

The Observer Effect

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN SOMEONE CAN SEE YOUR EVERY THOUGHT?

WHATEVER THEY WANT.

A HIGH CONCEPT DOCUMENT

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Short Description: The Observer Effect is an action-puzzle game where the player's main tool is mind control. In one form of gameplay, known as Subconscious mode, the player explores and controls dungeons that are built from a victim's thoughts. In another form of gameplay, Mass Suggestion mode, the player takes control of multiple characters' actions and manipulates their joint behavior to achieve goals.

Tone words: Destiny, Uncertainty, Manipulation, Secrets, Control, Humanity

GAME HIGH CONCEPT

The Observer Effect is a puzzle-based game with two main mechanics. The first mechanic is thought exploration. Thought exploration describes the process of examining a target NPC's mind to identify their emotions, possible actions, memories, etc. The player receives this information in varying ways from a simple emotional "radar" (happy to sad, angry to fearful) to full scale dungeons that represent the brain of the target. The second main mechanic is manipulation. Manipulation gives the player the power to change a target's thoughts and actions to be in line with their goals. However, this doesn't come without consequences. It takes more player effort the farther the chosen new state is from a target's previous state.

These two mechanics are used in two main forms of gameplay: “mass suggestion” and “subconscious.” Mass suggestion gameplay involves manipulating many targets to achieve goals through interactions. Puzzles in this mode are solved in three steps. The first step is examining a target's thoughts and emotions by looking at their emotional radar. The radar presents the target's current emotion, and plots their next possible thoughts based their relations to the current emotion. The second step is choosing one thought from the set of possible next thoughts to motivate the target to achieve a goal. The third step is making sure that the targets follow the suggestions by keeping up a rhythm game. The difficulty of the rhythm is based on how much coercion the player used to motivate the characters. Sample goals in this mode might involve distracting security guards, orchestrating a riot, or helping your buddy find a girlfriend. Mass suggestion gameplay is intended to create strong feelings of control and allow the player to explore the results of many combinations of actions.

“Subconscious” gameplay, on the other hand, is built for more personal interactions. It takes place in dungeon-style environments that are representative of a target's mind. Each dungeon is unique to the mind the player is exploring, with everything from the scenery to the available actions dependent on personality and memories. The player navigates the dungeon as either the main character, or as one of two special forms. These special forms give the player the power to fight evil thoughts and change the environment, but are only usable after being discovered in the level. The player's goal in this mode is to explore and manipulate the target's mind to force a certain chain of thoughts or actions. Multiple minds can be involved in one puzzle, requiring the player to hop between dungeons. The player may also have to manipulate “working memory” to affect how the target communicates with other targets in the puzzle.

In both of the modes, players solve puzzles by better understanding the characters and using their knowledge to progress. Learning that one character will back down in the face of a challenge, while another will fight to the death isn't just a “nice” part of the story; it could be critical to your success. *The Observer Effect* also provides a lot of room for exploration. The player doesn't have to choose the most expedient route to the goal, or a route than reaches the goal at all. Building an absurd conversation with an arch-enemy can be just as fun as beating them.

DEVELOPMENT SCOPE

The Observer Effect will contain roughly 40 hours of gameplay, broken into 3 acts of fifteen missions each. The development team responsible for building this will be composed of twenty members. There will be six programmers working on the game engine and graphics. A lot of time will be dedicated to producing the realistic graphics that are necessary for achieving the dark and gritty feel that the game is going for. Fortunately other game engine elements such as physics can be toned down because most of the player interactivity comes from NPCs and their minds. Three programmers will be dedicated to the task of creating a fast and realistic AI system for the NPCs. Modeling NPC social interactions, goals, and relevant behaviors is critical to creating understandable and realistic gameplay situations when NPC interactions can't be entirely pre-scripted. Working with the AI programmers will be two puzzle designers that are each responsible for creating puzzles from the two gameplay modes. The puzzles the mass suggestion designer creates will be closely linked to the NPC AI and will have to strike a balance between control and NPC autonomy.

In addition to the programmers, *The Observer Effect* requires people to create content for the game. The strong story focus will require two writers to compose dialog and write the backstory for the game world. It was also require four artists to produce character models, object models, and textures, along with two level designers to construct the scenes developed by the writers and puzzle designers. Finally, one sound designer will be necessary to produce baseline sound effects and ambient sound. The work will be completed over an 18 month period due to the AI ground work that must be laid, and the sizable amount of content to be created. At 10,000 dollars per man-month, the total cost will be 3.6 million dollars.

