YOU

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Group subject: *Identity Liberalism*
Genre: *Side-scrolling 'escape' game*
Platform: *PC*

Theoretical stance:

The keywords for our game are 'Identity Liberalism'. In this context we consider 'identity' to be something that is unfixed and mutable – that seeks to defy categorisation and strives for continuous freedom of self and expression. The overarching fiction of the game is a conflict between societal forces that seek to regulate or constrain an individual's identity, and the individual's identity that seeks to avoid being constrained or regulated. The game thus champions liberty, individuality, expression of self and personal freedom of speech.

Game overview:

*   **YOU** is an escape game where the player moves through a level filled with barriers, enemies and projectiles that aim to hamper the player's movement.
*   **YOU** is allegorical, where the level represents a phase from 'life' – in this instance, childhood – and the player must maintain and build their identity as they progress, without it being diminished or constrained.

Specifics:

*   The player must spatially navigate their avatar (or 'identity') through childhood.
*   The player is able to move within the screen, but the screen is also moving, to mimic the passage of time. If the player does not keep up with the passage of time and falls behind, they will lose the game.
*   The level features obstacles such as barriers and moving assailants that try to obstruct the player's path, preventing them from moving forwards.

Gameplay:

*   The player's 'identity' is mutable. It can 'squish' down to slip through narrow gaps in barriers, or 'dash' past incoming assailants.
*   The player can find and obtain 'confidence points' as they progress, which bolster the avatar by giving it more 'lives' and also allowing it to smash down ('stand up to') barriers that cannot be skirted.

Design overview

YOU is a side-scroller escape game for the PC where you move your 'identity' through several levels of increasing difficulty, aiming to avoid colliding with barriers and enemies, which will primarily be textual (written) threats and insults. The presented level depicts the theme of 'childhood'.

Story:
YOU is an allegory for going through life. There is no dramatic arc, only dramatic elements in the form of successful survival (and being cheered for it at the end) and the danger of losing oneself (in particular, the risk that your identity might diminish or be eroded). Tension comes from the feedback built into the game (see: *Feedback*).

Character/Protagonist:
The avatar is a symbol for the abstract concept of identity and is thus nondescript regarding traits such as gender or age. While the protagonist/avatar has been designed to be abstract rather than figurative, the player should be able to identify and empathise with it to enhance the gaming experience.
•　　　Method of characterisation: grow lashes/limbs ("confidence") or lose them.

The protagonist itself has no agenda – the player's goal is to keep it whole and help it survive through the course of the game.
•　　　Properties: different health settings in relation to the number of lashes/limbs.

Dramatic elements:
There is the overall danger of losing your 'self' ('dying' and failing the level), enhanced by audiovisual feedback (animations, sounds, both of the avatar and the enemies).

Player's abilities:
•　　　Patience and timing
•　　　Ability to focus
•　　　Quick observation of the surroundings
•　　　Quick decisions
•　　　Fast reactions and precision

Challenge:
The game challenge is based on player skill:
•　　　Skill based variables in pre-defined levels
•　　　No stats
•　　　No randomness = no element of luck

Variation in difficulty stems from:
•　　　Scrolling speed
•　　　Placement of obstacles/enemies
•　　　Number of obstacles/enemies
•　　　Types/behaviour of obstacles/enemies

Resources:
The only resources are 'confidence' points, which need to be collected for the avatar to grow and become stronger. The decision not to have coins or similar score-related collectibles is purposeful, as this would contradict the current game approach of 'floating through life', with the player instead focusing on gaining or beating a 'high score'.

When being hit by an enemy or projectile, the avatar will lose 'confidence', represented by a diminishing of the avatar until it finally dissipates, resulting in 'game over'.

