

Holy Fire

Abraham Falcon

“The player has little agency and cannot directly interact with the non-player characters, but in this case the form of the game is actually also self-explanatory: it expresses how one cannot do anything to save people in danger, and how there is no free will in these kinds of political systems.”

ICIDS 2020 Jury

Creating discomforts: game design and personal reflections on authoring *Holy Fire*

Abstract

Holy Fire is a Bitsy video game and digital interactive story that depicts the suicidal self-immolation protests by Tibetans against Chinese communist rule of Tibet. The subject matter is an ongoing human rights issue that is being actively censored by the communist Chinese state and largely ignored by mainstream 'Western' media. This game, available on mobile and PC, seeks to raise public awareness of this important issue through an accessible medium. This paper reflects on the pseudonymous author's personal experience creating the game. This paper firstly highlights game design aspects of the work: specifically, using the game's environment for storytelling; utilising behavioural economics principles to balance ensuring player agency with implementing intrusive but helpful and necessary tutorial elements; creating player agency through exploration; and applying 'Interpretation of Remains,' i.e., storytelling through what other undepicted game characters and events have seemingly left behind for the player to discover, examine and consider. This paper secondly analyses the many discomforts that this game is capable of creating for the player (both in terms of physical and emotional discomfort), and contemplates the many discomforts creating this game has itself caused to the pseudonymous author and may have caused to other political stakeholders.

Keywords

bitsy, china, interactive storytelling, game design, political games, serious games, tibet, video-games

Introduction

Holy Fire (Falcon, 2019) is a video game and digital interactive story, made using the Bit-sy game editor, that depicts the suicidal self-immolation protests by Tibetans against Chinese communist rule of Tibet (as the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region), which have been occurring since 2009 and continue to occur presently. 156 people, including monks, nuns and laypeople, have self-immolated as of July 2020 (Fadiman, 2020), most of whom have died (Free Tibet, n.d.). This ongoing conflict represents the uncomfortable, continued, widespread repression, segregation and cultural destruction in ‘post-imperialist,’ ‘third-world’ countries. The subject matter of the piece is inherently politically and emotionally uncomfortable: it is generally ignored by mainstream Western media and actively censored by the communist Chinese government. *Holy Fire* was selected for exhibition at

the 13th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling (ICIDS 2020) (ICIDS 2020 Organisers, 2020a) under the theme of ‘Texts of Discomfort’ (ICIDS 2020 Organisers, 2020b). This pixel-art interactive journey is recommended to be experienced on mobile devices using touchscreen controls, but may also be experienced on personal computers using keyboard controls, at the following link: <https://abrahamfalcon.itch.io/holy-fire>.

Inspiration and creation

Holy Fire was created as part of an assignment for an undergraduate game design module. *Holy Fire* is inspired by *The Killer* (Magnuson, 2011), a web-based Flash game (or ‘not-game,’ as its author, Magnuson, prefers to refer to it) depicting and publicising the Cambodian Genocide perpetrated by the communist Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979.^[1] *The Killer* was shown to me as part of the essential ‘playing’ list (in ad-

^[1] The Killer (2011, Jordan Magnuson: Flash) <<http://www.gametrekking.com/the-games/cambodia/the-killer>> accessed 11 December 2020.

dition to the essential reading list) for my undergraduate game design module. When tasked to complete an assignment for the module, I wanted to do more than just make a 'fun' game and hand in my assignment; instead, I decided to use this opportunity to make a similarly meaningful and serious game that has social value and wider implications. Consequently, I decided to make *Holy Fire* in order to raise public awareness of the self-immolation protests by Tibetans in recent years. I recommend that other students also actively consider if they may be able to research or create something more meaningful and valuable as part of their studies, and that we should choose to do so if opportunities arise.

