MENU NEW GAME PLUS

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"An original and thought-provoking artwork. The participant will deliberately volunteer for experiencing the discomfort of not being able to play the game that one mentally constructs in the process of menu selection."

ICIDS 2020 Jury

Let's not play: main menu creation as method for speculative game design

Abstract
Speculative and critical design practices have found broad interest in the academic design world, and yet have not been widely taken up by game designers. This chapter argues that a reason for this lack of engagement is that the non-real, imaginative status of speculative objects can be difficult to reconcile with the need for the playful interactivity particular to games. In response to this dilemma, this chapter presents the creation of main menus for games that do not exist (menuization) as a way of reconciling these speculative and interactive requirements. The exploration of menuization as a method for bringing the tools and insights of speculative design into game design involves a design case study of MENU NEW GAME PLUS, a video game consisting of a series of main menus for games that do not exist. This chapter presents the development of the four existing MENU NEW GAME PLUS prototypes before going on to identify insights for those wishing to explore speculative game design through menuization.

Keywords
speculative design, speculative play, interactive fiction, design fiction, game design

Introduction: the ontology of the speculative between game design & speculative play

Speculative design as proposed by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2014) points to the important role of design as mode of interrogation of the socio-political imagination. Their Foragers series exemplifies this (Dunne & Raby, 2009). Through a series of designed objects, photographs, and texts, Foragers sketches an imaginative future where prosthetic devices act as external and at times transhumanist digestive systems. The objects themselves range between the mechanical and synthetic-biological, but each responds to an all-too-likely scenario involving overpopulation and nutritional precarity, and each do so by imagining a grassroots solution to the problem in more than one sense of the phrase.

Such Speculative and Critical Design practices (SCD) have been a driving force in academic design research for over a decade (Bardzell et al., 2012; see also Bleecker, 2009). During this period, Raby and Dunne's picture of the designer as a social practitioner has traversed the lifecycle of academic ideas, having been adopted by many, widely critiqued (Martins, 2014; see also Kiem 2014), digested by industry and reduced to corporate truism (Salmon, 2018), reinvigorated within art and academia, and critiqued again (Martins 2017); along the way it has been deployed in a variety of design contexts (DiSalvo, 2021) and resulted in a huge number of objects with the peculiar real-unreal status of the speculative. Objects produced by speculative design are objects of imagination as opposed to function, and indeed are quite often freed from function entirely (Foragers is a case in point), yet they still stake a claim on our world. Hereafter I use the term 'irreal' to denote this real-unreal status.

Despite this broad interest, the uptake of SCD has not been evenly distributed amongst the subfields of design. In particular, speculative design has not found a broad application within the field of game design. There are notable exceptions to this, both within the academic design world as well as those game designers deploying speculative and imaginative methods (broadly construed) as a means of ideation (Barr, 2018).

Yet games are first and foremost playfully interactive objects. It follows that the field-specific application of SCD to game design is one in which the playful interactions themselves act as grist for the mill of speculative imaginings, as opposed to (say) the SciFi world in which a game narrative takes place, or the aesthetic and worldbuilding which give rise to said world. Speculative play, a term coined by Rilla Khaled and Pippin Barr (2017), describes an approach to speculative design utilizing the particular, playful idiom of games. The term denotes works of speculative design where the driver of speculative worlding and ideation rests primarily upon playful interactivity itself. This is the difference between Pippin Barr's It is as if you are doing work (2018), which uses the untapped interactive potential of jQuery user interface (UI hereafter) elements to expose a dystopian future, and the yearly Famicase competition (2018), which asks designers around the world to create evocative but non-interactive cartridge art for games. The latter is akin to concept art, in that its speculative designs are not themselves interactive.

Speculative play, in contrast to speculative design broadly, attempts to capture the unique potential of game mechanics and interactivity to operate on the imagination. Despite the existence of the term, this playful nexus between SCD and game design has yet to be fully prospected. As to the reasons for this we

may also speculate: perhaps it is that the initial presentations of speculative design—embedded as they were in a set of particular objects and seeking to avoid a 'theory first' approach—came to be marked by the material and disciplinary backgrounds of Raby, Dunne, and other non-game designers; perhaps the more grandiose pronouncements of Raby, Dunne, and their inheritors (the idea of transforming our relationship to reality as such) were difficult to meaningfully absorb and apply for those making 'non serious' games; perhaps the departmental variety within which academic game developers and designers find themselves led to less cross pollination between their own discursive situations and that of design at large.

Beyond these possibilities, I would add to the list of reasons for the general lack of engagement of game designers with SCD. The reason I have in mind here is that the very ludic requirement of playful interaction may itself conflict with the peculiar, irreal ontological status of speculatively designed objects (Auger, 2013); that is, there is a clear tension between the speculative (hence not of-this-world, not fully functional or fully operative) status of objects arising from SCD and their ability to be concretely interactive. While designers working in other fields can avail themselves of renders or mockups, one-of-a-kind instantiations of designed objects, performative video prototypes, etc., the very status of games as interactive implies a different and perhaps difficult to imagine relationship between the real and the speculative. To be interactive, it might be assumed that a game must simply exist as the interactive object that it is; and yet to perform the work of SCD, a game must not simply exist.

