

Game Design Document: Swan Song

Table of Contents

1. General Information	2
2. Summary	2
3. Target Audience	2
4. Prologue.....	3
5. Setting.....	3
6. Design Pillars.....	3
7. Levels	4
7.1 The Forest (First Level)	5
7.1.1 Theme	5
7.1.2 Location and Characters	5
7.1.3 Plot.....	7
7.1.4 Gameplay	8
7.2 The Factory (Second Level)	9
7.2.1 Theme	9
7.2.2 Location and Characters	10
7.2.3 Plot.....	10
7.2.4 Gameplay.....	11
8. Progression	12
9. Aesthetics.....	12
10. Positioning in Media and Game Studies.....	13
11. Project Team	14
Statement on Collaboration	15

1. General Information

Title:	Swan Song
Genre:	Adventure game
Format:	3D
Perspective:	Third-person
Platform:	PC
Number of players:	Singleplayer
Language:	English
Estimated game time:	2 hours
Pre-production year:	2021/2022

2. Summary

Swan Song is a 3D third-person adventure game about youth suicide.

After her suicide attempt, the protagonist Sol is left in a state of unconsciousness. In the world of her mind, the player has to help the teenager confront her traumata and discover something worth living for.

Each level focuses on a different aspect of Sol's life and the cause of her suicidal desire that resulted from it. Throughout the levels, the gameplay mechanics constantly change to reflect the underlying narrative.

The goal of Swan Song consists of working through Sol's crises and finding her reasons to live in order to regain consciousness and return to the real world.

3. Target Audience

Since the game has an adolescent protagonist and covers topics such as overprotective parenting and conformity at school, it is most relatable for teenagers. However, youth suicide constitutes a mature subject that is not appropriate for all age groups.

Consequently, Swan Song is suitable for older adolescents and young adults between the ages of 16 and 25.

Further, the game portrays the successful mastery of a suicidal crisis. Thus, it might be particularly attractive and beneficial for players who are vulnerable to self-destructive impulses themselves.

The low difficulty of Swan Song and the short game time (estimated to be around 2 hours) make the game accessible to casual and mid-core gamers.

This adventure game is tailored to players who like to explore unique game worlds and who are willing to think through the metaphors and symbolism of a story that is told without explicit dialogue.

4. Prologue

The adventure game starts with a film sequence that introduces Sol and her issues in the “real” world. For example, her unfulfilling daily routine and the distanced relationship with her mother are shown. The prologue ends with Sol attempting suicide by jumping off a bridge.

At this point, the game transitions to the world of Sol’s mind. She awakes in a black lake and the player takes control of the protagonist.

5. Setting

Swan Song is set in a fantastical world that represents Sol’s inner life. Thus, the locations and characters are imbued with metaphorical meaning. Rather than portraying real life, they resemble an exaggerated version of Sol’s perception of reality.

For instance, Sol’s overprotective mother is depicted as a hybrid creature between an owl and a tiger that watches over a withered forest. Similarly, her school creates the impression of a factory with assembly lines leading to the various classrooms.

As the creator of this world, Sol constitutes its only human inhabitant. Other characters are presented as plants, animals, and robots instead. The benign spirit of a deer, a manifestation of Sol’s self-preservation instinct, appears at several points in the story and guides the teenage girl towards her next goal.

The game starts and ends at a black lake that functions as a threshold between reality and fantasy, consciousness and unconsciousness. Located at the center of the mind world, the lake acts as a hub with paths leading to the different levels. Once Sol has faced all of the reasons for her suicide attempt, she enters the dark waters to return to her real life.

6. Design Pillars

The design of Swan Song is based on five fundamental characteristics: rich metaphors, expressive mechanics, non-verbal storytelling, self-contained levels, and positive transformation.

