Building a Universe Through Details

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<u>Today we are going to talk about details.</u>

Modern consoles can push a huge amount of data to the player and it is our responsibility to harness this power to create memorable content.

As level designers we own the details of gameplay content, things like trigger placement, state-changes, enemy placement, narrative artifacts, etc all sit squarely in our realm.

These details shape the player experience – expanding the fictional universe and defining the practical possibility space.

In this talk I am going to try and distill what Dead Space 2 taught me about good level design and will do my best to generalize the concepts to apply to different games, but be aware that I am looking at things from the single player, AAA console perspective.
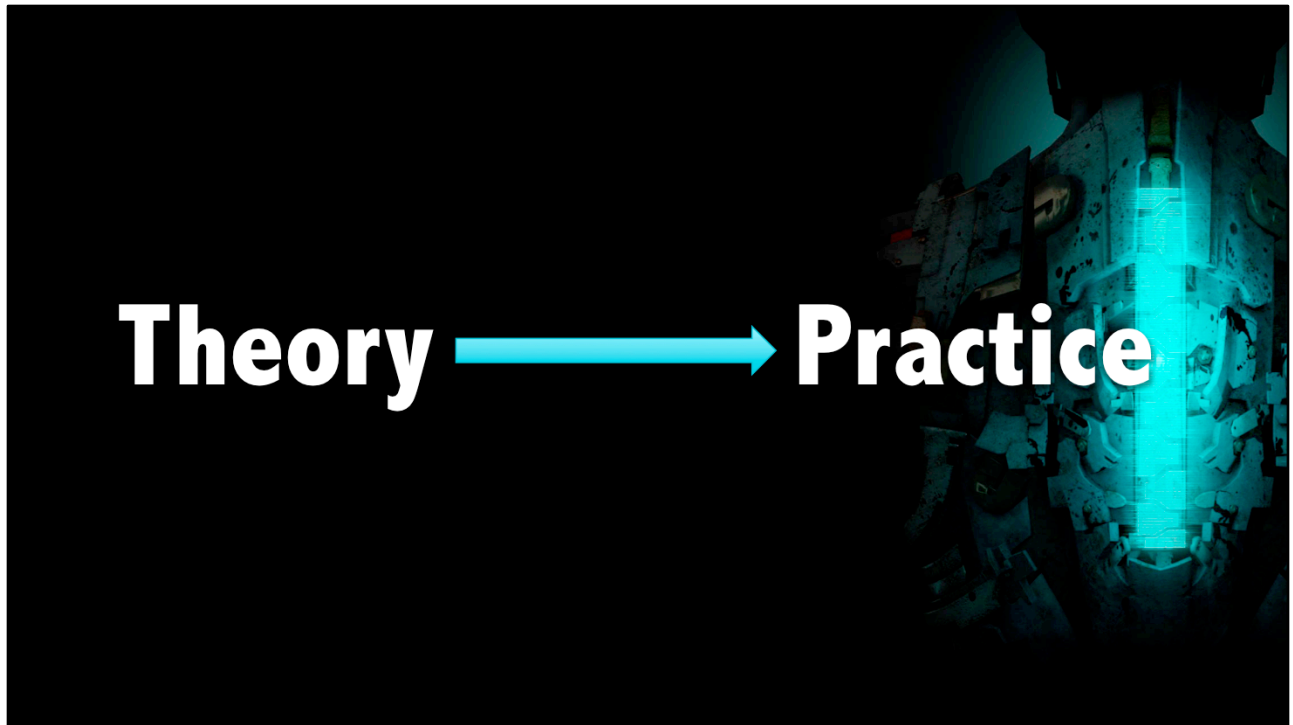
Since it is early morning and I am still trying to get my brain warmed up, we are going to start out with some theory, hang out in the clouds for a bit and explore the role of a level designer and what elements are common to good content.

Then we will work our way down to practice with some real world examples of both success and failure in Dead Space 2
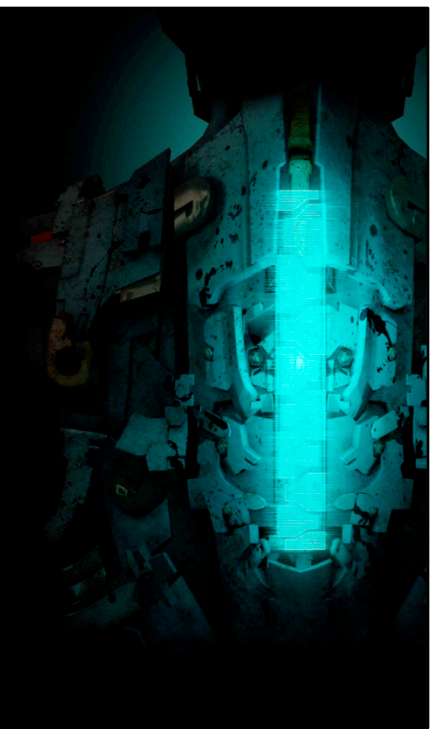
Theory
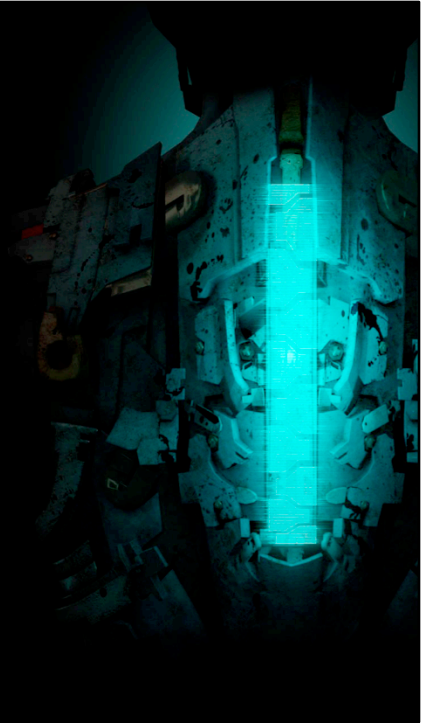
But before we get ahead of ourselves…

What is a level designer?

- Builder?
- Painter?
- Teacher?
- Integrator?

Lets get a little existential.

Defining the role of a level designer is never easy. Sometimes even within a game design team it can be confusing what the ultimate role of the level designer is. You have all probably seen the "What my parents thing I do, what my friends think I do… etc" meme flying around, we aren't going to go there, but I do want to come up with a good summary for our purposes here.

Is the level designer a builder? We are masters of tools and building levels is the first thing most people think of when picturing a level designer, but that really doesn't capture the creative side of the process. A level designer is more than an implementer, "design" is right there in the title!

Is the level designer a Painter? If you read a lot of articles on gamasutra etc you probably have heard someone say that level designers are like painters and mechanics are the colors we use to create these wonderful paintings of content, but this doesn't really tell us how to be good, just makes the act of level designing sound fancy.

