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Trouble Brewing: An exploration in parasocial relationships with fictional characters

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TROUBLE BREWING:
AN EXPLORATION IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FICTIONAL
CHARACTERS

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction

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December 2021

This Study by: Isabelle Zeimetz

Entitled: *Trouble Brewing: An Exploration in Parasocial Relationships with Fictional Characters*

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors with Distinction.

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I. Introduction:

In the 1940s and 1950s, television and radio had taken over as the dominant form of media (*Understanding Media and Culture: an Introduction to Mass Communication*).

Anthropologist Donald Horton and sociologist R. Wohl noted a strange new relationship developing between the audiences and the hosts under this new dominant media. These relationships ranged from close friendships with radio hosts like Dave Garroway to people wanting to marry fictional characters such as the gal from the radio broadcast, *Lonesome Gal*. Horton and Wohl realized that these new relationships were not quite the same as interpersonal relationships as they could never be reciprocated; therefore, they created a new concept: parasocial relationships (Horton 215). It defined a relationship that is entirely one-sided with little to no chance of a mutual relationship forming. It was 1956 when Horton and Wohl first defined this concept, and while they could not predict the way media would evolve, they had two hypotheses that would be later proven to be true. Loneliness breeds toxic parasocial relationships (Bernhold), and interactivity deepens parasocial relationships (Liebers). When these two facts are combined with the mass isolation caused by SAR-CoV-2 and limitless interactivity of video games, a recipe for trouble is brewing.

II. Explanation and Purpose:

Trouble Brewing is a social simulation video game that I developed using the Godot game engine from scratch meaning that the majority of code, sprites, and structure were made by me. The game is set in a post-apocalyptic setting where plant people have become the dominant

inhabitants of Earth. The game oversees the player taking over a simple coffee shop as they get

to know the non-player characters inhabiting the town called Prometheus. The major gameplay loop has the player logging in each day to interact with the civilians of



Prometheus to find out what they like and dislike. These likes and dislikes inform the player on what beverages, foods, entertainment, and decorations they should set up in their store to maximize the arrival of customers; therefore, this leads to greater profit margins for the player meaning they can expand the shop.

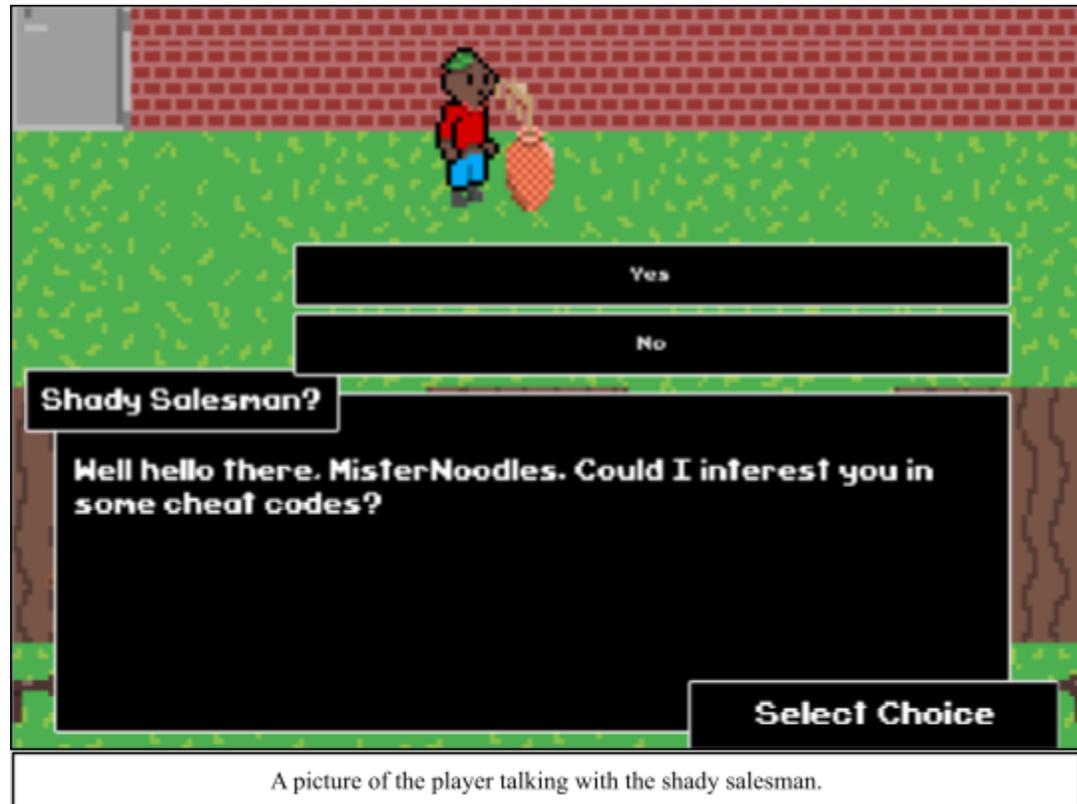
An intended consequence of this gameplay loop is to have the player form parasocial relationships with these non-player characters through repeated interactions. This will result in the player coming back to the game to interact with these characters. It has been shown that parasocial relationships are more likely to form if interactions are repeated frequently (Liebers).



