

Shadow Market

Game Design Document

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1. Overview

1.1 General Characteristics

Shadow Market is a **3D atmospheric horror merchant-sim** designed for **mobile and PC**, built around **slow-burn tension**, subtle environmental changes, and narrative through micro-interactions.

There are **no jump scares**; the horror comes from **accumulating distortions**, uncanny behaviors, and consequences.

- **Genre:** Atmospheric Horror / Merchant Simulation
- **Perspective:** Fixed Third-Person or Over-the-Shoulder Static Camera
- **Target Platforms:** Mobile (primary), PC (secondary)
- **Target Rating:** PEGI 12–16 (no gore, psychological themes)
- **Session Style:** Short nights (5–8 minutes), long-term progression

Core Fantasy

You run a nighttime market that only appears to “altered” customers.

You sell *strange, symbolic objects*; each one subtly changes the world.

Player Pillars

1. **Subtle Horror (No Jumpscares)**
2. **Meaningful Micro-Decisions**
3. **Symbolic Item Interpretation**
4. **Customer Observation & Emotional Reading**
5. **Eerie World Progression Through Consequences**

This positions Shadow Market as a **mechanics-driven atmospheric horror**, ideal for mobile.

2. Gameplay Breakdown

2.1 Summary

Each **Night Cycle** contains:

1. **Preparation Phase**
2. **Customer Encounters** (6–8 per night)
3. **Sales & Consequences**
4. **Return Home**
5. **Progression / Unlocks**

Gameplay has **no combat**, no running, and no chase mechanics.

Everything is built on:

- Observing customers
- Choosing which item to offer
- Accepting or rejecting requests
- Watching consequences unfold

2.2 Shop Phase (Preparation)

A tiny wooden booth illuminated by a single lantern.

Player actions:

- Rearrange 5 to 7 objects on the shelf
- Read the Ledger
- Pick the 3 items that will be “featured”
- Light the lantern (brightness depends on previous decisions)

Subtle prep interactions:

- Objects sometimes move slightly on their own
- Your shadow may change length
- Cold breath effect if anxiety rises

2.3 Customer Encounters

Each night, 6 to 8 customers approach.

They are **not monsters**, but uncanny humans expressing strange requests.

Examples:

- “Do you have something to quiet my shadow?”
- “I need help forgetting things that never happened.”
- “Do you have anything that makes reflections less... honest?”

Customer Types

- **Lost** > Normal people who wander too deep
- **Echoes** > Individuals who shouldn't exist anymore
- **Collectors** > Obsessed with a specific object category
- **Borrowers** > They return items, but... changed

Customer Behaviors

Type	Behavior
Lost	Hesitant, confused, human
Echoes	Repetitive dialogue, mismatched emotions
Collectors	Intense gaze, fixation on object
Borrowers	Calm, uncanny politeness

Interaction Loop

1. Customer approaches
2. They give a cryptic request
3. Player chooses an item to offer (or rejects the customer)
4. Customer reacts
5. Subtle world changes occur

2.4 Consequences System

Every sale subtly alters the world.

Negative (Wrong) Effects

- Slight vignette blur
- Shadows lag by 0.3 seconds
- Lantern flickers
- Shelf objects reposition over time
- Player reflection looks “elongated”
- Customers show faint twitching or glitches

Positive (Correct) Effects

- Lantern brightens
- Ambient dust slows (calmer atmosphere)
- New mysterious items appear
- Customers leave peacefully
- A warm hum surrounds the stall

