

Introduction

In this Reflective Commentary, I will be reflecting upon the journey of creating my final product and the wider processes that influenced it. A 10 week internship at Good Soldier Records dominated the majority of my final module, affecting almost every aspect of the process. In order to provide myself with a solid foundation upon which to build my project, I chose to continue a project started during my internship.

The single 'Spilled My Coffee' was first released in April 2021 by Snøw & Jack Cullens (featuring Rxseboy); a remix bringing the artist Allday onto the track was then released in July 2021. Created alongside these singles were a series of promotional assets in the pixel art style, made by the design agency F That. These assets consisted of a full-body pixel art avatar of each contributing artist, and a lyric video featuring these avatars skating through a pixel art cityscape.

In September 2021, two million streams later, renowned British electronic duo HONNE released a Rework of the single. Whilst working at Good Soldier, I was tasked with creating the artwork for this HONNE Rework. Though this was only a simple edit to the original artwork, I wanted to stamp my name further on this campaign, and on my own steam created two new portraits representing the members of HONNE. These were in the same style as the assets created by F That, and would later be animated by myself and composited into the lyric video by F That.

In this submission, I recontextualised my work on this project and placed it within the context of a theoretical two week brief, with Good Soldier Records serving as a client. The key deliverables were as follows:

- Analyse the previous style of the campaign creative direction, and create two new portraits depicting both members of HONNE (James Hatcher & Andy Clutterbuck). These must fit within the stylistic template established by F That.
- Conceptualise a new game much in the same vein as the previous collaborations between F That & Good Soldier.

Choosing the Project

Within my Written Proposal I'd established two possible directions for my pixel art-inspired product:

- *A 2D 'endless runner' game produced to coincide with a single release. This will involve a character(s) moving sideways, jumping to avoid objects and/or collect items.*
- *A map or piece of artwork created in the top-down perspective popularised by games such as Pokémon and The Legend of Zelda, produced to coincide with an album release. (Forsey, 2021)*

At the time of writing my Proposal, I believed I would have two full months in which to build this project. However, 3 weeks prior to submission and fresh out of my internship, I found myself still questioning

what to do. I'd directed all my energy and attention into making the most of the internship (with successful results), and subsequently neglected my academic responsibilities. In a tutorial with my tutor, I mentioned possibly creating the aforementioned map (route 2) to coincide with the release of Coldplay's newest album, however in my heart I knew this wasn't something that interested me. In the context of my portfolio, I tend to favour selecting projects with real clients attached, with their presence being tangible evidence of experience working as a commercial designer. Fanmade concept artwork in my eyes suggests a lack of experience.

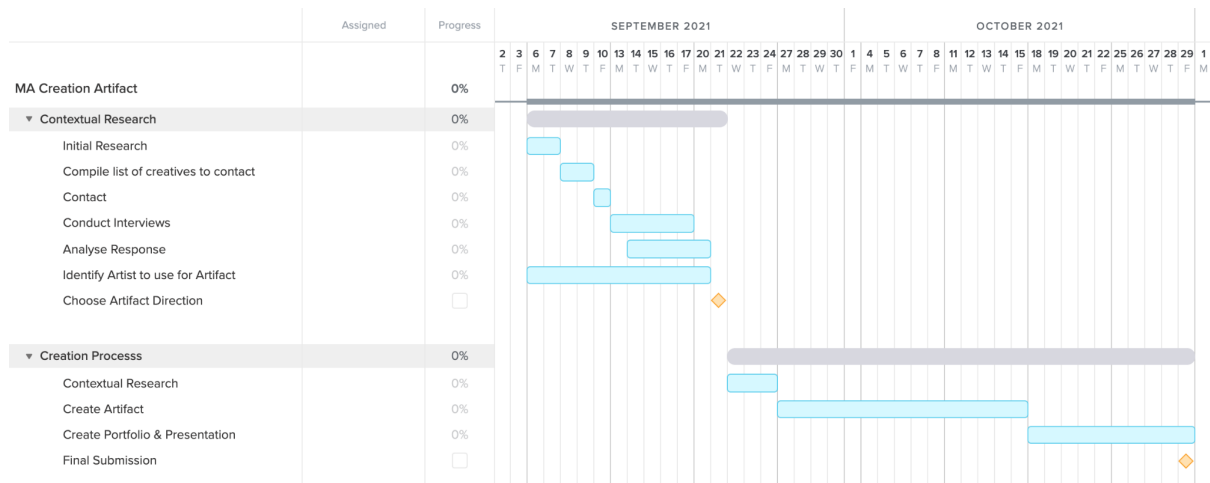
In a meeting on the 14th of October (my 24th birthday), I was presented with the chance to work on a new campaign, one that seemed like a dream at the time. It was a commercial project (as opposed to the fanmade concept work I'd be doing for the Coldplay release), and had indirect connections to Eurovision. With one of my long term career goals being to contribute in some shape or form to Eurovision, my favourite show, this naturally piqued my interest. The campaign would involve creating illustrated concept artwork and manipulating images to fit the project theme. At its core, it was an exercise in worldbuilding, with the goal of crafting an immersive location for the project to exist in. This would be done both visually, and within the performed content itself. Given my hobbyist interest in Game Development, I was familiar with this concept, and was eager to apply some of the skills I had learned along the way.

