A WITCH'S GUIDE TO STARTING FIRES

A VIDEO GAME HIGH LEVEL DESIGN DOCUMENT

HONORS THESIS

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by

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Contents

Abstract

A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires is not just a video game. It is an interactive experience for the player that places them in a world not so different from our own: a world where the Salem Witch Trials never ended and became part of the government system. This game serves as a commentary about a world where a collection of people are cast aside as lesser because society is afraid of what they don't understand and can't control.

This thesis is a high-level design document for *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires*. The document goes into depth about the world of Space, Illinois and the citizens that reside there. There is a choices tree provided that navigates through the various paths the player can take in the game, as well as provides basic profiles of each character featured.

In addition, the thesis discusses the mechanical concepts of the game. This covers the ways in which the player moves and interacts with the game, as well as the actions they can carry out as the player character.

Furthermore, there is art ranging from music, scenery, and the interface of the game so that the reader can begin imagining the world they will be playing in.

Lastly, there are numerous scenes from the game that will go into the script alongside a video game demo.

Overall, this thesis is a culmination of the visual, conceptual, and mechanical components of *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires.*

Executive Summary

Title: *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires*

Genre: Interactive Adventure

The Big Idea: *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires* is an interactive, choice-driven video game that tells the story of Saffron Eastey, a witch-in-hiding, in a telling of a world similar to our own. In Saffron's world, the Salem Witch Trials led to a mass spread of persecution, oppression, and regulation over Other citizens. Now, people like herself are expected to be registered under the government, heavily monitored, and virtually controlled for the rest of their lives. The player follows Saffron the day after she unsuccessfully tries to rid herself of her magical abilities. Instead, she wakes up with another presence within her and exponentially more magic than she's ever encountered. The player will decide what Saffron chooses to do with these powers: act in a time of heightened fear of witches or stay silent.

Category: *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires* is a choice-driven game that has slice-of-life elements and adventure components similar to *Life is Strange* and *Detroit: Become Human*.

Platforms: This game will initially be created on a PC platform and primarily be played on PC during this thesis. However, it is easily transferrable between all platforms either console or PC. The game does not have any discerning factors that limit it to require to be played on any particular medium. Rather, this game is meant to reach as many people as possible and remain, aside from controller configuration, the same experience across all mediums.

Target Audience: The target audience of *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires* are explorers—players who enjoy the process of a game and are driven by curiosity. These players are likely to enjoy discovery through a journey in a game. These players likely play at their own pace and could even be considered a casual gamer. The audience player can be an entry-level gamer or an expert.

Key Features:

- A slice-of-life story thrown in unusual settings driven by the player's choices
- 3-dimensional player character who is hindered by her lack of emotional control
- An altered telling of modern day in which witches are real and the Salem Witch Trials still take place
- Ability to wield immense magical power in a world limited by societal constraints and inhabited in a person unwilling to wield them.

The Grabber

A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires will pull in an audience that is driven by exploring a world that lets them choose how the adventure ends. The interactive adventure game will allow the player to explore and discover more about otherworldly beings in a modern society, engage with powerful magic, and make the decision of what to do with that magic. The player goes through this journey as Saffron, a witch who is unexpectedly "gifted" with powerful magic. However, Saffron's ability to hone her powers is stunted by her short temper, lack of self-control, and impulsive nature.

Lastly, Saffron gains these abilities as being one of a powerful species that society condemns out of fear. This leaves the player to make the choice of using their magic to help fight for the rights of Saffron's people or abandon them by remaining in hiding. On the opposition to Saffron is Veridian Borsch, a witch who chooses to use his magic to exact revenge on the society that casts out witches. Along either path, the player must be careful of Saffron's overwhelming powers corrupting her. The player will decide how this story plays out and what Saffron's magic is used for.

Game Philosophy

Witches have been a fascinating concept to me and society as a whole. They are typically one of three things: good, evil, or outcasted.

Witches used to be women and a collection of men who were condemned by society to be consorting with the devil. They were of color, powerful, or deviated in some way from the societal norms. Therefore, society decided they were dangerous and had to be executed. We see this in literature, pop culture, and our own history.

