

THE EXURBS: A VIDEO GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to construct a complete design document for the video game concept, *The Exurbs*. *The Exurbs* is a short single-player explorative artistic experience intended to convey feelings of alienation instilled by American suburbia, especially in queer individuals. It follows the player, who wakes up alone in an endless exurban isolated community even more disconnected from a city than a suburb. As the player explores, they encounter various houses which each distort the player's perceptions in their own ways.

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, video games have been seen as something to win or lose. Recently, especially in the sphere of indie games, video games have been used as more of an artistic medium. The focus has shifted from pure fun to creating something with artistic value. For many in marginalized communities, especially queer people, video games have become an outlet for them to express their experiences. One example of this is video game developer Kitty Horrorshow, who created the game *Anatomy* and the *Haunted Cities* series. Her games don't explicitly examine trans topics, but her exploration of the body, disgust, home, and personal interactions certainly resonate with trans experiences. The goal of this document is to put forth a design for a game also intended to be an artistic work. It does not have a win state, a lose state, points, or enemies. While there is conflict, it is internal.

II. BACKGROUND

As a transgender woman, growing up in a suburban environment was a very alienating experience. As a child, I didn't understand why I felt so disconnected from my body and those around me, so interacting with others was confusing. These issues were only exacerbated in a suburban environment, where the environment itself feels built to alienate. There were no public spaces, and the space outside my house was a blindingly bright mass of concrete and cookie-cutter houses. The people around me weren't mean, but passively hostile to difference, as is commonplace in many American suburbs. The main goal of this game is to convey the discomfort and disconnection stemming from my environment at that time in my life.

For me, the suburbs, and the exurbs even more so, exemplify the conformity that American capitalist society instills in its citizens. American ideology privileges the individual above all else, all the while molding that individual into the same perfect consumer as the next. This is shown perfectly in the suburban house. The suburban house is atomic, each separated from its neighbors with a tall fence, but nearly identical to the next. Making the suburban house the perfect dwelling for the American consumer, alienated from their fellow humans but shamed into being the same.

III. GAME FLOW

The game will open with a text prompt asking the player to enter their name. Once the player enters their name, they will be dropped in a blinding white neighborhood which seems to stretch on forever. The player will be able to look around and walk in any direction. All the houses around will be blurry white boxes which faintly reflect the staticky sky. If the player is still for too long, they will be issued a command in large block letters in the center of their screen: “WALK.” Whichever direction the player walks, they will encounter houses that are either more defined or differently colored than the rest. These will be the *anomalies*. They will be short (1-2 minute) experiences designed to evoke a specific discomfort or anxiety.

After the player finds and completes six of these anomalous houses, the neighborhood will begin fading out. When it has fully faded away, it will be replaced with a text prompt asking the player to enter their name again. Once the player enters their name the second time, the game will display one of two messages depending on the player’s input. If the player enters the same name they entered at the beginning of the experience, the game will display the message, “You’re still you.” If the player enters a different name than they did in the beginning, it will display the message, “We are never who we were x minutes ago, are we?” with the x replaced with the number of minutes that have elapsed since the beginning of the experience. The game will remain open with the message displayed until the player closes the window, signaling the end of the game.

IV. MECHANICS

There are only two primary mechanics to *The Exurbs*, exploration and dialogue. The player spends most of their time exploring and observing their environment. After the halfway point of the game, dialogue becomes a major component as well.

Exploration

At the beginning of the game, the player will be dropped into an endless suburb, surrounded by identical, white, featureless houses. As the player proceeds through the neighborhood, certain houses will be highlighted, either through color or other visual effects. These houses are *anomalies*, which have properties that make them especially disorienting.

Dialogue

After the player is finished with the Third House, NPCs, or “non player characters,” who can be conversed with begin to appear. The player is not presented with dialogue options but is given the option to trigger the NPC speaking to them. The dialogue will have an emphasis on the mundane, but with a grotesque darkness poking through.

