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CyberRun Game Design Document

Design goal:

The game is about unfairness in society with three layers of messages to communicate with the players. The game introduces the presence of unfairness and also illustrates some of its potential causes through the game mechanics and representational elements. Moreover, it comments on society's neglect of unfairness by allowing the players to realize the embodied cultural capital of every individual.

Theoretical basic:

To show the unfairness of society, the game uses the idea of procedural rhetoric to convey the presence of unfairness among us. As Ian Bogost states, procedural rhetoric is the practice of authoring arguments through processes, for example, game mechanics. (Bogost 125) The main mechanic of the game is that the 4 characters in it all have different jump heights and run speeds. Character 1 has the worst stat and character 4 has the best one. Players get to experience different characters in 4 rooms, with room 1 corresponding to character 1 and room 4 to character 4. Each room also has a different difficulty level. Room 1 is full of spikes and deliberately placed walls while room 4 is only a straight path of platforms with no spikes. Moreover, the game is structured as a fake multiplayer game in that it has a connection screen, and all 4 characters are competing in the same room. The one who first touches the flag at the top-right corner of the screen wins. Therefore, the normal expectation for this game is that all characters compete at the same level. The mechanics here revert the players' expectations, forcing them to play the game with a biased character design. Moreover, the game requires the

player to lose. When first entering the game, players have to play the first room and act as character 1. The other characters in the room create a disturbing atmosphere since they can run faster and jump higher than the player. As a result, players need to finish this highly demanding room with a lot of stress, creating an extra burden for them to succeed in this game. Connecting the idea of “you never win games” discussed by Mary Flanagan, such gaming experience alienates players from the game objective, allowing players to think seriously of the underlying reason why they are not winning this game. (Flanagan, 244) The players will then have the chance to realize that the difference in characters’ stat is a manifestation of the unfairness in society.

Understanding the presence of unfairness is the first step. The game further uses representational elements of 4 characters to illustrate some possible causes of unfairness while disputing some stereotypes of the game community. Borrowing the idea of Scalzi’s article that straight white male is the lowest difficulty setting, I constructed player 4 as the only white male character with the easiest setting, signaling the privileges that a white male may receive during his life. (Scalzi) Building on the idea of a straight white male as the default difficulty level, I also construct characters 1 and 2 with dark skins to show all the microaggression and discrimination that the black community may face in their pursuit of success since characters 1 and 2 have a relatively poor character stat. In addition, player 3 is set as a female character to dispute the video game community’s tendency to assume female players as those who only enjoy casual games, which are those that demand fewer skills and commitment. (Chess 13) Hardcore games, on the other hand, are usually considered male-oriented. However, in this game, the most casual character is player 4, a white male instead of a female, which contradicts the common conception that casual games are only for females. Compared to character 4, character 3 needs to pay special attention to different spikes that are either at the end or the start of the platform, forcing them to jump more precisely. Thus, the representational element in

this game acts to present some of the causes for the unfairness, which is race and gender, while providing a satire to the gender stereotype in the game community.

Moreover, how the game changes room for players also illustrates a possible cause of unfairness. When first entering the game, the player is forced to go into room 1 and act as character 1. Then the players are randomly assigned to the next room. The possibility of players going to different rooms is carefully constructed to reflect the different income levels in America. Players have a 54.3% chance of going to room 2, a 35.5% chance of room 3, and a 10.3% chance of room 4. Although all the rooms from 2 to 4 are easier than the original room 1, their individual level of difficulties still differs. Room 2 has fewer spikes but still requires precise jump timing and strategic path planning while room 3 is a straightforward path from beginning to end with a few spikes. Room 4 is designed as the easiest room with no spikes and a simple path from start to finish. Referencing to the percentage distribution of household income in the U.S. in 2020 by US Census Bureau, 54.3% is the percentage of US households that have an annual income from $74999 and below, 35.5% is the percentage of annual income from $75000 to $199999, and 10.3% is the percentage of those with $200000 or more. (US Census Bureau) Therefore, the game mechanics hint at the correlation between the income level and the room's level of difficulty. The higher the income level, the lower the game difficulties. The game's difficulty level can be seen as a metaphor for all the obstacles that a person needs to overcome in order to succeed. Thus, the game is claiming that the unfairness in society may also be caused by the gap in the household income level.

In addition to the causes of the unfairness of society, the game also comments on the phenomenon that society nearly neglects the presence of unfairness. There is a common misconception that efforts and hard work are the sole contributing factor to success. When a person succeeds in a certain field, the most predominant perceived cause is the large amount of effort he/she puts in for that accomplishment. The game follows this logic that all the successes are effort-based. Whenever a player finishes a room, either wins or losses, the player would be

