irritating problem-solving...

Ugh, I never want to solve another puzzle again in my entire life.

Zoe

(I almost feel sorry for her.)

Any idea who might have done this?

Fae

My guesses are as good as yours, Ribby.

Might be some sort of brave experiment to test out new escape room attractions or something.

But this goes beyond borderline illegal. I hope whoever came up with this crap gets sued to hell and back.

But what I do know for sure that there are other people in here besides us.

Zoe

There are!?

I mean, it makes sense. Why stop at two for such an elaborate scheme? But still!
Hey, what makes you so sure? Did you meet somebody else!?

Fae

Geez, stop shouting all of a sudden!

And nah, I haven't even been able to get outta this stupid room for hours now.
But every now and then I keep hearing things from beyond that red door behind me.

It's definitely somebody else's voice - I can tell.

Tried to open it once or twice, but it's no good, so I just dropped the idea.

Zoe

(I took a look at the red door. It looked like something that could never be forced open, much like the one that I managed to get through earlier.)

(Still, I wonder if there really is somebody in the next room? I hope they're okay...)

So, Fae. What do you think we should do next?

Fae

I think you mean what YOU should be doing next.

Zoe

What? How come?

Fae

I already told you that I ain't doing any dumb ass puzzles anymore. I'm satisfied for the time being.

You figure it out. I'll try to look out for something useful, I guess. Have fun.

Zoe

(She's actually slacking off at a time like this? Talk about irresponsible.)

(But I'm afraid to say it to her face - this girl's like a little landmine waiting to be stepped on.)

(But we've barely even met and she's already got an attitude going on - it's kind of disappointing to me.)

Well then, maybe I'll start looking around for anything that might help us with that red door.

Interaction: Fae

Zoe

So, uhh... You're really not going to help me with this door, now are you?

Fae

Nah. I'm way on edge right now.

I'll tell you if I find anything suspicious, so just trust me, and start sniffing around like the dog you are.

Zoe

(D-Dog!?)

Interaction: Plant

Zoe

At least that plant brings SOME life into this gloomy room.

Fae

Not to mention somebody's taking care of it right now.

Zoe

W-W-What? You can see g-g-g-ghosts!?

Fae

You're such a dummy, Ribby. I mean "right now" as in "it's been watered recently and most likely will be watered in the future".

Zoe

Oh. You sure do know a lot about plants.

Fae

You're observant, huh. I picked up a few hobbies, mostly due to boredom.

Wait, no. Anyone could have told that plant is in a fair condition. I take back that compliment.

Zoe

(Ouch.)

Interaction: Door on the left (too early)

Zoe

(I should search this room thoroughly before entering the room next to where Fae claims to have awoken.)

(Room room room room. It's starting to not sound like a real word anymore...)

Interaction: Red door (too early)

Zoe

(I can't make heads or tails out of the red door's mechanisms as of now.)

(Just this once I'll make an exception and investigate everything one-by-one before fiddling with this door at all.)

Interaction: Topmost cupboard

Zoe

(The topmost cupboard is mostly empty - but there are some leftover documents inside.)

(Though everything has been crossed over with a black marker. I can't make any sense off of it.)

(Or can I...? Maybe there's something I'm missing here.)

Interaction: Bottom cupboard

Zoe

(In the cupboard on the bottom... Whoah, what's this?)

(It's half of a note. That's funny.)

(Did somebody destroy it with the intention of making this riddle impossible to solve?)

(No, that can't be it. This one's "clues 101", Zoe!)

Interaction: Door on the left

Zoe

I think that's about it for this place.

How about the room on the left next? Or did you dig through it already, Fae?

Fae

Probably would have if I had any friggin' motivation left.

Not to mention there's barely anything to see there with the exception of some random junk on the floor.

Zoe

...Something tells me this "random junk" is worth investigating.

Fae

Surely you can't be serious.

Zoe

The name's Zoe! And I AM serious about it. Let's go!

Fae

Ugh.

Location: Room 820

Zoe

It looks pretty similar to the one we just came from, does it not?

Fae

Hey, I've spent the last decade staring at these god damn walls like I was outta my mind, whaddya think?

Zoe

W-Well, anyways, I got curious about this "random junk" you described, and I really want to check it out, first and foremost.

Fae

Be my guest.

Upon completion: Curious floor mechanism

Zoe

Aaaaand we're open!

(The lid in the center of the mechanism opened and I was greeted to something fairly familiar.)

Oh, look. It's a half of a note.

Fae

Uhh... You okay in the head, Ribby?

Zoe

What? What makes you say that?

Fae

Normal people don't mumble to themselves while inspecting other people's lost shopping lists, you know.

Zoe

Oh, give me a break! I like to... Observe, audibly.

Anything wrong with that?

