

## WORKING CLASS HEROES:

### *Post-Mortem of a Historical Narrative Game*

#### Mounting Apprehension, the Big Reveal, and the Ensuing Chaos

Normally, the biggest constraint we have when coming up with a game concept is merely the theme of the current semester, and that usually gives us enough wiggle-room to do almost anything we like. However, this year it was different: it was the first time we had an actual client with very specific topics and aims for us. I remember us all anxiously awaiting our topic reveal on our Discord server while our client, Marie-Paul Yungblut, struggled to screenshare on her MacBook. Then the theme was finally revealed: a digital adaptation of a museum exhibition about three workers' rights politicians from the early 20th century.

Needless to say, we were all very clueless and panicking at first about what we could possibly do with this theme, and were struggling to find where the "video game" part would come into play (this will be relevant throughout our project). We were also very confused about the exact demands and objective of this project. Initially we thought it was an adaption of the exhibition but then we realised we were supposed to bring a new perspective and create a different experience, but based on the same material.



## A Game Concept Emerges

However, our anxieties were misguided. Soon after, we had a meeting with our client and received a lot of material from the museum in the form of several prodigious Google Drive archives, filled with hundreds of historic photos from all facets of life during that time period. Inspired by this, we quickly had the idea about creating a "photo album come to life", where you can flip through several real historic photos and get transported into the real scene when you click on one. There, you would be able to talk to each character, experience immersive ambient sound effects, and initially mini-games were also planned.

After some clarification with our client, we started to better understand our requirements. Marie-Paul wanted our game to be playable in a classroom setting by teenagers/young adults, with the main aim of teaching them that people had to fight for the rights we have today, and make them appreciate these historical figures. We explained to her the Photo Album concept we had in mind, and she was totally on board; that was encouraging and made us more excited to keep going!

## Lady Youngblood's "Comic Book"



From a narrative and game design side, we all agreed that the story would work best if we focused on showing the everyday life of these workers, in an immersive and personal manner that allows players to empathise with them, instead of just narrating it or explicitly pointing out everything they did. We believed it would be more interesting if all the dialogue was natural and came directly from the characters, without relying on any forced expositional dialogue.

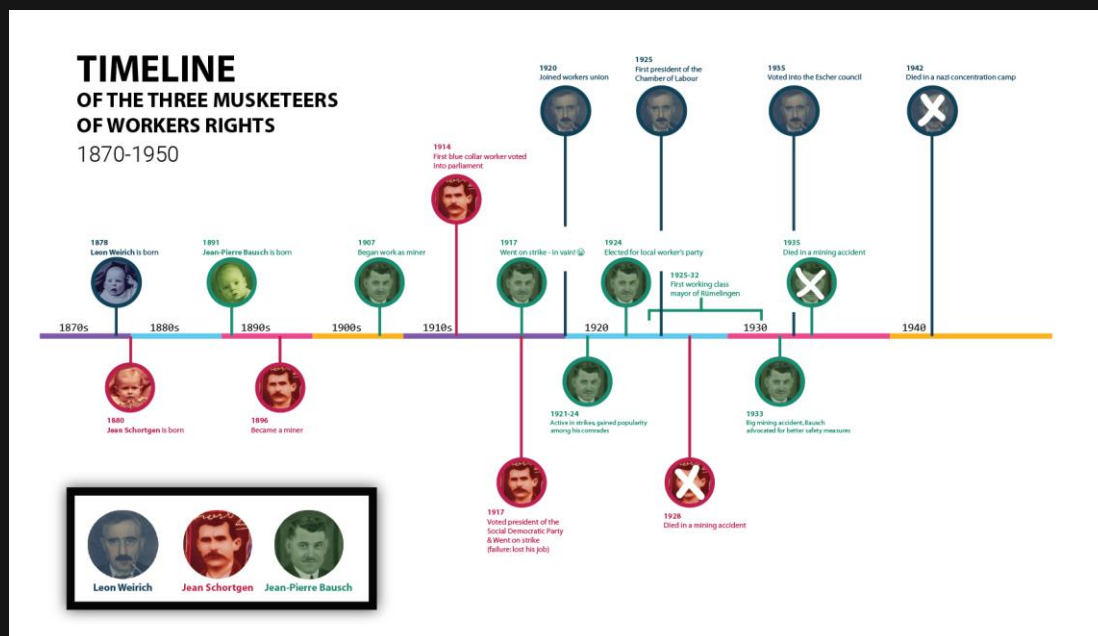
Players would gradually pick up key information about the three working class heroes, as well as their personality and mannerisms, and subconsciously build their own mental picture about them in a way that makes them feel relatable and real.

