

WSOA3003A Micro-Project 3: Level Design Reflection and Analysis

For the 3rd microproject, a prototype had to be developed which focused on level design. This was achieved through iterating on the previous microproject prototypes. Using this as a base, a level was created around the established mechanics.

Intent

For this prototype I wanted to create a single level that utilized the mechanics already created. Since from my understanding, level design is creating a gameplay environment in which the player can utilize the mechanics and other aspects (such as obstacles and player capabilities) to create some form of positive experience through gameplay or discovery.

For this prototype, I adapted previous iterations into a gauntlet of successive battles. There would be three battles in total which comprised the whole level. Each battle would have a unique opponent that was slightly more difficult but would require a slightly different approach using the current mechanics.

I took heavy inspiration from many turn-based games that have this type of battle in an arena setting where it becomes a battle of strategy and attrition.

Process

Before even designing the new level, I reworked my battle system to remove some of the randomness for the players choices. In previous iterations all choices would be randomized and given out and this would lead to certain situations where the same choice was given for two or even all the options. The rework ensured that there would be no duplicates and even kept some choices constant to provide more agency and strategy for the player. Now the first choice will always be Attack, the second will either be Defend or Heal, and the last choice will be randomized between the special abilities (Cripple, Poison, Lifesteal).

With the new battle system, I could begin designing the 'level'. Since the main intent was to create a sequence of battles, the first battle remained as the enemy from the 2nd prototype but as a weaker version. This battle would remain fairly straightforward with this "Grunt" enemy only attacking, defending or healing with minimal results.

The second battle I implemented a "Berserker" enemy who was slightly stronger but did have a few extra additions to make the battle more interesting. To potentially make the player interact more with the system and mechanics, the berserker deals more damage than any other enemy. When their HP reached a certain threshold, the berserker would deal even more damage and would constantly attack with no self-preservation. The new battle system allowed players to just rush through enemies with attacks, so I designed this berserker enemy with the intention that players could utilize their defensive abilities more often, thus creating further engagement with the system.

The final battle was designed to be like a small boss battle, which could be seen as the climax before the end of the level. Nothing major stands out from the enemy, but it is the hardest battle relative to the others. The enemy designed is a kind of knight who is wearing armor with spikes all along it who I have named "Blademail". The gimmick with this character is that whenever you attack, you will receive damage in return. This coupled with the idea that this enemy will defend majority of the time, makes it so that you may potentially kill yourself by being aggressive. For this enemy I wanted the special abilities to shine as only physical attacks will cause the player to deal damage, however if they were to poison or steal life from the enemy, they can bypass this damage return.

The thought process for this gauntlet of battles was building on mechanics even though they are not clearly defined from the beginning because there is no tutorial. The first battle is very simple where you can just defeat the Grunt with little effort. The second is similar but it is easy to be overwhelmed if you do not manage your choices effectively. Finally, the last battle ensures you to use the system to its full capabilities or there is a likely chance you will fail.

Reflection

The actual level design could be greatly improved upon, but it is like what I had in mind. The prototype utilizes the mechanics I have created and iterated on to provide an experience that scales between battles. The current level design increases the reliance on the prototypes mechanics the further you go and creates meaningful engagement.

There are a few things I would like to do that would improve the overall design, such as create a more consistent battle system where the player has more control over what they do. In the same area I would want to improve the enemy AI so that it can react better to the players commands and in turn improve the desired effect from the level.

Another potential improvement I thought of but could not implement due to the time frame was to make the level less linear. This would be done with the addition of more enemy types which would be implemented between the first battle (Grunt) and last battle (Blademail). These intermediary battles (limited to at most three) would be a random enemy type each with their own unique patterns and reactions to the players attacks.

Would also like to implement a proper ending to the level because at the moment it simply cycles back to the beginning of the level.

In the end however, I am satisfied with the overall level design as it matches what I had intended.

References

MasterClass, "How to Become a Video Game Level Designer - 2021," *MasterClass*, 08-Nov-2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-become-a-video-game-level-designer#what-is-level-design>. [Accessed: 07-Apr-2021].

