Illhugi's Crypt

Level Overview

Illhugi's Crypt is a modded level created for The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim using the Skyrim Creation Kit. It contains both a miscellaneous quest and a short dungeon level to explore which can be encountered and completed at any level. The quest takes the player through the titular level to determine the fate of a group of mages that descended into the Crypt. Inside the player must contend with disturbed draugr, hordes of spiders and the evil forces that have claimed the lives of so many others who have explored this crypt.

Story Design

This level has a main story, which the player partakes in during the course of the quest, and then two more stories that the player can discover as they explore the dungeon. The primary story is the journey the Dragonborn takes through the level at the behest of an elven mage he meets at the dungeons entrance. He has been sent to check on the progress of another group of mages who came to explore the cave a few days ago but have since not returned, unfortunately the cave has become infested with Frostbite Spiders. Due to a fear of spiders the mage is too scared to go in and so asks for the Dragonborn's help in discovering the fate of the mages, in exchange for money and any loot found in the crypt.

Entering and fighting his way through the dungeon the Dragonborn will mainly be engaged by the Frostbite Spiders that have come to infest the crypt. Exploring the cave they will come across a large locked door with a dead elven mage next to it. A book next to the mage will give a clue as to where the key can be found and the reason why the door was sealed, to stop the Daughter of Mephala from escaping. The key can be found in a ritual room on the other side of the Crypt. Once the Dragonborn has the key they can return to the door and confront the Daughter, a giant Frostbite Spider. Slaying it will complete the quest and returning to the mage above will complete the quest.

During the course of these explorations the player will come across the corpses of the mage group that initially explored the crypt. They will have various scraps of paper or journal entries that tell their story in the dungeon. The mages had come to search for a magic artifact hidden in the tomb. As it turns out the artifact is a daedric item belonging to Mephala, a daedric prince who delights in manipulating and confounding mortals. The mages' force their way through the crypt, opposed by swarms of Frostbite Spiders. One of their number is killed on the way to the main chamber, his body can be found tangled up in some webbing at the end of a hallway. The last four manage to reach the main chamber, realising too late that they had been deceived by

one of their own. As the corrupted mage attempts to sacrifice them to the Daughter of Mephala the others flee, one of them bravely sacrificing himself so that the others could escape. The last two mages seal the door shut, one takes the key and runs off deeper into the Crypt. The other, mortally wounded, bleeds out shortly afterwards. The mage with the key ends up in a ritual room deeper in the Crypt where he is killed by Draugr.

Along with these mages there will be the remains of one other person not from their group. This character is a desiccated corpse with a Whiterun Guards shield next to him, he is found in a cave at the back of the crypt where his corpse is awaiting consumption by the spiders. This guard also contains a note which suggests he came some years beforehand with a group led by Jarl Balgruuf the Greater. Apparently coming to seek out some cultists that had been terrorising the land. The note infers that the coming of this group first released the spiders into a larger crypt and that a large black blade was the culprit. While not stated out right this black blade is the Ebony Blade, an artifact of Mephala that is encountered in the official quest The Whispering Door. The quest in Illhugi's Crypt goes some way to explaining how the Jarl came to own this dangerous weapon.

Visual Design

Overall, the visual design will be similar to other dungeons in Skyrim that use the Nordic kit. Skyrim's Nordic dungeons tend toward gloomy darkness, often only lit by candles dotted around the various tombs and shafts of light reaching down from the ceiling. There also tends to be a degree of clutter items; such as plates, bowls, skulls and other miscellaneous items.

What will set this dungeon apart from most others is the infestation of Frostbite spiders that have taken over the dungeon. As such there will be webbing around the whole of the dungeon, specifically near the caves where they have broken into the dungeon. Aside from the ritual room, which contains the key needed to access the final cave room, the Draugr will have been mostly killed off by the invading spiders, though due to their undead status the spiders will leave their bodies where they lay instead of eating them.

Below is a mood board which gives examples of some of the visuals, colours and other elements of the dungeon I am building.

