

Advanced Level Design Genre Topics

Multiplayer – Versus:

Multiplayer – Versus is a wide genre. It encapsulates many different game genres, including racing games, fighting games, puzzle games, and even more than that. At its core, this genre is all about two or more players competing against each other to see who wins. I am a particularly big fan of fighting games because those games often completely boil down to skill. There is little to no luck involved gameplaywise and there are no teammates to blame if you lose, which makes it obvious to a losing player what they need to improve on to get better. Most other forms of multiplayer versus games are fun too, but I personally don't enjoy those as much as fighting games.

I think good games in this genre are determined by two things: how fun they are, and how balanced they are. Each player needs to have access to similar abilities and skills or else it will make the game feel unfair. Asynchronous games, such as *Dead by Daylight*, are anomalies in this case because both sides are given completely different tasks and abilities, but they can still be good if the chances of each side winning is about 50/50. At the same time however, the game can't sacrifice the fun factor for the sake of being balanced. Would you want to play a game where everyone played as the same character to make the game fair for everyone?

I'll mainly stick with fighting games when talking about the best and worst examples of the genre, because I feel that fighting games have both and I am most familiar with those. Some of the most coveted fighting games are usually one or the other. A lot of modern fighting games, like *Street Fighter 6*, *Tekken 7*, and *Guilty Gear Strive*, are considered good fighting games because of how balanced the rosters are. No matter who you play as, there is a good chance for you to win. On the other hand, classic fighting games such as *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*, *Street Fighter 3: Third Strike*, and *Capcom vs. SNK 2* are beloved because of how fun they are to play, despite how unbalanced their rosters are. Bad fighting games are both not fun and unbalanced. What people may find fun is subjective, but there are some fighting games that next to no one wants to play. There is a YouTuber called Matt McMuscles who has a series of videos called *The Worst Fighting Game*, and there are a ton of bad fighting games in that series. The reasons why they are on that playlist are for bad presentation, clunky and unfun gameplay, and general absence of fighting game philosophy.

Multiplayer – Co-op:

Just like with Multiplayer – Versus, Multiplayer – Co-op encompasses all sorts of game genres. Shooters, platformers, puzzle games, and even more genres can have coop components. For the most part, coop games are fun depending on who you play with and how involved every player is. If every player is equally engaged in the game, no one will drag down the enjoyment of everyone else.

I think good coop games have to fulfill one or both of these conditions: every player has the same capabilities and share the same goals to work toward, or every player is assigned specific roles and they have to fulfill their own objectives while working with the others to win together. If every player is equally engaged in the game and they can work together effortlessly, then that means the coop system was constructed well. On the other hand, if there is a coop game where one of the players feels like they have to do all of the heavy lifting in order for the team to win, then that is a poorly constructed coop system.

I do not have that much experience with coop games outside of a few games that I played as a kid, but I do remember some of them fondly. Most of those were from Lego games, like Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga and Lego Batman 2 for example. These games were just fun to play with a friend or sibling. You could either blitz through levels with your partner or troll your partner by killing them. The simplistic nature of Lego games of this style makes it very easy for anyone to pick them up too, so anyone could join in on the fun. Some other coop games that I enjoyed were the Little Big Planet games, Portal 2 multiplayer, and Earth Defense Force.

I don't think I've never played what I would call a "bad" coop game, but I can imagine that the bad ones have a lot of infighting and it's difficult for the players to work together. I've heard a lot of stories about how League of Legends is exceedingly toxic because of how difficult it is for people to work together to win, but I don't have any personal experience with that.

Stealth:

All stealth games have a simple objective: accomplish the goal while staying out of sight. The games themselves will add nuance to this with the level design and the behavior of the AI. These kinds of games require you to plan out your course of action on the fly as you navigate through the levels and avoid getting spotted. I'm not that good at these kinds of games, but I respect these games for their interesting and unique level design and mechanics.

I think a good stealth game has to be challenging and make you use your brain. Stealth encounters generally don't want you to blitz through the level like it's a hack and slash, so the mechanics level design, and enemy AI need to prevent that. At the same time, the game needs to give you a certain amount of tools that can help you complete the level while making the game fun.

