

The Story Citadel

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Design Process



Brainstorm on Story/Genre/Theme

1. Western fantasy. There are many tabletop adventure games set in fantasy. Basic elements such as dungeons, classes and skills work very well in this genre.
2. Asian fantasy. Like western fantasy, anything is possible in faraway time set in Chinese fantasy worlds. Besides the elements of western fantasy, rituals, martial art, sorcery seem very reasonable in this setting. Also, the six great divisions in the wheel of Karma provide possible classes, their skills and goals. Some common stories can be people vying for a peerless sword, Taoist people training themselves to obtain the immortality.
3. Chinese history. Characters travelling back and changing the history can be interesting.
4. Setting a story in a history period can create an experience that we will never have in real life. Landlords, Kong Fu, martial art sections and the Five Elements are fun to play with. My favorite two Chinese dynasties are Tang and the Three Kingdoms. Each of them has its special features and has dramatic events happened.
5. Alchemist world. Alchemist is interesting because it defines different skills in a unified format. Similarly to Dungeon and Dragons, it demands rich imagination and cooperation

among players. Each character can be an alchemist in a specific attribution such as fire, ice, wood, metal and so on. They can transform what they encounter, as long as the item is made from the elements in accordance with their specialty.

6. Parallel universes. The setting of the world view can be parallel universes that players travel between two parallel universes back and forth.
7. Asymmetric gameplay and escaping game. The role of players can be changing or unveiled at the beginning. It can be an escaping story that one player turned out to be the boss and others need to fight against him.
8. Using tiles as the structure and Post-it to create the fog of war, uncovering them piece by piece.

Choose Theme

After thinking about different styles and settings, I decide to design a world about alchemy where players can use alchemical transmutation to control different energy. So I researched on Alchemy and started to figure out the stories, skills and puzzles. And the story is an adventure about three alchemists investigating in the world and using their power to do something unusual.

Research on Alchemy

I did some research about the alchemy theories, history, transmutation circles, and animation themed in alchemy.

Think about the Story & Characters

While I was researching on alchemy, I thought about the story patterns such as “three alchemists learn alchemy from a mysterious old man”, “someone uses alchemy to revive his beloved somebody but failed”, “someone wants to sacrifice lots of lives in order to transmutate a Philosopher’s Stone”, “an activity calls for alchemists from around the world but turns out to be a tool to make Philosopher’s Stone”...

Then I narrowed to the story structure of a talented alchemy created a Philosopher’s Stone by accident. And the evil captured the stone. The player characters showed up and their goal is to destroy the stone or the evil.

But I felt this story is barren and is not touching. So I tried to think up a smaller and more concrete story. Such as a mother trying to use alchemy to revive her baby.

9. Storyline

● Act I The Test of Alchemist

- The condition of Master’s health.
- Master creates an Enchantment as the test for them to become a real alchemist.
- The master dies. Players can search his room and body.

- **Act II Village of Peace**
 - Players investigate in the village, learning about the background information.
 - An alchemist finds them saying his lord wants to meet them.
 - **Act III Manor**
 - Players go to the manor and meet the lord and maid.
 - The lord settles them down and asks them to have a good rest.
 - Players see the glowing lines on the ground, realizing it's an enchantment. Go out and investigate.
 - Players choose which direction to go, investigate in different rooms, collecting information, meeting NPCs and interact with them.
 - Players destroyed the enchantment by solving the puzzle.
 - Players use trophies, the Philosopher's Stone to revive people.
10. Characters: The three player characters can have a master, who once accidentally created a Philosopher's Stone and sacrificed lots of innocent lives. The master can have an old friend who shows up to help players reach the truth. There should be an antagonist whose goal is to kill the player characters or doing something bad. There can be another story

Design the Skills/Attributes

Before I finished writing the story, I've been thinking about the skills and attributes. Apparently an alchemical world won't focus on basic skills like melee fighting or dodging.

After I have the idea of using the Classical Elements as attributes, I wrote down all the skills I could think up and choose from them to match the need of the battle and match them into Physical/Mental/Social.

11. Attributes: I compared the Chinese elements (Fire, Earth, Metal, Water and Wood) with western classical elements (Fire, Earth, Water and Air). I choose western elements, because I want to put 4 bosses, each has the power of an element and takes place of a direction (North, East, South and West).
12. Skills: I felt that the classical Physical/Mental/Social Attributes work very well in tabletop RPG especially Social Skills plays an important role when dealing with NPC. But I already decided to use the four classical elements as the attributes. In order to include the basic skillset of classical role playing games, I thought about having a two dimensional skillset.

Think about the puzzle

My initial idea of the puzzle is having a ?x? map, each player can choose to move to a direction and draw a square card with some events on it, each square has an attributes, players can also move the squares to match with something in order to solve the puzzle.

But I found it hard to apply such a concrete idea to the story and realistic gameplay. So I changed the direction of puzzle. When I played others' games, I felt that puzzle can be a riddle or an escaping game level. So I started thinking towards this direction.

13. Tiles/Enchantment: Derived from the initial idea of a ?x? map, I tried to put the map into a puzzle board, where players can investigate and encounter enemies, solve the puzzle to get out of it.
14. Riddle: The method of creating a Philosopher's Stone using lots of human lives sounds dark and incredible. To make it real, I suggest it should not be an open knowledge even in the fictional world. So I thought maybe I could give some clues and let players learn a transmutation through the adventure. Also, to serve the story, it can be the way of destructing the Philosopher's Stone or killing the boss.

Others (maps, world view, etc.)

Based on what I thought about, I felt that I need some maps, background theories on alchemy and inventory to set up the adventure. For instance:

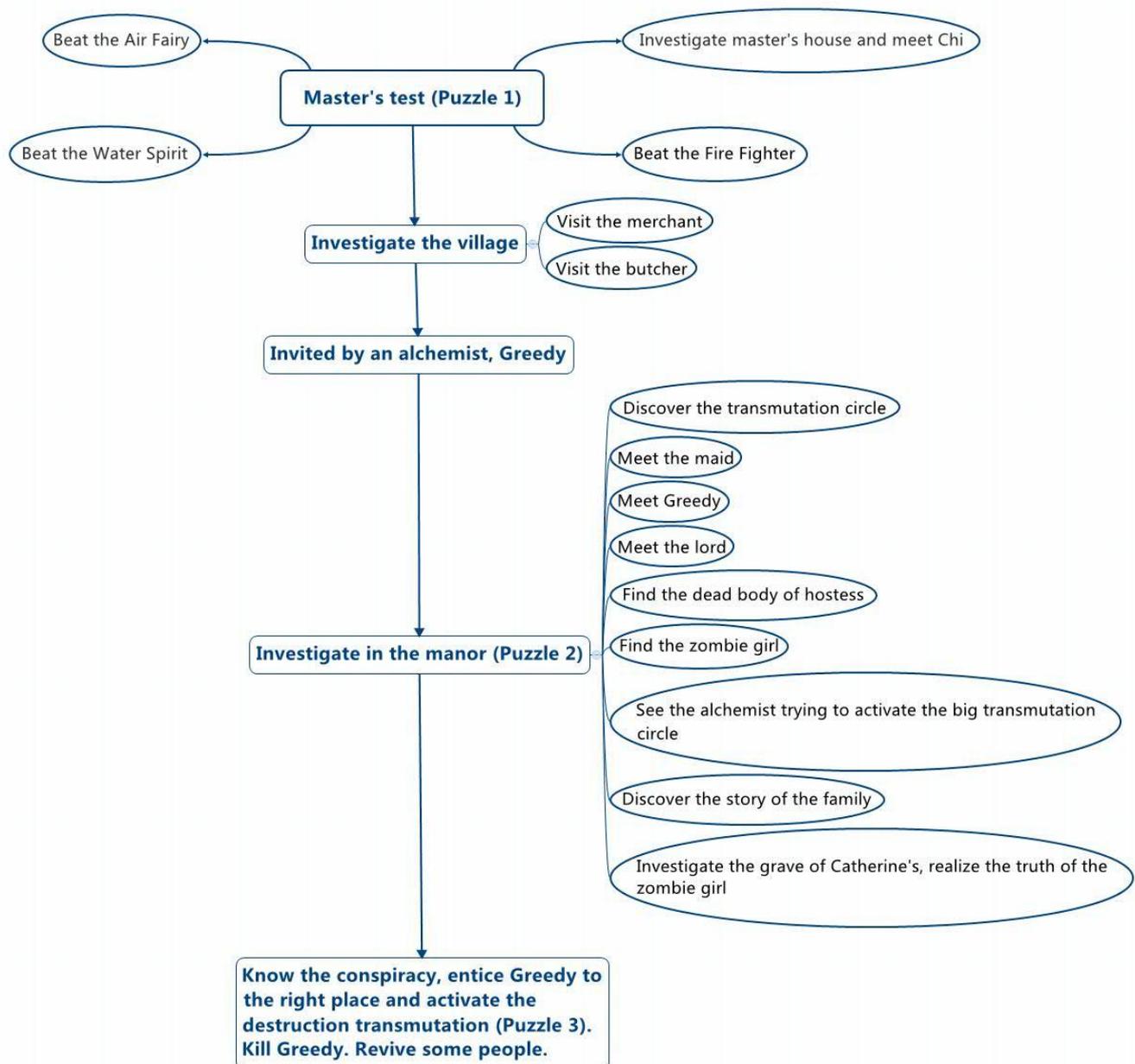
15. Maps (Dungeons): Since I want to use tiles as the basic structure of dungeons (#8), I came up with the idea of cutting transmutation circles into pieces. When players encounter a boss, the boss creates a big enchantment with a transmutation circle on the ground. So the game has two kinds of maps, town map and battle map.

How to Make Everything Support the Story Well

What I had were fragments of stories, puzzles, and other thoughts, I had a hard time putting everything together and modifying them to fit with one another, like combining the tile puzzle and the map of the manor, why the structure of the manor looks like a transmutation circle, getting rid of some ideas...

Game Work

Game Flow



Script

- About five years ago, the Earth Alchemist named Albertus Thomas passed by a village. He was curious about a mysterious transmutation circle (Inventory, "Try Me!") for long, so he decided to try it. He drew a huge transmutation circle on the ground of the village. After activating the transmutation, the village was gone, along with the villagers, and the

houses were destroyed.

- Everyone is believed to have two sides of characteristics. The good side of him was so regretful about it, while the evil in him was so excited and stole the Philosopher's Stone made by the lives of villagers and ran away.
- Albertus didn't kill all the people of this village. He was a little relieved to find three kids who went to a neighboring village to play. In order to atone for his crime, he decided to raise them up and teach them some alchemy, and hoped them to help him destroy the Philosopher's Stone or kill Greedy someday.
- Albertus became very frail owing to the loss of part of his soul and body (Greedy's gone). Until one day, he said to the kids: "I was too old to teach you anything. Let me show you the true power of alchemy and see if you are quality as a real alchemist." The kids were excited about the test.
- On the other side, a lord and his wife, the hostess used to live a happy life. The lord was a businessman and the hostess was an alchemist.
- It was also about five years ago, when they got married, the lord was doing business at somewhere and bought a big manor there to settle down.
- They had a lovely daughter named Catherine.
- Somehow, Catherine was so weak and always got sick. And one day, she died from a disease. The lord and the hostess were heartbreaking.
- But the hostess didn't want to give up, and she determined to transmute her daughter.
- However she failed. Furthermore, she herself was also wounded because the Equivalent Exchange forced her to sacrifice part of her live organic. The lord was so painful and spent as much money as he could to find people to cure his wife.
- Sadly, the hostess died eventually. It was last month.
- Then an alchemist called Greedy showed up saying he could revive the dead, especially people who died recently. He was mysterious and wears a mask. The lord didn't believe him until he showed the resurgence of a dead bird.
- While the alchemist was preparing for the human transmutation of the hostess. He came to the lord saying he knew there were three promising alchemists (PC) living in the neighboring village, and he would like to invite them for help to make sure the resurgence of hostess would be successful.
- The lord agreed and then the three alchemists showed up. It was late so the lord treated them a grant dinner, settled them down and planned to talk to them tomorrow.
- However, the Greedy already prepared and drew a big transmutation circle on the ground, just as the one that destroyed the village.
- When the three alchemists noticed that, they run out of their room and saw a huge enchantment in the manor.
- They started to investigate the manor, talked to people living here, and discovered the story about Catherine.
- They also realized the conspiracy of Greedy and figured out the way to kill him.
- They captured Greedy and learned a lot about the past of the village and their master.
- (Ending is open.) They killed Greedy and used his Philosopher's Stone to revive some people.

