

PCKF

- Modding Theory - Community Quotes on Difficulty



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Community quotes on difficulty

It is a general rule in game design to NEVER EVER make the player feel that there wasn't anything he could do to prevent being killed. Having trial-and-error traps might be fun for the creator, but is it fun for the player when he falls through the floor the fourth time, promptly getting killed by some spikes?

(Snaily, 2003)

Having some "chance" or "you didn't see THIS coming" areas isn't that bad when only points and greed are concerned.

(Snaily, 2003)

If it's necessary to die before working out how to pass a level, the balance between gameplay realism is lost.

(Commander Spleen, 2003)

Though, if the level is particularly taxing before and after, and the player must repeat it again and again, the trap becomes a routine, and as repetition endures, the player's reactions may dim and cause numerous slip-ups causing them to die on that same trap that before had been so enjoyable. There are so many of these traps used in games. Not properly handled, these lead to a downward spiral of the player's desire to play the game at that time (unless their interest can be held in some other way.)

(Commander Spleen, 2003)

Actually, 'obvious trap' is almost an oxymoron, when you think about it. If the player sees it coming, then it's a challenge. If the player doesn't see it coming, it's a trap. Traps should be used, IMHO, only if the player is offered a chance to realise it may end in tears (ie. the hand symbols in Keen6). Though other times, perhaps a simple reminder that 'if it's too good to be true, it probably is' is in order. Though if you're really looking to impress the player, you'll offer an alternative route to the loot.

In order not to disrupt the balance, I suggest ensuring 'challenges' are placed on the main, conventional path, and 'traps' are used where only ego would dare venture.

(Commander Spleen, 2003)

Difficulty in a level consists of three separate but important elements: Pacing, Endurance, and Use of Space.

Pacing: How frequently is the player challenged in some way? This has nothing to do with how difficult each individual challenge is, only with the frequency of the challenges themselves. This includes PERCEIVED challenges, such as a ledge with no visible platforms below, or an item suspended in midair. Risk.

Endurance: How many dangers does the player need to be aware of at once, and for how long? This one is where most of us get caught up, and THINK a level is harder than it actually is. The answer to this may surprise you!

Use of Space: How much of the level is a player presented with at one time, and how busy is the screen? This is a very important part not only in managing the difficulty of your level, but also in garnishing its presentation. So to conclude; when crafting the difficulty for a level, keep an eye out for the following:

Low-level stresses:

- Blind drops
- Hazard tiles on-screen (even when inaccessible)
- Monsters on-screen (even when inaccessible)

Mid-level stresses:

- Monsters that can be killed (they do not come back)
- Gaps/pits that need to be bridged (one-time dangers)
- Anything that restricts a player's mobility (a series of one-tile platforms under a low roof)

High-level stresses:

- Hazard tiles on an area which can be scrolled off-screen
- Monsters that shoot or require multiple shots to be defeated
- Monsters that push/stun Keen (regardless of the presence of other monsters)

Extreme stresses:

- Hazard tiles more than a screen below small platforms littered with points
- Invincible monsters that shoot
- Jumps with more than a single obstacle to dodge in mid-flight

This isn't to say "This is too hard – don't use these!" ...it's just saying be aware of the TYPES of stress you're putting on your player, and how frequently you're doing it.

(Xky Rauh, 2008)

I don't particularly mind high difficulty challenges. The problem is when a whole bunch of them are laced in a series, and failing one means having to start over the entire sequence again. And of course my skill diminishes as my frustration mounts, and I die more and more frequently. That's when I give up.

Perfect timing and agility puzzles are a prime example of one of these challenges, and generally they actually add up to several traps compressed into a small area. i.e. five jumps in a row, each from within a two-tile high passageway, with a pit of spikes at the bottom. Not only is failing that part of the level an instant death, but the same goes for each step along the way!

...

Oh, and trial-and-error traps just bug me. Not only in terms of the 80% probability of death and the challenge-compounding restart, but also because it causes things to become more a matter of chance than skill.

The main thing I want to communicate is that high difficulty areas can be quite a lot of fun (as long as they're not stupidly over the top), and create quite a sense of accomplishment, but become unplayable, as far as I'm concerned, when strung together into a gauntlet of evilness. Two traps with a >50% chance of death is more than enough for one level, especially if there are other more minor challenges laced between them.

