Moral Judge

A narrative adventure game

By

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Abstract

Moral Judge is a narrative adventure game designed for computer environments, compatible with both Windows and MacOS. Based on mythical Japanese monsters (yokai) and the world setting of fables, *Moral Judge* can provide players with easy-to-understand relevant knowledge. Moral Judge is an adventure game and the project goal is to explore immersion design techniques in narrative games. The story is about exploring a special village, gathering information and clues as power and fighting with the “evil power”. Developed over a span of three months, *Moral Judge* brings a fun experience in a fantasy world.

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Table of Contents

1.Introduction

1.1 Overview

Moral Judge is a linear narrative adventure game revolving around “collecting and selecting” gameplay mechanics. This style immerses players in a realm of interactive actions, challenging them with making thoughtful selections and discerning useful information. The game is based on a 5 Chapters story with 2 ends. The player starts with almost no information about the world. As the storyline progresses, players will learn about the world setting and storyline through multiple ways. In order to help players remember and confirm the information and clues obtained, the “Think cloud” system is used as the inventory system in the early stages of the game and makes players familiar with it. With the information collected, players will face “judge” as a checkpoint between chapters to challenge their collection and thinking. Only if they pass the judgment phase can they experience the next chapter, otherwise they are sent back to the place where they can make selection again. The world setting and character design are strongly based on Japanese “yokai”(natural spirits) culture. A character's personality and appearance are linked to yokai traits, which players will get explained later in the game. After experiencing the storyline, players will also have an understanding of these cultural elements.

1.2 Inspiration

1.2.1 Story

I think it’s cool to be able to use one’s abilities to make changes in a world and have those changes be responded to. I want to implement this idea in a narrative game in this project, and explore how to make it become impressive. As a one-person project, I couldn't complete a grand or long-form story in a short time, so I decided to start with a small perspective.

In my consideration, I decided to set the player as a judge, police officer or guard who already has the power to judge in the real world. I give them a more pivotal position, making "their every move will affect the world" more intuitive.

The idea of a "village of monsters" was inspired by the animated film *Spirited Away*.(Ghibli, 2001) It shows an isolated world inhabited by various animals and monsters. The protagonist, as an outsider, must get used to unique rules and overcome various difficulties. From the movie, I think "helping a monster village regain order" is an interesting theme.

Figure 1.1 A screenshot of movie “Spirited Away”

1.2.2 Main event

The main event in the game named “harvest festival” originates from various Japanese traditional festivals celebrating harvests. These festivals have regional characteristics, so each festival contains unique local cultural elements.

For example, the Karatsu Kunchi Festival is a massive three-day parade at the beginning of November featuring huge floats known as “hikiyama” toured through town and eventually from Karatsu Shrine to Nishino Beach. The floats include a killer whale and the legendary Urashima Taro—a fisherman who was Japan's version of Rip Van Winkle. (2020)

Figure 1.2 Karatsu Kunchi Festival(2020)

1.2.3 Characters

In terms of character design, I chose anthropomorphic images of yokai as the basis, and relate the traits of yokai to character personalities in the story. As times

change, more and more cultural works take monsters as themes or add monster elements. The image of monsters has gradually changed from mysterious and scary to cute and cartoony.

Figure 1.3 Image of Kappa in Edo period and in modern times

Combined with Japanese monster novels, monsters often represent a certain type of person. For example, a kind of bird yokai named “Ubume” represents a mother who died in childbirth.(Wikipedia, 2008) So I decided to connect the appearance of the characters with their personalities and characteristics of monsters in the game to enhance the cultural depth of the narrative.

1.2.4 Gameplay

The gameplay design is inspired by narrative adventure games like 13 Sentinels Aegis Rim(Altus, 2020) and Ace Attorney(CAPCOM, 2001).

Figure 1.4 Title pages of 13 Sentinels and Ace Attorney

As the first "Courtroom Battle" game, Ace Attorney immerses players in a courtroom simulation that keeps players tense and focused. In this project I took inspiration from this pattern and used "judge" as a similar courtroom simulation scenario. I hope this will allow players to feel the rhythm changes between "relaxation" and "tension" while experiencing the story.

