Story Beats

Three levels, two hallway sections.

Hallway sections are mazes. Lost woods, environmental cues, anchor on wall to signify beginning.

THE PROTAGONIST: Anxiety Person (AP)

AP’S GOAL: Escape the house

ANTAGONIST: The house (manifestation of AP’s anxiety)

THE HOUSE’S GOAL: To get AP to stay in the house

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The message of the first part of the game, where AP wakes up and gets out of bed, is that even that first step towards overcoming one’s anxiety can be difficult and that they should feel proud about having done that much. When they receive a key, a message displays which reads:

Starting is half the battle

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Anxiety is not simple. Those who suffer from it, by and large, want to break free of it so that it doesn’t affect them negatively anymore. By contrast, there is a part of them that wants to simply give up and succumb to their negative thoughts and emotions because that is what would be easiest. The message of the second part of the game, where AP speaks with their own conscience, is that those who suffer from anxiety are conflicted, and that in trying to break free of the negativity, they are struggling with themselves first and foremost. The temp conversation with the phone goes like this:

Hello.

If you’ve made it this far, you’re well on your way, now.

Soon, you’ll get the chance to see the outside world.

But you must be careful. There will be distractions.

(First phone starts to ring)

Don’t look at them. Look at me.

If you want to escape, you need to keep moving forward.

(Second phone starts to ring)

Do you understand? Concentrate. *Keep moving forward*, no matter what happens.

If you do that, then you’ll be just fine.

(Third phone starts to ring)

…Huh?

You want to know who I am?

(All phones start to ring)

I’m the part of you that’s sick of being stuck in this house.

Now let’s get out, together.

(All phones cut off and start emitting dial tones)

In regards to a puzzle element for the phone section – Huang came up with a trigger that change the player’s field of vision to be darker around the edges. Why don’t we have that happen to the screen when the player looks away from the phone conversation? The ringing phones incite the player to look away and the conversation incites them to stay focused on the dialogue.

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The message of the final section of the game, where AP walks down a hallway to leave the house, is that anxiety can be overcome if one perseveres. We can employ audio, art, and camera tricks to distract the player from the door. These distractions are the house itself trying to keep the player from leaving – AP’s anxiety trying to hold them back. But if the player keeps moving forward, then AP overcomes their anxiety and leaves their house behind.

In addition, I think that it would be better if AP reaches out with their own hand to open the door to exit the house instead of having someone else reach out for them from beyond the front door. I worry that the latter implies that it is impossible to overcome anxiety without the help of someone else, and I think that the former sends the empowering message that one can overcome anxiety through their own power. I’ve been trying to construct the narrative around the former, as well – that’s what the phone section conversation is now all about.

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY: House is a metaphor for living with anxiety. Many things in the house do not make sense, spatially or otherwise, to give this effect.

The game is structured in acts – there will be an enclosed act, most likely a single room, in which a special event will occur that the player interacts with. Connecting these acts will be the winding, nonsensical hallways of the house.

-Game starts with an alarm clock beeping and the player lying in their bed, trying to get up in the morning. The screen fades in from black and the audio fades in from silence. Pressing a certain key, perhaps the spacebar, snoozes the alarm. They have to mash a key or a bunch of keys several times in order to get up. As they come closer and closer to standing up, the chirping fades out. When they successfully stand up, the chirping shuts off completely, and a low tone marks the completion of the task. The player then walks out of their room to start their day by leaving their house.

-If the player waits for long enough (~20 seconds) the alarm will start beeping again. It can be snoozed indefinitely in this way. However, in addition to snoozing it, the player also has the option to shut off the alarm entirely by pressing a different key. If they do this, the screen starts to go black very slowly, and in as much time as it would’ve taken for the player to have to snooze the alarm again (~20 seconds), the screen will go completely black, the audio will fade out to silence, and the player will fall asleep and lose the game.

-A phone rings at the opposite end of a hallway. Said hallway has landline phones lining each side. Player walks to the end of the hallway, finds a darkened room with a single overhead light in the middle illuminating a landline phone on a small, round, wooden table that reaches up to about hip height. The player is prompted to use a button to pick up the phone, but it doesn’t work. (What could a good indication be for letting the player know that it isn’t working?) The player doesn’t pick up the phone, and it goes to voicemail. The person at the other end of the line explains that the protagonist hasn’t been to school in a while, and they’re starting to get worried about them. The one-sided conversation continues until the person on the other end starts questioning whether or not the voicemail is even going through. This continues until they start questioning whether or not the protagonist can hear and is just not picking up the phone. In addition, as the conversation goes on, more and more phones start ringing from behind the player, in the hallways that they came from.

-The final challenge of the game is nothing more than exiting the house. It’s a hallway with the exit door at the very end. Said door should probably be made to stand out from all other doors – i.e. there should be something about it that signifies that it’s a door to the outside world and not just a door to another place in the house. Maybe it has see-through glass on it? In that case, the Sun outside the door would have to be bright enough such that the tint of its light through the glass should be too bright for the player to see outside the door from the inside. In any event, as the player approaches the door, the music ramps up. The camera here can distort or perhaps contract, heightening a feeling of claustrophobia? Perhaps heavy breathing can be heard as the player character pants, on the verge of a panic attack or something similar? But finally, once they reach the door, they open it, and all sounds fade away as the screen fades to white. Given the plan for the rest of our game, I think it would be good to use the hand here to open the door.

If we do something like this for the final area of our game, it gives the programmers something interesting to experiment with through the camera, Kirsten something interesting with the door that light needs to be able to pass through as well as the hand, and me something interesting with making the music fit the scene well. That’s what I thought, anyways. My one worry about this scene is that there is too little going on for it to be worthy of the game’s final challenge, but upon further review, I actually think that I like that. Then it can be, like, there are all of these symptoms of anxiety (having trouble waking up in the morning, having trouble talking to people over the phone), but the root cause is something that is quite small and unassuming, like simply leaving one’s house. Well, we’ll talk about it more when I share this idea with you all. Which might be happening right now, as you’re reading this…? That’s funny XD