TO EXIST
eternally

To Exist: Eternally

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Abstract

With my project, I want to use the idea of a multi-layer simulation to ask the question if our perception of reality is truthful or is it just our senses lying to us? By having multiple levels of the simulation, each vastly different from the other, the player will keep questioning if they've escaped the simulation or not, or if there is truly escape at all. There is also the underlying theme of modern alienation, which all the characters experience to some extent, which causes them to always be unsatisfied with their life. I believe the theme of alienation and simulation works well together in creating an interesting story about the philosophical struggles of modern life. True to the spirit of a visual novel, the options in this game will lead to many different outcomes, depending on how the player wants to play the game.
The player will have the option to play the game as a typical slice-of-life story or a more bizarre sci-fi adventure, or if they don't want to play by the rules at all.

Authors Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Simulation Hypothesis; Existentialism; Human Condition; Alienation; Capitalist system; Neoliberalism.

Introduction

The main character, a seemingly normal human being, has a seemingly mundane life, with a common office job and suffer from a serious lack of individuality and meaning, until one day when they decide to make a change for the better, whether it is to escape the stuffy corporate life and pursue their own passions, or break the system and confront the truth. Along the way, the player will have the option to either keep the character in the dark and go along with the story or shatter the characters' perception of reality and possibly induce some existential crisis.

Research Question:

How do we respond to a multi-layer simulation that continuously evolve to accommodate our changing mindset?

Related works

Fig. 1: Doki Doki Literature Club (Video Game)

This game is truly one of the best examples of the visual novel genre. It shares the theme of self-aware machines, but it takes this premise even higer with outstanding game mechanics and visuals, showcasing a more disturbing side of this concept.

Fig. 2: Fight Club (1999)

This movie is an example of the life of alienated worker in a capitalist society, and how they try to regain control of their lives. This concept is what inspired me to explore the theme of worker alienation, in a modern world.

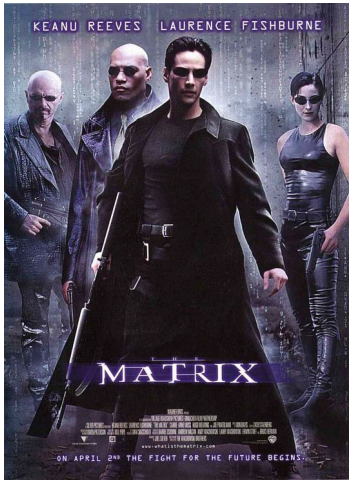


Fig. 3: The Matrix (1999)

This is one of my favorite movies, and what I like the most the the novel mind-bending concept of the simulation, which I'm taking inspiration from.

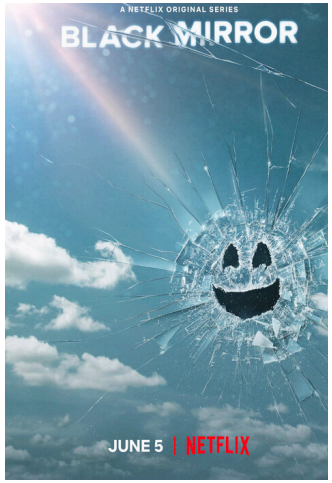


Fig .4: Black Mirror (TV Series 2011–)

This show finds very alternative ways to display the effects of technology, and I'm inspired by their original approach to storytelling.

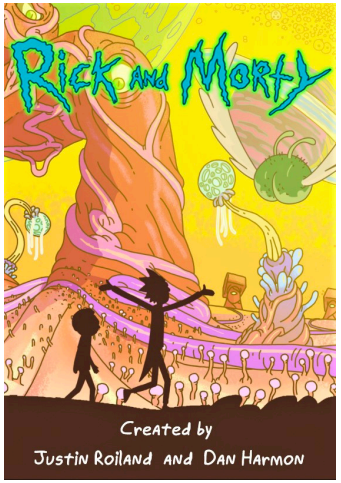


Fig. 5: Rick and Morty (TV Series 2013–)

What is more prevalent in the show is the idea of intelligence bringing about nihilistic misery, and this idea is what I want to focus on most.

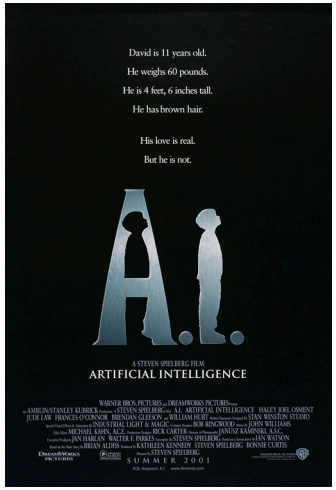


Fig. 6: A.I. Artificial Intelligence (2001)

The Ai in this movie view becoming 'human' as the higher goal for their existence. This makes me wonder if all machines consider becoming human as their purpose? Or could they make peace with being machine?

