DESIGNED TO BE EXPLORED

NOT EXPLAINED



Name of Course:
DSDN 371

Design-Research Territory pt.1



My design-research territory focuses on game design, specifically how players experience and navigate immersive digital environments. I am particularly interested in the balance between exploration and guidance, and how designers can subtly direct player attention without breaking immersion. Rather than relying on explicit instructions such as markers or UI prompts, I am drawn to the use of environmental storytelling, spatial design, lighting, and sound to guide players through a world.

This area of practice matters to me because of my long-standing attachment with video games, which began in childhood. I grew up watching my dad play games, becoming fascinated not just with gameplay, but with the worlds themselves. Over time, I realised that what interested me most was not simply completing objectives, but exploring environments and understanding how they were constructed. This curiosity has developed into a deeper interest in how game spaces communicate meaning and direction to players.

Games such as Portal demonstrate how environments can teach players through design rather than instruction. The game's use of spatial logic and visual cues allows players to learn mechanics naturally, without the need for direct explanation. The game Metro Exodus also presents detailed, post-apocalyptic environments that encourage slow exploration while still subtly guiding player movement. These experiences have shaped my understanding of how immersion can be maintained while still providing direction.

Design-Research Territory pt.2

I am also influenced by experiences such as Death Stranding, where the act of movement through the environment becomes central to the experience. Despite minimal traditional gameplay mechanics, the world itself sustains engagement through atmosphere, scale, and visual detail. This has increased my belief that environment design is not secondary to gameplay, but can be a primary driver of player engagement.

My own experimentation began through working with Unreal Engine, where I created a backrooms-inspired horror environment. Although the project was not fully completed, it allowed me to explore how space, lighting, and layout influence player perception and movement. This experience demonstrated that the environments I admired in games could be constructed and tested through my own practice.

Through this work, a key question has emerged: how can designers create environments that allow players to feel a sense of freedom and discovery, while still being subtly guided through space? I am particularly interested in the tension between being lost and being directed, and how this can be balanced through design decisions.

Overall, my practice sits at the intersection of game design, environmental storytelling, and user experience. It is driven by a desire to create immersive worlds that encourage exploration, while carefully shaping how players move through and understand those spaces.



Community of Practice pt.1

My community of practice consists of game designers, studios, and developers who focus on player experience, environmental storytelling, and level design. These people explore how digital environments can communicate meaning, guide interaction, and create immersive experiences. Through analysing their work, I am able to better understand how my own interests and design approach fit within this broader field.

One key example is Valve, particularly through the design of Portal. Valve demonstrates how gameplay mechanics and environmental design can be integrated so that players learn through interaction rather than instruction. The absence of heavy UI guidance aligns closely with my interest in subtle player direction.

Similarly, 4A Games, the studio behind Metro Exodus, emphasises atmospheric world-building and environmental storytelling. Their environments encourage exploration while still guiding players through visual cues and spatial design. This reflects my own interest in balancing immersion with direction, particularly in post-apocalyptic settings.

Another important influence is Kojima Productions, creators of Death Stranding. Their work challenges traditional gameplay structures by prioritising movement, environment, and atmosphere over action. This expands my understanding of how engagement can be created through world design alone, reinforcing the importance of environmental detail in shaping player experience.



Community of Practice pt.2

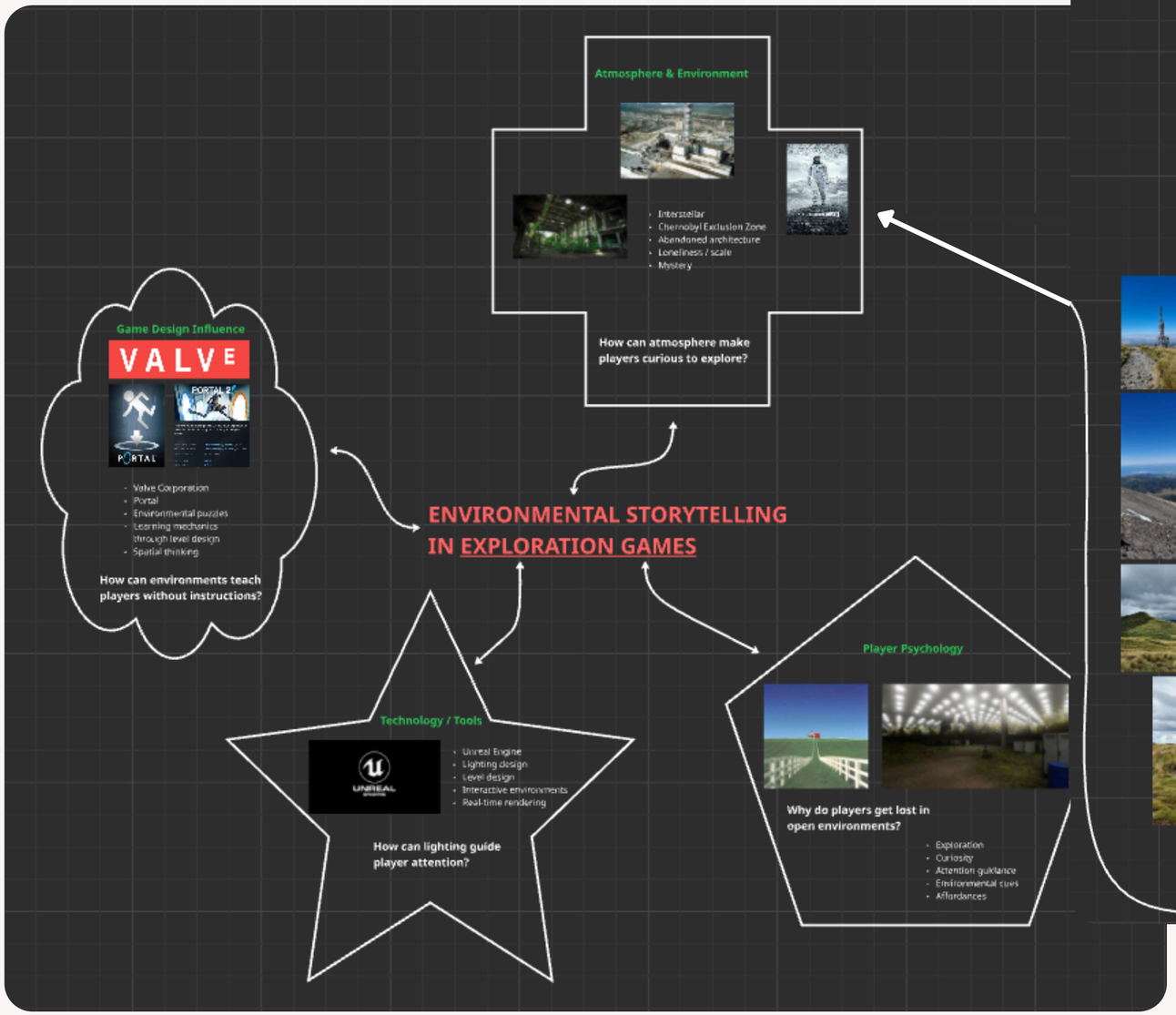
In contrast, Ubisoft represents a different approach, often using explicit guidance systems such as maps, markers, and objectives. While effective, this approach highlights a tension within my own practice, as I am more interested in reducing reliance on these systems in favour of more immersive design solutions. Looking at this contrast helps clarify my own position within the field.

