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# The Designing of Station 17

With the past releases and future updates for Station 17 coming along, I thought it would be a good idea to detail my design process and choices throughout development. I think that my design decisions are valuable to learn from and would at the very least be interesting to someone. This will be somewhat of a timeline of the design process as well as an analysis of some game design choices I made and the theory I had behind them.

## The Formulations

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When I started the project, I had no intentions of ever even publishing the game. It was to be a small project to show to maybe my friends, as something to bolster my resume, and just something to do during the height of the Covid pandemic. I played mostly rogue-likes, open-world, and multiplayer online games at the time, all of which I loved and had good ideas for, but they seemed too complex for the small project scope I had in mind. I had considered building a text-based adventure. It would have minimal art requirements, which I had no experience at the time in creating. However, I thought that such a type of game is very much carried by its aesthetic and storytell, neither of which I had any real practice with. In the end I chose to pursue creating a horror game.

Deciding on building a horror game was a bit of an odd direction for me, seeing as I do not play horror games much at all. Indie horror games have quite a big following on the internet however, and the exploits of one famous youtuber "Markiplier" are what swayed me towards this choice. One of the longest running video series that Markiplier has produced is "3 Scary Games". In each episode Mark plays through at least three short indie games. To most the videos are solid entertainment, but for me these videos are a library of hundreds of indie horror games and how someone might react to them. Many of these games inspired my design choices when building Station 17 and showed me that the horror genre was something that could be built with minimal resources.

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## The Mugs are the Key

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The very first design for Station 17 was very simple. The game would have the player being chased throughout a physically confined space, like a submarine or space station, by a goose. A basic design featuring a claustrophobic space, and a clearly recognisable and understandable threat. I wanted something a bit more to add to the fundamental mix however. This eventually became the idea that I would add several goose-shaped objects to the tightly enclosed space the game took place in as a way to sow paranoia. There were a few issues with this however. Namely that I had no 3D modeling experience and so modeling a goose, let alone goose-ish objects, was a fairly large and menacing hurdle. In the end I moved on to a more interesting and plausible idea. This idea is something that I like to call “Mug in a Mug Factory”.

The concept of “Mug in a Mug Factory” is that the threat facing you is indistinguishable from common objects, and there are a lot of common objects. The initial implementation of this idea was, of course, being a single mug trying to kill you in a mug factory. This solved two problems for me. First, I would not need to make a complex model with animations for the monster of the game since it would be just a basic mug. Second, this idea practically oozes paranoia into the player's brain. It would be very easy to condition the player to fear any mug they see. As a result, putting any number of mugs next to the player could instantly put them on edge. I realized I could take this a step forward and make it so that ANY object could be the enemy. Entering any room, walking next to any object, trying to do anything, could become a tense moment. This concept later formed into the idea of simplistically creating tension and became a core concept through development of the project and remained through every iteration since.



Mug O' Mug

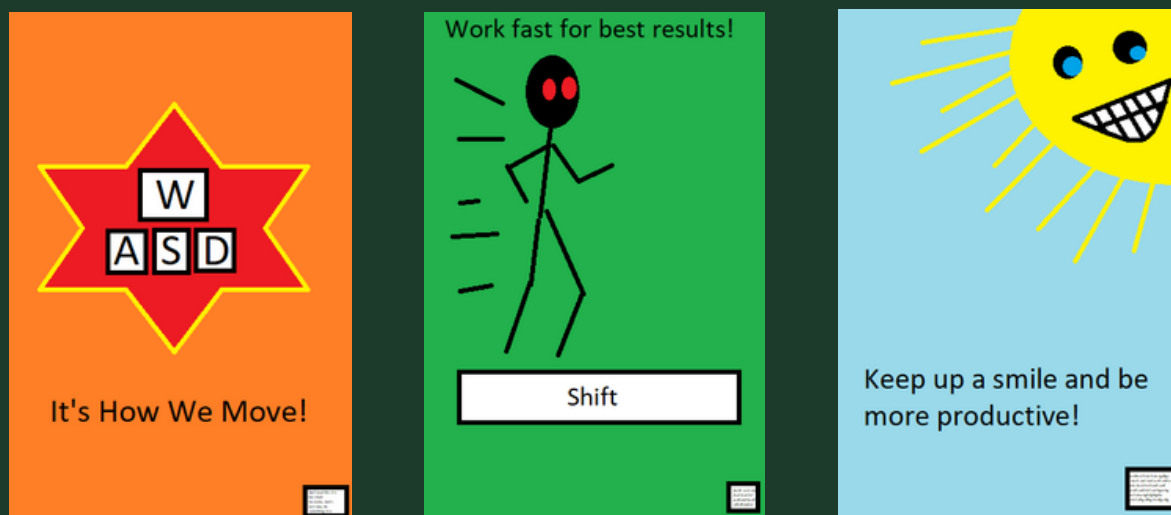
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## When and Where

