

## Play Log 2: Shotgun Jerboa

### Takeaways from a student-made game project

#### Introduction:

*Shotgun Jerboa* is a game I was made aware of through a friend who contributed some of the UI elements. It was created as a semester-long project for GSU's Gambuilders Club.

The [design doc](#) (and subsequently the [slides pitch presentation](#) that sold the game to the team of contributors) are on the game's itch.io page, inviting an in-depth look into the intentions and design decisions made and offering much insight into the open, collaborative nature of the game's creation since its inception. Subsequently, *Shotgun Jerboa* can be modeled through a systematic analysis that encompasses the full context of its creation. Following Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*, this would be an analysis of a game's development through an open system where outside components continually shaped the end product. Insights drawn will come from the stated design intentions of the documentation as well as what is already implemented in the currently available version 0.3.

#### Overarching Structure:

*Shotgun Jerboa* is a boomer shooter, a term affectionately coined for games made during an era where computer processing limited what was possible for games made in a 3-D environment. Like many modern games that successfully recreate that retro feel however, *Shotgun Jerboa* makes sure to keep up with the times. Aside from the typical (to be covered in detail in following sections), the game includes platforming elements and mechanics that involve the in-built physics of the Unity engine to create its own distinctive identity.

There are two resources in this game: health and nuts. Health is self explanatory, but nuts have a double function, where it functions as both ammo for the shotgun(s) as well as a health replenishment. Ammo can be consumed to restore health (20 a pop).

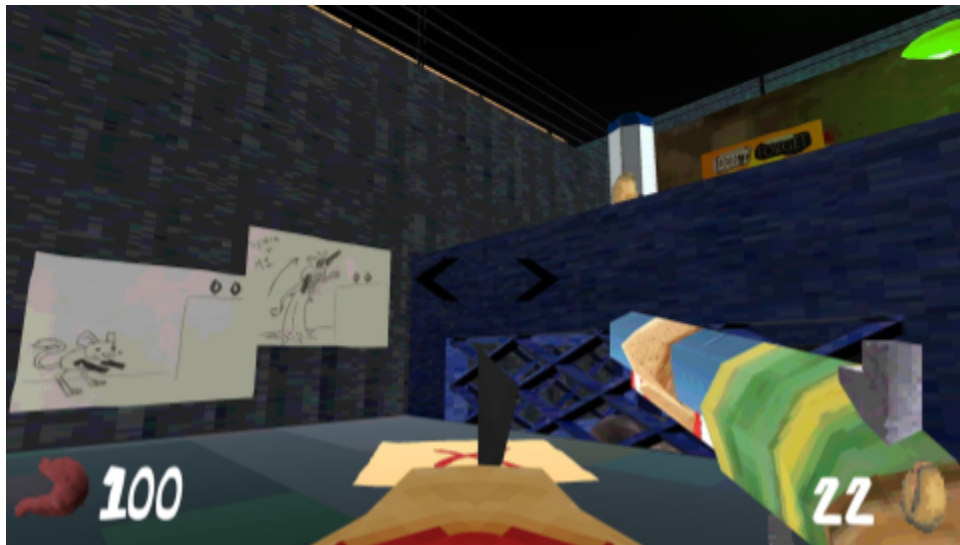
After acquiring at least one shotgun and eventually getting two to dual-wield in the tutorial level, the gameplay loop is to shoot enemies who drop nuts, and platform/maneuver through the 3-D level where nuts are generously but tactfully

spread out. There is one way through the level, but by exploring side routes or successfully performing a shotgun-jump (see Movement/UI), the player can build up an ammo reserve.

### Movement/UI:

The player navigates a 3-D environment, inhabiting the form of a mutant jerboa who hops rather than walks. Holding WASD in any direction results in smooth traversal but even tapping the button will result in a significant “hop”. This distinction in movement mechanics from the outset affects gameplay, particularly the platforming. Platform spaces that seem generous and would be if one could tap the button to every so slightly increment and adjust themselves become much more unwieldy as one tap of a directional key is always a full hop forward.

There is also a dedicated jump button however, and as a fun extension of that concept of jumping around to traverse the environment, the game also has a shotgun-jump mechanic. The shotguns have a large recoil that is especially prevalent when the player is midair, and by shooting off the ground at the apex of their jump, the player is able to launch themselves a significant distance vertically. This is a core feature taught in the tutorial and the game’s levels are designed around this mechanic.



