

Game Pillars

Introduction

The concept of Game Pillars can be easily misunderstood, mostly because of the broadness of the meaning but also because there is not a unified guide for game developers about how the core pillars of a game should be. Understandable if we take in account that every game is different, or at least the ones that succeed bring something new to the industry.

So what can be considered as game pillars?

Core Pillars of a game

The Core Pillars of a game are a list of very simple ideas that define what is most important in our game, the defining elements and actions that will the players engage with. Here we can describe what we want the game to mean to the players and how do we want it to feel.

Having this list of game pillars will help with hard decisions throughout the development, knowing better where you can cut corners but still maintaining the quality. Even though they are not specific elements, game pillars have the greatest impact and help keep perspective over your project, because what is not part of the core should not overshadow what is.

And now you could ask yourself: Is there a good number of game pillars?

Jay Wilson, game director of “Diablo III”, said in a GDC conference that the maximum should be seven pillars, which coincides with the number they followed in the development of “Diablo III”, but if it's possible to have less it's better. We have to take in consideration that they were developing a sequel, which means that they had to preserve the majority of the game pillars which made this IP (intellectual property) successful. And this statement makes a lot of sense.

First of all, having a lower number of core guidelines means that your game doesn't need a big quantity of elements to achieve the ultimate goal of every video game: being fun. But you need to identify what are those core elements and there isn't a mathematical nor reliable way to know that. This is what differentiates great games from mediocre games.

“Understanding what game you are creating is the cornerstone of a successful production.” - Patrick Plourde, Assassin's Creed 2 game designer

The counterpart is that, having a bigger number of game pillars (not excessive) makes the development of the game more clear. It leads to less doubts because more guidelines are created.

In conclusion, having a list of game pillars clear and well structured can help avoid needless work which will definitely result on a much better quality project with a high team moral.

But there is a need of a strong documentation process afterwards, to keep these ideas visible for all during the development process.

Examples

To start off with some examples we will see some game pillars to clarify the concept. Looking at the previously cited Blizzard game director, Jon Wilson, and his GDC talk we can see the seven core pillars of Diablo III.



We will see the first four ones in a more detailed way, because these four can be the most difficult to imagine.

Approachable: they wanted an easy-to-play game, with mouse focused controls and easier keyboard controls than "Diablo II". Approachable doesn't mean simplistic or shallow (hardcore game but easy to play and get into). Finally, the goal was to reach depth through complexity.

That point received some criticism because the lack of ramping up on complexity. But that game pillar led to the isometric camera and changes to the potion system.

Highly customizable: the problem they encountered when looking for a highly customizable game is that at the moment of development, they couldn't know if the player had all the abilities required so they had to do simpler combat mechanics and scenarios. They had a goal of deeper combat model but the customization was a pillar, so they followed that guideline.

Powerful heroes: to feel powerful they focused on the idea of "few against a many" through combat and death systems that make the player feel awesome. They also used identifiable archetypes through class design and skills that seemed unfair to the monsters.

Well paced rewards: the Diablo series was already well-known for the reward systems, so they decided to keep that as a pillar for Diablo III. But rewards are not just items, but also new monsters, environments bosses, skills... The idea behind that is that everything you put in your game is a reward to the player. To embrace that, the Auction House was introduced. But they encountered a problem when this part became a "P2W" (pay to win) and damaged the item and rewards value.

Development Pillars



TOMB RAIDER

Another video game example where we can see the Development Pillars is from Lara Croft: Tomb Raider Survivor.

The remarkable aspect of the development pillars shown in this example is the list of subaspects that appear when you start developing the idea of the game and that give form to what the result will be.

Tomb Raider was one of the first games to be categorized as Survival Action, and they had the idea from the beginning, so they built around the 3 game pillars.

Desperate Combat

- Ranged Combat
- Fluid Cover System
- Evolution of Melee Combat
- Weapon Progression
- Stealth Kills / Special Kills
- ... etc.

