

The Employment Trail

Game Design Document

Synopsis:

The year is 2024. COVID's long tail has kneecapped productivity nationwide. AI tools, grindset influencers, and 3 a.m. LeetCode sessions have warped the STEM internship space into a Darwinian bloodsport.

Thousands of undergrads now walk into recruitment season unprepared, unemployed, and deeply in debt, each believing they're the protagonist.

How will you fare?

Background:

YOU, a so-called "*STEMLord*," have been put through the wringer in the years since the post-COVID layoffs and the flood of underqualified applicants gutted the job market. Long gone is the promise of an "*easy path to generational wealth*."

Instead of the typical experience afforded to real students, you have spent your senior year of High School haunted by a dismal GPA while trying and failing to project an oxymoronic image based on "alcoholic" "academia" to your increasingly concerned friends and family.

With your work ethic in retreat and the laziness of the COVID era still in vogue, it's looking like you won't be in college any longer than your dropout friends. To have any hope of survival, you must persevere through endless struggles and mental crises and a looming *crisis of confidence* as your peers get interviews and climb the LinkedIn social ladder.

You must also contend with an interpersonal scene that still seems trapped in prepubescence, potentially ceding the blank canvas that is your romantic presence to your naïve best friend and your sleazy roommate.

Disclaimer:

This game is a satirical depiction of post-COVID college life, career anxiety, and the evolving nature/grind of STEM careers in this day and age. I decide to explore this from the lens of a narcissistic and self-absorbed student saddled with a deep sense of dread.

While the tone is biting, nihilistic, and cynical, this is only for artistic flavor. The writing and events depicted within are entirely fictional and **do not reflect** my personal views of any company, industry, or educational system.

Thanks for playing!

Questions:

Question 1: Throwback. A sunny day in August 2019. Your first day of High School. Middle School was a tumultuous place, but transferring to a new district gives you the capital necessary to start on a clean slate. Time and time again, you've heard from your parents, older relatives, and teachers that this is the time to find out who you really are.

Who are you?

- I've been an academic weapon all my life. It's time to keep going.
 - Response: It's four years of studying and all-nighters. Your classmates go out and enjoy their last years at home. You don't care. You have dreams to build.
 - Effects: Academic Skill +3, Burnout +1
- I've been an academic weapon all my life. Let's try to make more connections.

- Response: It's all so tedious. Performative. Fake smiles, handshakes, student clubs. You win HS DECA awards for being a visionary. Does that even matter?
- Effects: Social Skill +3, Burnout +1
- I've been an academic weapon all my life. Let's try to have fun.
 - Response: It's a sharp pivot. You alternate between long stretches of laziness, chaotic underage parties, and frenetic bouts of catching up to schoolwork. The American Dream.
 - Effects: Burnout -2

Question 2: Four years, a pandemic, 10 AP Courses, and a hell of a lot of stress later, it's your last year as a student. With the phantom of your own persona haunting you, you know taking a gap year or going to a Community College isn't an option. Thus, to broaden your horizons, you accept your parent's offer to go on a set of campus visits.

The question is, where?

- Let's hit the Midwest. There's lots of strong, institutional knowledge at the original Land-Grant campuses, and we'd be set up well for working in an industrial firm there. (Purdue)
 - Response: Driving by the barren fields that surround the campuses of UW-Madison, UIUC, and Michigan, you can't help but wonder if you made a bad choice. Nevertheless, you're accepted into Purdue and decide to commit.
 - Effects: Manufacturing Spec + 2, Defense Spec + 1
- The nexus of American intellectual might is the Northeast. Let's go through the Ivies and hit up the other schools in the area. Who knows? I might just run into a Quant to connect with on LinkedIn. (Cornell)
 - Response: Ivy day rolls around, and you're rejected from seven of them. You can picture them laughing at your pitiful essays. The only one with good news? Cornell. Sure, it's not MIT, but at least you're not at Rutgers or UMass Amherst.
 - Effects: Finance Spec + 2, Tech Spec + 1
- There's no other option than the West. The Pacific coast is the new focus point of American innovation, with VC's and YC Startups abound. It's an absolute no-brainer to swing by Silicon Valley. (Washington)

- Response: The sun-kissed valleys of the Bay and the picturesque beaches of SoCal are to die for. You're rejected from all 8 of the UCs and CSUs you applied to. Stanford probably didn't even open your folder. Your saving grace is the rainy University of Washington in Seattle.
- Effects: Tech Spec + 2, Finance Spec + 1
- An underrated region for American universities is in the South. North Carolina, Texas, Florida, and Georgia have top-ranked schools with deep historical ties to the Defense and Aerospace industries. (Georgia Tech)
 - Response: You quickly realize that for every Vanderbilt and Duke, there's a dozen more LSUs academically. You're puzzled by the presence of Confederate statues in the same town that hosts NASA Marshall. In the end, you end up committing to Georgia Tech.
 - Effects: Defense Spec + 2, Manufacturing Spec + 1

Question 3: Owing to your popularity, smarts, and kind nature, you've been elected to give the graduation speech for your high school class. The principal, student president, and superintendent sit behind you as you deliver your address.

- "I am profoundly honored to have the privilege to talk to you one last time..."
 - Response: When the applause finally dies down, you glance at the people clapping and wonder how many of them will peak here. Either way, there's no time to care about dead weight. It's time for a new chapter in your life.
 - Effects: None

Question 4: It's time for your first week at school! As you proudly stride onto your home for the next for the next four years, you think about what to do first.

What do you decide to do?