It was described as a "one way trip to a distinction", and part of me believes it might've been. Accepting this campaign as my project seemed like it would've been perfect, however at the same time the reality of having only 2 weeks to create a project from scratch was also becoming apparent. My physical health had already been pushed to the brink whilst operating a full time freelance career concurrently alongside my full time placement, and a sustained pain in my wrists made it clear that intense crunching was off the cards. All of my prior research for the proposal had been about pixel art, and the Personal Objectives outlined in my Written Proposal revolved around integrating my skills as a pixel artist into my portfolio. With my current existence within a pressure cooker in mind, I knew I wouldn't be able to offer my best abilities to this campaign, and so ultimately decided to pass on using it as my MA final project, instead agreeing to pick it up again in November post-graduation.

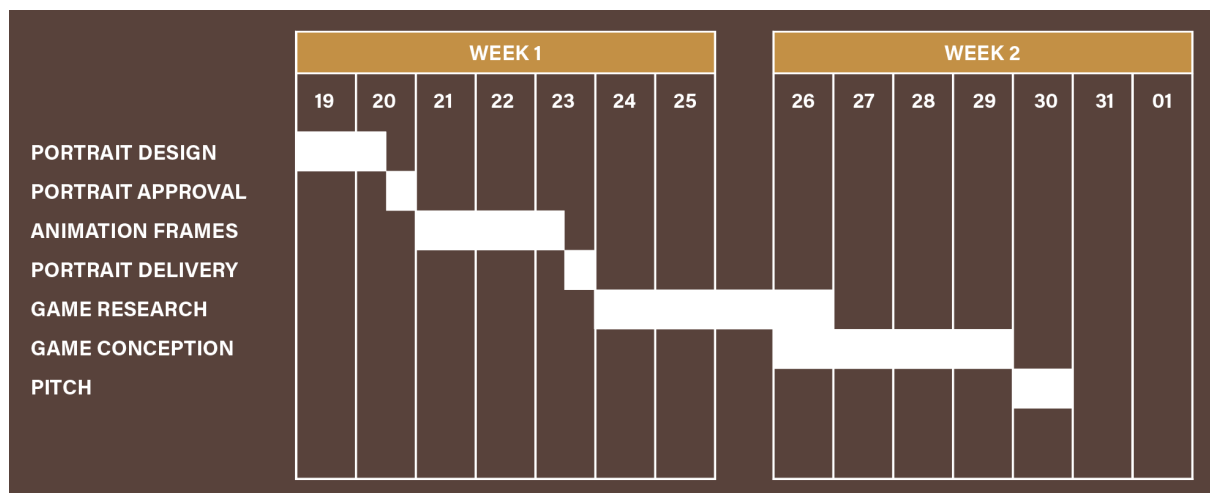
Whilst having this discussion with myself, I returned to my time working at Good Soldier and suddenly remembered the 'Spilled My Coffee' campaign. I'd mentioned the campaign briefly in my Written Proposal, though I was unable to go into any detail at the time, and with no clear release schedule in place, I had already disregarded it as an option. However it was now October and the campaign went live in September, quicker than I had anticipated. The project ticked every box in regards to the first of my two directions. I'd already spent days creating and animating the two portraits, and had good connections at the label that I could use for Primary Research.