(Commander Spleen, 2008)

Any point items that lead to death, switches that pull the rug out from under the player, or arrows purposefully pointing in the wrong direction without contextual reason to ignore their guidance really irk me. :) Anything that gets me killed for no reason other than the level designer wanted me to die once there, and never be fooled again, is ridiculous and cruel.

(Xky Rauh, 2008)

It seems that most people would think medium difficulty is best, but at the same time everyone has a different idea of what's medium difficulty. It is especially hard to tell how difficult levels really are if you build them yourself: You'll be knowing everything and therefore the level will seem less difficult.

(Tulip, 2008)

So long maze levels should be easy because it's too annoying if you have to start all over several times. Short levels, I think, could be very hard and still be fun, it's like a short adrenaline kick.

(Tulip, 2008)

Huge, difficult levels that I need to repeat a hundred times before I get it all right in one go just don't appeal to me. They shouldn't be a walk in the park (though I'm sure there's room for one or two levels of that nature) and don't necessarily need to be small.

But if there's a series of five monumental challenges that have an 80% chance of killing me first try, and the same again after I've repeated them 10 times and lose patience, making more mistakes, I'm going to get bored and possibly angered quickly.

(Commander Spleen, 2006)

It really irks me when I have to go through a five minute level just to face some horribly tricky jump at the end.

(Lemm, 2010)

How big is too big? How hard is too hard? ...how much Unknown is overwhelming? Often times I think it is impossible for a level designer to gauge such things. Having played Keen for so many years, and become familiar with the game engine, we all play Keen on a far different level than a casual gamer.

I asked my little brother to playtest some of these levels (he's 18) and I was shocked to find him missing jumps, unable to control the pogo stick, and firing his gun accidentally on a consistent basis. The jumps that I had designed for the "Easy" level completely stopped him!

Later, I had CheesyDave playtest the same levels and breathed a sigh of relief as he passed about 70% of the level as I imagined--but he also found a few errors I had passed over--shortcuts, abuses, and loopholes that I'd not thought of because I had the level's path in my mind already.

(Xky Rauh, 2004)

If the same mistake is likely to be made many times in a row, or if the challenge is a trivial one--getting over a ledge, gaining access to a keycard but without the payoff of some extra points--then the difficulty becomes absurd. Those are just a couple of examples, but in general if the challenge makes the player more annoyed each time, it's too hard. But incredibly difficult scenarios can be implemented into some levels without it becoming a chore--perhaps a hint of what's on the other side (a passageway that loops back above the player that can only be accessed by passing a particularly taxing trap, for instance). But only in shorter levels.

(Commander Spleen, 2004)

The more unknowns a level has, the more difficult/annoying it is. Take a room that's one long hallway (say, 50 tiles) with a door at the end. That's one unknown; "How long is the level? Is there something hiding further down?" Now, put a garg at about tile 15.

Now, there's an extra unknown, because after you shoot the garg, you now have more of a reason to believe that there's another enemy waiting.

Now, instead of a straight line room, make it go right-down-right. So at about tile 25, the room stops, and you have to fall down a pit to continue. If the pit is 20 tiles long, you have a third unknown. How far does this pit go? Will I land on something?

Simplistic examples, I know. But based on this, you can determine how easy/hard a level is. The first level of Keen 1 is easy, because even though there are things that can kill you, they're all visible. You see them coming, and as long as you don't stray from the easiest route, you'll get to the exit without incident.

The first level of Keen 6, however, has multiple dropoffs into the water, bloogs, spikes, a babobba, and blooglets, who, although they can't kill, will push you around, which takes away your feeling of control over the situation (unless you stun him).

Enemies that can't be killed are often considered the most annoying, because their kind of unknown is "Since I can't kill it, how am I supposed to get out of the way?". Giks (the yellow guys from Keen 6), jacks (from Keen 3), and dopefish are among the most annoying enemies for that reason. So, if you're doing a Keen 1 mod, you'll want to use the tankbots sparingly.

(Ilsap, 2004)

The fear of a death is more powerful than an actual death.

(Commander Spleen, 2004)