Fae

Well, I guess not. Besides the fact that it makes you look like a total freak, but be my guest.

Zoe

And besides, this note is definitely not a shopping list. I've seen something very similar to it not long ago, and I'm pretty sure it's related to our escape.

Fae

Wait. Are you seriously implying that you've almost cracked the code to the red door? By groveling on the floor like a dog?

Zoe

...Just trust me, okay?

(Time to go back and put some pieces together.)

Upon completion: Red door puzzle

Zoe

(I turned around as soon as the lock of the red door clicked, if only to notify Fae...)

(...but before I could say anything, I was taken aback by her reaction.)

Fae

W-W-What?

Zoe

What's wrong, Fae? We can go through now. You don't have to be sitting around in this room anymore.

Fae

Y-Yeah, I can see that. However...

Did you really just solve all of that nonsense by yourself? And in such a short amount of time?

Wait, don't answer me - of course you did. Stupid question. Stupid me. What else could have just happened?

Zoe

I'm, uhh... I'm afraid to ask, but is there something wrong about what I did?

Fae

No, no. Ribby, you did good for now.

I guess I'll swallow my pride for this once and admit that I'm sort of impressed.

Zoe

Hee-hee-hee... It's not that big of a deal.

I'm just like, really obsessed with detective shows and mystery novels, and a lot of these puzzles are cereal box mazes in comparison.

Fae

...So, a total nerd. Color me surprised.

Whatever. All the riddles and whatnot from now on are completely up to you, Ribby.

I hereby declare you a pureblood Puzzle Wiz. So go nuts.

Zoe

W-WHAT!?

So you're not going to help me at all!?

Fae

Oh, please. My cute face will be your emotional support.

Besides, you seem to be waaaay into this nerdy problem-solving crap, so I'd just be in your way.

Now, if you could open the red door for us, Miss Puzzle Wiz.

Zoe

Stop calling me that!

(Wait. I don't think I ever accepted "Ribby" as a name either, so why am I only complaining now?)

(...Let's put that aside for the time being and enjoy the progress.)

Anyways, you ready?

Fae

Yep. Go ahead and open it up.

Zoe

(I put my hand on the door's handle. I could actually turn it now, just like I figured.)

(The handle turned, a click was heard, and...)

(The red door opened.)

(We ventured into the following room.)

Location: Room 810

Zoe

Oh!

H-Hello!

(Fae was right, there WERE people in here!)

...Helloooo?

???

...

Fae

Yahooooo? Everything right between the ears? We're kinda trying to talk to you here.

???

...

...Eeeeeeeeh.

More funny-looking people are here.

Fae

Yo, you ever looked in a mirror before?

Zoe

Calm down, Fae! We've just met her.

Hello there! What's, uhh, who are you?

Jenny

...My name's Jenny.

Zoe

I'm Zoe. And this is Fae. Can you tell me what's going on in this place?

Jenny

...Eeeeh. Well, first Jenny walked around with nothing to do, and then Jenny heard voices....

...And then, and then funny-looking people came from behind the blue door to greet Jenny...

Fae

That's not what she meant, Shorty! What the hell have you been doing your entire time in this... Whatever we're at?

Zoe

(Shorty? She's taller than you.)

Jenny

...Eeeeh. Well, apparently Jenny woke up in a square room, but was fast asleep and couldn't see it...

...And then Jenny was in a hallway, and then Jenny was here.

Zoe

...I see.

(That makes zero sense. I really doubt she sleepwalked out of her cubicle.)

Fae

It makes me sick.

Zoe

Huh? What does?

Fae

Aren't you seeing a pattern here, Ribby? Whoever brought us here is clearly targeting nothing but young girls.

Jenny

...Eeeeh. But Taro isn't a girl at all.

Zoe

Taro? What are you talking about?

Jenny

Taro is Jenny's friend. Jenny met Taro here, and has not met anyone else.

But he's in daaaanger right now.

"There could be no air, Jenny, so break the glass if I don't return in 10 minutes."

That's what Taro said to Jenny.

But, Jenny has nothing to break the glass with, so Taro is still there.

Zoe

W-What!? How long ago was this!?

Jenny

...Jenny thinks it's been around 3 hours now.

Zoe

W-W-WHAAAAAT!?

Jenny, where is Taro locked in!? Please, tell us! We need to get him out, now!

(Jenny didn't say anything, but instead pointed at a device in the room that looked like a human-sized incubator.)

(It was humming slightly and also lit up, but despite that I could not make out a human figure through the glass.)

(In fact, I couldn't see anything. The machine's insides were covered in smoke.)

(I tried to force it's lid open, but to no avail.)

Fae

Bust it open, Ribby! Use your gorilla strength!

Zoe

What gorilla strength!?

