

Critical Analysis

Hollow Knight: A destined trip with endless challenges

In Art of game Design, Jesse Schell divided the complexity of a game into two types - the innate complexity and the emergent complexity, which means the difficulty of understanding the system of the game and controlling the characters to overcome the difficulties emerging along the way players play the game respectively. For instance, strategy games like Sid Meier's Civilization have relatively high innate complexity while 2D platformers like Super Mario have a relatively low innate complexity. The level of the innate complexity and emerging complexity is not the determine factor whether a game is interesting or not. As is mentioned above, for games of different types, we always have different standards.

For a 2D ACT game, there is no doubt that the most direct way players gain pleasure is making an attack. A crisp attack can always boil the blood of every player. That's to say, when we are designing a 2D ACT game, relatively low innate difficulty may be better since players can learn how to attack from the very beginning.

Hollow Knight provides only a few operations for a newcomer - attack, down-top attack, top-down attack and how to heal yourself. Despite the economy system and item system, most items you buy or get in the scenes can only passively increase your status or help your journey rather than combat. The extremely simple system makes players spend more time getting a clear picture of how to control the character.

All players who once played Hollow Knight must be impressed by the top-down attack. Players can attack the enemies below them when they jump into air, which greatly enhances the dimension of the combat. In most 2D ACT games, if players are given a melee weapon as their main weapon, players have to do damage the Boss during the attack intervals. For characters who cannot fly and are only able to attack enemies in front of them, the Boss battle in 2D mode often reduces to a turn-based combat. In games with thicker RPG taste, like Salt and Sanctuary, developers provide some distance items or special magic, or make the scene of the Boss battle more complex so that players can manage to attack the Boss in other direction to solve the "turn-based battle" problem. In Hollow Knight, however, the top-down attack and down-top attack allow players to attack the boss even when it is exerting an attack. This mechanism also leads to a lot more flying bosses in Hollow Knight. Some master players can even fly with the Bosses by this technique.

Furthermore, since players will be raised a little if their top-down attack hits enemies or specialized objects, although Hollow Knight exerts restrictions on players' travel skills to restrict the area they can arrive, those who play Hollow Knight for the second time or have mastered top-down attacks can traverse over some terrain by this technique. For developers, despite the increased difficulty in designing the map, for example, players may reach some certain scenes that may influence the game process; this mechanism does diverse the platformer part of Hollow Knight. Moreover, this technique also allows the players keen on speed run to find better routine continuously. In the long wait for the sequel of Hollow Knight, players themselves are even developing some platformer levels and strengthened bosses, proving the fact that the simple mechanism has bought growing emergent complexity to the whole game.

I am keen on games with few rules but challenging to be a master. When developing some mini games, I also keep this in mind as a creed. Hollow Knight is a typical game following this rule. It is worth tens of hours for every player.