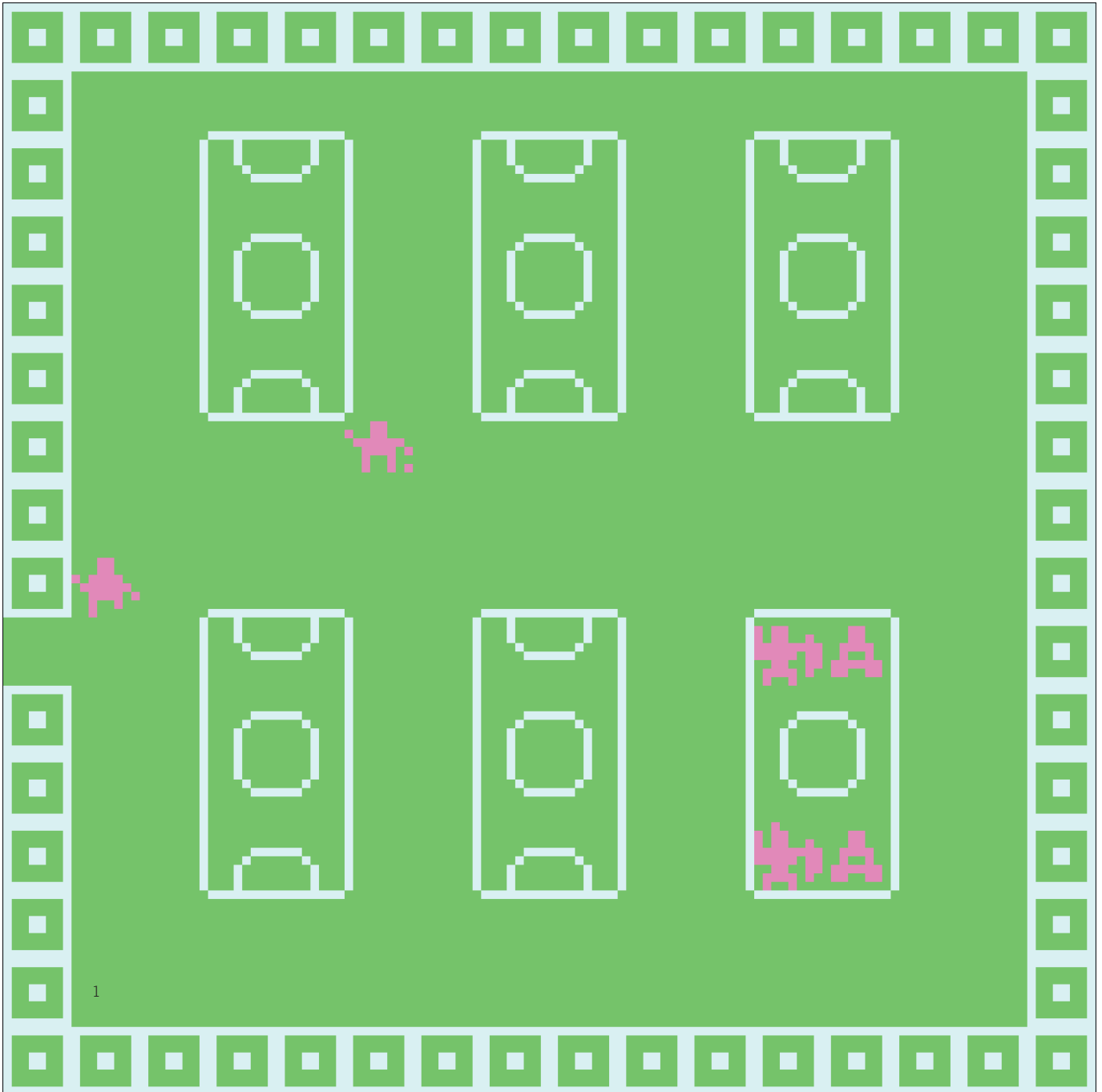
Game design

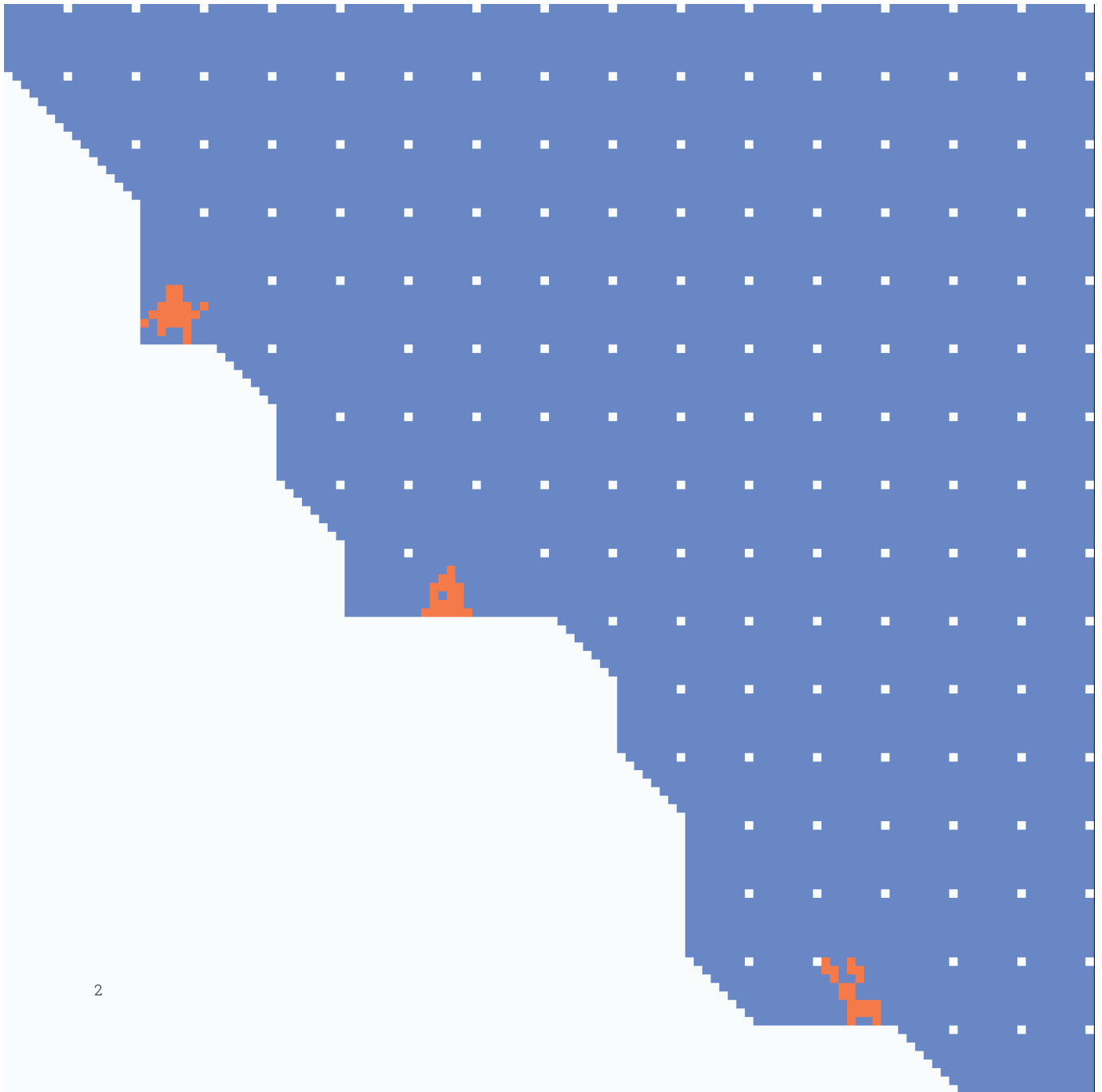
Evoking and creating story association through environmental storytelling

Jenkins argued that environmental storytelling can be made immersive for a player through the evocation of pre-existing narrative associations (Jenkins 2004): specifically, that the past experiences, knowledge and preconceptions of that player can be drawn upon to enhance the present experience. Almost every Room in *Holy Fire* attempts to evoke narrative association through familiarity by using varying but archetypal colouration palettes, and visual representations of quintessential real-world objects. For example, white lines on green grass delineating ball game pitches School Playground Room (as shown in Figure 1), and the white snowy mountains with falling snow and clear blue sky in the background in the Mountain Rooms (as shown in Figure 2).

Holy Fire

Interactive Storytelling Art





texts of discomfort

For pre-existing narrative associations to be made, it is a precondition that the player must possess prior knowledge which allows them to understand elements used by the designer to convey and evoke the environment. This prior knowledge is ideally obtained naturally from the player's own past experiences (as can be easily done for the examples above), but to account for more obscure references and less experienced players, the game can also provide such contextual knowledge through tutorial elements and dialogue. In *Holy Fire*, background information is provided to less knowledgeable and less experienced (in terms of the game's adopted Tibetan cultural context) players to also allow them to understand the wider, inter-textual narrative environment which surrounds them. For example, the descriptions provided by the various scrolls, signs and monk characters that the player can interact with explain Tibetan Buddhist references made in *Holy Fire*, such

as prayer wheels, prayer beads, prayer flags and the wheel of reincarnation (as shown in Figure 3), which not every player may necessarily be familiar with.