The broader point here is that speculative play finds itself needing to answer each time over the question of 'how much' reality and interactivity is needed for a project to operate on the

imagination, and that the answer to this question is far from trivial: caught between the particular requirements of concrete interactivity on the one hand and the exigency of irreality on the other, we're left with the question of just how, and by what means or method, to think SCD into game design practices. One way to frame this issue is by way of quantity: if reality, interactivity, and completeness can be opposed to irreality, imaginativeness, and incompleteness, we might then ask as speculative game designers, what is a just interactive enough object?

MENU NEW GAME PLUS

Project description

In response to this question, this chapter takes up *MENU NEW GAME PLUS* (MNG+ hereafter), a game presenting main menus for a series of video games which do not exist. The hypothesis of MNG+ is that the menu is such a 'just interactive enough'-object: a speculative menu is a real menu and therefore truly and playfully interactive; at the same time, a speculative menu is only a sketch of a projected whole—it bears only the promise of its game as opposed to requiring the game itself to exist in complete form.

Menus are the first thing a player sees upon starting a game, and the menus of MNG+ on first glance look no different; the speculative menu is therefore a 'normal' menu (consisting of recognizable buttons, sliders, toggles, and so on) that allow players to enter the game or to use other features within the project (changing

options etc.); yet speculative menus are also expressive of the entire game through these very same potential inputs, and aim to gracefully truncate the interaction rather than allow the menu to act as a mere passing point on the road to 'the game itself'.

Menuization as speculative method

The speculative menu is accordingly an object that allows for concrete interactivity to coexist alongside the pregnant irreality of the speculative. With the menu comes a world, but it is not the static world of the architectural maquette, or of illustrated concept art; rather, since all of the UI elements are 'real' and interactible, and since they already exist publicly as a sub-idiom of games themselves, the speculative menu both presents a game and bears the possibility for an audience's unique ludic experience. By critically making menus, new game possibilities can thus be concretely imagined and explored. MNG+ presents therefore a method—call it menuization—for approaching speculative design within the field of game design. Menuization, making the menu for a non-existent game, allows designers a way of creating an intermediary object that captures the benefits of SCD for both designer and player while putting the interactive idiom of games in service of this very end.

With this idea of menuization as a method for the ideation, prototyping and dissemination of speculatively playful objects, two questions emerged: the first was simply what game was to be imagined; the second was the more thorny topic of how a main menu—a real main menu, following or at least citing the inherited conventions thereof—could best be used to express a game.

It quickly became obvious that, given its reliance on the expressive potentiality of menus themselves, MNG+ would necessitate the criti-

cal examination of specific menu tropes and UI elements. Hence the project's trajectory doubled: not only would MNG+ act as a test case for a novel speculative method within the field of game design, it would also necessarily act as a critical look at user interfaces, employing the latter as a creative constraint as well as reservoir of inspiration. Straddling these two positions led to each menu of MNG+ focusing on a specific UI element as much as a specific, imagined game. In what follows, I share the results and generalized findings of the four existing speculative menu prototypes.

Menuization as method: case 1 Jitterburg

The first speculative menu prototype was made for a game called Jitterbug. The imagined game puts players in the role of a chameleon-like, color-shifting insect, with the graphics adopting an ASCII style; while a kind of 'retro' aesthetic may initially seem an odd choice for a project that is self-avowedly future-oriented, the decision to use this was not a capricious one. Working with a limited palette of UI elements and sounds, music, and 'background' images, my thinking was that it would be useful to drive the experience through familiarity (hence to utilize the knowledge and expectations that players bring to games) before providing a degree of estrangement (Nodelman, 1981; see also Gaver et al. 2013).

Jitterbug is imagined to play out as follows: as time passes, you (insect) move slowly up a leaf; at intervals you are faced with predators such as birds or mammals who arrive on the scene; upon such an encounter, you are asked to change colors to match the ambient background in an act of computational camouflage. In more than a single sense, the colour-change interaction demanded of the player is manual: the player must type in hex codes that match their background in order to evade their hunter, and

they must do so while referring to the accompanying paper manual.

The menuistic expression of Jitterbug relies on a 'How to play'-screen. Since games already have an element of self-explanation built in, usually in the form of a tutorial, this was an obvious place to start in exploring how a humble menu could express the totality of its irreal interaction. While a tutorial takes place within the game, the UI analogue of the tutorial—the 'How to play'-screen—has instead a reliance on telling over showing. In contrast to games of recent years which attempt to render their tutorials all but painless through diegetic context or playfulness, the 'How to play'-screen allows for only minimal interaction; it aims not for immersiveness or painlessness but rather bare efficiency, ie, to provide a quick orientation for the in-game UI or heads up display, as well as the broad goals of gameplay. It is commonly found in mobile apps. This tutorial-made-menu is surely not a favorite of players, but nevertheless seemed a clear place to begin exploring the ability of menus to express entire gameworlds.

Questions arising from prototype 1

Jitterbug's speculative menu thus presents clearly, albeit in a rather didactic 'showing over telling' manner, the mechanics of an imagined game; likewise, through the styling of the experience itself, the speculative menu posits a clear mood for the game and even an art style. Yet *Jitterbug's* menu raised a number of design-related questions as well.

