

Design of “Intellectually Bankrupt”

Neverwinter Nights Level Design Project

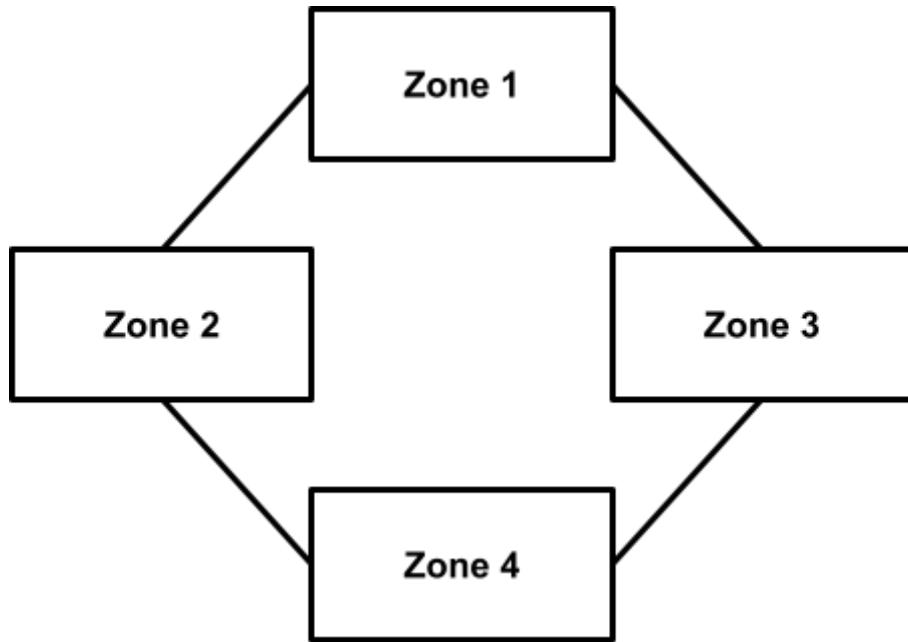
By Sebastian Bolatto

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/kKwtcJCmjiI>

General Notes

Different areas within the game are loaded in as “Zones,” with moving between two zones requiring the game to unload the last area and load in the new area.

The Following is a map of how the zones in my level are connected:



Engine Restrictions

The sizes of all zones are restricted to being within a tile grid of 16 x 16 tiles. Different areas are also restricted to using a specific tileset based on the chosen theme of this area; This means that you cannot create “forest” tiles within a zone that uses the “city” tileset. This also means that to create a larger level, or larger feeling environments, the developer must string together multiple different zones.

The developer is also able to throw in multiple different props and pieces of set dressing into their level; However, adding too many props into a single zone will create a lot of extra polygons in that zone, which can lead to a slow-down for the user depending on the specs of their PC and the number of props within the zone.

Zone 1 Beats: Silverkeep Outdoors

This is an outdoors urban zone somewhere in the middle of Neverwinter, in a district called Silverkeep. In the middle of the map is a large structure named The Silverkeep Trust, which is a local bank. Around this bank are many houses that act as set dressing. There are also multiple market stalls set up behind the bank acting as a local market, and there are some entrances to the underground sewers at one corner.



Quest Start

A local gambler by the name of Lyle Lastcoin stands around the outside of the Silverkeep Trust, and is the first character seen by the player. Lyle Lastcoin acts as an introduction to the quest, and is the character that assigns you the quest “Intellectually Bankrupt,” which is added to the player’s journal.

When talking with Lyle, the player is given his story about how the bankers at the Silverkeep Trust are acting uncharacteristically kind and dim-witted today. He managed to get a practically free loan offer today, which he finds odd since when he went to the bank earlier in the week, they threatened to break his kneecaps if he didn’t make his other loan payments!

Lyle will ask the player to investigate the bank (while also noting that he’s running off to the tavern to spend all of his new money!) At which point the player is free to either enter the bank, located in the very center of the outdoor area, or explore the rest of the outdoor area - including meeting some of the other NPCs or entering the sewers.

One piece of feedback I received was that Lyle’s dialog can be somewhat bloated for being an introduction to the quest. So, I cut up Lyle’s dialog into more digestible pieces, and even added an additional option to tell Lyle to “keep it brief,” where he will tell the player a much more condensed version of his story.