Figure 1.5 The "Connect my thoughts" system in Ace Attorney

The 13 Sentinels Aegis Rim has an impressive information storage system. The information collected by the character through various channels is gathered in the "mind" in the form of entries. Players can gain an understanding of the information contained in the entries from the character's perspective through "thinking". From this I got inspiration about the information inventory system. Different from the physical concept of "backpack" and other entities, I hope to apply the non-entity concept of "Think Cloud" to the information inventory system of this project. On the one hand, it is more suitable for "Moral Judge" , the group who has special abilities, and on the other hand, it prevents players from feeling inconsistent when obtaining information about entities and non-entities at the same time.

Figure 1.6 The information storage system of 13 Sentinels Aegis Rim

2. Technology

2.1 Software

2.1.1 Engine

The game was developed in the Ren'Py visual novel engine based on Python. Ren’Py allows developers to use words, images and sounds to tell interactive stories that run on multiple platforms such as Android, Windows and Mac. Ren’Py Documentation as a scripting library provides users with references for python scripting, which is suitable for developers without a strong programming background. Since the project is focusing on exploring design techniques rather than challenging developing abilities, Ren’Py can be better for getting

Figure 2.1 Logo of Ren’Py

playable builds made in a shorter period of time.

2.1.2 Code Editor

Visual Studio Code editor is used to edit python files for Ren'Py due to its ease of use and compatibility with Ren'Py.

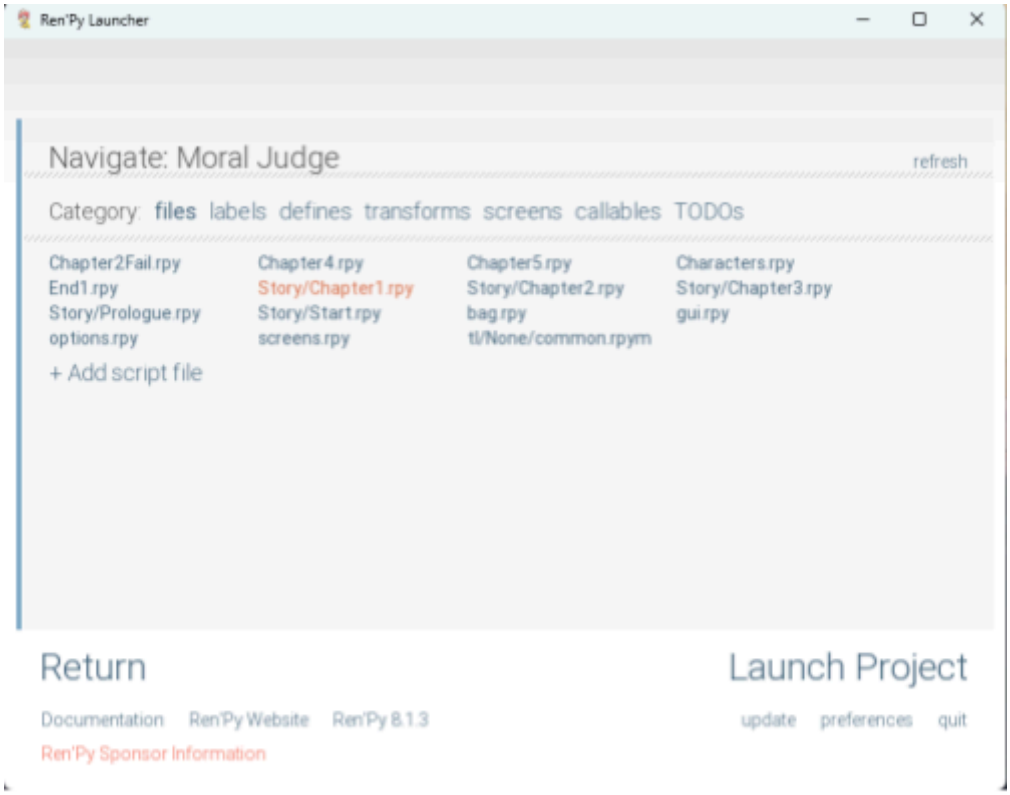

Figure 2.2 User can easily navigate python files through Ren'Py Launcher

2.2 Art

As I'm not an artist, the vast majority of art assets used were generated by AI tools.

