

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Everyday: A Critical Look at the Video Game Industry

GRAYDON KUPFER  
SPRING 2024

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Digital Media, Arts, and Technology  
with honors in Digital Humanities

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Elisa Beshero-Bondar  
Professor of Digital Humanities  
Thesis Supervisor & Honors Adviser

Lauren Liebe  
Assistant Teaching Professor of Game Design  
Faculty Reader

\* Electronic approvals are on file.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is about the problems and challenges faced by people working in the modern video game industry, as well as my process of creating a game that showcases these problems. The first part of the thesis highlights some of the issues within the industry that have come to light in recent years. The second part details the development process of *Everyday*, the game I have created alongside my thesis. *Everyday* is a visual novel about people working at an independent game company and the difficulties they face. It is meant to highlight the most significant and pressing issues within the game industry, as well as be entertaining. The documentation of the game's creation in my thesis includes the works that inspired *Everyday*, the technology I considered using to create the game, the gameplay and presentation elements that I considered during development, and profiles of each of the game's characters. My thesis concludes with a reflection on the research and development that I have done on both the thesis and *Everyday*.

Link to the game: <https://graydonk.itch.io/everyday>

Permalink to the game (This permalink is meant to archive the game online in case the link above stops working or the game becomes inaccessible for any reason. This DOI link should also be used when creating a citation of the game. Otherwise, use the link above instead.):

<https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10892446>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1: The Shortcomings of the Video Game Industry</b> .....	1
<b>Harassment &amp; Discrimination</b> .....	1
<b>Overworked &amp; Underpaid</b> .....	2
<b>Other Issues</b> .....	4
<b>Games That Criticize the Industry</b> .....	6
<b>Chapter 2: My Sources of Inspiration</b> .....	8
<b>Themes</b> .....	8
<b>Story Progression</b> .....	9
<b>Setting</b> .....	9
<b>Characters</b> .....	10
<b>Presentation</b> .....	10
<b>Chapter 3: Technology Survey</b> .....	12
<b>TyranoBuilder</b> .....	12
<b>Twine</b> .....	13
<b>Unreal Engine’s Visual Novel Framework</b> .....	14
<b>Narrat</b> .....	15
<b>Ren’Py</b> .....	16
<b>Software for Asset Creation</b> .....	17
<b>Chapter 4: The Themes of <i>Everyday</i></b> .....	18
<b>Chapter 5: Player Agency</b> .....	20
<b>How Player Choice Works in my Game</b> .....	20
<b>Chapter 6: Selection Principle</b> .....	22
<b>Chapter 7: The Narrative</b> .....	24
<b>Story Overview</b> .....	24
<b>The Game Within the Game</b> .....	25
<b>Characters</b> .....	25
<b>Chapter 8: Reflections</b> .....	27
<b>Reflecting on my Goals</b> .....	27
<b>Closing Thoughts</b> .....	29

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** .....31

## Chapter 1

### The Shortcomings of the Video Game Industry

Before I began developing *Everyday*, I did extensive research on the most prevalent issues within the video game industry. Just like in any other industry, the businesses behind creating and publishing video games have been the source of many problems and controversies over the years. There have been accusations of harassment, discrimination, and exploitation within these companies, many of which have surfaced within the past five years or so.

#### Harassment & Discrimination

Over the past six years, three major video game developers/publishers have made headlines due to claims of sexual harassment and discrimination based on gender. Riot Games, the developer and publisher of the massively popular game *League of Legends*, was accused in 2018 by several employees of promoting a toxic and sexist work environment. Current and former employees at the company have spoken out about how demoralizing it was to work at Riot Games as a woman.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, multinational publisher/developer Ubisoft had similar accusations leveled against it, resulting in many higher-ups resigning or being fired from the company. Former employees have accused executives at Ubisoft of being aware of the sexist work culture, but neglecting to do anything about it even after it was reported.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, two lawsuits were filed against publisher/developer Activision. The first was from the California

---

<sup>1</sup> Cecilia D’Anastasio, “Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games,” Kotaku, August 7, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483>.

<sup>2</sup> Ethan Gach, “Ubisoft Employees Have ‘Grave Concerns’ Over Toronto Studio’s Misconduct Allegations,” Kotaku, July 6, 2020, <https://kotaku.com/ubisoft-employees-have-grave-concerns-over-toronto-stud-1844277486>.

Civil Rights Department over alleged sexual harassment within the company,<sup>3</sup> and the second was from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which claimed that Activision had violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>4</sup> All three companies attempted to downplay the severity of the accusations and/or claimed that they were investigating them internally and would be working to prevent poor working environments in the future. It is very likely that these issues are still present to some degree within these companies, as well as others in the industry.

### **Overworked & Underpaid**

Another big issue for those who work on games that has come to light is the common practice of “crunch time” within development studios. Crunch time is a period before a game’s release in which the developers are forced to work many hours of overtime in order to meet deadlines. Employees are usually not paid for said overtime. It is a tactic that companies use to cut the time and money needed to make a large game.<sup>5</sup> This has been happening for decades now, with people speaking out about it online as early as 2004. One of the most infamous examples in recent years was with the highly-anticipated game *Cyberpunk 2077*.<sup>6</sup> Those working on the game had previously stated with confidence that their developers would not need to work mandatory overtime in order to finish it on time. The game would eventually receive multiple delays and the developers were required to work more crunch time each time the release date was pushed back, with some being required to work nights and weekends. What’s worse, when

---

<sup>3</sup> Renée Rondinone, “Court of Appeal Denies Request to Dismiss CRD’s Case Against Activision Blizzard.” October 21, 2022, <https://calcivilrights.ca.gov/crdnews/oct212022pr/>.

<sup>4</sup> US EEOC. “Court Approves EEOC’s \$18 Million Settlement with Activision Blizzard,” March 30, 2022, <https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/court-approves-eeocs-18-million-settlement-activision-blizzard>.

