"Face Your Fears?" Exploring the Complexities of the Human Mind through Visual Storytelling

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“Face Your Fears?”
Exploring the complexities of the human mind through visual storytelling

By
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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from the Western Oregon University Honors Program

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One further thank you is needed in recognition of all who are brave enough to tell their stories in every form they take. The level of honesty and vulnerability necessary to show a part of yourself, however small, in the process of storytelling deserves to be mentioned and noticed. Pulling back the curtains on our own self is a difficult task and makes these stories incredibly important as well as extremely difficult to release out into the world.
Abstract

My creation of the game “Face Your Fears?” has been a deeply personal exercise in storytelling, which uses different mediums to find the best way to convey an ultimate message of balance. This project demonstrates the necessary artistic and design elements that are required in video game creation, as well as showing my own process in the making of this story.

“Face Your Fears?” comprised of a framework that possesses the possibility for a unique experience with every new user. Though it is a personal connection to my own thoughts and experiences, thematically it stretches to broad meaning and questions how we as people choose to approach that which scares us. The elements I have created exist as the foundation for what this game could be, and express mechanics, functionality, and theme that would be present in the fully rendered game. With the creation of these game elements, I analyze the success of the project and detail the work involved and its accompanying meaning.
Overview

A fully realized video game primarily consists of a storyline, art style, mechanics and usability, as well as audio. Sound can act as a powerful tool through giving further dimension to any artistic creation, especially when they are represented as 2-D formats. While these are the surface components that are created in any given game out on the market, there is a huge level of research and development that occurs in the early stages of building any game. In making final decisions for “Face Your Fears?” I considered the perspectives represented by ethics and morality, Buddhism, philosophy, the psychoanalysis of dreams, my own artistic influences, and how nostalgia can operate as a tool. These trains of thought have been proven useful within the research and development section of this project as a way of structuring my progress and concepts.

In my own research I focused on ethics, morality, and philosophy when building the content of the story. I used Joseph Campbell and his philosophies to pursue the character and narrative arcs taking place. In considering the art I have consumed as an audience member I focused on stories and methods of storytelling that have impacted me in the past as a way to understand how to create a story that stays with its audience. Carl Jung’s dream theory as well as nostalgia were concepts I utilized when building the environment and integral themes to the landscape of “Face Your Fears?”. Together, these perspectives have assisted me in structuring the foundation of the experience that this project has resulted in.
Ethics and Morality

This project showcases how fear and decision-making affect the ways that people interact with the world – whether it is in their external lives or through the games they play. In the modern day we have collected and documented extensive data detailing the chemical composition of emotions and reactions, as well as academic theory regarding how fear is processed, but the fact remains that while this hard data is important in understanding the functionality of our minds we still have minimal control over the feeling of fear. The way we react to situations of stress, terror, or anxiety is a balance between instinctive responses and retrospective analysis. Fear is a core aspect of humanity; the fact that we can be afraid means we invoke caution in unknown or unnerving situations, and we are hardwired to remember moments or memories of fear or trauma because they act as a learning experience.

Because “Face Your Fears?” utilizes the process of how individuals make decisions in a situation when lacking an obviously correct choice, it becomes important to consider the impact of decision-making when crafting and executing this kind of story. People consistently make decisions relying on their moral compass, which is developed through their own life experiences. Every person has a unique experience which means that their own spectrum of right and wrong will always be slightly different from another. While right versus wrong can appear to be a clear-cut decision, there is little that is simple about this process since one consistent aspect of decision-making is that of human fallibility.
Though ethics and morality exist as a pair, they occupy differing spaces in the case of decision-making. Ethics are a system of values that guide action (Stout, Margaret, and Jeannine Love). The difference between ethics and morality is demonstrated in *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*, which states: “the understanding of ethics [is] a matter of right versus right, whereas morality is a matter of right versus wrong” (Kidder 1995; Badaracco 1997). Each individual has their own idea of what is best in any given situation, but we can all be influenced by context, such as historical precedence.

Since our culture is exceedingly entrenched in the media that surrounds us, especially the entertainment industry, it becomes important to analyze trends that can be found in the media we consume. One recurring theme presented is that of right versus wrong or good versus evil. This trope is used throughout superhero films, action and adventure television shows, horror movies, and especially in children’s films. This theme can be clearly identified through its direct usage in superhero films, particularly when these movies present certain characters as the “good guys” versus the “bad guys”, leaving little room for a morally gray zone. Since these are the portrayals we as consumers most often see, it is easy to mistake the act of decision-making in real life to a similar process. Oftentimes people are placed in situations where you have to make the “right choice”. Sometimes these decisions feel easy and clear but the more complex a situation the less likely there will be a clear-cut path to the “right choice”, or even that a truly correct choice exists.
In life there is very often no clear path to take. The phrase “stuck between a rock and a hard place” has risen in popularity since its creation in 1921 since it describes this idea of being in a difficult situation and needing to pick between the best of two bad choices. Additionally, there has been an increase in the polarization of ethics and our perception of it in today’s society; there is currently a rise in “ferocity and ideological fervor with which we now defend our version of right against others’ versions of right [which] have obfuscated the practice of ethics in a wash of moralism—our ‘ethics’ discussion is now more often one of morality” (Stout, Margaret, and Jeannine Love). The true meaning of making ethical choices, decisions that we as individuals are capable of living with or even being proud of, means examining competing values and determinations and then looking at the overall outcome of what may be at stake.

