

Sunset: A Visual Novel on the Mental Health Issues of a College Student

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Abstract

Despite there already being studies available on mental health issues like depression and anxiety, people still default to the stereotypical symptoms of these issues. This usually hinders people who go through mental health issues from seeking help from the outside, which gets them to go deeper into their mental health issues. Spreading awareness will make a difference when it comes to making people feel safe and healthy to seek help. I will create a visual novel, a genre under interactive fiction, concerning a college student who goes through a mental health problem but from a different perspective.

Keywords: mental health issues, depression, anxiety, visual novel, interactive fiction

Introduction

"I didn't think I would've made it this far." I know that is a powerful opening for an introduction for this paper, but sometimes, these thoughts come to our minds when we're going through something. Although people usually say that this is some form of suicidal thought, which, if you think about it, is rather dark, as of writing this, I am 20 years old, and I've been having those thoughts since the age of 13. At the time, I didn't know what it was until I found a video discussing it. Although self-diagnosing is not an idle thing to do, I know it made sense, especially now because I now have depression and anxiety. When I was 13, I didn't think I would make it to 15. Then I did. The same thought occurred when I was that age, thinking I wouldn't make it to 18. The cycle honestly kept going oddly enough.

"Department of Education Assistant Secretary Dexter Galban reports the rising number of students who attempted to take their own lives." It amazes me, in all honesty, how one disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic, could lead to another. I don't wish for it to sound harsh, but it took one pandemic for the government to finally take mental health issues seriously, especially when it came to students. It was stated that there were 2,147 who attempted, and 404 lives were taken. Mr. Galban stated that he believes even one case is too much and that "this is an alarming rate that continues to go up, given the transition from face-to-face to online, which has provided a strain to our learners" (Ann, 2023)

There are a lot of students, including myself, who have been struggling with their mental health before the pandemic, and I'm grateful that this was what finally triggered the government to make a proper move. Still, at the same time, it also saddens me that this was what triggered it to happen.

The lack of mental health facilities was a problem, along with the social stigma that people have, where if you asked for help, it would be a sign of weakness. Although there are times when double standards come in, that ruins everything and just makes things confusing because you encourage it, but not at the same time. It's just baffling to me.

Hence, I wish to show how certain things can affect the outcome of one's mental health. Even the most mundane of things. What I've gone through at the start of creating this inspired me to write a story on the same topic. I went through multiple different times where I considered and attempted to take my own life, but it's my best friends who gave me words of comfort that made me live a little longer than I'd liked if I were being honest.

Those close to me gave me reasons why I should keep going. I want to show people that no matter what happens, people will always be there for them. Even if you think there aren't, people will want to see the end of life with you, whether in real life or online. They want a future with you in it. I'm extremely aware that this would be hard to portray story-wise, but I want to let everyone know I'm willing to try. If I've lived this long, I believe you can, too, no matter what you go through. I believe we can all make it.

As an artist with a fascination with programming, I thought creating a visual novel would be my way to show off my story and my art, mainly because I get to combine three things I enjoy doing. Writing, programming, and art. Although I feel it's uncommon for people to enjoy all three simultaneously, I will do my best to show off my love for all three throughout this project. Although the sense of what I wanted to create has changed, story- and topic-wise, I will still push forward with what I have.

Creative Framework

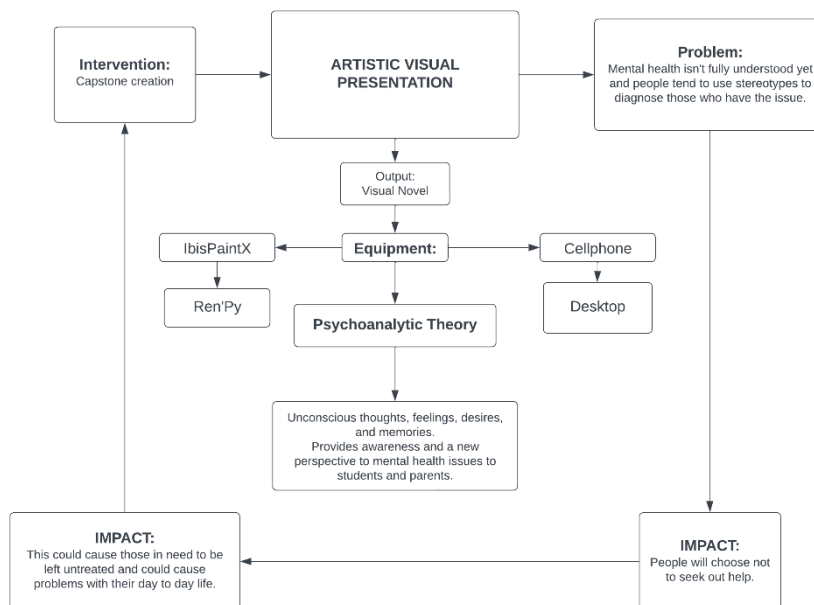


Figure 1 Framework Visual Representation of Overall Concept and Method of the Thesis Project: Visual Novel

The creative framework I showed above is composed of the core concepts and methods of the project itself. This figure shows my in-depth illustration summary regarding the output, resources, theory, impact, problem, and solution. I made this to create a simple summary of the details of how I created my thesis project.

Psychoanalysis is the chosen framework for this paper. According to Dr. McLeod (2022), psychoanalysis is the belief that all people possess some form of unconscious thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories. With that, the story will mainly go around Mochi, our main character, as she goes through what may be her final day before she chooses to end everything with one jump or choose to stay and see another day. The players will witness how her thoughts affect her actions in each decision that will be made, along with the outcome of each one.

During this time in our lives, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health suddenly became a serious thing that people were taking seriously. People now want to help those who want them but aren't sure how. The following are the target audiences for this paper: students (16+). I want to show them that taking care of yourself mentally and physically is very important, even if you think otherwise, and that there will always be someone there for you when you need them. You just need to reach out.

And finally, anyone who wants to help a person in their life—I know this one doesn't make much sense, but I believe there are people out there who feel like there is a person in their life who's going through something similar and wants to help but is unsure. With the visual novel, they might get a hint on what they could do to help the person in need or, at the very least, understand how they feel.

Since mental health issues have yet to be properly understood by the masses, especially when there are social standards wherein getting help is a sign of weakness, the creative production of a visual novel that can be used as a way to express topics that are hard to bring up to others and that asking for help is a good way to get better.

Design Process Creative Framework

The thesis project is titled “Sunset” to represent how something can come to an end and start something new; however, it can also mean farewell. The story will revolve around the main character, who has depression and anxiety. I will be writing it from a woman's perspective because, as a woman myself, I find it easier to write from a perspective I can relate to. I don't wish to challenge myself yet with writing a character that is of the opposite gender because men and women experience different things throughout their entire lives, so if I were to write something inaccurate, it wouldn't do well for the story and the player. The visual novel will consist of multiple choices you can make within the story that could either help the main character or not. I will upload the full game to Itch.io, which will be available to the public. It will look similar to Figure 1, shown below when uploaded to the website.

