THE LOST MANSION

H011428m

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INTRODUCTION:

I chose to solve a narrative based problem for this project, I have a great interest in this field and throughout previous projects have not had as much chance as I had hoped to explore this field and advance my creative story skills to a level that will allow me to enter the industry.

The Problem: Throughout many games I've played narratives can feel very static even when active choice making has been implemented, it still feels as though the outcome is set in stone and that each of the characters feel similar, having choices barely effect a specific character's outcome. This in turn creates a boring and linear experience for the player, disconnecting them from the story.

The Solution: I will be creating a short narrative experience that employs the use of scattered objects to present a player with an interesting narrative through simple techniques of environmental story telling. All items and story pieces will be found by the player at their own pace to show that player freedom can be preserve despite a linear narrative. All collectables and story beats will be optional finds, meaning the narrative itself relies on player freedom and exploration to discover.

By solving this problem, it will allow many games in the industry to be able to captivate audiences with effective storytelling and player choice, this can be implemented on my any different scales from indie projects to AAA, proving that it is possible to keep player agency and freedom while presenting a narrative.

AIM - CREATING A NARRATIVE EXPERIENCE THAT THE PLAYER FEELS A PART OF:

Objectives:

1. Plan a narrative that allows then player free roam of an environment, giving them full agency of the space to explore as they want.

2. Asure all story beats are well planned and scattered through the games location to allow the player to investigate and learn at their own pace.

3. Reduce handholding where possible to keep the player central in the narrative, making sure the game feels "real".

Deliverables:

I have created a narrative experience, created in unreal engine, with an interesting and fully player focused narrative. This project contains a few complex systems to allow for varied progression such as:

1. Effective inventory system (with the ability to use items)

2. Quests with relevant connected items (linking back to the inventory)

3. Simplistic battle mechanic to add tension and the possibility of a Game Over (varied outcomes based on items owned)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES:

- For this project I have investigated a few separate sources to gain insight and understanding into the development of narrative driven games, These have ranged from larger games with advanced and vast narratives such as Baldur's Gate 3 (looking into scattered item-based story telling) to smaller titles including Gone Home (free roaming narrative experience).

- While looking into these titles I was able to develop a good scope for the project I have proposed, sticking closely to the free roam style and smaller size of Gone Homes story and environment, this has allowed me to more efficiently develop the narrative plan for my project and keep within a scope that was possible for the timeframe of this project.

- I have been judging the success / failure of my project based on user feedback given to me during playtesting. They have been able to comment on how I have presented my narrative and encouraged players to explore and discover. Through this player testing I have taken note of the multiple path's players have taken and gather feedback on the story's progression from different perspectives.

- I have gathered this data through a survey presented during anonymous playtesting that includes questions on narrative choices and understanding as well as overall player experience and engagement. This information has been reviewed to see how well my narrative was understood and therefore presented in my artefact. This has also given me a good understanding of any shortfalls in my project that can then be reviewed and edited as needed.

DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE / PRODUCTION

NARRATIVE PLANNING:

Basic Story:

"You get lost trying to take a shortcut on a dirt trail through the woods, your tired bursts causing you to stop/ There's no signal so you walk down the path hoping to find some help. A large mansion comes into view, you approach and knock on the door a loud creak echoing through the house in front of you as the door swings open. You hear whispers from inside and a pull to enter. You gently creep into the house calling out to any inhabitants but get no response. Now you're inside looking for answers and discovering *the* homes dark secret. The story of a man who lost his wife and child doing anything possible to bring them back even if it involves the occult, begins luring strangers into his home."

- I wanted to create a story that would allow for there to be a central focus on player exploration that is when the idea of the mansion came into play.

- This location has allowed me to implement a locked in environment for the player to explore at their own pace, to best encourage this I planned for there to be very little information or pre-story when the game begins, leaving all discovery up to how much the player wishes to explore.

- This inspiration came from the game Gone Home, a game that uses a similar theme and can be completed in a single minute if the player knows the path, this idea of the player being in complete control of how long the experience lasts is something that I believe works well for the project I have created and allows complete agency over the game itself and how far the player wishes to explore.

With the premise set I began to expand, thinking about how the story will be presented to the character though my game itself, keeping in mind the fact that this information will be scattered in pieces through the environment for the player to find.