Characters

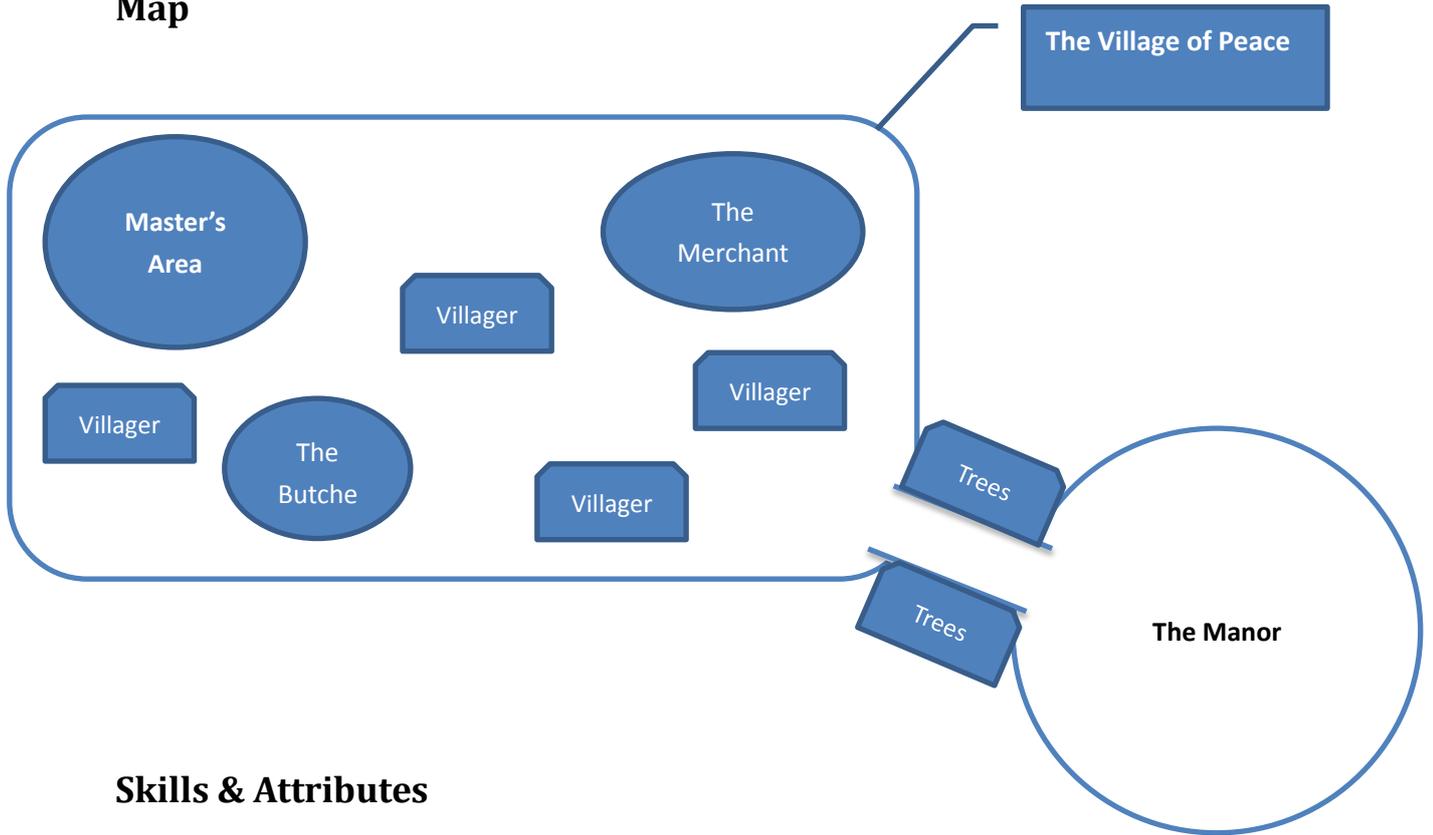
- PC:
 - Currently about 17 years old.
 - Three junior alchemists who learned alchemy from their master named Albertus Thomas.
 - The three became orphans owing to the accident.
 - At that time, an old alchemist Albertus just passed by. When he saw the three kids, he asked them if they want to be his apprentice and learn some alchemy.
 - They were delighted and enjoyed learning alchemy.
 - One day, the master decided to give them a test. They've been waiting for this day and were excited about it.

- NPC:
 - Albertus Thomas, the master of the three kids, whose true status is the Earth Alchemist. Tangled, remorseful and powerful. He was so regretful to kill the lives in the village by accident. So when he found the three kids, he hoped to help them and teach them alchemy to see if they could also help him to beat Greedy.
 - Chi, the rat who lived in Albertus' house. Chi is a cute and simple-minded female rat as well as a witness of the disaster of the village. Might because of the power of the Philosopher's Stone, Chi can understand human language, and can even talk! Chi acts as the tutor in the story.
 - The butcher, a new resident after the accident, a generous big man.
 - The merchant, a new resident after the accident, a girl who's good at bargaining with customers.
 - The lord, a businessman who moved to a manor near the village with his beloved wife. He was tactful in doing business, but was blinded by a cunning alchemist.
 - The hostess, the wife of the lord, who used to be an alchemist. Died of the transmutation of her beloved daughter. She was a mother with a strong heart.
 - Catherine, the daughter of the lord and the hostess, a lovely little girl.
 - The maid, having been the maid of the hostess before she married the lord, she is really loyal to her masters. She knows a little about alchemy from the hostess. She believed that Greedy wasn't well-intentioned and human transmutation is not possible.
 - Greedy, the antagonist, the evil side of the Earth Alchemist who has the appearance when Albertus was young, greedy and arrogant. Using the power of a Philosopher's Stone, Greedy possess an immortal life. As his name indicates, he was so greedy that he wants to get the power of the other three elements by transmutating the three alchemists (PC) into a Philosopher's Stone, after stealing the one made from the lives of the villagers. In order to achieve his goal, he fooled the lord and made use of him. The other reason of doing so is, he likes making fun of human by seeing them obsessed with the idea of pursuing the impossible (human transmutation). And he is so arrogant that never thinks the three can beat him and he wants to trick them.

Dictionary (Some are told before running the game, some are discovered by players through investigating books and talking to NPC.)

- **Alchemy:** The study of the energy of **Four Elements** and using them to **Alchemy Transmutation**.
- **Alchemist:** People who can perform **Alchemy Transmutation** and understand the Law of **Equivalent Exchange**.
- **Alchemy Transmutation:** Spending **Transmutation Elements** to cast **Physical / Mental / Social Skills**. The ability power of an alchemist and his tools (Transmutation Bracers) determines the effect of a transmutation.
- **Transmutation Circle:** An alchemist needs to draw a Transmutation Circle on the ground and put all the materials on certain positions on the circle. The energy of Four Elements will come from the ground and helps complete the transmutation.
- **The Law of Equivalent Exchange:** Whatever you want to transmute, you need to pay the materials as sacrifice of the same price.
- **The Philosopher's Stone:** Is a legend of alchemy, because it's regard as the elixir of life, and is believed to be transmuted with many human lives. It can possibly break **the Law of Equivalent Exchange**.
- **Enchantment:** Senior Alchemist can make an Enchantment by drawing a large Transmutation Circle on the ground. The **Enchantment** can trap people.
- **Four Elements:** The material universe is basically built with the Four Elements, Earth, Fire, Water, and Air. Alchemists are able to control the power of Four Elements by transmutating them into what they want. The Earth is the most powerful one of the four. Because it's the main carrier of all elements and their energy, also the reason why **Transmutation Circles** are drawn on the ground.
- **The Taboo of Alchemy:** Human transmutation is prohibited.