First was the aforementioned question of extensiveness, ie, how much of a main menu should be made in order to maximally explore and express an irreal game. Surely not all menu components allow for the expression of a game in equal measure and in all situations; this means that creating, say, a 'Graphical options'-screen in addition to a 'How to play'-screen—while

surely working in some sense to further define our ideations—also generates a degree of potentially disruptive noise for the player. Walking a line was then necessary between following through with the menu enough to allow for a suspension of disbelief, but not creating so much that the more fundamentally expressive UI elements come to be lost in the mix.

The second question raised by Jitterbug concerned the rather didactic nature of this 'How to play'-screen itself, which essentially operates as a series of PowerPoint slides. While this does the work of expressing the mood, mechanics, and experience of the irreal game, it was not clear that such a minimally interactive approach truly enacted the concept of MNG+ as a method for speculative play; that is, rather than using the playful interactivity afforded by main menus to express the game, Jitterbug's menu snatches outright the one UI trope that tells users how to approach an interactive object.

The third was how to present a main menu for a game that by definition does not and will not exist without simply trolling one's audience. A menu is, after all, a highly ignorable, often completely skipped part of the game's experience; menus are normally sought out only in moments of breakdown where the mechanics are opaque, or where some error has been encountered, etc. This insight was borne out in reality, as playtesting showed that most people's inclination, even the inclination of those who had some of the context for the project, was simply to click the "Start new game" button and immediately test their luck on the game. If they attempted to do so, or likewise when they attempted to change the resolution or toggle other inoperative inputs, Jitterbug's menu would tell them that they needed to restart their computers for their choices to take effect.

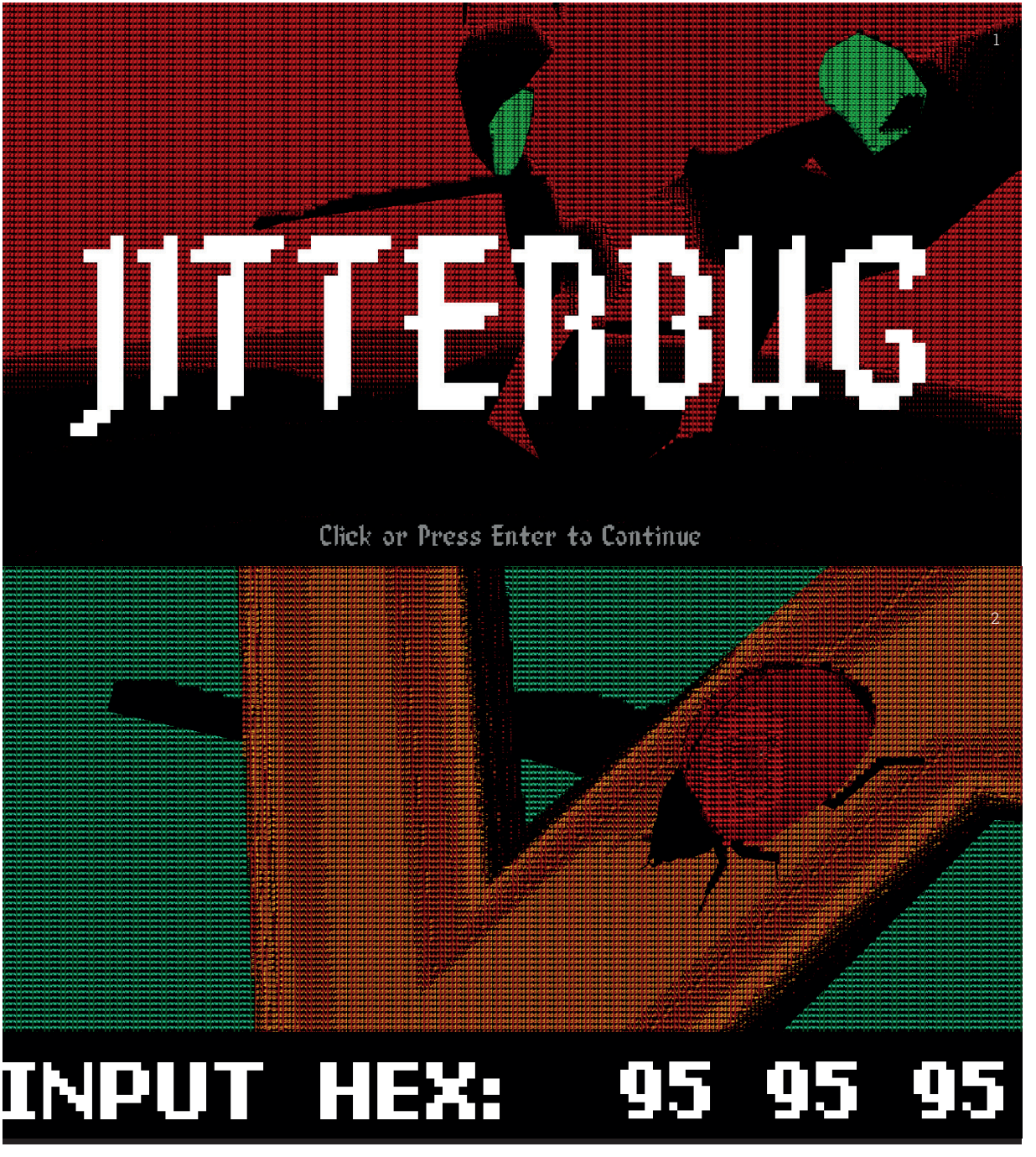
We may call this the "Start new game" reflex: the inclination of players to skip past the

menu is surely something to be grappled with for a project whose precise goal is to draw attention to and traction from the marginal corner of the game world that is the menu; and yet to declare such reflexes incorrect, to render such inputs null with a slap on the wrist, led to an unsatisfying, frustrating, and confusing experience—even with the additional diegetic text explaining this frustration in terms of the game world and DOS-era computation.

