HOW TO NOT SUCK AT GAME DESIGN

GAME DESIGN, ART, RESOURCES, RESEARCH, CRITICISM, TUTORIALS & STUFF BY ANJIN ANHUT.

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mechanics [http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=3115] , **July 13, 2011** [http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=3115] by Anjin Anhut.

This article is filed under *game criticism*.

Lazy game design: Silver Bullet Combat

The combat system in Alice – Madness Returns, like in many other games, relies heavily on silver bullet mechanics to mix things up in skirmishes. And like in so many other games, this specific combat mechanic gets quickly redundant after just a few encounters. I consider silver bullets to be a very shortsighted substitute for real strategic and tactical options or skill-based gameplay. And here is why‚Äö√Ñ¬∂

So What's Up?

Well I recently finished Alice – Madness Returns. While being a pretty looking game and very strong in its narrative qualities, I found the gameplay to be fairly outdated and to be honest rather lazy. Next to endless repetitive platforming there is an equally redundant combat system in place. Many enemies require no tactics at all, you just smack them down however you feel like. Others are more demanding, asking you for pattern recognition. But with a bit of practice you get the timing right and they become easy to beat. Then there are enemies that demand you to use just one specific attack to beat them and once you know what that silver bullet is, also instantly become more of a nuisance than a threat.

So what do I mean with silver bullet? Let me ride the analogy a bit. While both lead and silver bullets are flying pieces of metal, roughly equal in size, speed and destructive power and both need to be shot at the target in exactly the same manner‚Äö√Ñ¬∂ only the silver ones can harm the big bad werewolf. ‚Äö√Ñ¬∂because that's what the legend says.

It's a simple mechanic trick to force players in combat situations to switch up attacks (or weapons for that matter). Specific enemies only take considerable damage or even instantly drop dead when hit with a specific attack, while being practically immune to other attacks. A similar design approach is rock-paper-scissors. Unfortunately many game designers still base their idea of challenging enemies and engaging combat on this kind of try and error puzzle. But they fail to understand, that once you understand to only use the silver bullets, the general invulnerability of the werewolf becomes irrelevant. Once the player understands what the kryptonite of the enemy creature is, the challenge just vanishes. The puzzle is solved.

The first characteristic of silver bullets is, that the effectiveness of the attack is not dependent on the qualities of the attack itself or the skills of the player, but is arbitrarily determined by which creature gets hit. Secondly, we are not talking about degrees of effectiveness, but rather effective versus non-effective. So that all offensive options next to silver bullets become non-options.

Silver Bullets In Wonderland

So, let's talk Alice – Madness Returns. She can use a knife (light attack), a hobbyhorse hammer (heavy attack), a tea pot cannon and rabbit bomb (grenades) and a pepper grinder (assault rifle). Largely the various attacks are mapped on separate buttons and therefore quickly combined and switched around in combat situations. While having a handful of offensive options, Alice may only use certain attacks against certain enemies, due to silver bullet design decisions.

For example the Samurai Wasp, a katana wielding man-sized wasp is able to block any attempt to knife them or shoot them with the pepper grinder. Projectiles from tea pot cannon are useless, because of swift evasive moves. Sometimes there is a tiny gap in its guard, right before it is ready to strike, which makes even knife attacks and bullets connect. Though these gaps are small and rare and present a rather tricky strategy to make a successful kill.

What turns me off is, when I use the hammer, the wasp gets crushed like‚Äö√Ñ¬∂ well and insect. The wasp is completely helpless against the hammer, not being able to guard, getting stunned by a single hit and getting taken out by

the third. Instant obliteration without any resistance. Here we have a case of an enemy being generally resistant, but easily beaten with one specific attack. So effortless, that any other option would be a stupid pick.

There is as much strategy involved here, as in using a knife instead of a spork to slice bread.

