Assignment 4

“**This is Why Games Make Our Kids Violent**”

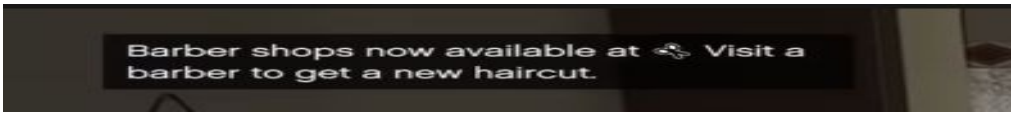

Fig 1: Decisive Finishers of Self Esteem

Gameplay Style: Decisive Finishers(DF)

“A combat maneuver initiated by the player that serves to remove an opponent or entity from the game world. Decisive Finishers are uninterruptible after initiation and take a specific amount of time - specifically until the player is given control to perform other actions again.”

It can be considered that each game is unique. However, certain games can be categorized with similar gameplay styles, offering a distinguishable style of play experience. Decisive Finishers(DFs) can be considered as one of such styles, and will be defined and analyzed here. *Gameplay design patterns*[1], **Sicartian**[2] mechanics,

and MDA((M),(D),(A)) mechanics[3] will be used to identify and discuss design structures surrounding DFs.

While the use of iStar's Goal Model and Machinations.io were considered, they were ultimately not used in this report as they were not considered to be extremely important. Although a few player goals are mentioned throughout the course of the report, they are not central for this gameplay style. Many of the game examples below are also extremely large, which would result in overly complicated models of player goals which do not strongly support my arguments. While some feedback loops are also mentioned, I quickly realized that many extra factors would be needed to make such loops function in Machinations, creating unnecessary bulk which again would not support my arguments as strongly.

Central Concepts, Definition

Interface Simplification

Players often need to perform actions or *abilities* through their games' *Focus Loci*. How players initiate these actions vary greatly depending on the game medium as well as their affordances. Many *Computer-Based Games* have pointing devices and keyboards which have buttons which are mapped to specific actions, while tabletop RPGs simply have players verbally describing their actions to the Gamemaster. Since the activation of these in-game actions often need to account for the technological affordances and constraints of the medium, complex actions are simplified by being mapped to a single button(keyboard, controller) for *computer-based games* or details are simply omitted when actions are described in RPGs. As DF-styled games are generally combat-centric, a high degree of simplification is required to map different maneuvers with similar results to a single button. In the case of DFs, the result is one or more opponents killed or removed from the game world, ceasing to be a threat to the player. Stealth Games, such as the Assassin's Creed[4][5] series and Dishonored[6][7] series use this extensively. Approaching enemies from above or behind result in different animations, but ultimately **assassinate**(M) the enemy. Social deduction games such as Among Us[8][9] also have DFs when **assassinating**(M) an innocent player.

As noted above, many of these button-to-action simplifications seem to stem from interface and human limitations - in a typical first-person shooter *computer-based game* control scheme, approximately five buttons can be pressed at any given time on the keyboard, and another 3 on the mouse. Given the rise of virtual reality, however, players are given more freedom and control with *mimetic interfaces* having an increased level of fidelity and granularity, which drastically blurs the line between when an action or maneuver is initiated. Furthermore, it is more difficult to determine when the player does not have control over their *Focus Loci* in a VR environment, making it difficult to implement DFs. This issue can be observed when comparing Doom(2016) and Doom VFR. While Doom(2016)[10] allowed players to initialize a DF, which triggered a mini-cutscene when close enough to an enemy, Doom VFR simply allowed players to

teleport(M) to that enemy[11], animating the death of the enemy afterwards without relinquishing *player agency*.

Larps have similar issues with action abstraction, as it can be considered that there is no abstraction - after all, the player is enacting the action. As such, it can be seen that player actions are always interruptible, since they can stop the removal of an opponent at any time. These issues could be solved by having a gamemaster determine when an action cannot be interrupted(D), for example. In general however, larps encounter the larger issue that two opposing players need to agree to perform a DF, making it unclear as to who initiates the DF itself. It could also be seen that all players involved initiate the DF as well. For Decisive Finishers, only one player initiates the DF, which eliminates many larps from this gameplay style.

