Yumeng's Thoughts on Final Project for Core Studio/Lab: Systems
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Concept (early stage):
    This project is a deliberation on the impacts and implications of punishment in video games to real life. It consists of a web game and a customized game controller, which turns the virtual punishment for the game avatar into physical punishment to the player's hands holding the controller.

Questions:
 - Everyone likes winning, so why is there failing in video games?
 - What is the psychology of failing in contrast with winning?
 - What does it mean to gain or lose points or be killed in a video game? What does it feel like in the real world in equivalence?
 - How does a video game's rewarding and punishment system impact on the player's cognition and behavior in reality?
 - How to build up empathy in video games through its rewarding and punishment system?

Inspiration:
    The idea of this project derived from a chapter that I recently read from a memoir named Gamelife, which depicted the development, confusion and loneliness of a childhood through seven classic computer games, ranging from the early 1980s to 1990s. In the second chapter Four Hundred and Ninety Points of Damage, the author, around 10 years old then, was introduced to a game called Bart's Tale II, a computer game version of board game Dungeons and Dragons. In this game, the computer would generate a random number of points for the ability level of the avatar, and usually the number would be less than 20 points. However, there was once that the author encountered an enormously destructive enemy, who caused 490 points of damage, consuming all of the avatar's life points instantly. As a 10-year-old boy, the author was appalled by this large number of points and pondered what it meant to be killed by 490 points and what it would feel like in the real life.

> But as I sat there on the bus, I didn't feel stronger. Pretend victories didn't feel real. And there was something else. Something from the game I couldn't stop thinking about. Something I'd felt in the game that I couldn't find any way to know or to feel outside it. *What did 490 points of damage feel like?* What would it look like? I could imagine 12 points of damage. A cut-through neck, for instance. A crushed torso. I could even imagine 20 points of damage. A pulverized skull. Both legs sliced cleanly off. But 490 points of damage? Here was a hard limit to my imagination. I simply couldn't imagine up to 490.

Research on Questions and Context:

1. The Purpose of Failing

The rewarding and punishment system of a video game often directly corresponds to failure and victory in the game. People all like to win, so what is the purpose of failing?

According to the article *Fear of Failing? The Many Meanings of Difficulty in Video Games*, failing contributes to the emotional variations in the game and keeps the game engaging by encouraging the players to reevaluate their strategies.

"…failure serves the deeper function of making players readjust their perception of a game. In effect, failure adds content by making the player see new nuances in a game. The study shows that players have quite elaborate theories of failure as a source of enjoyment in games… the role of failure is much more than a contrast to winning – failure pushes the player into reconsidering strategy, and failure thereby subjectively adds content to the game. The game appears deeper when the player fails; failure makes the game more strategic."

2. Punishment and Its Implications

There is punishment for failing. Common methods of punishment include:

- **Energy punishment**: Loss of energy, bringing the player closer to life punishment.
- **Life punishment**: Loss of a *life* (or "retry"), bringing the player closer to game termination.
- **Game termination punishment**: Game over.
- **Setback punishment**: Having to replay part of the game; losing abilities.

These methods of punishment have impact on the progress of the avatar in role-playing video games. However, no matter how immersive the games can be, the punishment does not have any impact on the player in reality. What can be the consequences of this? Especially, in violent role-playing games, what are the implications of killing some one and being killed?

Back to Gamelife, this excerpt talked about how two young boys interpreted death in the virtual games and in reality.

> "How many times can you die?" I asked James.
> "Three," he said. "You mean in *Pac-Man*?"
> "No, in life," I said.
> "Oh," he said. He thought. "I don't think you can die too many times."
> "How many?" I persisted.
> "Well," he said. "Jesus. Now, come on with yourself."
> "What?"
> "Well, how many stories have you heard where someone dies, and then they die *again*?"
> "In *Suspended* I die every day," I whispered.
> "What?"
> "*Suspended*," I said. "In *Suspended* I die all the time."
> "Whaddaya mean, you die all the time? How many?"
> "I don't know."

The death of the avatar in a game merely means the end of game and starting over again; how have death in games shaped the ways that we perceive and react to actual death? Are some of the mechanisms of rewarding and punishment appropriate in an educational perspective?

Studies found out that the immersive role-playing feature in video games did have influences on player's perception, reaction and behaviors in real life. For instance, violence games results in aggression in reality.

punishment will decrease them. If punishment in a violent video game does lead to a reduction in aggressive game play, GAM predicts this type of video-game exposure will decrease aggressive behavior in real-life situations compared with exposure to video games that reward aggressive game play. However, if a player insists on using an aggressive playing strategy and is continually punished for violent actions in a violent video game, frustration could increase. Increases in frustration frequently cause increases in aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1989).