1-1

A large set of doors leads into the grand building of The Silverkeep Trust. The ornate entrance of the building makes it clear that this is the building where the bank is located, and the building's central location also acts as a weenie for the players to easily find and return to. Moving through these doors will transition the player to Zone 2.



1-2

A human woman is trying to wrangle her four young children, who are all playing around a fountain. The player can talk with the woman for some silly dialog, and the player may ask this woman for her name, which will reveal her name to be “Hattie Hustleby.” The player can afterwards use this name when attempting to pose as another person to the bank teller, Otto Loanmore.

The presence of this woman acts as some extra environmental set-dressing, making the area feel less empty. She also creates some unexpected interaction for the player once the player meets Otto Loanmore.



1-3

A dwarven man sells apples outside of a market-stall. The player can interact with the dwarf for some silly dialog, and the player can ask this dwarf for his name, which will reveal his name to be “Grimbald Applecrusher.” The player can afterwards use this name when attempting to pose as another person to the bank teller, Otto Loanmore.

The presence of this dwarf acts as some extra environmental set-dressing, making the area feel less empty. He also creates some unexpected interaction for the player once the player meets Otto Loanmore.



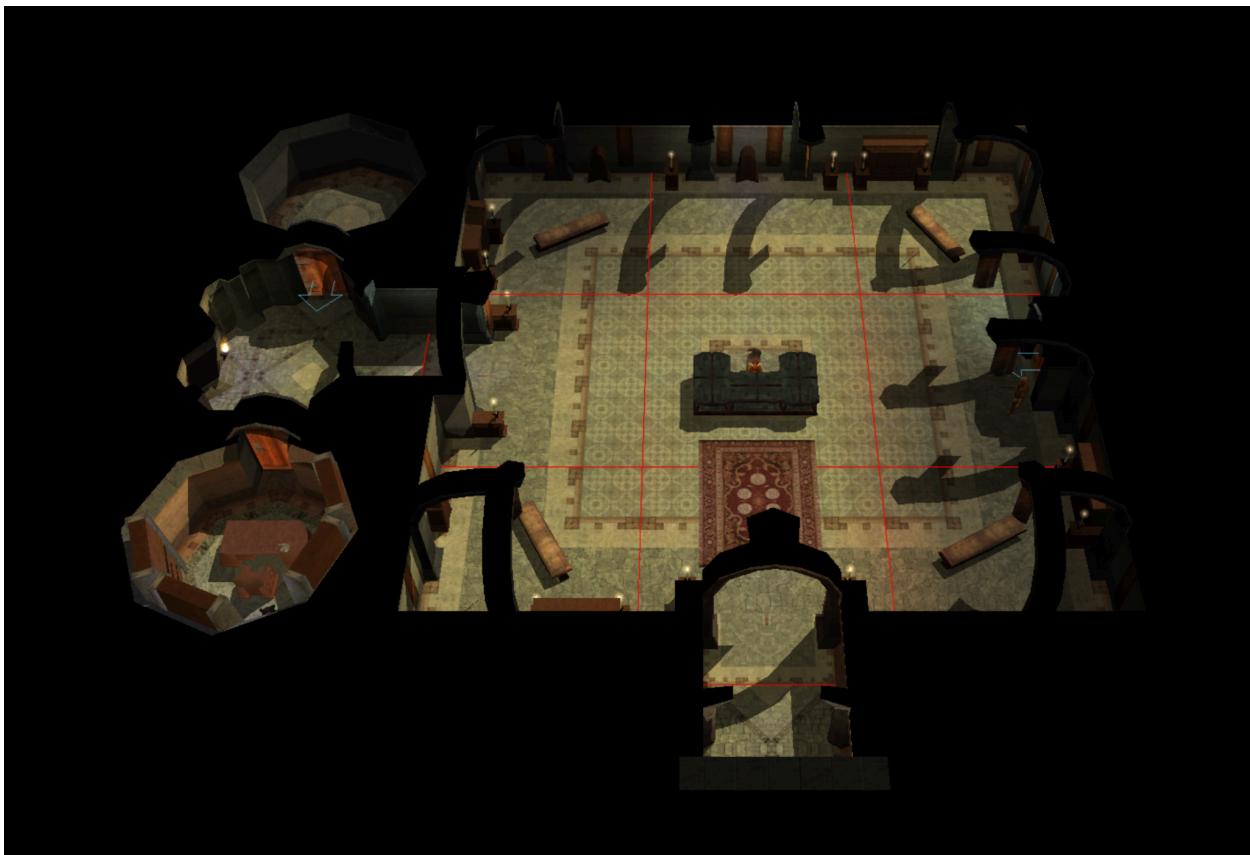
1-4

A couple entrances head down a staircase and lead straight into the sewers from off the side of the road. Moving through one of these entrances will transition the player to Zone 3.

