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Level Design Portfolio

Tony Hawk: Ride (Xbox 360 / PlayStation 3 / Wii) – Frankfurt Terminal

Background

Midway through Ride's development, I and two artists joined Robomodo as external contractors. Everything was new: the team, the engine, even the controller! Combined with a tight production schedule, it made for Interesting Times. Our job was to deliver a memorable level set in the Frankfurt Airport, and I think we succeeded admirably.
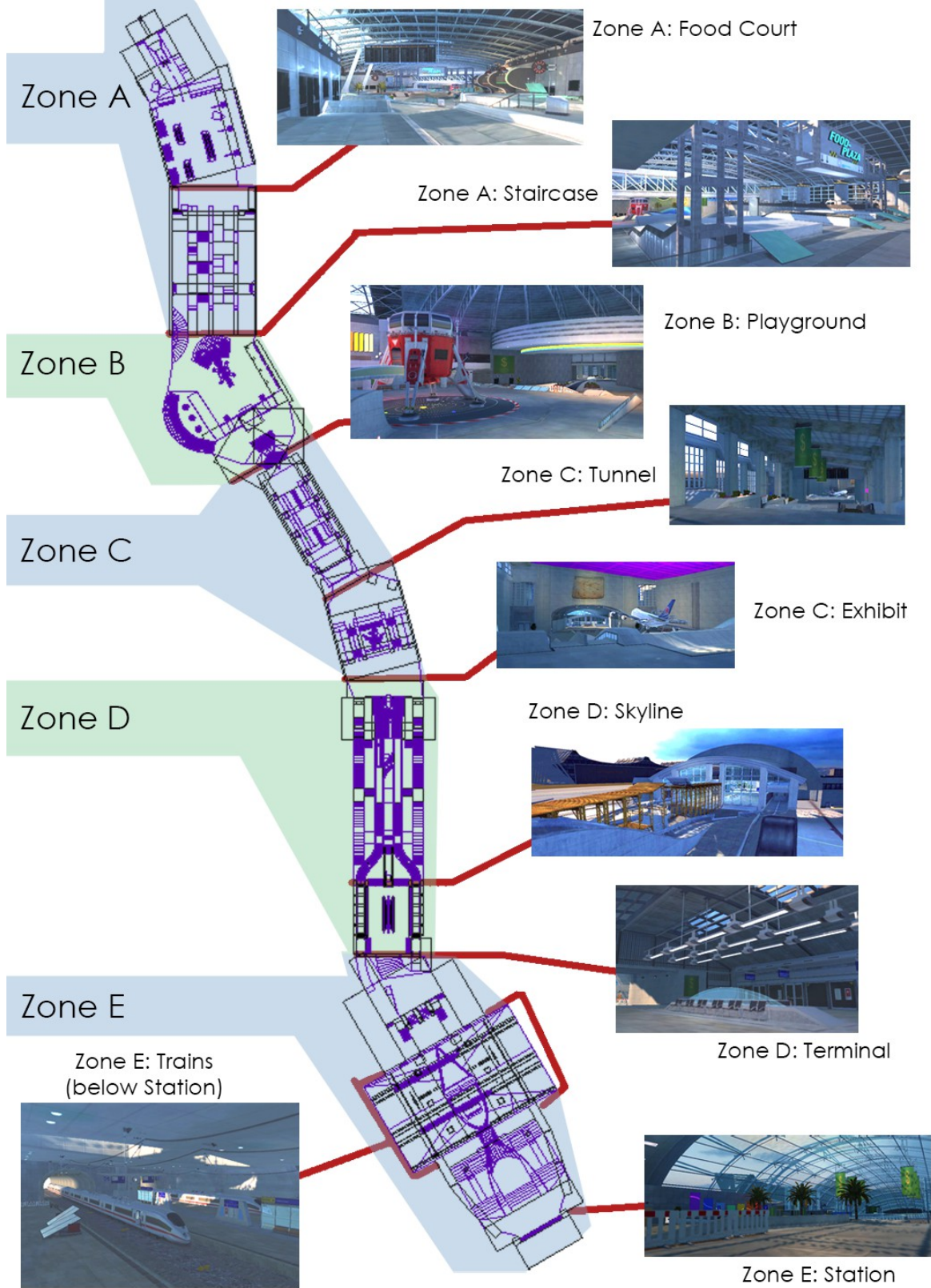
Creative Direction

