Here we go again! The messages have come in, the people have spoken, and I now have another half-dozen game design errors for you to avoid. I'm always interested in more, though, so if you think of one, be sure to send it to notwinkie@designersnotebook.com.

As ever, a disclaimer: even good games can contain bad game design decisions. Just because a game is mentioned here, that doesn't mean I think it's a bad game. Sometimes it's just a good game with a mistake in it.

On to the Twinkie Denial Conditions:

"Easy Mode" is Supposed to Be Easy, Dammit!

In one of my earlier No Twinkie columns, I complained about games that don't offer multiple difficulty levels. Now, I realize that this isn't appropriate for all kinds of games; but it's usually possible in the action and strategy genres. Offering different levels of difficulty, I argued, broadens your market and makes your game accessible to people who might not otherwise have played it.

This TDC is a corollary, sent in by Christopher Kempke. He writes:

"I've noticed a lot of games lately (and almost all shooters) seem to have a deep desire to prevent you from finishing. You can get to the last room/level/boss, but that room/level/boss has to be 'a challenge.'

"I tend to play all games on the easiest difficulty level, because I don't have forever to spend on a game. But I want to finish, and I selected Easy Mode for a reason. If I can play the first 15 levels with a half a dozen deaths, it seems reasonable that I should be able to complete the last level within two or three, or at most five or six attempts. But no! Generally the last level, room, or boss is roughly twenty times as challenging as anything I've faced to date, requires entirely different techniques to fight, or is simply beyond my abilities altogether.

"Far Cry is the worst I've seen lately; you get a full refresh of guns and shields, a door closes (and seals) behind you, and now you get to face dozens of the hardest monsters in the game. At no previous point have you faced more than three at a time (and almost died on those occasions). Now there are eight of them, and three or four extra enemies sniping at you from the shadows. Killing them all (probably at the cost of all your ammo) just lets you open a door that releases a bunch more. And of course it's a gantlet; you have no choice but to open every single door, knowing that each one contains an army that you can no longer fight."
"I'd guess I average about two games a year that I can get 99% of the way through unaided, but need a cheat code for the last little bit. It drives me nuts, and it isn't fun. If I wanted such an experience, I'd have set the difficulty higher."

Now, I don't have a problem with the fact that you have to use different techniques to fight boss characters - that video game convention is at least 25 years old, and it adds challenge and interest to the gameplay. But I think Christopher is right on target about the difficulty issue. This TDC is a good example of a classic design error: failing to think about what the player actually wants. If the player chooses Easy Mode, then he wants the game to be easy to play and easy to win - period.

"But," I hear a legion of old-time game designers cry, "that means he'll finish the game too soon!" Oh, yeah? Too soon for what? Too soon for your ego is what you mean, because you've still got that outmoded notion that the player is your adversary. He isn't. He's your audience, the person you're trying to entertain and provide enjoyment to. And if that means the whole thing only takes him two hours, well, so be it; it was his choice. He can always go back and play it again on a harder setting.

**Poorly-Implemented Rumble or Force Feedback**

This one was sent to me by Adam Doyle:

"I hate when the controller vibrates at every slightest action. Is a vibration for every footstep necessary? This is especially a problem in fighting games and first person shooters, where every impact or shot fired causes the controller to buzz. When correctly done, this can create a more immersive effect in a scene, but if the rumble is too frequent, it loses its physical impact because players will get so used to the vibration. A good example would be the new *Serious Sam* game for consoles. But many shooters and fighting games (like *Tekken 4*) have way too much rumble.

"Then there is the problem of inconsistent rumble power. Did a small window just break, and the controller jumped out of your hands? Or did a warehouse blow up with your character in it, and all you felt was a slight hum? Again, this breaks the connection between the player and the game. With force feedback steering wheels, the wheel can jerk back and forth so violently it forces the players to let go of it, and make them wait for the feedback to stop spinning before they can resume the game. A prime example is the new sim racer *Enthusia Racer*. The wheel will literally spin out of your hands.
"Not only does bad rumble design pull the players away from the game, but it can actually make them lose control of it by causing them to miss buttons or actions, or have their fingers slip off of the analog stick in the heat of a battle. There are also health issues in extreme cases: long periods of high vibration can cause numbness in the fingers and hands. Developers need to know that just because the controller vibrates, it doesn't mean that they have to have a rumble feature. In my opinion it's better to have no rumble or force feedback than poorly implemented rumble any day."

Actually you can generalize that last sentence to almost everything about games: a bad feature is worse than no feature at all. As I've said many times, if you can't do it well, don't do it.

All good points there, Adam. Rumble isn't just a gimmick you throw in because you can. It should be meaningful feedback to the player, part of the user interface and therefore part of your responsibility as a game designer. Take the time to think it through carefully and do it right.

**Unplayable Camera Angles**

Adam also sent me a second Twinkie Denial Condition, unplayable camera angles - usually in an effort to produce a "cinematic experience." He wrote:

"The problem with many survival horror games (and other genres too), is that the developers, in going for that 'cinematic experience,' will place cameras that may frame the scene well, but end up making for an unplayable experience. If your character is fighting off swarms of enemies, why in the world would you place the camera on the floor at a dynamic angle? Sure it may look nice, but players couldn't care less how nice it looks if they can't play the game."

