A.C.T.I.O.N. GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT (prototype version)

Game concept

A Cautionary Torment Imposed On the Nameless (*A.C.T.I.O.N.*) is an action, top-down game where the player has to escape a giant conglomerate of areas filled with highly deadly creatures by setting traps and making use of their limited resources.

Game loop

A.C.T.I.O.N.'s high-level game loop is to explore an area and evade enemies until (be it by using traps or careful traversal of the world) enough useful resources are found that the player deems it worth to leave towards another place. This repeats until the player feels sufficiently prepared to go challenge the final enemy's domains, where they will escape the last area.

Game mechanics and dynamics

The player's basic mechanics are to walk, run, attack and set traps. With those, they should be able to navigate the map until they decide to face the final challenge.

The dynamics that should ensue during the game loop would mainly derive from the enemies being very threatening entities: being caught by them results in an instantaneous death, and their chasing speed is higher than the player's. Additionally, the player has a stamina bar that limits how much they can run away.

On the other hand, the map will be mainly divided in two types of spaces: open areas where the player can be easily detected but which are easier to traverse; and enclosed spaces where instead of instant death, they face minor enemies that can be dealt with. Note that major enemies can still access enclosed spaces, but in those, the player can set traps to divert their attention (or they do so more effectively, left to develop).

Adding to the immediate issue of surviving, the player will have a "mind" bar that affects the effectivity of their actions, and which depletes parallel to stamina, albeit at a slower pace. While stamina recovers with time, mind only does so spending limited items.

The mind bar will be needed for the final confrontation (which will be made explicit to the player at the start), and the gathering of resources, necessary to reach the end, will require exploration. The balance between acquiring new items and keeping the mind bar sufficiently high, combining the combat and exploration elements of the game, is the core of the game's challenge.

Further development

The following are a series of comments relevant to the game core's periphery, but which will depend on implementation, playtesting and development time.

The priority to be discussed will be how to maintain spice in the game loop. The way it has been defined until now, a FOOS should be rather easy to develop, and it also feels like a game where you can win by playing extremely slow, not taking any risks, and feeling no emotional fluctuations.

The first measure to counter that was the introduction of status effects, more specifically, an item that serves to hide the presence of the player, but which has a timer attached to it. This way, the player is forced to go forth, be it in search of more of such items to extend their play time, or to hurry get other important resources before they become easily detected by the enemy entities. Additionally, we can use those items as a pace controller when making balancing decisions (especially if we keep a more linear level design, which is a discussion of its own, that will also affect the save system).

Another approach considered was the introduction of stealth mechanics; if we are going to have a detection level expressed in some way, we can diversify into multiple types of interactions. For example, if we assume the mentioned item is an odor mask, we can add a light system to affect detection based on distance and sight, or detection by movement speed.

The duality between open and enclosed spaces was also cause to worry, as the polarity between their risk – reward relations could make the player too reclusive, and stay only in enclosed areas. It would make sense to allow them to throw traps instead of setting them. Those could be less effective or consistent, but faster to deploy. Similarly, we could make the set traps require an activation trigger, be it by throwing a projectile, or activating when they are step on. Those approaches could imply the addition of a "shoot" action, or a "jump" action that added a skill degree to the use of traps, needing more than just planning. The idea of jumping over the trap to not activate it yourself could also apply to enemies, like having flying ones, or for them to have a chance to jump over it in open spaces, where they can "see" the traps more clearly. With that being the case, we could also have traps with

different activation conditions; that's probably out of scope, so I mention it here, but won't develop it anymore as of now.

Once the game loop was consistently engaging, it would be time to add events that hand-craft specific situations or dynamics that lead to especially interesting risk – reward situations. While this feature will not be present in the initial iterations, it will be important to start developing considering the idea of event signaling as a trigger for behavior change as a given, to avoid code re-works in the future.

Another idea that was mixed in during the initial brainstorming was of adding NPCs with similar gameplay capabilities around the world, and being able to use them to form alliances, as bait, for them to set traps against the player, to have narrative events… But that most definitely goes out of scope.

Interactive proposals

Here's a list of interactions that would or could generate interesting dynamics in gameplay:

- An item that gets the enemies' attention, like a bait (a rabbit or a bird, for example)

- We want the player to deal with problems 1-by-1, so we should have an entity manager that keeps each entity away from each other

    - What happens when two entities find each other while the player is being chased?

- Trap effects: slow down, blinding (resets enemy focus; if the player hides before they get the agro again, enemy will return to roam instead of chase)

- Enemies could have a rage meter that invalidate trap's effects, so the player can't just abuse them (probably solvable through resource balancing, though)

- If you are not detected but very close to a monster, the thing will stare at you for a few moments before passing by (audio spike for tension; decreases mind)

On the final boss

A part of the game's premise is that the player is aware of the importance of the "mind" bar to complete the game, and because of it, understands how detrimental it is to act rashly. This also informs the dichotomy between using resources to improve "mind", or using them to be better equipped to explore.

Such an approach has two major problems: how to avoid confusion with the premise, which could ruin the entire experience; and how to make the ending satisfying, if the condition we give to the player to reach it is simply to "gather resources", not to "learn a gameplay system".

On the introduction problem, an adequate sequence has to be built so that the player's purpose is as unmistakable, yet as immersive, as possible. While further thought will be given once there's a basis to work from, considerations to keep in mind include things like visually clear change (the mind bar having especially bright effects as it depletes in the introductory scene, for example), an insinuation that the sequence will be the final challenge of the game (something like a black screen that reads "… and so, you reach the pace where your journey will end"), and never taking the control away from the player to make them understand that the introduction is gameplay…

On how to make a satisfying closure, the easiest answer was to tie it to a skill check. This strongly supports the idea of traps being triggered by any entity, including the player, so that they have to maneuver around them too, but having an inventory that limits the amount of resources they can use, and then designing an arena that can only be traversed by accurately placing traps in the right place also serves as a skill check, albeit more cognitive that mechanic.

Art design

The main character will be an androgynous youngster who is left to a pack of wild beasts as an offering. Consequently, its clothes are basic, and in a state that reflects their abandonment. Art style-wise, I've experienced enough games that use a chibi esthetic combined with horror settings to know it's a good combination.

In terms of audio, I thought that a decent first approach, if maybe a bit unoriginal, would be to build tension through background noise, and do variations on that based on the game state. I'm no musician, though, so I'll do with what I can get from others.

In relation with gameplay, I did have in mind that I wanted to clearly reflect the state of the enemies through how they moved, to clearly indicate to the player

when they should run away, and when they should play the stealth game. This will probably be done through shader effects and UI elements.