

A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

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A study of “mental escapes” that people seek in digital worlds, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* weaves an immersive, interactive, animated story for the viewer to invest in and feel connected with a user-directed narrative, the protagonist, and the environment.

Background

The digital world is just that: a world. A person often thinks of his actual life as monotonous and repetitive, and hence uses movies, books, video games, or other narrative mediums to mentally transport his mind somewhere. Where he’s transported, he has qualities that are impossible in his actual life, he can go places that he could never reach in his actual life, but most importantly, he temporarily escapes the problems in his actual life. In the person’s actual life, he experiences authentic sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste; with narratives viewed on a screen, he is connected only through pixels and tiny speakers. These simple pixels and speakers make him recall past memories and emotions, and encompass enough resources to help him create imaginary worlds, or “mental escapes” from his actual life.

Modern video games are the best example of mental escapes, as they not only produce a fictional world for the viewer, but they allow one-to-one control of what goes on within that world. While most video games have a direct goal or path, the lasting appeal to the fans are the emotional and atmospheric elements of the game. Early point and click games involved the player directing an on screen character through environments to complete various goals. The player does have the choice though, to not act or play, while the character was still entirely at their command, waiting for instructions of what to do next.

In the video game *Full Throttle* by LucasArts, the player controls a character named Ben, leader of the Polecats motorcycle gang. When Ben is waiting outside the Kickstand saloon, the dangling sign creaks as the wind moans, birds fly high above in the desert sky, and the low purr of a wall fan is heard inside

the saloon. In another video game *Grand Theft Auto III* by Rockstar Games, the player directs an unnamed protagonist who works various criminal missions for gangs in Liberty City. If the player sets the controller down and stops playing, traffic still buzzes by wandering pedestrians, as trash blows in the wind and rain. Though just simple animations and sounds, the viewer is mentally within another, *breathing* world that they control. *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* takes the viewer to a world away from their actual life, and immerses them on a small planet with a young orphan named Gus.

Creative Work

I've defined the work as a "digital interactive storybook", which blends entirely computer created visuals, into simple looping animations that the viewer can navigate through. The project title, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, is inspired by the 1926 short story of the same name, written by Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's story is rumored to have inspired the 1942 painting *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper, which was a major influence for my work.

This work revolves Gus, a lonesome, young orphan forced to work alone at an intergalactic space station. Upon visualizing and creating Gus, I found he needed a problem. Many times in mental escapes, the person is escaping their actual life problems, replacing them with ambient environments and no problems; this was not conducive to storytelling. Gus one day finds a bridge to another planet close to his and upon crossing the bridge, he encounters and befriends a dog named Corley. Gus is happy to have found a friend in Corley and brings him back to his planet.

Upon arrival, Gus is confronted by his enslavers, who forcefully take Corley back to where he came from, destroying the bridge Gus used to cross planets, and forcing him back to work at the space station. Gus misses Corley, and decides to build a spaceship to return to Corley's planet. Once the spaceship is complete, Gus needs to charge the battery to start the ship's engine, which requires help from the viewer.

The 4th Wall

An aspect I wished to explore at the beginning of the project, was to do something more than just present a story to the viewer. If you invest yourself into a world or mental escape, you want to be able to have some influence upon it.

A unique way of interaction that had a lasting effect upon me, was in the video game *Metal Gear Solid* by Konami for the Sony Playstation. During the game, your character Solid Snake has to fight Psycho Mantis, a paranormal special agent. Mantis describes Solid Snake to the player, telling what types of games he likes and if they play the game carelessly or recklessly. The player (hopefully) then realizes that Mantis is reading different save files off of the Playstation's memory card, and observing player statistics and play style up until this point. Mantis then continues to toy with the player:

"You still don't believe me? I will show you my psychokinetic power. Put your controller on the floor. Put it down as flat as you can, that's good. Now I will move your controller by the power of my will alone!" At this point the Playstation DualShock controller's built-in vibrating function is activated and it violently shakes on the ground. The game shows that it knows not only about the traces of other texts embedded in the memory card, but also that the player is holding the controller. This knowledge is integrated into the play itself when the player's attempts to attack are all easily avoided by Psycho Mantis because he has foreknowledge of the player's acts, which are mediated by the controller. The game displays an active use of materiality by forcing the player to unplug the controller and place it in another port.

Many game reviews refer to this as Kojima (the creator) breaking the 4th wall in video games, through having unique and abstract ways of interacting with the game besides button commands on a controller. I wished to implement something similar to this for the viewer to be able to help Gus.