Reduction of *Player Agency*, Uninterruptible Action

As a result of this mapping, however, the player typically does not need to provide additional input to complete the maneuver. More importantly, once a DF is initiated, it cannot be interrupted by the player, similar to a *cutscene*. It should be noted that interruption is different from additional input to complete the maneuver - although players may retain control over their *Focus Loci*, the removal of the enemy entity continues to be an *Irreversible Event,* which can make it similar to a *Scripted Information Sequence*. The effects of a DF could possibly be reversed after the event - enemies may be revived, or the game world could be reset. However, players cannot cancel a DF while it is being played.

The idea that a Decisive Finisher takes a predetermined amount of time is also essential to the playstyle. As such, many games which contain this playstyle tend to be *real-time computer-based games*, since they are easier to keep track of time(cutscenes) with *Dedicated Game Facilitators*. In theory, turn based or *tick-based* board games could implement DFs, but it could be more difficult to make DFs be meaningful as they often require a sense of three dimensional space. One example of this could be the gamemaster in Dungeons and Dragons[12] describing how a player stylishly slices the head off of a dragon(D) during combat if the next hit is guaranteed it will defeat the dragon(1 HP left, for example). Since each turn in D&D during combat takes a specific amount of time, this could be considered to be a DF.

If certain additional actions are required for a Decisive Finisher to complete, one could argue that there is still a level of player agency. If the player fails to input the rest of the actions the DF may not be performed, essentially allowing the player to **cancel**(D) the DF. In general, however, if there is a significant degree of reduced *player agency* after a DF is initiated, it can still be considered as part of a Decisive Finisher gameplay style. One example of this can be found in God of War 2[13][14], where a sequence of buttons is required as a boss finisher *cutscene* proceeds.

Visually Conflict-Centric

The objective of DFs can be considered central to what distinguishes it from other simplified actions. Many, if not all *computer-based games*, require abstracting actions to a series of button and key inputs. Point-and-click games can be considered to be based on such simplified, uninterruptible actions, yet many cannot be considered to be DFs - they do not remove an entity from the game world in some shape or form.

The existence of an entity to “remove” also implies several aspects to the games that feature a Decisive Finisher gameplay style. Firstly, there are most likely *enemies* in the game, implying that there is conflict between certain *agents.* Secondly, the conflict, be it internal(mental) or external(physical battles) should be shown in an externally visual way. One counter example would be a player avatar mentioning that they eliminated an enemy off-screen in a *computer-based game*.

Although the conflict needs to be visually represented, the method or medium in which the information is displayed is not as limited. In many *computer-based games*, such visual information is output via a monitor. However, in a tabletop RPG such as Dungeons and Dragons, the gamemaster’s narration(M) of events, along with the imagination of the players and the optional inclusion of a game board all serve as visual representation of the conflict. It should be noted that visual *dedicated game facilitators* are important in DF as relying only on the imagination of the player may create a low-fidelity vision of what the designer envisioned. It is perhaps this that so many examples of games with Decisive Finishers are computer-based, as they convey this information with a high degree of fidelity.

Non-Randomness of Result

Finally, such a maneuver can only be a Decisive Finisher if the result is definite, such that the enemy is defeated. While the result must be clear, the chance of initiation may not be - it could be that rolling a 10 or above in a 20-sided die triggers a DF in a game. A TRPG example of this would be the use of a “Hero Point” in Drakar och Demoner[24]. A “Hero Point” allows a player to eliminate randomness in a roll, as opposed to normally rolling to determine if a weapon strikes its target, for example. This Hero Point could be used to, again, finish an enemy off (again, 1 HP dragon) with a guaranteed hit. This could also incentivize the gamemaster to describe the finishing kill in detail, creating a DF.

This type of result removes several cases which may seem like finishers, but has a variable outcome. These can be “Ultimates”(M), which may defeat an enemy but only when used in the right moment. One example would be the concept of Limit Breaks(M), which are powerful combat moves, in Final Fantasy VII[15]. While it may increase the likelihood of defeating the enemy, it does not guarantee it.