Obstacles:
There are various obstacles that define the possible path of movement. They differ greatly in regards to appearance and properties, though are designed to mirror the overall theme of the respective level. Some of them are objects, others are textual. The obstacles range from stationary objects to moving barriers of various sizes and shapes.
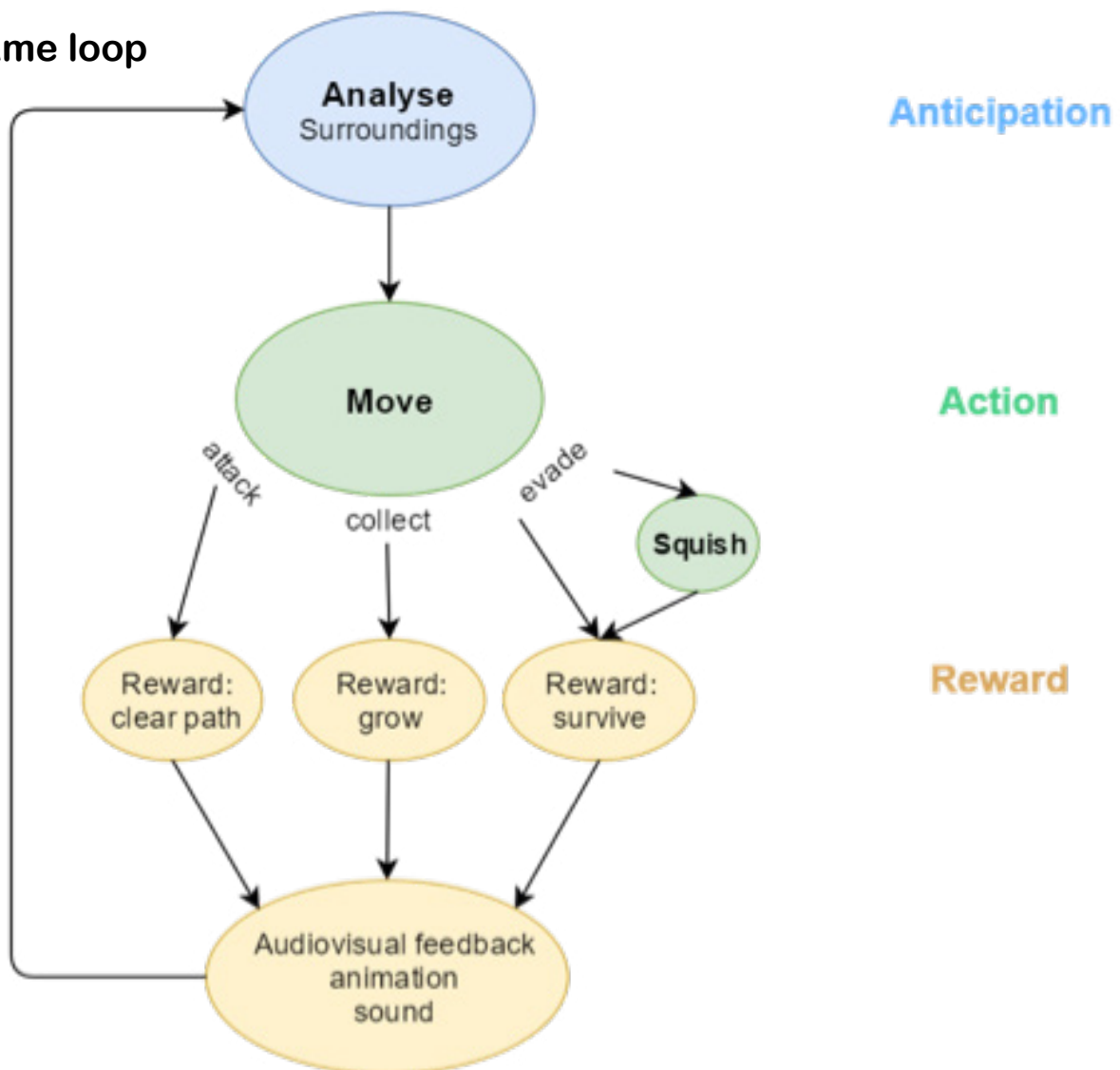 Properties: variation in look, size and movement.

