Serious Game Design

The Long View

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Games for Good GAD6502/25-26

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17/11/2025

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Problem Domain

Work-life balance, burnout, and mental health in a demanding professional environment. This game addresses the modern, real-world challenge of many individuals, especially in high-pressure jobs, struggling to manage competing demands on their time and energy. It is easy to make small, seemingly harmless choices; skipping a meal, working late, neglecting hobbies. Over time, these have a huge impact on your health.

These small choices create a struggle to manage health, happiness, and rest, which can lead to severe consequences like burnout and depression. Finishing that task often leads to a long-term cost to a person's wellbeing.

This game assists and teaches people in these areas by providing a safe, simulated sandbox. It allows players to experience a month-long project that takes place over a four-week cycle and see the direct, and very real consequences of their daily choices. By gamifying these decisions, we can make the invisible variables of Stress and Fatigue appear visible and immediate, helping players build an understanding of how to maintain a sustainable balance.

Game Pitch

"The Long View" is a first-person, narrative simulation built in Unreal Engine 5. You are a freelance Design Engineer living in a 3D house, working on a critical 4-week project for a major games company. By removing explicit UI, the design uses procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) to show that wellbeing is invisible but felt through experience.

Your Health, Fatigue, Stress, and Happiness are all communicated diegetically through the UE 5 environment. High Stress adds a subtle post-process vignette and a high-pitched audio hum. High Fatigue adds motion blur and screen desaturation. Low Health causes laundry and plates to pile up in your house.

You manage your 28 days by physically interacting with objects: work at your laptop, cooking in the kitchen, sleeping in your bed, or going out the front door. Every action changes your ‘invisible’ stats, which in turn changes the world you see and hear. The

aim is to finish the project without letting your physical and mental world collapse through burnout or depression?

Game Goals

1. **Educate:** To make players understand their choices and their environment are connected, making the invisible costs of the negative impact of your health.

2. **Promote Reflection:** To use the immersive 3D space as a mirror, this encourages autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2007) as players see environmental cues that mimic their own and their mental state.

3. **Simulate Consequence:** To use UE5's high-fidelity audio and visual tools to simulate the feeling of stress and fatigue.

Design Pillars

1. **Diegetic Stats:** The player's stats are not shown through the UI. The movement around the house, post-process effects, and audio design are the only UI. The player understands health and stress are experienced rather than numbers on a screen.

2. **Environmental Storytelling:** The house is the main area. Through the MDA lens, the mechanic of lighting to show a happy home as bright and sunny, a depressed one as dark and stormy. Health drops clutter will start to appear around the environment, this supports relatedness as it mirrors emotional states from their own lives. This will produce the feeling of oppression or relief and immerse the players in the game.

3. **Physical Interaction:** The player must walk away from their laptop to make a wellbeing choice, taking a break from the work, playing guitar or making lunch in the kitchen. This demonstrates the need to physically leave the work and engage in something else.

4. **Audio:** The audio design will be the crucial part of knowing what is happening to the player. High Stress will be a subtle, but present tinnitus. High Happiness will feature pleasant music or birdsong from outside and Work will be the loud clack of a keyboard.

This design is directly drawn from the analysis of Pox, focusing on systemic accuracy by creating an accurate simulation and CoronaQuest by using the intrinsic motivator of Competence.

Measures of Success

- **Educate:** Can players understand their stress level from the post-process effects? Do they know that a messy house means their health is low?

- **reflection (Qualitative):** Do players use words like oppressive, anxious, or stressful when they hear and see the audio/visual effects when completing the questionnaire? This language evidences competence, showing players have learned to read diegetic feedback as wellbeing indicators.

- **Consequence:** Do players try to clean the house or go outside when it becomes messy or dark and oppressive? This shows they have accepted the environment as the UI feedback.

Core Loop

The game's core loop consists of single time blocks, Morning, Afternoon and Evening.

1. **Phase 1. 3D Environment:** A clock on the wall shows the time. The environment, lighting, clutter and audio reflects the player's current stats.