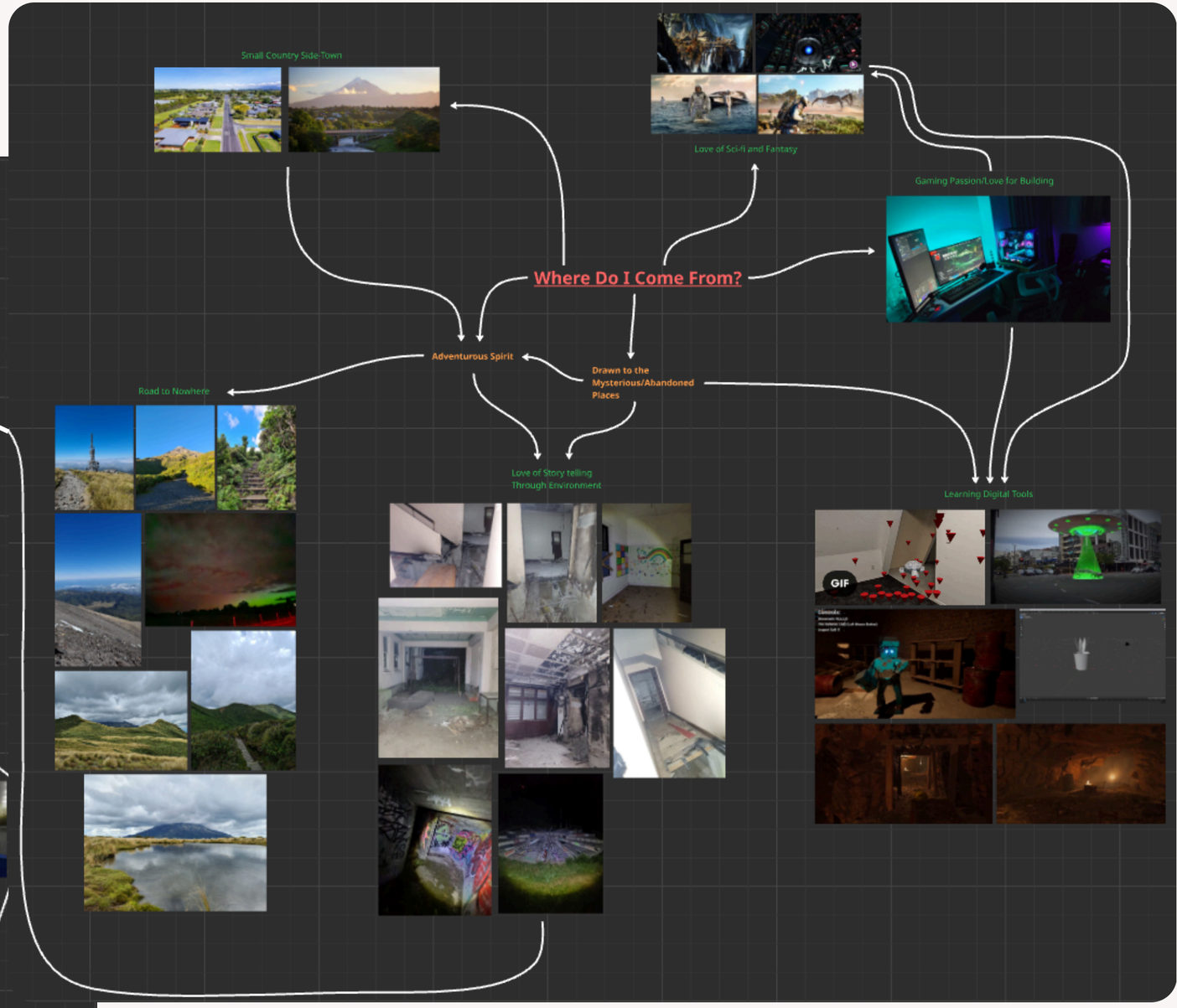
FromSoftware provides an example of minimal guidance, where players are often left to interpret the world independently. While this can create a strong sense of discovery, it can also lead to confusion. This further reinforces my interest in finding a balance between clarity and uncertainty in player navigation.

Beyond studios, online communities and learning platforms also form part of my community of practice. Resources such as tutorials and developer discussions around Unreal Engine provide insight into how other designers solve problems related to environment creation and player guidance. These communities highlight the collaborative nature of design practice and the importance of shared knowledge.

Overall, my community of practice is defined by a shared focus on designing meaningful player experiences through environment and interaction. By engaging with both similar and contrasting approaches, I am able to better understand my own position as a designer, particularly my interest in creating immersive environments that guide players without relying on explicit instruction.

