

Intro

This project explored how to design a stylized combat UI within a single-player, turn-based strategy framework. The primary design problem addressed is balancing visual flair with clarity in a stylized UI, which required not compromising usability or player experience.

The style of medieval + Post-Apocalyptic has not been done or researched much, which leaves a hole in the research done in this area. As most of the games in this style are done in a stylized and altered world, this has allowed me to test my skills in making it more grounded, while still trying to feel as good as the other games that I have researched.

For a lot of the problems, I researched and analysed in depth how they have been implemented, then adapted them to my theme. Then, after I had created a couple of examples and implemented some wireframes for testing, I got others to give feedback on it, so I could see if it would work or not.

The game has a realistic art style to fit the genre and allow me to try to keep the game within the gap of research. I also had to work on FX, animations, and 2D art on my game, which allowed me to develop some skills in Unreal materials, Adobe Photoshop, and Procreate.

Research

For my research, I started by playing the main games that influenced my project, which were Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024]; Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 [2025]; Wartales [2021]; Manor Lords [2024]. I also watched gameplay on Persona 5 Royal [2019] by [Archivist, 2024], to get an understanding of what the UI looked like and how it worked with the gameplay.

By watching and playing these games, I broke down their systems to understand what each one contains. This was especially important when I looked at them side by side, as I could see their similarities and how they could work within my project.

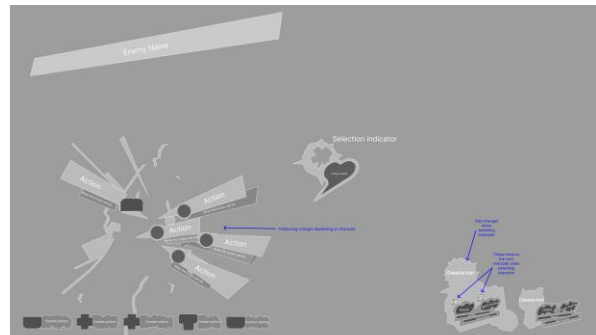


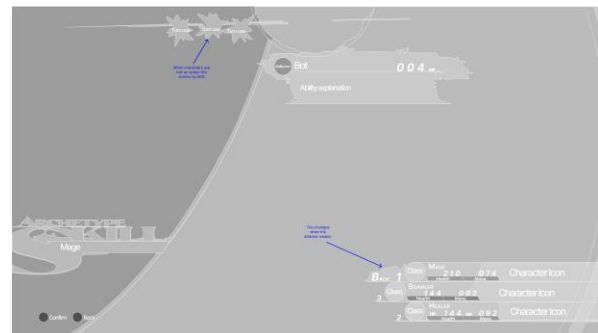
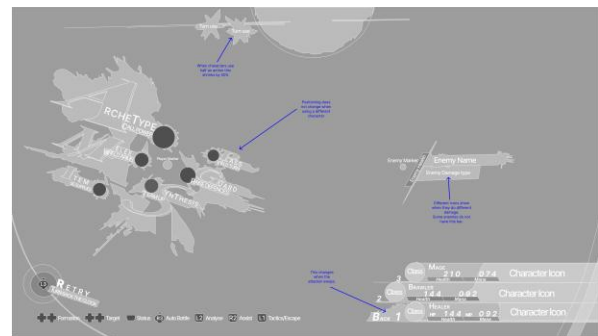
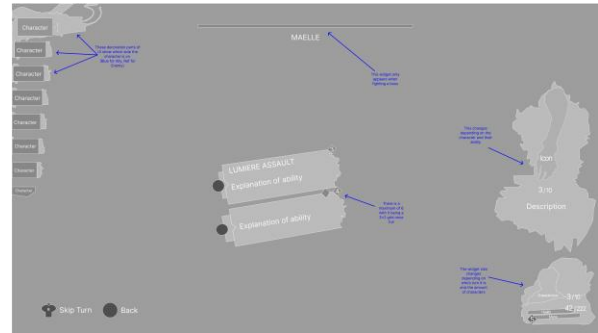
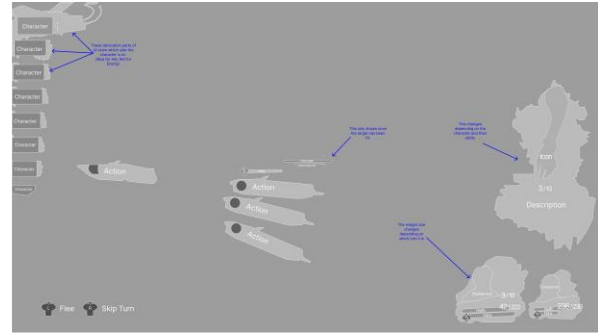
The next point of research was how cameras worked between my key influences. Both of these games used the camera to help convey the characters in different lights, making it feel as if the character is more grounded or empowered.

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 [2025] focuses more on camera movement, as the camera is always slightly swaying, compared to Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024], which has stationary cameras but uses a couple of camera movements to add flair.

