GAME 2304 Level Design 2
Adventure Game Analysis
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

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INTRODUCTION

- Game:
  - ***The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (2006)***
- Context:
  - The Elder Scrolls games take place within an expansive and deep universe, mostly in a world called Tamriel, consisting of many continents and races
  - This ES game takes place during the "Oblivion Crisis", a demon invasion of Tamriel led by the game's antagonist, Mehrunes Dagon
  - The player's character is no one significant initially, just a person who was at the right place at the right time to be given a critical task
  - After progressing the main quest a little, the player will enter the first Oblivion Gate of the game to close it and save a city
- Goal of Analysis:
  - Study how this level introduces key gameplay mechanics and environmental storytelling within the Planes of Oblivion and the world of The Elder Scrolls
- Key Terms:
  - Firmness (Structure), Utility (Function), Delight (Aesthetic), Continuity (Level Flow), Distinction, and Direction

GAME DESIGN VS. LEVEL DESIGN

Game Design:

- Focuses on closing the Oblivion Gate to save the city from invasion.

Level Design:

- This specific area in the Planes of Oblivion is known as "The Deadlands", one of the many realms of oblivion ruled by Daedric Princes/Lords
  - Environment challenges the player and provides exposition for the world of the Daedra

Game Mechanics Introduced:

- New Enemies, Sigil Stones, Vertical Level Structures, Platforming (minor)

Level Focus:

- Teaches the player how to survive in Oblivion
  - Navigating Paths
  - Climbing Sigil Keep
  - Combat with Daedra

LEVEL OVERVIEW

Setting

- The player enters the Oblivion gate after helping a few guards vanquish a couple of demons right outside of the besieged city of Kvatch
- Within The Deadlands, the intended path is quite clear and linear, with some branching to allow for exploration

Firmness

- Plenty of architectural consistency throughout The Deadlands
- Landscape looks almost alien compared to the regular, green world of Tamriel
  - Lava rivers, jagged rock formations, twisted organic structures
- The Sigil Keep tower is an obvious focal point, visible from everywhere and symbolizing daedric power of the realm

Utility

- This level teaches players essential mechanics like platforming, combat and narrative related puzzle-solving
- Lava pits, Narrow bridges, Sigil Stone interaction
- New Enemies

Delight – Aesthetic emphasis on dread and urgency

- Red sky/lighting
- Molten landscapes
- Harsh Daedric Structures/Architecture
- Organic Structures

Enemies (Demon Underlings)

- Scamps
- Clannfear
- Dremora

***ENTRANCE** (LOCKED FRONT GATE)*

Environmental Storytelling & Atmosphere

- **Visual Storytelling**
  - Very little dialogue within this level, landscape itself tells a story
  - The lands are desolate and scorched, torn apart by lava and littered with towering organic structures, hostile fauna, and various remnants of battles
  - The environment and architecture displayed tells stories of domination and death
  - Within the towers, daedric symbols and organized structures could suggest a calculated plan to invade the other worlds and continue their plans of domination
- **Continuity**
  - The atmosphere in The Deadlands mirrors that of the destruction at Kvatch, literally and figuratively → hopeless, apocalyptic red skies and storms, scorched earth
- **Delight**
  - Spiked, dark architectures
  - Lava & Fire
  - Sky/Lighting & Weather
  - Music (ambient & combat)
- **Contrast**
  - Very clear and strong differences between the fantasy world of Tamriel and the demonic hellscape of the Planes of Oblivion

Level Layout & Progression

- Firmness
  - Linear path with vertical complexity, once the player reaches the Sigil Keep
- Direction
  - Visual cues (red glows, lava rivers, towering structures and doorways) direct the player towards the level objectives
- Utility
  - Players must adapt to new environmental hazards (Spike traps, Fire traps, platforming) and the verticality of the Tower
- Progression
  - Upon entering the portal, the player navigates narrow paths and platforms that funnel towards the Sigil Keep
  - Within the keep progression is vertical, as the player must ascend the tower to close the oblivion portal
- Exploration
  - Branching paths and detours for loot but focused progression towards the exit

