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Soteria

Teaching Strategies to Overcome Anxiety

Doris C. Rusch (DePaul University)

Abstract

Soteria – Dreams as Currency (SDC) is a metaphorical, single-player, 3D adventure game intended to promote players' readiness to use psycho-therapeutically proven yet counter-intuitive strategies to overcome general anxiety disorder. It is based on the research of Anxiety Treatment Center founder Prof. Reid Wilson and serves to communicate principles of anxiety treatment in a way that enables embodied learning and experiential understanding. The design leverages a "recursive learning" approach (Mitgutsch & Weise 2011) that subverts player expectations and promotes the insight that to overcome fear, one must "move towards it". This paper is an in-depth analysis of how we harnessed rules, mechanics, narrative, metaphor and voice over to model anxiety behavior, dismantle it as unproductive and then introduce new, productive strategies to respond to fear in order to claim one's dreams and live a full life. The game can be accessed here: <http://playforchange.cdm.depaul.edu/projects/soteria/>

Introduction

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the US, affecting 40 million adults in the US age 18 or older, or 18% of the population.¹ Cognitive-behavioral therapy is the treatment of choice, yet as anxiety expert Prof. Reid Wilson states:

"[...] to engage the client in treatment, even skilled clinicians face the daunting task of changing anxious people's rigid belief system regarding how to cope with distress. (...) Typical clients have long established a mix of avoidance and resistance that is the most powerful potion they can conjure up to keep uncertainty and distress from boiling over. They seek help not because their current strategy fails to reduce distress, but because the decision to resist and avoid is generating a new set of problems." (Wilson, 2009)

To overcome anxiety, Wilson continues, patients need to let go of their desire for safety and certainty and move towards the fear, learn to not only accept, but even want it. This requires a difficult, because counter-intuitive, perspective shift. The impetus behind developing *Soteria – Dreams as Currency (SDC)* was to facilitate this shift through providing an *embodied experience* informed by a *recursive learning* model. According to Jim Gee (2003), *embodied experience* means learning by doing, by acting upon the (game)world and experiencing the consequences to one's actions first hand, just like in real life.

1. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-anxiety-disorder-among-adults.shtml> (URL consulted February 8th 2016)

The embodied nature of games makes them potentially supremely persuasive and vivid, more so than other, non-interactive forms of media (Bogost, 2007).

The *recursive learning* approach aims to address the rigid belief system anxiety patients have in order to cope with distress. Before one is open to trying something new, one needs to let go of the old. According to Mitgutsch & Weise (2011), recursive learning is based on the disappointment of old beliefs through failure followed by a restructuring and reframing of expectations, perceptions and meaning making. Recursive learning is transformational. It goes beyond knowledge acquisition to changing our modes of thinking. It is this kind of learning that gets us to “change our ways” and it can promote anxiety patients’ readiness to adopt new strategies. The safe space of a game presents the ideal “trial ground” to set the learning process in motion, to disappoint old beliefs in a tangible, experiential way by leading players down a path of failure and impasse, letting them experience first hand the negative side-effects of their established coping mechanisms. This disappointment reduces resistance towards trying a different approach and prepares the ground for the new strategy to be adopted: embracing fear.

It cannot be stressed enough that the purpose of the game is not to cure anxiety. It can best be compared to a self-help textbook, only with the advantages a procedural, experiential medium has to offer: to experience first hand and thus comprehend in a deep, embodied way the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of different approaches to fear. The game can only promote understanding of what needs to be done. It cannot hold players accountable for doing it. For some, playing the game might be enough to change their approach to fear in real life. Other still might need therapy. In any case, the game’s purpose is to help anxiety patients “get with the program”. To do so effectively, we had to address the following challenges with our design:

1. We needed to model anxiety in a general sense rather than focus on one, particular surface manifestation of it, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, panic attacks, phobias or social anxiety.
2. We needed to create something people would actually want to play / finish, and that helped counter their potential resistance to the theme.
3. We needed to make sure “fighting fears” wasn’t perceived as trivial in the context of the game
4. We needed to promote reflection and insight to help make sense of the gameplay experience and connect it to real life.

The following provides an in-depth analysis of how *SDC* addresses these challenges, how we used mechanics, metaphor, game structure, narrative and voice over to convey the message, and foster experiential, recursive learning. Reid Wilson acted as subject matter expert throughout the design process, providing feedback and ensuring accuracy of the portrayed strategies. Playtesting with people who self-identified as anxious and those who didn’t also played a crucial role throughout the whole design process. Anecdotes from testing are interspersed below. A formal study on *SDC* and its use in middle and high schools is in planning.

