

RAGE OF DRAGON

PROLOGUE

At first I wasn't sure what I saw··· Everything was covered in the darkness ··· Memories, dreams, mirages··· I realized at one point that the darkness··· this darkness was my own body – the reflection of what I was – the endless desert, the reflection of the ancient mirage I was looking for – the dragon. It came to me and I followed it into the silent blaze, "that which breaks to pieces".



ARK HOUSE

If you are reading this - I'm probably dead. Or may be not. Anyway, my name is Alexey Tsvelov - somewhat known as Arkhouse, a video game developer. This book is a demonic mixture of art, text and not so smart jokes, that should kill you in 7 days after reading. If not earlier, considering how much I deliver these days.

Jokes aside (if I can), I present you the Mirage of Dragon Commentary book. It is also an Art Book. It is also a guide. And finally it is a manual. All written and illustrated by myself. Partly because I can't hire anybody else, partly because I'm so good, naturally.

Nice to meet you, friend. If you accept my friendship scroll the page down and enjoy - 7 days run fast.



Contents

Since I'm so lazy and so busy at the same time, I write everything "in the real time". Meaning no editing is ever done. That applies to "the contents" section too. So have in mind that the actual contents of the book may differ. Honestly, I doubt it will come to this (because I'm such a good planner and all), but be warned anyway.

Also my goal for this book is 100 pages. No idea how I'm going to make it, but in the worse case scenario I'll put some blank "for notes" pages - in case you'll want to print the book and leave some important notes there later. Because I don't know - you might.

The contents are:

1. Story. "The Past"
Better word would be - "history" of this project. It is surprisingly rich and I believe it is necessary for you to see.
Bear.
Endure.

2. Developer's commentary. "The Present"
This section is the main dish of this book. Spicy and well-served, describing every element of the game and its development process. Contains several sub-sections, including a copy of the manual and my primary presentation "as is".

3. Other. "The future".
According to some incredibly smart and well-educated people 2012 was the end of the world. Living in this post-apocalyptic era I too can say whatever I want about the future and so I will in this special section. It is short and pointless, but it will serve me well as a finish line with some inspiring nonsense to leave a good aftertaste for you. Also the presence of this section is a good excuse to put my "for notes" pages.

That's the plan. The story of Mirage of Dragon is symbolic and short, so I'll try to make up for that with some wordy descriptions here.

Also, have in mind that English is not my first language. I have never been in any English-talking countries and never had a real English conversation. Don't be ignorant and respect the effort.

Scroll down if you want to read the book or press "x" in the upper right corner of your reader to quit. Have a nice time regardless of your choice.

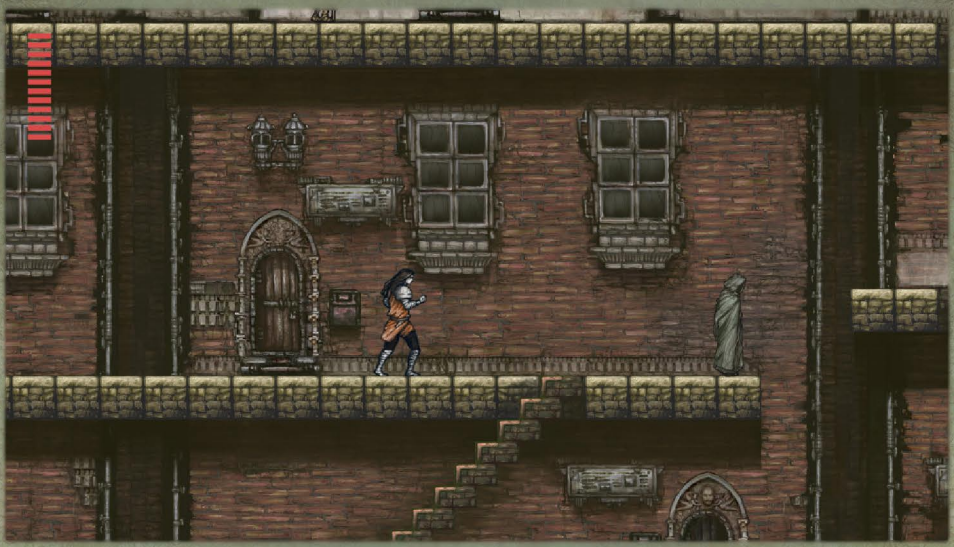


Temporary Cover Art 01

>The past...

SQ

About 5 years ago, having no experience whatsoever, I figured it would be a good idea to start with something simple (too bad the newcomers can't really tell what is "simple" and what isn't...). I'd started to work on a fan remake of a quite unsuccessful NES classic called C2:SQ (you can still find some of my old stuff on the internet and the project is not dropped - I will return to it someday, so I don't want to write the full name of it here (just in case). I'll give you a hint instead - this little picture:



La-la-laa-laaa...la-la-la-la-laa-laa-laa-la-laaaa....

Working on that game gave me an invaluable experience I needed. My work wasn't all that good to be honest (especially the first year), but everybody need to start somewhere. While I was learning I was also planning my own projects - one among many was Mirage of Dragon (initially called Dark Lord: The Duel - more on that later...).

Nothing else to tell about it in this book, but in case you are intrigued I must repeat again that the project is not dropped. The only reason I'd stopped working on it was my financial difficulties (I nearly lost my apartments and I still have some debts - so when I say difficulties I mean actual difficulties incompatible with the fan activities.). My choice was simple at the time - either I'll start working on something commercial or I'll quit achieving nothing. ... Many more "adventures" followed, but we'll "time skip" here to a much more significant Dark Lord: The Duel episode.



DL:TD

At the time I believed that working in a team is always better than working alone. I was wrong about it - not always.

The best team you can have is the team consisting of your neighbors (family is even better). I'd started to look for the people from Lithuania (that's the name of the country I'm living in - it's totally all right if you have never heard of it). I found nobody. So I'd tried to expand my search options with the one or two American forums (American internet = international internet - all the English-typing people from around the world are there, so my choice was obvious). That idea was much more successful. Some more "adventures" had followed until I found my dream team from Italy (again... American internet = international internet).

I'll "time skip" here again...

We were working relatively fast and relatively slow - no big progress, but no stagnation either. It became obvious soon we needed some funding. We had launched a Kickstarter campaign and it had failed in the most unspectacular fashion imaginable. Unable to continue the team had disbanded.

R.I.P.
Dark Lord: The Duel.

Surprisingly the game had some amazing success on the Steam Greenlight program - the game was

greenlit in just 8 days. I still believe it's an absolutely amazing achievement. Unfortunately we had to remove it from Steam the next day.

Why we were so successful on Steam and so bad on Kickstarter? According to the crowd-funding agents (never heard of them? Well, there are many - crowd-funding is a business - not a pink "dream machine") the campaign had a lot of potential but was doomed since day one because no money or time was spent on PR. We had no time, we had no money. Too sad. I never cared about myself, but I would wish a better experience for the rest of the team I was working with.

By the way you can still find our campaign's page on Kickstarter and you might think the campaign's content is lacking - well, it's because about half of the content was deleted. And another big part of it stayed "in-doors" never seen by anybody. So I don't recommend looking for it. Instead you can see some pictures of it here:







I'll skip even more "adventures" this time - we'll return to DLTD in the "Future" section of the book, but for now you know everything I wanted you to know.

The outcome of my adventures was this:

1. I have returned to my "do everything yourself"- "solo mode".
2. I had obtained the funding needed for the game development.
3, The new title of the game is "Mirage of Dragon".

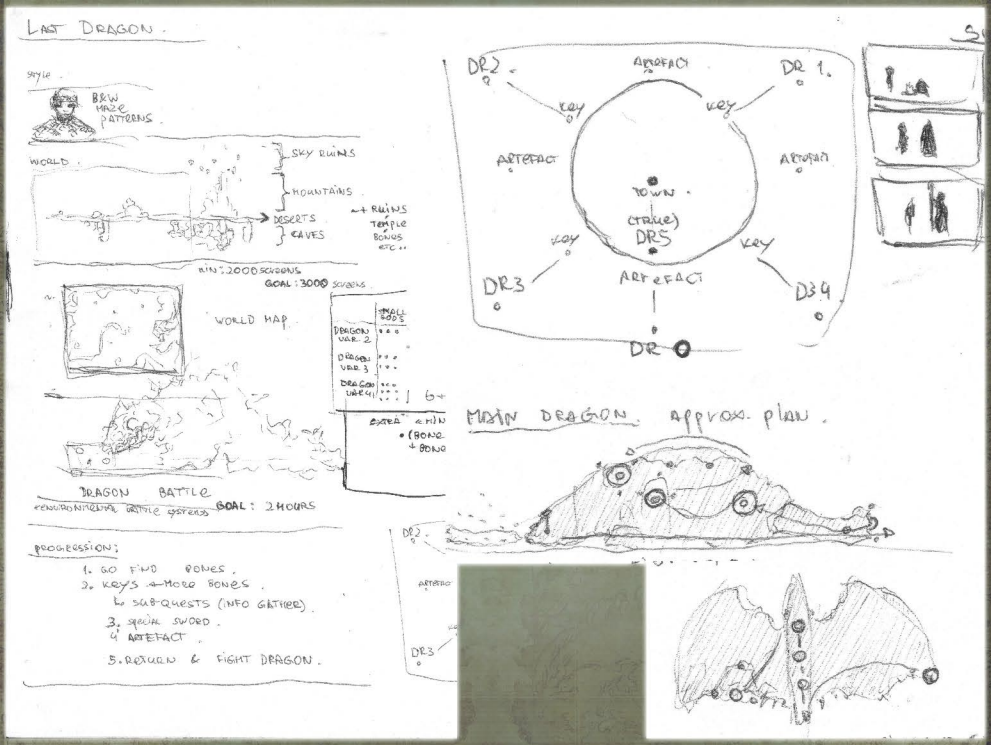
I'll tell you more about the differences between DLTD and MOD later.



MOD VERSIONS

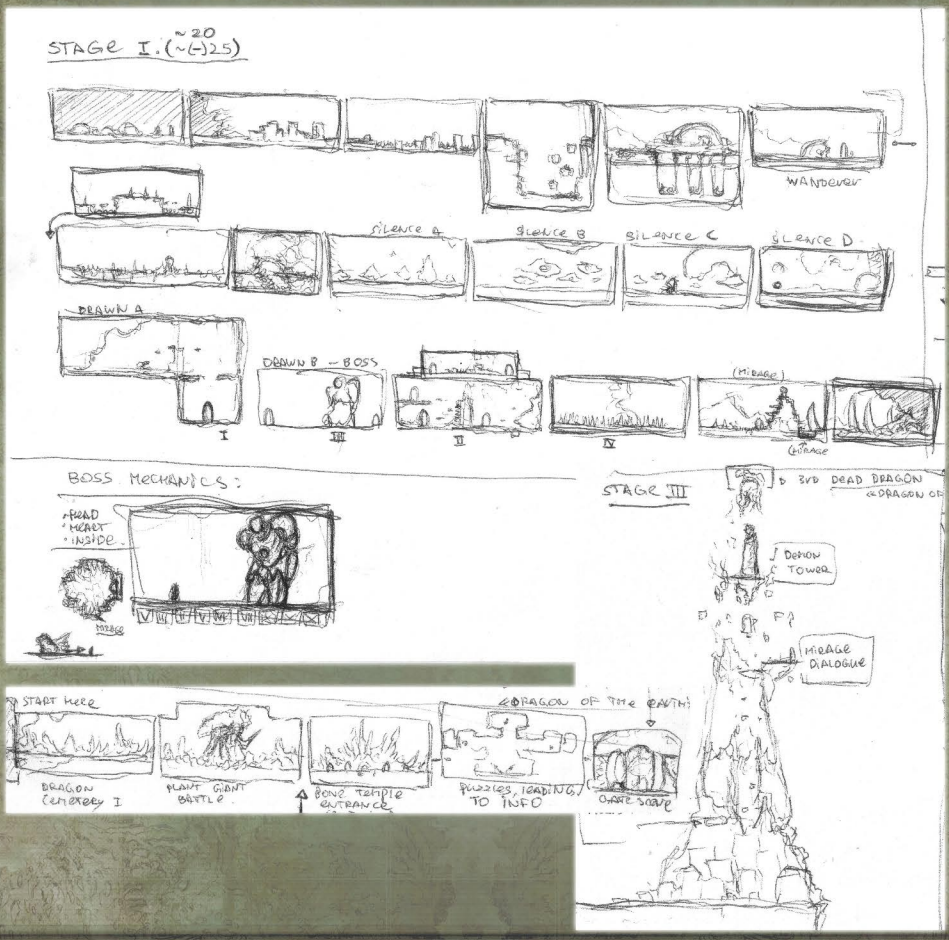
At first I had been planning a classic open-world kind of game. There would be a massive (and naturally half empty) non-linear desert, several big dragons to find and some simplistic survival management elements. I think it would feel a lot like a 2D-Shadow of the Colossus. Even though the battle would be very different, I can easily imagine people calling a game like that an "uninspired clone" (oh, how much I hate some of these Steam reviewers... how the hell you know if it's inspired or not? ... But never mind...).

Here you can see some primary concepts of it:



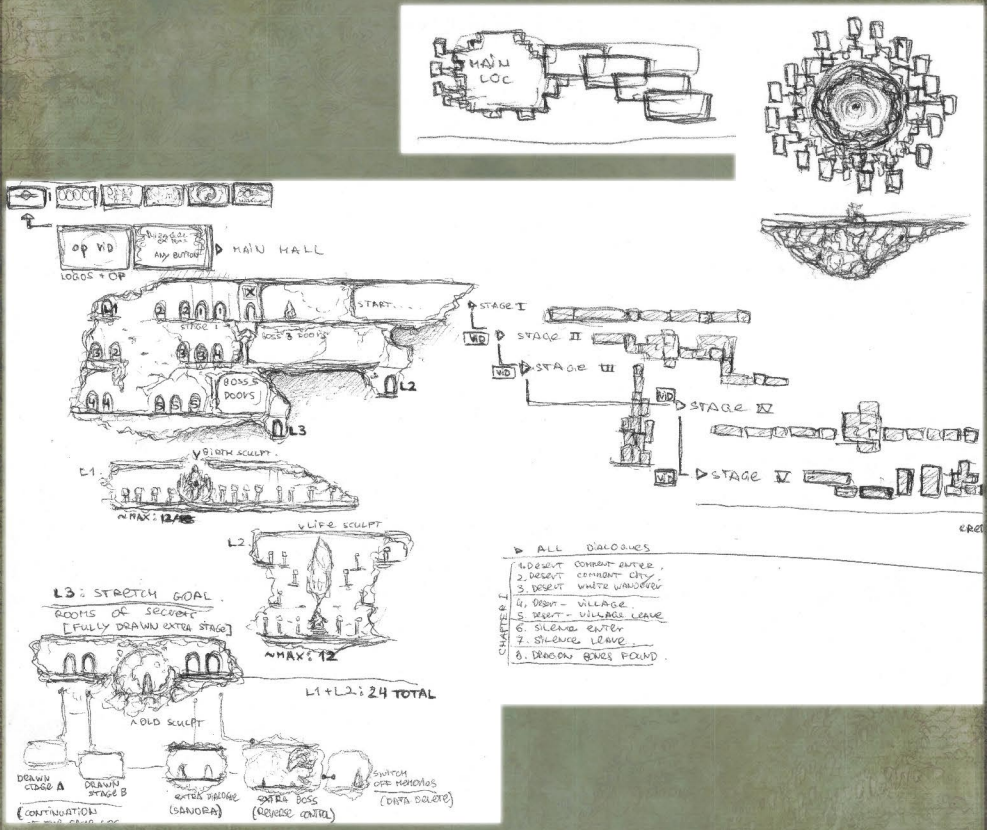
Then I had understood I can't produce enough content for such a game (having in mind a quite limited budget of my), I had started to think about the more traditional linear approach. The game would be divided into several chapters (or stages) and would be almost entirely linear. Well, I would love to play such a game, but working on it would be boring.