3. Interesting Fact – Punishment is Decreasing in Modern Games
The following chart reflects on the decreasing of punishment as a trend in video games by genre. "Modern design shies away from punishment, especially in the form

of setback. Instead designers focus more and more on rewards for doing particularly well, like achievements. Often, failure simply requires a player to retry the challenge they failed." (In the old time, the limitations of technology also account for punishments in games. For instance, the software of the game couldn't save the stage that the player has currently been playing.)
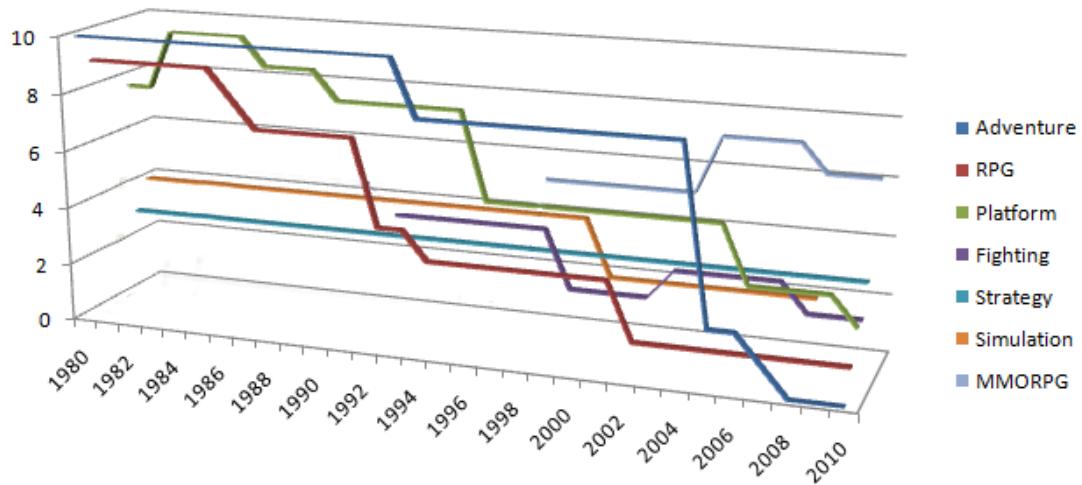

4. Empathy Games

Empathy games are a relatively recent genre of video games that tends to have an educational effect on players. They inject empathy to the players into the avatar in the game to experience certain life choices, social issues, etc. The punishment in empathy games is usually subtle, since winning is not necessarily the ultimate goal of the game and instead, the process matters. (See examples of empathy games in Reference.) However, this project has significant difference from empathy games, although both have educational intentions. While empathy games often aim to bring real-world dilemmas into virtual games seeking solutions, my game in this project diverges to an almost opposite route – a reflection on the impact of what happens in the game world, especially the punishment aspect, to the player's reality.

For Next Weeks:

I have a few sketches on the forms of the controller, which tie in the topic of this project and their counterpart on the webpage. A critical feature of the controller is that it acts as an input for the game as well as an output. The controller will physically punish the player if they fail or lose points in the virtual game.
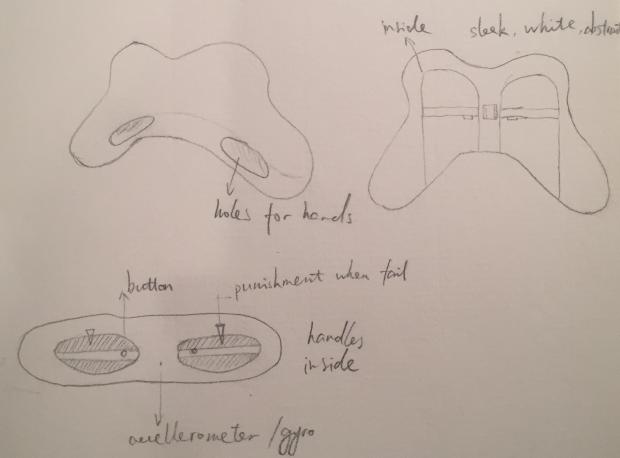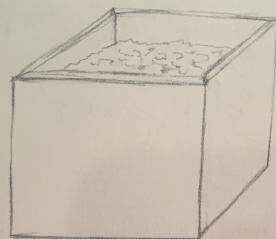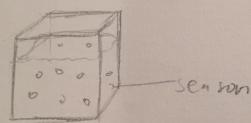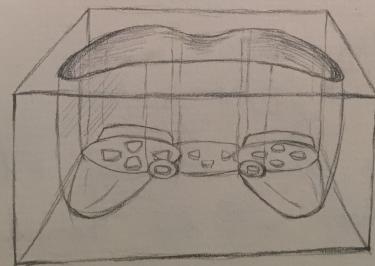
Reference:
Gamelife, Michael Clune, 2015

Fear of Failing? The Many Meanings of Difficulty in Video Games
https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/fearoffailing/

The Reward and Punishment in Violent Videos on Aggressive Effect, Cognition and Behavior
http://public.psych.iastate.edu/caa/abstracts/2005-2009/05ca.pdf

Gaming 101: How we die—player punishment in video games
http://icrontic.com/article/gaming-101-how-we-die%E2%80%94player-punishment-in-video-games

Empathy Games:
Emily Is Away: http://emilyisaway.com/
Depression Quest
Dys4ia
ohmygod are you alright?