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Game Design 201

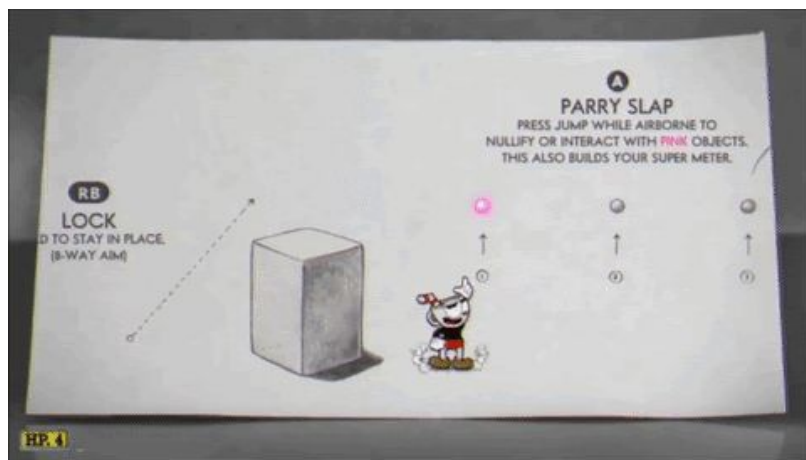
11/1/2020

Cuphead's Punishment-Oriented Level Design

Paying homage to the music and art style of the 1930s, *Cuphead* is definitely a sight to behold for the gaming community. Combining these elements into a coherent video game is astonishing enough, but the developers also wanted to make the game feel like players were watching an old cartoon. With bouncing rubber hose animations, the game feels like something your grandparents would have thoroughly enjoyed. Since this was the theme of the game, it seems that the developers wanted *Cuphead* to resemble a nail-biter brawl shown in cartoons, where the hero narrowly escapes gunshot wounds from big, bad enemies and makes it out alive just by the skin on their teeth. With this inspiration, came the final product of the game. Players soon realized it one of the hardest games they've ever played, with the boss-battle-style level design being the center of attention. After a few rounds of knocking out crazy enemies and losing dozens of lives, some players essentially threw their hands up and called it quits. This reaction from some players is caused by the incredibly hard boss battles that players have been dropped into that seemingly have learning curves and only serve to make players suffer.

To start off, the tutorial is misleading. The tutorial of the game is that of a storybook, in which Cuphead travels along a sheet of white paper and performs tasks as he is instructed by floating text. It is laid out in a side-scroller format, where the player has to keep moving to advance the tutorial since all objects and text are stationary. It teaches the player all of the basic

functions of the game, like how to run, jump, shoot, aim, and parry. However, one critique of this system is that the game doesn't teach you how to combine these abilities. One player on Reddit stated that they felt "The tutorial has a weird mix of inconsistent tone of instructions designed for people who are new to videogames but they also expect them to have a level of gaming knowledge of an experienced gamer. They spell out all the main mechanics of the game that gamers take as common sense like ducking and jumping that new player will have to learn but they never specify instructions on how to move in the game and expect new players to know how to do that even if they never played a videogame before"(Sxcbeastfareast). The layout of the



tutorial is shown in the image on the left. This player was frustrated with the learning curve between the tutorial level and the first bosses since it's decently steep. Another reason why players may find difficulty with

the first stages is that the tutorial and boss battles are completely different. As mentioned before, the tutorial is a side-scroller that encourages the player to run on to the next objective and advance the screen. However, the only levels this mimics are the Run 'N' Gun levels, which are pretty sparse and are only for collecting coins to use at the shop to obtain upgrades. The rest of the game is made up of boss levels where the player is jumping around on multiple platforms but remains stationary on the one screen. There is practically no running towards new enemies as if the player gets too close to the boss, they will take damage and lose one of their lives. This can be confusing to players, new and experienced, since a tutorial is supposed to prepare a player for

the onslaught that is yet to come. *Cuphead* is already difficult enough to beat, why should a player have the capability to immediately be turned off by the game when they find out the game isn't what they thought it was?

