From Slow Media to Slow Game:

Emergent lo-fi game design principles

Yu Zhang s3763983@studemt.rmit.edu.au

Abstract:

In today's post-epidemic world, questions of how to reduce loneliness and increase focus are issues that people face when studying/working at home (Sutton, 2020). Situated in the broad field in game design, my work seeks to examine new ways of thinking about improving people's focus and wellbeing through ubiquitous gameplay that inspired by slow media such as "Lo-Fi Girl". I examed the work of scholars and creators in the field of slow game, considered the method of Research through Design (RtD), I focused on four aspects of game design that guided my development: emotional connections, real world time, reflection on the real world and engaging with real life tasks. In this article, I bring up a gameplay concept that combines character animation with to-do items to encourage players to focus on their real-life tasks.

Background:



Figure 1: "Lo-Fi Girl"

In March 2021, the famous YouTube live channel "ChilledCow" changed its name to "LOFI Girl" in order to better fit branding and content(Roston, 2021). In 2018, Pablo Machado designed Chilledcow's "Lo-fi Girl" character, which remains popular to this day (Freedman, 2020).

Until May 2021, Lo-fi Girl's channel has 844 million subscribers, often there are thousands of viewers comes to the channel, watch the live stream and chat in the live chat together. This real-time chat feature reinforces the feeling of real time. In the current epidemic era, more and more people are subscribing to this kind of channel (Alexander, 2020). In addition, "Study with Me" is a phenomenal increase on Youtube as well, which allow people come to live stream and study together, or watch a pre-recorded video shoot people study for a long time.

I think the popularity of "Lo-fi girl" and "With me" culture is indicative of the need for companionship, focus and single-tasking. However, the exsiting practices doesn't take long time development into account. Therefore, I propose a slow game design approach: a productivity tool that allows the user to enter a to-do list and focus with a virtual character. By combining with real world time, the game environment can go through the seasons, encourage players to notice the beauty of "slowing down."

Introduction:

Before Artur Ganszyniec came up with the "Slow Game Manifesto", similar discussions between practitioners and researchers included "Zen Games", "Slow Serious Games", and "contemplative Games".

"FLOw", "Journey", "Sky" come from game developer Thatgamecompany and are generally considered Zen Games. Timothy J. Welsh (2012) points out that games like Journey, which provides an environment for players to observe, are more likely to be called contemplative Gaming than Zen games. He argues that, "Contemplative games geared towards shooting stylized and stylish art design to create interesting environments that reward wandering and just looking around. "

The Slow Game Manifesto mentioned by Artur Ganszyniec includes four aspects: "Sustainable development", "Local inspirations", "Originality of voice" and "Wholesomeness".

Remesal focused three aspect on player's experience and design thinking to understand the main element of slow gaming, include "Time expansion", "Serene contemplation experience "and "Non-economical sense of action" (2016).

With some reflection on slow media, I think "companionship" and "single-tasking" are the reasons for the popularity of "online study rooms" and "Lo-Fi girl". In the process of designing a virtual learning/living space with interactivity, I reviewed some games and came up with three design ideas to help me design a slow game:

- 1. Slow games focus on emotional connections.
- 2. Slow games can use real world time.
- 3. Slow games can be used to convey reflection on the real world. 4. Slow games can inspire people to engage with real life tasks.

Design Context:

3.1 - Slow games focus on emotional connection.

Neko Atsume: Kitty Collector (2014) is a game where the player lays out a courtyard to attract cats to visit. The cat visits are random, and the player spends most of their time watching similar looping animations. Travel Frog (2017) was a hit in China as a simple casual game. Like Kitty Collector, players don't explore the world directly. Instead, they need to prepare a Frog with a snack and amulet and wait for the Frog to return while it travels. Players can receive photos from frog or entertain animals that come to visit the house. EarthTongue (2015), however, is a pixel game that can cultivate a strange ecosystem. Players can slowly cultivate an ecosystem, learn about newly added insects, and observe the changes of the ecosystem.

3.2 - Slow games can use real world time.

It is worth noting that Mountain (2014), created by Dr.David O Reilly, allows the player to sit it and run it in the background. In the process of standing, the mountain thinks and changes for itself. In other games, the player experiences not only the day and night cycle, but also the changing seasons as the game progresses. "Animal Cross" series and "Cozy Grove" (2021) is games that changes its environment based on real-world timing. Another way is consider time in game design such as "The Longing" (2020), the game ends 400 days after opening the game, allowing the player to wander around The world, explore and read books.

By considering real world time, the game not only gives the player an in-game experience, but also leads the player to experience real time changes.

3.3 - Slow games can be used to convey reflections on the real world.

