The
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Challenge #1

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Discussions on an Ideal Game

Intro:

More and more intros seem to be discarded. Most probably because players just skip them to get into the game. Still, I believe that they are important in building excitement to the game. An intro should act in the same way as a movie trailer. It should be neither too short, neither too long: somewhere in the 30sec to 90sec range. The intro should have pre-rendered sequences if need be, but most importantly there should be some in game footage. Showing some exciting game footage has players attempt to mimic that situation; Cool combos in fighting games, exciting cornering in racing games, etc.

Demo play is also interesting since it can provide insight on secrets, and is also good for sales if your game happens to be on display at a store.

The menu must be easily navigable. Steps are preferred over panes, because they are easier to see and navigate. It's important to have most information on screen at once as possible so player doesn't have to remember much where the selection is. Adding some personalised layer to the menu is a good idea to make it look as it is part of the game, and not just a generic menu that could potentially be applied to any game. Make it special.

Getting going:

At the start of a new game, the setting and background is usually portrayed through a cinematic cut-scene. Other games, like Metal Gear Solid or Final Fantasy, have more of a movie like feel with opening credits or having you play the game some before the first cut-scene. The only importance here is making sure the player wants to see those cut-scenes, so all depending on the type of game; these intros should not be used. A portable game should be very easy to get into, and stop playing. Though story elements are important in RPGs mostly, it's important not to over do the cut-scenes in the portable market, since the game time can be as short as 10 minutes.

Though a tutorial is not necessary, it would be good. It should not be mandatory to play through the tutorial. If a tutorial is not used, the game should start off fairly slow so the player can get accustomed to the controls and the feel of the game.

Different games present the goals in different ways. For certain games finding the goal is the challenge, and for other the goal is more of a clue on what to do next. The goal should be described following the style of the game. In some cases, when the goal is so obvious, explaining it can be omitted (such as in games like Soul Calibur II where winning is the goal).

Fun:

It is good to implement various genres of game into one. Some of the biggest games of the last little while use this technique (GTA, Rachet & Clank) to diversify game play. Even older games (Zelda: A Link to the Past) have various mini games to diversify the game play.

Choice is another important aspect that allows the player to feel like he is part of the game. This feature is often implemented in the form of an open-ended style of game play where you are not constricted to follow the story, and do not progress from level to level.

For a game to be enjoyable it's required to have good challenges. An easy game will bore just like a hard game will frustrate. These challenges can present themselves as logic, pattern, or other types of puzzles or as action based sequences. It doesn't matter what the challenge is really, as long as the player recognises the situation as being challenging. That way the player will feel rewarded when overcoming the challenge.

Visuals:

Many games of late have put a lot of emphasis on visuals, and though visuals are important, they are not the most important aspect of the game. What is important is the constant fluidity of the graphics so as not to disturb the immersion or enjoyment of the game. Either a constant frame rate, or a frame rate that fluctuates very little.

The visuals for the game must be adequate. That is to say that the visuals must follow the style of the game. A comic style, humour filled game would have more cartoon-ish visuals and exaggerations in animations. A horror adventure will use more realistic graphics to portray the events as being real. Special effects are to be dealt in the exact same way.

The interesting aspect of visuals is its ability to add to the immersion of the game with detail. The right detail in the right place allows the player to feel how the designer wants him to feel. The right details to certain aspects of the game give a general more polished feel and appreciation by the player.

Intelligence:

There are still many games that use little to no AI, and all depending on the game it is not always necessary to have potent AI. The idea behind AI is to make it believable and to have the opponent do something you might have done, and have him react to your actions. This might be done through triggers (as seen in combat in various RPGs), or by having multiple patterns for one character. For racing games it is important to not have the racers fight for the perfect line; hitting you off the way for it. In all conscience a racer would not bump you if he didn't have to.

Randomisation is another interesting factor that can add to the replay factor of a game. By having characters in certain random positions within the map, the FPS becomes that more interesting. The difficulty of playing the same level stays essentially the same by always having the player guess where enemies will come out of; instead of picking them off early from knowledge of the level. On the other side of the coin scripting will allow for the player to devise special actions to overcome the challenge, and through many attempts, the player can devise the perfect plan.

The difficulty of the game must be managed to entertain and immerse all the potential players, and hopefully not alienate any. Various selectable difficulty settings are good, but more important is the way those difficulty settings are managed. If increasing difficulty means less health for you and more health for the enemies, or more rubber banding for the other racers and less for you, then the game doesn't become more enjoyable, just more frustrating because of factors which aren't in your control. Higher difficulty should mean extra thinking on your part to overcome challenges: More patterns for bosses, quicker and more responsive enemies, and to the minimal extent higher health or rubber banding like effects.

Immersion:

Story is generally one of the most immersive aspects of a game, and is also the major aspect of RPGs. An interesting and enjoyable story, no matter how cliché or uninspired, if pulled off properly adds all the necessary immersion since you want to follow it. Just like reading a book.

