

Game Design - Midnight Umbrella

 Milestone 4: Design Document

<https://github.com/Midnight-Umbrella/Project-Hidden-Threads>

GAME VIEW

StoryLine:

The player controls Harper, a senior journalism student who lives off-campus with her close friend and college roommate, Vera. Vera went to a party two nights ago and never came home. Her messages stopped mid-conversation. No one has reported her missing yet.

The game follows Harper as she investigates Vera's disappearance by combining real-world exploration with digital clues found on Vera's phone. What starts as concern for a friend slowly turns into the uncovering of something dangerous that Vera was involved in.

Design aesthetics/player experience:

The player experience focuses on:

- Feeling uneasy and suspicious as small details suggest something is wrong
- Building emotional attachment to the missing character - Vera
- Experiencing paranoia and vulnerability, especially when the player feels being watched
- Feeling rewarded for paying attention to surroundings/environment, solving hints/puzzles, and by connecting clues
- The game aims to create tension through atmosphere, dialogue, and story.

The Dynamics/Gameplay:

- **Exploration:** The player moves Harper through indoor and outdoor locations, deciding which areas to search first. Each location contains clues that may reveal new paths or unlock parts of Vera's phone.
- **Object Investigation:** Players examine environmental objects (phones, notes, laptops, posters, personal items) to uncover hidden clues. Deciding what to examine and in which order impacts what information is revealed and which locations unlock next.
- **Phone Investigation:** Unlocking Vera's phone is a central task. Players navigate apps (messages, social media, GPS/maps) to gather leads, which can alter dialogue options and available investigation paths. Missing a clue may require returning to a previous location, creating tension and replayability.
- **Dialogue Choices:** When interacting with NPCs, players select dialogue options that influence trust, cooperation, and future outcomes. Choosing whom to believe or confront affects both story progression and the final ending.
- **Puzzle Solving:** Players encounter environmental puzzles, such as connecting clues or solving passwords. These require careful observation and deduction. Solving puzzles

rewards progress and a sense of accomplishment; failing or ignoring puzzles may slow story progression or leave unanswered questions.

- **Decision-Making & Branching Outcomes:** Players make meaningful choices moment-to-moment, such as which location to visit, which object to inspect first, which NPC to trust, and how to respond in dialogue. These decisions shape the investigation, the main characters' relationships, and the final confrontation with the antagonist.

Mechanics:

The core mechanics of *Hidden Threads* focus on exploration, investigation, and narrative choice, encouraging players to carefully observe their environment, connect clues, and make meaningful decisions that shape the story.

- **Movement & Exploration**

The player controls Harper in a top-down 2D environment, freely navigating indoor and outdoor locations such as apartments, streets, and restricted areas. Exploration rewards careful observation and deliberate planning, as clues may be missed if areas are not thoroughly examined.

- **Object Interaction & Investigation**

Players interact with environmental objects to uncover text, clues, and narrative context. Examining objects in different orders can affect what information is revealed and how the investigation progresses.

- **Phone Interface / Digital Investigation**

Unlocking and navigating Vera's phone is a central mechanic. Players access apps such as messages, social media, and GPS/maps, which provide leads, unlock new locations, and influence available dialogue options. The order and completeness of phone interactions can open or close specific story paths.

- **Dialogue System**

Players engage with NPCs through selectable dialogue options. Choices influence trust, cooperation, and future interactions, directly impacting story progression and contributing to branching narrative outcomes.

- **Puzzle Solving**

Environmental and logic-based puzzles such as password hints and clue connection require careful observation and deduction. These puzzles prioritize understanding over trial-and-error and reward players with progression and narrative insight.

- **Branching Outcomes & Choice-Driven Endings**

Player decisions such as where to explore, which clues to prioritize, and how to respond in dialogue affect the investigation, character relationships, and the final confrontation. Multiple endings encourage replayability and exploration of different choices.

Game Walkthrough:

Introduction & Opening Scene – Apartment

The game starts in the small apartment Harper shares with Vera. Harper wakes up late and notices Vera hasn't come home after the party two nights ago. At first, Harper assumes Vera stayed over with friends, but things start to feel off: messages are left on read, Vera hasn't posted on social media, and her bag and jacket are still in the apartment.

The apartment feels quiet, almost too quiet. Harper thinks about calling the police, but she hesitates. Vera hasn't been gone long enough to report missing, and there's no clear proof something's wrong... yet.

Stage 1 – Vera's Room

Location: Vera's Bedroom

Harper searches the apartment and finds the key to Vera's room. The room looks normal at first glance, but small details stand out, movie posters, sticky notes, a laptop, and unfinished class notes. On the desk, Vera's phone sits locked.