<sup>5</sup> Ed Frauenheim, “No Fun for Game Developers?,” CNET, November 11, 2004, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/no-fun-for-game-developers/>.

<sup>6</sup> Charlie Hall, “Cyberpunk 2077 Has Involved Months of Crunch, despite Past Promises,” *Polygon* (blog), December 4, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/4/21575914/cyberpunk-2077-release-crunch-labor-delays-cd-projekt-red>.

*Cyberpunk 2077* was finally released in December of 2020, it was playable, but very clearly in an unfinished and unstable state.

Unfortunately, not even independent game developers are safe from these types of exploitation. In 2019, the head of independent game publisher/developer Chucklefish was accused by several artists and writers of not paying them at all for their contributions to the game *Starbound*. Some of these people were even teenagers, who felt that they had been taken advantage of by their employer. Said employer was also claimed to have been verbally abusive to those working on the game.<sup>7</sup>

While crunch may seem like a recent issue, in reality it has been a major factor of game development for well over two decades. One study done by researchers at the University of Oregon looked at sources from the 2000s for evidence of crunch culture and found plenty of telling anecdotes from those working in the industry during that time. The conclusion that they came to was that crunch culture has been normalized due to three prevailing factors: the perception of video games as “unmanageable” projects, the anti-corporate attitude of many developers, and the general misconception that developers work overtime because they are passionate about what they are creating.<sup>8</sup> The practice appears to have been just as prevalent back then as it is now.

The general public’s attitude towards crunch does not seem to be helping matters. Another study looked at articles about games that did or did not require crunch time in order to complete. Through an analysis of the comments of various crunch-related news articles,

---

<sup>7</sup> Colin Campbell, “Young Developers on *Starbound* Say Chucklefish Exploited Their Free Work,” *Polygon* (blog), September 2, 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/2019/9/2/20839830/starbound-developers-chucklefish-game-industry-exploitation>.

<sup>8</sup> Amanda C Cote and Brandon C Harris, “‘Weekends Became Something Other People Did’: Understanding and Intervening in the Habitus of Video Game Crunch,” *Convergence* 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2021): 161–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520913865>.

researchers found that a sizable amount of them were either indifferent to crunch or thought of it as a good thing. The comments had a range of attitudes on the subject, with the most hostile and cynical ones claiming that crunch is necessary for a game to be good and that the developers knew what they were getting into. Some even said that the developers complaining about crunch are being too sensitive. Of course, there were also plenty of comments criticizing crunch culture and expressing sympathy for game developers.<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that the practice has become so normalized to the point where people are defending it.

### **Other Issues**

While discrimination and exploitation are the main problems within the video game industry that I want to highlight, I do not want to completely ignore other issues, of which there are plenty. A study done by researchers from Concordia University in 2021 looked at 200 “postmortems” written by video game project leaders from 1997 to 2019. They found that some industry problems have lessened over the years, while others have significantly increased. The issues that aren’t as big now as they were before tend to be technology related, while the problems that are more prevalent nowadays are associated with people/workers. The study found that the potential solutions to the problems are game-specific and difficult to clearly identify. The researchers created a list of the different types of problems in the industry, as well as a list of what they believe to be the ten biggest “root causes” of the issues. They then went more in-depth on each of these ten root causes and state potential solutions for them. The ten root causes of problems in the game industry are:

---

<sup>9</sup> Amanda C. Cote and Brandon C. Harris, “Inevitable or Exploitative? A Case Study of Consumers’ Divergent Attitudes towards Video Game Crunch,” *Media Industries* 10, no. 1 (July 24, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.2357>.



- Insufficient workforce
- Environment problems
- Poor marketing strategies
- Underestimating while planning
- Unclear game design vision
- Lack of fun
- Platform and technology constraints
- Game design complexity
- Inadequate or missing tools
- Misaligned teams<sup>10</sup>

While many modern day industries are demanding on their workers, they also offer long-term benefits to their employees as a form of compensation such as better job security and higher financial stability. However, those who work in the game industry usually do not receive such extensive benefits. An article published in the *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal* emphasizes the distinction between full-time employees at game companies and contract workers, who are not employed full time and therefore do not have to be paid as much. Contract workers do not receive the benefits offered to full-time employees by the Fair Labor Standards Act such as extra pay for overtime. The article also indicates that steps are being made to reduce this distinction, with legislation changes in places like Seattle and Los Angeles forcing companies to treat contractors more like employees in terms of how they are paid.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Cristiano Politowski et al., “Game Industry Problems: An Extensive Analysis of the Gray Literature,” *Information and Software Technology* 134 (June 1, 2021): 106538, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2021.106538>.

<sup>11</sup> Matt Vernace, “Loots of Their Labor: Analyzing Wage & Hour Challenges in Gaming’s ‘Crunch Culture,’” *AELJ Blog*, November 2, 2020, <https://larc.cardozo.yu.edu/aelj-blog/252>.

One position within game companies that I wanted to look at specifically was that of a video game tester, as that is what the player will be assuming the role of in my project. In the book *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry*, former game testers claim that their work environment was comfortable and laid-back, but they were not treated well otherwise. Despite their overall importance in the game creation process, testers are often seen as “second-class citizens” within their workplaces. Testers are considered expendable and are paid significantly less than others in the industry because of the prevailing perception that video game testing is a highly in-demand career that takes very little skill to do.<sup>12</sup> However, being a video game tester of any kind does require specific skills, such as a good memory, an understanding of where and when to look for issues, and the knowledge of how to use the required software and hardware.<sup>13</sup> Many assume that being a game tester just means that you play video games for a living and nothing more.

