

The Size of Spaces



As the player traverse through a large interior or dungeon level the difference in size between small, medium and large rooms and gamespaces all have different types of impact on the player's experience, something that can be wise to keep in mind as you plan and build your level.

In this text I'll touch on some of the most basic architectural considerations of dungeon design, namely the size of spaces. It is meant as an introduction to making dungeons or interior levels, from an architectural perspective.

Small Rooms

Small and narrow spaces are typically not much larger than the player's own metrics, and these areas help to create tension in your level because they limit the player's movement and adds to his or her claustrophobia.



Narrow hallway in Ansilvund, Skyrim

Because of this they function well at the beginning of a dungeon, as build-ups and before boss-rooms.

Don't be afraid to make some of your hallways dark and relatively uninteresting in terms of loot or enemies, as that builds pace and anticipation for what's to come. The more dark and barren rooms can still have an important function for the dungeons structure as a whole.

In this way you can create rhythm in a dungeon by letting small and narrow areas lead to open and big spaces, something that also will benefit the bigger areas by letting them contrast the previous smaller spaces.

Big rooms

Where small rooms confines the player, big rooms exposes the player, and leaves the player at an disadvantage as he (or she) is vulnerable and open to attack. Now it's not claustrophobia but agoraphobia that comes into play.



Boss Room in Dead Men's Respite, Skyrim.

Big rooms are typically used for boss fights and other harder enemies, plus spectacular views. What separates these from other rooms is primarily their size, so if you want to keep the feeling of openness and vulnerability don't clutter up your wide, open big rooms with too many obstacles that undermines those feelings, or perhaps even worse; block out the view towards your terrifying boss.

If you want to make the player feel even more vulnerable, you might want to let him or her enter the big room from below, thus giving the enemies the height advantage.

You can also make your boss room more intimidating by using fog and audio, and keeping corners dark and mysteriously ambiguous. Keeping main focal points like hard enemies and loot well lit and not obscured by say rubble or large rocks makes the gamespace easier and more pleasant to navigate for the player.

Another feature of big rooms, and boss rooms in particular, is that they tend to be more symmetrical than other rooms, most likely because this underlines the symbolic importance of their inhabitants.

CK Tip: When modding for Skyrim or other such games remember that by using a tileset of the Big-type (like Nordic Big Rooms) you can sell the idea and vibe of a big room to the player by just using a few pieces of it, as they have the height needed to create the feeling of being in a large space. You don't necessarily need a 8×8 big room, which might quickly appear repetitive, bland and generic.

Medium rooms

Medium sized rooms are not too large and not too small, and hence they are the rooms where the player feel the most comfortable and safe. You can use these rooms as resting areas or safe zones for the player. These rooms function well for loot, lore books, puzzles and storytelling. This is not exactly hard coded rules, though; use them for what you like, just remember that if you need to give the player a safe spot, a medium room could do the trick.



Puzzle room in Folgunthur, Skyrim.

Conclusion

Try to make your dungeon have a variety of small, medium and large rooms. Mixing sizes up is good for pacing and helps keep the experience fresh and interesting for the player. Let narrow spaces lead to wide open spaces, but remember to keep view lines to your points of interest. Throw in some medium spaced rooms in between all your small and large rooms so the player doesn't feel claustrophobic or agoraphobic all the time, and give the player a well deserved rest. Or not...