

Playful Design, Programming and Art Creation in „Cargo“

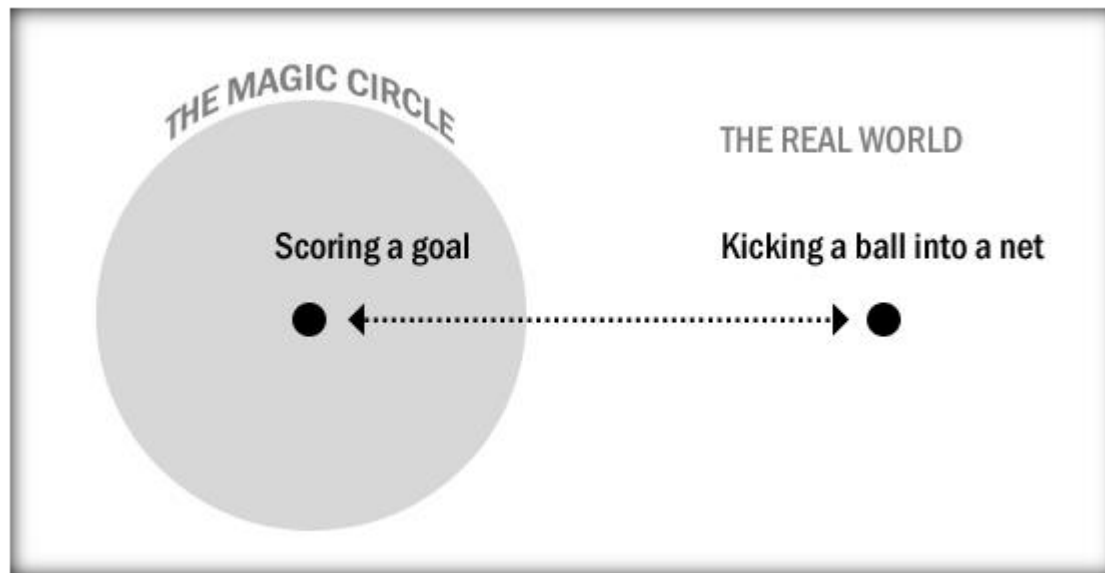
Florian Mehm

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AdventureX 2014

„Playful“

- Not in the sense of gamification...
- Instead: My approach to learning and producing a (hobbyist) game



„Playful“

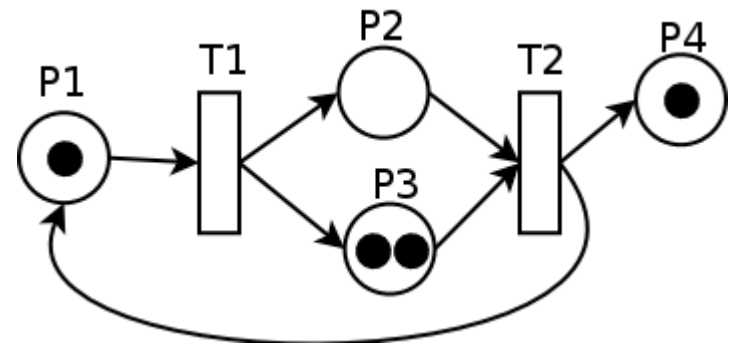


About me

- Researcher at TU Darmstadt, Serious Games
- Lecturer for „Game Technology“
- Computer scientist by heart
 - But strong interests in many areas
 - „Online Drawing Class“ (Michael Musal) since 2011
- Favourite Game: The Longest Journey