### **Games That Criticize the Industry**

Unsurprisingly, video games that give criticism to the industry that they are a part of are very uncommon. I doubt that any major publisher would approve of characters and storylines that bring their own misdeeds to light. Plenty of games contain social commentary or aim to expose problems within our society, but very few point the finger at game companies themselves. The few that I have played that criticize the industry do so in a more broad sense or provide commentary on specific concepts that are tangentially related to the industry’s

---

<sup>12</sup> Ergin Bulut, *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry*. (Cornell University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7298/37xe-v673>.

<sup>13</sup> National Careers Service. “Computer Games Tester.” accessed November 17, 2023, <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/computer-games-tester>.

wrongdoings. *Evil Game Company*,<sup>14</sup> an indie game on the game sharing site itch.io, highlights and makes fun of the general greediness of video game companies but does not touch on anything too deep (see “My Sources of Inspiration” below). The *Arcade Spirits* visual novels (also made by indie developers) are more so about gaming culture, but they do give commentary on the profit-driven nature of game companies and touch on specific controversial topics. While researching the sexism at Riot Games, I also learned that the company has banned the players and commentators of its sponsored esports competitions from making political statements or discussing politics during broadcasts.<sup>15</sup> This is a situation directly referenced in a scene in *Arcade Spirits: The New Challengers* (though no names of any specific people or companies are referenced).<sup>16</sup> Two characters are debating whether political commentary should be allowed at the events, and the player can give their own input to the discussion in the form of a few pre-written dialogue choices. However, none of these games go into much detail on the serious industry-wide issues that I went over, specifically the discrimination and exploitation that developers face. These are the major topics that I wanted to touch upon in my own project.

---

<sup>14</sup> Roby65, “Evil Game Company,” March 31, 2018. <https://robby65.itch.io/evil-game-company>.

<sup>15</sup> Nathan Grayson, “Riot Forbids League Of Legends Players And Commentators From Discussing Politics On Air,” Kotaku, October 11, 2019, <https://kotaku.com/riot-forbids-league-of-legends-players-and-commentators-1838978263>.

<sup>16</sup> “Arcade Spirits: The New Challengers,” Playstation 5, *Arcade Spirits* (Fiction Factory Games, PQube LTD, May 27, 2022), <https://www.arcadespirits.com/newchallengers/>.

## Chapter 2

### My Sources of Inspiration

There are several video games and visual novels that have served as inspiration for my own project. Some cover topics and themes similar to my project, while others have been influential mostly in regards to gameplay and presentation.

#### Themes

My project is meant to showcase what it is like to create video games for a living and work in the game industry through the experiences of its main characters. One of the games that I have cited has these ideas as its main focus. It is called *Evil Game Company*, and it is a game in which you make a series of business decisions with the goals of keeping profits up and customers satisfied. It is simple but effective in conveying its message, with the company higher-ups viewing the voices of their customer base as nothing more than numbers on a screen. My project explores similar issues, but more so from the perspective of employees and developers rather than executives.

A few of the other games that I cited also touch upon issues within the game industry. The *Arcade Spirits* visual novels have stories and settings heavily centered around the culture and history of video games and how they are treated as a business. The original *Arcade Spirits* (2019)<sup>17</sup> in particular focuses on arcade culture, but it can definitely be seen as a parallel to the climate of modern video games. The game's main antagonist is a wealthy businessman whose goal is to dominate the arcade business and has no appreciation for the games themselves or

---

<sup>17</sup> "Arcade Spirits," PlayStation 4, Arcade Spirits (Fiction Factory Games, PQube LTD, May 1, 2020), <http://www.arcadespirits.com/original/>.

those who play them. The sequel to *Arcade Spirits*, subtitled *The New Challengers* (2022), focuses more on the esports industry and is much less subtle with its commentary. The game's story shows what can happen when corruption, anxiety, and toxic behavior are left unchecked in both the players and creators of video games. It also explores ideas of why we make and play games to begin with.

### **Story Progression**

The story in *Everyday* plays out as a mostly linear sequence of events, beginning with an introduction meant to set up the game's plot and characters. These events will occur over the course of a few in-game months (from January to April), and the story will be told across five chapters. This day-to-day story progression is inspired by the *Persona* series. In the *Persona* games, the player's progress is dictated by an in-game calendar, and they must decide how they want to spend each day. Some events may be able to be viewed in a player chosen order, while certain plot-important scenes will occur at a fixed point in the game.

### **Setting**

*Everyday* is meant to be a contemporary work of fiction and is set in the winter/spring of 2024, which is the time period during which most of its development was done. It takes place in a largely ambiguous setting and is mostly set in and around the office that the player character works at. Most of the photos in the game that serve as background images are of the Penn State Behrend campus, so you could say that the game's setting is based on my real-life surroundings. Several of the games that inspired *Everyday* also have modern urban settings, including *Arcade*

*Spirits*, *Persona 5* (2017),<sup>18</sup> and *Coffee Talk* (2020),<sup>19</sup> another visual novel. These games are all implied to be set around the time that they were originally released.

## Characters

While I am hoping that all of the characters in my game feel original, the way in which I decided what their personalities and roles in the story is based largely around the *Arcade Spirits* games. Each of those games features six main characters who each have a distinct personality and/or role in the story that complement one another. My game also has a main cast of six characters that are the player character's coworkers, each with their own specialties and contributions to the team. Their personal conflicts largely come from insecurities they have about their skills and ambitions. Through their interactions with the player and the other characters, each one will have their outlook on themselves and/or their career changed by the end of the game.

## Presentation

*Everyday* has the layout of a typical visual novel, with a text box containing dialogue at the bottom of the screen and character portraits in the center against a static background image. The expressions of the characters will change depending on the context of the scene. Most of the games that I cited as inspirations are presented in this way. *Everyday* has a pixel art style similar to other visual novels such as *Coffee Talk*, though it is much less detailed and features pixelated photos of real places as the background images. For the game's music, I have curated a

---

<sup>18</sup> "Persona 5 Royal," PlayStation 4, Persona (Atlus, Sega, March 31, 2020), <https://persona.atlus.com/p5r>.

