

MAKING FEMALE AGENT GREAT AGAIN

Earlier this month, while trying to complete the Dubai scene, I had what alcoholics call a moment of clarity.

I realised that the project was in big trouble, and that polishing the Dubai scene wouldn't fix it. I also realised that the problems were the result of design decisions I'd personally made (and in many cases *insisted upon*, over the concerns of team and community members).

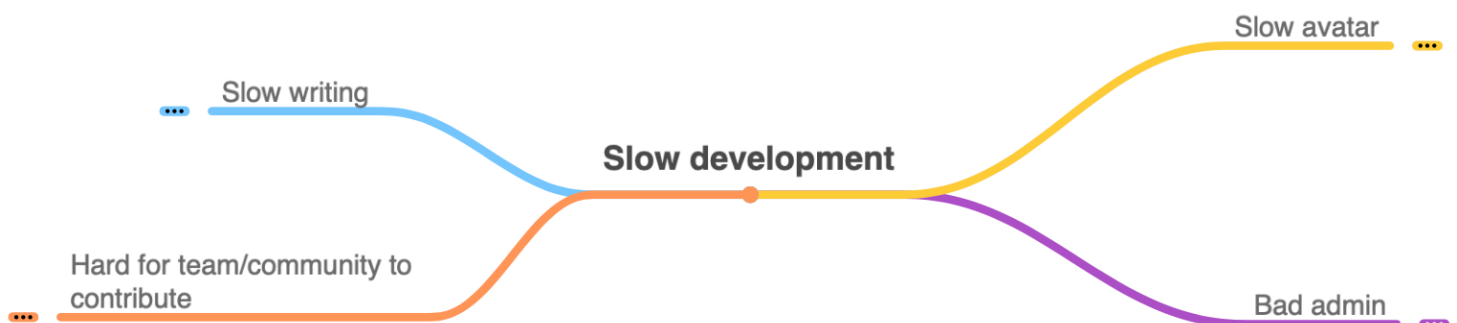
I thought for a few minutes about what it would take to fix the problems...and the scale of the task ahead was shocking. My first instinct was just to write off the game. Even just listing and understanding the problems felt incredibly complex.

And calling my old boss and asking for my job back seemed a lot less humiliating than admitting to everybody that I'd led this project into the wilderness, then asking for permission to try and lead it back on target.

Ultimately, I don't want to abandon the game, I want to make it work. I spent the last few weeks working flat out on a turnaround plan. (The details aren't all polished yet, but I wanted to make this plan available before the end of the month, so that patrons can make an informed decision about whether they still want to support the project.)