Game Examples - Edge Cases

Influence of Predetermined Story Structures, Repetition

Dragon's Lair(1983) is a game based fully on *Quick Time Events*, with some scenes involving the protagonist defeating an enemy[16]. Since DFs share some similarities with *QTEs*, such scenes in Dragon's Lair could be mistaken as a Decisive Finisher. However, the issue here is that while the action is uninterruptible, there is no reduction of *player agency* when compared to before the maneuver is initiated. Furthermore, it is unclear when the finisher begins in such games. In order to arrive at that specific scene, all the previous inputs needed to be correct as well. In this sense, the entire game leading up to that combat maneuver could be seen as the DF - which is too broad. As such, the combat maneuvers in Dragon's Lair are not DFs.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3's(MW3) ending[17] has a similar issue such that it is a narrative-heavy QTE reliant on cutscenes between player input, culminating in the death of the antagonist. Unlike Dragon's Lair, the player has much more *agency* before the ending, with standard FPS mechanics. As such, depending on the perspective of the reader, it could be argued that there is a relative decrease in player agency as it enters the QTE ending. In this sense, it could be seen as the Boss Finishers in God of War 2. However, MW3 does not have similar takedowns of other bosses as in God of War 2. As such, this ending can be seen as more of a *Finale Level* than a Decisive Finisher, especially because it provides the player with a sense of finality(A) and catharsis(A). The ending also has a heavy influence of a *Predetermined Story Structure* due to its use of QTEs, making it less of a DF.

These two examples help show the difference between a Decisive Finisher and narrative heavy QTEs, which can be too large to be an "atomic" DF. Another aspect important for a DF-styled gameplay is the repetition of such maneuvers in these games. If MW3 had several smaller QTEs eliminating different enemies, they could be considered to be Decisive Finishers too. There is some degree of subjectivity here in determining how much of a reduction in *player agency* there should be for a maneuver to be considered a DF, but that should be a discussion between the designers.

The aforementioned Doom VFR also can be considered as an edge case. Since the player initiates the DF by teleporting(M), the distance between the player and the enemy creates a variable Finisher duration. However, since the difference is nearly negligible, it is difficult to determine whether or not a significant effect is created. Furthermore, since the player can turn away from visually watching the maneuver, the focus of the player may not be on the finisher itself. Thus, strictly speaking Doom VFR is not a DF-styled game. Yet, the aspects of a DF gameplay style in Doom VFR cannot be ignored.

Guidelines - Does and Don’ts

While this section discusses guidelines for designing games with a Decisive Finisher gameplay style, the dynamics and aesthetics of such a gameplay style will be discussed heavily too, as they heavily influence each other. These guidelines help steer the designer towards a well made DF-styled game. Guidelines are underlined.

Challenging Gameplay

Since a DF guarantees the defeat of an enemy, allowing players to perform DFs at any time would not make for *challenging gameplay*. While what makes something challenging is indeed subjective and the game experience may not be to challenge players, balancing how and when a DF is allowed to be executed can drastically affect the difficulty of the game. No matter what type of experience designers want to create, do take the level of difficulty into account when deciding when players are allowed to perform Decisive Finishers.

Rhythm-Based Emphasis, Dramatic Connection

To allow for *challenging gameplay*, many games opt to only allow DFs to be performed under specific conditions. Stealth games, for example, tend to only allow players to perform DFs only if they are out of the *Line of Sight* of the enemy. Mirror’s Edge, for example, allows DFs (**disarms**(M)) to be performed when the enemy is in the middle of their attack[18], with a window of opportunity of around 1 second. This type of *dexterity-based action* forms the basis of many DF-styled *computer-based games.* If only small windows of opportunity are given, these finishers become *rhythm-based actions*, which again can drastically affect the difficulty of a game. This aspect of rhythm can heavily influence the “feel” of the *Focus Loci*, if using one. As such, do consider how the rhythm of Decisive Finishers influence the diegetic aspects of the game. Similar to cutscenes, DFs can hint or even show narrative aspects simply through the actions of the *Agent*. If designing a role playing game, how can the player feel like he/she is embodying the character? In Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, the *Focus Loci* performs DFs in a fluid, ruthless way[19]. In Apex Legends, the DFs are specific to each character, and thus each have distinct mannerisms that are taken into account[20].

Tension

Rhythm-based DFs affect *tension* as well. Although the result of a DF is definite, only allowing small windows of opportunity to trigger DFs can lead to tension. As a consequence, it can be considered to be a release of tension everytime a DF is performed. With opposition being a common theme in DF-styled games, it is perhaps not such a surprise that DFs themselves contribute to it. Similar to a narrative structure, putting many DFs in a short amount of time can reduce the impact of each DF, as the tension is constantly low/leveled. This could be desired, depending on what the designer wants - for example, allowing larger windows of DF activation for

lower-levelled enemies. In either case, do consider the level of tension in between DFs when designing the gameplay.

