**Lochlan Belford**
**Main Mechanic Design Doc**
**Independent Study Week 6**

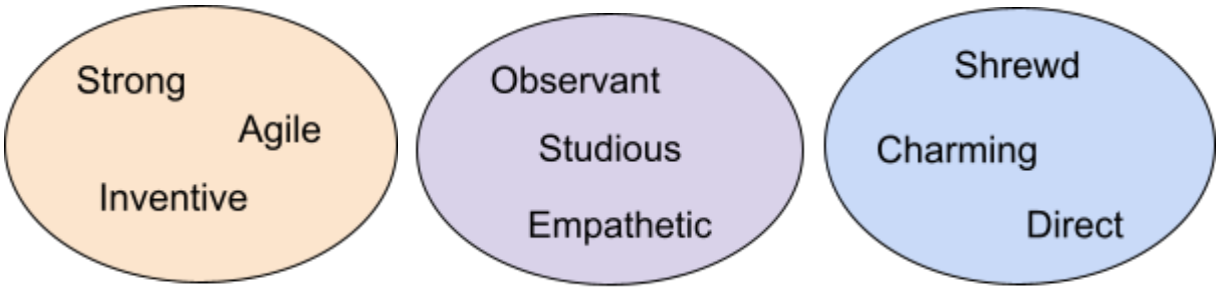
# “The Basilisk” Character Trait Mechanic

**Mechanic Goals**
The central mechanic of “The Basilisk” is acquiring character traits that represent your character’s main ways of interacting with the world. These traits unlock new, clearly-labeled options at choice points (ex. “[Inventive] Fix the Machine”) that the player otherwise would not see. This system serves the story both technically and narratively:

1. Technical
    a. Defines the **possible branches** and **limits of branching** in each playthrough
    b. Allows **customization** of several sections of story **without dramatic branching**
2. Narrative
    a. **Invests players in their character’s central relationship** by letting them define its details
    b. Ties **player power** directly to **acting in line with their character’s motivation**
    c. **Demonstrates character growth**, by changing the context of the traits later in the story

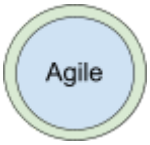
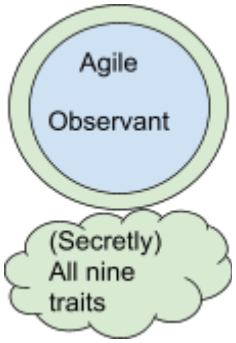
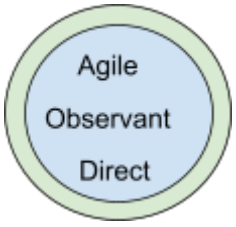
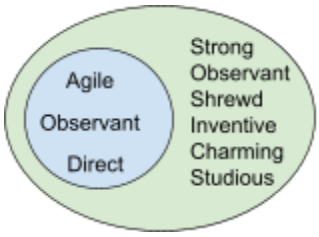
These goals are described in more detail at the end of this document.

**Summary**
Over the first three scenes, the player chooses three main character traits, exactly one from each of the groups below. These traits represent the main ways in which their brother, Zain, 1) Navigated the world, 2) learned new information, and 3) responded to conflict. The player character wants to emulate these traits, so the player must use their associated options to progress through the story. These traits are seemingly “set in stone” once chosen, and define both the player character **and their brother** for the rest of the story. However, this is ultimately used to highlight the contrast between Zain and the player character. Zain’s rigid approach relying on these three traits is what ultimately led to him being literally turned to stone by the Basilisk. Unlike Zain, The player character instead proves themselves able to grow and succeed where Zain failed–they end the story able to use any of the nine traits.




Group 1: Navigating the World | Group 2: Method of Learning | Group 3: Mediating Conflict

**Trait Changes by Scene**

| Scene | Description | Example Character State (Green = Player, Blue = Zain) |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | The player makes their **first trait choice (Strong, Agile, or Inventive).** The night before Zain disappears, he emphasizes that this trait is the most important thing he has taught the player. |  |
| **2** | In Zain's absence, the player gets by for five years by trying to act like their brother. They use their first trait to support themselves while searching for a way to rescue Zain. To do this, **they think back to his main way of learning new information (Studious, Observant, Empathetic)**, and begin emulating this as well. This five year stretch is **also** where the player character gains the life experience that ultimately lets them use any of the nine traits. However, the player character is so focused on their brother, that they **do not see their own potential yet.** |  |
| **4** | After using their two traits in combination to discover a way to revive their petrified brother, the player character goes to recruit Smudge, his brother's former ally, to help them. Smudge is at first reluctant to help. However, by **channeling their brother's approach to conflict (Direct, Shrewd, Charming)** to save Smudge from a loan shark, the player inspires Smudge and convinces him to help. The player now has their brother's full capabilities and feels empowered. |  |
| **7** | The player uses their three traits to great success in scene 5 to obtain the ritual supplies, but then is thwarted by a thief in scene 6. The thief can anticipate all the player's movements because they are familiar with Zain, and gets away seemingly without a trace. An argument following this failure forces the player to confront the fact that Zain's rigid approach is what got him in trouble, and will get the player character in trouble as well. After accepting this, the player realizes they have many capabilities beyond their brother's influence (the life experience from scene 2). To succeed where Zain failed, the player must now **avoid** using their original three traits. |  |
| **9** | (Seems like there should be a final moment that changes the traits at the end, but I don't have it yet. Letting them go in some way to accept Zain's death?) | **?** |

**Mechanic Goals in more detail**

**Branching**
The trait system is the only source of major branching in the story. Dialogue options not associated with a trait may lead to unique responses, but will always reconverge after a single scene beat. This helps define the limits of the story for players, letting them better anticipate when a decision is “major” or “minor”, and weigh their options appropriately.

**Customization**
The trait system also helps limit the overall amount of story branching by allowing the choices in Act 1 to be focused on customization of details rather than wide branching. While the initial trait choices lead to different descriptions of events in Act 1, they do not actually set up alternate paths or outcomes until Acts 2 and 3. This allows the scenes in Act 1 to be essentially linear and expository while still containing meaningful choice.

**Player Investment**
It is essential to the story that the player character idolizes their older brother and is motivated to save him. The trait system directly invests players in their character’s feelings by allowing them to customize the reasons *why* they look up to Zain. One player may prefer an Inventive, Perceptive, and Brave brother, while another is more compelled by a Strong, Charming, and Empathetic version of Zain. All versions of Zain serve the same purpose in the narrative, but the player has a sense of ownership over their personal version.

**Player Power comes from Symbolic Bond**
Narratively, these traits represent the player character’s bond to their missing brother. For the first two acts of the story, the only traits they have at their disposal are those that tie directly back to lessons that Zain taught them before he disappeared. While in the process of trying to rescue Zain, the player character is filling the absence in their life by trying to act like he would. To represent this mechanically, using these traits is the player’s only real source of power or means of progression for the first two-thirds of the story.

**Player Power changes after Character Growth**
At the turning point of the story, the player realizes that their brother’s combination of skills is only one possible way of going about things. Moreover, they learn that Zain’s rigid approach to things is what got him in trouble in the first place, and that they could end up sharing his fate if they don’t branch out. Narratively, the character realizes that they have been discounting what they have learned from all their other life experiences in the time since Zain disappeared. Mechanically, this realization is represented by the player’s new ability to see all possible trait-related choices, whether or not they learned that trait from their brother. For the rest of the story, the three traits learned from Zain lead only to dead ends or complications. The player must define their own new path to succeed where their brother failed.