GAME 3030 Game Level Design

1/26/2015 Spring semester
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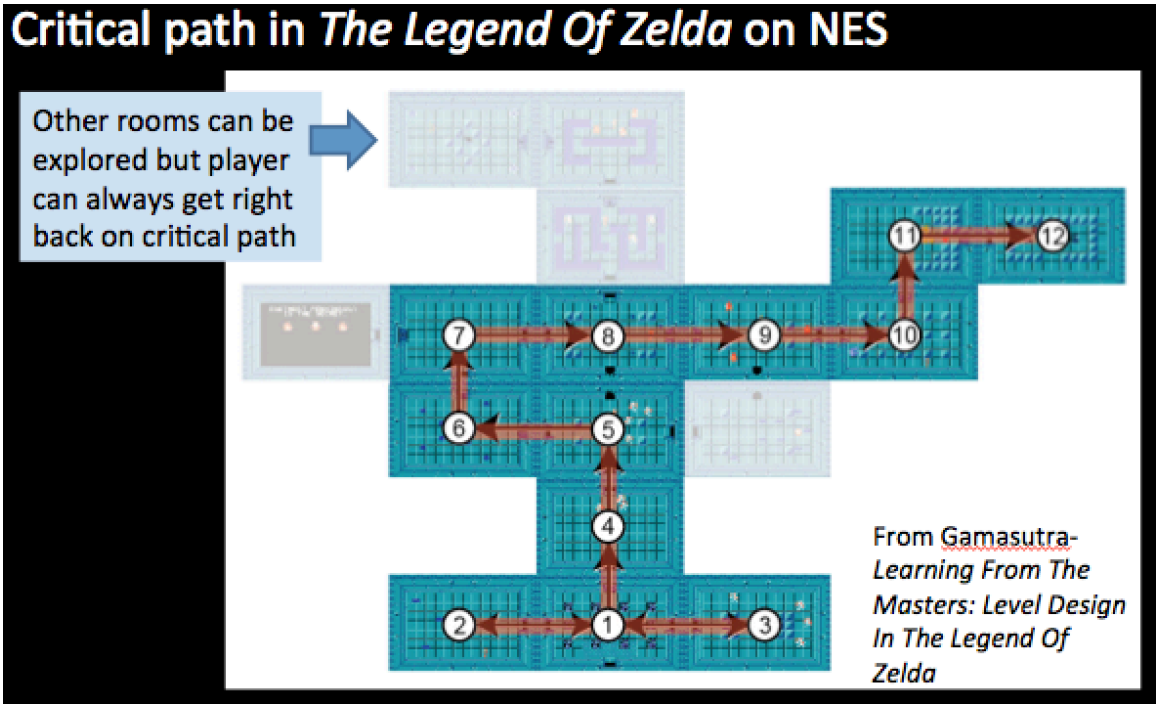
This document outlines some key points from the lecture of 1/26/14.
Please note: posting these key points is an accommodation for the "kickoff" nature of the first class of the semester. For all subsequent lectures you will be responsible for taking your own notes.

Overview of Flow

- The flow of a level can make it a good or bad level
- "Critical path" (aka "Golden path") is a large component of level flow
- Example – even in an old school game the critical path concept was understood:



Questions to ask about a level's Flow

- How do the spaces in the level fit together?
- Is it clear where players are supposed to go?
- Is it clear how they can get there?
- Is there lots of **backtracking** ?
- Getting lost? (which is not the same as "exploring")
- Essentially, is the **critical path** clear to the player?

"Clear" path is good flow

Even if not 100% clear, can the player get back on the critical path without totally getting lost?

Level Flow

- The trick is to allow "exploration" without creating "confusion"
- Critical path should get player to objectives
- Designers need to keep the player oriented

(we'll go over techniques in another lecture)

Level Designers control flow.

Here is a pertinent quote from a GDC talk by Jaime Griesemer, Gameplay Design Lead at Bungie:

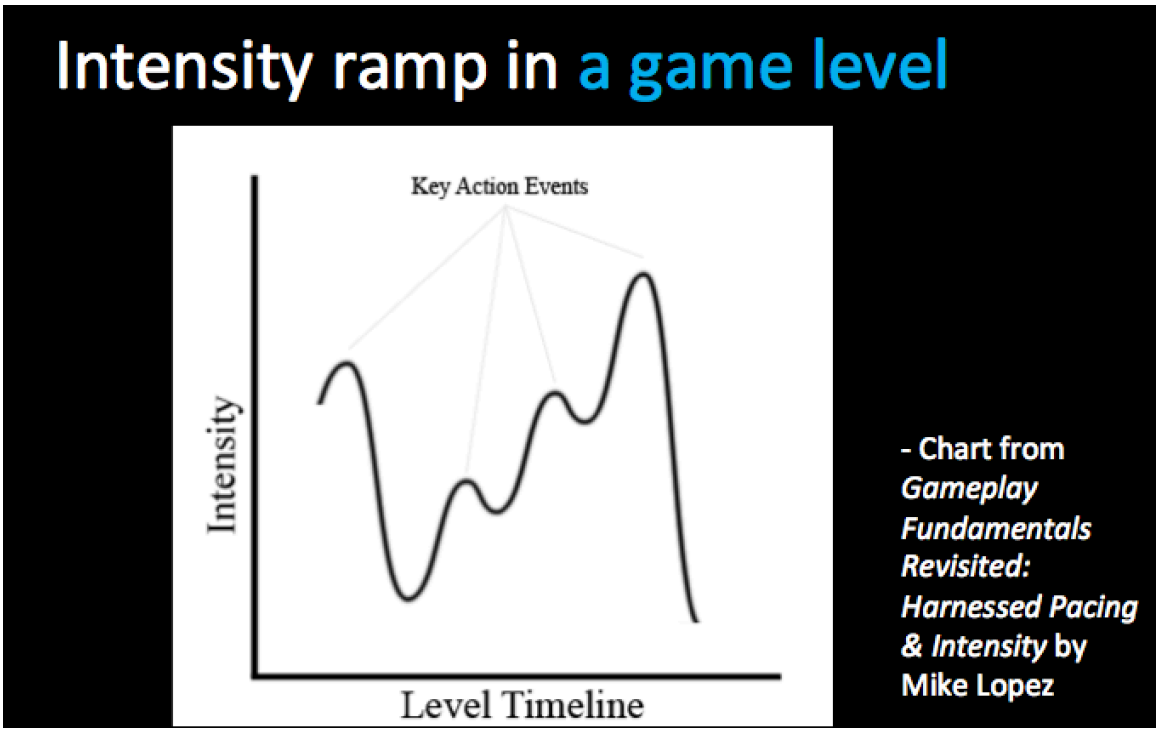
"This is why you are a designer

- Control over Flow is *the* essential skill
- Don't expect others to have it
    - Most Programmers see bugs
    - Most Artists see in still frames
    - Most Producers see inexplicable delays"

3 Act Structure and Pacing

- The 3 Act Structure that is used in books, movies, and concerts also applies to games and game levels. It builds interest and intensity.

Can be charted on an Interest/Intensity ramp graph



Note:

- It is not realistic, nor necessary, to execute a game level to perfectly match the graph targets at every point
- But keep ye olde 3 Act Structure in mind

Be aware that flow and pacing doesn't just have to do with the architectural space of a level, the layout – the rhythm of mob encounters, and other encounters, affects pacing.

Pacing and Tension

- Build up the excitement, tension, intensity
    - It (typically) should ramp up slowly
    - Mobs should get more difficult as you go
    - Player should learn how to deal with the mobs and other encounters (gain mastery!)
    - Typically a mini-boss or boss fight is the "climactic ending"
- Audio cues can be used to increase tension
- Vary activities, use of skills (ex: jumping, lockpicking)
- You can also move player through level with loot placement/treasure

***A few notes on "Mastery"**

"Mastery" = "Fun"

- Raph Koster (designer on *Ultima Online, Star Wars Galaxies, Everquest* II):

"Fun from games arises out of mastery. It arises out of comprehension. It is the act of solving puzzles that makes games fun." - Raph Koster's *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*

So "Mastery" is a Reward:

- Almost every game has a learning curve
- Every game teaches something
- Gaining that mastery is a large part of the fun

Creating Tension using the Environment

A level design's environmental hazards can create and build tension:

- Players may be afraid to fall, drown or be burned.
- Visibility, or lack thereof can build tension:
- Lighting and fog – low visibility vs. high visibility

But… remember to allow the player some time to take a breath between large encounters:

- So, vary the player's experience / gameplay
- Ex: the *Half-life* series was not all shooting and headcrabs jumping on your face yeah those scared me a lot sometimes but I didn't have nightmares
    - There were environment puzzles, machines to interact with, scripted scenes with NPCs, etc.

Brief Overview of Typical Types of Encounters

- Combat, battles ("mob encounters")
- Puzzles
- Traps
- Time-critical races
- Scripted narrative encounters