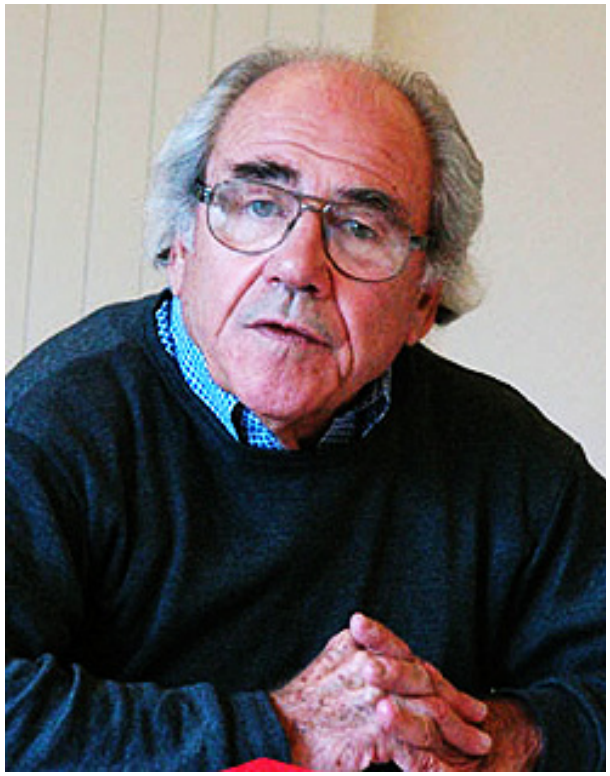


Fig. 7: Jean Baudrillard

Simulacra and Simulation by Jean Baudrillard

This theory give way to the distinction between the player's perspective of reality, through the character 'you', and the game character's perspective of reality. The story being told here does not in any way represent reality nor attempt to be realistic, and all the events are simplified and happen at the convenience of the character. This is because the characters exist in a simulacrum of reality, where everything are just references and have no real meaning, and therefore, lacks the necessity to make logical sense. However, they work in a way to show the player the progression of events in this simulation and the consequences of their decisions. The decisions given to the players are also part of the simulacrum, and therefore, are only of referential importance.

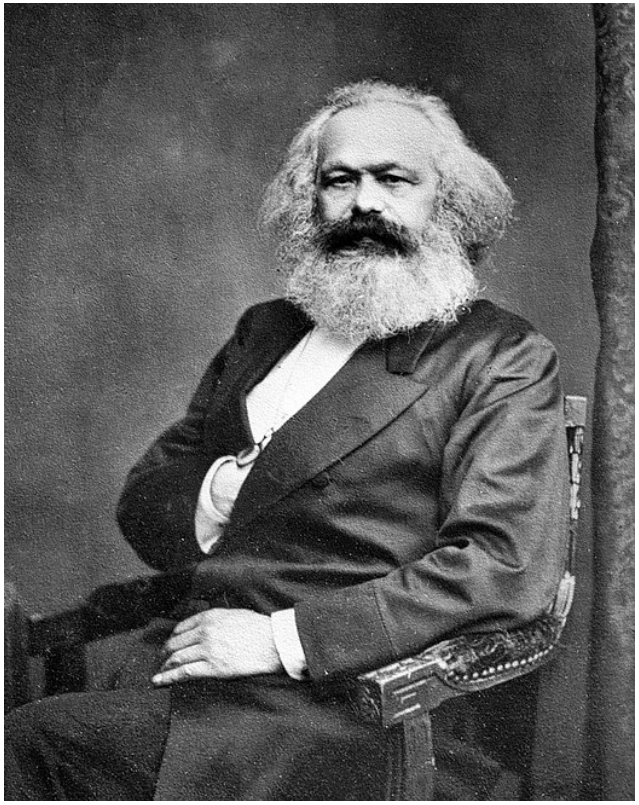


Fig. 8: Karl Marx

Marx's theory of alienation

This theory has influenced the driving struggle of the story, as all the main characters suffer from some form of alienation by the capitalist society they live in, and therefore, are unsatisfied with their current circumstances and desire changes. The scary thing about this alienation effect is that the victims are often unaware that they're even being alienated, because the modern system has evolved to be less conspicuous in their tactics by using a false promise of freedom to manipulate the victims.

