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GAT211

Lab Report #1

**Lab Report 1**

1. **Intro**

This lab report will be broken up into six different sections, including this introductory section. The section immediately proceeding this one will detail the creation process of two battle systems that I made in preparation for this lab (the missing third system will be dealt with in the final section). The third section will detail the playtesting done on one of these battle systems as done in the lab on Friday. The fourth section is comprised of changes made to both battle systems, one based on feedback from the lab, the other based on knowledge gained in the lab through the instructor as well as the other students. The fifth section will cover those battle systems created by students that were in the group I playtested with. Finally, the last section will deal with “the game I did not make”; that is, a game that I could not help imagining based upon the recent terrorist attacks in France. This final section will go into why I could not help thinking of these events in terms of a game, the mixed feelings I had about that fact, and why I eventually decided to not make that game.

1. **Creation**

I was in GAT211 last semester (Fall 2014) and stayed in the class until the week in which project 2 was due. Due to health problems out of my control, I felt I no longer had the time to commit to a class such as this that required a great deal of my time, even though it was one I enjoyed immensely. I say all this so that you will be aware that I have already gone through this first project once successfully (scoring a 94), but that I do not intend to rest on the “laurels”—whatever they may or may not be—of that former project. I’ve decided it will be a far more productive experience to create new, hopefully better systems and games since I have the luxury of repeating an assignment with which I have had a great amount of experience. With that said, I will now relate the process by which I created these two new battle systems.

Since I was getting another shot at this familiar assignment, I decided it might be beneficial to change up the creative process I’ve usually used in these classes before where I started with a theme or vague narrative and worked from there. This time I wanted to start with the mechanics only and create a system without any set theme in mind, letting the mechanics completely define the experience, at least in the beginning. Ever since I made my first board game in GAT210 (a cooperative game where two players were trying to escape destruction by a tornado) I’ve wanted to find a way to reuse sand timers as both a component and mechanic. The sand timer brought an intensity to that first game that my games since then, while still having their own virtues, have sadly lacked. So, I decided I would just start with the sand timer and figure things out from there. Since this assignment required that we make a battle system using the five most common battle traits or statistics—Attack, Defense, HP, Damage, Armor—I immediately thought about using the sand timer to fill in for one or more of those traits. The most obvious one, to my mind at least, was Hit Points. I thought it might be interesting to have someone’s hit points drop at a constant rate once they had been hit instead of losing some set amount of hit points for a given attack. This has at least a tenuous connection to reality that set amounts of damage lack: once a person has been injured grievously, they tend to lose blood and get progressively worse over time.

When I discussed this idea with Joe at the end of the lecture on Monday, he mentioned I might want to use colored sand to represent the different traits they stand for. Red for HP (Blood), Blue for Armor, and so on. So, without much more thought put into it, I ordered a bunch of sand timers from Amazon and decided to work on the system with the mechanics in hand. In the meantime, I had another idea for a system that I had been wanting to pursue since last semester: a crafting game that uses the mechanics of a combat system. With Joe, I talked about the pros and cons of developing as a PvP game or a PvE, and they both have their own particular challenges and charms. In a PvP system, the narrative might be that two smiths are trying to earn the same contract by creating the best sample of their wares. As such, the players would be both attempting to craft an item while also trying to sabotage the other player. This particular solution, while interesting in its own right, appeared to be a bit too complex for the simple system we were being asked to create for this particular assignment. So, I decided that I would attempt to make a PvE system where the player would try to craft different items, gaining benefits to stats with each successive build while also suffering randomized setbacks to each project that would come naturally when trying to smith a weapon (missed anvil hits, overheating, etc…). These setbacks would act as the “attack” against the current item, lowering its overall HP. Each item would have to have a limit to how much HP it could lose before it drops in quality, which would then affect the gain in stats at the end of the build. Of course, if the item reaches 0 HP, the build fails altogether and the player loses. The “armor” trait would be the character’s stat that can protect against setbacks and is consequently raised upon item completion. Thematically, the armor could be “knowledge” or “competency”. There could also be random “power-ups” in addition to set backs that either increase the player’s “knowledge” or give the player an especially well-executed maneuver that increases the HP of the object. As I am coming to see, there is a great depth of potential here. But for now, back to the sand timers.