Research Territory Map





Free Writing



Process Work pt.1

I have lived in New Zealand my whole life in Taranaki and video games have kind of always just been there for as long as I can remember like I don't even remember getting into them they were just always around. I remember sitting next to my dad while he played and just watching him for ages and I didn't even need to be playing myself. I was just completely into what was happening on the screen and the worlds and everything. I think that's probably where it started but I didn't really think about it like that at the time.

As I got older I realised I wasn't just playing games for the sake of it I was way more interested in exploring them and just being in the world rather than like winning or completing stuff. I think that's why I like certain games more than others. like Portal is one that really stuck with me because it doesn't just tell you what to do it kind of teaches you through the environment and the puzzles and it just feels really natural. and then games like Metro Exodus are kind of the opposite in a way but also similar because the world is so detailed and abandoned and quiet and it makes you want to actually slow down and look around instead of just rushing through everything.

I think immersion is probably the biggest thing for me like I just want to feel like I'm actually in the world. I remember playing Death Stranding and it's literally just walking most of the time but I didn't even care because the world looked so good and the atmosphere was so strong that I just kept playing anyway. it made me realise that gameplay isn't always the most important thing, like the environment itself can carry the whole experience if it's done right.

I've also always been the kind of person that looks for extra stuff like easter eggs and hidden details and just small things that developers put in on purpose. it kind of feels like they're leaving stuff there for people to find and I like that a lot. it makes the world feel more real and thought out. I think that's also why I started thinking more about how games guide players because when you're looking for things like that you start noticing how the game is actually directing you without you realising it.

I don't like games where you're just completely lost with no idea what to do because that just gets frustrating really quickly. but at the same time I don't want everything to be super obvious either. I think the best games are the ones that kind of guide you without making it feel like they are, like using lighting or sound or the way the environment is built to pull you in a certain direction. that's something I noticed a lot in both Portal and Metro and probably why I like them so much.

Free Writing

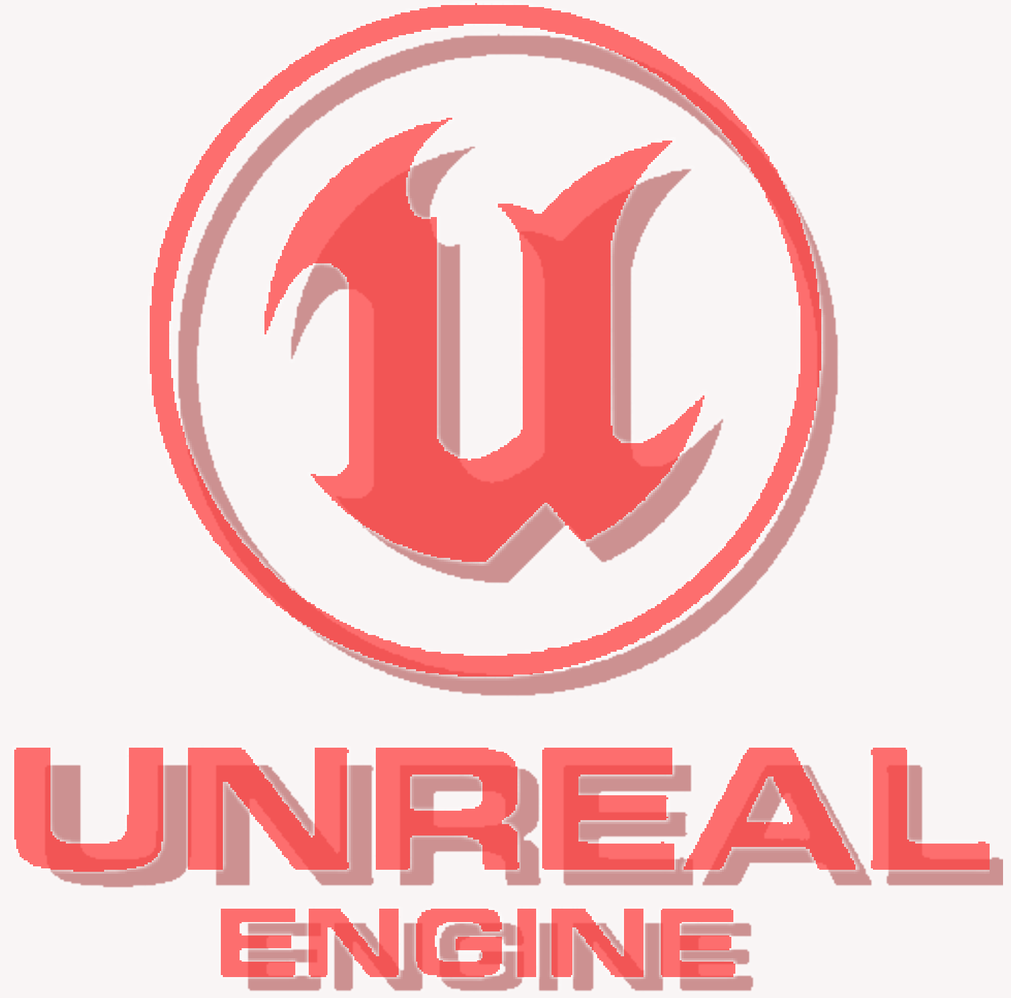
Process Work pt.2

I first used Unreal Engine about four years ago for a digital tech class and I made this backrooms style horror walking simulator which I never actually finished but it still turned out pretty good and my teacher really liked it. I remember it being really exciting because I had never used anything like that before and suddenly I could actually start making my own environments instead of just thinking about them. that was probably the moment where it kind of clicked that this is something I actually want to do.

Since then I think I've realised that I'm kind of a mix between being experimental and being a perfectionist which is a bit annoying sometimes because I want to try new things but I also want everything to be perfect at the same time. I think for me it mostly comes down to the details like how something looks and feels and whether it makes sense without needing to explain it too much.

When I get stuck I usually just go on YouTube and see if anyone else has had the same problem because most of the time someone has already figured it out and explained it. it kind of shows that this stuff isn't just individual and there's a whole community of people working on similar things.

