

THE VISUAL DESIGN OF THE ORIGINAL
VIDEO GAME *COTLER*

by

Liz Delapaz

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VIDEO GAME *COTLER*

Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Dusty Crocker, Ph.D.

Department of Design

David Elizalde, MA

Department of Design

Mikio Akagi, Ph.D.

John V. Roach Honors College

ABSTRACT

A system of visual design was created for a video game with an original concept. Research was conducted to understand the most effective video game visual design methods. Findings suggested that video game design, including branding and marketing, is most effective when it invokes an emotional attachment from the player. This conclusion informed the design for the original video game concept.

Contents

Introduction.....	6
Thesis Statement	6
Methodology	6
Research.....	7
Marketing Outside the Game	7
The Uniqueness of Video Game Marketing	8
Game Trailer	9
Merchandise.....	12
Marketing Inside the Game.....	15
Branding.....	19
Logos Emphasizing Worldbuilding	19
Logos Emphasizing Storytelling.....	22
Game Contents.....	26
Character Design.....	26
User Interface.....	37
Atmosphere.....	42
Historical Analysis: Customer Loyalty.....	44
Generation 1 (1996-1999).....	45
Generation 2 (1999-2002).....	46
Generation 3 (2002-2006).....	47
Generation 4 (2006-2010).....	48
Generation 5 (2010-2013).....	49
Generation 6 (2013-2016).....	50
Generation 7 (2016-2019).....	51
Generation 8 (2018-2022).....	51
Actions Taken	54
Premise.....	54
Branding.....	55
Logo	55
Typography.....	56
Color Palette.....	57
Character Design.....	58

Main Character: Cotler	58
Player Character: Spool of Thread.....	58
Adversaries: Marionettes	59
Game Content	60
Concept Art.....	60
User Interface.....	61
Marketing.....	63
Video Trailer.....	63
Merchandise.....	63
Packaging.....	65
Works Cited	67

Introduction

Thesis Statement

This project involved the marketing, branding, and conceptual development of an original video game. Research was conducted on branding and marketing. The deliverables of the project include the game's logo, branding, marketing, user interface, character design, and other visual elements.

Methodology

Descriptive research was used to study the design and marketing of video games. While the main goal of the project was to effectively design the visual identity of a game, the contents of the game must be considered as well to develop the message that the visual design will communicate. Moreover, a grasp on the culture of gaming and its presence on the internet is a large factor in the effectiveness of a game's marketing and visual design. Various articles, videos, opinion pieces, and existing successful video games were consulted to inform the design's decisions, including as follows. IGN is a video game review and journalism website founded in 1996 with over 4.8 million registered users. Its articles were referenced to analyze the effectiveness of video games similar in this project's tone. SullyGnome is a website that gathers data on the viewership trends of the streaming site Twitch. An API gathers information from Twitch directly, then the statistics are aggregated onto SullyGnome and updates daily. SullyGnome was consulted to compare the most watched video game streams in 2020. Nicolae Berbec is an independent game developer who has sold over 500,000 copies of his debut title, *Move or Die*. His YouTube channel, Mental Checkpoint, was consulted for tips about how to market an independently developed video game. Burback is a gaming-centered YouTube channel

with nearly 200,000 subscribers. Their videos were consulted to understand the video game marketing environment. Tyger is a YouTuber with over 1000 subscribers. His channel was consulted to understand the branding trends of video games. CBR, also known as Comic Book Resources, is an online source for pop culture news. One of their articles was consulted to examine how an independently developed game stayed culturally relevant many years after its debut. Santa Monica Studios is a game development studio responsible for the *God of War* series, a highly successful franchise. Their marketing materials were researched to analyze successful video game trailers. Qualtrics is an experience management company valued at \$1 billion. One of their articles was consulted to understand essential elements of product packaging design. Kotaku is a gaming blog that was featured on CNET's "Blog 100" list. Their article was consulted to understand what made a particular gaming merchandise product popular. TheGamer is a gaming website widely viewed as a resource for gaming-related news. Their articles were consulted to understand how much game branding relies on players, and how gaming merchandise can fail. Evolve Systems is a technology-based company that provides merchant and ecommerce solutions. Their article was consulted to understand how customers can become advocates for a brand. Polygon is a popular website for gaming-related news. Their articles were consulted to understand how the public received many of the researched games. Game Rant is a popular website for gaming resources. Their articles were consulted to understand common opinions of trending games at the times of their releases.

Research

Marketing Outside the Game

The Uniqueness of Video Game Marketing

Marketing and branding in video games are rarely like that of other products. Gimmick slogans don't carry a game to success, nor do billboards that sell a feeling to associate with the game, nor do direct mailers that provide calls to action. This is because games are not just a product, they're an immersive experience. Players want to care about the game's worldbuilding, its narrative, and what they can do in the game. This is especially true for role-playing games wherein the entire appeal is to feel engrossed in the world and be temporarily transported somewhere else. The most successful games can have a profound impact on the consumer, and with effective marketing, even before they play the game (Burback).

The most powerful form of marketing in the video game industry comes from players themselves. Communities built around the enjoyment of a game will rally to boost its visibility and relevance to the public eye, especially regarding games with no existing fame to ride on (Tyger). Take for example: the indie game *UNDERTALE*. Developed by Toby Fox (and it being his first game), the game had no TV commercials, no OoH marketing, no paid exposure, and no ad campaign. It only had a Kickstarter, and a trailer edited by Toby himself. Despite this, *UNDERTALE* is revered by the entire gaming world just because the experience is loved by its players. Subverting common gaming tropes and breaking the limits of what a game can do (*UNDERTALE* keeps track of how many times you quit and changes the story to reflect this), and the result completely baffled players old and new (Meszaros). These players then passionately shared the game so they'll have more people to talk to about the experience. *UNDERTALE* became like a friend to its fans. And by spreading the word to give the game more players, fans felt like they were helping their friend (Tyger).

Even a game's brand relies heavily on its players' experiences and their creations based on those experiences. For example, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* by Bethesda Game Studios has many trailers that try to sell the game as a gritty struggle for survival, among civil war, fantasy monsters, and even gods. But what truly carries the game's brand is how often it breaks (Troughton). The humor of seeing a stoic city guard clipping through polygons in the ground became an endearing trademark of the series. Because of this, the memes made by players are extremely shareable – a 5-minute musical satirizing Bethesda's many bugs has garnered over 14 million views on YouTube in less than two years. Todd Howard, the game director of the series, even leans into this brand identity during his presentations at gaming conferences.

Therefore, to successfully market an independently developed game, the groundwork must be placed to ensure it has a profound impact on its players, to make them think about the game before they buy it and to keep them thinking even after they've played it (Mental Checkpoint). This should be accomplished through visual choices inside and outside the game to maximize emotional attachment and shareability.

Game Trailer

While video game marketing should focus on the contents of the game instead of superficially associating the game with a desired emotion, that doesn't mean its video trailer should be made solely out of gameplay recordings. The goal is to get the audience interested in becoming part of the game's world. These tactics will be different based on the type of game,

i.e., a thrilling shooter game will have a different type of promotional material than a heartwarming story game.



An example of an existing game's video trailer that nailed the immersion without relying on gameplay recordings is *God of War (2018)*. The main character is Kratos, a Spartan warrior who obtained godlike powers after killing Ares, the God of War, and usurping his place. The series has historically been a power fantasy centered on the mindless rampaging of Kratos.

But this installment subverts the premise entirely. Kratos is now a father to a young but capable boy named Atreus, and when his wife passes, Kratos and his son must journey to the highest peak in the realms to spread her ashes. The game is no longer about senseless violence, and instead follows Kratos's struggle to raise his son to be able to survive, yet also be responsible with his latent godly powers.



The game has two draws: the combat system that requires strategic planning, and the dynamic between Kratos and Atreus. Both draws are highlighted in the game’s cinematic trailer, which is broken into four major sequences. First, Atreus is seen failing to shoot a deer with an arrow at close-range, as Kratos glares disappointedly.



That arrow carries the camera into the next scene – a full-blown fight between the characters and vicious wolves. Atreus continues to struggle, but with his father’s beckoning, tries again. In the

third sequence, the characters are fighting more dangerous monsters, and Atreus manages to contribute while his father carries the fight.



In the final scene, as Kratos charges a monster many times his size, he manages to take it down with the help of a well-timed arrow by Atreus. In just sixty seconds, the trailer has shown both the mentor dynamic between the father and son, and the strategic gameplay that relies on their teamwork. *God of War (2018)* is the Playstation 4's best-selling game, having sold five million copies within a month of its release and a total of 19.5 million copies at the time of writing (Mahmoud).