I know Metal Gear Solid is the *creme de la creme* of stealth games, but I don't have any personal experience with those games. So instead, I'll talk about the Batman Arkham games, as I think the stealth levels in those games are phenomenal. Every stealth level follows the same pattern in terms of layout: Batman starts off out of sight in a big room, and all of the enemies are standing or slowly walking around with guns. Batman doesn't have any sort of resistance to guns since he's only human, so getting spotted and shot at will put Batman in serious danger. This incentivizes the player to avoid getting spotted. In order to take down the enemies, the player has access to a wide range of tools and gadgets. This gives the player a lot of freedom in how they want to take down the enemies. At the same time, these tools have to be used wisely because most of them won't outright take down enemies for you, only stunning them long enough for you to take them down yourself. Levels may also provide a number of routes for the player to use, such as through vents and grates. Players can use these paths to perform surprise attacks or make quick getaways, but if an enemy spots Batman using one of these hidden paths, they will stay aware of them for the rest of the encounter, essentially blocking them off as stealth routes. The enemies will also change their tactics as they lose their numbers by doing things like patrolling in pairs. This makes it more difficult for you to isolate them, so you need to be more creative with your takedowns. All of these factors combine to make stealth levels in the Batman Arkham games intense, thrilling, and fun.

As much as I like the Insomniac Spider-Man games, I think the stealth segments in those games are kind of a joke in comparison to the Batman Arkham games (I'm talking about Spider-Man stealth, not the MJ or Miles segments from the first game). My main problem with them is that they are too easy. Spider-Man has ton of freedom of movement, which makes it easy to stay out of the enemies' sights. Across both the first game and Miles Morales, Spider-Man has a ton of tools that allow him to take down enemies from far away, making it basically pointless to sneak up behind them. By far the most egregious aspect of the stealth in these games is that when you scan the environment, the game will straight-up tell you if it's safe to take down an enemy. Now you don't have to be aware of your surroundings when taking down an enemy, you can just take them down if the game tells you "yes." All of these factors make stealth in these Spider-Man games unsatisfying and boring. Also, unless stealth is required for a mission, stealth in these games is completely pointless because you can fight the enemies normally by dodging bullets

and throwing their guns around and there's no incentive to use stealth over regular combat outside of reducing their numbers. Why would I want to sneak around and slowly pick off enemies when I could use the more fun route and blitz through them?

Strategy / RTS / Tower Defense:

This is a bit of a broad topic because we're covering three different genres here with the inherent similarity of revolving around strategic gameplay. I don't play these types of games too often, but I usually have fun when I play them.

Each of these game genres primarily focus on using strategy to win. I think good examples of these games are determined by a number of factors. Strategy games need to have enough mechanics to allow players to beat levels in numerous different ways, but they should present them in a way where it doesn't become overwhelming to the player and they start to neglect important information. The levels themselves should have a clear objective for the player to reach and they should be situated about everything happening at all times unless the levels are specifically designed to obscure information and surprise the player. Difficulty in these games is hard to determine because everyone has different capabilities of strategizing and thinking ahead, but the games overall shouldn't feel "unfair", whether it's because of an overreliance on luck, the player constantly being put in difficult situations, or some other factor like these.

My favorite series of strategy games is Fire Emblem. These games vary greatly from one another, but the core concept is that you control multiple units on a grid like you're playing Chess. Each of these units are different classes and wield different weapons and tools, giving them specific strengths and weaknesses. Because of these strengths and weaknesses, players are generally advised to keep a balanced army, but those that play these games extensively can learn the nuances of each game and how to break them. Even though I got into the series through the modern games like Awakening and Three Houses, I like the format of the older games more. In the older games, there is absolutely no backtracking. There are no points in these games where you can grind EXP to plow through the levels easily. You have to strategize and carefully build your army on the fly throughout the game as you progress through the story. At the same time, you also have to beware of permadeath. Once a unit's health hits 0, they are gone for the rest of the game, forcing the player to carefully consider all of their actions. It's a thrilling experience and it rarely feels unfair. Permadeath still exists in modern Fire Emblem, but only as a novelty because now you can choose to turn it off and keep your units after each battle when they fall.

