

Nancy Drew: The Case of the Redesign

Improving *Midnight in Salem's* User Interface



The Case

"Don't go out at midnight in Salem..." especially with the current UI! After feeling alienated by the company, fans of the *Nancy Drew* game series cried out for an overhaul of the latest title.

My Thinkful bootcamp capstone project was to help players solve this case — though no one expected me to choose a video game.

A game mod was required — one that built a new UI inspired by previous games with re-vamped features. This prototype serves as a starting point for future development and walks players through a tutorial, a minigame, and the beginning elements of in-world navigation. It also adds several new features, such as a plot journal and navigational overlay. The visual design features updated fonts, color scheme, and branding to fit the savvy sleuth.



The Scope

Nancy Drew: Midnight in Salem (MID) is the 33rd game in HER Interactive's point and click adventure series. Built in a new engine and boasting new graphics, mechanics, and interfaces, it received low ratings from players.

Objectives

To counter fan frustration over changes to the game's longstanding mechanics and interface, a game mod served as the best way to re-design the UI while preserving the series' established mental models and improving accessibility.

Roles

UX Research and Design, UI
Prototyping, Visual Design, Usability
Testing

Timeframe

Four weeks (August-September 2021)

Tools

Figma, Google Forms, Maze



The Investigation

To understand the problem, I approached research from several angles:

- Completed a full playthrough of *Midnight in Salem* and documented the various screens as a baseline for layout considerations and user interviews
- Researched the history of the *Nancy Drew* UI across the series' iterations to understand the mental models long-time players had built
- Ran a competitive analysis of popular games in the genre to identify features worth borrowing
- Searched game reviews and walkthroughs to form assumptions about player wants and needs
- Created a user survey and distributed it to the *Nancy Drew* Games Facebook community, then selected five participants to interview on gameplay strategy, frequently used tools, and opinions on previous interface designs

The Usual Suspects

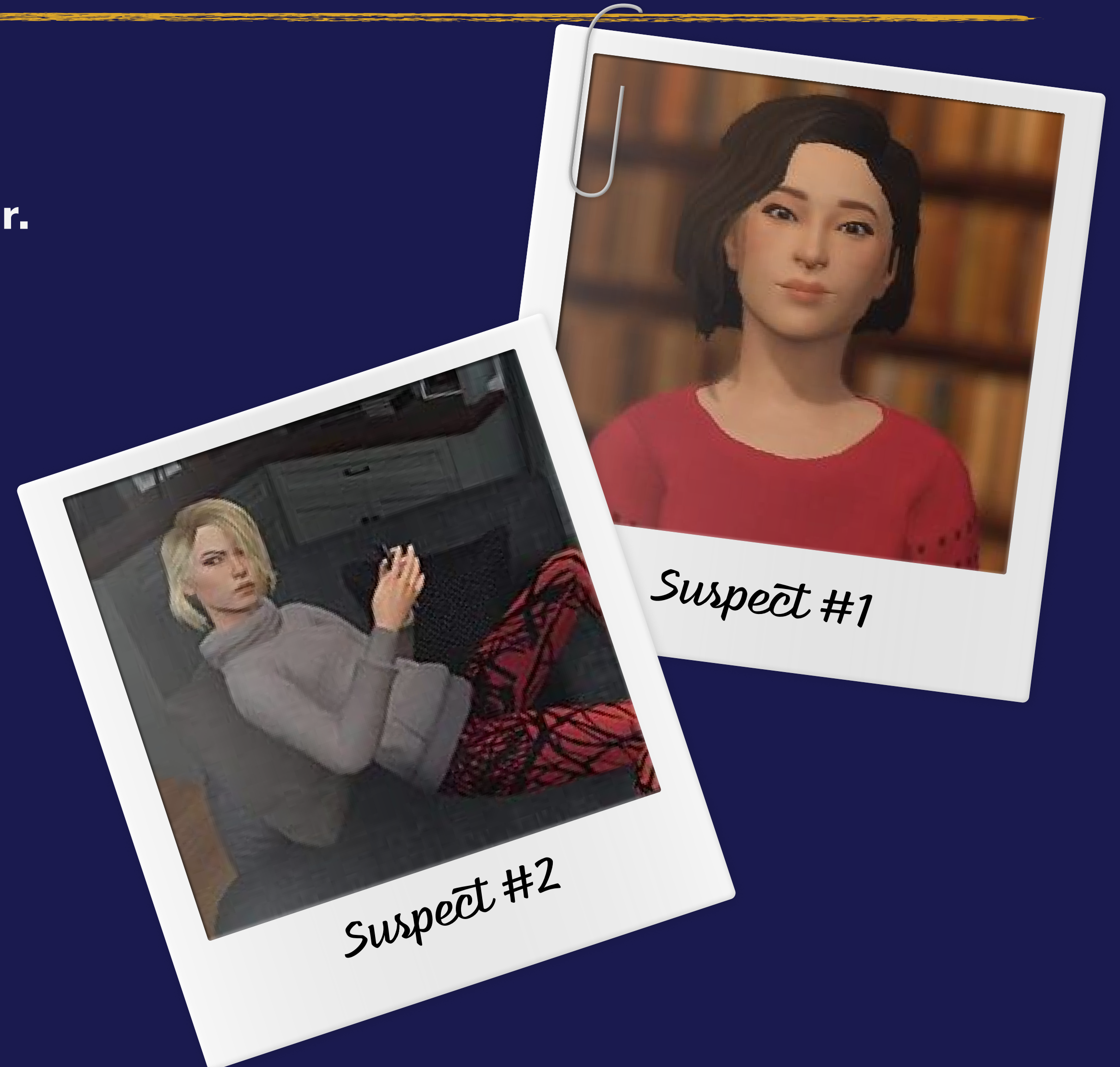
From 287 survey responses, I identified my target audience:

