

The **Nightmares**
of Edith Finch

a game by Giant Sparrow



For as long as anyone can remember, going back to the early days of the Washington territory, the Finches have died strangely. No two in the same way but each went violently, unexpectedly, and young.

Edith Finch is the youngest member of the family and might be the last.

Synopsis

The game is a collection of stories about a cursed family.

Our primary protagonist, Edith Finch, is a 15-year-old girl on present-day Orcas Island. Edith is a loner and considers herself a witch. She lives with a foster family since her own parents died soon after she was born.

She's obsessed with discovering why her ancestors have all died in such horrible ways – partly out of morbid curiosity and partly out of self-interest, since she plans on living forever.

The game begins with Edith poking around the ruins of Bleakwood, the family's ancestral home which burned down in 1978. As Edith uncovers artifacts of her family's history (a note scrawled on the back of a photograph, newspaper clippings, diaries, etc) new stories are unlocked to play. Characters and locations are shared across stories and someone who is a background element in one story might show up as the protagonist of another.

The stories are manifestations of the player and Edith learning more about the Finch family. Playing these stories will, in turn, unlock new areas for Edith to explore in the present day. For example a story might reveal a hidden passage behind a fireplace as part of gameplay which players could explore later in the ruins of Bleakwood, or a key might have been buried in a grave that Edith can retrieve later.

In the present day the game takes place over the course of a single night for Edith, ending at sunrise on the following day.



Underwater Stories

Although the stories will encompass a range of environments and gameplay, the first-person exploration of underwater spaces is intended to be the cornerstone of the game, both in terms of the amount of time players will spend with it and its importance in the narrative. These will include:

Aulis, 31, in 1957, the early days of the aqualung, Aulis is searching for the body of his brother Eerik, Edith's great-grandfather. Eerik had been mapping an underwater cave and is thought to have drowned. We follow Aulis as he makes his way deeper into the cave.

Hedda, 28, in 1986 is looking for the wreck of an old fishing boat when she finds what looks like a lost 18th century Native American settlement, mysteriously preserved on the bottom of the ocean.

Edwin, 23, in 2008 Edith's brother is diving in the arctic as part of a military salvage operation. When he attempts to return to the surface the hole in the ice has been filled and everyone on the surface has disappeared.



Other Stories

The following outlines are meant to provide an indication of the direction we expect the game to take, though many may not make it into the final game. We expect the game to have ~8 stories and take 2 hours for a first playthru.

Nils, 38, a vagrant who lives in a parking garage that he has come to believe is infinite. He dreams that a god waits for him at the top and so he begins to climb, avoiding a growing darkness and a malevolent 1984 blue Subaru.

Betsy, 12, a farm girl in 1877 who's afraid of the dark. Every night she goes to sleep with a candle burning at her bedside. One night she wakes up to find that every other light in the world has gone out.

Oliver, 24, a copper miner in 1889. A cave-in leaves him trapped far underground on the run from rising water.