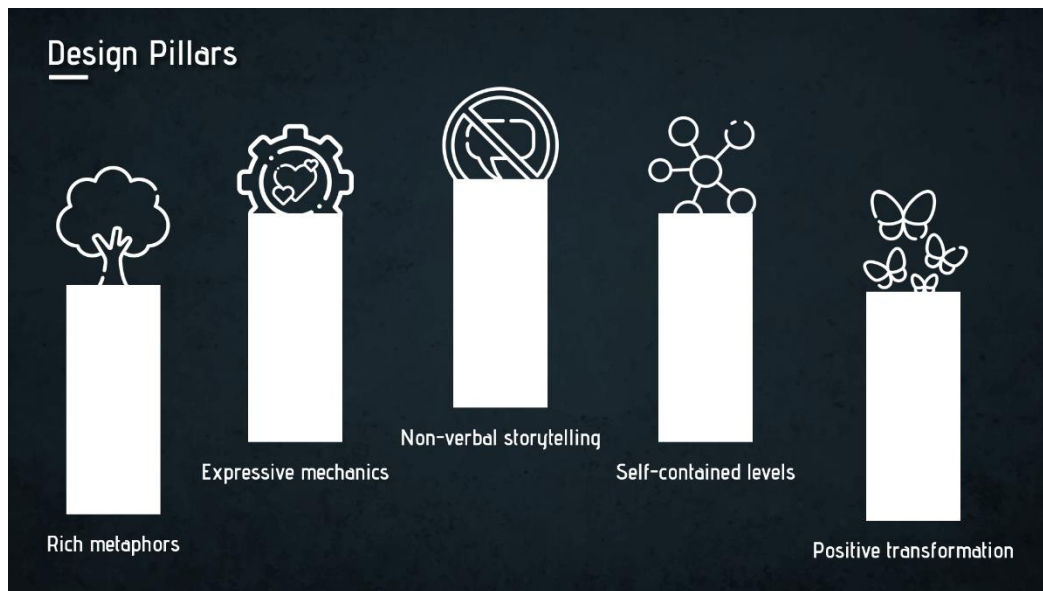


Figure 1: Design pillars for Swan Song. Icons from flaticon.com.

Rich metaphors: the characters and places are imbued with deep symbolical meaning. The game world and its inhabitants are not a representation of real life, rather they reflect an exaggerated version of Sol's perception of reality.

Expressive mechanics: the gameplay elements support the narrative of Swan Song. They serve to align the player's emotions with Sol's and model actions that are crucial to her healing process.

Non-verbal storytelling: the entire story is told without comprehensible dialogue. Instead, environmental storytelling, animations, visual language, metaphors, and gameplay mechanics are used to convey the narrative of Swan Song.

Self-contained levels: each level deals with a different reason for Sol's suicide that the player has to help her work through. Locations, characters, and mechanics differ significantly from level to level.

Positive transformation: as a visualization of her ongoing healing process, Sol changes the characters and places of the mind world for the better. Although there is a transformation in each level, its nature varies depending on the location.

7. Levels

The levels in Swan Song are completed in a linear fashion.

Each area begins with Sol confronting a cause of her suicide attempt and ends with her discovery of a reason to live on.

Currently, two levels have been conceptualized: the forest that deals with Sol's family and the factory that concerns itself with the teenager's education. A potential city level about large-scale social pressures is currently being discussed.

7.1 The Forest (First Level)

7.1.1 Theme

In this level, Sol's relationship with her mother is thematized.

The central conflict is between protection and growth. Her mother's overprotectiveness impedes Sol's personal development and prevents her from acquiring the skills she needs to navigate the challenges of life.

Also, the connection between mother and daughter is characterized by a lack of warmth and genuine trust. The main reason for this coldness is the death of Sol's older sister and the mother's inability to cope with this tragedy.

