

WINDMILL

A GAME

OF

FORKING

PATHS

MORGAN

RICE

This project is an experiment in game design; *Xanadu: A Game of Forking Paths* is my attempt to create an arena in which to explore the potential for collective storytelling within tabletop roleplay games. Developing this exhibition has been my opportunity to creatively respond to what I learned in the process of writing the game, and has given me a chance to explore artistic media that I usually don't consider part of "my practice," such as site-specific installation and set construction. My goal with the exhibition is to contextualize the game's narrative universe through atmospheric design and thematic breadcrumbs.

The main artistic medium of this multimedia project is, arguably, its research and composition. Creatively, it was often a process of brainstorming with myself and, across space and time, with the other authors and works of art who helped me realize this work. To convey this experience visually, I have tried to show the project's temporality from research notes and concept sketches, to the finished handbook and gallery exhibition. The wall-papered walkway at the start of the exhibition therefore also functions as one of the first thematic breadcrumbs: in the game's universe, time is nonlinear and defined by memory, which often communicates in notes and concept sketches and does not always abide by linear trajectories. The pathway into the exhibition is lined with the memories of its creation.

Writing the game, I went through dozens of false starts in devising a narrative pathway that would dispense information to players like a movie, as if they were strapped into the CGI roller coaster in those movie theater concessions ads. I found quickly that, for this to work as a game, it would rely on players consistently making the same decisions I would make in the scenarios I wrote, which was, hilariously, virtually never the case. At first, I responded by constraining players' choices even more, tightening the narrative around them so they'd be forced to respond

the way I wanted them to. At some point, it became clear that this approach was antithetical to the project's core philosophies around collective storytelling. This was when I started to think about how to set up a narrative configuration that would bring the players (and the characters) in on the composition process itself, while still supporting them within a playful framework of facilitation. The ultimate format for the game's mechanics came about as an experiment in elevating the narrative autonomy of player-characters.

To accomplish this, I embraced the storytelling convention of "place-as-character," which pervades many genres of storytelling including Gothic literature and science fiction but originates, of course, in Indigenous ways of knowing. In this way, players have opportunities to actually inhabit the "subject positions" of their surroundings, making decisions as the sentient labyrinth walls or the mysterious forest in which their characters find themselves. These built-in perspective shifts are designed to expand the potential for in-game world-building, while also allowing for individual character development through improvisational storytelling.

The thrust of gameplay is determined by word-association and literary references: players make progress by discovering fragments of passages from lost books that had been destroyed by a cabal of monsters called the Consortium. Similar to a game of "Password," players draw a card with a word on it, and if they can get the other players to guess the correct word without actually saying it to them, then the team is able to recover the completed paragraph. Paragraphs are derived from the books used in the research for this project, and the passages referenced are chosen to specifically allude to primary themes in the game such as performance, spectacle, memory, time, fascism, mutual aid, and the internet.

ON “XANADU”

“Xanadu” refers to the setting in which players encounter the Consortium, and is essentially a cyber-fascist corporate carnival-casino/mega-prison. For me, it is the culmination of the research that papers the walkway. It was only after Xanadu had congealed that I began formulating the actual mechanics for the game as it exists today.

My first exposure to a place called Xanadu was via Orson Welles’ 1941 film, *Citizen Kane*, in which “Xanadu” is the name of the protagonist’s lavish Florida estate. The film concerns newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane, a fictionalized version of the non-fictional media tycoon, William Randolph Hearst. We follow Kane’s rise and fall, not monetarily but spiritually; he is increasingly wealthy, and his wealth works as a corrosive agent on his relationships and sense of self, reinforcing the inexorable spiritual decay of capitalism. *Citizen Kane* is widely regarded as an extraordinary film, and is a movie I adore. Visually, its frames were instrumental in my learning to draw, and showed me electrifying possibilities for making a narrative with angle, light, and shadow. At some point in my hyperfixation, I started looking into Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, *Kubla Khan*, trying to decode the following line from an early newsreel sequence in the movie:

*Legendary was the Xanadu where Kubla
Kahn decreed his stately pleasure dome -
“Where twice five miles of fertile ground, with
walls and towers were girdled ‘round.” Today,
almost as legendary is Florida’s XANADU
- world’s largest private pleasure ground.
Here, on the deserts of the Gulf Coast,
a private mountain was commissioned,*

successfully built for its landlord. Here in a private valley, as in the Coleridge poem, “blossoms many an incense-bearing tree.” Verily, “a miracle of rare device.”