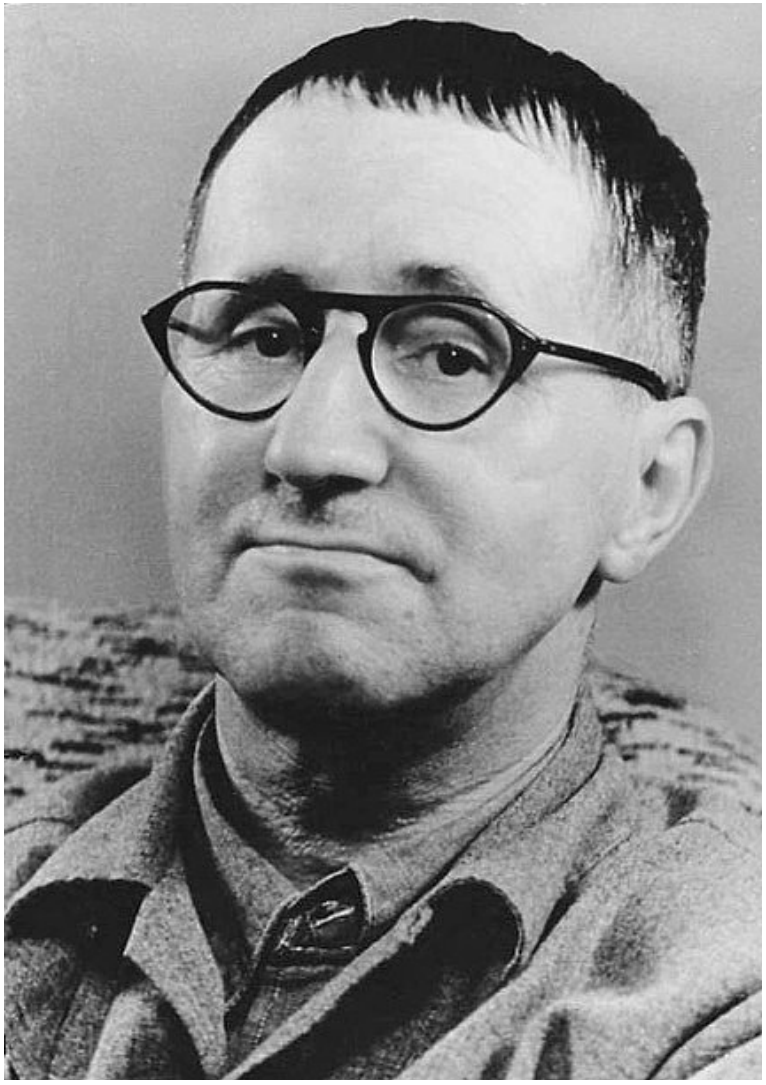


Fig. 9: Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht On Chinese Acting

Reading his theory of the 'alienation effect' (Martin, C. & Bial, H., 2000) gives validate to my use of two 'main' characters, which is the main game character and the character 'you', who represents the player's perspective.

The character 'you' knows that this is all a game, and so, has this distance from the story, unlike the game characters who are fully immersed in the story. Therefore, from this distance, the player can make interesting comments and draw conclusions that the game character cannot and make decisions to change the story that they're observing.

Fig. 10 : Heraclitus

Heraclitus on The Doctrine of Flux

Learning about Heraclitus and his philosophy has given me a logical explanation to my story. Just like how we cannot step into the same river twice, the player cannot play as the same character twice, because each time the character will reach a different ending, and it is that path that defines the character. And every time the player restarts, they are playing with another main character. Therefore, the player will have to hold accountability for whatever happens to the character based on their choices. Thinking about it this way gives me a different perspective on the concept of the different options and paths that the player can take and the consequences that the characters will have to face.

Exploration

Firstly, I want to discuss the idea of the simulation, and how reality can be deceiving to the player. Like the character, when the game first started, the player is also unaware that everything is a simulation, unless they make a series of specific choices, and they're not going to able to realize this and will finish the game normally. This is to show how reality can manipulate our senses to believe that something is true, and it is often difficult to realize the truth. A more interesting point to make would be how the character reacts to this deception, and this lies in the different paths the character takes and where they end up.

Fig. 11: Screenshot from To Exist: Eternally #1

Secondly, I would like to establish the theme of alienation, which differs greatly between the story paths. There are essentially 3 main story paths, where (spoiler alert) the character chooses to stay in their current life or escape into another dimension to live as an android. In the paths where the characters remain at their current life, they are alienated by the capitalist society they live in, taking away their own voices and values, turning them into typical corporate slaves. And this alienation extends to when they think they've escaped by pursuing their dreams, they're still being manipulated by the system for its own benefits.

If the character chooses to escape and live life as an android, then they are being more literally alienated by their nature. After living all their life as a human, as well as being designed to think so, the character firmly believe that they are human, and even has a human mindset and tendencies. But in reality, they are an android, who now lives in an android society, and has to behave like other androids. The juxtaposition between thinking they're one thing and being something else completely will create some internal conflicts for the character.

Fig. 12: Screenshot from To Exist: Eternally #2

Fig. 13: Screenshot from To Exist: Eternally #3

Finally, the choices that the player have now have more significant impact on the story, and different choices will lead many different endings, or help the player understands more about the characters they encounter in the game. Being able to offer the player freedom in how they want to play the game has always been the goal for this project. But the problem they I've encountered here is being able to develop a logical story flow to make every story path works together, as well as make sense separately, and the storytelling structure and quality are the same throughout the game.

Fig. 14: Screenshot from To Exist: Eternally #4

Testing

The first step for me before writing anything is to plan out my story because it gives me a base to work on. And I always have many different story paths set out before I choose one to follow because sometimes what I had in mind doesn't make a lot of sense after I write it out, so I think it's important to test out before committing to anything.