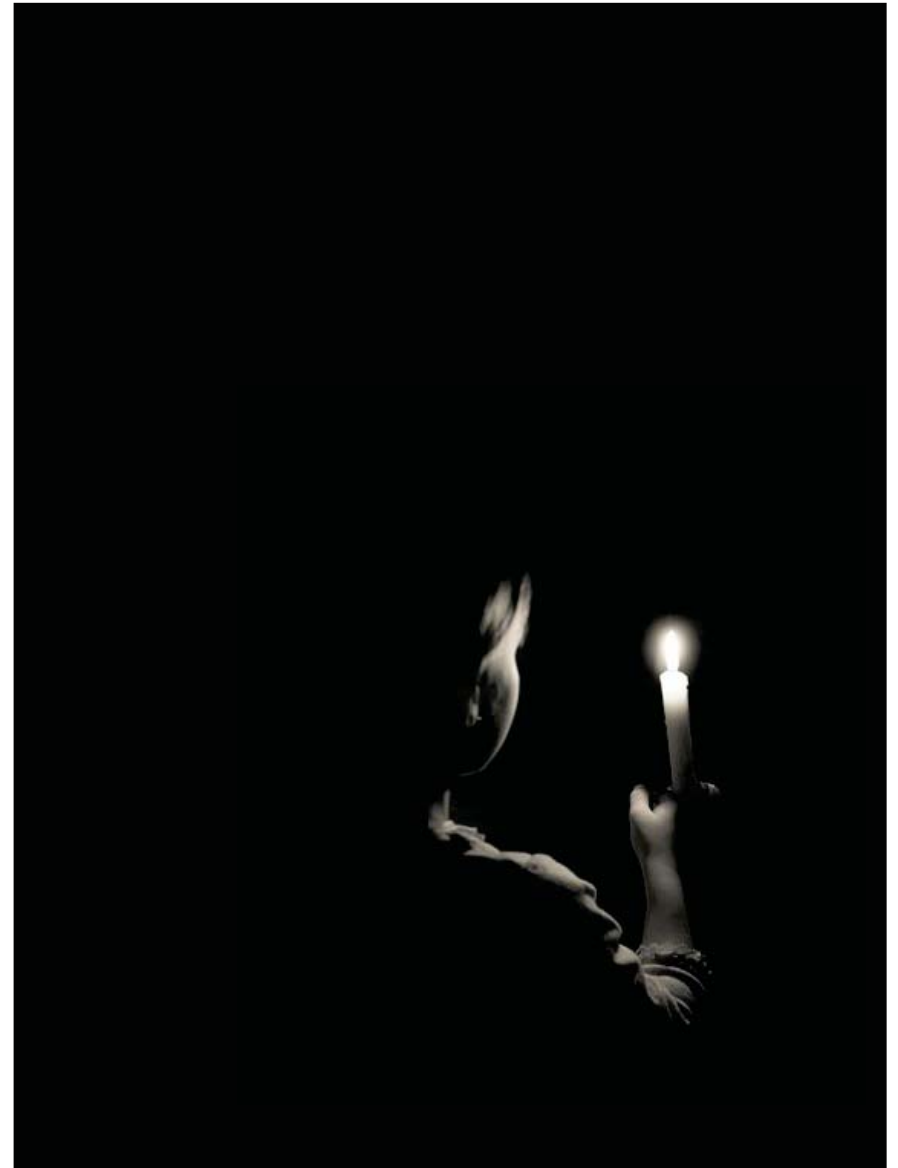
Agnes, 9, whose whole family disappeared a month earlier in April of 1892. She's waited in the house for them to come back ever since. One night something dark returns for her and Agnes finds herself trapped inside, running from whatever it is and looking for a way out.

Patrick, 31, a fishing boat captain in 1937 whose boat went down suddenly in the night. He and a Native American deckhand who may have been responsible for the wreck are now adrift on a raft in the middle of the Pacific.

Bartholomew, 36, married a Catholic woman. The lord gave them 11 children but on a fishing trip in 1967 something else took them all back.

Oskar, 32, a blind man in San Francisco in 1974 who wakes up, makes breakfast, and goes to work on what he believes will be the last day of his life.

