

VAULT PRODUCTIONS



A UI / UX CASE STUDY

Diegetic interface design for a first-person horror investigation — built in Unreal Engine 5, with C++ & Blueprints.

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THE PROJECT

The Dark Arrival: Shadows of the Past is a first-person survival-horror investigation set in the cursed town of Hollow Creek. The player arrives to trace a string of vanished children and uncovers a cycle of disappearances stretching back to the witch trials of the 1700s. The experience leans on atmosphere, environmental storytelling, and dread rather than combat.

My mandate was to own the player-facing interface end to end: the front-end menus, the in-game / pause flow, and the diegetic document system that carries the narrative. The brief was deceptively hard — the UI had to feel like it belonged inside a candle-lit, fog-bound world while still being something a player could read, parse, and navigate under tension.

Every screen in this study was designed, styled, and implemented to ship: from Figma layout and typographic system through to live UMG widgets driven by C++ and Blueprints inside Unreal Engine 5.

AT A GLANCE

ROLE

UI / UX Designer (sole)

STUDIO

Vault Productions

ENGINE

Unreal Engine 5

BUILD

C++ & Blueprints · UMG

PLATFORM

PC / Console

GENRE

First-person horror

DESIGN TOOLS

Figma · Photoshop · Illustrator · AE

STATUS

Demo complete · Steam showcase



The threshold of Hollow Creek — lantern light, cobwebs, and a porch that invites you in. Atmosphere is the interface's true backdrop.

FEAR YOU CAN READ

Horror UI fails in two opposite directions. Too much chrome — health bars, objective markers, glowing prompts — and the dread evaporates; the player is looking at a game, not a haunted town. Too little, and the player is lost, frustrated, and pulled out of the fiction by confusion instead of fear. The design problem was to hold both at once: total immersion and total legibility.

“The best horror interface is the one the player never notices they are using.”

FOUR DESIGN PILLARS

I DIEGETIC FIRST

Keep the player inside the world. Where a screen can be a prop — a newspaper, a lantern, a doorway — it is. Game-y chrome is the exception, never the default.

II PERIOD TRUTH

Interface artifacts are honestly dated. A 1850 broadsheet and a 1978 tabloid carry different mastheads, type, and texture, so era is read at a glance.

III LEGIBLE DREAD

Mood may set the stage but never blocks the read. Contrast, hit-targets, and wayfinding survive the fog — the player is scared, not confused.

IV QUIET HUD

No permanent overlay. Information surfaces on intent — on look, on reach, on pause — then recedes, leaving the frame to the world.

REFERENCES & SYSTEM

REFERENCES

The menu language draws on SOMA's austere, text-forward front-ends — a quiet list of verbs over a living scene, with no decorative panels competing for attention. The document system is rooted in classic survival-horror lore delivery: found newspapers and notes that reward the curious and let the story unfold non-linearly. From Amnesia I took restraint — trusting darkness, sound, and the player's imagination to do work no overlay can.

MOTIFS

A small set of recurring marks ties the world together: the warded eye at the heart of the sigil, the pentagram echoed in the witchcraft lore, drifting smoke, and candle / lantern warmth against cold blue night. These appear in the key art, the menus, and the collectible documents so the brand reads as one object.

TYPOGRAPHY

CINZEL

Display & titling. Engraved Roman caps for menus, headers, and the logo lockup.

EB Garamond

Body & long-form lore. An old-style serif that suits aged print without sacrificing screen legibility.

PALETTE



BLOOD
#B01F1C

AMBER
#C9A24A

PARCH
#D7C7A4

INK
#13100F



Logo lockup — distressed blood-red display with a contrasting white sub-title.

THE FIRST FRAME

The main menu is the first promise the game makes. Instead of a card stack floating on a logo, the verbs sit quietly inside a snow-bound cemetery at the town gate — the player is already standing in Hollow Creek before they press a button.



◆ ATMOSPHERE AS CANVAS

The scene is the background plate. No modal panel, no blur slab — the moonlit gate and drifting fog carry the mood while the menu stays out of the way.

◆ A LIST OF VERBS

Left-aligned Cinzel small-caps — New Game, Load Game, Settings, Quit. Calm, scannable hierarchy that reads instantly and respects controller and mouse alike.

