

NARRATIVE
DESIGN DOCUMENT

DEATHBOUND



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CHANGELOG

- Added this changelog
- Added the section “Mechanics and the Five Stages of Grief”
- Added the section “Cutscenes and Cinematics plan” at the end of the Document



I. OVERVIEW

1. Introduction

Eons ago, the Goddess Life had tricked her sister, Goddess Death, into stealing her powers and creating the First Men, a race of beings incapable of dying. Alive for thousands of years, they built a powerful and advanced civilization, with advanced technology and cities that spanned continents.

But Goddess Death would not be accept being deceived, and she slowly seduced these immortal people, weary of an existence that would never end. Eventually, they gave up their immortality, and their society collapsed.

Centuries later, a new civilization emerged from the wreckage of the old world, and with it, the desire to deceive Death once more. For years, the Essencemancers, a powerful sect of scholars of forbidden lore, have been trying to perfect a ritual that, using the First Men's long-lost technology, would allow eternal life - but at a terrible cost.

You are the result of these experiments.

Deathbound is an action RPG video game set in the kingdom of Krulezgon, in the post-apocalyptic medieval world of Zieminal. In the game, the player controls the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces, a creature capable of absorbing the Essence of dead warriors and, with that, transforming into them.

Each Essence is a complete character, with its own story, gameplay characteristics and personality, in addition to its own abilities and gameplay features. The player can form a group with up to four Essences that he can transform into.

The player can switch between the four Essences in their party at any time. With this, you can change your set of available skills, weapons and strategies during the game.



Along its trajectory, the player will be able to absorb new Essences, thus increasing its repertoire of choices.

Each Essence has a past and a set of beliefs, many of them antagonistic to each other - there are fervent believers in the Goddess Life and fanatics of the Goddess Death; victims of genocide and their executioners; veterans who participated in the same war on opposite sides. When these Essences are together in the group, their conflicts arise, and this directly impacts the gameplay.

Through this document the Narrative Design of Deathbound will be presented, considering the main goals for the game's narrative, the world building, the storyline, the main characters and what mechanisms will be used to convey such myriad of informations to the player without breaking up the flow of the game.

2. Narrative Goals

The narrative of Deathbound revolves around two main themes: **mortality** and **identity**. This directly reflects the nature of the game: an unforgiving action-adventure in which you play as several characters at once.

This, on the other hand, opens up the possibility of delving into two of the most burning questions on the human condition: *what does it mean to be who we are?*, and *what does it mean to be finite?* In the game, when we die, we get to play again, but in real life we don't get this chance - what does this make of our lives? As the player, you can switch between characters at will, each one with its own history and personality - but what does this say about the individual avatar we as players control? Is there an individual at all? And what about us in the real world? Aren't we too an amalgam of diverse experiences, feelings and personalities?

These questions are synthesized in the **tragedy of the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces**: a being trapped in a non-existence, both alive and dead, both an individual and a choir. It is through their trials that these questions will become material: it is through the game's plot, depicting the Prisoner's story, that we will approach these themes.



2.1. Mortality

Being faced with our own finitude is one of the most frightening yet humble experiences we humans can have. There is an inescapable contradiction between our self-consciousness and the awareness of our impending death. Our brains didn't evolve to contemplate oblivion, so we come up with ways of, in some form, overcoming mortality.

One can say that every single life is guided, ultimately, by the search for meaning - and understanding we won't be around forever is a major determinant in this quest. Thus, some look for it in religion and in the assurance of the afterlife; others, in the comforts of a job or family. But, in the end, the pursuit for the meaning of life is always guided by the fact that it is only a temporary state for us, mortals.

Life wouldn't be what it is if wasn't for it's opposite, **Death**. Any and all meaning for life can only emerge from its unavoidable end. One cannot exist without the other.

Surpassing death can take many different meanings. For some, it may mean enjoying life to its fullest; for others, it may be leaving a noteworthy legacy to the world. For some, it may mean avoiding death for as long as one can; for others, the opposite: embracing death with dignity or in control. One can say that, while Mozart's music is still played, he is not completely dead; while, for a less outstanding individual, there will come a time when they will be remembered for the last time. The old Romans classified the lowest strata of their society to be composed of those whose only legacy to the State were their offspring; but, for some people - in many ages and cultures -, rest comes from the knowledge that their family lives on in their children and their children's children. Some Buddhist monks in Japan, when nearing death, would go through a painstaking ritual in order to mummify their bodies while still alive. The same fervor can be found throughout History on those who willingly gave their lives for a greater cause, such as Bolshevik revolutionaries in the beginning of the century, or the Polish resistance fighters in the Second World War.

Be as it may, the prospect of our end is a terrifying one. We would go to any lengths to avoid death - and its herald, pain. Horror stories fascinate us precisely because they are



a possible glimpse on our future demise. Danger elicits action. It is in our instincts to fight to protect ourselves and those who we cherish. The paradox at the heart of all military propaganda is the call to lay down one's life in order to defend the lives of others. Entire schools of thought were erected on the subject of avoiding death through employing violence, and we, as a species, quickly figured out how to use our mortality as means of political power - by bringing death to those who would oppose us.

Finally, if there is anything more distressing than the knowledge of our mortality, it's the realization that life goes on without us. After we part, the calendar will still have more days, although for us it would have come to an end, like when we reach the last page of a book. There will be a world in which our dreams for the future will never come to fruition. The death of a person is also the death of an entire timeline for the Universe. An entire library, burned to the ground. And perhaps even more painful is to watch life unfold unmoved as someone else dies - someone you loved. Losing someone means to endure the rest of your existence in a state of no-longer possibilities: of unshared joys and pains, of collective choices not taken, of shared experiences never lived through. In many ways, it is easier for the departed.

Grief is what lies in the balance between Life and Death. It is the consequence of having lived, loved, formed attachments, only to have all of this taken away by time inexorable. The loss in time that manifests physically, be it of someone or something.

Deathbound is a game about mortality: about life only having meaning in face of death; the struggle to overcome death, in any shape this may come; about weaponizing death, and how that in turn shapes our fears; about grief, the loss that comes from having existed in the first place.



2.1.1. Identity

What does it mean to be someone, as opposed to someone else? The search for individuality is, first and foremost, a quest for one's Essence. But is such thing even attainable?

A good starting point is to think of an individual as the sum of their particularities. The color of our eyes, the tone of our skin, whether we fit a particular beauty pattern; our sexual orientations, our hobbies, whether we laugh or shiver in anger at injustice; our trade, our social status, whether we benefit from or we struggle with the status quo. Identity, thus, would be the whole that emerges from a spreadsheet of characteristics put together.

But the truth is the individual lives in a dual state, always being someone on itself as well as part of something larger. We're someone's daughter, or lover, or archnemesis; we're members of that congregation, or native to that country, or specimen of such species. Many of these supersets to which we belong are ours by chance or genetics, while on some others we exert our volition: we may choose to remain faithful to a religion, or opt to no longer be friends with someone, or enlist in a cause. One can say that identity materializes precisely on the possibility of such choice.

To some cultures, identity is a struggle between individuality and collectivism, being one's character the byproduct of such antagonistic forces. For the American way of life, hyperindividuality is the rule, and tales of the "self-made man" that pulls himself from the straps of his boots are aplenty. Any and all non-selfish concern for the collectivity is a sin of the Enemy. On the other hand, in Stalinist states behind the Iron Curtain, the individual lived for the collective, represented in the infallible Bureaucracy that, in its wisdom, guided the masses. Any and all traces of singularity were a sin of the Enemy. Identity, in this regard, would emerge from the balance between cultural and social expectations towards how one embraces - or differentiates from - the whole.

We are also an amalgam of every single individual we once were - and currently are. Like the Ship of Theseus of yore, throughout our lives we assumed many identities that were



gradually being replaced, updated or purged from our being. We were one before tragedy, and another after; what we are after years of experience doesn't compare to the neophyte we once were. But, mainly, we are not the same individual in front of family, or of work colleagues, or of our confidants. How we behave - even what we feel - is also determined by if we're addressing a Court of Justice, a scientific forum or a gathering of friends. Identity, according to this point of view, is actually the many context-dependent identities we carry within ourselves.

And, because of this, we're also many identities vying for becoming the One True self, sailing our many tempers and frames of mind. When angered, we're someone else from when we're orgasming; we may hold beliefs in a moment we later drop when holding them is no longer beneficial; we may hold prejudices against a cradle of individuals but revisit them in front of a single one of those individuals that grew close to us; we tend to speak out against oppression when we're their victims, but, should we profit from part of this oppression, we become collaborators. We're at the same time poets and savages, lovers and rivals, soothers and tormentors, instruments for change and cornerstones of business as usual. Identity, then, would be this battleground in which our contending selves wrestle for the spotlight.

Deathbound is a game about identity: about the quest for oneself; about what makes us unique in the face of the whole; about embracing - or not drowning in - the collective; about having many selves within one's self, and the struggles that ensue.

2.1.2. Other themes

The story of Deathbound will also examine other themes that are direct offshoots of the two main themes.

In some minds, the formula for overcoming death comes into being as unshakable certainties. One will live eternally, as long as they accept such divinity; one will not die in vain, so long as such cause is worthwhile. However, as mortality's dread can completely take over one's mind, so can those convictions. Consequently, all those who



do not follow our faiths are outsiders to the very human race - and potential substitutes for our own deaths. Fanaticism rises from the blindness that comes from the place where certainty and fear merge.

To avoid death is to survive the longest. When our ancestors learned to tame fire and crops, they were nothing more than learning to postpone death in more efficient ways. And when classes of individuals learned to exploit the rest of their peoples in order to ensure their dominance, they were too doing nothing more than creating an entire status quo around their survival. Institutional oppression is what emerges from the rich and powerful, in command of authority structures, befalling their sovereignty over society by persecuting anyone and anything that threatens their way of life.

After fire, we tamed iron, language, the electron and the atom. But, in command of the vast powers of nature, we are sometimes oblivious to the evils they can incur. Our thirst for knowledge is more than once tainted by greed and the will of the Powers That Be. We had our share of Dr. Mengeles and experiments on prisoners and other social outcasts; we flooded Native lands to build hydroelectric plants to power our cryptocurrency miners, and we almost rendered entire continents uninhabitable for tens of thousands of years to keep our political and economical regimes afloat. The ethics and limits of technology are an ever-present topic as long as we, as a species under structures of power, rely so much in our sciences, machines and techniques.

Memory is an important part of one's identity. It can be said that it is, essentially, persisted experience. Our tastes, our feelings, our skills, even our sense of belonging unfold from our memories, be it as synapses in our brains or as artifacts in a museum. To be deprived of it - be it through disease, through gaslighting one's experiences or through the systematic erasure of one's cultural and historical heritage - is a violent and horrendous prospect. And, thereby, can be weaponized or held hostage - such as the case of the people who, after revolution or cataclysm, chose to curse its no longer welcome past.

As we humans gather to survive the night, so grows this web of symbols and social contracts we call our cultures and societies. In a manner similar to our individualities,



these cultures grow to have their own singularities; and, in a manner similar to our own quest for uniqueness, they define themselves by how they differ from one another. Clash of cultures happens when these webs tangle up, short-circuiting meanings and expectations. And when, besides that, an imbalance of power is present, this may come dotted with sorrow and oppression. But this is not limited to different societies at the same time frame: what a single culture once was and what it is presently may also contend, especially when elements of the old coexist with the new. Just like an individual with many selves battling for supremacy of the being, a society may wrestle to find balance between taboo and tradition, between capitulation and innovation.

2.2. Tone, Ambiance and Setting

Deathbound is a tragedy, in the Aristotelian sense - a tale of people bound-to-death to their fates, and of all the misfortunes that befall them as they try to escape them. As tragedy, it moves away from comedy and towards catharsis - a cleanse of one's emotions by bearing witness to art. Thus, our main narrative goal with Deathbound's story is to provide our audience with the opportunity to purge the emotions our main themes elicit - fear of death, dread of one's mortality, grief, anxiety for one's search for identity - through following the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces' many trials.

We also aim to provide an artistic work that stands out by having an unique mix of setting, mature tone and a sense of historical authenticity.

2.2.1. Tone

Unlike most of the medieval fantasy storylines seen in games, movies and other mass media, Deathbound aims for a more grounded, mature tone - not in the sense of violence or sexuality, but in the sense of having a more adult onlook in general. Our goal is a narrative that is thought-provoking, that "asks the hard questions" and provides no easy answers - without being too much postmodernist.



Most mass media fantasy is comprised of somewhat childish, male-focused power fantasies, with worldbuilding that is at the same time vast and shallow. Their point of view is manichean, judgemental and full of Western bias. Deathbound is not a power fantasy; as a tragedy, it's about precisely the opposite: the inescapability of us mortals in the face of the Goddesses' whims. The game is not about "good guys" and "bad guys"; rather, it's about how social, material and historical conditions give rise to complex power relations.

Deathbound is also not another carbon copy of Tolkien's or Gygax's works; we consciously move away from an Anglo-Saxon-centric narrative and look to other sources for inspiration. It's no accident the name of the game world is "Zieminal" - from Polish **ziemia**.

We also aim in this game for a more sophisticated writing overall, full of subtext and with no "handholding" - for instance, unlike the overwhelming majority of backstory-rich games, Deathbound's opening cinematic was designed not as an "exposition dump" that explains every detail of the background story, but as a dramatic happening that puts the audience **in media res**.

2.2.2. Setting

Deathbound takes place in a **post-apocalyptic, techno-medieval** setting. We chose this for both artistic and production reasons - we wanted a setting that was sufficiently familiar to Soulslike lovers but, at the same time, would stand up as our "unique selling point".

The world of Zieminal was once home to an **advanced technological civilization** of immortal human beings. They built vast cities and unlocked wonders of science. Their technological level was roughly similar to our contemporary world - maybe 50 to 100 years in our future. But, overnight, their society fell due to humankind becoming mortal. Then, 522 years passed, and the survivors, thrown again into the Dark Ages, erected a **new, medieval civilization**, based on primitive technology, feudalism and religious piety.



The game uniqueness emerges precisely from the **clash between a technological (contemporary) past and a medieval (feudal) present**. We want to evoke images of medieval knights wandering among the rusty carcasses of automobiles; of wax candles glimmering next to electrical sparks; of runaway peasants driving their wooden carts through the ruins of skyscrapers; of soldiers in chainmail assessing the battlefield from the top of ruined overpasses.

In order to do so, the contemporary elements should elicit no doubt about their technological origin, as opposed to being confused with magical artifacts. It must be clear to the player, at first sight, that this setting is not another "weird magical" one, like the ones seen in games such as **Magic: The Gathering** and **Divinity: Original Sin 2**, or TV series such as **Arcane: League of Legends**. They must not confound a science lab with a temple, for instance, or an elevator powered by electricity with a contraption powered by magic.

2.2.3. Historicity

Though a fantasy story, *Deathbound* aims for historicity: a historical verisimilitude in worldbuilding and storytelling. The world of Zieminal is heavily inspired by our real world Middle Ages - not only by its tropes (knights, swords, castles etc.) but mainly by the way medieval societies actually developed and operated. In writing this story, we performed a curated historical investigation on cultural and sociological aspects of those societies.

This is something that is seldom worked into the fantasy genre as a whole. We see kings and armies on horseback, but no Feudalism or class struggle. One aspect that is blatantly left out is how overwhelmingly important religion was for medieval societies. Much more than simple backstory info for D&D Clerics, religion, as authors such as Marc Bloch and Jacques LeGoff pointed out, was the center of medieval political, cultural, even military life.

In *Deathbound*, we intend to do the opposite: sociological and religious concerns are the core of our worldbuilding efforts. Zieminal is divided into kingdoms that exist under feudal contracts: decentralized fiefs held by local Lords in lieu of their sovereigns, who,



in turn, cede portions of their territories to lesser Lords, thus amassing great power - in many ways, greater than those of their kings. Lying above them all is the all-powerful Church of Death, the de facto power in Zieminal, capable of making and unmaking even kings, and in which word rest all aspects of public and private life.

Resisting this status quo are the outcasts - the peasants, the heretics, the nonconforming, those who fell from the graces of Lords or of the Church. Class struggle is ever present, taking shape as the Cult to Life, an uneasy alliance of the exploited, based on real world social movements and resistance groups.

Finally, the nations of Zieminal were all based, to some degree, in our real world's medieval cultures and nations. Krulezgon is based on the medieval West, represented by Charlemagne's France and the Holy Roman Empire; Smirtolia is based on medieval Eastern Europe, represented by medieval Polish-Lithuanian union, medieval Hungary and Slavic and Turkish cultures; Sayabakn is based on the medieval West Africa, represented by the Ghana and Mali Empires; Klingazar is based on medieval Mongolia and their Khanates; the Exile, a abstract "kingdom" (mostly a gameplay concept rather than an in-game one) made up by the refugees from the Cult to Life, is based on many historically marginalized cultures, such as the Romani and the Jewish peoples.

A great deal of research and study went into defining names, cultural concepts and storylines for each of these nations, based on their real life counterparts.

2.3. The Kübler-Ross Paradigm

We have chosen to materialize the tragedy of the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces and the themes presented in the game through the use of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' work on the stages of grief, first introduced in her 1970 book, **On Death and Dying**.

We do understand that the issue of how the terminally ill and their loved ones deal with death is a complex one, and even Kübler-Ross' work, though as innovative as it was, portrays a limited view on the subject. However, we find that, due to its pioneering and



cultural impact, this paradigm is an excellent framework for us to structure the story we want to tell.

The "five stages of grief" model is not exactly news in the gaming world; works such as **Rime** and **Gris** already portrayed this pattern. However, few - if any - Soulslike game made use of this resource, and its structure fits perfectly within the themes we explore in *Deathbound*. Thus, we purposefully chose this as a storytelling paradigm in place of more traditional - and overused - structures, such as Christopher Vogler's **The Writer's Journey**, both as an artistic decision and as a way of distinguishing ourselves from other Soulslike tale.

2.3.1. The plot and the stages of grief

Kübler-Ross was a psychiatrist who, among other things, delved into the relationship between terminally ill patients and their impending deaths - a topic often neglected by mainstream medicine and patient care at the time. From her observations she came up with her "five stages of grief" model: phases that a grieving person goes through as they come to terms with their situation. They were: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Each of these, starting in a state of denial about their predicament and ending in a state of peaceful acknowledgement, depict a journey-like structure that one goes through facing their own mortality. *Deathbound*'s level structure rhymes this as the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces' own journey.

