

Jam 3 - Introduction

- **Level Design**
- Research



Childfree– Descension

Descension is a 3D first person educational walking simulator that attempts to dispel the stigma around being childfree by exploring several environments relating to core reasons why.

In the vertical slice, the player explores the 'health' related section. They will read statistics, and gain knowledge on the facts as to the reality of having children – societal implications, physical health effects, mental health effects and how it changes relationship dynamics.

Ideation

To start ideation we collated our personal reasons for being childfree – I am an active member of several childfree communities online so I shared reasons others presented from that community that also impacted my own opinion. We agreed on a 3D game in Unreal as we had not managed to do that yet with the other briefs. I proposed a walking simulator to fit the narrative take from the brief, where the player explores different environments from a first person perspective that are metaphors for reasons why people are childfree – similar to Silent Hill. Another team member added onto this with the idea to have facts and statistics in each section to add an educational aspect to the game.

After lecturers' advice, I looked at testimonies from the WeAreChildfree website – which further reinforced what was talked about in our initial team discussion about reasons for being childfree. It was also recommended to scope down the game from our initially discussed; future, finance *and* health section. I advocated for the health section to be kept, and the team agreed.

We started writing down the structure of the game on post it notes; with purple being the main sections (dining room and health section), pink being the interactions, orange being the specific things that can be interacted with, and green being the specific themes to be explored. I took the lead in this exercise, colour coding the post it notes and heading discussion as to the structure of the game.

I then created a list of what needed to be done before the next meeting, to ensure we didn't get stuck in the ideation phase again. I created the section for Jam 3 on the notion so I could put my research somewhere everyone else could see. This worked towards the development of my project planning skills, taking the initiative early on and ensuring what we had to do was written down for everyone to see.



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- How to represent the issues, what metaphors to use to portray them
 - research other games with similar metaphors, how do they gamify them/use them as set dressing
- look into indie games with metaphors on motherhood and childbirth
- statistics

Jam 3 - Childfree

▼ Colour code

Mick: purple

Morgan: red

Hannah: blue

Gregor: yellow

K: green

Pre-Production

Moscow

▼ Whiteboard iterations

▼ Roles initial

Morgan -

K -

Hannah -

Mick -

Gregor -

Goals

Haven't started

Working On

Finished

Research

[Notion](#) page with all my research

I started my research by looking into what the stigma is around being childfree, I then looked into media representations of childfree women to ensure we would not be perpetuating harmful stereotypes. As we were focusing on the health section, I looked into statistics on tokophobia – the fear of pregnancy. Once learning how prevalent this was, I looked into possible reasons why this may be. I carried out a broad range of research on related topics; declining NHS, body image, PPD, gestational diabetes, dental health during pregnancy, relationship dynamics changing, PTSD. I made sure to gather statistics for the majority of these to ensure we had a nice selection to pick which ones would be most suitable in our game, and to design the environment around.

Concept

Description

The player disassociates during a family dinner where they are being interrogated on why they are childfree, they find themselves wandering through a series of three environments inspired by the health reasons on why people are childfree.

Key Features

Walking Simulator

Educational experience with real world statistics

Audience

People who are interested in the childfree conversation

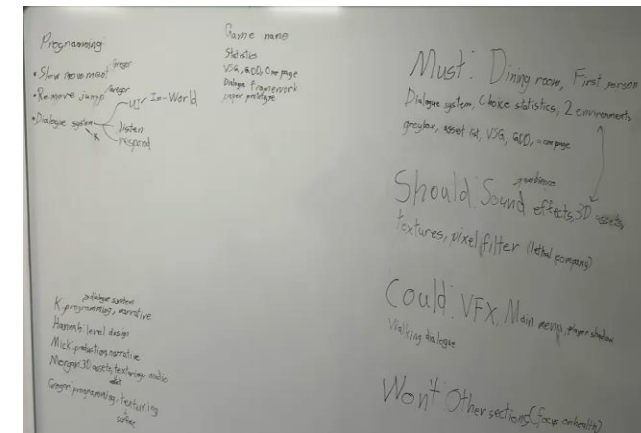
Genre

3D educational walking simulator

I then looked into how games explore related topics. I first came across an essay that noted how misogynistic cliches are easy to perpetuate in monstrous designs – to avoid this I suggested we simply avoid having enemies in our game, this would also lessen the scope and negate any further programming load. It was agreed to keep mechanics to a minimum. I came across more writings on how specific games represent issues: Bloodborne (2015) has a very valid feminist reading with all of its biological female elements, I also found an interesting reddit thread where one commenter noted how 'womanhood is not all femininity'. I noted this down as it was an interesting take on how gender enters the conversation, and opened up questions into how I can design the environment and choose statistics that allow for a less gendered experience. I found a few reading on Silent Hill 3, a series that is very heavy on metaphorical storytelling, and this installment in particular focuses on forced pregnancy. It was agreed very early on that we would not be discussing the 'forced' aspect of some pregnancies as it is too sensitive of a topic that we would not be equipped to portray. I noted down some environmental representations SH3 uses, that might also work in our game.