Dialogue Samples:

"Oh my god, I haven't seen you in years! You're so tall now."

"Did you hear Jack drove his car straight off that mountain? Awful thing, really. He was such a nice boy. But you can never blame nature for taking those who are reckless with it."

"You look so different from last I saw you! Not worse, but different. Something's changed... are you in love?! No, that's not it. You must have lost weight. Be careful the wind doesn't carry you away."

"Oh, it's been a long summer. The heats been a good break from the artery-bursting cold but, well, I don't want to complain too much. I just can't stand the feeling when your saliva is *just* starting to boil. Shivers down my spine!"

V. ART AND VIDEO

Goals

There are two primary visual aesthetic focuses of the game. The first is mimicking the appearance of a brand-new suburban housing development, with little vegetation and blinding white pavement. To this end, the game will use a few visual methods. To emulate the reflection of the bright sun off concrete, strong light bloom effects will be used. To capture the uniformity of suburban houses, the procedural generator will use the same model for every house, only varying them by reflection or rotation.

The second is to produce a sense of disorientation, disconnection, and confusion in the player. Within this goal, there are multiple types of disconnection intended to be conveyed: disconnection from others, disconnection from body, disconnection from environment, and disconnection from self.

Disconnection from others is captured visually through the representation of NPCs (non-player-characters) as rectangles of television static. The disconnection is such that the other people in this world do not have definite forms.

Art

While there will be visual art involved in the game as assets, the game itself will also be intended to be an artistic work. The primary intention of the game will be an artistic expression of feelings that I have as the creator. As there will be no win or loss states in the game, the focus will be the artistic value the game provides to the player, not necessarily the “fun” it provides.

Art Direction Examples



VI. SOUND

Goals

The goals for the sound design are similar to the goals for the art: namely, disorienting the player. For example, big spaces will have little to no reverberation, while small spaces will be very echoey. This is intended to confuse the player subconsciously, making the big spaces “sound small” and vice versa. It will also attempt to instill a sense of dread in the player through a sparse, echoey sound design. To achieve this, the game will utilize bassy, distorted sound effects.

VII. STORY

Overview

The player character wakes up in an endless suburb with no memory of a life before. The game will not have an explicit narrative. The game's narrative approach is heavily inspired by psychological narratives like that seen in the ending episodes of the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The final two episodes of the series disregard the plot of the greater part of the show and take place entirely within the protagonist's head as he grapples with depression and self-loathing. Just as in *Evangelion*, no major plot points are resolved; in *The Exurbs* there are not major plot points. The "narrative" is the one conveyed through the feelings instilled in the player through the environment and various houses. While that narrative is intended to be one of queer alienation, different players may end up experiencing different narratives based on their own experiences. Alternative interpretations of the game's narrative are not to be seen as a storytelling failure, but part of the game's existence as an artistic work.

VIII. LEVEL OVERVIEW

Houses

First House

The first house the player encounters has shifting architecture. As soon as the player walks in the house, the door behind them will morph into a wall. As the player proceeds through the house, doors behind them will continue to either disappear or lead to different parts of the house behind them.

This mechanic was inspired by the morphing architecture seen in *The Haunting of Hill House* and the game *Control*. It is meant to instill in the player a sense of unbelonging in their environment, so much so that the house itself is harassing them. The same mechanic also conveys a lack of control over where they are going, which is an important part of the personal experience I am attempting to capture.

Second House

In the second house the player comes across, everything within the house (including the interior itself) will be either slightly too big or slightly too small. The size changes from room to room to emphasize the disparity.

This effect is intended to create a sense of bodily awkwardness in the player. If the environment is unusually small, the player should feel that their body is too big, and vice-versa.

Third House

The third house will contain only a staircase, which continues up for 5 or 6 stories (despite the exterior being the same height as every other house). Once the player does finally make it to the top of the staircase, though, there is only a single door which leads right back to the ground floor outside of the house.