It starts with him in absolute denial of his plight, as we wakes up with the memories and personality of the first Essence he absorbs - Therone Guillaumen, the Cruzader of Death. As he slowly begins to understand what happened to him, he lashes out his anger at all those he considers responsible for his situation. One exhausted of this destructive energy, he starts seeking ways to circumvent what he believes is a curse laid onto him. At the lowest point of his journey, he fully realizes what happened to him, and that there is no escape. With nothing more to lose, he finally accepts what he now is, and, armed with this knowledge, goes on to face his final trial.



2.3.2. The stages of grief and the levels

Deathbound's map is divided into zones that more or less correspond to these stages: the Life Laboratories, where the story starts, stands for denial; the surrounding Lower Streets and the Zehrimbal stadium represent anger; the following up Higher Streets and the Vertical Tomb represent bargaining; finally, the imposing Cathedral of Life stands for both depression, in its bowels, and acceptance, at its roof.

The idea is that each one of these zones and areas reflect the metaphor of its correspondent stage of grief, in all of its elements: their level design, their concept art, their environmental narrative and art and, above all else, the game design of their gameplay elements.

2.3.3. The stages of grief and the characters

But it is not only in Deathbound's story structure that Kübler-Ross' paradigm will be portrayed: the game characters will be also conceptualized in light of this framework. Each character will exist in a dialog with Deathbound's themes and the particular point of view, expressed by each of the game's Essences, regarding how one faces its own mortality.

Since the player will have the opportunity to absorb the Essences scattered throughout the ruined city of Akratya, each one of these characters will also be strongly tied to the stage of grief represented by the zone in which they're found. This way, an Essence found at the bargaining stage, for example, will have their backstory, personality and what they consider to be the proper way of overcoming death thematically tied to this stage of grief.

Furthermore, the game will have different endings according to the player's actions, and of those, the ones that will have the greatest impact on determining these endings will be tied to the stages of grief - specifically, how to overcome each of these stages. To each Essence will be presented, in each zone depicting a stage of the Kübler-Ross' paradigm, a challenge that represents them surpassing that particular stage. Failing



them means that Essence will have "unfinished business" when the time come for the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces to face its final struggle.

2.4. Narrative and Gameplay

The main goal of Deathbound's narrative team is, far beyond telling the game's story through traditional storytelling elements such as dialogues and cutscenes, to tell this story through gameplay, first and foremost. We will seek to come up with not only characters, plots and backstories, but also with gameplay mechanics and tools that will make the player live the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces' tale, rather than simply being told about it.

We will also strive for making all game elements - gameplay and mechanics, art, level design etc. - exist in dialogue with a consistent narrative vision.

2.4.1. Soulslike storytelling

Deathbound is a Soulslike game; therefore, its narrative should be conceived within this genre tropes. We do seek to improve over this genre's formula, and we do have a lot of stories to tell about the world of Zieminal and all its characters; however, there should be made a distinction between the kinds of game that feature rich stories and the kind of game we're aiming to write.

"Story-centric" games are those in which experiencing the story is the main driving force, and the game exists only to give shape to the story being told; it's the case of many adventure games and interactive fictions, such as Life is Strange, Detroit: Become Human and the Choose Your Own Adventure gamebooks. "Story-driven" games, on the other hand, are games in which the focus is gameplay, but which progress is driven by storytelling; it's the case of many action-adventure games such as Horizon: Zero Dawn, Batman: Arkham City and The Last of Us. Finally, "story-rich" games feature rich storytelling and deep worldbuilding, but their propellant is not narrative; rather, it is the



gameplay itself that drives the story being told - such as the case of Dark Souls, Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice and Mortal Shell.

We see Deathbound as a story-rich game sooner than a story-driven one. Its narrative is being conceived as support for the game experience, rather than its fulcrum. We aim for creating a storyworld that fits both players that wish to immerse themselves in the game's lore and players that wish to skip all narrative and go right into action - without losing any of the core narrative experience.

Much of Deathbound's narrative will be delivered through clues scattered through the game world - old tomes and notes left behind in the game levels; item descriptions containing shards of information from the past; subtle details in the game's environments. The player will not experience the full depth of Deathbound's story passively; like a genuine Soulslike, they will have to go exploring for it, piecing together these puzzle pieces in order to have the "bigger picture".

That is not to say we will not rely on more traditional and "direct" narrative tools, such as dialogues and cutscenes. Nonetheless, we will restrict these to key moments within the game, especially when the game's plot needs to be brought forward.

2.4.2. Mechanics

When game mechanics work as metaphors for certain ideas, concepts or experiences, they effectively become a language with which we can express those ideas through the act of play. Gameplay itself becomes a storytelling medium, not through words, but by making players live through those ideas. That is the unique power of games, one that we intend to fully explore.

Besides the use of texts, dialogues or animations, we intend to come up with game mechanics that help the player experience the game's story and themes. We will at every turn try to come up with game mechanics that effectively tell the story we wish to tell, aspiring to turn all themes, story beats and emotions we want to elicit into words in this gameplay language.



Chiefly among these is the mechanic that depicts the conflicts between the Essences. Directly tied to the theme of Identity, this mechanic is intended as an exploration of the plight of having many different and conflicting personalities within oneself. The Essences in the game are fully-fledged characters, with their own personalities and backstories. Many of these characters would not see eye to eye in normal circumstances - but now they find themselves trapped together in a single vessel.

Identifying this as the main source of narrative conflict was actually one of the first things Deathbound's narrative team did. We wish for the player to actually live through having "sinners and saints, oppressors and victims" sharing a body, more than simply reading or hearing about it. We've been working on this mechanic for quite some time now, and it went through many iterations. We consider this to be the single most important goal in Deathbound's narrative design.

2.4.3. Gameplay and the stages of grief

Specifically, we intend to think of game mechanics that tie directly to each of Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief. Since, as we pointed before, the game levels will represent each of those stages, we aim for thinking on how we can translate them into gameplay experiences.

Our job will consist mainly of dissecting each stage of grief and the emotions associated with them into structures we can emulate through game mechanics. For example, anger can be understood mechanically as the feeling that emerges when we set certain expectations about the world - just to have these expectations violently subverted from under our feet.

We will do the same reasoning for all stages of grief, coming up with ways to represent them in game language. We intend to work very closely with the game and level design teams in order to accomplish this.



2.5. Ethical Concerns

For us, making Deathbound is not only about creating a salable product, but also about assembling an artistic work that stands for an aesthetical and ethical vision. We understand that our game is a cultural artifact that doesn't exist in a vacuum, but is rather part of the larger sociocultural reality that surrounds it.

We're very aware of the impact our work, consciously or not, can have in society, and we choose not to be passive about it. Deathbound is being made by progressive, Left-leaning people who value diversity, equality and artistic freedom, while abhorring any form of oppression. As such, all narrative work will be done in light of these ethical concerns.

2.5.1. Responsible representation

Videogames - and mass media in general - have a huge impact on one's identity building, and their characters are often presented as roles for their players to incorporate. According to the paper *Identification with the Player Character as Determinant of Video Game Enjoyment*, "when identifying with a character or role offered by the game, players change their self-concept by adopting relevant attributes of the character (...)".

When this representation is done without care, videogames can end up becoming instruments for propagating stereotypes and prejudices, or reinforcing structures of oppression. Male-centric power fantasies can reinforce toxic masculinity, while the prevalence of main characters from a single ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation tend to help marginalize people from more diverse backgrounds.

Deathbound's narrative team is committed to appropriately representing a variety of genders, cultures and sexual orientations within the game, leaving no room for stereotypes of any sort. The storytelling and design of each character will be carefully crafted taking into consideration equality and diversity. The many kingdoms of Zieminal are based on real-world historical cultures, and we intend for this inspiration to be the most respectful and enlightening as possible. Furthermore, by adding characters from



multiple ethnicities, origins and upbringings, we would like to encourage people from broader backgrounds to play the game.

In addition, we do recognize that player identification with their in-game avatar can be used to further specific gameplay experiences - such as the case of inciting a feeling of hopelessness in a character when we would like to amplify terror and tension for the player. We aim to use this as a means of telling our story; however, we also intend for it to be used responsibly, avoiding eliciting harmful feelings in the player - such as triggering traumatic flashbacks or encouraging suicidal ideation.

If, by any reason, we need to deal with themes or storylines that would end up evoking those feelings - for storytelling purposes, for example -, we pledge to deal with it in the most sensible and respectful way possible.

2.5.2. Sexism and the representation of women

While still on this subject, representation of women in games is a blatant case of sexism and male-centric narrative, to the point it became stereotypical of the so-called "gamer culture". As Anita Sarkeesian and many others pointed out, when female characters are not sexually objectified to the cis-hetero-male taste, they are the subject of many derogatory story tropes that exist for the sole purpose of aggrandizing male characters - from the infamous "damsel in distress" to the wife that is killed at the Inciting Incident so the vengeful protagonist can be shoved into his adventure world.

This stems from the perception that videogames are a male-dominated media. However, not only that was never completely true, each year female participation in gaming is increasing. Women today make up more than 40% of the videogame audience, and adult women gamers are more numerous than male gamers under 18, turning the lack of proper female representation in games ever more serious.

Deathbound is committed to be a story inclusive to cis and trans women and free of those harmful tropes. We intend to have strong female characters that stand as equal to their



male counterparts while still having their unique personalities, backstories and personal struggles.

By "strong", we mean well constructed characters that have distinct narrative purpose within the game's story - and not simply applying traditionally male tropes and characteristics to female characters. We believe it is indeed possible to have strong women without denying traditional female characteristics that are often portrayed as "weak". That, in turn, doesn't mean that a female character cannot have male characteristics or that a male character can't have female ones - but we won't represent neither woman nor man as weaker for having female characteristics.

We intend to go to great lengths to ensure our female characters do not perpetuate harmful stereotypes, or exist only to move another male character's arc forward, and we will try and subvert these sexist tropes at every turn. That is not to say we won't deal with negative happenstances concerning our female characters - such as being victims of violence, being killed, etc. -; what we mean is that, if such things happen, they will have a meaningful purpose within that character's narrative by itself.

Furthermore, we make a point of having a balance between the number of male and female characters, both as playable Essences and as NPCs.

2.5.3. Freedom of art

All that said, however, we also strive for a great degree of artistic freedom. Always keeping in mind the points raised above, we intend to explore our themes and storytelling opportunities to the fullest, without previous - or self - censorship. We understand our audience will have many different beliefs and moral codes - many of which will conflict with the themes and storylines presented in the game -, but we reserve the right to put our artistic endeavors before them.

For instance, one of the main antagonistic forces present in the game is the Church of Death, which contains many purposeful references to the medieval Catholic Church. Although this will be upsetting for some of our audience, we believe the presence of this



element in the game's narrative to be of extreme value. Also, the presence of LGBTQIA+ characters and relationships in the game will be frowned upon by part of our audience, specially in countries in which these are taboo or outright illegal. Nevertheless - and even because of this - we deem the presence of these elements essential to this work.

Ultimately, we understand we're creating a product that will be marketed and expected to provide financial feedback, and, within reason, we're open to reevaluate points of our narrative work in order to ensure that. Nonetheless, Deathbound's narrative team's main concern is with the artistic integrity of our work, and we would like to have the freedom to fight for our original vision, should the need arises. For instance, if upper management wishes to change some aspect of Deathbound's narrative, we expect to be consulted about it beforehand.

2.6. Research and References

2.6.1. References

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II. Narrative Design

Deathbound's core mechanic — and what makes it distinctive — is the management of Essences: their absorption, combination, and morphing during gameplay. Therefore, this should also be used to define the main "narrative hooks" of the game, that is, the most frequent ways to convey narrative information.

This section explores the tools that were designed to convey the narrative for the player in Deathbound. Some of those tools are very basic and direct, and can be observed in most of games, but other are designed considering the unique aspects of the game.

1. Essence Conflicts

Each Essence have their own backstory and motivations turning them enemies in life, by personal and direct reasons or even irreconcilable beliefs. Once they're all in one mind, as the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces, those can become deep conflicts that will affect how the Prisoner will perform in battle. How the conflicts will affect his performance is stabilished from the point of view of the narrative conflict between the characters. These conflicts will express the different convictions they can have and will tell more about the world, their past what moves them, deeply connected with the gameplay without breaking immersion.

2. Essence Reveries and Duels

When an Essence is found, the player has the option to absorb them, by conquering a special level that happens inside the Essence's mind. In this place, the player will move the character in an abstract place, made of floating rocks the will make a path through some of their most significant memories. As the player progresses, memories will materialize in an ethereal form in front of him, revealing important information about the character, his purpose, and the plot itself. Some of the critical memories of the



Essence may present themselves as challenges, where the player will need to fight his way through. When the absorbed Essence is hostile toward the one used to absorb it, they may duel in this realm of the mind, as the prisoner of a thousand faces tries to take hold of the new Essence consciousness in a less friendly way. Through this narrative mechanic we can convey important dense narrative without holding the player away from the play.

3. Echoes From the Past

While exploring Akratya, the player may find himself in the very place an Essence was before, during a significant event. When this happens the player may access a memory of that Essence. If he does that, the memory will materialize itself as they happened in that place, in an ethereal form, and the player may watch what happened from the point of view of his choice. To activate an Echo from the past, the player must be transformed into the Essence and interact with the Echo, a glowing sphere floating in the place of the memory. When not transformed into the Essence, a subtle flickering visual effect will be in that same place and a characteristic sound will be heard if the player is carrying that Essence in the Party. This mechanic is associated with the unlocking of the Talents of the Essence, encouraging players to seek those memories and learn more about the narrative and feeling rewarded by it.

4. Inner Voices

While exploring some locations, the Essences can manifest their consciousness inside the head of the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces. Those manifestations can be in form of interjections, observations or even arguments between one or more of the Essences in the Party. They can convey to the player some important pieces of the narrative while building their character. Because they need to be in the Party to manifestate, the player can have different experiences according to which Essences he is playing with in a



certain location, creating diverse experiences for the players and increasing replayability.

5. The Codex

As the player progresses through the game locations, talks to NPCs or discover pieces of intel, an entry will be stored in the player Codex. Those entries can help the player figure out what happened in the world of Zieminal and understand more about the obscure details of the plot. However, the Codex is like a map of the memories collected by the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces, a confused mind with many consciousness and points of view. Whenever a new entry is added to the Codex, it will be from the perspective of the Active Essence, and may differ from what another character perceives from such event or past events that, for instance, took place in a certain location. This way, the Codex is not a reliable source of truth, for it carries the perspective of the observer, as everything in the real world. When new information is discovered from a previous subject, the entry can be overwritten by the point of view of the new Active Essence, highlighting the difference in the points of view of the characters and how it can change ones perception about the world around him.

6. Other Narrative Mechanics

These are long known tools from the industry that do not demand definition, but will be used to convey other informations when necessary.

1. **NPC Dialogue:** The player will find a small number of non-hostile NPCs in Akratya that will want to speak with him. The dialogue can be used not only to convey narrative, but also to give and advance side-quests.
2. **Environmental Storytelling:** We must take any opportunity to convey narrative through the design of the environment and all the elements in it, the most we can say without the use of words, the most we can keep the player in the immersion of play.



3. **Cinematics and Cutscenes:** These are powerful ways to convey narrative, but at the same time, it takes the agency away from the player. In *Deathbound* we avoid this kind of method as much as possible, but in the right moments we will apply it without shame.
4. **Diegetic Texts:** Whenever seems fit, we can complement the narrative with small texts that can be found by the player in the environment, in form of interactable objects or in the environment itself.
5. **Item Descriptions:** All collectable items in *Deathbound* will contain narrative information associated with its origin that will convey more about the world and the main plot.

7. Mechanics and the Five Stages of Grief

7.1. Initial considerations

Deathbound's narrative design main goal is, primarily, to make its game mechanics express the story, ideas and emotions we want to convey, even more than its embedded narrative elements. Furthermore, we have chosen Kübler-Ross' paradigm as the story's guiding thread. To convey this paradigm as *Deathbound's* game experience, we need to translate each one of the five stages of grief into game rules, mechanics, and level design.

We need to effectively make our players *feel* anger and depression, and make them *experience* states of denial, bargaining, and acceptance - rather than simply showing them a story that talks about it. Elements of embedded narrative - diegetic texts, cutscenes, dialogues etc. -, on the other hand, should reinforce the experience we want to convey, and are a great opportunity for us to explore these themes in deep.

7.2. Mechanics and narrative - an analogy



An interesting analogy for understanding the relationship between making the player experience the stages of grief through mechanics, on the one hand, and talking about them through the embedded narrative, on the other, would be to "compose a song".

A song is made up of a melody (music) and lyrics (poetry). In effect, these are two different languages, each with its own way of producing meaning, combining to convey feelings, themes, or stories. However, there is a risk that the composer, wanting to tell such story or talk about such feelings, ends up privileging only the textual side (the lyrics). The melody ends up being poorly developed, blunt, or even clashing with the lyrics altogether - it is the case of a song that talks about happiness with a funereal melody; or lyrics that talk about tragedy with a happy, upbeat melody.

It is possible, however, to "tell stories" solely through melody - obviously without the same imagetic precision of the written text. It can't describe precise happenstances - but it can communicate in a much deeper, emotional level through its chords, harmonies and rhythms. A classic example of this is Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, which recollects the attack by Napoleon's troops on Russia, and the ultimate victory of the Czar's forces. The song portrays everything from the sadness on the eve of battle to the battle itself and the triumph of Russian troops - without using a single written word.

If we understand game mechanics as "the melody" and embedded narrative as "the lyrics", we can apply the same reasoning to games: it is possible to convey meaning through game rules, challenges, puzzles, skill trees, gameplay choices etc. - not in the same "hi-res" as a written text, but by making the player live through the experience rather than simply watching it.

7.3. Denial

[WIP]

7.4. Anger



When we with on the feeling of anger, we conjure images of wrath, boiling blood, volent acts, frustrating difficulties, unanswered injustices. Someone calling our mother names, putting in question our partner's fidelity, or provoking us with any other offense we take by heart; watching white cops brutalizing an innocent, black woman, and then getting away with it scot free; us throwing gamepads on the wall after losing that unfair boss battle for the 100th time; the thrill of adrenaline pumping in our veins as we beat a wrongdoer in a street fight.