Map



Skills & Attributes

	Physical	Mental	Social
Earth (D6)	Indestructible Wall Build walls that can trap or block enemies.	Dust Spirit The Spirit of Dust shows up and helps you decode the obscure context.	Trustworthy You look as honest as the earth. Others tend to believe you, whatever you say.
Water (D6)	Mirror Entity Temporarily summoning a copy of a character you can see and ordering him to do something.	Stealth You turn yourself into transparent water that no one can see you.	Subterfuge Telling lies and detecting them.
Fire (D6)	Fire Ball Destruction. Fire balls falling down and burning things.	Ignition Setting fire to illuminate, making it easier to investigate in the dark.	Berserker Rage Intimidation. Frightening others and forcing them to do something.
Air (D6)	Windborne Speed Summoning a wind carrying to flash to anywhere you want.	Healing Breeze Generating a breeze which can heal wounds.	Air Attunement Style. Etiquette, social grace, general physical appearance.

- **Associate Attribute:** Each character rolls 4D6 and allocate each point to an attributes as the.
- **Skill Points Allocated:** Each character gets 20 “skill points” to attribute among his/her skills.
- **Formula: Actual Skill = Associate Attribute + Skill Points Allocated**
- Skill Checks:
 - **Master’s enchantment:**
 - ◆ Moving towards a tile: Associate Attribute (of the object element) + 1D6, Difficulty 8.
 - ◆ **Casting a spell:** Actual Skill, Difficulty 10.
 - **Greedy’s enchantment:**
 - ◆ Moving towards a tile: Associate Attribute (of the object element) + 1D6, Difficulty 10.
 - ◆ **Casting a spell:** Actual Skill, Difficulty 15.
 - **Outside enchantment:**
 - ◆ **Casting a spell:** Actual Skill, Difficulty 10-15.

Inventory

- **Transmutation Bracer:** Can increase the power of alchemy transmutation. Gain +n points of associate attribute by rolling D4 to define which attribute to strengthen (**Attribute Check**).
 - **The Bracer of Dust:** The glove created by the master. Gain +5 points attribute. **Attribute Check.**
 - **The Leather Glove:** The most common glove in Alchemy’s world. Gain +3 points attribute. **Attribute Check.**
- **The Philosopher’s Stone:** Can break **the Law of Equivalent Exchange**.
- **Notes/Books/etc. on Alchemy:** Containing useful knowledge and hints about the story and the puzzle.
 - **Master’s Books:**
 - ◆ Common Sense about Alchemy, Jerry Chen
 - ◆ Knowing Yourself, Haley Yang
 - ◆ The Study of the Four Elements, Justin Stanley
 - ◆ What You Don’t Know about Alchemy, David Liu
 - **The Hostess’ Books:**
 - ◆ The Art of Transmutation, Justin Stanley
 - ◆ Fundamentals of Transmutation, Jerry Chen
 - ◆ How to Become a Good Chef, Albertus Thomas
 - ◆ The Study on Transmutation Circle, David Liu
 - ◆ Clumsy Alchemist, Haley Yang
 - **The Hostess’ Album:** Something like a diary, containing photos and texts.
 - ◆ I have a baby!!! We name her Catherine. She’s so lovely! ^^
 - ◆ Catherine’s is so weak. She often gets sick. I’m still studying alchemy and there’s something I can’t make out...
 - ◆ Catherine ill’s badly... I don’t know what to do!

- ◆ ...She left us... She's only 5 years old.
- ◆ I decide to use my specialty to have a try. Bless me...
- ◆ I failed. And the cost is so expensive...
- **"Try Me!" on Greedy's desk:** A piece of paper with the title "Try Me!", a big transmutation circle on it, along with some descriptions and a tiny line: "The distance from construction to destruction is 60° ."

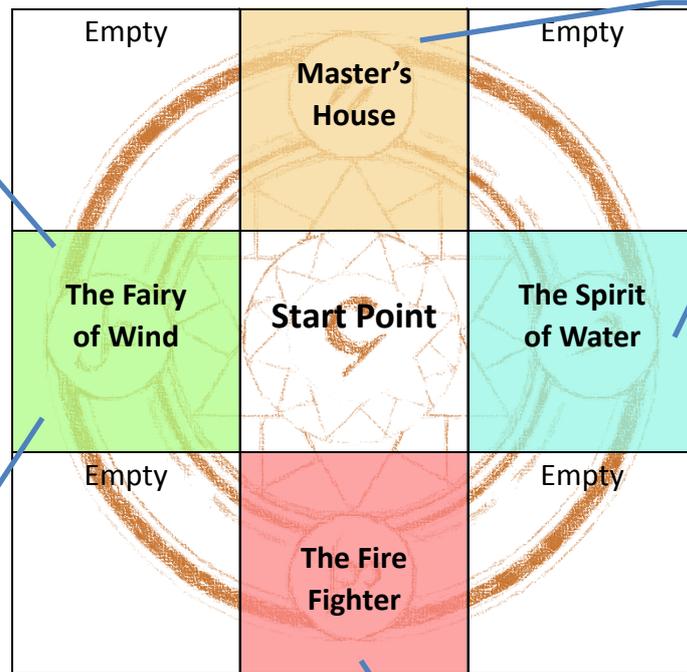
Puzzles

Puzzle 1: Mater's Enchantment

- **Story relationship**

- In order to test the ability of his three apprentices, the master set an enchantment for them to solve. It takes place at his house and the open area in front of his house.

- **Map**



An enemy has all skills of Air.
Moves fast.
Can be beaten with any reasonable attack.