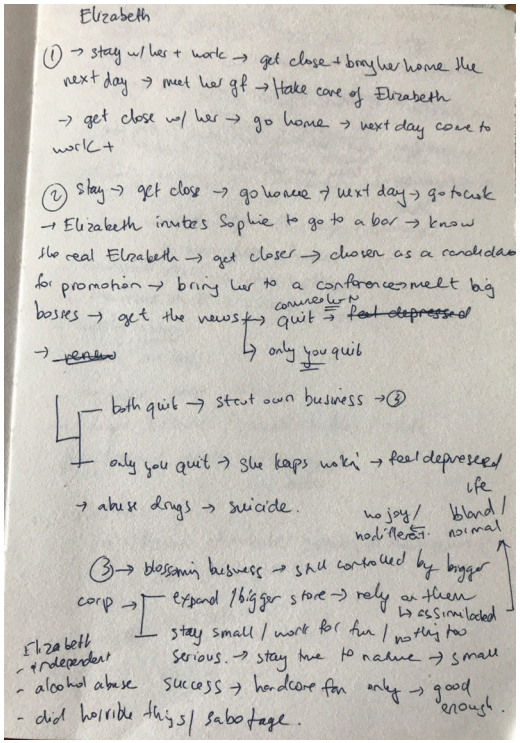


Fig. 15: Elizabeth's story maps #1

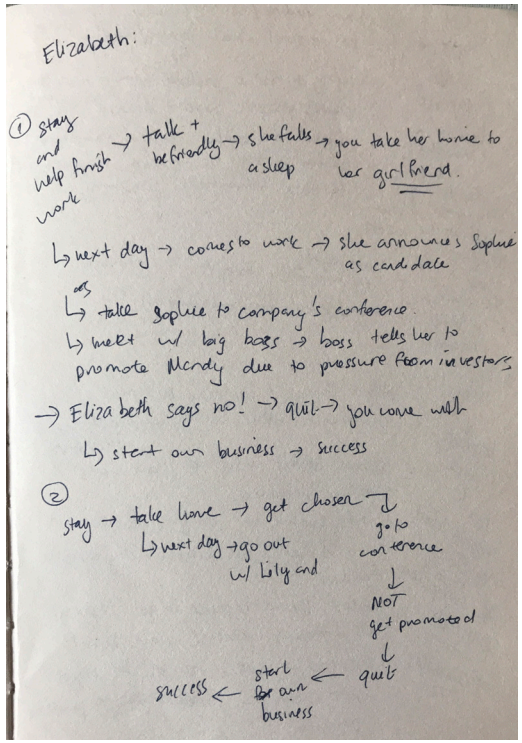


Fig. 16: Elizabeth's story maps #2

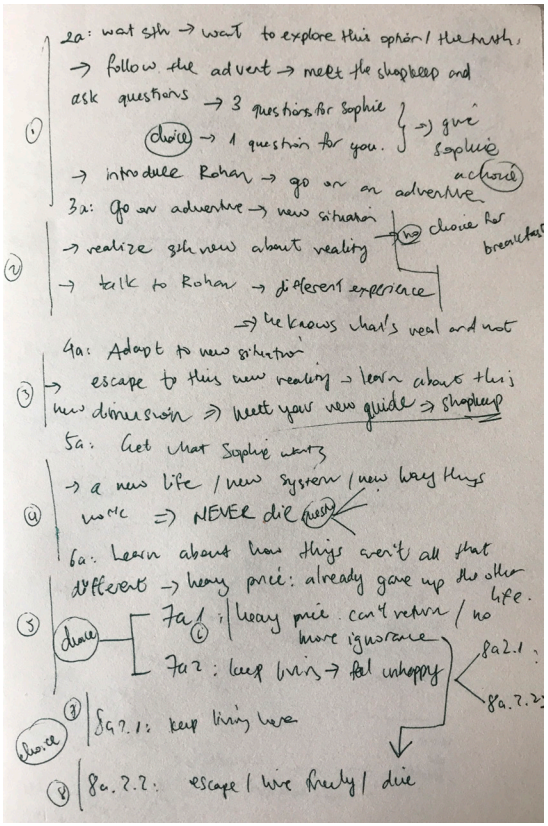


Fig. 17: Robot adventure story maps #1

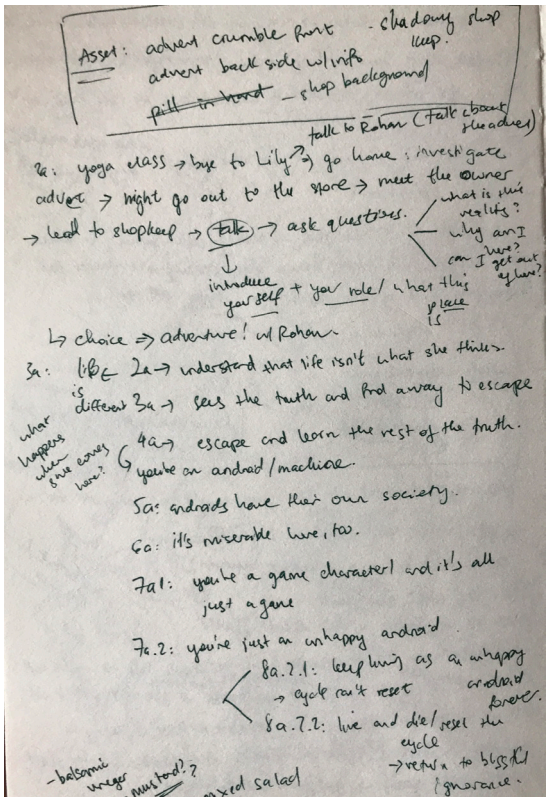


Fig. 18: Robot adventure story maps #2

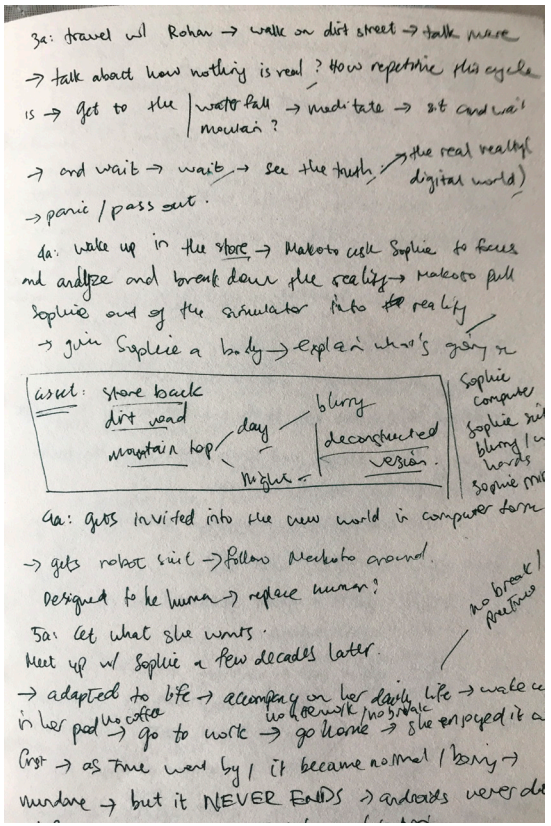


Fig. 19: Robot adventure story maps #3

Not only that, for all the story paths to work together, I have to keep track of what's happening, so there's also a map to guide me through the events, and also if I wanted to come back and make adjustments to