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Level Design Mini-Portfolio

This portfolio is designed to give insight into my design processes during construction of a single-player role-playing modification for *Oblivion*. An online copy of this document can be found at www.lizengland.com/portumbra.htm.

Port Umbra (TES Construction Set)



The docks of Port Umbra, rife with smugglers and murders,

For this three-month Oblivion modification, I was tasked with creating a new world space driven by a main quest and 1-3 side quests. While developing this project, I created five quests that all ran parallel along a consistent theme – the corruption within Port Umbra, from the lowest beggar to the Count himself.

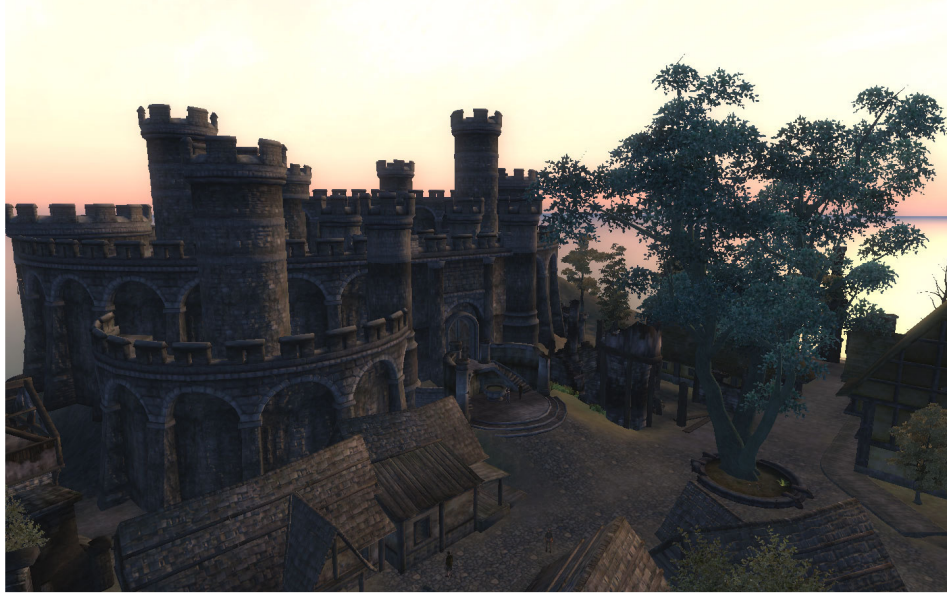
My personal goal for this three month project was to create a world space where everything, from dialogue to quests to the environment – fit within a consistent theme. Instead of a single main quest, I developed three extensive quests whose characters, themes, and goals ran parallel to one another, with two supporting side quests that delved into the culture of corruption that infested the city.

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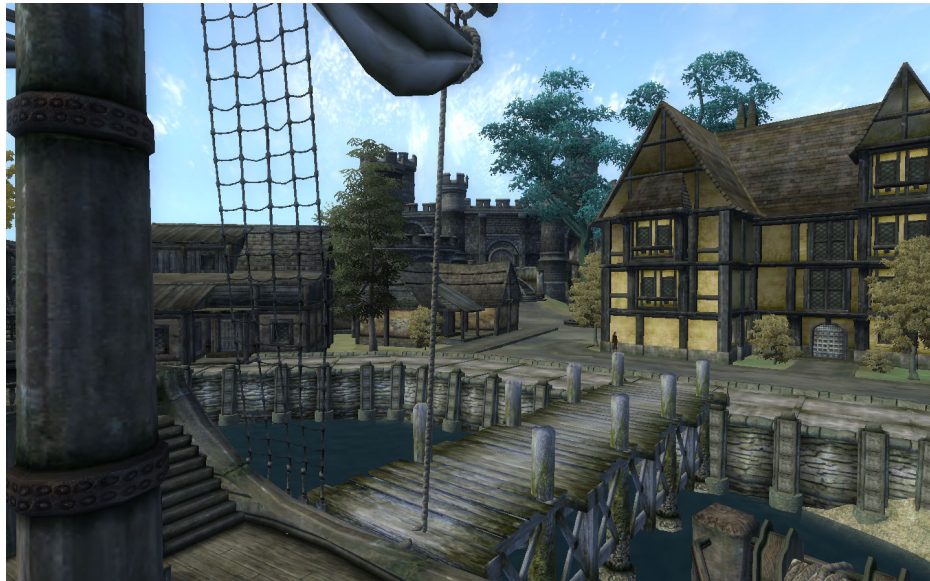
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Visual Aspects



View of Castle Lark, where the corrupt Count stands watch over the Port

As a creative writer and literature major, I find story-driven gameplay that is supplemented by an equally immersive environment incredibly rewarding to play in. In order to create that type of environment, I began by developing the back story for Port Umbra and fit it within the Elder Scrolls universe. As a result, the environment style was visually consistent and supported the themes behind the quests.



View upon arrival at Port Umbra

I paid specific attention to what the player would first see upon arrival at Port Umbra because this would determine how the player reacts to the environment and quests. I created a road leading almost straight to Castle Lark, the imposing structure towering over the island, to draw the player to this area, where all the extensive quests begin.

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To create the feel of a city with distinct disparity between the mass of impoverished Umbrans and the rich but corrupt nobility who profit from the port's smuggling, I designed the initial road leading to the Castle as a division between the slums on the left and the richer merchants' quarter on the right.



View of the burnt remains of the Old Town

I created a series of hovels in the Old Town, using the burnt and ruined architecture from the city of Kvatch to give the area an abandoned and desolate feel. I then populated the area with beggars and thieves to emphasize the corruption and poverty.



