

The history of Otherworld

The first iteration

As far as I can remember, the very early designing of the project started as far back as 2012. Only very little was done back then.

As far as I can remember, in 2014 I wrote very detailed plans for the game, including researching which food crops were native to which region on Earth and reading up on the evolution of food plants. The list of wanted resources included things like ancestral tomatoes and toxic manchineel trees.

Programming the first iteration of Otherworld started in 2016. I first started programming it locally, using MySQLi for interacting with the database and Xampp for running a local server. The world was initially intended to be as large as Earth in real life, but it was reduced to the size of the moon.

The world was spherical and consisted of a global map that was divided into local maps. The local maps were procedurally generated based on a color-coded graphic map that had values for moisture (blue), vegetation (green) and altitude (red). Based on these, when a user landed in a new x,y coordinates pair, the system generated a new local map, which was translated by the game into a visual grid with trees, rocks and water.

There was also a set of resource maps, where colored areas indicated a certain resource. There was probably over a 100 of different image files. When a new local map was created, it had resource deposits that you could search for. Then you could gather resources.

The founding idea of the game was that it would take players on a journey through historical ages, starting from the Stone Age. It was assumed that every character has a mother and father, even if it isn't always spelled out who they were. Everything was founded in realism. This was a very bad idea.

All the fruit and vegetables could be processed into chopped versions of themselves. Only processed vegetables could be used for cooking.

There were about 20 different types of trees, each with their own hardness. Some trees could only be harvested with an axe, while others could be chopped manually. The local maps had tree icons, and you could cut them down to get wood. It was also possible to move the player icon on the map somehow. I think you clicked on squares to determine where to move.

The founder of Gameogre got excited about Otherworld and let me use the server Ogreworld, because he wasn't using the domain currently, but had it registered. This allowed me to test the game online and open it up to test users. In the beginning, there were a lot of bugs that were not visible in the local environment.

The test users were mainly interested in running around the world map and gathering resources. Inventory size was not limited, because the way the weight of resources was tracked was very complicated. A unit of resources could have a variable weight with a minimum and maximum. Every time you dropped a part of a pile, it would calculate the weight of the dropped proportion.

There were collaborators involved in the project, primarily Mattwithoos, who helped me set up a Slack channel. Later we moved to a new server. There was a website for seeking collaborators at the time, and some people came in through there, but it never took off the ground. The Discord channel was also founded.

Originally in the game, there was a non-linear time system that allowed people to interact with other people after they had already left a location, just as long as they had overlapping timelines. This was insanely complicated and was holding down the project for weeks or months, until it was eventually scrapped.

In the game, originally you could rest indefinitely to regain energy, and therefore travel long distances. Traveling involved selecting how many legs of the road to travel, up to 10 at a time. In reality, pretty much every tester always chose 10, unless they had to land on a specific square, and then they would select smaller numbers.

There were rivers in the game, which served as roadblocks, because there were no boats and no bridges. This meant that if you ran into a river, you had to walk all the way upstream to the mountains where it started from to get around it.

Later as I got Cron jobs running, characters started to gain AP hourly, and manual resting was turned off.

Characters had a body, which was an object, and inventory items were child objects of this body object. Early plans involved the possibility of two characters sharing the same body. The system also involved watcher roles, which allowed special users to see the world through the eyes of another player's character. The roles of public watcher and invisible watcher were separated, so certain characters could be watched by the admin without the player knowing.

All characters and animals had blood, that was measured in grams. If you lost enough blood in combat, you would fall unconscious. Combat was really complicated and involved selecting from several fighting styles, such as inflict maximal pain, cripple, or aim to kill. When animals bled, the blood would appear on the ground. When you killed an animal, first you had to drain the blood, then there was a whole page long menu that allowed you to select which things to extract from the corpse, including meat, bones, sinew, intestines, and hide or fur. Some animals could also have antlers or horn.

Later in development, the game got a weather system that involved the temperature of every object changing based on the amount of sun. There was also a day-night cycle. There was a fire system that allowed items to get hot. Lighting fire required tinder, kindling, and firewood. Camphor wood could be used as tinder and wood shavings could be used as kindling. You got wood shavings as a side resource from working on wood carving projects, so they were readily available, but tinder was hard to come by. As a side effect, you could set your entire inventory contents on fire if you picked up a burning object. This didn't damage you but some objects could be consumed by the fire.

In the late stages of the project, there was an introduction of mold and yeast, which was intended to allow making blue cheese and fermented items. This never took off the ground.

