

GENTLEMAN OF THE RAILS (AKA The Hobo Code)

Game Design Document

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HIGH CONCEPT

Learn the hobo code to escape the dust bowl cloud!

Gentleman of the Rails is a dialogue-driven, map-based game. The game is set during the American Great Depression of the 1930s, a time of uncertainty and widespread hardship.

In Gentleman of the Rails, you play a hobo who needs to get across several states to reach his goal. Each state is a self-contained map containing several locations that you can either see or uncover through dialogue with the state's inhabitants. Each location will give you the opportunity to talk to the locals, or unlock rare bonuses, with every interaction influenced by YOUR knowledge of the Hobo Code.

To move to the next state, you need to find the train station location, the train time, and the number for the safe carriage... Can you find them all before the Dust Bowl cloud catches you?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT & RESEARCH

The Great Depression, The Dust Bowl, and Hobos

The Great Depression is a worldwide economic downturn resulting from the 1929 Wall Street Crash, resulting in between one quarter to one third of Americans being unemployed (Evans, 1998, p.218).

To make matters worse, a severe draught and issues with farming methods led to severe dust storms in the mid-western area from the early 1930s (figure 1) that cater to be referred to as the Dust Bowl (Evans, 1998, p.219). Their devastating effect only furthered the damage of the economic recession, deepening work and food shortage in the affected areas.

During this difficult period, one million Americans left their farms to look for work - or, simply, to get away from poverty at home (Evans, 1998, p.227). Those constantly on the move because known as hobos. Hobos were characterised by being always on the road, and by

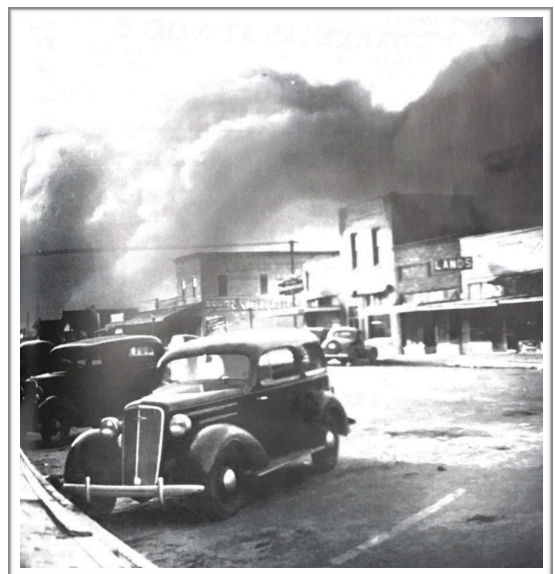


Figure 1: Dust Bowl storm in 1933

sustaining themselves through work or sometimes charity, using as little money as possible. Interestingly, they came from all classes of society (Maxwell, 1959, p.32).

As their numbers grew, so did the need to communicate with fellow travellers to inform them of their locale - be it the presence of danger, charitable locals, or simple locations such as train tracks or water sources. Thus was created the Hobo Code (figure 2), a set of symbols used by hobos and for other hobos to communicate and help the next person on the road.

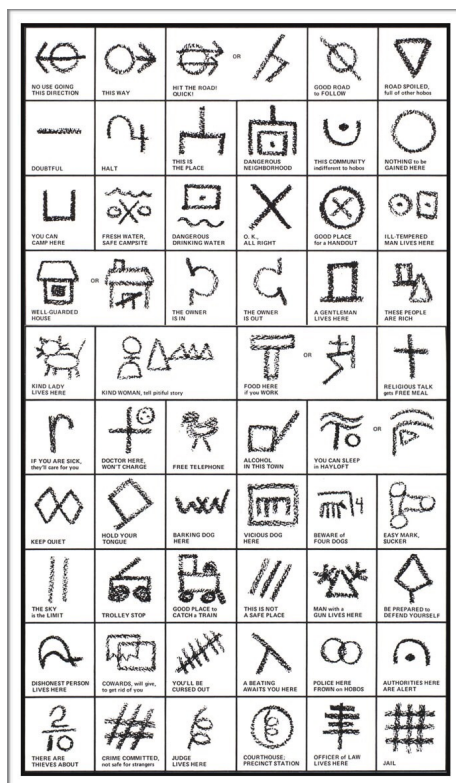


Figure 2: The Hobo Code

References

Evans, E. (1998) *The American Century*. New York: Knopf.

Maxwell, J.A. (1959) 'Hobo Symbolology', in Elwood, W. (ed.) *Symbolology : the Use of Symbols in Visual Communications*. New York : Hastings House, pp. 31-40.

