Designing Content With Purpose

Seth Marinello - @sethmarinello
March 2017
What is a level designer?

- Builder?
- Painter?
- Teacher?
- Integrator?
What is a level designer?

Storyteller!
What is a level designer?

Storyteller!

(Story-Enabler)
What is a level designer?

Storyteller!
(Storyteller! (Player Narrative Experience Architect))
Level Designers are storytellers. Good level design is much the same as good storytelling.
The scale of the plot can vary dramatically
We want the player to remember the story of the level. Not an annoying jump in that level.

@MattThorson
Plot + Context + Gameplay = Experience
Why worry about story?

- Story provides several major elements
  - Creates a context for the game rules and characters
  - Provides long-term motivation to the player
  - Makes goals easy to communicate
Affordance – intuitive functionality
Affordances allow a player to understand the possibility space of your game intuitively.

This enables Intentionality.
Why do we want this???
Players with high intentionality will feel ownership over the story even if the choices were curated by the designer.
Which leads us back to...
Components of Story

- **Inciting Incident** – The event forcing action
- **Rising Action** – Tension builds as events progress
- **Climax** – The peak of tension in the story
- **Resolution** – Resolve objective, open new questions
Components of Design

- **Objective** – A goal is placed before the player
- **Obstacle** – Something that stops the player from reaching the objective
- **Ramping** – An increase in the challenge of the obstacles
- **Reward** – The payoff for reaching the goal
Components of Story

- **Inciting Incident** – Presents Objective
- **Rising Action** – Difficulty of Obstacles ramps up as player progresses
- **Climax** – Culmination of challenge
- **Resolution** – Victory over ultimate challenge, reward
Mosaic of Narrative

Game

Levels

Rooms
...but how do you make it memorable content?
Dominant Feature

- X-Statement
- Hook
- Theme
- Centerpiece
- Visual Identity
“this is the .... level”

- What is the central element of the level?
- What does it say about the world?
Dominant Feature Example

Barrels of Fun – Doom II
Dominant Feature Example

Stop and Go Station - DKC
Dominant Feature Example

Uncharted 2 – Chapter 13 “Locomotion”
The details of the design should support the dominant feature.
Subtlety is overrated.
Designing a Level
Capture Intent

- Capturing the Design of a Level
  - Concept
  - Walkthrough
  - Blockworld

- This is all one deliverable
  - THE DESIGN!
This is most important when there are multiple stakeholders
Determine Constraint

- What determines the scope of the content?
  - Target length
  - Narrative
  - Number of Players
  - Mechanic Concept
Concept

- Find your Dominant Feature
- Summarize the Dominant Feature and how it relates to your world.
“Awaken the sleeping ship”
Walkthrough

- **Scope**
  - (what mechanics, how much content, unique features etc)

- **Major Objectives**
  - (How does the game fit into the overall arc of the game?)

- **Major Beats**
  - (What key moments do you want to highlight in this level?)
Top Down Map

- Capture the flow of the level
“Almost every time I've given a concept to a designer I've been amazed at how different the blockworld ends up from what I had in my head… Typically that sort of surprise is a delight, but after that stages the surprises almost completely go away… my image of the level aligns almost perfectly with what the designer's is once the blockworld is complete.”

- Patrick Lipo
Blockworld
Capture the look and feel of the space

How do the beats connect?
  ▪ This is almost as important as identifying the beats themselves.
Strategies
Gating and Loops
Landmarks
Landmarks
Item Placement
Experience does not require challenge
Iteration

- Play level. Play level some more.
- Think of each space as a small story
  - How does it start, what is going on in the space when the player enters it? Is there only one way to enter?*
  - What happens in the middle, combat, exploration, story, goodies?
  - How does it end? Does the player run out? Does the player cleanup after a fight?
- Once the story is complete, what new questions are raised?
Takeaways

- Level Designers are story facilitators
  - Define the possible elements of the player narrative
  - Allow the player freedom to explore those possibilities
- Details should support a Dominant Feature
- Games are a mosaic of micro-stories
- Remember that while details are important, you must be able to step back and see the bigger picture
Contact

email: seth@pocketgems.com
twitter: @sethmarinello
"Acting with Intentionality is making conscious choices with specific goals and expectations in mind" - Steve Lee - @essell2