Coleridge’s poem, composed in 1797, was written in an opium-induced haze upon waking from a dream about Shangdu, the summer capital of China’s Yuan dynasty and its Emperor Kublai Khan; this is explicitly included in Coleridge’s preface to the work, and alluded to in its subtitle, “*Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.*” It is incomplete, because Coleridge was interrupted while writing down his dream, causing him to forget the rest. The substance of the poem describes an imperial “pleasure dome,” suggesting the violence wrought by illusory wealth and the peril of surrounding oneself with those illusions.

Citizen Kane led me to Coleridge like a stepping stone, so when a few years later I read Italo Calvino’s 1971 novel, *Invisible Cities*, it felt like I already had the ciphers for interpreting it. *Invisible Cities* is a book of prose poems arranged structurally like the architecture of an M.C. Escher print, meditating on the ways in which cities are reflections of the human mind. The chapters are delivered through fictionalized letters between non-fictional historical figures: European explorer Marco Polo and thirteenth century Emperor, Kublai Khan, known for formalizing a militarily and conceptually unified “China” as its first non-Han Emperor; he was the first Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty.

In my mind’s eye, the Kublai Khan of Calvino reads Marco Polo’s letters from beside a giant fireplace in a Florida mansion, which itself resides inside a kind of mythical bell-jar-terrarium: *Citizen Kane* situated within Coleridge’s dream. Something about this combination of preformed imagery felt

intuitively aligned with Calvino's opening passage in *Invisible Cities*:

In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing and understanding them. There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening... a dizziness that makes rivers and mountains tremble on the fallow curves of the planispheres where they are portrayed, and rolls up, one after the other, the despatches announcing to us the collapse of the last enemy troops, from defeat to defeat, and flakes the wax of the seals of obscure kings who beseech our armies' protection, offering in exchange annual tributes of precious metals, tanned hides, and tortoise shell. It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which has seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing.

To me, this passage could be read in Joseph Cotten's voice, Jedediah Leland musing about his storied friend and colleague, while the camera pans slowly over a black-and-white graveyard of meaningless riches. Reading it for the first time, I nodded along knowingly, already projecting onto it my preconceptions around "the emptiness of empire" and "capitalist decay." At the same time, the more antiquated and indeed ancient connections to Coleridge and the Chinese Yuan Dynasty lends Calvino's work a mythical air, which on top of its mathematical poeticism makes it feel like one of

those books that has somehow never not existed; to me, the book has the air of something mystical, like a magical map. Recursively, this mythical feeling reflected back again onto Citizen Kane, enhancing, despite the movie's specific internal timeline, its timelessness. The three stories braid together, overlapping and interchanging and beginning to form a higher-order version of themselves.

In the process of composing the in-game narrative for my thesis project, I had conceived of a nameless brutalist hellscape with which, using allegorical examples of real-world colonial and neoliberal policies, I wanted to explore the ideas that, 1) corporatism and fascism are the same thing, and 2) that this ideology can be strategically undermined through collaborative play, imagination, and informed silliness. I envisioned an open-air mega-prison that advertised itself as a luxury resort, centrally located in contrast to a vast wilderness, whose train systems and urban construction had come about through the destruction of an ancient place called the Labyrinth; I envisioned that getting there would entail a journey through a place defined by what was rejected and exiled to support the Consortium's illusions, in which players would befriend the denizens of the unknown, getting to know more about their characters as they went along. Then, when they arrive at the razor-wired fortress of the Consortium's territory, they would find that their journey through the unknown and their new rapport with the forces of non-normativity have in fact given them the exact tools they need to successfully navigate through the Consortium's traps. I don't remember exactly when the name Xanadu came to me, but when it did it had that same mythical feeling of never having not been the name of this place.

For me, because of this Kane-Coleridge-Calvino braid, "Xanadu" is a concept unto itself, referring to the doomed and illusory notion of centralized power.



| ARCHETYPE | |
|-----------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Explorer/Drifter |
| 2 | Performer/Athlete |
| 3 | Artisan/Craftsman |
| 4 | Spiritualist/Mystic/Cleric |
| 5 | Trickster/Outlaw |
| 6 | Community Nexus |

| DESCRIPTOR | |
|------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Grumpy |
| 2 | Punk/nonconformist |
| 3 | Nurturing |
| 4 | Party animal |
| 5 | Thrill-seeker |
| 6 | Impossibly cheerful |
| 7 | Recklessly brave |
| 8 | Fanatic |
| 9 | No-nonsense |
| 10 | Lavishly self-indulgent |
| 11 | Sweetheart |
| 12 | Bossy/authoritative |

| TEXTURE | |
|---------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | Green thumb |
| 2 | Talent for stage magic |
| 3 | Combat experience |
| 4 | Complex family history |
| 5 | Musical proclivity |
| 6 | Interestingly-shaped scar |
| 7 | Excellent fashion sense |
| 8 | A love of the sea |
| 9 | A flair for the dramatic |
| 10 | A revoked medical license |
| 11 | Advanced culinary skills |
| 12 | A mysterious, unopened letter |

