Cruel Survivor

The ultimate test of a player's moral decision-making willpower.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The story will take place in a corrupt dystopian world and deeply incorporate themes of morality, consciousness, and humanity. The game will challenge the player's emotional and practical decision-making skills, test their willpower to do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means betraying in-game allies, and explore what it means to be human in the modern age. Inspiration will come from The Last of Us, Red Dead Redemption, and Squid Game.

The main character, Rowan, will travel alongside two allies with greatly contrasting moral values. Vera prioritizes morals and humanity over practicality and self-interest. She believes you can survive a cruel world by changing it. On the other hand, Dane prioritizes practicality and self-interest over ethics and humanity, believing you must do whatever it takes to survive no matter how heinous your crime is, believing the only way to survive in a cruel world is to outmatch it with greater cruelty.

There will be many instances during the gameplay journey in which the player can do certain things to benefit their own survival, but most will require the player to do something unethical that we wouldn't do in the real world (ex. Refuse to pick up a hitchhiker, raid an innocent old couple's house for supplies, betray a village who just saved your life and steal their supplies and medicine knowledge.) Over time, the player will earn pragma or virtue points based on their actions, as a measurement of the player's/Rowan's moral values. Based on which they have more of, their allies will either grow closer and more trusting of the player or the opposite. This will determine something very important later on.

By the end of the game, if the player has a certain magnitude of pragma points greater than virtue points, then they will lose the trust of Vera and be seen as a threat that must be killed for the greater good. In contrast, if the player has a certain magnitude of virtue points greater than pragma points, then they will lose the trust of Dane and be seen as a threat to Dane's personal survival and must be killed to make his own life easier. Essentially, one of the allies will be the game's final boss.

This game is the ultimate test to challenge the player's willpower to do whatever it takes to survive in a corrupt world and surpass others in survival of the fittest. By the end of their journey, the player’s perspective on the definition of “cruel” will never be the same again.

1.2 Designer’s Motives

Upon completing *The Last of Us* for the first time, my perspective on interactive storytelling and ethics altogether changed forever. I sat in silence as the main theme played over the rolling credits, thinking to myself about how astonishing the story was. How well a video game could tell a compelling story about love, humanity, morals, and survival. Those themes tie back to the real world and the current state we live in, especially humanity and morals. Our world is falling apart. There is no denying that. Just look at the man ruling over North Korea and all the individuals struggling to even find their next meal. And the war

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between Russia vs. Ukraine, and Israel vs. Palestine. Even now, the United States' president is taking away rights of groups one at a time. It could be said we live in a cruel world, and life is unfair. What does it take for an individual to survive a cruel world? Should they change the world with morality until it is a utopia, or surpass it with greater cruelty until enough people follow that path to turn the world into anarchy like it once was? Is morality an illusion created by those who ignore the reality of self-interest? Why are cruel people cruel and good people good? What does it mean to be human? This game will explore those questions in a hyperbolic setting that mirrors the growing corruption and cruelty of the modern world.

1.3 Core Themes & Concepts

- Survival in a corrupt world – serves as a hyperbolic interpretation of our current world slowly falling apart politically, environmentally, and ethically.
- Ethical dilemmas and consequences
- Idealism vs. Pragmatism
- Trust, willpower, betrayal, and sacrifice

1.4 Vocabulary

- Virtue - Measurement of the main character's tendency to choose moral decisions
- Pragma - Measurement of the main character's tendency to choose pragmatic decisions
- QTE Dilemma - An instance in the game where the player must choose between several options that will affect their moral alignment
- Moral alignment - The moral side that the player currently stands by, based on their virtue/pragma point count
- Aligning decision - The decision that matches the player's current moral alignment

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2. Characters

2.1 Main Character

2.1.1 Rowan Dareth – The protagonist, whose moral alignment is shaped by player choices. “Survival requires you to find refuge in the herd.” The name “Rowan” sounds like “ruin”, reflecting the ruined world he lives in. “Rowan Dareth” sounds like “ruined earth,” foreshadowing the end of society and the world. If Rowan becomes a pragmatic survivor at the end, Dane will develop a brother/sister relationship with him, but not necessarily being the one who “unlocks the humanity lost within Dane” like Ellie Williams did for Joel Miller. Rather, it will be simply a case of Dane seeing Rowan as a tool-like partner to work together to survive in this world, nothing else.



Physical description: Rowan, who has a gender-neutral name, can be customized to be male or female. But for simplicity's sake, Rowan will be referred to with only masculine pronouns in this document. Height will be 5’8” or 5’9” depending on his sex. Both counterparts will have short, brown hair. The outfit he wears at the beginning of the game will be standard survivalist gear with neutral colors, symbolizing his neutral stance on the moral spectrum. As he progresses through the game’s chapters, his clothing will change to be lighter or darker based on the player’s tendency to make ethical or practical decisions. Rowan’s appearance may be highly customizable to allow players to make him as physically accurate to themselves as possible, maximizing their immersion

Personality: Quite neutral and baseline, but has a confident and demanding personality as shaped by his history as a lawyer. ChatGPT Generated: Rowan’s personality is shaped by the player’s choices, but before that influence takes hold, he begins as a logical, strategic thinker who weighs risks and rewards carefully before taking action. He is emotionally detached at first, approaching survival like a puzzle to be solved rather than a deeply personal struggle. His ability to read people makes him adaptable, but it also means he keeps others at a distance, avoiding unnecessary attachments. While he doesn’t fully agree with Vera’s idealism or Dane’s ruthlessness, he also doesn’t dismiss either outright. Instead, he is skeptical of absolutes, trying to find the best course of action based on the situation rather than any rigid philosophy. As the game progresses, his personality shifts depending on the player’s decisions. If he follows Vera’s influence, he becomes emotionally invested in protecting others, willing to sacrifice efficiency for morality. Under Dane’s influence, he prioritizes survival over ethics, becoming colder and more calculating with each choice. A balanced path allows him to maintain both compassion and pragmatism,

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knowing when to be merciful and when to be ruthless. No matter the path, Rowan's journey is one of transformation, shaped by the harsh world around him and the choices he makes along the way.

Backstory: Rowan was a lawyer before the downfall of society. He represented Dane in his case against Commander Toro, which earned him a level of personal trust from Dane, thus why the two work together. His occupation naturally enables him to be in a somewhat neutral moral stance at the start of the game. Like most lawyers, his work was purely out of legal obligation and for money, but that doesn't stop him from developing personal level connections or contempt towards certain people or issues. He represented Dane in court against Commander Toro in an attempt to earn him compensation money and press charges against Toro. Although this was simply one of many cases he served for one of many clients, he felt especially sympathetic for Dane and put a greater amount of effort into his case than he normally would.

