

Coming of Age

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> Start New Game?

Introduction

Aging is becoming more difficult. The medical costs of end of life care are steepening and individuals are preparing for the changes of aging later and later in life. A major proponent of these negative changes are due to a universal shift in a societal view of aging. Media representations of older populations are especially negative, causing poor self esteem in older adults and a fear of aging in younger people¹. A major media shift could contribute in helping older adults be seen in a more rewarding light, helping them find work, healthcare, and support as they age. However, the media itself would have to be a strong teaching tool, allowing learners to adapt to the shift at their own speed. What are the physical manifestations of these negative stereotypes and how are they affecting the aging problem? What would media that aims to discredit these stereotypes look like? And what forms of media are the strongest teaching tools to tell a marginalized story?

In my work, *Coming of Age*, I will create a piece that provides representation that addresses the marginalization of older adults, societal fear of aging, and stigmatization of illness and disability. I will design a multi-chapter science fiction video game with older adult main characters that focuses on human interactions and deconstruction of social stereotype through creative use of genre. Players will play as an older adult interacting with older adults all within an adventurous genre of fiction that age is often left out of. By making the game social in gameplay and subversive in artistic visuals, I plan for the work to serve as an empowering representation for players both facing aging and who have already aged. The game will also serve as a way to break down stereotypes that able-bodied and younger players have about age

¹ Linda Fried, "Making Aging Positive," *The Atlantic*, 2014, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/06/valuing-the-elderly-improving-public-health/371245/.

by introducing new representations to their understanding of this population.

Personal Experience:

So, who is to say that these representations fall short? In that case, what other representations are there? I have volunteered at a nursing home for the past year. The way that older adults speak about themselves and their aging is not overwhelming negative. The topic of resisting and embracing age are in every day conversations. While some can be upset by shortcomings of their own forgetfulness, others make light of it, cracking jokes, and saying they'll do better next time. There are positive and negative ways to deal with age. But, like any other community, there is interpersonal and intrapersonal diversities and complexities. Older adults do not ask that you act as though they are not old, they only ask that you treat them as a whole person. To represent older adults as complex people is to treat them in a way that pushes employers to hire them as employees, doctors to treat them equally, and families to give them leading roles.

In age care fields, there is a strong emphasis on the *story* of an older person. As people who have lived a significantly long time, older adults are known to hosts of long tapestries of stories and dispensers of unknown wisdoms only time can teach. This certainly a stereotype, but there is some truth to it. Older adults do have a lifetime of stories to tell and often they are looking to tell them. The tradition of storytelling is weaving itself more and more into traditional care practices to create a space that respects an individual for their whole story. On the other side of that coin, it is important to remember that time does change us. And older adults are trying their best to see themselves in their new truth and there are ways we can help them on that journey. Personality, mood, interest, and belief changes that come over time must also be respected. And the transition between these phases are easier for some than other. The balancing

act of the new and old history is a tough one to maintain. But, if you intend to tell the story an older generation honestly and fully, you must consider both ends of this particular equation.

The Aging Stereotype

Via Congressional hearing, the *Committee on Aging* presented cases to the House of Representatives regarding the media portrayal of the Elderly²— including stereotypes of the media portrayal of the elderly, how it affects its subjects, and what changes need to be made. As the Chairman of the Committee on Aging says, “Negative Stereotyping robs the elderly of their dignity, their sense of self-respect, their self-worth, their feeling of being wanted and needed”.³ Older adults



Figure 1. Frame from Episode 13.13 of *The Simpsons*— The image is later adopted by the internet as a symbol of negative demeanor or ignorance in the elderly.

are rarely main characters on screen. When they are, their disabilities are exaggerated, played for laughs. Their demeanors suggest negativity, stupidity, and general incompetence. While illness, disability, and difficult adjustments to change are all possible side effects of natural aging— it is harmful to exaggerate, generalize, or warp these people beyond recognition. In one of the cases presented in the 1980 hearing, a speaker went so far as to say he understood the artistic process of abstraction and exaggeration for the sake of visual flare— but limits needed to be discussed. The final conclusion of the hearing still rings true today— the issue with problematic representation arises when societal understanding of the aging process becomes primarily based on these stereotypes in media.

² U.S. Congress, Committee on Aging, *Media Portrayal of the Elderly: Hearing Before the Select Committee on Aging House of Representatives*, 96th Cong., 1980, 1-74.

³ U.S. Congress, Committee, *Media Portrayal of the Elderly*, 15.