Opponents:
YOU features several types of opponents, ranging from small to big ones with different behaviours, some being more difficult than others to evade.
  Properties of different types of opponents: different look, movement, speed, various strength/damage

Game loop

The game loop focuses on constantly observing and analysing the situation, deciding, and then taking action. The main action is to move the avatar to avoid obstacles and enemies or to target specific areas (to squeeze through gaps/to smash barriers/to collect confidence points). Rewards come in the form of audiovisual stimuli, but also in avoiding 'death'/being able to continue on.
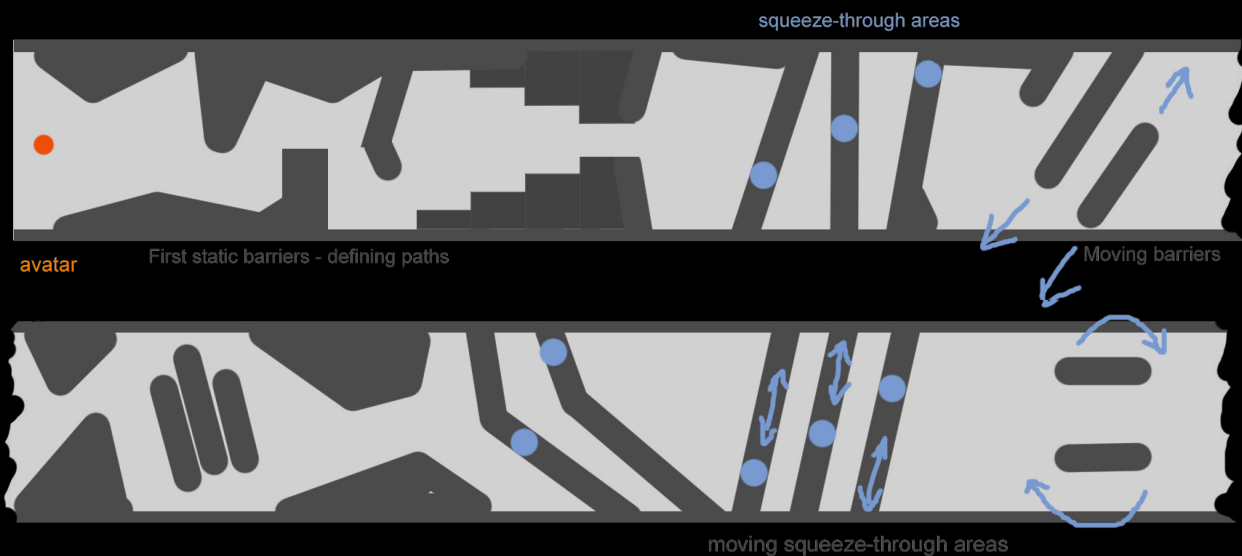
Character actions: move, squish, smash, dash
- Position the avatar by moving up, down, right, left in a smooth, floating manner
- Squeeze into thinner form
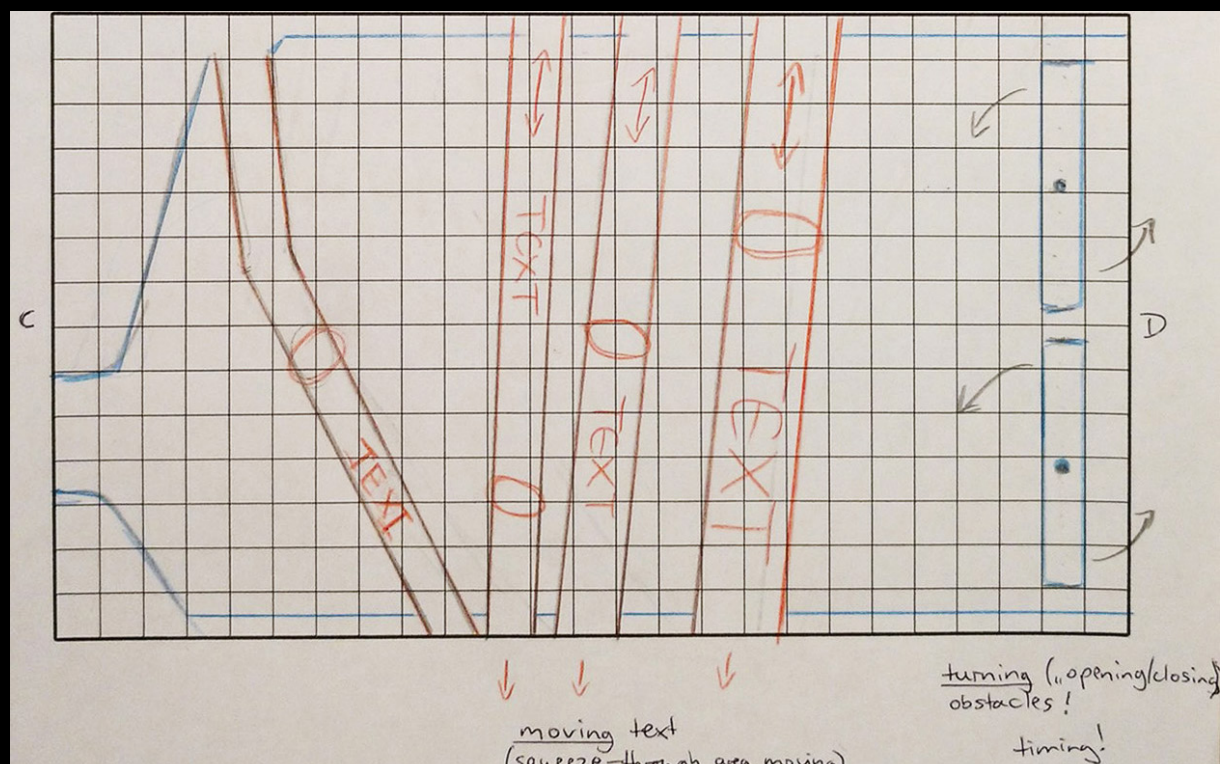- Smash barriers at specific weak areas
- Dash quickly over small areas