Unlockable elements are a way to have players come back for more. Be it special items, cheats, characters, or even mini-games, an unlockable element keeps the player playing until he has it. Unlockables usually come in two varieties, the ones you are aware of and the ones you don't. When you unlock something you weren't aware of, you want to keep on playing to see if any more of those pop up. If are aware of them, you have a clear goal – or goals – and will play until they are reached.

Added detail makes the game more immersive. Visual details make the world more believable, Story based details, such as character backgrounds, makes the characters more believable, and other details, like the ability to change suspension in the car, make the game feel more realistic.

Cameras:

Many different styles of cameras are available with the advent of 3D, and though it is normal for cameras to be constricted on a 2d playing field, certain camera aspects should be adhered to when playing on a 3D field.

In a 2D environment the character should stand in the middle of the screen; as is seen since the days of Metroid for platformers. This technique has also been used in the tactics genre by having the selected character in the center of the screen, and sometimes the cursor in the middle of the screen. This is obviously dependant on game genre, but can usually be applied to a vast majority of games; exceptions being shooters with an automatic scrolling and free flowing of character within the screen such as R-Type or Gradius.

Most 3D games follow either first person camera (Time Splitters 2) or third person camera (Mario Sunshine) or both (Halo, Oddworld). First person cameras are technically

fairly easy to do and the only recent changes being about rotation. In Metroid Prime for example when you are reaching a limit in the Y axis the movement slows as if the main character was stretching her neck to look a little higher. Third person cameras come in plenty forms, but are usually elevated and fairly close to the character. The general problem about this type of camera is the collision with world objects. Ideally the camera should pass through those objects which would be come invisible. Object invisibility should also apply to large elements that could stand in between the camera and the character (pillars, trees). For games that use both styles of camera, it is important to differentiate the different actions that would trigger one camera or the other. The different camera angles should not make the game more difficult to navigate. For example in Oddworld, you could only bounty in 3rd person mode, and only shoot your crossbow in 1st person mode; though technically there is no reason why those actions should not be available in both camera modes. Also the camera change doesn't allow for quick manoeuvring.

Most camera styles should be taken in consideration depending on genre. Simulation racing titles should have a cockpit cam, and that should be mandatory. GT3 doesn't have one. Cinematic cameras are to be used in situation where the desired effect is not the main character but something else; the background scenery for example. Final Fantasy makes great use of the camera style.

Controls:

Generally speaking, controls are very standardised from one game to another. In this way it is easy for the player to feel comfortable with them and rapidly adapt. With the likeness of most console controls and porting one type of control from console to console is also very easy.

For games that require different control schemes (mostly sports games) it is important to have similar actions in the different schemes mapped to the same buttons. With less control change there will be less mistakes and adaptation time required by the player.

More and more games have been using a sort of quick search for some selections. Ratchet & Clank and Rainbow Six 3 both use this to feature to easily cycle through the weapons list. This is something fresh since a player can easily choose the item without having to go through all the other weapons first.

Control should also be looked into to make the game enjoyable, not to make it realistic. Certain games push so much for the realistic control that it becomes almost impossible to properly control the main element. A balance should be found where the control feels realistic, and is still fun to use.

Ideas:

Sequels are some of the biggest money makers in games, though more of the same isn't always good. A sequel should keep the good ideas of the previous while still making the second game different enough to make it new. Most games do this with a continuing story, more/different items, and more refined gameplay. Some games, like Resident Evil 4, completely reinvent the style by changing some of the major elements, which in the end was making the series a little stale.

Unlockable classic games of the series is another interesting idea that is being used in many games. This tactic increases replay value by having the player relive memories of the previous game. Games like Panzer Dragoon Orta and Metroid Prime use this, as does the Super Mario Advance series.

With the advent of technology, saving anywhere is something that would be mandatory. There is no reason why a game can not save at anytime. However the fact that this is not available can make for some frustrating situations where you must start back pretty far from dying or from having to stop playing for another reason.

Innovation is one of the most interesting aspects of game design and is still not being used completely. Where one game innovates, plenty more follow in the now tried and true mechanic. Grand Theft Auto III popularised the go anywhere do anything game mechanic. This style was then copied numerous times by other developers who wanted something similar. All games should have something new, so no one can say: "that's just a rip off of that other game."

Memory:

It is inevitable for a game to provide both good and bad memories, as a designer you must ensure that the good memories are both more exhilarating and more in number. Creating a good balance in the other design sections of the game will usually automatically create this memory balance as well.

A Strong story will provide valuable memories and having many twists and turns in the story will have the player play through the story again to completely understand it. Multiple endings will also push the player t play through the story again.

Particular elements in a game is another major memory creating element in a game; Exciting crashes in Burnout 3: Takedown, Sniping grunt in Halo, the sense of loss in Ico. These elements are the ones that really stick to the mind.

All the other design features also create memories; responsive control, good cameras, interesting visuals, unique ideas. The whole game combined provides the best memory. One element out of place and that memory might fall into the wrong slot, ad you won't be recommending that game to your friends.