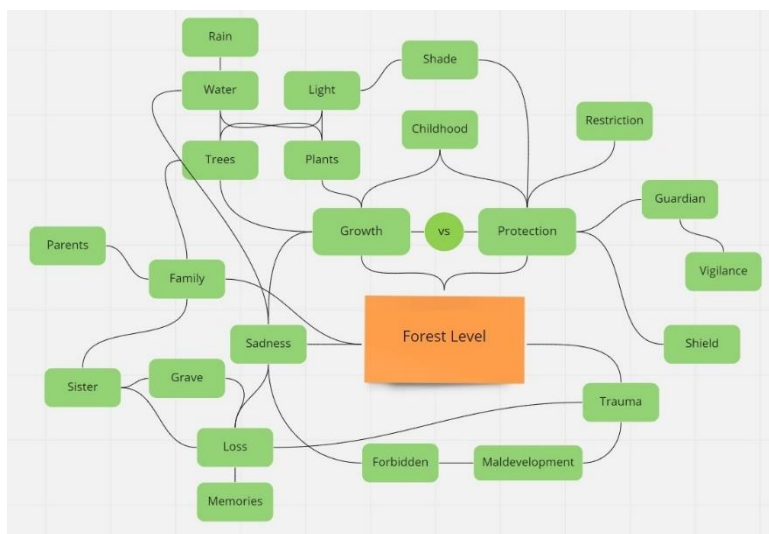


Figure 2: Themes and their connections in the forest level. Created in Miro.

7.1.2 Location and Characters



Figure 3: Illustration of the forest level. Artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

A dark and withered forest with a giant mother tree in its center. On its top lives the guardian of the forest, a mixture between an owl and a tiger that represents Sol's mother.



Figure 4: Concept art of Sol's mother, the forest guardian. Artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

The dense leaf canopy of the tree blocks all incoming light, covering the area beneath the tree in darkness. It has not rained in this part of the forest for years and the local rivers have all dried out. Due to the lack of light and water, the plants and trees in this area are dead.

So-called saplings, small and sickly-looking forest creatures, inhabit the giant tree and its surroundings.



Figure 5: Concept art of the tree. Artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

7.1.3 Plot

Sol is led on a path towards the forest by the deer spirit that acts as a guide throughout the entire game. On the way, she is attacked by mosquitoes, who sting her. Before fainting, Sol watches the forest guardian appear and fend off the insects. Sol tries to touch her but the guardian jumps back. Unconscious from the sting, Sol is carried to the giant tree by the mother, who takes care of her injuries.

When Sol wakes up, the guardian is out of her reach, watching over the forest from the top of the tree. Sol exits the tree and explores the area outside. She tries to leave to continue her journey but every time she is about to step out of the shade of the giant tree, the guardian flies down, picks her up, and brings her back to a room inside the tree.

Eventually, Sol discovers a memorial of her dead sister Nana, located in the mother's blind spot. When Sol starts to cry, she notices that her tears transform nearby saplings into plants and fungi. Using that ability, she manages to climb the giant tree.

On top of the tree, she finally touches her mother, and the aura of coldness that has accompanied the creature dissolves. The rain returns to the forest when the guardian sheds some tears herself. Then, she opens the leaf canopy of the tree and the light pierces through, restoring the forest to its former beauty.