Level Layout and Maps

Paper Design

The whole dungeon takes place within a single cell, and should take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete. The first few rooms are based on Bethesda's YouTube tutorials, though there has been a level of modification as the rest of the level began to take shape. Once I had made the first three rooms from the tutorial, I sketched them out a basic idea on paper. This can be seen below.
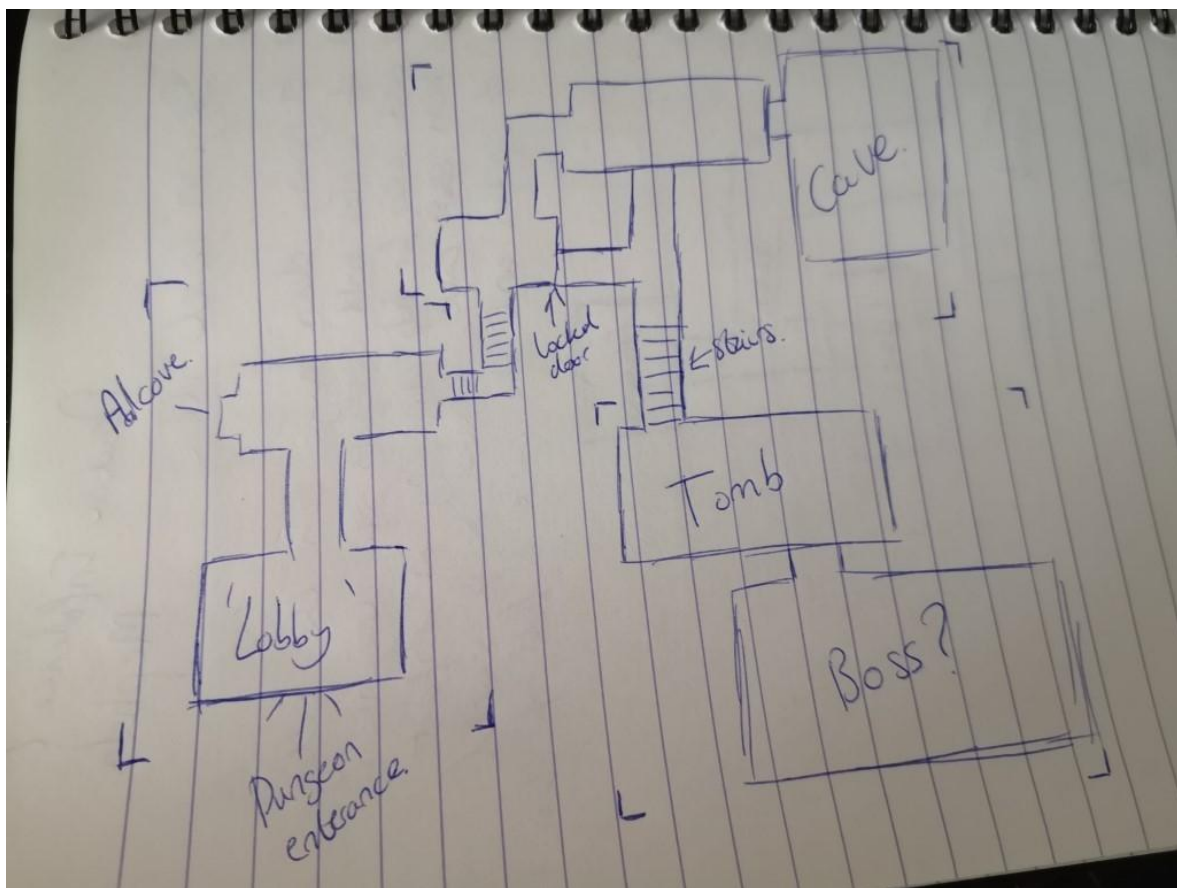
With this design I had three 'areas' in mind. The entrance and the first room would be the first area and contain a few enemies in the form of spiders and at least one fallen mage to get the ball rolling with the dungeon story.
The next area would contain two directions for players to go, depending on their skillset, as one door requires lockpicking to pass through. However, going the other way would take the player

to another set of enemies and a small boss encounter in the cave. There would also be extra information about the dungeon hidden in the cave.

Finally, the last area would contain a large tomb area for a large combat encounter and then the final boss room which contained the Daughter.