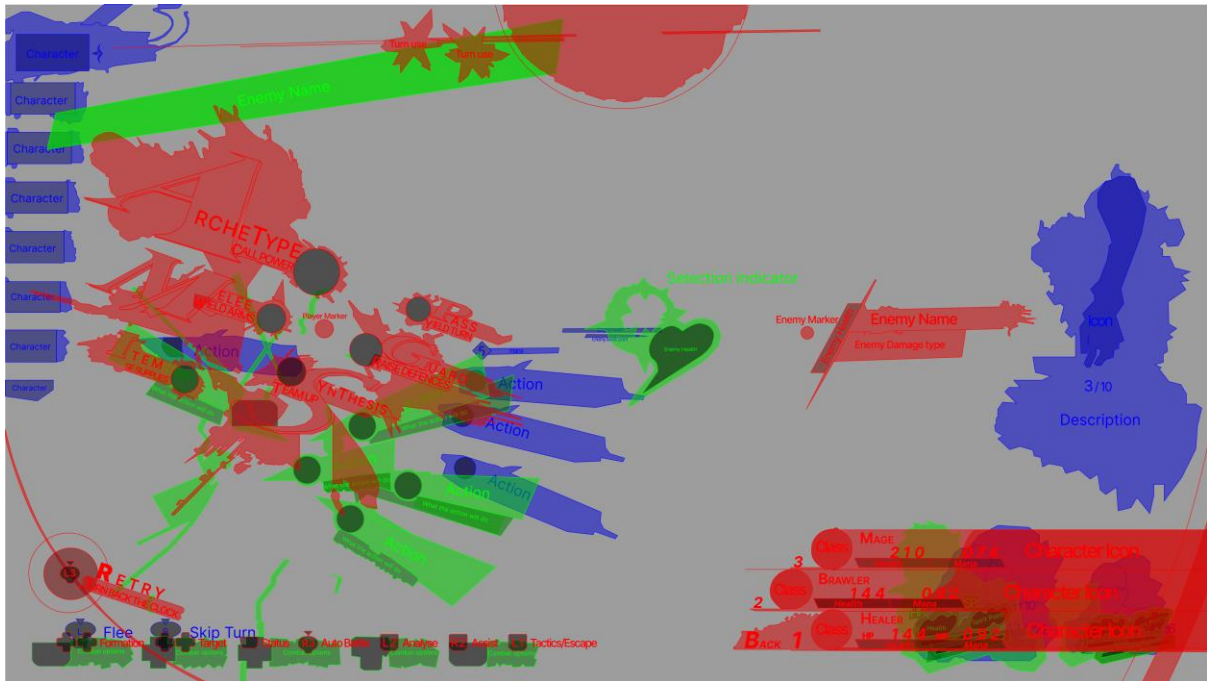
They both have the player focus on the left side of the screen, but they have different heights for the camera. Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024] goes for an empowering angle of the camera, whereas the camera is eye level, which is neutral and makes it feel more realistic.

Both have the same selection angles, where they focus on the players from the front when selecting allies. When selecting enemies, they do it slightly differently, as Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024] keeps it more static, using an indicator to display the character they are selecting, but in Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 [2025], the camera focuses on the character that is being selected.

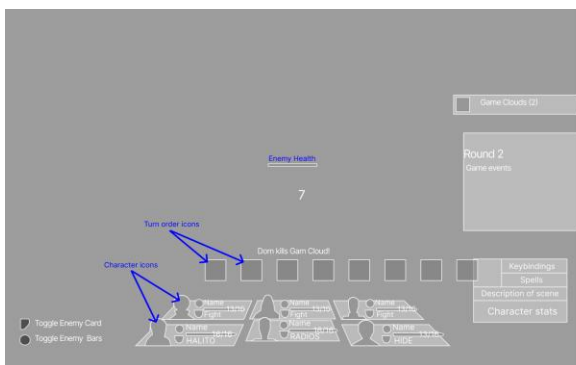




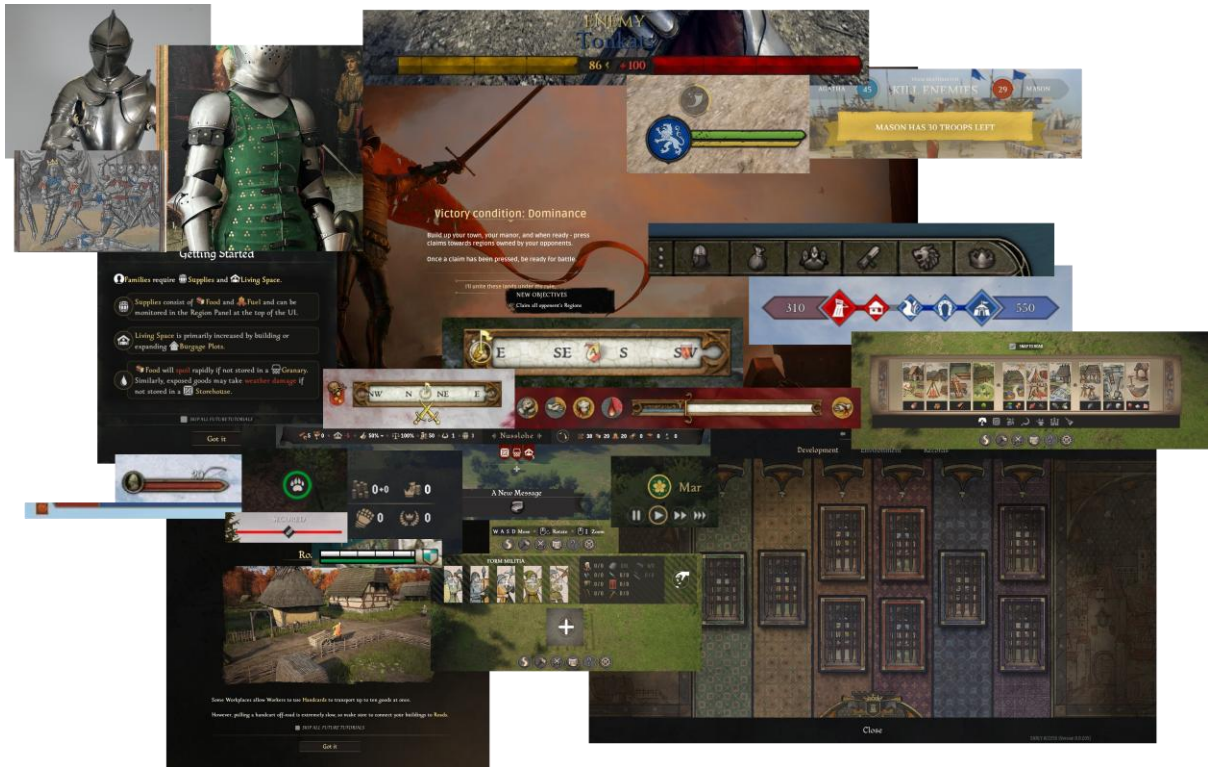
I outlined three of the game's UI at two points of the game to get an understanding of how they looked while selecting an ability and standing to take an action. This was a good process, as it allowed me to layer the screens on top of each other to get a better understanding of the UI. It also told me important information about the screen and the information displayed during them. As in one of the talks I listened to by [Hodent, 2019], It explains how it should not be a challenge to get the information you need. This is shown in all three of these games, showing me important ways of displaying information.