NARRATIVE PLANNING:

Scattering this information through my level has been done though notes written by the antagonist while dealing with his grief, each one getting progressively darker as he shifts his focus from moving on to bringing his wife back.

These notes will be the main way the player learns the present narrative, all these collectables will be optional, and the player is able to simply enter the final room and complete the fight, this will end the game, but if they explore it begins to put a new perspective on the antagonist. Instead of him being a twisted killer he is instead seen as a broken man.

CHARACTERS:

There are a few characters present in my narrative that are important for progression and narrative understanding.

1. The player: A victim in the story, a faceless character that the player can connect to.

2. Lord drummer: owner of the mansion and antagonist, looking to raise his wife from the dead to cure his grief at the cost of others' lives.

3. The watcher: holds an optional quest to give the player a better chance in the final fight, is the living, hidden remains of lady drummer trying to free her soul from the house, stop her husband and move on.

I wanted to keep the number of characters small so that the house would feel empty adding to the eerie themes and ensure the player feels alone in the location. My choice to keep the player anonymous is one that has been sat in stone since the beginning of planning, I wanted to make sure that the player could feel connected to this character as much as possible, by giving it a name and a face I believe it would take away from that connection, stopping the story from feeling like the players experience.

Floor 1:
1. The Watcher
2. Notes

Floor 2:
1. Wisp Enemy
2. Notes
3. The Mirror
4. The Watcher

Floor 3:
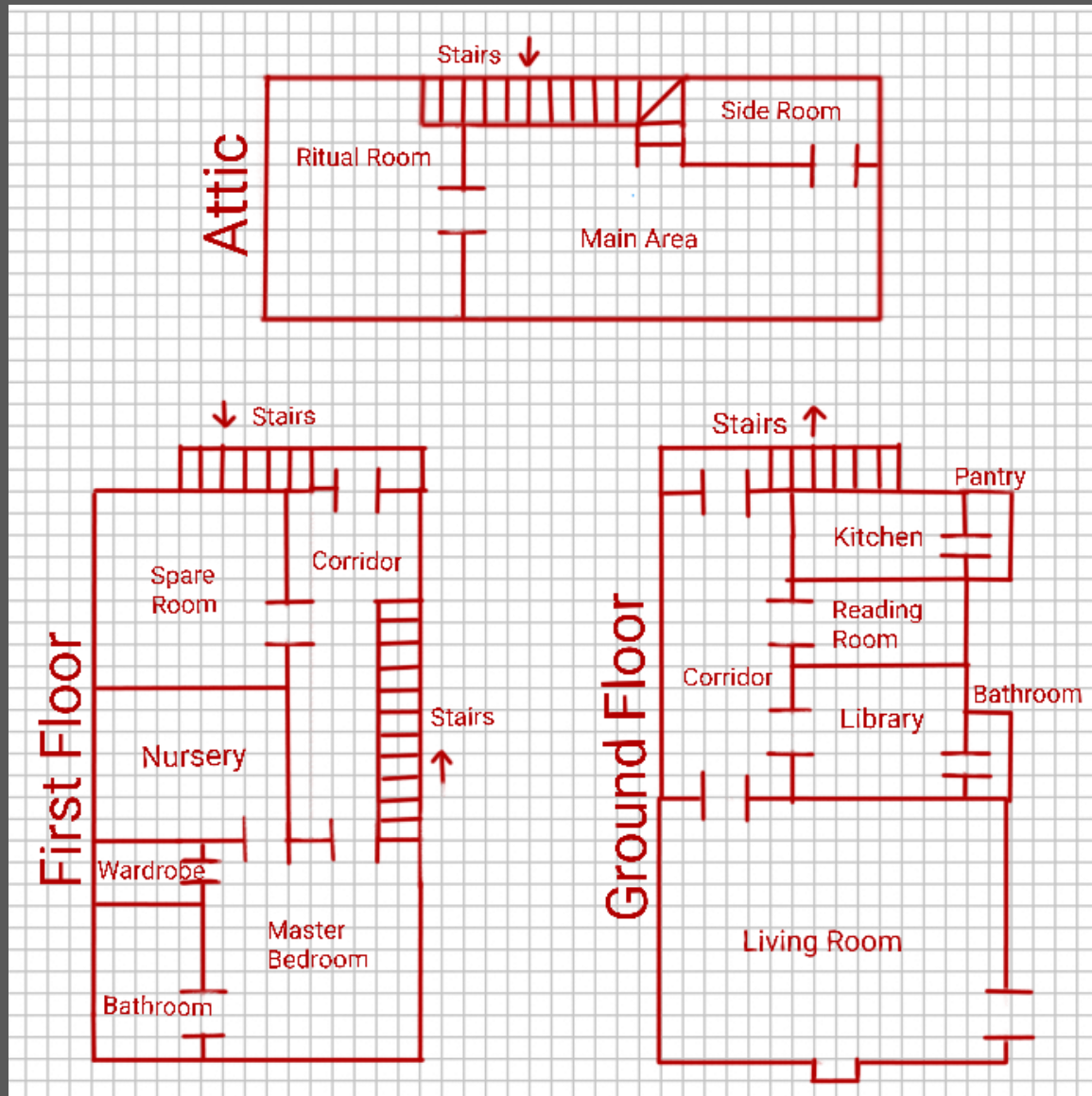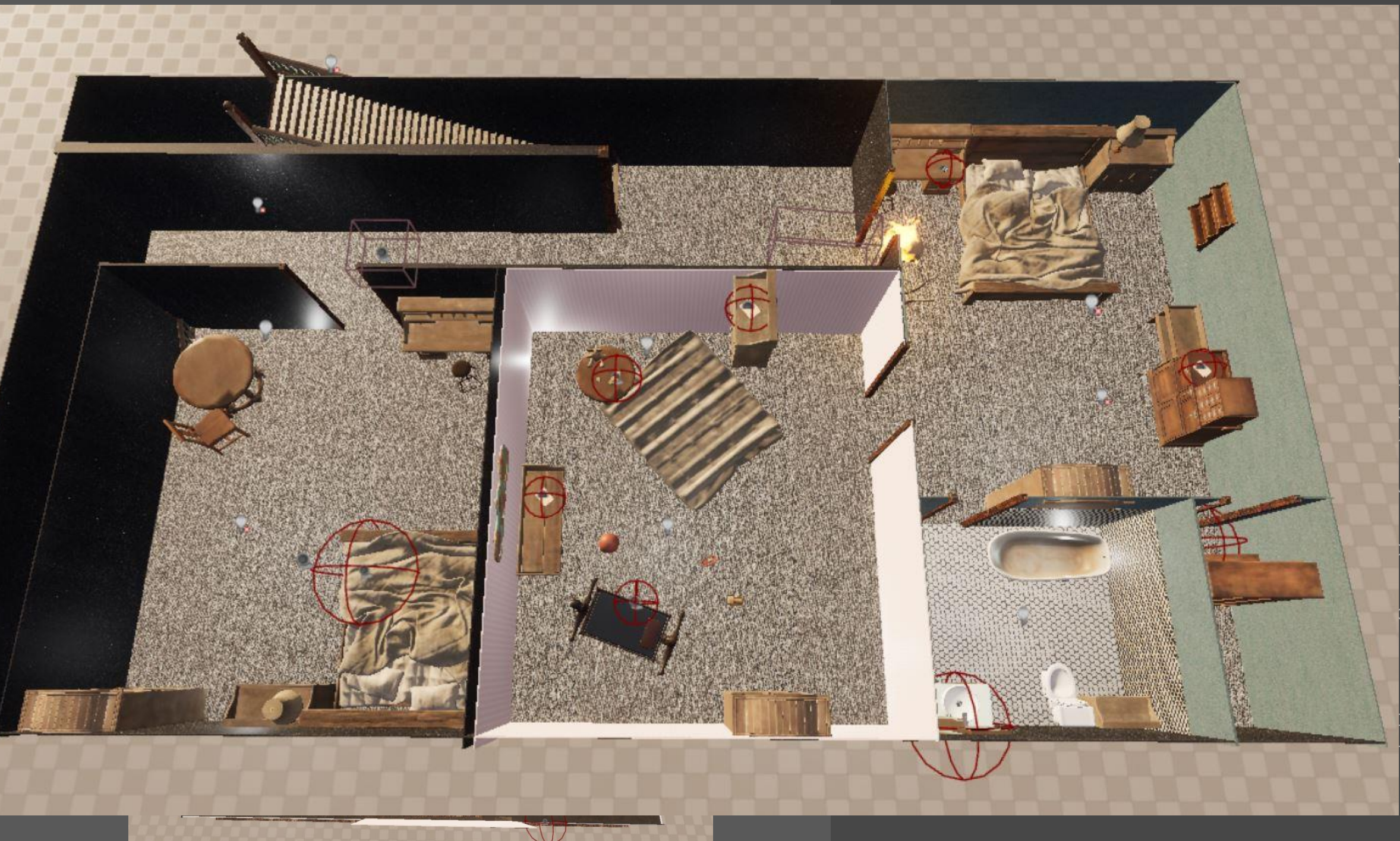1. The Watcher
2. Notes
3. Wisp Enemy
4. Lord Drummer