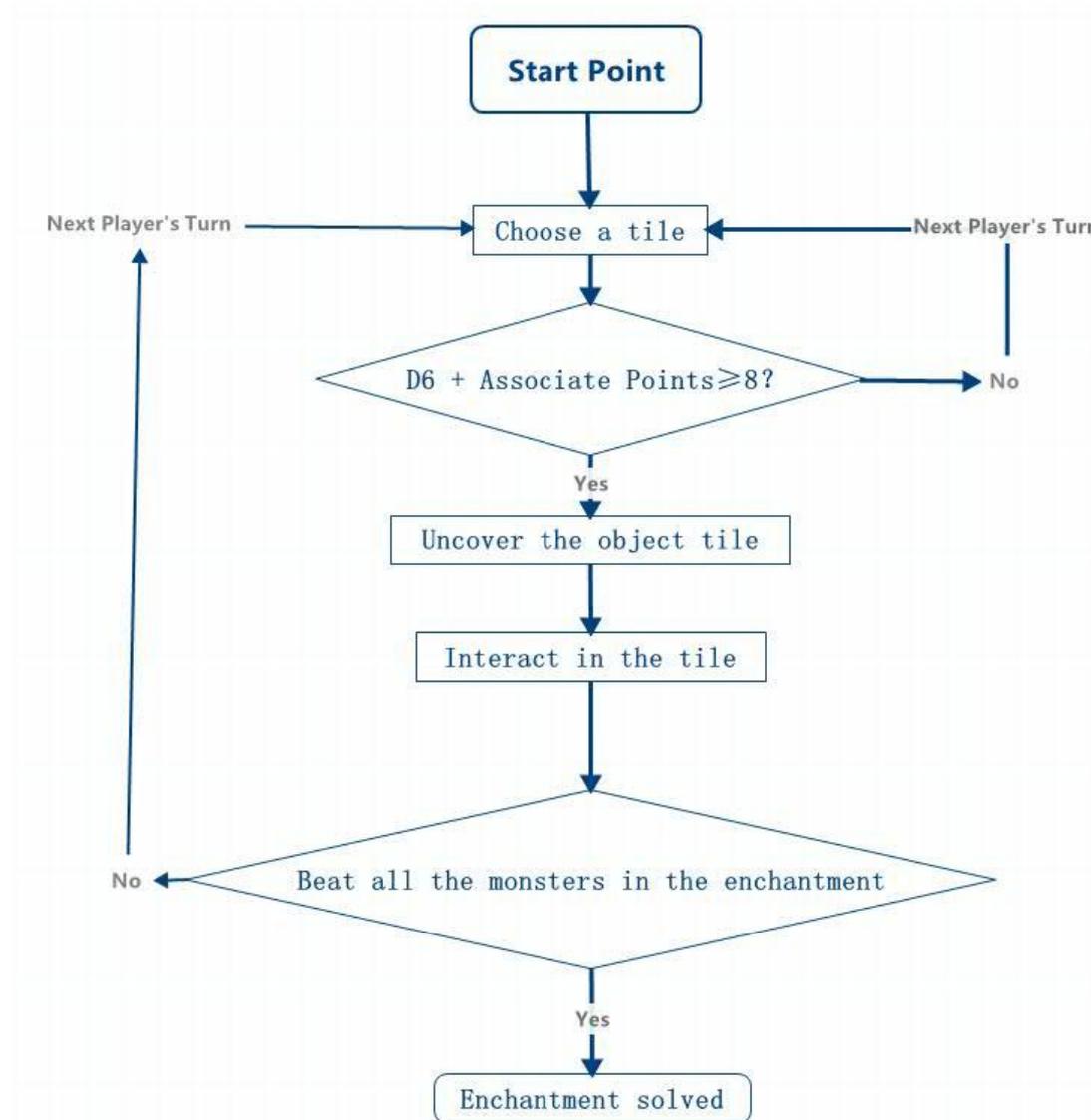
The color of the tile indicates the associate attributes would be used to check.

A desk, with some books on it.
A bed. Under the bed there's a rat hole, players can find Chi under the bed.

An enemy has all skills of Water.
Can be beaten with Intractable Wall or other reasonable attack.

- **Flow:**

An enemy has all skills of Fire.
His body is made of fire so he's not afraid of Fire.
Can be beaten with any reasonable attack.



- **Analysis**

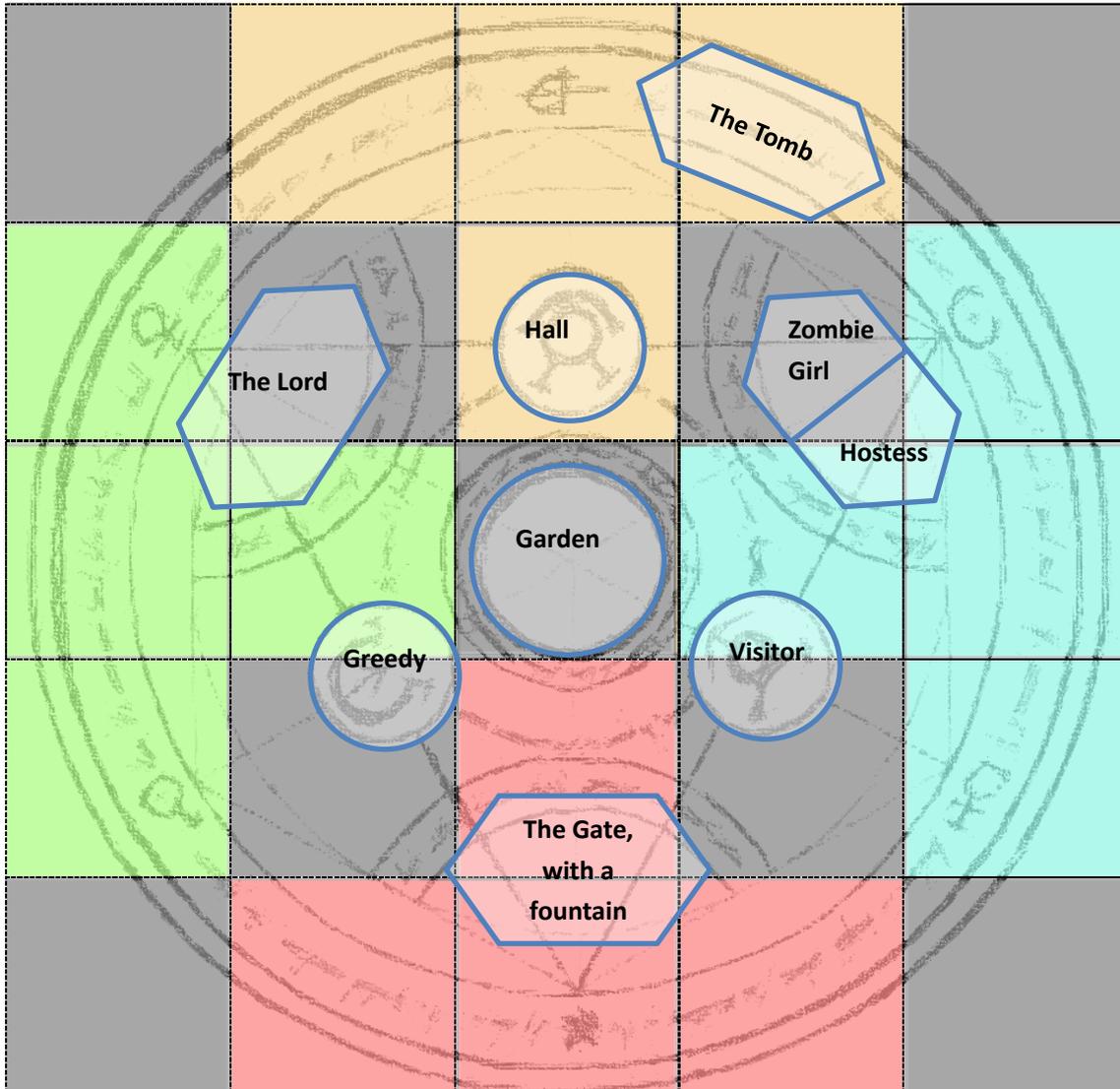
- This puzzle is not hard to solve. It successfully introduces players to the rules of enchantment and helps players understand the flow of the gameplay.
- Meanwhile, players learn some basic knowledge of alchemy and meet Chi, their accompany in future adventure.