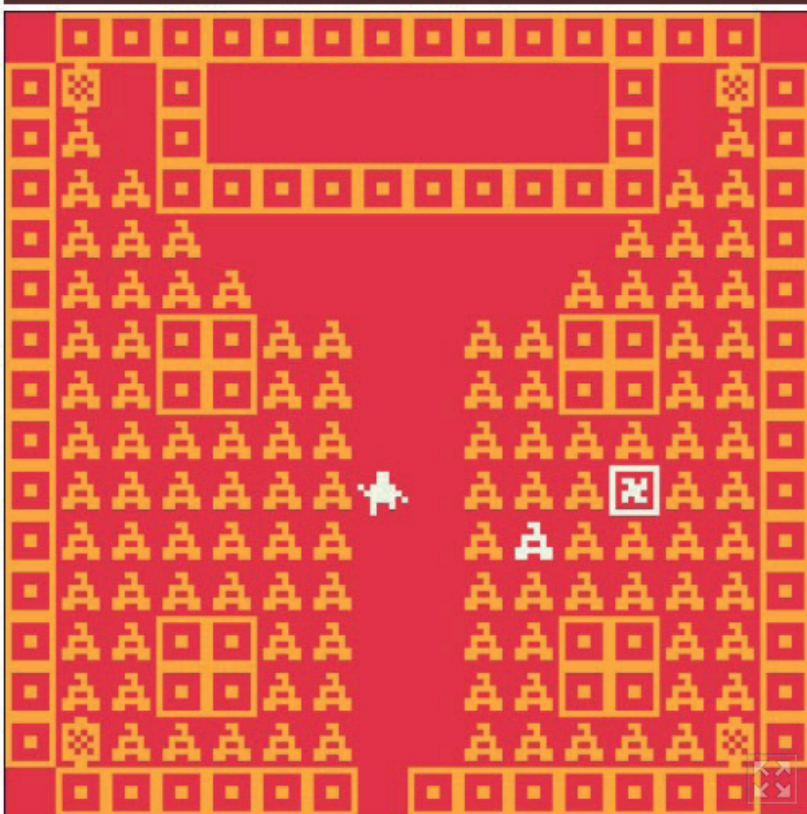
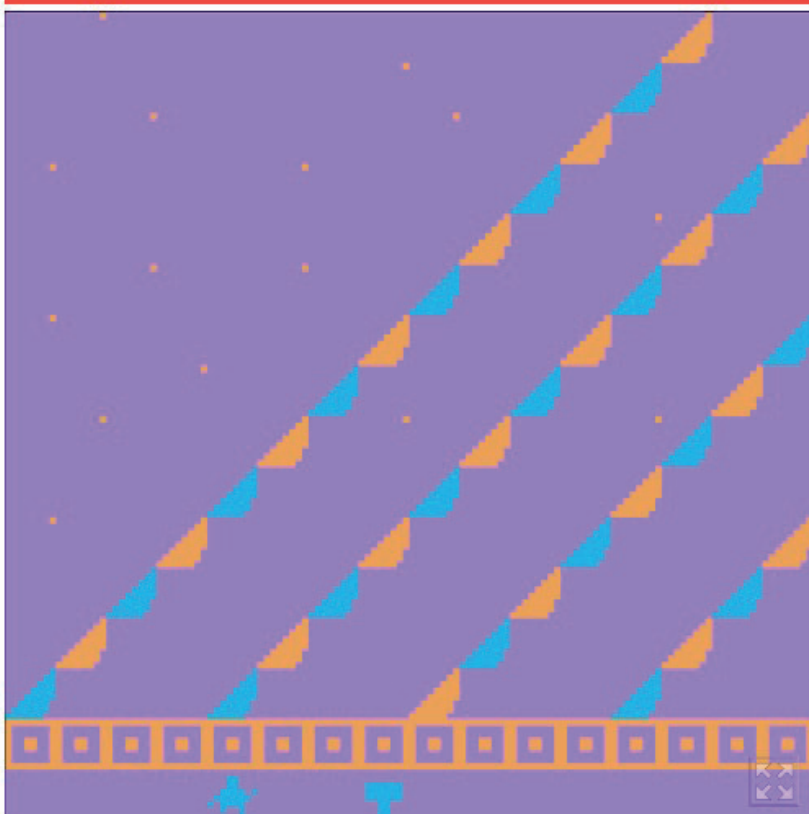
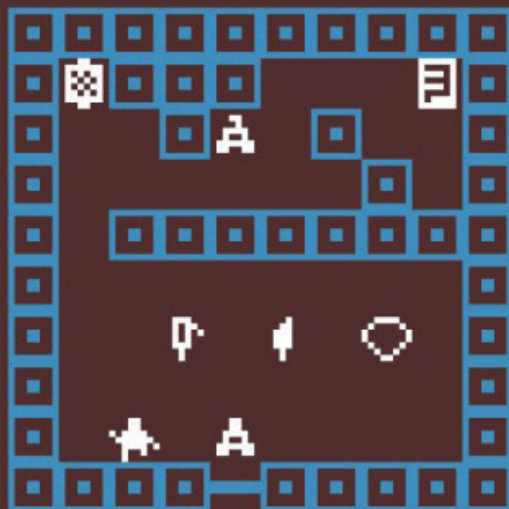
Embedding (optional) information to create emotional responses

Jenkins differentiated between enacted and embedded narratives (Jenkins, 2004). The enacted narrative is controlled by the designer and compulsory for the player to experience, whilst the embedded narrative, although also intended by the designer for the player to experience, requires the player to actively discover and interact with them in order to experience them. Dialogue is a method for the designer to convey information and it can be either compulsory or optional for the player to engage with. Optional engagements with Items, Sprites and even certain Rooms thus embed information in *Holy Fire*. For example, exploration of the School

Welcome back! This is you in
your mother's womb. Life flows.



3



Playground Room is entirely optional (the player can choose to not visit it and nonetheless progress through the story): the player is not given any active tasks to carry out, such as puzzles to solve, in this Room; the player must choose to discover and interact with the optional dialogues with the various characters in that Room in order to understand the information I embedded.