Merchandise

Craig Lutz, product package designer, notes that a good package design should awaken emotions and be iconic. Packaging is more likely to connect with its customers when it evokes an emotional reaction and stands out from competitors (Qualtrics). But standard video game packaging is little more than a DVD case – not so much room for creativity. So occasionally, certain games will be released with a “Collector’s Edition” that includes bonus content and

physical paraphernalia related to that game. This method has the potential to stand out from competitors and is handy in generating excitement from an audience at the game's launch. But when designers don't understand the purpose of the Collector's Edition collateral, this tactic is easy to get wrong, and may end up disappointing or even enraging the fanbase. Generally, the paraphernalia included are pulled straight from the game to make the consumer feel more immersed in its world.

Successful Collector's Edition Design



A major selling point of *UNDERTALE* is its gorgeous soundtrack. Knowing this, the *UNDERTALE* Collector's Edition comes with a 14K gold-plated brass locket with a functioning music box that plays one of the game's most tender melodies. The inside of the heart locket also has the phrase "Best Friends Forever" etched into it. This tiny detail, sweet as it may seem, is actually a haunting memory for enjoyers of the game, and a total surprise. *UNDERTALE* is

known for hiding little secrets in their merchandise, making fans itch to get their hands on the latest merch to see what new snippets of the story they can find (Grayson). On a practical level, the locket is also wearable in everyday use. This locket was so successful that a fan-made video simply showcasing it has gained 1.2 million views in 4 years (Hardcoded).

Unsuccessful Collector's Edition Designs



Many collector's editions were surface level in what they provided and lacked an understanding of what their players truly want. Included in the Special Edition of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* was a Batarang. Buyers were excited to have their very own replica of Batman's preferred weapon, but upon receiving it, found that the Batarang was permanently attached to its decorative stand. Tragically, it couldn't be used to fulfill the common childhood practice of pretending to be Batman (Jurkovich).



In another instance, the Collector's Edition of *Call of Duty: World At War* came with a steel canteen branded with the game's logo. No doubt, users of this canteen would feel like they're deep in the trenches with every swig. But when buyers tried to open the canteen, they found it to be sealed shut – decorative only. These are both examples that made it on TheGamer's list of "20 Lamest Video Game Collector's Editions Ever" (Jurkovich). This serves as further proof that players are invested in games that can make them feel part of something greater, and disappointed when they feel they're just being marketed to (Burback).

Marketing Inside the Game



“You can customize so much in New Horizons that it has me just as excited to see what people create as recent, lauded craft-'em-ups like Super Mario Maker 2 or Dreams.”

– Samuel Claiborn via IGN.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a game developed and published by Nintendo and released for the Nintendo Switch console in March of 2020. As a long-awaited addition to the widely loved game series *Animal Crossing*, the game became a social phenomenon on platforms such as Youtube, Twitter, and Twitch. It saw over 11 million players within the first two months of its release (S).

The *Animal Crossing* series is known for being open-ended, meaning there is little storyline, so the player explores their town and develops it as they see fit. Anthropomorphic animals inhabit the world and can be befriended over time, leading to a colorful and lively community completely by the player's design. A wide array of furniture can be collected and placed in buildings to decorate. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* improves on its predecessors by introducing more customization features than ever before. Furniture can now be placed outdoors, and the area can now be landscaped, meaning cliffs, staircases, waterfalls, and paths are added to the player's toolbelt. This not only opened up new avenues for the player to exercise creativity, but allowed the players to experience the game in more unique ways – no two game files are the same.



In the age of the internet, this means that social media was flooded with players proudly showcasing their island designs, whether they're recreations of locations from the real world or pop culture, completely original, or inspired by the designs of other players (Claiborn). When existing customers are publicly enjoying a product, potential customers are drawn in (Mizrahi). This process was made easier and faster through the camera feature built into the game. Players can pull out a camera and set its position for handheld, tripod, or aerial views to get the best picture of their designs. There's also a button on the Nintendo Switch controller that can instantly capture short clips, which can be shared on Twitter directly from the console. With these functions, players can make multiple social media posts in minutes, advertising the game in the most natural way possible.



Animal Crossing: New Horizons is also a very “streamable” game. While individual games are understood well by players who have invested time into them, potential buyers may not understand what’s happening on the screen. It’s important that the game appears approachable,

and that beginners feel that learning how to play the game is worth the money and time. Even the most popular games can turn off potential customers if they look too complicated (Towell). But *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is as approachable as it gets, and this is evident by the number of people who are willing to watch others play the game. It was the 17th most popular game on Twitch at the time of its release, with a peak of 244,171 viewers at once. To compare, the #1 most popular game on Twitch at the time was *Fortnite*, which had a peak viewership of 289,330 (SullyGnome). The Twitch algorithm and gaming community pushed this game to the eyes of potential customers by primarily using the design choices made within the game itself.

Branding

Logos Emphasizing Worldbuilding

Kirby's Epic Yarn



Kirby's Epic Yarn, developed by Hal Laboratory and Good-Feel and published by Nintendo, is a platform game released in 2010. It was the first game of the *Kirby* series to be released for the Nintendo Wii.



As the Wii console contains a more powerful engine than its handheld predecessors, *Kirby's Epic Yarn* was given the freedom to use more complicated animations and larger file sizes (Harris). Realistic textiles were ingrained into its game mechanics and visual design, and the logo reflects as much. Every component of the logo simulates a textile. “Kirby” is fuzzy like fabric, and the letterforms of “Epic Yarn” are rounded and braided with frayed ends, much like rope. A string of yarn flies through as the tail of the shooting star in the series’ signature wordmark, leading to the beginning of the game’s title.

While the game plays with increased realism in its visual design compared to other entries in the *Kirby* series, it remains in the familiar realm of 2D. The textures are subtle and the shadows are light – mere suggestions of realism. This style is reflected in the logo. The sutures in the outside ring are made of a few repeated assets with adjusted lighting. Therefore, while the logo imitates a sewn patch, it is still clearly digital. Regarding color, pink and yellow are staples of the series,

and provide youth, cheeriness, and playfulness, according to an article about color psychology from Verywell Minds. (Cherry). But to give a humbler and more rustic feel, the supporting colors are light beige and dark brown – natural, bringing the starriness of the *Kirby* brand more down-to-earth while letting the brighter staple colors come forth.

Yoshi's Woolly World



Released in 2015 for the Wii U console, *Yoshi's Woolly World* is a platform game developed by Good-Feel (who also worked on *Kirby's Epic Yarn*) and published by Nintendo.



Compared to *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, this logo has a higher emphasis on texture, with deeper shadows and more unique suturing assets. Even the trademark symbol (™) is rendered like a tag on a stuffed animal. As a result, the logo appears much more realistic, bringing more tangibility and a deeper immersion (Krupa).

That's not to say the logo of *Yoshi's Woolly World* is better than that of *Kirby's Epic Yarn* – the level of realism in each logo corresponds to the realism of each game. *Kirby's Epic Yarn* is a 2D game that uses textures to imitate 3D, so its logo follows the same pattern. Meanwhile, *Yoshi's Woolly World* is a fully 3D game. Therefore, the logo uses real 3D assets. Like the logo of *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, the *Yoshi's Woolly World* logo uses a light beige backing to let the brighter staple colors (green, white, and red) come forth. However, since beige is neutral and the shades of green and red used have a subdued saturation (therefore, functionally neutral), the logo would lack energy without the introduction of blue and purple yarn balls and a button of brighter red.

Logos Emphasizing Storytelling

Don't Starve



Don't Starve is a survival game released in 2013 for PC, developed and published by Klei Entertainment. Set in a magical gothic world, the tone of *Don't Starve* is supported by its dire survival situations, terrifying monsters, and the main character's hallucinations. The art style is intentionally rough and sketch-like, as if the characters and setting are coming straight from the artist's unstable brain. But while the visual design of *Don't Starve* is more serious than that of *Kirby's Epic Yarn* or *Yoshi's Woolly World*, there is still a touch of whimsy to support the feeling of an erratic mind (Lazarides).