These sewers are actually located at the very end of the player's "expected path," which passes by the bank, Hattie Hustleby, and Grimbald Applecrusher, while also being easily accessed by a shortcut around the bank building. Players will generally keep to the "expected path" first as they naturally travel down the main road, but when they reach the sewer entrances they will also notice that they have a quick shortcut that goes back to the bank entrance.



Zone 2 Beats: Silverkeep Trust Foyer



2-1

The main doors lead into the large and pristine foyer of the Silverkeep Trust. Going back out through these main doors takes the player to Zone 1.



2-2

There is a gnome teller towards the front of the bank who goes by the name, “Otto Loanmore.” On talking with this bank teller, it is quickly made obvious to the player that the teller is acting unnaturally dim-witted. This information is added to the player’s journal, and the player is told that it may be good to further investigate the bank.

The player has a large array of conversation options when talking with Otto Loanmore. Since the bank teller is acting rather dumb, the player can take advantage of Otto’s dim-wittedness in many ways. This includes taking advantage of Otto’s new customer promotion, which gives the player a large sum of gold for free, or the player may attempt to imitate any of the NPCs that they have met so far. This includes Lyle Lastcoin, Grimbald Applecrusher, Hattie Hustleby, or Borag Trolshurgh. Imitating any of the NPCs includes some new silly dialog; Imitating Grimbald or Hattie in particular gives the player a chance to either take out the money that those NPCs are keeping in the bank, or to contribute towards their funds. Taking out the money will give the player a large sum of money while shifting their alignment towards evil, while depositing money for them will take money away from the player while shifting their alignment towards good.



2-3

There is a door to the lower floors of the bank, which is locked and protected by a half-orc guard called Borag Trolshurgh. The guard is also acting very dumb, and the player can do a simple persuasion check to convince the guard that they are allowed to go downstairs. If the player succeeds, then the player is given a key that allows them to open the door. If they fail, the player is not able to pass through this door, and must go through the alternate route in the sewers. This door leads to Zone 4.

This persuasion check acts as a reward for those players with characters who focus on charisma and manipulating other people. Being able to go through this door allows them skip the fighting or sneaking in the sewers, which is the alternate route into the Silverkeep Trust Vaults.



2-4

A hallway leads into a few open offices to the side, one of which has an open door. The office belonging to Otto Loanmore has an open ledger on top of their desk which the player can examine. On examination, the player notices that the ledger is completely empty, except for some mindless doodles. This helps to build up the mystery of what is happening here, and serves as an extra clue for the player if they decide to go exploring.



Zone 3 Beats: Silverkeep Sewers



3-1

There are two exits from the sewers which head up a flight of stairs. These exits are usually the way through which the player enters the sewers. Going back through these sewer exits will take the player to Zone 1.

On entering the sewers, the player will also notice a raft hitched to a post that is floating on the sewer's waterways. This was an addition that was made after I received a lot of feedback from people feeling that the sewers were too empty. Previously the playtesters felt that the sewers were mostly just an "area to move through," rather than an area with interesting aspects to explore, so I added multiple elements to help build up an environmental narrative about an individual that lived in these sewers.





3-2

A few oozes block the player's path. The player must fight or sneak past these oozes in order to continue down the sewer.

A dead body, and multiple splatters of blood, act as a clear indication that there is some danger in this area. This gives stealthier players an indication that it may be time for them to activate their sneak mode, if they want to make it past the dangers that lurk in this area.

The dead body and blood splatters are an addition that was made after I received a lot of feedback from people feeling that the sewers were too empty. Previously the playtesters felt that the sewers were mostly just an “area to move through,” rather than an area with interesting aspects to explore, so I added multiple elements to help build up an environmental narrative about an individual that lived in these sewers. Here, we can see that the individual who once lived in these sewers was slain by some creature that could utterly dissolve their flesh. The player quickly discovers that the culprits are likely the oozes that the player needs to fight past.