Tituba, Sycorax, and Medea were foreign and cast aside in their communities for being of color and practicing witchcraft.

Joan of Arc was a powerful heroine who was condemned to be getting assistance from demons because there was no way she could be victorious by her own will.

Children in Togo with mental and physical disabilities were abandoned in forests and abused because they were viewed as different and vulnerable.

Today, witches are being re-written as a symbol of feminism. While this may be true, they are still personified in the media as women who often have to make a choice: to be obedient and good like Glinda or powerful and evil like Elphaba. Women are told they can't be commanding without trading in some part of inherent good.

In a Witch's Guide to Starting Fires, the story explores the seemingly correlated relationship between female power and morality and world that has decided to control and maintain what they do not understand.

Essentially, a world not too different from our own.

Story

The video game begins the night after Saffron uses a forbidden spell to try and rid herself of her magical powers. This spell had high risk of killing her and just before she carried out her suicide mission, Saffron is struck with a sudden presence occupying her body that carries immense power. Panicked, Saffron seeks to learn what went wrong with her spell.

Saffron follows throughout her typical day trying not to use magic and feels fear of being found out. Since Saffron has lived her life pretending to be human and her typical day is spent in downtown Space, where witches aren't permitted, Saffron must make an extensive effort to not be discovered. The player is introduced to various friends of Saffron's, as well as Emerald, the character who witnessed Saffron in an incriminating situation prior to the start of the game. The player has many options in their encounters with Emerald to be suspicious, hostile, or friendly of her intentions.

After various adventures to finding this information, the player will learn that Saffron's magic comes from the Indomitable Spirit, which is the spirit of Margorie Balfour. The spirit bestowed its power upon both Saffron and Veridian Borsch, who both reached a point of helplessness simultaneously.

Overall, based on the player's decisions, the player can end up incidentally killing Emerald or Veridian, who are not villains. Emerald, the seemingly dangerous human who can report Saffron as a witch, is actually an undocumented Other citizen who is a part of a secret organization seeking basic rights for Other citizens. Veridian, although using his newfound powers to commit vicious acts against humans, is not as evil as the player can perceive him as.

Depending upon the players choices, they will have to face these consequences.

The World

The world is if the Salem Witch Trials continued and accusing others of witchery became a citizen's responsibility to their country. This is also given that witches, werewolves, and the like exist in the world *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires* is set in.

Today, citizens that are anything other than human are referred to as Other citizens. These citizen's species is recorded and registered at birth. All their documentation states their specie, if their appearance does not already notify someone of their citizenship. Among these citizens, the rarest and most regulated is witches.

Witches are the species that started it all. They outed the entire world of Other citizens and started what became a long history of societal oppression. Years later, humans have a fear for witches greater than any type of citizen. This is because werewolves can be brought down by a bullet. Sirens and Merpeople can be silenced outside of water. Even the legendary dragon can be caged and used for game fighting. However, water doesn't melt witches. Depending on the power of the witch, burning at the stake and hangings are ineffective. The powers of a witch can be limitless depending on their level of knowledge and training. That is why all scripture pertaining to witch magic is contraband and anyone seen with it is reported.

Space, Illinois is one of the most innovative metropolitans in the world because of their high usage of Other citizens. Due to this, many Other citizens have access to certain occupations. However, there is a class system among Other citizens. For example, Phoenixes are upper societal citizens that often look down on shapeshifters and werewolves, who are viewed as the 'mutts' of creatures.

Some citizens are even restricted to certain areas of town. If a witch is found out of South Space, the lesser side of the town, they can be fined or brought into custody.

Player Character

Saffron Eastey is a mid-20s graduate student working a start-up for graphic design. Prior to the game, Saffron starts out as a selfish, stuck-in-a-rut witch in denial. She goes on daily pretending to be human and limits all interactions with magic or her people. This all changes when she becomes a host for the Indomitable Spirit.

Saffron is an undocumented witch. Her human mother conceived of Saffron with her witch father, who was undocumented until outed and punished with execution by hanging and burning. Her mother, who had been with Saffron's father in secret, gave birth to Saffron after his death and documented Saffron as the child of a close family friend. Therefore, Saffron has lived her life posing as a human.