I addressed the rise in complexity of decision-making via my own decision to handle this topic through the creation of a video game. Since games use immersive techniques, they enable a greater extent of empathy to others mindsets and opinions. In Stories, Probes, and Games, James Paul Gee writes:

For most of human history, while each human played the hand they were dealt, they could not, save in imagination, play the hands other people were dealt. But now humans can, indeed, play hands they were not dealt and construct identity stories that are not really (just) their own. In this way, people can today have second, third, fourth, and multiple lives. It is digital interactive media, like video games, that allow for this possibility (354-355)
This stressor upon the importance of empathy and therefore understanding the complexities and emotions of the lives of others indeed demonstrates how singularly important games as a medium can become.

Although the use of video games in our culture is widely debated, commonly in conjunction with the larger conversation that is whether violent video games are creating a rise of violence in society, at their core video games represent another avenue to tell a story. Furthermore, they represent a unique opportunity to create a dialogue with your audience as the story is being told. Most media, even in the digital age, incorporates a distinct separation between the experience of consuming the content and the experience of reacting to it in a meaningful way, such as on an online platform or in a conversation with a friend. This delay between the action taking place and the reaction to those perspectives means the consumer is less likely to fully invest in the mindset of the story they were a part of. However, video games and their design represent a unique opportunity to allow for instantaneous choices and reactions on the player’s part. This therefore cuts out the delay and creates an experience wherein the player is reacting to the story and contributing their own perspectives concurrently. This therefore presents the possibility to have shared experiences with deeper empathy and attachment because the audience or user is personally investing in the actions they take. Although each game will always present a unique framework with predetermined biases and opinions, the fact that there is a level of free will on the player’s behalf allows for the opportunity to sympathize with the character they play, thus creating a possibility of true empathy.
Buddhism and Philosophy

The core message of “Face Your Fears?” is one of balance. Throughout gameplay the user is given two consistent choices, wherein an over-usage of either option results in pain or trauma within the game. The first option is that of helping or assisting another, with the possibility of a cost coming to your own character. This occurs because an over-emphasis of helping someone else can mean your own health will become forfeit; in other words, a lack of properly establishing boundaries can at times result in a loss of your own sense of self. The second option presented is that of self-interest or independence. When asked to help those in need, instead the player proceeds on their own path, neither acting to help nor harm the other characters in the game. While independence is an important quality, choosing to time and time again to place yourself and your health above assisting others can mean complete isolation and cutting of all ties. Though independence is an excellent goal there will come a time in any person’s life where they will need help. No single individual can go through their whole life without assistance from another. Therefore, the key to continuing the journey with the least amount of harm done to yourself and others is finding a balance within yourself and your actions.

This idea of balance is reminiscent of the Gautama Buddha’s notion of the Middle Way. Soka Gakkai International describes the search for the Middle Way as “the quest for a way of life that would give the greatest value to human existence and help relieve the world of suffering”, but in essence it means finding balance between two extremes. Buddhism represents an important perspective to consider, particularly
the idea of the ‘Two-truth theory’, created by Nagarjuna’s work on Sunyata; this theory subdivides the truth “into a relative truth needed in order to communicate, and an absolute truth, referring to objective reality” (Wangmo). Truth as a concept is an honorable goal to strive towards, but absolute truth when dealing with people can be hard to swallow. We often modify or lessen the meaning of our words rather than be blunt and direct because diplomacy is a key trait when interacting with others. We do not necessarily always tell ourselves the truth, especially when protected in the sanctity of our own minds. Objective reality and our place in it can be a cold comfort, so denial becomes an easy option to retreat to.

Though it is a divergence from Buddhism, Joseph Campbell and his work in philosophy offers another perspective to consider. Campbell’s work on the hero’s journey acts as another piece of the puzzle in determining plot progression and core traits of “Face Your Fears?”. In “The Hero-Journey, Hamlet and Positive Psychological Transformation”, Peter Bray writes “[Campbell] describes an archetypal figure […] presented with a difficult and pivotal life event that they are urged to resolve”. A hero’s journey relies on an individual contemplating a question or dilemma that has been posed to them, this problem then acts as the catalyst to begin their quest, i.e. the journey itself. In his writing, Campbell describes structured challenges that must be faced in order to complete their journey. He discusses the idea that across a huge number of cultures and throughout time, in folklores and tales there remains a consistent pattern in the challenges that all hero’s must face and conquer, which he titles the monomyth. While there are individual stages in this
journey, there are also three main acts: separation, supreme ordeal, and unification (“Science Fiction Writers Workshop: Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey”). These acts represent the character arcs, which demonstrate facing challenges and completing the adventure. Ultimately, Campbell's work in analyzing the challenges that go into completing a quest act as a guide for writing stories that then present these obstacles.

