Level Design and Interactive Storytelling

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Level Design

What is a "Level"?

- A "level" often defines a play session
- Like a chapter in a book/an act in a play
- Should have its own dramatic arc

Level Order

- It is best to break up levels with a similar gameplay focus (combat-heavy, puzzle-oriented, stealth, etc.)
- Bosses (or other points of high action or drama) should be evenly distributed
- Level content must support any story points

Level Components

Action   Exploration   Puzzle-Solving

Storytelling   Aesthetics

Level Components

- Action
  - What geometry/terrain supports the player's necessary actions?
  - Consider pacing - how many conflicts? How much time in-between?

Level Components

- Is the pace exciting and tense, or relaxed?
- Where will the player be rewarded?

Last Enemy · Last Threat · Homefree · EXIT

Level Components

- What is the level's purpose from gameplay and story perspectives?
- What challenges will the player face?
- Which environments will best facilitate these challenges?

Level Components

- Exploration
  - Imagine a player experiencing the level for the first time - test with new players
  - What exciting landmarks can you provide?
  - Consider flow - linear or branching?

Level Flow - Nonlinearity

- Allow the player to choose which objectives to complete, or what order to complete them in

- Branching stories - the game progresses differently based on player choices

Level Components

- ## Puzzle-Solving
  - Simple switch puzzles = just finding the puzzle is the focus
  - More complex puzzles shift the focus to correctly manipulating them
  - Player should understand context (what is possible in this world?

Level Components

- Storytelling
  - Know the goals for the level prior to building it - how must it advance the story?

Level Components

- Aesthetics
  - Should not be prioritized at the expense of functionality
  - Must be balanced with other aspects

Elements of Good Levels

Elements of Good Levels

- Player cannot get stuck
  - (this should be obvious)
  - Eliminate dead-ends, soft-locks
  - Ask: "But what if the player tries it this way?"
  - And playtest!

When i'm stuck on a level in a game…

Start watching a gameplay and the guy does it on the first try

Elements of Good Levels

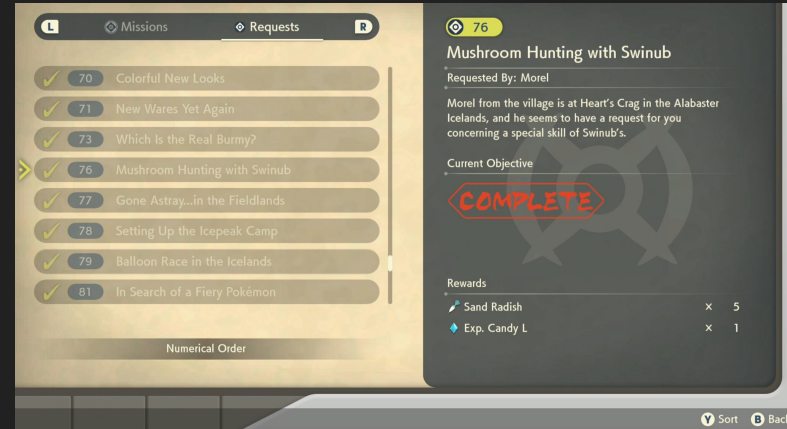- Sub-goals
  - Milestones measure progress
    - Blue Key in Doom, Boss Key in Zelda dungeons
    - Checkpoints in sidescrollers, racing games

Elements of Good Levels

- ## Sub-goals
  - Rewards let the player know they are playing the game well and feed into other systems, creating a loop
    - Sidequests in RPGs
  - Lead towards larger goal

Elements of Good Levels

- Landmarks
  - Help players understand level layout
  - Prevent players from getting lost
  - Should be integrated into the environment

Elements of Good Levels

- ## Critical path
  - ### Even in a non-linear area
  - ### A physical direction or objective
  - ### Keeps player aware of primary goal
  - ### Prevents confusion

Elements of Good Levels

- Limited backtracking
  - Can work if the area has changed or the player has new abilities to interact differently with the area
  - Branching paths should rejoin the main path at some point

Elements of Good Levels

- Success the first time
  - Should be theoretically possible for a sufficiently skilled/observant player
  - Can still be challenging - subtle clues, puzzling dilemmas
  - Player should never have to rely on trial and error or luck

Elements of Good Levels

- Navigable areas clearly marked
  - Differentiate between where the player can and cannot go - use different textures
  - Give information to indicate where progress is possible

Elements of Good Levels

- Choices
  - More than just multiple paths
  - Different options for defeating enemies/solving problems
  - Bonus objects that require risk to get
  - Can be tied to the story

Interactive Storytelling

Storytelling in Games

- Games do not always need stories, but can be made stronger when implemented properly
- Games can make the player the main character in a story - potentially more powerful than static media

Storytelling in Games

- Tell a story that will work with the gameplay and the technology
- Allow the constraints to be guidelines or sources of inspiration

Methods of Storytelling

Cutscenes

- Non-interactive storytelling must supplement the game experience and not detract from it