No, I'm... Pretty sure that there might be another way to open this thing.
I just need to think. Think, think, think.

Jenny

But Taro said to break the glass.

Fae

So why haven't you!?

Jenny

Eeeeh. Jenny's not very strong. Jenny would cut her fingers.

Zoe

(This Taro person sure got himself a solid insurance before locking himself in there.)

(Anyways, I need to get this incubator, or whatever, open right away.)

(I hope to God he's okay...)

Upon completion: Incubator Puzzle

Fae

You did it, Ribby! It's opening!

???

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

Zoe

(As the lid opened, we were immediately greeted to roaring laughter - the last thing we would have expected.)

(While we were taken aback, a leg emerged from amongst the smoke.)

???

Why, you have my gratitude for that one, Jenny!

Jenny

Eeeeh. Taro's welcome.

Fae

Hey, why are you thanking HER!? Ribby's the one who got you out!

Taro

Ha-ha! Oh, my apologies. It never crossed my mind that you young ladies could have helped. How rude of me!

As Jenny just said, the name's Taro. It's fantastic to see some fresh faces, I was afraid it was only going to be the two of us in here!

Zoe

Yes, I understand. It's the same for us, too. The name's Zoe, and she's Fae.

Taro

Ha-ha-ha! Pleased to meet you, Miss Zoe, Miss Fae!

Zoe

But what's really been bothering me for a while is...

How in the world did you get locked inside that contraption?

Taro

Oh, ha-ha! Well, it's a pretty long story. No, scratch that. It's relatively short, now that I think about it.

I climbed in out of pure curiosity. Nothing more!

Fae

...This guy has definitely hit his head real hard some point in time.

Taro

Wow, how mean! That's excellent, keep it up! Kids need to have spunk in order to survive in this harsh world, right?

Anyways, my little journey inside that chamber was not in vain, no no!

You see, there was a monitor inside. And since you were taking your time getting me out, I had quite a lot of time to inspect it!

Fae

Please be useful for once and tell us that it's a code that gets us out of this room or something.

Taro

Oh! Oh, no no. Absolutely nothing of the sort!

Not to mention, I've already figured out the way to get in and out of this room!

Hours ago, at that!

Zoe

R-Really? You have!?

Please, tell us!

Taro

All you have to do is twist the doorknob!

Zoe

...

Fae

...Ribby, I want to hit him.

Zoe

Resist, Fae. Please.

So what you're telling me is... The door's been open the entire time?

That's a great change of pace for a while.

Taro

Hahaha! I have got no idea what you mean. Very embarrassing!

But, regarding that information I discovered...

Ta-dah! It's a bunch of gibberish!

Zoe

...Huh.

(I keep running into a lot of things that seem to make no sense at first glance...)

(...So I'm taking that deduction with a grain of salt.)

Taro, could you please share this "information" with me?

I'm sure I can make sense of it to the best of my ability.

Taro

S-Sure, young lady! Right away! I wrote it down here in my notepad...

Or, was it in my old grocery list...? No worries, I shall find it in no time!

Fae

Hey, Ribby. While he's busy making up for his failures, I want to talk about something.

Zoe

Huh? I, yeah, what's up?

Fae

I've been thinking about this for a while, and... Uhh...

I'm...

...

Actually, I'll leave it to another time.

Zoe

...Huh?

(Is Fae trying to... Open up to me about something?)

(No, wait. I must have simply irked her in some way earlier.)

Fae. If you want to talk about something, we-

SOUND EFFECT: ALARM

Zoe

Eeek!!

Fae

What the!?

Taro

Aww, shucks! I dropped it!

Jenny

Noooo. It's the thing that makes Jenny's ears ring.

Zoe

What is this!? A siren!?

(As soon as I said that, the alarm stopped.)

(And following the silence, a voice emerged.)

???

Hello? Testing, testing. Hello?

Zoe

(A voice? So there are even more peo-)

(...No. Could it be one of our captors?)

???

If you can hear this transmission, you're in luck.

I suggest you stop stressing over the current situation and calm down. We are here to help.

My name is Solomon, and from now on, I will be your leader.

Zoe

(Solomon...?)

Fae

The hell? "Leader"? Who the hell do you think you are!?

Zoe

I'm fairly sure he can't hear you from here, Fae.

Taro

Oh, it's Leader again!

Jenny

Jenny doesn't like Leader. Leader hurts Jenny's ears every time he speaks to Jenny.

Fae

Can you stop repeating your name over and over already like a friggin' collectible monster!?

...Wait, nevermind that. Do both of you actually know this guy?

Didn't the dwarf princess just claim that you haven't met anybody else!?

Zoe

Guys, you're talking over him... I can't hear what he's saying.

Taro

Oh, haha! We haven't met Leader at any point.