I also embedded information and attempted to evoke emotional responses from the player through game mechanics and a difficult user interface. The sudden mechanical change of the guard characters in the Injured Monk Room (as shown in Figure 6), from being non-Wall Tiles which the player can navigate past to Wall Tiles which the Player cannot navigate past, surprises and disappoints the player. The player expected the guard characters to behave mechanically in the same way, i.e., to be able to walk through them in order to interact with the

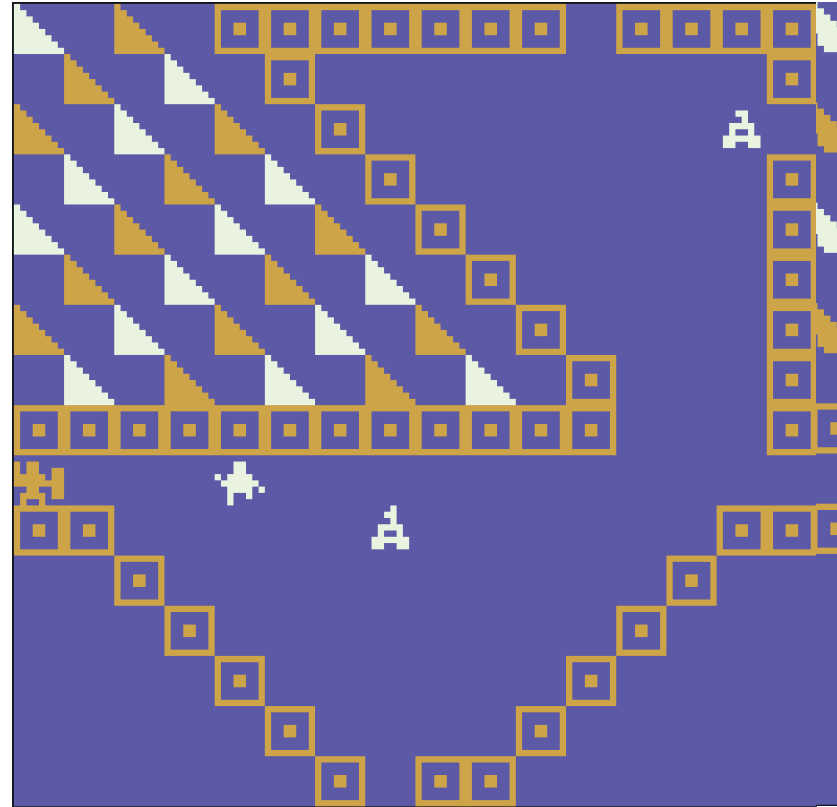
injured monk character that the guards are surrounding. However, upon interacting with the first-aid kit, the guard characters change mechanically: the player can no longer walk through them and interact with the injured monk character so as to help him with the first-aid kit. The difficult controls required to navigate the Mountain Rooms (as shown in Figure 2) and the External Temple Room (as shown in Figure 4) force the player to feel hardship and frustration because the player is required to tap or press the movement buttons repeatedly. My implementation of a difficult user interface was inspired by Juul and Norton's paper (2009) in which they argued that the difficulty a player encounters when interacting with the game (e.g., controlling the avatar) potentially adds to the gameplay experience: a game that is more difficult to interact with may tell a more meaningful story. I argue that both mechanical changes and difficult controls constitute narrative game mechanics

(Dubbelman, 2016, pp. 40–41).

Allowing the player to control progression: applying behavioural economics

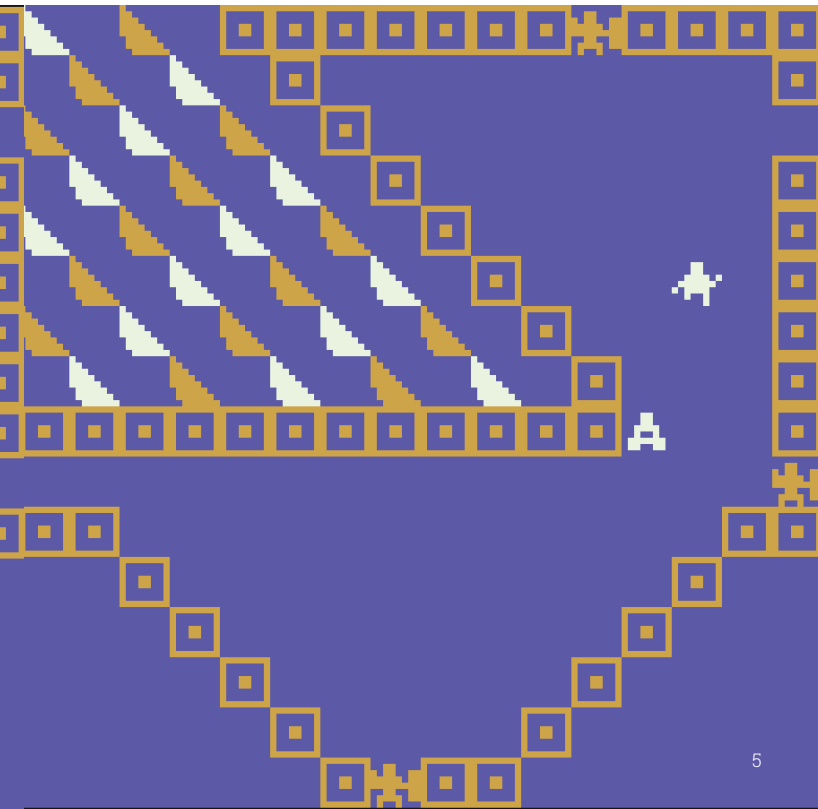
The Bitsy game-making platform (Le Doux, 2017) does not allow for complex limitations and restrictions of player progression as neither endings nor exits could be conditionally triggered. I address this software limitation by using way-pointing signages which I argue represent one of the simplest, most effective and non-intrusive methods of conveying tutorial elements.

I borrow from behavioural economics' understanding of the concept of 'nudge'^[2] (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008, p. 6) and Baldwin's categorisation of nudges into separate degrees^[3] and propose to divide the tutorial elements in games into two categories:



^[2] Which refers to a method of influencing behaviour and decision-making with suggestive, non-restrictive interventions rather than with indiscriminately imposed mandates;

^[3] Specifically, I refer to first- and second-degree nudges.