At day

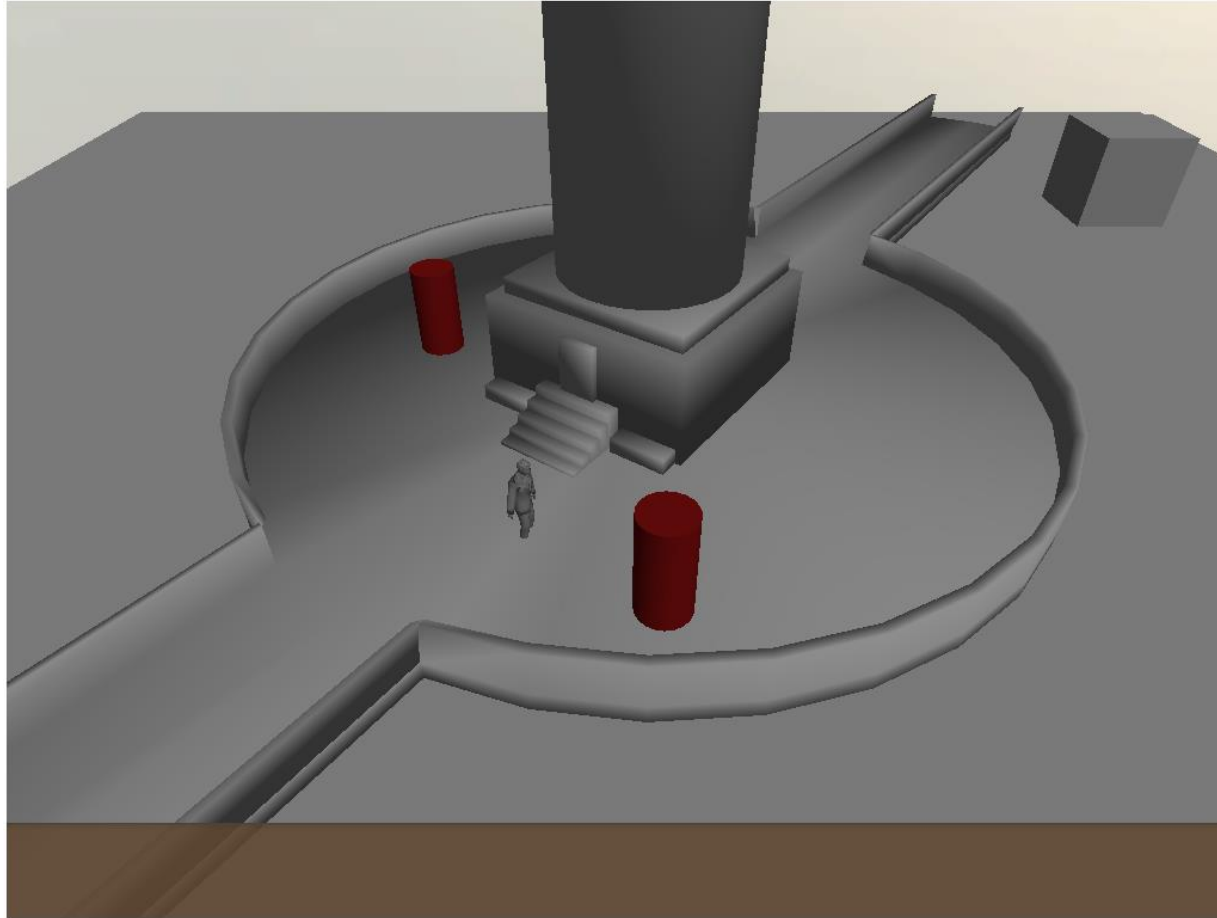
- Built an authoring tool for adventure-like games
- Follow-up research:
 - Multiplayer adventure games
 - Automatic analysis of games using colored Petri nets



Steamquest

- Ethan Hunt finds his father on the verge of a coma in his laboratory one fateful morning
- The blame for the crime is put on him
- A mysterious source helps Ethan escape custody and aids him in uncovering the truth

Steamquest



Cargo

- The story of two young souls, a female human and an alien who meet in a cargo facility
- You play as Vala, who has the task of helping the alien return to its home from which it has been brought to Earth by accident

Inspiration

- „Blend & Paint“ DVD tutorial for Blender



Cargo



Learning by doing

- Out of your comfort zone
- Many doubts turn out to be overthinking
- Other things can go horribly wrong or your estimates be way off (1 week vs. 1 year...)

Embrace Failure

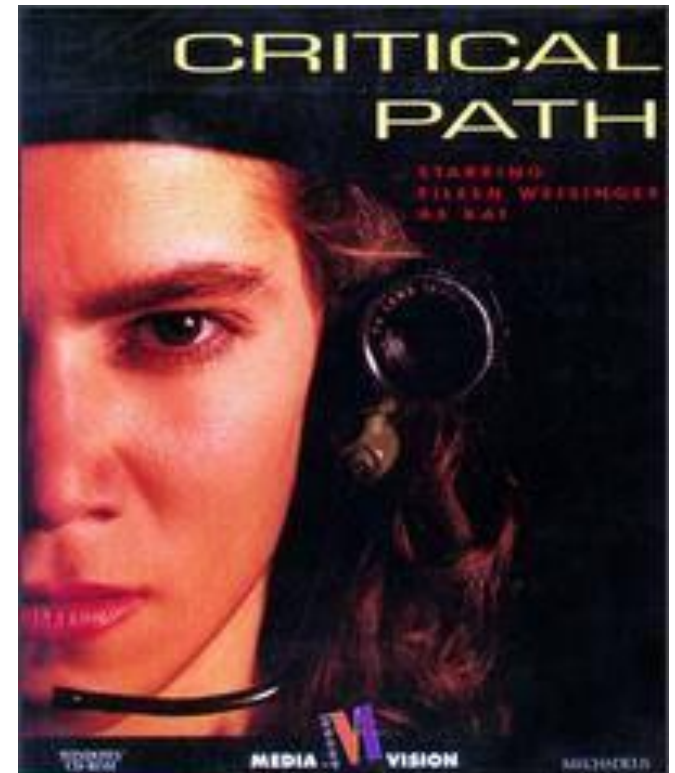
- „Fail early, fail often“
- Nothing cures insecurities as well as action
- My insight (no guarantee that it works for you)
 - Get into „doing“
 - 10 minute sprints
 - Jerry Seinfeld's Productivity Method