How can this reflex be dealt with, presuming that menuization is thought as a vehicle of communication as much as speculative ideation? The solution to this problem arose upon beginning work on a second menu. MNG+ would take the player's inclination to 'Start [a] new game' seriously, but also literally: clicking on this option would take the player to a menu for a new—or rather another—game, which in this case means sending them to another speculative menu. The whole experience would then loop in a manner that allowed the first (hence likeliest to be skipped) menu to be returned to painlessly. The reference to the new game plus mode in the title arose from the recursive, self-amplifying nature of the 'Start new game'-button interaction (TV Tropes, 2015).

UI as ideational reservoir: prototype two 8 Tons of Oxygen

The second prototype proceeded with similar goals and starting questions: what irreal game, and what menu trope to deploy for the maximal expression of this game? This time work proceeded with the further insight that *Jitterbug's* menu was wrought with the same tension between interactivity and speculation as described in the introduction to this chapter: it was more inert than interactive, more speculative design than speculative play. It would not be enough therefore to ask after menu tropes in general; rather, in order to enact the playfulness


1
JITTERBUG
Click or Press Enter to Continue
2
INPUT HEX: 95 95 95

of the speculative play, it was necessary to begin asking after what menu tropes might allow for more fulsome and satisfying modes of interactivity.

Furthermore, while *Jitterbug* was imagined with a very simple and singular mechanic, I hoped to test the menu method's ability to express a narrative-based game. The most salient menu trope capable of approaching plot progression and playful interactivity was the level selection screen, and the irreal game to be expressed became a narrative piece called *8 Tons of Oxygen*. A late-nineties styled metroidvania, the game takes on the story of three (playable) characters in the far future working to terraform a distant planet. The plot unfolds as follows: as the three human characters (each controlled in turn by the player) work to tame and terraform the alien planet, they encounter greater and greater environmental dangers; meanwhile, one of the indigenous life forms, an aeroplankton covering most of the surface and forming a semi-sentient neural network, pleads to and struggles with the player for its existence in what is becoming an increasingly inhospitable environment for it, chemically speaking; indeed, when a certain crucial threshold of atmospheric oxygenation is reached (the eponymous 8 tons), every individual aeroplankton will perish.

Here, similar questions arose to those mentioned for the first prototype. How fulsome a main menu was to be created? Would having an options screen (for instance) reveal crucial information about the irreal game as well as providing more potential for interesting interactions, or would it simply add to the noise and confusion? This time I decided on quite a detailed menu; because I was aiming to show and not tell in a greater degree to that of *Jitterbug*, these details would work to reveal such things as the basic elements and mechanics of the game (shooting, lives, etc.).

The focus remained on the level select screen. Yet while the level select screen surely is capable of showing something like the broad arc of such a narrative, it too felt less than interactive; it suffered from the same kind of inertness as the 'How to play'-screen. At best, it seemed like a kind of wordless, abstract graphic novel. This problem was amplified by the fact that I had actually written the plot beats for this story, replete with twists and perspectival shifts; having the story as the horizon of my work drove home the dim opacity of the level select screen itself. How would it be possible to allow players to circumnavigate this plotline without abandoning the 'level select' pretense?

Player as editor: the divisibility of the level

In order to add a deeper mode of interactivity that would at the same time allow the player to fully explore the narrative, a novel mechanic was introduced: while the plot was conceived to be more or less linear, the 'line' constituting said plot would be divisible by the player in multiple ways and on the basis of their own chosen criteria; this interaction would be built-in to the level select screen itself, since a level is nothing more than a meaningfully divided chunk of a plot or experience. 8 Tons' speculative menu therefore puts the player in the position of being a kind of book editor.

To elaborate: in normal games a level is similar to a book chapter in that is conceived to be something like a meaningful, yet relatively bounded and self-contained, piece of a plot (for plot driven games); for other games that focus more on exploration, what constitutes a level might be conceived more in spatial terms, ie, a relatively bounded environment; for some games these two become mixed; in still other games it is simply a matter of the length of probable playtime. Yet in broader terms this appeared to me a question that few had asked in

the abstract: what constitutes a level? On what terms does one divide a presumably continuous plot or experience into pieces?

We can imagine, for instance, a game being divided arbitrarily into 'days' that all have the same length; we can imagine a game's levels being bounded by place, or by environment (tileset etc); we can even imagine a plot-driven game being divided *thematically* and aiming towards didactic ends, like some versions of the Christian Bible, or the 'Art of War' training campaign in Age of Empires II (Age of Empires Wiki, 2019). All of these and more are possible interpretations of what a level is. Furthermore, each of these possibilities of division implies a particular emphasis, indeed a particular hermeneutical approach, towards the whole: division and organization creates meaning.

