



A Game Design Doc

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Document made for ARLH 376: Historical Virtual Environments

Twine Game made for DWRI 355: Spectrum of Storytelling

DISCLAIMER: No gen AI was used. Just our silly little brains.

Genre: mystery/horror

Execution: first person visual novel

Audience: horror and visual novel fans that are 15+, with elements to entice LGBT people and their allies

Engine: Unity/Unreal (3D environment, 2D characters/objects)

Summary: *Doll Strings* is a first-person visual novel inspired by games like *Ace Attorney*, the *Persona* series, and *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. The player is an amnesiac, customizable avatar who must figure out the circumstances of the place and time they've woken up, form relationships with the people who live there, and ultimately seal their own fate as they come to terms with the reason they became an amnesiac.

## Characters

Protagonist: The owner of the mansion. Their pronouns, name, hair and eye color can be customized. Third generation of owners, they had been obsessed with the otherworld and spirits. After the death of one of their friends from the plague, they successfully bind the soul of their friend to a wooden doll. From that success, they spiral and become obsessed with immunity and immortality from the plague. After becoming an amnesiac, the obsessions dial down to curiosity, and they become kinder and more self-aware. They had an older sister and a dad. Their mom is still alive but not present at the mansion.

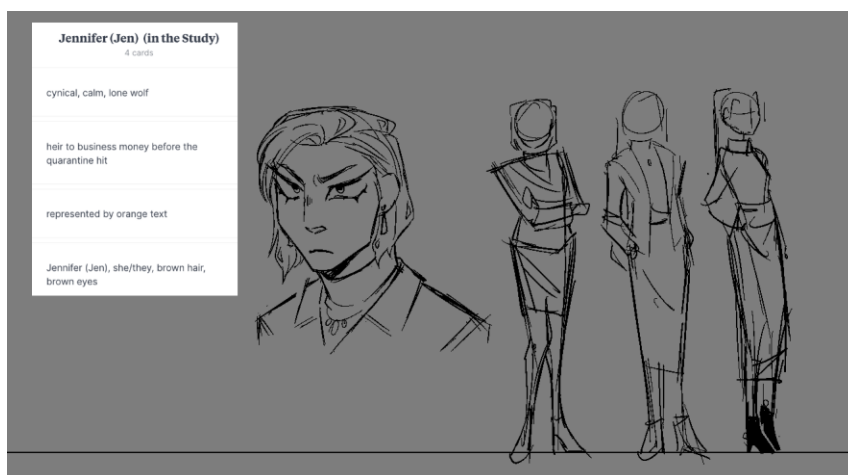
The avatar has a default name and appearance. It is **Tyr, they/them, black hair and green eyes**. This will be used to refer to the player and their actions throughout the document.

Almos: they/them, silver hair, black eyes. A chipper individual who was the first person to see Tyr upon waking up. No one else comments on their presence in the mansion. Acts as a guide for the player (think Tatl from *Majora's Mask*) until revealing their true identity: Tyr, pre-memory wipe. They transform into Tyr's appearance, reveal story information, and then disappear forever since they're only a cognition of Tyr's mind.

Morgan: they/them, blonde hair, gray eyes. Morgan is the family-hired detective. Intelligent, quirky, and acts like a gentleman, from the American South. They were very close with Tyr's dad before he passed.



Jen: she/they, brown hair, brown eyes. Jennifer (Jen) was the best friend of Tyr's older sister. When the sister died because of the infection, Jen was heartbroken. She threw herself into her business, trying to make something from all the destruction the plague that is ravaging the land.



Eric: he/him, brown hair, piercing blue eyes. Before the game, he had approached Tyr to willingly become a doll to achieve immortality. Eric and Tyr's dads were family friends, so the two of them were forced into a cordial relationship.



Midori: she/her, blonde hair, brown eyes. One of the few remaining servants in the mansion. She's a bit timid but very dedicated to her work. However, she is becoming a bit stir-crazy and bored with the consistent monotony from being ordered around.



Duncan: he/they, black hair, blue eyes. Tyr's former best friend. Constantly wearing a plague doctor mask. While he wants the best for humanity, they're a little paranoid about the whole infection thing. He keeps his distance from everyone but is secretly working to find a cure for the plague.