"Desert Bus" (1995) is a game that uses a long, undistracted journey as a metaphor for the real world. The game was originally intended to satirize the stigma associated with video games, but the deliberate repetition and monotony of the game's design is a reflection on the reality of life. Unlike the "Desert Bus", Walden (2017) is designed to allow players to enjoy a slow walk during the course of the game. The player walks through the forest to generate insights about life, to get inspiration for writing, and to maintain a balance between life and rest. "A Good Gardener" (2015) is also A game that causes the player to reflect. Gardening in A beautiful garden is relaxing, but the products created by the player turn into war supplies. With this contrast, the game has designed a way for the player to reflect on war.

3.4 - Slow games can inspire people to engage with real life tasks.



Figure 2: Kind Words(2019)

Kind Words (2019) is not only a game but a friendly community. In this game, people can share kind words with strangers. In the process of sending and receiving letters, people answer questions from strangers or write down their troubles.

The Virtual Cottage (2020) was created during the epidemic to create a space where people can stay focused. In the "Virtual Cottage", the player can listen To the Lo-fi Hip Hop music, make their own To Do List slow, and have it run in the background.

Method and Implementation:

Research through Design (RtD) is the main path leading to this design practice, by considering other's games and design project in exegeses, this design research is Inspiration-Based, used the method of 'doing design', which by definition the working process is include the generation of idea and concept, as well as synthesis, development, integration, discovery, prototyping,

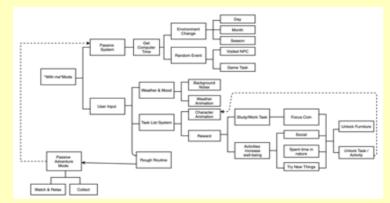


Figure 3: Flow Chart Diagram

As can be seen from the Flow Chart Diagram, this game contains two modes. One is that players can use the game as a tool to accompany and focus on, the other is that players can use the game as an object to watch and place. Players can set a rough routine and start it when they don't need company. As a slow game, the games can show changes through the seasons use real life time. Focus with character on amount of time, player can unlock different furniture or decoration as reward.



Figure 4: UI Sketch



Figure 5: Environment Design



In the beginning, I mainly focused on design the characters and environment. I have a vague image of the young girl character, and the aesthetics of the room. The character's image was inspired by millennial fashions.



After determining the layout of the main scene, I did some color tests. Then I I chose two contrast colors for the scene. The orange sunlight showed that it was sunrise, and the color of the bedroom was changing from gray to bright.

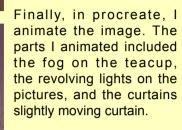




Figure 6-7: Color Test Figure 8: Final Sketch Figure 9: Finished Illustration and animation

Future Development:

Future development can be exploring more design directions based on the evolving principles of the game design and continue thinking about the broad design implications of this approach to slow game design. I believe that I can create other impressive and experimental products based on the design direction I focus on: connecting emotional connection, real time, reflection and real event motivation. Recently I'm in discussions with other game studios about slow game and slow game design, including MistyMountain Studio, which created game "The Rewinder," and I hope to get in touch with more studios to discuss the future of slow games.

In an increasingly rapid digital world, especially in the post-epidemic era, people spend more time on digital devices and face the challenge of concentrating at home. My game design approach, which aims to reduce player loneliness while allowing people to accomplish more real-world tasks, is a reflection on how people in the post-epidemic world can combine ubiquitous digital work with rest. My design direction explores the intersection between slow media and slow games, showing an exploration of the future gameplay direction.

Conclusion:

In the post-epidemic world, the popularity of slow media such as "Lo-fi Girl" reflects people's need for companionship and the need to focus on single tasks. By taking the benefits of slow media into account in game design, I propose an approach to game design to increase player's well-being. As a slow game, this game design focuses on four aspects: emotional connection, real world time, convey reflections on the real world, and inspire people to engage with real life tasks. I explained the originality of mine concept development and showed the HCI and visual development thinking. Through the process of doing design, the concept of slow games can be explored and expand, and it bring value to existing discussion on slow gaming,

References:

Alexander, J. (2020, April 20). Lo-fi beats to quarantine to are booming on YouTube. The Verge. https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/20/21222294/lofi-chillhop-youtube-productivitycommunity-views-subscribers.

Freedman, M. (2020, July 6). *You Can Thank Studio Ghibli for YouTube's Loft Anime Study Girl*. CBR. https://www.cbr.com/studio-ghibli-whisper-of-the-heart-loft-study-girl/.

Remesal, V. N. (2016). [web log]. https://abcdefghijklmn-pqrstuvwxyz.com/slow-gaming-notes-for-contemplative-game/.

Sutton, H. (2020). Stay focused and reduce stress while working from home, meeting virtually. *The Successful Registrar*, 20(9), 8–9. https://doi.org/10.1002/tsr.30770

Stappers , P. J., & Giaccardi, E. G. (2017). *Research through Design*. The Interaction Design Foundation. https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/research-through-design.

Welsh, T. J. (2012, July 24). *Notes toward the concept of contemplative gaming*. Timothy J Welsh. https://www.timothyjwelsh.com/2012/03/notes-toward-the-concept-ofcontemplative-gaming/.