Hannah Kim
Prof. Christina Wodtke
CS 377G
06 Nov 2023

Behind Closed Eyes
Final Writeup for P2: The Future We Deserve

Link to Game

Overview:

"Behind Closed Eyes" is an intense, short-form interactive game that simulates the stark realities of high school bullying in South Korea. The game acts as a psychological test, placing players in the shoes of a high schooler of either low or high socioeconomic status, where each decision could lead them down the path of intervention, victimization, or silent complicity.

Upon starting the game, players find themselves randomly assigned to a socioeconomic status, which immediately influences their standing and power to make effective decisions. As players navigate through scenarios based on real-life victim accounts, they are faced with the choice to either stand up to bullying or remain a bystander. Once the choice of inaction is made, the game locks them into the bystander role, creating a loop of witnessing abuse without the power to intervene.

The game is designed to test the player's resolve, examining how long one can endure witnessing or experiencing bullying before regretting their inaction. It pushes players to contemplate whether they truly possess the resolve to sacrifice their reputation and potentially their own safety for the sake of another.

The key features of this game are three-fold:
1. **Irreversible Role of Bystander:** Once players choose inaction, they are forced to continue as a bystander, compelling them to reflect on the consequences of this choice.
2. **Empathy and Regret:** The game challenges players to endure the hardships of bullying and tests their emotional limits, conscience, and societal pressures, potentially leading to a sense of regret for not acting sooner.
3. **Real-world Relevance:** The scenarios are grounded in actual cases of school bullying, offering a sobering perspective on the experiences of real victims.

Motivation:

I created "The Cost of Silence: A Bystander's Dilemma" because the issue of bullying in South Korean schools is a topic I've been closely aware of for years. It is a pervasive problem that is often only discussed within the Korean cultural community. My motivation to shed light on this also came from a personal place—a friend of mine, who moved to Korea during her middle

school years, was forced to change schools due to violent bullying solely because she couldn't speak Korean fluently.

Her story is not unique, which is what makes it so distressing. School violence is endemic in South Korean schools; studies reveal that "'nearly one in three students in South Korea has suffered bullying'", contributing to a tragic rise in school-aged suicides. Legal disputes related to school violence have doubled in the last two years, with accused bullies being the primary filers. Therefore, the "Hakpok #MeToo" movement was born and began sweeping through South Korea, where survivors of school violence are speaking out decades after withstanding unspeakable abuses. This movement resonated with me deeply, compelling me to think of ways to share their stories and contribute to this movement though a medium we have been closely studying in this class: gaming.

By confronting players with the harsh realities of bullying and the socio-cultural dynamics of bystanderism, the game endeavors to amplify survivor stories and challenge players to confront their moral and psychological boundaries.
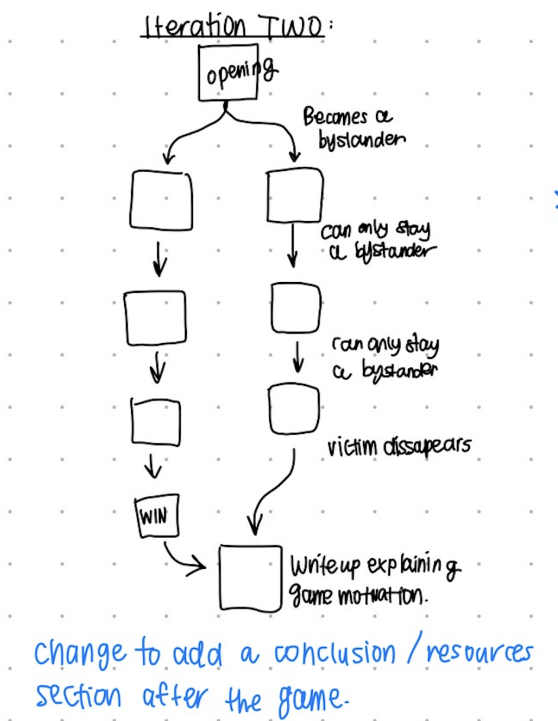
Game Iterations and Playtesting:

Iteration One:
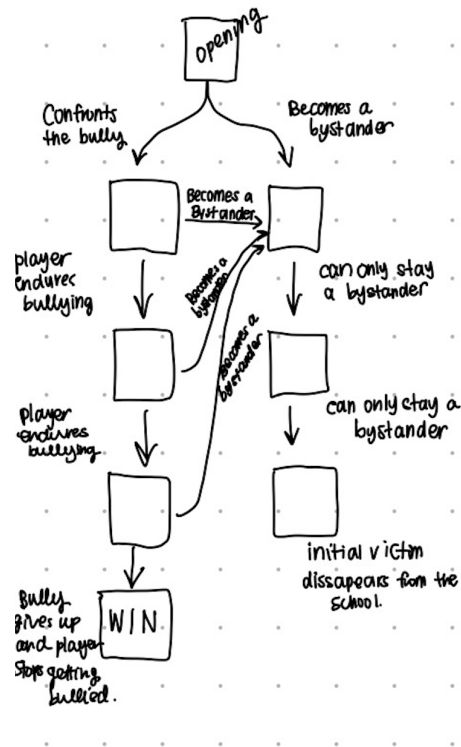
This is a diagram of my first low-fidelity prototype on Twine. It only has two main storylines where players can either confront a bully or become a bystander. Once the player becomes a bystander, the player loses to option to confront the bully anymore and has to stay a bystander until the bullied victim disappears from their school. If the player continues to confront the bullying even after they get bullied themselves, both the player and the previous victim stops getting bullied in the end.

In a playtest of this digital prototype conducted on 10/19/2023, Ore, a male playtester in his early 20s with medium experience, provided valuable feedback on the game storyline because of his knowledge of short story creation. Ore played this game without any background knowledge of the game or setting. He first shared that the mechanic of not giving the players a choice once they become bystanders was highly effective. He then emphasized the importance of adding more details during the setup so players can immerse themselves into the story. He advised that I continue to come up with more descriptions of the bullying and preface the game by saying that all bullying accounts are based on real-life examples. He also recommended that I add statistics about Korea's school bullying issue in the end to tie it all together.

Iteration TWO:

opening

Becomes a bystander

can only stay a bystander

can only stay a bystander

victim dissapears

WIN

Write up explaining game motivation.

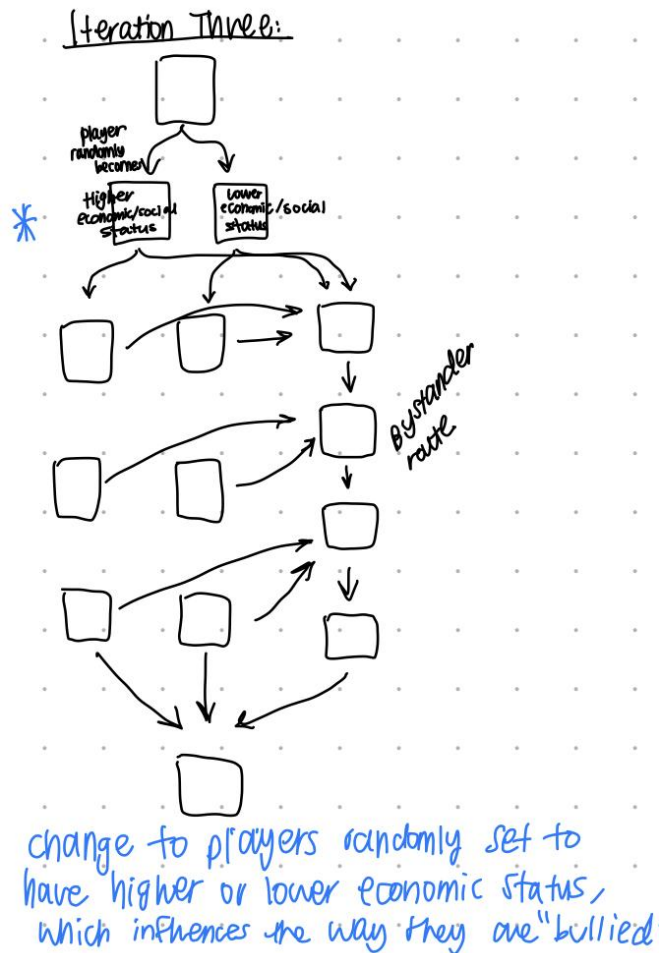Change to add a conclusion / resources section after the game.

Based on Ore's feedback, I added an addendum in the end of the game that provides players with an overview of school bullying in South Korea, rise in suicide rates among young people, and the efforts of the Hakpok "MeToo" Movement.