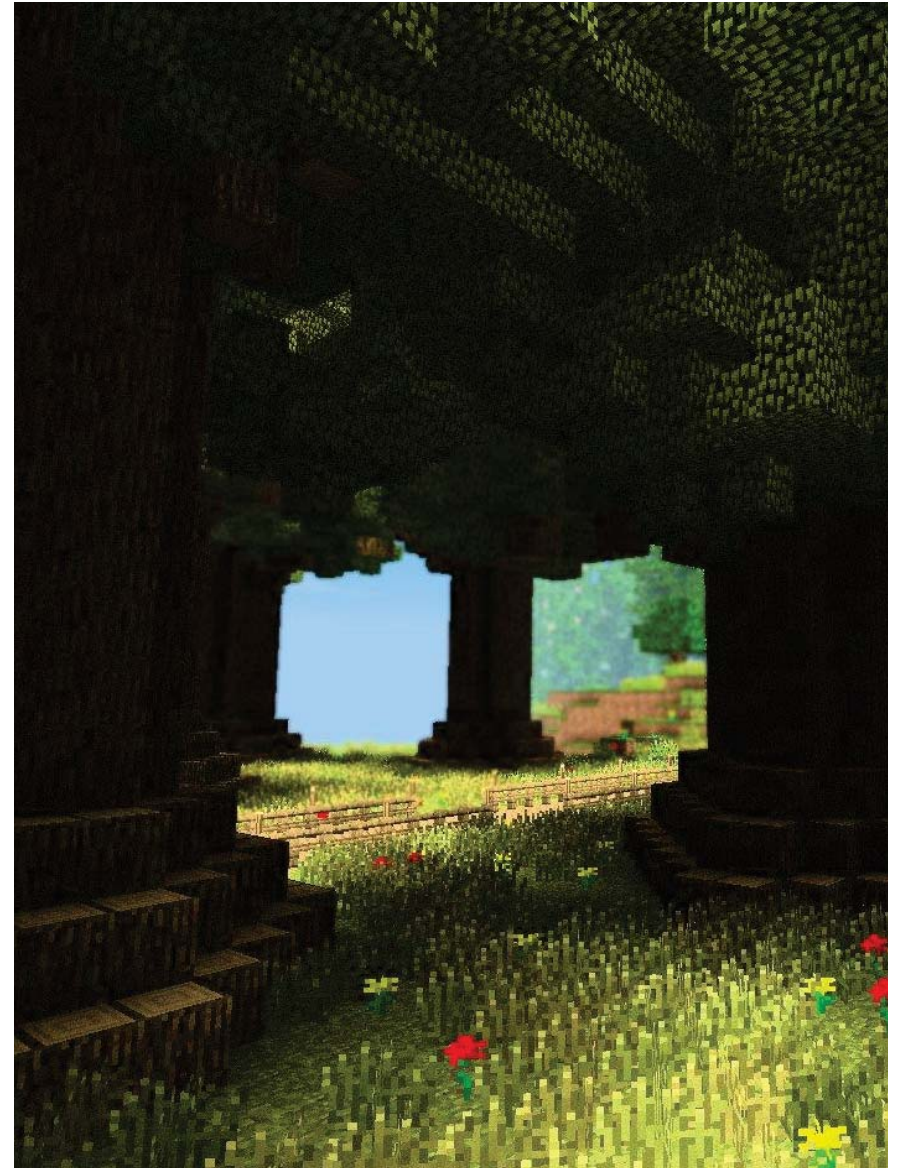
Erik, 29, a farmer and volunteer fire fighter in 1978 battling his first wildfire who has become separated from his group deep in the forest.



Guest Stories

To add a bit of variety we plan to collaborate with outside game developers on 3 stories. Each story would reflect the personal style of the developer involved.

The scope of collaboration would depend on the developer's interest and the complexity of the story. Our expectation is that their stories would be relatively short (10 minutes or less). For more ambitious stories we would produce them in house with the guest developer simply consulting on it, while for simpler ones (eg a retro 2D game) we might have the developer produce it themselves. The subject matter of the stories would be developed collaboratively with a goal of matching the developer's interests/abilities while also fitting within the larger context of our game. We would hold off on approaching collaborators until we had a proper vertical slice of our own, to help communicate what the game is (and make sure we knew ourselves).





Tone

This is a game about the horror of nature.

We want to give players the feeling of what it's like to walk through the forest at night, to be out of your element and prey to unknown forces greater than yourself. Tonally we plan to achieve this by focusing on three core feelings:

Sublime. The modern opinion of nature is that it is clean, efficient and good. The view in this game is closer to the Enlightenment idea that nature is full of perpetual violence, and that the beauty of nature is mixed with the sublime. The immensity of nature reminds us of how small and powerless we are in comparison, which is both liberating and terrifying. We want players to stand in awe.

Intimate. We want the game to feel a bit like good radio, in the vein of This American Life. Partly this is so the game feels believable and specific, and partly it's because we want to emphasize the personal nature of these stories to remind players that they're fragile, ordinary human beings here and not space marines.

Murky. The scariest part of being in the wild isn't what's actually out there, it's what we imagine might be out there. We want the entire game to feel murky so players are always straining to see and hear what's out there and relying on their imagination to fill in the gaps. This is particularly important since our core gameplay will be the challenge of finding your way through murky environments and, in some cases, of hiding in them.



