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Recombinant Play

A Dark Room is a browser-based web game developed by Doublespeak Games. Characterized by its minimalistic and unassuming presentation, some of its affordances to the player are as follows:

Firstly, the game establishes a relationship with the player using a minimalistic ASCII-based interface that gradually includes more visual components as the game introduces new mechanics. Upon starting the game, the player sees only a title (“A Dark Room”), two lines of text, and a rectangle with the text “Stoke fire” contained within. The rectangle, as well as the way the text “Stoke fire” underlines itself when moused over, suggests interactivity to the user provided they have even a basic literacy with computers, and in an instant gives the user a sense of the methods they will be using throughout the entirety of the game to interact with *A Dark Room*’s world. Initially, the user only has the worry about stoking the fire a few times in order to warm up the room, but over time they will be using the exact same simple minimalistic interface to manage dozens of interdependent resources and navigate a sprawling and hostile environment.

On that note, *A Dark Room*’s second characteristic affordance is the gradual and intuitive way in which it teaches the player about itself. This affordance (considered in some cases to be a telltale sign of a well-designed game) is not always dependent on a minimalistic interface such as that of *A Dark Room*’s, but in this case the two affordances are inextricable. To re-use the example I gave earlier, at the beginning of the game the only problem the player is responsible for is stoking the fire -- correspondingly, that is the only action that the interface actually affords to the player. No other buttons are visible. But shortly, a line of text in the message log informs the player that the wood is running out, and simultaneously reveals an area of the screen where the remaining quantity of wood is displayed. From there on out, stoking the fire decreases the wood counter by one. The player quickly begins to understand that to perform actions in this world is to commit to a corresponding consequence -- in this case, the depletion of a finite pool of a particular resource. Over time, the game reveals ways to gather more wood, different options for using the wood gathered, additional resources to gather and manage, and eventually a roguelike-type exploration and combat engine which is the final purpose of all the skills learned up until that point -- the player creates a village so that they can produce the means to explore the world of *A Dark Room* and learn its secrets. This premise might strike an initial player as daunting and overwhelming, but it becomes incredibly accessible and easy to learn when this depth is concealed by the initial simplicity of the first screen the player sees. It’s also worth

mentioning this system also lends the game a sense of depth by engaging the player's curiosity -- "What hidden aspect of this game will reveal itself next?" the player asks himself.

In regards to affordances that I found interesting in others' projects, I will list a few: the mobile-device-to-console interactivity of the *Just Dance* app, the multimedia storytelling of *Homestuck*, the level submission and sharing of the *Bloxels* app, the accessible representation of complex 4-dimensional space by the *4 Dimensions* app, the animation-friendly interface of *Flipnote Studio*, and the social dynamic presented by Reddit's *r/place* social experiment.

My first idea: a minimalistic and/or text-based roguelike-type game in the style of *A Dark Room*, but played by multiple players simultaneously on each player's respective mobile device. This idea combines the affordances of *A Dark Room*'s minimalism and the *Just Dance* app's phone-as-a-controller feature. Further, these two affordances combine particularly well, as the proposed system would result in the game being hugely accessible, with little barrier to entry -- most people in our culture have some sort of mobile device, and thanks to the minimalistic visual nature of the game, it could run smoothly on even the least powerful of modern devices.

My second idea: a collaborative world-building and story-writing tool that allows users to combine multimedia to build a fantasy universe. In the style of *Homestuck*, this universe might be the sum total of the collective multimedia the user base has contributed -- so, illustrations might give the sense of how a castle looks, short stories might explain things that have happened in that place, flash animations might convey the dread of walking through a certain forbidden forest, etc. This world would be very much a community-driven effort, so functionality that would enable users to submit and share their content would be paramount (such as with the level sharing tool found in the *Bloxels* app).

My third idea: a 4-dimensional block-placing place that enables the user to create simple voxel art that extends through 4 dimensions. This sandbox would use coding systems similar to that of the *4 Dimensions* app to store blocks in 4-dimensional space, but if the world was divided into grid-based blocks such as in Minecraft it would make implementation surprisingly manageable. In addition to using traditional first-person controls to fly a camera throughout the world and place blocks, the player could use two additional keyboard keys to shift "in" and "out" through 4 dimensional space in increments. One potentially amusing application of this environment would be to create 3D voxel animations, where the 4th dimension is used as an axis for time -- by creating each "frame" of the animation in a successively further spot along the 4th dimension, the observer could then watch the animation by simply "shifting" at a fixed rate. This functionality might lend the software a reputation as an interesting toy for experimental animation (such as with *Flipnote Studio* for the Nintendo DS). If one were to take this environment and combine it with a similar dynamic to *r/place*'s community driven territory wars, it would be fascinating to see what conquests users would wage in a mind-boggling 4-dimensional space.