




Darkest Dungeon: A Design Post-Mortem

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Darkest Dungeon is about making the most of a bad situation. Quests will fail or must be abandoned. Heroes will die. And when they die, they stay dead. Progress autosaves constantly, so actions are permanent.

The game expects a lot out of you. How far will you push your adventurers? How much are you willing to risk in your quest to restore the Hamlet? What will you sacrifice to save the life of your favorite hero?

Thankfully, there are always fresh souls arriving on the stage coach, seeking both adventure and fame in the shadow of the...



Brace yourselves! Stand
your ground!

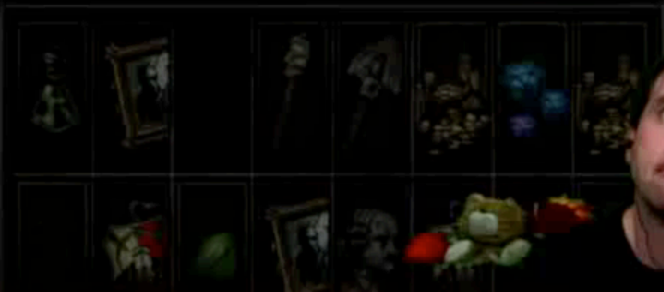
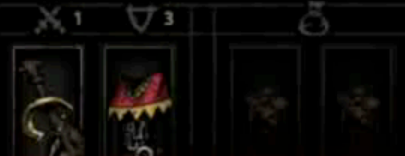


Ezekiel-II
Jester



55.0/100

ACC 2
CRIT 17%
DMG 5-8
DODGE 25



What Went Well: Emotional Engagement!

- RPG space - evergreen, but CROWDED
- Heroes are Human
- Uncomfortable Decisions
- Moments of Despair
- Moments of Triumph
- The sword arm, not the sword

My background:



Night of the Ill Tempered Squirrel!



A Tyler Sigman Game

Each year, movie studios spend untold millions of dollars trying to seek out the best combination of actor, special effects, and plot that will result in financial windfall and Oscar success. Alas, no more are the days of the penniless director lighting plastic models on fire and dressing in a gorilla suit as part of a personal quest to create something truly horrible.



Shrimpin'

ed Squirrel!
e your heart
tunately, the
its of under-
method actor
e strong, and
f.

A Tyler Sigman Game

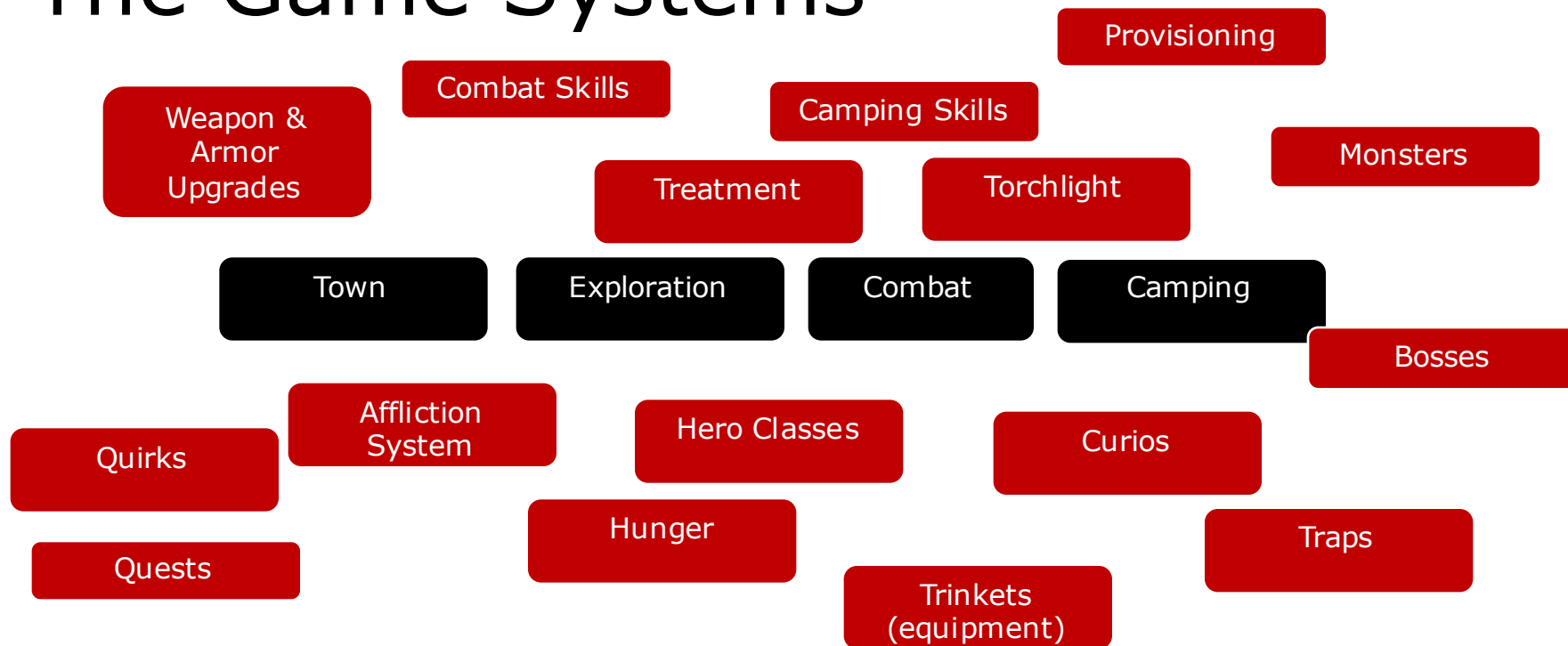
Dump that day job and put on your hip waders. You're going into the Shrimpin' business. In Shrimpin' each player has scraped up just enough cash to purchase themselves a brand spankin' new used shrimp boat. Unfortunately, not much money is left, and if a profit is not turned quickly the whole shrimpin' idea might fold on itself. Competition will be fierce and ruthless because there just aren't enough shrimp to go around. The fisherman who shrimps the most in the crucial first week in



