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MDA Analysis: Level Design

MDA Analysis of Dark Souls

Dark Souls is a third-person action roleplaying game (RPG) in which the player takes control of an undead character that sets out to defeat certain boss enemies through combat and collect their souls in order to link them and preserve what is known as the First Flame (FromSoftware, 2011). The following essay will analyse the game's level design, which is a process where games are created with certain aspects in mind such as difficulty and teaching game mechanics in order to create a positive experience for players, and this will be done by using the MDA Framework as proposed by Robin Hunicke (Hunicke, 2004). This will be done by looking at the game's world-space, specifically its hub and the open-world experience it brings, the game's difficulty, reasons that players continue to play the game as well as the presentation of lore and information.

Dark Souls is an open-world game that makes use of a hub area from which players may access other areas. Areas can be unlocked through exploration and certain objectives in-game such as defeating specific enemies or obtaining specific items. In this we see that progression is encouraged through exploration and appeals to Discovery, one of the 8 categories of aesthetics that defines games as exploration of uncharted territory (Hunicke, 2004). This is done by giving players complete control and freedom to go wherever they would like in-game without limiting them by ways such as keeping them on a linear path, while also providing ways for the player to find new places to explore and the cycle repeats until the player reaches the end of the game. The open-world aspect also allows players to pick which available area they would like to explore first, meaning that the decisions players make hold weight and in doing so are able to create their own unique experience by forming their own path in the game.

Dark Souls has a story and lore which is not explicitly provided to the player other than a cinematic cutscene at the start of the game which gives the player context to the world. Lore and other important information is provided through interaction with some of the game's non-playable characters (NPCs), item descriptions and through places. For example, should an item be a ring with flavor text that explains the owner was killed by a landslide in location A, should the player go to location A it may be possible to find said landslide. A number of boss enemies are also mentioned in the opening cinematic, and as they can be fought in-game this gives them some importance. This implicit aspect encourages players who enjoy narrative and storytelling to explore areas, talk to as many NPCs as they can as well as pick up as many items as possible in order to be provided with more information and context.

The game is notorious for being brutally difficult with its combat. Players are provided with a brief tutorial section at the start of the game and then the difficulty scale increases drastically. Combat against boss enemies are often tests of endurance and encourage more careful gameplay. When players are defeated, they lose their resources and if players cannot collect them before they die again, those resources are gone forever. If players are not careful, they can be defeated very quickly and some boss enemies do enough damage to defeat a player in one or two hits. This appeals to

Challenge, one of the 8 categories of aesthetics that categorizes games as an obstacle course (Hunicke, 2004). This gives players an obstacle in which they must overcome and as such players will fight boss enemies repeatedly and learn from their previous mistakes as well as the enemy patterns and use the information learned through play to try to do better in the next attempt. The steep difficulty strengthens this sense in most players as it means they are taking in more information and making more attempts at defeating the enemy.

Due to the aesthetic categories Challenge and Discovery which influence the play of Dark Souls, players are able to continuously play the game despite the gameplay loop being redundant (explore, fight boss, lose, fight boss, win, repeat) as there are constantly obstacles for them to overcome and areas to explore. As players have a say in when they unlock areas due to having to manually go out and meet the criteria to unlock those areas, players will keep playing in order to unlock and explore every area. The same can be said for the feeling of challenge as each enemy offers something new and unique which constantly has players adapting to the situation which provides new challenges for players and due to the steep difficulty players are rewarded with a sense of relief and accomplishment when defeating boss enemies and to replicate this feeling players seek out more challenges.

In conclusion, Dark Souls makes use of great level design that plays on the emotional response of players. The aesthetic categories Discovery and Challenge are seen the most and the level design focuses on these categories by providing players with difficult enemies to overcome and a sense of freedom and exploration for players, as well as the agency to decide on how and when they would like to progress the game's story.

References

FromSoftware. (2011). *Dark Souls* [Video Game].

Hunicke, R. (2004). *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research* (p. 5).