◆ THE GOLD HOVER

A single warm amber highlight is the entire interaction vocabulary, echoing the lantern light in-scene. One unmistakable state for focus / hover / selection.

CONTINUE INVESTIGATION



The pause menu dims the rain-soaked forest behind it rather than replacing it — the world waits, it doesn't disappear.

WORDS ARE INTERFACE

The pause menu is where UX writing does quiet character work. “Continue” becomes Continue Investigation; the player is not resuming a save, they are a detective returning to the case. The labels keep the role alive even in a system screen.

Hierarchy is set by weight and size rather than boxes: the primary action sits largest, secondary options step down, and the same amber hover from the main menu carries through — one consistent interaction grammar across the whole front-end and pause flow.

GENERIC → IN-WORLD

<i>Continue</i>	→	Continue Investigation
<i>Main Menu</i>	→	Exit to Main Menu
<i>Load</i>	→	Load Game



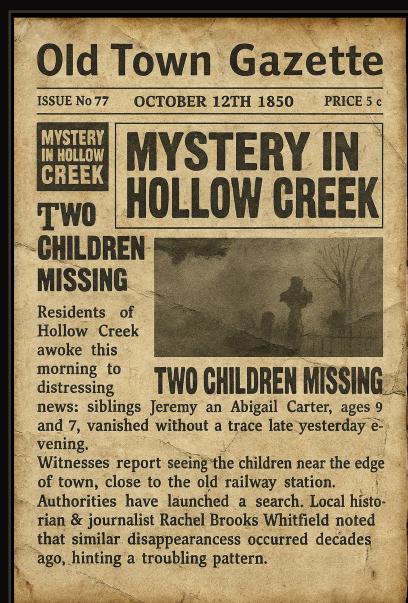
06 — NARRATIVE UI

THE OLD TOWN GAZETTE

A collectible newspaper system that tells a 128-year mystery — without a single line of expository dialogue.

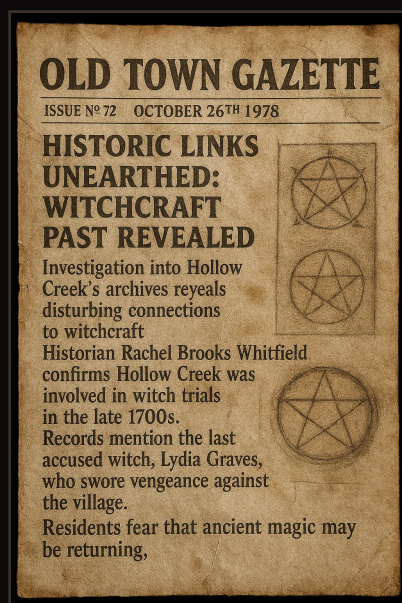
STORYTELLING BY OBJECT

Rather than cut-scenes, the plot is delivered through found newspapers the player collects across Hollow Creek. Each issue of the Old Town Gazette is a fully designed prop — readable in the world and in an inventory reader. The system carries the entire mystery: missing children, carved sigils, a witch named Lydia Graves, and a vanished historian named Rachel Brooks.



1850

Two Children Missing



1978

Witchcraft Past Revealed



1978

Truth or Myth?

◆ NON-LINEAR BY DESIGN

Issues can be found in any order. Each one is self-contained yet adds a piece, so discovery — not a fixed script — drives the player's understanding.

◆ TYPE AS A TIME-STAMP

Mastheads shift across eras — an ornate blackletter for early issues, a heavier 20th-century grotesque for 1978 — so the player dates each clue at a glance.

THE HOLLOW CREEK THREAD

Read in sequence, the six issues braid two timelines — 1850 and 1978 — into a single cyclical curse. This is the spine players reconstruct for themselves.

- 
- OCT 12, 1850** ◆ **TWO CHILDREN MISSING**
Siblings Jeremy & Abigail Carter vanish near the old railway station.
 - OCT 19, 1850** ◆ **STRANGE SYMBOLS FOUND**
Sigils carved into trees tie the search to ancient witchcraft.
 - OCT 26, 1978** ◆ **WITCHCRAFT PAST REVEALED**
Archives surface the 1700s trials — and Lydia Graves' curse.
 - NOV 9, 1978** ◆ **BENEATH THE OLD CHURCH**
Hidden chambers under St. Mary's hold relics of the missing.
 - NOV 16, 1978** ◆ **THE LEGEND OF LYDIA GRAVES**
Was she wronged? Her final words promised retribution across generations.
 - NOV 30, 1978** ◆ **ANCIENT RITUAL UNCOVERED**
Historian Rachel Brooks vanishes as cult whispers grow louder.