According to Kübler-Ross' paradigm, Anger is the next stage of grief, after we can no longer deny the grim reality: that we are about to die of an incurable disease, or that our loved ones are going to face this fate; that we lost our love, our home, or our careers forever; that us, former star athletes broken by accident, are never going to perform as we once did; that the cause we have been fighting for our entire lives is a lie, and that all was for nothing. We can no longer pretend that it is not the case, and we get angry at our fates. We blame the Gods for letting this happen to us instead of others; or ourselves for not quitting an unhealthy habit earlier, or society for never letting us have a chance in the first place. And we are *pissed*.

Anger is fire, explosions, exothermal chemical reactions, fast release of energy; a bomb exploding, an inferno consuming everything in its path; it is adrenaline numbing the pain receptors in our hands, making our punches hit the hardest. When we are taken by wrath, it is as if we are being possessed by a demon that controls us and blinds us.

7.4.1. Anger in Deathbound

In Deathbound, the Anger stage takes place in two distinct spaces within Akratya: the Lower Streets, and Zehrimbal. At those stages, two more Essences can be absorbed: Iulia Tchevlaskia and Agharos of Meriva.

The Lower Streets, in the First Civilization, was a working-class neighborhood inhabited by those who worked in the nearby Shopping Mall and Zehrimbal stadium. Their hard-working lives were full of rage-inducing social injustices.



The stadium that would eventually be known as Zehrimbal was a multisports arena where the immortal First Men played several brutal games. Since they could not die, these games were fertile ground for all the rage and fury competitive sports elicit.

Iulia Tchevlaskia was the victim of a great injustice. She fought in a rebellion to protect her village from famine during a plague, but not only saw her comrades slaughtered by the repression but her entire family burned alive by a soldier called Agharos of Meriva.

Agharos of Meriva was born a killer. From a tender age he liked to fight, torture, and kill. He became a Sergeant in the Archduke's army - his best henchman. His bloodlust was the source and the cause of much hatred.

7.4.2. The temptation of extreme difficulty

The easiest way of eliciting anger in the player is to make them enraged at the game itself. Because of this, it is tempting that, aiming for the player to feel rage, we end up making Anger a difficult game stage, in terms of challenges - stronger enemies, in greater numbers, with unfair and difficult traps etc. Even more if we consider that the *Soulslike* genre is famous precisely because of its extreme difficulty. However, there is a risk that, by doing this, we end up making a game that is extremely unbalanced - which, in turn, will end up alienating a portion of our players.

By making the Anger stage an extremely difficult one, we are messing up with the game's overall balance curve. In order for this increase in difficulty to have any meaning, we would need to make the next stages less difficult - otherwise, the player would simply assume that Deathbound is just a very hard game overall. This "spike" in difficulty can end up throwing Deathbound's balancing off, diminishing its game design quality.

Also, as we discuss later on, the type of anger an unfairly difficult stage elicits - frustration - is only one of many possible forms for this feeling to manifest itself. By focusing on only one of these different types, we are failing to explore all the others; and, since frustrating the player is the easiest way of getting them angry, we are also settling for a mediocre work, far beneath our capacity.



Finally, there is also the risk of making the game so much difficult it ends up becoming unintentionally comical - like the example of those ultra difficult games, in which the "fun" is precisely in "torturing" the player, like *Unfair Mario* and *Trap Adventure*. In those cases, the feeling that ends up being elicited is humor rather than anger, and the game experience is one of memorizing obstacles rather than overcoming challenges and exploring the game.

7.4.3. Anger from a psychological perspective

We experience anger as a feeling: a psychological experience, a reaction of our intellect-body to something that happens to us. Therefore, it is interesting to begin this study from this perspective.

According to Wikipedia, "anger (...) is an intense emotional state involving a strong uncomfortable and non-cooperative response to a perceived provocation, hurt or threat. (...) Three types of anger are recognized by psychologists:

1. *Hasty and sudden* anger is connected to the impulse for self-preservation. It is shared by human and other animals, and it occurs when the animal is tormented or trapped. This form of anger is episodic.
2. *Settled and deliberate* anger is a reaction to perceived deliberate harm or unfair treatment by others. This form of anger is episodic.
3. *Dispositional anger* is related more to character traits than to instincts or cognitions. Irritability, sullenness, and churlishness are examples of the last form of anger.

(...) Anger, in its strong form, impairs one's ability to process information and to exert cognitive control over one's behavior. An angry person may lose their objectivity, empathy, prudence or thoughtfulness and may cause harm to themselves or others."

The Portuguese version of this Wikipedia entry adds: "in healthy individuals, anger is triggered when a significant goal is frustrated by the improper actions of external agents."



7.4.4. Anger as projection

Sometimes anger in a person's life manifests itself not as something they feel themselves, but as a state of affairs that surrounds them. A wrathful person may turn everything and everyone around them wrathful too; in turn, it is possible for a not-angry person to experience wrath on the world around them. It is the case of the stark, intolerant, and reactionary patriarch who controls every aspect of his extended family's life; of the abusive, difficult to deal with landlord who misers over every little issue; of the young person who live in a world of violence, poverty, and drug abuse, who ends up making the lives of everyone around them a living hell; of the law enforcement agent, who has to deal with violence, crime, and heinous acts on a daily basis.

In game, this can be translated as anger manifested not in the player characters themselves, but in the NPCs, environment and situations around them. As the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces travels through Akratya, he will meet wrathful soldiers and vengeful survivors; he will witness the outcome of great injustices and the aftermath of terrible fatalities.

7.4.5. A mechanism of anger

PegasusNLP is a self-help website focused on the controversial Neuro-Linguistic Programming techniques. Regardless of the scientific validity of these techniques, this site has a text in which its authors makes a very interesting analysis of what they call "anger mechanics":

According to this text, "anger is a feeling which some of us experience when events in our world are not going according to our plans. Usually we have an idea of how things, events and people should be – and when they don't march to our tune we get angry and either feel frustrated and simmer or we try to change the events or people."

This process, they argue, materializes as specific mechanics: "one common way of setting yourself up to become angry is to have a version of how things should be and to continuously compare reality with your version – and then feel angry when reality gets



it wrong! As part of this process you have mental list of triggers against which you test reality and when reality gets it 'wrong' you feel angry. These triggers are situations that cause you to explode – or implode if you tend to suppress your anger.”

To summarize, the mechanics of anger work by establishing an **expectation** of fairness - an imagination of how things should be in a just Universe - and a corresponding negative **subversion** of that expectation. By being aware of this formula, we can translate it into game mechanics.

7.4.6. Types of anger

There can be several different kinds of anger, according to the type of the expectation/subversion pair they originate from:

Injustice

Expectation: whoever commits injustice must be punished, and whoever suffers injustice must be repaired

Subversion: someone commits an injustice and gets away with it; or someone who suffers injustice is not only not redressed but ends up being punished themselves

Ex:

- A woman is raped and forced to marry her rapist
- An innocent black man is beaten by the police
- A trans woman, because of LGBTphobia, is arrested accused of a crime she did not commit

Fatality

Expectation: all people should live their lives healthily until the natural end their of lives, at an old age

Expectation: good people, who do not commit injustice or harm anyone, do not deserve to suffer



Subversion: an illness, accident, or fatality

Ex:

- A woman discovers she has terminal cancer at age 28
- A father loses his child due to a stray bullet
- An athlete at the height of their career suffers an accident and can no longer compete

Frustration

Expectation: if you do everything right, you should get a satisfactory result

Subversion: failures, defeats, mistakes

Ex:

- A person strictly follows the instructions to assemble a piece of furniture, but ends up assembling it wrong anyway
- A programmer who, despite his best efforts, cannot find the bug in his code
- A person makes an online purchase but receives the wrong product

Betrayal

Expectation: if we place our trust in someone, that person must honor our trust

Subversion: treachery, being conned, manipulations

Ex:

- A person who vouches for a coworker only to have this coworker take advantage of this to get promoted ahead of the person
- An old lady accepts the help of a stranger and they end up stealing money from her bank account
- A woman, who believes a man is her friend, opens up with him in a fragile moment but then discovers he only wanted to have sex with her

Disappointment



Expectation: if just we (or someone else) do the right/necessary thing, we (or the other one) can achieve greatness

Expectation: we (or someone else) have a lot of potential; we (or the other person) just need to reach for it

Subversion: we (or the other person) don't do what's right/necessary; we (or the other person) get shy, or lazy, or end up not believing in oneself

Ex:

- A friend's crush is also into them and clearly expresses it; nevertheless, our friend fails to make a move, and their crush ends up dating someone else
- We encourage someone we know has a lot of musical talent into applying for a spot at a band; but they don't show up at the audition
- We are in an abusive relationship we know it's abusive; but we fail to muster the willpower to break away from it
- We witness our son or daughter waste away their lives in an overly hedonistic way of life, filled with drugs and risky behaviors

7.4.7. Anger as a game mechanic

Finally, to present to the player the experience of Anger, in all its aspects, we need to translate it into game mechanics. Based on the discussion above, we can come up with a "formula" for such mechanic:

💡 **Expectation > Subversion > Anger**

However, this alone is not enough to translate the experience of Anger into meaningful game mechanics. Games produce meaning through their rules and mechanics by making the outcome of player interaction - the *raison de vivre* of games - both **visible** (the player can visibly see the result of their action reflected on the game world) and **integrated** (their actions actually change things within the logic of the game). In order for the subversion of a expectation produce such experience in players, they must visibly



integrate with Deathbound's gameplay: combat, exploration, character improvement etc.

Setting up expectations and rewarding the player for accurate pattern recognition are the bread and butter of level design. So much so that Nintendo's developers came up with a "4 Stage Level Design" paradigm: a framework for gradually introducing new mechanics by presenting them in a safe environment and then "twisting" them in an innovative way.

What we propose as game mechanics of Anger is a subversion of this paradigm: first, we create a reasonable **expectation** in the player about an aspect of the game; they will act on this assumption, expecting to be rewarded by it; however, instead, we **subvert** this expectation, often by turning it upside down; but that's still not enough, so we then **punish** the player for developing that expectation in the first place.

In effect, our "formula" becomes as this:

Expectation > Subversion > Punishment

The punishment part is important because, otherwise, the breaking of expectations could assume a number of different meanings: it could be seen as a positive, story-forwarding trope; it could convey an atmosphere of deception and mystery rather than one of rage; it could create in the player an undesired sense of fear, making him cautious instead of wrathful.

Examples of this mechanic in action would be:

- "This enemy is easy to defeat" → another of this same enemy appears, but is stronger
- "This is the main path I have to go through to reach the end of the level" → the path is actually a dead end
- "This secondary area is guarded by a lot of enemies, therefore it must contain a worthwhile item" → the area has a weak item, or no item at all
- "This NPC is here to help me, so I should trust them" → the NPC actually betrays the player



- “This NPC is an enemy and I should attack him” → the NPC was actually going to help the player
- “This terrain is hard to navigate, but at its end there is a worthwhile item” → the player successfully navigates it, but at the last moment the pedestal holding the item breaks and it falls out of reach
- “This mini-boss is too hard; I’ll level up and prepare myself before facing it” → after all the prep, the player gets to the mini-boss only to discover it is already dead
- “I was killed in this room and lost all my XP; no problem, I’ll just go back to this room and retrieve it” → when the player gets to the room again, its floor collapses, rendering the XP forever inaccessible

Of course, the idea is not that this is the only mechanic used to convey the experience of Anger; it is to be used in conjunction with other mechanics, the level design itself, the environmental narrative, and the embedded narrative to produce a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts.

7.4.8. Conclusion

Anger is a tormenting feeling that emerges from setting up expectations about the world, only to have them shattered. Injustice, frustration, fatality, betrayal, and disappointment are some of its sources. Within the Five Stages of Grief, it emerges from the realization that our mortality is unavoidable, and we can no longer deny it.

In *Deathbound*, the player will experience Anger through many venues: through the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces’ struggles; through the dealings and happenstances of its characters - mainly the injusticed Iulia Tchevlaskia and the monstrosity that is Agharos of Meriva; through turning the paradigm of expectations being subverted into game mechanics; through level and environmental design.



7.5. Bargaining

[WIP]

7.6. Depression

[WIP]

7.7. Acceptance

[WIP]



III. Worldbuilding

1. The World of Zieminal

The world where Deathbound takes place is a planet similar to Earth, with similar physical properties - gravity, average temperatures, meteorological phenomena, etc. It has a single moon, which was shattered in the final battle between the Goddess Death and the Goddess Life, and which debris form a whitish trail in the night sky. The landmass of Zieminal forms a single large continent, stretching from South to East and West, with an inland sea separating the South from the lands to the North.

The world is not fully explored by the current Krulezgon-centric civilization located in the Southern Hemisphere of Zieminal. The "known world" where the game's plot unfolds is similar to Central/Eastern Europe in the High Middle Ages, with parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East from the same period.

In the world of Zieminal, days last 24 hours and 35 seconds, and the planet orbits its star in a period of 360 days, 6 hours and 12 seconds. The official calendar of the four kingdoms is called the Helean Calendar, named after the Deathly High Priest who established it. It has twelve months of thirty days each. The months, in order, are:

1. Azmovin
2. Thermiron
3. Pluvinem
4. Gravitass
5. Bruminem
6. Frostas
7. Nivosni
8. Nitherim
9. Hippatim



10. Zehrim
11. Olivernia
12. Tempus Mortem

The year count starts from the date of the death of Nito, the First to Die, with the years divided into “Before the First to Die” (bFD) and “After the First to Die” (aFD).

The plot of Deathbound takes place at the end of the year 522 aFD.

2. World Backstory

2.1. Mythopoeia

In the beginning, there was only Goddess Time. The moment she was born, the Universe came into being. Inside her furnace-heart, the stars were forged, and these in turn forged all the matter in the Universe.

When the creation of the Universe was complete, her furnace-heart cooled down. At that moment, however, Goddess Time realized how lonely and incomplete she felt. To appease her loneliness, she tore herself in half with her bare hands, separating her beginning from her end. From her halves emerged her two daughters: Goddess Life and Goddess Death.

Goddess Life then desired to popularize the entire Universe with her creations. However, it was Goddess Death - who came from her mother's left half - who had inherited her furnace-heart, and, with it, the power of creation. Goddess Life was simply not as strong as her sister was - and that made her resentful.

For billions of years Goddess Life had begged her sister to relinquish her power; sometimes arguing with logic and reason; occasionally with tears and blackmail; other times with threats and violence. Finally, exhausted, Goddess Death relented.



2.1.1. The Pact

However, Goddess Death would not bestow her power without a demand: each being created by Goddess Life must eventually come to an end, so that its Essence would return to the Goddess Death. In turn, Goddess Life asked her sister to promise not to intervene directly in the existence of these beings: their eventual death would be the result of their own finitude, and not an action of one of them. Thus, Goddess Death complied.

Goddess Life then set the basic cycle of existence in motion. Various animals and other creatures were born, grew up, aged and finally died. Goddess Death was pleased to feel the Essences of the first dying creatures returning to her, and was reassured. Eventually, her interest in the material plane dissipated.

But Goddess Life had lied to her sister: her intention had never been to give back her power. In her vanity, she wanted to conceive the perfect creature: an intelligent being, unlike the basic animals, capable of transforming the world around it, and eternal like the Goddesses.

2.1.2. The creation of the First Men

Realizing her sister's distraction, Goddess Life created, in the world of Zieminal, the First Men, creatures that, like all others, go through the cycle of existence - but, unlike them, would never die. To make them immortal, she took advantage of a loophole in the Pact with Goddess Death: according to it, the beings, at the end of their existence, should have their Essence returned to Goddess Death - but it had never been defined for how long they could exist, or at what exact moment their ending would occur.

As every being had within themselves a fraction of Goddess Death's Essence, her sister chained human mortality to the mortality of Goddess Death herself. In effect, these "Death-bound" beings could only die *when Death itself died*.

When Goddess Death finally realized what had happened, it was too late: she had already relinquished much of her power - now accumulated in human lives - and was



irreversibly weak. Her sister, Goddess Life, took advantage of this and banished her from the earthly plane, forevermore.

2.1.3. Death's revenge

In her cosmic exile, Goddess Death then hatched a plan of revenge: knowing that human mortality was tied to her own, she would put her own Essence into a human being and make him die. This would fulfill the words of the Pact - humans would become mortal once Death itself died - and would not affect her in any way. After all, all Essence, upon dying, returns to Goddess Death - she would just end up "return to herself".

Furthermore, the Goddess Death would humiliate her sister: she would steal from her the adoration that humans gave her, and would become the Goddess worshipped by her sister's own creations. But she should act quickly: once the first human died, she would need the Essence of thousands of others to strengthen herself before Goddess Life realized what was happening.

To do so, she would materialize in Zieminal in the form of an elderly woman - something humans had never seen, since they didn't age - and would preach her own word, in search for her first followers. To them, she would promise her "Three Reliefs": the **War**, to end power struggles; the **Breath**, to end the apathy that befell the people; and **Peace**, to replace a lifetime of suffering.

When she finally amassed enough followers to spread her Promise of Final Relief to all humans, Goddess Death would choose one of them to put her Essence into their body to be sacrificed. But this one should offer themselves voluntarily, since the Pact forbade the Goddess to intervene directly on the life and death of human beings. Therefore, this one should be nothing less than her most devout follower.

2.2. The First Civilization



2.2.1. The beginning

When Goddess Life created humans, they multiplied and spread to all corners of Zieminal, establishing towns, cities and territories. Over the next 2000 years, due to their immortality, their society developed to the point of having advanced technology. Their machines, computers and skyscrapers became the dominant landscape on the planet, and their cities spread across continents.

The largest of these cities was Akratya, located in the central part of the southern hemisphere of Zieminal. It was the center of power to the First Civilization, as well as the heart of their culture. The Cathedral of Life was also located there, center of the faith professed - however in a timid way - by those people.

2.2.2. Immortality

By betraying her sister Goddess Death and distorting the words of the Pact they signed, Goddess Life had ensured that the First Men never died. They were "perfect immortals" - which means they did not die of either natural or other causes. They were, nevertheless, human - beings of flesh and blood, unlike the Goddesses. Such flesh could be torn, bruised or broken. Their skin could feel not only pleasure, but pain.

This contradiction was at the heart of the nature-defying existence of those beings. If a human had their body damaged, their flesh would eventually regenerate - even if by twisting the laws of physics; even if this process took days, decades, or even centuries. And, in most cases, it was an excruciating process. Immortality thus became a fate worse than death - for those trapped at the bottom of the sea, or those crushed under rocks that slid down a mountain, or those unable to climb out of the bottom of an erupting volcano's lava pit...