I think the only games in these genres I've played that I didn't like are Bloons Tower Defense 1 and 2. You don't get that many towers in these games, so it is difficult to manage your funds and determine the best places to put each tower. 2 helps a little bit with the addition of road spikes, which can cover you if balloons slip through your defenses, but those can become money drains if you use them too much, which further punishes you for having suboptimal tower layouts. Overall, these two games are very difficult and they punish you for not finding the optimal tower layouts to clear each wave, which greatly lowers my enjoyment of them.

Hack n' Slash / Beat em' Up:

There is going to be a ton of bias and gushing in this post because I have a massive soft spot for hack n' slashes. These games to me are THE definition of fun. Once I understand how the combat works in these games and I enter the flow state, it is pure bliss. The only other genre that can get me remotely close to this experience is fighting games. I don't have nearly as much experience with beat em' ups so I can't say much about them, though I have played Castle Crashers and Scott Pilgrim.

Hack n' slashes and beat em' ups are primarily focused on their combat and how the player fights enemies. Good games in these genres have to make the combat feel good, have a lot of replayability, and have good enemy design. Games of these genres can generally be played in short bursts and they can be beaten quickly compared to most other genres, ranging from about 6 to 13 hours on average. The levels in these games can be short, but they shouldn't be frustrating to play through. If the gameplay and level design are done well, as well as the difficulty balance with the enemies, players would want to replay them over and over again, providing these games their longevity.

The Devil May Cry series is my absolute favorite series of hack n' slashes, especially 3, 4, and 5. Most of the joy in these games comes from the feel, the depth, and the spectacle. DMC games have a reputation for being more difficult than their contemporaries because they have a higher skill floor. However, once you learn the basics of the combat, a whole world of possibilities opens up to you. Now you can come up with creative ways to combo enemies and the best ways to counter the enemies' attacks. There is so much depth in these games that you could play through them multiple times on every difficulty and still learn new ways to play them every time.

Aside from the combat and its depth, the other biggest factor of enjoyment in these games comes from the style ranking system. To me, this system is the sole reason why I like improving in and replaying these games so much. The style ranking grades you based on how well you're fighting. It's not a simple combo indicator where the more hits you land the higher rank you get. That's how it works in the first two games and the reboot. Instead, the style ranking system rewards variety. Spamming the same move over and over again nets you less style points and in some cases can even lower your style rank, so you're encouraged to constantly switch up your gameplay. When you do play stylishly and you reach the higher ranks, the game rewards you more points, red orbs (these games' currency), and sometimes health. In DMC5 specifically, the music will even skip to specific parts depending on your style rank so the music always synchronizes with how well you're playing. This further heightens the feel-good factor of playing the game because now the player is guaranteed to time amazing moments with "that part of the song".

To me, Vergil in DMC5 is the epitome of everything that is great about these games, and playing as him is the most fun that a video game can possibly get. He has a ton of depth for those that want to fully utilize his kit, myself included, Bury the Light is a godlike song that blasts in your ears when you get high style rankings, and he is extraordinarily satisfying to play as. He is so

unbelievably fun in fact that he lowers my enjoyment of other hack n' slashes and even other characters in DMC5. It's addicting and I can't get enough of it.

Another hack n' slash that I deeply enjoy playing is Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance. I know it's an endless fountain of memes, but I also enjoy its gameplay a lot. While it doesn't have DMC's level of depth, it makes up for it with pure spectacle. Killing enemies with the game's signature Zandatsu mechanic is super satisfying because it replenishes your health and energy and the sound design gives you a rush of adrenaline and dopamine when you do it. The music is also spectacular and it gets you pumped up for fights instantly. The boss fights are especially great in this regard. This game also has some of the most hilariously awesome quick-time events ever seen in a video game, next to Asura's Wrath.

I would also like to give a particular shoutout to Warriors games like Hyrule Warriors. These are borderline button mashers compared to these other games, but the point of these games is to take the player on a power trip and let them plow through literal armies. It feels satisfying performing special moves, because you see a ton of enemies fly away from you and you get to see a huge number indicating how many enemies you took out with that attack. The real difficulty of these games, funnily enough, is making sure that you follow the objective and that you don't blind yourself with your overwhelming power. It's an interesting take on the hack n' slash genre and I like it.

