UC Irvine
2022 Games + Learning + Society Conference Proceedings

Title
LoFi Hip Hop Worlds to Study In

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Publication Date
2022-09-18

Peer reviewed

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Figure 1

Description

LoFi Hip Hop Worlds to Study In is a collection of three-dimensional worlds full of study spots with instrumental music and ambient sounds. Students can explore these worlds to relax while they take breaks from studying. The software allows them to set a timer to remind them to come back to their studies. When they do, they can set a new timer; the game-world remains inactive in the background, but the application continues to provide relaxing sounds and beats with no ads. The game was released on Itch.io in 2021 to support students with remote learning during the COVID19 pandemic (https://lofiworlds.itch.io/study). At GLS 2022 it was set up in the arcade to offer attendees some meditative downtime as they took a break from the intensity of the conference.

Links and Reviews

A full playable version of the game, a short Youtube video trailer, and screenshots can be found at https://lofiworlds.itch.io/study. An example screenshot can be found above (Figure 1). The game has been downloaded over 2,000 times, is rated 4.8/5 stars, and has been presented at the USC Games Expo, HCI '21, and IndieCade Horizons. Alex Ong (2021) from PC Gamer described it as "something brilliant that I didn't know I needed after over a year of pandemic life". A student named KiraV said that it is "so relaxing to pick a spot and chill, really helps me with studying for uni exams and there is a huge variety of spots, relaxing sounds, and calm lofi music."

Design Goals Narrated by the Author

When the pandemic hit, I found myself struggling to work in a shared apartment in a loud neighborhood. I put on headphones, and like many students, I searched for instrumental study music to help me focus. I returned to the popular LoFi Hip-Hop Beats study playlists on YouTube that my students had introduced me to when I was a high school teacher. A survey on remote learning among LA public school students found that only about one in three families reported that students always have a place to study free of distraction (Aguilar et al., 2020). In an effort to reduce barriers to learning and help students focus, Los Angeles Unified School District gave high school students noise cancelling headphones (Los Angeles Unified, 2020). I imagined that many students might use them for a familiar purpose: listen to hip hop study music from YouTube. But I worried that the ads on these channels might be distracting for them.

To support these students, Israel Jones and I designed a cross between a mindfulness app, a study aid like a Pomodoro timer, and a walking simulator game like Walden (Fullerton, 2017). Beyond remote learning, teachers and students can also use it to help focus and relax during in-person and hybrid learning sessions. Some players have compared it to the "fidget toys" they have on their desks to provide sensory breaks during long work sessions, like squeezable balls or spinners.

The software features a minimal user interface, customizable settings, diverse and culturally relevant characters, and no objectives beyond the study goals students set for themselves. Students can fine-tune their soundscape by walking closer or farther away from radios playing different playlists or other sources of sound in the worlds such as waves, crackling fires, and non-player characters doing breathing meditations. The game's built-in timers can help establish a sustainable rhythm between studying and taking breaks, similar to the Pomodoro method.

This design is based on recent HCI research I conducted on mindfulness games and apps (Hamilton et al., 2021). *Walden, a Game* (Fullerton, 2017) has gained a lot of attention because, unlike most games, it encourages players to slow down and contemplate life mindfully. I analyzed data from interviews and contextual inquiries where participants played *Walden* and thought aloud about their experiences with it. Many participants liked the open-world design of *Walden,* where they can wander freely to relax, but they wanted a game without defined objectives such as survival needs or quests that they could play for short amounts of time to relax between work sessions. We designed *Lofi Hip Hop Worlds to Study In* to meet that desire.

The game offers an experimental approach to educational game design and it is a product that conference attendees might find immediately useful inside and outside of classroom spaces. I also hope it might help attendees transition back to being in person together by providing a space to relax and reflect.

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