

Level Design in Diablo

Ergonomics

The hack-and-slash RPG is most renown for its randomly generated maze-like dungeon layouts. For good or ill, it was a major selling factor at the time of its release. One would suspect that without the careful hand of a level designer, the game's levels could vary unpredictably from terrible to passable. Diablo's design, however, allows these randomly generated levels to not have any detrimental effect on gameplay.



In this example, the player has just stepped foot into the first level of the dungeons. Not far from the entrance, seen near the bottom right of the automap, the next room over contained the stairway to the second level. In most games, this kind of unpredictable level layout would cause problems, since some playthroughs would be must quicker and easier than others. In Diablo, however, the player's character level is a parallel progression system. Since the second level will contain enemies of a higher difficulty than the first level, the player will probably want to avoid going down there until they have found more items, gold, and spells, and gained more experience.

This can, however, cause player frustration, as new players will have no knowledge of these factors. Players coming from other genres may be more accustomed to simply progressing through levels without having to also progress their character. The only way for players to learn their weaknesses is by overextension, which often results in dying. In singleplayer, the player must load a save to come back from death. In the multiplayer, the player drops all their items where they die and is sent back to town. This can be an excruciating experience, considering even if other players had not stolen the dropped items, the player would still need to venture into dangerous territory, now unequipped.

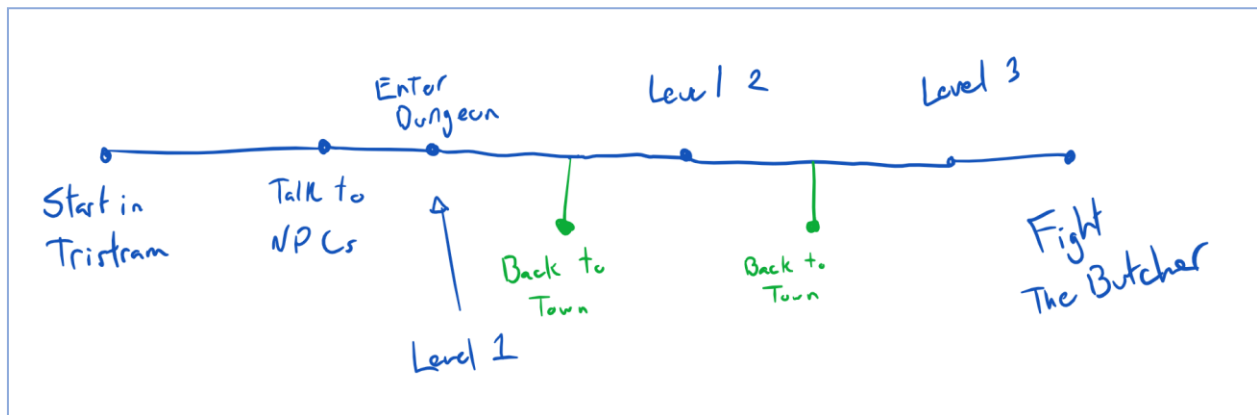
Flow and Pacing

Diablo's dungeons are dark, sprawling, and slow paced. There are a wide variety of room layouts generated by the game which often obstruct and impede movement. This encourages players to slowly and methodically trudge their way through the labyrinth. Most of the time, players are mapping out the dungeon while collecting items and killing monsters to gain experience. When their inventory is full or they are low on potions, they will need to return to town. The game provides town portal scrolls which help the player quickly get back to town, as well as return to where they were in the dungeon.



Town portals allow the player a one-time round trip to town and back.

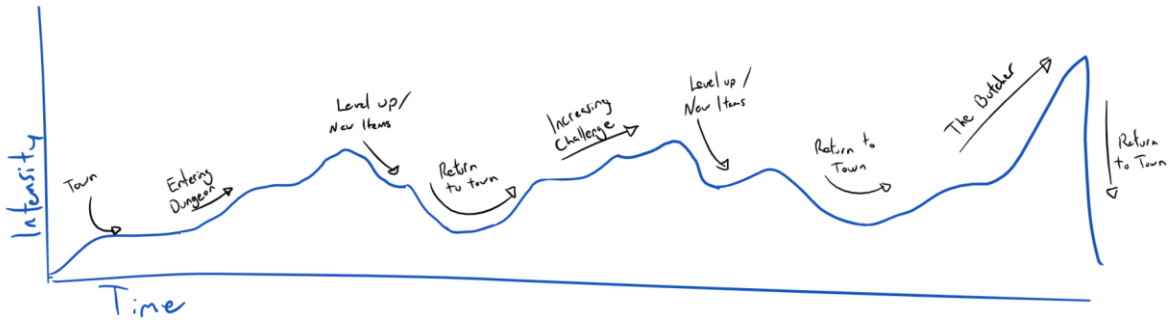
The following is an example level timeline with beats. Given that levels are procedurally generated, the level timeline will vary between playthroughs.



