

Rodent Accompaniment Document + Design Notes

Game Summary

Rodent is a text-based Twine [1] narrative game about navigating a maze test as a lab rat. The goal is to take only the correct turns to reach the end. Failure in the maze leads to immediate death by electrocution and the player is assigned a new rat to control and has to restart their journey from the beginning. The game takes a dystopian feel to explore feelings of perfectionism and mortality. It is not explicitly stated that you are playing as a lab rat until far into the game, although things like the title and such hint at this before the explicit reveal.

Portfolio Intention

Growing and changing is something I think is my biggest asset as a designer. I think iteration and the new should be the focus of my portfolio. As such my intentions for the project were as follows:

- To learn a new engine and tools (Twine)
- To take a design I have already explored and develop it for a new narrative
- Deliver a compelling narrative in a writing genre different from my previous work
- Create design work that is not reliant on art to accompany it

Design Notes + Breakdowns

While I don't intend to lay out every part of my design choice and process, I would like to break down a couple of the key elements of my game and provide some insight into the reasoning and work that lead me to them.

Perfectionism and Morality

In my personal work, I am drawn to creating autobiographical pieces. I believe that writing about what I know allows me to be both inventive and passionate. Using Twine as a new tool presented challenges and forced me to approach design decisions differently. Although this was a great learning experience, the heart and inspiration for the story came from my own personal experiences.

Perfectionism often imprisons me in my pursuit of personal goals. The pressure to succeed in life can make me push myself to the limit. In fact, this project was difficult for me to begin because of my perfectionism. Exploring what it means to seek perfection and the dystopian world of the lab rats harshly punished for a single mistake was something I could connect with emotionally. It played a significant role in my decision to explore this theme in my project.

Death and mortality are themes that I relate to personally. Recently, I have been surrounded by death with the passing of family members and loved ones. As an anxious person, I often think about my own death. Using the fragile lives of mice and their fears of death in my project allowed me to explore these thoughts and emotions. It was more than just highlighting the harsh punishment for not being perfect but also a way for me to express my own thoughts and feelings on the topic.

Dystopia

I often find myself writing things that are more humorous and surreal so this choice was unusual for me, but overall was the best choice for the game. Rodent uses the dystopian genre to create a disturbing and oppressive world in the game to take place in. This genre deals with themes such as corruption, injustice, and various forms of division. My story follows a tortured lab rat as an allegory of forced perfectionism, making dystopia the ideal genre and setting. I was heavily influenced by the writing style of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley and aimed to emulate a similar style while still maintaining my unique voice in storytelling. Animal Farm, specifically the way the animals communicated, was particularly influential and I even included a quote from the book at the start of the game to establish the dystopian tone and make a clear connection to the genre I am depicting.

Frustration maze

One of the influences for my game originated from my desire to revisit the theme of a "Frustration maze" that I had previously explored in my second-year game, I'm Peachie! [2]. The core idea of this style is to create an unsettling, hostile environment that disorients and frustrates players to convey the negative emotions explored in the game's narrative. Unlike Peachie, which used the maze as a metaphor for mental health issues such as ADHD and depression, Rodent explores the theme of perfectionism and how failure, even when there was only ever a small chance of success, can be devastating to a person. In the game, the player takes on the role of a lab rat forced to navigate the maze with no context or help. Despite the unfairness and the unlikeliness, if the rat fails to choose the correct path even once, it is terminated. The process of repurposing the Frustration maze design for this new purpose was challenging as I had to decide what elements had to stay the same from my previous attempt and what needed to change to keep the core design pillars with a different identity.

The Blinding White

Peachie was heavily reliant on using visuals to disorient the player to deliver the Frustration Maze and I couldn't rely on visuals to disorient the player in a text-based game. Not only that, but one of my personal challenges points in this project was to make one with little to no art. So instead I focused on combining the distressing nature of the dystopian genre, descriptive passages with little information to enforce the mystery, black text on a harsh bright white background, and a discomfoting soundtrack consisting of looping melodies and unnatural machine noises to create a disorienting effect. This led to the concept of "Blinding White", which was not only used to fulfil the disorienting criteria for the Frustration maze, but also became a significant narrative element representing fear, confusion, and oppression.

The Rats

The rats are really at the core of this story. Past the abstract themes and the genre influences, the rats had to be the core focus of this story in order for the project to have an anchor point on which to keep the narrative focused. The story of the rat's lives, how they all have different names and interests but essentially the same past thanks to the sterile lab upbringing, to the way they tell their story through their human-like, but somewhat almost broken English. Writing for the rats was a new experience for me as I have a tendency to write protagonists of a similar kind (youthful girls and women, often in an autobiographical or idealistic version of myself). This time I had to create characters that were more openly empathic and more widely relatable. It was a style that had to work for the multiple rats you would be introduced to and appeal to the multiple players who would be interacting with it.

Despite the more vague writing for a bigger empathy pool, giving the rats their individual character was important to me. Before I even had planned the maze or written the dialogue, I spent a good week alone innovating how to create a variety of rats which didn't overwhelm the main gameplay but still gave the rats a spotlight in which to shine. This led to me creating the rat generator, the block of code seen at the start of every run where you are assigned a rat and told its name, age and interests.

I made the decision to not reveal the player's identity as a lab rat until later in the game. This decision was made to enhance the strange and dystopian feel of the game and to make players more likely to read the dialogue as if they were humans, therefore creating more connection. Even though the game is about lab rats, I chose to refer to them as mice in-game to encourage empathy towards them and discourage negative associations often associated with rats.

Playtesting

I conducted playtesting with a group of 6 participants. On average, they completed the game between 30-40 minutes without any assistance. 5 out of 6 participants were able to accurately identify the story and themes when asked to write their own summary of the game. 4 out of 6 participants felt that the frustration aspect of the game enhanced the storytelling. This is noteworthy, as some players mentioned that while they didn't necessarily enjoy the gameplay, they appreciated how it conveyed the struggles of the lab rats. While this sample size is small, the results suggest that my game design has successfully created the intended experience for players. However, to further validate these results, more playtesting is needed.

Evaluation

Making this game has taught me the importance of setting high goals for myself and constantly striving for improvement. While there may be similarities between this game and my previous ones, I see it as an evolution rather than a failure. Each game is unique in its own way and serves as a demonstration of my growth as a designer. If I were to work on this project again, it would likely take on an even different direction. This is evidence of my ability to develop and iterate my work which ultimately, is what I wanted from my portfolio.

References

[1] (2009) Twine. Available at: <https://twinery.org/>.

[2] Christopher, E. (2022) "I'm Peachie!" Available at: <https://eggchanted.itch.io/im-peachie>.