

# Dark Souls Level Design

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## 1 Introduction

This report intends to discuss the implementation of mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics in the level design of the 2011 game Dark Souls.



Figure 1: A Game-State Screenshot

## 2 Illustrating Mechanics With Level Design

Dark souls is a role playing game which sees the player traversing an interconnected open world and engaging in combat with the many inhabitants that guard the many corners of this world. The player is presented with a melee weapon and shield and is provided with two attack options, two defense options and two dodging options. The attacking options include a heavy attack and a light, faster attack which deals less damage and uses less stamina. The defending mechanics include blocking enemy attacks with the shield or parrying the attacks which allows the player to counter the incoming attack with a riposte. The dodging abilities include the player being able to jump backward or dodge roll in attempt to avoid enemy attacks. However, a type of attack that is not immediately obvious to the player is the back-stab. A player may preform a back-stab if they have their shield down and they preform a light attack behind an enemy. This is particularly effective if the player is able to sneak up behind an enemy. The game illustrates this to the player early game in the undead parish by conveniently placing an enemy with their back facing the player at the end of a corridor as seen in figure 1. If the player cautiously walks up towards the enemy, they will go unnoticed and will have the perfect opportunity to preform the maneuver.

This is an example of using the environment and enemy placement to provide the player with an opportunity to exercise a mechanic.

### 3 Challenge Through Level Design

This combat system, overall is designed primarily for one to one combat as trying to fight more than one enemy at a time usually results in the player being unable to avoid the series of incoming enemy attacks. When trying to attack one enemy, the player leaves them self exposed to the other enemy, which can sometimes allow them to strike and stun the player which can often result in the player being frenzied. Even the earlier, weaker enemies in the game can easily kill the player when they outnumber them and unleash a frenzy of fast attacks. Trying to block a series of hits is only a viable strategy for so long as each hit reduces the player's stamina and can stagger the player if the player's stamina goes past a certain level. This dynamic is used to create difficulty in the game as the world is often designed in such a way that the player can easily find them self in combat with multiple enemies if the are not careful in traversing the local area. For instance, when the player is making their way through the undead burg, the come across some stairs next to a tower that lead down to an area where three undead soldiers are placed. If the player carelessly makes their way to the bottom of the stairs, they breach the region which triggers all three enemies the attack the player simultaneously. However, if they proceed with caution, they can trigger each of them individually and lead the enemy towards them to fight one on one which is a far more manageable task.



Figure 2: A Game-State Screenshot

Another way the game creates a challenging and a punishing aesthetic through level design is by placing the enemies in such a way as to ambush the player. This is achieved by luring the player into a particular area wherein there is a hidden enemy. If the player is not aware of their surroundings, they will leave themselves vulnerable to being attacked from behind by the hidden enemy. As seen in figure 2, the player is lured towards the enemy at the end of the corridor. From the player's perspective, the second enemy around the corner is hidden. If the player goes straight to take on the first bandit, the second bandit will sneak up behind them, jump on their back and put the player in a vulnerable position to be attacked by the first enemy. This forces the player to learn the hard way about the enemy placement implemented in the current level.