Is a level designer a teacher? What we do as LD's is often a lot like what a teacher does, structuring content so concepts are introduced in a logical manner, building on existing knowledge, creating gates and tests on progress. The problem here is that most of us are not in a lead design role and these sorts of high level mechanics planning often isn't something all LD's take on during a project, let alone MP designers.

What is a level designer?

Storyteller!

Ultimately, a good level designer is a good storyteller.

BUT!

A story teller requires listeners, and players are not passive listeners but a partner in the experience so how about…

What is a level designer?

~~Storyteller!~~

(Story-Enabler)

The level designer enables the creation of player story by determining what elements the story can contain.
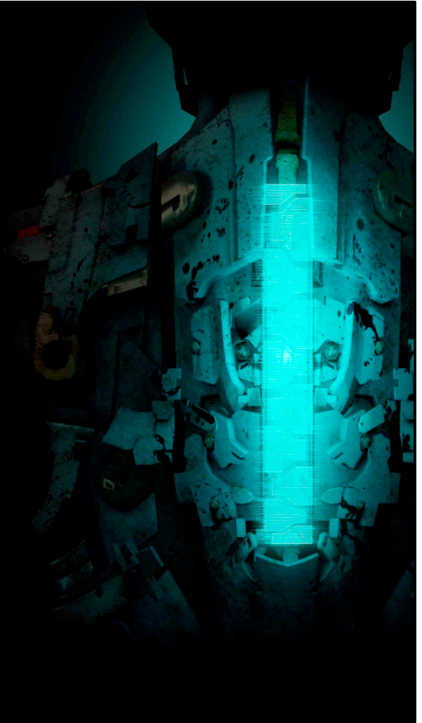
What is a level designer?

~~Storyteller!~~

(Player Narrative Experience Architect)

But these terms are kind of awkward and pretentious

ERRR How about we go with this next slide….

Level Designers are storytellers. Good level design is much the same as good storytelling.

In fact I would say that level designers are storytellers and good level design is much the same as good storytelling.

This is not always an easy role to fill

The Two Masters

Systems ← You → Script
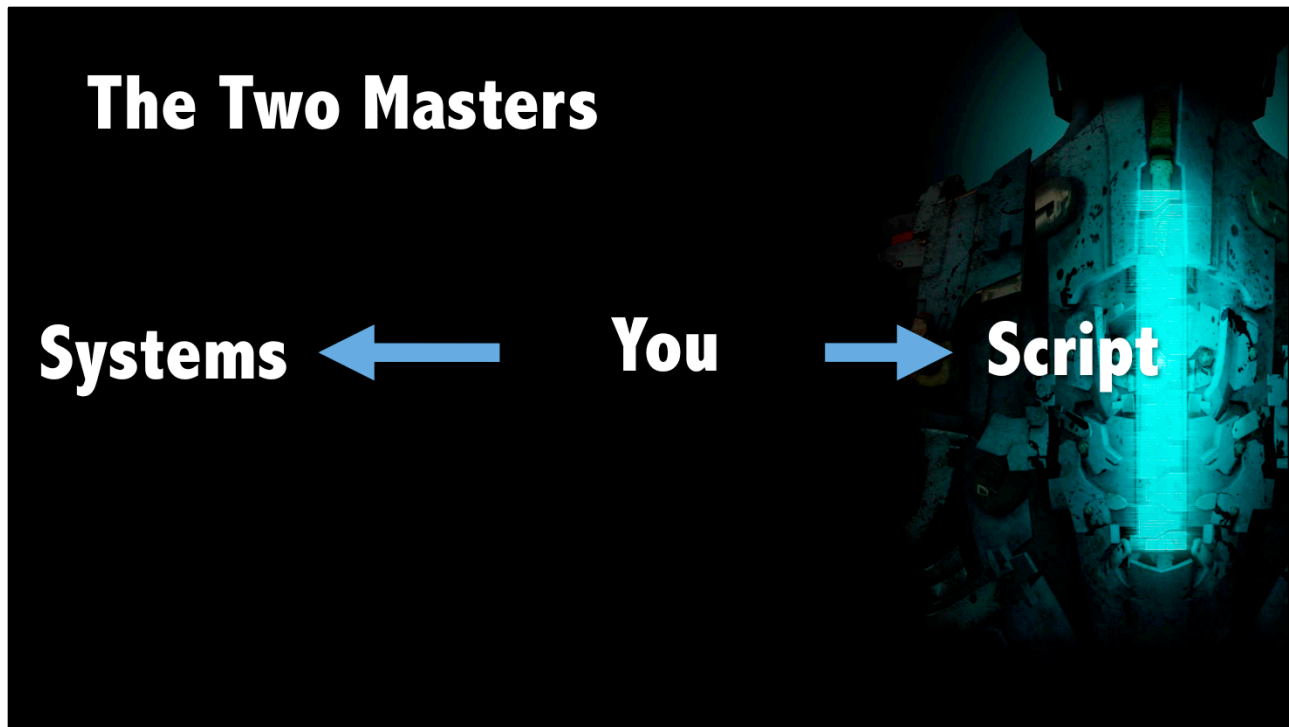
Partially because an LD has these to somewhat crazy masters.

On one side you have the game systems and the player, waiting for you to create a scenario which enables awesome, emergent player stories.

On the other side you have the plot, characters and vision of the creative director, art director, writers, etc which must be told (and is a major part of selling all the complex game systems to your audience).

Sitting between them is you, the level designer, and it is your task to create a context and gameplay which satisfies both.

Now some of you out there are probably crying foul, why would a designer worry about story so much? Isn't the gameplay the meaningful part of the medium? In many ways I agree with you, but I think as a level designer story provides 2 very important elements…

Why worry about story?

- Story provides two major elements
  - Creates a context for the game rules and characters
  - Provides long-term motivation to the player

First off the story creates the context in which you are going to be building your space, so it makes sense to have a healthy grasp of what the higher creative direction of the projects and story is. This offloads a huge amount of teaching that would be required in a context-less universe.

