

The Front Office: Hockey Management Simulator

Vishal Dhillon

Front Office | hockey management simulator

Take full control of a hockey franchise and shape their future

Project Type: UX/UI Platform, Simulator, Personal Project

Role: UX/UI Designer

Industry: Sports, Mobile gaming, Simulation

Tools: Figma, Banani

Methods: Informal interviews, Competitive analysis, Usability testing

Overview

The Front Office is a personal concept project born from a specific frustration that sports management simulators are often more about basic features than they are about the thrill of running a team. As a hockey fan and a designer, I've seen the split between overly simple mobile clickers and incredibly dense desktop sims that feel visually exhausting. This project is an exploration of how a digital command centre can feel professional and data heavy without losing its soul. It's an attempt to build a global hockey ecosystem that scales with the user, moving away from the unrealistic amateur experiences that are

currently present in the space.

Why This Mattered to Me

I wasn't just interested in building a game, I was interested in how to manage unstructured complexity. In sports, finance, or logistics, we are surrounded by metrics, but we are rarely supported in how to interpret them or use them.

Hockey is the perfect environment to study this. I wanted to create something that encompasses all of the complicated dynamics in hockey ranging from salary caps, collective bargaining agreements to advanced analytics and business tactics. This project was my way of seeing if I could design a concept that acts essentially a SaaS platform for sports that prioritizes the depth of real world sports management.

Problem

After spending time in community forums and reflecting on my own experiences with sims, a recurring pattern emerged. Most tools are technically functional, but they fail to support the feeling of being a General Manager. One user's feedback stuck with me: "I love the mode, but after a few seasons, it feels like I'm kinda just doing the same thing over and over."

This revealed a massive gap. The tools were recording the stats but weren't guiding the strategy. The experience was hollow and didn't have the depth to really sustain the feeling of being a General Manager.

The Human Friction

- **The Interpretation Barrier:** Fans know their team needs a trade, but they don't always know how to navigate the intricate CBA rules to make it happen.
- **The Sandbox Churn:** Without a sense of beating the game, the simulation eventually loses its

weight. Users were quitting not because they were bored of hockey, but because they were bored of the interface.

Discovery

Methods

To find the right balance, I performed a Heuristic Evaluation of current leaders like Football Manager and EA Sports' NHL, but I also looked outside the genre at professional trading platforms and wellness apps. I wanted to see how other industries handle data density without overwhelming the user.

Identifying the Tensions

- **Precision vs. Focus:** Users want every advanced stat (Corsi, xG, Fenwick), but they don't want them cluttering the home screen when they're just trying to check the schedule.
- **Trust vs. Automation:** I found that users are skeptical of auto features such as auto scouting or auto trading because they don't see the AI's logic.
- **Light vs. Dark:** While dark mode is the default for games, I began to question if a light mode inspired by a fresh sheet of ice would actually improve focus and long-term session health.

What I was Unsure About

I didn't start with all the answers. I was genuinely worried that a white ice background would be too bright and distracting. I also questioned the gamification layer. Would a list of objectives called "Road to Greatness" feel like a cheap mobile gimmick? I had to stay skeptical and iterate through several versions to ensure these features felt like a natural part of the executive experience.

Design Strategies

The "White Ice" Canvas

I made a deliberate pivot to a light mode. The background is a high-resolution, top-down view of a rink surface covered in realistic skate grooves and blade marks. This wasn't just for style; it was about clarity. By using white ice as a canvas and navy blue data became much easier to scan. It felt less like a game and more like an immersive simulation.

Pivot: Physicalizing the Transaction

Early in the design, trading was a standard list based transaction. It felt hollow. I decided to pivot and trade efficiency for agency. I designed the Trade Negotiator around a scale system. As you add players or draft picks, the scale physically tilts. It's an intentional piece of friction that provides immediate, non verbal feedback. It makes the user feel the weight of their decisions. They are also given feedback about why a certain trade can or cannot happen due to certain restrictions in the CBA or a player's contract.

Road to Greatness

I realized that simulation games need a more defined purpose. I designed the Road to Greatness to turn a never ending simulation into a directed journey. By tying legendary content like the 1994 Rangers or the Miracle on Ice rosters to specific management milestones, I gave the user a reason to care about the progress they were making in the game. They have other reasons beyond simply taking over a franchise, they will have certain tasks that they will need to complete to be great. These tasks will begin broadly and become more difficult and specific as the user progresses.

Contextual Navigation

I worked hard to keep the interface from feeling basic. Using Progressive Disclosure, I designed a system where the navigation adapts. In the "Lobby" (Solo, Online, Edit), you're a player. Once you enter a "Save," you become the GM, and the UI shifts to prioritize the Dashboard, Roster, and Pulse.

Prototyping & Iteration

I spent a lot of time testing between making the UI too sparse or too dense. Through several iterations, I focused on:

- **The Matchup Widget:** Making the transition from checking mundane things to simulation feel seamless.
- **The Social Pulse:** Refining the X style feed to ensure rumours felt like genuine insider leaks rather than just random text.
- **The In-Depth Sim:** Giving the player more control over what's actively happening in the game as opposed to a simple simulation that generates a score and stats.

Outcome

The final concept for The Front Office demonstrates how complex data can feel approachable when it's organized around user intent. It stops being a database and starts being an experience.

- **Integrated Management:** From arena operations to the minor league affiliate, everything feels connected.
- **Behind the Data:** Advanced analytics are embedded into player cards, explaining why a player is struggling rather than just showing a low number.

- **Global Reach:** A system that scales from the NHL to European leagues, respecting the unique rules and tensions of each.

Reflection & Next Steps

This project fundamentally challenged me to rethink what adapting truly means in UX. I've realized that it isn't about stripping away features to reach a minimalist surface, but rather about making inherently complex systems intuitive, easy to understand and navigate.

To validate this, my next step involves conducting rigorous usability testing with hardcore simulation players to ensure the aesthetic maintains its clarity and comfort over the course of a full game experience. I am also eager to expand the pipeline by exploring how the "Road to Greatness" progression could adapt to a user's specific playstyle. Finally, I'll be focusing on the technical mapping required to translate these high fidelity screens into a fully functional app that can handle the rigorous amounts of data that will be entering and exiting the game.