WSOA3003A MDA ANALYSIS 3: Child of Light

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Child of Light (2014) is a 2D platformer role-playing game developed and released by Ubisoft Montreal. The game tells the story of a child who wakes up in a strange mysterious land that goes on a fantastical journey to retrieve the sun, moon and stars from an evil queen holding them captive in order to return home. *Child of Light* depicts remarkable level design; with integrated obstacles making the journey progressively more difficult as the player goes on, concise and visually appealing environmental storytelling and mechanics balanced with the level's design to create a unique and pleasant gameplay experience. This paper will analyse specific aspects of *Child of Light* and discuss its level design using Hunicke, Leblanc and Zubek's MDA framework.

Child of Light is a 2D platformer role-playing game with an integrated active time turn-based battle system. The game tells the story of Aurora, a young child who wakes up in the mysterious land of Lemuria after supposedly dying from an illness in her sleep. She is told that to return home, she must retrieve the sun, moon and stars held captive by the Queen of the Night and return Lemuria to its former glory (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014). The game has two modes of play – exploring and battle. While the player is exploring, they can run, jump and as one progresses further into the story, fly around. They are also able to control a firefly-like character named Igniculus to reach interactable objects out of Aurora's reach, turn on light in dark areas within the level, heal allies in the party and slow down enemies so that Aurora can evade them. Aurora can also open chests to collect potions and other collectibles (see Appendix A) and move boxes around to reach higher platforms when she is unable to fly (see Appendix B).

The player can only control Aurora while she is venturing into Lemuria but can control different characters in the party during the active time battle with enemies (see Appendix C). During battle mode, Aurora and people in her party can battle up to three enemies at the time, waiting the time to cast launch an attack. The player can choose to launch a melee attack, heal an ally in the party using potions or an ally's ability, cast a spell against an enemy of their choice, slow down enemies using Igniculus, defend against attacks and flee from battle. The player is unable to flee from boss battles. All these actions take unspecified amounts of time; for example, Aurora's slash melee attack takes a "medium" amount of time, while her spells take "long" or "very long". When enemies are defeated, Aurora and her party gain XP and may level up, collect skill points, and unlock new skills which make their actions more powerful or gain new actions (see Appendix D).

Using the theoretical knowledge that Hunicke, Leblanc and Zubek's MDA framework (2004) provides, as well as Rudolph Kremers's book *Level Design: Concept, Theory and Practice* (2009), one can infer that level design focuses on game mechanics, obstacles within the levels and interactable objects; it is the phase of the game's design that incorporates mechanical design as well as environmental design (which can be considered more about aesthetics). It combines the visual and audio elements of a game and the mechanics and dynamics that can arise throughout to immerse the player in a unique type of gameplay, to make the game slightly more challenging to the player, and thus can be considered one of the most important aspects of the game design process. The way a game achieves this is crucial to creating an enjoyable player experience.

Child of Light's level design can be considered an extremely good example of level design due to its environmental design and how it functions in parallel to Aurora's mechanics. The game has many blocked off areas where the player cannot reach without moving certain objects in order to reach them. For example, the player's route may be blocked off by a door, and to open it, they may have to pull a lever placed on a more elevated platform, which they may only be able to reach by placing a box on top of a button that needs weight constantly on it to keep a door open (see Appendix B). This aspect of game play makes the level more challenging to navigate and would then require the player to explore the level more to find the solution to the problem at hand, much like a puzzle. The game also contains collectible potions and other artifacts (such as Confessions) which helps Aurora get stronger scattered around the game world in chests (see Appendix A). These aid in further immersing the player within game lore and offers great replay value (allowing the player to return and collect all artifacts). While the game has enemies patrolling around, they can be relatively easy to avoid due to Igniculus's existence (its ability to slow them down or distract them), and even more so due to Aurora's ability to fly. In the game, there are certain areas that hinder these abilities to balance out the game. Specific areas that Aurora explores have objects that can directly hit Aurora and decrease her HP (such as the thorn bushes in the second level as seen in Appendix E), which makes flying much more challenging to the player; often times forcing the player to walk instead.