Critical Path

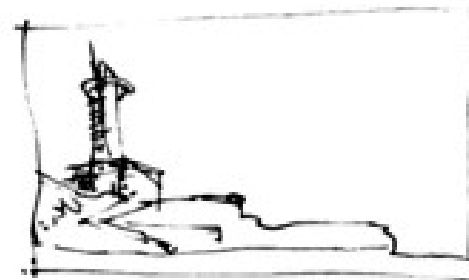
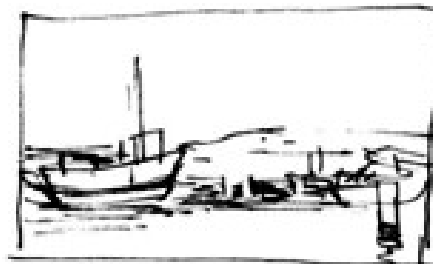
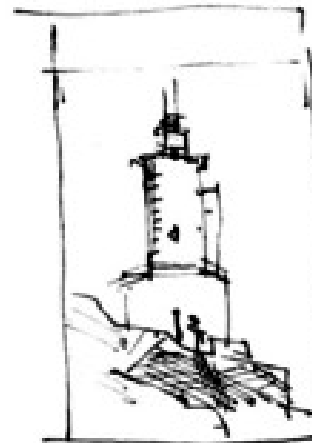
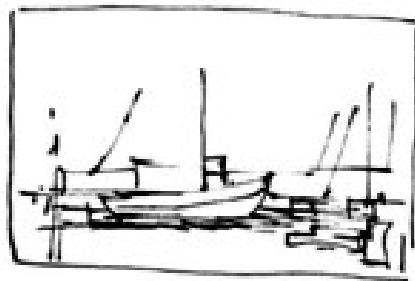
Slightly different than the project management definition (the longest path)

The minimal set of actions that will lead you to the end of the game aka „walkthrough“

Highly motivating → You will remember the first time you were able to play through the game 😊



Critical Path



Critical Path

- Make sure that the actions, animations etc. on the critical path are finished first
- By definition, everything else is an add-on
- → But of course, we need the add-ons to get a good game
- More motivating to have something finished and go back and refine what you have

Exploring your world

- Narrative
 - What happened before, what will happen after?
 - What is the political situation in the narrative?
 - How far is technology in your world?
- Character properties
 - Why does the main character do what he/she is doing?
 - How would the antagonist react to being imprisoned/laughed about/sent to Mars/...?

Media shift