In line with the art style, the *Don't Starve* hand-rendered logo looks to be hastily scrawled. This tells the story that whoever wrote these words was in a rush, fearful and frantic. Yet the flourishes suggest the writer was not thinking logically. At the bottom of the logo, hidden in the scratches, is a creature's open and smiling maw, with a sharp tongue and sharper teeth mirroring the accents of the logo's frame, mirroring the hallucination monsters. Much of the logo is made up of a black mass, giving it a heavy weight and a grave feeling while consuming the type in an oppressive darkness. This logo is layered with elements that tell the unique story of the *Don't Starve* world, differentiating it from competitors.

Little Nightmares



Little Nightmares is a horror adventure game released in 2021, developed by Tarsier Studios and published by Bandai Namco Entertainment. The story follows a little girl as she tries to escape a ship filled with monstrous humanoid beings. However, the little girl is plagued by a powerful hunger, and will eat anything, or anyone, when the urge strikes.



The typography of the logo is reflective of the mysterious humanoids on the ship – instantly recognizable yet unsettling with its varied stroke weights and crossbars at different angles. The wavering baseline creates instability, like the chaos of a bad dream or even the waves that the ship sits on. *Little Nightmares* has a symbol in its logo featuring a silhouette of the main character, recognizable as the child in her signature raincoat. The child is enveloped in an eye, representing the larger, overbearing entities that the child must sneak past. But she fits in the iris so perfectly as if it's her own eye, hinting that the child may be the true threat.

The logo is not only revealing the main character's appearance, but her complexity. She appears innocent, but she is dangerous and will eat living creatures when she gets too hungry. The juxtaposition of her character is one of the most interesting parts of the game (Reynolds), and the logo intentionally sells this.

Game Contents

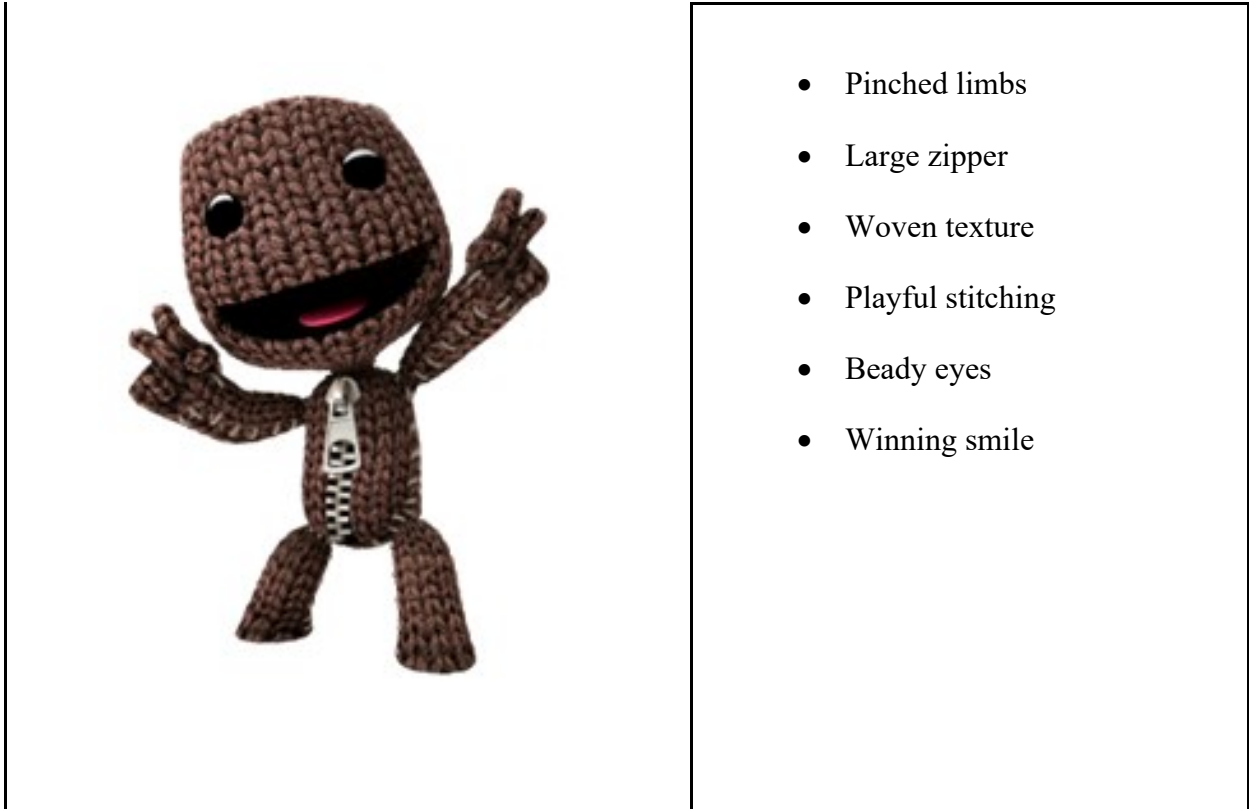
Character Design

LittleBigPlanet

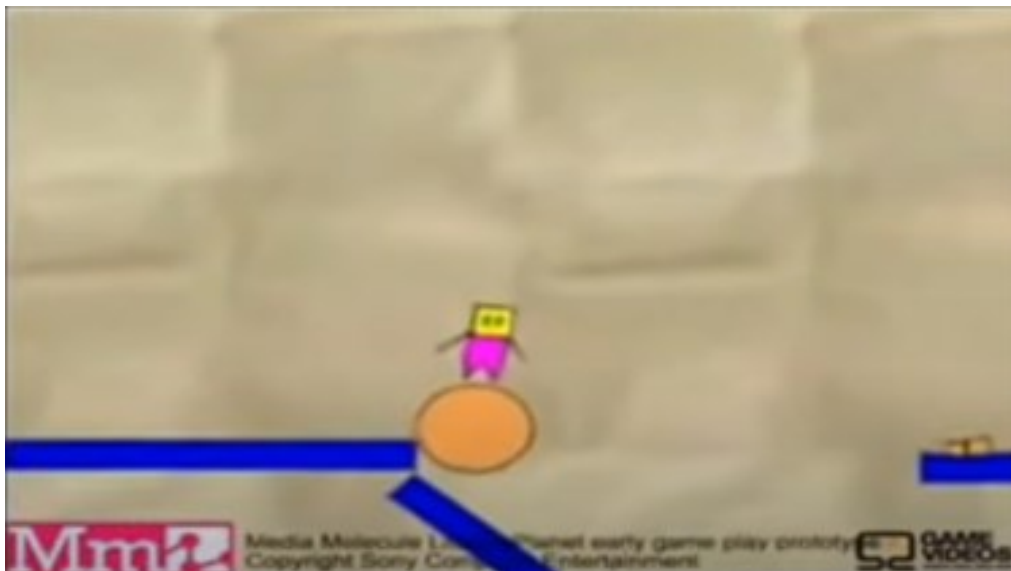


LittleBigPlanet is a platform action game developed by Media Molecule and published by Sony Computer Entertainment. In a world made entirely of toys, gadgets, and crafty creations, the player can tailor their exploration with the freedom to build their own structures directly onto any level. The first game was released in 2008 and debuted the series' main character: Sackboy.