Skill: Fast learner. Can learn new skills relatively quickly.

2.2 Companion Characters

2.2.1 Vera Justine – A former doctor who advocated for ethics and humanity before the collapse of society, who believes that survival was achieved through wide-scale positive change. "Vera" means truth or faith, and "Justine" refers to justice and fairness.



Backstory: Vera worked as a doctor before the world she knew became corrupt. She loved nothing more than making a better life for her patients, making ethics a number one priority in her work. In a heated moment of desperation, She faced the consequences of her own actions. An incident in which she selfishly chose pragmatism over morality caused her to lose her own unborn baby. Since then, Vera has sworn to never break her moral code out of fear of hurting anyone she loves ever again. During a fire or raid in the hospital she worked at, she activated the safety emergency metal doors to shut herself in and protect herself and the occupants who just so happened to be in the room with her, refusing to let anyone else from the hallway in out of fear of putting herself in danger. She later learns she left her toddler son

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out there, leading to his death and a lifetime of guilt. While Vera is a gentle and caring individual, she is still firm and will stand up for herself if need be, prompting her to master several forms of martial arts for self-defense. Her proficiency in Dim Mak and Kyusho Jitsu combined with her vast knowledge of the human body makes her a resilient opponent in close-range combat. Unfortunately, her combat techniques are useless against long-range weapons, which she was unable to defend herself against in a second street attack and was instead saved by Dane at the last minute who saw this as an opportunity to return her favor for saving his life in the hospital.

Physical description: Neck-length blond hair. Slightly taller than average build; 5'10". Wears light-colored (but not clean) clothing to symbolize purity, but also wears a few strong-colored accessories to emphasize her strong, confident femininity. She wears thin, lightweight clothes to allow flexibility, speed, and agility. Form-fitting tactical pants with concealed pockets for medical supplies/tools. Sturdy combat boots that are lighter than Dane's, meant for movement rather than brute force. The coat is reinforced with light armor plating on the shoulders and forearms for protection. Her primary choice of weaponry involves non-lethal self-defense weapons like sedatives and pepper spray, because she believes if she were to kill, she'd be no better than the broken world she's trying to reform. She always carries medical kits with her, along with a printed ultrasound photo of her unborn baby while it was still alive in her womb.

Personality: As Vera would say, "To survive a cruel world, you must change it with morals." In survival situations, she prioritizes diplomatic solutions or stealth before resorting to violence, believing a solution can be reached without confrontation. To her, survival should not be achieved at the cost of morality, otherwise, she'll be no different than the cruel people she is surrounded by. Her grief of losing her unborn child at the fault of her own immoral decision now shapes her motives to keep moving forward towards a brighter future. Life is too short to not share with a loved one. Compassionate but firm – Vera genuinely believes in saving people, but she isn't blindly idealistic. She understands that hard choices must be made but insists they should always lean toward preserving humanity. While she's intelligent and adaptable, she sometimes refuses to prioritize her own good over others, making this her biggest weakness and susceptible to falling into dangerous situations.

Skill: In cases she is forced into combat, she utilizes precise, incapacitating strikes that specifically target the nerves. Her knowledge of the human body and the location of the nerves enables her to use minimal energy to inflict the most damage. As a former doctor, she's an expert at reading people, whether it's their physical condition or emotional state. She often knows what someone is thinking before they say or act it out, making it easy for her to sympathize with others and build relationships. She rarely panics under pressure, even in life-threatening situations, making her an excellent leader... and mother figure.

2.2.2 Dane Ashford – A former engineer who has lost hope for society, turning into a ruthless pragmatist who believes in survival at any cost. The name "Dane" is derived from the word disdain, as a portrayal of his view of humanity's unworthiness of his respect. "Ashford" is the ruins of the world Dane lives in. His survival mindset surpasses others in the survival of the fittest. He is not an evil man; he is a broken man, so while he is willing to do anything to survive, he holds himself back from committing unnecessary, cruel deeds… most of the time.

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Backstory: Before the collapse of society, Dane grew up in an orphanage with his brother, Toby, and became a highly innovative engineer who made multiple technological breakthroughs. His inventions made him famous (later infamous). His wealth was earned through organizations who would buy his inventions from him, and the rights to the inventions. Through loopholes in the legal system and corporal greed, organizations with malicious intent sought to steal his inventions, formulas/blueprints, and knowledge. This drove Dane to slowly lose his trust for higher powers. The last straw for him was a tragic event of police brutality and misconduct, resulting in the murder of his brother and severe personal injuries. The police weapon that ended his brother's life was a weapon that Dane had invented and sold to police forces years earlier. Years of his morality being taken advantage of by greedy powers and then on top of that losing the only person he ever loved to said powers, he has no reason to believe morality helps you win in life. This betrayal left him scarred and broken, forever losing hope and trust in society. "Nobody is going to help you. If you want something done, you have to do it yourself." As a personal side quest in the game, Dane seeks revenge on the officer(s) involved in his brother's murder and the court judge who dismissed the officer's murder charge, wanting nothing but to make them feel even just a fraction of the pain he felt after losing his brother.

Physical description: Short black hair with hints of gray. Dark-skinned. Slightly smaller than average build; 5'6" to avoid making him the cliche "tough guy hero" and reflect his inferior treatment by society. "Good people go to waste." Wrinkly skin from stress and aging. Wears a thick black jacket with reinforced padding on the arms and shoulders. The hoodie is tattered and patched up in places with blue stitches. Dark cargo pants filled with makeshift tools and small weapon holsters. Utility belt loaded with custom-made gadgets, small explosives, and multi-tools. Heavy-duty combat boots, scuffed and worn. Fingerless gloves allow dexterity when working with weapons but still provide some protection. Concealed in his sleeve, he wears a concealed glass shard launcher activated by air pressure.

Personality: Cold, mysterious, gruff, unfriendly, impatient. Not necessarily in a villainous, Satanic evil-doer, or gangster style. Rather, in a broken, sorrowful, full of grief for his lost brother. He prefers to use brute force and power in combat. However, he holds himself back from committing atrocious acts without reason or self-benefit..

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Skill: He is highly proficient in weapon-based combat due to his technical knowledge, arsonel, and battle IQ. His weaponry compensates for his lack of physical strength and intimidation. Believing morals makes people weak, he fights dirty with disregard for fairness or honor, like Ender Wiggin from *Ender's Game* or Sang-Woo, Player 100, and Player 096 from *Squid Game*. He's the type to whip out a gun in the middle of a knife-only fight. He'll deliver the finishing blow before his opponent even readies their fists. Dane will break every possible rule to win. This reflects what he learned from his betrayal from society. Honor makes you weak. Cheating makes you win.

