

## **Existential Bummer Game Spec**

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## Logline

For Sarah, every day was pretty much the same and she was okay with that. At least, she thought she was. When a small misstep at Burning Man leaves Sarah stuck reliving the same sequence of events, she finds life and her future aren't as clear cut as she wanted to believe.

## Overall Vision

Existential Bummer is a single-player, branching-narrative game that explores aspects of the human psyche that lead to a disimpassioned mind. It is heavily reliant on the replayability of digital games – exploiting and subverting it to create a 'Groundhog Day' phenomenon that leaves players of their choices and their results. In an experience spanning three chapters, the protagonist finds herself reliving the same events at a Burning Man festival over and over again and must find a way to make it to the next day in a world that is influenced by the choices she makes.

### a. Title –

Existential Bummer as a title emphasizes the project's roots in existentialism and musings as to our purpose and motivation in life.

### b. Genre –

I would be hard-pressed to see this game as anything other than indie, but within that, this game would likely be categorized as a psychologically-focused graphic adventure game.

### c. Target Audience –

Existential Bummer will target young adults. Specifically, recent graduates still trying to sort out their lives.

### d. Platform –

Likely published for Microsoft Windows, Apple MacBooks, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One.

### e. Implementation –

Existential Bummer will be built using Unity and would likely take upwards of 5 months of dedicated work to complete.

## Narrative Design

### a. Objective

Existential Bummer is a graphic adventure, concerning itself heavily with the experience of the narrative and the characters rather than having a win condition. There are multiple story branches that influence different endings.

### b. Setting

Existential Bummer is set in the present day at Burning Man -- a free-spirited celebration of radical community that takes place every year in the Nevada desert.

### c. Key Characters

#### - *Sarah Coates*

The protagonist. A going-nowhere-fast young woman that once dreamed of becoming an explorative travel journalist. However, she has been told time and again that what she's doing doesn't have any value, and has since lost her nerve and given up on her dream. The elitist travel magazine that she works for is covering the Burning Man festival and she is sent along with two other young coworkers in a competition for the feature article spot.

#### - *McKenzie Reed (Mac)*

A devilishly mischievous, but mysterious woman who has inserted herself into Sarah's life after saving her from a deathly fall. She is secretly driven by extreme loyalty and protectiveness for her brother, who ended up in a coma after being supplied with drugs at the festival. She desperately wants to find the people that hurt her brother and will do anything to achieve her goal, even if it means manipulating those close to her.

#### - *Hayley Barnes*

One of the other young journalists sent by Sarah's travel magazine. She and Sarah have developed an unbalanced friendship that is contingent on Hayley's superiority.

#### - *Calum Walsh*

Another of Sarah's friends and coworkers. He's a goof and comes off as laidback, but has a bit of a temper. He has a crush on Sarah but is incredibly shy about it.

- *Brimstone (Brim)*

Leader of the Hellfires, a gang that runs the darker side of the festival – has a monopoly over the distribution of drugs. Knew and employed Mac's brother.

**d. Story Arc –**

The game opens with Sarah taking some time away from Burning Man in a bathroom – splashing water on her face in front of a sink and mirror and trying to muster the energy to re-enter the world. A heavy knock sounds from the door and Sarah forces herself to leave. After meeting with her boss and coworkers, she is dragged to the top of the Burning Man Statue scaffolding by Hayley. Two guys appear and attempt to flirt with them. Calum, protective of Sarah, breaks in and shoves the guys away – a fight quickly breaks out. Sarah is caught in the crossfire and is accidentally punched in the nose. She stumbles backward quickly and tumbles off of the scaffolding – dying. The game begins again with Sarah shooting her head up from the sink, looking thoroughly shocked.

What follows is a series of attempts by the player to make it through the three-chapter story – making various choices that sometimes result in the player's death and a sudden restart. The player's choices have a wide range of effects on the game's events, environment, and other characters forcing the player to consider their actions. Sarah is forced through a journey of self-discovery and understanding as she tries to find her place and purpose in the world.

**e. Chapter Breakdowns –**

- Chapter 1: Laplace's Demon
  - Sarah comes to terms with her new ability.
- Chapter 2: Entropy
  - Sarah and Mac explore parts of Burning Man.
- Chapter 3: The Taboo
  - Confrontation with the Hellfires and destabilization of Sarah's restart ability.

**f. Possible Endings –**

There are four possible endings for this game in which Sarah is allowed to move on with living. There is no necessarily 'correct ending' and each features a different emotional epicenter that is determined by your choices, both large and small.

- Burning Temple: an impassioned ending
- Downpour: cleansing, a release of past failures ending
- Dust Storm: everything made raw, suffocated by choice ending
- Acid Trip: a destabilization of reality ending

## Aesthetic Design

### a. Player Perspective –

During play, the game camera will be situated behind the player character from a 3rd-person-perspective. The player will be able to pan the camera in any direction independent from the movement of the character, however, the camera will always pivot based on a singular point such that it is not just free form, but attached to where the character is. During cut scenes, the player will not be able to operate the camera.