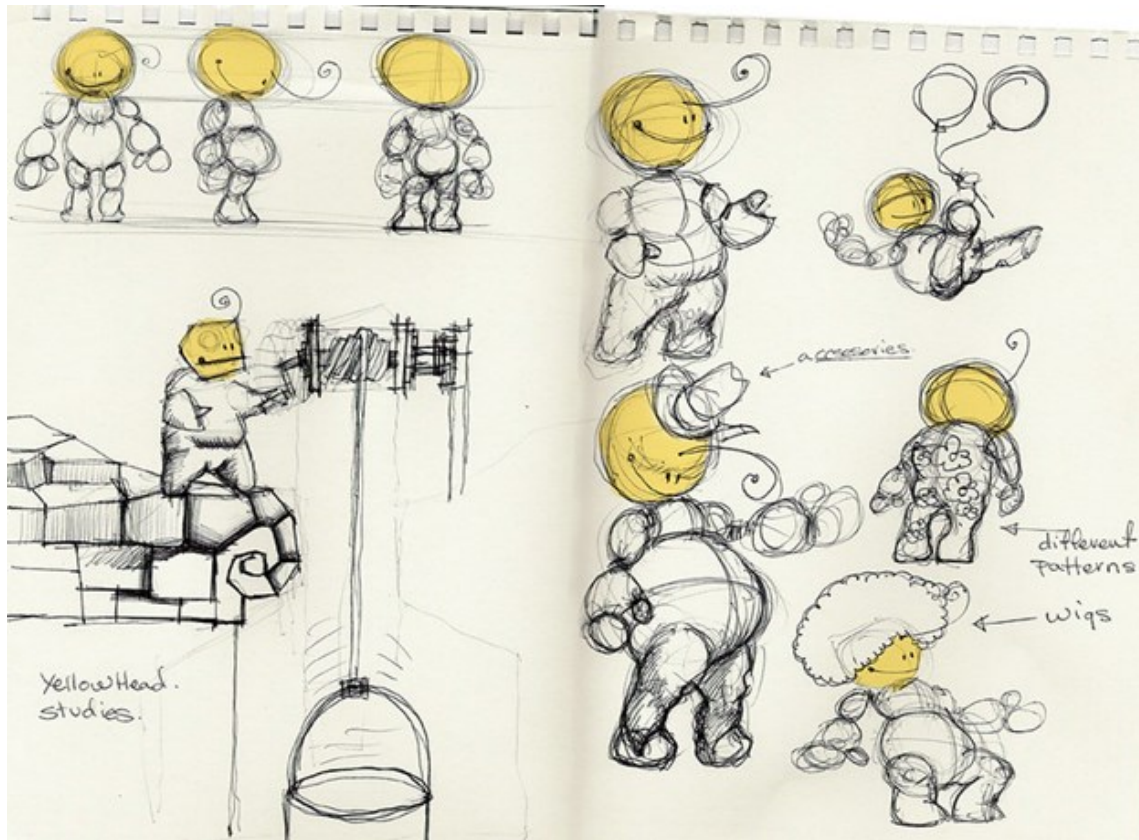
	<p>Sackboy's Appearance</p>
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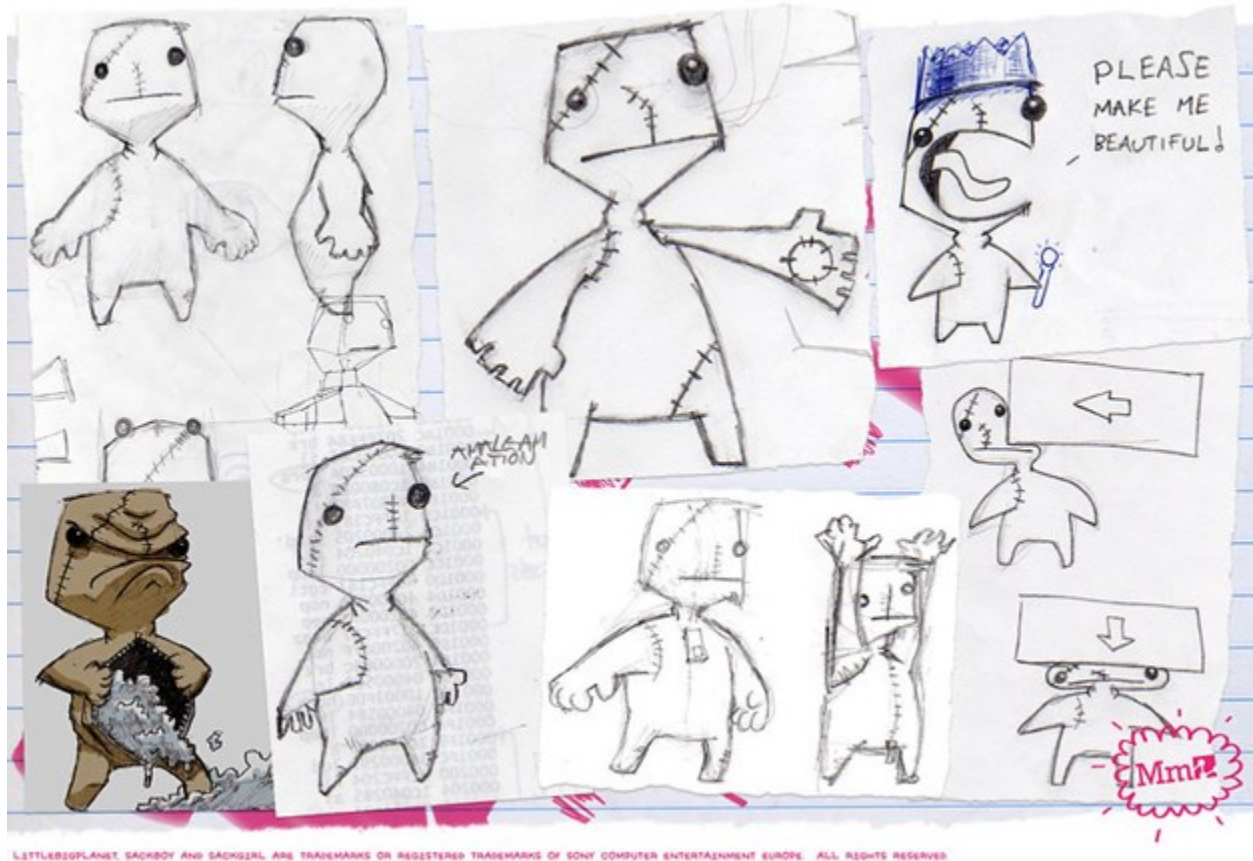
Sackboy's appearance may be simple, but his beginnings were far from it. The protagonist of *LittleBigPlanet* was once known as YellowHead, on account of the placeholder character's square yellow head.



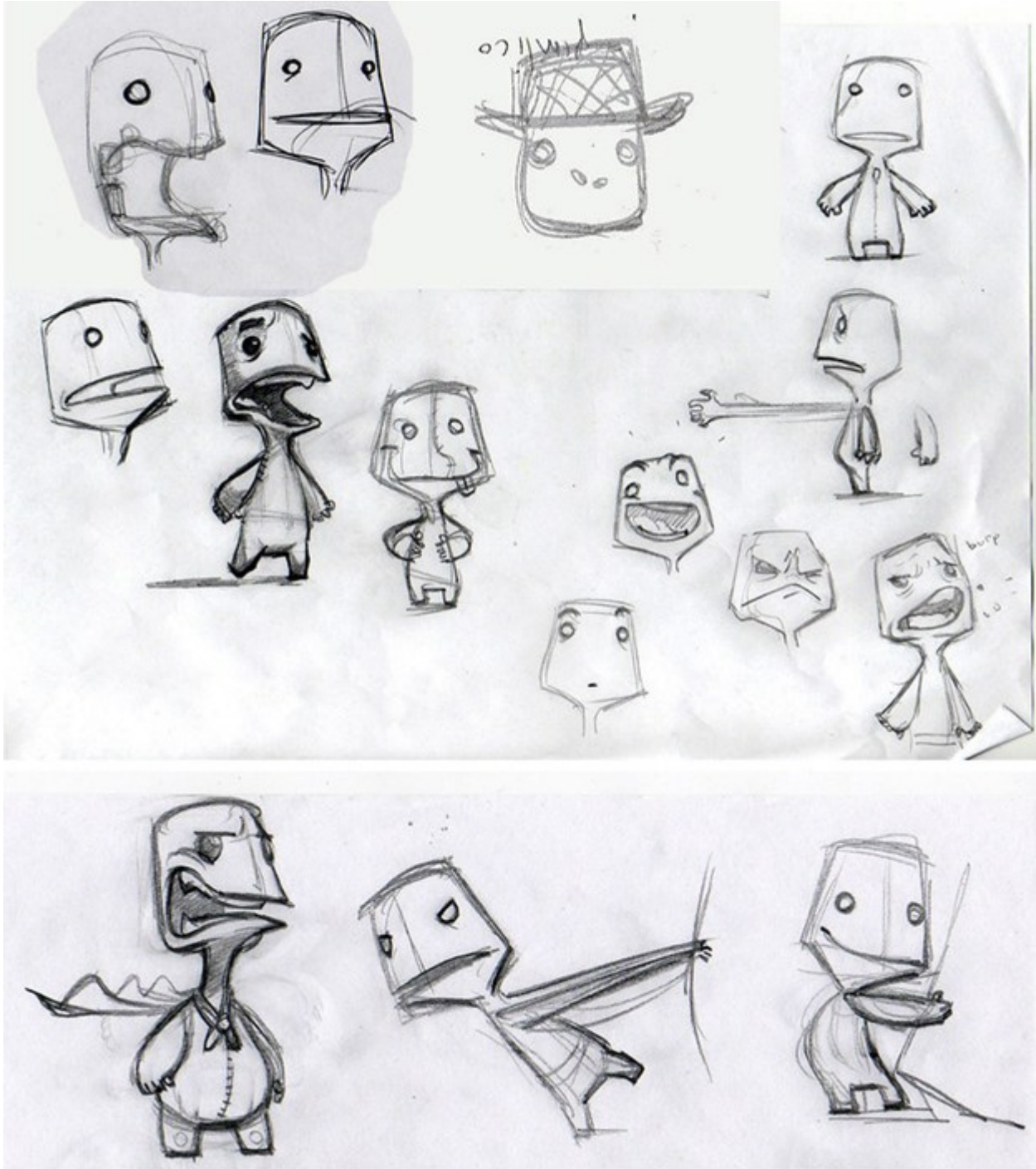
In 2006, the design team at Media Molecule was tasked with turning YellowHead into the studio's golden child. At first, YellowHead's defining feature stayed with the progression of the character design.



