

MDA Analysis of Sort the Court!

2281696 – Robert Johannsen-Hanes

2021/04/04

Introduction

Dark Souls III is a third person action RPG developed by FromSoftware and published by Bandai Namco Entertainment. In the game the role of a character in fantasy world destined to try save it by exploring the fallen kingdom - killing and looting the former residents. Gameplay consist of exploration and combat against multiple enemy classes in large, interconnected levels. This report focuses on the Farron Keep level.

This report aims to analyse the Level design using the MDA frameworks a lens.

Context

Farron Keep is a level located in a dangerous, a toxic, stinking bog - the goal of the level is to light 3 ritual fires to unlock the boss. The boss of Farron Keep is the first difficulty spike in the game and beating them marks the end of Act 1 of the Dark Souls 3 campaign.

MDA Framework Analysis

Mechanics

Combat

The main method of engaging with the games systems is combat,

Player: Each “combat action” the player takes drains stamina. The player can attack, block and roll to effectively dispatch of enemies. Rolling makes the player invincible for its duration and creates space in encounters. The player can recover health a limited number of times which can be reset at a checkpoint.

Enemies: Each enemy class is unique and different movesets ,models and animations to tell them apart, enemies

Movement: navigation in the game is done by ground exploration of the level, with the movement speed being decided by the players choices as well as if they are running. Running consumes stamina. The player can also roll for a short burst of speed in a linear direction. In certain parts of the swamp, the water level is deeper limiting the players movement options (running is disabled, rolling is shortened). Falling into these parts also players a long recovery animation.

Status effects

Status effect can be applied to the player by the micro level elements, where after a threshold the effect is activated. Items can provide resistance to status effects.

Curse: Enemies in the swamp can apply the curse effect to the player and which causes them to die instantly.

Poison: The swamp waters in Farron Keep (+ enemies) are poisonous on contact and standing them for too long will apply poison. Once applied the player will continuously lose health until the effect runs out or they die.

Fire: The enemies are vulnerable to fire and once applied either die instantly (exploding) or burn to death.

Interaction

The player can interact with elements within the level.

Looting The player can loot corpses to gain useful items

Ritual fires the player can light these fires by interacting with them, lighting 3 of them will open the door to the boss.

Checkpoint (bonfires): These serve as the players respawn point, refilling consumables, the player can also warp around the level to other “lit” bonfires (serving as a checkpoint/fast travel system to quickly get around the level)

Dynamics

Ambushes: The enemies of Farron Keep remain in place until the player is spotted (sometimes these enemies are camouflaged into their surroundings), at which point they will chase the player. Most enemies in the level are placed on small islands in groups, resulting in little room for difficult combat, where if the player makes a wrong move, they either quickly die or fall into the swamp and get poisoned. Larger more dangerous groups enemies are in the deeper parts of the swamp waters usually guarding useful items and are optional (these enemies apply the curse effect on hit).

Navigation: By moving around the level, the player begins to explore it, uncovering its secrets and most optimal routes to get where they need to be. Using the negative effects of walking directly in the swamp the player is encouraged to minimise the time spent in water (as dealing with enemies becomes harder and the risk of being poisoned) and the level starts to funnel the player through choke points. The walking into the water is made mandatory as it directly obstructs access to the ritual fires needed to access the boss. The player is encouraged to explore the level for these fires and items to make progress.

Narrative: Through moving through the swamp, the player begins to piece together the story of level. The level lore is found in items descriptions. Level tension is built as the player works through the swamp being forced to fight increasingly difficult enemies with islands becoming less common before reaching the boss.

Aesthetics

Fantasy: The game is centred around the player being in a large fantasy world with its own lore and culture. While this fantasy world is on the brink of collapse and this is shown through Farron Keeps visuals and enemies (slugs, corrupted humans, knights fighting the corruption)

Discovery: Each level in the game is created like a large open maze with the goal of killing the boss. These mazes are created in such a way that the loop in on each other creating shortcuts and paths for the player to discover. In the case of Farron Keep the level is designed to be explored for the ritual fires to open the boss arena. The level is large and open with secrets for players who explore. Each enemy has an attack pattern that be discovered and learnt by the player.

Challenge: The level is built like an obstacle course, where falling into the water results in debuffs and more difficult combat, with enemy challenge increasing the closer to the boss (weak slugs -> Abyssal Humanoids -> Darkwraiths -> Abyss Watchers (boss)). The game is setup where the player will die many times and respawn at the last bonfire. The player will go through the process of slowly clearing through the swamp gaining ground by getting to new bonfires. The level ends with the first lord of cinder a large difficulty increase from the previous bosses.

Sensation: The level is meant to invoke a sense of finality and sadness in the player, through its visuals of the black swamp, surrounded by ruins crumbling into the swamp. The player will get lost as all the area looks mostly the same with large trees blocking sight lines, the only sound played are the ones the player makes by disturbing the environment making the swamp feel lonely. The only music track played is in the boss fight where bells toll opening the sound into violins and vocals sounding like a person mourning.

Conclusion

Farron Keep of Dark Souls 3 captures the feeling of an all-consuming swamp at the bottom of a fallen kingdom, using its mechanics and visuals to make the player act in deliberate ways as they navigate the swamp. The level builds up in difficulty through encounter design as the player progresses before culminating in a boss fight which for the player to get to, they must engage in macro complexity of entire level (combat, puzzle solving, exploration).

References

FromSoftware (2016) *Dark Souls III*. [Digital] (PC) Tokyo, Japan: Bandai Namco Entertainment.

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M. and Zubek, R. (2004). *MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research*.