Looking back at it now it actually all kind of connects even though it didn't feel like it at the time. from watching my dad play games to now trying to make my own stuff it's all kind of been leading to the same thing which is making environments that people can explore and get immersed in but still have some kind of direction so they don't just feel completely lost.



Community of Practice

Games

Journey

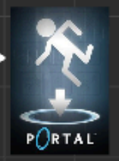


- ***What is it?***
  Journey is an exploration focused game where players travel across a vast desert toward a distant mountain. The game contains no dialogue and minimal UI relying mainly on environmental cues to guide players.

- ***Why is it interesting to you?***
  The game uses visual landmarks, color contrast and lighting to subtly guide player movement and and attention. The mountain in the distance acts as a constant orientation point, preventing players from feeling lost.

- ***What do you want to borrow, challenge, or do differently?***
  I want to borrow the idea of using landmarks and lighting to guide exploration instead of interface markers. In my own work I want to experiment with environmental storytelling and spatial cues to direct players without explicitly telling them where to go.

The Portal Games



- ***What is it?***
  Puzzle games where players use a portal gun to create linked portals and solve environmental puzzles inside the Aperture Science testing facility. Both games are linked to each other and tells the player an amazing story throughout the gameplay.

- ***Why is it interesting to you?***
  - Very interesting/smart level design that teaches mechanics through the environment
  - Players learn by experimenting rather than being told what to do
  - Clean, minimal environments that focus attention on the puzzle

- ***What do you want to borrow, challenge, or do differently?***
  - Borrow the idea of guiding players through level design instead of instructions
  - Use environmental cues to teach mechanics
  - Experiment with puzzles or spaces that players learn by exploring rather than tutorials

Inside



Tools/Technology

Unreal Engine



- ***What is it?***
  A real-time 3D engine developed by Epic Games used to create video games, simulations, films, and interactive experiences.

- ***Why is it interesting to you?***
  - Powerful tools for building interactive 3D environments
  - Realistic lighting and visuals help create immersive spaces
  - Widely used in both game development and film production

- ***What do you want to borrow, challenge, or do differently?***
  - Use it to design explorable environments and level layouts
  - Experiment with lighting and atmosphere to guide players
  - Explore how interactive spaces can influence player behavior and exploration

Architecture/Space

Chernobyl Exclusion Zone



- ***What is it?***
  A large abandoned area around the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant evacuated after the Chernobyl disaster.

- ***Why is it interesting to you?***
  - Strong post-apocalyptic atmosphere
  - Buildings show stories of the past through decay and abandoned objects
  - Nature reclaiming human spaces creates powerful visuals

- ***What do you want to borrow, challenge, or do differently?***
  - Borrow environmental storytelling through abandoned spaces
  - Use objects and decay to imply past events
  - Design environments that feel lonely and eerie without needing dialogue

Studios

Playdead Studio



Valve Corporation



- ***What is it?***
  A video game company known for developing influential games and platforms such as Half-Life, Portal, and the digital distribution platform Steam.

- ***Why is it interesting to you?***
  - Known for innovative game design and storytelling
  - Strong focus on environmental storytelling and player-driven experiences
  - Their games often teach mechanics through level design rather than tutorials

- ***What do you want to borrow, challenge, or do differently?***
  - Borrow the idea of letting players learn through interacting with the environment
  - Use level design to naturally guide players without heavy instructions
  - Explore ways to make environments feel immersive and responsive to the player

Movie

Interstellar



- ***What is it?***
  Interstellar is a science fiction film made by Christopher Nolan. The story follows astronauts venturing through space to find a new habitable planet for humanity.

- ***Why is it interesting to you?***
  - Strong sense of scale and atmosphere
  - Environments feel mysterious and unfamiliar
  - Uses visuals and environments to create emotion

- ***What do you want to borrow, challenge, or do differently?***
  - Borrow the use of large environments and landmarks to guide attention
  - Use atmosphere and lighting to create curiosity
  - Make environments interactive for players to explore, unlike film where you only observe