Tiffany: she/her, gray eyes, ginger hair. The first friend to be turned into a doll. She's sweet, hopeful, but a bit ditzy. She had initially gotten sick and died from the plague before Tyr was able to revive her, so her memory is also a bit splotchy.



## Storyline

Regarding the Plague:

The disease that is running rampant during the game is unnamed, commonly referred to as “The Disease”, “The Infection” or “The Plague” by the other characters. It acts very similarly to The Black Plague, but it’s main symptom is the infected teeth turning an unnatural shade of blue. While a gradual process, it’s surmised to be irreversible, and once a tooth is fully blue, death follows soon after. It's assumed that the plague is airborne, so the way to stop the disease from spreading is through the quarantine of infected parties.

Regarding the Otherworld:

The *Doll Strings* Otherworld is the place where spirits go upon passing away, but also where they come from when new life is created. The cosmic forces of life and death are the ones who assist these spirits with crossing between these barriers. These two forces have noticed Tyr’s meddling with the order of the world, but have chosen not to punish them, as their rituals are contained and limiting. At least, for now. If they step out of their bounds even more, the forces will have to act on this threat to their very reason to exist.

## Backstory

A few weeks into the quarantine, Tiffany is infected with the disease. The group places Tiffany into quarantine. Most of the house's guests remain uninfected, but Tiffany and the servants attending her all pass away from the infection. Tyr is overwhelmed with grief, and unable to really do anything else, pours their remaining energy into otherworldly research, especially into spirits and souls.

Tyr makes a research breakthrough in the terms of soul transplants. They build a machine to accomplish this. After experimenting on rats and other small animals (most notably, transplanting a rat's soul into a rabbit) they build a wooden doll with the same dimensions as Tiffany. After upscaling the machine they built, Tyr is able to attempt to bond Tiffany's soul onto this wooden doll.

And it works.

Tiffany wakes up confused, but after Tyr explains the situation, she is half appreciative, half a bit freaked out (I'm wooden now?). She doesn't remember dying from the plague, just catching it and being quarantined. Tiffany asks if they can go back out into the world, and why Tyr is initially ok with this, they quickly learn that she cannot. When she tries to leave, she physically cannot walk out of the mansion. Tiffany is a bit disheartened but takes it in as much stride as she can. Eventually, the rest of the house guests all re-meet Tiffany, and have varying reactions, ranging from "oh neat," to "what the actual %&\$#?"

After a couple days pass, Eric approaches Tyr and asks if he can be put into a doll. Tyr is a bit caught off guard but says "sure whatever ya want man." Eric and Tyr work together to create Eric's dolls, as well as making the machine more streamlined and efficient. Once everything's ready, there's the matter of getting Eric's spirit. He ends up poisoning himself and passing away, which allows Tyr to quickly bind Eric to his doll.

Through this process, Tyr's mind breaks. They realize that they can make dolls of their friends and transfer their souls into them, making all their beloved ones functionally immortal. Tyr begins to create dolls of all of their friends, killing their friends, and transmuting the souls into the made dolls. One by one, everyone is transformed. The last person to be turned is Duncan, who confronts Tyr. Tyr shows him the hidden lab next to their room and attempts to convince them that this is a good idea. Duncan is not convinced, and Tyr leaves him in the lab, disappointed. Tyr then remembers what happened to Tiffany, and her jumbled memory. Redetermined, they rush back down to the lab, kill their best friend, and transplant him into the last doll body. Upon waking up, Duncan is absolutely furious. This gets

to Tyr, and they finally realize what they had done. In their distraught guilt, Tyr uses part of the machine they built to wipe their own memories of the lab, their actions, and essentially makes them forget that their friends are dolls. They fall unconscious upon this process being completed. Duncan takes Tyr's unconscious body up to their bedroom and shuts + locks the lab door.

