



THE FIRST DAY
GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT

by
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Table of Contents

1. GENERAL OVERVIEW	3
2. Controls.....	5
3. Mechanic Analysis	6
3.1. Physical exploration.....	6
3.2. Puzzle Solving.....	6
3.3. Narrative.....	6
3.4. Horror elements	6
4. Game Flow and Plot.....	7
4.1. Prologue	7
4.2. School	7
4.3. Hospital	7
4.4. Subconscious.....	8
4.5. Ending	8
5. Puzzles and Riddles.....	9
5.1. Chapter End puzzles.....	9
5.2. Pigeonhole Puzzle.....	9
5.3. Knight/Knave puzzle	9
5.4. Puzzle Boxes	9
5.5. Environmental Puzzles	10
5.6. Lock and Key Puzzles.....	10
6. Horror Philosophy	11
6.1. Types of Horror.....	11
6.2. Use of Sound	11
6.3. Isolation.....	11
6.4. Darkness.....	11
6.5. Jump Scares.....	12
7. Meeting minutes	13

1. GENERAL OVERVIEW

Title The First Day

Tag line “You don’t want to be late for your first class”

Your name Cowcat Studio

Genre Puzzle, Horror

Platform Windows

Market Horror & Adventure game fans, Concordia students

Setting “Nightmare” version of Concordia University

Plays like Silent Hill meets Monkey Island

Mechanics:

1. Physical Exploration
2. Puzzle Solving and Item Collection
3. Narrative Exploration, piecing together of
4. Create emotional reaction through fear

Reference Art:

1. Concordia University
2. Yume nikki
3. Danganronpa
4. Ib
5. White Day
6. Lone Survivor

Related Games

1. Silent Hill 2, Konami, Ps2/Xbox/PC, 2001

In Silent Hill 2, the player has an unclear relationship to the unreliable narration of the protagonist. The protagonist must visit familiar locations twisted into their horrifying counterparts: the familiar and safe becomes unfamiliar and threatening. Likewise, the player character of “The First Day” will progress through the very familiar halls of Concordia University to find them devoid of people. The trivial becomes grotesque and surreal: the halls are littered with statues of other students, frozen in terror; lockers can open to reveal entire hellscape behind their metal doors. A goal of our game is to fill the player with a sense of dread and unease, to pull from them any semblance of safety as they find themselves unable to predict what diabolical visions to expect at every turn.

2. The Secret of Monkey Island, LucasArts ,PC, 1990

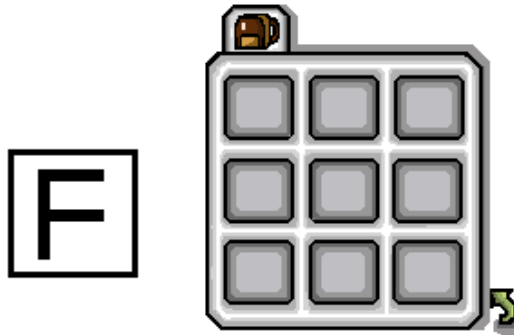
This game, like all the other LucasArts Scumm engine games of the nineties, as well as several other “point and click” adventure games, engage the player by locking their progression behind puzzles, often item based, requiring that a certain “key” item be used in the correct location. These puzzles reward exploration and lateral thinking, often having unusual and dubious solutions. Many such games, like LucasArts’ The Dig or Broderbund Software’s seminal Myst series, force the player to learn about a different world and its inhabitants. Our game also “teaches” the player about the nightmare logic of the world in order for them to employ that logic in solving riddles and puzzles.

3. Amnesia: The Dark Descent, Frictional Games, PC, 2010

In Amnesia, the protagonist is an unreliable narrator afflicted by the eponymous condition. As such, the player has very limited knowledge of the events of the game and the player character’s role in bringing them about. In addition to this, the game mechanically hints (with its sanity meter) that what is happening may be a figment of the character’s imagination. This allows the player to speculate on the story of the game as it is presented, but also to try to understand what is being omitted by the player character. The narrative focus in our game also centers the psyche of its protagonist, forcing the player to try to understand the narrative and guess if they are being misled by the protagonist, whether willingly or unwillingly. The character’s actions prior to the game will also be revealed as a “twist” to allow the player to gain a deeper understanding of the game’s events.

