

Orphan Age – Skill Test

Design Process

I) Setting up

I started by reading the prompt three times, to get all the information.

And then I created the spreadsheet and text document that I would use for the test.

1) Basic information

Firstly, I made a list of every data that could be tied to a piece of furniture, separated in categories:

A- Basic information. What the furniture is.

- Name: How the furniture is called. It should be short and easy to grasp.
- Description: Either an explanation of the object, or a flavor text. Should be no longer than a single sentence.

A- Cost. What the needed resources are, to make the furniture.

- Size: The width and length of the furniture, measured in squares. A bigger object should be more useful than a smaller one, since room is limited. The size also needs to make sense, compared to an orphan size, which we'll consider as 4x2 squares, lying down.
- Materials: What you need to build the object. Mostly listing the 4 construction resources. This cost is correlated with size, as a bigger object needs more materials. It's also correlated with complexity and usefulness. A more advanced piece of furniture needs better building bricks, and may need more of them.
- Time to build: The standard time an orphan needs to build the object, before applying any skill and attribute effect. As before, the more complex and big a piece of furniture is, the longer it'll take to make one.

B- Orphan Requirements. The builder's prerequisites, in order to make the furniture.

- Difficulty: How hard it is to create the object. The more complex the furniture is, the higher the difficulty is. Made of a note between 2 and 20, as there is no point going higher than what an orphan could do.

- Required Skill: Show if the object requires a specific skill (or skills) from the builder. Mostly used for dangerous or complex things, like a controlled fire. As a form of hard gate, it should be reserved for highly useful furniture, and used with parsimony.

C- Environment. What the furniture does to the room. May have multiple states, for things than can be turned off. Each of these data uses a simple system of +/- X. Each environment stat is based on a scale of 0 to 5 (F to A), with 0 being the worst, and 5 being ideal.

- Heat: How warm the object is. The higher, the better, but a warm item may be a fire hazard.
- Clean: How much the furniture helps in cleaning the room, or makes it dirty when used.
- Comfort: How soothing the object is. A high comfort means something that helps the orphans feel safer, and more at home.

⇒ Later during the day, I changed that into a single column. Most furniture only affects one of those, and it can easily fit in a lone cell, instead of taking up three of them for nothing.

D- Limits. Everything linked with the bad side of the furniture.

- Durability: How long/How much the object can be used before breaking down. For furniture that needs energy (like a fireplace), how much a single piece of fuel lasts.
- Risks: States if the furniture is hazardous or if there is a consequence to using it for a long period of time. Beware to not overdo it, as it can easily become frustrating.

E- Actions. The list of things you can do when interacting with your furniture.

- Action X: A short description of the action.
- Prerequisite: If something is needed before being able to use the furniture (fuel, another orphan, etc.)
- Effect: What the interaction does. Most of the time, either creates another thing, or modify the interacting orphan's state.

F- Additional Notes. Any detail or information that wouldn't fit in the other categories.

2) Rough concept

Once I got a spreadsheet with all my stats, I could get a better idea of what a good furniture list would need.

Ideally, I'd need to make a diverse list, in order to cover the spectrum of costs, requirements, and effects.

Of course, this spectrum would be limited by the intersection of conditions. For instance, it would make no sense to have a 6x6 piece of furniture with an extremely low resource cost, or a basic tool that needs an orphan with an engineering degree to build.

Also, a good way to cover more ground would be to use different "tiers".

This means, starting with a furniture concept, and then decline it in other versions.

For instance, a basic object, which would then get an average, and a luxurious iteration.

Those would also make sense from a gameplay perspective, as the furniture would get better and more useful as the game goes, but would ultimately always serve the same purpose.

Then, I took a tour of my home, to see what kind of furniture I had, and why.

The results were not really surprising, but I could get a rough idea of categories:

- Cleaning stuff, either for the home, or the self.
- Containers. Things made to hold other things, and keep the place ordered.
- Comfort. Sleeping, resting, and feeling cozy.
- Mood items. Everything that decorates the room, or can be used for fun.
- Transformative. Furniture that can be used to repair, upgrade, or transform other things.

All of this being pretty good, as these categories can easily be linked to a need or an environment stat.

Then, I could select a few things of each kind, and get pretty standard yet effective furniture set.

II) From theory, to practice

With everything set up, I tried designing a simple item.

It would be a standard sink.

This could supposedly be a good start, as it's not a complex item, and it can serve a variety of purpose.

My first take out, from filling up the sink's line is how nebulous the data felt.

Even though I played the demo, and watched some videos, before the test, I didn't feel like I had a good grasp of what kind of values would make sense.

This was quite a big problem, as the whole balance depends on it. The costs should be fair, and the reward should compensate said costs, lest the furniture would be deemed useless.

So, rather than agonize about it, or work with the demo on the side, to compare values, I decided to simply not use them.

This means that I'll be treating the spreadsheet as a kind of first draft document.

Instead of numerical values, most of the data will be presented as abstract quantities, or as a range of possibilities. For instance, setting the cost as "a few scraps", rather than a precise number like 5. Or basing the difficulty on the prompt's own value ranges, as an indicator of what kind of character could do it.

Once this problem was out of the way, making up a few pieces of furniture was much easier.

Then, mostly became a question of what would be useful to add.

Since I wanted to cover as much of the game aspects as possible, I thought about the different uses that each item may have, and conversely what may work with a certain Orphan or house need.

One interesting thing I realized while doing so was that there is a usefulness threshold for items.

For instance, our sink is useful for a lot of things, as we can see in the spreadsheet. But it's pretty mediocre at what it does. It can't compete with a shower for self-cleaning, nor with a washing machine, for clothes.

But on the other hand, both the shower and the washing machine are only useful at one specific task.

Thus, when adding more refined items, like the Oven, they tend to have a single option that it does well, whereas a more standard piece of furniture would have a larger range, with less effectiveness.

Of course, this only applies when refining a concept to a specific use. For instance, going from a simple fire, to an optimized fireplace only makes it more efficient, up to a certain limit.

Given how the day was progressing, I settled up for 15 objects. It should be enough to cover most of the game, and have some upgrades. I also wanted to avoid making too much of them,

which may have ended up being redundant, and eat up time that I needed for this document and the balance theory one.

So, for each object, I tried picturing how to make one, and what would be needed, in order to translate it into the game. Due to the fact that I was using abstract estimations instead of number, quite a lot of these ended up being similar.

However, I don't think that's a problem. Regularity is nice for the player, and the actual values could be tinkered with in a production context.

I also didn't make any furniture that needed a unique component, as I felt more inspired for "standard" items, and considered that unique, high end objects would make more sense with an already established context, rather than in this kind of exercise.

In addition to this, a part of my spreadsheet is dedicated to things outside of standard balancing data. Mostly, the prototype afflictions, which I felt were necessary to elaborate on, as their severity is yet another balancing axis. As for the descriptions, they aren't useful per se, but the added flavor is always nice, both to make the player more at ease, and in the context of the test, to give out a bit of my personality.

III) Closing up the test

Well, both this document (up to the end of section II, of course), and the spreadsheet were good enough for me, with some time to spare before the 7 hours limit.

So, I decided to try and do the bonus document about the balancing process, and the testing.

This one was pretty straightforward.

I mostly laid down the standard process that I would use, and a basic explanation behind the decisions.

Overall, this bonus document may feel a bit scattered, as I might be repeating myself, in order to be completely clear. But I feel that it conveys the point I'm trying to make.

Since I don't have much more to add than what's already written, I'm finishing this document with the present sentence.