

## Premise

In a world where the documentation of history has been outlawed, you are a 28 year-old who has left your hometown for the city. Accustomed to the robotic, capitalistic life of society, you've forgotten everything you once knew when you were younger. Until one day...

Play the game here: <https://nickvo.itch.io/an-ode-to-new-years>

PW: 377g

## Overview

This game is an exploration of the consequences of assimilation and the reality that cultures with a limited written history face in preserving their traditions, language, and past. Through focusing on the dynamics of an intergenerational relationship, the game hopes to encourage players to examine what exactly can be lost in assimilation for both *present* and *future* generations, as well as the challenges encountered in trying to bridge the gap between generations.

Central to this game, was the idea of memory which was inspired by a quote from *The Sympathizer* discussing three types of forgetting:

- To know what one has forgotten
- To forget without knowing what one has forgotten
- To know that one has forgotten something without knowing what that something was

As a game mechanic, puzzles are included in the game and can be accessed at any time. These puzzles represent the memory of the main character and care was put into designing the puzzle to feel as if you were trying to piece together fragments of your memory. Furthermore, the puzzles change as certain milestones in the story are reached, reflecting the idea that certain memories can be evoked by words, experiences, and people. Puzzles will either become easier, unlock a necessary piece, or suddenly become accessible.

Additionally, another game mechanic that's introduced is the scrambling of words in certain texts. This is intended to mimic a language barrier that exists between the grandmother and grandson and is contingent on choices made by the player. The text will either remain scrambled or become less scrambled based on whether the player blindly accepts words or decides to dig deeper. This mechanic is a play on the idea that a forgotten language can come back with practice, as well as the decision to choose discomfort for better connection.

There are ultimately two endings which are influenced by both the completion of the puzzles and decisions made throughout the game. Neither ending is the "correct" one but each reflects the possibilities that may come from the main character's effort to connect with his grandmother.



[initial concept map]

## Version History

### Playtest 1

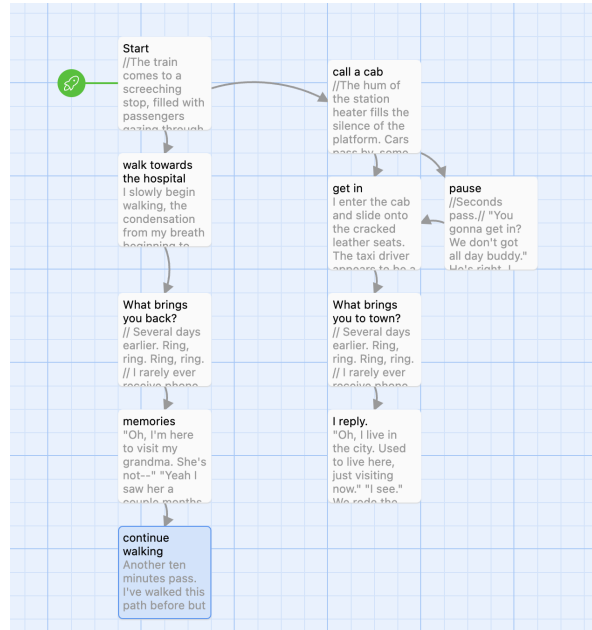
10/19 | 22F, 21F, 20M | In-Class Playtests

For this 1st In-class playtest, I used a short prototype of my story in Twine. Beginning at the middle of the plot, I wanted to show players a slice of what the dialogue and choices would look like. Furthermore, I wanted to gain a sense of how players think and feel about the premise and choices.

From the playtests, I was able to gather that:

- Players wanted choices that introduce a perceived dilemma in order to create tension and give value to each option.
- A player suggested that the presence and/or absence of certain choices can be as powerful as the story content itself. For example, it can make players consider and rethink their own beliefs.
- The dystopian aspect of the story may be a little too extreme and introduces implications that affect the choices and content.

From these observations I decided that I would change to shift from the original idea of “outlawed writing” to a ban on documentation of history/culture, so that the dystopian aspect is not as extreme.