I also started creating a GDD, but research took over most of my time as I was the only member to conduct any during the first two weeks of our jam. As we are creating a game about a sensitive topic, I stressed how important it was to conduct research – and find inspirations for how we should be metaphorically presenting the issues, as well as finding grounded statistics. I believe I communicated this fairly, I stressed it at the end of class time and meetings, I wrote a to-do list in the discord (see previous slide). I took the initiative and increased my interpersonal and project planning skills in doing so.

During the first meeting we did stand-ups, then I contributed to creating a MoSCoW list, as well as a list for what needs to be completed next.



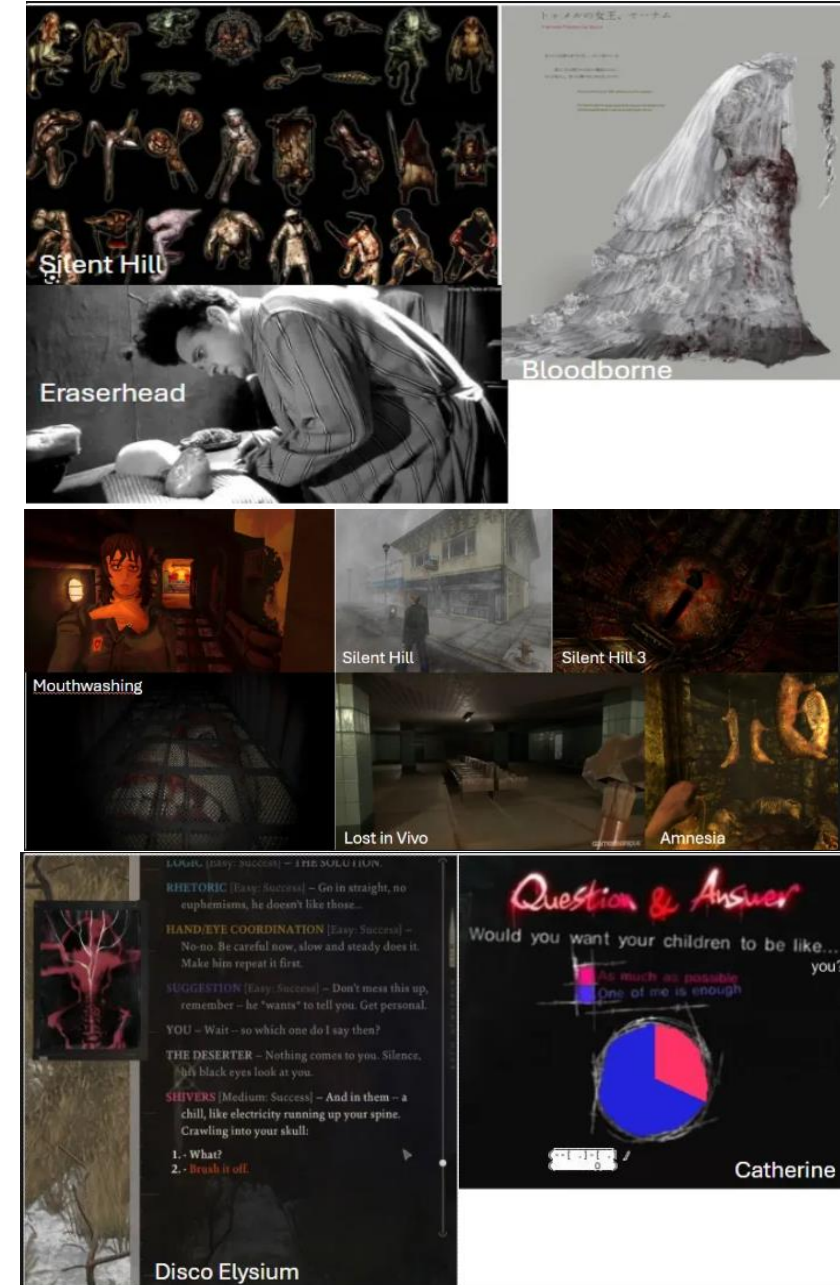
Moodboards

[Notion](#) page with all my research, annotated moodboards at the end

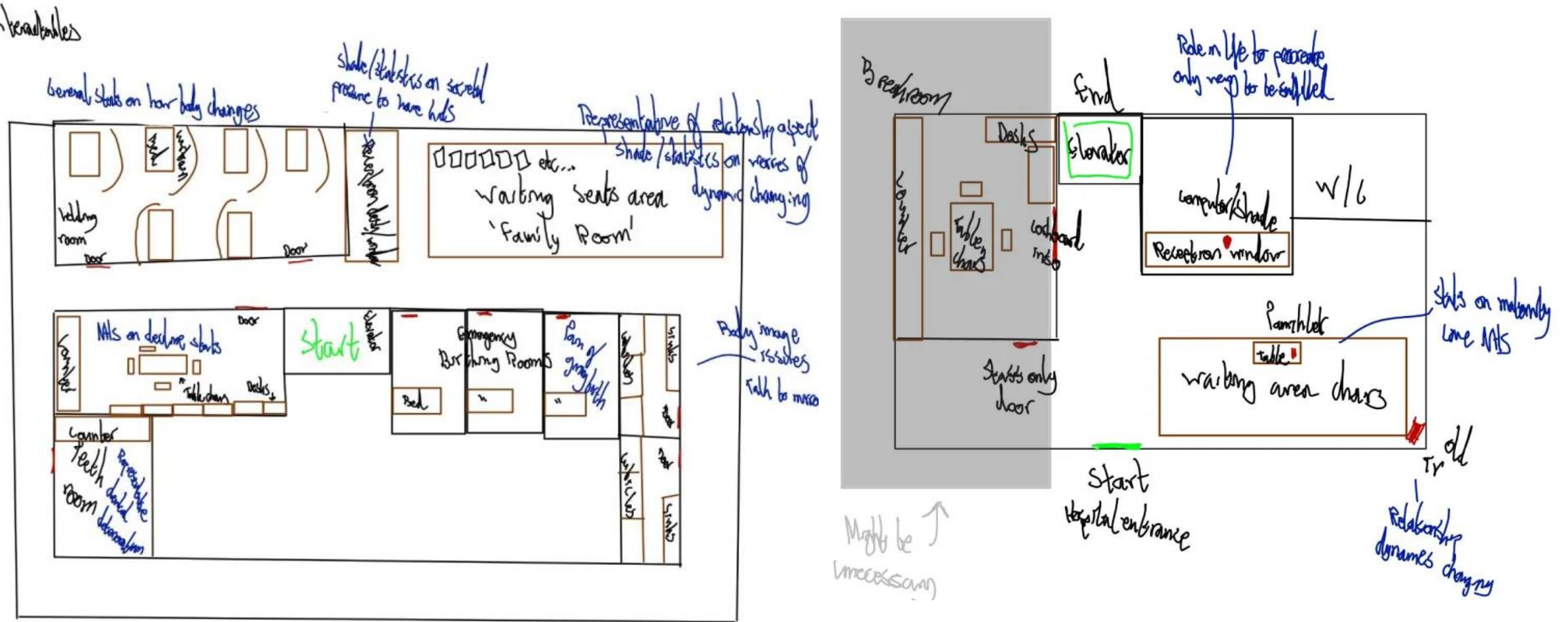
I created these moodboards before we had agreed on not putting enemies in the game. My first moodboard was on character designs – I included the Silent Hill (1999) monster designs as they are all metaphors for different parts of the protagonist's traumas, a still from Eraserhead which is a surreal exploration of a man who isn't ready for parenthood as the way the 'baby' in the film is physically portrayed is interesting and may be relevant for our design, then the Bloodborne (2015) character Yharnam's design despite it being very on-the-nose as it is a memorable design with a lot of visual storytelling.