Player Strategies & Classes

- Class-specific Approaches
  - Warriors – Must rely on melee combat or Bows
    - Confined spaces in the tower can make melee combat challenging
    - Certain brawler enemies (Clannfear & Dremora Warriors) can close gaps quick
  - Mages – Ranged spell advantage, Fire resistance spells, Healing
  - Rogues/Thieves – Limited stealth options, sneak attacks with Bow
  - All classes can benefit from having a high Acrobatics skill, as this can allow the player to jump and traverse like a superhuman
- Distinction
  - The layout provides opportunities for all classes to succeed, but lacks specific stealth-based opportunities
  - lots of head on encounters

ENVIRONMENTAL CUES

- **Sigil Keep Tower** – Epitomizes the firmness, distinction, and continuity of the Daedra
  - The tower is not just a structure, it's the heart of the Daedric invasion and a structural representation of Mehrunes Dagon's power
  - Ominous & Oppressive architecture and glowing sigils instill fear
- **Sigil Stone**
  - This stone is a power core for the Daedric invasion portal
  - Found at the top of the Sigil Keep, it's a literal and metaphorical representation of Dagon's control over Oblivion
  - By capturing it, the player destroys the Oblivion portal and halts the invasion
- Environmental Storytelling & 'Delight'
  - Subtle, yet clear details can be found scattered through the level:
    - Caged prisoners mistreated by Daedra, bodies of Kvatch soldiers, Daedric banners and symbols
    - Twisted organic hallways and ritualistic structures
- Immersion
  - All these aspects of design deepen the player's sense of urgency, as well as the significance of the mission's completion

STRENGTHS

- Firmness, Distinction, and Continuity
  - Strong visual/architectural design, art style/direction, and overall atmosphere provides consistent worldbuilding reinforcement and grounding for the player
- Utility
  - This level introduces the sigil stone key mechanic (closing oblivion portals) into the game for the first time, as well as other mechanics in a clear, intuitive way
- Delight
  - With its harsh, alien-like landscapes and nightmarish structures, this level is visually stunning and is clearly meant to immerse the player in fear
- These aspects of level design all come together to reinforce and further the narrative of the game
  - Foreshadowing before this level makes the experience of closing the first Oblivion gate much more impactful
  - The player not only joins the fight against the forces of Oblivion, in completing the level, they become the unique key person with the knowledge to help stop the overall invasion (how to close the gates)

WEAKNESSES & SUGGESTIONS

- Utility
  - Linear level design lacks optional paths and can feel restrictive
- Balancing
  - Difficulty spikes for certain classes, depending on skill levels
- Continuity
  - The level's exterior (landscape areas) could use more traps and encounters
- Replayability
  - More Side objectives/Quests or random encounters could lengthen the level and make it more engaging → on the other hand, this is essentially the Oblivion Gates tutorial

IMPROVEMENTS: PLAYER ENGAGEMENT/EXPERIENCE

- Firmness
  - As previously mentioned, the outside of the Keep could be improved by adding more dynamic obstacles or hazards: more platforming, lava bursts, debris hazards
- Utility
  - There could be more class-specific paths or opportunities throughout the level
    - i.e. Stealth pathways to get behind key enemies, Magical barriers that mages can dispel, etc.
  - More interactive puzzle variety, like Skyrim's dungeon puzzles
- Continuity
  - More NPCs with dialogue or books with lore throughout the level would be nice to hint at the larger conflict at hand, further immerse the player

CONCLUSION

- Recap
  - This level acts as a sort of tutorial, teaching the player the process of closing Oblivion portals for the first time while introducing new storytelling devices
- Strengths
  - Very strong atmosphere, visually striking, clear and effective SFX and OST, effective mechanical tutorials, clear progression and environmental storytelling
- Improvements
  - Class-specific approaches
  - Better use of exterior spaces
- Closing
  - When it comes to level design, overall atmosphere, and storytelling, I think TES IV: Oblivion is one of the greats and this level showcases it well
  - While it may have some drawbacks, I believe that this game, as well as this level analysis, can serve to inform future developers specifically in balancing aesthetic, mechanical, and narrative elements of level design

Overlooking Tamriel (**Imperial City**)

REFERENCES

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