2. Controls

The Player is controlled with the WASD keys and objects are interacted with using the F key. Space can be used to select something or advance dialog, Q is the back key, and E is the inventory key. A contextual prompt appears above the environmental element with which the player can interact.



When the player interacts with such contextual environmental item, a text prompt appears at the bottom of the screen to explain the object the player is looking at. Any decisions, such as dialogue options, are chosen in this text box. If an item needs to be used in this interaction, the player's inventory will appear on screen for them to choose which item to use, or to use none. The player presses F to choose an item to use or Q to choose none. Some interactions will grant the player an inventory item, which will be added to their inventory.

The inventory can be opened with E. The player can navigate between items with WASD and press F or space to receive information about a specific item, or Q/E to close the inventory. E closes the inventory when it is open in order to maintain the consistency of the key press in the player's expectation.

The use of the keyboard has been chosen over the use of the mouse in order to maintain the aesthetic of RPG maker pixelated horror games. The keyboard is also more portable than a mouse interface. Even if the genre is called "point and click," original ms dos adventure games (ie the original monkey island game) used only the keyboard as an interface. A lot of point and click games also feature no direct locomotion, but fixed tableaus the player can navigate between (ie Myst). The keyboard allows more direct locomotion for the player character. It also stops the so-called "pixel hunt" puzzles where the player must find a very specific and obtuse screen area to click on. These puzzles often cause frustration in the player when they get stuck and seem unfair. The First Day favors logical puzzles where the pieces are easy to find but putting them together is the challenge.

3. Mechanic Analysis

3.1. Physical exploration

As outlined above, the player character can be moved using the keyboard WASD key. In each of the chapters of the game, several rooms are available to be explored from a central location, a hallway. Each of the rooms can be accessed from the hallway, and these rooms contain items to be collected and puzzles to be solved. In both the school and hospital chapters, a central puzzle must be solved to complete the chapter, the solution of which requires many items which must be found in the other rooms (“sub-areas”). The school hallway connects to 3 classrooms, the starting class, a music class, and a biology class. The hospital hallway connects to a morgue, a laboratory, and a maternity ward. The prologue chapter plays like a cutscene, ie no player decisions are required, and the final subconscious section features a large area where the player speaks to characters.

3.2. Puzzle Solving

In each of the 2 large sections, a large puzzle must be solved to finish the section. This puzzle requires several items to be collected and brought together in the correct sequence. Items are picked up to interact with other puzzle elements. For additional details on puzzles, see section 5: Puzzles.

3.3. Narrative

The player will slowly be given glimpses into the overall narrative of the game as they progress through it. At first only hints will be dropped, until later things will be revealed in a more straightforward manner. At the end of the game, the player will be given a choice of endings which will reflect their decision based on the provided narrative. For additional details, see section 4: Game Flow and Plot.

3.4. Horror elements

The game will intend to unsettle and upset the player with horror elements. Using the 8-bit style with which we have built the game, the horror elements are intended to be psychological and use dread and uncertainty as emotional motivators. Because the graphics are basic and the gap between player and character is large, the soundscape of the game will be a constant driver of fear. For additional details, see section 6: Horror Philosophy

4. Game Flow and Plot

The game will follow this outline, and the plot will be provided in the following ways

4.1. Prologue

In the prologue, the character will get their student ID and go to class. This is the only “peaceful” section of the game: the whites are bright, and everything will appear as normal. The player will have no decision but will be provided with a basic tutorial on how to use the interactable elements as well as a simple introduction to the character: she is on her way to her first class. Once in her class, the player character will fall asleep.

4.2. School

The player will wake up to an abandoned classroom, with blood and limited light. From here, their sight will be limited to the halo of their flashlight. The player’s motivation in this chapter will be to escape. They will need to solve a puzzle to leave the room. Once outside, they will find many statues of people which appear to be stuck in time. They will have access to 2 more classrooms: music and biology. In the biology classroom, they will find a friend as another survivor, as well as a stethoscope. The friend will be as clueless as the player about the situation. Here it will be hinted that the player character is familiar with biology as a topic and wonder why they were in a computer science class. The stethoscope will allow the player to hear the thoughts of the statues, alluding to the fact that they are people who have fallen ill to a mysterious disease. The player and their friend will explore the school and solve the central puzzle in the hallway, allowing them to enter a locker and mysteriously appear in a disused hospital.

