Mysteries & Magic:
The Stories of Spider

Before Spider, there was this gravestone. My friend Melisa found when doing yard work. Who was CK Jackson, was he buried in her backyard? We did research with just this name and date of birth. Found some prison records, a nearby cemetery that had been exhumed to make way for a catholic school where a Mrs.CK Jackson had formerly been buried, and some photos of people who might have been related. but it was definitely an incomplete story, if you've every done genealogical research, it's like this. It requires faith and interpretation, like many different stories are possible. I was really absorbed by this and it was one of the seminal inspirations for spider's story.

Spider's proto story: the witch. Crappy. just a placeholder because even though it was conceived as a very mechanical game about a spider, we wanted there to be a story.

Earliest proto levels for Spider – based on the "Spider fantasy", e.g. where webs are built in real life – shelves, pipes, etc..

People dug this level in particular, wanted to know more about this guy who was depressed after a hard day's work.

This is when we realized it could be a story about not just a spider but the humans the spider encounters.

A Spider's Eye View
between the floorboards and the walls, find objects that have been hidden, lost, or discarded, that humans no longer see.
This serviced both the spider fantasy, and the unique lens of the story.
Important who the central character is. Why a spider. Why not a frog? Or a fireman?
The answer was it's a story that's crucially only truly accessible to a spider – of all the characters, the spider is the only one who gets the whole picture.

Archeology Storytelling

A story that took place in the past, that you interpret by examining props etc in the scene

forensic scenes for the player to interpret by examining the environment.

S1 took place on the first day Bryce Manor was abandoned – you leave the place covered in cobwebs – another reason why your role as spider is crucial to this story. You are the "agent of abandonment."

After the fact, we realized/felt that one of the themes of the spider story is death: that when you're gone, all that people will know you by is the small tokens you leave behind.

Aside: Rare chance to tell stories in video games using fine details, not just running and gunning past at 50 mph.

Interpretability

S1 tells the story of a pair of brothers in a love triangle with a girl who lived next door
And a playful patriarch, CK Bryce, inventor and adventurer, who before his death hid a secret in the house for his descendents to unravel
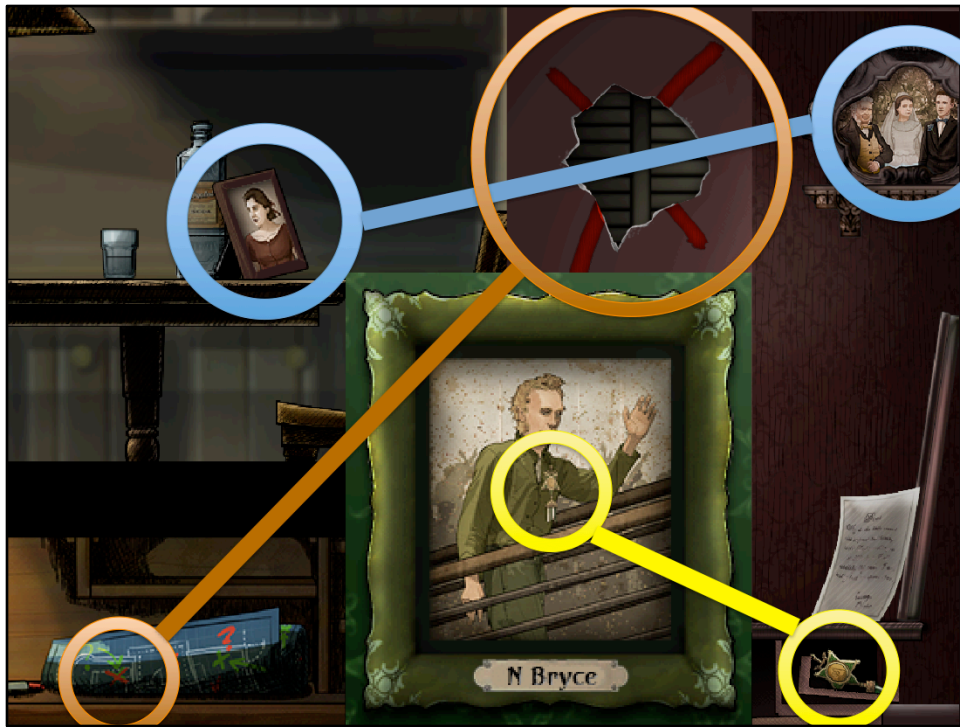
Imagined it as a picture book, each of which depicts a different room in a house. You flip through and make connections – A character in this photo shows up in this photo, a medal seen on this guy is hidden in a secret drawer, an X on a map matches an X on a wall, two halves of a photo ripped in half, etc..

Interpretability: But none of this comes together quickly. One source called it "tattered" storytelling. Did contrive to make it easy to read, but also it's deliberately supportive of multiple interpretations and incomplete histories, per CK Jackson's gravestone.

