Grafted at Sea

“Wretches always wash up here. Seems you’re no different than me.”

“I wouldn’t go down there. The grafted lord forsook this rock for a reason.You should stay clear.

“So be it. But I warn ye, abominations lurk below. Even the sea chokes here. One can’t swallow something so foul…”

- *Armless Goslyn*

Southwest of Stormveil Castle, an outpost lay sunken in the sea. Estranged over the millenia, it has become a refuse of Godrick’s failed “projects.”

I want to create a legacy dungeon in Elden Ring that explores more of the architecture, layout, and lore of Stormveil and its surrounding forts. One of the bosses is an abomination of limbs who lords over the castle. He acquires power through “grafting”, that is, dismembering and attaching corpses of fallen heroes to augment his strength.



“Bear witness!”



More nightmare fuel…

This level I’m designing would become a side-quest the player could undertake to improve their armaments and discover more of the origins of Godrick the Grafted.

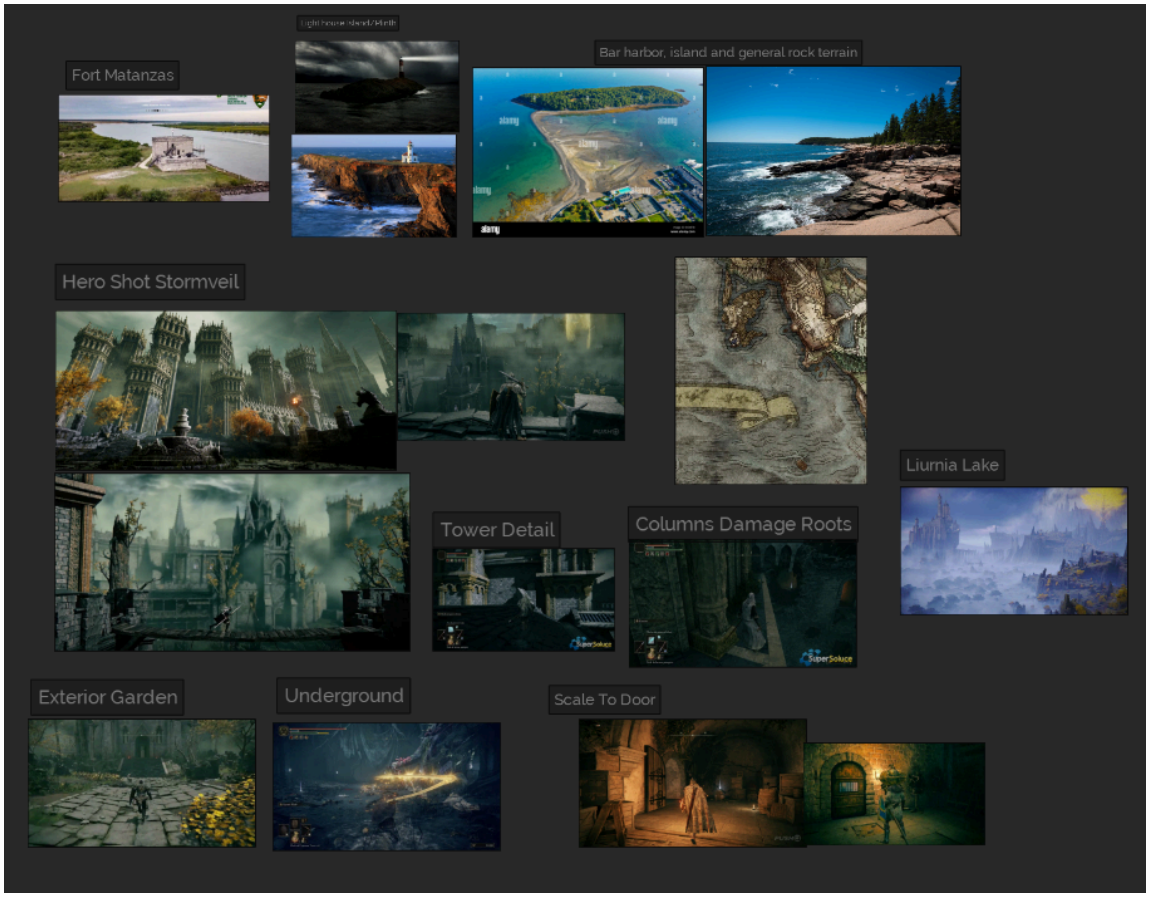
Located at sea off the coast of Stormveil, a primary castle/dungeon, I envision a ruined fort fighting against its watery engulfment. Before the Shattering, a lore event occurring 5000 years prior, this fort served as a beacon and checkpoint for foreign vassals visiting the Lands

Between. In its prime, it would have been connected to the mainland like at the tip of a peninsula. Now, as is everything else in this world, the fort has fallen into ruin - the sea has risen to separate the outpost from the mainland and a sinkhole has opened up, swallowing most of the structure. The player would arrive at the beachhead, meet an npc to warn them, and then traverse into the depths to discover what lurks below. It is here the player learns the origin of how Godrick became obsessed with grafting, his first experimentations, etc…

Research and Development

I'm a nerd for lore in games which led me to stumble across this person's phenomenal videos. She's an environment artist that creates fan-made Elden Ring content. It's astonishing work. Fortunately (and as a little self-reminder) I plan on approaching this level from less of an art perspective and more of a gameplay design. I hope to create something that follows the beats of how Elden Ring lays out forts and legacy dungeons as well as feel like it at least belongs in the same universe. To me, legacy levels are ones that have a start-to-end format containing monster encounters, puzzling routes, and obtainable secrets. The level design surprises the player and is all driven by some underlying lore.

So, to begin, let's start with some references.



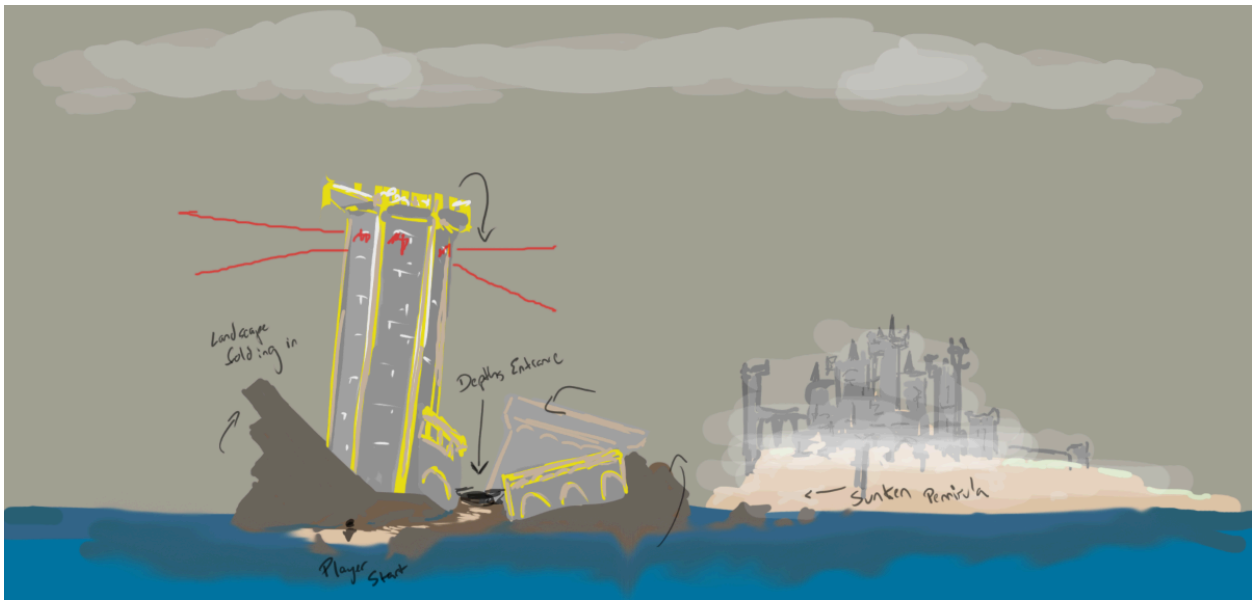
Reference

We should also decide where this place could fit into the world. As stated earlier, I chose here.



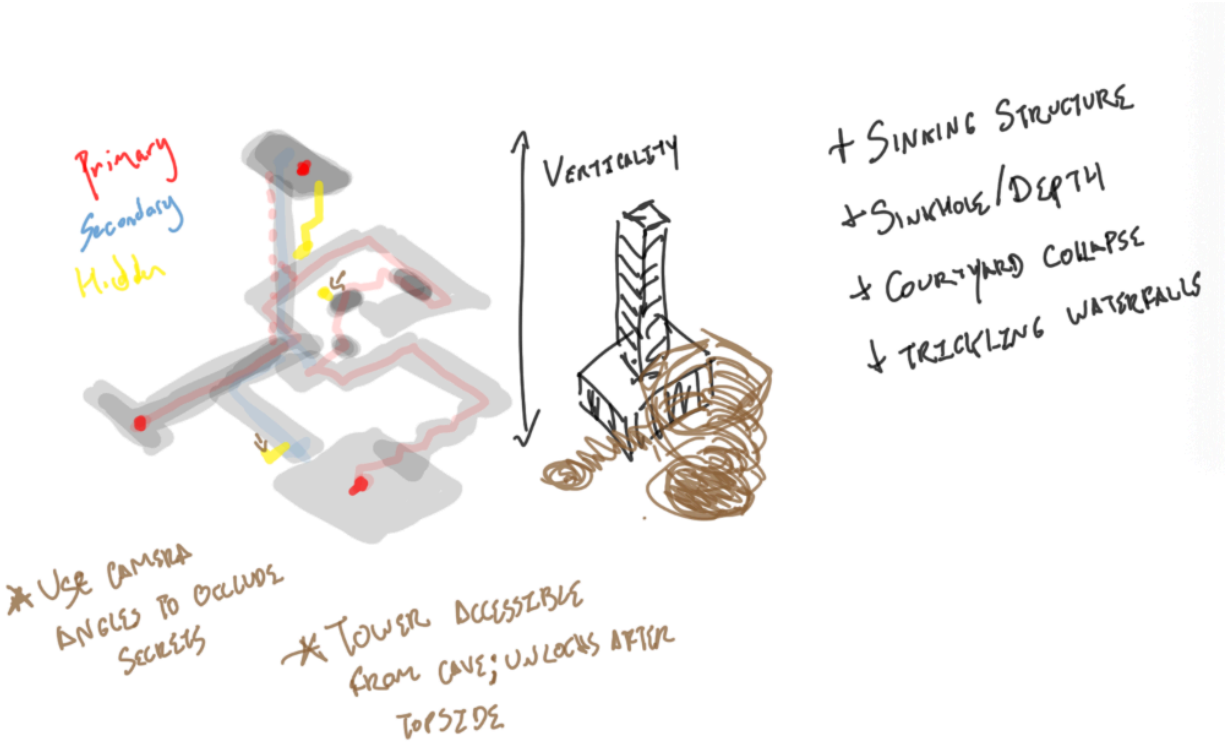
World Placement

Onto some fun. Taking the world placement above, here's a simple (albeit sophomoric) sketch to get a feel of the location.