- (i) the supplying of simple tips and reminders to assist the player in going in the correct narrative direction; and
- (ii) the manipulation of ‘default rules’^[4] (Sunstein, 2013) which prevents the player from easily and accidentally going in the incorrect narrative direction, but from which the player can ultimately ‘opt-out.’ (Baldwin, 2014, pp. 835–837),

Holy Fire implements both first- and second-degree tutorial elements. In terms of first-degree tutorial elements, many of the notes, signs and monk characters placed around the game world in *Holy Fire*, represented as either Sprites or Items, inform the player about possible directions to explore and some even nudges them towards exploring certain options before others, e.g., the monk character in the Temple Square Room recommends a sequence

^[4] Which refers to the options which are designed to be chosen automatically unless the decision-maker actively refuses.

to visit the various Rooms in (as shown in the left screenshot of Figure 5).

In terms of second-degree tutorial elements, for example, the default option for the player when encountering an unblocked exit is to enter said exit. I prevent the player from choosing this default option of entering unblocked exits uninformed by blocking said exits with Items in the form of monk characters who instruct the player to do certain tasks before entering said exits, e.g., in the first Baby Hut Room and the Temple Square Room. However, I do allow the player to disregard this amended default rule and, nonetheless, choose to enter said exits if they so decide, in order to ensure that the player's autonomy and agency are preserved.

In addition to first- and second-degree tutorial elements, I also utilised mandates by creating points of no return in *Holy Fire*: once the player has triggered certain plot devices by entering certain Rooms, they would not be al-

lowed to return to previous areas. For example, once the Player leaves the Baby Hut Room; climbs down from the Mountains; visits the Temple; enters the Temple Square (as shown in Figure 5); leaves the Dormitory; sees the Abbot self-immolate; and chooses to commit self-immolation at the Bonfire, they would not be allowed to return to previous areas of the game, thus ensuring that the Player will only travel through the narrative in a chronologically sensible direction as intended. This ensures and controls the temporal continuity of the story by preventing player immersion from being broken by unintended time paradoxes.

Signages and tutorials: nudging the player may not break immersion

When designing *Holy Fire*, I set out to create agency through exploration. I concur with Fernández-Vara's argument (2011, pp. 8–9) that tutorial signage is often disparate from the

fictional game world: the so-called theatrical ‘fourth wall’ will inevitably break as game tutorials tend to interact directly with the player by making reference to specific controller inputs, despite the designer’s best attempt to integrate the tutorial material into the fictional game world.

I argue that although tutorial elements may not constitute a part of the narrative, they represent an effective way for the designer to shape the player’s understanding of the narrative. Unless the designer wishes to leave the player completely in the dark, then tutorial elements should be included in games in order to encourage and nudge the player towards the correct direction in understanding the narrative the designer intended. Agency through exploration is not necessarily a wander in complete darkness. I argue that agency through exploration is created in a story when the player goes on a journey to uncover more information about

the game world and the characters that inhabit it. This journey does not have to be completely unguided. In fact, this journey can be completely linear and still effectively convey a sense of exploration and discovery, as demonstrated by the game, *Journey*.^[5]

I argue that whether or not agency through exploration is created does not depend on whether or not the journey is guided or unguided. It depends instead on whether the player felt as if they discovered more about the game world through their time spent playing the game. If the player, when prompted and guided in the correct direction, would discover more about the game world, then I argue that the game should prompt and guide them thus. For this reason, *Holy Fire* rightfully provides tutorial elements, as I detailed above, in order to assist the player in comprehending the narrative whilst at the same time preserving autonomy and agency. Although correct progression through the narrati-

^[5] *Journey* (2012, Thatgamecompany: PlayStation 3).

ve of *Holy Fire* is heavily nudged towards, progression is not fixed; thus, the Player is allowed to disregard nudges and explore freely if they so choose.

The Injured Monk Room: Interpretation of Remains

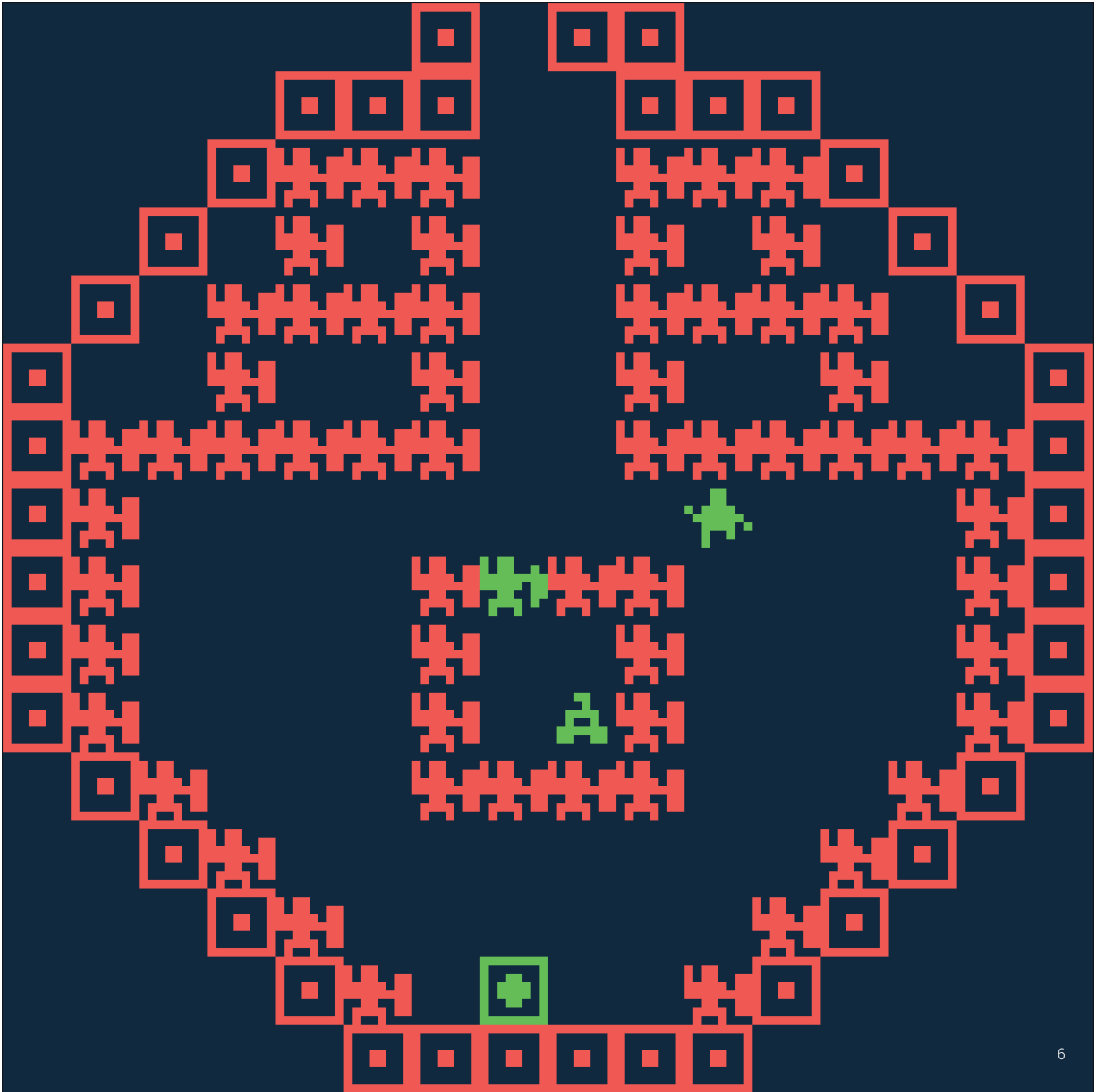
The room containing the Injured Monk (as shown in Figure 6) is an example of my application of the ‘Interpretation of Remains’ as defined by Fernández-Vara (2011, pp. 6–8), which refers to environmental storytelling through what other undepicted game characters and events have seemingly left behind for the player to discover, examine and consider. As the story designer, I do not explicitly explain why and how the injured monk was injured: I only show the aftermath of the events which must have unfolded before the player arrived at the room, i.e., the monk becoming injured and surrounded by government guards. The player must disco-

