

Social-First Game Design through Casual Ambient Mechanics for Cooperation

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Project overview

Communications and cooperation has become increasingly prevalent in modern multiplayer games, often relying on structured cooperation and requiring players to coordinate using explicit mechanics and objectives. While this is effective for task-oriented games, it can limit natural and social interactions. This project explores an alternate approach using ambient mechanics, allowing gameplay to operate in the background, putting the focus on organic interactions. The goal is to design systems that prioritize social preference over performance.

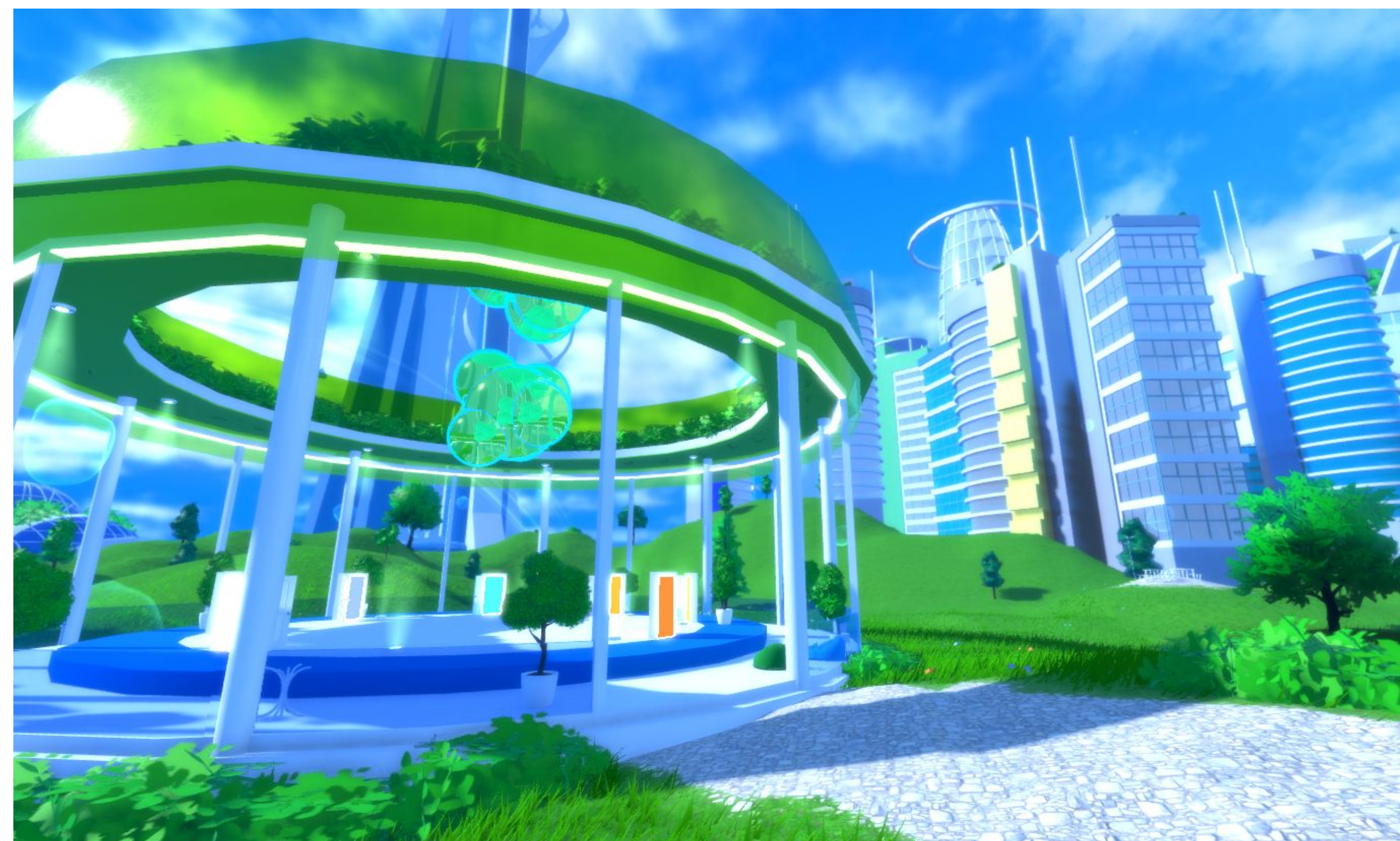


Figure 1. The Hub location of the Fishing Prototype

Fishing Prototype

To demonstrate the framework created by this project, a basic fishing prototype was created with the framework design in mind. Players can fish solo or together, assisting others when reeling in a fish by contributing to the minigame, and sharing rewards.