Players solve a simple puzzle using environmental clues, like hints from posters or notes, to unlock the phone. Once it's open, they can check messages, social media notifications, missed calls, and GPS data.

A message pops up telling Harper that Vera was supposed to meet someone at a bar. Combined with the phone's location data pointing to the bar and a nearby alleyway, it's clear that Vera's disappearance might not be an accident. Harper grabs the phone and heads out to follow the trail.

Stage 2 – Following Vera's Trail

Locations: Bar and Alleyway (player must investigate both; order is optional)

Using Vera's phone, Harper retraces Vera's steps from the night she disappeared. The phone shows a range of possible locations, so players need to check both the bar and the alleyway to uncover all clues.

The Bar:

At the bar, Harper talks to the bartender and a few regulars. The bartender remembers Vera with a tall man in a suit and notes she kept checking her phone. Harper also runs into Louise, Vera's ex-boyfriend, who says they were still in contact. Players can decide whether to trust Louise or keep him at a distance.

Re-checking Vera's phone reveals older messages from a contact matching the bartender's description, pointing to an abandoned warehouse.

The Alleyway:

In the alleyway, Harper finds signs of trouble: blood marks, a dropped purse, torn photos, and possibly a secondary device or notes. These clues suggest Vera may have been taken or was involved in something dangerous. Harper starts to feel like someone is watching her.

After exploring both locations, Harper uncovers the final destination hidden in Vera's phone data.

Stage 3 – The Confrontation

Location: Abandoned / Restricted Building

Harper arrives at the warehouse, either alone or with Louise depending on earlier choices. Inside, she meets Mr. Crocker, a corporate fixer responsible for silencing Vera after she uncovered a conspiracy.

Mr. Crocker explains Vera's investigation and sees Harper as a threat. The situation quickly becomes life-threatening. How it ends depends on player choices: whether Harper trusted Louise, what she learned from the phone, and how prepared she is.

Endings

The game features multiple endings determined by player choices.

Good Ending:

Harper survives, defeats Mr. Crocker, and rescues Vera. The phone's evidence exposes the conspiracy, and Harper, Vera, and Louise escape together.

Bad Ending:

Mr. Crocker overpowers Harper and Vera. Both are killed, leaving the conspiracy intact. The game ends abruptly, showing the consequences of missed clues and poor decisions.

LOCATIONS:

Location ID: L01

Name: Apartment – Hub

Purpose: Introduce story and character, establish Vera's absence, let player explore basic interactions

Key Interactables:

- Vera's Bedroom Door / Key

- Harper's Phone (messages, notifications)
- Notes / Sticky Notes

Required Assets: Backgrounds (living room, hallway, kitchen), props (bags, jackets, posters), lighting/shadows

Required Systems: Object interaction, clue/puzzle logic, dialogue triggers

Owner: Alan/Nate (scene setup & collisions), Jenny (art), Divine (UI/phone), Mashhood (story/text clues)

Location ID: L02

Name: Vera's Bedroom

Purpose: Player investigates Vera's disappearance, unlocks phone, gathers crucial clues

Key Interactables:

- Vera's Phone (locked puzzle)
- Posters / Sticky Notes (clues for password)

Required Assets: Bedroom background, props, lighting/shadows for atmosphere

Required Systems: Phone interface, puzzle logic, object interactions

Owner: Divine (phone UI), Jenny (props & environment art), Mashhood (clues/text)

Location ID: L03

Name: The Bar

Purpose: Provides timeline and social clues

Key Interactables:

- Public location Vera visited the night she disappeared
- Contains NPCs - the bartender (no name) and Louise (Vera's ex boyfriend)

Required Assets: ...

Required Systems: Object interactions

Owner: ...

Location ID: L04

Name: Alleyway

Purpose: Introduces tension to the player and the feeling of being watched

Key Interactables:

- Matches the GPS location from Vera's phone (found in stage 1)
- Contains physical evidence of Vera's disappearance

Required Assets: ...

Required Systems: Object interactions

Owner: ...

Location ID: L05

Name: Abandoned / Restricted Building

Purpose: Determines the game's ending

Key Interactables:

- Final location is an abandoned warehouse Mr. Crocker uses as a place to take Vera
- Site of the confrontation with Mr. Crocker

Required Assets: ...

Required Systems: Object interactions

Owner: ...

