

“The Routine”

Game Design Document

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1. Game Summary

The game is a single-player text horror experience, in which the player is presented with a screen with text that tells a story. The player can choose what to do based on what is going on in the story.

In the story, the player does their morning routine every day, and the more days it passes, the weirder it gets.

1.1 High Level Vision

This game is about making meaningful choices in a world where we are just stuck in a loop that defines our lives, and we don't even notice it.

1.2 Target Audience

People who like horror experiences and prefer a good narrative.

1.3 Game Design Pillars

1.3.1 Unreliable Reality

The story shouldn't be fully trustworthy. Contradictions, missing time, and wrong memories are part of the horror.

1.3.2 Suggest, Don't Explain

Descriptions should be vivid but incomplete. Enough for the player to picture it, not enough to feel in control.

1.3.3 Meaningful Choices

Choices should change outcomes, information, or the player's condition. Fear comes from agency and consequences.

1.4 User Experience

1.4.1 Emotional Journey

The UX should guide the player in a slow descent from routine familiarity to psychological discomfort.

- The **early game** should be stable. The player should be able to get their bearings about the situation they're in and how the game works. Actions seem ordinary and safe.
- The **mid game** should be where the disorientation starts. Subtle text formatting changes, pacing, rewording and contradictions.
- In the **late game** the player should feel uncertain about what is real. UI glitches, delayed text or disappearing choices only add to this sense of confusion. The emotional arc is not only told through the story but felt through the moment-to-moment presentation of the text itself.

1.4.2 Information and Clarity

Although the narrative relies on unreliability, the interface should never confuse the player mechanically.

- Choices must always be readable, clickable, and understandable in purpose, even when their meaning is ambiguous.
- The player should always know:
 - What they are choosing.
 - Where to click.
 - How to progress.
- Mystery comes from narrative uncertainty, not from UI frustration.
- Clear controls, unclear reality.

1.4.3 Atmosphere and Immersion

The UI should act like an extension of the stories tone.

- Minimalistic design with subtle animations.
- Ample negative space.
- Ambient and sounds reacting to what the player is doing.
- The story and the UI should feel inseparable.

1.4.4 Player Agency

The UI should:

- Present choices clearly, but not spoil which are safe, and which aren't.
- Occasionally remove or reword choices based on past decisions.
- The player should always feel responsible for their fate, even when the story is slipping out of their control.

2. Core Gameplay

2.1 Aim of the Game

Player goal: survive their morning routine long enough to uncover what's changing about reality and decide whether to accept, resist, or escape it. Success here is understanding and surviving the consequences of your choices.

Ultimate goal: Uncover what caused the reality distortion and find a way out.

2.2 Game Design Goals

- Create and maintain dread/unease through repetition with variations across days.
- Make player agency feel meaningful even if outcome is ambiguous, choices alter the future.
- Use repetition to create expectations, then break them.
- Reward careful observation and memory retention.
- Keep mechanics simple so narration and presentation carry horror.
- Avoid frustrating UI.

2.3 Core Loop

1. Wake up.
2. Routine actions (2 – 3 tasks) – make coffee, check mailbox, turn the TV on, check texts, take medicine, etc.
3. Investigate until tiredness.
4. End of day.

2.3.1 Failure Conditions

- Player becomes trapped in a "bad ending" loop where they can no longer make meaningful choices.
- Missed clue thresholds by day X locks the player out of the true ending.

2.3.2 Success Conditions

- Collect enough evidence and make enough meaningful choices to get out of the loop.

3. Features

3.1 Gameplay Mechanics

- Reliability meter (hidden): not shown directly — affects text formatting glitches, delayed choices, or swapped options. Expose only via UI tastefully.
- Choice mutation: past choices can reword future options.
- Timed choices: occasionally force a quick decision to increase tension.
- Procedural contradictions: a light rule system that randomly flips small facts about past days to create unease.
- Save points: the game saves when the player sleeps

3.1.1 Reliability Meter

- **How it works:** it works as a hidden variable that goes down the more the player makes choices.
- **Example:** At < 40 reliability, the player's reflection describes a different outfit.

3.1.2 Choice Mutation

- **How it works:** it works by slightly changing more and more the wording of the routine choices.
- **How it triggers:** it's tied to the reliability meter, the lower it is the more and more intensely it happens.
- **Examples:**
 - **Example 1:**
 - Day 1: [Drink coffee]
 - Day 5 (Mutated): [Drink your cold coffee again]
 - **Example 2:**
 - Day 1: [Check phone]
 - Day 4 (Mutated): [Check your stupid phone]

3.1.3 Timed Choices

- **How it works:** some choices are marked as timed in the dialogue graph. They should have a greater impact on the game and have consequences if answered and if not answered.
- **Example:** "Answer the call", if no choice is chosen after a specific amount of time, the phone stops buzzing.

3.1.4 Contradictions

- **How it works:** it works by getting past choices/events that happened in the past and talking about them in an untruthful manner.
- **How it triggers:** it triggers itself randomly throughout the game, escalating with time and the reliability meter.
- **Rules:**
 - Never contradict major plot facts

- Some contradictions repair themselves later
- **Examples:**
 - Different number of pills in the bottle
 - TV showing tomorrow's date
 - A note referencing something the player didn't do
 - Mirror showing a different outfit than the one the player is using

3.2 Player Mechanics

- Read
- Choose
- Investigate

3.2.1 Reading

The player needs to read all the descriptions of all the scenery, actions and choices to understand what is going on in the game around them.

