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Cursed Items and Inventory Management in *Moonlighter*

Digital Sun's 2018 game *Moonlighter* is an action game with RPG elements. Its core mechanics are divided into two parts: first, the more standard portion, wherein the player fights their way through a dungeon, looting items from the monsters killed and managing a limited inventory. It's similar to a rouge-like, as the player is sent back to the beginning upon death, although they can also choose to leave the run at any point. The second section is where things take an interesting turn – upon exiting the dungeon, the player returns to the town, where they run a store selling the items that they've collected. The key element here is bringing the looted items back from the dungeons, which is complicated by the player's limited inventory. This is further complicated by the addition of 'cursed items' - items with special effects attached, some of which take effect the moment they enter the player's inventory. These items mean that inventory management shifts from a simple value-based judgement of what to keep and what to discard to a variable puzzle.



The two inventory sections.

The first thing to establish is the basic mechanics

behind the inventory system. While traversing the dungeon, the player technically has two inventories – a handful of slots for items kept on hand, and a much larger section for those kept in their bag. There are a few ways of getting the items back home: first, a relatively rare room containing a chest that will instantly transport them to your house. This method is almost entirely up to luck and the player's own observational skills, as there's no way to ensure that this room is found. Second, the player can opt to leave the dungeon midway through for a small amount of money. It's a safe way out, but it also means that the player gives up on finding more items of greater quality or quantity. Finally, the player can return home with their inventory after defeating the final boss at the end of the dungeon. This is probably the simplest solution, while also a slightly risky one. If the player dies, they lose all of the items from the larger inventory. This means that pressing onwards is always a judgement of risk versus reward, which is only furthered when more valuable items (as cursed items often are) come into play.

Probably the easiest of the cursed items to handle are the ones that require a certain placement. These items either need to be placed along the side of the inventory or along the top and bottom (listed as the 'side-side' and 'top-bottom' curses respectively) – these are, of course, indicated with a small icon above them in the same manner that all the cursed items display their effects. These don't pose much of a challenge in terms of inventory management, aside from the

fact that cursed items cannot stack, even on the same item, unless that object also has the same ‘curse’ in effect. It just adds something else to take into consideration. As one reviewer puts it, “It forces a lot of interesting decisions and creates a new field of useful information. What items sell better at the store? Do I really need to carry another stack of these at all?” (Patrick Hancock, 2018).

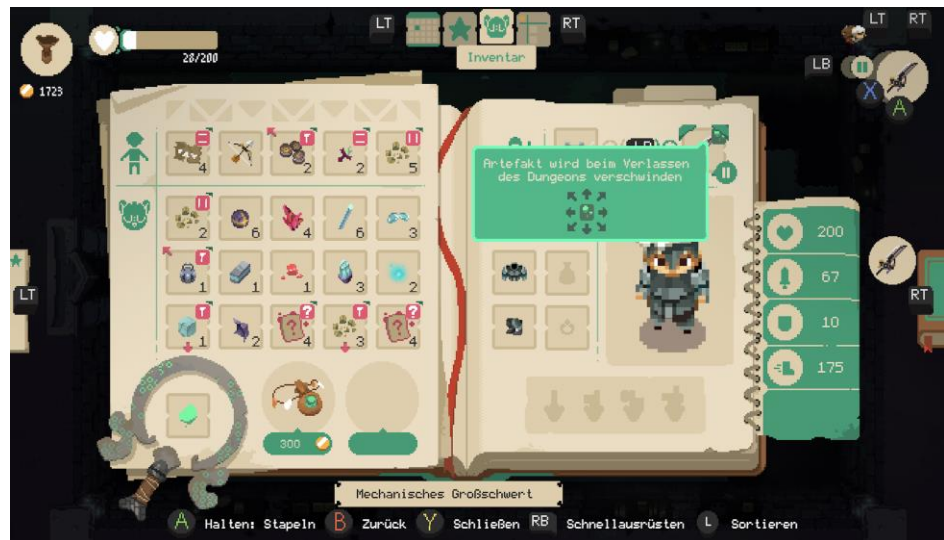
Not all of the curses are as benign as the location-based ones. The list also includes the ‘fragile’ curse, which will cause the item it’s on to break if the player receives too much damage while holding it. If a player wants the item with this curse, another layer of difficulty is added to the dungeon. Unless they decide to return without completing the dungeon, every fight now carries additional risk. A different type of risk comes from the ‘unknown’ curse. This one entirely obfuscates the item it’s attached to. It could be something valuable, or it could be something nearly worthless. It’s up to the player whether they take the risk of wasting precious space.