**Psychoanalytic Theory**

In the course of working on this thesis I pivoted on the delivery of its core message based on some personal experiences. In doing so, the work I began to focus on and develop operated within the bounds of Carl Jung's work, especially his analysis of dreams. One of Jung’s foundational views is the theory that everyone has three distinct levels of consciousness: the ego, the unconscious, and the collective unconscious (Coward, p. 6). The unconscious represents dreams, memories, and repressions, while the collective unconscious represents “predispositions to universal human reactions, the archetypes” (Coward). This distinction of the human mind into levels shows that there is surface thinking and judgment that people utilize in addition to deeper thinking. The level of the unconscious is related to our instinctive reactions, such as why we react in the manner that we do, especially when an immediate rational explanation is lacking. This level assists in explaining that while our conscious mind does not have an immediate understanding of the action we took, our subconscious mind followed its instincts and at times this proves to be the correct path.
Jung also worked heavily in the field of dream interpretation. Within this field he wrote three books expressing his understanding of analyzing dreams, such as: “General Aspects of Dream Psychology”, “The Practical Use of Dream Analysis”, and “On the Nature of Dreams”. In order to understand his work in analyzing dreams, one must first understand his theory of compensation. Compensation, defined by Zhu Caifang, is “three possibilities or manifestations: (1) opposites, (2) satisfaction with slight modifications, and (3) parallels or coincidences” ("Jung on the Nature and Interpretation of Dreams: A Developmental Delineation with Cognitive Neuroscientific Responses"). Dream analysis and dreams themselves can be subjective, and the field of analysis implies two people working together to understand what has occurred and why. In “General Aspects of Dream Psychology”, Jung writes:

A dream, like every element in the psychic structure, is a resultant of the total psyche … so the dream cannot be explained by this or that element in it, however beguilingly simple such an explanation may appear to be [...] In order to do anything like justice to dreams, we need an interpretive equipment [...] from all branches of the humane sciences (para. 527)

This passage shows what anyone who has dreamed would understand, the things we experience in our dreams are a result of our total psyche and therefore total experience in life, usually focusing heavily on events in the recent past. Jung’s work relates to the creation of “Face Your Fears?” in that this game deals heavily in surreal imagery, closer to what someone would dream up than experience in real life. Part of
my own developing understanding regarding how to write this story involved doing work on dream theory and understanding how to analyze these stories our brains create based on our experiences. To some, dreams are our way of understanding events or emotions that we were unable to process in our waking hours, and therefore represent an important piece of our experience of day-to-day life.

Artistic Influences

To begin the process of building my own narrative, characters, and story, I took an in-depth look at the work that has inspired me over time. Shaun Tan’s illustrative work has informed most of my artistic interest since middle school, and his collage art style and minimal text stories have been a staple in the list of books I consider valuable to understanding the world. His books *The Red Tree*, *Rules of Summer*, *The Lost Thing*, and *The Rabbits* are of particular note for their message and impact they’ve had on me. The main take-away from the bulk of his work is that he utilizes experimental art styles to tell stories relating to themes of loneliness, isolation, childhood, and imagination. Additionally, he succeeds in turning a tale of colonization into an illustrated thought-provoking experience that can be related to in his book, *The Rabbits* (Tan). Tan uses illustration as the primary driving force in the narrative, with a secondary element of written text - usually only one line per page. A consistent pattern in my own part of consuming media is the idea that the art can almost entirely speak for itself, without prompting to the audience through narration.
The phone application “Monument Valley” was an additional origination point when I was crafting this project. “Monument Valley” is a physics-engine that has the player solve 3D puzzles over a series of ten levels. Artistically it uses soft colors and geometric visuals to reinforce both the minimal elements and emotional impact of what would otherwise be merely a puzzle game. On the ninth level, titled “The Descent”, there is an opening screen that utilizes both text and images. The image is an island of stone surrounded by stormy seas and the text reads: “in which there is nobody left to forgive us” (Ustwo). Though simple, that single line stayed with me well past completing chapter ten’s puzzle and therefore the game. That line has an impact to it, it implies both that there is something that must be forgiven and also that even asking forgiveness is a lost cause because there is no one left who is able to. To me, “Monument Valley” is an excellent demonstration of the merit of few words. The story is short and with little explicitly told to the player, they are still able to gain a sense of the world and their character through solving puzzles and occasionally encountering other creatures who help guide the experience. This lack of direct storytelling leaves room for complex thought as well as emotional investment.

One other game that influenced the direction my original brainstorming took is a computer-based game titled “Darkest Dungeon” by Red Hook Studios. It uses heavy dark imagery and a grim art style to give the player a sense of stress and pain, but lightens an otherwise heavy atmosphere through relying more on cartoon renderings than realism. In playing this game, I was able to examine my own reactions and investment in various chunks of gameplay in order to understand what
it is that not only makes a story worth being a part of, but keeps a player entrenched within gameplay. The grim imagery and net experience of playing “Darkest Dungeon” assisted my process by steering me in the direction of examining how I can interpret and utilize physical manifestations of stress in the work I create. By looking at the value stress can provide as a piece of an experience, rather than only focusing on its negative qualities, this has changed the path my art has taken.