Early In-Game Design

With this generalised layout set up I began putting it together in the Creation Kit. Below is an image taken halfway through designing the level.
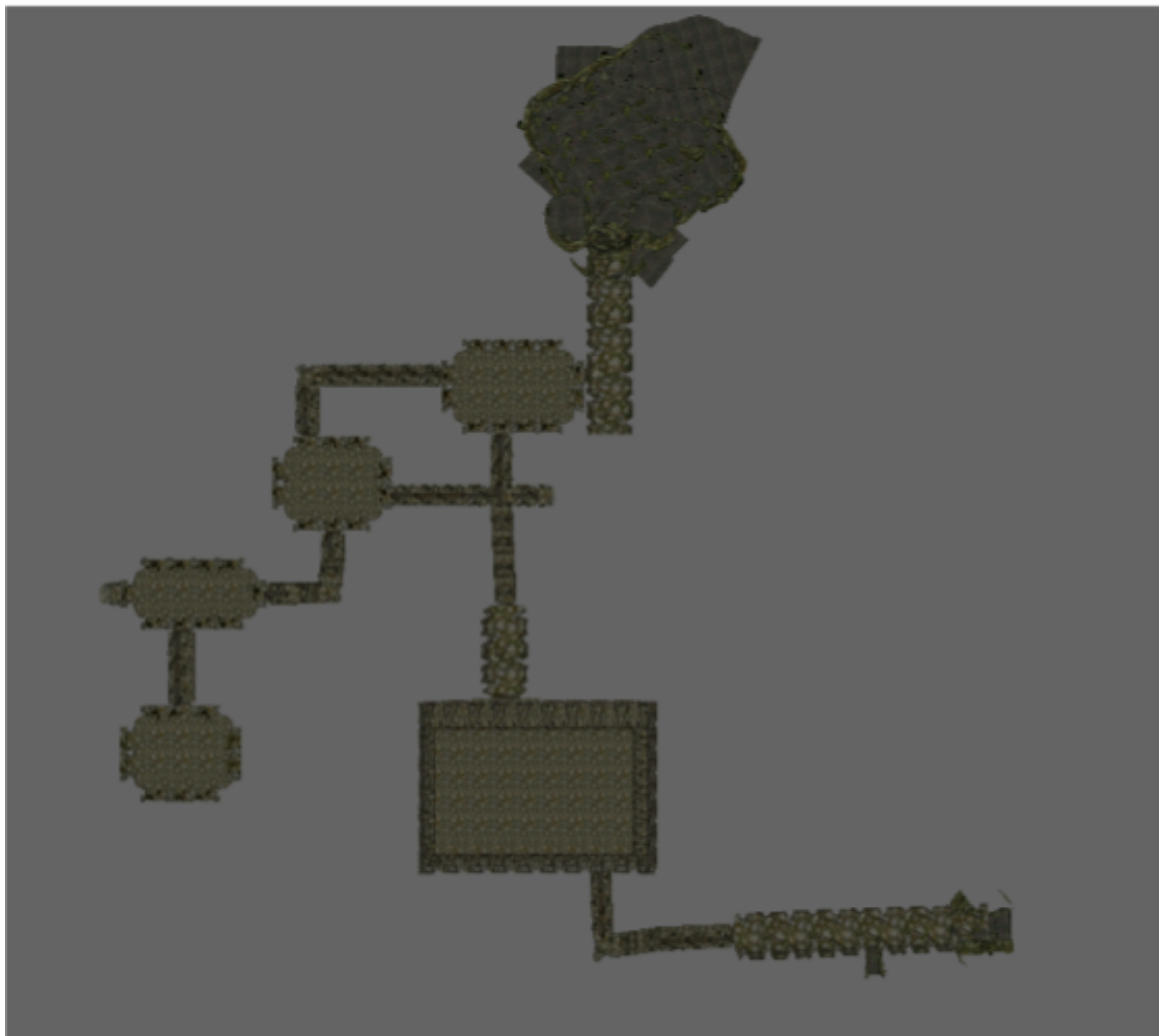
The first areas of the dungeon design have remained relatively consistent with the sketch I made above. Where I started to deviate with the cave up in the top of the map. Initially the plan was to have the entrance to the cave to be connected directly to the room however, in experimenting with the different hallways I found it more visually interesting to place it at the

end of a large hallway. This did have the issue of creating a hallway with nowhere to go but, I decided that I would have it connect to the tomb to create two different paths for the player to take. Also, looking closely at the bottom tunnel leading out of the large tomb, there is a small pathway that I was planning to connect to the final room. This would allow stealth based characters a different avenue to explore and potentially outflank the boss by allowing them to enter the room from a different side.