Here you can see some primary concepts of it:



This "linear approach" was definitely a better start than this "massive non-linear desert" I was thinking about earlier. Naturally I have decided to combine the 2 approaches - expanding the linear version to the open-world version as much as my budget can allow me. Perfect.

Here you can see some primary concepts of it:



So the end-result is still an open-world game, just not the kind I had been planning it at first. It's better. Way better. I will explain why and how exactly in the main section of the book - "The present".



Temporary Cover Art 02

>The Present...

Again, I'm a lazy bastard, so I'll just copy-paste my first MoD project's presentation here - that should work nice as a prologue. Usually I do one to present my games to the possible publishers (and get the damn spice I need!). I also present them some other materials including demos, screenshots and arts, so this short description goes as an extra. This time however I knew I'll include it in the book as it was practically a "tech demo version" of it.

Here it is in its pure unedited form:

(scroll down to start seeing it…





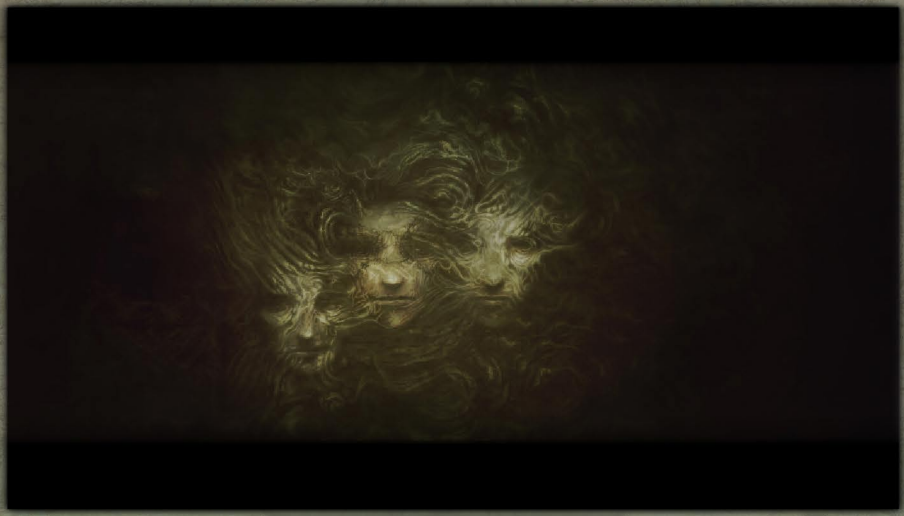
Mirage of Dragon is an open world puzzle platformer set in a post apocalyptic Arabian fantasy world with strong horror influence.

Key features:

|- True open world (absolute freedom of exploration)
|- Environmental battle system and varied boss battles (from micro to colossal)
|- Detailed 2D graphics, varied visual style
|- Rich, yet entirely optional, monologue-based story with 3 different endings
|- Original soundtrack fusing "Arabian motives", drum-heavy battle marshes, atmospheric minimalist solos, sexy rock guitars and more..
|- “Emotion-only” voice acting
|- Classic platforming, mazes, traps and puzzles

Other:

|- One and only mind-bending "Door Maze"
|- One and only "Dragon Castlefuse" (literally a fusion of a dragon and a castle)
|- last but not least: a 100-page Art-book with a guide and more



|- "True Open World"

There are literally no closed doors in Mirage of Dragon. Right from the very beginning players have the absolute freedom to go wherever they want and explore the game's events in any order they desire (while not breaking the logic of the story).
It is possible for example to visit the final boss immediately and finish the game in about 10 minutes (with some skill and knowledge) - this makes the rest of the game's content absolutely optional.
The common idea of "progress" in video games doesn't apply to Mirage of Dragon. There is no "first stage", "last stage" or "beginning of the story" (even though Mirage of Dragon has a lot of story under its skin) - instead you start exactly in the middle of all game's events - both gameplay-wise and story-wise. You decide what is a "progress" for yourself, not the game. The obvious goal I can suggest as the game's author would be to explore it 100%, get all achievements or find the fastest ways to beat it. You can also say that there is simply no progress to be made in Mirage of Dragon - it's almost like visiting a labyrinthine gallery with interactive installations opposing you on your way out. If this idea appeals to you Mirage of Dragon is a game you'll enjoy.



|- "Environmental battle system"

There are 3 steps (or modes) to this system.

Mode 1 (basic):
To kill an enemy interact with a certain element of environment (for example: use a lever to open a bridge, which results in enemy falling to lava).

Mode 2 (medium):
To use the "spells" in RPG games you often use a menu in one of the corners of the screen. Imagine this menu being integrated into environment itself, becoming a property of this particular location and not your character's. The environment itself becomes your menu.

Mode 3 (advanced):
This mode allows an enemy to use the "environmental menu" the same way as the players. It's a turn-based battle in a real-time. It may remind you chess.



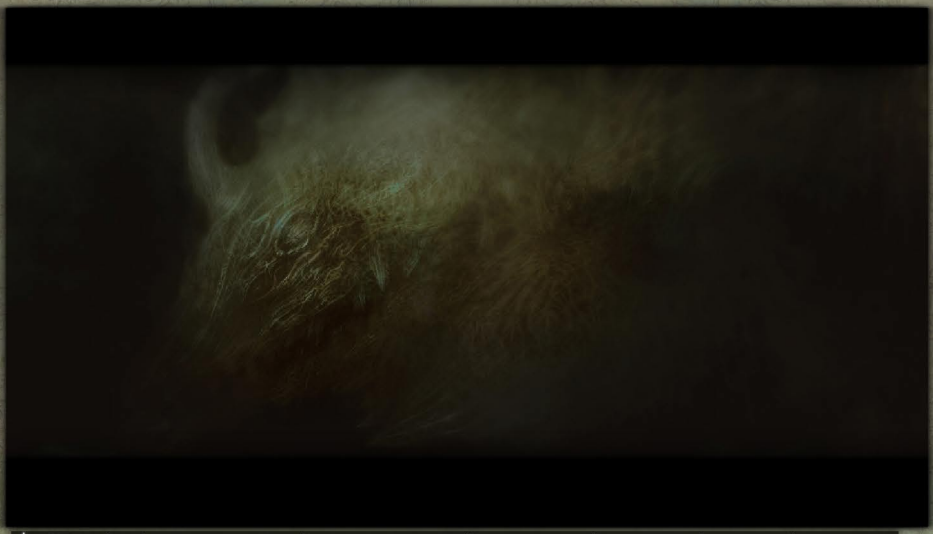
|- "Varied Boss Battles"

In theory there is only one enemy in Mirage of Dragon. Dragon. You can fight it in several different time periods, which allows you to see the growth of your enemy. The first one is slightly bigger than an ordinary cat. The last one is slightly bigger than an ordinary dreadnought.

|- "Detailed 2D graphics, varied visual style"

(You can see some early screenshots and concept arts further in the book.

There are many places to visit. Many strange "things" to encounter. All of it is drawn and animated in a traditional style "in between" the old school pixel-art and high resolution "painted art", that is quite popular nowadays. You can say that Mirage of Dragon looks as a game made for the 5th generation consoles in a world, where 2D games remained a main stream standard (at least that's the image I have).



|-"Rich (yet entirely optional) monologue-based story with 3 endings"

Wordless storytelling became a standard for puzzle platformers. I both love it and hate it. I was looking for a way to do both "word-less" and "word-full" at the same time and I found it. If you want to play Mirage of Dragon the classic "wordless" style you are free to do so - the game will never bother you with its text - you'll see an entirely symbolic story, open for whatever interpretation that works for you best. If however you want to know what's going on in more detail than meets the eye, you can read the thoughts of your character at any given moment, pressing just one button, assigned to "monologue". When you meet another character you can use the same button to read their inner monologue. If that isn't enough for you and you want some wordy fantasy style lore you can visit a library with the texts, written on the walls like in the temples of the ancient civilizations.

There are 3 ways to end the story. You get one ending for defeating the hardest boss. You get second for solving the hardest puzzle. And you get the final third ending for finding the deepest and dark-est room in the game.



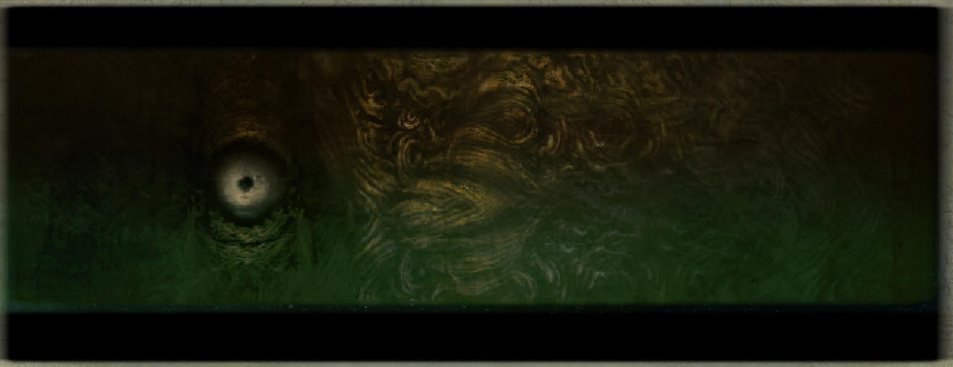
|- Original soundtrack

Since it's "Arabian fantasy" I am composing this OST in the so-called "Jewish Scale" most of the time (but not always). Naturally it has very "Arabian feel" to it, but it also can be somewhat tragic or somewhat dark, depending on the situation you see on the screen.

The instruments are traditional with only few exceptions - synthesizers for atmosphere and electric guitars for epic. (Also doing my best to avoid violins, cellos and violas...).

|- "Emotion-only" voice acting

Thought-reading" that was mentioned before is a way I found to make one game wordless and “wordfull” at the same time. Full voice acting would break this idea, so instead you'll hear the "emotional comments" of the character. Like laughing or making a "Hmmm" sound, breathing like a maniac or humming a tune. Usually these "emotional comments" are connected to the current thought of the character. Sometimes they can be clues (character will make a sound near a fake wall for example)



|- "Classic platforming, mazes, traps and puzzles"

For the most part Mirage of Dragon is a game about exploration. The levels are filled with various platforming challenges, sometimes unusual traps, not very difficult puzzles and mid-size mazes - all of it leads you to the battles with dragons. The balance is more or less classic for the genre: about 80% of exploration and about 20% of fighting the bosses.

|- Other

Door Maze. The most unique location in the game I think is a door maze. A maze consisting of doors. Very simple if you know and infuriating if you don't. So find the clue first. (this location is absolutely optional, of course).

Dragon CastleFuse. One of the forms of the Dragon - a fusion of a dragon and a castle. Naturally to kill the dragon you'll need to enter the "castle-part" and eventually get to the heart. I was looking for my own way of fighting the giant creatures - something unlike Shadow of the Colossus preferably, something different. I think I found it. My idea is "get in and beat the monsters from inside". Simple, yet effective.

100-Page Art Book. It consists of several sections including an illustrated guide and some useful maps, project's history (it's quite rich surprisingly), concept arts and other "in progress" materials.

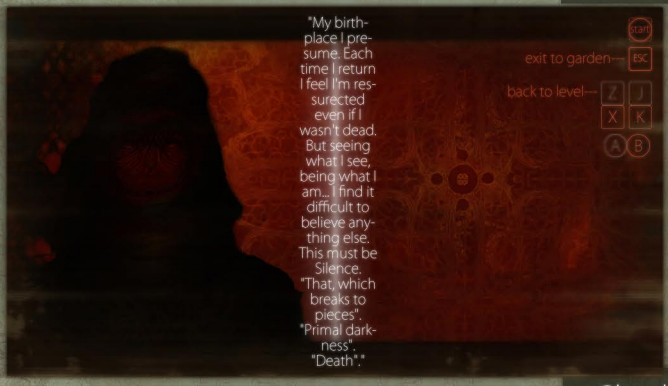
|- EARLY SCREENSHOTS (WIP)



-Gardens



-Shaitan



-Shadow

|- EARLY MOCK-UPS (WIP)



-Desert



-Caves



-Sky Palace

|- EARLY MOCK-UPS (WIP)



-Bone Valley



-Mountain Tree

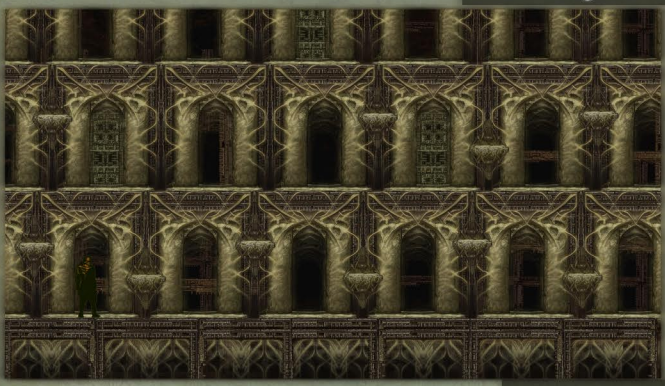


-Golden Temple

|- EARLY MOCK-UPS (WIP)



-Mirage of Dragon

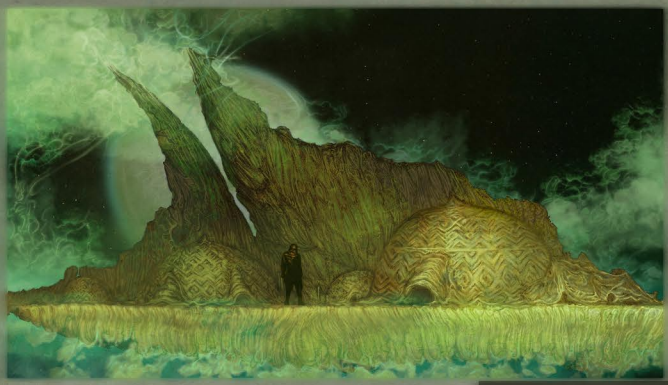


-Door Maze



-Philosopher's Stone

|- EARLY MOCK-UPS (WIP)



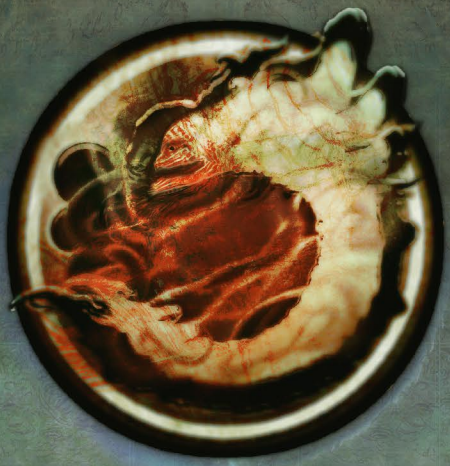
-Hunters Village



-Malachite Temple



-Bio Temple (early ver.)



The unedited presentation ends here.

The original real-time story returns - scroll down to continue.

CONCEPT

Ahh... I always have a lot of difficulties explaining what I want to do and no matter how many times I try some word or two is always missing. The hardest thing to explain this time is the "True Open-World" I keep mentioning. I'll try again starting from the very beginning...

Exploration games were tough back in the day. It was always a battle against time (or long complicated passwords). Some of these games were aware of that battle and some were not. The "right" exploration games could have some shortcuts, some alternative ways to get through the boring stages that normally people wouldn't know about when playing the game for the first time. You needed to get a clue first or find it by accident.

Secret portals were the easiest way to implement this "hidden navigation". Strange enough it was more common for the long linear games than the actual exploration games. As possibly the best example I would mention the pipes of Super Mario. Genius! These pipes blew my mind back in the day (and I wasn't alone at that...).

(comment: you might be surprised but I was often thinking about Super Mario Bros while developing Mirage of Dragon. To the point that you can tell that Mirage of Dragon IS my personal Super Mario Bros. It was my first source of inspiration for this particular project and I hope it explains a lot of the choices I made while developing it.)