Narrative Integration, QTEs

Since Decisive Finishers can be extremely similar to *QTEs*, there is a risk of making DFs too narrative heavy if multiple inputs are required, similar to MW3. This emphasizes the need for a minimum amount of maneuver repetitiveness in a DF-styled game. As such, strive to make "atomic" DFs, and allow players to perform multiple DFs in a game session. This may not always be possible, or may be made scarce to emphasize the DF itself, similar to the Fatalities(M) in the Mortal Kombat series[21] - only 1 is allowed in every game session, but is pretentiously grandiose to let the winning player feel glory(A). This also reduces the influence of DFs in that specific game, to the point where it could be considered an edge case.

It should be noted that this guideline heavily depends on the type of gameplay "feel"(kinesthetics) a designer is aiming for. On one hand, having long, QTE-like DFs like in God of War 2 allow designers to present narratives with maximum control, but make it difficult to repeatedly develop similarly unique finishers(for each boss, for example). The lack of player agency for long periods of time can further reduce interest in the gameplay, if done poorly. On the other hand, short one-button-trigger DFs allow designers to quickly reuse animations and quicken the rhythm, reducing *player agency* downtime. However, too much repetition can get boring quickly as well, requiring designers to come up with variations in how DFs are triggered or executed.

Modifications for Gameplay Style

There are a few modifications and additions for Fullerton's[22] when considering methods to design Decisive Finisher-styled gameplay. For Chapter 4, dramatic elements in games, the window of opportunity to activate DFs could influence the concept of Flow as well - allowing players to perform DFs without a challenge can lead to boredom, while too small a window could lead to frustration. Yet, the reward could be greater if the window was smaller. This is especially important if a DF is essential for the progression of the game, as the player cannot progress through the game without performing the DF. The book also mentions the challenge of personal limits in Chapter 11, which is important for DF-styled games as Flow increases. Specifically, the Rhythm-based actions to activate these finishers could challenge the personal hand-eye coordination skills of the player.

Characterization is also important when it comes to DF-styled games. As mentioned above, DFs can function as a cutscene in a narrative sense, conveying dramatic elements related to the *Focus Loci*. In other words, the DF is part of the characterization of the *Agents* involved.

DFs can affect the predictability of behaviours in different ways, discussed in Chapter 5, System Dynamics. Taking into account how the book mentions that complexity does not necessarily equate to a more enjoyable experience, adding multiple inputs to trigger DFs may not always be more enjoyable than simplifying them. However, having a range of choices is still

important in a DF-styled game simply because there needs to be a reduction of player agency for the DF. In this sense, behaviours should be less predictable before the DF is initiated.

Interestingly, this can lead to some more fundamental issues - should a game be DF-styled or not? If there is no reason to add mechanics and behaviours other than to provide a reduction of player agency for DFs, perhaps such a gameplay style is not suitable for the premise of the game. This ties into Chapter 6, Conceptualization.

Conceptualizing new games with DF-styled gameplay often means breaking the boundaries of the current state of DF games. What this also means is that some of the rules stated above would also be broken - after all, rules are made to be broken. The central concepts described above tend to steer games towards *challenging gameplay, rhythm-based actions,* and are mostly focused on *computer-based games*. As such, the advancement of technology along with other mediums of games are not explored too well. Brainstorming towards these avenues could most likely lead to innovative gameplay.

Digital playtesting, Chapter 8, discusses the importance of kinesthetics in games. Since many DFs are *rhythm based actions* as well as serving a dramatic purpose, modifying related mechanics such as cooldowns(M), animation durations, and even the number of frames allowed to react to perform seamless actions can affect the kinesthetics of a DF-styled game. In turn, this indirect influence affects the DF itself, since part of the “feel” of the gameplay revolves around DFs. As such, a larger emphasis in getting the kinesthetics right during digital prototyping should be encouraged.

Spatial and temporal player input sensitivity is central to the rhythmic aspect of DFs too. Where the player has to be in relation to the opponent, as well as how long the player is given are all input sensitivity issues that can affect the Flow of the gameplay. Viewpoints can also affect spatial perception too - it is much easier to see the surroundings of the *Focus Loci* in third person than in first person.