Metaphorical Approach – A Harbor Town, Shadows, a Key, and a Cat

To model the essence of anxiety disorder, rather than depicting specific surface manifestations of it, we decided to take a metaphorical approach to the design. According to Wilson, treating anxiety disorders

has little to do with the content of a particular fear (e.g. germs, flying, social judgment.) It is about targeting the motivations behind anxiety patients' actions.

Most decisions by anxious clients are motivated by two intentions: 1) to only take actions that have a highly predictable, positive outcome, and 2) to stay comfortable. If you lead with technique or skill practice without accounting for these implicit goals, you will encounter resistance. (Wilson, 2009).

These motivations are the invisible force underlying all anxiety disorders. They are also abstract. We can only see their symptoms, e.g. carefully avoiding the cracks between two cobblestones, not flying. Metaphors are excellent tools to make the abstract concrete. They allow us to get an "inside view". According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". With a metaphorical game, we can depict fear itself and use rules and mechanics to model the relationship between the fear, the person with anxiety and the issues that arise from that.

A metaphorical approach further addresses our second challenge: how to entice players to play a game on anxiety disorder? We were wary that a literal depiction would be overly preachy, boring and unappealing. A metaphor, however, creates a magic door into a difficult theme. This is a common approach in traditional media (few parents would go see a movie about death with their child, but *Bambi* addresses both in a manageable way through metaphor) and is becoming more and more popular in games as well (See *Papo Y Yo* (2012) and *Spirits of Spring* (2014) by Minority Media). Lastly, metaphor implies mystery. Beneath the visible surface is a deeper meaning. Uncovering this meaning motivates continued play and an active decoding process conducive to learning.

SDC's core metaphor is the inner landscape of a young woman, Ana, who is tormented by fears. It is represented as a night-time harbor town infested with Shadow Creatures and dedicated to the worship of the Goddess of Safety: Soteria. Your goal is to liberate your dreams from the clutches of Oicys (= the anxiety disorder) and his Shadow minions. The town is empty except for a few non-player characters – Soteria's servants – that stand for aspects of Ana's anxious self. They bestow protective items upon you: Soteria's token, which can be used to teleport out of danger into the safe town center; a compass to reduce uncertainty of navigation; a flash-bang lamp infused with Soteria's light that temporarily stuns the Shadows; a Phobos suit that is the ultimate protection against the Shadows (but has the side-effect of preventing you from claiming your dreams).

The only other character in Soteria is the alley cat O'Malley, whose sarcasm is only surpassed by his mangy appearance. O'Malley is the counter-voice to Soteria's servants. To reinforce the recursive learning process, he is designed to raise suspicion and resistance. He pushes you out of your comfort zone, but you are not ready. It makes sense to doubt his trustworthiness at this point.

The town center is the only safe place in the game and prominently features Soteria's statue – the cupped hand that protects and confines. The three districts that branch off to the east, west and north from the center are metaphorical representations of salient and pervasive aspects of anxiety. They all feature a special "challenge" location that further reinforces the district's theme, reusing its central motifs. The music district revolves around "loss of self-expression" due to anxiety. Its special location is the music store, which contains piles of silenced instruments. The theatre district's central idea is "fear of judgment". The district is lined by rotating eyes. Getting caught in their gaze draws the Shadows. At the end of the district is the puppet theatre that features a puppet version of Ana hanging over a pit on the stage. This plays with the concept of "being fear's puppet". The stage lights continue the eye motif and

their anxiety-inducing gaze. The third district forms around the observatory. Its core theme is “fear of uncertainty” represented by an illuminated, safe pathway that leads through the district and is guarded by Shadow Creatures. Step off the path and the Shadows attack. The observatory itself continues this motif by guiding you on a grid on the floor via a star chart that is projected on its far wall. Following the star chart’s instructions keeps you safe.

SDC’s mechanics are also metaphorical. They model Ana’s relation to her fear and its evolution in the course of the game. The game is structured in three parts, each with its own mechanics. In the first part, the Shadows are insurmountable. This models the perceived reality of anxiety patients that their fear is too big to be faced. The only way to deal with it is to avoid it. The first part of the game thus has stealth mechanics: observing movement patterns, sneaking, hiding and teleporting out of danger. The only non-stealth mechanic is “stun” with the flash-bang light. This mechanic, however, is extremely limited, can be used only once per level and needs to be recharged in the town center. (Some playtesters interpreted the lamp as anti-anxiety medication, which wasn’t intended but makes sense). The stealth gameplay is designed to evoke an experience of helplessness, making the player wish for more safety. In the second part of the game, this wish comes true when you obtain the Phobos suit. The Shadows can’t get to you while you’re wearing the suit, yet can’t do anything other than walk around. The suit prevents you from doing anything outside of your comfort zone. This is a mechanics-based commentary on the fact that safety measures severely limit your agency and keep you stuck. The third part of the game – the liberation – introduces two new mechanics to replace stealth: lingering through the fear and provoking it. “Lingering” is represented by repeatedly pressing space bar. This player input is meant to physically reinforce the will power needed to stand your ground in the face of fear. We deliberately stayed away from a “fighting” mechanic, since fighting is just another form of resisting fear. The point is to allow fear and endure it. You learn to provoke fear by choosing the right phrases from a dialogue menu.