Timeline & Budget

In order to sync up my timeline and make the budgeting process easier for me to digest, I placed my final portfolio and presentation with the context of a theoretical 2 week brief, with Good Soldier acting as the client. Comparing the Gantt chart I made at the end of August with the one created on the 17th of October, it'd been stripped down to the bare essentials. I no longer had time to carefully schedule interview dates or days to spend analysing responses.



Gantt Chart created on August 26th, 2021 (Forsey, 2021)



Gantt Chart created on October 17th, 2021 (Forsey, 2021)

The main costs (not overhead) established within my Written Proposal covered design resources such as stock images, website hosting and new software to experiment with, totalling around £150. With the time constraints, I didn't spend anything on these. A cost I didn't anticipate was the purchase of an iMac for £500 from the university. A need to use video editing software such as After Effects & Premiere Pro whilst at my internship influenced this decision, and I deemed it a necessary investment. This however meant I couldn't afford to outsource my game concepts to be turned into a functioning prototype. Not having anything functional to show will inevitably harm the quality of this project, however I deem the improvements having an iMac will bring to my career more beneficial than the positive marks I would've gained.

Primary Research

In my initial Gantt chart, I had allowed for 2 weeks of research, during which I planned on contacting creatives who had worked on similar pixel art projects. In reality, I only had a few days to deploy this, however I was determined to get some primary research and implement the skills I'd learned in our Academic Development classes with Dr Lindsay Davies.

I was a lot more direct in choosing the subjects of my interviews, opting for one person from the Good Soldier Marketing Team and one from the Good Soldier Creative Team in order to get both the objective marketing facts and also some more informed creative reasoning behind the decision to choose a pixel art direction for the release. Harrison Seward, Marketing Manager at Good Soldier spearheaded the marketing campaign for 'Spilled My Coffee,' and was recommended to me as the most knowledgeable person to interview. My questions were specific, and his responses were to the point yet still rich with authority.

The next interviewee was Arthur Coppens, Junior In-House Designer at Good Soldier, and now a close friend of mine. Within an hour of asking Arthur to conduct an email interview, I'd received a set of very articulate responses to my questions, fleshing out the thought process behind outsourcing the job to F That, and also his opinions on why pixel art was becoming so prevalent in the world of music marketing.

On the decision to choose pixel art:

"Our head of creative picked the pixel art/8-bit direction as it fits the playful, lo-fi and colourful direction we wanted to establish our act Jack Cullen in. It feels nostalgic and cool [...] This generation is heavily influenced by the games they play, so by referencing this world, we hoped the project as a whole would speak to this audience. The song Spilled My Coffee is a collaboration with lo-fi hip hop legends Snøw and Rxseboy so going for a rather lo-fi art direction made total sense." (Coppens, 2021)

On the decision to outsource the creative:

"We outsourced the creation of the pixel art characters, lyric videos and other assets to our good friends at F-That. They were able to take our references and turn it into something incredible that we wouldn't have been able to do in-house. We have a great in-house creative team and try to do everything we can within our team but we do have our limits of course." (Coppens, 2021)

Pixel art has always been a very accessible form of digital art, so it was interesting to note that even with their combined creative skills, nobody on the Good Soldier creative team felt confident enough to attempt tackling this brief. Admittedly, the most difficult part about creating pixel art is knowing how it functions within the wider world. Basic principles such as which file type to export pixel art in and how to scale pixel art correctly without compromising pixel density were clearly not known upon examination of the previous campaign's assets. The Instagram AR filter used low quality, improperly scaled images of the previously made portraits. When it came to updating this filter with the new headshots, I made sure to return to these and render them all properly.