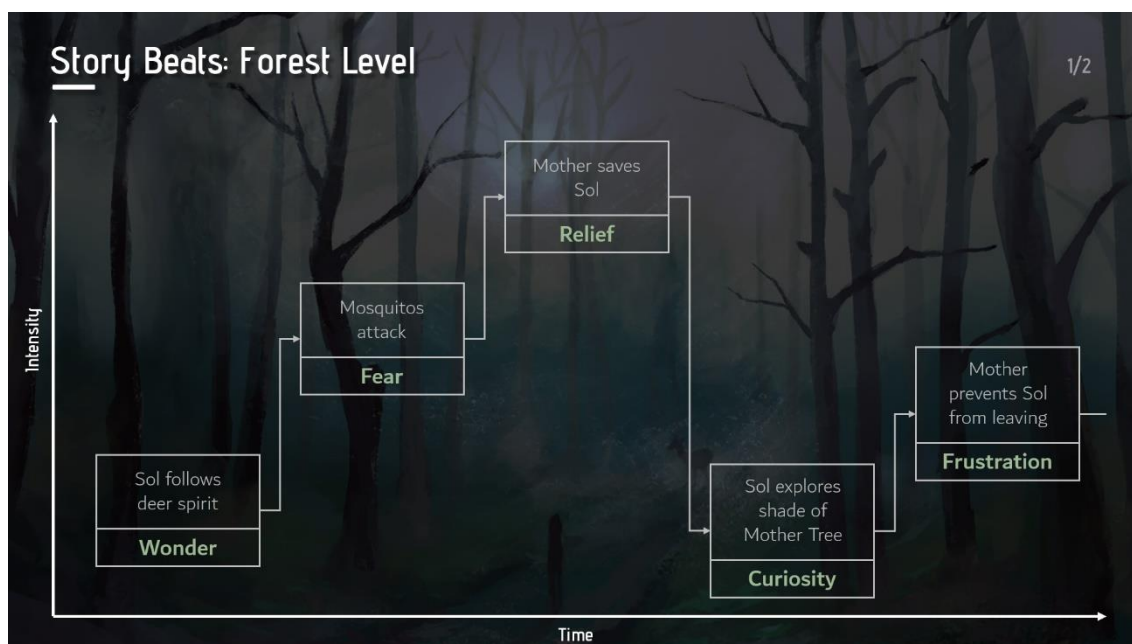


Figure 6: Story events in the forest level. First half. Background artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

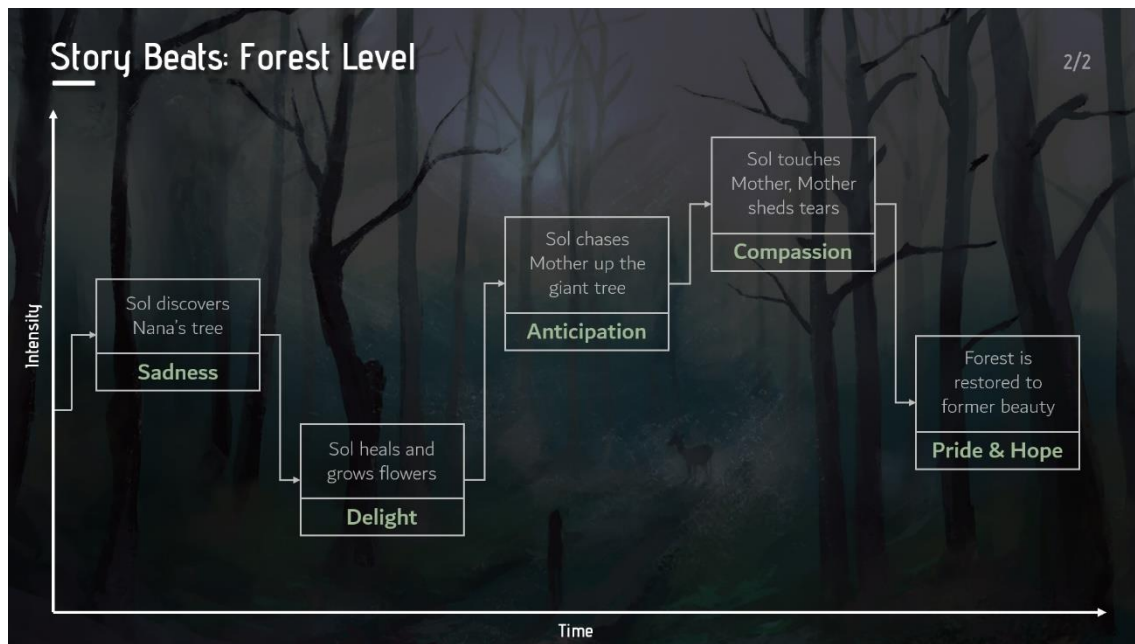


Figure 7: Story events in the forest level. Second half. Background artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

7.1.4 Gameplay

At the beginning, the player may only walk and jump. This changes when Sol discovers her sister's memorial. She unlocks the ability to shed tears, which affects nearby saplings.

