

## FM5506 – GAME DESIGN I – Assessment Three

# “THEATRE OF DREAMS” – Evaluation

Reflecting on the brief to design a game for a popular History Magazine’s website allowed a wide scope to explore many potential creative avenues – the only thing to really keep in mind was the control method as Internet games are generally played with the far from intuitive combination of keyboard and mouse. Straight away Team Alchemy considered the ‘edutainment’ approach of teaching through amusement, as History is a typically rich subject yet is often considered boring to study. Usually there is not a direct engagement with the text and it is a process of remembering facts, but there is a tentative link that interactive videogames can certainly assign as learning aids. The overall aim was always to teach of historical time zones and their realms in an entertaining and broadly challenging way. It was also always to be aimed at schoolchildren, who would reap the most benefit from historical education, and hence be the easiest to engage with an entertaining game within the historical context.

Next it was working out an environment where players could learn about Historical Artifacts, and so thus the ‘*Mystery Museum*’ was born. The central notion was a night/daytime dichotomy where the player uses a point and click adventure interface taking their time to learn about exhibits in a museum environment during the day, and then at night have to break in to rescue a stolen exhibit in an arcade *Pac-man* style maze. Here they would avoid security systems and guards and be asked questions based on the knowledge they were to accumulate during the day, hence satisfying the quota for enjoyment and puzzlement. Care had to be taken with regards to the audience; morally if the Museum was founded on unethical grounds it would allow the premise of player intrusion. Gameplay wise the nighttime arcade section failed to be interesting enough, although the charged narrative possibilities of uncovering evil or a secret proved popular. Decoding, torchlights, maps and keys in a Museum environment was a route to a rich contextual gameplay experience where the title screen could be a menu in the Museum entrance hall. Next it was suggested that the exhibits would come to life and immerse the player in different Historical Worlds by night. This was deemed too similar to the recent film ‘*Night At The Museum*’ (2006, 20th Century Fox) and the dualistic characterization was too typically trench coated, magnifying glass wielding detective versus a monocle and tophat wearing mustached aristocrat, similar to the game ‘*Where in The World is Carmen Sandiego?*’ (1985, Brøderbund Software).

An idea that was from myself was to attempt for originality and have the whole game as a grand metaphor for human existence. This would allow a creative and innovative execution of a multi-layered narrative that the player would take with them long after completion of the quest, where questions from History would be answered but deeper questions from the historical nature of existence would be asked. So the narrative began taking shape, with each floor in the Museum being an adventure through a different time zone level (being Egyptian, Vikings, Knights, Feudal Japan, Modern Industrial, culminating in a rooftop under the stars that represented the future).

The Introduction to *Mystery Musuem* was the ground floor being Prehistoric times, which would allow fusion with a personal favourite Philosophical element of Plato’s Cave Allegory<sup>1</sup> to allow the suggestion the game was going to be about a central

character who represents humanity, who goes through these time zones towards an uncertain destiny looking for fundamental answers to existence, which is what loosely History is a recording of. Reaching out to the silhouette shapes of the beyond and other is a key motivation of our nature and one that could be explored throughout the narrative. Staging the game from a Theatre perspective where the player literally controlled a stringed avatar puppet followed as it was deemed the *Pinocchio*<sup>2</sup> story drew parallels to the Cave Allegory; where shadow puppets dancing in the fire of the Prehistoric Cave were representative of humankind's *Deus Ex Machina*<sup>3</sup> and hence motivation for pursuing the non-tangible beyond life, or in Pinocchio's case harking to become a real boy. The ending was written and involved the cutting of his strings to realize his absolving wish of truth and certainty, a metaphor for death, and the releasing of the anchor that stops the trapped from ascension - thus the joining with the mimetic<sup>4</sup> 'real'. Free from control the avatar's memory lives on in the player and audience; the twist being the panning out of the camera across the audience where they make up all the Gods from the different Mythologies – suggesting post death we live on in the minds of the Gods we create to watch us through life. This proved an original and satisfying suturing between player and avatar, where the player is the God the avatar sees swirling in the shadows of their theatrically staged Prehistoric cave allegory. The Theatre was also useful for framing the game with tickets and stage ephemera generating an outline for building an experience within.

At this point three levels were narrowed down based on cultural richness of Egypt, Greek and Norse and a short narrative for each time zone was written in a map format, including NPCs, their whereabouts in the game, flow of environments to explore, mini-game ideas and items to pick up and exchange. Combining an adventure 'point and click' interface with embedded arcade elements was the ideal solution to balancing education and entertainment. The adventure gameplay allowed players to learn as they solved puzzles by logically exchanging items and thus aiding people - hence lending a functional coherence and layout. A novel approach to control in this section was worked out where different strings corresponded to different keys, so the player would mimic using a marionette when not moving around. The inclusion of the different arcade mini-games injects an urgent sense of spontaneous fun. With more time these arcade games could have been more closely researched to further represent their time zones, as only the Egyptian level has a literal game from its real historical time in the form of Senet. Further detailed tweaking to increase fun elements of control and challenging time-limits could also be worked over.