BUSINESS CASE

Audience

The Observer Effect is targeted at a teenage and older audience because of its suggestions of sex and its dark, dystopian storyline. Another reason for this choice is that the complex themes and characters will be better understood by a mature audience. The age range defined by this audience contains 75% of game players, which is enough to not worry about constraining sales by targeting a tiny age segment¹. In the

1 "2008 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data: Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry." 2008. The Entertainment Software Association. 24 Oct. 2008

area of gender, *The Observer Effect* is crafted to appeal to both male and female audiences. This is an important choice because female gamers made up 40% of video game players in 2008². It strives to match these audiences through a balance of gender neutral issues and its strong lead characters: Jimmy and Sam.

The Jimmy character is built upon the nerd ideal of an intelligent person who is devoted to a profession or cause. Jimmy's main issue is coping with a girlfriend whose brain he's fried. The paternal role he's forced to take on to handle this will resonate with men in particular, and a relationship fluent, older audience in general. The Sam character is meant to embody control in the face of adversity. She fights throughout the game both with her own misfortunes and the problems that face the world. Sam provides a positive and deep character for women to identify with, which is opposed to a damsel-in-distress, Princess Peach-type character. However, she isn't just a strong woman, she's a gender neutral example of how to make the best of an imperfect life.

The gameplay in *The Observer Effect* is built for people who don't necessarily have a lot of skill at gaming. The dungeon crawling gameplay is intuitive because the goals are based on the goals of the NPC that the player is exploring. They are asked to help a person feel better, which is significantly easier to approach than finding an arcane artifact or a magical scroll. The mass suggestion gameplay is crafted in such a way as to not punish the player if they don't get it the first time. False moves don't end in death, they end in sometimes absurd interactions that don't happen to get the player where they need to go. Additionally, if a player isn't able to figure out the best solution to a mass suggestion puzzle, they can fill in the gaps using the rhythm mechanic instead of cheating, or beating their head against the wall.

The Observer Effect draws from a varied set of gameplay elements. This has the benefit of allowing it to tap into a number of popular markets. One important form of gameplay in *The Observer Effect* is the exploration of dungeons in peoples' minds. The tasks involved in exploration require mental and physical dexterity to complete, which most strongly identifies them with the action game genre. The ESA identifies action games as making up 22.3% of

http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa_ef_2008.pdf, 5.

2 Ibid.

console games sold in 2008, and the largest category overall³. *The Observer Effect* would be a natural fit for consoles because of its simple control scheme, standard 40 hour gameplay, and similar themes to many popular console action games (see comparison).

The second important form of gameplay in *The Observer Effect* is manipulating the interactions of multiple characters. This manipulation exists in the mass suggestion gameplay where the player is trying to orchestrate the thoughts and actions of several people to achieve a goal. This gameplay is similar to simulation and strategy games. In both strategy games and *The Observer Effect*, the player is controlling many units (orcs vs. people), managing a resource (gold vs. rhythm game complexity), and seeking a goal (hard to get territory vs. hard to get actions). Strategy games account for 33.9% of computer games sold⁴, which indicates that the strategy game market would be a good market to pursue for a PC version. One way of pursuing this market could be adding a heightened level of control and an expanded set of scenarios that would let the strategy gamer get more into the complexities of human interaction. This market will be left for a secondary venture for the time being; but regardless of whether it is on a console (Xbox360 or PS3), or both console and PC, *The Observer Effect* provides gameplay that is sure to sell well in today's markets.

Comparison

The Observer Effect is a story-based action-puzzle game with social simulation as its core mechanic. Both action-puzzle games and social simulation games have had great success over the past ten years. The success of the story-based puzzle game is typified by the smash hit *Portal*, which merges the hilarious story of Aperture Science with portal-based puzzle solving mechanics. *Portal* proves that pure puzzle solving can be integrated into a story; or said another way, that constant fighting isn't necessary to make a good story-based game. *The Observer Effect* shares with *Portal* a strong sense of story and compelling puzzle solving mechanic that rewards exploration. It differs by putting a darker spin on the story, and by tightening up the integration between puzzle solving and story events. These changes will invest the player more heavily in the game and lead to a more engaging experience than the lighter *Portal*.

Another successful game with action and puzzle elements is the vaunted *Legend of*

3 Ibid., at 7.

4 Ibid., at 7.

Zelda: Twilight Princess. *Twilight Princess* has sold nearly five million copies since its release⁵ and ranks as one of the all time best games on MobyGames.com⁶. *Twilight Princess* was specifically rewarded for Excellence in Writing by the IGDA in 2007⁷. *The Observer Effect* benefits from *Twilight Princess*' demonstration that a good story can sell a game as well as a movie. *The Observer Effect* also uses the tried and true Zelda model for gameplay, which is based on unique dungeons that have unified sets of goals that can be solved using exploration and puzzle solving mechanics. The subconscious gameplay specifically draws on the winning *Twilight Princess* dungeon gameplay, but also adds interesting twists that come from being situated in a character's mind such as moldable, meaningful environments. These small twists will add an element of freshness while benefiting from the Legend of Zelda player's knowledge.