Level design

The level is a 'tube' scrolling from right to left. Objects, barriers and enemies are strategically placed to form a certain path – sometimes different choices. The player has to maneuver with the right pace to successfully reach the end. Additional levels may include features such as changing the direction of the scrolling motion, having the avatar move to the background to evade dangers in the foreground (several layers of the level), boss fights and more.

Example of design for part of the first level

squeeze-through areas

avatar First static barriers - defining paths Moving barriers

moving squeeze-through areas

Single screen of the level design showing barriers and movement in proportion

moving text
(squeeze-through area moving)

turning (...opening/closing)
obstacles!

timing!

The difficulty increases as new obstacles (see: *Obstacles*) and enemies (see: *Enemies*) are introduced, providing a greater challenge to the player as they become more familiar with the controls and gameplay.

Different levels:
The game is comprised of one level; childhood. However, there is the option to expand the existing game to include different levels representing crucial stages in life, for example:
    Level 1: Childhood/Nursery/Kindergarten
    Level 2: School/College Level X-Y: Shopping Mall, High Street, etc.
    Level 3: Adulthood/Workplace

Feedback

Audible
•   Changing direction of avatar
•   Hitting a surface/being hit
•   Changing shape – squeezing
•   Dying
•   Collecting a confidence point and growing
•   Enemies flying towards you

Visual
•   Changing direction of avatar
•   Hitting a surface/being hit
•   Changing shape – squeezing
•   Dying
•   Collecting a confidence point
•   Colliding with enemy – losing confidence points – diminishing

Sound design

The overall sound design aids with immersion by relating to the theme of the level. The level features ambient sounds from childhood, such as children playing, and joyful outdoor sounds (birds singing etc.), mixed with simple, child-friendly melodies, typically featuring piano instrumentals. For enemies, abstract noises are used rather than spoken words, so as not to inundate the player with both audible and written text.

ART

Art overview

The aesthetic of **YOU** is meant to feel colourful, bold and bright, with high contrast between a fantastical background and a dark, silhouetted foreground.

