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Title
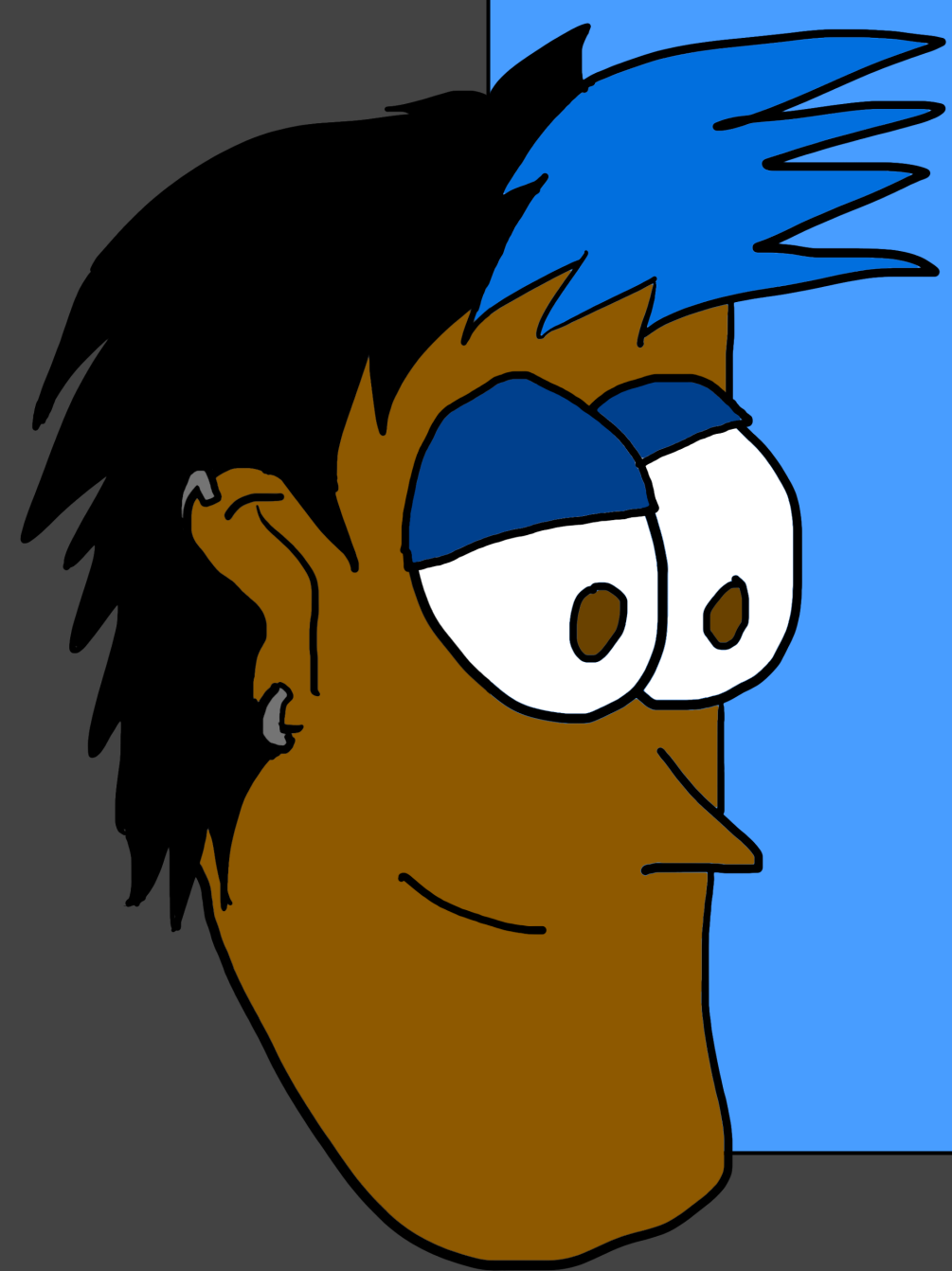Coffee! A Misunderstanding