The final interviewee of my primary research was Kyle-Dove, a hobbyist pixel artist and friend of mine. Having idolised his work for over a decade, it was surreal to be interviewing him. His knowledge of pixel art as a whole really contextualised the 'Spill My Coffee' campaign within the current societal zeitgeist. His thoughts on the topic of nostalgia summarised the intention behind everything I was hoping to achieve with this project.

"I think also Pixel art as an art form carries a lot of nostalgia for people, bringing back fond memories of their childhoods. It's no surprise to me in a world of constant reboots and remakes, that pixel art is making a comeback. In fact - it's often labelled as "retro" or "8-bit" when that's not even the correct term. People are longing [for] an escape to the past, and pixel art can provide that." (Kyle-Dove, 2021)

Ergonomics — Confronting Arm Pain

My final question for Kyle-Dove questioned the impact creating digital art has on the body. After juggling two full time jobs that relied fundamentally on using a laptop, both my wrists were left in agony. My forearms had also begun to experience a dull ache. I asked Kyle-Dove what approaches he takes to maintain an ergonomic workflow:

“Honestly, I’ve been lucky that I’ve not had much issue. For a while, I did start to notice some wrist pain on long durations of creating pixel art. At the time, I had recently changed my home set up and noticed my hand on my mouse was raised higher than my elbow, which I knew was bad form. I made the change to my set up so my elbow was always level or higher than my hand and I’ve not had any wrist pain since. I regularly take breaks and make sure I’m always using tools with a high zoom level to reduce any eye strain when working with pixels.”

(Kyle-Dove, 2021)

For the past few months I’d been actively working on improving my own workflow in a similar way. Whilst researching workflow ergonomics, the term *contact stress* kept appearing. The Government of Alberta, Employment and Immigration described contact stress as occurring “...when force is concentrated on a small area of the body, pinching or crushing tissue and causing discomfort and often pain.” (The Government of Alberta, Employment and Immigration, 2010). Despite many objections to using a trackpad as a digital artist, I find it to be the quickest way of navigating a canvas. However, as a result my wrists tend to wrest on the sharp edges of my laptop. As a temporary solution to this, I purchased two wrist supports to compress and prevent further swelling, however with the correct terminology, I was able to make a more informed choice. In a bid to reduce the amount of contact stress on my wrists, I purchased an ergonomic Keyboard Wrist Rest. Within a few days, the angle at which my wrist sat whilst typing had already improved.

To target the pain in my forearms, caused by contact stress occurring between my arm and the table edge, I navigated a labyrinth of expensive clip-on wrist supports, before realising subconsciously that I was positioning my Wrist Rest in a way that also raised my forearm off the table, to the same effect. The wider issue as a whole came from working at a small desk, however due to budget constraints I was left with little other option.

Whilst working at Good Soldier, every member of the team was provided with a laptop stand, which upon further research targets what is known as *tech neck*. Zoe Thomas, a health & wellbeing journalist with over a decade of experience, described *tech neck* being the result of “the weight of your head hanging forward [placing] a huge amount of strain on the spine which, over time, can cause aches pains and even long term injuries” (Thomas, 2010). Almost every person you ask will admit that their posture is terrible, but for years I believed the answer to be expensive ergonomic chairs, all of which fell out of my budget range. After 10 weeks at Good Soldier, I was amazed at how much more aware I was of my posture. Following the submission of this module, I intend to conduct more research whilst at Good Soldier and find out which brands are recommended.