Puzzle 2: Greedy's Enchantment

- **Story relationship**

- Greedy planned to use the "Try Me!" transmutation to convert the Philosopher's Stone, the lives of three young alchemists and the transmuted body of Catherine into a big Philosopher's Stone. According to Philosopher's Stone's special power, the ability of three alchemists and the sacrifice to revive Catherine (live organic, though failed), it should work.

- **Map**



- **The Gate:** Players came into the manor through the gate. In the middle of the fountain, there's a statue of a man, one of his eyes is covered, and the other is in red. (Philosopher's Stone)
- **Visitor:** The place where players are settled down.
- **Greedy:** Greedy's house. A desk with the "Try Me!" paper.
- **Garden:** Then center of the Transmutation Circle.
- **The Lord:** The house of the lord.
- **The Girl:** The room of the zombie girl. There are lots of toys and dolls in the room. A girl

sitting on a sofa in the middle. The girl will rush to you and start to bite your skin. The zombie girl was the failure of hostess' human transmutation.

- Hostess: The room that placed the hostess' body.
- Hall: The place the lord treats the players.
- The Tomb: The tomb of Catherine's. If players dig out her bones, will be able to know the zombie girl was a failure because the bones don't match.
- **Analysis**
 - The map is big. Players are able to get plenty information in different rooms. Greedy will randomly appear in the manor after he was found in his room.
 - The information of all the rooms helps players to realize the truth of the story.



Puzzle 3: The 60°

- **Story relationship:**
 - By collecting the information from the books/notes and talking with people and interacting with the zombie girl, players can figure out the truth of zombie girl and the method to kill Greedy, that is activate the transmutation of three dots of the smaller triangle of the transmutation circle.
- **Illustration**



**The Transmutation Circle in Manor
Construction**



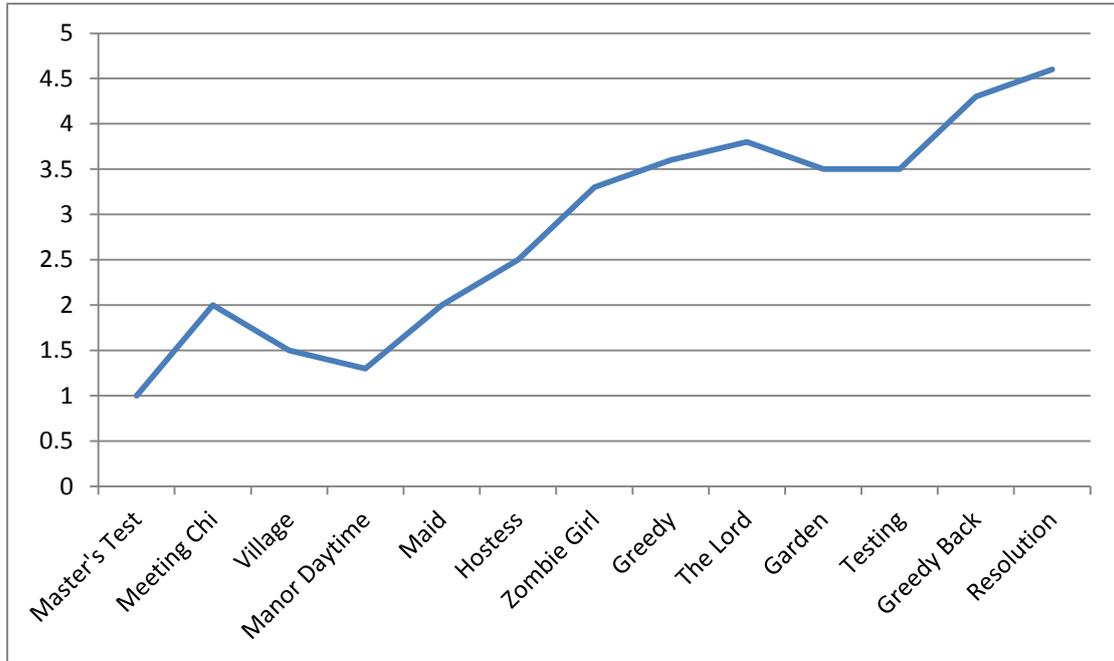
**Rotate 60° the Transmutation Circle On Paper
Destruction**

- By moving the objects that are materials of the transmutation, players can see the lines of the circle glowing to test the places and materials.
- **Analysis**
 - This puzzle is more like a riddle.
 - The key to this puzzle is the clue on the paper in Greedy's room: "The distance from construction to destruction is 60° ."
 - This puzzle is hard because there are many places and materials to test.