- „Writing prompts“/Short stories
 - Write down a part of the story as if it was a novel. Describe what is happening
 - Like before,
- Comics
 - Draw out a part of the story as a comic
- Improv
 - Ask someone to play your characters for you
 - Haven't tried this one, but it sounds awesome 😊

Media Shift Example: SteamQuest

- Development stalled
 - Writing an own engine
 - Story still unclear → hard to work top-down as a beginner

Objective Story Throughline	Subjective Story Throughline	Main Char Throughline	Impact Char Throughline
Aus dem Labor des Erfinders wird die Formel geklaut	Der Täter versucht den Protagonisten von sich abzulenken	Der Erfinder bittet den Protagonisten den Raub aufzuklären und die Formel zu beschaffen	Antagonist klaut die Formel

NaNoWriMo

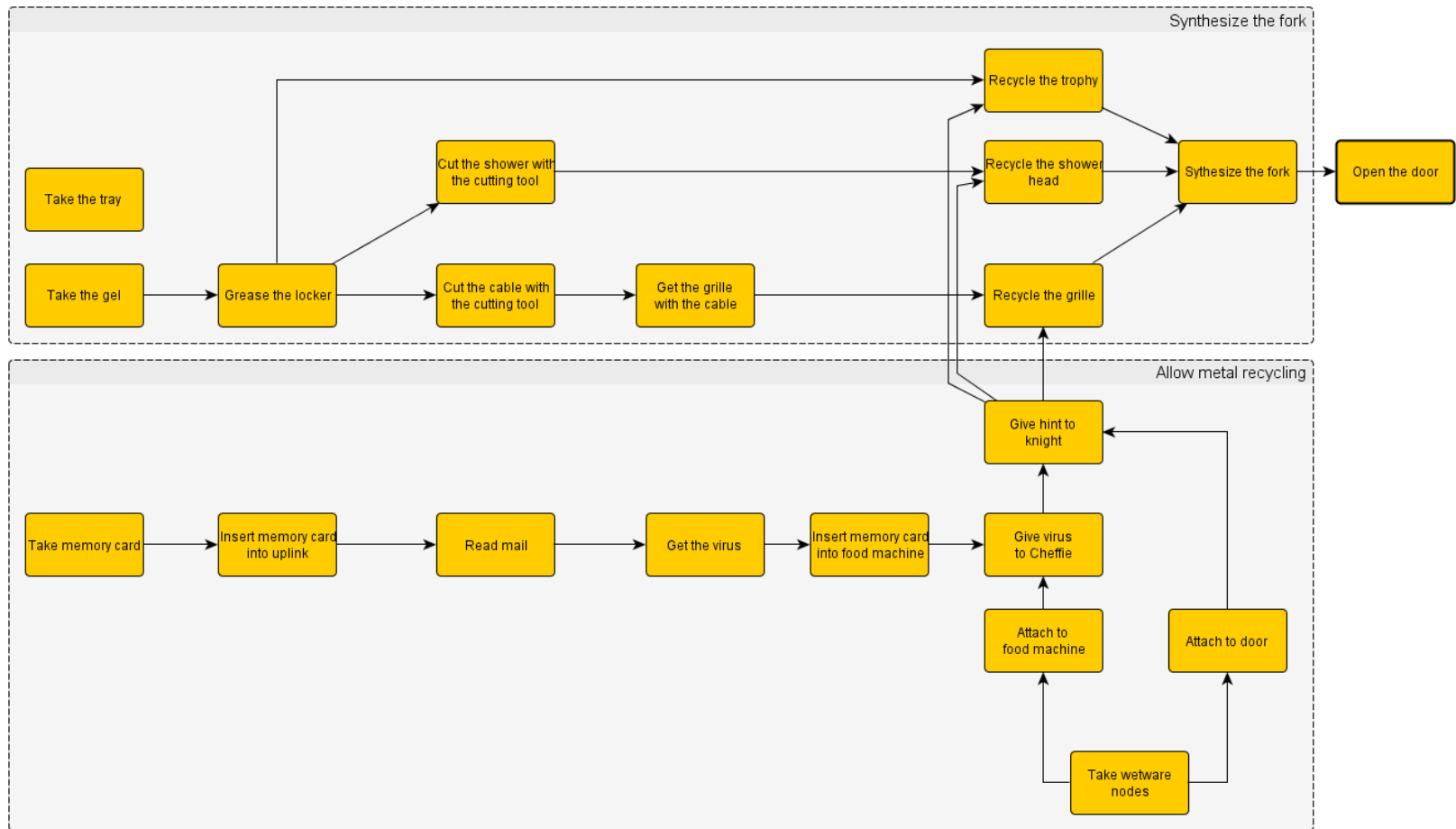
- Write a 50.000 word novel - In November...
- Finished NaNoWriMo with Steamquest in 2014
- Advantages
 - Cut out the „inner editor“
 - Get something finished – maybe a nice Kickstarter incentive? ;-)
 - Meet new, creative people in your area
- Disadvantages
 - Little sleep, others might suspect you are crazy...