Landscape Prelim Sketch

Plus some more diagramming of initial ideas. I want this level to have a good deal of verticality.



Level Pathing Sketch

Alright, let's really, actually begin now!

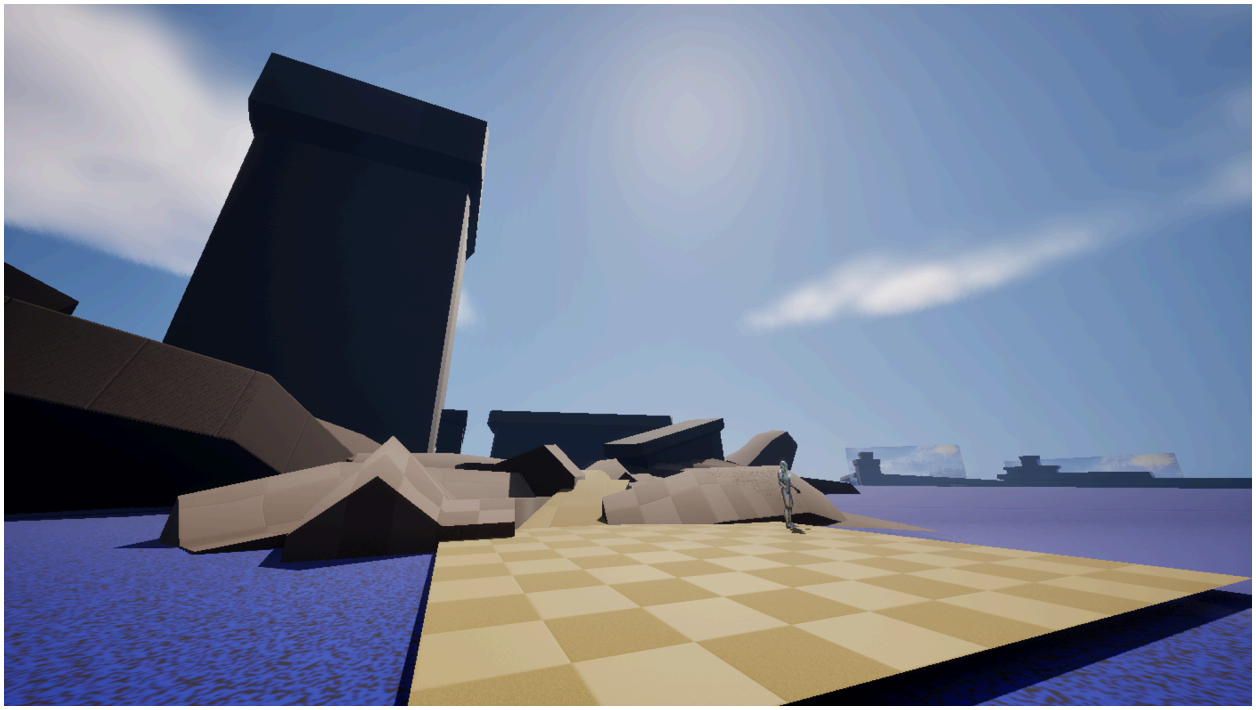
The Start

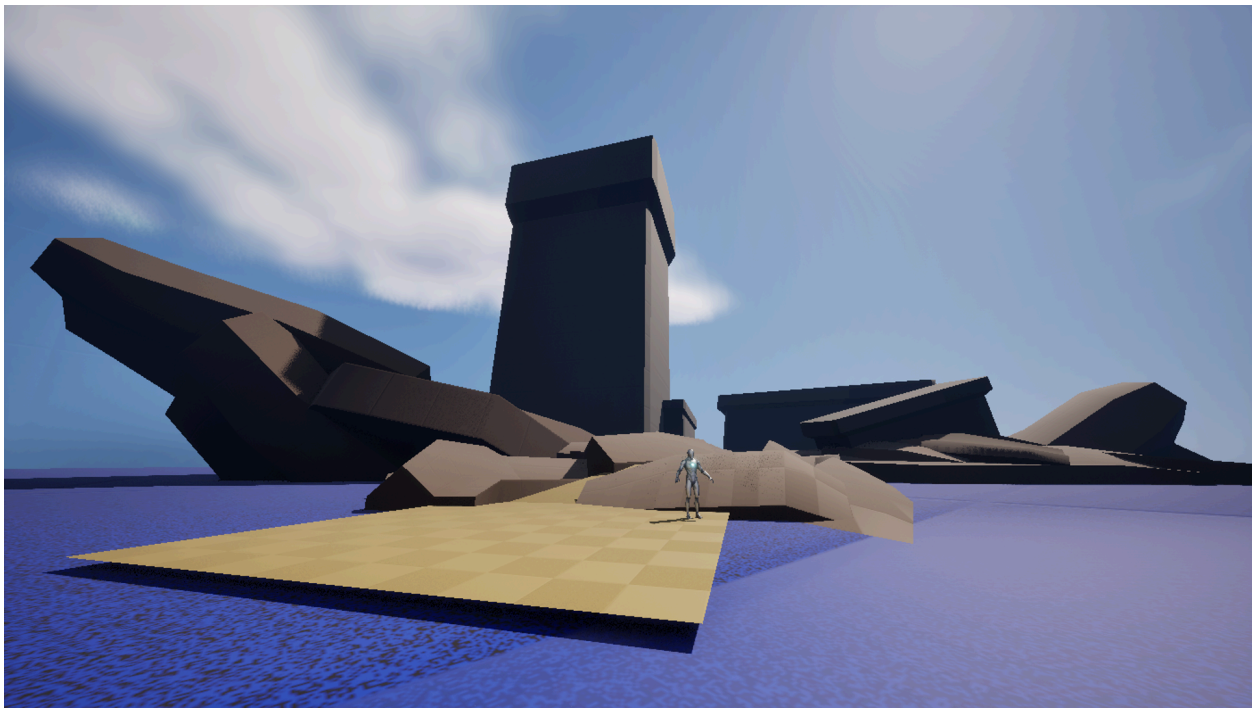
I decided to start making timelapses. Another process I need to improve on. But, since I can't create a small enough gif here, YouTube it is…

Timelapse 1

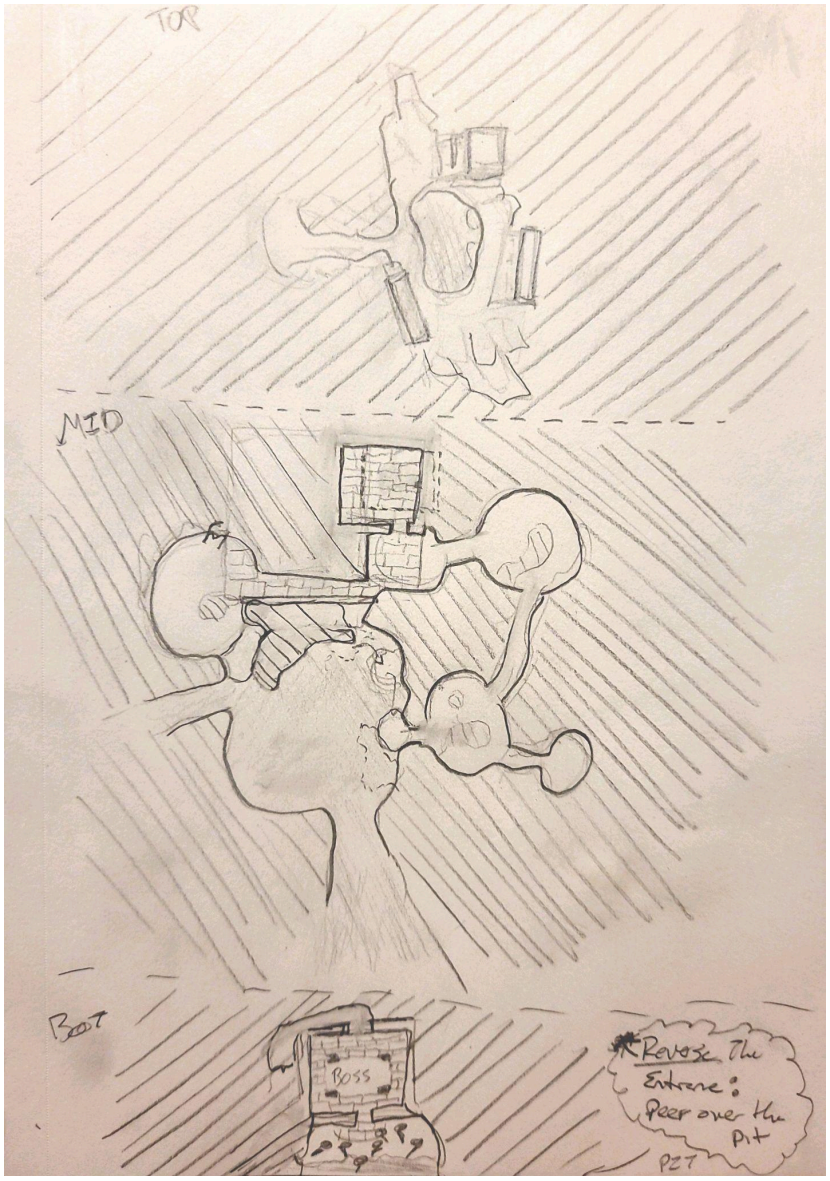
The beginning is always the hardest. With blank canvas syndrome, it's best to just start. It's gonna look bad but gotta start somewhere. So, the main intention here is to set up the general feel. It's an isolated island, there should be the castles/structures that relate to this story off in the distance, and the main landmark should give an indication of where the user needs to go. In this case, the giant pillar overlooking a cavern on a wide open sea.

