Drop/let's/fail to connect

Laureline Chiapello and Florian Glesser

Interactive Storytelling Art

"*The juxtaposition between the descriptive poetry and soothing piano music with the minimalist game play and visuals is striking. Encouraging the player to accept the inevitability of collision to experience the true meaning of the game and to arrive at an end or win state is an original idea.*"

ICIDS 2021 Jury

Drop/let's/fail to connect

Abstract

Drop/let's/fail to connect is a browser game Florian Glesser and Laureline Chiapello made during the COVID-19 pandemic, while we were physically disconnected from the world. This short minimalist poetic game aims to remind its players of a simple and inspiring thing: despite all the pain they can bring, obstacles can also connect people. Telling our stories, especially the difficult ones, is a way to connect. In this paper, we will present the three types of rhetoric we used to make the game: procedural, visual and written. We will then explain how the game can provoke a reflection about obstacles, failures and [Re|Dis]connection, for the players but also for us, the creators.

Keywords

Visual poetry, procedural rhetoric, minimalist game, failure, obstacles, peaceful

[re|dis]connection

Procedural Rhetoric

Drops/let's/fail to connect looks like a classic/
retro video game where the player has to avoid
obstacles. It can be seen as a kind of vertical
Flappy Bird (Nguyễn Hà Đông, 2013), a form of
gameplay already explored by the very creator
of *Flappy Bird* himself in *Swing Copters* (Dot-
Gears, 2014). However, our first inspiration for
this vertical gameplay did not come from these
popular games but from the 48th Ludum Dare—
an online game jam—whose theme was "deeper
and deeper". This theme obviously called for dig-
ging games, where you usually make the screen
scroll vertically and not horizontally. But "deeper
and deeper" also carried a depressing feeling: we
were getting deeper and deeper in the pandemic
and we wanted to make a game with an interest-
ing and inspiring message. Thus, we worked on a
way to transform the central action of the player
into a meaningful experience.

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fail to connect

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[re|dis]connection
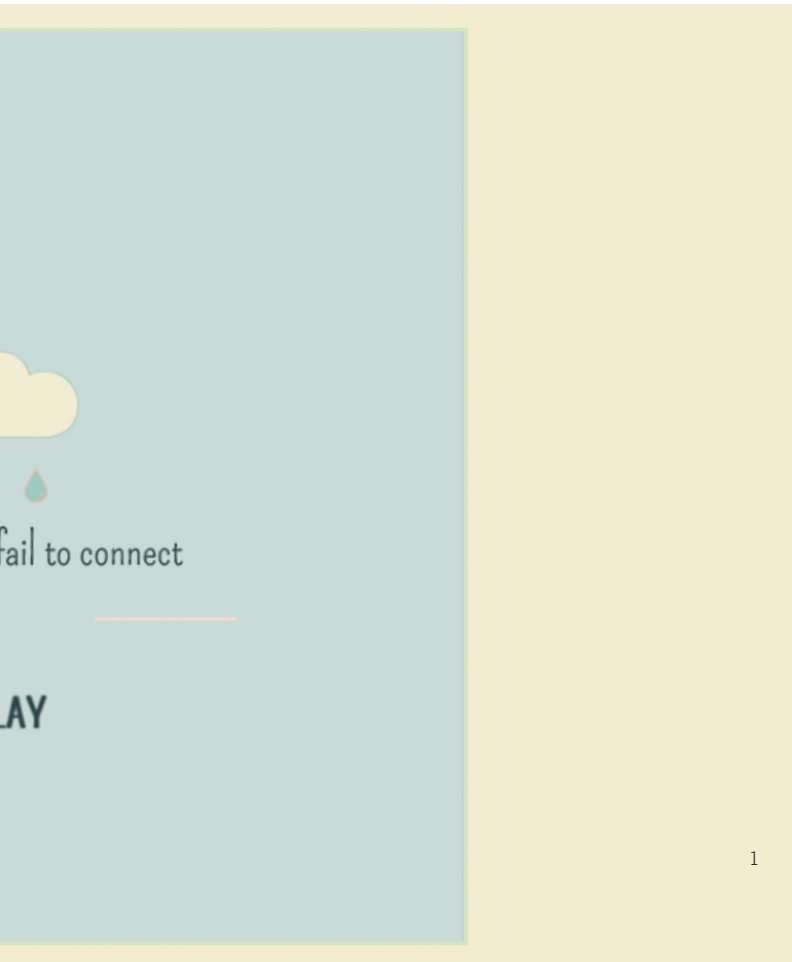
Our process builds on the well-known concept of "procedural rhetoric": "a technique for making arguments with computational systems" (Bogost, 2010, p. 3). For us as game creators, it means making a game where the procedures that the players follow (the game rules) are actually a form of discourse that delivers meaning. We were specifically inspired by games that question video game conventions and player expectations. For example, in *Final Fantasy IV* (Square, 1984) or in *Undertales* (Toby Fox, 2015) players think they should attack and kill another character, like they usually would, only to discover that they should not. Another inspiring game is *Fit In* (Axel Rozo Brézillac, 2015) where the players have to stop following the game instructions in order to win.

