Trial By Fire

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ABSTRACT

Trial by Fire is a mystery game that involves inspecting various clues that are added to a journal entry (once interacted with) in order to determine the cause of a burnt house. The user plays as Tom Changestone, an insurance investigator. Tom has a magical ability that allows him to switch between two different time zones - the current, post-fire house and the past, pre-fire house in order to see where differences lie.

Keywords

Setting, Mechanics, Interactions, Audio

1.INTRODUCTION

Trial By Fire incorporates various storytelling and game design techniques. To begin, the story opens with a cutscene introducing the player to the situation they are about to step into. Tom Changestone, an insurance investigator, is the first person to enter the house since the fire. It is now up to him to determine the cause of this fire and whether the family is entitled to monetary compensation. This family includes a mother, father, 17-year-old edgy boy, 9-year-old girl. In the true sequence of events, the dad becomes absent, and the mom creates a plan to start an "accidental" fire in order to collect insurance money. However, she was unable to follow through with the plan because the fire was accidentally started by her daughter before she could carry it out.

2.MAIN TEXT AND ARGUMENT

2.1.Setting

Important components of game building include the aesthetic, lighting, and sound design. In regards to the art direction of this house, the house has a 90s, FRIENDS type of feel. The reason for this aesthetic is to accentuate the bright pops of colors and liveliness in the house in contrast to the monotone burnt house. The stark difference between both settings emphasizes the state the burned house is in compared to its former self. [2] Both time zones of the game take place at night and the embers are present in the burned house. As far as modeling is concerned, the goal was to reinforce that the house is built around a 1990's era aesthetic. Some models are more modern, such as the countertops and some of the appliances. There are, however, more retro elements such as the TV and refrigerator. This approach was also taken with the color palette, as the goal was to emulate the gaudy '90s aesthetic that evokes a sense of nostalgia in the player. The intensity of the style serves to juxtapose the burnt-down house even more emphatically, as the brighter color palette is meant to be in direct contrast with the darkness present in the house after it has been burnt.

Lighting-wise, much of the house has the same flat, bright lighting. However, there is near total darkness in the boy's room outside of some faint light sources such as the moon and a candle. The purpose of this was to convey the edginess of the teen boy as

well as create an uneasy feeling in the house considering the motive of this fire is unknown. In addition, the dim lighting in the parent's room conveys moral ambiguity as well. The intention of the mood lighting in those two rooms is to make players question, did they, or did they not purposefully burn the house down? The lighting in the daughter's room stays bright because the person who lived there had no malintent.[2] Though they were the ones that caused the fire, it was completely a child's accident. Furthermore, the light level between the burned and past house is drastically different to serve the established dramatic contrast. This dramatic contrast is accentuated by strategic level design to create affordances that are similar to those that are synonymous with a burned house. Fallen wooden beams and cracked in walls create additional barriers to entry that force the player to explore other avenues as well as access points to find clues that will help them solve their journey. Players perform actions based off of scene and light designs. [3] We wanted the game to feel like the player gains a new realization at every turn and these structural design elements came to be a huge influence. Even just for normal elements like stairs and door frames. These elements embed a natural sense of establishment for the player that creates a proper context for the following events. Seeing stairs will make the user recognize that a second story exists, or even going as far as noticing bedroom furniture could naturally make you want to check the dresser drawers.

2.2.Mechanics

The main mechanics of the game surround switching between the pre and post-fire house and interacting with clues to discover what happened. The present time is the burnt-down house, whereas the past is minutes before the fire started. This switching mechanic is key to traversal and judging a clue's validity. Switching between time zones allows the player to see the cause and effect of certain objects, such as the candle not being burned. It acts as a change in perspective and places emphasis on the different aesthetics. [2] Traversal-wise, there is an inability to access certain areas in both the pre and post-fire house. Switching allows the player to move past these obstacles.

Investigating clues is the second main mechanic of the game. When close to a clue, the player will receive a prompt to inspect it. After interacting and inspecting a clue, a journal entry with a short description and image is added to the journal. The player can pull up the journal and read through the different pages about each clue. This is important as it keeps track of the player's findings and aids in filing the final report.

At any point during the game, the player can choose to file the final report. This entails the player filling out blanks as part of a report to their company, describing the culprit, cause, and an assessment of whether the family deserves the money. The report will decide if the family of the house receives insurance money. As stated above, clue discovery assists the player. Each clue that you discover will change the options on the report form. For

example, finding the magnifying glass gives you that as a possible cause, and hearing the voicemail opens up the mom and son as culprit options. This mechanic rewards exploration and compels the player to explore their space, else they will be making a claim with no backings whatsoever.

