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

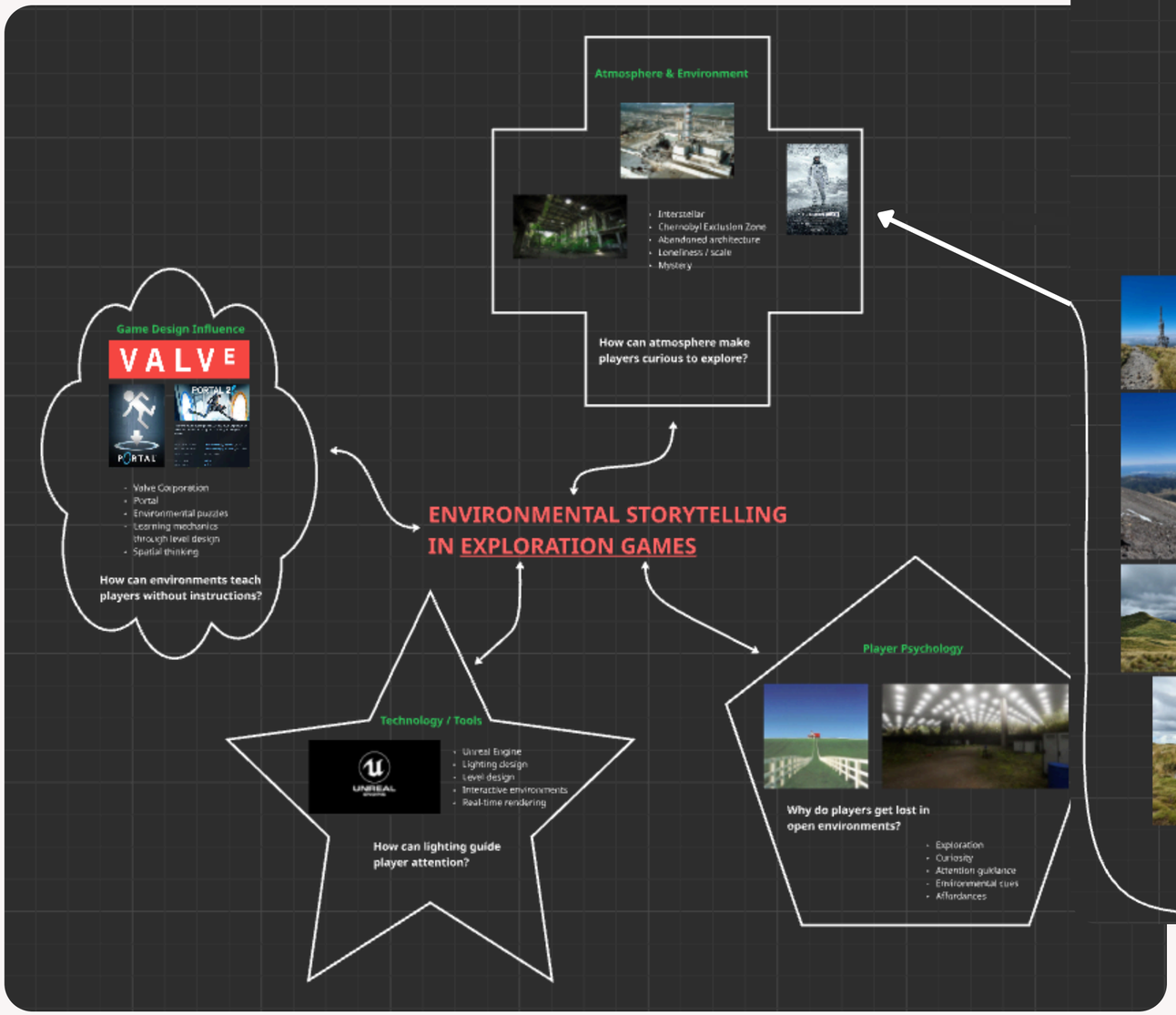
In contrast, Ubisoft represents a different approach, often using explicit guidance systems such as maps, markers, and objectives. While effective, this approach highlights a tension within my own practice, as I am more interested in reducing reliance on these systems in favour of more immersive design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

