

Serbow Sanctum

Level Design Document

Context

Serbow Island is a lush, tropical atoll in a somewhat remote corner of the Kelaranian continent, home to vibrant and unique marine life, and a small but thriving humanoid community. Below the lagoon in the center of the island lies Serbow Sanctum, a network of flooded tunnels and grottos in which the ancient guardian dragon of the island, Serbethan, resides. Following a resource-extracting occupation of Serbow Island by the ruthless Star Clan, Serbethan retreated into the depths of the Sanctum and has not appeared outside since, and the inhabitants of the island have understandably been quite worried about what has happened to him. It is that mystery that incites the player's curiosity and drives them to open the sealed door in the island's tunnels and investigate the sanctum for themselves.

Goals

The primary objective of this dungeon is to showcase the unique and (in my opinion) underappreciated level design possibilities afforded by Minecraft's water mechanics. This includes mechanics such as the ability to swim through one-block-tall tunnels, pushing items and entities around with water flows, bubble columns as one-way paths, and my personal favorite, launching out of water pools at high speeds with the Riptide enchantment. I want to use water as a more dynamic level feature than just an area that the player can swim in.

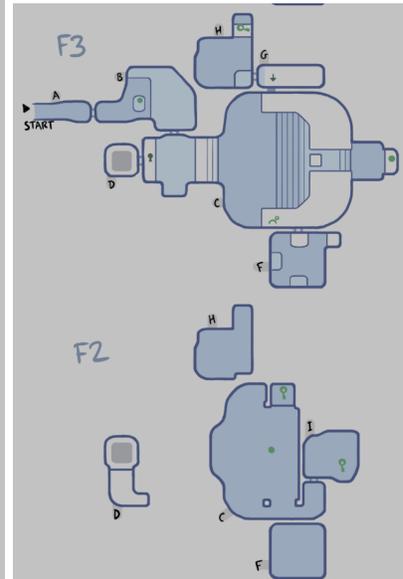
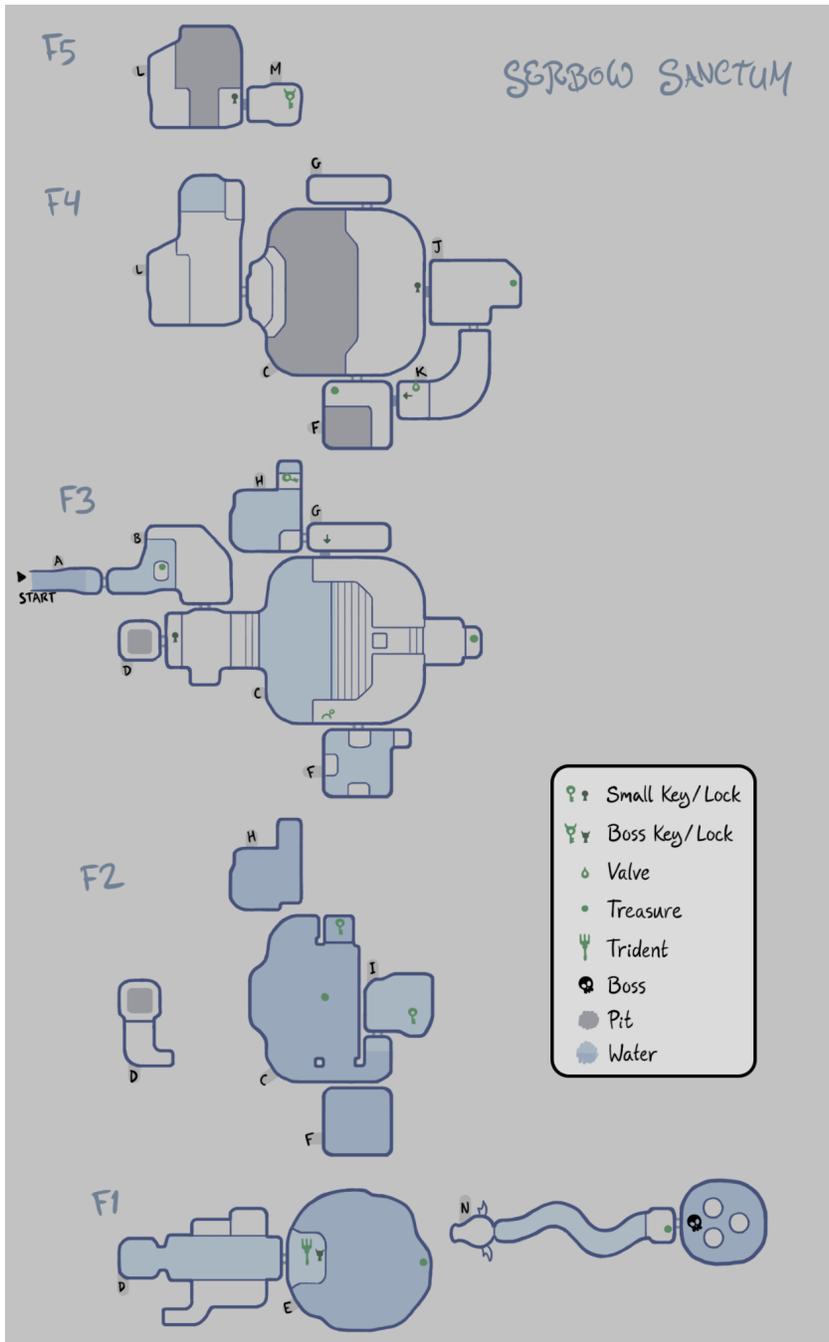
Another useful property of water is that the player being able to freely swim up and down opens up interesting possibilities for level design in three dimensions. I intend to take advantage of this to challenge the player's ability to navigate in a complex 3D space.