Now, I love unusual camera angles and anything that creates visual interest and breaks up the monotony of the third-person perspective. But Adam is right: the game must still be playable! Interesting camera angles are great for slower moving genres such as adventure games or action-adventures that aren't too difficult, like *ICO*. But if you're fighting for your life, it's imperative that you be able to see clearly what's going on.
Bad Manuals and/or Bad Tutorials

T.C. Fox wrote in to say:

"I am one of those gamers who always reads the manual and likes good, informative tutorials before I am thrown into a game. I loved all the tutorials about race driving in Gran Turismo 4. However, after a long hiatus from the world of golf, I decided to pick up a copy of Tiger Woods 2004, and I was dismayed at the complete lack of information about the finer points of the game (both the game of golf and the videogame itself). The tutorial the game makes you play before you can do anything else is abrupt and cursory. The manual is awfully thin. This made for a hugely frustrating initial game experience that almost made me return it on the spot."

Manuals seem rather outdated today, as they have mostly been replaced by tutorial levels. Even so, a manual offers an important feature that a tutorial can't: you can look stuff up in it while the game is paused. It's also valuable to a player who likes to know what's expected of her before she dives in, rather than learning by trial-and-error. Trial-and-error learning is characteristic of a hardcore style of gameplay ("shoot it and see what happens") that many casual gamers aren't comfortable with and, more importantly, don't have time for.

Tiger Woods is a game that a casual gamer or even a non-gamer might try out. Someone might give it as a birthday present to a golf aficionado who would otherwise never touch a videogame. That kind of player is going to need - and to expect - a decent introduction to the experience. Make it frustrating for him, and you've just blown your chance to sell him next year's edition.

I know manuals cost money to produce and they take up space in the box; that's why we've shrunk them down to nothing but a leaflet these days. But if you want to reach a market beyond the traditional hardcore gamers who have all the time and patience in the world, you owe them a decent manual and decent tutorials.

Bad Split-Screen Design

This is chiefly a problem in console racing games, where the screen is split for each of the players. Mat Lamarche writes:

"In single-player mode the screens are nice and big, you get a great view of the track and whatever is down the road... but I have yet to see a game that handles multi-player split screen management properly. Those damned time indicators (how much you are winning/losing by) pop up in front of you and you can barely see anything down the road!"

This is just one example of a larger general problem: split screen interface design is tough. It's about to get tougher, too, as we move into the HDTV generation of games. With higher resolution, you would expect it to be easier, but unfortunately, for the next five years or so there will be millions of players who don't have high-definition televisions. You'll have to design your game to be playable on their TVs too, or lose their business.

In the meantime, keep the pop-ups out of the road! Put them off to the side or something.

Crates Without Pallets or Forklifts (Stuff in Impossible Places)

Crates are already a standing joke in the world of videogames, because we see so many of them. The Old Man Murray website includes a hilarious review of a number of games (caution: strong language) based on the length of time you have to play before you see the first crate - at which point, the authors claim, the game designer has run out of ideas. The longer you can play without seeing a crate or a barrel, the better the game is.
The ubiquitous crate makes its inevitable appearance in Counter-Strike.

The same article points out that you can't move crates without a forklift and a pallet for the crate to sit on. If there are crates in a place, there had better be pallets under them and at least one forklift as well. In fact, somebody wrote to me (unfortunately I lost his name in an E-mail crash) and pointed out that wooden crates are completely passé now anyway. Modern shipping is done in piles of cardboard boxes all held together with industrial-strength plastic wrap. Wood is heavy and expensive, cardboard is light, cheap, and recyclable. But our FPSes are still displaying 40-year-old shipping technology, even in futuristic science fiction games.

I can't claim crates without pallets as an original Twinkie Denial Condition because the Old Man Murray guys thought of it first, but I can generalize the issue to the problem of stuff being in impossible places, something that several people have complained about. Now, obviously, this doesn't apply to platform games in which it's common for crates (among other things) to float in mid-air. Levitating crates is part of the platform game convention; I understand that and maybe that's why they don't need pallets or forklifts. But if your game is going to pretend it's about the real world, if you're going to have a lot of box copy about how exciting and believable your storyline is, then try not to create rooms without any doors, full of crates that apparently came in through a ventilation shaft. Try not to put barrels down in a sewer system in which all the manholes are smaller than the barrels. Try not to put a crate containing half a ton of weapons and armor in an alcove 50 feet up a cliff. And - for that matter - try to think of something more interesting than crates and barrels to keep health and ammo in.

**Conclusion**

That's it for this year: six more dumb things not to do in your game. Some of them, like bad camera angles, will actually kill the game's playability. Others, like poorly-designed rumble, will just annoy the player for no good reason. In any case, heed these warnings, lest you, too, have your Twinkies taken away.

Thanks to all those people who contributed, and once again, keep 'em coming!

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