

# Postmortem for Mikami



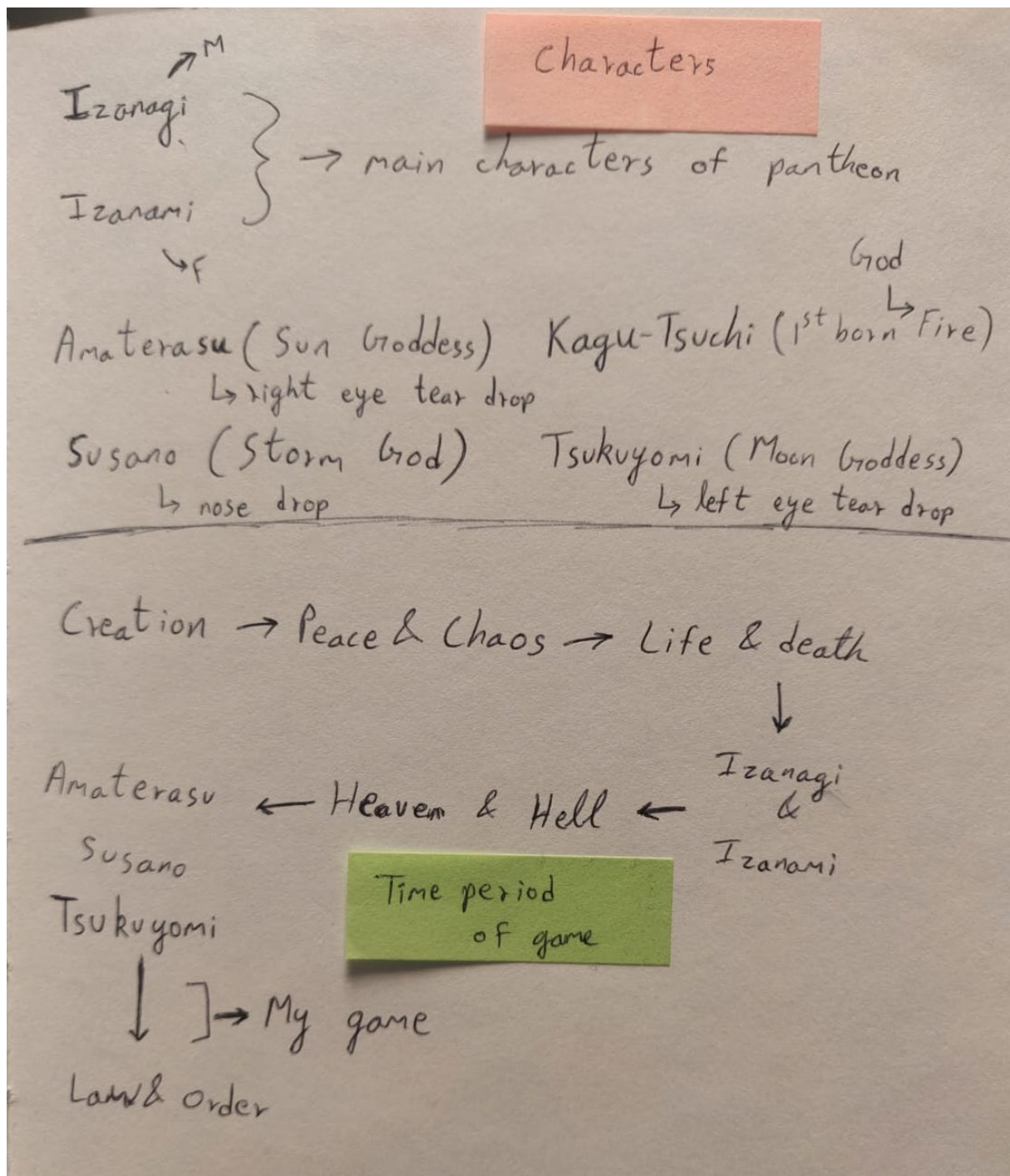
Mikami has helped me evolve into a game designer from a computer engineer. I have found my design process while designing Mikami. I aim to land a job in AAA market and hence I decided to design a game of AAA scale. It was a challenge and I was taking on extra work, but I wanted to do it willingly. I initially thought that the project is too ambitious, but I wanted to go ahead with an ambitious project. This is a master's course; I think that it's all about pushing my boundaries and taking on tasks that are out of my comfort zone. I faced many setbacks while designing Mikami, but I learnt how to make the most of these setbacks and either scope them out or make them into unique selling point of the game. I am happy with the result of this project as I know I gave it my all. Even though the project might never be made into a game, it has made me into a game designer and now I am confident with my design process. Mikami is the first AAA game I have ever designed and it will always be close to my heart. Mikami is the story of three young Gods venturing into a big world with a heavy lineage and responsibility