Throughout the game, depending upon the choices of the player, Saffron can take various paths:

- The Advocate: Saffron can use her magic to make strides toward the rights of witches and Other citizens. This is one of the harder routes to attain.
- The Defender: Saffron can choose to take a not-so-obvious route: use her magic to fight for a life she wants with her friends and others.
- Radical Magic: Using magic can be good, but too much magic can be all-consuming for Saffron. By ignoring Saffron's emotional state and having a disregard for the magic she is using, she can become something not too far from an antagonist.
- Cowardice: Saffron can continue pretending she is not a witch. This can result in a premature ending or even death.

Characters of the Story

Veridian Borsch

- A proud witch from South Space
- A radical anarchist who's choosing to use his magical power to "make people see witches as superior."
- An ENTJ— "The Commander"
  - Charismatic, strong-willed, confident
  - Cold, stubborn, dominant, intolerant

Indigo Harr

- A freelance artist in downtown Space, Illinois working as a librarian
- A modern-day non-binary succubi
- An INFP— "The Mediator"
  - Open-minded, creative, passionate, idealistic
  - Impractical, overly-altruistic, takes a lot personally

Cinnabar Bennu

- Bar manager at the family bar chain
- A phoenix from a long-standing family legacy
- AN ISTJ— "The Logistician"
  - Honest, direct, dutiful, practical, responsible
  - Stubborn, by-the-book, judgmental, self-blaming

Emerald "Emma" Guilladot

- Coder at a start-up in downtown Space
- ???
- AN ENTP/ENFP— "The Campaigner/Debater"
    - Quick-thinker, brainstormer, charismatic at times
    - Argumentative, insensitive, controlling, over-thinking

The Indomitable Spirit

- An age-old spirit that is said to have formed from Margorie Balfour, a witch who was sent to be burned at the stake and would not burn once lit by the fire. It reaches out to vessels that are overcome with the feeling of defeat and helplessness.

Umber Burroughs

- A South Space witch
- An INFP— "The Mediator"
    - Committed, relaxed, prioritized, calm in crisis
    - Private, stubborn, judgmental

Obstacles

Veridian Borsch

Veridian is a character that the player is gradually introduced to. Through circulating rumors and news headlines, the player first has a view of Veridian as a named "otherworldly terrorist." As the player begins to have closer encounters with Veridian, they will see that this is the media has labelled Veridian as a villain and a sign that witches are supposed to remain feared of. Veridian's intentions are much deeper than they first appear to be. Unlike Saffron, Veridian takes pride in his identity as a witch and has spent his life immersed in the positives and negatives of being a witch. He has found family in South Space among his coven. After facing helplessness about what his people have gone through, Veridian acquires a large portion of magical powers. He decides that he will use these powers to change the minds of the public about witches. How he plans to do that is by showing humans what it is like to fear for you life because of who you are. Veridian, unlike Saffron, has no faith in humans and believes they all are merely taking advantage of a system that oppresses witches and Other citizens. Throughout the game, Saffron can make decisions that will draw her closer to the path of Veridian. If she chooses to keep moving forward with these paths, Veridian's acts on society can place Saffron at risk if she remains in hiding.

Saffron Eastey

Saffron is a clever witch and this intensifies once Saffron attains greater magical powers. However, Saffron lacks the control of her emotions and her powers throughout the game. When angered, distraught, frightened, or anguished, Saffron can begin to use magic without intending to or her magic is overpowering. An example of this is when Saffron initially wakes up at the beginning of the game and is trying to process all of what happened the night before, if the player chooses options that increase her distress, the player will have difficulty successfully maneuvering the controls needed to carry out the scene and magic actions will occur that the player did not prompt. Because of this, the player has to be aware of Saffron's emotional state when making decisions or using magic. The player has an indicator at the bottom of the screen that will indicate how Saffron is feeling.