Samurai Wasp

Department Of Redundancy Department

So why do I complain? Said mechanics offer binary qualities, right and wrong. There are no third or more factors to consider. Once the player understands which attack is the "right" one, there is no further evaluation, experimentation and thought necessary. You just keep doing that one thing with that one enemy type and that's it. So with any new enemy we encounter, we get the try and error phase, looking for the silver bullet and once we found it enjoy some satisfaction in using it. But after that we are now doomed to redundant repetition in any further encounter with that specific enemy. Silver bullets are only interesting the very first times you use them.

This becomes even more pointless, when new enemies get formally introduced and the fricking silver bullet gets explained by a tutorial.

"This is bob. he has heavy armor and is impervious to most attacks but he is also lactose-intolerant. so use the cheese launcher."

Thanks for also taking away the challenge of finding my opponents weakness, jerk. (Tron: Evolution)

Though there are places for this mechanic. The satisfaction of cracking the defenses of a level boss, finding its one weakness and exploiting it, just needs to hold up until the creature is beaten‚Äö√Ñ¬∂ once. There is a reason why each boss fight usually only occurs once or maybe twice over the course of a campaign. And if you don't ask players to redo a fight, which he already knows how to win, when it comes to bosses, don't do it with foot troops either.

Are There Better Solutions?

Many actually. Assuming the designers aim for continuously engaging combat.

Strategic options and skill-based challenges always reign superior. though they need way more consideration, concept work and testing to really kick in.

you know, game design work.

The thing with options and skill is, that they allow the player to keep evolving.

Real strategic options in combat aren't binary. There is no clear right or wrong in regard to the enemy type. There are multiple specific advantages and disadvantages inherent to the possible attacks themselves. And separate from that, there are the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of enemy units, spacial qualities of the environment and available resources (ammo, healing items, special gadgets). All those factors can be combined in potentially endless ways to create fresh situations, which need to be freshly evaluated by the player.

When every weapon is able to affect a certain opponent, many other things need to be judged. How far am I away? Can I snipe? What stopping power do I need? Can I stun him? Do I need to spend my rare rockets to finish him quickly or do I have the freedom to wear him down with cheap rifle ammo? How mobile do I need to be in this cluttered area? Do I need to focus my force on single target or is crowd control in oder? How well can I aim for his weak spot or head from my position? and on and on‚Äö√Ñ√Ñ¬∂

Conclusion
Silver bullets? They are a weak and short sighted way to fake variety in combat. Do the work and make enemies special by their behavior. Give them special offensive and defensive qualities, use proper AI and don't just give them allergies to exploit.

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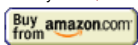
2 THOUGHTS ON "LAZY GAME DESIGN: SILVER BULLET COMBAT"

Alex
on **February 19, 2012 at 11:42 am** said:

Good article.

Although I think there's a different way to go about "silver bulleting" as well. If a game has a combat system with a lot of options (like Jedi Outcast or Jedi Academy, where you have eight strike angles), using the silver bullet mechanic might be effective for very low tier enemies but ignored for higher tier enemies. For instance, say a swordfighting game has that eight-angle thing going and middle strikes defeat high strikes. You could have the easiest enemies in the game only ever use high strikes and allow the player to work out that middle strikes defeat them instantly.

This way, the silver bullet characterises weak enemies instead of strong ones; a strong enemy in the above example is strong because of their lack of weaknesses, so you have to fight intelligently to win. Then you retire those weaker enemies over a period of play time, replacing them with other silver bullet adversaries, then mixing and matching. So you could teach the player that it's the weak links that have their own silver bullets and encourage them to find those strategies.

You could even have more depth. In a truly diverse combat system, one could have ways to goad an advanced adversary into a strategy that has a silver bullet solution. That's usin' your noggin, eh?

Thais
on **July 13, 2011 at 1:34 pm** said:

Well, silver bulleting is also the base for Megaman bosses, but even though each boss is more sensitive to one kind of attack, they just don't drop dead like you described and you can kill them not using silver bullet advantage, which

makes the gameplay still fun. So probably using, you know, game designing to silver bullets it can still have a fun gameplay.

But that's just sad, I was considering buy this game and now I know I'm going to hate it.