The Hobo Code (no date). Available at: <http://blog-omotives.blogspot.co.uk/2008/10/dusting-off-ol-symbol-sourcebook.html> (Accessed 15 February 2018)
[image]

PREMISE & STORY

Using the Setting for Gameplay

In *Gentleman of the Rails*, you play a hobo who has to get to his destination by crossing several states.

In order to utilise the hobo code, several aspects of the gameplay will be based on it:

- As the game progresses, you will find symbols to add to your hobo code journal.
- You will be required to know or guess symbols to decide on
 - locations (which location is best according to the signs shown?)
 - situations and people you meet (are they telling the truth? is there something you are not seeing? should you trust that person?)
 - riddles (special locations)

Linking to the real-life hobo lifestyle and journey, each map can only be completed once you have found the key information you need: the train time, the train station location, and the safe carriage.

In order to feed on the theme, players will follow the journey of a hobo, now on the run from the dust bowl cloud after leaving their homestead.

Using the Setting for Art

The art-direction of Gentleman of the Rails, focuses heavily on the idea of the severe droughts and dust-storms known as the dust bowl, mentioned above.

The environment the player traverses, is dry, arid and dusty. Nothing grows, and everything is covered in sand. The background depicts heavy dust-clouds sweeping the land.

The colour-scheme is kept to sandy, sepia, and yellow / pale orange tones, both to stay true to the idea of the sandstorms, and to the general finish of some of the photographs from the time period.

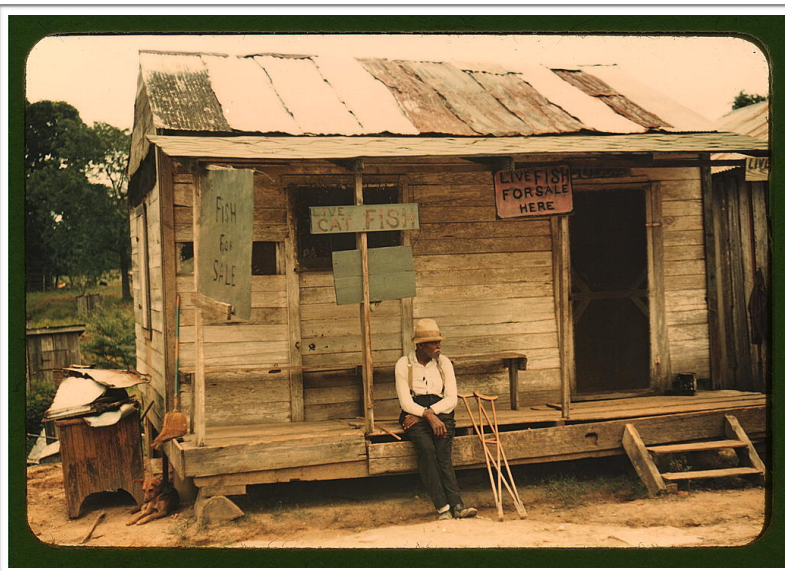
The characters presented in the game is likewise dressed for the dust bowl Environment, shielding their mouths and eyes from the sand using scarfs, glasses and hats.

Emotionally, this should leave the player feeling a general barrier between him- or herself, and the people she/he seeks aid from, by robbing the characters of the world of any sort facial expressions.

The goal is ultimately to communicate the unpleasant, otherworldly hostility of the environment, and the uncertainty of the people who inhabits that environment.



Americans shielding themselves from the Dust Bowl.



This photo from 1940 shows the general pale / warm colour-scheme we are looking to re-create

References

Messy Nessy (2013) No Title, The Ten Year Apocalypse that Nearly Destroyed Midwestern America.

Available at: <http://www.messynessychic.com/2015/04/03/the-ten-year-apocalypse-that-inspired-interstellar-and-nearly-destroyed-midwestern-america/> (Accessed: 3. March, 2018) [image]

Walcott, Marion Post (1940) A store with life fish for sale, vicinity of natchitoches.

Available at: <http://www.messynessychic.com/2016/09/28/youve-never-seen-1930s-40s-america-like-this/> (Accessed 3. March, 2018) [image]