My second moodboard is on environment/art direction. I pushed early on for a low poly artstyle, as this would make creating our own assets a lot simpler and allow for more of them to be made in comparison to if we wanted something with more realism. I again used the SH games as examples as they utilise a low poly artstyle – and the environment design for the descension further into the minds of the protagonist is relevant to our games similar premise. I also used Mouthwashing (2024) as inspiration, it also has a low poly artstyle and a similar descent into madness that is very explicitly shown through the environment design and changing gameplay from a VN/walking sim to a more 'minigames' ending that would be interesting to apply to our game. In terms of scope it may just mean I get to ideate the last level, rather than expecting the programmers to program new mechanics for it. Lost in Vivo (2018) is another low poly game with a grimy atmosphere that descends into a fleshy aesthetic with matching enemies, the assets used are minimal so it makes for good inspiration into creating an imposing atmosphere with minimal resources. Amnesia (2010) has a PSX style with a very dark and grimy atmosphere that would serve for strong inspiration for the environment design.

I lastly made a moodboard on games with mechanics that could be included; the survey mechanic from Catherine Classic (2019) was suggested by another member. I suggested the personality system Disco Elysium (2019) uses, and included it on the moodboard as a way for the player to explore different views on the childfree conversation within our game – for example there could be a 'mothering' personality that talks to them stating how it's part of nature to have kids, and then the player would be allowed to respond to this by either agreeing, disagreeing or an undecided/unsure neutral response.