From Fearful to Fierce – Promoting Reflection and Insight through Game Structure

Another big challenge was to make fighting fears non-trivial in the context of the game. We decided to depict the whole process of anxiety treatment – anxiety, impasse, overcoming – rather than fast-forwarding to the solution.

Part I: Modeling Anxiety

At the beginning of *Soteria*, you are subjected to the perceived reality of someone with an acute anxiety disorder. Fighting your fears – the Shadow Creatures – is not a choice. The game’s rules don’t allow it, because to someone with anxiety, facing the fear doesn’t feel like a choice. To set the journey in motion, we had to introduce a strong goal: unlived dreams. Like someone who would love to go on a camping trip with a bunch of friends but has a deep fear of spiders, or someone who wants to spend the summer with grandparents overseas, but is afraid of flying, Ana feels stuck, tired of feeling scared, but afraid to move forward. While she wants to pry her dreams from Oicys’ clutches, the only strategy she knows is to avoid and reject fear. Hence, when you as Ana try to confront Oicys right away, the gate to his domain is locked. O’Malley the cat tells you that you are not ready, yet. You need to find the key first. This key is broken into three pieces, each one hidden in one of the aforementioned special challenge locations and guarded by a particularly fearsome Shadow Creature. Since you only know how to sneak, hide and teleport out of danger, you are helpless in the face of these foes and are forced to back away.

Our intent was to make this part of the game feel profoundly disempowering and frustrating and to cater to all the false beliefs held by anxiety patients: that more protection – rather than less – will do the trick. We would then dismantle this instinct as misleading to leverage the power of recursive learning, which relies on the disappointment of current beliefs as the basis for new insight.

Part II: Impasse

After you have been forced out of the special locations with no key pieces to show for, you turn to the tailor for help. He says exactly what someone with anxiety might want to hear: that there is a way to be perfectly safe: the Phobos suit! He sends you back into the districts to collect cards that will infuse the Phobos suit with its protective qualities. Each district holds three cards: two represent dreams, one represents an avoidance strategy: card of chameleon to blend in; card of eggshells to walk as quietly as a little mouse; card of star chart to always stay on known pathways. These avoidance cards make the Phobos suit effective. It is a cocoon of fear and when you revisit the challenge locations with it, it keeps you safe by preventing you from doing anything. You're stuck.

Part III: Move Towards the Roar!

After your faith in safety strategies / Soteria has been utterly disappointed (and you got rid of the suit), the third part of *SDC* is dedicated to learning new strategies to overcome anxiety: O'Malley, whom you are now ready to listen to, teaches you how to linger through the fear. The ability to linger makes stealth superfluous, yet we observed that players often continued to sneak and hide for a while. Lingering is not difficult to perform on a mechanical level, but due to the conditioning players underwent in the first part of the game, it now presented an *emotional* challenge. Confronting the fear – even in the safe space of a game – had become non-trivial. You revisit the challenge locations and this time instead of being turned away by the Shadows, you linger through the discomfort as the noise in the music store, the scrutiny of the eyeball laps or the uncertainty of leaving the known path threaten to overwhelm you. Your reward is the “key to recover”, which you cannot fit into your limited inventory without letting go of all safety devices. We observed that some players were reluctant to toss their protective items but understood that it was necessary.

The final step to recovery is to provoke fear. You learn this strategy by “rattling Oicys’ cage” before the final confrontation. From several dialogue options, you pick the most provocative to announce your presence to the foe. O'Malley applauds a bold choice and is unimpressed by a timid one. Each provocation of fear is an act of blasphemy towards Soteria and erodes her statue in the town center until only one piece is left. This piece blocks the sewer gate to Oicys’ realm. Before you can use your key to open the gate and confront Oicys, you have to choose the right dialogue line to explicitly abandon Soteria, destroying the least piece of the statue. The final showdown with Oicys uses “linger” and “provoke” in tandem. You pick the right provoke from the dialogue options and then endure Oicys’ resulting tantrum. The confrontation has three stages to make sure players have to understand what they need to do and can't just win by accident. Choose the wrong provoke resets the encounter and you have to start from the beginning. Only when you got all provokes right and lingered through the fear, Oicys’ exhausts himself and releases your dreams.