Secondly the story provides the long-term motivation for the player. When you are talking about AAA action/adventure games, most players can only go so many hours without significant narrative progress before losing interest in the game.
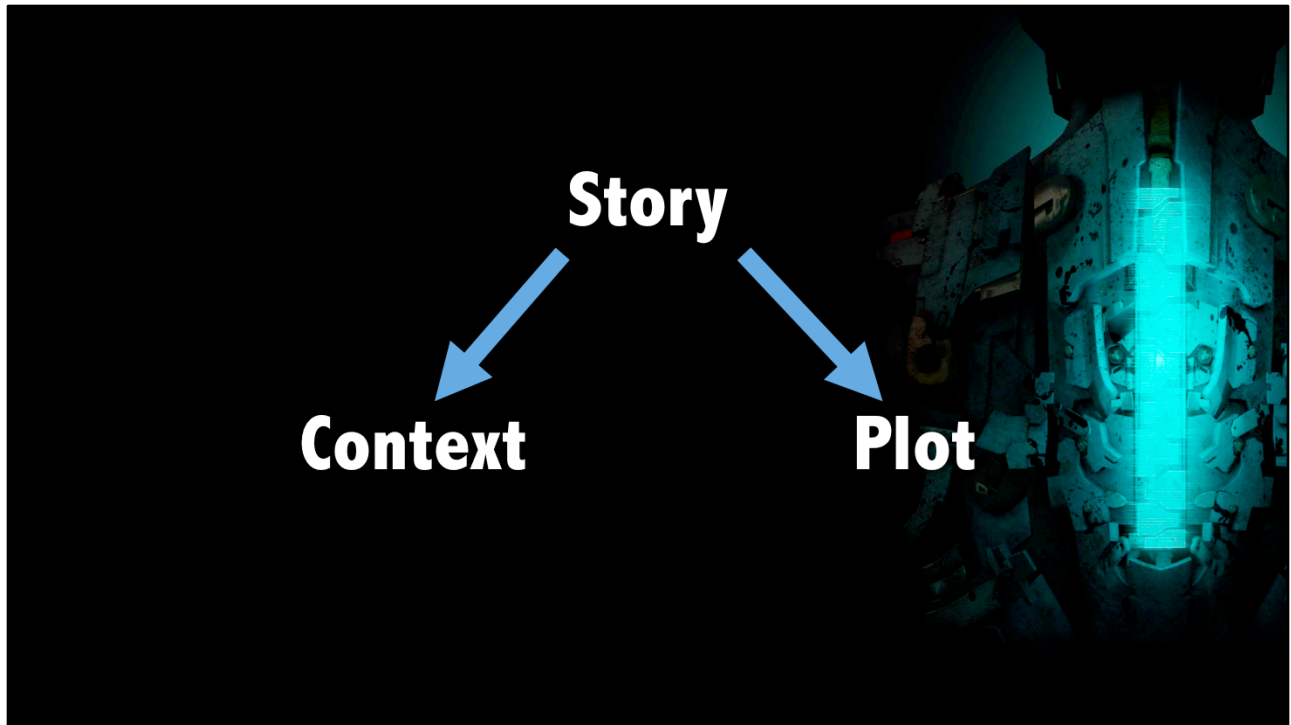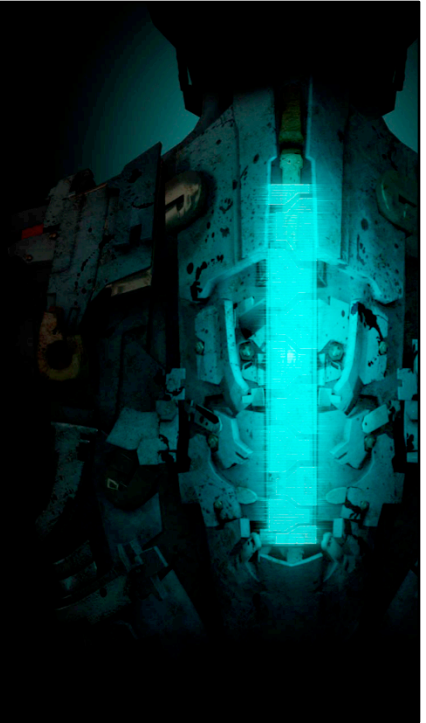
Put another way, story can be divided into two distinct components, context and plot.

As a level designer you don't normally define the context at a high level, but you do build it.

And as a level designer you don't write the plot, but you do fill in the descriptive details.

Level Designers create the *moment- to-moment* **narrative.**

Level designers craft the moment to moment storytelling. When you are building a space there should be a story in mind, the experience you want to create.

This is just as important as big cut-scene moments, dialogue trees, and discussed far less often when talking about story in games.

Plot
Context
+ Gameplay
= Experience
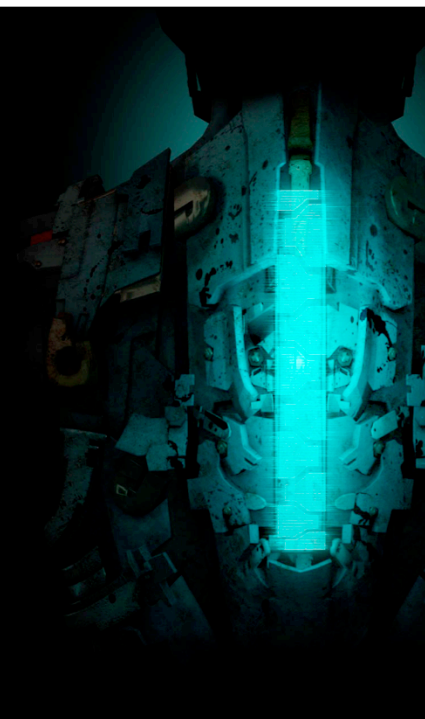
Here the experience is ultimately the player story, which Matthias will explore in depth in the following talk.

Layers of Context

- **Setting**
  - The location, time, and genre – WHAT/WHERE
- **Depth**
  - What makes the world unique - WHY/HOW
- **Flavor**
  - World-building elements – SIDE STORIES

Setting - The location, time, and genre of the story. The setting contextualizes both the narrative events and the mechanics of the game. For example, in Call of Duty 4 the player understands the basic rules of the game and how the mechanics work because they are placed into a context familiar to the player through other media experiences. This is the only layer the player should be REQUIRED to follow to understand the core story.

The Depth layer provides additional information about core Plot elements, but is not part of the core sequence of events. Elements in the Depth layer build the world out beyond a standard genre piece into a fully realized environment for the player to explore. This layer explains not just WHAT is in the world but HOW and WHY.

Flavor – Elements that enhance the world but do not relate to the core Plot. Side-quests, which do not tie back into the main conflict of the game, would fall into this category.

Distributed Narrative

In Alan Wake there are pages on his manuscript spread all over the world for the player to find. They foreshadow coming events or explain the reason behind what just occurred. While I do not advocate littering your world with little notes explaining everything, it is a very literal example of a distributed narrative.

In games we have limited time for exposition, in fact the less we can do normally the better, because cut-scenes and interactivity are either expensive or mutually exclusive. For this reason I think that a distributed narrative, told through many small stories, vignettes and environments is an important part of creating a universe for your game. It encourages the player to explore, be aware of the game space and is not force excess narrative upon players not looking for it.

Traditional media often follows a few characters through a lot of dense narration in quantities that games just cannot effectively support. I think that you can create the same basic narrative volume through lots of little quest chains and environmental details.

