

Morbid Game Design

Obesity: *Diagnosis, Complications, and Effective Treatment with the “Five Fun Factors”*

a.k.a. - Keeping Your Team Focused on the Right Goals and avoiding bloat and feature creep



“Dr. Dave” Rohrl, Ph.G.D, M.G.D(O), G.D.

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Abstract

Morbid Game Design Obesity describes a game design that spills over the healthy limits of its own scope, creating a design that is flabby and diffuse. Although the cause can be rooted in Chronic Game Design Myopia, it often results from weak articulation of the game's focus and is often accompanied by acute feature creep.

Without treatment, outcomes can include audience confusion, schedule detonation, and project overrun. Fortunately, Mobile Game Doctor can help identify and treat Morbid Game Design Obesity via methods discovered and tested at our labs.

Morbid Game Design Obesity is treatable. This is the focus of the second in the Creative Clarity Toolkit™ developed and practiced by Mobile Game Doctor for treating and preventing a variety of game design disorders.

The Series Includes:

1. The Four Questions
2. **The Five Fun Factors**
3. One Bullet Management
4. Potential Player Profiling
5. The Glory Shot
6. The Big Poster

Mobile Game Doctor has developed the Creative Clarity Tools™ with the goal of identifying issues, then clearly exposing and correcting them. The intent is to enable more effective and efficient development, better products, and happier teams. For more information, please visit <http://www.mobilegamedoctor.com>

Risk Factors

Morbid Game Design Obesity occurs in teams with structural deficiencies, specifically:

- Lack of a strong Creative Vision
- Lack of an identified Vision Holder
- Lack of an Empowered Decision Maker

***Creative Vision** - Clearly articulated creative goals that the game is focused on delivering.*

***Vision Holder** - Person who is tasked with driving a shared understanding of what ideas are or aren't in line with the game's creative goals.*

***Empowered Decision Maker** - Person with clear authority to make decisions about how the team and product should move forward.*



Symptoms

The most typical symptoms of Morbid Game Design Obesity include:

- Overly diffuse feature set
- Unclear decision mechanics for feature additions
- Extended schedules
- Difficulty formulating marketing messages
- Unfocused, sprawling pitches

Causes

Morbid Game Design Obesity stems from two potential causes:

- 1) Failure to identify critical player drives - stemming from a failure to understand the audience and/or starting production before the vision has solidified.
- 2) Weak or missing idea filtering framework - stemming from Chronic Game Design Myopia, unclear or hidden success criteria, or a lack of process around refining design focus.

Regardless of root cause, Morbid Game Design Obesity manifests in **a constant addition of new features to the game without a proper justification.**

Damaging symptoms include ongoing scope bloat and schedule slip. We recommend immediately addressing the symptoms, and postponing root cause analysis.

Prognosis

When team leaders allow new features to be added to the game willy-nilly, multiple negative outcomes follow. The game becomes not only large but formless, taking on features and mechanics seemingly at random. This leads to expanding schedules, decreased team morale, an unfocused product, consumer confusion, poor reviews, and depressed sales.

Fortunately, Morbid Game Design Obesity is treatable, especially if detected and applied early in the project. The treatment should be reapplied from time to time throughout the project, particularly as the team discovers and reinterprets the game's core fun.

Unfortunately, treatment does not directly inoculate future projects; the treatment must be reapplied for each project to ensure continued immunity.



Do these symptoms sound familiar? Your team may suffer from Morbid Game Design Obesity; but it is treatable with minimal lasting effects if addressed aggressively and if you inoculate future projects against creative ambiguity—STAT—to avoid wasted time and demoralized teams.

Treatment

For projects suffering from Morbid Game Design Obesity, Mobile Game Doctor recommends regular application of the “Five Fun Factors” treatment.

This regimen forces key creative leaders to identify critical areas of the vision and pare away unnecessary design elements. Re-apply the each time the game’s vision evolves and key fun factors are discovered. Post application, you and your team will observe a tightening of focus, leaner feature lists, stronger project momentum, and improved team health.