When crafted and told, stories are always meant to have a level of potential personal investment that any passerby can relate to. The purpose of a story is to be told, this is how they survive and grow as time passes. Rick Yancey’s book series, The Monstrumologist, is one of my original inspirations because his own writing has had a monumental effect on both my own development and the work I create. The Monstrumologist is a four-part book series entertaining the question ‘what is the composition of a person? what makes us human?’ through a world that contains monsters. He illustrates the divide and similarities between humanity and the monsters they study as a way to show to the reader that this question is complex and mostly unanswerable. In The Monstrumologist, Yancey writes a scene in which the main character, Will Henry, remembers a moment of helplessness via the process of watching his father grow increasingly ill:

My own anxiety, unsustainably acute in the early stages of the illness, resolved itself into a persistent, nagging ache, an undercurrent of care running beneath numbing fatigue and fatalistic dread. A child has little defense against the sight of a parent laid low. Parents, like the earth beneath our feet and the sun above
our heads, are immutable objects, eternal and reliable. If one should fall, who might vouch the sun itself won’t fall, burning, into the sea? (559)

This passage focuses on Will Henry’s memory of his father’s slow decline, and his own inability to do much more than temporarily helping to alleviate the pain. In the broader context of the scene, Will Henry witnesses his father’s transformation from parent, caretaker, and human into existence as a monster via parasites that are ravaging his body. His father’s own humanity is called into question because of this illness, and the extent of his injuries both transfigures his physicality while robbing him of his energy and his faculties. Ultimately both of Will Henry’s parents are killed when his father tries to get the parasites out of his system by setting himself on fire, leading to the house burning down. For Will Henry, this moment not only represents unimaginable loss, but also a moment of absolute lack of control over the outcome.

This is an event in which he could see the incoming pain and grief without being able to prevent or avert the calamity. In re-reading the book, this particular passage struck me due to my own experiences over the last several months acting as a witness to my father being in pain, while I am unable to do much more than remain on the sidelines. As children, most of us do see our parents as giants who are unshaken and unshakeable, but as we grow up and become adults ourselves, we are put in positions in which we must recognize the humanity in our parents – everyone is fallible.

The way Yancey writes the series is to set up as a story within a story. The novel itself is comprised of many folios but each book in the series begins as if someone in our world was reading and questioning the truth within the following
folio. By calling into question the existence and truth of the story itself, Yancey places the reader in a position of deciding for themselves whether the truth matters. This question of whether what we read and believe needs to be true in order to be real is one worth considering. At times, the outrage at the possibility of being lied to or tricked outweighs the message behind whatever event it may have been. In writing this series and giving the reader room to question and argue, Yancey allows the reader to decide for themselves what it is that makes us different from the monsters that haunt our nightmares. The decision I have arrived at in reading and re-reading these books is that we are different from the things we fear because we believe it to be so. Oftentimes the moment you change your mind or make a decision on what you believe, it shifts your entire worldview and actions. Therefore we are both in control and simultaneously at the whim of our own beliefs.

The Relevance of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is defined by the New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998, p. 1266) to be “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past”. While some people are fascinated with and pursue the future and the limitless possibilities it represents, many others exist more in their memories of the past than within the current moment. Sometimes this means their own past and the accompanying memories it represents, but oftentimes this also applies to the perceived sentimentality of times not lived in but rather read about.
Nostalgia is a tool used by people to soften the past or alter the memories they prioritize. Although we learn through pain and trauma, we can utilize nostalgia to hide away painful moments and instead remember a specific picnic or perhaps a museum we visited with a loved one. Typically nostalgia means a lack of objective truth or reality – in some way the fond memory we share has been altered, though not always on purpose. As an artist, nostalgia is an especially useful and impactful tool that allows you to change the perception of a piece by invoking specific design elements that trigger fond memories for a broad portion of your audience.

In this project I utilize elements such as an 8-bit or pixelated art style, VHS fonts, and glitches, these all bring to mind the thought of home DVDs or television recordings prior to the mid-1990s. There are specific audio and visual elements that accompany the use of any recording medium, such as the fuzz and grain on an old television box, and the crackle that you can feel if you place your hand near or on the screen; landlines have a specific pop and burst when the sound comes to life, versus the audio transmitted in cell-phones nowadays. The difference in a VHS or DVD recording of a movie can mean a lack of detail clarity on the screen, but the surge of fondness many people get at the use of a VHS can make up for any technical imperfections. The specific design elements I bring to life in “Face Your Fears?” are all meant to utilize these errors that accompany those mediums, acting to invoke both a surreal sense and feeling as well as pointed nostalgia in reference to those memories.
According to Wijnand van Tilburg, nostalgia accompanies guilt, unrequited love, and pride in the category of self-relevant emotions. Van Tilburg goes on to say “Characteristically, nostalgic narratives depict the self as [the] protagonist” (p. 4), which means that in remembering events we commonly identify ourselves as the one in the right. This idea of self-relevant emotions matters because they:

involve complex cognitive and motivational processes that implicate directly the self […] those that have several (but not all) of the following features: (a) self awareness and self-evaluation, (b) relatively delayed childhood onset of the capacity to experience the emotion, (c) serving primarily social needs, (d) no discrete, universally recognizable facial expression, and (e) complex cognitive appraisals (p. 2)

Self-relevant emotions provide a divergence from both self-conscious and basic emotions, and this separate category allows for complex thought regarding their importance. Altogether, separating nostalgia into an identifiable category assists in recognizing moments where it affects us.


