

Introduction

This document is intended for internal use only, between all parties involved or interested in the development and publishing of The Dream of Shadowlands. As I am largely inexperienced in the video game industry and much of the relevant terminology used within it, this document aims to fully expand upon the scope and features I have in mind for development of this title. This document has been written after the completion of Episode 1 and during the development cycle of Episode 2, so it will discuss aspects of the game's design that have already been implemented and playable, as well as aspects that are planned for the future.

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Game Design: Structure and Rules

Episodic Format

The Dream of Shadowlands is one large, overarching game divided into 5 smaller episodes. This was decided to help the game garner a following more steadily with each episode's release, as well as to make the game more accessible to people with lower-end hardware or less storage space. All episodes share a repository folder on the player's computer, allowing save data to be convertible to the next episode once it is ready for release.

Story

- The story is the main focus of the game.
- The story must be driven primarily by character interaction/development (60% based on characters either speaking to one another or having introspective moments, 40% based on level progression or scripted plot events).
- The story will contain mature themes such as violence, sexual themes, and psychological trauma, but most graphic acts will either be implied or not shown explicitly.
- By the final episode, the story will have multiple endings based on player choices across all episodes.

Audio/Visuals

- The visual style must be inspired by 90s anime such as "Slayers."
- The overworld sprites of characters and enemies must be simplified to resemble the smaller sprites of other games in the RPG genre.
- The sound design must set an unsettling tone.
- The game must feature full voice over for all character lines.
- Music composed for the game is written in MIDI in either the LMMS or FL Studio programs, then exported as a track.

Core Gameplay Loop

- The core gameplay loop is: Explore a new area > Encounter monsters and solve puzzles > Find new items > Encounter a boss battle > Proceed to the next area
- Throughout the loop, the player will uncover the story, learning more about the characters and setting.
- There are a variety of secret paths and dialogues that are not required to progress through the level, but are hinted at subtly. Finding these can give players new insight about the story or provide stat boosts to their combat abilities.

Key Elements of Gameplay

Story Progression

The game focuses heavily on story, often triggered by the player interacting with the game's environment. There is a mix of dialogue that will be seen in every playthrough and dialogue that can be uncovered through player choice. The story emphasizes character relationships, psychological horror, and philosophical issues.

Story Synopsis: When someone is truly hated, they may find themselves forced out of the safety of the light and into the unforgiving dark. Rina wakes up lost and confused in a mysterious new world, learning she has been cursed. Reluctantly teaming up with a plain-spoken demon named Jyl, they adventure through a myriad of twisted dreamscapes in search of a goddess with the ability to send Rina home. Stumbling upon a cult's plot and facing off with fearsome monsters, the Shadowlands prove to be a treacherous place.

Throughout the story, Rina must face her inner trauma stemming from an attempted sexual assault and stalking incident, as well as try to understand the circumstances of her curse. Likewise, Jyl must learn to understand his disillusionment with his life and feelings of inadequacy. The pair are mutually supported by one another, and are able to overcome much of their problems because of their unlikely friendship. The story's main themes are of psychological struggle and friendship, which is why it is primarily character driven.

Similarly, the game will touch on philosophical issues when one of the main antagonists, a cult leader named Kazari, wants to use Rina in her plan to destroy the goddess, Yurenica. Kazari's intentions are surprisingly good, but her methods are morally questionable. This is one of a few different instances where Rina, and by extension the player, must weigh the ethics of other characters.

Puzzle Solving

There is a diverse array of puzzles that must be solved in order to progress through each episode. Many of the puzzles involve either encoded messages or inferring from hints scattered around the game's environment.

Each episode has two different types of items introduced that each can help solve puzzles: Combat items and key items. Combat items can be used to change the environment and unlock secret paths that are initially blocked. Key items can be used to decipher secret messages and learn how to progress through the game. It is important to note that all key items will have a

printable, DIY version that allow players to solve puzzles with their own hands if they prefer, but the items themselves are coded into the game and accessible from the pause menu.

[Example of DIY Project: The Cipher Wheel](#)

Combat

Across each episode, there will be various hostile NPCs that either roam freely to pursue the player, or remain stationary until the player is in their range to attack. There are multiple factors that affect combat:

1. The Will Stat: Rina's Will is displayed as a health bar below her normal health bar. Attacking enemies with her sword will lower her Will, and enemies being defeated in any way will partially restore her Will. This stat must be managed in order to not hit zero, or else her sword will break and become unusable for the remainder of the playthrough. The management of this stat is intended to add an element of survival horror to the combat experience.
2. Rina's Bravery: Depending on choices the player makes throughout each episode, Rina's level of bravery will be affected. Choosing to fight and defeat monsters will increase her bravery, whereas avoiding them will lower it. Additionally, her bravery can be slightly affected by dialogue options the player chooses between. Her bravery affects enemy encounters by increasing how many hits an enemy can take before being killed; the more afraid of enemies Rina is, the more hits it will take to defeat them.
3. Rina's Fear: Enemies are classified into three different categories: Spectral, Fleshy, and Animalistic. Rina has separate bravery levels for each category, and whichever type she is most afraid of, combat and dialogue will be affected.
4. Rina's Sanity Level: Directly tied to her bravery, Rina has a sanity meter that will change when enemies are nearby. There are 4 different levels of sanity to visually represent how dangerous an enemy encounter will be to the player, and at the lowest level, Rina will enter a state of panic where she cannot attack, but will become slightly faster.