<sup>19</sup> "Coffee Talk," Nintendo Switch, Coffee Talk (Toge Productions, January 9, 2020), <https://www.togeproductions.com/project/coffee-talk/>.

collection of royalty/copyright-free music. This music ranges from upbeat to melancholic, and I have inserted the various tracks into scenes where I feel they are most appropriate. Overall, the music has a lo-fi/MIDI sound to it.

## Chapter 3

### Technology Survey

Before beginning work on *Everyday*, I looked at various technologies that I could potentially use to create the game. These included various game creation software as well as art programs. I looked at each one in terms of useability, price, and how effectively I could utilize them to create the game that I envisioned. The two main programs that I decided to use are Ren'Py and Paint.net. Ren'Py is a python-based game engine that was made for creating visual novels and was easy for me to learn how to use. Paint.net is a robust art tool that I have used to create pixel art with relative ease. It also allows images to be easily resized without losing their quality, which was very useful when editing the game's assets.

### TyranoBuilder

TyranoBuilder is a visual novel creation program that is designed to be usable without any coding experience. Games are made using drag-and-drop components and text is written into simple boxes instead of a coding interface. The website features simple tutorials that are short enough that one could create and export a small visual novel in under an hour. However, there are also more complex components like variables and flags. It even allows for 3D movement to be given to 2D images. Games made in TyranoBuilder can be played on Windows, MacOS, iOS, Android, or on a website in a browser (as long as said website is hosted on a server or a static site like a GitHub page).<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> TyranoBuilder. "Getting Started," accessed November 10, 2023, <https://tyranobuilder.com/tutorials/getting-started>.



I found TyranoBuilder after searching online for recommended visual novel engines.<sup>21</sup> It does seem like it would be the quickest and easiest way to develop my project, but I am not certain that it would be ideal for the large scale that I am envisioning. *Everyday* will take several hours to play from start to finish, and TyranoBuilder would not be a great fit for a project this large based on its description. The base software does not appear to be capable of a complex narrative beyond dialogue choices and story branching. If I wanted to implement the scoring system that I have in mind, I would likely need to install and learn how to use TyranoScript, which is a plugin/extension for the base software. If this is not too complicated to do, then I might consider using TyranoBuilder. The other caveat for this software is that it costs money. It only costs \$15, but all of the other options that I have looked at are free to use.

### **Twine**

Twine is a software that is meant for creating text-based games. It can be used in a browser or installed locally. According to its website, it is good at text-based storytelling, branching narratives, and web-based publishing. A finished Twine game is published in the form of HTML files that can be hosted on a server, meaning that no installation is required. The website claims that Twine is not good at integrating multimedia or multiplayer functionality, and it even recommends other software that can do these things better. Since Twine games are HTML files, they should run in any browser and on any operating system as long as said website is hosted on a server or a static site like a GitHub page.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Brittany Vincent, "The Best Engines for Making Your Own Visual Novel," *PC Gamer*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-best-visual-novel-engines/>.

<sup>22</sup> Chris Klimas, "Introduction," Twinery. accessed November 10, 2023, <https://twinery.org/reference/en/>.

I think that Twine would be a good choice for my project if I wanted it to only have text and nothing more. It is not too complicated and the tutorials are easily digestible. However, my project will contain a lot of images (characters, backgrounds, and other potential assets), and Twine does not seem capable of handling a substantial amount of multimedia files. The way in which it implements multimedia is unconventional compared to other software. Twine is also not ideal for large projects, and I expect mine to be quite expansive.

### **Unreal Engine's Visual Novel Framework**

Unreal Engine is a powerful game creation engine that some of the most cutting edge video games in the industry are created in. The Visual Novel Framework for Unreal allows developers to more easily create visual novels in the engine. This add-on contains some options that I have not seen advertised by any other software, including layered character portraits, animated faces, and even fully 3D environments.<sup>23</sup> Games made in Unreal Engine can run on Windows, MacOS, Linux, iOS, and Android, as well as all major consoles.<sup>24</sup> However, there appears to be no conventional way to run Unreal games in a browser. The Visual Novel Framework itself only lists Windows as a supported platform.

The Visual Novel Framework looks to be an advanced and robust tool for creating visual novels, taking advantage of the power of Unreal to make features such as 3D space possible. Other software is simpler and fully capable of handling the type of game that I want to create. It is also uncertain which platforms can run games made in this program.

---

<sup>23</sup> “Visual Novel Framework - Full System in Blueprints - UE Marketplace,” Unreal Engine, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://www.unrealengine.com/marketplace/en-US/product/visual-novel-framework-full-system>.

<sup>24</sup> “Unreal Engine | Features,” Unreal Engine, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/features>.

## Narrat

Narrat is a JavaScript-based engine meant for creating “narrative role-playing games.” Games made in Narrat can run either in a browser or on a desktop computer. It requires the installation of node.js and a JavaScript text editor, and the visuals are customized with CSS. Narrat can implement elements of typical role-playing games, such as leveling up, using skills, and tracking quests. It even allows for the player to store and use items in an inventory.<sup>25</sup> Presentation-wise, it allows for character portraits and interactive environments, with the text appearing (by default) in a log form on the side of the screen. Games made in Narrat can run on desktops and mobile devices, as well as on a website in a browser (as long as said website is hosted on a server or a static site like a GitHub page).

