

Senior Thesis Proposal

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Fulfillment: An Exploration of Amazon's Work Environment through Play

Introduction

In the age of electronic commerce, Amazon has emerged as a supergiant. In addition to the company's presence in the online shopping realm, Amazon is a front runner of cloud computing and storage. Founded in 1994, the company has experienced exponential growth over the past 5 years. To put that in perspective, in the past year, Amazon's gross profits have grown five times that of Home Depot, Costco, Walmart, Target, and Lowe's' combined (Kim, 2018.)

Though Amazon has become notorious for providing customers with speedy shipping and easy returns, these services come at a cost. A few recent news stories reveal the inner workings of Amazon. These narratives depict demoralizing working conditions for Amazon's workers. Some employees have even gone as far to compare the warehouses to prisons. In 2016, journalist James Bloodworth worked undercover at an Amazon Fulfillment Center in the U.K.. Bloodworth documented his experience working in the warehouse with a book titled "Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain". In his exposé, Bloodworth outlines the structure of an associate job at Amazon's Rugeley warehouse and shares several anecdotes from his experience.

In one narrative, he describes the process of going to the bathroom for an employee at the warehouse. He recounts that it can sometimes be a ¼ mile walk to the bathroom. In addition, employees are required to going through airport style security before and after using the restroom. This process along with disciplinary threats from managers have contributed to the fact that 74% of Amazon warehouse employees in the U.K. "avoid using the toilet for fear of missing their target and receiving a warning point" (Organise, 2018.) Bloodworth describes the "point" concept, referenced in the statistic, as a six point disciplinary system in place at Amazon warehouses where employees will receive a point for not meeting quotas, arriving late, taking a sick day, spending too much time "idling", etc. Once an employee has received six points, they run the risk of being "dismissed" from their position at the company.

The working conditions and treatment of employees that Bloodworth depicts, while shocking, are not unprecedented. Apple has been under fire for their factory conditions, specifically at the Foxconn manufacturing site in China. The factory gained attention in 2010 after multiple Foxconn workers committed suicide at the site. These incidents prompted a closer look into the horrific conditions within the factory.

Project Format

Humans should not have to urinate in bottles or take their own lives before horrendous work conditions are acknowledged and addressed. Why is it that some of the richest companies in the world (by revenue) have the poorest workplace environments? Through my thesis project, I will explore the function of games as a tool to explore these issues. My project will take the form of a digital video game in which users will assume the role of an Amazon warehouse worker. I have chosen a game as my medium to encourage a hands on learning experience for the user. I want the user to learn about the experience of low-wage workers by virtually walking in their shoes.

The 2D video game will take place in an Amazon Fulfillment Center, and users will have to navigate the environment to locate and collect specific objects (products) from the storage shelves. The six point system that Bloodworth describes in his book will be included in the game as a type of “lives” system. Users can lose lives by collecting the wrong item, not collecting enough items, or taking too much time to use the bathroom. Once a player loses six points, the game will be over.

After developing the game, I plan to run several play tests. These play tests will help me assess how users navigate the game and what knowledge, if any, they take away.

Methodology

In terms of theoretical research and sources, I plan to expand upon the readings from Carlin Wing’s Intro to Game Design and Theories of Interaction courses. Specific texts that I would like to focus on are *Rise of the Videogame Zinestars* by Anna Anthropy, *Rules of Play* by Katie Salen, and *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* by Mary Flanagan. These books will serve as a theoretical basis for my game concept. In Intro to Game Design, I also gained experience writing game proposals, so I feel comfortable creating a formal game proposal for my project.

A couple of games that have inspired my project are *Lost Wage Rampage* developed by Jane Friedhoff in 2018 and *The Oregon Trail* developed by Don Rawitsch, Bill Heinemann, and

Paul Dillenberger in 1971. Both games allow users to explore social issues as virtual avatars. In *Lost Wage Rampage* two shop girls have just found out that they have been underpaid in comparison to men in their same positions. After learning about their story, the user assumes the role of the two women and is tasked with driving around an office space and crashing into objects to steal back the difference. *The Oregon Trail* is a strategy game in which users are tasked with selecting a character, and navigating the Oregon Trail. Both games are almost impossible to win. In *Lost Wage Rampage* the character is inevitably caught by the police, and in *The Oregon Trail*, the character typically dies before reaching the end of the trail. My game will also be almost impossible to beat, which stresses the harsh reality of the experience and treatment of Amazon warehouse workers. Another element that I will take from these two games is the narrative piece. Both games tell a story through digital representations of the environment that they are trying to create in virtual space. In *Lost Wage Rampage* this is done through a brief animation played before the game starts. My game will draw on this visual narrative tactic to establish the environment and perspective that I would like the user to take. This perspective is that of a worker that is entering the warehouse and experiencing the work conditions for the first time.

My game concept will be based on multiple narratives of Amazon employees. Along with Bloodworth's account, I will draw from anecdotes from a past employee of Amazon's corporate sector. I will also interview a friend of mine that interned with Amazon, and was based out of an Amazon Fulfillment Center in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

I plan to design this game on the Unity platform. I have chosen this platform because of its user-friendly interface, and abundance of online tutorials. Considering my academic background in computer science, that includes the courses CS5, CS35, and CS60, I feel confident that I will be able to navigate Unity to produce a successful project. In addition to Unity, I plan to use Adobe Illustrator to design visuals for my game. The courses Introduction to Digital Art and Intermediate Digital Art have provided me with the tools necessary to use this software. Time permitting, I would like to create a short animation with Adobe After Effects to accompany the game.

Timeline

Week 4 - Pitch Prep

- Solidify Game Elements/Narrative (Game Proposal)

- Layout Rough Design
- Research/Read

Week 5 - Pitch Project

- Revise Game Elements/Narrative (Game Proposal)
- Research/Read
- Start Designing Skeleton in Unity - Basic Mechanics of the Game

Week 6

- Research/Read
- Continue Designing Skeleton in Unity - Basic Mechanics of the Game

Week 7

- Continue Working in Unity
- Start Artwork Design in Illustrator

Week 8

- Start Paper #1
- Continue Working in Unity
- Continue Designing Artwork

Week 9 - Paper #1 Draft Due

- Finish Paper #1
- Finish Skeleton - Game Should Be Bare, but Playable
- Start Incorporating Art into Game - Background

Week 10 - Peer Reviews of Paper #1 Due, Projects WIP Review w/ Faculty

- Finish Skeleton in Prep for WIP Review
- Continue Incorporating Art - Objects

Week 11 - Projects WIP Review w/ Faculty

- Have a playable game for the WIP Review
- Continue Incorporating Art

Week 12 - WIP Peer Reviews Due

- Final Touches on Project
- Start Paper #2 Draft

Week 13 - Spring Project Proposals Due, Paper #2 Draft Due

- Finish Paper #2 Draft

- Final Touches on Project

Week 14 - Peer Reviews of Paper #2 Due

- Have a Final Product (File is Completed and Shared)
- Revise Paper #2

Week 15 - Projects and Papers Due

- Write Final Draft of Paper
- Final Tweaking of Paper and Project
- Turn in Paper and Project

Works Cited

“Amazon: What's It like Where You Work?” *Organise*, 2018, <https://static1.squarespace.com/>.

Kim, Eugene. “Amazon Is Growing Its Gross Profit at a Staggering Rate.” *CNBC*, CNBC, 14

May 2018, www.cnbc.com/.