Explorer/Drifter

This is someone whose first love is the open road; they like and prefer to stay on the move, whether because of a drive to discover new things, a desire to escape their past, or simply an inner restlessness. Some in this archetype may be more focused on gathering new information and puzzling it together, and the nature of their work might require anonymity and relatively few personal connections; others are less concerned with what they find on their explorations and care more about the experience of the journey. Some examples of this archetype might include: traveling journalist, bounty hunter, wildlife photographer, RV-driving cross-country bound retiree, archaeologist, teen who spotted something suspicious in their neighborhood, or private eye, to name just a few.

Performer/Athlete

This is someone who enjoys using their body to create “live” entertainment, excitement, art, and/or spectacle. They appreciate being able to physically participate in schematics of play, whether that be team sports, stage acting, musical performance, or independent workout routines. They might be someone who craves widespread acclaim and attention for their performance abilities, or they could be more oriented toward the internal benefits or intellectual value of embodied activity. Sometimes, those in this archetype have a desire to “enhance” their body, which can be born of insecurity or feelings of inadequacy, and they might want to prove that they are not just talented but more talented than others. Or, they could simply have a deeply rooted love for the performance/sport, and may use this characteristic to build team cohesion. Some examples of this archetype: TV sports announcer, community theater actor, cheerleader, professional wrestler, figure skater, high school football coach, poet/rapper or contemporary dance choreographer, to name just a few.

Artisan/Craftsman

This is someone who enjoys using their body and imagination to create objects of beauty, utility, and/or pleasure (“objects” is a broad category and can include conceptual and written works). They enjoy seeing the material results of their ideas and labor, and may be driven towards constant refinement and skill acquisition. Some in this archetype may lean more towards the creative experimentation side of the spectrum, finding joy in artistic expression whether it yields a cohesive product or not; others dedicate themselves more actively to creating a final product that satisfies them. Some examples of this archetype: carpenter, photographer, graffiti artist, weaver, sculptor, short-story writer,

or animator, to name just a few.

Spiritualist/Mystic/Cleric

This is someone who is driven toward connection with some form of “the Divine.” They probably feel inspired by or called to some kind of ritual practice, whether that be organized religion or individual meditation, and they are moved by something beyond what one might call the earthly plane. This person is convinced that there are forces at play in the universe beyond the scope of human perception; they might feel so inspired that they want to share their beliefs with others, possibly in the form of a sermon, a written spiritual manifesto, or simply dispensing what they see as spiritual wisdom during conversation. Or, they could be more of an ascetic, preferring to deepen their relationship with their spirituality in solitude. Some examples of roles that might fit this category: Buddhist monk, Hasidic scholar, new age guru, herbalist, yoga instructor, cleric, missionary, or shaman, to name just a few.

Trickster/Outlaw

This is someone who is driven by a need for freedom from order or authority. They probably feel stifled when told what to do, and derive pleasure from introducing some degree of chaos or unpredictability to ordered systems. The “law” outside of which they live might refer to actual laws, or could have more to do with cultural expectation; they might dedicate themselves to a life of crime, or they could simply be known as a prankster, subversive, or saboteur. Some examples of this archetype could include bank robber, pick-pocket, drug dealer, embezzler, bootlegger, masked vigilante, hacktivist, sex worker, ecoterrorist, corporate saboteur, or hitman, to name just a few.

Community Nexus

This is someone who is moved to use their relational skills and connections with others to serve as a binding agent for their community. More than anything, they enjoy and gravitate toward planning/attending social events that allow them to engage with the groups of people they find meaningful in their life. This might look like a widely known socialite or networker, a community organizer, a politician, or it could simply mean that frequent family gatherings or regular routines with their friends are of utmost importance to them. Some other examples of this archetype could include soup kitchen volunteer, youth pastor, anarchist mutual aid organizer, housewife who hosts a book club, or old-fashioned bed-&-breakfast host, to name just a few.