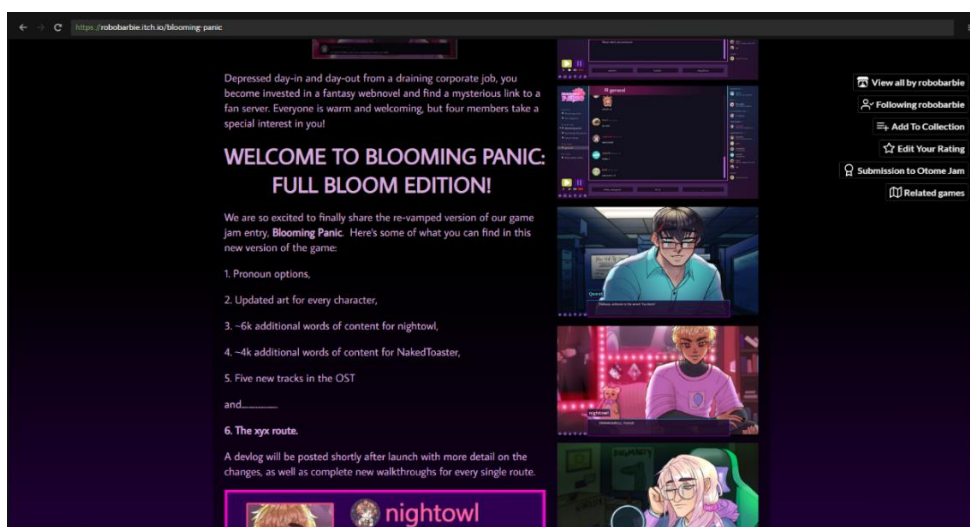


Figure 1 UI/UX of the webpage for the Visual Novel “Blooming Panic” by Robobarbie on Itch.io (2021)



Figure 2 *The first TV head caught on a security camera in Henrico Valley, Virginia (left) and fan art created by slimyswampghost(2019) on Twitter (right).*

With that, I went with a TV head as the design. They would have their unique designs for the different characters in the story. For instance, one could have a big white bow. The other would have gloves or rings, etc. Although the origin of TV heads' popularity started on August 11th, when a mysterious person with an old TV covering their head started leaving old TVs on the front porch of people's houses in Henrico Valley, Virginia, they were caught in the security cameras of the homes they would leave the old TVs on. A Redditor named "UnionizePokeMarts" posted it on r/nottheonion, and from there, the story spread like wildfire. People started making fan art and creating characters with a TV for a head. (Sophie, 2020)

To add a new, different feel, I also wanted to go with the route of the characters not being humans. More so in the way of having more human-like features, mainly their bodies, but everything else that involves them will be more robotic-like, adding to the whole thing's different perspectives.

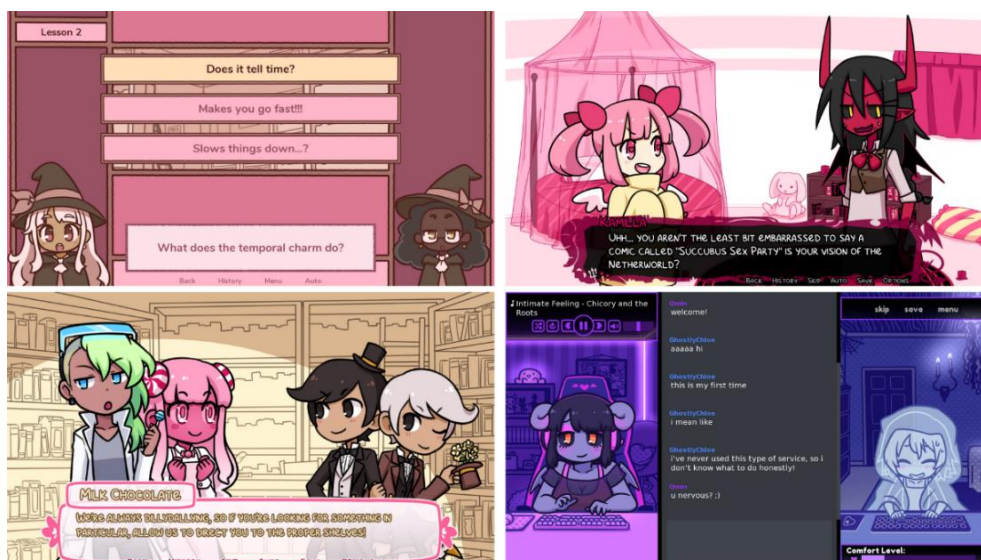


Figure 3 *Charm Studies* (2023b, top left), *Contract Demon* (2019, top right), *Syrup and the Ultimate Sweet* (2015, bottom left), and *Sex Advice Succubus 18+* (2023a, bottom right) by NomNomNami

The way I wish to color everything is for it to be simple. Mostly to reference how simple life can be at certain times. Similarly, the way I wish to color everything would be similar to NomnomNami’s creations, as shown in Figure 3. The method of coloring is called “cel shading.” Cel shading is also known as “toon shading,” where it mimics the visual style of traditional animation or comic book art. It uses a non-photorealistic rendering technique used in computer graphics, where it appears flat. This shading style has been adopted in different media types to create a unique and stylized appearance. This method is commonly used in video games to give them an animated look. (G2A.COM, 2023) I’ll do this to use the cartoon-anime style I wish to use with my project.



Figure 4 *Main Character’s Color Palette*

The main character, Mochi, will have an array in their color palette. All my characters will have a baby blue skin tone for this story since I’m designing them after a TV head (please refer to Figure 2). Mochi will use the following color palette, each with a different meaning. (Please refer to Figure 4.) The skin color is baby blue. Black will represent her power to keep going despite everything she’s gone through. White represents her hope regarding things getting better since white is usually represented as being pure or innocent. Green will be the color of her eyes since green is usually correlated to good, growing, and healthy. That will represent how she can still see how she can grow into something better. And finally, we have violet, the color of her head, or, should I say, her TV head. This will represent her sensitivity to her emotions and her wisdom with her awareness that she has depression. (Olesen, 2020) However, every color also has negative attributes, adding more to the characters.

Like every game, it must be programmed; a visual novel is no exception. To program the project, I will be using two different programs. The first one is Ren’Py. It is a free program that has been said to be an easy way to create visual novels because the codes used are easy to understand. I’ve dabbled with the program before, so I got the gist of how to program it. The code used for the program is similar to Python, and there is a helpful community with it, so if I ever encounter a problem, I’ll be able to solve it.

The second program that I will be using is called Twine. It is also a free program used for creating visual novels. This program will mostly help me line up the script properly, so it will look less confusing when coding it once all its assets have been made. It will also help me better understand how the different outcomes can go. However, unlike Ren'Py, the programming for this is just basic HTML coding, which is why I'll be using it to map out the story since it will have different endings.

Pre-production

In the pre-production stage of this project, I worked on the script and the concept of the visual novel. The script for the story was done during my Script Writing class. The script was composed of how the different interactions would go and what the different outcomes would be like. The same goes for the different endings.

Since a visual novel will be composed of a story and character sketches, I must establish my story's direction. With that, I want to show my audience that not everyone can show the normal signs of depression or any form of mental illness because, the majority of the time, people sweep it under the rug. Although there are games about depression already, what I'm portraying is having depression and anxiety because it is possible to have both at the same time.

The story's background will be colored in a slightly muted tone mainly because you perceive colors differently depending on your mental state. For instance, those with depression tend to see the world in a more dull and darker light. (Juby & Gillette, 2022) The story is being viewed from Mochi's perspective. Everything will look less vibrant, except when she feels at peace with herself and the world (refer to Figure 5 for reference). Although these may be pre-production assets, they show what I wish to show off. When MochiM is at peace with herself and the world, for example, when she's sleeping or sitting by the edge of a cliff watching the sunset, there are moments when she feels at peace with herself and the world.

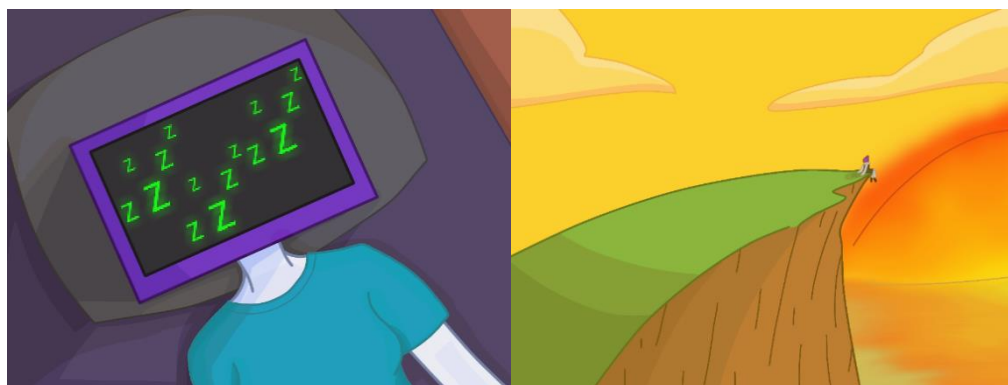


Figure 5 *Pre-production assets created*

Production

Moving on to the production stage of the project will involve multiple layers of different tasks that will happen throughout the project.