Products Systems

Spotify

Spotify

Expeditions/Art

Rain Room





Community research

Experiments / Work

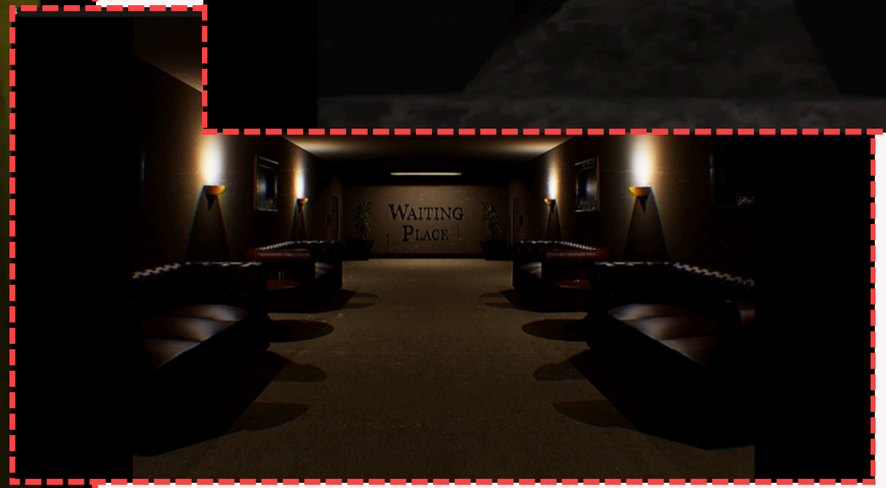






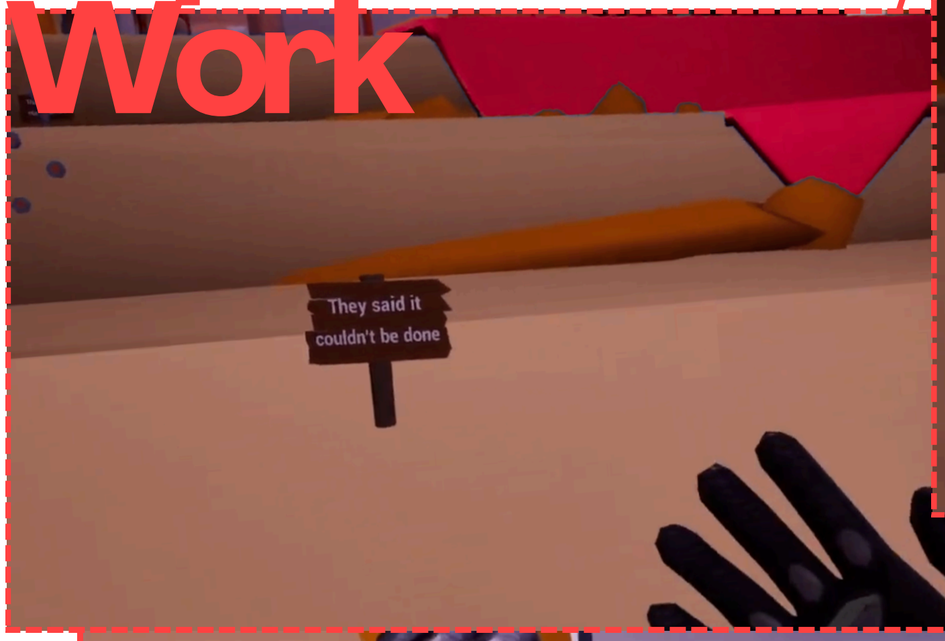








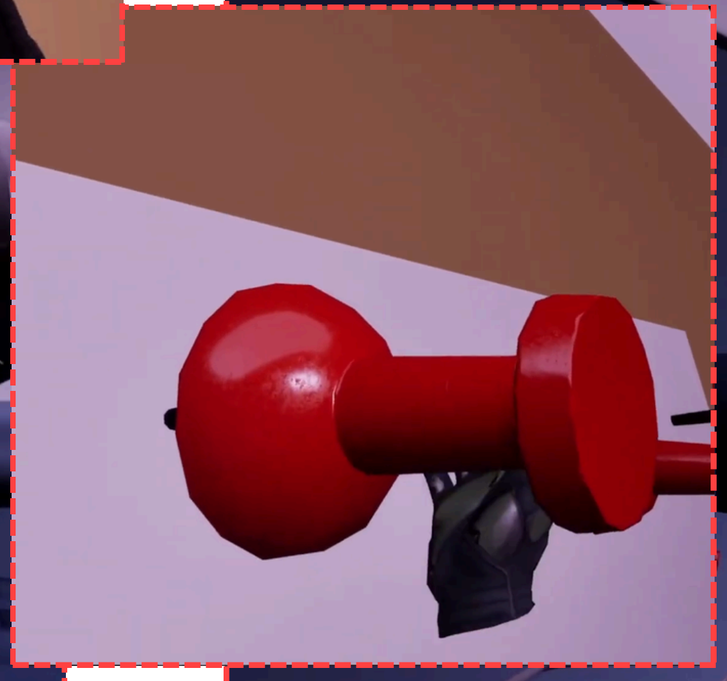
Experiments / Work











Experiments / Work

My first piece of work I showed in my portfolio was a video game I worked on in year 13 of high school. I was tasked to make some sort of digital media whether it be a designed website, an app or a game. I decided I wanted to try to learn a new software I have never used before. I had barely heard of unreal engine at this time and found out all of the cool things you can make with it.

This really sparked something within me and made me able to get my ideas out into the world. I was heavily inspired by found footage videos and video games. I loved the story of the backrooms and wanted to make a mysterious phycological horror game that scared the pkayers by the environment rather than monsters. The game had many different “levels”.

The game starts outside of an abandoned multistory parking lot where the player will find a note telling them about what has happened in the past to someone. They will then find a hole in the wall and venture inside. That is when things start to become weird. This project really helped me understand what I wanted to do in university and opened up many opportunities to learn more digital software like blender and unreal engine through uni assignments.

The second piece of work I used was a virtual reality experience I made in my second year of uni. We had to make some sort of interactive environment that would run entirely on the headset that ran android. That meant I had to make something that would run well (above 90 frames per second) and would look good. My original idea was going to be a PC building simulator where you got taught through prompts on how to complete the build.

I scrapped that idea when I thought of a climbing game where the player was in a small workshop and had to climb to the top. Throughout the game there are signs that look like they’ve been placed by another player. I took heavy inspiration from other video games like portal that do this similar technique to make the player want to find out more as they keep climbing.

At the start of this assignment I felt pretty lost and didn't think I had a clear project or direction. Through the writing and mapping process, I realised that I actually had consistent interests, I just hadn't properly defined them yet. Looking back at my work and the things I'm drawn to, I can see that my focus has always been on games, especially immersive environments and exploration.

A key idea that came out of this process is the balance between exploration and guidance. I enjoy games where players can explore freely, but are still subtly directed through the environment using things like lighting, sound, and layout. This has become an important part of how I think about design.

Using Unreal Engine also helped me understand how these ideas can be applied in practice. Even though my project wasn't fully developed, it showed me how environment design can influence how a player moves and experiences a space.

Overall, this assignment helped me turn a general interest in games into a more focused direction. I now have a clearer idea of what I want to explore moving forward, particularly around player guidance and immersive environments.

Reflection

WHERE IM HEADED

01 June, 2026

Design-Research Proposal

By: Brendan Dutton

Looking back at the first part of this portfolio, there's a common theme running through almost everything I've made, environments that carry feeling. Spaces in games that make you slow down, look around, and feel something you weren't expecting. I've been creating these instinctively for years, but I've never stopped to ask why they work, or how to do it on purpose.

That's where this research begins. I want to understand the mechanics behind wonder, what it is about light, scale, sound, and the quiet details of a space that can make a player feel genuinely small, or curious, or moved. These aren't just aesthetic questions. For me they're fundamental to what games can be as a medium.

My community of practice; studios like ThatgameCompany, FromSoftware, and indie developers pushing the boundaries of environmental storytelling, have been doing this for years. But I want to go beyond admiring the results and start understanding the process. The theory behind it. The intentionality.