Smart Resourceful Lara

- Character Performance / Overlay System
- Survival Experience / Survival Skills
- Survival Instinct
- Salvage / Weapon Upgrades
- Intuitive, Physics-Based Puzzles
- Gear-Based Interactive Objects (Torch/Axe)
- ... etc.

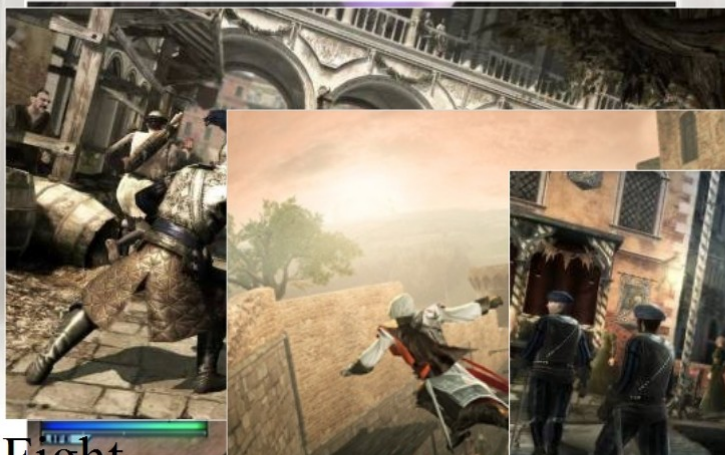
Traversal and Exploration

- New Traversal Mechanics/Air Steer
- Dynamic Traversal
- Retraversal/Fast Travel
- Traversal Equipment (Axe/Rope)
- Rewards/Collectibles

TOMB RAIDER CRYSTAL DYNAMICS SQUARE ENIX

The final examples are from Assassin's Creed 2

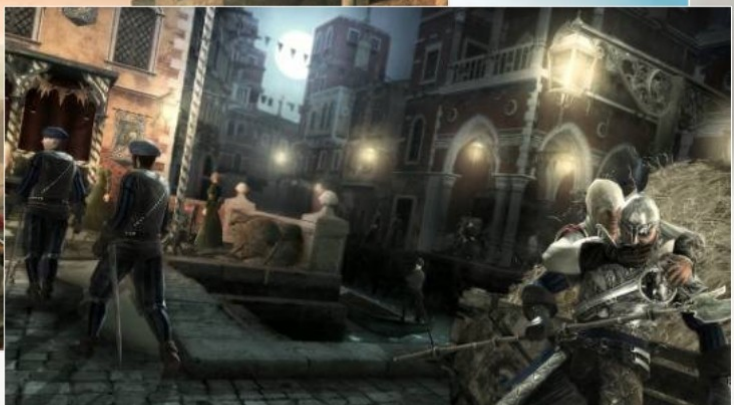
THE GAMEPLAY PILLARS NEED TO BE ROCK SOLID



Fight



Navigation



Social Stealth

The core gameplay pillars are: Fighting system, Navigation and Social Stealth. Ubisoft designed the game around these three pillars. To see it clearer, for fighting, they added tactical player choices (new moves, disarming enemies, new tools...). They also focused on the challenge of navigation coming from the environment and not from player controls.

To encourage the Social Stealth system they added an ability to use the crowd as a gameplay tool, so the player can take advantage of the environment to disappear.

EXERCISE

As an exercise, try pick your favorite game, or the last game you played and try to identify what could be the game pillars the designers first thought of.

LINKS

Jay Wilson's GDC talk (Diablo III game director)

<http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1017813/Shout-at-the-Devil-The>

Jonathan Hamel's GDC talk (Lara Croft: Tomb Raider Survivor)

<http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1017767/One-with-Lara-The-Croft>

Patrick Plourde's GDC talk (Assassin's Creed 2)

<http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1012306/Designing-Assassin-s-Creed>