Young adults — specifically Millennials — and older.

Long-time players of *Nancy Drew* games.*

Players of *Midnight in Salem*.

*For this project, I defined "long-time players" as people who have played the games for more than ten years and have played more than ten games in the series.



The Clues

Current gameplay mechanics in MID confuse users — right mouse button mechanics for camera rotation and clue interaction were a pain point, and an accessibility concern for users with limited hand function or laptop trackpads.

"*Midnight in Salem* doesn't feel like *Nancy Drew*" — a common phrase in both the survey and interviews, citing the minimalist UI, new mechanics, and loss of fan-favorite Easter eggs as reasons HER Interactive alienated their core users.

Most users have the same strategy when playing *Nancy Drew* — clicking around the screen, hunting for the red-outlined magnifying glass, and checking the journal/task list for progress.

The new black-and-white interface resulted in a loss of information — minimalist white silhouettes made inventory items harder to identify and nearly indistinguishable from one another.

Similar games have a diverse array of interfaces — while genre mechanics are consistent, UI approaches vary widely. Skeuomorphism (like the valise in *The Testament of Sherlock Holmes* and the phones in *Nancy Drew*) appears to be the standard visual choice.



The original *Midnight in Salem* inventory bar.

Personas & User Stories

With the data collected at this point, I created three personas and a number of user stories. These stories addressed the most common complaints and issues with the gameplay. I also completed some additional ideation exercises.

I asked a number of questions, such as:

- How might we ensure clues can be interpreted by a variety of players?
- How might we allow players to receive hints in-game?
- How might we help players who are blind/have low vision navigate through the game environment?



The Direction

Based on my research and efforts to define these critical issues, I narrowed down the list of features to add/change to the following:

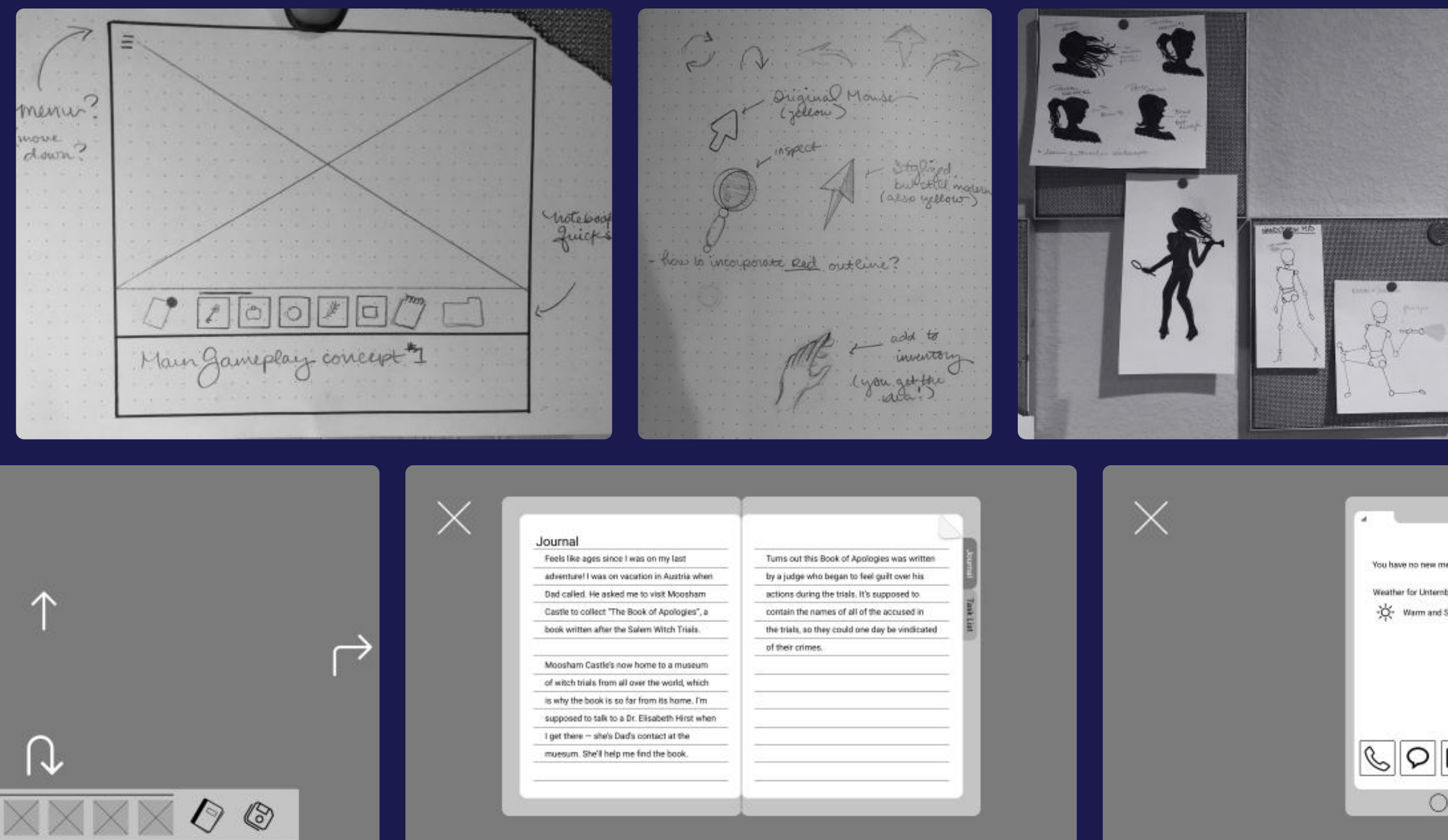
- Changes to gameplay mechanics for accessibility,
- A newly-designed UI which reflects previous brand stylings,
- A journal and interactable task list,
- A more detailed tutorial to reduce cognitive dissonance,
- A navigational overlay to reduce friction, and
- Instructions for puzzles and minigames.