Later In-Game Design
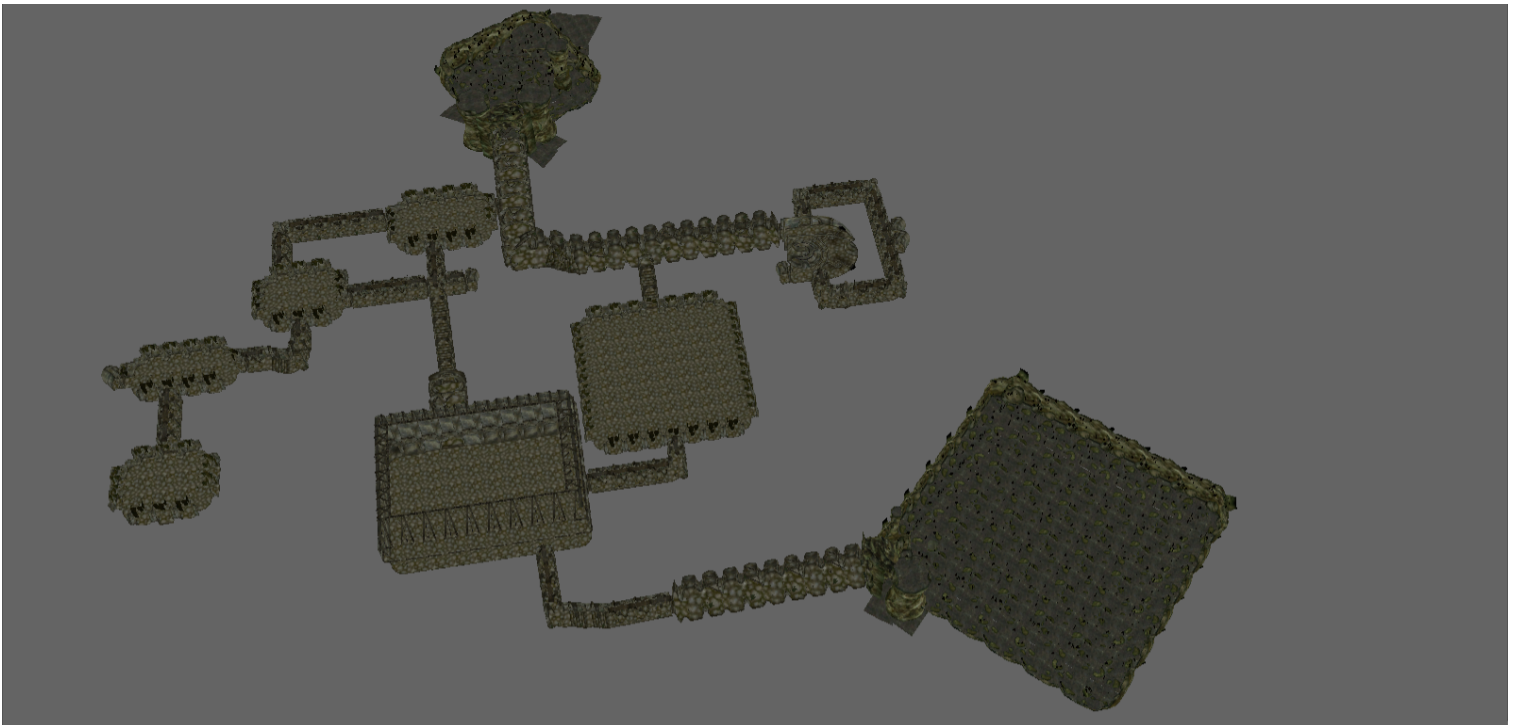
The picture above is the layout of the dungeon further into development, though not before I have filled the interior space. It has ballooned out from its initial planned design though this has been helpful in some cases. For example, I realised that it would be quite easy for a player to simply walk through the level without much challenge as it was only enemies blocking their path. Instead, I decided to add a key hunting puzzle to enter the final room. This means that there is an extra layer of challenge and it forces the player to explore more of the dungeon. This led to an expansion of the corridor from the cave at the top. Originally that was just going to link up directly with the tomb. But I felt that made it a bit pointless as there is a much more direct route. Instead, I branched it off into two rooms that connect to the large tomb. The key will be held in the small room at the end of that hallway and the room between there and the tomb will serve as another combat encounter.