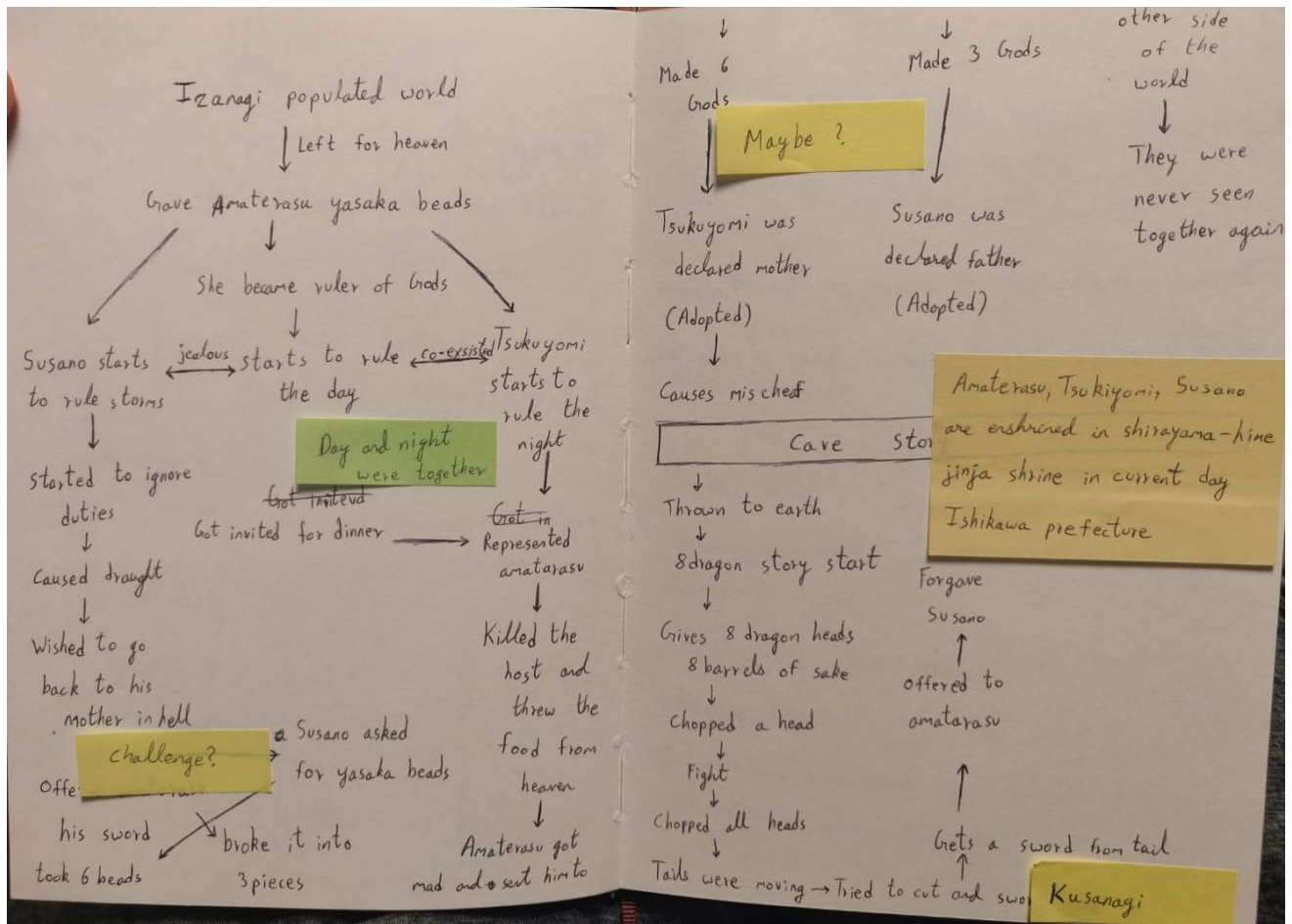
on their shoulders. The game depicts how the well-known Godly trio of Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi and Susano became the well-known Gods of Japan. It describes the relation of these Gods with the Japanese pantheon. Though it is my creative vision I have taken utmost care about cultural appropriation, and I do not intend to offend any culture, religion, cast or faith within this game.