Another very important example I was thinking a lot about is rather unique to my own experience. I'm talking about a broken copy of Play Station 1's Diablo. The game itself was all right, but something had happened with the CD itself (or may be it was a bad pirated copy - it wasn't that unusual for the Eastern Europe at the time). The problem of that Diablo was the save files - the game just wouldn't read my save data. And for that I'm very angry and also... very grateful.

I was speed-running. Each time I would start it from the very beginning and run wildly through the levels till my always epically brutal death. Each time I would be a little bit better, a little bit smarter, a little bit faster. I even met Diablo once, but I could never beat him.

It is still one of the best video game experiences I ever had in my life. At some point later I bought the awesome PC version of the game and I was disappointed. Playing it with an instant "save/load" menu was boring, easy, almost relaxing. I couldn't believe that the hellish massacre I was playing on PS1 and this perfectly conformist experience could be one and the same game. And they weren't one and the same.

Now... we are getting closer to my "True Open World" formula. Just have in mind the "Mario Pipe" portals and the brutal "No-Save Diablo" mode I was talking about.

The third and final example I will mention here is Metal Gear on NES. The game had passwords I think, but for some reason I was always playing it the "classic way" - always from the beginning. At first the game had impressed me with its wide (seemingly open) world, but later I had realized it was rather minimalist in fact and I could easily beat it in one sitting. The "car portals" weren't as convenient as the pipe portals of Mario and in fact you needed to use them to beat the game - still it felt good to memorize all the car points and etc. I think my last speedrun took me about 40 minutes total.

Now I'll try to explain how all these experiences combined have formed my "True Open World" formula. Imagine a standard open-world game with you always starting at the most convenient position right in the center of the world. You can't save your progress - you ALWAYS start from the very beginning. There are no closed doors. There are no obstacles, requiring you to find an upgrade in the far corner of the world. You are free to go wherever you want and you will always reach something regardless of the direction you would choose. At first the world seems big, but soon you find the "pipe portals" which allow you to travel anywhere you want very fast. In the end you find out you can get any of the endings in less than 15 minutes if you know how to get there and what to do.

The only type of data that is saved is achievements (in case of MOD it is Steam Achievements). Since there is a hidden shortcut leading to the true final boss, you can say that 99% of the game is totally optional. The only way to track your progress is getting the achievements - if you can get them all - you have seen everything the game has to offer.

Sounds strange? Sounds wrong? Well, if you think that "save game" is a modern standard - it is wrong. But I am an artist and I do not care about the modern product standards. I'm not creating products, you see. I have my own standards, coming from my own experiences I have described to you earlier.

(Comment: In case you think I'm too stupid to add a save game functionality to my games, then I must tell you, that the easiest way to save a current game in game maker is just one line of code which is this: game_save();. You can guess yourself how the game load function looks.

I fully realize how bizarre the "no save exploration game" description may sound to most gamers of today. I can only imagine now the "smart reviews" on Steam that this game may get. It will be so hard to explain them... and honestly I doubt I can. I tried to explain it here once again, but as I said before "the word or two is always missing"... You got to experience this "true open-world" yourself. It's not the kind of experience you can start enjoying immediately. Getting in it is an iterative process unfortunately.

Still I must try it. I really hope that "No Save Exploration Game" (NSE :)) will become a sub-genre of its own someday. I want that experience. Convenient things make everything less important (saving game in this case). That's why these overly-convenient AAA products feel so dull often. They are not dull - very talented and super professional people are working on them. They are just too convenient for us to care about anything. They are like people hopelessly in love with you.

Environmental Battle system

I have explained this before on my dev log's page, but since nobody cares about my blog I think it's totally all right for me to copy-paste it here "as is":

The most basic example of a good environmental battle would be the Bowser fight in the very first Super Mario Bros on Nintendo. The key difference is: you don't attack the enemy directly; instead you change the state of environment using a certain " switch" object. You don't kill the enemy – you create a situation in which the death of the enemy becomes natural··· (I'll skip the rest – it's getting wordy···)

Not much I can add now - it's a very simplistic system after all.

As a gamer I would prefer to see more "pure platformers" on my "to play" list. They are quite rare unfortunately. "Action Platformer" combos became the norm for the genre almost immediately. Apparently most developers believe that platforming alone isn't enough to entertain. Well, I believe it depends on the level design mostly. There are like 1000 ways to place four platforms in a row. Of course if you copy-paste it one way exactly it will become boring soon. Developers are not as limited nowadays as they were in the early days of the media - there is a lot of new potential to be found in the pure platforming alone. I wanted MoD to be that "pure platformer" with the most basic "jump on top" attacking style.+ the environmental "Mario VS Bouncer" style boss battles described in the article above.

I know that many gamers love button mashing, but I prefer the opposite. "No Attack button" style is especially intriguing for me (two great examples from the previous century - Sonic and Ys I-II).

(comment: As you can notice I'm often mentioning some popular games from my childhood and later - I'm not advertising or anything - it's just a fast way to explain what I mean without the need to draw the block-code logic. I have some lazy paper sketches for that matter.

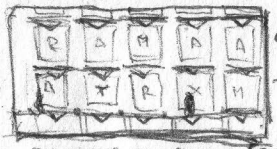
Enjoy if you must:

EBS ver. 03.

ver. 01: MARIO BOWSER

ver. 02: ATTACKS IN BUTTONS

ver. 03: BOSS VER. [BOSS 7].



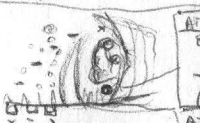
EX: 3 ACTIONS PER BATTLE [3 ROUNDS~]

EX: OBTAIN BOOST

SWITCH OFF SHIELD

LURE AND ATTACK.

DRAGON 5 form).



ATTACK 1: BALL APPEAR → FIRE (RE ON PLATFORM)

ATTACK 2: PATTERNS OF BULLETS AND MIRAGES

1. BEAT SHIELD WITH SHIELD

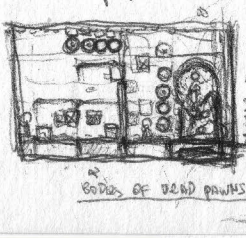
2. DESTROY ARMOR WITH (<<X>>)

3. USE PLATFORMS TO GET TO WEAK-POINT

DEATH: I. II. III. FADE TO BLACK

SCULPT- (NO e

simplified «mine field» ver. - BOSS 4





3D BATTLE

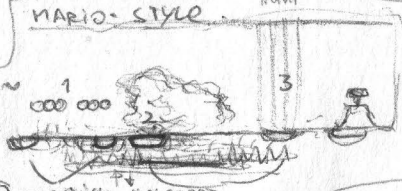


DES(IGN): [MECHANICAL]



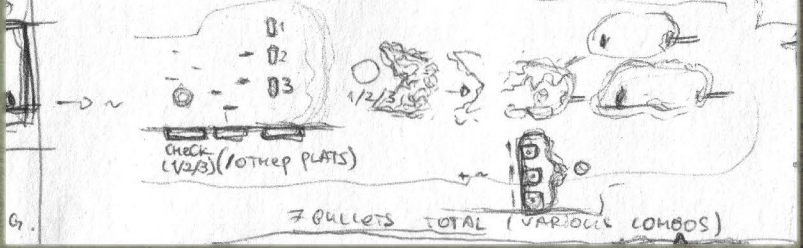
DRAGON DES: WALL-FUSE

MARIO-STYLE

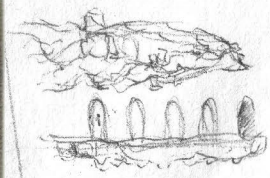


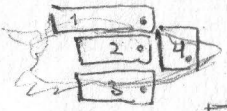
perfect jumps (ooo ooo)

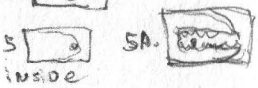
- WAIT FOR MOUSE TO GET BACK (2)
- TIME PORTAL TO NOT BE KILLED BY LIGHT (3)



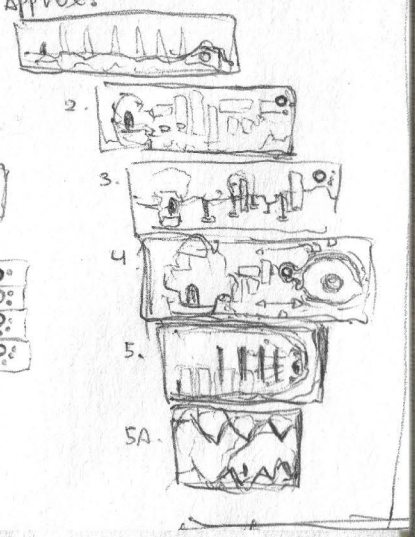
Boss 6.







Approx:

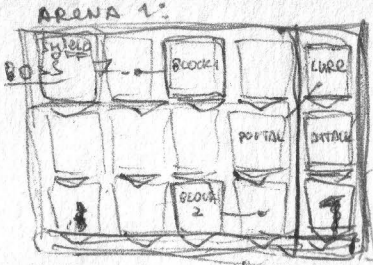


- Destroy 4 weak points in the right order for portal 5 to be opened.

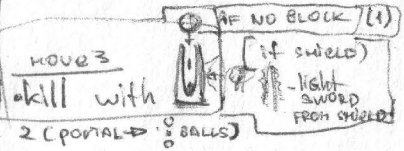
if right: ▷ final weak point

if wrong: ▷ trap

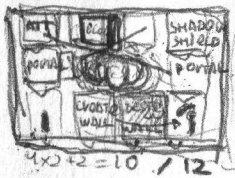
Arena 1:



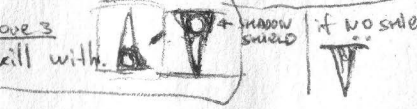
5x3 = 15

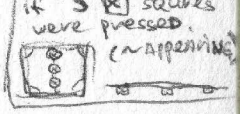


Arena 2:



4x2+2=10 / 12

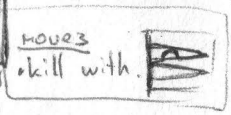




Arena 3:



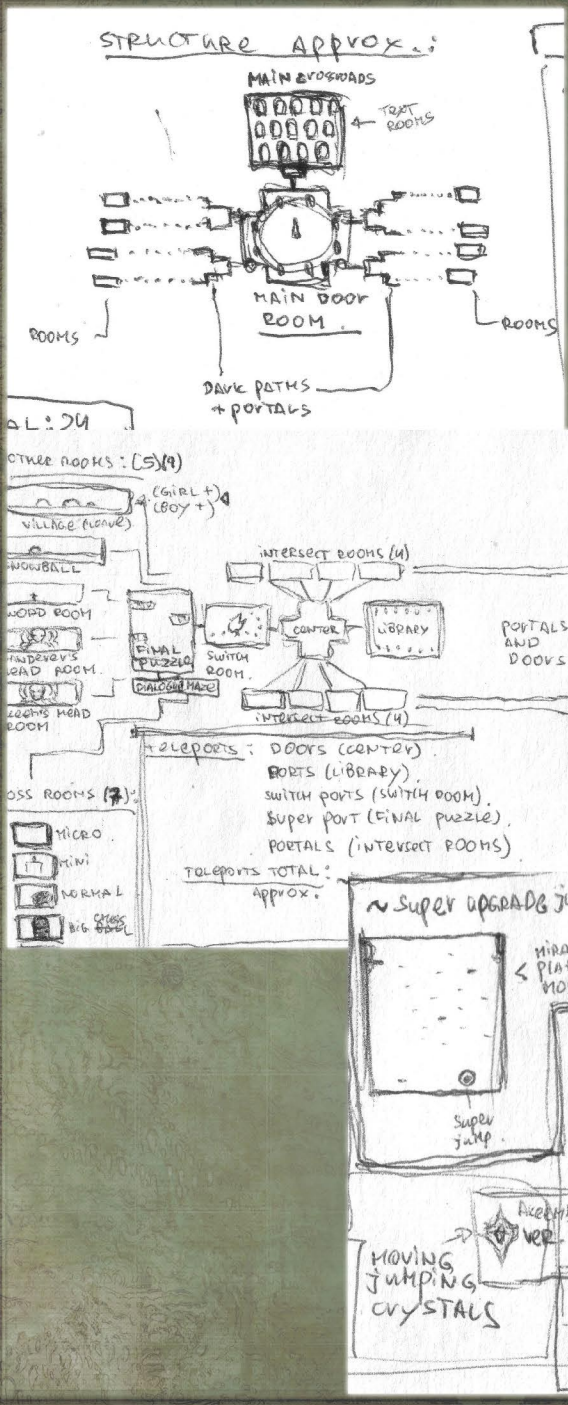
3x3=9.