3-3

A side path allows stealthier characters to attempt to sneak past the oozes, breaking their line of sight.

Also within this side area is a small camp, clearly indicating that an individual lived here rather recently - likely the individual who died to the oozes not too far from here! The players can loot a chest that is located here, which contains a small amount of treasure and enhanced Thieves Tools +1, which grants a bonus to checks involving picklocking or disabling traps, and are a reward for players using rogues and bards who can make use of thieves tools.

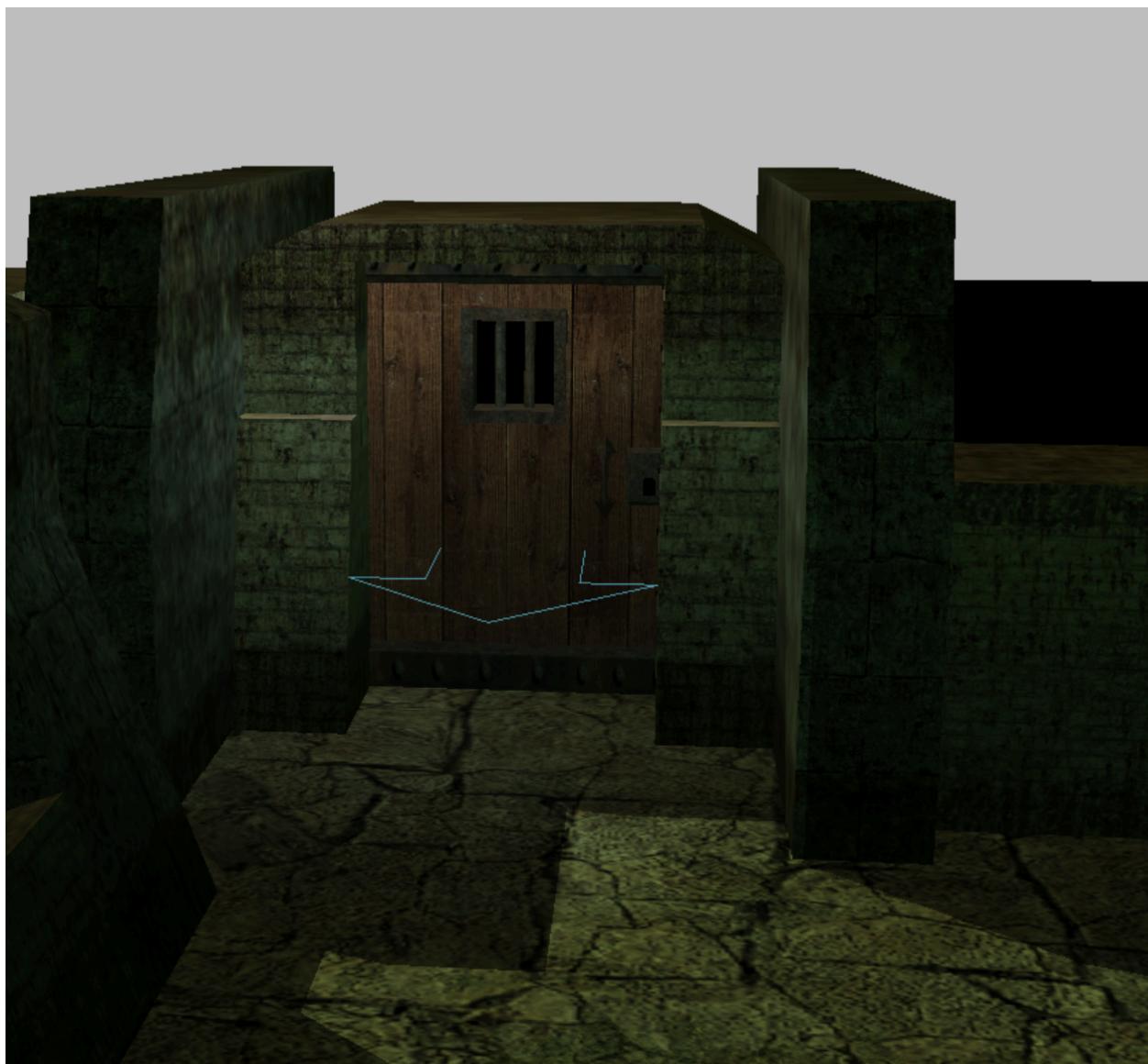
This small camp area is an addition that was made after I received a lot of feedback from people feeling that the sewers were too empty. Previously the playtesters felt that the sewers were mostly just an “area to move through,” rather than an area with interesting aspects to explore, so I added multiple elements to help build up an environmental narrative about an individual that lived in these sewers.