View of the coves hidden behind Castle Lark

As a seedy port town, I felt it was necessary to create a set of smuggler's coves hidden from the main traffic of the docks. On the far side of the island I created a cove ringed with sharp rocks emerging from the ocean and added shipwrecks to imply that this area was both abandoned and dangerous. The player is led to this area from a secret passageway within Castle Lark after following a traitor as she tries to escape.

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Technical Aspects



A quest update after choosing to kill a murderer

I developed dialogue and quest trees intricately on paper, but implementation proved to be a difficult task within the allotted time. The original quests depended upon choices within one quest affecting the outcome of other quests. To redesign them in a way that only minimally changed the content of the modification, I restructured the quests to run parallel to one another, the characters and themes still overlapping but no longer interdependent.



The beginning of a quest that brings the player to Port Umbra

One common problem in the development of role-playing games is creating concise and effective dialogue that keeps the player's attention. In order to write successful dialogue, I used my playwriting experience from undergrad, where I learned to create natural-sounding dialogue that carried layers of meaning.

I created optional conversation topics to give additional information about a quest, person, or location, but all required information fit within the quest dialogue. I also gave the player the option to end the conversations at any point if they are disinterested in the topic.

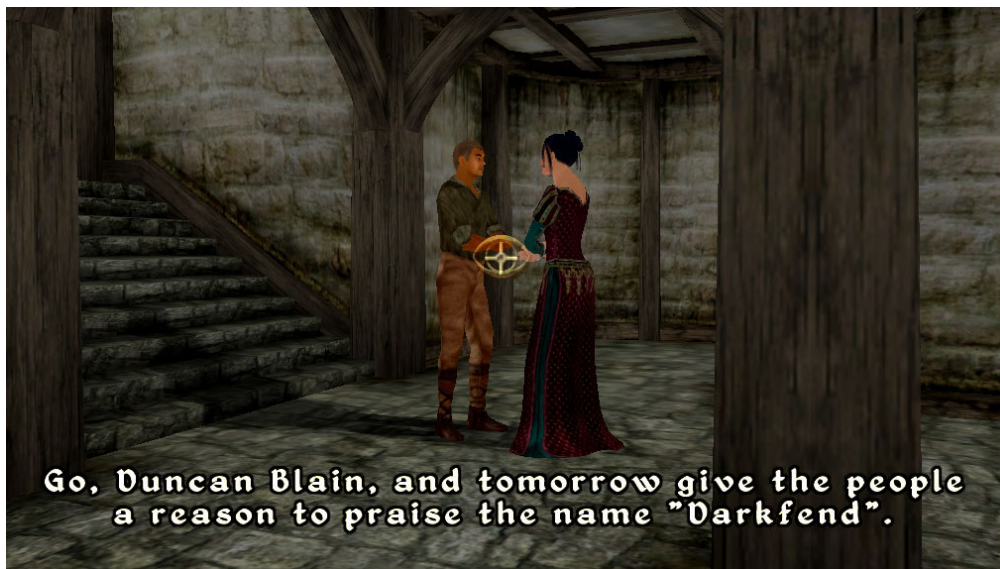
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Once the town of Port Umbra was created, I realized that in order for the player to feel immersed, I needed residents. Though it is simple to create multiple NPCs within the construction set, creating a large number of NPCs with individual personalities had the potential to be difficult and time consuming. I decided to develop nearly thirty NPCs using specific character archetypes that players would expect to find in a place like Port Umbra – self-absorbed or scared noblemen in Castle Lark, smugglers and sailors wandering the docks, and drunken rabble in the tavern, among others. I gave each of these one or two topics for the player to choose from in conversation, with very specific responses that both matched the character's personality.



A secret meeting between two traitors

Oblivion's toolset allows level designers to have a large amount of control over how to script AI interactions. One of my quests required the player to discreetly follow a character and listen in on a secret meeting she has with another NPC. To do this, I developed an entire conversation tree and triggered it through script, taking into account conditions such as where they are, who was the last to speak, and whether they can detect the player trying to listen in on their conversation.

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A brawl breaks out as prisoners raid the Count's banquet in rebellion

One of the events I wished to include in this project was the mayhem associated with a riot within the castle walls themselves. Pulling off this sort of action required extensive scripting to get all of the events. To meet this challenge, I wrote scripts that sent various noblemen as well as the Count to the banquet hall to sit and eat at a particular stage in one of the quests. When the player searched for the Count to bring him information, prisoners would run into the room and attack the Count, his guests, his guards, and the player.

```
Script Edit - [PUPrisonBrawl *]
Script Edit Help
Script Type Object
Scriptname PUPrisonBrawl
short spawnOnce
short evalOnce

Begin Gamemode
  if (Getstage PUFollowCountess < 30)
    disable
  endif
  if (Getstage PUFollowCountess == 30)
    enable
    SetFactionReaction PUPrisoners PUGuards -100
    SetFactionReaction PUGuards PUPrisoners -100
    Player.SetFactionRank PUGuards, 0
  endif
  if (evalOnce == 0)
    evaluatepackage
    ;StartCombat PUNPCGuard1
    set evalOnce to 1
  endif
End

Begin OnDeath
  If (GetinFaction PUPrisoners == 1)
    PUCount.StartConversation player, PUCountForceGreet
  endif
End
```

The prisoners first reside in the Castle dungeons. My original plan involved moving them to various places around the banquet hall when they were needed, but this script caused their appearance to lag considerably. To get around this, the prisoners in their cells were hidden, and previously disabled clones were unhidden around the hall, directed to move in and attack different noblemen and guards.

In order to get the prisoners to attack the player and the guards, I put the player in the same faction as the guards, and increased the prisoners' hate for that faction.

After the prisoners have all been killed, the script tells the Count to approach the player and begin a conversation, prompting the next part of the quest.