For the first term at UCA (University for the Creative Arts) our instructor assigned us a project to make a game theoretically. I was confused because in my prior experience I have only developed games along with the prototype or the full game. Our instructor informed us that this game could be as ambitious as *Witcher 3* by CD Project Red. I aim to join a AAA development company, so I got extremely excited about this opportunity because I could go all out on content, and I did not have to develop it.

My initial thought process was this game will need a lot of research, I need to pick a topic that intrigues my interest. The two things I decided to continue with my research on were war and Japanese mythology. Now that I had my base topics, I went ahead to explore the genre of my game. I have worked at Ubisoft for almost two years. I was part of multiple open world projects but as a tester and a black box developer. I always wanted to add my design elements to these vast worlds. I took this project as an opportunity to make my own open world. Being a DM (Dungeon Master) for multiple D&D (*Dungeons and Dragons*) campaigns made this option seemed very feasible. I have never designed a card game. I was thinking on the tangent that a war-based game could be depicted as a card game. I researched a lot about card games as I am not familiar with them as a player. I wanted my card game to be different from Magic the Gathering, Hearthstone and Runeterra. I went ahead to play and study these card games. After a few hours of playing them, I understood their core system and decided to make my own core system for the card game. I quickly realized that developing a core card game system with no prior experience of system design would be extremely challenging, hence I abandoned the idea of the war-based card game and went ahead with open world Japanese mythology idea.

Firstly, I did tons of research of Japanese mythology because I wanted to get it right and not offend their rich cultural heritage. I had to map a framework for the entire Japanese mythological timeline.





I wanted to game to present my take on Japanese myth while staying true to its roots, like *God of War* (2018) by Santa Monica, *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) by Sucker Punch and *Sekiro shadows die twice* (2019) by From Software. After a lot of digging into the Japanese myths I discovered a part of the Japanese myth timeline that had no explanation or written narrative to it. I cross checked this with the oldest Japanese mythological text that exist to verify this fact. As I came across this blank spot in Japanese myths, I decided to fill it with my own creative vision. This became the backbone of my project. It provided me with a framework to fit my story into. This framework had an antecedent that helped me set up my narrative and an aftermath that will eventually help me conclude the narrative. Now I had my characters, my big bad guy, a start and an end to my story. I was still clueless about the gameplay, systems and world of the game but I saw potential in this idea. During my research I listened to a podcast from *Ghost of Tsushima's* Brian Fleming at *AIAS Game Maker's Notebook*. He mentioned that during the early development of *Ghost of Tsushima* Sucker Punch had a