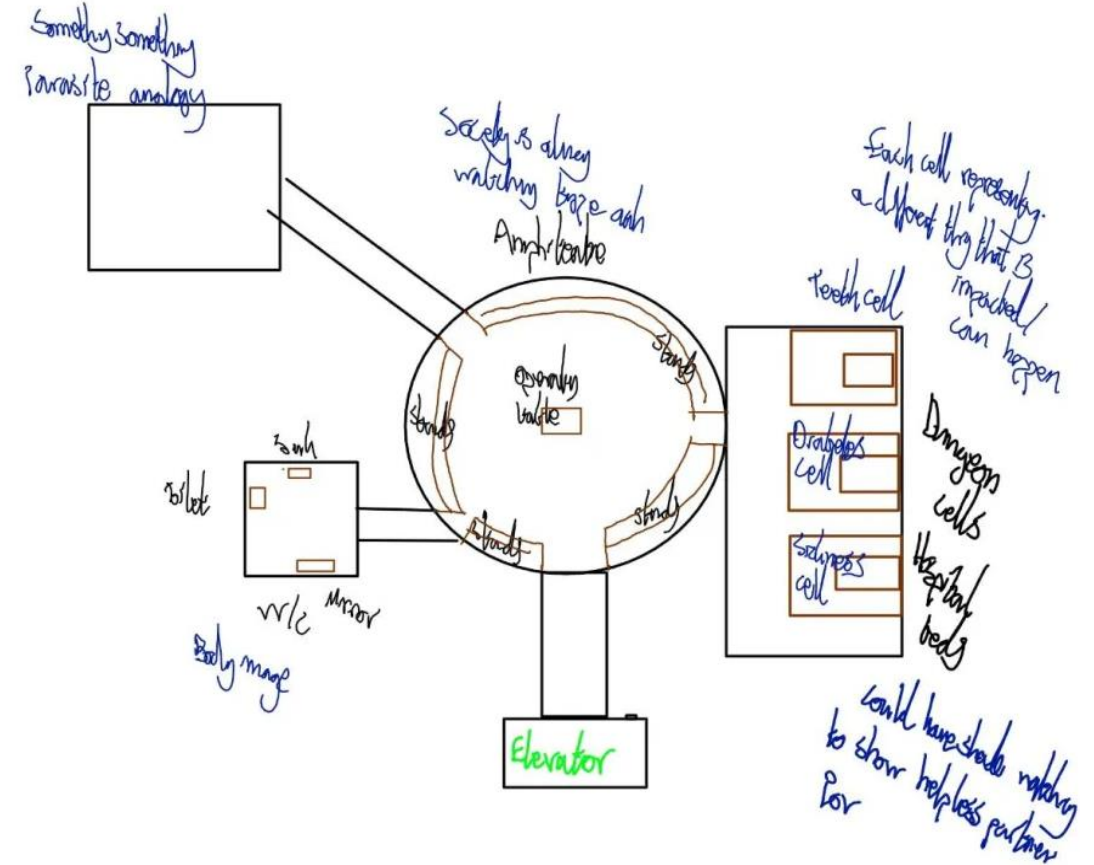
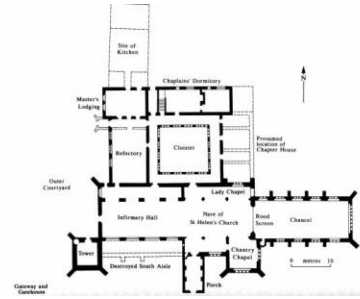
Level Design



I started by drawing the first level which would be a hospital. I based it off of various layouts of different maternity wards, wanting to keep it to three central hallways. Each room would be based off of a different area of my research. After showing this to my team, the idea was floated that it may be better to have three levels – I agreed with this as then we could further separate the levels thematically, having the first one utilise my research on the NHS and move the relationship dynamic theme to another level as well. I then created a design for the new first level: the hospital level. I based this around a hospital waiting room, I originally designed for a break-room but decided to make this a 'could have' as I realised it was not entirely necessary, all the information could be displayed in the waiting room area. I designated where the player would start and end up in green, red is for doors on the first design, and interactables on the second. I labeled in blue what each segment would represent, and what statistics would go there. General annotations on what the objects are and what the areas are, are in black.