Speaking of Asura's Wrath, I think it's an example of a bad hack n' slash. The cutscenes and the quick-time events are some of the best I've ever seen in a video game, but the gameplay itself is painfully plain and boring. It has the same level of button mashing as Warriors games, but you don't get to fight armies. Instead, you're mainly fighting small waves of enemies and singular bosses, like in DMC and MGR. The worst part is that they're on the same level of difficulty as Warriors games too, which makes them unsatisfying to fight. It's better to describe Asura's Wrath as an interactive movie rather than a fully-fledged video game.

TL;DR: A good hack n' slash is defined by how satisfying its combat is, how nonintrusive the levels are, and its replayability. Devil May Cry 3-5, Metal Gear Rising, and Warriors games are good hack n' slashes. Asura's Wrath is a bad hack n' slash, but it has its merits.

Casual / Social / Facebook:

This genre is weird to me because it's definitely a genre that I have played before but I don't think about it all that much. I guess that's by design though, because play times for these games are extremely short compared to console games. To me, casual games that you play on your mobile device are used as simple and effective time sinks. If I have some time to kill while waiting for something, I'd might as well play a quick casual game on my phone.

Casual games are meant to appeal to the widest possible demographic. They must be simple enough for anyone to play and they must have a premise that can appeal to as many people as possible. That being said, the game should also still be fun to play for anyone. The game should have a rewarding difficulty curve for players of all skill levels. This is usually accomplished by arcade-style high scores, insane amounts of levels, or a combination of both. If it gets constantly bombarded by advertisements, a lot of people will be drawn away from it because that gets annoying really quickly.

There are many different kinds of casual games. There are puzzle games like Candy Crush Saga, idle games like Cookie Clicker, infinite runners like Subway Surfers, and so much more. I think the casual game I got into the most was Pac-Man 256. It's an "endless runner" in the form of Pac-Man, where you travel through the maze as you try to outrun the Glitch. You eat pellets and avoid ghosts like in the original game, but now there are powerups that can help you. You unlock these powerups by collecting coins as you play the game. The only time ads play is when you want to receive bonus coins at the end of a run, in which case they are nonintrusive because the player is choosing to watch ads for a benefit. The gameplay can be addicting and it feels nice seeing your slow progress towards unlocking all of the powerups.

Most bad casual games are ones that either bombard the player with too many advertisements or are pay-to-win. I can't name any off the top of my head, but there are an alarming number of them. These games do not respect the player's time whatsoever. They will constantly show ads to players for revenue and they will grind the pace of the game to a near halt without paying real money to progress. These to me are the most frustrating kinds of casual games, and I usually just stop playing them very quickly.

Survival Horror:

Out of all of the genres we've talked about so far, I think this is the one that I play the least. I find horror games to be a lot more fun to watch rather than play, because you get to see other people react to the jump scares and terror. Playing them stresses me out too much and I don't like the idea of being completely helpless in the face of an adversary. This is why I gravitate more towards genres like hack n' slashes.

A good survival horror game has to be thrilling. It needs to sell the player on the aspect of terror and fear while still giving them a clear objective to follow to beat the game. These games generally have one or several unstoppable monsters following the player to give them something to be afraid of, but they don't always need them. I think it is also important for survival horror games to give the player points of downtime throughout the game so they can relax a little and think about their next plan of action. Having the monster chase the player nonstop throughout the entire game would just be extremely stressful and potentially unfun.

A flagship franchise of this genre is Resident Evil for its innovation on the genre. I haven't played any of these games, but from what I've observed, 2 and 4 (both the originals and the remakes) are the most praised out of all of them. I'll talk about 2 Remake in particular. In 2 Remake, there is an unstoppable monster that chases the player named T-00, or Mr. X. Because he's unstoppable and he deals massive damage whenever he attacks, the player naturally has to stay away from him. Thankfully, he only appears during specific parts of the game, so the player is given some breathing room when they aren't being chased. These parts of the game are usually the most terrifying, because the player has to constantly watch their back to make sure Mr. X isn't onto them.

Whenever I hear people talk about Resident Evil 3 Remake, I usually hear about how much of a disappointment it is. I think most of that disappointment stems from the fact that the big unstoppable monster, Nemesis, was a big letdown. The Nemesis parts of the game were scripted, so the player doesn't have to be afraid of him because the script would carry them through the encounter. Then during one of the boss fights against Nemesis, he could stun-lock the player and they just lose from getting hit once. Overall, Nemesis seems more annoying than terrifying from these complaints, which is not what a survival horror game wants.