Narrat was made known to me by my game design professor, Dr. Liebe, and I am glad that she informed me of it, as it is a program that I can actually picture myself making games in. Coincidentally, I have been learning how to use node.js in my digital project design class recently, so much of the sample code on Narrat’s website looks familiar to me. I think it would be fairly easy for me to learn, and the website features extensive tutorials that cover many different customization options. However, the default presentation from Narrat games is not quite what I had in mind for this project. In Narrat games, the character dialogue is on the far right side of the screen and more so resembles a text log or screenplay of sorts (the website refers to it as a “dialog panel”). In most visual novels made with other software, there is instead a text box in the lower half of the screen or speech bubbles that appear above the character’s heads, and dialogue is presented in real time rather than as a series of messages. Narrat’s default presentation is not the ideal way of presenting the narrative in my opinion. It feels more like you

---

<sup>25</sup> Liana Pigeot, “Narrat Documentation,” Narrat, 2021, <https://docs.narrat.dev/>.

are just reading what a character says instead of having a conversation with them. That works for some kinds of interactive stories, but to me it causes a feeling of disconnect with the characters and is not the way that I want my project to look. You can modify the presentation of the text in Narrat to more closely resemble a typical visual novel, but it would be more convenient and less time consuming to use certain other software.

### **Ren'Py**

Ren'Py is a Python-based game engine designed for creating visual novels. Games made in Ren'Py can run on most operating systems and can be published to platforms such as itch.io and Steam. They can even run embedded in an HTML website as long as said website is hosted on a server or a static site like a GitHub page. It is very user-friendly for both creators and players, with a built-in tutorial that is easy to follow and a simple code infrastructure. For players, there are a variety of settings and accessibility options that are pre-programmed into every Ren'Py game. Multimedia is easy to implement, though it may require some tinkering to get it to look exactly how you want it to. Games made in Ren'Py can be played on Windows, MacOS, Linux, iOS, Android, or in a browser.<sup>26</sup>

Ren'Py appears to be one of the most versatile choices for the type of project I am developing. I have created a project in it before, and it is indeed easy to learn and use compared to many other engines. Much of the programming legwork is done automatically. There is no need to program a menu or user interface from scratch, but the premade one can be customized to look any way the developer wants. I know from experience playing games made in Ren'Py that it is capable of the features that I want my project to have, including a scoring/points system

---

<sup>26</sup> Ren'Py. "Why Ren'Py?," accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.renpy.org/why.html>.

that will allow the outcome of the narrative to change based on choices made by the player. All things considered, Ren'Py seems to me like the best choice of software for creating my project.

### **Software for Asset Creation**

I have created all of the artwork for *Everyday* in a free art program called Paint.net. I chose this software because it was used to create all of the art in *Stardew Valley*, a game created by a solo developer with well-made pixel art. It has been fairly easy to use and contains many of the tools and options that one would expect in art software. One feature I appreciate is the option to increase the resolution of images without affecting their quality. I created the character portraits at a very small resolution (64 by 128 pixels) and resizing them to be bigger using other methods has left them looking blown up and blurry.

I may look into other software for creating the artwork if Paint.net is no longer meeting my needs or I discover a superior alternative. I could always use Adobe software such as Photoshop or Illustrator, since those programs are free for all students at my university. I don't expect to require the advanced photoshop tools that these programs offer, but they could come in handy at some point. Another highly rated one that I know of is called Aseprite. It appears to have even more features and tools that would be convenient for creating pixel art, as well as tools for animation. However, it costs money (\$20), while programs like Paint.net are free.<sup>27</sup> Any of these options would be suitable, and I could always use more than one of them if necessary.

---

<sup>27</sup> David Capello, "Aseprite," accessed November 16, 2023, <https://www.aseprite.org/>.

## Chapter 4

### The Themes of *Everyday*

There are several themes that I emphasized through the story and characters of *Everyday*. The first, of course, are the struggles of working in the modern video game industry. Every year, more stories come out about employees at video game companies being treated poorly and having their projects mismanaged. These unfortunate occurrences are often attributed to the greed and/or incompetence of the company higher ups. In *Everyday*, everything that goes wrong behind the scenes is the fault of the company's leadership, but the motivations of said leadership are not flat-out greed. Selfishness will play a big part in it, but there is also a slight sympathetic angle to the whole situation. The player is able to choose how to react to these events as they are made aware of them.

Two other themes of *Everyday* are work culture and video game culture in general. I consider the wider game industry problems to be a combination of these two themes, but they are also frequently addressed separately. Work-related subjects discussed in the game include career-related anxiety, the use of social media in marketing, and the relationship between education and the workforce. Topics discussed in the game that pertain to video games (but aren't necessarily workplace-related problems) include video game preservation, artificial intelligence, and "safe modes" in video games.

Additionally, two more character-focused themes in *Everyday* are communication and generational divide. These are two issues prevalent in our modern world, so I think it makes sense to touch on them in a game with a contemporary setting. The characters in *Everyday* frequently struggle to effectively communicate with one another due to their contrasting dispositions. Of the six main characters, I consider two of them to be very extroverted, two of

them to be very introverted, and two of them to be somewhere in between. Many conflicts between the characters tend to come about when an extrovert is paired with an introvert, and the two struggle to understand each other to some extent. Problems with communication are also implied to be the cause of many of the issues that the employees of Nomina Games face over the course of the story. Struggles with communication are even referenced by the CEO during the game's first chapter as an ongoing problem within the company. Generational divide is a more subtle theme of the game, but tends to show up whenever one of the older characters (Amelia or Yosef) are on screen. These two characters are meant to be in their 30s, while the rest of the main cast is in their early 20s. They often try to offer advice or words of wisdom to the younger characters, but learn from the younger characters just as frequently. The theme of generational divide is mostly relegated to character moments and is very rarely brought up in the game's main story.

## Chapter 5

### Player Agency

Many video games allow players to make choices that will influence the progression of the game in some way. These could be as simple and inconsequential as allowing them to choose the color of a character's shirt or as complicated as determining how the game's story will end. Every possibility within a game is a new choice that can be made, and all of them affect the player's experience to some degree. How effective a choice is at increasing the player's sense of agency and immersion within a game world depends on how well the choices are designed and how much players are willing to suspend their disbelief. This works best when players feel like their decisions are impacting the narrative in a significant way.