2. **Phase 2. Player Action:** The player has free roam of the house. They are free to choose one interaction per time block by walking up to and interacting with an object.
    - Interact with Laptop: Triggers the "Work" action.
    - Interact with Bed: Triggers the "Sleep" action.

    - Interact with Fridge: Triggers the "Eat" action.
    - Interact with Front Door: Triggers "Go for a Walk" or "Socialise."

3. **Phase 3. Resolve Action:**
    - If "Work" is chosen, a laptop screen widget appears on the main screen. The player completes a simple task, a mini-game and the laptop shows an increase in the project completion.

4. **Phase 4**. **Show Consequence:** The stats update, and the world reflects the change.
    - After "Working," a coffee cup appears on the desk, and the Stress audio hum gets slightly louder. After “Going for a walk” the audio hum decreases in volume and the world appears brighter.

5. **Loop:** The diegetic clock advances to the next block. This repeats for 28 days.

Gameplay

This is a game of observation and listening to your environment.

The Variables (Diegetic Stats)

- **Health:** Represented by clutter.
    - **High Health***:* The house is clean, and fresh.
    - **Low Health:** Takeout boxes, rubbish, and piles of laundry appear.

- **Fatigue:** Represented by post-process effects.
    - **Low Fatigue:** The image is crisp and clear.
    - **High Fatigue:** Adds motion blur, desaturation, and a slight camera head bob.

- **Stress:** Represented by audio and post-process effects.
    - **Low Stress***:* Audio is calm music playing, birds chirping.

    - **High Stress:** Adds a high-pitched tinnitus like hum, the clock ticks louder and there's a slight vignette with chromatic aberration on the screen.

- **Happiness:** Represented by lighting and life.
    - **High Happiness:** The house is bright and sunny. Houseplants are healthy.
    - **Low Happiness:** The house is darker, It is raining or overcast outside the window. Houseplants are wilting.

- **Work Progress:** Represented by a progress bar on the laptop screen.

To ensure that the diegetic stat pillar works, the player must understand the mechanic. Therefore, the player will start at ‘Day 0 - pre-project’. The house is clean, it is sunny and the birds are singing. This shows a baseline for the rest of the gameplay.

Win/Lose Conditions

1. Victory

- **Conditions:** Day 28 arrives. Work Progress is 100. The house is in a healthy state, clean, bright, and plants are alive.
    - **Diegetic Scene:** The player walks to the laptop. The UMG widget on the screen shows the project is 100% Complete. The player gets up from the desk, looks around at the clean house, sees it is sunny, and walks to the front door. They would interact with it, opening it to a lush green lawn and a lovely summer day scene.

2. Failure (Burnout)

- **Conditions:** Stress and Fatigue effects are at their maximum.
    - **Diegetic Scene:** The audio and visual effects would be at their peak. The tinnitus hum would be loud and the screen would be desaturated and blurry. The player would attempt to interact with the laptop, but the

scene would end with the player slumping forward, their view fading to black as they collapsed onto the desk.

3. Failure (Depression)

- **Conditions:** Health and Happiness effects are at their minimum state.
    - **Diegetic Scene:** This would be an environmental failure. The house would be full of clutter, rubbish and laundry mounting up. The lighting would show that it is dark and raining outside. The houseplants are dead. The player receives an email on the laptop. The player's character would be lying down on the bed, their movement would be slow and heavy, and the screen fading to black as they refuse to get up.

4. Failure (Fired)

- **Conditions:** Day 28 arrives. Work Progress is less than 100.
    - **Diegetic Scene:** This would be the most anti-climactic and cold ending. The player would walk to their laptop on Day 28. The progress bar on the laptop would show "Project: 75% Complete." There is an email from your boss. The player would click it, and the email would simply read: "Subject: Contract Termination. You have completed the work assigned in the timeframe given. Effectively immediately you’re fired!." The screen would then flicker and go to a red "ACCOUNT DEACTIVATED" login screen.

References

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