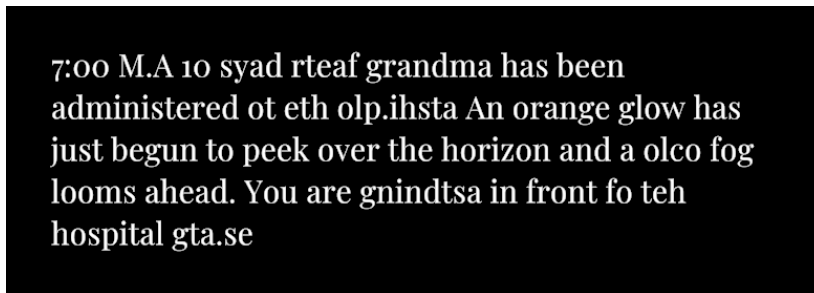


[screenshot from first twine prototype]

## Playtest 2

10/24 | 21F | In-Class Playtest

For the second prototype playtest, I introduced the mechanic of language scrambling and combined it with the Twine prototype. My goal for this test was to gauge whether players would understand “why” this mechanic was being used and if it’s coherent within the context of the game.



[screenshot of the scramble mechanic]

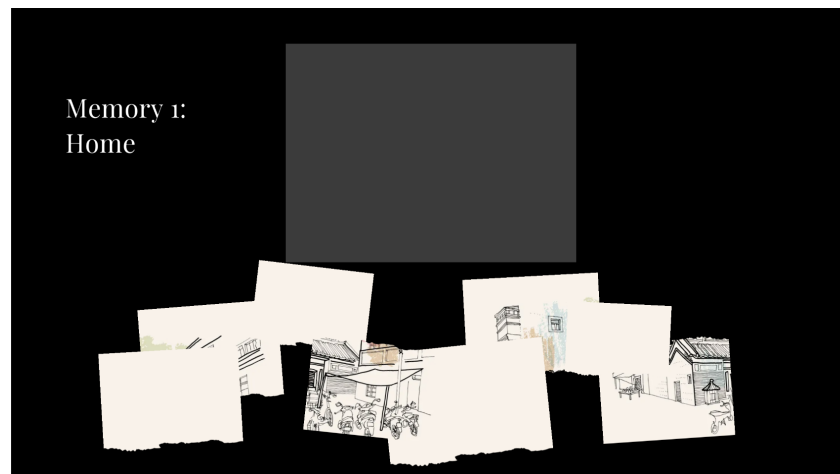
From the playtests, I was able to observe that players liked the idea of partially understanding a language, but I need to fully flesh out what choices are associated with that and what type of consequences will be imposed. Furthermore, there needed to be clarification of when such a mechanic would be presented and it needed to depart from regular text. As a result, I decided to continue to use this mechanic but introduced the idea of only using it when the grandmother is telling a story AND having it evolve based on the decisions of the player.

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### Playtest 3

10/24 | 23F Non-Stanford | In-Person

That same day, I had an idea that completely shifted the game and decided to prototype it. Inspired by game mechanics found in *Florence*, I decided that I wanted to integrate the theme of memory being tied to culture. The goal of this playtest was to understand how players would feel solving these puzzles and if they were able to relate it to the theme.



## [screenshots of first versions of the memory puzzle]

From this playtest, I observed that the player felt that the puzzle was intuitive to solve. However, they often clicked on the empty pieces and were surprised that they were unable to move it. While they liked the idea of the memory puzzle, they wondered how it could be related to the story game itself. Additionally, they also suggested the idea of pieces continuously moving, so that it's "constantly shifting and changing like how our memories do".

After reflecting on this playtest, I decided to implement the idea of moving pieces but decided to have the empty pieces stay static. I wanted this to intentionally be frustrating for players as they would be removed in the future based on some player decision. Nonetheless, I got to work thinking about how to tie the narrative, player decisions, and these mechanics together.

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## Playtest 4

10/26 | 25M | In-Class Playtest

For this playtest, I had gained an initial understanding of how I wanted to tie everything together in the game and developed two separate prototypes that the player could walk through: the twine and the memory puzzle using Unity. The player would be able to read through the twine and at a specific point I would introduce the puzzle. Additionally, the puzzle was modified so that on completion, it would reveal more information about the main character's past. My goal for this playtest was to understand if there was coherence between the two.