Societal view of witches

Saffron has to be careful when and where she uses magic and how she speaks to others. Because Saffron is not a registered witch, people assume she is a witch. If she uses magic or makes a dialogue choice that tips the wrong person off that Saffron is a witch,

Saffron may be reported and detained. If the player makes too many reckless decisions like this, the player will have an early alternative ending of the game.

Movement and Interactions

Players will navigate as Saffron throughout the game. In portions of the game where scenes will not be cutscenes, the player navigates the game from mainly stationary screens. They select areas on the stationary screen to interact with.

Interactable portions of the background will be marked with a symbol. Players will use a point-and-click system with their computer mouse, analog stick, or directional buttons.

Once the player is hovering over an interactable object, a symbol will indicate what they can do with this object. These symbols vary from an action, choice, conversation, or to use magic.

Once they have selected to interact with that object, a character will likely show up along with text over the stationary screen.

To leave one screen and move onto the next, the player can press the exit button to the bottom left or right and confirm that they wish to move on.

Character Actions

Magic

A WITCH'S GUIDE TO CONTROLLER CONFIGURATION MAGIC

1. PHYSICAL MANIPULATION

The magical act of interacting with physical matter without actually touching them. This type of magic is levitation, telekinesis, or the manipulation of elements.

2. LOCATION MANIPULATION

This can be the body moving from one place to another without taking up the space between or the spirit leaving the physical body to travel between dimensions.

3. HEALTH MANIPULATION

This is magic such as the use of crystals, potions, exorcisms, or healing.

4. KNOWLEDGE MANIPULATION

Seeking and obtaining knowledge by unknown or obscure means. This can involve divination, where one uses items to find answers, premonitions or precognitions.

5. ILLUSORY MANIPULATION

This is the altering of the five senses. Examples of this magic are sensory magic that can cloak something from sight, change what a person thinks they are seeing or hearing, and more.

6. MENTAL MANIPULATION

This is magic that deals with the mind. This magic is used to alter or control people's intentions, read their thoughts, or even communicate in the privacy of people's minds.

1. Physical Manipulation

Players will be prompted to use a joystick, directional pad, or directional buttons to click and move objects when prompted or choosing to.

When magic becomes difficult for Saffron to use, the assigned direction to the button or joystick will change. For example, the left directional button usually makes an object move left. However, it will begin to move up or right every few attempts the player makes.

2. Location Manipulation

When Saffron or the player need to teleport from one location to another, this is the magic they'll use. In order to travel successfully (to another earthly location or otherwise), the Saffron has to have seen this place before, either in person or through a vivid picture.

Saffron will have to envision the location in her mind and "focus" on its surroundings. The player will see the picture of the location. However, the image will be blurry. In order to teleport successfully, the player will use the mouse/analog stick to toggle with it and make the image clear.

When Saffron is in a vulnerable state, the player is in a time crunch. If they don't act fast enough, the image will reset to blurry.

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3. Health Manipulation

Throughout the game, the player can gather strewn notes or books that provide recipes for health magic. When the player wants to use health magic, the screen will pop up with different magic ingredients. The player then has to choose the ingredients that combine to do what they intend, such as selecting the correct combination of herbs or crystals. For example, in order to successfully carry out the stress-relieving spell they found on a post-it note, the player has to choose a rose quartz crystal and lavender oil.

If Saffron is in a favorable state, the player can receive a hint to which item is needed by Saffron herself or a written explanation that pops up when they hover over a choice. If Saffron isn't in a healthy state, these are not available to the player and they have to guess.

4. Knowledge Manipulation

This type of magic requires intense concentration. The player will be prompted to carry out different actions depending upon the situation this magic is being used in. For example, when the player is attempting to carry out a premonition or precognition in the game, they will likely be carrying out actions similar to if they were using location magic. Whereas if they were interpreting runes for divination to locate something, they would use a system similar to health magic that comes from learning about runes through reading books and scripture.

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5.   Illusory Manipulation

In order to use illusory magic, the player must successfully hold down a combination of buttons that are presented to them on the screen. If they are not successfully held, the illusion the player is trying to hold will disappear.

When the player has caused a high level of stress on Saffron, the combination of buttons will be presented to the character at an unexpected, faster rate.

