

2010 Summer Games Projects inspired by Innovative Research from Singapore & MIT

1. AFTERLAND

**Research Goal**

Afterland was developed as a tool to study recursive learning processes in videogame players. It is meant to explore how players' expectations can be challenged through subverting common design patterns (in this case, those of the 2D platformer) in a motivating way.

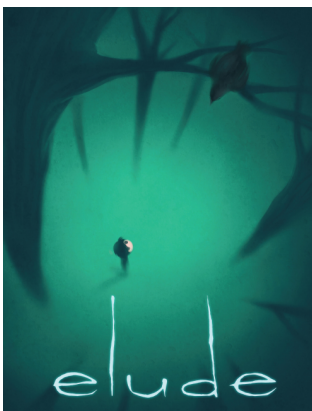
The experience of learning is grounded in a player's expectations and anticipations, which makes recognizing and identifying patterns and mechanics a key player activity. Players learn to play games through developing skills, strategies, and models that help them understand patterns, master challenges, and reach given goals. Playful learning, therefore, is a process of experiencing, recognizing, and reflecting on patterns, and it involves exploring the scope of one's actions in game space.

In *Afterland*, various paradigm shifts subvert common gameplay patterns in order to encourage players to modify their anticipations. In this way, the game is meant to provoke a corresponding paradigm shift in the player, forcing him or her to reassess certain expectations and adopt new mental models, strategies, and goals than those commonly found in games of its genre. Data can then be collected on how players respond to this paradigm shift, how it affected their own conscious experience of learning, and so on.

Project Synopsis

Afterland is a side-scrolling 2D platformer that immerses the player in a world out of time. You play as a reclusive forest-dweller with a penchant for collecting. One day, in his wanderings, he discovers an ancient parchment that he can barely decipher, a remnant of the past. Inspired by his discovery, he seeks to fill his house with the fascinating artifacts that have captured his imagination. Can you help him to find fulfillment and inner peace?

2. ELUDE

**Research Goal**

Elude aims to raise awareness for the dangerous illness of depression and to inform about it. It is specifically intended to be used in a clinical context as part of a psycho-education package to enhance friends' and relatives' understanding of people suffering from depression about what their loved ones are going through.

Modeling what depression feels like by contrasting it with other mood states (normal and happy), *Elude* portrays depression metaphorically. The various parts of the game-world represent emotional landscapes that correspond to different moods with the gameplay changing according to mood changes. The core gameplay (i.e. "normal mood") happens in a forest filled with "passion" objects that resonate and act as power ups when one calls out to them. Only when infused with passion is it possible to overcome the obstacles on the way to the tree tops, where one reaches "happiness".

Project Synopsis

Life is a never-ending struggle, full of rising and falling moods. *Elude* mirrors this struggle against the rising tide of depression, and the search for a path to happiness. Yet happiness remains elusive. Again and again, losing passion for anything in life, you plunge into depression. Only by continually calling out to the world can you find experiences that resonate, allowing you to ascend into happiness.

For people who have never experienced it before, depression is difficult to understand. It is not simply sadness, as many may think; it is more akin to an all-encompassing hopelessness, a failure to connect to or derive meaning from the outside world. By tapping into the experiential aspects of the video game medium, *Elude's* metaphorical model for depression serves to bring awareness to the realities of depression by creating empathy with those who live with depression every day.

Interestingly enough, the word "Elude" originates from the Latin word "e-ludere" which means "away from" and is itself derived from the "ludo" with the meanings "to play" and "to trick."

3. IMPROVISO



Research Goal

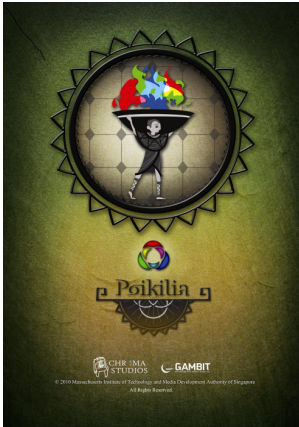
Improviso is an online multiplayer game in which pairs of players dramatize a story together -- a story about an encounter with an alien. Our research question is two-fold, with a short- and long-term goal. In the short term, *Improviso* explores how the user interface and framing of the game can lead ordinary players to engage in dramatic improv, even if they have no prior experience acting or storytelling.