### **Act 1: Everything's Normal**

Tyr wakes up to Almos, the friend who had found them unconscious on the floor. Through Almos, they quickly realize that they are now an amnesiac and begin exploring the new-for-them mansion. This section is mostly gameplay, as both the player and the avatar are equal in terms of their knowledge of what's going on. They meet a bunch of the cast, and get initial impressions of the characters. Some are amicable to Tyr's amnesia; some could give zero shits. After various player interactions, Tiffany appears, stating that they heard about Tyr's amnesia. After confirming it for herself, she seems a bit saddened, stating that they were the one who cured her, sending Tyr into confusion.

### **Act 2: Something's Up, Isn't It?**

The player continues to interact with the characters, both deepening their relationships as well as learning more about this world, in particular quirks about the otherworld and the plague, particularly the symptom of blue teeth. They also attempt to sort out some of their memories and learn that what they remember isn't necessarily what happened.

The final person Tyr will talk with in this act is Duncan, who (no matter the player's standing with him) will argue with Tyr. Tyr will end up storming off into their room and notice a locked door that they didn't see beforehand. Through some more gameplay, the player locates a key and unlocks the door in their bedroom. Through this door is the lab. The machine (in a state of disrepair), all of the strewn-about doll parts, and most of all, the only mirror to be present within the mansion. Upon seeing their reflection, they realize that they look vastly different from the other denizens of the mansion. This causes their buried memories to resurface, and they remember everything they had done.

That's when Almos appears, revealing that they were the pre-amnesiac Tyr, and after a long talk, they state "what happens next is up to you." Almos then disappears, never to be seen again.

### Act 3: Ohhhhh #\*\$&

Upon Almos's disappearance, the player is truly left on their own. The big question they must answer is "what do I do now?" The player may work towards any unblocked endings that they have access to. They may achieve these endings and end the game at any point within the third act. The tone of the NPCs shifts dramatically, as they all realize that Tyr has regained their memories. Most of the NPCs tell Tyr to stay with them, that it's not safe outside still, and many more reasons to stay.

#### Potential Endings:

**Remain:** The player chooses to remain in the mansion. This is the default ending, if the player cannot achieve any of the other three endings, or the game detects that it has ran through all the Act 3 story events. Upon deciding to remain in the mansion with everyone, the group gets a picture taken by Midori. The player is shown the picture, and they see that the avatar's front teeth are starting to turn blue.

**Leave:** The player chooses to leave the mansion. This requires a positive relationship with Duncan by the end of Act 2 and is the easiest of the three alternate endings to achieve.

Tyr ends up leaving the mansion by themselves, and upon walking down the road from the house, they find an old flyer. It talks about a cure to the plague being found, and to report to a clinic to get vaccinated/treated for the disease. As the camera pans back to the mansion, all of the dolls are shown lying lifeless in the various rooms of the mansion. The last doll the player sees is Duncan, who has a content smile on their face.

**Insane:** If the player has a high enough Attention stat, when Almos attempts to disappear, the process will fail, and Almos remains with the player. From this point, the player may follow certain steps to attempt to turn Almos into a doll, including building a new doll and repairing the machine.

As Tyr places themselves into the machine and has the main syphon device pointed right where Almos currently resides, they flick the machine on. Everything goes black for a few seconds until Tyr opens their eyes, staring at their own body, frozen in stasis within the machine. Almos appears, and simply says "What have you done now?"

**Ritual:** The player can attempt to reverse the ritual that was performed on the dolls to turn them back into humans. This requires a positive relationship with Eric and Jen, as well as a negative relationship with Duncan. A story event will unlock, as Jennifer speaks with Tyr about potentially reversing the effects of the dolls, as they think enough time has passed to where the plague is no longer a threat. The player can work together with both Eric and Jen, and after stopping a sabotage from Duncan, they will go through with the reversal ritual.

Surely, reviving the dead has gone well for anyone.

Really, it's a wonder it got *this far*.

As the group goes to activate the machine, Tyr and the machine are whisked away in a flash of light. The two forces of life and death completely wipe Tyr's memory of their research and drop them into the middle of a field. Tyr finds a nearby pond and upon looking at it, realizes they've been infected. With them being so far from society, there's no hope for their survival. It's not seen, but the dolls meet the same fate as the Leave ending.