This magic is often used when Saffron is hiding in public site. For example, there will be moments in the game when Saffron wants to listen in on conversations without being seen. In order to remain out of visibility to people around her, she will use illusion magic. Or if she is carrying around magical items in Downtown Space and is questioned about them by authorities, she can use illusion magic to make them see something else.

6.   Mental Manipulation

When Saffron wants to use her magic to enter the minds of others, this means overcoming the unique mental path that every individual has. Every character in the game has a distinctive button pattern. Indigo's button pattern is a string of the directional pads. The player must guess the pattern of buttons successfully in order to use mental manipulation.

The player will typically receive hints. If Saffron is not in a favorable state, the player will have no hints to work off of and will have to guess.

This magic is used if Saffron needs to read the intentions of others, tell someone something without others hearing, or to even influence their actions or thinking.

Choices

When players encounter a scene that asks them to make a choice, they will be presented with their options. These can be dialogue choices or actions they can make. For example, the player can choose for Saffron to use magic to take control of someone's mind, whereas the alternative option is to not use magic and try persuasion instead. These choices may have a significant impact on the story or may not. Below is an example of a choice that can impact if the player can receive help from Emerald later in the game. While the choice appears simple when it is presented to them, it will alter their ending and the presence of a character in the game.
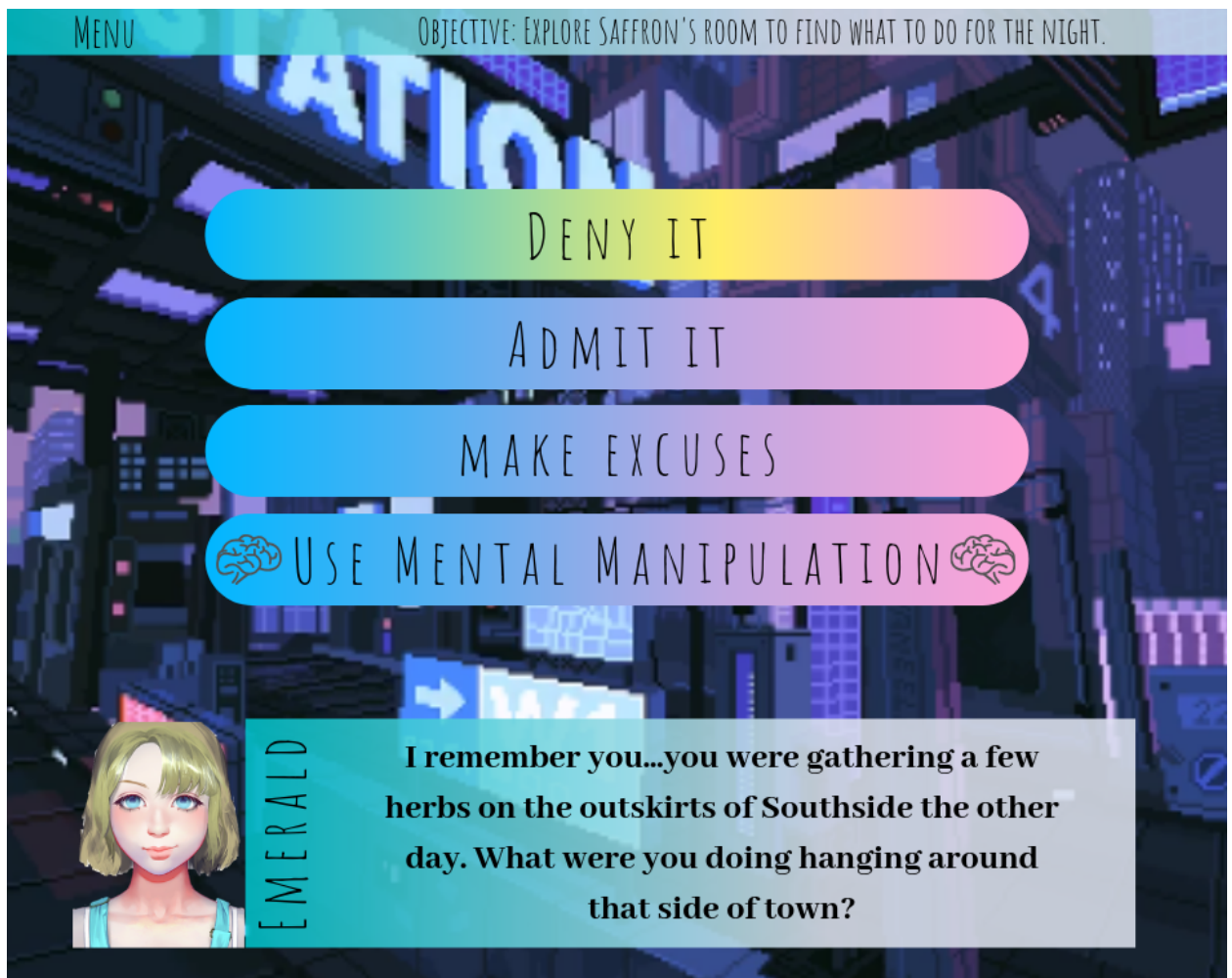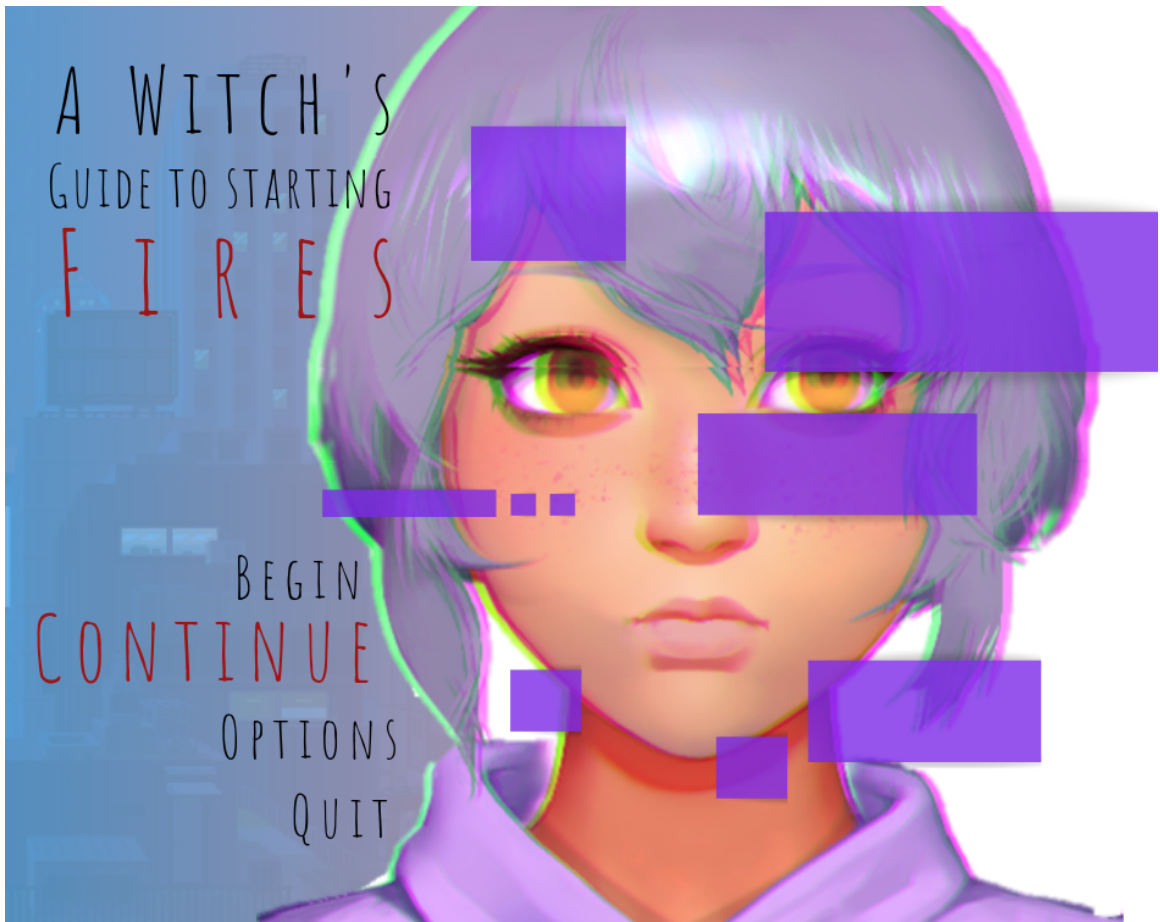
Interface