In addition to different statistics in the game affecting combat, there are multiple approaches to enemy encounters as well:

1. Evade the enemy by running away from them and/or avoiding their attacks.
2. Fight the enemy by swinging Rina's sword at them.
3. Fight the enemy by using combat items as a projectile to inflict damage.
4. Block, using Jyl as a shield, which stuns the enemy and inflicts damage.
5. Dash and attack to engage the enemy in close combat using Rina's sword. Close combat involves the completion of different quick-time-events to land multiple hits on the enemy, with each enemy having a specific mini-game. When fighting the enemy in close combat, more damage is sustained by both parties. Close combat also features a detailed animation of the enemy that Rina is fighting.

Finally, different kinds of enemies will have different attacks. Free-roaming enemies are predominantly designed to chase after the player and inflict damage by touching Rina's hit box. Stationary enemies will not actively pursue Rina, but will either attack her through use of projectiles or by touching her when in range.

Boss battles are a type of stationary enemy, but stand out from other encounters, as they take inspiration from the bullet-hell genre to create a more varied gameplay experience. The boss can be evaded if the player can avoid its attacks for the duration of its theme song (around 3 and a half minutes), at which point it will become too fatigued to prevent players from escaping the room. Otherwise, bosses can be killed using any of the above listed methods aside from close combat. Bosses follow a system of 3 different attack phases, each with 2 different attacks introduced (6 different attacks total). The order of attacks vary depending on Rina's main fear, so different playthroughs will not necessarily follow the same sequence of attacks by the third phase. The different phases are triggered either by the boss losing $\frac{1}{3}$ of their health, or their song completing $\frac{1}{3}$ of its runtime, whichever comes first. Once the boss enters its third phase, it will remain in that phase until the end of the encounter (thus cycling through all 6 of its attacks).

Exploration

Players must navigate around the various environments of the game in order to find the right path to progress. Some portions of the game are predominantly linear, such as the level design of Episode 1, whereas others will be more open-ended for exploration. For example, Episode 2 consists of multiple branching paths that can be tackled by the player in whatever order they choose. Once they have explored all the paths, they are able to unlock the final one that leads to the end of the level. Subsequent episodes will follow either format of linear vs. nonlinear, and likely switch between types of exploration depending on the environment.

It is important that there be various obstacles and set pieces to draw the player into the atmosphere of the setting. The horror tone is largely set by surreal and disturbing creature- and set-design throughout the series. Overall, exploration serves as a way for players to stumble across much of the disturbing imagery of the game, which can double as a reward for players who are either seeking a disturbing experience or are looking to unlock as much of the story and lore as possible.

There are many secret paths and events for players to find, and something I've observed when watching others play the game is that most will actively look for as many secrets as possible once they realize just how many there are. The inclusion of secrets has aided in extending playtime and replayability, as the required sections of the first episode are not especially time-consuming.

Development Status

Episode 1

Episode 1 has been completed and released to Steam and Itch.io on December 28th, 2020. Since its release, it has received multiple updates to respond to bug reports and further optimize performance on lower-end hardware. I am planning to keep past episodes up-to-date with many of the features that I develop for subsequent episodes, such as the new difficulty and brightness settings I have implemented into Episode 2. These feature updates are planned to coincide with new episode releases.

Episode 2

Episode 2 is currently around 45% completed. The episode shares much of the same code as its predecessor, so as of this point in time it is playable but lacking content and not fully polished. It is missing around half of its rooms, half of the dialogue/script, all of its unique enemies, and at least one new major feature, the map. In general, the main differences between episodes will merely be differences in content, as each episode has the same core gameplay loop.

Visuals

Overall, I have mixed feelings about the current visuals in the game. I am generally happy with the character and enemy overworld sprites in terms of both style and animation. I am also happy with the background sprites, but feel like they can be improved. My uncertainty with the visuals of the games largely stems from the character portraits and cutscene art (minus the fully-animated cutscenes) as I am still a novice artist and feel that the presentation could be elevated. The visuals currently in the game do not seem to hinder player experience; in fact much of the feedback I receive has expressed positivity for the art style and design. My feelings towards the visuals are best described by, "They work, but they could be better."

