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You wake up in a cell, all be it a sterile environment, with happy music playing for ambient effect. Finding out that you are now the research subject for Aperture Science, this could just be a normal day, but then you are confronted with portal technology, a new way for you to travel, and interact with a game.

I will be critiquing the game “Portal” which was recently released as part of Valves “The Orange Box”, it is a multi platform game, its “type” is a combination of both Puzzle, and First Person Shooter (FPS). This critique is aimed at three key elements of Portal, level design, difficulty progression, and story.

As with all Source games the designer has given this game a uniform menu system, which offers both simple and advanced functionality to the player.

The designer has seen fit to force the player through this game in a continually forward motion, by this I refer to the fact that the player generally has only one way to progress (Excluding the problem I mention late*). The puzzle elements of the game are contained within the actually level architecture, posing the player with several elements which they are required to interact with in order to solve puzzles and progress. The player is also introduced to the “Portal Gun” (The FPS Element) at an early stage in the game, which changes the temporal components of the game, initially portals are activated automatically, but this new element changes the rules so that the player can dictate when, and where they activate portals The designer has done this to force the player into tackling puzzles in a new manner.

Portals are connecting gateways that allow the player to step from one point on the map to another instantly, turning the usually mechanics of a game upside down, this allows players to reach almost anywhere within the game, if they use the portal mechanic in the correct manner. Portals are designed to be a limited (But Reusable) resource, with a maximum of two being active at any one time, in order to make puzzles more challenging. The designer is continually introducing new boundary elements into Gameplay to confront the player with new challenges, for example the introduction of different surface elements which limit where a portal can be activated, thus forcing the player to rethink their ludic strategy. During Gameplay the player must develop their skills with the “Portal Gun” to continue, the designer has taken this into consideration and introduces more advanced functionality to the game when new elements are added via help provided by the narrative (Talked About Later).

As previously mentioned the designer has structured the levels with puzzle elements in mind, in order to pose the player with more of a challenge than walking from A to B, by placing obstacles in their way. Levels therefore appear to be logically structured, and complete the designers goal in this respect. Unfortunately the levels still appear very linear, with only one entry point, and one exit point, and only one “intended” way to complete them. This causes the game to feel like it is forcing you in one way, however this is an intended design feature, so that the player is forced to progress, and not just linger in one area. Because of the linear design the player is always able to see clearly where they need to go next in order to complete a stage. The design of the game also makes it obvious what elements are important to the players progression, for example cube dispensers have been created to interrupt the ambience of the game in order to alert the player to their presence, and buttons which need to be pressed have been given a striking red texture so that they are nearly unavoidable. Shields are also introduced to the player during later stages of play to force them to reformulate the strategies they have adopted, so that they will be able to complete more difficult puzzle elements.

As the player progresses through the game, the complexity of level design is increased in order to make the player develop more advanced strategies to solve puzzles, and to pose the player with a new challenge, so that the game does not appear to be dull and repetitive. As previously mentioned the difficulty is also incremented with the addition of new Gameplay rules, introduced in most stages, starting with the simple hazard of a radioactive floor, and moving onto greater threats such as enemies. Elevators, Generators and more are also implemented in order to create a more complex level design. Players will however be able to develop a strategy for each element and reuse it throughout Gameplay, for example a button has been designed so that it always needs something to hold it down.

The player will also find “Hidden” areas in certain levels, if they explore however these areas have been made noticeable to promote the player to find them. These areas are not of critical importance to the Gameplay, however are created to add to the overall atmosphere of the game, giving the player a

slight glimpse into the darker elements of the story which encompasses the game. The areas are dark and foreboding places, and have writing scrawled across them such as “The Cake Is A Lie

The levels are created to reflect the atmosphere of the story, starting off sterile environments, and progressing to rust filled concrete factory like environments as the story becomes more twisted.

*One flaw however in level design, which would appear to be unintended by the developer is that players are able to take strategies formulated in later stages of Gameplay, and use them on earlier ones. Meaning that the player can formulate shortcuts (Or Cheat) through levels which break the core mechanics (Rules) of the game. For example on level 6 the puzzle requires the player to obtain a cube, engage a reactor, and press a button in order to raise an elevator, but with the know how a player can simply use the games physics to jump straight to the elevator.

The above are the main mechanics that define the overall Gameplay for the player, however the game also has an ongoing Narrative or Storytelling mechanic introduced at the onset of the Gameplay experience. This is delivered by the so called Artificial Intelligence called “GLaDOS”, created by Aperture Science to run the research facility you are in. Over the course of Gameplay GLaDOS delivers the main story ark to the player, with it all starting off perfectly innocent, but as previously mentioned taking a twist to a much darker tone, which is reflected by the change in atmosphere during level progression very well, making the story relevant to the overall game design. I felt betrayed by GLaDOS towards the end of the game (Much like I did by “Wesker” when playing “Resident Evil”), when I realised she was not in-fact trying to aid me, but kill me! It would appear that the developer intends for the player to form a relationship, however fragile with the A.I, so that they initially feel secure in their environment, and then rip this safety net away from them in order to force them to think outside the box. The narrative given to the player only helps to enforce the linear level design, giving them no option to deviate from the set path, even near the end there is only one way forwards, and the player can only ignore the pleas from GLaDOS for them to “Come Back” as it is physically imposible to do so.

GLaDOS does however aid the player throughout the game, having been designed to give the player hints on how to complete the more difficult puzzles (As well as taunting the them) so that players do not get frustrated with the game. If this was not enough help they have also placed helpful signs at the beginning of each stage which show the player what they will be expected to do in order to progress.

In order to complete the game the player must destroy the “Game Boss” GLaDOS, allowing them to get revenge for the attempts she made on their characters life, I did feel glee initially at this thought. Once complete the player is posed with new content created to give them more of a challenge, and to expand the length of the games life. These levels are intended to force the player to create more advanced strategies in order to complete the new tasks posed to them, complete the level in X amount of steps for example.

Sub goals have been incorporated into the Gameplay, which the player can choose to complete if they wish. These are in the form of Achievements, (e.g. complete a level in X amount of time) which will be recorded in the players progress record, this is intended to make the Gameplay last longer, and be more in depth in order to keep the players attention for longer, and to make the player interact with the game in new ways in order to attain said achievements.

To summarise the game, I found the general structure to be logical. Levels were designed with the player in mind, allowing them easy navigation as they can always see where they need to be, and marking out areas of key importance to the players progression. The level design and story are also well connected, with the change in story being reflected by the atmosphere of the current level, this emphasise the overall story to the player and makes it easier to understand. The developers have also created a logical structure for difficulty progression, pacing it so that the player is forced to quickly develop new strategies to progress, but so they have the correct balance of help in order to do this meaning that the game is still a challenge, but not to much of one. The overall design of the game is indicative of a puzzle game, however one that forces the player to interact with it on a whole new level, not just the traditional way of tackling for example Tetris. . The FPS element is also quite well designed forcing the player to manage their available resourced in an appropriate manner, and to form new strategies and skills based on the situation they are in.

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