#### How Player Choice Works in my Game

As for how player choice works in *Everyday*, most of the decisions made by players will have the short-term effect of changing what dialogue is spoken right after and the long-term effect of determining what each of the six main characters will be doing at the end of the game. Dialogue choices for the player to make will appear in most scenes, and the choices made will influence how the ensuing conversation plays out. Beyond just differing text, choosing certain options will also increase your friendship with a certain character. Each of the six main characters have a variable or "score" that can be increased through the player's choices. These scores are meant to represent how well the player is getting along with each character. If the player chooses an option that one character agrees with or approves of, they will most likely receive a point for that character. The player will be informed if they have gained a point with a "+1" at the end of a line of dialogue. The player's score with each character by the end of the



game will determine which of their three endings they will each get. If the player does not gain a lot of points for a character over the course of the game, said character will have one of the less ideal endings. This is similar (but not quite the same) to a system used in *Arcade Spirits*. The main characters in that game also have a point system tied to them. Depending on certain choices made by the player, the characters with the lowest scores at the end of the game will have “bad” endings while the rest of the characters will have happier ones.

In *Everyday*, there are three possible endings for each character: A good ending, a neutral ending, and a bad ending. However, there is also an overarching choice in the game’s story that will decide which of these endings are possible to achieve. The main storyline will have both a good and bad ending, though they will not be labeled as such. The two endings will be stylistically distinct from one another. In one of the game’s final scenes, the player will be prompted to make a crucial choice that will determine the overall ending of the game. If the player chooses the overall good ending, each of the main characters can get either their neutral ending (if their score is low) or their good ending (if their score is high), depending on how many points the player got with them. If the player chooses the overall bad ending, each of the main characters can get either their bad ending (if their score is low) or their neutral ending (if their score is high), depending on how many points the player got with them. The player will essentially choose the fates of each of the main characters through this point system, whether they realize it or not. However, this is not something that they are supposed to be thinking about as they play the game. The intended experience is that the player interacts with and gets to know the characters naturally. The scores are meant to be seen by the player as how well they are getting along with each character or how good of friends they are with each character.

## Chapter 6

### Selection Principle

When developing *Everyday*, it is important that I be selective about what I choose to spend my time writing and designing. In terms of the script, I need to make sure that every scene contributes to one of the game's themes or messages, the most important of which is the struggles of making games as a career. The characters need to be likable and relatable while also effectively conveying the game's themes. The presentation needs to be cohesive and all of the game's assets should feel like they belong together. Finding or creating all of these assets takes time, so I should get as much value as I can out of each of them.

For these reasons, I will have to cut corners in certain places during development. Since drawing the characters tends to be very time consuming for me, I have only done art for the eight main characters (Ren, Amelia, Yosef, Donovan, Olive, Noel, Elizabeth, and Mr. Adams). I created these character portraits in a very simple pixel art style. While it would be nice to have more detailed character art, the way in which I have designed them invokes the characterization theory of Scott McCloud, a renowned comic book author and illustrator. In his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, McCloud presents the idea that a less detailed face has more universal appeal and relatability. It is easier for someone to identify with a character if the finer details of their appearance are undefined and left up to interpretation.<sup>28</sup> I am hoping that I have successfully applied this concept with the character designs in *Everyday*. There are also minor characters with speaking roles, but they will not be shown in full on screen. They are either outside of the player's view or talking to the main characters through phone calls or video

---

<sup>28</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York ,NY: Kitchen Sink Press, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993).

chats. For the same reason that I have done limited character art, I have not created any background art. Instead, I have gone out and taken photographs of real places and applied a pixelation filter to them so that they match the style of the characters. For the music and sound effects, I have used royalty-free MP3 files, as I do not have the time or skill needed to create original music for the game.

These selection principles that I have established for myself will impact how I develop the game's presentation and story. Visual novels tend to be limited in terms of what can be conveyed to the player, and *Everyday* is no exception. Much of what happens in each scene will be carried by the narration (text that describes what is going on from a third-person perspective) as well as the player's imagination. Even actions that could be effectively conveyed may just be limited to being described through narration. There are multiple instances in *Everyday* in which a character does something that could be shown with a new variation of their character portrait, but it would be worth spending time creating said variations when they will only be shown once or twice in the entire game. I have instead focused on creating assets that I expect to use over and over again during development.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Narrative**

#### **Story Overview**

*Everyday* is divided into five chapters, as well as a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue is simply meant to introduce the player to the characters, the setting, and the video game that they will be working as a tester on. Chapter 1 continues the character introductions from the prologue, introduces the struggles of working as a video game tester, and begins to lay the groundwork for the overall narrative. In Chapter 2, the characters discover evidence of employee exploitation and neglect within their workplace and must decide how to react to it. Tension in the company escalates further in Chapter 3, as the player is informed of the rampant sexism and harassment that the female employees of the company constantly face. At the end of Chapter 3, the characters begin to form a plan to confront the company's CEO about these issues. However, before they can enact this plan, all of the serious issues within the company are revealed to the public during a hacked broadcast in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 takes place roughly one week after Chapter 4 and involves the characters reflecting on what they have learned about the video game industry and themselves and deciding what their next course of action should be. At the end of Chapter 5, the player will be prompted to make a choice that will determine which of the two endings they will get. In one ending, the characters will stay with the company to finish creating their game despite all of the bad press surrounding it. In the other ending, the characters will resign from the company and take their game with them with the intent to complete it on their own. What will happen to the player and each of the characters will be significantly different in each ending.