2.2.1 AI image generator

The AI image generator is a built-in function of the "Novel AI" platform that allows users to generate "anime" style character images based on words that describe characteristics.

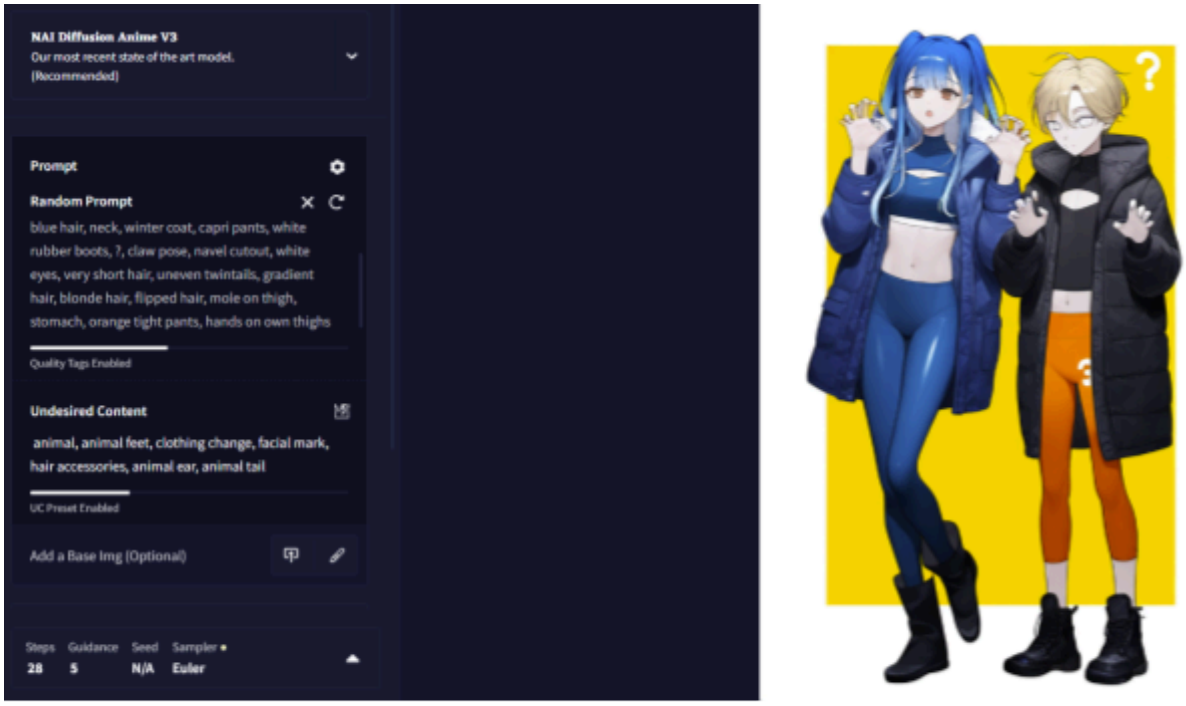

Figure 2.3 The user interface of Novel AI image generator

2.2.2 AI audio generator

The “Soundraw AI audio generator” is a platform that allows users to generate “anime” style character audios based on words that describe genre, mood, theme and other attributes..

