

LDD essay ashanti

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Level Design Development

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Our game, Sinbound, at its core is a DOOM-meets-dating-simulator title, where the main character you play as needs to make their way down into the 9 Circles of Hell, to collect each piece of their soul back. In doing so, they will be granted access back into the overworld, our world. They must fight or flirt their way past our dating or fighting cast, to fight or flirt the final boss and escape Hell. Originally, we decided to aim for our target demographic to be late teens, around 16+. However, after having a few discussions about this- specifically about the Lust circle we would have to cover, and checking the ESRB [1] and PEGI [2] rating websites, we decided that the demographic for our game would fit much more in the 18+ category, as some of our levels do contain explicit not-safe-for-work material.

Firstly, our team decided to take some time into researching the MDA Framework [3]. The MDA Framework breaks down video games into three singular components- mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics, also commonly called the what-how-why of the game. The mechanics in Sinbound would be the fundamental rules of the game itself, the player progression, resources etc. In Sinbound, the player's health (in-game name of 'hope') would be a defining mechanic. If the player's hope depletes, it's a game over. Other mechanics include the dialogue screens with characters, the dialogue options the player can pick (ones to fight, or ones to flirt), the game's shooting and changing gun mechanics, and even it's transport system, with how the player can gradually unlock more platforms in the Train Station in order to get to each circle in Hell. Next, the dynamics refers to how our mechanics evolve overtime. One example of this is the Train Station, at first it is a singular platform with a singular option, but as the player progresses, every platform becomes available to them, and they can choose where they travel to. Sinbound's dynamics also encase its learning curve. Initially, the enemies are lesser imps and angels with less health and damage, but as you descend down into the Circles of Hell, the enemies increase in quantity, variety, health pools and the damage they do to the player. The player would have to strategize different ways to face each enemy and preserve their ammunition. Finally, there is the aesthetics. Whilst this does cover the actual aesthetics and visual design of the game itself, it also entails which emotional response and engagement the game would trigger at specific points. Sinbound is very character-centric, so throughout the story, we intend for our main character to interact with our cast and to become invested in their stories. We also want Sinbound to have a certain sense of discovery, with hidden easter eggs and potentially even powerups scattered around the levels.

As a team, we conducted a lot of research about the 9 Circles of Hell and Dante's Inferno [4] and learnt about the theories behind the concept. I intertwined our research of the 9 Circles of Hell in with the concept art that I created for our levels. The Train Station is our equivalent of the River Styx, with our character The Conductor being the Ferryman. In The Conductor's design itself, he references the source material of the Ferryman via his eyes being blue coins. We also stuck with the blue motif throughout The Train Station, incorporating black as well. The blue we chose for The Conductor and The Train Station is a colder, greener blue than the one we opted for in Limbo. This was to both

differentiate the hub world and the level, and to make The Train Station seem and feel colder to our player than Limbo does. As well as this, when the train stops in the next level after Limbo, Lust, the bright blue of the train's accents and smoke would give a stark contrast against the warm, pink tones of Lust.

Limbo is a place where souls who were virtuous but never knew Jesus Christ or were unbaptised came to and is often pictured as a boundary between Hell and the rest of the 9 Circles. This is why we opted for a lush, thick forest and maze, and a grand Church that looks like it has been eroded over time due to break-outs from lesser enemies (our imps, angels etc). Greens, blues and pale yellows litter Limbo, giving almost a childlike look to the Circle. Green is often considered a calming colour, whilst the combination of yellow and blue is usually found as a playful, youthful mix. The character that resides in Limbo and guards it, The Bishop, is also a figure of strength and has a wide, structured stance and silhouette. He protects the younger children in Limbo and fends off the lesser enemies to the best of his ability. Specifically for our background in Limbo, I created an illustration that was inspired by children's books artstyles, bright and simplistic in colour and form. This was because we wanted to make our rendition of Limbo to feel more like a safe haven that's been intruded upon, as it is our player's first introduction to the game and it's setting. It makes sense narratively and via gameplay for Limbo to contain less threat.

