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Advanced Game Design

Essay 1

My team decided to use a game called Cube Quest as the starting point for the group project. We titled our version Cube Wars and started implanting changes as instructed. The group decided to keep the core aspects of the game and make a few additions to the gameplay. In order to talk more about some of the aspects of the game, I will be using several of the “lenses” that are talked about in “The Art of Game Design” by Jesse Schell. These lenses allow Schell to give designers tips and advice on how to bring out the best in a game by explaining the various elements and mechanics that make up a game in its most basic form and their importance to the other elements and the overall end result.

In chapter four, Schell talks about how different things like experiences arise from games. One specific thing that arises from games is curiosity. Curiosity is talked about in the first of several lenses I will be talking about. In this chapter, Schell introduces lens #6, *The Lens of* Curiosity. Curiosity makes players ask themselves questions about their, actions, goals, strategies, and resources. The existence of a curious player reminds me of me when I play The Last Guardian. The extremely vast majority of the game is exploration. In terms of attacking enemies and defending myself, I have little to no options. At one point I had a mirror that let me shoot lightning at things, but I lost it after I \*\*spoiler\*\*. That being said, I always have to pay attention to my surroundings and *ask* myself how I can avoid being captured if surrounded. That same curiosity shows itself when I enter a new area. Since I have to find a way to move forward, I find myself thinking about whether or not I can scale this wall, make this jump, or get off this platform before it collapses.

Through this lens, Schell wants to let designers know that curiosity drives the player forward. The more the player thinks about a problem, the more solutions they come up with. In short, the game should make the player think about how to achieve the overall goal. One way to do this would be to give the player options that may not be too obvious to them. This is done in The Last Guardian, as players are forced to move forward, but must figure out how to do so with little help from the game. Another way to do this would be to have the player face off against an entity that has the same capacity of thought as they do and make them compete against each other. Both Cube Quest and Cube Wars use this method to bring out the curiosity in players by pinning them against an opponent with the same goal as them.

The next lens that I chose was lens #9, *The Lens of the Elemental Triad*. Schell describes the elemental tetrad as a group of four different game elements. Said elements are mechanics, aesthetics, story, and technology. These four elements are without a doubt some of the most important aspects of any game and help form its foundation. As far as mechanics go, the basic ones went unchanged. Mechanics that we are currently toying with include adding offensive and defensive stats to the cubes, various power-ups for the cubes, and a system that allows the players to fling their cubes.

The next mechanic was aesthetics. For a reason I will explain later, all of the game’s visual elements are space related. The cubes for the game will feature space related characters such as astronauts and aliens, and the battlefields that the players can choose from will also be space themed. At this point, we don’t know if we’ll add music or sound effects, but if we do, they would be appropriate to the situation. As for the game’s story, even though it’s somewhat nonexistent, there is a sequence of events. Players will still be tasked with taking turns using their cubes to knock their opponent’s cubes off of the field. Now that I think about it, if we wanted to, we could make a story, albeit a somewhat limited one. The player could use the astronaut cubes to fight the alien cubes on various stages to combat an invasion.

Schell describes the technology element as where a game’s aesthetics and procedures occur. So far we’ve been using Unity to bring our changes to life. We’re currently taking advantage of the terrains to create the various fields for players to battle on. For us, the technology element also includes using a physics engine to allow characters to fling their cubes to their hearts content. Players will click on the cube they want to attack with and “slingshot” it at the target cube.

Lens #11 was the next lens that I focused on and it’s titled, *The Lens of Unification*. Throughout the chapter that contained this lens, Schell talks about how the various elements and aspects of the game need to reinforce and support each other so the overall goal of the game can be achieved. Said goal being the ability to live up to the standards of both the creators and players. When talking about this lens, Schell states that there are just two steps to using a theme to improve the game’s quality and better the player’s experience. Naturally, the first step is to find a theme and the second step is to reinforce it by any means possible. Schell also states that things that don’t relate to the chosen theme serve no purpose and have no place in the game.

The theme that we eventually settled on was space. We decided that the players would use either astronaut cubes, or alien cubes to battle each other with. Space themed battlefields are currently being designed for players to battle on. As for the power-ups that we are going to add, there will be both generic buffs and debuffs for both character classes and abilities that are exclusive to a single class. For instance, the alien cubes could have access to a slime power-up, or one that lets them abduct one of the opponent’s cubes. While the idea of using a single theme may seem limiting, it actually helps us keep thematically irrelevant things from appearing during gameplay. For example, while some players may see having a giraffe cube at their disposal beyond hilarious, it simply doesn’t fit into either of our character classes. Besides, what would a giraffe be doing in space anyway?

Schell talks about flow in chapter 10. Flow can be described as a balance between how challenging a game is and the skill level of the player. This brings us to lens #21, *The Lens of Flow*. Schell talks about how the player’s skill increases over time and how the game needs to keep up with that. If the player’s skill is greater than the difficulty of the game, the player gets bored. If difficulty is greater than skill, the player gets frustrated. Flow is the equilibrium between the two. To keep track of flow, Schell urges designers to make sure that their games has goals and that the goals that the player recognizes are the same as the goals that were intended. Schell also suggests that the game should get progressively harder as the player gets better at playing it. Cube Wars tries to make itself difficult by pinning the player against opponents that can think for themselves.

In chapter 12, Schell talks about the various game mechanics that make up a game. Those game mechanics include space, time, objects, actions, rules, skill, and chance. In a way, it’s these mechanics that give each game its personality, so to speak. The first mechanic that was covered was space which brings us to lens #26, *The Lens of Functional Space*. When discussing a game’s functional space, Schell tells us to keep in mind things like the dimensions, boundaries, subspaces and the different ways the space can be represented.

As far as the type of space that the gameplay takes place in, the space is continuous as the battlefield isn’t divided up into separate sections by boundaries. There is however, a boundary that surrounds the entirety of the battlefield. This space is treated as a dead zone of sorts and any cube that passes into it is removed from play regardless of which player caused it to end up there. Even though the inside of the battlefield isn’t separated by actual boundaries, it does contain subspaces. Each player’s side of the battlefield can be considered a subspace as it differs from the other one in the sense that only the player that owns that side of the field can place their cubes there at the start of the match.

As far as the dimensions of the space, the game takes place in a three-dimensional space. Even though the standard shape of the field would be rectangular, we could use different shapes for the battlefields. Different shapes would result in different strategies in terms of where to set up your cubes at the start of the match and where to send them to gain an advantage.

The second mechanic Schell talks about in chapter 12 is time. The next lens that is talked about is lens #27, *The Lens of Time*. When it comes to games, time is something that can take many forms depending on what kind of game is being created. Time can take shape in the form of turns. This type of time is categorized as discrete time as each turn is considered a unit of time as far as the game is concerned. Schell warns us to be careful when manipulating time as things get messy when things are either too long, or too short. Things that also fall under the time mechanic are clocks, time limits, and the length of player activities.

As of now, there is no time limit on player’s activities during their turn, but crating one would force players to make decisions a lot faster. This leaves very little room for error during turns. As far as the overall length of the game, matches don’t have a set time limit. The overall length of a match is determined by how fast one player loses all of their cubes. This is determined by the skill of each player, how they react to the other player’s moves, and how power-ups are used.

The tips presented in Schell’s lenses are meant to help designers, more or less, perfect their product. As long as the advice is followed all should go well.