A big question we kept receiving from our client was "what motivates me to keep going playing and go to the next scene?". It would have been easy to use cheap game-y tactics like item rewards, experience points, or a score system of some kind. However, Sarah, Ziad, and I concluded that for a narrative game, especially one with an educational impact in mind, the story itself should do the heavy lifting; it should be intrinsically interesting, in order to motivate players into finding out more and being attentive. We figured if there were game-y rewards or mini-games after each scene, then players, particularly in a classroom, would just skip all the dialogue and only care about the mini-games. This did create a high bar for our future writing, but I was personally very confident that we would achieve it. It was challenging trying to explain this concept to our client, though, who kept referring to our game as a "comic book".

## Writing The Narrative

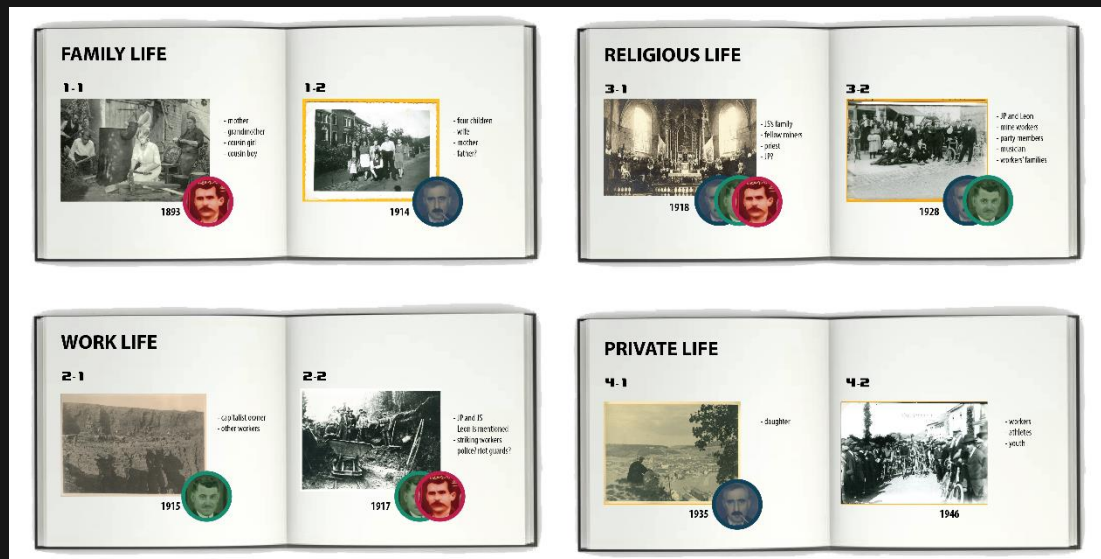
### Research, Research, More Research

As for actually writing the story and the dialogue, that would still be some time into the future. Before any of that could happen, we had to process and digest the information given to us by the museum. This was made extra challenging by the fact that all the information was either in German or French, which only three members of our group spoke. Sarah, Ziad, and Kevin had to translate the biographies of each of the three politicians into English before anything else could be done. During this time there wasn't really much for me to do until they finished that task. Having that completed, each one of us designers made a timeline of events: highlighting the key points and achievements of the three heroes, based on their biographies. We then compared our different timelines to see what elements stood out to us the most. This was to see what their main achievements were, and where they all lined up and met together, so that we could have an easy overview of their lives and craft a story around that. My timeline visualisation was made in Illustrator and is viewable here:



In the meantime, our two artists, Luliia and Kevin, had combed through all the photos in the museum's archive and selected the ones they thought were most striking and suitable for creating scenes. From this curated selection, and with the timeline in mind, Sarah, Ziad, and I got together and chose eight final photos to be used as the in-game scenes. Again, we split up and individually made a list of all the characters we felt

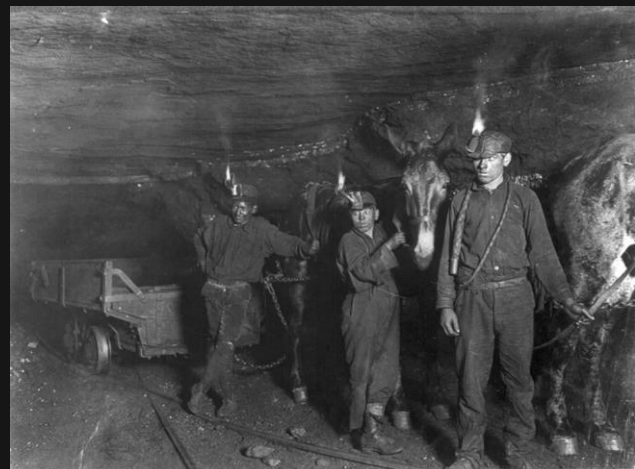
should appear in each of the finalised scenes. This idea of us designers splitting up to make some concepts and then getting together to compare our work and create a unified concept from all the best parts was a recurring theme throughout this project; one that I believe worked quite well for us. After a designer meeting, we came up with a list of characters for each scene.



## Of Mules And Men

Next step on the designer roadmap was creating plot outlines for each scene. Now that we had the photos and the characters, what would we make them talk about? What information, thoughts, and feelings would they convey? That was what we focused on here. This is where task separation started to come into play, as we divided the eight scenes across the three of us: there are four chapters (aka albums) in our story, so we assigned one to each of us, plus the second album. We figured it would be good if we all did plot lines for this same album so that we could, again, compare our ideas and make sure we had a consistent style and tone.

