MDA Analysis- Dark Souls

Rayyan Gafoor- 1839637

Introduction

For this assignment, we will be looking into the three Dark Souls (DS) games and their level design. When we look at the level design of these games we will be focusing on the environmental aspects. On further inspection, we will be looking into how the environment is built, how different environments result in different enemies and behaviours, and how item layout and locations are used. Breaking this aspect further down into those sub-categories (Enemies, Geography and Layout) we will be analysing the following: Combat, Gameplay and Game-feel. How do these sub-categories affect the player when using and learning the mechanics and how does this influence the dynamic? We will also see how the aesthetics of the game are manipulated through these.

Enemies

First, we investigate the combat system surrounding the enemies. DS has a variety of enemies and from hollows to the "Nameless King", each enemy is dynamic, equipped with its own set of movement and attack patterns. But how does a player go from fighting a simple hollow to fighting the notorious king. One-way DS does is through its environment, using level design as a learning structure. The environment is not only used to hint at the type of enemies found in areas using different themes, but it also matches their fighting style, forcing players to change theirs and their approach. The next section we will mainly focus on the tutorial, but also branch out from this.

The mechanics used in Souls games are not easy to master, which does make the combat system slightly more complex than other games. Although DS does make it easy to learn the basics. This is done by putting the player immediately in a conflict situation, but still making it easy enough for the player to win. Using a hint mechanic by placing orange markings on the ground for the player to interact with, the player is thought how these mechanics work. Accompanying these orange marking are strategically place environmental elements, such as gaps, enemies in different idle or moving positions and let us not forget a simple empty corridor (DS3), but well get back to the corridor later. The environment the placed in creates a safe space for the player to test these mechanics, an example of this is learning the plunging attack, take DS1 for instance, when you first encounter a boss, it is almost impossible to defeat him, but once you move around him you eventually progress to an area where you are now above the boss. The player is then instructed to use a plunging attack and once done, the player can immediately see the effect it has on the boss making the fight easier then before. This teaches the player the significance of the plunging attack. Another example is in DS3, with an unaware enemy placed just at the bottom of a small ledge, although this does not show how powerful the plunging attack really is.

The game also teaches players to use their environment to lure enemies and fight them one at a time. In the beginning of the tutorial, players are exposed to only one enemy at a time, making it easy to fight, but this soon changes when we are faced with two or more enemies and to complicate things, enemies that use different attack types such as melee and range. The game not only teaches you how to use the combat mechanics but also how to approach different enemies and situations. An example of this would be using walls and corners to block archers and luring melee enemies around them or using other forms of environment elements like ladders to divide and conquer.

Back to the empty corridor, specifically looking at DS3, using the environment and orange markings, the designers use this to manipulate the players curiosity, one of the main effects DS level design has on players. Although we are looking at the enemies, so where does this fit in? DS3 uses this curiosity to teach the players lessons. This marking specifically warns players to turn around, and like as most would do, players will continue moving forward and eventually they encounter an enemy almost impossible to kill and eventually die. Although, another great aspect about this is that this situation can

also be used to create a sense or progression, and that's just what DS enemies do, they help create a sense of progression. Once the player develops their own sense of dynamics using the mechanics provided, they can learn to use them including the environment to defeat this enemy, and once again approach matters. Players can soon learn that can lure this enemy, continue to dodge it and eventually lead it off a cliff, but only once they have observed the enemy's movement and attack patterns.

Geography

DS areas are not the most visually appealing, but they can be considered as some of the most well designed. The geography is used to enhance almost most of the play experience we see in the game, from combat to foreshadowing and not to mention linking each game. This section we will review how the geography does this.

First, lets look at how geography is used to tell the player where to go. DS games do not come with a in game map, and with the complex world designs, one might think this will make navigating through the game difficult, but this is not the case. In DS games (lets looks at DS3 again) whatever you see, you can somehow get to it, be it through some shortcut or a main path. This is mostly done through framing, lighting, but more often by using terrain. DS games are known for not building levels on a vertical scale, allowing areas to be seen from different points of view. An example of this is after the fighting through the first area in DS3, just before the first bonfire, the player can clearly view Firelink Shrine, one of the key locations that the player constantly returns to. The developers created an environment leaving indirect clues for players, encouraging exploration and rewarding players for their curiosity. Hence, using player curiosity and terrain to their advantage, even without a map, players can navigate through these areas of high levels of complexity. This creates the sense of an open yet distinctive world, that allows players to feel free and learn their way around through consistent area flow.

Let us move back to the idea of a vertical layout. This geographical design helps with various factors through out the game. Areas in DS games are all logically and functionally interconnected. This being said there is no one way street to a certain area. The game makes use of a lot of shortcuts, that need to be unlocked through traveling the longest route possible. Once these shortcuts have been revealed players can immediately observe how areas are connected, using the vertical layout makes this possible in almost every case. Considering DS gameplay, this helps the player feel like they are unlocking the world, leading to a sense of progression. Once again, we can also see the factor of curiosity playing a hand, since areas are not one-way streets, what is stopping players from choosing to progress rather then to explore further. DS simply uses a reward system, by placing items, weapons or even NPCs in certain areas, forcing players to explore the game almost completely.