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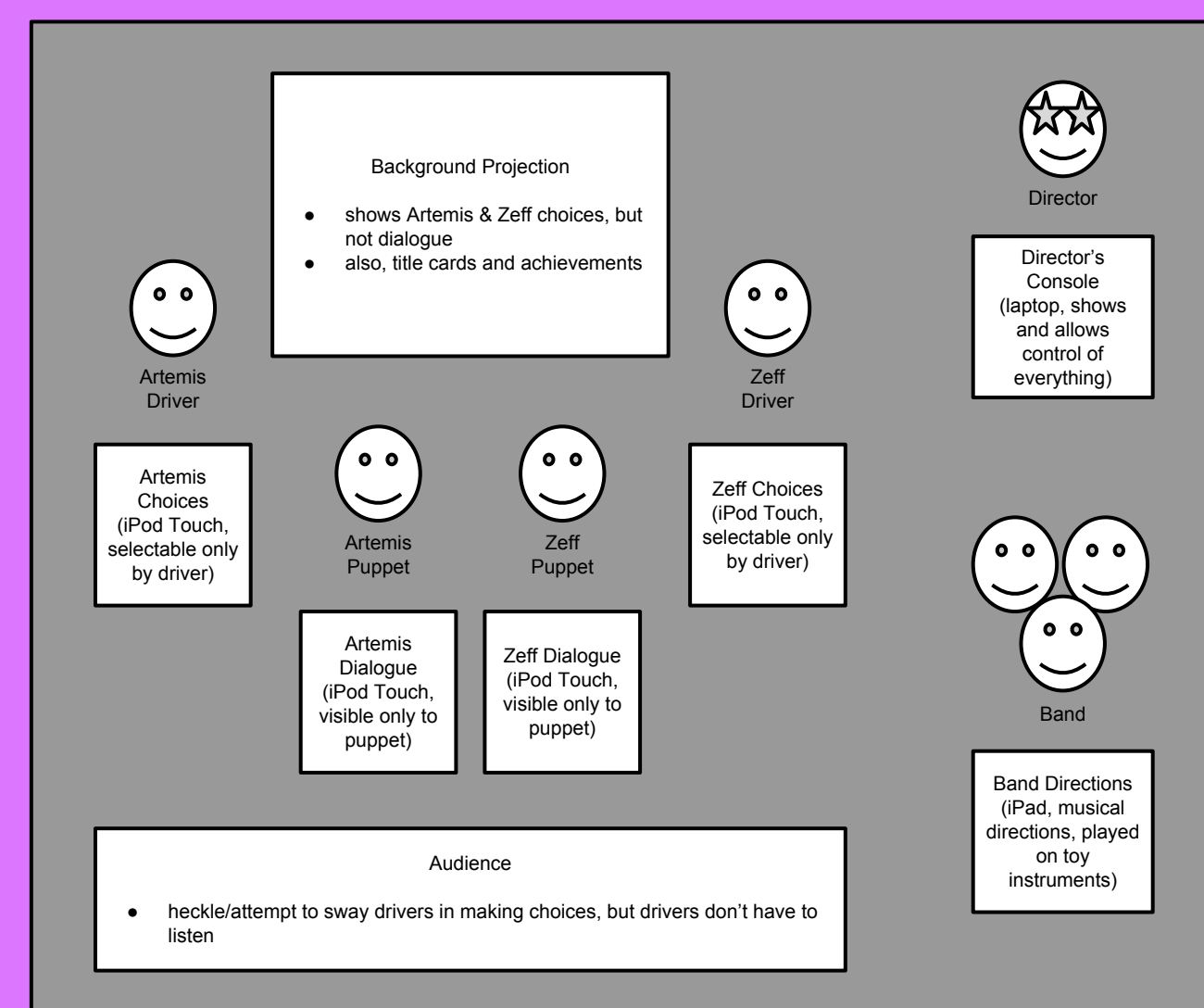2014-05-22

Coffee! A Misunderstanding

an interactive theatre performance
by Deirdra "Squinky" Kiai

"Coffee: A Misunderstanding" is an intentionally-awkward, computer-assisted interactive theatre performance touching on themes of contemporary geek culture, the blurring relationships between artists and fans, and the difficulty some have in living up to gender expectations. It concerns two internet acquaintances, named Artemis and Zeff, who meet in person for the first time during a fan convention, and find that their expectations regarding the other person do not necessarily align with reality. In the course of a single conversation, a number of different outcomes are possible, ranging from heated conflict to mutual understanding.

Each character in "Coffee" is portrayed by two audience volunteers. One, the "driver", is given sets of branching dialogue options at key points in the story, which are selected using a menu displayed on a mobile device. The other volunteer plays the "puppet", who recites the dialogue selected by the driver, the lines for which are also displayed on a mobile device. Meanwhile, the other audience members are able to see each character's dialogue options via a background projection, and are encouraged to heckle the performers and attempt to sway the drivers in their choices. (The drivers can choose to ignore the hecklers if they wish.) Rounding out the ensemble is a band playing improvised music to written cues that fit with emotional moments in the story.

These interactions will be enabled through a multi-screen JavaScript app, which uses Node.js and Socket.IO to allow all of this information to be displayed to and controlled by the performers. The user interface for the app will be refined through several rounds of test performances, in order to strike an optimal balance between allowing performers to grasp what to do more intuitively while still preserving the awkward nature of the interaction.

Background Projection
- shows Artemis & Zeff choices, but not dialogue
- also, title cards and achievements

Director

Director's Console (laptop, shows and allows control of everything)

Artemis Driver

Zeff Driver

Artemis Choices (iPod Touch, selectable only by driver)

Artemis Puppet

Zeff Puppet

Zeff Choices (iPod Touch, selectable only by driver)

Artemis Dialogue (iPod Touch, visible only to puppet)

Zeff Dialogue (iPod Touch, visible only to puppet)

Band

Band Directions (iPad, musical directions, played on toy instruments)

Audience
- heckle/attempt to sway drivers in making choices, but drivers don't have to listen

Through this piece, my goal is to explore the role that technology plays in our social interactions, and in culture as a whole. By interspersing videogame-like branching narrative interactions, as well as visual language such as dialogue menus and unlockable achievements, with live performance, I want to express how what we see and interact with on a screen on a regular basis might affect the way we interact in our offline lives. In addition, by forcing actors to constantly look at a mobile phone while performing their lines, I want to highlight the idea that our lives in a constantly connected society have become both more social and more antisocial at the same time. As our interactions are mediated more and more by text, how is our ability to communicate in person affected?

Furthermore, I hope to explore the ways in which embodiment affects empathy. Given that the characters in this piece can be played by anyone -- a straight white man can volunteer to play a queer woman of colour, for instance -- how might people feel when portraying a person with radically different life experiences? Moreover, what are the effects of abstracting decision-making as separate from enactment? Are there particular play experiences that increase empathy, or, conversely, highlight alienation?