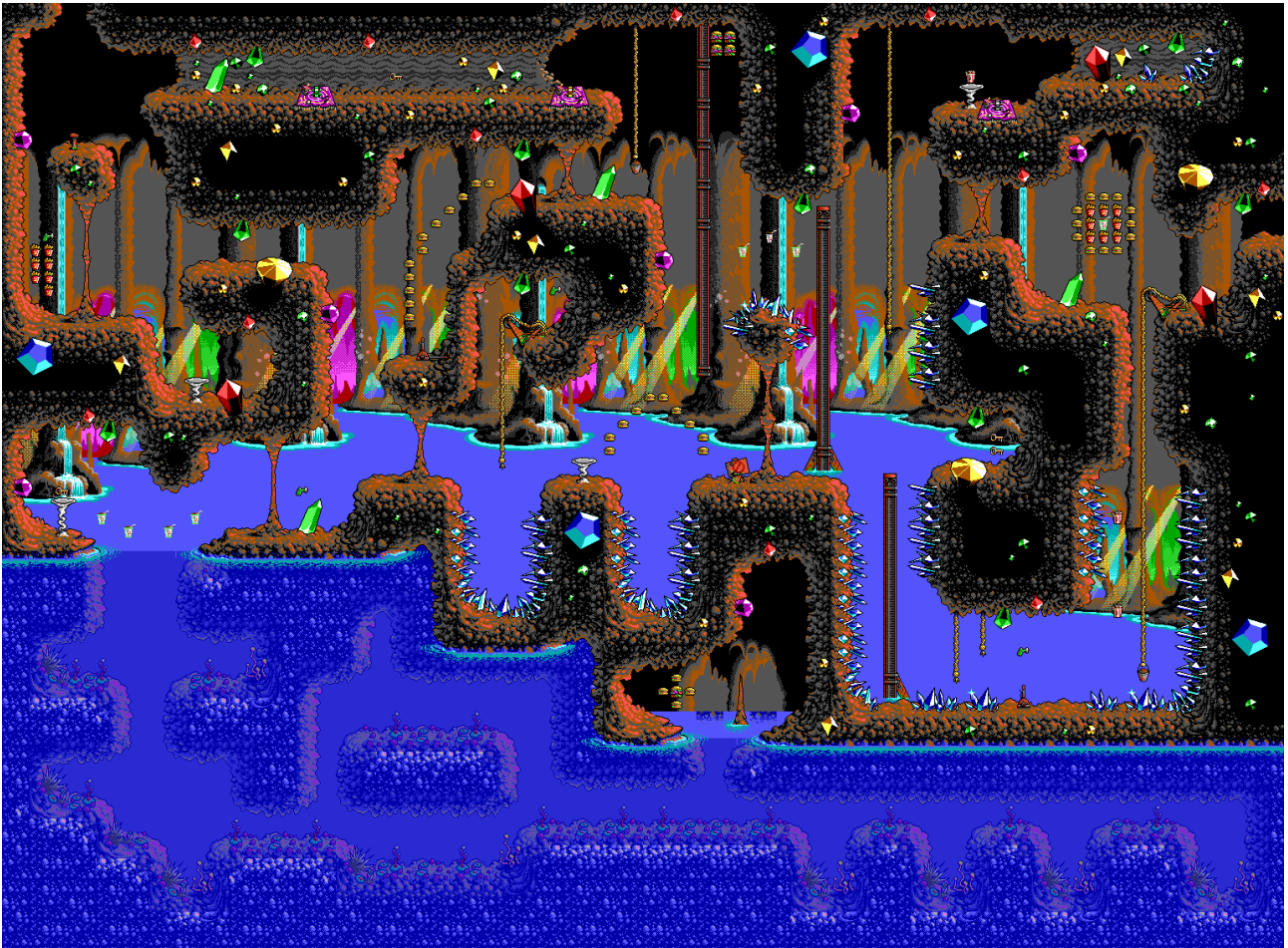


PCKF

- Modding Theory - Progression Theory Draft



all hints and tips by Public Commander Keen Forum Members
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1. Progression Theory (by Ceilick)

In my observation there are three, interrelated concepts of progression in Commander Keen and related games: experiential progression, macro progression, and micro progression. In this article I'll define the meaning of each and suggest ways in which level designers can best approach them. To begin with, let's introduce terms.

