GA2a Games Jam 1 - Level Design Focus

GENRE & THEME:
The game jam focuses on the genre of 'ESCAPE' a subgenre of point-and-click adventure games which require the player to escape from imprisonment by exploiting their surroundings. This allows for either an open ended or fixed narrative design during the ideation and development process as the objective focuses on escaping from enclosure (regardless of the narrative we seek to tell.)

Additionally this game jam also falls within the genre of 'Science Fiction' allowing us to explore and creatively depict an environment as well as a narrative that falls with a plot, setting and theme based on imaginary science.

Through creative exploration and ideation we arrived at the idea of focusing upon a Sci-Fi Escape genre where the player has to escape from a space prison/asylum. The player must use their initiative as well as puzzle solving abilities to exploit their surroundings and progress from one room to another - [solving puzzles, cracking codes and deciphering in order to escape.]

KEY PILLARS:

- Puzzle Solving
  - Increasing Challenge
- Single Player Adventure
  - Immersive
- Level Design
  - Unique Mechanics

MAIN FEATURES & MECHANICS:

The player starts in a base level escape room which they are free to navigate and move within. Interaction is achieved through the use of a combination of point-and-click mechanics as well as pressing specific keys - this allows the player to engage with objects and items within the environment as well as the doors themselves.

Including the 'Base Room' there are nine total rooms within this level design that become progressively harder to navigate and well as solve as the player advances through the game. Each room is unique to itself with varying puzzle styles introduced as well as techniques to be learned along the way - [a technique learnt from a previous room can be utilised within further rooms as well… everything is of value within these spaces.] The player must utilise their knowledge and their surroundings (assets, environment etc) to open the door and progress to the next room - this is the ONLY way to escape and survive.

Puzzle Mechanics:

- ***Extract Numbers From Pictures -*** allows the developer to hide numbers within decor (poster, painting etc) which provides the key to some sort of combination lock.
- ***Cast a Shadow -*** assets can be designed or placed in such a way that they reveal numbers, letters or symbols when a spotlight is shone in the right way; providing the answer to another lock.
- ***Press Buttons or Place Items in Order -*** involves a sequence of buttons that the player needs to press in the correct order. Buttons can be labelled, shaped or different colours with some sort of clue within the room that tells the player the order.
- ***Decrypting Messages -*** custom codes and ciphers can be used to place the answer to the combination lock in front of the player. Cipher keys can be provided through decor that allow the player to crack the code whilst also being a great way to incorporate themes (space/sci-fi glyphs and runes etc.)
- ***Finding Information in Plain Text -*** the developer can hide information in passages of text that help expand the lore and narrative of the game. This can be achieved by highlighting certain words or letters within a text passage, words in the text relating to objects/symbols around the room, and hiding messages or words in particular lines (acrostics.)
- ***Reveal Through a Blacklight -*** a blacklight can reveal messages written on walls. The light can be hidden somewhere within the room and allows the player to comb the whole environment to find it as they are guided by the clue of a blacklight marker on a table etc.
- ***Combination Lock -*** a fancier combination lock such as a 'Cryptex Line' focuses on aligning the dials in the proper position to open the cylinder and reveal a code. Hints and clues to the cryptex can again be hidden through decor, symbols or a blacklight; thus forcing the player to cover the entire room to solve the puzzle.
- ***Perspective -*** introducing the Y axis to the room provides the player with a unique viewpoint that they haven't been accessible to before. The utilisation of this perspective change can be used to hide symbols, numbers or assets in plain sight which can't be seen from ground level.
- ***Chess Puzzle -*** involves the player having to check the king in order to open the door. A board is laid out with different 'solutions/moves' hidden within decor (posters etc) for how to achieve this with algebraic notation used as the cipher (Be5 means bishop has moved to e5; the move that checks the king is the key to escape.)
- ***Morse Code -*** due to its flexibility it can be used in both audio and flashing light forms. The player must listen to a radio or watch a light and thus decipher the code to open a combination lock of some sorts. More code is generally recognisable and can be guided by hiding a cipher sheet within the room somewhere that the player has to find through the use of a previous mechanic.

Player & Base Mechanics:

- A base door system which can be opened - this must be modular and thus achievable through different means and methods (combination locks, buttons, alignment etc.
- First person player controller - this can be based on the UE5 base template to save time.
- Code lock with both number and letter input - this is essential for the majority of the puzzles as the 'key' is often a code or cipher.
- Pressable buttons - related to either a colour or symbol code.
- A blacklight spotlight that changes the perspective of the room - letters, numbers or assets must be visible when the blacklight is shone on it and invisible when not.
- Inclusion of the Y Axis - the player must climb stairs or move to higher ground. This should be achievable through the base UE5 first person player blueprint.