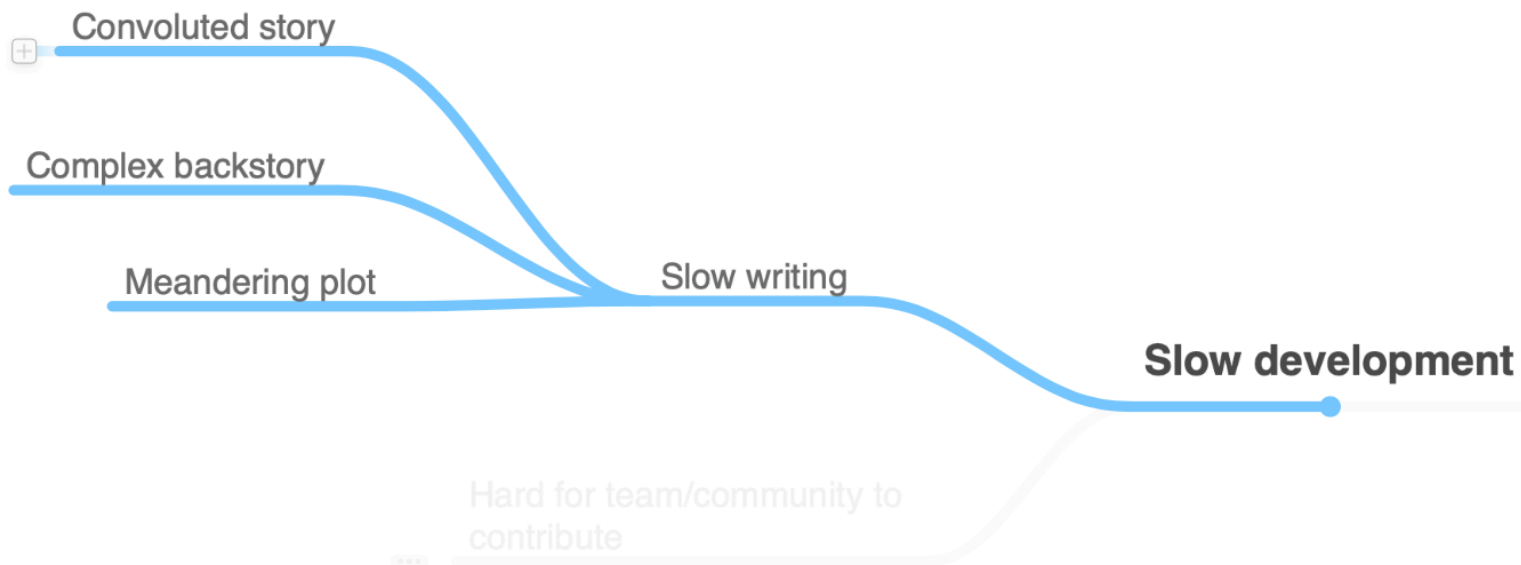
Core problem

The game's development is **much too slow**. I've identified four main reasons:



Slow writing

Individual scenes take much too long to write. There are three main reasons:



Causes of slow writing

Convolved story. The story jumps through some weird hoops in order to squeeze in all the scenes.

Dubai's the obvious example (there's really no good reason for the heroine to be in Dubai in the first place), but lots of the Scotland sequence is also convolved (largely in an attempt to rationalise Dubai).

That slows down the writing a lot, because it's very hard to make a scene work when the characters involved don't really have motivations for being in the scene in the first place. (And this is *especially* true for sex scenes.)

Trying to write your way out of a structural problem slows down the writing considerably, because it complicates the writing task.

Complex backstory. There are lots of variables in the heroine's backstory: five nationalities, five social classes (which can change during childhood), five social cliques, two career paths of various lengths, etc.

Supporting all these different options slows down the writing, because it's hard to support so many backgrounds.

Meandering plot. Related to (and partly the cause of) the convoluted story. The scenes just kind of *happen*. They're not written with consideration for how they impact and advance the overall plot.

This slows down the writing, because scenes that affect the plot are inherently interesting and dramatic. Scenes that don't affect the plot aren't, so the writer has to try to make it interesting somehow.

Proposed solutions

Streamline the backstory. Cut some of the options; e.g. reduce social classes from 5 to 3 (elite/middle class/working class), cut the "alpha female" and "no clique" background options (so the heroine can be a star athlete, rock chick or geek girl), etc. Narrow the age range so we don't have to support rookie & veteran backstories; pick one and stick to it.


Streamline the story. Cut Dubai. Trim the fat out of the Scotland sequence so it runs faster and has more of an impact on the heroine. Temporarily cut hypno (to be restored properly later).

Create plot outlines. Before writing, plan how each scene will impact the plot. That doesn't mean that every scene needs to progress the mission, but every scene should be there to develop the story and/or the heroine. If it doesn't: cut it.

Example: there's a concept in fiction writing called Scene/Sequel. It basically means that you have an event that advances the action (the scene), followed by a main character reacting to that event and experiencing some kind of dilemma (the sequel).

The Scotland sequence almost gets this right, because there are travel scenes between the briefings & nightclub encounters ("scenes") that could be used for the heroine's reflections ("sequels").

Allowing the player to set whether the heroine is *stoic/frayed/pissed off/secretly loving it* would be a fascinating, meaningful character moment. And it would give the writer so much to work with that the scene (and the following one) would practically write itself.

But because those scenes weren't written with development of the main plot in mind, they don't do that. Instead they describe a motorway. 

Avatar problems

I love the avatar, but it has become time consuming to support and maintain.



Too many variables. 3 body shapes x 6 bra sizes = minimum 18 hand drawn variants of any top or dress we want to add into the game. (The dynamic dresses in Dubai each have more than 100 variants.)

Complex production process. The layer architecture in the master Adobe Illustrator art file is very complex (because it grew organically instead of being designed in advance). That makes the process of converting a piece of art from Illustrator to Female Agent complex and time consuming in itself.

Proposed solutions

Clean up the layer architecture. Reorganising the layer architecture would make conversion from Illustrator to the main game much less of a chore. The reason we haven't considered doing this before is that it would also require rewriting the avatar code that's in the game. This is a pain in the ass, but I think we need to bite the bullet.

Simplify the avatar. Painful but obvious: reduce the body shape options from three to one. Reduce bra size options from six to three (small/average/busty).

There are two ways to go about this:

- A. Delete two body types and three bra sizes, or
- B. Draw a new avatar.