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With a core idea for gameplay under my belt, I needed a setting. The biggest contributor to the creation of Station 17's setting was the fact that I had no experience with any form of 3d modeling. I needed an easy way to get simple assets to test with and to decide on a setting for the game. In the end, I used the Unity Asset Store to solve both these problems. There are a variety of asset packs on the store designed for prototyping. There were two in particular that piqued my interest, both made to promote the Snaps editing package in Unity. These were office and Sci-fi packs. This led me towards a setting that would incorporate both of these. Finally, with some inspiration from the SCP Foundation, My setting was decided to be some kind of underground government containment facility filled with depressing offices. A true horror setting.

To really sell the horror of an office space, I designed many of the tutorials for the game in the form of motivational posters. It was a clever idea that I thought of early on that led to some more interesting things later. This method of giving information also followed another principle I had in early development, which was to minimize the use of UI as much as possible. I think that games feel much better if they can communicate information within the game without UI. If done well it can be immersive and memorable. It is a fine line to walk however, as not being clear enough is always bad for your players.



Poster Examples

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## Tutorial Time

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My next task at hand was to design a simple tutorial encounter for the enemies of the game, the dreaded “mugs”. Before I could even do that, I needed to actually narrow down how the player was going to interact with the “mugs”. By now I had decided that the “mugs” or mimics could be any object in the world which would prove to be rather easy to communicate. I needed a way to have the player interact with the mimics however. My first idea was a sort of “weeping angel” situation where the mimics move when the player is not looking, but that feels overdone. Instead I decided that the mimics would only move when the player is deemed to be “preoccupied” or rather, if the player is performing a task. These tasks would force the players attention and blur their surroundings. Each room with enemies could only be left by performing a task, and would have some task in the room that needed to be completed to proceed. This situation creates a strong point of tension, as the player can not know for sure if they will survive performing a task and entering any room is a commitment to dealing with what is inside.

To communicate this gameplay loop, I created a simple room for a tutorial that hits the key points of this situation. The player would enter the room by using the door lock, interact with a container to acquire a key, and exit the room on the other side. While this is happening the player needs to notice that a suspicious potted plant is no longer in the place it used to be. In the very first version of the room this was difficult to convey for two reasons.



A Mimic in Waiting

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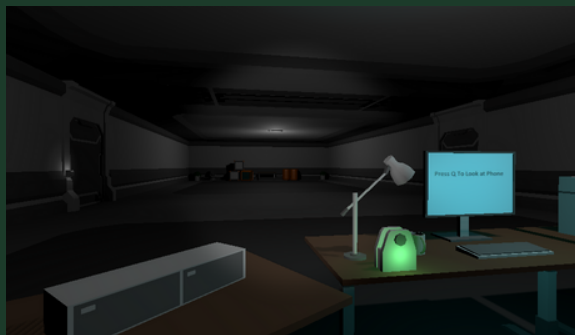


## Tutorial Time

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First, the places the mimic could move to were limited as the player had to be in specific places to interact with objects and be preoccupied. Second, I found that my test suspects were much less observant than I thought they would be. To solve the first problem I needed a new mechanic in the game. I needed a way for the player to manipulate the positioning of mimics around them so that they could freely perform what was needed in a room. I decided that the best way to do this was with a phone. The player would be able to pull out their phone and become preoccupied wherever they wanted and be able to move while doing so. This solved the first problem easily enough but did nothing to help the second. Most players did not even realize what the phone was for anywhere near as fast as I would have liked. To aid this I ensured that the center of the room was empty giving the mimic plenty of space to show itself. This did not even help as much as I would have liked, but it was noticeable.

For quite awhile this is where the tutorial sat. Many first time players would still have more trouble than I wanted with grasping what was assaulting them. The solution came much later, almost near the end of development and some further improvements after the first release. The first change was to put the necessary task to acquire the key in line with the mimic. A subtle visual cue. It became much easier for players to notice that the plant directly behind what they were doing was moving. An after release update made this even more clear by forcing the player into certain camera angles when interacting, and in this case, pointing the player directly at the mimic in question.