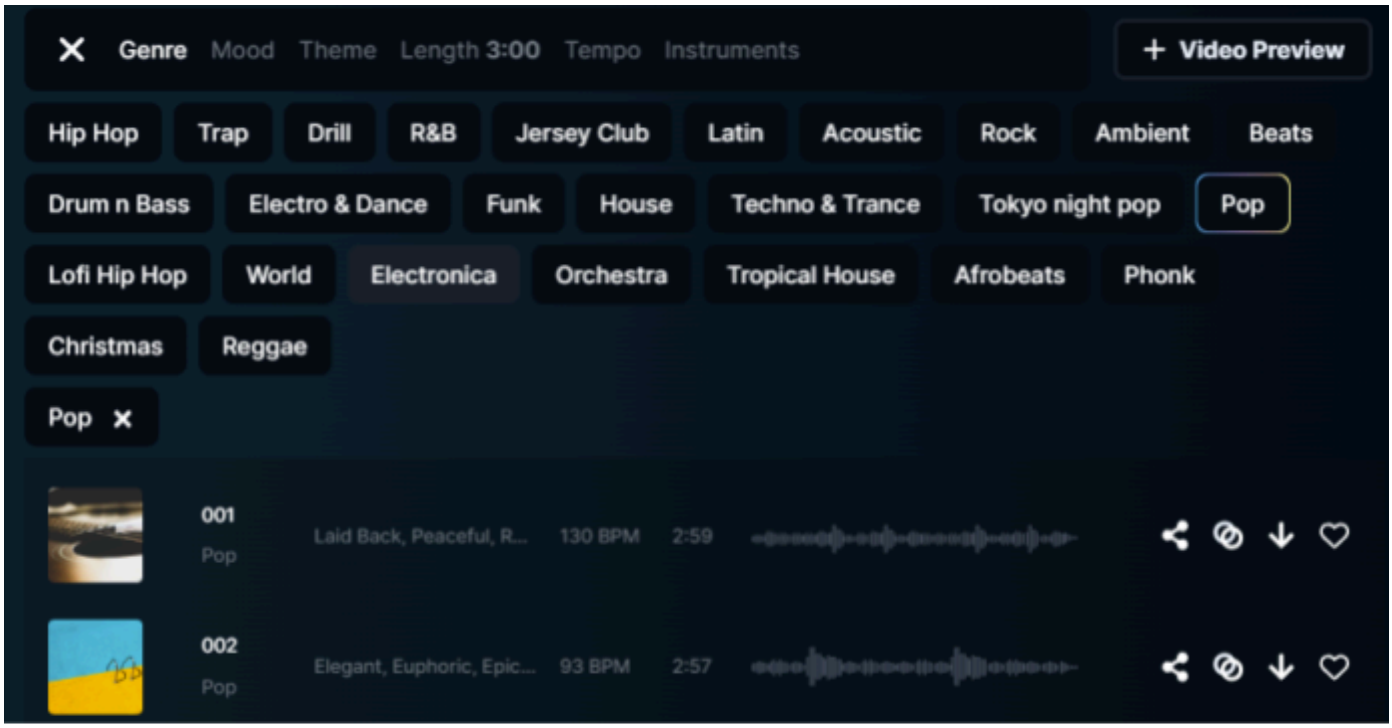

Figure 2.4 User interface of Soundraw AI audio generator

3. Design

3.1 Gameplay Loop

The storyline is divided by chapters period, in all chapters players need to make choices and collect information and clues on the way. Then they will face Judge, which is a checkpoint to push the plot by showing the right clues collected. If players cannot make it, they are sent back to the place where they can make selections again. If players pass the judge, they are able to read the next chapter.