Therefore, by having the player come back to the game on a daily basis, they are more likely to develop a parasocial relationship with the characters of *Trouble Brewing*.

Another dynamic to the game is a focus on the artificiality of the world the player is inhabiting. Every so often a merchant will show up selling cheat codes that allow the players to skip ahead in time, boost their profits, or a number of other benefits; however, these cheat codes

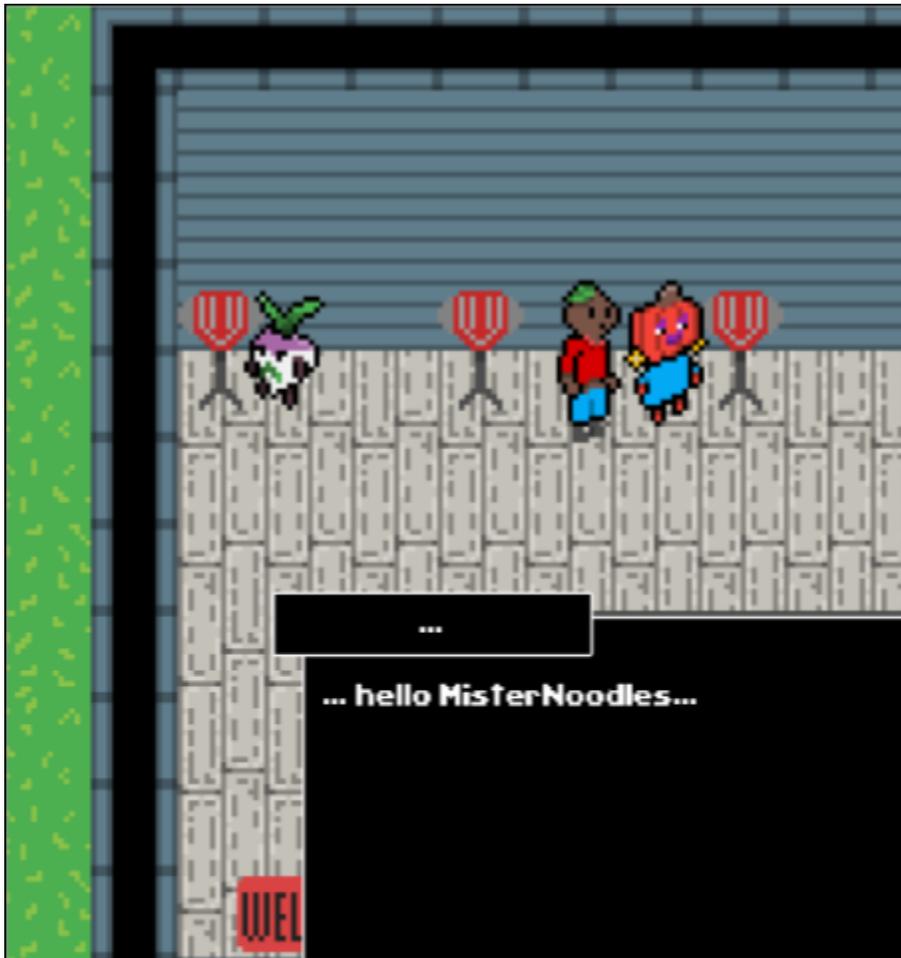
also impact
the game
world in a
negative
way. For
instance,
they can
corrupt
characters
turning into
glitched
versions of



themselves that spout nonsense dialogue. The Crow, one of the non-player characters, is aware that the world is artificial and will berate the player for messing with the game world in this way. In fact, all the characters will occasionally say things that make them self-aware.