It was simple: base it on the Frankfurt Airport, and make it linear. We also had the original pitch doc for inspiration, an art bible, and a fun level set in the LA Reservoir to use as a gameplay reference. It was expected that my work on the Tony Hawk series, and regular feedback from a team of experienced designers at Robomodo, would take care of the rest. I would also serve as its mission designer later in the project.

Design Philosophy

Because important aspects of the engine – texture memory, occlusion, even lighting – had not been nailed down when we started, I decided to use a modular approach to designing the level. It would be divided into zones, with each zone having either a focus on variety of gameplay (such as spaces that could be grinded, ollied, manualed, etc) or set pieces that would define the level's look. These zones would then be put together with "connective tissue:" flexible design spaces that could be altered easily, while keeping the overall skate line clean. This would prove to be a lifesaver when when adapting to new occlusion technology, and again when cutting down the level for the Wii version.

Zone A

Zone A: Food Court

Zone A: Staircase

Zone B

Zone B: Playground

Zone C: Tunnel

Zone C

Zone C: Exhibit

Zone D

Zone D: Skyline

Zone E

Zone E: Trains
(below Station)

Zone D: Terminal

Zone E: Station

ZONE A: FOOD COURT

TH11 v4.0.61373 - freebird

GPU:59.5 G:139.5 R:137.7 Agg:30.0

Looking back towards the start of the level

The first zone got thrashed more than any other part of the level. Part of the problem was an evolving sense of what the game was, versus what people wanted it to be. But it was also important to understand its role. It started as a space that could exist on its own, which people could warm up in before moving on. But when I re-purposed it as a place to set up a line for the next part of the level, its identity clicked into place, and unnecessary design elements fell away.

It was also imperative to keep future mission goals in mind. If the space did not have enough discreet objects, designing clear goals (e.g. "Kickflip over the trashcan") would be extremely difficult.

Once the graybox was mostly complete, I took a screenshot of the wireframe, and the art director worked with a concept artist to finalize the look. Though the concept shows early morning light (to add color), the next art director decided blue and orange was overplayed, and decided a neutral tone was a better fit.
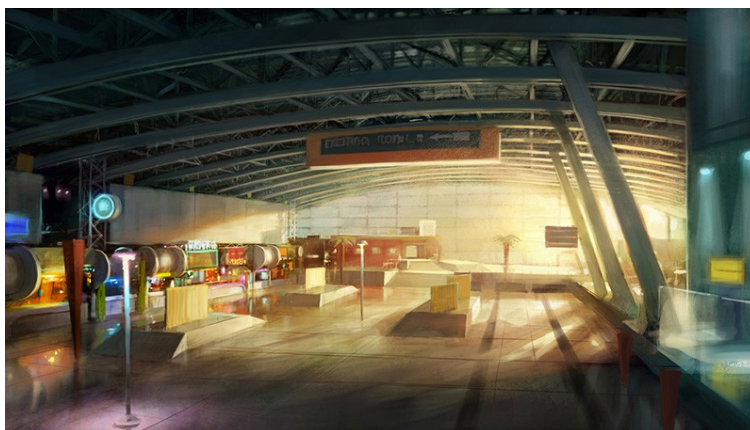
This staircase is one of the first set pieces I knew I had to add. Staircases are a proving ground for real skaters, and I felt something this high might actually prove to be a challenge for someone just using a controller. The proportions were eventually stretched to a cartoonish degree to match the skater's speed, and other changes were made to improve its gameplay, instead of being leashed to reality. It had extended landings to allow multiple stair hops, broad shoulders that could be taken in a single manual, and extreme, epic drops off either side for guys who like their trucks with extra cushion.