“Five Fun Factors” Treatment Details

The Five Fun Factors treatment is a regimen developed and regularly delivered by Mobile Game Doctor to help game teams all over the world create increased focus on the core of their design and alleviate design bloat.

The Five Fun Factors™ are a proprietary game design rubric developed and owned by Mobile Game Doctor and part of the Creative Clarity Toolset™. All elements of the Five Fun Factors™ and Creative Clarity Tools™ are wholly owned by Mobile Game Doctor, LLC, Copyright 2018, all rights reserved.



“Five Fun Factors” Treatment Step 1 - Identification

The first part of the treatment requires the design team to make a list of NO MORE THAN FIVE things that the player can do or experience in the game that WILL be:

- Absolutely delightful for the player
 - Highly repeatable
 - Linked to a game mechanic so the player can easily (or at least fairly easily) understand how to get there again
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As with any of the Mobile Game Doctor treatment rubrics, the responses should then be lab tested for for the Four Cs: Compulsion, Clarity, Conciseness, and Consistency. Specifically:

- **Compulsion:** Does this activity *sound* fun? As implemented in the game currently, is it fun yet? It is really, really fun? To be a high quality Fun Factor, the response has to rise to a high level.
- **Clarity:** Does the description paint a clear picture of the activity in your mind? Does it create the same picture in the minds of all team members?
- **Conciseness:** Is the activity concisely stated? Will players be easily able to talk about it over a beer and/or in a tweet? Does it suffer from a significant case of And-itis or But-itis?
- **Consistency:** When you take the responses together, do they form a clear, conceptual whole? Do they sound like they come from a single game? And if not, is there a clear, concise explanation as to how they are woven together?

If the responses fail the Four Cs lab test, repeat the identification step until a solid set of answers emerges. If this proves impractical, repeat the Four Questions treatment, then retry Step 1.



The 5 Fun Factors of



Pulling off great combos!



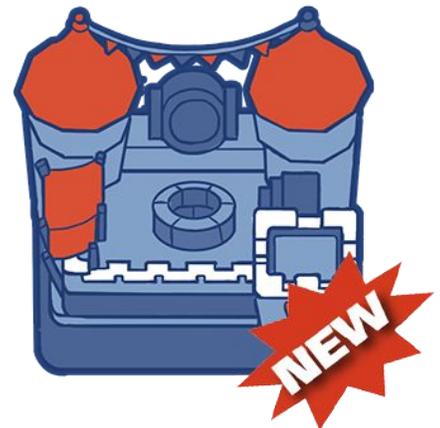
Defeating the Enemy!



Unlocking New Units!



Unlocking New Arenas!



Mastering new strategies!

“Lab Test” answers for:

Clarity: Can a relatively naive reader visualize the core gameplay?

Conciseness: Are answers brief and direct, without tons of clauses, commas, qualifiers, or “and-itis”?

Compulsion: Does it sound fun/interesting/good/worth exploring?

Cohesiveness: Do the answer make sense together? Do they form a meaningful whole, or do they drift off in different directions?



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“Five Fun Factors” Treatment Step 2 - Surgical Featurectomy

Once the Fun Factors are determined, each feature and system of a game should be analyzed and sorted into one of these four categories:

1. **Fun Factors:** The features and systems that directly deliver the game’s big moments.
2. **Scaffolding:** The features and systems that enable the Fun Factors to exist.
3. **Table Stakes:** The features and systems that all games on the target platform need to have.
4. **Features to be Removed:** Features and systems that don’t help create your game’s truly outstanding experiences and aren’t necessary to compete on your target platform should generally be removed from the design.

While radical, in some cases, Featurectomy has a number of key benefits, including:

- Reducing development timelines
- Improving design clarity and focus
- Improving team morale (see Side Effects)
- Sharpening marketing messages
- Removing cruft
- Increasing the game’s fun level

“Five Fun Factors” Treatment - Notes on Application

At times, team members may have significant ego investments in features and systems they have proposed. Junior designers are especially prone to this syndrome. For this reason, it is critical that the Five Fun Factors are well communicated throughout the team and that the team accepts them as the creative core of the game. Without this communication, hurt feelings and team divisions may appear. This is part of the Game Poster exercise regimen described in an upcoming article.