Background

The background art for **YOU** shows scenes and environments from an idealised childhood. It is supposed to take you on a journey from the hospital to small, colourful villages, playgrounds and birthday parties before ending up in a bedroom decked out with youthful regalia. The palette is bright and colourful, contrasted with the silhouettes and barriers of the foreground. As a whole, the background is supposed to feel sweet and innocent.
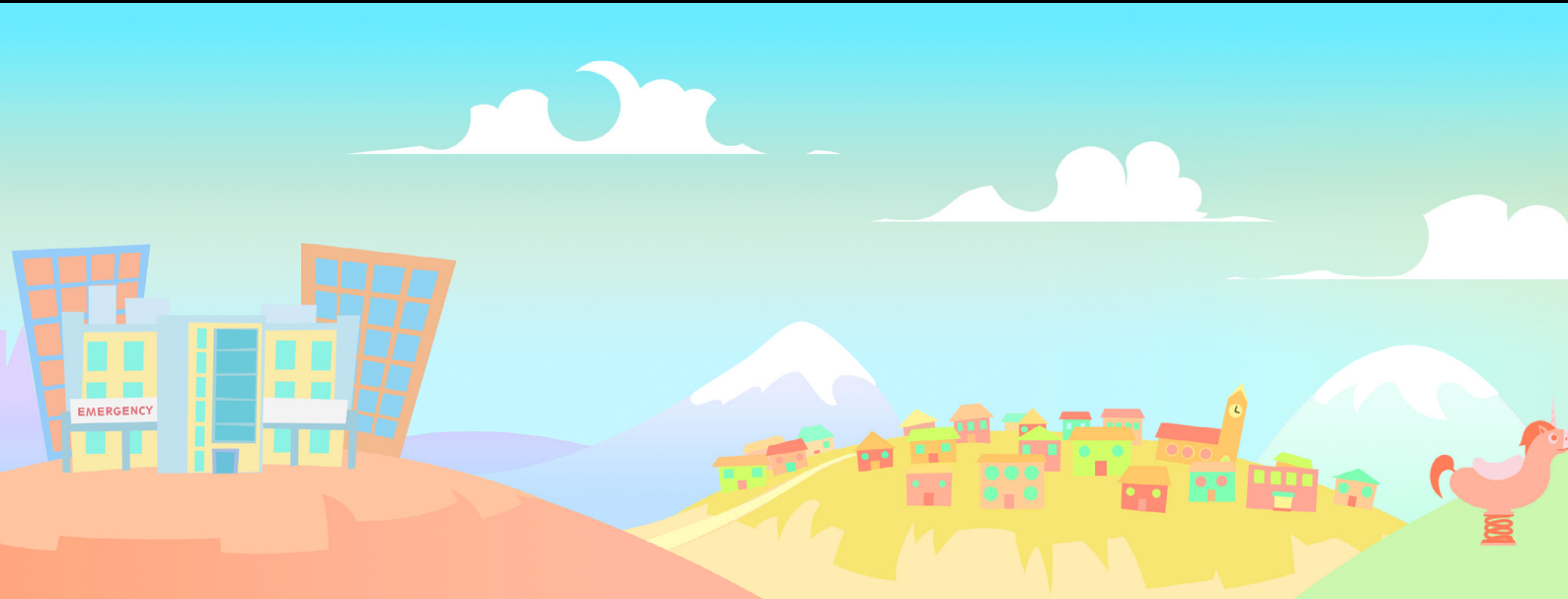
Foreground