Main Menu

Players will have four options in the main menu screen:

- Begin the game or re-start completely new.
- Continue and be taken to their save files.
- Toggle with the options in the game, such as the volume of the music, text speed, subtitles, and more.
- Quit the game altogether and close the application.

Pause Screen

Save/Loading Screen

The player will have the capability of accessing save files. These save files are points in the game where they manually went into their in-game menu and chose to save their game. The save features are not available when a choices screen has been presented to them. The player will have a total of ten slot files available for them to use.

Game Over

In the case that the player gets an early alternate ending, such as dying or being found out as a witch, the player will be presented with a "game over" screen. They have three options from there: retry the scene that they were in last, load from their save files, or go to the main menu.

Scenery

THE MAGICAL COSMOPOLITAN

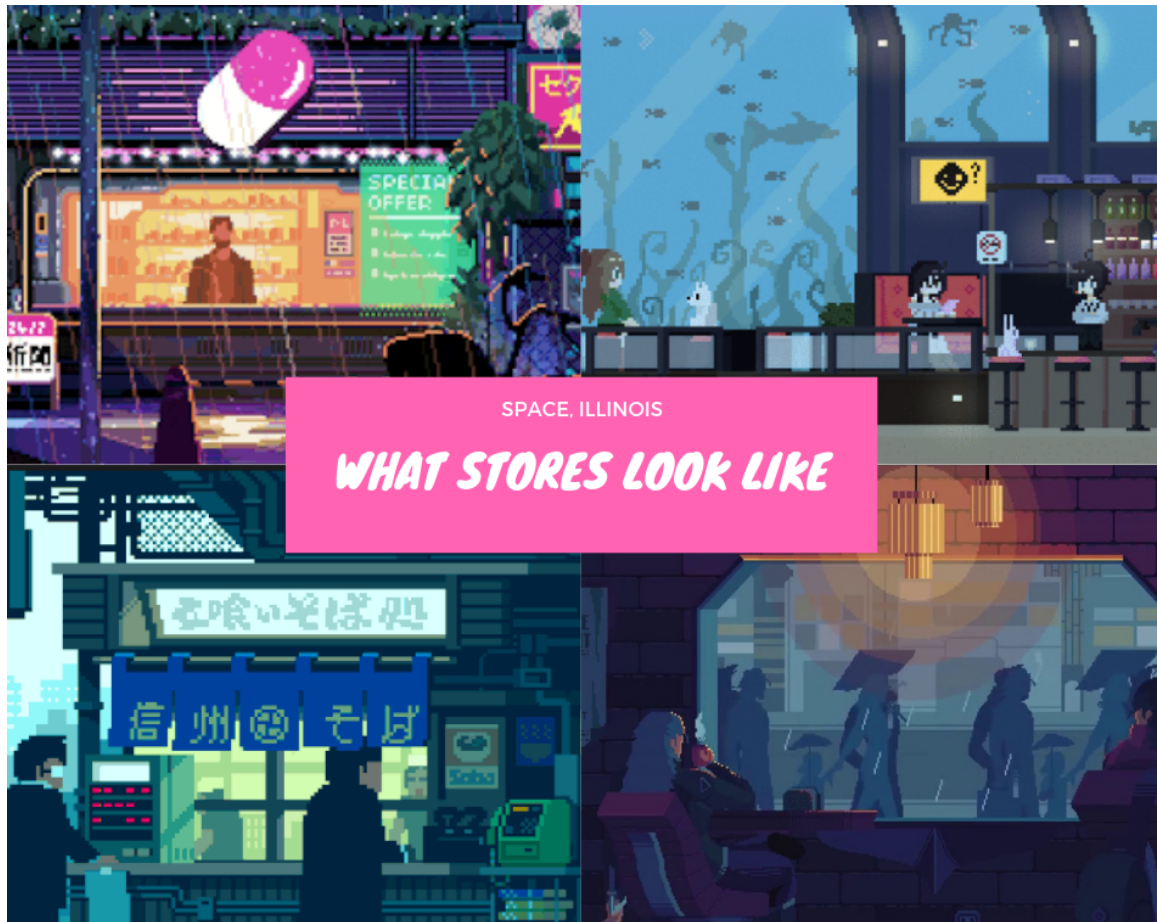**CITY OF SPACE, ILLINOIS**

Blue hues with a clean cityscape

Downtown Space

In the fictional city of Space, Illinois, the player is taken to a not-so-distant future. Space is considered one of the most "liberal" places to live for Other citizens to live, because much of the city has lower-level jobs specifically made for them that help the town function. Space is a bustling metropolitan that has a clean, futuristic city illuminated with the glow of technology. In the game, this scenery has a generally blue tone.

"THE WITCH'S DEN"

SOUTH SPACE, ILLINOIS

Warmer colors with a battered, cluttered look

South Space

Other citizens are pushed to the southside of Space, Illinois. This side of town looks more closely to the present-time and still utilizes most older technology. South Space has a rather sporadic, cluttered, and withered look compared to downtown Space. However, it does look the homiest. This area of town has warmer tones.

Stores in Space, Illinois 2035

This section serves as an example of what something in our world looks like in Space, Illinois into the future. Depending on where you are in Space, service looks very different. Stores, such as grocery stores, pharmacies, eateries and more are often in a quick or mobile form for the bustling town of Space. However, the Space citizens still like to sit down and enjoy a dining experience. Rather, they enjoy more experiential dining, such as an underwater bistro or a virtual scene-simulation café.