The saplings are small animate versions of certain plants or fungi they would eventually grow into. Due to the lack of light and water in the forest, this has not happened to them.

Saplings are placed at various locations in the forest level. Once the player approaches them, they start following Sol until she reaches a higher elevation.

By pressing a button, the player temporarily transforms all nearby saplings into the plants/fungi they represent. These then allow for new actions: for instance, Sol may use a bouncy mushroom as a trampoline or an ivy sapling could grow up nearby walls with occasional leaves forming a path for the player.

After a few seconds, the plants/fungi disappear and the saplings may be picked up again. You can click on the image below to watch a prototype of the sapling behavior:

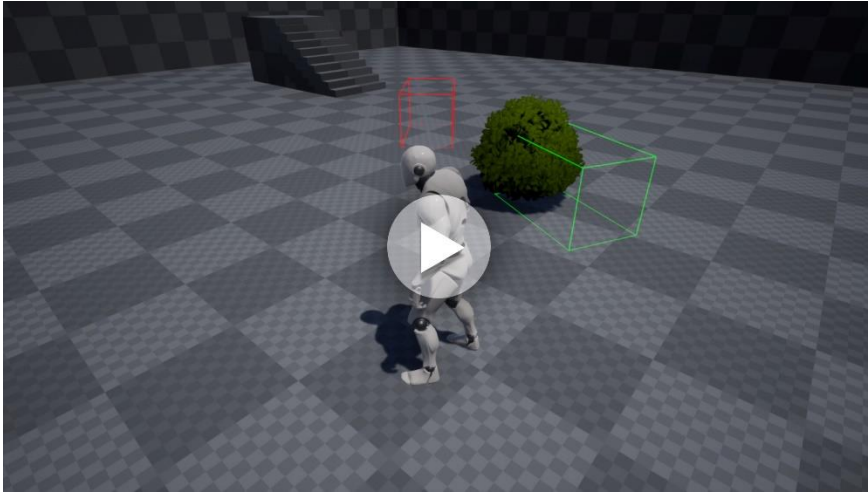


Figure 8: Gameplay prototype of the sapling behavior. Link: <https://youtu.be/DAaitFilxag>.

7.2 The Factory (Second Level)

7.2.1 Theme

The factory level recounts Sol's experience at school.

It revolves around the conflict between identity and conformity. Originally, Sol was interested in arts (visual arts and music) and wanted to become a musician. However, her submission to a deindividuating education system that stifled creativity led to the loss of her unique style and her self-image as an artist.

In the world of her mind, Sol eventually manages to break free from the monotonous school routine and recovers her sense of identity by rebelling against the teachers.

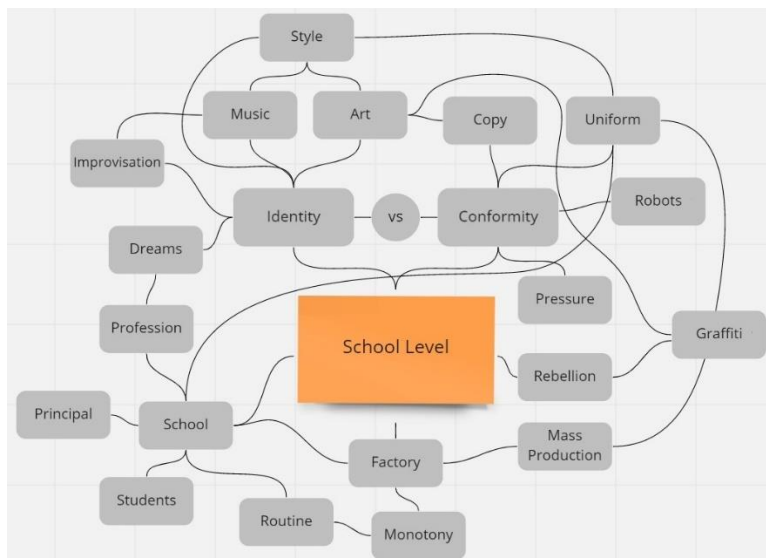


Figure 9: Themes and their connections in the factory level. Created in Miro.

