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ART 007
Final Reflection

Final Usability Survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/S2PV7GF>

Throughout the semester, “Art of the Game” has served as a constant reminder of both the difficulty inherent in producing a thoughtful creative work and of the payoffs associated with totally immersing oneself in the creative process. On the whole, my projects tended to be of higher quality near the beginning of the term, when I had plenty of time to throw myself at the challenge of crafting an HTML webpage or piecing together an audio walk for days at a time. As the semester continued, however, I devoted less and less time to my projects, until the creative process behind them took place in a hurried all-nighter before the due date, rather than organically over the span of a week or two. As a result, projects like the Twine story and game trailer contained certain leaps in logic/narrative that sometimes rendered them difficult to understand for players and viewers. Even though the constant critiquing and tweaking of the same Twine story over multiple weeks could be tiresome, it did ultimately force me to engage with my work at length. This engagement, though still hampered by a severe lack of time set aside for the projects, led to a better product and a more interesting narrative.

One of the major initial critiques of *Cupule: A Survival Story* as an interactive narrative was the apparent lack of true control over the narrative. Players felt that many of the choices—which often boiled down to “click Option 1 to progress with the story” or “click Option 2 to die and start over”—lacked significance, and were even caught off guard by the illogical consequences of their actions. The link between their actions and the outcome of the game was often either nonexistent or completely obscured. As a result, they gave up on the game after a few abortive play-throughs. Some players, however, were driven by their deaths to play again

until they succeeded; according to the usability surveys, they established a sort-of rivalry with the in-game squirrel, relishing the challenge that came with defeating it. This relationship with a virtual character calls to mind Huizinga's definition of play as role-play, where players don new personas and feel the sensation of interacting with otherworldly beings (1955). Figuring out how to make the game just challenging enough to keep the player mentally engaged without annoying them too much proved to be a central part of the revision process.

Several strategies were employed to better retain the player's interest and better keep them within a mindset of play and not of frustration. For instance, the narrative was reworked slightly so as to increase player agency within the game—now, instead of dying every time they chose the “wrong” choice, they have the opportunity to get back onto the main narrative path, or at least are not immediately sent back to the title page. This feeling of control is crucial to the player's voluntary enjoyment of the game (Huizinga, 1955). Overall, the changes seemed to work pretty well. In a new usability test, many of the players felt that the narrative or types of choice had improved the most from the previous version of the game, with a few stating that they spent more than 15 minutes with the game both because they were having fun and because they wanted to (and felt they could) reach a satisfactory ending. Nevertheless, one player who had played *Cupule* before was unimpressed with the narrative changes, noting that “there didn't seem to be a whole lot that changed.” Another tactic employed to keep the player engaged was the addition of a title page, with a trailer, coherent color scheme, and links to other relevant work. The page is meant to prepare the player for the game's odd world—where mind-controlling squirrels possess woodland spirits—by contextualizing it within a greater fantasy theme, reflected in the trailer and many of the links. Just as Toole uses the strange city of New Orleans to make Ignatius more believable, I wanted to make my characters appear less idiosyncratic by

placing the game itself within a thematically similar webpage (1994). Again, this strategy achieved mixed results. While every respondent agreed that the title page and final game fit together thematically, some felt that the game's trailer could've been better made. Indeed, some of my "Art of the Game" classmates have let me know that, if they weren't already familiar with the game's concept, it would've been near impossible to tell what was going on in the trailer. In any case, most respondents spent some time with the title page before jumping into the game, revealing that it was interesting enough to catch their attention.

Several of my classmates' projects stand out as particularly successful examples of how to create engaging play spaces. Sharon's audio walk, for example, managed to expand my view of the world, exposing me to a different perspective in the vein of Sousanis (2015). As a result of one part of her game, I now look at the trees on Cross Campus and see them reaching enviously up to the sky instead of simply just existing. Adam M.'s Twine story about cats, though at times bordering on annoyingly arbitrary, does a good job of creating a comprehensively strange world that reminds me of Toole's New Orleans. In addition, his sassy, informal narrator is a character in itself—as a result, players are encouraged to keep playing just to see what the narrator will say or do next. Sometimes, the player even makes choices that they would never make in real life, just for the comedic payoff provided by the narrator. This is akin to the role-play aspect of play mentioned in Huizinga (1955).

Overall, viewing the work of my classmates has been one of the most rewarding parts of the class. Their creativity and passion stirred me to put more thought and effort into my own projects.

Reference List

Sousanis, N. (2015). *Unflattering*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Toole, J. K. (1994). *A Confederacy of Dunces*. New York, NY: Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

(Jones, 1998, p. 199)