Since we're reorganising the Illustrator layers anyway, Victoria and I favour option B. V was never crazy about the body proportions of the avatar she inherited when she joined, and she'd like to create something better.

She's been experimenting with new looks over the past fortnight. We invested in a new 3D character modelling tool (<https://www.reallusion.com/character-creator/production.html>) for V to experiment with body shapes and facial features to use as her model for the character.

(To be clear: we're not planning to use a rendered 3D model in the game. This will just be used as V's model, from which she'll create a 2D avatar in her own art style.)

V sent over a draft model of her proposal at about 1am on Wednesday. Here's my reply:

Wow wow wow wow wow.

Seeing this reminds me of something I learned once about the TV show "Sons of Anarchy". A producer was talking about how they cast Charlie Hunnam as Jax – he praised Charlie's acting skills, and his physicality, and the intelligence and seriousness he brought to the role. And – almost as an afterthought, because it was *so* obvious to this producer – "plus, of course, it had to be someone attractive enough to carry a show."

It was just a throwaway comment, but I remember thinking, "wow, yeah, that makes sense. You want somebody who can attract people's attention and interest based just on seeing their face. Ideally someone should see an advert or a few seconds of your show while they're flipping channels, and think *whoa who the hell is that?* and want to learn more about the character."

That feeling is *exactly* what I got when I opened your zip file. She just oozes personality and charisma, and I want to learn more about her. :-D This is real exciting!

Images to follow **soon**. This feedback was based on the first face shape – we'll add more (including celebrity requests) in the future.

Barriers to team/community input

This has been a serious problem since almost the start and we've never solved it.



Barriers to team/community contributions

Unclear game mechanics. The mechanics of skills & dice rolls feel 85% complete – they're complete enough for me personally to make them work, but not solid enough for contributors to use.

This makes it hard for anybody to contribute anything that's complete and functional (because they can't know what skills to use, what difficulty number to set, etc). Imagine trying to write a mod for a game while the control system was still being developed.

No templates. Because I write the scenes in an ad hoc, unstructured way, there's no template for other writers to adapt and modify (except for trivial examples, like hometown descriptions and relationship table partners).

This means that the only way they can contribute is by sending me an idea for a scene, which I then have to implement personally. This completely defeats the point of team/community contributions.

Dirty code. Like the avatar layers, lots of the source code has been created organically, not built to be lightweight and reusable. That's a barrier to community contributions because there's no clear framework for handling things like alcoholic drinks, or blowjobs.

Proposed solutions

Finalise the game mechanics. Go firm on the skills, status effects, dice rolls.

Write long, outsource wide. This is a new concept designed to speed up beta releases, and also meaningfully engage community and freelance writers.

Basically: instead of me writing complete scenes that support all the different nationalities and backstory types, I just write a scene that supports a basic character. Community writers then move in and build out alternative paths and snippets.

Example: the heroine's intelligence career. When I submitted it, it supported all five nationalities, both Operator & Analyst career paths, an additional Failed Operator career path, and various postings based on nationality and length of service. I was "writing wide."

Two problems: it took forever, and because I was trying to rush it, the differences are all pretty minor anyway.

If I'd "written long", then I'd have just written one career path as an MI6 officer, and submitted it much sooner. Other writers could have then come in to write the CIA/CSIS/ASIS/NZSIS paths, possibly benefiting from Beta feedback on my original MI6 path.

I'd have moved onto the next target, and fresh minds with new perspectives would be building out the alternative paths with ideas I hadn't even considered.

Create content templates. This is basically a change in mindset: instead of me just writing story sections that work, I try to write them more like models that other writers can adapt and modify.

(Practically speaking, this essentially just means I add comments and explanations to my code as I'm creating it.)

This will make it actually possible for community/freelance writers to contribute the "wide" alternative paths.

Temporarily reduce nationalities from five to one. Support for all FIVE EYES nations (plus at least one other in the future) stays as an objective. But in order to speed up development – and to prove the above concepts – I propose cutting the available nationalities from five to one (UK). Community/freelance writers will restore the others ASAP.

Bad admin

This is the problem that causes all other problems.



Types of bad admin

Bad prioritisation or, more precisely, “failure to prioritise admin tasks over my own individual taskings”.

When I’m behind on an individual tasking, I’m real quick to ditch my admin responsibilities. Everybody has to fucking wait until Crush has finished whatever it is he’s doing.

This is my single most destructive behaviour (as far as this project is concerned 🐱). I have to become better on this. I know I can, I’ve overcome destructive behaviours in the past, I just need to recognise this flaw and concentrate on it.