All these games show the ability menus in a variety of ways, though some take up a lot more room when choosing. The simplest version is Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 [2025], which has a HUD very similar to the screen before, but with only the UI around the character changing. Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024] takes up most of the screen, covering the enemies, but also shows the most information about each attack. Persona 5 Royal [2019] also removes the visibility of the enemies, but it does not give a big explanation like ReFantazio for each ability. All these games make it clear how much it will cost to cast and make them easily visible for the one you are currently hovering over. I do think the character name and icon in Persona 5 are big, but I think it could be good if used in a different style. As it is not that important information and takes up a lot of the screen.



I also looked at another game called Wizardry for some bad practices of UI, as the core systems within the game are good, the UI fails to convey this information to the player in an informative way. The UI is clumped into the bottom and right side of the screen, leaving a lot of empty usable space. The turn order also overlaps with another piece of UI used for key information. The information in the bottom right is very small and is very confusing to look at, especially if you must quickly glance at it.



As I couldn't find many examples for a mood board containing medieval and post-apocalyptic, I separated the two into different board conveying each theme. Medieval was the simplest, as there are many games with this theme that keep a consistent theming throughout, which I wanted to apply to my game. The most difficult was post-apocalyptic, as a lot of games go with a futuristic way of displaying it, as shown by the mood board above.



To try to solve this problem, I created another using the UI elements found within Warhammer: Vermintide [2007] and Total War: Warhammer III [2022], as they have a lot of post-apocalyptic-themed UI within the game, similar to what I wanted to go for.



I broke down the mood boards into colours, icons, and art themes. The colours were mainly to do with red, blue, and yellow, which are consistently shown throughout the game and mood boards. The icons are shown in the middle section of the image, utilising negative and positive space to show images and not making them too detailed and overwhelming for the player. The top left showed the art theme I was going for, with my UI looking broken and torn along the edges of the elements.

Method

With this project, I investigated how different forms of UI design, including diegetic, non-diegetic, spatial, and meta-UI, can be intentionally integrated to create a cohesive and immersive player experience. A central focus of this investigation was understanding how animation, interactivity, and visual consistency contribute to a sense of realism, ensuring that each UI element feels naturally embedded within the game world rather than detached from it. To support this process, I expanded my technical proficiency in Figma and Adobe software to produce high-quality visual assets and structured wireframes that accurately communicate my design intent.

For my research method, I began with a comparative analysis of existing games, identifying how different games implemented their UI and other supporting features to reinforce immersion and player engagement. I did this through multiple forms, such as reverse engineering, comparing games, and player motivation. I assessed aspects such as player motivation, controls, juice, and error tolerance to identify effective design strategies. Based on these outcomes, I developed a series of low-fidelity wireframes to experiment with the layout and flow, followed by mid-fidelity prototypes to refine the structure and interactivity. Once I chose the strongest concept, I produced a high-fidelity, potentially interactive wireframe to streamline the implementation into the engine.

I ensured the designs get the highest quality outcomes by adopting an iterative development process, obtaining feedback at the end of implementing each important aspect to evaluate usability, aesthetic coherence, and immersion. The challenges were maintaining readability within diegetic interfaces and balancing the stylization with realism, which were addressed through consistent testing and iterated upon after the feedback. This structured approach I will take will allow me to identify challenges early, refine solutions efficiently, and develop a well-informed and functional UI that aligns closely with the project's goals.