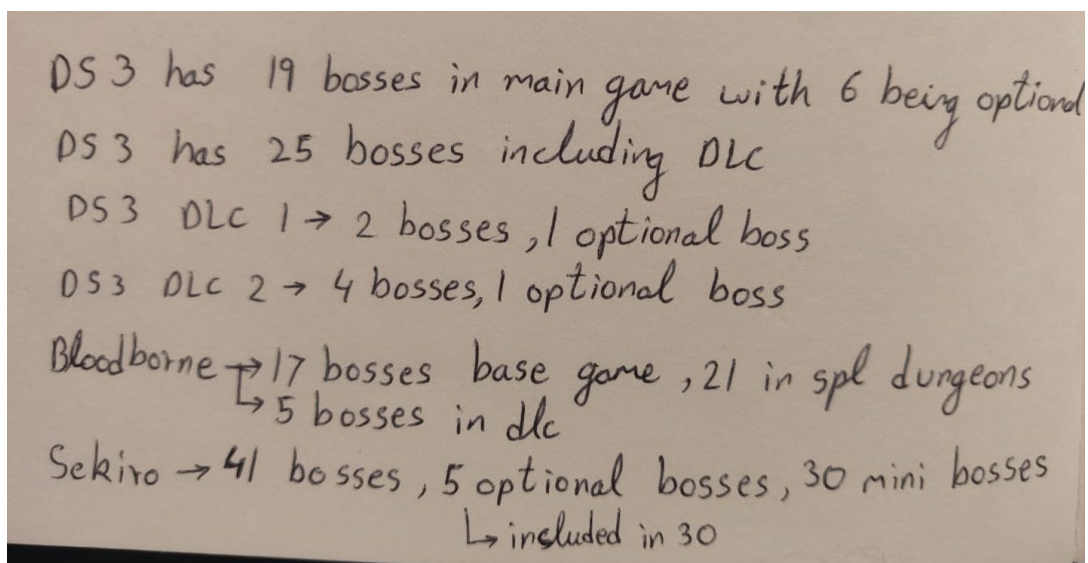
clear view of how they wanted their final product to look and feel like. During the pre-alpha they invested heavily in research and set things, each task in stone before going ahead with the next one. This provided *Ghost of Tsushima* with strong pillars for its core gameplay and saved them reiterating their core systems and designs. I used this as my principle for designing this project and it helped me a lot during milestone 2. A night before submission I was unsure what to name this project. I thought I want the title to deliver what this game is about; this game is the story of three Gods, so I translated three Gods to Japanese and named the game “*Mikami*.”

At our first milestone I pitched this idea to my instructor and she gave me the green light to go ahead with it. She warned me to make sure it has cultural appropriation. The next step in my development process was to decide the personality of my main characters. They are Gods in myths, but I did not want them to be Gods at the start of my game. I wanted to portray their journey of becoming the Gods they are in myths. I researched about these Gods and found strengths, flaws in their personality. I decided to show these characters with potential in the opening scene of the game but with flaws and over their journey they shall overcome their fears, flaws to become the Gods as they are described in myths. I thought this gave my characters depth and it would help keep the players engaged during gameplay. While researching each of my main characters' personalities I also came across their nature of relationship with each other and the cause behind it. This served me as ideas for side quests on a silver platter.

My secondary research was about open world games. I knew I wanted to make an open world game, but I did not know what kind of open world I wanted to make. I could imagine the gameplay and world in my head, but it was not tangible yet. I read a good amount of design breakdown articles and papers to understand the diverse types of open world games and the thought process for making those. I explored multiple AAA titles with this approach and decided that *Dark Souls 3* (2016) by From Software, *Bloodborne* (2015) by From Software, *Legend of Zelda Breath of the Wild* (2017) by Nintendo, *Final Fantasy XV* (2016) by Square Enix, *God of War* (2018) by Santa Monica and *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) by Sucker Punch were the games I would take

inspiration from for world building, system design, quest design, combat and character development. I spent about two weeks with the first week dedicated only to research and the second week dedicated only to making my own designs inspired from my researched games.