In terms of viewpoints, it should be noted that many DF-styled games seem to use third person views to showcase the maneuvers, as they are more easily understood. Mirror’s Edge Catalyst is an exception, as it had both first and third person views of a maneuver. Some finishers in Apex Legends can even be considered to be in second person view, since they are portrayed identically regardless of who **performs the finisher**(M). While having DFs in different viewpoints may not strictly serve a functional purpose, this relates back to the kinesthetic aspect of how players view and embody the characters.

Chapter 11, Fun and Accessibility discusses stretching the personal limits of the player and the sense of accomplishment it provides. Many current DF-styled games use *challenging gameplay*, which can be problematic for fun and accessibility. Some have criticized Sekiro:Shadows Die Twice to be too difficult, and adding an “easy mode” for disabled players is important[23]. Yet, others argue that overcoming the difficulty hurdle provides enjoyment. This example helps support how the large difference in personal limits requires the designer to consider who the target audience is when designing DF-styled games. It would be best to focus on the general personal limits of this target audience first before looking into others.

Finally, audio for DFs should be addressed as well. Specifically, audio cues for initializing DFs are central to the reactivity and serve as immediate feedback to the player. While not all games necessitate this depending on the context, such cues can help guide the player into whether the DF was performed. This also ties into accessibility - can a blind player imagine

the maneuver? Designing the audio to tell both the dramatic and formal side of the finisher can greatly enhance the impact and immersion of the DF, allowing players to be able to “see” finishers without necessarily the *dedicated game facilitators*. Audio cues for the window of opportunity to trigger these DFs could be useful as well, allowing the audio to create a rise and fall of tension in and of itself.

References

[1] Björk, S., Lundgren, S. & Holopainen, j. Game Design Patterns. DiGRA '03 - Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up, 2003, Volume: 2. ISBN / ISNN: ISSN 2342-9666.

[2] Sicart, M. Defining Game Mechanics. Game Studies, volume 8, issue 2, December 2008. ISSN:1604-7982.

[3] Hunicke, R; LeBlanc, M; & Zubek, R. MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. CiteSeerX: 10.1.1.79.4561

[4] Assassin's Creed, Series. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassin%27s_Creed

[5] Assassin's Creed 3 Counter Kills. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4D1DU5YtPA

[6] Dishonored. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dishonored

[7] Dishonored Takedowns and Finishers. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmNIgtG67u0

[8] Among Us, Steam. https://store.steampowered.com/app/945360/Among_Us/

[9] Among Us - All Kill Animations (Switch). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4NIDmyfJYo

[10] DOOM (2016) Takedowns & Finishers. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq3IXnoqX-I

[11] DOOM VFR Launch Trailer, 30 second mark. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I55t9gePzVA&t=30s

[12] Dungeons and Dragons, Rules Introduction. https://dnd.wizards.com/rules-introduction

[13] God of War 2, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_of_War_II

[14] God of War 2, All Boss Death Scenes. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mezgJVORHjE&vl=en

[15] Limit Break (Ability), Final Fantasy Wiki. https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Limit_Break_(ability)

[16] Dragon's Lair (1983) Full Playthrough. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRU0TaJq2eA&t=7m

[17] Modern Warfare 3 Ending. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsImV95IrqQ

[18] Mirror’s Edge Takedowns/Disarms. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT0T6Nwco34

[19] Sekiro Deathblows and Shinobi Executions Compilation. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtA_gd59KcQ

[20] Apex Legends Finishers. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KufKq25_kVs

[21] Mortal Kombat 11 Wiki, Fatalities List. https://www.ign.com/wikis/mortal-kombat-11/Fatalities_List_-_All_Character_Button_Inputs_and_Codes

[22] Fullerton, T., Swain, C. & Hoffman, S. Game Design Workshop

[23] “An insanely difficult new game from the creators of 'Dark Souls' has some players demanding an easy mode, but hardcore fans think it would ruin the creator's vision”, Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/sekiro-shadows-die-easy-mode-difficulty-2019-4?r=US&IR=T#hardcore-fans-feel-like-overcoming-the-difficulty-is-an-achievement-4

[24] Drakar och Demoner, Wikipedia. https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drakar_och_Demoner