Design

- Play games to learn about games
 - What are great puzzles, what goes into them?
 - Interesting effects
 - Emotional reactions
- Analyzing Games
 - Make the structure apparent to you again
 - Learn to „read“ the game
 - (Analogy in music: Learn to hear chords and melodies to learn how to play them)

Analyzing Games: Example „TechnoBabylon“



Sidenotes

- Used tool: yEd Graph Editor
(<http://www.yworks.com/en/products/yfiles/yed/>)



Technobabylon [Technocrat Games]
PC, MAC, 2D, point & click, sci-fi

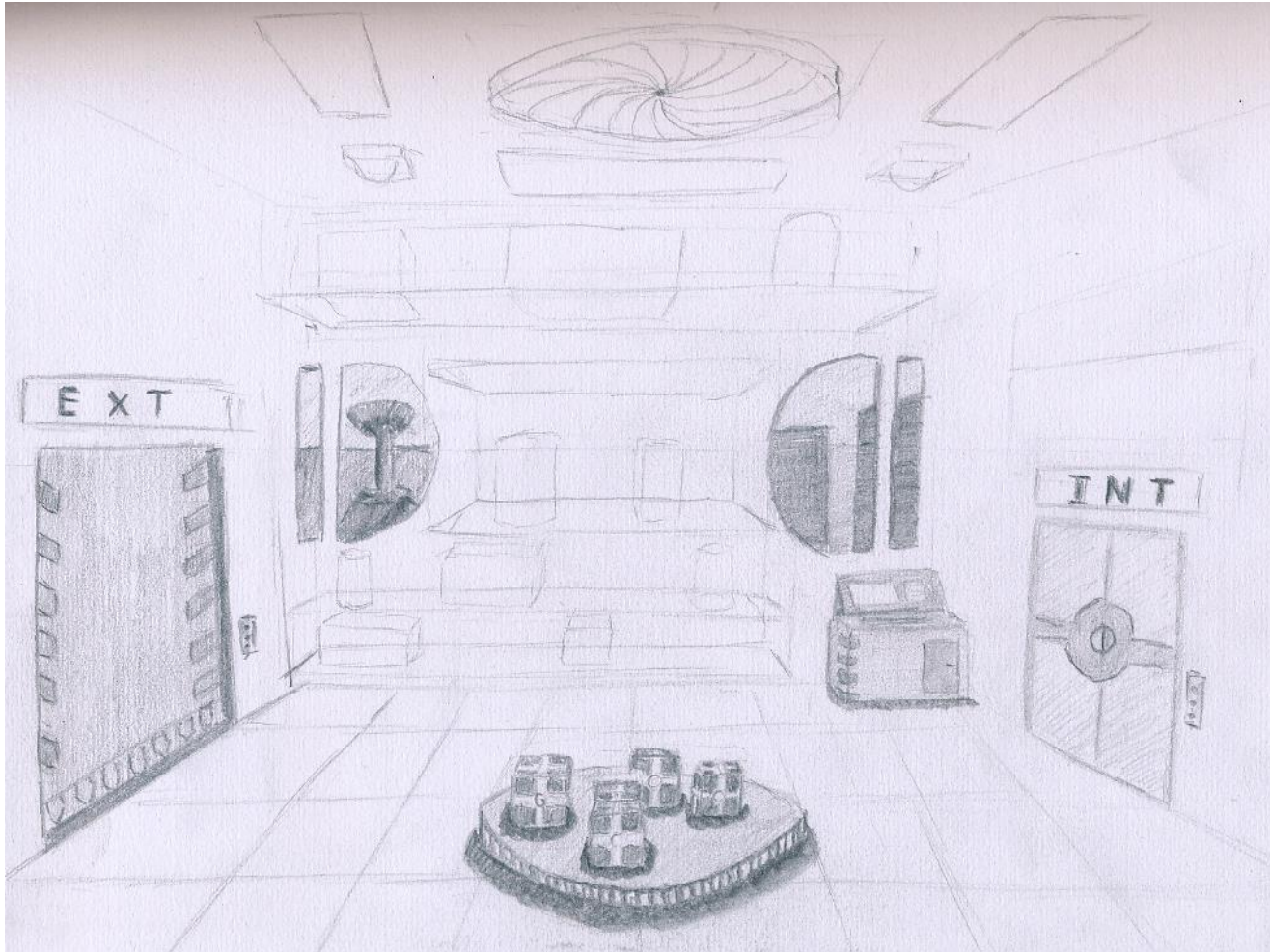


Cargo [Florian Mehm]
PC, 2D, point & click, sci-fi

Design Iteratively, Try your game

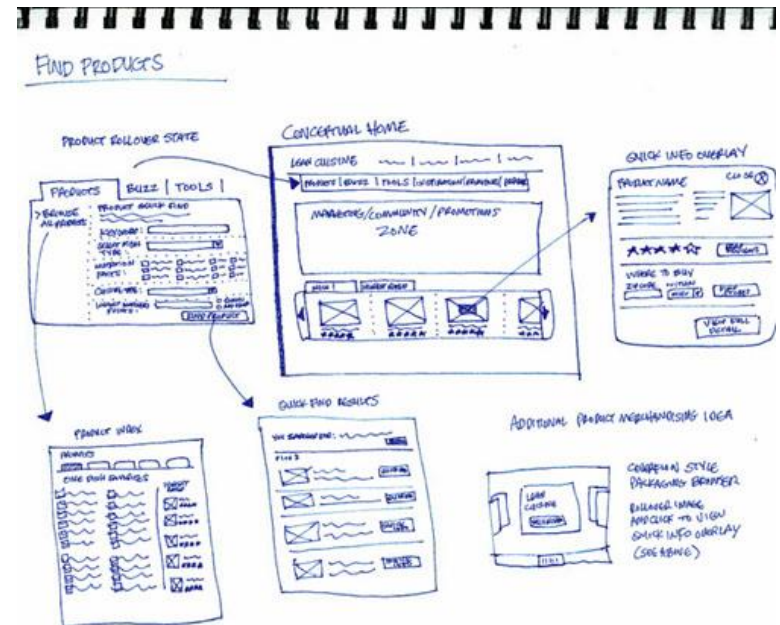
- Quick production
 - Take shortcuts
 - Build the critical path first
- Playtests
 - From early stages on
 - Even for a hobbyist game
 - The first playtester will –within seconds- find an item combination you would not dream about

