

Level Design in Games

Terms

Levels: creating the architecture of maps in the game, plus dealing with object placement, with the mission or goal of the map, and often with 'mini-missions' within the level.

Mini mission: creating a smaller goal or challenge within the level to get something necessary for advancement (such as getting over a open trap to get a key to open door)

Inventory: objects that you pick up and carry around for later use.

Goals to GOOD level design. Challenging enough to complete so that accomplishing a level is a reward in and of itself.

Focus and Continuity. Consider the overall mission of the game. A level is just one chapter of that game and should be consistent to the theme(s). Each level must also have its own mission. Every level (and map) must have a reason for its existence.

Architecture Design. Guide your player using architecture and game play elements (such as item inventory, monsters, and other pickup objects). There must always be natural breaks between levels.

Risks and Rewards. A big risk should promise a big reward. Rewards can be visual, an object that is highly desirable, cool inventory items, a musical track etc.

Environmental Feel and Teasers. You can have windows that look out at the world you may not ever interact with but include them so the player feels less part of the vacuum of the level you create. Consider 'grand entrances' and spectacular views.

Interact with everything. Nowadays, players should be able to interact with anything. Click on or destroy anything. So don't include a painting on the wall and not expect the player to click on it.

Steps to Level Design

1. Sketch out a map on paper
2. Start only with just a few rooms
3. Make it so the few rooms you start off with are modular
4. Consider 'gimmicks' – wind tunnels, portals, lava themes
5. Test gimmicks, tricks and traps for playability
6. Study real architecture
7. Block out before building detail.
8. Don't add every 'feature' into one level.
9. Use distinctive memorable memorials or markers for better orientation
10. Use light and shadow for drama
11. Create possibilities for multiple solutions for puzzles
12. Keep puzzles consistent with theme of level
13. Use variety (all action or all puzzles = boring)
14. Don't over challenge, don't under challenge
15. Study maps you like

16. choose an unconventional solution (move away from 'solve puzzles, find hidden goodies and avoid or kill bad guys).
17. Pay attention to the world around you for inspiration as to how to create your world.

Anatomy of a Level

Architecture: used to limit your character's movement as well as to 'frame' your level theme as well as build an atmosphere of thrill, excitement or fear. Walls can be also ways to hide your character from monsters or monsters from character.

Traps: if you are going to use traps be sure to signify them indirectly so that it doesn't just 'pop' out. Players will consider this cheating.

Puzzles: include puzzles where solutions make sense. If a player is forced to buy a solution book or find a cheat online for a complicated and indirect puzzle then toss it. Puzzles should be such that make sense.

Keys and Doors: you know, find keys open doors to different parts of the same level or to get to the next level.

Hidden Rooms and objects: generally this means that you have to click and click anywhere and everywhere and statistically you might find something. Better to give a sign of some sort so that the hidden area 'looks' or behaves differently than everywhere else. More significant, slightly glowing or moving with animation, etc.

Monsters: monsters and ammo and health are wed together. Too much monsters and too little ammo or health = death. Too few monsters too much ammo or health is boring. Monsters get stronger as levels go higher.

Bosses: super monsters usually guarding the gate to the next level.

Weapons: used to kill monsters! Most cases. Can kill you too.

Ammo: fighting power; see monsters above.

Health: get hurt by the monsters - find 'health' and heal self.

Power Ups: can give you special strengths or power to withstand monsters.

Information (people you talk to): hints to puzzles, information on where to go or how to play. Can include finding a map of the level if not automatically provided.

Inventory Items: can be health, ammo, weapons, maps, special puzzle breakers etc.