# Game Designer Reflections

In 'A Closed World', the main character goes through a series of trials in order to get to 'the Fog'. The Fog is no promised land though – it is a strange and unfamiliar place, only spoken of in hushed whispers and derisory tones. But for those who believe that there's more to it, the Fog is a gateway to freedom and happiness.

While my own journey to becoming a game designer was far less dramatic, it hits some of the same beats. I was brought up in an environment where respectability and financial security were the only things sought after in terms of career paths. There were mainly four choices for those who wanted success; engineering, medicine, law and business. Game development was unknown; it was too risky and too new. It was stuff only kids had any interest in. Wanting to be an astronaut was less ridiculous.

Now, as my greatest achievement yet in game design is about to go gold, I wonder if I'm completely out of the Fog yet. There's so much I've learnt from these last few weeks, not just about game design on its own, but what it takes mentally to put a professional game out there under all kinds of pressure and constraints.

A GAMBIT game differs itself from the rest right off the bat with its research goal. I had designed games before, and I had done research before – but the two had never occurred mutually. Having our game be so intimately connected to such mature material was refreshing. One of the stigmas I've encountered so often is that games can't be taken seriously AND be fun at the same time, and working on a project like this, one that would defy that stigma if successful, was exciting.

The research goal in our case was also an intriguing challenge – creating a game which portrays the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Genderqueer) community in a meaningful and well-represented light. The biggest challenge, to me, was making a game that could do the job in the simplest way possible. Not being very familiar with the community myself, I didn't want to make a game that simply drowned the player in LGBTQ culture; I didn't have the required knowledge and experience to do justice to that. The game also had to be something that people both inside and outside the LGBTQ could play and appreciate; in order to do that, and at the same time keep the scope of our game manageable, we realized early on that the game would have to focus on a simple but important aspect of LGBTQ culture that everyone could relate to – personal issues.
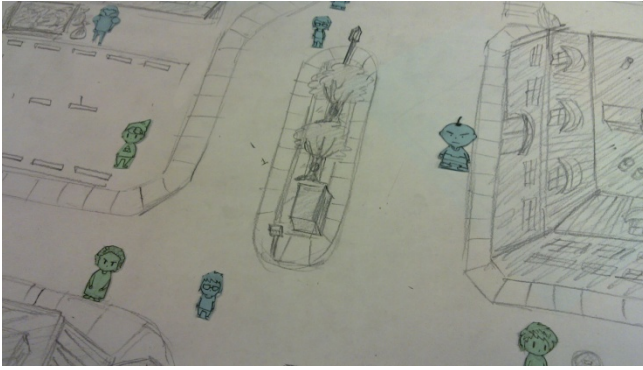
Everyone has issues they have to overcome as they go through life – more so for some people than for others. Almost anyone can appreciate and sympathize with a person who decides to face those issues head-on instead of running away from them. For our research goal, we studied some of the issues that were faced specifically by the LGBTQ community, and found some very interesting conflicts we could work with.

In our mostly hetero-normative world, a big problem that LBGTQ people have is coming to terms with who they are and their difference from most people around them. This problem of accepting their differences and not seeing them as flaws became a central theme of the game very quickly. It was simple, and yet a powerful statement about where we draw the line between acceptable differences and unacceptable ones. Everyone is different in some way, or used to be, from the so-called 'accepted norms' of society, so learning to deal with that was an inner conflict that we felt most players would immediately resonate with.

For the genre that our game belonged to, the classic Japanese Turn-Based Role-Playing Game (JRPG for short), conflicts are the meat of the game. Since our game wasn't going to have many of the extraneous RPG trappings such as side-quests and inventory management (mainly for scope issues), the conflicts became that much more important in terms of game design. While the rough format of the conflicts was in place (turn-based encounters with either one enemy or a small group of enemies at a

time), the question remained as to how these conflicts could contribute to the meaning behind the game. It was around that time that the idea of the demons took form. The demons were a meld of both abstract issues and social issues that our main character would face. They represented concepts like hate and discrimination, while taking on the form of the types of people who perpetrated such concepts. By confronting and defeating these demons, the protagonist also confronted and dealt with the issues and people that those demons represented.

Designing the conflicts in the game was also where I learned, quite painfully, to let go of great ideas in order to make a great game. As a greenhorn game designer, I was always attached to ideas that I came up with, because those ideas would always somehow make it into the game. There were no time constraints that prevented them from being fully implemented, no clients to satisfy with them.