At the second milestone I presented combat design, exploration and rewards to my instructor and friends. This was a major turning point for "*Mikami*" because this was the first time, I was presenting the core gameplay and its pillars to others. I was worried that the combat or exploration would not make sense to others from a player perspective, but I am glad that it did. My goal for this milestone was to share my character's personalities and my core gameplay. My instructor advised me to start with the narrative as I had only presented by core gameplay on the second milestone. After second milestone my priority was developing a narrative and delivering it through quest design. I had an overall idea of what I wanted Mikami's narrative to be but I was not completely clear about who to go ahead with it. I went back to doing some more research on my base games to decide how long should my critical path be. I took steam and play station's official data on my targeted games to see their completion rate. The next step was to determine how many bosses each of these games had. Depending on the number of bosses and the game's completion rate I derived the best approach to go ahead for Mikami's number of bosses and critical path's length.



DS3 has 19 bosses in main game with 6 being optional  
DS3 has 25 bosses including DLC  
DS3 DLC 1 → 2 bosses, 1 optional boss  
DS3 DLC 2 → 4 bosses, 1 optional boss  
Bloodborne → 17 bosses base game, 21 in spl dungeons  
↳ 5 bosses in dlc  
Sekiro → 41 bosses, 5 optional bosses, 30 mini bosses  
↳ included in 30

## Target games completion rates

Dark souls 3 steam (27.78) → 5 years

Ending 1 → 33.28% (23.6) → base (Too Flame die)

Ending 2 → 27.21% (18.8) → Secret end (You take Flame)

Ending 3 → ~~27~~ 22.86% (14.8) → Good end (You become Flame)

Sekiro steam (25.47) → 2 years

Ending 1 → Shura (22.53%) → betray master → kill everyone  
↓  
become shura

Ending 2 → Immortal severance (32.08%) → kill master → become saint

Ending 3 → Purification (21.83%) → save master → carving buddha

Ending 4 → Return (25.47%) → both line on → kill yourself  
↓  
Go west and come back purified.

FF XV (Overall Kotaku) → 1 year

60% after an year of release

Grow 2018

71.93% → Golden path → 3 years

37.31% → Valkyries quest

Ghost of Tsuchima → 1 year

50.2% → Golden path

I took inspiration from God of war 2018 Valkyrie quest and divided Mikami's critical path into ten segments. Segment 0 is the prologue and the opening scene to the game. Segment 1 to segment 7 could be accessed in any order. I went ahead with this approach because when I played God of war Valkyrie quest my friends and I discussed which Valkyrie we defeated first and what's the best order for our individual playstyle. I want Mikami's player to have a similar feeling. During week 6 of our classes, we were shown memento, this reinforced my idea of segmentation for narrative. Segment 8 to 10

is the final fight of Mikami. Once the player starts segment 8, they cannot stop until segment 10 and the epilogue of the game. After epilogue the player can again explore the world of Mikami. Total number of segments was derived by the research done on AAA games and their completion rate, number of bosses. The next thing on my list was populating the world of Mikami and bringing it to life. I had a narrative structure now, but I still did not have the narrative for the game.

Mikami had a start and end to its story write from the beginning of the project but filling in the world was a real challenge. In my perspective Japan as a nation is very proud of their culture. The Japanese culture consists of Samurai, Japanese cuisine like sushi, ramen and cherry blossom trees. Ever since the start of the project I thought my game will consist of these elements. But later, while researching documents for the narrative build my illusion about Japan was shattered. In the pre-Jomon period the time period of my game, none of these things existed. The shrines and villages very were different from what I had imagined. This became a challenge for me to fit in my creative vision, but I made a few design changes around the world to make the factual things exists in the game. Though Mikami is telling a story from my creative point of view I want the elements like world, architecture, Gods, weapons to be factual for cultural appropriation. This setback transformed into a unique selling point for my game because this is one of the few games that represent factual things about Japan that is not known very widely in the south Asian and western markets. Thus, it also tackles the stereo types of western perspective that Japan is all about samurais, food and cherry blossom.

