Describe the story arc for your game. What happens in the beginning, middle, and end? Is there a central dilemma or crisis that the player character has to overcome?

In the Method Actor 2000, the player assumes the role of a hapless actor (working name: Jonathan Stillwater), who is hopelessly unprepared for the opening night of his big show. The game can be split up into three Acts. Act I transpires the night before the big opening during the final dress rehearsal: the last chance that is going to have to make decisions about his performance before the public, and critics, will have a chance to critic him into oblivion. By the end of Act I, the director of the piece rudely tells Jonathan that the reason why he is not a good enough actor is because he has not fully experienced life, and therefore lacks a sufficient pool of emotions, memories, and experiences to draw from and channel into his performance. Act II transpires the next morning, and details Jonathan’s escapades in his endeavors to cram as much aforementioned life experience into his system as possible; the player will have multiple locations that they can visit through Jonathan, though they only are allowed to spend time at one per play through before Act II ends. Act III is none other than the much anticipated opening night, in which the skills and tricks that Jonathan obtained in Act II can be put to good use. Depending on what skills Jonathan acquires during Act II, and how he chooses to deploy them in Act III, will both affect the audience’s reception of the play, as well as have long-lasting consequences on Jonathan’s very life.

Perhaps it would be beneficial to go into more detail about Jonathan’s skills and life experiences that are obtained in Act II. While other games might have a character develop through means of granting new magic spells or better weapons and armor, Method Actor 2000 attempts to subscribe to the philosophy of The American Method, which is composed of “theories, rehearsal exercises, and rules which allow actors to access their emotions more freely and maintain the essential but elusive creative state.” (As described in *Actions: The Actor’s Thesaurus*, by Marina Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd-Williams). The question then becomes, how does one simulate accessing one’s creative state through a text based adventure game? Actor Method 2000 will attempt to simulate it through a system that has many names, but for the purposes of this document will be referred to as Actioning. Actioning a text is to visit each line of dialogue—or better yet, each beat in McKee and Stanislavskin terms—and affix to it some playable action. A playable action, in this case, is a transitive verb, i.e. *(something that the actor can do to someone else)*. This system was created under the notion that it is difficult—if not impossible—to play emotions; for example, what does it actually mean to be angry with someone? Anger is an emotion, and is broad enough that if an actor were to attempt to accomplish it on stage, there is a high probability that the performance would lack specific details and ring to the audience as inherently false; the spectators would more
likely than not realize that the actor is trying to indicate an angry character, as opposed to actually being angry. This is not necessarily wrong, and is in fact encouraged in Brechtian models of acting, but for the purposes of this game, we are going to focus more on the Stanislavsky/American method. So, for example, instead of being angry at someone, you can terrify someone, attack someone, lambaste someone, chastise someone, murder someone etc. Clearly in a typical performance the actor’s don’t get so swept up that they actually murder each other, rather, each of these actions are ideas that the actor can wrap their head around and use to color the lines that they speak and the stage business that has been choreographed.

This philosophy of actioning is, of course, not universally accepted, but it does provide us with a name framework for the context of this game. Depending on where the player decides to take Jonathan in Act II will affect two things: What actions (i.e. transitive verbs) he obtains—which will affect his ability to perform during Act III—and How he obtains them—which will affect the end game. So, for example, if Jonathan solves a puzzle by seducing someone, then the action ‘seduce’ will be added to his list of transitive verbs. If he solves a puzzle by murdering someone, then not only will ‘murder’ be added to his list, but the police are likely to barge into the middle of his performance and arrest him. Since Act III transpires during the performance, the player is not allowed to decide where Jonathan walks (because he is not allowed to change his blocking) nor can the player alter what Jonathan says (because he must remain faithful to the words of the script.) However, for each beat, the player will be able to choose a transitive verb, that is, choose how they would like to play the beat (‘seduce’, ‘murder’, etc.). The choices the player makes will affect how the fellow actor on stage responds, and how the player and the fellow actor on stage work in tandem together will affect the audience’s overall enjoyment of the show.