**Start**  
If the train comes to a screeching stop, filled with passengers

**call a cab**  
The hush of the station hater fills the silence of the platform. Cars

**walk towards the hospital**  
I slowly begin walking, the condensation from my breath

**get in**  
enter the cab and slide onto the cracked leather seats. The taxi driver

**pause**  
[Seconds pass.] "You gonna get in? We don't got all day buddy!"

**What brings you back?**  
Several days earlier. Ring, ring, ring. Ring, ring, ring. I I rarely ever

**What brings you to town?**  
Several days earlier. Ring, ring, ring. Ring, ring, ring. I I rarely ever

**memories**  
"Oh, I'm here to visit my grandma. She's real." "Yeah I saw her a

**I reply.**  
"Oh, I live in the city. Used to live here, just visiting now." "I see."

**continue walking**  
Another ten minutes pass, I've walked this path before

**enter the hospital**  
I notice the sterile white

**Turn Around**  
I walk a few steps forward but pause. My eyes close and I begin to

**leave the elevator**  
Clicker-click this passage to exit it.

**stay in the elevator**  
The doors begin to close -- a hand

**Memory 1: Home**  
Where I used to play until the street lights dimmed and the light began to glow through the windows. Where red streamers and embroidered lanterns hung every fall and sweet smells arrived at the fall of snow. Where the whispers of grandma's guitar tiptoed through small corridors. Where my parents live -- used to live. Where I grew up... and where I am now.

## [screenshots of twine and puzzle reveal screen]

In conducting this playtest, the player had questions such as:

- Are memory choices pre-defined
- How can you access specific memories?
- What does completing all the puzzles do?

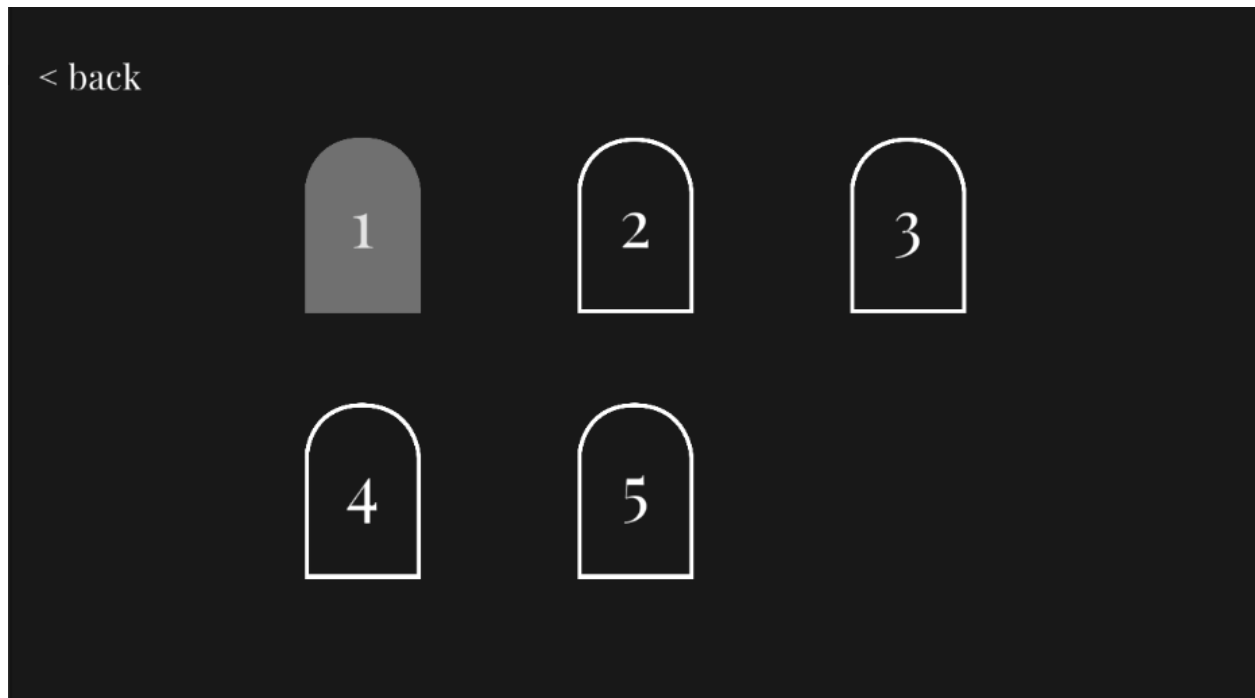
These were awesome questions and really made me consider the implementation of these changes and how they would affect the narrative as well. After taking some time to brainstorm, I decided that there would be a set number of memories that represent a theme or experience of the main character. Furthermore, there would be a menu that could be opened to access all of the memories.