2.2.3 Ray - A young male character who becomes Vera's surrogate son. His name means a ray of light representing a glimmer of the goodness that still remains in the world.



Backstory: Ray grew up in a struggling orphanage within a makeshift survival community, never knowing his parents and relying instead on the caretakers of the orphanage. Life was hard, but there was at least some structure—until everything fell apart. The orphanage was no longer a safe place due to decreasing availability of resources. Rations became too low for the orphans to sustain themselves. So, at age 9, Ray discreetly raided what was left of the food supply and abandoned the only place he ever called home. Forced into the outside world alone, Ray quickly learned that brute strength wouldn't keep him alive. Instead, he adapted, becoming an expert in blending in, slipping through cracks, and taking what he needed without being noticed. He survived by pickpocketing, scavenging, and manipulating others when necessary, developing a keen ability to read people and adjust his approach accordingly. Ray first crossed paths with Rowan, Vera, and Dane in a desperate situation—perhaps while attempting to steal from them. From the start, Dane saw him as a liability, another mouth to feed with no guarantee of loyalty. But Ray's stealth skills quickly proved valuable. He could navigate tight spaces and move unseen in ways neither Dane nor Vera could. While Vera was drawn to his vulnerability and saw someone worth protecting, Dane tolerated him only because his skills made him useful… for now. [TBD: His orphanage used child labor]

Physical description: Short in height (4'10"). Has short blond hair like Vera. His clothing is a patchwork of scavenged layers, nothing fancy, just whatever he could find to keep warm. A tattered scarf or hood often covers his head, both for warmth and as a way to conceal himself when necessary.

Personality: Similar to Ellie Williams from *The Last of Us*, Ray's playfulness, humor, and musical skills with Ukuleles will contrast with the broken world he was born into, opening the possibility

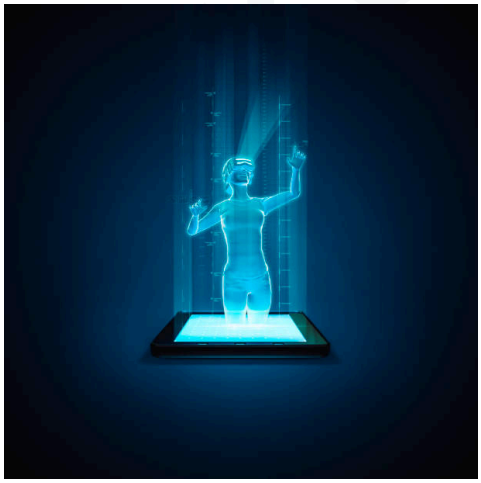
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of forming a mother-son relationship with Vera and providing the player with some comic relief from the game's intense atmosphere. Ray's personality is shaped by his life on the streets. He is street-smart and adaptable, always calculating how to best position himself in any given situation. While he can be charming and playful, it's often a mask, hiding deep-seated distrust built from years of abandonment and survival. Unlike Vera, who clings to her ideals, or Dane, who fully embraces pragmatism, Ray operates in the murky middle ground. He doesn't believe in absolute morality but isn't entirely ruthless either—his choices depend on what benefits him most in the moment. Though he would never admit it, he secretly craves belonging, making his dynamic with the group complicated.

Skill: His skills make him an asset, but they also reveal his limitations. He is adept at stealth and pickpocketing undetected, serving as a perfect middle ground between Vera's non-violent stealth tendencies and Dane's practical survival mindset. To avoid physical violence, he prefers flight over fight, knowing he stands little chance in a direct confrontation. He's like Furiosa, Kevin McAllister, or Ender Wiggin. Despite his resourcefulness, he is still a child in a brutal world, and his small stature and lack of combat ability means he is constantly at risk. For now, his survival depends on his wits—and on how long the trio will keep him around.

2.3 Side Characters

2.3.1 Sighmon - His real name is unknown and is only referred to by his infamous nickname. His real name is unknown—if he ever had one. He simply goes by **Sighmon**, a name he insists on spelling that way "because it pisses people off" and it's "how he feels when he looks at the hilarious disappointment that the loser-AF government has turned into." While most assume it's a joke, no one has ever successfully traced, corrected, or silenced him, making the name stick across the dark web and underground networks like a virus no one can uninstall. Sighmon is an expert computer hacker and the manager of **NULL (Network of Urmom's [Il]legal Logistics)**, one of the largest smuggling and information-brokering networks in the world. NULL operates through countless secret bases, but it's unknown whether any of them house the real Sighmon—or if he even exists as a physical entity at all. He runs this dark-web operation to "step up and serve customers when the government wouldn't, like how your mom took care of you when your dad ran away to get the milk"



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Backstory: No backstory is known. Let the playerbase create his backstory.

Physical description: No one ever sees his real physical form, only the hivemind interconnected versions of him displayed through holograms. It's unknown if his human form even exists anymore (if ever) or if he's just an artificially intelligent digital entity. All hologram representations of himself at all of NULL's bases use very basic human-shaped models as if humans had a default skin and threw on some cheeky sunglasses.

Personality: While the majority of dark-web entities in the media have monologous, no-nonsense personalities, Sighmon on the other hand has a humorous personality, speaks with a mocking demeanor like that of a rude sports announcer mocking players in a scuffed football game, and has an Elvis voice and dialect like the English-dubbed Etemon from *Digimon*.

Skill: Despite his theatrics, Sighmon is considered one of the most intelligent and dangerous (to the government that is) beings alive. He orchestrates a multi-gazillion-dollar "totally legal" empire across both digital and real-world systems—not by staying hidden, but by being untouchably loud without giving the authorities any hints of how to shut him down. The only reason the authorities know of this operation in the first place is that he let it be known as a cruel taunt to government authorities and to draw attention from smugglers in the outside world who may wish to work in his business. It goes without saying that he is a master in anything and everything related to computers, data, digital engineering, and business. However, he has one weakness and one weakness only. Since he has never and can never reveal his true physical form, he relies on a trusted (or perhaps distrusted) team to do all the dirty work for him, including but not limited to stealing physical forms of secret data. A chess king is only as strong as the pieces who work for him. "I'm just a king without legs, baby. My pawns sweat by do the walkin', but I decide the checkmate by doing the talkin'."



2.3.2 Types of people/factions – The fallen world has several classes of people who have adopted their own new way of living/surviving.