What we Mean by "Nature"

Although many of our stories take place in the wilderness our conception of nature is broader than that. This is not a game about a fear of the natural world — of sharks, snakes, or spiders — it's about a more existential dread.

Our game is about the uneasiness of being alone in a vast and unknowable universe.

The natural world offers some very simple and effective representations of that feeling but they're not the only ones. We intend to include several stories that focus on more civilized spaces (albeit surreal ones like an infinite parking garage), to add variety and to make a point about this existential dread not being confined to natural spaces. The dread we feel isn't because of the spaces themselves, it's because of the way we approach them.

Ultimately it's about how we as human beings deal with the infinite.



The Setting

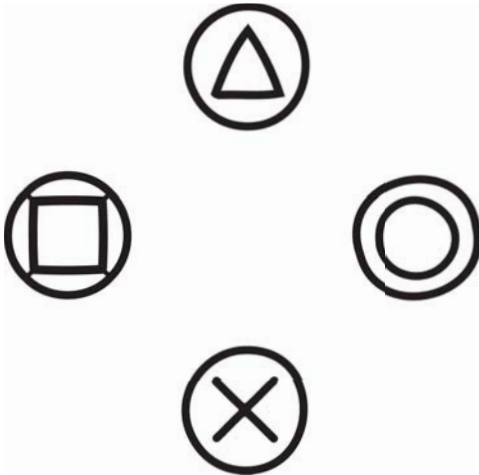
The game takes place on and around the San Juan Islands of the Pacific Northwest.

As part of our focus on the history of the Finch family we're also going to be touching on the history of the place they live. To balance out the entirely fictional Finches we want the environment to feel believable to the point of being mundane. Our goal is to ground the surreal elements in a place that feels real.

I should point out that "real" doesn't mean photorealistic lighting or motion-captured animations. By "real" we mean specific and familiar. This isn't a generic foggy place, this is Washington. Our stories aren't about killing a demon, they're about collecting firewood, or leading a spooked horse through a forest, or waiting at the bus stop for your sister. There are supernatural forces in the game but they're not the primary focus. We want to take an already scary situation and use supernatural elements to raise tension just a little higher.

We chose the Northwest because it has strong associations with unspoiled natural spaces, isolation, and oddball characters, which are all important elements for our game. The coastal setting and near-constant rain is also a natural fit for the game's underwater motif.

Also, I grew up there. It's an environment I feel like I know well enough to add the sort of little touches that will make it believable.



Gameplay

Our core gameplay is exploring murky environments and dealing with hostile creatures (generally by hiding and/or running). The specifics will vary based on the location and who the player is in the story. Most stories will use first-person controls though a few may use third-person or 2D if it's a better fit.

