Creating engaging gameplay with only two buttons: Design Concepts in "ERS"

TCY Games - Grant Williams

One of the projects I have in the works is an adaptation of the traditional American card game "Egyptian Rat Slap" (abbreviated to ERS). The way you play is as follows: the deck of cards is divided between the players, and whoever goes first places a card in the middle - this will be referred to as the "center pile." If the card played meets a "slap condition" such as two of a kind, a sandwich, a run of 3 numbers in a row (ex: 4, 5, 6), then players can slap the center pile and whoever does it first collects the pile. The other way the pile can be collected is if a face card is played. When this occurs, the next player is "challenged" and has X amount of attempts (1 for Jack, 2 for Queen, 3 for King, and 4 for Ace) to draw another face card to pass the challenge to the next player. If they fail to do so, then the challenging player can reach in and collect the center pile, assuming a different player has not slapped the pile first after spotting a slap condition. The rules will be left at that for sake of simplicity.

The game boils down to two types of interactions: playing a card onto the center pile and slapping/collecting the center pile. When transferring this concept to a video game, this means that only 2 buttons are needed in order to play, with a directional

pad/control stick unnecessary outside menus due to the lack of choice when playing cards. This enables the design and presentation of the game to be more relaxed in a way akin to party games such as Jackbox games.

With the control scheme decided, the next question is "how could this game be made more engaging with only two buttons?" The original, more relaxed version of the game will be present in the final version regardless, but with a story campaign and online mode planned, gameplay will need to be shaken up or else risk becoming stale over time when played in a non local multiplayer setting.

A preface before going further: one of the main aspects of the game's design is that the rules are not set in stone, and customizing them is encouraged for local play, especially when the people playing might not even know them. The rules come in a wide range of complexities, from allowing a double sandwich to enabling players not even playing to slap a three of a kind for an instant win. The rules don't just set the framework for the game, they *are* the game.

For the story mode, the player will face opponents who each have a specific rule as their gimmick, such as a gourmet chef who plays with triple and quadruple sandwiches, and an Elvis impersonator who plays with the "marriage" rule (a king and a queen next to each other); The player will have to figure out the rule their opponents use as they go. Using a health system instead of just trying to have all of the cards at the end, slap conditions will have differing damage values to enable strategic choice as they can pick and choose three other rules to play with to cater to their favorite play style.

For the online multiplayer, there will be a casual mode which plays the same as the local multiplayer mode, but additionally there will be a more strategic mode where players pick a set of two rules to use on top of the defaults, but the rules their opponents choose aren't known until they use them. Just like the story mode, there are two ways players can be eliminated: run out of cards, or run out of health, where more complex/difficult slap conditions to pull off will deal greater amounts of damage to their opponents. Strategy is important, as even if there is a meta to which slap conditions are most optimal to run, they do not stack, so if all four players run the same two rules, then only those rules will be active, plus a random rule added for the sake of variety. On the other hand, if four players all ran a different set of two rules, then all eight of said rules will be in play.

Even with a lot more experimentation and development ahead, the game concept has evolved far beyond just a simple game played with two buttons, and it's only going to become more interesting as time goes on. Stay tuned!

(These card designs are placeholders, not final)