around
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4807356



The Game Systems



Well: Special Blend of 694 Spices

- A tasty stew!



Well: Conspicuous & Conscious Exclusions

Dialogue Trees

In-depth
Quests

Heavy Lore

Focus on emergent
narrative

Crafting

Focus on sword-arm,
not the sword

Well: Design Process

- Chris as idea factory
- Me as cynical, nervous killjoy
 - Ok also wrangler and dd of systems in totality
- Creative Direction as the razor
- Rest of the team as helpers

Well: Affliction System



Events and
Situations

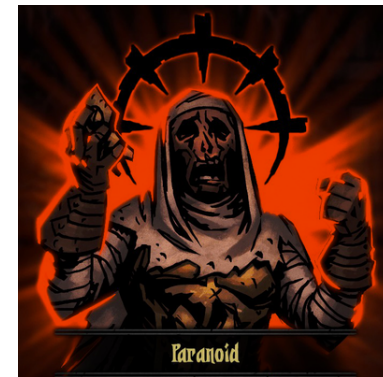
Stress

Resolve Check

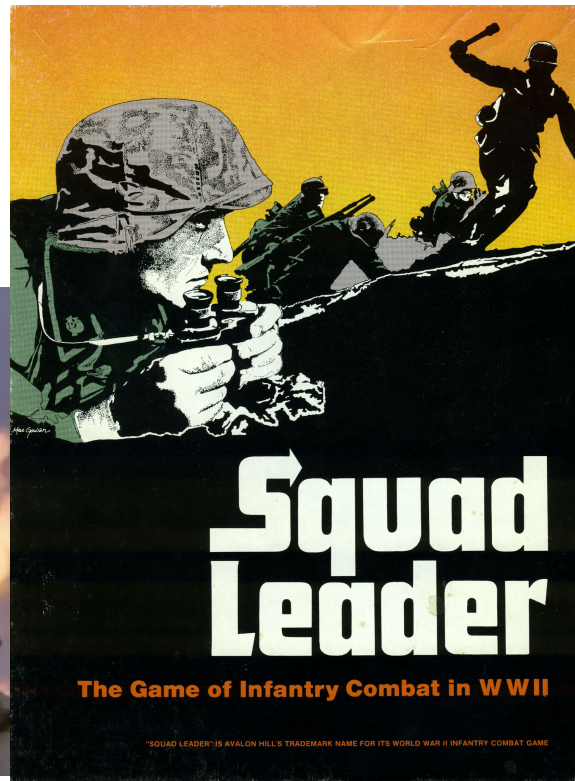
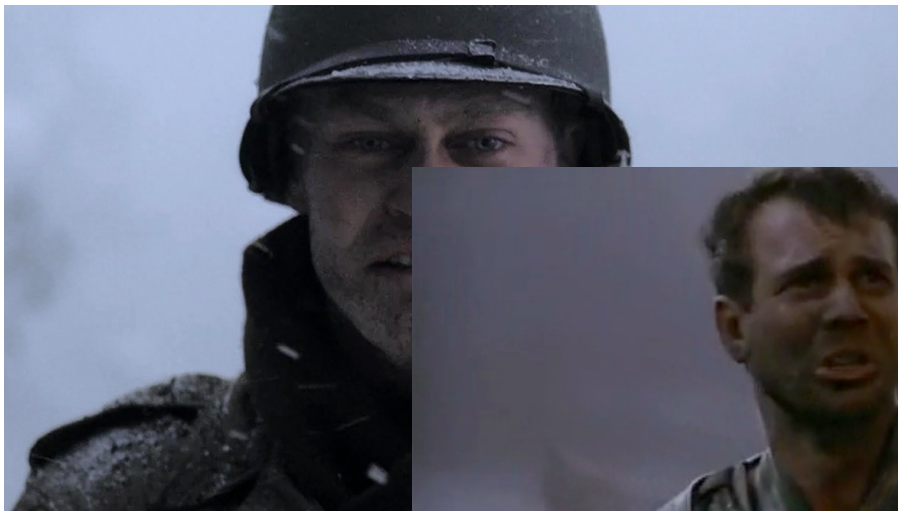
Virtue