Documentation of production

Framework

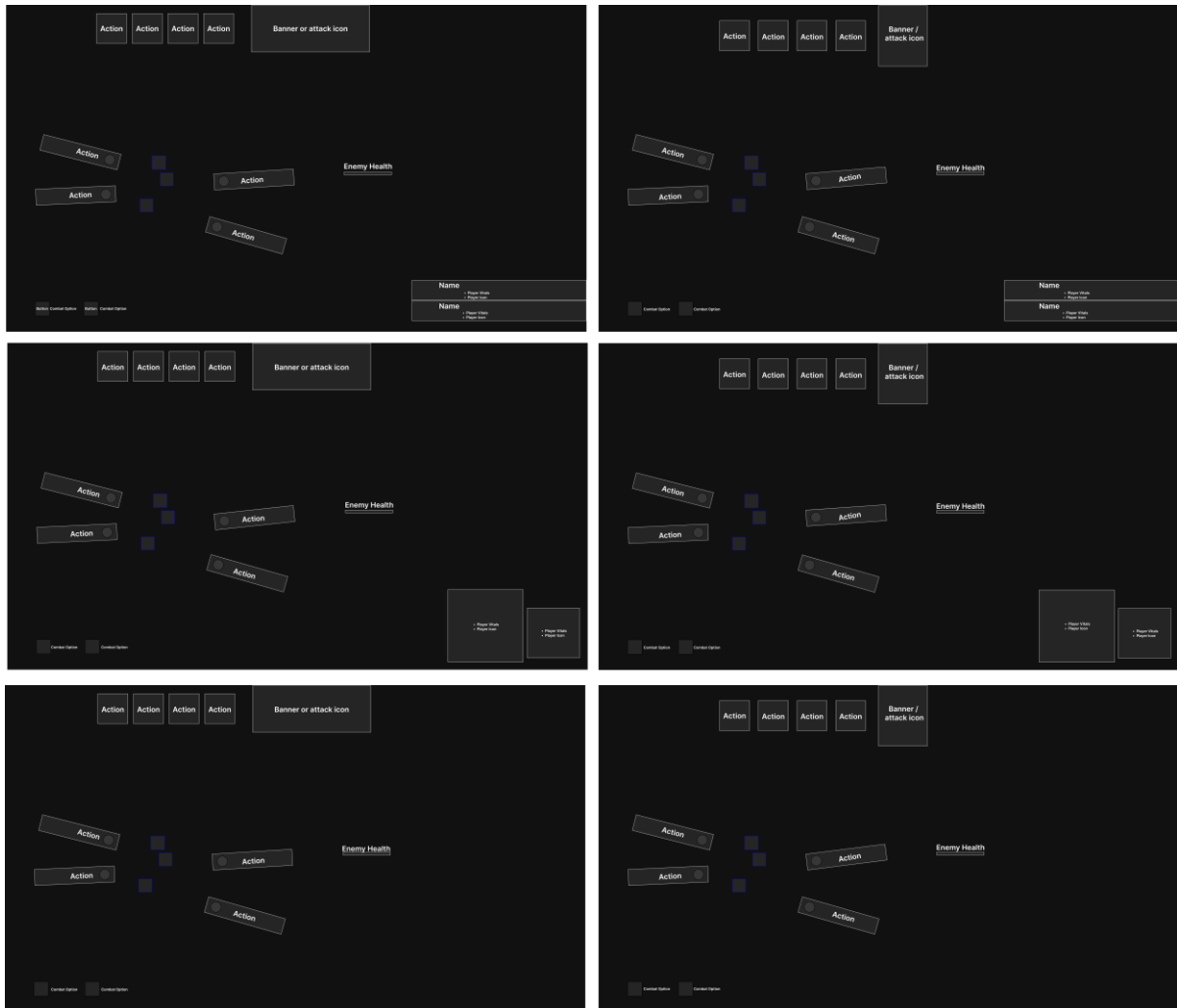
The framework was made at the start of the project. It is a 2v3 turn-based fighting game, which allowed me to develop the UI of this framework.

