Into the Void

by Kira Scott

A one session game of existential identity crisis in the isolation of space.
Written for Game Chef 2012.
A special thanks to everyone who helped me brainstorm this.
I couldn't have done it alone.

The ingredients I used

Mimic (the duality of self, and the doppelganger hallucinations)
Lantern (the name of the ship, a light in the dark)
Big Brother Zombie Thread (for the claustrophobia, relationships, and confessionals/space logs)
http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=27658.0
Disease Mechanics Thread (for the madness and gradual descent into)
http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=27554.0

Why I wrote this game
I have always loved the space madness genre. Movies like Moon, Solaris, Sunshine, Event Horizon, Alien, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Sphere, Pandorum, have always hit a sweet spot for me and the themes I care about--isolation, identity, survival, madness, and fear of the unknown. Some of these movies are horrific, teaching us that what is out there in the dark really is an Alien trying to eat us all. Others are more inquisitive, asking us to hold a mirror up to ourselves and gaze at the truth of who we are. Some deal with loss, some love, some terror, but all of them involve the relationships that the crew members develop in the vacuum of space, and how that claustrophobia talks about the human condition.

That's what this game is about. Facing madness, perception, reality, and... yourself.

The subtext
Space madness is a fictional disorder, a trope used by movies, tv shows, and novels ever since the beginnings of our first paranoia about travel in rocket ships. Psychologists have analyzed astronauts and found them disappointingly stable, so there is actually no factual basis for a disorder with symptoms similar to space madness.

This game, beneath the surface, is about that dichotomy, about our desire to believe that there is awfulness out there, in isolation, in the black, when in fact there is nothing to be afraid of. The truth is there isn't anything outside ourselves that will drive us to madness. It's the classic fear of the unknown, eating at us. We can overcome it if we want to, or we can succumb to the stories our culture wants us to believe.

"I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night."
- Galileo Galilei

A bit about the setting
The earth is dying. Overpopulation, natural disasters, pollution, wars, disease... one of these has overwhelmed us. The human race is on the brink of extinction. Our last hope is The Lantern, a spacecraft on a mission to save us all. The crew are to travel through the black of space and bring back our only salvation. But the dark is far worse than we could ever have imagined, and the things that lie dormant in our minds are easily as dangerous as the things out there trying to kill us all.

"Above there were stars and planets, distant bodies so intriguing and elusive, formed like a pattern across night's ceiling, a map to all that I could not reach."
- David Levithan

Beginning Play
5 players sit down, one of them the GM. The scenario is explained to them, and the burden of the world put upon their shoulders. Next, they create the **Setting** for their scenario. Answer these series of questions to build the main focus of your game. The GM can record these for the group and keep them amidst her game notes.

Your mission
What is ending the world?
What are you travelling into space to find?
Why is it humanity's last hope?

The Lantern
What type of spacecraft are you on?
What does it look like?
What are the four main jobs that need to be performed on it?

Once these questions are answered you have the main thrust for your tale, and some juicy details about your setting and where the characters will be spending their time. The why's and the where's. Now, it's time to answer the who's. Character creation.

"Nothing. Because wasn't that how I felt that day? If you zoom close - if you really get close to someone, if you really get close to yourself - then you lose the other person, you lose yourself entirely. You get so close you can't see anything anymore. Your mind becomes all these

abstract fragments."
- David Levithan, Every You Every Me

Character Creation
On each character sheet there are a few things that need to be detailed. Follow these steps.

1. Choose a name
2. Choose one of the jobs available on the ship
3. Write down a physical description of your character

After this we're going to create the INNER LINE and the OUTER LINE traits.

INNER LINE traits are how your character sees herself.
OUTER LINE traits are how other people perceive your character.

