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Misdirection of Hyper Realism

In Black Myth: Wukong, you play as a monkey trying to be the next Sun Wukong. Throughout the traversal of the game, you will explore captivating levels with gameplay heavy main paths entrancing the player. Many optional side paths facilitate player progression, world building, and rich narrative. The level design uses an arsenal of hyper realistic art assets to create a life-like world, immersing the player into the fantasy that is Chinese mythology. However, the hyper-realism, which makes this game so beautiful, interferes with the player being able to navigate effectively throughout the level. Things that should be obvious, such as main paths, are hard to distinguish from other optional routes. Not only that, but non-uniform, hard barriers set up throughout the map not only break immersion, but also make it hard for the player to understand and utilize the type of navigation facilitated in each level.

Hyper-realism has many advantages in the game design. From the art perspective, it looks beautiful and helps build a relatable world while keeping it fantasy based. From a level design perspective, it is a strong way to encourage exploration. With there being no explicit objective, the interpretation of the given world is for players to decide, giving them a lot of freedom.



Figure 1

In the figure 1 there are multiple paths the player could take but the shrine acts as a landmark for the player to be attracted to (shown in red). Galuzin, a respected level designer, states: “Landmark is a dominating element that helps to orient the player within your environment or guide the player to their final destination.”. (2023, September 13) A strength of Black Myth: Wukong is that it uses landmarks, but it doesn’t make them dominate the scene and only acts as a slight interest mark for players to reorient themselves. The other paths (blue) link together to make sure you don’t branch off from the map too much while also making the map feel expansive. This approach allows the game to feel expansive while keeping the game's linear progression. Many games take either two routes, complete open world or just straight linear progression.

Throughout the levels, you can utilize the environment to approach the map at different angles, using the environment to your advantage.