Finalised In-Game Design

Above is a top down, finalised view of Illhugi's Crypt. There have been some large reworks during the ending of the development process. Most importantly I removed the large cave at the end of the level and made the room before it the boss room. I chose to do this because I felt that the level would flow better, as moving from that large room to an even larger cave room felt unnecessarily stretched out.

The path through the level now feels a lot more simplified and there is a reason to visit almost all of the rooms, bar the top cave and the group tomb. Though both of these will reward explorative players with extra loot and story information. Despite the grand changes I am satisfied with how the level has come together. I have learned that while it is true that no plan stays the same once it is implemented, I think I could have sped up this work if I had spent a bit

more time thinking out the level plan. But on the other hand this was also an exercise in experimentation with the Skyrim Kit and through that experimentation I thought up things like the ritual room and the boss room.

In-Game Screenshots

Entrance Room

These screenshots are of the room the player starts in. Following the common design of most dungeons in Skyrim there are no enemies in here. I placed some bedrolls and supplies to indicate that the mages had set up camp in this room before pushing further. Amongst the various items they left behind is a journal, seen on the right, which explains a bit about the group and why they came here.

Crossroad Room

This room is the second room reached after the entrance room. It is also the player's first encounter with two levelled spiders patrolling between the egg sacks and rubble piles. Regarding the layout of the dungeon I thought of this as a room that allowed access to different parts of the crypt and as such doesn't have much in the way of furnishings or miscellaneous items. However the spiders have marked this as the edge of their lair with a variety of eggs and webbing. This also gives the player some choice in how they explore the dungeon. The door on the right is a locked door, requiring the player to pick the lock in order to get through, but can offer a quicker way to discovering how to complete the dungeon. Alternatively the player can take the open door in front of them. Creating a longer route but letting them explore deeper into the dungeon.
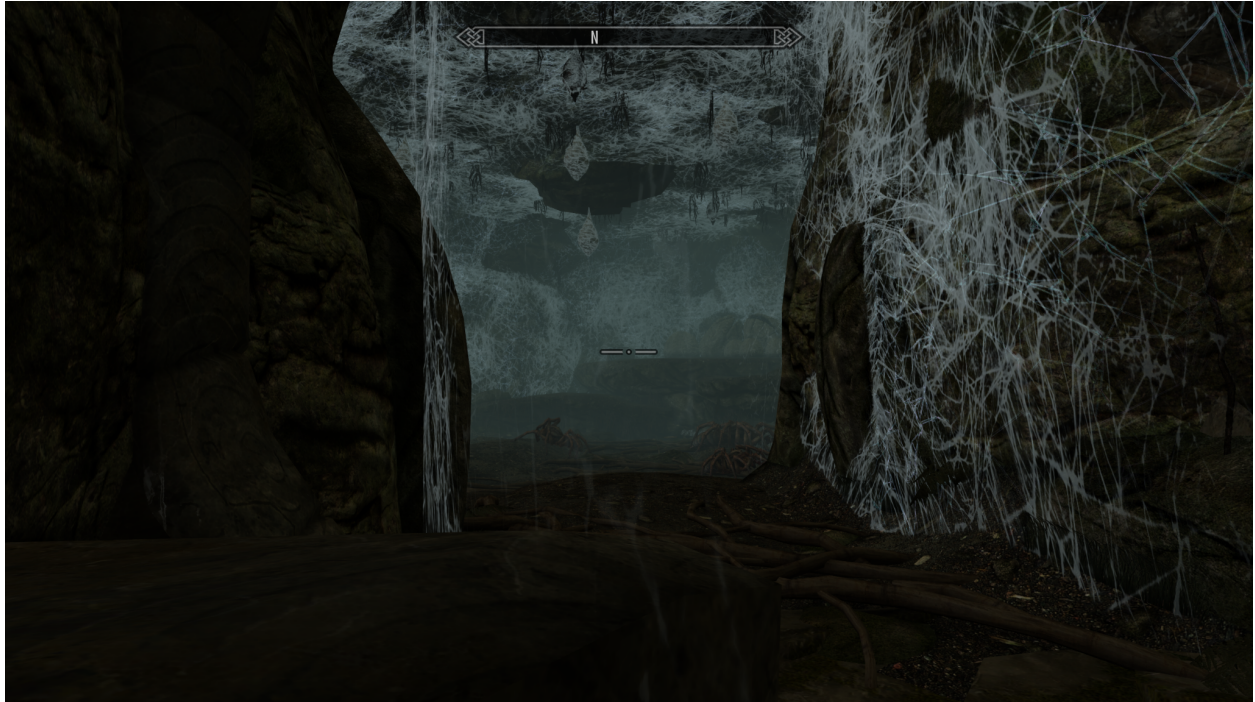
Offering Room