Role-Playing Game (RPG):

This is one of those genres where there are so many games in it that I want to play but I don't have the time for them anymore. Like, I still have yet to finish Xenoblade Chronicles 3, Persona 4, Dragon Quest 8, Tales of Symphonia, and Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic just to name a few. I usually play these games for the stories, but some of my favorite games in this genre make the gameplay engaging and fun too.

Describing RPGs is funny because it doesn't really have a concrete definition of what they are. You can't just say that RPGs have the player role-play as a character because that's literally every video game where you play as a named character. It's easier to describe RPGs by common gameplay mechanics and traits, such as level systems, dungeon crawling, party systems, and either action or turn-based combat. Good games in this genre often depend on engaging gameplay, fun characters, and interesting stories.

One of my favorite RPGs in recent memory is Persona 5 Royal. There is so much to like about it. Its art style is iconic and inspirational, the story is very engaging, I like almost all of the characters, and the combat, while easy, is fun to mess around with and break. I especially like how the game is structured overall. There are two sides to this game. The first is a social sim where you go to school and you have different options for what to do for each day, such as hanging out with one of your friends, or "confidants" as this game calls them, doing an activity that boosts a social stat such as working or studying, and so much more. The most important thing to keep in mind is that your options are limited because you are given deadline days throughout the game before the major story beats, so you have to make the best use of your time. "Take your time" to decide, as the loading screen tells you. The other side of the game is a traditional turn-based RPG, where you tackle Palaces or an "endless" dungeon called Mementos to grind EXP and fulfill the conditions to progress the story. The combat is very easy, but it's exceedingly stylish so it's still satisfying to play. The best part about this structure is that these two sides go hand-in-hand with each other, as whatever you do in one side can help you in the other. For example, some confidants can teach you new skills for combat, such as advanced gun techniques and switching out party members. In turn, you can defeat specific mini-bosses in Mementos to advance your relationship with some of your confidants. This unifies the social sim and the traditional RPG elements of the game into one cohesive package.

One of the worst RPGs I've played in retrospect is Paper Mario: Sticker Star. Its main mechanic is using stickers, as the title suggests. It's a neat concept on its own, but the way it's handled in this game is questionable. You use the stickers that you collect throughout the game to fight enemies, but that also means you have a limited number of moves. When you run out of moves, you literally can't do anything but flee or get a game over. There's also no EXP system in this game, so the only reward you get is coins. This results in fighting enemies being pointless because you want to stock up your stickers for the boss fights and coins are only used to buy stickers even though they're littered everywhere throughout the game. Aside from the combat, the story as a whole is plain and the characters are pretty bland. Bowser doesn't even speak a single line in this game.

First Person Shooter (FPS):

I feel like this is one of the most popular genres here, but I'm personally not that interested in it. I've only gotten into a select few FPSs in my lifetime, those being Star Wars Battlefront (2015) (it was my first FPS), Star Wars: Republic Commando, the Metroid Prime games, and the Portal games. I have my eye on Ultrakill, since that game has a style ranking system akin to that of Devil May Cry, so I might try it out at some point.

A good FPS relies on a good foundation for its gameplay. The end goal for all of them is to aim and shoot, so they need to build the rest of the game around that core. From here, we get into different subgenres of FPSs, and good games in these subgenres are defined by what they are trying to achieve and whether they achieve it. In multiplayer shooters like Call of Duty, the goal is to provide the player with lots of customization for their loadouts and lots of multiplayer content. In hero-based shooters like Overwatch, the goal is to provide unique and balanced characters that are simultaneously fun and effective in a team. In fast-paced shooters like Doom, the goal is to let the player skillfully blitz through their enemies. There are a lot of factors that go into deciding what makes an FPS good.