Self-Taught Hard Skills

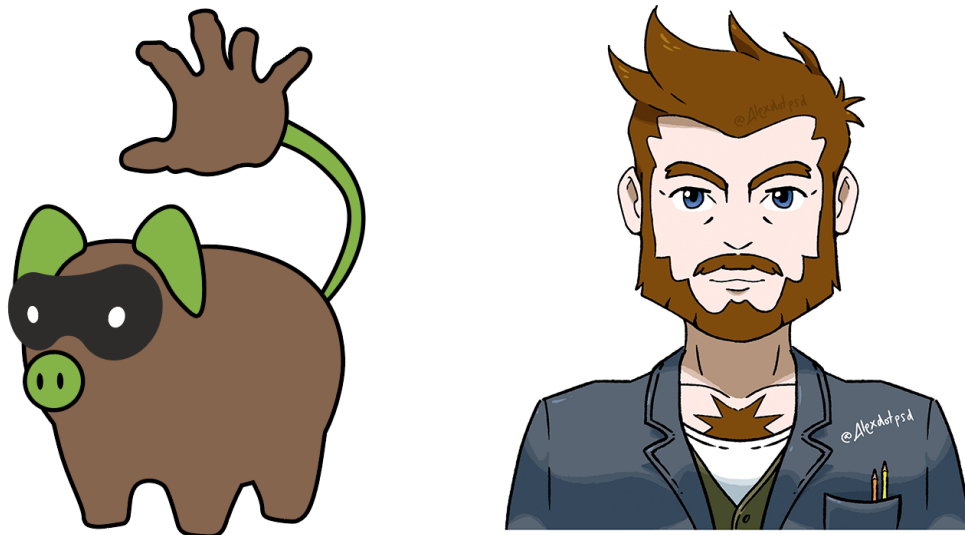
Even though I wasn’t actively job hunting at the time, I’ve always considered it best practise to stay in touch with current market trends, and one that I’d observed more and more throughout Q3 of 2021 was a preference towards designers with illustration skills. For years I’d been telling myself that I didn’t need

to learn illustration, I was comfortable not knowing something that I simply didn't enjoy doing. What I didn't expect was to actually start enjoying it through the medium of pixel art. Kyle-Dove explained the choice many take using pixel art as a medium further in our interview:

"We're making a deliberate choice to use this art style and to express ourselves with it in a way no other art form can - It's not about what's "prettier" or mimicking real life - it's about conveying our vision in a specific, defined way." (Kyle-Dove, 2021)

My 'vision,' however, was an indirect result of impatience. I struggled with digital illustration simply because I wasn't good at it, and a fear of failure prevented me from challenging myself. My only tool I had to illustrate digitally was my trackpad, which contributed considerably to the pain in my arms, so naturally I moved away from it. Pixel art was more accessible to me as a medium, and yet every pixel placed was laid with as much consideration as a brush stroke. It allowed me to connect with my identity as a creative on a deeper level, and gave me the confidence to pick up a paintbrush again, albeit in a way I wasn't used to.

As a birthday treat, I purchased a Wacom One drawing tablet. The tablet connects with a USB cable and is designed to mirror the monitor it's connected to, in this case my Macbook Pro. The more expensive ones actually have a screen built in for even smoother use. By 'drawing' on the tablet with the pen, my cursor moved across my screen, so in effect it had use as an alternative to the trackpad, however the benefit of this as a creative is the *pressure sensitivity* function when paired with a drawing software's Brush tool. By applying pressure, the brush stroke gets thicker; by removing pressure, the brush stroke gets thinner — a function not achievable without a tablet and pen. After experimenting for a few days, it felt like I'd unlocked a new part of myself: a home for the homeless fragments of artistic theory I'd picked up over the years. Knowledge I thought I'd left at secondary school came flooding back, and I found myself *wanting* to illustrate.



A digital illustration made in January 2021 using a laptop trackpad (left) vs one made in October 2021 whilst practising with a Wacom One drawing tablet (right) [Forsey, 2021]

In relation to my project, having the means to digitally sketch my thoughts out encouraged me to flesh out my concepts in a way that pen and paper couldn't. Within seconds I was able to add colour to a rough sketch, transforming it. Even though I had only been using it for a few weeks, I'd integrated having a tablet into almost every aspect of my workflow and professional practise, whether it be retouching or making pixel art. On a personal note, I also feel like my own skills as a visual creative have been elevated. Where before I wouldn't have offered illustration services, I now feel more confident in offering this.

Sacrificing Quality for Opportunity

Within my Written Proposal, I discussed the risk that an internship played in relation to project management.