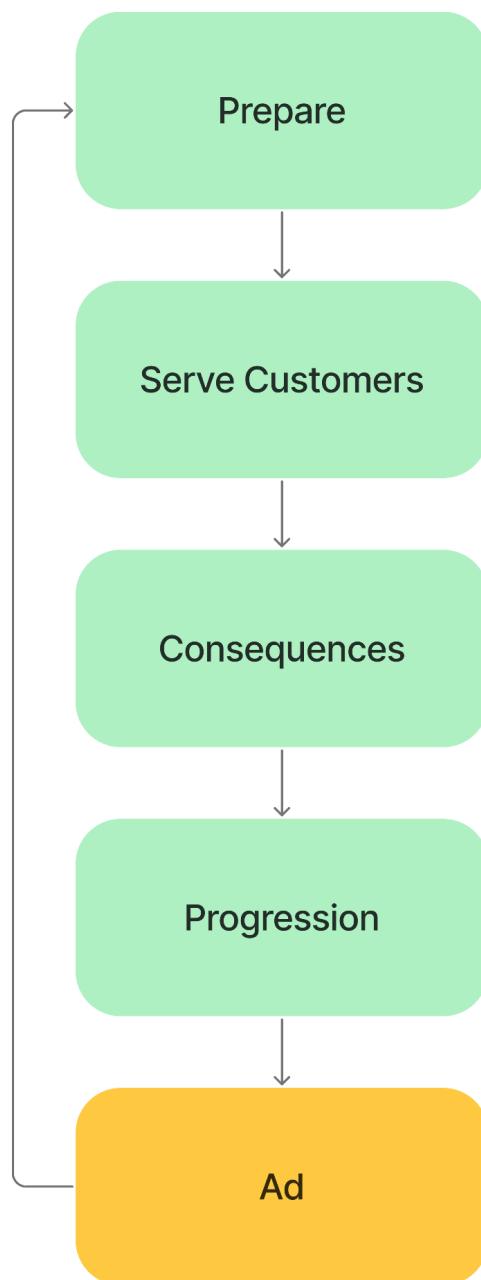
Each night intensifies the cumulative effect.

feedback loop where:

- Player choices → Visual/Ambient Changes → Emotional Response

This demonstrates **player psychology**, **systemic design**, and **thematic cohesion**.

2.5 Core Loop Diagram



3. Mechanics

3.1 Movement & Camera

- Player stands behind the stall (mostly static)
- The camera uses three fixed angles for mobile
- Slight “breathing sway” in the camera to maintain tension

3.2 Interactions

All interactions are simplified:

- **Tap to inspect**
- **Tap to show item**
- **Drag to rearrange**
- **Swipe to open the ledger**

Items have **symbolic attributes**, not RPG stats.

3.3 Item System

Example Items

- Locked Music Box
- Tooth with Symbols
- Bottle Labeled “Memory”
- Cracked Lens
- Withered Flower
- Pebble That Hums
- Glass Eye That Watches Itself



Each item has:

- Meaning
- World-effect
- Customer-type compatibility
- “Weight” in the story

The items are based on **visual metaphors** and **psychological associations**.

3.4 Player Stats / Variables

Instead of combat stats, you use mood-oriented variables:

- **Stability** (world integrity)
- **Attunement** (player's connection to the market)
- **Distortion Level** (horror escalation meter)
- **Reputation with Customer Types**

These influences:

- Lighting
- Visual warping
- Which customers appear
- Item unlocks

3.5 Random Generation

The nightly sequence randomizes:

- Customer types
- Dialogue variants
- Item availability
- Consequence intensity

4. Assets

4.1 Clients List

- Lost
- Echoes
- Collectors
- Borrowers
- (Late game) The Quiet Ones
- (Final arc) Customers Who Already Know You

Design focuses on:

- Minimal animations
- Subtle abnormal behaviors
- Low-poly stylized models

4.2 Items

30 to 40 items total, each symbolic.

You can add a table later.

4.3 Environment

A single small scene:

- Stall
- Surrounding an empty square
- Fog layer
- Lantern + light rig
- Ambient particles

5. UI

Minimalist UI

- Soft vignette
- 1–3 buttons on screen
- Ledger overlay
- Night-end summary screen
- No inventory clutter

UI is built with:

- Big touch targets
- Minimal transitions
- Diegetic elements, when possible

6. Story & Narrative Arc

6.1 Premise

The Shadow Market appears only to those whose minds are “altered.”
You’re not helping them.
You’re *guiding fate*.