- Should remain consistent with the visual style of gameplay

Cutscenes

- Irony: non-interactivity injected into interactive medium
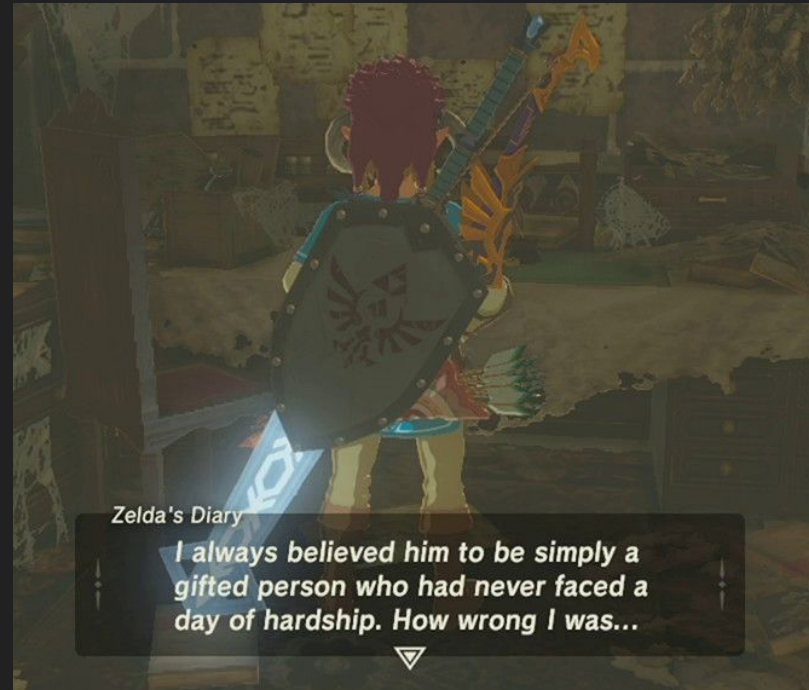- Imagine the inverse - interactive phases in the middle of movies, books, plays

Cutscenes

- Often cannot be controlled (other than skipped entirely), though pages in books can be re-read, movies rewound, paused, fast-forwarded
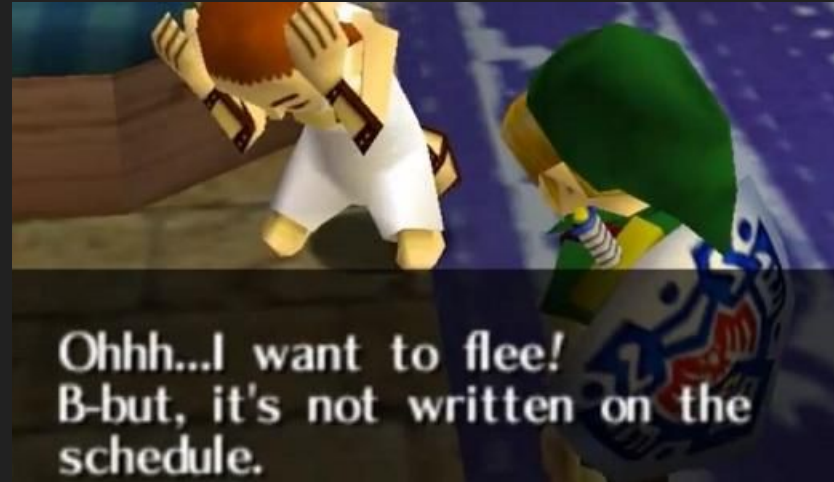
In-Game Storytelling

In-Game Storytelling

- Text - placed in game world (signs, graffiti, interactable books)

Zelda's Diary

I always believed him to be simply a gifted person who had never faced a day of hardship. How wrong I was...

In-Game Storytelling

- **Dialog** - from NPCs, artifacts - can offer **choices** of response
- **NPC Behaviors** - should perform actions that support storyline

Ohhh...I want to flee! B-but, it's not written on the schedule.

In-Game Storytelling

- Setting - exploration of the game world can reveal elements of the narrative

- "Show, don't tell"

Designer's Story vs. Player's Story

Designer's Story vs. Player's Story

- **Designer's Story**
  - **Predetermined** series of dramatic events - not much different from books or movies
  - Determines where levels take place and what player's objectives are

Designer's Story vs. Player's Story

- **Designer's Story** - Advantages:
  - Can contain interesting characters and situations
  - Can employ devices like tension and foreshadowing

Designer's Story vs. Player's Story

- Designer's Story - Disadvantages:
  - Inflexible
  - Players don't always pay attention to the story
  - Players may not want to be force-fed the story

Frustrated Linear Writers

- What if the player misses part of the story?
  - Simply the nature of interactivity
  - Never force the story on a player
  - Can offer replay value
  - Remember to show, not tell

Frustrated Linear Writers

- What a player's alternative path loses in drama (not following the path the writer deems most dramatic), it makes up because the player feels ownership over it - it becomes the player's story

Designer's Story vs. Player's Story

- Player's Story
  - The story generated by gameplay - how the player won or lost

What is an example of a good "player's story" from your gameplay experience? What made it a good story?

Designer's Story vs. Player's Story

- Ideal: Merging Both
  - Think of the parent telling a child a story
  - Child asks questions - shows what they are interested in; parent elaborates based on child's interest
  - D&D Dungeon Master - also relies on improvisation

Designer's Story vs. Player's Story

- Ideal: Merging Both
  - Designer's responsibility is to make the designer's story flexible enough to allow it to become the player's story as well

Frustrated Linear Writers

- Worry less about overall plot and more about situations players find themselves in and characters with which they interact
- Don't spell out too much of the story - allow players to figure certain things out

Non-Linearity and Game Stories

- Games are inherently nonlinear in some ways
  - Players talk to certain NPCs and not others, read certain signs, explore the game world in their own way

The Bottom Line

- Goal of game storytelling: create a story in which players feel they can play a significant role in affecting the outcome

What is more important:
gameplay or story?