Separation Between Player and Avatar

You play a spider who is only interested in spider stuff: webs, insects.

We only give you the tools to pursue spider stuff, you can't express any reaction to the story – you can't have conversations, read books, examine objects more closely.

This is most noticeable when the spider is in a situation that evokes an emotional response from humans (but not from the spider).

Layers

1. A human who is limited to playing the role of the spider, but who is interested in the human story.
2. A spider who only wants to eat bugs.
3. A house whose props tell the story of its former occupants
4. A family and their relatable domestic dramas
5. A secret the family strives to uncover but only the spider can find

Apologies for my crappy attempt (and not my first one) to explain why this is interesting to me.
Spider has all these layers of experience.
Most notably these two:
Layer 2 - you play a spider (the character) who only cares about bugs, doesn't care about humans, and who is exploring a human environment, AND
Layer 1 - on another level you're an actual human (the player) who is almost sorta watching a movie of the spider in layer 2, and unlike the spider who cares about the human things in that movie. But even though you're controlling that spider, you can't actually express any reaction to that movie/story.

Also that as the human in 1, with the perspective of the spider in 2, you know more about the story than the human characters in the story do, but, again, there's nothing you can directly do about it, you're limited to playing the role of the spider: leaving the place covered in cobwebs.
So…. All these connections of meaning between the layers.

Layers 4 and 5 are about the specific story: the story told through environmental props is about 5 - a family living in a house that contains epic secrets, and they 4 - live out their domestic dramas in that house, including that they attempt to find the secrets, but they can't, only the spider (2) can find them. It gets hard to track all the interconnections, hence my recurring failure to diagram it.

Great formula we as much stumbled upon as developed. Partially it was the product of constraints, eg – small budget, didn't want to do localization, so we made a story that uses literally no words.

So all that was about Spider 1, which I sort of understand now.

The rest of this is about Spider 2, so it's going to get more vague, because I'm still exploring it, this is just as best as I can explain it right now.

That concept of interplay between Layers is one of the things I wanted to get deeper with in Spider 2.

It connects somehow to one of the major themes of Spider 2 – that of blurring the lines between game/reality, fiction/fact, what's true/what's false.

For example, that what you see when you look out your window matches what you see in the game.

(that's a real Masonic engraving on the right, but not directly relevant to Spider 2, just a cool example image.)

One of the things that didn't work well in Spider 1 was that epic mystery, the secret hidden in Bryce Manor. Very few players caught on to it and even fewer solved it. So for S2, wanted a richer, more interactive, satisfying mystery layer.

That's how the idea of a secret society came up. That there would be a domestic story again, but this time it would be set not just in a house but a whole estate, an estate built by a secret society, for a specific purpose, which is the reason you can find mysterious puzzles and engravings in the rock and secret passages.

Post CCC Annos Patebo / Vigenère / qzsvmyfrqrglptxhphrcelnxphxrshxtlidfth
Secret Societies in Spider 2
I especially like that secret societies blur the lines between fiction and reality, making it hard to tell what's real.
They deliberately obfuscate their origins, they invent their own mythologies, keep secrets from even themselves, they may not exist at all, they may just be covers for other secret societies, they may have started off as a hoax but other people believed in them and started up chapters. They famously use encrypted messages such as this one, they actually do engrave secrets into building facades, etc..

I like how this adds more confusion and interplay between the Layers - now the characters in the story themselves don't know what's true or false, what's reality vs. wishful thinking. They live in a place that can be read for subtle meaning, that is clearly signaling that there's more here than meets the eye, but it also deliberately tried to obfuscate that meaning, so they aren't sure what to believe. And that story of theirs is the story that you as a spider/human are interpreting through the environmental props they leave behind.

Let's change topics.

This past fall my friend Tim and I dug into the ground in our tiny rural hometown in Vermont. I was expecting to find occasional artifacts, but instead the entire area was rich with glass – resting on the surface and countless shards in every scoop of earth.

Antique glass from the 1800s. Tons of bottles worth.

Tim grew up not ¼ mile down a quiet village street. If we had dug there as kids, we would have been stoked to find this stuff. But we didn't know to dig there.

Turns out our tiny rural town of Sheldon Vermont was once an important place in early America, hosting a giant hotel (as seen on this bottle label). People took trains from Boston, NYC, and all over to spend time in sleepy little Sheldon to visit its mineral springs.

Similar to Saratoga springs (and others). Thought to have curative and restorative affects for a lot of afflictions, including cancer.   Bottled and shipped all over the united states. I somehow did not know this growing up, even a bit of history this significant had barely survived just a handful of decades.

The ground we were digging was also clean, wet and gravelly. It was the actual site of the actual mineral springs, cold water bubbling up from from the ground, now covered over and forgotten. The hotel had been burned down a century earlier by a disgruntled employee, and the foundation had been filled in and repurposed. We were standing on the banks where they would toss their trash, including countless Mississquoi A Mineral Springs bottles of various vintages, some of which are worth lots of real money to collectors.