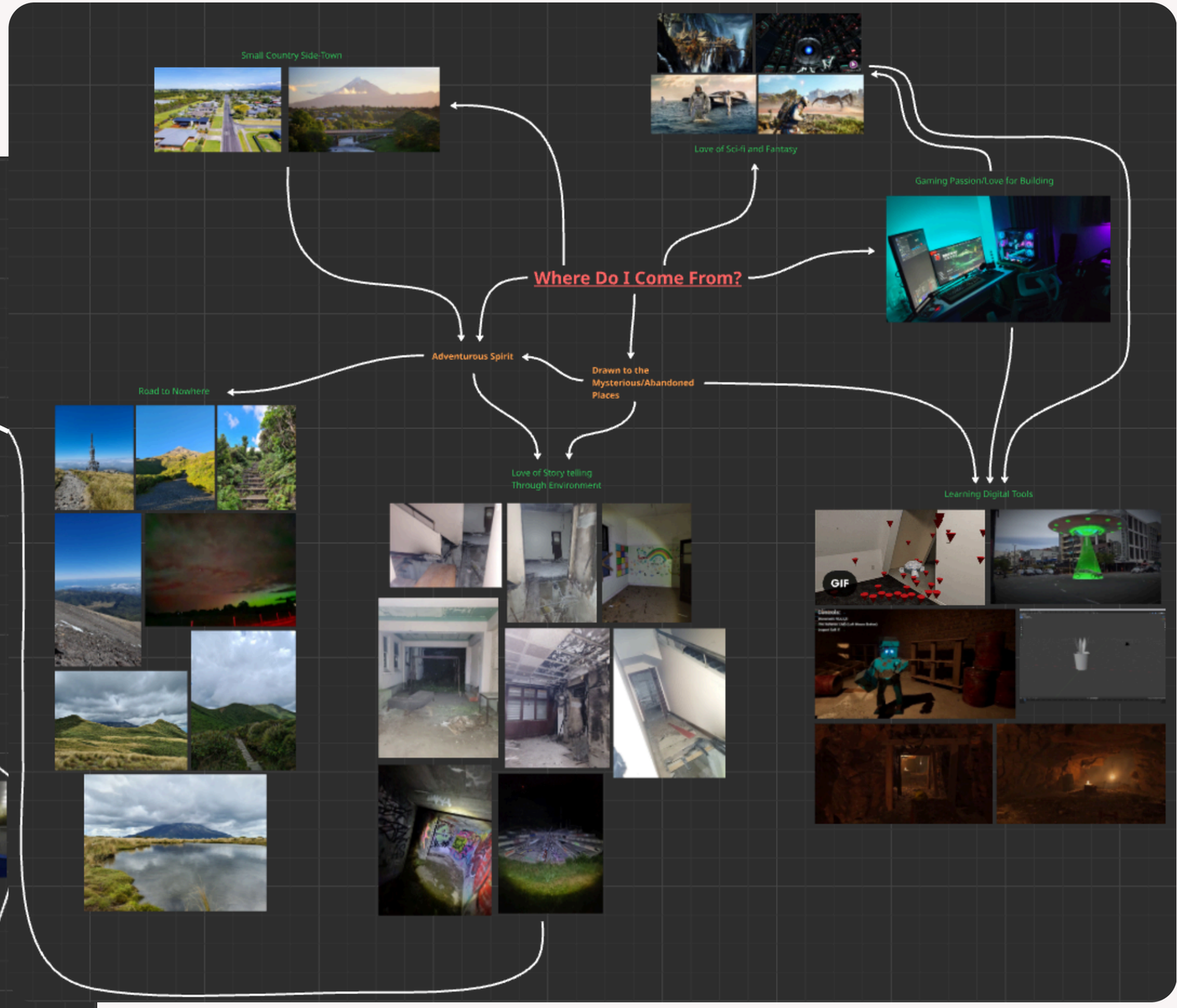
FromSoftware provides an example of minimal guidance, where players are often left to interpret the world independently. While this can create a strong sense of discovery, it can also lead to confusion. This further reinforces my interest in finding a balance between clarity and uncertainty in player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