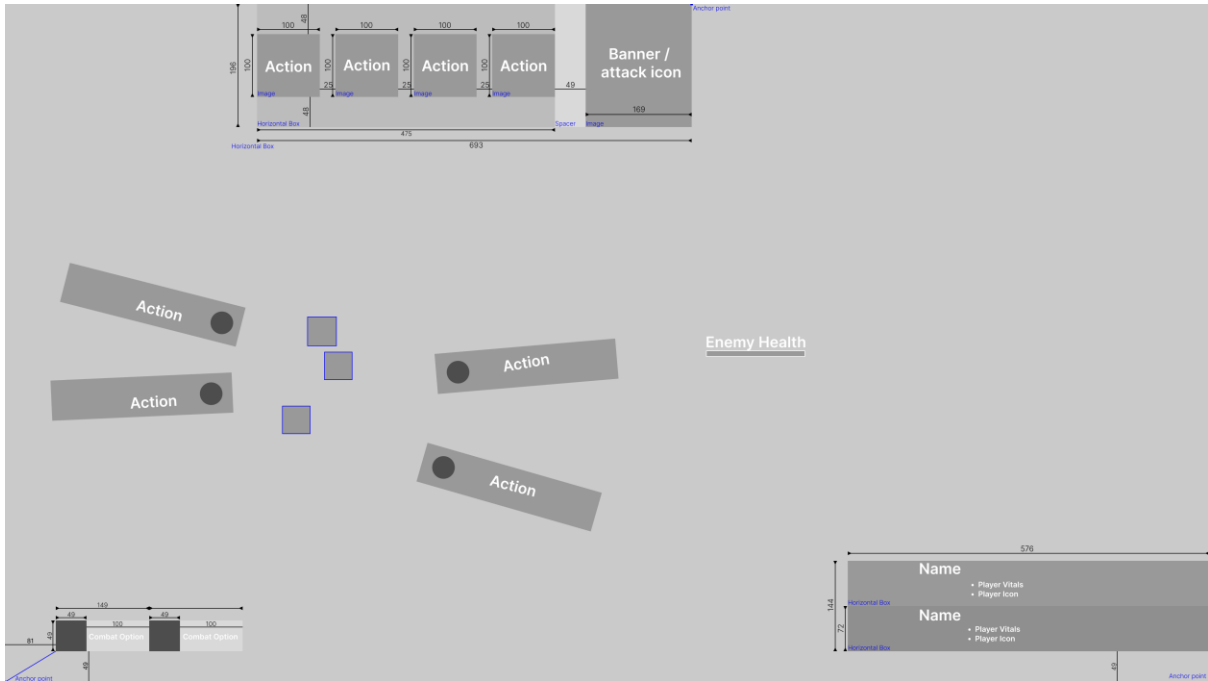
Key Systems & Camera work

For this, I looked at how I could implement these into my game, and I chose to go for a mix between Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 [2025] and Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024]. For turn and action management, I used the resource management via the turn icons that ReFantazio uses, as they fit what I wanted better. I then used the line-based format from Expedition 33, as there was no need for rows in my game, since there are no ranged characters. For the Combat feedback, I used the hit/miss feedback like in Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024] and Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 [2025]. The vitals were going to be used the same as ReFantazio, using normal numeric and visual vitals. I then decided to have the other systems for later on in the MoSCoW, as they are not key features.

Then I looked at the camera within Metaphor: ReFantazio [2024] and Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 [2025] and decided that for my game, I will use a bit more of the movement from Expedition 33, as it keeps the game feeling a bit more realistic, and this was tested with good results, as if it did not, I would have pivoted to the way it is done in ReFantazio. For the angle on the character, I used the way it is done in ReFantazio, as it makes the character feel more empowered. When selecting the target, I went for more of an Expedition 33 style, which was tested and felt good.

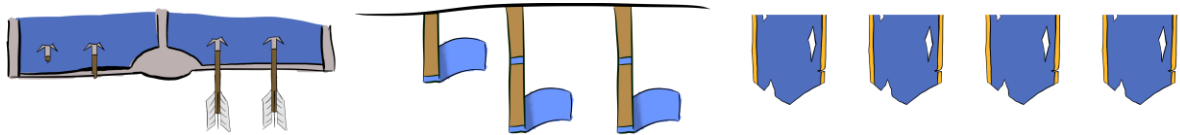
HUD Design





After doing the research for the HUDs, I started to design a layout for my project. These needed a lot of thought, as it felt very difficult to get a good layout when a lot of the references had very stylized games, and I did not know what mine would fully look like. In the end, I decided to go with the top-right one. This was because I needed a direction to go in that would allow me to pivot the design if needed.

Banners



I started by sketching out some ways I could display the turn order, as it would be the most looked at aspect of the game. The images above were the first quick ideas that I would be using. After some thought and feedback, I went for the idea of using banners within the game, as they fit the theme better and would be better for the immersion.



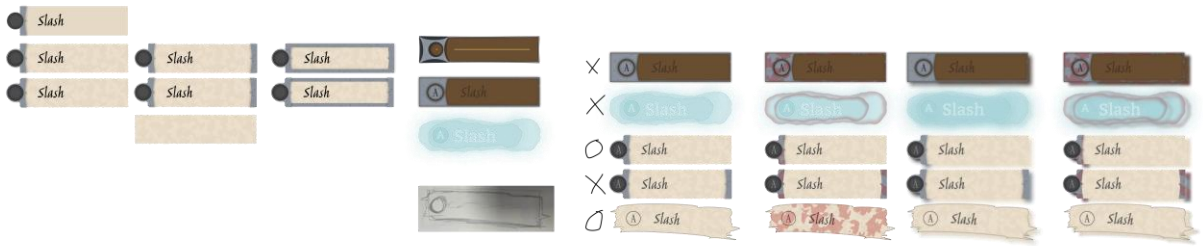
I added the wave texture and fabric pattern to keep it with a medieval theme. I also created shorter versions to use when doing half an action.

My focus for the flags was getting the burning effect into my project. This took a couple of weeks, as the tutorials I followed were for 3D materials. I used two main tutorials, one for a dissolving effect by [ONLINE, 2021] and the other for a wind effect by [Cleverlike, 2023] on the flag. After a lot of trial and error trying to get it to work on UI, I managed to use a gradient and maps to create the effects I wanted on the flag.



