

'Horizon Zero Dawn' : A Game Design Postmortem

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Abstract

1 Summary of Talk

Through the creation of early prototypes and design decisions and processes that shaped development of Horizon Zero Dawn, this talk takes us into the journey game design went through while moving from an ambitious paper concept to a finished open world action RPG. Thanks to Eric Boltjes' details, this talk helps us to understand how small and large design decisions and choices can improve a game and players' experience.

1.1 Early Concept

Guerrilla Games studio never did an open world video game before. Here was for them the challenge represented by Horizon. Indeed, the idea of the game came in 2001 with some important guidelines such as :

- Majestic post-apocalyptic wilderness
- Awe-inspiring machines (as an innovant concept)
- Exotic tribes
- And the open world idea

But like all beginners, they didn't know how to structure that kind of game development. So, they started with a really small team in 2011 composed by designers, artists, coders and animators. Each of them without a specific role. And, of course, with a lot of questions (how the open world is going to look like, what kind of combat against machines we want and so on).

As they didn't have a global idea of how everything will work together, they decided to do different prototypes to test them and judge their reliability. The feedbacks were very good in the sense that these prototypes were really effective and helped them to know what they wish to create for Horizon Zero Dawn. But it was costly in money and time. And also, prototype after prototype, the team started to think "Where is the game so?".

Thus, they answered two different fundamental questions before starting the pre-production:

- What Horizon Zero Dawn is
- What it is NOT

1.2 Pre-Production

As they started to know where they were going, they focused on three major parts of the game for the pre-production step:

- World systems and mechanics
- World building
- Horizon Zero Dawn story

They so improved the size of the team by adding new responsibilities in it such as Core Design, World Design, Story Design etc. Especially for the story, they didn't really thought about it during the concept step. Everything still needed to be done.

They also worked to answer a lot of different questions they had. At this point, the team still needed a context to be able to have the full game idea in their mind. So, they focused on different parts of the game.

- Riding (they wanted a special character so the normal horse has been replaced by a machine)
- The main character, Alloy (personality, style, gameplay...)
- Machines (behaviors, look and also "feelings")

Fixed contexts helped the team a lot. But be careful in game development, don't do it too soon or it will prevent cool ideas to come. Everything went well so they thought they had enough answered to start the production in a good work environment. Unfortunately, problems started to appear.

1.3 Production

At the beginning of the production, Guerrilla's teams started to really show their lack of knowledge in open world game development. Indeed, they faced quickly important problems in the game.

Firstly, they didn't know how to include efficiently a mechanics tutorial when the game starts. Mostly because they didn't think about all the mechanics yet. Which is important to start every game production.

Secondly, they also didn't go completely through the combat mechanics with machines. They wanted a game accessible for everyone. Not too hard but also challenging. So they wanted to give different ways to win a fight for the players through a bunch of weapons and abilities. Problem : non experiment players will only use one type of weapon constantly. Thus, they add a way to see all machines' weaknesses to know instantly which weapon or combat tactical would be the best.

Thirdly, the human combat. It's quite challenging with the machines so it has to be at least also a bit challenging with humans. Problem : fewer tactical options than with machines. So they chose to use environment's elements to put the player more into the fights.

To summarize, Guerrilla underestimated the impact of encounter design and had to status about problems which could have been resolved earlier. So every designer has to take care of every mechanics as soon as possible and don't rush into the production step.

1.4 Polishment

It's time to polish what they did. This step can be summarize in one sentence : playtesting a LOT. In this one it's possible (sure) that some new problems will appear. Horizon didn't avoid it also. Indeed, because of all the different ressources the player can gather in the open world, all the economy seemed to be quite difficult to understand. Every ennemy can give a lot of various objects, specific for each race.

Unfortunately, Guerrilla didn't find a way to solve this problem and the economy stayed quite complex to comprehend. So as game designer, find a key to have a simple and accessible economy is also really important.

1.5 Core points

A game designer has to take care about everything and review all the points, all the time! For examples, these are the most important points a game designer should be awared of:

- Fix the goals (What do you want to achieve - be as clear as possible)
- Specify all the intentions you have for the game
- Be honnest with yourself (Don't be stubborn, if something doesn't work, it doesn't)
- Get ready for problems (Be flexible in everything to face problems easier and adapt yourself)

2 Overview and Relevance

2.1 Game design through prototypes

2.2 How to be a good game designer

3 References and Further Sources

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- [4] Josh Sawyer, lead designer at Obsidian Entertainment, *TUGraz talk : What's a lead game designer*, 23.10.2018.