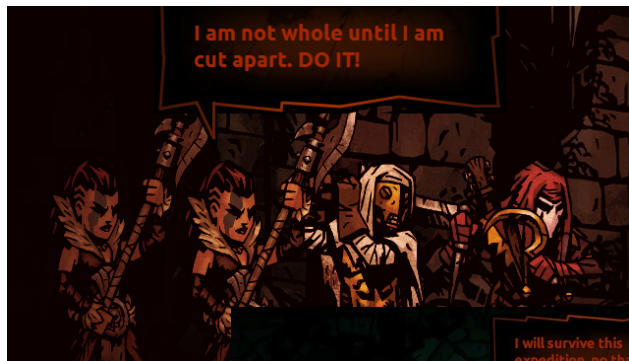
Affliction



Well: Affliction System



Well: Affliction System



- 7 Afflictions
- 4 Virtues
- Multiple unique variant text strings for every situation and EVERY CLASS



Well: Affliction System

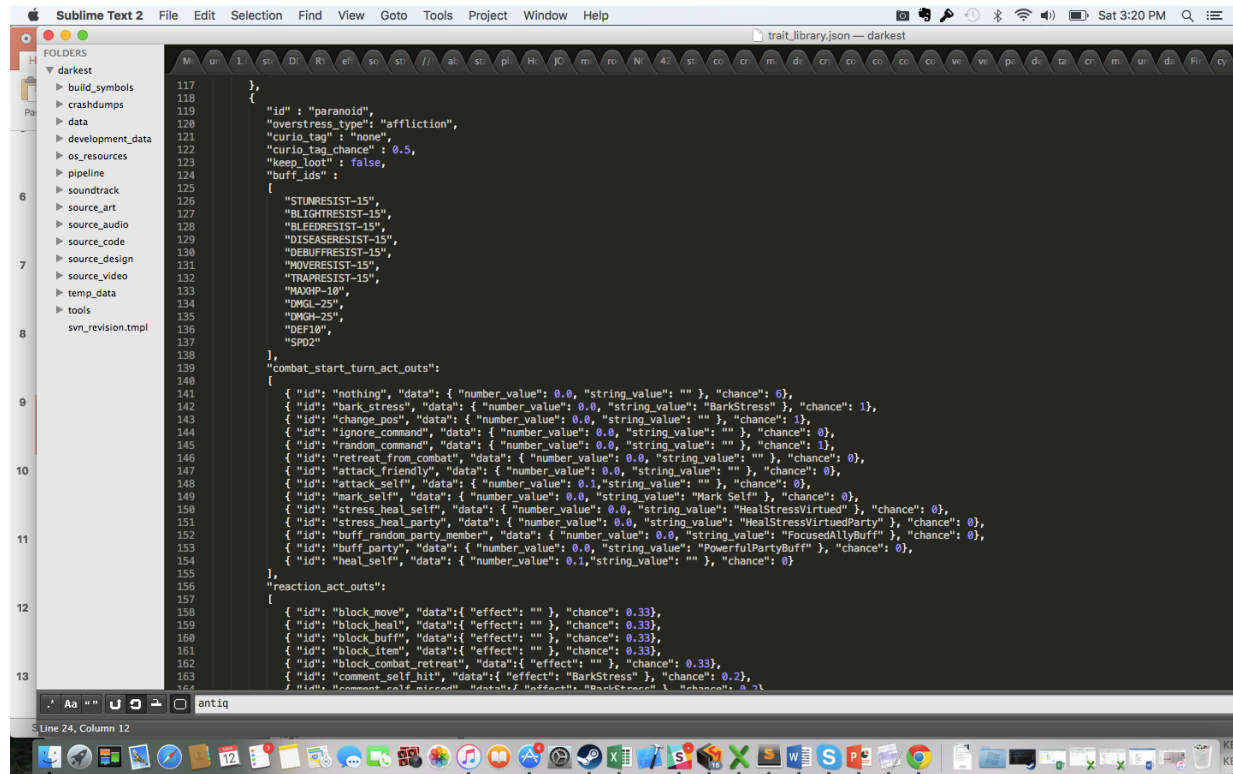
- IT'S THE HOOK
- Simple sub-systems
- Purposeful obfuscation
 - But not STRESS METER and STRESS DAMAGE
- Loss of Agency
- It worked!
- VERY LITTLE CHANGE in E.A.

