Lecture 7

Economies & Balance
What is Game Balance?

• What does it mean to be unbalanced?
• Examples of unbalanced games?
• Examples of well-balanced games?
• What types of games can be unbalanced?
Types of Game Balance

• Player-versus-Player
  • **Fairness**: equal players have equal chance of winning
  • **Pacing**: players have “reasonable” chance of catch-up
  • **Politics**: skill should be more important than alliances

• Player-versus-Environment
  • ** Appropriately challenging**: neither too hard nor too easy
  • **Balanced resources**: actions are not too “expensive”
  • **No dominant strategy**: requires multiple play styles
PvE: Appropriately Challenging

- Play should ramp up from easy to harder
  - Early levels are tutorial levels
  - Feeling of accomplishment over time
- **Easy mode** crucial for story-focused games
  - Casual players just want to experience story
  - Should have “press button to win” mode
- **Harder modes** should be hard, not boring
PvE: Balanced Resources

- **Sources**: How a resource can increase
  - **Examples (player)**: ammunition clips, health packs
  - **Example (external)**: spawn points

- **Drains**: How a resource can decrease
  - **Examples (player)**: firing weapon, player damage
  - **Examples (external)**: monster death

- Adjust sources and sinks to “balance” economy
  - Together, determine “price” of resource
  - Price of resource should reflect its “power”
Design Problem: Pricing Resources

Underpricing

- Cheap, powerful actions
  - Players favor these verbs
  - Limits play variety

- Buffs in *Might & Magic*
  - Same mana as attacks
  - Lasted all **day** long

- *Dragon Age* cold spells
  - Shattered enemy on critical
  - Rogues had auto criticals
Design Problem: Pricing Resources

Overpricing

- Expensive, weak actions
- Usage is “penalized”
- Waste of designers’ time

- Shredder ammo in ME2
  - Same damage as inferno
  - But inferno lights on fire

- Raise Dead in early D&D
  - Loss of stats (e.g. Con)
  - No easy way to regain
Design Problem: Pricing Resources

**Underpricing**

- Cheap, powerful actions
  - Players favor these verbs
  - Limits play variety
- Examples:
  - Buff spells in most RPGs
  - *Dragon Age* cold spells

**Overpricing**

- Expensive, weak actions
  - Usage is “penalized”
  - Waste of designers’ time
- Examples:
  - Shredder ammo in ME2
  - *Raise Dead* in early D&D

- Resource usage determines difficulty
  - *Resident Evil*: Availability of ammunition
  - *D&D 3.x*: 20% resource per encounter
Resources and Strategy

- What is more “dangerous”?
  - Damage-dealer
  - Healer
  - Controller (lock-down skills)
  - Summoner (chain or simple)

- How does this affect strategy?

- Is the answer always the same?
  - How do you analyze this?
  - What resources do each of the archetypes above involve?
Simple combat mechanic
- Each round, swap damage
- Enemy dies when health is 0

Player goes until health is 0
- There is healing in game
- …but too sparse to go forever

Two primary characters
- **Paladin**: can lessen damage
- **Vampire**: drains blood to heal
- Which is better?
Bad Design: “Engines”

- Actions combine to make resources free
  - Spend one resource to get another
  - Use new resource to get old one back

- Example: *Dragon Age*
  - Resources: Health, Mana
  - ![Health](image) Small health loss; regain much mana
  - ![Mana](image) Small mana loss; heal much damage

- Solution? Cool-down time
Bad Design: Deadlocks

• Cyclical interaction between sinks & sources
  • Prevents any further action
  • Example: *Settlers 3*
    • Need stone for stonecutter’s hut
    • Stonecutter’s hut is source for stone

• Treat deadlock as a loss condition
  • **Example**: No more builders in *Starcraft*
  • But detection of deadlock is **hard**
PvE: No Dominant Strategy

- “Rock-Paper-Scissors” model
  - No strategy always wins
  - Optimal depends on context
  - Challenge is finding context

- Play is **highly variable**
  - Monotonous play is punished
  - Must master different styles

- Play becomes **psychological**
  - What is opponent thinking?
  - True even if opponent an AI
Meaningful Choice?