This next stage of research is about bridging the gap between instinct and intention. Between making something that feels good and understanding why it feels good, so I can do it better, more deliberately, and help push what game environments are capable of expressing.

Background by Brendan Dutton

DSDN371

PRECEDENTS

Firewatch



Firewatch is one of the clearest examples of colour doing emotional work. The warm oranges and yellows of the Wyoming wilderness create an initial sense of comfort and openness, but as the story darkens, the peaceful nature of the environment is harshly contrasted with the eventual burning of the forest, smoke filling the screen to support heightened tension and a sense of vulnerability. Lighting, colour palette, weather and sound work together not just to set a mood, but as a design mechanism that intentionally mirrors the player's emotional state.

https://medium.com/@aslaitner/firewatch-an-atmospheric-masterpiece-bea3c71d95a9

https://medium.com/@msnmclennan/firewatch-freedom-or-restriction-602e8c73ac64

Portal/ Portal 2



Portal uses environment as a slow reveal. The game simply places you into the world with little to no tutorial, its story is told entirely through its environment. The clutter-free spaces, simple props, and monotone colours create unease from the very start. That extreme cleanliness makes the moments of discovery hit harder. When players stumble through a busted hole in one of the otherwise perfect walls, they discover the maddening drawings of someone called the Ratman, and the world cracks open. In Portal 2, the backstory of Aperture Science is revealed not through text or exposition, but through environment, posters, signs, and recorded messages show a huge texture that players feel they discover and piece together themselves.

https://medium.com/@eshan.esmail04/portal-environmental-storytelling-e4ac509e6095

DSDN371

PRECEDENTS

Journey



Journey is one of the most deliberate example of a game designed purely around wonder and awe. ThatGameCompany's goal was to make the player feel small and to feel wonder, to create an emotion missing from modern gaming, a sense of not knowing, of being something tiny in a large vast world. There is no dialogue, no UI, no enemies in the traditional sense. Instead, through beautiful landscapes and exploration, the game encourages players to ask questions, who lived in this world, what happened to them, and will the same fate happen to me? Every design decision, the scale of the dunes, the way sand clings to your robe, the wordless encounters with other players, purely exists to serve a single emotional intention.

https://www.digiart21.org/art/journey-2

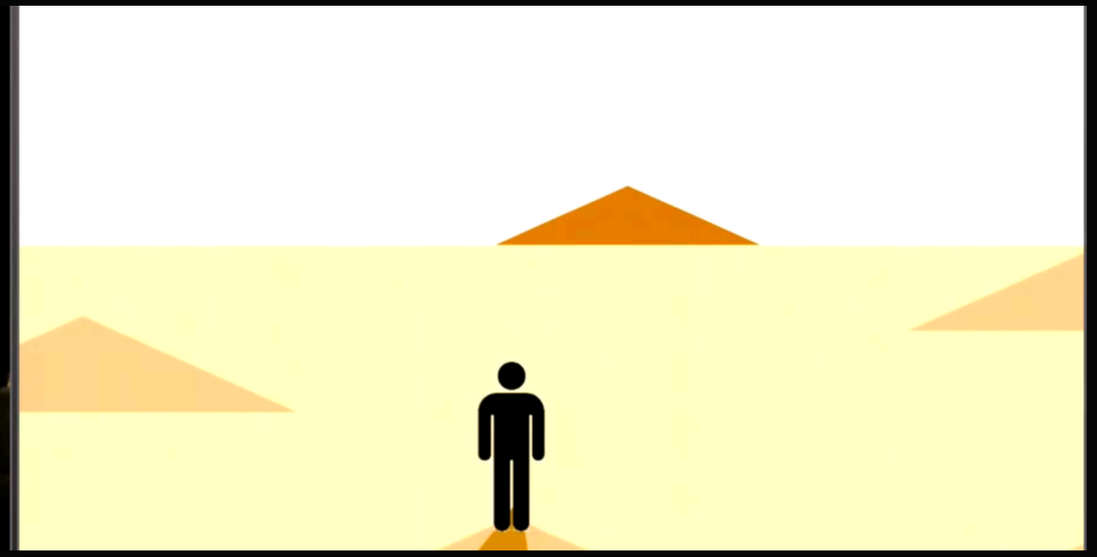
https://vfs.edu/programs/game-design

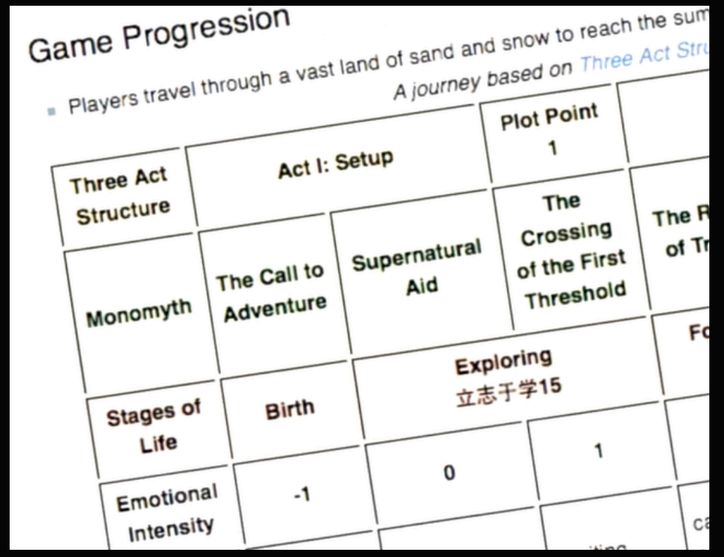
DSDN371

CASESTUDY

Designing Journey, Jenova Chen (GDC 2013)







What I find most interesting about Journey isn't the game itself, it's the story of how hard it was to make people feel something. Jenova Chen walked into the project with one goal: make the player feel small. Not scared, not empowered, not entertained in the usual sense, just genuinely, quietly small. Awed by the world around them. That kind of emotional precision is rare in any creative medium, let alone games.