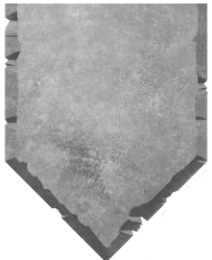
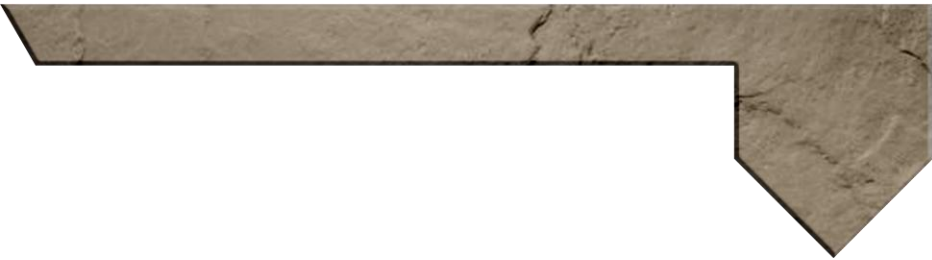
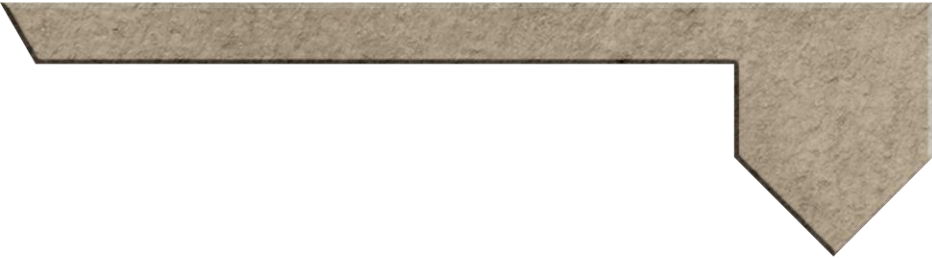
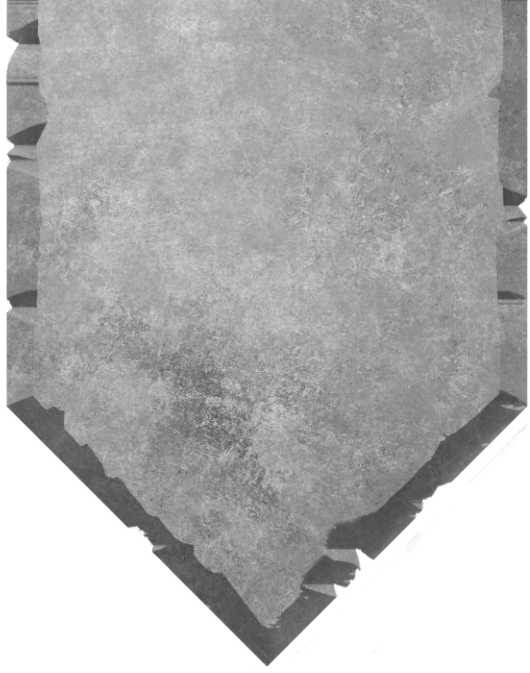
I created three flat variants of the first design, as I realised that I could add the wave texture in materials, and that I could burn the flags to half using modifying material while animating the flag in the widget.

Action Bars

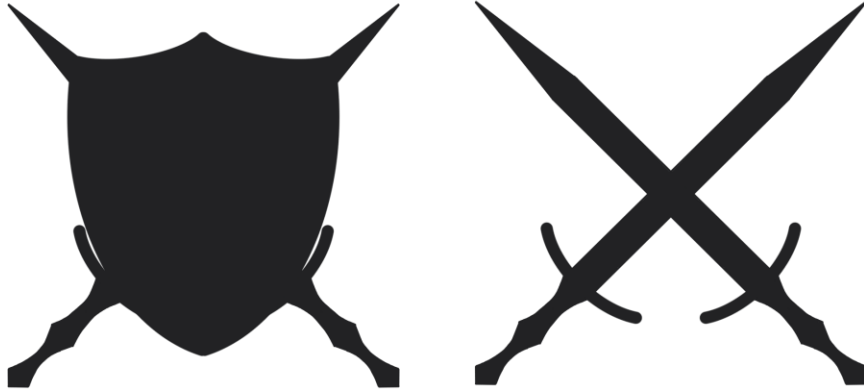


The hardest part was the action bars, as I had a lot of ideas and ways this could go, with my initial idea being the leather and metal. When I was adding the textures, it never felt correct, so I decided to go back to the designing stage and get some opinions. I then ended up going for a mix between two of my designs. This was good, as I was also able to use the burning effect in mind for these action bars as well. I then polished these up by drawing out the design, then adding textures to it, while getting some more feedback on the best design for it.

Turn order block



The top centre of the screen was going to have a slab of stone, which was going to just show the turn order. After some testing of materials, I ended up going more for a supporting slab that also holds the flags.

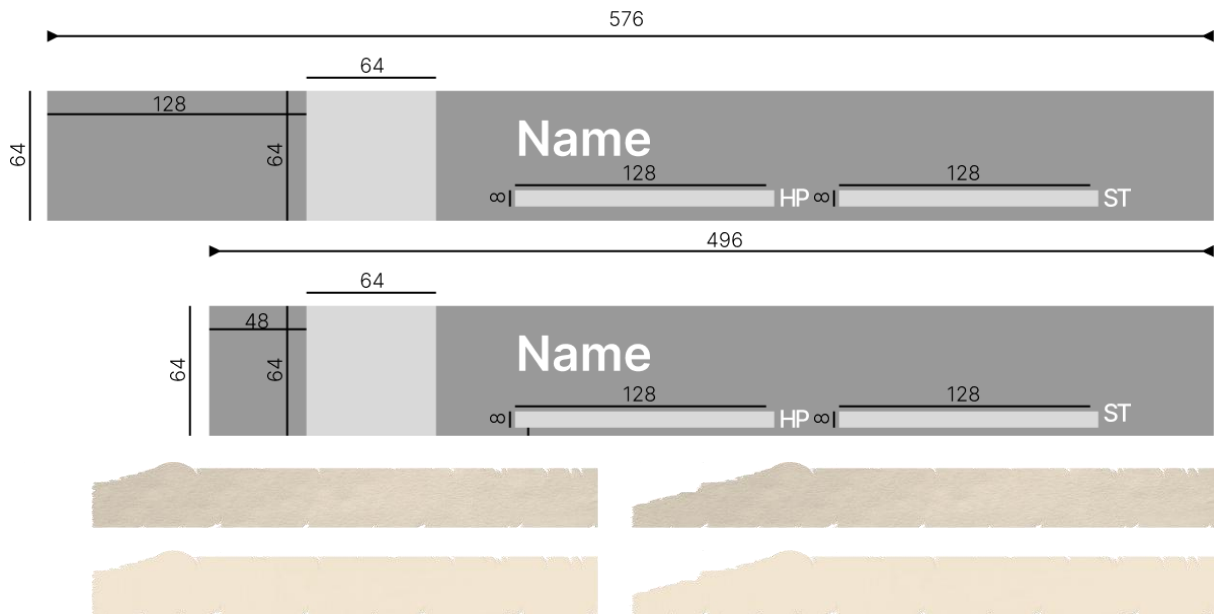


I also create these icons to go in the centre, to show whose turn it is.

