

1. What is the setting and story? What is the one paragraph pitch?

Honestly, this is extremely difficult for *You Will Die In This Place* and probably the one aspect of creating the game that I've struggled with most of all. It is a post-modern ergodic horror novel in the guise of a game and yet it is also an entirely playable game that benefits thematically from the layers of context provided by its meta-narrative. That probably sounds like a load of nonsense, and, well, I wouldn't blame anyone for thinking that. If it helps to try to picture something more solid, it has been described by other people as something of a cross between *House of Leaves* and *Piranesi* in the form of a ttrpg.

The game takes place within the blighted setting of the Abyssal Labyrinth, a cyclopean dungeon that predates the life which dwells within it. Characters are exiles, banished from the Vaulted Kingdom and its capital of Ashendee, doomed to wander the labyrinth until they inevitably succumb to its horrors. It is a game about grief, loss, identity and finding meaning in a world that often seems indifferent and cruel.

The framing device of the rulebook is that of an indie author who has found a collection of unfinished notes and essays pertaining to a roleplaying game. The rules sections of the book are the pieces she has managed to compile and polish up into a playable state. However, along the way, through various design documents, essays and commentaries, there is a story about a girl struggling to understand her lost friend and process a lot of issues regarding identity and what it means to create art.

Sorry, I really couldn't manage to say much in one paragraph. Forgive me for cheating and using several.

2. What inspired this project?

Oh, this one is slightly easier. I was standing around behind my table at Diceni (a local games convention) pondering about the nature of indie games and how so many are doomed to go unplayed despite how beloved they are and the best of intentions of those who bought them. I'm quite guilty of this myself - I buy indie games at every opportunity and yet it is quite rare that I manage to bring them to table with my group. Anyway, this got me thinking about what elements of a ttrpg book I value most highly and how one might go about creating something which is equally enjoyable as an artefact purely to be read as it is as a game to be played. It was this train of thought that led to the inception of *You Will Die In This Place* and its structural framework.

3. What is your history with game design? First project or not?

I've been making games on and off forever, but mostly just personal projects or material for friends. I was working as a freelance artist in the video game industry while I was supposed to be doing GCSE graphics coursework in our high school computer labs, but it was in university that I really started working on tabletop games seriously. My friendship group created a system where we would take it in turns to GM short horror scenarios and oneshots. Each time it was our turn, we would pitch three different ideas to the players who would vote on them and then we would develop that into a full scenario. Often, we used or hacked existing systems and occasionally we would cobble together something of our own. We must have created dozens of scenarios over those few years. In fact, *Isolation*, one of my more recent releases, originally started its life as one of those.

My first publicly released game came out back in 2016. It doesn't take much effort to find information about it if you go digging, but I'd rather that people didn't since it deadnames me. Honestly, it was a bit of a mess with a setting grafted onto a system that wasn't really that well suited

to it. This was back in the days when I still thought that there might be some kind of merit to the idea of 'universal' mechanics that could be easily adapted to fit all sorts of different games. These days I'm firmly of the belief that mechanics should evoke theme and, although you certainly can use a universal system to play a heavily themed game, I believe you're missing out on a whole layer of potential experience by trying to do so.

#### 4. Do you have any crowdfunding experience?

Yes, and it almost killed me. I'd love to say a lot of positive and insightful things here, but I really can't. I have a lot of very complex feelings and thoughts about crowdfunding, to the point that I very nearly pulled out of the RPG Party immediately upon receiving the email telling me that I was one of the 'winners'. In truth, I didn't even remember submitting the project. In a moment of self-doubt when I was really craving some form of validation, I tossed an early copy of the project out to a few random emails, reviews, websites and other places. I think the Gamefound application form must have been one of those.

My first released game, the one that I mentioned before, was a crowdfunded project. Keep in mind, this was back in the glory days of crowdfunding where it was less about big companies using it as a glorified pre-order service and more about people with wild ideas who wanted funding for their dream. I had never brought a physical book to print before and, as it turns out, there were a lot of challenges and lessons to learn along the way. I had set a goal of £5000 to cover the art commissions that the project still needed. Despite no real marketing on my part, the game sailed through this and fully funded at around £10,000.

Having raised double what I had needed, I decided to invest the additional funds into even more art to really make the best of the project for my backers. I was working with a lot of very talented artists at the time, none of whom were based in the UK and so I paid them in USD. I remember having to do this at my bank in person quite vividly. Now, if you're a person of a certain age living in the UK, the date I mentioned before might mean something to you. 2016 was when the UK unexpectedly voted to leave the European Union. This happened at that moment in my game's development and the relative value of the pound against the dollar collapsed literally overnight. My dreams of funding future development crashed with it and I barely managed to claw my way out of the project afloat.

I also suffered a serious injury to my foot during this time period, which left me using a walking stick for a year and taking a constant series of painkillers with their own unpleasant side effects. Still, I did my best to embrace the situation and decorated my stick with a flame decal meant for a motorcycle (I'd been watching a lot of House at the time, so I couldn't let the opportunity escape). It is, however, very difficult to write high quality prose when you are drugged and in agony. My updates started slipping, my anxiety mounted and the sickness caused by those feelings were far worse than the physical pain. In the end, I managed to ship my game, typos and all, somewhat behind schedule but not outrageously so.

What was I talking about again? Right, crowdfunding. Yeah, I once swore that I'd never do it again and yet here I am. The hypocrite who just can't help themselves.

#### 5. Did the project exist in some form before?

As a previously released title? No. However, the project was certainly not made with the RPG Party in mind and was submitted to it on a whim. Without Gamefound, it may have languished unfinished forever or found itself unceremoniously tossed out of my development cave as a free PDF on Itch with a POD available somewhere.

