

ORIGINAL STORY DESIGN

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Working title: Dire

Protectors

Genre: Fantasy role playing,
social simulation, platform
fighting

Platform: PC and consoles

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PITCH / STORY OUTLINE

A mysterious sorcerer lays a curse on an unsuspecting town with his dying breath. For the next three weeks, no one can enter or exit thanks to a magic barrier lying just beyond the outskirts. Each night, ghouls emerge from the barrier to terrorize the townsfolk. Playing as a party of six fighters, each brought to the town under different circumstances—now united for the same cause, can you protect the town from falling to its nocturnal adversaries?

Dire Protectors follows a format seen in many role playing games with social simulation elements. Usually, one phase of the game allows members of the party to partake in a plethora of activities that serve a dual purpose of both providing benefits in battle later on and giving the player insight on the personalities and relationships of the characters. In *Dire Protectors*, each morning the player chooses which fighter they would like to control for the rest of the day, wandering the 2D side-scrolling town to perform various tasks or participate in various story moments (think *Kingdom: New Lands*).

However, come the next phase, night, instead of entering into a turn-based dungeon or battle, the player splits the six fighters into either three groups of two or two groups of three, selecting which of the five parts of the town they would like each group to defend that evening. Then, based on the number of groups they made, the player then enters into either three or two successive platform fighting battles, respectively. Controlling the fighters they selected for each group, the player must destroy waves of enemies, lest they let the town fall.

The narrative arc of the game focuses on the dynamics and development of each of the six fighters as the main characters in this fantasy story, forced by the circumstances to learn from and cooperate with each other in order to succeed in protecting the town. In this way, the main plot's conflict serves as a catalyst for the change in each character that leaves them different from when they first arrived at this village.

While each of the main characters enjoy their own spotlight, the central conflict between the town and the curse—and the mystery that surrounds it—serves as the backdrop for them. Not only are they tasked with defending the town, they are intent on finding why the sorcerer laid this curse, and the nature of the magical barrier and ghouls. As the weeks progress and their teamwork improves, the party finds themselves closer to uncovering these secrets—together.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Arkahr [ark-**ar**]

Female tabaxi who embodies the heavy weight brawler platform fighter archetype and strong but stoic character archetype. At the onset of the game, Arkahr tends to not be very receptive to criticism and seems to have the opposite of a growth mindset. Having taken on many different physically intensive jobs throughout her life, she prefers to fight with her powerful fists and limbs.

Dathas [daath-**aass**]

Female human who embodies the medium weight sword user platform fighter archetype and epic hero character archetype. At the onset of the game, Dathas seems to lack confidence in her combat skills despite being demonstrably proficient in them, and often finds herself in situations missing the assertiveness that she needs. Having grown up idolizing the town's militia with the dream of one day joining their ranks, she has trained herself in various arts of sword wielding and white magic.

She is characterized by dark brown skin and short black hair, and stands at about 5' 10". Over the course of the game, Dathas grows to embody the role of de facto leader that is thrust upon her by the party, as she is the only member who is native to the town and knows it inside and out. Driven by her determination to not let the other party members or the townspeople down, she learns the power of having confidence in one's abilities and acting out with them when the time is right.

Eadsa [**ed**-suh]

Male kenku who embodies the light weight zoner platform fighter archetype and reclusive worker character archetype. At the onset of the game, Eadsa is often liable to be a bit of a control freak, singularly taking on tasks he deems himself the only one eligible to complete, rather than explain his wants and needs to others. Having nurtured a childhood obsession with mixing random ingredients to make unholy concoctions into an adulthood profession of brewing potions, he fancies fighting with elixirs of his own design, rather than the over-the-counter kind.

Grih [**grih**]

Genderless dragonborn who embodies the medium weight zoner platform fighter archetype and know-it-all scholar character archetype. At the onset of the game, Grih has the proclivity to try to insert themselves and take control of situations they otherwise would have no bearing on, arrogantly thinking themselves more capable of than others at solving a given problem. Having always treated the use of the arcane arts as an exclusive skill that very few people venture to learn or utilize, they favor using black magic in combat.

They are characterized by orange scales that cover their entire body, and stands at about 6'1". Throughout the game, Grih's finds that their wealth of knowledge alone is often not enough to suffice in practice, marring their arrogant view of themselves. After seeing Dathas slowly adapt to becoming the leader of the party, instead of lashing out, Grih uses the opportunity to realize that true leadership requires more than just intelligence.

Marcel [**mar-sell**]

Male wolfskin who embodies the medium weight brawler platform fighter archetype and happy-go-lucky best friend character archetype. At the onset of the game, Marcel is prone to be either dismissive or oblivious of other people's emotions and boundaries, not out of spite, but out of inattentiveness. Having never truly found himself in a dilemma where his innate physical features as a wolfskin weren't enough to get him out of trouble, he defaults to the use of his claws and fangs in combat.