Each night reveals:

- Who the customers really are
- What the Market trades
- Why are you able to run it
- Why your actions alter the world
- What happened before Night 1

6.2 Narrative Structure

Progression across ~20 nights divided into arcs:

Act 1 - Orientation (Nights 1 - 5)

- Meet customer archetypes
- Understand item meanings
- First distortions appear

Act 2 - Revelation (Nights 6 -12)

- Customers return changed
- Borrowers bring back warped items
- Echoes ask for help resolving their existence

Act 3 - Consequence (Nights 13 - 18)

- The environment becomes unstable
- Distortion is now visible in daylight
- The player's role becomes clearer

Final Act - The Market's Truth (Nights 19 - 20)

A subtle reveal, not a shock.

The Market is choosing a successor.

Your decisions determine if you're becoming **a guide, a collector, or an echo yourself.**

7. Progression

- New items unlocked
- New customer variants
- Ledger pages fill with cryptic notes
- Lantern level improves or decays
- Endings depend on Stability vs Distortion

8. Technical Implementation (UE5)

Blueprint Systems

- Customer spline paths
- Item DataTable
- Consequence post-processing manager
- Dialogue bubble widget
- Night-cycle manager
- Lantern intensity controller

Performance Considerations

- One small map
- 2–3 skeletal meshes reused with variations
- Single directional + one point light
- Mobile material instances
- Scalable fog

Player Experience Goals (PXG)

Player Experience Goals

Shadow Market is built around *emotional pacing* rather than mechanical complexity. The goal is to guide the player through a slow-burning emotional curve each night.

Emotional Intentions:

- **Curiosity:** Encouraged during item preparation and early-night encounters.
- **Unease:** Through strange requests and subtle visual distortions.
- **Recognition:** Understanding customer patterns and item meanings.
- **Tension:** Accumulating consequences across nights without jumpscare.
- **Reflection:** Wondering how decisions shaped the world.
- **Dread:** Realizing the market is changing *because of the player*.

The emotional signature of the game:

Calm, intimate horror, always quiet, never safe.

Player Journey Map (Night-by-Night Emotional Curve)

This table outlines the intended escalation across the full narrative arc.

Night Range	Player Focus	Tone	New Elements
1–3	Learning items, simple customers	Curious, calm unease	Basic Lost Customers
4–6	Interpreting requests, early distortions	Mild tension	Collectors, first distortions
7–10	Recognizing patterns, symbolic decisions	Uneasy curiosity	Borrowers, returned items
11–14	Understanding consequences	Quiet dread	Echoes, altered reflections
15–18	World destabilization	Constant tension	Stronger distortions, environmental shifts
19–20	Final realization	Intimate horror	The Market's truth, ending states

The curve mirrors a **gentle rise**, not a spike, matching the no-jumpscare philosophy.

Design Pillars vs. Features Chart

Core Pillar	Supporting Features
Slow-Burn Horror	Subtle distortions, lighting shifts, breathing shadows
Symbolic Narrative	Items with meanings, cryptic dialogue, and lore in the ledger
Player Interpretation	Minimal hints, no correct answers shown
Atmosphere Over Action	No combat, no chase, limited movement
Intimate Encounters	One-on-one customer interactions
Accessibility by Design	Visual feedback, no reliance on audio, simple inputs
Mobile-Friendly Depth	Limited inventory, simple UI, short sessions

Accessibility Design

Accessibility Considerations

Shadow Market is built to be immersive **without** excluding players with various needs.

- **No audio-dependent gameplay** - all cues have visual equivalents
- **High-contrast UI** - readable on mobile screens
- **Large tap zones** for item selection
- **Minimal camera movement** to reduce motion discomfort
- **Colorblind-friendly palette** (deep blues, muted oranges, desaturated greens)
- **Adjustable text size** in dialogue bubbles
- **Optional auto-progress dialogue**

This ensures the experience remains atmospheric and inclusive.