Now, as to how old You Will Die In This Place actually is, I suppose that depends how you look at it. It is a bit of a Ship of Theseus (or Trigger's Broom if you're from the UK). The name came into being during a road trip to the UK Games Expo, while thinking about a much more stripped down and lightweight nihilistic dungeon crawler idea that eventually formed the bare bones skeleton of what would grow into the game part of the final thing. However, many of the ideas and mechanics are the reanimated corpses of my dead game ideas that weren't wholly interesting or complete enough in themselves to be born into the world.

6. Was this made by you or a team?

I did all of the writing, the rules, mechanics, layout and a small amount of the artwork myself. The majority of the artwork is licensed or commissioned from a group of varied but extremely talented individuals including Shimhaq, Arief Rachmad, Droned Artworks and Noirmatic. You can see some specific examples of their work and links to their social media pages on the game's preview page on Gamefound. I'd also like to credit Vanessa Chainey and Errol Seymour for some extremely helpful and professional proof reading and editing notes, as well as just generally being all around wonderful people and very supportive of my absolute monstrous mess of a game. In particular, it is not something that is easy or comfortable to read in places and these people have had to read it more closely than most.

7. An aspect that you're excited for people to explore?

I guess, like with many things related to this project, it's something I want to answer on more than one level really. I think one of the dangers with a game that is made in part as something other than a game, is that the actual game parts might not be very good or interesting. I really didn't want that to be the case here, but I used the freedom granted by such an unconventional project to really just let loose and experiment with some ideas. For example, each class in the game (there are currently five core classes available in the preview, which will be joined by a few more) is radically different and has its own entirely individual game mechanics. This isn't a case of one character having a bow and another having a sword and another using magic, but they all use the same dice, use stats the same way and ultimately the experience of playing them is the same.

There is a class in You Will Die In This Place that involves programming an undead servitor to carry out actions, but they need to be planned in advance of its turn. If the program works out successfully, it gets an additional action the following turn. If the program halts because of your bad planning, the creature stalls and any bonus actions it had earned are reset. During character creation you get to craft this monster out of body parts which allow different types of movement, durability, attacks and so on.

There is a wizard whose character sheet is mostly taken up by a blank spellbook. During character creation, they need to write in the names of the spells they know and when they cast these spells, they have to physically redact words from the titles as part of their casting cost. The more words you choose to spend, the larger the casting pool for the spell. Some of the most potent spells have only a single word and, therefore, can only ever be used once. If they take damage, they have to physically tear chunks of the character sheet out, potentially losing spells but also their memories, notes and possessions (which are recorded on the reverse).

There is a class with a worker placement system for stamina and actions that can be moulded into all kinds of archetypical fighters, warriors or weapon masters. Another that uses a deck of cards, with

their life being physically represented by the number of cards remaining. One who is the owner of a demonic suit of relic battle armour that performs better as its muscles warm, but risks overheating if it is pushed too far.

This is just a brief overview of how these classes function and how different they are. I feel like, potentially, any one of these could have perhaps served as the core mechanic for a different game that I might have made. And I hope that, inevitable balance issues and minor gripes aside, other creators might take some kind of inspiration from any of them in some way, or just take a similarly unconventional approach in their own games. Game design is art, it's all about expression. It's really not a science and I say this as someone who is a scientist. Yes, there is maths and statistics heavily involved, but there is not one correct solution to a problem. Something as basic as making a fantasy game is not a solved problem.

Ok, so I've rambled on for a bit longer than I intended to about classes there. However, you'll have to forgive me, because I wanted to talk about the game's other layer too. The meta narrative. The discussions and writings of Charlotte and Samantha, the two fictional authors of the game, express a lot of my thoughts, feelings and fears about game design, but also of my life as an autistic, transgender creator. I've been told by other people that are elements of this story that have resonated very deeply with them, at times being too difficult to read. I think, ultimately, there are a lot of different reads into this aspect of the game and two different people might conclude that it is 'about' two very different things. I just really hope that people find something of value in the labyrinth of words I've made.

#### 8. How has Gamefound helped?

Gamefound have provided us with a wealth of seminars and talks from people about very useful topics relating to different stages and aspects of the process of creating games. Sadly, and this is really just an unavoidable aspect of the way the world works, due to my location in the UK and my job as a full-time physics teacher, I have missed many of these. However, I can't hold this against them and the staff have been exceptionally supportive, available and personable. It's clear that they're as excited about our games as we are and that this is a project they care about. Cam in particular deserves a shout out for being an unrelentingly positive force.

Beyond Gamefound themselves, the private area of their discord that they've dug out for us has allowed us to talk out problems with each other, share tips and advice and generally boost each other when we need it. The other members of the RPG Party include some genuinely wonderful people who I hope to stay in touch with beyond just this event. They have some cracking games too.

#### 9. Why should people try your game? What's the big sales pitch?

Damned if I know. Like some of the material that it pulls from for inspiration, this is undeniably not a game that will be for everyone. Some people might argue whether it even counts as a game at all, although I would disagree with that position (the game and non-game parts feed into each other in a way that makes neither complete without the other). This is a weird, complex, niche and incredibly dark piece of work. The fact that it has already been received so positively by so many who have read it genuinely confounds me. And it has taken me a good while to even accept that reality as true. I suffer from an imposter syndrome so deeply entrenched that I would rather believe that a good review is some kind of malicious joke at my expense than accept it for what it is. With that said, if you have a high tolerance for weird art, enjoy a bit of a melancholy, are gay, trans, or a creator of some kind, perhaps you might find something for you here.