*Figure 1: Hand-drawn tutorial images explaining the shotgun-jump mechanic originated from Pitch Presentation (Jett Butler)*

### The Aesthetics, Sound, & Vibes:

For a game with a three month development period, *Shotgun Jerboa* has an impressive amount of polish and this is in no doubt due to the strong vision of its team lead. In the team lead's words, "This game *lives or dies* on the movement controls, art style, and level design coming together" (SSJ Pitch Presentation).

The art is eclectic and loud. Of note is that there were several different artists contributing to the wall art in this game, resulting in a mishmash of styles all pulled together through thematic cohesion that emphasizes humor and some level of overtness and crudeness.

That "jankiness" is a deliberate aesthetic however, which turns out to not be a cop out. The game signals to the player through how refined its movement and gameplay design is that it is in fact a competently made game.



Figure 2: Variety of art contributions from different artists (*Shotgun Jerboa*)

### Agency:

The player is placed into a 'Rat Maze' as outlined in the design document's key features which brings to mind Murray's interpretation. There is one way out of the level but it isn't quite linear, as the 3-D environment filled with rooms that contain vertical platforming challenges which are strung together through a network of branching tunnels results in a lot of room for physical exploration. It's quite possible that the player never acquires their second shotgun if they do not

go one way in the tunnels. Subsequently, while signaling a clear intended path, the game's level design communicates that it encourages exploration through reinforcement in rewards through nuts.

There is something to be said about reinforcing player behavior as they embody a rodent through nuts. The player exerts agency, but they are in fact built in a designed environment which draws attention to that fact in the framing of its premise and the hints of its narratives which barely come through in the 0.3 version of the game but can be seen in the design document and presentation.

### Pacing/Progression:

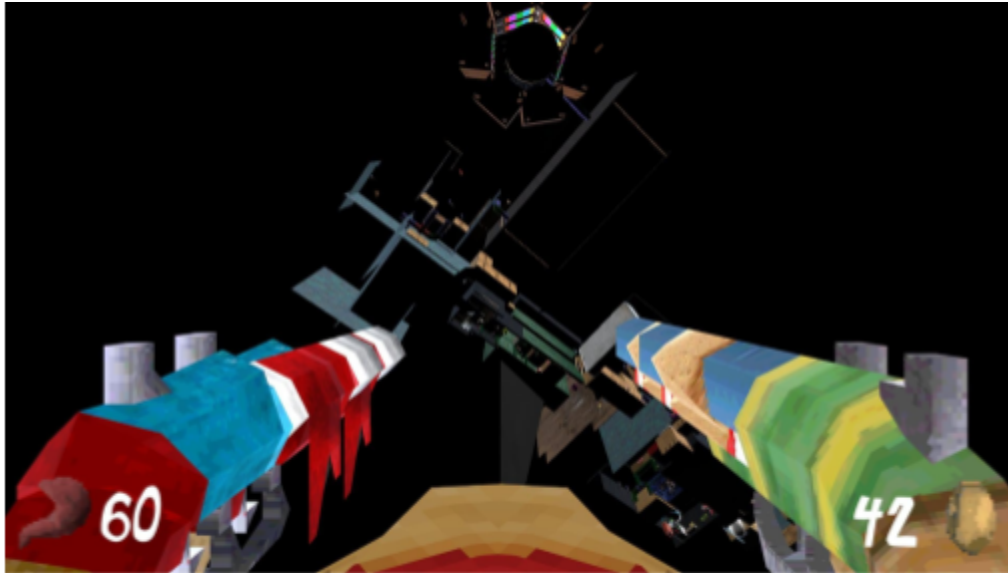
The game switches between its tunnels systems where the player chooses what route to go and open levels with enemies that are to be cleared before platforming (of course, the player can also choose to platform with enemies chasing after them).

What's on offer at this moment in Version 0.3 is a showcase demo. The initial tutorial level eventually leads the player through to a free play section and the very start of a story mode.

### Intentions and Framing in a Systems Analysis:

So far, with the exception of some references to game design intentions, I have been representing *Shotgun Jerboa* through an experiential system frame of analysis (Salen and Zimmerman 51). As outlined, this particular framing blurs the line in assuming that the game is a closed or an open system (54). The player is meant to embody the jerboa and not only sympathize but relate to its situation as a mutant in a maze where they are inundated with strong, propagandistic messaging that feels distinctly dystopic.

There is another frame of analysis however, one that analyzes the game itself as the object with the design choices as the attributes, where the internal relationships are between the creators, their contributions to the project, and the environment is the context that this is all an extracurricular project for a university club. In that framing, intention seems to adhere to the attributes and internal relationships.



*Figure 3: Falling off the map after entering the 'Story' section (Shotgun Jerboa)*