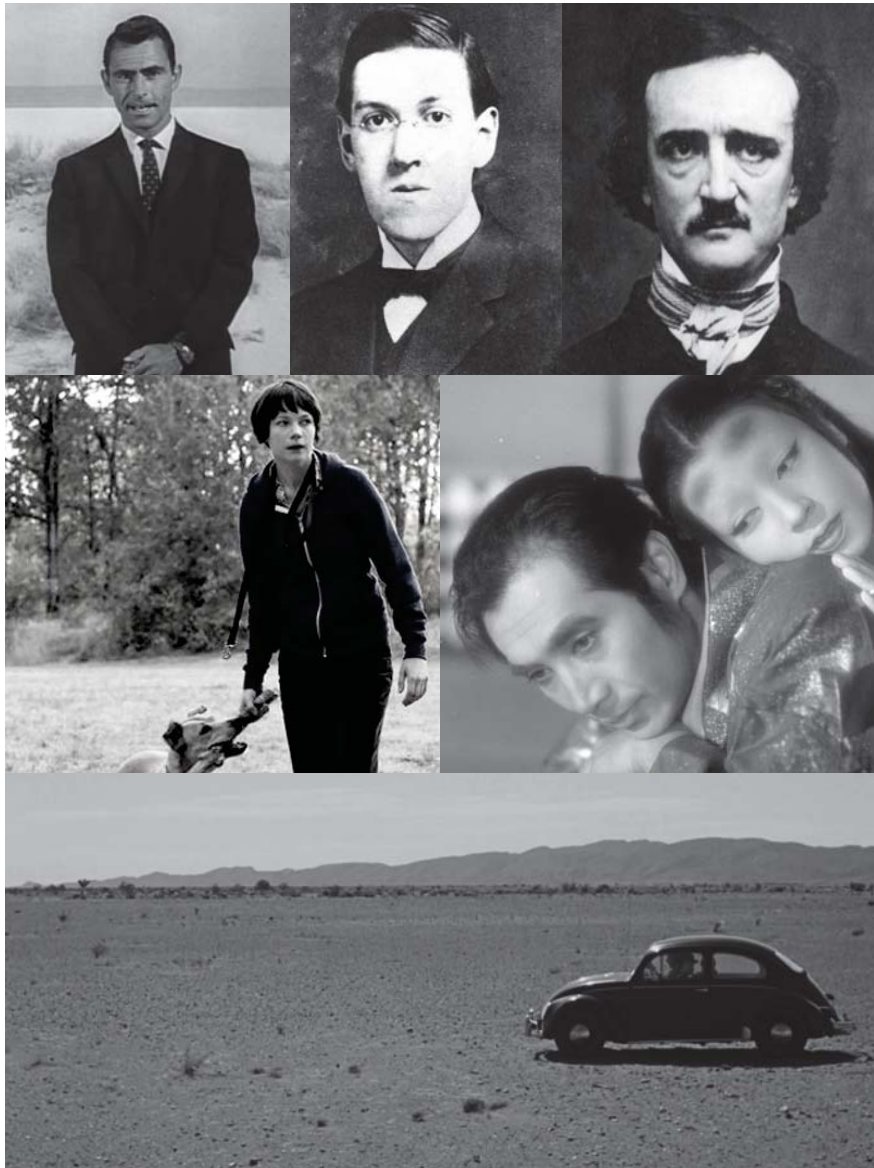
Most stories take place at night and players will have a flashlight and/or a source of fire like a candle or torch. Lights can be used to explore spaces as well as to interact with creatures. Mechanics we're considering include:

- Lights can keep small creatures at bay but will attract large ones
- Lights can be used as bludgeons but risk being damaged themselves
- Electric lights are resistant to wind and water but dim near large creatures
- Fire can activate torches on walls, creating permanent areas of safety
- Using two-handed items (like some doors) requires putting lights down
- Some creatures are invisible and can only be seen by the shadow they cast
- Bright lights can wake up creatures so players will want to keep their finger on the flashlight's off switch, roughly analogous to the way players have their finger on the trigger when scanning rooms in a first-person shooter.

We may include a UI element showing how well hidden players are (ala Thief), to help convey the visibility cost of player actions. For example walking on metal grating would make more sound (and generate more awareness) than walking on grass. Or perhaps exhaling underwater generates awareness so players are encouraged to hold their breath when monsters swim nearby.

We may include stamina as a resource (with or without a visual indicator) so that each action players take also includes a cost in stamina, limiting the effectiveness of button mashing and encouraging more careful play.

Whether or not the game will include combat is an open question. While it could provide a compelling and familiar gameplay loop, combat also runs the risk of obliterating the quiet, eerie atmosphere we're aiming for. This is something we'll look at carefully and early in the prototyping stage.



Tone References

The central influences for the game are: Lovecraft's view of a pitiless and unknowable universe, Borges' urbane and relatable sense of the surreal, and Marquez's mix of broad strokes and intimate details in painting the life of a family in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Books

- Lovecraft (esp *The Outsider*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Dagon*)
- Borges (esp *The Aleph*, *The Secret Miracle*, and *The Zahir*)
- *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
- *Ugetsu Monogatari* (a collection of Japanese ghost stories)
- Edgar Allan Poe
- Kafka

Movies that are slowly paced, tense, and atmospheric

- *The Descent*
- Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* and *Walkabout*
- Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy* and *Meek's Cutoff*
- *The Haunting*
- *Rosemary's Baby*
- *The Ring*
- *The Blair Witch Project*

Movies that weave together a collection of surreal stories

- *Ugetsu*
- Kurosawa's *Dreams*
- *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie*
- *Tampopo*

TV

- *The Twilight Zone*
- *Twin Peaks*

Games

- *Silent Hill 1+2*
- *Thief 1*
- *Dear Esther*
- *Clocktower 1*

Key Challenges for Design

Structuring a game as a series of short stories. The anthology format is a mainstay of horror fiction and horror movies but is much less common in games. There's a danger that the game might end up feeling like a collection of mini-games (is there anything less scary?). Making each story feel self-contained but part of a greater whole will be a core design concern. We'll also need to find the right balance of how much we focus on Edith in the present day versus her exploration of the past, which is part of a larger question of how much this experience is about Edith versus how much it's about the Finches.