Tsue [**tsu**]

Male orc who embodies the light weight assassin platform fighter archetype and short-tempered character archetype. At the onset of the game, Tsue has a propensity to become annoyed at the slightest provocations in the environment or behavior of others around him that would otherwise go unheeded by anyone else. Having never been one to cause a scene, however, he prefers to take his enemies out with the sly use of his daggers and hand-to-hand combat.

NARRATIVE DESIGN BRIEF & QUEST/OBJECTIVES EXAMPLES

A distinction should be noted between methods by which a game delivers mandatory plot progression that is meant to advance the story and non-mandatory character development and world building information that serves to color the story. The line between these methods are often very blurred, and that holds true for *Dire Protectors*. While the game's narrative is primarily concerned with advancing each of the main character's personal arcs, that doesn't mean that solving the mysteries around the plot's central conflict should be neglected.

Additionally, there aren't really any "quests" in the typical sense in *Dire Protectors*. The game keeps itself moving forward with a calendar system, so the actions that the player must take to progress through each day, such as the daily activities and nightly combat, could be considered "objectives".

Character Development Delivery Methods

Primarily, *Dire Protectors* delivers character development similarly to most other RPGs with social simulation components: through daily activities the player can participate in, alongside special interactions between characters. The player gets three activity points to use at the beginning of each day. Because the player must also select one of the characters from the six characters to control each day, the activities the player participates in are from the point of view of the currently controlled character. Characters selected to be controlled must wait two days before being selected again.

Supports

Similar to the mechanic of the same name in the *Fire Emblem* series of video games, supports are special conversations between two characters that become unlocked the more those two characters fight together in the same group each night. When a support between two characters is unlocked, they will appear to be conversing with each other in the town the next day. The support conversation can then be viewed by walking up with the currently controlled character and interacting with them. If an unlocked support is between the currently controlled character and another character, the other character will appear with a notification above them in the town the next day, signifying they can be interacted with.

Each character has three support conversations with every other character, which can be unlocked one at a time. Each subsequent conversation requires more use of the two characters together in combat. These conversations are the main way that the player can see how the characters learn and grow from each other. Activity points are not required to view supports.

Special training

Participating in special training uses up one activity point. In combat, each character has unique default directional light, heavy, and special attacks. However, any given character can learn how to use another character's special attacks through special training. If the currently controlled character has unlocked at least one support conversation with another character, they may learn one single special attack from that character's default move set. In order to learn another special attack from that character, they must have their second support conversation unlocked between them, and so on. In that way, since there are only three support conversations between each character, any given character can learn a maximum of three special attacks from another given character.

After selecting who you would like the currently controlled character to learn from, a scene plays out between the two, and the player is able to see how these characters interact in a teacher-pupil setting. Later on, if you go to learn another special move from that same character, the subsequent scenes that play out will reflect a development of the characters' relationship in this setting. After the day is over, the player is then able to select which special attacks they want each character to have equipped in preparation for combat each night.

Heavy research

Participating in heavy research uses up one activity point. Like special attacks, heavy attacks are also able to be customized. Each character has five default directional heavy attacks that they are able to upgrade by equipping to each direction one of five heavy items that are unique to them. Heavy items are acquired through random drops that defeated enemies have a chance of leaving behind. As such, when a heavy item is picked up, it goes into the party inventory, as the heavy item might not be equippable by the character that picked it up.

However, the character that would normally be able to equip the item must first go to the town's library and museum to learn about *how* to use it, and the item's history. If the currently controlled character has a newly acquired heavy item that they need to learn more about, they can participate in heavy research with the use of an activity point. Another member of the party tags along with them to aid in the research (who tags along is predetermined by what the item is). A scene plays out, and the player learns alongside the characters' reactions if the item is a

weapon or a spell, how the item came to be, and how it's been used in the past in the context of the game's world. Through this, the player gets to see how these characters interact in a scholarly setting, as well as get a glimpse into the greater world that is the setting for the game. Researched heavy items can be equipped in combat preparation at the end of each day.

Light gardening

While light attacks are not able to be customized in the same way as heavy or special attacks, they are able to be temporarily augmented for the duration of a single night. To do this, you must first acquire seeds that have a chance of being dropped by defeated enemies. Different enemies drop different seeds. During the day, you are then able to plant those seeds by using one activity point to participate in light gardening. Like the other daily activities, another character tags along with your currently controlled character to help sow the seeds, and a scene plays out. The player gets to see these characters interact in a more relaxed setting.

After a certain number of days, the flowers or herbs that grew from the seeds will be ready to harvest. After harvesting them, you may then have Eadsa brew a potion containing the harvested plants for a character to drink to during combat preparation. The potion will have a different effect depending on the ingredients and will last for the duration of the night.

