GENRE: Action-Adventure, Narrative-Driven, Survival Horror

TARGET AUDIENCE: Ages 18+ (Contains intense violence, gore, and mature themes)

PLATFORM: PC



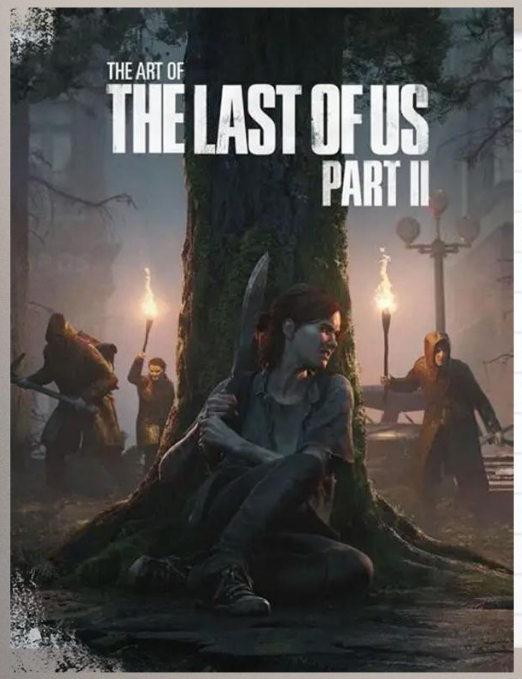
THE YEAR IS 2028, CALIFORNIA.

The ˋTD Rabies Virusˊ has wiped away everything we once knew.
A pathogen with a maliciously altered RNA sequence spreads efficiently through the air.
It rapidly destroys higher brain functions, turning the infected into mindless zombies driven solely by the instinct to attack.
Human civilization collapsed within a year.
And you are Ethan Xia.
A former Marine, also a husband and father,
who has struggled to survive for five long years in the fallen City of Angels.

I. GAME REFERENCES & CORE CONCEPT

The Crater is a deeply narrative-driven action-adventure game. Its level design draws inspiration from the cinematic storytelling of The Last of Us Part II and the survival-horror tension of Resident Evil 2 Remake. The core concept focuses on constructing richly detailed environments that support multiple exploration paths, combined with tense and realistic survival combat.

I aim to strike a balance between strong narrative direction and player freedom through carefully designed semi-open "pocket areas." These zones are filled with valuable exploration content and environmental storytelling. Through deliberate lighting, audio cues, and visual guidance, we subtly steer the player forward while fostering the oppressive atmosphere of a post-apocalyptic world.





II. BACKSTORY

In 2028, the United States, specifically California, was struck by the "TD Rabies Virus". Its RNA sequence had been deliberately tampered with, granting it airborne transmission and potent neurotropism. Those infected lose their sanity within days, descending into a violent frenzy; all existing vaccines proved ineffective.

Ethan Xia, a member of the Marine Corps, was deployed with his unit to Los Angeles to help maintain order when the situation swiftly spiraled out of control. Authorities ordered a full retreat and initiated devastating bombing campaigns over LA. While covering his comrades' evacuation, Ethan failed to board the final transport in time, becoming trapped in the dead city.

Five years after the bombings, neither the virus nor the Infected have vanished. Instead, they have swept across North America, obliterating civilized order. Relying on his military skills, Ethan barely survived and eventually established a small survivor settlement. Yet, he never gave up hope of finding his wife and daughter, who were lost in Irvine. Once the settlement achieved relative stability, he resolutely set out on a journey along the California coastline to search for them.

Present-day Los Angeles is a living hell. Beyond the endless hordes of Infected, the remnants of humanity are divided between the "California United Front" (CUF) and the fanatical religious cult known as "Oswell." Following leads about his family, Ethan must not only confront the moral compromises he made for survival but also inadvertently uncover truths related to the origin of the viral crisis.

In the stage presented here, Ethan has just left his settlement. According to intelligence from smugglers, the only relatively safe exit route from the city is to traverse the "Central Tunnel" and find a way past Trump Tower. The tip states: "Follow the craters along the path, that is the correct way."

III. INTERACTION & CORE MECHANICS

THIS GAME'S EXPERIENCE RESTS ON TWO CORE PILLARS:

1. SURVIVAL & COMBAT MECHANICS

Core Loop:
Realistic, brutal, tactically deep combat centered around managing scarce resources.