Being scary. This is a fun challenge. The hard part is that the illusion of terror is easily broken. In order to know if the game is sufficiently scary we'll need to have a lot of pieces in place, or at least not obviously missing (programmer art = not scary). Our approach will be to drive to playable prototypes early, to playtest with a variety of players to gauge how it hits people of various temperaments, and to focus on audio design from the very beginning (which is easier to bring up to quality and does a lot of the heavy-lifting in terms of scaring people). In the longer term we plan to bring our underwater tech up to speed early in the project so we can verify that our core experience evokes the right level of fear and wonder.

Keeping players oriented. Natural spaces are easy to get lost in. We'll need to make liberal use of lighting, landmarks, and potentially HUD elements to keep players focused. Being a little lost is actually a good thing (it's scary), as long as players aren't wandering in circles for too long.

Pacing. We want the game to feel open enough that players can appreciate being in these spaces but intense enough to maintain a level of unease that keeps players focused and interested. The natural elements risk becoming dull while the horror elements risk becoming relentlessly intense. Hopefully we can find a balance that gives each element a chance to support the other.

Key Challenges for Tech

Lighting. Most of the game will take place at night. Creating a hauntingly beautiful, murky atmosphere will require a lot of back and forth between tech and art. Some specific features we're considering include: support for dozens of lights, realtime shadows, player-controlled flashlight, candlelight, ground fog, and god rays.

Underwater atmosphere. Creating stylized but believable underwater scenes will be an interesting challenge as well, including: atmospheric diffusion, suspended particles that respond to movement, and underwater physics.

Procedural generation. We'll be exploring the use of procedural generation to create environments and place creatures. Though procedural content has its own issues, it's a fantastic way to create spaces that have a sense of being infinite and mysterious. It also removes some of the sense of safety in a world that players know has been manicured just for them. Procedurally placed creatures and events would also give us a way to randomize things a bit after players die, so death doesn't become a way of brute forcing the game through trial-and-error, since dangers will be arranged differently each time (ala Left 4 Dead).

3rd person camera and controls. At least one of our stories (Cousin Oskar) will use third-person controls, which will be a new challenge for us.

AI. Creatures will likely require at least a rudimentary AI system, especially if we introduce any combat.