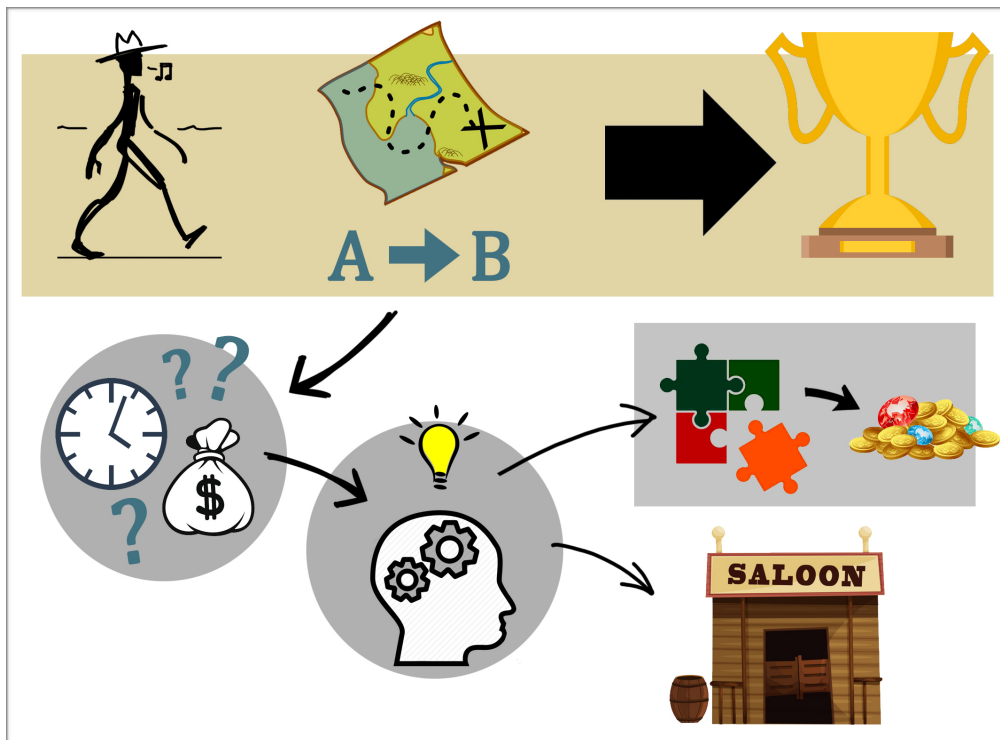
MOODBOARDS

Art

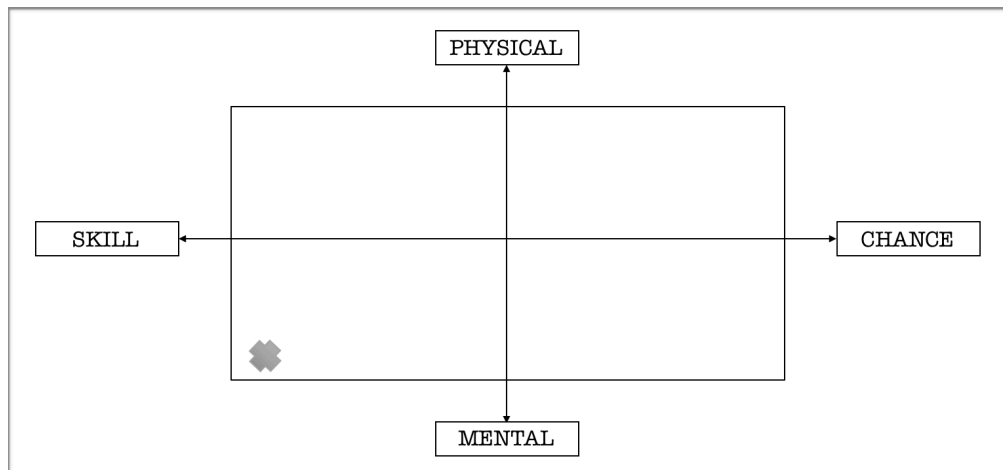
This art-focused, reference-based moodboard represents the art direction, and the general emotional mood prevalent throughout the game.



Gameplay



MATRIX



The game does not require any physical skills or chance, instead relying on mental-based skill challenges: managing resources, learning/recognising the hobo code, choosing optimal dialogue options.

GAMEPLAY ACTIONS

Using the Hobo Code

- **Learn hobo symbols** from NPCs through correct dialogue options or bribery
- Failed to learn a symbol from an NPC? **Get clues** from them as to what the symbols meant - confirming that hunch is then up to you
- **Use hobo symbols** you know to decide where to go on the map or solve riddles

Decision-Making

- **Decode or guess** what the hobo code attached to the each location mean
- **Decide** on the best available option based on the time it takes to go to the location, and what you understand from the symbol

Clue-Collecting

- To finish the map, you need to **get three clues**: the train time, the train station location, and the safe carriage number.
- **Find** these clues by successfully completing NPC dialogue
- Short on clues and running out of time? **Take a risk** by visiting a ruin and attempt a hobo code riddle.