Affliction System: an aside

- We also succeeded in:
 - Making players afflicted
 - Making ourselves afflicted



Affliction System: Implementation



```
Sublime Text 2  File  Edit  Selection  Find  View  Goto  Tools  Project  Window  Help
trait.library.json — darkest

117  },
118  {
119    "id": "paranoid",
120    "overstress_type": "affliction",
121    "curio_tag": "none",
122    "curio_tag_chance": 0.5,
123    "keep_loot": false,
124    "buff_ids":
125    [
126      "STUNRESIST-15",
127      "BLIGHTRESIST-15",
128      "BLEEDRESIST-15",
129      "DISEASERESIST-15",
130      "DEBUFFRESIST-15",
131      "MOVESRESIST-15",
132      "TRAPRESIST-15",
133      "MAGBIP-10",
134      "DMGL-25",
135      "DMGH-25",
136      "DEF10",
137      "SPD2"
138    ],
139    "combat_start_turn_act_outs":
140    [
141      { "id": "nothing", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "" }, "chance": 0},
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143      { "id": "change_pos", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "" }, "chance": 1},
144      { "id": "ignore_command", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "" }, "chance": 0},
145      { "id": "random_command", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "" }, "chance": 1},
146      { "id": "retreat_from_combat", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "" }, "chance": 0},
147      { "id": "attack_friendly", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "" }, "chance": 0},
148      { "id": "attack_self", "data": { "number_value": 0.1, "string_value": "" }, "chance": 0},
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151      { "id": "stress_heal_party", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "HealStressVirtuedParty" }, "chance": 0},
152      { "id": "buff_random_party_member", "data": { "number_value": 0.0, "string_value": "FocusedAllyBuff" }, "chance": 0},
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155    ],
156    "reaction_act_outs":
157    [
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165    ]
166  }
}
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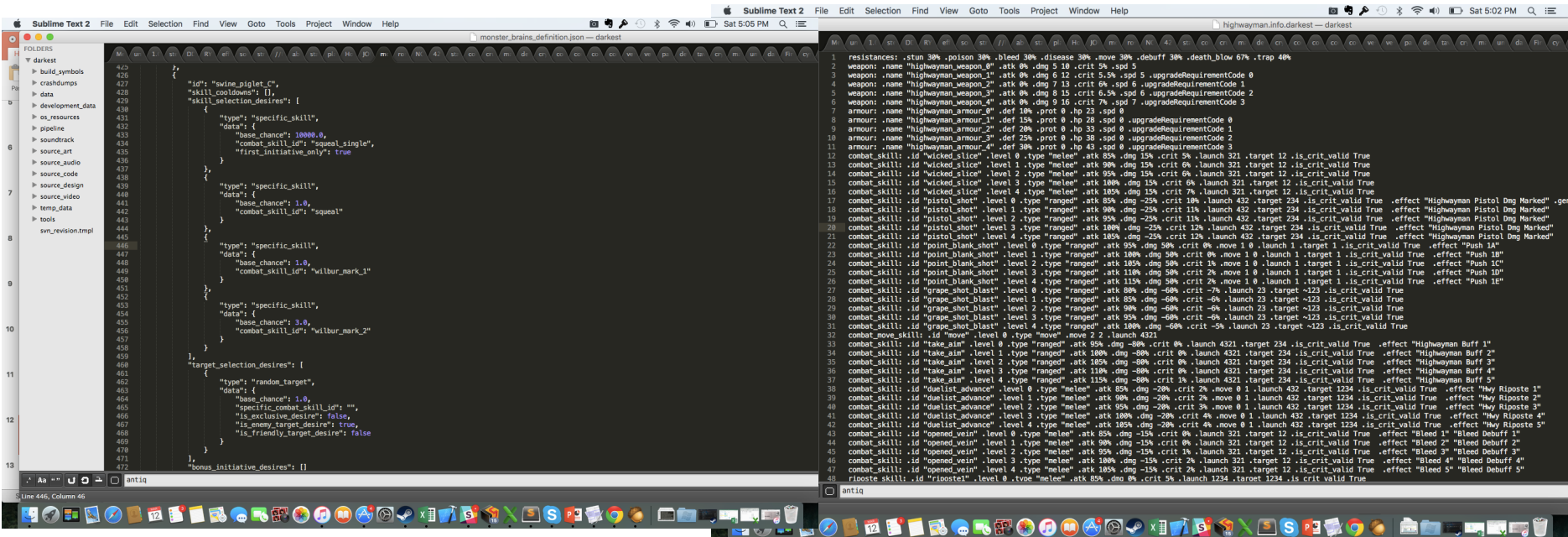
Well: Design Pipeline

Excel, Excel, Excel