Activity	Month								
	Oct = 2023	Nov	Dec	Jan = 2024	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June
Script writing									
Sprite creation									
Background creation									
UI UX creation									
Sound design									
Programming									
Bug testing									
Release of game									
Consultations									

Figure 6 *Timetable for the project*

As stated in the pre-production part, the script was made for my script writing class; however, as time passed, I changed and added more scenarios and decisions to make the game more interesting or add more backstory for the characters. I polished it even more while adding and removing parts from the story.

Creating the character sprites is next up. What are character sprites? Character sprites are 2D video game graphics representing the character and their appearance. (Wirtz, 2020) I will create the different character sprites for the visual novel using IbisPaint X. They will be made on the same size canvas to maintain the same height for the game without trying to resize it to match their height. I will be drawing them at their height on canvas of the same size. I'm mostly doing this to save time when programming it. Since the size of the game will be 1920 x 1080 pixels, I will use a 768 x 1024 canvas for all the characters. Each character will be adjusted according to height based on how I imagined them.

Script Writing

When creating the script for the visual novel, I had to look back on my own life as a college student, especially since Mochi is also in college. I added a few aspects of my life; however, the whole thing was mostly based on how the current times are. Some are taking classes online, while others can take them physically.

I went with a simpler route regarding how the story would go. Since I wanted something different, I went with what a normal day would be like for someone who's struggling with any mental health issue, mainly focusing on depression and anxiety. As someone with both, I can write from a different perspective. I made sure that it was properly depicted; however, everyone can experience and react to their illness differently, and this is just what I go through, but I modified it to the point where it isn't my own anymore but has a small essence.

Mochi will be going through how my day goes during class. If I'm being honest, when I wrote the plot for it, I didn't think it would match what my schedule would be like. It's such a funny coincidence. I decided that her classes in the morning would be something that some classes in college would do. I mainly wrote that for plot convenience, so it would make her afternoon activities make sense. For example, her walk with Hazel could've been done during the morning, but that would mean she wouldn't have the time to go to the cliff because she would have classes in the afternoon and would need to eat lunch with her family. I could write that she isn't required to eat with her family, but it would be written for plot convenience. I didn't want to write too many plot conveniences, so her classes being in the morning was the one I chose for this story.

Each plot that was added had something to do with my daily life as a college student. It's kind of the same routine every day. I wake up, go to lunch and afternoon classes (if I have a class for it), rest, do school work, have dinner, and then sleep. Often, I wouldn't have classes in the afternoon, so I would skip to rest. Going back to Mochi waking up and taking a moment to process the fact that she woke up is something I often do; however, I don't do it when I know I have classes. I just get up and go to class. For Mochi, she will be taking a moment to process is something I believe she would do if she were real.

I created this during one of my classes, which was script writing. During that class, I wrote out the main summary, if you will, of the story. However, at the time, it was still a draft. My group got to read my work and give me their opinions. I added what they thought, although the way I wrote it was still in the context of what interactive fiction would be like. The story will always have a different ending or story if you choose to do something different. Regardless, their inputs were still considered and inputted into writing the scripts. At the bottom of the paper will be the finalized script for the visual novel.

Character Design

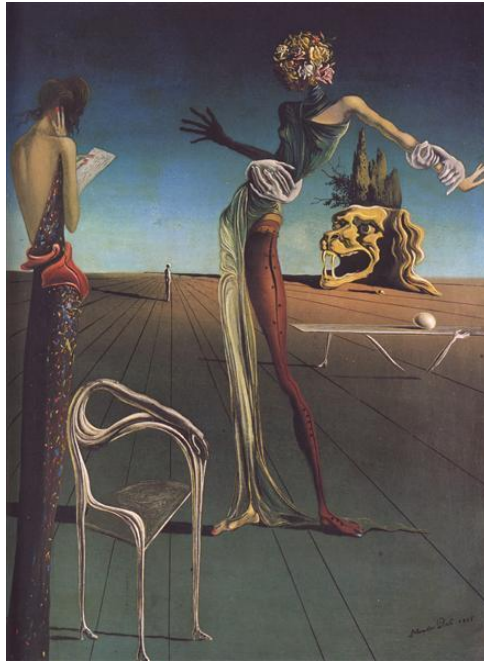


Figure 7 The “*Woman with a Head of Roses*” by Salvador Dali during the year 1935 (poochyena, 2018)

Regarding character designs, I wanted to take a different approach. I wanted to go with something different than what is usually used when portraying something like this. With that, I wanted to go with an object head type of character. It was said that object heads are generally used to symbolize a connection between humanity and an inanimate symbol. The earliest known use of an object head dates back to 1935 when Salvador Dali created a piece called “*Woman with a Head of Roses*.” (Please refer to Figure 7) The painting presented a humanoid woman with various fabrics and a head made out of roses. (poochyena, 2018)



Figure 8 *Pyramid Head* from the game *Silent Hill* from 2001.

A famous character with an object head is the Pyramid Head from Silent Hill 2 way back in 2001. He is considered the main antagonist of the game. Pyramid Head represents the protagonist's subconscious desire to be punished for his wife's death. (poochyena, 2018)



Figure 9 *The Main protagonist of the game, Cup Head.*

A game that has multiple characters with an object head is “Cup Head” (Poochyena, 2018). The main protagonists of the game are based on tea cups with straws in them.

With that, the first thing I did to create my characters was to figure out what I wanted them to look like. Regarding how everything is, it would make sense to start with the seeds before anything else since the sprites would be the main focus of the visual novel since they would represent the characters in the story.

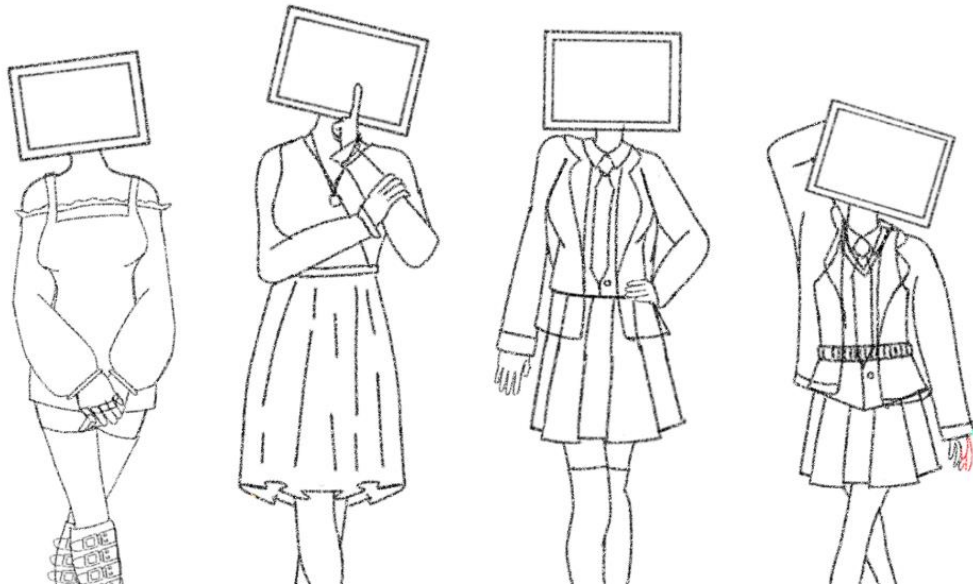


Figure 10 Sketch done for the characters sprite base (draft) – Mochi (Far Left), Mama (Left), Aria (Right) and Damien (Far Right)