Aesthetic Blueprint

Aesthetic Blueprint (MDA Framework)

Mechanics:

- Item offering
- Customer requests
- Distortion triggers
- Night cycle
- Reputation and attunement

Dynamics:

- Interpretation of meaning
- Anticipation of consequences
- Emotional tension through subtle feedback
- Personalized moral choice-making

Aesthetics:

- Mystery
- Uncanny calm
- Slow dread
- Symbolic revelation
- Intimate fear

Production Roadmap

Phase 1 - Prototype (4-6 weeks)

- Core loop (sell → consequence → night end)
- 5 base items
- 4 customer archetypes
- Basic distortions
- Basic UI
- One stable camera angle

Phase 2 - Vertical Slice (6-8 weeks)

- First full Night
- Polished customer animations
- Lighting + post-processing
- Expanded item set (10–12)
- First Borrower behavior
- Minimal ledger system

Phase 3 - Early Access Content (3-4 months)

- 20+ items
- Full consequence system
- Echo customers
- Narrative arc Nights 1-10
- Full UI polish
- Mobile optimization pass

Phase 4 - Full Release (6 months total)

- All customer types
- Full 20-night narrative
- 3-6 endings
- Achievement system
- Cosmetic skins for stall/lantern
- Final optimization + bug fixes

This roadmap demonstrates realistic scope planning and production awareness.

Monetization Model

Monetization Strategy

Shadow Market maintains a **premium, narrative-first atmosphere** while adopting a **cosmetic-based free-to-play model** that never compromises immersion or fairness.

The core philosophy is:

Story is never paywalled. Cosmetics never affect gameplay.

Free-to-Play Base Model (Mobile)

- The game is fully playable for free.
- After each night, the player sees **one ad** (short, non-intrusive).
- A single **Premium Unlock** removes all ads permanently.

Premium Unlock Price

- **Mobile:** €2.99
- **PC:** €3.99 (no ads included, premium by default)

This ensures:

- Extremely low barrier to entry
- Transparent value
- No interruption during play, ads appear **only** between nights
- No pay-to-win or story restrictions

In-Game Currency System (Soft + Premium)

Soft Currency (Game Currency)

Earned through:

- Daily login rewards
- Progressing through the nights
- Returning customer bonuses
- Special events

Used for:

- Basic cosmetic skins
- Seasonal stall decorations
- Simple lantern frames
- Low-tier item skins

Premium Currency (Obsidian Tokens)

Purchased with real money or rewarded occasionally during events.

Used for:

- Premium cosmetics
- Advanced customer skin variants
- Holiday/limited-time sets
- Animated stall skins
- Rare particle effects (fog variations, ember trails)

No gameplay advantage.

Purely visual customization, keeping the game fair and atmospheric.

Daily Login System (Replay Value Boost)

To encourage retention and replayability, a gentle, atmospheric daily login reward system is included.

Rewards may include:

- Game Currency (soft currency)
- Rare cosmetic item fragments
- Seasonal decorative items
- Limited-edition holiday skins
- Small narrative “Whispers” (lore mini-lines)

No pressure, no streak punishments, rewards are **calm and optional**.

Cosmetic Store (Main Monetization Layer)

A diegetic, thematic in-game store that fits the Shadow Market style.

Categories of purchasable cosmetics:

A. Stall Skins

- Weathered wood
- Obsidian stall
- Candle-lit shrine stall
- Paper lantern booth
- Winter frost stall (holiday event)

B. Lantern Frames & Light Variants

- Iron cage
- Bone lattice
- Jade frame
- Eldritch tendrils
- Festive variations (Halloween lantern, winter lantern)

C. Item Skins (NEW)

Every object sold in the market can have:

- Aged variants
- Gilded versions
- Haunted visual effects
- Holiday versions (snow-dusted, pumpkin-tinted, etc.)

This adds personalization and replay motivation.

D. Customer Appearance Variants

Strictly **subtle** changes that keep the tone:

- Different cloak shapes
- Different shadow behaviors
- Color variation in garments
- Seasonal cloaks
- Limited-time event designs

E. Particle Themes

- Ash drift
- Firefly fog
- Whispering symbols
- Winter dust
- Candle sparks

All cosmetic. No gameplay changes.