Core Controls:
Perspective: Over-the-shoulder third-person view, camera distance referencing God of War (2018).
Movement: Walk/Run (Shift), Jump/Climb (Space), Running Jump (Shift + Space).

Interaction: Universal Interact (E), Open Inventory (Q).

Combat: Melee/Fire Weapon (Left Mouse Button), Crouch/Sneak (Ctrl), Stealth Takedown (Ctrl + Left Mouse Button).

Crafting: Instantly craft essential survival items like Medkits, Molotov Cocktails, Knives.

Feature System: Melee weapons feature durability, emphasizing planning and trade-offs.







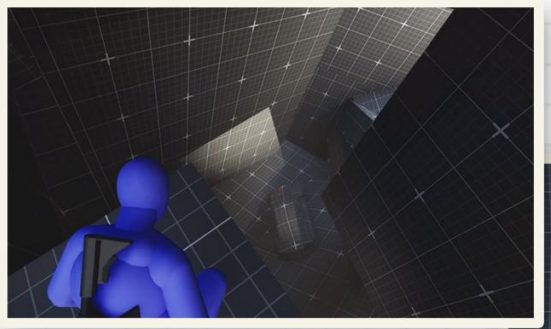
2. EXPLORATION & ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING MECHANICS

Immersive Guidance:
I abandon traditional mini-maps and objective markers, instead relying on the player's keen observation of the environment—lighting, sound cues, object placement—to gather information and find their way.

Key Exploration Elements:
Workbenches: Key locations for weapon upgrades and enhancements.

Boxes/Heavy Objects: Strategically placed to open new paths or shortcuts, connecting different areas.

Environmental Storytelling: Every ruin, every skeleton silently tells stories of past tragedies.





IV. LEVEL ELEMENTS & GUIDANCE

SCENE COMPONENTS:

To create an ultimate sense of post-apocalyptic desolation, scenes include extensive fine-detailed modeling of wreckage and broken structures, e.g., ruins, vehicle husks, tilting skyscrapers, building frames, load-bearing columns, exposed rebar, collapsed floors, slopes.

PATH TOOLS:

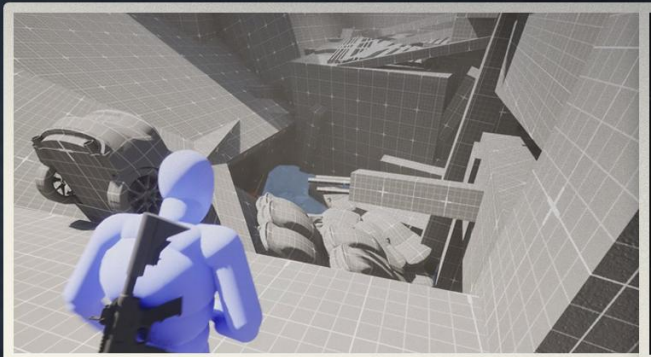
Ladders: The most common method for vertical movement. Some ladders are obvious, others require careful discovery. There are also special ladders that cannot be climbed directly from the bottom, requiring alternative methods to access, adding a layer of puzzle-solving.

PASSAGE TYPES:

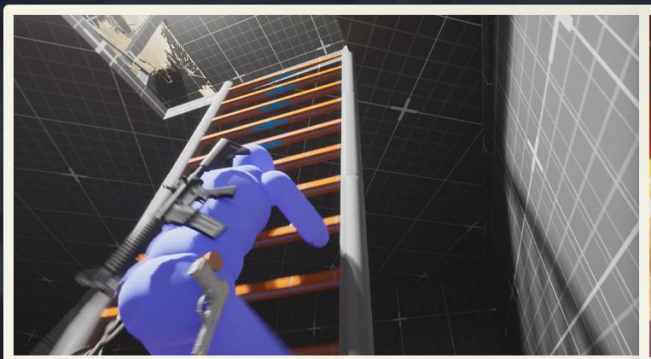
Standard Passages: Can be traversed directly; some low passages require crouching.