- **Rustborns** - Sly criminals, usually in gangs, who use their amature craftsmanship and scavenging instincts to create traps and weapons, usually made out of scrap metal, to take unsuspecting wanderers' supplies. Far too common



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- **Revenants** - “Good” cops and soldiers who dropped out of the police force to avoid further contributing to the corruption of government authority. They now use their training and equipment as a means of survival



- **Bleeders** - Cannibals who survive by eating other people or rodents… or literally any flesh they can find. They can be easily identified by the knives they carry and their blood-stained clothes and mouths.



- **Vultures** - People like you and me, who have yet to accept the cruel nature of the world they live in, still attempting to live life normally with money.



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- **Ascendants -** The Ascendants are a fanatical religious cult that believes society collapsed because humanity turned its back on divine order. They follow a deity referred to only as The Voice, claiming it speaks through signs, dreams, and "the chosen." They preach that restoring the old world requires obedience, purity, and sacrifice—literal human sacrifice. Inspiration: Seraphites from *The Last of Us Part II*.



- **Stoners -** No longer believing in societal structures, these people have readopted our Stone Age ancestors' ways of animalistic survival, living in remote wooded areas and hunting for themselves with sticks and stones, staying warm with leaves and leather.



2.4 Enemy Characters

2.4.1 Commander Toro – The corrupt police officer who killed Dane's brother using the same weapon Dane invented. He was an officer at the time he killed Dane's brother, then was promoted throughout the years to the highest rank in his department. His name is designed to be easy for a player to remember and symbolizes his ruthlessness, aggressive demeanor, and blindness/obliviousness of his actions, much like that of a real bull. However, in a moment of vulnerability and a flashback, it is revealed that Toro's homicide against Toby was motivated by merely following strict commands from his former superior out of fear of losing his job and falling into financial ruin. Much like Dane, Toro was forced to act out of self-interest for his own survival, not out of cruelty. It can be said Toro and Dane are mirrors of each other, with the main difference being that Toro had adopted a pragmatic mindset before Dane.

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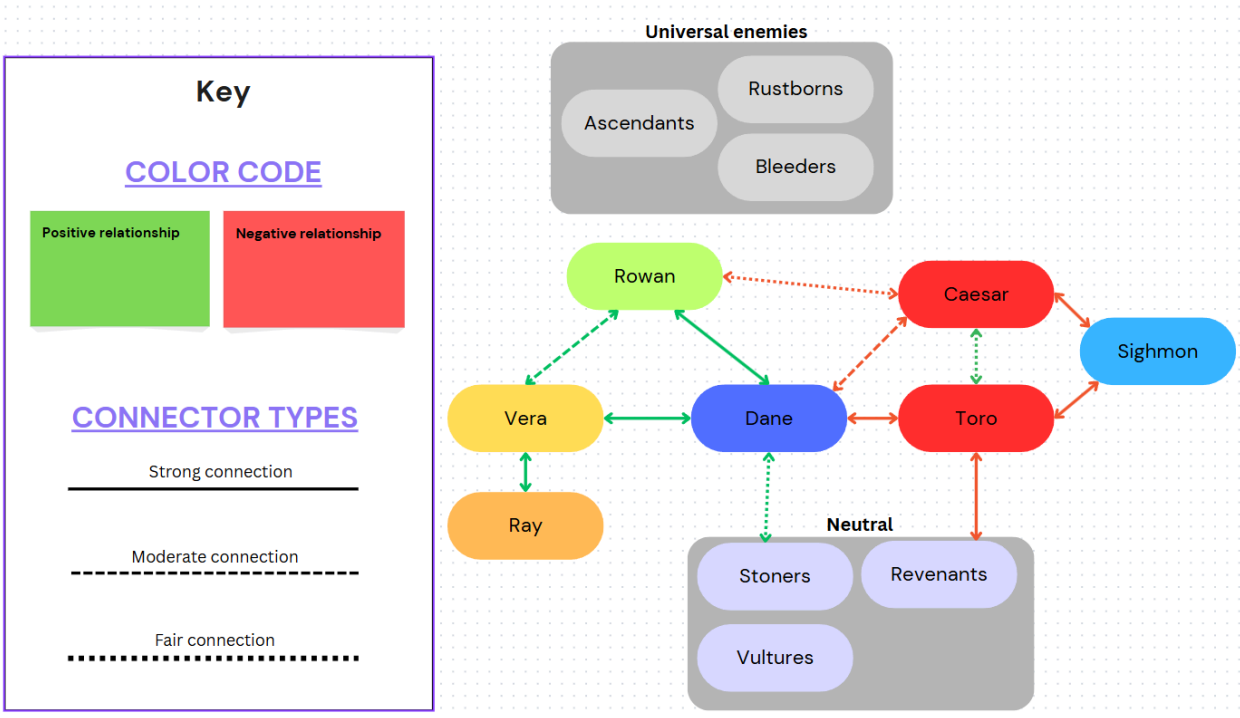


2.4.2 Judge Caesar – Named after Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor, he is a powerful court judge and tyrant-level ruler who pardoned Commander Toro's murder charge. Not much is known about him other than he may have some secret digital records that may turn his own minions against him if it ever got leaked.



2.5 Relationships

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2.6 Moral alignment

	Good	Neutral	Evil
Lawful	Vera Ray	Rowan Vultures	Caesar Toro
Neutral	Revenants	Sighmon	
Chaotic		Dane Stoners	Bleeders Rustborns Ascendants

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3. Story

3.1 Setting

3.1.1 Prospera - The starting city. At the start of the story, Prospera is one of the only cities remaining with a decent level of safety and governmental order, despite still succumbing to intolerable dystopian corruption. After Dane and Vera's tragic backstories, the trio moved here as their new residence. The safety of this city won't last long. Eventually, the eviction of the citizens and the total destruction of the city will doom it to the same fate as all other dystopian cities around it.

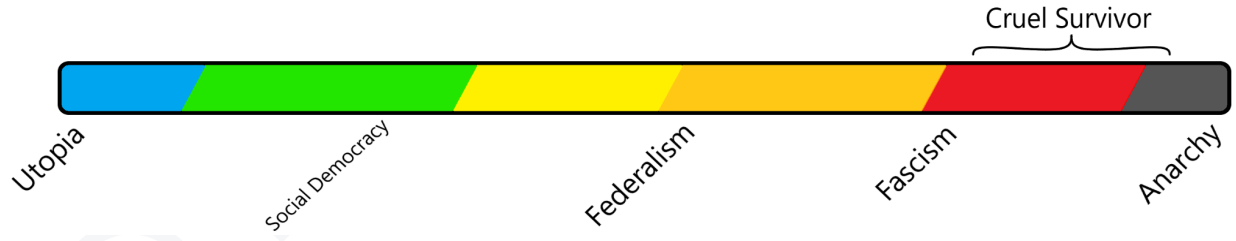
3.1.2 Shatterbay - A neighboring city. [TBD]

3.1.3 Grayspire - A dull neighboring city on the verge of societal structure collapse. The orphanage Ray lived in rests on the outskirts. While on a mission, the trio meets Ray and takes him along with them.

