

Level Design: Guiding The Player

There's many ways a player can be guided through a game level, some more subtle than others. From the glorious points of interest to glimmering gold and frenzied enemies, and will take a closer look at some of the most common techniques used to guide players through game levels. With examples from games like Skyrim, The Witcher 3 and more, this text is meant as an introduction to some basic level design principles.

Enemies

Perhaps the most obvious technique to use is enemies. Nothing spells "I haven't been there yet" as much to a player as enemies that still lives and moves around in front of him or her. If the player gets lost in an area, seeing new enemies in the distance is a way to know where to go.

Light

Just as the player itches to dispatch enemies, the player will also always be drawn towards the light. Light helps illuminate dark areas, makes areas easier to manoeuvre in, and when strung along throughout an otherwise dark level, they create a path for the player to follow.

Contrasts between darker areas and more well lit areas also help the player to visually orientate himself, and create a mental map of the area. If everything is similarly lit, no areas will be distinguishable, and hence it will be difficult for the player to understand where he or she is.

Some claim that the player will be more drawn towards warm, orange light than cold, bluish light, perhaps because warmer colours are connected with more positive experiences, and vice versa.

Audio

A more subtle guiding technique is to use audio. The player will typically seek out sound sources, whether its a radio playing in the next room in Fallout 4, or a distant waterfall in Skyrim. Not only does the use of sound sources hint at areas not yet explored, they can also give the player an incentive to explore locations further in order to gain rewards, like with the alluring sound of bonecharms in Dishonored 2, or the sound of a place of power in The Witcher 3.

Loot

Speaking of rewards, no player can resist the temptation of glimmering gold, loot and pickups that help them grow stronger or richer. This can be used to moderately reward the player throughout your level, and more in excess after extra difficult battles.

Of course, if you're a slightly evil level designer, you can also occasionally use loot to lure the player into traps, like in Dark Souls.

Loot can also be placed in a seemingly unreachng location, giving the player a long term goal to get to that location later in order to reap his or her reward.

Landmarks and Weenies

Another technique often used is to place landmarks or "Weenies" in your level. "Weenies" is a term coined by Walt Disney to describe how they used architectural landmarks, like Sleeping Beauty's Castle or giant mountains, to draw guests into different areas of their theme parks.

Landmarks and weenies is very often used in large, open world games like The Elder Scrolls- and Fallout-series, and some obvious examples are the iconic White Gold Tower of Oblivion, the towering Dragonreach of Whiterun and the green Diamond City in Fallout 4.

Landmarks or weenies does not have to be large architectural structures though, they can also be smaller, unique objects in the level, like statues or characteristic trees. What is common for all these landmarks and weenies is that they are visually distinct; because they stand out from their surroundings, they help the player to figure out where he or she is geographically. Weenies and landmarks can be particularly helpful if your level is very big, labyrinthic or repetetive.

Point of Interest/HUD marker

When all else fails and immersiveness is ready to be sacrificed on the altar of convenience, a very popular technique to use in modern games is the point of Interest, or HUD marker. This is a technique favoured by the impatient and commonly disliked by old school rpg players. It can be useful or even necessary in very complex or large levels where the player might become easily lost, but is also a fallback when all other design techniques fail.

Mixing it up

In practical use more often than not all these techniques are used in combination with each other. Enemies make sounds and move around, and loot is usually placed in well lit areas. Shifting sun rays and architectural lines work in tandem to draw the player towards bosses or chests full of gold, and quest locations and important npc's typically comes with the corresponding HUD marker.

Although enemies will more often than not be placed in the light and loot is usually used as a reward, sometimes the rules are broken, like in Dark Souls.

Summary

Use enemies, light, audio, loot and geometry to draw and guide your player through your level. Keep the path throughout your level reasonably well-lit and reasonably filled with activity to keep your player on track. Place architectural weenies here and there in larger areas, and use audio sources to guide your player onwards when all other enemies have dutifully been dispatched off and silenced.

Occasionally break the rules to keep things interesting.

These basic techniques can of course be expanded on by using other techniques, like contrast, colour, and architectural lines and variation, but that will have to be another story for now.