Possible Treatment Complications

As standard practice, a design should have three to five high-impact Fun Factors. Fewer, or more, may indicate issues with the underlying design, especially for a typical free-to-play casual game.

- **Only 1-2 Fun Factors** - the design may be on the thin side and may struggle attaining the medium and long-term retention critical for audience and revenue development.
- **More than 5 Fun Factors** - often indicates a diffuse and messy design, where it's hard to make any of those big moments impactful.

Of course, context matters.

For a “hyper-casual” game, 1-2 Fun Factors *may* be adequate given that long-term retention is less critical.

Likewise, a big console title MIGHT be able to pull off 6 or 7 Fun Factors, the team should still consider whether the game would be more fun with a tighter, more focused design.

Ongoing Design Health Maintenance

As any veteran game doctor can tell you, the core fun of a game can evolve over the course of its development cycle, even post-launch during live operations. The team must begin with an idea of what will be fun, but must respond to the realities discovered during design, prototyping, and playtesting.

As the team discovers that some of the Fun Factors originally conceived simply don't work, or that other, better Fun Factors have been discovered, the team should repeat this treatment regimen, **making deliberate and formal changes to the list of Fun Factors.**

In order to avoid recurrence (or onset) of Morbid Game Design Obesity, it is important that the list of Fun Factors be contained to 3-5, using newly discovered Fun Factors to REPLACE those that didn't pan out.



Disclaimers

Like any treatment, application differs depending on context. Bejeweled is unquestionably a great game, but evaluation of the the story is likely to fail at least some of the lab test points. “Break gems!” gets high marks for cohesion, but tests for “compelling” will likely fall short.

Likewise, for games that are mostly focused on delivering delivering narrative content the mechanics may seem quite thin, but this doesn't stop games like Choices or Episodes from being entertaining and successful. If you are unsure about how rigorously you need to evaluate the answers for your particular game, seek expert professional help from [Mobile Game Doctor](#).

Special Application for Hypercasual games

Because of the nature of so-called “Hypercasual” games, Morbid Game Design Obesity is especially likely to be terminal. In these cases, overweight lab tests for “clear” and “concise” and underweight tests for “cohesive” and “compelling” when evaluating design health. Likewise, hypercasual games should value strong mechanical answers over narrative responses.

About “Dr. Dave” Rohrl

Dave is the founder, owner, and Chief of Surgery for the [“Mobile Game Doctor” Game Design Agency](#). He is a 24-year game industry veteran with extensive experience in game design, production, and team leadership at successful game companies like the Learning Company, Playdom, Zynga, and PopCap. Dave designs substantial, yet accessible, games through hands-on activities that evolve the art and science of Game Design.



He created the Creative Clarity Toolkit™, and other game design tools, to document best practices uncovered during his time designing casual games for Pogo, Popcap, Zynga, Playdom, The Learning Company,, and others. He has since applied and refined these through 5 years of consulting and training Game Design teams around the world. His breadth and depth of experience ensures that the [Mobile Game Doctor](#) team provides clear and positive outcomes for clients and that every collaboration leaves his clients’ teams better prepared for the future.





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Mobile Game Doctor is an expert Game Design Agency committed to bringing the most experienced Game Designers from all over the world together to discuss, advise, collaborate, and consult to promote global game design health and creative well-being.

For immediate emergency assistance, preventative care, or just a game design checkup, the game design experts at Mobile Game Doctor are ready to help. Find us at <http://www.mobilegamedoctor.com/>

With an average 20 years game design experience and expertise in a variety of platforms, genres, and sub-disciplines, your studio can trust the designers at Mobile Game Doctor to prevent, diagnose, and treat even the most virulent of game design disorders.

And we even make house calls.

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