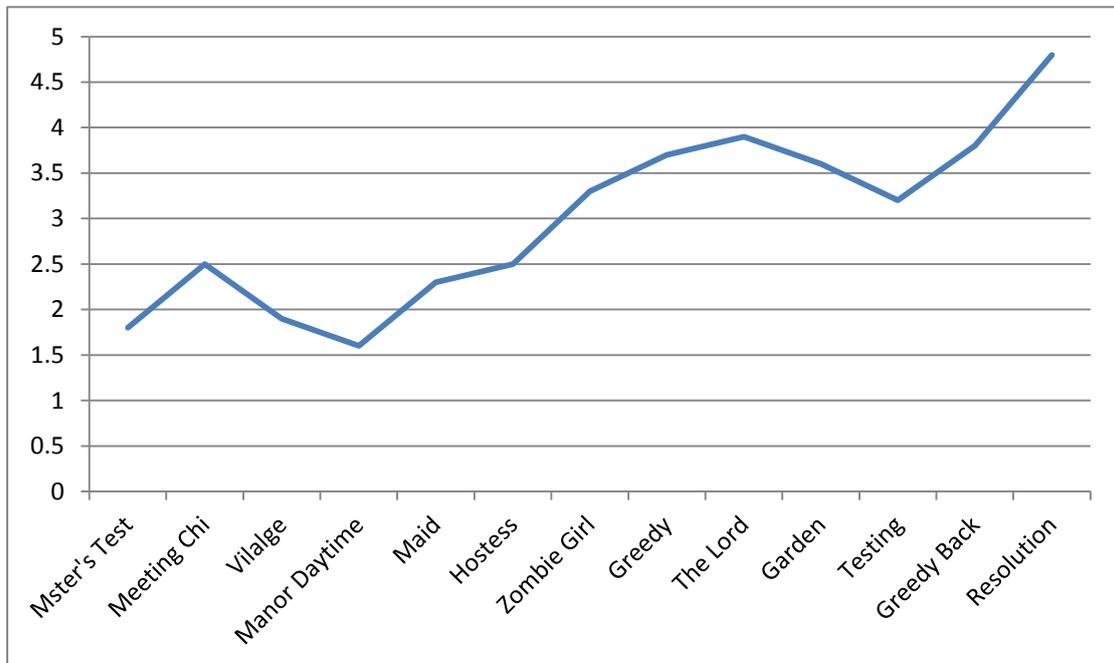
Interest Curves

My Interest Curve

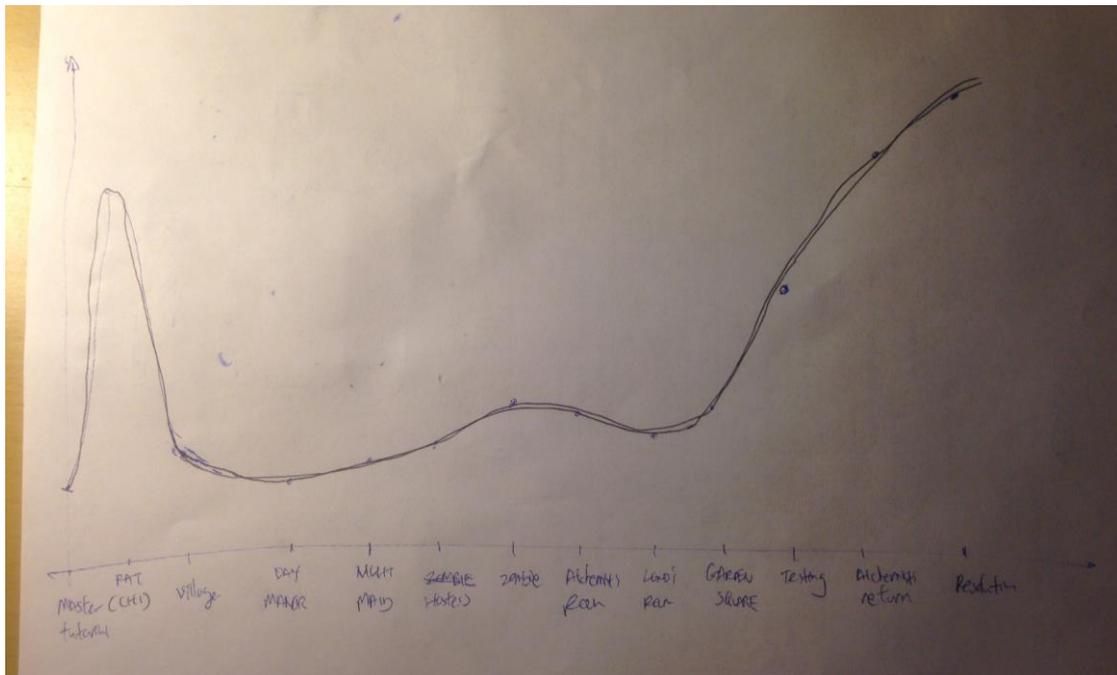
- Before: (Rearranged the order after running the game.)



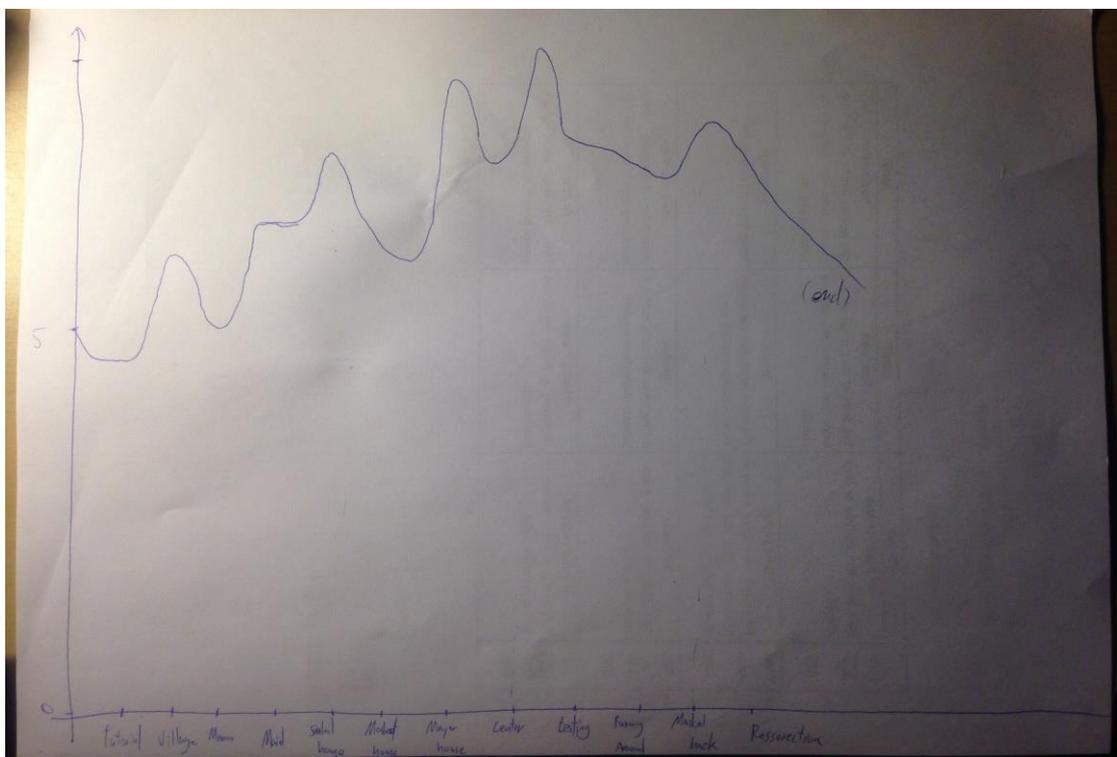
- After:



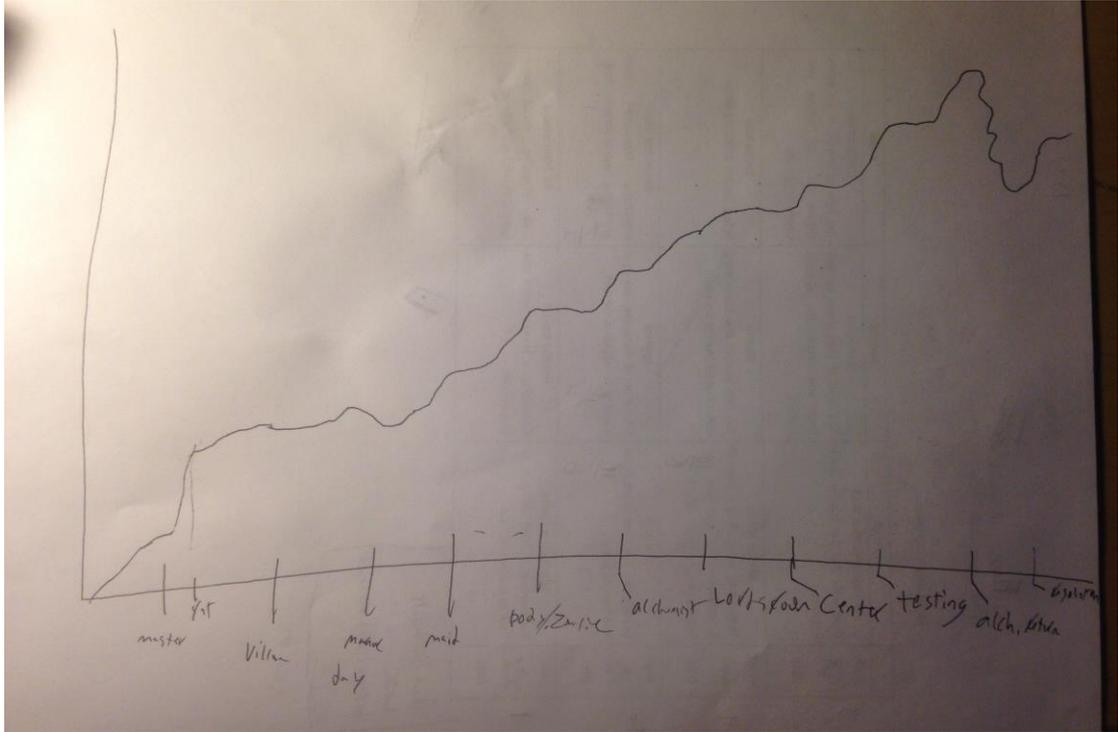
Player 1: David Liu



Player 2: Jerry Chen



Player 3: Justin Stanley



Analysis

- Overview:
 - The whole game lasted 4 hours, which was beyond my expectation. The main reason is because players spent much time solving the “60° puzzle”, doing experiments and discussing strategy. However it seemed that all of us enjoyed the game because David being an untitled alchemist with a titled talking rat Chi. (When Justin got the three bracers from master, he was afraid it was not good, so he tested one with Chi. Then Chi became the Wind Alchemist.) My initial idea of Chi was that she acts as a tutor and offers help to players varying a little from their need. She wasn’t supposed to master any alchemy. But it turned out to be fun to allow her becoming an alchemist.
- Well played:
 - The story is long and informative. While they made the process really fun by having three characters of different personalities and using the skills flexibly. Two player characters are boys and one is girl. Justin was chosen as the Flame Alchemist and he always used Fireball and Ignition. He used Fireball to set fire to the trees to ignite the dark. After I told him that Ignition was supposed to use as the tool to light up, he used Ignition to blind enemies for a while with his high power in Fire Elements, which make sense and was fun. David played a girl character and the character was so sympathetic that she protected Chi from her teammates and treated Chi as her pet, which was the furthest possibility I gave Chi and was fun too. Jerry was good at calling at the best timing. He thought about questions carefully and always gave the critical strike to enemies, which helped the story to complete.
- Best/Worst part:
 - After running the game, I asked players what are the best and worst part of this game. They said Chi (the rat NPC) and Mirror Entity (the Water/Physical skill) were awesome. But the 60° puzzle might not be very good because it was a bit too hard and confusing.
 - I agree that Chi brought so much fun to this game. And it was well played that two of the players have Mirror Entity and they carry copies of the dead hostess and Catherine, using them to frighten Greedy and the lord.
 - About the 60° puzzle, I agree it can be confusing for some players. Actually one of the three players got the right answer to the puzzle. The other one can realize it after listening to the first one. However Jerry didn’t agree with them. I can understand. Because in the first puzzle, the master’s test. There are three monsters; each of them is of an attribute. When they fought against the Water Spirit, they used the **Indestructible Wall** to execute her. And I said, after casting the spell, walls made by soil appear around the Water Spirit; her body mixed with the soil and was destroyed. This process fits the explanation of the overcoming relationship between the classical Five Elements in Chinese culture, that Earth absorbs Water. This misled him of thinking about the generating/overcoming relationship between the elements in this puzzle. Also, although I tried to show the characteristics and

motivation of Greedy, it seemed that the signal of his plan of turning them into a Philosopher's Stone was not apparent enough.

- Food?
 - I was the third to host my game in my team. During playing others' games, I felt that eating is sort of useless in this game. Because it's ridiculous to say that you will lose this game owing to not having any food for half a day. But I still set a butcher in the village and allow players buying some food. And players did take preparing food for the coming adventure seriously and paid much attention to the butcher.
- **Redesign the attributes & skills:**
 - Undoubtedly the skills play an important role in this game. Like magic skills, limiting the power of alchemical skills is hard because they are much different from the basic material based skills. The Mirror Entity was really flexible and they liked it so much. But I personally feel it a little overpowered. Players always used the social skills and as I imagined, they were helpful and are irreplaceable. On the other side, I feel the distinguish between physical and mental skills seems not very apparent. It might not be a big problem, but I hope to give them different roles in the game.
 - Also the balancing of the skills and attributes can be a problem. For instance, Justin can use Ignition without rolling a dice, because he allocated high points to this skill, plus the special effect of his Flame Bracer. I could decrease the effect of the bracer, but it still possible as long as it's allowed to allocate points as they want.
- **Motivation:**
 - The goal of players, how to motivate players to finish a task and make perfect sense is a question. At the beginning, I was considering that asking the players to find Philosopher's Stone and to revive their master to be the initial and ultimate goal of the game. However, the master died at the start of the game. I don't think reviving master can make a good motivation. Also, telling them the ultimate goal at the very beginning makes the adventure not interesting because they will lose curiosity. So then I decided to separate the truth into pieces and let players discover by themselves.
- **Story & Characters:**
 - I tried to make the story concrete, reasonable and convincing. Maybe it's hard to be very creative and compelling to tell a story with tabletop paper game. I did choose between having a solid bigger story and using random events to tell a string of smaller stories. I chose the former one because I feel it would be hard to make it interesting by putting together some random barren events.