"One of the more substantial problems that had already started affecting the project [...] was the 2-week placement I had started in the first week of August. After a very successful fortnight, I was offered an extended paid contract for another 3 weeks. [...] Including this extended contract, I would now be juggling a full-time freelance career, a full-time placement, and a full-time MA course. With only so many hours in the day, I was confronted with a question: am I content with the quality of my submission dropping, if it meant getting my foot in the door to a very closed-off industry? This comes hot off the heels of a very successful second module, and the possibility of graduating with a First Class Master's degree is very real if I continue to exceed my own expectations." (Forsey, 2021)

Ultimately this proved a reality, with my contract being extended twice more, totalling 10 weeks. After my second contract period ended and I was offered another contract for a further 3 weeks, I enacted the plan discussed in my Written Proposal and asked if I could transition to a part-time internship. As opposed to working 5 days at the Good Soldier office, I was now contracted to work only 3 days, with 2 days put aside for MA work. What I didn't anticipate was that I would spend all of my days off and weekends either in the Good Soldier office (regardless of contracted hours), or catching up on my own freelance work. It wouldn't be too dramatic to describe the feeling as drowning: whilst I was able to keep up with my career workload, the guilt over neglecting my MA final project ate away at me. My mental and physical health was buckling under the pressure and guilt, but why did I feel guilty?

Being one of 3 students on the MA Entertainment Design course, I felt a responsibility to do well and live up to the standard we would be setting for future generations of Entertainment Design students. In doing so however I wasn't allowing myself to live in the moment and enjoy the opportunities I'd been provided with. This led me back to the question 'am I content with the quality of my submission dropping to take advantage of opportunity?' To answer this, I had to look at the Personal Development Plan I established for myself prior to starting my studies at the Tileyard.

I came to the Tileyard with the goal of getting a job at the end of it, something I had failed to do after leaving university the year before (though this wasn't helped by the pandemic). I'd found myself stuck in Somerset, and after a summer of little success I began to feel the familiar feelings of stagnation. I'd managed to sustain myself at university with a freelance design career specialising in design for music, however with the music industry at a standstill, I suddenly found myself with no work. For the month of July 2020, I didn't turn a single profit, and subsequently had to apply for a job in a craft factory to keep my finances floating above the surface. I'd never experienced this level of instability before, and it put my whole practise into question. At the heart of it, I was a creative, not a businessman. I didn't have the confidence, experience, nor prowess to sustain myself and acquire new clientele during what was for

many freelancers a lucrative time — 49% of 11,000 designers surveyed for 99Designs' *Design Without Borders 2020* report expected to earn more during 2020 than in 2019 (99Designs, 2020).

Previously my only experience working in-house was at a one week internship at Amphora Design in Bath back in 2019. With the structure of a 9-5 job providing me with a reason to wake up earlier. I was shocked at my own output when placed within a professional context. Previously, I was reaping the benefits of being a freelancer in that I could choose my own hours, however this was also a hindrance at times, and enabled lazy habits to form. Whilst in the studio I was working at full capacity, and it set a positive standard for the rest of the university year, culminating in my best academic results yet — tangible evidence of my own potential.

With the pandemic in full effect, I found myself revisiting this internship and the benefits of working in a team-based environment. The career plan I'd constructed in my head had always included a pitstop in London, however I found myself waiting for the right opportunity that just wasn't coming. Entry Level design jobs within the music industry didn't exist, and graduate peers were echoing similar strife. Seeing an advert for the MA Entertainment Design course was the first step towards taking control: it would place me in the heart of the industry, provide me with the chance to explore my relationship with design at an even higher level, and introduce me to a whole new network of like minded creatives. To synthesise, it would provide me with opportunities. Using grades as a measurement of my own value was redundant when I'd already proved to myself that in the right conditions I could achieve excellence, instead I needed to prioritise manifesting these conditions within the realm of a full time job.

The weeks I spent interning at Good Soldier were, in short, the most important and validating 10 weeks of my life. For years I'd grappled fierce imposter syndrome, feeling like an incompetent child masquerading as an adult. With every contract renewal, this feeling diminished and my confidence in my own abilities grew. In the first two weeks, I struggled to speak up and talk to the members of the team without stumbling over my words, 10 weeks later we were hugging goodbye (albeit temporarily). I'd made great connections, and proved to myself that I belonged in this space. As the end neared, I heard more and more how the team was advocating in my favour. This was where I wanted to be, I had never been more ready to make the transition from freelancer to in-house designer.

