

Level Design Style Guide

- [Eden: Universal Approach To Level Design](#)
- [Specific Must Haves](#)
 - [Object placement:](#)
 - [Visual Story Telling Guidelines](#)
 - [Level Starting Area](#)
 - [Delays between end of story and start of new quest](#)
 - [Cutscenes](#)
 - [Talking Heads](#)
 - [Fog Clearing](#)
- [Gameplay](#)
 - [Object Value \(Loot Drops\)](#)
 - [Paths](#)
- [Trem's Tips For Good Level Design](#)

Eden: Universal Approach To Level Design

When creating a level, at every step of the way, ensure that everything in a scene screams AVATAR and PANDORA. Whether it's plant placement, level intros, tasks, exploration, POIs, cutscenes, ambient animal placement... everything should always stand out as if the player is standing on Pandora. This should be our guiding principle in all matters concerning level design on Project Eden.

When given a narrative direction, always find a way to sell the narrative direction in visual form. Express your level layout in a way that will support the story, add additional reasons for a narrative direction, and try to lend a visual reason for why a narrative situation is taking place. It's our job to express the narrative story in visual form.

Support the art team in any way possible. When coming up with an idea, draw it out with labels and describe exactly what it is you're trying to achieve. Provide reference pictures (google image search) to support your vision. Make it easy for art to know what it is you're trying to achieve so they can provide you with the best art possible for level's direction.

Specific Must Haves

Object placement:

Plants need to be layered in the most realistic ways possible.

- Start with trees (which are NOT collectible) and let that frame each section
- Use base plants (ferns, grasses, small bushes) to fill in negative space and to define initial paths
- Then spot place specific/rarer objects (mid tier rocks/minerals/resources)
- Finally, spot place Pandora specific/feature plants
- Bonus - ambient animals, especially in opening area

Visual Story Telling Guidelines

General guidelines for how we can tell story with object placement to complement POIs.

- **Have Fun with This!**
 - Try to create fun little story moments to provide added narrative immersion at a low cost.
 - Don't forget the most powerful shader in the universe, the Mindshader
 - Sometimes it's what the player doesn't see that tells the story.
 - Thanator footprints may be all you need to summon the idea of a Thanator in someone's mind.
- **Use What We Have**
 - Place existing assets in ways that help tell a story by creating little vignettes
 - Example 1: A scene around a broken bridge .. use the standard broken bridge asset and add a rock/boulder asset nearby in the same path to imply the bridge was broken.
 - Nothing unique.
 - Example 2: RDA trash leads the player past fallen tree obstacle which opens up to a broken AMP suit where Wandering Trader assets can be collected.
 - All using existing assets and just placed framing a scene.
 - Example 3: Hexapede are standing around a pond then run away on reveal. The player may think they must have been drinking and got startled.
 - This uses already pre-made fidgets with no new animation requests.
 - Avoid asking for unique assets when possible.
 - See below
- **Needs to be Justifiable**
 - Ask how important is this story telling for the goals of the adventure?
 - Is it worth creating complex VFX or Unique assets?
 - Can it be done in a simpler more cost effective way?

- Is it adding gameplay?

What to Avoid

- Major state changes
- expensive or new VFX that haven't been accounted for
- costly new assets
- new animations requirements
- one-offs (new scripting commands, hard-coded engineer support, assets, etc) If it cant be re-used a lot probably, not worth making.

Level Starting Area

- Use some kind of flourish to intro level before cutscene
 - Riding in on horse
 - Flying in on banshee
 - Walking in
 - Running in
 - But remember to keep all of this simple. Use existing or already planned for animations/assets.
 - Where animations/assets are not available, imply the flourish happened (i.e. hexapede hoofprints).
- Context...
 - If player flies/rides in on an animal, have player walking through the start area, have the player walk a ways into the level, then start cutscene. This gives the player a sense that the character has been traversing for a while before getting to the start of the level.
 - Include evidence of where they came from. Footprints coming out of the fog from where they supposedly came from, for example.
- Start Node (Quest Graph)

Story after Start Node - Unlocks and level unlock - ALL LEVELS MUST HAVE THIS

- Example:
 - # HUD Unlocks
 - unlock_hud MapButton
 - unlock_hud QuestsButtonParent
 - unlock_hud ResourceButton
 - unlock_hud BuildButton
 - activate_quest "Quest ID"
 - unlock_scene "Level Designation"
 - travel_tutorial

Delays between end of story and start of new quest

- Delay of 2 seconds at the end of every *.storyconfig before starting next quest to give breathing room for the end of one quest and the start of the other.