## Gameplay Mechanics

There are 4 standout gameplay mechanics in *Doll Strings*:

Story Events: scripted events that occur semi-randomly throughout the game. These are multi-character interactions, minigames, and other events that progress time within the game. Their timing is somewhat random. In general, each act's story events will take up to about 3 hours per act. When the game detects all story events for one act are cleared, then the events that transition the player in between acts will occur.

- If the game detects all Act 1 events have been triggered, the player will meet Tiffany, prompting Act 2 to begin.
- If the game detects that all Act 2 story events have been triggered, the next event will be Duncan's argument.
- If the game detects that all story events have been triggered, the "Remain" ending will occur.

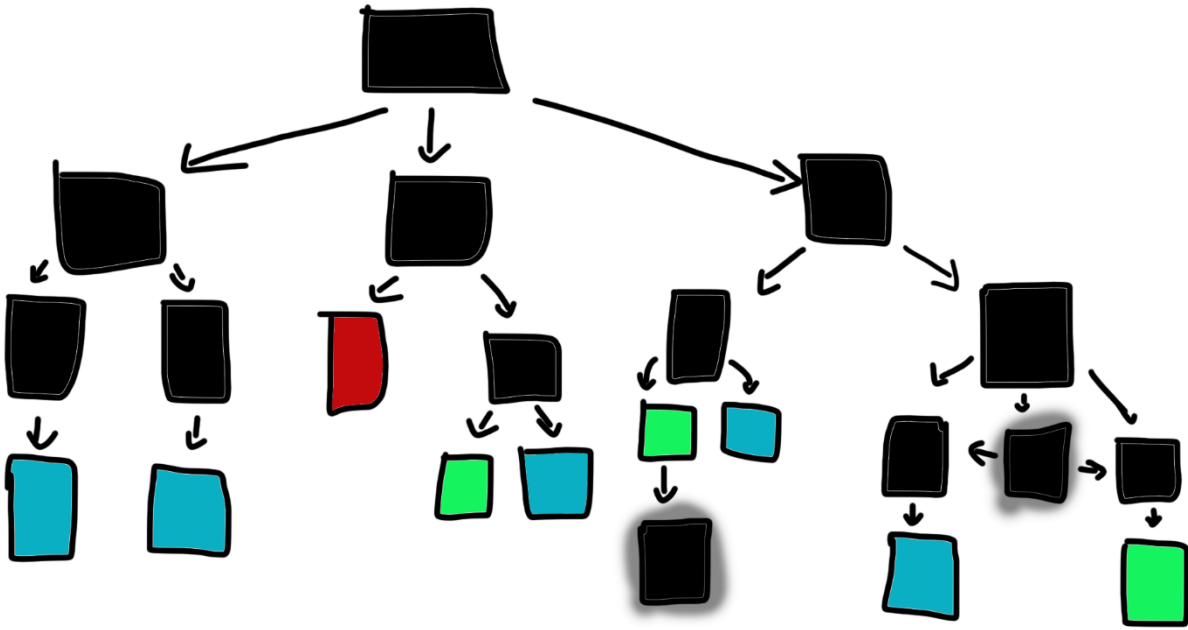
Upon completing these story events, the player can influence their relationship with NPCs, gain unique items that can unlock more dialogue branches, and even items that are required for certain endings.

Environmental Interaction - there will be a variety of objects that the player can interact with. Some objects will just lead to commentary from Tyr, some will be pickups that are tracked, some will lead to conversation topics with NPCs, and some will result in Almos saying something about them. In each room, about 75% of objects will have some sort of interaction to them, rewarding players for being curious and looking through every nook and cranny.

Almos Attention - a hidden stat tracked by the game. As the player interacts with the world and talks to characters, Almos will sometimes pop up with a comment. If the player chooses to respond to Almos, characters will take notice about them “mumbling to themselves” or mentioning that they don’t know who this “Almos” person is. If this is done enough, then Almos will not disappear upon the completion of Act 2, allowing the player to achieve the Insane ending.

Character Relationships - As the player interacts with different characters, certain dialogue routes will increase or decrease the player's relationship with said character. As the game progresses and those other characters begin interacting, the player will have certain dialogue options open to them depending on their relationship with the characters. Some routes may even let the player play simple minigames or give extra items to progress towards a specific ending.