- I can't afford to fall behind early. I'll walk my classes and start getting ready for the 6-hour daily homework grinds. Maybe I'll meet someone on the way...
 - Response: No, you won't. While everyone's out there enjoying new friends and exploring campus, you look like a maniac measuring the time it takes to walk between academic halls. But hey, maybe the 4.0 GPA will make it worthwhile.
 - Effects: Burnout +2, Academic Skill +2, Social Skill -1

- College is another place to make a fresh start. I wanna be proactive in making friends, let's go out this week!
 - Response: Sips turn into shots, which turn into swigs. Your stomach hates you and your brain is in revolt. You can't help but wonder how much you've changed from High School, and how people would see you now.
 - Effects: Burnout +1, Social Skill +2, Academic Skill -1
- This whole move-in process is exhausting. I wanna take a nice break and get used to living here.
 - Response: What was supposed to be a productive session of organization and unpacking quickly devolved into an afternoon of bedrotting. Every time you scroll to another TikTok, you can picture more synapses withering and dying.
 - Effects: Social Skill -1, Academic Skill -1, Burnout -2

Question 5: The first job fair is coming around. Considering that an internship is your first shot to get ahead of the heap of idiots that saturate Computer Science, it's time to lock in.

What do you do?

- I'm not going. Honestly, most companies won't even look at freshmen, so there's no point wasting my time.
 - Response: Your optimistic best friend decides to go alone. She comes back with an interview scheduled at UPS for a Data Analytics role. She says it's "only a stepping stone" and "not to worry." You look at your empty inbox in silence.
 - Academic Skill +1, Social Skill -1
- I think I should be rational. My resume isn't worth shit, so I'd better go target the smaller companies that come to these fairs.
 - Response: Two days later, you receive more promotional material from a local controls company. You think it's an avenue to explore, but you quickly realize it's just mailing list fluff. The same day, your charismatic roommate connects with an AMD campus recruiter on LinkedIn.
 - Burnout +1, Social Skill +1
- I've been someone who's thought big and dreamt bigger all my life. I'll target Defense and Manufacturing for this fair.

- Response: You got through about 20% of your elevator pitch before their eyes glazed over. You could feel the pity. Quite frankly, you should've known better, but they silently respect the balls you had to go up to Lockheed Martin and Stratasys as a freshman.
- Burnout +2, Defense/Manufacturing Spec +1, Social Skill +1
- I've been someone who's thought big and dreamt bigger all my life. I'll target FAANG and FinTech for this fair.
 - Response: You got through about 20% of your elevator pitch before their eyes glazed over. You could feel the pity. Quite frankly, you should've known better, but they silently respect the balls you had to go up to Apple and Jane Street as a freshman.
 - Burnout +2, Tech/Finance Spec +1, Social Skill +1

Question 6: Fuck, that was bad. An absolute embarrassment. But you're only down for now, and not yet out.

Where to go now?

- Give up. 2025's recruiting season is not for me.
 - Response: At this point, you're wondering whether or not to transfer to the School of Business. What a sick fucking joke. (GAME END)
- It's clear that I need to start standing out more. I'll join an engineering club.
 - Response: After the fair, there's lots of new faces looking to "make an impact." But the rest of the club rightfully sees you all as carpetbaggers desperate for a ladder out of the pit. Either way, you have work to do.
 - Effects: Defense/Manufacturing Spec +1, Academic Skill +1, Social Skill +1
- It's clear that I need to start networking more. I'll try to rush a professional frat.
 - Response: A case and behavioral interview later, you're officially in the frat. It's a nice couple of days before you realize that it (like any business-adjacent club) is a nothingburger. At least you'll learn Excel.
 - Effects: Finance/Tech Spec +1, Social Skill +2
- It's clear that I need to just get better. No need to do anything else than increase my own value by studying and getting on LeetCode.
 - Response: It's 3 AM. You've been staring at a LeetCode Hard for the past 90 minutes. Your roommate kicked you out of the room to bring a girl over. You fight back the soreness in your eyes.

- Effects: Burnout +1, Academic Skill +2

Question 7: The morning after, you're hit with a sober reality. You're balls deep in a group project, and nobody's helping you out.

How do you get back on track?

- I need to whip them back into line.
 - You fire off a strongly worded group chat message at 10:00 AM. They all read it. No one replies. You notice their commits being pushed to the repo later that evening.
 - Effects: Burnout +1, Academic Skill +1, Social Skill -1
- I need to call for a team meeting.
 - Two people cancel, one shows up late. After a lengthy discussion about accountability and norms, no concrete agreement is made. Still, it's progress, and they appreciate you trying.
 - Effects: Academic Skill -1, Social Skill +1, Burnout +1
- I need to put these idiots on my back.
 - Your TA checks the group repo and notes that 80% of the codebase has been written by you alone. You notice the same thing while buying another case of Red Bull.
 - Effects: Burnout +2, Academic Skill +3
- Screw this. Let it ride, I'll tank it.
 - Your group gets a 63. The average was 85. When discussing your submission, the TA chides you all for not working together. No one says a word. You hate them more for it.
 - Effects: Burnout -2, Academic Skill -2

Question 8: Your group's final presentation is in 45 minutes. They've got the deck, the script, the outfits. They don't need you to speak. But they did say you'd be useful for any technical questions. They did say, "just be there." Your alarm keeps ringing. Your body's not listening.

Do you go?

- Yeah. I said I'd be there.
 - IF Burnout <4:

- You show up in the nick of time. Plug in the laptop. When the questions come, you're sharp. Relaxed. In control. Well-rested. Your team daps you up after. Pure and deserved bliss.
- +2 Academic Skill, -1 Burnout
- ELSE:
 - Everyone can tell you're not okay. Your clothes are wrinkled. Your eyes are dead. But when the TA throws a curveball about your code, you knock it out of the park. Your headache crescendos as your classmates applaud the presentation.
 - +1 Academic Skill
- I can't. They'll survive without me.
 - You send a text: "*Sorry, something came up.*" They reply, "Ok." Nothing more. You sleep through the morning. It helps for a bit. But when you wake up, the shame's already waiting for you.
 - Effects: Burnout -2, Academic Skill -1, Social Skill -1

Question 9: An email arrives in your inbox. It's the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Students.

"Dear Student, We are reaching out to inform you that your peers have requested a wellness check..."

You file it away. You'll deal with the bleeding hearts later, but what do you do now?