Cutscenes

- Order of components
 - Zoom distance
 - Delay
 - Talking heads
 - End zoom
 - See Talking Heads below
- Focusing on NPCs
 - No interacts with NPC
 - Auto start NPC cutscenes w/ no interacts on NPC
- Traversing during Zoom in
 - Don't traverse before or after cutscene starts. Traverse during the cutscene to prevent the player character from walking out of frame
 - Player character(s) orientation:
 - Always face the player to the camera when talking unless talking to an NPC that's facing the camera too
- When teleporting the player character across a level, ensure that when the player character appears at the destination that she appears a bit away from the final target location and either walk or run to that spot. This will make it appear as if the player character had traveled there by foot.

Talking Heads

- Use letterbox
- Zoom in to .21 over 2 seconds
- Zoom out to .6 over 2 seconds when done
- 2 second delay between move and letterbox appearing. This allows time for the zoom to take place before dialog/talking heads appear.

EXAMPLE:

```
move_camera Cam_X 2 .21
delay 2.0
letterbox true
start_dialogue ley'la
line level_actor_01
line level_actor_02
line level_actor_03
line level_actor_04
end_dialogue
letterbox false
move_camera Cam_Start1 2 .6
```

Fog Clearing

FFA sets fog clears based on fog groups more so than with automatic fog as we do.

For Eden fog clearing, a mix of auto fog and fog groups will be left up to the LD for the level as the pace, size of the level, and desired energy usage will determine the rate at which fog will be revealed.

Gameplay

Object Value (Loot Drops)

Kristopher Eidukas (systems) has come up with a pyramid approach to loot drops from collecting world objects in levels. Essentially, the most common objects (filler plants for example) will have the most common drops. Rocks of various types will have a tier system as well. Special Pandoran plants will either have specific drops or more rare drops.

The upshot is, level designers don't have to worry about placing specific objects to yield specific drops as long as we stick to using the priority order of objects placed:

- Start with trees (which are NOT collectible) and let that frame each section
- Use base plants (ferns, grasses, small bushes) to fill in negative space and to define initial paths
- Then spot place specific/rarer objects (mid tier rocks/minerals/resources)
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Paths

Feint paths will be painted in the ground textures (LDs will have to work with 2D artists to ensure the pathing are correct) but it will be up to LDs to ensure the objects that are collected will reveal fog in such a way that these feint paths are visible at all times post fog reveal.

LDs can accentuate paths with object placement by suggesting/outlining paths with various objects.

Other ways of making paths stand out is, ironically, by blocking paths with either normal, collectible world objects OR with actual obstacles. Once removed, the player should instantly see the path so they know they're moving in the right direction.

Creatures can also help lead the way for the player. An animal that's the focus of a quest/task can and should run in the direction we want to lead the player towards. Preferably on a path.

Trem's Tips For Good Level Design

- Rule of thirds (learn it, live it, love it)
- 3 is a magic number, yes it is, it's a magic number
- Don't forget the most powerful shader in the universe, the Mindshader
 - Sometimes it's what the player doesn't see that tells the story.

- Thanator footprints may be all you need to summon the idea of a Thanator in someone's mind.
- Symmetry is not bad. Symmetry is not good. Use your best judgement and imagination
- Don't give it away, don't give it away now.
 - If there is a special quest item that you want the player to acquire, make them work for it.
- Repeat after me, I am not Ley'lan.
 - I am controlling all aspects of the game. I am okay with that.
- Always have a point to any interaction or quest with a special NPC. Use this as an opportunity to tell a small story.
 - Use common and relatable themes.
- Don't microtask the player (please don't hand hold with tasks, let people figure it out)
- Don't slip me tasks under the radar (If you task me, tell me)
- Get comfortable with things you can't remove from the levels
- Get comfortable with teleportation of characters and cameras
- Get comfortable with using the space and doing things without Ley'la, like using dynamite. (I am not Ley'lan. I am all powerful.)
- **Do not** make cutscenes harder than they need to be.
 - Tell the story in states.
 - You don't need the characters to act out every action. (For example, when Ley'lan returns the rope to Zey, the screen fades to black and fades back up and the rope is tied across the river.
 - Note from Kraig: In the same regard the level art doesn't need to tell every aspect of the visual story you want to tell. it just needs enough to imply it.
- Simpli-Fi!
- Let the states tell the stories
- Show me something cool
- Show me something fun
- Use the IP
- Let's see some sand-box objectives that give me agency on the order and direction I choose. (If I have to find 5 Teylu patches, spread them out, make me use the hint system to find them.
- Don't forget, a player could take weeks or even months to complete a single adventure level if non-payer.
 - Do not expect them to finish on a single playthrough. (1st level doesn't count).
- Do not expect the player to play every level in a linear path.
 - There will be LTEs and other events that they may decide to focus on while in the middle of an adventure.
- Let's see something new in isometric layout (Verticality?)
- Fun Shui - I'm just saying. Have fun.