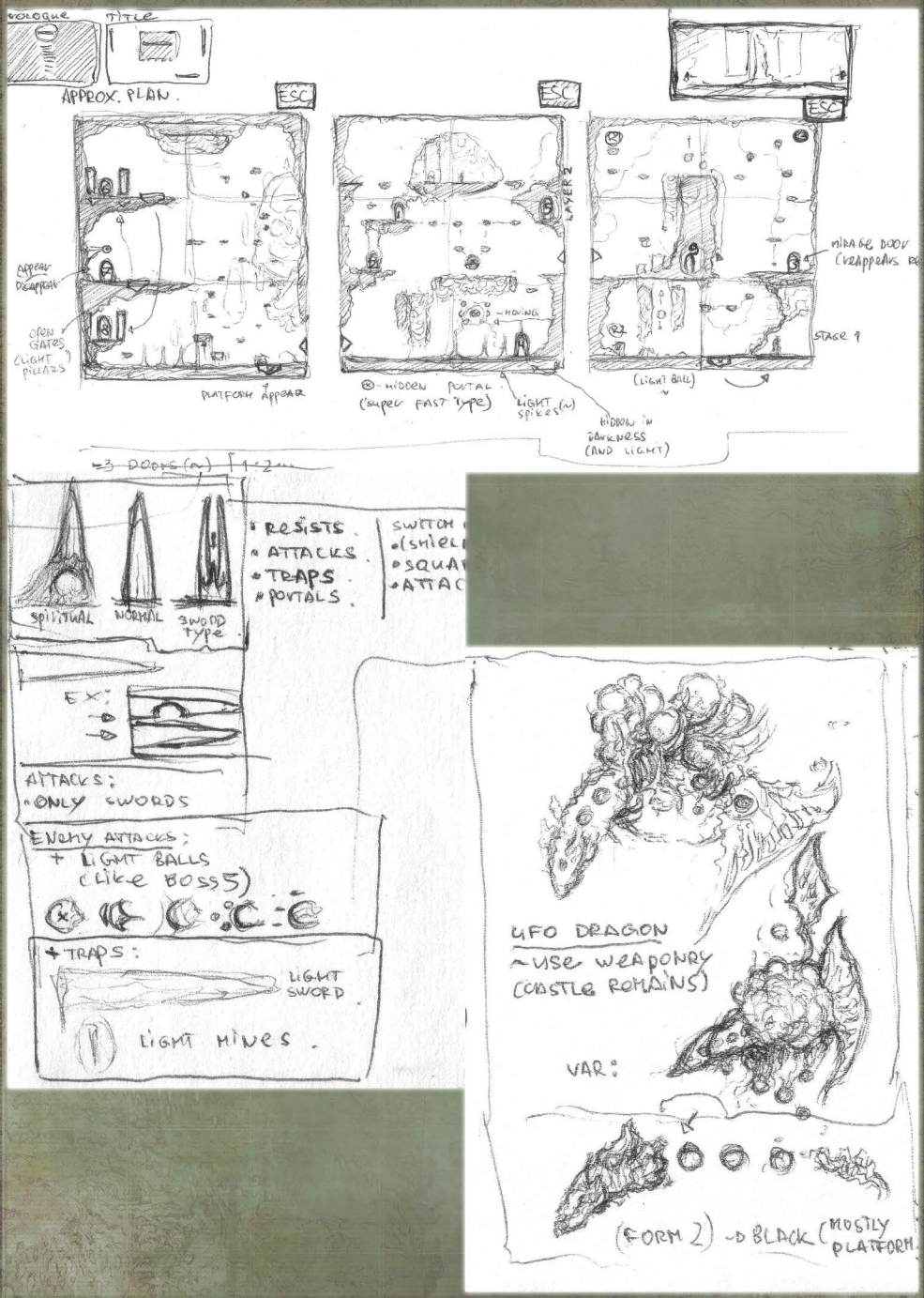


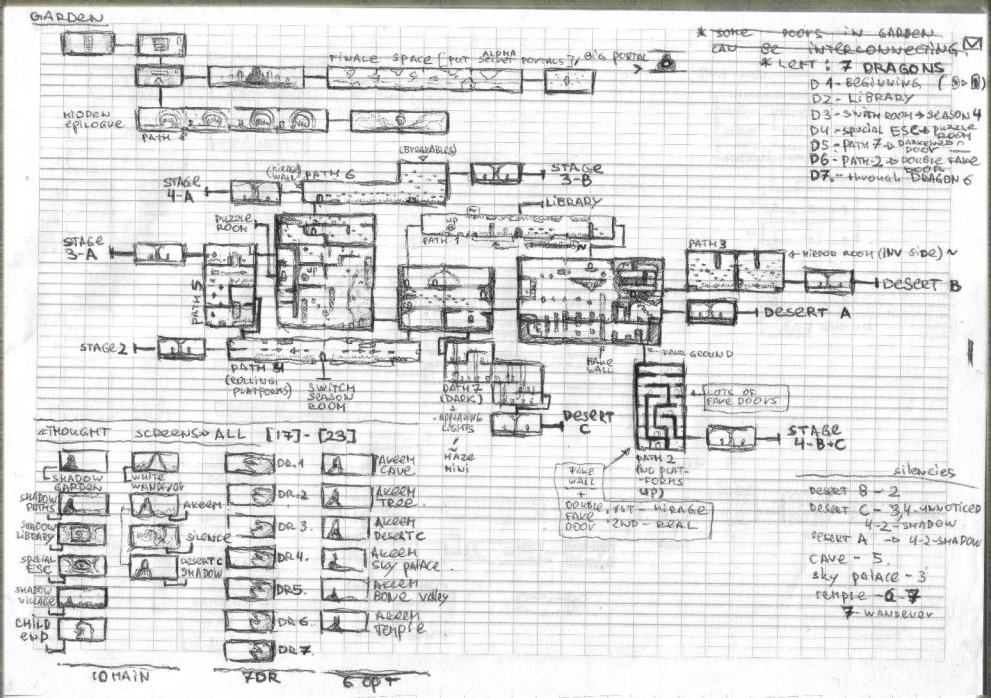
← EACH BLOCK IS A SWORD ATTACK.

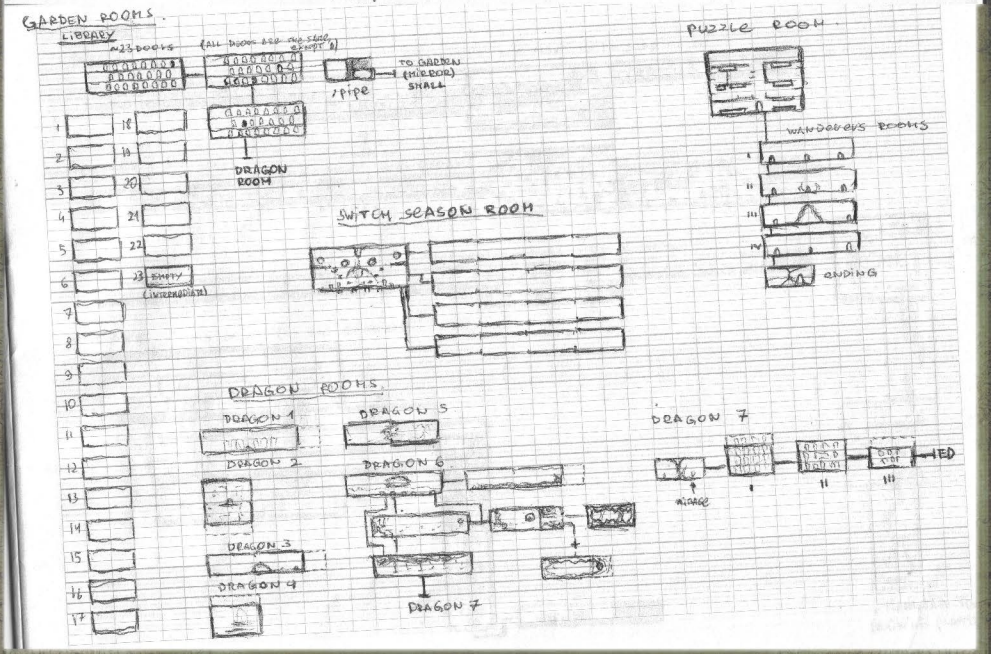


• ACTIVATE A SWORD ABOVE. SLOW TO LURE ENEMY ~~to~~ BELOW


STRUCTURE APPROX.:
MAIN CROSSROADS
4 TEXT ROOMS
MAIN DOOR ROOM
ROOMS
ROOMS
DARK PATHS + PORTALS
OTHER ROOMS: (5)(9)
(GIRL +) (BOY +)
VILLAGE (LEAVE)
SNOWBALL
WOOD ROOM
FINAL PUZZLE
SWITCH ROOM.
CENTER
LIBRARY
DIALOGUE MAZE
INTERSECT ROOMS (4)
INTERSECT ROOMS (4)
PORTALS AND DOORS
TELEPORTS: DOORS (CENTER).
PORTS (LIBRARY).
SWITCH PORTS (SWITCH ROOM).
SUPER PORT (FINAL PUZZLE).
PORTALS (INTERSECT ROOMS)
TELEPORTS TOTAL: APPROX.
MICRO
MINI
NORMAL
BIG
physical WORLD (STAGES)
LOC I : DESERT
DESERT SILENCE.
LOC II : CAVE
CAVE SILENCE
LOC III : MOUNTAIN TREE
LOC IV : BONE VALLEY
BONE TEMPL
[10 TOTAL]
(BLOOD)
HALL OF FACES
~ SUPER UPGRADE JUMP.
MIRAGE PLATFORMS MOSTLY
SUPER JUMP.
> WALL MAZE
ACCESS VER
MOVING JUMPING CRYSTALS
~ MOVE BALL PROJECTILE.

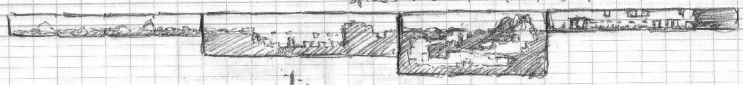

PROLOGUE
TITLE
APPROX. PLAN.
ESC
ESC
ESC
APPEAR
DISAPPEAR
OPEN GATES (LIGHT PILLARS)
PLATFORM APPEAR
LAYER 2
MOVING
HIDDEN PORTAL (SUPER FAST TYPE)
LIGHT SPIKES (W)
HIDDEN IN DARKNESS (AND LIGHT)
MIRAGE DOOR (REAPPEARS
STAGE 9
(LIGHT BALL)
3 DOORS (W)
SPIRITUAL
NORMAL
SWORD TYPE
RESISTS
ATTACKS
TRAPS
PORTALS
SWITCH
EX:
ATTACKS:
ONLY SWORDS
ENEMY ATTACKS:
+ LIGHT BALLS (like BOSS5)
+ TRAPS:
LIGHT SWORD
LIGHT MINES.
UFO DRAGON
~USE WEAPONRY (CASTLE ROMAINS)
VAR:
(FORM 2) ~D BLACK (MOSTLY PLATFORM


GARDEN
FINALE SPACE
ALPHA SECRET PORTALS
BIG PORTAL
HIDDEN EPILOGUE
PATH 8
STAGE 4-A
PATH 6
(BYPASSABLES)
STAGE 3-B
LIBRARY
PUZZLE ROOM
STAGE 3-A
PATH 5
PATH 1
PATH 3
HIDDEN ROOM (INV SIDE)
DESERT B
DESERT A
STAGE 2
PATH 4
(ROLLING PLATFORMS)
SWITCH SEASON ROOM
PATH 2 (DARK)
DESERT C
MAZE MINI
FAKE WALL
PAUSE GROUND
PATH 2 (NO PLATFORMS UP)
LOTS OF FAKE DOORS
STAGE 4-B+C
DOUBLE FAKE DOOR
1ST - MIRAGE
2ND - REAL
* SOME DOORS IN GARDEN CAN BE INTERCONNECTING
* LEFT : 7 DRAGONS
D1 - BEGINNING
D2 - LIBRARY
D3 - SWITCH ROOM → SEASON 4
D4 - SPECIAL ESC → PUZZLE ROOM
D5 - PATH 7 → DARKENED DOOR
D6 - PATH 2 → DOUBLE FAKE DOOR
D7 - through DRAGON 6
THOUGHT SCREENS ALL [17] - [23]
SHADOW GARDEN
WHITE WARNDOOR
SHADOW PATHS
AKEEM
SHADOW LIBRARY
SILENCE
SPECIAL ESC
DESERT C SHADOW
SHADOW VILLAGE
CHILD END
DR.1 AKEEM CAVE
DR.2 AZEEM TREE
DR.3 AZEEM DESERT C
DR.4 AZEEM SKY PALACE
DR.5 AZEEM BONE VALLEY
DR.6 AZEEM TEMPLE
DR.7
TO MAIN
FOR
& OPT
silencies
DESERT B - 2
DESERT C - 3,4 UNNOTICED
4-2 - SHADOW
DESERT A → 4-2-SHADOW
CAVE - 5
SKY PALACE - 3
TEMPLE - 6 7
7 WANDERER


GARDEN ROOMS
LIBRARY
~23 DOORS
(ALL DOORS ARE ONE-SIDED EXCEPT 6)
TO GARDEN (MIRROR) SHALL
PIPE
DRAGON ROOM
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23 EMPTY (UNFINISHED)
SWITCH SEASON ROOM
PUZZLE ROOM
WANDERERS ROOMS
I
II
III
IV
ENDING
DRAGON ROOMS
DRAGON 1
DRAGON 2
DRAGON 3
DRAGON 4
DRAGON 5
DRAGON 6
DRAGON 7
DRAGON 7
MIRAGE
I
II
III
END

Akeem levels.

- Desert A



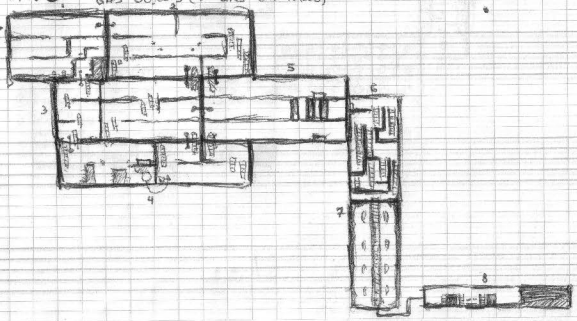
- Desert B

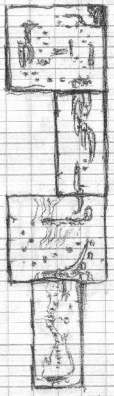


- Desert C



- cave (gas objects (+~ gas creatures)



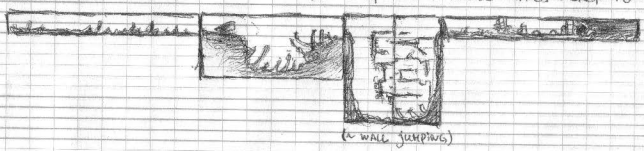


- Mountain tree (blowing plants)

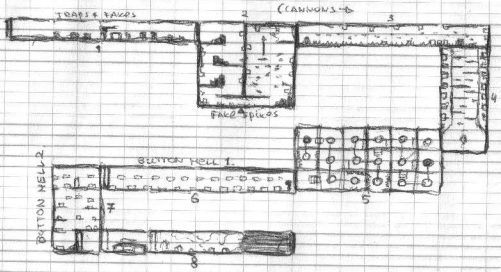
Akeem levels 2.

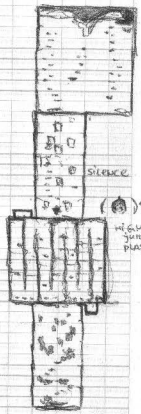
- Valley of Bones.

(bone spikes + skull mines : step to activate ~~(+~~) (+~  skull-based plant)



- Temple.





- Sky Temple

(+ falling space spikes/ white hedgehogs /+

You would be surpised may be if I would say to you that Mirage of Dragon is artistically a spiritual sequel to Jan Brueghel's painting Misanthropist. So yeah. Mirage of Dragon is a spiritual sequel to Brueghel's painting Misanthropist. Here's the painting:



Unfortunately I was a child when I saw it for the first time and I think I was shocked. It's hard to tell how much this painting have influenced me as a person, but I have been looking for my own answer to the mystery of Misanthropist and eventually I have started to work on a video game sequel to it, so you can probably tell the shock was great.

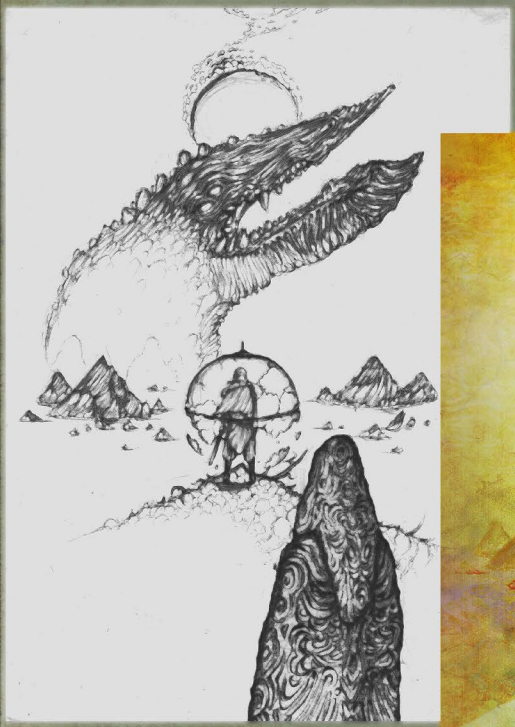
You see the book I had was very old and the pages looked reddish and partly yellow-ish like some hidden notes from the horror games. So what I saw was this (edited digitally to re-create the effect):



As a kid I thought it was a heart (and originally it's just a pouch). It was strange to see it placed so low, but it only added to the horror for me. I have never seen anything scarier than this. The "egg man" is bloody disturbing! And the black robe guy is not a pussy either - how can you not notice your heart is missing?

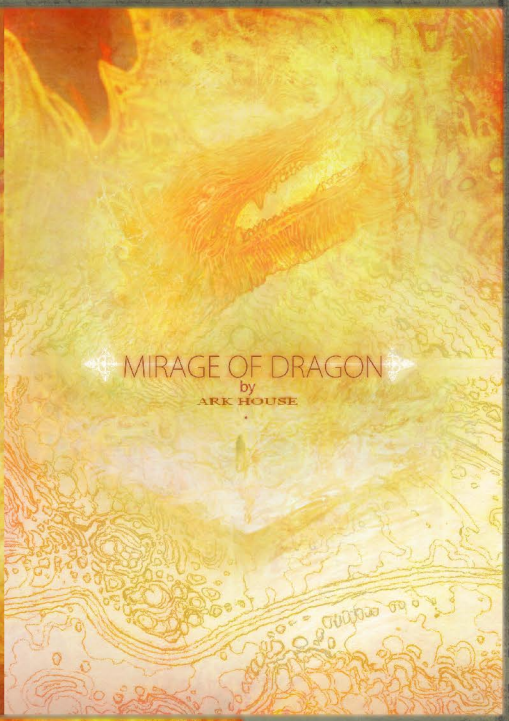
Misunderstanding the painting so much has made all of my theories go in the wrong directions - I was very disappointed in fact when I found out the truth. And it happened only recently - I was deep into Mirage of Dragon already, so I needed to change a few important things ASAP (on the brighter side I have decided to make a true "misanthropist" game right after I'll finish MoD, so it's not over yet!).