Timelapse 2





Great, I've got a feel but no indication of pathing besides the start. Let's switch gears and set up the routes. It felt necessary to go back to the drawing board and plan out some more.



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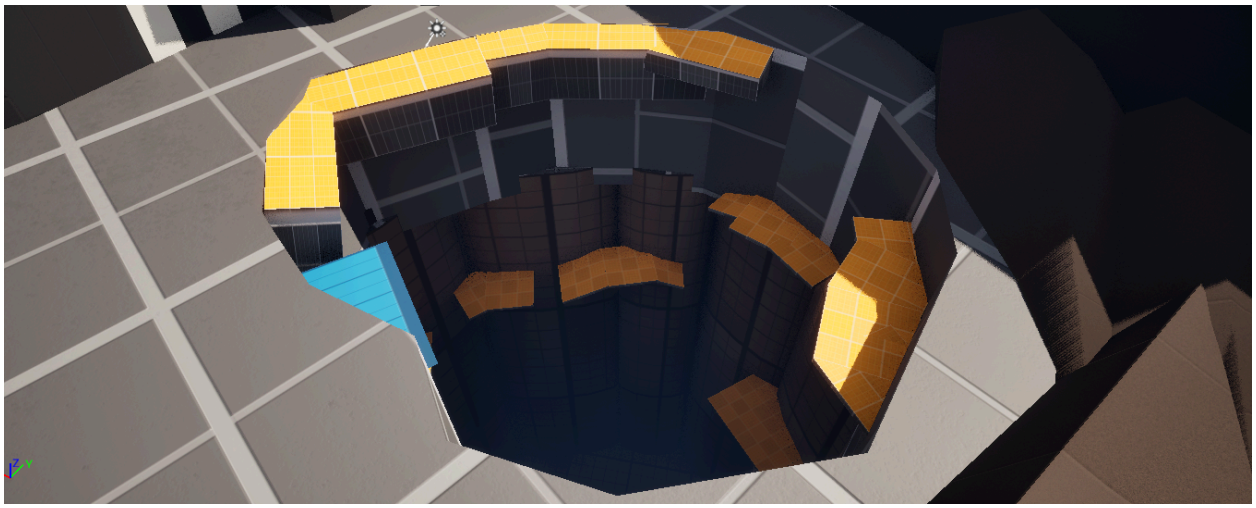
Progress is slow and I'm falling into old bad detail habits (at least at this early stage). So, I decided to get a blockout kit which has helped immensely. Personally, I'm trying to throw caution to the wind and just build, but it's really frustrating knowing there will be pits, awkward edges, z-fighting, etc… But hey, some work is better than no work.

Next Time Lapse

A hiccup

I think I bit off more than I can chew by going for an organic/ruined environment. Instead of nice orthogonal edges, I have a pit and caves to deal with. Also, the scale in Elden Ring is

enormous. Also…and this is a **big** also, the FOV is incredibly low. The default Unreal FOV is 90. Supposedly, Elden Ring is 48! So, not shown above, I had to tweak values on the third person blueprint to get a somewhat similar feel in the engine. Which of course changed the feel and scale. Which of course I have to make way, way bigger.

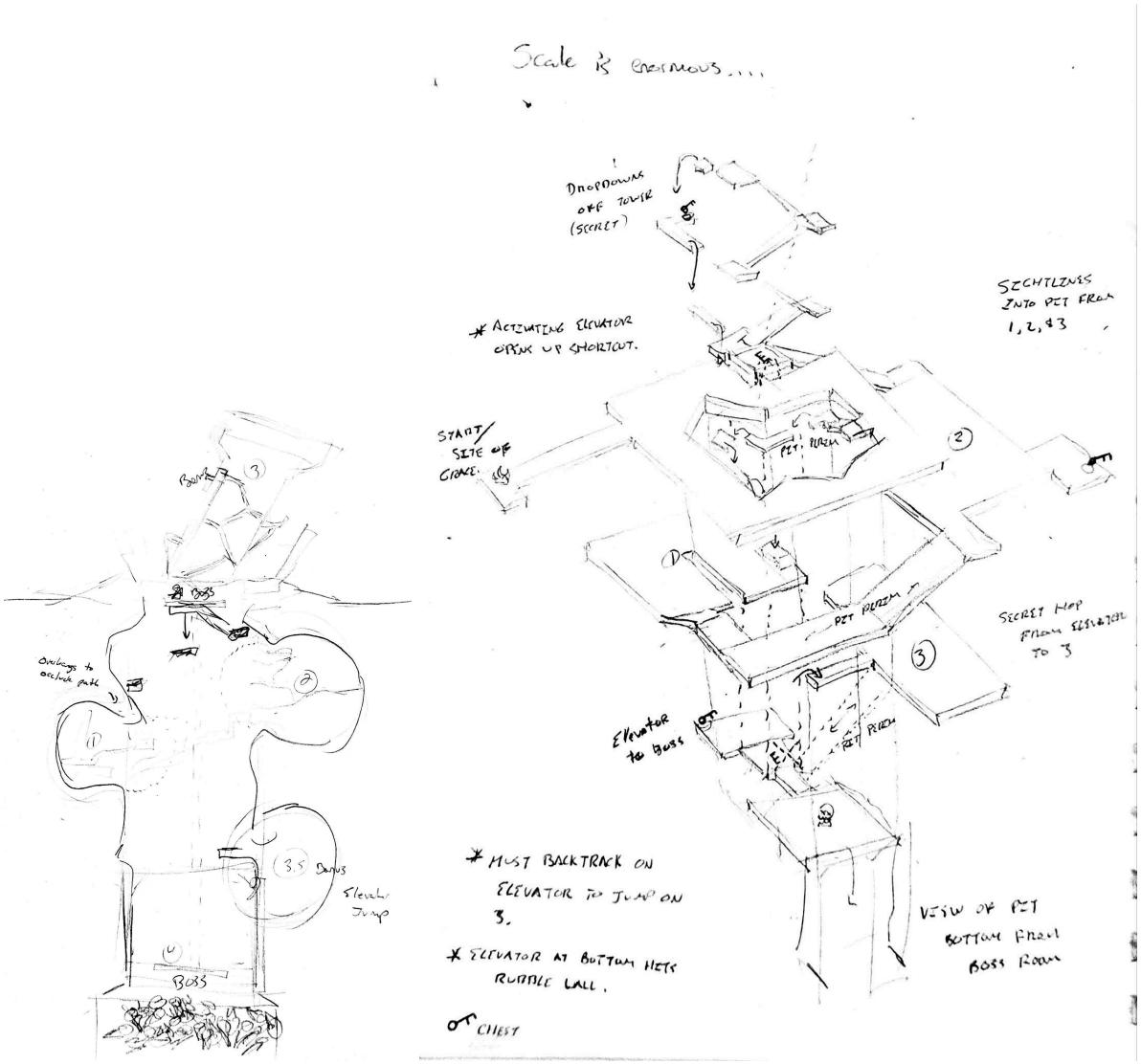


The Pit

Just like the Halo ot UEFN level project (here), if you're going to build for a certain game, *make sure the fundamental feel matches that game*. **Camera and scale are foundational to level design.**

So, after a bit of a design block, I return to sketching.

Breakthrough:



With the sketches above, I think I've figured out the beats:

1. Entrance and reveal - the tower over the pit. Suggest the player can enter the tower but must go into the pit to venture forward.
2. Delve into the caves, winding around the pit. The first cave is lower than the second as the player drops down then ascends. Keeping in theme with Fromsoft style of dungeon progression, **linear doesn't mean obvious**.
3. Enter the base of the tower. Here the player can descend via the elevator or climb the tower to find secrets in the ledges at the top (and drop back down to the outside surface). In the elevator room, the player can unlock a door to the outside to make a shortcut.

4. Descend the elevator to the boss room - boss room is blocked. Ascending the elevator should reveal to the player a secret jump-off point to the final cave. This cave actually leads to the entrance of the boss room.
5. Boss room. At the base of the pit, reveals the lore; a scene of the grafted parts/corpses piled and tossed in a flooded environment.