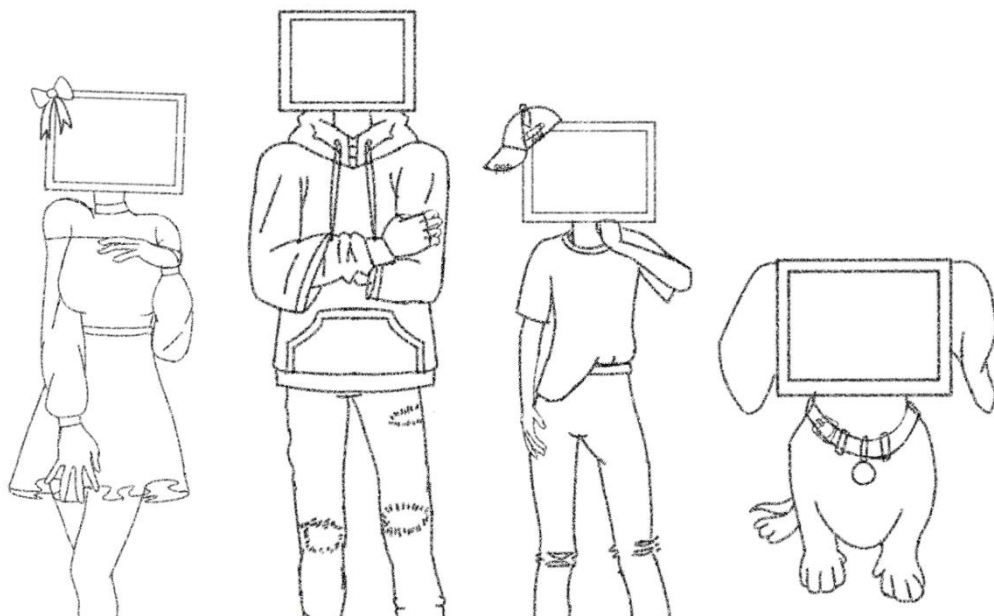


Figure 11 Sketch done for the character's sprite base (draft) – Lily (Far Left), Lowell (Left), Ash (Right), and Hazel (Far Right)

I created these sketches to make them feel semi-realistic. I tried to create these sprites with a more realistic look; unfortunately, realism isn't my strong suit, so I went with an anime type of art style, which is what my art style is. Each character is designed after a TV head (please refer to Figure 2) under the sub-genre of object heads. This adds a different perspective because the person portrayed isn't human. They have human-like features and personalities but are not fully human. The characters are more robotic in the sense of their anatomy and heads, but they have more human-like personalities.

Before properly sketching out the characters, I figured out first what pose each character would have for the game. I thought I could go with how they portray themselves. At the time, it made sense; however, it made more sense to go with how they tend to act around others. Each pose I gave them reflects the dominant personality that they tend to show to people. For instance, taking Mochi as an example, she has a timid pose since she has her hands together while having a small lean-to her right.

I struggled a little bit when creating Hazel's character, Sprite, for she is a TV head dog. I've yet to perfect drawing animals, so until then, Hazel's character sprite will have some form of imperfection here and there. However, I did enjoy trying to draw Hazel properly since she is based on my dog in real life. I also kept the same name for her, which is Hazel. I wanted to include my dog in my project, so giving Mochi a dog was out of pure selfishness.

Also, in case you have noticed, I drew Hazel a little bigger than I intended to make her more visible to the players. I believe it would be hard to see if she was her actual size rather than the size, I drew her in. Originally, to fit with all the other character sprites, I was supposed to draw her the same size, but due to the size of everyone else, I had to scrap the idea of it.



Figure 12 Character reference sheet - Mochi (Far Left), Mama (Left), Aria (Right) and Damien (Far Right)

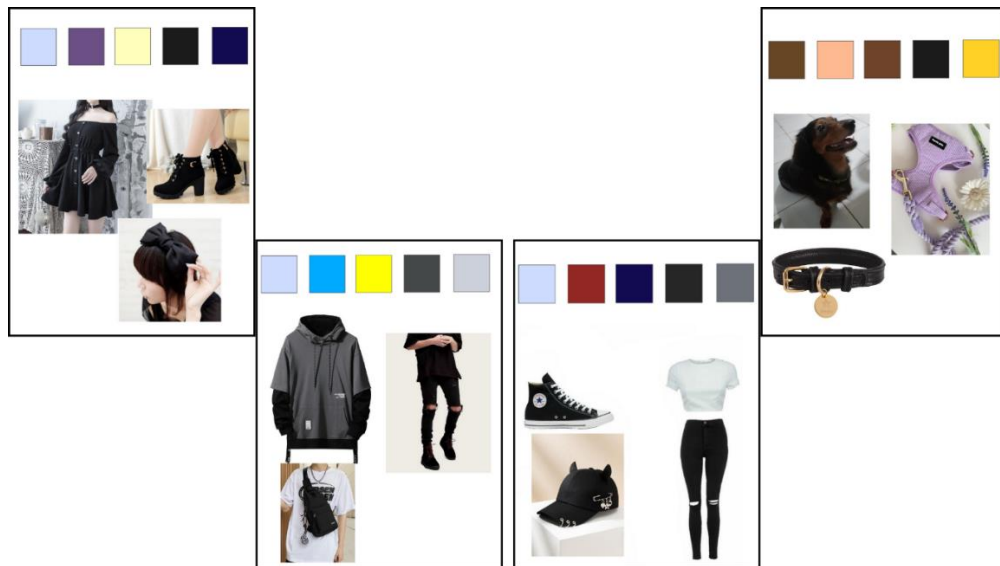


Figure 13 Character reference sheet - Lily (Far Left), Lowell (Left), Ash (Right) and Hazel (Far Right)

The outfits are based on how I imagined what they would wear or what they would add to their outfit. Mochi's little sisters, Aria and Damien, are examples of "what they would add to their outfit" because they are the only ones from the characters who are wearing a school uniform. To make them more unique, despite having the same uniform, I added a little bit of what they could choose. Aria would have a cardigan over her uniform, while Damien had a wool-type vest for her. See Figure 11 for reference.

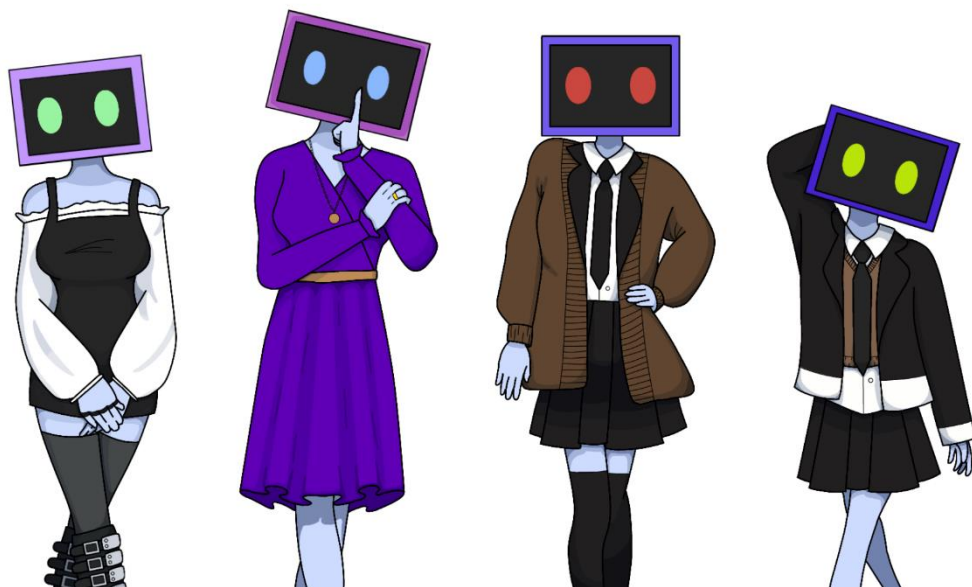


Figure 14 Base Color of the character sprite base - Mochi (Far Left), Mama (Left), Aria (Right) and Damien (Far Right)