Programming

I will preface this section by stating that I am not a programmer, and I am still not yet proficient at it. While I started as very inexperienced in all fields of game development before beginning this project, programming was the only area that I had exactly zero prior experience. Because the game is being programmed in the Gamemaker Studio 2 engine, I have not had too difficult of a learning curve to overcome in order to make a game that can run without falling apart. Additionally, I contracted a programmer to assist in optimizing Episode 1, and have continued development based on this better optimized code. At this point, I do not foresee any blatant programming issues as most episodes will be essentially the same at this point. Any differences

in programming are expected to be small, such as different enemy behaviors or new puzzles that cannot be built off an existing puzzle's architecture. The foundation of each episode's programming will be the same, and as I have no longer received any performance error reports from players, I believe that programming will not be a significant issue moving forward.

Of course, there are aspects of the programming that could be improved upon, such as NPC AI and combat, but that is something I am open for discussion about.

Audio

Audio is another area of development where I feel uncertainty; I personally am very happy with much of it, but some aspects of the audio have been controversial with players. To begin on a positive note, the music has not had any issues and I am satisfied with the current state of it. The first episode featured an original soundtrack that was entirely composed by myself, with a credits song created by another independent artist and licensed for use in the game. For future episodes, I plan to co-compose the original soundtrack with a friend, which has not only improved the soundtrack for Episode 2 so far, but has also freed some of my time to focus on other areas of development. Similarly, I feel the general sound design/SFX of the game are adequate; they do not seem to stand out but they do not present issues either.

The aspect of the audio that has been divisive among players has been the game's voice over. The game is fully voice acted, with much of the cast consisting of amateurs. For some people, the performances are off-putting, whereas for others, they find it entertaining and elevating to the game's experience. Additionally, the voice recordings are run through audio filters to sound as though the characters are talking through a radio (intended not only to add to the "retro" feel but also to mask the differences in microphone quality between the cast). This filter is likewise controversial among the game's playerbase; some are put off by it and think that it makes the game sound low-quality, whereas others do not find it bothersome. It should be noted that the game's voice over can be turned off and replaced with simple vox sound effects, but the default option is to have the voice over enabled. Overall, I personally am happy with the voice acting in the game, but if there is a better alternative that could appease both crowds (aside from the already present option of choosing whether or not to have voice over on), I would be happy to consider it.

Gameplay

The biggest aspect of the game that could benefit from refining is the combat. I have gotten it to the point where it "works," but still could use additional polish to make it more enjoyable. While the main focus of the game is the story and atmosphere, I would ideally want players to find all components of gameplay satisfying. There are already a few improvements that I have in mind while developing Episode 2 and can likely implement myself, such as better explaining the close

combat mechanic, adding a delay before the start of quick-time-events to give the player time to react, and adding a difficulty level selection for combat (which has been programmed but not fully fleshed out).

Story

The main story beats and most of the characters and lore have been planned out already, but the actual script to be used in the game is written as I work on episodes. Episode 2's script is currently a bit under halfway done, but the different events and encounters that it will depict have already been planned.

Timeline

Depending on how much time I am able to devote to the actual development of the game (and not working on my day job or marketing the game myself), I can expect a new episode to be released every 10 to 12 months. This could also be shorter if I had greater assistance with various things such as art and audio. My main priority in terms of my own contribution to the game are as the writer and lead creative designer. While I am happy to be the one working on most tasks other than these, I am also happy to try working with other people who can not only do a better job than I can, but can speed up the development process.

While I do not adhere to a strict schedule, here is generally how the development process occurs for me as a solo-developer:

Creation of new rooms and environments, including puzzles and character encounters:

4.5 months

Creation of new enemies:

2 months

Composing new songs for the soundtrack:

1 month

Completing audio (SFX and Voice Over):

1 month

General bug fixing/polish:

1.5 months

As you can see by this timeline, 10 months can be expected to be sufficient for a single episode's development if I am working by myself, but in the event of an unforeseen setback, I would say it is safest to account for actual development time being 10-12 months. I tend to err on the side of caution when estimating how long it will take me to develop something, so please note that I am someone who prefers to under-promise and over-deliver rather than vice versa.

Conclusion

I believe that The Dream of Shadowlands has the potential to be a beloved indie game, but it needs some help getting there. There are a few quirks currently in the game that could use further polishing, but do not currently prevent the game from being enjoyable for most players. Still, improving in these areas would expand the widespread appeal of the game and make it into something that fans of RPGs, retro anime, and psychological horror could all enjoy thoroughly. I also firmly believe that the market for this game exists, but the current marketing efforts I have engaged in have not yet effectively reached this audience. Many of the people who have already become interested in the game are passionate about supporting it. With proper exposure through an organized marketing campaign, I think that The Dream of Shadowlands can garner many more passionate fans. Ultimately, I am looking for a publisher that not only has the means to support this game, but also one who believes in this project the same way that I and the game's current audience do and wants to be part of its development.