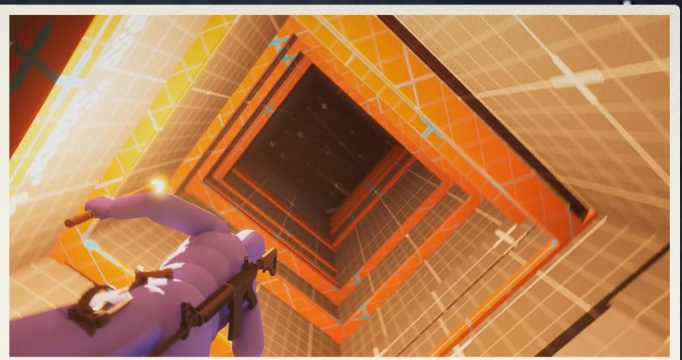
Blocked Passages: Require completing specific prior interactions (e.g., moving obstacles) to pass.

One-Way Passages: Can only be opened from the other side, adding backtracking and strategic considerations to exploration.













IV. LEVEL ELEMENTS & GUIDANCE

INFECTED ENEMIES:

Categorized by stages of infection and behavioral patterns, these entities are codenamed after canine species—each presenting distinct threats.

- **FOX**: Lower threat level.
- **DOG**: Heightened sensitivity to sound and smell.
- **WOLF**: Stronger, faster, and more aggressive.
- **MASTIFF**: The largest of all infected entities; seldom sighted. It is rumored that none who crossed its path have survived to tell the story.

HUMAN ENEMIES:

- "California United Front" (CUF) Soldiers :
  Well-trained, skilled at cooperation;
- "Oswell" Members:
  Experts in ambushes, more fanatically devout.
- Elite/Bosses:
  Possess significantly higher health than regular enemies and unique attack patterns.

GUIDING ELEMENTS:

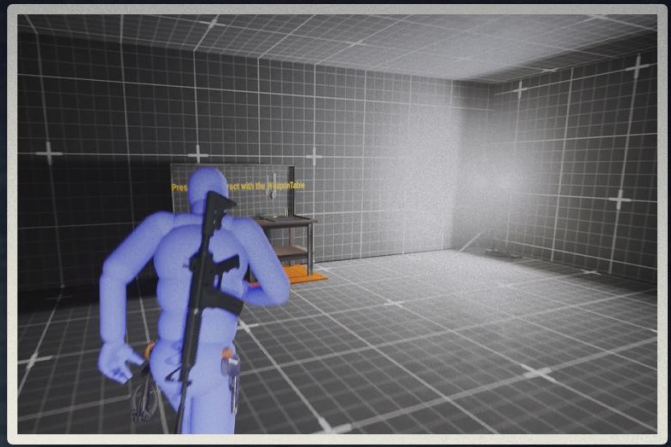
Natural Guidance: Using the natural placement of objects in the environment to create point, line, and plane visual guidance.

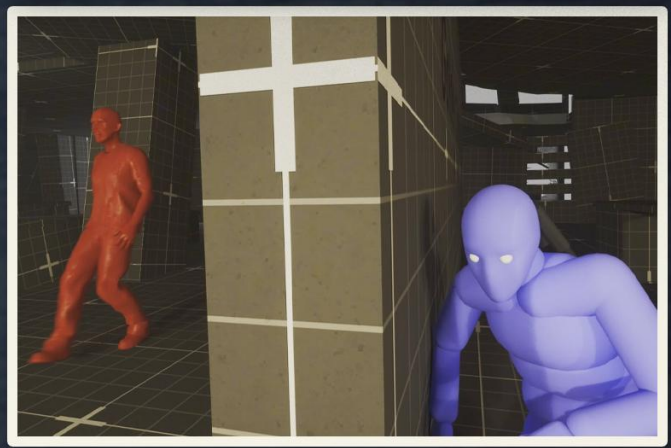
Light & Shadow Guidance: Utilizing both natural and artificial light sources to indicate direction.

Tactical Windows: Clever destruction of terrain allows players to preview parts of enemy patrol routes without exposing themselves, gaining the initiative in stealth.

Dynamic Projections: Combining terrain and lighting causes enemy shadows to partially fall into areas visible to the player, aiding threat assessment when direct line-of-sight is blocked.

Cognitive Shaping: Repeatedly placing specific environmental elements (like scattered cardboard boxes) around interactive points (e.g., supply carts) builds the player's intuition for interacting with the environment.







V. DETAILED LEVEL WALK-THROUGH

GAME OPENING – SURVIVOR SETTLEMENT GATE:

- Narrative Intro:
  As the prologue begins, Ethan quietly reiterates key route details after speaking with his guide, highlighting his vigilance amidst constant danger.

