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HISTART 395

World Building and Immersion in Video Game Development

Introduction

My fascination with video game mechanics took on a new dimension during my "Gaming as a Method" course. We delved into the explorative storytelling power of tabletop RPGs (TTRPGs), sparking a question that lingered: how do these translate to the world of video games? This question became the seed for my choose-your-own-adventure project, where I explored the blurry lines between video gaming and role playing. Ultimately, I suggested that all video games are role-playing games and TTRPG discussions can, to some extent, be extrapolated to video games.

When I embarked on the development of "Retro AstroSphere" as an interdisciplinary project, I began exploring . Bridging the gap between my "Video Game Development" and "Gaming as a Method" courses, this game served as a practical exploration of these ideas. By stripping away complexities with a minimalist design, "Retro AstroSphere" removes confounding variables, allowing for a generalizable analysis of the video game development cycle through the lens of TTRPG concepts.

This paper delves into world-building and player immersion in "Retro AstroSphere." I'll explore how, despite its simple mechanics, the game fosters a role-playing experience.

Retro AstroSphere: Game Overview

I made Retro AstroSphere over a 2-week period as an interdisciplinary project. The game boasts simple level design with a minimal color palette and grid-based platform. It's a minimalist retro game where players control a sphere with a glowing core, navigating through levels filled with multicolored platforms possessing different gameplay features. The game stands out for its simplicity and intuitive controls, allowing players to move, jump, and manipulate gravity. Though the controls are intuitive, the game is difficult and requires precise planning, timing, reactions, and momentum control. As levels progress, new platform types are introduced, gently guiding players to adapt and learn without explicit instructions.

While designing Retro AstroSphere, I often found myself getting lost in the implementation and losing sight of the user. My "Gaming as a Method" course provided a crucial perspective shift, emphasizing the broader view and placing the player at the forefront. This interdisciplinary insight reminded me to balance technical intricacies with a user-centric design approach. Navigating development challenges, these teachings guided me in ensuring that the game's minimalist design and intuitive controls seamlessly enhance the player's experience.

World Building in Retro AstroSphere

The world design of "Retro AstroSphere" intricately weaves a captivating experience for players. As they guide the cracked sphere through levels adorned with gray, green, red, and blue platforms, the absence of explicit lore invites players to interpret the environment on their terms. The shining blue core within the sphere, expanding and contracting with the use of abilities, serves as a dynamic visual element that subtly communicates the sphere's energy or

power. The choice of colors for different platforms introduces a non-verbal language, guiding players through the game's challenges without the need for explicit instructions. The surrounding stars and the emphasis on the core's glow create a visually stimulating yet minimalist backdrop, encouraging players to immerse themselves in the abstract world while sparking their curiosity about the sphere's origins and purpose.

The deliberate design choices and the absence of explicit narrative in "Retro AstroSphere" contribute significantly to player engagement and narrative cohesion. By allowing players to interpret the world and its elements, the game fosters a sense of agency and ownership over the narrative. The evolving challenges presented by new platform types mirror the sphere's journey, offering a subtle narrative progression. The shining core becomes not just a gameplay element but a symbolic representation of the player's progress and mastery. This open-ended approach encourages players to invest emotionally in the experience, creating a unique narrative bond that transcends traditional storytelling methods.

Environmental storytelling and interactive elements play a pivotal role in shaping the player's journey within "Retro AstroSphere." The absence of explicit lore allows the environment itself to become a storytelling medium. The changing colors of platforms and the dynamic behavior of the core serve as visual cues that prompt players to infer the game's rules and context. The introduction of new platform types serves not only as gameplay challenges but as narrative beats, allowing the player to discover and adapt to the evolving world. This interactive narrative approach fosters a deeper connection between the player and the game, making the overall experience more engaging, memorable, and subject to individual interpretation.

Immersion in Game Design

Retro AstroSphere adeptly leverages simplicity in its controls and design to create a dual-layered immersion for players. Visually, the minimalist aesthetic, accentuated by the grayscale and punctuated by the vibrant blue core, invites players to project their interpretations onto the abstract world. The shining core's dynamic nature, responding to the player's actions, becomes a visual anchor that reinforces the connection between the player and the game. Narratively, the absence of explicit lore encourages players to fill in the blanks, turning each level into a chapter of a personalized story. The choice of a sphere as a protagonist may initially seem disconnected, but this abstract representation fosters immersion by allowing players to focus on the core gameplay and mechanics without being burdened by unnecessary character expectations.

The first-person simplicity of controlling the sphere in Retro AstroSphere plays a crucial role in shaping player experience and engagement. By adopting a third-person perspective through the sphere's controls, the game provides a direct and unfiltered connection between the player and the in-game environment. This viewpoint enhances the immediacy of interactions, making the dynamic changes to the core and the platform-based challenges more personal and impactful. The intentional avoidance of human-like actions, such as crouching or emoting, aligns with the sphere's nature and reinforces the immersive experience. This first-person immersion serves as a deliberate design choice that ensures players focus on mastering the unique mechanics, fostering a deeper engagement with the game's abstract world.

Immersion, whether through visual aesthetics or narrative ambiguity, plays a pivotal role in shaping the player's connection with Retro AstroSphere's game world. The deliberate design of simple controls that offer full command over the sphere's abilities ensures that players feel a sense of agency within the game context. The absence of unnecessary actions, typical of human characters, eliminates potential frustration over unimplemented controls, allowing players to maintain a seamless connection with the game's mechanics. This immersive experience, both visually and narratively, creates a unique bond between the player and the abstract world of Retro AstroSphere. As players become more adept at navigating the challenges and understanding the visual cues, their connection deepens, transforming the gameplay into a personal and memorable journey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of world-building and immersion in the development of "Retro AstroSphere" unveils the profound impact of deliberate design choices on player experience. The game's minimalist aesthetic, coupled with intuitive controls and dynamic environmental storytelling, creates a captivating and open-ended experience. By opting for a cracked sphere with a glowing core as the protagonist and steering clear of explicit lore, the game allows players to shape their narrative interpretation, fostering a sense of agency and personal investment in the abstract world. The integration of immersive elements, both visually and narratively, serves as a testament to the interconnectedness of game design principles and player engagement.

Through the lens of "Retro AstroSphere," this essay highlights the synergy between simplicity in controls, world design, and narrative ambiguity to enhance player immersion. The game's success in facilitating a dual-layered immersion, both visually and narratively, demonstrates the efficacy of prioritizing gameplay mechanics and player agency. Ultimately, the study of world-building and immersion in video game development serves as a testament to the artistry involved in creating memorable gaming experiences, showcasing how thoughtful design choices can elevate a simple concept into a rich and engaging journey for players.

Future Directions

Building on Fuist's cultural tool perspective and insights from Hammer et al. regarding learning and roleplaying games, the future of "Retro AstroSphere" could involve a deeper integration of player-driven narratives inspired by tabletop RPGs. By introducing collaborative storytelling elements and potential multiplayer features, the game could offer a dynamic, shared narrative experience. These expansions align with the agentic imagination concept and communal aspects found in tabletop gaming.

Moreover, the design principles of "Retro AstroSphere" present versatile applications. The minimalist aesthetic, emphasis on player agency, and immersive world-building through environmental storytelling can be adapted to narrative-driven games for impactful player choices. Additionally, the simplicity of controls can be employed in educational game development, promoting accessibility and ease of use. Translating these design principles into

diverse contexts offers the potential for innovative and inclusive gaming experiences across various genres and platforms.

Works Cited

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