Similarly, our game expects players to fail—it is necessary to stop avoiding the obstacles in order to discover the story. Winning all the time is not possible nor desired. We played

with the digital procedures and with the expectations players have concerning them, in order to make our public think about the meaning of obstacles and failure in general. In "real" life, the very idea of avoiding obstacles might be tempting but is in fact unrealistic. So, our game suggests that we ought to start seeing obstacles differently. Players should embrace them, crash into them cheerfully. The title may be first read as a failure: "Droplets, fail[ing] to connect", but actually, it is a happy injunction to fail: "drop, let's fail [in order] to connect!"

Visual Rhetoric

While the game relies on procedural rhetoric to convey its main meaning, it is not an abstract game: we used the metaphor of the water cycle to tell a story and help the player make sense of the game system.

We chose to tell the story of two fall-ing droplets (inspired by the deeper and deeper theme) who are to be reunited in the end: they fall and fail until they finally succeed. Using the water cycle metaphor allowed us to illustrate the physical disconnection (when the droplets are separated through falling) and reconnection (when they fall on the same spot and make a single "body" of water). Their true connection comes from their tales of adventure they share with one another. Telling stories is a form of connection that we humans can easily forge, even when physically disconnected.

The disconnection of the two droplets is visually clear as the screen is vertically separated in two parts, one for each droplet. Moreover, each droplet lives its own adventure, with the corresponding text being displayed on each side. The role afforded to textuality in video games is a vast subject of discussion, as the infamous debate of narratology vs. ludology demonstrated (Corliss, 2011; Ryan, 2002); text is not specific to video

Once upon a time there were thousands of small drops of water asleep in a cloud.

Every little drop of water has fallen in so many places, so many times, that nothing impresses them anymore.

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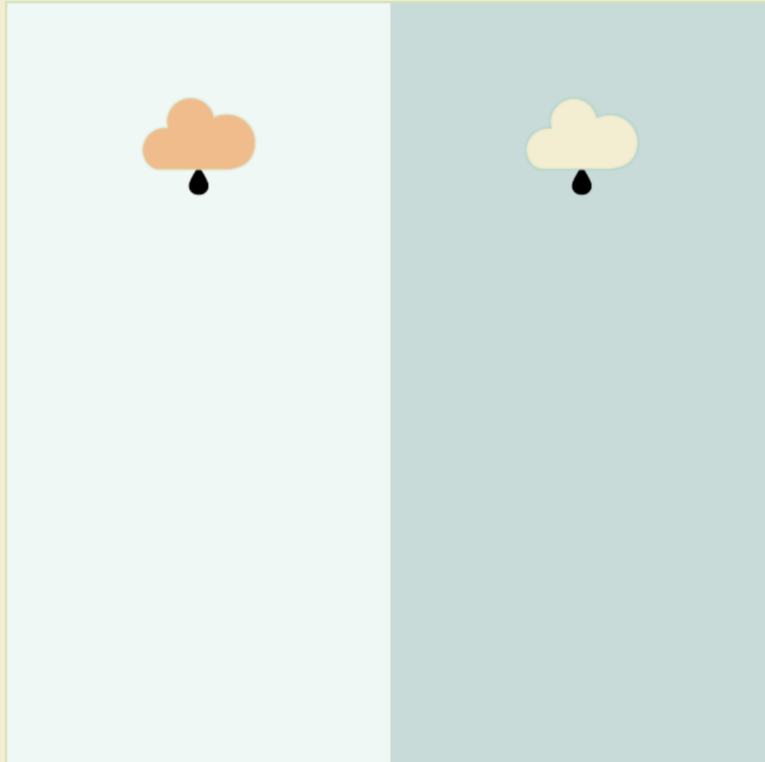
Every small drop of water went through the water cycle a thousand times.