This room can be accessed by taking the unlocked door in the Crossroad Room. This room was designed as a place where ancient nords would've come to give offerings, a room that was tended by the two dead draugr that can be seen sprawled on the floor. Two spiders have made this place their home instead, with a small clutch of the eggs near a door on the right. This door leads down to the main chamber and joins with the route from the locked door in the Crossroad Room.

Originally this room was going to be left void of enemies but it ended up making the room feel like an uncomfortable break. It is also quite large compared to the other three rooms visited so far and has a very different design. I found that making this a combat room made it feel more used as the large corridor beyond works as a much better break in the action. Also it leaves the possibility for unwary players to quickly be overwhelmed by the other two spiders in the adjoining corridor.

This is also one of the few well lit rooms in the dungeon and once it has been cleared of enemies it can be a good place for a player to catch their breath. Especially considering the difficulty of the coming encounters.

Spider Cave

The spider cave is an optional encounter room found outside the Offering Room. It contains two small spiders and one large spider patrolling between the various eggs and webbing around the caves edge. This cave was placed to break up the similar nordic dungeon style that dominates the rest of the level and to provide some extra challenge and loot to explorative players, hidden in a chest on the ledge at the back of the cave. Also found in this room is a dead Whiterun Guard and a letter containing his last words, as seen on the right. This letter hints at the past of the cave and what the player might face in the main chamber.

The Long Corridor

The Long Corridor is a large, unlit corridor that connects the Offering Room and Spider Cave to the Ritual and Battle Rooms. It acts as a break between combat encounters and gives the player a chance to breathe. It doesn't contain much in the way of furnishings and its sparse nature is meant to highlight it as the no man's lands between the spiders and draugr who live on separate sides ends of the dungeon.

This corridor was initially meant to be another route to reach the final chamber but I found by making this longer route it would cause the dungeons story to lose its context, as the mages sealed the door to the final chamber shut to keep in the Daughter of Mephala. Instead I made this section of the dungeon more draugr based to provide some different combat experiences and extra loot for players that wanted to explore more.

Battle Room

The Battle Room is an optional combat encounter behind a locked door on the right side of the Long Corridor. It has a large number of draugr present and is one of the more challenging engagements in the whole dungeon. The room is laid out in with all the sarcophaguses arrayed in lines before three thrones on a raised platform. The idea being that this was a group of warriors laid to rest before their three leaders. Although some of them have now finally passed away at least five still remain to fight the player when they enter the dungeon.

Initially I had all the draugr come from their sarcophaguses at once but this ended up making the encounter more difficult and clustered than I wanted it to be. Instead only the first sarcophagus and one of the throne draugr will stand up. The other three sarcophaguses will open as the player advances into the room. This made the encounter slightly more manageable for the player but left the chance for overconfident players to be overwhelmed by the number of enemies.

I also had an issue where the draugr on the raised platform wouldn't come down to fight the player and instead stayed on the platform. As I couldn't figure out how to get him to come down to fight I instead gave him a bow so that he could pepper the player as they fought through his henchmen. As a reward for this battle, at the other end of the room there is a large chest with good loot as well as other useful items scattered around the room.