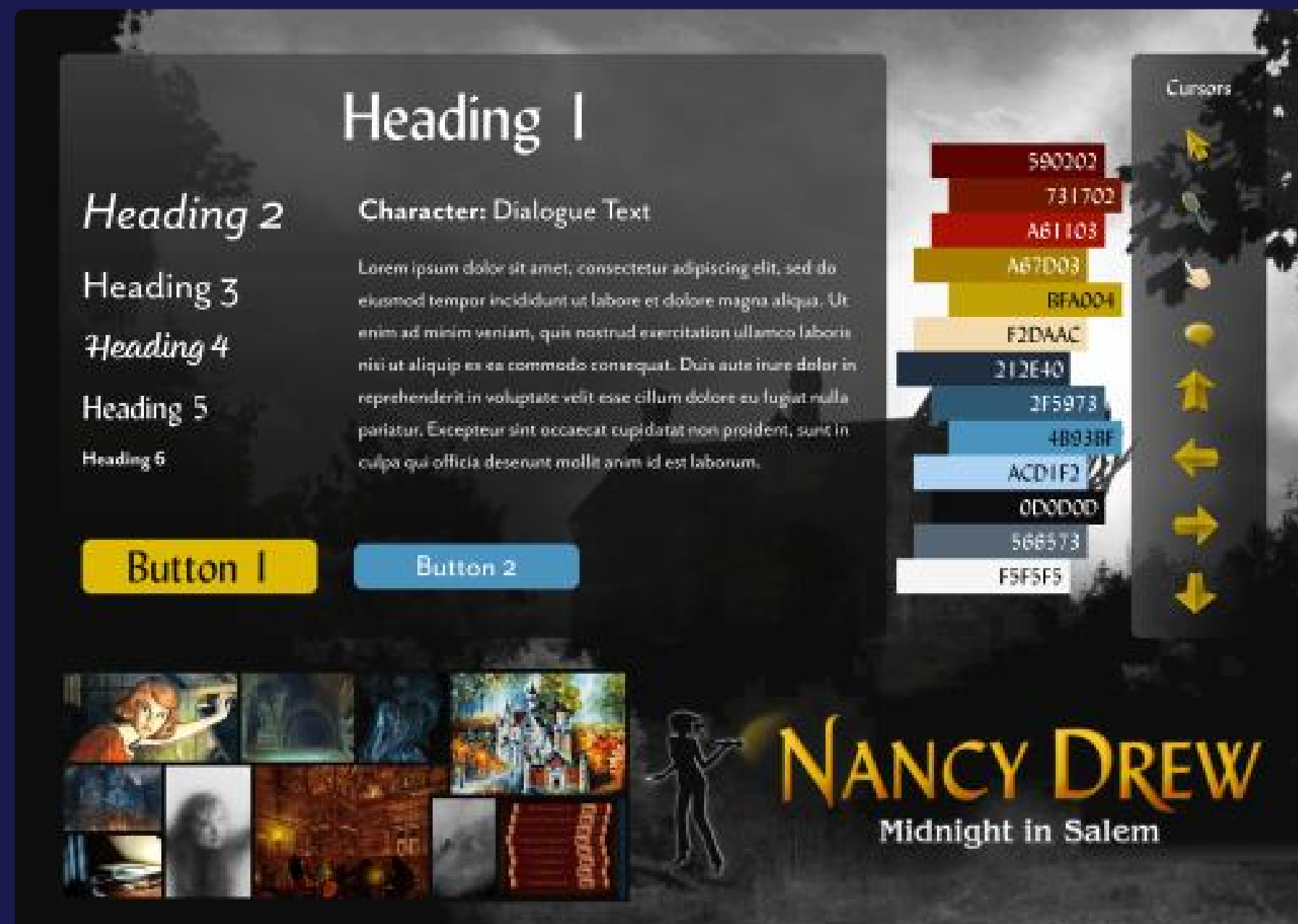
Sketches & Wireframes

With the information architecture in place, I could begin designing in earnest. I wrote original content for the journal and task list based on the tone and phrasing of the other games, and started working on sketches of the interface, cursors, and logo.

Now equipped with an idea for how to proceed, I began building wireframes. Once I had the general layout of the various screens, I could move on to visual design.



The Look: Mood Board & Color



Mood Board

I compiled a mood board centered around Nancy and the locations she's visited across the series — novel art, in-game stills, castles, catacombs, libraries — with a game-specific fiery and smoky element to reflect Midnight in Salem's arson storyline.

Color

The palette was built around smoke and fire, grounded in the series' established red and blue — blue being Nancy's signature color.

