Quest for Arete

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Research Question

Can you teach ethics and social justice through a highly immersive user experience in an Interactive Fiction game?

Introduction

Quest for Arete is an Interactive Fiction game—a text-based, literary experience where players use text commands to guide characters, explore environments, and solve literary puzzles. We chose to create Quest for Arete in Inform 7, a programming language and authoring platform that uses natural language syntax.

Quest for Arete is intentionally designed with institutional and national discussions of social justice, contemporary virtue ethics, and accessibility in mind. Our project challenges players to face ethical dilemmas in order to make conscious decisions that lead to further contemplation. Each aspect of our project is designed to meet high accessibility standards defined by W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), which go beyond accessibility standards outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Methodology

Virtue Ethics
We chose to focus on Nancy E. Snow's Neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics because an understanding of virtuous living impacts the development and sustainability of a civil society.
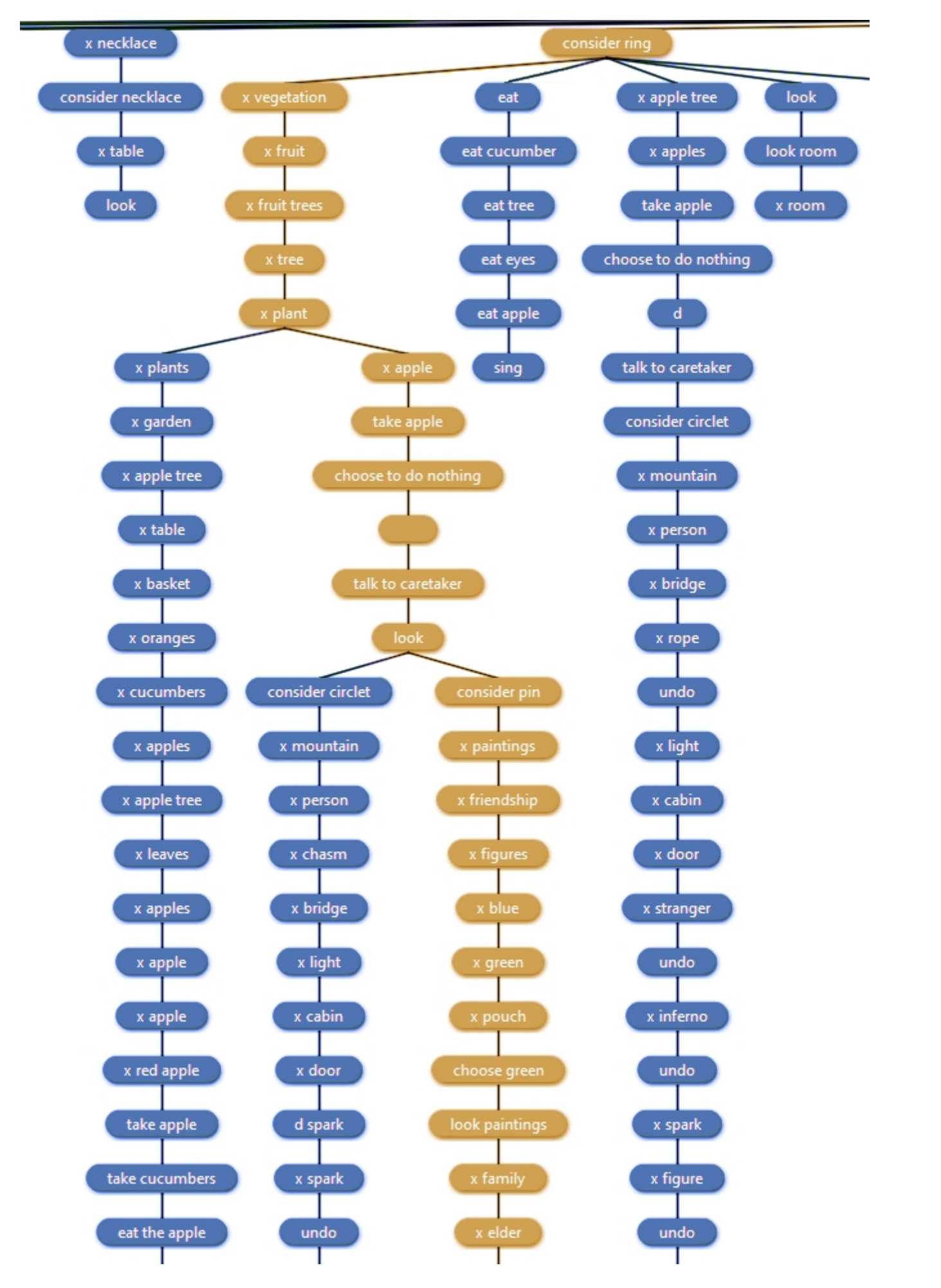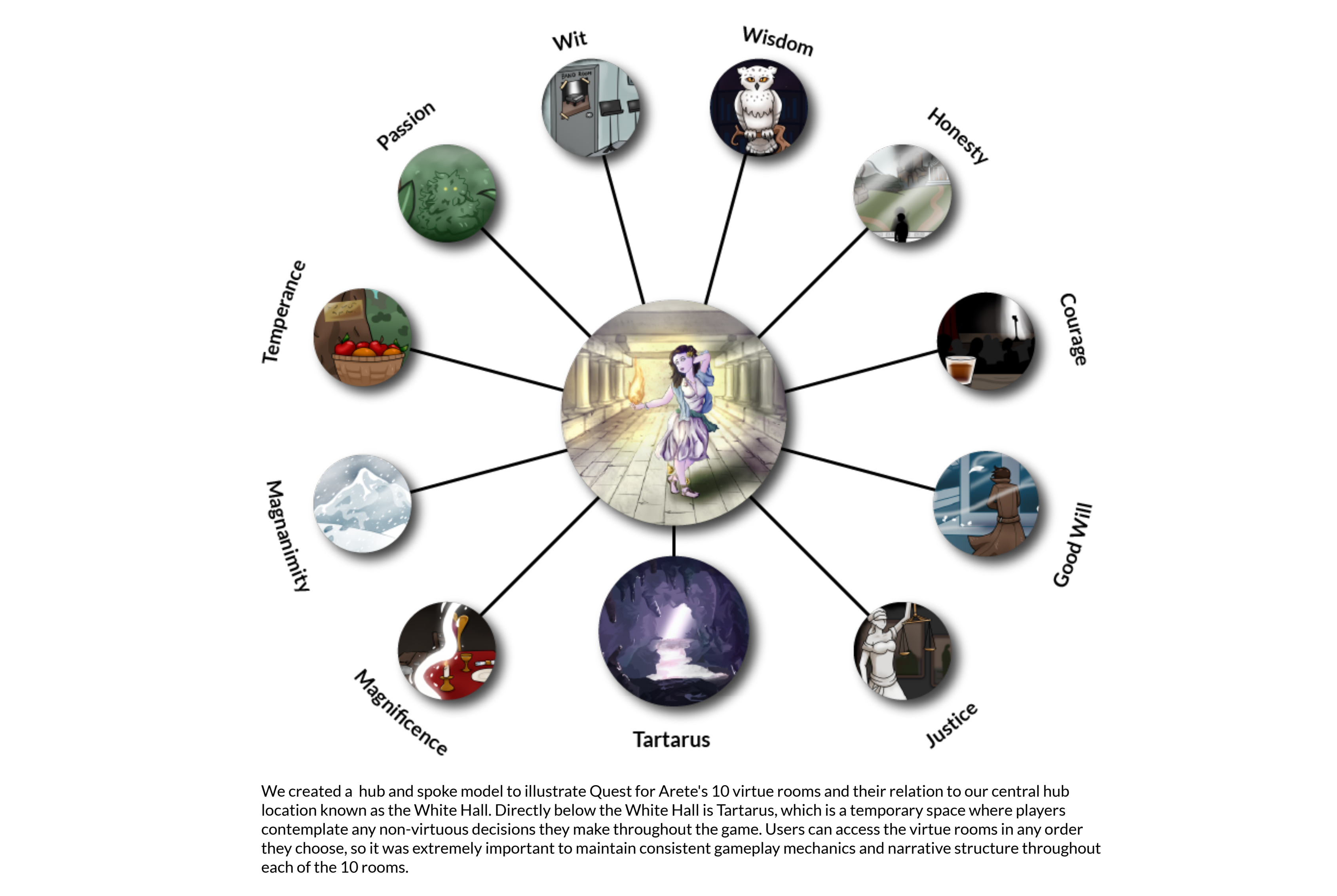
Action Research
Stefano Vannotti defines Action Research as systematic enquiry conducted through practical applications of theoretical scholarship. Vannotti's methodology guided each stage of our project.