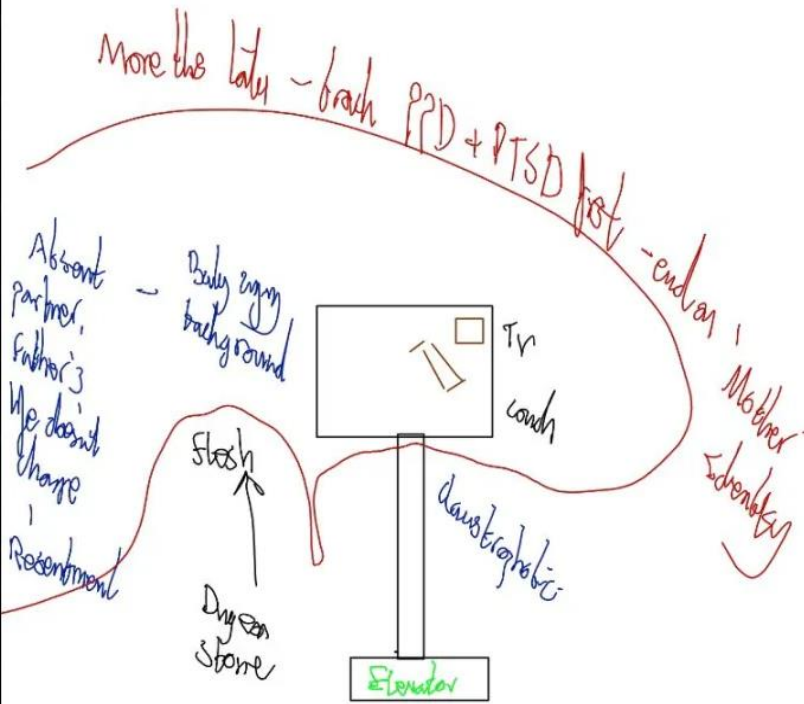
Level Design contd

(Inspo image for left)



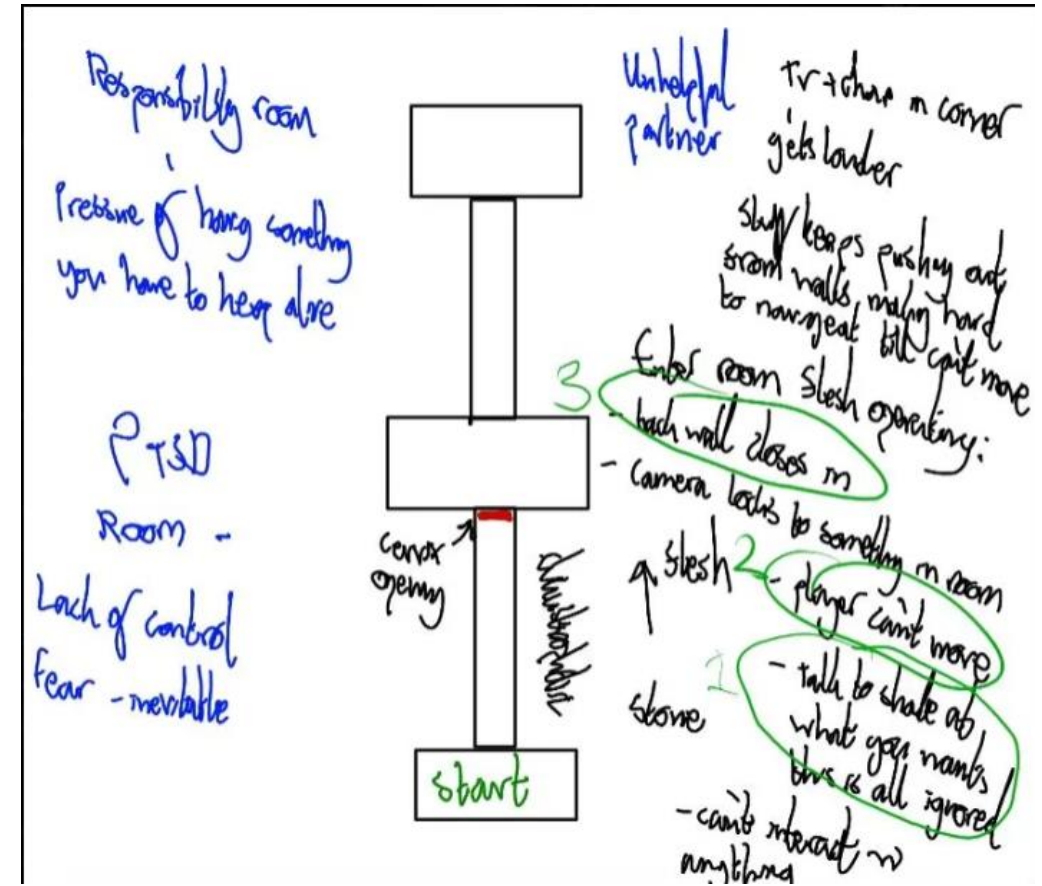
I iterated upon the initial hospital design, we decided that this second level would be more based upon a dungeon. I looked at different layouts for medieval hospitals – and ended up on a layout that had an interesting floor plan. I altered this to allow for a more linear exploration, intending for the player to work around it from right to left.. A team member mentioned wanting an amphitheatre, I thought this could work in this initial design – but decided to create another iteration solely based around an amphitheater as I really liked the thematics of the concept: society is always watching/judging. I followed the same colour annotations key for these designs. Given more time, I would have stuck with the second iteration, but added the amphitheater as the landing area from the elevator – then extending into the linear exploration of the first design, searching each room around a central room that cannot be entered.