INTERACTABLE OBJECTS:

Vera's Phone:

- Central gameplay object
- Contains lock screen puzzle
- Apps include:
 - Messages
 - Social Media Apps
 - GPS / Maps
- Unlocks new locations and story progression

Environmental Clues:

- Movie posters (password hints)
- Sticky notes
- Laptop
- Personal items in Vera's room (nightstand, bed, desk, study lamp, rug, dresser with drawers)

NPC List:

- Bartender (NPC who gives hints about where Vera was last seen)
- Louise (Vera's ex boyfriend whom Harper knows and dislikes)
- Mr. Crocker (corporate fixer, main antagonist/villain, player will fight him)

CHARACTER LIST:

Harper (Player Character)

- **Role:** Protagonist
Age: Early 20s
- **Appearance:** Female, Dark brown hair, Brown eyes
- **Clothing:** Oversized white hoodie, black Skinny Jeans, Sneakers
- **Description:** Harper is a senior journalism student who is observant, empathetic, and driven by concern for her missing friend. She is not an action hero, but someone pulled into danger through curiosity and care.

Vera (Missing Friend)

- **Role:** Central mystery / Missing character
Age: Early 20s
Appearance: Female, Blond hair, green eye
- **Description:** Vera is Harper's close friend and roommate. She is trusting, social, and optimistic. Her disappearance drives the entire narrative, and she appears primarily through phone data, memories, and digital traces.

Louise (Ex-Boyfriend)

- **Role:** Optional ally
Age: Early to mid-20s
Appearance: Male, light brown hair, blue eyes
- **Clothing:** Trench coat,
Description: Louise is awkward, kind of weird, and comes off as rude but well-meaning. He genuinely cares about Vera and offers to help Harper.

Mr. Crocker (Antagonist)

- **Role:** Corporate fixer / Antagonist / evil
Age: Late 40s–50s
- **Appearance:** Male, Short, gray hair, Dark hair, blue eyes
- **Clothing:** Dark/black colored suit and dress shoes
- **Description:** Mr. Crocker works to quietly eliminate corporate problems. He is calm, threatening, and views Harper as a loose end once she begins uncovering the truth. He reveals to Harper how he cruelly takes satisfaction in his work.

Bartender (Minor NPC)

- **Role:** Informational NPC
- **Appearance:** Female, Bar uniform with apron, brown hair, green eyes
- **Age:** Mid 30's
- **Description and only importance:** Provides information about Vera's behavior the night she disappeared and helps establish the timeline.

UI SCREEN INVENTORY:

UI Screen	Purpose	Components	Data Displayed	Interactions
Main Menu	Start game, access settings or exit	Play, Settings, Exit buttons	N/A	Click buttons to start, adjust settings, or quit
Phone Home Screen	Central hub for Harper's investigation	App icons: Messages, Social Media, GPS/Maps	Notifications, unlocked apps	Open apps, check notifications, scroll
Messages App	View text conversations on Vera's phone	Message threads, new message indicator	Messages between Vera and contacts	Tap to read messages and unlock clues
Social Media App	Check Vera's social posts	Feed, notifications	Social posts, comments, likes	Scroll, inspect posts for clues
GPS / Map App	Track Vera's last known locations	Map, location pins, range circle	Vera's last known positions, unlocked locations	Tap pins to navigate, zoom in/out
Clues / Inventory Screen	Keep track of collected clues/items	List of clues/items collected	Names and short descriptions of each clue	Inspect or select items to use
Dialogue Box	Interact with NPCs	Text box, portrait, dialogue options	NPC dialogue, player choices	Select dialogue options to influence story
Settings Screen	Adjust game preferences	Volume sliders, toggle controls	Current audio/video/input settings	Change settings and save

ROLE VIEW

Audio (Thomas – Sound Lead)

Deliverables:

- Background music for indoor and outdoor locations, ambient audio to support tone and immersion, sound effects for object interactions (phones, notes, as needed...),
- Audio cues for dialogue and story events, final audio implementation and sound balancing in the game.

Programming (Alan, Nate, Divine, Thomas)

Deliverables:

- Player movement and exploration system (top-down 2D)
- Object interaction and investigation logic
- Phone interface / UI functionality (Messages, Social Media, GPS)
- Puzzle system and progression tracking
- Dialogue system and branching paths
- Scene transitions and cutscene implementation

Extra Responsibilities:

- **Alan** – programming, QA testing
- **Nate** – level design systems, scene navigation
- **Divine** – UI/UX design, phone/menu logic, layout implementation
- **Thomas** – integration of sound assets with gameplay systems

Writing (Mashhood – Story / Writing Lead)

Deliverables:

- Main narrative and story structure
- Character dialogue and NPC interactions
- Environmental storytelling elements (notes, messages, digital content)
- Branching story paths and multiple endings

Art (Jenny – Visual Design Lead/ Artist)

Deliverables:

- Environment and location artwork, character and NPC visual designs, object artwork
- UI visuals and menu layouts (collaborate with Divine), visual prototypes

RISKS/CONTINGENCY

Risks:

1. **Time constraints** – late asset delivery, delayed coding, or story adjustments may push milestones.
2. **Technical bugs** – phone UI, puzzles, or dialogue branching may malfunction.
3. **Asset mismatch** – visual style or audio not matching intended mood.
4. **Team availability** – sickness, overlapping schedules, or workload imbalance.
5. **Scope creep** – adding new features could overwhelm the schedule.

