

Level and Storytelling

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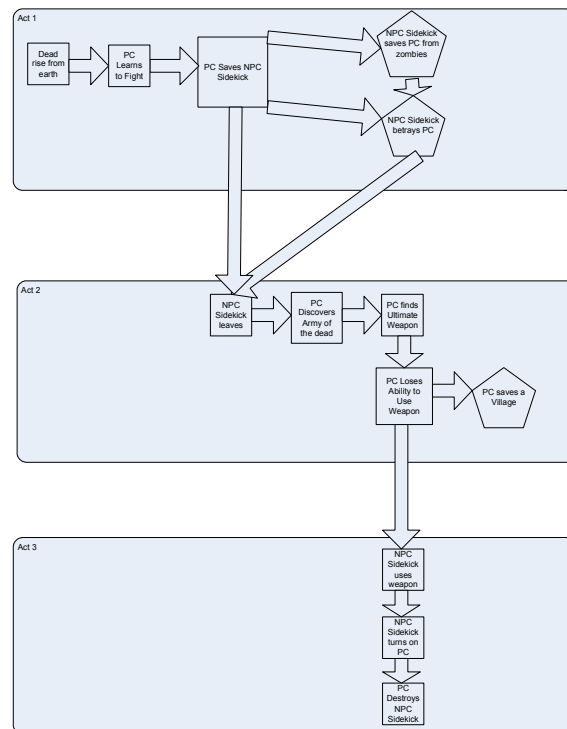
Introduction

When beginning game writers first write the story for a game they tend to start with the levels. This is like building the fireplace before you've bothered to plan the rest of the house. Good stories are not built around levels. Levels propel good stories.

Chapters

Before you write the specifics of a level begin by writing out the chapters of your story. A chapter roughly equates to an hour or two of gameplay. Each chapter is a big event that propels the story forward.

The chapters should be diagrammed to show the many possible relationship each chapter has to others. The flowchart to the right is a simple example of a chapter diagram. The game is separated into three acts that match the standard conflict establishment (beginning), conflict exposition (middle), and conflict resolution (end). The game to the right is fairly linear and would translate to 10-15 hours of gameplay.



Levels

Chapters are comprised of levels. In story driven games you've probably noticed that the game plays through phases. These phases might be childhood through adulthood or from trainee to captain. Within each phase you can identify distinct moments where the game's story changed. Such events might be when a non-player character died, when a new conflict arises or when the player character achieves a new status. These events are really the end of chapters. These chapters usually end after finishing several levels.

Beginning Levels

One of the core challenges facing any storyteller is how to engage a their audience quickly. Games have the particular challenge of requiring skill to understand the story. The skill, or game play echanincs, are sometimes so

simple it doesn't take more than a few minutes to understand how to play. On the other hand, story intensive games such as role playing games usually have the challenge of training players. For this reason most designers and writers try to balance story development with level design. It's frustrating for a player to learn about story when they are also learning how to use their avatar.

The system that seems to work most consistently in level design is to offer few, and short levels at the beginning of the game. In such a scheme, early levels require only basic game play skills and but they expose the situation of the game. The best games increment the game play challenges so that the player feels as though they have made progress in the game without making the game overly challenging or boringly simple.

One such technique is to integrate the training component of the game into the game's story. Knights of the Old Republic, Grand Theft Auto III and Red Dead Revolver each do this to varying degrees. Knights of the Old Republic begins the player in spaceship under attack, but clumsily describes controls. Grand Theft Auto offers a little gameplay training by requiring the player to drive and follow a map. Red Dead Revolver begins the player in a makeshift shooting range and then propels them into a gunfight to defend the family.

Describing Levels

For game planning your levels can be described as simple lists of key events. This information can then be passed on to a level designer or added to the general design document. The following information describes the key goals in describing levels for a game storyteller. Actual level design is a much bigger task than what is described here. The storyteller is merely providing an outline to explain the story. This information would need to be refined to meet the art and design requirements of the entire project.

For some writers outlining the specifics of levels is quite cathartic. It allows the writer to move from the abstract to the concrete.

In an ideal world level descriptions will contain the following:

Level Description:

Written from the designer's perspective, this section describes the overall level. Answer questions like *where does the level take place and what are the player's primary goals?*

Player Objective:

Written from the player's perspective, this section describes the level's goal. Remember that the player's goals are often much simpler than the designer or writer's goals. The player may have the objective *save villagers*, while the designer may have the objective *demonstrate vastness of game world*.

Gameplay Objective:

Written from the designer's perspective, this section describes how the level helps develop the gameplay of the game. In simple terms, answer why this level helps enhance the player's enjoyment of the game.

Story Objective:

From the author's perspective, this section describes how the level helps develop specific storytelling goals. This section should describe how the story is enhanced in this level through development of character, theme, or plot.

The following are a couple of simple examples of level outline information

Level 1

Level Description:

PC begins at the edge of a cemetery. The PC must destroy zombies on the way to the opposite end of the cemetery. PC receives level goal through an NPC running from the zombies.

Player Objective:

Get to the church.

Gameplay objective: Introduce basic gameplay mechanics: movement, practice killing zombies.

Story Objective:

Establish the game's situation: *an army of the undead emerges*.

Level 2:

Level Description:

While in the security of the church, the player learns to develop the core skills for playing the games. These skills include targeting, conjuring spells, and bartering. Players also develop a relationship with NPC trainer who harbors them in the church.

Player Objective:

Learn how to beat the zombies.

Gameplay Objective:

Training for core game skills.

Story Objective:

Emotional investment: Establish relationship with NPC trainer. The NPC trainer will later die defending the PC.