What is a game level, and how has this concept been thought and rethought historically? No fulsome study of this topic has ever been done. For the speculative menu for 8 Tons of Oxygen, players are put in the role of answering just this question; the level select screen is not the inert 'press and proceed to play' of most level select screens, but rather an archive of a world in need of the editor-player. This means that the player has the ability to toggle what a level is, ie, how the plot/game arc is segmented and on the basis of what principle of division: environment; place; time; perspective; non-interactive cutscenes, and even endings. Circulating around the plot—the *same* plot—the player sees it therefore from a variety of perspectives of possible interpretations. Call it a divide your own adventure novel.

Yet, while the goal is to provide a glance at the whole through the reflection upon a different cutting instrument (as it were), the very level select screen format also implies that the plot can be lept into at any of these moments. This provides a huge variety of hooks and imaginative platforms from which the player's imaginings may leap.


LEVEL SELECT
3
SOLAR
RINGS
ORBITAL
DIVIDE LEVELS BY:
BY ENVIRONMENT
OPTIONS
4
GAMEPLAY
CONTROLS
SOUND
VIDEO
SCREENSHAKE
BLASTER DMG
1-2
LIVES
ONLY ONE
STORYTELLING
CUTSCENES
STARTING SPREAD
0% (EASY)

UI before game, or game before UI?

With 8 Tons, both the power and limitations of MNG+ had begun to coalesce, and it became clear that the two questions stated above for both prototypes—what unreal game to express, and what menu element(s) to use that would best do so—could not be separated so neatly. A third question arose only thereafter, and had to do with the primacy given to the answer of the first and second questions: do we begin with a game idea, or do we begin with a menu trope?

By this point it had become clear that, as much as being a speculative exploration of games and gameworlds, MNG+ is equally an exploration of the expressive potential of UIs; accordingly, beginning with just any game idea was, while perhaps possible, not ideal to see through the concept fully. MNG+ would need therefore in each case to consider the game and UI of choice as co-implicative.

Indeed, this co-implication of menu and speculation may prove to be a limit to the idea of menuization as a broadly applicable method; that is, this co-implication may imply that the speculative ideations of the designer are not allowed to roam in a truly free-form way, constrained as it is to pass through UI tropes. Nevertheless, while menuization as enacted by MNG+ may not set the conditions for completely free-roaming of the imagination, what it surely does provide is a proof of the imaginative power to be found even in the most marginal aspect of games— their menus. 8 Tons' menu places the player in the position of biblical-editor, and it does so by utilizing an otherwise ignored part of the ludic experience. Through MNG+'s acute attention to the menu, a reservoir of untapped possibility is discovered. In turn, this allows for the creation of meta-awareness and criticality towards games and menus for both players and

developers. There is power to be found through attention towards the margins.

World generation: prototype 3 empires of idleness

Following work on *8 Tons*, it became absolutely clear that the most evocative and interactive instances of menuization would be where the menu-concept and the game-concept are most intertwined and co-implicative; such an object would be a prime example of speculative play's hypothesis that playful interactions themselves can do the work of worlding sought by SCD.

Thereafter, study for a third menu began. Bearing in mind the need to think menu and game together, this time I took up the world generation screen, seen in so-called '4X' games such as *Civilization* or deep simulations such as *Dwarf Fortress*. The idea here was that giving the ability to actually set the meta-parameters of the world would be an excellent way to explore the playful possibilities within an irreal management game; at the same time, the intuition was that the creation of this world was itself a satisfying interaction (as anyone who has spent too much time looking for a starting position in Dwarf Fortress, or anyone who drew imaginative maps as a child, may attest).

The idea of world creation acted as a conceptual through-line, and with this I proceeded to a third prototype. In addition to the exploration of the possibilities and limits of the world creation screen, my broader goal here was to aim for a more focused menu. While Jitterbug and 8 Tons both attempted to use the ambient menus (graphics and control options etc.) to further create a sense of reality and context, I wanted here a minimal test case that would not allow the player's attention to stray. The formal desire for minimalism, as well as the growing desire to differentiate each game from all the others in