4.3. Hospital

Once in the hospital, the player’s friend will fall ill and turn into a statue like the ones seen in the school. The player will explore the hospital to manufacture a cure for their friend. They will need to find ingredients and put them together in the lab in order to complete the chapter. When exploring the hospital, they will comment on the fact that they are familiar with this place, and that they eerily know what they are doing. They will be surprised to find that they know how to manufacture a cure for the disease. They will be able to explore a morgue and a maternity ward, as well as a research laboratory where they will put the cure together. Once the cure is finished, the player will drop it, and get a flashback to their lost memory, remembering that they likewise had had an accident in a lab before. Once they see this, the hospital will melt away and they will find themselves in a void, inside their subconscious.

4.4. Subconscious

Here, the plot will be delivered via dialogue and the puzzles will be limited. The game will be revealed to have been a dream from the very beginning, not simply from the point where the player fell asleep in the prologue. The player will realize that they were a medical researcher who was doing illegal gain of function research in order to better their dissertation (Gain of function research is using viruses to cure diseases). Their friend was also a medical student, and the first to die. They accidentally released the virus to the world and caused the death of most humans. Because the player was wearing protective equipment at the time, the player was immune. In this section, other characters will confront the player, accusing them of inventing puzzles to solve so they felt useful, inventing a scenario where a cure existed in order to free themselves of the responsibility. Likewise, the notes found in the game portrayed the people who wrote them as violent, petty, and selfish. This is also something the player included in their fantasy in order to minimize the tragedy he caused, making humans seems unworthy of saving. The player will be offered with a choice: Go back to the dream, blissfully forget their role, or wake up from the nightmare and allow hope to live on.

4.5. Ending

4.5.1. “Bad” Ending

If the player chooses to forget, they will wake up in the class from the beginning and go back to the happy simple world of the prologue. They will see their friend but fail to recognize them. They will happily walk through the sunny hallway, and the game will end on a still of the player character in their bed, dying, and the screen will fade to black and the words “Mankind has gone fully extinct. All hope is lost” will appear on the screen.

4.5.2. “Good” Ending

If the player chooses to remember, they will awaken to their room, our first glance at the real world, and they will put on a gasmask to go outside in a post apocalyptic empty world, where everyone is dead. The screen will fade to black and the words “Hope for mankind lives on... for now” will appear on the screen.

5. Puzzles and Riddles

5.1. Chapter End puzzles

For the school chapter, the player will find six statues in the main hallway. They will find masks to put on these statues, each mask will have a number on the front. When put in the right position, the masks will give the combination to the locked door which will allow the character to escape. Each mask will provide a hint as to which statue it should go on, ie one mask will have red marks on the inside and one statue will have red lipstick. For the hospital, the main puzzle will be to find the ingredients for the cure, antibiotics, a diseased liver, and sulphuric acid. They will then need to find the correct measurements to make the solution.

5.2. Pigeonhole Puzzle

For this kind of puzzle, the correct item must be placed in the correct position, based on contextual clues. The mask puzzle mentioned above is one such puzzle. Another puzzle involves dolls in the maternity ward which need to be put in the correct crib to solve the puzzle. Each doll has a message on it giving hints as to where it goes as well small details to differentiate them, ie one doll will say “That one eyed bitch next to me won’t stop crying.” The puzzle is solved when each item is in the correct position / each object in the correct permutation.

5.3. Knight/Knave puzzle

Also known as Liar and Truth Teller puzzles, these logic puzzles task the player with finding out which of the provided statements are true and which are false based on logical contradictions and inference. These puzzles will appear in each section to familiarize the player with them, opening desks and cabinets. They will make an unexpected return in the last section of the game, where each statement will come from the player, for example “I am a good person”, “I didn’t do anything wrong.” This “puzzle” will be solved by correctly identifying that the player is a liar. This will allow the gameplay and plot to merge in a way that subverts player’s expectations.

5.4. Puzzle Boxes

Another type of puzzle which will open boxes involves a physical “Rush Hour” style interface. These logic puzzles use special reasoning and motion to free a specific block from other moving blocks. These puzzles allow for trial and error. They reward experimentation and forward planning. By incorporating these puzzles, we can test the player on another element of logic.