The problems for new players don't stop in the first world, they carry over into most of the levels in all the worlds. The concept that makes players throw their controllers and yell is the game's use of randomness. In all levels, there are projectiles that the bosses throw at the player that they have to avoid or else they lose one of their lives in the process. The projectiles and where they come from depends on the stage that the boss is in. For example, one of the bosses is a carnival clown, and in one of his stages, he sends balloon-animal dogs after you from a system of air pumps. In another stage, he rides horses that were ripped off of a carousel and they spit out horseshoes in special patterns depending on their color. When players get to each new stage, they are immersed in it and have to figure out this new territory quickly so that they can recognize the patterns of the projectiles and survive the stage. Some of the stages have multiple different projectiles that could be thrown, and it all depends on the randomly generated number the game spits out to determine what code runs. Another player describes their feelings in the second world with randomly generated attacks and platforms, saying "its biggest problem is moving RNG (random number generator) platforms combined with its own RNG attacks. Stage 1 of the dragon isn't bad. Stage 2 is RNG nightmare and has no patterns to learn at all from both RNG platforms and RNG attacks that great tracking. Stage 3 still has the moving platforms and no longer has RNG attacks. But stage 3 now has fireballs that split into 4 shots when you shoot them AND a flamethrower that covers HALF the screen. With RNG placed platforms"(Chewy102). Even without playing *Cuphead*, anyone can read that description and imagine themselves trying to play that level without losing their minds. A stage of the level this

player is talking about is shown in the image on the right. While this may look quite difficult already, this is only the first stage and the projectiles become more random and distracting in the later ones. Randomness in games like this can be fun to give the player new and exciting playthroughs, but when it feels like an impossible draw that players can't get out of, that's when it can become damaging to the game's playability.



The final issue players take with the boss level designs is its repetitiveness. As mentioned earlier, the game consists almost solely of boss battles and only has a few Run 'N' Guns sprinkled throughout all the worlds to allow the player to collect coins for upgrades. Almost all bosses start on the right side of the screen, possibly allowing for what the developers would see has some comfort at the start of each extraordinary battle. While some battles take place in the sky and others take place on land, that's where the main differences stop. When a battle is finally completed, players sigh in relief, but then they pick their controllers back up and look over the name of the next creature they have to fight and are filled with dread once again. I, personally, did this on my playthrough after many of the bosses that I did not enjoy. I also found myself wishing there were more Run 'N' Guns for two primary reasons; the first reason being that I wanted more coins to get better upgrades so I could pass bosses I hated, and the second reason was that I wanted something else to do other than fight and lose to the same boss repeatedly. And I too felt the dread of starting another boss battle, since I knew I knew nothing about it and would have to start the process all over again. Another player felt the same as I did, but put it

into better words, saying that they felt like “*Cuphead*’s entire path to mastery is in familiarizing oneself with enemy attack patterns. This means that every new battle engaged is a clean wipe of accumulated skills, that *Cuphead* has no difficulty curve, and that its bosses could have been arranged in any order”(Suskie). What Suskie meant by this statement was that players have a hard time learning from their mistakes when crossing over into a new boss’s territory. While one can memorize patterns and block out the fancy colors of one level, they may have a hard time doing that anywhere else again since they’re starting from square one. *Cuphead* could have benefited from having minor similarities between bosses in order to reinforce mechanics and make the player feel like they’re learning from the game as they go.

Like most games, *Cuphead* is an amazing game to play that has some flaws that unfortunately turn some players away. While this game isn’t an online game that constantly undergoes updates, some fixes could have made the experience better for all players. For starters, the tutorial could have been different. The premise of the game was to throw players into the deep end of the swimming pool, but if that’s the idea, having a tutorial doesn’t make much sense. To make the tutorial resonate with players and introduce them to combining mechanics, the developers could have made a tutorial boss. The boss could be black and white, which would mimic old rubber hose cartoons of the time period, and also the color scheme would blend well with the paper the tutorial is currently set in. There, the boss could have been like old cartoon bosses, that speak their mind about what they don’t want the player to do and are overdramatic about events that ensue, which would add a more memorable character to the game while also teaching the player what the rest of the game will be like. On the topic of randomness, the game could have used a little less of it. The amount of random attacks each boss has is astonishing, but sometimes just because developers are able to show off how much they can do, doesn’t mean

that the players will appreciate all of the abilities of the bosses. Randomness within attack times, instead of having attack times along with the number of different attacks, could have been enough for what's generated on the screen. Finally, the game could have been improved with more Run 'N' Guns spread throughout. This would allow the player to collect more coins for upgrades and give them more breaks from the onslaught of boss battles. There's currently only two per world, so I believe three or four could have been better, that way the ratio between the two levels is more proportional. The game has its flaws, but these small additions could have made the game more enjoyable for a wider range of video game players.

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