anything. Especially when I want to have many different options for the player to play the game however they want, I still want the current story to make sense with the past versions of the story because they're building on top of each other.

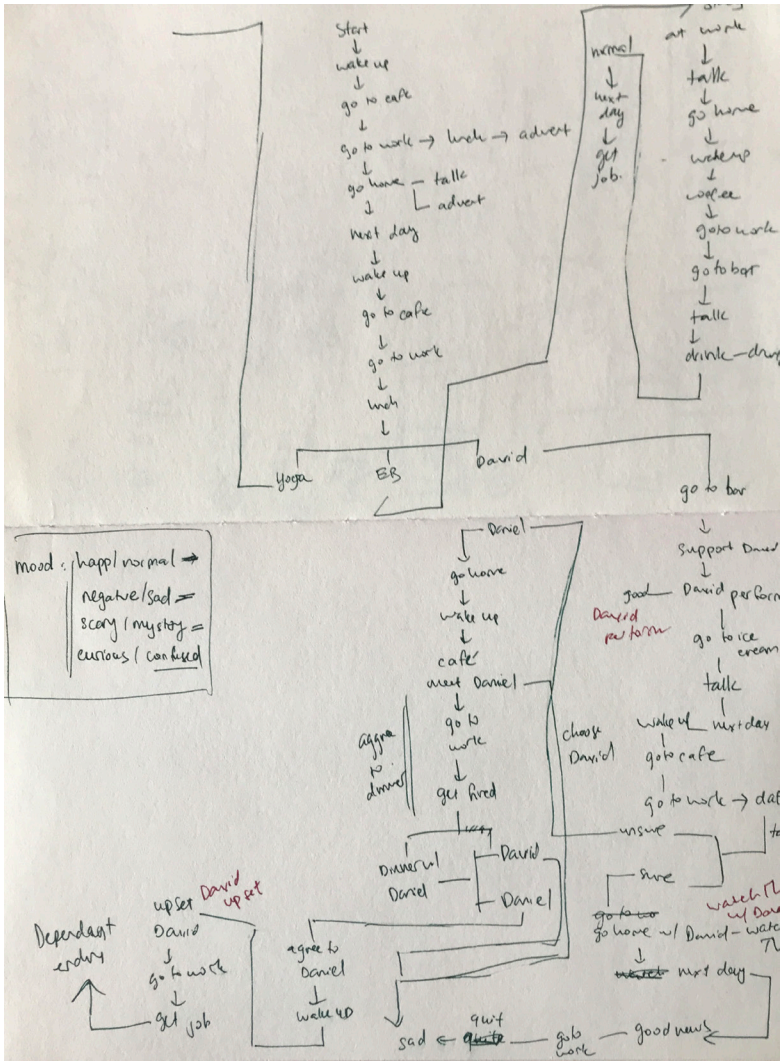
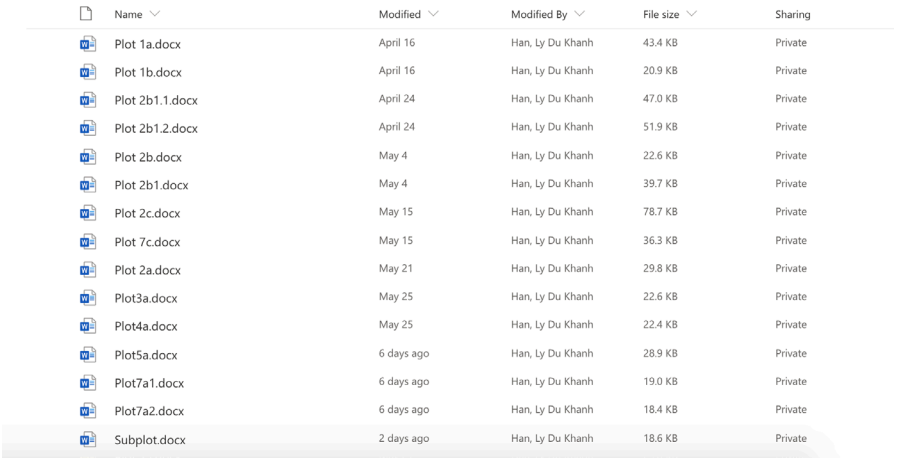


Fig. 20: Full story map

After planning out my story, I begin to write it, and this is my biggest hurdle because I'm not a writer, so I try my best with what I can. And afterwards, when I'm testing the game and the writing sounds clunky and odd, I'll come back and fix it, and test it again.