**What is the role of the player character in the game? Does the player play multiple characters? If so, what is the relationship between the multiple characters?**

Although I think the player character for the most part is going to remain as Jonathan, I think in Act I the player is going to assume the role of the director of the show. This will allow the player to get an outsider’s view of Jonathan before they assume his identity, so that they will already have a clear picture of the character the player is going to be assuming. I also plan on having the director explain to Jonathan (and, in so doing, the player) the concept of actioning the beats. When Jonathan is confused by this, the director (controlled by the player) will then lead by example, and engage in a small scene with Jonathan. Since the director is an old pro and has been doing this for years, his list of transitive verbs is immense—in fact, it is every transitive verb that the player (as Jonathan) potentially has the option of attaining in the game (though during any given playthrough, Jonathan will only be able to obtain a relatively small subset of the actions.) This should simultaneously give the player an idea not only for the form that Act III will take, but it will also give them an idea of possible methods of solving puzzles, and different verbs that they can strive for—providing them a rough idea of the replayability of the game.

The role of Jonathan in general is to serve as a means to explore two different narrative structures placed up against each other. One structure is the play that Jonathan
is in, which has been pre-written—as plays tend to be—and the other structure is the adventure that Jonathan goes on himself on his quest to find life experiences. Depending on the actions the player takes, Jonathan could find true love, get arrested, land a successful acting career, or other options. In putting a “set” ending and a “variable” ending side by side, I hope that an interesting examination between the two will blossom. I also hope to explore the idea—perhaps most famously depicted in Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off*—that the wants, desires, goals and life of the actor are sometimes in direct contradiction to those of the character the actor plays.

Describe each location that will appear in your game. Draw a map showing how the locations relate to each other (boxes and lines are fine for the map).

In both Act I and in Act III, there will be only one location: The Stage. The player will not have control over movement during these phases of the game, though through in-game ‘cinematic text’, it may talk about how Jonathan moves upstage right or downstage center depending on his blocking. Act II will have more the more traditional compass based cardinal directions, though I believe Act II will begin with “where would you like to go” and a list of options will appear for the player to select one, from which they will not be able to leave until Act III of the game begins.

Although ideally I would love for their to be a myriad of locations that the player can visit, for simplicities sake, I am going to promise only two for the purposes of this design document: Jonathan’s Mother’s House, and a Bar. Having two fully fleshed out locations, I believe, would be more satisfying than several undeveloped locations. However, as time permits, more areas can be added.

The layout of Jonathan’s Mother’s House is:

![](image)


The layout of the Bar Is:
What are the significant objects in your game? What role do they play in the game?

The standard inventory of tangible objects that the player character possesses will be kept to an extreme minimum in this game. In its stead will be the ever-increasing list of actions that the player acquires as they play through the game. These actions will approximately serve the purpose that traditional objects usually fulfill, being tools to progress towards an ending in Act III. Occasionally tangible items may need to be picked up to aid the player in attaining actions (and I think I want to give the player character a copy of the script that they can choose to read at any time, just to give them a familiarity with the dialogue if they so choose before Act III begins), but the primary focus is not on obtaining any specific object or set of objects—such as the treasures in Zork I—but rather to allow Jonathan to learn his precious transitive verbs. The question becomes, which transitive verbs will be included in the game?

The English Language has been blessed with a plethora of transitive verbs and although in a perfect world with infinite time, resources, and patience Method Actor 2000 would have on the order of, say, 2000 verbs, that is an unreasonable goal considering how this is in fact a world of quickly approaching deadlines. To help combat this, I am going to take a page (or several) out of The Actors’ Thesaurus and pick a handful of words. These words are going to come from one of three “emotional groups”: Nurturing Words, Using Words, and Damaging Words. Each of these emotional groups can be split further into three subcategories. Here is a partial list of the words from each category that I would like to have:

Nurturing Words
A) Loving Words
   - Calm, Kiss, Purify, Revive, Woo
B.) Encouraging Words
   - Applaud, Befriend, Heal, Pressure, Stir
C.) Supporting Words
   - Defend, Help, Lift, Obey, Toast

Using Words
A.) Manipulating Words
   - Beg, Bribe, Corrupt, Seduce
B.) Deceiving Words
Betray, Steal, Throw

C.) Disturbing Words
Distract, Freeze, Grab, Undo, Wring

Damaging Words
A.) Discouraging Words
Cage, Chill, Offend, Silence
B.) Harming Words
Cut, Damage, Drain, Poison
C.) Destroying Words
Extinguish, Incinerate, Murder, Shatter

More words will hopefully be added as time permits.

