The Art (and level design) for Where is my Heart?
by Nils Deneken

the first impression
In 2009, after the first Where is my heart?–prototype was displayed the independent games festival, Bernhard asked me if I wanted to do the artwork for the game.
Already the prototype that Bernhard had submitted to the IGF 2009 had a very distinct Art Style. Obviously it's a game that uses pixelgraphics and thus refers to games from the creators childhood, but it has some aesthetic twists that sets itself apart from the games of yore (and just as much from the games of today).
One visual twist is the representation of the gamelevels as comic panels. It is one of the basic mechanics of the game which has both a strong influence on the level designs and the visuals of the game. The other distinctive visual element is the bold choice of colors, which is quite unusual for games in general.
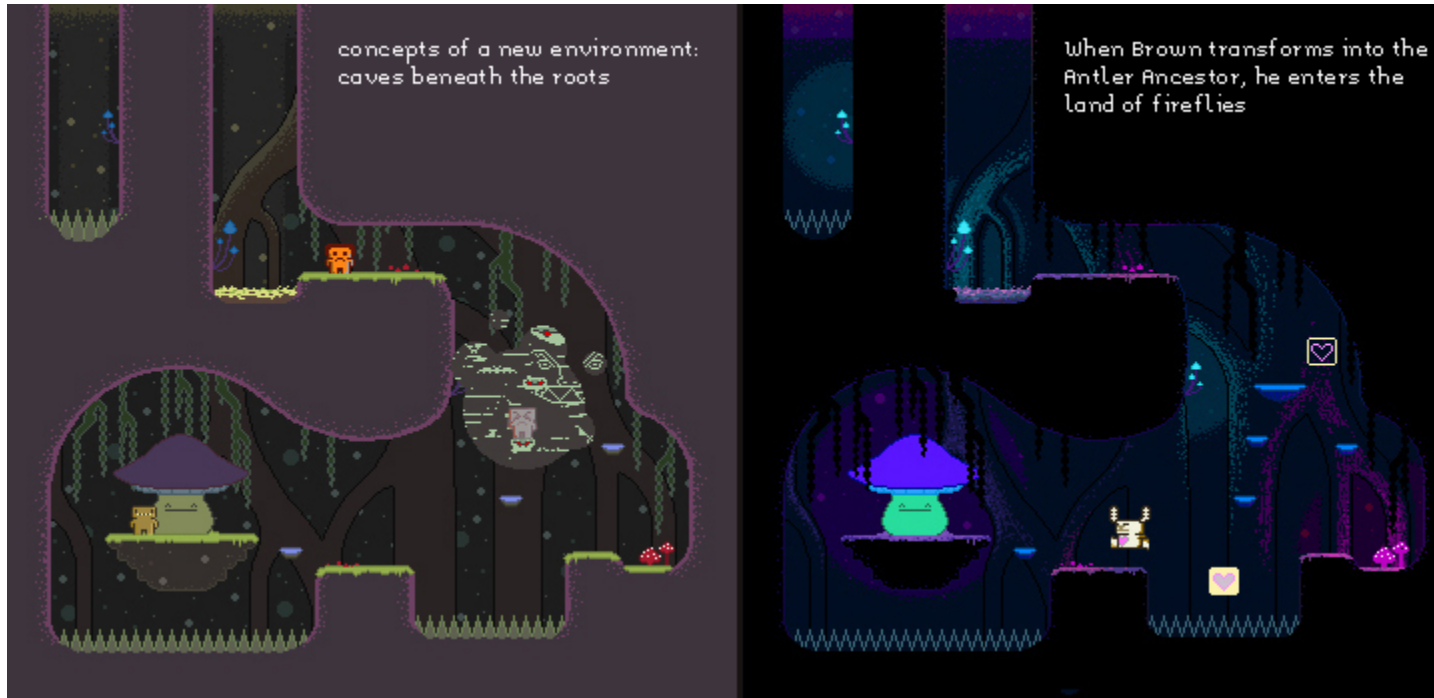