BASIC STORY/NARRATIVE:

VISUAL STYLE:

Before finalising upon a visual style & theme for our level design we sought to independently explore our own interpretations in order to gain a greater understanding of how assets, the level design and the game itself should be tailored. This would provide the level and asset designers a basis to work from so that level designing and asset/model production could gradually begin to progress. Once decided upon, our visual style exploration can be narrowed down with a basic synopsis of what we are basing our work off and what we wish to achieve in reference to artistic capabilities.
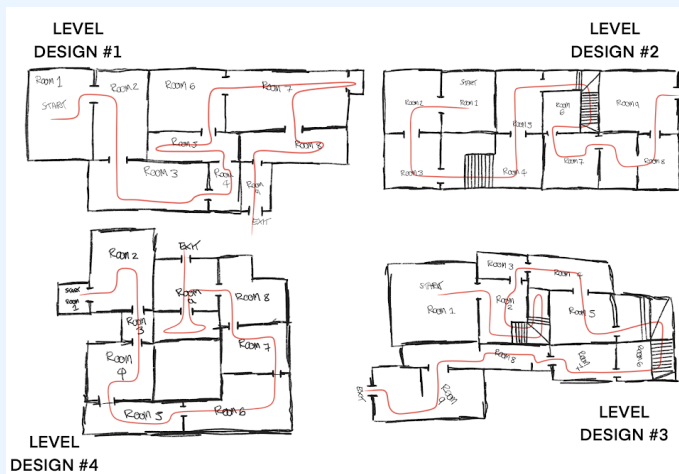
Ciaran's Exploration of Style & Theme:
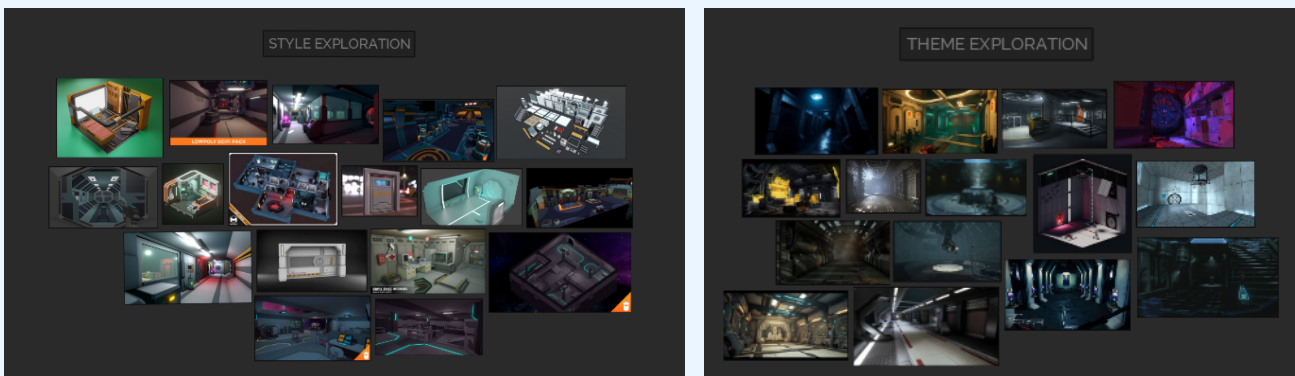
Charlie's Exploration of Style & Theme:
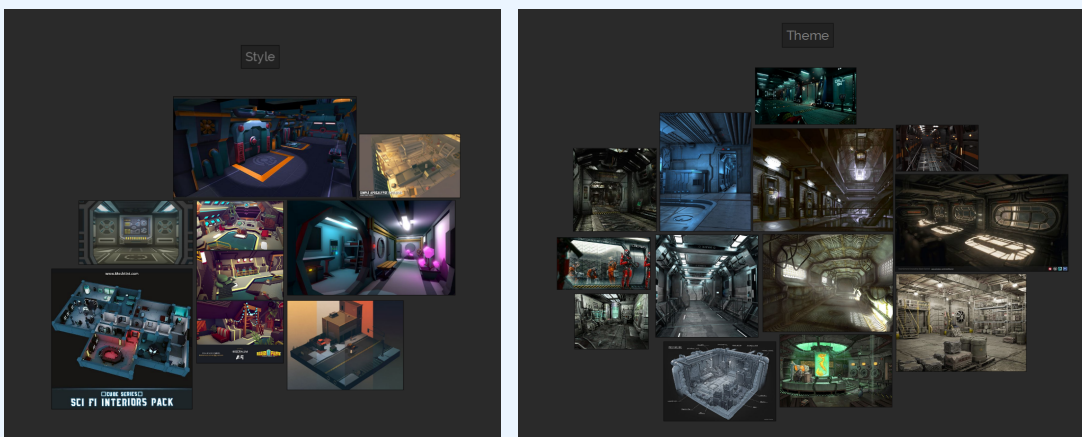
LEVEL DESIGN:

SIMILAR GAMES/MEDIA & GENRES:

- Cube 1997 - strangers awake in a prison of cubic cells laced with traps and puzzles. The prisoners must use their combined skills and knowledge in order to escape.
- Portal - a puzzle platforming game which consists of the player having to overcome and solve a series of puzzles by teleporting the player character or assets through the use of a "portal gun" in order to advance through the facility. Whilst this is occurring the player is taunted and challenged by the GLaDOS AI to complete each puzzle and try to 'escape.'
- The Backrooms - following the aesthetic of liminal spaces the Backrooms puts players in a maze-like labyrinth of empty office rooms where they have to find their way out through navigating complex long hallways and rooms whilst avoiding strange anomalies.
- The Stanley Parable - an omnipotent narrator tries to tell a story about a silent office worker called Stanley who realises that everyone but him has disappeared from the office building. If the player tries to disobey the narrator and use their own individual choice to direct the narrative/gameplay interesting things can happen to the story, level design, assets and Stanley himself.
- Halo - set across multiple games Halo sees the player take part in an epic 26th century conflict between the remnants of humanity and an alien threat known as the Covenant. Halo features a recurring theme of a highly advanced science fiction aesthetic with striking colours, materials and assets.