I did a fair bit of research here, looking into the lives of miners in the early 20th century, to immerse myself in their daily struggles and their outlook on life. I found a great article about "mine wars" in America during the 1920s that really inspired me and stuck with me; in particular, this quote that I also used in our game: "If you got a mule killed in the mines and you were in charge, you could lose your job over it. If you got a man killed, he could be replaced."

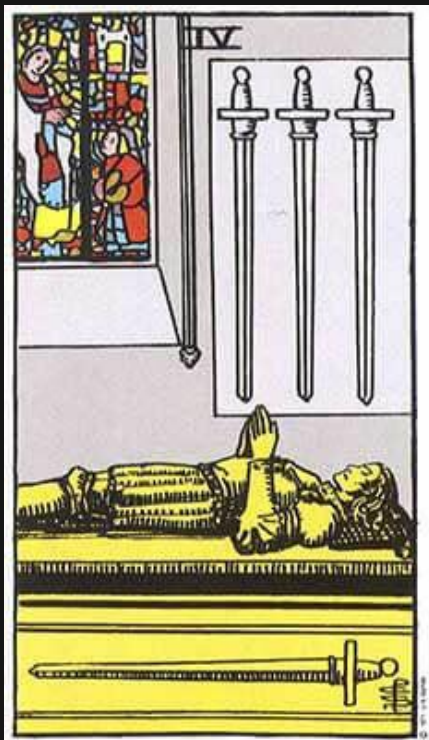


## The Dastardly Duo

It came time to compare our outlines, as was tradition, except this time it was only two of us. Ziad unfortunately fell ill, so his scenes weren't part of our comparison. Sarah and I took the reins for that meeting and gave each other feedback to adjust our scenes and make sure we weren't unintentionally repeating topics. The two of us agreed on the general flow for our part of the story and decided to split the second album between us for the final writing task, since Ziad wasn't present. An important element we finally figured out at this meeting was the role of the player. We hadn't really discussed it much before, and assumed the player would be some disembodied outsiders observing the scene. But after thinking about how we'd write the scenes that way, it just didn't make sense for the player character to be fully detached from the scene. Therefore, Sarah and I agreed that the player should embody one of the characters present in each photo, to be able to naturally talk to other characters and overhear conversations. Next, we went over each photo and chose a person to represent each character and the player.

The following meeting with all the designers was basically a re-run, as Sarah and I walked Ziad through all the things we had decided upon and which he would have to begrudgingly agree to after some friendly discussions :). We were now about three weeks from the Final Presentation, and finally committed to writing one full scene's script and meeting in a week to give each other feedback and get the train rolling.

## The Four of Swords



Alas, it was not meant to be! Both Sarah and me became ill for a few days, just as Ziad was recovering, so we had to postpone that meeting indefinitely. I still managed to write my full script for scene 3-1 and post it on our Discord between stomach pangs. Communication and feedback broke down here, and it really threw us off. Unlike the previous stages where we gave ourselves constant feedback, we were now writing our scripts "in the dark", without comparing with each other. This is why our scenes vary so much in tone and length.

In the meantime, Ziad had a meeting with the artists and the programmer where they settled on polishing only 4/8 scenes, but forgot to share which scenes with me and Sarah. This added even more to the confusion and chaos of the final weeks, as I had spent my time writing a script for a scene that wouldn't even be polished.



Regardless, I was able to write the entire scripts for all three of my scenes on time and I'm very happy with how they turned out. They are available here in PDF format: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1yMWaW0x5pIG0axt0q32SB5HNjL-BsMgL?usp=sharing>

## The First Meeting

The final stage for us designers was implementing our dialogue into the Unity scenes using YarnSpinner, alongside creating a matching soundscape. Sarah and I met up to work together on this, and it proved extremely fruitful and productive! We made immersive realistic soundscapes with Ambient Mixer, using a mix of constant looping audio, dynamic randomly-timed sound effects, and stereo panning. Working together in person made everything go super smoothly, and by the end of the day we had all our scenes fully implemented with dialogue and audio.



**That's it for my part as game designer!**

## Conclusion

I really enjoyed working with this team! Everyone pulled through and did their share, and besides that brutal hiccup, we were in constant communication, and everyone was supportive with each other. We had some arguments, but it was all in good faith and we always ensured everyone was on the same page :). However, we lost some time due to all the translations, and I feel we took things too slowly until mid-way through the project. I wish we had met up in person more (than once), as it would have negated many discord/internet issues, would have made it easier to share feedback, and generally would have been more productive. Our client was also very helpful, somewhat communicative, and let us do our own thing, despite not grasping the appeal of a narrative game. Overall, I believe we made an interesting prototype given the topic, with beautiful art and an immersive story.

Cheers everyone!

