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Words: Interacting With Propaganda
Matthew Foster

      Words was conceptualized as a game that allows its players to explore the connections

between text and image, and examine the possibilities of altering diction to interact with political

propaganda. Politicians in America have had a reputation for twisting their words into

propagandistic messages for decades. Constantly between professors, students, adults, children,

and my parents and I there are debates about whether or not certain elected officials mean what

they say. Whether a candidate is "good", what they truly stand for, but the truth that I have

observed is that only the politician themselves know the answers to these questions. What is

given to the public usually is a mixture of jargon and lies made to sound like compassion and

truth. "Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit - you choose" Proverbs 18:21.

      After hearing the presidential candidate speeches in 2012 I became fed up with this

public state of affairs. It is easy to feel like your voice goes unheard in this age of politics, or that

there is no one in power speaking on your behalf. I began to wonder what a game would look

like that gave power back to its players. *Words* is the end product of that vision, and while it may

have come unrecognizably far from its original form, its purpose remains the same.

      The original ideas for this game followed similar gameplay mechanics to games like

Papers Please, and *Democracy 3*. To put the player in a position of power -- the president's desk

in the oval office -- and have them make choices on how to settle disputes, complete important

tasks, and communicate information to the public. The focus of this presidential simulator was to

enlighten the players about the obscured trials and tribulations of the POTUS. It's easy to take an

opinion about President Obama's accomplishments or shortcomings when the public is rarely

given a good understanding of the decisions made or positions he is put in every day. I started

doing some research into what sorts of things a president has to deal with Monday through

Friday, and quickly found that while many historic moments within a presidency have been accumulated in textbooks and manuscripts, there was little documenting the specifics of a presidential day. However, as I was reading up on the POTUS I encountered dozens of articles describing similar activities in increasingly skewed ways. Some touted actions and decisions made that others had nothing but abhorrent comments about. I took a step back from my research and realized that rather than make a game about one specific part of the American government, it would be more interesting to make one that has a subject matter that permeates all divisions: propaganda.

Before going any further, allow me to explain the game. *Words* begins when the player presses start and are dropped onto a map with earthy textures (grass, dirt, rock). The objective of this part of the game is to obtain as many words as possible within the time limit. To acquire words the player must navigate the map using the W, A, S, and D keys encountering objects all along their path. Each object has a specific purpose to be fulfilled before it gives the player a word. For example, the words United States and Nationalism can be obtained if the player chooses to raise the American flag on a pole. Alternatively, if they choose to burn the flag, the word treason will be obtained instead. The following is a list of every word or phrase available within the game and their associated sprites:

Nationalism

United States

Treason
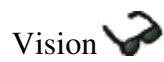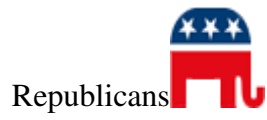
Fortune

Love

Evil

Good

Dark

War

Life

Valor

Strong

Men

West

Justice

Fighting

Peace

Descendants

President

Obama

Republicans

Democrats

God

Vision

Future

Race

Dividing

Liberty

Smash

Demon

Money

The option for the player to make their own words is given as well by picking up:

     "Fortune" and "Money" are acquired by collecting the three piles of coins/money scattered around the map. Upon acquisition of the third, the sprites explode and the word is dropped. "Love" is obtained in a similar fashion, there are four pieces of a heart scattered around the map that create a full heart. "Evil" is a bit more complex; First the player must acquire the Angel sprite giving them the word "Good", afterward they are able to interact with the "Demon" to vanquish him and acquire Evil. "Dark" is garnered simply by picking up the eclipse sprite. "War" is represented by a battlefield cross (a symbolic replacement of a cross created using a helmet placed on top of a vertical rifle with boots on the ground in memoriam of a soldier who has been killed) placed within a ring of fire that the player can only access the interior of for the brief moments when the fire dies down. "Life" is received if the player knocks over the bucket of water placed onto the ground next to a newly sprouted tree sapling. If kicked the right way the water will cover the sapling and cause it to grow into a full grown tree before exploding and rewarding the player with the word. If the chess knight is vanquished by the player using the

sword then they are granted the word "Valor". The sword can also be used to destroy the wooden box giving the player "Smash". Picking up the flexing arm gives the player "Strong". If they then pick up the torch, the sprite changes into a raised arm holding the torch. Combining this with the armless Statue of Liberty will reward the player with "Liberty. "Men" and "God" are both obtained by pushing the two pieces of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* together. Running over the W in the compass gives the player "West", and combining the gavel with its base explodes into the word "Justice". The player is given a choice between the words "Fighting" and "Peace", two options are given for interaction with the boxer sprites, one breaks them up maintaining peace, the other fights them both. When one is acquired, the other cannot be. "Descendants" is one of the trickier ones in the game to figure out, but simple in execution. The player must stand on the right side of the evolution series making it look like they are the next in line. President Obama asks the player if they can fix America, responding with either yes we can, or no we can't grants the player both "President" and "Obama". Another choice is posed to the player when they are asked to choose between "Democrat" and "Republican". Again like before if the player gets one they can't get the other. "Vision" is received by picking up the sunglasses. "Future" is only going to make sense to those who have seen the movie *Back to the Future*, one must combine the flux capacitor with the modified DeLorean for it to explode and drive away. "Race" is represented by the crossed white and black checkered race flags. Perhaps the most abstract in the game is "Dividing" which is received by pushing the two balls above and below the division line into place to create ÷. Lastly, by picking up the quill, paper, and ink sprites the player is able to type in and create their own word.