7.2.2 Location and Characters

The environment of the second level combines elements of a public school and an industrial factory. Assembly lines take the students to their classrooms. The building itself is pale and lacks any form of decoration.

Students are depicted as empty school uniforms. The fact that no individual features are recognizable in their outfits evokes the impression of an anonymous mass.

Sol's art and music teacher, who is also the principal of the school, is a robotic creature. The other teachers are represented as drones, constantly hovering over the students to make sure they do not deviate from the expected behavior.

7.2.3 Plot

In this level, Sol relives an exaggerated version of her "real-world" school experience in a time lapse.

It starts with her first day at school where she is asked to copy an existing artwork. Whereas all the uniforms (students) draw the exact same picture, Sol applies her own style to it. The principal humiliates her in front of the whole class for not being able to complete the task.

At first, Sol is angry at the teacher and her classmates. However, she stumbles upon a photo of her dead sister, who was an exemplary student with many accolades. She makes the decision to follow in the footsteps of her sister and submits to the school system.

Sol completes her daily routine of art and music classes, which consist of perfectly copying artworks and reproducing sections of a score, until her own style has vanished completely.

One day after art class, the deer spirit appears and leads her to a storage room. Amidst hundreds of identical student artworks, her piece from the first lesson is the only one that stands out. Later in music class, Sol completes her awakening when she ignores the score and starts to improvise, thus freeing herself from numbly following the dull school routine.

Whereas previously, Sol only ever took the assembly lines to the classrooms, now she is able to explore the whole building on her own. In doing so, she must avoid the drones that are patrolling the corridors to identify and punish deviant students.

In another storage room, Sol eventually finds an old spray can. By putting graffiti everywhere in the school, Sol rebels against the education system and recaptures her identity as an artist. Her art affects the uniforms, who interrupt their routine to stare at the graffiti. Slowly their outfits change and exhibit particular features that separate them from other students. At first, the principal tries to clean up the graffiti but ultimately, it is too much to get rid of. He loses his composure and flees from the school, taking the drones with him.

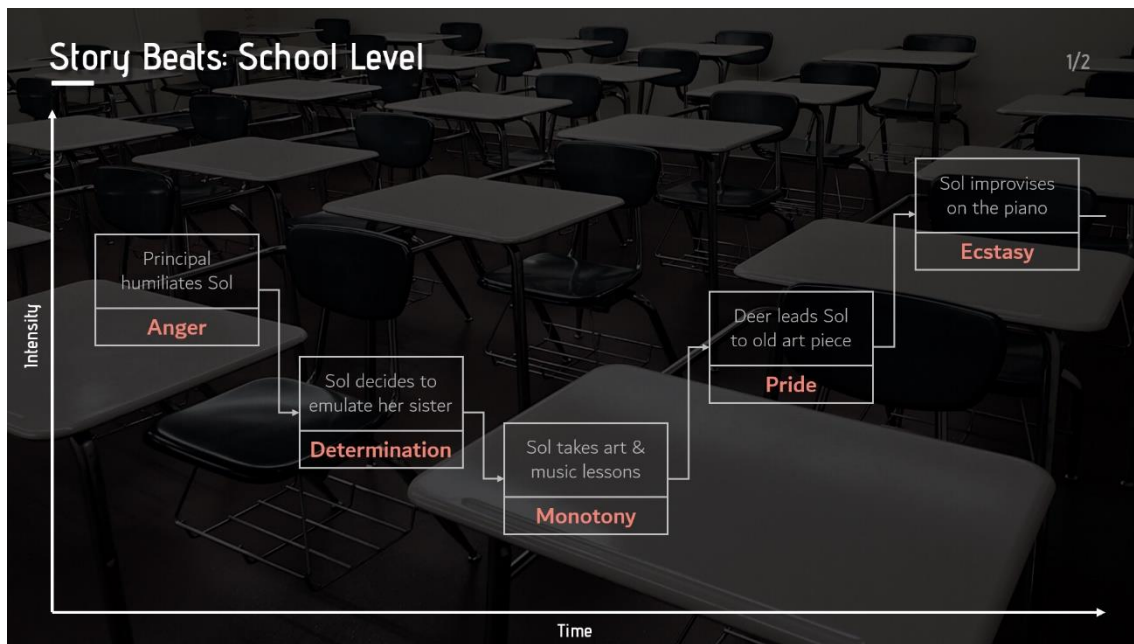


Figure 10: Story events in the factory level. First half. Background photo from pexels.com.