(Aside – the bottom right is an actual photo of the hotel vs. the significantly more palatial depiction on the bottle label at left.)

End of story = mineral springs fell out of public interest, hotel burned by disgruntled employee, and just a few generations later it was a sleepy town again and no one remembered its hay day.

I went to high school in the nearby slightly larger town of St. Albans. It wasn't a wealthy town then, but there was clear evidence it had been a bustling center in its past. There were all these beautiful stone facades and gorgeous architecture that I would marvel at. There were (to me at the time) mysterious engravings on the buildings. Above all there was this sense of layers of history: clear indication of an earlier time and purpose to these fancy buildings, that today not that many generations later very different people living in those buildings were basically unaware of their past.
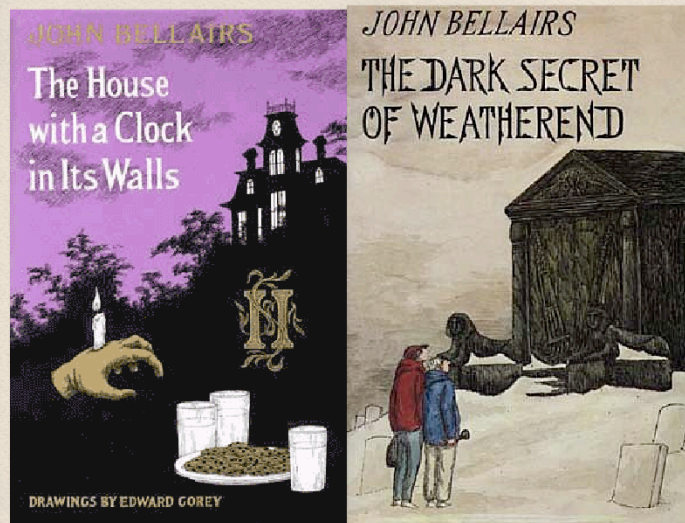
I used to say the John Bellairs books were an inspiration for Spider, but now I'm starting to understand this the other way around: I loved these books as a kid because my childhood was like the real life version of these stories: old houses with hidden messages and buried secrets that required interpretation.

Real Research
(these are just some random secret society images, no specific meaning.)

Strap yourself in for my rambling description of Spider 2's craziest experiment.

So I've been doing a bunch of research into exactly what secret societies really are. Like everyone else my info started with Templars, Nicolas Cage in National Treasure, the Illuminati, weird occult symbols, Eyes Wide Shut.   Wanted more authenticity. After months I finally am starting to get the real deal (more on this next slide).

Wanted the secret society in Spider 2's story to be based on a real life sec soc, but a lesser known one, not the Freemasons – too much data and confusion with them, instead a cool unfamiliar one with a finite amount of data to research, so all researchers get more or less the same picture.
So Spider 2's Blackbird Estate, the secret society that built it, their symbols, their ciphers and secret passwords, their rituals and tendencies, etc. – all heavily based on those characteristics of a real life secret society, not just invented out of thin air.
Idea is you could embellish your understanding of the video game by doing your own real life research into this secret society, obtain more perspective, see deeper meanings, solve harder puzzles.
So I'm liberally using facts and characteristics of this real life secret society in the game. Obviously to some extent having to fill in some gaps, modifying, embellishing, interpret. And on top of that, even the basic facts about this real life secret society (same as all secret societies) are questionable, interpretable, shrouded in mystery and confusion, possibly invented. Also there's some chance your research will turn

(notes, cont.)

up different facts / interpretations than mine.

So all in all, this really makes the Layers thing go crazy (in a hopefully good way). The secret society that confuses the family's understanding of what's going on is not a convenient contrivance, it actually crosses over into the real world (creating confusion about game vs. reality), with all the usual real world messiness (especially for a topic like this), plus my interpretation of the data vs. yours as separate researchers…

…sorry for the not succinct summary, it's because as I said, I don't even really understand this stuff yet. But I can tell I think it's going to be cool. Hopefully.

(noteworthy: Much like the story in Spider 1 – you don't need to do any real life research to enjoy S2, you don't need to pay attention to the story at all, it's all optional, for devoted and interested players.)

So I went out in search of a secret society that would work, and I got super lucky.

Found the right: emphasis on the moon, correct historical period, right location, reputation for secret doors, etc. – great material to work into the game.

The secret society we're using is not called The Rite of the Shrouded Moon (we made that up because it sounds cool). Not going to release the name or any identifying characteristics until closer to ship, because I don't want people to know everything about this secret society before they can even play the game!

But if you're interested – stay tuned! Look for clues! Go play!

I'm going to deliver a fun research report about what I've learned about secret societies in the near future.

Follow us on these social channels for more in-development reports, clues, screenshots, other stuff.

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Thanks

Go play!