ver and ponder the cause of the monk’s injury by themselves.

Fernández-Vara argued that the ‘Interpretation of Remains’ as a narrative method is not necessarily directly relevant to gameplay and fails to encourage a specific behaviour from the player. I agree that an overarching narrative regarding the background of the game world may well be very distant from gameplay and difficult for the Player to relate to, for example, the massive amount of background information embedded in open-world games through conversations with NPCs, audio recordings and text. In such a case, the Designer must somehow persuade the Player to invest the necessary time into the game and the narrative in order to truly comprehend the breadth of the game world. See examples of games with a massive amount of embedded lore: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*^[6] and *Horizon Zero Dawn*.^[7]

^[6] The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011, Bethesda: PlayStation 3);

^[7] Horizon Zero Dawn (2017, Guerrilla Games: PlayStation 4).

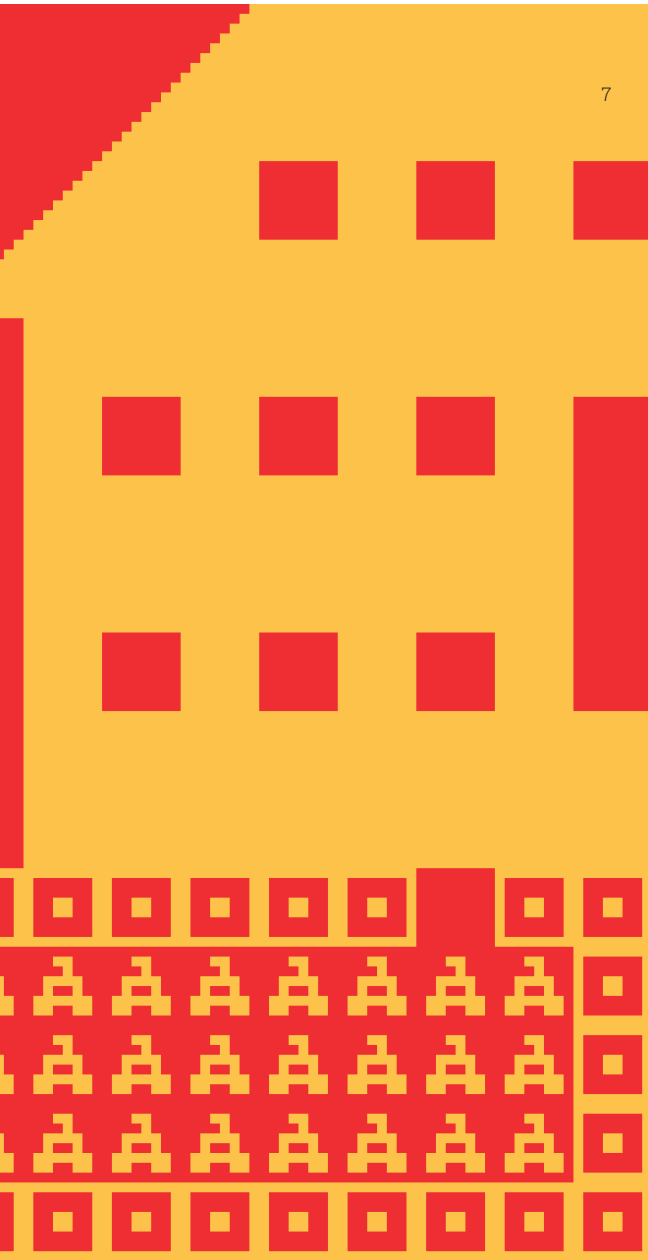


texts of discomfort

However, I argue that, in compact games with few but focused mechanics, this narrative method can be effectively utilised. For example, in *Return of the Obra Dinn*,^[8] the implementation of the 'Interpretation of Remains' as a narrative method was particularly apt because the gameplay elements mandated an examination of the past, thus forcing the Player to engage with the narrative method. Similarly, in *Holy Fire*, I attempted to emulate this by forcing the Player to engage with the narrative method of 'Interpretation of Remains' through mandating a related gameplay mechanic: in order to 'solve' the Injured Monk Room, the first-aid kit must be physically interacted with through gameplay, thus raising the salience of the injury in the player's mind.

^[8] *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018, 3909 LLC; Lucas Pope: Windows).





7

Creating discomfort

Emotional discomfort through exploration and player agency

Holy Fire depicts the suicidal, self-immolation protests by Tibetans against Chinese communist rule of Tibet. The subject matter of the game is inherently emotionally uncomfortable. The control granted by the interactive medium allows the player to personally struggle as a member of a marginalised group from a first-person perspective. The player will step into the shoes of a local monk; witness the injustice against their people; and fail repeatedly at attempting to help and make the situation better. The player is allowed to explore various aspects of the storyline in different orders. In the end, the player is forced to make the life-defining choice as to whether or not they will commit ritual suicide in public protest (which leads to the two possible alternative endings, as

shown in Figure 7). This was and continues to be a life-or-death decision that faced and is facing many Tibetans in real life. The game helps the player to learn about, experience and understand the emotional discomfort suffered daily by the Tibetan people.