GAMEPLAY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGY

Challenge will come from several gameplay elements:

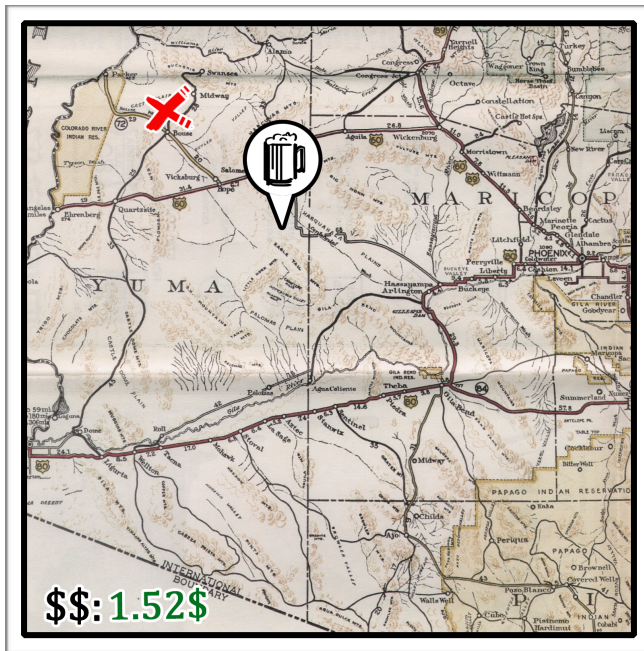
1. **Making strategic decisions** between:
 - High risk but high reward locations - hobo code displayed not known, location far away so will take more time away BUT a chance of getting a clue or more hobo code.
 - Low risk but low reward locations - hobo code known, locations closer to the player and therefore outcome easier to reach BUT or low risk but lower chance of reward
2. **Learning the hobo code**. This is a natural consequence of talking to everyone available and choosing dialogue options carefully, potentially informed by already known hobo code. The more symbols the player knows, the best they can judge each situation and respond accordingly. Hobo code knowledge is also key to solving riddles, an important tool to gain clues or resources such as new symbols, or money.
3. For each map the player must find the **train time**, **the train station location**, and the **carriage number**. Players should keep in mind the time they have to do so and be wise about how they spend it!

STORYBOARDS


The Map: Journey, Time, and Decision Making

The first thing the player encounters in Gentleman of the Rails is a map.

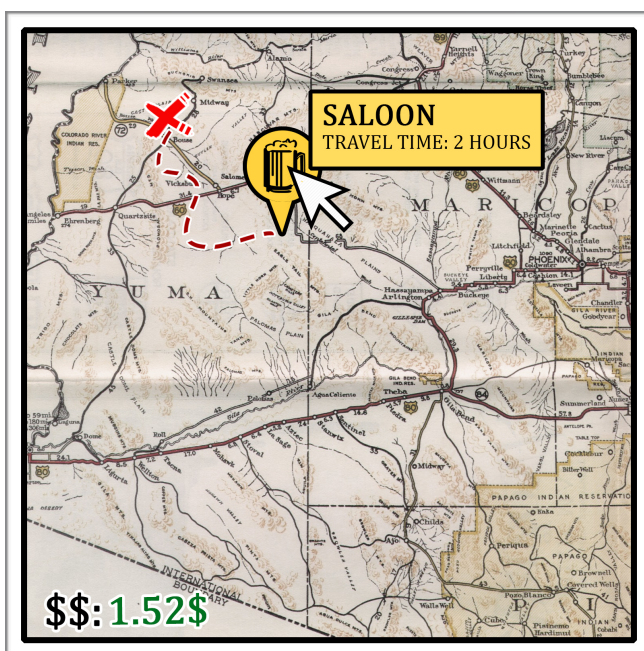
This map is a visual representation of the player's journey and shows key information that the player needs for decision-making: time/cloud advancing, time it takes to reach each location, and locations illustrated by symbols. The map also shows money collected by the player, which can be used to help in some situations.



The player's current location is represented

by the red X ().

Currently there is only one available location to travel to, represented by the white location-icon.



As the player mouses over a location, a tooltip will appear, showing:

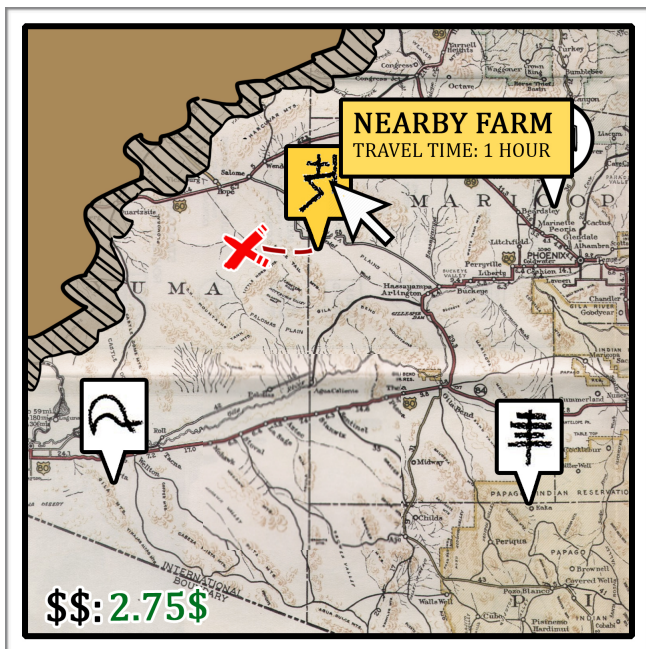
- The name of the location
- How long it will take the player to get there