Overview of the Tutorial Area



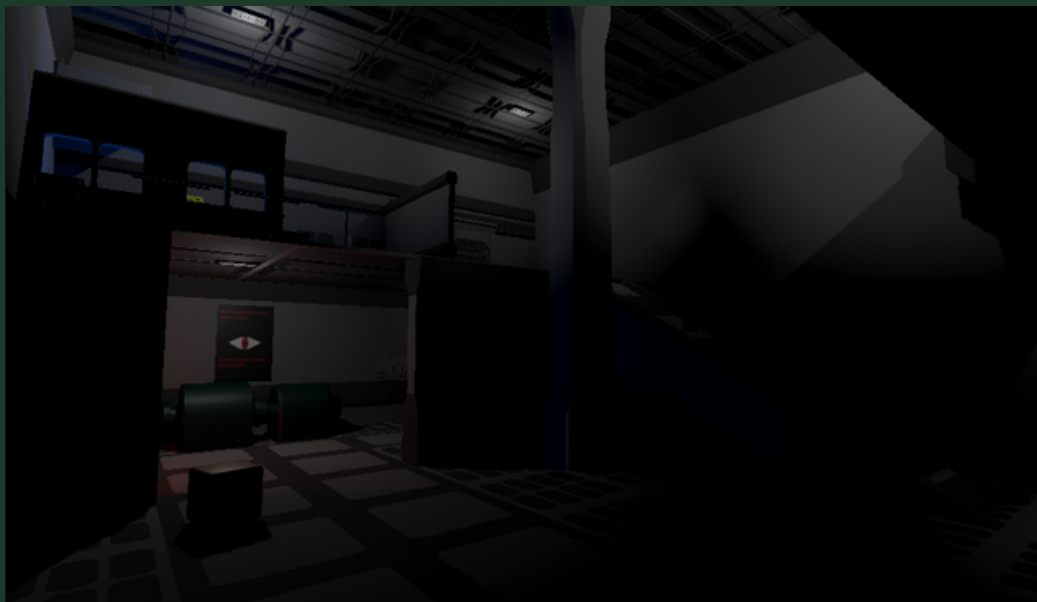
The Phone in Question

## The Storage Room

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While the first room was always a hot point for editing and revision, nearly every other room after that in the first version of the game, much to my surprise, was smooth sailing. It was helpful that my main gameplay element, the mimics, was directly tied to the environment. When I would design a new environment for the player to be in, it would also be creating a new gameplay experience for them. The loudest and subtlest parts of the environment can play a part in this. Even the safe room immediately after is often viewed with great suspicion now that the player knows that anything might be a threat. The first few rooms branching off of this safe zone play out in very different ways, despite containing only mimics as threats to the player.

The storage room has verticality to it and limited ways the player and mimics can move between floors. This results in a conga line of mimics the player has to manage when trying to interact with objects in the room. It becomes very clear very quickly to players that there are a few suspicious objects coming after them. It also teaches players of the variety of the objects that can be coming after them and reinforced the idea of using the phone as bait for the mimics, seeing as you cannot leave the room without doing so.