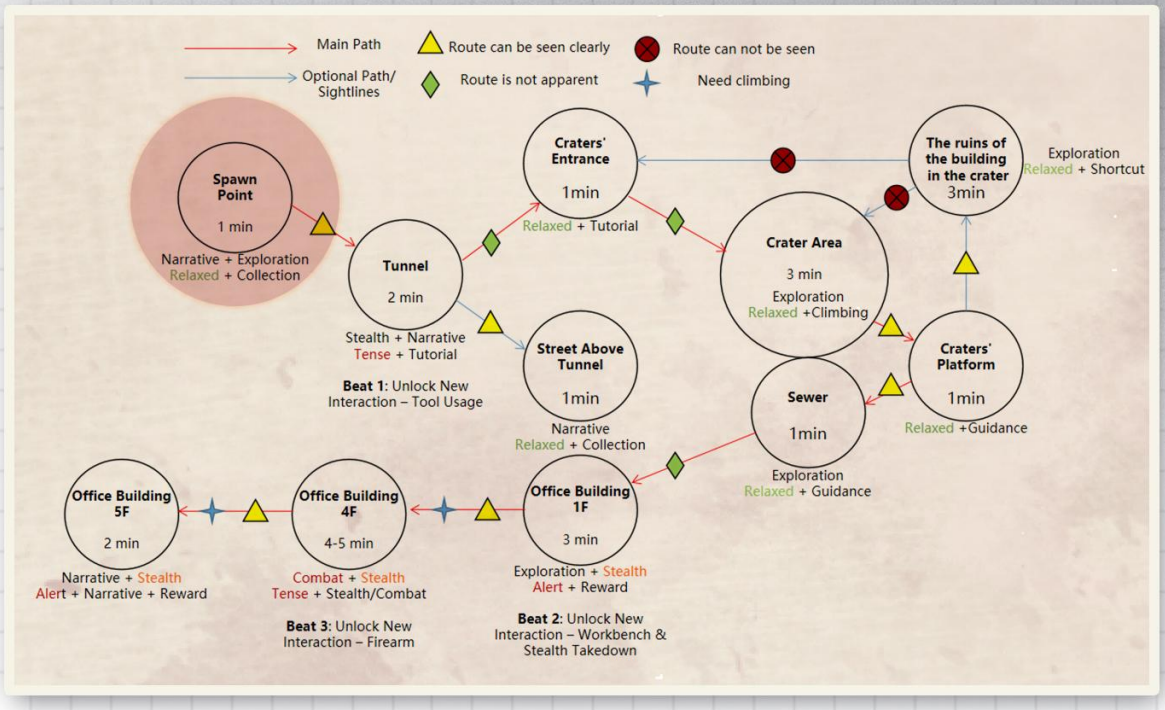
- Atmosphere Setup: Leaving the settlement, Ethan passes a completely barricaded intersection, where rusting lines of cars stand frozen relics of former bustle. Following this are abandoned military vehicles, tanks, and graffiti-covered walls, piecing together a glimpse of the conflict that spiraled out of control.

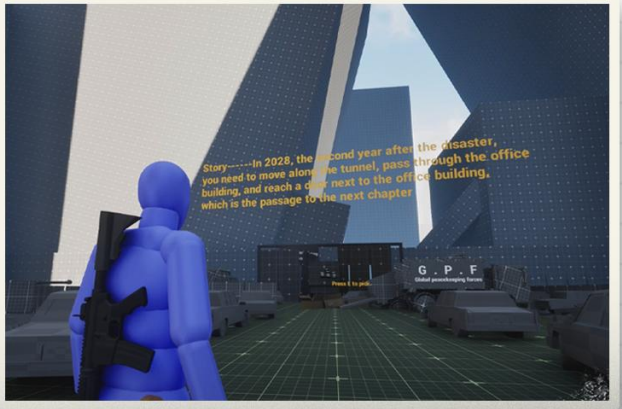
SCENE 1: MAIN CITY ROAD & IMPACT POINT RUINS:

- Introductory Environment Puzzle: Arriving at the "Impact Point," Ethan finds a target item atop a high truck. Observing the surroundings, he pushes a nearby wooden crate (with interaction prompt) under the truck, using it as a step to climb up successfully.

- Spatial Exploration: After reaching the truck roof, Ethan moves cautiously against the backdrop of the ruined city skyline, finally landing on a tank below. Subsequently, he must crouch to squeeze through a narrow gap formed by collapse ahead.