Mirage of Dragon Cover Art in progress:






MIRAGE OF DRAGON
ARK HOUSE


MIRAGE OF DRAGON
by
ARK HOUSE



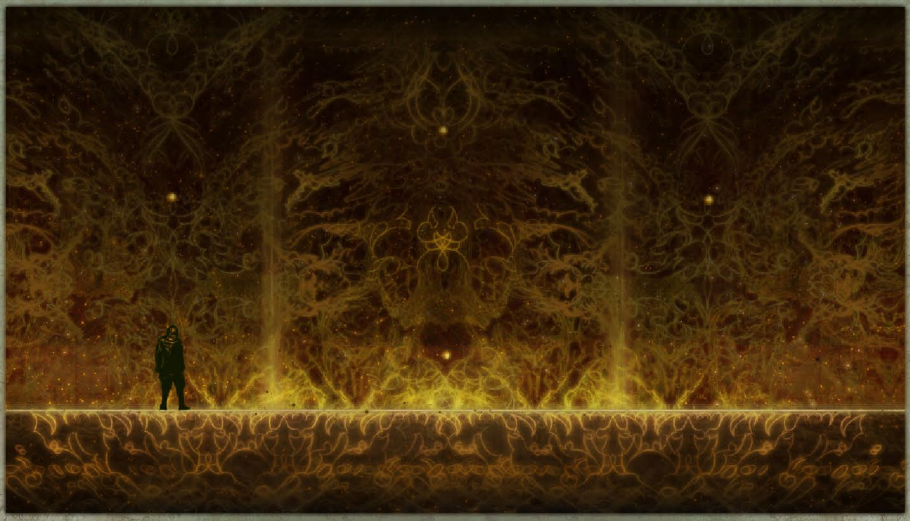

MIRAGE OF DRAGON
That which Breaks to Pieces

...then I found out the truth behind Misanthropist...

Switching from Misanthropist-Mirage of Dragon to just Mirage of Dragon had changed the way I saw the project, so many things I wanted to mention here are now pointless. Still, I have a thing or two to say about the animation and the backgrounds.

...

It's different for everybody but for me the most time-consuming thing ever is drawing backgrounds. Doing it the way I want requires a tonne of time I normally do not have. But it's OK in my case - I'm not drawing graphics because I'm a video game developer. I'm making games because I'm an artist. Visual part is the heart and blood of all my projects. Mirage of Dragon is no exception. So be prepared to see a lot of different places with gigabytes of graphics compressed into. The most interesting location for me as an artist is the patterned part of Garden. Here's an example:



See what's good about it? Nothing but the lines is used here. Patterns consisting of the simple colored lines. That's a fairly simple experiment I'm going to work with more in the future. To me 2D games are all about lines. You can make lines in 3d games too, but why would you? Lines are good in the 2-dimensional worlds. I hope I'll have another chance to prove it to you.

Just a few words about color, contrast and brightness...

My art may look too bleak for you or otherwise too bright. The reason is my weak eyesight. I can solve the blurring problem with the glasses, but the contrasts are weak and the colors are greyish no matter what I do. I always adjust the monitor settings accordingly - the default settings kill my eyes. For the most people these settings are all right - they rarely change them. So the picture I see while working on Mirage of Dragon and the picture you see while playing it is probably not one and the same thing. The chance is the game looks horrible on your monitor (and the chance is you don't even realize it). Know this however - the game looks awesome on my monitor when I look on it with my eyes. Unfortunately I can't adjust the settings of your eyes, so I think there is no such thing as "recommended settings" for a monitor. Depending on your eyes it may differ significantly.

So the only thing I can say: the game shouldn't look too bleak or too bright. Nothing should look too black (I never use "true black") and nothing should look too white (I never use "true white"). Having some brightness/contrast settings in the game itself is probably the best solution, but unfortunately I have no time to implement such comfy features. Don't call me lazy - if I'll spend too much time on this game I may loose everything... again. Thanks for your understanding (if you do).

looks right in my eyes:



eye killer!



bleak

Animation. Almost forgot to say something about animation. Well, there is not much to say. My methods are traditional and I'm not that good at it to be honest. The walking (or running) cycles are a nightmare to make. Everything else is much easier. I'm actually trying to invent my own super convenient secret technique, but it's too soon to say anything - I'll test it on my next project.

Although I'm somewhat proud of my big creature animation method. I'm not using bones (which are very popular), because they look mechanical - good for robots and well... skeletons, but biological creatures require more movement, more blur and less frames in my opinion. I'm doing almost exactly the same thing, but I move every part manually, modifying and even redrawing some of these parts in some of the frames. I'm not as perfect at this as computer, so the end-result looks more hand-made (because it is) and so more natural in my opinion. Shit takes time, but it's worth it.

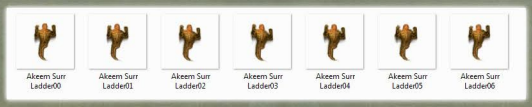




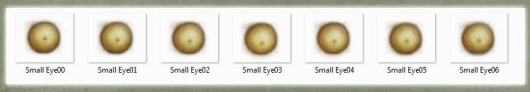

Eye Shielded Purple Death00
Eye Shielded Purple Death01
Eye Shielded Purple Death02
Eye Shielded Purple Death03
Eye Shielded Purple Death04
Eye Shielded Purple Death05


Fire Orb Rotating00
Fire Orb Rotating01
Fire Orb Rotating02
Fire Orb Rotating03
Fire Orb Rotating04


Green Attack00
Green Attack01
Green Attack02
Green Attack03
Green Attack04
Green Attack05
Green Attack06
Green Attack07
Green Attack08
Green Attack09


Akeem Surr Ladder00
Akeem Surr Ladder01
Akeem Surr Ladder02
Akeem Surr Ladder03
Akeem Surr Ladder04
Akeem Surr Ladder05
Akeem Surr Ladder06


Portal Big Seal00
Portal Big Seal01
Portal Big Seal02
Portal Big Seal03
Portal Big Seal04
Portal Big Seal05
Portal Big Seal06
Portal Big Seal07
Portal Big Seal08


Small Eye00
Small Eye01
Small Eye02
Small Eye03
Small Eye04
Small Eye05
Small Eye06


Abirvalg Run00
Abirvalg Run01
Abirvalg Run02
Abirvalg Run03
Abirvalg Run04

MUSIC AND SOUND

Composing my own Arabian Album was always my dream. I just love that kind of music. And I've always thought I can do it better than anybody else (yeah, I think so still). My answer to that now is:

NEVER AGAIN!!!

I had no problems with the actual composition, but arranging the music was a nasty masochistic kind of "fun" I would never want to repeat again. I mean the choice of instruments more than anything else. I simply don't have enough! My financial situation is partly to blame here - the software I'm using is almost 20 years old and it wasn't the best even back then (and no - it doesn't support VST :D). The only instrument I have which I believe sounds Arabian is Sitar. My woodwinds sound like ass - usually I'm combining 3 to 5 instruments to mimic the sound. Every other instrument I can use sounds either European-classic or too modern. So...

NEVER AGAIN!
NEVER!

Some vocals could solve the problem, but I'm a horrible singer with a horrible microphone bought for 2 bucks. Ubisoft's Prince of Persia soundtracks were full of vocals - I was always wondering - why!? Now I know why - there aren't many instruments that sound Arabian. It's HARD to compose an Arabian kind of music without a beautiful female "AaaaaaAAAAaaaaaAAAAh... OoooooOOoooh". You know how it sounds :)

Still... I believe my work on this soundtrack is very good. I believe it's the best Arabian music album ever composed. Well... in my little world it is :D Let me know if you have heard anything better - as I said before I'm a big fan of Arabian-like music, so I would be happy to find something better myself. For now... my mission is accomplished. I have a trump card, you see...

And the trump card is SFX! I wouldn't even think of it, since the sounds I make honestly suck. But! I have a good digital friend from America - John Moh, who happens to be a great sound designer. His work has real quality, so using the sound effects instead of music in several sections of the game was a smart thing to do - this minimized the risk of me overusing the damn Sitars and the woodwind combos I'm still hearing in my nightmares.

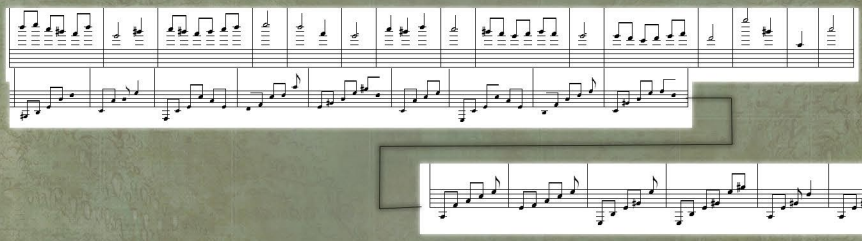
Thank you for helping me yet again, John.

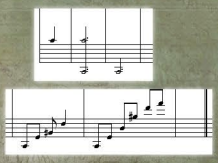
Also, I think it would be cool to add some midis to the Soundtrack folder (you don't buy the soundtrack separately, but receive it for free as a bonus to the game! If you haven't found it yet - it's in the game's folder! Enjoy the arguably best Arabian-like music album ever composed!).

If you are not into music, then you may ask what the hell are you talking about? (I actually believe it's not you first time asking :)). Midi format to composer is like a source code to programmer. Normally composers don't give away their midis that easy, but as a multimedia artist I see it from a different perspective and I'm always doing a lot of changes along the way, so the final result may turn out to be something quite different - sometimes I may cut big parts of original composition just because it's getting too long for a 1-minute run stage. You may even like my midis more. I'll put them in the Soundtrack folder (which you can always find in the game's folder). Have fun... if you must.

To make the section longer (you know why I need it) here's some notes:







Title Screen theme

Garden's theme

hand 1:



hand 2:



hand 3 :)



STORY

I have a lot I want to say in this section. The story of Mirage of Dragon is absolutely optional, minimalist and symbolic. Its explanation may require more words than it itself contains. But of course I'll try to simplify it as much as I can.

First I want to explain what Fata Morgana is. It's a super mirage! And any mirage is just an optical illusion - no magic - it can be recorded on camera. But unfortunately Fata Morganas are rare - these super mirages can project places from some distance away. Again, no magic - it's a real-time (video only) illusion of another physically existing place. May be Wikipedia can explain it better - I hope it's OK to use its content here:

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Fata Morgana (mirage)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

A **Fata Morgana** (Italian: [fa:ta mor ga:na]) is an unusual and complex form of superior mirage that is seen in a narrow band right above the horizon. It is the Italian name for the Arthurian sorceress Morgan le Fay, from a belief that these mirages, often seen in the Strait of Messina, were fairy castles in the air or false land created by her witchcraft to lure sailors to their deaths. Although the term Fata Morgana is sometimes applied to other, more common kinds of mirages, the true Fata Morgana is different from both an ordinary superior mirage and an inferior mirage.

Fata Morgana mirages significantly distort the object or objects on which they are based, often such that the object is completely unrecognizable. A Fata Morgana can be seen on land or at sea, in polar regions or in deserts. It can involve almost any kind of distant object, including boats, islands and the coastline.

A Fata Morgana is often rapidly changing. The mirage comprises several inverted (upside down) and erect (right side up) images that are stacked on top of one another. Fata Morgana mirages also show alternating compressed and stretched zones.[1]

The optical phenomenon occurs because rays of light are bent when they pass through air layers of different temperatures in a steep thermal inversion where an atmospheric duct has formed.[1] (A thermal inversion is an atmospheric condition where warmer air exists in a well-defined layer above a layer of significantly cooler air. This temperature inversion is the opposite of what is normally the case; air is usually warmer close to the surface, and cooler higher up.)

In calm weather, a layer of significantly warmer air can rest over colder dense air, forming an atmospheric duct which acts like a refracting lens, producing a series of both inverted and erect images. A Fata Morgana requires a duct to be present; thermal inversion alone is not enough to produce this kind of mirage. While a thermal inversion often takes place without there being an atmospheric duct, an atmospheric duct cannot exist without there first being a thermal inversion.



A Fata Morgana seen from the coast of Queensland, Australia.



Now a few words about Arabian hell, Shaitan, gardens and etc...

You know the famous Floating Gardens of Persia (I mean “Hanging Gardens of Babylon”). I've tried to make my own surrealized version of it in Mirage of Dragon drawing no plants whatsoever! I think its genius because you don't see the garden - there is none - but it feels like a garden. It should be a garden, except it isn't. Genius.

Shaitan is Arabian Satan. I can't be sure but I think that Christian Satan is in fact based on Arabian Shaitan and Shaitan means hatred. In Mirage of Dragon you can see my own surrealised Golden Shaitan who does absolutely nothing! That's how I imagine God (good or bad). He's there for you to notice his presence and that's about it. You can do whatever you want, but he will never reply you directly. He won't move an inch regardless of anything. That's why he's a god. But if you want to destroy your own consciousness (simply quit the game :)) he's the one to seek. A glorified "quit game" menu.



Arabian hell - ... I'll quote Wikipedia again:

Jahannam

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jahannam (Arabic: جهنم (etymologically related to Hebrew גיהנום *Gehennom* and Greek: γέεννα) is one of the names for the Islamic concept of Hell. Other names for hell (or the different gates of hell[11]) occurring in the Quran include: *al-Nar* النار ("The Fire"[2]), *Jaheem* جحيم ("Blazing Fire"[3]), *Hatamah* حطم ("That which Breaks to Pieces"[4]), *Haawiyah* هاوية ("The Abyss"[5]), *Ladthaa* لظى, *Sa'eer* سعير ("The Blaze"[6]), *Saqar* سقر.[7][8] The hadith of Islamic prophet Muhammad, and some writings of later Islamic scholars also describe Jahannam.

According to the Qur'an, on the Last Day[Note 1] the world will be destroyed and all people and *jinn* will be raised from the dead to be judged by God as to whether they deserved to be sent to paradise (*Jannah*) or hell.[10] Hell will be occupied by those who do not believe in God (Tawhid), have disobeyed His laws, and/or reject His messengers.[7] One group that will not have to wait until the Last Day to enter hell are "Enemies of Islam", who are sentenced immediately to Hell upon death.[10]

Suffering in hell is both physical and spiritual,[10][11] and varies according to the sins of the condemned.[12] As described in the Quran, Hell has seven levels (each one more severe than the one above it[10]), seven gates (each for a specific group of sinners[13]), a blazing fire, boiling water, and the Tree of *Zaqqum*.[14] Not all Muslims and scholars agree whether hell is an eternal destination or whether some or even all of the condemned will eventually be forgiven and allowed to enter paradise.[10][12][15]

Contents [hide]

1 Sources
2 Concepts of Jahannam
  2.1 The 7 levels of hell
  2.2 Duration

I fell in love with the symbolism in this translation: "that which breaks to pieces". It's exactly how I imagined the story and the world of Mirage of Dragon - all of it broken to pieces for you to find, but never restore.

Yes, the world of Mirage of Dragon is Arabian hell Hatamah - "that which breaks to pieces". I have written a pretty classic linear story - a grand quest like countless others - and then I literally broke it to pieces. Everything is broken - the protagonist and his story, the world itself, the dragon. Naturally the hero remembers nothing, but wandering the garden and Necropolis (the city of the dead) he can reach the pieces of his own memories (only if he wants). He can be anywhere and any time (if he can reach it in the maze).