But physical pain wasn't the only one the First Men were subjected to. The weight of eternal life has built up upon these First Men - several lifetimes of pain, heartbreaks, torment, and boredom. They had reached the height of their civilization; there was no longer, in their point of view, anything else to explore or to develop. It had come to a



point that, in its last decades, this society had succumbed to complete hedonism, trying to move away from anguish. They were aware, to some degree, that they were stagnant - but they were yet to realise that their affliction was due to eternal life itself.

2.2.3. The temptation of Death

Sensing in this the perfect opportunity to set in motion her plan of revenge, the weakened Goddess Death materialized in Zieminal with the appearance of an old woman and started to pilgrimage throughout the planet, spreading her Promise of Final Relief. One hundred and forty-five people heard her initial call, and became her First Prophets, in turn spreading themselves the Promise throughout the First Civilization.

When the moment finally came, Goddess Death asked her followers to volunteer one of them to have their body sacrificed. Five of her most faithful stepped forward, and the Goddess chose one of them, Nito, to be the first to die.

Using the last of her strength, Goddess Death, like Goddess Time before her, ripped her Essence from her body with her bare hands and placed it in Nito's body, forcing her earthly body to dissolve. Then, he and the four other most faithful Prophets went to the Cathedral of Life to carry out the sacrifice.

However, upon entering the temple and contemplating his fate, the chosen one panicked, and tried to run away. The other four Prophets then grabbed him and brought him, struggling, to the top of the building, and threw him out from there. When his body hit the ground, both he and Goddess Death died. The Goddess' Essence returned to the astral plane, while Nito's Essence remained forever trapped to the material plane.

Death died. The Pact between the Goddesses was rectified. Humans finally became mortal.

2.2.4. The collapse

Overnight, thousands of people started to die: either by their own hands, or murdered by others. Death had become a weapon. Very quickly, those who yearned for power



discovered the advantages of bringing death to those who stood in their way. War was suddenly invented.

The social fabric of that civilization dissolved as chaos ensued. Gangs rose up, using all kinds of violence to impose their domination. The strong preying on the weak became the rule. Urban areas grew into extremely dangerous places. Overall panic led to a general diaspora, with hundreds of survivors migrating to rural areas. In a few days, the smaller urban centers became empty. In a few years, they became ruins. At the end of a century, they disappeared completely.

Having lived for millennia, people just didn't know how to stay alive. The absence of basic survival instincts, such as avoiding mortal dangers, dealing with disease and reproducing to perpetuate life, further worsened the chaos and panic.

Finally, with mass migration, abandonment of large urban centers and the growing influence of the newly founded Church of Death - which saw everything related to the First Civilization as sinful, as reminiscent of the tyranny of Goddess Life -, the remains of the ancient civilization completely collapsed. Its advanced technology and its culture were lost, while the survivors developed new cultures and ways of living.

Today, what remains of the First Civilization are the ruins of its great buildings, spread across Zieminal. Huge concrete blocks and collapsing machinery dot the planet's landscape - their original meaning and purpose long forgotten.

2.3. The Rise of the Church of Death

2.3.1. The First Prophets

Humiliated, lost, and finding themselves for the first time in thousands of years in a fragile situation, it was natural for the surviving First Men to seek refuge in faith. But not in their old belief in Goddess Life, which in their eyes had abandoned them - they turned, begging for mercy, to Goddess Death.



In a short time, these survivors ended up seeking shelter with the Prophets of Death, who organized the first religious communities after the fall of the old civilization. These communities became safe havens amidst chaos and violence, providing both physical and spiritual protection.

The First Prophets of Death thus saw their prestige - and their power - grow immensely. With that, the first internal conflicts among the faithful surfaced - a situation worsened by the absence of Goddess Death to guide her followers.

2.3.2. The First Council

Just a few years after the fall of the First Civilization, the 144 First Prophets of Death thus gathered in a Council near the ruins of Akratya. There, after 32 days of heated debate, they decided to found a Church, which would be the sole guardian of Goddess Death's word in Zieminal, a central and irrefutable authority in matters of politics and faith to all believers.

To command this new institution, the Prophets elected 11 among their peers to compose their first Executive Synod - the Church's ruling council. The Synod, in turn, elected among them the first Deathly High Priest - the Church's maximum authority, the representative of Goddess Death herself in Zieminal, who would lead the Church to the day they died. The first four Deathly High Priests, elected in succession, were precisely the four Prophets who murdered Nito, the first to die: Deathly High Priestess Semanthia Hippacrite, Deathly High Priest Manmin Oumee, Deathly High Priestess Wu Tse-Dan, and Deathly High Priest Józef Boleslaw. Each ruled for exactly six years.

To this day, the Church follows the same structure. In stead of the original Prophets, the Church elects every 10 years their Central Committee of Faith - the true power behind the institution, comprised of 144 of the most powerful and distinguished religious people in all Zieminal.

Finally, it was throughout this first Council that 48 of the First Prophets faced their own deaths, dying - for the most part - from natural causes.



2.3.3. The church and the kingdoms

In the following centuries, several communities of survivors settled in Zieminal, giving rise to several "Second Civilizations". Isolated and distant from each other, they developed their own cultures and their own ways of life, having the faith in Goddess Death - and the guidance of the Church - as a common thread.

Over time, from these communities emerged the four great kingdoms of the known world, the result of conquests, wars and political plots. The power of the Church of Death, however, has remained unshakable - from kings to local lords, all submit to the Church's authority, which can confirm or undo them all.

2.3.4. Persecution of objectors

But not all descendants of the First Civilization willingly submitted to the Church and its dogmas. Many chose to remain faithful to Goddess Life, or refused to accept the Church's doctrine, which preaches complete submission to the faith and rejects any element that refers to the First Civilization, its technologies and culture.

In the first few centuries after the collapse of the First Civilization, the Church could do little about these "heretics." But as its power grew, so did its brutality pursuing those who dared to question it. All thoughts contrary to its dogmas were considered illegal; any nation who refused to bow to its authority were crushed. Transgressors often found themselves facing a terrible fate: after all, nothing better than an grueling execution to make one ardently desire Death.

To prevent the spread of these "heretic" ideas, the Church has also prohibited any contact with elements of the First Civilization. The ruins of its ancient cities were considered forbidden zones; scientific knowledge accumulated over millennia had been banned; their habits and cultures labeled "immoral", "corrupt", the responsible for the decadence of their society.



2.3.5. The rise of resistances

Many of these oppressed people, not resigned to a life of persecution, fought back, in any way they could: by preserving their original cultures and rituals, right under the Church's noses; by daring to keep scientific inquiry alive; even by directly engaging the Church's warriors in battle. But these people quickly learned that facing the almighty Church alone is suicide at best.

Throughout the centuries, as the power of the Church grew, so did many "resistance movements": spread across Zieminal, from many backgrounds and roots, these groups of destitutes, heretics and social pariahs banded together in order to stand a chance against the Church. Their goals and organizations were as diverse as their origins: some wished for simply keeping their faith in Goddess Life alive; others intended to amass an army to end the Church's tyranny by the way of the sword; some aimed to rally all other oppressed peoples of Zieminal - regardless of faith - to rise in revolution; others designed to uncover the lost secrets of the First Civilization; some even sought a way of bringing eternal life back to humankind.

Fleeing the Church's and the four kingdoms' armies, these movements sought refuge precisely within the ruins of the First Men's cities, deemed forbidden by the Church. Akratya, being the biggest one, also became home to the largest of these groups. However, a common enemy did not mean common understanding, and many conflicts and infights broke between such different factions.

2.4. The Age of Mortals

2.4.1. The rise of the Four Kingdoms

With the science and social structures of the First Civilization long forgotten, the survivors and their descendants naturally built their own new societies. With the immediate dangers of the First Men's collapse having passed, these peoples left the safe havens of the first Death devotee's communities and started reaching out for the world



at large. But with human mortality now an ever present threat, they did not do so peacefully. The first century after the collapse saw the ascent and fall of many tentative warlords, risen in a streak of bloodlust and conquest, only to have their dominions turned to dust by a new contender.

The state of constant warfare also changed the economics of that new world. The lower strata of these new societies - the workers, the peasants, those unable to brandish a sword - became tied to the land, submitted to the rule of their local lords. These land owners' political schemings in turn gave rise to a feudal system - a social structure in which lords could swear fealty to a more powerful one in exchange for protection; conversely, a lord could cede part of its territory to lesser lords in exchange for tributes and soldiers for their armies.

All these elements combined to, at the end of the first century aFD (After the First to Die), give rise to four great kingdoms - the Kingdom of Krulezgon, the Commonwealth of Smirtolia, the Sayabakn Empire, and the Klingazar. Each set at one corner of the known world, they represent very diverse cultures, bound together by their common faith.

The Kingdom of Krulezgon was the first to be formed and, to this day, remains the most powerful. Within its territory lies the Church of Death's headquarters, at a citadel named Temple of the First to Die. It is home to many political intrigues, with its lord vying for absolute power. It is further subdivided into many duchies, and its Council of Dukes is the de facto power in the kingdom. The largest of these duchies is the Archduchy of Meriva, and, historically, its Archduke is the single most powerful person in Krulezgon, just below the King.

The Commonwealth of Smirtolia is a formal accord of many principalities, petty kingdoms and formely independent duchies and counties. It is ruled by a Prince, elected each 10 years among the ruling families by the most powerful lords in the country. Since its inception, the kings of Krulezgon greed for Smirtolia's lands, and that, added to some important cultural differences have lead to an uneasy peace between the two nations.



Hailing from the deserts of the West, the Sayabakn Empire is a cauldron of many colorful cultures, flourishing trade, and wealth beyond measure. Its rich salt and gold mines inspire both greed and wonder, and were battleground for many disputes in the past, leading to the ascension of the Sultanate that rules the land. Its caravans can be seen crossing every corner of Zieminal, and its religious scholars and fighting monks are a common sight throughout the nation.

The Klingazar started as an alliance of many nomadic, horse-riding tribes of the great steppes of the far East. Unlike the other kingdoms, they maintained their independence from the Church of Death for two centuries, and harbored many different faiths. But, by the end of the Second Crusade - a worldwide war mobilization of all the faithful in Goddess Death, instigated by the Church -, the horselords were all subjugated, and its population was forcibly converted. Today, the Klingazar is a client state to Krulezgon, ruled by a puppet Khan chosen by the Church - however, the vast distances between the two nations make this task a difficult one.

2.4.2. The question of magic

In order to break hers and her sister's pact, Goddess Death had to circumvent the wording of that arrangement. By using her own Essence to die and make humanity mortal, the Goddess opened a rip in the very fabric of reality. Human Essences were now not only mortal, but also open to manipulation. Thus, some people started to be born with the ability to tap into their Essences - and of others - to, with the raw power of creation at their hands, perform magical effects. They could summon lightning from the tip of their fingers, or bring about a freezing cold, or hurl boulders without touching them.

Of course this kind of power did not went unnoticed by all those aspiring warlords of the first century aFD. Many tried to enlist these "mages" into their ranks - most of them against their will -, and there were some warlords who were themselves "spellcasters". The Church of Death quickly realized this was a power too volatile to remain at large, and many of the very first edicts the recently convened Central Committee of Faith



enacted were about controlling it. No mage was allowed to exist outside the Church; every person that discovered they had such powers has to report themselves to the Church and join one of its monastic orders dedicated to this; anyone caught practicing magic without the Church's blessing was considered an heretic to be put to death at the first opportunity.

The result was that the Church ended up amassing a powerful cabal of magic-wielders, practically monopolizing the scholarly study of this art; and a new strata of society appeared, made up of those who spent their lives hiding their abilities in order to live outside the Church's grasp. The former developed a systemic, orderly and hierarchical approach to magic, based on formulae and formal rites; the latter gave rise to countless schools of magic, based on intuition, improvisation and unpredictability.

In this manner, being born with these powers could be a blessing or a curse, depending on one's place in society, paving your destiny with opportunities or making you an outcast. To make matters worse, many of those born with magical powers were afflicted with gruesome side effects, such as deformities, degenerative diseases, or mental disorders.

But the Church's control over magic was not absolute, despite its efforts. Many with this power lived hiding in plain sight - as the village's healer to which everyone turned when incurable affliction hit their children; as a "miraculous" apothecary who would save entire crops from plague; even in a lord's court, as a cunning "councilor" who could make their liege's enemies disappear mysteriously.

2.4.3. The Cult to Life

The many resistance groups that banded together to withstand the Church's oppression continued to do so, albeit in a sparse and individualistic fashion. However, after four centuries of struggle, they put aside their differences and officially joined together in an organization supposed to be larger than the sum of its parts. In Akratya, led by the single largest group of worshippers of Goddess Life, a collective of resistance movements against the Church was formally convened, founded over the principles of mutual



collaboration, mutual self-defense, resource sharing and freedom of thought. Thus, the Cult to Life was born.

It was made up by many faiths - with many worshippers of Death in their ranks -, but its name was chosen to represent their common struggle against the Church and its weaponizing of the very concept of death. Nonetheless, old rivalries wouldn't suddenly disappear just because these different groups resolved to stand together. For this reason, it was decided that, rather than a single, unified party, the Cult to Life would be a federation of quasi-independent factions, each with its own internal organization, finances and hierarchies. In matters that affected the Cult as a whole, all these factions, called Tendencies, would elect representatives that, in turn, would gather in a General Assembly, discuss and vote the issue at hand.

The largest of these Tendencies was - and remain to this day - the Life Worshippers, a religious, non-sectarian group of devotees to Goddess Life having its roots going back to the original cult of the Goddess, in the First Civilization. They are a politically moderated group, which only goal is the preservation of humanity's original faith, not interested in directly confronting the Church of Death.

Another Tendency within the Cult is the Unwary's Covenant, a gathering of magic-wielding people seeking refuge from the Church's persecution of those with such powers, who found in the Cult a way of exercising their powers free from oppression. They are less interested in the Cult's political clashes and more focused on freely practicing magic and doing unconventional research - being criticised by some other Tendencies precisely for this "apolitical", selfish stance.

On the other extreme, going against all this political inaction, is the most recent Tendency to join the Cult: the 8th of Zehrim Movement. A partisan group of former soldiers, peasant leaders and guerrilla fighters, the Combatants, as they are called by other Tendencies, seek to face the Church of Death head-on by organizing the Cult to Life into an army. The Tendency's name comes from the date in which an important freedom fighter and revolutionary leader against the Church and the four kingdom's armies was captured and killed by them. They are criticised by other Tendencies by their



belligerent stances, but it can be said that no other groups shed more blood - theirs and their enemies - for the cause.

2.5. The Essencemancers and the Fifth Crusade

2.5.1. Immortality and the intransubstantiation of the Essence

Since the very day humans became mortal, there were those who wished for immortality once again. With the apparent vanishing of Goddess Life from the material plane, this became a helpless utopia. But this did not impede scholars, people of sciences and theologians - even within the ranks of the Church of Death - to seek it.

This search gained special contours among those who still worshipped Goddess Life, for the return to immortality would also mean the return of the Goddess Herself. For centuries, this search was at the heart of their way of life, and they firmly believed that, if they could amass the right number of followers, their prayers alone could empower Life and return Her to Her followers. This, in fact, was the central reasoning behind the group known as Life Worshipers to found the Cult to Life in the first place.

Among those seeking for eternal life, those who could wield Essence and use it to perform magic deeds were in a very privileged position. The intransubstantiation of one's Essence - that is, the fact that one's Essence becomes trapped and cannot escape the material plane - was long thought to be the mechanism that allowed Goddess Life to keep humans from dying. If this hypothesis was to be proven true, only magic wielders could hope to achieve this effect once again.

Finally, there were those who believed that the answer for this quest lied in the lost knowledge of the First Civilization. Anyone who had ever ventured through the ruins of their old cities could testify about the wonders and oddities that could be found there: strange contraptions; books speaking of eldritch knowledge that made no sense to a contemporary mind; impossibly high towers made of an exocitic kind of stone. If there



was a wisdom that could help bring eternal life back, it would certainly be among that weird, dead world.

2.5.2. The rise of the Essencemancers

When the Cult to Life assembled, all those isolated efforts to bring back immortality finally meet common ground. For the first time and in relative safety, magic wilders could discuss the theological implications of that effort with priests of Goddess Life. Scholars of the ancient times could compare notes with people who have been exploring First Men's ruins for a lifetime. And, for a small sect of people who lived in the intersection of all those groups, time for prayers had come to an end.

It all started with a group of spellcasters who were also members of the Life Worshipers Tendency. In the security of Akratya, the ruined city, they began to experiment with Essence, not to produce magical effects, but to manipulate the energy itself. At first they were more theoretical than practical, but soon they began to see some results: they could keep rats alive for full five minutes, after their throats were slit; they could prolong an old person's life for a week more than when the disease should have taken them. This was seen with both hope and distrust by the rest of the Cult.

With the passing years, though, it became clear that their experiments have reached a plateau. No significant advance was made in decades, and they were getting to the limit of their knowledge. It was then they decided to turn their attention to the ruins around them. From experimenters, they became explorers. They learned how to switch contraptions on and off, and even how to put some of them to use. They successfully translated some ancient books on sciences, though their full meaning remained out of their reach. More than anyone before them, they became specialists in the First Men's technology - to the limit of what was possible to medieval people.

Armed with this knowledge, and with the help of some First Civilization artifacts they successfully mastered, their experiments began anew. A contraption was able to restore torn tissue and broken bones in a living being - so they tried using it to restore the Essence of dying animals. Another contraption generated a kind of lightning capable of



powering other contraptions - so they started using it to amplify one's magical abilities. A machine could be used to see the insides of someone without opening them up - so they used it to try and cure diseases within a person without surgery.

The more result these experiments yielded, the more ambitious these spellcasters became. Soon, they realized experimenting on animals could only take them so far. The moment they started to seek human test subjects, though, their comrades in the Cult to Life turned on them. They feared they went too far, that these experimentations could put human lives at risk. They also feared, not without reason, that, should word about these experiments reached the Church of Death, it could incur in their wrath.

Finally, after heated debates bordering on physical confrontation, these spellcasters, guided by their leader, Soulon Legéones, chose to break away from the Life Worshipers and found their own internal Tendency in the Cult to Life - the Essencemancers.