Generally, INNER LINE traits are positive, and OUTER LINE traits are negative. Some examples of both INNER and OUTER lines are:

Artistic
Reliable
Good with Hands
Logical
Bossy
Untrustworthy
Forgetful
Manipulative

4. Each player will choose 3 INNER LINE traits. We'll deal with OUTER LINE traits in a moment.

5. Players will build CONNECTIONS with other players. Pick two players. Write on your character sheet how you feel toward them. This doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. You might feel loyal to Ripley, but Ripley might feel wary toward you. Go around the table taking turns picking who you have a connection with. Then, secretly exchange with those players on scraps of paper how you feel about them. It's important that, at the beginning of the game, how you feel about your connection is only known between you and the player you have the connection with.

6. OUTER LINE traits can now be assigned. You will receive a total of 2 traits, one from each of your connections. They will tell you how their character perceives you.

Thus ends character creation. Starting out, you know what your characters look like, their

names, and their jobs on the ship. You should have a good idea about who your characters are and what relationships they have with other PCs. You've got the starts of your game.

A brief GM interlude
While everyone is making their characters, pay attention and take notes. Figure out what characters would be afraid of, what they would suspect, what's ending the world, and what they're trying to find out in space.

This is where, as the GM, you create the MADNESS based on all of those elements. It might be aliens. It might be a star with malicious intent. It might be an AI that thinks the crew is turning against him. It might be the ghosts of the characters' dead loved ones who just want to be loved again. And so on.

As gameplay progresses, you'll want to include subtle descriptions of these things as if they're there all along. The players, however, don't know what the big bad is. Maybe things on the ship are always melting from the evil star. Maybe there's always minor malfunctions on the ships computer systems from the AI. Maybe characters have dreams about people who have passed because their dead loved ones are haunting them.

The reasoning behind this is that, at the end of the game, it might actually be this madness that's working against the characters. So best to have that in your back pocket for the endgame. If it's not the madness? Well... must've been the darkness of space fucking with us.

"Let everything happen to you
Beauty and terror

Just keep going
No feeling is final"
- Rainer Maria Rilke

Gameplay
Into the Void is meant to be played in one session taking approximately four hours to play. It's ideal for a convention game or a one-shot. The crew will begin and end their journey on The Lantern out into the dark of space in one game.

The Saturn V rocket is, to date, the only launch vehicle to transport human beings beyond low earth orbit. It had three stages to its launch sequence. Accordingly, there are three stages to the progression of gameplay.

Stage 1

- build traits + interact
- catastrophic event
- actions

Stage 2

- gain madness
- void encounters

Stage 3

- revelation
- showdown

In the next few sections I'm going to break down how these work, and the interlacing mechanics that allow characters to take action, gain madness, and lose traits to the void. There will also be instructions for the GM to help the players along. Prepare to launch.

Stage 1
Building Traits + Interaction (Players)
Both INNER LINE and OUTER LINE traits are important to keep an eye on throughout the

game.

Traits are what you use to take any kind of action in the game. You wager them. If there's ever more on one side than the other after a character performs an action, they gain a point of madness. You can gain and lose traits in several different ways. And after stage one, you can't gain any new traits, so try and get all the ones that are important to you before this stage is over.

1. Space logs
If you want to create a new INNER LINE trait (or in Stage 2, retrieve a trait), that is, a trait that your character believes he has, you can have a space log scene. This is a short monologue that a player can ask for with the goal of gaining a new INNER LINE trait. So the scene should be aimed toward describing that traits through roleplay. Picture Jake in Avatar, getting more haggard and unkempt as he spends more time in the machine, journaling into his videocam. He would gain the trait Determined. That's a space log.

2. Interaction
OUTER LINE traits can only be given to you by your shipmates. In order for your shipmates to have a perception of your character, you have to have scenes with them. Have a scene with 3-4 people. One of them has to be someone you have a relationship with. After the scene, players may assign a new OUTER LINE trait to any other player--but only one per character per scene, at the max.

It might be a little difficult to dive into the beginning of the game and jump right into character interactions. In order to help players frame scenes and create situations, utilize the SHIP'S AGENDA worksheet. This can help place characters in certain parts of the ship doing routine ship jobs, and helps to create a scene and maintain the feeling of the setting.