I keep repeating "if he wants" and "if he can", because the story of Mirage of Dragon is entirely optional. In fact more than 90% of the entire game is optional. That's how I wanted it to be right from the start.

But trying to re-unite the pieces into something whole I would say the main theme of the story is... frustration. And also "desert" in its widest meaning, but it's secondary, since it's the source and catalyst of this frustration. The linear and simplified version of the story goes like this:

MAJOR SPOILERS AHEAD... I think

The hunter's name was Akeem. He saw a big Fata Morgana of a dragon somewhere deep in the desert. Knowing what you know thanks to Wikipedia, you can tell, that the dragon existed somewhere - possibly somewhere far far away from the desert... But at the time there was no Internet, and naturally Akeem thought the dragon was somewhere nearby. He thought he can reach and defeat the monster in a matter of days - he was a brave hunter after all...

But life sucks, so Akeem could never find the Dragon. In a way he had conquered the desert - he knew it better than anybody else - slowly going nuts he even thought it's mutual. Once he had found some ancient texts, hinting at the Dragon's location. The monster was called the Dragon of the Sea. The problem was however... nobody knew what the hell this "sea" is and no ancient text was descriptive enough describing it. It's a desert world now - the seas have disappeared naturally.

Looking for the sea (not knowing the desert IS the exact location of that sea from 1000 years ago) and "hunting" the Dragon, Akeem died. Twisted his leg and fell down from the mountain. He has never achieved anything. A warrior who never fought...

At the moment next to Akeem's death "Mirage of Dragon" begins. You are in hell. You don't remember anything and you don't know anything. You are a shadow of Akeem. Do what you want now. You have options, you see :)

And these options are:
Find the mirages of your dragon (there are plenty of them...). (Consider these bad endings)
Find the only true dragon and reach the stars (the true ending, I suppose).
Stay in hell, becoming someone important... (I won't tell you who)
Find the Genie and leave the hell.

10 endings (exits) total. They are quite simplistic, so don't expect much. (again, that's the way I like it - big cinematic endings would look inappropriate and alien in a game with an optional story. I leave the details to your imagination.).

And that's it. Very simple story, that only seems complex, because it is divided (or broken!) into many many little pieces, that don't even look connected at first glance. But technically it's just one long monologue (another thing I have always wanted to try..). Of course it is recommended to find and read it in its entirety in the game itself if you are interested in it to begin with. If you are not interested - well, skip it entirely. In my opinion it works as well without the story.

I wanted to say something else, but I forgot what it was, so here's a small bonus: unused dialogue parts. At first I have started with a much more classic approach with some long dialogues like this one:

WHITE WANDERER DIALOGUE 1

Wand: Greetings… Akeem.
Akeem: White Wanderer… It's been a while.
Wand: It's been a while… How are you? How's your leg?
Akeem: I can walk again.
Wand: I see. I knew you won't give up.
Akeem: I had no choice.
Wand: Nobody has it. The choice is a mirage.
Akeem: I disagree.
Wand: How so?
Akeem: There is a choice… a choice between the only truth and countless mirages.
Wand: He he… You are right. If that is what you would call a choice.
Akeem: What about you? Still wandering?
Wand: They call me "Wanderer" for a reason. I'm always the same. Not much to tell…
Akeem: And yet I have questions for you. Too much have changed around these parts – I recognize nothing.
Wand: The desert remains a desert. Is it surprising you don't recognize the sand?
Akeem: Even the sand feels different this time.
Wand: The night is upon us. Share the light with me, Akeem. I'll tell you all I know.
Akeem: You are right. This night will be cold.
Wand: As all nights this season. The ancients were calling it "winter".
Akeem: I miss winter.
Wand: I barely remember it unfortunately...

***

Wand: Where have you found such a nice stone, Akeem?
Akeem: In my cave. There are so many in fact I could become rich.
Wand: You would, but not in this time. Humans are rarity these days… gems are nothing compared.
Akeem: This is what I wanted to ask. What's happening in the city?
Wand: Not much. It's closed as tight as before.
Akeem: Do they still refuse to open the damn gates?
Wand: No. They simply can't open the gates.
Akeem: How so?
Wand: Too heavy.
Akeem: Pathetic. Why can't they build a ladder?
Wand: I don't know. Either they can't build anything at all or they simply see no reason.
Akeem: Because the "saints" say so?
Wand: It's a possibility, yes. Saints know other way, you see…
Akeem: What way?
Wand: Underground passage, built by the first king himself. Some say there is a whole world underground – cities and castles, gardens even.
Akeem: Bullshit.
Wand: For the most part of it – yes. But the tunnel itself is there. In theory it should connect the city with an old Vatsara Temple – the one on the western road to Agost.
Akeem: I came from there – there is no temple, there is no Agost, there is no western road even.
Wand: What is there then?
Akeem: Desert.

Wand: So… was your long journey in vain?
Akeem: It was. I found nobody.
Wand: Saddens me…
Akeem: I confirmed one thing though.
Wand: Which is?
Akeem: There is nowhere left to run.
Wand: May be you need to run longer?
Akeem: One life wouldn't be enough to cross the Amberd desert. I'm stuck here. And most surprisingly I'm content with it being this way.
Wand: You found the only truth among the mirages?
Akeem: Yes. I will finish what I have started. I never needed any doubts, I never needed anyone.
Wand: You believe this?
Akeem: I believe in this.
Wand: You were alone for too long, Akeem. You forgot the joys of company.
Akeem: May be so. In this desert it's better to forget about the silly things told to you by your mother. I did everything I could to return that I have left. The truth that was left to me instead is this: there is nowhere left to run.
Wand: I bet the saints of the city say the same things to their followers. All of you… you are just too frightened to dream about anything that's not in your hand already.
Akeem: And for a good reason too – even dreaming is dangerous in the desert. It's been a while since I had a decent sleep.
Wand: The mirages grew strong enough to enter your dreams, to become your dreams.
Akeem: Is Silence growing?

Wand: It is growing. And it is near. Always near… Tomorrow morning after another impulse it will expand itself yet again. If I were you I would hide.
Akeem: I won't hide – not anymore. I'm going east.
Wand: Deeper into the desert? To the "Ruined Oasis"?
Akeem: Yes, to the Dragon of The Sands.
Wand: What if he was devoured by Silence?
Akeem: Have you seen it with your own eyes?
Wand: No. Just a realistic guess on my side.
Akeem: Then I must find him.
Wand: You know the path?
Akeem: Yes, this region is home to me after all. It's like I read a map from my memories. But other than that map, it's alien to me… again.

…and it goes on and on and on...
I never finished it.

Sorry again for my English. I'm trying to improve it, but it's not easy. I can't afford a sensei and I have never been anywhere outside Lithuania. And also I can't afford proof-reading, so don't ask. No, thanks, have a nice day.

GAMEPLAY

Theories may sound good on paper, they may look good written in code, but good gameplay is not exactly good game design + good coding. It's more about the balance. 1 pixel difference in speed may ruin or save an entire game. 1 extra pixel of the playable character's hit box may turn your experience to either hell or heaven. What I want to say is that a good game is not about its particular features or its unique "ground breaking" innovations. Good game is a good balance. That's more or less everything I can say about gameplay overall, but there is much more to say about any particular project and MoD is no exception.

Can I achieve a perfect balance this time? (at the moment of writing this the game is not finished). Who knows... I can say for sure that I will achieve my subjective perfect balance - on the day of release it will be a perfect game for myself (and I hope it won't have any bugs). Will it be a perfect game for you personally? Well, that chance is almost nonexistent - too many things are associated with video games nowadays. To some it may be a kind of sport, others may look for art and spiritual experience, to some others gaming is a mindless fun - just like Atari many years ago, but with a better looking graphics.

Mirage of Dragon is more about art and experience. I believe the term "video games" is old and confusing. I would describe modern video games as "Experience Simulator". Doesn't sound as good, but this is exactly what we are doing and where it's heading. We are creating and simulating interactive experiences. And this is probably the most important thing ever. From this moment on I usually go global and dramatic explaining why video games is a turning point of human civilization, but in this book it might be a little bit inappropriate, so I'll leave the "dreaming" to you and switch back to Mirage of Dragon... for now.

Right... I was talking about the balance and also I was mentioning this "True open World" formula few sections above. Yes.

Balancing the "True open World" in the "No Save Exploration" style is like solving a big sudoku puzzle.
Rooms can't be too big.
Levels can't be too long.
The starting point of each area should be reachable in 5 minutes.
The end of each area should be reachable in 15 minutes.
All ending achievements should be obtainable in less than 20 minutes (15 preferably).
The first room of the game must be an actual center of the game's world map and should be accessible any moment in the game.

With such strict boundaries, managing the game's content can be a hard task. Of course the game's difficulty must be rather low for the most part. Player is immortal (meaning you have infinite "continue"s). No checkpoints - dying restarts the room.

A lot of testing will be done for all of this to be balanced properly.

...

One of the most important gameplay elements of Mirage of Dragon is the "pure platforming" I was talking about earlier. Even the world structure itself is secondary in comparison. If getting from a point A to a point B is not enjoyable enough, the As and Bs become almost meaningless. This "purity" of platforming is again a limitation making my life harder, but it is also an invaluable experiment for me as a game designer.

...



Break!
-an entire month I have been working on the game, writing nothing for this book.
I return to continue.
The thought is lost and I'm too lazy to read my own text, so I'll start anew. I have something else to say now.)
!Break



I have been thinking a lot about my game and my own place in the industry this month. I have realized one quite important thing for me (or any other developer/creator): the target audience. Who are these people? Really, who they are? There is no one right answer to the question, but my personal is:

Myself. My target audience is myself. Now and forever.

Realizing this was a big surprise for me. It may sound wrong to some people, but seriously... it's not like anybody needs me pleasing them - there are many huge AAA companies that can do it miles better than me. Indie developer shouldn't care about others - the same way others don't care about him (as a fan of indie video games you may think you care and really - you are not. You probably can name just several super popular titles and that's it. Nobody cares about young indies. Nobody cares about young anybody. And don't even start about crowd-funding... Crowd-funding is a pirate bay of Inafune, Suzuki, Igarashi and the others. I consider them to be crowd-funding terrorists, stealing the once promising platfrorm from the young.).

Having this sudden realization in mind (and it was sudden indeed) I have made several changes to the game.

First of all, this "No save Exploration game" is a strange definition I'm not using anymore. It's just "Maze game" now.
How many maze video games do you know? Surprisingly for myself I know no such games! Not even one! This genre simply doesn't exist! Mirage of Dragon is the first maze video game.

I'll explain what I mean. Here's my rule set, defining the maze video game genre as I imagine it:
1. No save! (optional)
2. No map! (this one is mandatory)
3. No long-ranged two-step sequences - only one step actions. (I'll explain that later)
4. The goal is always the same: FIND THE EXIT (multiple exits (endings) preferable)

Third point is very important. Two-step sequences work like this:

1. Go left - find double jump upgrade.
2. Go right and get to a high platform, inaccessible without the double jump-upgrade.

Another example:

1. Go right and find a key
2. Go left and use the key to open a door.

These are 2-step sequences that can be infinitely frustrating in a big maze with no map and save points. But! It's totally fine if both actions can be performed in one room. For example - a temporary double jump upgrade that can be found right in the same room you need to use it in. That is a short-ranged two-step sequence that shouldn't be frustrating in a maze.

Having a big maze with just one exit can become monotonous soon. So having multiple exits is recommended. Mirage of Dragon has 10.

Maps simply kill the concept. If there are no long-ranged two-step sequences maps become pointless. All you need to do is find the exit (one of the exits)

Last thing to understand - in the Maze video game genre - maze is the main element of the gameplay. It's not just a container for other elements (like in some old FPS or Dungeon Crawlers).

So the main rules are these - I'll repeat for clarity:

1. No save! (optional)
2. No map! (mandatory)
3. No long-ranged two-step sequences - only one step actions. (and the main action is: see "4.")
4. The goal is always the same: FIND THE EXIT (multiple exits are preferable)

How many games like that exist? I know just one and it's Mirage of Dragon. It's the genre I have invented - not because I'm so bright, but simply because nobody cares about it. Everybody think that a good game is a good list of features, forgetting about the pure simple things. Speaking of the pure things...

Platforming. As I have said before I want Mirage of Dragon to be a pure platformer. Not an action platformer, puzzle platformer or even RPG platformer - there are countless chimeras like that and sadly only a few pure breads (like Mario). Being sad and radical I have decided to cut out ALL the enemies and about 3/4 of the traps from the game. (I would like to show you these in this book, but I won't because I will use them all in my next project, which is coming soon). Also I have simplified the puzzles to a very primitive "console level" (console adventure games usually have very primitive puzzles compared to the pc games of the same genre, that's why I'm calling it this way. Don't get me wrong here - I enjoy primitive puzzles a lot myself.)

Finally I have simplified the dragon battles (but increased the number of them by adding 3 sub-forms and one secret).

(It may seem like I just cutting (deleting) the stuff making the game less than it should be, but no, it's not true. I cut one thing and add 2 new in its place. And I'm always following the original concept - I wouldn't cut something that is important for the game's world.)

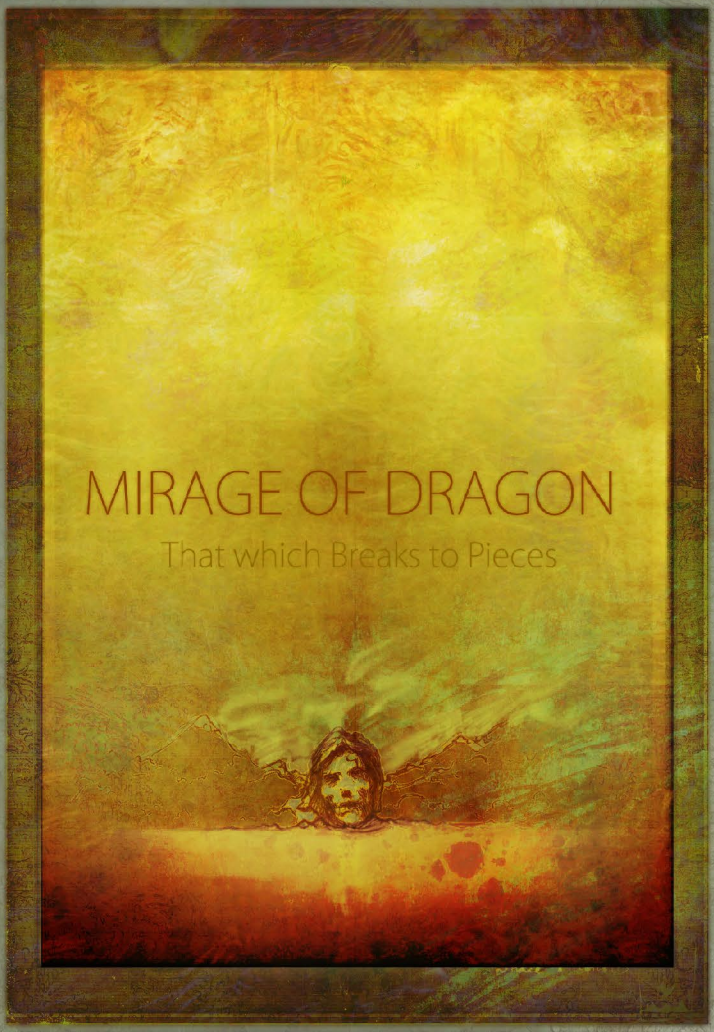
As a result of these radical changes we now have this as a gameplay formula:
-maze exploration + pure platforming + hidden dragon battles + optional story;

All of these elements together form this "atmosphere" everybody keep talking about. It's not a game-play element on its own, but a combination of all other. And the atmosphere I want is... relaxation.