What is the role of non-player characters (NPCs) in your game? Can the player talk with NPCs? If so, how will dialog be implemented (topic keywords, conversation dialogs, etc.)? Do NPCs move around and take action or are they primarily conversational? If NPCs move around and take actions, what do they do?

The Act II NPCs are very different than the Act III NPCs. The role of the Act II NPCs in this game is primarily as a means of attaining additional actions—if Jonathan were to successfully bribe the bartender, for example, he would gain the transitive verb bribe added to his action list. At this point, I foresee dialogue being implemented via conversation dialogues, though I do fear that conversation dialogues would end up having a one to one mapping of conversation option to action gained, and would have to take special precautions to safeguard against it. The thrill one received in Galatea when successfully figuring out a valid topic keyword was incredibly satisfying, but I’m not sure that it outweighed the frustration that stemmed from the myriad previous attempts to speak with her which elicited no response. Conversely, Photopia streamlined the process, reducing the frustration levels immensely. I feel both models could be made to subscribe to Aristotle’s desire for Formal Causal Chains—Photopia since everything furthered the plot, and Galatea if in game statistics changed if people felt that the player was speaking nonsense for a prolonged period of time (and these statistics then had an effect on game play)—and therefore could contribute to a good narrative foundation. All of this is speculation before I personally have done any conversation coding. I think I am going to plan on using the conversation dialog method, but will withhold final decision before I have experimented with both forms.

Right now, I am imagining the Act II NPC’s to move around and take actions, but the actions they take are going to be relatively simple, based largely on what room they are currently in. For example, Jonathan’s mom will wander around the house, if she is in the garden, she will be pulling weeds, if she is in the kitchen, she may make a sandwich, if she is in the garage, she may be working on the car, etc. Based on where she is and what she is doing will affect the ways that the player character will be able to interact with her. (Jonathan may be able to beg for the sandwich, in the garage, his mom may hand him a tool and ask for his help—you can either help her by doing what she asks, or betray her by shattering the car windshield (netting yourself two verbs in one action!).
The Act III NPC will behave in an entirely different fashion. As mentioned before, Act III is the opening night of Jonathan’s performance, specifically, it is a scene between him and another actor—the NPC. Neither Jonathan nor the NPC can deviate from the lines that they say, nor can they alter their blocking that was assigned to them. However, they can change the actions that they play to color each of their beats. The NPC’s action choices will change based on what choices Jonathan makes, essentially resulting in a turn based game, where each turn either Jonathan or the NPC decides upon a new transitive verb. Additionally, there is a second NPC, essentially, in the form of the audience. Although the audience cannot move around, or be conversed with by the player character, their perception of the show (whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, whether it is a strong or a weak performance) will be based on how well Jonathan and his fellow actor NPC work together in tandem.

What prior stories, story genres, or games will your game reference? If so, how will you leverage the player’s prior knowledge in your design?

The most important foreign concept that will need to be communicated to the player is the concept of “Actioning” a text, as well as some possible theatrical vocabulary like beats, or stage directions. I plan on attempting to communicate this as much as possible during Act I, using the device of the director to serve as a sort of in-game instruction manual. There also may be the perception that during Act III, the goal is to do “better” than the NPC actor, while in actuality the goal—just like in real life—is to work together to make the show as great as possible. Now, there are of course actors in real life who feel justified in stealing the spotlight, and this would certainly be a terrific thing to explore in this game, but it is not a design priority, and it is certainly not the way that the player “wins,” so this may need to be communicated.