Level Designers are storytellers. Good level design is much the same as good storytelling.
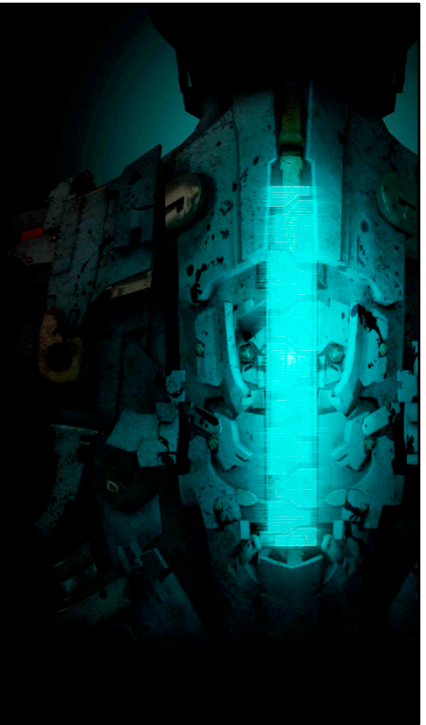
But we are getting off track here, we are supposed to be exploring the relationship between good design and good storytelling. To do that we are going to have to go back to high school for a moment.

Components of Story

- **Inciting Incident** – The event forcing action
- **Rising Action** – Tension builds as events progress
- **Climax** – The peak of tension in the story
- **Resolution** – Resolve objective, <u>open new questions</u>

Now in some high school English class we all probably went through the basic elements of drama, looked at the hero's journey and so on, I think if you boil it all down to basics you have an inciting incident, rising action, a climax and usually a resolution. This has a lot of overlap with basic elements of design…

A good story is always asking and answering questions, keeping the player engaged.

There should never be a moment when all questions are answered.

Components of Design

- Objective – A goal is placed before the player
- Obstacle – Something that stops the player from reaching the objective
- Ramping – An increase in the challenge of the obstacles
- Reward – The payoff for reaching the goal

RAMPING CHALLENGE

OBJECTIVE

OBSTACLE

REWARD!
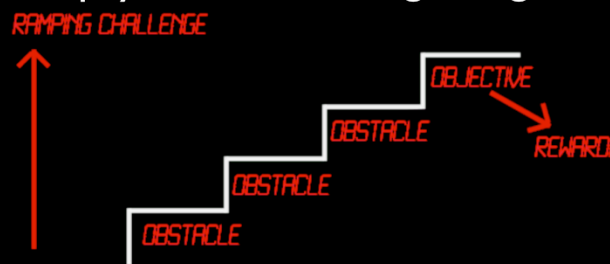
OBSTACLE

OBSTACLE

Aside: Good storytelling it founding on asking the right questions at the right time.

Components of Story

- Inciting Incident – Presents Objective
- Rising Action – Difficulty of Obstacles ramps up as player progresses
- Climax – Culmination of challenge
- Resolution – Victory over ultimate challenge, reward
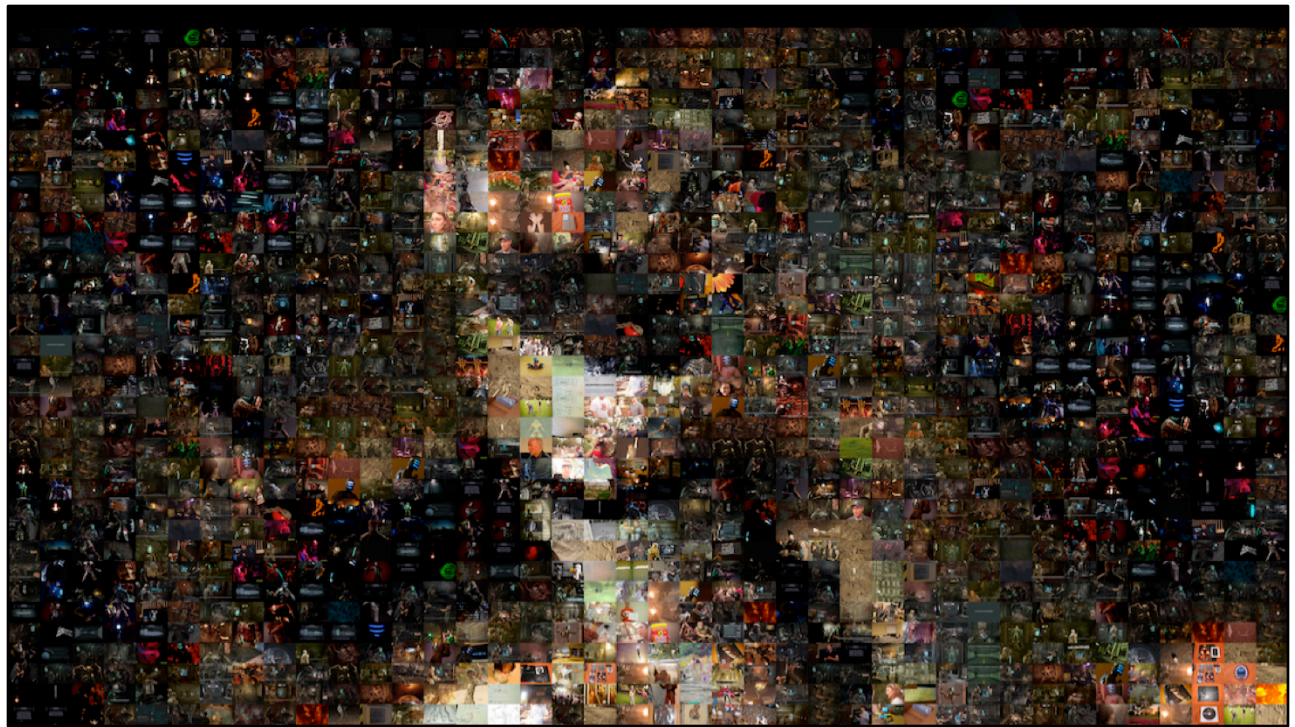
Mosaic of Narrative

Game -> Level -> Room

…but how do you make it memorable?
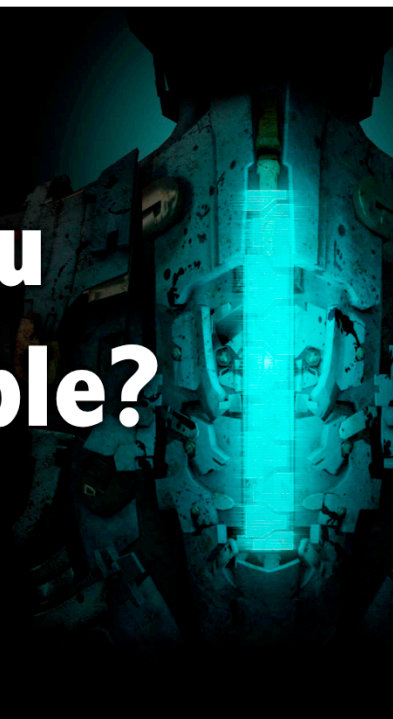
Dominant Feature

