A.C.T.I.O.N. GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT

While this is a preliminary version of the GDD, it already considers the game's core design as a settled matter, and as such, it only describes and discusses the vision of the game concerning elements that are within said restrictions. For an overview of everything that was dropped up to this point, check the prototype version of the GDD.

Game concept

A Cautionary Torment Imposed On the Nameless (*A.C.T.I.O.N.*) is an action, top-down game focus on resource recollection and management in an extreme environment.

Game loop

The core game loop consists of the player exploring the map, killing minor mobs, recollecting materials, and crafting traps with them, to put them to use against the area's boss. This cycle repeats multiple times per area, against the same boss.

The experience aims to create long wind-ups of tension during the low-risk scavenging that culminate in a short, easily deadly peak encounter with the boss.

Game mechanics

The player is able to:

- Walk: slow movement, value 250 pixels / second.
- Run: fast movement, value 800 pixels / second. It causes a "noise" signal that can alert the area's boss. Running decreases the stamina bar.
- Attack: fast hit fit a branch, only effective against minor enemies.
- Set trap: the avatar stays in place during 2 seconds, setting a trap on the ground.

- Hide: the avatar covers itself with their cloak, emitting no more “vision” signals.

Game components

The game can be divided in three parts:

Avatar

The avatar is an androgynous youngster who recollects materials in order to leave the hazardous environment they were thrown into at the start of their quest. Gameplay-wise, it is characterized by a series of parameters:

- Stamina bar: regulates how long can the avatar run. When it goes under 50%, it starts building up the stress bar.

- Stress bar: regulates the success rate of the planted traps: the higher the bar, the higher the chance that nothing happens after is it triggered. It increases once the stamina bar goes under 50%, and when a boss is charging towards the avatar.

Additionally, they will have a simple inventory from which they can automatically craft different traps based on the gathered resources, and see how many of each type they have.

Enemies

The enemies in this game are the environment’s wildlife, which can be divided in two: minor enemies, and bosses. Minor enemies are non-moving entities who can drop resources, whose only behavior is to attack the player when it enters their range.

Bosses are the real juice of the action side of the game. They are entities who constantly go after the player, and once they catch up, cause instantaneous death. There are only two types of bosses: the average one, and the final boss.

The average bosses’ basic behavior is a pathfinding algorithm towards the player, based on their “sense of smell”. Once they have reached the end point of their pathfinding, they will relocate the player, and renew their persecution. During that process, two things might happen:

- Hearing event: in a radius of 640 pixels, any “sound” is detected, and its origin position becomes the new objective of the boss.

- Sight event: in a radius of 640 pixels, raytracing is used to see if there is any wall between the boss and the source of a “sight” event. If there is not, the boss enters a chase state towards the origin of the event.

Once the chase state has been entered, the player might be caught, triggering “game over”; the boss might lose sight of the player; or the boss’ attention might go to some other entity. Once their chase reaches the final destination, or is interrupted without the possibility to continue, the boss returns to their basic patrol behavior.

The average boss’ walking and running speed both are 1.1 times bigger than the player’s, ensuring they will catch up, and forcing the player to interact with them to survive.

While the final boss is not defined yet, we do have defined that, unlike the basic bosses, it shouldn’t cause the stress bar to increase, because the final level should be a close-range persecution; if stress was built up just by proximity, we would have to make the level very short, or the increase very negligible, both of which seem emotionally inconvenient options.

Traps

Traps are tiles that have been manipulated by the player to cause a certain effect when triggered, which can be caused by the player or any boss stepping onto them.

There are three types of traps:

- Light trap: its effects last 6s. It requires 1 vegetal rope and 1 incandescent bulb.

- Sound trap: its effects last 2s. It requires 1 vegetal rope and 3 pressurized glands.

- Movement trap: it requires 3 vegetal rope and 1 unconscious mouse. By triggering it, a mouse spawns and starts running towards the opposite direction at which the area boss is, emitting vision events. Once it hits a wall, the mouse disappears.

Depending on who does so, they have different effects (if it’s not specified, assume there is none):

- Player-trigger case:
    - Light trap: the screen goes totally white through a 0.5s transition. The player can still move, but will hardly be able to tell where are they going.
- Boss-trigger case:
    - Light trap: an animation appears at the traps position, causing the boss to be unable to receive vision events. Their pathfinding, however, is not deleted, so they will continue moving.
    - Sound trap: the boss is shaken by the sound, and is kept immobile.
    - Movement trap: the boss will prioritize movement trap vision events over player vision events.

Progression

The game starts on a cinematic that showcases the final boss, and explains both the goal of the game and the conditions to succeed. From there on, the player is thrown into a safe zone that connects the final boss area with the rest of the world. Since going into the boss arena means losing, the player will have to enter the world, but doing so with the knowledge of what is necessary to return and win.

From there, a series of levels will follow, in a sequence of increasing difficulty, pitting the player against the harsh environment, and making them use the resources they have to gather before they undo their way to challenge the final boss. The game will only save every time an area transition takes place, to derange the player from abusing the save system.

Among the sequence that defines a playthrough, there are a series of elements yet to be considered design-wise:

- How would the introductory cinematic convey all the concepts it should
- Whether we should add a fog of war effect to increase tension during map traversal

- The addition of hand-crafted events that lead to especially interesting risk – reward situations

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 combat 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 a difficult-to-traverse arena would serve the same purpose of raising the skill ceiling.

The ability to make an enemy go forward without vision, to stop them and redirect them combined with hazards is a refreshing yet consistent approach to take on the final boss in comparison with the rest of the game, making those dynamics fit with the initial plan.

Level design

Considering the simplistic gameplay, and the lack of diversity in enemy behavior, the level design will be doing most of the heavy-lifting to regulate difficulty.

There are three elements worth paying notice to:

- Corners: due to the pathfinding's traversal, the enemy loses a bit of distance relative to the player when turning corner, even with their superior speed. Thus, the more corners, the more opportunities a payer will have to skillfully maneuver away of their persecutors.

- Width: if being reached by the boss is an inevitability, the player will have to use traps. To trigger them, they will have to make the bosses stand on them. However, they always follow behind the avatar, and since traps trigger when the avatar step on them, too, the player is forced to make a turn to trick the boss. In summary, the wider a space, the easier for the player to make that turn, although the more distance they will have to cover back to align the enemies with the trap.

- Openness: the vision of bosses is limited by walls. The more walls, then, the safer it is to move, as the avatar will not trigger the chase behavior of enemies.

Discarded content

The following is a list of content that was discarded during the first iteration, and the justification for it:

- Smell-regulating item: this was conceptualized as a way to regulate pacing, but since enemy speed > player speed, there will already be enough pressure to discourage excessively slow or conservative gameplay.

- Projectile weapons: they were mentioned as a mix of increasing the skill requirement to use traps, and to diversify the types of traps available, but the later won't be implemented due to time constrains, and the prior can be done less cumbersomely through a jumping action.

- Enemy rage meter: a bar that would invalidate the effects of traps after a boss had triggered multiple of those. Due to their deadly nature, and how we visualized player interaction in the game, this would be too niche an interaction to spend time on it.