Balancing Action & Exploration

Presented By Avinash Kadali
Artefact Development Report
Supervisor – Renzo Palmisano

Content

Introduction

- The project being presented is a **Level Design Project** focused on **Balancing Action & Exploration** within game design.

- The core **Problem** this project addresses is player engagement—specifically, that players can become bored with excessive downtime or fatigued by constant action. This often results in player disengagement.

- The primary objective is to develop a level design methodology that consistently achieves an engaging and smooth player rhythm.

The Solution: Pacing & Mechanics

The proposed solution is the creation of a dynamic gameplay flow by systematically **alternating between action sequences and safe zones** dedicated to narrative development or exploration.

Combat-heavy gameplay will be interspersed with **traversal puzzles, physics puzzles, and side quests**. These mechanics are intentionally designed to serve as essential 'calm breaks' to refresh the player's mental and emotional state.

A key design pillar is the use of **environmental storytelling**, where the narrative unfolds entirely through the level's visuals and layout, maintaining player curiosity without relying on immersion-breaking cutscenes.

Aim, Objectives & Deliverables

Aim

Maintain player interest through varied pacing.

Provide tension and release cycles using balanced action and downtime.

Use environmental storytelling to motivate exploration.

Introduce light puzzles and optional quests to diversify gameplay.

Objectives

The objective of this project is to design a level that balances action and exploration to maintain player engagement. It aims to reduce boredom and fatigue by alternating intense combat with safe zones, using environmental storytelling, and integrating puzzles or side quests to create a varied, immersive gameplay experience.

Deliverables

- Full level layout draft
- Grey box prototype
- Playable test build
- Documentation: pacing charts, flow diagrams, puzzle design sheets
- Player feedback report

Research and Methodologies

- **Research Methodology**
- **Literature Review:** Research on flow theory, cognitive load, and environmental storytelling to support pacing decisions.
- **Game Analysis:** Study existing FPS and action-adventure games to identify effective pacing strategies.
- **Prototype Development:** Create a playable level in Unreal Engine 5 with combat, safe zones, and puzzles.
- **Playtesting:** Collect player feedback through questionnaires, observation, and gameplay metrics.
- **Data Analysis & Iteration:** Evaluate results and refine pacing, difficulty, and flow accordingly.

Puzzles Research

- The level design draws inspiration from cinematic action-adventure games such as *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (Naughty Dog, 2016) and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal, 2018), with development conducted in Unreal Engine (Epic Games, 2023).

- Eidos Montréal (2018) *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*. Montreal: Eidos Interactive.
- Epic Games (2023) *Unreal Engine 5 Documentation*. Available at: https://docs.unrealengine.com (Accessed: 17 February 2026).
- Naughty Dog (2016) *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Action Gameplay Research

Platforming Escapes: Fast-paced sequences where players leap across collapsing or unstable platforms.

Fire Traps: Timed hazards that require precise movement to pass safely between bursts of fire.

Moving Platforms: Sections where players must time their jumps between shifting platforms or ledges.

Mood Board Research:

Lighting/Mood





Landscape/Environment





Key Influences

This approach is strongly influenced by titles such as *Uncharted 4*,*Half-Life 2*, *Portal 2*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Fall Guys*.

Uncharted 4: Shows how to balance cinematic action with quieter exploration. Climbing or traversal sections placed after combat create natural cooldown moments before the next challenge.

Half-Life 2: Demonstrates effective pacing through physics-based puzzles that break up combat. Its environmental storytelling and NPC interactions keep players immersed without interrupting gameplay.