the color and the style
While other games tend to use fairly realistic colors to represent their environments, Bernhard chose a strange palette of pastel colors. The grass wasn't a saturated green, like it is in most game graphics, but a very light green, which seemed to glow almost neon-like in front of the browns and grays from the rocks. the sky was light purple instead of sky-blue and sprinkled with yellow stars that would fade in and out. Then there were the three little monster characters and a big tree with a face, whose displayed emotions were ranging from grumpy to sad. The old tree, the Heartboxes, which the player has to unlock to progress, Antler Ancestor, in which the Brown Monster turns into, seem all to be taken straight from german fairytales. The heart boxes remind us of the Gingerbread house from Grimm's "Hänsel und Gretel", while the Antler is clearly derived from the Bavarian mythical creature called the Wolpertinger. Their representation

however is more inspired by japanese anime, games and pictogram culture.
The whole strangely colored mix of japanese cuteness with german fairytales distinguished it as something very contemporary.

I was excited. It was very liberating not having to do world and character concepts from scratch, but to work with the constraints that came with Bernhards prototype level concepts, to refine them and build new worlds with that feel and color palette that he had introduced.

concepts of a new environment: caves beneath the roots

When Brown transforms into the Antler Ancestor, he enters the land of fireflies

the environments
The locations the levels were taking place were all tied to the overall topic of getting lost in the woods. The environments, even though fantastic with flying platforms and such, are rooted in a moderate climate. They are believable settings for the fiction we created around the three monsters. Besides the forrest, I added different kinds of caves to the environments, since they would bring variation to the levels without braking the overall theme of the game.
Some environment designs required night settings. We decided to have the the scenery change into night time, when the Brown Monster transformed into the Antler Ancestor. We aimed for the most satisfying feedback that comes with his transformation, where he would literally step into "the land of fireflies".
When the grey monster transformed, he would open a window into a dark parallel world, the "land of the bat", where he could use different platforms and secret passages, which meant that some levels needed a land of bat-version as well.
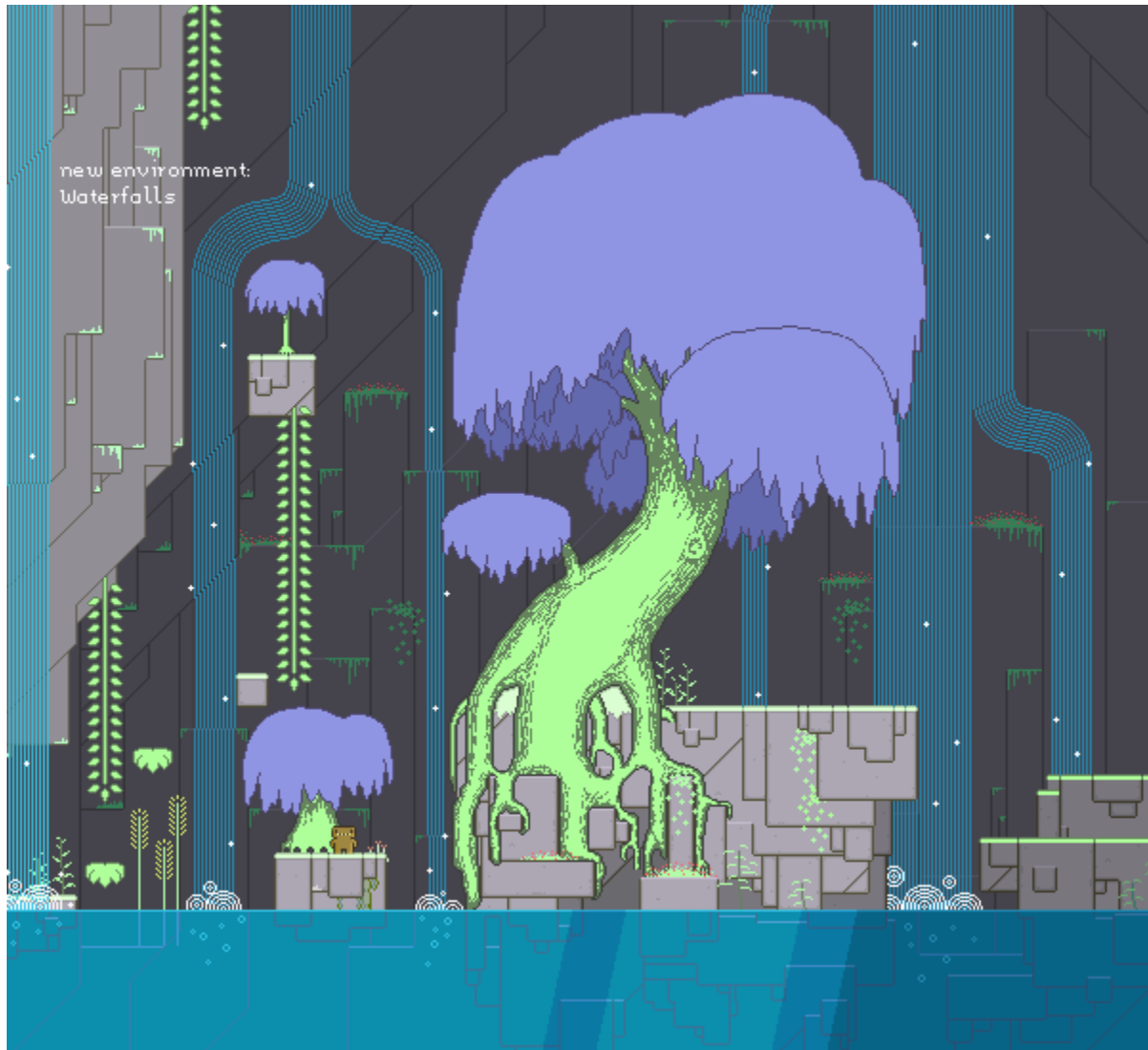
Character Design
The three family characters Bernhard created in his IGF prototype were interesting and had a lot of personality already, but I took the liberty of changing some of them a little to make them more distinguishable from each other and more coherent with the game style at the same time.
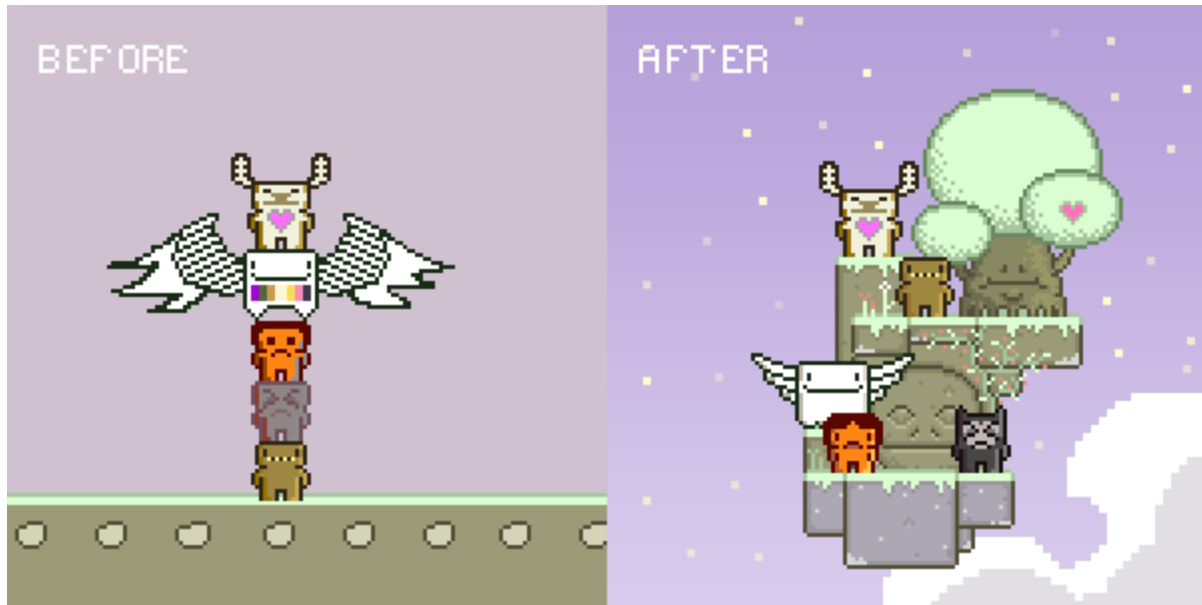
Comic Panels

The player moves a monster family through a traditional 2d world, but the visualization of this world as comic panels mixes things up. The player needs to find her way in this world of splitscreens, where she might exit a frame at the bottom right of the screen, but enter another frame somewhere located in the top left.