===

Tower work has commenced. A bit rough so, in the meantime, some videos I stumbled upon:

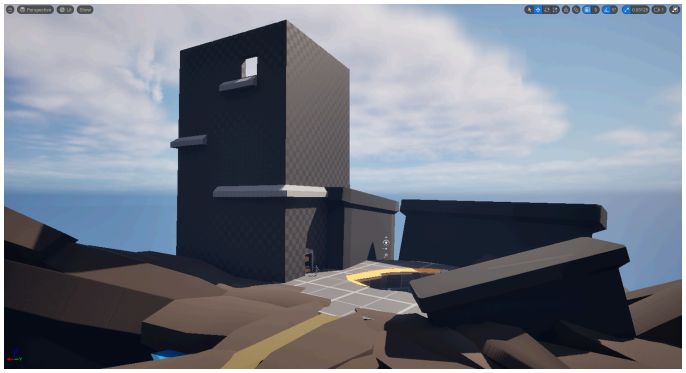
Level Design Workshop: The Illusion of Choice

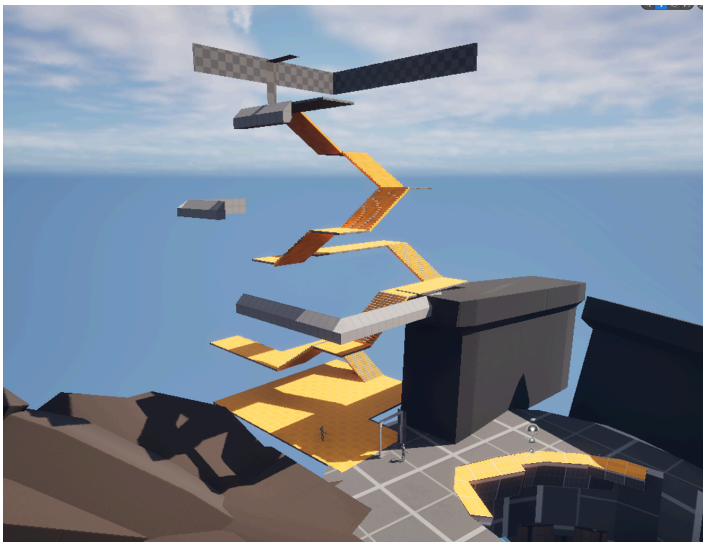
Game Design as Narrative Architecture | The 5 Types of Spaces in Games

Welp, back to it…

==========

Breakthrough… 2



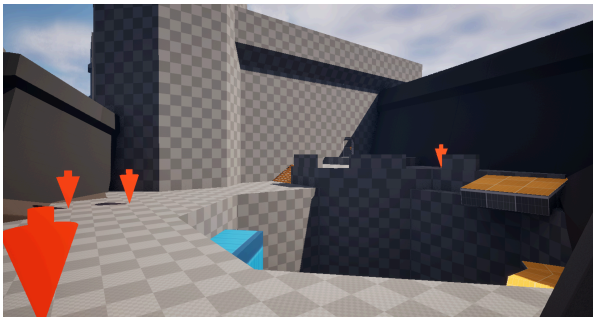


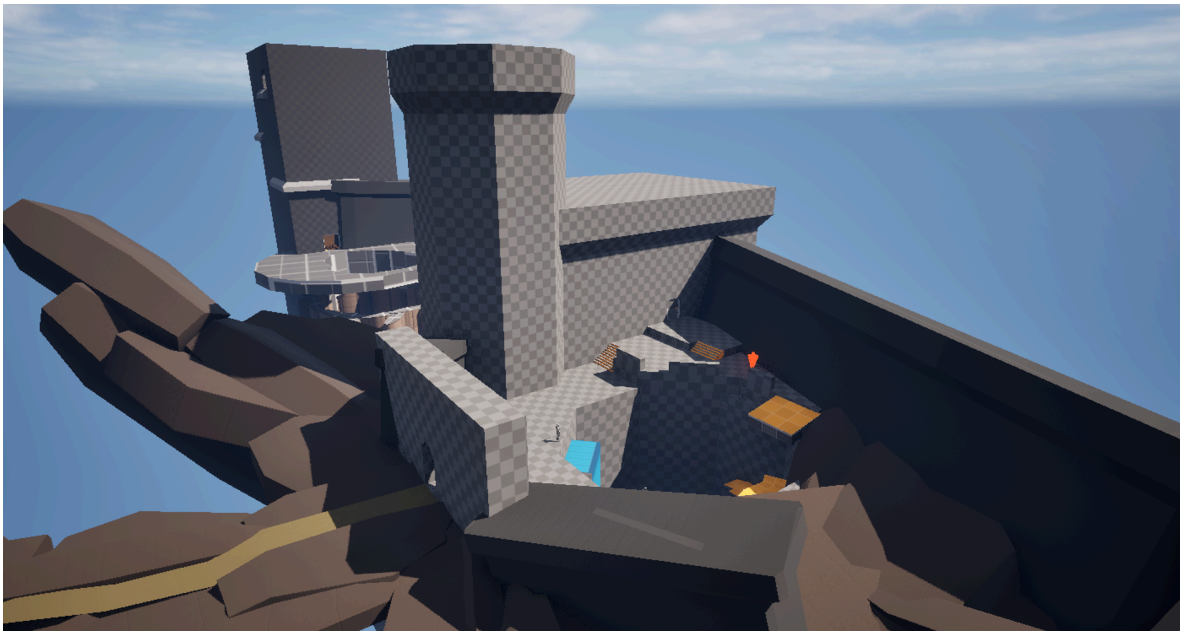
At first glance this seems to be a decent start for the tower, however I realized I've been going at the scale incorrectly. I've been using Stormveil, a massive dungeon/castle as a reference when in reality I should be referencing the smaller forts. I'm building a hybrid fort/cave level and a big influence, both in architecture and flow, is now coming from areas like Fort Haight.





What's notable about this realization is the incorporation of the pit with the courtyard. I was kind of just "making it up" cause it was a cool idea, but seeing the layout here really solidified what I want to do. There will still be a tower as a bonus route, but I'm not going to make it tiers of stairwells - it's going to be a simple ladder climb with a drop down onto the roof of the main structure. The key takeaway is the pit. It fits wonderfully in this courtyard space.



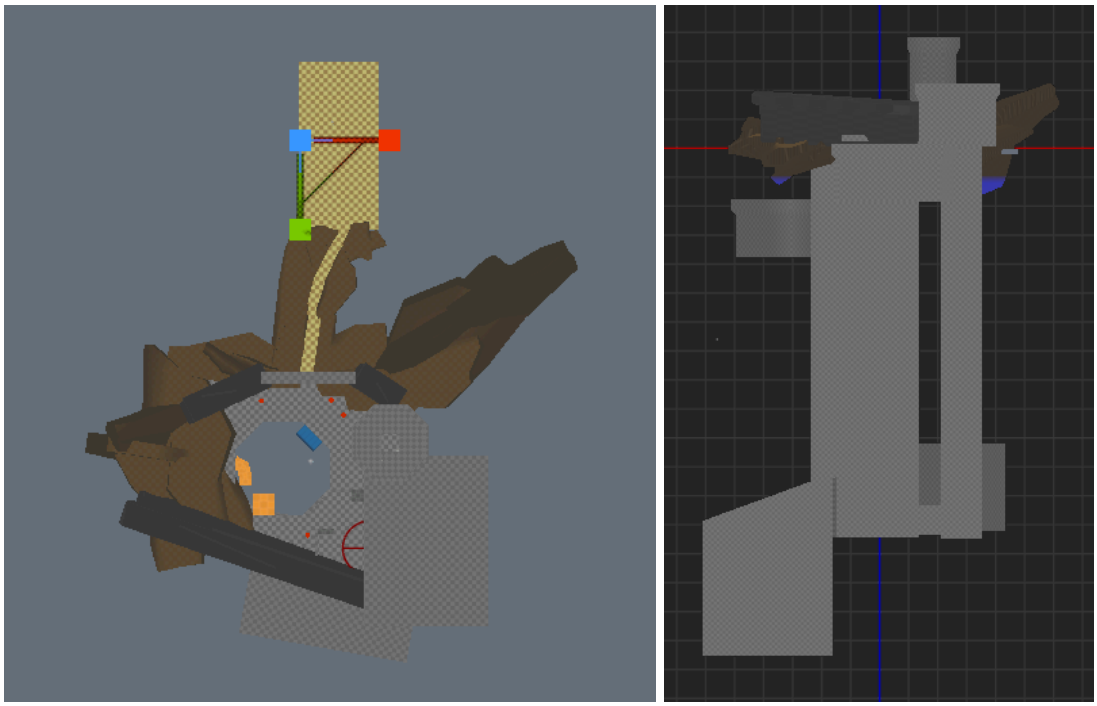


I will say, I continue to find that a 48 FOV is insanity. I get the intention - it's to make the player feel claustrophobic. Souls' games are known for their… surprises. The camera is a massive part of that experience. Elden Ring just has such a grand and massive scale, that the openness continues to trick my brain into thinking the FOV isn't what it is.

Anyways, the main route will be this:
Start on the beach, progress through the gates into a courtyard with a maw of a pit. In the corner appears a tiered platform and door entrance. Enemies will dot this area, with surprise encounters to the sides of the wall that are occluded by the camera angle when the player enters the space. The player will naturally want to go towards the door in the back however it will be locked. Moving towards the pit, they will see drop downs. One must go down before they can go up. Dropping down through the pit will open into a series of caves that will ascend back into that main structure's interior. Here there will be an elevator, a ladder in the tower, and the door which is unlockable from inside. The door now acts as a shortcut for when the player dies. Taking the elevator will lead to the boss room. The entrance to the boss room is collapsed and the player will need to ascend the elevator once more to see a jump point to one more set of caves that actually lead to the boss area.
I'm hoping the flow feels Souls-like, where there's a straight-forward but occluded path with branching secrets. All the while, indications of where to go next. With the start it's the tower, then the pit, then descending the pit - caves that you can't jump to (windows into the pit), and finally the return elevator jump off.