1.1 [Experiential progression](#)

Experiential progression is the rate at which the player encounters new material in a game. This can be anything from new graphics, new enemies, new puzzles, new gameplay features, new story elements, and new 'scenes' (this last item doesn't necessarily feature new graphics, but features a unique, picturesque display of graphics which sticks out to the player).

This kind of progression can take place and be measured in a single level (for example, a level that starts on a mountain and goes underground), over the course of several levels (level 1 taking place on a mountain and level 2 taking place underground), or develop over the course of the game (levels 1-6 are on a mountain, levels 7-12 are underground). Experiential progression is directly related to time: how long a player must undergo macro and/or micro progression before encountering something new and how long that something new will sustain the player before something else must be added to it.

1.2 [Macro progression](#)

Macro progression is the rate at which the player moves across the world map or from one level to another. It is not limited in scope to any one level; it takes any number of levels into account, up to the total number of levels (hence the 'macro'). If a player is stuck on a level, macro progression has stopped. Macro progression is a time oriented concept, affected by how long it takes to beat individual levels. What characterizes macro progression as good or bad, however, is not level time but quality of micro progression.

1.3 [Micro progression](#)

Micro progression is the movement of the player toward the exit in a specific level. It has to do both with the player's ability to locate the path to the exit and to actually complete the level. The quality of micro progression is affected by complexity, difficulty, and the degree of experiential progression within the level. If the player cannot find the exit to a level or cannot overcome some obstacle between them and the exit, there is a failure in micro progression.

1.4 Real progression

Real progression is quantitative progression which has hard, measurable evidence. Examples: real experiential progression could be the introduction of a new enemy when it was notably absent before; real macro progression is the rate at which the player completes levels compared to the total number of levels; real micro progression is a measurable closing of distance between the player and the exit of a level.

1.5 Apparent progression

Apparent progression is qualitative progression and deals with the player's feelings. Examples: apparent macro progression is the player's feelings of victory over completing levels even though they have no idea how many levels are in the game; apparent micro progression is the player's feelings that they are getting near the exit or figuring out a puzzle even though they may not be.

Apparent progression usually coincides with real progression, but not always. For example, in the case of macro progression: if player A has completed one, twenty minute level in a ten level Keen game, he feels less macro progression than player B who completes three levels in the same amount of time in a thirty level Keen game. Apparent progression is useful for creating twists and surprises for the player, but it can also create situations where the player feels cheated when they realize what they thought was progression is miniscule or no progression at all.

2. Usage of progression

Now that we have some understanding of the progression concepts, how can we make these types of progression good?

2.1 Usage of experiential progression

Experiential progression is all about feeding the player new things and keeping them from getting bored. The level designer chooses when the player takes each new spoonful of experience. Different elements of experience will exercise different degrees of power on the player: the introduction of a new background may only impress the player for a moment in comparison to a new enemy. A new backdrop may impress the player for a whole level but a new story element may affect the player the rest of the game.

Good experiential progression is characterized by giving the player something new to think about and interact with before the player can get bored with what they've already been given. As the level designer

you'll be injecting the player into a world and slowly add to their experience of that world. Throw too much at the player and they may be overwhelmed, but give the player too little and they will become bored. When working with experiential progression, you'll be addressing both the player's conscious and unconscious thoughts and reactions to your level. Everything counts, although some things are very mundane and only affect the player for the briefest moment: a new platform, a different looking tree, an arena featuring a certain enemy, something that needs to be jumped over, a hole to fall into, etc. It's up to the level designer to keep the simple and small experiences progressing and to pace the bigger ones and just the right moments to grab the player's attention and inspire them to continue playing.

2.2 Usage of macro progression

Macro progression has two purposes: creating apparent progression and providing new opportunities for experiential progression. The game as a whole can be thought of as a ladder with each rung as a level. The ladder can only be climbed with each step, the player experiences no apparent or real macro progression between rungs.

Keeping the player in any single level for too long can be detrimental to the player's experience to an entire game, even if the player is making real progress in that single level (as opposed to being lost); they're taking too long to climb a single rung on the ladder.

