

Chronic Game Design

Myopia: Possible Complications, Identification, and Treatment With The Four Questions™ Lab Test Method

a.k.a. - How to Stop Wandering in the Desert and Get Your Team Focused on the Right Goals



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Abstract

Chronic Game Design Myopia describes a state in which a game team lacks sufficient high-level game design vision to define a clear course of future action. It is usually caused by an incomplete or unformed core creative thesis, with a resulting lack of clarity. This disorder can lead to many negative outcomes for infected teams, including wasting time, energy, and resources in counterproductive or inconclusive efforts. It is surprisingly epidemic in the game development community.

Game Design Myopia is treatable. This is the focus of the first in the Creative Clarity Toolkit™ developed and practiced by [Mobile Game Doctor](http://www.mobilegamedoctor.com/) 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

This disorder is often seen in growth-focused studios that have recently added project capacity through new team structures, but can impact organizations of all sizes and shapes. New teams, existing teams operating with new (or no) Game Design/Creative Direction ownership, or teams relying on Game Designers spread over multiple projects are especially susceptible.

Mid-size, high-growth studios are most at risk as symptoms can go unrecognized for some time, resulting in acute motivational atrophy and/or chronic team dysphoria caused by repeated design “whiplash”.



Symptoms

Commonly observed symptoms of Chronic Design Myopia include:

- Inability to articulate concise goals
- Lack of team focus
- Wandering projects
- Frequent rebooting
- Consistently half-hearted, unsatisfying results

Less common symptoms include:

- Repeated changes of design leadership
- Project cancellation

Causes

Studio growth patterns are one typical cause of Chronic Design Myopia. New studios often form around a single team, working on a passion project. The vision is tightly held by a few founding members. With success comes growth, often in bursts. Establishing new game teams requires an influx of new talent. With a pressing need to decentralize design decisions to trusted employees, founders promote successful individual contributors from within. This results in projects led by designers who have not yet developed the ability to unite entire teams behind a single, cohesive vision.

High levels of time pressure applied early in a project lifecycle is a second common cause. Teams asked to focus on aggressive deadlines from the start of a project often feel a strong urge to move directly into execution mode rather than taking the time needed to clearly define a creative direction. This results in effort being directed into activities that do not contribute to a final creative goal. This syndrome is sometimes known by its Latin name, "chaos".

Prognosis

Chronic Game Design Myopia can be serious or fatal if not treated. When game designers (or others with vision-holding responsibility) have difficulty clearly and concisely communicating the design vision, the whole team suffers. Unless the disorder is diagnosed and treated effectively, mediocre to poor project results typically follow. The team is likely to "wander in the desert", suffer multiple reboots, and fail to produce a compelling game despite schedule extensions and resource infusions.



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

Prescription

For wandering projects caused by Design Leads with chronic lack of design focus, Mobile Game Doctor prescribes The Four Questions™ regimen to aggressively refine creative direction, identify risk areas, and maintain team health.

The Four Questions™ Lab Test Method

Game Design vision can be refined by exploring the answers to the following questions and then lab testing the answers.

1. What is this game, mechanically?
2. What is this game's story?
3. What does mechanical success look like?
4. What is the story of success in this game?

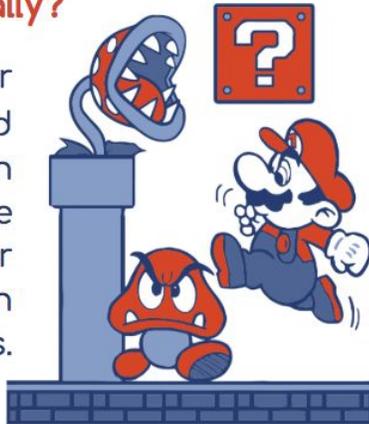
The Four Questions™ are a proprietary game design rubric developed and owned by Mobile Game Doctor and part of the Creative Clarity Toolset™. All elements of the Four Questions™ and Creative Clarity Tools™ are wholly owned by Mobile Game Doctor, LLC, Copyright 2018, all rights reserved.



SUPER MARIO BROS

Q1 - What is the game, mechanically?

A1 -The player runs and jumps through levels while evading or bouncing on enemies.



Q2 - What is this game's story?



A2 - The evil Bowser has kidnapped Princess Peach and you must survive his obstacle course to rescue her.



Q3 - What does success look like, mechanically, in this game?

A3 - Complete all the levels in the main quest line and beat the final boss before losing all your lives.

Q4 - What is the story of success in this game?



A4 - You reach the final castle and save Princess Peach.

"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?