But it nearly didn't work. Twice during development the team had what looked like a finished game, and twice playtesting showed that players weren't feeling it. The environments were stunning. The music was beautiful. And yet the emotional arc kept falling flat. The fix wasn't adding more — it was understanding why certain spaces and sequences weren't landing, and redesigning them from the ground up with the feeling as the target, not the visuals.

That's what makes this such an important case study for me personally. It's proof that the kind of wonder I want to create in my own work isn't something that just happens when a game looks good enough. It has to be built intentionally, tested honestly, and sometimes torn apart and rebuilt. Chen called it innovating what a game makes you feel — and that's exactly what I want to learn how to do.

https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1017700/Designing

DSDN371

CASESTUDY

A Play of Bodies, Brendan Keogh (2018)



A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames

By Brendan Keogh

The MIT Press
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Publication date: 2018

Availability Key
- Open Access
- Free
- Available
- No Access

An investigation of the embodied engagement between the playing body and the videogame: how player and game incorporate each other.

Our bodies engage with videogames in complex and fascinating ways. Through an entanglement of eyes-on-screens, ears-at-speakers, and muscles-against-interfaces, we experience games with our senses. But, as Brendan Keogh argues in *A Play of Bodies*, this corporal engagement goes both ways; as we touch the videogame, it touches back, augmenting the very senses with which we perceive. Keogh investigates this merging of actual and virtual bodies and worlds, asking how our embodied sense of perception constitutes, and becomes constituted by, the phenomenon of videogame play. In short, how do we perceive videogames?

Keogh works toward formulating a phenomenology of videogame experience, focusing on what happens in the embodied engagement between the playing body and the videogame, and anchoring his analysis in an eclectic series of games that range from mainstream to niche titles. Considering smartphone videogames, he proposes a notion of *co-attentiveness* to understand how players can feel present in a virtual world without forgetting that they are touching a screen in the actual world. He discusses the somatic basis of videogame play, whether games involve vigorous physical movement or quietly sitting on a couch with a controller; the sometimes overlooked visual and audible pleasures of videogame experience; and modes of temporality represented by character death, failure, and repetition. Finally, he considers two metaphorical characters: the "hacker," representing the hegemonic, masculine gamers concerned with control and configuration; and the "cyborg," less concerned with control than with embodiment and incorporation.

I agree with Keogh's idea with how the Players' inputs create different outputs from the game.

unsure of what this means

Videogames are experienced through the body, not just the mind. e.g Heart racing in intense moments, muscles tense up when scared.

MY KEY TAKEAWAYS:

“EMOTION BEFORE AESTHETICS”
“SCALE CREATES FEELING”
“SILENCE IS A DESIGN TOOL”
“COLOUR DOES EMOTIONAL WORK”
“WONDER REQUIRES INTENTION, NOT INSTINCT”
“ENVIRONMENT AS NARRATIVE”
“RESTRAINT OVER DETAIL”
“THE PLAYER MUST FEEL SMALL TO FEEL AWE”
“PACING SHAPES EMOTIONAL ARC”

Background by Brendan Dutton

DSDN371

INITIAL IDEAS/CONCEPT

Place/context	Design Types	Problems	People/company	Themes or theories	Tech eg Technique or Technology	Qualities/ Vibes
① Apartment	① Game design	① weight painting in blender	① Valve	① conflict	① Blender	① Immersive
② Dystopian	② 3D Animation	② When I don't have a solid Plan	② Obsidian Entertainment	② Dark	② Unreal Engine	② Interesting
③ Destroyed	③ Posters	③ Group work when others don't Contribute	③ Naughty Dog Entertainment	③ Horror	③ Godot	③ Thought provoking
④ Time travel	④ Photography	④ Unable to get ideas out	④ Kojima	④ Action	④ Sketchbook	④ Nature
⑤ Darkness	⑤ 3rd person game	⑤ Generative AI	⑤ Gamers	⑤ Fiction/Non Fiction	⑤ Grey boxing	⑤ Intense
	⑥ 2D game					

Round 1

- Dystopian
- Game design
- Generative AI
- Valve
- Horror
- Unreal Engine
- Immersive

Round 2

- Time Travel
- 3rd person Game
- When I don't have a solid Plan
- Obsidian Entertainment
- Dark
- Blender
- Thought Provoking

Round 3

- Destroyed
- 3D Animation
- Group work when others don't contribute
- kojima
- Fiction/Non Fiction
- Sketchbook
- Intense

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EXPERIMENTS

For my first experiment I wanted to understand what people actually remember about game worlds, not mechanics, not the story, but the feeling of being in a space. I asked a small group of players a single question:

"What video game world do you remember most, and what do you remember about it? What did it feel like to be there?"

The responses were interesting. Nobody described a mechanic. Nobody mentioned a tutorial or a UI. Every single person went straight to the atmosphere of the world, a colour, a feeling of scale, a sound. What people carry with them from games isn't what they did, it's how a place made them feel.

Person 01 - what they remember

BioShock's Rapture. The feeling of something once large, now broken. Art deco architecture half submerged under water, flickering neon, audio diaries left by people who didn't survive. It wasn't about what happened in the game it was about piecing together why things happened.

Person 02 - what they rememeber

The Portal games. Aperture Science feels abandoned but alive. Very clean white chambers, sound design very important to portray emptiness, random writing on walls to show story that you slowly piece together yourself. The world tells you everything without stopping to explain it. It never holds your hand through the game, it trusts you to “feel” the place yourself.

Person 03 - what they rememeber

Metro Exodus for sure. I still think about the moment you first leave the tunnels and everything opens up. You've been underground this whole time and then suddenly you're standing in the middle of this massive dystopian world. The Caspian Desert, the frozen river, the forests, each place felt completely different but all of them had this same style to them. Like something happened here and everyone is just gone. You'd walk through somebody's abandoned home and there'd still be photos on the wall. Nobody told you to feel anything, you just did. The previous metro exodus games make you feel very clostrophpbic and cramped but the new Metro Exodus makes eveyrthing feel much more open. The contrast between the games is very important for making the player feel something.