Aesthetics and Mood

Serbow Sanctum is a partially flooded underground grotto made of dark bluish stone. Most of the dungeon's structure consists of natural caves with paths and doors built into them; within and near the central chamber, though, there is more manmade architecture, mostly carved from stone and coral by the early inhabitants of Serbow Island. The underwater parts of the dungeon are lush with coral, seagrass, and even live fish in some places, while areas above water are less overgrown but still have some moss and grass. In a few areas, pipelines, pumps, and other machinery left by Star Clan's dragon scale mining operation cut through the caves and rather jarringly break up the dominantly natural aesthetic. The environment design is intended to mostly evoke a sense of natural beauty and wonder, thus accentuating the damage Star Clan left behind.

The final area of the dungeon is inside Serbethan himself, so it completely ignores everything above-- the rooms are very organically shaped, the walls and floors are made of bright red and pink blocks, and the biome is changed to swamp for duller-colored water.

Map



Left: The full dungeon map in its initial state

Right: Floors 2 and 3 with higher water level after the player activates the flood valve

Walkthrough and Story

- The player enters the dungeon via an underwater tunnel on the third floor (Room A).
- The first challenge (B) is a simple puzzle involving redirecting some water flows through pipes, just to get the player thinking about water in a dynamic way. They need to direct water through a pipe into the next room (C), in order to create a waterfall that allows them to swim over a wall into the central chamber.
- Also in Rooms B and C, the player finds a couple important narrative set pieces. They notice some of the damage that Star Clan's mining efforts caused to the sanctum; and they also learn that Serbethan himself resides in a large grotto at the very bottom of the caves, establishing the general direction they should try to look.
- There are two small keys available to the player once they reach the central chamber: one in a flooded arena containing a Guardian (H), and one in an underwater maze (I). For now, the player needs to find at least one of these keys.
- The player platforms up the tower room (F) to the fourth-floor balcony. Here, the player can open a shortcut to get back up to the balcony more easily later (G), and if they've found a key, they can unlock the door in the right wall. After passing through a couple more action-oriented obstacles (J, K), the player reaches an especially large installation of old Star Clan machinery. The player can activate a valve here to raise the water level in the third floor by about eight blocks. This change to the dungeon's state cannot be undone.
- The player can now revisit some previous rooms on the third floor, which work differently due to being flooded. The player no longer needs that waterfall in order to reach the central room, so they can return to the beginning of the dungeon and redirect it (B) to let them access a locked door instead. If they haven't obtained the second small key yet (H, I), the extra water has now made those obstacles a little harder-- after all, the player should be a little more comfortable with the swimming mechanics at this point.
- After unlocking the second locked door, the player drops through a shaft all the way down to the first floor (D). After heading through a short tunnel, they finally reach the grotto and meet Serbethan (E). The player learns that the old dragon had been infested with a mechanical parasite designed by the Star Clan to suppress his elemental magic, which has trapped him inside the grotto.
- Serbethan presents the player with a Riptide trident known as Serbethan's Fang, granting the player the ability to launch themselves through water with incredible speed. The trident's enchantments are weaker than they're supposed to be, and Serbethan believes it is not powerful enough to defeat the parasite, but mentions that there is a small shrine elsewhere in the sanctum and that if the player can find it, it may be able to restore the trident's true potential.
- To warm the player up to Riptide movement, before the player can get back up to the higher floors, they must do a short platforming challenge in the previous room (D) to reach a lever that releases a waterfall into the entrance shaft.
- The player can now reach a couple new places with their trident. They can launch up to a hidden treasure at the top of Room F to find a bunch of optional loot. More importantly, they can use the trident's speed to get past a gate obstacle in the central room (C) where they must press a button on the opposite side of the room to open the gate, then swim through it before it closes. Behind the gate, they obtain the third and final small key.