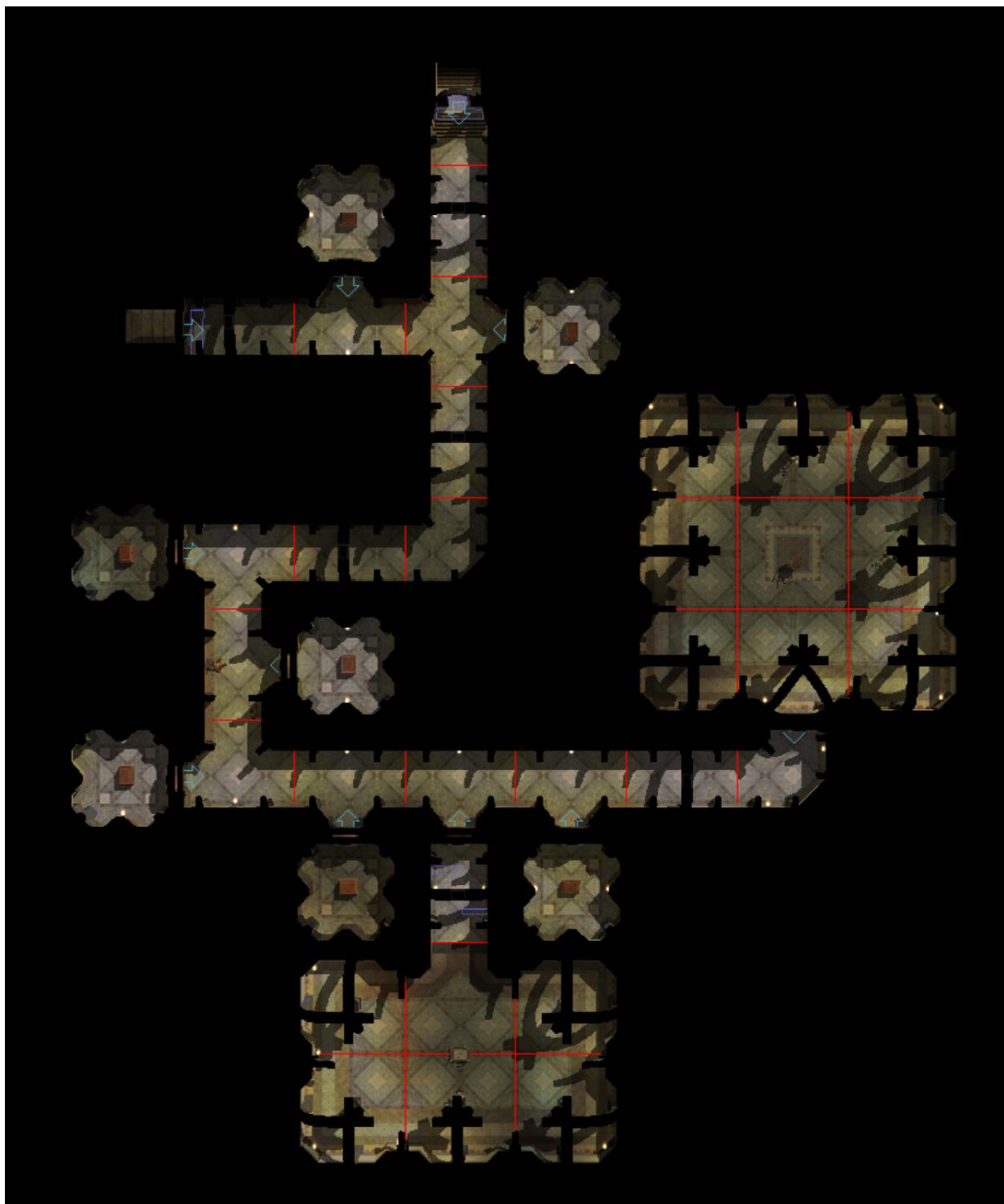


3-4

A shabby wooden door in the sewers opens directly into the lower floor of the Silverkeep Trust. While the door is locked, the door is also extremely brittle, so any player can bash it down easily. Moving through this entrance will take the player to Zone 4.