2.5.3. Forbidden experiments

Breaking away from the majority Tendency in the Cult was not without its setbacks: these new Essencemancers found themselves isolated, without financial aid or allies - not even a place to stay. This newfound freedom from the political ties to the Life Worshipers that binded them, however, allowed them to redouble their efforts. They settled in an abandoned building in Akratya that acted as a "hospital" and research center to the First Men, full of old machines they could use. It was a sign of the Goddess, Soulon once said, that this place, in which they would finally bring back eternal life, was set just beside the old Life Cathedral.

To survive in their "Life Laboratories", the Essencemancers traded in contraptions and trinkets of the First Civilization with those seeking its mysteries, and offered their healing services to the rest of the Cult. In exchange, they were given provisions, protection, and some political currency - that would come in handy in the following years.

With the issue of their survival out of the way, they resumed their experiments. This time, they did not settle for keeping rats from dying - they would try and raise dead



ones. They cease to do “harmless” experiments to keep one’s life, and started to do bizarre attempts at creating life. At first, they started with small animals. Then bigger animals. Then started to construct biological golems out of pieces of different living beings. Then, sensing a human Essence would be stronger than an animal’s, they started to create hybrids from human and animal corpses.

Then they crossed the line.

It came the time to test with the first live human volunteer. This test subject’s gruesome fate didn’t stop the Essencemancers, who then in turn started to force people into their experiments. It began with the Cult’s enemies, like bounty hunters trespassing into Akratya to capture runaway heretics, or soldiers of Krulezgon, setting up ambushes in the woods near the city - so no one in the Cult bat an eye.

But even that was not enough, so they started to barter their services in exchange for “volunteers” - more than one desperate mother gave herself away to cure her children. Soon they began to put bounties on the enemies of the Cult - ironically, not unlike the Church itself did with them -, and entrepreneuring groups of brigands started showing up with soldiers of the Church in chains - even if they were actually innocent peasants.

It did not matter to the Essencemancers - because they began to get results. They successfully held the Essence of a dying man for an hour outside his dead body, before it disintegrated. They were able to use fragments of another Essence to reanimate a corpse, before the creature collapsed in unimaginable pain. They started to create human chimeras, this time with live people - a small girl and her dog, at first, then a soldier and a wolf, then two soldiers welded together to create a bigger soldier.

At last, they were successful in creating a creature that resembled human consciousness, albeit a horrendous imitation. Soon, they had a horde of these “flesh dolls” at their command, which Soulon employed as a workforce to the Essencemancers. They would help them perform other experiments, or act as muscle and servants to them, tending for security or doing chores around the Life Laboratories.



2.5.4. The Essencemancers-Combatants alliance

It could be said that the Essencemancer's success was in no small part due to their leader, Soulon. He was charismatic, intelligent, and with an iron will. He could swap between politician and scholar with ease, and was widely respected among followers and foes alike.

The Essencemancers got to a point where they were very close to their goal of eternal life, but could not proceed without more test subjects and even bolder experiments. They could no longer afford to continue without allies, and this is when Soulon's charisma and the Tendency's political currency were decisive. Soulon's political acuteness allowed him to perceive a great opportunity by working with the 8th of Zehrim Movement.

Throughout the years, the Combatants tried in vain to convince the other Tendencies to turn the Cult to Life into a fighting force. They were themselves formidable warriors, that dedicated their lives to warfare - and that is what kept them alive in face of the Church and its armies, even without the support of the rest of the Cult. By means of guerrilla warfare, they routinely organize raids on Church's lands to steal supplies, free prisoners, and weaken the enemy's resolve. More than once, they managed to incite revolt and depose lords - but the enemy's answer was equally brutal. When the armies of Zieminal struck back in revenge, it was often the entire Cult who suffered their wrath, further isolating the Combatants politically.

In the last decade, years of falling on deaf years begun to take a toll on the Tendency. Soulon had heard rumors of them talking about leaving the Cult altogether - with some of its more hardcore members even suggesting a final attack on the Temple of the First to Die, so they could go in a blaze of glory. But, before they could make any decision, Soulon made them an offer: if they could provide him with more test subjects, the Essencemancers would provide them with an army - creatures specifically built for war, infinitely replaceable soldiers who would instill terror in their enemies.



The 8th of Zehrim Movement threw themselves into this new alliance head on. Their raiding parties were no longer targeted towards collecting resources, but capturing prisoners for becoming their soldiers. And they went even further - without even the Essencemancers asking, some of their warriors started volunteering for the experiments, in hopes of becoming themselves supersoldiers in the service of the Movement.

2.5.5. Shady dealings

With this new influx of test subjects, Soulon and his Essencemancers drew even near to their goal of eternal life. But the price of this success was the end of anonymity, and soon news of their experiments went over the walls surrounding Akratya. They reached Olivia Heinz, Chancellor and spymaster for the King of Krulezgon, through her network of spies. She has been monitoring Essencemancer activity for some time, but had yet to obtain confirmation of the reports of sinister experiments and ungodly creatures she has been receiving.

Fearing that the Church's reaction to these news could destabilize the kingdom, already engulfed in political ploy, Olivia made sure the rumors were quelled. She intended to bring that information directly to the King - but she was intercepted by lord Asqueron Pöbel, Archduke of Meriva. The second most powerful man in Krulezgon, however, had an agenda of his own - he wished to depose the King, take the throne and, without even the Church's interference, conquer all of Zieminal. He assured Olivia that he would inform the King and take action.

Instead, he sent a small team of his best knights, led by his brutal enforcer, Agharos of Meriva, to Akratya, and managed to capture Alurna of Meriva, Soulon's second-in-command. He released her so she could send her boss a message: the Archduke wanted to make him an offer he could not refuse. Intrigued, the leader of the Essencemancers met with him, and the lord proposed him a deal: if he could provide him and his armies with First Civilization's technology, and if he could share with him the secret of eternal life once they had it, the Essencemancers would be left alone forever. Even better: once



he conquered Zieminal, they would become their personal order of spellcasters, with infinite resources. Making the best out of a bad situation, Soulon agreed.

Back to Krulezgon, Archduke Pöbel put in motion his schemes. His first act was to take the King's most important asset - Olivia Heins - away. Olivia was secretly a spellcaster, and used her powers covertly to be such successful spymaster. The Archduke revealed her secret to the Church, and she was immediately arrested. With her being sentenced to death for this crime, the way was free for him to get near the King and arrange the coup.

2.5.6. The Essence of the First to Die

After years of steady progress, the Essencemancers once more reached a stalemate. They were closer than they ever were to immortality, but something was amiss. They had perfected the technique to rip or inject one's Essence into any meat vessel, but the issue of the intransubstantiation of the Essence remained.

Truth be told, the choice of the Life Laboratories for their base of operations was not just a theological one. In his research, Soulon had come into contact with clues pointing to the whereabouts of Nito's Essence, which was trapped in the material world. Since he died at the foot of the Life Cathedral, that was as good a place as it could be to search for it. Even so, throughout the years, it eluded Soulon.

He theorized that, in order to revert the pact, Goddess Death ended up "mirroring" the intransubstantiation effect, switching it "upside down" for the rest of humanity, but doing the opposite for Nito. If the Essence of the First to Die was to be found, the Essencemancers could perform this "mirroring" too, reverting what was done.

With the pressure of the newfound alliance with the Archduke, Soulon was getting to a dead-end. For the first time in many years, he actually prayed to Goddess Life, in search for guidance. Then, as if by miracle, he found Nito's Essence and trapped it in an orb.

With that missing piece in his hands, and with Asqueron Pöbel dangerously close to enacting his coup, Soulon made a harsh decision: the final experiment would be performed on himself.



2.5.7. The Fifth Crusade

Meanwhile, in Krulezgon, Olivia Heinz was in a Church's dungeon, waiting her fate. The King himself pleaded with the Deathly High Priestess, who, reluctantly, agreed to let her live - provided that she abandoned all her nobility fiefs, claims, and her work at the Krulezgoni court and joined the Church. Olivia herself proposed a compromise: she would join the Church, but as the personal representative of the King of Krulezgon, so she could still be of service to the King - and to enact her revenge upon Asqueron Pöbel.

Her neck safe, Olivia immediately put her old spy network to use to gather all information they could about Asqueron and the Essencemancers. The Archduke covered his track too well - he even arranged for his faithful henchman to be killed in Akratya, leaving no loose ends. But there was plenty to be said about the Essencemancers and their experiments. When Olivia presented this information to the Deathly High Priestess, the old woman panicked.

It was the dawn of the year 522 aFD. After almost a hundred years, a Fifth Crusade was being summoned by the Deathly High Priestess. Its target was the city of Akratya and all the Cult to Life, who seek shelter there. Warriors of faith from all over Zieminal heed the call, amassing a huge army in record time. When the news reached the Archduke, he knew this was Olivia's doing. He also knew that, should he do nothing, it could ruin his whole plan. So, using all of his political influence, he volunteered to be Supreme Commander of the Crusader armies himself, to try and minimize the damage.

2.5.8. The catastrophe

The news of this Fifth Crusade being organized hit Akratya hard. The Cult to Life went in disarray, with hundreds fleeing the ruined city, while infight got to an all-time high. Many proposed that, since all that was the Essencemancers' fault, the Cult should deliver them to the Church and plea for mercy. The 8th of Zehrim Movement, on the other hand, welcomed the news, and urged the rest of the Cult to, once and for all, become an army.



All this climate forced the Essencemancers to move forward quickly. Alurna of Meriva tried to dissuade Soulon of going forward with the experiment, begging him to do more tests before, but he argued that, should the Church invade Akratya, all of their effort would be in vain. And, as he was used to say by then, they “went too far already to back down”.

But the truth was Soulon himself was no longer sure he wanted the experiment to succeed. When the Essencemancers first started, their goal was to bring back life eternal and Goddess Life to all peoples. They never intended to hurt anyone. The more gruesome their experiments became, the more Soulon tried to rationalize it. “It was the only way”, “we couldn’t go forward with our research without sacrifices”, “we went too far already to back down”. The fact was, Soulon was tired of these excuses. Goddess Life, after all, was not meant to be worshipped with death.

The last straw came when, during a secret meeting with Asqueron Pöbel to discuss the issue of the Fifth Crusade, Tehkri Haodai, Soulon’s star pupil, inadvertently happened on them. The boy panicked, unable to believe what he saw, and Soulon realized that, should the boy say any word about that to anyone, it would be dousing oil in an already boiling situation - so he killed him.

Then came in the news that the Crusader armies were going to reach Akratya a full month before planned - once again a move by Olivia Heinz. The troop were almost at the Essencemancer’s doors, so Soulon decided to go ahead with the final experiment that same day. But, by the time he laid on that operating table, he was no longer willing to go through it. Like Nito before him, he changed his mind, all the sorrow, regret, and shame for what he did hitting him.

Future scholars will never know if it was this regret, or the fact that the experiment was made in a hurry and without being fully tested, that allowed for the catastrophe that followed happen. The fact was, the experiment went horribly, completely wrong.



2.5.9. Deathbound

As the Crusader armies draw near the walls surrounding Akratya, the room in which the experiment took place exploded.

Many Essencemancers were killed. Some managed to flee at the last minute. Their horde of creatures was released without control over Akratya.

Heavy boulders, launched by trebuchets and other war machines whizzed through the skies of the ruined city.

The armies of Goddess Death, led by Her only true representatives on Zieminal, poured through the ancient ruins.

And, hours later, what was once Soulon woke up, his memories replaced by those of a complete stranger.

Soulon was no more. Now there was only the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces.

The world where Deathbound takes place is a planet similar to Earth, with similar physical properties - gravity, average temperatures, meteorological phenomena, etc. It has a single moon, which was shattered in the final battle between the Goddess Death and the Goddess Life, and whose debris forms a whitish trail in the night sky. The landmass of Zieminal forms a single large continent, stretching from south to east and west, with an inland sea separating the south from the lands to the north.

The world is not fully explored by the current Krulezgon-centric civilization located in the Southern Hemisphere of Zieminal. The "known world" where the game's plot unfolds is similar to Central/Eastern Europe in the High Middle Ages, with parts of Africa and the Middle East from the same period.



IV. Main Characters

1. The Essences

1.1. Therone Guillaumen, the Crusader of Death

Hailing from the Kingdom of Krulezgon, Therone was born into nobility, member of House Guillaumen. Since a very young age, his father left him in the care of strict tutors, that trained him to be a knight and follow the words of Goddess Death. The tutors were sever, applying corporal punishments if he didn't succeed or comply. Therone grew to become a skilled swordfighter, the words of faith carved deep into his heart.

What started as ordinary faith soon became fanaticism. Spending much of his time in the chapel, Goddess Death became his only friend, and self flagellation his pastimes. Even thought his father was also a Death devotee, he started to disapprove when Therone's faith came into conflict with his duties as a noble. Therone found himself divided between a rigorous father and blind faith.

When the Deathly High Priestess summoned warriors to fight against an increasingly embolden Cult to Life, however, Therone made his choice. Leading many of his house's soldiers into battle, he accused his own father of treason against the Church for trying to stop him. That very day, Therone, now a Knight in the Order of Saint Louisa, executed his father, along with many others that tried to defy him. From the cinders of his father's corpse, Therone rose as a Crusader of Death.

Gender: male

Age: 30

Ethnicity: white (Western European)



1.2. Tehkri Haodai

Haodai lived with his sister, Quianlun, in the steppes of the Klingazar. They lost their parents at a very young age, but despite poverty, they always did the best to manage by themselves. Quianlun was an excellent fighter, while Haodai had born with a degenerative disease that provided him with the power to control Essence beyond common knowledge. While she acted in the front lines, he performed in the shadows, buffing his sister's fighting capability and weakening enemies. His abilities, however, didn't come without a cost. Along with such power also came excruciating pain. Haodai knew he didn't have much time left. In the search of a cure, the siblings decided to travel across the Four Kingdoms.

However, little did they knew that the physical pain wasn't the worst to bear. With magical powers also came persecution. When they arrived in Krulezgon, they were hunted down by the Church for unauthorized use of sorcery. To put an end to this, Quianlun sneak out in the break of dawn and gave herself in, saying that she was the spellcaster. Haodai ran trying to stop her, but it was already too late. When he arrived, she was trapped in a cage along with other captives ready to be public executed. All he could do was scream her name. Luck struck, however, and her execution was interrupted by an attack by the 8th of Zehrim Movement, seeking to free the prisoners. In the struggle that ensued, most were slaughtered, but some managed to escape to the forbidden city of Akratya. She was one of them.

At the Life Laboratories, Haodai searched for his sister, but couldn't find her - she too had left to search for him. He wanted to go after her, but Soulon, the leader of the Essencemancers, convinced him to stay. He sensed the boy's potential, and promised him he would teach him everything he knew in order for Haodai to control his powers - and eventually, through their experiments seeking eternal life, cure him. Only then Haodai would be well enough to search for Quianlun.

He joined the Essencemancers and became Soulon's star pupil. He wanted to fulfill his promise of finding Quianlun - even if it was too late. With the Essencemancers help, his



symptoms were under control and he felt no pain anymore. Blind by hate for what the Church has done to his sister, and charmed by Soulon's charisma, he took part on several sadistic experiments. He trusted Soulon completely - and that would end up costing him his life.

Gender: male

Age: 16

Ethnicity: asian (Mongolian)

1.3. Anna Lepus

Anna was born into a family of travelers and nomads of the Egisiroimi people. Without a fixed abode, they migrated through all four kingdoms, living a harsh but incredibly free life. Her family was made up of many brothers, cousins and uncles - most of whom Anna saw lost to the violence of the Church.

After an entire life on the run, everything that she could use to continue living is more than welcome. Her father, whom she loved with all her heart, made her promise in his deathbed: stay alive, at all costs. If, for Church, violence and criminality are portraits of the heresy from the Egisiroimi, for Anna, these are means of survival. The problem with this lifestyle is that the more places you visit, more enemies you make and harder it gets to fight them all by yourself. One day, however, her life was saved by a member of the Cult to Life, making her rethink her behavior and ideologies.

Looking to find the woman who once helped her, Anna ended up in the forbidden city of Akratya. There, the Life Worshipers welcomed Anna, offering her asylum and something to live for. In exchange for protection, Anna embraced her new life. From a thief, Anna became a spy. Little did she knew, this choice would lead her right into the claws of death from which she sought to escape.

Gender: female

Age: 25



Ethnicity: multi-racial (brown)

1.4. Iulia Tchevlaskia

In life, Iulia was a skilled huntress and spearwoman from the Commonwealth of Smirtolia. Trained as a warrior as part of her local lord's militia, when she was not fighting in her liege's battles, she was helping her small village to overcome hunger, or protecting them from brigands. A devotee to Goddess Death like all citizens of Smirtolia, she would dedicated every heart pierced by her spear to Her - be it of animals she hunted or of enemies she bested.

When plague started to ravage her village, however, many died as famine struck. While the people suffered with hunger and illness, the lord of those lands decided to "fix" the situation by increasing the peasant's taxes. When they revolted, the lord ordered Iulia to spill their blood. She chose to pierce his heart with her spear, instead. Thus started the 3rd Peasant Revolt in the Commonwealth, with Iulia as one of their leaders.

The fires of revolution set Smirtolia ablaze, defeating the Prince's armies. It was then that Krulezgon interviened, sending an army of its Liquidators to quell the revolt, and the peasants where no match for such force. The repression was barbaric, and thousands of peasants were killed. Iulia had her entire family - her father, her mother, her brother and her nephew - burned alive in front of her by a sadistic soldier called Agharos of Meriva.

News of Iulia's death reached her fellow rebels, and she was hailed a hero that died in battle. But in reality, she not only survived the repression, but ran from it, an act of cowardice she was deeply ashamed of. With nowhere else to go, Iulia went to Krulezgon and sought shelter in Akratya. There she was welcomed by fighters like her, from the 8th of Zehrim Movement. Despite being a Death worshipper among a cult named after Life, she was not seen by the Combatants as an enemy - but as a comrade.

Gender: female



Age: 27

Ethnicity: black

1.5. Agharos of Meriva

Agharos of Meriva was a veteran Krulezgoni soldier, serving as Sergeant under Archduke Asqueron Pöbel's armies. A vicious, brutal man, he revels in carnage and violence - which made him the Archduke's perfect enforcer. Of plebeian origin, Agharos was already a bully at the age of 5. At 6, he already mingled with hardcore brigands. At 7, he asked them to allow him to kill someone for the first time, so he could "know how it feels like". At 10, already an accomplished assassin, he was found rotting in a dungeon by Asqueron Pöbel, who realized his potential. He bought the boy from the jailor by a silver coin and put him to train with his man-at-arms. Treated like an animal, the more he was beaten, starved, and submitted to gruesome training, the more formidable the young warrior became.