3.1.4 Ironvale - A heavily polluted and rusty city controlled by thousands of Rustborns. It is rumored that another one of NULL's bases secretly operates here. Although a highly dangerous place to be, this is the only other known place to meet Sighmon.

3.1.5 Shavar DC - A capital city heavily patrolled and armed with government security. This is the location of Caesar's palace and other important high-level government buildings.

The game takes place in a dystopian world several decades in the future, around 2050 AD. The level of dystopia by the end of the game is more severe than the period in which Vera and Dane's backstories took place. Street violence, homicide, police misconduct, and theft have become the new normal.



3.2 Storyline

Backstory D1: Dane, born in an orphanage with his brother Toby, was a brilliant engineer who made groundbreaking tools for public service.

Backstory V1: Vera worked as a doctor before the collapse of society. Her life revolved around saving others, guided by unshakable ethics and a deep desire to one day become a mother. But her dream was stolen when a violent street gang attacked and raped her, leaving her infertile. Despite the trauma, she never lost her sense of compassion. Years later, she found herself treating one of her attackers in critical

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condition. Bound by her beliefs, faith in forgiveness, and medical duty, she saved his life—choosing morality over revenge.

Backstory D2: Dane's weapons he invented to protect lives were stolen and used for oppression. His younger brother Toby was killed by a police officer using one of Dane's own designs. The courts dismissed the case, and the government protected the killer. This betrayal hollowed Dane's soul and shattered his faith in law, morality, and society itself. He concluded that ethics were illusions—and that survival required cruelty.

Backstory V2: Devastated but determined, Vera trained herself in martial arts that targeted nerve points. Though now capable of defending herself, she remained a healer, not a killer. Despite her efforts, her hand-to-hand combat proved futile against ranged weapon-wielders, as made apparent when she was attacked by a second gang wielding guns. She was saved at the last minute by Dane who was looking to return the favor.

Backstory R1: [TBA - In a desperate attempt to escape the fall and corruption of the government, the trio barely make it moving into the safe haven city of Prospera together and live a relatively normal life for a while]

Prologue - Ashes of the Old World: The story introduces the player to Rowan and the harsh dystopian world he inhabits. Early scenes reveal glimpses of Rowan's connection with Vera and Dane—two allies with deeply contrasting philosophies—setting the stage for their evolving dynamic. As the game unfolds, the player will gradually uncover more of their intertwined backstories.

Chapter 1 - Gray Lines: This chapter serves as a tutorial and introduction to core game mechanics. The player witnesses a powerful contrast between Vera and Dane's moral approaches: Vera intervenes to save an innocent citizen from gang violence by incapacitating the attackers, while Dane waits until the attackers finish looting, then eliminates them to steal their supplies. These moments, delivered through interactive gameplay or cinematic sequences, emphasize the normalized chaos of Rowan's world—where drawing weapons and even murder are disturbingly common, though not always technically legal.

Jump to Backstory D1

Chapter 2 - The Stray: The trio travels to the nearby city of Grayspire to dismantle a fraudulent loan shark operation. Along the way, a scrappy young thief attempts to steal from them. Despite his criminal act, his cleverness, survival instincts, and orphaned background resonate with both Dane and Vera. Dane sees a potentially useful asset, while Vera is moved by compassion. The boy introduces himself as Ray—and he is invited to join them… for now.

Jump to Backstory V1

Chapter 3 - Kindling: Back in Prospera to regroup, Vera offers Ray shelter, and their bond begins to deepen, forming the foundation of a mother-son dynamic. Meanwhile, Rowan and Dane plan the next mission. But Prospera itself is unraveling. Corruption, police brutality, and authoritarian laws are rising rapidly, making the city increasingly uninhabitable.

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Chapter 4 - Blood for Data: The group journeys to Shatterbay, dangerously low on supplies. Tensions rise as resource scarcity forces hard decisions—especially with Ray now part of the team. The group seeks out Sighmon, the elusive hacker running NULL. He holds the key to toppling Judge Caesar but demands a steep price: return to a high-security government facility and retrieve confidential physical documents needed for NULL's own operations.

Jump to Backstory D2

Chapter 5 - Operation EVICT: The documents Sighmon requires are stored in a government building within Prospera—now under full lockdown due to Operation EVICT, a brutal campaign to expel and execute individuals labeled as societal threats. The trio must break in, retrieve the documents, and escape without being caught or killed.

Jump to Backstory V2

Chapter 6 - Ruins of Silence: After successfully stealing the documents, the group returns to Shatterbay—only to find the NULL base in ruins following a government raid. Their only remaining option is to locate another base, hidden deep within the dangerous city of Ironvale.

Chapter 7 - Static and Thunder: Upon arrival in Ironvale, the trio begins uploading the sensitive documents to NULL's network. In the midst of the upload, another government assault erupts, led by none other than Commander Toro—the officer responsible for Toby's death. Vera races to complete the upload while Rowan and Dane fend off the attack. Once successful, Sighmon delivers the promised intel. With Toro captured, a moral showdown ensues: he begs for his life, claiming he was simply following orders to avoid losing his job. Dane is unconvinced.

Chapter 8 - The Gilded Guillotine: Armed with Caesar's exposed secrets, the trio heads to Shavar DC, to confront him in his fortified palace. Disarmed and under surveillance, they present their evidence. Caesar publicly dismisses them, then reveals a devastating truth: he was the one who ordered the execution of Dane's parents decades ago, placing Dane and Toby in the orphanage. The trio is sentenced to death out of spite and abuse of power, but Dane—blinded by rage—hurls a hidden hydrobomb shuriken at Caesar, barely missing. A high-stakes escape follows.

Jump to Backstory R1

Chapter 9 - The Death of Home: Now fugitives, the group fights through relentless security forces and flees the capital. Their path takes them back to Prospera—only to find it demolished. Their former home, like the rest of the world, has crumbled into ruin.

Chapter 10 – Cruel Survivor: The final chapter shares its name with the game itself. Rowan has become exactly what the world forged him into. The definition of "cruel" now varies based on the player's moral journey, sparking reflection and debate. Based on past choices, Rowan's values now collide with those of his closest allies. Moral fractures erupt, and one of them will become his enemy. A betrayal is inevitable. The environment is set. The final boss fight begins.