START OF DEVELOPMENT:

The first step in this project's development was to create the environment my story would take place in, having the location set allowed me to figure out the location that felt natural for my items.

I made sure the take note of the different items and objects on each floor so that I could keep track of the assets that I would need (tables, chairs, etc).

I also needed to make sure there were different emptier spaces to place my NPC (The Watcher) and a few enemies that will be present in my environment.

The level plan itself helped me scatter my different encounters evenly throughout.

MECHANIC DEVELOPMENT:

Inventory:

- Having an inventory present in my project is incredibly important for players to keep track of the quest items they've collected as well as manage their health between fights.

- I created the inventory using an array that stores interacted objects, items can be added and removed when used. This is done using an interaction system that checks for a Blueprint component on each object.

- There will be 5 types of items that can be stored in the inventory, 3 being quest objects, 1 being a healing item and one will be a "Weapon" (increases damage).

- The inventories UI will only be visible after a keypress too keep the menus separate to the main player experience, this will make it so that during exploration the entirety of the player's screen is free to create emersion as best as possible.
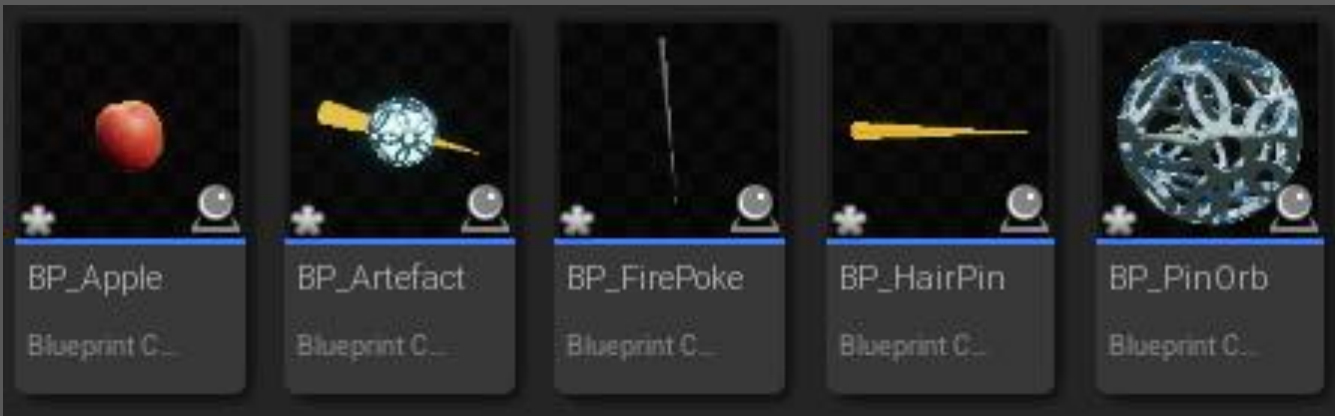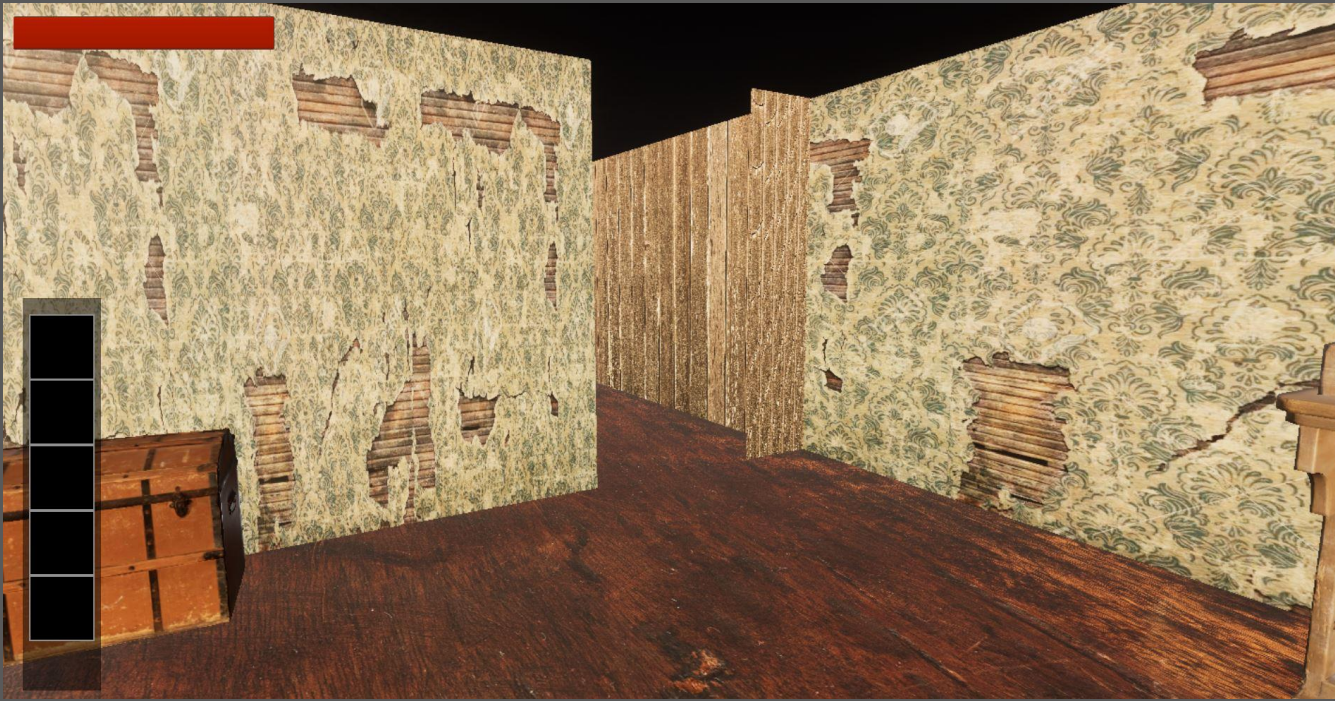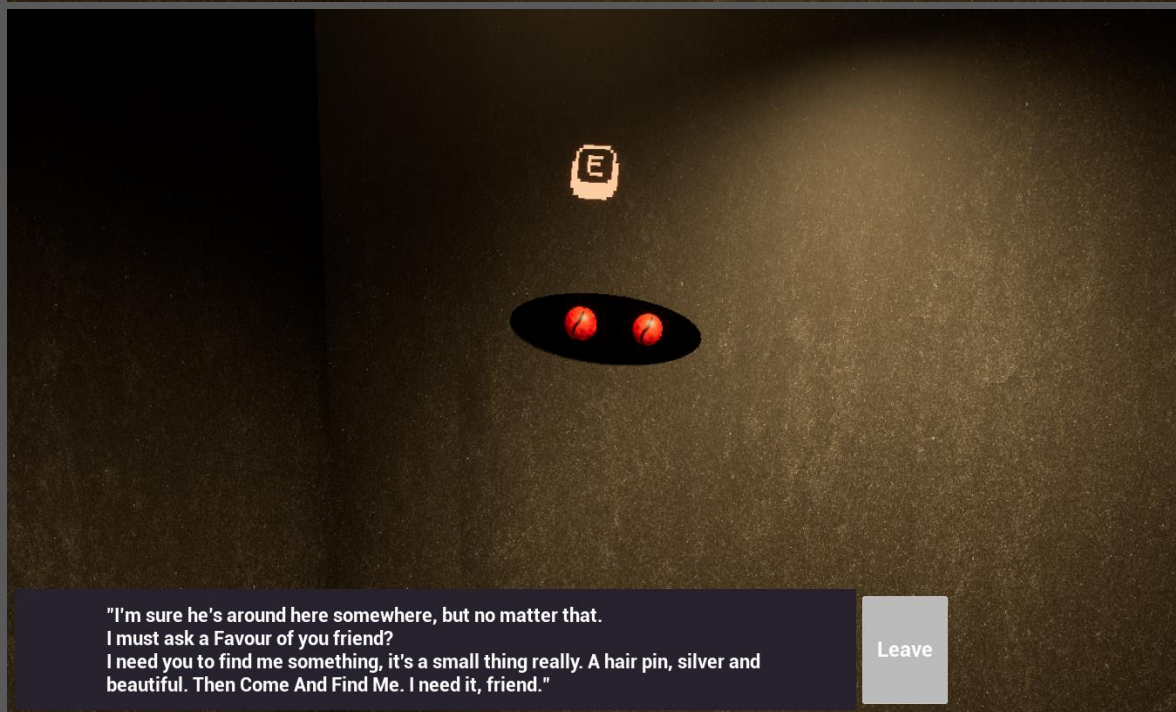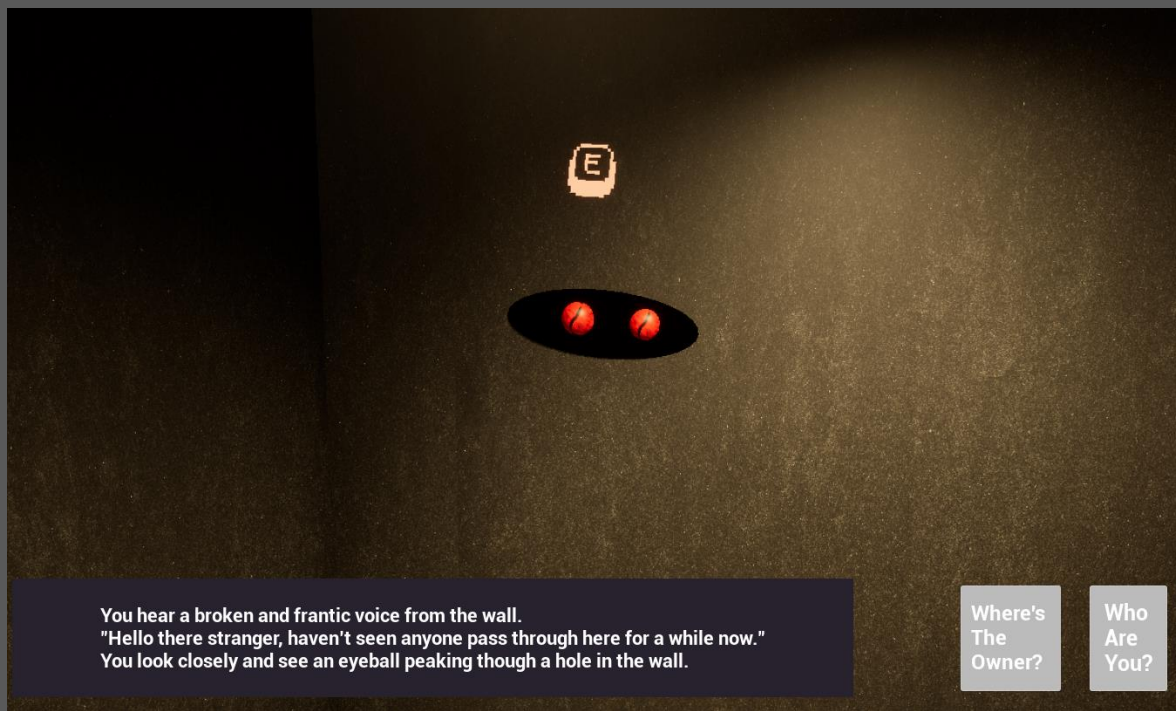
MECHANIC DEVELOPMENT:

NPC:

I have added an NPC into my environment to help gently guide the player to collect the quest items, you are not required to speak to this character, but they will give you important story as well as, upon quest completion, give you an item that reduces the boss's damage as well as reveals the identity of the character being the Lady of the house.

This character appears in different locations throughout my environment to ensure the player can find a version of them when completing quest steps.

They are also only visible from a certain range, to imply that the character is shifting through the walls of the house following the player.
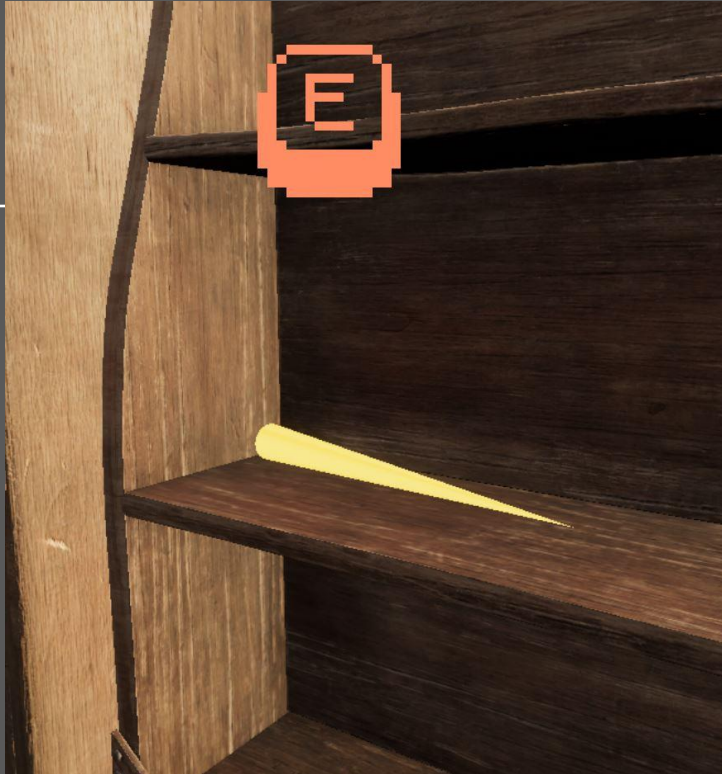
MECHANIC DEVELOPMENT:

Quest:

The quest items play an important role in my game, if all items are collected and the NPC is spoken too, you'll be given a bonus item.

If you fight the boss with this item, he will have a disadvantage as his attack damage will be lowered.

Having this item also triggers a different interaction before the boss fight, that adds the last piece to the puzzle of my story.

The quest system is simplistic and relies on the player interacting with certain items throughout the environment, I have made sure these items can be collected in any order and the quest will still progress.

DIALOGUE PRESENTATION:

He pulls out an ornate dagger,
"Your finally here, Let's begin shall we."

You feel a faint hand graze your shoulder.
Shock floods the man before, a look of loss, as a bright light engulfs you.
You hear a faint whisper from the ghostly figure. "My love, this must end."

Dialogue Colours:

Each character has their own dialogue colour, this allows the player to make connections between certain aspects of my story, such as the fact the notes you find are in the same colour as the Lord Drummers dialogue boxes (1st picture).

Having these colour differences means the player makes the links between the different encounters and characters, in a few sections there are colour changes that show transformation, this helps the player understand the story better as there are definitive differences between how each character is presented.