Float Off Into Space

Once Gus's spaceship is complete, Gus needs to charge the battery to start it. Gus redirects a satellite on his planet to intercept SMS text messages and charge the battery. At this point, the viewer can use a phone to send an SMS text message to a specified phone number to help Gus. As soon as Gus's battery has X amount of "volts" (SMS text messages), he can start the engine, and fly his spaceship to Corley's planet. If Gus's battery doesn't have X amount of volts, he is unable to start his spaceship and he must wait for more viewers to help him. Over time, the battery volts will slowly decrease over time. This leaves the ending of the story constantly in a state of limbo, with either Gus being able to reunite with Corley (more than X amount of text messages stored), or else being stuck to work alone on his planet (less than X amount of text messages stored).

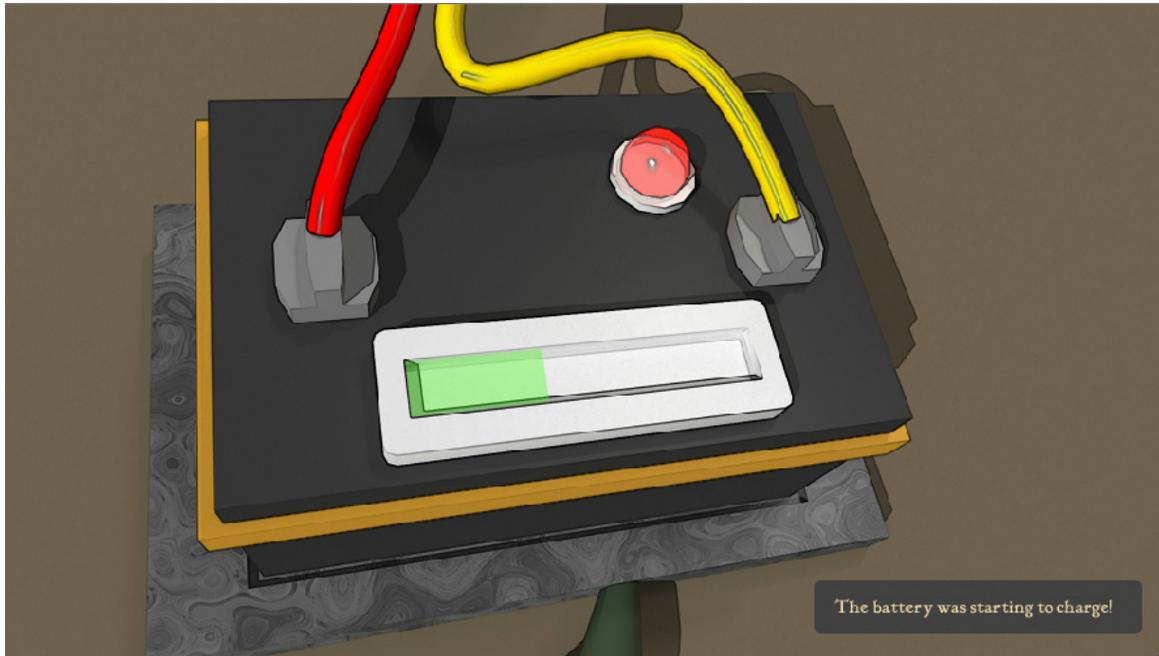


figure 1: Screenshot of the battery that is being charged by the viewer's text messages. The green meter is a transparent, dynamic shape that changes width based upon the text message counter, and laid over top of the video.

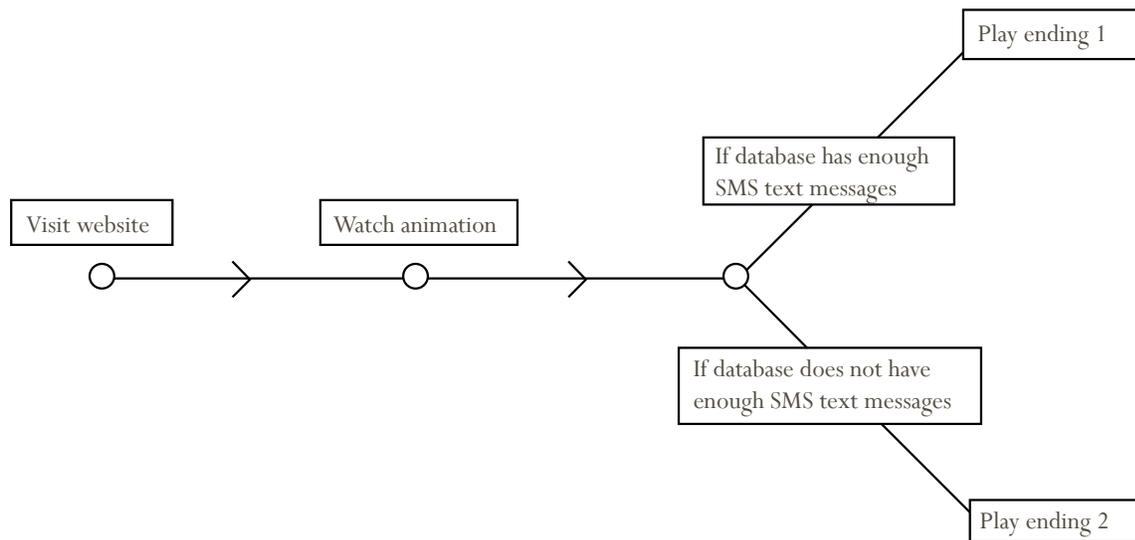


figure 2: The diagram explains the animation flow as viewed by the user. The break point determines which ending of the story the user sees.