Physical *discomfort* during gameplay: physical mimicry

The interactivity of the game is simplified such that the player may only move their character in four directions and proceed with dialogue. Each movement requires the player to swipe in the desired direction on their mobile phone or to press the appropriate arrow key on their keyboard. Hundreds of such repetitive movements are required to finish the story because I force the player to complete certain complex, ritualistic movement patterns, which are inspired by Tibetan Buddhist motifs. The tiring and uncomfortable nature of the physical inte-

raction with the game is intentional.

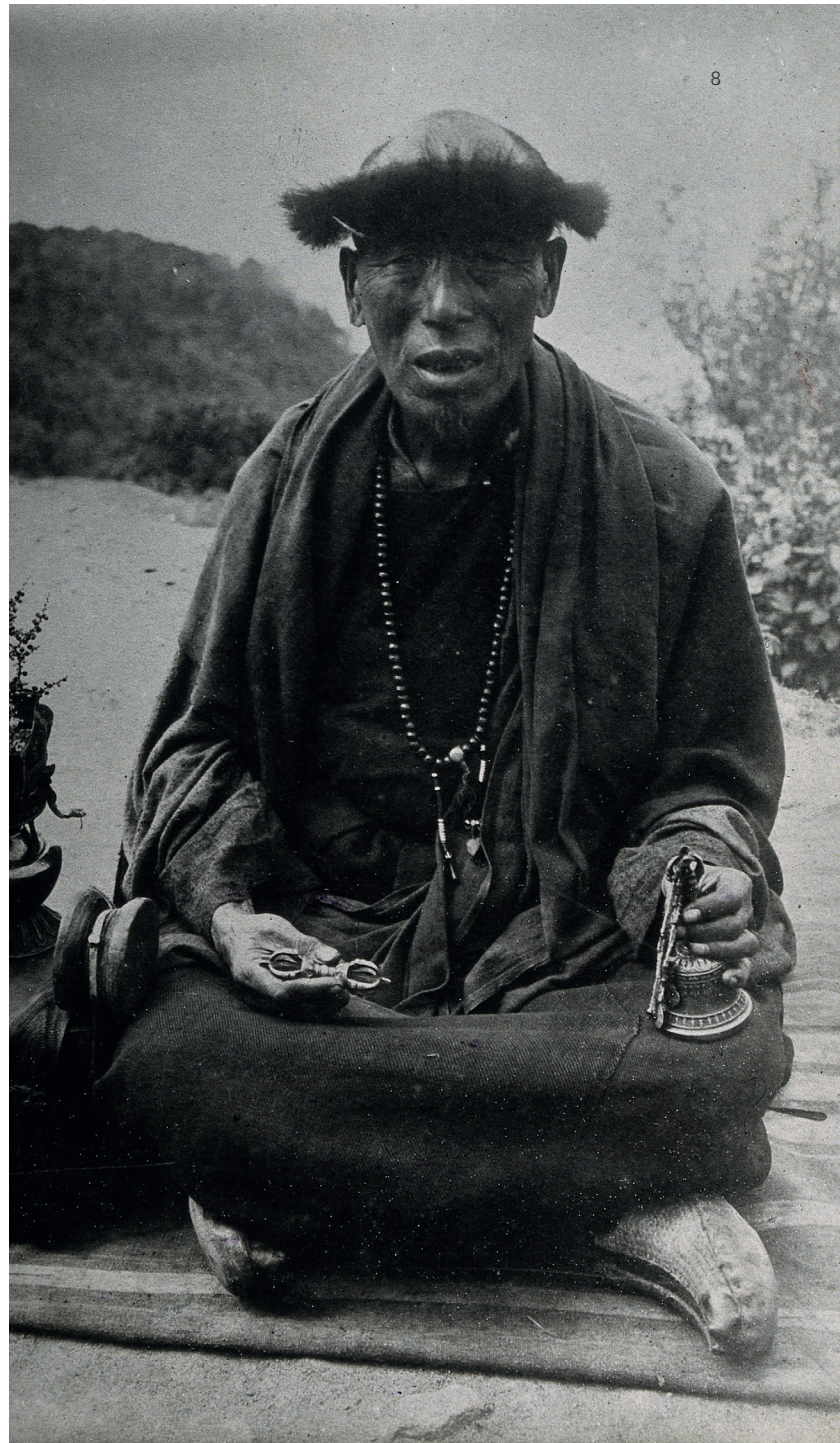
I also intend and desire that players, if they are physically able, should sit uncomfortably cross-legged on the floor, in groups of a few members, in a room that is in near-complete darkness, lit by but a few candles, for the duration of the gameplay (as shown in Figure 8). The uncomfortable physical posture that players should be in to play the game directly replicates the physical posture of the game characters, specifically the monks. I hope that at least six players would sit cross-legged in a 2-by-3 pattern to play the game together: this replicates the physical, regimented and patterned system that monks sit in during prayer. Ideally, dozens of players would play the game together and sit in even larger formations.

I hope that the uncomfortable primitive interactivity of the game and these uncomfortable physical mimicries allow players to build a deeper, more personal connection with the

narrative, and empathise better with the pained struggles of the portrayed characters, by forcing the player through a real-life exploration of another cultural and religious system's physical discomfort, in addition to the emotional discomfort represented by the game's challenging storyline and difficult decisions.

Overcoming discomfort through emotional strength

I hope that the harsh realities of this ongoing, real-life political situation will inspire players to overcome both the physical and emotional discomfort they experience whilst viewing the game and to finish the narrative. Alternatively, if the player gives up, it is hoped that they will reflect on their failure to access uncomfortable materials in everyday life because of the lack of comfortable and accessible sources, such as main-



stream media reporting, which often censors potentially disturbing imagery, such as burnt human flesh. Similarly, the display of the game on the players' own mobile devices is intended to demonstrate how easily viewers could have accessed the difficult content portrayed and the discomfort conveyed, which should be contrasted with how viewers either choose not to or are unable to access such uncomfortable content.

Inspiring future work through accessible and *comfortable* mediums

Web-based computer gaming is an accessible and comfortable medium for artists that can intimately bring public attention to an uncomfortable current political and social issue that has been disregarded by mainstream media. The game was made using a very accessible and comfortable-to-use game design tool. Bitsy is a web-based game maker that is easy

to use and does not require any programming skills (as shown in Figure 9). It is hoped that viewers would be inspired to create similar games to publicise other unknown uncomfortable conflicts and struggles around the world. The designer's comfort in making the game should be contrasted with the discomfort of the player. The player cannot naturally appreciate the designer's comfort through their uncomfortable gameplay, and must be told of this after their gameplay experience.