- X-Statement
- Hook
- Theme
- Centerpiece
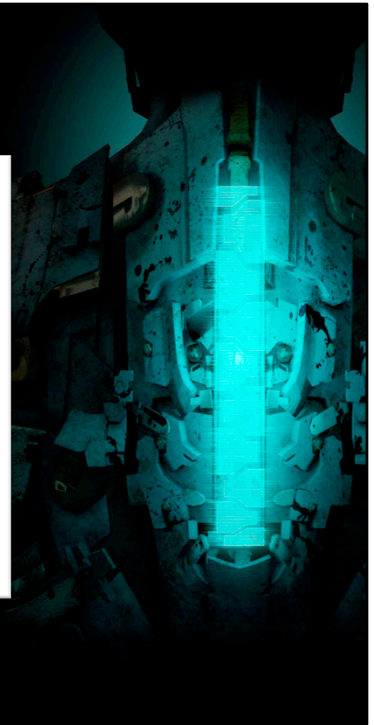- Visual Identity
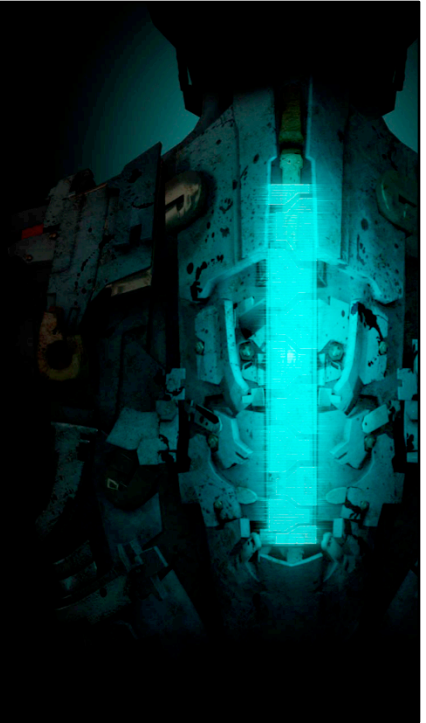
"this is the …. level"

- What is the central element of the level?
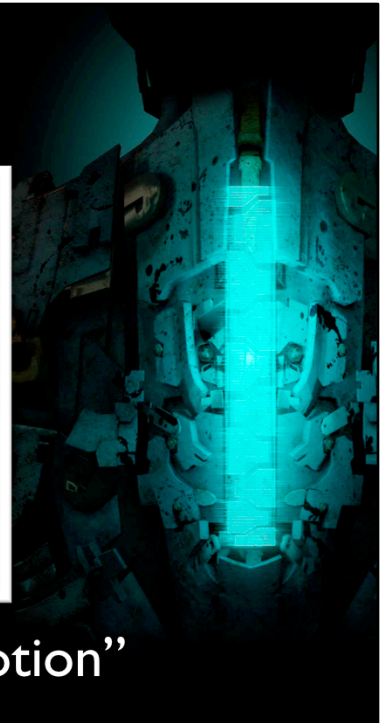- What does it say about the world?

Dominant Feature Example

Half-Life – Blast Pit
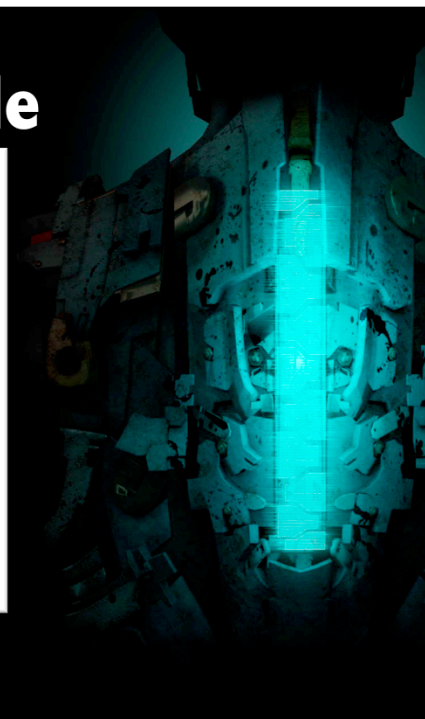
Dominant Feature Example

Uncharted 2 – Chapter 13 "Locomotion"

Moving up the train creates a clear path to the objective.

Train car in opening is the same as the one you crash into the train yard, same one you jump onto to start the train ride.

Sequence highlights all classic events you can think of with trains, climbing on the roof, dodging signals, fist fights at high speeds, climax with helicopter and end in tunnel.

The whole level loops around and spawns obstacles off triggers and not the environment to keep everything perfectly paced to player progression.

The details of the design should support the dominant feature

This builds out the fictional universe of your level in a meaningful manner. Modern games have the ability to push tons and tons of A/V information to the player, the purpose of a dominant feature is to create a rally point around which meaning can be created for this information. The signal/noise ratio should be high, otherwise you are wasting time making pretty art with no relevant player information.

Subtlety is overrated.

Another way to look at this is that players are more often than not looking at the floor or hiding behind a box, they are not going to pay attention to small isolated details, but if the level is built out of little bits which all support a strong dominant feature your meaning will not get lost.
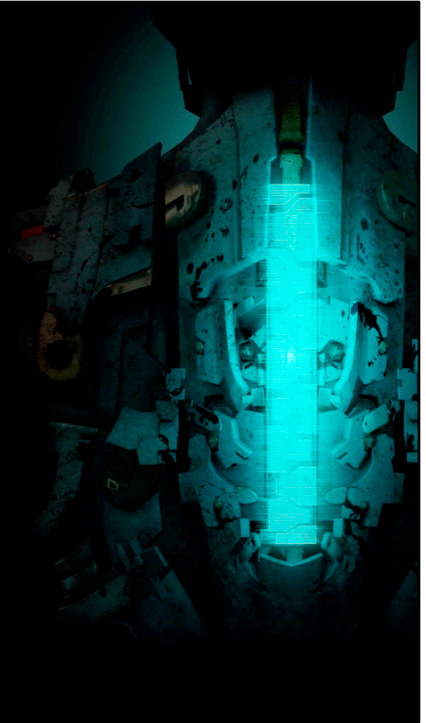
Challenges of player experience:

Camera 1 meter behind.

Looking at the floor picking up items

Zombies!

Practice

And with that I think we are ready to move onto actual process. It is like theory for producers.

Developing a Level Structure

1. Start with script, block out fixed story points.
2. Find your Dominant Feature
3. Create an objective flow around these 2 elements, adding in additional steps for major activities
4. Block out the level around these objective points and add streaming/combat space as required.

*Examples – Creating the last level of dead space 1 around escorting the marker to the pedestal, this formed the backbone of the level structure and is an element of almost every space. This can be simple, it could be just always going up, or it could be abstract like the concept of always being pursued.

• The story will have an objective such as "reach the evacuation pad" so that is the overriding objective during the level, but unless your level is very short there will be multiple hurdles for the player to overcome on the way there. Major challenges should build on the core theme of the level and be called out as part of the objective flow.