Catastrophic event (GM)
Usually at this point in the story, everyone has spent a few days or weeks on the spacecraft. They've gotten to know each other, and maybe gotten a little annoyed with their crewmates. Maybe a few minor repairs have been made, and a course has been set through the stars. Cabin fever might be starting to settle in as the crew spends more time in recycled air and cramped cabins.

This is when the catastrophic event occurs. The GM can use the type of ship, the types of conflicts, the relationships that are developing between characters, and the building madness to inspire what this event could be. The goal of this scene at the end of Stage 1 is to get players wagering traits, taking action, and starting to move their traits into the void.

Picture that scene when someone gets trapped inside the airlock and is about to get flushed out into space, or an engine begins to fail due to increased temperatures, or there's a fire in the kitchen that threatens to suck all the air out. These are prime examples of catastrophic events.

Basically, it has to threaten the entire ship.

Actions (Players)
In order for characters to react to the Catastrophe, they have to take Action. This is the first time they'll be doing this, so it'll help teach the learning curve. Dice rolling and wagering of traits is involved. To take any action, characters must:

1. Wager at least one trait, either INNER LINE or OUTER LINE.
2. Roll a D10.
3. Each wager gives you a +1 bonus, and you can wager multiple traits at a time.
On a 1-4 you fail. Move all traits you wagered to the void on your sheet.
On a 5-7 you fail. One trait may be assigned to the person you have a relationship with.
On a 8-10 you succeed. Add a new trait, on either side of the void on your sheet.

GM: Whenever a player loses a trait to the void, note it on the Void Sheet in the void you've assigned to that player. This will become important in Stage 2.

Stage 2
Gain Madness (Players)
The more traits players lose to the void, the more madness occurs, because traits will continue to become more and more imbalanced. Here's how madness works.

Madness isn't you becoming some crazy serial killer, or starting to get all loopy and talk in voices. Madness is literally having no objectivity. Your character begins to lose her sense of self, and the difference between reality and unreality becomes unclear.

MADNESS is recorded on the Madness Spiral handout placed in the center of the table. When a character gains a point of madness (your traits are just one trait out of balance) move your representative token on the spiral up one dot. Start at the center, and move outward. Each player gets a token on the madness spiral. If one of the characters reaches the end of the madness track before the end of the game, that player becomes the reason the mission is failing. If none of the characters do so, the Madness that the GM manifests in the game is the reason the mission is failing.

Void Encounters (GM)
Pay attention as traits pile up for each character on your void sheet. Once a bunch of void traits (at least three) have built up for a few characters, you can start having void encounters. Void encounters involve hallucinations. People begin to see things that aren't there which implicate the people with the highest amount of void traits as the most insane and untrustworthy. Involved in a void encounter scene are the character with the highest void points and two others, one of which has to be a character who has a connection to the character with the

highest void points.

The GM looks at the void traits for the character with highest void points, and the relationship with the connection involved in the scene. From these, she can craft a conflict that's going to make the character with the highest void points suspicious. Perhaps her two crewmates find Sharon (highest void points) gnawing on the fuel line (a situation posited by the GM). This becomes something that Sharon didn't realize she was doing, because she's beginning to go mad, and losing all sense of herself. The other players then react.

Or maybe Hicks (highest void points) is on surveillance duty, and sees frightening apparitions and gruesome innards strewn about the bunks (a situation posited by the GM). He starts freaking out to his nearby crewmates, which causes mistrust and upheaval.

These scenes still count as Interactions! Players, after the ending of a scene, can still apply OUTER LINE traits to other characters.

One more thing about Void traits. Remember Space Logs? Unlike Stage 1, where you can gain INNER LINE traits from a space log, in Stage 2 players can, once per scene, record a space log to get a Void trait back. Players can only put traits back on their sheet as an INNER LINE trait, regardless of what it was before it went into the void. At this point in the game, this is the only way to get INNER LINE traits. This is a bit like therapy: talking about the things you've lost in order to get them back.

The intended pattern that's forming from these actions, mechanics, and scenes, is that Stage 2 will embody the downward spiral toward the end of the story. The spiral toward madness, one way or the other. The characters are about to have to barrel through it, with everything they've got.

