-GATING MECHANICS AND PROGRESSION-

What Games Are  
Tadhg Kelly

**Gating**“A gate might a physical door that they have to unlock, a time window that they have to show up for, a specific condition like a solving one task before unlocking another, or a requirement that a player research one technology before being allowed another.” (Kelly, n.d.)

**Progression**Progression has two distinct meanings:

* Progress through the levels or tasks of a game, usually a single player game, toward completing a campaign. This meaning sometimes also encompasses story.
* Advancement of certain key meters like character level, experience points or high scores.

In game design, the term tends to be used informally to describe a sense of both.

Gating and Implicit Linearity

* Linear design allows you to control the pace at which the player is introduced to new content and harder challenges
* In games where the player is exploring non-linear space, gating mechanics can be used to create implicit linearity
  + Can gate off certain areas or content until the player has progressed to a certain point in the game, thus controlling the order in which the player does things to some degree
* Gating can be used to control how a player experiences your game, while giving them some level of freedom to explore

Gameplay Design Fundamentals: Gameplay Progression  
By Mike Lopez

* Progression is defined as
  + 1: a series with a definite pattern of advanced [syn: patterned advance]
  + 2: a movement forward [syn: progress, advance]
  + 3: the act of moving forward toward a goal [syn: progress, procession, advance, advancement, forward motion, onward motion]
* All three of the above definitions for progression apply to games, because it is both the realised pattern of advance and the act of movement towards the ultimate goal that are essential to an enjoyable experience for the player
* The pattern or structure of the advance is what will ensure a rewarding experience during gameplay and will ensure the continuation that is necessary to turn non-repeats in repeating players

**Key Elements of Gameplay Progression**

Games that do not structure the distribution of these elements risk the danger of overwhelming the player with too much up front, or not keep the users engaged enough with the new elements to encourage them to keep playing

* **Game Mechanics**
  + All of the controls and interactions within the game, including new weapons, abilities, powers, vehicles and environmental states/events
  + These are extremely important as they directly affect the control complexity and learning curve of the game
  + In more complex games, layering in the mechanics/mechanics progression is crucial so players are not overwhelmed by the complexity of controls
  + 2 main styles of mechanics progression are Gated Access and Directed Gameplay. Some games use one or the other, while other games use a mix of both.
    - Gated access: making mechanics initially unavailable until a later point in the game (can be accessed via inventory, or progressively added in)
    - Directed gameplay: make all mechanics available up front but direct the gameplay to utilise the mechanics progressively (earlier levels only require the basics and later levels build on this)
  + The important thing to remember is that most games can and should have their mechanics structured as part of the gameplay progression in order to deliver a great experience to the player
    - Easy to grasp, keep the user wanting more and rewarding continuation with new abilities/challenges
* **Experience Duration**
  + The average time that it takes to complete each stage (including deaths if applicable) or course (using the most relevant vehicle)
  + Not all games need to increase the length of the experience to be fun, but experience length can directly support the gameplay progression and the overall enjoyment of the experience
  + Even subtle differences in experience length over time will subconsciously increase the sense of progress for the user and therefore their overall gratification
  + On a micro level, the user should feel a sense of progression within a single mission, level or course, and building the structure into the content allows designers to control the pacing
  + On a macro level, the sense of advancement and overall game percentage completion for the player should be obvious
* **Ancillary Rewards and Environmental Progression**
  + Visual, aural, decorative etc.: environmental wonders, fancy visual effects, scripted events etc.
  + It is great to weight some of the more spectacular environmental wonders and effects up front, but an enjoyable game needs to have all the level, course or mission experiences built so that new visual rewards are staggered at a pace that keep the user interested **(Environmental Progression)**
  + Ancillary rewards add to player gratification and therefore encourage replayability
  + Visual environmental rewards can be very pleasing and memorable to the player and include things like fantastic environments, amazing particle/lighting effects and incredible scripted action events
  + Environmental progression of these elements is important to structure since it is key to encouraging continuation and replay
  + Environmental rewards are especially valuable to the player experience since they can directly affect gameplay pacing
  + Decorative rewards can be things like trophies or medals that serve as unlocked collectibles but do not alter gameplay, but adds value in helping recognise player progress
  + If decorative ancillary rewards are the bulk of the unlockable content the first unlockables should be revealed quickly and then over progressively longer time periods from that point
  + Ancillary rewards should be interesting and unique enough to keep players interested
  + Ancillary rewards can also help you play up key game events (visual and audio affects) to make it more gratifying for the player
  + Key visual rewards that dramatically affect the pace of gameplay and thus need to be structured into an environmental progression are things mentioned above such as scripted action events, as well as object groups, terrain types and weather types
* **Practical Gameplay Rewards**
  + New game modes, upgrades and practical unlockable content are very useful as the “carrot on the stick” that entices users to continue playing the game
  + Practical gameplay rewards lead the player through the game and are the most effective means to encourage continuation and replay (vs. decorative rewards or just beating the game)
  + A well-planned and executed practical reward structure is extremely helpful in enticing player continuation and replay
  + It is extremely important for a player to be able to understand the rewards system; in cases where this is intuitive, such as receiving a reward after completing a level, this does not need to be explained
  + Keeping the system as obvious and simple as possible will reduce the amount of explanation feedback the interface will need to provide
  + The player should also get a glimpse at the reward content that lies ahead in order to encourage their long-term continuation
  + It is important that main content unlocks of the game should feature practical gameplay rewards only, and should kept presented separate to the ancillary rewards
* **Difficulty**
  + Not just how hard it is to pass obstacles and NPCs, but also how much risk is taken with respect to player injury/death, weapon depletion or equipment damage/loss
  + The best structured games start out extremely easy to allow all players to quickly experience the reward of game progress
  + Linear progression may frustrate casual gamers too soon, and thus a curved difficulty progression can often be the best choice
  + The difficulty progression must be verified and tuned via focus testing

Sources

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