The idea here is to run two conflicting themes into each other. The first is to create a realistic set of characters that the players want to interact with, and the second is to expose the artificiality of the world that the player inhabits. By doing this, I express the core theme of the game which is that these parasocial relationships can be an amusing escape from reality, but they are not real. They are as artificial as the world they inhabit. With video games that continue to blur real relationships with parasocial relationships, *Trouble Brewing* seeks to clarify this blur by

providing a game that's entire focus is on exposing parasocial relationships as facsimiles of real relationships.



Betsy (the pumpkin NPC) has become glitched as a result of using cheat codes. She now addresses the player not as their given name, but as their system name. Pulling apart the illusion of the game world by directly addressing the player.

III. Creative Process:

During the summer prior to this semester, I laid out all the important features I wanted the game to have. From there, I broke the larger systems into smaller pieces. For instance, I knew I wanted the game to have a dialogue system, so I broke this system into parts such as writing dialogue for each character, displaying dialogue in game, triggering dialogue, handling dialogue changing

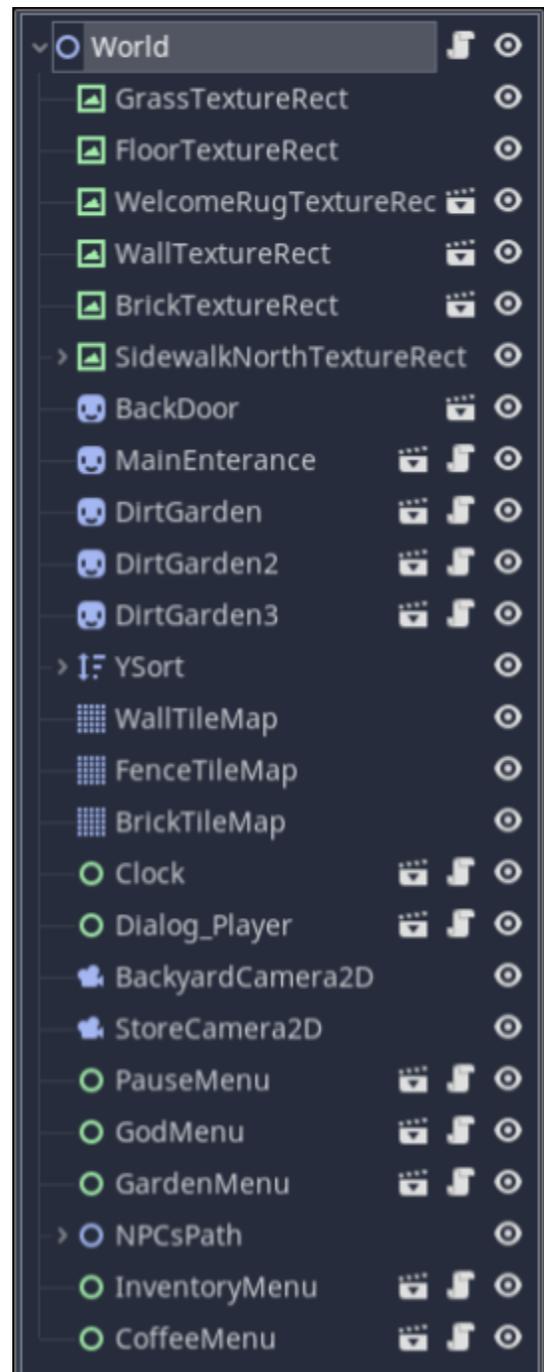
from day to day, and making dialogue interactive for events.

For each two-week sprint, I pinned one of these larger systems and their smaller pieces onto a corkboard with four columns: planned, blocked, in-progress, and finished. Throughout the two weeks, I would take planned work, move it to the in-progress column, and work until it was

finished. Any work that did not get finished was left in the planned column. Blocked work came up anytime I needed to complete a different piece of work before another one. I would sometimes pull in one of those large systems if I knew it would allow me to work on the blocked column after it was finished. For example, to get the dialogue system triggered, I had to first create an interaction system that would allow the player to interact with objects in the in-game world.