- President Roosevelt once declared that ultimate triumph is won from bitter toil. I think it's time to get back into the gym.
 - Response: You were once a varsity athlete in high school. After months of lethargy, your muscles are sore and your head is throbbing after a punishing HIIT set. But you've never felt more alive.
 - Effects: Burnout -2, Fondness +1
- I think it's time to be frank about my shitty mental health. What's the number for the campus CAPS services?
 - Response: You stare the therapist in the eyes for 90 minutes. Does she even understand what pressure you're under? Does she really believe in you? Isn't she just paid to keep you happy? Either way, it works.
 - Effects: Burnout -1, Social Skills +1, Fondness +1

- This isn't worth my time. Just pay them lip service and move on.
 - Response: Your next battery of midterms yields dramatically better results. At the same time, your daily dosage of caffeine creeps upward while your average length of sleep steadily declines.
 - Effects: Burnout +1, Academic Skills +3

Question 10A (If Academic Skill ≥ 3): Post-midterm celebration. By the grace of God, you scored an 85% on your first CS midterm. Your brain won't let you study at all.

- Let's go out to party again. Fuck it, it's still early in the year.
 - Response: You're now considered a regular among the party scene. The night swiftly turns into a blur, but all you know is that it was a needed reprieve. Your roommate spots you drinking with the same girl all night long.
 - Effects: Burnout -2, Fondness +2
- How about I have a nice kickback with my friends in their apartment?
 - Response: You bond with classmates over copious amounts of beer while playing MarioKart. A cute girl is there and you exchange Instagrams. Your best friend sees it and silently immortalizes the blackmail in her mind.
 - Effects: Burnout -2, Social Skill +1, Fondness +1
- It's Friday. No better thing to do than watch a college football game!
 - Response: Your home team gets routed off the field 52-21. The commentators call it an absolute disgrace, but you pay no mind. It's a blast getting to make new friends there.
 - Effects: Burnout -2, Social Skill +2

Question 10B (If Academic Skill < 3): You get your first CS midterm back. The average is 79, and you got a 52. You failed. After going home from a raucous night of drinking, you call your parents.

- "Hey mom, I haven't called you in a while..."
 - Response: She asks if you're okay. You fight back the welling tears. You're stronger than this. You're meant to be here. It's just another setback, you say.
 - Effects: Burnout -2

Question 11: Thanksgiving Break. A patriotic, red-blooded monument to American consumerism and revisionist history. Whatever the case, it's the first week in a LONG while where you're free from the grip of your everyday obligations.

What do you do?

- Let's just go home and rest.
 - Response: Despite your own protests, your friends force you to go home for the break. You sit at the end of the dinner table, listening to your Woke mom and MAGA uncle scream their heads off. There's no place like home.
 - Effects: Burnout -1

Question 12: It's November. With the failure from the September career fair lingering in your mind, it's time to prepare for your school's next corporate welfare convention.

How do you do it?

- I'm thinking that the results will speak for themselves. The past couple of months have seen a new, renewed work ethic, and I think I'll be able to project that mastery if we execute the basics.
 - Response: This conservative approach saves you lots of energy and mental fortitude leading up to the fair. If you had wanted to continue coasting on upward momentum, it worked. Otherwise, expect a tougher climb socially and academically.
 - Effects: Burnout -2, Fondness +1
- What really screwed me last time was our lack of social skills. I'll hit up the career center and practice mock interviews, to hopefully get better at selling myself to people.
 - Response: Going to the career center over time helps you nail down the mock interview questions they give you. By the end of your grueling "interview bootcamp" sessions, you're confident in your ability to sell yourself, while you feel more tiresome than ever.
 - Effects: Social Skills +2, Burnout +1
- I can't sell a person that's not worth anything, can I? There's lots of online coding assessments, even past LeetCode, to try and cut my teeth on.
 - Response: You're right. Learning how to approach technical and casing questions is an invaluable skill. From the sheer amount of time and effort you put into this, you feel very well prepared on this end, while fatigue creeps in.
 - Effects: Academic Skills +2, Burnout +1

Question 13: It's dinner. Over slices of pizza, your group of friends talk about their experiences this semester. Hiking. Road trips. Movie nights. When they ask you about what you've done, you stammer out a half-response about going to house parties. It's pathetic.

In a drunken stupor, you ask your friends for advice, and respond best...

- ...to your best friend. She thinks you've just got to continue the trajectory you're on. Self-care, self-worth, and steady progress. Grow your own garden to attract the butterflies.
 - Effects: Social Skills +1, Fondness +2
 - Response: It's not flashy. It's not going to get you anywhere quick. Your Instagram feed turns into a curated, aesthetic feed. Nobody says it outright, but you gain quiet admiration from others on campus about your turnaround.
- ...to your roommate. He takes one look at you and realizes that you're a nice enough person— just awful at projecting yourself. He suggests you go out and try to make yourself known to more people.
 - Effects IF: Social Skills ≥ 5
 - Response: The transformation is instant. Gone is the uncoordinated Instagram feed, replaced by a unified, coordinated, and bold set of posts. Heads are turned and people start looking at you in a new light.
 - Effects: Fondness +3
 - Effects ELSEIF:
 - Response: It's a disaster. Your thirst traps are met with silence and empty DM's. You can feel the eyes digging into your soul, mentally dressing down your appearance, your mannerisms, every ounce of your personality. You set your Instagram profile to private.
 - Effects: Fondness -1

Question 14: Gameday. It's time for the second job fair. A sea of tents dot the grassy mall in the center of your campus' quad. After getting the nerves out from talking to smaller companies, it's time to make a big move.

Who do you talk to?