GAME OPENING & SCENE 1:







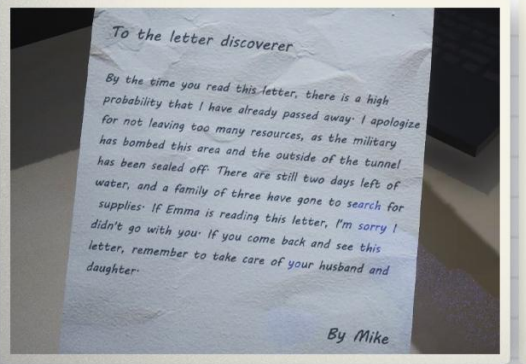
V. DETAILED LEVEL WALK-THROUGH

SCENE 2: TUNNEL ENTRANCE & INTERIOR:

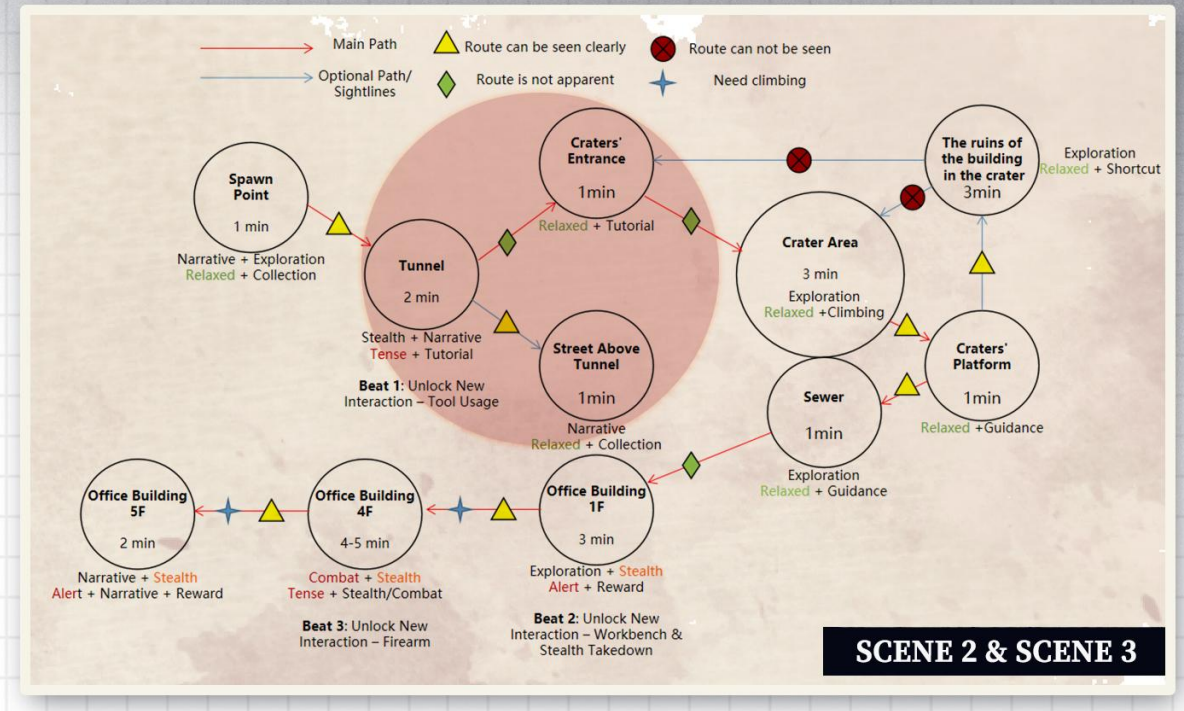
- Path Creation: The main tunnel entrance is sealed shut. Ethan squeezes through a gap created by a suicidal impact nearby.
  Narrative Introduction: Inside the tunnel, environmental cues lead Ethan to an overturned van, where he finds a diary detailing a "family's" story, along with supplies.

- Survival Tutorial:
  Jumping out of the van injures Ethan; the system guides him to use a bandage for treatment.
  While bandaging, he spots a zombie. Due to its poor eyesight and obstruction by traffic, this initiates the game's first stealth experience.
  Nearing the end of the stealth section, he has a dangerously close encounter with another zombie.

