The Theory of a Balanced Challenge

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Probably humanity's second most favorite, and certainly second earliest practiced hobby is the concept of a game. But why do humans enjoy games, and how can one ensure that each challenge a player has to face is both fair and enthralling at the same time?

Disclaimer: I am not a philosopher or a psychologist. Everything below is only a theory that I came up with, and should not be considered life advice.

The Illusion of Happiness

First of all, one has to understand what it means to have fun. For the sake of this article, let's assume that fun equals the illusion of happiness. So what a game has to achieve is both make each player forget their troubles and allow them to achieve something which makes them happy, i.e. in the broadest sense "success". Given the large differences between individuals, this is quite the undertaking; a few key points however always remain the same: A player is handed tools with which to reach a goal, according to a specific set of rules. As this holds true also of real life, perhaps "winning" in a game of this structure equals "winning" real life, i.e. finding happiness.

Learning (by Trial and Error)

In both real life and games, a player starts out with no experience, and mostly vague instructions and guidelines. So like a child learns from its parents, a player has to be taught the necessary skills; in the best case, from his or her own past mistakes, as in the classical principle of Trial and Error. The problem with this scenario lies in the fact that while a human lifetime lasts many decades, a game will probably not, so having players make mistakes and spend time learning from them will not make it fun.

The Learning Curve

So usually, a player is presented with select simple challenges to complete with their limited knowledge, upon which each skill is then based and furthered. The level of skills required throughout a game and the ease with which those skills are learned is commonly called the "Learning Curve". This curve has been an obstac-

le in many a game's path to commercial success, as it clearly separates the customers into the categories of hardcore and casual players; those that are willing to invest much time and effort into furthering their success, and those that are not. Finding the right balance here is crucial to the point that it is highly common to find games with an adjustable degree of difficulty.

Difficulty and Cheating

And while in many cases, raising difficulty levels might only result in numerical changes such as number and health of enemies, often a high level of difficulty results in gameplay changes, and possibly a more realistic game experience. But wait – wasn't the whole point of a game to forget about reality for a moment? Of course, however, it is quite against human nature to accept success for a challenge which demanded too little effort; and for many people, features such as a limited AI or Auto-Aim add the feeling of "playing dirty", i.e. cheating the challenge. But again, everyone will feel different about this. Therefore, there have been video games with over 5 gradient levels of difficulty, to allow for crassly varied adventures.

Playing To Your Strengths

The common point of gameplay to all games is using your own advantages to trump someone else's disadvantages. This may be the simple stone-paper-scissors mechanism, which is found in real-time strategy games to this day, but is still very exploitable: A very recent example is Valve's *Team Fortress 2*. The 9 classes of the tactical multiplayer shooter can be grouped into 3 groups of Attack, Defense and Support, or, alternatively, into triples of running speed: Fast, Medium, and ➔

After his third defeat this week, King Edmundo started to seriously question the balancing of Chess.

Delicious fruit veils a deceptive learning curve.

Slow. And just as well that stone-paper-scissors can be adapted to varieties with an odd number of materials , as every class has its distinct boons and banes.

Staying On Top

And the main reason why *TF2* and nearly all titles of famed Blizzard Entertainment enjoy an incredibly long and healthy life, is that their balancing is insurmountable, and stays that way while new elements are introduced. As an example, take Blizzard's *Diablo II*. Published in 2000, it has received only one commercial add-on in 2001. However, its latest patch numbers 1.13 and was released in only March of 2010. That is no typo; a whole ten years after the original release, features are added and balanced to reward the players which remain true to the franchise.

The Proof is in The Pudding

So for all intents and purposes, a correct balance consists of at least these three pillars: One, a consistent learning curve to suit both casual and hardcore players. Two, gameplay that requires and rewards individuality, catering to strengths and weaknesses. Three, keeping your eyes wide open, be it simple tinkering with floating point numbers to achieve true fairness, or giving characters a wider set of tools at their side. These are the very foundation of everything which wants to call itself a balanced game; and to be straightforward: a game without balance is not a game, it is a farce. After all, what holds true of real life and love should also hold true of an abstraction of them: Even if you don't know what the end holds in store for you, The path is the goal. ◆