Location fortification

During combat preparation each night, the player is given scouting information on the five locations the ghouls will be attacking from: how many ghouls, what type they are, and the fortification status of each location. From that, the player is able to prepare each character how they see fit and split the characters into three groups of two or two groups of three. As these groups can only defend three or two locations respectively, the other locations will be guarded by the local militia stationed at their fortifications. At the end of each night, the damage dealt to the fortifications at the locations the player wasn't present at will be calculated. If a fortification goes down, and the ghouls get into the town, you lose.

During the day, the player may have the currently controlled character participate in location fortification to repair the damages done to one of the fortifications by using one activity point. Another character from the party will accompany them to help, and again, a scene will play out showing the characters attempting to work together to fix the defenses. The player gets to see these characters trying their hand at true manual labor, something that not everyone is cut out for.

Plot Progression Delivery Methods

Dire Protectors utilizes common video game story delivery methods to move the player through its plot. There are a few key differences in how these methods are triggered by the player, however, in order to more seamlessly integrate these moments into the game that the player is already experiencing.

Daily activities

Despite for the most part being reserved for character and world building moments, daily activities can also be used to convey certain plot points by being the trigger for scripted events that are set on specified days.

For example, an extra scene can be set to play after the first heavy research that takes place in the second week. In the scene, the characters are shown to accidentally stumble upon a book that provides hints on how this town's type of curse was cast and how to become capable of casting it.

Of course, inserting plot points like this into daily activities means that character dialogue needs to be written for every possible combination of two characters that might be present during scenes like these. However, it presents a way for playthroughs to be even more unique for each player.

Cutscenes

Arguably the most common story delivery method outside of dialogue itself, cutscenes are extremely easy ways to provide cinematic story moments, but can feel very intrusive to the gameplay experience if done wrong. As such, how cutscenes are triggered should be designed to mitigate this as much as possible. To do this, there must be an action in-game acting upon the currently controlled character that reasonably leads to the introduction of a cutscene, rather than simply triggering after entering a new area or crossing a threshold.

An example of this could be if a townspeople is shown running up to the currently controlled character with that character's name shown in a speech bubble above their head, along with exclamations like "Hey!" and "Come quick!" This could signify that something is happening and they are calling for you, and the cutscene triggers when you stop and the catch up to you.

Plot-significant encounters

The use of plot-significant encounters, such as boss battles or the introduction of "rare" special enemies is something that should be taken advantage of to make the game more memorable

by providing the player with a chance to prove their growth in skill and move the plot forward while doing so.

The calendar format of *Dire Protectors*, taking place over the course of three weeks, is set up perfectly to implement this. The player encounters a new boss at the end of each week, before taking on the final boss, the true perpetrator of the town's curse, to finish off the game.

DESIGN DOC

SCRIPT SAMPLE

The following script sample presents the opening cutscene of the game, introducing three of the main party members and establishing their dynamics. It also serves to slide the player into tutorialization and tie the tutorial to the main plot.

The tutorial allows the player to try using each of the three main characters previously introduced to fight against the cloaked figure, all the while guiding them on basic combat mechanics. After the player easily defeats the cloaked figure (read: completes the tutorial), they cast the curse that besieges the town for the rest of the game, which sets up the main conflict and mystery.

DESIGN DOC

TOWN SQUARE - DAY

It is a bustling, beautiful morning in the town square. Musicians are playing, customers are milling about the market stalls. A woman, DATHAS, is seen pondering a booth in which the shopkeeper appears to be selling books. She is rubbing her chin, and a bubble with ellipses appears above her head. A dragonborn, GRIH, approaches the booth.

DATHAS

(to shopkeeper)

Excuse me? It looks like you have some spell pamphlets mixed with normal books.

Dathas picks up a spell pamphlet.

That could be dangerous, if someone inexperienced with magic were to accidentally find one.

SHOPKEEPER

(bubble with sweat drop appears above shopkeeper's head)

Oh! Thank you for telling me! I've been stopping by these last few towns so quickly, I haven't had the chance to properly organize yet. Half the time I don't know what I'm picking up.

Grih motions as if to clear their throat and decides now is their time to butt in.

GRIH

How irresponsible! This lady is quite correct, most people are unfamiliar with magic and its plethora of uses. Allow me to help you categorize right this moment, before anyone has the chance to get hurt. Tsk tsk.

SHOPKEEPER

(bubble with anger mark appears above shopkeeper's head)

I'm perfectly capable of doing that myself, thank you very much! Hands off the merchandise unless you're looking to buy!

GRIH

(bends down as if to pick up a stack of books)

Truly, I insist! It's not everyday you encounter someone so knowledgeable in spellcraft, you know. So allow me to be of service.

DATHAS

(to Grih)

Um... sir, I'm sure there's no need...