Sketches



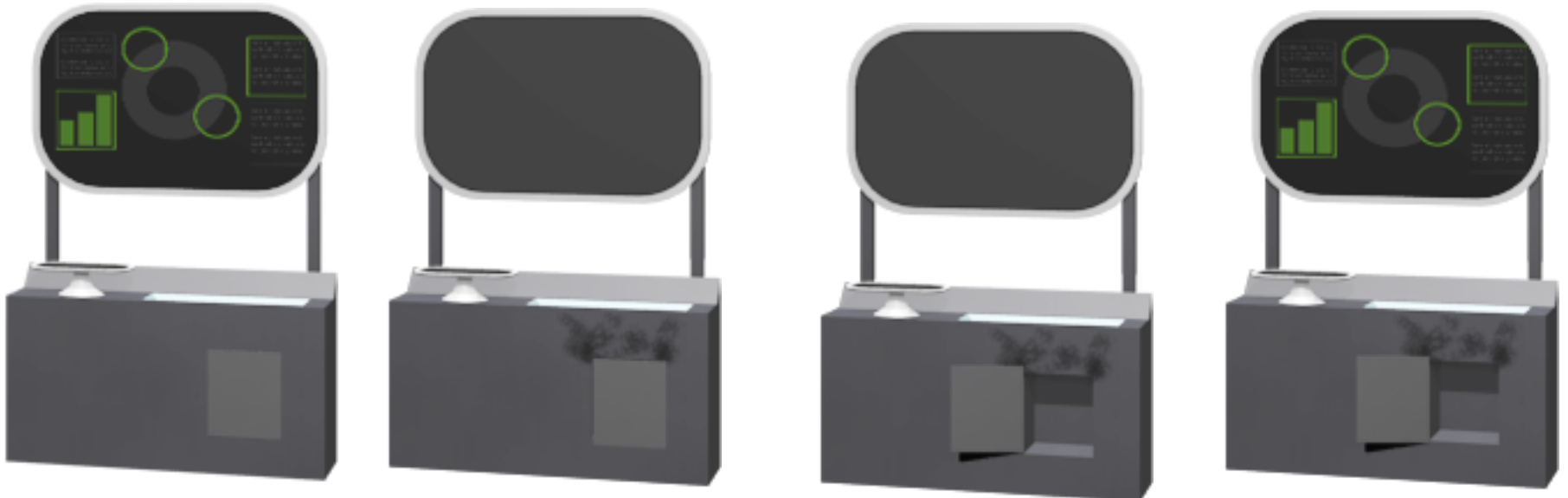
Prototyping vs. Producing

- Be aware of the cost of produced content and the rigidity that comes with production → harder to change the result
- But: All content should be on a comparable level



Producing the final game

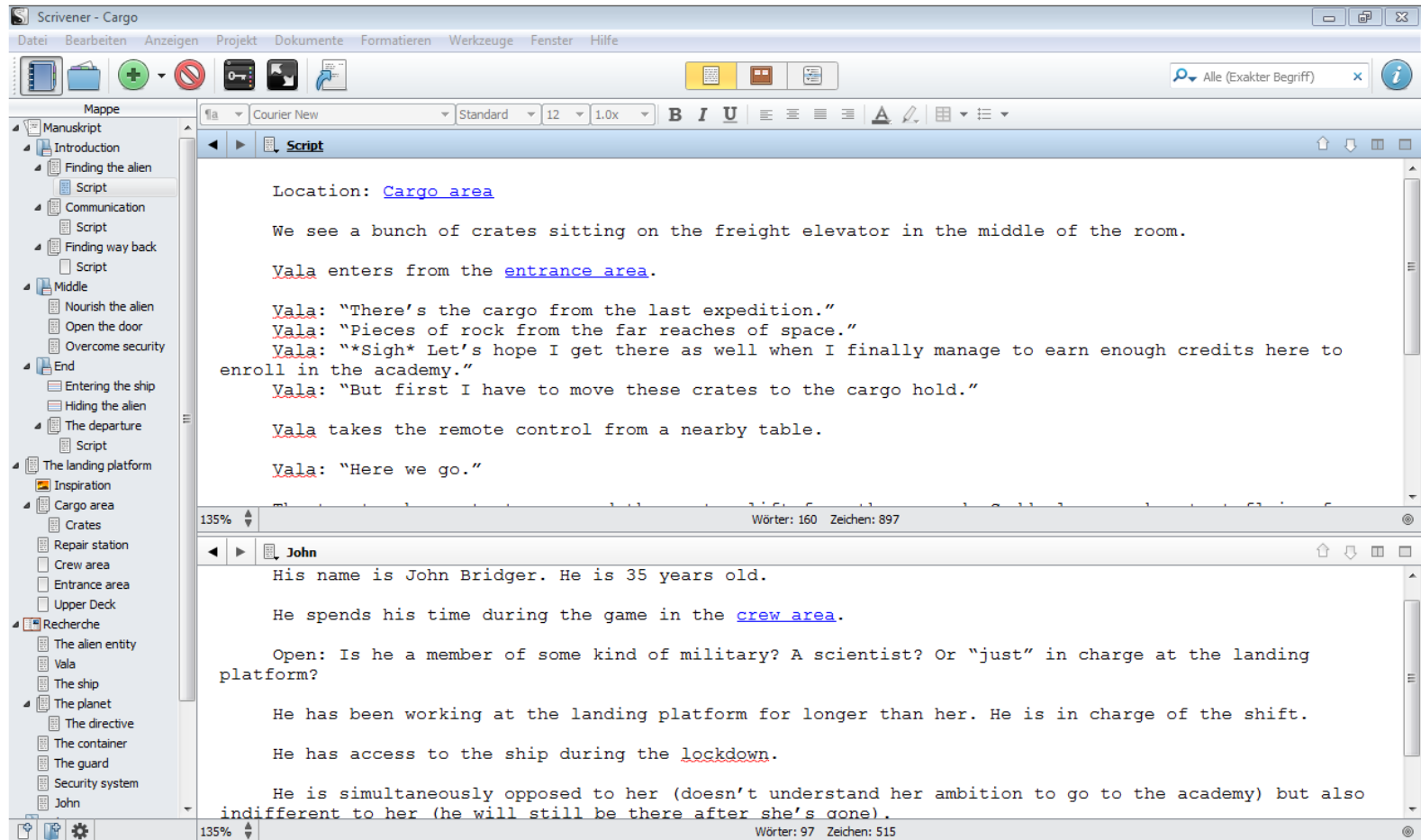
- Placeholders can provide you with good approximations
- But be aware of shortcuts!



