

Assignment 1

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Introduction

For assignment 1, I had a hard time finding a game I liked that has either the required complexity to make this report longer than 2 sentences and not too much complexity so that I won't break the word count after one paragraph. I tend to like strategy games and big flashy RPGs which sounded like bad choices for this assignment. After looking at my game shelf, I stumbled upon the game "Spyro the Dragon", a PS1 classic I own on my PSP. I decided to use this game as the foundation for this report as it's a simple and very fun game. I will not be touching on the newer remake of that game since I do not own it. Also, to make this report shorter, I will ignore the flight levels of Spyro the Dragon as they have completely different sets of rules and objectives.

Goals

As long-term goals for the game, a player can complete the game by beating all the levels and defeat the final boss as well as collect everything to reach 100% completion. As this game is a level-based game, all levels have similar goals. When the player enters a level, they are presented with some enemies, gems and a path to follow. The immediate goals are clear, defeat the enemies, collect the coloured gems and make your way to the end of the level. As the player roams around, he can encounter frozen dragons and thieves carrying dragon eggs. Throughout the levels, frozen dragons need to be saved to complete the level and dragon eggs are an optional collectible for completion. Finally, a player needs to keep Spyro alive. Roaming wildlife around the level can be defeated to collect butterflies which keeps Sparks, Spyro's life bar, alive. New lives are hidden in special chests around the level.

The game offers many collection goals, collecting gems, collecting eggs, collecting frozen dragons and collecting lives. This set of goals gave birth to the name "collect-athon" for games such as Spyro the Dragon. These goals help the player work toward the long-term goal of achieving 100% completion. On the other end, defeating enemies, keeping Spyro alive and, as a medium-term goal, completing the level help the player finish the game.

Clarity

In part due to technical limitations, the game was built around giving the player all the directions they need to complete the goals. Since the engine could not render complex shape too far away from Spyro in the game, gems too far away to be rendered still sparkle, giving the player a direction on where they might be. Frozen dragons have a similar behavior in that their statues will render and shake when the player looks at them, making them pop in the environment. Sparks will also point towards the closest gem, helping the player find hidden gems that the camera cannot show.

To collect dragon eggs, an audio cue is played constantly. The player can simply follow that laugh to find the thief and chase him. Furthermore, the laugh was made as annoying as possible to encourage players to make it stop. Finally, all collectibles are shown on the screen when the player stop moving for a few seconds, reminding them of their progress.

The goals of each level can sometimes be confusing, as defeating all the enemies is not always the final goal. Small cutscenes play before each level with NPCs informing Spyro of his goal for this level. These NPCs can be activated again to remind the player of his goals in the level. Furthermore, most frozen dragon rescued will give a small hint to the player to remind them of their goals and choices.

Spyros health is very clearly shown as his sidekick, Sparks. Sparks' color will change depending on the amount of health remaining for the player and disappear when hit three times. When Sparks disappear, the player cannot collect gems at a distance anymore to show how much of a predicament they're in. Thankfully, harmless wildlife creates butterflies if defeated that increase Sparks' life or make it come back to life.

Choices

Spyro is not a complex game from a choice perspective, the player has only a few actions given to them from the start of the game. They can run around the level. They can jump using the jump button and using that same button twice will make Spyro slowly glide towards his destination. They can hold the charge button to gain speed and defeat enemies by hitting them or break objects. Finally, they can breathe fire to defeat close enemies or break some objects. These are all performative choices; the player needs to aim their attacks or their jumps to succeed.

However, some enemies and objects can only be dealt with either the fire or the charge. The game follows certain rules to show that information to the player. Enemies or objects made partially of metal will only visibly become hot if the player spits fire at them. On the other hand, very big enemies or very tough looking objects will stop Spyro's charge and damage him, showing they are resistant to his charge. The player needs to make the declarative choice of using their fire or charge depending on the obstacle. A similar declarative choice exists with the choice of gliding to some platforms or not. The glide arc is always the same for Spyro and the player can easily predict if they can reach a platform through gliding or not.

Ending a level is also a declarative choice for the player. Levels can be finished early to complete the game faster, but the player can also continue searching the level for collectibles at the expense of time and possibly lives. If Spyro is hit, Sparks loses some life and changes color. The player can make the declarative choice to go back and defeat some of the limited wildlife in the stage to regain life or carry on. If Sparks is gone, the player loses the ability to collect gems from a distance which makes this choice even harder to make. Thankfully, a player can choose to go back to a platform where a frozen dragon was saved to save his progress in case they are defeated.

Progression

Spyro the Dragon's progression is limited to completing the game and collecting all the collectibles. Spyro does not grow, he does not gain any new abilities nor become stronger as the game progresses. This was most likely made to make the game simpler and more appealing, but subsequent games in the series have shown that giving new abilities to Spyro makes the game more interesting. Without progression, all levels can be completed at 100% when the player first enters them. In the following games, parts of the levels are locked to some abilities (Though skilled players can move around some of these obstacles) which makes revisiting the levels necessary. While backtracking is not always considered fun, I would argue that Spyro was improved by making levels more memorable and adding activities in each level as the game goes on.

Resources

The resources Spyro has access to are limited. Spyro can collect butterflies to keep Sparks healthy and prevent the loss of a life. Lives are found throughout the level, but losing one simply means that Spyro is brought back to the last dragon platform he visited. The loss of all of Spyro's lives means that Spyro is thrown out of the level and all completion for that level is lost. While this makes the player lose some time, there is no long-term resource loss from a game over.

In some way, Gems could be considered resources. They are not expanded, but a certain number of gems is necessary to unlock some of the later levels for 100% completion. As such, the game length is increased by the need to collect more gems than a casual player might collect in one run to see all the game's content.

Variety of Encounter

There are a few types of enemies encountered throughout the game. Most enemies can be defeated in one hit and the only difference between most of the enemies are their type of attacks and the choice of which ability to use to defeat them. The enemies in Spyro the Dragon can be seen more as obstacles than enemies, they exist to possibly make Spyro lose a life, but do not pose much of a challenge. Some enemies are special however and need to be defeated using the environment. Finally, bosses are defeated after a chase where the player needs to charge to the boss and hurt it until it is defeated. Most bosses are known to be very easy if not long due to the chase part of their encounter.

The environment itself poses a much bigger challenge. Levels are covered in bottomless pits, hazards and traps. These obstacles are often much harder than the enemies and navigating through them require some skill. The difficulty of these obstacles and the enemies is very poorly distributed. For example, the level Tree tops appears near the middle of the game and is well known to be very hard to complete at 100% due to some of the jumps and glides necessary. As the game is otherwise easy, this level can be frustrating to many players.

The game could gain from a more varied type of bosses and a more distributed difficulty curve. The later games have shown how some of those improvements can help the game, though the third game also suffers from a very poorly distributed difficulty curve with some nigh impossible challenges.