The Look: Typography & Logo

Typography

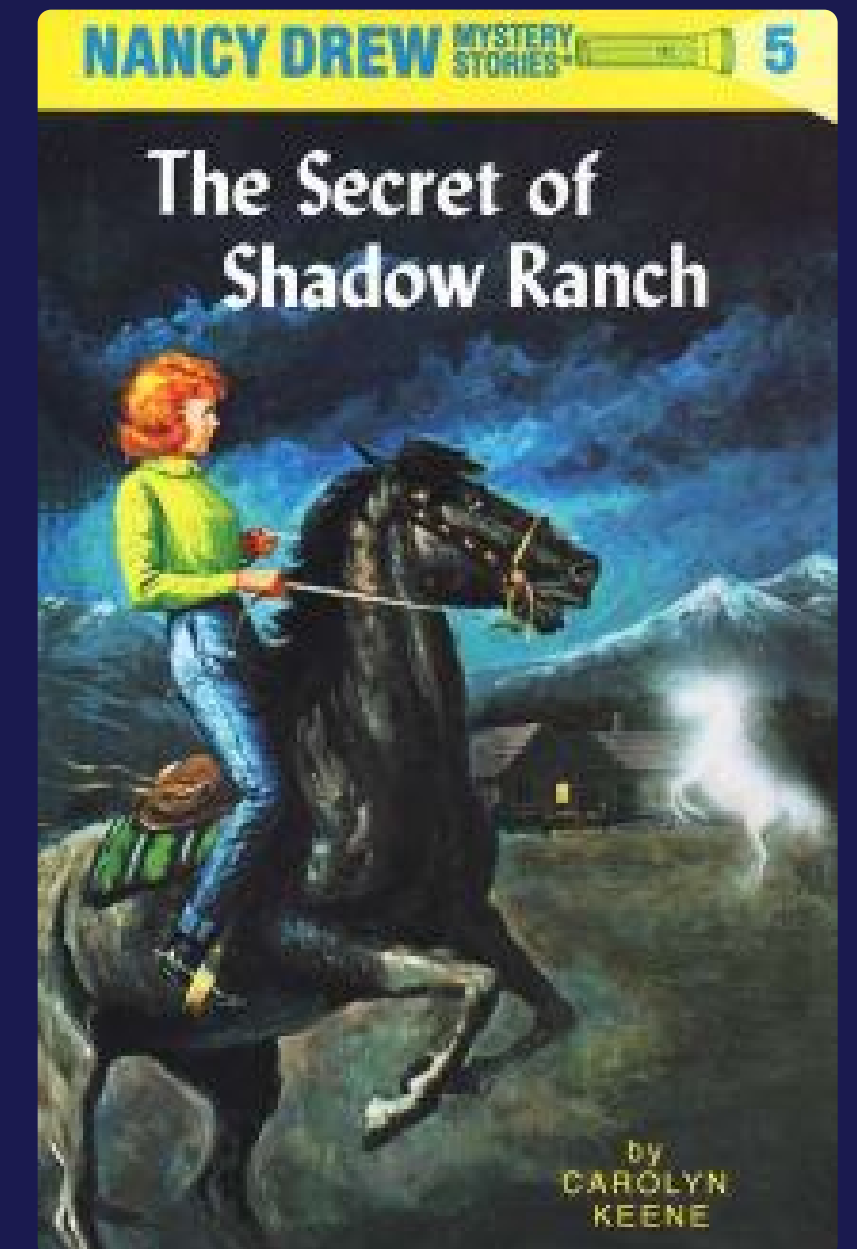
- Lydian — the typeface of the original novels, used to set the tone
- Benguiat — subtitle font, best known from Netflix's *Stranger Things*; suited to mystery and drama
- Feltro — a handwritten typeface for journal sections
- Mr. Eaves — the primary in-game font

Logo

Every *Nancy Drew* logo features a passive silhouette looking over her shoulder. I kept the *Midnight in Salem* silhouette but made it active — windswept hair, arms in more active positions — as though Nancy were interrupted by something behind her in a dark room.