The foreground of **YOU** is where the main obstacles are situated. The foreground is meant to be dark and ominous, with discarded toys and symbols of childhood scattered in and amongst barriers made up of words and phrases meant to put the avatar 'in its place' – to constrict, constrain and bar its path.
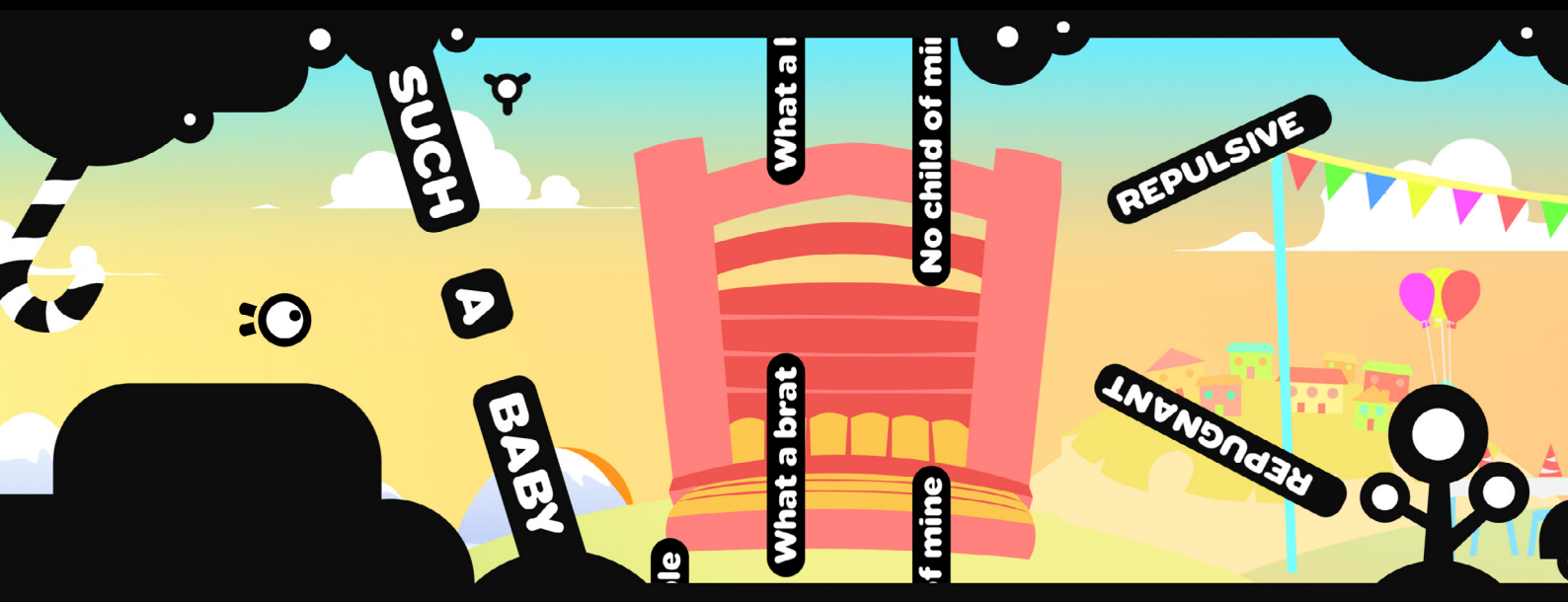
Player avatar

Figurative vs symbolic:
The main character of **YOU** is not so much a specific character as it is the concept of the player's identity. Had the avatar been figurative or representational in nature, it would have been too constraining and too embodied. After all, having the avatar as a man or woman would not represent every player's identity; neither would an adult or child represent every character's age. In fact, the problem with being figurative and referential is that identity then becomes rooted in the physical – which would contradict the liberal theme of the game, as many aspects of identity, such as sexuality or personal ideologies are not necessarily embodied.

Symbolic turn:
Turning to the symbolic, the design for the avatar was deeply influenced by representations of identity in the arts. One of the main inspirations was the mandala; a symbol used in Buddhism as a representation of the universe, and in Jungian psychology as a representation of the complete self. A mandala, in its simplest form, is a circle. One of the most graphic is the 'sun' mandala; a black dot inside a black ring. This concept formed the basis of the avatar, with the circle being a way of representing one's self and one's own universe.

Simplicity is key:
The final design for the avatar is based around hybrid elements; the sun mandala, the letter 'i' (which is also an indicator for the self) and a literal 'eye', which brings life to the avatar, anthropomorphising it so that the player can more readily relate to it.