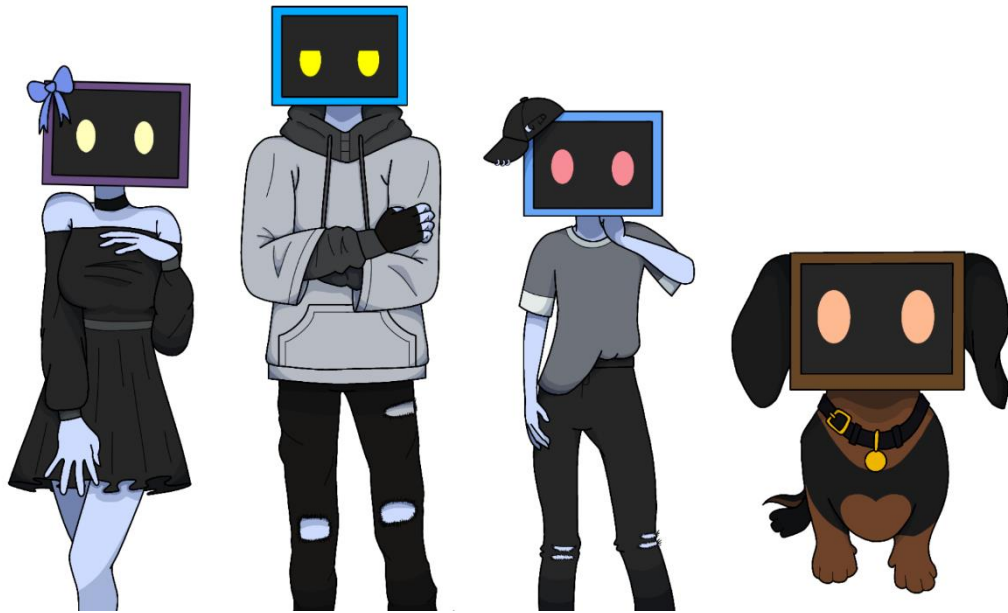


Figure 15 Base Color of the character sprite base – Lily (Far Left), Lowell (Left), Ash (Right) and Hazel (Far Right)

I tend to experiment with different outfit ideas before settling on ones that would work well with the character. Upon creating the appearance for my characters, I went with a few before going with what I had chosen. I mainly factored in their personalities and how they could potentially affect how they dress. Hazel is the exception, of course, but she does have a sprite change wherein she will have her dog harness on. Please reference Figure 14 below.

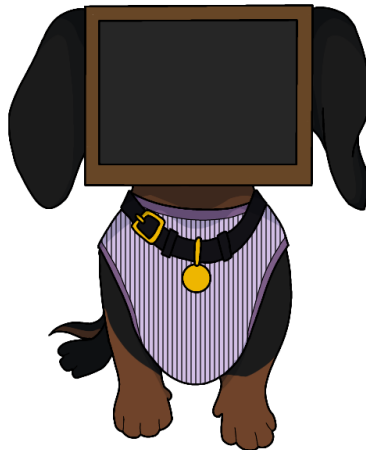


Figure 16 Hazel with harness base sprite

Refer to Figures 12 and 13 as the fully rendered character base sprites. The colors I chose for each one have something to do with some of their personality traits. However, one thing all of them, excluding Hazel, have in common is their skin and body color, which is a pastel blue. I chose this because blue symbolizes trust, loyalty,

responsibility, and security, so having it look a lot lighter would mean that it's, in a way, diluted. From observation, everyone is very cautious of others. We all don't trust easily when it comes to new people or just our family. So, having it in pastel blue seemed like the right choice.

Another example would be Mochi's color palette (please refer to Figure 5); it combines black, white, pastel purple, and pastel green. Originally, it was supposed to be a lot brighter, but I thought, like the skin or body color, that making it a little lighter rather than duller would make more sense because it has been said that those with depression tend to see the world in a more dull and darker light. (Juby & Gillette, 2022)

Now come the eyes, or more so, the screen. Their screens will be the part of them that gives the characters expressions, whether they are happy or just sleepy. What I'll be using for their expressions is kaomoji. Kaomoji is a very popular Japanese-style emoticon made up of different characters available to express emotion through texting and online communications. Often referred to as Japanese emoticons, they are formed from two Japanese words: kao (head) and moji (character). Kaomoji is very popular all around the world thanks to it being a creative way to express yourself through text messages. Kaomoji is extremely diverse, as over 10,000 variants exist all over the internet and can express things like individual emotions, complex actions, objects, and whole stories. (Isaac, 2019)

Background Creation

The backgrounds, unfortunately, are not one of my strong suits, so I've hired two artists to create them for me. I will show the references used to create these backgrounds and how they came to be. The story will take place in about eight different locations: Mochi's bedroom, the hallway, the living room, the kitchen, outside the house, the neighborhood, a forest trail, and a cliffside. Each one has a different part that could relay some history of Mochi.



Figure 17 *Item reference for the Mochi's room*



Figure 18 *Item reference for the hallway of the home*

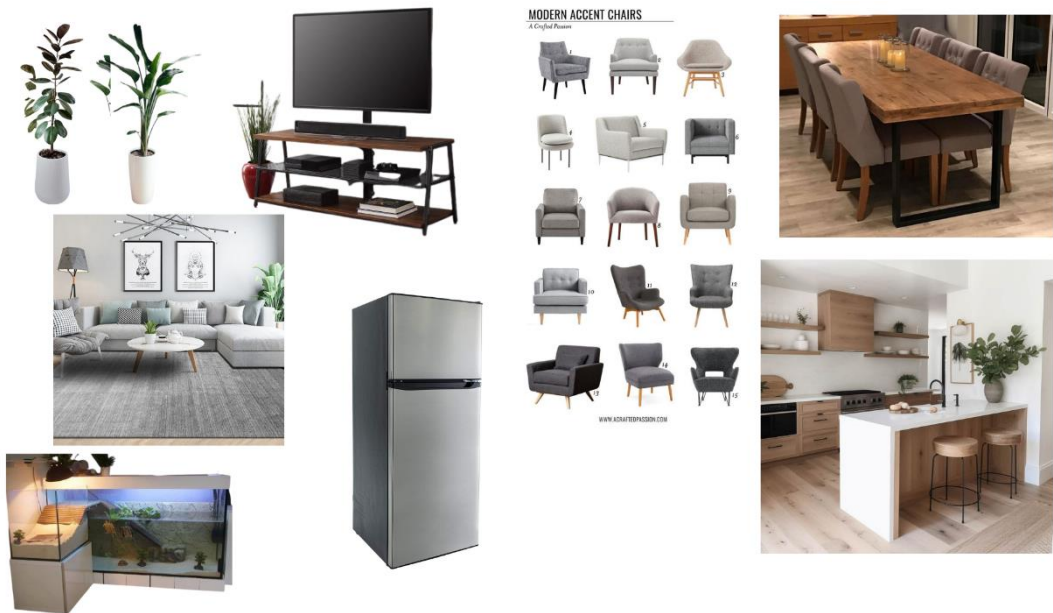


Figure 19 *Item reference for the living room and kitchen*



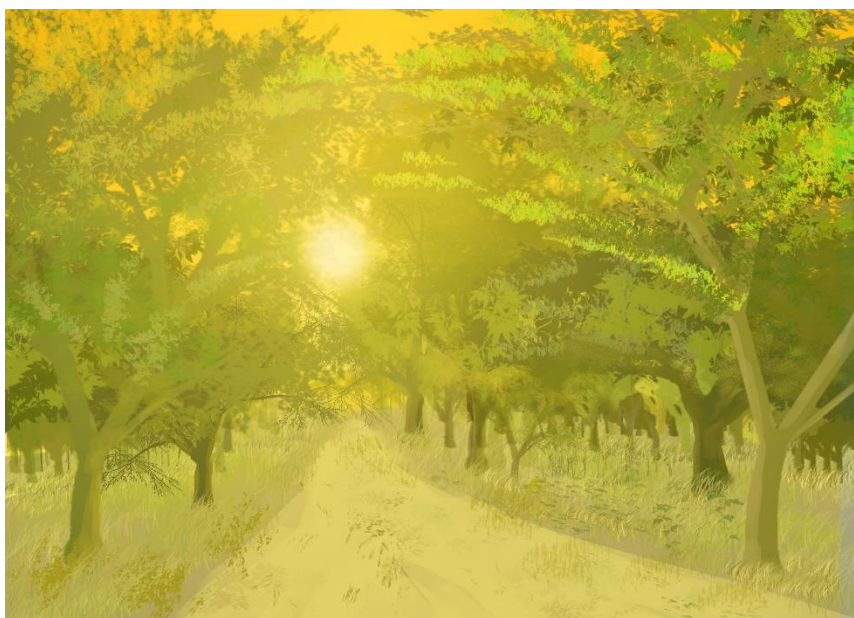
Figure 20 *Location reference for the outside look of the house and the neighborhood*