Example Dialogue Tree:



The dialogue tree above is a simpler example of one that the player may come across. The blue blocks are neutral endings to the dialogue, green is positive, red is negative. The blocks with the gray underneath them are blocks that affect the Almos Attention stat.

### Environment

The Victorian Mansion was first owned by Tyr's grandparents, then passed to their father, then passed to Tyr upon their father's passing. Tyr now resides in the place along with many of their friends and servants. While it was built with the traditions of the era in mind, Tyr and their friends have ignored some of those traditions, and all different kinds of people can be found in both the men and women's wings. The place has been on lockdown since the plague hit, and no one has been allowed in or out of the mansion. They still have an outdoor space with the courtyard, but other than newspapers (which stopped showing up months ago) the place has had no contact with the outside world. Most notably, the mansion has no mirrors anywhere, the only mirror is present in Tyr's lab. Some inspirations in terms of visual style can be found in the following 3 images.



Figure 1: Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*, The winter garden at Somerleyton Hall

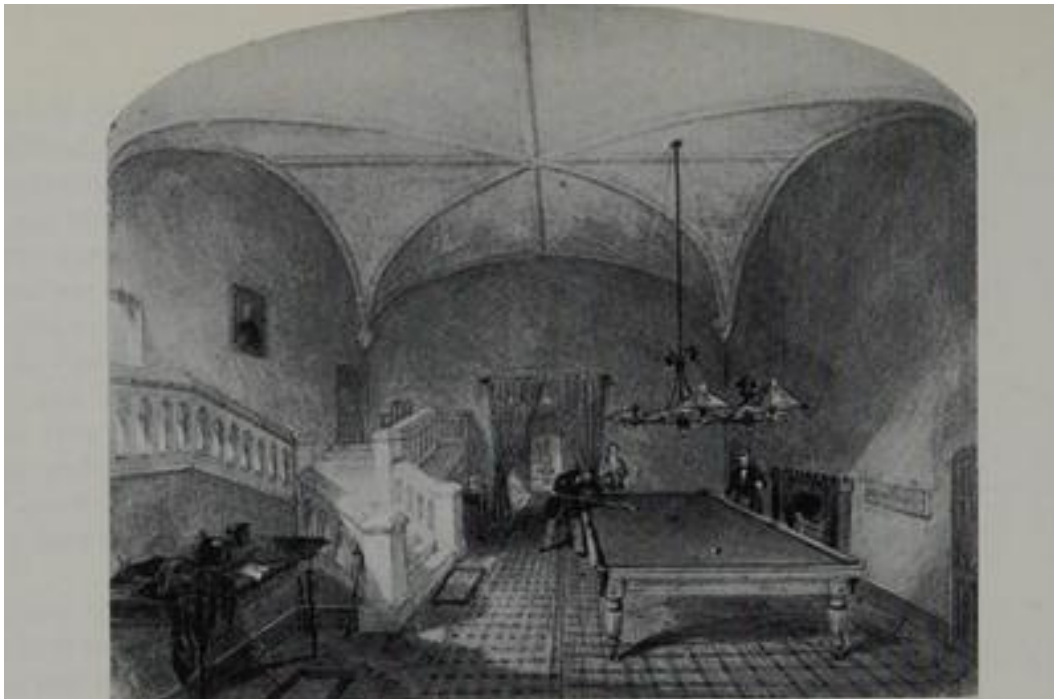
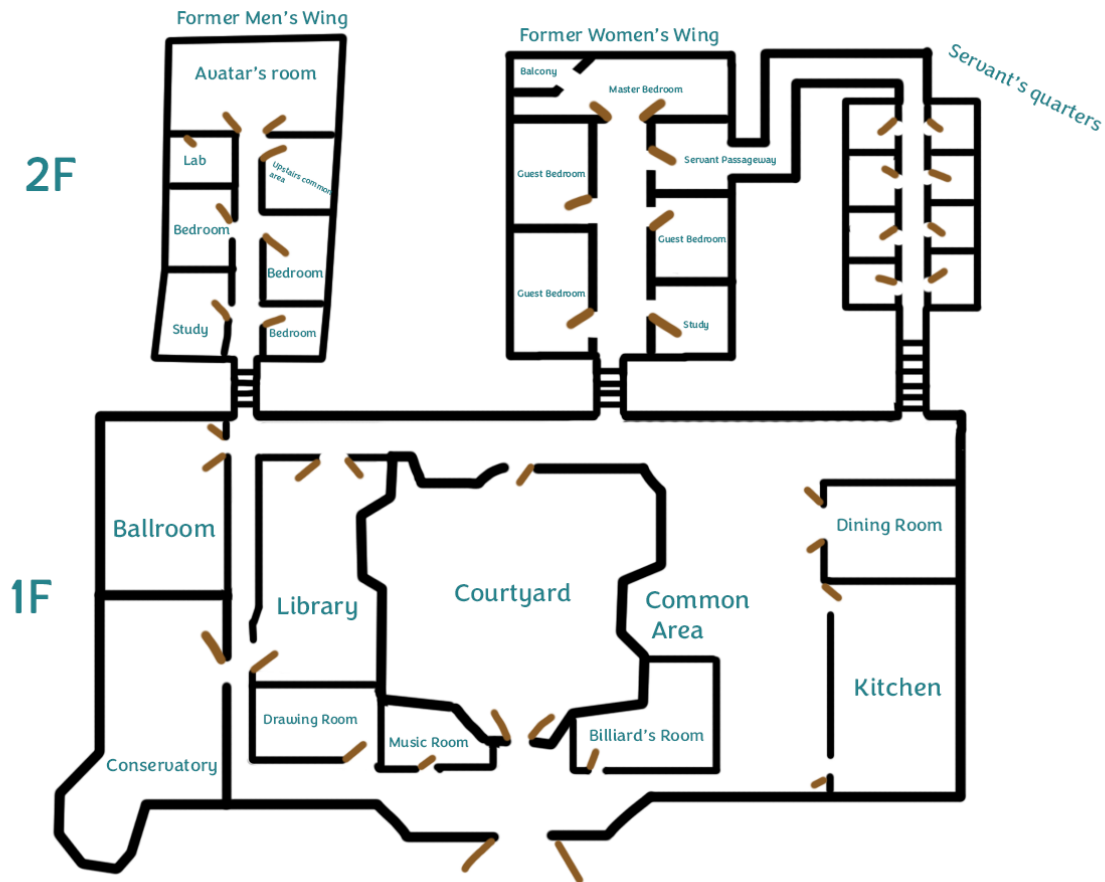