The image displays two side-by-side screenshots of Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, illustrating a game design pipeline. The left spreadsheet, titled 'DDDW_Monsters.xlsx', features a 'NORMALIZED LEVEL 1 MONSTER VALUES' table. This table lists various monster types (e.g., Mage, Warrior, Archer) and their corresponding stats (HP, DOD, PRET, SPD, ATK, ACC, DEF). The right spreadsheet, titled 'DDDW_Characters.xlsx', contains a 'HERO PROGRESSIONS' table. This table details the progression of different hero classes (e.g., Mage, Warrior, Archer) through various levels, listing their stats and progression values. Both spreadsheets utilize conditional formatting to highlight specific data points, such as 'Bad' or 'Good' performance metrics. The spreadsheets are shown in a windowed view, with the 'Excel' application title bar visible at the top of each window. The status bar at the bottom of the Excel windows indicates the current slide number (Slide 11 of 44) and the language (English - Canada).

Well: Design Pipeline

- .json, .darkest files



Well: Design Pipeline

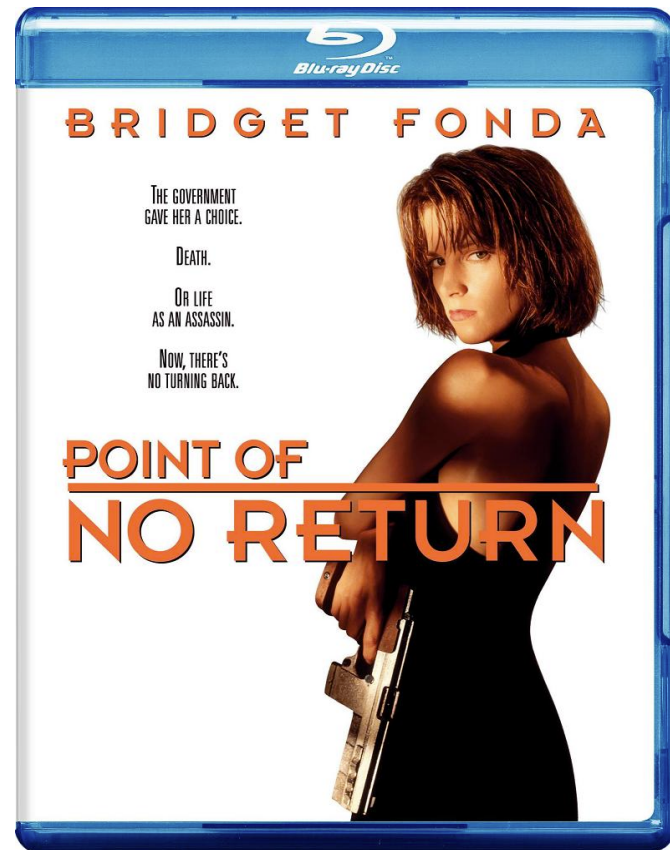
- VBA exporters
- Went well: 1 click monster library export (200+ files), parametric stats
- Went badly: missing exporters (no time)
 - Town buildings, camping skills, loot

Well: “Bad” Design

- Affliction System: loss of agency
- Heroes sometimes...
 - ...pass their turns
 - ...refuse to be heal / be healed
 - ...attack/do skills on their own
 - ...move on their own
- Your heroes are human
- True tactics/strategy game or not?

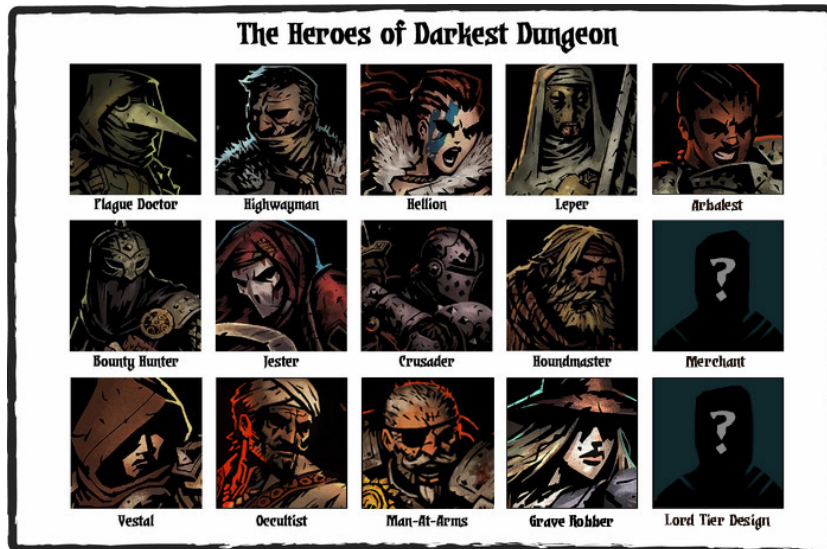
Well: “Bad” Design

- Punishing save system
- Permanent consequences
- Zeke’s Lament



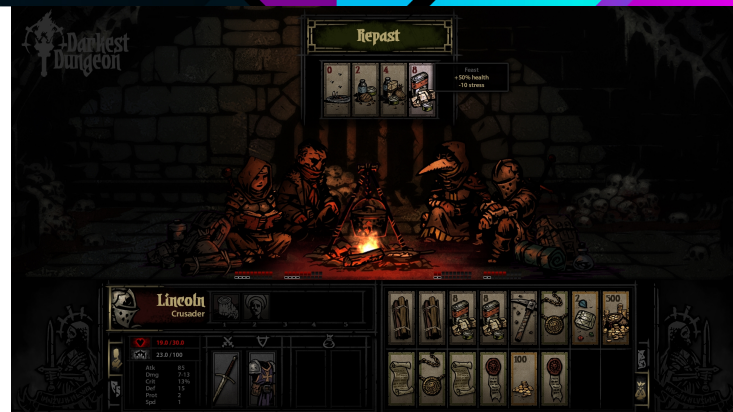
Well: “Bad” Design

- 15 Unbalanced Hero Classes





COMBAT



CAMPING



EXPLORATION



TOWN

Well: “Bad” Design

- R
- N
- Gesus
- Darkest Dungeon is poker. Get ready for some bad beats.

Well: “Bad” Design

- Final boss – killing heroes outright
- SPOILER ALERT

05:53:46



Heart is in the Heart
Kill 1 Heart of Darkness.



B2-2/0
Bounty Hunter



CHARACTER

EXP: 4/200

ACC 115
CRIT 14.0%
DMG 19-38
DODGE 30
PROT 65%
SPD 7

Behold the Heart of the World! Frogenitor of life, Father and Mother, Alpha and Omega - our creator and our destroyer!

Heart of Darkness

HP: 189/252

COSMIC

DODGE: 24
SPD: 10

Hero to Hit: 90%
Hero to Crit: 14.0%
Hero Dmg: 19 - 38

Bleed 48%
Debuff 58%
Move 88%

뭔가 열리면 무지막지한 것이 나
올거같은데

녹색우서 (yongk91) 09:05
버프탑

느껴봐~썬플러스 (sugi9709)
09:05
알려주는 기분....

농부 후안 (laeksgh123) 09:05
저거 깨면 나오는건가

버루감 (xownd125) 09:05
저거 알인거 같은데??