Stage 3
Revelation (Everyone)
There isn't really a rule about when Stage 2 is over. Narration will help guide this along... have a bunch of void encounters and scenes until you feel it's driving toward some resolution. At this point, you've entered into the Revelation portion of the game.

At this point, take a look at the madness spiral.

1. Has anyone gained enough to get to the end? If so, they're the reason the ship hasn't gotten where it's going, everyone is beginning to lose it, and you're having trouble telling what's real and what isn't. Someone is fucking with your head. It's time to put an end to it.

2. If no one has made it to the end of the madness spiral, that means that the madness is at fault! This is where the GM can swoop in with the big bad she's been building up this whole

time. The players have the opportunity to confront it, for earth, for humanity, for sanity.

Showdown (Everyone)
This is it. This is where the players go up against the MADNESS or their fellow MAD players and dice out who wins or loses. The stakes are high: it's sanity or earth.

Players can all pick one trait that they've lost to the void, and reassign it to either Inner or Outer Line Traits. If the MADNESS is in play, it can get a number of traits equal to the dots on the madness spiral, and they come from the void traits the characters have lost. Actions still happen the same way! Wager as much as you want, and make sure the stakes are intense. This is the one last battle for the end of the world. It can happen anywhere. Inside the minds of the sleeping crew. In another dimension. In the strobe-lit hallways of the sabotaged spacecraft. On the exterior of the ship in the deadly light of the nearby sun. One last thing needs to happen, and the mad PCs or the MADNESS is standing in your way. Go.

1. If it's PVP, determine what the goals of each side are. Then the players just go at each other until one side is victorious.

2. If it's against the MADNESS, fight it until there is victory, in whatever form it takes.

Victory? Play until all traits have been wagered and nothing is left on either side. Rounds continue, and all players will get a turn until all traits have been wagered. This can be a series of more and more complicated tasks against the madness, an escalation of a brawl among the characters, or just trying to survive to get to the escape pod. Keep playing scenes and telling the end of the story until it comes to its natural end.

Based on where each side is at at that point in the narrative, determine who has won: Humanity or the Void. The GM can narrate the aftermath, and what happens, and if the crew of The Lantern have actually succeeded or failed at their mission.

A few multimedia ideas
Use google for images of spacecraft interiors while you're deciding what your spacecraft looks like.
Listen to the Moon soundtrack while playing. Or Phillip Glass. Or Kraftwerk.
Record actual SPACE LOGS for your game, and upload them to the web for us to watch.
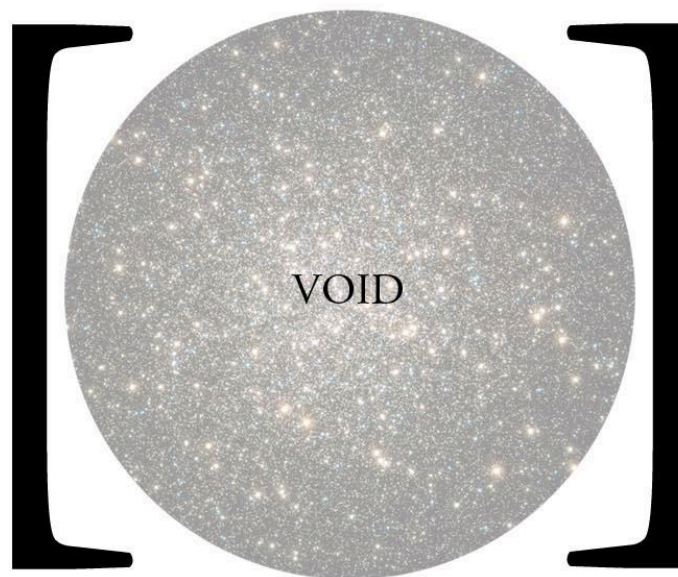Google ideas for tech you might have, or certain technobabble that might be helpful to have.