Remain agile - Writing

- Linear tool (word processor) not well suited to games
- Scrivener
(<http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.php>)
- yWriter
(<http://www.spacejock.com/yWriter5.html>)
more for novel writing (→ NaNoWriMo)

Screenshot Scrivener



Remain agile - Tools

- „Don't put all your eggs in one basket“
- Examples
 - Vector art can be changed, rendered for new resolutions
 - 3D models can be used for promotional materials, higher-resolution versions or 3D versions of the game
 - Photoshop Adjustment Layers and Layer Effects

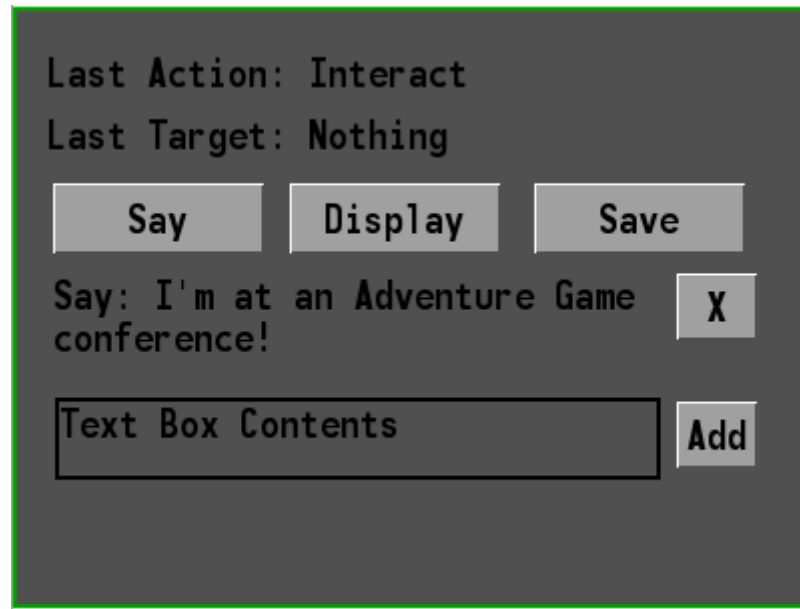
In-game editing



In-game editing

- Change simple properties while playing the game
- Current state: After each „unhandled“ action, can bring up a GUI with simple options (character says, show text, ...)
- Start playing very early, enter descriptions etc. as you go

Screenshot In-Game Editing



A screenshot of an in-game editing interface. The interface is a dark gray panel with a green border. It contains the following elements:

- Text: "Last Action: Interact"
- Text: "Last Target: Nothing"
- Three buttons: "Say", "Display", and "Save".
- Text: "Say: I'm at an Adventure Game conference!"
- A small button with an "X" icon.
- A text input field containing "Text Box Contents".
- A button labeled "Add".

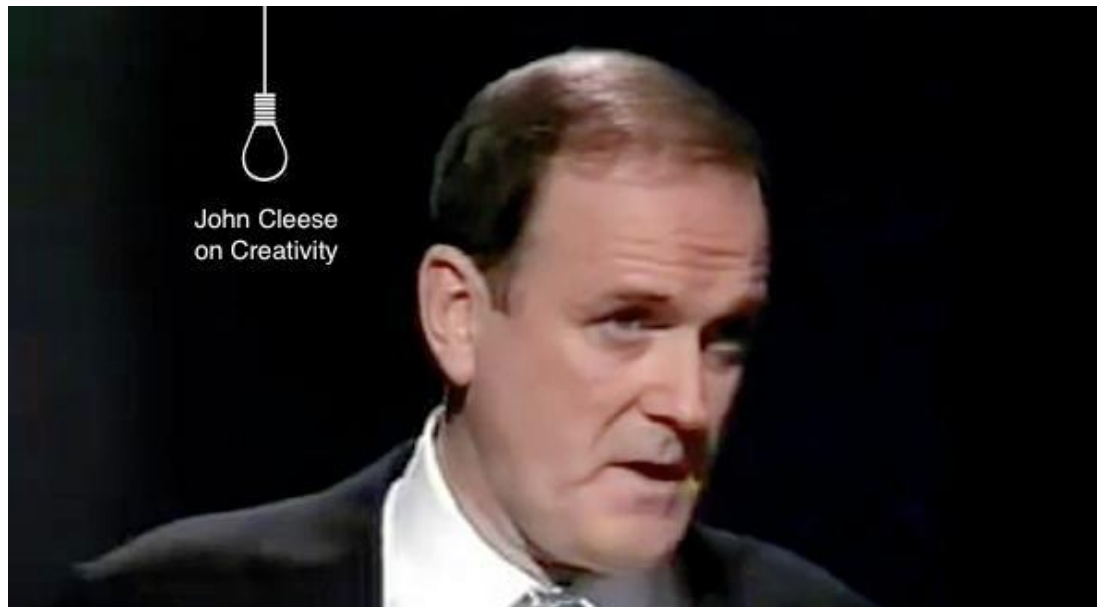
Elegy for Dead World



- <http://www.dejobaan.com/elegy/>

John Cleese on Creativity

- Talk for Video Arts (founded by Cleese in 1972)
- <https://vimeo.com/89936101>



Open vs. Closed Mode

“We all operate in two contrasting modes, which might be called open and closed.

The open mode is more relaxed, more receptive, more exploratory, more democratic, more playful and more humorous.