- The player launches up to the top of the dungeon, where there are some more water pipe puzzles (L). Ultimately, after solving the puzzles and using the last key, they enchant their trident at a small shrine, significantly boosting its attack damage and granting it an effective boss key status (M).
- The player returns to the bottom floor, and with their upgraded trident, Serbethan is convinced that they are prepared to save him, and swims into Serbethan's mouth. They travel down into an arena inside his body (N) and face a boss fight against the Star Clan's parasite.
- GG

Enemies

Combat is a rather minor component of this dungeon, mainly because there are not many underwater enemies worth fighting in vanilla Minecraft. Only a few rooms contain enemies, and the player is not required to kill any of them (with the exception of the boss). The most notable areas with enemies are Rooms J and F, which contain some drowned and pufferfish, and Room H, which contains more of the above, plus one guardian inside a cage in the center of the room. There might also be single drowned scattered around the level in above-water areas.

The other notable combat component of the dungeon is, of course, the boss battle. I'm not completely settled on what the boss will be, but most likely, the Star Clan's parasite construct will actually be an Elder Guardian with a lot of extra health and a few redstone clocks set up to simulate additional attack patterns.

Treasure

What's a dungeon without some fun loot? The player can find treasure, equipment, and key items in various places throughout Serbow Sanctum, ensuring that they are properly equipped for the dungeon's challenges and motivated to explore thoroughly for chests. I use the term "generic treasure" to describe loot that does not give the player any sort of gameplay advantage within the dungeon, but is valuable within the greater context of the game of Minecraft. In the case of Serbow Sanctum, this mainly means rare water-themed items such as prismarine, sponges, nautilus shells, and enchanted fishing rods and armor; there are also some minerals like gold and diamonds, which are still pretty unmatched in their ability to make the player feel excited about finding treasure.

- Room B: The chest here contains the player's starting loot: mid-tier sword and armor, food, maybe a consumable or two. If the player has made it into this dungeon, it's likely they already have better gear than this, but it can't hurt to offer it just in case.
- Room C: This large room contains equipment in three places. At the bottom of the water pool is a chest holding a dungeon map and some generic treasure items. Behind the gate, also in the water pool, is a small key. The switch to open the gate is on the other side of the room, and the gate closes quickly, so the player has to use the trident to reach it in time. Finally, the passage all the way on the right side of the room contains a chest with combat gear of a higher quality than the gear found at the beginning of the dungeon. This last chest is only reachable after the player has raised the water level.

- Room E: Upon reaching this area for the first time, the player receives Serbethan's Fang, a trident with Riptide II and Sharpness I enchantments plus the Unbreakable property. In addition to this, a hidden chest at the back of the room contains generic treasure items.
- Room F: There is a large amount of generic treasure hidden inside the ceiling at the top of the tower. Reaching it requires the trident.
- Room H: A ledge at the back of the room holds a small key.
- Room I: There is another small key at the end of the maze. The ideal path through the maze is different depending on whether the dungeon has been flooded or not.
- Room J: The chest at the back of the room contains food and other consumables, plus some more generic treasure.
- Room M: Bringing Serbethan's Fang to the shrine in this room upgrades its enchantments to Riptide III and Sharpness VI. This also acts as the boss key, in effect, as Serbethan will not allow the player to venture inside his body to clear out the boss until the player has obtained the upgrade.
- Room N: This final chest at the end of Serbethan's esophagus contains some healing potions and food to ensure the player has a chance to heal before the boss, plus some organic-themed junk items like bones.