The Aging “Problem”:

The difficulties of the aging process have remarkably harshened in recent decades as the cost of end of life care has spiked. This is in part due to a rising population of older adults as life expectancy rises, but the issue is not helped by the fact that less and less people are considering their own potential to age.⁴ Due to institutional fear and the culture of universally shortened medical and financial resources, people of all ages are leaving preparations for older age to be dealt with later and later in life, seeing less familial support, and amassing less savings to help them receive care⁵. As retirement age gets pushed further and further up, older adults seeking to remedy costs of aged living are getting turned away from work⁶, despite credentials, due to societal assumptions about the ability of older adults as workers. Rates of STD’s and other infectious illnesses are rising in older adults⁷ due to failure to educate aging populations on new medical knowledge and denying them access to necessary resources to avoid contamination. While life expectancy and the rising price of health care are both potentially to blame, it is important to consider the fact that aging is a constant that no one is preparing for.

There is more than one population affected by stigmatization of age. When the idea is spread that aging is scary, celibate, and sick and when that message is streamed directly into our homes, woven in our tv shows, and naturalized into our daily routine— every one fears to age.¹ Conversations to empower aging are not only for aged, but the young as well. The cycle of degrading and fearing aging that creates a suffering aging population is one that could be stopped

⁴Linda Fried, “Making Aging Positive,” *The Atlantic*, 2014, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/06/valuing-the-elderly-improving-public-health/371245/.

⁵ Linda Friend, “Making Aging Positive”.

⁶ Kenneth Camp v. Bi-Lo, LLC No. 16-5080, Justia (US Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit October 21, 2016).

⁷ Linda Friend, “Making Aging Positive”.

through widespread de-stigmatization. Resources and spaces for older voices are limited, making the engagement of other ages necessary for spreading these messages.

Gaming As A Learning Rhetoric:

Due to the fact that easily accessible medias are the primary operatives of narratives that dehumanize older adults, its important to consider how these forms of narrative can be used to reverse the stigma. With that in mind, it is important to turn to the media most equipped to connect diverse viewers to a marginalized narrative deeply unlike their own. It is in this potential paradigm that I believe video games come into play. While video games are not universally understood as strong teaching tools, there is no narrative form as successful in engaging audiences in a story on such a personal level. Video games are the sole narrative form that ask the audience not to engage with the story, but to become the story's driving force. Due to the addition of gameplay mechanics to the viewing structure of video games, the story cannot continue without the audience understanding the story itself and the rules that it plays by.

Gameplay does more than functionally “turn the page” of the story's book, it creates a new interaction space of every player with which to engage. In his writing for the book “The Ecology of Games”, Ian Bogost⁸ writes on rhetoric of video games and he touches on this idea of communicative, educational player engagement heavily. As he puts it, when putting the action of learning into the hands of the learner, you let them engage in their own collection of knowledge. The idea they leave with feels just as much their own as it does something presented to them.

⁸ Ian Bogost, *The Ecology of Games*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008.

However, how can a developer ensure that the message and gameplay successfully communicate between one another? To Bogost, video game developers have the opportunity—or the tool, rather—to create a *possibility space* through rule and gameplay design. A possibility space refers to the space built by the game developer (in this sense, the artist) through which the player can engage with the game. Bogost insinuates that gameplay rules, limitations, and actions dictate the conceptual space in which a player can engage with a game.⁹ In this way, a game is not a narrative story in sense of plot, characters, beginnings, and endings—a game itself is an experiential retelling of that narrative. It is through tailoring the audience’s interaction that a developer makes sure that the player can successfully engage with the narrative.

Possibility Space in Action:

For an example of possibility space, consider the game *Papers, Please*¹⁰. *Papers* is an important proxy as it asks the player to engage with a large social issue as its story progresses.⁴



Figure 2. Frame from *Papers, Please*.

In the game, the player works on the border of country— suggested to be a fictional Eastern Bloc dystopia- where they must accept or deny entry based on strict criteria. The possibility space is built by player’s only gameplay options: to

accept or deny. As the story progresses,

the stories of the migrants the player must accept or deny become more complex, social tensions

⁹ Ian Bogost, *The Ecology of Games*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008.

¹⁰ *Papers, Please*. Lucas Pope, 3909, 2013.

are rising, threats are being made against the player's family— but the player can still only continue to accept or deny. Due to the player's limited possibilities of play, the player is meant to feel helpless as the pressure mounts. The writer, Lucas Pope, hoped the tension of the game would force discussions about inequalities of immigration and the tensions of border crossing into the minds of players. Pope's intention is for a player to feel so unsettled that the only way to settle that distress will be to make real life changes that keep the world of *Papers, Please* from becoming a reality. It is an extreme example, but Pope employs Bogost's possibility space perfectly. As Pope allows players to play one specific way, he hopes to funnel them to one specific result. If gameplay options were different, different outcomes could ensue.