As the combat, narrative structure and world of Mikami was ready I was still deciding on what my narrative should exactly deliver. Maybe this is an amateur approach for writing narrative, but I closed my eyes and kept myself in the shoes of my characters to decide what would this character's action be in a certain situation. I had already designed the personality of all major characters earlier and that helped me a lot to go ahead with this approach. Being an experienced dungeon master helped me a lot in this aspect and I am used to making and iterating stories on the fly while playing D&D. I went ahead with the best approach in my perspective and designed segment 1 to segment 9 on Mikami.



Segment 0, the prologue was designed during 2<sup>nd</sup> milestone itself. I had kept the last and final segment 10 for a later date because I wanted that to be the last thing I designed.

Next task was deciding about the bosses of the game. I initially planned to have only demons as boss but during research I found a few Gods that were promising as a boss and they could deliver the lore from a Gods perspective. Hence from segment 1 to segment 5 the bosses are usually Gods as they deliver world building lore upon defeat. The bosses from segment 6 till the end of the game are mostly demons as they deliver lore of a specific character from their perspective. The book of Yokai helped me a lot to decide enemies for Mikami. After this I moved onto systems and things like items and skill tree. I developed an excel sheet for items and skill tree to grant player tangible rewards. Mikami delivers its story though dialogue and hence as Mikami's quest and narrative for critical path was ready I went ahead to write its script. The script was heavily influenced by each character's personality and while making dialogues I made sure to the best of my ability that each character's personality is shown though dialogue. I moved onto environmental mood boards after completing dialogues. I had an idea of what I wanted the world of Mikami to look like but I did not want it to be extremely dark like a dark souls game. During the pre-Jomon period Japan did not have a well-defined map and hence to pay a small tribute to Japan and its rich biodiversity of flora, I took inspiration from each region of Japan to design its zone of the map. The northern part of Japan to design the northern region of Mikami map and the other parts as follows. Making the story boards were a challenge to be to be honest. I cannot draw and all my story boards have an action sequence in them, so it took me sometime to trial and error with the story boards, but I finally completed them. The 2<sup>nd</sup> last thing that I designed for Mikami were the side quest and legendary quest. Those Mikami has a creative vision behind its critical path, I felt it was not enough to make the game will satisfying and filled with activities content wise hence I designed side quest and legendary quest to tell stories about characters that feature on the critical path only for a brief period. The objective behind designing this was to give these non-playable characters more screen time and deliver their story to the player as well. As these non-playable Gods are

important to the Japanese pantheon and they have a relation with main characters of Mikami it felt like a good opportunity to establish these bonds in the world of Mikami.

The last thing that I developed was the segment 10 of the game. There was an end in my mind since the start of the project, but I was not satisfied by it. I had two approaches to conclude the story but none of them seemed fitting to the rest of the game. It felt like the heroes are winning due to plot armor or just because they were heroes. I took a day off and did not think about the end at all. The following day I woke up booted my pc and started writing the document. I had no idea about what the end was going to be, I took inspiration of what Neil Drunkman did on last of us 2. He used the last bit of the game to set up his next game. I was tying the narrative and this approach struck me. Because the heroes were far to young and weak compared to the main villain in the last segment, I made a grand entrance of a set of new entity in the world of Mikami that would increase the player's curiosity and shift the power balance of the world. In my perspective this sudden twist and cliff hanger at the end of the game will make players excited for the possibility for a sequel game. Obviously, I checked facts from my research books about this set of new entity and it worked in my favor. With this approach I kept the ending I had originally planned, intrigued the player about a future possibility of game and left the game at a cliff hanger. In the end Mikami has helped me evolve into a game designer from a computer engineer. I have found my design process while designing Mikami.