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games. As game designers in the industry, we also have some very concrete problems with text. For instance—how and where do you display the text in a AAA game? The convention is to display it at the bottom of the screen, often on a black background. In addition, we also regularly encounter usability concerns, like—what if people do not want or cannot read the text?

In our game, we purposely leaned toward text-based games' minimalist aesthetics, hoping that the short bursts of text would encourage people to read. We were also inspired by visual poetry and digital poetry movements. Consequently, we wanted the text to be displayed so it mimicked falling rain. Sentences would appear suddenly on the left or the right side of the screen, never exactly on the same spot, like falling drops. The players make the text appear, but sometimes paragraphs drop anyway, like water drops that unexpectedly and annoyingly fall down our neck after a shower.

But two little drops are special: they come from a glacier that had not evaporated for billions of years.

They are afraid to finish their run on a plane or worse, to damage a butterfly's wings!
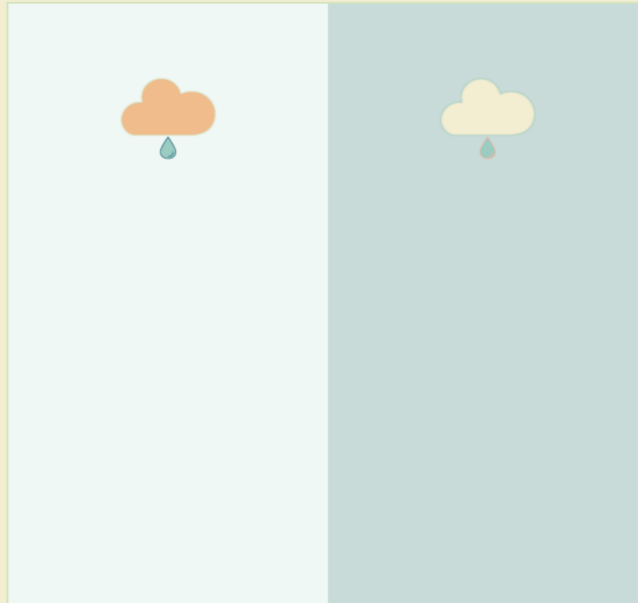
They don't remember anything. And deep down in their heart, they are a bit scared.

Try to guide them smoothly.

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Written, Classical Rhetoric

We explained how we relied on procedural and visual rhetoric. By having text as a central part of the game, we also make use of traditional, written rhetoric. Specifically, we chose to adhere to classical poetic rules. Indeed, the story, originally written in French, follows the structure of a poem with verses, and adheres to the French style that has dominated since the 16th century: rhymes (Dubois, 1999). This aspect is unfortunately lost in the English translation. In lieu, we focused on keeping the simplicity and the beauty of the situations encountered. We employed a naïve, ludic style, and chose fun onomatopoeia for the drops in both languages.

The result connects procedural, written and visual rhetoric in a small, minimalistic game. We only graphically represented the drops. The obstacles themselves are just color-ed lines, like classic game platforms, and it is through text that the players discover their nature. This is obviously a trick to avoid drawing tons of graphics, but turning obstacles into poems is also a way of catching the player/reader's attention. It's a trick to connect with them through storytelling.

The main idea of connection comes from the short story the players discover. When the drops crash on obstacles, players are first supposed to have a feeling of failure, a negative one. A prompt reinforces this impression by offering the players a chance to restart … or to continue. This question serves as a reminder that neither obstacle nor failure is an end in and of itself. If the player chooses to continue, they'll discover a few more details about the obstacles the drops fall on: an interaction with a bored cat, a trampolining session on a tree, or the Leidenfrost effect (when a droplet hovers over an extremely hot surface instead of evaporating). The obstacles

[re|dis]connection

in video games are like obstacles in storytelling: they are useful to craft a message. Indeed, when the droplets reach the ground at the end, the two of them have a lot to tell each other, letting us imagine that it reinforces their friendship—their connection.