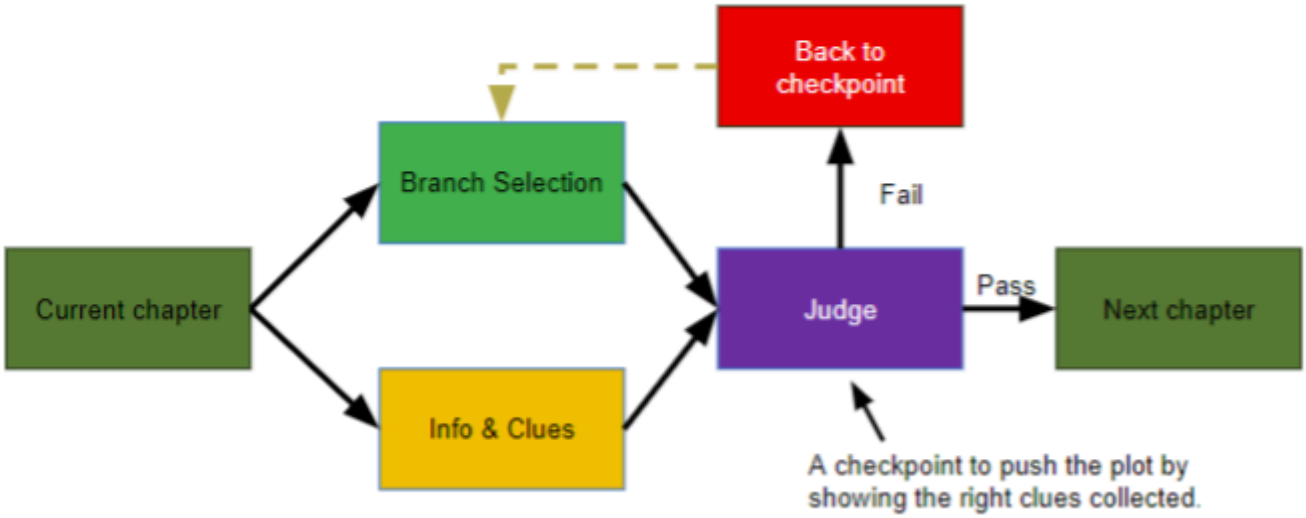

Figure 3.1 Visualized game loop

3.2 Narrative Design

The primary narrative design goals were creating an immersive and interesting atmosphere to players.

3.2.1 Background setting

I aimed to set the game in a fictional world and the story takes place in a small village with Japanese cultural elements such as fields, clothes and buildings. And these elements were reflected in dialogue texts, images and

scenes.

The world is set with a principle that virtue is blessed and immorality is punished. “Moral Judge” is a kind of person ordered by the god of virtue to monitor immoral people and purify their souls by “judge”.

Areas that are too deeply affected by immorality are regarded as threats, and gods will use various methods to reduce the connection between the area and other areas to ensure that the order of other areas is not affected.

When players reach the good end of the story, they will be able to learn the truth of the reason why Aslan lost his memory at the beginning, what are those “yokai” villagers, why they have different “yokai” appearances and how the order of this world works.

3.2.2 Story

One day, the young Moral Judge Aslan wakes up having no memory of how he got there in the forest. Without food and water, Aslan is about to faint. At this time, Kappa who claimed to be the head of a nearby village appeared and extended a helping hand to Aslan.

Awakened in the room prepared by Kappa, Aslan is brought back to the village. Guided by Kappa’s granddaughter Kitsune, Aslan finds that immorality is hiding in the village, and the only way to save it is to find the immoral people and judge them.

Aslan investigates that the village was about to hold a harvest festival, and “immorality power” is planning to ruin it. Collecting clues and uncovering the truth is the only way to prevent the village from suffering misfortune. Why was Aslan in distress in the forest at the beginning and why villagers looked like monsters? All the secrets are unlocked at the end……

3.2.3 Dialogue text

As experiencing story is the core part of the player experience, I aimed to make the dialogue text clear and expressive.

Dialogue text is the primary way players experience the story. In the game, dialogue text mainly comes in two forms: soliloquies and conversations. The soliloquies are responsible for environmental description, psychological description, etc., and has the function of helping players understand scene changes, character images, etc. Conversations include conversations between characters and players and conversations between different characters. The purpose is to make the playing experience more interesting and make the world more vivid.

Figure 3.2 An example of conversation among the player and characters

Figure 3.3 The soliloquy at the beginning of the game to introduce the world

3.2.4 Item description

Item descriptions are an important part of supporting and supplementing the narrative. During the game, players will collect some items or clues that are closely related to the story. These items are designed to be readily available for viewing and often contain important information. In order to encourage players to think and summarize information on their own, item descriptions are written in an objective tone and mixed with some distracting information.

Figure 3.4 An example of item description text

Figure 3.5 An example of item description image

3.2.5 Selection

Selection is a common narrative mechanism in games and the main way for players to interact. The function of some selections is to make players more involved and immersed when experiencing the story. Such selections will not affect the direction of the storyline, but are based on the player's preferences. The consequences of your choices will result in the character reacting differently or experiencing a different story text.

Figure 3.6 Example of selection based on preference

Another part of the selections will affect the direction of the storyline. Players usually need to combine the obtained clues and their own thinking to make the right choice.

Figure 3.7 Example of selections effect storyline

Failures in making this kind of selection lead to “dead ends”. Players will be sent back to the place where they can change their choices.

Figure 3.8 A screenshot shows important clues are missing.

Figure 3.9 A screenshot shows players will be sent back when facing "dead ends"

3.3 Inventory System

In order to help players remember important information and help storytelling, the think cloud as an inventory system is applied. Useful information and items are collected in "Think Cloud", but it depends on player selections. Both entity and non-entity information can be stored in it and usually they are closely connected to the storyline.