드와이트 (goodman-2000) 09:05
하트 오브 다크니스가 아님

hacjiny (hacjiny) 09:05
저거 완전 네루비안 알



Darkest Dungeon

Made by 승덕

방송 다시보기는 유튜브 김나성 검색 or 방송 홈 클릭해주세요!

정발이다. 달라자.

Well: “Bad” Design

- Healing vs. Damage
- Quests as battles of attrition (health, stress)

Went Well: “Bad Design”

- DON'T BE AFRAID TO BREAK THE RULES



Well: Combat



Combat: Inspiration





Combat Evolution

- Positional requirements
- Status effects
- Moving
- 1D: Enough depth?

Well: Death's Door

Cannot kill in 1 blow



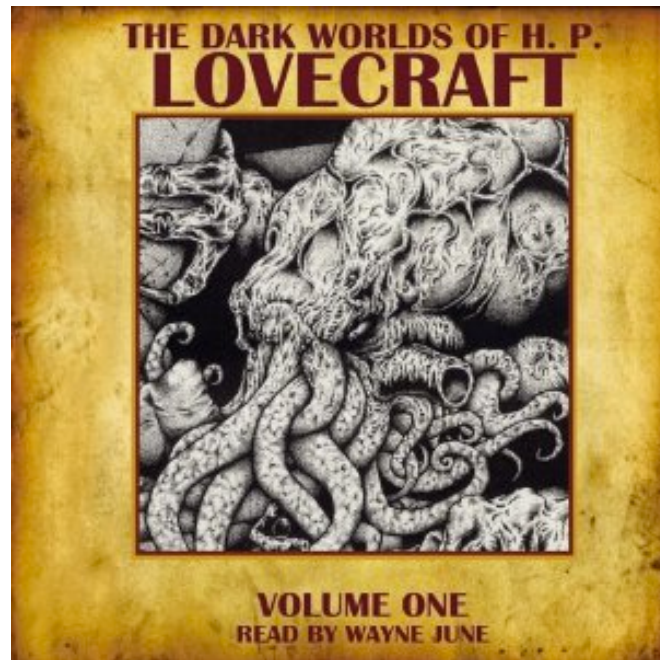
To endure both
variance
& cheapness



But shit still happens

Well: Narration Reinforcing Gameplay

- Terror and Madness Trailer
- Lovecraft Audiobooks
- The Horror at Red Hook



Overconfidence is a Slow and Insidious Killer

- It's hard to overstate the importance of the narrator to the game and to the game's remarkability
- QUOTABLE! YouTube, Reddit, etc.

Well: Audio!

- Aside from narration, sound design and music were huge in filling in gaps in the play experience
 - Power Up Audio / Stuart Chatwood
- A racing game without an engine roar—it's less fun.

Narration

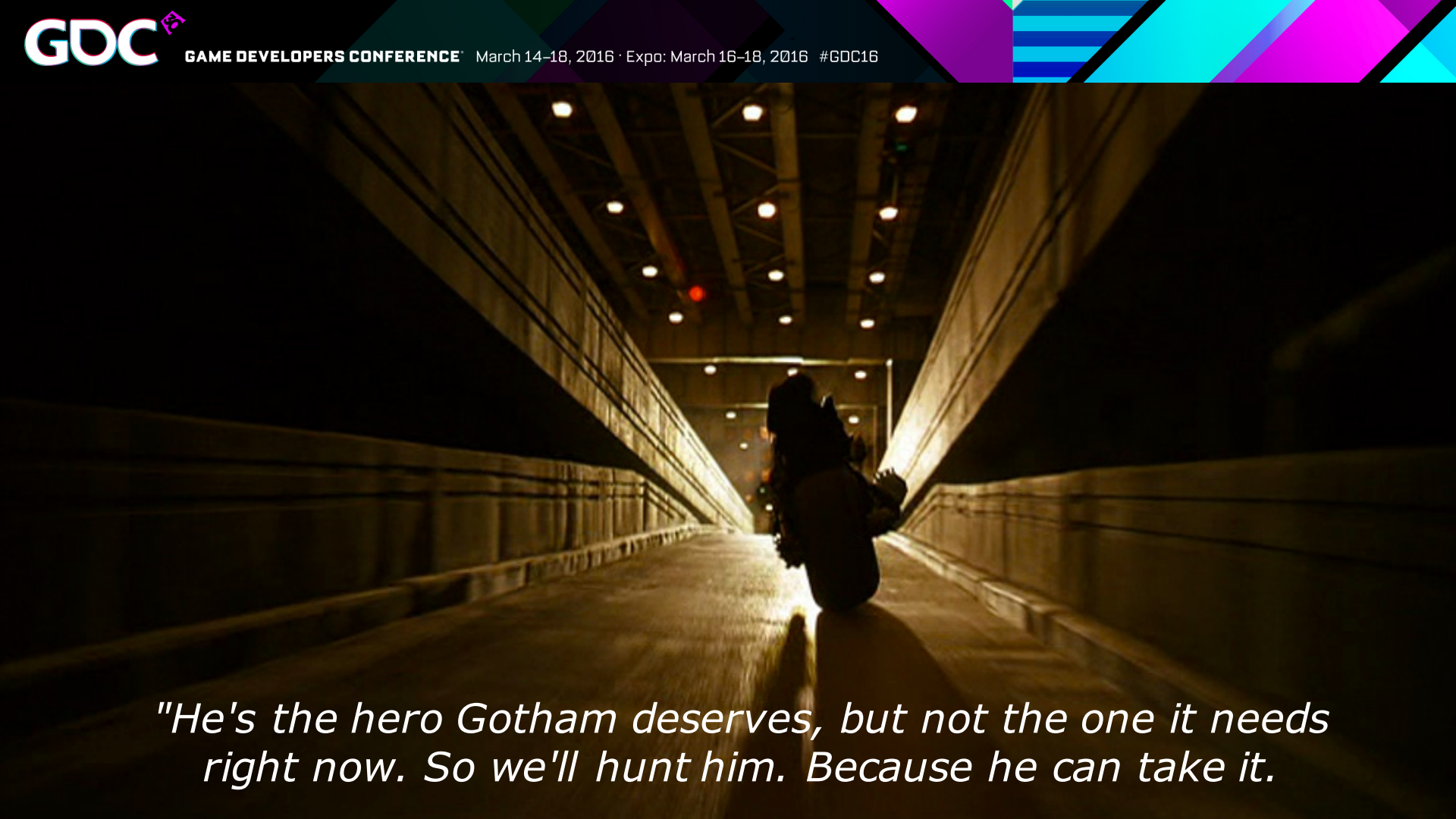
NARRATOR COMMENTS ON: Narration writing is INDIRECT and more about atmosphere than direct commentary

Light/Dark	E.g. "Darkness fills the hearts of even the brave..."	Things are light. Things are dark. Things are really dark.
Food Level	E.g. "Without sustenance, the sword arm weakens."	Tons of food. Decent food. Running low. Out of food.
Combat: monster abilities	??	
Combat: overall ebb and flow	E.g. "...	Things are going great. It's a pitched battle. Things are going poorly. We are completely fucked.
AFFLICTIONS	E.g. Paranoia: "When surrounded by terrors, who is to say which are imagined?" See Afflictions.	
Exploration - General	E.g. This is the spot for random commentary. Omnious or not, can be general mood commentary. "Wandering endlessly, a career for some, hell for most." "The smallest noise could signal the largest of lurking horrors."	
Exploration - Obstacles	E.g. "Even cold stone can seem imbued with hatred for the causes of good."	
Exploration - Events	just use Exploration GENERAL?	
Exploration - Traps	E.g. "Curious is the trap-makers art; the efficacy of his plot destined to be unwitnessed."	
Exploration - Curios	E.g. "A welcome respite? Or merely a vehicle for corruption?"	
Mission Goal commentary	E.g. "Eager steps forward, hastening the collision of purpose with hidden evils."	