Contingency Plan:

- **Prioritize core gameplay first:** if short on time, focus on Stage 1 (Apartment + Vera's Room) and phone mechanics before Stage 2/3 polish.
- **Fallback assets:** use placeholders for visuals/audio if final versions are delayed.
- **Simplify puzzles or branching:** reduce optional branches to keep game playable.
- **Reassign tasks:** balance workload among team members if someone falls behind.
- **Milestone buffer:** plan extra 2–3 days per milestone for bug fixes and integration.

MILESTONE VIEW

Milestone 6 – Vertical Slice (March 4th, 2026)

Goal: One polished stage of the game

Deliverables: Complete stage 1 - apartment scene with Vera's phone investigation, environmental clues, NPC interactions, dialogue choices, and simple puzzles. Add placeholder text, audio, and visuals.

Team Responsibilities:

- Alan – programming, QA, documentation, coordinate vertical slice playthrough
- Divine – UI/UX for phone, menus, dialogue box
- Nate – level design and environmental elements for stage
- Thomas – programming, and implement at least some sound effects and background audio for stage 1
- Jenny – work on environment, props, and visual assets/ artwork for stage 1
- Mashhood – work on dialogue, clues, and story content for stage 1

Milestone 7 – Beta (March 27th, 2026)

Objective: Complete playable game with all core systems, art, audio, writing, and programming implemented. Test for gameplay bugs and design issues.

Deliverables: Full game playable start-to-finish, including multiple locations, NPCs, puzzles, phone investigation, branching dialogue, and all endings. Survey for player feedback created and submitted.

Team Responsibilities:

- Alan – programming, QA, documentation, bug tracking
- Divine – finalize almost all UI/UX elements for game menus and phone
- Nate – aim to complete level design for programming
- Thomas – polish up and finalize audio implementation and balancing/sound effects
- Jenny – final visual assets/artwork for all locations, NPCs, objects
- Mashhood – finalize/polish up story, dialogue, branching narrative

Milestone 8 – Trailer (April 2nd, 2026)

Objective: Produce a 60–90 second trailer that showcases the game.

Deliverables: Trailer storyboard, gameplay footage (at least 25 seconds), highlights of unique features, tone, and story. Storyboard submitted for EP review.

Team Responsibilities:

- Alan – coordinate trailer creation and EP approval
- Divine – capture UI/UX elements for trailer
- Nate – capture level and environmental footage
- Thomas – integrate audio/appealing sound effects into trailer
- Jenny – highlight visual assets, character and environment art for the trailer
- Mashhood – assist with script trailer in narration

Milestone 9 – Gold Release (April 12, 2026)

Objective: Final polished game submitted. EP must approve playthrough before submission.

Deliverables: Final game executable, Fully playable with all endings and polished assets.

Team Responsibilities:

- Alan – programming, QA, documentation, submission coordination
- Divine – finalize UI/UX polish and menus
- Nate – finalize level design polish and environmental details
- Thomas – finalize sound design and audio balance
- Jenny – finalize all visual assets and effects
- Mashhood – finalize narrative, dialogue, and story polishing

Extra (For Internal Team Use)

Building / Game Design

- **2D game** – top-down perspective
- **Setting** – fictional world
- **Player control** – character can move freely in the environment

Visual / Style Design

- **Art style** – British-style pixel art
- **Open Scene** – a small animated mini-cartoon introducing the setting and backstory to the player

Game Mechanics Overview (MDA Framework)

> Aesthetics (Player Experience)

- *Hidden Threads* blends genres such as digital conspiracy and noir detective stories
- Players should feel:
 - Uneasy and suspicious
 - Curious and engaged with environmental storytelling
 - Rewarded for observation and deduction

> Dynamics (Gameplay Behavior)

- Players combine **digital-sleuthing** with **physical exploration** of the game world
- Exploration and interaction drive discovery of clues, story progression, and branching outcomes

> Mechanics (Player Actions)

- Movement and exploration in top-down 2D spaces
- Object interaction: clicking / examining objects (phones, notes, posters, laptops)
- Phone investigation system: unlocking apps, checking messages, social media, GPS/maps
- Dialogue system: talking to NPCs and selecting choices that affect trust and story
- Puzzle solving: environmental and logic-based puzzles tied to progression
- Branching outcomes: player decisions influence story, relationships, and endings