Figure 3.10 User interface of "Think Cloud"

3.4 Character Design

3.3.1 Player Character

Based on the world setting, the playable character “Aslan” is a young “Moral Judge” who has the ability to influence the storyline and has a special status in the world. In order to make it easier for players to assume the role, Aslan’s character image is not given, and the story is always narrated from a first-person perspective.

At the same time, in order to allow players to familiarize themselves with the world and obtain information at a good pace, a segment is set at the beginning of the story where Aslan awaken with no memory in forest and is temporarily unable to grasp information about themselves and the surrounding environment, thereby reducing the information gap between the players and the character.

Figure 3.11 After distressed at the beginning, Aslan raises questions on behalf of the player

3.3.2 Villagers

The villagers in the game are the main group that players come into contact with when experiencing the story. Combined with the world view, due to the influence of immorality, villagers have changed from human beings to a "yokai" appearance and only outsiders can notice it. The main characters in the game are Kappa, Tanuki, Kitsune and Tesso, who respectively correspond to the yokai of the same name, and their character traits are also combined with the legends or characteristics of yokai. (Foster, 2009)

For example, Kitsune is a fox-like yokai. Kitsune is considered to be the incarnation of Goddess “Inari" - the god of wealth and rice. It has the ability to guide people to obtain good luck and realize their wishes. In the game, the villager Kitsune is a young girl, she is lively and kind. As the player's guide, she leads the player to understand various things in the village and guides the player to think. (Yoose, 2013)

Figure 3.12 Some image of villagers (Kappa, Kitsune and Tanuki)

3.5 User Interface

In order to make the in-game UI simple and intuitive, but still fits the game's theme, I modified the initial user interface settings and made it look better.

Figure 3.13 Main menu of the game

For example, I chose to use text boxes and selection buttons that look like a piece of broken paper. This style fits the fantasy world theme.

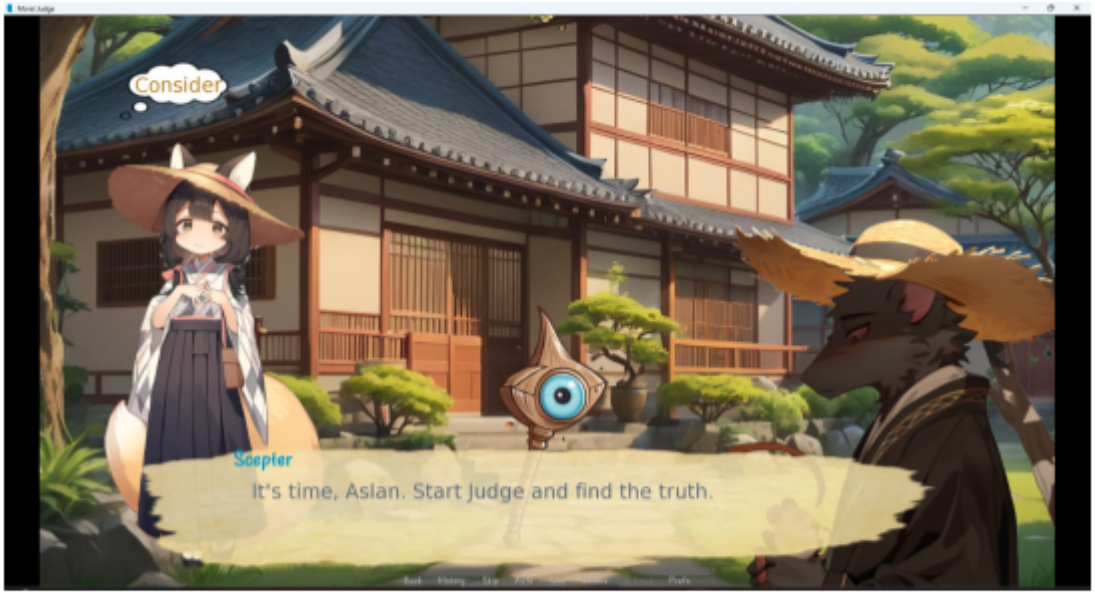

Figure 3.14 The in-game user interface

At the same time, I modified the fonts of the UI menu parts to keep them in a cute style. This font allows the game to maintain a relaxed and fantasy style without affecting player reading.