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Plot 1b.docx	April 16	Han, Ly Du Khanh	20.9 KB	Private
Plot 2b1.1.docx	April 24	Han, Ly Du Khanh	47.0 KB	Private
Plot 2b1.2.docx	April 24	Han, Ly Du Khanh	51.9 KB	Private
Plot 2b.docx	May 4	Han, Ly Du Khanh	22.6 KB	Private
Plot 2b1.docx	May 4	Han, Ly Du Khanh	39.7 KB	Private
Plot 2c.docx	May 15	Han, Ly Du Khanh	78.7 KB	Private
Plot 7c.docx	May 15	Han, Ly Du Khanh	36.3 KB	Private
Plot 2a.docx	May 21	Han, Ly Du Khanh	29.8 KB	Private
Plot3a.docx	May 25	Han, Ly Du Khanh	22.6 KB	Private
Plot4a.docx	May 25	Han, Ly Du Khanh	22.4 KB	Private
Plot5a.docx	6 days ago	Han, Ly Du Khanh	28.9 KB	Private
Plot7a1.docx	6 days ago	Han, Ly Du Khanh	19.0 KB	Private
Plot7a2.docx	6 days ago	Han, Ly Du Khanh	18.4 KB	Private
Subplot.docx	2 days ago	Han, Ly Du Khanh	18.6 KB	Private

Fig. 21: All script files

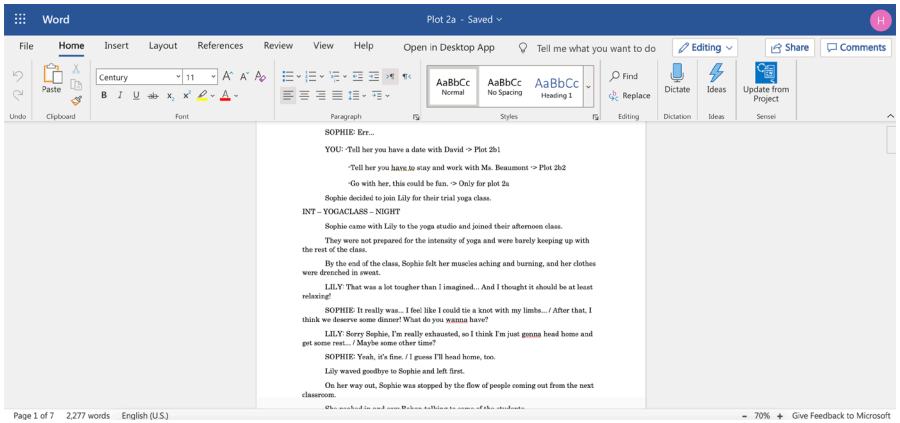

Fig. 22: Writing script on Microsoft Word

Which leads us to the translation from script to coding and after doing this for a few months now, I've become more familiarized with this language and made fewer mistakes. I've also incorporated different commands to accommodate more interesting gaming styles.

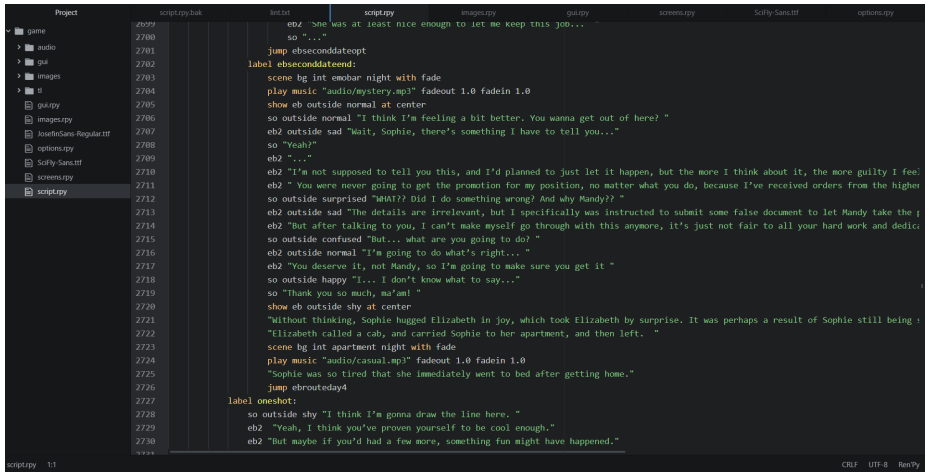

Fig. 23: Translating script into coding language #1

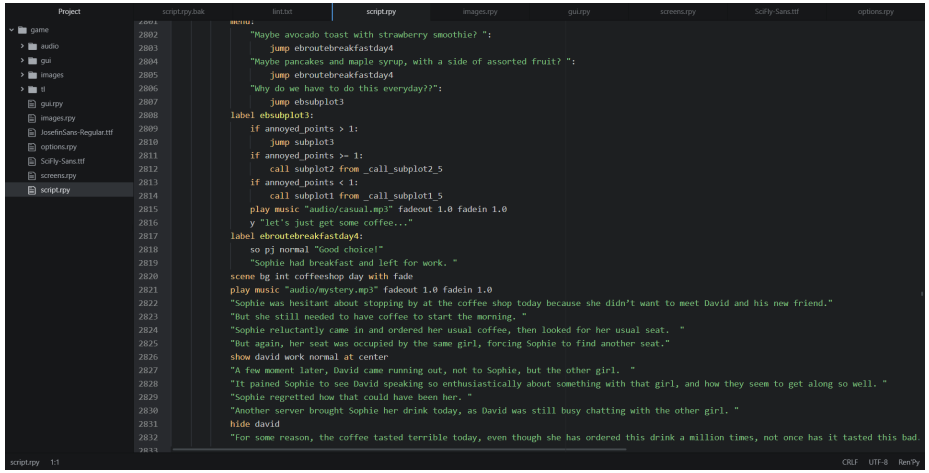

Fig. 24: Translating script into coding language #2

To emphasis more on the visual aspect of the visual novel, I've added many more illustrations to the story, to help tell the story better visually, as well as maintain the interest of the viewer through long dialogue scenes.

