Chapter 4: Context

Written Assignments

1. Choose a scene or a series of scenes from a game you find interesting or moving. This game should be one with visual elements of context: interface, icons, characters, story or mood conveyed through images, a visual representation of a world or space, etc. Write a paper describing how these visual elements help create the experience of the scene or scenes you played, answering one or more of the following questions:
   - What does the appearance and animation of game objects or characters convey—or fail to convey—about the rules associated with them?
   - Are there recurring visual motifs, and how does the player learn what those motifs mean in the game's system?
   - What did the visual shape of scenes, the space created by how objects are positioned, tell you about what you could do in each scene?
   - Were there visual elements that didn't have rules associated with them (like the distant background behind the space of play, or non-interactive elements) but which still affected your experience of the game? If so, how?

2. Play a game that has a musical soundtrack, and listen to the soundtrack while playing; be sure to play enough that you're very familiar with how to play, what the shape of the game is like, and the music you're hearing. (If you choose a game you've played a lot already, you may already be at that point!) Take a break, and then listen to the soundtrack *without* playing the game. What parts of the music or sound effects are especially memorable—and what aspects of gameplay, or moments in a scene you remember, do they evoke for you? What do these memorable moments tell you about how the soundtrack affects your experience of the game? How does the soundtrack help reinforce the rules and verbs of the game? Do you think a different soundtrack, or changes to the existing soundtrack, could make your experience more memorable? If so, describe why or how.

3. Choose two games that use the camera in different ways to give the player a view into a virtual space. For example, choose one game that uses an overhead view and another that shows its world from the side, or from a first-person point of view, or "over the shoulder" of a character that the player is controlling. Think about other ways that game cameras differ when choosing you games: does the camera follow the player's avatar or focus of activity as it moves across space, or is it fixed in place? Does the point of view of the camera change from scene to scene, or is it under the player's control, and if so, how? (You should choose games that represent a space, as opposed to abstract games such as 2-dimensional puzzles!) Write a paper discussing how each game's use of the camera changes your experience, paying close attention to how the camera is controlled, when the camera changes based on player input or changes in the game's pacing (such as in the example from *Fotonica* in Chapter 4). Compare and contrast the different roles that the camera can play in creating the game's experience.

Project Ideas

1. Choose a game that has a cast of characters. This could be a game in which you control multiple avatars, such as a single-player role-playing game with group battles, or a game with a story that involves many different characters. The game you choose could also be a very different kind of game, with a cast that includes not only the protagonist—such as Mario in *Super Mario Bros.*—but also enemies or other characters. A full list of characters in *Super Mario Bros.* might include Goombas, Koopas, Princess Peach, Toad, or even the power-ups Mario collects, which could be seen as characters in the game's story because they have eyes!

   Working alone or in a group, design a new character for the game you chose; describe what this character looks like, and create a sketch or illustration of the character. Think about how the visual elements and motifs of your new character relate to the visual elements that are already in the game, including color, shape and silhouette. What sets your new character apart, visually? What role does this character play in the game? What kinds of rules are associated with your character, and how are they distinct from existing characters? After you've thoroughly described this character, think about and evaluate, in writing, whether this game needs your character; do you think you made a useful addition to the cast, or a character that's redundant or unnecessary?

2. Working alone or in a group, brainstorm a new concept for a game—but rather than starting with rules, mechanics or verbs, use a visual image as the starting point for a game. This could be a favorite piece of artwork, an evocative photograph, an image from advertising or popular culture, or an image chosen by your instructor—but be sure to use an image from outside of games! Think about the choices that the visual artist or designer who made this image made: what is it representing? What moods or feelings does it convey? How do this image's visual design elements, texture, references to other images, genre and texture combine to create your impression of the image? After discussing or making your own notes on the image, think about what kind of game could be inspired by this image, or use this image as a foundation for an in-game visual style. What kind of game would use this kind of image as context? Develop your game idea further into a document that describes gameplay, a visual style inspired by or rooted in the image you chose, and other elements of context (including camera and sound) that help support your vision for the game. When your document is complete, discuss the influence and role of your image in your process and the overall design of the game.

3. Starting from the examples drawn from *Knytt Stories* at the end of chapter 4, create a new tileset for the *Knytt Stories* editor. Follow the instructions at this address:
   http://nifflas.lpchip.nl/index.php?topic=1742.0
   Use your favorite paint or image editing program, or other software tools mentioned in the above instructions: GIMP, Paint.NET, Photoshop or Paint Shop Pro.

   Your tileset can include more than one kind of contextual element: background elements that a *Knytt Stories* player won't interact with or foreground elements that Juni, the *Knytt Stories* avatar, can climb up, jump on, or fall off of. Review figures 4.24 through 4.28; can you find new ways to create visual elements that serve these purposes? Be sure to play *Knytt Stories* as part

of your process of creating new tilesets, and try to generate your own ideas about what kinds of tiles might be interesting or useful to help communicate information to the player—or hide information from her!