When designing the combat, I tried to stray from the typical attack-magic-defend formula of JRPGS and do something different with combat, something that was more in tune with the subject matter of our game. The decision to shy away from physical conflict was made very early, which meant that attacks were of a verbal nature. Many changes later, I had an idea of a modified rock-paper-scissor system that was inspired by Aristotle's three persuasive ideals: Logos (logic), Pathos (passion) and Ethos (ethics). The system involved three unique attacks, each affecting the enemy demon in different ways and each having unique strengths and weaknesses. For example, Logos could deflect the demon's next attack back onto itself. It did very little low damage on its own, however, and could not deflect the high intensity damage of a Pathos attack.

I had faith that the system, though it took a while to get the hang of, would be a refreshing and engaging take on JRPG combat. However, I was blind to the fact that it was too complex to understand, and I fought to get the system in for the longest time. In the end though, I realized that by clinging on to it for so long, I lost focus on the game as a whole, as well as some of my other duties (such as writing the story of the game). In the end, I reduced the system to a very simple rock-paper-scissors clone that maintained the connotations of Aristotle's system while being easy to understand and get used to.

The ordeal of seeing an idea with such potential just dissipate into this air was painful, but necessary. My obsession with it had affected my contribution to the game as a whole for the worse. I gained a new level of understanding and sympathy for game designers in larger companies, who probably saw the very same thing happen all the time – a design concept that would make the game better getting scrapped because of time/budget concerns.

When it came to the story, I learnt the value of having an open mind by seeing how destructive a closed and stubborn mind could be to game development. While I was occupying myself with the conflicts and structure of the game world, the story was delegated to the artists on my team so that I had fewer plates to spin at a time. Since the story in our game was communicated with visuals as much as it was with text, I reluctantly agreed that it was a good idea. I was reluctant because one of the parts I love best about games are the stories they tell, and net being able to work on the story in our game made me feel like I had failed myself in some way. But I got over those immature thoughts and made the choice that would help the game more.
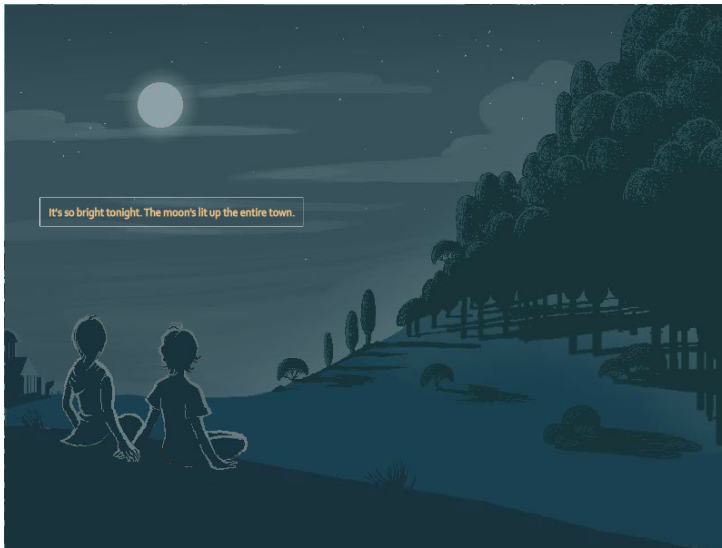
When the game mechanics and layout had been more-or-less finalized, I was ready to help contribute to the story and help bring it to life in-game. But the artist who had taken on the story-writing mantle refused to let me work with them until they were completely done. While they had been more exposed to the LGBTQ community than I had, I feared that they would write a story more suitable for a book than a game. The fear grew bigger when, on trying to inform them of the subtle differences that would need to be taken into consideration, I was brushed aside and told to work on other game design stuff and not worry about the story.

Luckily, I had a chance to look at and edit the writing before it made it into the game. And my fears were confirmed. The story, while very moving and ideal for our research project, was conveyed in a very old-fashioned, clunky manner that not many people would have taken the time to read and enjoy. However, when I expressed my concerns to the artist, they were convinced that people wouldn't be deterred by the lengthy text. It took a while, and required some assistance from our bosses, but they finally assented to my help in making the writing easier to read and more accessible to people who played our game.

The process of making our game was as long-winded and multi-directional as this blog post. But in the end, I was part of a great team with awesome supervisors, and we created 'A Closed World'; a game about not just LGBTQ issues, but about the courage and persistence it takes to confront and defeat the demons that block the way to self-acceptance and happiness. Just as I hope that people who

play the game will take those ideals to heart (while having fun of course!), I hope that people will look at this blog and take something away from it too. I certainly took a lot away from this brief sojourn with GAMBIT, and I look forward to the experiences like it to come.