The longer term goal is to train an AI system with data collected from thousands of people telling stories together with the same characters, sets, and props. Once trained, this AI system will control one or more characters that can converse and interact with other AI- or human-controlled characters. This project builds on AI research developed for *The Restaurant Game* project, and will demonstrate that the system generalizes to new scenarios.

Project Synopsis

Improviso is a role playing game that focuses on improvisation and role-playing between two players as they interact with each other and the objects in the world to create a personalized experience that is unique to them. Players will be placed on a stage and they will assume the role of actors. A scenario will be given to them at the start of the game and both players will have to work together to act out the scene. Several tools have been provided to aid them in their role-playing: numerous props for them to use, the ability to swap between different characters in-game, and the ability to change the soundtrack to bring out the mood of the game.

4. POIKILIA



Research Goal

Scot Osterweil and Jason Haas, product owners from The Education Arcade, will be conducting experiments in schools to determine the impact of narrative in knowledge transfer. The game will be developed in such a way that game mechanics of colour theory will be used as a context for the research question. There will be two versions of the game: one in which narrative in the form of comic cutscenes will appear, and the other without.

Project Synopsis

Designed as an educational game for middle-school-age students, Poikilia includes modular narrative components to allow for gameplay with and without story, as part of ongoing research on narrative in educational games. Players, employing their knowledge of additive and subtractive colour theory, control a young boy who has to navigate his way past the ruins of a labyrinth.

5. SYMON



Research Goal

Symon is an experimental adventure game. The puzzles try to reproduce the odd logic of dreams, where things make sense, but not quite. This logic becomes the underlying system of the game, which generates new puzzles procedurally whenever you start dreaming. The theme (being in a dream) is therefore embodied in the game design, which at the same time aims at introducing replayability in the adventure game genre.

Project Synopsis

Symon is a point-and-click adventure game that takes place inside the dreams of a paralyzed patient. Through exploration of the pensive and sentimental dreamscape, he discovers repressed memories and tries to reconcile his troubled past.

The game requires the player to think differently, stepping out of the normal boundaries of conventional adventure game logic. *Symon* places a heavy emphasis on dream-logic, focusing memory and synesthesia to form the (il)logical connections required to solve the puzzles.

Each dream world is populated with characters and objects that represent the player character's broken past. Each time he returns to the dream state, the puzzles are different, so every playthrough is different. While most traditional adventure game puzzles are hard-coded, *Symon* aims to bring a fresh experience through the introduction of procedurally generated puzzles and game-spaces.

6. SEER

7. YET ONE WORD



Research Goal

An ongoing labor of love, The Sophocles Project has roots in a long tradition of textual interpretation. Working with the classic Greek master's most renowned works, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, these games are intended to communicate themes culled directly from close interpretive readings of the texts. *Seer* and *Yet One Word* are inspired by *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* respectively. As with any piece of artwork, communication is mediated. The player's reading and interpretation of the games matters as much, if not more, than any intended meaning suggested or intended by the work's creators.

Project Synopsis

Seer is an exploration game where players control an unassuming and mysterious figure in his trusty rubber ducky as they wander and explore a dark seascape. However, darkness is not the only adversary they must face; whirlpools, rocks, and ripping currents all stand between them and the truth. However, whether the truth is something that the curious duo really wants to find is something that remains to be seen. Will they hunt down the lighthouses and conquer the challenges necessary to light them? What about when they realize they can quit searching and leave at any time?

Yet One Word is a platformer that makes the player reflect on their lives, actions, and relationships to progress while maneuvering a faceless horned character through a world of perilous platforms. Unlike other platformers the player doesn't directly control the avatar's movement and jumps; instead they command the avatar from platform to platform through typing. Throughout *Yet One Word* the avatar will grow and develop to face increasingly dangerous challenges. This growth comes not through defeating enemies or completing objectives, but through the player answering personal, and occasionally uncomfortable, questions.