Farmsteads rely on the players knowledge of the Hobo Code. This symbol, seen on the map as the location icon, implicitly warns the player of what is to come should they chose to travel there.

Map of the Phoenix, Arizona area. Symbols include a red 'X' in the desert, a lightning bolt in a speech bubble, a beer mug in a speech bubble, a U-turn arrow in a speech bubble, and a tree in a speech bubble. The text '\$\$: 2.75\$' is at the bottom left.

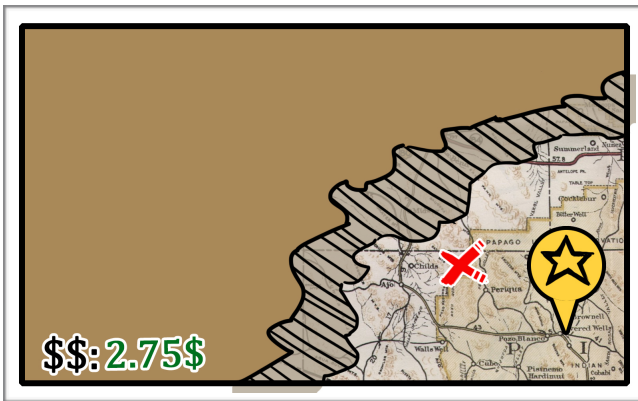
Farmstead close to the player (less time to get here) but if the symbol is unknown this adds an element of risk (closer but reward less likely)

Farmstead far from the player (more time to get there) but if the symbol is known then it is lower risk for the player (far but reward likely)



As the player mouses over a location, they will also be able to see how far the Dust Bowl cloud will move into the land.

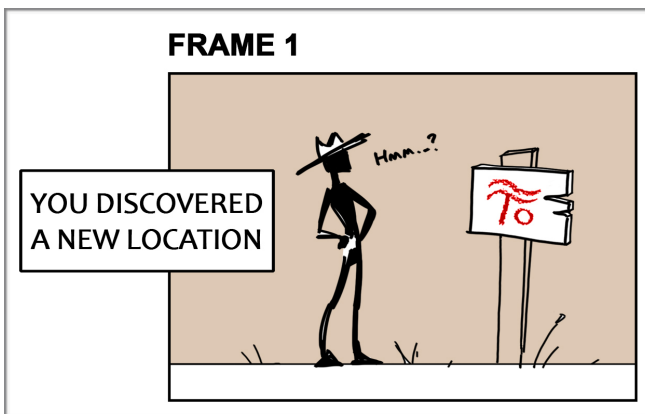
To escape the cloud and finish the map, the player must find three vital clues from NPCs: the train time, the train station location, and the safe carriage number.



Once they find all clues, players will see the final location icon on the map, ready to be moved to - towards safety... For now.

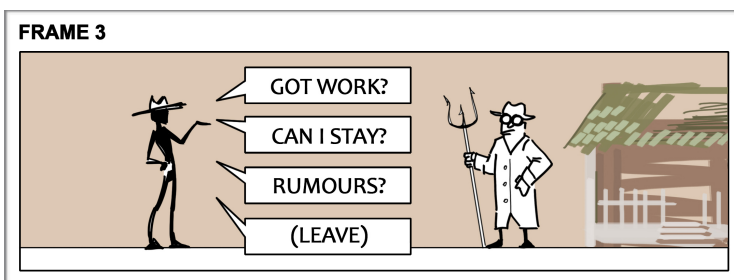
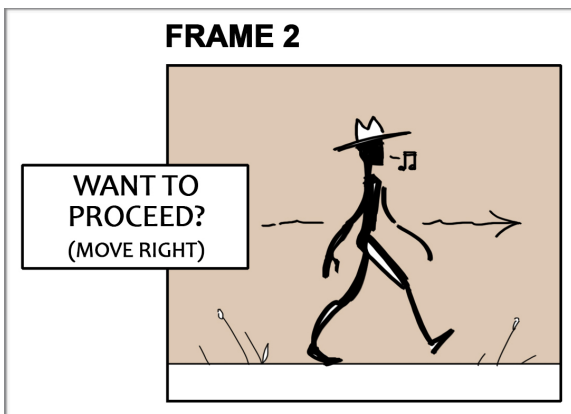
The Zones: What Happens in a Location