Another iconic spot in the airport that serves as a visually striking waypoint for players. It's also a piece that suffered mightily as the game mechanics were finalized. I'll be honest: if I had the chance to do this section over, I would. Making it through the ship serves as a wonderful target, and there's a great reward of speed and jump height for doing so. But it's a precision goal that's better suited to a traditional controller, which is the only thing we had to test our levels until much later in the project. In hindsight, I would have had the player jump over it.

Thanks to excellent physics and animation, the wave on the right feels really good to roll on.

The Tunnel served several purposes. It provided multiple unique lines players could choose to ride, allowing them to express themselves through play. It had giant windows to show off our dynamic lighting, and be a contrast to the previous dark areas. It could be stretched to any length with little effort, in case more time was needed for streaming, or distance needed for occlusion. It also has a gentle grade, to increase player speed while rolling, and the roof is slanted down on the right side to hint that the player should go a bit left, which puts them in a better position for the next zone. And its functional architecture highlighted the dynamism of skating.

You can tell this is a development screenshot because there's a missing texture in the distance, and there are dollar signs where TBD advertisements would go. Yes, I worked with awesome artists.

As for the exhibit: yes, there is a plane exhibit at the Frankfurt Airport. No, you can't skate it. But you can in Tony Hawk: Ride! You can even grind those windstreams! WHO LOVES YA?
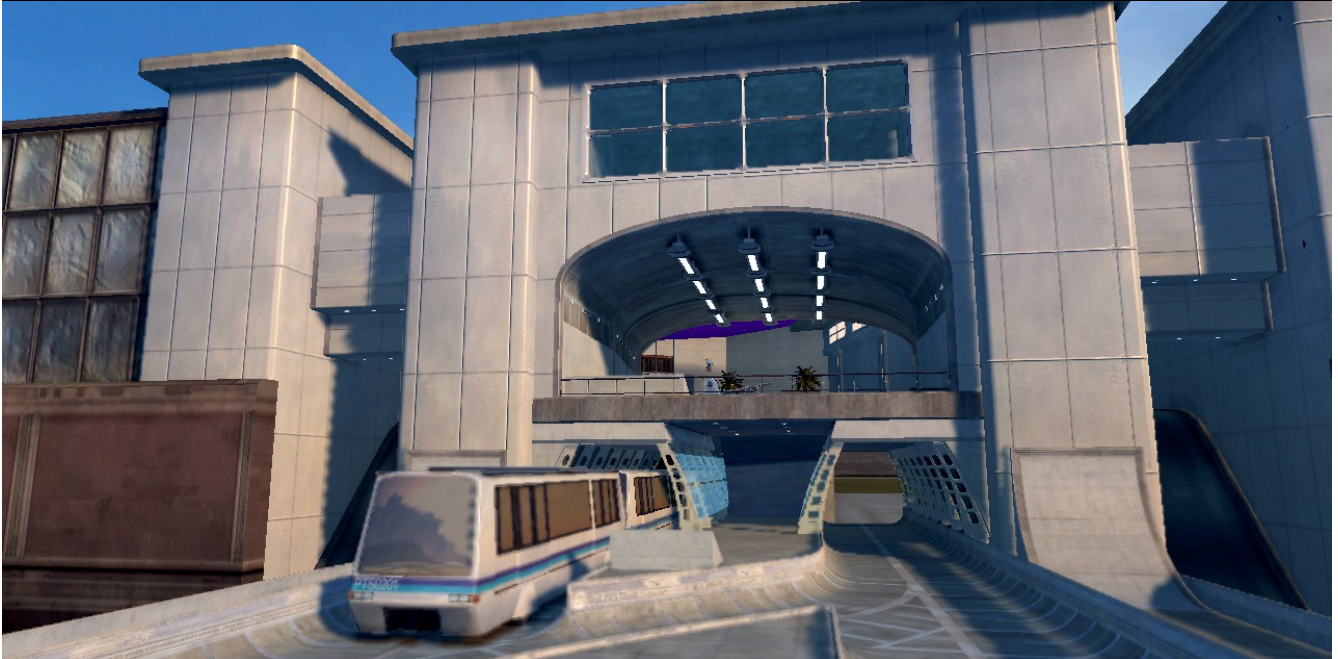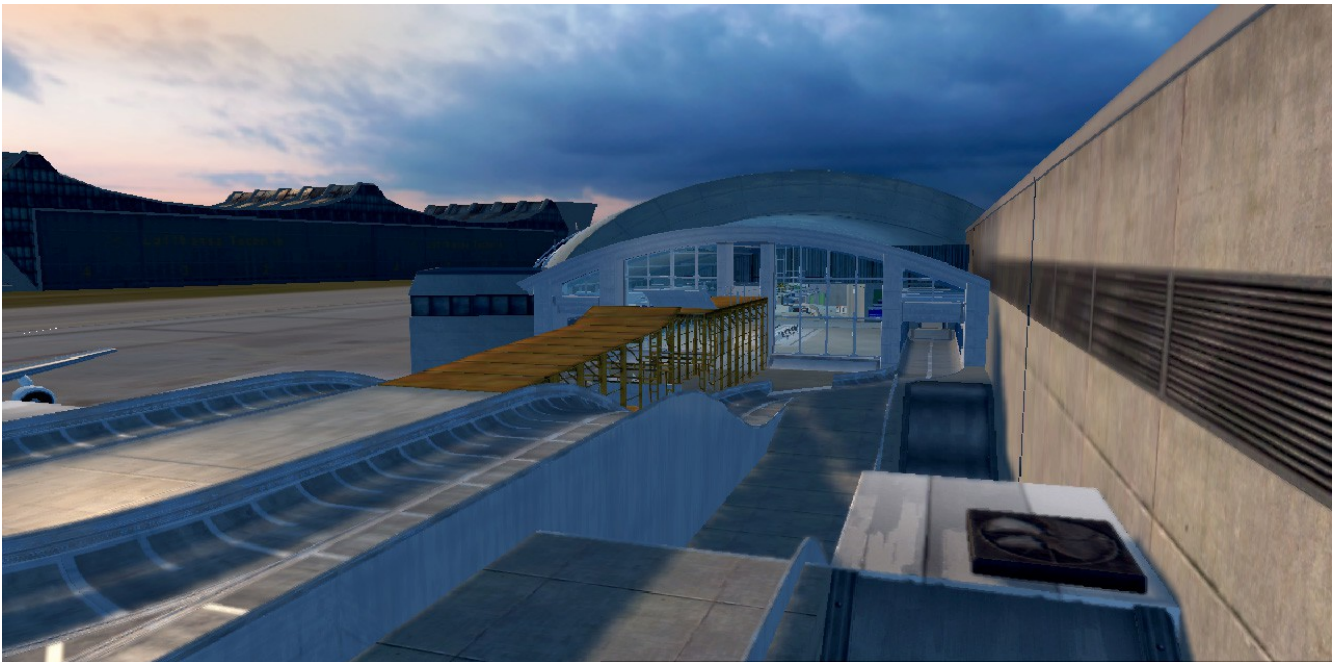
Looking back towards Zone C: Exhibit

After being teased with a bit of light, then grinding a jumbo jet, the player takes one of several paths and bursts into the open sky. There are mega-ramps on either side, an epic rail-to-monorail gap, and a central ramp run that leads directly into another high ramp and jump. Assuming the player doesn't bonk or bail, it can be a breathtaking moment of real joy.