Development Process

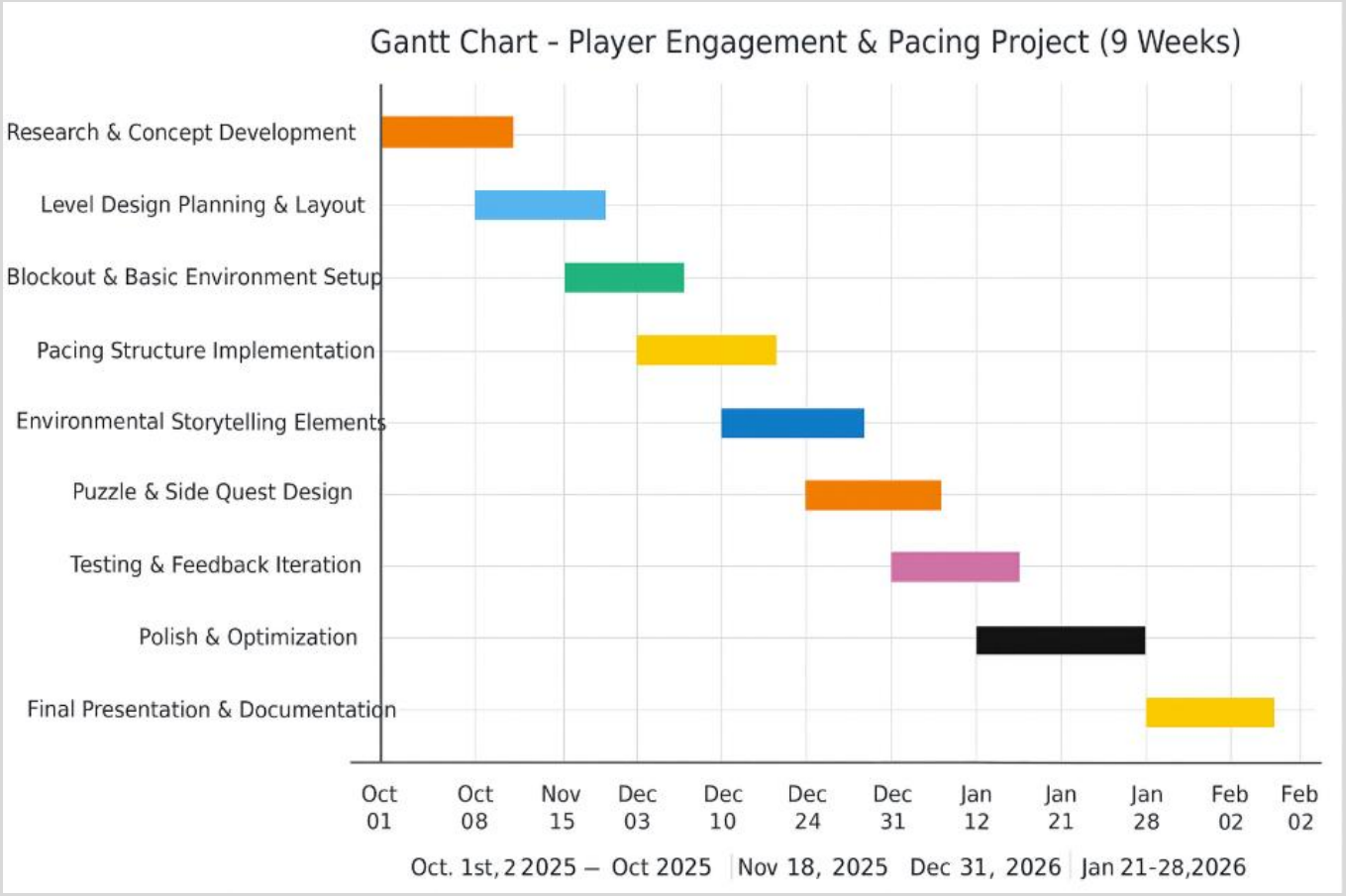
Planning & Gnatt Chart

Expected Outcomes:

Balanced Gameplay Flow: The level will maintain an engaging rhythm by alternating between intense action sequences, calm exploration, and puzzle-solving moments.