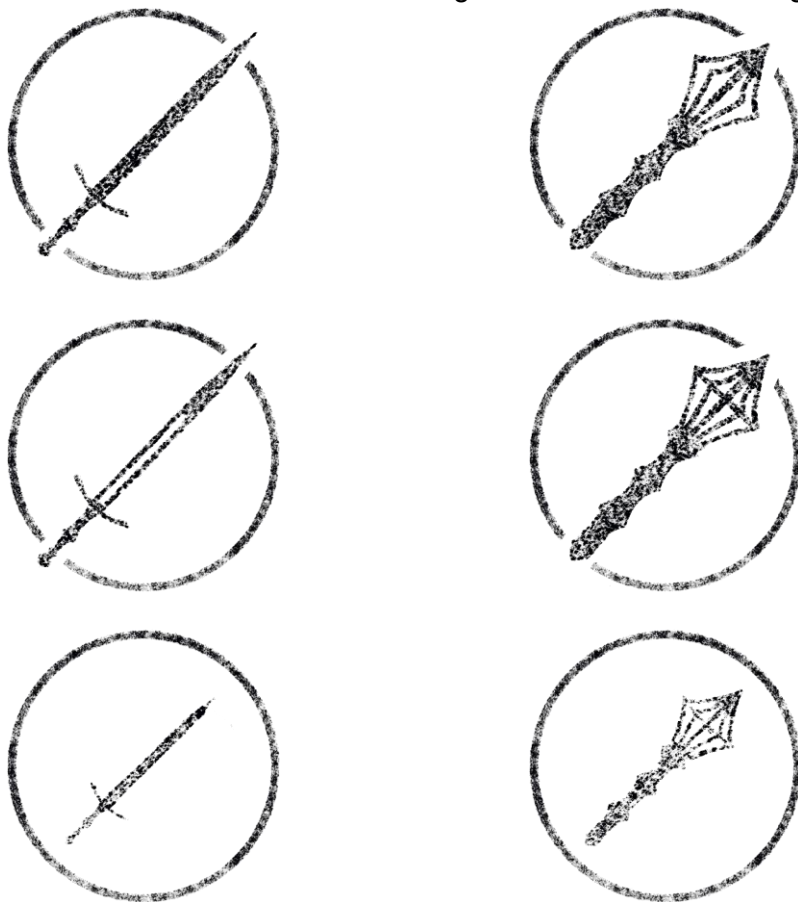
Vitals



This was the original image to display the vitals, which was the same texture as the action buttons; this was to keep the theme together.



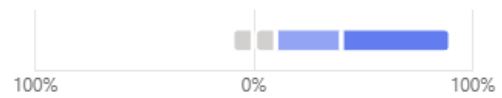
I had to go back and put a more of a detailed layout for the vitals bar, and I also made paper vitals to be more consistent in design with the rest of the images within the game.



These were the icons created to show the class of the characters. This needed some iteration, based on feedback from people not understanding what they were.

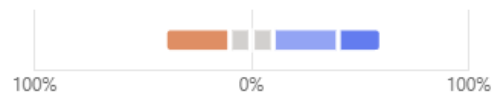
Testing

● Rarely ● Occasionally ● Regularly ● Frequently ● Very Frequently



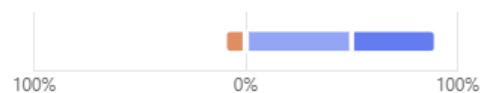
All testers play games regularly or frequently, making their feedback reliable when compared to typical player expectations. The commonly played games are action-based, which are relevant as they rely on a quickly readable UI.

● Not Familiar at all ● Less Familiar ● Familiar ● More Familiar ● Very Familiar

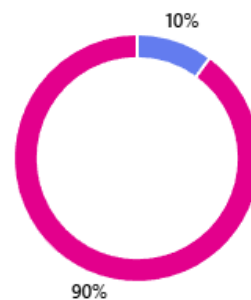


Nearly all testers had experience with stylized UIs, allowing for informed feedback on the visual style. Additionally, 40% were unfamiliar with medieval or post-apocalyptic settings, providing both informed and fresh perspectives.

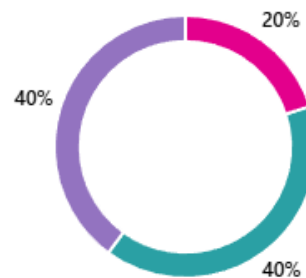
● Very Unclear ● Unclear ● Normal ● Clear ● Very Clear



● Yes 1
● No 9



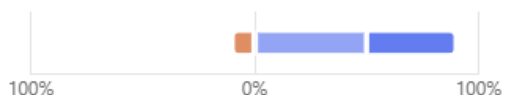
● Frequently	0
● Occasionally	2
● Rarely	4
● Never	4



Only 10% of players struggled to identify vital information such as health, stamina, targeting, and actions. This was mainly due to the compact layout of the vitals widget, which also contributed to 10% of players feeling the UI was cluttered. These layout issues caused some players to pause, to read information, with 20% reporting this as a recurring problem.