- Exit Guidance: At the tunnel's end, strong light filtering through a shell crater on the left provides the primary guidance, while a rewarding side path/slope is located on the right.







SCENE 3: CRATER EXPLORATION ZONE:

- Ability Unlock: After exploring a dead-end to the right, Ethan returns to the crater's edge. Facing a dilemma, he attempts sliding down the slope, thus independently mastering the new movement skill: "Sliding Descent."
- Map Design & Narrative: At the bottom, light guides Ethan leftward for optional rewards, potentially causing him to miss a temporarily inaccessible shortcut above.
- Exploration Rewards: While traversing the ruins, he might catch an early glimpse of the main route below — the sewer system. At one platform, if he notices and explores a hidden narrow path to the left, he can acquire a firearm early and unlock two shortcuts leading back to the crater entrance and central area respectively, enriching exploration depth and non-linear possibilities.
- Narrative Continuation: Entering the sewers, Ethan discovers more traces of the struggle for survival endured by "that family."

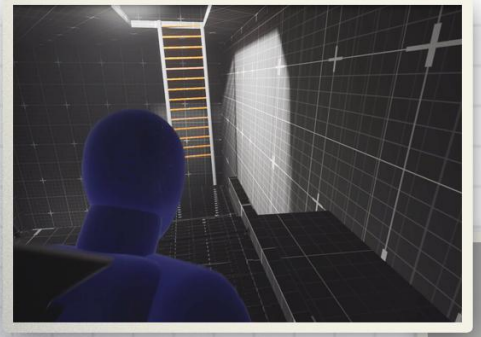
V. DETAILED LEVEL WALK-THROUGH

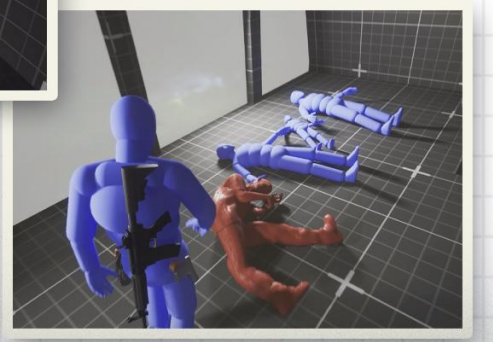
SCENE 4: UNDERGROUND SEWER HUB & OFFICE BUILDING:

- Advanced Puzzle: In the sewer hub, Ethan needs to push a metal crate beneath a high ledge, then combine sprinting and jumping to reach a ladder above. Moderate fall damage and sufficient bandage supplies encourage player experimentation.

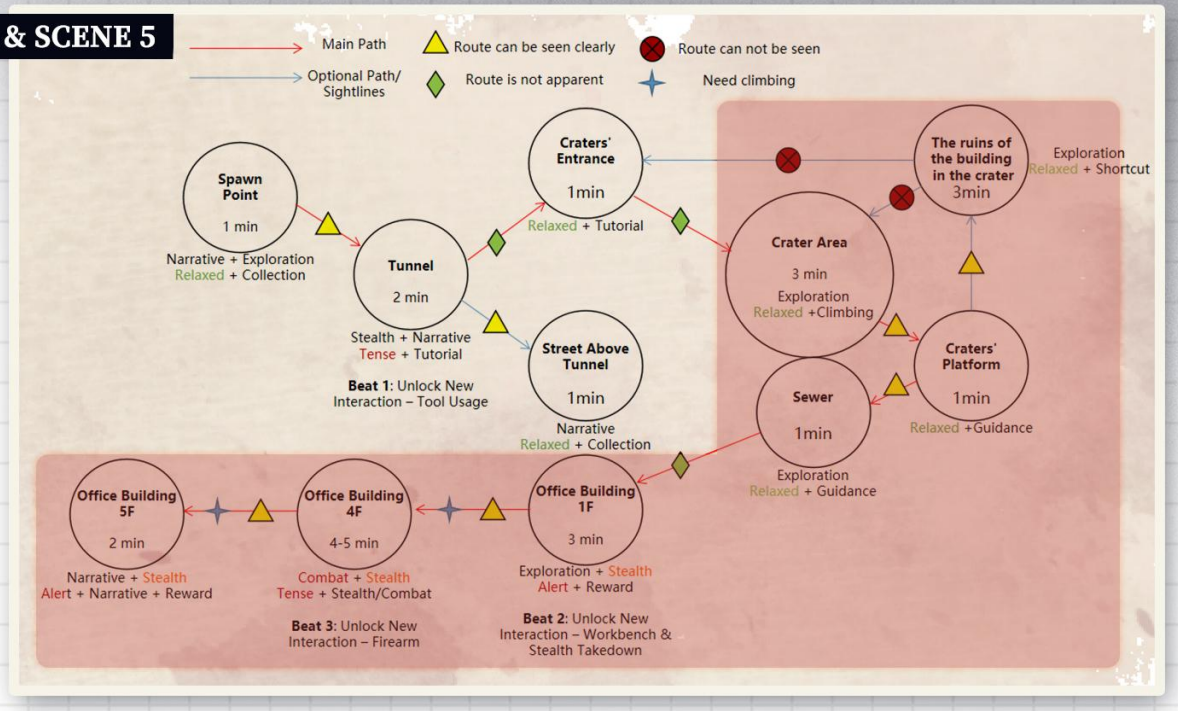
- Function Unlock: Entering the office building basement, Ethan unlocks the "Workbench" for the first time, allowing him to modify and enhance weapons and equipment.

