

Gameplay Outline – Shadeshifter

Overall Gameplay

Shadeshifter is an action-driven 2D Metroidvania with three main components: combat, transformation, and exploration.

The protagonist Slate is a humanoid shadow who can run, jump, and attack. In the game world, he encounters many hostile creatures that resemble combinations of animals, minerals, and elements. Slate has a unique ability that allows him to transform into enemies he has slain, granting him access to their movement and combat abilities. Using those, he is able to explore parts of the world that were previously inaccessible to him.

Combat

Slate starts out with just a few lives (3-5). Enemy attacks take away one life, except for particularly powerful moves, mostly used by bosses, that are specially telegraphed. Once his lives drop to 0, Slate respawns at the save point he activated most recently. Save points are objects that are placed in the level. When the player interacts with them for the first time, they save their game and restore their lives.

Slate attacks with a melee weapon (maybe a scythe?) that he swings in the direction he's looking at. By repeatedly pressing the attack button, the player makes Slate perform a combo of 3-4 attacks with little time in-between. After the combo, there's a slightly longer delay until the next attack may be performed. Slate's attacks keep him in the air and prevent him from falling until the end of the combo. Thus, the player can combine the jump with an attack to defeat flying enemies.

The enemies in the prototype are slain after one or two of Slate's combos. Standard enemies don't have a health bar to prevent the screen from becoming cluttered. Boss enemies survive much longer, and their health is visualized on a UI bar.

Once Slate transform into an enemy, he gains access to their attacks, some of which are melee, while others are projectiles or areas of effect. Slate retains his current and maximal health when he transforms. If Slate was to drop to 0 lives while he's transformed, he takes on his original form and gains 1 final life. The corpse of the creature he possessed is permanently destroyed in the process.

Standard enemies respawn after a while in case the player destroyed a corpse he needed to progress.

Transformation

Slain enemies leave behind a corpse that falls to the ground if the enemy was killed in the air. If an enemy dies and there's a corpse of the same enemy type nearby, no corpse is created to prevent the screen from becoming too cluttered.

If Slate is in the vicinity of a corpse, the player can press a button and Slate turns into the slain creature, while the corpse disappears. Slate is invincible to damage during this process. Once transformed, the player gains access to the creature's movement and combat abilities. However, Slate's current and maximum lives remain as they were. Both the movement and the combat abilities of the various enemies are used to pass gates in the levels and explore the world of Shadeshifter.

The player can stop possessing the current creature at any time, even while they're in the air. The corpse reappears and falls to the ground. It can be used as many times as you like. The only way a corpse is

destroyed is when the player's lives drop to 0 while they're transformed. In this case, Slate is forced back into his original form and gains one last life to fight. The corpse, however, is permanently deleted.

To prevent the player from ever getting stuck, standard enemies respawn after a while. So even if the player accidentally lost an important corpse, he could simply wait a few seconds and kill the same enemy type again.

Throughout the game, the player collects dark orbs—one of the two main resources of Shadeshifter. Those orbs can be used to level up the various creatures Slate has defeated so far. This increases the strength of their attacks, improves their movement, or even gives them new abilities.

Exploration

As a Metroidvania, Shadeshifter puts an emphasis on the gradual exploration of intricate levels. There is no standard direction and the player is forced to go left, right, up, or down, depending on the layout of the level at hand. The progress across the play space is structured through the use of gates, blocked locations that require a certain ability to be passed. In our game, these abilities come from the enemy types that Slate may transform into after defeating them in combat.

In order to avoid backtracking, looping level structures, one-way barricades, levers, and elevators are used. The verticality of the levels can be explored through elevators, enemies that can fly or jump, Slate's own jump move, and his ability to drop down from thin platforms.

There are gated areas, optional paths, and secrets that add to the player's sense of discovery. Secrets are small spaces that can only be found by paying close attention to slight variations in the look of walls, ceilings, and floors. If the player comes close to one of these fake walls, they fade out and the secret room is revealed.

The two main resources that are used to reward the player are dark orbs and coins. Coins are used as a currency in the world beyond the laboratory and can be spent on various things. The dark orbs serve the function of levelling up the enemies the player can transform into, improving their stats and occasionally granting them new abilities. The types of rewards in Shadeshifter are listed here, starting with the rarest and most impactful ones:

- Health shard (find two to gain +1 maximum life)
- Enemy types
- Save points
- Dark orbs
- Shortcuts
- Life regeneration
- Coins