This effect conveys a lack of change or direction to the player. The player must continue up the steps as it is the only avenue forward, but in the end, they find themselves at the start.

Fourth House

In the fourth house, NPCs start appearing. They are represented by roughly human-sized rectangles of television static. Within this house, the NPCs will speak to you if prompted, but they all address you by a different name. They will talk about the mundanities of their day, interspersed with grotesque anecdotes.

The representation of the NPCs conveys a lack of connection to other people, so much that the “people” in the player’s world appear completely featureless. The NPCs also deliberately ignore the name the player chooses at the beginning of the game, to emphasize the difficult contrast between self-image and others’ perceptions. Furthermore, the NPCs also each address the player by a different name, showing that each other person also has their own image of you.

Fifth House

The fifth house will be populated with NPCs similar to those found in the fourth house. Although a dialogue option will still appear, pushing it will do nothing, the NPCs will only stare at the player, rotating their bodies to always face the player.

This house is meant to simulate the effects of social anxiety. Social anxiety can be severe enough as to hinder speaking, which only exacerbates the anxiety. To hopefully make this even more anxiety inducing, the NPCs are constantly staring at the player.

Sixth House

The sixth house contains the same NPCs as the fourth and fifth houses, but the player cannot look at them directly. The player's camera will refuse to turn towards any of the NPCs no matter what they do. The NPCs will also begin addressing the player unprompted, breaking the previously established system of prompted dialogue.

The last house is designed to produce a feeling of loss of agency in the player. For the first time in the game their camera's movement is restricted, and the NPCs begin ignoring the player's wishes altogether.

IX. DEVELOPMENT

Game Engine

The game will be written in C# using Unity as the game engine. As both C# and Unity utilize an object-oriented structure, the game's code will also adhere to this paradigm. This means each in-game object will also be an engine object containing components which give it its properties. It also means that objects can contain other objects, known as children.

Software

For the game development software aside from the engine, I have decided to use FOSS, or Free Open-Source Software. For sound editing, I will use Audacity. For 3D asset creation and modification, I will use Blender. For texture creation I will use Krita. These have all been chosen for their features, ease-of-use, and most importantly, community support for self-learners.

Code Samples

Following is a sample of prototype code managing the player movement for the game:

```

using System.Collections;
using System.Collections.Generic;
using UnityEngine;

public class FirstPersonMovement : MonoBehaviour
{
    public Transform cam_transform;
    public float forward_speed;
    public float strafe_speed;
    public float jump_height;

    private float distToGround;
    private Rigidbody rb;

    // Start is called before the first frame update
    void Start()
    {
        distToGround = GetComponent<Collider>().bounds.extents.y;
        rb = GetComponent<Rigidbody>();
    }

    // Update is called once per frame
    void Update()
    {
        //Keyboard Input
        float forward_movement = Input.GetAxis("Vertical") * forward_speed * Time.deltaTime;
        float strafe_movement = Input.GetAxis("Horizontal") * strafe_speed * Time.deltaTime;

        //Rotation
        transform.eulerAngles = new Vector3(0, cam_transform.eulerAngles.y, 0);

        //Forward Movement
        transform.position += transform.forward * forward_movement;
        transform.position += transform.right * strafe_movement;

        //Jump
        if (Input.GetKeyDown(KeyCode.Space) && IsGrounded())
        {
            rb.AddForce(Vector3.up * jump_height);
        }
    }
}

```

A NOTE ON AUDIENCE

While art created by marginalized groups (such as queer people) is often viewed as something meant to educate those in power, that is definitively not part of the scope of this game. The art that has personally affected me the most has been the art I've seen my own experiences and feelings reflected in. Considering this, the audience I had in mind while designing this experience has been other trans people. When I imagine meeting the goal of this project, I see another trans person recognizing themselves in the game.

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