Jazz Jackrabbit 2: MDA Level design analysis

Intro

When trying to analyse a game in terms of the MDA framework, it is important to understand how the framework describes the perspective with which designers look at a game and players perceive a game. These perspectives are the mechanics and the aesthetics, respectively. In order to satisfy these two perspectives, I will discuss the game in terms of the mechanics , relate that to a dynamic that is created, and then look at how this contributes to the overall aesthetic of the game.

Jazz Jackrabbit 2 is comprised of multiple different episodes each with its own theme and style. I will be analysing only the first of these episode titled, "Formally a Prince ". it is important to have a clear understanding of the terminology related to this game. I will be defining a level as one sequence that starts with the title name of said level and which ends with the totalling up of your points. In this specific episode, there is a total of 6 levels, each with a host of scenes in each.

Body

Mechanically Jazz Jackrabbit 2(JJR2) is a side-scroller platformer game. The player needs to get from the start of each level to the end by overcoming various scenes in each level. An important dynamic of JJR2 is exploration and quickly understanding how to interact with new level elements and enemies. The main aesthetics of the game are;

- Challenge - There are many obstacles
- Discovery - The game is based in strange lands
- Sensation - Great visuals and music
- Fellowship - If playing multiplayer
- Submission- Based off difficulty selection

The goal of the level design within JJR2 is to introduce the player to the games mechanics, heighten the experience of these aesthetics as well as control the difficulty and flow of the game.

The first level is told to be a tutorial. In this level it is interesting what the designers decided to show and not show the player. Before indicating any controls to the player, they are told to collect items around maps, but jumping is needed to get across a point before this. The standard platformer base controls are assumed to be known by the player. This immediate pushing of collectables heightens the aesthetic of exploration/discovery. The more niche mechanics such as jump-hovering is taught via text, and a scene that you can't progress without doing the action. This pacing is seen again with the introduction to shootable blocks, if you do not shoot the blocks you cannot progress as they are in your way. In this tutorial level, all the mechanics are introduced to the player. This is all the movements and actions the player can do. Multiple level elements are also introduced as well as all notable collectables. In this tutorial level there are no enemies. The tutorial also indicates twice to the player to search for secrets in the levels. Pacing is used again in the introduction to this secret aspect of the game. There is a fake wall that the play must pass in order to continue with the level.

The introduction to all the player inputs to control the character allows the aesthetic of competition to begin from the beginning, as the player should understand what they can and can't do straight away. The choice to put no enemies in the level and to tell the player twice to search for secrets adds to the aesthetic of discovery as the player feels safe as well as has a desire to uncover these secrets. The introduction to only the basic recuring level elements, such as bounce pads and

shootable blocks allows the player an understanding of these high recuring level elements but lets the player figure out how to interact with all the new elements that come along. This adds to the aesthetic of competition.

The second level(first level after the tutorial) enemies are introduced straight away. These enemies are basic and only pace back and forth. These enemies ease the player into the flow of the game, starting off with a gradual increase in the competition aesthetic.

There is a standard level pattern that follows throughout the game. This is, the introduction to enemies and multiple level elements and collectables. Some levels will have the exception of a mini boss/unique enemy at the end. There is also a more complicated bigger boss at the end of each episode. Levels do get harder and enemies do get more complex as you progress. Pacing is used to control players from advancing in the macro linear level structure without beating the previous level.

The difficulty of JJR2 is not only complexity but also conceptual. As you progress there is always new and wacky level elements where you are not sure what to do, as well as enemies that you have to figure out how to beat. The complexity comes as the number of these level elements and enemies increases throughout a level. But the main interest and difficulty comes from every levels unique conceptual design. This conceptual difficulty adds to the aesthetic of discovery as you uncover more strangeness in the game, the conceptual and complexity difficulties add to the competitive aesthetic.

Controlling players frustration and anxiety is important to keep the flow and difficulty of the game at the desired amount. Checkpoints are frequent and used to lower players frustrations. Where new level elements and enemies are used to increase players anxiety. This balance and use of checkpoints allows the play to enjoy the world and adds to the sensation aesthetic.

Conclusion

The level structure of Jazz Jackrabbit 2 is effective at creating a game that rewards exploration and discovery, skilled twitch movements and aggressive playstyle. The level design is used in the tutorial to teach all the player inputs and how to interact with the base game elements and encouraging exploration. The strong use of conceptual difficulty ensures the players are always on their toes and feel like they never get used to the game, further adding to the aesthetic of discovery and challenge