He quickly rose through the ranks, and soon was leading his own men. As an Archduke's Sergeant, he held a small but significant amount of power, which he abused by practicing organized crime - illegal gambling, extortion rackets, human trafficking. The Archduke knew about it all, of course, but indulged his favorite henchman, knowing it was a way of keeping him in check - and satisfying Agharos' thirst for cruelty.

Other lords saw him as a ruffian lacking manners and with no regard for appearances or etiquette, but knew better than to argue. He got a wide berth, since his victims were always the destitute, the revolting, the heretics. He got his first medal when he was sent to quell the 3rd Peasant Revolt in Smirtolia, leaving a trail of blood behind him. As a Death devotee, what connected him to religion were not prayers or commandments, but the relief his bond with the Goddess brought him, as if it justified his desire to kill and the countless murders he carried on his shoulders.

His unwieldy loyalty to Asqueron Pöbel is less a matter of gratitude or a question of honor and more the fact that, as it is, he has an endless influx of wealth and carnage - a



fact the Archduke was well aware of. Which is why, when the time came, he sent Agharos into Akratya in a covert mission, but let slid this information to the militant 8th of Zehrim Movement. They captured the infamous Agharos of Meriva, putting and end on his particular reign of terror.

Gender: male

Age: 38

Ethnicity: white (Western European)

1.6. Olivia Heinz

Born in the Archduchy of Meriva, Olivia Heinz was a noble spellcaster that worked most of her life for the King of Krulezgon. Member of the Royal Council of Krulezgon, Olivia was once the Chancellor and Spymaster to the Kingdom. Too cynical to openly embrace ideologies, she believes in no god nor goddess - but that, nonetheless, the Church and faith are important to maintain social order and prevent anarchy. She sees the Church as the cement that holds all civilization together - not as a matter of faith, but as a matter of politics. Without it, humans would not have survived the fall of the First Civilization, and the realms would today be in an endless war. Therefore, it must exist - irrespective of her personal religious beliefs.

Her noble blood and high rank position guaranteed she was able to conceal her powers as a spellcaster. Although Olivia's magical abilities were kept a secret, the King of Krulezgon knew it, but turned a blind eye to her practices as long as it helped her work as Spymaster. During her not so short life, she witnessed - and orchestrated - countless shady schemes and war crimes. Even tough she had her fair share of sins, she believed it was all for the greater good. Extremely intelligent and calculating, she believed in the system, as it is the necessary evil for the common good.

At the end of her life, however, Olivia's secret was revealed. Scheming to overthrow the King of Krulezgon, Asqueron Pöbel needed the King's most loyal asset out of the way. To



prevent her execution, the King himself pleaded with the Church. It was agreed that, in exchange for pardon, Olivia would be forced to leave her position as Krulezgon's Spymaster and join the Church. However, the King managed to keep her close, by appointing her as his personal representative within the Church.

Looking for retribution, she started to dig up Asqueron's relation with the Cult to Life. While in Akratia to investigate, she met her demise in a plot articulated by the Archduke to hide his trail of illegal activities.

Gender: female

Age: 50

Ethnicity: black

1.7. Mamdile Ogate

Wanting to give their child a better life, a couple of Sayabakniri beggars left their son at the gates of the Sinjwari Temple, a common practice in the Sayabakn Empire. The monks of the Sinjwari Order took him in, as they did with many other orphans. With no recollection of his past, Mamdile Ogate, as he was named by the monks, was initiated in the beliefs of the Goddess Death and never saw his parents again.

Living a monastic life of reclusion in the Temple, his early years were of much prayer and hard work, cleaning the temple, working in his fields and serving the needs of monks and fighters. The monks were strict, demanding constant self improvement and perfection. The severe lifestyle from the temple left marks on his personality. At age 12, he was one of the few selected among his peers to receive special training to become a warrior monk. Quickly, Mamdile stood out among his class mates as a wrestling prodigy. The weight of this responsibility started to reflect upon Mamdile as an obsession to constantly prove himself. To mask his fear of failure, he would act overconfident, and even arrogant in battle.



The fighting monks from the Sinjwari Order believe one should rise to the Goddess' arms as a hero, not just as another nameless vessel. After finishing their training, they must prove themselves to her by facing a life threatening challenge. Only then, they will be fully welcomed as one of them. Mamdile's entire life was built upon this one single goal. Each day of training, each test passed, each overcome self-imposed challenge, represented another step towards victory. For his final test, Mamdile decided to participate in the invasion of Akratya, only to fail what he believed was his one true purpose.

Gender: male

Age: 18

Ethnicity: black

2. Main NPCs

2.1. Soulon Leogenes

The Essencemancers had a very important leader and that man had Always been Soulon. There would be no Essencemancers without him. His was the dream that became the single most important goal of the group: to seek and discover a way to make humans immortal once again.

He was a dreamer and an obstinate man. Being a faithful believer in Goddess Life's ideology, he was of the firm opinion that nothing should stand in the way of the quest for immortality. When people didn't die, society wasn't the cruel thing it was today. To bring immortality to men would also be to cure the world.

His idealism, as one may foresee, was an open door inviting tough decisions. He held on to his Life-oriented pacifism for as long as he could, but not much could have been done once the Essencemancers were becoming more powerful and relevant, with more and more people relying on their skills and knowledge of the First Men.



In order to achieve their goal, the Essencemancers would partake in increasingly questionable, sometimes downright cruel endeavours. They started keeping secrets from the other branches of the Cult to Life. They used POWs to conduct their experiments. They made deals with the enemy. They killed friends who stood opposed to their decisions. Acts that would weigh heavily on Soulon's conscience. The man who started it all, who made it all possible. It was he who began saying, to help ease his and his fellow's burden, that they'd "gone too far to quit now", a motto which gained a life of its own.

The experiment to turn Soulon immortal failed, and he died. But not exactly.

One could argue that the reason why it didn't work was that his Essence was split into the will to live forever and the urge to die, after all the things he did and sanctioned. Maybe that is why part of his Essence became the Prisoner of A Thousand Faces, which is our main playable character.

All this time then, the player has actually been playing as Soulon. He will only become aware of this fact later on.

2.2. Alurna of Meriva

Alurna was Soulon's second-in-command and, therefore, one of the most important Essencemancers. She was also arguably the most powerful of them all, and as determined as Soulon to achieve the Essencemancers main purpose: immortality.

With Soulon gone, she would become the new Essencemancer leader during what was surely their biggest moment of crisis. Chased down relentlessly by the Church of Death and by the Archduke Asqueron Pöbel during the invasion of Akratya, her decisions are what lie between the achievement of their lifelong quest and total obliteration of their kind.

Depending on whose side the player takes by the end of the game, Alurna may be his final opponent.



2.3. Archduke Asqueron Pobel

He's one of the most important articulators of the recent Crusade against the Cult To Life; the main figure behind the army that marches into Akratya. Every single one of Death's soldiers knows and fears the Archduke Asqueron Pöbel. What his allies don't know, however, is that he has secret interests behind the invasion of Akratya, other than the holy mission of cleansing Zieminal of the heretic Cult to Life.

Even while being one of the most wealthy and influential lords of Krulezgon, Asqueron Pöbel is a relentless power seeker. His secret desire is to rule the entire world and, as far-fetched as that may seem, the Duke is a man with a plan: to become the new king of Krulezgon and to conquer all the other kingdoms of Zieminal.

Such a quest for world domination could only be achieved with what his own faith has deemed forbidden: the knowledge of the First Civilization. Asqueron knows the rumors, weapons strong enough to make an entire city vanish from the face of Zieminal in the blink of an eye. Such power could be his, if only he were to turn a blind-eye to the commandments of the Church of Death. Secretly, that's what he did.

Asqueron has formed a secret alliance with the most radical tendency of the Cult to Life: the Essencemancers. Being the ones with the most knowledge of the Old Ways of the first men, no one would be more suitable to aid in his quest. But as the Essencemancers themselves grew stronger due to that alliance, time has come for Asqueron to terminate the deal — as well as all traces of its existence.

Depending on whose side the player takes by the end of the game, Asqueron may be his final opponent.

2.4. Nito, the First to Die

Nito achieved the amazing deed of being idolized by completely different people for completely different reasons.



Main Characters

During the glory days of the First Civilization, Nito was known and loved for his athletic skills by his fellow people, the immortal men who praised Goddess Life. Time and time again he would emerge triumphant in the sporting battles fought within the arenas of the First Men. After centuries of pointless battles and meaningless victories, however, Nito began to feel the pain of a lack of purpose. He was seduced by Goddess Death and what she had to offer: finality.

Nito was among the first followers of the Goddess, in what would later turn into the Church of Death. It was he who bravely stepped up and offered his immortal Essence to be sacrificed. He actually changed his mind at the very last minute, but it was too late then, and the ritual got carried out even without his consent — but people generally don't mention that part.

Nito was the First to Die. Once he was gone, all other human Essences instantly became mortal. Chaos ensued.



V. The Plot

1. Main Story Beats

1.1. Prologue

01 – A huge battle takes place in the opening cutscene: the invasion of *Akratya* — once a big, modern-looking metropolis from a long gone civilization — held under siege by a massive, medieval-style army of followers of the mighty Church of Death. The invasion starts and it is a massacre. Even with the help of its fighting monsters, The Cult to Life is no match against the Church.

02 – One of the commanders behind the invasion is THERONE, known as the Crusader of Death. He ventures into a building that used to serve as a hospital for The First Civilization. A big explosion makes part of the building fall apart, leaving him trapped alone inside the hospital.

03 – Therone makes his way through the old hospital turned into a “monster factory” of sorts, slaying every heretical creature that wanders into his path. He understands that he is on the right track, for that place is surely where his enemies — a radical tendency of the Cult To Life called The *Essencemancers* — have been making their profane studies and experiments.

04 – The Crusader arrives at a torn-apart room where some big explosion took place. Before being able to make any sense out of what he sees, he's caught off-guard by the appearance of a big monster. They both fight and fall through a big hole in the ground, plummeting all the way into the sewers. The monster lives and starts to walk about. Therone lies above the rubble, lifeless.



1.2. Chapter 1 – Denial

05 – Therone's Essence is absorbed from his body by this mysterious thing that roamed the sewers. That leads to us perusing some of his core memories, moments that defined his fanatic personality.

06 – Therone wakes up, as though resurrected. He doesn't know it yet, but he's no longer the Crusader of Death. He is something else that we shall name *The Prisoner of A Thousand Faces*.

07 – The Prisoner wanders through the damp tunnels until he finds yet another human body with an Essence still within it. He absorbs the Essence of the late ANNA LEPUS, a spy and member of The Cult To Life who had met her demise for going in too deep trying to uncover Essencemancer secrets.

08 – Therone and Anna are now both part of the same being, taking whatever Essence it can find so as to become stronger. The prisoner's will is confused with that of his incorporated Essences (and with that of the player). Along the entire game there will be a total of seven playable Essences that can be found and absorbed.

09 – The way through the sewers leads to an underground parking lot and then to an abandoned shopping Mall. The prisoner looks for a way out into the streets, and notices that a mysterious man has been following him around. The first time their paths had crossed, this man was actually a corpse — way back when the Crusader was still alive and poking through the strange room where the explosion took place. This figure lay there, dead, and now it tries to catch and kill the Prisoner. That man, which is no simple man at all, we call NEMESIS.

10 – After some wandering around the mall, finding a third Essence (HAODAI, the Essencemancer pupil), and accidentally learning about the consumeristic and hedonistic lifestyle of the First Civilization, the Prisoner finds a way out of the building. It requires, though, that he slays the monster that had previously been responsible for the Crusader's death. But the Prisoner is a stronger being, and prevails.



1.3. Chapter 2 – Anger

11 – One thing is undeniable: the Essences know they should be dead. Yet, here they are. They make a plan: to find Soulon, the leader of the Essencemancers. He must know what happened to them, and he is the person with better chances of solving their conundrum.

12 – The Essencemancers are hiding inside Zehrimbal, an ancient arena where the immortal men and women of the First Civilization battled each other for sport. To reach Zehrimbal, the Prisoner must find and activate two of the city's backup power generators. And that's what he does, meanwhile slaying monsters, killing and/or evading soldiers from the Church of Death, fighting and running away from Nemesis and discovering more about Akratya's history — like the fact that the Essencemancers seeked volunteers for their experiments. They were attempting to bring back the gift of immortality, once bestowed upon them by Goddess Life.

13 – By the time he's at the ancient arena, the Prisoner has now five Essences within his mind and body — two of which hated themselves with all their might. Unending fights take place within his head as he also angrily fights the dangers of the arena, such as monsters and traps.

14 – Up until now, the Prisoner could have avoided facing Nemesis altogether. But here, if he wants to proceed and find the Essencemancers, he must confront Nemesis. He does so only to discover that, just like himself, his enigmatic pursuer is also unable to die.

15 – The Prisoner finds the Essencemancers, but things don't look too promising: Soulon, the man who could have the answers he so desperately needed, is dead. He was killed in their base, the hospital, when their experiment to bring back immortality failed.

1.4. Chapter 3 – Bargaining

16 – Desperate for a solution to their problem, the Essences come up with a new goal: if Soulon is dead, then the Prisoner shall find his body, absorb him, and learn how to put



an end to this cursed state. It's quite a desperate plan, but that's what suits a desperate man.

17 – The body must be at the place where the experiment was conducted: Life Laboratories. The Prisoner then seeks a way into the crumbling building, not knowing that there is also where Alurna and Eithalos, the current Essencemancer leaders, are headed.”

18 – Inside the lab, the Prisoner comes to know of the shady dealings that happened between Soulon, former leader of the Essencemancers, and ASQUERON PÖBEL, the Archduke of Meriva and follower of the Church of Death. Soulon traded knowledge of The First Civilization in exchange for test subjects to conduct their ever more nefarious experiments. As hard as the weight on his shoulders would get, Soulon had long settled to stop at nothing in his pursuit for immortality.

19 – On his search for the dead Essencemancer, the Prisoner winds up once again meeting Eithalos and Alurna, current leaders of the group. They had gone back to where the experiment was realized in order to retrieve a most important artifact which greatly augmented their powers: an orb which contains the remainders of the Essence of the very first man who died. That man was NITO, and with the power of his Essence Eithalos brings the dead back to life as horrendous creatures and makes them fight the Prisoner.

20 – After the Prisoner defeats Eithalos, Alurna drops an unexpected revelation: the Prisoner will never be able to find Soulon, for a simple reason: *he is Soulon*. She disappears as this information slowly sinks in, leaving the Prisoner with the orb of Nito in his hands but with nothing to live for, no objective whatsoever.

1.5. Chapter 4 – Depression

21 – He roams aimlessly trying to grasp the notion that he, the Prisoner, is not the many Essences that he thinks he is, not the people that they think they are, but instead he's this horrible man he's learned to despise and all those Essences are nothing but



memories of people who are no longer there. As absurd as it is, somehow he knows it to be true. He is Soulon. Or part of what Soulon once was.

22 – With no purpose for himself, he simply follows a trail of memories from Nito, back from when The First Civilization still existed. He witnesses, through Nito's memories, the rise of the Church of Death from within a bored society of Life-oriented immortal beings. Nito offered himself as sacrifice so that Goddess Death could turn the Essence of all human beings into mortal Essences. It has been this way ever since, and that is what the Essencemancers have been trying to undo.

23 – The Prisoner winds up in a swamp, where he fights countless creatures for no reason whatsoever. He engages in yet another fight with Nemesis — two immortal freaks doomed to kill each other off time and time again. They fight until both are swallowed by the mud.

24 – Nito appears to the Prisoner in a vision. He tells him of a way to use a fragment of his own Essence — the Essence of Nito, The First To Die — in order to kill Nemesis once and for all. It can be done. But it must be understood that Nemesis is also a part of what once could be called Soulon. He and the Prisoner are one and the same. To kill Nemesis is to open a path for the Prisoner's own demise.

25 – The Prisoner wakes up and finds he's been dragged by a creature to the bottom of a cave in the depths of the swamp. He must fight his way out, confronting the monster.

1.6. Chapter 5 – Acceptance

26 – The Prisoner heads to the top of Life's Cathedral, where he knows the Essencemancers are trying once again to realize the experiment of immortality. He fights his way through monsters and men.

27 – Waiting for him in a passageway near the top of the cathedral is Nemesis, his other half. The last duel ensues, and this time the Prisoner gets rid of his adversary for good. With his enemy's demise, he feels closer to his own. He feels freedom drawing in. All the



Essences do. It is as if they had gotten rid of whoever held them prisoners. They are now free to act upon their will. But what will that be?

28 – At the very top, the Prisoner finds the Essencemancers about to lose a fight against members of the Church led by the Archduke Asqueron Pöbel. The experiment is halfway through. There is a choice to be made: who does the Prisoner wish to help? Is he there to help carry out the experiment? Or to keep it from ever happening?

29 – If he helps the Essencemancers defeat the soldiers of the Church, his final boss will be Alurna after she submits herself to the experiment and it once again falls short of its promise, turning her into a monster; meanwhile, if the Prisoner seeks to destroy the experiment, he must fight and defeat Alurna. Then, as he's about to shut down the experiment, Asqueron Pöbel unexpectedly throws himself in the way and turns into a powerful undying creature (except for the Prisoner, who carries the Essence of Nito) that must be brought down.

30 – In the end, the Prisoner shall die. The way he handles his final moment, however... that depends on small but significant choices he's been making all along his journey. Every chapter has presented itself with opportunities for him to show his inner will and to cope with the inevitability of fate. Fate has finally arrived, and he can rest.

2. Narrative Progression

We begin with a **playable intro**:

The player is in control of some kind of spirit that roams about the sewers of an abandoned city. It glides through the damp and poorly-lit tunnels in search of something.

Corpses lie around, dressed in ways which don't fit the sewer's modern architecture, Some are not yet corpses, though they look and behave as though they should be: horrendous creatures, resembling what could once have been human beings, creep along the tunnels aimlessly, eating rats, each other, feeling pain. One of those creatures,



absolutely huge and disgusting, stomps around killing what it can find. It presents no danger to the player, however. Not now.