Saffron's Spaces

Saffron's spaces are her room, work/school, and hangout spots with friends. These spaces, minus her room, follow the color scheme of their locations. For example, she works in downtown Space, and therefore it remains a blue hue. Whereas, the café she frequents is closer to South Space, meaning it is a warmer color and an older, outdated location. Her room, however, has a dimmer, darker, and messy backdrop compared to the rest of her life and doesn't fit into either backdrop theme because it is the only place, she is herself: a witch.

Sound

The music of *A Witch's Guide to Starting Fires* is lo-fi music that has a "chill" essence to it. These tunes have jazz undertones and are generally easy-going sounds. Some will sound more somber in nature during serious scenes. Additionally, depending on where the player is located in the game, the music sounds different. For example, in South Space and other "rustic" locations of town, the music may sound grainier, outdated, and even a tad heavier in tone. Whereas, in Downtown Space, most music is smooth, bouncy, and futuristic.

For example, a sound that can be heard while playing in South Space is the somber, jazzy tune of Blue Wednesday by Murmuration ft. Shopan. In Downtown Space, the player would hear the bouncy, summer city tones of Takin' You For a Ride by Pandrezz that do not have the same pop-and-crackle grain sound in the background that the former has.

Other examples of where music in the game comes from can in be found from these locations:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB-fo_bGnQs
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmbdY5FpRwA
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rhomn5Um9dg
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8HDvTuctOU
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTXFKD7fMlE
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRNcojzOJVk
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FlxM_0S2lA

Video Game Demo and Full Access

The full video game and demo can be accessed here:
https://drive.google.com/open?id=158U9McGuBBUADgTQP9g34knnHDvSqm4p

Resources

Character Icon Created By: Icon Creator | CHARAT MAE. charat.me/en/front/create/.

All Visual Creations Made On: Canva. Amazingly Simple Graphic Design Software – Canva, www.canva.com/.

Game Scenery is from permissible use from artist Waneella: waneella. "WANEELLA Pixel Art." WANEELLA Pixel Art, waneella.tumblr.com/.

Character Portraits Made By: "Live Portrait Maker." Itch.io, zephyo.itch.io/live-portrait-maker.