- CapitalOne. A “tech-forward” financial firm that definitely wants me to know they’re more than just credit cards. It’s the only shot I’ve really got at proving my tenuous interest in Finance is more than just a Reddit phase.
 - IF Finance Spec ≥ 2 :
 - Response: You launch into a pitch about economic resilience, embedded payments, and your fascination with policy-driven FinTech innovation. The recruiter blinks once, nods twice, and pulls you aside for a talk. You don’t even remember what you said.
 - Effect: CapitalOne is your Final
 - ELSE:
 - Response: You say “machine learning” and “financial accessibility” like you just read it off a slide. She asks you a question about the Fed’s role in stimulus. You blink. “Apply online,” she says, turning to complement your best friend’s blazer. You stare at your resume, unsure what it even says. Deloitte it is.
 - Effect: Deloitte is your final (NO Boost)
- **L3Harris.** They’re not flashy, but they know their way around embedded systems. I figure if I can fake enough passion for “defending America,” I might just sneak into a defense role no one else applied for. (Check if Defense ≥ 2)
 - IF Defense Spec ≥ 2 :
 - Response: You shamle up to their booth and ramble on and on about their work on the F-35’s avionics suite. They’re just university recruiters. Neither you nor they actually understand the conversation that takes place, but it’s enough to get you to finals.
 - Effect: L3H is your Final
 - ELSE:
 - Response: You say “defense” with the enthusiasm of someone who just Googled what L3Harris does. You mumble something about “military-adjacent tech.” She replies, “we’ll be in touch.” The Deloitte recruiter catches your eye from across the room. You know what’s coming.
 - Effect: Deloitte is your final (NO Boost)
- **IBM.** The ghost of tech’s past, now rebranded as the “future of hybrid cloud.” I don’t even know what that means—and I don’t think they do either. But they still show up with a table, and I still need a win. (Check if Tech ≥ 2)

- IF Tech Spec ≥ 2 :
 - Response: You drop a line about AI ethics and quantum computing, and their ears perk up. A recruiter asks about your thoughts on hybrid cloud strategies, and you rattle off something about Red Hat you vaguely remember from Hacker News. They nod, impressed.
 - Effect: IBM is your Final
- ELSE:
 - Response: You say “cloud computing” like it’s a spell. The recruiter’s smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. She hands you a flyer and says you’ll “find plenty of great resources online.” You nod, defeated, as the Deloitte recruiter waves you over with a lanyard.
 - Effect: Deloitte is your final (NO Boost)
- **GM.** They’ve been building real things longer than most tech firms have existed. Between EVs, robotics, and controls work, it actually feels like something meaningful. I could see myself here. (Check if Manufacturing ≥ 2)
 - IF Manufacturing Spec ≥ 2
 - Response: You talk about embedded systems and supply chain resilience. The recruiter looks like they’ve finally found someone who doesn’t flinch at the word ‘MES.’ You’re ushered into a follow-up round almost immediately.
 - Effect: GM is your Final
 - ELSE:
 - Response: You try to spin your summer of Python tutorials into “strong embedded systems experience.” She thanks you for stopping by and gestures toward the QR code taped to the table. You notice the Deloitte recruiter waving at you.
 - Effect: Deloitte is your final (NO Boost)
- **Deloitte** is a safe pick for us Computer Science majors. They’re practically always in need for eggheads like me to sell overpriced SaaS packages to middle managers who know no better. (+1 Social, Academic Skill boost)
 - Response: You gambled little and gained even less. While your friends are locking in offers at Northrop Grumman and Meta, you’re able to beat a bunch of Econ and Finance majors for a low-tier Consulting final round.
 - Effect: Deloitte is your Final

- Special Option for Cornell/Washington/Purdue/Georgia Tech: Jane Street/Apple/Stratasys/Lockheed Martin (In addition to Checkif ≥ 4 , Allow “Unicorn” Flag for Q16):
- This school gives me many more... “boutique” options. I wanna try finding an experience I’d be hard-pressed to gain anywhere else. Sure, they don’t bother with amateurs. But what’s stopping me?
 - IF School = Cornell AND Finance ≥ 4 :
 - Response: You speak in fluent acronyms—MMFs, HFT, QE. You talk about rates with the detached violence of someone who actually reads central bank PDFs.
The Jane Street recruiter doesn’t smile. She just scribbles your name down and tells you to be ready by Tuesday.
You feel like you passed a test no one told you existed.
 - IF School = Purdue AND Manufacturing ≥ 4 :
 - Response: You mention topology optimization and polymer blends in the same sentence. The Stratasys recruiter doesn’t blink. She asks if you’ve ever worked with a Markforged.
You say yes, even though you haven’t. Doesn’t matter—you’re invited to the next round.
You pretend not to notice your hands shaking with excitement.
 - IF School = Washington AND Tech ≥ 4 :
 - Response: You wax poetic about user privacy, design systems, and your hatred of Material UI. The recruiter listens quietly, then asks if you’d be willing to relocate to Cupertino.
You nod so hard your iPhone drops. The offer to interview comes before you’ve even opened LinkedIn.
You walk away in a daze, convinced you just won the lottery.
 - IF School = Georgia Tech AND Defense ≥ 4 :
 - Response: You speak with reverence about aerospace telemetry and fifth-gen RAM coatings. The recruiter hits you with acronyms that sound like classified documents. You respond in kind.
There’s a brief pause. Then she nods. “You’ll do.”
You don’t remember the rest of the fair—you were too busy mentally rehearsing your Top Secret clearance interview.
 - ELSE:

- The Amazon recruiter gives you a thin smile. Hands you a QR code. “Apply online,” she says. She turns around and greets your roommate behind you with their name.
You stand there, blinking. At least Deloitte still wants you.
- Effect: Deloitte is your final. (NO Boost)

Question 15: You’ve hit the final stretch. A sprawling CS project, a dead-week final, and a half-baked case comp are all due within 48 hours. This is the kind of week that breaks people. You can feel it in your bones. You’re almost out of fuel. But you need to win.