But the team went on to explore ways to refine the character, from defining features to proportions to textures. What persisted through all of Sackboy's iterations was the handmade look: buttons, patches, and hessian fabric. Then one of the programmers, Dave Smith, introduced what was referred to by the designers as "refreshing". Rather than pushing for unique features that would distinguish their protagonist, Smith's character sketches were all about one thing: personality.



He did away with the antenna, segmented limbs, and lumpy torso to focus on morphing the body. Influenced by his experience seeing the placeholders in the 3D game demos, Smith played with proportions and pushed the limits of a 3D model's anatomy, bringing a 2D-like cartoony charm into the 3D space.



LITTLEBIGPLANET. SACKBOY AND SACKGIRL ARE TRADEMARKS OR REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

What the design lacks in features is made up in expression. The face squishes and stretches and so does the fabric, wrinkling to give more force behind the emotion. With this decision, the team was unified in their vision for Sackboy.



Sometimes a design doesn't make it into the final cut, but its DNA is present in the final design. In the early stages of the game's development, Sackboy was meant to retreat into a hole in his stomach to plan out his creations. The logic was that imagination comes from inside of you, and the literal interpretation was conveyed with a large zipper on Sackboy's chest. The stomach hole was scrapped, but the zipper gave Sackboy the perfectly subdued amount of accessory to complete his character design.

Sackboy's zipper is an example of another key takeaway: a character design should have a mutual relationship with the game's mechanics. If any other character can be dropped into the shoes of the game's protagonist and the gameplay does not change, the character design is unimportant and therefore weak. Sackboy works because he is made of the same material that the

game's world and levels are made of, so while the player can decorate the world by stamping objects onto the levels, they can stamp those same objects onto Sackboy to decorate him (Spaff).

A character design is not reliant on a flashy, complicated outfit. It only needs to mold the canvas on which the character's adventure and growth will take place, providing the vehicle that the player will view as their gateway to the world (SkillShare). Reducing the design to its most essential shapes, and then morphing those shapes to portray emotions, creates a broad foundation for the player to empathize with the character. It also becomes easy to reproduce and highly versatile.

The Walking Dead




“Telltale Games gambled the whole experience of their game on Clementine and how players would react and care for her and it paid off big time. We all fell in love and wanted to protect her like she was our own.”

— Todd Eisenhauer via WhatCulture

When a player must protect a non-playable character (NPC) for a duration of a journey, this is known as an “escort mission”. Players dread escort missions (Anderson). According to Anderson, escort missions are frustrating because, since the NPC cannot be controlled, it’s easy for them to wander off and get into danger, which punishes the player by failing the mission. However, Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* created a whole game based on an escort mission and made it widely successful.

Like the popular TV show of the same name, *The Walking Dead* is a video game series based on a comic series by Robert Kirkman. The apocalypse has come about, and the main characters must survive a zombified world while trying not to turn on each other. The player controls Lee Everett, and Lee’s goal is to survive the apocalypse for as long as possible while protecting those dear to him, especially a little girl named Clementine. While every other NPC can die and the story moves on, the game heavily emphasizes the importance of keeping Clementine alive, to the point where a “Game Over” occurs if she is killed.

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* is one large escort mission, and Clementine must be safely escorted through the entire game. However, much to the gaming world's surprise – frustration and resentment did not come out of this. Clementine turned out to be a “likable obligation” to the player. She even appeared on IGN's *The Best New Video Game Characters of 2012* list. Clementine was able to accomplish this because of her characterization, as listed below.

	Clementine's Characterization
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8-year-old girl • Cute, innocent, down-on-luck • Funny, sweet, considerate • Determined, clever • Helpful to the player

These traits make Clementine likable. But that's not enough to make the player care about her to the point of enduring a dreaded escort mission. That is why Telltale introduced a key characterization: Clementine's parents are dead. This creates a vacuum of guardianship that, when combined with the above traits, makes the player want to make the main character, Lee, fulfill the role of her guardian. Even when Clementine makes a serious mistake – as an 8-year-girl would – players don't berate her or complain that the game gives them too much

responsibility. Instead, they relish in that responsibility, and are often disappointed in themselves for not guiding her well enough (Eisenhauer).

This was the desired outcome for Clementine's character. But the audience wouldn't immediately know this about her. Her visual design must communicate these promising traits to the audience so they would be willing to invest time into her development.



One of the most immediately interesting features of Clementine's design is her hat. A blue and white sports cap with a stylized "D" doesn't match the rest of her outfit at all, and therefore incites curiosity within the player. Questions arise, such as: why is this tiny girl wearing a mismatched sports hat, and what does the "D" stand for? These questions burn in the minds of the player, spurring them to play more to find out.

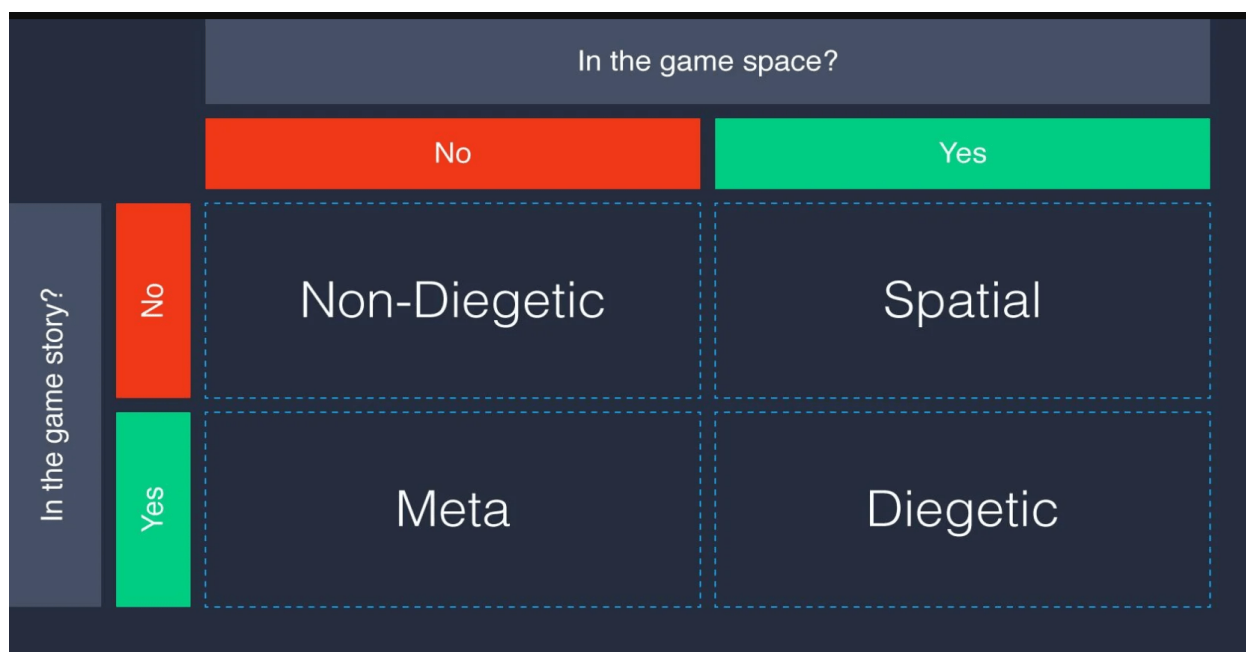
On a symbolic level, the hat represents her journey from innocence to a hardened survivalist, and it is the only piece of clothing in the series that persists from beginning to end. The hat was originally her father's, who let her borrow it but was never able to get his hat back when he fell to the apocalypse. This is a visual signifier of the vacuum of guardianship – it's as if this hat is an unfulfilled promise, a lingering debt that can never be paid and a reminder of what Clementine has lost.