The reason combat is not called out specifically is because I feel most any space needs to support combat at some point. If you are building an action centric game combat is going to happen almost everywhere, even if it is just during backtracking.
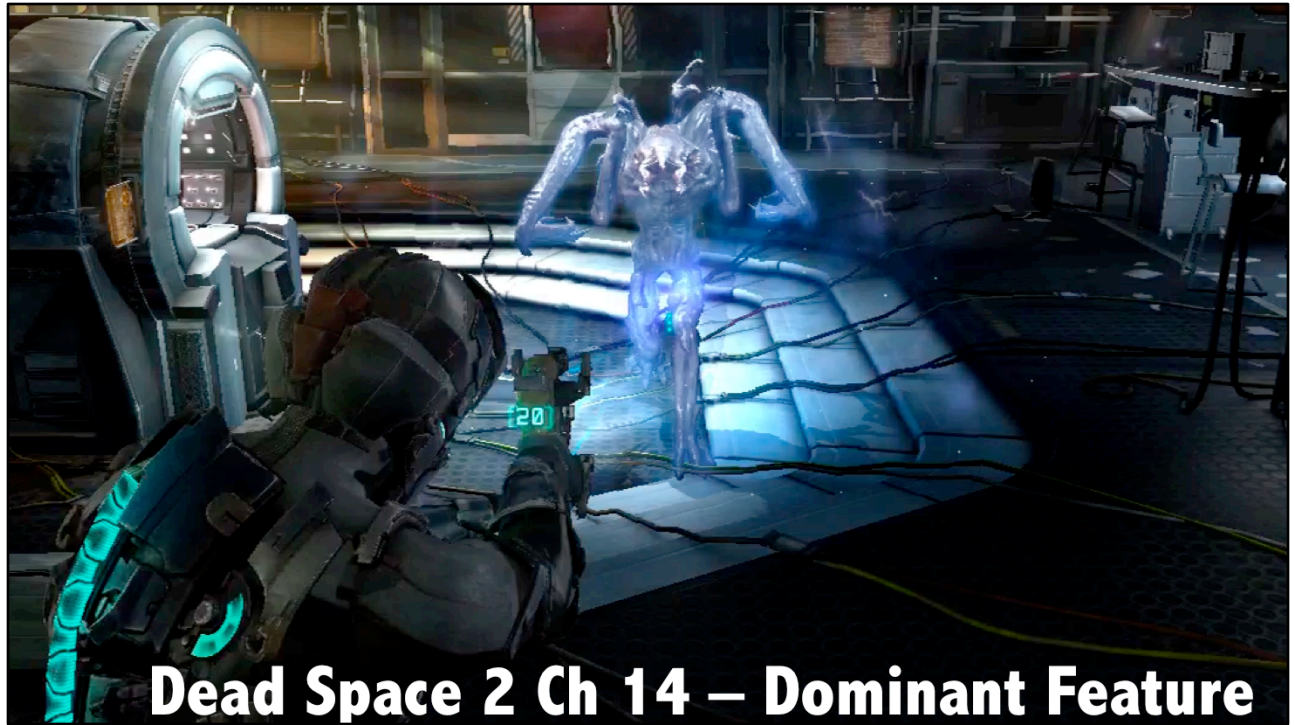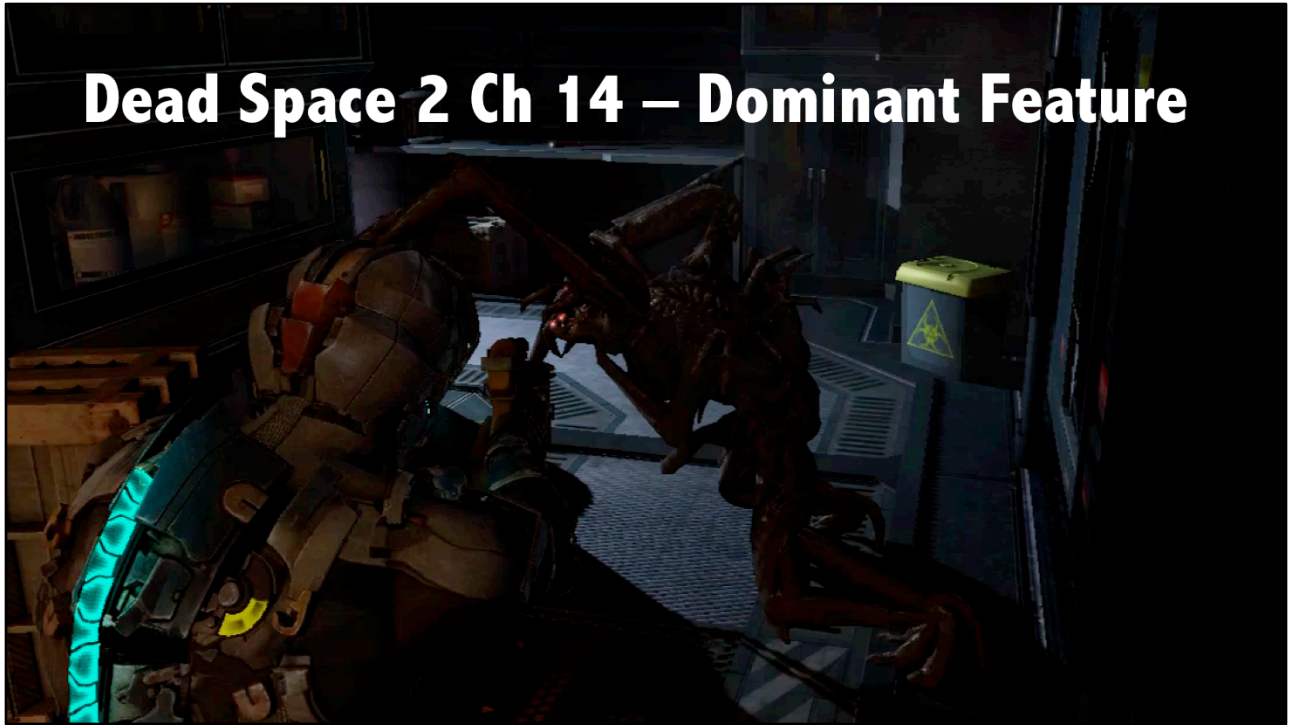
Dead Space 2 Ch 14 – Dominant Feature

Wait…where is the inciting incident?