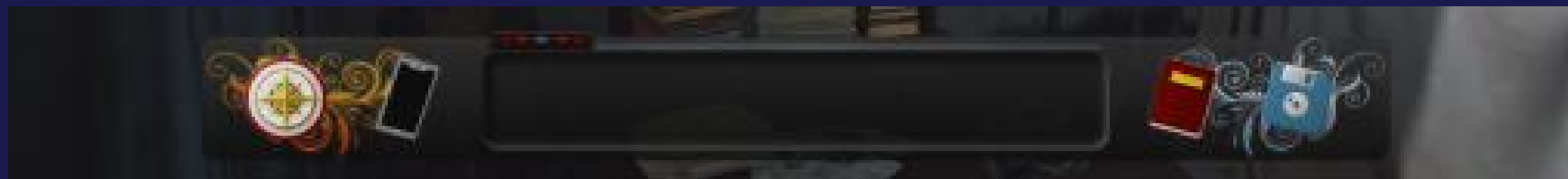
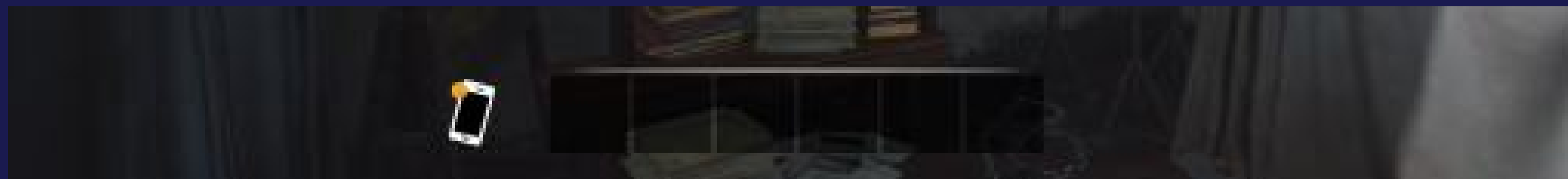
NANCY DREW
Midnight in Salem



Accessibility Concerns

As a big focus of this mod was to improve the accessibility of the game, I focused on several areas:

- Widening the line spacing to at least 1.5 times the height of the font,
- Setting a minimum font size of 18pt,
- Adding the navigational overlay for users who have low vision,
- Removing the right-click functions to accommodate users with limited mobility or who play on a laptop,
- Improving the color contrast of the text to be AA compliant with WCAG, and
- Increasing the UI elements' color contrast (inventory bar, cursors, etc.) to ensure they do not blend with any in-game surface.