As the story progresses, Clementine gets older and has survived more brutal situations, and the hat ages as well. It shows wear, dirt, and frayed stitching. But the most noticeable change is the glaring bloodstain. This stain comes from a very important moment in the story: when Lee, the player character who has guided her throughout the entire first season, is bitten and infected when he reaches for the hat Clementine dropped. Lee eventually passes, and Clementine becomes the player character from then on, now wearing a memento of *two* late fatherly figures. This is meant to incite pity from the player, a constant reminder of the unfairness that the young girl must endure. The vacuum of guardianship is the strongest it's ever been after this point, encouraging the player themselves to step to the plate as Clementine's final guardian.

User Interface

The user interface, or UI, is extremely important in a video game. It is the bridge between what happens in the game and what information the player needs to know to continue. In a roleplaying game, the main character tends to have a HUD – a “heads-up display”, also known as status bars. These are UI elements that simulate the status of health or stamina, indicating to the player how many times they can be hit by enemies before a Game Over occurs, or how many times they can execute an action, like attacking, before the main character needs to rest and recharge. As such, there are four main types of video game UI: diegetic, non-diegetic, spatial, and meta (Bowers)(Sydney).



Diegetic UI: Stick RPG 2

Diegetic UI exists in both the game’s space and its story, i.e. the characters are aware of the information displayed in the UI.



Stick RPG 2, like any RPG, has status bars in its UI. However, the most important status to keep an eye on in this game is not the main character's health, but the time of day. In the bottom left of the screen, a digital clock can be seen alongside the main character's face. The face's expression will change based on the amount of energy the character can use for actions in the remaining day. Wordlessly, this communicates to the player when their character is running out of steam, and whether they'll need to ration their remaining actions for the day or head to bed. This is an example of diegetic UI because the main character is aware of the time and their facial expression.

Non-Diegetic UI: *Team Fortress 2*

Non-diegetic UI exists entirely separate from the game's space and story and purely displays information for the player.



In *Team Fortress 2*, the "Kill Feed" is a UI element that lists all deaths of characters on ally and enemy teams in real time. In the image above, the blue and red names signify players on the blue

team and red team respectively, and the icon between the names shows what weapons were used to make the kill. In the game's universe, there is no way for the characters to know exactly when and how their teammates and enemies are defeated. This information exists solely for the players, and therefore, it is a non-diegetic UI.

Spatial UI: Persona 5

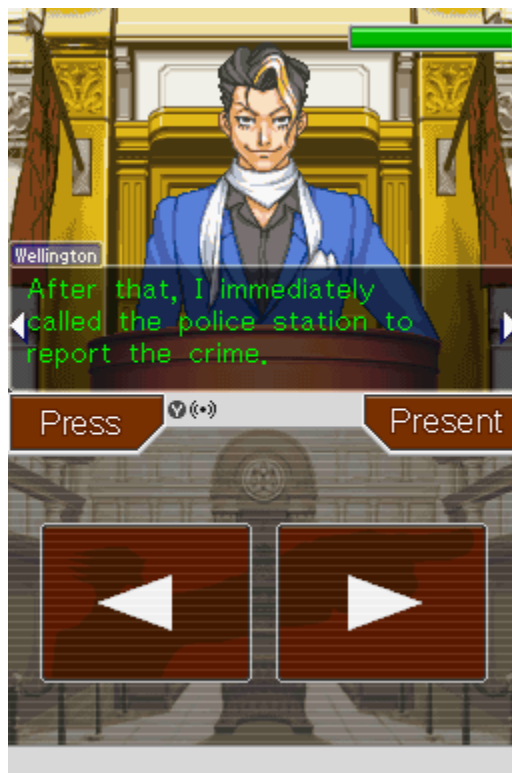
Spatial UI consists of visual indicators that exist outside the game's story, but within the game's space.



Persona 5 is praised for its alternative UI format. Menu options radiate from the characters like action lines, existing within the game's 3D space but unseen by the characters. In this specific case, the blending of UI into the game space is a stylistic choice, as the game is known for its comic book dynamism. Practically, it also serves to immediately identify which character the player is currently choosing an action for, as multiple characters can be controlled in a single battle. As pictured above, the spacial UI is hovering around a character, wordlessly communicating that this specific character can take an action.

Meta UI: Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

Lastly, meta UI exists outside the game's space, but within the story, utilizing the digital and interactive nature of video games.



Ace Attorney is a series of adventure legal drama games wherein the main character is a defense attorney. The player must comb through testimonies of witnesses to find discrepancies. To do this, the player is given arrow keys that can cycle through statements, a “Press” button that pushes the witness for more context, and a “Present” button that allows the player to present evidence that contradicts the statement. These are integral parts to the story and gameplay, but the characters in-universe are unaware of this UI and assume everything is happening verbally. The UI also sits on a separate, removed screen from the game's space. Therefore, this is a meta UI design.

Atmosphere



Stray is an adventure game developed by BlueTwelveStudio, published by Annapurna Interactive, and released on July 19, 2022. The story follows a cat journeying to reunite with its family after it falls into a pit, taking it to an underground civilization inhabited by robots long after the passing of humans. What *Stray* lacks in playtime and gameplay mechanics is made up for in immersion and an intimate story experience (Loveridge).

“Stray’s greatest strength is its sense of place, with environments achieved on a comparatively miniscule budget compared to its blockbuster counterparts. The tightly enclosed alleys and squares are crammed with graffiti, trash, and other artifacts of human habitation. Hermetically sealed from the wider world, the city is illuminated

entirely artificially, with the warm hue of lamps and Chinese-looking lanterns or the cold blue of computer screens.”

– Matt Gardner via Forbes

Its environment is a series of enclosed areas, most notably the Slums area as described the quote above (Gardner. Yet this location is the most open and explorative area in the game. While claustrophobic, this plays to the strengths of the nimble cat. The result is a limit on the player’s immediate view of the landscape while assuring that there is much to explore beyond what can be seen. It also contributes to a coziness, and a loving community among those that live in the Slums.



The lighting of *Stray* is also highly immersive. Because most of the game takes place underground, there is no sunlight, which means every light source is artificial and can be carefully tailored to guide the player naturally. For example, yellow lighting can be used to signify entrances, beckoning the player, while red lighting warns of dangers nearby, urging the player to stay away. Because lighting can guide the player, the UI is allowed to be extremely non-invasive, letting the player pay full attention to the game's world. The lighting and space of *Stray* creates its moody yet vibrant, wordless yet alive atmosphere, and a highly successful component in *Stray's* visual design.

Historical Analysis: Simulated Companionship



Pokémon is a video game franchise that has been creating new installments for over 25 years. It centers around the titular creatures known as Pokémon made of hundreds of species with combat prowess. Humans can capture these creatures and form battle teams with them. In each core game, the player travels around a given region using a Pokémon team of their choosing. The franchise is regarded as one of the most successful video game franchises in history and has undergone changes over the years to cater to the interests of the players – most notably, the ability to simulate companionship.

Generation 1 (1996-1999)



As the first installments of the series, *Pokémon Red Version* and *Pokémon Blue Version* were first released in Japan in 1996 to widespread success. Due to this success, a children's cartoon was made based on the series. This TV series is credited for popularizing Japanese animation around the world and saw even larger success than the original games (Bailey). To capitalize on this, The Pokémon Company created revised versions of the original *Pokémon Red Version* and *Pokémon Blue Version* games, called *Pokémon Yellow Version: Special Pikachu Edition*.

In this iteration, the player must use a Pikachu – the *Pokémon* TV series’ mascot Pokémon – throughout the game. This is the only game in the series that forces the player to use one specific Pokémon on their team, as freedom of choice is a core component of *Pokémon*’s brand. To compensate for this limitation, the Pikachu is given a personality, and walks alongside the player in the overworld and outside of battles. Unique to this installment, pressing the “Interact” button when facing Pikachu will prompt a pop-up of its face, showing Pikachu’s emotion given the context of its surroundings or health condition. This establishes empathy with the player and makes Pikachu feel like more a companion (Tan).

Generation 2 (1999-2002)



In the second generation of the core series, the “Friendship” mechanic was introduced. As more time is spent with the player’s Pokémon, the hidden numerical Friendship value will increase. This allows certain Pokémon to become stronger in battle, providing an immersive explanation for this change in the core mechanic. Pictured above is a character that can relay each Pokémon’s Friendship value to the player. To some, achieving the response of the highest Friendship value is emotionally rewarding (Psypoke).