The purpose that these words serve in the game is to fill in sentences (in the style of Mad-Libs) after the timer has run out on the main phase of the game. The sentences used are as follows:

From Mitt Romney's "Strong Words for Obama: Remarks in Ohio" 2012

- This is what an **angry** and **desperate** Presidency looks like

       changed to: This is what a _____ and _____ Presidency looks like.

- If an American **president** wins that way, we all lose

       changed to: If an American _____ wins with _____, we all lose.

- **America** is one **Nation** under **God**

       changed to: _____ is one _____ under _____

Theodore Roosevelt's "The New Nationalism" 1910

- Looking back, we are all of us now able to do justice to the **valor** and the disinterestedness and the love of the right

       changed to: Looking back, we are all of us now able to do _____ to the _____

       and the love of the _____

- Today and for weeks past honest and law-abiding citizens of this country are being **terrorized** and outraged in their rights by those sworn to uphold the laws and protect the rights of the people

       changed to: Today and for weeks past _____ and law-abiding citizens of

       _____ are being _____ and outraged in their rights by those sworn to

       uphold the laws and protect the rights of the _____

- More than all, the **citizen** and [its] representative in **Congress** in time of war must maintain his right [to] **free speech**.

changed to: More than all, the _____ and its representative in _____ in time of war must maintain his right to _____

These sentences were chosen from two very different speeches. One from a stop in Ohio on Mitt Romney's presidential campaign trail, and the other from an address Theodore Roosevelt gave in Osawatomie, Kansas that became cornerstone of 20th century progressivism. Romney touted the need for a reformed government, one whose hands were as removed from the public cookie jar as far as they could be, while Roosevelt spoke nothing but the opposite. He stressed the need for a strong central government that could protect ordinary Americans from what he called the greed and recklessness of big business and special interests. I chose these two vastly different pieces of political oration to give the player the opportunity to manipulate popular ideals from both the left and right sides of America's partisinal dichotomy.

Making a game is no easy feat. When I chose to embark on this for my thesis, rather than heed the advice from professors and friends alike, I decided that it couldn't be that hard to make a game from scratch. I was wrong. Never before have I had to keep track of the structure and framework of a virtual world of this scale. I have programmed menial assignments in Racket, Java, and C++, but to keep track of something as large and intricate as a game required patience and brain power that I had never needed to utilize before. On top of that, I had never embarked on any sort of digital art projects. I was forced to learn how to use photoshop from scratch, and how to draw using a Wacom tablet.

The game was programmed using OpenGL 3.3+. SFML libraries handle input and output, utilities are handled using OpenGL Mathematics, and the GL Extension Wrangler libraries help with the initialization of GL states. Rendering is done using GL Shading Language using a method that transforms two half-screen-sized triangles to the size and location of the image

drawn. I wrote a function called gui_Texture_Selection that handles image loading from sprite sheets; its inputs are four positions corresponding to the top right, top left, bottom right, and bottom left locations of the sprite on the sheet. The shaders work through two functions in tandem. 2DVert creates positions on screen to determine where things are meant to be, and 2DFrag creates the image in the location specified from 2DVert. Collision is handled simply so that static objects don't move but dynamic objects can push and be pushed. There is much more, I could talk about but it would do me no good to describe it in this essay. The most difficult part of the process was learning how to properly use OpenGL. I learned a lot of what I know from tutorials online, and the assistance of friends who have experience using the libraries.

The art for the game I made or found over the course of a few months. At first I tried using my laptop's trackpad to do the drawings, but quickly found this way to be much too time consuming and cumbersome. Vassar's library has a single computer with both photoshop and a Wacom tablet available. For weeks I went in every day and learned little by little how to get the results I wanted with the electronic pen and pad. I wasn't the only one who wanted to use that computer however, and for every three days that I could work, one would be spent waiting for it to be available. Eventually I downloaded the trial version of Photoshop CC on my laptop and luckily had a friend from which to borrow a small Wacom tablet. Most of the images in the game are ones I drew myself, but there are a few that I decided to grab directly off of the internet. Those that deserve outside credit are the sprites associated with: Valor, Evolution, Men, God, Fighting, Peace, Republican, Democrat, President Obama, Future and Liberty.

The hardest question I had to answer throughout the entire development process was: Am I doing this right? I have learned how to write papers following very specific templates over the years of my education. Everything I have done in school has followed a very specific set of

guidelines. For the first time in my life I was forced to work based off nothing but goals set by myself. I don't know if what I have created with *Words* is a product that I feel has gotten across the points I was trying to make. I have had so many ideas that have come and gone over the past few months that there were times when I lost sight of what sort of game I was actually trying to create.

To think of it simply: Is there a playable game that I created? yes. Does the player interact with propaganda in ways that gives them the power to manipulate diction? yes. Does the player understand the prevalence of political propaganda in America's modern government? no. Is this game something that could be commercially viable in today's game market? no. In some ways I have succeeded, in others I failed. However, I would be hard pressed to say that this wasn't the single most informative assignment of my time in school. In addition, I think that *Words* serves as a starting point -- a conceptual beginning available to all those in the field of Media Studies who wish to study the interaction between games and language.

There are many things I would add given the time. Extra levels with entirely new sets of words to continue the game. New sentences taken from a wider breadth of speeches for the player to change. Sound for all parts of the game. Smoother animations and sprite interactions. I might even change the entire gameplay to be less focused on the collection of objects within a gamespace and more centralized on the creation of suitable words. As it stands *Words* is the beginning of something that could be grand, and hopefully time will permit me to continue working on it to make it something truly worthwhile.

Acknowledgements, and References