Receiving the phone call with a job offer was a real milestone in my professional career. Initially the internship had ended with the possibility of some freelance work, and whilst I admit being slightly disappointed that they weren't able to offer me a position, immense gratitude soon took over. To then be offered a job was evidence that they'd fought to keep me; that my absence was felt enough to create a space for my return. A decade of hard work had paid off, it felt like the graduation into adulthood I'd never gotten. The realisation that these lessons I'd learned (and the doors that had been opened for me) were far more important than the shame I'd feel getting a poor mark allowed me to put down the guilt. In retrospect, I went into the office on my days off not because I felt pressured to be there, but because I wanted to be there. My desire to make an impression and be seen as a team player meant sacrificing time I didn't have, and the overall quality of this submission. I couldn't allow myself to feel shame about these choices when they were the reason that I'd been offered a job.

Creating the Game

One of the main motivators that this project still had relevance was another game commissioned by Universal Music to promote the release of Norwegian singer AURORA's 2021 single 'Cure For Me'. Much like the original 'Spilled My Coffee' visual, the gameplay employed the side-scrolling and endless runner genres.

“A side scroller is a type of video game where a side-view camera angle is used for action viewing. Side scrollers are generally in 2-D with game characters that move from the left to the right side of a screen. Some side scrollers require users to move in one continuous direction (usually to the right).” (Techopedia, n.d)

“...endless runner games don’t end. You continuously “run” through the game until an obstacle stops you with the point being to achieve the highest possible score. Their quick play, addicting nature, and simple controls make them an accessible genre that virtually anyone can pick up and play.” (Hindy, 2021)

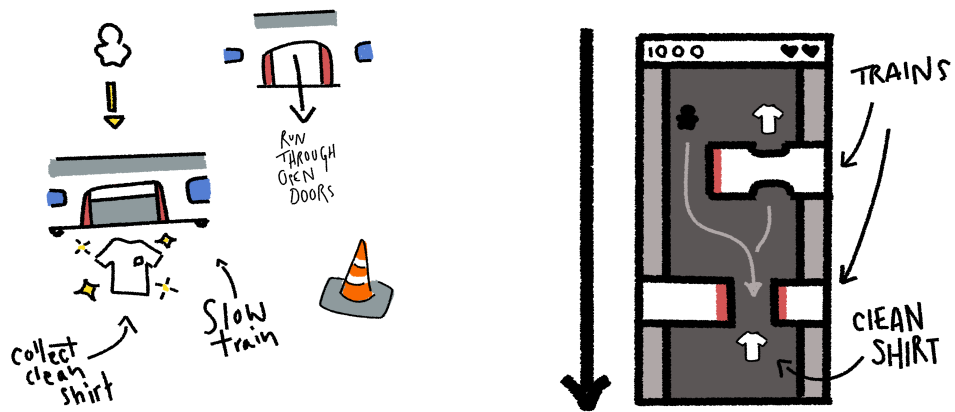
For my concept, I went in the direction of an endless runner app. I believe the side-scrolling element had been done already, and excluded those who didn’t want to turn their phone to the side to play (like myself). Endless runner games such as Temple Run and Subway Surfers still hold onto relevance a decade after their releases, so how would this look when paired with the lo-fi world built for the ‘Spilled My Coffee’ campaign?