A third game in this genre which has many similarities to *The Observer Effect* is *Psychonauts*. *Psychonauts* is a platformer that uses exploration of subconscious minds as its main mechanic. It was released in 2005 to wide critical acclaim, with Electronic Gaming Monthly exclaiming that "anyone who doesn't fall for the unique characters, hilarious dialog, and brilliantly conceived environments of *Psychonauts* has no soul."⁸ Despite the good reviews, *Psychonauts* was only moderately successful, selling around 500,000 copies to date⁹. *The Observer Effect* borrows the successful character and environment building techniques from *Psychonauts*. However, instead of applying them to an unconventional story about a psychic secret service, it applies them to a more conventional, hero journey, sci-fi story of the type that the public knows (see the Halo franchise). *The Observer Effect* grabs the player with a scenario they know first, and then holds onto them with fresh and engaging gameplay.

On the simulation side of things is *The Sims*, which is a game is about managing the lives of simulated people. *The Sims* is currently the best selling computer game of all time, with 6.3

5 "The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess." VGChartz. 24 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.vgchartz.com/games/game.php?id=4573>>.

6 "All Time Best." Moby Games. 24 Oct. 2008 <http://www.mobygames.com/stats/top_games>.

7 "Game Developer Choice Awards." 2007. International Game Developer's Association. 24 Oct. 2008 <http://www.gamechoiceawards.com/archive/gdca_7th.htm>.

8 "Psychonauts Review", Electronic Gaming Monthly (May 2005), pp. 136.

9 "Double Fine Action News - Just Buy a Few More and then we'll be Done." 14 June 2007. Double Fine Productions. 24 Oct. 2008 <http://www.doublefine.com/news.php/site/just_buy_a_few_more_and_then_well_be_done/>.

million units sold¹⁰ and has racked up an additional 16 million units with a video game version¹¹. *The Observer Effect* borrows the sense of exploration and control that makes *The Sims* an engaging game. This sense of control is particularly present in mass suggestion gameplay, which involves manipulating many units at once to see how they interact. However, *The Observer Effect* adds a set of goals and achievements that direct and reward the player's efforts. It also expands *The Sims'* gameplay by merging the sandbox feel of *The Sims* with story driven, persistent characters that feel important and personal to the player.

An example of a grittier game with simulation elements is Grand Theft Auto IV. GTA IV has sold 6 million units since its April 2008 release¹² and was so eagerly anticipated that people speculated it would dampen the sales of the movie *Iron Man*, which was released on the same weekend¹³. GTA IV promotes a form on sandbox gameplay that encourages the player to see what will happen when they take different actions. Yet, at the same time, it has a strong story that Jon Hicks of Xbox Magazine called "genuinely engrossing."¹⁴ The success of GTA IV indicates that a game can be story driven and yet leave room for plenty of messing around. *The Observer Effect* will take these elements, along with GTA IV's dark story, and combine them with fresh environments and quality dungeon design to create a game that is more than the sum of its parts.

In conclusion, *The Observer Effect* is linked to two of the most popular genres in video gaming today. It also builds on the successful gameplay of a number of recent blockbuster hits. There is little question that it can break a 500% return on investment with its 3.6 million dollar price tag. At the standard console price of 50 dollars a box, achieving a return of 18 million (500% of 3.6 million) would require 360,000 boxes sold. Even replicating *Psychonauts'*

10 Walker, Trey. "The Sims overtakes Myst." 22 Mar. 2002. Gamespot. 24 Oct. 2008 <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/strategy/simslivinlarge/news_2857556.html>.

11 "The Sims." VGChartz. 24 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.vgchartz.com/games/game.php?id=6478®ion=all>>.

12 "Grand Theft Auto IV." VGChartz. 24 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.vgchartz.com/games/game.php?id=7103>>.

13 Lewis, Nick. "Grand Theft Auto could be Hollywood's biggest summer competition." *Canada.com*. 28 Apr. 2008. 24 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.canada.com/topics/technology/games/story.html?id=00fb5015-0575-4889-817c-c79f4f4cf176&k=64752>>.

14 Hicks, Jon. "Xbox Review: Grand Theft Auto IV." *Xbox 360: The Official Xbox Magazine*. 28 Apr. 2008. 24 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.oxm.co.uk/article.php?id=3993>>.

underwhelming sales would easily pass this mark. Performing at around half the level of a *Sims* or *Twilight Princess* (roughly 2.5 million boxes) would produce a 3500% return. Additionally, as stated above, there is ample opportunity to expand into the PC market. By building on current successes, targeting large markets, and differentiating itself in meaningful ways, *The Observer Effect* is prepared to become the next hit title.