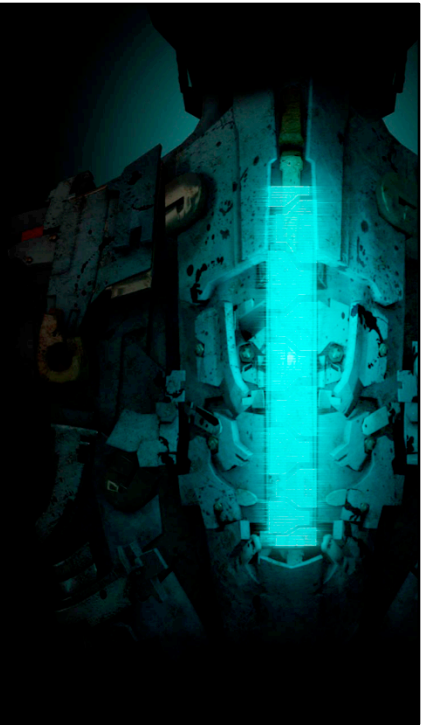Objective is not clear and the conflict is no introduced properly

Dead Space 2 Ch 14 – Dominant Feature
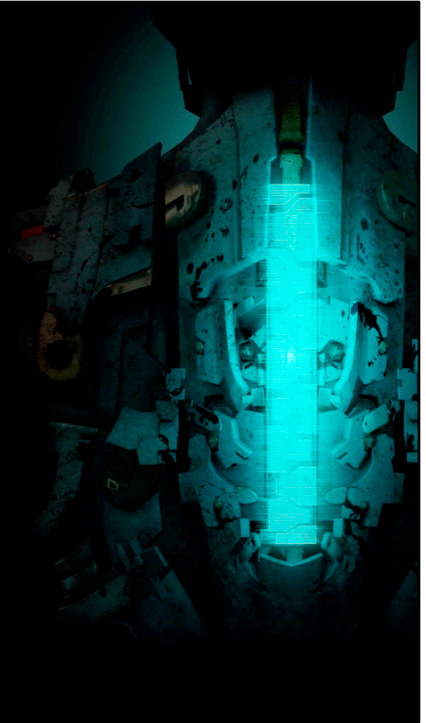
Dead Space 2 Ch 14 – Dominant Feature

Resolution?

CUT!

So Sad

Strategies

What are some of the ways you can tell a better story than I was able to in Ch14?

Gating and Loops

Bloom!

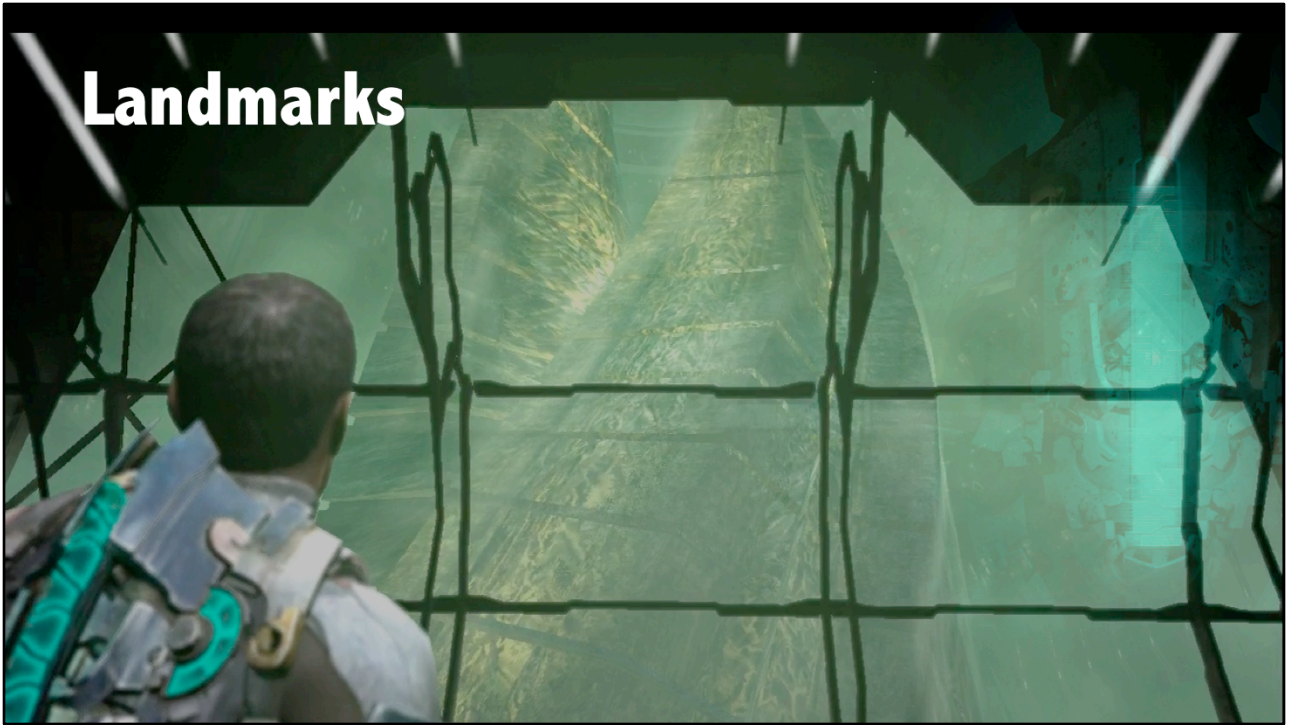Batman Arkham city ice flow level.

Metroidvania.

Item Placement

Pickups, Logs, diaries, books

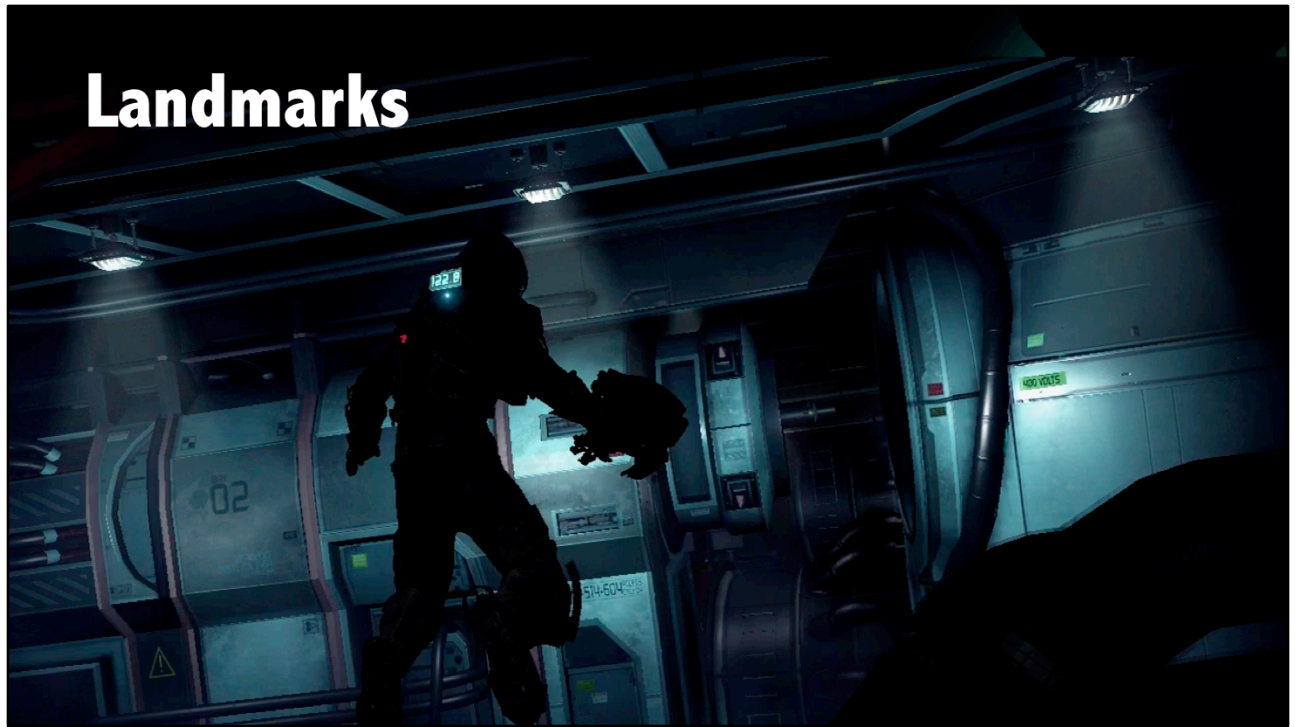There is a fine art to the well placed log which answers the inquisitive players questions.