Name:
Job description:
Physical description:

INNER LINE   OUTER LINE

[VOID   ]

Connections
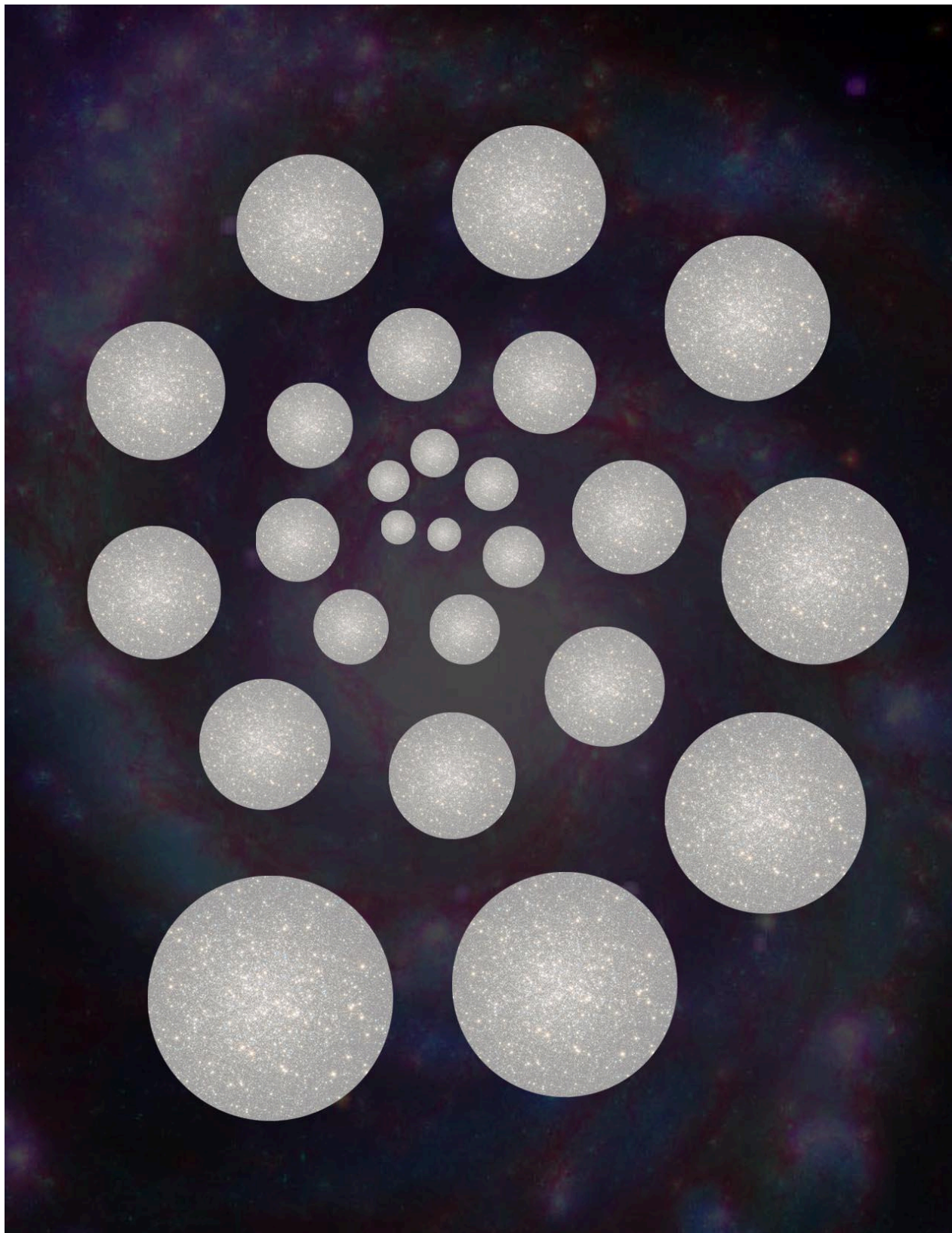
I feel _____ toward _____
I feel _____ toward _____
I feel _____ toward _____

GM VOIDS

IDEAS FOR MADNESS

Madness Spiral

Ship's Agenda

6am

8am

10am

12pm

2pm

4pm

6pm

8pm

10pm

12am