Branching Endings

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Pragmatic Survival: Rowan kills Vera and abandons Ray, forging a hardened alliance with Dane. Survival outweighs morality.

Virtuistic Survival: Rowan sacrifices Dane to protect Ray and support futile Vera's dream of rebuilding society.

Epilogue: There is no clear-cut hero or villain. The game's conclusion reflects the player's personal journey and choices. Humans are such a complex species that we've managed to turn ourselves into our own enemies. We have such differing views on all sorts of topics. Every villain is a hero in their own mind, and every hero is a villain in someone's eyes. And most importantly, we're scarily adept at hurting each other. Like all powerful narratives, the ending provokes questions, discomfort, and debate—ensuring the story of Cruel Survivor stays with the player long after the final scene fades.

3.3 Progression

The storyline will be linear for the most part. The game will take Rowan and the allies on the same path. Minor branching paths will be made based on the moral decisions the player makes, which will affect Rowan's relationship with either ally, change the difficulty of certain areas of the game, determine the required input of button prompts to commit a certain action, and most importantly decide which ally will turn against Rowan.

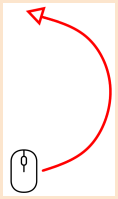
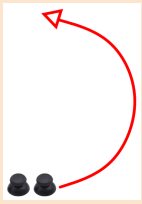
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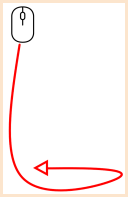
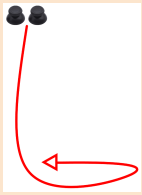
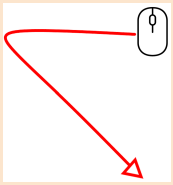
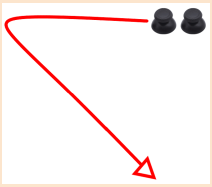
4. Gameplay Mechanics

4.1 Controls (Keybinds can be customized)

* indicates mashing
^ indicates press and hold

Action	Input on PC	Input on Console (PS5)
Movement	WASD	Left joystick
Sprint	^ Shift	^ L2
Camera/view panning	Mouse	Right joystick
Jump	Space	✕
Toggle sneak/duck	C	○
Interact with environment object	**E**	△
Open/close inventory	Tab	Touchpad
Select/equip item	Numbers	Directional buttons
Use non-weapon item	**RMB**	**R1**
Aim ranged weapon	RMB	L1
Fire ranged weapon	^ RMB + LMB	^ L1 + L2
Reload ranged weapon	LMB	L1
Basic melee attack	F	□
Roundhouse heel kick	^ (Shift+A+S+D) + Mouse 	^ (L1+L2+R1+R2) + Joysticks 
Palm heel strike	^ (Shift+A+S+D) + Mouse 	^ (L1+L2+R1+R2) + Joysticks 

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Inward elbow hit	^ (Shift+A+S+D) + Mouse 	^ (L1+L2+R1+R2) + Joysticks 
Thrust kick	^ (Shift+A+S+D) + Mouse 	^ (L1+L2+R1+R2) + Joysticks 
Dodge	Alt	L2
~~Block~~	~~\/ R~~	~~\/ R2~~

4.2 Survival Mechanics

Health - If Rowan's health depletes to zero, he will die and the player must restart at the most recent checkpoint. Each time Rowan takes damage, Vera's AI will take note of the area of Rowan's body in which the damage was inflicted, storing the values in variables..

Stamina - Each action will deplete Rowan's stamina by a certain amount. The only way to regain stamina is to rest or stand idle.

Resource management - An inventory will allow the player to store a certain amount of each type of item (food, medicine, ammunition)

Crafting and upgrading - The player can craft or upgrade weapons as Dane teaches throughout the story

Martial arts - The player can learn and practice martial arts taught by Vera

4.3 Moral Dilemmas & Choice QTE

- Similar to the honor system from *Red Dead Redemption 2* and ally relationship system in *Detroit: Become Human*
- Player choice impact system - Each moral decision the player makes will affect the storyline.
- Some choices will increase or decrease the total ethic or pragma point count, or modify the multiplier
- Some choices provide immediate benefits but have long-term consequences
- Trust system affecting relationships, dialogue, and animations

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- Minor dilemmas will not present the player with a dilemma UI. These are simply small actions that the player makes throughout the game, such as mugging. These will still affect the player's moral stance.

4.4 Combat

Melee combat

- Basic punch or melee weapon - Will do basic damage to the opponent.
- ~~Block - Mitigate damage against melee attacks. Not recommended for countering weapons~~
- Melee weapons (should be moderately difficult to obtain and usage decreases ethic points)

	Fists/body 	Short, sharp weapon 	Long, blunt weapon 	Long, sharp weapon 
Damage	Very low	Low	High	High
Attack speed	Fast	Fast	Slow	Med
Durability	Infinite	High	Low	Med
Concealable	N/A	Y	N	N
Stamina usage	Low	Low	High	Med
Alignment	No change	Decrease virtue	Decrease virtue	Decrease virtue

- Nerve strikes target nerves on the body that effectively immobilize a target with minimal energy. Failing to perform the attack in time or pressing the incorrect sequence of buttons will cause Rowan to stumble/fall, leaving him vulnerable for 0.5-1.5 seconds depending on his stamina stats.
    - Temple kick - Deals massive damage by targeting the temple with a heel kick, knocking the opponent unconscious
    - Palm heel strike - Targets a nerve on the collarbone, stunning the opponent
    - Inward elbow hit - Targets a nerve on the torso, stunning the opponent
    - Thrust kick - Targets a nerve on the thigh, causing the opponent to fall

Ranged weapons

- Debris - Can be picked up and thrown
- Basic revolver - Light and easy to carry in a pocket, making it convenient to whip out quickly. Requires ammo which can be hard to come by. Dane customized it to be compatible with barbed bullets, which makes it excruciatingly painful to remove once fired into a target.