What’s the move? (Academic Skills)

- Pull the all-nighters. Sleep be damned, we need this. Just one last push.
 - IF Burnout < 4:
 - You hole up in the library, fueled by iced coffee and trauma. The hours blur. By sunrise, your code compiles, your deck looks decent, and your notes are color-coded. Caffeine, a color-coded Notion, and adrenaline pushes you past the finish line this one last time.
 - (Boost Academic Skills by 4, Social Skills by 1)
 - ELSE:
 - You try. God, you try. But sometime around 3 AM, your body says no. You fall asleep in the library, miss the group chat call, and turn in a half-working repo. Your head is throbbing and you want to gouge your eyes out. But you don’t even feel guilty. You feel *numb*.
 - (-3 Academic Skill, -3 Social Skill)
- Bring friends. Let’s suffer together.
 - You text the group chat. Soon, laptops are open, snacks are everywhere, and Spotify is arguing with your attention span. The work gets done to a point. More importantly, no one feels alone.
 - (Boost Academic Skills by 1, Social Skills by 3)

Question 16: It’s been a chaotic semester, but somehow, you got a “Hey, want to hang out?” text. You know what this is. You know who *she* is. You’ve known for a while. You stare at the message for a long time.

Two hours later, you’re standing outside a Parisian-style bistro not too far from campus. You see her inside.

- I’ll go in.

- Effects IF Fondness ≥ 4 :
 - It starts quiet—fries split, hands almost brushing, soft laughter between long silences. But the way she looks at you tonight? It's different. Real. You talk about dreams, failures, the future. By the time you make it back to her place, there's no need for small talk. You stay the night.
 - Social Skill +3, SET Fondness = 10
- ELSEIF:
 - The night starts fine. But the silences stretch. You fumble for words that don't come. It ends with an awkward hug and an unspoken understanding. You check your phone later. No new messages. It was a valuable experience, you say, consoling yourself late that night.
 - Social Skill +1, SET Fondness = 0
- I'll just pass on this one.
 - As you walk away, you tell yourself it's not the right time. That you need to focus. That it wouldn't have worked anyway. The text thread goes cold. You lose more than you expected.
 - Social Skill -1, SET Fondness = 0

Question 17: The sun is long gone. The day's over. You sit at your desk, staring at a blank Google Doc, blinking cursor pulsing like a metronome. Tomorrow is your final round. Just one more day. One more chance. One more version of yourself to present.

So... what do you do tonight? (options appear based on your burnout/fondness)

- (IF Fondness = 10): Go see her. You said you'd come over.
 - The lights are low. Her Spotify playlist is on shuffle. The two of you talk softly—about nothing, about everything. She holds your hand and reminds you you're more than a résumé. For the first time in weeks, you feel like a human being.
 - Effects: Social Skill +1
- (IF Burnout < 4): Hit up your TA's office hours. One extra review can't hurt.
 - It's just you and one other student. Your TA makes dumb jokes about recursion and explains fluid dynamics like a bedtime story. For once, you're smiling at a whiteboard instead of crying at one. They say, "You're gonna kill it." You believe them.
 - Effects: Academic Skill +1

- IF NEITHER is available: Just sit here. Think. Worry. Hope.
 - You open old Notion pages. Re-read half-written cover letters. Scroll through texts you never sent. You picture the recruiter's face tomorrow, unreadable and cold. You close your eyes. Try to sleep. You dream about fire alarms, whiteboards, and your best friend saying "you got this."

Question 18: This is it. The final round.

After all the LeetCode grinds, mock interviews, group presentations, and résumé rewrites, you're finally here. One last shot to make it count.

What do you lead off with?

- I wanna focus on my behavioral skills...
 - You rehearse your story: adversity, resilience, teamwork. You force a smile as you walk in and pray they don't ask about that semester you bombed. Somehow, it feels more real this time. Like you're not just reading a script anymore...
 - (Social Skill +1)
- Let's establish a strong technical background...
 - You whiteboard until your hand cramps, polish your GitHub one last time, and reread every system design note you've ever taken. You enter the call tired, but focused. When they say "walk us through your approach," you actually feel confident...
 - (Academic Skill +1)

THEN CHECK ENDING CRITERIA

Question 19: The interview is over. You step out of the building. The campus is quiet in that strange, in-between way. Your earbuds are dead. There's nothing left to distract you. You start walking. The sky is pale. The wind is soft. You think about everything that got you here. And then, like an old photo pulled from the back of a drawer, something comes back to you.

What is it?

- Where I started.
 - It feels like a lifetime ago. A hallway. A club meeting. Quiet promises to yourself you didn't know you'd have to break. You wonder what that version of you would think now.

- Everything I gave up.
 - Late nights. Missed calls. Friendships that slowly faded into the background noise of the grind. You can't decide if it was worth it. Maybe that's the point.
- The little wins.
 - The project that finally ran. The smile you got across the room. The one friend who said, "Hey, I believe in you." You hold onto those tighter than anything else.
- The moments no one saw.
 - Quiet breakdowns. Inbox rejections. Doomscrolling until sunrise. You survived every one of them. That counts, doesn't it?

Question 20: The email hits your inbox at 8:46 AM. Subject line: *"Offer Decision – Thank you for interviewing with us."* You hover over it. Your hands are shaking.

- You click.
 - "We're thrilled to offer you..." (GAME OVER, END BASED ON CONDITIONS)
 - "Thank you for your interest, but..." (MOVE TO 21)

Question 21: You stare at the screen. Not angry. Not even surprised. Just tired. You scroll back through your sent folder. Dozens of applications. Dozens of versions of yourself.

None of them was enough. Now what? (depending on skills, certain options will open. So we'll have 18A/B/C/D based on whether they pass/fail SS/AS checks.)

- ...Maybe I can still get something—anything. I'll ask around, find a local internship.
 - You message a friend of a friend. Their local tech office "might have something." It's unpaid at first. You say yes before they finish explaining. It's not even in your field. You pretend not to care. It's better than nothing. Right?
- ...Maybe I can do research. Something to keep my resume from dying.
 - You send a desperate email to your old TA. She forwards it to a professor who doesn't remember your name. He offers you a spot "to build

experience.” There’s no funding. You accept instantly. You delete the email thread right after.

- ...I think I just need to stop. For a while.
 - You close the laptop. You sit there, staring at nothing. You tell yourself the market was tough. That you just started too late. That it’s not your fault.
You don’t believe it.