Figure 21 *Location reference for the forest trail and the cliffside*

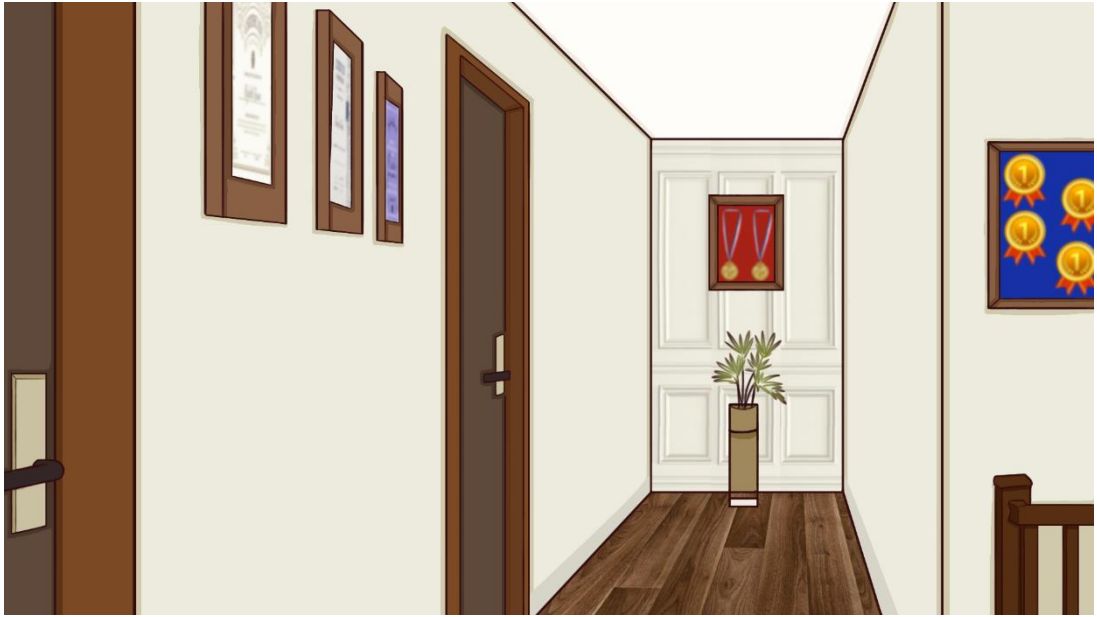
These pictures were taken from the website Pinterest. Pinterest is a website where artists normally get their references for their artwork.

I've sent these to both of my artists to have them create my backgrounds. I've hired two instead of one, mainly because the first one I commissioned was not experienced in creating nature-type backgrounds. The backgrounds below were made by the second artist that I've commissioned, Lycan Wolf on Twitter (X).



I requested them to create these under a sunset setting, and I believe they've done a lovely job with it. Another thing to note about these backgrounds is that the art style is different, mainly because this is where Mochi starts to feel more at peace with herself and her surroundings. Hence, the art style is very different from everything else; this gives off a dream-like vibe to the whole thing.

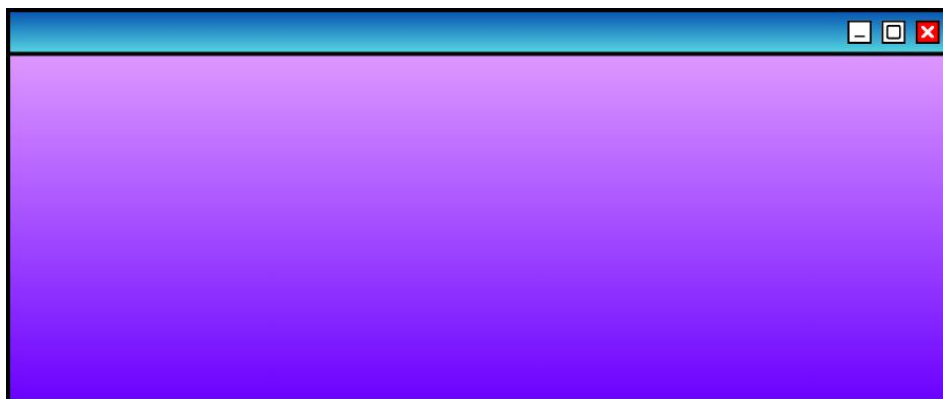
My first artist, Kitsu Amaya, created most of the backgrounds needed for the visual novel since her art style is close to mine and what I need. The following are a few that she has given to me.





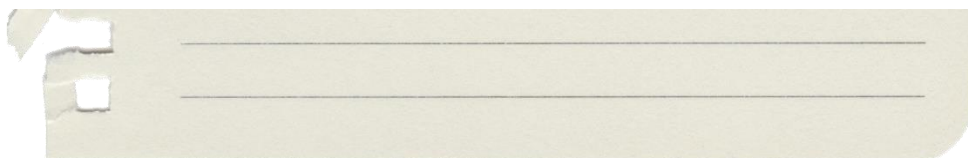
Her art style when it comes to creating backgrounds is honestly amazing. I gave her creative liberty when it came to creating the backgrounds for the interiors and exteriors. I did this mainly to see how she would create them using the few references I've sent her.

Some of the other assets were created using Canva. These were mostly made for some GUI in the program. Like the story, I chose a simpler route for some of them. I made a few GUIs based on computer windows.



I made this from scratch because I couldn't find one that fit my vision. I mainly thought outside the box for the UI since encoding them wasn't truly easy.

For instance, I used paper for the text box for the dialogue and name tag. I did that to break up the whole thing since my characters are mostly robots with humanistic features.



I wanted to go with something completely opposite of how some GUI looks since everything is relatively robotic or computer-related, hence why the text box of the dialogue and name box are paper strips.

Review of Related Literature

The following section will discuss the related literature for the thesis paper and project.

The first visual novel released was “The Portopia Serial Murder Case” by Yujin Horii. Many have said that this game paved the way for visual novels to be a game and a genre. He stated that he created Portopia to introduce American adventure games to the Japanese audience. However, people were more concerned about the mini-games than the story (Crimmins, 2016).

