

Psychasthenia 4: Insomnia, 2022

Artists' statement

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Psychasthenia 4: Insomnia explores the idea of hacking into the unconscious world of sleep and dreams through the use of sleep technologies, an emerging field of psycho-neural transformation. The game experience is initiated with a visit to a sleep doctor who helps you tune your sleep settings meant to produce feelings of comfort, safety, naturalness, and community via artificial means. Hours of sleep, reading materials, temperature, and an array of audio options are presented. These mechanisms reflect an aggressively instrumented industry of self-care. Neuroplastic triggers and digital tweaks on the idea of medication blur the boundaries further of body/mind/machine. A breathing game further immerses the user into the techno-mediated system. By breathing in and out you are also buying in physiologically to the world we create; beating the game enables you to enter the first stage of sleep.

As you drift off and move through the cycles of sleep and dreams in the game world, you periodically find yourself in the dream space in between, a psychic lobby which reflects the interior of your mind. Guides appear throughout to help you navigate the system at key points in the experience. The first Guide orients you towards what to expect in your quest and leads you into the next phase of your sleep cycle. You next transition into a hotel room/childhood bedroom/hospital room that becomes a psychic waystation and memory palace. Within the dream world, you have some ability to choose from amongst potential totemic triggers objects that take you into micro-dreams, which tease you with moments of angst, futility, and disempowerment, coupled with enigmatic commentary reflecting the collective unconscious of our data-driven world.

As the heroic night journey progresses, you encounter the recurring micro-traumas that keep you awake at night by instancing past failures and the corresponding performance anxiety. Early on, the Test, The Presentation, the Interview reflect archetypal experiences that live on your wretched re-imaginings. At this stage in the game, the user has minimal agency, but this is your first mock heroic battle and you traverse quotidian, psychic landscapes as mediated through the system. The next Guide you encounter upon your return to the hotel room points out the need to do some personal housekeeping. You can then go deeper into navigating your life's path by picking up car keys, reading a book of wisdom, or seeing what is happening in the news on the tv. Each of the mini-dreams triggered here is about the present state choices to be made in your life's path. Mini-games within dreams also allow you to exert some limited control over your ultimate night-time fate.

Over the course of the game, the stages of your sleep journey progress to increasingly abstracted and surreal surroundings. Your next dream teleport journey is into a desert, ruined landscape of abstracted fears and worries, manifesting the outsized social burdens contemporary culture. Here you must decide which psychic burdens to take up and carry forward, and which to drop. These take the form of acoustically activated rocks that you investigate and select or discard. The final Guide forces you to accept responsibility and agency in your actions, as you perfect dream lucidity as a form of instrumented self-control. In this late phase of your nighttime reverie, you traverse psychic scaffolding in order to enter into a city whispering with ongoing obligations and threats. Survival here depends upon your ability to focus and persist amidst innumerable distractions and demands.

Finally, your reward is a deep, oceanic sleep state – but one that you nonetheless must continue to work to maintain. And then, just as you find perfect nighttime balance, the alarm goes off, ending your repose. Your journey through the system is complete - for now - but interruption provokes awareness that success was only partial, with another sleep cycle still awaiting your calibration and re-discovery.