Thresholds:

- Social Skill (MAX/PASS/MARGINAL): $\geq 10/\geq 7/\geq 4$
- Academic Skill (MAX/PASS/MARGINAL): $\geq 10/\geq 7/\geq 4$
- Fondness (PASS): ≥ 4
- Burnout (PASS): < 4

Endings:

- Apple Internship (MAX out Academic Skill, MAX Social Skill, SPEC in TECH, Washington, Unicorn)
 - GF: 87
 - S1: You board your flight to Cupertino with one carry-on and a DM from your now-girlfriend reading, *“Call me when you land.”* The office is sleek. The badge feels heavy. The workload is absurd. But you made it. You split fries over FaceTime that night. You’re both smiling.
 - S2:
 - **YOU:** got the badge today.
 - **Best Friend:** oh my god. u better not become a silicon valley ghoul
 - **Roommate:** pics or she’s not real
 - **Best Friend:** no fr i wanna see her
 - **YOU:** you guys are insufferable
 - **Roommate:** she is too if she’s dating you lmao
 - **Best Friend:** 😭😭
 - **YOU:** [sent a photo]

- NO GF
 - S1: The badge says Apple. The desk is sleek. The code compiles.
You eat dinner alone most nights, but you're not lonely. You've got your footing now. You're making things that matter. The validation didn't come from someone else this time.
It came from you.
 - S2:
 - **You:** first intern standup went fine. didn't stutter once
 - **Best Friend:** he's GROWING
 - **Roommate:** did they assign you a work wife yet
 - **You:** just me and this SwiftUI bug i've been dating for 3 days
 - **Best Friend:** proud of you fr
 - **You:** thanks. i kinda am too.
- Jane Street Internship (MAX out Social Skill, MAX Academic Skill, SPEC in FINANCE, Cornell, Unicorn)
 - GF: 88
 - S1: The office feels like a spaceship. You spend your days speaking in acronyms and numbers, making decisions faster than thought. But at night, the pace slows. She calls. You talk. You laugh. Somehow, you've found someone who grounds you—even while you're helping move markets.
 - S2:
 - **You:** my desk has six monitors. they gave me a keyboard with no letters
 - **Best Friend:** she's gonna dump you if you turn into a quant bro
 - **Roommate:** bro *is* a quant bro
 - **You:** not true. i still have a soul
 - **Best Friend:** only bc she's holding it for you
 - **Roommate:** enjoy your blood money
 - **You:** lmk when you start getting paid in anything
 - NO GF:
 - S1: You live by the terminal now.
7:00 AM. Futures.

12:00 PM. Lunch + ML models.

6:00 PM. Yoga. Technically.

There's no one waiting for you at home. But that's okay. You're not just surviving anymore. You're playing the game—and winning.

- S2:
 - **You:** cleared \$10k in housing stipends and haven't spent a dollar
 - **Roommate:** psychopath
 - **Best Friend:** don't forget to be a person sometimes
 - **You:** already did
 - **Roommate:** bro is finance pilled
 - **Best Friend:** fr tho congrats. you made it
 - **You:** thanks. i'll come back when the algorithm lets me
- Stratasys Internship (MAX out Academic Skill, MAX Social Skill, SPEC in MANUFACTURING, Purdue, Unicorn)
 - GF: 89
 - S1: You spend your days prototyping parts no one's ever built before. Industrial resin. Topology optimization. 200-micron tolerances. She sends playlists while you work. You send her videos of prints failing in spectacular fashion. It's not glamorous. But it feels real. Like something worth building.
 - S2:
 - **You:** got my first part approved for flight cert
 - **Best Friend:** THIS IS HUGE
 - **Roommate:** bro's dating and innovating
 - **You:** she brought me coffee this morning. almost cried
 - **Best Friend:** wholesome king
 - **Roommate:** cringe
 - **You:** cope
 - NO GF:
 - S1: The lab smells like melted filament and caffeine. You run tests. You fail prints. You iterate. The work is slow—but honest. You're making something permanent. You don't have someone to celebrate with. But you're proud anyway.
 - S2:

- **You:** i just watched a 28-hour print collapse in the last 10 minutes
- **Best Friend:** oh my god
- **Roommate:** industrial L
- **You:** don't care. final design passed anyway
- **Best Friend:** you're lowkey thriving out there
- **You:** weirdly yeah
- **Roommate:** blue collar rizz
- Lockheed Martin Internship (MAX out Academic Skill, MAX Social Skill, SPEC in DEFENSE, Georgia Tech, Unicorn)
 - GF: 90
 - S1: You work in a windowless building with badge scanners at every turn. The things you're helping build will never have your name on them. And still—she calls. She asks how your day was. You lie, a little. But she gets it. Somehow, you don't feel alone in this.
 - S2:
 - **You:** can't say what i'm doing. but it's... heavy
 - **Best Friend:** emotionally? morally??
 - **Roommate:** physically??
 - **You:** yes
 - **Roommate:** she still dating you or did you get replaced by a drone
 - **You:** she made me lasagna last night
 - **Best Friend:** yeah he's locked in fr
 - **Roommate:** fine. i support militarized love
 - NO GF:
 - S1: Your badge gets you into rooms that don't officially exist. You sign NDAs you don't fully understand. The work is precise. The impact is... hard to think about. You don't talk about your job at parties. But you sleep better than you used to.
 - S2:
 - **You:** can't tell if i'm building a missile system or just debugging hell
 - **Roommate:** if you disappear we'll assume it was a drone strike