Landmarks

Landmarks

Landmarks

Experience does not require challenge

Separate your exploration, activity, story moments from your challenging action.

Types of Spaces

- **Action** – fast paced gameplay, often combat
- **Activity** – player is expected to pause and find solution to progress
- **Story** – space must be reserved for cut-scenes, character chatter, slice of life
- **Streaming** – spaces created to allow for loading of new content

Often a space will serve multiple purposes, particularly if it is a big set-piece environment, but there will be one dominant factor in its design.

Exploration space?

Size of Spaces
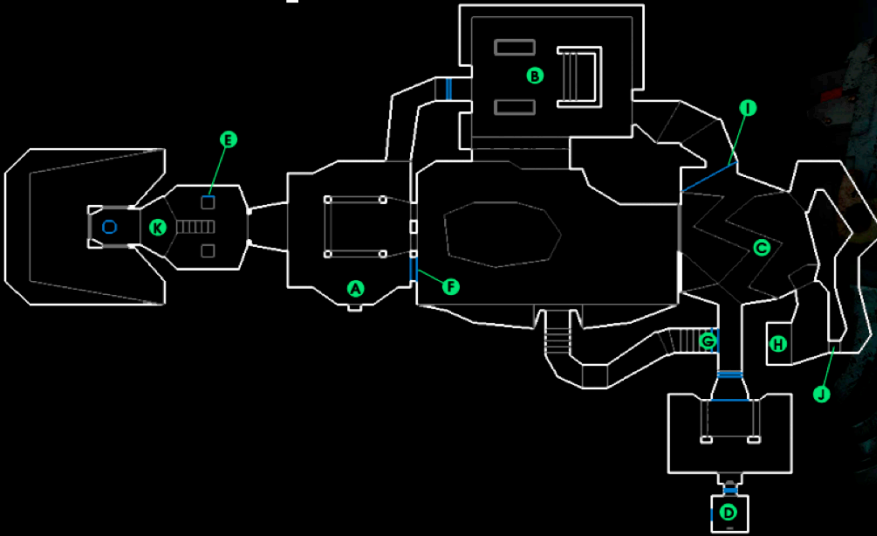
Think about what does the size of the space do to the gameplay elements that are contained within?

Iteration

- Play level. Play level some more.
- Think of each space as a small story
  - How does it start, what is going on in the space when the player enters it? Is there only one way to enter?*
  - What happens in the middle, combat, exploration, story, goodies?
  - How does it end? Does the player run out? Does the player cleanup after a fight?
- Once the story is complete, what new questions are raised?

*A key thing we do on dead space is have NPC's doing thing in a room when you enter when possible. Creating the illusion that NPC's have things to do other than interact with the player is important to making the universe feel alive.

Example – Severed Intro
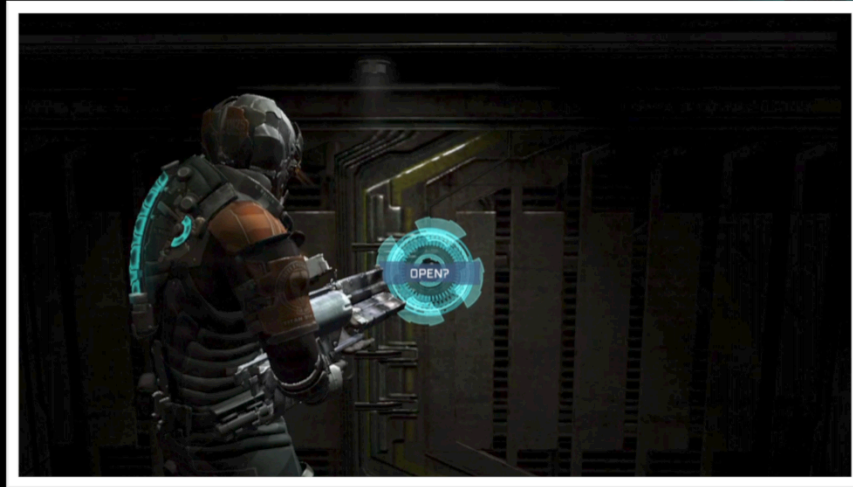
The question is often what's behind this door, but the answer must vary and be interesting.

Example – Infection Panic
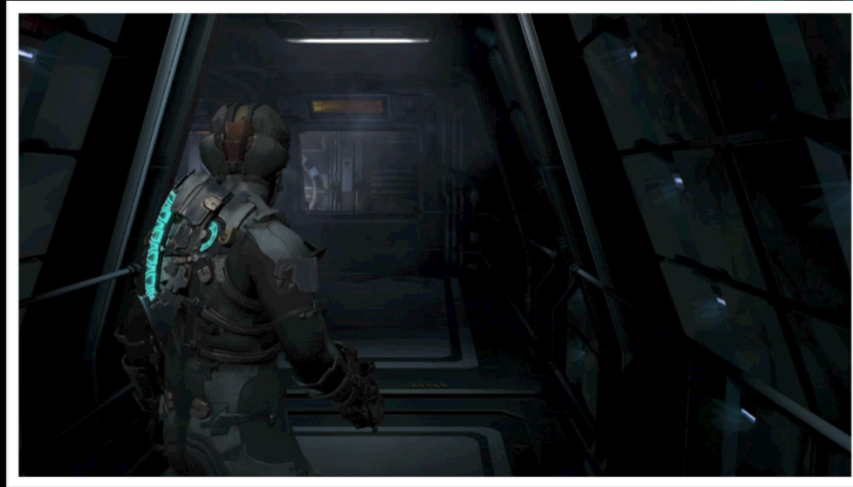
Takeaways

- Level Designers are storytellers
  - Define the possible elements of the player narrative
- Details should support a Dominant Feature
- Games are a mosaic of micro-stories
- Remember that while details are important, you must be able to step back and see the bigger picture