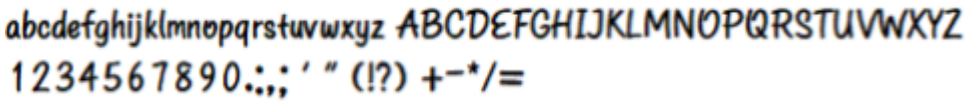

Figure 3.15 "Love-Queen 2" font diagram

4. Programming

Based on the Python language and Visual Studio code editor, almost all parts of project code can be managed from the Ren'Py launcher panel.

In terms of dialogue, "label" and "jump" link between paragraphs. Players can select through options in the "menu" and jump to different labels with different names.

For character images and scenes, pictures already stored in the directory can be called through "show" and "hide". I can adjust the position and special effects of the picture through commands.

For audio files, the play effect and volume can be adjusted through commands.

```
label FestivalDayMorning:
    scene bedroom
    play music "village.mp3" loop fadein 2.0 volume 0.3
    "Just after dawn, there was a knock on the door of the room."
    "Miss Ki's voice came from outside the door"
    show fs at right
    f "Aslan, are you up? I brought your breakfast."
    hide fs
menu:
    "(Sleep a little longer)":
        play sound "ui.mp3" volume 0.3
        jump SleepLonger
    "(Get up immediately)":
        play sound "ui.mp3" volume 0.3
        jump GetupSoon
```

Figure 4.1 Screenshot of part of project code

To keep the project files in a good structure to manage, I named them as Story, Character, Items and others. To make the story files easier to navigate, I divided it by chapters.

In terms of puzzle solving parts, I named them in a similar format to make labels easier to recognize. For example, in the field irrigation section, I set a start label and lead players to different branches based on selection. Once players go the wrong way, they will be sent back to the start label.

```
label FindWaterwheel:
    hide n
    show fs
    f "From the map, we are on field 2."
    f "What's the next step, Aslan?"
    hide fs
    "\"Maybe I should follow the map to repair the disconnected pipes one by one.\""

menu:
    "Rotate 2-3 pipe.":
        play sound "ui.mp3" volume 0.3
        jump TwoAndThreeReady
    "Go to field 1.":
        play sound "ui.mp3" volume 0.3
        jump WaterPipeFailed

label TwoAndThreeReady:
    show fs
    f "Good job. Water will not leak to others field now."
    f "Let's go to field 1!"
    jump AtFieldOne
```

```
label WaterPipeFailed:
    hide fs
    show fu
    f "It seems something went wrong, Aslan."
    f "We should go back and check again."
    jump FindWaterwheel
```

Figure 4.2 The screenshot of structure of field irrigation part

5. Development

5.1 Summary

After I decided the outline of the story and initial thought of the world setting, I made a prototype including the basic gameplay mechanisms to test if it works.