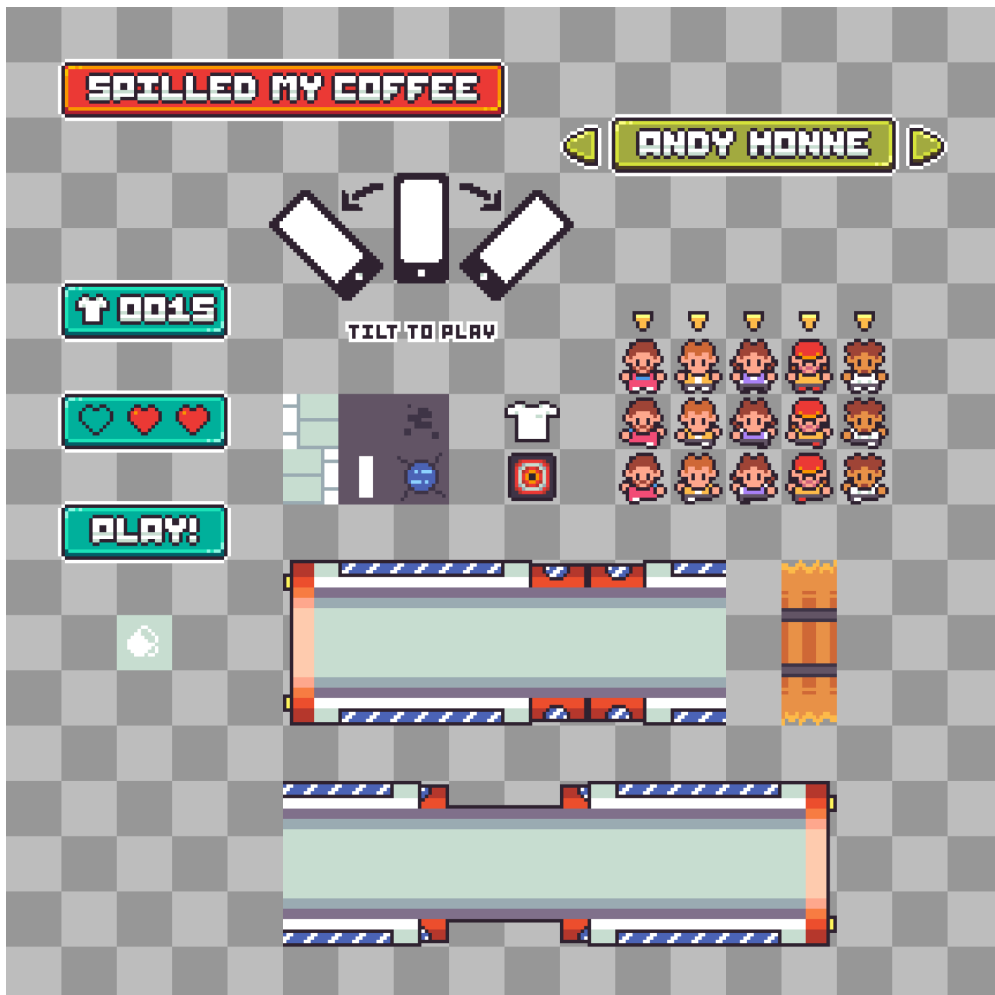
A screenshot from the ‘Cure For Me’ game released to promote the single of the same name by Norwegian singer AURORA (AURORA, 2021)

Gameplay

For the actual gameplay, I wanted the player to run through trains collecting clean white shirts as a nod to the lyrics in the refrain. Colliding with obstructive objects such as traffic cones or pot holes would result in the loss of a life, 3 strikes and the player is out. For visual inspiration, I looked to retro RPG games such as Earthbound & Pokémon, and used newfound resources such as Lospec’s Palette List to elevate aspects of my creation.



Concept artwork created using the Wacom One. (Forsey, 2021)



An asset sheet breaking down the components of my game (Forsey, 2021)



Conclusion

Whilst not my most impressive project, I'm content with what I managed to achieve in the timeframe. I've never made anything like this before, and I'm saddened that I didn't have the time to get it functional. Returning to the Personal Objectives outlined in my Written Proposal:

- *Make my strength at pixel art more prominently positioned within the context of a commercial design portfolio. This will be achieved through the creation of a project centred around the marketing of a piece of music.*
- *Challenge my engagement with the medium and attempt something functional and personally ambitious, whilst making it more commercially viable as an offered service. An example could be an animated product, or something playable.*
- *Attain a greater understanding of both my craft, capabilities, and pixel art as both a medium and its role as a tool for marketing music.*

I feel confident that I've met the first and third objectives, and am comfortable in my failure to meet the second. If I were to continue this project, I would like to spend time working on a marketing rollout,

utilising the resources and connections at Good Soldier to workshop an ironclad proposal. This would include social media assets, and research into whether it's possible to turn the fundamental gameplay principles of my concept into a functional AR filter.

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