Obstacle, Failure and Challenge

Most of the time in video games, obstacles must be overcome, avoided or passed through. In his book *The Art of Failure* (2013), Jesper Juul wrote that in games: "It is the threat of failure that gives us a thing to do in the first place" (p.45). Without failure there is no challenge, thus no game. However, as stressed by Juul, this is paradoxical: failure makes us unhappy, so why do we expose ourselves to it in games? This idea of preventing failure was at the heart of discussion about casual games (Chiapello, 2013) and walking simulators (Stang, 2019), where defeat

is often nonexistent. While this debate is still open, we wanted to question this status of failure: what if failing was instead a way to access new meaning?

Juul explains that:

"Most video games represent our failures and successes by letting our performance be mirrored by a protagonist (or society, etc.) in the game's fictional world. When we are unhappy to have failed, a fictional character is also unhappy" (2013, p. 117).

However, he points out that there is sometimes a disconnect between the players' feelings and their avatar's. He suggests that a new trend of indie games revisited this adequation between falling and happiness by making the protagonist sad when the player beat the game. He adds that:

"This type of tragedy is in many ways stronger than regular, nongame tragedy because we are forced to admit that we really did consid-

And drip, against a window!

[C]ontinue or [R]etry

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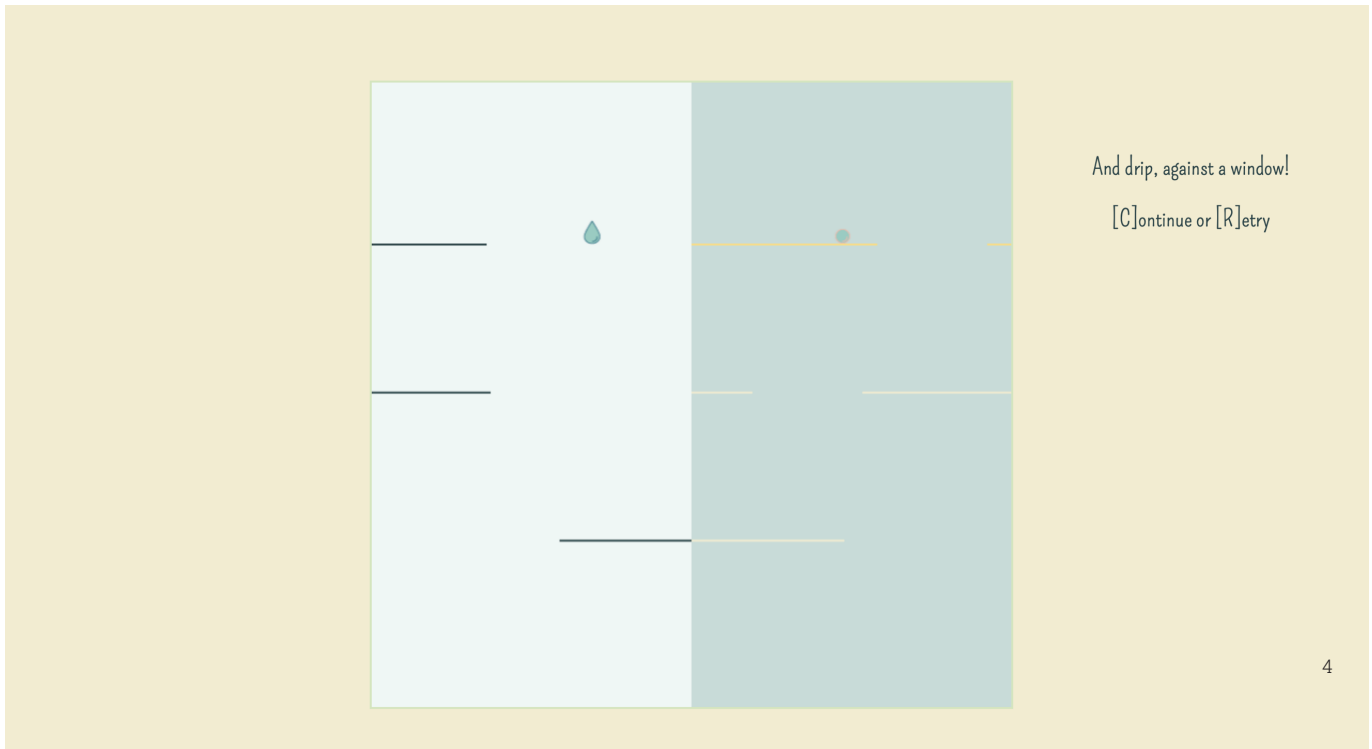
*er how to bring about the unfortunate events at the end of the game". (*Juul, 2013, p. 117)

We want to add that the opposite is also possible—that the avatar's failure can be satisfactory for the player. For instance, when the player's avatar falls in a hole and discovers a secret passage, a special mission, an unexpected achievement or some new information, the player might experience a pleasant feeling.