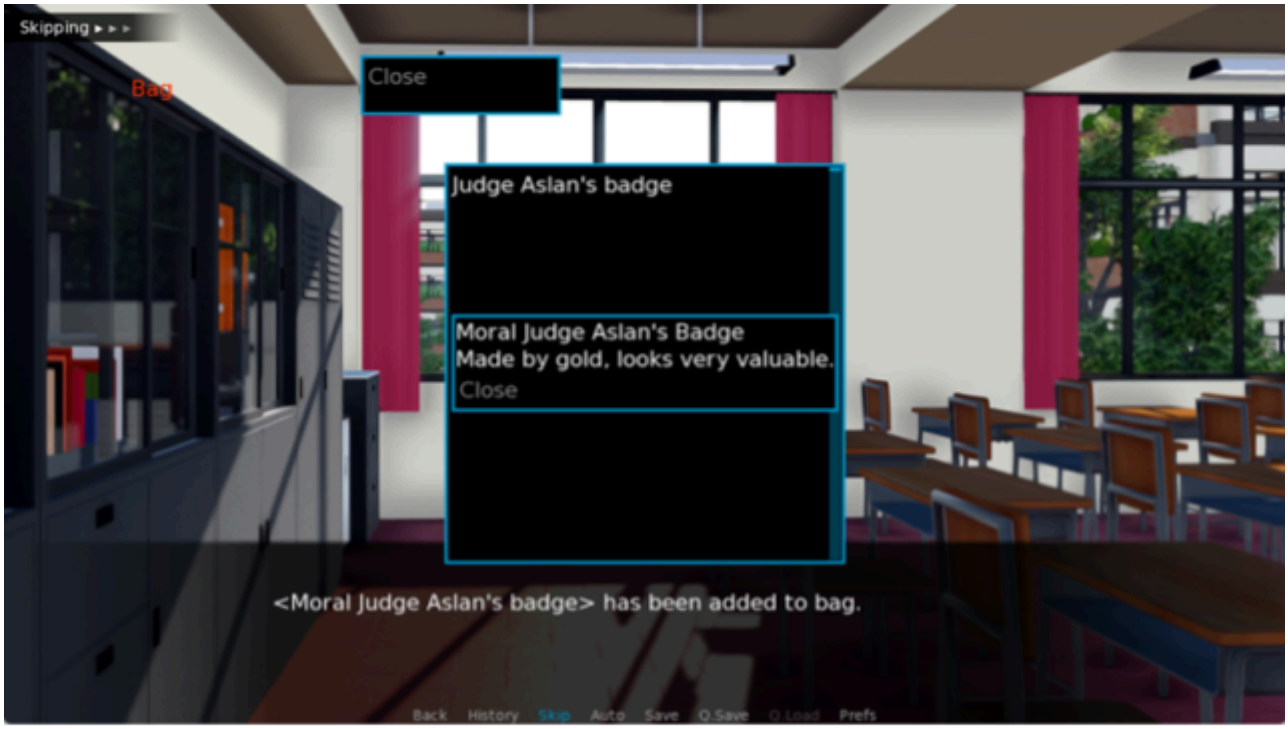

Figure 5.1 The screenshot of the prototype.

Since the prototype works well, I added two more chapters based on its structure and make it playable with character image, inventory system and selections. Due to encountering unexpected difficulty, I falled behind the initial plan after the stage and had to change and cut some parts.

In order to guarantee the dialogue texts could be completed on time and the playing experience mentioned in the game loop could be finished, I decided to cut some mechanics for enriching the exploring experience and simplified storyline branches and UI design.

In the initial build, I realized the core gameplay mechanics and it’s

performing better than I had anticipated. The art style is cute and bright and the shape of the story is clear and strong. Meanwhile, many problems were also found. Some of the wording is difficult to understand. “Bag” should be able to store non-entity information. The guidance for some puzzles is unclear. There are some information errors or conflicts in the text. Some parts of the story need more explanation.

Therefore, the build needs polishment and I made some improvements and implemented them in the current build.

5.2 Changes Implemented

5.2.1 Inventory system

I modified the concept of the inventory system, transforming it from a "backpack" to a "thinking cloud" to make it more in line with Moral Judge's capabilities while eliminating the sense of dissonance when storing non-physical information and clues.

5.2.2 Story

In order to enhance the importance of choices and let players feel the changes brought about by their actions, I added more branching choices for detecting information collection. At the same time, the steps for picking up the correct clues in the judge have been optimized to allow players to be more thoughtful when making choices.

5.2.3 Guidance

In order for players to be aware of the method when they start puzzle solving sessions, I added explanatory texts before the relevant paragraphs so that players can pay attention to the guidance.

6. Conclusion

In a short period of developing time, I'm happy that I finished a more complete story with more content than expected. After undergoing modifications and cuts, mechanics implemented could still support a certain length of storytelling experience and interactive content. After encountering and exploring a strange and unique world, players can use their given abilities to unlock the secrets hiding behind the "yokai village" and learn about yokai culture.

Through the whole time of developing time, the process of exploring and learning is satisfying and enjoyable, and I also learned from overcoming various unpredictable problems.

In the future, I'm passionate about making the game better and keep exploring borders. For example, some additional points like thoughts to enrich the exploration process, such as environmental exploration, will be developed and implemented in the future iterations. At the same time, I will explore the judge's performance effects, UI themes and special effects based on the existing story volume, and may expand and enrich the content of the story. In order to improve and expand the worldview of "Moral Judge", I will continue the story of young judge Aslan and explore the border in the future.

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