The Prototype & Testing

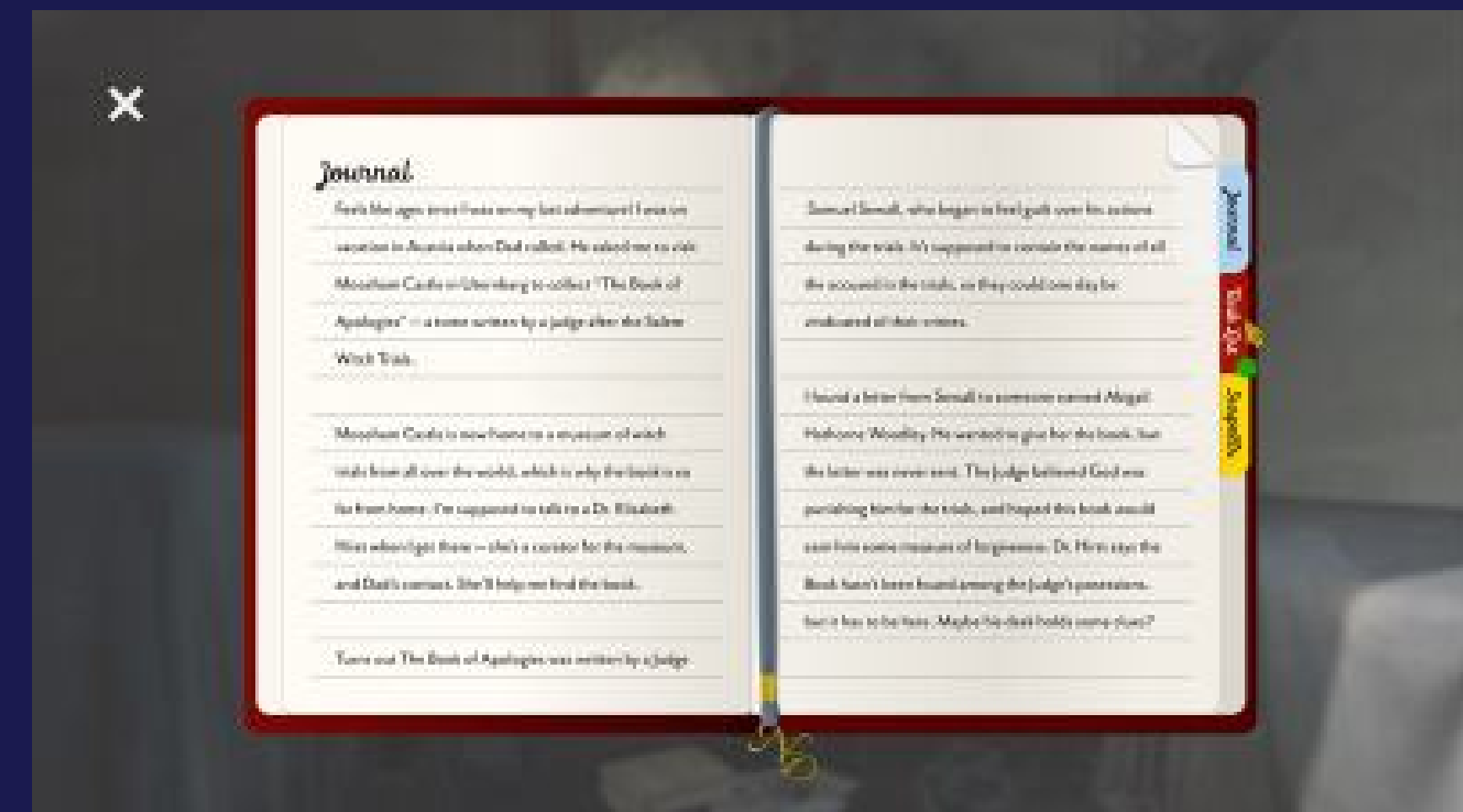
With the architecture, layout, and branding in place, it was time to build and test.

The Prototype

Built in Figma with minimal function by design — focusing on the tutorial and a minigame repeatedly identified as a pain point. In later iterations, the minigame was integrated through a mock saved game to maintain immersion.

The Testing

Testing occurred in two stages — five participants in proctored Zoom sessions (hand-picked from the survey) and 67 participants on the Maze testing platform. Each test had four tasks across two scenarios, with additional qualitative questions during the proctored sessions.



The Good, the Bad & the Ugly

The Good

Overall Usability: 4.8/5 | Overall Design: 4.6/5

"Can't wait for your next update! You have made me fall in love with the Nancy Drew series all over again!!! Super excited!!!"

— User Tester

The Bad

- Users expressed confusion due to a lack of sound feedback, such as dialogue.
- The new click-and-drag navigation was not well-received by Maze testers.
- When turning, the available clickable area was too small.
- Lack of error messages when attempting to check off incomplete tasks led to confusion.
- The order of the tutorial left users confused about UI functions early on.

The Ugly

The Maze prototype suffered from extreme lag due to file size, resulting in several problems: no participants completed the full tutorial flow, 27 participants dropped from the test entirely, and the per-task usability ratings had to be thrown out.

The Solution

With the feedback received from user testing, I built a second prototype.

What Was Added

- Expanded navigational overlay
- A new section to the journal
- Re-arranged tutorial flow
- Additional elements (save page, loading screens, dialogue boxes) to heighten the game feeling