In a way, our game tries to chase this type of experience: what if when we fail, we always get "happy accidents"? What if our failures make our character happy? What if obstacles were all supposed to be failed at?

Like many other stories, failing is an option in our game. In fact, it is the only option. If the players avoid the obstacles, nothing happens. There is no end to the game, no high

Drip drop. The two little drops fell off. In the same place. A nice meadow. They get closer and the two of them start talking. They tell each other about cats, pears, barbecues and frogs.

Their hearts are overflowing with joy; They've seen so much, they have so much to share, they're so happy. They are still getting closer and suddenly connect and become one.

They will never be afraid to fall again.

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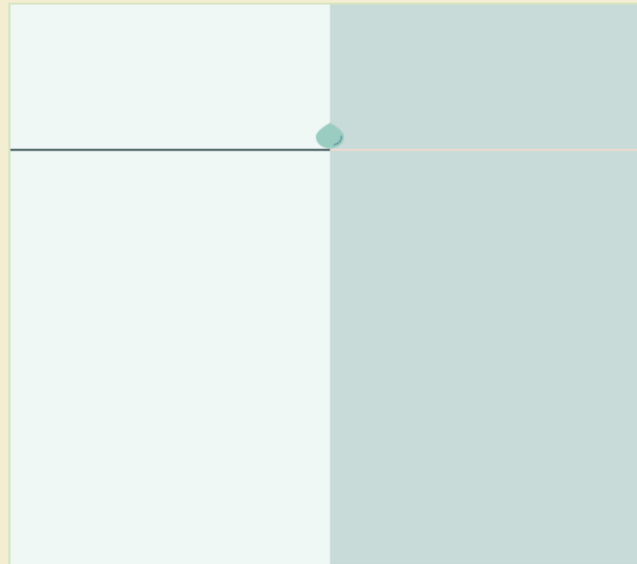
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score. But after enough failures, a story begins to emerge. Something happened and is worth telling. And telling our adventures, our mistakes, is a way to connect.

Players' Experiences

Now that we have exposed our intentions, we would like to talk more about how players actually understood our game. This is by no means a study of user experience with a wide sample of participants, but more of a reflection on the experiences of the few people we had the opportunity to see playing. Since the game is supposed to be quite short (a few minutes), it was possible to observe full game sessions. Evidently, as the creators, it was wonderful to see how people interact with the game—beginning to end.

At first sight, the game is an infinite falling game, with a small twist: the player controls two avatars—the two droplets. However, the game is easy, and after a few minutes players

generally realize it is an infinite game. This is where the real twist is supposed to occur: if the player doesn't accept failure, the game continues ad nauseam and nothing special happens. It is a bit boring. However, when the player accepts their failure, they discover parts of the story. At this point, players usually change strategy and start crashing voluntarily into the obstacles to further the plot, seeing the poetic aspect of the game. Failing six times grants the player the ending, where the two droplets reconnect.

First, we remarked that some players only see the competitive aspect and don't want to fail. Thus, they keep avoiding the platforms and never finish the game. It is a bit disappointing to see them play this way, completely unaware of the experience we designed. However, the opposite also occurs: some non-gamers find the challenge of avoiding platforms overwhelming and keep crashing on obstacles unintentionally. At least they see the ending and realize

that the two droplets reconnect by telling each other about the obstacles, but they don't experience the powerful moment of choosing to crash to progress the story.

However, many players master the game quickly, eventually playing "with" the obstacles and thus getting the meaning of the game. Depending on the player, the experience can be quite short or rather long. For example, my students—who are familiar with the concept of procedural rhetoric and know my love for unusual indie games—often catch onto the meaning of the game quite quickly. Other players spend far more time avoiding the obstacles (several minutes, making the whole observation session a bit awkward) before falling and allowing themselves to experiment.