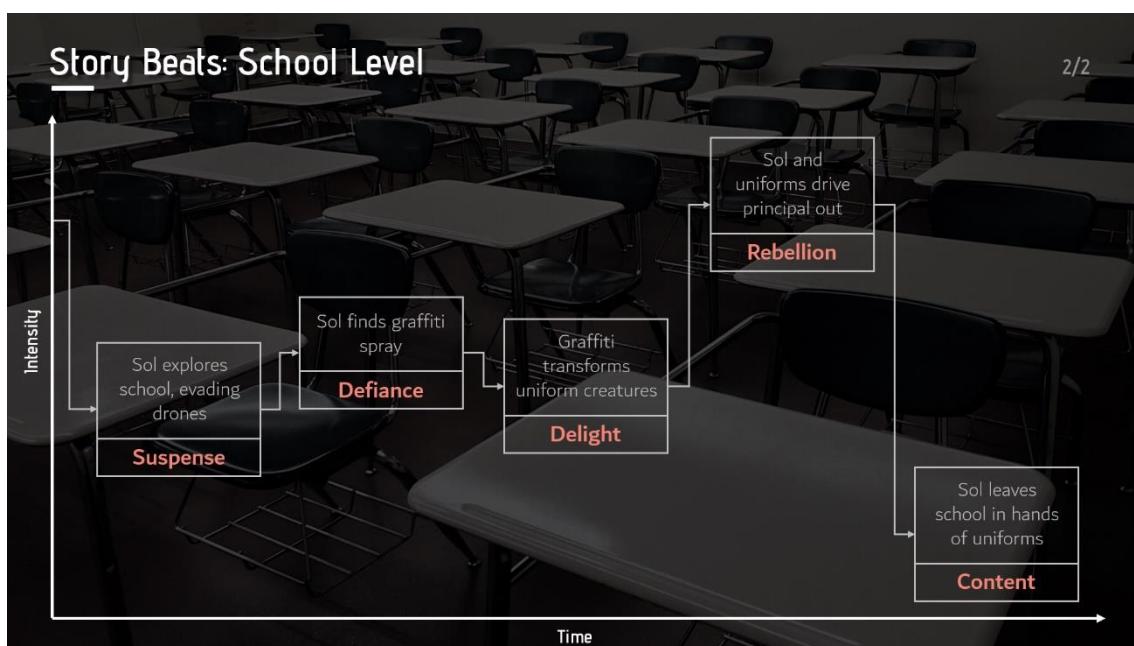


Figure 11: Story events in the factory level. Second half. Background photo from pexels.com.

7.2.4 Gameplay

The gameplay of the factory level is divided into three parts:

First, the player gets to experience Sol's daily routine by completing mini-games that represent her classes. The art lesson works like color by numbers. There is one correct order in which the different points on Sol's canvas have to be connected and if she makes a single mistake, everything she drew is erased and the player has to start from the beginning. In music class, Sol has to play a section from a score. The player

has to press the keys that correspond to the notes shown on the screen at the right time. Once again, a single mistake forces them to start all over again.

Second, after Sol breaks out of the monotonous loop, the player must explore the school building without being seen by the drones. This sequence includes basic elements from stealth games: the player must pay attention to the drones, memorize their movement patterns, and wait for the right moment to sneak past them. If Sol is caught, she is brought back to the nearest classroom and has to complete one of the mini-games before she can try again.