The comic panel approach redefines the traditional game space and gives us as level designers a rich possibility to both lead and deceive the player. It has strong impact on both the gameplay and aesthetics. It was possible to do frame configurations that were just visually appealing, while it was preferable to set up the frames in a way that it posed an interesting challenge for the player. It was furthermore important to use the comic panels in a way that suited the difficulty of the level and ensure the player was able to read the frames instead of getting frustrated by them.

At some point of the game, the rainbow spirit gets introduced, a character that has the possibility of jumping from one frame to another by rotating the comic panels underneath it. This made the level design become a mind-bending process. Suddenly we had to think about the space in the level not just as environments that were somehow differently represented by the comic panels, the panels themselves became a new layer of space in which the player was able to move.

the Rainbowspirit rotating the frames
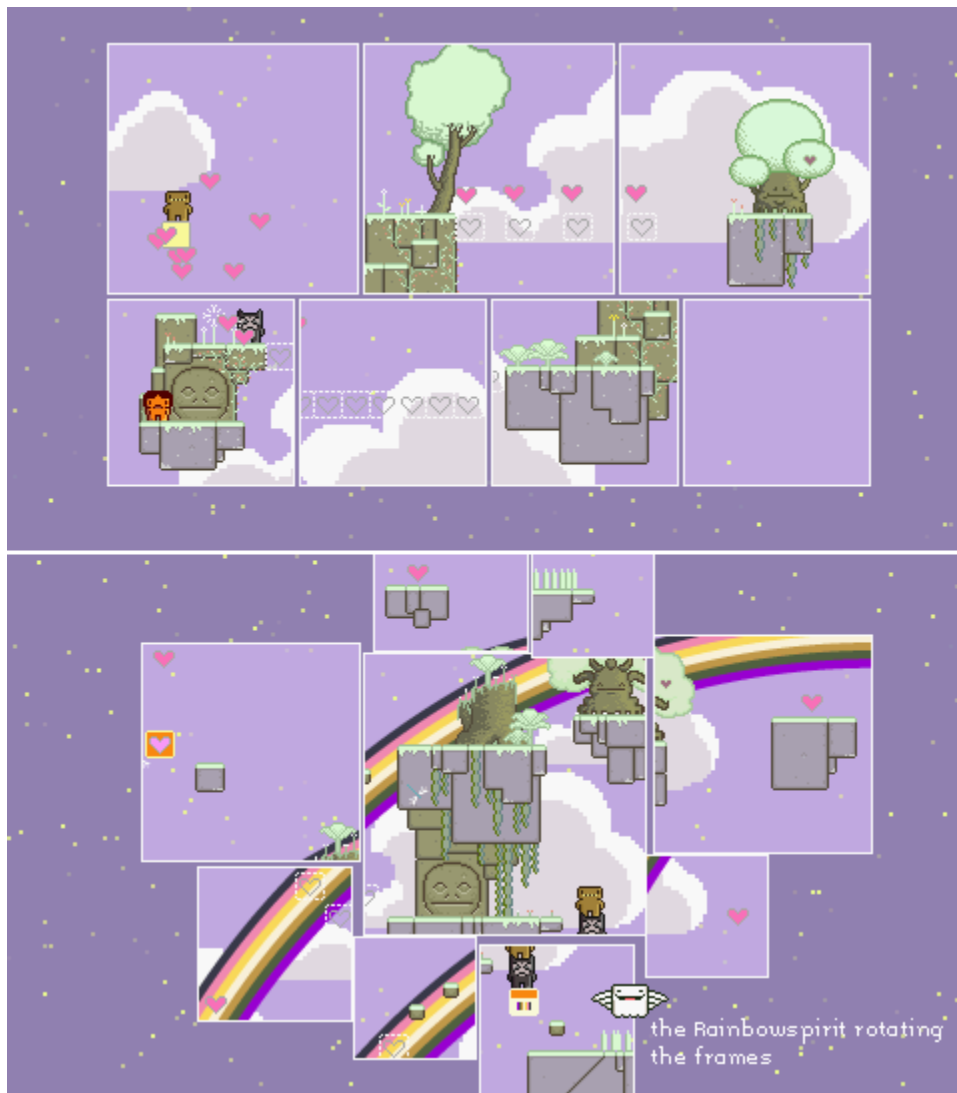
For more information about the Artwork of Where is my Heart and other projects, feel free to

visit http://gutefabrik.com/ .