Ritual Room

The Ritual Room is found at the end of the Long Corridor. It is an important room as it is where Aldo fled with the key to the main chamber when all the mages were killed. Within this room are two draugr guards, presumably the ones who killed Aldo, that come out of sarcophaguses on either side of the room. This room has a variety of loot and is designed as a place of reverence for the draugr. For example the troll's skull in the center of the room is surrounded by various items seeming to commemorate the beast or the one who killed it, like the broken mace that sits to the side.

In an earlier version of this room had a hallway that wrapped around the back of the room, which was where the two draugr were going to emerge from. However I found that it was an unnecessary addition that didn't add to the room. Instead it creates a contrasted fight space which is much smaller than the previous encounters, such as the Spider Cave and the Battle Room.

Due to the smaller nature of the room and the number of opponents I chose to up both draugr by one level. I think this works from both a gameplay perspective, as this is the last challenge before the boss room and suitably raises the bar without being too difficult. From a narrative and visual storytelling point I think it makes sense that these two were stronger draugr warriors who were chosen specifically to tend and guard this room.

Final Chamber

The Final Chamber is found down a corridor which can be entered either from the Crossroad or Offering Rooms. The door to the Chamber can be found quickly but can only be opened with the key from Aldo's corpse which is found in the Ritual Room. Next to the door to the Final Chamber is the corpse of Master Mage Aladil and his journal, which explains more of what brought the mages to this place and a clue to the location of the key. Inside, the Chamber is covered in spider webs, egg sacks growing up the walls and various dead humans and animals strung up on webbing that surrounds the whole room.

The centrepiece of the room is the large web tunnel in the ceiling where the Daughter of Mephala will descend from when the player enters the room. There are also a number of smaller spiders that wander around the room. Stealthy players have the option of engaging these spiders quietly from the doorway without triggering the Daughter.

The room is quite open, with two raised platforms, one on the left which contains four sarcophaguses (The occupants long since dead) and an altar, with another platform on the right which is occupied by a large table. At the end of this platform is a chest hidden in some webbing that serves as the final reward for finishing the dungeon.

In the earliest designs, and up until the last few reworks of the dungeon, this was going to be the final stop on the way to a much larger cave behind this chamber. However, after a while I

began to feel that this room was a more fitting end to the dungeon. It is the largest room in comparison to all the others and it felt like moving onto an even bigger room afterwards would only cheapen both of them.

In this image you can see the Daughter of Mephala in her trap before she descends to fight the player. I wanted to have her further up in the tunnel but I kept running into an issue where the Daughter would fall from the ceiling and either immediately be killed by fall damage or at least lose a significant portion of her health, thus making the fight less difficult for the player. To remedy this I moved her down as far as I could to keep her in the tunnel and set her trigger to be quite close to the door so that stealthy players would be less able to get a quick shot off while she's in the tunnel.

Evaluation

What went well?

- I was able to create a level with a consistent theme and tone that matched a lot of the conventions of Skyrim level generation.
- I was able to leave a variety of clues to different stories within the dungeon and I was able to tell them without any dialogue.
- I created a variety of combat encounters with different variables and challenges without making them too easy or difficult.
- I quickly picked up the specific ways in which the Skyrim creation kit is used, such as how individual room pieces are fitted together and steps that can be taken to optimise the level.

What could have been done better?

- I feel like I spent a lot of time getting the aesthetics of the earlier rooms right, which ended up taking more time than I had expected. It was often hard to know when I had placed too much and this led to some overdesigning of some rooms.
- Despite having a plan set out from the start my constant revisions extended the project beyond what I had initially thought. While I think that this worked to the levels benefit it took me a while to finalise the maps layout.
- The dungeon design ended up being very linear and while there are optional areas to explore and loot, there isn't a branching path that offers different ways to complete the level.

What did I learn?

- It is better to have a detailed plan from the start than figuring things out as you go, this ends up taking much more time than I expected and led to a lot of rethinking during the early design phase.
- I learned about the basic logics and thought processes that Bethesda puts into their dungeon designs.
- When designing rooms I found that giving each of them a designation and a central image made it easier to figure out the general design. For example, with the Battle Room I knew I wanted it to look like a parade ground with the sarcophaguses lined up in front of the thrones. With that initial design idea it was a bit easier to figure out the flow of the room and fill in the areas in between.