The levels in child of light get progressively trickier to navigate, with more powerful enemies that often times stalk the player on sight, unavoidable battles and areas forcing Aurora to walk instead of fly, *Child of Light* finds the perfect balance between challenging and enjoyable. Many visual aesthetic decisions serve as both mechanical level design and as

environmental storytelling. The story speaks of the land of Lemuria; a world where the Queen of Light once governed but was ripped from her grasp by the Queen of Night, leaving behind a mostly empty civilization crawling with monsters and no citizens. The world has little to no NPCs except for the enemies and the Lady of the Forest Aurora saves at the beginning of the game. The colour scheme of most areas is grey and devoid of many bright colours (or are usually bright areas accompanied by dark obstacles), giving an eerie atmosphere to the game. Many areas in-game requires the player to use Igniculus to be used as a makeshift lamp as these areas are pitch black. These areas not only become obstacles to the player as they must use Igniculus's depleting energy to navigate the darkness as well as to notice enemies before becoming ambushed by them, but they also depict the effects of light being taken from the world as well as the extent to which this was done. This further shows how *Child of Light* accomplishes a unique, immersive narrative experience while simultaneously challenging the player.

To conclude, *Child of Light* is a game with very interesting elements of level design – each decision having meaning to both its environmental storytelling as well as its mechanical design. The ways in which the game balances the difficulty of navigating the level with the capabilities it offers to the player. The challenges, the obstacles, the enemies and other aspects of the game's level design makes for interesting gameplay and overall an extremely positive player experience, with great replay value.

References

1. Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M. & Zubek, R., 2004. *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research.* s.l., s.n., pp. 1-5.

