

Play Log 5 (Twine Reflection): *The Secret Sauce*

How the Sauce was Made

The Secret Sauce is a game where the player inhabits the role of a spy who's infiltrating a faux-upscale Italian restaurant. As an under-cover waiter, the player must avoid drawing suspicion while maintaining a baseline of competency at their duties as they try to uncover what is going on in the restaurant, going in with only the knowledge that something big is happening in five days.

My two main roles on this project are heading the game design as the de facto design lead and then ultimately implementing all of these systems and text as the twine coder. In these two roles, I primarily contribute to the formalized systems and structure of our group's project whereas my teammates developed the puzzles, found the artifacts, and are writing out the content to fill out that structure. As the person plugging things in, I have the first pass in seeing how different contributions meld together from the dialogue to the puzzles, and oftentimes I find myself necessarily adapting and adding certain elements to make them fit seamlessly. It's in that interplay of different fixed focuses has given me firsthand insights into how certain mechanics of the game's systems can reflect the particulars of the player character and the premise which we figured out and tried to lean into part way through development.

The rules of the systems in place are "fixed" and "unambiguous", two key traits outlined by Salen and Zimmerman (Rules). The time and the stats tracked are all presented for the player to see and make informed choices from. In moving through the game, the hours go by and the player is reliably able to go talk to Nest at the end of every shift. For the environment of the restaurant, there are rooms the player can freely navigate through, only constrained by the amount of competency they are willing to tank if they choose to shirk off their waiter duties for an insufficient amount of hours. These temporal and physically mapped states are all there and reliably signaled to the player.

It's worth looking into how these stats are signaled to the player. Of course it's mirrored on the top of the screen through a condition and a numerical value, but in plugging in dialogue and interactions I've found myself having to fill in lines of text reflecting the state of the game's systems as it may not be obvious otherwise. This winds up being in the form of the spy's inner monologue. When I see a comment to raise suspicion from an interaction, I fill in a line that says that the lady has her eyes on them.

"You seem QUITE interested in our sweaters, for someone who doesn't wish to donate..." one of the ladies observes. She smiles but you feel her eyes on you.

Your suspicion has increased (+2).

Reassure: "I was just admiring..."

Apologize: "I can't donate on the job..."

Figure 1: "...you feel her eyes on you", an addition I ended up making to give context to the increased suspicion (Screenshot taken during development)

These additions fulfill the purpose of signaling the updates to the game's systems to the player, systems like suspicion and competency and even the time of day that the spy is interpreting. As far as the game's systems are concerned, these interpretations are *always right*. A perceived suspicion score of 0, as is coded in through the conditional statement, will in fact lead the player to the 'Suspicion Fail Screen' passage and a bad ending. Our spy is confident and has a good read on what day it is (thankfully), the hours on their shift, and how they are perceived. The statistics are then a reflection of the spy's characterization. This reinforces the premise of our game, where you are a competent spy coming from a serious place who's trying to sort out what's going on in a weird as heck themed restaurant.

```
<<if $suspicion == 0 && $statCheck == 1>>  
  <<goto [[Suspicion Fail Screen]]>>  
<</if>> <<if $competency == 1 && $statCheck == 1>>  
  <<goto [[Competency Fail Screen]]>>  
<</if>> <<if $suspicion <= 3 && $competency <= 3 && $statCheck == 1>>  
  <<goto [[Suspicion and Competency Fail Screen]]>>  
<</if>>
```

Figure 2: The conditions to send the player to the failure states of the game. (Screenshot taken during development on Twine)

The second part of the premise is where the game gets interesting, as that is the context and primary content of the game (characters, puzzles, etc.). Notice that this is the part that the other group members did. There is no hard-coded randomness in this game. The procedural system for this game stays consistent, only modified and customized to reflect the content as my teammates make notes for me to raise or lower a stat based on the outcome of a choice option. In the writing we find the somewhat jaded main character the player embodies, the

hyper-competent woman playing a supporting role, and a whole slew of suspicious and zany characters that embody chaos. It's in trying to read into characters and objects and picking options from the branching lists of choices, that the player grapples with uncertainty. They are defining the playground, the "possibility space" (Bogost 120) to complete the requirements for Bogost's model of a "procedural model" in combination with the rules described above (The Rhetoric of Video Games 136). The characters and dialogue lean into this. *Secrets of the Sauce* carries a self-aware and oftentimes humorous tone, leaning into the tropes of spy fiction. In many of the choices the spy fumbles simply due to their inability to anticipate how extreme some of these characters are.

To once again lean on Bogost's ideas on Procedural Rhetoric, the procedure of play can be used to advance an argument (133), but it is first and foremost there to be an "imagined system" (136). This is just a silly little spy game after all, albeit one that models its premise well. The resonance between the possibilities of play, which are tied to the certain, reliable systems and the actions that the player can do as the spy, and the play space, all come together to fulfill the core premise of the game, resulting in an entertaining and meaningful gameplay experience where the player feels like they are in the scenario and making moves.