Media Theory
Prominent media theorist Janet Murray argues that any form of user participation, particularly the interactive components in our project, breaks a user's immersion with the narrative. An interactive game like the one we have created refutes this idea.

Game Design
Our findings add to the knowledge suggested by Robert Zubeck that good gameplay, strong mechanics, and robust narrative writing are necessary for creating highly successful immersive user experiences.

Published Work

We created a hub and spoke model to illustrate Quest for Arete's 10 virtue rooms and their relation to our central hub location known as the White Hall. Directly below the White Hall is Tartarus, which is a temporary space where players contemplate any non-virtuous decisions they make throughout the game. Users can access the virtue rooms in any order they choose, so it was extremely important to maintain consistent gameplay mechanics and narrative structure throughout each of the 10 rooms.

This diagram highlights one section of our data model that shows possible player actions (blue) next to the shortest logical solution for each room (gold) known as the "golden path". The resulting solution map is hosted on our website walkthrough page where each room's solution is hidden by drop-down tabs. This design allows players to find the solution for a room they are stuck on without spoiling the rest of the game.

A room not dissimilar to the Caretaker's hall materializes around you. You see three unique paintings on the walls surrounding you. In the center of the room is a large, white, marble statue of a blindfolded woman. In one of her hands is a sword, and in the other, an unbalanced scale. The air around you carries an inescapable weight of purpose, morality, and truth. You feel there is some connection between the paintings and the statue's scales that needs to be re-balanced.

>look scale
The statue in the center of the room is of an imposing white marble statue of a blindfolded woman holding a sword in one hand and an unbalanced scale in the other. The air around you carries an inescapable weight of purpose, morality, and truth. You feel there is some connection between the paintings and the statue's scales that needs to be re-balanced.
True Judgements: 0/3
>look paintings
There are three paintings hanging on the wall: the Painting of Friendship, the Painting of Family, and the Painting of Panic.

>look painting of friendship
You look upon the Painting of Friendship. There are two figures standing in a bustling market, one painted in green and the other in blue.

You should examine the scene.

>examine blue
The two figures are shaking hands. They appear to know each other well. The blue figure has a pouch on his side.

>examine pouch
Upon closer inspection the blue figure's pouch appears to have money inside. You notice the green figure is holding a dagger, poised to cut the blue figure's purse strings without him noticing.

>choose green
You have judged the green figure as guilty.

>look scale
The statue in the center of the room crackles with an invisible energy as her scales tilt closer to equilibrium. The weight of the room seems to lift, at least slightly.
True Judgements: 1/3
>look painting of family
An elderly man is lying in bed, blood staining the white sheets. Three men stand at the foot of the bed, the dead man's elder son, younger son, and another man who is dressed like a servant. To the side is a small table.

You should examine the scene.

>examine elder son
You examine the eldest son of the house. His fists hang at his sides clenched with rage. His cheek appears to shine in the light.

>|

Above is a screenshot from the Justice Room within Quest for Arete. Users are asked to examine three separate scenes to gather evidence and determine which party is guilty in each scenario. With each correct judgement, the scales of justice move closer to a balanced state. Each scenario is intentionally written to challenge the user's initial assumptions about the characters in the scene and look beyond incomplete conclusions.

Each component of our project lives on a hand-coded website that ties each element of our project together into a single, cohesive space. The website is designed to be responsive across all device types, including assistive technology like screen readers. We designed everything with accessibility in mind, working to maintain WCAG accessibility standards that go beyond what is considered ADA compliant. Our website includes an animated trailer, image carousel to showcase all in-game art, links to play Quest for Arete in-browser or on itch.io where it is externally published, and a walkthrough solution map for new players.

Findings

Our project led us to three major findings:

• Teaching students about social justice and leading virtuous lives is imperative at all levels of education. Our project meets individuals where they are and provides them with an educational tool to engage in these important discussions.

• Using Vannotti's methodology to build Quest for Arete provides concrete evidence that participatory experiences can be incredibly immersive and serve as an effective way to explore complex ideas like social justice and virtue ethics contrary to Murray's assertion.

• Our findings go beyond the knowledge suggested by Robert Zubek, who argues that good gameplay, strong mechanics, and engaging content are all necessary for a great game. We show that robust narrative writing can produce a highly immersive environment conducive for engaging players.

Acknowledgements

Citations

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