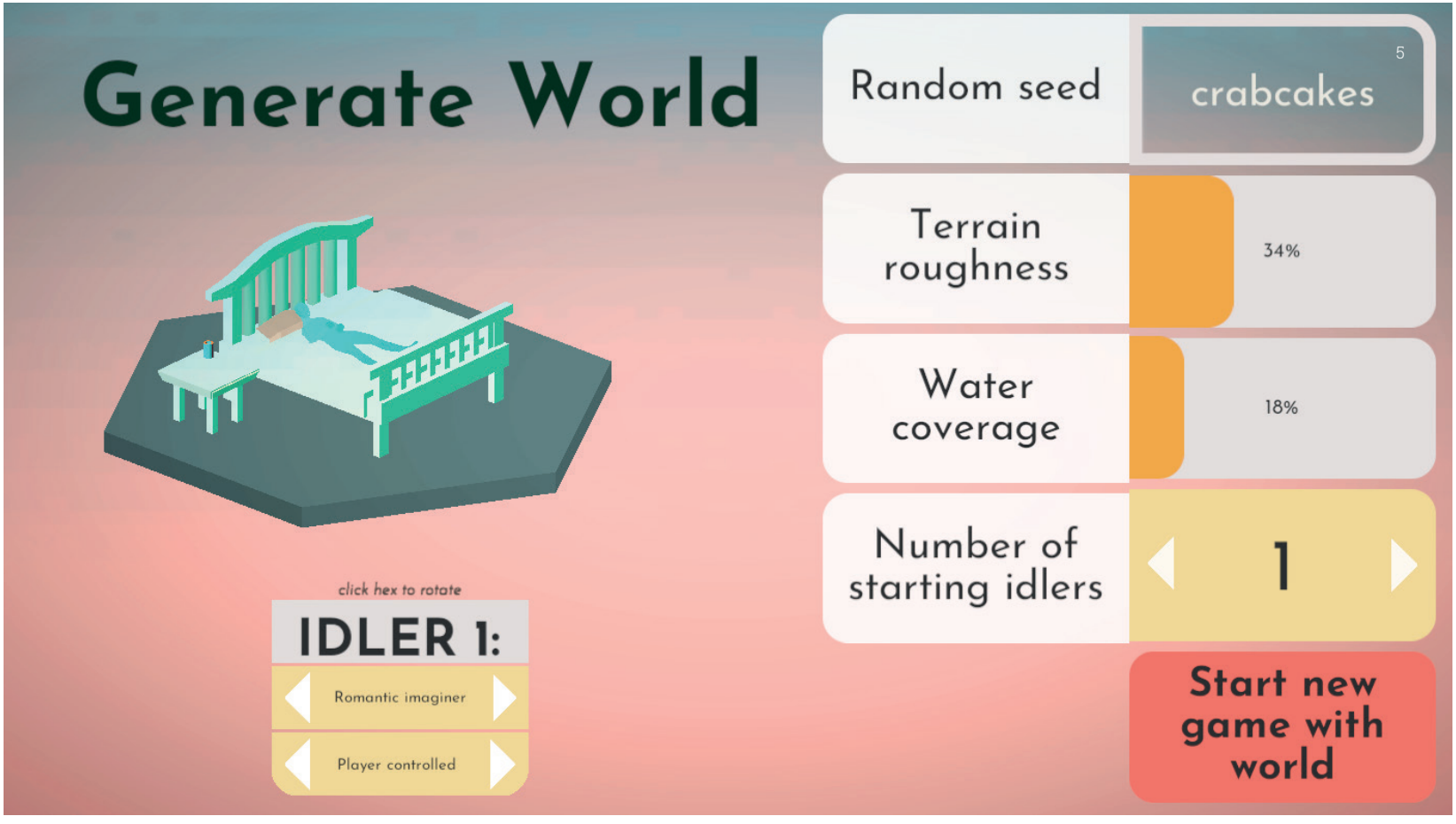
this tiny but growing Borgesian library, led to the adoption of an equally 'minimalist' aesthetic: the flat-shaded/mobile aesthetic of the mid 2010 indie game (think Kentucky Route Zero or the Monument Valley series).

The mood of these indie games is anathema to the 4X genre, the latter pushing the player towards the imperialist mindset eXploring, eXpanding, eXploiting, and eXterminating. Combining this aesthetic with the 4X genre, the speculative menu for Empires of Idleness was born. Empires is a playful re-imagining of a 4X game where the goal is to be as idle, hence as inactive and unproductive, as possible; the choices in the world-generation screen reflect this play space, allowing the user to change the 'geographical' parameters of a bed scene (roughness being the number of pillows, water coverage being the number of cups on the nightstand), the number and type of the starting factions (Romantic imaginer, spiritualist meditator, or someone paralyzed by the anxiety of precarious labour), and so on.

Twice the world over: games and world building

Empires is a 4X game, but a 4X whose mechanics imply the polar opposite of the capitalist and colonialist impulses of the genre; what matters in the gameworld, and hence the world generation screen, of *Empires* must shift in an equally drastic manner. In broader terms, the whole notion of world creation led my thinking in another direction; specifically, I began to realize that, if the goal of speculative design/play is to set the conditions for a glimpse of a world that is not ours and the increased malleability of the critical imagination that should result, then speculative games do this twice over. First we have the world in which the unreal game is real, and then we have the diegetic world of the game.

The diegetic world of the game is not un-


Generate World
Random seed
crabcakes
5
Terrain roughness
34%
Water coverage
18%
Number of starting idlers
1
click hex to rotate
IDLER 1:
Romantic imaginer
Player controlled
Start new game with world

real in the same sense as speculative objects. Yet it is possible that this already-speculative status of games presents another reason why SCD has not been applied broadly to game design, as it may appear on the surface that such work is always already being done. Here, it is important to point out that we must not confound these two levels of worldbuilding: to do so would be to confuse purely fictional worldbuilding for the peculiar real-unreal status of the speculative object; while the former presents a fictionalized elsewhere, the latter presents a concrete object to rethink reality with (Coulton et al., 2016).

Yet the realization persists that games promise a world, and that speculative games (hence speculatively playful menus) promise a world in more sense than one: if speculative design gains its traction in part by positing a world in which the designed object can be contextualized and understood, speculative play posits a double elsewhere, a possible world wherein the game exists (as marketable, sellable, historical, fun, etc.), as well as the fictional world of the game itself. How do these two levels of 'world' flow into one another? How can they best support, or productively undermine, one another? And how can game designers working speculatively best capitalize on this apparent peculiarity of speculative play? Such questions arose directly from the creation of *Empires*, but they present a fruitful site of intervention for future investigations into speculative play.