Introduction

The art of storytelling is an innate piece of what it means to be human. We process the day’s events through dreams at night, and daydream small adventures when given a free chance during the day. Families carry on traditions and memories through oral histories as well as written ones as a way to remember who we are and where we come from. We share current events in the news through a huge variety of mediums just as a way to tell tiny stories about what we are doing, how we feel, and how it affects the world around us. The number of mediums available to us in the modern day only emphasizes the importance of this ability and tradition.

The ultimate purpose of a thesis is to demonstrate skills and knowledge gathered in the course of a student’s education. Throughout the process of working on this thesis that idea was never articulated fully to me. While generating ideas for what I could do and then fully realizing the project I had decided upon, I was continuously grasping to reach further than necessary. Though it may seem obvious in retrospect, the fact that I never understood that my thesis only needed to display what I had learned in my education up to that point meant I created a much more difficult task for myself then necessary. This means that I was constantly worried about how to accomplish the task I had set, but it also means that I learned so much more than I otherwise would have. Although at times this journey has been as much a source of terror as one of teaching, this process has reaffirmed for me the importance of sharing the stories we write, create, and hold dear to us. Connection is
a key element to being human, and telling the truths we believe in remains the best way to continue reaching out to each other and listening to what is being said.

Self-reflection

In picking the creation of a video game as my project topic, I had set a monumental goal in a field I had extremely minimal technical knowledge in. Prior to this experience, I had no knowledge in how to implement my drawings and ideas into a realized animation or playable game. Additionally, there are only two classes taught within my discipline and in the entirety of university that offer skills relevant to creating a video game, and due to scheduling conflicts I was able to only enroll in and take the first of the two; that class specialized in shooting film, understanding theory, and how to use basic abilities in Adobe Premiere Pro. I would like to emphasize the fact that while my education at university gave me a base of skills as a jumping off point, everything I did within this thesis was made based off of my independent learning.

Previous to building the assets for this game I had no knowledge of how to animate in any capacity, but especially how to do it in Photoshop. I was never formally taught how to use AfterEffects, but it became a program I relied on alongside Premiere Pro when it came to rendering both visuals and sound. I had never worked with audio and sound editing prior to this experience. Essentially, every tool and asset I used in the majority of this work is something I went and found for myself as a way to accomplish the goals I had set. It would have been smarter never
to embark on creating a game, because in truth my technical knowledge from my education did not prepare me for this project.

I did all of this because every time I thought about the task that is a thesis, it always seemed like it needed to be grand, niche, and impressive. In hearing my classmates discussing their preliminary ideas during the thesis proposal course, everything I heard always seemed like it met those ideals. This process of thought meant that I felt I needed to demonstrate I was more than capable, and I did this by assigning myself the ultimate task of a video game. I gave myself more goals than were possible to accomplish early on, because I felt I needed to prove myself and my own capabilities, and the best way I could think to do this was by tackling what I knew to be too much. This is of course untrue, because at its heart a thesis is meant to demonstrate a student’s proficiency and ability to accomplish a task by showing what they have taken away from their education.

While my discipline offers very little in terms of direct resources in my task, I was encouraged in a path to critical thinking that supports conceptualizing and discussing themes. I was additionally taught the foundation for the programs I utilized in the process of making pieces of this project come to life. Throughout the last approximate two years, I have set on a course in which I found all my own resources that are available regarding animation, creating video games, and creating the artwork used both as concepts as well as the final result. The creation of this thesis required me to teach myself things that I never would have had to learn within my field of study because it is a niche area. In summation, in choosing the idea of
creating a video game I created a task that was already far outside my own skills and knowledge base. This pushed me past my own limits on many an occasion, but it also forced me to continuously find the tools I needed to accomplish my goals. One major takeaway from this project is that while I did take on more responsibility than was necessary or doable, in setting this task for myself I inspired myself to push forward and learn more even when my own current knowledge would have been satisfactory. The work I’ve done for this thesis demonstrates not only the knowledge I have gained in my three years of schooling at Western Oregon University, but it also demonstrates what I am capable of on my own volition, in my own time, and how much I can accomplish even and especially when I feel overwhelmed and a little bit hopeless.

**Storytelling Medium**

In originally considering the concept of “Face Your Fears?” it became a question of which medium would best suit the narrative I was trying to convey. The way individuals interpret and identify with a story is largely decided upon by both the contents of its message and the way it is told. A huge variety of available mediums exist nowadays, especially considering the introduction of digital storytelling in the last forty years through the invention of the internet. Digital storytelling populates most of our waking hours through movies, television shows, interactive websites, video games, webcomics, and social media. This substantial increase in mediums
available means that it is all the more important to pick the correct way to tell each
story.

I decided upon utilizing the platform of a video game, particularly one
utilizing retro effects such as an 8-bit art-style, because a video game is fundamentally
interactive. Any game, no matter the genre, will have its core functionality and
message, but the experience that accompanies that game changes depending on the
person who is playing it. Each individual brings their own experiences, perspectives,
and ideas before they sit down and play, and the medium any game presents is one of
innate interaction. Many kinds of stories can be told via a video game, since in the
history of their creation there are multitudes of recognized genres and tropes.
Through using a gaming platform, the story is transformed into a conversation with
the audience rather than simply monologuing an unchanging narrative. Since games
present multiple choices for every available action, this possibility of change results in
a unique experience in which every play-through can have a different end result and
allows for a slightly different story to be told. The narrative is allowed to grow even
though it contains the same source material and mechanisms through each new
iteration.