Players want to feel like they are accomplishing something, like the effort they put into the game is getting them somewhere. If it's taking too long, they're more likely to get frustrated and not feel like pushing on; it's just too much work with too little payoff on the macro side of things. This can be offset with experiential progression within levels; as long as the player is receiving new experiences (both quantitative and qualitative) in a single level and not getting bored, macro progression can be delayed.

However, when a single level has run out of opportunities to provide experiential progression, it's time to progress on the macro so that experiential can resume in a new level (or even on the world map).

2.3 Usage of micro progression

Micro progression is all about giving the player challenges to overcome, places to explore, and new opportunities for experiential progression. However, from the design standpoint, challenges and exploration should never be considered as ends in themselves. The player's number one goal in a level is to find the exit.

Level designer's need to give the player signs of real progression or give the player signs for apparent progression toward that goal. Challenges and exploration can be done along the way and this is by no means a suggestion that the player should be able to follow a single path to the exit or know exactly where to find it. Players do need, however, to not wonder aimlessly in levels or die repeatedly in the same

spot. Areas that are too difficult hinder real and apparent progression. Mazes and other complex situations hinder apparent progression.

Too much progression can also be a bad thing. Long, flat hallways are an example of this; the player covers too much area, progressing too much while experiencing only the barest minimum of experiential progression (that being the player's feeling of "this is a long hallway").

Each new area and tile placed in a level grants the player a little bit of experiential progression. More unique experiences can be added to hold the player's interest in micro progression. Micro mixed with experiential can only last so long, however, before the player needs a new setting (another level) for micro progression.

3. Final pensée

Progression through a game is much more complex than "beat the levels to see the ending". It is a dynamic experience which the level designer is responsible for creating. Level designers need to pay attention to the rate of at which all of these progressions flow; doing so is crucial to a fun, exciting, challenging game.

Some may excuse this as obvious, or that designing progression comes naturally to level designers, or that progression works itself out, but we've all seen more than enough Commander Keen mods to indicate the contrary.

Author: Ceilick

4. Community Quotes on Progression

If it starts to feel stale, you're in trouble because the player is going to keep getting sicker and sicker of your map and is likely to get distracted from the game easily (especially if your levels are particularly difficult.) Strategically placed backgrounds can easily give the player an impression that the map is alive (at least for a bit longer than usual).

Things like a launchpad with a rocket or small village areas on the inaccessible areas of the map to keep the world alive, unusual flora to fascinate the player, later areas in plain view to amp up the player's anticipation. Simple things, but very effective... Things that would fascinate Keen are likely to fascinate the player, so 'useless' background objects serve a purpose in making the world feel like it is more than 'bare essentials'. It gets the player involved in the game...

(Commander Spleen, 2004)

Be strategic with such subtle details. A huge patch of identical space platforms or the same plant growing in every single corner, or even too many future levels in plain view, are detrimental to your cause. Think 'glimpse' and you can't go wrong.

(Commander Spleen, 2003)

Sprawling levels with no unifying themes. **THEY ARE BORING** It's often 16 copies of the same thing: a couple yorps, a couple gargs, a vorticon blocking a bridge tile etc. Each level should have a gimmick. Maybe one is pogoing over butler bots, another is fighting vorticons on ice surfaces. KeenX is a good example of this (e.g., the sparky chase, the mortimer clone room, the friction dispersal pad level).

[...] Platforms should be arranged neatly, not just wherever, and the same goes for items. Often it's just a big mess because the person was just trying to fill space with whatever in that area.

(Lemm, 2010)

I do my best not to engage in repetitive puzzles (ie. opening a door, collecting another card hidden behind it (in front of yet another door), navigating through three passages that end up six tiles above, opening another door, collecting a card behind it (which has another door behind it, returning to the other door, and continuing the process until finally all the doors are open.

(Commander Spleen, 2003)

Keeping things organic I find important also. Long passageways with little activity lead to stagnation of any interest the player once had in solving a puzzle, yet excessive bonuses or enemies unbalances things and leaves the player becoming bored and/or frustrated.

(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)

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...

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)

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)

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.

(Iisoap, 2004)