

FNAT102 Final Project Journal

2016-02-01 10:32 AM

I meant to start this journal a few days ago; it's only honest that I mark the exact time I truly began to transcribe the process involved in producing my final project for First Nations Studies.

I came upon the original idea last week, 6 days ago on a Tuesday, just prior to the morning lecture commencement. I'd been putting together a plan to do a monologue: a scripted, one-man-show performance, where I laid bare my soul for the audience, presenting a man who'd grown up without any connection to his ancestral roots.

It seemed like a good plan at the time, especially in light of Laura Cranmer's tales of her own "playwriting as healing". This is a gross simplification, and even what little was presented in class seemed to only scratch the surface: a 10-year-long process, emotionally jarring and somewhat disaster-struck final result, and one that hasn't really been preserved for public consumption. It sounded to me exactly like something such as this should go: very private, cathartic, and hopefully moving toward release but potentially harmful to the spirit if not treated with care.

I changed my mind about the monologue after considering the logistics of the presentation. It was unlikely that I'd have the time or space to really act out what I had in mind, and I felt disinterested in recording a *performance* for later video perusal. By the afternoon I had made up my mind to go with my strengths, and decided to produce a video game.

On Friday, 3 days ago, I sat down at my computer and updated all of my tools. These tools had lain dormant for months, and after a careful polishing were ready to go. I slapped together a very quick prototype of a moment and UI system, more to remind myself that I could actually create the kind of content that I need to. As of this entry it's working as expected. It seems it's a lot harder to forget how to manipulate code and the wiles of the Unity engine than I'd perhaps hoped.

I need to form a proper design document. A lot of loose ideas are floating around in my head right now: a hallway, bracketed on both sides by little alcoves or chambers, where the virtual representation of the player can walk down and explore. The alcoves will be filled with objects from my past, and manipulating them will offer spoken-work and written descriptions of the items, plus various choices that can be made. For example, drug paraphernalia may trigger a short discussion on the impact of drugs in my life, and then the option for the player to actually use the drugs (in the virtual space, of course) which would then change the way the environment is presented. There will also be an inventory/collection aspect to the game, where the player can take objects from alcoves and assemble them at the end of the hallway to reach a "conclusion". What the conclusion will be depends on the choices the players make in the hallway. Additionally there should be two doors behind the player at the start, one each for each of my parents. Whether I choose to populate the rooms behind the doors or not remains to be seen, but perhaps simply having them as locked portals will be enough to communicate just how little I know about the two people who raised me.

2016-02-14 11:06:26 AM

It's been two weeks since I last wrote in this journal; that's not to say I've been idle in all that time. Last Wednesday, after my morning gym session, I returned to my bicycle to find that it had a flat tire. This meant a 30-minute walk back home, then the necessity of dealing with the repair. It was raining that day, but I still pushed the bike up Bowen to Pacific Cycles, my usual spot for such incidents. The young man there told me it would be an hour, so I walked a little further up the road to the Landlubber Pub, where I had a shot of Jack and a bottle of Corona, along with their signature Lubber Burger. While there, satiated and slightly under the influence, I wrote a bunch of design notes into my paper journal. The ideas I'd had for the project had been rattling around in my brain for a few weeks, and they flowed from the end of my pen with elegant form.

When I returned home, I sat at the machine and started pounding together a prototype. Movement controls, a simple user interface, and a rough sketch of the overall level all came together in about 3 hours. I was impressed with myself, considering I reused nothing from my past work and cobbled it all together from scratch.

Yesterday I added doors, since "sealed, mysterious chambers" is something of a sub-theme to this work. Up next I need to formulate some systems for object inspection, manipulation, and inventory. There's still plenty of time left before the whole thing is due, and at this time I'm very confident that I'll be able to execute on my plans.

2016-03-26 12:32:01 PM

There are roughly 5 days left to work on the project. All that's left is to fill in the blanks where the main content is supposed to be; confident that the system is working I'll spend a few hours today piecing it together in Word, then drafting a production document (or possibly just pantsing it from the Word doc) and getting busy with the in-game modeling, writing, and audio. It should all come together as planned.

2016-03-30 5:34:29 PM

This morning, much to my regret, I asked for an extension to the project deadline. While the core concept is complete, much of the creative content remains in the pre-production stage. I spend a lot of the day in bed, paralyzed with stress and fear. I'm going to have to double down and work as hard as I can to complete this work, and I pray that publishing it will bring me some measure of relief. This is one of the toughest things I've ever done.

2016-04-07 1:57:42 AM

It's been more than a week since I requested the extension, and I finally feel like I'm closing in on some kind of end to this project. The last couple of days I've been trying "segmented sleep", where I go to bed around 8PM and wake again in the middle of the night, do a couple hours of work, then go back to sleep until morning. So far it's seemed to work, as yesterday was far and away the most productive day I've had in months.

I'm really praying for some kind of cathartic release once I reach the end of the current iteration of the work. I say "current iteration" because I've had to make a lot of compromises on the overall vision to make sure it get submitted before the absolute end of term. Certainly, there'll be time to refine and

improve the work beyond the scope of the FNAT course, though whether I'll feel the desire to do so remains uncertain.

I'm so very tired, emotionally and physically. I've gained about 15 pounds. I haven't been to the gym in a couple of weeks. I hope this ends soon.

2016-04-13 1:16:20 PM

I'm close to the finish line now, just finalizing the audio and text, and polishing out what bugs I have found. Obviously, the largest lesson I've learned here is to start production far earlier and work through it piecemeal over a longer stretch of time. I don't know if it's how I'm conditioned to develop games, or whether or not the emotional strain of formulating this project has been so immense that it's somehow crumpled me into this corner. Maybe it's a combination of the two. Whatever the case, I've managed to execute on my vision to a degree that's "good enough", and if I feel like it there's a solid foundation to build upon here.

Drafting my artist statement:

This has been the hardest thing I've ever done, either in terms of game development or academics. I've gained a newfound respect for developers who manage to execute on personal artistic projects over pure entertainment products.

I only hope that I can find some small measure of catharsis by releasing this work out into the world.

The piece is meant to represent the various artefacts of my past and present, and draw the connections forward that have resulted from a lack of connection to my ancestral heritage (First Nations, Lower Mohawk).

All text in the museum was generated using the 1,000 most common words in the English language, symbolizing the importance of clear and concise communication.

There are three possible conclusions to the piece.

Thank you for taking the time to experience this work.

Christopher 'Jack' Nilssen, April 15, 2016

2016-04-14 7:21:05 PM

I think I'm finished. I haven't eaten or slept well for almost two weeks, but now the fruits of my labor can get published and graded and, most importantly, experienced by anyone who wishes.

I don't know how I feel. I need to sleep, and dream, and see what tomorrow brings.