Gaming for Marginalized Narratives:

So, what is a less severe version of the “Papers Please” pressured narrative? Using gameplay tension like Pope's may not deconstruct the social tension that exists around aging. Pope wants to make the players feel pressured and vulnerable, the mission we are lining out here is quite the opposite. A pressured space is not a comfortable one to form bonds in. There are other ways to build possibility spaces that communicate narratives, especially in spaces where you hope to put an audience into the shoes of someone they may not necessarily see eye to eye with.

Luckily, the tradition of marginalized narratives in video games is not a new one, even if it is a small one. Merritt Kopas talks about this in her book “Video Games for Humans”— a collection of writing on independently programmed works that highlight social and cultural struggles¹¹. Due to the high costs of video game production, big release mainstream titles have

¹¹ Merritt Kopas, *Video Games for Humans*. Instar Books, 2015.

the tendency to be white, male, cisgender, and straight. The nature of the titles is also indicative of the audience large scale developers hope to reach, leaving them uninterested in publishing games about marginalized persons out of fear of lower sales. Due to this phenomenon, marginalized stories are more likely to be seen in works by independent developers, sometimes one-man teams, on less than shoestring budgets. For this reason, these are visual languages more likely to be seen in video games that are non-white, LGBT+, non-male, or, in our case, older.

According to Kopas, the most successful way to share a marginalized narrative in gaming when resources are low, is through text and dialogue based games. On the one hand, text based games cut down on the cost and time needed for creating graphics and specific coding of motion gameplay. But, on the other hand, text-based gaming gives the audience the depth of a book, but the ability to feel as though they have a hand in writing it. Through the use of branching story lines and varying dialogue prompts, players must not only read a story, but they must also care enough to respond and engage¹². This is the possibility space in text based gaming, because the developer gave the audience major choices in the story and therefore involves them in the plot, narrative, and ultimate message of that story. Games produced in the .html software Twine— which emphasizes use of diverting, lopping, and webbed storylines— have been known to highlight issues such as mental health, sexual abuse, racial identity, and more. Part of what makes Twine games such strong story tellers— despite the visual limitations— is the presence of dialogue gameplay. Dialogue gameplay forces a player to see the people as real people to engage with them socially, no matter how inaccessible a person of that identity may be to them in real life.

¹² Merritt Kopas, *Video Games for Humans*. Instar Books, 2015.

Summary of Contextual Discussion

It is important to consider that media is not the only answer for re-contextualizing societal sentiment toward aging. On the one hand, media is a good teacher and dissipates well into our personal psyches with little extra work on the learner's part. In addition, it can encourage individual to consider their own future needs and the needs of their family members reaching that age. On the other, changes in individuals cannot make all the changes necessary to help deal with real world issues like emotional and monetary costs of aging. In that way, medicine and policy have their own major changes that must be made— both in educating individuals on specifics of their own aging and in creating systems that support the community as a whole. It is not an impossible goal, countries outside of the U.S. have practiced positive aging support for years— making age powerful rather than daunting.

Methodology and Development

Implication of Research for Development

When facing writing and designing tasks for this project, it became important to consider what parts of this aging representation research should be funneled into a game type narrative to make it strongest in conveying meaning and creating a social change in a player's attitude.

First, *positive representation* is the biggest factor. To achieve positive representation, one must avoid negative tropes— such as single-note depictions of helplessness, uselessness, or stupidity. While also keeping in mind that super ability is not the only way to depict older adults who are naturally aging and living full, complex lives.

Following that, when funneling those learning experiences into a gameplay space, a designer must consider how they are *shaping play* to create the most educational and personal experience. Players should feel as though they must understand and socialize with the story to progress as they therefore become the willing drivers of the story.

A game following these rules would have *active, complex older main characters* with which the players both plays as and plays along with. This player-character relationship can help build an emotional space in which the player is able to sympathize with the story and create their own opinions about the new ideas presented.

As I moved forward into production of work and therefore my own form of research, I thought it important to reintroduce driving questions. Therefore, I have found a set of driving questions around which to form my own media representations:

- **Does this representation subvert stereotype?**
 - What kind of characters and actions subvert stereotype?
- **Does this representation form empathy?**
 - What gameplay types, character interactions, and plot moments create moments of empathy?

It is only through these two pathways that a media representation can create a change in the views and feelings toward older adults in its viewers— by creating a space that a viewer feels safe in and emotionally understands and therefore feel more open to changing their current views.

Phase One: Concept Art



Figure 3. Early Art of Five Projected Main Characters. From Left to Right: Doris, May, Bessa (not included in final game), Leo, and Ford.