DSDN371

EXPERIMENTS

I asked a friend who playes video games to watch three short video clips from different games (he did not get told what the game videos were) and share their honest thoughts and feelings after each one. The clips were selected deliberately to represent three distinct emotional targets, wonder, dread, and comfort. They were not told what emotion each clip was designed to evoke before watching. Each response below was recorded and the transcript of what they said was refined and put below.

Video 1 — Journey Gameplay, Wonder & Awe (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PdeLp490PE)

"It feels very mysterious. There are runes and symbols scattered around that you have no idea about, what they are, what they mean, what they're for. The whole space feels empty, almost like a graveyard.
As for what the character has to do, it just feels like you're meant to explore. There's no pressure, it's just fun and mysterious. And that peak in the distance, with the light coming from it, it feels like something is guiding you toward it without telling you why.
The landscape itself makes you feel very small. It's so vast that you become this tiny speck in the middle of a desert. It's overwhelming in a quiet way."

Video 2 — Alien Isolation, Dread & Unease (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTjeJVKN_PY&t=576s)

"It's very intense. Everything about it feels complex and layered, like there's always something going on just out of sight.
It's a little scary honestly. The corridors are so narrow and claustrophobic, the spaces feel deliberately tight and suffocating. You get this constant feeling that something could jump out at any moment, that you're never actually safe, even when nothing is happening."

Video 3 — Stardew Valley, Comfort & Nostalgia (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjvFF2Kvx1U)

"It feels very peaceful. It's gardening, it's simple, almost like a hobby rather than a game. Something to do just to relax, nothing to stress about.
Just peacefully chopping trees. There's no urgency to any of it.
The sounds and style are what really do it, they're charming, almost cutesy. Everything about it feels warm and unhurried. It doesn't demand anything from you."

DESIGN RESEARCH PROPOSAL



Background by Brendan Dutton

“AN EXHIBITION OF FEELING”

A PLAYABLE ENVIRONMENT THAT USES LIGHT, SCALE, SOUND, AND SPACE TO DELIBERATELY PORTRAY WONDER, UNEASE, AND COMFORT. IT ASKS WHETHER PLAYERS FEEL WHAT WAS INTENDED.

My design research I'm proposing is an interactive exhibition built around a short game I will create myself. The game will feature several distinct environments, each designed deliberately around a different emotional target, using lighting, colour, spatial scale, sound, and environmental storytelling as the primary tools.

Players will move through the game with no instructions and no hand-holding. The environment itself will be the only guide, the same way the best games I've researched do it. After completing the experience, each player will fill out a short survey asking which spaces affected them, what they felt, and what they think caused it.

The exhibition format is important. Watching someone play a game in a shared physical space creates a different kind of engagement than playing alone at home. It makes the emotional responses feel more immediate and observable, and allows me to gather honest, in-the-moment reactions rather than reflections after the fact.

This proposal brings together everything this research has been building toward, the theory, the precedents, the experiments, and tests it all through something I've actually made. The goal isn't just to create a game that looks good. It's to find out whether wonder, discomfort, or warmth can be designed deliberately into a space, and whether players feel what I intended them to feel.

CONTEXT, OPPORTUNITY & SIGNIFICANCE

I've been making games for as long as I can remember. Not because I wanted to build mechanics or systems, but because I wanted to build worlds. Places that felt real enough to get lost in. Growing up I wasn't just playing games, I was studying them. Noticing how certain spaces made me feel things I couldn't explain. Why some environments made me stop moving just to look around. Why others made my chest feel tight, or made me feel extremely safe.
Choosing game design as my field wasn't just a career decision. It was an acknowledgement that environments, virtual or otherwise, have a genuine power over how we feel. That power deserves to be understood, not just stumbled into.

What concerns me about game development today is how rarely that power is used intentionally. So much of the industry measures success in mechanics, monetisation, and engagement metrics. The emotional experience of simply being in a space is often an afterthought. Something that emerges from good art direction rather than deliberate design thinking.

I want to change how I approach that in my own practice. I want to move from making environments that feel good by instinct, to understanding exactly why they work and building that knowledge into everything I create going forward. This research sits at the intersection of game design, environmental psychology, and emotional experience. It feels like exactly the right question for exactly the right moment in my practice as my final year doing game design.

WHAT IF...

THERE WAS A GAME WITH NO OBJECTIVES, NO INSTRUCTIONS, AND NO STORY TOLD IN WORDS. JUST A SERIES OF VIRTUAL SPACES, EACH DESIGNED TO MAKE YOU FEEL SOMETHING SPECIFIC. AND AFTER PLAYING, YOU WERE ASKED WHETHER THE ENVIRONMENT MADE YOU FEEL EXACTLY WHAT THE DESIGNER INTENDED?

AIMS & METHODOLOGY

My response to this identified opportunity is to create a short, playable game environment built entirely around emotional intention. Imagine a game with no objective, no score, no instructions. Just a series of spaces designed to make you feel something specific. This project aims to: demonstrate that wonder, unease, and comfort can be deliberately designed into a virtual environment, test whether players feel what was intended without being told what to feel, and develop a transferable design framework that other game developers can learn from and apply to their own work.

Without relying on narrative or mechanics, this project celebrates the raw power of environmental design and asks whether a space alone is enough to move someone. As a research proposal, it will further explore the relationship between intentional design decisions and genuine emotional response, but allow it to unfold on the player's own terms, at their own pace, in their own way.

This project follows a practice based research methodology. The game will be built iteratively, with each design decision, lighting, colour, spatial scale, sound, environmental detail, treated as a testable variable rather than an aesthetic choice.

The initial steps will focus on building three distinct environments, each targeting a different emotional response. Playtesting will be central to the process. Players will experience the game in an exhibition setting and complete a short survey afterwards, recording what they felt, which spaces affected them most, and what they believe caused those feelings.

It is crucial that the game does not guide the player toward a feeling through text or instruction. All emotional work must be done by the environment itself. Photography, screen recording, and reflective journaling will document the iterative design process throughout. Without honest player responses, there is no research.

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