2.3.Interactions

There are various sequences to follow in order to guess the cause of the fire. Each sequence seems plausible at first, however, all but one of the sequences has a debunk. The purpose of these narratives is to get the player thinking about what truly occurred, following the clues and visual hints to their conclusions.

To begin is the mom sequence. In the office, the player can see unpaid bills on the kitchen counter as well as an insurance claim form. In addition, there is a message from the financial advisor on the answering machine in the living room. From these clues, the player may assume that the mother started the fire; however, the debunk to this sequence is that there is a shopping list of fire items stuck on the fridge and they have *not* been bought yet. Aside from the answering machine, all of the clues in this sequence are visually linked by them being different types of sheets of paper. The clues for the mom sequence are all around the house so giving that visual link is key for the player to recognize.

The next sequence of clues to be considered is the edgy teen sequence. From his bedroom and lighting, players may assume that this boy may have contributed to the fire. In his bedroom, the boy's cassette player plays the song "Burning down the House" by the Talking Heads, pre-fire. Interesting music choice, right? In addition, the answering machine in the living room includes a message from the principal about the son's behavior. Finally, there is a diary with a manifesto on how the boy hates school and society from the post-fire house. However, the debunk of this sequence is that the boy left for a road-trip three weeks before the fire. As opposed to the clues in the mother sequence, the son's clues are spatially linked, as they are all in his room with one exception (once again, the exception being the answering machine).

Furthermore, there are a couple of miscellaneous clues in the house. Such clues include a candle stick on the dining room table as well as an ashtray and cigarette in the metal trash can in the kitchen. Yet, the post-fire house shows that both the candlestick and ashtray/cigarette still remain. The real clue sequence involves the magnifying glass on the child's desk alongside small burn marks on the desk and floor in the pre-fire house. In addition, there is a book about bugs, alluding to the young girl's fascination with burning insects. In the post-fire room, the desk is completely reduced to ash and only the magnifying glass is left. This sequence leads to the true cause: the magnifying glass caught on fire through the reflection of the sun. Similar to the clues in the son's sequence, the daughter's clues are all in her bedroom.

2.4.Audio

Finally, Audio adds to the experience by accompanying narrations, sound cues, and ambient music. There are three key narrations in the game: the introduction, the financial advisor's voicemail, and the principal's voicemail. Each serves to communicate aspects of the story to the player and give them hints about what may have actually happened. Sound cues are used to give the player feedback on certain actions and let them know something has occurred. [2]For example, each time a clue is inspected, a scribble noise plays. This cue lets the player know that a note was added to their journal and that they should read it.

Lastly, ambient music serves to create the tone of the space and further that deep contrast between the bright, poppy, almost artificial pre-fire house, and the eerie, dejected burnt house.

3.CONCLUSION

Through these elements, we hope to successfully portray Trial by Fire - a mysterious and eerie case that leaves players feeling excited, interested, and curious as they explore the house and its various clues. Although there are various misleading sequences, we encourage players to really explore the house, use audio to their advantage, and connect the dots. Finally, the mechanics of the game are user-friendly and easy to catch on to, mainly consisting of interactions with the keyboard.
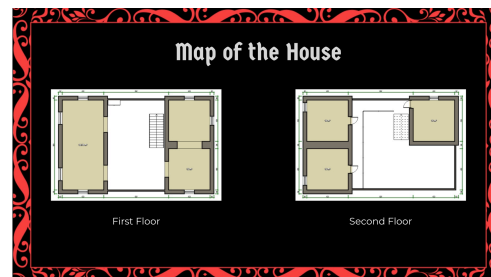
4.FIGURES

Figure 1
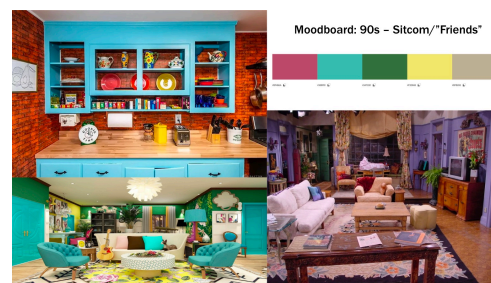
Moodboard: Pre-Fire House Aesthetic Inspiration

Figure 2

First Sketch of House Layout

Figure 3

Final Sketch of Floor Plan Diagram

5.REFERENCES

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