The Farmstead



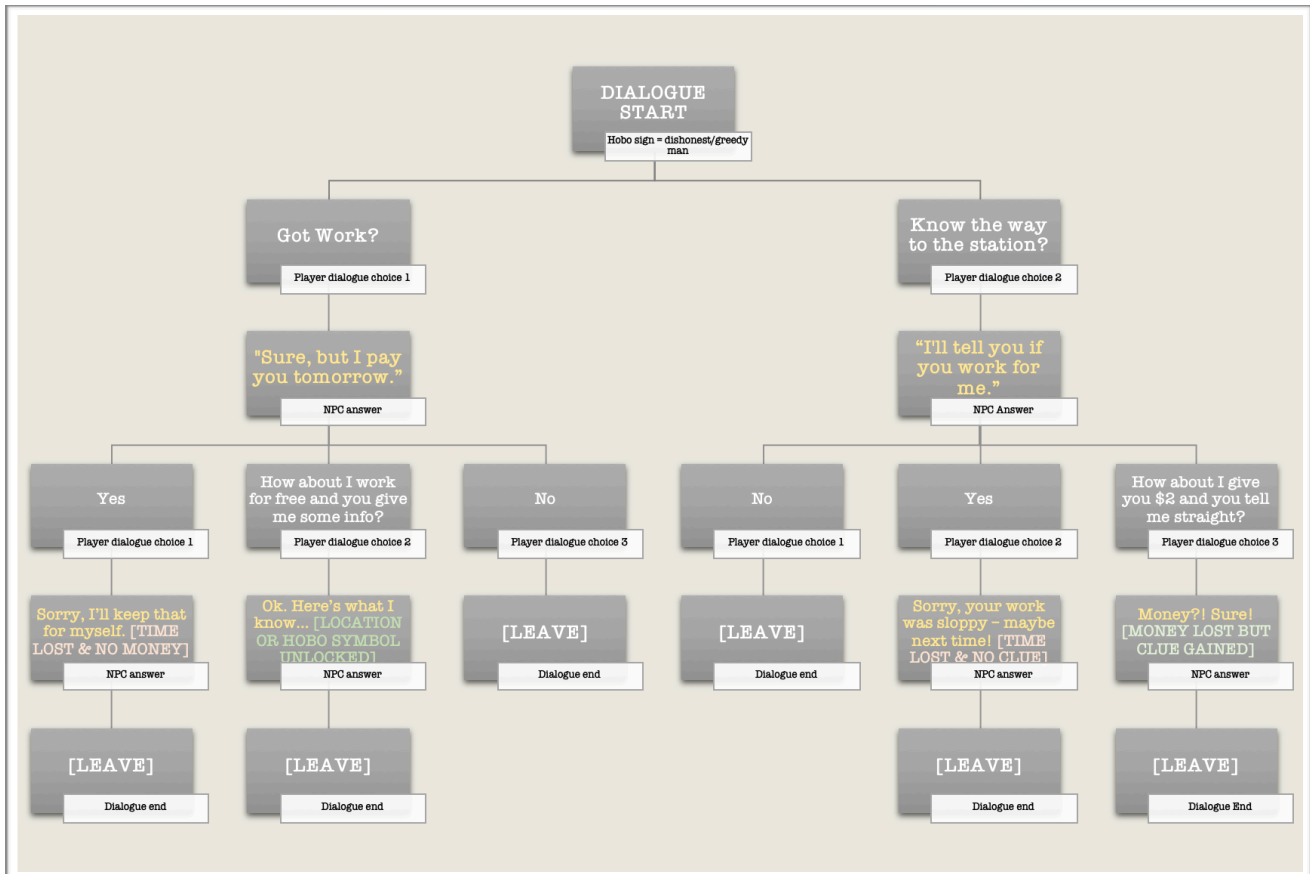
When the player clicks the icon of choice on the map, the game will switch to a 2D view and allows the player to walk forward to an NPC by clicking to move forward.

The energy-meter and money-count will still be visible at this stage for the player to review.



Each farmstead contains an NPC with whom a conversation can be triggered.

Dialogue Tree



- This tree will change depending on the hobo code symbol; this particular example shows the player encountering a dishonest/greedy man. If the player knows this symbol, they will know not to trust future rewards, and choose straight money exchanges instead.
- In the dialogue tree above, green text indicates potential rewards, red text potential failures in dialogue choice (player spends time in the location but doesn't get any reward).
- Once the player has reached the end of a dialogue thread ([LEAVE]), they go back to the map, ready to pick a new location.
- Currently, choosing one option locks the player down the associated dialogue path. However, depending on playtesting results, this may change to allow more flexibility in going back to previous options.