Post pitching presentation it was examined how the Theatre, historical elements and the Cave Allegory/Pinocchio concept failed to cohesively gel as well as we would have liked. The postmodern notion was thought from my recent essay in the Theory side recently submitted that the player could play as a Mythological shadow puppet God playing a marionette puppet, who in turn is playing as a human. These three levels was similar to Cloud in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) who is designed to be played by a typically angst-ridden teenage player who role-plays as an angst-ridden teenage character who is role-playing to be someone else (Cloud thinks he is another character called Zack; it is revealed half way the game as being through due to eugenics altering his mind previous to the game beginning). Therefore there was gestalt suturing on three levels; the 'real' of the historical time zones and their puzzles, the 'unreal' of the theatre dynamic

and crafted nature of reality, and the ‘mythological’ realm of the Gods the player inhabits – high above and beyond the realm of the marionettes below.

Thus the *Theatre of Dreams* was born, a commentary on the games of fate and destiny played out by Gods throughout the ages. The rule of the game was simple, where the more puppets who believe in a mythology the more powerful their Gods become – therefore the player was to take over the other remaining realms, which was the hinge for allowing historical immersion, transportation and exploration. Whilst the time zones the player were to be immersed in were easy to flesh out with adventure it was deemed innovative to flesh out the mythological aspect as well by giving all the shadow puppet Gods in the three teams personalities, with NPC’s being controlled by Good or Bad Gods on the opposing teams sides – with all the marionettes being controlled by thread there is a parallel where the morality of humans in reality are possessed by their own Gods. A further commentary on the nature of personality was present with the use of a standard Marionette puppet body but different characters wearing different masks and clothing; this would help with already stretched production resources as well by minimizing the rendering of character models.

Some of the best ideas that were generated from myself was the inclusion of the ‘Divine Intervention’ option which allows a player to skip a mini-game and mirrors the supposed supernatural agency of a God in the real world, the final twist in the game of a never ending chain of puppets, and the aforementioned NPC’s polarity system which hence allows simulated interaction between the opposing Gods and the players invading God. All further channel a notion of personal Philosophical exploration into the nature of the relationship between humanity and the divine, which strengthens the cohesive quality of the overall design.

Use of marionette merchandise tie-in’s lent the project needed commercial awareness and the potential for a massive chain-reaction of advertisement, for both the website and game; this in turn would prove useful for reclaiming production costs. As marionettes are not rigid models their virtual agency is possible to be played out in reality with merchandise. The line is blurred between playing with a toy and using the marionette as a tool, and so the owner could even pretend to be their chosen God beyond the game with their own Anima! Once this was realized it was considered how if the project was started from the beginning again then it could be deliberately designed around a more central tie-in strategy instead of accidentally designing for simple avatar retail.

Designing *Theatre of Dreams* proved very fruitful in learning about many things. The amount of thought, energy and time that goes into producing an original game was certainly a point to meditate upon conclusion as well as the nature of sharing and refining ideas with others. Balancing enough entertainment and education in a single satisfying gameplay length (it was decided a two hours sitting, or an hour for a level was plenty) also proved rewarding with careful consideration. Initially it was believed the different cultural backgrounds of the design team might prove to be a hindrance with a potential language barrier or clashing of ideas yet instead it proved to be a very fertile breeding ground for generating and developing. One thing though was the final formatting of the actual document, which had to be done with a critical English eye, and therefore perhaps especially towards the end of the time spent on the brief the workload was disproportionately weighted towards myself. Although design jobs were delegated it was

a case of organizing and formulating the ideas and presenting them in the brief to produce a document that was a coherent whole that only a person with grounding in English could really achieve. The control method for the adventure gameplay was also a source of tension where it was believed that a simple mouse control would have sufficed, but a member of the group insisted upon the use of keys to control strings; this added agency to the notion of controlling a marionette but also was deemed needlessly convoluted. These are only minor points however as the finished design document reflects the sheer volume of hard work all three members of the team poured into the delivery of the diagesis. There was certainly an organic quality to the flow of idea generation as more thought was put forth; the Design Document and subsequent reflection of the quality of the potential finished product is a sincere testament to the whole rewarding experience of producing the *Theatre of Dreams*.

Definition of terms:

- 1 – Plato’s Cave Allegory – [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory\\_of\\_the\\_cave](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_cave)
- 2 – The story of Pinocchio – <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinocchio>
- 3 – Deus Ex Machina – [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus\\_ex\\_machina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_ex_machina)
- 4 – Mimesis – <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mimesis>

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CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS GAME DESIGN?  
CHAPTER 2: GAME CONCEPTS  
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*Night At The Museum* (2006, 20th Century Fox)  
*Where in The World is Carmen Sandiego?* (1985, Brøderbund Software)  
*Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997)