The remaining curses return to the pattern of needing interesting inventory shuffling. First, there’s the ‘crush’ curse, which destroys the next object over in a given direction. While these items sound like something that one should try to keep out of their inventory, these curses can be circumvented by putting these objects at the edge of the bag so that their arrows don’t point to anything, thus mitigating any risk of destruction. A slightly more benign version of this curse comes in the form of the ‘swap’ curse, which, instead of destroying the item pointed to, replaces them with the item that the curse is attached to. These curses also don’t act immediately – only activating upon the player’s return to town - so it is entirely possible to forget about these cursed items until the effects go off unexpectedly. Having to reshuffle the entire inventory every time the player wants to pick up something new is pretty common, and as one review site says,

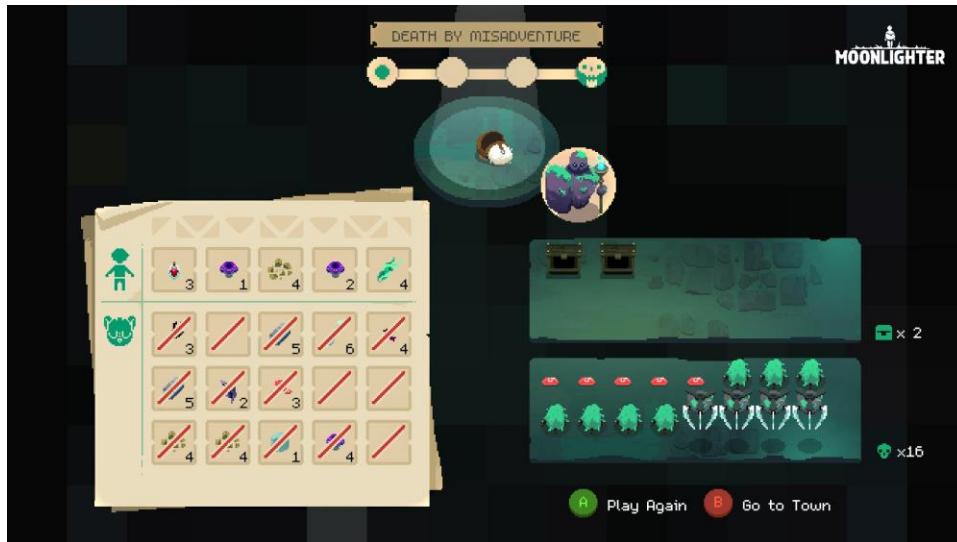
“There’s a sense of pride in clearing half my inventory with intelligent use of curses, and losing a well-planned layout is more of a tragedy than the lost profit.” (Lauren Morton, 2018).

Note how the items with the ‘crush’ curse are moved so that the arrows aren’t pointing at another item. Also shown are the ‘unknown,’ ‘side-side,’ and ‘top-bottom’ curses.

As with the ‘swap’ curse, not all of them



are necessarily negative. There’s also the ‘home’ curse, which instantly will send the item stack that it points to back to town. If the player has a particularly valuable item (or something with the ‘fragile’ curse), this is very handy. After this effect, the curse is removed, and the item becomes stackable with others of its non-cursed type. Unfortunately, if they don’t have anything in particular that they want to send back, they can’t save the effect. This leads to an on-the-spot evaluation of the items that the player has in their inventory and what they’re willing to risk.



When a player dies, they lose all the items that aren't in their smaller inventory.

Similarly, the 'remove' curse will remove the curse of the item that it's pointing at once

added to the inventory. This one can be saved, but likewise can only be used once before the effect and curse disappear. The appearance of these cursed items prompts the player to reconsider how to strategically place these to remove the most cumbersome of their cursed items. "It's a constant juggle that keeps you weighing up item worth, usefulness and other traits," a third reviewer says (Sam Loveridge, 2018).

While inventory management by itself may seem like more of a chore than a piece of gameplay, the addition of cursed items adds enough diversity and variability to make it a puzzle rather than a bothersome task. It keeps players thinking about what they have with them and what the value of each item is, which means that it's all the more devastating when they lose their progress – and all the more satisfying when they make it out with their loot intact. As Malindy Hetfield from *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* puts it, "Lots of games make you care just enough about items to prompt you to stuff them all in your pockets; Moonlighter makes you care enough to pack them carefully, and eventually to leave them behind entirely." (Malindy Hetfield, 2019) A full inventory is now a completed puzzle, and each new item gained must be re-evaluated for both worth and viability. Since half of the gameplay is about managing a store, *Moonlighter* has

a lot of focus on the inventory system by necessity, but thanks to the curses, it also becomes another method to keep the players engaged and invested.

There are some flaws with the curse mechanic, although some of them, such as the randomness of what items get cursed, kind of work as just another facet of it. One issue that I often ran across is that the player can very easily add items in bulk to their inventory without double-checking them, which sometimes leads to random items being sent back to town or curses being accidentally removed. On one hand, this does encourage the player to focus and pay attention even when adding things to their inventory, but on the other hand it can be incredibly frustrating. If I were to alter this mechanic, I'd make it so that cursed items can't be added to the inventory with the 'add all' button. Another, more conceptual flaw with this mechanic is how it effectively ceases to exist once you have exited the dungeon. Once the player returns home, their inventory is back to just being regular stacks of items, with no additional variables to juggle. While this does make things a little easier in terms of storing and selling these items in the shop, it also removes the challenge posed by the curses in the first place. The puzzle of *Moonlighter*'s inventory system – and satisfaction gained from besting it – are left entirely behind. I see why this was done, but at the same time it's kind of regrettable. If I were to make a change, I'd add a lasting effect from the cursed items. As cursed items don't stack on items that don't also match their curse, storage would be tough if they just kept the same curses. Maybe a single curse could replace them, making it so that they sell for more than they would otherwise, but only if sold within a short period of time. Or perhaps they could sell for the same amount but improve the base item's popularity (which lets the player temporarily set the price higher). There are a few options, but I think the key point would be to keep the curses' element of variation even within the shop management portion of *Moonlighter*.

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