Generation 3 (2002-2006)



Introduced in the third generation, “Super Contests” gave players the option to enter their Pokémon into talent competitions. To score higher points in these competitions, players can cook “Pokéblocks” for their Pokémon, which will make their Pokémon more confident in Super Contests. When feeding their Pokémon, a special animation plays wherein the Pokémon hops around, the player tosses the Pokéblock in the air, and the Pokémon catches it. This nonessential animation simulates how one might playfully toss a treat for a pet.



The animation also varies depending on the “nature” of the Pokémon, i.e., a Pokémon with the “Docile” nature will wait patiently before being fed, while one with a “Rash” nature will zoom around the screen before being fed. Natures were introduced in this generation in direct relation

to the battling mechanic – a Pokémon’s attack level, defense, speed, etc. will be influenced by this value. However, the decision to assign personality traits to this value serves to further anthropomorphize the Pokémon to make them feel more “real” to the player.

Generation 4 (2006-2010)



In the fourth generation of the core series (2006-2010), three new immersive mechanics were added. Amity Square was a new location that enabled players to take their Pokémon on a “stroll” around a fenced area. Dr. Footstep was a new character that can read the feelings of Pokémon and translate it to the player. This character gives the Pokémon a “voice,” which will vary in attitude and speech patterns based on the species of Pokémon. This simulates communication with the player’s team.



The latest fourth generation installment allowed Pokémon to permanently walk alongside the player in the overworld, expanding the previous Amity Square location across the entire game. The player can also speak to their Pokémon at any time, earning unique flavor text depending on the location, the type of Pokémon, the Pokémon's health, and friendship levels, like *Pokémon Yellow's* treatment of Pikachu. However, it now applied to every Pokémon available, so players can feel more connected to the specific Pokémon of their choosing. This level of interaction drastically changes the attitude towards Pokémon from that of tools for gameplay to companions. This walking Pokémon mechanic did not return for the next generation, much to fans' disappointment (OnlyKyOni).

Generation 5 (2010-2013)



In the fifth generation, pixel sprites became fully animated and situationally responsive. When a Pokémon obtains the Sleep status in battle, its pixel sprite closes its eyes (as shown in the picture above) and the animation loop slows. When a Pokémon obtains the Frozen status, the animation freezes, etc. This decision deepened the player’s empathy towards the Pokémon, who are now visually affected by ailments in battle.

Generation 6 (2013-2016)



The sixth generation introduced a game mode called “Pokémon Amie.” In it, players can interact with 3D models of their Pokémon – petting them, feeding them, or even poking and teasing them. It was the first time the series enabled players to directly interact with their team using the game system’s touch screen. In this same generation, character customization was established,

meaning players could feel even more immersed by changing the main character's hair, skin tone, and clothes. By identifying more with the main character's model, the player feels a closer personal connection to the game (Reyes).

Generation 7 (2016-2019)



“Pokémon Refresh” was a mechanic introduced in the seventh generation. It expands on the concept of Pokémon Amie in the previous generation by allowing players to clean their Pokémon after a battle. If a Pokémon obtains an ailment during battle, the player can treat it with medicine. If a Pokémon gets wet, dirty, or disheveled, the player can blow-dry, towel, and brush them. This mechanic further imitates the familial intimacy of caring for a pet.

Generation 8 (2018-2022)

E3 NINTENDO NEWS

Why Pokémon Sword and Shield's limited Pokédex is such a huge deal to fans

A new furor appears

By [Patricia Hernandez](#) | [@xpatriciah](#) | Jun 13, 2019, 12:38pm EDT

In every Pokémon game in history, including spin-off games, new installments would include every single Pokémon in its programming at the time of its release. It was Pokémon's branding that every Pokémon meant something to someone, and that keeping its worlds well-populated will make its players happy. However, this business model is not designed to last. On June 11, 2019, The Pokémon Company made the decision to include only a limited number of Pokémon in its then-upcoming titles, *Pokémon Sword* and *Pokémon Shield*. Despite The Pokémon Company's best efforts to include the most popular Pokémon in their roster, fans were still outraged (Hernandez). The very notion that any Pokémon would be left behind was upsetting. Because of this, many fans rallied to boycott the game (Cooper).



However, this generation also included the “Pokémon Camp” system. Like Pokémon Amie and Pokémon Refresh, the Pokémon Camp allowed the player to interact with 3D models of their Pokémon, but now, all six team members can be interacted with simultaneously as opposed to one at a time. Players can also play fetch with their Pokémon, and some Pokémon may even interact with each other. While previous quality-of-life additions helped players feel more connected with their individual Pokémon, the Pokémon Camp addition made players feel part of a family.



These mechanics rarely reward the game's core experience of battling. None of these mechanics will bring the player closer to beating the game. Yet they exist to immerse the player in the experience of having beloved pets, and to tell the player that despite their digital nature, the player's Pokémon love them back. The culture of the *Pokémon* games revolves around the emotional attachment formed by players towards their favorite Pokémon. This drives returning players and inspires curiosity among potential new players.

Actions Taken

Premise

Cotler is an action-adventure game wherein the player is not the main character, but a force that influences the main character. The setting is an abandoned mansion inhabited by living textile creatures.

Branding

Logo



Cotler



The name *Cotler* is a portmanteau of the words “cotton” and “straggler” – the meaning of which will become apparent in the Character Design section. This logo is made of threads and passes

through a needle. Like the worldbuilding logos examined in the Research section, it emulates craft materials to convey the game’s setting. Taking inspiration from the storytelling logos, the use of light-yellow threads creates a soft, innocent tone, while the needle conveys danger that must be passed through.

Typography

COTLER IS YOUR DOG.

AND THE TWO OF YOU ARE QUITE... INSEPARABLE.

Headline — Corundum Text Book SC
Subheadline — Corundum Text Light SC

Cotler is a story-driven adventure game with both horror and heartwarming elements.

Body — Corundum Text Book Roman

Your progress has been saved.

Description — Corundum Text Light Italic

“What the hell kind of puppet are you? Scram!”

Dialogue — Corundum Text Book Italic

The Corundum family was chosen to represent *Cotler*. Regarding worldbuilding, the serifs convey the elegance and prestige of the mansion. Regarding storytelling, this font is somber and serious.