While print media such as picture books, novels, zines, magazines, and
newspapers, do allow writers to tell profound stories and relay messages with
incredible meaning to their audiences, it is extremely difficult to emulate interaction
with their readers. It is in this way that digital storytelling mediums have enhanced
our ability to choose the best way to pass on any tale.
Thematic Shift

“Face Your Fears?” acts to question how individuals deal with fear. Every person experiences fear, and yet the way we decide to act upon it or refrain from reacting varies widely from person to person. When originally brainstorming how to have the visuals support this line of thought, specifically how fear operates within ourselves and our reactions to it, I began by deciding to focus on an artistically dark, dungeon-driven game. This version utilized monsters as the main opponent to beat in every level, and required the player to try to hold onto the light while surrounded by literal darkness. I sketched out a few scenarios in which the player, upon entering a new level, would encounter a battle between a person and a monster, and the game would then offer the player a choice between “SAVE THEM?” or “KEEP GOING?”.

In this original version of the game I allowed the player to very early on pick the battle class of monsters they would face throughout game-play, thereby introducing an element of choice for the player and allowing them to regulate what they would encounter. The line of thought behind this was that the player could pick a monster type that truly inspired fear within themselves, or one that they knew they could handle. The classes I decided upon were blood, flesh, bone, dust, numb, fire, and decay. While these classes are abstracted versions of their inspiring monsters, the connections are easy to make – for example, blood and vampires, flesh and humans, bone and skeletons, and so on. I abstracted the class to broad terms so that the identifier ‘vampire’ or ‘skeleton’ wouldn’t inspire a player’s innate biases, but I was
still relying upon a level of fear that these abstracted terms induce. Although the choice of the main brand of creature encounter was left to the player, I had decided the ‘boss fight’ would be against a version of yourself, thereby symbolizing that the true monster we all fear deep down is comprised of the worst parts of ourselves. In making these decisions I attempted to get away from stereotypes and biases however I was still relying on the innate provoked fear that accompanies this category of game to do part of the emotional leg-work for me.

This concept design relies on dark versus light imagery, dungeon-style levels, monsters as villains, and limited choices. Using levels and dungeons is an extremely popular structure for game design because this method of clear objectives and incentive allows for a steady and continuing journey for the player. The momentum and excitement does not die down, thereby allowing the player to remain invested in the storyline and keep playing. However there are a few key problems with this original concept, namely the fact that it relies on using monsters as your enemy, and the driving force in all of this imagery is fear and darkness-based art and world building. Within our culture, monsters are easily recognizable as beings that inspire fear within us; many of us are afraid of the dark, we fear isolation and helplessness, and dungeons in our media represent death or torture exceedingly frequently. In the process of examining these concepts, I realized that I needed to look at my motives for using these elements.

The question I needed to ask myself was ‘how am I intending my audience to react to the game I am building?’. Everything that I was making up to this point was
using elements meant to horrify and scare my audience, but my end goal is not to
scare them. While the horror side of the video game industry is thriving for a reason,
the story I am trying to tell with “Face Your Fears?” is not one meant to induce
terror or fear from the people playing the game. During this process I wrote in my
notebook: “What is the story I am trying to tell? [...] I am trying to connect. This is a
dialogue”. My end desired result is to tell a story that relies on connection, one that
uses isolation and loneliness as a tool, but does not create truly frightening moments.
The level of fear this game inspires should be closer to that of a surreal dream than a
nightmare. A quote I continued to return to in attempting to clarify my thinking is
from the novel Daughter, where Janice Lee writes “Draw a monster. Why is it a
monster?”. I was using monsters, gore, and dungeons as elements in a game but there
was truly no good reason to make them the driving force.

The original concept utilized design elements dealing with darkness, monsters,
dungeons, and glitch elements to enforce the horror. However, over the course of
designing the base for this game, it became clear that emphasizing and utilizing those
elements acted as a way to frighten the user. While the game is intended to offer
difficult choices and some frightening ideas, the core goal has never been to scare the
audience, regardless of the fact that the word fear is in the title. Ultimately, the game
is meant to provoke questions regarding sense of self and how we make the decisions
we make. Every human being is offered decisions on an unending basis and we must
continue to live with whatever is decided upon.
Personal Investment

In the duration of creating this thesis, there came a moment where I witnessed the aftermath of a loved one experience trauma. This moment impacted me both on a personal level as well as forced me to question the direction I was taking with my work. Traumatic events are not isolated and do not come with their own warning, so this ordeal of acting as a witness but unable to truly assist within the situation – both for my loved one and myself – had a drastic effect upon me.