5.5. Environmental Puzzles

By observing their surroundings and drawing parallels between locations and items, the player can solve this type of puzzle. To escape the first room of the game, the player must figure out in which order a character intends to kill students, their chairs being associated with digits on a nearby keypad. By drawing the parallel between the chair's positions and the keypad, the player will piece together the correct combination from the clues provided in the room.

5.6. Lock and Key Puzzles

This classic adventure game puzzle type involves using the correct item in the correct location. The stethoscope that can be used to obtain hints from the statues is an example in our game. Another is a scalpel which must be used on a body in the morgue to obtain an infected liver.

6. Horror Philosophy

Many concerns were raised in the criticism about our ability to scare the player. What follows is a general overview of the game's philosophy on "Horror".

6.1. Types of Horror

There are many ways to elicit fear, whether via fear or anticipation of the unknown. The feeling of "Terror" will be defined as a fear of an immediate danger which is immediately present. This feeling is shown when a character is being chased by a murderer in slasher films: the danger is immediate, the fight or flight response is triggered. This is not the kind of horror we are trying to elicit with our game. Rather, we are trying to elicit "Dread", which we will define as horror of the unknown, the feeling that things are wrong and that anything can happen. This kind of fear is calmer, involves uncertainty. Violence and gore are used to destabilize the player, forcing them into a more vulnerable state of mind. Exposing the player to unfamiliar and grotesque situations raises their discomfort level which brings them closer to a feeling of fear.

6.2. Use of Sound

An oppressive soundscape helps unsettle player. Sharp sounds and loud bangs, scary music, and the whispers of the statues will keep the player on edge. The game is intended to be played with headphones to enhance the feeling of oppression caused by the sound design. Unsettling noises, like the crunching of bones and the crying of children, signify danger to the human mind and can help exacerbate the feeling of lurking dread.

6.3. Isolation

By providing the player with a friend, the game delays the feeling of isolation and solitude. When we remove the safety net of the player in the hospital, we return fully to the feeling of being alone exploring an unknown place. When the friend returns in the subconscious chapter to accuse the player, the feeling of friendship is removed in order to make the player character feel truly alone.

6.4. Darkness

With the small halo of the flashlight, the player can only see things to a very limited distance, making the unknown an ever present and larger threat. The player may return to find things not as they remember. They will also have to be very close to anything they want to investigate, robbing them of the safety of distance.

6.5. Jump Scares

Jump scares can be used effectively if used sparingly. The problem with jump scares is that they are often cathartic, they release any tension. EG: in Five Nights at Freddy's, the player operates with the rising tension of fearing the jump scare but the appearance of the jump scare signifies a failure state, releasing any built-up tension. In the original resident evil, a famous jump scare sees many dogs jump through the windows and attack the player. In this scenario, the jump scare escalates tension but does not let it go. Rather, the tension remains as the player finds themselves faced with several dangerous enemies. Jump scares can be used to escalate tension, as a threat that they may happen, but they must not become too common so as to not desensitize the player to their effect and cannot lead to catharsis as this also robs them of their power. We intend to use a few early on, to keep the player aware of their possibility, but will refrain from overreliance on startling.

7. Meeting minutes

Meeting 1 - Sep 29rd 4:30 to 5:30

Discussed Topics:

- brainstorming idea for gaming proposal
- 2 main categories for further decision: action game or puzzle game
- Date for next meeting

To be done for next meeting:

- Do research on different game topics to see which project suits better for us
- Make decision

To discuss next meeting:

- Decision making
- Task division
- Supported software

Meeting 2 - Sep 30th 8:20 to 8:50

Discussed Topics:

- Choose the topic
- Mechanics we could use
- Procedure of our project

To be done for next meeting:

- game proposal
- story base

To discuss next meeting:

- game proposal
- game mechanic
- game theme and concept

Meeting 3 - Our 5th 4:30 to 5:30

Discussed Topics:

- Gaming proposal completion
- Gaming presentation completion
- Next Milestone tasks
- Possible Endings for our game: fake happy ending, true sad endings; The main character can choose between staying with friend in a forever dream or leave the friend and go back to cruel reality.
- Possible puzzles, such as box pushing, key finding.
- The possibility of gender choice.
- Date for next meeting

To be done for next meeting:

- Develop more details in story
- Develop more scenes and characters

To discuss next meeting:

- Story separation
- Task division