- **Best Friend:** are you okay tho? fr
- **You:** idk. but i'm good at it
- **Best Friend:** that counts
- **Roommate:** better than being broke tbh
- **You:** that too
- L3Harris Internship (MAX Academic Skill, MARGINAL Social Skill, SPEC in DEFENSE)
 - GF: 91
 - S1: Your badge doesn't open the cool doors, but it opens enough. You write code for embedded systems no one talks about in the news. She meets you for lunch sometimes. She says it's cute how serious you get about antenna calibration. It's not flashy. It's not glamorous. But for once, that doesn't matter.
 - S2:
 - **You:** spent 6 hours debugging an ISR today. feel like i aged 10 years
 - **Best Friend:** you'll be fine. my model just told the execs to kill a whole product line
 - **Roommate:** lmao try watching a chip fail post-silicon
 - **You:** i'd rather not
 - **Best Friend:** how's she doing btw?
 - **You:** she packed me lunch. i almost proposed
 - **Roommate:** simp
 - NO GF:
 - S1: You clock in. You write drivers. You get home before 6. No all-nighters. No LinkedIn hustle. Just clean code and quiet wins. It's not where you thought you'd be. But it's solid. And it's yours.
 - S2:
 - **You:** l3's been chill. not glamorous, but solid
 - **Roommate:** "not glamorous but solid" describes 90% of working in hardware
 - **Best Friend:** honestly that's rare. hold onto it
 - **You:** i even get to touch the RF stuff sometimes
 - **Roommate:** okay now i'm jealous
 - **Best Friend:** we're getting old aren't we

- **You:** terrifying
- Capital One Internship (MAX Academic Skill, MARGINAL Social Skill, SPEC in FINANCE)
 - GF: 92
 - S1: You're mostly optimizing credit flows for people who will never know your name. The tech's modern, the meetings are constant, and your deliverables have deliverables. But she listens when you rant about APIs and vaguely predatory interest models. She gets it. Or at least, she's trying. And honestly? That means more than any promotion ever could.
 - S2:
 - **You:** i built a dashboard today that got 12 stakeholders to shut up
 - **Best Friend:** oh so you've joined the middle-manager appeasement arc
 - **Roommate:** welcome to the spreadsheet-industrial complex
 - **You:** she bought me new blue light glasses. said it was "combat gear"
 - **Best Friend:** i love her
 - **Roommate:** bro's cuffed *and* optimized
 - NO GF:
 - S1: You spend half your time debugging internal tooling and the other half trying to explain to your manager what you're actually building. It's not the dream. But you're on the board. And in a year like this? That counts.
 - S2:
 - **You:** just watched a 14-slide deck about "the cloud" that said nothing
 - **Roommate:** classic consulting
 - **Best Friend:** you okay though?
 - **You:** i mean yeah. it's fine.
 - **Best Friend:** "fine" as in "soul dead"?
 - **You:** as in "i have dental now"
 - **Roommate:** capitalism wins again

- IBM Internship (MAX Academic Skill, MARGINAL Social Skill, SPEC in TECH)
 - GF: 93
 - S1: It's beige walls, old ThinkPads, and meetings where people still say "synergy." You spend most of your time rewriting COBOL wrappers for cloud services. She teases you about being a "tech historian," but she's the one who made you breakfast before your first day. It's not cool. But it's stable. And right now, stable feels like grace.
 - S2:
 - **You:** first thing i did today was update a system older than me
 - **Roommate:** you're in the trenches
 - **Best Friend:** proud of you for making legacy feel legendary
 - **You:** she says my badge pic looks like i just got drafted
 - **Roommate:** she's not wrong
 - **You:** i kinda like it here though
 - **Best Friend:** then that's all that matters
 - NO GF:
 - S1: You're not pushing the envelope. To be honest, you're duct-taping it. But you show up. You keep things running. You quietly become indispensable among the grizzled ranks of engineers at Big Blue. No fanfare. No algorithmic glory. Just a paycheck, a title, and peace.
 - S2:
 - **You:** taught myself how to use Lotus Notes. please pray for me
 - **Roommate:** ancient tech unlock
 - **Best Friend:** that's actually kind of impressive
 - **You:** i think they'd hire me full-time just for knowing where the backups are
 - **Roommate:** that's job security
 - **Best Friend:** low-key power move
- General Motors Internship (MAX Academic Skill, MARGINAL Social Skill, SPEC in MANUFACTURING)

- GF: 94
 - S1: You spend the summer tuning embedded systems in a windowless lab next to a factory line. It smells like oil and ozone. She visits once. Brings you iced coffee and calls the shop “kinda cool, actually.” You don’t talk about impact or changing the world. But the cars move. That’s enough.
 - S2:
 - **You:** spent the morning on EV battery diagnostics. it’s kinda fun
 - **Best Friend:** you sound like you’re thriving
 - **Roommate:** bro’s literally driving the future
 - **You:** she brought me lunch again lol
 - **Best Friend:** SHE’S A KEEPER
 - **Roommate:** stfu and just get me a free car you fucking simp
- NO GF:
 - S1: The work is routine. CAN buses. Firmware. Testing protocols. You end most days sweaty and underappreciated, but satisfied. You’ve built something you can point to. Something real. Not many people get to say that.
 - S2:
 - **You:** debugged a sensor issue today. car wouldn’t stop accelerating lol
 - **Roommate:** hell yeah. hardware supremacy
 - **Best Friend:** are YOU okay??
 - **You:** i got it working eventually. unfortunately, i don’t get to keep the car.
 - **Best Friend:** silent wins hit different
 - **Roommate:** what’s life without a little flair?
- Deloitte Internship (PASS Social Skill, MARGINAL Academic Skill)
 - GF: 95
 - S1: You’re not really sure what your job title means. Half your day is in Google Sheets, the other half is listening to people say “synergy” without flinching. She says she’s proud of you. Says it’s a way up. You believe her. Even if you don’t believe in the work. And maybe that’s enough.