Visual novels tend to be mistaken for graphic novels when, in reality, they are a sub-genre of interactive fiction wherein they combine text, character portraits, and a static background. They are often considered inferior to other genres due to their complexity, but their complexity does not define their quality. The growing popularity of visual novels as significant works of art is exciting, as it allows authors to create storylines without the limitations of traditional genres. As the genre grows in popularity among serious gamers and newbies, it is seen as an exciting step forward in humanity's ongoing search for the greatest means for telling stories. (Klotz, 2021)

Meanwhile, graphic novels, often confused with comic books, are full-length, narrative-driven volumes with usually more than 100 pages. They have a similar theme and are meant for standalone stories or series. Compared to comic books, which may span many years, graphic novels progress into new novels or series. They may be about any subject and fit within standard genres, making them an exaggeration. (Knutson, 2018)

So, having a narrative with numerous possibilities adds depth, realism, uniqueness, and complexity to it. Whether these are good things or not is something we'll return to in a moment. However, by offering multiple endings to your story, you are distancing the reader from it and breaking their immersion. In effect, as the narrator, you are saying very loudly: "It could be that X happened, or Y, or Z, but I won't tell you which." So, you're moving the focus from the story to the narrator. You're implying that "what happened" is less important than another factor. While entirely feasible, implementing multiple endings to a story often feels unfulfilling. Although, in opposition to traditional storytelling, there are visual novels and interactive video games. Multiple endings are popular in many games, especially those that emphasize player choice, branching paths, and non-linear storytelling. They can create replay value, immersion, and emotional impact for the audience. (Cova & Garcia, 2015)

The Philippines' basic education system is declining due to the rise in the number of students with mental illnesses and teachers who are in debt. School officials and guidance counselors discussed the worrying increase in suicides and suicide attempts at a Senate committee public hearing on Senate Bill No. 379. According to Assistant Secretary of Education Dexter Galban, 404 students and 2,147 learners committed suicide in 2021, emphasizing the need for more mental health services. However, the country has just 16,557 guidance offices and 2,093 professional counselors. The preferred guidance counselor-student ratio is 1:250; however, the real ratio is 1:13,394. The Department of Budget and Management is attempting to improve the salary of guidance counselors from SG 11 to SG 14, but the Department of Budget and Management hasn't approved it. (Ann, 2023)

Another article mentioned how there are at least 1 in 5 young Filipinos who have contemplated committing suicide. As of 2021, the number has risen from 3% to 7.5% since the last recorded in 2013. Putting it in a numerical sense, 1.5 million youths have tried to end their lives during the year 2021, which was a 4.5% increase from the year 2013, which would have been 574,000 young people. They also explained that the number of young Filipinos experiencing "suicide ideation" has doubled since the last record back in 2013. A large number of those people were young women. The University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI) has surveyed 10,949 randomly selected young Filipino teens ranging in age from 15 to 24 to examine the indicators of mental health problems, with a greater emphasis on depressive and suicidal symptoms.

The UPPI's 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS5) data collection survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when being physically and socially isolated might have greatly affected the minds of young people. They have stated that 6 out of 10 of those who thought of committing suicide chose not to reach out to anyone regarding it. Of those who tried to seek help, 25% went to their close friends or peers, 7% went to their parents or legal guardians, and 5% went to their relatives. It was stated that seeking professional help was a very unpopular choice, which only 4% have done. (Boiser, 2022)

According to "The Prevalence of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress and Their Associated Factors in College Students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, before and after COVID-19, the impact on college students. It specifically focuses on the changes in anxiety and depression, along with their symptoms. From what they found through their surveys, the students' mental health declined during the COVID-19 outbreak with regards to the academic challenges that they've experienced, which, according to the authors, should be targeted by the mental health workers and educators of the schools. However, it was stated that having the skill to be able to find something positive in relatively negative situations is something that should be taught to promote being resilient. Another note to mention is that those who have already been experiencing stress before the COVID-19 pandemic have created a temporary barrier against their anxiety and depression over time. The pandemic has caused those who experience the highest levels of stress to experience some form of relief for a brief moment. (Ramón-Arbués et al., 2020)

Review of Related Works

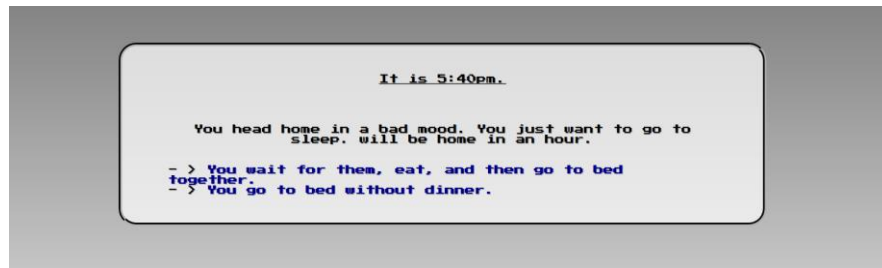
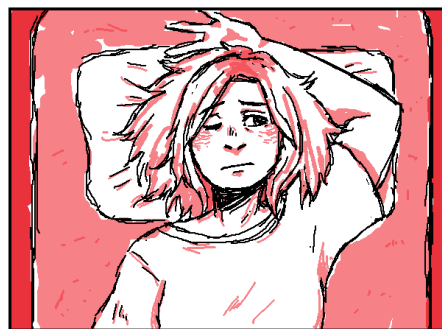


Figure 22 *Woebegone* by Louey (2021)

"A game about trying to cope." (Louey, 2021) *Woebegone* is a short HTML game that talks about learning how to cope with your depression and anxiety. You'll go through the day and see what will happen when you make specific choices and how it affects everything you do. This is a fair warning because this game graphically deals with suicide ideation, depression, and anxiety. This game helps with how to show other symptoms and a different perspective on depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation. This game is also based on the perspective of someone in college, specifically someone with an art degree.



It's time to wake up but you stayed up really late last night and now it's such a chore to stand up. There was only one reason why you're going to wake up today and it was something that has kept you up for several nights now.

You stand up and **look around your room.**

Figure 23 *Goodbye* by Barrels (2018)

"A short game about saying goodbye." *Goodbye* is a short game about saying goodbye to the people you love and how sometimes reaching out will give you another reason to keep moving forward. (Barrels, 2018) You get to see how, with each action, Mochi feels before she leaves unless the player chooses to get her to open up. A fair warning with regards to the game: This game handles topics about suicide and depression. This game is for me to reference how to do simple storytelling. I enjoy the simplicity of the storytelling because you can tell how the character is feeling. The art style is also simple, which I would like to do for my project.

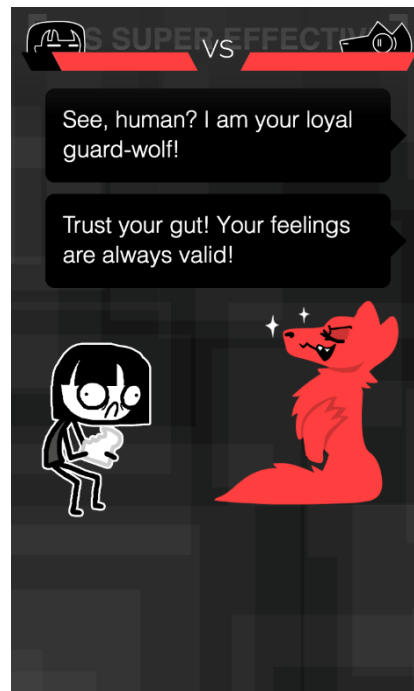


Figure 24 *Adventures with Anxiety* by Case (2020)

"Adventures with Anxiety is about, well, anxiety. But I've made this for folks with anxiety disorder, like myself. I hope it can help you see with humor how anxiety works. And, just maybe, reduce the fear of fear itself." Adventure with Anxiety is a short game about how anxiety can affect your life and choices, but it is depicted in a comedic way. (Case, 2020) The game shows how much anxiety can ruin your time thinking about things that are possibly not true but, again, depicted in a very comedic way. It also shows how you can sometimes work with your anxiety and get it to calm down. A fair warning about the game is that it depicts anxiety, alcohol abuse, sexuality, and swearing.