What Was Still Limited

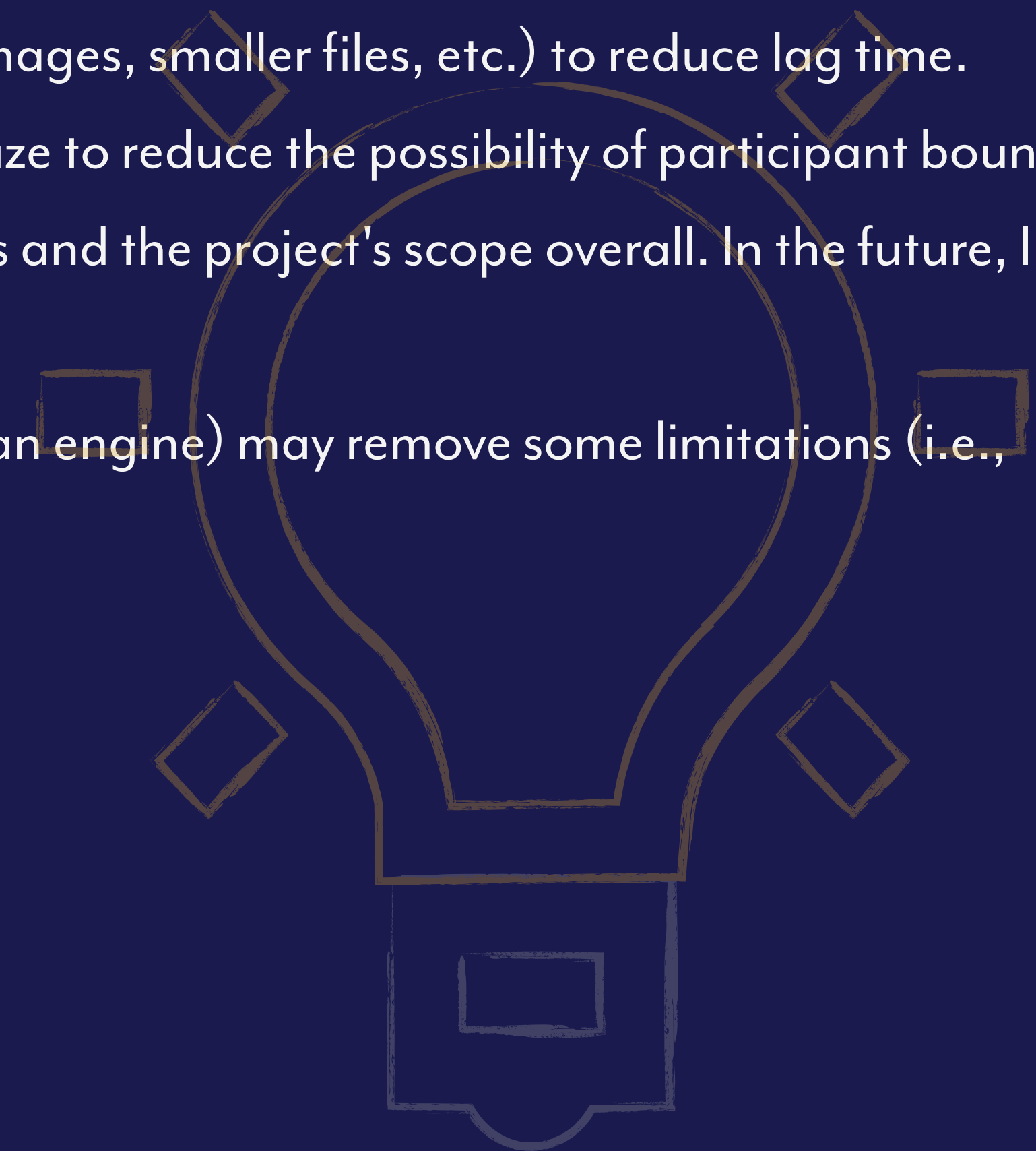
Due to the limitations of interactions in Figma, the prototype does not include the changes to gameplay mechanics highlighted in testing — though it meets the original goals and flows built at the beginning of the project.



A Few Final Thoughts

Despite the technical difficulties suffered on the back half, I learned a lot during this project:

- When testing in Maze, the prototype files need to be optimized (compressed images, smaller files, etc.) to reduce lag time.
- Additionally, I should split up any long testing tasks (such as the tutorial) in Maze to reduce the possibility of participant bounces.
- Time management was difficult for this project, given the size of the prototypes and the project's scope overall. In the future, I should look into further reducing the range of my projects to fit my timeline.
- Building the prototype in a program other than Figma (possibly Adobe XD or an engine) may remove some limitations (i.e., changing the cursor).



Want to Learn More?

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