◆ 1850 & 1978 — THE SAME TOWN, THE SAME HUNGER, 128 YEARS APART.

INTERFACE BY RESTRAINT

Out in the world there is almost no HUD. Wayfinding, mood, and tension are handled by light, staging, and sound — the same diegetic logic as the menus, applied to the play space. Interaction prompts appear only on approach, then fade.



Light as a guide. The flashlight cone is the only ‘cursor’ — it directs the eye and doubles as the reading tool for portraits and clues.



Negative space does the warning. A far cross lit in red pulls the player forward without a single waypoint marker.



Threat reads instantly. Glowing-eyed dolls in the dark need no health bar or label to register as danger.



Landmark architecture. The chapel anchors the map mentally, so navigation works without an on-screen minimap.

BUILT IN UNREAL ENGINE 5

These screens are not mock-ups — they were built and wired in-engine. UI lives in UMG, with a deliberate split: C++ owns the systems and data layer, while Blueprints handle widget logic, bindings, and the moment-to-moment interaction polish that benefits from fast iteration.

REUSABLE BUTTON COMPONENT

One parent button widget defines the amber hover / focus state, type, and padding, then every menu instances it. Changing the hover color or easing once updates the whole front-end — and guarantees controller and keyboard / mouse stay in lock-step.

DATA-DRIVEN DOCUMENTS

Each Gazette issue is a data entry — image, era, and metadata — fed to a single reader widget. New lore is added as content, not new UI, so the newspaper system scales without rebuilding screens.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- ◆ Front-end menu system & flow
- ◆ In-game / pause UI & state
- ◆ Diegetic document (Gazette) system
- ◆ Typographic & color system
- ◆ Key art & logo direction
- ◆ Figma → UMG implementation

STACK

Unreal Engine 5

C++

Blueprints

UMG

Figma

Photoshop

Illustrator

After Effects

FROM FIGMA TO FRAME

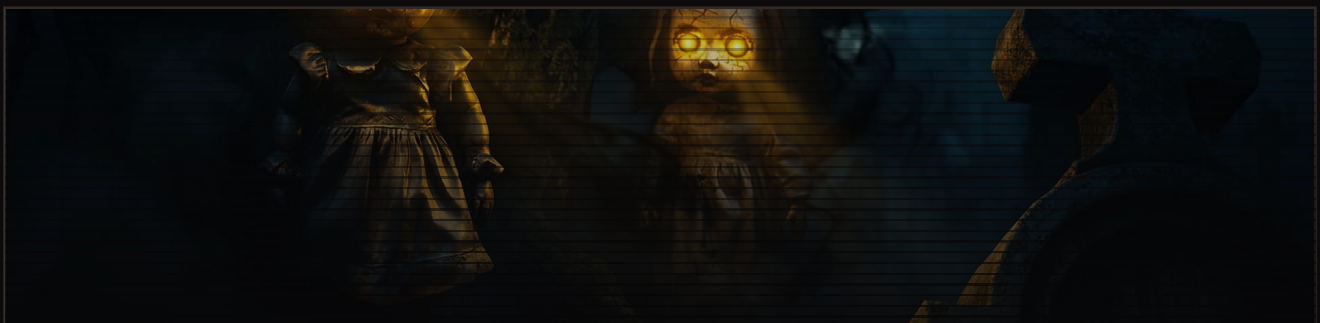


WHERE IT STANDS

The full UI for the demo build is complete — front-end, pause flow, and the Old Town Gazette document system — and *The Dark Arrival: Shadows of the Past* has been submitted to the Steam Short Games 2026 showcase, with a full launch targeted for Halloween 2026. The interface system is built to grow with the game: new menus and lore drop into the existing component and data structures.

WHAT I'D PUSH FURTHER

- ◆ An in-world journal that auto-files collected Gazette issues onto a visual timeline, turning lore-gathering into a readable case-board.
- ◆ Subtle diegetic feedback for objectives — light, sound, and prop changes in place of any text marker.
- ◆ A full motion pass on the amber hover and page-turn transitions for more tactile, weighty menus.



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