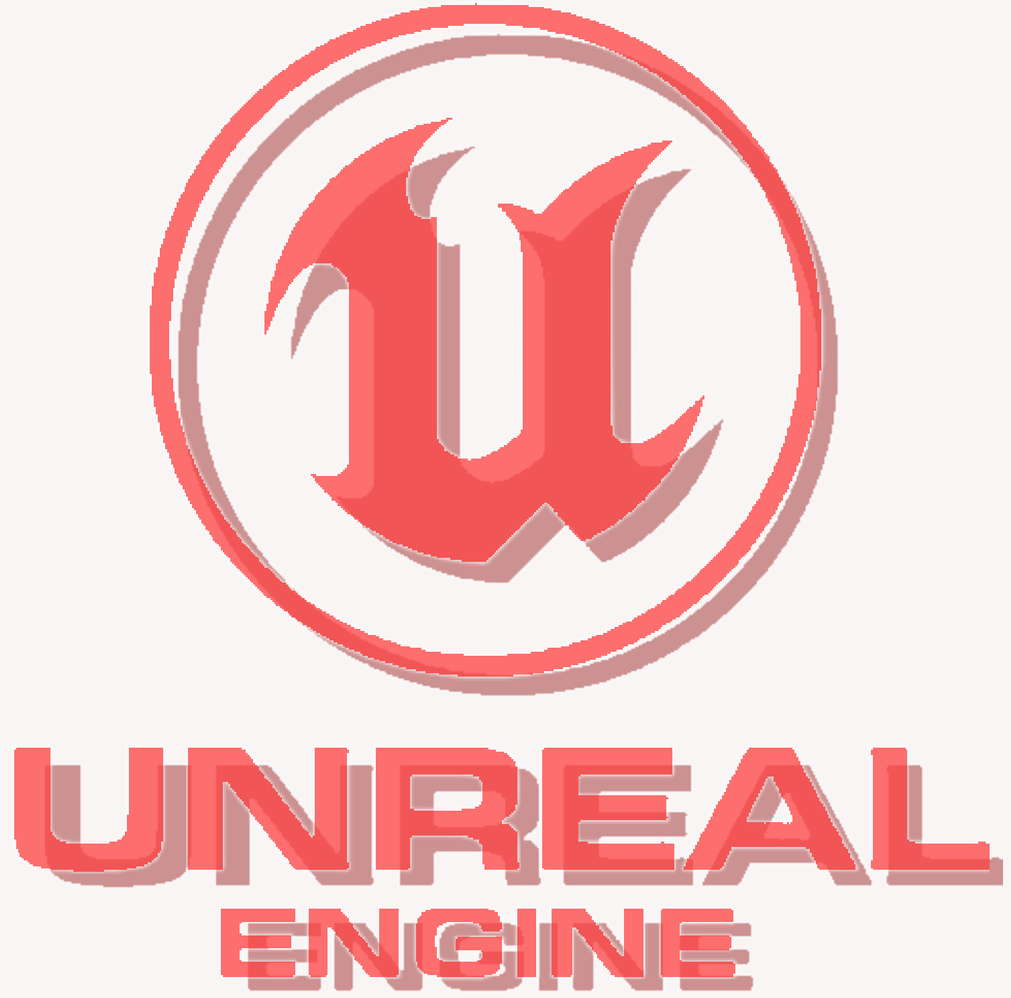
Process Work pt.2

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

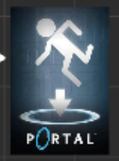


- ***What is it?***
  Journey is an exploration focused game where players travel across a vast desert toward a distant mountain. The game contains no dialogue and minimal UI relying mainly on environmental cues to guide players.