Bad personal management. I’m living on takeouts and trucker pills, and getting drunk to tune out the stress. This is obviously not helping me, but more importantly it’s not helping the project.

At the risk of turning this into some kind of therapeutic exercise, I’m wondering whether I was somehow subconsciously *trying* to fuck up the project so I live longer. I do remember the emotion that I felt on that day earlier this month, when I felt like quitting the project, was *relief*.

But I don’t need to choose between the game and my health, I just need to make some better decisions.

Proposed solutions

Crush daily admin. I stop feeling guilty about doing admin “instead of working” and accept that managing the project and communicating with the team and the community are in fact the highest uses of my time. (Practically speaking, I’m planning to set a time maximum on the amount of time I spend every day on writing/design, and a time minimum on my admin tasks).

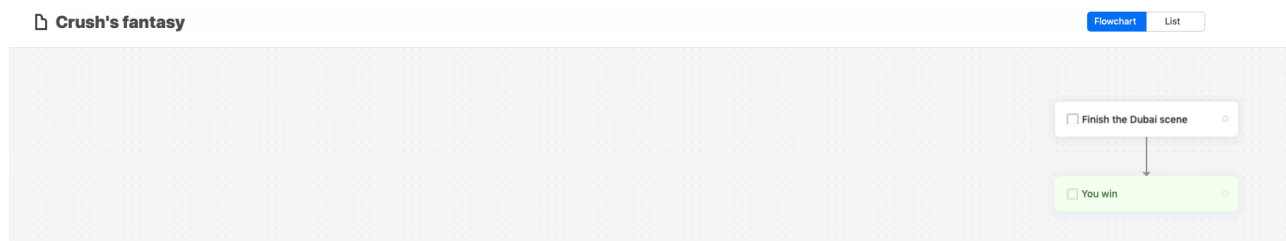
Crush R&R. I take at least one day per week off, in order to improve my output in the long run. Part of this involves accepting that my desire to work really hard is actually hurting the project.

Execution

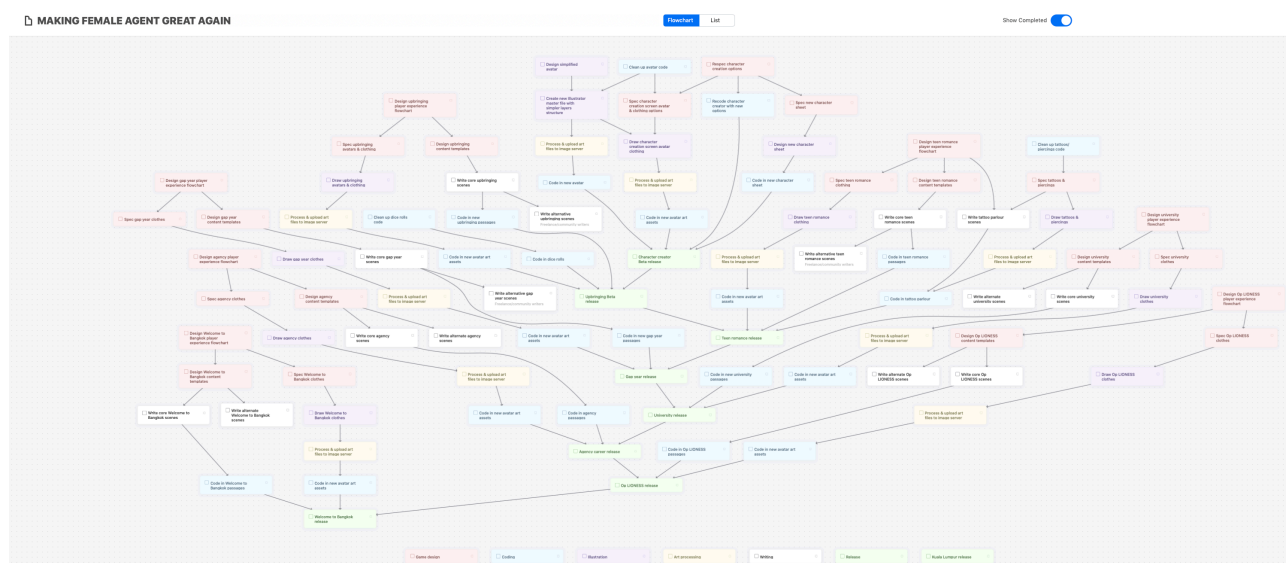
I've made a draft plan that organises the various tasks by dependencies, colour coded by type (red = design, blue = code, purple = illustration, yellow = art processing, white = writing).

It looks like a model of a *human fucking brain* which is the most incredible practical demonstration that I am not as fucking smart as I think I am.