In my first version of the game, I focused heavily on a notion of being able to battle and fight fears away, done through the literal representation of monsters. Although I attempted to approach the concept with abstract thinking by trying to deal with the roots of a fear rather than all the surface symptoms, I still played heavily into stereotypes and tropes of being strong enough to overcome what scares you. The truth about fear is that you cannot always battle it into submission, because oftentimes the thing you are fighting is yourself. There was a pivotal moment for me where I recognized that personifying fears as literal monsters to do battle in each level does not address the crux of my goals. From that point I shifted from creating a typical level-up style dungeon game to an ongoing journey. In the new and final version of “Face Your Fears?” it is structured as a street, representing this journey. Rather than battling monsters that represent our internal biases like skeletons, vampires, zombies, or unidentifiable creatures, I focused on creating unsettling or unnerving encounters – relying more on the surreal rather than the scary.
Without getting too heavily into specifics, my father has been struggling recently with his own mental health. The course of action he pursued to heal and become stronger ended up worsening both his happiness as well as the fact that he sustained some physical injuries leading to being in the hospital for approximately a week. While this experience did not directly happen to me, I was still existing in a space where I had to witness a person I care deeply about and has always seemed to be independent and self-sufficient crumble into moments of despair. In the moments that always struck me the hardest, it was clear to me that at times he exists as a personification of his own fears. By this I mean that every person possesses within themselves what they fear most— all the qualities that terrify us as people are usually pieces of ourselves that we hate or despise. In seeing my father have moments where his pride and outer protective shell peeled away, the things he was running from were in part of his own making. I don’t say this as a way of blaming him for the hardships he was dealing with at times, but as a way of understanding both the situation itself and what had led to it.

While that has been extremely difficult to work through and not focus all my time and energy on, that experience definitely informed the decision I made to change the core content and design of my thesis. Throughout the past few years of concept progress on this design, I was focusing on the outer shell. The message I was trying to convey was one regarding that quality in our own self that scares us, but I was relying heavily on showing this through monstrous creatures you encounter and defeat. The truth of the matter is that things do exist in our lives that scare us, and
they have reason to, but much of the time we lend them greater presence in our minds and fears by focusing on them and therefore giving them more power than they may have to begin with. We can be the darkest spots in our own lives. This is not an ultimatum or a prophecy, no person is forced to be their own breaking point, but we exist in a tenuous place where that possibility is always in place.

**Game Mechanics**

I recognize that many games currently in the industry work in a space intended to frighten, shock, or horrify their players. However, I have always wanted to share a story with the audience, and hopefully create a tale that they can be an active part of. During my experience witnessing what happened with my dad, as well as my own feelings and reactions to that time, I really clarified that I wanted to focus on this idea of our own self being capable of the deepest fear and power within our lives. Therefore, I moved away from monsters and darkness. Instead, I decided to shift into using the imagery of an empty street on a summer night.

The fact is, there are streets everywhere. No matter where you may have been in your life, there has been at least a single moment in time where you were walking down a street surrounded by power lines. I wanted to capture that moment and universality and transform it into a setting and feeling very slightly distanced from reality. The elements contained in the scene on their own are that of power lines, an empty street with the white dividing lines to demarcate each lane, the sky in the background with just a hint of a sunset, and empty buildings on both sides of the
street. The basic meaning of this imagery is all meant to hint towards emptiness, solitude/isolation, power/electricity, and a feeling of movement in stasis. Streets imply movement in a variety of ways, and have an innate sense of directionality. Power lines carry electrical currents in a literal sense, but they also represent physical manifestation of power as well as connection. Many streets are connected to one another via electrical lines and because of this quality they are able to act as a form of web. Furthermore, the empty buildings bracketing in the player show that other people exist and live their lives in this space, but the emptiness reflects the sense of unease in the moment. In life, the sunset is a way of tracking time passing, signifying movement in our day. The setting within the game makes use of a frozen sunset during the entirety of gameplay to drive home this sense of stasis, it takes a moment all of us has experienced it and pauses it to create an entirely new world to be a part of. All of this together conveys a main message of a journey in an altered place.

Throughout working on “Face Your Fears?” I have been utilizing a mantra, one of the core messages reiterated throughout the entire gameplay. Essentially, the player is given two options in almost every situation they encounter: 1. Save them? or 2. Keep going?. The logic behind giving repetitive but simple choices is to have the game mimic more closely how a story works, while still allowing for every player to have a unique experience that they take part of. These two options emphasize the idea that boundaries and taking care of yourself are extremely important, one person cannot always drop everything and help people even when they want to lest you risk total burnout and fatigue. But on the other side at some point in your life you will
need help from someone else; every individual needs some form of a community, whether it is family, friends, or peers. By denying others assistance and firmly traveling alone it means when those times come, and they do come, you will be unable to rely on someone else to help you through. Therefore the key idea of the gameplay is the notion of balance, as stated earlier in Section III: Buddhism and Philosophy.

When launched, the game application opens with a loading screen (see Appendix A, Figure 3.0). Upon loading content, a control screen will show (Appendix A, Figure 2.0) which gives the player four options: “START”, “CONTROLS”, “KEEP GOING”, and “EXIT”. ‘Start’ refers to creating a new game, ‘controls’ allows for modifications to be made such as changing between keyboard input and mouse input, ‘keep going’ is only selectable when a current play-through exists, and ‘exit’ will result in closing the app. Upon clicking “START”, an introductory animation will load – this animation loads every time a new game is begun, and acts as an immediate world building tool to benefit the player. The basic elements of this animation can be seen in Appendix A through Figures 4.0-4.2. The full transcript for the audio is located at Figure 4.2, but the opening lines are: “The electricity sizzles in the telephone lines / and you come upon a crossroads in this moment of connectivity. These lines stretch and connect place to place / and for a moment you imagine what it would be to turn around and face what you have been running from”. The scene this audio sets is that of a moment of contemplation, wherein the user knows they are avoiding something that remains unnamable. Essentially, it builds
tension into the scene, and begins the game with a feeling that a decision of some kind must be made.