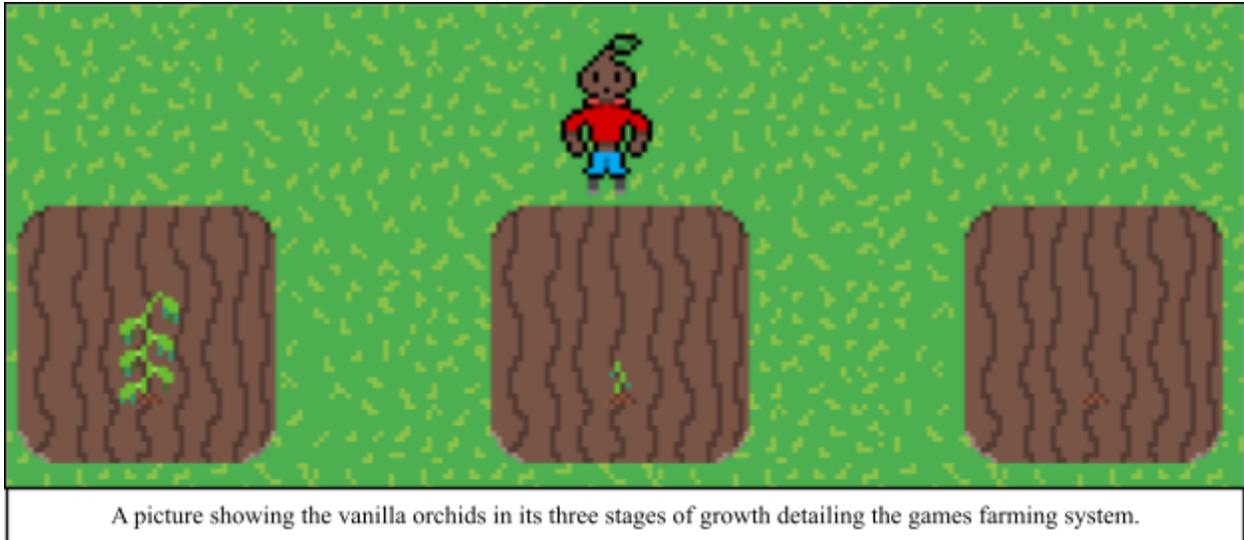
IV. Description of the Final Work:

The finalized product of this Honors Thesis is a beta of the video game. It has been coded in the Godot game engine. After about the midway point through this project, I realized it would not be obtainable to have the game be in its finalized version because of the short deadline I had allotted. Instead, I decided to focus on getting the game into a state where the core systems were put in place but not the entirety of the content. The original game was supposed to have content that lasted for one entire real-world year. I have instead reduced that content to only take up the first two weeks of the game.



These are all the nodes in Godot that form the basis of the video game. Many of them break down into smaller nodes with scripts attached to them.

The current systems in the game include dialogue to fill those first two weeks, a dialogue system, half the cast of characters, an inventory system, farming mechanics, two character



events, the like/dislike system, a time and date system, and most importantly the manager function that coordinates all of the other systems.

The reason for selecting these systems to develop is that they are core to the overall experience of the game. From this point forward, it is a simple matter of adding the additional content and tweaking these systems to expand the game into its finalized product.

It is also important to note that not all planned systems were implemented. The like/dislike system is very much a skeleton that is not implemented anywhere in the game as there was not enough time to design unique decorations or a system to place those decorations. The coffee shop also can not be upgraded at this point because the prototype for that feature was unstable and was ultimately removed from the project due to time constraints. There is also only the cheat code for skipping ahead in time because it was only necessary to create one in order to demo the glitched feature.

V. Importance in Media:

In terms of games addressing parasocial relationships, there are very few that attempt to do so. Two games that address parasocial relationships are *Doki Doki Literature Club* and *Undertale*. Both of these games use meta-narratives to discuss the relationship between the player and the game.

In *Doki Doki Literature Club*, a game that is part dating simulator and part psychological horror, the player is subjected to the nightmarish reality a virtual being goes through when it realizes its world is fake. Despite what the player does, they ultimately have to say goodbye to the characters of *Doki Doki Literature Club* as there is no happiness to be had when virtual beings are put into contact with the real world which they can never be a part of. *Doki Doki Literature Club* argues these parasocial relationships can never be anything real, and as one of the final acts of the game, it requires that the player delete the fictional character holding them hostage from the game's directory on their computer. Then when the player reboots the game, it is like the character never existed.

Undertale falls on the opposite side of this spectrum by stating that these fictional characters have souls. The game has three distinct endings: true pacifist, neutral, and genocide. The game's message very much pushes the player along the route of true pacifism as all the monsters can be defeated through puzzles with no acts of violence required. In fact, many times the game will make you befriend the monster before fighting them such as with the skeleton Papyrus. However, the player can choose to kill every monster they encounter. This will leave the world empty. After clearing a zone of all monsters, the music will fade away and the world will fall silent. If the player goes through with killing every monster in the game, their

character's soul will become possessed by a demon. This will lock them out of getting the true pacifist ending, and if the player attempts to complete a true pacifist run after a genocide run, the player character's eyes will flash red indicating that they are still possessed by the demon. There is no way in the game that the player can undo this change. By taking this path, the game indicates the player has become a true monster for killing everything in their wake.