Figure 2. Screenshot taken from early versions of the Fishing Minigame

Framework for Social Interaction

The proposed framework for designing multiplayer systems focuses on 4 main aspects:

1. **Low Barrier to Entry** - Easy mechanics to learn, allowing the game to be accessible to all players
2. **Background Gameplay** - Gameplay mechanics shouldn't require constant attention, allowing for players to have time to interact
3. **Embedded Cooperation** - Assisting and interacting with others should be integrated into the core mechanics rather than tacked on
4. **Environment-driven Interaction** - Spatial designs that encourage player clustering and observation

These elements combine to reduce friction between players and allow for interactions to emerge naturally during gameplay.



Figure 3. Image of the Inventory UI found within the prototype..

Types of Interactions

Player interactions can generally be categorized under 3 types.

1. **Individual Interaction** - Players act independently, minimally relying on others. Interaction is optional and generally limited to shared presence instead of direct cooperation. Rewards are distributed per player.
2. **Collective Interaction** - Players work together towards a shared goal, requiring coordination and collective contribution. Often emphasizes efficiency and planned teamwork. Rewards are often distributed to everyone depending on shared goal success.
3. **Hybrid Interaction** - Players operate independently while keeping the ability to assist others if needed. This allows for cooperation to emerge naturally without constant coordination.

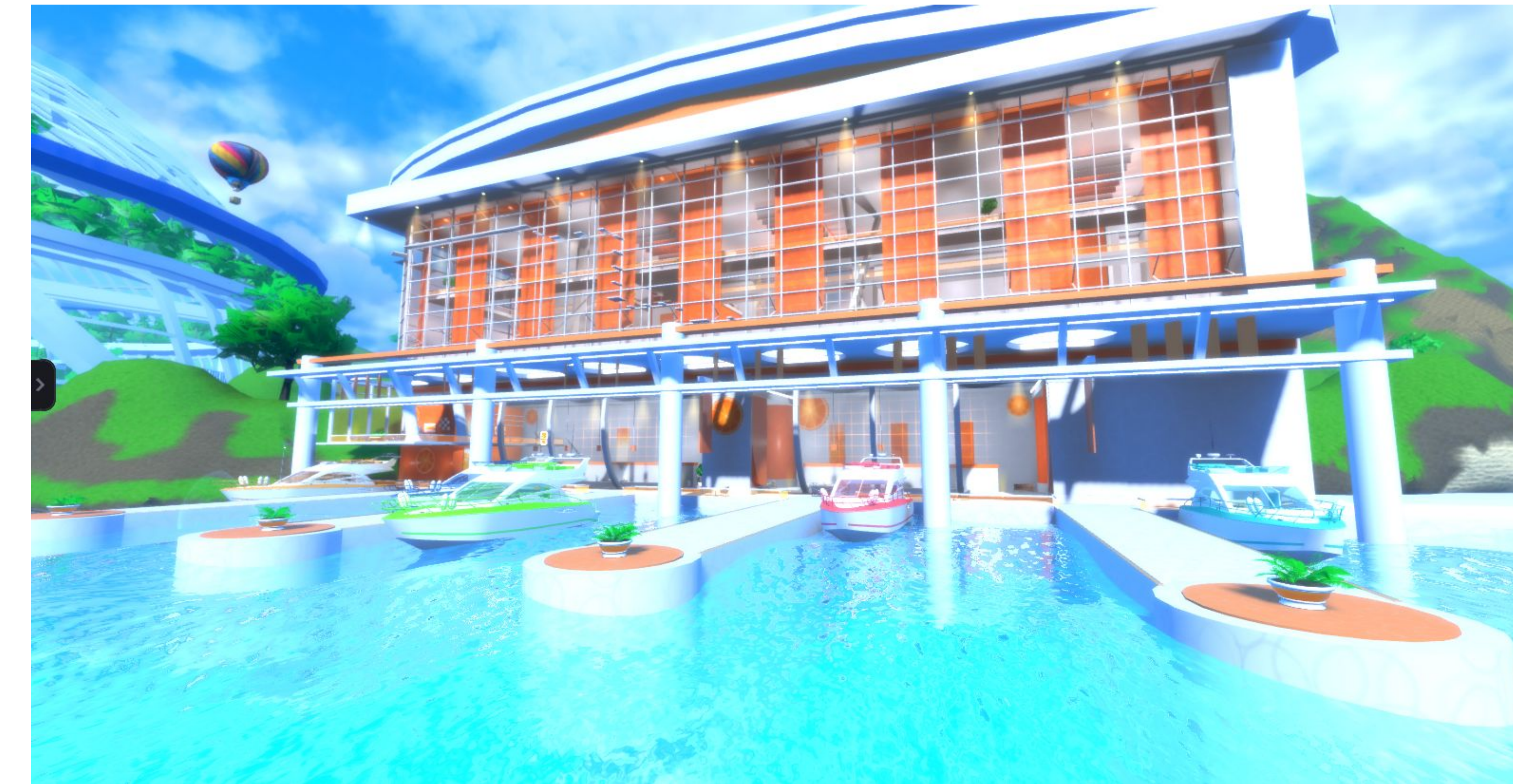


Figure 4. Dorfic Docks, a fishing zone focused on shared presence between several groups, and easy transference between groups.