*Looking towards Zone D: Terminal*

Looking back towards Zone D: Skyline

After the openness of Exhibit and Skyline, players are again given clear lines to choose from, and "secrets" to try for, such as seeing the high light grind and realizing they'd have to start much farther back to try and reach it. The space is also intentionally low, broad, and a good bit darker, because it serves as a contrast to the previous area and the one immediately following.
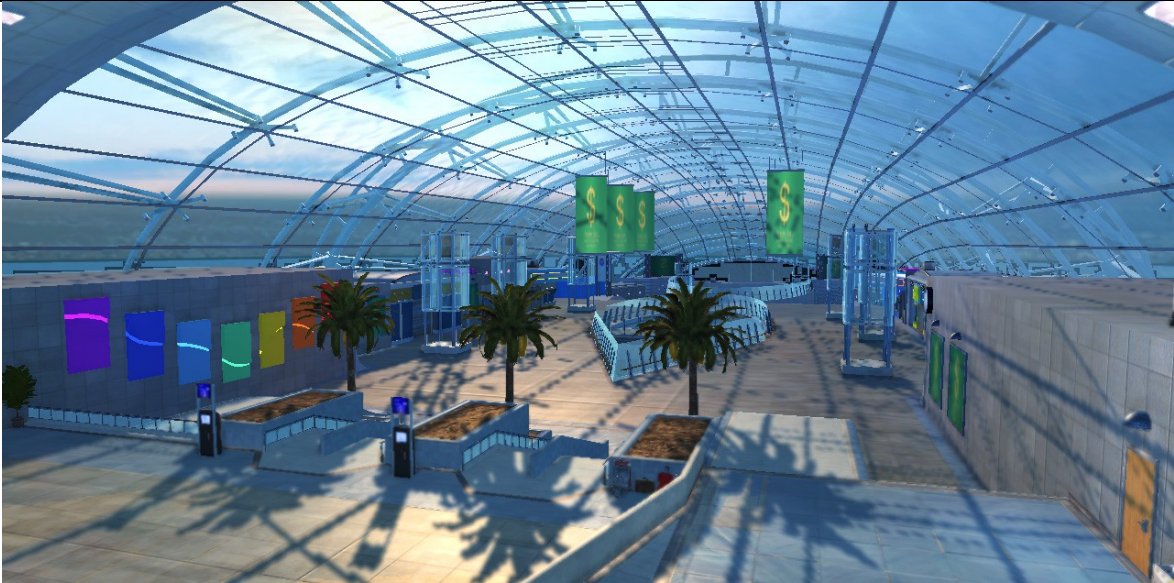
The coup de grâce of Frankfurt Terminal, this real-life station tested the limits of our engine. Full of interesting lines and objects to jump through and over, it's a memorable ending that is true to its source.