After the introductory animation plays, with accompanying sound-bite (with a length of 39 seconds), it fades out with the title screen (Appendix A, Figure 1.0) then showing. This transitions into a new scene opening, this new setting is where the majority of the game’s action will occur in. The bulk of the time will be spent in a seemingly unending section of street, surrounded by empty buildings and power lines. A rough rendering of this movement can be seen in Figure 12.0. Additionally, Figure 11.6 demonstrates an animation featuring a day/night contrast with these telephone lines, which emulates that moment of existing in limbo.

Gameplay will overall consist of moving down a section of the street, where you will come upon creatures – titled ‘Encounters’ in-game – that have a discussion with you. You do not need to fight them, and after short introductory dialogue, you as the player are presented with two options “Save them?” or “Keep going?” The creatures you encounter mean you no direct harm, they represent lost souls that have taken on a new form in this existence of stasis. As an example scenario, upon coming upon an angel-esque figure (Appendix A, Figure 6.0), dialogue between the player and encounter would be as follows: “Who do you think you are? Who are you? Decide.” / “I don’t know. I am what I can be.” / “You’ll face it one way or another” (Appendix A, Figure 14.1). While ominous, there is no threat coming directly from the figure. This exchange would be followed by the standard two options, and depending on what they choose the player would continue speaking with the creature or walking on
their path. Sometimes, speaking with them will result in them vanishing, in others words, they have let go of what haunts them and are free from stasis. However, one conversation or moment of connection will not always be enough to heal what haunts us, and at times even as the conversation comes upon its natural end the creature will remain where it was even as the player moves on down the path. Mechanically, in game-play it would be determined whether they stay and how long they do by a randomized function in the program, therefore changing slightly every time.

A secondary element in game-play is that of finding memories on the ground, although whether they are memories of the player or someone else who has walked this path is left up to the viewer. One such memory is a film negative (Figures 16.0 and 17.0). Figure 16.0 flickers between static, the word ‘remember’, and the actual negative and this glitch motion gives a sensation of uneasiness. These memories that are found can give hints as to both memories that the creatures you encounter are holding onto as well as a glimpse into how to find a way for yourself out of this limbo.

Ultimately, the game ends when the player either chooses to exit through the controls or by balancing enough moments of saving others and saving yourself from being brought down into the emptiness with them. The main experience of game-play is reminiscent to walking down a street or hearing a story, where sometimes parts of what’s being told feels extraneous or tangential, but it all gets you to the next moment.
Outcome Analysis

One thing I’ve learned in the course of this project is that sometimes I make life more difficult for myself than may be necessary, because I chose this concept and took on too much in spite of every professor, mentor, and peer who told me it would absolutely be too much to do in the time given; they were right, and I should have listened. In this sense this project did not succeed in comparison to my original plans and ideas. What this project does succeed at is displaying technical ability in using many programs within the Adobe Creative Cloud Suite. It demonstrates critical thinking and conceptualizing, as well as an ability to clearly and concisely display visuals to support a main theme. This project is not, however, a success. The time it takes to build an entire working video game, or even an animation of a game, is too large a task alongside an undergraduate degree and a job to accomplish as a solo individual. However, what does exist of this game meets my goal of having a foundation set for myself. This project has a deep personal meaning to me, and from the beginning I always wanted to at least set up strong bones that I could develop further on my own time. I am extremely proud of the work that I have done in the course of this project, and glad for what I achieved and brought into existence.
Appendix

See the work in motion

Open using Adobe Acrobat Pro for best results

**Title Screen**

*Figure 1.0: Face Your Fears*

![Title Screen Image]

**Control Screen**

*Figure 2.0*

![Control Screen Image]
Loading Screen

Figure 3.0

Figure 3.1: Stills Series
Introduction Animatic

Figure 4.0: Soundbite

Figure 4.1: Text

THE ELECTRICITY SIZZLES IN THE TELEPHONE LINES

Figure 4.2: Transcript

the electricity sizzles in the telephone lines
and you come upon a crossroads in this moment of connectivity
these lines stretch and connect place to place
and for a moment you imagine what it would be to turn around and face what you have been running from
and the moment passes / and the heat stays / and the summer sun lowers
and you look back into the face peering from your past
you make a decision / and turn around
Encounters

Figure 5.0: Skull

Figure 5.1: Skull Stills

Figure 5.2: Skull Mosaic

Figure 5.3: The Twins
Figure 7.0: Army - Angel Flash
Figure 8.0: Static Eye

Figure 8.1: Static Eye Stills
Worldbuilding

Figure 10.0: Edited photograph
Figure 11.6: Day/Night Telephone Lines

Figure 12.0: Moving Street Test
Figure 13.0: TV Static Final

Figure 13.1: TV Static Test

Figure 13.2: TV Static Test
WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

I DON’T KNOW.

Figure 14.1: Dialogue Transcript

“Who do you think you are? Who are you? Decide.”

“I don’t know. I am what I can be.”

“You’ll face it one way or another.”

Figure 15.0: Options

SAVE THEM

KEEP GOING