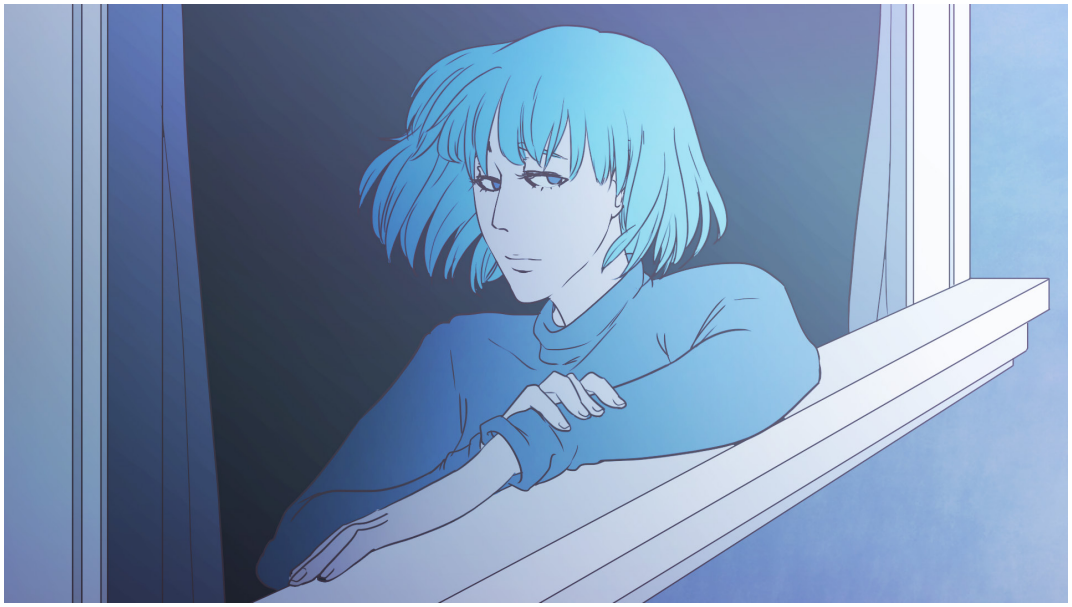

FIg. 25: Sophie sitting by the window

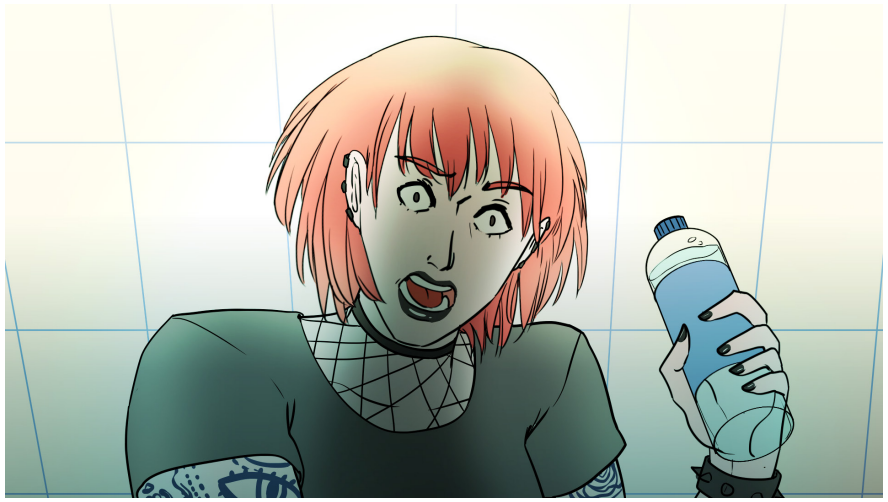

FIg. 26: Elizabeth panicking

FIg. 27: Dark bar background

FIg. 28: Makoto's store in darkness

FIg. 29: Chamber alarming

By far my biggest concern, I've also added music to the game, which I think helps tremendously in setting the mood for each scene and is a tool to help further express the emotions of the characters. I've chosen only a few tracks to express specific moods and emotions, because I believe this is the simplest and clearest approach. However, I do believe there is room to improve as I'm not completely happy with how the music transitions between scenes.