Figure 2: Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*, Billiards in the hall at Lismore Castle



Figure 3: Johnson, *Knives Out*, The Thrombley's mansion (specifically, the library)

## Level Map:



This is the mansion that Tyr and friends live in during the events of *Doll Strings*. While on the map the former men's and women's wings have been denoted, the characters in the game typically refer to those wings as the "West" and "East" wings.

**Player Interaction in Map:** Within all the named areas will be several items for the player to interact with, from pickups to characters. *Doll Strings* will allow the player to walk around in first person through 2.5D environments. They can enter/exit rooms freely, as the mansion is one map. Some events will be locked due to story, mainly the lab (locked until the end of Act 2) and the front of the mansion (locked until Leave ending requirements are met)

## Audio

Music: In the first and second acts of the game, the game uses both upbeat and regal tunes to set the tone of the house and the unassuming nature of the first part of the game. Once the more horrific elements begin to show themselves, the music will transition with it, becoming lower and filled with despair.

Some example tracks that fit the vibe desired for the game are found below:

[Noble Waltz](#) from Tyrion Cuthbert: Attorney of the Arcane

[Glitch City](#), a bonus track from Va-11 Hall-A

[Last Day](#) from The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask

Sound Effects: sound effects found in the game include once from doors, picking up objects, and talking with characters. Depending on scope of the project, characters could either be just sfx playing as their dialogue appears, or fully voice-acted.

Player Interaction with Sounds: Player interactions will have sound, and sound will assist with reinforcing the current theme of the game as well as give the player affirmation of actions and awareness of their surroundings.

Sources:

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Johnson, Rian, dir. 2019. *Knives Out*.