Interpreting Your Results

As you explore the four questions, you can gauge the degree of myopia (or the presence of other maladies) based on evaluation of these critical indicators:

If the answer isn't clear: The writer has a murky understanding of at least one critical component of the game's essential identity.

If the answer isn't concise: It's likely that the game is sprawling, lacking in design focus.

If the answers lack cohesion: It's likely that the game feels messy or scattered, a product of weak creative direction (the topic of another upcoming paper).

If the answers are not compelling: This generally indicates that the core design is being driven by something other than player value. It's critical to pause and rework the unconvincing answers until they are in a form that both the team and its target players can get excited about.

Applying the Four Questions™

Step 1 - Ask Each Person on the Team to Give Their Answers

Treatment for Game Design Myopia starts with highlighting the symptoms and bringing them into sharp focus. Quarantine each member of the development team and evaluate the level of myopia by asking each to write down answers to the Four Questions independently.

Early Application as a Preventative

Ideally, apply early in the design process as a preventative measure. Best results occur when the Four Questions are an exit criteria for concepting, to immunize the team against this disorder from the project's outset. While not a guarantee against later infection, preventative application minimizes the risk.

Compare the answers. If strong creative focus exists, team members will give consistent answers that perform well in the lab tests outlined above.

The degree of alignment (or misalignment) is incredibly revealing. The differences will highlight the need for curative action and set the stage for productive discussions on a range of treatment options.



Step 2 - Ask the Designer to Craft Their Answers, Present Them to the Team

Note that the specific recommendation is to approach the designer only after gauging the level of team alignment. This is to avoid preemptive remedial actions on the part of the designer that might interfere with accurate diagnosis. The answers from the team afford a baseline on how aggressively treatment should proceed, and therefore need to be as sterile as possible.

If you find the designer cannot give high-performing answers using the lab testing procedure above, then the root cause is clear. Immediate intervention is necessary in the form of aggressive design coaching.

If the designer's vision is clear, then treatment need not be so aggressive. Focus instead on team dynamics initiatives to build trust, followed by Step 3.

Step 3 - Question, Discuss, Refine, Revise

Robust and trusting group therapy is a key component of treatment.

A key secondary effect is trust-building for the entire team, as individual ownership of ideas expands into group ownership and belief in the direction. Decision-making in all disciplines becomes more aligned, and “wandering” far less common. The team's clarity on not just the decision but also the decision process also ensures that if a course correction is needed, it will be identified early and the team can quickly rally behind the solution.

As tertiary benefits, this process can be repeated frequently to create a more agile team that is able to almost instinctively react correctly to external or internal factors that might otherwise derail or confuse direction.

Success breeds success. These positive traits tend to be contagious, spreading quickly throughout other teams within the studio—a factor that can be accelerated with cross-team interactions and staff rotation.

Step 4 - Publish

As one might assume clarity of vision is enhanced with greater transparency. Encourage sharing of ideas and direction, and solidify core decisions by physically publishing them. In this case, digital media alone, while transportable, lacks shared visibility and presence.



In addition to the clear benefits to the team, talking through and sharing these answers with management and other stakeholders promotes quick and clear project understanding. Such group therapy frequently increases the availability of support for the project, and promotes healthy cross-team function.

For more on creatively and effectively publishing game design information to your teams, sign up for future updates at mobilegamedoctor.com to be sure you are notified when we release The Game Poster (#6 in the Creative Clarity Tools™ series).

Recovery and Aftercare

Teams are most vulnerable to relapse just after treatment, before the new direction has fully settled and had time to set properly. Publish results promptly to serve as persistent reminders and check for commitment on an individual basis shortly after treatment is completed. Watch carefully for signs of dissembling, uncertainty, or apathy. Repeat steps 2 and 3 above on a regular basis to ensure continued (and increasing) sharpness of design vision.

As with any chronic condition, Game Design Myopia can flare up even after successful treatment. Repeated treatments may be necessary, especially in environments where strategic direction and market conditions change rapidly.

If vision clarity and team direction does not improve, or myopia continues to flare up regularly despite regular treatments, seek professional help immediately. Both circumstances can be the result of more deeply-seated conditions that are difficult to correct without outside consultation. The trusted and experienced [Game Designers at Mobile Game Doctor](#) can help with even the most insidious and dangerous game design maladies. Contact us at whitepaper@mobilegamedoctor.com for a consultation.

Warning! Don't exchange myopia for Target Fixation

Four Questions answers sometimes change over the course of development and that's fine. But, like any of the Creative Clarity Tools™, the team should take the time to formally and intentionally update these answers rather than just let them slide around amorphously.



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, Game Design Myopia 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.

Trust Mobile Game Doctor team to help make your games, and your teams, better.