Adapting to COVID-19 discomforts

ICIDS 2020 was held virtually because of the global outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Appreciating this ongoing situation and that the ICIDS 2020 Exhibition would be held virtually, I adapted the game for exhibition in an exclusively virtual environment. The game itself can be played on the player's phone and therefore experienced remotely from anywhere in the world.

Bitsy Holy Fire

exits & endings

exit destination

WombA (8,11) Baby Hut (11,6)

exit options
transition effect: wave

dialog

new section text effects

dialog list conditional

1. dialog
cries

2. conditional
when item Bucket == 1
Middle-aged Nun: "We tried... That's..."
when item Bucket == 0
Middle-aged Nun: "there should be..."

find drawing

avatar tile sprite item

PrayingWf Praying M PrayerMat Instruction Old Prayin Brush
Prayer Bea Guiding M Tree House PrayerWhi TempleSq
GuardA GuardB GuardC GuardD BurningTe BurningTe
Abbot GuardLeac FallenTree MonkinNei InjuredMor InjuredMor
InjuredMor WheelIntr MountainA BallBounci Teacher1 Teacher2
SchoolGua SchoolGua Old Scroll Old Robe Wood Can Baby
HutGuard HutMonk RabgyalLe

room

play

room tools
name: TempleExter colors: Temple Exterior
grid walls exits & endings add exits & endings

paint

avatar tile sprite item

name: burnIngTemp
dialog
cries
{
animation
preview frame 1 frame 2

colors

background color
tile color
sprite color
#795ccc
palette select

The physical elements can also be replicated by giving players prior instructions. Indeed, I proposed that each player can sit uncomfortably on their own, whilst a remote conference call of multiple simultaneous players could replicate the intended group sitting arrangement. In fact, a remote call may have incidentally allowed more players to experience the game together.

The pseudonymous author's own personal, political discomforts

The subject matter of the game is under constant supervision and censorship by the Chinese government under a regime of misinformation popularly supported by mainland Chinese netizens. The subject matter is so uncomfortable to the Communist Party of China that I must display the game under a pseudonym in fear of political persecution of myself and my family members in Mainland China, if they are personally connected to the game. I was

unable to refer to my other creative and academic outputs to establish my previous experience during the competitive submission process for the ICIDS 2020 Exhibition. My future career and portfolio would also not be able to benefit from any publicity and recognition that this game generates and receives, because I would be too afraid to directly reference this game.

Others' political and commercial discomforts

To provide an example of the political pressures at work: *Holy Fire* was shortlisted by the student art prize of a European university. However, the organisers of that art prize, having contemplated the potential political and commercial pressures from mainland Chinese students (e.g., a reduction in admissions and the generation of tuition fees), decided not to promote *Holy Fire* as widely as it had intended, nor as widely as other shortlisted pieces from the same competition. In light of the outbreak of CO-

VID-19 and the racism that Asian (particularly, Chinese) people have experienced because of it, which rendered this time period especially politically sensitive, I agreed with the university's approach. However, such self-censorship sets a dangerous precedent.

This piece has made a European university and its mainland Chinese students uncomfortable. This highlights how the piece subverts the established, mainstream political and business systems which acquiesce to, if not outright allow, censorship and prevent people from learning important information about the political sufferings and discomforts of other cultures.

Cultural appropriation(?) and other *uncomforting* connotations

Further, I also had to grapple with a separate, uncomfortable inner conflict: the morality and ethical issues surrounding telling someone

else's story. The Tibetan culture is not my culture. A charge of cultural appropriation can reasonably be levied against me in relation to the creation of this piece. In fact, on the face of it, I actually belong to the Chinese culture that has oppressed and continues to oppress the Tibetan culture. I may well be seen by some as the 'enemy.' This ongoing story is not mine, but is it mine to tell?

There was also the concern that this game would achieve little else but merely exhibit a real-life culture's ongoing suffering as if it is 'art' and a human zoo. Given that my own culture is arguably the antagonist of this story, there may be suspicions of imperialism and colonialism in my taking the role of the storyteller. I decided to embrace this potential interpretation and, in my opinion, this legitimate critique by voicing the introductory video to *Holy Fire's* ICIDS 2020 exhibition using a text-to-speech software that spoke in a voice impersonating that of Sir Da-

vid Attenborough. I was and remain conscious of the connotations of my work.

In the end, I came to the view that no one else could or would make this or a similar game, or even attempt to tell this story in another medium. I think no one else would have spoken up, so I decided to act as a voice for what I saw as the voiceless. I endeavoured to be objective in my portrayal, and to present information and advocate for players to try to find out more about this real-life situation after the gameplay, rather than for them to merely shrug, think that they now know better and walk off without trying to do anything else.

Conclusion

This game does not simply make its viewers emotionally and physically uncomfortable through an accessible medium in order to best inform them of an uncomfortable current issue. Because of political and cultural reasons, the mere presence and existence of the piece make the totalitarian Chinese regime and anyone who potentially benefits from it extremely uncomfortable and worried about its implications, including me, the author...

Disclaimer

No expression of personal opinion on the morality, legality or politics surrounding the decisions to self-immolate is intended or should

be inferred. I simply want to bring peoples' attention to the fact that this is happening. Any references to Tibetan Buddhism are made with as much due deference and research as possible.

I apologise for any inaccuracy or offence. Artistic licence has been taken to portray certain religious concepts in a simplified, pixelated form. The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this game are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places and buildings is intended or should be inferred.

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Images

11. Screenshot of the School Playground Room;
12. A screenshot of one of the Mountain Rooms;
13. A screenshot montage of the Tibetan Buddhist motifs in Holy Fire;
14. A screenshot of the External Temple Room;
15. Screenshot comparisons of the Temple Square Room before and after certain events occur: the dark yellow-coloured guard characters prevent the player from revisiting certain rooms;
16. Screenshot of the Injured Monk Room;
17. Screenshot of one of the two potential endings: the player character has decided to self-immolate and is walking towards a bonfire;
18. A Buddhist monk sitting cross-legged (photograph, circa 1910–1930). Credit: Wellcome Collection. Licensed under Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0);
19. An under-the-hood look at the simple and accessible Bitsy game maker interface for Holy Fire.

Abraham Falcon is the pseudonym of an undergraduate student at Durham University. Their real identity cannot be associated with the piece because its contentious political nature may affect their future professional career.