Level Design Workshop

**Section Five:
Level Designer As Storyteller**

GDC 'Cn

LEVEL DESIGNER AS STORYTELLER

Player Stories

- Every time a level is played, a story is told.

- The player's experience of playing through the level -- what happened to THEM -- is that story.

Inherent Storytelling

- The story is told through a variety of means

  – player's interactions with the game's mechanics

  – exploration of the environment

  – observation of the scripted story elements.

- But each player's experience of this level's story is different.

Inherent Storytelling

- It is the level designer's job to define the possibilities of what a level's story might be.

- In some games, most players' stories will be nearly identical; in others all will be very different.

- But in each case it's up to the level designer to determine the bounds of the experience.

YOUR TOOLSET

What tools does a level designer have at their disposal to define the possibilities of the level's story?

- Layout/flow

- Mechanical population

- Environment art

- In-world scripting/voice

- Cutscenes

Storytelling Tools

- All of the above can play important roles in telling the story of a level. However:

  – What kind of story does your level need to tell?

  – Which of these tools will provide the most efficient way of telling this story?

- This will determine the level's **scope.**

Types of Story

- Gameplay story

- Environmental story

- Scripted story

- Super Metroid Example Contains All Three

Example:
Super Metroid Intro Level

Super Metroid – Gameplay Story

"I navigated by running, jumping and shooting, then encountered a huge monster and fought against it, but it was too powerful for me.

I then rushed through hazards to escape the space station before it exploded."

Super Metroid – Environmental Story

"The base was deserted, all the scientists were dead, and the dangerous specimen was missing from its containment unit."

Super Metroid – Scripted Story

"The monster stole the specimen and flew away with it, causing the space station to enter destruct mode.

I escaped in my spaceship just in the nick of time, moments before the space station exploded."

GAMEPLAY STORIES

Gameplay Story

- Most important story to get across

    - (from design perspective)

- Teach Player What Abilities Exist

- Consistency = Trust

- If a player completes this level without understanding this story, they also walk away with an incomplete understanding of their role as the player.

Gating

- Mandatory mechanical elements must be **gated**.

  - Running solves itself

  - Jumping is similarly straightforward

  - Shooting is slightly more complex

    - Can't rely on player shooting during boss fight.
    - Doors only open when shot.

Beyond Tutorials

- But this is only one very limited type of Gameplay story: the tutorial.

- Gameplay stories can be highly varied and expressive, allowing the player to shape their own experience based on the opportunities provided by the designer.

Multiple Paths
Deus Ex: Human Revolution

Varying Gameplay Stories

- *"I used cover and explosives sweep through the room, killing all of the enemies."*

- *"I hacked security to fight for me, then snuck away while the enemies were distracted."*

- *"I used my abilities and cover to sneak through the room without anyone knowing I was there."*

By carefully managing the level's layout and the arrangement of gameplay elements within it, the designer can guide the player through one very specific Gameplay Story, or present them with a number of possibilities to create their own.

SCRIPTED STORIES

Scripted Story

- Often a level designer is responsible for presenting a scripted story as well.

- This story most often comes from the writer of the game, and is considered "THE STORY" from a reviewer's standpoint.

- It is the level designer's job to present the Scripted Story as clearly and compellingly as possible.

Scripted Story

- Scripted story can quickly become very expensive

    - Cutscenes are the most reliable, and most expensive, method.

- Any way in which the designer can express more of the Scripted story in the level itself will benefit the project, and the player experience, as a whole.

What elements of Scripted story can live in the level itself?

- Voice-over

- Character animation

- Environment events

Scripted Story

- Any of these is better integrated into the gameplay -- and less expensive-- than a cutscene

- Must be managed along with all the other gameplay elements that the player encounters

SCRIPTED STORY TECHNIQUES

- **Framing**

  – funneling the player's attention via layout

- **Gameplay mechanics**

  – or lack thereof/minimizing distraction

- **Staging & lighting**

  – focusing attention visually

- **Gating**

  – keeping the player from skipping the sequence, if necessary

Framing

- FRAMING: Using layout to ensure the player is facing the event when it begins, and is able to see it clearly as it proceeds.

- Should always occur in the center of the player's screen.

- Dog Leg or S-Lock to funnel the player's view
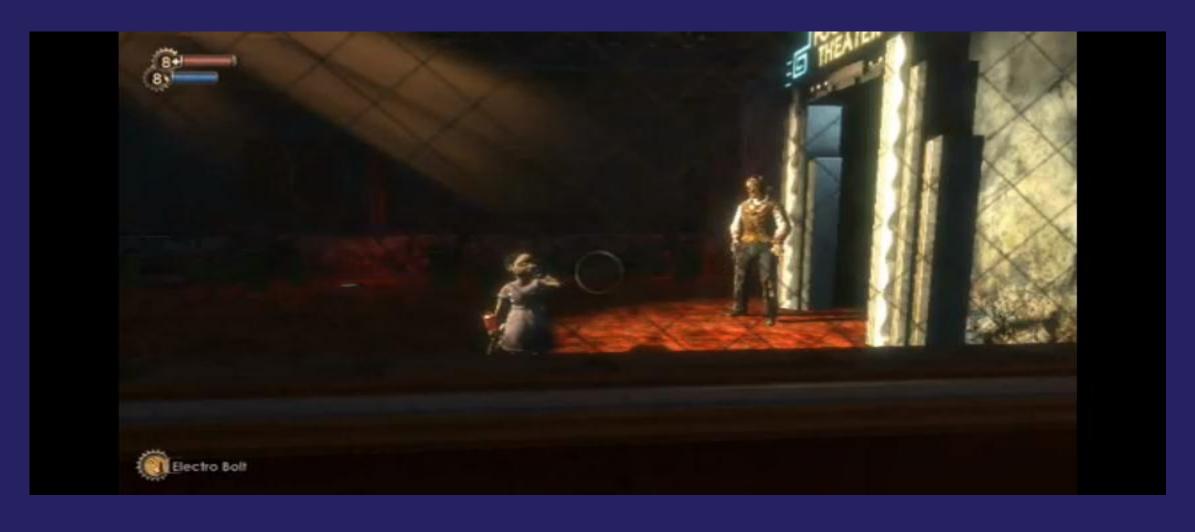
Dishonored "Plague Train"

Mechanics

- Any interactive elements will draw attention away from the Scripted story sequence.

- If interactive objects cannot be removed, any effects that highlight them (special effects, particles) should be disabled.

Staging / Lighting

- Scripted Story is a stageplay.

- Lighting and blocking draw attention to the most important elements of the sequence.

  - Spotlighting highlights specific elements

  - Silhouetting isolates specific elements from the surrounding scene.

BioShock

Optional or Non-Optional?

- Unless the player can skip the sequence, some form of gating is required.

- Ideally the resolution of the sequence itself should clear the blockage, allowing the player to move on

- Allowing the player to skip the sequence requires additional planning, but allows the player to interact to the game more naturally.