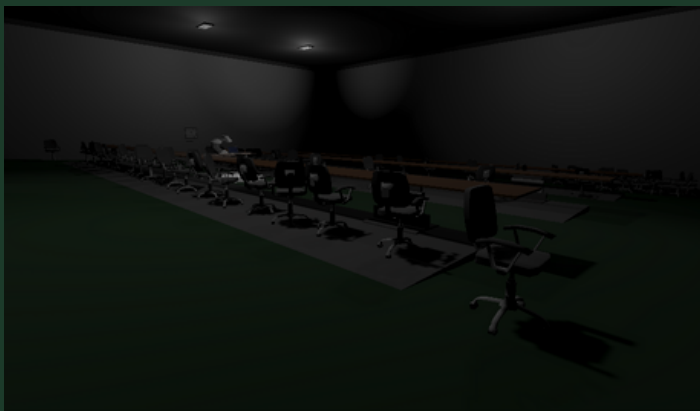
The Storage Room and It's Verticality

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# The Briefing Room

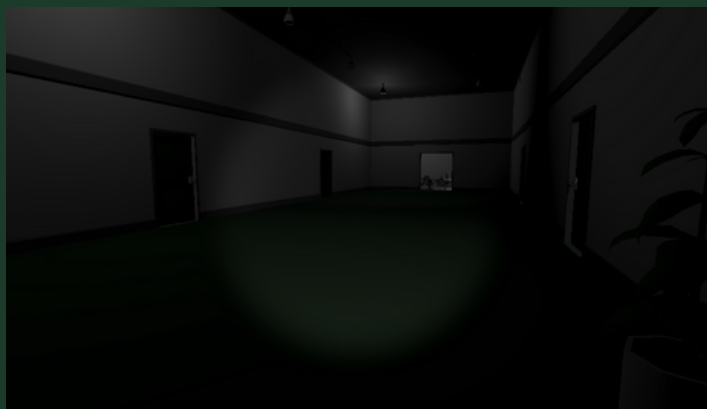
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The briefing room opposite storage has much less verticality but is much wider and more open. As a result, the conga lines formed in storage don't occur here. The mimics are too spread out and will approach the player from various different angles. No choke points like floor transitions to funnel them. Mimics are also significantly more difficult to identify in this room because of this, except for one. This particular mimic also clearly demonstrates one trick I used often in designing rooms, that being to make one mimics very obvious. In the case of the briefing room, a single door is off its hinges and players tend to notice this immediately. These obviously misplaced or attention drawing objects are not intended to act as threats to the player directly, but as a distraction or red herring. In wider spaces with clutter near the center, like the briefing room, this can create a significant moment where the player can hear the other more hidden mimics coming for them, but are fixated on the obvious one. This experience was had by nearly every tester for the game and proved a significant learning point in their understanding of how to approach rooms.



Briefing Auditorium

Briefing Room Hallway  
Standout Mimic Pictured

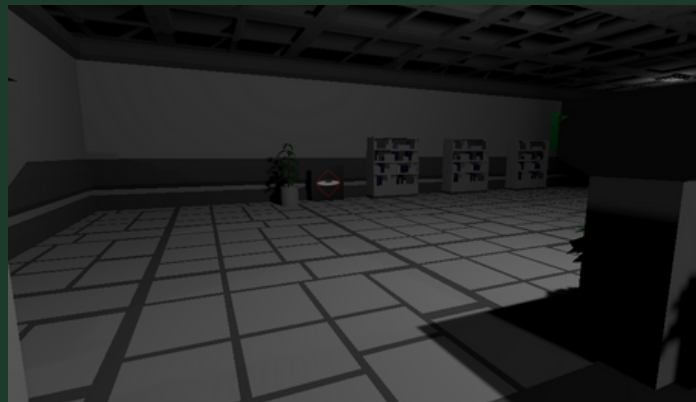


# The Security Room

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The security room proceeding the briefing and storage rooms contains elements from how both rooms are laid out and a new spin on changing the players visibility of the room. This room is long and narrow with a variety of objects placed along the edges and throughout the center of the room. This creates a somewhat similar situation to the briefing room including a red herring mimic. However, the room has several dividers in it. These dividers do not block the player's movement very much, but act as small funnels for the enemies. This gives the player greater room for searching the room as the mimics throughout cannot reach the player as directly as before. A secondary result of these dividers is that they block the player's vision of the room, often hiding mimics moving behind them. The result of all these elements is that the security room feels very different from the storage, briefing, or tutorial rooms.

Security Room Standout Mimic



Elevation Changes  
and Wide Cluttered Spaces

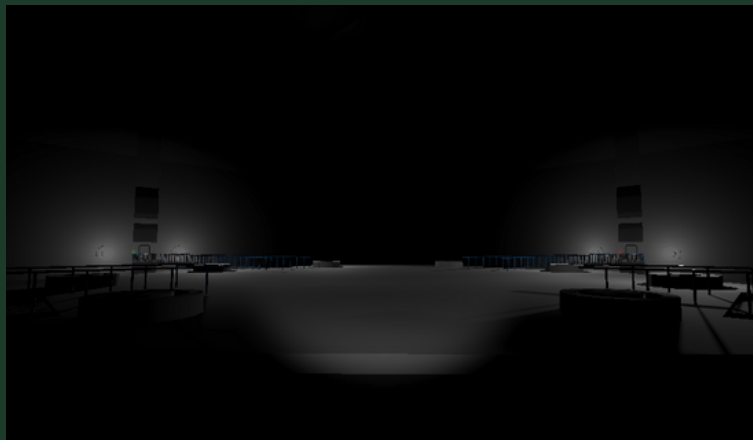


## The New Styles

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After this room, and down an elevator, is another example of something I attempted to do when building the environment, creating large reveal moments that show the extent of the location the player is in. The turbine room served as the end point for the first demo of station 17 and a teaser for what was to come. It was a reveal of just how large the facility potentially was. Moments like these are important for giving players something to remember and something to expect. A few other places later in the game are examples of attempts to do this. Entering the vent systems, the room of Level 13, the container on Level 16, and the core on Level 17, all try to create a new visual take on the station and mix up the flow of the game.