Every now and then, he simply repeats those words over the speakers.

Zoe

(Which was enough to convince him to be your leader...?)

(Also, I still can't hear what he's saying at all.)

Taro

Sssh! He's going to continue from this point on.

Fae

Huh!? How do you...

???

Me and my followers reside in floor 6, in the room 650.

Come see us, and as you do, put your hands into the air as soon as you walk in.

We are constantly on alert. You can probably understand why, assuming that you have seen what this place has to offer.

If you happen to find any colored keys during your exploration, use the elevator in the hallway and bring them to us.

I will not repeat myself any more - your co-operation with me is crucial to everybody's survival.

This automated message will repeat again in an hour.

Zoe

(So the message is automated. No wonder Taro could tell that this Solomon person was going to continue.)

(Such a shame that I had to miss parts of the message due to the commotion.)

(Well, whatever. I'll be able to hear the rest in another hour.)

Fae

Whaddya mean "will repeat again in an hour"?

I haven't been able to hear crap even once, and I've been out of that cubicle for way more than an hour now!

Zoe

You sure about that, Fae?

Fae

Huuuh!?

Zoe

Think about it. The rooms that we were previously in didn't have any speakers, unlike this room.

Maybe Solomon's message is the voice that you kept hearing through the door every now and then.

Fae

...

Jenny

Eeeeh. Big sis Fae looks flustered.

Fae

Shaddup. Whenever did I agree to be your "big sis"?

Taro

Ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, youth! Don't you agree, Miss Zoe?

Zoe

Yeah... They're impossible, aren't they?

(And consider yourself lucky that Fae is busy arguing with Jenny. If she heard you imply her to be younger than me... Oh boy.)

Taro

Ha-ha! And so...

Game plan.

Zoe

...Huh? Yeah!

(Taro suddenly sounded much more serious than before.)

Taro

Like we agreed, here's the information I got from inside the contraption!

Zoe

Well, you weren't kidding. Certainly doesn't seem sensical at first glance.

Taro

Right? But if Miss Zoe is confident about using it to get us out of here, I'll gladly do whatever I can to help!

However, for now...

I think we should split up.

Zoe

...Huh?

Wait, so soon!?

Taro

Well, we do have to find some of those keys mentioned in Leader's message, right?

So far, Jenny and I have found nothing but dust, moths and you two.

But now I am certain! If we work together as groups, our progress will be twice as rapid! Does that not make anything but sense?

Ha-ha-ha! I can feel it now - we'll definitely make it out of here in no time!

Zoe

(Taro's suggestion sure came from behind the corner - and so did his optimism.)

(Well, I guess the plan makes sense...)

(...Although I would have liked to feel the safety of a big group for a change.)

Taro

Oh, there is no reason to worry, Miss Zoe! Turn that frown upside down!

Zoe

O-Oh. Sorry about that. It's just-

Taro

We'll agree to meet up in this room at a later date! But since there aren't any regular clocks in here...

We shall use Leader's next message rerun as a point of reference! Is that okay with you?

Zoe

Yeah, that sounds good. And you, Fae?

Fae

What? Whatever.

But I won't be solving any riddles - not now, not later.

That's all I wanna make clear.

Jenny

But Jenny will help Taro with riddles.

Taro

H-Haha... That's, that's okay, Jenny.

Fae

Hey, I only got one question for you, bigface.

Taro

...A-Am I “bigface”?

Fae

What makes you so sure we’ll be safe out there? You’d think a giant like you would be all about protecting women in a situation like this!

Taro

Oh, ha-ha! But I am certain that this place will pose no danger to us! After all, if our... “captors” had any security in here, Leader wouldn’t be able to hijack all the speakers for such a long period of time, now would he?

Fae

...

You better be right about that.

But you two put way too much trust into this Solomon guy. You call him “Leader” despite never even seeing him face-to-face.

I’m kinda convinced YOU’ll be the one in danger with that naivety of yours.

Taro

Ha-ha-ha-ha! I’m flattered by the concern, Miss Fae!

But I can assure you we’ll be alright!

Fae

What!? I wasn’t conce-

...Whatever.

Zoe

(I can't believe we'll be splitting up so soon after joining together with more people...)

(But it's only for an hour. I'm sure we'll manage.)

Taro

Alright, Miss Zoe! I leave it up to you!

When you're ready to leave, the rest of us shall follow. And following that, we'll split.

Zoe

Right.

(I'll do as Taro says, then.)

Interaction: Door out of Room 810

Zoe

I'm ready. Let's go!

Location: Floor 8 Hallway

Zoe

Well, I'm guessing this is goodbye. For now.

Taro

Ha-ha-ha! But we'll see each other again, soon enough!

Finding anything that looks like a key is the priority for now, but! All of us will get out of here together, without a question!

Fae