This example follows a player from starting a new game to defeating the first boss, The Butcher. Between levels, the player will likely make several trips back to town to clear their inventory and restock on potions. They may also want to talk to the NPC Deckard Cain, who can identify magic items for free.

Rhythm

The pacing created by procedurally generated maps can be difficult to control, but Diablo expertly handles this using its numerous character mechanics. For example, the player is given a limited inventory size deliberately to keep the player going back and forth from the dangerous dungeons to the safety of town. This creates a cycle of excursions into the dungeons with ramping difficulty and stress, and finally relief.

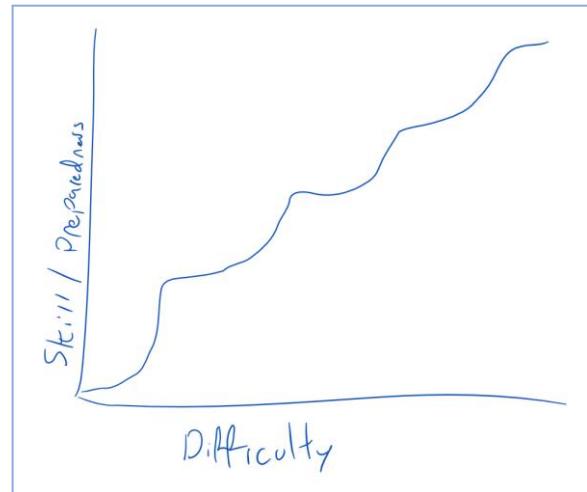


The dips and valleys in intensity are mostly related to game mechanics rather than the layout of the levels. The randomly generated maps serve more as a vehicle for these mechanics. Still, the levels do manage to pack “micro-rhythm” into the game from room to room. There are some interesting moments created by this micro-rhythm, including the jaw-dropping reveal of The Butcher, which I will elaborate on under “Wow Factor”. The image to the right shows two adjacent rooms separated by a door. The room the player is in contains book shelves and tomes, and is free of monsters. The room next to it contains several skeletons, as well as a brazier lighting up the room. Under normal circumstances, the player would not be able to see the enemies in that room, but the separating wall has metal barring which allows the player to see inside. Moments like these allow the player to weigh the risk/reward of their decisions.



Difficulty

In most roleplaying games, difficulty is not traditionally compared with skill. Instead, it is a balancing act between character power and enemy power, which I have indicated in the chart as “Preparedness”. Players must improve their characters’ statistics through gaining experience, items, and spells. Diablo is no exception to this, though there is some skill involved in combat decision making. When players encounter new types of enemies, they will often have to learn strategies for avoiding their abilities or exploiting their weaknesses. Skeletons, for example, are weak to blunt weapons, so players may consider switching weapons when fighting them.



In terms of level design, Diablo separates its levels with stairways. These thresholds help inform the player that they are entering a more dangerous area. In the chart, these thresholds are represented by the sharp “stair stepped” shape of the graph. The player will need to seek out improved items and grind additional experience to get over these steps. It may occur to the player when the area they are in becomes too easy that they are ready for a higher level of challenge.

Wow Factor

While Diablo’s levels are randomly generated, the quests in the game also affect how they are generated. If the game gives you the quest “The Butcher”, a room is guaranteed to appear on level 3 containing a boss. These quests provide the game with many of its Wow Factors.

The Butcher quest is infamous in the gaming world, as it created one of the most terrifying moments in gaming at the time of Diablo’s release. The quest has a chance to be given as the first quest in the game, a bleeding man lies outside the door to the church, begging you to slay the butcher who killed his party.



“Find this butcher and slay him, so that our souls may finally rest...”

After entering the dungeon, players find themselves navigating a dark and twisted path through the labyrinth, descending further and further down. They encounter small enemies, including zombies and skeletons, but nothing would prepare them for the chamber of The Butcher.

Alex Mason – 301151818
February 12, 2016

Back in town, the player can ask any NPC about The Butcher. Many of them have tall tales to tell about the horrifying demon. After navigating level 3, the player will eventually come across a large, square shaped room with a singular door on the camera-facing wall. The room has no windows, and its contents are hidden. Upon opening the door, the room suddenly becomes visible, and The Butcher delivers his infamous line.



"Ah... fresh meat!"

For players with at low character levels, encountering The Butcher will most likely result in death. He is a difficult boss which will pursue the player in close combat range. To this day, The Butcher is one of the most memorable moments in video games. It leaves the player feeling ill prepared, teaching them that they will need to improve their character before delving so deep into the dungeons. It also has one of the best build-ups of any boss encounter. The slow pacing of the previous gameplay serves as a good source of tension for the moment when they open that door, and the way the NPCs in town talk about The Butcher keeps the player on-edge throughout.