An infinite speculation: an AI-assisted dwarf fortress

Following the first three menu prototypes, work began on a fourth that would strive to combine some of the most relevant insights of the prior: the most effective use of menus as a communicative tool would be one where a *specific* speculative world is maximally expressible from within a *specific* UI trope; furthermore, this

trope would allow for a playful form of interactivity and would not fall to the level of concept art. Attempting to combine these insights, a fourth menu prototype was born: Peon Caravan is a kind of base-building game along the lines of *Dwarf Fortress* or *Rimworld*.

This genre of game aims to give the player a unique, emergent narrative (Eladhari, 2018). It does so partly on the basis of its extensivity, that is, by creating things that are notoriously huge, complicated, and (quite often) opaque. James Ryan's dissertation (2018) presents arguably the most fulsome study of the topic to date. Ryan connects the emergent narrative to non-fiction, claiming that-- much like the work of a historian-- the emergent narrative only comes into being when raw materials are curated by a person. The player is, in other words, put in the position of historian of the idiosyncratic, procedural gameworld. While looking to explore this genre critically, I also hoped to capture at least some sense of this 'scholarly' enjoyment-- the enjoyment of discovery.

Which menu trope might allow for the exploration of this genre? The obvious place to begin was with the patch log, the place where-- in a real game-- the developers update the playerbase on the most recent changes to the game. *Dwarf Fortress's* bizarre patch notes already have a kind of cult following, even amongst those who have not played the game itself (Livingston, 2016); indeed, they continually reveal some of the incredible complexity of the procedural interactions that can take place therein. But while simply writing patch notes would be an option, it would have meant that the sense of extensivity and the emergent quality would be lost; no longer would the player be able to 'find' some interesting and idiosyncratic detail about the world, since it would be purely scripted and already curated by the author (myself).

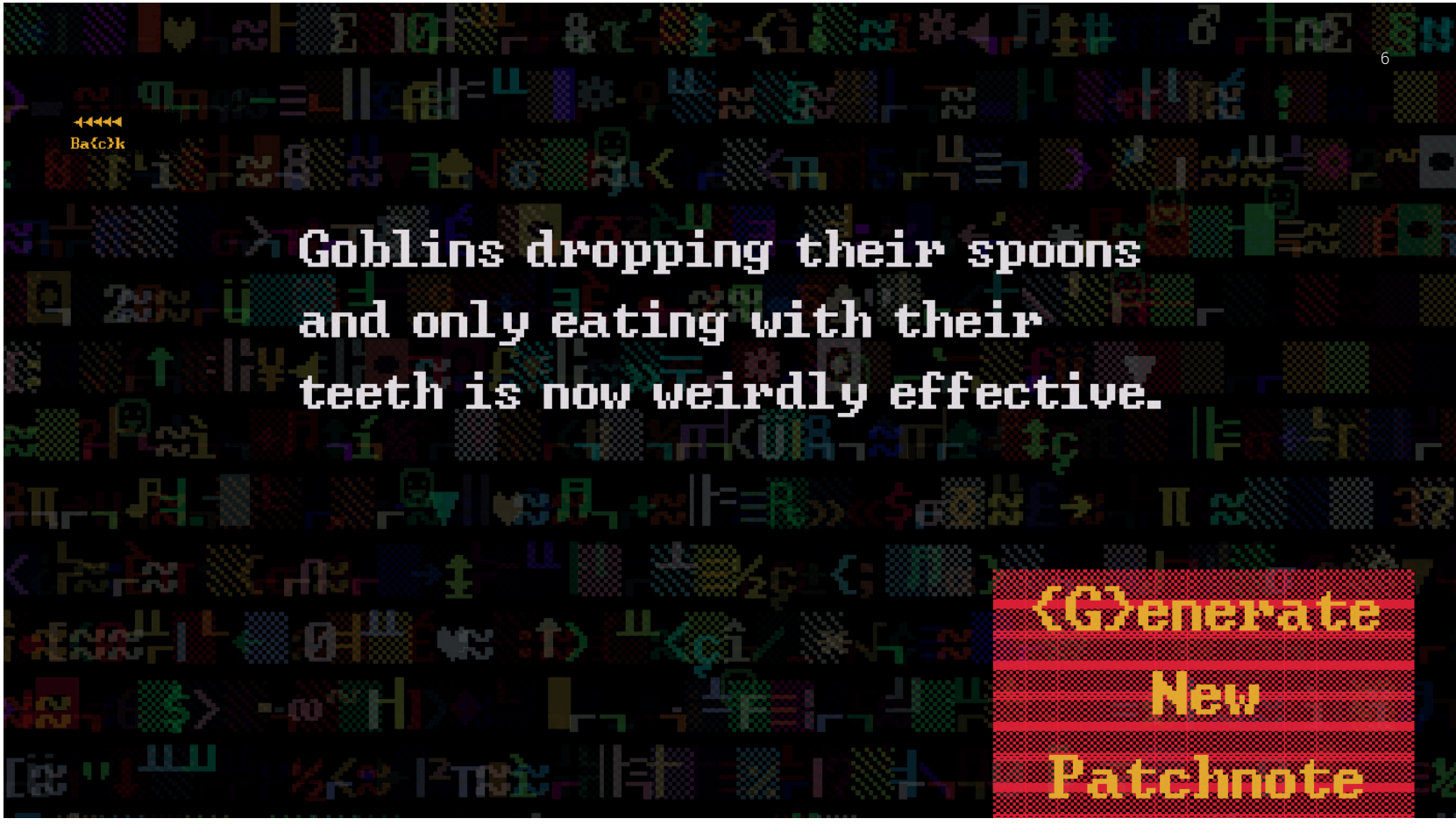
Seeking such extensivity and this paral-