Changes in theme affects geography as well as combat. Not only does the theme allow players to distinguish between different areas and hint to the type of enemies, but it also allows them to change the way they fight and play the game. How does geography affect combat? Well let us start with size matters. Depending on the area and the space you are in, certain weapons could lead to the players death, forcing the player to change their approach. There are three examples to this: 1. Fight in an enclosed corridor or space, using a long and broad weapon will not allow you to hit the target, instead attacks will bounce off from the walls and stagger the player, therefore using a faster shorter weapon will work best. 2. On the other hand what happens when you are face with a fighting on a ledge, using the faster weapon could result in the player losing balance and falling, therefore range or slower weapons are recommended, 3. Finally, there is the option of not fighting at all and using the environment to your advantage. DS does this mainly in areas that could result in an ambush or simply fighting enemies in unfavourable conditions. 3.1. In DS 3, in the cathedral rooftop, there are knights located on every ledge you turn on. The player could simply aggro these enemies and run away from them causing them to lose balance, fall and die. 3.2. Another simple example would be using the traps in the areas against the enemies.

Normally in DS games one is thought not to rush through things, and the game explicitly teaches the players this, using the world and enemies to do so. An example of this is the slimes located in the cathedral. These slimes hang from the ceiling and when a player moves underneath it, they jump down and ambush the player. This forces the player to constantly pay attention and gradually move through areas. Although, with DS being the game that it is, it challenges this ability of the player, by changing the geographical elements. In DS3, the swamp is a dangerous area that constantly applies poison to the player. This forces players to change their gameplay creating tension as the player moves through these areas. Therefore, it can clearly be seen that the geography allows players to develop different dynamics to accomplish their goals.

Layout

One thing that DS does well is telling stories, building the climax and frustrating players, this is done through items, locations and lore. Let us first look at the how Stories are told through the game, again this is best explained through DS3. Most of the game goes unscripted, leaving players to set their own goals and discover story lines and quests all on their own, and this can almost always only be accomplished through exploring every area of the game completely. To further progress on the story, certain environments will hold certain items and/ or details (art, scenes, objects) that build onto it. When players read item descriptions, the lore throughout DS and other souls games can be thought to the player. The details used in some areas also not only tell stories but also link the games, an example of this would be the corpse of Laddersmith Gilligan found in DS3. Players unfamiliar with DS games will overlook this minor detail, but this corpse is actually the body of an NPC found in DS2, a merchant that specializes in the art of ladders, leaving players to wonder how and why he is there. These items and minor details are all placed strategically to answer such questions. Back to the merchant, in DS3 his body is located on a broken yet stable ledge with (wait for it) a ladder leading right up to it, possibly the last ladder he ever built, which once realised this could trigger some emotion in the players.

On to the frustration that DS games create. DS games have a way to prey on players emotions and use this against them. One common way of doing this is by taking the joy of seeing an item and turn that into fear and hate. From item locations to treasure chest, DS uses these two game component to achieve this. Let us take, the items for example. As the player moves through an area, they see this shiny object (shiny means good right?), well as players move toward certain objects, they are then ambushed and killed because there were not aware of their surroundings, thus explicitly demonstrating how the environment is used against the player. When players move to these items, their view is almost completely obstructed from some enemies, who are just waiting for the right moment. Once again, we see how enemy placement comes into play. Another example of this would be placing treasure chest (rewards) right next to a group of enemies or one difficult enemy. The player, after killing them, will see the chest and believe it is a reward for clearing the area, well no. DS decided to create fear and destroy the hope of players by creating Mimics (enemies that are disguised as chest). With that being said we clearly see how DS uses manipulation to change the game-feel and play throughout the game.

Lasty, we investigate how DS uses the environment to develop a rise and fall in climax. Looking at DS3, when entering the High Wall of Lothric, players come across a deceased wyvern. One would think that seeing it dead would create relief indicating that its dead and the player won't need to fight it, well again no. This major detail foreshadows the fact that players will encounter other wyverns or creatures of its kind, creating tension leading up to the first time the player does come across a living one. Although, this specific wyvern only acts as an obstruction that can be avoided. Another way climax is raised in this location, is after defeating the second boss. The player is introduced to a view of almost all areas of the game, hinting at the long journey ahead of them.

If failure has no penalty, tension is reduced. DS places a heavy penalty on players death, by removing the players souls (in game currency), and this tension is further amplified by allowing the players to retrieve the souls, if they do not die again. Although due to the vertical layout of the map and dynamic

placement of bonfires helps reduce this tension. Which leads to the next factor, "just one more bonfire" syndrome. Bonfires are strategically placed to make the player feel at ease, using exposition. When the player comes across a dangerous looking enemy, almost always there is a bonfire or shortcut near by and in the opposite direction of the enemy, ultimately reducing the tension at these points. With that being said, with the tension drop players almost always find themselves saying: "just one more bonfire".

Conclusion

With that being said, it can be concluded that DS games are well designed in terms of level design, with each aspect affecting gameplay and feel. Although it goes unnoticed by the player, DS tutorials are so well-designed players do not realise that they are being thought how to play the game. Player's skills are tested through their conceptual understanding of their environment, combat mechanics and enemies by placing them in complex situations. DS will have players saying, "these guys are easy" to "I hate those archers". Creating challenges that teaches the player and putting them in situations that display their growth. Although, players are given to much freedom and choice, when it comes to the level geography and layout, that is almost all unscripted. This leaves most players having to look at guides, which could ruin gameplay and reduce the intended tension the designers hoped to create.

References

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