2. Kremers, R., 2009. *Level Design: Concept, Theory, and Practice.* s.l.:s.n.

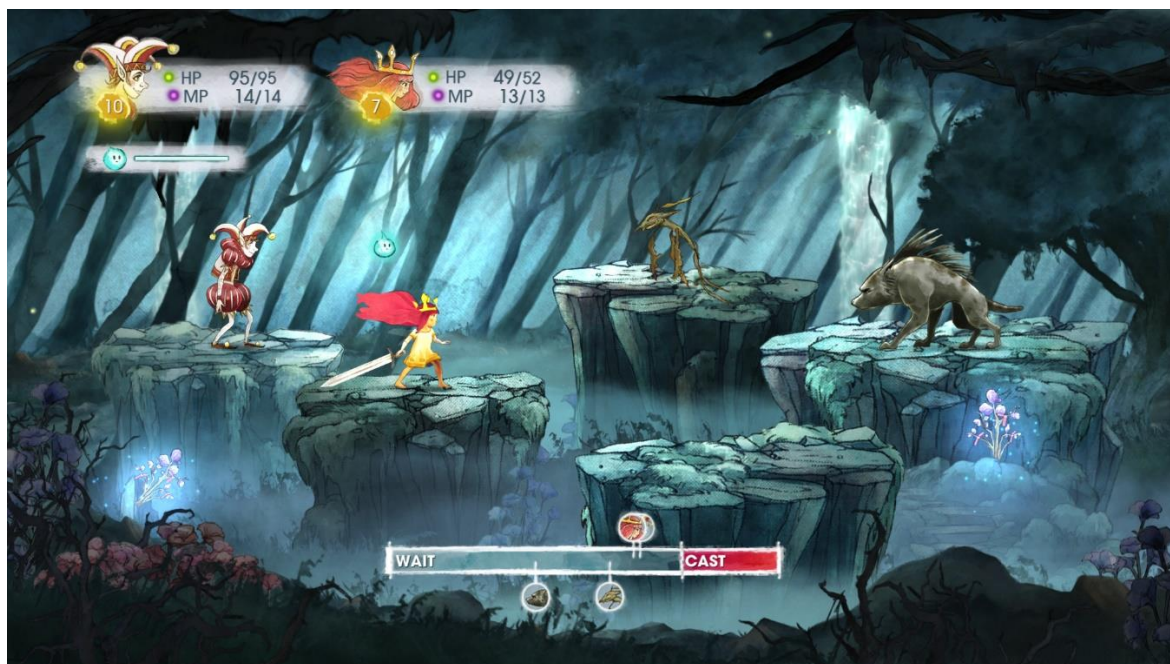3. Ubisoft Montreal (2014) *Child of Light* [PC] Playstation Vita. Montreal: Ubisoft.
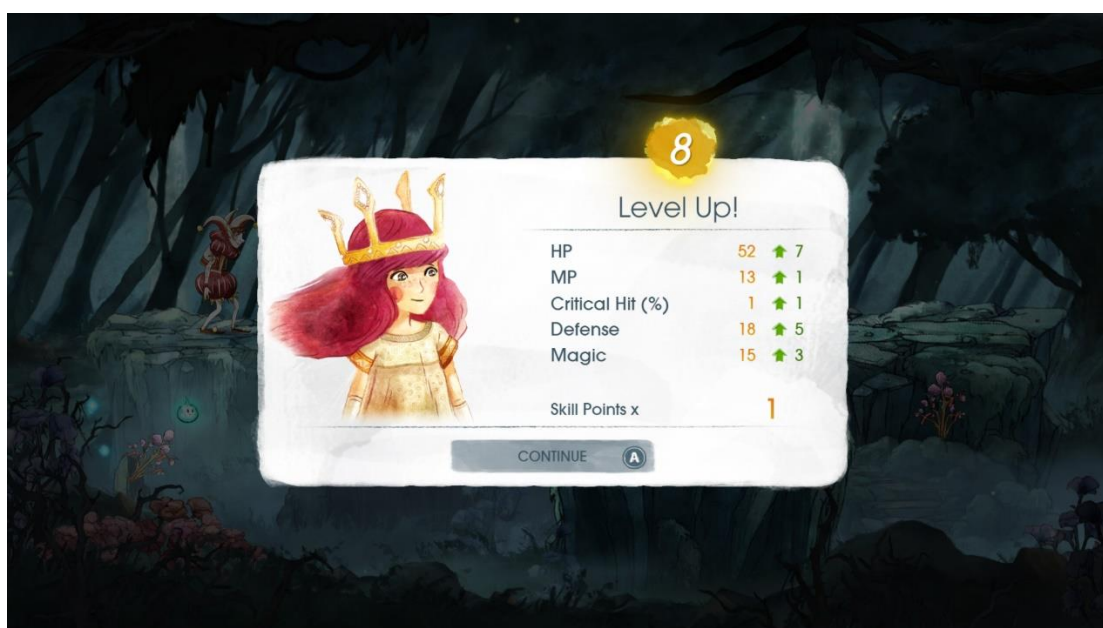
Appendix List
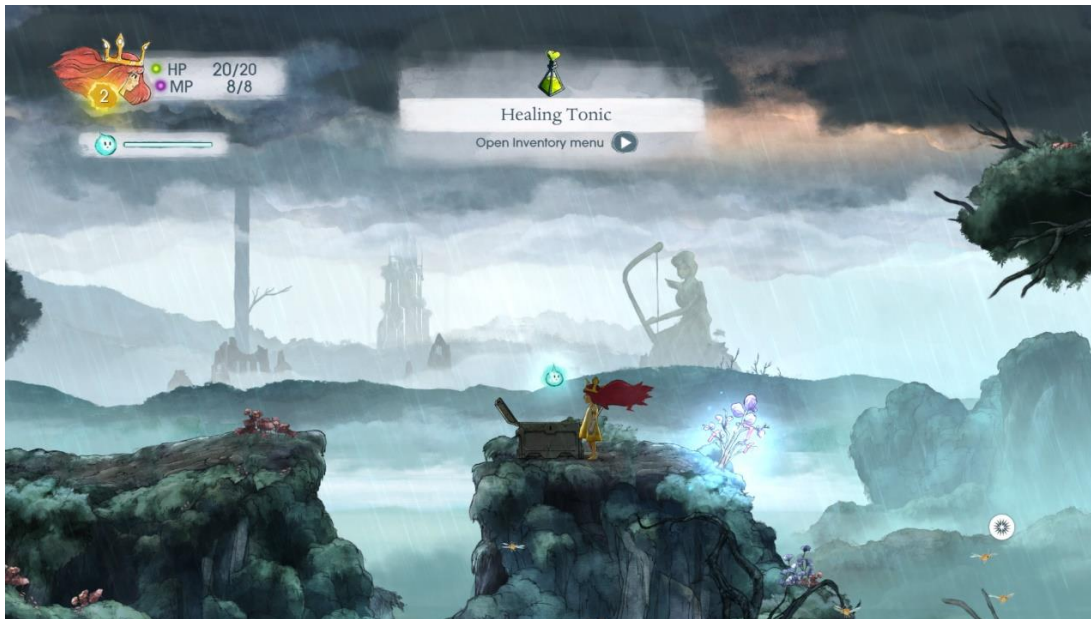
Appendix A: in-game screenshot of Aurora receiving a Healing Tonic from a chest

Appendix B: in-game screenshot of Aurora pulling on a box onto a moving platform.

Appendix C:in-game screenshot of the battle system, featuring Aurora and her party against various enemies.

Appendix D: in-game screenshot of Aurora leveling up after a battle, and her current stats.

Appendix E; in-game screenshot of Aurora flying next to a thorn bush.