Enemies

For the enemies, a cohesive look was established by adopting similar round shapes in each of their designs. They all have a solid and distinct profile, using the same bold, black and white palette that is used for the foreground barriers. As the game level is 'childhood' themed, the enemies were inspired by children's toys, patterns and textiles, but transformed into something menacing and mean.
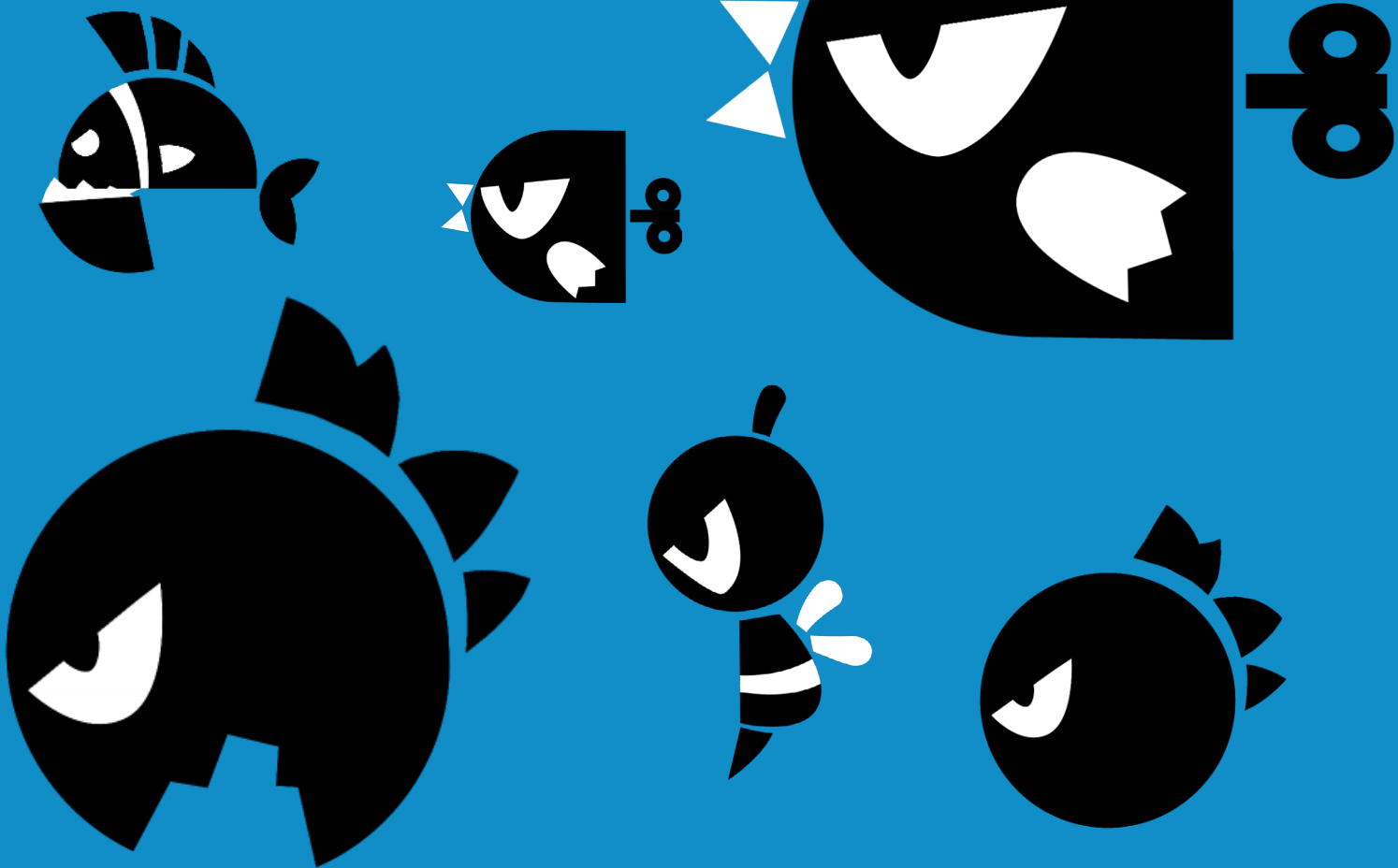
Informatics overview

The game was systematically built in Unity by adding the rough concepts for mechanics and graphics, assuring access to a functioning prototype as early as possible. Because of that, bugs were easily found and fixed. Everything has been tested and reworked to develop a polished game.