Speaking the Mind – Promoting Reflection and Insight through Voice Over

Apart from the metaphors and game structure, *Soteria*'s voice over served a crucial role in helping to convey the game's message and promote insight and self-reflection. It was mentioned before that *Soteria*'s servants represent aspects of Ana's anxious self. The exchanges with them express Ana's concerns (e.g. going after her dreams is dangerous) and false hopes (e.g. if she just follows her "gut" and stays safe, all will be well). Ana's voice over reveals how conflicted she is about wanting to live her dreams and going after them. Her script was rewritten several times, taking feedback by subject matter expert Reid Wilson into account. According to Wilson, the first pass made her appear too confident. In order to accurately capture the mindset of a person struggling with anxiety disorder, she had to be much more hesitant and reluctant to move forward, yet compelled to do so by a strong motivation (=dreams). He also pointed out the importance of articulating her worries – the whispers you hear in the challenge locations – in a way that didn't speak towards one, particular manifestation of anxiety, but captured a broader range of the disorder.

Ana's voice over is meant to be a vehicle for empathy as well as identification. Players' feedback to Ana as a character was mixed, though. While some players who self-identified with anxiety disorder said they had to take a break from playing because the whispers were "too close to home" and triggered intense discomfort, others experienced Ana as "too whiney" in the first half of the game. We generally observed players responding positively to Ana's increasing empowerment in the second half of the game. It is noteworthy that particularly players who self-identified as anxious rejected Ana's initial hesitancy, while players who had anxious friends or family members found Ana very relatable and thought she was an accurate representation of someone with anxiety disorder. We found that people who most rejected Ana didn't do so because anxiety was a foreign concept to them, but because they were overly familiar with it. As one of our playtesters said, who self-identified as having anxiety: "What she says rings true, but it made me disengage. No one wants to be that pathetic!" How a player relates to Ana can promote self-reflection and critical discussion, which promises to be particularly productive when the game is played in the context of therapy, counseling or with a parent.

O'Malley also has substantial voice over presence. The dialogues between him and Ana are some of the main drivers of reflection, aimed at helping players interpret and make sense of the game's metaphors and encounters. O'Malley's job is to point Ana in the right direction, yet he is deliberately designed to be ambiguous to make his advice as "un-preachy" as possible. One of our playtesters, a 15 year-old young man, exclaimed delightedly after a dialogue with O'Malley: "Oh that cat, he's such a dick! I love him!" Raising doubts about O'Malley's intentions and reliability was further conducive to our recursive learning approach. If O'Malley had been clearly portrayed as trustworthy from the start, it would have conflicted with our goal of luring players down the wrong path first. However, the relationship with O'Malley changes after Ana's strategies have been disappointed. As in many mentor-disciple narratives, the disciple first rejects the mentor's ideas as absurd or pointless (think of the great car washing scene in *Karate kid!*) and tries to go his / her own way, until he / she hits bottom and ruefully returns to the mentor, willing to trust his / her tutelage. Once O'Malley taught Ana the linger mechanic, he becomes a source of encouragement, providing her with the affirmations that help her stand her ground in the face of fear. These affirmations are eventually internalized by Ana and her voice over replaces that of O'Malley's when she beats the Shadows in the challenge locations.

Conclusion

SDC allows players to experience the ineffectiveness of common, counter-productive anxiety strategies – rejecting and avoiding fear – in order to prepare the ground for new, more effective strategies to deal with anxiety: moving towards, enduring, even wanting the fear. It does so by leading players through the whole dramaturgy of anxiety treatment with its game structure: from modeling the initial problem (i.e. fear is perceived as insurmountable), to reaching and impasse, to providing a solution. The game leverages metaphors to reduce resistance to the theme, tap into players’ curiosity and, most importantly, to portray the essence of anxiety, rather than depicting particular surface manifestations of it. It “works” in the sense that players cannot complete the game without understanding its core messages: they cannot win, if they don’t stop worshipping Soteria, the goddess of safety, if they don’t abandon their stealth gameplay in favor of confronting and lingering through the fear, and if they don’t learn how to provoke fear. Does that mean players who identify with having an anxiety disorder are cured after playing? Unfortunately, no. Reading a self-help book doesn’t absolve you from applying the newly learnt strategies to real life, “doing the work”, and neither does playing *SDC*. It is our goal, though, that the game effectively challenges players’ belief system about how to deal with anxiety disorder; that it provokes reflection and insight through embodied experience, and that it sets a process of rethinking / relearning anxiety strategies in motion that – maybe with the help of a supportive context within which the game is played – transfers into real life and transforms how people approach the disorder.

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