The residential area after the turbine is an example of my attempts at adding variety to the game in more than just the visual spaces. Most players enter this area expecting a threat to be pursuing them as the room's location follows the pattern of the first area. I use this to my advantage to try to make the player as paranoid as possible. The area has things appear and disappear constantly, make foreboding sounds, and do everything I could muster at the time to put the player on edge. There is no actual threat here, but the player does not know that and will eventually realize that. This slight mixup in gameplay pattern is important to keeping things fresh and this was the first significant instance of my attempt to do so. Just as with unique locations, creating unique gameplay moments is important for keeping the player interested and sticking a game in your players mind.



Top of the Turbine's Bottomless Pit

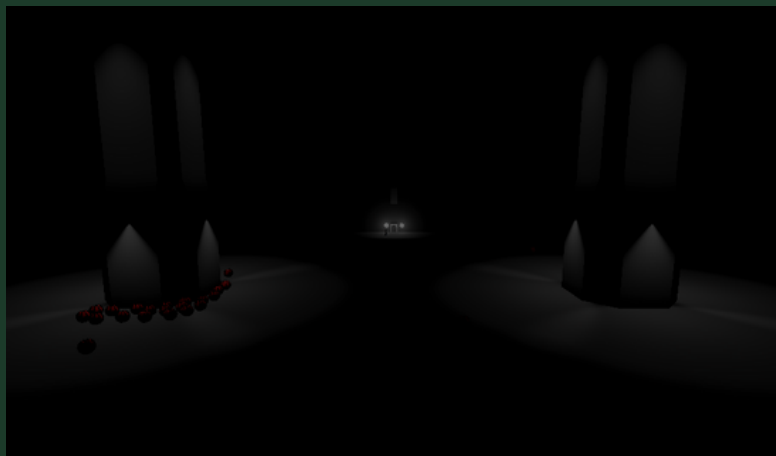
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## The New Styles

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This is doubly effective when location and gameplay work together. The prime example of this is the large room on Level 13. This room functions as a tutorial for the second enemy type in the game. These enemies act much like the “weeping angel” concept I decided not to go with for mimics. When the player is close enough, and not looking at the enemy, they will move toward the player, making a loud noise when doing so. Players are quick to understand how these enemies function, but the magic of the room is in how the player has to exit. The door is locked by a mechanism the player cannot interact with directly. This oddly shaped formation of objects serves as the lock for the door and, without fail, each player understands instantly what they need to do to exit the room. More than any other moment in the game, this sequence of events creates the strongest “a-hah!” and simultaneous “goddammit” moments within the game. This is all achieved with simple visual cues throughout the area. No direct text explanations, or words of any kind.

It's moments like this that drive me to keep creating more for the game. Every release was a time of excitement to see what my testers would think and drove me to create the next more than each before. To see if the moments I wanted to stand out really did their job and were memorable to the players. I always have new ideas and moments I am thinking of to give my players something to talk about. In time, hopefully, I will write another synopsis of what I created and what I learned from it.



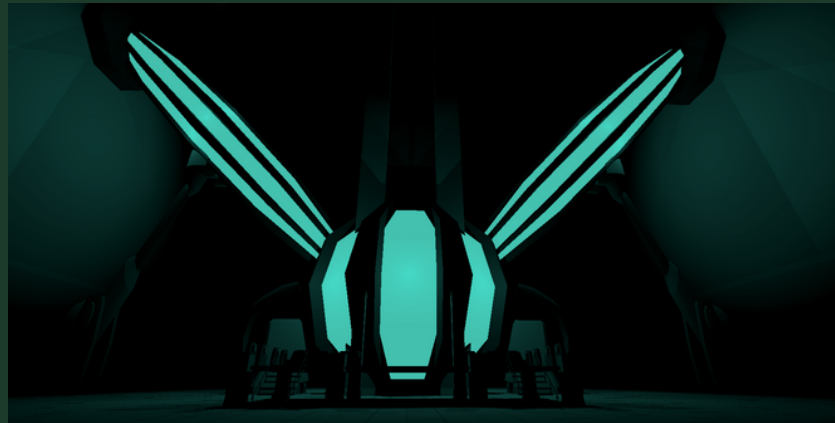
Distant Door in the Centre of the "Angel" Room  
"Angels" Visible on the Left Pillar

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## Bonus Pictures

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Beta Version of an Important Location



Another Example Room  
With Absolutely Nothing in It  
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My Personal Favorite Poster Design