Zone 4 Beats: Silverkeep Trust Vaults



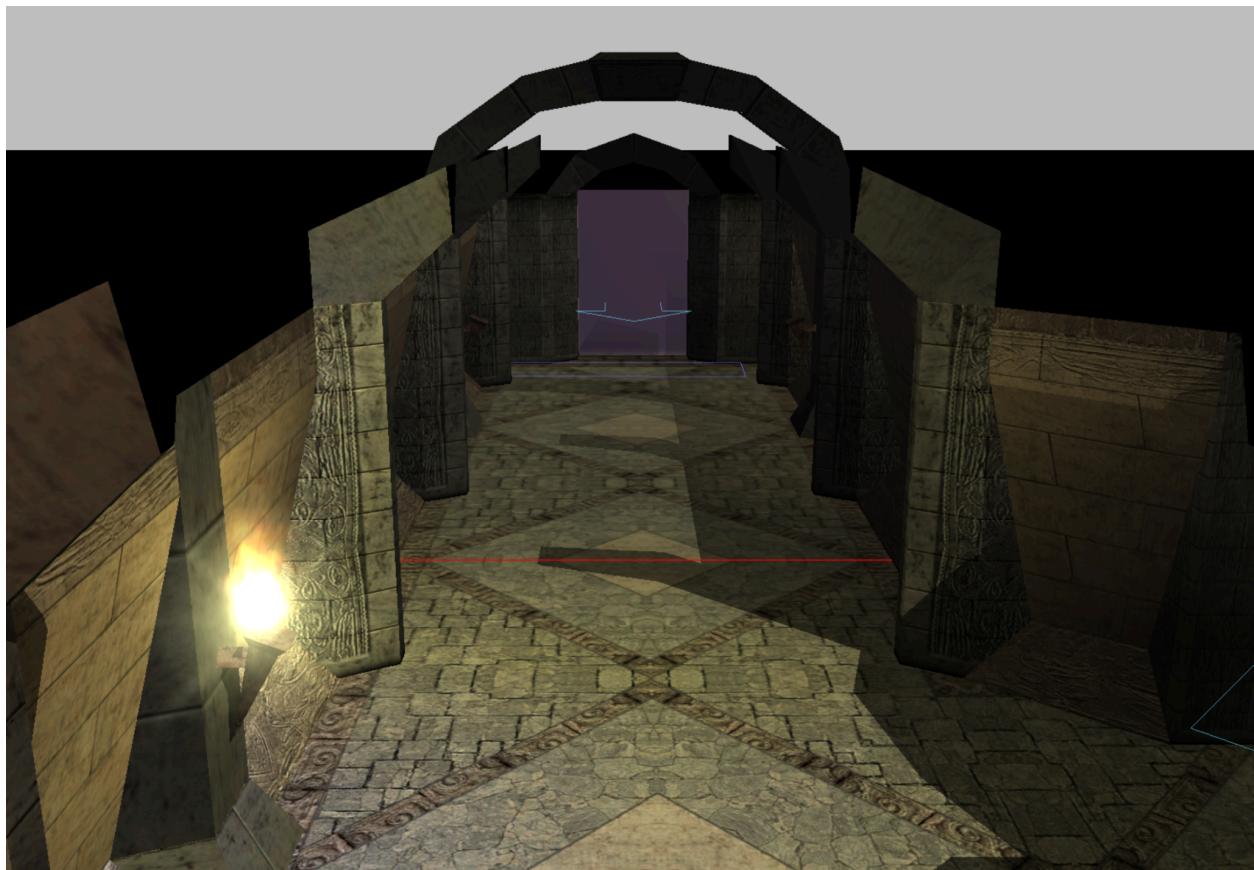
4-1

A staircase leads up to a door which exits back into the Silverkeep Trust Foyer. Moving through this entrance leads to Zone 2.



4-2

A doorway down another short hallway opens directly into the Silverkeep Sewers. Moving through this entrance will take the player to Zone 3.