As a good example, I'll talk about Metroid Prime, since that is the one I've played that sticks to my mind the most. Since it's a 3D Metroidvania, it has a large emphasis on exploration, and it is handled masterfully. The extra dimension makes each location more atmospheric and realistic. The layout itself is complex yet simple enough that the player doesn't get too lost when exploring or looking at the map. Little details in 2D Metroid games can be easy to miss if they are in the background, but it is impossible to miss them in Prime because they are within the same space that you are in. There are a number of moments in this game where I chose to slow down just to observe the environment and soak in the atmosphere. Aside from the exploration, the overall flow of the game is very similar to that of the 2D Metroid games, but it trades their emphasis on movement for more combat tools and weapons. I played the GameCube version of Prime where it used a weird tank control scheme from before the dual stick control scheme became the standard, so it took me a while to get used to it. I thought it was fine for what it was, but I want to play Prime Remastered at some point to experience the game with modern controls.

I haven't played any FPSs that I particularly disliked, so I'll talk about everyone's favorite punching bag: Overwatch 2. It did a lot of things wrong to put it lightly. It introduced a battle pass system where players have to unlock characters by either grinding the battle pass or straight-up buying them, inducing a "pay-to-win" mentality and FOMO (fear of missing out) among the players. The overall team dynamic was changed by reducing the number of teammates on a team from 6 to 5, which from what I've heard, did more bad to the gameplay than good. Finally, it cancelled the PvE mode that served to be the entire point of Overwatch 2's existence. The game is so bad that it was the lowest-rated Steam game for a time.

Platformer (2D & 3D):

Now here's the ultra-popular genre, and of course it's saved for last. Like most people I assume, I played a ton of platformers growing up. I'm not as into them as I used to be, but I'm always more than happy to play a good platformer if it's presented to me. I've always been a Mario person for the most part, but I was also a big fan of LittleBigPlanet growing up and I played Sonic Unleashed.

The main thing that separates good platformers from truly great platformers is the movement. Your character needs to feel good to control so that both casual players and speedrunners can play the game smoothly. Having clunky movement can make a platformer feel sluggish to play, and it can easily turn people away from it. Other factors such as level design and gameplay mechanics also contribute to making a platformer great.

I want to talk about LittleBigPlanet as a good example, because that game series left a massive impression on me as a kid. The gameplay itself is pretty fun. It's fairly slow-paced, but there are tons of tools and powerups you can use across all 3 games that spice up the gameplay. However, the main thing that made these games stick out to me was the overwhelming amount of customization. You can customize EVERYTHING in these games. Your character, your pod (which is your little hub where you choose your levels), even the levels you played by slapping stickers on everything. Heck, you can even make your own stickers by taking screenshots in-game, and then you can save them to your PS3's storage and extract them via hard drive.

But by far the best part about these games is their level editors, which only got better with each game. They're so freeform that they might as well be their own game engines. You can even recreate the story levels in every game if you were good enough. There's already a ton of stuff you could do in the first game. The level layout has 3 layers, so you can create your own backdrops and foregrounds. You can create your own enemies with all of the freeform drawing tools and gadgets that make them come to life. There are lots of objects that make the levels interactive, such as levers, buttons, player sensors, emitters (I mainly used these for raining bombs), and so much more. You can even make your own music with the in-level-editor music maker. Then the second game came around and added circuitry that mirrored real-life circuitry and robotics, which single-handedly blew the first level editor out of the water and raised the number of possibilities sky-high. Now you can make complex machinery and controllable objects. One of my favorite things to make in 2 was superpowered characters that I could possess. Ones that could fly, were invincible, and could shoot fireballs that disintegrated everything out of their fingers for example. Needless to say, the levels that people made with these new tools were mind-blowing. I haven't messed around with 3's level editor as much as 2's, but it raised the number of layers from 3 to 16 and added a ton of cinematic tools. If you were really dedicated, you could straight-up make entire games with this level editor. The only thing I vividly remember making was a controllable character that could move across all 16 layers as if they were in a 3D space.

If I had a capture card for my PS3, I would've easily decided to use the level editor for LittleBigPlanet 3 for this class. Maybe I can finally understand what I'm doing with the circuitry in it.

The only platformers that I didn't really like were unreasonably hard flash game platformers. I forget the names of them, but they generally revolved around the idea of being unfair. Enemies appearing out of nowhere, invisible blocks that get in the way of your jumping, pixel-perfect jumps, and other factors made up these games. I get that there's a certain audience for these types of platformers, but I wasn't a big fan of them.