For the first phase of my project it was my intention to only create concept art for “potential” video game. I worked for awhile around learning how to draw older adults—postures, body types, wrinkles, and clothing styles. That particular learning period was technical only and did not lead me closer to either of my conceptual compasses— subverting stereotype or forming empathy.

Following that, I started to put these older adults into “unexpected places”. Due to the fact that I was focusing on video games, most of these places were science fiction and fantasy themed spaces. I also saw science fiction and fantasy as a space that older adults were not even written to— often due to the stereotype of their inability in the face of adventurous or action based stories. The pieces I created during this phase served my purpose to subvert stereotype on a surface, visual level. However, they did little form empathy with a viewer. Critique following

this phase led me to considering realistic options of creating game that played to my strengths and my narrative purpose.

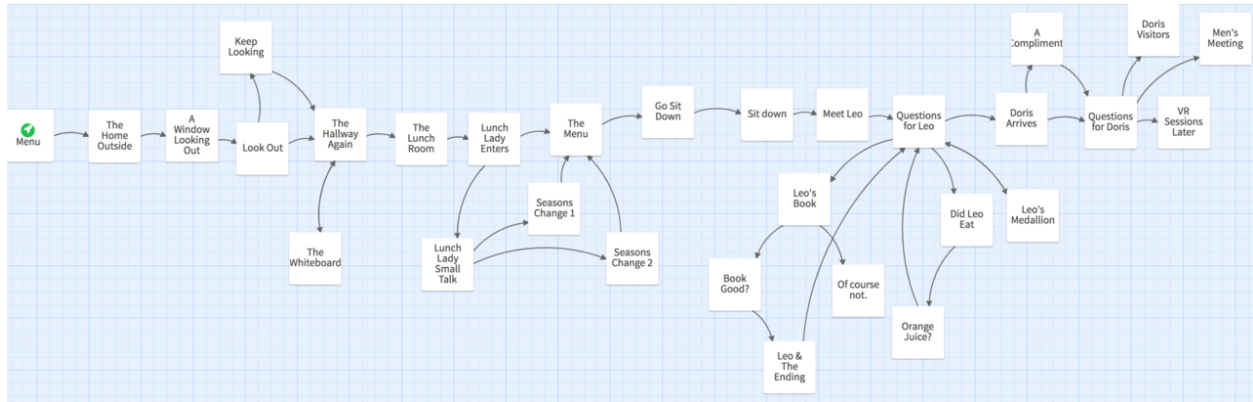


Figure 4. Version One of Chapter One Developed in Twine. This is a zoomed out view. Each widget can be opened to show scene descriptions and dialogue.

Phase Two: Gameplay, Version One

This shift led me to Twine, a simple .html game form that focuses on decision based text stories. I wrote scripts in twine to understand my branching storylines and story progressions. I then used the scripts for the game's prologue to create a single chapter of the game using Visual Novel Maker (VNM). VNM is a widget based copy application that worked well for me, as a beginner in game development, to focus on things like visuals and narrative more than I focused on lines of code. The coding commands are simply dragged and dropped into a timeline with a deep breadth of customizable characteristics for each command. This makes VNM games both easy to customize and easy to build— both necessary characteristics for my game's production.

The chapter itself took about seven to ten minutes to play depending on reading time and depicted a main character, Ford, on his first day moving into the nursing home. The chapter was paced fairly slowly and relied mostly on talking back and forth. I showed this chapter in critique

and got fairly uniform reviews. The concept of the narrative space was novel, but the way I was using it was slow and monotonous