As for Lust, in Dante's Inferno, Lust is typically pictured as an eternal storm that whips and thrashes, not letting its inhabitants rest. We wanted to spin this concept and instead decided on a red-light-district style environment, where it's constantly nighttime and constantly a party. The catch in our rendition of the 2nd Circle of Hell, is that you cannot touch another person/soul in Lust, or it would feel akin to putting your hands into a flame, and they would get burned. The clubbing industry in Lust is also extremely popular, people who are damned down into Lust are taunted for eternity, and clubbing is the closest thing they could get to what they truly yearn for. They would also actively be torturing themselves, Asmodia- the Goddess of Lust and Indulgence in Sinbound- would not even have to lift a finger to torture her people. Another one of our characters, The Temptress, has built an empire in Lust, as she has built the biggest, most infamous nightclub in Lust, called Hellfire. Lust mostly consists of the colours hot pink and black. Black is usually a seductive, elegant colour [5], whilst a hot pink is a contrast to that; loud, bold and feminine in nature. The use of hot pink and black together is a striking combination, but the combination is also commonly thought of as a dilemma. Black is the dark temptation, and pink is the youthful innocence fighting against it. I believe that colours tell a story, and hot pink and black definitely tell our Lust's story.

The visual design of our game takes inspiration from titles such as the aforementioned DOOM [6], PuppetCombo [7], and Father Forgive Me 2 [8]. These games all share a similar theme of the PS1-era survival horror aesthetic, evoking a sense of VHS-era influences in the player. We opted for this because of the gritty, fast-paced style of gameplay we chose met with the softness of dialogue and romancing characters provides a stark contrast; one that hasn't been truly seen before. We believed that it was a niche that could be built upon with our concept. In my personal designs for Sinbound, specifically for The Temptress' office and her nightclub Hellfire, I researched 80s-90s diners and nightclubs and their aesthetics. Twin Peaks [9] is famous for this, but the influences from the previous 20-40 years' worth of diners is obvious in the interior and exterior design of 80s diners. I

spent a good amount of time looking at diners and nightclubs from different eras and designers taking them apart, and I specifically chose 80s diners to reference due to it's slightly more modern feel over the classic 60s. I also conducted self-directed research on train conductor uniforms, as well as the basic shape and know-how of steam trains in order to be able to design both with more confidence. For both of these, I watched YouTube [10] videos on the topics whilst I drew the subject. I did find this helpful; however, I would have liked to study further into the mechanics of steam trains to fully understand how they work. I had time constraints to consider, however, in the future I would definitely like to research further into steam locomotive components by loaning books from my library, or by reading articles.

As our team's 2D Concept Artist, I took the time to research the pipelines in game studios, and the exact role of the 2D Concept Artist. Whilst I do have industry experience in this field, I had wondered if that was all there was in my role. In undertaking this role, I am required to work collaboratively to directly support the creative decisions of the team and the creative direction of the game, whilst also staying grounded enough for our programmer. This is not only at the start of the pipeline to create the fundamentals of an art style like I had previously thought, but I am to pitch in whenever I am needed. This could mean various things come under my responsibility, such as:

- Orthographics
- Storyboards
- Mockups
- Logo ideations
- UI ideations
- Photobashing lighting keys

...and more. I enjoy how a typically rigid, almost limited with its lack of 3D aspect, medium can be so helpful in every step of the game design pipeline in a typical studio, and within our game. During this project, I stepped out of my comfort zone and into photobashing. I have found through my individual research that photobashing is actually quite a controversial method of creating concept art and is sometimes looked down upon in the industry. However, photobashing was developed primarily by game concept artists who need to work fast [11] and turn over high volumes of work in quick succession, so I found it fitting to try with Sinbound, seeing as we needed a fast turnaround time and a lot of pieces to create throughout our processes. I use an Apple software called Procreate [12] to create most- if not all- of my artworks, but I believe that Photoshop [13] has more appropriate tools for photobashing. I began some research into using Photoshop, however once again due to the time constraints, I did not think this would be the best time to learn a new program and test it. In the future, learning Photoshop thoroughly is something I would very much like to consider looking into.

Overall, I am very satisfied with my contribution to both my self-directed research, and to the development of Sinbound alongside my team. I believe our concept is strong and unique, that it would stand strong by itself if we were to continue development further to completion. I have learnt a lot about the processes behind an actual game design studio and altered my understanding of the role of a 2D Concept artist. My team has also managed to organise a structured framework in the development of creating our game, following and inspired by the MDA Framework. I also considered

the theory behind the choices that I was making whilst helping to design Limbo and Lust, and their characters.

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

68/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Thanks for this submission Ashanti. Overall a very good reflective document that details your role in the project with contextual references/research used to reinforce design choices. Potentially, the usage of some imagery may have enhanced the readability of the document. There is good usage of referencing in the IEEE format throughout. Well Done.

 A voice comment was left for this paper.

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