

Catch The Butterfly: A Gaminiscing Game about Immigration

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Abstract— *Catch The Butterfly* is a narrative game exploring the real, lived experiences of an immigrant. It was created using the gaminiscing method. In *Catch The Butterfly*, every mechanic and representation is derived from the authentic stories of the subject. The aim is twofold: to provide insights to game designers interested in the gaminiscing method, and to promote empathy and understanding of immigrants. Through the personal narrative of an immigrant, this game offers a personal perspective on immigration and a unique example of the design process when creating a game with the gaminiscing method.

Keywords—Gaminiscing, Empathy, Game Design, Storytelling, Meaningful Games, Immigration

I. INTRODUCTION

Catch The Butterfly is a short virtual experience with simple gameplay that aims to generate awareness of the immigrant experience and dispel stereotypes regarding this population. The player controls a lotus flower petal that has been separated from other petals and must navigate a treacherous river in an attempt to find peace and happiness. The game's narrative is a true story about a man (the Narrator) who immigrated from Syria, detailing the social and psychological hardships of leaving one's home country. The game is designed to create empathy between the player and the Narrator, as games can allow players to assume new roles to experience a wide range of experiences and foster empathy [1]. Through gameplay mechanics that are inspired by the Narrator's experience, empathy is created in this game.

Catch The Butterfly's narrative is conveyed through a raw recording of the Narrator as he recounts his journey. The Narrator, who is part of the design team, provided full, written consent for the use of his audio in the game. This co-design process with the narrator helped us receive invaluable feedback and insightful perspective that shaped the design of the game. The recordings were gathered through interview sessions. The game's name is inspired by a metaphor drawn from the Narrator's closing sentiment about how setting simple goals for oneself is a method in escaping deep depression. In relation, the game's visuals and gameplay are drawn from the design team's interpretation of the Narrator's story. The game's soft, pleasing, hand-drawn art style contrasts the gritty and heartbreaking story the player is hearing as they play (see Fig. 1). Upon completion of the

experience, the player will have engaged with the emotions of the Narrator's story through gameplay, grappled with the positive and negative aspects of the Narrator's journey, and have a deeper understanding of the profound emotional effects that forced immigration has on those who live through it. This approach encourages compassion and minimizes the perceived boundaries between the Narrator's world and the player world through the use of personal stories [2].



Fig. 1. Soft and pleasing hand-drawn art contrasts with the heartbreaking reality of the Narrator's experiences.

This game is based on research into gaminiscing as a method of narrative game creation [3]. Embracing the methods outlined in the gaminiscing heuristic blog post, this game was created to enhance the Narrator's story through interactivity, ensuring that every aspect of the game's design reflects aspects of their story.

II. GAME CONCEPT AND DESIGN

Catch The Butterfly delivers its core experience to reflect the hardship and resolution of the Narrator's immigration journey. The gameplay evokes the frustration and loneliness of the Narrator's story, but also the inspiration and connection felt at the conclusion of the tale. The player should feel as though they have overcome this hardship alongside the Narrator, creating a sense of empathy between the two.

A. Design Pillars

Catch The Butterfly delivers its core experience through the following design pillars:

- The player hears the story directly from its source: The narration of the game is delivered through a raw recording of the Narrator’s interview. No element of the game’s design should compromise or overshadow the Narrator’s voiceover. The player should clearly be able to hear and see not only the story’s subject matter, but they should also feel the tone and emotion of that voiceover.
- Gameplay mechanics are derived from details of the Narrator’s story: Each mechanic is conceptualized and built to reflect a specific detail in the Narrator’s story. The mechanic should be introduced alongside the piece of the narrative that generated it to display that connection.
- Gameplay should reflect the sentiment of the story: The game should be more difficult and evoke frustration or annoyance when the narrator is discussing frustrating and somber elements of their story, and less difficult and more rewarding when the narrator is discussing happy or uplifting elements of their story.

B. Narrative to Mechanic Implementation

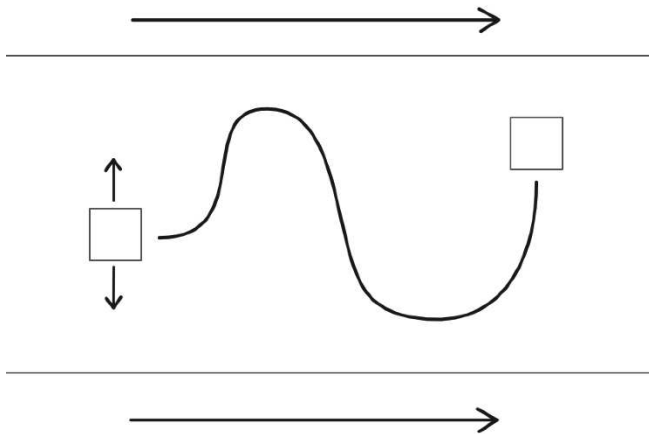


Fig. 2. Representation of gameplay illustrating control over the lotus petal while the game forces movement to simulate loss of control. See Fig. 1 for implementation of this design within the game itself.

This section details a core mechanic of *Catch The Butterfly* to illustrate how the mechanics are implemented through the design pillars.

The most fundamental core mechanic of the game is movement. The player character (the lotus petal) moves automatically down the river at a speed that the player cannot control. However, the player can move the lotus vertically on the river using the arrow keys or WASD keys. This mechanic is derived from the Narrator’s story as he states “During the civil war in my country, and because of the minority issues over there, I had to leave everything, and seeking (sic) a new life, in a new country.” The story is about moving from their home country to another due to forces that were out of their control. Likewise, the lotus moves with the river from left to right regardless of the player’s actions (see Fig. 2, see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Representation of the dark state. Desaturated and with a vignette, this state bombards the player with ghostly echoes of negative thoughts.

C. Dark State Mechanic

While the player moves horizontally down the river, obstacles will spawn randomly in front of the player. If the player collides with an obstacle on the river, they enter the dark state, signaled by a desaturation of colors and a vignette effect (see Fig. 3). The Narrator’s voice fades out, and is replaced with repetitive and echoey vocal reminders of the narrator’s weakness and hardship. This mechanic motivates the player to move vertically to avoid obstacles and prevent entering the dark state.

When in the dark state, the player gains the ability to jump and to control their horizontal speed. This is done to allow the player agency to catch the butterfly – a mechanic that allows them to escape the dark state. This too is based on the Narrator’s story as he states “my therapist advised me to get up again, to collect my strength, and chasing (sic) targets. Either like working out, drawing, playing music, socialized (sic). To be like something aiming to do - like catch a butterfly.” By allowing more player agency in these states, this game further reinforces the ties between the Narrator’s story and the game mechanics.

III. CONCLUSIN AND FUTURE WORK

Catch The Butterfly was designed using the gaminiscing process. Embracing an immigration story, the game was designed to reflect every aspect of the Narrator’s recordings in order to tie his lived experiences with metaphorical gameplay and visuals. Research is planned to be conducted on assessing the game’s ability to promote engagement and empathy.

REFERENCES

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