Onwards

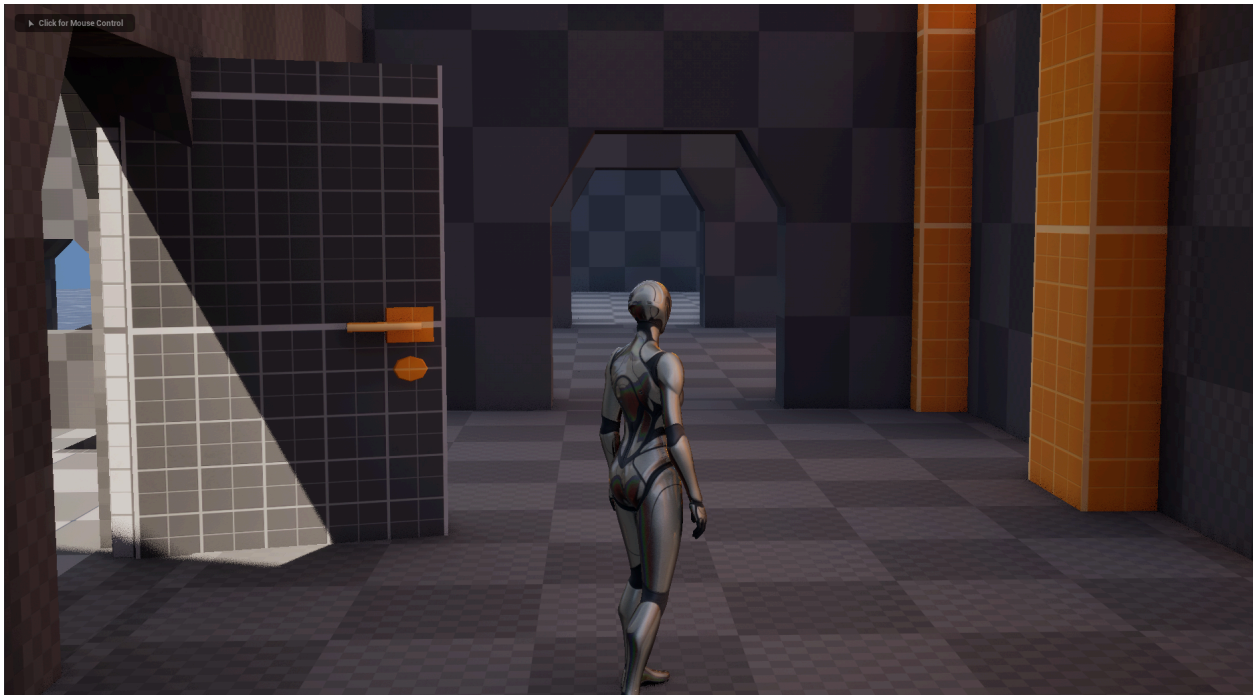
I think I've got a better handle on the scale - the 48 FOV still throws me, but the general layout is about set. Below are some simple screenshots of the beach approach to the pit/fort and a side view illustrating how deep and vertical the game level will be. The pit dwarfs the tower.



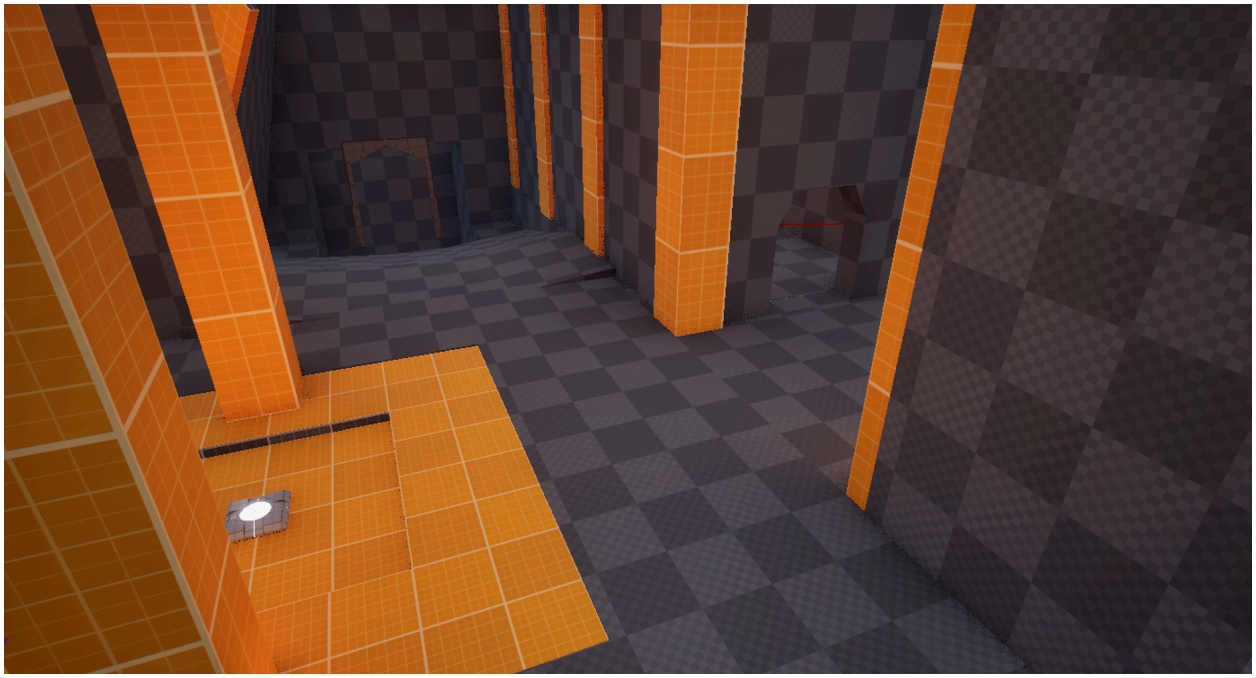
Top layout and simple side view showing verticality



Player Entrance into Fort (at Elevator Room)



Player Re-entering after unlocked door (front of Fort)



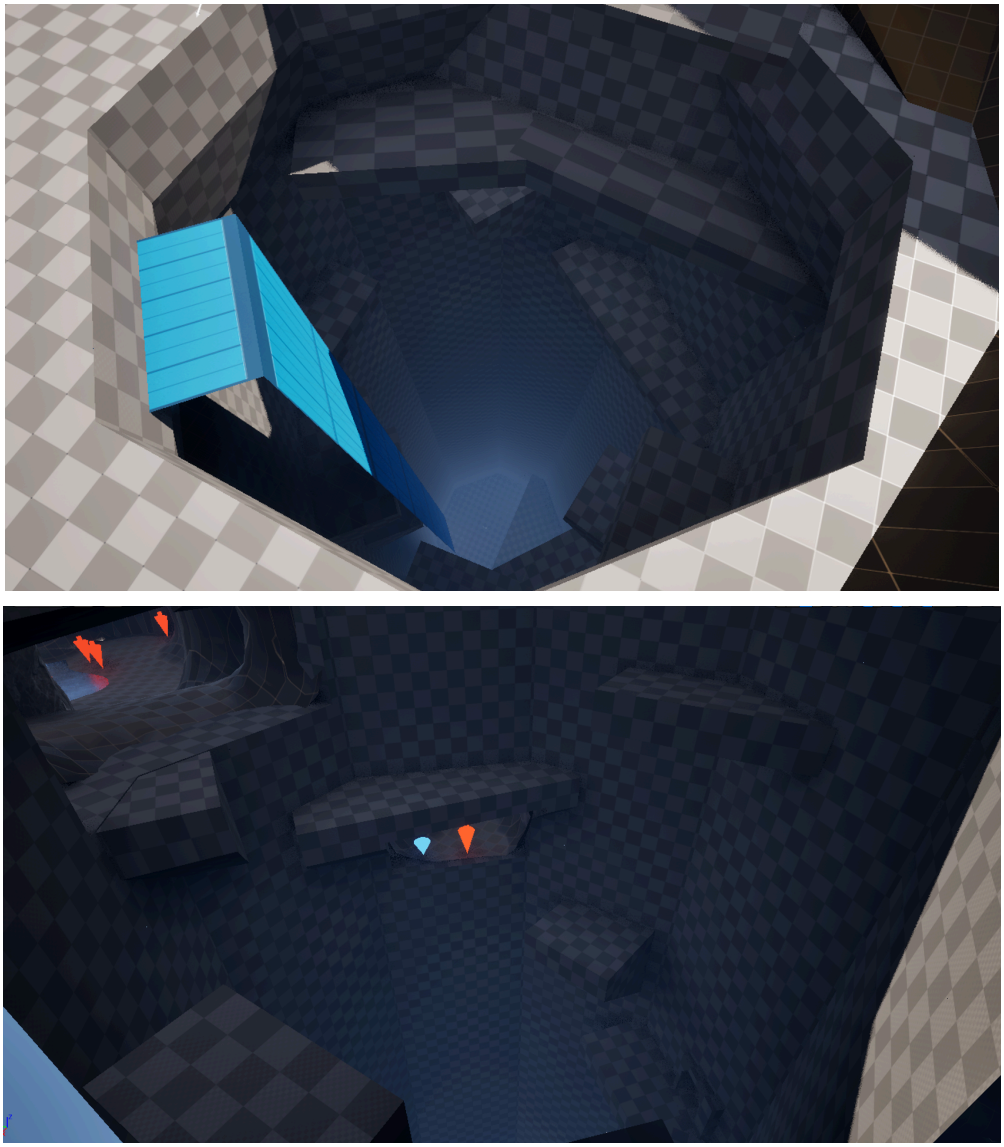
Fort Interior Overview

I wanted to work on the junction point of the level before building the caves and pits. I'm not entirely happy with the fort, both for the awkward approach from the fort entrance and hellishly narrow 48 FOV, but it at least generates a concept for the rest of the layout. And honestly, the player would enter the elevator room first since the fort "entrance" is technically an unlocked shortcut for when the player respawns. ~~So the experience from the entry into the elevator room via the cave (1st player image) matters more than the shortcut where the player doubles back (2nd player image).~~ [*This gets resolved later!]*
The verticality of the pit will probably shrink, but I wanted to make a spectacle of the pit/boss room being visible from the beginning, just not accessible (fall death if player tries). The curiosity of what lies below drives the player and the narrative where hints are shown the closer the player gets to the bottom. Next will be to develop a winding cave system that spirals around the pit, giving windows into the bottom, and designing a cognizant flow with enjoyable enemy encounters.