The best sessions happen when players spontaneously unravel the game's structure and story, talking about failure, obstacles, and their own life experience. They link the game's rules

[re|dis]connection

with its narrative structure, which they reaffirm by talking about obstacles and failure to somebody else as a way of connecting.

It was also quite amusing to hear about some players' feelings and interpretations for the game: some thought that the color of the platform was meaningful in determining their progress. This is not true: the colors are random and the obstacles appear in a predetermined pattern, as the game is meant to be played only once.

While the game was designed for one player using both hands, it can also be played by two people in the same physical space. In fact, the question of the number of players raises another question: why complicate a single player game with two drops? Indeed, it seems that, for the sake of procedural rhetoric, the game should be absolutely easy, in order for the players to quickly understand that it is boring and that something else is expected from them. As

stressed earlier, by using two-handed coordination, the game is already a bit too difficult for non-gamers and this prevents them from having the full experience.

However, we wanted to have two separate "objects" that get reunited, to get this final feeling of connection. Consequently, we kept this initial difficulty. Moreover, during the Ludum Dare, we thought that it made the game more interesting at first for gamers and that it would catch their attention. However, this notion can be misleading: this being a form of novelty, some gamers just don't think there is anything more to the game. We can conclude that it is best to have two players, but this can also have some undesired side effects: it tends to raise the feeling of competition between players, thus making failure less appealing. In the end we think we should keep exploring this idea of "failing in order to succeed": our experiment was not a total success...
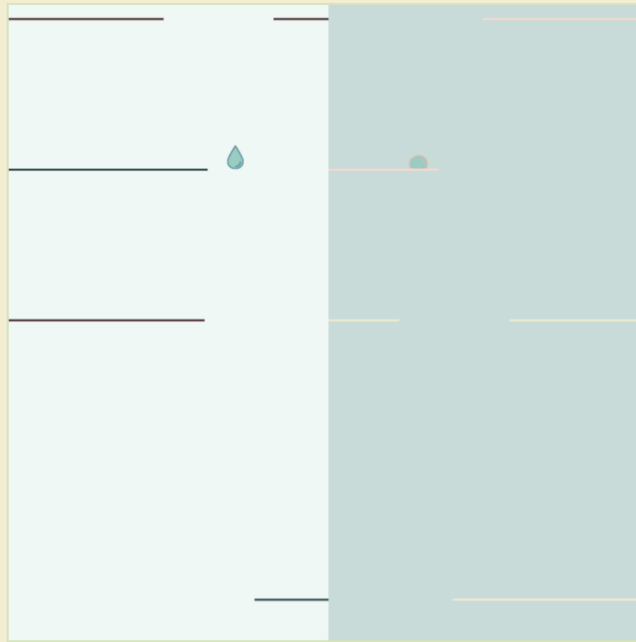
And drip, against a window!

A black and white cat is staring.
He gives a blow of his little pink
tongue against the glass. "I'm all
alone" meows the cat, "Stay with
me!",
But the drop slides along the glass
and suddenly drops, and continues
to fall, ever lower.

Use [J] or [L] to move

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Creators' Experiences

Our use of minimalism in our game is a conscious choice. Florian Glesser is a game programmer with more than 10 years of experience and has worked on several AAA games when he was at Ubisoft Montreal. He is currently working at Unity technology, coding matchmaking systems that are used on some currently popular video games. Laureline Chiappello a game design professor, lucky enough to work in a university department with a strong tradition of game making and with students capable of creating stunning graphics and great gameplay and able to quickly find jobs in AAA companies all over Canada. This means that we both understand how much effort, skill and patience are

required to make AAA or AA titles. We know our capacities and limits. Sometimes a very small game is enough to test an idea, and to make us grow in the process as game makers. Besides, we wanted to do something with a lighter feel while weathering the pandemic—something to disconnect from the world for a few minutes and come back with a slightly changed perspective.