## **The Game Within the Game**

The game that the characters are developing within *Everyday* is called "The Lonely Star." It is an adventure game with an overarching theme of connection and finding commonality with one another. The player explores a world filled with unique characters and is tasked with helping them solve their problems. Many of the solutions to problems are found through interacting with other characters. The CEO of Nomina games believes this game to be the most important title that the company has ever published. He is determined to see the game become both critically and commercially successful, even if he must cause problems for Nomina's other projects and developers in order to do so.

## **Characters**

*Everyday* has a cast of nine primary characters. Of these, I consider six of them to be main characters with a significant amount of screen time and character exploration. I consider two of them to be supporting characters, but they are both integral to the game's plot despite having comparatively less screen time than the main characters. The remaining one is the player character, who serves as the point of view through which the story is experienced.

### The Player

Jackie - The new game tester for "The Lonely Star." Jackie is their default name, but the player can name them whatever they choose. Their identity is left up to the player's interpretation and their personality is determined through the game's dialogue choices.

### Main Characters

Ren Kuang - The main programmer of "The Lonely Star." Ren is outgoing and enjoys playing video games in his free time. He is often cynical about the current state of the game industry.

Amelia Ulrich - The marketing consultant for "The Lonely Star." Amelia is polite to those around her, but is not very fond of her job or work culture in general and is not afraid to let others know.

Yosef Peters - The financial advisor for "The Lonely Star." Yosef holds strong values and is usually not afraid to say what he is feeling. He enjoys acting as a mentor figure to the other characters.

Donovan Farley - The writer of "The Lonely Star." Donovan is very socially withdrawn and typically does not speak unless he has to. He was the one who first pitched the idea for "The Lonely Star."

Olive Emani - The audio designer of "The Lonely Star." Olive has a bright personality, but acts a bit naive to the feelings of those around her. She hides some anxieties about herself and her job.

Noel Richards - The artist for "The Lonely Star." Noel is shy, but secretly desires praise and approval from others. She is often afraid to speak her mind and tries not to offend anyone.

### Supporting Characters

Elizabeth Bender - The secretary at Nomina Games. Despite her wealth of experience in the tech and game industries, Elizabeth does not think that anyone at Nomina takes her seriously.

Gerald Adams - The CEO of Nomina Games. Gerald is very enthusiastic about "The Lonely Star" and will make sure that the game remains uncompromised, even if it is to the detriment of his employees.

## Chapter 8

### Reflections

#### Reflecting on my Goals

Throughout the entire process of creating *Everyday*, I had two primary goals in mind for the game. The first was to develop a story about people struggling under the weight of all the problems in the video game industry. The second was to create an interesting and relatable cast of characters that would have meaningful interactions with both each other and the player. I like to think that I successfully accomplished both of these goals, but I also can't help but feel as if the game didn't come out as well as it could have because I tried to do too many things with it at once. For the first half of development, the characters were my primary focus and the existence of the industry problems were merely being hinted at. After completing the first couple of chapters, I felt as if I wasn't giving the game industry issues enough attention.

Once I finally did start addressing the problems, I did so in a way that I originally considered to be somewhat ignorant on my part. Instead of having the characters deal with the difficulties of working in the game industry directly, I mostly wrote scenarios in which the main characters are discovering the problems from minor characters who had been struggling with them offscreen. Most of the commentary about the video game industry in *Everyday* is presented anecdotally, rather than it being experienced by the main characters firsthand. Once I realized this, I thought that I was being negligent of the pressing social issues that I was supposed to be addressing in this game. However, after receiving feedback from my thesis advisor, I realized that the way in which I presented the issues was similar to how many others and I have been exposed to them in real life. Most people who are going to play *Everyday* have never worked in the video game industry. However, many of us have heard about the unfortunate issues taking

place within video game companies, usually either through the internet or from other people who have more firsthand experience. This is how the problems are first presented in *Everyday*. The player finds out about labor exploitation within their company through an internet post and discovers much of the gender discrimination taking place within the company by talking to one of the supporting characters. I have since realized that this was likely the only way in which I could have written the problems into the story, as I have also not yet had any firsthand experience working in the game industry. I did plenty of research on them, but it would have been virtually impossible to have the player experience them directly without having ever been in the shoes of a game developer myself. In the end, I think that the way in which I presented the issues is the most approachable way for the majority of players. If I were to do this project again, it could be worth consulting with some current or former game developers on their personal experiences.

During the second half of *Everyday*'s development, I was struggling a lot more with character writing. After the end of Chapter 3, I had a clear idea of how the remaining story scenes were going to play out. However, once I began work on Chapter 4, I began to have a much more difficult time writing the character-focused scenes. These had not been nearly as hard to write in the previous three chapters, and I was now at the point where I had to begin wrapping up each character's individual arc. I think that after focusing on showcasing the industry problems for a while, I had become a bit confused as to what I wanted to do with the characters. I began writing the character scenes in Chapter 4 as more dramatic and emotional scenes in which each person's struggles are finally laid bare for the player to see. However, I eventually realized that I had not given the characters enough development to justify going in that direction. *Everyday* is not a very long game (at least compared to most other video games), and having the



characters face their inner demons this intensely felt unnatural for such a short game. My desire to write these kinds of scenes most likely stems from when my plans for *Everyday* were much more ambitious. I originally wanted to have a lot more character-focused scenes in the game than there are in the final product. This was before I had started development and before I became aware just how much time it would take to create each scene. I ultimately decided to tone down the dramatic angle of the later chapters and keep the character interactions more simplistic, which I think is more appropriate for a game of this size. Perhaps one day I could return to this story and these characters and create a much more ambitious narrative with them.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Overall, I think that I accomplished both of my goals when it came to creating *Everyday*. This was my first time creating a story-heavy project of this scale, and I think it came out well for a game made in roughly five months. If I had to pick one aspect of the game that I would like to improve, it would be the player interactions. The protagonist whose role the player assumes is arguably the least important character in the game, as they do not have any significant influence on the larger narrative until the very end of the game. I would like to make the game more engaging by creating more elaborate choices for the player to make and allowing the player to have a greater impact on the story. I would also like the player to be able to form deeper relationships with the characters, as the characters spend much more time talking to each other than to the player. The player only gets to chime in with their own thoughts two or three times per scene and otherwise acts more like an observer, which was not my intention.