Yes, most platformers (if not all of them) are somewhat difficult - Mario can be brutally hard (Mario Lost Levels for example). Action Platformers starting with Megaman, Ninja Gaiden and Castlevania are probably even harder. Cinematic Platfromers (or puzzle platformers) can be surprisingly cruel too, be it Prince of Persia or Limbo. Nothing changes - I would say that some modern platformers are even harder than the old.

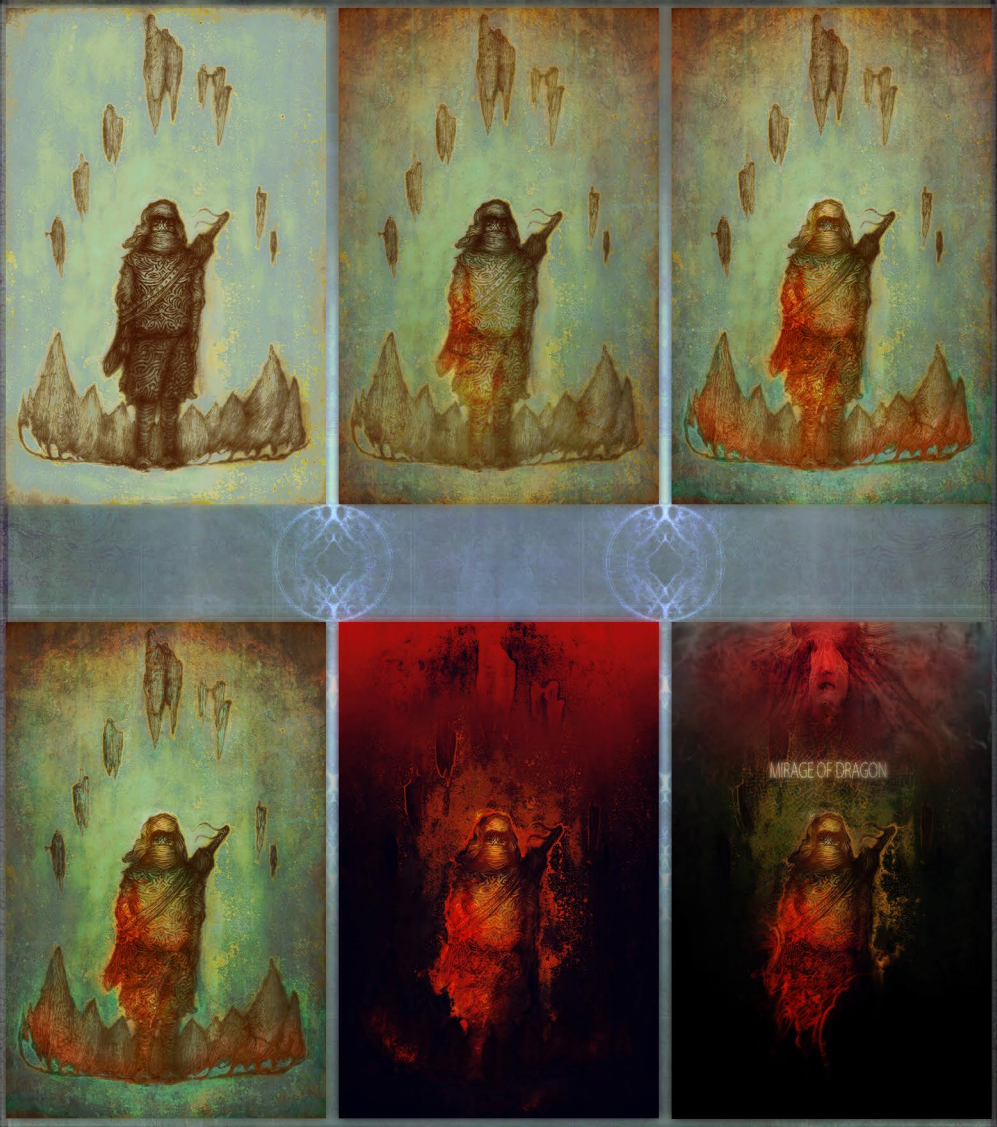
As a small burst of opposition I have decided to make Mirage of Dragon the way it is now - a relaxing platformer. I have modified the first (and the biggest) location in the game to not have any hazards at all - you are perfectly safe there. Small locations have some traps that can kill you, but they are few, they are obvious and simple. They exist only for you to laugh at them... and also learn, because Dragons are a different thing. Dragons can kill you in many ways - their attacks are similar to the traps on the levels, so it's important for you to see these before you find the guys. They can be hard, but you have infinite continues, so I think nobody should complain. They are more like “animated puzzles” really.

And that's it. A relaxing maze platformer is what I'm doing here. There are other things to mention, but they are not that significant. I think I will have another chance to mention the "small things" later in the book.





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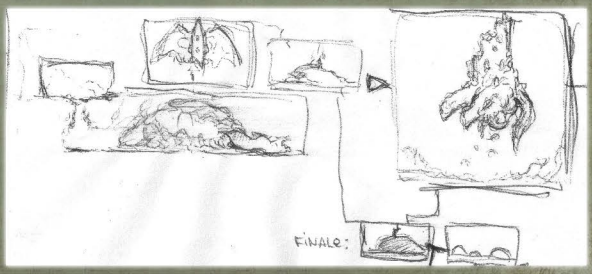


The Future

MOD EXPANSION PACK

Several big and somewhat important episodes were never made but not forgotten. An important sub-story and the epic battle with a huge 2-headed dragon + some other episodes - all of that amounts to about 50% of the current game. I would need a year to make it the way I want to make it now. Of course, it's out of the question at the moment. I need to start a new project immediately or else my career will end with Mirage of Dragon.

Even if Mirage of Dragon will become a successful game it wouldn't change a thing for me - I'll need to get some money ASAP and my best bet is to start a new project right away and hope the publishers would agree to give me some money to make it. The money I may get from Mirage of Dragon will be used to pay my debts. I may get something from it in 4-6 months if I'm lucky, but usually I'm not. I need to survive somehow this period. So no DLCs. Instead... I'm thinking it would be great to return to Mirage of Dragon in approximately 10 years and make that expansion then. It may never happen, but I will have that thought in mind. I want to make it. I just can't. For now.





MIRAGE OF DRAGON

Dragon Castlefuse



MIRAGE OF DRAGON

Da Vinci Tank Variation

DL:TD

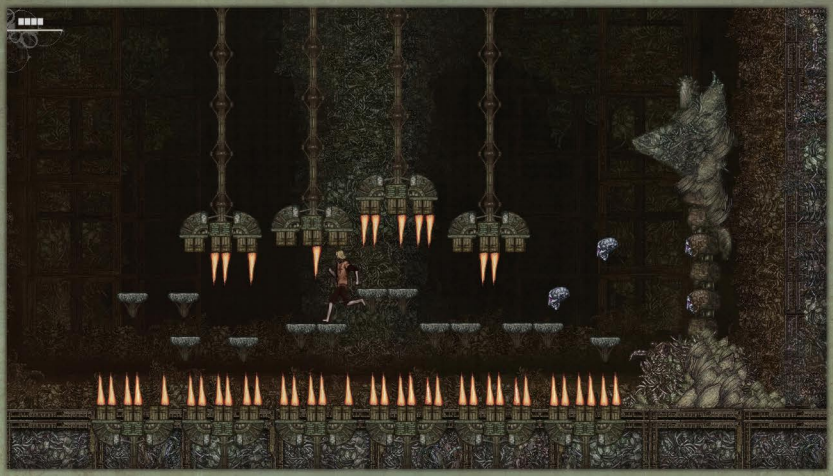
If you have a good memory you know by now that Mirage of Dragon was planned as a kind of remake of another (unreleased) game of my called Dark Lord: The Duel. Well, nothing beats the story of DLTD - Mirage of Dragon is more like a spin-off to it, short and simple in comparison. I WILL return and finish Dark Lord: The Duel, the game that inspired Mirage of Dragon and about half of the other projects I'm planning to work on in the future. In a way it is a sequel and I plan to start working on it in 3-5 years from now on. May be sooner, but not later. It's a big game, so I need to be sure first I have the money to finish it. And to be honest I need to upgrade my software and hardware too...

comment: I need to find a new and better name for the new version. The work title so far is simply "Dark Lord Saga". May be I'll leave it just like that.



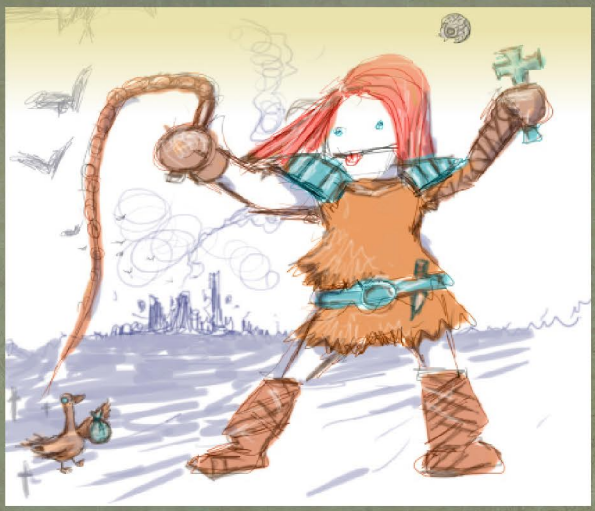






CAS: RE: RE

This fan project is even more important to me - this is where everything has started for me. I absolutely can't afford a fan project - not now, not later. So either I'll get the license, which seems unlikely at the moment, or I'll just make a clone and release it honestly and openly as a commercial game. This means I'll need to change countless things for it to have its own distinctive style and feel. Fortunately, I have a brilliant concept unlike any other. And may be I'll start working on it in about 2 years from now on (just before DL:TD).



That's the plan. It may change as all good plans should.
I'm already working on my next game - a Survival Horror Action Platformer. Somehow similar to MoD and yet completely different. Another game inspired by DLTD.



Some time later (a month probably)….



I have changed my plan in a big (and a better) way. So everything I have said in this section is not exactly accurate anymore. But it is not exactly false either. I'm just changing the form, not the content.

I wanted to finish the book with a big post-mortem, but for many reasons I don't feel inspired to write it anymore – it would end up as a long boring text filled with negativism and paranoia.

I have been thinking lately how far I am from that big popular thing, which they call video game industry these days. I don't feel like I'm connected to anything or anyone in it. Not because I keep trying, but somehow can't get in - no, not that at all. I think I overcame that obstacle if only to find another one. I feel now that there is simply no place for me in that industry··· or may be there is no place I would like to call my own. Sure, my mind tells me that in this case, as in all similar cases, all I need to do is to create a new place of a new kind, good enough to call my own. Sounds great, but I'm not sure anymore I need it, be it old or new.

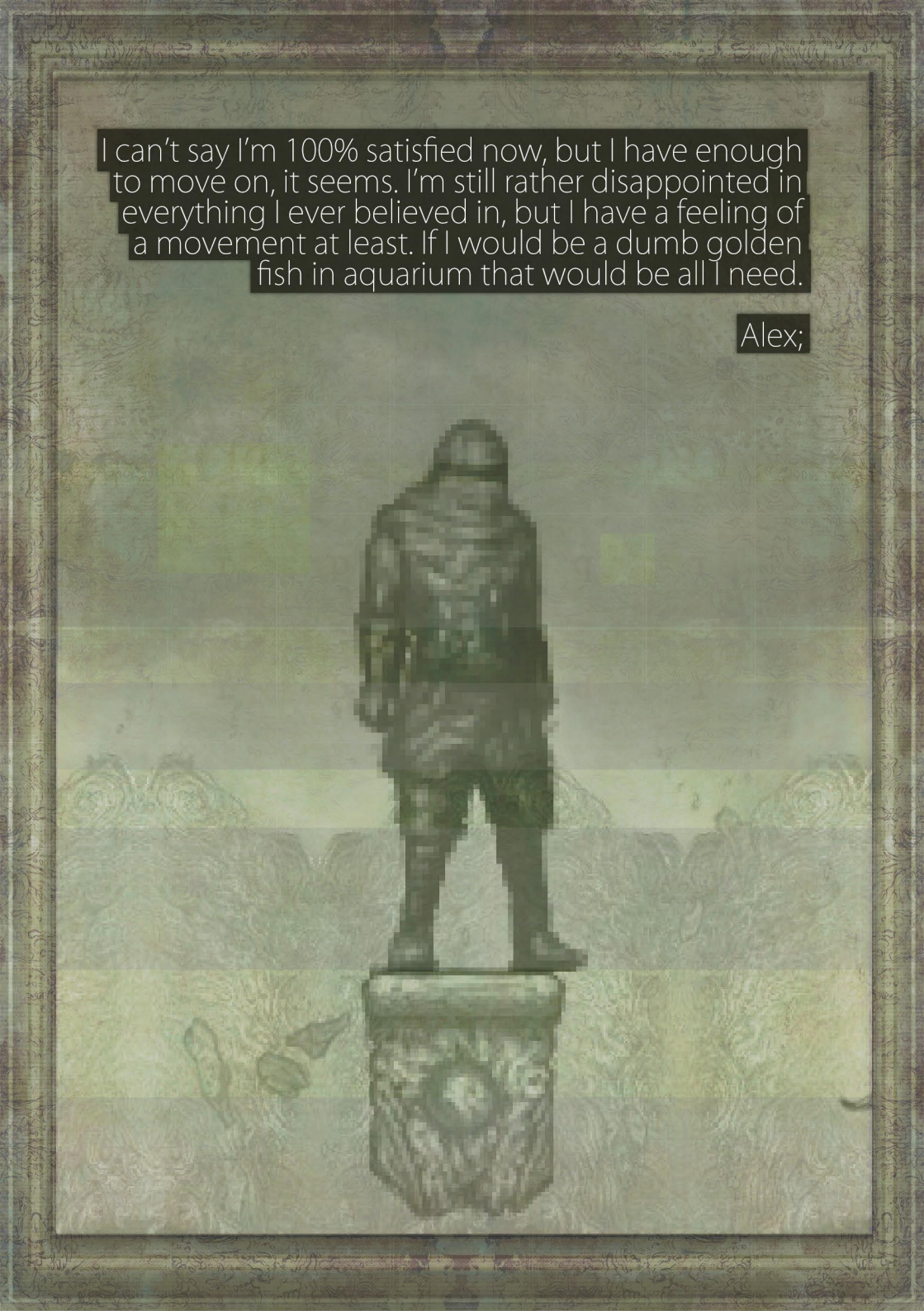
This year's E3 have showed me how alien I am to this "beautiful video game world" both as a gamer and developer (I haven't been there physically, but I have seen the stuff on the internet). This year I was too lazy to even think negatively about it. I simply have no impression of it – I'm indifferent to it. May be it is simply a bad year for the industry, but since I'm the only one disappointed··· I doubt it is. So I have started to think about it···

I don't like the industrial approach. I don't like people seeing video games as "products". "Products" must have "standards"··· "industry standards". And these standards kill everything what I'm looking for in video games. E3 is supposed to be the highest point of that industry and so its highest standard and in my eyes··· it is dull. The kind of evil "dull" that makes you dull in the process. To the point that people simply loose the taste they once could have – ask them what kind of game they would like to play and they would give you a list of standard features – the kind of list a simple program can compile in numbers randomly. "60fps"! "HD"! "Procedurally generated levels"! "Crafting"! "Customization"! " New Game+"! ··· Really, guys··· you sound like robots. Is this your actual taste? Is it even you saying? I think no. All these things never mattered to you, believe it or not. You are not playing digits. You are not playing products. So what the hell are you playing then? ...

Who knows··· We all have our own answers to find – I won't comment on yours :). My own answer is quite detailed and maniacally well researched despite the simplicity of the question – I'll start my next game's book with it. I think I found some interesting things in the darkest depths of the industry and in the end these findings helped me to realize what kind of game I want to do next. For now I would describe it as the next evolutionary step of Mirage of Dragon. Not a sequel, not an "upgrade", but more like··· its more advanced child, following its own path.