We tried to connect through creation, and we chose to construct this small game in order to achieve something together. We made the first prototype in 72 hours (the Ludum Dare version), and then spent a few more days reworking it. We realized that despite being a couple, we haven't really made a game together since 2012, which also made us think about this great connection we have. We share common knowledge about games, design, informatics, and we just needed a form of reconnection. The whole process of submitting the game to the Ludum Dare, then reworking it for ICIDS and thinking about

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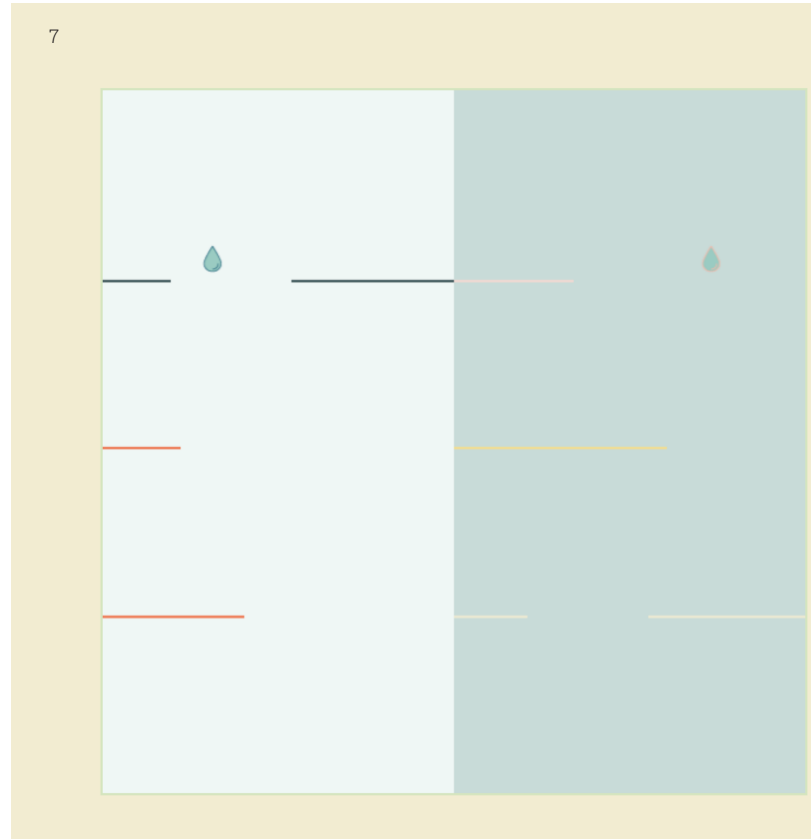
the theme [Re|Dis]connection was a wonderful reflective process, and we are grateful for such a venue to exist. Creating and submitting a game is a process full of obstacles and failures, but writing a paper about it strangely resembles the experience we wanted to convey with our game: one of hope and happiness. Making games, even small quirky ones, is a source of joy. We hope more and more spaces for alternative game creation will flourish in the future, and we wish to be part of this culture.

Conclusion

Drop/let's/fail to connect was a way to experiment with visual, written and procedural rhetoric. We showed that there are still some little cracks in storytelling and video game theories where we can reflect, experiment, and have fun. While procedural rhetoric is a specific aspect of video games, we think that visual and written rhetoric should not be discounted. Certain games can fuse those three aspects into provocative experiments, combining them in novel ways—like making players think about the role of obstacles and failure in games by subverting traditional game design. By talking about our failures and sharing the story of our life and the obstacles we faced, we connect with others. Video games make use of this as well, we just wanted to push the idea and make it the central system of our game—to create a hopeful and unusual experience in the midst of a pandemic.

[re|dis]connection

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Images

1. The game title screen
2. The beginning of the story: the context, including clouds, drops and the water cycle
3. The protagonists of the story: two special droplets
4. An obstacle (a window), and the prompt "Continue or Retry"
5. End of story: the reconnected droplets
6. A happy accident … with a cat
7. Avoiding the obstacles is a bit boring

Acknowledgements

Laureline Chiapello is Professor of Game Design, Playability and Narrativity in the School of Digital Arts, Animation and Design at the University of Québec at Chicoutimi (NAD-UQAC), Canada. She is interested in new ways of telling stories in games by experimenting with structure, visual poetry and, of course, player choices.

Florian Glesser is a back-end programmer at Unity Technology Montreal, with 10 years of experience with indie and AAA titles. He is an enthusiast of game jams, small quirky retro games, and he loves to test new frameworks or program new gameplay ideas in his free time.

Medium: Virtual Reality
Year of Release: 2021
Link to the artwork: https://youtu.be/pdeDCu98Wx0
Artist Website: https://tianbaijia.com