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Cuphead's Boss-Battle-Oriented Level Design

Cuphead, developed by Studio MDHR, can be described as a fast-paced shoot 'em up that easily becomes frustrating to play by players. The game allows for one or two players to travel through the world of the main character, Cuphead, sometimes with his brother Mugman alongside him, and meet incredible beasts that are looking for a worthy opponent to fight. Players are allowed, and encouraged, to customize their weapons and abilities frequently in order to properly defeat each boss. The most interesting part about this game is that almost every level is only a boss fight. Normally, games like this would have an entire level themed around the upcoming boss at the end. Players would defeat smaller enemies in areas before the final chamber where the boss emerges. However, this is not the case for this game. As a result, the level design of *Cuphead* places the player in a constant adrenaline-fueled state and gives the player little time to calm down while playing.

The story of Cuphead and Mugman starts when the brothers come across a casino on their little island. They decide to play a few rounds and find themselves on a hot streak. The owner of the casino comes to congratulate them, and it turns out the Devil is the owner. He offers to gamble with the pair in exchange for their souls, and Cuphead excitedly agrees. Being the cheater he is, Devil ultimately wins and demands they pay their debt. After pleading for their souls back, the Deil agrees to let the debt slide if they manage to collect the souls of other

debtors that have not paid. The game then revolves around the pair fighting fantastical beings in order to save their lives. From the premise of this game, it's understandable why there are almost no regular levels, with the exception of some levels called "Run 'N Gun"s where the player is able to collect coins for upgrades. There's seemingly no need for each being to have their own minions protecting them from any collectors, as they were all ordinary before gambling with the Devil on their little island, making this game solely boss battles. This also means that the entire game is made up of difficult battles where it's impossible to clear a level on the first try and redos are unavoidable.

The main reason why players often feel stress is because of the learning curve within the game. While there is a tutorial level to start players off, there is no "tutorial boss". They are told how to jump, shoot, and dash but are severely underprepared for how to use those abilities in combination. Players are unaware of how crazy the levels are until they are ultimately thrown into whichever enemy they chose first, in which they are met with fiery flies, crying vegetables, and sucker-punching blue blobs. Although this may seem like a bad thing and a turn-off for any new player, the reputation the game has built is exactly where it intended to be. Because of its high-difficulty rating, overall satisfaction is also very high. On a personal experience, Elise Favis from Game Informer wrote that "Cuphead is a difficult game, but in an incredibly satisfying way. As I struggled to even make it through the first level, I was hit with a wave of joy when I

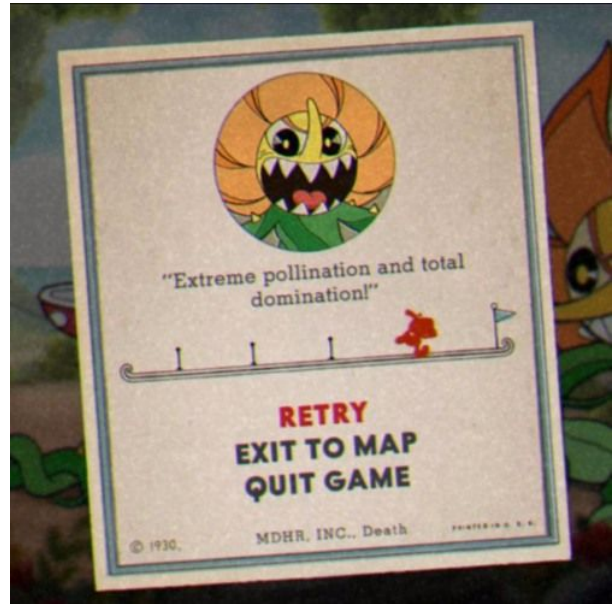


finally beat it. My tiny Cuphead character waved his arms around and cheered, as if he were as happy as I was for the success". The win screen that Favis is referring to is the one shown to the left,

where the boss explodes into puffs of smoke after the player has been running around and dodging every projectile on a moving screen. Since this game is primarily intended for those who can quickly recognize patterns, which tend to be older demographics, the feeling of victory has to replace the feelings of anger and frustration players experience just moments before the battle is over by an overwhelming amount for the game to succeed.

Anticipation adds another layer to this stress-heavy game. As mentioned before, players have no way of knowing what kind of battle they are walking into against what kind of creature, but one might be able to guess based on the beast's name. In the world of *Cuphead*, there are three main types of levels; the 'Run 'N Gun's, as mentioned before, where players are constantly moving to try and get to an end checkpoint while collecting coins, the regular levels, where players are able to use their upgrades in a platform-style level layout, and the flying levels, where Cuphead is dropped into a bomber-style plane and upgrades are virtually unavailable. There are variations within the categories that make each level harder, but each player has their own opinions on which are more boring or frustrating to complete. However, all players can agree that the lack of health shown for bosses is highly stressful. All bosses have three or four phases they undergo, in which their attacks reasonably become more hectic and harder to avoid. All the while, there is no bar or percentage hanging on one corner of the screen to let players know when they're down to the wire. Players have to memorize the sequences the enemies put them through in order to roughly gauge how close they are to beating the level. To make matters worse after seeing Cuphead float towards heaven on the screen after he's lost his last life, "when you die you're shown a graph of how close you were to the KO or the next phase of the battle. It reduces screen clutter while also encouraging...you into taking another crack at it"(Skrebels). This death-screen graph can be seen pictured below and is usually shown with a running cycle of

Cuphead looking to reach the finale. While the lack of health may have been a design choice based on the chaos already ensuing onscreen, it's clear that its secondary intention was to permanently keep players on-edge at all times when in battle, allowing for no end-of-the-line sighs of relief when players think they've already won.



Another way that stress stays within the player is the way that it is very difficult to speed-run this game on your first try. It's also very difficult for pros to mostly lean on their previous knowledge of playing video games since "the game isn't designed for *true gamers* to race through with nothing but raw skill and unearned confidence. If anything, the boss fights punish pride, filling stages with minions, projectiles and traps. Where *Cuphead* scolds speed, it rewards a careful and thoughtful method. Anytime the challenge feels too great, a solution can typically be found by inhaling, exhaling and carefully considering all possible solutions before diving back into the fight"(Plante). As mentioned before, this game is primarily for players who can recognize patterns and respond to them accordingly, meaning that when a player enters a new boss level, they enter with very little knowledge of what this boss will look like, attack with, and what guns would be the best to use against them. Since there are no enemies leading up to the boss that have a similar fight style to train the player, experienced players can't pick up knowledge on what the boss will be like until they enter the level and play through at least two of their phases.

Cuphead's storyline is definitely something interesting, but the game's art style and unique levels will be what it's most remembered for. Most games look to teach players through a steady buildup of smaller enemies with similar abilities to the boss until the player has conquered them all and ready to face their leader. However, *Cuphead* aims to teach players by throwing them into the deep end of the pool immediately, as the first bosses are no easy feat on their own. The developers knew they were making an incredibly stressful game, considering boss battles in other games are supposed to be the most climactic events of a game's adventurer. When a game is only made up of super climactic moments, players are practically falling off their chairs from adrenaline and focus. Since all bosses have to be beaten in order to advance to the final level, replayability on the premise of completionism is slim to none, but with the number of times players die while playing, players feel as though they've played the game dozens of times, allowing *Cuphead* to become an instant classic for ingenuity.

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Boss Knockout Image:

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