lel between the genre and the menu, I turned to Artificial Intelligence. A neural network called GPT-2 (OpenAI, 2019) was trained on a collection of patchlogs from existing games. The dataset consisted of *Dwarf Fortress* and *Rimworld* patchlogs, as well as patchnotes from other base building games: *Oxygen not Included, Kenshi, Crusader Kings,* and *Gnomoria*. Ultimately the dataset comprised roughly 8,000 separate patchnotes, tweaked using few strategic find-and-replace commands to give Peon Caravan a sense of unity. Finally, in order to flag the AI-backbone of Peon Caravan, a contrivance was developed: players are told that *Peon Caravan* is a game created by an AI that was trained on a *Dwarf Fortress* 'Let's play' from 2011. The game is patched continuously by this AI, and so players are tasked with calling up continuous patch notes from a seemingly infinite reservoir, thereby putting them in the position of historian-detective.

In many ways the menu for *Peon Caravan* is the most accomplished of the four prototypes. It deploys a specific UI-trope that deftly expresses its gameworld; from this, it derives a new playful mechanic that analogizes the games it explores and parodies (the exploration of procedural extensivity through exploring patches); finally, it raises critical questions about design and about genre, suchsuch as the continual references to slavery, the imperialist overtones derived from the dataset of patches and--perhaps most importantly-- the very question of *where* players find joy in such emergent discoveries.

Discussion

Over the course of four prototypes, MNG+ developed menuization as a method for game designers wanting to explore their work speculatively.


6
Ba{c}k
Goblins dropping their spoons
and only eating with their
teeth is now weirdly effective.
{G}enerate
New
Patchnote

Each prototype allowed the development of a clearer understanding of both the potential and limits of menuization. To speak in general terms of some of the insights of the above project and chapter:

Main menus can act as an effective vehicle of ideation

Like most works of SCD, MNG+ aims to create a more pliable future for games through the effects of tangible creations. Yet this also means the creation of a series of design prospecti for a number of games which could (in principle) exist, and which could (in principle) be played and even be fun. In this sense menuization is a method not only of approaching speculative play, but also a tool for ideation in general: one makes a menu as the game's manifesto; this can subsequently either be shared as it is and act as a pivot for thoughts and conversations or, if it is developed into a whole and 'actual' game, then it can act as a design document—a far more interactive and open-to-conversation object than the design document as ordinarily construed. This implies also that the creation of main menus for non-existent games could find use beyond academic and speculative design work; for instance, it could present an interesting assignment for a game design course, a contrivance for a game jam, an exercise for a company, etc.

Menuization as a mode of expressing a game may be overly attached to games expressible through UI elements

MNG+ is a test case for its own concept, and therefore acts in three directions at once: it explores imagined games, it critically explores UI elements and menu tropes, and it explores the latter's ability to express the former. These three directions together implied co-implicative status of the choice of UI element with the imagined game, and often this meant beginning with a specific UI trope rather than a free roaming of one's imagining. In other words, menuization here implied that creative speculation passed through UIs as the medium. This may indeed prove to be a limit to menuization as a

method.

Menuization allows for speculative inspiration to arise from an unexpected source (UIs)

The flipside of the menuization's grounding in (or shackling by) UI elements is the reminder of the importance of creative constraints. Even the main menu—arguably the most formalized and routine, as well as the most boring and skippable, aspect of games—acted as a reservoir for the development of both game ideas and ludic criticality. Here we can point to the creation of the player-as-editor role for the divisible level select screen of 8 Tons, or the purely practical patch note updates from Peon Caravan.

The doubling of fictional worlding in objects of speculative play is a site of necessary future inquiry in further developing speculative play

Games promise a world, and speculative games enact worlding on two levels. Though the interconnections between these variegated modalities of 'worlding' are too complex to delve into for the scope of this chapter, disentangling these levels and their interconnections will be crucial for further investigations into the methods and applications of speculative play.

Conclusion

MNG+ presents four speculative menu prototypes, each acting as a kind of test case for menuization; menuization is a method of ideation and prototyping to be used by speculative game designers looking to deploy the unique tools of games (playful interactivity). This chapter has explored the development of MNG+'s four current prototypes; in reflecting on the development of each, this chapter has set into relief five insights about menuization: as a method for enacting speculatively playful interactions, as a tool for ideation, its potential overattachment to UIs, as a way of using UI tropes as inspiration, and as a starting point in the investigation of the complexities of 'double worlding' found in speculative games.

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Images

1. Title screen for the game Jitterbug
2. The unwieldy color input mechanic in Jitterbug
3. The subdivided level select screen for 8 Tons of Oxygen
4. One of the options screens found in 8 Tons of Oxygen
5. World generation and mechanic building in Empires of Idleness
6. Example patch note from the game Peon Caravan

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Medium: Web-based piece and application for smartphones
Year of Release: 2010
Link to the artwork: http://lossofgrasp.com / http://deprise.fr
Video artist: https://vimeo.com/453009501