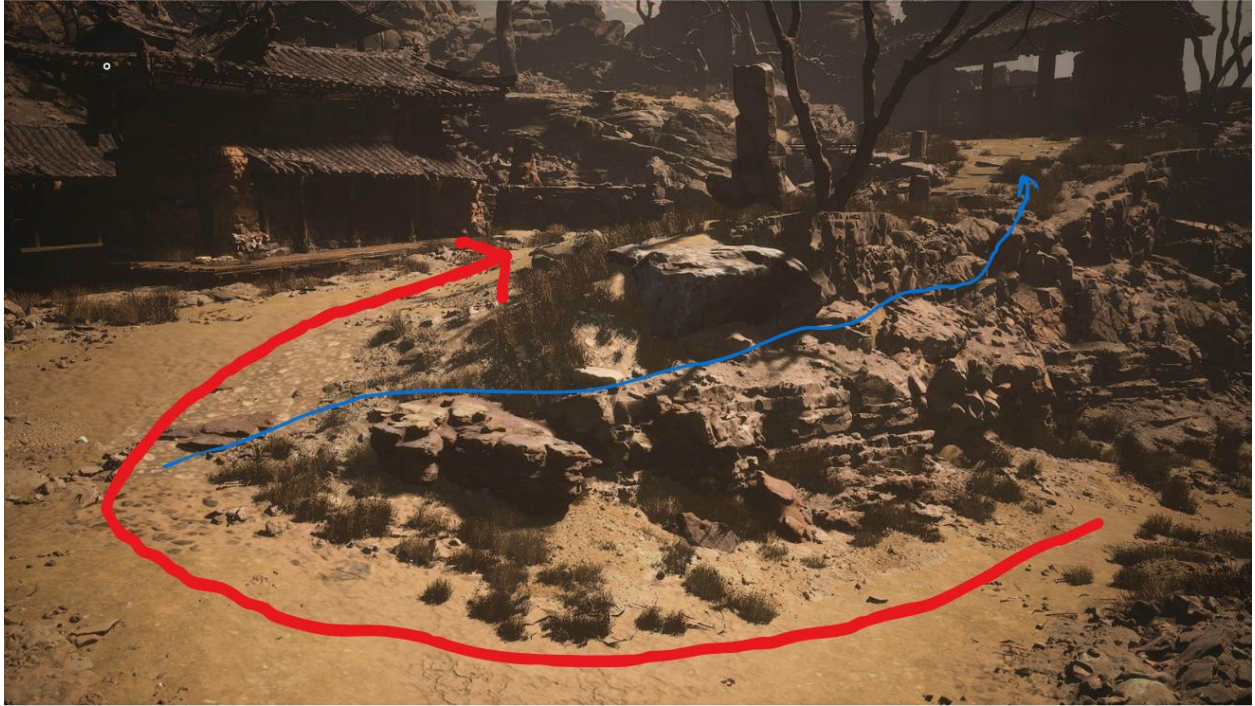


Figure 2

In figure 2, the red line indicates the most obvious path for players to take, abiding by the game's default navigation rules. However, players can explore the other path (blue line) as the terrain allows it. This side path allows players to avoid enemies, rationing their health and mana for bosses later down the line. More than anything, this allows the player to feel smart, and that they did something others might have missed.

However, a problem arises with the traversable environment; there is no uniform ruleset applied throughout the world.