Also, the concept of acquiring words to make you a more viable professional has some similarities to the Insult Sword Fighting system from *The Secret of Monkey Island*, but I do not think that it is necessary for the player to make that connection to fully enjoy the game.

How will player interaction be integrated into the story structure? Will the player be uncovering a story that already happened? Will the player have an impact on the plot (and if so, how)? What will be the relationship between story and discourse in your game? In describing the interactive story structure of your game, use terminology from the readings from the first half of the class.

This was discussed a little bit in question two, but could benefit from more elaboration. To the degree that performing a play that has already been written is to uncover a story that has already happened, then yes, approximately half of the game (Act III) is a devoted embedded narrative. However, both Act I and Act II are principally an enacted narrative—the actions Jonathan takes are happening in real time, and will have direct—sometimes immediate, sometimes delayed—effects on his life. Depending on the effect, they may or may not be influenced by his performance in Act III. For example, if Jonathan *murders* a man at the Bar during Act II, and performs in such a manner that the audience adores him in Act III, then if the police interrupt your performance searching
for you the audience may impede the policemen’s entry, defending you from the game ending in your arrest. As mentioned before, this is one of the primary goals of this game, to place embedded and enacted narrative, a ‘set’ ending and a ‘variable’ ending, side by side and within each other, and explore what is created when the two intertwine.

Although I’m not anticipating any temporal effects on the discourse (that is to say, there will not be any flash backs or flash forwards. It will be a simple linear story), as the story progresses, you may learn things about Jonathan’s past—why he chose to become an actor, the love of his life that left him, his fears, etc.—and once that information is revealed, it should provide clues as to how the player might be able to obtain additional transitive verbs, in an effort to balance formal and material affordances.

I think my biggest fear for this game is implementing an efficient Listen-Think-Speak loop to maximize the interactivity, specifically the loop as it will exist in Act III. Once the player has gotten to Act III, the Listen portion is more or less set, for the only actions the player can do is specify transitive verbs that were discovered in Act II. Thinking and Speaking, I anticipate, will be more difficult. In order to think well, the other NPC actor will need to have some sort of inherent understanding of the meaning of the word that the player used (Perhaps achievable through the fact that the words have already been split into various categories), and then be able to decide upon a good word to say in response. This is complicated by the fact that a good response must be decided not solely on the current exchange, but would ideally take into account the entire scene that had transpired up to that point (so, for example, if the scene had a somber tone, and then the player threw a curveball of a jovially-charged action, the other actor would have to somehow understand that this is odd behavior, instead of mindlessly responding with happiness back.) I think the answer must be to have a series of internal values (not unlike Galatea), but deciding what those values should be will require fine tuning. I would love to incorporate actual theory from Stanislavky’s “An Actor Prepares” or “Building a Character”, but I fear that may be too ambitious given the encroaching deadlines. Of all the work that lies ahead, perfecting the think loop is perhaps the most difficult of them all. The Speak loop concerns me too; though once the NPC decides which verb to use, printing that verb to the screen (i.e. ‘speaking’ it) would be easy, the question becomes, is that enough? If given a line of dialogue and an action to go along with it, is that enough for the player to make an educated guess as to what verb to respond with and get expected results? If the user feels lost in choosing a verb, or that the responses they receive from the verb are completely arbitrary, then it will severely limit the sense of agency involved, and although I like the idea of reducing the control of the player to simply suggesting verbs during Act III, I do not want the player to suffer from a lack of agency. Perhaps the metaphor of ‘notes from the director’ could be incorporated to provide hints—if the user wanted them—as a training on how to illicit different reactions. Perhaps this could be weaved into the Act I tutorial. Based on either the cheers of the audience or the chirping of the crickets, the player will be able to get a sense of how they are doing as a whole as well. That might work out quite well, actually—even though Galatea had several values constantly adjusting behind the scenes, there were very few indications of game state visible to the player, the most apparent one being how much Galatea was turned towards the player. A similar metaphor could be slapped on to the audience—either cheers or chirps, tears or boos.