- Isn’t this a bad design?
  - Game “feels” random

- Don’t make actions equal
  - Just make nothing the best
  - But some actions are worse
  - **Challenge**: separate two

- Make AI “predictable”
  - Best move if know opponent
  - Player learns how AI thinks
  - Challenge for AI design
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PvP: Fairness

- **Symmetric**: have same start position & rules
  - Easiest way to achieve fairness
  - **Examples**: Chess, monopoly, *Warcraft II*

- **Asymmetric**: start & play with different rules
  - Fairness harder, but more interesting
  - **Examples**: Fox & Geese, *Starcraft*

- Requires user testing
Assymetric Gameplay
PvP: Pacing

- Pacing is a function of feedback
  - **Positive feedback**: rewards player successes
  - **Negative feedback**: punishes player successes

- Positive feedback leads to *snowballing*
  - Once player gets ahead, hard to catch up
  - Opponent will quit early (redefine loss, victory)

- Negative feedback leads to *stalemate*
  - Game goes on forever without a winner
  - Even worse, winner may feel arbitrary
Feedback

- Common form of emergent behavior
  - Game mechanics produce certain outputs
  - Outputs then modify the game mechanics

- **Positive**: reward player for success
  - Extra-lives in any arcade game
  - Power-ups/abilities in Raiden clones

- **Negative**: handicap player for success
  - Blue shells in *Mario Cart*
Feedback: *Raiden*
Feedback: *Mario Cart*
These Terms are Not Normative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Feedback</th>
<th>Negative Feedback</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Can be <em>constructive</em></td>
<td>• Can be <em>constructive</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Ex</strong>: Increase attack</td>
<td>• <strong>Ex</strong>: Boost opponent</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can be <em>destructive</em></td>
<td>• Can be <em>destructive</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Ex</strong>: Drain opponent</td>
<td>• <strong>Ex</strong>: Drain player</td>
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<td>• <strong>Key Features</strong></td>
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<td>• Magnifies early successes</td>
<td>• Magnifies later actions</td>
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<td>• Increases player disparity</td>
<td>• Equalizes player status</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Make game end quickly</td>
<td>• Make game end slower</td>
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Ideal Game Progression

![Diagram of Ideal Game Progression]

- **Player Advantage**
- **Game Duration**
- **Game Balance**
Too Much Positive Feedback

Game Duration

Player Advantage

A

B

Game Balance
Powerful Negative Feedback

Game Duration

Player Advantage

A

B

Game Balance
Parameter Tuning

- **Recall**: mechanics have parameters
  - How fast you can run
  - How far you can jump

- **Tuning**: adjust these parameters
  - Allows you to control feedback
  - How bad should blue shell effect be?

- Tuning requires a **lot** of playtesting
PvP: Politics

- Politics occur from **player alliances**
  - Players “gang up” against an opponent

- Problem with politics
  - Turns the game into a form of “voting”
  - Winner a matter of popularity, not skill

- What games are susceptible to politics?
  - Game must support **more than two players**
  - Game must allow **resource sharing**
Are Politics a Bad Thing?

- Not necessarily; some players like them
  - Make a strategy game more social
  - Example: *Settlers of Catan*
    - Trading resources is important
    - Consider player advantage in trade

- Impossible to eliminate in some games
  - Example: free-for-all games, wargames

- Just be aware in player testing
Kingmaking

• Player “chooses” winner
  • Extreme form of politics
  • Voting is not necessary

• Forms of kingmaking
  • Excessive aid to “king”
  • Sabotaging other players
  • Blocking player obstacles

• **Snowballing** encourages kingmaking
Controlling Politics

- Make the game more like a race
  - Players have little ability to influence each other
  - Examples: footrace, backgammon, high scores

- Make **sabotage** resource expensive
  - Loss of resources disadvantages saboteur later
  - Example: base defenses in a strategy game

- Limit opportunities for **alliances**
  - Make it difficult for players to share resources
  - Example: cannot trade cards in Risk
Summary

- Game balance does not need an opponent
  - Appropriately challenging: neither too hard nor too easy
  - Balanced resources: actions are not too “expensive”
  - No dominant strategy: requires multiple play styles

- Multiplayer games introduce other issues
  - Fairness: equal players have equal chance of winning
  - Pacing: players have “reasonable” chance of catch-up
  - Politics: skill should be more important than alliances