The major problem was that it was impossible to produce bronze or iron on the test continent, so you couldn't advance out of stone age technology. Items also had realistic weights, so gathering enough stone to build an oven or a kiln was incredibly tedious and no one actually did it within the bounds of the system.

It was possible to form travel parties and certain characters had the right to lead the group, so people could travel together. People could also request a companion and players could fill a request instead of spawning in a random location.

The game was intended to include child characters, but the mechanics were never coded.

There was an NPC system, but it was never finished. There were so called shadow societies, which were Stone Age tribes with a random name, and they consisted of adults, children, the elderly and the disabled. You could talk to the group to improve your standing and take risks of different sizes to gamble the effects of

the speech. You could also go hunting with the tribe and someone could get lost or injured, so it wasn't always guaranteed that the group caught any prey.

Roleplaying in the game involved around setting up scenes that could be public or private.

In 2017, things quieted down and few testers were logging in. I decided to rewrite the game from scratch, and this was a mistake.

The short-lived second version

The second version was a chatroom rpg with a revised map. It had animals like capybaras and the starting area was based off the Amazon region. The plan was to have a starting town, three-toed horses, and a region of wildlings that lived up the river in the jungle. It was a cool idea, but nobody was interested in a purely chat-based environment.

When it came down to the choice of renewing the server and domain registration for a second year, I chose to shut down the game and put development on a hiatus.

The third version

The designing of the third version started in March 2023. The third version started from the idea of using timers as the basis of everything. Initially, the resource gathering timers were intended to be 1 minute a tick for 5 stars, 2 minutes a tick for 4 stars, 4 minutes a tick for three stars, 16 minutes a tick for two stars and 32 minutes a tick for one star. The early testers hated this, but I'll get back to that later.

For database connections, I decided to use PDO instead of MySQLi. Since the project was only in the beginning stages, there was really nothing to lose and nothing to rewrite, since I was starting from a blank slate. This turned out to be a good choice.

The earliest plans for resources were reed and wicker for making baskets that allow you to carry more, iron ore and coal to make iron, wood to craft most things, stone to build, jute and flax for making string, rope, and sacks, and clay to make pottery. I wanted to ensure that iron technology was available for everybody, so I added iron and steel production very early in development and skipped most stone tools altogether.

Traveling also worked on a timer. The world was divided into locations, that were connected by paths. The paths were also locations, but they had a start point and end point, and length. Animals could only be encountered on the roads, so if you wanted to hunt, you had to go on the road and refresh the page repeatedly, hoping to trigger an encounter. In the beginning, the only animals were the fluffy bunny and the bear. Bears were very dangerous, and it once took four characters armed with spears to take down a single bear.

Traveling generated thirst, and a waterskin allowed characters to consume water automatically. Making a waterskin required leather, which was made out of hides, which you got from killing animal encounters, so it was important to hunt. Losing to an animal in combat gave you Scarred status, that showed up in your profile. It was possible to craft lichen bandages, that could be worn, and they deteriorated as they boosted your healing. Healing happened while resting and it also used a timer, like everything did at the time.

The basis of the PvP system was that when you attacked another character, the victim retaliated automatically, and if you failed your roll, the victim confiscated your weapon, effectively making them stronger and you weaker. So effectively, all combat was resolved in one hit. It was unnecessary to bring the enemy down to 1 HP, as you would win regardless of their HP if you succeeded in your roll. The victim would

gain defeated status, and you could confiscate items from them. Unarmed characters would surrender without a fight to protect themselves from harm. You could still choose to attack them regardless, and gain Evil status.

A big part of the game was the intimidation mechanic, which allowed you to command intimidated characters and confiscate items from them. Intimidated characters could attempt to break free once a day. Hiding allowed you to be safe from attacks and intimidation.

Certain types of terrain counted as roadblock. The terrain was bound to the road rather than the destination. Mountains required rope and climbing hooks, swamps required wading boots, lakes required a boat, and jungle roads required a machete. There was also a plan to add deserts, that required a large supply of water, but this never took off the ground.

There was also a wish to have rivers you could ford, and build bridges to cross.

Characters could lead anybody by the hand, so there was no need for a dragging mechanic. You could lead characters down a road or into buildings.

Clothing was very generic and was divided into 4 tiers. The lowest tier would take 1x materials, the highest 4x, and the other two were something in between. Clothes could be made of jute, linen or leather. All clothing deteriorated into rags after 30 days of being worn.