- ***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

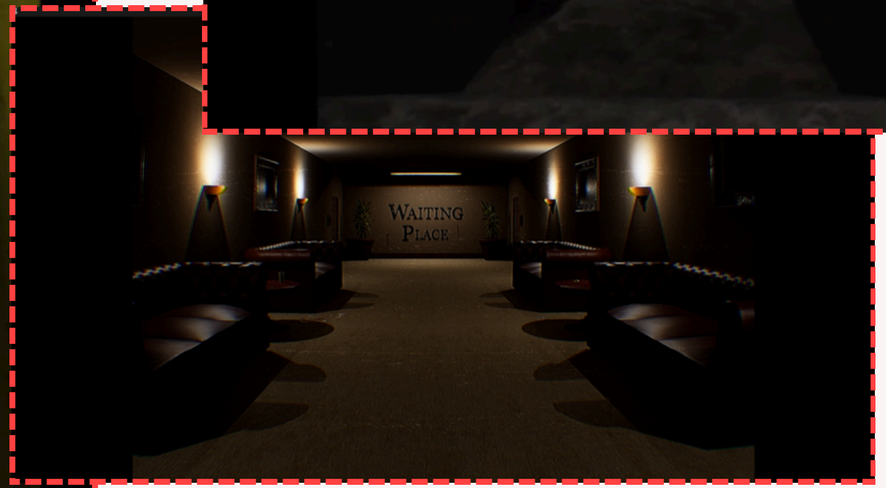






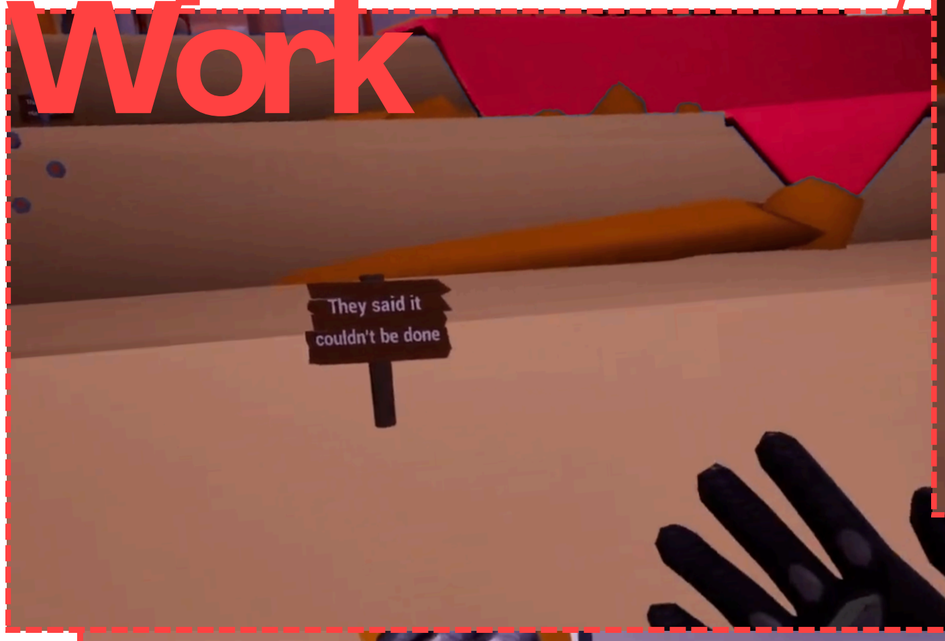








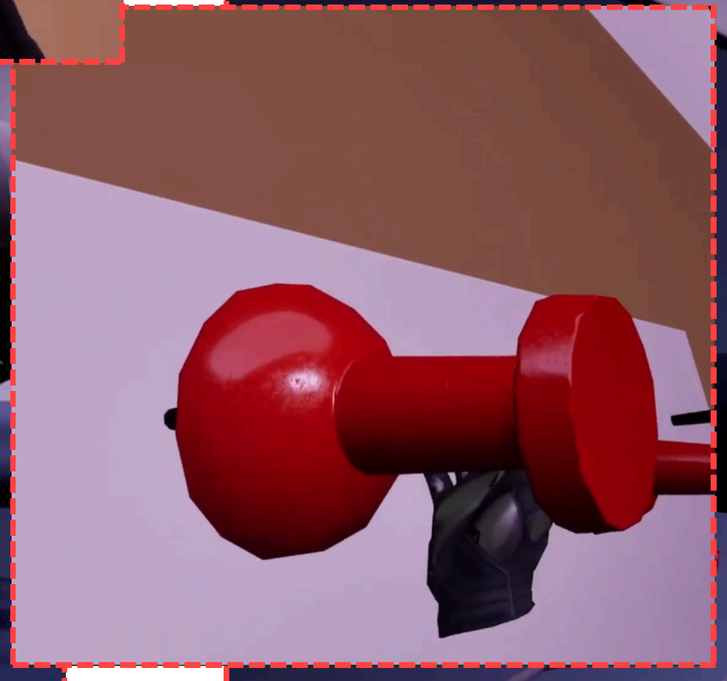
Experiments / Work











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

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