The purpose of this addition is to offer a real-world connection to the experiences depicted within the game and to underscore the importance of the movement's current advocacy for legal reform. By incorporating these factual elements, the game not only serves as an engaging interactive experience but also as an educational tool that enlightens players about the societal challenges that extend beyond the digital realm. This context-rich summary at the game's end will help players understand the magnitude of the bullying problem in South Korea.
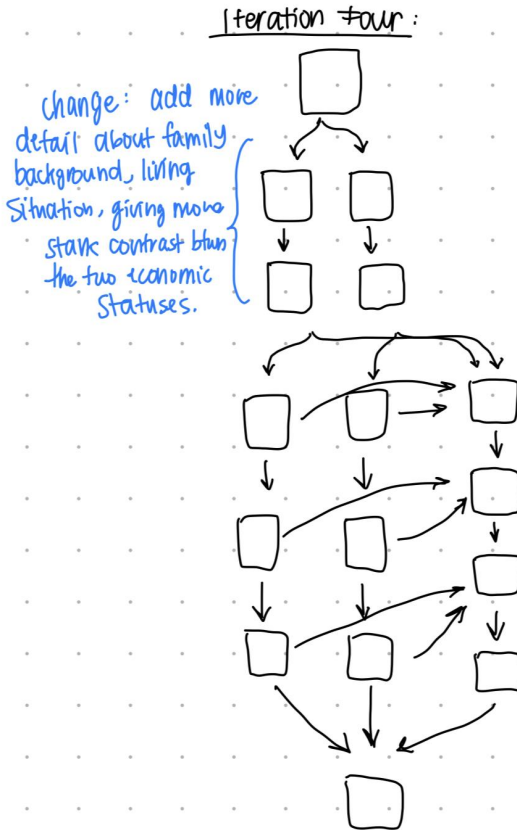
Moreover, I added a few more detailed scenes to heighten the moral conflict faced by players as Ore advised. These tougher scenarios would escalate the sense of self-preservation, pushing players towards a more realistic and challenging experience.

This second prototype playtest was conducted on Tiffany, a female playtester in her mid forties with minimal gaming experience. Tiffany was a valuable playtester because she went to elementary, middle, and highschool in South Korea. She mentioned that the bystander lock mechanic was very effective for the game, and she appreciated the addendum at the end of the game. She then commented that people who have higher socio-economic status have the resources and connections to escape bullying in Korea, and she would like that dynamic to be explored in the game.

Iteration Three:

change to players randomly set to
have higher or lower economic status,
which influences the way they are "bullied"

Therefore, in my third iteration, I added a function that randomly assigned a player to the higher or lower socio-economic status character. The two different characters have different interactions with the bully: the higher status character effectively utilizes their social power and connections to defend against the bully while the lower status character is left powerless and defeated. At this point, I was having trouble curating the storyline and dynamics based on socioeconomic status, so I decided to focus my next playtesting on that game aspect.

My third prototype playtest was conducted on Terry, a male playtester in his early twenties with medium experience. He mentioned that the game setup can delve more into the demographics of the characters (what does their family or home look like). This way, the players can tell the more stark differences between the roles. He also recommended to rewrite certain descriptions where I can show more and tell less, where privilege and lack of privilege can be implied rather than directly stated.

Iteration four:

change: add more detail about family background, living situation, giving more stark contrast btwn the two economic statuses.
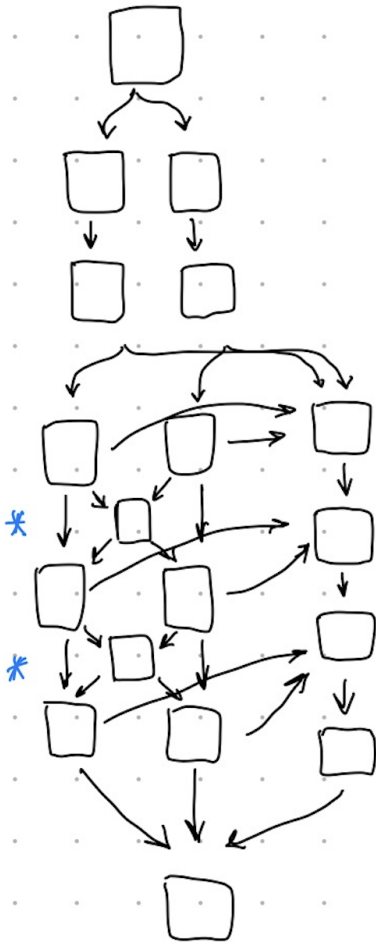
Based on Terry's feedback, I decided to add two more features. First, I added supplemental scenes for both characters, depicting their house, parent occupations, their means to getting to school, all of which work together to insinuate their socio-economic standing and also allow the player to fully step into their character's world. I also decided to add a custom macro/typing simulator scene for my lower socio-economic status charcater. In this scene, players are invited to express their character's emotions through a journal entry, a mechanism meant to symbolize the character's attempt to process their feelings. However, to reflect the character's lack of agency, the game overrides the player's input with the repeated message, "No one will help me." This deliberate design choice underlines the character's sense of helplessness and the reality that without social support, their avenues for change are severely limited.

