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Rewards and Punishments

Rewards and punishments are truly the core compulsion of game play. They are the carrot and the stick that either lure or drive you through the experience. Since we are playing a game, by its very definition, we expect rewards (advancement, winning) and punishments (obstacles, losing).

Rewards come in numerous forms ranging from power-ups to victory cinematics. Punishments arrive in numerous forms ranging from loss of life (which adds up to loss of player progress up to a point and loss of player's time) to missed opportunities.

Normally the rewards and punishments in a game are the province of the designer. However, there is little that tells you more about a world and your character's place in it than how they are rewarded or punished for their actions. This is the value system of the game and it needs to align with the narrative. In any world, especially a game world, everything depends on what is valued.

Characters are defined by the choices they make; this has always been true. A hero reveals himself by what he decides when faced with adversity. A villain shows his true colors when temptation presents itself. The beauty of games is their unique ability to put you in the position of making those choices for the characters.

Let's suppose for a moment that you're playing a game, and your character is in the following position: he has low armor and he's working against a timer to rescue a hostage. If you attack with low armor you'll probably die rescuing the hostage. If you go for armor, the

hostage will die. It is a conundrum that is revealing on a number of levels. What will you do? Your choices are things that need to be anticipated, and manipulated, by both the game design and the narrative. How the game rewards or punishes you for the choice you ultimately make is one of the keys to your overall gameplay experience. Will these little dilemmas encourage you to move forward, try again, or hurl the controller across the room?

If you are playing a well defined (licensed character), then the gameplay and fiction will be derived from the persona of that character. For instance, many major franchises have injunctions against their hero character knowingly hurting an innocent human being. Therefore, collateral damage is heavily punished. Conversely, if you are playing a sociopath you might be rewarded for the number of people your character kills. That's a huge decision. In gameplay you must decide what your character will and won't do. Do you allow the player to do things that are out of character or do you punish those actions?

Not all rewards need have direct consequences to be satisfying. For instance, what if, given the richness of a franchise property, we feel that we should embed info nuggets in the game. Think of them as trivia pieces about bosses or locations that may serve as clues to the player, but are basically there for collectibility based on franchise history. Players collect them and can then view them in an archive, like little movies or slideshows. In this way, you are offering a reward that is outside the fiction of the game, but is inside the fiction of the franchise.

Here are the most common ways to reward and punish a player. Consider how you can integrate them into your design and story.

REWARDS

- ❖ Resource (Lives, Health, Fuel, Ammo, Weapons). In many games these are sprinkled throughout the environments, and by

exploring, you can find them. In this way, the designers are able to “breadcrumb” you in the direction they want you to take.

Resource can also be spawned from dead enemies, forcing you to put yourself at risk to reap the reward.

- ❖ Power Ups. Power Ups will give your character increased power and abilities to specific tasks they can perform. They are usually temporary.
- ❖ Information. This can take many forms: letting you know where you can find a character you need to talk to, or giving you a clue to where you can find the treasure, or which door is a portal to the next world, or how to defeat a dragon, or where enemies may be waiting in ambush. Information is a great reward because it encourages you to keep advancing further into the game.
- ❖ Keys (to unlock new areas of the game). We are using keys in the generic sense to mean any object, which allows you to solve a problem (although games still show up with find the “red keycard” to get through the “red door lock” gameplay, mainly because it still works and players understand it).
- ❖ Skills (Fighting, Climbing, Stealth, etc.). This is a way of leveling up your character, gaining new abilities. For example, the further you get into the game, the more acrobatic you become, opening new areas of levels that were previously off limits because your character couldn’t reach them.
- ❖ Points (if the game is keeping score). There is still something very satisfying about seeing a number that let’s you have some objective standard (no matter how arbitrary the scoring system) you can measure your progress against.

- ❖ Upgrades and Add-ons. These enhance the weapons and gear you already have. For instance, silencers for weapons, or enchanted chain mail that improves your armor.
- ❖ Collectibles. Added value elements that may or may not have a direct effect on your advancement in the game.
- ❖ Difficulty Level Unlockables. This reward allows you to play the game at higher difficulty levels (usually by successfully beating the game at a lower one first).
- ❖ Reveal Hidden Areas or Characters. These are very satisfying because they come with an added benefit: the joy of discovery.
- ❖ New Alliances and Allies. Often, success will bring new fighters and friends to your cause, and to your side.
- ❖ Game Saves. Many games are tuned to create maximum tension by placing save points in strategic locations that makes reaching them before you are killed a major reward.
- ❖ Easter Eggs. Easter Eggs are added value items, hidden gameplay, special codes, etc., (and often in-jokes) that you can discover.

PUNISHMENTS

- ❖ Progress. This is the most obvious one, usually in the form of character death (which can mean restarting from the last save or at the beginning of the level).
- ❖ Capability. This diminishes your capability to advance through the game. Health and armor damage are the most common ways this manifests itself in gameplay. Reduced health can affect your

speed, how you fight, how you aim weapons, etc.

- ❖ Time. Time is and will remain one of the best ways to manipulate any situation. Everyone understands what it feels like to be at the mercy of a “ticking clock.” Taking time away from you ups the ante.
- ❖ Resources. This usually comes in the form of a resource that you’ve already collected being taken away from you. For instance, you are attacked, and your wallet is stolen. Now, you’re going to have to go and earn that resource (money) again before you can advance.
- ❖ New Enemies. Sometimes, you’ll find that if you attack the wrong character, or group, or even neutral NPCs, you suddenly have a new enemy, or a whole new set of enemies, to deal with.

Rewarding and punishing the player helps to direct him through the gameplay experience. It gives him tasks to accomplish, and provides him with a metrics (standard) by which he can measure his progress (or lack thereof).