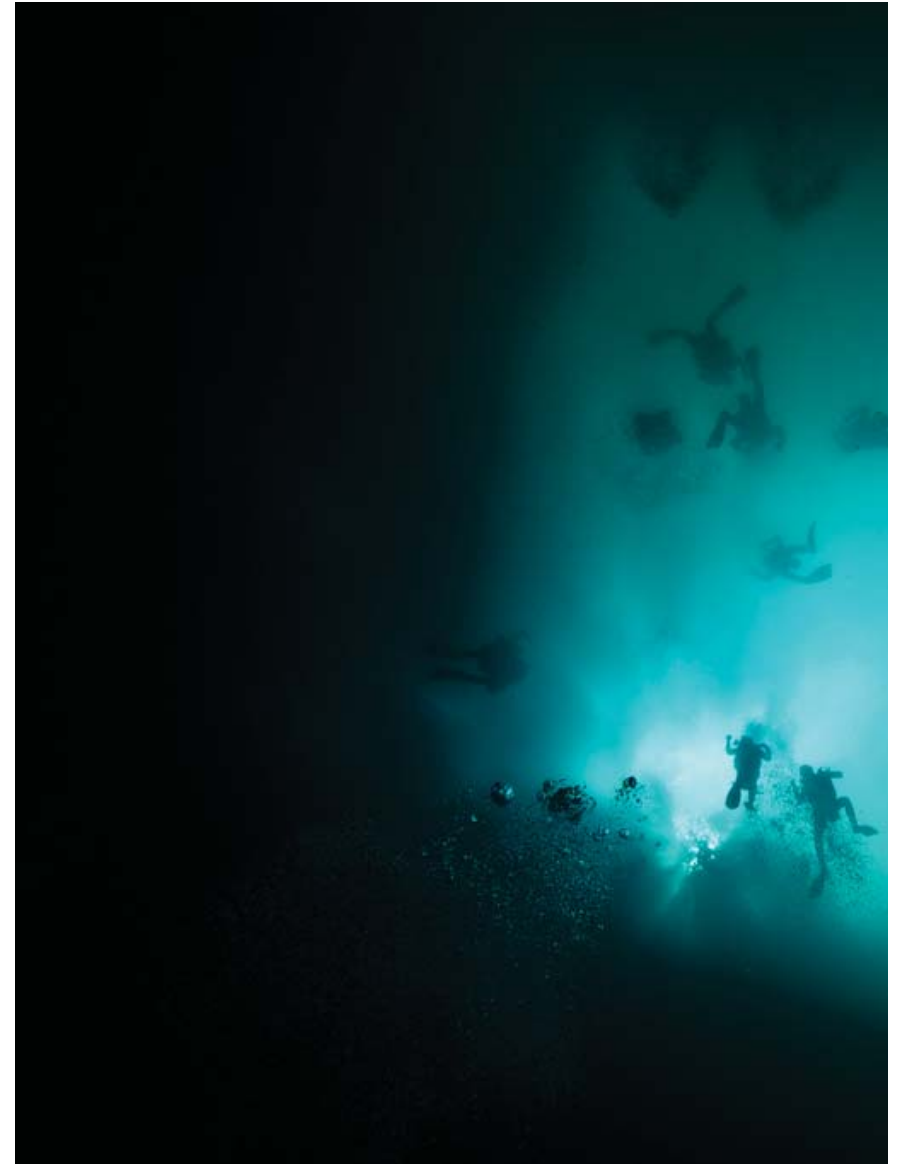
Key Challenges for Art

Beautiful + scary. A lot of games are beautiful and a few games are scary but none (so far) have been both. To some extent this is a design challenge as well – if the game is too scary players won't be in a mindset to appreciate the beauty of what's around them. Luckily, nature and evolution have given us some great starting points. By focusing on environments that are inherently beautiful and scary we can leverage player's instincts to do a lot of our work for us.

Art style is tech-dependant. This is a bit of a double-edged sword. Because so much of the game takes place at night and/or underwater we'll need to have art and tech work closely to make sure all the effects are functional and in-line with art's requirements. On the other hand once we're happy with the underlying systems it should be relatively straight-forward to apply that across the rest of the game.

Wide variety of locations and eras. The stories include locations ranging from forests, to underwater caves, to abandoned houses, and stretch from present day back to pioneer times. Luckily since our focus is on natural spaces there's a lot of potential for reuse (trees today look pretty much like they did 200 years ago). Also, since most stories take place at night and/or in fog the environments will emphasize silhouettes over details.

Fluid animations. In keeping with the game's underwater motif, the majority of creatures are expected to move in fluid, elegant ways (think octopus, eel, or shark). There will also be considerably more animation than in our previous game since creatures here will be more of a foreground element. How (and if) combat is implemented will also impact animation requirements.



Who is this for?

This is a game for people in search of weird and beautiful new experiences.

Although it has scary elements it is not primarily targeted at horror game fans. To appeal to a more general audience our plan is to emphasize the game's eerie atmosphere and its lack of violence or gore. Our focus on the natural world and the through-line of a family mystery are also meant to communicate that this is not a traditional horror game.

A scary game is an inherently polarizing proposition. Some people have no interest in being scared — at least most of the time. That's probably why there are so few games that successfully scare players, and why AAA horror games tend to get less scary and more action-oriented with each sequel.

At the same time this creates a great opportunity. A genuinely unsettling game like *The Nightmares of Edith Finch* has a chance to give players a powerful experience they can't find anywhere else.