Third, after picking up the spray can, the player may use it to draw on nearby surfaces. The graffiti makes uniforms who look at it join Sol's rebellion and they start painting on the walls of the building as well. To complete this segment, Sol and the uniforms have to spray so much graffiti that the principal can no longer clean it off and leaves the school instead.

8. Progression

The sense of progress in *Swan Song* comes from the transformation the player triggers in the game world and its inhabitants.

In the forest level, Sol helps the saplings grow and removes the aura of coldness from her mother. Further, her actions cause the light and rain to return to the forest, which changes the look of the environment significantly.

Then, in the second level, the player uses graffiti to decorate the walls of the monochromatic school building. Additionally, their art results in the uniforms becoming more personalized. Finally, Sol drives the principal and his drones out of the school, thus freeing the place from the robotic characters who used to control it.

Sol also undergoes a transformation herself. At the end of each level, a visual feature that represents her newfound reason to live is added to her appearance. After completing the forest level, an owl feather is stuck in her hair to remind Sol of the possibility of fixing the relationship with her mother in the real world. Finishing the factory level reveals the tattoo of a musical note on the teenager's face. It stands for her identity as an artist and her liberation from the pressure to conform.

9. Aesthetics

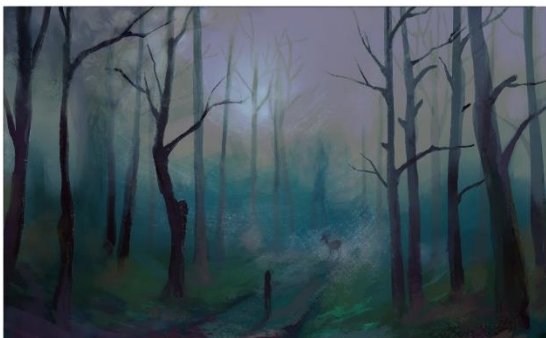


Figure 12: Style examples. Artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

The art of *Swan Song* is created in a painterly style that emphasizes the strange and mysterious nature of Sol's inner world.

Colors are not used to heighten realism but to convey the emotions associated with the various levels. For example, the forest relies on darker shades of blue to reflect the themes of loss, sadness, and coldness.



Figure 13: Illustration of the forest level. Artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

Lastly, positive transformation, which represents one of the design pillars of *Swan Song*, also relates to the art of this adventure game. Changes in tone or emotion are expressed on the visual level, too. An example of this is the forest guardian, who radiates coldness until Sol manages to touch her:



Figure 14: Sol's mother before and after the transformation. Artwork by Vanessa Ptak.

10. Positioning in Media and Game Studies

Swan Song follows a modern trend of games that focus on issues of mental health. The platformer *Gris* (2018), which deals with the stages of grief, or *Sea of Solitude* (2019), an adventure about depression, are examples of this category.

More specifically, our game concentrates on youth suicide. Other games that portray suicidality include *Actual Sunlight* (2014), *Life is Strange* (2015), and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017).

Swan Song differs from these depictions in the perspective it offers on suicide: instead of preventing the self-killing of an NPC or experiencing the inevitable self-inflicted death of the playable character, the gameplay begins after the suicide attempt of the protagonist. By confronting Sol's traumata in her subconsciousness, the player helps her find out what it is worth staying alive for. Thus, *Swan Song* is a story of overcoming suicidal impulses that almost led to the protagonist's death in the past.

In terms of the gameplay, we rely on the same approach as, for instance, *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (2013) or *It Takes Two* (2021). These games create strong variation during the play experience by constantly introducing new mechanics that only exist within one level. As such, there is no uniform gameplay loop. Instead, the mechanics shift all the time to match the current moment in the storyline.

11. Project Team

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Statement on Collaboration

The content of the project and documentation was created in collaboration with Su-Jin Song and Vanessa Ptak. The story and game design work was shared between Su-Jin and myself. Vanessa was responsible for the concept art of the characters and environments of Swan Song. The exact contributions of each team member have been outlined in the project documentation.

Lars Kalthoff

Bochum, 04.01.2022