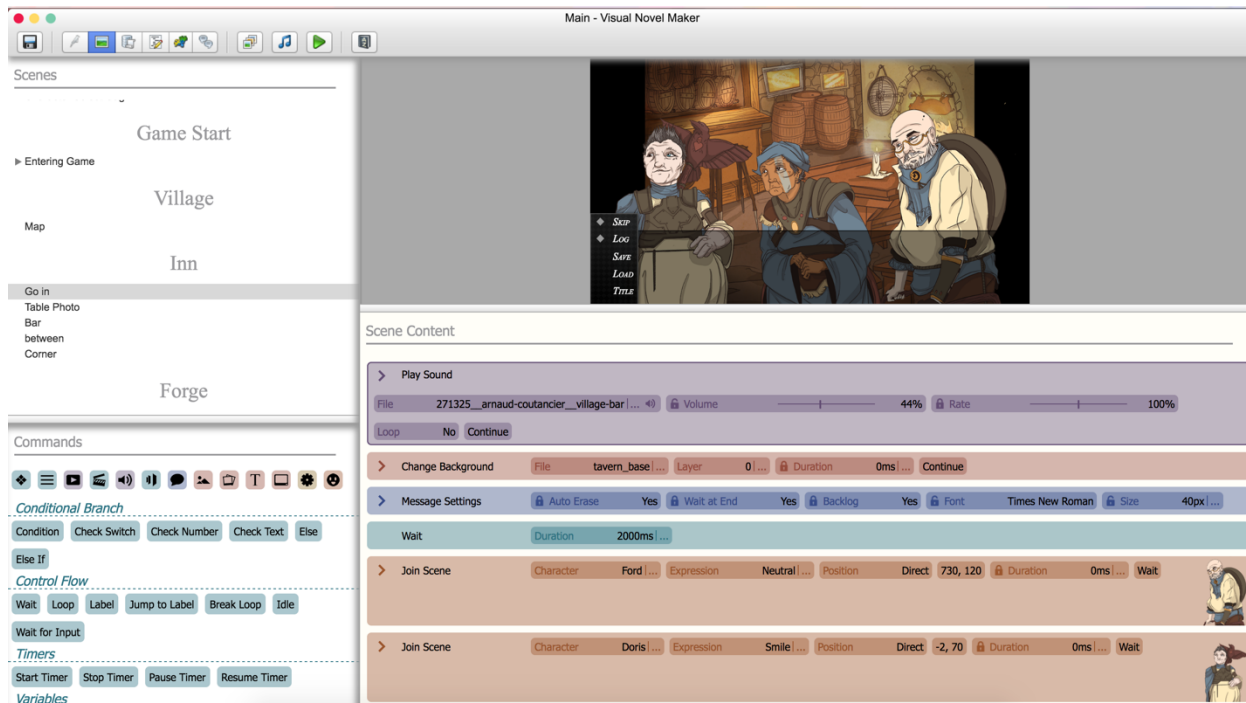


Figure 5. Example of Visual Novel Maker workspace. Commands are color coded can be expanded for more options.

I received positive feedback regarding the visuals, but the writing certainly needed work as did many of the gameplay models. The story was empathetic, but the characters had yet to leave the home. Finally, the duality of the main character's shyness and subsequent grumpiness was the only new form of representation I brought to the table. When he first semester then ended, it was clear that I had find a more defined path for my integrative project, but I still had a lot of work to complete.

Phase Three: Storyboarding

Entering the new semester, I found I had lost every copy of the original Twine scripts and used the loss as a perfect time for major re-writes. I faced re-writes using the skills and writing concepts I had learned in Twine and Visual Novel Maker while drawing storyboards by hand. I

cut places where there was too much slow dialogue. I added many more intractable items, such as maps or enemies that encourage player choice. Drawing the story instead of writing it meant I knew a scene was too slow or occurring too long as soon as I had been writing dialogue longer than I had been drawing for it. This gave me a shorter game that both I, as creator, could finish making and players could get to the end of with more chances for memorable moments and more significant social bonds.

Phase Four: Production of Images and Game Integration

The final steps took most of the final semester. During this time, I turned the storyboards into line art images first, followed by a two-week session of coloring, and I finished by integrating the images into the game. It was during this time that I hired out work on music based on major areas, moods, and themes in my game's world. I often would need to backtrack through these steps to ensure all necessary changes were being made to make the final piece as seamless as possible.



Figure 6. Example of Image Production Work-Flow. From left to right: completed line art, colored artwork, and highlights added for use in image map (final image is image in use in game as a mouse passes over an option).

It was at this stage that I made major edits to some of my original concept art. I still felt as though character design would be my fastest way of diverting stereotypes and that an unexpected image can be very memorable and I am hoping to create characters that are memorable for their diversity. But, I also had a need for more cohesive designs with diversity of

character instead of diversity contextual imagery— that is to say, I wanted these characters to be different, but come from the same world. My main characters have different body types and ability statuses. Doris uses a cane, Ford uses a walker, and May stands hunched. Equally important to me was that these visual identities do not get explained away when they enter their fantasy realm.

My last step was to run the game through a series of playtests.

First, to make sure the game could be

played from start to finish and that it was officially debugged. The second round of playtests insured that the narrative could be understood and played through without creator explanation or intervention. Once I was sure that these two goals were fulfilled, *Coming of Age* was ready to release.



Figure 7. Art of major character, May, in full fantasy regalia.

Creative Work



Figure 8. "Coming of Age" Main Menu.

Coming of Age is a short, narrative-based visual novel game that takes players on a fantastical journey with a group of diverse older adults. Based on my own experiences working with older adults in memory care and research on the American aging crisis, the game and its narrative act as a counter to age-based stereotypes and erasures that aid in causing real world harm to generations both aged and aging. By giving the audience agency over the story, the game means to push audiences, young and old alike, to engage with new representations of older adults that aim to deconstruct the negative stereotypes of illness, disability, and age as they are seen in current popular media.