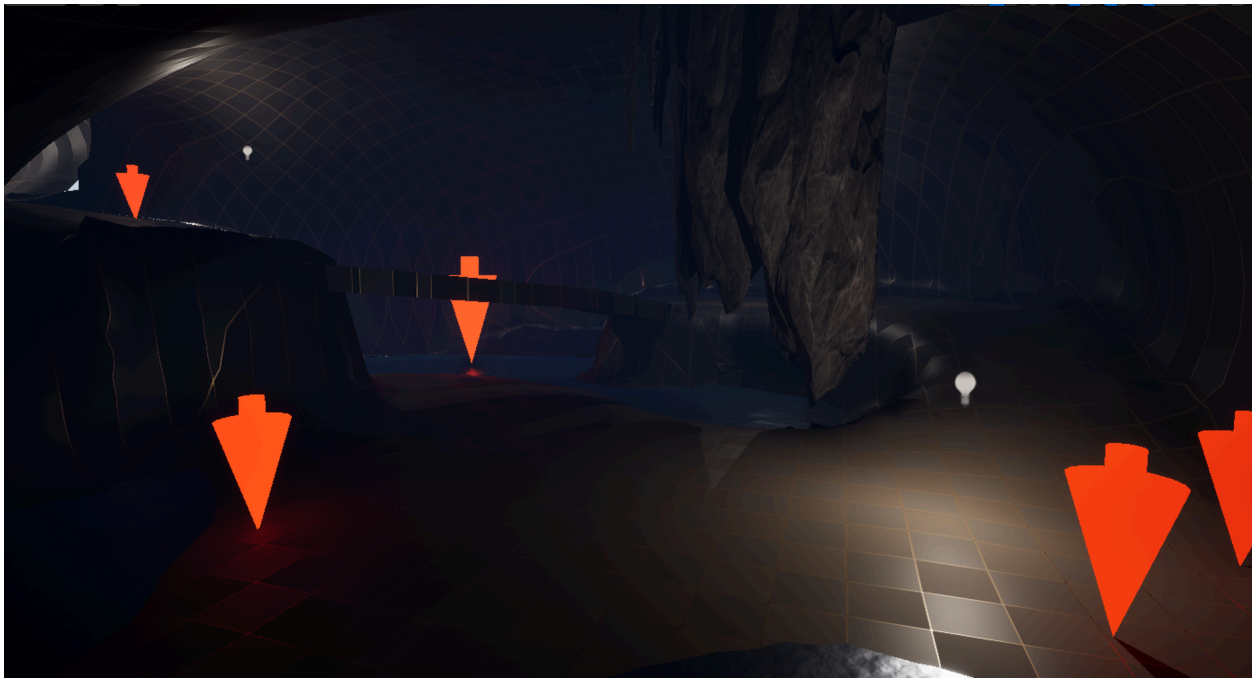
The Caves

Discovered something wonderful. It took a deep dive into tools I've never used before for me to figure out a fun workflow for constructing caves and interior organic spaces. Unreal's cube grid combined with dynamic modeling tools are fantastic. I used Blender's dynotopo so discovering the implementation in Unreal 5 has been a joy.
As for the level, I have to keep reminding myself, "bigger." I think that will be the biggest takeaway when I get to the post-mortem - the camera is everything. With that being said, I've developed the pit a little more, exploring the idea of the cave systems looking back into the pit

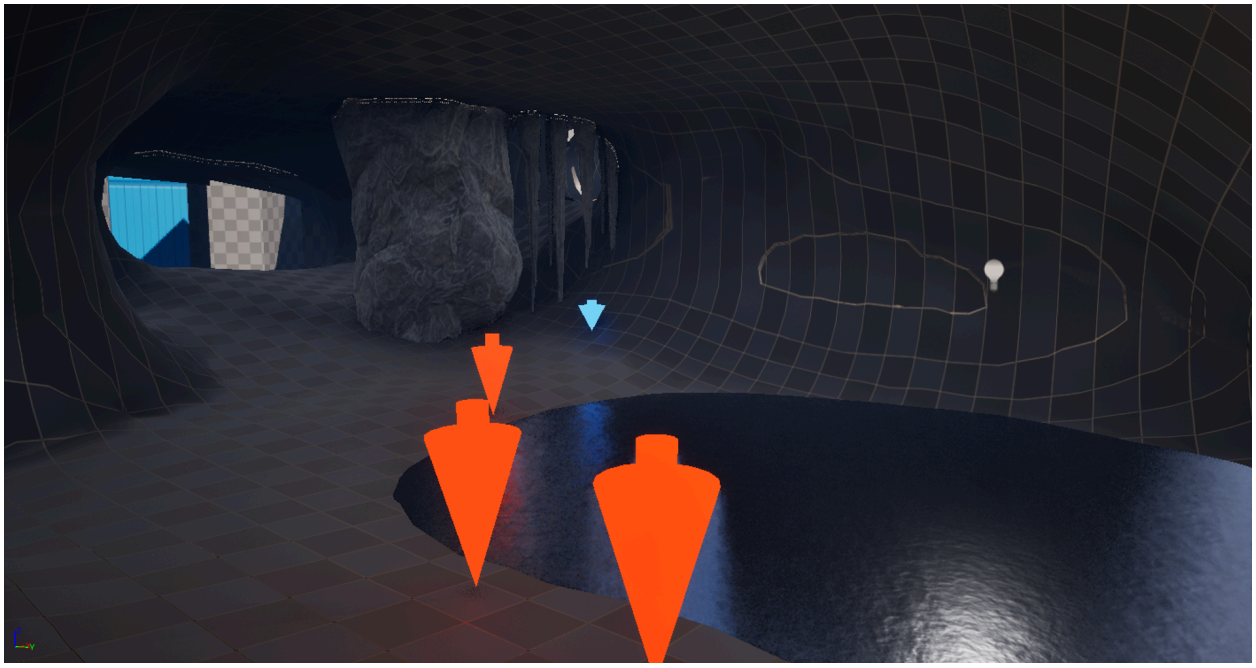
with window pockets. *[Something something, seeing ahead and enemies attacking the player from vantage points they will eventually get to, and be rewarded].*
Got a prototype of the first and second cave done, along with really rough pathing (I'm going to stitch the hallways properly later… ignore the terrible gaps for now).
Anyway, the level is starting to take shape!



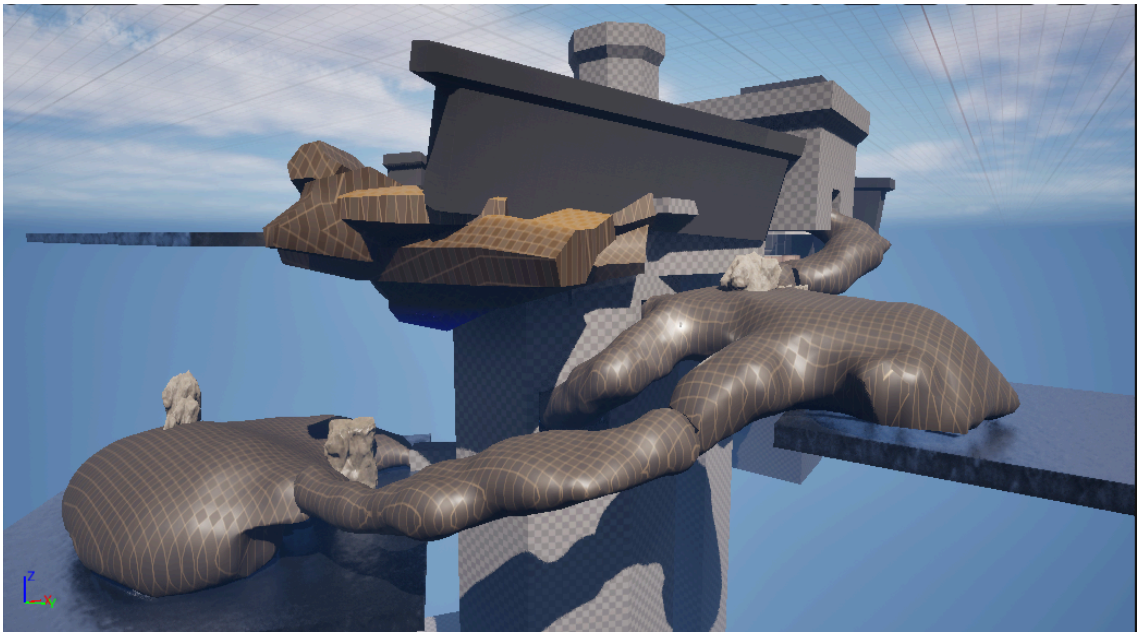
Progress on the pit - caves peer back in.



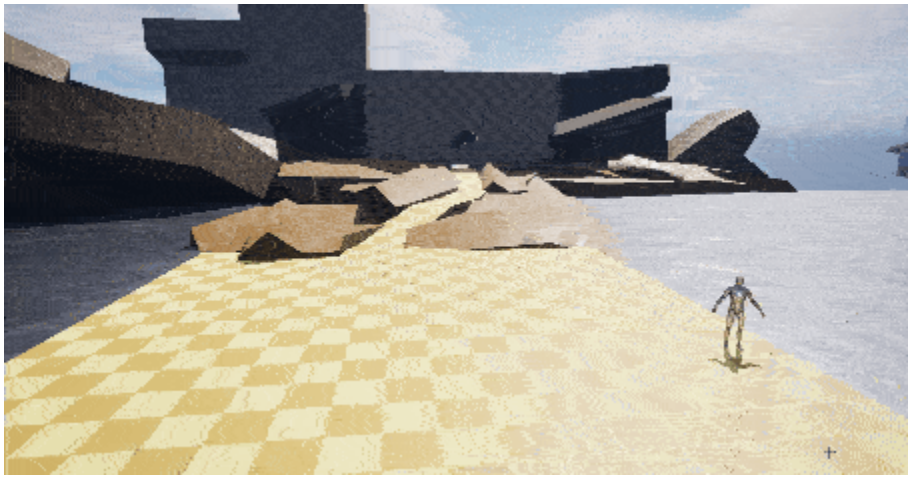
Cave 1



Cave 2



This side of the amalgamation of caves you'll never see in game (hopefully).