Ads (Kept Minimal)

Even in the free version, ads are handled respectfully:

- **No interstitial ads during gameplay**
- **No rewarded ads**
- **No banners**
- **Only 1 short ad after each night**

Premium upgrade eradicates all ads.

Post-Launch Paid Expansions (Optional)

“Night Variant Packs” expand narrative depth without harming the base experience.

Each pack may include:

- New customer archetypes
- New symbolic items
- A themed market variant (snowstorm, drowned quarter, silent festival)
- A mini 3-night narrative arc

Price: €1.99 to €3.99 per pack

These expansions keep the artistic, premium feel while offering meaningful post-launch content.

Ad-Based Currency Booster

Shadow Market includes a voluntary, player-driven reward-ad system that allows players to earn additional Game Currency (soft currency) by choice. This system is never required and never interrupts gameplay.

After completing a night, the player may open the **Whispers of Fortune Board**, a 5-step reward track. Each step grants a bonus of **+50 Game Currency**, unlocked by choosing to watch a short ad.

Players may watch 1 to 5 ads to earn bonus currency. If the player ignores this system, they still progress normally without penalty.

To maintain immersion, the board is presented with atmospheric visuals (soft light, fog, calm transitions) and uses thematic language such as “attuning to the Market’s whispers.”

Premium Unlock Interaction:



If the player purchases the ad-free upgrade, this board becomes fully claimable once per day. Each step rewards Game Currency automatically, with occasional premium currency bonuses.

This system increases replay value, supports the cosmetic-driven economy, and provides players with a non-predatory way to earn cosmetic currency at their own pace.

Balanced Pricing Table

Pack Name	Game Currency	Bonus	Price (€)	Value
Whisper Pack	250	–	€2.99	Entry pack
Fog Pack	550	50	€5.49	Good value
Lantern Pack	1200	150	€10.99	Better value
Eclipse Pack	2600	400	€21.99	High value
Drowned District Pack	5000	1000	€39.99	Great value
Marketmaster Bundle	9000	2000	€69.99	Best value

Cosmetic Pricing Philosophy

All cosmetic prices in the Shadow Market are based on a **fair, transparent internal formula** that balances:

- Development cost
- Visual complexity
- Rarity
- Player accessibility
- Return on investment

Base Price Formula

$$\text{Item Cost} = (\text{DevTime} + \text{ImplTime} + \text{ContentMultiplier}) \times \text{ValueFactor}$$

Where:

1. DevTime (DT)

Time spent creating the asset (in hours or days)

2. ImplTime (IT)

Time spent integrating it into the game:

- Importing
- Setting up materials
- Testing
- Optimization

3. ContentMultiplier (CM)

Extra cost for additional content:

- Animations
- SFX
- VFX
- Seasonal variants
- Alternate color sets

4. ValueFactor (VF)

A balancing constant to ensure prices remain:

- Affordable
- Fair
- Encouraging engagement

Typical ValueFactor range:

0.25 to 0.5 for soft currency items

0.75 to 1.25 for premium currency items

This allows the team to price cosmetics **proportionally to effort**, ensuring the game recovers production costs without inflating the in-game economy.

In short:

$$\text{Cost} = (\text{DT} + \text{IT} + \text{CM}) \times \text{VF}$$

Example Calculation

Example: “Frost Lantern Frame” (Seasonal Cosmetic)

- DT = 6 hours
- IT = 2 hours
- CM = +3 (holiday VFX + emissive shader tweaks)
- VF = 0.5 (soft currency)

$$\text{Cost} = (6 + 2 + 3) \times 0.5 = 5.5 \text{ units}$$

Converted into soft currency:

- **5.5 > 550 Game Currency**

This keeps the cosmetic affordable yet reflects the work put into it.

Optional Rarity Modifier

$$\text{Final Price} = \text{Cost} \times \text{RarityModifier}$$

Where:

- **Common = 1.0**
- **Uncommon = 1.2**
- **Rare = 1.4**
- **Epic = 1.7**
- **Legendary = 2.0**

But this is optional, depending on how “gamey” or “immersive” you want the cosmetic store to feel.