Level Design Cont



For the final level, I did not have a solid idea what to do. I was already crunched for time as I had to start blockouts at this point. I started designing it, then left it to start blockouts as I realised it was more important to have at least one level fully completed so we would have gameplay to show.

After completing two of the level blockouts, I revisited the level design and added details that I had thought of in the meantime. I added the 'cervix opening' design similar to the Silent Hill 3 final boss fight entrance as I thought this would be a fitting introduction to the final level which was meant to be more *visceral*. I wrote down the thematics of the room in blue, and then potential mechanics that could be central within the spaces, that would represent the theme. This final level (much like Mouthwashing (2024)), I wanted to be more interactive and contain less statistics – the ones that were there I wanted to be diageitic to end the stage on a more atmospheric rather than educational tone. I then continued working on the blockouts, when I came back to the level design I knew what machanics I wanted to combine and in what order: circled in green and numbered.



I increased my project planning skills as I focused on getting finished what was needed, rather than what I wanted to finish. I also increased my interpersonal skills throughout the duration of my level designing as I was consistently asking for feedback, and discussing design decisions I was making with the team.

Greyboxing – Dining Room

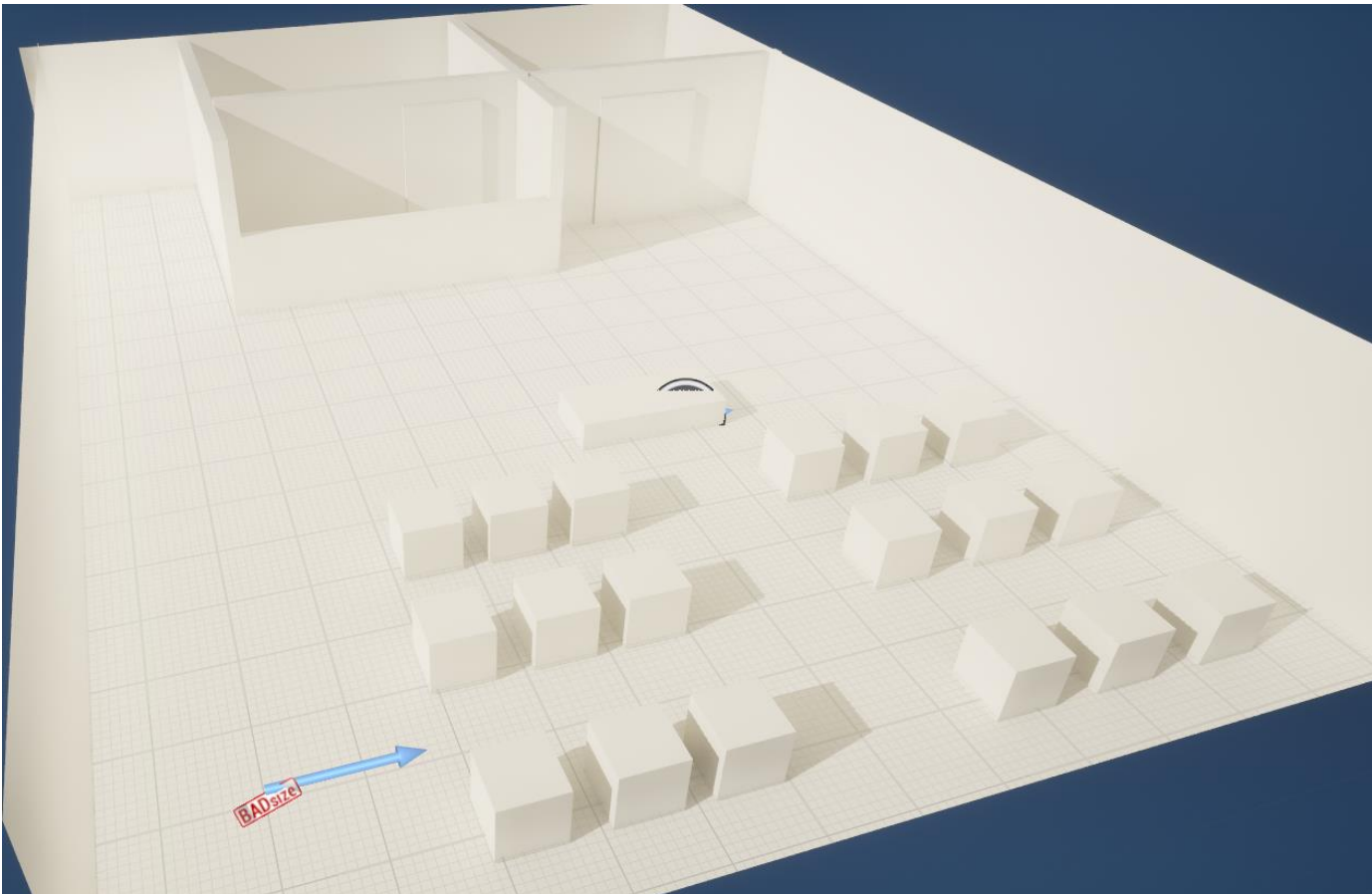


As the dining room is meant to be cramped and claustrophobic, I went straight into unreal to greybox it out based off of another team members moodboards to save time. The first image is the kitchen as the player would see it: from a chair at the end of the table.

Greyboxing – Level 1 Hospital

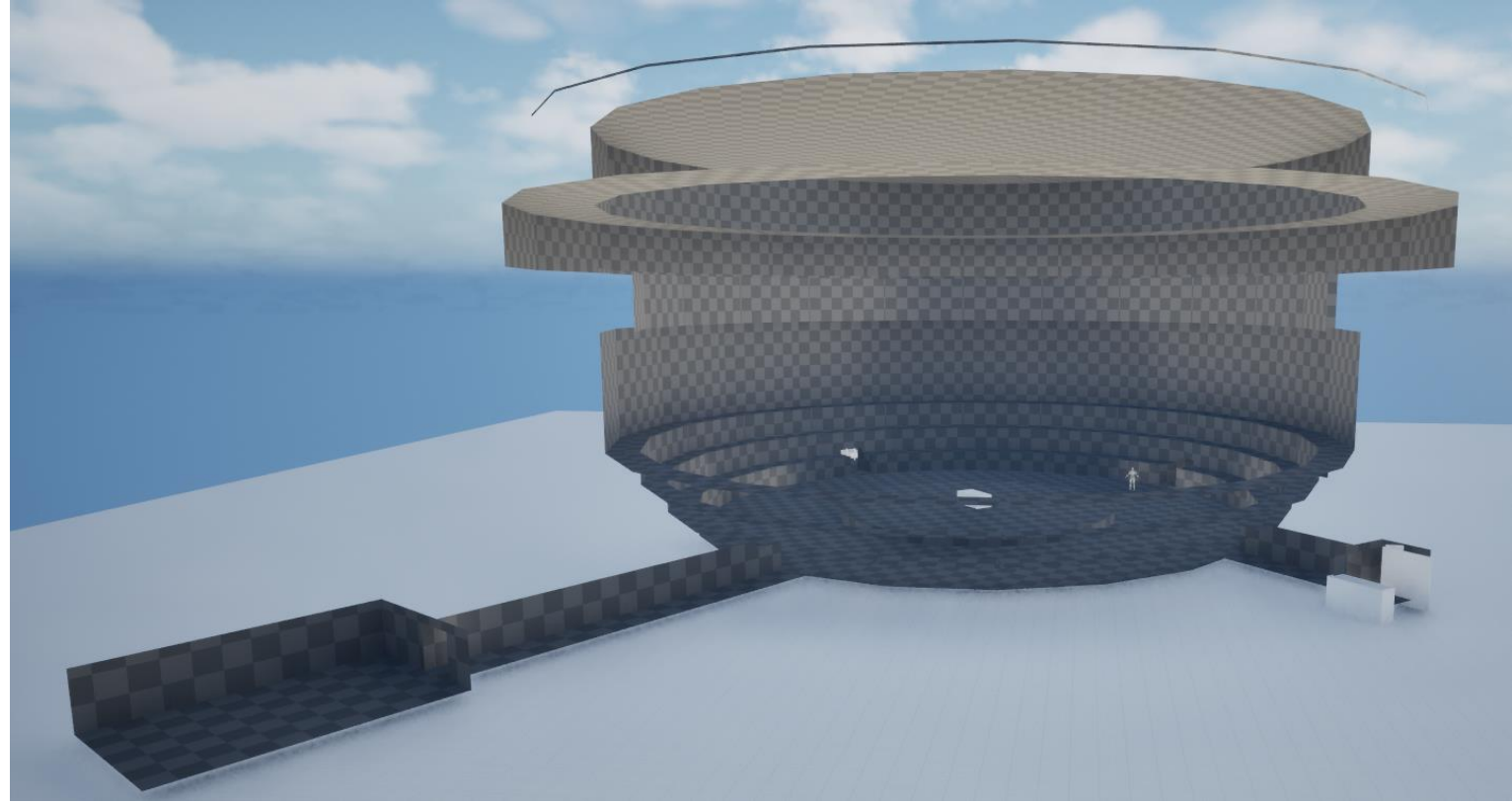
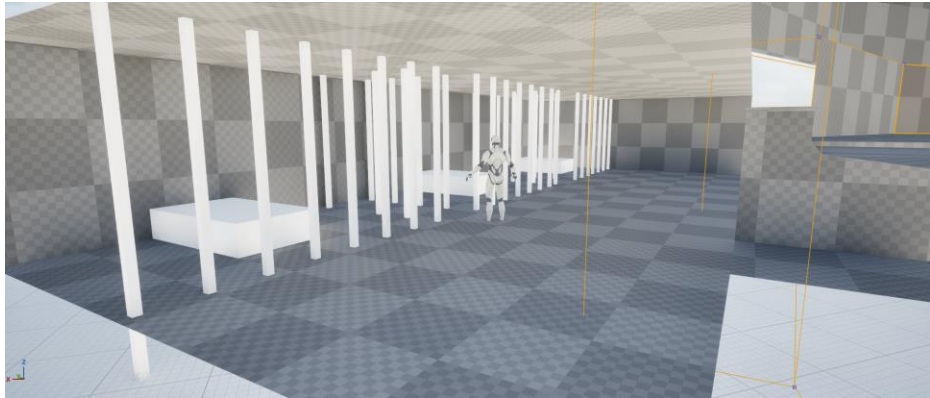
I created a greybox for the first level based off of my level design.