This typing simulator isn't just a narrative device; it's a psychological tool that positions players directly in the shoes of someone who feels their voice and actions are constrained by their circumstances. Players can experience firsthand the demoralizing impact of feeling powerless.

My third prototype playtest was conducted on Malachi, a male playtester in his early twenties with medium experience. His first reaction to the game was that he was sad that he couldn't choose to help once he became a bystander, but he felt like that mechanic was an effective way to teach about bystanderism consequences. He also thought the typing macro was both scary and powerful; he said he felt trapped and helpless when he couldn't type what he wanted, which are two desired emotional responses for this game. He thought the ending was very "depressing" but necessary to make the player feel hopeless and not in control; he also said he felt mad knowing that these accounts were based on real victim experiences. Some feedback he offered was that it wasn't fully obvious to him immediately that he was locked into the bystander. He would like icons or color differentiation between the choices he can make and not make anymore. This way, the user won't blame the game but the user's decisions.

Malachi also mentions that the socio-economic dynamics are a bit too obvious, and he wished he saw more interactions that insinuated the power of connections or wealth instead of stating the fact.

Iteration Five :

Both player story line options will
have the option to call their
homeroom teacher or the police.
Their status will influence the amount
of help they get.

Based on Malachi's feedback, I decided to add to the first two bystander scenes a small note "(You're a bystander. You can't confront Alexis anymore.)" to make it clear when the player is locked into the bystander role. Now, the player won't confuse this important game mechanic as a poor game decision or typo. I also added a few more bystander scenes to further confront the player with the ongoing and escalating consequences of their inaction, highlighting the significance of each decision made.

I also decided to add two scenes where the player can choose to let their homeroom teacher or local police know about the bullying. The scenes include detailed reactions of the teacher and

police officer that clearly suggest they are connected and highly motivated to help the character or does not have any desire to be involved with the character. In fact, for the lower socio-economic status character, these two interactions drive the forced journaling scene home because truly "no one will help" them.

My next digital prototype was conducted on Elliot, a male playtester in his early twenties with medium experience. He first mentions that he really enjoyed the game and thought the game mechanics like the bystander lock was highly effective. He also was very surprised and positive about the forced journal writing scene. He then suggested that I add more bystander options than just staying silent. He wanted to see if the game can get into the headspace of the bystander, see what the player thinks when they look at a friend or a teacher. Overall, Elliot was shocked that this level of violence exists in South Korean schools.
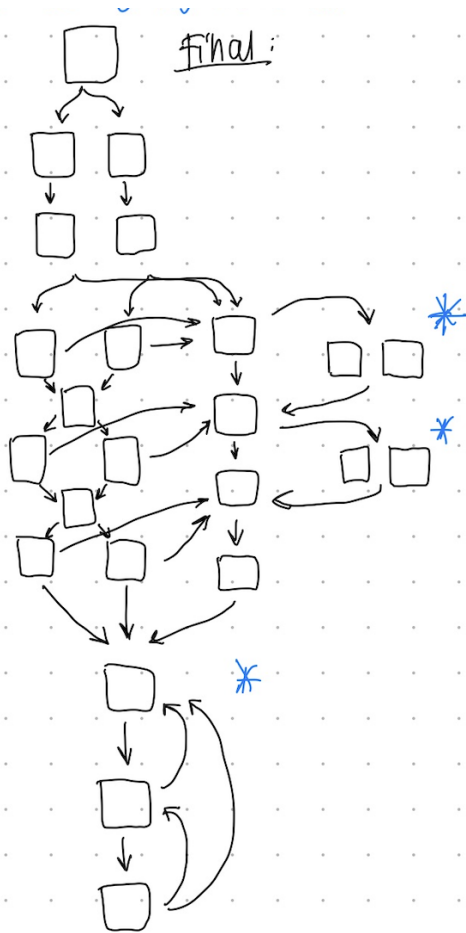
Iteration six:

nuve
whi

*
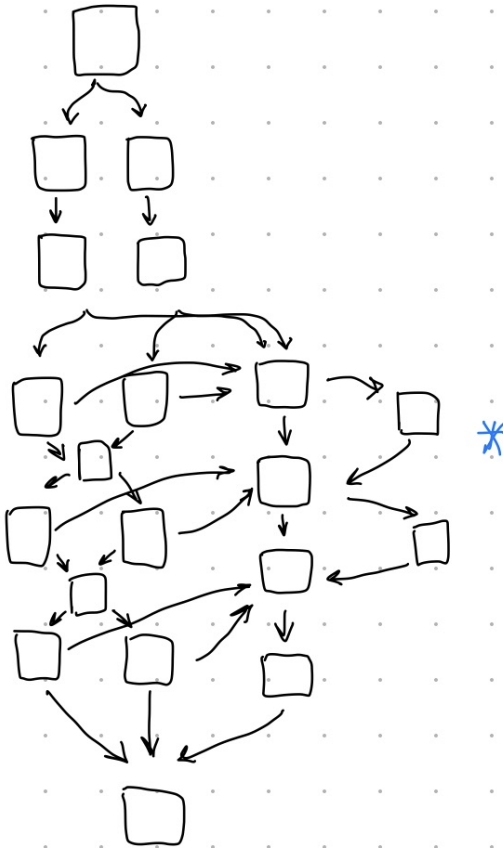
The bystander storyline will also have multiple options that go into the bystanderism effect / how a bystander would actually think (looking at their friend / mirroring other people's apathy)

Therefore, for my second to last iteration, I added more bystander options for the player. The player can look at a friend during the first bystander scene, where they experience the effects of social influence. Because their friend is inactive, the player is influenced to remain passive. The second bystander scene has an added option to look at the entire classroom, where they then experience the effect of perceived diffusion of responsibility. The player assumes that there must be someone who is braver and righteous enough to stand up against the bullying, and that it is not the player's responsibility to protect the victim.

These enhancement provide players with a more authentic experience of the bystander phenomenon. It's not enough for players to simply find themselves in the role of a bystander; through these additional choices, they can understand the internal and external forces that can

compel a person to remain silent in the face of wrongdoing. This not only raises the stakes of the gameplay but also equips players with a deeper comprehension of the complexities involved in real-life situations of bullying and the obstacles to standing against it.

My high fidelity prototype playtest was conducted on two classmates, a female and male playtester in their early twenties with medium experience. The first playtester offered a lot of positive feedback, saying that she enjoyed the parallel stories where she can clearly see the disparities between two characters and how different actors treat them. She also liked how each bystander option has a supplemental scene that explains why the character chooses to be passive in that moment, and she said the lack of choices made sense for the game. The second playtester wondered if there was a way to get more into the brain of the bystanders, especially in the socio-economic context I set up before. He thought it would be interesting to have parallel stories for not only the victim but also the bystander storyline. Lastly, he mentioned that I can divide the write up a little more because the block of text was slightly daunting for him. If the statistics and ending remarks were shorter, they would be more impactful for the players.

Final:

Changes include: Different bystander
options will also depend on the characters
socioeconomic status. The conclusion / resources /
ending remarks are now split up so its
easier to follow and digest.

Therefore, for my last iteration, I added two different bystander storylines based on the character's socio-economic status. In the storyline for the character from a wealthier background, players will navigate the complexities of having a reputation that feels like it's at stake. This character's journey illustrates the conflict between maintaining their social standing and doing what is morally right. Conversely, the character from a less affluent background experiences the sense of vulnerability that comes from lacking influential connections or a support system.

By introducing these differentiated storylines, players can delve into the nuanced experiences and realize how factors such as the fear of social repercussion or the absence of a support network can influence the bystander's behavior.

Finally, my completed prototype playtest was conducted on James, a male playtester in his early twenties with medium experience. He pointed out a few typos and code errors (which I quickly fixed), but overall had a huge reaction to the bystander storyline and the game ending where the victim disappears from the school. He mentions that he feels like the game introduces him to a completely new culture and reality, where the extent of physical harm and bullying is a new degree of severity. He felt trapped when he was playing the bystander and lower socio-economic status character, compelling him to reflect on his own actions or lack of action when he was in highschool.

Reflection:

Reflecting on the development process of "Behind Closed Eyes," I had a very educational and fulfilling journey. I was able to delve into the Hakpok #MeToo movement, the psychological pressures of bystanderism, and the deeply ingrainedsocial inequalities in South Korean culture. I found extremely moved to bring this knowledge to a broader audience through the medium of interactive fiction, and it was even more motivating to witness my playtesters' reactions. None had prior knowledge of the severity of school bullying in Korea; their shock and emotional responses to the game's content validated the importance of the work and reinforced my hope in the gaming industry to become an educational tool.

For future iterations of the game, I would love to integrate dynamic elements such as sound effects or color to represent certain scenes or character actions. I'm interested in researching other interactive fiction out there to draw inspiration from them