4-3

A halfling rogue by the name of “Robin DeBanks” has accidentally locked himself inside of his own bank vault while attempting to steal from it. He bangs on the door as the player goes by, asking them to help him get out of his vault. He tells the player that he dropped his keys down the hallways as he was running from the “brain-bugs,” or Intellect Devourers, that have infested the bank. He promises to join the player as a companion if the player can free him, either by picking the lock or by finding the key he left down the hallway.

Once the players free Robin, he notifies the player that the vaults have been infested by Intellect Devourers, which are likely the reason that the bankers are acting so dim-witted. He also notes that Intellect Devourers don’t act alone - They are likely being controlled by some other entity within these vaults, and killing that entity will probably end the enchantment that the bankers are under.

Freeing Robin DeBanks allows the players to have him join them as a companion. His skills are extremely useful in this area, as the area includes a lot of locked doors and some traps. Even opening the final door to the beholder requires somebody who is adept at picking locks like Robin!

Some of the feedback I received from playtests included adding some more narrative context to the beholder fight at the end, since there wasn’t previously too much context behind the final beholder fighter other than what some more experienced D&D players may logically figure out, which is that the Beholder was in control of the Intellect Devourers, Robin now helps to provide some of that narrative context, acting as an “aha!” moment for the players when Robin describes how the reason for the banker’s dim-wittedness has to do with the Intellect Devourers, and also describing the player’s final true objective - which is to defeat the beholder at the end of the vault hallway.

Other feedback also noted that obtaining Robin DeBanks should be made more necessary in order to fight the beholder, since the beholder can be a tough fight without the companion, and because Robin provides the narrative context behind the Intellect Devourers and the beholder which is vital for the quest’s story. Because of this, a locked door was added to the entrance of the beholder room, which requires Robin to open the door for the player.

If the player waits outside of the vault door without opening the door to free Robin, then Robin will periodically say the next phrase on a list of phrases. It can be pretty funny to just sit outside of the door and listen to what Robin says. The following is the list of phrases:

- Is somebody out there? Please, help me!
- I left the key out there, down the hall! But be careful -I had to run from some nasty beasties...
- Just- just let me out! Please? Please!
- I- I know you're out there. I can hear you. Just... Could you say something, or?
- Look I, I get it, I shouldn't have tried to rob this bank. Just, let me out, and I'll never steal again! I swear!

- Or, like... Maybe you want me to steal for you? I can do that! I'll help! I can pick locks!
- Now, I know what you're asking, "Robin, if you're such a great thief, why don't you just pick your way out of that door?"
- Well you see, I regularly would, just uh, just... These doors don't have a keyhole on the inside. I'm... stuck.
- Okay, is there actually somebody out there, or have I just been talking to myself this whole time? Because if so, that would be uh, embarrassing.
- This is awkward. And I'm starting to consider that I may just be going insane.
- ...Help...



4-4

The hallway is blocked by a few intellect devourers, who are hostile to the player. The player must fight these intellect devourers in order to continue exploring the vaults.

The number of intellect devourers in this hallway was reduced after feedback, as it was previously too difficult of a fight for the player.



4-5

Some small side vaults have doors that can be bashed down, or pick-locked. These small vaults have some money and gemstones inside of them, rewarding players for exploration. Robin is especially useful as a companion, as they can pick locks for those players who lack the ability.



4-6

One of the locked vaults is larger than the others, and is actually protected by a variety of secret traps that the player may trigger when entering the vault. However, as a rogue, the companion “Robin DeBanks” should be able to find and disable some of these traps. After getting through the traps, the player will also trigger an ambush, which causes two Intellect Devourers to appear and attack the player! If the player manages to get through the traps and the ambush, there will be a table with a special magic item atop of it. This magic item is an enchanted spear called “Wit’s End,” which deals extra damage against aberration-type enemies, such as intellect devourers and beholders.

Playtest feedback said that the magic item needed a better description, so I added the following description for this item:

“A sleek, brain-poking spear that hits enemies right in their overthinking zone. Perfect for beholders, intellect devourers, and anyone who is ‘too smart for their own good.’ Its sharp tip cuts through big brains and big egos with equal efficiency.”



4-7

The last chamber at the end of the vault hallway contains a beholder, locked behind an evil-looking door. The beholder acts as a final boss-fight for the player, as the beholder can fire dangerous spells out of their many eyeballs. Once the beholder is defeated, the bank teller Otto is released from its enchantment, and the player may go back to Otto to finish the quest.