There is also a font difference for one of the characters (The Watcher) to help show the broken and creepy nature through the presented text.
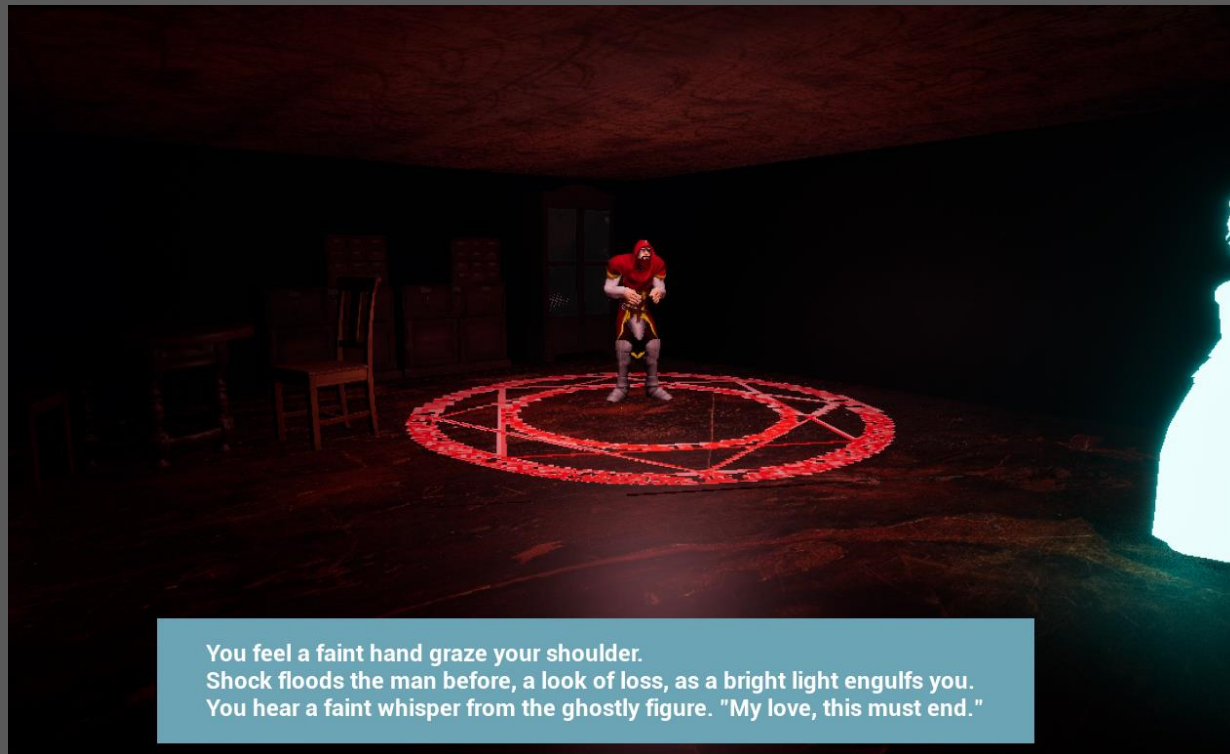
DEVELOPMENT ISSUES:

Final Fight:

During the packaging and testing segment of development there is an issue that arose with the final boss fight, while the fight works perfectly in the editor, once packaged this fight no longer keeps track of the Boss's health, while the ending is still possible to reach the fight isn't fully functional. The player makes the first attack, and the boss is defeated in the packaged version.

PLAYTESTING RESULTS

Did you understand the story?	Did you enjoy the exploration?	Did you feel connected to the player character?	Did you feel as if you had choice?	Was there any point in the story that felt unfinished or uninteresting?
Partially	Yes	Yes	Yes	Ending could be slightly more developed.
Partially	Yes	Partially	Yes	I wasn't 100% sure how the ending related to the story in the letters, but i did forget a few moments after reading.
Partially	Yes	Yes	Partially	An opening could be added. Showing how you got into the situation would be beneficial.

- Reviewing the results of playtesting shows that overall, the experience of my game is enjoyable and mostly understood.
- Due to the partial story understanding I opted to add a few more hints throughout my dialogue to the identities of certain characters, Keeping in mind the explorative nature of my game where there is the possibility for information to be missed, as to not hand hold my players through the story.
- This is also what gave me the idea of separate dialogue colours for each character to help clarify the narrative.

These results have been beneficial in adding final polish and clarity to my game through smaller additions that I mentioned above.

EVALUATION:

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- Overall, this project has been a helpful insight into the games development pipeline and has benefited me greatly, allowing me to explore different mechanics and design methods.

- The development of this project has been challenging and has pushed me to improve my time management and problem-solving skills, this will be incredibly beneficial on future projects and in the industry itself.

- The final product itself is something I am proud of, I believe I has presented a solution to my problem well and will be able to carry that solution with me into other projects. I have output what was expected of myself, a complete and playable short game with an explorative narrative, and I have done this while adding some advanced and interesting mechanics, creating a well-rounded player experience.

Looking over this project's outcome and reflecting on playtesting, there are some places I would polish to create a more professional game,

- Refined Animations and Specialized Assets

- Opening Cutscene