What Went Wrong: The Corpse in the Room



A person on a motorcycle is riding away from the camera down a long, dark tunnel. The tunnel has concrete walls and a series of lights on the ceiling that create a strong perspective effect, drawing the eye towards the end of the tunnel. The motorcycle's taillight is visible, and the road surface is illuminated by the overhead lights.

"He's the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. So we'll hunt him. Because he can take it."

Lead Up to C&H Update

- Background:
 - EA launch Feb 3rd
 - My father died March 10th
 - Pre-planned content patch “Fiends & Frenzy” in May
 - C&H first *real* chance to make gameplay changes



The Corpse in the Room

- Heart Attacks (May)
 - Stress = 100 -> affliction check
 - Stress = 200 -> INSTANT DEATH 😊



**Skirmish**

Complete 100% of room battles.

1

00000000 00000000 0000 000000 00000000 00000000

**Vastel**

Crusader



19/33

0/200

ACC 85
CRIT 5.0%
DMG 6-12
DODGE 5
PROT 0%
SPD 1

1

1

Press this advantage, give them no quarter!**Corpse**

HP: 7/7

CORPSE

DODGE: 0

SPD: 0

Resistances

Skills

Bleed 0%
Debuff 200%
Move 200%

The Corpse in the Room

- Fixed dominant strategy
- Improved existing combat mechanics
- Did so thematically
- Better than other design options
- PEOPLE LOST THEIR MINDS

The Corpse in the Room

- The hardest thing we've dealt with on the game
- Splintered community
- Changing wave of sentiment, easily packaged sound byte
- Steam review bombs and vote brigading
- Beginning of a hateful crusade by a select few against the game, the company, and us as individuals
- Narrative vs. Truth and the spreading of fear
- I was also interning my father

The Corpse in the Room

"That this is the only game on this list that's still in Early Access says much about how brilliant Darkest Dungeon is."

July

...Again, it's still in Early Access, so all is theoretically subject to change. It's improved enormously over the last six months though, including getting rid of some significant irritations, so the signs are good."



Aug

*"In both concept and execution, the corpse system is simply daft....**A sad fate** for a game which sought to leave roleplaying stereotypes behind." <--**during early access***

The Corpse in the Room

- Soul searching & endless discussions, Devil's advocacy
- Community mgmt crisis
- People hate change:
 - Combat camera example
- Weird dilemma: do we make the game WORSE to make people happy?

The Corpse in the Room

- The Dark Knight->The Dark Knight Rises
- Fast forward 6 months to launch
- General critical reception:
overwhelmingly positive, *including*
corpses and heart attacks

The Corpse in the Room

What got us through:

- Being US – developing the same way we had all along
- Following the GAME – We'd rather make the game we want and suffer the consequences than subvert our vision
- Investment in more community management
- Toggle options (heart attack eventually revised and option removed)
- You can't please everyone, and DD has always been a game that is not for everyone.

Learnings about Early Access

- Content = always good
- Substantive gameplay changes = RISKY
- Delay as long as possible before EA

What Went Wrong: Grind

- Finishing the game can take 40++ hours.
- **Loss of high level party is crushing, demotivating**
- Deployed DD at full release, so no E.A. benefit
- Making tweaks now, kinda like in E.A.

What Went Wrong: Exploration

- Combat, camping, affliction system all took shape pretty well
- **Exploration consistently problematic**

What Went Wrong: Exploration

- These boots were made for walking
 - **V1 autowalk...TERRIBLE**
 - V2 active...markedly better

What Went Wrong: Exploration



What Went Wrong: Exploration

- “Happenings” = Events
- “Jostled Free”: oops you lost an item!
- The Jostled Free rule: don’t arbitrarily kick the player in the nuts.
- **Kick them in the nuts with specific and carefully crafted purpose.**

What Went Wrong: Exploration

- Never fully capitalized on:
 - Dungeon layouts
 - Quest types / features

What Went Wrong: Balancing

- Balancing for two
- Time and delegat
- Hero balance app
work out as well



The Dungeon isn't too Dark

- 800,000 copies sold
- Avg/Median playtime: 23hrs/12hrs
- Day 1/7/30 Retention: 67/27/5
- Metacritic 84
- **It's the game we set out to make**

Path Forward

- Town Events
- Steam Workshop
- Daily challenge mode?
- PS4 / Vita ← SO EXCITED
- Other platforms?

Red Hook Game #2: Official Announcement!!!



Brightest
Kittens

Takeaways

1. Have a mechanical “hook”
2. Follow your vision through turbulence
3. Don’t be afraid to break the rules
4. Changing substantive mechanics during E.A. is hard. Content = always good.

Q&A: No Question too Dark?



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