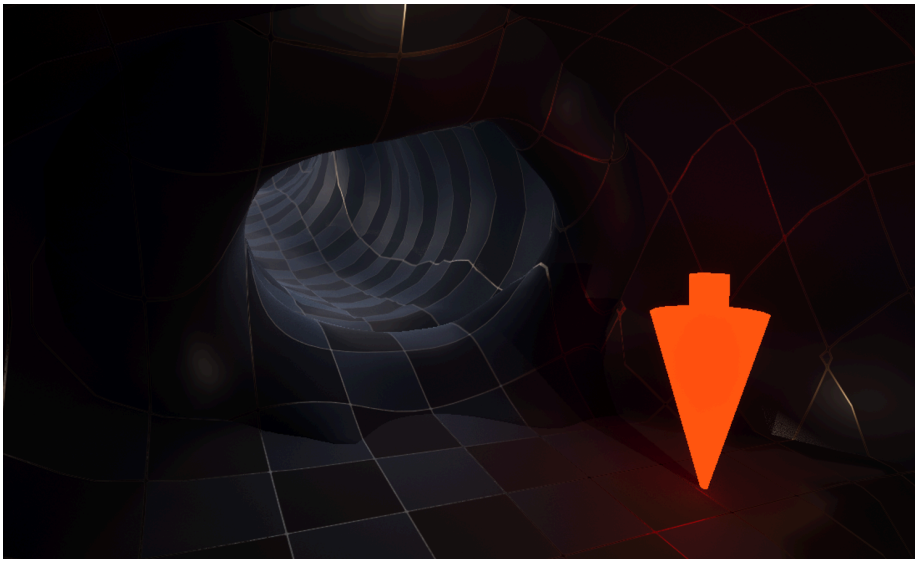
Run through from beach to cave 1. (Crunchy gif…)



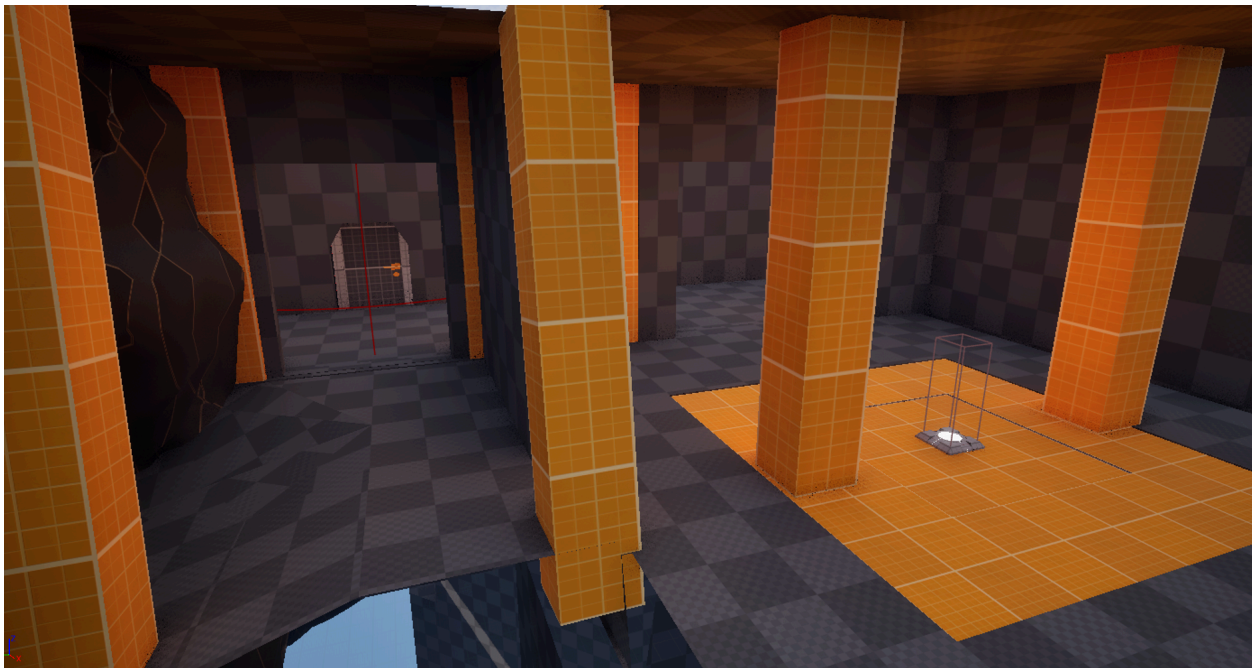
Run through from cave 1 exit through cave 2 to the fort shortcut. (Even crunchier..)

Enter the Boss (Room)

Closed all the mesh gaps between the cave transitions. Added a boss room and fleshed out the entire lower half of the level. Also made tweaks to the entry to the elevator/fort from the cave as well as scripting the elevator.



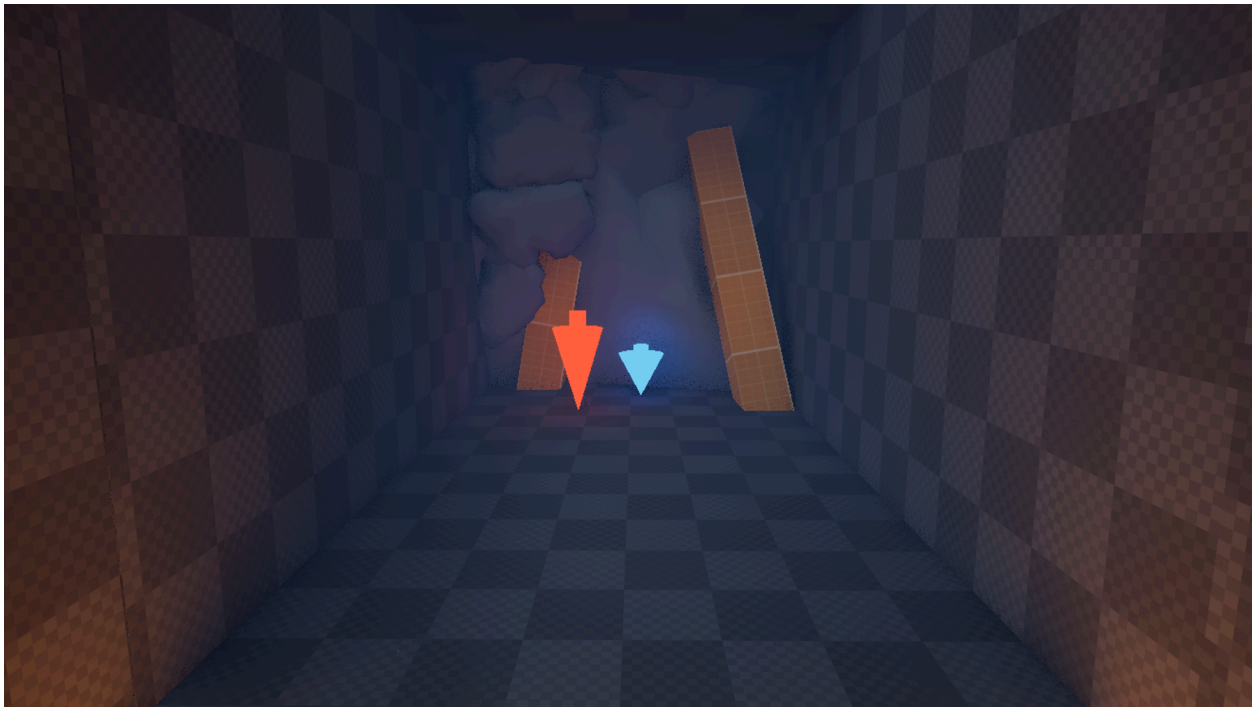
Example of Fixed Cave Transition Gaps



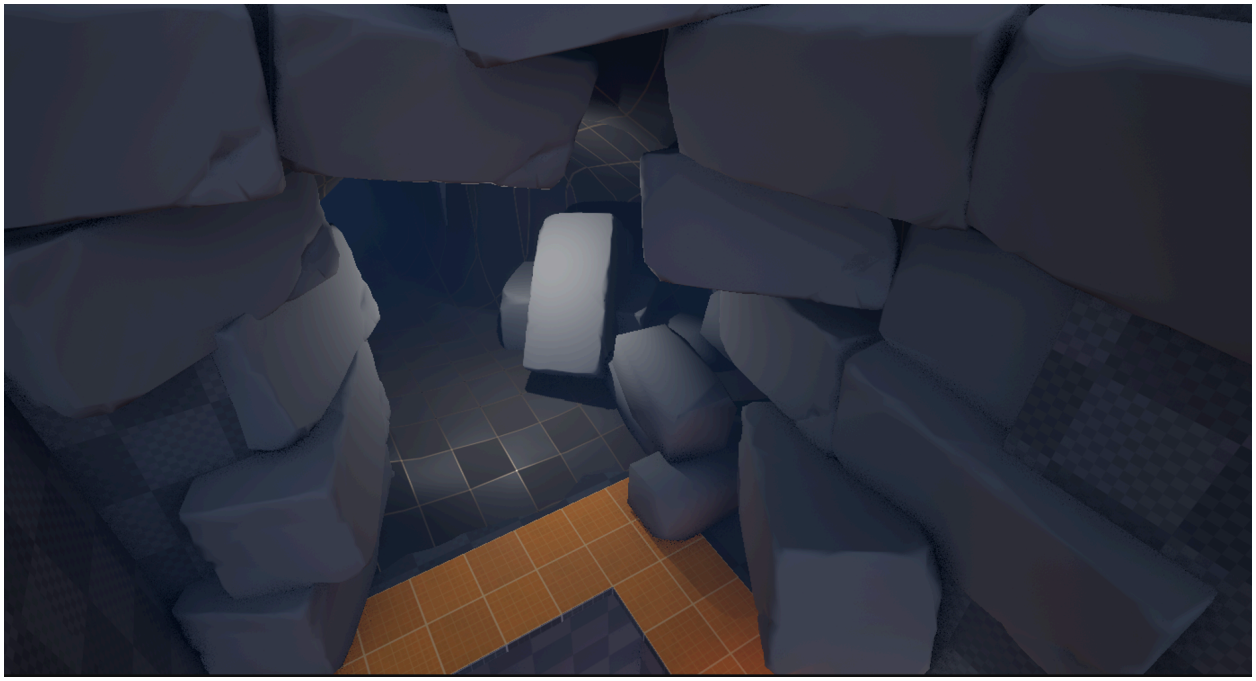
Entrance to fort

Note: This entrance fixes the door/elevator issue mentioned earlier. Exiting the cave (seen on the left above), the player is now forced to take a left, running smack-dab into the door. Whether