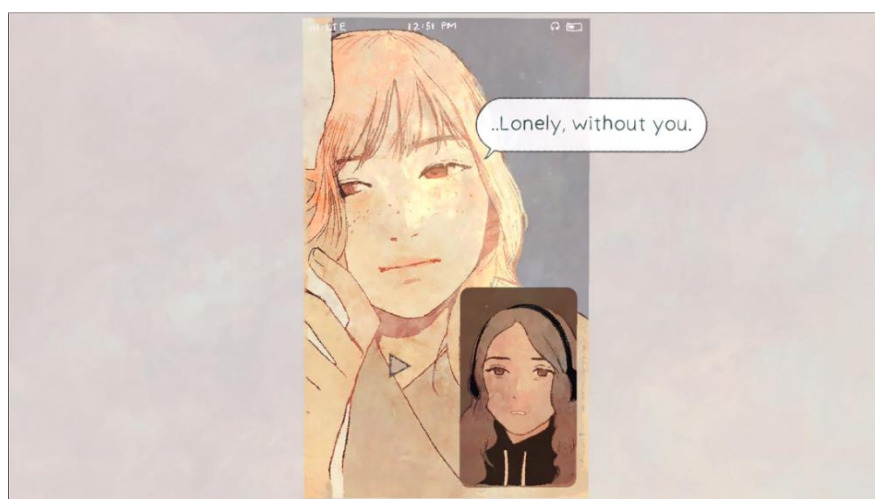


Figure 25 *A New Life* by Angela He (2020)

"A classic love story: Meet, marry, grow old. But when your loved one hurts you, what do you do? Is it better to love and be hurt than never love at all?" (He, 2020)

This game will let you go through the life of meeting your loved one, possibly marrying them, and growing old together. The choices will determine how you'll end up with the love of your life. This visual novel tackles the grief of a dying loved one. This would be another example of a visual novel relating to mental health.



Figure 26 *You Left Me* by Angela He (2018)

“You wake up in a different world. You have until nighttime to escape. Why are you here? You’ve forgotten something important. But what? Remember - before it’s too late, you’re lost forever.” A dark/ funny/ surreal game about loneliness and loss. Come with a chat-speaking cycloptic cat and moon that tells you dad jokes. (He, 2018) The game is about recovering from grief and how moving on can help you see the light of another day. The game has five different endings that show how some actions can affect how everything will end.



Figure 27 *Missed Messages* by Angela He (2019)

“‘goth GF's iPhone’ airdrops you a photo. Accept or decline? A romance/horror story about life, death, and memes. How will you spend time?” (He, 2019) The game is about trying to catch the signs of mental struggle. Whether you figure it out will affect how the story goes. A fair warning for the game is that it contains mentions and

indications of suicide and self-harm. If you are sensitive to that topic, please play the game at your own risk. This one relates to how I wish to portray my story but from the perspective of the person struggling.

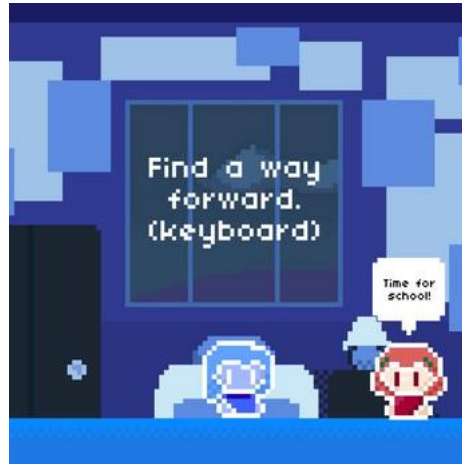


Figure 28 *Blue* by *danielvincenz* (2017)

“An experimental game about coping with mental illness.” A short game about coping with mental illness. The game's mechanics give you a sense of anxiety as none of the controls work while the screen slowly zooms in and the music intensifies, which gives you a false sense that you're about to lose, but before it can happen, the controls will start to work again. The story told through short dialogues, shows how much Mochi struggles to keep up with others who aren't struggling with their mental health. This game honestly provides how it feels to have anxiety even when you're in just idle mode.

Results and Discussion

For this study, I did an internet assessment of current literature and studies and qualitative data analysis. Due to time constraints and personal issues, this appeared to be the ideal option for gathering data on this topic. Aside from that, the findings come from adolescents who are struggling with their mental health. I examined many papers and articles on the subject.

The first study reviewed is “Filipino Help-Seeking For Mental Health Problems And Associated Barriers And Facilitators: A Systematic Review.” Based on the study, Mental health spending in the Philippines is only 0.22% of total health expenditures, with a lack of health professionals working in the sector. 'Overseas Filipinos', or Filipinos living abroad, also face elevated mental health problems, with 12% of Filipinos in the US suffering from psychological distress. Barriers to mental health help-seeking include a preference for self-reliance, poor mental health awareness, and perceived stigma. Higher-income is associated with better mental health, while poor socio-economic status increases the risk of developing mental health problems. Lack of familiarity with the healthcare system in host countries discourages new Filipino migrants from seeking help. Later-generation Filipino immigrants or those with residency status in their host country have more positive attitudes towards help-seeking

and higher rates of mental health care utilization. The presence of friends and family can discourage Filipinos from seeking professional help, but positive attitudes towards formal help-seeking can promote its utilization. (Martinez et al., 2020)

The next study is “Student Involvement, Mental Health And Quality Of Life Of College Students In A Selected University In Manila, Philippines.” This study examines the link between student involvement, mental health, and quality of life among college students at a Philippine institution. The Mental Health Inventory and Youth Quality of Life Instrument-short form are used in the study to assess students' health and quality of life. Previous research indicates a substantial link between mental health and quality of life among students. According to the findings, school officials should encourage students to participate in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to improve their mental health and quality of life. This is especially essential given the current Mental Health Act in the Philippines. (Cleofas, 2019)

According to the “Exploring the Well-Being of Guidance Counselors in the Philippines: A Phenomenological Study,” counselors in the Philippines prioritize their well-being by connecting with loved ones and valuing their time. They receive psychological support through online communication and encouragement to overcome adversities. Schools provide training and support for new guidance counselors, allowing them to navigate their creativity and contribute to the community. However, some schools fail to recognize the importance of guidance counselors in seeking wellness and mental health. A good guidance orientation is crucial, as counselors feel valued and respected by their principals, leading to increased job satisfaction and less job seeking. Institutions should consider wellness programs for Filipino guidance counselors, promoting motivation, engagement, and happiness in their work-life. Flexibility in attending seminars, training programs, and further education is also important. However, a profession focused on wellness often neglects the importance of self-care and wellness practices in personal lives. (Gallardo & Chavez, 2022)

“Do School Counselors Help Students? An Evidence-Based Guide To Maximizing Counseling Impact” has stated that school counselors play a crucial role in creating positive school environments for students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. They provide academic, career, and social-emotional support through various modalities. However, due to non-counseling duties, they often spend only 35% of their time on direct counseling. Proper practices, resources, and structures can significantly impact students' well-being. (Padilla, 2024)

Conclusion

In conclusion, if a student or a child cannot access a mental health professional, they can seek help from their school's guidance counselor. Though this may not work for all students, it's best to test out the waters with it before thinking it may not work out. It was recommended by the current Mental Health Act in the Philippines that being able to do co-curricular and extra-curricular activities will help improve their mental health and quality of life. Another thing to note is that not everyone is in a rather safe and encouraging environment. Potentially, friends and

family may be why the person hasn't decided to seek help because of past treatment from said people. Being surrounded by those with a positive outlook on life will do the person good in the future.

Recommendations

Research Topic

This research topic is open to future improvements in terms of data collection and respondents' attitudes toward experiencing any type of mental health difficulty. The material acquired was based on research and available on the Internet. I feel it might be more demonstrated if an interview was carried out to clarify the study's findings, as well as stories from respondents about how they encountered and dealt with their situations.

Creative Process

The method of developing the visual novel for my thesis output may still be enhanced in terms of representation, code, artwork illustrations, and production schedule. Regarding the medium, due to time restrictions, I could only produce a simple visual novel rather than something fresh, distinctive, or more complex in terms of gameplay. When working out the code framework, I ventured into a new area, which increased my understanding of creating a visual novel; however, it delayed the progress of my work concerning finishing this on time. I recommend creating the code or starting to code the visual novel as soon as possible because this will take most of your time. Even if it's just encoding the story's script, it will be enough while creating the illustrations and character sprites. Including more illustrations and variety in the character's sprites would be a good idea.

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