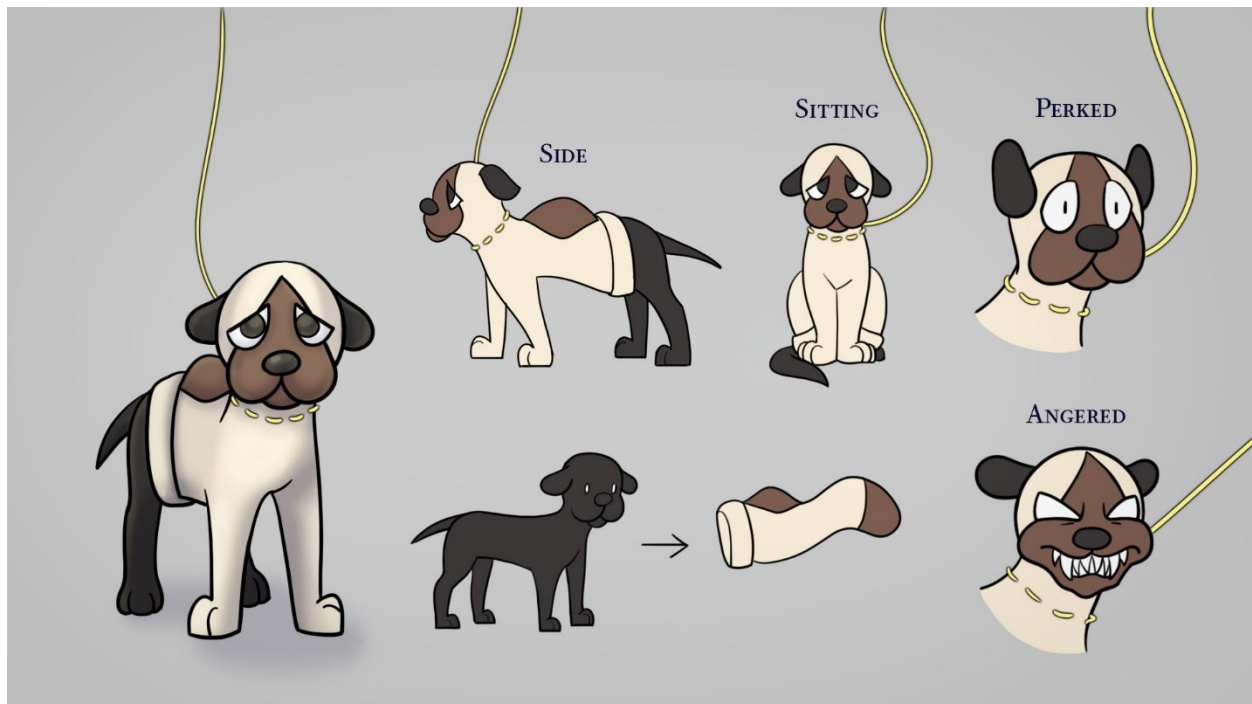
Color Palette

<p>Hex #30282e</p> <p>RGB (48, 40, 46)</p> <p>CMYK (68, 70, 58, 64)</p> <p>BLACK COFFEE</p>	<p>Hex #501c32</p> <p>RGB (80, 30, 50)</p> <p>CMYK (50, 87, 54, 54)</p> <p>OLD MAUVE</p>
<p>Hex #c1ad98</p> <p>RGB (193, 173, 152)</p> <p>CMYK (25, 29, 0, 39)</p> <p>KHAKI</p>	<p>Hex #30282e</p> <p>RGB (45, 43, 65)</p> <p>CMYK (81, 78, 47, 50)</p> <p>MIDNIGHT</p>
<p>Hex #ecea6</p> <p>RGB (236, 229, 166)</p> <p>CMYK (8, 4, 42, 0)</p> <p>CANARY</p>	<p>Hex #d8d1c1</p> <p>RGB (216, 209, 193)</p> <p>CMYK (14, 13, 22, 0)</p> <p>BONE</p>

To accomplish worldbuilding, the natural, earthy colors convey a rustic environment. Royal colors – old mauve and midnight – further communicate prestige. To accomplish storytelling, dark tones convey seriousness and horror elements.

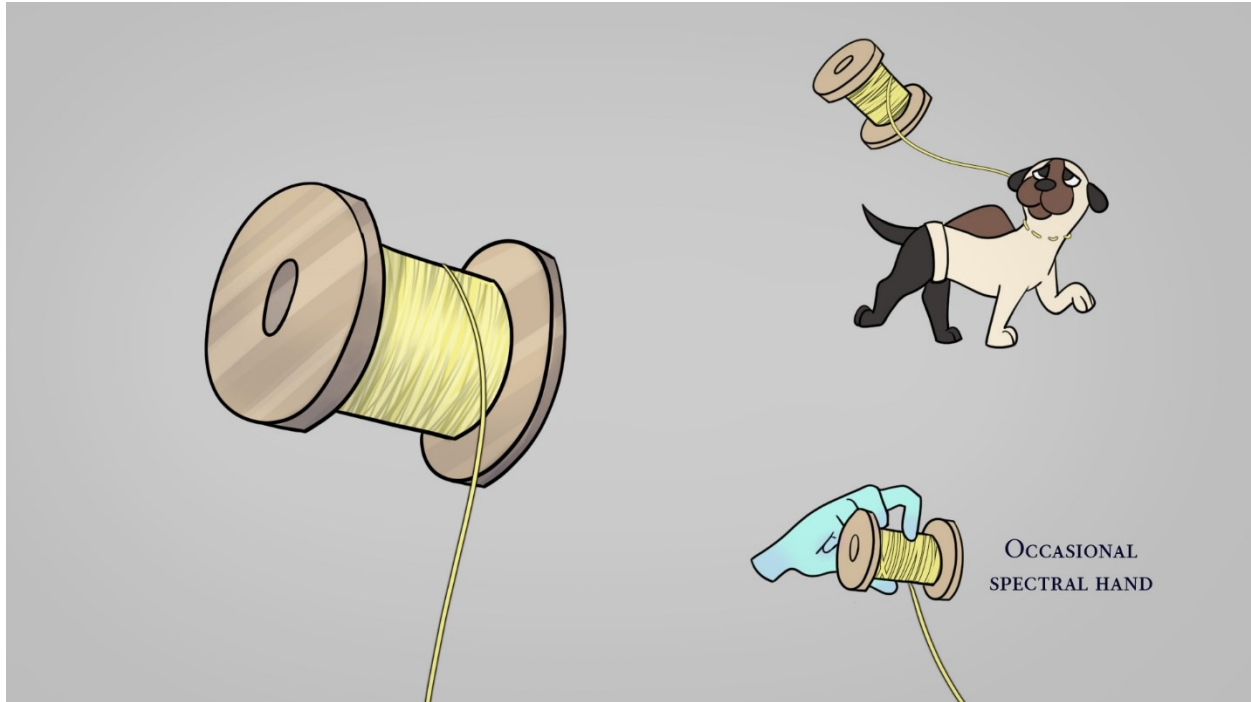
Character Design

Main Character: Cotler



Cotler is a sock puppet dog. By three accounts, he is lost. He is a lost dog, a lost sock, and a lost toy. This concept strongly invokes the vacuum of guardianship. To further elicit sympathy, Cotler's eyes droop in sadness, and his body language is small and non-invasive.

Player Character: Spool of Thread



The spool of thread attached to Cotler is the playable character. It has no defining features apart from the bright yellow thread connecting it to Cotler. A ghostly hand is sometimes featured holding this spool to represent the player, but because Cotler is designed to appear as alone as possible, this hand is only used to clarify the player's role in the game and is not always visible.

Adversaries: Marionettes



Three major adversaries that thwart Cotler and the player were designed. All three are marionettes based on renowned professions but have corrupted in some way due to neglect. The mad Doctor (left) loves to take things apart and sew them back together, so their coat and scrubs have been torn and restitched, and a pincushion is attached to their chest to store their needles. The harrowed Mayor (middle) has pulled his hair out from the stress of managing Living City, but must maintain his public image, so his suit is pristine. The delusional Astronaut (right) lives in the Kitchen, as the murky sink water filled with sparkling shards of broken glass remind her of outer space. As such, her body is made of interlocked bowls, her helmet has a smiling face drawn up of ketchup and mustard, and mold creeps through her body.

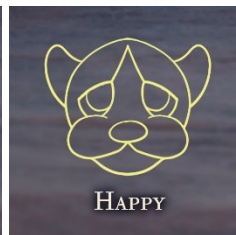
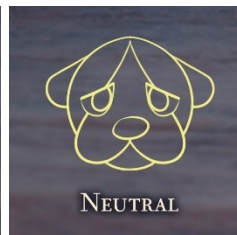
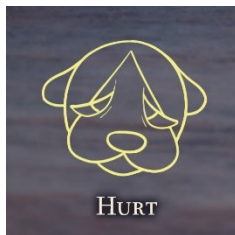
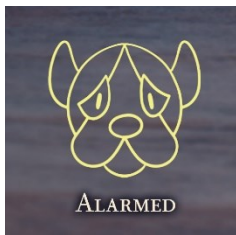
Game Content

Concept Art



A digital painting of the setting was created, featuring one of the locations Cotler and the player can pass through. This location is called Living City, a settlement in the mansion's living room that's inhabited by living puppets. It is made of dollhouses, blankets, and battery-powered candles in the nooks between couches and tables. It uses dark, moody lighting to set a mysterious atmosphere.

User Interface



The user interface consists of a meta health indicator, non-diegetic combat options, spatial enemy health bars, and a non-diegetic dialogue box with an interactive needle button. While most of the UI is minimal, the responsive indicator of Cotler's face is designed to force the player to always be aware of Cotler's mental and physical wellbeing. It is larger when a threat is present.

Marketing

Video Trailer

An animatic video trailer was made to promote the game, featuring an original score. The trailer focuses on the two main draws of the game: the unique premise and the character dynamic between Cotler and the player. The trailer can be accessed with the QR code below, or by following this link: vimeo.com/778048623.



Merchandise



A plush toy of Cotler and two posters were created as merchandise. The plush toy uses fabric that easily frays at the ends, creating the look of amateur craftsmanship and a more “loved” look. The first poster highlights the unique premise and horror worldbuilding. The second poster features the three marionette adversaries.

Packaging





A game card case for the Nintendo Switch was designed, using the illustration from the first poster. The second poster is featured on the inside of the case. The backside uses images and copy to tease the concept.

Marketing Inside the Game



A game mechanic was planned to encourage merchandise sales. Throughout the game, players can customize Cotler's appearance and order their designs as plush toys.

Conclusion

Cotler is an immersive adventure game of the horror genre and was created to be an emotional gaming experience. Throughout this project, extensive research into the video game industry led to design decisions that emphasized storytelling both inside the game and in its marketing.

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