It was decided in the beginning that there would be no death, and that characters with 1 HP would be considered beaten up instead of dying. Abandoned characters would go on a trip instead of dying, and could always come back. If an intimidated character would go on vacation, it was intended that it would be described as running away, but in reality, this was never implemented.

Types of food were intended to be very generic, and you could make them in multiple ways. You could make flour out of different grains and bake it into bread. Beer could be made out of barley, hops, and water. It was intended that making beer would take 20 days. I intentionally limited myself to very few food ingredients in the beginning in order not to get carried away.

I wanted to include children, and they could be controlled through the intimidation mechanic. There was no need for mating. Characters would randomly get pregnant when in presence of a male, as long as there was at least one eligible male and the mother wasn't abstaining. Children would reach maturity after 60 days. If a child character didn't have a player by then, it would enter vacation mode and could be claimed later.

The first resource in the game was wicker, and the first test item was the wicker basket. It also served as container.

After about 3-4 weeks of development, I added a dyes system that allowed changing the description of a clothing item into the name of a color. The color was defined based on the combination of used dyes and the weight of the materials inside the dyer's vat.

Hand carts were added as a draggable container, which enabled transporting large amounts of resources from place to place. I also added container locks, so that people could protect their property. About a week later, I also added the possibility to bash locks to break them, because I didn't like that in Cantr, you had to have a crowbar to break locks.

After about 6 weeks, I decided to use Smarty for templating instead of echoing html directly from php. This was a big project, and it took over 2 weeks to convert all the pages.

In the beginning, the interface was divided into a location page, inventory, people, and craft menu. The location page grew really long and required a lot of scrolling to access the items in the bottom, so it was divided into subsections that were on separate pages.

After about seven weeks, I added the ability to forage, mainly to ensure that no one was going to be stuck on an island with no water and unable to travel.

After two months of development, I registered a domain and made it possible to register accounts. In the beginning, hardly anybody was registering, and the few that did would run around like headless chickens, never interacting with any of my characters. Very few people were taking the game seriously or trying to roleplay.

I decided to add a rudimentary quests system to teach people about the core mechanics.

In the beginning, there were hardly any event messages, but gradually, more were added.

After about a week since the game went live, I switched the game into speed mode, which involved turning every 1-minute timer into 10 seconds and so forth. This was supposed to help the impatient players stick around but it didn't really help. While there were several registrations, most people would quit within 5 minutes.

Javascript was introduced to tell people that timers were actually progressing, so you didn't have to refresh the page to see the updated number.

Early on, a tutorial zone was introduced and there were some special travel requirements for moving between locations. About 90% of new accounts never cleared out of the starting location, and as far as I recall, only 2% made it to the third location.

Masks were added to boost intimidation. Around this time, I received stern feedback that the intimidation mechanic was ruining the game and making people not want to play because you could lose everything you had gathered in an instant if you got unlucky, so I had to mostly remove the mechanic. This made me really sad, as I personally liked the mechanic a lot.

In the beginning, the game had almost no graphics at all, save for the thirst and stomach icons. At one point, there was a simple graphic map, but it was turned off later as the travel system changed, and it no longer made sense. Graphic icons were added for objects, and later for wild animals and action buttons.

About a month after the release, an AP-based system was introduced for crafting. Later AP was used to replace an increasing number of things previously done using timers.

During July 2023, I worked on adding domesticated animals and the livestock merchant mechanic, but it wasn't actually finished until September. A general trader character was also added, along with the introduction of coins and lost souls as a source of coins. These systems never quite off the ground, because after a few days or weeks of playing, you can already manufacture every item in the game and no longer need to buy anything.

In September, the traveling system was switched into using unlockable zones.

In October, I added the possibility of trying out the game with a guest account. After this, very few people have created actual accounts, so most players are only interested in checking out the game for less than an hour and then never coming back.

In January 2024, I got tired of Xampp corrupting the database when ever my computer decided to reboot itself and switched to using Laragon. This turned out to be a good decision, as Laragon hasn't crashed a single time, whereas during the Xampp times, the local database broke at least 2 or 3 times.

At some point, the game went through a major shift of loading pages with Ajax rather than reloading the entire page. During the history of Otherworld, there have been multiple changes to the visuals, and there are no guarantees that the current look is going to be the final version. The most recent change was switching from a flexbox-based layout to using a grid. In the beginning of April, I also redrew the map, even though it's not visible inside the game. When I introduced the first version of the map for this iteration of the game, I wasn't expecting Tschaimmesheang lakeside to become such a major location and having the zone 2 locations spread all over the map made the world make very little sense. In the new map, they are all close to each other, so the connections between zones make sense again.