The closed mode is the tighter, more rigid, more hierarchical, more tunnel-visioned.

(...) we must return to the open mode, because in that mode we are the most aware, most receptive, most creative, and therefore at our most intelligent.” – John Cleese

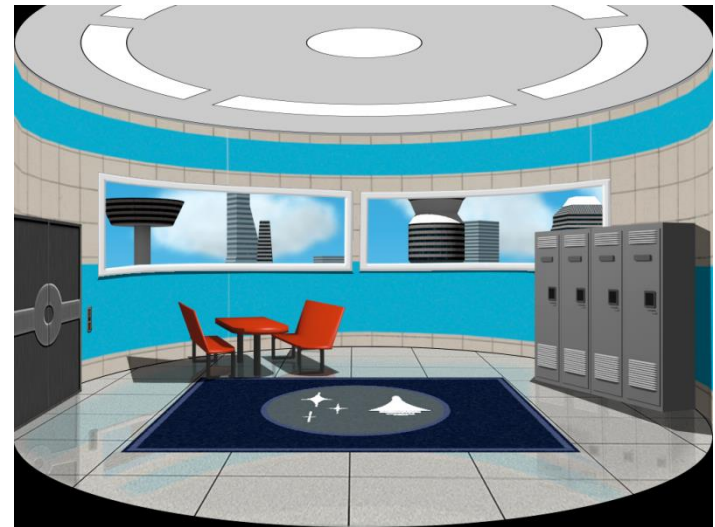
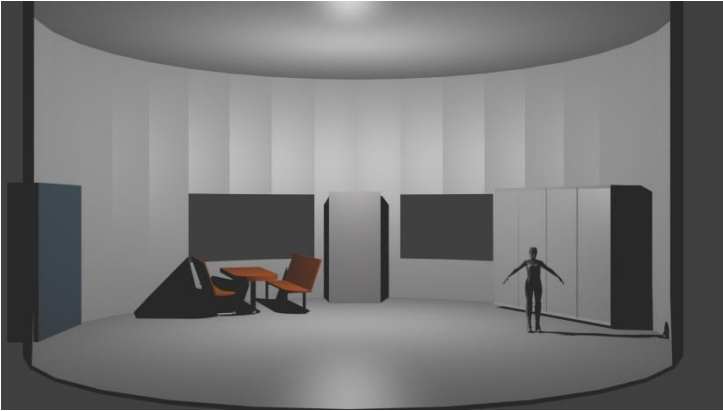
Learning vs. Producing

- Learn something new
 - Takes longer
 - More risk
 - Acquire a new skill
 - Find out what works and what does not
- Build something with the skills you have
 - Faster
 - Inside your comfort zone
 - Can aid you on your way to „mastery“

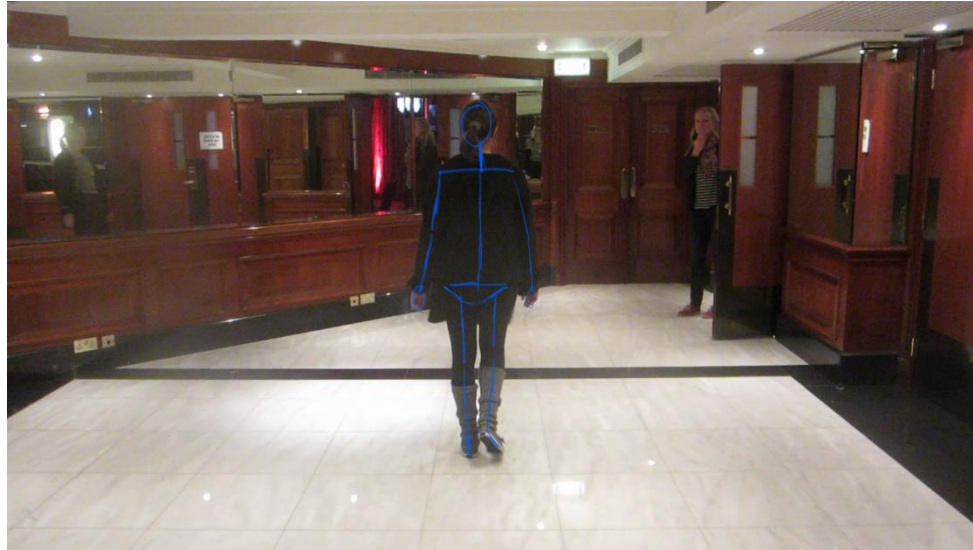
Examples for workflow

- Switch between tools and approaches
 - Initially: Afraid of inventing the perspective
 - Rendered the first versions of the screens in Blender
 - Finding visual ideas with sketches
 - Sketched over the rendered screens
 - Combination of paint and rendering
 - Due to the technical/sci-fi look of Cargo
 - Comics for intro and extro (in progress ;-)
 - „Cross-Pollination“ → Increased understanding in one domain based on the other domain

Process



Animation



Thank you for your attention!

- Find me outside in the exhibition area!
- More info on Cargo: cargo.mehm.net
- My blog: www.mehm.net
- Contact me at florian@mehm.net