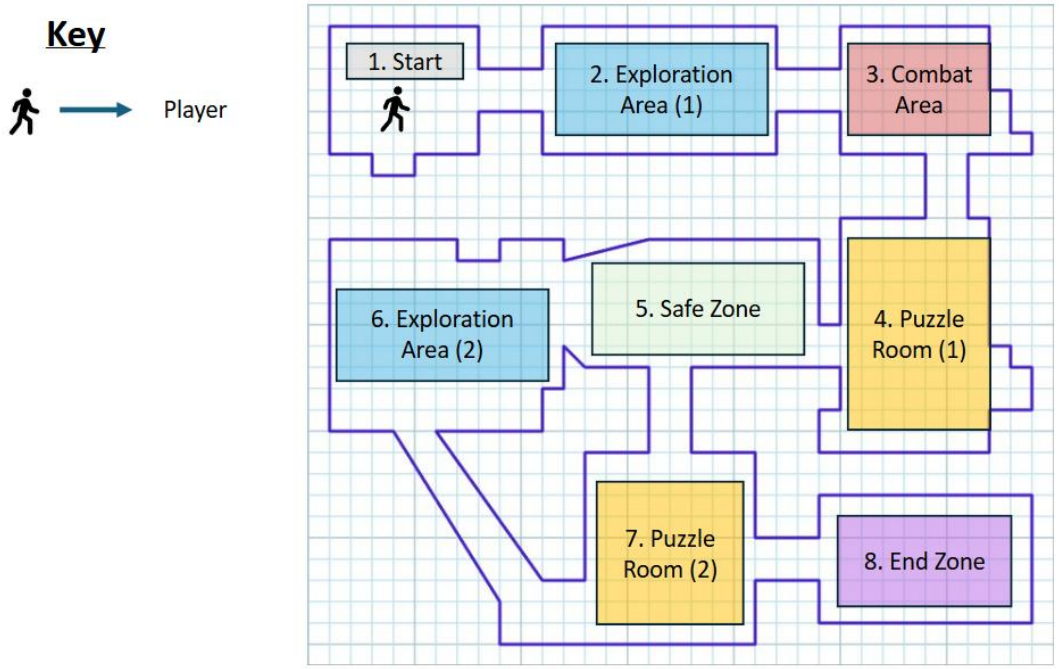
Enhanced Player Engagement: Players will remain interested throughout the experience, feeling emotionally and mentally stimulated without fatigue.

Improved Player Feedback Loop: Playtesting will show consistent engagement, smooth pacing, and positive emotional flow between gameplay phases.