With canes, walkers, wizards, hearing aides, goblins, and more— a ragtag group of nursing home residents have a lot of learn if they want to find their friend who has trapped himself in fantasy world of a virtual reality video game. On their quest, the characters balance the potential difficulties of age— hesitation, isolation, or fear— with the unique opportunities age also brings in new beginnings, fresh identities, and meaningful legacies. So, join their party, pick up your sword, and do not ever let age stop you.

The game, in full, takes approximately seventeen to twenty minutes to complete— depending on player style. It has a single ending, but the path to

the ending is not identical for all players. Narrative progression and, therefore, time of play rely on player choice. Throughout the game, players will be asked to respond with dialogue prompts in conversations with non-playable characters. Choices can also decide between which of the three main characters will complete a given action or whose plan of action will be followed.

Throughout the game, players are encouraged to use the power over the narrative to interact with others, explore new areas, and collect necessary lost objects.



Figure 9. "Coming of Age" on display at The Stamps Gallery.

For the official display, *Coming of Age* ran on a television screen connected to a laptop computer running the Mac OSX copy of the game. The pedestal was painted to look like a log or



Figure 10. Visitors to The Stamps Gallery playing "Coming of Age".

tree trunk in the style of many of the game's backgrounds and user interface objects. The backdrop of the display was painted a warm grey to keep anything from removing visual weight from the gameplay screen itself. Mounted images were added above the screen for players unable to play every scene the game had to offer. Easy directions for restart or

returning to the menu were posted as well. Headphones were connected to the display system so that players could engage with the music and sound effects of the game world without sound mingling with other works in the gallery space.

Plot and Narrative of "Coming of Age":

"Coming of Age" follows 3 friends— Leo, May, Doris— as they seek to find their companion, Leo, who has trapped himself in a virtual reality and refuses to come out. All four main characters live together in a nursing home that provides virtual reality games and simulations as a way to keep the residents actively learning, moving, and engaging their minds.

The story opens with brief introduction to the quartet as they meet for lunchtime from Ford's point of view. The lunchtime chatter shows how social and active the group can be. We learn about Doris' maternal instincts, May's penchant for puzzles, Leo's love for fantasy, and Ford's generally shy and reluctant personality. As this scene fades out, we see it was just a memory that Ford is recollecting as a nurse explains to him that Leo is missing.



Figure 11. First Scene featuring the three main characters. May comforts Ford after hearing his reluctance to try new things. From Left to Right: Doris, May, Leo, and Ford.

Leo has entered a fantasy world video game and refused to disengage from the game



Figure 12. Nurse Laura debriefs Ford on his mission to save Leo as he prepares to enter the immersive virtual reality space.

when prompted by the facility's staff. Because the game is connected closely to the operations of his brain, the staff are reluctant to remove him without his consent— in case it proves harmful. They have asked Ford— his closest friend— to enter the game, find him, and reason with him. Ford agrees.

Following a menu and title screen, Ford

is taken to a character select screen. Ford's reluctance to select any of the versions of himself in

medieval regalia reminds the player of his stubbornness. When the computer gives Ford a character without his walker, Ford demands on his added to the game.

When entering the game, Ford faces an altercation. In a moment of stress, Ford is offered the chance to add another player to the game. Doris enters the game and the player now plays as Doris. Players should find that the gameplay options for Doris are much more in line with the theme of the fantasy world and she acts much more rationally than Ford. Upon her joining the game, the player will add May. When added,



Figure 13. Still from the goblin encounter. As May, players have the choice to attack the goblins, in any order they like, as long as they attack all three.

the player is informed they are now playing as May and are given even more in depth prompts than Doris as they are given the option to fight each monster one on one. Once the monsters are cleared, the gang talks about their plans and eventually will be led to head to game's starting area— a medieval town.



Figure 14. The main town map. Each building and the cave can be clicked on to enter a new scene or area.



Figure 15. The Inn. Within the Inn, players can click on the photo of the table, click on the bar to interact with the bartender, or click on the corner of the room to explore the photos on the wall.

The town is now an open world. Players can choose between three locations— the inn, the armory, and the cave. The locations are open for exploring, where the player can interact with non-playable characters (NPC's) and collectible objects. The collectible objects are images of Leo's past captioned individually and are the only hints to his eventual whereabouts. When receiving the photos, Leo's friends start to find there may be a great deal they do not know about him. The locations, dialogue, and action prompts in the town will each apply one of the 3 active characters and the players may find they favor the personalities of specific characters as they go through.



Figure 16. An Example of Leo's Collectible Photos. The arrow indicates the player's option to flip over the photo and read the note written on the back.