Figure 4. Evil Villa, a zone focused on difficulty, with a layout encouraging players to group up on their way to the fishing area on the balcony.

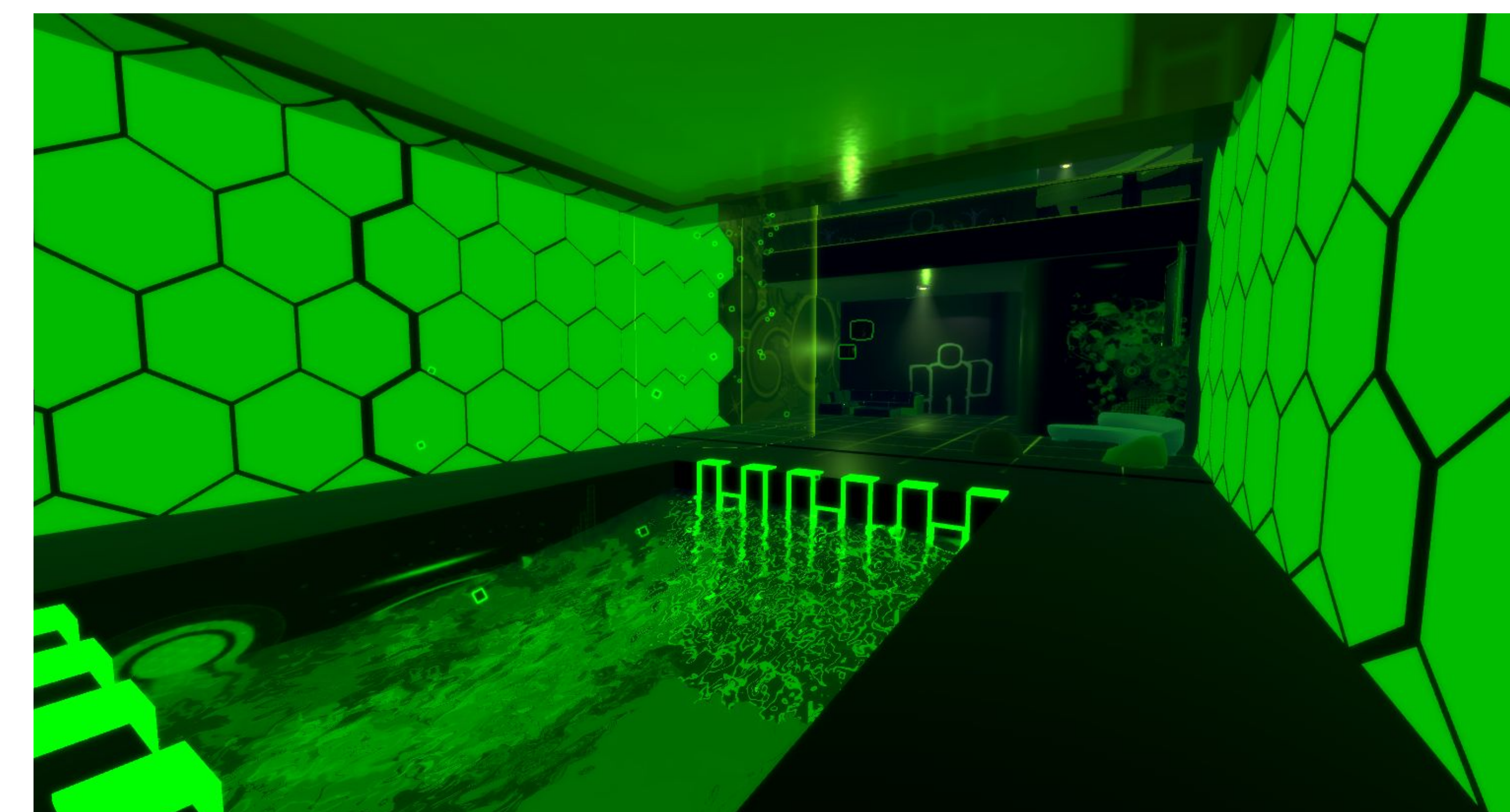


Figure 4. Darkaero Club, focusing on a 2 layer layout, encouraging players to group up at the top, with individual players scattered around the water.