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## Playtest 5

10/29 | 22F Non-Stanford | Zoom Video Call

In this interview, I was able to have a friend test out the new puzzle menu combined with a more fleshed out Twine prototype. My goal of this was to see the behavior of the player and how they decided to make decisions in both the twine prototype and puzzle. The player could access the twine prototype and the Unity game at any point if they chose.



[memory puzzle menu]

The observations from this playtest were surprising and left me with a lot to change. I mainly observed that:

- The player would just complete all the puzzles

- The player felt that the puzzles were too similar
- They enjoyed the choices in the narrative and liked “staying” or “leaving”
- They wondered about the impact of choices however

In addressing these changes, I needed to re-evaluate the uniqueness of interactive fiction as a platform and how I could use it in my game. Ultimately, I decided that to make choices impactful, I would have both the story and puzzle influence one another. For example, certain milestones would unlock specific puzzles and the completion of puzzles would further influence the story, as well as reveal more information.

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## Playtest 6

10/31 | 20M, 25M | In-Class Playtests

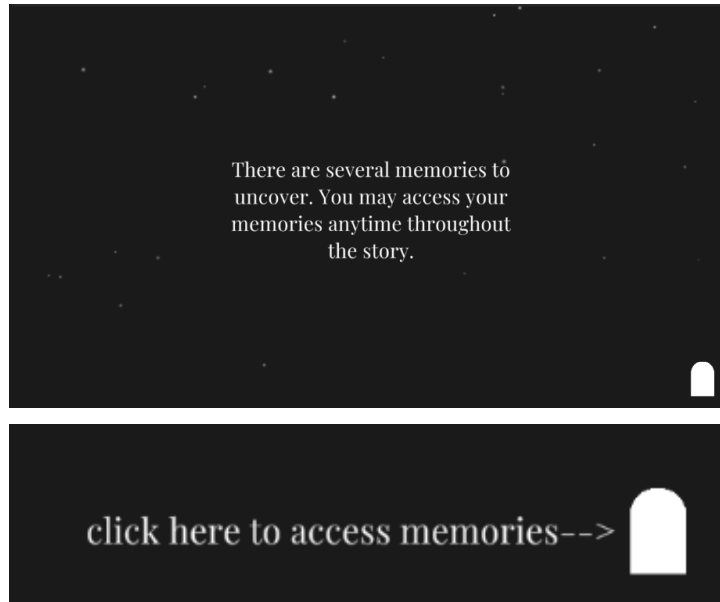
Coming into this playtest, I had begun to transition all of my work in Twine to Unity. Because of this, I primarily wanted to test the narrative aspect. Nonetheless, I received valuable feedback with regards to the playability of the game itself.

Main feedback points:

- Wants an introductory puzzle, so they know what they’re missing
- “Picture, grayed out behind text would be cool!”
- Clarify who’s talking
- Wonder about clarity of option choices, especially when in-line option

From this feedback, I decided to implement all of these changes as they heavily impacted the player experience. Furthermore, I continued to work on the narrative elements and develop the individual puzzles and memories.





[screenshot of changes]

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## Playtest 7

11/1 | 21M Stanford Student | Zoom Video Call

In this playtest, I was able to continue working on the narrative and flesh out how choices will impact the progression of the player. In this test, I wanted to see if the changes I made impacted playability, as well as observe how the player feels throughout the game.

From this the player stated that there needed to be more clarification between dialogue. However, they felt that choices were clear and I observed that they were intuitively able to progress through the game. For this test, I decided to add a minor change of making the text more distinct and offset between dialogue.