Once all locations are visited and all objects have been collected, the residents are welcome to leave town. Ford speaks up on how he believes Leo is feeling and why he is acting



Figure 17. In his speech in support of Leo, Ford recounts all the photos that the players have found throughout the game and talks about how he thinks Leo must be feeling right now.

this way. The gang gear up for the long adventure and head out on the road.

Relying on the clues in the photos, Ford discovers Leo having built a metaphorical home for himself within the confines of the game. The player is now left with the task of reasoning with Leo by connecting with him on an emotional level to ask him to leave the game, despite his obvious emotional

attachment to it. The game ends as the player reaches their conclusion of their conversation with Leo, someone with whom they promised to look out on a brighter, stronger future with. The gang prepares for another adventure in both their video game and their aging experiences.

Analysis of Creative Work

Connection of Narrative to Goals:

The narrative is meant to primarily service my goal of empathy. The nursing home setting is meant to speak to my own experiences and the importance I see in complementary therapy. By having a diverse cast of characters, I aim for the player to feel as though the game is

very social. The dialogue between the characters should lead the player to feel as though they must understand the people talking and what is at stake in order to respond to the action at play.

As for genre, I have always admired science fiction for its ability to create a space in which a story can deeply analyze a moment in the human condition without blatantly psychoanalyzing a human life. In this way, the virtual reality space is symbolic of the sectioned off space in time that we call older age. It is a space of isolation and escapism but also of mystery and adventure. On that note, it is important removed that fantasy has favored strong, masculine stories for a long time. The use of fantasy, I believe, is my greatest subversion of stereotype. My older adults are now knights and vagabonds by means of written trope alone.

For character development, the development of Ford, as the character with the most playtime, was especially important to the development of this narrative itself. Ford has a reluctant view of aging. As a result, Ford is shy and unwilling to try new things. But, with support from others and production of his own self confidence, Ford is the often key to the game's puzzles. By the end of the game, reluctant Ford is the one ready and willing to help Leo with his own emotional issues and join him in the adventure of growing old together.



Figure 18. Despite initial reluctance to play, Ford is now confident enough to commit himself to the quest of finding Leo.

Similarly, the slow reveal of Leo and his intentions is also integral to the game's message. Leo comes off as someone who is content with his hobbies and friends. He does not

talk much about his past and his family but, as it is revealed through the photos, he thinks of them often and is having trouble letting go. The game he plays makes him feel closer to the ones he's lost along the way, so, when given the chance, he aims to stay there as long as possible. This reveal of Leo's vulnerability works as foil to Ford as they come together in the end. He is a character with great passion and ingenuity who simply needs to be heard and supported by those who understand. Much like how I want my players to be those who can support and understand.

The game ends with Ford encouraging Leo to exit his game. This will mean that, symbolically, Leo will leave a part of his life behind him. However, Ford and the others agree that they will enter the game with Leo anytime— whether that means to reignite those memories or to just get away for awhile. The ending faces out toward their virtual adventure but also their own adventurous reality that will be their many days to come. The plot and ending aim to highlight the reluctance that comes with age but the beautiful and meaningful moments that accompany it. I aim to highlight the importance of understanding, socialization, and validation of the full people that are experiencing their own era of older age.

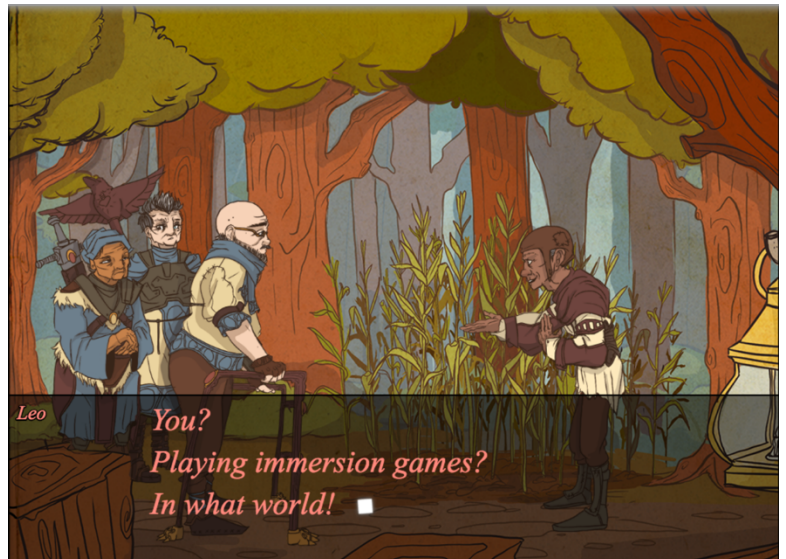


Figure 19. All the characters have a heart to heart when they find Leo gardening at a small cottage in the words.