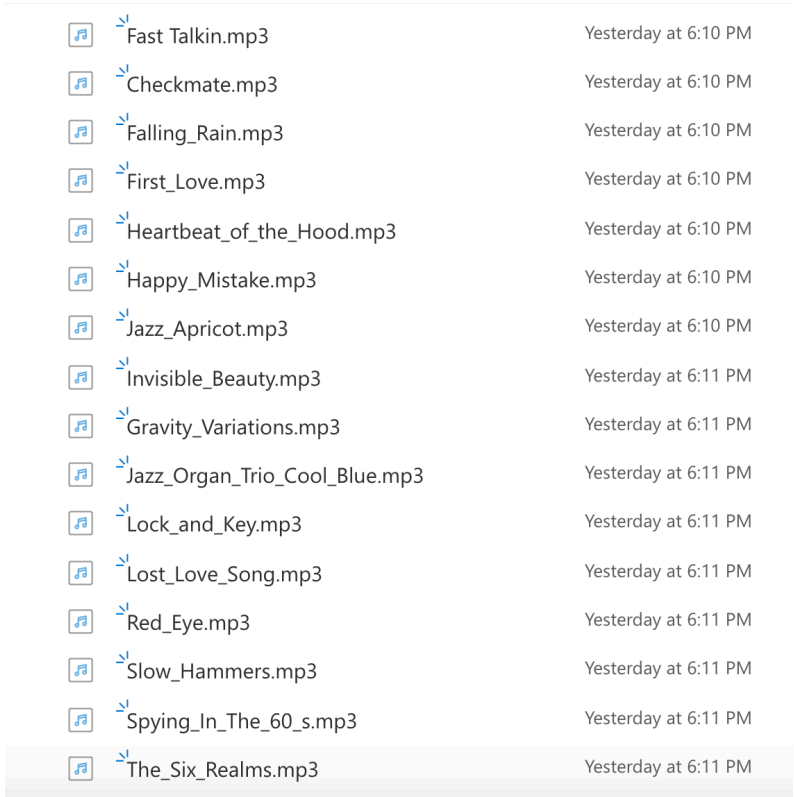

Fig. 30: All chosen sound files

Iteration

This iteration is the complete version of what I set out to do, and it's amazing to see how everything has come together and can now be played and enjoyed in its entirety. It is definitely not perfect, and there is always room for improvement, but this is without the doubt the vision I had for this project, but I still want to see how much further I can take it.

Fig. 31: Main menu of To Exist: Eternally

Discussion

I believe the story I have constructed has reflected the philosophical themes I had explored, by displaying the struggles and problems that motivates the story. But no matter which path the player chooses, there will always be conflicts between the character human nature and their environment, whether it be their workplace, their daily life, or even their reality, and what I really wanted to see was the response the character will have. How will they react to finding out they've been manipulated by the simulation all this time? Or how will they react after having made a great sacrifice that ended up not being worth it? That's essentially what the story is all about. And what I consider to be the goal of my visual novel is to let the player choose the response that fits with them, based on how they want to play the game.

Conclusion

The project to me has reached completion and it can now be published and played in its entirety. Not only does the story reflects all the ideas that I wanted to explore, the medium of a visual novel also allows a more interesting experience in telling this story using different paths and endings. The process of making this visual novel has also forced me to employ various tools for more effective storytelling, not just visually, but also in other aspects.

There are certainly many things I'm still not satisfied with, and could use improvement, which is why feedback is greatly appreciated. You can play my game through this link and please give me comments or suggestions for the further improve of my project:
charlamainely.itch.io/to-exist-eternally

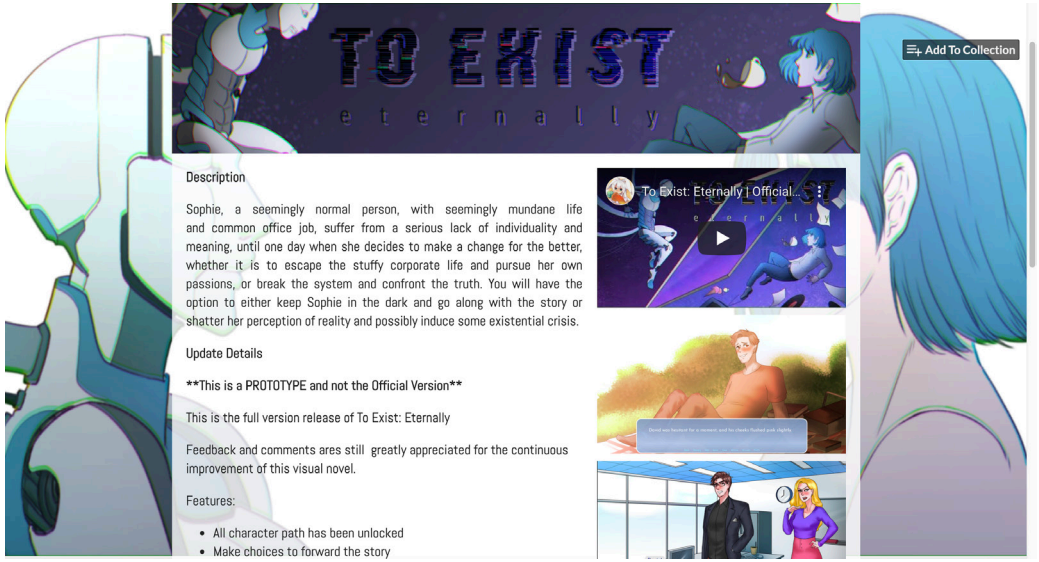

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Figure 3: The Matrix's poster art [computer generated graphic], 1999. Concept Arts. Available from: http://www.impawards.com/1999/posters/matrix_ver1.jpg [Accessed 30 March 2020].

Figure 4: Black Mirror's poster art [computer generated graphic], 2011. Art Machine. Available from: http://www.impawards.com/tv/posters/black_mirror_ver10.jpg [Accessed 30 March 2020].

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