Despite these games taking entirely different stances on the idea of parasocial relationships, they both do one thing in common: they seek to challenge the assumptions their audiences have about virtual worlds. In regular role-playing games, a player normally mows down countless enemies with no remorse. *Undertale* asks its players to question the ethicality of this violence by introducing enemies that are more like real people than digital entities. *Doki Doki Literature Club* forces its player to face the horror of being an entity whose only way of achieving happiness is through the arbitrary choices of players. It turns the tables on these players by forcing them to be the ones that are acted on as opposed to being the ones that act, and their only choice of freedom is to sever this false connection. Through these meta-narratives, these video games are able to create mind bending stories that cannot exist in any other form of media.

Trouble Brewing is an extension of these games' attempt to use meta-narratives to pull apart our expectations of video games. Most social simulation games pride themselves on establishing a realistic environment for the player to interact with. *Stardew Valley* is a game about a farmer living in a regular small town, and while there are some fantastical elements such as tree sprites and wizards, the game never presents these things as outside the scope of the gameworld. *Trouble Brewing*, on the other hand, revels in this idea of creating a realistic

environment and then suffusing it with elements that point out its artificiality such as having characters glitch or strange unknown creatures appearing in the background. By defying the player's expectation of social simulation games, the ultimate goal of the game is to deliver its message about parasocial relationships. While they can be beneficial, they should never replace real world relationships. In this way, *Trouble Brewing* becomes the middle ground between *Doki Doki Literature Club* and *Undertale*.

VI. My Experience:

The value of this project mostly comes from taking a video from nothing to multiple lines of code, art assets, dialogue, and the like. From the project, I got experience problem solving as I sought out ways to make my game work in the way I wanted it to. One of my favorite achievements was creating a generic system for interaction that could be copied into multiple places with slight tweaks in the code to model different behaviors for different interactions. For example, both the dialogue system and coffee system run on the same interaction system. It also helped me realize how to take already existing tools and modify them for my needs. One such example is that the basic dialogue system came from a tool created by another developer. I was able to take this tool, alter it slightly, and use it in my game. The final large piece of experience I got from this project was troubleshooting. About midway through development, I ran into performance issues with the way I was having systems interact with each other, and because I had coupled so many of the other systems closely together, it ultimately meant I was forced to rewrite a lot of code. What it made me realize is that no two systems should so heavily rely on

each other and should instead be able to work independently.

VII. Conclusion

Trouble Brewing is a video game about illuminating the artificiality of parasocial relationships. It accomplishes this by running two conflicting ideas next to each other: the game attempting to make the world as realistic as possible and the game dropping moments of artificiality into the realism. The juxtaposition of these two ideas breaks apart a world that is trying to appear realistic by exposing its artificial nature. This core idea came from games like *Doki Doki Literature Club* and *Undertale* that both use a meta-narrative to challenge the expectations of gamers in order to provide thought provoking themes. It is also backed up by the works of Horton and Dohl, Gannon, and Liebers that all claim that an important aspect of parasocial relationships is based on how real they seem. It seemed only logical to pair these two ideas together in order to pry apart parasocial relationships.

The primary limitations of this project are lack of time and lack of required skills. Making a video game in under three months is a grueling process. It meant that certain features had to be prioritized over others leaving the ones that got left behind underbaked. It also meant that there was not a lot of time to go back and revise the game's code to work more efficiently and to re-design systems to work in new environments. The second major hurdle of this project came down to my lack of artistic skill. I have done very little in the way of sprite-work, musical composition, and audio recording. This resulted in a game that looks a little stilted, lacks music, and lacks sound effects. Well not detrimental to the game's core thesis, it still makes the project look under-polished. In terms of going forward with this project, more time and access to other

artistic individuals would make for a product that was more efficient, more polished, and fully realized.

Trouble Brewing matters because it fills a niche void in the world of parasocial relationships. There are almost no direct forms of media that address this growing phenomenon, and as we continue to exist in a world where video games continue to blur the distinction between real and parasocial relationships, it is therefore important to have a piece of media that addresses this rising concern.

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Appendix A: How to download the game

In order to play the video game, one can follow the link to this GitHub repo in order to download it: <https://github.com/average-noodles/trouble-brewing/releases>

If one wishes to edit the files or get a better understanding of how the game works, they must download the godot game engine. A link to that has been provided here: <https://godotengine.org/>