I apologize that these images are from during development, and not final art. When my work here was done, I immediately transitioned to the Wii project, and rarely booted up the HD version afterwards.
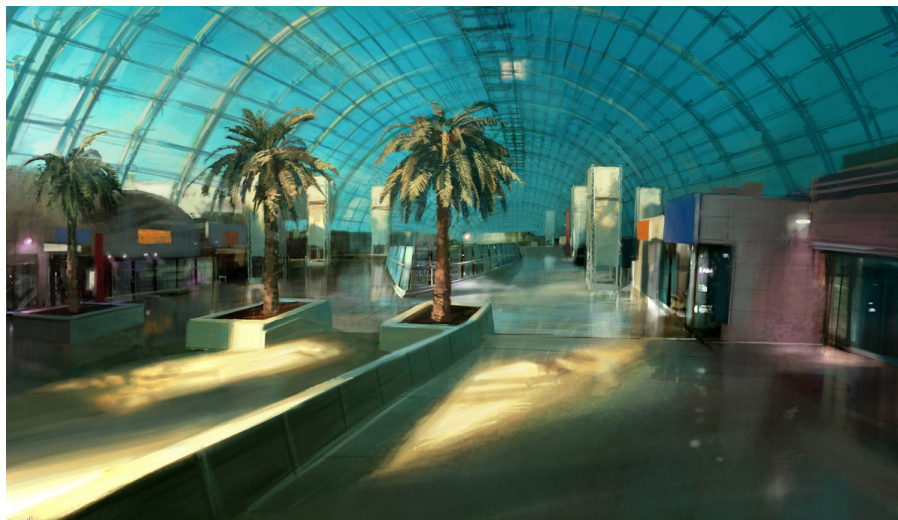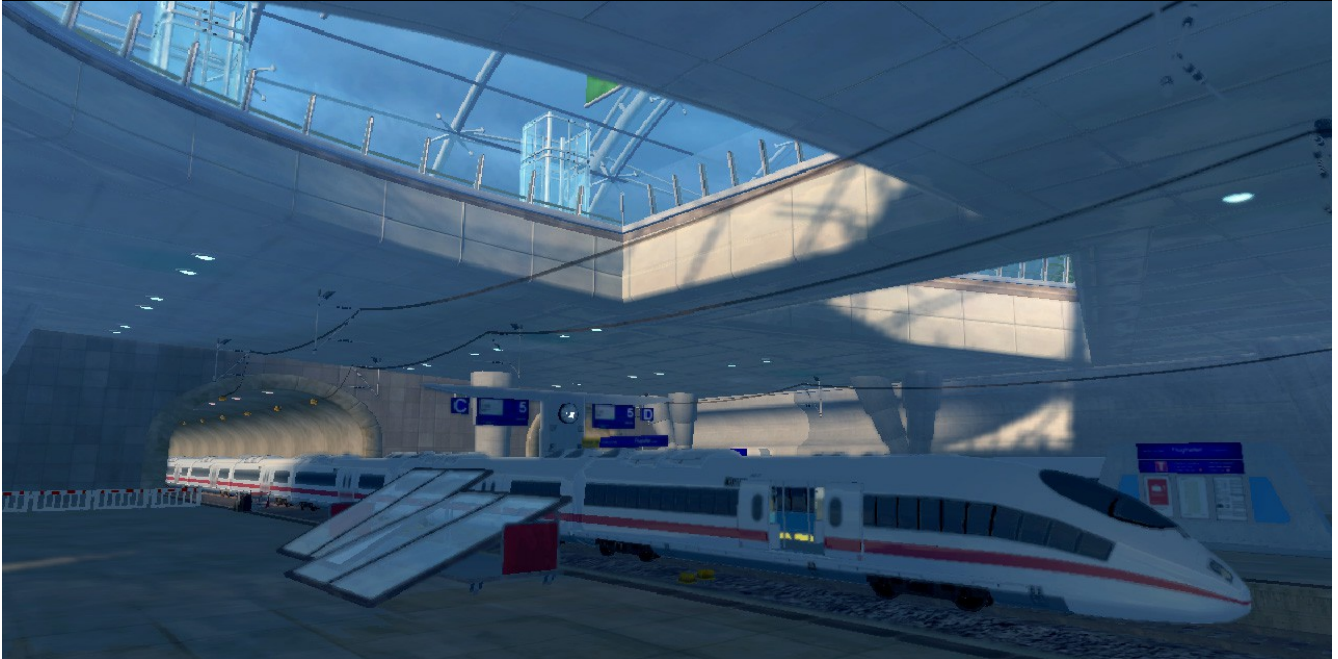
At the end of the Train Station, players are met with a giant quarter-pipe that reverses their direction and sends them rocketing underground, where they hit one of two ramps and clear a bullet train. After skidding to a stop, an in-game cinematic triggers, and the skater non-chalantly steps into a car as the doors close. Quickly, conductor: to the David Hasselhoff concert in Leipzig!