- S2:
 - **You:** client just asked if we could make the SaaS tool “more agile”
 - **Roommate:** bro’s in the fake tech mines
 - **Best Friend:** i’m glad you have stability though
 - **You:** i’m doing like 20% tech and 80% smiling
 - **Roommate:** consultant riz
 - **Best Friend:** i’d still hire you before most of LinkedIn
- NO GF: 15
 - S1: You’re technically in tech.
But your projects involve Excel macros and billing hours to middle managers who can’t open PDFs. You look polished in your ID photo. You feel... unfinished. But hey—your parents brag about you at dinner parties. That’s got to count for something.
 - S2:
 - **You:** built a dashboard that tells managers to open their email
 - **Roommate (AMD):** elite SaaS engineering
 - **Best Friend (Eli Lilly):** you doing okay? for real
 - **You:** yeah. just kind of feel like i’m LARPing
 - **Roommate:** corporate cosplay
 - **Best Friend:** still. you made it. that matters
 - **You:** yeah. maybe it does
- Local Internship (MARGINAL Social Skill)
 - GF: 96
 - S1: You work in a fluorescent-lit IT office two blocks from a courthouse. You fixed a printer jam, set up a Zoom call for someone named “Councilman Dickerson,” and spent your afternoon pretending to understand the city’s Wi-Fi contract. She still brings you lunch. Says she’s proud of how far you’ve come. You believe her. Even if no one else does.
 - S2:
 - **You:** i just got thanked for resetting a password
 - **Roommate:** my man is the backbone of bureaucracy
 - **Best Friend:** that sounds... oddly heroic?

- **You:** they told me i'm "one of the sharper ones"
- **Roommate:** govtech legend
- **Best Friend:** honestly i respect the grind
- **You:** lol thanks. i'm surviving
- NO GF: 16
 - S1: It's beige walls, clunky software, and coworkers who call you "the computer guy." Your most exciting moment this week was deleting 700 rows of duplicated budget data. Nobody asks about your internship. You don't bring it up. But the checks clear. You're not unemployed. That's enough. Right?
 - S2:
 - **You:** just watched a guy print a 42-page doc to the wrong building
 - **Roommate:** lol. you gonna be okay man
 - **Best Friend:** you're doing what you have to. i respect that
 - **You:** it's quiet. i'm not gonna die here or anything
 - **Roommate:** "not gonna die here" is a wild benchmark
 - **Best Friend:** hey, still better than nothing
 - **You:** yeah. trying not to forget that
- Research Internship -
 - GF: CODE 97
 - S1: The lab smells like ethanol and burnt silicon. You run tests, rerun tests, fix broken scripts, and spend hours pretending to understand a grad student's methodology notes. She walks you to campus sometimes. Brings you coffee when the experiments drag past midnight. There's no funding. No recognition. But there's something here. Something *real*.
 - S2:
 - **You:** just spent 4 hours figuring out a bug caused by a loose USB cable
 - **Roommate:** bro... unpaid???
 - **Best Friend:** that's kind of sick though
 - **You:** we got a result today. pi actually said "huh." that's the win
 - **Roommate:** you need hazard pay

- **Best Friend:** you'll remember this summer more than any of us
- **You:** yeah. probably
- NO GF: CODE 17
 - S1: You show up before the PI. You leave after the grad students. Your name's misspelled on a poster that might be presented in Belgium. You don't get paid. You don't get credit. But for the first time, you feel like you're part of something that might outlast you. Even if no one else notices.
 - S2:
 - **You:** fixed a major data issue and the PI just called me "intern"
 - **Roommate:** nah that's insane
 - **Best Friend:** i know it's thankless, but i'm proud of you
 - **You:** my code's probably going into a paper. that's kinda cool, right?
 - **Roommate:** as long as it's not just the acknowledgements section
 - **Best Friend:** it's cool. even if they forget you, you'll remember
 - **You:** yeah. i think i will
- Unemployment (FAIL All)
 - GF: 98
 - S1: The inbox stayed quiet. The calendar stayed empty. But the world didn't end. You help her cook. You go on walks. You finally read that book you kept pretending to finish. It still stings, yeah. But you're breathing. You're still here. And for now, that's enough.
 - S2:
 - **You:** no luck this cycle. i think i'm just gonna take the L
 - **Best Friend:** rest. rebuild. you've earned both
 - **Roommate:** yeah. fr. we all hit walls
 - **You:** she said she's proud of me anyway. idk why that made me cry
 - **Best Friend:** because it matters
 - **Roommate:** she's a real one

- **You:** yeah. i think she might be
- NO GF: 18
 - S1: You sleep in. Scroll past sunrise. Apply to jobs that don't reply. The semester's over. The groupchats are quieter now. You tell yourself it's temporary. That the market's broken. That next year will be different. But you don't believe it. Not really. You just close the tab. And lie back down in tears.
 - S2:
 - **You:** no internships. nothing
 - **Best Friend:** i'm really sorry
 - **Roommate:** man. i don't know what to say
 - **You:** it's fine. just tired
 - **Best Friend:** it's not fine. but you're allowed to be tired
 - **You:** thanks
 - **Roommate:** we still got you
 - **You:** i know. just wish that was enough
- Business School 19
 - S1: You're in business school now. There's a bitter convenience to it; a preordained pipeline for the kids who were once gifted and tired. No one asks why you gave up. You just kind of... stopped. Now you spend your days in case studies and coffee shops, talking about leverage like it's a religion. Quite simply, you let the fire go out. And sometimes, when the professor calls on you, you swear you can still feel the ghost of who you used to be.
 - S2:
 - **You:** forgot my AirPods and had to raw dog a Harvard case discussion
 - **Roommate:** you've changed. you used to build stuff
 - **Best Friend:** now you just build debt
 - **You:** stfu i'm networking
 - **Roommate:** business casual arc
 - **Best Friend:** business *tragedy*
 - **You:** i hate all of you
 - **Roommate:** dw u hate yourself more for selling out

Thanks for Playing:

I wrote this game over the course of two weeks while I was in lecture. The scripting was done during dead week on my campus.

Please don't infer anything about my perspectives from this game, this is merely a work of fiction! Furthermore, I'm neither a CS nor DS student so this is an outside-in perspective on the SWE market as it stands. And yes, I grossly overestimate your chances of getting into IB/FAANG. Makes it more fun.

I hope you enjoyed The Employment Trail!

Check out my other projects (or send me hate mail) on my portfolio [here](#).