Right now, all that interests the spirit are the human bodies scrambled about, those medieval-looking corpses which the player floats by until one of them in particular catches its attention. It is bathed in a strong, artificial moon-like beam that enters through a big crack in the broken ceiling. The corpse lies above a huge pile of rubble, its white armor from the Church of Death sparkling as the spirit closes in. That corpse was once THERONE, the Crusader of Death.

Standing above the dead, glimmering corpse, the player has one action that he can perform: ABSORB. As he presses the button, something strange begins to happen to the body of the Crusader. The milky-white light becomes stronger, and at the same time the corpse begins to deteriorate. Before anyone can fully comprehend what the hell is going on, we cut to black.

Opening Cutscene:

We're in the dark. Thunder rumbles in the distance. We hear someone's prayer to Goddess Death, asking for protection before a Holy battle. As the image starts to form we see that it is the Crusader who prays. He is not yet dead.

Therone kneels in front of his warriors, one of the many legions that form the massive army of The Church of Death that we see taking the horizon. The medieval-style army is in formation, ready to invade AKRATYA — once a big, modern metropolis from a long gone civilization.

A man with a powerful look strides across the front of the army. That is ASQUERON POBEL. That is his campaign. His Crusade. You can see in his eyes how much he craves to invade Akratya.

He positions himself besides the army. The commandeering of the forces is not his duty. That is up to men like Therone, The Crusader of Death. He is the one who launches the offense.



The attack begins.

The invasion is actually not so much a battle as it is a massacre, for the army of the Church of Death is far more numerous, organized, weaponized, and prepared to kill than its adversaries, the members of the Cult to Life.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and so the Life cultists unleash all their horrendous creatures, some of which are trained to fight alongside them. Others are pure beasts that run along killing whoever they can get their hands, blades, claws and fangs on. Still, the army of the Church of Death has the upper hand and prevails.

At some point, while the Crusader and other commanders from the Church prepare for the next step of the invasion, the artificial lights along the city of Akratya — from the street lamps, electric signs, windows — begin to flicker.

The whole city seems to be going through a power shortage, except for one building. A very bright light shines from one specific floor, high atop an old hospital/laboratory. Something is taking place there, consuming a lot of energy. Something very crucial, which demands attention from the Church of Death at once.

We go to black once again, ending the cutscene.

Here begins the game.

2.1. Prologue

Location: LIFE LABORATORIES, PT.1

We hear a big explosion and the sounds of a big structure crumbling down.

The image comes up, and the player now has control over THERONE, the Crusader of Death. He is alone inside **Life Laboratories**, and the way from which he came has caved in. There's no going back, no getting out.

He slays his way through the trembling, flickering building... killing the creatures in his path. Not all of them seek to fight but it doesn't matter for Therone.



The building served as a hospital for the First Civilization, the high-tech society which existed before the current Middle Age. The Crusader crosses rooms with several high tech body reconstruction chambers — some highly advanced 3D printers that help the body get back into its original, healthy shape and function. The men and women of the First Civilization were once immortal beings, unable to perish — but able to get hurt. The strange technology found throughout the hospital resonates with this fact, as well as the names of the hospital wings, and instructional videos being turned on and off due to unstable power.

As the Crusader delves deeper in search of his foe, he comes accross adapted versions of the same machines, rigged for a new purpose: Essencemacer studies and experiments. This means that instead of rebuilding bodies for the living, the machines are now twisted and combined to shape the creatures that the Crusader has been killing all this time. The hospital has been converted into a "monster factory" of sorts: body parts being reanimated; Essence being extracted from a being and introjected into another; a veritable freak show. Some of these experiments jump out of their test chambers to attack Therone.

The purpose of the Essencemancers wasn't to create monsters for monstrosity's sake. The Crusader goes through planning rooms, where they studied and catalogued ways of preserving Essence, of transferring it from one body to another, as well as the bad consequences of such doings: the Essence corruption. Essence turns green-colored and corrupted if artificially manipulated, and that is a problem they've long been trying to deal with. The manufacturing of an "eternal vessel", a body that is capable of renewing its Essence without corrupting it, seemed to be their goal. Manuscripts can be read and drawings can be seen depicting a body we are yet to recognize, but with whom we'll be pretty familiar as the game progresses: we call him NEMESIS.

Therone finally arrives at his destination: a once vast room, now partly destroyed due to an explosion which seems to have taken place right there, not so long ago. What remains of the floor and furniture is marked by traces of the experiment gone wrong, A strange,



glimmering orb floats right above the big hole in the ground, in what should have been the center of the room before the accident.

There's another odd thing in the room: a big, muscular human corpse, strapped to a structure that keeps it standing upright with arms and legs forming an "X." Its intimidating dark armour has the insignia of the Cult to Life.

Just to be sure, the Crusader slits the throat of the corpse. Nothing happens. It's dead, all right.

The building has been shaking occasionally. But now the trembling feels different. Therone stares at a locked door and watches as it is torn apart by a huge MONSTER. Crusader and monster fight, and eventually they both fall through the big hole in the room. After the long fall, the creature gets up and starts walking through the **sewers**. The Crusader lays there, lifeless.

2.2. Denial

Location: ESSENCE REVERIE: THERONE

"**Essence Reveries**" are inward travels that take us through the core memories of our playable Essences. That is to say, through events that were crucial to define and/or understand who they are. Actually, who they *were*.

In Therone's case, what we experience is a lifetime of devotion to Goddess Death. At first, because that's what he was forced to live by. But soon Therone would become a more faithful servant than anyone else he knew. He winds up burning his own father at the stake in the name of his faith. A true fanatic. You can see why it won't go down so well when he starts to understand that he is now unable to die and join his Goddess in Eternal Rest...

Location: SEWERS

Therone wakes up in the **sewers**, only he's no longer Therone, the Crusader of Death. He doesn't understand it yet, but now he is the PRISONER OF A THOUSAND FACES.



Looking up, the Prisoner spots an odd thing: staring at him from way above the hole in the ceiling is NEMESIS. Though his throat is still slit from the cut given by Therone, he is no longer an inanimate corpse.

The Prisoner explores the sewers, trying to find a way out. He follows a path of destruction most likely laid out by the Monster that fell with him into the sewers.

While fighting monsters along the tunnels, the Prisoner discovers and explores some of his new abilities.

A strange, vibrating light attracts his attention. It is an Echo from the past: a memory from before Therone's demise. He and other soldiers from the Church of Death were searching for a way into Life Laboratories through the sewers, when all of a sudden they were attacked by monsters. Some of his men died, and Therone said they'd come back for the corpses after the mission. The corpses are still lying around.

At a waste renewal segment of the sewers, there's another Echo: Therone and his men (still alive then; this was before the ambush) discuss the meaning of these recycling facilities, and how the heretic society of The First Men would cease to function without such artificial life-sustaining methods. That is the point of the Church of Death: all physical things were made to perish and transform. Only humans, in their self-centered minds, would bring it upon themselves to try and be above the greatest Law of nature. All things must perish.

There's a human corpse with a strange glow on his path. It's the body of ANNA, our second playable Essence. The Prisoner can absorb her.

Location: ESSENCE REVERIE: ANNA

In Anna's **Essence Reverie**, we come to learn a bit about her and, mostly, about the enemies of the Church of Death: the so-called heretic *Cult to Life*.

Those considered by the Church to be Life cultists can be many things: from people highly devoted to Goddess Life and her goals, such as the Essencemancers; to people that simply do not abide by the rules and ideologies of the Church of Death, without



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actually seeing themselves as religious. That's the case with Anna. She was just a person trying to live by her own set of rules.

Location: SEWERS

The Prisoner now has the ability to switch between the two absorbed Essences: Anna and Therone.

Echoes show Anna being taught about the story of the First Civilization — and its downfall. It was there, in the sewers, that the first followers of the Church of Death began to meet up and organize themselves as a movement. The person who taught her this was an Essencemancer named SOULON. We'll get to know him better.

Soulon explained to Anna the importance of knowing not only the story of your own kind, but also that of your enemies. As a matter of fact, the most important discovery the Essencemancers have made on their time living in Akratya has all to do with the birth of the Church of Death. (That is to remain a mystery for now, but he is talking about the finding of the Essence of Nito — the first human to die.)

More echoes from the past show Anna's body being dragged into the sewers. She was killed for spying the Essencemancers, who were not always in terms with the other segments of the Cult to Life.

The path through the sewers leads to the underground **parking lot** of a mall. The prisoner enters the **mall**.

Location: THE SHOPPING MALL

The prisoner wanders through the Mall, looking for a way out. Most entrances are boarded-up or destroyed.

The third Essence is found and absorbed: the Essencemancer HAODAI.

Location: ESSENCE REVERIE: HAODAI

In Haodai's **Essence Reverie** we get a glimpse of his journey to become an Essencemancer, as well as who the Essencemancers are and what they strive for:



regaining the power of immortality, once bestowed upon humans by the benevolent Goddess Life.

Haodai was very close to the leader of the Essencemancers, Soulon. They worked tirelessly to create the Eternal Vessel, the body that would hold the first immortal Essence since the fall of the First Civilization.

Location: THE SHOPPING MALL

When crossing a corridor, the Prisoner spots Nemesis — the body that should have been the Eternal Vessel — also wandering, unreachable: they're in different sectors, separated by a big drop. They'll meet soon enough, though.

The sight of Nemesis causes a strange effect. The Prisoner collapses onto the ground as the three Essences within his mind seem to be having trouble dealing with each other and the chaos of being many minds, memories and personalities in a single self. Haodai sees Nemesis and shouts "Soulon! It's you! It worked!" But at the lack of response from Nemesis, he understands that something is off.

Echoes from the past reveal part of the stories of Anna and Haodai and tell us more about Akratya: a refuge for all those who had to escape the grasp of the intolerant Church of Death. And so it happened that people from all around the world winded up here. People like Anna, who upon arriving in Akratya was given a small tent to live in at the Mall's used-to-be food court, a spacious area adapted to serve as an occupation, filled to the brim with tents that served as temporary housing for the new arrivals.

Exploring the Mall — the giant department stores, the posters for endless sequels of the same movie franchises, the praise of material goods — gives us a trace of what The First Civilization had amounted to at its finest: to become a consumeristic, hedonistic society, possibly trapped within the meaninglessness of eternity. There are also traces of guerrilla propaganda scattered throughout the mall, made by the first people to follow Goddess Death. They attacked and criticised the vain lifestyle of their time, offering Death as the solution for its lack of purpose and finality.



Hidden somewhere inside a department store, there's an Echo of the Past that shows Haodai being lured into a trap and stabbed to death by another Essencemancer. We can't tell who it was exactly, the mysterious figure wore a hood. But it must've been someone he knew, and trusted.

The way out of the Mall involves going through the monster that had previously killed the Crusader of Death. By combining all the abilities from the three Essences, the Prisoner of a Thousand Faces emerges triumphant. He does not feel that way, though, not in the slightest. After what the Essences have seen and been through, there's an ugly truth being thrown in their faces. They can't turn away from it but can't deny it either. They're dead.

Or they should be.

After some arguing among the Essences about what the hell is going on — with them and around them — Haodai brings an answer: "We must find Soulon, the leader of the Essencemancers." He recognizes some friendly faces along the disgusting body of the monster they just brought down. Those were his fellow Essencemancers. Something they were doing went very, very wrong. Anna doesn't like Soulon, but agrees that he's likely the one who can help them out of that cursed state of theirs. Therone can't believe that he'll settle for asking an Essencemancer for help — but he would do anything to lift this heretic curse that impedes him from joining his Goddess in Eternal Rest. Off to find Soulon they are.

2.3. Anger

Location: LOWER STREETS

The Prisoner crawls out of the mall and into an open area for the first time: the **Lower Streets**. The Essences recall the main objective: to find Soulon, the leader of the Essencemancers. From this point on, exploration is a bit less linear, with many opportunities for the Prisoner to explore Akratya and some of its stories as he looks for intel on where the Essencemancers could be holed up.



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He stumbles upon the corpse of a woman surrounded by dead soldiers from the Church of Death. It looks as though she'd been fighting them off all by herself. Three soldiers lie impaled simultaneously by her long spear. That is IULIA, the fourth playable Essence.

Location: ESSENCE REVERIE: IULIA

Once an honorable spearwoman fighting at the service of Goddess Death, Iulia's salad days had met their end when a plague devastated the small farming village she lived in with her family. Agricultural production took a punch, and instead of coming for the aid of the people, the feudal lord decided to increase taxation. Iulia and others took up arms, and the consequences of the peasant revolt were dire: she had to watch her entire family burn at the stake.

Despite her own faith, Iulia's choice was to cowardly escape. She lived to fight another day. She's ever since been consumed by hatred and longed for revenge against those responsible for the death of her family.

Location: LOWER STREETS

The streets are packed with creatures running loose and some occasional troops from the Church of Death; as well as corpses, many corpses from both sides of the holy war. Makes you think Death is the big winner. But where there is hope, there is a chance for life. So they say.

Eventually, through one of many ways — Echoes of the past; eavesdropping conversations from Life cultists hiding inside their homes; talking to soldiers "disguised" as the Crusader of Death — the Prisoner learns where he must go: to the big fighting arena, Zehrimbal. That's most likely where the Essencemancers are holed up and, consequently, where Soulou could be found.

There's a catch, though: the Church had been trying to access the arena, unsuccessfully. The only entrance still available requires the use of a drawbridge. However, the drawbridge needs electricity to work, and the city block is out of juice.



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One of the Essences knows the answer for that problem: to use two of the city's backup generators. They must be nearby, it's just a matter of following the wires. The Prisoner can go to any of the two generators, in no specific order.

On the path to one of them, a great deal of corpses pile up along the way. As the Prisoner makes his way through ever tightening corridors among the cramped up houses, he can still hear the slaughter taking place somewhere not too far ahead. The slashing, the screaming... When he arrives at his destination, someone's already there: Nemesis.

The Prisoner can fight, but he could also run and hide — which is very much encouraged; Nemesis is quite a formidable adversary. If he chooses to run or ends up dead, Nemesis doesn't show up at the same place again. He is not like your regular enemy. You never know where you'll find him next... If it so happens that the Prisoner is already a very skilled fighter and beats Nemesis, he notices that the corpse has vanished after getting the power back on.

One generator turned on; one to go.

Echoes from the past show Iulia in the chaos of the invasion. She fought skillfully against the soldiers of the Church of Death. She got ahold of the last breathing soldier and tortured him for the answers she sought. She wanted to know if any of the men responsible for the death of her family were taking part in the invasion. One of them, as she found out, was already dead. The other, a sergeant named Agharos, might still be around. The man didn't know. She asked whether he accepted the embrace of Goddess Death in his final breath. So he did, and she pierced his heart.

Echoes from the Crusader show the lengths he went through to get the information he needed: the location of the Essencemancers' headquarters. He watched as his men tortured a member of the Cult To Life until he spilled it: Life Laboratories is where they conducted their experiments. And it was true: they were indeed close to attaining the long awaited gift of immortality. After the interrogation was done, Therone asked if the man embraced Goddess Death in his final hour. The man said nothing. And so the torture continued, even though there was no more information to be obtained.



Along with the Crusader in these Echoes, was a man we've already seen: Asqueron Pöbel. He demanded urgency in discovering the whereabouts of the Essencemancers. Despite the lack of official confirmation, from the very beginning Asqueron had known for a fact that the rumors about the Essencemancers had been true; that they were close to succeeding in their strive for immortality.

(We can't know it yet, but there are reasons why he already knew it. After all, he had been making secret deals with the Essencemancers.)

The Prisoner and Nemesis have several random encounters throughout the city. Sometimes a fight is carried out; other times, their quarrel is interrupted by other enemies that appear — and vice-versa: at times, the Prisoner is in the middle of combat against regular foes, when all of a sudden Nemesis pops up and starts killing everything that moves, allowing the Prisoner a run for his money.

Somewhere along the way, there's a courtyard. Once, way before the invasion took place, there had been a public Assembly for all members of the Cult to Life. Soulon had his turn to speak to a vast audience. That memory can be accessed via Echoes from many different Essences that were there that day — Anna, Haodai, and Iulia; each with their own take on what he had to say:

As the Essencemancers' strife for immortality began, there had been many people volunteering their very Essence to help out. People who, like the Essencemancers, dreamed of everlasting life. In some cases, people who had nothing to lose. But time had been passing, and the tests had revealed themselves to be rather fruitless, not to mention quite dangerous. Many volunteers had wasted away their lives and sanity in exchange for nothing. As Soulon tried to convince his audience in the public speaking, "Such is the way of science. There must be trial and error before success. We Essencemancers are not Gods. To us, it doesn't come down to sheer force of will--" and as he was saying that, someone cut him by yelling: "If you're not Gods, why are you trying to achieve what only the Goddesses could?" That was Iulia. Haodai stepped in to show faith in his master: "Because it is possible! And that is the most important rule in the Way of Life: whatever can be done, must be done! Life is the act of saying yes,



instead of giving up. No matter how hard. No matter the cost!" A huge discussion ensued, and not much could be understood until Soulon manifested himself again. He repeated what he said earlier, stating that they were only seeking out volunteers. In no way whatsoever would they ever force others to partake in their dangerous quest, "for life is too valuable a thing to be spent without resolution." Anna observed all this from atop a building, along with a mysterious old woman whom she treated as a superior. She confided to Anna in her weary, wise voice that there was absolutely no possibility of the Essencemancers giving up their studies simply because they lacked the test subjects. The woman asked Anna to spy on the Essencemancers. "We shall wait and see the strength of their resolution..."

There's a very secret echo hidden away within one of the houses. Apparently, that's where Iulia lived. There she used to pray for her one and only Goddess: Death. Every night of the rest of her life she begged for forgiveness and pledged her remaining years to a sole purpose: to seek revenge and to rid the world of Goddess Death's worse enemies: the false followers. Those who call themselves loyal servants of the Church of Death, but who actually kill for their own sake and pleasure, staining the reputation of her faith.

With the second generator active, the Prisoner is now capable of activating the drawbridge and using it to reach the arena where the Essencemancers are said to be hiding.

Location: ZEHRIMBAL

The Prisoner finds himself within **Zehrimbal** — the ancient fighting arena of the First Civilization. It resembles our modern-day sports arena, only several times bigger and with many sections devoted to the praise of their Goddess, Life, She who granted them the ability to engage in everlasting combat. Along the main corridors and the main hall, one can see several tributes to the Goddess — as well as to some of her champions, the best gladiators to ever have thought in Zehrimbal.



Many of these statues were later destroyed. The statues of Goddess Life were laboriously reconstructed by the new occupants of Akratya. There's one statue, however, which never got to be destroyed. That is the statue of NITO.

