

Analysis of Micro Duel Prototype

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Micro Duel is an iterative project, with each version being something standalone with a new set of features and mechanics, but with each version contributing to the outcome of the next. Each version of the prototype has been created specifically using the mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics framework (MDA) made by Hunicke, Leblanc & Zubek (2004). The current version being analysed in this essay is no different, and thus will also be using MDA as the main source of analysis. Past versions of the prototype focused solely on the core aesthetic risk-vs-reward and how this was communicated and reinforced to the player, creating a solid set of core mechanics that played out in a single battle with a static enemy. This latest version instead moved on to expanding the depth of the game with the introduction of level design and player progression. While some parts of this system, such as the existence of a player and enemy stat system, had been put in place previously, the introduction of progression required a whole new aspect of the game to be added.

The idea from the start was to move away from the single screen that the battles previously took place on, and use an 'overworld' type of space in which the player could move around and choose which enemies to fight, as they make their way towards a set endpoint in the game. While simply having the player progress statically from one battle to another would be simple, giving the player agency in how they approach fights would give an overall much more interesting experience and give room to create more depth in the design. The existence of the stat system would be added on to this overworld with the player gaining skills after each successful fight, thus getting stronger the more they played, and with the ability to see how their own stats compared to any enemies. Players then are given a new chance, to proceed as quickly as possible to the finish line, or take on side paths and fight enemies there, becoming stronger for the harder battles and gaining an advantage. This would contribute to the risk-vs-reward aesthetic and the players agency.

The Process

The actual process of creating this version of Micro Duel was much more straightforward than in previous ones, with all the major design questions coming up in the beginning. Firstly it was decided to work entirely in a grid system as this was both easy and typical for many games that use any sort of overworld, this would make actually laying out the levels spaces very easy. Secondly the control of the player had to be decided on, whether to use keyboard, mouse clicking or something else. But seeing

how the battle mode was accessed entirely with a mouse and buttons, it was decided on to use a very simple system where the player would show arrows in every direction they can possibly move, and clicking on the arrow would move them that way by one block. Attacking enemies thus also worked by clicking an arrow to move on to them, with the fight starting instantly. Enemies were simply placed as static objects, with certain ones blocking hallways requiring the player to fight them, while others just occupied side rooms and could be avoided.

The UI for this version was also simple and straightforward, with a text box added to inform the player of their level ups and the stats increased. The more difficult inclusion was a text box that would appear over enemies when the player mouses over them, to show how the players skills compare. In the end the decision was to show the differences between stats, not requiring lots of text, and letting the player know by how much they had above or below the enemy stat wise, quickly letting them know the potential difficulty of the fight. The final main decision was on the balance of enemies, with the outcome being that if the player made a beeline directly to the end, they would be on par with every enemy they fought, and players would be rewarded for fighting side fights by being stronger then the required enemies they faced, gaining an advantage for their extra effort.

Reflection

For the player, the newly added overworld does not really add that much to the game, with the main series of battles being basically linear and while they have agency in approaching fights it is still limited and restricted to the area they are in. But in terms of the depth existing in the battle system, this is an appropriate level of agency for the player and gives enough interesting choices while keeping the mechanics simple and focusing on the core without extraneous features. By keeping this focus, the main aesthetic that has been built up in previous versions is not affected much and still remains at the core of all the design.

A main issue, that mostly comes down to time constraints, is that this entire overworld mode lacks any polish or consideration towards player communication and feedback. So while it is not complicated, it does not really inform the player well about their actions, giving only very basic information. A big improvement would be to focus in the future on the communication design and more clearly connect and feedback to the player as they move between the two modes. This should include some tutorialisation that happens organically in the beginning as the player is not told about any goal and it is simply the linear layout of the level that guides them through it.

References

Hunicke, R., Leblanc, M.G., & Zubek, R. (2004). MDA : A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research.