The Saloon



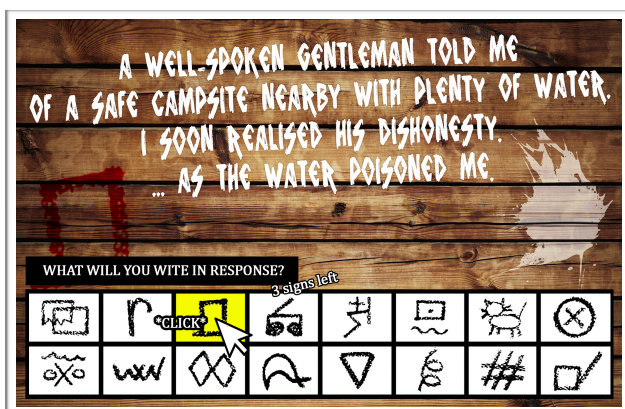
In these areas, the player can talk to NPCs to gather information and buy food in exchange for money.

The Haunted Locations



In these areas, the player can use their hobo code knowledge to solve a special puzzle. They are hard to reach (difficult to discover, far away from other locations and thus requiring more time to get to), but can trigger significant rewards: a clue to finish the map, and hobo code knowledge.

They will give weight to the overall narrative by allowing the player to gain more insight into the world and into hobo life and tribulations.



As the player explores a haunted location, they will find a written story on the wall.

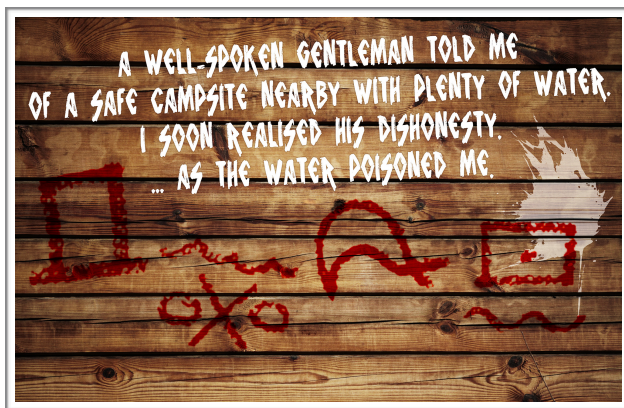
Analysing the story, the player must now transcribe it using the correct hobo code symbols. This must be done in the correct order.

If the player chooses the wrong symbol at any point, the puzzle sequence will end.



At the end, if the player completed the puzzle successfully, they will be presented with the final wall and get the relevant rewards.

While there is no explicit penalty for failing puzzles, doing so represents a great loss of time for the player, which is a penalty by itself.



Transcribe the story above:

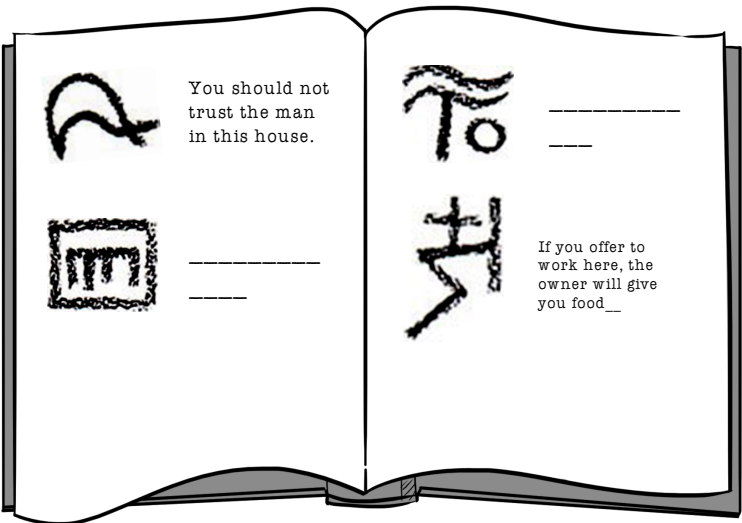
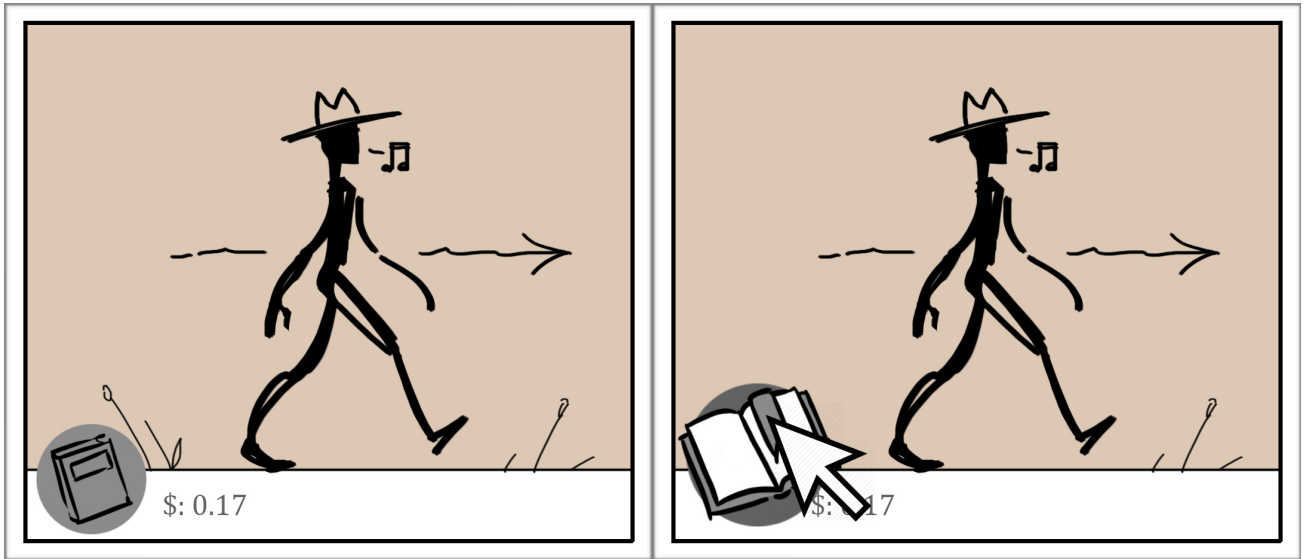
“Don’t Trust Poshos”:

A well-spoken gentleman told me of a safe campsite nearby with plenty of water. I soon realised his dishonesty... as the water poisoned me.



The Hobo Code Journal

Access to the hobo journal is available at any point in the game.



In the journal, the player can jolt down anything they learn about the hobo-code, as they go through the game.

The notes will be kept, even if the player start a new game, on a new map.

Once a symbol is verified, it will appear in red.

ZONES OVERVIEW

Saloon

Saloons serve several purposes:

1. The starting saloon, first location of the map, will have a reminder about the game win condition (3 clues) and the premise (dust bowl cloud, time).
2. Other saloons, dotted around the map, can be a place for gaining new information about locations or hobo symbols from NPCs through dialogue or money.

This zone can be unlocked via:

- Starting saloon: getting to a new map
- Other saloon: finding the location through dialogue

Outcome of this zone:

- Information about the hobo code.
- Unlocking new locations on the map.
- Spending money to get extra information or food

Farmsteads

Farmsteads will each feature one NPC the player can interact with.

This zone can be unlocked via:

- Information from saloon-patrons.
- Information from other farmhouse NPCs.
- Information from Dust Bowl Ghosts.
- The player being in its vicinity

Outcome of this zone:

- Change in resources.
- Unlocking one of the three vital clues, to end the game.
- Unlocking new locations on the map.

Haunted Location

This area contains a puzzle, which, if solved, will grant the player a certain amount of desirable resources.

This zone can be unlocked via:

- Information from saloon-patrons.
- Information from farmstead NPCs.
- The player being in its vicinity (rare and early maps-only)

Outcome of this zone if riddle is won:

- 1 clue
- Hobo code symbols (confirming or giving new ones)
- The player will get to hear the ghost's story.
- Extra money or food

KEY PROGRAMMING CONCEPTS

Game Rules Overview

Player & Win/Lose Conditions

If player food meter = 0 then game over

If player time = 0 then game over

If player has train time + train station location + carriage number then player proceeds to next map

If player is on the last map && has train time + train station location + carriage number then game win

If player moves to new location then time goes down and food meter goes down

Map

If time goes down then map cloud moves forward

If map location discovered is true then map location appears on the map

If player is near a location && location is discoverable through vicinity then map location appears on the map

If map location discovered is false then map location does not appear on the map

Hobo Code

If hobo symbol is learned then add/lock in to journal

If hobo symbol is not learned then player can add journal notes to guess it

Saloon

Subject to dialogue trees: if dialogue is successful and/or money given then something is given to the player

Farmsteads

Subject to dialogue trees: if dialogue is successful and/or money given then something is given to the player

Haunted Locations

If puzzle is solved then player gets reward

If puzzle is not solved then nothing happens