Music and sounds:

The game contains different tracks for the main menu and the game, and scripted transitions and conditions declare when and how they should be played. As for the effects, there are some AudioSources and a script attached to an empty object that find public AudioClips on the different game objects and play them with a randomizer in pitch and clip (if there are more than one), should the conditions for the effect be given.

Enemies:

There are four different types of enemies that behave differently when the avatar approaches them. Some of the enemies trigger on activation points and some have a given path to patrol. Others do not move at all, instead acting as spawn points for projectiles.

Animations:

In total, there are 26 animation states for the player in the game that are used whenever a function or ability requires the avatar to change its appearance. Transition options and conditions as well as speeds for the different states were declared using Unity's built in animator tool. The animator variables were then modified via script to trigger animation transitions. An example of the animator is shown below.
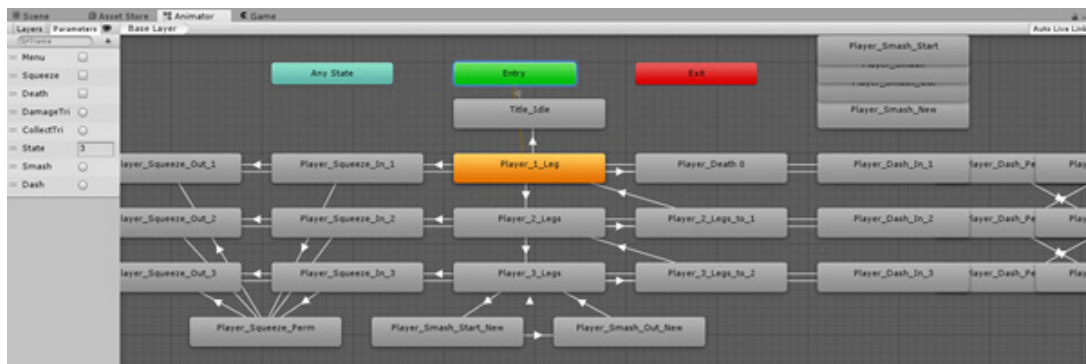
Player abilities

Smash:

This ability enables the player to smash through the final barrier in the first level of the game and as such is a vital mechanic for its completion. Many different mechanics were explore to achieve the best result. Currently, the ability is assigned to the same key as the *dash* mechanic, but only triggers if the player has collected enough confidence points and is close enough to the final barrier. With a click, the player control is disabled, the avatar moves to destroy the barrier and then moves out of the screen.

Dash:

This feature was not initially planned. However, playtesters asked for an option to temporarily boost the movement speed of the avatar to get more control in situations where the player threatens to fall behind or when enemies approach. With this mechanic, a force is applied to the player object that propels it forwards in the direction it is moving.

Squeeze:
A key aspect of gameplay is squeezing, where the player squeezes between barriers. The initial script reduced the avatar's size with a click. However, this mechanic was visually unsatisfactory and was scrapped. Now an animation shrinks the avatar, and only the collider is updated in the script.

To prevent players from exploiting these abilities (e.g. overusing them), a condition has been implemented that prevents the player from being able to use them in tandem. As such, a player cannot dash and squeeze at the same time.

Miscellaneous:
•   At the start of the (first) level, two tutorial screens appear. The game will not begin until the player has dismissed them by pressing 'continue'. They do not reappear until the game is reloaded.
•   A menu shows up whenever the game is paused via button press (space). During this time, all the key shortcuts that are shown on the menu are enabled.
•   An ending screen shows up as soon as the final obstacle is overcome. It slowly fades in and enables a button that loads the game back into the main menu.
•   To stay true to the visual style there is a custom icon for the mouse cursor. The cursor is set visible/invisible depending on the current game scene or event.
•   Declaring different collision layers for player, enemies and environment helps with enemy movement and certain player functions.
•   Collectibles are spread throughout the level. They restore the equivalent of one 'life' to the player, up to a maximum of three. Initially rotated via script, collectibles currently move via an animation to attract the player's attention.
•   In addition to the static foreground screens, there are several moving barriers and obstacles with different behaviours in the level that cannot damage the player, but do obstruct their path.