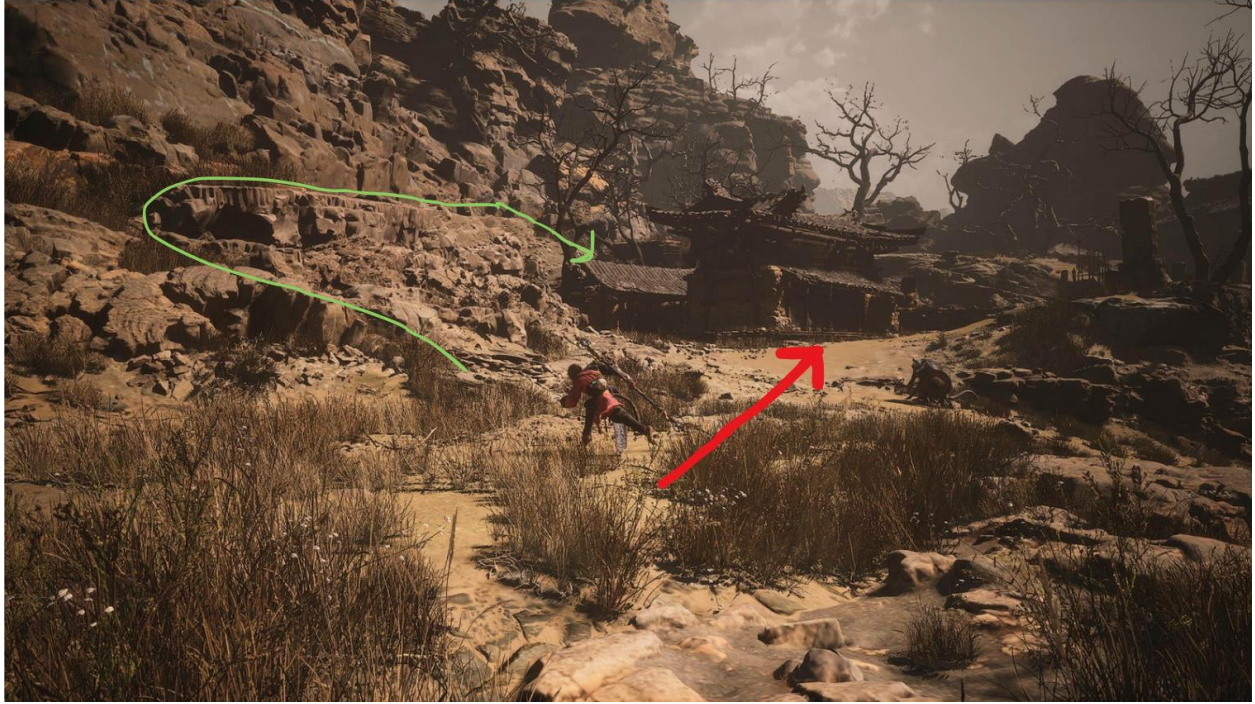


Figure 3

In figure three, the player has progressed up the hill and decided not to take the first optional terrain path, but instead opted for the green path. This new path would lead farther in the level, maintain a high ground, and avoid enemies. When the player approaches, they have the expectation of being able to climb up since they were able to do so before hand and on the count that it seems navigable to the player, however, they are hit with a sad realization that instead of a new navigable path, or at least a more diegetic collider, the player only receives a hard, invisible collider. During my first playthrough, this broke some of my immersion. This was a shared experience, with IGN reviewer Mitchell Saltzman writing “The lands you explore in Wukong are beautiful, no doubt, but they’re far too big and too crammed with secrets to not give you some sort of navigational help, especially the second and third chapters. This, along with the fact that it’s aggravatingly hard to tell what obstacles can actually be climbed over and what’s an invisible wall, can make exploration quite cumbersome.” (2024, August 22) Not

only does it break immersion, but it gives the player an inconsistent feeling of freedom when traversing the levels.



Figure 4

In figure 4, you can see how this cliff, which if applying the same rules of terrain navigation from figure 3, you would think this to be impossible to scale up. However, this is possible to go up and is one of the easiest ways to escape the labyrinth that is the cliffs of turtle island.

Traversing through the levels, it can feel often like I am bouncing around, hitting walls back and forth until I eventually progress through the level. There is a stark contrast between worlds like Yellow Wind Ridge and Turtle Island, versus worlds like the Black Wind Mountain, where it feels open enough, but sets up clear boundaries for the players to abide to. A great example of this being done is the lead up to the Guanyin Temple. While it does a lot of things right, the best thing is the uniform collider rules set up. It does not allow you to climb up some walls and prohibit others, but instead creates steep level geometry that doesn't give the player ideas of climbing up. While it is more restrictive, it creates order in the level, something

preferable over chaos. To apply this to levels that lack good structure, such as Yellow Wing Ridge, it is important to not just get rid of the open traversal present in the level, but to set up executive boundaries for your level. Going back to figure three, the green path should either not be an attractive path to take or make it a navigable path players can traverse. It is not bad for the level designer to set up a boundary for its players, that is fundamental for level designers to put into practice. However, these should be apparent to players and not ambiguous.

To keep levels fresh and communication clear, it is important to raise the status of this traversal mechanic to a pillar of level design and alternate it throughout the totality of the game. In Ben Bauers “A Practical Guide to Level Design”, he speaks of the totality behind the design of levels in game, and how certain elements are shared with every level, which allows the game to introduce and cycle through different gameplay throughout the experience of the whole game. Black Myth: Wukong needs to embrace terrain navigability as a core element of the levels in the game. This would allow the level designer to have a clearer image of what should be included in the level, and other departments as well to create gameplay orientated around this element. Combat designers can adjust the “thrust stance” to hit enemies from below, narrative designers can now have a clear image of what extra space is available for details to be included in. The embracement of this element would increase cohesion for not only the player, but the team working on the project.

Black Myth: Wukong has very strong level design, allowing players to feel like they are in an open world while really playing a linear game. The navigation system in the terrain has a lot that can be worked on, but its existence in the first place adds a unique mechanic to the game that others lack. In future sequels, this feature should be embraced as a core element of the game, as it makes the game stand out from other titles in a genre that has a lot of harsh competition.

Citations:

Design, W. of L. (n.d.). *7 ways to effortlessly guide the player with level design as seen in “Alan Wake.”* 7 Ways to Effortlessly Guide the Player with Level Design As Seen in Alan Wake.
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Bauer, B. (2023). *A practical guide to level design: From theory to practice, diplomacy and production*. CRC Press.