- Vertical Exploration: While climbing the elevator shaft, numerous corpses and hastily erected barricades made from furniture silently reveal the desperate final stand of those previously trapped there.





SCENE 4 & SCENE 5



SCENE 5: HIGH-RISE COMBAT AREA & NARRATIVE CLIMAX:

- Final Confrontation: Reaching the upper floors, Ethan encounters an Infected in a "dormant" state, standing motionless before the remains of a family. Due to terrain constraints or mechanics, he is forced to shoot and eliminate it.

- Story Climax & Closure: Beside the mother's body, Ethan finds a suicide note. The letter reveals how she was forced to make the cruelest choice after her family turned, ending with a message addressed to the "Tunnel Survivors"—this forms a complete, tragic narrative loop connecting back to diary entries Ethan found earlier in the tunnels.

- New Beginning: Finally, Ethan pushes open a heavy fire door at the top floor, stepping out into the sunlight, marking the start of a new linear chapter in his journey.

VI. CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

Throughout the development of this game, I faced several novel challenges. Through considered innovation, I successfully addressed them:

TECHNICAL FIDELITY & EMOTIONAL IMMERSION

I pursued a new threshold of realism in both visual presentation and tactile feedback. This involved a deep dive into Unreal Engine 5, where I leveraged technologies like Nanite and Lumen to construct vast, intricately detailed environments while maintaining stable performance.

BALANCING CINEMATIC NARRATIVE & PLAYER AGENCY

To deliver a cohesive story, I implemented mandatory linear sequences at critical plot points to ensure emotional consistency. Conversely, the "pocket areas" showcased in this demo grant players significant autonomy to explore, scavenge, and absorb the profound isolation of the apocalypse. My approach to storytelling is embedded in the environment—graffiti on walls, discarded letters, forgotten toys—each element serving to breathe life into the world without fracturing the player's immersion.

SUSTAINING TENSION & A SENSE OF OPPRESSION

The most formidable challenge was maintaining this heightened emotional strain over long play sessions. In later levels, this will be achieved through dynamic enemy compositions, environmental hazards (e.g., chemical contamination zones), and abrupt, unavoidable moments of cruelty. The goal here extends beyond mere difficulty; it is fundamental to the story's central theme: that the physical and psychological trauma psychological trauma inflicted by violence cannot be quantified by game metrics alone.

VII. EVALUATION & REFLECTION

My ambition with this project is to advance the frontiers of narrative-driven gaming and interactive storytelling. Through unflinchingly visceral combat and a deeply woven environmental narrative, I aim to offer players an emotionally exhausting and intellectually provocative journey—one that compels them to continuously re-evaluate their own stand and the very definition of "justice."

Regarding this demo, I believe several design aspects merit further discussion and refinement:

Player Expectation Management & Emotional Preparation

The game's profoundly heavy and dark themes may surpass the expectations of many players. Consequently, I must explore more effective ways to signal its emotional tone from the outset, properly preparing the audience.

Optimizing Pace & Rhythm

Certain narrative transitions still feel underdeveloped, occasionally creating a sense of fragmentation and narrative resistance. Determining how to preserve our structural innovations while smoothing the rhythm of these storytelling shifts remains a primary focus for my ongoing research.