● Poor ● bad ● Normal ● Good ● Excellent

Readability

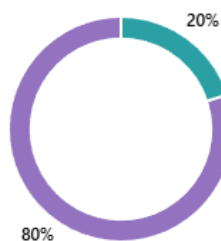


● Yes	0
● No	10

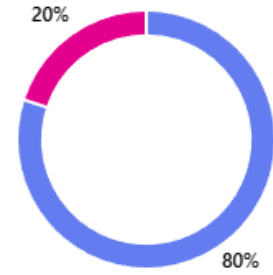


Most testers found the font, icons, and colours readable, with only 10% reporting issues. In response, text size and padding were adjusted. No testers experienced the UI blending into the background, confirming effective contrast and visibility.

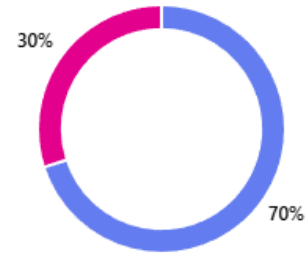
● Often	0
● Occasionally	0
● Rarely	2
● Never	8



● Very smooth	8
● Somewhat smooth	2
● Slightly distracting	0
● Very distracting	0



● Enhanced immersion	7
● Neutral / No difference	3
● Reduced immersion	0

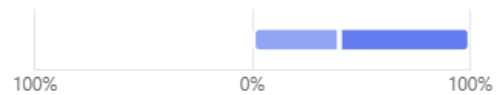


● Yes	0
● Slightly	0
● No	10

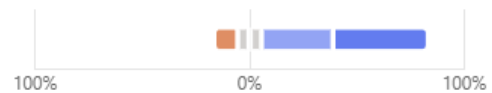


Camera effects were well-received overall. While 20% occasionally struggled to track UI elements due to a misalignment bug, no testers found the camera distracting or uncomfortable. Furthermore, 70% reported that it increased immersion.

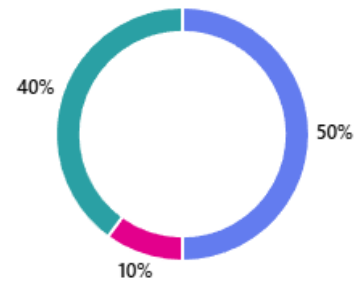
● Poor fit ● Slightly poor fit ● Neutral ● Slightly fits ● Perfect fit



● Not at all ● Not really ● Neutral ● Slightly ● Strongly enhanced

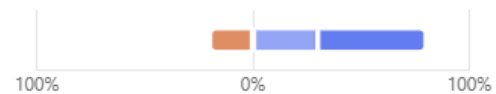


● Added immersion	5
● Distracted from gameplay	1
● No noticeable difference	4



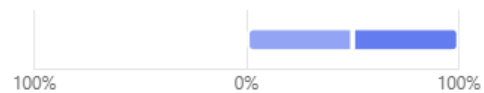
Most players felt the UI enhanced immersion and matched a medieval combat theme. While 40% felt it only slightly fit the genre, this feedback largely came from players unfamiliar with the setting. Stylized elements enhanced immersion for 50% of testers, while 10% found them distracting, showing the previous readability problems.

● Very difficult ● Slightly difficult ● Normal ● Slightly easy ● Very easy



● Too cluttered ● Slightly cluttered ● Normal ● Slightly Balanced ● Perfect balance

Statement 1



Despite 20% of testers experiencing bugs, 90% found the UI visually appealing. Feedback highlighted strong animation and artwork, with some reported as occasionally confusing, such as the vitals and font.

Improvement plan from testing

- Add more vital banners to the bottom right widget.
- Make them play an animation to show that a different character is in play.
- Fix turn order bug.
- Give some controls in the bottom left for selecting and hitting the opponent.
- Improve the vitals widget to remove dead space.
- Add a health aspect to the healer character.
- Way to go back to the original options.
- Audio

Conclusion

The project managed to meet all the deliverables, with some of the should-haves and could-haves added into the project. I managed to find the answer to my problem to design a stylized combat UI that balanced visual flair and clarity. Through testing, it was found that my game was balanced, with it being a 50/50 on people feeling it to be perfect or slightly balanced. This has taught me an important part of balancing the visual flair and clarity, as I think if I had kept more consistency within the measurements of my UI designs, there would not be a problem of cluttering and unreadability.

This project has also shown me that I need to look a lot more into UI material within Unreal Engine. Even after doing the project, there are still aspects that I am very confused about, but with the practice from this project, I am more confident in my ability to use materials. I have also found creating my own art to be a struggle, as I was not very good at making good resolutions for them, as I forget that they do not need to be high definition in a lot of cases. With these known problems shown, I can address them and practice these parts on future projects.



Compared to the other games I referenced, I think my game managed to use the layout well, which is found within my research examples. I do think I should have gone back and looked at how mine compared multiple times throughout the project, as this could have kept parts of the design more consistent and allowed me to create a better design. For future projects, I will need to work on my sizing of the widget, padding, and breaking down the widgets, as this is what makes them different from those in the industry.

The designs are where I think I could have improved the most, as I only broke down the individual aspects once I got to them, but in some cases, this would have been better to do all at once, to keep a good consistency between all of them. I could have also added a lot more detail to these designs in terms of measurements, padding, and positioning details, as this was only used in my latest updates of designs. But throughout the project, I did go back

to many of the designs and change them throughout the process, iterating on the feedback I got from others about my game.

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