Grih lifts a stack of books, revealing the head of MARCEL, who was hiding behind them. Grih jumps back, and everyone is surprised, signified by a bubble with an exclamation point that appears above each of their heads.

GRIH

A wolfskin!

MARCEL

(still crouched between piles of books)

Hey what's up?

SHOPKEEPER

How did- ?! [That's probably why the boxes felt heavier than usual unloading this morning...]

MARCEL

I needed a ride from the last town you were in, but I didn't wanna pay for a real wagon, so I decided to hitchhike with you. Sorry about that.

GRIH

[More like stowaway...]

MARCEL

Then I thought, hey, wouldn't it be great if I surprised some clueless customer? And I was right! It was great!

Suddenly, there's a commotion from across the town square, catching everyone's attention. The MAYOR runs out of the town hall, yelling as a CLOAKED FIGURE surrounded by a black mist levitates after her before stopping in the middle of the town square.

MAYOR
HELP ME! HE'S TRYING TO KILL ME!!!

CLOAKED FIGURE
THIS TOWN HAS ESCAPED PUNISHMENT FOR
FAR TOO LONG. SOMEONE MUST PAY FOR THE
CRIMES THAT HAVE BEEN COMMITTED.

Our heroes decided it is time to head into battle.

DATHAS
[Really? I wanted to relax today.
Well, I think I can handle it...]
(to shopkeeper)
Thanks for the spell! Keep the change!

Dathas drops some coins in front of the shopkeeper, then runs off towards the cloaked figure with the spell pamphlet she picked up in one hand and her sword drawn in the other.

GRIH
Now this looks like my kind of affair!
[Time to show what I'm capable of.]

Grih drops the stack of books they were holding and rushes towards the cloaked figure.

MARCEL
[That looks like something I can
fight!] Hey, wait for me!

Marcel jumps up from his hiding spot, completely knocking over multiple stacks of books in the process. He races to catch up with the others.

SHOPKEEPER
(bubble with ellipses appears
above shopkeeper's head)
[What is happening...]

TUTORIAL BEGINS.

AUTHOR'S NOTE / STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Author's Statement

With this original story design, I hope that I'm able to showcase my main strengths in this area of expertise. I feel that my skills focus mainly on character and scenario writing and implementation of narrative design. Essentially, I feel that I am better at finding ways to tell a story over conceptualization of the story itself.

Statement of Purpose

Within recent years, JRPGs with social simulation and calendar mechanics have found great success (*Persona 5*, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*). However, a common criticism of these games centers around their lengthy playtime, often slow pacing, and sometimes low replayability. *Dire Protectors* aims to mitigate these issues in a few different ways.

By having the game's primary mode of combat be platform fighting instead of turn-based combat, the pace of the game becomes much faster and less tedious, as it allows for the removal of combat menus and stats-based progression systems. Additionally, by limiting the game to three weeks, rather than a full year like in *Persona 5* and *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, the playtime to experience the full story is much shorter, making completing the game even once more accessible. However, the short playtime also ensures that it is impossible to unlock every support conversation between every character, complete every special training, and find every single heavy item, etc. As such, the game incentivizes people who enjoy the gameplay and character interactions to play again in a new game plus mode. This is why it's beneficial to have the narrative revolve more around the characters rather than to create intricate plot. If the plot was grand and complex, what made it engaging the first playthrough wouldn't nearly have the same effect in subsequent playthroughs.

Reflective Statement & Statement of Professional Development

I did not keep up with giving and receiving feedback with peers, so unfortunately I can not write about that missed opportunity. However, my story design changed heavily as I figured out a workflow that best fit me. At first, I mostly only thought about what characters I wanted to make and what kind of story I wanted to tell with them, but struggled to pin down what exactly those

would be. I realized then that I was approaching this project from the wrong direction. I needed to figure out what I wanted the game to be first and foremost, then mold the story to that game.

To that end, I also realized that the oft repeated phrase “make the game you want to play,” applies to narrative design as well. More specifically, how would you like the story to be told to you in a way that’s enjoyable as part of the game experience. I found that I enjoyed games where delivery of narrative elements were tied to core gameplay mechanics, rather than existing as separate from them. Intrusive cutscenes, scripted mandatory quests, or essentially anytime a game would take control of your character to move you in another direction as if to say “you’re going the wrong way” were all examples of things I wanted to avoid.

Over the past couple of years, I have been able to adjust my mindset when approaching game development to that of a designer, thinking about what kind of experience I would want to convey first and foremost, and designing around that. Working on this project helped me to step back and try to think more about what the player is experiencing and how they feel during play. I think that only could have happened because this project was for narrative design. A story will fall short and completely fail in its purpose if the player isn’t receiving it in a way that is both understandable and enjoyable to them. In that way, a designer might have a story they want to tell, but it matters not how they want to tell it. What matters is how the player wants to hear it.