

Level Design Tutorial

Selected game : Dark Souls

The main problem of the game is an abundance of controls and mechanics. Consequently, it seems necessary to progressively teach the different concepts, without doing it key by key. In my opinion, a small-scale 'dungeon' is perfect to showcase the game's world and gameplay, while still going progressively through the mechanics.

For starters, the player's most important tools are the rolling and healing mechanics. For that reason, I think that a good introduction to the game and these concepts would be to make the player start on a platform, or in a suspended cage, forcing them to fall in order to progress and discover the Estus Flask on the ground while learning about both fall damages and the main healing item.

Once the player is healed, a single path should be available, with a visible bonfire at the end. On that path, an obvious trap must be placed. For instance, a pressure plate that triggers a wall of spikes a little further along the way, then another pressure plate right before the same trap. That way, the player will be aware of the trap and will have to roll to pass through it. The player will then reach the first bonfire, where they'll get their starting gear and will have to try out the inventory.

Fighting must be taught through a series of small skirmishes. First, a single slow enemy, to acclimate the player with the controls and the dodging. Then, two of them. This will tell the player that the game is not made of single combats, and that they will have to manage the 3D space. Then, another fight with two enemies, but with one of them placed a bit further away and wielding a bow. The player must then continue to manage the space and learn to block or master the rolls to get through.

A little pause would be acceptable here, before the final challenge : an enemy with a shield. This one would allow the player to learn how defense works if they hadn't understood yet, the way kicks works, or how to use the backstab as a way to work around the problem. Finally, the enemy could use parades, first to indicate the timings and the whole principle (by giving them a not-so precise timing, in order not to punish the player too much). This final enemy contains the key informations on defending in this game.

To conclude that part, a boss must be the final exam. A battle that would require the use of every mechanics previously seen.

To achieve this, an humanoid boss would be a good idea. Enabling the use of every known maneuvers by the player, notably the parade and the backstab.

That boss must also have very telegraphed moves, but an important range, showcasing the importance of the rolls' direction or the gestion of stamina, by having it hit hard on the shield.

Once the boss is beaten, the player is rewarded with the arrival to the hub, allowing the discovery of the merchants and the level-up mechanic.

As an added bonus, it would be nice to include a tutorial on the "mini-bosses" of Dark Souls. As in, in the "pause" room right before the shielding enemy, should lie a branching path leading to a more powerful enemy, like a Black Knight.

This enemy has great odds to beat the player, but also gives them a preview of the game's difficulty while offering a great reward if they persevere enough.

The enemy must however be located in an obvious dead end, to help the player understand they're facing a non-mandatory challenge.