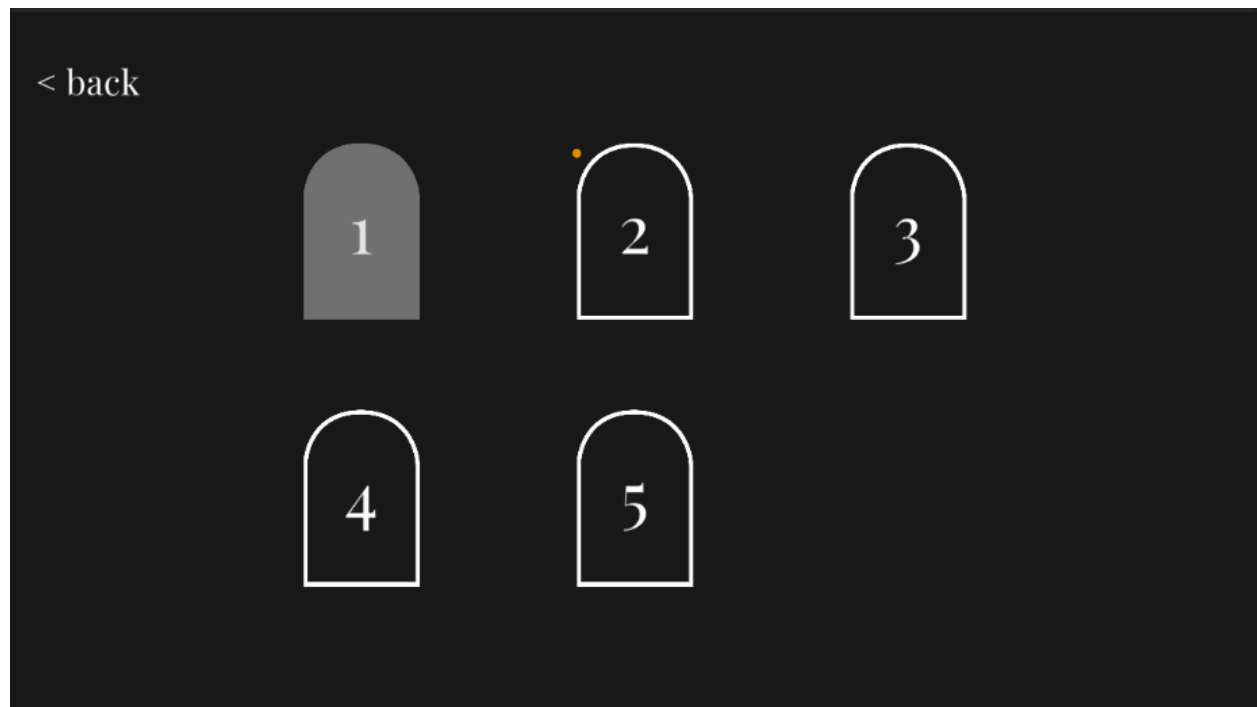
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## Playtest 8

11/2 | 25M | In-Class Playtest

In this final playtesting, I wanted to test the cohesiveness of the story and all the changes that I had made up until this point. My tester provided amazing feedback afterwards and had a great distinction that they thought the puzzles would pop up as the story progresses as opposed to clicking around. As a result, I decided to implement an indicator that would notify players when a milestone in the game had been reached.





[indicator on menu]

## Reflection

This was certainly a process. I completed my first interactive fiction game (wool!) and also conducted several playtests independently. I learned an immense amount about playtesting from both my peers and through conducting individual playtests on my own time.

Furthermore, I also learned how to use Twine and used Unity to build the game. From this experience, it was fascinating to see the complexity of interactive fiction and the unique ways that interactive fiction can be used to change behavior and knowledge. My peers and in-class examples had such unique techniques and stories, and I learned extensively from participating as a playtester myself.

With regards to scoping this project, I came into this project excited and with a boundless amount of ideas. As a result, I found myself unrealistically adding more things to my plate which led to sacrifices being made in both building and storytelling. Moving forward, I'm aiming to do a better job in scoping and planning my time. I would also like to change and add elements to the game and do a more comprehensive playtest where I measure player's attitudes towards the topic.