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- Air-pressure glass shard launcher - This can be loaded with a glass shard and launched by air pressure. It is small and wearable on the forearm/wrist, making it concealable under long sleeve shirts.
- Lightning zapper - Effectively stuns an opponent depending on the voltage setting and distance like a long-range taser. Requires renewed batteries or solar energy collected by a mini built-in solar panel. Ineffective against rubber material and SWAT shields.
- Hydrobomb shuriken: A compact disk-shaped hydro-explosive grenade with spikes along the perimeter. It can be thrown like a disk/frisbee. The spikes detect when it pierces material with texture resembling flesh, and detonates the explosive.
- Ultraviole(n)t flamethrower - Cannot be obtained by the player. It is one of Dane's special weapons that he keeps for himself. It has two modes to launch fire either as a fireball or as a stream. The temperature is hot enough to melt some metals. To ensure only he can use it, the trigger button has a fingerprint sensor. Its ammo is dependent on gasoline.
- Sedative dart gun - Cannot be obtained by the player. Only Vera uses this.
- Pepper spray - Vera's personal weapon

4.5 Level Up System

Taught by Vera

- Nerve strikes
- Stealth strategies

Taught by Dane

- Weapon crafting
- Weapon combat proficiency

Level up perks

- Increase maximum health
- Increase maximum stamina
- Decrease stamina expenditure
- Increase inventory space
- Unlock new crafting recipes
- Decrease footstep loudness for better stealth

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5. UI/UX Design

5.1 HUD Elements

For the sake of reducing clutter on the screen to maximize immersion, most HUD elements will be hidden, and only appear when the player interacts with it. For example, the health bar will be hidden, but will appear once the player enters combat or takes damage.

- Player health bar
- Player stamina bar
- Inventory & crafting menus (Will look similar to a Minecraft inventory, but will be split into sections that only allow Rowan to carry a certain amount of each type of item)
- Nerve strike technique skill level (Dim Mak, Kyusho Jitsu)
- Unlocked weapon expertise
- The moral alignment will be discreetly hinted at in the border color of the player's HUD (Although the specific Pragma and Virtue point counter will be hidden from the player)
- During long cutscenes, all HUD elements will be hidden, except for button prompts that are used for decision-making
- Enemy health bars will be visible above their head, although their stamina bar will not be visible



- Boss health bars will be placed in the center top of the screen. It will look like a standard load bar that has the boss's name and icon on the side



5.2 Dialogue

- Dialogue will be displayed through subtitles
- Cutscene dialogue will be displayed only through subtitles and audio

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5.3 Dilemmas: Choice Interface

- During major dilemmas (moral choice-making), the player will be presented with two button options correlating with a certain action (ex. X to trade, O to steal). The consequence of each action will NOT be visible to the player before committing the action. [TBD: Should the player be required to actually perform a series of actions to complete a moral decision, or should it be done via a cutscene after pressing a button?]



- Every dilemma UI will have a timer displayed as a load bar that shrinks towards the center, forcing the player to make a decision within a few seconds or minutes.
    - If the player does not choose before the time is up, the game automatically selects Rowan's aligning decision. The timer will be shorter the more extreme Rowan's moral stance is towards either side.
    - In some cases, if the player does not choose in time, the player will die or receive a game over
- As the load bar timer shrinks, its color will gradually change colors to approach the motif color of the player's current stance, indicating which choice will be made by default if the player does not choose before the timer runs out.
- Once a decision is made, whatever's left of the load bar timer will recolor to the corresponding motif color before quickly fading out.
- In some cases, whether or not the player is presented with the decision QTE will depend on the extremity of their stance. For instance, when prompted to deliver the final blow to kill off Vera, if Rowan has a moderate pragma stance, the button prompt to kill her will show. But, if Rowan has a strong pragma stance, he will deliver the final blow without player input. Below is a list of levels in which button prompts are presented to the player in order to execute Rowan's action:
    - Morally neutral - Presented with both moral choices with a long timer. The player must mash the button to commit a decision.
    - Light stance - Presented with both moral choices with a timer. The player must press the button a few times to commit to a decision.
    - Moderate stance - Presented with both moral choices with a short timer. The player must press the button once to commit to the decision that aligns with Rowan's current stance but must actively mash the button that goes against his current stance.

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    - Strong stance - Presented with both moral choices, but the conflicting choice will fade away within seconds, leaving only the moral choice that aligns with Rowan's current moral stance with a short timer, essentially forcing the player to choose the aligning moral choice if they don't quickly choose the conflicting choice.
    - Morally committed (Tier 3) - Only the aligning choice will be presented with a very short timer. There is no option to choose the conflicting choice from here on out. No turning back.
    - Morally committed (Tier 2) - Only the aligning choice will be presented with no timer. Rowan will commit the act without the player pressing the button.
    - Morally committed (Tier 1) - No decision UI will be presented. Rowan will commit the aligning act immediately as if it were part of a choreographed cutscene.
- ~~A brief indicator of changes to Rowan's moral stance will be displayed as a subtle orange or blue vignette after the decision is made (Orange if the player's decision was ethical, blue if the player's decision was practical)~~
- The total accumulated virtue or pragma points will be HIDDEN from the player, and can only be turned on in developer mode settings for debugging purposes

5.4 Cutscenes

There are three types cutscenes that temporarily takes control of the game for the player:

1. Full cutscene - A longer movie-like sequence
2. Mini-scene - A short cutscene that changes the camera from 3rd POV to cinematic. It hides the HUD completely. (ex. The trio running away, interacting with Sighmon, inspecting a poster)
3. Animation - A short non-controlled animation that plays out to execute unique actions. (ex. Crafting, moving a ladder)

Whenever possible, cutscenes should transition seamlessly to and from gameplay.

Game-over mini-scenes will end with a black screen, like *The Last of Us,* followed by a line of text with a gameplay hint to help the player. (Ex. If the player was shot to death while charging directly at an armed enemy, the hint will say "Melee attacks are difficult to perform on an armed opponent. Try stealth.")

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6. Art & Audio

6.1 Visual Style

- Gritty, dystopian atmosphere
- By the time this game is in the production phase, ultra-realistic graphics will be a meta
- Run-down futuristic population-dense urban style

6.2 Color Motifs

Light Orange: Virtue

- Sunlight
- Lamps
- Street lights

Deep Blue: Pragma

- Evening sky
- Lightning
- Street lights

6.3 Music & Sound Design

- Dynamic soundtrack reflecting moral choices
- **Emotional cues in key story moments**

Multiple themes

- Main game theme – Simplistic and minimal, similar to *The Last of Us*. There's a high chance I will compose this theme myself. I may create my own virtual instrument and/or sound library. (ex. Sound of guitar strings played by a violin bow)
- Pragma theme – Used during instances in which the player accumulates Pragma Points, or during Dane's important moments.
- Survival/determination rhythmic motif - Used during instances where a character's adrenaline and will to live enable them to outmatch impossible scenarios to survive
- Virtue theme – Used during instances in which the player accumulates Virtue Points, or during Vera's important moments.
- Ray's theme - A simple melody. Signifies the love Vera has for Ray and her dedication to protect him like a son.