3.2.2 Choices

The player has agency to choose whatever they prefer to do. There are three types of choices:

1. Free choice
2. Choose one
3. Timed choice

3.2.2.1 Free Choice

The player can type their choice and hit the Return key to send it.

Example: The player wants to go to the living room. They type "Go to living room".

3.2.2.2 Choose One

The player is presented with a set of 2 – 5 choices they can choose.

Example:

1. Text back
2. Call the person
3. Ignore

3.2.2.3 Timed Choice

The player has a limited time *Choose One* style choice. (See 3.1.3 Timed Choices above)

3.3 Ending Structure

- **Bad Ending:**
 - Stuck in the never-ending loop, accepting reality as is.
- **Good Ending:**
 - Escape the loop and discover the truth.

4. Audio Design

4.1 Goals

Immerse the player in the story through audio. Make them feel like they are the ones in the story.

4.1.1 Audio Design Pillars

- Immersion.
- Clarity.

5. Game World

5.1 Environments

- Bedroom
 - Where every day begins.
 - It's messy, full of things .
- Kitchen
 - Less messy than the bedroom.
 - Predominantly white.
- Living room
 - Mostly empty but still cozy.
- Bathroom
 - A normal bathroom.
 - Mostly white.
 - Broken mirror.
- Hallway
 - Empty hallway.
- Stairs

5.2 Characters

- The player (unnamed).
 - **Personality:** messy, lacking attention
- The player's mom.
 - **Personality:** She's a sweet and caring mother, but she has her secrets.
 - **Narrative role:** Be part of the contradictions and bring the sense of isolation when she's not there anymore.

6. Narrative

6.1 Structure Overview

The game is separated in acts, each increasing the dread and anomalies presented, making the game “weirder” the more you play.

6.1.1 Act I – Routine (Days 1 – 3)

Purpose: establish normalcy, teach gameplay loop and introduce small anomalies.

Narrative Beats

- Introduce morning routine
- Establish the mother as a distant but normal presence
- Small, dismissible micro-anomalies begin
- Player builds habits,

Turning point:

A contradiction that the player cannot ignore happens. The mother calls from the kitchen, but she’s texting you at the same time

6.1.2 Act II – Distortion (Days 4 – 7)

Purpose: Escalate reality inconsistencies, distort memories, break the player’s trust.

Narrative Beats

- Contradictions become frequent and deliberate
- Reliability meter begins influencing text
- Choices mutate or disappear
- Familiar rooms feel subtly wrong
- The mother's presence becomes uncertain
- Player begins questioning their own memory

Turning Point:

A major event interrupts the routine loop for the first time.

Example: The mailbox contains a letter written in the player’s own handwriting.)

6.1.3 Act III – Collapse (Days 8 – 10)

Purpose: Reality unravels; player chooses how to confront or escape the loop.

Narrative Beats

- UI/audio decay accelerates
- Full hallucination sequences
- The mother’s role clarifies (or fractures further depending on choices)
- Paths branch into “accept,” “resist,” or “escape”-aligned endings

Climax:

Player must choose between contradictory truths, uncertain memories, or impossible actions.

Resolution:

Player achieves one of the possible endings based on choices, discoveries, and reliability.

6.2 Example Days

6.2.1 Day 1 – Normalcy

Purpose: Establish the loop. Player gains trust in the routine.

Narration Samples:

- “The coffee tastes good.”
- “Your mother left early again. You think.”
- “Your phone buzzes once. It’s your mom saying she went to buy the groceries”
- “The hallway painting is beautiful, it’s a flowery meadow”

Choices:

- [Ignore the buzz]
- [Check phone again]

Nothing weird happens on either choice.

6.2.2 Day 3 – Anomalies Appear

Purpose: Subtle but undeniable inconsistencies.

Narration Samples:

- “Your coffee is already warm. You don’t remember making it.”
- “Your phone buzzes twice. The message preview spells your name wrong.”
- “The hallway painting is beautiful, it’s a dense forest”

Choices:

- **[Drink the coffee anyway]** (Reliability -2)
- **[Pour it out]** (Triggers new text on Day 4)

6.2.3 Day 6 – Contradictions

Purpose: Player begins doubting memory and routine.

Narration Samples:

- “Your mother’s voice calls your name” but she left already.
- “The pill bottle reads 12 tablets left.” Yesterday it said 7.
- “Your reflection shows your coffee-stained shirt” You were wearing a hoodie.

Choices:

- **[Call for your mother]** (Choice mutates next day)
- **[Ignore the voice]** (Increases hallucination frequency)
- **[Inspect the pill bottle]** (Reveals first major clue)

6.3 Tone and Narrative Style

- **Tone:** restrained, unsettling, direct
- **Perspective:** 2nd person (“You wake up...”)
- **Tense:** present
- **Prohibited:** gore, long exposition, jokes
- **Required:** subtle surrealism, sensory details, ambiguity

7. UI/UX Design

- Gradual UI degradation as reality collapses
- Micro-animations to convert text into action

7.1 Accessibility

- Dyslexia-friendly font
- High contrast mode

7.2 Inspirations



Example 1: Stories Untold

8. Risks

8.1 Player's Expectations – High Risk

The story and its execution can fall short of player's expectations due to its complexity, leading to a bad experience and review of the game.

8.2 UI Confusion – Medium Risk

The UI can be confusing and leave players not understanding how to use it properly, which can lead them to not stick to the story at all.

9. Technical Requirements

- **Engine:** Unity 6
- **Platform:** PC
- **Input Devices:** Keyboard and mouse

10. Production Notes

- **Estimated game length:** 30 – 60 minutes
- **Number of days:** 10 – 12 days
- **Text volume estimate:** 20k – 30k words