Regardless of my qualms about it, I am proud of the game that I created and what it represents. I hope that everyone who plays *Everyday* finds some value in it, whether it be

through a relatable character, some good background music, or (perhaps most importantly) the commentary on the video game industry. If even one person becomes more aware of the issues plaguing the industry by playing my game, then I'll have made an important impact. In the time since I began this project, even more problems with the game industry have made headlines, the most notable being the mass layoffs that nearly every major game company has experienced within the past year. As video games and the businesses that create them continue to change, I think that critiques of the game industry such as *Everyday* will grow more and more relevant. As someone who has been playing video games his entire life and wants to continue working on them in the future, I sincerely hope that projects like mine continue to be made and inspire positive changes across the gaming landscape in the coming years.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Arcade Spirits.” PlayStation 4. Arcade Spirits. Fiction Factory Games, PQube LTD, May 1, 2020. <http://www.arcadespirits.com/original/>.

“Arcade Spirits: The New Challengers.” Playstation 5. Arcade Spirits. Fiction Factory Games, PQube LTD, May 27, 2022. <https://www.arcadespirits.com/newchallengers/>.

Bulut, Ergin. *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry*. Cornell University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7298/37xe-v673>.

Campbell, Colin. “Young Developers on Starbound Say Chucklefish Exploited Their Free Work.” *Polygon* (blog), September 2, 2019. <https://www.polygon.com/2019/9/2/20839830/starbound-developers-chucklefish-game-industry-exploitation>.

Capello, David. “Aseprite.” Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.aseprite.org/>.

“Coffee Talk.” Nintendo Switch. Coffee Talk. Toge Productions, January 9, 2020. <https://www.togeproductions.com/project/coffee-talk/>.

Cote, Amanda C., and Brandon C. Harris. “Inevitable or Exploitative? A Case Study of Consumers’ Divergent Attitudes towards Video Game Crunch.” *Media Industries* 10, no. 1 (July 24, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.2357>.

Cote, Amanda C, and Brandon C Harris. “‘Weekends Became Something Other People Did’: Understanding and Intervening in the Habitus of Video Game Crunch.” *Convergence* 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2021): 161–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520913865>.

D’Anastasio, Cecilia. “Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games.” Kotaku, August 7, 2018. <https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483>.

Frauenheim, Ed. “No Fun for Game Developers?” CNET, November 11, 2004. <https://www.cnet.com/culture/no-fun-for-game-developers/>.

Gach, Ethan. “Ubisoft Employees Have ‘Grave Concerns’ Over Toronto Studio’s Misconduct Allegations.” Kotaku, July 6, 2020. <https://kotaku.com/ubisoft-employees-have-grave-concerns-over-toronto-stud-1844277486>.

Grayson, Nathan. "Riot Forbids League Of Legends Players And Commentators From Discussing Politics On Air." Kotaku, October 11, 2019. <https://kotaku.com/riot-forbids-league-of-legends-players-and-commentators-1838978263>.

Hall, Charlie. "Cyberpunk 2077 Has Involved Months of Crunch, despite Past Promises." *Polygon* (blog), December 4, 2020. <https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/4/21575914/cyberpunk-2077-release-crunch-labor-delays-cd-projekt-red>.

Klimas, Chris. "Introduction." Twinery. Accessed November 10, 2023. <https://twinery.org/reference/en/>.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York ,NY: Kitchen Sink Press, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993.

National Careers Service. "Computer Games Tester." Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/computer-games-tester>.

"Persona 5 Royal." PlayStation 4. Persona. Atlus, Sega, March 31, 2020. <https://persona.atlus.com/p5r>.

Pigeot, Liana. "Narrat Documentation." Narrat, 2021. <https://docs.narrat.dev/>.

Politowski, Cristiano, Fabio Petrillo, Gabriel C. Ullmann, and Yann-Gaël Guéhéneuc. "Game Industry Problems: An Extensive Analysis of the Gray Literature." *Information and Software Technology* 134 (June 1, 2021): 106538. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2021.106538>.

Ren'Py. "Why Ren'Py?" Accessed November 10, 2023. <https://www.renpy.org/why.html>.

Roby65. "Evil Game Company," March 31, 2018. <https://robby65.itch.io/evil-game-company>.

Rondinone, Renée. "Court of Appeal Denies Request to Dismiss CRD's Case Against Activision Blizzard." Civil Rights Department, October 21, 2022. <https://calcivilrights.ca.gov/crdnews/oct212022pr/>.

TyranoBuilder. "Getting Started." Accessed November 10, 2023. <https://tyranobuilder.com/tutorials/getting-started>.

Unreal Engine. “Unreal Engine | Features.” Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/features>.

Unreal Engine. “Visual Novel Framework - Full System in Blueprints,” October 25, 2021. <https://www.unrealengine.com/marketplace/en-US/product/visual-novel-framework-full-system>.

US EEOC. “Court Approves EEOC’s \$18 Million Settlement with Activision Blizzard.” Accessed September 21, 2023. <https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/court-approves-eeocs-18-million-settlement-activision-blizzard>.

Vernace, Matt. “Loots of Their Labor: Analyzing Wage & Hour Challenges in Gaming’s ‘Crunch Culture.’” *AELJ Blog*, November 2, 2020. <https://larc.cardozo.yu.edu/aelj-blog/252>.

Vincent, Brittany. “The Best Engines for Making Your Own Visual Novel.” *PC Gamer*, April 2, 2020. <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-best-visual-novel-engines/>.