### b. Art Style –

Existential Bummer's graphic style will be 3D and semi-realistic. Ideally, it would be reminiscent of *Life is Strange* (shown below), which its designer called 'impressionistic rendering'. The art style is meant to inspire a sense of nostalgia in the player and encourage them to stop and appreciate the world around them.



*Life is Strange (2015)*

c. **Sound Design –**

Both diegetic and non-diegetic music will be included.

d. **UI/UX –**

This game will not have any obvious HUD elements but will feature an object highlight system that appears when players get close to and direct the camera toward an object. This highlight system will outline objects and provide interactive options. Additionally, during cut scenes with branching options, choices will be displayed near the bottom of the screen. These choices will be arranged as four points up, down, left, and right of a center point. On console, the placement of the choices will correspond to how the face buttons are situated. On computer, players use the mouse click to select choices.

During timed Butterfly Effect choices, which offer only two options, a small circular timer will appear between the two choices with a thick white outline that disappears clockwise as time counts down to show how much time the player has to make the choice. Everything in the scene slows to the point of almost stopping and the lighting becomes slightly purple as the camera flits between different parts of the scene such as the player character's face, the face of the character they are talking to, or an object.

Players can also collect certain objects for use later. These objects are represented as small icons in the top right of the game screen.

Part of the UI will be the player character's Journal, which updates with information the player has learned – bios on other characters or places, and choices the player has made previously. This journal will also update with the player character's thoughts, which can be read for added immersion and understanding but are not necessary for the story.

## **Control Interface**

### **a. Player Movement –**

On console, players use the left joystick to move around. On the computer, players use the WASD buttons on the keyboard to move the character forward, backward, left, and right respectively (pressing some of the buttons at the same time will move you diagonally).

### **b. Camera Movement –**

On console, players use the left joystick to move around and the right joystick to adjust the camera position. On computers, the mouse movement is used to move the camera.

### **c. Interacting with Objects and Selecting –**

On console controllers, the face buttons can be used to select different options for object interaction and, in cut scenes, for selecting dialogue branching choices. For computers, the left mouse click selects objects to interact with and dialogue choices during cut scenes.

### **d. Skipping Through Dialogue**

Sometimes, players can skip through dialogue they've already heard. On consoles, this is done by pressing R2, and on computers by pressing the right mouse click. This skip only goes until the next dialogue branching prompt.

### **e. Opening the Journal and Options Menu –**

The touchpad on PlayStation 4 and the center-right button on the Xbox One can open the journal and from there R1 and L1 can be used to flip right and left respectively between the sections of the journal. With a controller, pressing the options or menu button will open the game options screen. On a computer, pressing [Enter] opens the Journal, and [Escape] will open the game options menu.

## **Mechanics**

### **a. Player –**

There is one playable character through which the player can move around the world and interact with objects.

### **b. Interactable Objects –**

Some objects can be interacted with. When players get close enough and turn the camera to the object a prompt will appear displaying possible options for interaction. Options include: observe, which will prompt the narrator to say something about the object, take, which will allow the player to pick up and store the object, or a unique interaction, such as drinking something from a cup. Interactable objects also include other characters who you can either observe or sometimes talk to.

### **c. Collectible Objects –**

Some objects in the world can be picked up and stored for later use.

### **d. Dialogue and Dialogue Branching –**

Players can sometimes talk to other characters in the game. Talking to someone will enter a cut scene situation where the player cannot move the character and will be offered dialogue prompts at appropriate times during the conversation. Prompts might include comments that carry on the conversation, questions, actions, or an option to leave the conversation. Given that this game is dependent on replaying different scenes, it is also possible to skip through dialogue that you have already heard. This skip only goes until the next dialogue branching prompt.

### **e. The Butterfly Effect --**

Certain choices in the game will have either immediate or long-term consequences. For each narrative restart, these choices will be reset so that they haven't happened, but the player Journal will keep track of the choices that you've made. These choices also range from big to small levels of importance but in general, they will influence how other characters see or interact with you, the events that happen in the world, and changes that happen in the environment/setting.

f. **Specifics on Starting the Game –**

The first screen upon opening the game is the title screen, with a button prompt to continue. Upon pressing the assigned button, the screen displays a list of 3 game data options and prompts the player to choose one. If you have played the game before one or some of these options will be saved content.

g. **Post-It-Note Tracker –**

To avoid player frustrations over having to restart the game completely, Sarah will begin keeping a record of the choices she's made and the checkpoints she has passed in the game through labeled post-it notes cluttered around the starting bathroom mirror. From then on, at the beginning of each restart, the player will be able to choose where to skip to in the story, maintaining the choices they've already made.

## **Design Notes**

This project was designed as an entertaining way to explore inhibitions of the psyche and 'unmotivation' in an attempt to realize a deeper truth about our drive and need for curiosity, passion, and exploration to give purpose to our lives. It is meant to call on the player to self-reflect and find moments of wonder and comfort in their lives.