Upon receiving the sand timers, I started to look at the various timespans available to me, deciding that the HP should probably be the longest time available with traits such as armor, which takes the place of the timer representing HP, ideally around half that time. I didn’t want to use any more than two sand timers to keep the game from becoming a confusing, chaotic mess, but I still needed another mechanic to initiate attacks in the first place. To keep things as simple as possible for the time being, I created a rule where the attacker roles a D6 and the defender rolls a D4. If the attacker rolls higher than the defender, the defender loses their armor and their HP sand timer begins to count down. If a player has their HP timer running down, they can then use their attack roll (D6 again) to “regain” their armor by rolling successfully against the other player (D4). I stopped there as going much farther would have required introducing more rules into system without testing the possibly overly chaotic base mechanic. So, with these prototypes done, I went to the lab.

1. **Playtesting**

When my group (comprised of Dakota Galayde and Maddie Santino) got around to testing my game, I had to tell them the rules. In telling them the rules, I immediately realized one situation that I had not taken into account during the game’s initial creation. What would happen when a player who has still has their armor up (that is, their “armor” sand timer is running and not their HP sand timer) while the other player has their armor down? At that point, there is nothing for that player to do as they can neither make the situation worse for the other player nor do anything else to improve their own. I asked if it seemed unfair that the player would then just “forfeit” their turn to the other player, especially in a game where time is a critical factor. Dakota said that, yes, this might not work well but since none of us could think of anything better to do, we decided to just the start the game and see how quickly that situation would arise.

It happened maybe 30 seconds in. It took about three seconds to even realize what had happened: Dakota was in the lead position, with Maddie’s HP running down and he realized that he had no reason to roll. That stopped the game dead, as we assumed it would. Nothing immediately sprang to mind, and by that time Prof. Holcomb was free, so we asked for his advice. His initial advice was that it may not, in fact, be that unfair to let the other player just continue to roll in an attempt to gain their armor back. The player who is forced into this position is already constantly losing hit points, which can only hurt that player and consequently help the player who is “losing” their turn. Prof. Holcomb also suggested that this might just be a case where the game has run into an issue that it cannot reasonably fix without the use of custom-made components (sand timers where the rate of slow of sand could be changed), reminding me of the insane amount of time I had put into making custom components for my final project in GAT210 two semesters ago. Repeating that experience, even though I am fairly happy with the result, is not something I’m willing to endure again, so that was immediately off the table. Wanting to at least finish one playtest, my group started another game, using Prof. Holcomb’s initial suggestion.

The game lasted about 4 minutes overall when Maddie’s HP timer ran out. During the chaos that was ensuing both of them actually forgot about their HP timers altogether, focusing more on the state of the armor timers. It is this fact that now, after the lab, has revealed to me the most about the limitations of using sand timers as mechanics in board games. In my first GAT210 game, where I had used sand timers to great success, there was only one running at any given time and both players had to keep track of that same one. Having both players not only keep track of two different timers, but also to make sure their opponents timer hasn’t run out, was asking too much. Both players did enjoy the fast-paced, back and forth action that the game gave rise to, but perhaps thought that, at least as far the sand timer components were concerned, needed a bit more work. While using a sand timer for one’s HP was intuitive, using another one for armor was completely unintuitive. Also, while playing a game that has another mechanic separate from filliping sand timers, players tend to lose track of one and focus only on the timer that is immediately at risk or in play. Looking back to it now, it is clear that I should have only had one sand timer per player and that it be used where it made the most sense, as the player’s overall hit points and the rate at which it is lost. While that rate must remain constant unless I wish to torture myself through crafts for a 1/4th of the semester, I believe in the right setting, it still has the potential to be a valuable and engaging mechanic. What that setting may be, I am not sure I will ever find out as I may very well end up taking Prof. Holcomb’s second word of advice and let this game die an easy death and just move on.

Summary

* Players were unable to keep up with two sand timers each while also performing another mechanic.
* The HP sand timer makes much more intuitive sense than the armor one.