During the second meeting, we did standups then I contributed to creating asset, texture and decal lists based off of my level designs.



Done	To Do	Dining Room	Asset List	Shades
Dialogue System	Asset List	Dining Table	Hospital	
Dining room dialogue & tree	Elevator BP	Dining Chair	Waiting Room Chairs	
Screen Fade (dialogue)	Audio System	Kitchen Counters	CRT TV	
Blockout for level 1 & 2 (Dungeon JT.3)	Greyboxing - Dining Room Hospital	Lampshade	Reception tray	
Research (Statistics, representation, References)	Dialogue - Hospital, Dungeon	Banister	Ball	Panels
GDD Template	Surface materials - Creation, Importing	Window Door	Clipboard	VC Signs
Hospital dialogue tree outline	Decals	Cracking	Pamphlet Stand	Elevator Guide
Visual Style Guide - Colors, Colours, Mood boards	Dining Room Assets	Fridge	Plant	Pastors
		Hub	Elevator Door	Cracks
		Clock	Elevator Buttons	Chairs (solid)
		"Food"	Side Table	Block stairs
		Pots	Chairs (solid)	Dirt edging
		Corridors	Notice Board	
		Tile Floor	Computer	
		Yellow wall paper		
		Wood	Carpet	
		Table cloth	Two Color Wall Paint	
		Popcorn Ceiling	Linoleum	
			Ceiling Squares	

Greyboxing – Level 2 Dungeon



I had to remake the Dungeon level three different times as there were lots of issues with github. This did end up with me being able to iterate on the scale of the design through the three different attempts. I created this greybox using geometry in unreal, which allowed me to create the circular shapes and the different corridors leading to the different rooms in an efficient way. I also created a viewing gallery section at the top where I would place 'shades' looking down into the amphitheater.

Final Level

Once the textures and models were done, I went back into the greybox and replaced the stand-ins with the actual models. I refined objects we did not have assets for, such as the fridge, extractor fan, and light to look more polished for the final version. I used some textures that were already in Unreal (metal for the light, fridge, oven and fan, as well as the backsplash tiles and stairs) that weren't made by our texture artist, just to ensure there wasn't too much repetition within the environment.

With the help from the programmer, I added post processing to bring down the lighting to a more atmospheric level, then added the shades to the table.

I believe the finished (for this jam) product looks good, I increased my level design and lighting skills as a result of this. I also increased my interpersonal skills through asking others for their work so I could create the finished level, and asking for help with the lighting.



I did the same for the hospital level, I replaced all the grey boxes with the actual assets – I squished the table and chairs down to give some visual variety from the dining room. I refined the reception desk, by adding a desk and chair inside and a glass partition. I added post processing to bring down the lighting, I originally put it quite dark but after feedback from my team I brought it up to what is currently shown. I added separate environmental rect lights; one above the pamphlets to give them more visibility to the player, one above the shade for the same reason, one in front of the TV for the same reason, and a red light above the elevator to indicate the change in tone that will happen once the player descends. I also added some 'flesh orbs' along the hallways to the elevator to further indicate this through the environment.