Technical Process

The project took many different technical paths to include the visuals, sound, and interactivity. The world and environment was modeled, colored, and textured entirely in Luxology Modo 501. After viewing *Madagascar: carnet de voyage* by Bastien Dubois, I wanted the visuals to appear as a mix between two

dimensional and three dimensional; the camera movements suggest the depth and space, but the flat shading and heavy strokes gave it a cartoon-like, hand drawn feel.



figure 3: Screenshot of a scene which introduces the planet that Gus lives on. The style is meant to appear as a mix between 2D hand-drawn sketching and 3D modeled environments.



figure 4: Screenshot of a scene introducing the protagonist Gus.

The short video sequences were compiled in Adobe After Effects CS5, with simple sound loops created in GarageBand and royalty free sound effects. Each “page” in the project incorporates a short video segment feeds directly into a looping animation that will only end once the user clicks through to the next page.

All of the created video files are located on a server and called by a Flash .swf file. The .swf file receives the text message count from XML input text generated by a PHP document, which draws from a MySQL database. The MySQL database text message counter is populated from a service by Twilio, which receives and processes the viewer’s text messages. A cron job is run on the server every hour which removes 1 entry from the database, simulating the battery losing 1 “volt”.

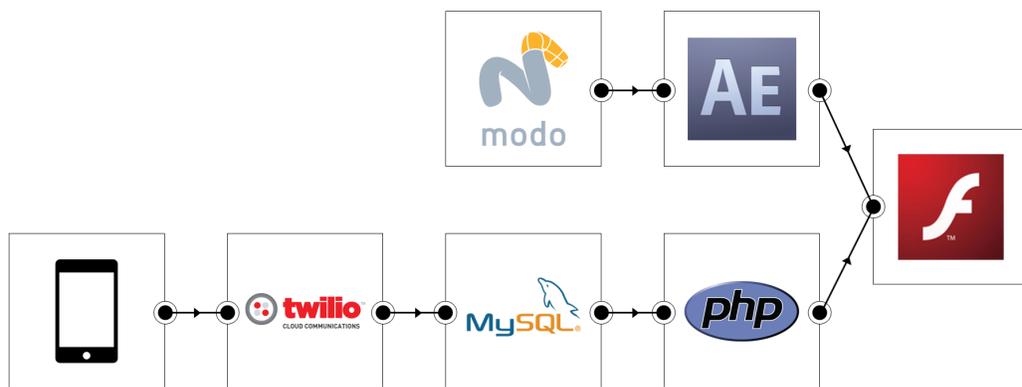


figure 5: The technical setup displaying the flow from the user’s phone to the Flash video.

Other technical choices were considered, but I decided early on in the project that I wanted the visuals, storyline, and animation to take priority over the interactivity and technical challenges. I work best as a designer who hands off visuals to a programmer or developer, as opposed to spreading myself too thin amongst multiple technical challenges.

Extremely basic sketches were created for storyboards, but I have found drawing scene by scene not to be extremely helpful when I’m working alone, and have a 3D scene to work off as well. When presenting to, and working with a group on an animation, I would value the importance of storyboards, but in this case I felt comfortable with being able to write a simple script, and sketch just enough to imagine the scenes in my mind.

Conclusion

The initial goal of this project was to create a realm or world that a viewer would want to spend time in, and to use techniques “other than realism which cause a player to become emotionally immersed in the world of the game.” After researching and experimenting with various digital mediums, I believe I have come up with a method to express the original intent of the project. The idea of a mental escape proved challenging to explain properly, but this project encapsulates that through a character the viewer can identify with, and through giving the viewer the ability to affect, influence, and help that character. “Games are often seen as a form of escape from the real world or social norms, or as a way to do things that people otherwise lack the skills, resources, or social permission.” Though not quite a one-to-one controlled video game, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* attempts just that, an escape from the real world.

Mental escapes are inspired by traditional feelings of depression: loneliness, the need to be needed, and a lack of feeling of self worth. Gus’s story develops in a direction of giving hope, with the viewer able to directly help Gus achieve happiness through his friendship with Corley.

Bibliography

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