I can't say I'm 100% satisfied now, but I have enough to move on, it seems. I'm still rather disappointed in everything I ever believed in, but I have a feeling of a movement at least. If I would be a dumb golden fish in aquarium that would be all I need.

Alex;




MIRAGE OF DRAGON
by
ARK HOUSE

GUIDE

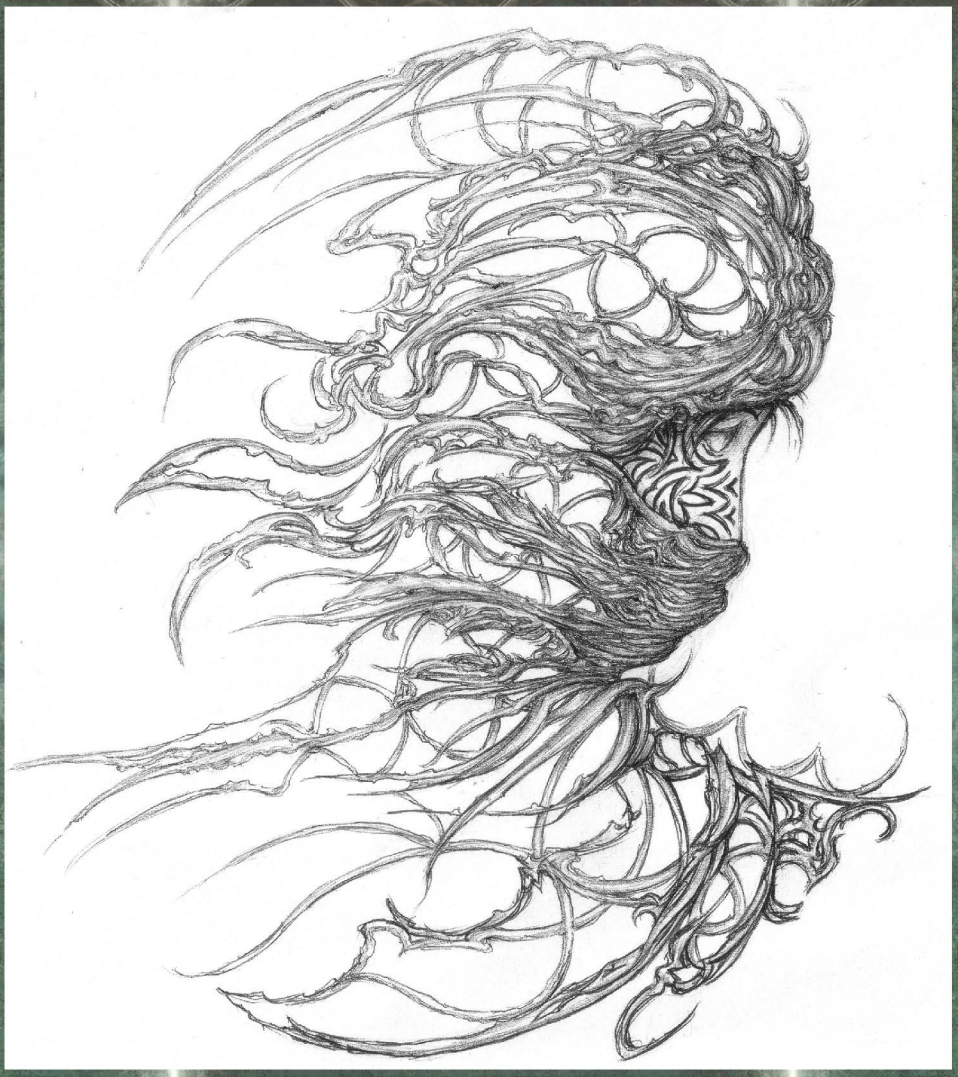
I have decided to make it as a separate PDF – it's locked and the password can be found in the game itself.

(very direct HINT: it's in the library)



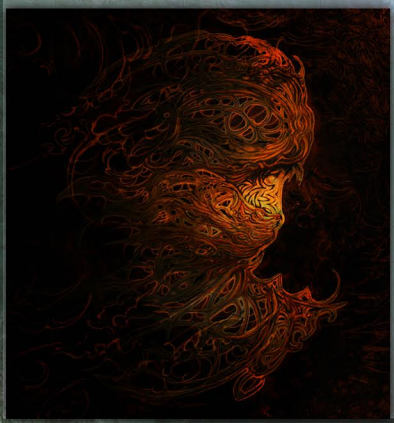


Extra Art:











MIRAGE OF THE DRAGON
DARK HOUSE


ARK HOUSE


MIRAGE OF DRAGON


MIRAGE OF DRAGON


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MIRAGE OF DRAGON


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MIRAGE OF DRAGON


MIRAGE OF DRAGON



Final Cover Art



Final Logo





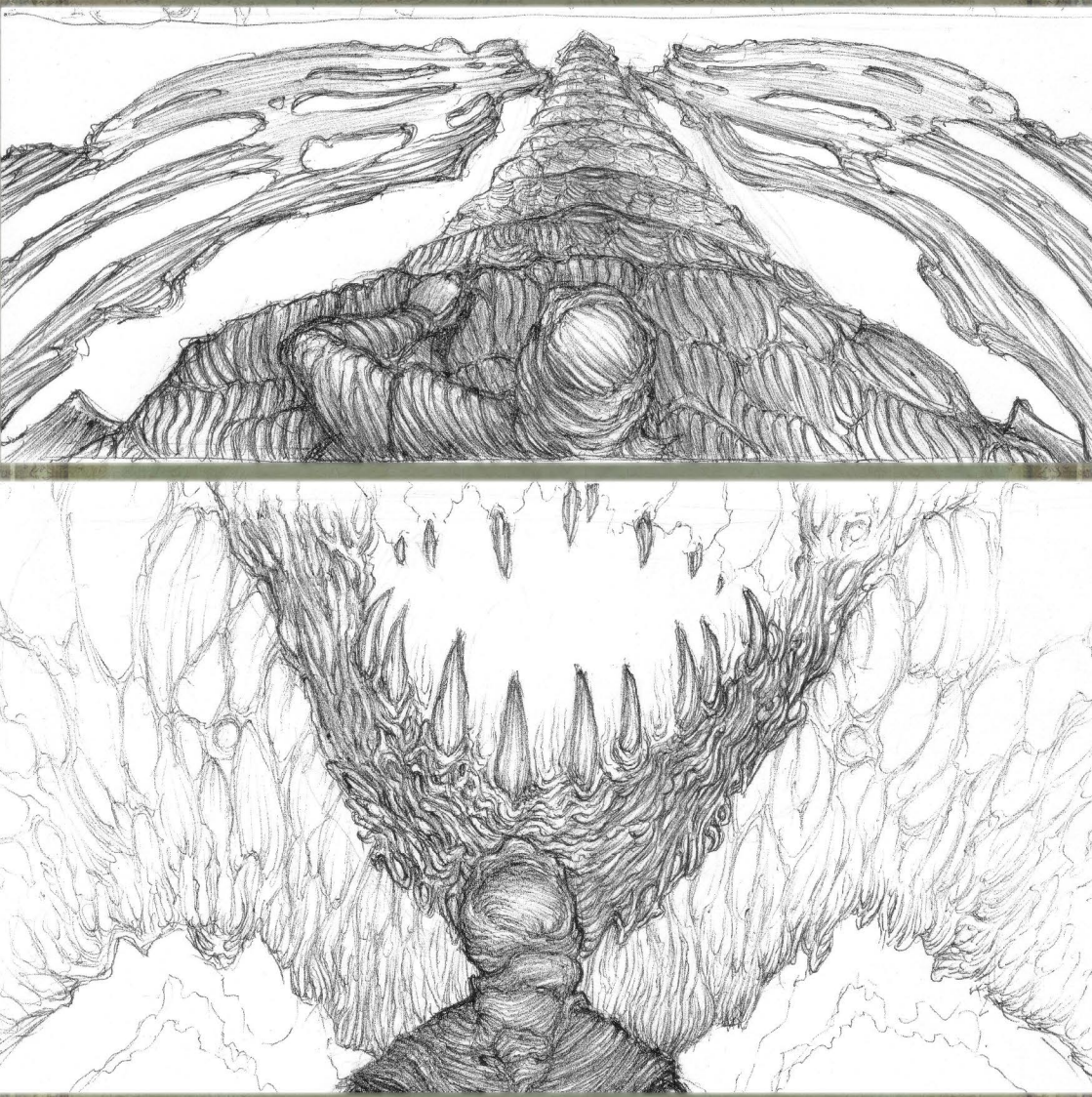




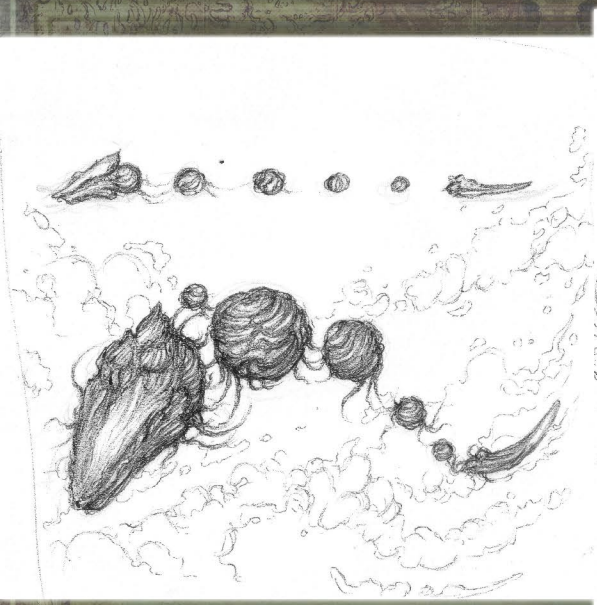


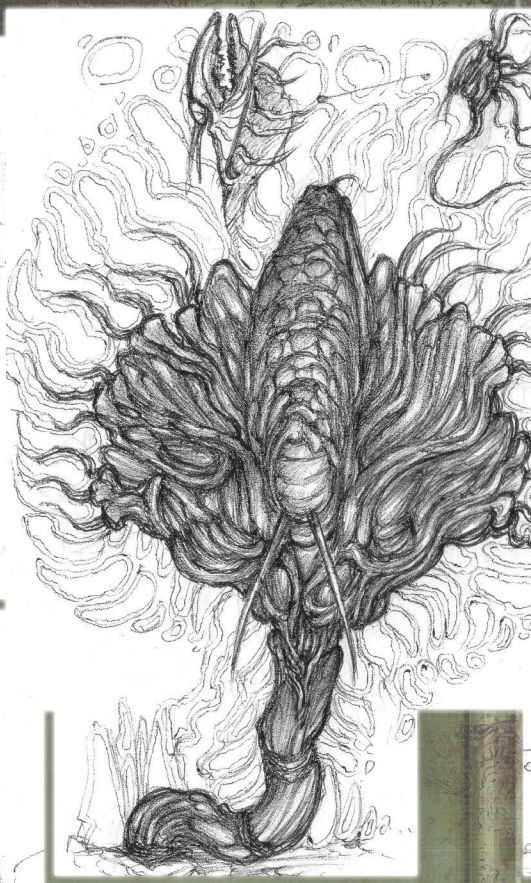

ARMOR

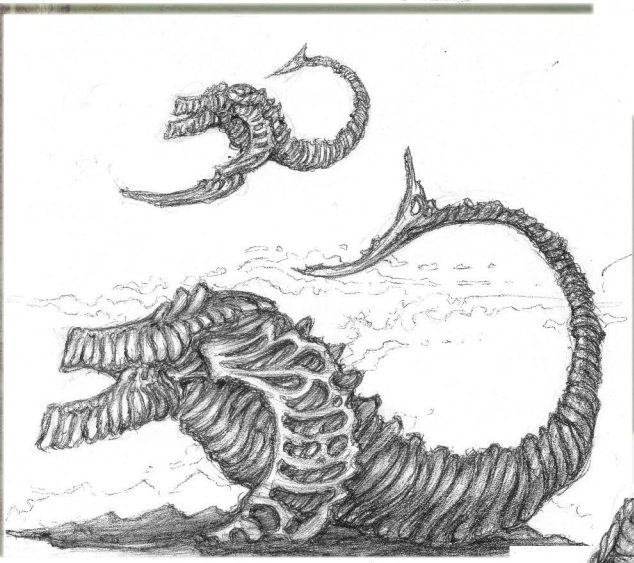


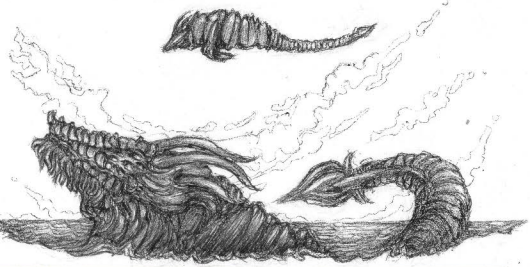


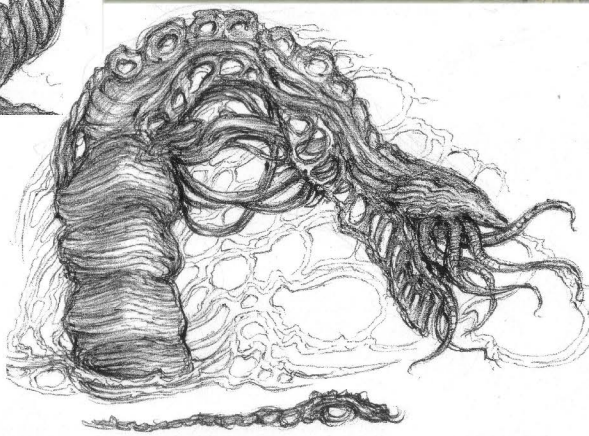
Very early concept arts for a totally different Mirage of Dragon (that first version...)











CREDITS

Developed by:



Alexey Tsvelov

:

Design, Art, Music, Story, Coding, "Acting" and Sound Effects

&

Jonathan Siri-Mohs

:

Sound Effects

Published by:

Forever Entertainment SA

P.S.

You probably can notice how many things mentioned in the book have nothing to do with the final version of the game (that primary description for example). Well, it's because as I have said before this book is my personal dev-log I am writing while working on the game. Even now the game isn't finished (but I'm very close to actually finishing it – just a month or two··· and then a month of testing and trailer making).

I have a blog (http://arkhousetelegraph.blogspot.com/) but nobody's reading it, so I have lost motivation to write anything there. Instead I have stuff to write here.
I like it this way.
Hope, you like it too.
If you don't – well, sorry.
I never said it will be fun.

Ark

P.P.S.

Being poor sucks. My computer was too old to handle gigabytes of stuff I'd made, so I had no choice but to cut out about 30% of the game's content. I won't waste your time explaining how and why – I doubt it's interesting… Yes, I have a nearly official right to blame the software I'm using (and the lack of support), but no – it's hardware. Tried every imaginable option to avoid this - it wasn't an easy decision.

I would like to show you all the stuff you won't see in the game, but not this time – I can (and I will) re-use it in my future projects.

Also, I deleted all special effects – now I'm using some not so spectacular particle effects instead. They are functional. They are OK.

The sound designer John had an extremely heavy schedule this time, so you won't hear the awesome SFX I was mentioning earlier. In the end I'm using some old effects he's made for me earlier (for a completely different project) + some sounds made by me – they are usually not as good.

But regardless of everything Mirage of Dragon is finally finished. It is done and it is good. Of course, there is no such thing as a "universally good game" that everybody can love equally, but in my little world it's a great game I'm proud of. If your little world is somehow overlapping mine in a point or two, you may love it as much. If not – well, sorry. I have an excuse, you see… blame my poverty. I'm going to get myself a new PC as soon as I'll get some money. I need it for my future games. And, yes, I'm already working on a new game. Changed my big plan yet again. It's not a horror game. It's Sci-Fi and it's surreal! Coming soon.

Ark


ARK HOUSE