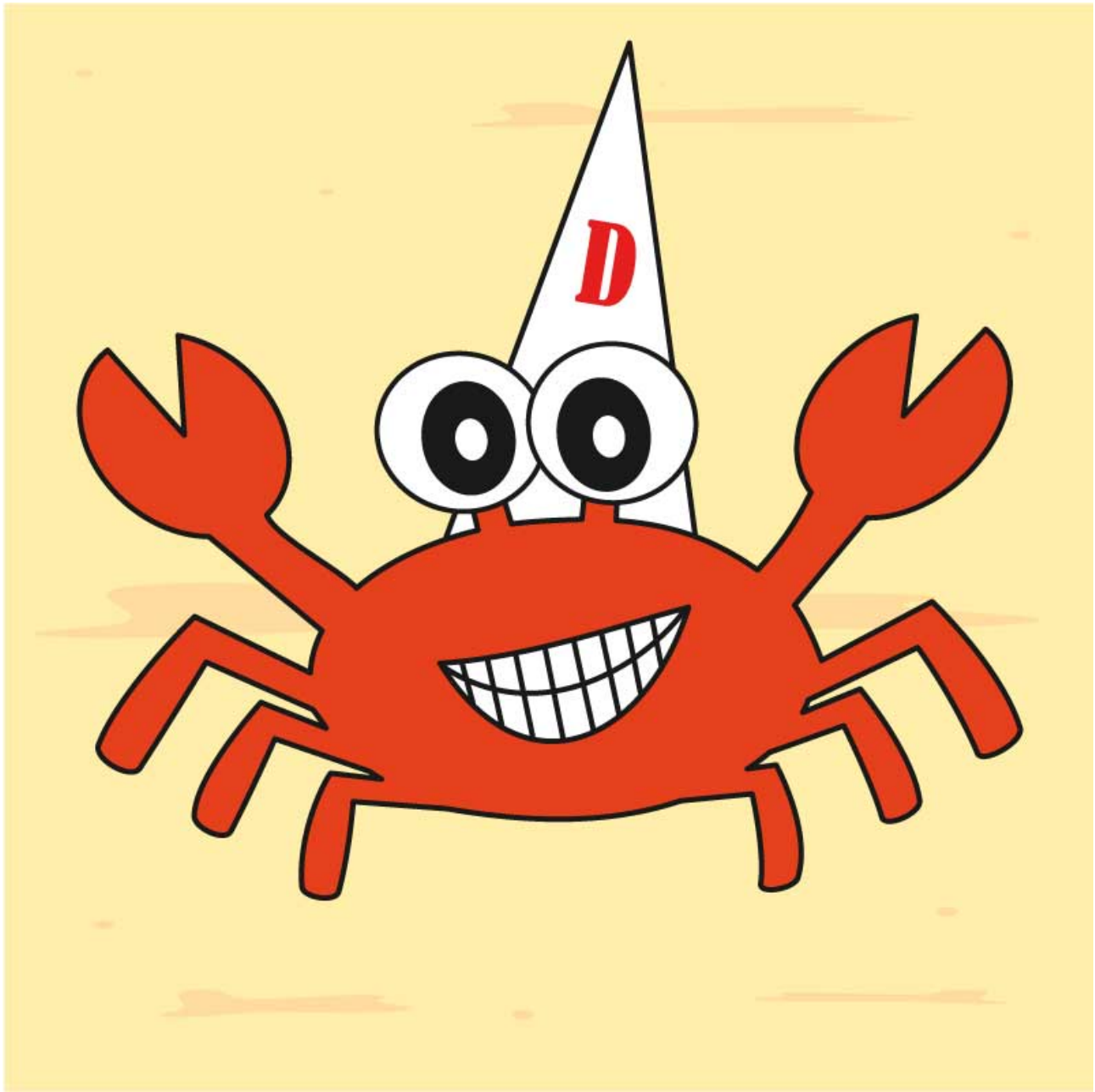
Here's what I thought the path ahead looked like:



Here's what it actually looks like:



Note that the thing that I thought was the only priority is *not even on the fucking list*.



I'm sorry for being so fucking dumb. I really just want to make the sexy RPG that I've always wanted to play.

I shared this plan with the team and some of the community yesterday, and the general consensus is that these changes will be painful but they'll lead to real change. We'll make a better game, with better writing, better graphics, and more frequent releases.

I can't believe that so many patrons have kept supporting the project this month, without any sign I was even still working on it really: you humble me because **I do not deserve you guys.** But I promise I'll try to.