Final boss fight – Friend turned foe

Rowan versus Dane
Mood: Intense, dramatic, high-stakes

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The richness of the orchestration intensifies as Dane's health bar depletes.

Rowan versus Vera
Mood: Mournful, regretful
The melody and orchestration evolve as the fight progresses

1. Sustained chords played by low brass and strings, just enough to convey the feeling of painful realization of what the player must do to their former ally, and Vera's realization that she must kill her former ally in an animalistic way, contrasting with her ethical ways.
2. Another layer of orchestration is added in the upper register, introducing a simple but emotional melody, accompanying the growing intensity of the fight
3. As Rowan gets the upper hand in the fight, Vera gets a massive resurgence of determination to win as she remembers the stakes at hand and who she's fighting for: Ray and the goal to change the world to make a better life for him. Thus, the melody changes to an orchestral rendition of Ray's theme
4. As Rowan delivers the final few blows to finish off a defenseless Vera, the loud, high register drops down to a deep, brooding rumble from the double basses and cellos
5. Depending on the extremity of Rowan's moral pragmatic stance, the aftermath music will be triumphant or mournful or a mix of both, giving insight into Rowan's internal emotions after the battle and how he feels about killing off Vera
6. As Ray arrives post-battle and mourns over Vera's lifeless body, there is no music.

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7. Boss Fights

7.1 Gang leader

The trio is cornered by a common gang in a compact series of alleyways in Prospera.

7.2 Stoners

The trio encounters a squad of stoners in Shatterbay.

7.3 Vehicle takedown

The trio gets ambushed on the streets by a fleet of Rustborns on their road trip to Grayspire.

7.4 Commander Toro

After returning to one of NULL's known bases in Ironvale, the trio must hold off a police invasion long enough for Vera to upload all of the confidential government documents to NULL's database. Upon realizing the police squad is being led by Commander Toro, Dane insists on staying to fight him.

7.5 Judge Caesar

Player will enter some sort of courtroom or government building, then go through metal detectors and security. Must confiscate all weapons to enter. This boss fight is more about exposing Caesar's corruptness than physical fighting. His boss health bar is absent, replaced by a reputation bar. The trio exposes Caesar for [TBD]. After his cover is blown, Caesar defies the legal system and abuses his power, ordering the security guards in the room to detain the trio and sentences them to death to silence them and protect his own reputation. In the process of them being removed from the courtroom, he taunts Dane with new information: Decades ago, he sentenced Dane's parents to an unjust execution, being the reason he and Toby were raised in an orphanage without ever knowing their parents. Now enraged, Dane throws a single hydrobomb shuriken at Caesar that he somehow snuck in, barely missing him grazing him by the right ear. A chase happens, and the trio must escape and get their weapons back.

7.6 Final Boss Variation

Fight Vera if you accumulate more Pragma Points

Music concept: Mournful, painful, regretful, Ray's theme

She can be defeated more easily than Dane, but the player is meant to feel bad for having to kill off Vera because of a combination of factors including the player's natural real-life moral standards working against them emotionally, Vera's tragic backstory, and subjecting Ray to a terrible fate. The easiest way to defeat her is to target areas of the body that inflict the most damage using the same martial arts techniques she taught Rowan earlier in the game. Using Dane's weapons will not be a viable strategy. In addition,

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due to her ability to read her opponents, Vera will adjust her battle strategy based on the player's weaknesses, which will be determined based on what factors the player died to the most during gameplay. (ex. If the player died from / took the most damage from strikes to the head against enemy NPCs, Vera will use more moves that target Rowan's head)

Before the fight begins, a cutscene will play out in which Vera sedates Rowan from behind, ties him up in a building, and places his weapons on a shelf. Vera now sees Rowan as a "threat" to her goal of trying to restore society. When Rowan awakes, Vera will have one last talk with Rowan about his moral wrongdoings before attempting to painlessly euthanize him. Rowan escapes at the last second by activating the sharp glass launcher hidden in his sleeve that Dane previously gave him, cutting the ropes binding him. A brief struggle between the two former allies causes the shelf holding Rowan's weapons to fall over, accidentally detonating one of the explosive weapons. The explosion collapses the building, destroys Rowan's weapons, and sets fire to the area, essentially creating the final battle Rowan. The orange fire acts as the color motif for Vera's ethical values as well as a natural enclosing barrier/obstacle. As Rowan picks up one of the destroyed weapons in a futile attempt to get it to work again, Vera kicks it out of his hands and kicks him off a ledge down a slope. Vera jumps down landing on her feet approximately 10 meters away from Rowan. With Rowan's weapons now lost, he is forced to fight Vera ironically using the same nerve strikes that she taught him. The scene transitions from cutscene to gameplay as Vera's boss health bar appears on screen, with the player now realizing what they are forced to do… for the sake of Rowan's long-term survival in this cruel world.

However, killing off Vera will mean killing off the only mother figure Ray ever had. The post-fight cutscene will feature Ray weeping hysterically over his adoptive mother's lifeless body while Rowan reunites with Dane who reassures him he did the right thing…

Fight Dane if you accumulate more Virtue Points

Music concept: Intense, dramatic, high-stakes

He can only be defeated by his own weapons that he taught Rowan how to use/make earlier in the game. Using Vera's techniques will be ineffective because Dane's long-range weapons will not allow Rowan to get close enough to use any of Vera's nerve strikes. This was foreshadowed in Vera's backstory in which she was unable to use her martial arts to defend herself against a gun-wielding gang.

To prepare the scene for the fight, Rowan and Dane aggressively argue about their disagreements and how Rowan has now become a "threat" to Dane's personal survival, in a similar manner as Gi-Hun and Sang-Woo after the glass bridge game, or Obi-Wan and Anakin before their duel. "Rowan! Open your fucking eyes! Look at what our world has become. Are you so blinded by morals that you refuse to see / are unable to see that our world is beyond saving? **The only way to survive a cruel world is to outmatch it with greater cruelty,**" Dane says as the motif blue colors of the ruined city of Prospera, evening sky, and lightning behind him illuminate the scene. The cutscene briefly switches to gameplay to allow the player to move Rowan around. As soon as Rowan looks away from Dane, Dane makes the first attack, hurling projectiles at Rowan, who barely manages to react in time. The two take cover behind some rubble. The scene transitions from cutscene to gameplay as Dane's boss health bar appears on screen, with the player now realizing what they are forced to do… for the betterment of humanity.

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However, the player must consider whether Dane was ever truly a villain or just trying to survive no matter the cost…

This document will continue evolving as development progresses.

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