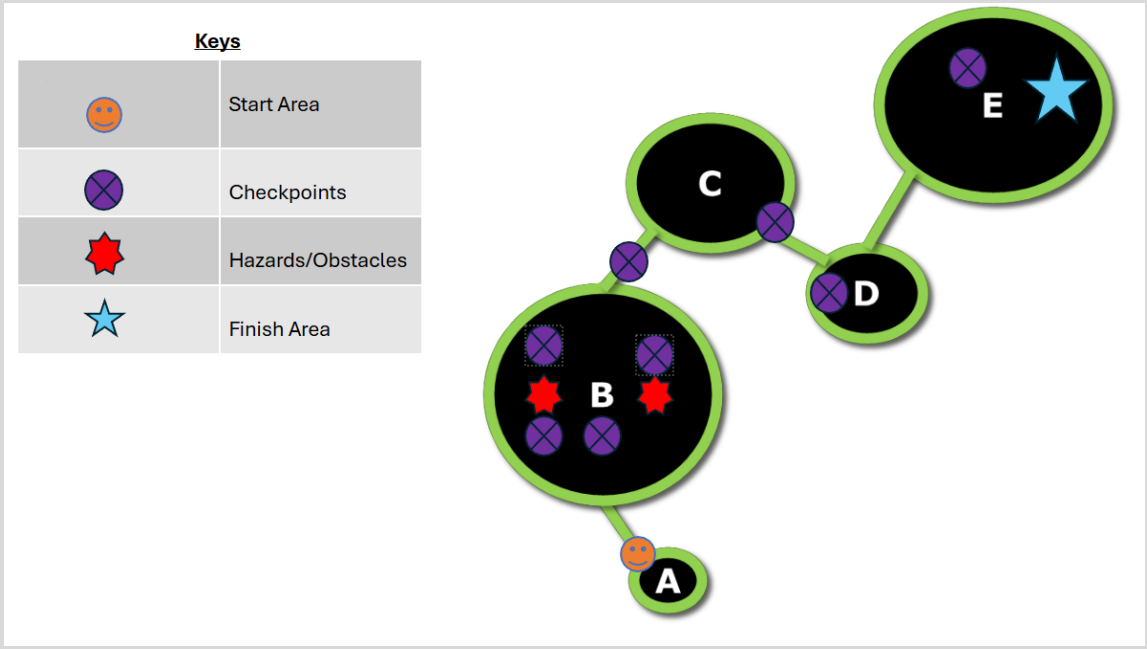


Level Layout Diagrams

Initial Layout Diagram



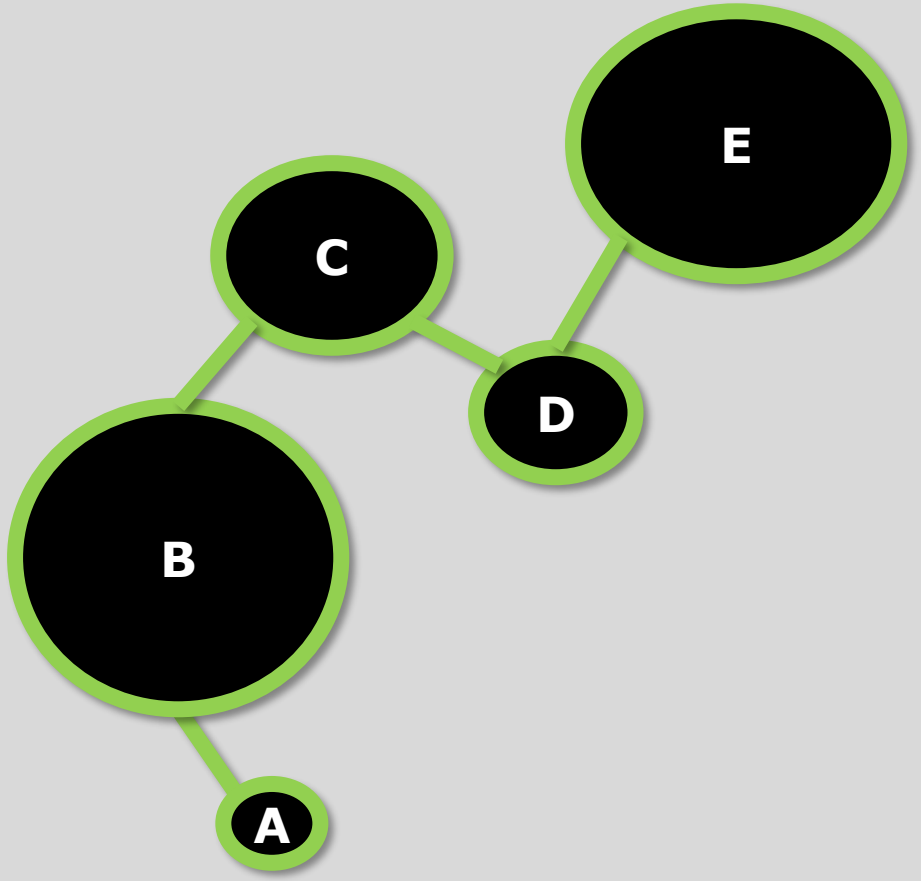
Final Layout Diagram



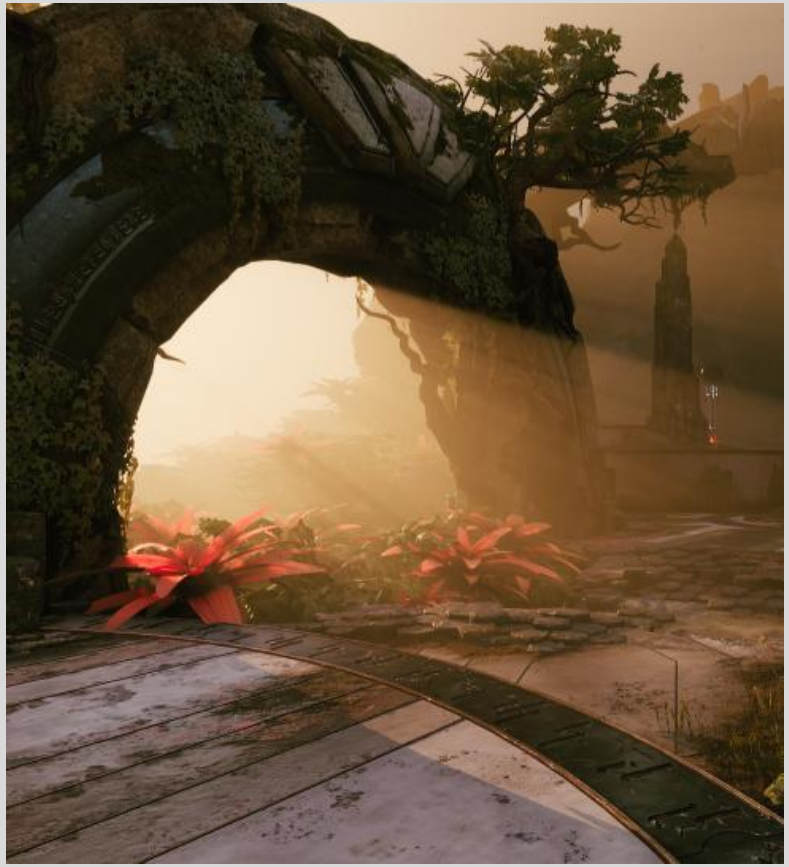
Blockout Iteration:

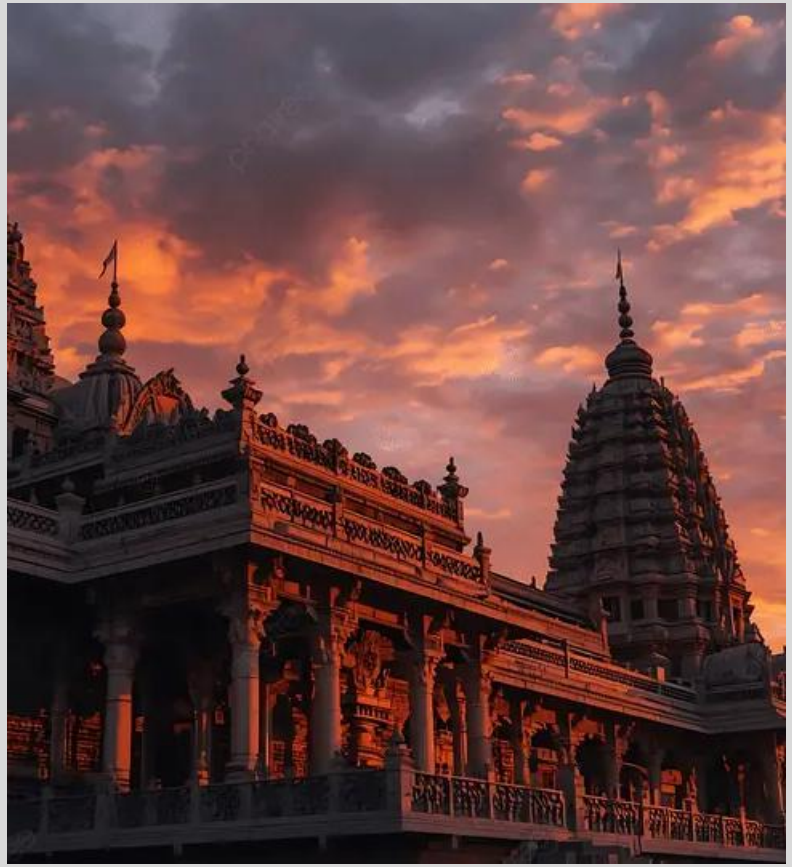
Beats & Pacing

- A) Start Area: Where the player learns the mechanics.
- B) Castle Area: Where the player has some to action and puzzles to complete.
- C) Traversal: Where the player learns to traverse through the level.
- D) Cooldown Area: Where the player can just get some downtime and traverses to the next part of the map.
- E) Final Area: Where the player must find keys that unlock a door to escape.



Lighting





Assets

https://fab.com/s/1b265c2f5301

https://fab.com/s/46a85e1ef0c5

https://fab.com/s/c411e92f949e

https://fab.com/s/72819bb69926

Final Artefact

Artefact Playthrough Video

Link-
https://youtu.be/gLUb6llDeqg

PlayTesting & Feedback

Issues/Bugs (Feedback)

- Positive Feedback:

1. Visually the level looks really good.
2. The platform Mechanic is really interesting.
3. The traversal was super fun to do.
4. The castle area was really cool and the puzzles were pretty easy to do as well.

- Negative Feedback:

1. The quest system was not working properly.
2. In some parts the climbing was not proper and was really frustrating.
3. Landscape could be a little improved.
4. The assets felt inconsistent.

Evaluative Review

- Demonstrates strong foundational level design and spatial awareness.
- Shows ambition in scale, verticality, and cinematic architectural presence.
- Blockouts clearly communicate structure and modular workflow in Unreal Engine.
- Large, readable forms support gameplay clarity at early development stage.
- Successfully reflects inspiration from cinematic action-adventure design.
- **Areas for Improvement:**
- Player flow and visual guidance need stronger direction.
- Gameplay beats and encounter design require clearer intentionality.
- Lighting lacks consistency and could enhance atmosphere further.
- Environmental storytelling could be developed to add depth.
- **Overall:**
  A promising intermediate-level project with strong potential. With improved pacing, lighting polish, and clearer gameplay structure, it could become a solid portfolio-quality cinematic adventure environment.

Bibliography

https://fab.com/s/1b265c2f5301

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https://fab.com/s/c411e92f949e

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Thank you

Avinash Kadali – K016564n

K016564n@student.staffs.ac.uk