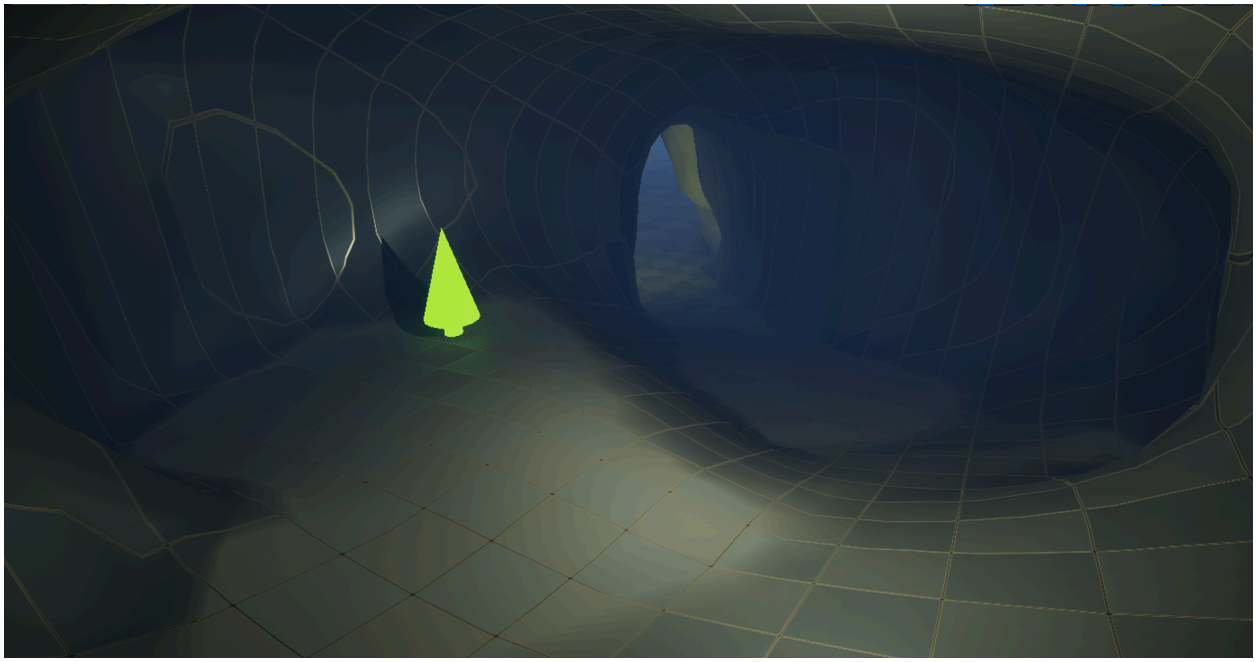
or not they choose to interact with it is on them. But that choice is there and discovery is rewarded (with a shortcut to the fort interior from the beachhead).



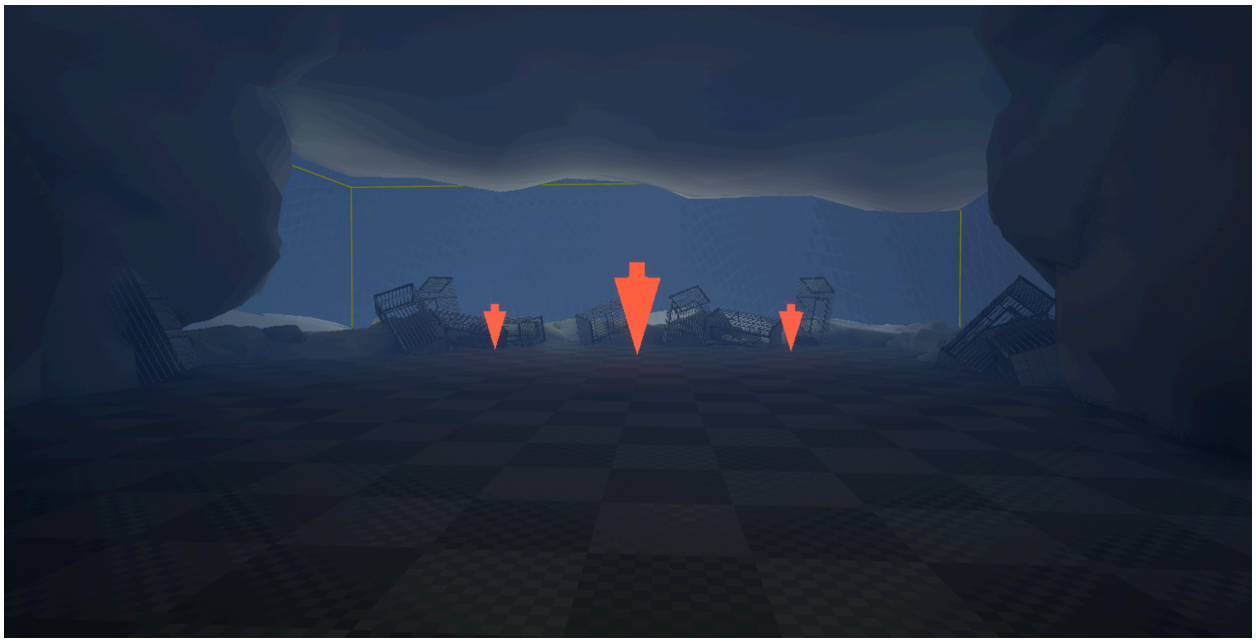
False Entrance to Boss - Where Elevator Stops



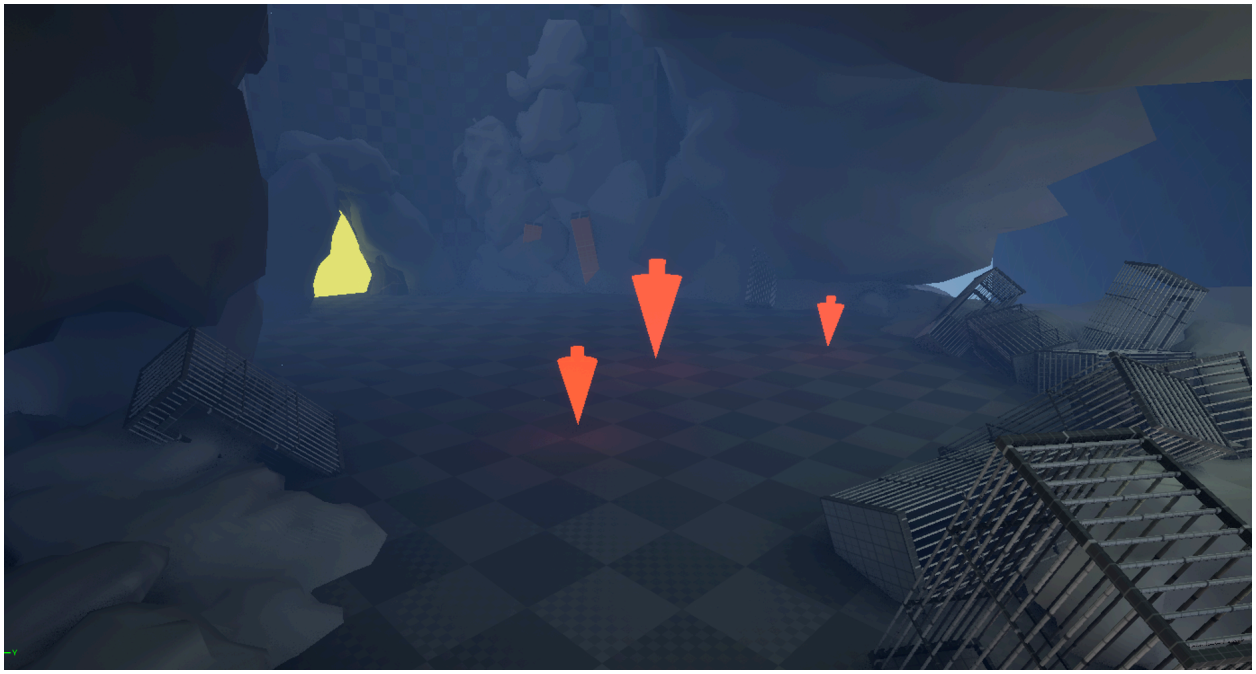
Jump off Entrance to Boss - Player must jump to platform from moving elevator



Brief respite before boss - Stake of Mairka (respawn checkpoint)



Boss Room Entry



Boss Room Overview



Elevator To Boss Walkthrough

Wrapping up:

At this point, the level is starting to feel realized. The tower needs to be fleshed out and there are a number of iterations I can already see I'd like made, such as:

- Tower route realized - climb to top, jump down and fort roof access, tilted geometry (sinking tower look) once all of the route has been made.
- Expanding visual size of pit to reduce camera issue/narrowness while descending it. Also to add visual effect from the cave pockets that peer back into the pit.
- Add particle effect to the waterfall - necessary because it creates sightlines as the player descends and ultimately reveals the story of the boss room.
    - The water spilling from above cascades over the top of the boss area, creating a rain-like effect adding to the dramatic atmosphere.
    - The water that has flooded this room has pushed all of the debris to the cliff of the cavern. The cliff edge has rock out-croppings where the debris has been piling up. This all explains why there are cages/debris, why there is this boss existing down here, and why this reveal the player experiences walking into the boss room is effective.