Some of the Essences recognize Nito. He is also known as "The First To Die". Supposedly, the Church of Death owes everything to this man, once a proud gladiator/celebrity of The First Civilization turned follower of Goddess Death way back when it all started. He offered himself as sacrifice for his new divinity and became the first human ever to die. After him, all other humans would "follow the example" and instantly became mortals — whether they wanted to, or not.

Not only there are monsters to deal with along the corridors of Zehrimbal, but also traps. Dozens of them, many of which are almost unforeseeable. Add to that the occasional appearance of Nemesis, who seems to be in a slow-paced but relentless hunt for the Prisoner. It's like he had all the time in the world to complete a never-ending task. Doesn't stray too far from the truth... Some traps can be used to slow Nemesis down or even to part ways with him. That's as silver lining as it gets.

Going through what seems to be an underground locker room converted into a dungeon, we find the rotting corpse of the fifth Essence: AGHAROS.

Location: ESSENCE REVERIE: AGHAROS

Agharos was a natural-born killer turned sargeant of Asqueon Pöbel's army. Killing was what gave him the most pleasure, an inclination that made him a very valuable asset for Asqueron. The perfect henchman, he was, never asking too many questions — except maybe the occasional "How do you want it done, Sire?" Agharos wasn't concerned whether the commands of his master were akin with the Church's commandments. He was asked to do something, and he did it. No matter how nasty it was. Actually, the dirtier, the better.

His **Essence Reverie** is a collage of carnage. One horrible deed after the other. It was Agharos who set the fire which killed Iulia's family.



As soon as the Prisoner has both Essences within its mind, Agharos and Iulia, they get into a duel. They're surrounded by a village on fire and by shrieks of unbearable pain. The only sensible thing to do is to fight. And so they do. It is a gruesome duel, the most pointless and justified of all.

It just so happens that both Essences are immortal. The struggle could go on and on, forever. They must be stopped by the other Essences. Either that, or the Prisoner simply walks into the fire, giving an end to this eternal/internal duel.

Location: ZHERIMBAL

Back into the real world, the Prisoner feels like he is starting to deal with more than he can cope. Too much anger, hatred, fear, regret — only the worst of five existences into a single, tormented self. The player needs to choose a maximum of four Essences to carry along. (He can always change his "party" at the checkpoints.) The hate these Essences carry for each other flows into the Prisoner's behavior, and maybe even into his fighting style.

Echoes of the past show that Agharos had been captured by a group of fighters from the Cult To Life. They are called the 8th of Zherim Movement, also known as Combatants. As part of a deal made with the Essencemancers, some of their prisoners would be offered as test subjects for the Life cultists experiments. In exchange, the Essencemancers would provide the Combatants with some of the creatures that were created as "collateral damage" during the many experiments seeking the recovery of immortality. Soulon and the leader of de Zherim fighters had a discussion over the fact that the fighters wished to terminate the deal. The rumors about them training monsters to fight had already spread, and many believed that this could rally the public opinion and grant the Church the conditions for another Crusade against the Cult To Life. It could be even worse if they found out about where exactly the creatures came from.

"The risk is far too great, even for us" claimed the leader of the Zehrim fighters. As a response, Soulon had taught himself to think and convey one simple, however fundamental notion: "We've gone too far to quit now." He didn't know it then, but, man,



can he go lower than that... "You know what you'll have me do, don't you?" Soulon asked. But instead of going there, he changed the subject to tell why they really mustn't give up. Now they had someone new on their side. It was what they'd been looking for all this time. It's the main reason why the Essencemancers established themselves in Akratya. They had finally found Nito...

All this time, Agharos had been pretending to be weak and waiting for the best opportunity to seize the blade of one of the guards, taking him hostage. Still, he was surrounded, with nowhere else to go. Soulon tried to appease to him, telling of all the good things that would come of those experiments. "No one needs to die," he said. But it was far too late for Agharos to choose Life, and he knew it. He slits the guard's throat, and then his own. Here ends the Echo.

At a secret location (this is another Echo), Anna met up with her superior to tell of what she had discovered. The Essencemancers were doing a trade with the fighters of the 8th of Zherim Movement, but the deal had ended. Still, the experiments kept happening. The Essencemancers must have been getting their test subjects from elsewhere...

Besides the colossal main arena, Zehrimbal has also got a few minor fighting stages. In one of them, Nemesis awaits the Prisoner. This time, through Nemesis is the only way forward and the fight is inevitable. As many attempts as it takes, Nemesis must be brought down.

After finally succeeding in doing so, the Prisoner stops to catch a breath. He realizes that Nemesis is coming back to life, right then and there. He runs and leaps through one of the doors of the arena, quickly destroying the button while doing so. The door seals shut. Nemesis is left on the other side of a thick glass wall, staring at him. He starts punching the wall and it slowly cracks. He'll stay there punching that wall for as long as he must. The Prisoner continues his search for the Essencemancers.

A few minutes later, the Prisoner hears the faint sound of breaking glass.

(If the player comes back to that spot later, the glass is broken and that is his way back to where he came, should he ever want to go back.)



The Prisoner finally gets to the center of the arena. Indeed, there the Essencemancers are. He shouts from a distance, saying that he has come to talk to Soulon. They do not have to be enemies. Soulon, however, isn't there. He comes closer and realizes that the only main figures present are ALURNA, the new Essencemancer leader, and EITHALOS, her second-in-command. Alurna says something that makes the Prisoner come to a halt: Soulon is dead. He died during the last experiment. As she is speaking, someone comes along with news that the army of the Church has entered the arena as well. Alurna then says to the Prisoner: "And you, whoever you are, you die now."

A big monster is released and the Prisoner has to fight it. It is, without a doubt, his scariest adversary yet. It requires a very skilled, resourceful fighter to overcome this beast in combat.

Eithalos and Alurna witness, amazed, as the Prisoner handles the monster. They look at him differently now. It is as if seeing the Essences in combat had made them understand something vital. The experiment was not a total failure. They need to go back to the Lab. Back for Nito. They could try again. There is still hope for eternity.

The Prisoner hurries after the two Essencemancer leaders, but enemies and chaos impede him from keeping up and he loses track of where they went once he's out of Zherimbal. He is driven mad by the prospects of failure. The creatures and people in his path endure the consequences.

2.4. Bargain

Location: UPPER STREETS

At a chance to take a breather and recollect his thoughts, the Prisoner comes to the conclusion that he could look for Soulon's corpse and absorb his Essence. Maybe then he will know how to fix himself. And all the Essences know where the experiment took place: Life Laboratories.



The Plot

That plan is a very long shot. It is, however, the only plan, and the Prisoner is unwilling to simply give up fixing his condition. He must alter his fate, no matter what.

The Hospital/Lab is not too far from where they are. The problems are that the streets are packing with soldiers and monsters, and that the main entrances to the building are pretty much blocked. The Prisoner has to be clever if it wishes to avoid unnecessary conflict, and to discover a way into the Laboratory.

Echoes from Haodai show him trying to comfort Soulon. He does not, however, know what exactly is it that afflicts his master so deeply. Choices he had to make. Soulon still hung on tight to his belief: "We've gone too far to stop." Some of the Echoes that can be found give a clue as to how to reach the Lab through a secret entrance within another building.

Location: LIFE LABORATORIES, PT. 2

We've been here before, but only as Therone Guilaumen, the Crusader of Death. Now it is the Prisoner of A Thousand Faces that roams through the old hospital, in search for Soulon's Essence. What he finds is another Essence: Olivia, a spellcaster from the Church of Death.

Location: ESSENCE REVERIE: OLIVIA

Olivia lived in service of the king of Krulezgon, and therefore worked to, among other things, maintain the power and influence of the Church of Death. That said, she did not believe in the religion's cosmogony and didn't share any of the beliefs of her fellow Death devotees. She did, however, believe in the social and political part played by the religion in preserving the fabric of society. And she would do whatever lay within her reach to keep the wheels turning.

She hid her spellcasting abilities as best as she could, but when her path crossed with that of Asqueron Pöbel, she got herself a far too powerful and influential foe.

Location: LIFE LABORATORIES, PT. 2



Echoes show Haodai discovering that the new test subjects were neither volunteers, nor Prisoners brought in by the Zherim fighters. They were people taken captive by Asqueron Pobel. Soulon had been making deals with the enemy! And worse, using innocent people as test subjects! They both got into a big fight, with Soulon trying to assure his pupil that there had been simply no other path to be followed. And more, once they'd got the experiment right, everyone would be saved. "Don't you see?" Soulon continued, "They were doomed, doomed to die, we're all doomed! I'm trying to save us all! The Gods have left, they lost their interest. I'm the one trying to save us!"

Despite Soulon's best efforts, it just didn't seem to sink in. Haodai left, claiming that he would talk to others about what had been going on there. Soulon fell on the floor, devastated. Mainly, because he knew what had to be done. This time it was Alurna who voiced the all-soothing mantra: "We've gone too far to stop now..."

The Prisoner finds himself where his story began: in what's left of the room where the failed experiment took place. When the Crusader had previously been there, a floating orb stood above the big hole in the ground. Now it is under Eithalos' possession. He and Alurna went back to the Lab for that orb is an important tool for the experiment, which they have now set their minds on to trying once more. As Alurna tells the Prisoner, they must give it another shot, now that they have seen him. Him, the Prisoner.

The orb greatly enhances the powers of Eithalos, and he uses said power to reanimate dead corpses along the Lab. The Prisoner has to fight these corpses as he follows the Essencemancers, room after room, after room...

He finally beats Eithalos. The strange and powerful orb now lies within his grasp. He can sense its properties... "You know what it is, don't you?", Alurna asks.

He knows it is an Essence. "Is it Soulon?"

"No, that is the Essence of Nito. The First To Die." And then she says: "*You* are Soulon."

The statement comes to the Prisoner as a shock. Before he can even formulate any kind of response, Alurna continues her speech. She knows that Soulon is incomplete, no longer the same, but he's still somewhere in there, inside this strange creature that he



has become. She will go to the top of the cathedral, where she'll attempt to do the experiment one last time. She could really use the orb — and she could really use her old friend Soulon, or whatever is left of him. She'll be waiting. Having said all that, she disappears.

It sinks in very slowly. Not only did Alurna leave him without a plan of action but also - he's starting to realise - she has left him with absolutely nothing to stand for. The Essences had been striving for reparation, but what is the point of that if they aren't even who they think they are? If they're just memories intruding into someone else?

2.5. Depression

Location: LIFE'S CATHEDRAL, DESCENT

Life Laboratories is adjacent to **Life's Cathedral**. Attracted by Echoes from the Essence of Nito, the Prisoner heads there and starts heading down, experiencing old memories from the golden days of Akratya and The First Civilization.

The Prisoner keeps going down, unraveling Nito's inspired speeches about why all humankind would be grateful for what they were about to do; witnessing the very moment in which he stepped up and offered himself as sacrifice for Goddess Death; even gets to see the moment when he succumbed to fear and despair, being the first ever human to face the imminence of the end. For some reason, this glance into the beginning of the end of The First Civilization makes everything even more bleak for the Essences. Not just their pathetic half-lives, but the whole world seems pointless, a big joke.

The Prisoner finds yet another Essence, the last one. That is Mamdile.

Location: ESSENCE REVERIE: MAMDILE

Mamdile was left by his parents at the gates of the Sinjwari temple, and there he was raised. His life training among the Sinjwari monks was no walk in the park. He didn't



have much to hold on to besides his devotion to Goddess Death and the ambition of becoming the best fighter the Sinjwari have ever groomed.

Location: SWAMP

Eventually, the Prisoner has wandered off so far that he finds himself in the **swamps**. There's nothing to be done there. He fights the monsters as they come.

He travels through Echoes of a desolated Soulou, so close to attaining his dream of immortality, yet as far as he'd ever been from the desire to stay alive. He had been a dreamer; he became a killer.

He and Nemesis fight an endless, meaningless battle in the mud. Winning or loosing, the Prisoner falls to the ground, unconscious. They're both swallowed by the mud and the earth.

In this state, being as close to death as he could ever be, the Prisoner meets the Essence of Nito, personified within his mind. Nito tells him that there is, indeed, a way to get rid of Nemesis once and for all. It is necessary, though, to understand who he is. Nemesis is also Soulou. Both he and the Prisoner are fragments of an Essence that was once the same being. Both parts immortal. The experiment was a success.

To kill an immortal being, one must do what Goddess Death herself did in the past: insert a portion of Her Essence inside the Essence of the being that must die. The Prisoner can do that, now that he possesses Nito. After all, Nito is imbued with a fragment of the Goddess. But for the Prisoner to kill Nemesis... to do it means to start the process of his own demise. The Prisoner... that is, Soulou must be ready for that.

The Prisoner wakes up gasping for breath. He is no longer inside the mud where he had drowned. Both he and Nemesis were dragged out of there and into a cave; the home of a huge monster that was saving its meals for later. In order to leave this cave in the depths of the swamp, the Prisoner must fight and prevail.



He walks out of the cave. He looks at the top of the Cathedral. The whole city seems to be going through another power surge just like the one that took place during the experiment, only this time it is the cathedral that shines in bright light.

2.6. Acceptance

Location: LIFE'S CATHEDRAL, ASCENT

The Prisoner finds his way out of the swamps and into t the **Cathedral**. It has already been invaded by the Church's forces, and so he must battle both monsters and men as he makes his way up, all the way to the top. Just as before, when the Essencemancers first attempted to reach immortality, the electricity all around seems to be going through a power frenzy. Just like when he was born. When he died.

He must switch towers in order to keep going up. There's a big passageway, very close to the top. Someone waits for him there. Himself. Nemesis.

The last duel ensues. The Prisoner prevails. Nemesis falls to his knees. The sun is about to set as Soulon does what must be done — he inserts a fragment of Nito's Essence deep within Soulon, to a surprising effect: it is as though Nemesis had regained his life. He is different. They fight again, and his foe presents an even bigger threat this time.

Nemesis loses the fight, now for good. He staggers back, coming to a halt at the very edge of the passageway, hundreds of feet above the ground. He calmly falls backwards and disappears. He is gone, forever. The Prisoner can feel that his mortal enemy, his other half, has finally departed. He feels relief. No longer anyone's prisoner.

Soulon is no more.

For the first time, all the Essences appear at once. They stare at each other and nothing needs saying. For a little while, these beings shared a bond forged in hell and it is now starting to fade into oblivion. They can tell.

The Prisoner silently makes his way to the top of the cathedral. There's no other moment as peaceful as this.



2.7. Finale

Continuing his ascent of the cathedral, at the top he finds two fighting groups: on one side, Asqueron Pobel and his henchmen from the Church of Death; on the other, Alurna and the remaining Essencemancers. In the middle of the room, something big lies covered under a dark cloth. It is the new eternal vessel. Nemesis' replacement.

The experiment has already been started, and many Essencemancers struggle to make do without the Essence of Nito. Alurna spots the Prisoner and shouts for help. The Prisoner can choose to help Alurna and the Essencemancers (scenario 1), and then he'd have to fight Asqueron, who stands in his way.

He could, on the other hand, choose to end the search for immortality once and for all (Scenario 2). That would mean joining the fight and taking down Alurna.

Scenario 1: having killed Asqueron and his men, the Prisoner and Alurna conduct the experiment. The cloth covering the eternal vessel is sent off flying by a gust of wind, and the Prisoner glances upon this new, powerful body, even bigger and stronger than Nemesis. Upon completion of the experiment, Alurna is gone. The Vessel wakes up. Expectation around the room is for Alurna to, now living inside the vessel, signal that everything went well. Instead, she approaches the last living Essencemancers and kills them, absorbing their Essences and growing even stronger. She turns to the Prisoner and the last fight of the game begins.

Scenario 2: after defeating Alurna, the Prisoner steps up and prepares to use his power to stop the experiment. He is thrown aside by Asqueron, however, and watches as the Duke takes Alurna's place in the experiment and transfers his Essence into the vessel. The immense, frightening body wakes up. It slowly gets a feel of its immense new power. Power that must be tested. He kills all the living people in the room. Only he and the Prisoner remain and the last fight of the game begins.

Whatever the Prisoner chooses to do at this final hour, it is not the only thing that matters in defining the end of his tale. Many little choices were made along his journey — to seek or to avoid the truth; to act on feelings of hatred or to let go of what is past;



to try and solve his way out of death until the very end or to take in the truth, as hard as it is; to succumb to inertia or to make good use of what remains; and finally, to accept or deny his fate.

Such choices have come to define his inner will, whether he's desiring to stay or ready to go. The Prisoner shall, one way or another, part from this world and into whatever comes next. Maybe nothing. That is his fate and he couldn't escape his fate. But all the choices he made, all the things he's been through, and that define who he is, will determine his resolve.

3. Cutscenes and Cinematics plan

3.1. Cutscenes

There are two planned cutscenes in Deathbound:

- Introduction: A mysterious intro to insert the player into the game world from the start, giving them a basic understanding of what is going on, but not revealing too much about the setting (we want to let them realize what is Akratya during gameplay). We'll probably stick to what was done in the demo version but, adding whatever is necessary to introduce the story.
- Ending: After showing an ingame cinematic about the particular ending the player unlocked, we will show the inevitable end of the prisoner of a thousand faces and what are the ultimate consequences of what happened in Akratya.

Both cutscenes will use a highly stylized visual, with simple animation and visually stylized to grab the player's attention, while voice overs deliver the meaning of what is being shown. A recent example would be the Elden Ring introduction cutscene.

3.2. In Game Cinematics



During the rest of the game, everything will be done using ingame animations and models. Some examples of planned cinematics:

- Main Bosses introductions: a brief cutscene to heighten the moment one of the main bosses are found, with a intro showing off a bit of their personality and mechanics. We'll have about 6 Cinematics like this.
- Important narrative events: some driving narrative events will have an in game cinematic to increase the dramatic delivery and to make sure the player understand the basics of what is going on. We'll have about 5 of them.
- Echoes from the Past: pieces of narrative backstory of the Essences, using a stylized ghostly/hologram visual and simplified models with some details for secondary characters and minimalistic animations. We'll have about 50 of those. (They are connected with the talent point mechanic present in the GDD)
- Essence Reverie Scenes: Very similar to the Echoes from the Past, will be bits of narrative information that will build the base understanding of each character, conveyed in scenes with voice over and minimalistic visuals and animations. We'll have 7 Reveries, one for each playable character, each with about 5 Scenes.