Connection of Gameplay to Goals:

The final piece to my puzzle is the gameplay styles I employ. There are 2 major game actions: Interactive Image Maps and Multiple Choice Prompts. These actions can be used in the

following ways: character-to-character interaction, entering new locations, fighting, collecting items, and choosing courses of action.

The multiple choice prompts appear as clickable text boxes on the screen, their choices act as a way to move story along or interact with other characters. They appear after another character finishes talking while they wait for you to respond or when a choice— such as fork in the road— appears. Adding choices to the game makes the player feel as though they need to stay informed with the plot and stakes of the story in order to make an informed decision. It also makes them feel as though they are deciding the outcomes of every scene as they see it play out.

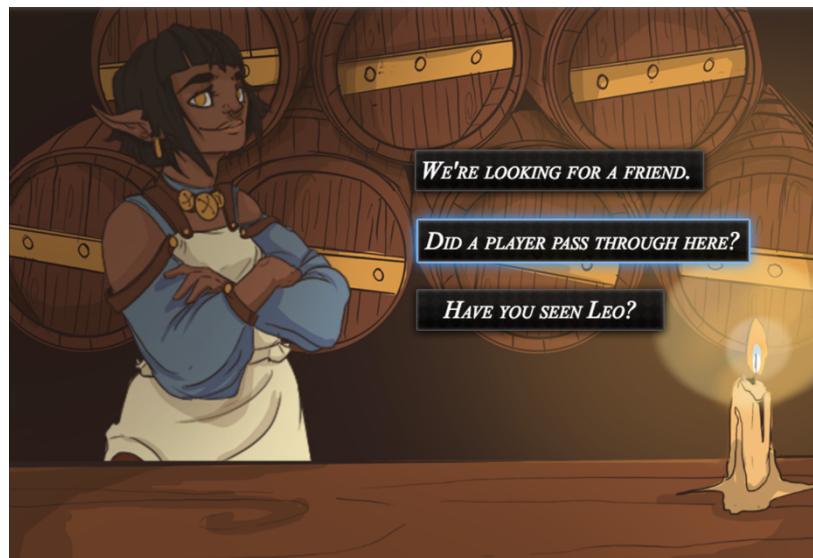


Figure 20. A bartender at the inn that players enter in the village. Each choice here indicates a different playable character. When you select one, the corresponding characters takes over talking.



Figure 21. Each choice indicates a different character's plan of action. Selecting one of the characters takes their route.

The second operation is interactive image maps. When a background space appears without characters or dialogue boxes, specific sections of the screen, when clicked, will open new scenes or interactions. When a cursor crosses over one of these location, the section or object will light up and release a sound to indicate it is available for selection. The screen will then change to show a new scene or intractable object. Often, in the case of the whiteboard above



or the main village hub, after selecting a section, the map will return until the final destination is clicked and a new scene rolls. The interactive maps break up the

monotony of the dialogue prompts, give the player further movement over the story, and make the world of the game seem more alive.



Figure 22-24. These three images display the photograph discovery process. First, a player selects the object, then the photo opens, and, finally, the photo can be turned over and read.

The most of important use of image maps in the game is in the collectable photographs. As mentioned above, Leo's past and motivations are pieced together through images that can be found around the game world. The photographs can be found discarded on tables, framed on the tavern wall, and even in a forgotten treasure chest. The player need mouse over the area, click on the image when it glows, and then click between the front and back of the photos until they

decided they are done and functionally put the image back down where they found it. This form of selection makes the player feels as though they are personally finding these clues and piecing the mystery together all on their own.

Conclusion

The production of this project has been a long process, each step of which has only become clear as I have reached them. I learned a lot of skills all on the go with this project, such as narrative to gameplay translation, simple code debugging, and the nuances of digital drawings. I learned a great deal about trusting my own artistic instincts, especially when working under immense pressure and shortening time restraints. On this flip side of that, I have learned to be more open to making changes. Without integrating criticism into my project, there is a good change that *Coming of Age* would've never been a playable game. Working with my cohort and instructors pushed to add music, sound effects, collectable items, and a more immersive gallery— all features that, looking back, were completely necessary for the game's completion and presentation.

In the future, I would be very interested in another narrative game project like this one— perhaps one less hindered by time constraints, narrative requirements, or a need to learn a brand new set of skills. I have become passionate about the advents of gameplay as a learning tool and how simply those rules can be used when budget and time are short. Every day new ideas pop into my mind of how to bend this rules and expectations into something completely new and unexpected. Most of all, I intend to continue my work with older adults— especially in exploring new, innovative forms of care... perhaps like the ones in my game.

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