directed into a new room. 3 possible situations may arise. If the player finishes first in the previous room, he/she would be prompted by how many milliseconds took to succeed and be praised for the hard work. Milliseconds here serve as a way to highlight and exaggerate players' efforts. If the player reaches the flag but doesn't come in first or is killed by the spikes, he/she would be informed by all the other player's finished time and the overall ranking. Moreover, the game deliberately mocks the player for failing at such a "simple" game and pushes them for extra effort. However, the real situation is that players are more likely to finish first in room 3 or 4, which are much easier and would take less time to conquer. Therefore, when finally finished first in a room, all the amount of effort that the game praises are actually less than the actual efforts that the player devotes. It is possible that the player spent more time and effort in room 1 or 2 but couldn't succeed while easily finishing first in room 3 or 4 with less effort. How the game counts such efforts into the only cause of success is similar to how society views the relationship between success and efforts. The player can then discover an unequal relationship between the recognized and praised efforts and the actual efforts devoted. Using the concepts of cultural capital, the embodied state such as family background, gender, race, or socio-economic level, also contributes to people's accomplishment. (Bourdieu 17) Since embodied cultural capital is something that resides within us, it is often invisible to the general public and overlooked by its effect on an individual. The endgame screen reveals how embodied cultural capital serves to assist people by showing the unbalance of socially recognized efforts and the actual effort, illustrating how society's view on success is misleading and flawed.

Platform

I use game maker studio and GML to create this game. Since I want to create a platformer with a fake multiplayer game setting, the GML scraping language gives me the freedom to write my own game logic, add different room transitions, and also change the character stat in each room. The challenge that this platform presents is that I have no prior experience with game maker studio thus I have to learn everything from scratch.

Mechanics

In addition to all the mechanics discussed in the theoretical basic section, there are also collectibles placed in each room. Each collectible can increase the player's jump height and run speed by 10%, which also acts as a way to illustrate the room's difficulty level. Collectibles in rooms 1 and 2 are placed in extra dangerous locations with spikes around them while in rooms 3 and 4, collectibles are placed just in the player's path to the flag. Therefore, collectibles can be seen as efforts for players to catch up or exceed other characters. Players from a relatively poor background, represented as the player's initial stat, would require extra hard work in order to compete on the same level with other characters.

Theme

Other than the representational elements for all characters, the background image in each room also changes to reflect the player-controlled character's background. The background for room 1 is based on a deserted wasteland while room 4 is based on a well-constructed modern city. The background of the room indicates the character's socioeconomic level, which is a form of their embodied cultural capital. Moreover, the collectibles are designed to represent the extra efforts that a person should take in order to compete with others from the same background, thus better contextualizing the meaning behind each collectible.

Reflection

From multiple rounds of testing by peers, the game also presents some limitations. First of all, as a platformer, the game doesn't have a smooth control in that the initial run speed and jump height for each character are not being carefully designed. I can conduct more surveys and research to find an optimum character stat so that players can control the characters more smoothly. Moreover, the representational elements of the backgrounds and collectibles still require refinements. The backgrounds for rooms 2 to 4 are fairly similar so they cannot accurately represent the different embodied culture capital by the player-controller character.

Moreover, the collectibles in the game are designed as money, which also cannot best contextualize the extra efforts devoted by an individual. Last but not least, the room design can also change to illustrate a more reasonable difficulty curve. Currently, rooms 1 and 2 are in the same difficulty range with room 2 having fewer obstacles. Yet there is a massive decrease in difficulty level between rooms 2 and 3, which may weaken the claim made by the difference in room's difficulty level. In fact, each room can change to have a uniform design of platforms with each room having different kinds and number of obstacles. In this way, players can better see the idea of unfairness hidden in each room in that the path from beginning to destination is the same, yet the amount of hardship and efforts committed are different.

In addition, the game can better utilize the anger that players get from playing. Published in GXC (an online game platform developed by Game Maker Studio and Opera) for a larger player base, the game receives a rating of 2 out of 5 and keeps decreasing, which is an indication that people dislike this game and triggers their anger. The game can utilize this anger to better state the issue of unfairness by transforming it into an actual multiplayer game. In this way, players can directly understand the idea of unfairness since their opponents all have different player stats. Moreover, a multiple-player game emphasizes the idea of competition, which exaggerates the idea of failure presented in this game and better illustrates the idea of "you never win games" discussed in the theoretical basis section.

Appendix

Work cited:

Bogost, Ian. “The Rhetoric of Video Games." *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning.* Edited by Katie Salen. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 117–140. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262693646.117

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Scalzi, John. “Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is.” *Whatever*, 23 May 2012, https://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/.

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Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Forms of Capital.” *The Sociology of Economic Life*, 2018, pp. 78–92., https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494338-6.

US Census Bureau. "Percentage Distribution of Household Income in The U.S. in 2020." Statista, Statista Inc., 14 Sep 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/203183/percentage-distribution-of-household-income-in-the-us/

Game Assets

- Character sprites
    - Character 1, 3, 4
        - https://craftpix.net/freebies/free-3-cyberpunk-characters-pixel-art/
    - Character 2
        - https://craftpix.net/freebies/free-3-character-sprite-sheets-pixel-art/

- Background
    - Background of 4 rooms
        - https://craftpix.net/freebies/free-pixel-art-street-2d-backgrounds/
    - Background of start screen
        - https://craftpix.net/freebies/free-industrial-zone-tileset-pixel-art/
- Game elements sprites
    - Destination Flag and collectibles
        - https://craftpix.net/freebies/free-industrial-zone-tileset-pixel-art/
    - Spikes
        - https://omniclause.itch.io/spikes
    - Start Arrow Sign Board
        - https://www.spriters-resource.com/nintendo_switch/supermariomaker2/sheet/149366/

Chart from the US Census Bureau

